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Houston’s Noble Experiment

Can good government uplift the New Orleans evacuees whom bad government harmed?

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From the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina emerges a historic natural experiment: Can one city’s good governance help undo what another city’s bad governance helped create?

In the decades before Katrina, New Orleans was a place where failed urban policies let social pathology fester. Its economy was listless, its population declining. Free-market employers and middle-class residents shunned the city, because its public sector was seen as corrupt, its citizenry was uneducated, and its neighborhoods were crime-ridden. Failed criminal-justice and public-education systems helped perpetuate a large underclass, mostly black, as the city’s productive class, white and black, dwindled. Decades of government mismanagement and private-sector abandonment had turned New Orleans’s once-whimsical local nickname—“The City That Care Forgot”—into a sad epitaph before Katrina.

To escape Katrina, about half of New Orleans’s population, or about 240,000 people, fled 350 miles west on Interstate 10 to Houston, whose increasing population and expanding economy have been the inverse of New Orleans’s over the past five decades. More than seven months after the storm, Houston remains home to about 150,000 New Orleans evacuees.

Houston isn’t just showing its guests some Texas hospitality; it’s showing displaced New Orleanians what a difference it makes to live in a city that strives, if imperfectly, to operate upon sound urban-governance precepts—leadership in a crisis, competent policing, a functioning judicial system, accountable urban schools, and a culture of private-sector entrepreneurship.

Since multiple surveys of Katrina evacuees in Houston indicate that between half and two-thirds plan to stay, the challenge for post-Katrina Houston is to ensure that the worst elements of New Orleans’s crime-ravaged underclass don’t perpetuate their dysfunctional habits in Houston. Houston’s success would show the rest of the nation how much good government matters, even—or especially—to the toughest population.

Houston wouldn’t be the setting for this unprecedented experiment if it hadn’t risen to the occasion as no other government—federal, state, or local—did after Katrina. How did it mobilize so quickly? A social-services expert might think that, being such a small-government town, it would have been overwhelmed by the influx: recently branded one of America’s “meanest cities” by a homeless-advocacy group, Houston spent less than $1,500 per person in city funds last year, compared with New York’s $5,000. It has one public-sector worker to serve every 130 citizens, compared with one for every 22 in New York. About 6 percent of New Yorkers live in public housing; less than 1 percent of Houstonians do. Houston has no income tax, and nearly everyone you meet there boasts that the city is a “business city” with “business interests.”

But that’s no measure of Houston’s generosity. All it proves is that Houston never entwined its budget with radical entitlement politics in the sixties and seventies. Yet when Houston saw a crisis of humanity, it acted.

The tales of the city’s generosity, individual as well as civic, are breathtaking. To tell just one: after Katrina destroyed her New Orleans home, Pauline Horton, along with her son, mother, stepfather, and sister, was “desperately searching for answers, resources, and directions” in a

Houston shelter when she heard a “loud authoritative voice coming from a tall white man in his mid-fifties,” she recounts. The voice belonged to Daniel Shea, a lawyer who had come in search of an elderly couple to share his modest home for a few days.

The Horton clan didn’t fit the description. But, Horton relates, Shea was “very persistent about helping the Katrina evacuees.” He decamped from his own house into a friend’s for nearly two weeks so that Horton and her family could move in. Shea “moved very swiftly to provide for our basic needs. . . . He took me to enroll my son in a nearby school and bought his uniforms. Anything we [didn’t] think of to assist in rebuilding our lives, he did.” When Horton’s brother turned up in Arkansas after a close escape from New Orleans’s Lower Ninth Ward, Shea, “waiting for his next assignment,” flew him to reunite with the rest of the family.

Houston solved the first long-term crisis Katrina caused—what to do with thousands of desperate citizens washed out of their homes—because elected local and county officials carried out Shea’s style of determined competence on a mass scale with military precision. The city augmented its own resources with volunteers from churches, temples, corporations, and charities to take in what amounted to a new population equal to 10 percent of its own citizenry over seven days, and to place two-thirds of these evacuees into housing within weeks.

