

Who Inherits The Earth?

To the masses, it was a vicious blast of nature's cruelty, a bruising brawl to survive, a forced trip to an uncertain future. To the few, it was just another miserable day. For all the hardship and pain unleashed by Hurricane Harvey, many of Houston's homeless shrugged it off. "We ain't got nothing to lose anyway," said Eric Brian, one of the thousands of the city's dispossessed.

Brian is 63 and is resting against a chain-link fence in midtown Houston, where he's lived on the streets the past two years. He's not interested in elaborating on the family problem that drove him here, and doesn't think people care too much what happens to the homeless anyway. He says he never thought twice about seeking shelter even as the torrents came down.

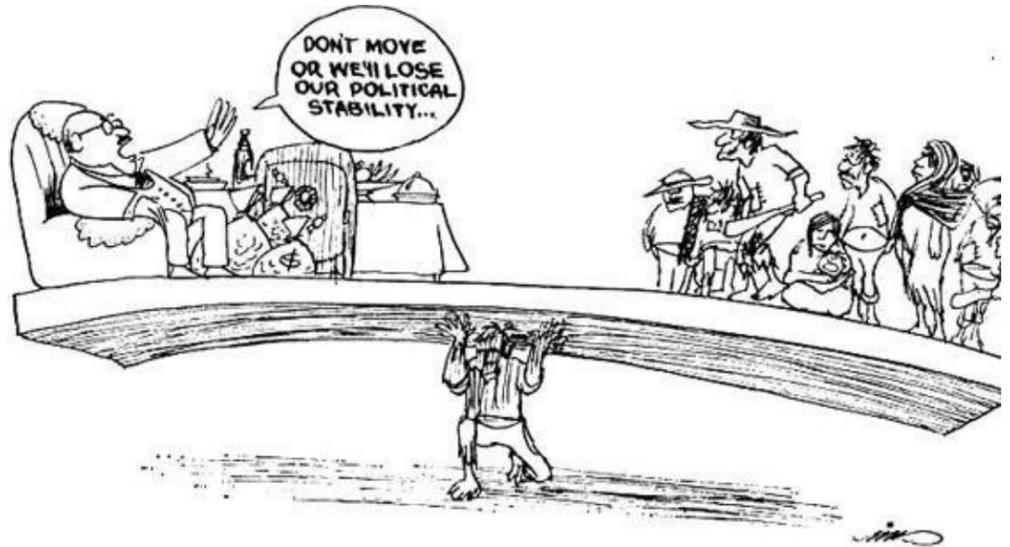
A few blocks away, beneath an overpass for Interstate 59, about 20 tents are clustered with dozens of bikes, numerous charcoal grills, the occasional piece of furniture and mounds of trash. Many of the dozens who live here chose to brave Harvey in this place they call home, where pigeons gather to pick at food scraps and the steady hum and clacking of overhead traffic sounds.

Asked why he did not fear the storm, Billy Matthews, 46, points upward, to the tons of concrete overhead that shelter him. He began staying here about two weeks ago, when he said he finished a yearlong prison stay for stealing a pair of Gucci sunglasses from the mall. For him, he said, Harvey was nothing. "It's just rain," he said, echoing the words of others on the streets.

Some who live in the camp have phones or try to follow the news, but others rely entirely on the scraps of information passed along by their neighbors. They do not know whether to believe the stories they hear of how devastating the storm was, of overflowing rivers and swamped neighborhoods; they know only that flooding in their camp was minor, leaving them on muddy ground.

The camp's unofficial leader is Stanley Unc, 56. He too came here after time in jail, most recently for a drunken-driving arrest. He says even if conditions were worse here, many wouldn't have blinked — they are toughened by lives lived outside. He said others can't grasp what their lives are like each day, much less on a day when a Category 4 hurricane hits. "They know what it took them through and we went right in the middle of it," he said.

For those who work with those on the streets, the steely assessment of the storm by the homeless is not entirely surprising. "They experience a different world than people who are not in their circumstances," said Joseph Cohen of the Salvation Army, which housed about 450 homeless people in its Houston facility. He said advocates are bracing for what may come next as waters further recede; help for the homeless, often



hard to come by under normal circumstances, likely will be even more challenging in the storm's aftermath. To many affected by Harvey, there is newfound loss. To the homeless, though, it may be more familiar. "It's heartbreaking every day," Cohen said.

Some of Houston's homeless did seek protection from the storm. Desiree DeMarco, 29, turned to *Ben Taub* Hospital for refuge. She suffers from bipolar disorder and other mental conditions, she explained and had been seeing things and hearing voices as the storm approached. She works as a prostitute but hasn't had a good customer in a while. She said she didn't even have enough money in her pockets for a soda and figured the hospital was the only place she could go. "I needed to get out of the rain," she said. "I needed to go somewhere."

Antonio Scoggins also ended up in the hospital. The 43-year-old man woke up at St. Joseph Medical Center as Harvey roared. Before the storm hit, he was knocked unconscious in a fight he can barely remember. He later wound up at Ben Taub's neuropsychiatric center because he suffers from schizoaffective disorder. He was discharged Wednesday, wearing the light blue paper shirt they gave him, and dabbing a right knee still oozing blood with a hospital-issued boot. Scoggins became homeless after relapsing into cocaine use a year ago. He sleeps beneath a Gulf Freeway overpass in southeast Houston and even though he has no walls or roof, he considers it home and was desperate to get back. As the hospital let him go, they handed him a yellow bus pass, though service had not been restored. He sat at a stop outside for a bus that would never come. "I have nowhere to go," he said. "I don't know."

Earlier this year, an official count required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found about **3,400** homeless people in Houston, without doubt **an undercount** of the

problem in a city of 2.3 million but still the best official data available. Despite the uncertainty over the precise number of homeless people, there is general consensus there have been improving conditions over the past decade as locals undertook efforts to increase housing opportunities and made other changes aimed at getting people off the streets.

After Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, New Orleans and Jefferson Parish saw its official count of homeless go from 2,000 people to 9,000 four years later. It wasn't until 2014 that it dipped to pre-storm numbers. Not every place hit with historic disasters has seen such a prolific surge in homelessness, but it has advocates nervous. Nan Roman, president and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, said Houston will be "sorely tested" in the storm's aftermath. "A lot of poor and vulnerable people who lost their homes will be at risk of homelessness because there will be less affordable housing to replace them," she said by email.

Back at the homeless tent camp, 41-year-old Michelle Brown spoke of how she and others "just need an opportunity and a chance," and said a hurricane did nothing to change that. She's lived here for a few months, since an electrical fire torched her apartment. Her renter's insurance only went so far; living outside, her hygiene deteriorated, and the restaurant where she worked as a cook no longer wanted her. She cringes at the people who slow down as they drive by, gawking at this community as if it's a zoo, and she rejects stereotypes that most homeless people are "lowlifes and drug addicts." Harvey, she said, was in most ways no different than so many days before it. She thinks it underscored the thing homeless people do best. "The main thing people do here is survive and make it another day," she said.

Matt Sedensky, HOUSTON (AP)

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