The Politics of Resilience: Civic Engagement in New Orleans 20 Years after Katrina

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July 2025

Overview

Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levee system in 2005 created a catastrophic disruption to civic life in New Orleans. The loss of population, homes, and businesses ripped apart the social fabric of the city. Yet the long process of putting that social fabric back together created new and innovative methods of social civic engagement but also led to a steady decline in political civic engagement.

The objectives of this report are to document these changes in civic engagement after Hurricane Katrina to the present, evaluate the current strengths and weaknesses of civic life in the New Orleans metropolitan area, and make recommendations to improve the weak aspects of civic life in the city today while highlighting the positive aspects. There are two important takeaways from this research. One is that New Orleans learned from and is still building upon the social cohesion and resilience displayed by its active and engaged social civic institutions over the past 20 years. The second is that robust social civic engagement needs to be matched by the city's residents in municipal and state elections.

As this report will demonstrate, this second takeaway is more easily said than accomplished. It closes with recommendations of how to show the citizens of New Orleans what harms will result from their increasing political apathy, especially after their initial burst of political activity in the immediate wake of Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees. These policy recommendations could increase civic engagement in the democratic process as residents imagine a more resilient future.

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Early efforts at Recovery from Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. Before most residents even had a chance to return to New Orleans after the storm, people started organizing to influence the recovery planning process, mainly because they saw it as an act of survival. The first neighborhood recovery group to form was the Common Ground Collective, founded seven days after the storm on September 5, 2005.[1] The group was formed by Malik Rahim, Sharon Johnson, and Scott Crow, neighbors in the Algiers neighborhood on the west bank of the Mississippi River.

The original purpose of the group was to find out what neighbors who had sheltered in place during the hurricane needed in terms of supplies, then bringing those lists to first responders and recovery teams from the National Guard and the Red Cross. After the National Guard was able to stabilize the security of the neighborhood and volunteers began arriving from all over the world, the volunteers were sent to the Common Ground Collective to be briefed on residents' needs.

Due to their efficiency in organizing residents, Common Ground Collective started to receive funding to expand the services of the group to include a medical clinic and workers to gut houses. The collective then began organizing as an advocacy group, communicating to national media and elected officials about the need to bring more resources into the New Orleans metro area.

Common Ground Collective incorporated itself as a non-profit and continued to raise money and expand its mission. In 2008, the group moved its headquarters to the Lower Ninth Ward. The organization continues to operate today under the name Common Ground Relief. In addition to its volunteer board members, it now has a full-time paid executive director. The group continues to provide social services such as medical care and a food pantry, and it also runs advocacy programs focusing

on coastal restoration as a means to protect the metropolitan area from flooding and land loss.[2]

The first attempt by local government at recovery planning was the Bring New Orleans Back, or BNOB Commission, formed by Mayor Ray Nagin and announced on September 30, 2005.[3] While the full commission did not release its final report until March 20, 2006,[4] its land use subcommittee released a map that was published by The Times Picayune on January 11, 2006.[5] It was called the "Green Dot Map." It included some areas that were being considered for the inclusion of green space or retention ponds.

The way the map was configured, however, caused many residents to interpret the map as recommending that some neighborhoods would be bulldozed and totally turned into green space. While commission members argued that the map was being misinterpreted, the damage was already done. The mayor publicly opposed the maps of his own commission. Citizen groups began to organize to oppose the plan, even though most residents were not back in the city yet.[6] Homeowners associations in the affected areas organized by email lists and internet discussion groups. They were able to create enough opposition that the commission report was tabled.

Tulane University geographer Richard Campanella said in 2010: "Mayor Nagin, embroiled in a nationally watched reelection campaign, rejected the politically volatile advice of his own BNOB Commission. Fatally undermined, despite its worthwhile contributions beyond the footprint issue, the commission disbanded unceremoniously."[7]

When the planning process moved to the next stage, residents were energized and organized. Federal infrastructure funding for rebuilding was already beginning to be distributed by an agency created specifically for that purpose: The Louisiana Recovery Authority, launched in October 2005.[8] The authority required a recovery plan from each city in the state damaged by Hurricane Katrina that requested funding. There were two sets of planning processes going on at that time in New Orleans, one driven by the mayor,

and one driven by the city council, culminating in the Unified New Orleans Plan.[9] This was followed a few years later by a new Master Plan in 2010 and a new Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance in 2015.[10]

Each of these stages in the planning process had an organized citizen participation component. Many public meetings were held from 2005 to 2015. Neighborhoods that had dormant homeowner's associations or civic associations became very active.[11] Neighborhoods that did not already have such groups saw the need for them and created their own civic associations.[12] New Orleans citizens became the most knowledgeable amateur planners in the world.

