I. Introduction

Much has been made of New Orleans as a "shrinking city" – having lost 283,000 residents since 1960 when its population peaked at 627,525. But from a geographic perspective, New Orleans has grown since 1960 when most New Orleanians lived closer to the river in the historic and more elevated sections of the city. From 1960 to 2000, as the city lost population, it simultaneously spread out toward the north and the east as seawalls, levees, drainage and Interstate 10 supported suburban-style development in former marshlands. As the population declined and decentralized, the older sections of the city experienced abandonment and blight.

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For maps of occupied housing density that demonstrate residential sprawl within New Orleans and across the metro since 1960, be sure to visit: www.gnocdc.org/HousingDevelopmentAndAbandonment/MapBook.html

The history of the city's development patterns has particular relevance in post-Katrina New Orleans as city officials and nonprofits grapple with how to revitalize neighborhoods and preserve historic housing stock, given a greatly reduced population. Repopulation of the city was a focal point of our civic leaders immediately post-Katrina. But as repopulation steadied, the discussion shifted to the housing stock, and in particular, the blight and abandonment in our neighborhoods. The realization that many neighbors are not coming back has led New Orleanians to demand that City Hall get tough on property owners who have abandoned and neglected buildings that now scar nearly every neighborhood across the city. But it's important to remember that blight in New Orleans is not strictly a post-Katrina phenomenon. Indeed many of our neighborhoods have been plagued with blight for decades.

To optimally address blight, decisionmakers must identify and deploy effective polices and also capitalize on the power of the private market and consumer preferences to remediate blight. Historical settlement patterns provide clues regarding the impact of policies as well as changing preferences of the private market. The most effective housing, community development, and blight policies for New Orleans will be informed by an historical perspective as well as by current market indicators.

This brief summarizes the spatial patterns of development and abandonment within city boundaries and across the metro area between 1960 and 2010. Because New Orleans does not have a comprehensive, historical database of all parcels in the city, we use decennial census data on occupied, vacant, and total housing units to illuminate residential settlement patterns over time. An analysis of occupied housing unit distribution is superior to an analysis of population distribution when examining housing patterns, because the number of occupied housing units can grow even as population shrinks if the smaller population is spreading out across more housing units with fewer people in each household.

We first divide the city of New Orleans into three residential development zones or "rings" defined by development time period (pre-1900, 1900-1950, and post-1950), and we examine the residential settlement patterns across these three zones from 1960 to 1980; 1980 to 2000; and 2000 to 2010. For each time period, we also examine the distribution of households across the 7-parish New Orleans metro. We include some analyses of occupied housing units by neighborhood since 1990, particularly within the city's downtown.

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and historic areas. And we supplement the decennial census data with Valassis, Inc. data on households receiving mail in June 2005 and June 2011 in order to distinguish post-Katrina trends from pre-Katrina trends in select neighborhoods. Finally, we compare 2000 and 2010 demographics for a few neighborhoods in order to identify who is staying or arriving versus who has moved away.

This brief builds on studies published between 1956 and 2002 that examined changes in population settlement patterns within American city boundaries, and also builds on a detailed historical analysis of New Orleans’ growth and development.3

II. Key Terms and Definitions

A. Residential development zones

In order to quantify the spatial patterns of growth and decline within the city of New Orleans, we divide the city into three “rings” and analyze changes in housing units within each ring. The three rings are defined by their time period of residential development as documented in Richard Campanella’s book Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day.4 The areas of the city first to be developed were closer to the river in the more elevated parts of the city, and the last areas to be developed were the lowest lying sections of the city (see elevation map in appendix).

Residential development zones

New Orleans


4 Ibid., 50.
B. Housing units, extremely dilapidated structures, and vacancy rate

Throughout this brief, we use terminology from the U.S. Census Bureau to describe different types of housing units. It is important to take a close look at these definitions, as they do not always coincide with the common usage of these terms, nor do they account for all blighted properties and empty lots. The infographic below explains the difference between a housing unit and a non-unit, as well as an occupied versus vacant unit according to the Census.

**Occupied housing units:**
A housing unit is occupied if it is the usual place of residence of an individual or group of individuals who are living in it on Census Day or who are only temporarily absent on Census Day.

