Katrina's Latest Casualty
When it comes to violent crime, New Orleans' gain may be Houston's loss
By Cathy Booth Thomas
March 5, 2006

Crime may be down in New Orleans, but many of the city's bad guys seem to be turning up in Houston, which finds itself caught in the cross hairs of an apparent gang war between Hurricane Katrina evacuees from two rival housing projects. On Friday, Houston's newly formed Gang Murder Squad announced the arrest of eight men from New Orleans suspected in 11 murders in the Houston area over the past three months. "These guys are hooking up with friends and old rivalries are beginning again," Sgt. Brian Harris, a Gang Murder Squad investigator and the top detective on the case, told TIME. Unlike gangs in Houston, which are usually affiliated with the Bloods and the Crips and deal in crack, the New Orleans groups are strictly based on local fault lines, formed around housing projects, and deal mostly in heroin, he said.

The Houston Police Department has acknowledged in recent weeks that a surge in violent crime is directly attributable to the criminal element that evacuated New Orleans after the hurricane. Murders in Houston, which took in an estimated 150,000 evacuees from New Orleans, shot up by nearly 25% last year and are already up 50% in January from the year before. In Sacramento, California police captured a 20-year-old New Orleans native accused of gunning down two other evacuees in a Houston apartment complex. Other states are reporting similar problems. Three Katrina evacuees from New Orleans were accused earlier this month of gunning down and killing two men outside a music hall in Oklahoma City. Outside Atlanta this week, another Katrina evacuee—rapper Jerome "Slim Rome" Spears—killed his girlfriend and wounded her son before committing suicide, according to police.

When the Gang Murder Squad began investigating a series of Houston-area shootings starting in November, detectives quickly discovered a tie among the victims and suspects. Police said the same nicknames and the same vehicles kept popping up in various attacks. "Of 23 Katrina-related homicides in Houston, we linked nine to just two groups from New Orleans—the 3'n'G and the Dooney boys," Harris told TIME. The Dooney boys, who come from the Magnolia Projects just west of downtown New Orleans, home of the slain rapper Soulja Slim, are old rivals of the 3'n'G (named for the intersection of Third and Galvez). "This wasn't a Houston thing," says Harris. "You see a spike in homicides in New Orleans in July and August, then the hurricane comes and they are displaced to Houston and elsewhere."

September and October were relatively quiet while the evacuees reconnected with family and friends. But as they got FEMA money, settled in and began to acquire cars, they started moving around Houston."By November, the Houston nightclubs were having New Orleans nights," says Harris, when the groups would sometimes spot old rivals in the parking lots of clubs. Often, Harris says, "These shootings were dope deals gone bad." The shooters were heavily armed with everything from pistols and shotguns to AK-47s, and three suspects remain at large.
Violent crime in New Orleans was virtually non-existent after Hurricane Katrina last fall. The police chief even joked that the city felt like the fictional Mayberry. But there are signs that the city's notorious violence has started to return. Three people were shot and wounded in mid-January during a "second line" parade as social clubs marched in support of New Orleans' rebuilding effort. Crime has also been a major issue during discussions of how to rebuild the city's poorest—and often most crime-ridden—neighborhoods. A new study from Brown University concludes that up to 80% of the city's black population might not return to New Orleans. "I'm sympathetic to those who are dispersed, but not to the criminal element," says shipyard builder Donald "Boysie" Bollinger, who sits on both the mayor's Bring New Orleans Back Commission and the state's Louisiana Recovery Authority. "We should not try to bring back a society that breeds crime." Good news for New Orleans, but apparently not for Houston.

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Houston Wants Katrina Evacuees to Move On

Crime is up. Schools are overcrowded. Hospitals are jammed. Houston welcomed a flood of hurricane evacuees with open arms. But now the city is suffering from a case of 'compassion fatigue.'

By Arian Campo-Flores
March 13, 2006

In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, Houston earned a loving moniker among many of the evacuees who sought refuge there: the Big Heart. This, after all, was the city that housed, fed and mended more than 150,000 survivors in a herculean effort that won national acclaim. Houston officials mounted what is believed to be the biggest shelter operation in the country's history, including MASH-like megaclinics that took on problems ranging from emergency care to eyeglass prescriptions. Then, just as quickly, officials disbanded those facilities to usher evacuees into more-permanent housing, offering them generous vouchers that covered rent and utilities for a year. "No other city really provided the resources and assistance Houston has," says Angelo Edwards, vice chair of the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association. "If not for Mayor [Bill] White and his administration, a lot of us would've been lost."

