

“Held Captive”: Child Poverty In America

A Children’s Defense Fund Report

By Julia Cass



CDF Mission Statement

The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for *all* the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor and minority children and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by foundation and corporate grants and individual donations. We have never taken government funds.

Cover caption: Young Chastity stands with her grandmother Pamela outside their ramshackle home in Lambert, Miss.
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In Quitman County, Miss., three-year old Alexis, who slept on a pallette on the floor with her mother Grace, would later die from pneumonia.

Foreword

My father told me I could do and be anything I wanted to be if I dreamed and worked hard enough for it. I took these words to heart, despite growing up in the Jim Crow-era in Marlboro County, South Carolina. Today, too many children in Marlboro County and throughout America are not being taught to dream and to work hard for a better future. Unemployment in my home county has hovered between 18 and 20 percent for long periods of time and many children there have never seen anyone in their family able to find a job and go to work. I was deeply saddened by a story I heard recently about three young teen boys who were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. The first boy said he wanted to work at McDonald's; the second boy said he wanted to be Spiderman and when pushed for a real person, he could not think of one; and the third boy drew a boy lying on the ground and said he was going to be dead before he grew up.

Hopelessness and despair is too often the product of poverty. Today, 15.5 million children are living in poverty in America—the highest child poverty rate the nation has seen since 1959. And the younger the children are the poorer they are. Recently released U.S. Census Bureau data confirmed our worst fears about the impact of the recent recession. Nearly four million Americans fell into poverty last year. And worst of all, children experienced the steepest rise in poverty and the largest single year increase since the 1960s.

Back in the 1960s, as a civil rights lawyer working in Mississippi, I learned that civil rights without economic rights did not add up to justice. After two civil rights bills had passed and three years into President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the condition for poor Black Americans in Mississippi was not improving beyond a snail's pace. When U.S. Senators Joseph Clark and Robert F. Kennedy and other lawmakers came to the Delta of Mississippi to see how the War on Poverty was going with their own eyes, the swollen bellies and empty cupboards shocked them into action and led them to reform and expand the child and family nutrition programs we know today including food stamps, WIC and school lunches.

Knowing that fair people will take action when they see and hear about the plight of poor children, I asked Pulitzer prize winning journalist, Julia Cass, to go to the Delta in Mississippi, the ravaged cities of New Orleans and Baton Rouge in Louisiana, and to the birthplace of the suburban American dream, in Long Island, New York, and find those children and tell their stories today.

Julia Cass' report puts human faces on the statistics that tell the frightening and heartbreaking reality of how poverty is impacting America's children. She found that despite safety net protections put in place over the past generations, poor children are still adrift in a sea of poverty with their future in jeopardy. Years of research link childhood poverty to a multitude of poor outcomes: lower academic attainment, higher rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration, a greater chance of health and behavioral problems, and lifelong poverty.

The greatest threat to America's national security comes from no enemy without but from our own failure to protect, invest in, and educate all of our children who make up all of our futures in this global economy.

We need to invest now in child health, early childhood development and education. For today is tomorrow. Children have only one childhood and it is right now. God has blessed America with great material wealth. America can and must step forward to correct the gross imbalance of government subsidization of the wealthiest and most powerful among us and provide a future for all children free from hunger, hopelessness and despair. If America cannot stand up for its children it does not stand for anything at all. And it will not stand strong in our competitive, global world.

Marian Wright Edelman



President, Children's Defense Fund

Introduction

During the summer of 1966, when the thousands of acres of cotton in the Mississippi Delta baked in the hot sun, Martin Luther King, Jr. visited the Black sharecropping community in Marks, the seat of Quitman County, to preach at the funeral of a friend who had died of a heart attack.

Quitman was one of the poorest counties in America in 1960. Many Black families lived in rented houses or in shacks on the plantations where they worked, subject to eviction at any time. The White side of town had paved streets; the Black side was unpaved. The Black schools, housed in inferior, poorly ventilated buildings and using out-of-date books from the White schools, held split sessions so the children could help plant, weed and pick cotton at different times of year. Many families could not pay the 25 cents it cost for a lunch at school. Hilliard Lackey III, a professor at Jackson State University who grew up in Marks, ran the dishwasher at the high school so he could eat. He remembers January, when the sharecroppers' "settle" money after the harvest was gone, as the toughest month for his fellow students. "Stomachs growled like engines, and the little crowd in the lunchroom got smaller and smaller."

A visit to a fledgling Head Start program in Marks brought home the reality of rural poverty to Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy. "We looked around the primitive schoolhouse and saw them watching us, wide-eyed and silent, having been told who we were," Abernathy recalled in his autobiography.¹ "They seemed bright and alert, but something bothered me about them. Then I realized what it was: virtually all of them were under weight, a condition that lent a special poignancy to their enormous eyes." After witnessing the teacher divide an apple into four pieces for four hungry children at lunchtime, Dr. King uncharacteristically broke into tears. "The tears came streaming down his cheek. And he had to leave the room."



Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King visits the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1964.

Later that evening, Dr. King told Abernathy, “I can’t get those children out of my mind...We can’t let that kind of poverty exist in this country. I don’t think people really know that little school children are slowly starving in the United States of America. I didn’t know it.”² Seeing these children planted these seeds for Dr. King to think about a Poor People’s Campaign. Though he didn’t live to see it, some 3,000 to 5,000 poor people of all colors from across the nation camped out in Washington, D.C., in June 1968 and told government agencies and Congressional committees that they needed food, jobs, housing, and fair treatment. This was the first time that Congress heard testimony from actual poor people of all colors.

U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy felt the same shock at seeing children with bloated bellies in the Mississippi Delta in 1967, after being encouraged to come there by Marian Wright who then headed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in Mississippi and later founded the Children’s Defense Fund.

Senator Kennedy’s visit put hunger on the national agenda and sparked a coalition of individuals and groups that produced reports on child hunger, malnutrition, illness, and death and pointed out the callousness of the federal school lunch program that had no place at its table for six million needy children whose families could not afford to pay. A *60 Minutes* documentary put a national spotlight on the issue. Opposition to the Poor People’s Campaign was strenuous, and poor people and their advocates did not gain nearly all that they sought.

The spotlight on poverty, which shone for about a decade (following Dr. King and Senator Kennedy’s visits to the Mississippi Delta), did succeed in expanding the availability of food commodities, food stamps and free school lunches and breakfasts. This basic safety net is still helping long-time poor families, and newly poor families losing jobs and homes during the current recession, avoid the kind of utter destitution, hunger, malnutrition and starvation that shocked Dr. King, Senator Kennedy and the nation.

Still, 15.5 million children live in poverty in America today.

One of them is Audrey, a 13-year-old African American girl who lives in Quitman County, Miss., in the town of Lambert two miles south of Marks. She’d been suspended from school for five days and didn’t know what to do with herself the day I met her. She dyed her hair a reddish color one morning. She threw a ball against the side of the house. She took a walk to her sister’s house. Then she wandered around town,



Senator Robert Kennedy tours the Mississippi Delta in 1967 accompanied by a young Marian Wright.

passing a long, run-down building called “The Flats” that has no running water or electricity. An old man sat on the sagging porch. She walked by boarded-up building after falling-down building to reach the one retail store still open in Lambert, a small convenience store with racks of snack food that is a hangout for the unemployed and out of school. Later, she walked down the block where the few remaining White families live and watched young men work on cars in the yards. Chastity, a White girl a few years younger, lives with her grandmother in one of those houses. Chastity didn’t start school until she was seven because she had no birth certificate.

Audrey said something that captures the feeling of poverty that only those caught in it know and that could have been said by most all the children I met while researching this report. I remarked that Audrey seemed isolated in this decaying town where 34.5 percent of households live in poverty.³ “Yeah,” she said, “Isolated. Remote Island. *Held captive.*” That sense of poverty as a stifling force, and the children as tender buds without the air and light they need to grow, came through to me in these encounters in the same way the starving children struck Dr. King and Senator Kennedy more than 40 years ago: I had no idea it was so bad.

Officially, poverty means living in a family of five with an annual income less than \$25,991, a family of four with an income below \$21,954, a family of three with an income less than \$17,098 and a family of two with an income below \$13,991. This is what the federal government determines to be the amount needed for a minimum standard of living in America in 2009.⁴ For poor children, though, poverty means more than money. For them, it can be a life sentence of exile from the larger society.

Spending time with poor families in Quitman County, Miss., Baton Rouge and New Orleans, La., and Long Island, N.Y., underlined a central truth about America today. Poor children and children who are not poor live in utterly different worlds. All parents, no matter how much money they have, need all the help they can get to raise happy, productive children, but parents who are not poor have more time and money to invest in them. They raise their children in decent, safe neighborhoods, send them to good schools, take them on trips, buy them books, bicycles and computers, get them counseling or tutoring if they need it, and music, or art lessons if they want it. They read to them and become involved in their school and other activities. They do this because *they know it makes a difference*, and even in tough economic times, they struggle to offer extras to their children.

Think of it this way: Children who are not poor live on land. They can see the horizon and make choices and plans as they move forward into the future. They have opportunities, experiences and supports unknown by poor children. They are on the playing field.

Poor children swim in a sea of poverty. It is all they know. They go to inferior schools and day care centers where everyone around them is poor. They live in poor, rundown, unsafe neighborhoods. Compared to other children, they are exposed to more family turmoil, violence, instability and chaotic households. They are read to infrequently by their under-educated parents, watch more TV, and have less access to books and computers. Their parents and almost everyone they know are poor and struggling. They lack nutritious food. They receive less social support. Most cannot see land no matter how hard they paddle. They give up and tread water. Too often, they flounder. They have what sociologists call “risk factors” not “protective” ones.

Years of research link childhood poverty to a multitude of poor outcomes: lower academic attainment, higher rates of non-marital childbearing and incarceration, a greater likelihood of health and behavioral problems, and lifelong poverty. Even a poor child who makes it onto land is not equally poised to be successful because the playing field is not even. Worse, many are left behind in the sea of poverty, never making it onto land at all.

In the current downturn, middle-class families and their children are slipping into the growing ranks of the working poor, while working poor families are sliding into poverty. The number of poor children in America has increased by more than two million in the past two years. On Long Island, many families make too little to live on but too much to be eligible for food stamps, Medicaid, or help paying the rent, mortgage

or utility bills. Families that have lost jobs and homes and may be eligible for assistance find that they need a social worker to figure out the patchwork system. Their children do not face the confluence of risk that the long-time poor children in Mississippi and Louisiana do, but they are being uprooted from homes and schools, upset, disappointed, and embarrassed. Several were very reluctant to talk, one hid in the basement for a while, as if their situations were shameful.

Americans like to believe that the United States is a land of mobility where the race is fair and those who rise to the top do so by virtue of talent and effort. In fact, in America, more than in other advanced western nations, rich children stay rich and poor children stay poor. According to a study done by the Economic Mobility Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts, the United States stands lower in economic mobility than Canada, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, Spain and Australia.⁵ The study found that 42 percent of American children born to parents in the bottom fifth of income levels remain there as adults; an additional 23 percent will move up only one rung.⁶ Poor African American children are even less mobile; 54 percent born at the bottom stay there.⁷ (By contrast, 38 percent children born to parents in the top fifth remain at the top. Another 23 percent move down only one rung.)⁸

Because they live in different neighborhoods and go to different schools, poor children are invisible to other children and parents, their identities, struggles, and stifled aspirations unknown. In describing what they want, the younger children I met talked about ordinary things or experiences that most children who are not poor take for granted. Jillian, 8, who lives with her parents and brother in a single motel room in Hempstead, N.Y., described the bedroom she wants – real big, purple, with a pink princess bed and purple and white shelves for Barbie dolls. Jason, 9, has lived in 11 places in his short life and now stays in a homeless shelter in New Orleans. He wishes he could be “in an actual house with my own room and closet and stuff” and be on a swimming team and go to the beach and surf.

The teenagers have very modest ambitions, as if even their dreams are stunted. A high school senior in Marks said he aspired to have a nice house and legal money. Navia, 14, in Baton Rouge, La., said she wanted to be the first female in her family to graduate from high school and not have a baby before the age of 20. Already, it seems unlikely that she will reach these goals. Navia is a self-raised child who doesn't go to school or listen to anybody. Her mother, who struggles with mental illness, can't make her go, and the school district did not send a truant officer to the home *all year*.

Accompanying the stories of children and their surroundings in Mississippi, Louisiana and Long Island are sections and boxes that embellish community problems. Much more is now known about poverty and its effects on children than in 1962, when Michael Harrington “discovered” poverty and wrote his influential book, *The Other America*, and the recent findings refute long held ideas about poverty and the poor.

Reports on the irrational, ad hoc nature of the safety net have proliferated as the recession has taken hold. Food, housing, health, and cash assistance programs are run by separate federal bureaucracies with different eligibility requirements and offices. States have their own requirements so that a family could be eligible for assistance in one state and not in another, with the poorest states often the ones that help fewer families. The federal poverty level is wildly out of sync with the cost of living in an expensive place like Long Island.

A common response to the predicament of poor children is, “it's the parents.” Of course, that is literally true. Children are poor because their parents are poor. In this report, the neediest children have the neediest parents, who grew up in the sea of poverty themselves. They don't have the personal, educational or financial resources of parents who had a middle-class upbringing, and some make bad choices and give poor guidance. Even if they deserve it, blaming the parents, and stopping there, does nothing for the children. Sister Judith Brun, a nun who works with Katrina dislocated families in Baton Rouge, said that some agencies drop poor families when the parent, for example, misses three appointments. She decided not to do that because “We shouldn't let children suffer because of the dysfunction of a parent. We can't just let them flop around.”



Audrey, left, sits on the couch in her home with her younger sister in Quitman County, Miss. Asked if she felt isolated, Audrey responded, “Yeah. Isolated. Remote island. *Held captive.*”

The banking system, auto industry and other businesses considered “too big to fail” are being rescued and subsidized. Children are small, and they are being allowed to fail. America is allowing children like Audrey to flop around in the sea of poverty. Over the past 40 years, America has added a patch here and there to the safety net, but has never made a serious, comprehensive, sustained effort to bring children out of the captivity of poverty even though the well-being of children is at least as important to the future as the health of banks and major industries—and vital to the American ideal of equal opportunity for all.

Sister Judith said that her work with Katrina children has taught her this: “Children of poverty have a very deep hole that needs to be filled. We all have a hole, but theirs is unfathomably deep and wide. There’s been so much deprivation and disruption, so much want and so many needs that haven’t been met. ”



Quitman County, Mississippi, 2010.

Quitman County, Mississippi: “Remote Island”

“Rural poverty is the worst. It’s deeper. The amount of material deprivation is greater, and there’s a lot less mobility. It’s harder to get out of rural poverty.”

— Gary Evans, professor of human ecology at Cornell University

Highway 3 runs north-south through the major towns of Quitman County – Sledge, Falcon, Darling, Marks, Lambert. It is called Charlie Pride Highway in honor of the singer who grew up in Sledge. When the road passes through Marks (pop. 1,551), it is renamed Martin Luther King Ave. Like so many other streets named for King in towns and cities across the nation, it is a signpost for decay and abandonment, with more boarded up businesses and stores than operating ones. It is hard not to be affected, even during a short visit, by the pervasive sense of decline in all the towns of Quitman County. It is hard not to think about how Dr. King would respond to the place 42 years after the Poor People’s Campaign, when its signature mule train departed from Marks.

