One step forward, three steps back: Criminal legal reform and community safety in New Orleans 20 years after Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures

by Kim Mosby, Sarah Omojola, Hanna Love, and Keesha Middlemass
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Overview

New Orleans is a resilient city, rebounding after disasters again and again, with local policy reforms contributing to safe and thriving communities despite the state's tough-on-crime posture. The cascading disasters of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita, and subsequent levee failures in 2005 caused widespread destruction and prolonged displacement throughout the region. They were followed by hurricanes Ike in 2008, Isaac in 2012, and Ida in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, and the long-standing underfunding of public services—all of which have had comparably adverse impacts on the well-being of New Orleans' residents and the social-legal infrastructure of the city.

Following each disaster, societal issues are exacerbated, with rising rates of poverty and homelessness, increasing job losses, escalating rates of violence, and deepening educational and mental health challenges becoming pervasive as the social, economic, health care, and political infrastructure systems of New Orleans operate on the verge of collapse. When disasters strike, residents lose access to their families, friends, communities, educational pursuits, jobs, and careers, as well as access to health care and mental health professionals.

Photo source: Shutterstock

This report explores the community safety ecosystem in New Orleans, the criminal legal system that shapes it, and how the criminal legal system operates as a catch basin for broken social systems. With a particular focus on the state's efforts to undo criminal justice policy reforms, we examine

these interconnected and interdisciplinary topics to show how New Orleans today is similar to New Orleans in 2020 and 2005. New Orleans and its residents continue to survive, with many thriving and many being left behind, so we detail how more can be done to bolster community resilience and limit the ability of the criminal legal system to erode the resilience of vulnerable populations, while also highlighting local successes as our springboard to recommend policy changes, including:

- Create and implement human-based systems focused on addressing mental health issues for adults and for children in schools
- Increase the stock of affordable rental housing and the number of available housing vouchers
- Prioritize diversion, restorative justice, and substance use treatment programs and adopt recovery-treatment based programs
- Embrace economic policies such as raising the minimum wage and increasing vocational and educational programs, combined with apprenticeships

Acting on these recommendations is necessary to build resilient, thriving communities across metropolitan New Orleans, reduce the cascading effects that disasters create for individuals, families, and communities, and prepare for the next disaster.

Understanding New Orleans and the criminal legal system today in the wake of cascading disasters and the enduring legacies of institutional racism

A few hours into 2025, a man intentionally drove a pick-up truck into a crowd of New Year's revelers in New Orleans' French Quarter.[1] After driving along a three-block stretch—killing 14 people and injuring 57—the driver exited the truck and engaged in a shootout with police.[2, 3] The incident exposed anew the severe failures in the security infrastructure of the city.[4]

Elected officials, clergy, and the New Orleans Police Department honored victims with prayers, while a second-line brass band played "I'll Fly Away" in tribute.[5] Public officials once again declared New Orleans "resilient"[6] and "open for business."[7] New Orleans residents, however, were reticent about this description of their city, sharing sentiments such as:

> *"Things keep happening here—hurricanes, floods, now a terrorist attack. We're just expected to dust ourselves off and keep going."*[8]
>
> *"We're so sick and tired of having to be resilient. How about for once things just work?"*[9]
>
> *"But at what point do we stop sucking up the stuff we shouldn't have to suck up?"*[10]
>
> *"It's not fair to be judged by your ability to navigate trauma."*[11]

The events of January 1, 2025, occurred the same year that New Orleans commemorates the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and levee failures. This year also marks the fifth anniversary of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, where New Orleans became an early epicenter of the disease and experienced an uptick in violent crime alongside the rest of the nation.[12]

In response to this temporary uptick in violence during the pandemic, many Louisiana politicians returned to "tough-on-crime" policies, enacting legislation to incarcerate people for longer periods while defunding social services, to curry favor with a fearful electorate. Research shows, however, that such policies foster disproportionate harm to racial and ethnic minorities and low-income people.[13] Such policies are inextricably linked not only to the enduring legacy of the enslavement of Black Americans and the subsequent Jim Crow racial apartheid system of laws, but also to the continuing imprisonment through exploitation and punishment that arbitrarily sends

African Americans to jail for minor crimes and exploits their labor.[14, 15, 16]

In the Deep South, these legacies of the enforcement of antebellum slavery and Jim Crow as well as today's continuing use of prison labor remain deeply intertwined.[17]

Research shows that addressing the underlying causes of violent crime—including concentrated poverty, lack of educational attainment, unemployment, housing insecurity, access to guns, and lack of access to mental health care—most effectively prevents and reduces violence without the collateral harms of incarceration.[18, 19, 20] What's more, in the years following Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana state government passed forward-thinking criminal justice policies supported by the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), a bipartisan nonprofit initiative that advocated for criminal justice reform.[21] Louisiana enacted the JRI plan, including:

- Reforming sentencing and corrections policies
- Reducing spending on the criminal legal system
- Streamlining parole releases for nonviolent crimes
- Strengthening community supervision during the critical reentry period
- Offering criminal debt forgiveness as an incentive for small and regular payments
- Reinvesting funds to prevent crime, building safer communities, reducing barriers to reentry, supporting victims, and shrinking the prison population[22]

Over the past 20 years, Louisiana took giant leaps to improve community safety and resilience by passing criminal justice reforms in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Under Democratic and Republican governors, the state passed marijuana sentencing reform laws[23] and comprehensive criminal justice reform laws designed to reduce prison terms, while strengthening alternatives to imprisonment, removing barriers to successful reentry,[24, 25] and passing bipartisan legislation to reduce Louisiana's prison population.[26] But each reform effort faced headwinds, including "backsliding;"[27] since the COVID-19 pandemic, recent political decisions have moved away from reform policies and toward punitive policies that were in place over two decades ago.[28]

Despite data showing that violent crime returned to pre-pandemic levels by 2022,[29] Louisiana voters elected a new governor in 2024, Jeff Landry, who campaigned on "law and order" to rollback bipartisan criminal justice reforms passed after Hurricane Katrina.[30] Gov. Landry's push to pass new "tough-on-crime" measures, such as longer prison sentences, eliminating discretionary parole, and supporting regressive truth-in-sentencing laws, may cost the state an additional $600 million each year.[31, 32]

This report demonstrates how the changed focus from prevention to punishment undermines public safety and community resilience, while showing how investments in thriving communities provide an evidence-based framework for building resilience to withstand recurring disasters certain to befall New Orleans in the years to come.[33]

A history of the criminal legal system and resilience in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic

Relying on the criminal legal system to address societal failures—such as failing schools, housing insecurity, and poverty—is out of step with evidence on how incarceration undermines resilience[34, 35] and reduces opportunities for educational attainment and employment,[36] safe housing,[37] community cohesion and positive family and children outcomes,[38] and the ability of local governments to invest in "rainy day" funds following a recession or unexpected events, such as pandemics and natural disasters.[39]

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana had the highest incarceration rate in the United States and housed the largest share of its prison population in local jails.[40] Orleans Parish, which includes the city of New Orleans, had the largest jail system[41] in the country in 2004.[42] Importantly, Louisiana did not become the incarceration capital of the country overnight. It was the result of the long-standing history of political, racial, and economic factors related to how the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections pays local sheriff departments to house state prisoners, racially biased criminal laws, and racially coded media messages about "dangerous criminals."[43]

For instance, in the 1970s, conditions at Angola (the Louisiana State Penitentiary) were known for violence, racial disparities, and overcrowding, with Black prisoners filing a lawsuit against the penitentiary in 1971 for medical neglect, lack of safety, religious discrimination, racial segregation, and overcrowding—prompting the U.S. magistrate to declare the prison an extreme public emergency.[44] In response, the state's politicians decided to "build their way out of the overcrowding crisis" through a prison construction boom, which added thousands of beds to Angola and to parish jails, leading the state's prison population to more than double between 1975 and 1980.[45]