Two nights after the August 29 storm, as New Orleans’s Superdome and convention center were boiling over with desperation, Judge Robert Eckels (the elected executive for the nearly 4-million-strong Harris County, which includes the 2 million residents of Houston) got a phone call from Governor Rick Perry’s emergency-management team in the middle of the night. Texas, the governor’s team told him, had volunteered to take in thousands of evacuees from New Orleans. “They said they would need 2,000 beds” right away, Eckels recalls.

Eckels in turn called up the private-sector stadium operators and worked with them to get the sites ready. He was unfazed when the governor’s office called back to say that they would need 23,000 beds instead: “It was still manageable,” Eckels notes, adding that disaster management isn’t a matter of sticking to a plan; it’s figuring out what to do when the plan won’t work.

New Orleans had decades to prepare large-scale shelters to house, feed, and police its citizens during and after a catastrophic hurricane. Houston had two days. But the evacuees who filed into its stadiums and a city-run convention center found orderly rows of cots, as well as ample supplies and security, in marked contrast to the chaotic, ill-supplied, and unpoliced New Orleans Superdome and convention center from which many of them had come. And as Houston and Harris County officials watched New Orleans descend further into chaos over the week before Labor Day, they decided that they had to do something more: they sent their school-bus fleet to New Orleans over the long weekend to pick up even more desperate citizens.

The evacuees “were in horrible shape,” Eckels remembers. City paramedics and hundreds of volunteer doctors and nurses treated those who had been without medication for chronic illnesses ranging from diabetes to schizophrenia. Local pharmacies set up shop in the stadiums to dispense 11,000 prescriptions. Police kept order. Workers in downtown Houston still boast of the lines of cars that snaked around the stadium complex when commuters stopped to drop off supplies. They also boast of how efficiently Houston officials told faith-based and other charity groups exactly what each team of volunteers could do to help, from cooking 1,000 meals to sheltering 20 families, while at the same time they coordinated the thousands of volunteers, some from as far away as Colorado and Idaho, who just showed up at the stadiums on their own.

But Judge Eckels and Mayor Bill White quickly determined that the challenge went beyond providing a few nights’ sleep and security. By the first week’s end, Houston’s stadiums were housing nearly 30,000 evacuees. “My goal was that it not become a refugee camp,” Eckels recalls. Tens of thousands more were staying in charity, church, and temple shelters and in private homes. “Katrina wasn’t here, but the disaster here was housing,” recalls county Housing Authority chief **Guy Rankin**, whose job it was to figure out where thousands of evacuees would live. One day in early September, Rankin arrived at work to find a line of 600 evacuees snaked around his office building; all needed a place to live.

The federal government’s answer for evacuees whose homes and jobs had washed away was the one it gives to those displaced briefly by a run-of-the-mill hurricane: motels and “FEMA-villes” of mobile homes in isolated rural spots. But Houston knew that such temporary housing was no answer for the hundreds of thousands who needed to restart productive lives as soon as possible. The last thing America needed was massive Palestinian-style refugee camps on our own soil, filled with people who would refuse to get on with their lives, until, as former New Orleans mayor Marc Morial and the Acorn urban-activist group have already insisted, they are awarded a “right of return.”

For the thousands who did stay in FEMA-paid hotels and trailers after Katrina, at a cost of over a billion dollars, hotel living encouraged dependency and inertia, particularly for those who had been dependent and inert in the first place. Many evacuees in hotels delayed looking for real housing and employment for months, focusing instead on pushing back each new FEMA eviction date (and, at one New York hotel, enlisting the Reverend Al Sharpton to help them achieve “social justice”).

Fortunately, Houston had a better idea. In little more than a week, the city and county designed a mass-scale housing program to give displaced citizens an alternative to sitting in hotel rooms, with nothing expected of them but waiting. This housing program, coupled with the massive job fair Houston held for evacuees, helped its new citizens understand that, despite the traumatic storm and sudden relocation, “there was still a high degree of personal responsibility” expected of working-age adults, Eckels said.

Houston and the county offered any adult from hurricane-ravaged areas a 12-month voucher to rent an apartment at the median local market price—about $700 a month for a two-bedroom—to be paid to participating landlords by the city. In doing this, Houston quickly mastered the tactical rule of disasters: to get the federal government to do something, do it yourself, and then make the feds pay for it. When FEMA later periodically balked at paying the cost of the housing program Houston had devised—as much as $30 million a month, but much cheaper than hotels—and then tried to tinker with the program so that it conformed to its bureaucratically inflexible rules, Houston alternatively ignored the feds and reasoned with them until they gave in. The result was a better use of the federal dollars that would be spent on evacuees anyway.