He would not see a teacher having to quarter an apple to feed hungry children. The public schools now serve free breakfasts and lunches to every student, since the vast majority meets the poverty requirements. This alone reveals what has changed and what has not. People are still poor and some do not have an adequate diet, but with the school breakfast and lunch, food stamp and WIC programs greatly expanded during the late 1960s and early 1970s, they are not starving.

Streets on the Black side of the tracks now are paved, including Cotton Street, the second place in Marks where Dr. King is said to have wept. The flooded shack he visited (and the nearly naked children who lived in it) are gone. After a flood in the early 1990s, people who’d owned homes there became eligible for low-cost loans to put trailers on their property. Dr. King surely would smile to go in one of them and meet Barbara, a single mother with two sons who works cleaning houses for eight families. Her oldest son, Cordera, was the salutatorian of the class of 2005 and studied engineering at the University of Mississippi. One or two students a year from Quitman County’s high school make it to the University of Mississippi, the state’s premiere university. Almost none go out of state and none at all to Ivy League or other top tier national universities.

Cordera likely will make it out of poverty, but his story is not a typical one. Lack of opportunity stunts the lives of adults and children in Quitman County. The mechanization of agriculture that put Black residents out of homes and jobs in the 1950s and 1960s has continued. Quitman County, and the Mississippi Delta in general, never had (and when labor was needed for cotton, didn’t want) much manufacturing but what it had is diminishing. A mere 98 manufacturing jobs were reported in the county in 2008.⁹ By 2010, not one



The mule train of the Poor People’s Campaign departs from Marks, Miss., in 1968.

factory was working in Quitman County. “All our factories are empty,” said Butch Scipper, the chancery clerk and county administrator. “They’re not full of equipment waiting to reopen. They are *empty*.”

The largest local employer in Quitman County is the school district. Casinos in towns on the Mississippi River are the only new source of employment of any size; the closest to Marks are in Tunica County 50 miles away. In the current recession, casinos are laying off employees, and the public school system plans to close the schools three days this school year to save money.

With few unskilled jobs elsewhere in the country, many people are stuck – and their children are stuck with them. A 2008 report on concentrated poverty in America by the Brookings Institution and Federal Reserve Bank found that 48 of the 50 counties with the highest child poverty rates are rural.¹⁰

Ten days in Quitman County in November 2008 made it clear that the safety net set up in the 1960s and 1970s—food stamps, school lunches and breakfasts, Medicaid, housing programs, Head Start—have ameliorated some of the awful affects of poverty in Quitman County. But education and support systems to pull the next generation—the children—out of poverty are vastly insufficient and spotty.

The inadequacy of federal, state and local support for poor children in Mississippi is underlined by this startling fact: The after-school tutoring and reading programs in Quitman and three other Delta counties are financed by what is essentially foreign aid, The Bernard van Leer Foundation of the Netherlands. “The foundation focuses on children and families in what it refers to as oppressed societies,” said Betty Ward Fletcher. Her Jackson-based consulting firm was contracted by the Dutch foundation to help it design a program in Mississippi, called Children’s Villages, for children aged five to 14.

“Some of its people wondered why it should be working in the most affluent country in the world, but they decided the reality is, we have poor children in this country who are denied the opportunity to be all they can be,” Fletcher said.

She held “talking circles” in small communities in the Delta about the pressing needs of children. “What we heard pretty consistently was: Few support services to improve school achievement, no Boys and Girls clubs, sometimes no library or recreational facilities or even a park. Children have nothing to do, especially in the summer. We heard a story of a 10-year-old boy consistently breaking into homes. He would eat and play on the computer and then leave.”

A reality show of poverty

One of the sites in Quitman County where the Dutch-financed after-school programs are located is the North Delta Youth Development Center in Lambert, two miles south of Marks. Lambert has more people (1,967) than Marks but even less activity and more poverty. Although a signpost at the town limits proclaims, “Lambert: City of Hope,” the downtown area is a ghost town except for one shabby storefront in an abandoned block where several buildings are falling down. This is the North Delta Youth Development Center.

Robert Jamison, the Center’s founder and director, grew up in Marks from age nine when his sharecropper parents moved into town. He was one of the first 10 Black children to go to the all White school, where he suffered so much harassment—“I couldn’t even go to the bathroom”—that he quit that year and returned to the Black school the following year. His life was shaped by the civil rights movement,



The North Delta Youth Development Center in Lambert, Miss.

the War on Poverty and the Poor People's Campaign. He went to college with the help of a Pell grant, a federal program initiated in 1973 to help poor young people attend college, and then got a VISTA job. Twenty years ago, he and a teacher saw the need for a youth resource center in Lambert. A lawyer donated the abandoned two-story building for a tax write off.

The ground floor contains a small room with a desk and long table and several even smaller rooms behind it where Jamison and a staff member interview Lambert residents who need help because their electricity was turned off, they can't read a document, their child has been suspended, they've been unfairly fired and can't get unemployment, they were turned down for food stamps, they're losing their home to foreclosure, and other troubles that afflict families with little money and education. Jamison calls it his "family helper program." A TV producer wanting to do a reality show on poverty could set up a camera here and have it all.

Most of Jamison's "family helper" clients are parents, grandparents or other guardians of the 30 children who come for the after school program upstairs. Elementary school students sit around tables in two small rooms, getting help with homework and reading books. In another very small and windowless room, a high school senior helps middle school students do their homework on dated, donated computers.

The setting could hardly be more raggedy but the children, all of them from families at or below the poverty line, are vibrant. A table of kindergarteners, first and second graders competed to read simple books to me and delighted in hearing their voices on my tape recorder. Although a few of them are already a grade behind in school, their vitality and promise represent the "hope" in the town's sign. The odds, though, are against them.

One morning, three people were waiting to see Jamison as the office opened. One was an older man who wanted to be added into the settlement of a lawsuit on behalf of Black farmers (many now *former* farmers). The settlement followed a 1999 ruling by a federal judge that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has systematically discriminated against Black farmers in granting loans and subsidies. He brought the papers for Jamison to read and help him fill out.

Another was a single mother who wanted Jamison to help her keep her oldest child, who has seizures, on Medicaid. The child was about to be cut off because she had reached the age of 18, although she is still in school.

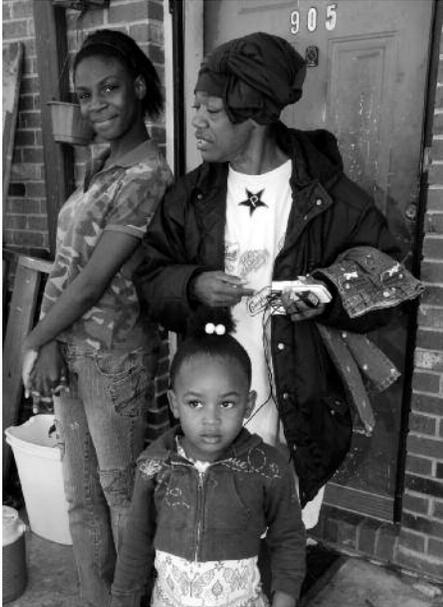
Mary, who lives in a small blue house a few blocks from North Delta, called to see if Jamison had found a way to save her home from foreclosure. She and her husband, both in their 60s, grew up in large sharecropper families and worked all their lives, he as a truck driver for a lumberyard, she in several factories and then as a cook for the school system. They raised four children and now are raising two grandchildren, an eight-year-old boy and an infant girl. When her husband had a heart attack and kidney problems that require dialysis, they got behind in their payments to the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) for their home. To pay off FHA, they borrowed from a storefront loan company that charged them 18.36 percent interest. Then they fell behind on that payment and had been threatened with foreclosure. Jamison eventually helped them re-finance and they continue to live in their small blue house.

Audrey: "Held captive"

One afternoon, Audrey, then 13-years-old, came to ask Jamison if she could use the center's phone to call her mother's cell phone. A slender girl with bright eyes and a chipped front tooth, Audrey had been suspended from school for five days and wanted to ask if her mother wanted her to meet her sister Alexis at the bus stop when she returned from the Head Start program. Alexis was a three-year-old Audrey's mother unofficially adopted as a baby from a woman who was unable to care for her. Audrey couldn't call her mother from home because there's no landline telephone.

Her mother told her to do that, and Audrey met Alexis at the bus stop that day and the other days during her suspension. She played with Alexis when they got home. But Audrey didn't know what to do the rest of

the day. That was the day she dyed her hair, visited her sister, took a long walk around the decaying town, and stopped in the town's sole grocery, a convenience store stocked with snack food. Dr. Aaron Shirley, a retired African American pediatrician in Jackson who took part in a survey of hunger in 1967, said that by now, "the whole dynamics have changed" from close to starvation to an epidemic of obesity and diabetes. He attributes this in part to the proliferation of fast food restaurants, often the only place to eat in small towns, and the fact that "foods that are the least healthy cost less." He spoke of the "Pick 5" packs ubiquitous in rural Mississippi supermarkets—five packages, usually pork products, for \$20. Audrey hung around the store for a while and then walked home.



Audrey, her mother Grace and adopted sister Alexis who passed away shortly after this photo was taken.

"I'm bord," she'd written on a note left on the door for her mother.

Audrey has spent a lot of time out of school, frequently suspended and home schooled for several years. Her mother, Grace, took her out of school because she hated to see her come home crying. Grace and Audrey's father, a truck driver who helps support the family, were Muslim and the kids were teasing Audrey, who wore a head scarf, about being a "raghead."

Audrey said her mother, who has a GED, taught her "out of McGraw Hill. She did excellent in that but I guess the books were out of date because when I went back to school last year, I wasn't up to date and I had to go in the fourth grade." Audrey's older sister helped teach her during periods when her mother was working. "She got a diploma at the junior college in Senatobia, Miss. She was studying to be a nurse but kind of drifted away," Audrey said. Her sister has a child and was working as a cashier at a gas station. Sometimes, Audrey said, she went to the North Delta's after school program and asked other children "about their day at school and what went on." Who were her friends? "Me, myself and I."

Grace, Audrey and Alexis were living in a brick home several blocks from North Delta. The house looked sturdy enough from the outside but inside, part of the ceiling in the living room was gone and the rafters were exposed. Every surface was covered with something; the two couches with blankets and pillows. The only heater that worked was the one in the living room so in the winter, Audrey slept on one couch, Alexis on the other, and her mother literally on a pallet on the floor. "I get so cold," Grace explained.

Grace worked in housekeeping at a casino in Tunica, Miss., until May 2008, when the toes on her left foot had to be amputated. Gangrene had set in "from my diabetes." Two toes on her right foot "aren't looking too good either," she says. She wears slippers and walks slowly. "Two weeks ago my pressure went sky high but I have no medicine to take care of it. Wal-Mart has the prescription but I can't get it because I can't afford it." As she sat on the couch speaking, she winced in pain from what she thinks is a problem with her nerves. "Sometimes I can't stand for clothes to touch me."

Audrey did well enough to move forward to the fifth grade for the 2008-2009 school year, in a classroom with children a year or two younger than she was. By November, though, she'd already missed so many days that she would not be able to move up to sixth grade. Her absences were due mainly to suspensions. Other kids call her "snaggle tooth" because she fell a few years ago and broke a front tooth. It hasn't been fixed because her mother can't afford to take her to a dentist. "I haven't seen a dentist in three years," Audrey said. She gets into battles with kids who tease her and into power struggles with teachers she believes "disrespect" her. She's also had seizures and been taken to the hospital.



Grace holds her newborn child in their home in Quitman County, Miss.

Audrey and her mother attribute the seizures to anger. “Students bother me constantly and I get blamed. I keep my madness to myself and all of a sudden it bursts out and I start shaking,” Audrey said. Grace said, “She gets angry and stops breathing. They said at the hospital that I should take her to mental health but everything costs.” During times when Audrey’s father works for a trucking firm that provides insurance, it covers Audrey. When he doesn’t, she is uninsured. Grace said she hasn’t applied for Medicaid for Audrey because she would have to sue Audrey’s father for child support. “But we live in his house and he pays the gas and electric and food so I didn’t think he deserves that,” she said.

Grace said she wants her daughter to do whatever makes her happy. “She wanted to take dance, ballet or ice skating, but I couldn’t get her to Memphis.” Grace, who was raised by her grandparents, said she once had the idea of being a lawyer. But she left school in the 11th grade when she got pregnant with her older daughter.

Asked what she would like to be doing now or later in life, Audrey said, “Right now, I would like to be in school. I can’t believe I just said it. But I would like to be put in my right grade.”

She would like it if her mother “happened to come up with some money and decided to move on with her life. We once moved to Memphis for a few months and stayed with my aunt. I took karate and went to the movies. I enjoyed it but my aunt said we couldn’t stay there anymore so we moved back here.” She went on, “I would like to live in Atlanta. One summer my dad took me on the road with him. We went to Atlanta and saw a lot of stuff I would like to be around.”

Apart from these glimpses of Memphis and Atlanta, Lambert is the only world Audrey knows, and her life is relentlessly the same day after day. That’s when I commented, “You seem isolated here,” and she said, “Yeah. Isolated. Remote Island. Held captive.”

Marietha: “I want to do something”

Tyrese, 6, was a regular at the after-school program at North Delta. He couldn’t yet read but he made a beeline for books about animals. “I want to be a scientist so I can see snakes and collect frogs,” he declared. He had a big gap-toothed smile and said, “Nice to meet you,” when his mother introduces him.

His mother, Marietha, 31, was working at North Delta answering phones and doing filing and anything else that seemed useful. She is a powerfully built woman with chiseled features. This was her required job in order to receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits of \$170 a month for her, Tyrese and his half-sister Laila Marie, who was born in June 2008. The idea of welfare reform was to put women in job training or temporary jobs that would give them the work skills needed to move off the welfare rolls and into permanent employment. In Quitman County, with no industry of any significance, TANF recipients are usually placed in community service sites, pointing up the problem of having a work-based safety net without work.

Marietha already knew how to hold down a job. She had worked at two casinos in Tunica County; as a slot attendant at the Grand Casino and then on the housekeeping staff at the Isle of Capri. At the Isle of Capri, “the supervisor was stealing and they laid off our whole shift,” she said. She no longer had a ride when she broke up with the man in her life, who also worked in Tunica. Rather than applying at another casino, she got a job at a small factory in Marks that made cigarette lighters for cars. When that factory closed, she did babysitting and other odd jobs, and she got financial support from Laila Marie’s father, who died of a heart attack when she was three months pregnant. That’s when she applied for TANF. “I had to. I had no other help. I’ve never been on it before,” she said.

Marietha walked to her job at North Delta from a subsidized multi-family housing complex in Lambert where she and her children lived. Her apartment was spotlessly clean and neatly furnished. “I’m three months behind on this living room set,” she said. “My mom had a good account with the store, and the owner is working with me.” She said she shops at rummage sales and at Fred’s or Dollar General to try to make ends meet. Besides the welfare check, she received \$455 in food stamps every month, and she and the children were covered by Medicaid. Her electric bill alone was about \$100 a month.

The government assistance she received kept her and her children from destitution, but it hasn’t shown Marietha a way to a better future. “At one time, they had a program—Americorp. It would help. If I could get training for a job where they pay you while you’re doing it, that would give me peace of mind. I like working for Mr. Jamison but that’s only for a few months. Doing nothing, looking around, you just go crazy.”