In the 1980s, the growth of Louisiana's prison and jail systems' population converged with the politics of fear-based and racially coded media messages.[46,47] Politicians explicitly campaigned on "tough-on-crime" platforms, arguing that overcrowding could be managed by expanding the number of prison beds. As the state legislature of the 1980s passed punitive crime bills calling for longer prison sentences, this meant housing a larger percentage of state prisoners in local jails controlled by sheriffs. As the financial burden shifted from the state to parish jails, sheriff organizations campaigned for an increased per diem rate for each person housed in their jail facilities.[48, 49] By 2022, approximately 53 percent of the state's prison population was housed in local parish jails.[50]

Following Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures, New Orleans was underwater for weeks,[51] devastating the city's built environment, homes, businesses, schools, government buildings, roads, bridges, and systems for public health, utilities, sewage processing, and transportation.[52] The criminal legal system in New Orleans, in many ways, ceased to function, as the water effectively washed it away and resulted in the collapse of local law enforcement operations, the district attorney's office, indigent defense by public defenders, jails, criminal courts, and related documents and evidence, while displacing the personnel who operated these systems (see Figure 1).[53]

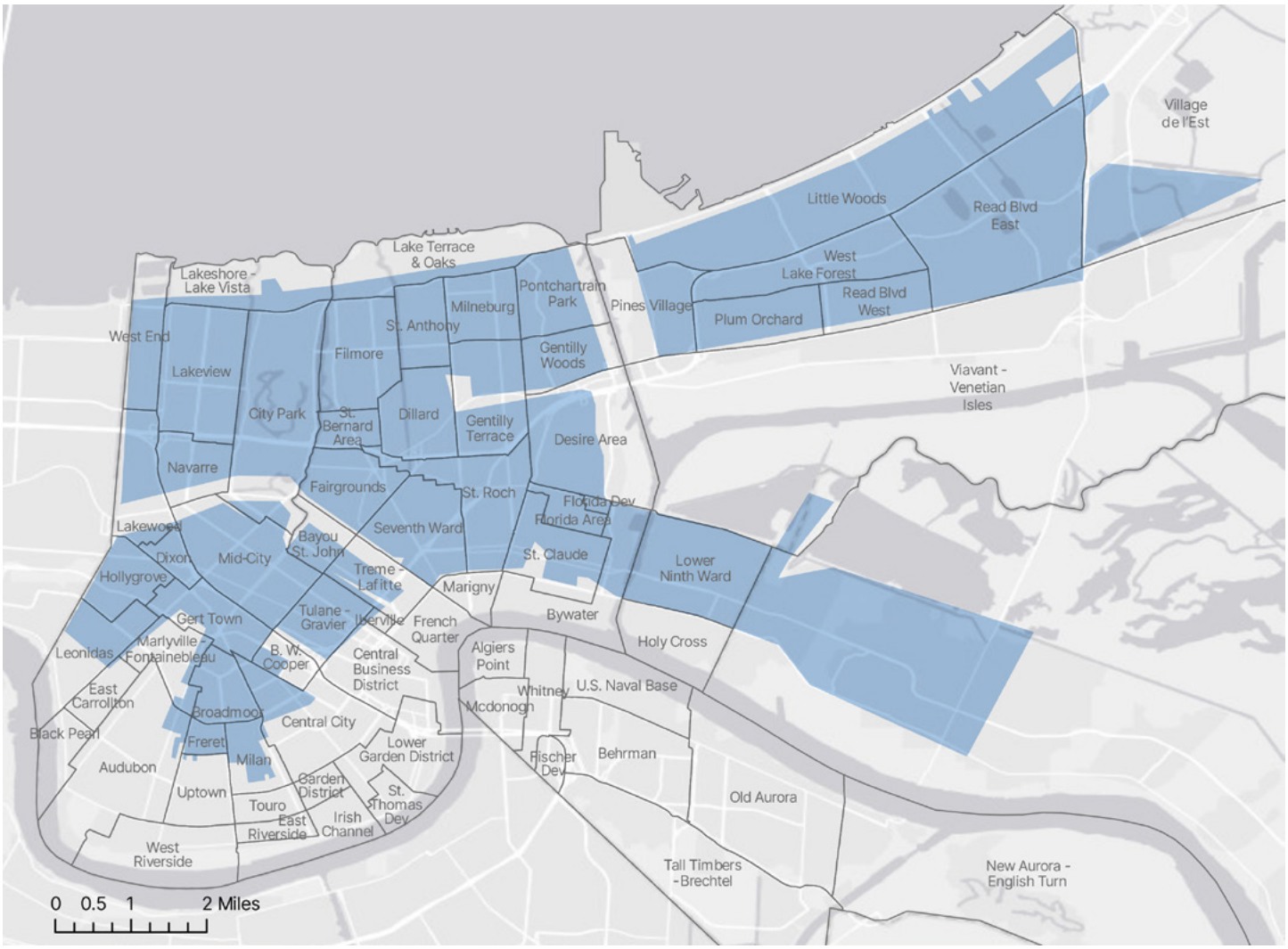
The devastation and destruction provided New Orleans with an opportunity to rethink its criminal legal system, including its inefficiencies; structural barriers to fair representation and the administration of justice; underfunded indigent defense, and jails; and problems with policing in a city that was considered one of the most violent in the country at the time.[54] The system also faced two immediate challenges. The first was how to move forward with pending cases when offices were flooded, evidence lost, witnesses and victims displaced, defendants dispersed to prison and jail facilities across the region, and lost paperwork about the initial charges and quality of evidence.[55]

The second was how to bring forth new cases when the system was not functioning because there were no suitable offices; records management and processing services were not available; locating defendants, witnesses, and victims was difficult; and the New Orleans Police Department was broken.[56] Plus, there were lingering issues from when then-New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu asked the U.S. Justice Department to investigate the New Orleans Police Department for its actions before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina; the resulting consent decree put the police department under federal oversight and compelled it to enact reform.[57]

The Justice Department investigation was the result of the murder of Henry Glover and efforts by New Orleans police officers to cover up the homicide.[58] It was not until 2015, 10 years after his killing, that his death was declared a homicide by the Orleans Parish Coroner's Office. The resulting consent decree,

FIGURE 1

The extent of the floods caused by Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures, by New Orleans neighborhoods, 2005



Source: City of New Orleans, The Data Center

Note: Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA

findings of police misconduct, and delayed justice for Glover remained a sore point for the public.[59, 60]

Given the fractured infrastructure of New Orleans' criminal legal system, the city realized it could not incarcerate itself into a safer city. But the hard part was maintaining the philosophical and practical shift of only incarcerating people arrested for violent felonies.[61] With this reality in mind, New Orleans officials explored policy alternatives to the overuse of incarceration for many of society's ailments.

These efforts were supported by the U.S. Department of Justice, which invested resources to help rebuild New Orleans' criminal legal system in 2007.[62] Also included in the assistance were multiple federal justice grants given to state and local jurisdictions through the Justice Assistance Grants program, the Office of Violence Against Women, and the Office of Justice Programs, alongside local, state, and federal actors creating collaborative task forces to bring together multiple agencies across jurisdictions, including the courts, law enforcement, and community partners; the goal of these collective efforts was to rebuild the criminal legal system across metropolitan New Orleans.[63]

In the state and local political landscape after Hurricane Katrina, the shifting political winds also were accompanied by major state-level political and policy changes. In 2006 and 2008, Louisiana enacted statutes to transition the state from a punitive stance to one focused on public safety and rehabilitation.[64] This was done through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative in 2011, 2017, and 2021,[65] which invested in prisoner reentry programs[66] and community-based organizations such as Goodwill's Re-Integration Program in southeastern Louisiana,[67] and led to the formation of the 2006 Louisiana Sentencing Commission to ensure the development and implementation of uniform sentencing policies.[68]

A part of this investment also included the Safety and Justice Challenge,[69] which is a network of participating cities, counties, and states funded by the MacArthur Foundation that focuses on finding community-based solutions to reimagining the criminal legal system and the over-incarceration of people in jails across the country. New Orleans made tremendous progress in reducing its jail population through an array of new strategies,[70] among them:

- Investing in access to defense counsel
- Improving pretrial services
- Engaging more with communities
- Diverting defendants to community-based treatment options for mental illness, substance abuse, and other services
- Using an intense case-management system
- Reducing racial and ethnic disparities

In fact, the Pew Charitable Trusts reports that over 10 years, these reforms and investments in people and communities have resulted in greater support for victims, fewer people convicted of nonviolent offenses, a decline in the state's prison population, and recidivism rates on the decline.[71] Moreover, these reforms also have produced significant savings on prison expenditures and criminal legal processing.[72, 73, 74, 75]

But just as Louisiana was previously overwhelmed by hurricanes Katrina and Rita and subsequent levee failures, the criminal legal system was overwhelmed 15 years later by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced New Orleans and other jurisdictions to rethink their criminal legal practices to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus.[76] Many law enforcement agencies suspended the arrest of individuals for misdemeanor and traffic offenses and reduced the number of arrests, except for violent crimes, which in turn reduced the number of people in jail.