To direct ground operations for the thousands of families who showed up for their free apartments, Houston hired freshly retired army major Buddy Grantham, who had handled supply logistics for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and had come to the Astrodome to volunteer for a few days because he had figured he could use the same skills to sort out people. Harris County also got help from executives of the Houston-based utility CenterPoint Energy, who helped coordinate everything from deliveries of donated furniture to meals to be delivered by the people from churches and charities who showed up to cook them.

Houston stopped awarding vouchers in December, when Katrina evacuees—eager for apartments, not hotel rooms—were still arriving from other cities. Mayor White wasn’t exaggerating when he said then that “Houston is getting full.” Houston had given out 46,000 vouchers, housing well over 100,000 people, the majority (over 30,000 families) from Orleans Parish, for a year. The influx pushed Houston’s apartment vacancy rate down from about 14 percent in midsummer to the mid–single digits by the end of the year. Thanks to the vouchers, the evacuees “have a year to get their life together,” Judge Eckels told me.

That was when Houston’s role turned from one requiring excellence in disaster management to one requiring excellence in something less glamorous: workaday urban governance.

As many American cities have proved, competent local governance doesn’t come naturally, particularly when social services are involved. And, indeed, Houston, whose police department and largest school district have each faced high-profile scandals in recent years, faces a learning curve here, after its stellar performance during the acute crisis.

It would have been easy for Mayor White and Judge Eckels to botch the governing of Katrina evacuees from day one. It would have been easy to treat the evacuees as a marked population needing all manner of permanent government services due to their status as mostly black disaster victims from poverty-ridden New Orleans. Many politicians would have taken advantage of Americans’ vivid memory of the thousands stranded at the Superdome to call for government-provided “justice” à la Sharpton.

After all, the population that arrived in Houston, particularly those who took vouchers, is disproportionately poor. Houston’s United Way surveyed thousands of evacuees in the shelters and found that their household income averaged about $19,000, well below the national average and just half of Houston’s median household income of about $37,000.

New Orleans’s poor population includes a sizable underclass. Before Katrina struck, fully 10 percent of New Orleanians lived either in public housing or Section 8 housing, far above the rates in Houston or New York. Only 36 percent of New Orleans’s adults were married, compared with more than 49 percent in Houston, and more than half of mothers were unmarried, compared with 28 percent in Houston. In some New Orleans neighborhoods, only a quarter of the children lived with married parents. More than two-thirds of female-headed black households lived in poverty. Though many of New Orleans’s underclass had moved from idleness into low-wage, tourist-trade jobs over the past decade, thanks to federal welfare reform and an abundance of such work in the city, their family structures and social skills hadn’t improved along with this fledgling work ethic. The concentration of weak families partly explains why the city endured some of the nation’s highest violent-crime rates.

Because Houston took in so many evacuees directly from New Orleans’s Superdome and convention center, its population of New Orleanians is more heavily underclass than New Orleans itself. As Judge Eckels told me: “Those who left last had the least.” Those who crowded into the Superdome and convention center were those who didn’t heed the mandatory evacuation. They included, in addition to indigent elderly, New Orleans’s poorest single mothers, as well as (almost certainly) many of the young men who had looted New Orleans in the critical hours after Katrina, before the catastrophic flooding of their own homes in low-lying neighborhoods forced them to the Superdome and convention center and then to Houston.

But neither Judge Eckels nor Mayor White used the evacuees as an occasion to make speeches calling for Great Society–style social programs. In fact, as Houston absorbed its new population in late 2005, it began to grasp that what ailed New Orleans’s poor before the storm was not so much poverty as violent crime. It followed that the best social program for them would be good policing, to protect citizens new and old.

When I asked Mayor White in February how Houston would ensure that the evacuees didn’t re-create New Orleans’s infamous crime- and poverty-ridden enclaves, he didn’t invoke “root causes”; the answer, he said, was to remove New Orleans’s violent criminals—a “tiny minority” of evacuees, he took care to note—from the population.