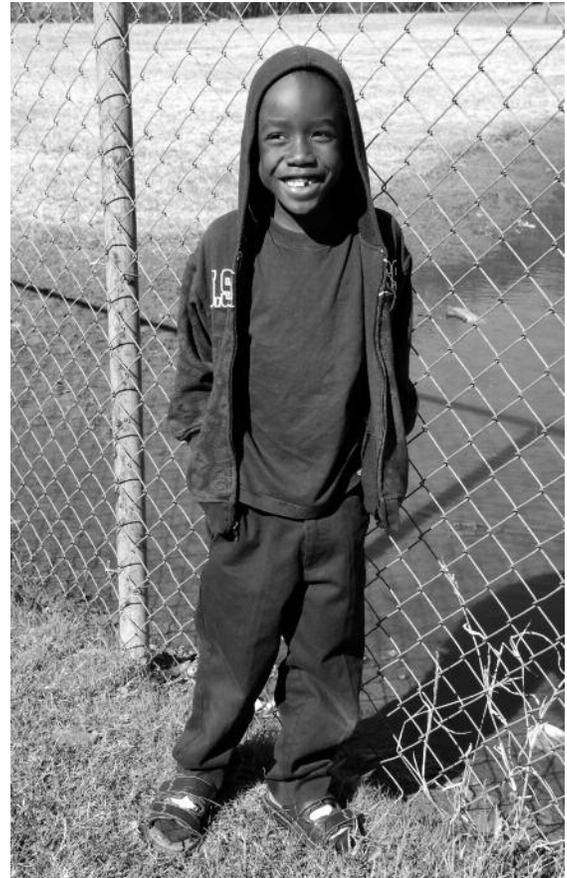
Lacking a car, she said she wanted a job in Lambert or Marks. She was considering applying at McDonald’s or Bumpers, the two fast food places in Marks, but didn’t feel hopeful since these are prized jobs. She looked forlorn even talking about it. It’s obviously enervating to apply for a job that you don’t think you’ll get or enjoy and that even if you got it and liked it, it wouldn’t pay enough to lift you and your children out of poverty. “Even looking for a job takes money,” she said. “You are so down you don’t know what to do.”

Seeking work in another, more prosperous part of the country seemed out of question to her, especially because of child care. Her mother cares for Laila Marie while she’s at work. Lack of affordable quality day care is one reason women in Quitman County are reluctant to leave home. “I wouldn’t want to leave her with just anybody,” Marietha said.

She’s sorry she didn’t graduate from high school. She spent a few of her teenage years in St. Paul, Minn. When she was in the 11th grade, she and her mother returned to Marks to take care of Marietha’s ailing grandmother. Marietha lacked a credit and didn’t graduate. “I took the GED but I failed the math part. When that happened, I just decided to work.”

No one in her family insisted that she take the test again, and she didn’t spend her childhood with the expectation of going to college, though now she wishes she had. “I just wish I could have did it, stayed in a dorm and did what the college kids do.”

She wants more for her children than she’s able to give them. She thinks the local Head Start program isn’t rigorous enough but there’s no alternative. “Tyrese didn’t know how to write his name or how to count. He has a good teacher now in kindergarten but he moves a lot. He can’t be still. Everything will distract him but when he does his work, it’s good. He’s smart.” She added that his speech is not too good but she’s sure he’ll grow out of that.



Tyrese, 6, was a regular at the after-school program at North Delta.

Tyrese had been in his room, and she called for him. He demonstrated his ABC's and counted to 30, though he skipped a few numbers. "He will ask a thousand questions," his mother said. That evening, he talked about his uncle's dog that died but had some babies and the babies are alive. Play is his favorite thing to do but he doesn't like to play with the kids at the housing complex because "we fight." On the weekends, he said he goes to his grandma's house in Marks. "I eat and watch TV."

Marietha said she dreamed of having "a steady job that I like, like maybe being a secretary. Get up in the morning and be glad to go. Have my own home, my own car. Get around and take Tyrese to the zoo (in Memphis) so he could see the animals. Just go places and take the kids places. Long as we're trapped up in this place, no car, no money, we're gonna be fussing. When you ain't got nothing to do, you be frustrated, the kids are gonna get on your nerves and it's not their fault. You're the mom and you're supposed to make a way for them."

Her aspirations sound reasonable but Marietha didn't know what to do to achieve them. She went on to say, "I'm a good person. I want to do *something*" in such a plaintive voice that poverty seemed like a physical force holding her and her children back. And it still does: In October 2010, she was still unemployed, and she has another baby to support.

"Earning Capacity Poor"

A looming problem in the current recession is this: Changes in the safety net in the past 20 years have emphasized work – the Earned Income Tax Credit for working poor families and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (welfare reform) of 1996, which requires recipients to work or be in a work-training program in order to receive welfare benefits and sets a five-year lifetime limit. A *New York Times* reporter attended a poverty conference in Washington, D.C., in May 2009 and quoted an economist as saying, "We have a work-based safety net without work. We're really in a pickle." ¹¹

Many of the working poor and unemployed are what Robert H. Haveman calls "earnings capacity poor." Haveman, Professor Emeritus of Public Affairs and Economics and Faculty Affiliate of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said he proposed this measure of poverty because he believes that income stream is a crude measure. "Some of my graduate students are probably captured in the poverty statistics but they're not poor people. They have tons of human capital and education. They'll do fine." ¹²

Haveman uses the earnings capacity measure to identify people who "don't have the personal resources for the economy alone to boost them above poverty." The primary resource related to potential earnings is education. Health is another and geography matters, too, because wages vary from region to region. For earnings capacity, he calculates how much a particular type of family, say a single mother with two children, could earn if she worked full-time, given her education, health, and location. Child care, if needed, would be subtracted from her hypothetical income. ¹³

"There are two ways to boost earnings capacity," Haveman said. "One is to increase skills. Think schooling, higher education," he said. "The other way is to increase the returns for using capacity. Now we're talking about wage rates and employment." His research also suggests subsidizing child care for the "earnings capacity poor," along with measures like increasing the earned income tax for families who cannot work themselves out of poverty.¹⁴ The implications for the nation's 15.5 million poor children are clear. Their life circumstances put them in risky, unsupportive neighborhoods and poor schools where they have a hard time gaining the skills needed to build earnings capacity. Without a serious, sustained effort to help them, many are unlikely to have the ability to earn their way out of poverty and fulfill the American dream of getting ahead. Then their children, in turn, will be held captive in poverty.

Struggling to help children and families

Each of the communities I visited has dedicated, determined local leaders who continue to work, sometimes over years of disappointment and frustration, to build and maintain local institutions and programs that help poor families and children.

Robert Jamison at the North Delta Youth Development Center struggles constantly for funding. The Christian Children's Fund, a major sponsor of the "family helper program," has scaled back on the money it provides to North Delta and three other Mississippi organizations. "Donors are not giving like they used to, and here in Lambert, we don't have corporations to sponsor things and the county can't help us out," he said. He says the reason he's been able to keep the organization going for 20 years is because "I didn't try to grow."

Another community leader is Robert Jackson, director of the Quitman County Development Organization (QCDO) founded in 1971 by veterans of the Poor People's Campaign and the civil rights movement. The son of a sharecropper, Jackson's first big campaign for QCDO was bringing the federal free breakfast program to the school system in 1979. There was opposition from the still-White school board but QCDO was victorious. "It was needed because people still were having a hard time feeding the kids," he said.

Racial battles have diminished now, and the White community is leaving Quitman County. Lambert now is 82.8 percent Black; Marks is 64.7 percent Black.¹⁵ I asked Aubrey Collums, the White mayor of Marks elected with Black votes, what White parents with money do for their teenagers since there are so few recreational outlets in the county. Collums, who has since retired, thought for a moment and responded, "We don't have White folks with money with young kids. Most of us who are left, our children are gone."

Now, QCDO's big struggle is maintaining its programs to help poor people, which include a credit union and several affordable housing complexes. For children, QCDO runs a youth credit union, an after school tutoring program, an early childhood development program, and a Youth Opportunities Unlimited program that operates a day care center and teen pregnancy and drop-out prevention projects.

These projects are financed by grants from private foundations, the federal government and occasionally state government. Here's the problem: The federal government may pay for a building but QCDO has to find the money to run the program. A foundation may fund a project for a few years and then decide to move on to another project in another place. When Quitman County wins a grant for a program for children, a program for equally needy children in another county or state doesn't get it. The needs are great, and the federal government and American people are not making a committed effort to poor children in all places and all years. Programs to bring children out of poverty do not compete for federal dollars with the wealthy farmers or defense spending or business bailouts: They compete with each other.

The Bernard Van Leer Foundation made a hard choice when it decided to work through existing non-profits in four counties to create the Children's Villages' after-school and summer programs. It selected QCDO in Quitman and others in Sharkey, Issaquena and Webb counties. "We had to leave some places out because there wasn't enough money to go around," said Betty Fletcher, the consultant who worked with the foundation. "We lamented the little town of Sunflower. And Glendora. The needs are great in Glendora."

Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU)'s programs cover four Delta counties. It began as a project of the U.S. Department of Labor for children at risk. "It was a competition," Jackson said. "The state of Mississippi won because we had the worst statistics." This meant the children of Alabama and West Virginia were left behind.

The YOU headquarters in Lambert is a sparkling new building—the first major new construction in Quitman County in 30 years, Evelyn Jossell, its director, said. YOU gets grants from federal and state agencies and private foundations to provide the programs, but not, consistently, enough money. The building has a very nice basketball court, the only recreational facility in Lambert. But it closes on weekends unless members of a nearby church volunteer to come in and supervise, since the current budget doesn't cover overtime for staff members.



Programs for children and youth in Quitman County are funded by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, a Dutch charity.

There is just one day care center in the county, the YOU Day Care Center located on the grounds of the high school in Marks. Queenie Sims, a former teacher brought out of retirement several years ago to manage the financially struggling facility, said the school site was selected so teenagers with children would not have to drop out of school but would have a place for them while they attend classes. Teen pregnancy is common in Quitman County, as in other places of concentrated poverty where the future doesn't look promising to young girls who are not able to imagine a world beyond their limited environments.

The day care center receives money from the Department of Human Services for children of mothers on TANF, provided they are working at least 25 hours a week. Some teachers and other workers pay \$70 a week for the day care service, and the USDA provides the food the center serves. The Department of Human Services doesn't pay for the children of students since they aren't working. Just imagine the paperwork – and the time devoted to grant writing.

"If they don't have anybody to keep the baby, we pay for it ourselves. We don't want anybody not to go to school who wants to," Sims said. "I'll be begging. I'll do anything."

Jossell, who oversees the day care center as part of YOU, said that three grants she hoped for didn't come through. "The day care center is a draw on our budget but it's the only one in the county. If we close, parents will have to drive to Batesville or Clarksdale. I hate to see us go backwards just to break even."

Reached in October 2010, she said, "We've made it through the toughest years we've ever experienced but we're still standing. We restructured the day care center and we got a couple grants from private foundations, very small but helpful." Jackson and Jamison made similar statements about their organizations. QCDO has laid off a few staff members but maintains its programs. North Delta continues its after-school and family helper programs, and Jamison got some funding this past summer to create a vegetable garden with children. His main problem: "Our building is falling down. We won't be able to stay here much longer."

Chastity: “An under under dog”

Jamison, who has seen so much of poverty’s impact up close, says there are two things that really get to him: kids whose parents can’t afford to pay for field trips and are left behind and the “little poor White kids who are in the all Black schools.” Jamison identifies with them because of how he felt when he was the only Black child in his eighth grade class. “If you are a poor White here, you are the under under dog,” he said. According to Jamison, some poor White families don’t send their children to school at all. They home school them, and some don’t have the knowledge or experience to do a good job.

Pamela takes care of three grandchildren in a ramshackle house in Lambert, across the tracks in what used to be the all-White part of town. One Saturday, one of her daughters and other relatives were at work with hammers trying to fix the broken porch and put in new windows. The interior also was a work in progress, she said, and not fit for visitors.

She adopted her oldest grandchild, Jennifer, when she was eight. Jennifer is a tall girl with gorgeous straight black hair who was a student in the school system’s alternative school. “They kicked Jennifer out” of the high school, Pamela said, because she reacted when the other kids “picked on her.” She lost a year. She liked the other school because they’re not smart with her even though “she’s the onliest White kid there.” Pamela’s grandson, Jordan, was attending the high school but gets in trouble because “he won’t take nobody’s mouth.” He was in the in-school suspension room the day I visited the high school.

The grandchild who worried Pamela and Jamison the most was Chastity, a beautiful, sweet, withdrawn girl of 11. She “gets along good” with the other children at school, Pamela said, but she’s behind. “Chastity was seven by the time she got in school. She wanted to go to school. They (her parents) didn’t have a birth certificate,” Pamela said. Pamela has been caring for her since that time. “If she goes to Batesville to see her mama, she starts crying. She’s closer to me. If I lost her, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Chastity has Medicaid and food stamps, along with her grandmother’s love. But she obviously needs more support and encouragement than Pamela can give her. She was in the fifth grade and, Pamela said, is “a slow learner.” A child who lives next door said that Chastity, “don’t know her vowels. She don’t got nobody to help her.” Pamela can’t help with school work because she doesn’t know how to read or write. She’s a full-blooded Cherokee who grew up in the country in a large family that picked and chopped cotton. None of them went to school. She said, though, that one of her daughters helps Chastity with her homework. “Chastity says she wants to be a doctor and I say ‘you can do it.’”

After school, Chastity rode her bike around the dirt yard of the house. She sat on the porch with her grandmother. She went inside and then came out again. She was polite but uncommunicative. Asked about school, she said, “It’s okay” and could not be drawn out to talk about herself or her experiences.

Jamison doesn’t think Chastity is as slow as she is said to be. “Oh no, no, no. She’s kind of on the shy side but she’s a smart young girl. She really wants to do better. She came and talked to me, asked could I talk to her grandmother because ‘I need tutoring in math. I’m so behind.’” In his view, Chastity’s grandmother doesn’t understand the importance of education because “She never experienced anybody pushing her to go to school.” He has used North Delta funds to make sure Chastity can go on field trips and to buy her a Girl Scout uniform. “She wanted to participate,” he said.

“We need some type of system set up for special assistance to families,” he went on. “If you’re a single parent and trying to raise a family without resources, it’s hell. Some places have people or companies who will sponsor a child, make sure they have uniforms and can take part in extracurricular activities. That means a lot to a child and gives them something to go out for and keep on going.”

Will they make it? Where will they end up?

Madison Palmer High School in Marks serves the entire county, as do the one elementary and one middle school. No metal detector stands at its entrance, the hallways and classrooms are relatively quiet and orderly,



Chastity did not start school until the age of seven. She did not have a birth certificate, further complicating her admission.

and even the guys with low-hanging pants say “Yes, ma’am” and open the door for an older woman. This school of about 400 students has civility but nowhere near the range of opportunities and amenities that children in wealthier districts receive. According to Superintendent Valmadge Towner, 98 percent of Quitman County public school students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches.

It is a well-known disgrace that in America, which considers itself a land of equal opportunity, the poorest children go to the worst schools. Some individual high poverty schools achieve excellence with intensive efforts by a great principal or non-profit organization but most high poverty school districts have the least experienced teachers, the highest teacher shortages, the most run-down buildings, the fewest extra-curricular activities, the least special help for struggling students, and the most children already behind their middle class counterparts when they enter kindergarten.