While reducing the intake of prisoners by local jails and prisons, many criminal legal systems also implemented early release procedures for sentenced offenders while the number of individuals released on recognizance and pre-trial increased.[77] The decreased incarcerated population allowed for social distancing while the courts postponed cases and

hearings. Yet, the criminal legal system's response to the pandemic was mixed; many remained incarcerated without charges as due process was suspended. In an emergency public health executive order, which then-Governor John Bel Edwards signed in April 2020, the legal deadlines required for district attorneys to file charges against people held in jail were relaxed.[78]

This decision left thousands of Louisianans in legal limbo—many were incarcerated without charges and without access to legal counsel.[79] The American Civil Liberties Union reported that Louisiana's pretrial incarceration rate was three times the national average, as thousands languished in parish jails awaiting disposition of nonviolent criminal charges.[80]

Tough-on-crime policies return in force in 2024

In 2024, when voters elected the state's former attorney general, Jeff Landry, as governor, the state started to undue the reforms made after Hurricane Katrina, moving back to the "tough-on-crime" policies of the 1980s and 1990s and the ugly history of punitive policies. Under Gov. Landry, it is reported that the state will become one of the toughest "tough-on-crime" states in the nation.[81]

Louisiana's new laws, specifically HB 9 and HB 10,[82] eliminate discretionary parole and remove pathways for prisoners to apply for early release,[83] and turned many sentences into life sentences[84] by passing one of the harshest "truth-in-sentencing" laws in the country.[85, 86, 87, 88] In addition to HB 9 and HB 10, other bills in the "tough-on-crime" package will lengthen criminal sentences, resume executions through electrocution and nitrogen gas (in addition to the standard lethal injection),[89] and will require 17-year-olds to be prosecuted as adults for all crimes, including lesser offenses such as damaging property, trespassing, theft under $1,000, disturbing the peace, and marijuana possession.[90]

Data analysis by ProPublica of arrests after the law went into effect in March 2024 indicates that under the new law, most of the 17-year-olds booked in three of the state's largest parishes have not been accused of violent crimes, yet are still automatically transferred to adult criminal court for prosecution,[91, 92] which also results in them being held in adult jail facilities pre-trial.[93]

A report by the Vera Institute of Justice shows that sending people to prison for decades is dangerous and does not contribute to safe communities or public safety; instead, the best way to address and prevent crime is to invest in the social determinants of safety.[94] Research by the Prison Policy Initiative also shows that long prison sentences do not deter crime.[95] Moreover, time and again, research demonstrates that people with a criminal record face a wide range of barriers to reentry,[96] and are more often excluded from housing and employment opportunities after a criminal conviction.[97]

Investing in 'social determinants' bolsters community safety and resiliency in New Orleans and beyond

Rather than implementing punitive policies in a misguided attempt to lower crime rates (which tends to only reinforce myths about violent and nonviolent crimes and the danger levels of people convicted of violent offenses),[98] research by scholars at the Brookings Institution and others[99] shows the answer is to address the "social determinants of safety,"[100] such as the loss of employment and inadequate housing, poverty, failed school systems, and crumbling infrastructure.

The answer is to create economic opportunities for everyone, while investing hard resources to meet unmet social needs and a lack of structural resources. These investments include safe spaces such as parks and community centers, safe and supportive schools, violence prevention programs, community-building, and local organizations devoted to keeping residents

safe by addressing structural conditions to reduce the likelihood of coming into contact with the police and the larger criminal legal system.[101]

Decades of evidence reveal that states and localities can advance public safety by investing in community-level "social determinants of safety" instead of "tough-on-crime" approaches. Just as in the field of public health, where some of the greatest improvements in population-wide health outcomes stem from investments in "social determinants", such as education, economic opportunity, and the built environment, so too do the determinants of public safety. These investments are known to improve community safety outcomes.[102] Let's examine each of these in turn.

Economic opportunity, safety, and place

On the economic opportunity side, a job protects individuals and families from financial hardship while also providing economic stability. For young people, incidents of violence tend to be tied to root causes such as poverty, lack of access to educational opportunities, and poor housing.[103] The implementation of youth workforce development and employment programs reduces violent crime arrests by as much as 45 percent, making summer jobs one of the nation's most effective safety programs.[104] Evidence also indicates that this efficacy applies to adults as well. A study of a New Orleans-based job training program found that program participants were two-fifths as likely to be arrested as nonparticipants, indicating that the training program reduced the likelihood of future arrests.[105] Decreasing unemployment is also associated with significant reductions in property crime,[106] as are efforts to improve job quality and pay through increases in the minimum wage.[107]

In contrast, lower-resourced communities with higher poverty rates and histories of systemic disinvestment are more vulnerable to experience violence and its repercussions.[108] In fact, a recent Brookings research study found that in a typical U.S. city, homicide rates in high-poverty neighborhoods are three times to four times higher than in other residential areas in the same city.[109]

The relationship between economic opportunity and public safety is also clear to many residents as they envision the policies needed to keep their communities safe. Following the height of the pandemic, community organizations, such as the St. Charles Center for Faith + Action, asked residents to envision safety. When New Orleans residents describe the neighborhood features that reflect their visions for safety, their answers seldom allude to the criminal legal system. Instead, they highlight the features of thriving communities.

For instance, Fund the People, a New Orleans-based coalition formed after the murder of George Floyd in spring 2020, created an online survey that asked residents across the city to: "DREAM BIG: If your neighborhood had everything you and your family needed, what would the neighborhood be like?" One response below summed up many respondents' answers, tapping all five senses to do so:

> *"We would have…a neighborhood master gardener who could consult with us and teach us how to be more self-reliant, have solar panels that were connected to our own grid and our homes so we could have power when the hurricanes come, have a neighborhood-based restorative justice/ transformative justice program that could help neighbors and youth settle disputes and work through conflict, hold community-building circles and neighborhood events."*
>
> *"It would smell like jasmine and sweet olive, marijuana and crawfish boils, fresh roasted coffee and trees. It would sound like honeybees pollinating our gardens, like second lines and kids practicing their instruments together, neighbors saying hello and catching up, elders telling young people stories on the porch…"*
>
> *"It would look like wheelchair-accessible sidewalks and public spaces, outdoor classrooms and community centers within walking distance,*

> *neighborhood schools where the teachers know all the families in the neighborhoods and schools that are stable enough and stay open long enough where the teachers get to know all the siblings in your family."*
>
> *"It would look like so many different types of mental health resources; playgrounds with workout equipment and places to be quiet and meditate, public hammocks and cozy places to lounge and relax or take a mid-day nap, rain gardens on every block to help catch the flood water."*[110]

Building upon these insights and dreams, research also shows that criminal penalties and longer prison sentences neither increase public safety nor address the underlying issues of crime. Rather, locking people up removes a person from society, limiting their lifelong educational and labor force participation outcomes while the systemic failures that fuel violence go unaddressed.[111]

The consequences of disasters in New Orleans—including those sustained during hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the COVID-19 pandemic, and long-standing legacies of racial segregation, economic inequality, and public and private disinvestment—further the disparities in access to neighborhood institutions and networks that keep people safe, particularly in majority-Black and low-income places. Indeed, the impacts of the levee failures during Hurricane Katrina were heavily determined by inequities in race, place, and income—all of which are related to historic patterns of property-market redlining and public and private disinvestment in majority-Black communities.