But it had taken Houston precious months of experience with New Orleans’s criminals to get to this point. When Houston first began to suffer a string of murders committed by and against the same young thugs responsible for New Orleans’s pre-Katrina reign of violence, local officials seemed anxious to wish away the crime spike. As late as early January, officials were insisting that the surge wasn’t due to the low boiling point of its new population, arguing instead that with any increase in population, crime is bound to go up.

In fact, as Houston has slowly acknowledged, Katrina evacuees pushed up Houston's rates for some crimes, particularly homicide, not just the raw number of offenses. Houston's post-Katrina crime surge is an extension of the pre-Katrina violence of New Orleans's criminal underclass. Before Katrina, New Orleans had the highest murder rate of any big U.S. city, almost four times Houston's, with 58 people killed per year for every 100,000 citizens. The murder numbers Houston has racked up since Katrina prove that violent New Orleanians haven't changed their ways, but only their scenery.

Since Katrina, Houston police have identified New Orleans evacuees as either suspects or victims (or often both) in more than 30 Houston-area homicides. Of an evacuee population of 175,000, this works out to a per-capita annual murder rate of about 34 per 100,000, well above Houston's pre-Katrina rate. News of violent murders committed by and against Katrina evacuees has created a bit of a backlash in Houston. In a recent Rice University poll of Houston-area residents, two-thirds of the participants blamed Katrina evacuees for the crime spike and for a "considerable strain" on community resources. Some bloggers grumble that the thanks houston bumper stickers sported on cars in post-Katrina New Orleans have a snide double meaning: that is, thanks for taking our thugs. In any event, Houston's most acute post-Katrina task is to treat its post-Katrina crime problem as seriously as it treated its post-Katrina housing crisis.

Houston's housing-voucher program for Katrina evacuees, a workable solution to an acute crisis, nevertheless proves the law of unintended consequences in even justified government largesse. The vouchers encouraged the incursion of New Orleans's population of criminals into Houston's most vulnerable tracts: acre after acre of two-story apartment complexes that blot Houston's underpoliced southwest and west-side neighborhoods. Adorned with vacation-style names like Whispering Oaks and Happy Homes, these complexes were built by private investors more than two decades ago for the city's young petroleum elite. But when an oil boom busted a generation ago, the young middle class moved out, and landlords slashed their prices.

Now, though Houston has little public housing, these apartment complexes are the same idea. Long before Katrina, the complexes on the city's southwest and west side were rife with crime and drugs. Their isolated courtyards, designed for after-work barbecues and cocktail parties, serve just as well as venues for gang loitering and drug dealing.

By late September, these complexes were home to tens of thousands of New Orleans evacuees. They concentrated there partly because some landlords refused to accept housing vouchers, and partly because of a FEMA dictate that was later fixed after lobbying by Houston (but not before thousands of evacuees had found housing): voucher recipients weren't allowed to pay the difference between the voucher's value and a higher market rent, limiting their options. Moreover, some evacuees gravitated toward the apartment complexes simply because they aren't different from what New Orleans's underclass is used to: low-rise housing projects where young men gather in courtyards. As Michelle Bullock Brefect, a graduate of New Orleans's public housing whose older brother was shot to death in a project more than a decade ago, put it: gang members "go where they're comfortable."

Worsening an already explosive situation, the evacuees didn't group randomly; in some complexes, they roughly sketched out the same neighborhoods they had fled. Free to choose their own Houston apartments, New Orleanians got on their cell phones to find out where friends and family members were staying. Compounding matters, Houston and FEMA awarded housing vouchers to any adult from the hurricane-hit area, not just to those who'd been renters or homeowners there. As the housing authority's Buddy Grantham told me, young people who'd been living with their mothers in New Orleans suddenly got a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

Katrina evacuees have largely crowded into four already crime-ridden patrol districts on Houston's west and southwest sides. In some apartment complexes, evacuees now make up 40 percent of the tenants. Pre-Katrina, these districts had suffered persistent homicide increases over the past two years, but a few statistics show how the influx of evacuees made matters worse.