Since a good education is a major route out of poverty, poor or mediocre schools perpetuate disadvantage. According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, only about 61 percent of students in Mississippi graduate from high school with a regular diploma in four years.) A 2005 report of the Mississippi public schools’ class of 2002 found that just 33 percent of those who did graduate that year were “college ready”; that is, prepared to undertake the minimum requirements of a four year college or university.¹⁶

These realities play out at Madison Palmer High School. The building dates back to the 1960s and until a few years ago had no air conditioning. Bond issues for new schools are harder to get passed in poor areas, so a visible disparity exists between school buildings and resources in the impoverished Delta and those in the wealthy suburbs of Jackson, the state capital.

Trailers set up behind the main school building house some classes and activities. The choir was practicing in one of them during a visit. The director, Kimberly Morgan, was the second Black woman to be Miss Mississippi. To everyone's surprise and delight, she returned to teach at Madison Palmer after her year as royalty rather than move on to Atlanta or Hollywood. "I spiritually felt connected here," she said.

I asked the students in the choir what young people in Quitman County need. "More job opportunities for teenagers. More things for us to do. There's no boys' or girls' club or skating rink or movie house or bowling alley. Basketball is not *all* we want to do." Morgan added to her wish list: "A choral room with chairs and a piano. Choir robes. I would *love* to have choir robes."

In 2008, Superintendent Towner put better early childhood education at the top of his list of what the children of Quitman County need. He thought the local Head Start program "needs to strengthen work in academic areas, instead of just social areas. It's not vocabulary driven. Some children come into kindergarten without knowing how to spell or write their names.

The \$1 million in federal stimulus money provided to the Quitman County school system has made it possible for Towner to achieve the top item on this list. In August 2009, the district began offering pre-kindergarten classes with two teachers and two aides paid for with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds, Towner said.

"With the stimulus money, we've been able to preserve some jobs and create new jobs and programs," Towner said. "We have some differentiated science teachers now, after-school tutoring, new software and and a special ed bus. We're waiting on bids for a special ed building."

He would also like to "do whatever it takes to attract good teachers and train our teachers but that would take more financial resources than we have." About 20 percent of teachers in Quitman County are not certified, he said, and recruiting is difficult in a place with so few amenities. No Child Left Behind did not help the schools in Quitman County. Its sanctions were meaningless because there are no other schools for parents to choose as alternatives and firing everyone in a poorly performing school would result in an even more severe teacher shortage.

Like many high poverty schools, test scores and graduation rates are low. During the 2008-2009 school year, Nathan Sison, one of the system's Teach for America teachers, started an after-school and weekend workshop on the ACT college entrance exam. He teaches an advanced placement class and started the workshop because the students wanted it. "They asked me to help." Those who came, he said, are intelligent and hard-working. "There are students at this school who are amazing and can go places."

Andrea Shegog, the high school counselor, said a majority of seniors take the ACT test. The scores are good enough to get into some public colleges in Mississippi but not enough to be admitted into a big state college elsewhere. About two graduates each year make it to the University of Mississippi. Superintendent Towner said none make it to an Ivy League or top grade private college. "They don't have the scores and couldn't afford to go except with full scholarships," he said. About 30 percent of graduates go to college, he said, primarily to the two junior colleges in neighboring counties. Those who enter four-year colleges most often go to Mississippi's historically Black state universities: Mississippi Valley, Jackson State and Alcorn.

Shegog said she never asks why students choose junior colleges. "That's where they naturally want to go. It's the adjustment if they haven't gone off by themselves before. They want to start small and stay close to home." Community college is also cheaper, especially if you commute from home. The costs of attending college have risen faster than Pell grants and other financial assistance options.

Carlos, a high school senior who tutored middle school students in the computer room at the North Delta Youth Opportunities Center, had plans to go to a four-year college next year. He played t-ball as a young man, then baseball in high school. He coached in a Pony League and got a lot of awards. He attended Sison's ACT workshops, says he loves math and is good at it. Hilliard Lackey III, the Marks native who teaches at Jackson State University, encouraged him to come there to study computer engineering.



The scoreboard at Madison Palmer High School.

His dreams were modest. “I’d like to live in a big house and have legal money and a nice family.” He said a couple of his friends were thinking about Jackson State and Delta State but “many seniors don’t think college is for them. I have a friend who dropped out in 12th grade and took the GED. And he made a 20 ACT score! He thinks about all the money he’d have to pay back” if he went to college. “He’s working at McDonalds.” Carlos himself is now attending an area junior college because he didn’t have the test scores to go to Jackson State and did not attend the summer program there to bring them up.

Lackey recruits about 10 students from Marks every year, although the word “recruits” doesn’t do justice to the range of his activities. He speaks to the juniors and seniors about setting goals and the benefits of going to college. He advises those who are interested on improving their grades and follows up on how they are doing. He helps with the applications for admission and for grants, scholarships and work study programs. He takes them to Jackson State football games in Jackson and Memphis. They (and students from other schools elsewhere) are paid to come to a pre-college program before their freshman year. He invites the Marks students into his home when they start college and keeps in touch through text-messaging. Those studying and doing well in science or business are almost guaranteed a summer internship, often in Houston or Atlanta, and after graduation, a job—or they were prior to the recession.

“Inspire and motivate. That’s the crusade of the historically Black college. That’s our niche,” Lackey said. “(Jackson State) can’t compete with Ole Miss or Mississippi State. We have to go the extra step to nurture.” In his 40 plus years at the university, he’s recruited about 400 Quitman County students to Jackson State. They now work in government or non-profit agencies, as lower-level or middle managers in businesses and

as computer engineers, teachers, school administrators, accountants and nurses. A few became doctors and lawyers. "I can't think of any one of them living in poverty today," he said. This year, the top four graduates from Madison Palmer's class of 2010 are attending Jackson State.

Young people who get associate degrees from the area junior colleges often find themselves just a baby step out of poverty. LaTosha Jones, 24, who is the tutoring director for North Delta's after-school program, graduated from Coahoma County Community College with the help of a Pell Grant in 2005. She was earning \$580 a month for the part-time job and paid \$385 in rent. She said she has trouble paying all her bills and lacks health insurance.

Those who don't graduate from high school usually remain mired in poverty. Girls find themselves like Marietha, with children and occasional, marginal jobs that don't provide enough money, training or momentum to move up to a better life. Young men without degrees rarely find long-term productive work and become what the U.S. Department of Labor terms "the permanently discouraged." All too typically, some deal drugs and wind up in prison.

One Madison Palmer High School graduate attending Jackson State said that a lot of the guys he grew up with are "just sitting around the house. They don't think they have potential. They're afraid of leaving home and exploring new things and meeting new people. They think if they go elsewhere, they won't succeed." Does that mean that they don't have dreams? "I think they have dreams, but they don't know how to express them or they don't think they can get them."



Following Hurricane Katrina, children taking up shelter in the Superdome saw fights and shootings and later drew pictures covered in crayon red blood. This illustration was done by a displaced child living at Renaissance Village in Baton Rouge, La.

New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Childhood Interrupted

“Awareness was raised about the scale of poverty in New Orleans, but the response didn’t match. Much more has been done to restore buildings and infrastructure than to rebuild families.”

— Ron McClain, CEO of the Family Services Society of Greater New Orleans

Just as Robert Kennedy’s visit to the starving children of the Mississippi Delta brought poverty to the attention of the nation in the 1960s, television images of the children and families trapped in New Orleans during and after Katrina in August 2005 made poverty visible once again. The world saw them standing in the hot sun on the interstate for days awaiting rescue, surviving with little or no food or water in the fetid Convention Center or on the roofs of their flooded homes or in the dangerous Superdome.

These families had various reasons for not evacuating the city but the principal one was poverty. They had no car, no friend or family member elsewhere to stay with, no money for a motel. Their plight revealed not only the extent of poverty in New Orleans—23.8 percent, nearly twice the national average of 14.3 percent—but also the woefully inadequate response of all levels of government to their suffering.

By now, five years later, most Gulf coast children from families with resources are settled back into homes and schools. Stability is still lacking for poor children and their families. After experiencing the worst trauma during and after the storm, many have spent the years since Katrina in nomadic uncertainty, staying in shelters, motels, formaldehyde-laden trailers, apartments in distant cities, or doubled or tripled up with relatives in New Orleans. Today, thousands of Katrina children are seriously behind in school, acting out and suffering from shockingly high rates of health and mental health problems. They lost not only all of their belongings but a big block of schooling and sizeable chunk of their childhoods. They are experiencing multiple challenges:

Housing Instability. Even when they received funds from a federal program for Katrina-affected homeowners, the poorer families did not have enough money to rebuild their homes that were flooded when the levees failed. Many others rented, and owners of rental properties were not eligible for rebuilding assistance. Four large public housing projects in New Orleans have been demolished since the storm. Planned affordable housing is on hold because of neighborhood objections and the recession. Nearly 60 percent of renters now pay more than 35 percent of their income on housing; compared with 41 percent of renters nationally.¹⁷

Temporary housing vouchers issued to some evacuee families in Houston and in Baton Rouge when the trailer parks closed were phased out in the Spring of 2009. Family homelessness has increased, with the numbers of homeless people in New Orleans nearly double that in the city before Katrina.¹⁸ Jason, a nine-year-old interviewed for this report, counted up 11 places he has lived. He was staying in a homeless shelter with his mother and sister.

School Instability. The Recovery School District in New Orleans, which operates 23 schools and manages 46 public charter schools, had an extraordinary influx of students in March 2009, when the housing vouchers began to end. Families from Houston and other cities returned to New Orleans, adding more than 200 children to the 33 schools it operates. “This is just two months before the school year ends! A horrible time for children



A child survivor of Hurricane Katrina looks at his new home, Renaissance City in Baton Rouge, La.

to go to new school,” said Michael Haggren, then deputy superintendent for school management. Some of the Louisiana children interviewed for this report do not attend school regularly even five years after the storm.

Family Instability. The stresses of post-Katrina life produced a higher incidence of divorce, domestic violence and alcohol abuse, says Joy Osofsky, a professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at the Louisiana State University (LSU) Health Sciences Center who helped direct a mental health screening of children after the storm. Some children now live with a different parent or relative than they did before the storm. And since many poor children in New Orleans lived near their extended family, Katrina knocked out their community support system. “They saw the destruction of life as they knew it,” said Sister Judith Brun, the nun who works with Katrina refugees still living in Baton Rouge. “Their social fabric is gone. They might have been hanging on by a thread but now, it’s gone.”

Jermaine: The lost years

Jermaine, 17, is a shy, slender, soft-spoken teen with long curly eyelashes and a new mustache. His brother Jamal, 15, was profiled in two previous Children’s Defense Fund reports on Katrina children when the boys and their father, Griffin, lived in Renaissance Village, the largest of the trailer camps for Katrina refugees—575 trailers on 62 treeless acres located just north of Baton Rouge.

For Jermaine and Jamal, the past five years are a story of loss, insecurity and indifference from the public institutions charged with involvement in their lives. Throughout it all, Jermaine has made a steady, brave effort to find support and stability and to maintain at least a glimmer of hope for the future.

In New Orleans, the boys, their father and grandmother lived in a rented three bedroom home in the mid-city neighborhood. The boys and their father were picked up by a rescue boat and taken to the banks of Bayou St. John. “Then helicopters came to get people,” Jermaine remembers. “They got the old and sick people out first and then the children. We didn’t want to get lost or mixed up with other people so we stayed with my dad. We had to sleep on the bayou for like two or three days. Then we got on the helicopter. I was so scared I was covering my face. Me and Jamal kept asking, ‘Where are we going to go?’ The worst thing was, we didn’t know whether our grandmother was dead or alive because she and my auntie left before us.”

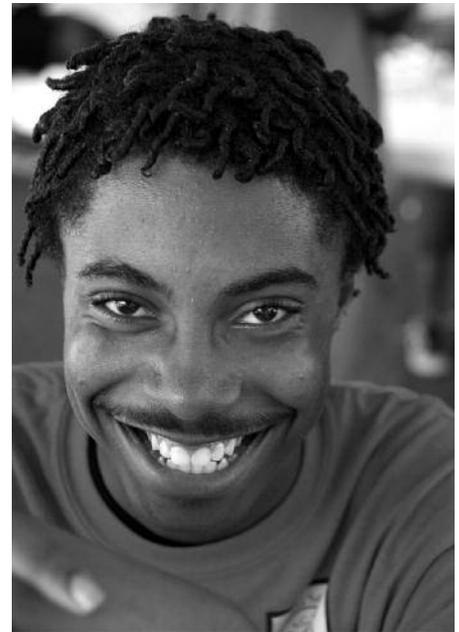
After staying in several shelters in Baton Rouge for a few months, the boys and their father spent *two and a half years* in Renaissance Village, where Jermaine eventually grew too long for the built-in bed in the small trailer, less than 400 square feet, and slept on the sofa. He missed his friends in New Orleans and his grandmother, who “saw us on TV and called from California,” where she wound up after the storm.

School might have been a refuge from the cramped, dreary environment of the trailer encampment but it wasn’t for Jermaine, Jamal and many other evacuee children. A principal reason: constant fighting, especially for the boys. Every boy interviewed in Louisiana for this report talked about fighting in school, which verifies the mental health surveys that found a very high incidence of anger among Katrina-affected and poor children. Sister Judith calls it a “default of anger and fussiness, of arguing instead of conversing” that she believes may be a common characteristic of children growing up in poverty.

For Jermaine, going to school meant trying to avoid fights. “When I started going to school in Baton Rouge, there was a whole lot of mess about New Orleans versus Baton Rouge. They told us we needed to go back under the water and stuff like that. So a lot of New Orleans children were getting in fights and getting suspended. I had a fight and I didn’t want to go anymore because I didn’t want to deal with that everyday. I loved going to school in New Orleans. Then when we came out here, I felt like, ‘I don’t want to go. It’s just going to be another day of me getting sent home for somebody messing with me.’” A study done in Renaissance Village found that two-thirds of the children living there did not attend school regularly.¹⁹

Between being suspended and just staying home, Jermaine’s grades began to drop. In February 2008, at age 15, he quit going to school altogether. He had not earned a single credit in more than two years. The school system in East Baton Rouge paid little attention. After he flunked out of seventh grade, it allowed him to skip eighth grade and begin high school. After three semester of irregular attendance, he left Baton Rouge and moved in with a family in a New Orleans suburb and got a job at a Dairy Queen.

By then, more and more families were moving out of Renaissance Village. The families with the most resources moved first, leaving the poorest families behind. Griffin, who has no car, got work on occasion but



Jermaine, 17, is a shy, slender, soft-spoken teen with long curly eyelashes and a new mustache.