Black residents comprised a majority of the flood-affected population, with an average income in disproportionately affected areas of $38,300 according to the 2000 census.[112] The economic recovery from the hurricane was also starkly unequal, with 70 percent of the jobs added being in low-wage industries, resulting in workers and their families in low-income communities having similarly low incomes 10 years after the so-called "recovery."[113]

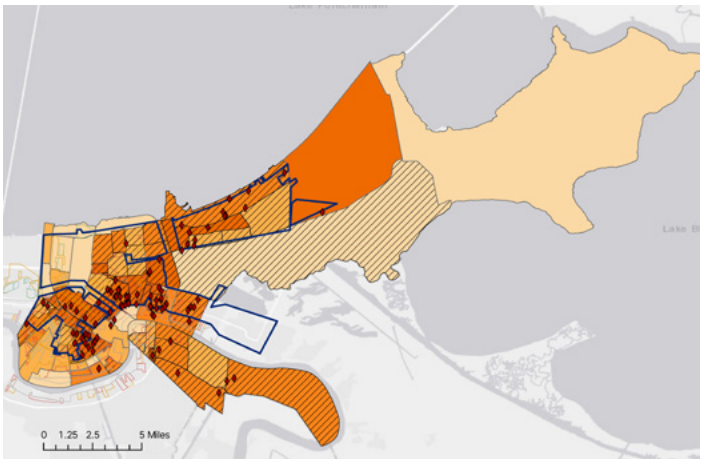
Today, the challenge of poverty in New Orleans is particularly stark for young people. Thirty-two percent of children under the age of 18 live below the poverty level—twice the national rate and 7 percentage points higher than the rest of Louisiana.[114] Largely, these are children of color; 43 percent of Black children live below the poverty level in New Orleans, in comparison to 4 percent of non-Hispanic White children.

Then there is the relationship between racial segregation, poverty, and gun violence. In Figure 2, we explore how neighborhood poverty and racial segregation patterns may correspond with firearm homicides rates in New Orleans. Our analysis reveals that while only about one-quarter of New Orleans neighborhoods have a poverty rate of 30 percent or above, more than half of all firearm homicides in New Orleans take place in those neighborhoods. While this relationship cannot draw a causal connection between poverty and homicides, it speaks to the economic drivers that New Orleans residents themselves spoke about in terms of their requests for safety, and shows the need for further research on this critical intersection (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

How neighborhood poverty and segregation patterns correspond with firearm homicides rates in New Orleans, 2010 to 2023[115]

2010



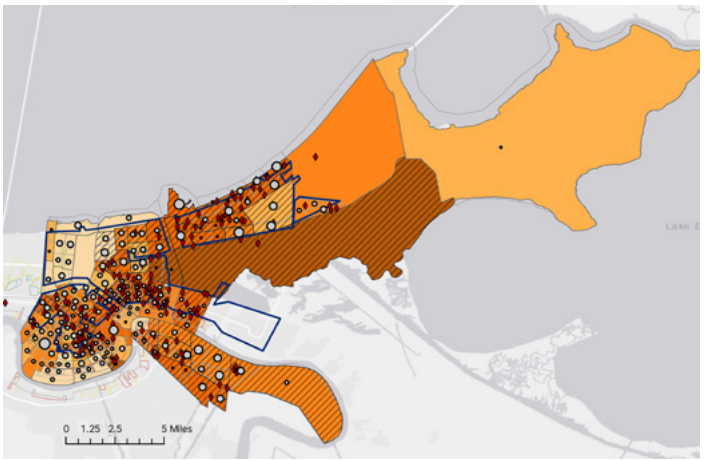
LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2010
- Poverty Rate, low to high 2010
- Firearm homicide 2010

2010: Source: Authors analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2010, The Data Center, University of Richmond Mapping Inequality

Note: Some neighborhoods and census tracts including Lake Catherine and Florida Dev (see neighborhood key in Figure 1) had lower populations and population densities and higher margins of error and therefore may not follow as closely all the patterns reflected in the visualization. Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA

2020



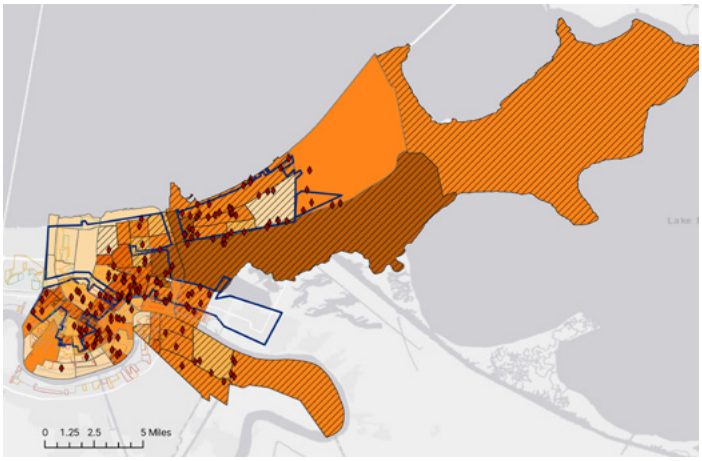
LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2020
- Poverty Rate, low to high 2020
- Firearm homicide 2020
- 2,000 / 1,000 Total Covid cases 2020–2023

2020: Source: Authors analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2020, Louisiana Department of Public Health, The Data Center, University of Richmond Mapping Inequality

Note: Some neighborhoods and census tracts had low populations and did not report enough COVID cases to populate on the map. Some neighborhoods and census tracts including Lake Catherine and Florida Dev (see neighborhood key in Figure 1) had lower populations and population densities and higher margins of error and therefore may not follow as closely all the patterns reflected in the visualization. Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA

2023



LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2023
- Poverty Rate, low to high 2023
- Firearm homicide 2023

2023: Source: Authors analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2019-2023, The Data Center, University of Richmond Mapping Inequality

Note: Some neighborhoods and census tracts including Lake Catherine and Florida Dev (see neighborhood key in Figure 1) had lower populations and population densities and higher margins of error and therefore may not follow as closely all the patterns reflected in the visualization. Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA

Education, safety, and place

Investments in education are another highly impactful tool for advancing public safety, with evidence indicating that increased educational attainment can reduce future rates of incarceration by 16 percent.[116] Improving school quality, funding, and programming also can significantly decrease adult crime rates while saving state governments money overall.[117]

Yet, educational programming is one of the first investments to be disrupted during disasters, including after Hurricane Katrina and during the COVID-19 pandemic.[118] After the 2005 hurricanes, for instance, the state of Louisiana took over the vast majority of public schools and transitioned the public school system to one that prioritizes nonprofit charter schools, which involved firing teachers (the majority of whom were Black women), eliminating attendance zones, and employing a lottery-based enrollment system.[119]

The new education system also doubled down on punitive enforcement policies, significantly increasing suspensions and the "pushing out" of special needs children.[120] Moreover, the reorganization of the entire school system occurred at the same time that 20 percent of children displaced by Hurricane Katrina remained unenrolled or absent from education institutions (public, charter, and private schools), while also experiencing disproportionately high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder.[121]

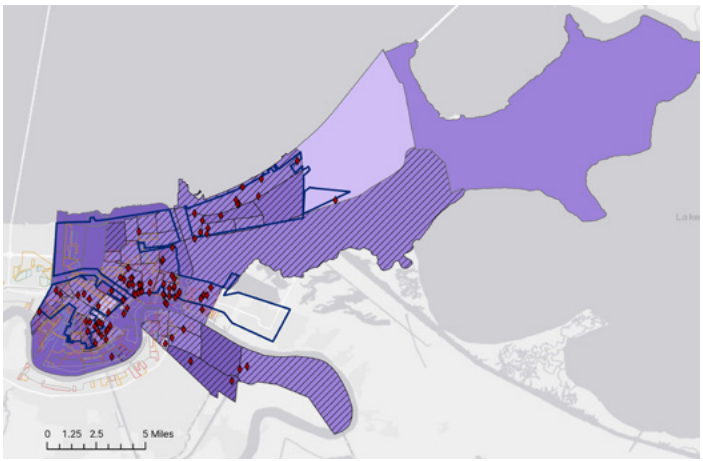
Losses in educational attainment due to societal shocks such as flooding or pandemics are proven to significantly increase gun violence.[122] This pattern held true in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and despite the many challenges and limitations of criminal justice and crime data,[123] available data show that nearly 35 percent of all people charged with homicide between 2009 and 2010 were aged 18 to 23, many of whom experienced significant educational disruptions during the aftermath of the 2005 hurricanes and levee failures.[124]

