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Katrina amplifies troubles that exist in your town, too

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Katrina is old news, right? New Orleans who cares? It's just another big city with big problems, bad luck and bad weather. Get over it.

Actually, please don't.

Don't ever get over the tragedy of New Orleans. It's your tragedy, too.

What happened to this historic city two years ago is more than the obvious cautionary tale of what might befall your community after a natural disaster or a terrorist strike. It's also a sad reflection of what's happening now today, in your hometown and across an anxious and ailing nation.

Inadequate health care.

A housing crisis.

Crumbling infrastructure.

Racial division.

Poor schools.

Rising crime.

And at the core of these and other problems threatening our way of life: a pernicious failure of leadership.

Katrina did more than claim lives and property. It ripped away the glitzy veneer that made New Orleans' reputation and exposed a festering brew of problems lingering beneath problems endemic to the rest of the nation, begging for attention, if we only had the guts to look.

If this country can't help New Orleans rebound if we and our leaders break the promises made to its citizens what are the odds your health care will ever get cheaper? Your bridges safer? Your schools better?

"New Orleans is an incubator for all our nation's ills," said historian Douglas Brinkley, author of "The Great Deluge," a book about Katrina.

"If you study what's going on in New Orleans, it's just an exaggerated version of what's hitting us in many areas of the country," he said. "Just pick your topic."

OK, let's start from the top.

FOR YOUR HEALTH

Katrina made a bleak health-care system worse in New Orleans. The death rate jumped 47 percent after Katrina as a city of 270,000 mostly poor and middle-class people lost seven of 22 hospitals and more than half of its hospital beds. Nearly 4,500 doctors were displaced from three New Orleans parishes.

The lack of space for mental patients has caused problems for police departments, who have complained of having to use officers' time to drive from hospital to hospital looking for vacant beds.

Dr. Atul Gawande, a local surgeon and author, said the city's medical system is in a "death spiral" that is more rapid but no less certain than the crash course the rest of the nation is on.

It goes like this:

People rely on employers for health insurance. They lose their jobs. They lose their insurance. They can't afford their pills. They put off doctors' visits. Minor illnesses become major. They go to the emergency room. The emergency overflows with uninsured patients. The hospital loses money. Insurance rates skyrocket. The hospital shuts its emergency room. Uninsured patients crowd other ERs. Doctors leave town. Businesses leave town. Jobs are lost. Repeat.

New Orleans is just one city in a country with more than 43 million uninsured, a figure that increased 2 million from 2005 to 2006, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nearly 20 percent of working-age Americans did not have health insurance in 2006.

The percentage of uninsured among the 20 largest states ranged from 7.7 percent in Michigan to 23.8 percent in Texas.

"What you see in New Orleans is the extreme of what happens when you live in a flawed health care system. And all of us do," said Gawande, author of "Better," a book about the system's failures. "It's a slow-motion train wreck."

NO ROADS HOME

The homeless population of New Orleans has nearly doubled since before Hurricane Katrina. Many of the poor, mentally ill and drug-addicted are squatting in the city's estimated 80,000 vacant dwellings.

Tens of thousands of other people are a bit luckier, living in badly damaged homes, government trailers and out-of-state apartments.

The state and federal governments are in a petty fight over how to fund the Road Home program, which is supposed to help people repair and rebuild houses.

With 183,000 people applying for the aid, the Road Home program's needs exceed its budget by about \$5 billion.

Nationally, ill winds are stirring up a crisis that sharp eyes saw coming. The combination of higher interest rates and weaker home values has clobbered homeowners, especially those with higher-risk subprime mortgages.

Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of borrowers, stand to lose their homes while Washington and the media obsess over the impact on Wall Street.

BRIDGES FALLING DOWN

The New Orleans levees were not built to withstand a sizable hurricane, a historic lapse of judgment and competence topped only by this: The levees are still not ready for the next serious storm.

The city's 3,200-mile system of water and sewer lines were old, leaky and in need of repair long before the hurricane. The crush of pipe-corroding salt water made things worse.

Miles of New Orleans streets were destroyed or damaged by the storm, and remain in disrepair because the city failed to give the federal government a to-do list.

This can't be much comfort to the people of Minnesota, where the collapse of an Interstate 35W bridge killed at least 13. President Bush toured the site, promising to cut red tape and rebuild.

Just as he toured New Orleans, making promises to be broken.

From New York to California, cities are raising utility rates and issuing bonds in hopes of modernizing public works systems straining under increasing populations. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that \$1.6 trillion is needed over a five-year period to bring the nation's water systems, runways, dams and roads and bridges to a good condition.

Government agencies have set aside just \$1 trillion for infrastructure improvements in the next five years, and those budgets are historically raided for other purposes.

BLACK & WHITE

For many blacks, Katrina is their generation's epic reminder of how far the nation is from true racial equality. The hurricane had a predominantly black toll, and many blacks felt the fatally inept response was tinged by racism.

Whites were less likely to think so.

"You have to go back to slavery, or the burning of black towns, to find a comparable event that has affected black people this way," Darnell M. Hunt, a sociologist and head of the African American studies department at UCLA, said days after the storm.

ABCs

Of the students in New Orleans high schools taken over by the state after Katrina, two-thirds flunked the state graduation exam. At least 40 percent of the city's fourth-graders and one-third of the eighth-graders in those schools failed promotion exams. Many flood-ravaged schools remain closed.

Most New Orleans schools performed poorly long before Katrina and the school system was riddled with corruption, mismanagement and poor bookkeeping.

Sound familiar?

Nationally, nearly 40 percent of high school seniors score below the basic level on national math tests. More than a quarter of seniors fail to reach the basic level on the reading test.

Three decades ago, the U.S. had 30 percent of the world's population of college students. That has fallen to 14 percent.

"A strong school system is providing a variety of community functions that are primarily unseen," said Phil Schlechty, a leading advocate of school reform. "In New Orleans, where the schools are not a part of the community, they couldn't even get the buses out of the parking lots."

IT'S A CRIME

Military police in their Humvees still patrol New Orleans streets, where the murder rate has doubled, the number of police has declined and crime suspects walk free because of legal system that was at the brink of collapse before Katrina.

Nationally, a lull in violent crime has come to an abrupt halt. The murder rate jumped by more than 10 percent in large cities since 2004. Robberies also spiked, as did felony assaults and attacks with guns.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Nobody. At least that's the prevailing view of most Americans.

Katrina showed governments failing to prevent a crises, moving sluggishly to respond to it and refusing to be accountable. Charities, churches and other institutions couldn't fill the vacuum.

We live in an era of failed leadership. Corrupt and incompetent politicians. Thieving CEOs. Priests as pedophiles. Media monopolies. A president's unpopular, intractable war. Steroid-enhanced sluggers.

Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? Or Harry Truman?

A recent Gallup Poll shows that the public is losing confidence with the institutions that make up the fragile fabric of society. The military, police, churches, banks, the U.S. Supreme Court, public schools, the medical system, the presidency, TV news, newspapers, the criminal justice system, organized labor and Congress all lost ground from 2006 to 2007 in terms of the public's confidence.

More than 7 of 10 Americans think their country is headed in the wrong direction.

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You should.

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