“The Sickest Children I Have Seen”

Louisiana ranks 49th in the nation in a state-by-state study on the well-being of America’s children²⁰ and 47th in the percentage of the population lacking access to quality health and mental health care.²¹ The children of Katrina who stayed the longest in the Federal Emergency Management Assistance (FEMA) trailer parks have the most severe health problems. “They are the sickest children I have ever seen in the U.S.,” said Irwin Redlener, president of the Children’s Health Fund and a professor at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health.²²

The Children’s Health Fund placed a mobile medical van staffed by doctors and psychologists at Renaissance Village and sent other vans to schools in impoverished neighborhoods in Baton Rouge. Some of the van’s patients at the schools were displaced poor children from New Orleans; others were poor children who grew up in Baton Rouge. In 2008, researchers reviewed the medical charts of 261 children seen by doctors in the vans from January through September that year. Many of them (more than 40 percent) had iron-deficiency anemia, allergic rhinitis or upper respiratory infections and behavioral, mental health or learning problems. More than 25 percent had a vision or hearing problem. More than half the children examined in the van required at least one specialist referral.²³

Children lost so much in the aftermath of the hurricane. Of the more than 12,000 public school children in greater New Orleans screened by Louisiana State University’s Health Sciences Center in the years following the storm, about 65 percent had damaged homes, 20 percent reported that a family member had been injured, 15 percent reported that a family member had been killed, 26 percent were separated from their caregivers at some point, 33 percent were separated from a pet. The children had gone to an average of two schools, with a maximum of nine, after Katrina.²⁴

The emotional impact continues, and mental health remains a persistent problem. For its August 2010 five-year status report called “Legacy of Katrina,” Children’s Health Fund researchers asked parents and caregivers of children who’d been displaced to trailers parks or motels a set of questions that screen for “serious emotional disturbance” – defined as having a diagnosable psychiatric disorder that severely disrupts social, academic and emotional functioning. They found:²⁵

- 45 percent of parents said their children were experiencing emotional or psychological problems that they did not prior to Katrina.
- 33 percent of the children in the study have been clinically diagnosed at least once with a mood, anxiety or behavioral disorder, according to their parents or caregivers.
- 35 percent of the children met criteria for severe emotional disturbance, compared with national rates of five to nine percent.
- 52 percent of parents thought their children needed professional help for their problems but did not receive it.
- 33 percent of parents living within 10 miles of the coast line reported that their children had experienced either physical symptoms or mental health distress as the consequence of the recent oil spill.

The LSU Health Sciences Center found similar mental health problems in the more than 12,000 public school students it screened. *Forty-five percent of fourth to 12th graders met the cut-off for mental health referral. Twenty-five percent of younger children, ages one through eight, met the cut-off for mental health services* based on parent reports, and 34 percent of the parents requested counseling. Symptoms most commonly reported were depression, post-traumatic stress and anger, with more fighting and bullying reported by schools.²⁶

Some of the hospitals, health and mental health clinics that flooded after the levees broke have been restored and new ones have been created. Still, the needs far exceed the services. “As far as mental health needs, recovery has been very slow,” Joy Osofsky, of the LSU Health Sciences Center said. In 2009, the Center provided mental health services in 15 public schools in New Orleans—out of 89. “We can’t be in all of them. We don’t have the funding,” Osofsky said, adding that for the following school year “we don’t even have the funding to continue with all the schools we’re in now” because of state budget cuts.

Also to save money, the state of Louisiana closed the only public institution in New Orleans with in-patient beds for children with mental illness—the New Orleans Adolescent Hospital (NOAH)—and moved the patients to a hospital in Mandeville, 35 miles away. Among the groups who protested the move was the New Orleans Police Department, which said that without NOAH, officers would have nowhere to take the mentally ill teenagers they arrest or are called upon to control.

did not earn enough to finance a rental deposit and a move for him and his sons. FEMA closed Renaissance Village and other trailer camps by the end of May 2008, giving temporary housing vouchers to some, though not all, of the remaining families.

Jermaine was devastated when his godparents and their children, who’d become his best friends at the trailer camp, left a few months before the camp closed. “One day they were packing up their stuff. I said, “Where are ya’ll going?’ And they said they were going back to New Orleans. ‘Ya’ll are *leaving* me? Why are ya’ll leaving me?’” They said he could come live with them. This was the family he moved in with outside New Orleans.

In the Fall of 2008, Jermaine tried to enroll in school with his friends but wasn’t allowed because he didn’t have his birth certificate. He returned to Baton Rouge in October and moved into a one-bedroom apartment occupied by his father, brother and grandmother in a low-income neighborhood called Mall City. Sister Judith helped him enroll in the ninth grade at a high school near their new location.

This process became another trauma. The family could barely get together the documents needed to prove his address. Then school officials hesitated when they saw that he had previously registered under his father’s last name and not the name on his birth certificate. Jermaine had tears in his eyes as he was forced to explain that his mother was in prison, said Sister Judith, who accompanied him. Then came another blow: Because he had missed so much already, he would receive no credit for the fall semester.

Jermaine’s father, a high school dropout himself, thought it was pointless for Jermaine to attend without credit and wanted to find him a job, but Jermaine went to school. He took the bus each day from the family’s apartment in a two-story L-shaped building that looks like a motel. The apartment was “bigger than our trailer was, and I appreciate that,” he said. But he and his brother had no space of their own, no private place to do homework, and no computer. They didn’t even have their own beds. Their grandmother slept on one bed, they slept on another, and their father slept on the couch. The family lived on the money the father earned at occasional jobs and the grandmother’s social security.

By March 2009, a few rays of sunshine had penetrated Jermaine’s world. He likes his current school. “I take agriculture, math, algebra and English. My favorite is English class. We have fun. I like my English teacher.” He said his grades are better and he’s starting to catch up on what he missed.

He’s also found friends. For months after he moved to the apartment, he felt isolated. “I really didn’t have anybody to talk to. I mostly stayed inside until my grandmother told me I had two cousins who went to school with me. We didn’t know we were cousins but ever since then, we been hanging around and they take me to their church and I sometimes go to their house on weekends. So it’s going better.”

His brother, Jamal, though, appears to remain in darkness. At 14, he was in the fifth grade. He was attending school irregularly but just shrugged when asked about it. Summer plans? Another shrug. His standard response to questions about his world is, “It’s okay.” He seems numb.

Justin: An Angry Boy

Justin lived with his father and older sister in a trailer in Renaissance Village for two years, and his potential as a very bright child began to fade. Justin, now 15, is articulate and analytical, but the upheaval, the unknowns and lack of control following Katrina made him frustrated and angry.

Just before the storm, he, his older sister, father and stepmother left their home in New Orleans East and went to stay with the stepmother’s relatives in Baton Rouge. “They didn’t want us to stay, my dog got killed and my dad and step mom got into it and I didn’t see her ever since.” Justin said as we ate lunch in a fast food restaurant in Mall City.

“Then we went to a shelter and then to the trailer park. I felt scared. Would I be able to go to New Orleans again? Would it get better? What was going to happen to the economy? It was hard for me to concentrate in school. We thought our mom had died because we didn’t have contact. And my dad. He worked on the docks in New Orleans. How will he get a job in Baton Rouge?”



Justin, now 15, is articulate and analytical, but the upheaval, the unknowns and lack of control following Katrina made him frustrated and angry.

At Renaissance Village, Justin said, “I stayed in fights. I had a BB gun. I was shooting at trailers, busting the windows. I felt bad. I got around the wrong crowd. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t care. That was me after Katrina. I was taking people’s bikes, too. Happiness was gone.” He stopped and added, “I wish I could take you in the past and show you all of what happened.”

Asked about his worst day, he named two. One was his arrest for shoplifting with some buddies. The second was his father’s arrest in New Orleans a few months after he went back to his former job on the docks. By

then, Justin’s birth mother, who had gone to Texas after the storm, had come to Baton Rouge to take care of Justin and his sister. She got a small apartment across from the detox center where she worked as a housekeeper. With the father working and sending money, the family seemed to be getting back on its feet. Then crash—another life change entirely out of Justin’s control. He said he argued constantly with his mother. “I was so used to being with my dad. It was hard to control me.”

His best day? “When I went to Boy’s Hope,” a national program for low-income, at-risk, academically capable and motivated children. Since the fall of 2008, Justin has lived in a Boy’s Hope residence in Baton Rouge, attends a Catholic school, and comes home on weekends once a month. Sister Judith paid for him to be tested and helped him get admitted.

New Orleans Schools: Built-in Disparities

Just before Katrina, New Orleans' many academically failing public schools were about to be taken over by the state; the system's out-of-control finances had been handed over to a private management firm; teachers had to buy supplies like toilet paper; and any number of school bathrooms didn't work properly. Students who were already years behind in school fell further behind in the chaos after the storm. Many saw Katrina as an opportunity to remake a dysfunctional school system.

Five years later, the public school landscape has changed dramatically, with 58 charter schools. The state's Recovery School District (RSD), which took over the city's failing schools after Katrina, now operates 22 schools and oversees 46 of the charter schools. The New Orleans Parish School District remains in charge of the schools not deemed failing; four are operated by the parish school system; 12 are charters. A total of 86 schools were open in the fall of 2010, with 38,000 students, compared with 129 schools with 66,372 students in October 2004.²⁷ The student body remains overwhelmingly African American. Although the proliferation of different types of schools has been confusing, parents now have much more choice.

Since the storm, the system has become a focus of national interest, support, ideas and financing. FEMA funds paid to restore or rebuild some of the damaged schools; five newly constructed or completely renovated schools have opened since last fall and almost 20 more projects are underway.²⁸ Paul Vallas, the superintendent of the Recovery School District for the past three years, has a national reputation. New Orleans has more Teach for America teachers than any city outside New York and more charter schools, proportionally, than any other city in the nation. Several are Knowledge is Power and Performance (K.I.P.P) schools that have shown success nationally with low-income students. National organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund work inside schools to support students and their families.

There is no question that these efforts have made a difference. In general, the schools today appear to be in better physical condition and more hopeful and positive than they were five years ago. In the Louisiana Department of Education's School Performance Scores, which combine test scores, attendance and drop out data, the percentage of New Orleans public schools rated "academically unacceptable" in 2010 was down by nearly half from two years ago. Although the Recovery School District (RSD) remained the second-worst district in the state in School Performance Scores, it had the highest percent increase—11.4 percent.²⁹ In 2009, for the first time ever in the New Orleans system, teachers in some schools received bonuses for boosting student performance.³⁰

Scores on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) math and English exams given to fourth and eighth graders in the Spring of 2010 improved across most grade levels and school types. Statewide, the number of students scoring at a basic level or above increased by only a single percentage point from 2009, to 65 percent. In New Orleans, schools overseen by the Recovery School District improved their combined pass rate from 37 percent to 43 percent – by far the largest increase in the state. In the past three years since 2007, the RSD schools as a group have increased their test scores by 27 percent.³¹

Still, a sizable gap remains between achievement scores in the city and the rest of Louisiana, and the criterion for passing is not high. The five categories for achievement are: advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory. To pass to the next grade, a student must score “basic” on either the math or English portion and at least “approaching basic” in the other subject.

Equally important is this: All public schools in New Orleans are not the same. The neediest children, those from the poorest and most unstable households, go to the worst schools. The great experiment of today’s New Orleans school system has not been able to erase this tragic disparity that characterizes American education and perpetuates inequality.

Although not every New Orleans charter school is high performing, almost all the top performing schools are charters, along with a few schools still in the hands of the Orleans Parish School Board that have selective admissions. Conversely, the poorest performing schools are the non-charter, formerly failing public schools now operated by the state RSD. At the bottom was HOPE Academy, a state-run alternative school operating on the old Booker T. Washington High School campus, where only five percent of eighth graders passed the state’s English Language Arts assessment.³² About 75 percent of students in the RSD operated schools are at least two years behind, according to Siona LaFrance, the RSD’s chief of staff.

The difference does not necessarily reflect efforts by the leadership of the charters vs. the non-charters or RSD vs. the Orleans Parish School District. To boost achievement in the 23 RSD operated schools, Vallas has lengthened the school day and year, ungraded technology, spent more per pupil, and begun restructuring failing high schools, among other reforms. The disparity in outcomes springs primarily from the advantages of the charter schools, which are supposed to accept all students regardless of academic ability. The charters attract more involved parents who shop more assertively for schools, and they serve fewer special needs students. The RSD schools must accept students enrolling throughout the year, while charters can cap their enrollment, giving them a more stable student population. And students expelled from charter schools wind up in the RSD operated schools.³³

“I say we have five school districts: the private schools, the Orleans Parish schools, the charter schools, the RSD schools and the Archdiocese voucher students,” said former Juvenile Court Judge Bell, who saw the school system’s failures in his courtroom. “The state pays the Catholic schools for students using vouchers. When they don’t perform well, they’re put out and they go to the RSD schools, which are now under funded because the head count was already done.”

“At first I said ‘no’ but when I went to visit, I didn’t hear no one fighting,” Justin said. “They help you out academic-wise and the house is nice. My roommate is the smartest kid there. I learn a lot from him. At first, I wanted to fight him. He got on my nerves but I had to keep my behavior contract. I like the staff, too. We went to an LSU game. We went to the harness races. New people. New places.”

Although Justin still has bouts of rage, Sister Judith is certain he will make it. “We took him out of his environment,” she said. “Of course, we can’t do that with even a fraction of needy children.” Especially now, she said, when contributions have dropped. Her biggest “mind quake” since she started working with poor children is this: “People don’t change if the environment doesn’t change. To help children, you have to help families and neighborhoods.”



Sister Judith Brun shelters a young girl at Renaissance City in Baton Rouge, La.

“I realized I would have to be their safety net”

FEMA did not keep records of the names and numbers of children in the trailer camps so there is no official follow-up on their status or needs.³⁴ Sister Judith knows more than FEMA or the Louisiana Recovery Agency about what happened to the children who lived in Renaissance Village. That situation had prompted her to get involved with the children and to form two organizations to help their families expose not only the large holes in the federal, state and local safety net but a bureaucracy not structured or committed to do whatever it takes to keep families afloat and prevent children from falling by the wayside.

A former Catholic high school principal, Sister Judith began working for the Baton Rouge Foundation and launched an effort to improve public schools just before Katrina struck. Seeing the bleak situation for families at Renaissance Village, she created the Community Initiatives Foundation and raised funds to help children there.

As the trailer park neared its closing date, most of the residents remaining were, as she put it, “the maladjusted or still traumatized and really poor.” FEMA gave temporary housing vouchers to some individuals and families to pay for housing. In a rush to find places near the end, some were placed into housing too expensive for them to afford once the subsidies go away. Others were deemed ineligible for a variety of reasons.

With this ineligible group, Sister Judith said, “I realized that once the trailers went, they had nothing. They were going to be homeless in Baton Rouge. I realized that I would have to be their safety net.” Her organization got together with the Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless to subsidize the rents of 100 households, many with children, and to pay occasional utility bills for another 100 households to help them

avoid eviction. Later, they formed an organization called Neighbors Keepers to provide mental health and social services to poor families and children in Mall City, where a number of Katrina refugees live.

Like Robert Jamison in Lambert, Miss., Sister Judith and her staff see the needs, large and small, of poor children and the daily stresses in their lives. Putting Katrina aside, Sister Judith believes that poverty itself is traumatic and destructive because “you’re always living in survival mode. To plan for high school or what you want to be when you grow up or saving money for college isn’t part of your thinking. Poor families never have any money so why would they want to save it in case it goes away or something happens? Immediate needs are so much more pressing. Poor children don’t get to be part of family decisions—where to take a vacation, where to live—because their parents are reacting to the moment. They don’t learn control because they don’t have any. When you’re surviving, you grab what’s there and do what you can with it. I think that’s one of the terrible things that come from being a survivor. The system of planning, predicting and delaying that helps people succeed is just not part of what’s built into your views or responses.”