In Figure 3, on the following pages, we explore how levels of educational attainment may correspond with firearm homicides in New Orleans neighborhoods. The findings indicate that educational attainment was lowest in neighborhoods in New Orleans East—areas that also saw an increase in firearm homicides and had the greatest concentration of COVID-19 cases in 2020. Importantly, this relationship is not causal, and can only offer a preliminary exploration of the how educational attainment and homicides rates may be related in New Orleans, given the existing evidence base from other cities demonstrating how losses in educational attainment for young people living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (30 percent or above) were closely related to increases in gun homicides during the COVID-19 pandemic.[125]

FIGURE 3

How neighborhood educational attainment outcomes correspond with firearm homicides in New Orleans, 2010 to 2023[126]

2010



LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2010
- Firearm homicide 2010

Highest level of educational attainment 2010

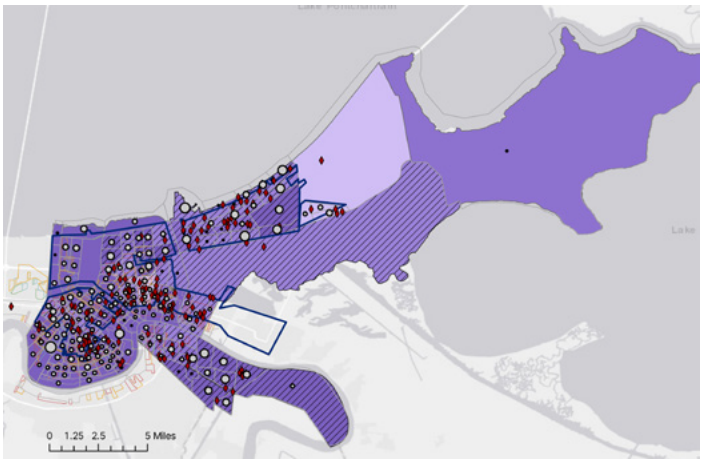
- Less than a high school degree
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college
- Bachelor's degree or higher

2010: Source: Authors analysis of demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2010, neighborhoods and flood extent boundaries from The Data Center, redlining data from University of Richmond Mapping Inequality, Firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents.

Note: Educational attainment assessed for the population ages 25 and over, with shading representing the highest level earned by the largest share of the neighborhood's population. Some college exposure refers to any length of college attendance that did not culminate in a degree earned. There were no neighborhoods where the largest share of residents had an Associate's degree.

Some neighborhoods and census tracts including Lake Catherine and Florida Dev (see neighborhood key in Figure 1) had lower populations and population densities and higher margins of error and therefore may not follow as closely all the patterns reflected in the visualization. Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA. These homicide numbers may differ from published NOPD counts based on discrepancies in the completeness or up-to-dateness of publicly available records. Analysis on file with the Vera Institute of Justice. For more information, contact Dr. Kim Mosby, Associate Director, Research for Vera Louisiana, at kmosby@vera.org.

2020



LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2020
- Firearm homicide 2020
- 2,000 / 1,000 Total Covid cases 2020–2023

Highest level of educational attainment 2020

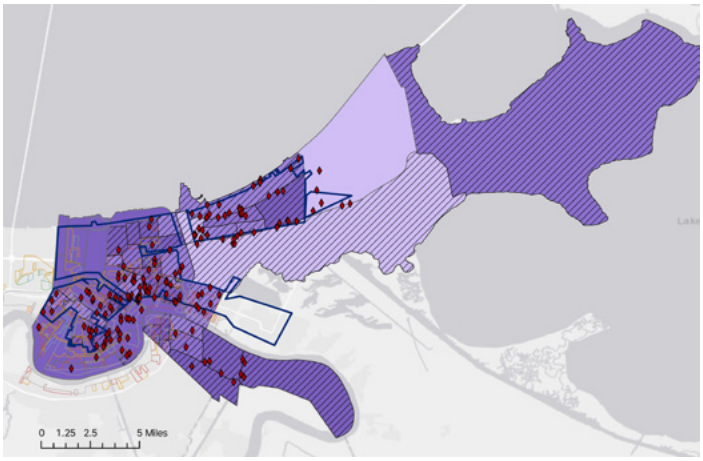
- Less than a high school degree
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college
- Bachelor's degree or higher

2020: Source: Authors analysis of demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2020, neighborhoods and flood extent boundaries from The Data Center, redlining data from University of Richmond Mapping Inequality, COVID cases from Louisiana Department of Public Health, firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents.

Note: Educational attainment assessed for the population ages 25 and over, with shading representing the highest level earned by the largest share of the neighborhood's population. Some college exposure refers to any length of college attendance that did not culminate in a degree earned. There were no neighborhoods where the largest share of residents had an Associate's degree.

Some neighborhoods and census tracts including Lake Catherine and Florida Dev (see neighborhood key in Figure 1) had lower populations and population densities and higher margins of error and therefore may not follow as closely all the patterns reflected in the visualization. Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA. These homicide numbers may differ from published NOPD counts based on discrepancies in the completeness or up-to-dateness of publicly available records. Analysis on file with the Vera Institute of Justice. For more information, contact Dr. Kim Mosby, Associate Director, Research for Vera Louisiana, at kmosby@vera.org.

2023



LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2023
- Firearm homicide 2023

Highest level of educational attainment 2023

- Less than a high school degree
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college
- Bachelor's degree or higher

2023: Source: Authors analysis of demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2019-2023, neighborhoods and flood extent boundaries from The Data Center, redlining data from University of Richmond Mapping Inequality, Firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents.

Note: Educational attainment assessed for the population ages 25 and over, with shading representing the highest level earned by the largest share of the neighborhood's population. Some college exposure refers to any length of college attendance that did not culminate in a degree earned. There were no neighborhoods where the largest share of residents had an Associate's degree.

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The evidence also reveals that the relationship between educational attainment and community safety goes both ways: Upstream investments in educational attainment and youth development programs are proven strategies to advance public safety and chart more stable communities.[127]

Housing, safety, and place

As a social determinant, access to housing contributes to the likelihood of a person being arrested for crimes linked to survival, such as prostitution, theft, loitering, or "quality of life" crimes,[128] as does access to a neighborhood with a purposefully built environment for safety that is free from vacancies, environmental contaminants, and dilapidated buildings. Research shows, for instance, that increasing access to rental housing in low-income neighborhoods through programs such as the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit can reduce violent crime, while permanent housing subsidies are associated with reductions in intimate partner violence.[129]

Efforts to reduce neighborhood foreclosures and vacancies can also reduce crime. In Philadelphia, for example, one city-based program that provided low-income homeowners with $20,000 to fund structural repairs to their homes contributed to a 21.9 percent decrease in homicides and a total crime reduction of 25 percent.[130]

