

Opening Essay [3]  
“Race and Sprawl Shape Greater New Orleans”

Every community has its unique history and personality, but New Orleans is “more unique” than any other. Its French-Spanish-American heritage, the French Quarter, wonderful restaurants and distinctive cuisine, the jazz tradition, its location among the bayous and wetlands of one of the world’s greatest rivers, Mardi Gras – it’s no wonder that Louisianans are proud of New Orleans and that millions of visitors annually arrive from around the world to delight in its historic charms.

However, I have found that the characteristics that make a region different often are its positive attributes. The problems faced by most of our metropolitan regions are distressingly shared in common – race and sprawl. These two factors are inextricably linked – most clearly through the concentration of poverty that is itself a racially skewed phenomenon.

In this respect the New Orleans region is not unique at all. Race continues to shape and divide the region in many ways. About 35% of the region’s population are African American – the second highest percentage among major metro areas. (Greater Memphis is 42% black.) However, this high percentage is, in part, a function of the New Orleans region’s low economic and population growth. The New Orleans, Atlanta, and Charlotte regions were all 29% black in

1950. Atlanta and Charlotte's booming economies attracted hundreds of thousands of new households (predominantly white) to their regions. With a lagging economy, metro New Orleans' population has grown primarily through natural increase.

### Gaps between Blacks and Whites

The New Orleans region remains highly segregated. On a scale of 0 to 100 (with 100 indicating total segregation), the regional housing market measured a 69 on a common diversity index in 1990. That figure had improved only slightly from an index score of 73 in 1970. That was less than one-third the average rate of improvement for major southern metro areas and was even behind the rate of improvement for major northern metro areas. (Many Northern regions still remained, however, much more segregated than the New Orleans area.)

In 1990, black family income in greater New Orleans was only 44% of white family income. Among major metro areas New Orleans was second only to Milwaukee (at 39%) in having the largest income gap between blacks and whites. And that gap grew by six percentage points during the 1980s.

In the 1990 census poverty struck much harder at the black population (38% were poor) than the white population (7% were poor). Only 42% of poor whites lived in poverty impacted neighborhoods where 87% of all poor blacks lived.

More striking, only 6% of poor whites lived in high-poverty neighborhoods (where poverty rates exceed 40%) while almost half of all poor blacks (49%) lived in such “deadly communities.”

By contrast, the racial segregation index for metro Charlotte’s housing market improved from 67 to 53 during the 1970-90 period. Metro Charlotte’s black family income was 62% of white family income (and the gap was narrowing) in 1990. Only 54% of the region’s poor blacks lived in poverty-impacted neighborhoods (and only 21% in high-poverty neighborhoods).

African Americans in greater New Orleans have struggled hard for and have achieved political power and access to new educational and occupational opportunities almost unimaginable fifty years ago. But the reality is that for the great mass of the black population social and economic progress in greater New Orleans is occurring at glacial speed.

### Urban Sprawl

“New Orleans is different regarding urban sprawl,” I have been told. “Growth around here is hemmed in by bayous, wetlands, and the river and lakes like nowhere else.”

That may seem true, but the federal and state governments invested in bridges, interstate highways, and the Lake Pontchartrain causeway that overcame geographic constraints. These were not primarily transportation decisions, but land development investments. They opened up the region for far-flung urban development. In 1950, the New Orleans metro area was composed officially of only Jefferson, Orleans, and St. Bernard parishes, embracing 952 square miles; today, metro New Orleans contains eight parishes, covering 3,400 square miles.

Of course, much of that land is under water. A more accurate measure of sprawling development is the growth of the New Orleans urbanized area. In 1950, the region's urbanized population was 660,000 persons living in 90 square miles of urbanized land. By 1990, the urbanized population had grown only 58% to 1,040,000 people while the amount of urbanized land had mushroomed 190% to 270 square miles. The region's development patterns consumed land at over three times the rate of population growth, slightly exceeding the national average during the four decades. During the 1980s new suburban development was occurring at less than half the density of new suburbs around cities comparable to New Orleans.

### Land Use and Economic Development

Greater economic development is the region's top priority. This report will not address that challenge directly. Studies prepared for the New Orleans

Regional Chamber of Commerce and Metrovision analyze economic development issues more expertly than I could.

However, across the global economy, traditional geographic advantages, such as nearby natural resources, key water and rail linkages, or availability of local capital, are becoming less important. Local quality of life and quality of the local labor force increasingly determine where growth-spurring investments are made. How a region grows and how its housing market shapes access to educational and job opportunity help define a region's quality of life.

“We are dispersing our wealth while we are concentrating our poverty,” a community leader in Lorain-Elyria, Ohio once told me. That statement is truer of New Orleans than of any of 90 other metro areas that I have analyzed. For effective economic development, a region needs to disperse its poverty and concentrate its wealth strategically.

Regional land use and transportation planning is essential. No region needs a sensible, long-term comprehensive plan more than Greater New Orleans.

[966 words]