In these districts, homicides were up 52 percent for the last months of 2005 over the same months in 2004, and Katrina evacuees accounted for a vastly disproportionate share of the increase. After Katrina, armed robberies in the districts were up 11 percent, after an 11 percent drop during the same months between 2003 and 2004. Assaults, flat the previous year, were up nearly 12 percent after Katrina. Weapons arrests, also flat the previous year, rose 31 percent. In crime reports, police now are directed to identify suspects by their hairstyle and accents, as those from Louisiana often wear distinctive dreadlocks and speak in a unique dialect.

Numbers are one thing, but fear is another. By late autumn, New Orleans's underclass wars had come to Houston. The Big Easy's style of crime isn't what Houston is used to. Houston gangs—which include international drug traffickers—are violent, to be sure, but their violence makes a rough kind of sense, having to do with money, position in the gang hierarchy, and the ruthless protection of turf and of affiliates. Though New Orleans's gangs, like Houston's, traffic in guns and drugs, their main concern seems to be violence for the sake of violence. "Murders are just the way this group of individuals resolves conflicts," notes James Bernazzani, the FBI's special agent for New Orleans, who has studied New Orleans's gang culture carefully. "They graduate from theft to robberies to homicide" as they move through adolescence, he reports. One Houston police officer who has done prison details since Katrina mused to me that "hardened Houston criminals" have complained to him of how gratuitously violent the prisoners from New Orleans are. "That's an insult," Houston prisoners snarl when someone asks them if they are from New Orleans.

While Houston has seen some fighting between Houstonians and New Orleans evacuees over turf, much of the evacuee bloodshed results from the intact relocation of New Orleans's relentless gang violence to Houston. "The crimes we're seeing are homicides, robberies, and assaults of people who knew each other and had problems before," said Houston police lieutenant Humberto Lopez. This is "legacy fighting," says Bernazzani.

One of the many dismally similar murders that have plagued Houston since Katrina shows how well New Orleans gangs regrouped. Steven Kennedy survived the floodwaters, only to be shot to death by a fellow evacuee in a Houston apartment complex in December. Houston and New Orleans police believe that the killing was just another in a string of homicides committed by members of the rival Dooney Boyz and 3NG gangs, each affiliated with a Big Easy housing project. The killing likely resulted from Kennedy's own murder in 2003 of an aspiring rapper associated with the 3NG Boys, while that murder in turn was probably retribution for the 2001 murder of a heroin trafficker who is the Dooney Boyz's namesake.

The FBI's Bernazzani cites one statistic that shows what Houston could expect if it does not quickly get a handle on the new crime: in one year, 94 killings took place in and around one gang-ridden New Orleans housing project before officials finally gave up and tore the place down. Unchecked, New Orleans violence could make some marginal Houston neighborhoods horrific places. Since Katrina, Mandy Kao, who owns five Houston apartment complexes, has counted five evacuee homicides near her properties; in January, a gunman threatened her employees. She has hired guards to patrol her complexes. When I asked Kao if they were armed, she sounded surprised: "They have to be armed," she replied, "or they would be killed."

Confronting New Orleans's legacy, the Houston Police Department has shown over the past few months that competent policing can make a big difference in the lives of criminals and victims alike. Some of the HPD's early post-Katrina work was easy. As officer Orlando Patterson told me as we rode around southwest Houston, New Orleans evacuees don't even seem to know that possessing or smoking marijuana, or carrying unlicensed weapons, is a crime. "They say, 'Y'all ain't like N'Awlins' when we arrest them," Patterson observed.

Houston has gone beyond the easy work with a gang-intelligence project. Late last year, the HPD tapped Lieutenant Lopez, a 21-year vet, to head its new gang-murder squad. As he set to work trying to link a spate of murders, he recounts, “We noticed [some evacuees] were giving us a lot of problems. We saw the suspects, victims, witnesses linked to New Orleans. . . . We said, okay, we have a problem. Since we found this, we decided to learn as much as possible about the Louisiana people.”

Lopez’s task force is benefiting from information that the FBI’s Bernazzani compiled during the first few months of his now year-old tour in New Orleans, when he worked with the NOPD to compile a database of the Big Easy’s gang members and their crimes. New Orleans cops and FBI agents traveled to Houston to share the information they had gathered under Bernazzani’s initiative, including a list of more than 800 known gang members from New Orleans as well as information on the gangs’ long-running disputes, neighborhood affiliations, and favored crimes. Houston is using the information to implement a new anti-gang strategy, involving narcotics and robbery squads in tracking gang members, and working with prosecutors to ensure that individuals arrested for drugs or robbery, who already have been tagged as violent gang members, are prosecuted aggressively on those charges rather than released to the streets. Houston has also worked doggedly to make public the identities of suspects from New Orleans who have committed the most egregious crimes, including homicide, in Houston; one list of 11 wanted violent suspects netted eight high-profile evacuee arrests in just weeks.