In response to this new energy from neighborhood civic groups, the city wrote a Citizen Participation Plan as part of its master plan. And it created and funded a permanent Office of Neighborhood Engagement within the mayor's office.[13]

At the conclusion of the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance planning process, civic engagement in planning dropped off simply because there was no longer a pressing need for it. But many of the civic organizations formed during this period still exist. If the city were to be hit by another disaster, they could quickly spring into action.

Planning engagement also had initially important political effects. Some of the community organizers who got started amid the planning period after Hurricane Katrina moved onto elected offices. Mayor LaToya Cantrell, elected in 2017, started her political career as a District B City Council member in 2012. Prior to entering elective politics, she served as President of the Broadmoor Improvement Association, which was her political springboard to get elected to the city council. The Broadmoor Improvement Association was one of the principal groups opposing the original Green Dot Map of the BNOB Commission maps.[14]

The period after Katrina also led to innovations in political engagement. Mayor Nagin held town hall meetings with citizens of New Orleans residing in Houston[15] and Atlanta.[16] The first municipal election

after the storm, held on April 22, 2006, made special accommodations since the majority of the voters were displaced outside of the city.[17] Absentee voting rules were relaxed so that every registered voter who requested a mail ballot could receive one, without regard to physical location or other usual restrictions. Early voting days were expanded and additional locations added throughout the city, and voters who wanted to vote on election day could do so at centrally located polling places, since most neighborhood precincts were not able to open.[18]

Conceptualizing civic life

The Center for Civic Engagement at Illinois State University conceptualizes civic engagement beyond simply being involved in political affairs such as voting, campaigning, and lobbying. It also includes public activities such as organizing community groups, volunteering, fundraising, philanthropy, civic learning, and educating the public about community affairs.[19] The center basically defines civic engagement as any public activity that takes place outside of the private sphere of a person's family, job, religion, or hobbies, and that is focused specifically on improving the public good. This is how I conceptualize civic life in New Orleans.

New Orleans had a rich civic life prior to Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees. Civic life tended to be focused around the city's role in the global economy as a major river port, alongside the promotion of cultural activities unique to the city, such as its music, food, architecture, and festivals. These activities had historical significance to residents, and they also served as important attractions to bring visitors into the city to support the local economy.

Less well known is the city's rich political history. In the decades before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was

noted for its role in the Civil Rights Movement. In the early sixties, New Orleans was one of the first cities to engage with national volunteer programs to provide social services and job training to the poor, such as the Volunteers In Service to America program.[20] VISTA was created by the U.S. Congress in 1964 within the Economic Opportunity Act (part of president Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty,") and was originally seen as the domestic form of the Peace Corps.[21] Although VISTA members were prohibited from engaging in partisan political activity, early VISTA members were active in community organizing against Jim Crow laws, opposing police brutality, and in registering Black residents to vote.[22]

Fast forward to 2005, and in the months after Hurricane Katrina, VISTA volunteers (now under the AmeriCorps banner) played a significant role in supporting neighborhood groups in their disaster relief efforts. VISTA supported local groups by providing volunteers for gutting houses, debris removal, and transporting food, drinking water, and medical supplies into affected neighborhoods.[23] AmeriCorps continues to work in New Orleans in conjunction with the city government, providing services such as job training and helping poor and disabled residents apply for federal benefits,[24] though the second Trump administration is moving swiftly to eliminate the program.

In the years immediately following Hurricane Katrina, most of the city's civic activities were focused around the city's recovery. This took the form of city-wide groups forming to lobby the federal government for funding to improve the federal levees and the flood control system, and neighborhood organizations getting involved in the city planning process to make sure residents could return to their homes and ensure the new planning process was fair.[25] Non-profit organizations, old and new, became active in preparing the city for future disasters.

