

# Donors favor those 'worthy' of compassion: A troubling trend

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

As Americans set new records for charitable giving in response to Hurricane Katrina, some fund-raisers are seeing a principle confirmed: when the sufferers are perceived as innocent victims, donors respond generously.

But giving patterns suggest that donors are losing interest in chronic problems such as poverty, in which suffering is arguably exacerbated by questionable individual choices. Private donations are shrinking for homeless shelters, AIDS-related services and programs for troubled youth, to cite just a few examples.

In religious circles and beyond, some see a troubling trend: compassion is increasingly being reserved for those who appear to have done no wrong.

It took only ten days after the hurricane hit the Gulf Coast for donors to exceed \$600 million for relief efforts, according to data tracked by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. Ten days after the attacks of September 11, Americans had donated \$239 million to relief efforts.

A quick glance at the big picture reveals an increasingly generous public. Total annual giving to all charities has climbed steadily from \$231 billion in 2001 to \$249 billion in 2004.

Closer scrutiny reveals that giving to human service causes—including legal services, food pantries and rehabilitation for ex-convicts—has declined every year, from a \$22.1 billion peak in 2001 to \$19.2 billion in 2004. Hardest hit: small organizations, those raising less than \$1 million per year. They received 3.4 percent less from private donors in 2004 than in 2003, according to Giving USA 2005.

“For some reason, we’re not being sympathetic to the poor and the needy as we’re leaving certain people behind,” says Daniel Borochoff, president of the Chicago-based American Institute of Philanthropy. “It is harder to raise money for people who made bad choices. . . . It is hard for the charities to tell people, ‘Yeah, OK, sure,

these giant things get a lot of news, but you know, there's thousands of people who smoke in bed and start a fire and have to get help.'" Historically donors haven't dwelled on the question, "Is it your fault or not?" according to *Chronicle of Philanthropy* editor Stacy Palmer. She has a hunch that donors now ask it quite often.

"I think it's increasing" as a criterion, Palmer said. "Charities need to do more to get information out about the kinds of problems people face and why they face them." Otherwise, she says, would-be donors can too easily dismiss a particular cause because it seems the clientele are wholly responsible for their own misfortune.

Religious charities say they feel the same pressure as others do to frame every cause as one that helps innocent victims. Virginia-based Christian Children's Fund hasn't hesitated to serve Angolan teenagers, even though some took up arms to advance a bloody civil war, according to vice president of marketing Betty Forbes. Yet she says marketing appeals need to emphasize that these teens had joined militias not as free agents but under lots of outside pressure.

"You have to say that that's what happened to them," Forbes says. "They were pretty normal children, [but] they were taken out of school, they never had a childhood, they certainly didn't have any teenage years. They were fighting. So you paint that picture and explain what happened and how we as an organization can help them get back into the community and hopefully allow them to be children again."

Not all religious donors are on the lookout for pure innocents. For the 49 members of Maryland-based Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, priority is given to the poor without regard for how they got that way, according to president Francis J. Butler.

"I get very nervous when we start talking about the worthy poor," Butler said. "In the national debate, the poor got smeared with the idea that these poor were driving Cadillacs while they were on welfare. . . . The thing to do is respond [to their plight] as Christ would respond, with justice and mercy."

More than half of donors are motivated by faith, according to two recent Center on Philanthropy surveys. Yet principles of religious faith aren't always manifest in charitable decisions, according to former Harvard Divinity School dean and International Rescue Committee president George Rupp.

“Donors who are oriented to meeting human needs should be most generous to where the needs are greatest,” Rupp says. “I think that is not the case when overwhelmingly more is given to the victims of natural disasters than to the victims of protracted conflicts.”