All this good police work actually has an effect in Houston, because, in contrast to New Orleans, it has a functioning prosecutor’s office, complemented by judges who actually sentence criminals to prison. Says Lieutenant Lopez of New Orleans suspects: “They’re not used to being policed. . . . A lot of them are surprised—and after a few weeks are surprised that they’re still in jail. They’re not really aware of how Texas works.” Concurs Bernazzani: “The HPD does not experience the frustration that the NOPD experiences. . . . There is a sense that the revolving door is closing as individual cases are resolved” in Houston.

How much more effective is Houston’s criminal-justice system than New Orleans’s? In New Orleans, according to its nonprofit Metropolitan Crime Commission, 7 percent of those arrested for a crime ultimately served prison time, compared with 58 percent in Houston. In New Orleans, only 12 percent of those arrested for homicide are ultimately incarcerated for that crime; in Houston, it’s 47 percent. In New Orleans, 18 percent of robbery and 12 percent of drug-distribution arrestees ultimately serve prison time; Houston’s numbers are 60 and 71 percent. Compared with national averages, Houston’s results aren’t stellar, but the city’s obvious superiority to New Orleans demonstrates how poor policing, poor prosecution, and poor sentencing nurtured the Big Easy’s criminal underclass.

Building on these successes, the HPD now should do a full-scale rollout of data-driven policing down to the patrol level, as pioneered by the New York Police Department in the 1990s. Such policing would make a huge difference in Houston, because the city will never have the manpower it needs to patrol its city adequately. Houston’s central policing problem is not much different from sprawling Los Angeles’s. As Heather Mac Donald reported in the Autumn 2003 *City Journal*: “The core challenge of L.A. policing [is] to cover a huge area with a woefully small force. Angelenos have always balked at funding a police department big enough for its responsibilities, perhaps because most of the tax revenue comes from neighborhoods with little crime.”

Houston’s police force, smaller than Los Angeles’s, must cover an even larger populated area. While Houston and L.A. have about the same number of cops per capita—about one per 410 residents—L.A. has about 19 cops per square mile, while Houston has fewer than nine per square mile. (New York has about one cop per 235 residents, and more than 100 per square mile.) Because of Houston’s low density, patrol districts are huge; a Houston cop can spend half an hour driving from one call to the next. Worse, Houston’s southwest apartment complexes were designed to discourage traffic; police who enter the complexes must confront security gates that sometimes work and sometimes don’t.

While Houston should beef up its force, it will never have a cop for every apartment complex. The city needs to reinforce the scant patrol resources it has with superior technology and more aggressive street-level intelligence gathering. “You must intersect [crime reports] with areas and times of day, and put cops there at those times,” says Louis Anemone, former NYPD chief of department. “Question everyone and anyone, and focus on the bad guys. . . . Community policing can bring in tremendous intelligence when done right.” Yet Houston doesn’t have a computerized central data collection and analysis system anywhere near comparable to New York’s CompStat. Houston patrol officers, who often work alone, don’t even have GPS; they must find call addresses on paper maps.

In December, the HPD showed what it can do when it does use data to allocate resources: it devoted Katrina-related overtime patrols (paid for by a $6.5 million federal grant) to “hot spots,” targeting areas that have had a marked crime uptick since the hurricane. The department is coupling this initiative with warrant sweeps to take wanted suspects off the streets. The early results in evacuee-packed neighborhoods are promising: over one 19-day period, police apprehended 229 evacuees.

But the department doesn’t fully exploit patrolling as an intelligence tool. For example, residents and landlords of apartment complexes complain that loiterers menace them and that trespassers who lurk in their parking lots are responsible for burglaries, robberies, and drug dealing. (Along with violent criminals, Katrina brought drug addicts and new demand for drugs, cops say.) Houston could dispatch overtime shifts to the apartment complexes with the most loitering, menacing, and burglary complaints at the specific times that callers mention. The department could view chronic trespassers and loiterers as a resource, pressuring them for intelligence and then dispersing or arresting them in a targeted broken-windows-policing approach.