Kindergarten-through-12th grade education in the city faced an unprecedented set of challenges. While many private schools could reopen because they received their funding directly from parents in the form of tuition, the primary sources of funding for public schools,

local property taxes and sales taxes, were disrupted as large parts of the city were depopulated. Louisiana state temporarily took over management from the local school board via the statewide special Recovery School District, but this was only a short-term plan.

The long-term solution was for non-profit organizations to form and each take over the management of each individual public school as a charter school. It worked. A study by Tulane University published in June of 2025 argues that these reforms led to large gains in average student achievement and increased rates of high school graduation, college entry, and college graduation in the first decade after they were implemented. [26]

Yet in spite of many successes, the new charter school system was not praised by all observers and continues to be a source of controversy and disagreement in some areas. A study by Stanford University Graduate School of Education in 2015 found that, "Among many findings, the research shows that New Orleans reforms have created a set of schools that are highly stratified by race, class, and educational advantage, operating in a hierarchy that provides very different types of schools and to different types of children."[27]

The debate over public charter schools will continue for years to come, as the most recent annual poll on the subject, published by the Cowen Institute at the end of 2024, indicates that about a third of New Orleans public school parents polled said that the public school system was getting better, about a third said it was getting worse, and about one third said it had remained the same.[28]

Whatever the enduring benefits of this civic response to the collapse of the public primary and secondary education system in the city after Hurricane Katrina, the response itself is emblematic of the civic forces at work in New Orleans over the past 20 years. This report now turns to the key civic players over this period and then the current status of both non-political and political civic life.

The rise of the non-profits

New non-profit organizations developed separately from new planning practices in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees because they served a different purpose. Most planning organizations were primarily focused on rebuilding physical infrastructure, housing, and the efficient use of land. Most non-profits were focused on providing social services and social support networks.

A study by the Urban Institute documented a large increase in the number of non-profits in New Orleans in the decade after Hurricane Katrina.[29] Five years after Katrina, in 2010, New Orleans had 247 non-profits, more than twice as many as Jefferson Parish in the metropolitan area south and west of the city, which had 109—even though Jefferson had a much larger population.[30] (New Orleans had 343,829 residents and Jefferson had 432,552 in 2010.) About 27 percent of those New Orleans non-profits had been founded since 2005.

The top two categories of non-profit were community and economic development, 23 percent, followed by emergency assistance and homeless services at 12 percent. It should be noted that although local charter school boards are technically non-profits in terms of IRS reporting status, due to their unique role in delivering public education, charter school boards are excluded from most non-profit databases, and are usually listed in their own category[31].

Some non-profits were specifically designed to assist with hurricane resilience, such as Evacuteer, an organization that set up hurricane evacuation points for residents without transportation, and then provided volunteer drivers to pick those residents up and bring them to city bus-staging locations.[32] Other non-profits were focused on specific neighborhoods such as Sankofa Community Development Corporation, which focused on rebuilding the Lower Ninth Ward. [33]

There also are non-profits that serve specific cultural groups. An example is Musician's Village, a collaboration between Habitat for Humanity and musicians Branford Marsalis and Harry Connick, Jr.[34] The Musician's Village built homes for professional musicians who had lost their houses to the hurricane and flooding. In addition to serving a charitable purpose, the village supports the music tourism economy, since many musicians could not find affordable housing after Hurricane Katrina.

Culture as civic life and social cohesion

So, other than planning, politics or non-profits, where do the residents of New Orleans invest their civic engagement time? Many invest in traditional cultural activities such as parades, second lines, and festivals.[35] To external observers, this activity might appear frivolous. These traditional organizations, however, have historically served not only a recreational purpose, but also as social support networks. In addition to serving as professional networks where members can find job leads, business partners, and clients, many of these organizations engage in charitable work to serve the greater community in some way.

Some raise money for K-through-12 public schools.[36] Others volunteer time at homeless shelters or food kitchens. Some fund after-school athletic programs for at-risk children. In whatever ways they choose to participate in community engagement, the long tradition of "social aid and pleasure clubs" is alive and well across the city.