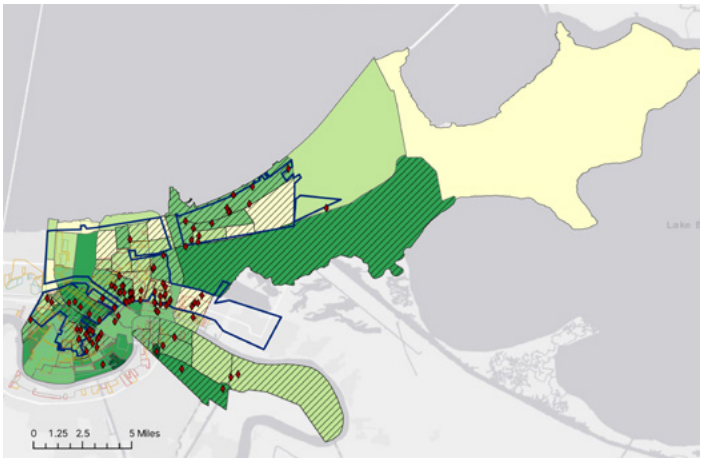
In the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the extensive flooding from the levee failures, 70 percent of low-income housing units experienced significant damage.[131] The number of blighted and abandoned properties increased significantly and has not yet recovered to levels prior to Hurricane Katrina.[132] Today, more than 34 percent of renters in New Orleans spend more than 50 percent of their household income on housing costs.[133]

Figure 4, on the following pages, maps the share of renters in New Orleans neighborhoods, finding that citywide, the percentage of households that are renters increased from 39 percent in 2010 to 55 percent in 2020. Homeownership rates are lowest in Gert Town, B.W. Cooper, the Seventh Ward, Treme-Lafitte, St. Roch, and the Desire area—areas formerly impacted by redlining policies (see Figure 4).[134] Importantly, this analysis is not meant to draw a causal connection between housing and homicide trends in New Orleans, but is an exploratory examination of the relationship that should ideally be followed up with further research, given the preexisting evidence on how stable, secure, and well-maintained housing can promote community safety.

FIGURE 4

How housing type corresponds with firearm homicides in New Orleans, 2010 to 2023[135]

2010



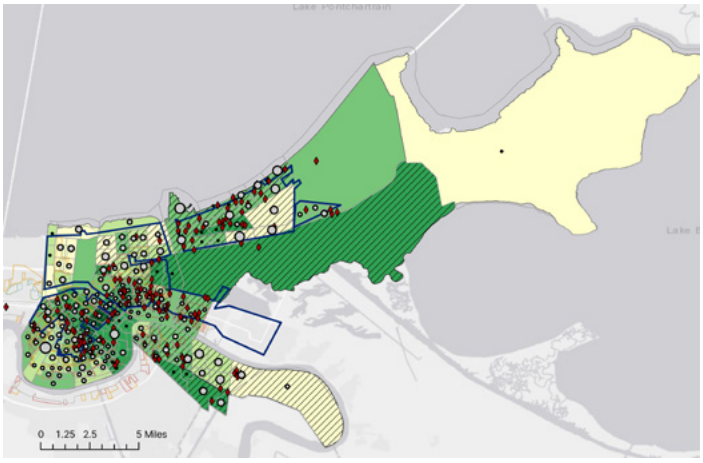
LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2010
- Poverty Rate, low to high 2010
- Firearm homicide 2010

2010: Source: Authors analysis of demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2010, neighborhoods and flood extent boundaries from The Data Center, redlining data from University of Richmond Mapping Inequality, Firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents.

Note: Some neighborhoods and census tracts including Lake Catherine and Florida Dev (see neighborhood key in Figure 1) had lower populations and population densities and higher margins of error and therefore may not follow as closely all the patterns reflected in the visualization. Flood extent as defined by The Data Center using data from FEMA. These homicide numbers may differ from published NOPD counts based on discrepancies in the completeness or up-to-dateness of publicly available records. Analysis on file with the Vera Institute of Justice. For more information, contact Dr. Kim Mosby, Associate Director, Research for Vera Louisiana, at kmosby@vera.org.

2020



LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2020
- Poverty Rate, low to high 2020
- Firearm homicide 2020
- 2,000 / 1,000 Total Covid cases 2020–2023

2020: Source: Authors analysis of demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census 2020, neighborhoods and flood extent boundaries from The Data Center, redlining data from University of Richmond Mapping Inequality, COVID cases from Louisiana Department of Public Health Firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents.

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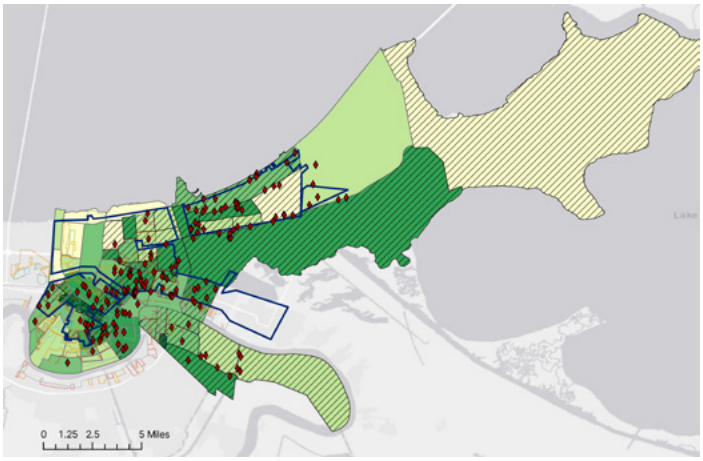
2023



LEGEND

- Hurricane Katrina Flood Extent on September 11, 2005
- Formerly redlined area
- Majority Black neighborhood 2023
- Poverty Rate, low to high 2023
- Firearm homicide 2023

2023: Source: Authors analysis of demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2019-2023, neighborhoods and flood extent boundaries from The Data Center, redlining data from University of Richmond Mapping Inequality, Firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents.

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Research also indicates that population losses within communities may increase violence due to the cascading ramifications of increased vacancies, job losses, and declining quality of life in impacted communities.[136] Following Hurricane Katrina, the population of New Orleans declined by nearly 200,000 people, 64 percent of whom were Black.[137] In Table 1, on the next page, we present data on how New Orleans neighborhoods with the highest shares of population loss fared on several measures of community safety.

Taken together, our analysis points to the need for city, parish, and state policymakers to work together to better address the intersecting social determinants of safety that cross policy sectors between community safety, housing, and the built environment, including efforts to invest in housing, vacancy remediation, and population retention as a tool to support safe and thriving communities.

New Orleans implemented many changes to increase resilience after the COVID-19 pandemic

New Orleans remains a resilient city, with residents rebounding from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the subsequent levee failures, and again after the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The city has taken great strides in improving residents' outcomes, but as one citizen wrote in response to a news article by the Neutral Ground News, titled, "New Orleans Deserves Better. Much Better.":

> *"I've been tired of the resilient label since [Hurricane] Katrina. We shouldn't have to be resilient. We should be prepared and protected."*[139]

In an effort to improve and in response to economic and housing instability, social isolation, mental health disorders, and violent crime following the COVID-19 pandemic, the New Orleans Health Department in June 2023 launched its new Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit to respond to behavioral and mental health calls as an alternative to dispatching police to nonviolent behavioral and mental health-related emergencies.[140] This unit is now the fourth branch of the city's emergency response services dispatched by 911 operators.

