

Three Years After Katrina

The pace of recovery is slowing in New Orleans as the city approaches the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina late this month. The next president and Congress will need to expedite assistance before the city's mood turns from guarded optimism back to despair.

With a mélange of federal, state, city and private recovery efforts under way, it is difficult to grasp what is really happening in the stricken city. Fortunately, two reports on New Orleans's condition have just been issued by authoritative outside organizations.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation released its second survey of the attitudes and experiences of the city's residents. The good news is that 6 in 10 Katrina survivors say that their lives are almost or largely back to normal, and most see recovery moving in the right direction. The bad news is that 4 in 10 respondents say their lives are still disrupted, and more than 7 in 10 see little or no progress in making housing affordable or in controlling crime, which they view as the city's top problem. Smaller majorities see little or no progress in making medical services available, strengthening public schools, attracting jobs or rebuilding neighborhoods.

These perceptions are largely consistent with an index of progress compiled by the Brookings Institution and the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. Their third-year report finds that the greater New Orleans area has recovered the vast majority of its pre-Katrina population and jobs but that recovery trends have slowed in the past year. Tens of thousands of blighted properties, a lack of affordable housing and thin public services continue to plague the city. Rents are 46 percent higher than before the storm.

New Orleans residents expressed mixed attitudes about their prospects. Three-fourths told Kaiser that they remained optimistic about the future even though most felt that both Washington and the American public have largely forgotten them. What is worrisome is that half of the residents are dissatisfied with or angry about the lack of progress, most think it is a bad time for children to grow up in New Orleans and 22 percent (predominantly young) are seriously considering moving away.

Unless government agencies and private organizations pick up the pace of recovery efforts, New Orleans may see its future pack up and go with them.