When compared with the largest 50 Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the United States, the New Orleans Metro Area is second only to the Philadelphia MSA in the number of social clubs per 100,000 people. There are 172 incorporated social clubs in the New Orleans MSA.[37] This number indicates a high degree of social cohesion. (See box)

Social cohesion and resiliency

Recent studies indicate that social cohesion is important to community resilience.[38] This applies to both natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, as well as economic shocks such as recessions. The World Bank has demonstrated that in the case of poor or developing areas, it is the existence of measures of social cohesion that determines whether the area can improve its economy and the standard of life of its citizens.[39]

Social cohesion broadly refers to the strength of bonds or social distance between societal members. The concept can be traced back to the late French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries defined social cohesion as the interdependence or solidarity between individuals with strong social bonds and without social conflict.[40] More recent interpretations of social cohesion take a more complex view of a "resilient city."[41] The resilient city concept argues that resilience not only requires traditional family, job, and recreational social bonds, but the ability to build cohesion among diverse urban groups that can bridge divides of race, income, political ideology, and neighborhood geography.

The politics of resilience

While civic life has a broad definition, when most people think of civic life they think of the relationship of citizens to political activity and governance. The City of New Orleans has a rich history in its role in Louisiana politics, Southern politics in general, and the Civil Rights Movement. [42]

It started with its role as a river port city that brought a large cast of politicians to the city. It later became a foil to colorful Governor Huey Long, who loved the city and spent a lot of time there in the 1920s and 1930s, but was frustrated that he could never make the city part of his famous political machine. It was, and is, fiercely independent.[43]

The city also played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement, not only because of the activities of early VISTA volunteers mentioned earlier, but also due to the marches and protests that took place in the city, which served as the training ground to some of the earliest Black public officials to be elected in the United States.[44]

Most of the early Black politicians came out of the old-line Black political organizations, which were similar in operation to some of the old-line White ethnic urban political machines, such as the Irish political machines in many Northern cities at the time. The difference was rather than coming out of ethnic or labor union or small business associations, the Black groups came out of civil rights organizations.[45]

The first three Black mayors of New Orleans, Ernest Nathan "Dutch" Morial, who served from 1978 to 1986, Sidney Barthelemy (1986–1994), and Dutch's son Marc Morial, who served from 1994 to 2002, were organization politicians. The Morials were from LIFE (Louisiana Independent Federation of Electors), and Barthelemy was from COUP (Community Organization for Urban Politics), respectively. These organizations, and many like them, once dominated New Orleans politics. Their strength was that they were neighborhood-based.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the city and the levees failed, this also proved to be their weakness. The disaster ripped neighborhoods apart and scrambled the demographics of the city as residents settled in different areas other than where they were born. This fundamentally changed politics in the city. Traditional organizational politics never really recovered after Hurricane Katrina and the city is still trying to define itself politically 20 years later.

Indeed, in every other area of civic life since Katrina except politics, there has been increased engagement. Much of that engagement is uneven and fluctuates from year to year depending on threats to the city, but it is always there. The engagement of voters in the democratic process is the exception to this rule. There has been a measurable decline in voter engagement over the past 20 years.

As with recovery planning, residents were active in electoral politics in the years immediately after Hurricane Katrina because they saw it as a survival tactic. They were afraid that the wrong set of elected officials might bulldoze their neighborhoods and stop them from returning. And indeed, the political life of the city would be tested very soon after Katrina, since 2006 was an election year.

The election was originally scheduled to be held in February 2006, but Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued an order moving it to April that year to give more residents a chance to get back into the city. In the first election after Hurricane Katrina, incumbent Mayor Ray Nagin (first elected in 2002) faced a record 21 challengers in what was essentially a referendum on how he handled the first few months after landfall.

On April 22, 2005, 37.5 percent of registered voters turned out for the primary.[46] Nagin ran first with 38 percent and entered into a runoff with Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu. On May 20, the runoff was held and Nagin emerged victorious, with 52 percent to Landrieu's 48 percent. In spite of all the challenges with residents getting into the city to vote, turnout was 39.9 percent.[47] (The City of New Orleans does not have traditional party primaries. It has an open primary system where the top two finishers in the primary advance to the general election, also called the runoff. If a candidate gets over 50 percent in the primary, they win outright without a runoff.)