Sister Judith views the social services provided to Katrina refugees in Baton Rouge as a model of what not to do with the neediest families. “It’s a product model, which I think is the federal poverty model. Here’s a housing voucher, here’s a list of landlords, here’s a food stamp application. There’s no personal engagement or advocacy. When you’re dealing with survivors, you have to work with people, not products.”

The Neighbors Keepers staff also has discovered the barriers and gaps in services for families and children in federal, state and local programs. If Medicaid or food stamps lapse—in some cases, notice is sent to an old address—people have to get transportation downtown to reapply or are put on hold for 30 minutes on calls they make from pay-as-you-go cell phones. Also, truancy reporting is poor, and designated “wrap-around” services for problem families aren’t sufficiently wrapped around. Sometimes, the most dysfunctional families are dropped altogether. With many social agencies, “If you miss three appointments, you’re terminated,” Sister Judith said she suspects that the same gaps and rules exist in many places, and some agency must be designated to pick up dropped families. “We shouldn’t allow children to suffer because of the dysfunction of a parent.”

Navia: A self-raised child

Navia, age 14, wasn’t at home on a weekday afternoon in 2009, though she wasn’t in school. She was at another home babysitting for a cousin’s child. Her mother, Michelle, opened the door to the dark, meagerly furnished house in Baton Rouge. Her youngest child, Trely, age three, held onto her leg. As soon as she sat down on the worn couch, her cell phone rang. The water company was calling about her overdue bill. “I will try to do that,” she said. “It’s just so hard. My debit card only has \$15 on it. How much do I owe exactly?” She owed \$67.55 on a payment plan worked out for a previous bill. “I wasn’t able to catch up,” she explained with tears in her voice. The water had been cut off for three days.

One misfortune that can trap a family in poverty is a disabled parent. Michelle suffers from schizophrenia and depression. When Katrina struck, she was in the psychiatric ward at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. “I was raped on my way home one night and I kept it hid. I didn’t tell no one and I had a breakdown behind it. The kids saw me not acting normal. I was pregnant with Trely then. I was really frightened and scared for my family. I wasn’t around to my normal thinking. I had put a lid on things that happened in my past.”

She grew up in the St. Bernard housing project in New Orleans. Her mother was disabled – a severe diabetic who now is blind. She was raped as a child, her best friend was murdered and when she was 11, she found a dead baby while playing outside. “I got good grades but I didn’t finish high school, she said. “I got married real young and started having babies.” She had been hospitalized twice before her confinement in Charity Hospital in August 2005. During those times and when she was not functioning well, “the kids raised themselves,” she said. “My husband was having his freedom.” She speaks slowly, with occasional sighs.

One son was attending community college and had a job at a fast food restaurant. The other just got out of jail and was living with her. Her 18-year-old daughter, Joy, has an infant and also lived in the household. When Joy was young and the family lived in the St. Bernard project, Michelle said, she was shot in the leg by a stray bullet while putting up Christmas decorations. Navia was the child who distressed her the most now.

“I’m trying to find a good word,” she said. “She angers very quickly with me. I can’t give her...It’s like the times I was out of her life. She doesn’t recognize me as being there for her. She tries anything and everything not to go to school. I try but sometimes it’s not hard enough. The medications I take brought me back to my normal way of thinking, but sometimes I can’t get out of the bed. She doubts she should listen to me. I hear doubt, and it’s hurtful.”

A short time later, Navia returned holding her cousin’s baby on her hip. Instead of going to school, she often babysat for her cousin’s or her sister’s babies. She also helped care for her blind, diabetic grandmother who was living with Michelle’s sister about a mile away. She changed her grandmother’s clothes and helped feed her meals and her medicine because “my auntie can’t do it by herself.” She hung out with her friends. Navia spent two days on the I-10 overpass in New Orleans after Katrina, then a month in the Astrodome in Houston, worried about her mother, whom she was told had died. Eventually, half the large extended family settled in Baton Rouge; the other half is in New Orleans, meaning that half the family safety net is gone.

In New Orleans, Michelle’s husband lived with the family, though her description of the situation was not positive. When she was evacuated from Charity after the storm, she was hospitalized in Alexandria, La., for a while. Through the Red Cross, she said, her husband and siblings located her and brought her to Baton Rouge. He obtained FEMA housing vouchers in his name, and the family lived together for a while. He and Michelle broke up and he went back to New Orleans. At some point, he called FEMA and said he wasn’t living in the household. FEMA then accused Michelle of fraud and stopped paying rental assistance. Neighbors Keepers helped her get other rental assistance. Navia said of her father: “I love him but I don’t respect him.”

The family subsisted on Michelle’s disability check, food stamps, food pantries and rental assistance. She was receiving mental health treatment through the local human services agency. Neighbors Keepers provided the housing portion of the family’s care and has also stepped in during emergencies and provided other services because no one else was doing it.

On the wall of Navia’s bedroom was a certificate for being an outstanding kindergartener in 2000-2001 in New Orleans. She said she was on the honor roll in elementary school there. Neighbors Keepers had her tested for intelligence and aptitude and found out that she has “good horsepower” but limited knowledge and no traction or motivation because she’s left to her own devices, said Toni Bankston, mental health director for Neighbors Keepers.

Why hasn’t she been going to school? Navia said she was in a school one year that the state was about to take over as a failing school. She thought it was going to be closed and, in the meantime, the family moved. She started the 2008-2009 year in a different school nearer to their present location but she didn’t like it. “The dress code was too strict,” she said, and her friends were still at the former school. She persuaded her mother to let her drop out in order to return to the previous school, but she didn’t attend on a regular basis. When Navia missed taking the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) test, required to go on to the next grade, she gave up on the year. Why did she miss the test? She didn’t have a new pair of pants and didn’t want to show up at the school looking bad.

Obviously, Navia is making poor decisions but she is self-raised, without routine or direction. Sister Judith thinks that the problem with children raising themselves goes beyond no planning and bad decisions. “It keeps them from being able to collaborate and trust and work with others. When you’re self-reared, you’re always looking out for yourself. You don’t learn how to hold hands when crossing the street. You don’t learn the value, place and needs of other people. I think it can become the basis for criminal activity.”

David Bell, former chief justice of the juvenile court in New Orleans, also spoke of self-raised children. “We have teenagers arrested who are reading at the second grade level, who have been in seven schools, and who have a parent with a health or mental health issue. This child basically has to fend for himself. It’s not a normal childhood. In his mind, he’s an adult. You can’t tell him what to do. We need to figure out a way to communicate and connect. They don’t know how to ask for what they need, and we don’t know how to answer.”

Navia insisted that she would go to school the next year. “I want to go to high school and get it over with. I don’t want to be like my sister and have a baby at 16. I want to be the first in our family not to have a baby before 20.” She didn’t seem to realize that missing a year of school would make it more difficult for her to reach that goal.

No truant officer ever came to the home. In the spring, Bankston called the school where Navia was enrolled to find out if she had been reported truant. The school said they had reported it. Nothing happened, and Bankston later called the school board office and learned that it had no record of a report on Navia’s absences. She was told that someone would go out to the house again, time passed and nothing happened. Bankston called again and was told, “There are just four days left in the year.”

“I said, ‘We need an outside authority or Navia will do nothing over the summer. How about summer school?’” Bankston said. She was told that someone would get back to her. She got a message on her voice mail a few days later. Navia had missed too much school to be able to move on to the next year so she was not eligible to go to summer school. The message ended: “If you have any other questions, please don’t hesitate to call.”

Jason: A homeless boy

In April 2009, Jason, age nine, was living with his mother and 11-year-old sister in the New Orleans Women’s Shelter. They had been living there for eight months, while she saved enough money from her job as a cook to afford an apartment, a deposit and furniture. The shelter, a homey place created after the storm, can accommodate 20 women and children, and it is always full, its founder, Jackie Silverman, said. “This week, we had to turn away a woman with four children.”

Jason could count 11 places he had lived in his short life. When Katrina struck, they lived in a rental home in the Lower 9th Ward that was destroyed when the levee broke. They were staying at a grandmother’s house in another part of town until the roof started to fall in. Then came a series of hotels and apartments in Houston, where Jason’s mother worked as a cook in a Burger King and as a home health aide. She wanted to come back where her mother and family live, so they returned to New Orleans in July 2008. She found an apartment, but a glitch prevented her FEMA housing voucher from transferring from Texas to Louisiana. They crammed themselves in with family until space became available in the shelter.

“I know this is a good place,” Jason said as we sat in the shared living room of the large shelter. “I just wish I could be in an actual house with my own room and closet and stuff.”

He was attending an RSD school but wasn’t there that day because he had been suspended for—this won’t come as a surprise—fighting. “People want to fight me. They pick on me. They told another boy to fight me. I got frustrated and fed up and when he started swinging, I started swinging too.” They were both suspended for two days. He missed his “only true friend” in Houston but says he “used to be suspended even more in Houston. There I was fighting a whole lot of the time.”

What is it with all this fighting? His mother said, “Children have so much anger. It comes from the parents, too. You’re upset because you have to be there in poverty. It’s sad. It hurts. Parents bring anger to the kids. ‘Hey, you’re supposed to handle this, not me.’”

There is so much that Jason, who is quick to talk and to hug, wants to have and to do in life. “I want to get on a swimming team. I never had a chance to play a sport. I mean, I played played but I never played on

a team. I always wanted to go to the beach and surf.” Afterwards, I sent him an email asking if he thought he would have a chance to do those things. He emailed in return from the computer at the shelter.

“Hi, How are you doing? I don’t think I’ll do those activities because I don’t know if they have any programs here but what I really really really really really want is a puppy.”

“All the Extreme Cases”

A morning spent at a Recovery School District (RSD) building in March 2009 dramatized the challenges the RSD system faces in educating the city’s poorest children. The building houses the office of Michael Haggen, then deputy superintendent for school management, the Welcome School where parents can enroll their children after the school year has already begun, and Excel Academy for students who have committed expellable offenses—drugs, weapons, fights—at other schools.

The RSD district has “all the extreme cases: speech and language difficulties, medical disabilities, behavior problems, schizophrenia,” Haggen said. Twelve percent of students in the RSD schools are in special education while two percent are gifted and talented. “So many of our families have just gone on and on with no psychological or social or economic help,” Haggen said. “It’s not just the kids who are angry. The violence in this city reflects that.” He estimated that as many as 35 percent of students in the RSD operated schools do not live with their parents or grandparents but, rather, by themselves or with “friends, cousins.”

As he spoke, he took a phone call. “I want that IEP done by the end of the week,” he demanded. “It’s not to have a form done. It’s for the student.” When the schools flooded, the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students in special education were destroyed. To date, the system has not yet re-evaluated all of the students who lost their IEPs, according to Haggen, who said he was “sick of” excuses from staff. The call involved a 16-year-old girl who had been enrolled in an RSD school the day earlier. “She has an ankle monitoring bracelet and a one-year-old baby. She’s in special education. She’s been in so many schools that we haven’t caught up with her for re-evaluation. We need her to stay in school.”

Another “huge problem,” Haggen said, is truancy, especially in the high schools filled with students who not only lost school time after the levees failed but were the victims of the dysfunctional education system in the years before that. Over the past three years, Paul Vallas, RSD school superintendent, has developed a truancy task force to search for teenagers on the street and a truancy center where two social workers try to find out why these students are not attending and to provide some counseling. Truant officers can issue warrants for truants 17 and older, and judges can impose fines on parents whose children are chronically truant.

Daily attendance averages 85 to 88 percent in the RSD run schools, meaning that 12 to 15 percent of students are absent on any given day, LaFrance wrote in an email. Teachers point out that truancy affects the education not only of the missing children but the children who faithfully attend because they have to keep repeating lessons.

Lateness is also a problem. “First period is a loss for the most part,” Haggen said. “The sad thing is: They want to eat. We do give them breakfast if it was the bus that was late.”

Mid-morning, Haggen attended the daily “town hall” meeting of Excel Academy where students can air grievances in a civil way. The student leading the meeting had trouble getting attention because the others were talking and laughing. A lanky boy rose and said loudly, “It’s not a joke,

homey. You still in the 'hood. Stop cuttin' corners. Ya'll got to strive, dawg. I'm tryin' to stand up and make changes in my life. If you don't make changes, dawg, it ain't gonna happen." He became so emotional that he had to leave the room. A short time later, he sat in the office of the school's social worker with his head in his hands, sobbing. His brother had been murdered over the weekend—another senseless act of violence that has taken so many young Black lives in the city, which has the highest murder rate in the nation. Children growing up in poor neighborhoods in New Orleans have many opportunities to see a dead body lying in a pool of blood on a street or sidewalk.

During the first week of March 2009, 150 new students were enrolled at the Welcome School, said William Cravens, the coordinator of placement who runs it. It was indeed a welcoming place, with couches and a rug. Cravens said the many of the families had been living in other cities around the country but came home when their FEMA housing subsidies were reduced or cut altogether. Constantly adding new children is another disruption for teachers and the students already there.

"They come in and they are so needy," said Debbie Schum, then the RSD's deputy superintendent for academic affairs. "Some lack not just academic but social skills. So many of our high school-age kids had to become mini adults, but they don't have the maturity or skills."

Some of these families are homeless. Deborah Morton, the coordinator of social work services for the RSD, said homeless families with children in the district number "1,100 to 1,200 that we know of, who acknowledge that they are homeless." This number includes families in shelters, in housing not fit for habitation, or doubled or tripled up with relatives. Many of the latter, Morton said, "only sleep there at night and have to be gone during the day. They have no permanent place to stay. For these children, school is the only stability they have."

She described one family, a mother with three children ages nine to 12. The mother, who finally got a job, hasn't yet been able to afford both the rent and the deposit for an apartment. She and the children lived in a temporary shelter with time limits and were supposed to leave on a Friday. Morton negotiated for them to stay through the weekend because she couldn't find another shelter for them.

By 2:30 Monday afternoon, she'd set up another place. She called the school the children attend and asked the social worker to put the children on a different bus than the bus they'd taken in the morning. "My social worker said she almost cried when the nine-year-old looked at her blankly, confused, yet he went ahead and did what she told him to do." She added, "And we wonder what's wrong with children and why they behave the way they do. We call it numbing, teaching yourself not to feel."

Morton has worked in the New Orleans school system for 21 years. She said that the behavioral problems that existed before Katrina have intensified since the storm, and the social work staff scrambles to make psychological assessments. Morton reported in 2009, "I have 33 social workers this year, down from 40 last year. We're told we may lose half of them next year. It's mind boggling to abandon supports now when we're moving in the right direction." In the 2010 school year, the number of social workers dropped to 17.

In May 2009, Superintendent Vallas unveiled the RSD's \$176 million budget for the 2009-2010 school year. He was told to cut costs because of the state's budget shortfall and the end of one-time funding from FEMA. It was the leanest spending plan since he took charge of the system—down 23 percent from the budget in 2008-2009. It meant cutting 155 teachers, 35 employees in the central office, and an unspecified number of social workers, nurses and security officers.³⁵ The RSD's budget for the 2010 - 2011 school year is even leaner - \$136 million. Superintendent Vallas had hoped to close the gap with ARRA stimulus funds, but received just a fraction of the expected \$16.5 million—about \$4.3 million—apparently due to a decision to use 2007 enrollment figures, according to LaFrance.



A volunteer packs a box of food as part of a recent food drive benefiting Island Harvest, an organization that serves as a bridge between those who have surplus food and those who need it on Long Island.

Long Island, New York: New Faces of Poverty

“Nobody likes to talk about poverty here.”