This integrated public safety approach diverts non-emergency calls away from police services and toward trained mental health professionals who are better prepared to help someone in distress, while releasing the burden on police officers who are often untrained to respond adequately to such occurrences. More importantly, the integrated approach for non-police responses does not require community members to learn or utilize new methods when calling for help and reduces the frequency with which people in mental health crises are met with punitive repercussions or blunt and violent force.[141]

Since its inception, the Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit has responded to 37 percent of mental health calls and transported recipients to hospitals, other treatment facilities, or family members less than 15 percent of the time.[142] The rest were not transported, with 45 percent of calls being resolved on site in the community and 40 percent disengaged before a team was dispatched.[143]

In the same year, the New Orleans Health Department also created an Office of Violence Prevention to coordinate partnerships with community-based organizations, service providers, health care professionals, and academics working to reduce violence and promote peace across the city.[144] As part of this evidence-based model, which is being implemented in cities across the country with promising outcomes, the new office is committed to fostering a collaborative ecosystem to drive innovative solutions to reduce violence, support victims, and create a resilient city.[145] Using a public health approach to deliver services and programs, the Office of Violence Prevention supports multiple strategies, such as:

TABLE 1

How neighborhood population loss corresponds with firearm homicides in New Orleans, 2010 to 2023[138]

Neighborhood	Population percent change, 2000-2023	Total population (2000)	Total population (2023)	Black population percentage point change, 2000-2023	Poverty rate (2000)	Poverty rate (2023)	Firearm homicides per 10,000 residents (2010)	Firearm homicides per 10,000 residents (2023)
Iberville*	-64%	2,540	913	-7%	84%	49%	0.0	0.0
B. W. Cooper*	-64%	4,339	1,573	-3%	69%	54%	24.8	0.0
Lower Ninth Ward	-64%	14,008	5,095	-9%	36%	26%	14.1	11.8
Florida Area*	-61%	4,775	1,849	-14.6	51%	47%	15.4	16.4
Fischer Dev*	-57%	2,034	869	0%	88%	48%	11.8	0.0
St. Bernard Area	-57%	6,427	2,755	-7%	66%	33%	0.0	0.0
Viavant - Venetian Isles	-57%	1,883	810	-19%	48%	54%	11.9	111.1
Holy Cross	-56%	5,507	2,402	-23%	29%	21%	3.7	8.3
West Lake Forest	-50%	9,596	4,832	-9%	27%	24%	5.0	6.2
Desire Area*	-46%	4,451	2,396	2%	40%	45%	15.0	16.7
St. Claude	-45%	11,721	6,480	-31%	39%	26%	11.7	7.7
Pontchartrain Park	-45%	2,630	1,456	-17%	10%	16%	0.0	0.0
U.S. Naval Base	-40%	2,902	1,744	6%	22%	25%	4.5	5.7
St. Roch	-40%	11,975	7,237	-30%	37%	35%	3.0	9.7
Seventh Ward	-39%	16,955	10,271	-25%	38%	36%	15.7	14.6
Mid-City	-37%	19,909	12,624	-30%	32%	20%	2.1	5.5
Village de l'Est	-35%	12,912	8,417	-7%	30%	28%	1.2	5.9
Treme - Lafitte*	-34%	8,853	5,849	-35%	57%	39%	4.8	6.8
Freret	-32%	2,446	1,666	-25%	33%	27%	0.0	0.0
French Quarter	-31%	4,176	2,893	-3%	11%	14%	2.6	6.9

*Source: Brookings analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, 2000–2003 using neighborhoods defined by The Data Center. Firearm homicide data from the New Orleans Police Department's Major Offense logs, 911 Calls for Service data and Electronic Police reports. Vera Institute of Justice staff assisted the NOPD in cross-validating incidents within each of these three sources to construct a more complete dataset of firearm related homicide incidents *Created with Datawrapper.*

*Note: Poverty rate defined as the percent of the population whose income is below the federal poverty level. *Indicates neighborhoods affected by HUD Hope IV housing restructuring. The Florida Dev neighborhood was excluded due to low sample size and large margin of error. Firearm homicide data was not available prior to 2010. These homicide numbers may differ from published NOPD counts based on discrepancies in the completeness or up-to-dateness of publicly available records. Analysis on file with the Vera Institute of Justice. For more information, contact Dr. Kim Mosby, Associate Director, Research for Vera Louisiana, at kmosby@vera.org.*

- The nonprofit, community-based organization Ubuntu Village's NOLA Peace Ambassadors, who are credible messengers working in partnership with community members to prevent and mediate conflict, de-escalate tensions from developing and escalating, prevent community violence, and intervene to stop retaliation.[146] The NOLA Peace Ambassadors also distribute biometric gun safes to low-income families and provide long-term case management services to connect high-risk individuals and their families to services and economic opportunities to address the root causes of violence.[147]
- The Center for Restorative Approaches, an initiative launched by the nonprofit Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans, which uses restorative justice circles to address conflicts in schools across the city to prevent violent altercations and help students develop positive coping skills to address conflicts.[148] Restorative approaches are used to build, strengthen, and repair relationships.[149]
- The New Orleans-based nonprofit hospital system, LCMC Health's University Medical Center, which offers wraparound services for patients traumatized by serious injury or violent crime through its Seeds of NOLA Trauma Recovery Center and hospital-based violence intervention program to address violence through a care-centered approach.[150] The hospital-based violence intervention team meets people who have been shot and with their families at the bedside, work to de-escalate tensions, prevent retaliation, and connect them to service providers to address basic needs and root causes of violence.[151] The Trauma Recovery Center offers free mental health services to all Orleans Parish residents impacted by trauma from exposure to any form of violence. The NOLA Trauma Recovery Center's services include offering one-on-one counseling and support groups with trauma specialists; providing practical help with social needs, such as housing or employment opportunities; and assisting patients navigating the health care and legal systems.[152]

Reforms are also happening on the housing front. In November 2024, Orleans Parish voters passed an amendment to the city's charter to create a fund for affordable housing in New Orleans, with 75 percent of voters supporting the amendment, which will dedicate 2 percent, or roughly $17 million annually, from the city budget to affordable housing projects.[153] Affordable housing projects in New Orleans will include building new housing stock, preserving existing housing units, and creating opportunities for New Orleans residents to obtain affordable homeownership. The voters recognized the trust fund was needed, as more than half of renters and one in three homeowners struggle to cover their housing costs.[154]

As unhoused people often experience episodes of homelessness and increasingly are being criminalized across the nation for being homeless,[155] creating a resilient city through safer communities should focus on reducing the likelihood of unhoused people coming into contact with the criminal legal system, while increasing contact with wraparound social services designed to assist the unhoused and insulate people from being subjected to the long-term consequences of incarceration.[156] Housing initiatives, social programs, and investment in people and the built environment are important steps in creating a safer, more resilient New Orleans.

More can be done at the state and local level to increase resilience across New Orleans

Many complicated social problems are referred to as "wicked problems" because they are multi-causal and interconnected.[157] Many contemporary public challenges require several government agencies, collaboration across jurisdictions, political agreement, and financial resources to address. When a wicked problem is left unaddressed, the problem mutates and leads to unintended consequences.

In the instance of social problems—homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness—the criminal legal system has become the catch basin for these issues even though it is ill-equipped to address the underlying causes that led to involvement with the criminal legal system. Resilience theory offers an alternative approach: By building adaptive and flexible systems and social services to address functional diversity within a community, people, families, and communities are able to resist a shock or disturbance and have the ability to bounce back.[158]

As climate disasters become more frequent, local and state leaders in New Orleans and Louisiana are encouraged to leverage lessons from the past, take a human-centered approach, incorporate research-based evidence to bolster individual, family, and community resilience and well-being, and combine strategies with intentional investments to strengthen the social determinants of safety. By building resilient infrastructure that creates safe, thriving, and prepared communities, today's investment and actions will better prepare and mitigate the cascading and compounding effects of future disasters impacting the metropolitan New Orleans area.

Below, we outline several actions and encourage state and local leaders to consider each of them when investing in people and communities.

Action one: Evaluate the impact of criminal justice policies, and instead of focusing on punishment, the emphasis should be on supporting alternatives to incarceration.

Such tools and programs include using diversion and treatment programs and providing wraparound services to allow individuals to address the underlying and root issues related to crime and violence, such as mental illness, housing and food insecurity, unemployment, and substance use, while allowing an individual to remain connected to their loved ones and community.

The goal should be to address basic needs to promote recovery and resilience, because once someone is arrested and detained in a parish jail, their lives are disrupted and many do not recover. Their likelihood of future food and housing insecurity increases, their mental health is affected, and many of them lose access to stable housing upon release.[159] Using alternative methods instead of jail is a human-centered response and should promote equity and access to services for those less fortunate.

Action two: Integrate the public sector more seamlessly into disaster recovery.