Many residents believed that the new interest in civic life as seen in planning and non-profits would spill over into politics. And for one election, it did. But this heightened interest did not last. The 39.9 percent turnout in the 2006 mayor's election turned out to be

a 20-year highwater mark. The following 20 years saw a steady decline in voter turnout and interest.

Four years later, with Nagin term-limited after completing his second term in 2010, the seat was open. As expected with an open seat, qualifying drew a large field of candidates. Eleven candidates joined the race, including the 2006 runner-up Mitch Landrieu. The results were much better for Landrieu this time. He won in the primary on February 6, capturing 66 percent of the vote. Of the 273,239 registered voters in the city, 89,355 voted, for a turnout of 32.7 percent.[48]

Popular incumbent mayors usually only get token opposition, and that was the case with Landrieu. On February 1, 2014, he defeated two opponents with 64 percent of the vote in the primary. Turnout was assisted by the fact that all city council races were contested and made it to 35.2 percent.[49]

By 2017, with the mayor's office once again vacant due to term limits, a robust field qualified for mayor. On October 14, 2017, eighteen candidates met in the primary. In spite of a large field which included several elected officials, turnout dropped to 32.2 percent.[50]

On November 18, 2017, District B Council Member LaToya Cantrell met former Municipal Judge Desiree Charbonnet in a runoff. Cantrell won the runoff decisively, 60 percent to 40 percent. Turnout in the runoff improved slightly to 33.3 percent.[51]

Four years later incumbent Cantrell did draw 13 challengers, unusual for an incumbent mayor, but on November 13, 2021, she was able to avoid a runoff by securing 65 percent of the vote in the primary. Turnout hit a new low of 29.1 percent. [52] Even though incumbent mayors are hard to defeat and thus might suppress interest somewhat, all of the city council seats were contested, and there were other municipal offices and judgeships on the ballot. So, a 29.1 percent turnout is a very poor municipal election turnout no matter whether the mayor's office is contested.

Voter turnout is low not only for municipal elections, but also for state elections. In the October 14, 2023

primary for Louisiana governor, turnout statewide was low at 36.3 percent, but it was especially low in New Orleans at 27.3 percent.[53] Jeff Landry won the election in the primary and became governor with 52 percent of the vote.

Dropoff in turnout only applies to state and local elections. Turnout for presidential elections is high in Louisiana. In the 2024 presidential general election, New Orleans turnout was 59 percent[54] and statewide turnout was 66 percent.[55] Louisiana is very reliable red state. The outcome of Louisiana's Electoral College votes is never in doubt. Most Louisiana residents turnout for elections when the outcome is already known, but not for elections when their votes can make the most difference.

So, while the non-political civic life of New Orleans has become more active over the past 20 years, political activity has fallen—despite a great deal of political activity in the first five to six years after Hurricane Katrina, as residents debated what they wanted the future of New Orleans to look like. As the city's residents began to put the hurricane behind them, political activity gradually waned until it reached its current level, where only about one third of the electorate even shows up to vote.

In the last open-seat election before Hurricane Katrina, in 2002 and won by Ray Nagin, turnout was 45.7 percent in the primary,[56] and 44.3 percent in the runoff.[57] In the following 23 years, since the 2002 election, only 2006 was close to 40 percent. Every other municipal election since then has had turnout in the low 30-percent range.

Such political apathy is not only a New Orleans problem, it is a Louisiana problem in general. In the 2023 state legislative elections, 46 percent of the seats in the Louisiana legislature were uncontested.[58] This is a problem because research shows uncontested seats can lead to an inefficient legislative body and poor policy outcomes for the citizens.[59]

This apathy appears to have spilled into the upcoming mayoral election primary to be held on October 11, 2025. Uncharacteristically for New Orleans, only a few major candidates are running for mayor.[60] For an election so pivotal and so important to the future of the city, it seems that much of the political and business elite of the city is not interested. It's only a matter of time before this lack of interest is reflected once again in the electorate as a whole.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

As this report details, there are different types of civic life in New Orleans, non-political and political. The big difference between the two categories is that non-political civic engagement appears to be stable, and in some cases even growing, while political civic engagement is in decline.