— Gwen O’Shea, president of the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island

Long Island, N.Y., is not the kind of place one would expect to find in a report on poor children and families. It is the birthplace of the suburban American dream, a national symbol of the single-family suburb. Unlike Orleans Parish, La., and Quitman County, Miss., Long Island’s two counties, Nassau and Suffolk, have an educated work force, well-run governments, and a long history of stability and affluence. Long Island’s child poverty rate is low compared with the two Southern states: five percent in Nassau and seven percent in Suffolk. Demographically, too, Long Island is different: its population is 80 percent White, 13 percent Hispanic, nine percent Black and five percent Asian.³⁶

Gwen O’Shea, of the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island, said that even though people on Long Island don’t like to talk about poverty, “Many families are falling into poverty or are on the cusp, living paycheck-to-paycheck, unable to pay all the bills or meet all the needs.” Tom Goodhue, executive director of the Long Island Council of Churches, calls the situation faced by a growing number of Long Island families a “Sophie’s choice: Do I feed the kids or pay the utilities?”

With unemployment in New York at 8.4 percent, shelters are filling to capacity, homeless families are living in hotels, food pantries are emptying, and outreach agencies are running out of their funds to help with a month’s rent or an overdue utility bill almost as soon as the money came in. More than 500 people sought emergency housing in Nassau County, the richest county in New York, in just one cold December week. Most were families with children. Connie Lassandro, Nassau’s director of housing and homeless services, said the need for emergency housing has risen 40 percent since 2007, and more than 10,000 households in the county are on waiting lists for housing rental subsidy assistance. The waiting list for subsidized child care in Suffolk County had swelled to 1,000 children.³⁷

Requests for food are way up too, with one in 10 Long Islanders now appearing at emergency feeding programs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, said Randi Dresner, president and CEO of Island Harvest, which supplies hundreds of non-profits across the island that give away food. The Long Island Council of Churches now feeds nearly 1,000 people a month at its Suffolk County pantry and 2,000 in Nassau. People come for food, diapers, cooking oil and baby formula. They are not the chronically needy, according to the Council’s director of community resources. “Our donors are now our clients. People who gave us food are now asking us to help them.”

The new faces of poverty—the families that now seek help—are diverse:

- An Italian-American father, with a teenage son, whose paycheck doesn’t cover expenses since his wife became incapacitated with muscular sclerosis and cannot work.
- A White, college-educated schoolteacher with three children whose divorce and child with special-needs have pushed her into the working poor.

- A Hispanic couple (Brazilian and Ecuadorian), with a three year old daughter, who achieved the American dream—well-paying work and a suburban house—and lost both.
- A couple (White and Asian) whose work dried up and whose house was damaged by fire. They and their son and daughter live in a motel room.
- A Hispanic single, working mother of three (second generation Guatemalan) who was evicted from her Section 8 housing because the owner hadn't paid the mortgage and the bank foreclosed on the property.

Workers caught in the middle

The era of steady economic growth and rising real wage rates that lifted the living standards for most workers in the quarter century after World War II ended in the mid-1970s. The 30-plus years since then have been characterized by slower growth, with periods of recession, and rising wage inequality between highly skilled and less skilled workers, who saw their real wages (buying power) decline. During the same period, the cost of living has gone up dramatically.

This is the dilemma of the working poor. You work full time, even get a second job, and you still can't make ends meet for a family. Running as fast as you can, you can't get ahead or even stay even because the rent will go up or, as happened recently on Long Island, the utility company raises its rates, and you're not getting a raise. You're lucky to have the job. That's when a "Sophie's choice" has to be made.

The gap between wages and cost of living is a nationwide problem. About a quarter of American families with children work regularly but remain low income.³⁸ The gap is especially wide and obvious on Long Island because housing is so expensive. Even before the current recession, Long Island food pantries and housing agencies saw more people coming for help, although the number has escalated even more in the past few years as more families, working and middle class, have lost jobs and homes. "We had a significant increase in hunger and food insecurity even when the economy was booming," said Goodhue, of the Long Island Council of Churches.

O'Shea, the Health and Welfare Council president, said that her agency did an analysis of the cost of living on Long Island. "We found that a family of four needs an annual income of at least \$50,000 to make ends meet," she said. The reasons are revealed in the 2010 Long Island Index, which gathers and publishes data on Long Island:³⁹

- Even in the recession, with home values dropping, houses for \$200,000, which would traditionally be considered affordable to a family with a household income of \$80,000, have disappeared from the market.
- Rental units, whether single family homes or apartments in multi-family dwellings, make up less than 20 percent of Long Island housing.
- More than four in 40 percent of rentals cost more than \$1,500 a month (only 12 percent of rentals were in that price range in 2000.)
- One-fifth of Long Island households spend more than half their income on housing; one-third of households pay more than the recommended 35 percent.
- Between 2007 and 2009, Long Island wages per employee fell four percent, while the U.S. figures were stable. In constant 2008 dollars, average pay per employee was \$1,285 lower in 2009 than it was in 2000.
- At minimum wage, a total of 4.1 full time jobs would be needed for a household to afford a two-bedroom apartment at \$1,529, the fair market rate.

Other costs are high as well. Public transportation is limited and even people who work in Manhattan and can take the Long Island Railroad usually need a car to get to the station. Car insurance is costly. Child care is expensive, \$300 a week for an infant and \$200 to \$250 for a children age three to five. That amounts to between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year, O'Shea said.

This is the first gap, wages and cost of living. Many of the working poor then fall into a second gap, their income and the eligibility criteria for aid programs. They don't make enough to support their families but they make too much to qualify for food stamps, Medicaid and other programs for the needy.

Eligibility for aid programs is pegged to the national poverty guideline, which in 2009 is \$22,050 for a household of four, less than half the \$50,000 the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island calculated that a family of that size actually needs to meet basic expenses on the island.

The guideline is updated by percentage changes in the Consumer Price Index but nonetheless seems wildly out of sync with the cost of living on Long Island. It does not take into account differences in the cost of living between cities, regions and states, except for setting a higher threshold for Hawaii and Alaska.

"Some of our employees here—single or divorced mothers with children—now face the same economic problems as our clients," O'Shea said.

Joseph and Joey: "I'm a one man army here"

Joseph and his son Joey are caught in the middle. Joseph is a blue-collar Italian American who grew up on Long Island and has worked all his adult life painting cars in auto body shops.

"At one time, I thought about being a physical education teacher," said Joseph, who used to wrestle and is still physically active. "But my hobby was cars and I stuck with that and went to trade school for auto technology. I kinda wish I'd gone to college for physical education. I'd probably be doing better now."

Joseph and Joey, age 16, live in a split level home in Medford, in Suffolk County. Joseph and his wife bought the home seven years ago, when she was working as a bookkeeper. She has multiple sclerosis and now lives in a nursing home. Although he does not have to pay her expenses, the loss of a second income put him and Joey into the growing number of working poor families.

Joseph has been laid off twice in the past few years, but managed to find another job within weeks. Recently, he lost three weeks of pay between jobs. "And I just got notified of an escrow shortage, and the taxes have gone up." He put a "for sale" sign on the house for a while but there were no takers. By the time he pays for his housing costs, he has little left to live on since he makes only about \$600 a week.

"It's not easy being a single fella," he said. "I am totally broke. I live paycheck to paycheck. I can't pay all the bills. I don't qualify for anything." He has become a regular patron of local food banks.

Joey is a slender young man, shy, polite and withdrawn. He doesn't participate in after-school activities because he has to come home on the school bus. He locks himself in the house until his father comes home from work. Joe asked his neighbors to keep an eye on the place when Joey is there by himself. Joseph said his son "knows we have to watch our step. Every step. But I try to shield him. I've been taking all the sacrifices. You have no idea. I try to shield him to the best of my ability except the grief over his mom. Nobody has control over that. She's just hanging in there."

Joey has health insurance through his mother, but Joseph does not. "I'm worried because I wake up snoring. I think I might have sleep apnea. I could go to a clinic but I need a specialist so I'm just letting that go. I can't take off work anyway. You take a day off and they really need you, they get someone to replace you."

Joseph gets some financial help from his father "but he's having a hard time, too. I still owe him money." He goes to food pantries. Through a support group for single parents, he learned about Eunice Miller, a family development worker for the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk County. Most of the families she works with are the working poor. She finds out if they are qualified for food stamps, health insurance, child care and other programs. Those who aren't – most of them, she said – she helps with stopgap aid such as a reduced utility bill, a tank load of free heating fuel, clothing, emergency food, school supplies,

or summer jobs or programs for the children. “She made the holidays. She comes by with food and clothes, and she’s good for advice. She helped me get a benefit for oil.”

Joseph summed up his situation in October 2010: “I’ll be honest with you. I’m barely hanging on by a shoestring. Day by day. Week by week. People try to encourage you but you know what? Things are bad. People don’t really understand. I’ve learned to eat a little something in the morning. I don’t eat lunch. I drink from the hose at work. That’s just how things are. You gotta sacrifice for your child. Sometimes I feel like hanging it up but I can’t. I’m a one man army here.”

Jodi: Her three children and a mountain of bills

Jodi teaches fourth grade in a charter school in Riverhead, in Suffolk County. She has a college degree and owns a home in Shirley, a working class community in Suffolk where it used to be possible to buy a home for \$200,000. She is divorced and has three children. Her education and white collar job would seem to place her out of poverty, even working poverty, but the family has run out of heating oil—“We bundled up for a few days until I borrowed \$100 from a neighbor,” she said—and she wears the same clothing over and over, sometimes gets food at a pantry and worries about the bills all the time.

“One of my students noticed in our yearly school photo that I’ve worn the same blouse for the last five years,” she said, with a wry smile. “He said, ‘You must really like that blouse.’”

Jodi’s youngest child, Johnny, age six, has serious developmental and behavioral problems. She described him over the phone as having “a heart of gold. He can melt you with his little smile.” Indeed, he is very cute, with blonde hair, pale skin and an intense look in his eyes. When he was two, he was diagnosed with a speech delay, ADHD, sensory integration disorder and borderline autism. His overall diagnosis is “pervasive developmental delay.”

“He’s all over the place, even with medications,” Jodi said, explaining the time and attention required to care for a child with this disability. “His safety boundaries aren’t what they should be. He’ll grab something not realizing it’s hot. You have to keep a constant eye on him.” She considers herself fortunate to live in an area with good schools for special needs children. “The school is wonderful. He started off in a class with eight children. This year he was integrated into a larger pre-kindergarten class. That was a huge adjustment. He had to get an aide because it’s just too hard for him to focus.”

Even with this, meltdowns happen, and Jodi has had to arrive at her school late or leave early to go to his. The week I met her she’d been called twice because Johnny wouldn’t get on the school bus. He was having trouble with a new bus matron who kept yelling at him to stop talking or sit down, and he became petrified of getting on the bus with her, Jodi said.

“He’s a fidgety kid. That’s part of his disability,” she said. “You might wonder how a tiny five year old can’t be put on a bus. It would take five adults. He’s double-jointed and he falls backwards. I had to pick him up twice this week, and then he figures, ‘Oh, I do this and Momma will pick me up.’ Both times I had to take off from school and another teacher had to cover for me. My principal understands but there’s only so often I can do this. I don’t want to lose my job.” Eventually, she got him on a different bus “but it took him a month to get back to the routine of feeling that the bus is a safe place.”

Her son James, age nine, has anger problems. Last year, he ripped a door off by its hinges. Jodi believes his anger comes from her unpleasant divorce and the greater attention Johnny receives. The two boys together create so much commotion, she couldn’t sit down for an interview when both of them were home. James plays rough, and Johnny, over-stimulated, starts hitting and yelling. Her daughter, Jordyn, age 12, just wants to be left alone. She said she locks herself in her bedroom to get her homework done.

Marco, Aline and Samatha: American Dream

Marco and Aline picked up canned goods, bread and some puzzles for their three-year-old daughter, Samantha, at the food pantry in Riverhead, in Suffolk County, one rainy Friday afternoon in April 2009. They said it was their third time coming to the pantry.

Marco's is a classic immigrant success story—except that the current chapter is about loss, not achievement. He is from Ecuador and took two years of computer study there. He tried to get a job in computers but the pay was very low: “You can make as much as a dishwasher in a week in the United States as a computer operator for two months in Ecuador,” he said. He was married and had three children and needed money to support them.

He came to New York in 1989 on the visitor's visa and stayed—no English, no legal papers. He couldn't find work at first; he slept in an abandoned car for two weeks and didn't eat for 10 days. Then he got a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant in Hempstead and lived in a place with eight men in a room. He got another dishwashing job and another shared living space. He started to learn some English and sent money home to his family.

Occasionally, Marco went home to be with his family, but he continued his climb upward on Long Island. He got a job as a busboy at a country club, then a job as a waiter in a Mexican restaurant. A regular customer offered him a job cleaning up on construction job sites. “I looked and learned.” The man bought him some tools and made him his helper. He saved his money, bought more tools and a truck and got a job as a carpenter. For six years he worked for a contractor building mansions in Easthampton. “We were very busy,” he said. “By now, I have a big panel truck, a tool box truck. I want to be a contractor.”

By then, he had met and married a U.S. citizen and became a legal resident. He continued to support his children in Ecuador. He talked to another contractor in Easthampton and became a sub-contractor. He hired his two brothers from Ecuador. His father already had moved to New York. He and his second wife divorced, and he met Aline, a Brazilian, in an online chat room. Her mother had died and she came to New York to live with an aunt and uncle.

“Everything is good. I buy a house and fix it up. I am making good money. Aline is staying home with Samatha. But last September, everything was coming down. I went from 60 hours to 40 hours to no hours. I ask around. I look in the paper. I apply in the Labor Department. I went for one job and 500 people came.” Aline got work as a part-time helper to a wealthy woman who lives in Bridgehampton and Manhattan, driving, cooking and cleaning. The money she earns—about \$12 an hour, Silva said—pays for insurance on his truck and her car and other expenses. Their home was in foreclosure, though a few months ago he got temporary work with a large construction company and hopes to keep the house .

The interview took place at the home in Riverhead owned by Marco's father. The family eats regular meals there—Marco, his unemployed brothers, themselves in foreclosure, and his two teenage daughters from Ecuador, who are attending school in Riverhead. They feared they all might wind up living in the father's house for a while.

Still, Marco considers himself relatively fortunate. The recession's pain cascades to the lower rungs, to the immigrants not as well established as he is. He said he has a friend, Angel, who called him a few weeks ago to ask for help. “He said, ‘I am not working and I don't have food.’ He has two boys and his wife is sick. ‘Marco, do you have some work for me?’ I had to say I didn't. I tried to call his phone after that but he doesn't answer.”

Food Insecurity On a Wealthy Island

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that in 2008, 32.4 million adults (14.4 percent of all adults) and 16.7 million children (22.5 percent of all children) faced a constant struggle against hunger.⁴⁰

The U.S. Census Bureau's annual survey looks at food insecurity in two categories: "low food security" refers to people who have to make changes in the quality and quantity of their food because of a limited budget, and "very low food security" refers to people who have to cut back or skip meals on a frequent basis, which for children can have harmful effects on learning and development. Adults who fall into the most precarious category of food insecurity rose from 3.7 percent in 2007 to 5.4 percent in 2008.⁴¹ The number of children who experienced very low food security also increased from 691,000 in 2007 at the start of the recession to 1.1 million in 2008, an increase of almost 60 percent.