But six months after the evacuees arrived, the city's heart seems to be hardening. The signs of a backlash are sometimes subtle. "You'll hear little snide remarks," says Edwards. "People will say, 'The reason you can't get a job is because you can't talk right.'" Other times, the reaction is more venomous. Among the nasty examples Dorothy Stukes, an evacuee, cites: graffiti blaring F--- NEW ORLEANS in her apartment complex, schoolkids taunting her grandchildren to "swim in that Katrina water and die" and shopkeepers muttering about survivors' sucking the public coffers dry. Stukes, chair of the ACORN KSA, has become so concerned that when New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin came to town recently, she begged him to hire a public-relations firm to repair the evacuees' image. But given all that Nagin has to contend with amid his own run for reelection, that is not likely to land high on his list.
Katrina continues to be a destructive force. The Bush administration found itself engulfed once again last week, after the release of some footage of the president at an August video briefing on the hurricane. The tape revived discussion of some of Bush's darkest days, when he seemed either uninformed or unable to respond to a national disaster unfolding on TV. But the tape wasn't the only thing fueling Katrina's return to the news. Stoked by congressional investigators, new details have emerged about the government failures that left so many people in mortal danger. Late last week retired Marine Corps Brigadier Gen. Matthew Broderick resigned his post as Homeland Security's operations chief amid accumulating evidence that the command post he directed as Katrina hit misjudged the early damage to New Orleans. (Homeland Security said Broderick left to "spend more time with his family.")

Yet as devastating as Katrina has been for the administration, its impact has been far more visceral in those communities that received tens of thousands of evacuees overnight. In cities stretching from Atlanta to San Antonio, good will has often given way to the crude reality of absorbing a traumatized and sometimes destitute population. In Baton Rouge, which added 100,000 people to a pre-Katrina population of 225,000, residents bemoan the loss of the city's small-town feel and worry that trailer-park settlements will become permanent fixtures of blight. In Dallas, the city housing authority began offering rent vouchers to some of its 20,000 evacuees, only to become quickly overwhelmed and fail to pay landlords, prompting a number of eviction notices.

But perhaps no city has been as convulsed as Houston, which took in the greatest number of survivors. As some see it, the city is suffering from "compassion fatigue." Public services are overwhelmed, city finances are strained and violent crime is on the rise. When city leaders in New Orleans made comments two weeks ago suggesting that they wanted only hardworking evacuees to return, some Houston city-council members erupted in protest—fearing that politicians in the Big Easy were trying to stick Houston with their undesirables. "We extended an open hand to all kinds of people," says Councilwoman Shelley Sekula-Gibbs. "If they want to return home, it's their right." And if they want to stay, she adds, they "need to stand up, get on their feet and get jobs."

It doesn't help that a small segment of criminals threatens to give all New Orleanians a bad name. Though Houston's murder rate was already climbing before Katrina, the newcomers have added to it. Of 189 murders in the six months after the hurricane, 33 involved Katrina evacuees as either suspects or victims, according to Police Chief Harold Hurtt. Initially, the killings resulted from clashes among rival New Orleans gangs, says Hurtt. More recently, they've stemmed from robberies or narcotics, he says. Many cops are struck by the brazenness of the evacuees. "It seems like the face of crime has changed in Houston," said Officer Brandon Brown one night last week as he patrolled the sketchy Fondren area of the city, where many of the arrivals have settled. "It's more tense, more violent." Soon after saying that, he was called to respond to an alleged assault. A New Orleans woman was accused of attacking her boyfriend, whose head she had previously slashed with a shard of glass.

There are other signs of strain. The Houston Independent School District has been flooded with 5,800 additional kids, out of 20,000 overall in area schools. That influx has forced it to spend an
additional $180,000 per day of its own $1.3 billion annual budget—only a fraction of which may be reimbursed by the federal government—to educate the new students. With their arrival have come new social tensions: one near-riot between Houston and New Orleans kids at a high school in December resulted in the arrests of 27 students. Part of the problem, according to Edwards of ACORN's Katrina survivors' group: a hip-hop culture clash between kids who feel a need to "represent" their musical style. "Now you've got two sticks of dynamite rubbing against each other," he says.

The newcomers are also taxing the area's health-care system. Already burdened by a high proportion of uninsured people before Katrina, Houston has had to contend with thousands more. The problem will likely only get worse: on Jan. 31, more-generous Medicaid rules for Katrina victims expired. As a result, countless patients who had been receiving treatment in doctors' offices may now turn to overwhelmed emergency rooms. "Our hospitals are struggling financially to get by, and this doesn't help," says David Persse, Houston's EMS medical director. "Hospital CEOs are about to have coronaries." Worse still, infection rates for sexually transmitted diseases are increasing—possibly an outgrowth of high rates in New Orleans, city health officials say.

All of which leaves Houston Mayor Bill White scrambling to keep the city's finances afloat. He's taken heat from political opponents who carp that he should have sought greater assurances of federal support before welcoming evacuees so magnanimously. "This is going to create turmoil for many years to come," says Steve Radack of the Harris County Commission. But White responds that the city couldn't exactly shut its doors to desperate, dislocated people. Last month he announced that FEMA had agreed to reimburse the city for its housing-voucher program—expected to cost $300 million to $400 million—and to pay $6.5 million in police overtime costs to boost patrolling. And he continues to campaign for additional education and public-safety funds. Six months after Katrina, he says, "there is still an emergency." The city that so generously opened its heart could now use a little generosity itself.

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