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## **Murder rates in New Orleans, 2000-2008**

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## Murder Rates in New Orleans, 2000-2008

### Abstract:

The homicide rate in New Orleans fell back to pre-Katrina levels in 2008, after spiking to unprecedented heights never before experienced in the city soon after this major disaster. While the substantial decline in 2008 over the previous two years is welcome news, our murder rate is still 5.8 times as high as it is in other American cities our size, and 55% higher than it was in 2000, when we were already over 3 times as high as other cities our size.

We discuss some of the reasons underlying our city's longstanding high murder rates; the spike observed during the first two years post-Katrina; and the decline in 2008, the 3<sup>rd</sup> year after the Katrina disaster.

### Background and Introduction:

Homicide rates in New Orleans, already very high before Hurricane Katrina, spiked significantly during the first two years after the disaster. We calculate these rates for the period 2000-2008; describe the steady rise in homicide underway before Katrina as well as the dramatic fluctuations occurring just after this major disaster; and discuss the leading theories explaining these trends.

### Data and Methods:

A rate is defined as the number of events (murders,<sup>1</sup> in this case) divided by exposure, i.e., person-years lived in the population during the period of interest. Under typical circumstances, the mid-year population provides a reasonable approximation of how much exposure – or how many person-years – a population had during that year. Official mid-year population estimates are routinely provided by the U.S. Census Bureau using a component-of-population-change method.<sup>2</sup> 2005 was not a typical year. The vast majority of those estimated to be residing in New Orleans on July 1, 2005, were absent from city between August 29 and December 31, so using this standard approach would result in a substantial over-estimate of population exposure to an event of interest (murder, in this case) during that unusual year. Therefore, one of us has estimated person-years of exposure for 2005 based upon that official mid-year figure and other estimates made during the final four months of 2005 (see VanLandingham 2007 for details).

The official Census Bureau estimate for the mid-year population for 2008 will not be available until late spring of 2009. To provide an interim mid-year estimate for 2008, we use the official Census estimates for 2006 and 2007 and then assume that the rate of increase observed between mid-year 2006 and 2007 holds steady between 2007 and

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<sup>1</sup> The term “murder” is used here to be consistent with terminology employed in official federal, state, and local crime statistics. The numerator of the murder rate includes what are legally known as homicides.

<sup>2</sup> For the latest official figures and key methodological details, see the U.S. Census Bureau's website: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

2008. Such an assumption will be liberal in nature, since the rate of re-population has been slowing as the city moves further beyond the disaster date. This procedure will thus provide a maximum figure for the estimated population size for mid-year 2008 and a minimum figure for the homicide rate for that same year.

### Results:

Homicide rates for New Orleans and other cities in its size class are presented in the graph (insert graph here). At the beginning of this decade, New Orleans had a homicide rate of 42 per 100,000, which was 3.3 times as high as other American cities in its size class at that time (250,000 – 500,000). This remarkably high rate increased further to 55 by 2002 and 65 by 2005, during which time the differential with other cities had increased to 5.1 .

In 2006, the first full year post-Katrina, the homicide rate in the city spiked to 77 per 100,000, an 18% increase over the previous year and a 35% increase over 2004, the last full year before the Katrina disaster. This spike served to make New Orleans much more of an outlier than it was before Katrina. In 2004, the murder rate in New Orleans was about 4 times as high as it was in other American cities its size. In 2006, this differential spiked to 10 times as high.<sup>3</sup> 2007 was even worse. New Orleans' homicide rate increased further to 88 per 100,000 residents; now 54% higher than it was in 2004; and double what it was in 2001 and 2002.<sup>4</sup>

In 2008, based upon a preliminary homicide count of 179 and the calculations described above, the homicide rate in New Orleans declined back to about (or more precisely, no less than) 66 per 100,000, which is only 15% higher than where it stood in 2004 – the last full year before Katrina – and is almost exactly where it stood in 2005. But our city's murder rate is now 55% higher than it was in 2000, when we were already over 3 times as high as other cities our size. The rate of murder in New Orleans in 2008<sup>5</sup> is now 5.8 times as high as it is in other cities our size.