The HPD has stepped up recruiting to increase its strength by 100 officers in each of the next few years. But there’s a justification for spending more than that, particularly on the best proven technology, to allow the department to deploy its new personnel most effectively. Houston is beginning to show that average police work can affect New Orleans’s stubborn crime. Above-average policing could transform vast acres of Houston’s low-rise neighborhoods. Skimping here, and allowing already marginal neighborhoods to decay, would take years to undo.

Crime control can improve the lives of those who came from New Orleans’s worst neighborhoods. And working-class New Orleanians are also learning about something else they didn’t have much of back home: economic opportunity. As Mayor White told me: “I hope there are people who come from devastated areas who had seen dead ends in their lives and who use this as a time to find hope and opportunity. I’ve met people like that [from New Orleans]. . . . That is the great thing about America.”

Compared with pre-Katrina New Orleans, Houston abounds with jobs. That’s partly why its population has grown 23 percent since 1990, while New Orleans’s population, before Katrina, had shrunk by 8 percent. Just since Katrina hit, the Houston area has added 40,000 new jobs. Despite an enduring myth that New Orleanians are lazy, they’re seizing those jobs, and Houston gives those who worked at low-wage jobs in New Orleans the chance to upgrade their skills and move up.

When Judge Eckels and Mayor White commissioned their job fair in early October, they found that thousands of evacuees couldn’t wait to get back to work; 8,500 showed up at the convention center event, and some 2,000 found work that day. Thousands didn’t have to seek new jobs: Wal-Mart and Home Depot offered all their displaced employees transfers to their new cities. Some national food chains had the same policy. A federal grant put another 1,300 evacuees to work temporarily in area nonprofits, giving them an alternative to unemployment benefits as they looked for full-time jobs. The state has also used federal funds to train interested evacuees for jobs ranging from construction to nursing.

Many evacuees plan to make Houston their permanent home. Twenty-eight-year-old Satacha Johnson, living in voucher housing on Houston's west side with her nine-year-old daughter, is just one of many young New Orleanians I spoke to who plan on staying; she's been working at a Houston charity as she searches for a permanent job. "Who doesn't love New Orleans?" she said. "But there's more opportunity for a single mom in Houston."

Matching Houston's culture of economic opportunity is the culture of striving in its public schools, which took in more than 20,000 new students after Katrina. Their parents are almost uniformly surprised at the quality of the education they're getting.

Stasia Marie Davis, who evacuated from New Orleans East and was about to start work as a teacher's aide when I spoke to her, says that her two high school–age daughters had been in gifted programs at a New Orleans public school but "are struggling to keep up" at Houston's Westfield High School. "In New Orleans, they are preparing them for the tourism business. Here, they are preparing them for college," she told me.

Ariane Daughtry, a Catholic Charities caseworker from New Orleans now working with evacuees, notes that she paid $250 a month in New Orleans to send her son to private school, but in Houston he's thriving, even playing the violin, at a public school where nearly all the kids can read and do math at grade level. William Coleman, who has custody of his grandchildren, told me that the Houston school the children attend call the house if the kids are late or absent: "They didn't do that in New Orleans," he marveled.

At the Briarmeadow Charter School in southwest Houston, principal Lynn Barnes is educating 22 evacuees, ranging from children from affluent New Orleans neighborhoods and suburbs to inner-city kids from New Orleans's Ninth Ward. The nine-year-old charter school is a far cry from the New Orleans public schools the disadvantaged kids attended.

Some of Barnes's new students come from Mildred Osborne Elementary School in New Orleans, where only one-third of the students could read or do math at grade level. Others come from Sherwood Forest Elementary School, where fewer than half could read or do math at grade level. Now, the kids attend a school where 85 percent of fourth-graders can read at grade level, and nearly three-quarters can do math at grade level. Briarmeadow's middle school offers a gifted program, and Barnes expects all her pupils to go on to college.