There are many complex reasons why a voter might not participate in the democratic process. Some of those reasons might be barriers that make voting difficult for working class citizens or those without transportation. But national polling by Ipsos Market Research indicates that the top reason survey respondents in the United States give for not voting is not legal or physical barriers. It is that they do not think their vote will make a difference or change anything.[61]

Specific policy recommendations can be made to increase access to voting. These include longer early-voting periods, wider access to mail-in voting, same day voter registration, automatic voter registration with the issuance of a driver's license or state ID, and more physical polling locations.

Policy recommendations designed to convince voters that their vote will make a difference is a much more difficult challenge. Researchers and politicians alike know from experience that public information campaigns scolding people about doing their "civic duty" do not work. Any future political campaigns in New Orleans will need to actually produce concrete evidence about the bad things that can happen to a community when people don't vote.

Modern voters are skeptical. Telling them something bad will happen won't work. They need to be shown. Don't rely on words. Produce evidence. New Orleans is at a crossroads. The city government is facing tough challenges. Now is not the time for two-thirds of the voters to sit on their hands.

In looking at rates of participation in civic affairs, people respond to a feedback loop. If they perceive that an activity benefits them directly, then they continue to participate. If they do not perceive a direct benefit in participation, then they might drop off. This explains the drop off in political participation. Most residents don't perceive a direct benefit to voting, so they don't vote.

In the case of non-profits and social clubs, residents experience immediate benefits, so they stay engaged. The challenge is in trying to convince voters that they will receive the same benefits of social cohesion and the resulting resiliency that they get from social clubs, if they participate in politics. It's a hard sell, because their experience is that they will not.

Voting used to be the primary way that residents would plug in to their city government. Today, people have simply found more productive and enjoyable ways to plug in. Ultimately, it will take a new generation of political leadership delivering a set of specific tangible benefits to the residents to bring people back to the polls in large numbers. In the meantime, non-profits and social clubs can help by adding non-partisan voter registration drives, candidate forums, and voter turnout drives to the services they deliver.

In an age when most political communication takes place on television, through direct mail, or social media, perhaps political candidates can take a lesson from the old-line carnival clubs and social and pleasure clubs. Maybe a return to the old Louisiana tradition of "retail politics," when candidates travelled from town to town and offered hot dogs, beer, and live bands to entertain voters before the campaign speech. Voters probably won't return to the polls in large numbers until they get the same enjoyment from political events as they do from their civic engagement in non-profits and social clubs.

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Acknowledgments from the Authors

I would like to thank Dillard University for the academic freedom and protection to engage in research that is sometimes controversial, and for always supporting my publications and television commentary. I would especially like to thank Dillard President, Monique Guillory; Provost, Eric Buckles; Dean, Eartha Johnson; and Chair, Casey Schreiber. I would also like to thank the Brookings Institution for supporting this research, and send a special thank you to Allison Plyer and Lamar Gardere of The Data Center, who I have had the pleasure of working with over the post-Katrina years.

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About The Data Center

The Data Center, a project of Nonprofit Knowledge Works, is the most trusted resource for data about Southeast Louisiana. Founded in 1997, we provide fully independent research and analysis to offer a comprehensive look at issues that matter most to our region. With a mission of democratizing data, The Data Center has, and continues to be, an objective partner in bringing reliable, thoroughly researched data to conversations about building a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region.

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The New Orleans Index at Twenty collection includes contributions from The Data Center, the Brookings Institution, and a dozen local scholars. The aim of this collection is to advance discussion and action among residents and leaders in greater New Orleans and maximize opportunities provided by the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

The New Orleans Index at Twenty: Measuring Progress toward Resilience analyzes more than 20 indicators to track the region's progress toward metropolitan resiliency, organized by housing and infrastructure, economy and workforce, wealth and people. Essays contributed by leading local scholars and Brookings scholars systematically document major post-Katrina reforms, and hold up new policy opportunities. Together these reports provide New Orleanians with facts to form a common understanding of our progress and future possibilities.

The New Orleans Index series, developed in collaboration with the Brookings Institution, and published since shortly after Hurricane Katrina, has proven to be a widely used and cited publication. The Index's value as a regularly updated, one-stop shop of metrics made it the go-to resource for national and local media, decisionmakers across all levels of government, and leaders in the private and non-profit sectors.

Acknowledgments from The Data Center and the Brookings Institution

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