### Interpretations and conclusions:

These results present three questions. First, what underlies the longstanding very high homicide rates in New Orleans? Second, what led to a steep increase in these already very high rates during the first two years post-Katrina? And finally, what led to the decline during the 3<sup>rd</sup> year post-disaster to more “normal” - albeit very high - pre-Katrina rates?

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<sup>3</sup> The lower rate for comparable cities in 2006 reflects the fact that New Orleans was only about half of its earlier size; the smaller comparison cities have a lower homicide rate.

<sup>4</sup> The differential between New Orleans and comparable cities increased only slightly this year from 10 times as high to 10.2 times as high, since there was also an increase in the rate of homicide among other cities our size.

<sup>5</sup> We use FBI data for 2007 for the comparison figure here, since 2008 data are not yet available. Since New Orleans had almost surely passed the 250k population threshold by mid-year 2008, we use the FBI category 250k-500k for the comparison group.

Regarding the first question, most criminologists emphasize social structural factors. High poverty, poor education, easy availability of drugs and guns, fatherless households, and high unemployment all conspire to concentrate violent crime into the neighborhoods least equipped to combat it. While aging population structure has served to lower crime rates nationally, this “demographic dividend” with respect to violent crime has unfortunately not eased homicide rates in New Orleans.

Regarding the second question, leading theories that address the spike in homicides in post-Katrina New Orleans emphasize several major changes in the socioeconomic landscape in the poorest neighborhoods during the Katrina aftermath. New street drug gangs moved in to compete with longstanding drug dealing groups. A smaller city footprint forced drug dealing groups into competition with one another. Many adolescents returned to the city alone, without the protective benefit of their family and friendship networks. And the loss of criminal justice personnel, facilities, equipment, and leadership post-Katrina left the city ill-prepared for these new challenges.

Regarding the third question, the decline of homicides during Year 3 may well be more the result of a natural course of events than a consequence of any specific targeted intervention. Above a certain threshold, extremely high rates of lethal behavior are simply unsustainable in the long run. Key participants are killed, injured, or incarcerated; turf eventually becomes newly demarcated; families return to support previously unaccompanied youth; and law enforcement rehires and retrenches. An equilibrium of sorts, returns; but at very high rates of homicide, even by American standards.

#### References:

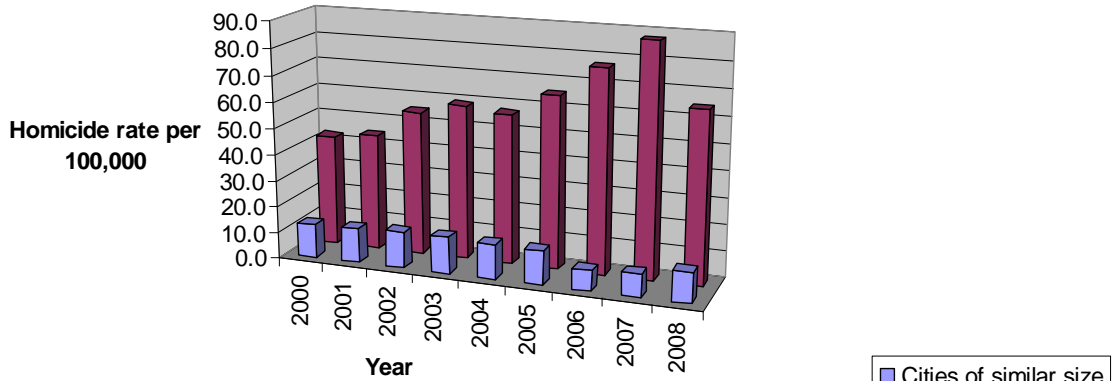
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### Homicide Rates in New Orleans, 2000-2008



|                        | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008  |
|------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Cities of similar size | 12.7 | 13.1 | 13.7 | 13.9 | 13.2 | 12.9 | 7.70 | 8.60 | 11.40 |
| New Orleans            | 42.4 | 44.4 | 54.7 | 58.8 | 57.1 | 65.3 | 77.1 | 87.8 | 64.7  |

■ Cities of similar size  
■ New Orleans