Teachers as well as parents are pleased. Before evacuating, Warren Johnson taught English at McDonogh #35, one of New Orleans's few high-performing public schools. Now teaching at Yates High School in Houston, he's thrilled with the quality of resources and plans to stay. He notes that the school is well managed and has good security, and the administration works efficiently and "without so much politics." "I hate to talk bad about my city," he says, but some things in Houston "are a bit more logical."

Texas and Houston have already determined that evacuee students badly trail their new peers when it comes to basic skills. Just one measure of the shocking disparity: on a standardized state reading test administered in February, 89 percent of Texas third-graders could read at grade level, while only 59 percent of evacuee students, most from New Orleans, could do the same. In fifth-grade reading, 80 percent of Texas students passed, while more than half of evacuee students failed. (Texas has not yet released reading scores at the school-district level, but Houston students' reading scores have been nearly identical to those of their peers across Texas in the past.) The mayor took note early on of the challenge that New Orleans students face in Texas schools, and used a federal grant to help schools hire 100 tutors and teachers from New Orleans beginning last fall to give evacuee children extra help.

Houston's schools are not perfect; nor are New Orleans evacuees integrating perfectly. At several schools, New Orleans and Houston kids have engaged in large-scale brawls, and I saw competing graffiti, including a tag that said "NO Boyz," in a stairwell at Yates. But Houston boosted security quickly after the early fights, and, just as important, it hasn't given up on its public schools, as New Orleans had. It is still innovating in its quest for greater accountability and better results; in January, for example, over the objections of the teachers' union, Houston's largest school district voted to implement a sweeping merit-pay system for teachers.

Further, Texas has nearly 300 charter schools, compared with pre-Katrina Louisiana's 16. After Katrina, Houston started a charter elementary and middle school in partnership with the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) college-prep academy and Teach for America, just to serve evacuee students, with teachers and administrators from New Orleans. Principal Gary Robichaux told the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* that the new charter school, New Orleans West, "functions much healthier than many of the schools did in New Orleans." Robichaux said that most of his eighth-grade New Orleans evacuees can read at only a fifth-grade level, "if they can read at all."

Houston's culture of opportunity leaves little excuse for failure. But Houston must put this philosophy to work in motivating its underclass evacuees. "A lot of people who lived in public housing and were not working, you have to get them used to a different way of living," says caseworker Ariane Daughtry. "The only lifestyle they know is the welfare system, low-income housing. They may be getting help now, but they have to realize they need a plan. [We have to] show them this is a fresh start."

Bob Fleming, Daughtry's boss, concurs that it will be a challenge to "to get down to the 5 to 7 percent who may be dependent. . . . That will be the issue in the end." One measure New Orleans itself is contemplating—barring the unemployed from public housing—will make Houston's job more difficult, as those who aren't working will be likely to stay where they are.

At the biweekly meetings that Mayor White holds on Katrina strategy, everyone knows that this issue is key. Says Jeff Stys, who attends the meetings for United Way, the "main message" for unemployed evacuees now is that "the clock is ticking. Houston has opened its doors. This is time to make sure you uphold your end of the deal."

Houston also has a fiscal motive to ensure that temporary government assistance for Katrina evacuees remains temporary. While the feds have reimbursed the city for many (although not all) of its first-year evacuee costs, they will end that reimbursement once they view the former Louisiana residents as Texans. Louisiana itself has already cut off federal welfare payments to the evacuees, claiming that they no longer live in Louisiana.

Mayor White says he's open to suggestions for Katrina's next phase. This is a perfect opportunity not just for Houston's local charities—including faith-based groups—but also for national social-entrepreneurship groups to help evacuees who aren't used to working, or who are difficult to employ, such as convicted felons or illiterates. Even more ambitious social entrepreneurs could help New Orleanians learn that the "normal" New Orleans culture of single motherhood isn't normal at all. The ultimate challenge for philanthropists and policymakers is to ensure that a new generation of single mothers doesn't set loose another generation of unsupervised violent young men to prey on another city.

Houston's openhearted outreach to New Orleans in its hour of need was an extraordinary gesture, and it saved lives. But Houston will have accomplished a truly heroic task if it can redeem the undereducated, underpoliced, and unmarried underclass that made New Orleans a disaster long before Katrina.

Houston approaches this task with a crucial advantage: its leaders and citizens don't instinctively see big government as the solution—only good government.