In 2009, Long Island Cares and Island Harvest conducted a study of emergency food programs (soup kitchens, food pantries or shelters) in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. More than 283,700 people were helped that year, the majority being women, children and the working poor.⁴² Emergency food programs on Long Island helped nearly 65,000 people a week in 2009. Well over half (60 percent) of the organizations with emergency food programs reported funding problems and 20 percent reported turning clients away during the past year, in many cases because they ran out of food.⁴³

The study surveyed clients about the extent of hunger. Over one-quarter said their children often or sometimes were not eating enough because they couldn't afford food, and 13.4 percent said their children skipped meals for the same reason.⁴⁴

The survey found that 30 percent of Long Island client households received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.⁴⁵ The "Hunger in America 2010" report by Feeding America found that, on average nationally, SNAP benefits (formerly called food stamps) last 2.7 weeks, up from 2.5 weeks in 2007.⁴⁶ Since April 2009, the federal economic recovery package has meant higher benefits for food stamp households—\$80 more per month for a household of four.

The number of people receiving food assistance on Long Island has increased 21 percent since 2006. Nearly half of the households served by emergency food programs in 2009 had at least one working adult and yet were still unable to earn enough money to feed their family.⁴⁷

Noting the increasing number of people coming to Long Island food pantries, Dresner, president of Island Harvest, said, "We've been noting a changing face of hunger. We are seeing middle class people fall into the gap, which has widened. Even if you had a good income, if you lose your job, you've still got a mortgage payment and other expenses that were tied to it. Suddenly, you can't pay all your bills and you may run short of food. We've had people request us to open pantries at midnight so nobody could see them."

Jodi earns about \$44,000 a year, and her husband pays child support irregularly. She was behind in the escrow for the mortgage and was supposed to pay \$1,600 a month, instead of \$1,100. “I’m late every month,” she said. The SUV she drives belongs to her disabled mother, but she pays for the gas and insurance. The children have health insurance through the father, but the co-pay for the boys’ prescriptions runs about \$100 a month. And Johnny is still not toilet trained so he wears pull-ups that cost \$40 a week. “I have to supply them to the school. Plus he has sensory issues with diet and won’t eat what kids usually eat.”

In the pile of bills stacked on her kitchen table was a termination notice from the power company: If she didn’t pay her back bill of \$1,700 her electricity would be cut off. When she was found ineligible for utility assistance, she sold every piece of jewelry she owns to pay part of the bill, and had a monthly budget plan to pay off the rest. Last year, she took a second job in the deli section of a supermarket three nights a week to help pay the bills. Her disabled mother takes care of the children. When I called the home recently, her mother began crying as she described the family’s situation. “Things are not easy here and they are getting worse. The kids have birthdays. We can’t do anything.”

Jodi is in a bind that other working parents in Long Island also face: She could earn more if she got a master’s degree because that would qualify her to teach in the better-paying public school system. But she can’t take the courses because she can’t afford child care and she makes too much to qualify for a child care subsidy or other financial assistance. “The University of New York at Stony Brook is a half hour away,” she said. Now, this possibility is even more remote since she’s had to take a second job.

At one time, she applied for Social Security Disability for Johnny, hoping that she could afford to have someone watch him after school or in the evenings so she could get the degree and pay more attention to her other two children. “The people I spoke to were very rude. ‘How much do you make?’ I told them and they said, ‘Oh no, you make way too much.’ I know we’re not living on the street but we have many needs that aren’t met. “

Lisa: A Section 8 nightmare

Lisa, a working mother of three, has what so many other Long Island families seek: a Section 8 voucher. Her recent three-month ordeal has been finding a place that accepts the vouchers. On Long Island, like other places with a very small stock of affordable housing, owners of rental properties have other options and are reluctant to accept Section 8, in part because of bad experiences with renters and in part because of the program’s reporting requirements to the Internal Revenue Service. Section 8 housing is so hard to find in Nassau County that several real estate brokers specialize in finding it for a fee of one month’s rent.

Lisa paid a broker \$2,100 for locating a house in Baldwin with an owner who accepted Section 8. She was won over by the neighborhood of tidy homes and good school district. That was in the summer of 2008. She and her three daughters had to leave their previous rental in Island Park, also Section 8, because raccoons in the attic were eating through the walls and “all the landlord did was take the rent.”

In February 2009, a representative from a bank knocked on her door. “She said the bank had taken over the house in foreclosure. She told me not to pay another penny to the landlord and said I’d have to find someplace else to live. I was hysterical. I said ‘I just moved here and fixed up the place. I painted the cabinets and my daughters’ rooms. I don’t want to uproot them *again*.’”

In early April, when I visited her in the house, she had the list of presumably available Section 8 properties from the housing agency. She’d crossed off most of them after calling and finding them unavailable after all. She used up cell phone minutes calling real estate agencies. She wanted to stay in Baldwin so her daughters wouldn’t have to change schools again, and she wanted to avoid having to pay a broker’s fee. She had come up with nothing after six weeks. The bank gave her until the beginning of April to move. “They called yesterday and said I have another week. I said, ““Can you help me out? I’m trying to find a place and work, too.””

“Astronomical” Housing Crunch

Connie Lassandro, Nassau County’s director of housing and homeless services, said she has never seen such a demand for emergency housing and for Section 8 vouchers and other rental assistance. “I’ve opened new shelters. I could use 10 more. Calls to our emergency hotline in the winter are off the charts. In one weekend, we placed 83 people. That to me is astronomical and I’ve been doing this for 30 years,” she said. “Many are children and families. I don’t think we’ve seen it all yet. That’s what scares me.”

She said that, “The new faces we’re seeing are families who have never before faced the risk of actually being homeless. They are middle-income homeowners who have lost their source of income or now have one income instead of two.” Nassau County has the third highest rate of foreclosures in New York; Suffolk County has the highest. One in eight homes sold on Long Island in 2009 were foreclosure sales.⁴⁸

Some of these families are entering the already tight and limited rental market. The vacancy rate now is less than three percent and dropping, Lassandro said, and no additional Section 8 vouchers for subsidized housing are available. (Section 8, a federal program, pays the rental cost above a third of the recipient’s income.) Some 11,000 households in Nassau County currently have Section 8 vouchers, but 10,000 more are on the waiting list, which now is closed.

“I’m still working off my 2003 (waiting) list,” Lassandro said. “People can be waiting six months to six years.” All those on the waiting list are qualified for the subsidy, an income of \$30,550 or less for a family of four on Long Island. Lassandro is well aware of the eligibility gap, echoing O’Shea’s statement that it costs at least \$50,000 a year to support a family that size on Long Island. “Otherwise, it’s not possible. If you don’t get rental assistance or help from family or friends, you’re in deep trouble. You’re doubled up or in a shelter.”

Lassandro sees the impact every day on families and children. “It’s really a travesty in this day and age to see so much unemployment and homelessness. We were doing well and then the rug is pulled. It affects children so dramatically. They don’t understand. I was in a home yesterday and today: ‘Where’s my bedroom? Where’s my toys? Where are my friends?’ They don’t say this but Where’s my stability? We as adults are supposed to protect them.”

Lassandro said that one good thing, “a godsend,” has arisen during the crisis: a \$6.4 million grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for homeless prevention and rapid re-housing in Nassau County that is part of the federal stimulus package. The grant has enabled Lassandro’s agency to provide financial assistance for moving, utility and security deposit expenses, to help pay overdue rent due to sickness or loss of employment and expand long and short term rental assistance. The eligibility requirements enable the program to reach people at 50 percent of the area’s median income of \$103,600 for a family of four, “which shows you the new face of people who seek our help now,” Lassandro said. “I don’t even like to think of what would have happened without these stimulus funds.”

In June 2009, Nassau County operated eight family shelters, which accommodate about 10 families each. Now it operates 14, and still must house additional families in motel rooms, according to Lassandro. With unemployment and foreclosures, the families in shelters and motels go beyond the chronically homeless. “They’ve had a stable home environment. Now they’re in a motel room,” Lassandro said. “For the children especially, life is disrupted. It’s not their fault but I see the embarrassment on their faces.”

Lisa was working as a bra specialist for Victoria's Secret. She'd had this job for two years, and has previously worked in other retail jobs: as a hair dresser and nursing home aide. "I'm very good at sales," she said. "I studied nursing when my girls were babies. Then my husband left me and I ended up carrying the weight myself," she said. Her father, originally from Guatemala, and mother, from Trinidad, owned a small business in Brooklyn. Her family was her safety net until her father died.

Since then, she's had to "lean on the system" for housing assistance. She fiercely defends her choice of taking part-time jobs or jobs with flexible hours even though this meant lower pay. "I can work. I'm a hard worker. But who's going to pick my daughter up at 3? Who's going to take my daughter at 6? Your children run in the street. They get pregnant at 17 and you want to know what happened. I know what they eat at night and where they go. That's my choice. Children need a parent to guide them. That's my job. When they approved me for Section 8, I was grateful. I'm raising my children, and I thank the program that I am able to do that."

Her oldest daughter was attending a college in upstate New York in January, using a Pell grant. Her 17 year old, Judy, was a junior in high school. She's already completed her high school credits and will be taking college-level credits in her senior year. She's on the basketball, track and softball teams at her high school, and she sews some of her own clothing. Her youngest daughter, also named Lisa, 11, was struggling in math. "She gets extra help at school and doesn't back down from that. She's willing to spend the extra time," Lisa said.

The girls were distressed about the possibility of having to change schools again. Long Island has 154 school districts, and even a move of a relatively short distance can put a family in a different district.

Young Lisa sat in her bedroom, where her dolls were lined up on the bed. Judy stayed in the basement. "She's embarrassed," Lisa said. Finally, Judy came upstairs. "If we have to move far away, I'll have to make new friends again," she said. "Last year, I had to start over and catch up." Lisa said she was just getting to know her new friends. "If I go to a new school, what will it be like? I hope we don't have to move. I don't want to." They do have to move. A foreclosure trumps a lease.

Lisa went to court several times. She persuaded a judge to postpone the eviction date until the end of June so that her daughters could finish the school year. That month, she said, she got a call from a broker who said she'd found her a Section 8 home just four blocks away in the same school district. "It's a little smaller but I'll make it work," Brown said.

Once again, she had to pay a broker's fee, her share of a security deposit, and moving expenses.

Jillian and Joseph: Life in a motel room

Jillian, age eight, loved to take baths. The bathroom was the only place she could be alone and have privacy in the motel room where she, her parents and 13-year-old brother, Joseph, were living. She couldn't stay in there too long, though, because the bathtub was where her mother does the dishes. She slept in one bed with her mother. Joseph slept in the other with his father. Sometimes, Jillian played under the sink with one of her now nearly-naked Barbies. She lost most of their clothes. One has a bathing suit and a pink convertible. Jillian calls this a beach car and "I pretend she's going to the beach in her pink car. I will have all of my Barbies when we go back to our house."

Their house had a fire several years ago. Insurance paid for the damaged part but not enough to make the house livable, Jillian's mother, Bridgett, said. She insisted on meeting me at the office of the social services agency that is helping the family, rather than at the motel. "It's too cramped," she said. Her husband, who works in construction and is not doing well, did not come.

For a while, the family rented rooms near the house in Roosevelt while Bridgett's husband gutted it and began fixing it up. When the landlord sold the building, they sought help for housing. The Department of Social Services is paying for the motel in Freeport. The children still go to school in Roosevelt. "When kids are homeless, we don't want them to have to change schools," said Joyce Mullens, director of market and communications for the Family and Children's Association, the agency helping the family at the time I visited. The agency is now no longer involved with the family.

While the family was renting rooms, it didn't make mortgage payments on its house. With the economic downturn, it couldn't afford to make them even with the motel room paid and the house went into foreclosure. "We need \$26,000 for the bank and \$10,000 for materials for my husband to finish the work on it," Bridgett said. With construction at a standstill, her husband has little work. She has worked as a waitress and school bus driver. She recently applied for several jobs but didn't get them, she said.

Asked about living in a motel, she said "the food is lousy. Sometimes I cook in the microwave or electric fry pan. Mostly, we do fast food and take-out Chinese. Right now, I would love a steak and a salad." She conceded that the family argues so much "I'm surprised we haven't been kicked out."

The family wants so much to move back into their house that they've considered going to a loan shark for the money they need, Bridgett said.

Said Joseph, "I want my own room. My own bathroom. I want my own space so my friends can visit and a laptop. My friends can't come to the motel." He was having behavior problems at school.

Jillian was in the second grade, though she should have been in the third. She got extra help with reading in a special program run by Hofstra University. She goes to a good charter school that has a waiting list for pupils. It has a longer school day and devotes more time to every subject.

After her brother said what he wanted, she said, "I know a lot of things I want. I want to go to the beach on the weekend. I want to go to Chuck E. Cheese. My room is the largest. It's going to be filled with Barbies. It's going to be purple. I'm going to have a nice bed with a pink bedspread, and I'm going to have purple and white shelves so I won't step on my Barbies. I'm going to need a lot of shelves."

Postscript

As the sea of poverty rises and sinks more boats, some of the children in this report keep on swimming against the current while others are at best treading water and floating, at risk of going under at any time. In Baton Rouge, Jermaine has not caught up from his lost years of childhood and of schooling but he's trying. He now lives with his cousin's family and goes to school regularly. Sister Judith is hopeful that he will eventually graduate. She has no such hopes for his younger brother, Jamal, who has stopped attending school altogether—his grandmother is home schooling him, or for Navia, the self-raised child who moved out of her mother's house when their arguments escalated.

On Long Island, Joseph worries more every day that something will happen to him and he will lose his home and the stability his “one man army” is providing for his son. Jodi, the teacher, took a second job for the same reason. They don't want their children to face the disruptions and instability that are known to affect development. They need a better safety net.

In Quitman County, Butch Scipper, the County Administrator, said that he expects the results of the 2010 census to show that the county has lost 25 percent of its population, leaving children like Audrey, who can't leave, even more isolated. Asked for an update on Audrey and her family, Robert Jamison had very sad news: In 2009, their house burned down and they lost all their possessions. That same year, little Alexis died of pneumonia. Audrey now lives with her older sister and still has a chipped front tooth. Jamison's only encouraging note is that she *is* attending school. Her family's experience recalls a statement made by Gary Evans, a Cornell University professor who has studied the way the stress of growing up poor affects the brain: “When you're poor, if it rains, it pours.”

Where will Audrey be in 10 years? Or Navia? Or Jamal? Or Chastity? Will they escape the captivity of poverty? In his article on “The Environment of Childhood Poverty,” Evans details the confluence of social, psychological and physical environmental risks that may precipitate the “developmental disarray associated with poverty.” In his view, children who grow up with a confluence of risks need a confluence of support to release them from poverty.⁴⁹ Projects that deliver a confluence of support, such as the Harlem Children's Zone, which has transformed the lives and life chances of thousands of children and their families living in a 97 block section of Harlem through in-school, after-school, social-service, health and community-building programs, shows that this can and does work. These projects also reveal the energy, resources and commitment it takes to change the life prospects of poor children.

When I'd tell people I was working on a report on child poverty, many of them practically sighed and said, “Oh *poverty*.” They'd go on and say, in effect, that it's a shame that children live in poverty but it's such a huge and persistent problem. Where do you even start? they'd ask. After meeting the poor children in this report, here's what I say: “Care.”

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