Currently, disaster recovery policies tend to rely on the private market to return communities to a stable status,[160] which leads to an uneven recovery and perpetuates systemic inequalities present within society before the disaster.[161] Access to the private market for services related to recovery—housing, food, water, logistical and financial support—is stratified by race, class, and gender inequality, and the same is true when trying to access public funds following a disaster. In short, the nation's disaster policies too often fail the neediest households, and New Orleans is no different.[162]

Indeed, disaster recovery does not fix inequality; rather, it typically exacerbates it. As such, disaster recovery plans that bolster public safety and support resilience must prioritize access equity to ensure people in every community are able to access resources to meet their basic needs, including stable housing, employment that pays living wages, quality education, and physical and mental health care following each disaster. Creating a human-based disaster recovery system requires the development and implementation of intentional policies that consider historical contexts of race and social inequities based on gender, place, and economic status, and how each factor—separately and together—interacts with disaster recovery policies and other policies that are implemented in the years following.

Action three: Both state and local governments should implement policies that support long-term human- and community-based stabilization efforts while addressing long-ingrained systemic inequalities.

For instance, if housing stock is damaged, then disaster recovery assistance should compensate households for the cost to replace the structure and its contents. Compensation should not be based on pre-storm home values, because the housing market is racially stratified, with housing in White neighborhoods assessed at higher values, and thus eligible to receive more aid than those in minority neighborhoods.[163]

Alongside homeowners, disaster recovery plans and compensation levels should focus on renters. Resiliency for renters starts by bolstering the stock of affordable, disaster-resilient rental housing that is built before times of crisis; fully funding Housing Choice Voucher programs that help those with extremely low incomes afford housing in the private market; and increasing the availability and number of long-term housing vouchers following a disaster. Providing rental assistance to displaced renters until disaster recovery funds from the Community Development Block Grant program would result in the replacement of affordable rental units, which often are only started two years after a disaster strikes.[164]

Action four: Relying primarily on criminal legal responses in the wake of disasters further destabilizes communities already experiencing disinvestment and marginalization from the larger socioeconomic system.

State and local leaders can work with media to help residents know what to expect and how to access resources to address common issues most people experience after a disaster, including mental health and substance abuse needs in addition to housing, food, and income support. Leaders also should educate constituents and communities that rises in crime are normal after disasters, but that crime rates will return to pre-disaster levels when stabilization returns.[165]

Action five: Human-focused policies would also include local and state governments increasing funding for mental health care and the number of in-patient mental health care beds in the New Orleans metropolitan area and across the state.

The closing of Charity Hospital following Hurricane Katrina decreased the number of in-patient beds available for people experiencing mental health crises, and eventually led to more primary care community health centers.[166] However, New Orleans needs both, and instead of replacing these beds in a new health care facility based in the community, the city has chosen to build a larger mental health ward in the Orleans Parish jail.[167]

The parish's Orleans Justice Center will be the city's largest mental health care facility.[168] This means the primary way for people to receive in-patient mental health care will come with a term of incarceration and a criminal record, which may prevent them from attaining housing, education, and employment upon their release.[169] The city and the state should invest in creating more in-patient beds in mental health care facilities based in the community instead of relying on jails to fill the gap in needed care.

Action six: While the New Orleans Health Department has taken positive steps toward increasing resilience by creating and supporting the Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit and the Trauma Recovery Center, city and state leaders should prepare today to assist and treat people recovering from the trauma of future disasters.

This preparation should not rely on the criminal legal system to provide mental health support, as it carries long-term consequences, including destabilizing individuals, families, and communities, and restricting future access to housing, education, and employment opportunities—the very things people need to maintain safe, stable lives and resilient communities.[170] Funding mental health care should be a public health priority in New Orleans and across Louisiana as disasters become more frequent.

Action seven: Community resilience can also be increased by redesigning schools in ways that redirect punitive, zero-tolerance policies with a public health approach that prioritizes building healthy positive relationships that promote a sense of connectedness, and providing adequate resources and staffing to meet mental and behavioral health needs while students cultivate social-emotional skills.[171]

Research shows incorporating restorative approaches in schools teaches children how to resolve conflict while fostering healing, strengthens student-teacher relationships, and improves student perceptions of school culture and teacher perceptions of safety.[172]

Local and state leaders can support these changes by increasing funding for school-based restorative justice programs and increasing the number of guidance counselors and social workers in local schools. These steps would ensure that all students have access to professional mental health care before and after disasters, which will help reduce the top barriers many schools reported as major limitations to efforts to prevent crime and provide mental health care.[173]

Action eight: Investments in education as a means to increase resilience and the social determinants of safety also should provide adequate funding for vocational programs and for paid apprenticeship programs for youth and adults who might have limited access to high-paying jobs and be stuck in low-paying jobs without these programs.

Higher-paying jobs can increase economic resilience of individuals and communities by providing a cushion or savings to navigate times of crisis, which might mean evacuating, rebuilding, or adjusting to periods of unemployment connected to disasters.

Action nine: Additionally, Louisiana leaders should create a state minimum wage that supersedes the federal minimum wage, which has remained the same since 2009.

With COVID-19-related inflation now subdued but still baked into the prices of most goods and services, minimum wage jobs are not able to support families. A full-time minimum wage job today pays approximately $15,080 per year, which means that families will struggle to meet basic needs and will not have the financial ability nor savings to prepare for, respond to, or recover from future disasters.[174]

In summary, city and state leaders should take action before the next disaster strikes by planning during the time between disasters. They can create and implement human-based systems focused on addressing mental health issues for adults and children. They can increase the stock of affordable rental housing and the number of available housing vouchers. They can prioritize diversion, restorative justice, and substance use treatment programs and adopt recovery-treatment-based programs. And they can embrace economic policies such as raising the minimum wage[175] and increasing vocational and educational programs, combined with apprenticeships. The time between disasters should be used to foster and invest in deeper individual and community resilience, pass policies that encourage stabilization in communities instead of using incarceration as a blunt tool for societal ills, and devote resources to address the social determinants of safety.

Conclusion

Twenty years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, poverty rates and the number of children living below the poverty line in New Orleans persist at levels much higher than the national rate, and in some instances, double the national rate.[176] To combat poverty, protect the most vulnerable in the city, and rely less on the criminal legal system to address societal challenges, elected and appointed state and local officials should find ways to build resilient and safer communities by addressing all of the social determinants of safety simultaneously. Unfortunately, the next disaster will come, and New Orleans and the metropolitan area deserve to have a chance to withstand and recover.

Climate and other natural disasters, as well as man-made disasters, cause social disruptions, displacement, and trauma, and are often accompanied by a rise in crime and violence as residents struggle to find a new equilibrium and more people experience a range of individual challenges, including mental health crises. Yet, once communities stabilize, rates of crime return to pre-disaster levels and disaster-caused trauma dissipates.

Government leaders have a responsibility to all community members to invest in building resilient communities, and can do so by avoiding a return to debunked "tough-on-crime" measures to address wicked societal problems. Time and again, research shows that longer prison sentences and stiffer and punitive penalties will not prevent crime, do not improve public safety, and fail to address the social determinants of safety.[177] Punitive "tough-on-crime" policies instead exacerbate racial, financial, and social inequalities and destabilize communities, which serves to undermine individual and community resilience.

Lawmakers at the local and state level can instead bolster resilience in times of disaster by building safe, thriving communities through intentional investments in the social determinants of safety, such as mental health care, affordable housing, social services that support youth and families, and opportunities for quality education and living-wage jobs. These investments need to take place between disasters. Sustained funding in multiple and linked areas, even after crime and violence return to pre-disaster levels, will help communities, families, and individuals be better prepared to absorb the impacts of the next disaster and able to bounce back after it passes.

Endnotes

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For more Information

Kim Mosby, PhD,
Louisiana Associate Director, Research
Vera Institute of Justice
kmosby@vera.org

Sarah Omojola, JD
Louisiana Director, Vera Institute of Justice
somojola@vera.org

Hanna Love, MA,
Fellow, Brookings Metro
hlove@brookings.edu

Keesha Middlemass, PhD,
Fellow, Brookings Governance Studies
Associate Professor, Howard University
kmiddlemass@brookings.edu

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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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For More Information

Lamar Gardere
Executive Director
The Data Center
lamarg@datacenterresearch.org

Andre M. Perry
Senior Fellow and Director, CCU
Brookings
officeofandreperry@brookings.edu

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