



Treated Like Trash: New Katrina Report Reveals ‘Dickensian’ Abuse of Incarcerated Youth

New America Media, News Report, Cheryl Brown and Donal Brown, May 09, 2006

Editor’s Note: A damning new report details the ordeal of incarcerated youth during Hurricane Katrina, including being shackled and left in the rising waters in their cells. This story is a joint project reported and written by Donal Brown, reporter for the New America Media and Cheryl Brown, editor and co-owner of the Black Voice News serving Riverside and San Bernardino, California.

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. -- Imagine you are a 14-year-old boy incarcerated for a minor offense and a category five hurricane is bearing down on the city. You are told nothing but then the lights go out, they come on for a short time, but go off again for good. The water is rising up to your legs then to your thighs.

A day passes and you are given no food and water.

“The water was past our hips. Beaucoup feces was everywhere, and we hoped the water wouldn’t go over our heads.” So begins the story of Eddie, an African-American child who said he will never be able to get out of his mind what happened during Katrina.

In a telephone interview on May 8, Eddie Fenceroy, now 15, told of his experience in the South White Detention Center at the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) during Hurricane Katrina.

When Eddie was finally evacuated to some fish farm ponds at the OPP, he was "shackled at the ankles in a coffle and handcuffed," in the style trains of slaves were handled in the old South.

“The grown people [adult inmates] were not shackled; it was like they thought we were much faster and could run away. Where would we have run? I was hoping to live and not die,” he said.

Eddie said he was starving and not allowed to eat the food that floated past on the flood waters, not even wrapped loaves of bread. He had to watch as the guards fed their own children. Then the guards deserted with their families. They left one person to guard, and he had an assault rifle trained on the juvenile inmates.

Eddie was finally taken to the Broad Street Bridge where he saw a lot of dead bodies floating in the water. He still has nightmares about the bodies and is plagued with foot fungus contracted during three days standing in the polluted waters.

It was three weeks before Eddie's mother, Lynette Robertson, with the help of a private investigator hired by a sympathetic Texas businessman, found Eddie. Eddie was in Shreveport still in custody but was released on a judge's order to his grandmother who lived nearby. Eddie now lives with his mother and siblings in Taft, Texas near Corpus Christi.

Said Robertson, "I feel the state and city officials should have had a better plan for evacuating the city and children in detention. They put the kids in danger and in detention with adults. They could have let kids with minor [offenses] out."

In an attempt to increase public awareness of the failures and to create a more professional and competent juvenile justice system, the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana produced a report, "Treated Like Trash," that describes the horrors suffered by Eddie and 150 mostly African-American children in detention during the hurricane.

The children told stories similar to that of Eddie. According to the report, H.J. a 16-year-old boy said, "Guards kept saying food was coming. Kids were throwing up...I was sick and dizzy a lot of the time." In spite of fecal bacteria, heavy metals and petroleum in the waters, many resorted to drinking the water. Said A.F., age 16, "We were so thirsty, we drank the contaminated water."

Seung Hong, communications director for Juvenile Justice Project, summed up the circumstances in a March 8 e-mail, "...many kids spent up to two nights in flooded cells before they were taken outside to the fish ponds. None of the children except for the 15 girls received any food or water until they were taken to the bridge, which depending on the kid was 2 to 4 days after the storm. Children were trapped in flooded jails without food, water, medical attention or toilet facilities for up to two days and nights."

The evacuation to the ponds and bridge caused major trauma for many of the children. C.S., aged 15, said, "It was scary because I can't swim, and they were pulling us by our shirts and I went under the water a few times. I even swallowed a lot of water..."

Supervision was lax during the days after Katrina, and in the tense conditions, fights broke out. C.K., aged 16, witnessed a boy breaking another boy's jaw. The victim spat out some of his teeth after being beaten. C.K. said he himself was hit in the face many times by stressed guards trying to manage both the children and adult inmates who were challenging their authority.

The Sheriff's Department essentially disavowed any responsibility for or knowledge of the children in the Orleans Parish Prison. Sheriff Marlin Gusman's spokesperson, Renee Lapeyroleire, in an e-mail on March 2 wrote, "A juvenile facility from near the St. Bernard Housing Development evacuated to our jail, which has multi-level buildings...(They) were provided space and came upon the condition that they would guard their own detainees. That's all I know about juveniles."

Lapeyroleire did not make any references to children like Eddie already at the OPP in the South White Detention Center, part of the sheriff's jurisdiction.

According to the Treated Like Trash report, when ordering the mandatory evacuation on Aug.

28, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin exempted prisons, hospitals, tourists, officials and media. During the press conference, Sheriff Gusman said it was not necessary to evacuate the OPP because they had backup generators, a full staff and an emergency operations plan.

A review of the sheriff's plan shows that it failed to provide evacuation route and omitted details of how to remove inmates.

The report also said the failure to plan adequately focuses attention on the sheriff's leadership. "This failure alone, apart from the stories of the children themselves, calls into serious question the competence of Gusman's office to manage OPP safely," it said. "Most important, it should lead New Orleans citizens to demand a system of detention that is managed humanely and responsibly, in accordance with the highest professional standards."

The report cited the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative that outlines a system that eliminates large juvenile prisons subject to abuses. For example, under the initiative, a system of community or home detention under unannounced visitations and strict curfews keeps youth going to church and school. And those requiring 24-hour supervision are placed in facilities that provide education, recreation tutoring and other life skills training with a staff to youth ratio of six to one.

The Juvenile Justice Project wants to convene representatives with vested interests including the Juvenile Court, police, and elected officials. The report said the broken juvenile justice system needs to be rebuilt with fresh vision based on sound research.

New America Media is a project of [Pacific News Service](#) | [Copyright](#) © Pacific News Service