**Vacant housing units:**
A housing unit is vacant if no one is living in it on Census Day, unless its occupants are only temporarily absent.

Vacant units include:
- short-term vacancies such as homes that are for sale and for rent,
- long-term vacancies such as homes that have been boarded up and are in need of repair in order to become habitable, and
- homes temporarily occupied at the time of enumeration by individuals who have a usual residence elsewhere (e.g. “seasonal” housing).

**Not housing units:**
A structure is not considered a housing unit if it is open to the elements (the roof, walls, windows, and/or doors no longer protect the interior from the elements) or has a posted sign indicating that it is condemned or that it will be demolished.

These structures are also referred to in this brief as dilapidated, derelict, blighted or abandoned.

**Total housing units:**
the sum of all occupied and vacant housing units.

**A structure that people commonly think of as “blighted” could be a vacant housing unit or classified as not a housing unit, depending on if it is protected from or open to the elements.**

Protected from the elements

Open to the elements

**Households:**
the individual or group of individuals who live in an occupied unit.

**Vacancy rate:**
\[
\frac{\text{Total vacant units}}{\text{Total housing units}}
\]

This definition provides a useful measure of demand for housing versus the supply of both habitable and boarded up housing. However, this definition is different from that used by housing market analysts who are interested in vacancies caused by units that are for rent or for sale.

C. Residential addresses receiving mail

The decennial census is the most accurate source of occupancy data for New Orleans. However, Katrina made landfall in August 2005, nearly the exact mid-point between the 2000 and 2010 Census. Thus, we use trends in residential addresses receiving mail in New Orleans as a proxy for occupancy trends during the years between the decennial census. The source for our residential addresses receiving mail is the Valassis Residential and Business Database, which is a near perfect substitute for the United States Postal Service (USPS) master address file. The Valassis database is address-level data updated weekly through direct feeds from the USPS. GNOCDC obtained an archived copy of the Valassis database from June 2005 to serve as our pre-Katrina benchmark and a copy of the June 2010 and June 2011 Valassis database in order to capture changes since Katrina.

The Valassis database includes fields provided by the USPS indicating whether the address is residential or business, and active or vacant. Active addresses are defined by the Post Office as delivery points where mail has been picked up in the previous 90 days. We construct our definition of residential addresses receiving mail as addresses in the Valassis database that are residential, actively receiving mail, and not a P.O. box. Although Valassis provides census block IDs for each address, we re-geocoded the addresses using MapMarker Plus software so that we could maintain more control over the geocoding process and improve the accuracy of our neighborhood counts.

III. Households move to the suburbs: 1960-1980

A. City of New Orleans - Housing demand in middle ring and suburban fringe surges along with demolitions in the historic core.

In 1960, New Orleans had 202,643 total housing units of which 189,801 were occupied, leaving a relatively low vacancy rate of 6 percent. The majority, or 58 percent, of all New Orleans households resided in the historic, more elevated (“inner ring”) section of the city in 1960. The middle ring neighborhoods were home to only 37 percent of households and the newest development areas primarily in New Orleans East and the West Bank housed only 5 percent of all households.

Between 1960 and 1980, the number of occupied housing units in the city grew slightly from 189,801 to 206,435 even as the total population declined from 627,525 to 557,515 – the result of falling birth rates and shrinking household sizes following the end of the baby boom.

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6 See the Methodology for information about how this vacancy rate is calculated and how it differs from the other definitions of the vacancy rate employed by housing market analysts.
Between 1960 and 1980, the number of occupied housing units in the city grew slightly even as population declined.

Population and occupied housing units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Orleans</th>
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<td>800 thousand</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Occupied housing units</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>627,525</td>
<td>189,801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>557,515</td>
<td>206,435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>557,515</td>
<td>120,106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>557,515</td>
<td>120,106</td>
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</table>

Source: GNOCDC analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Also during this time period, the housing options available to New Orleanians increased dramatically. The construction of new levees, drainage systems, and highways allowed developers to build in areas of the city that were previously off-limits. Given these new opportunities, many New Orleanians began to express their preference for suburban style homes on the edges of the city.

During the 1960s and 1970s, home builders constructed 25,273 new units in outer ring neighborhoods, and 12,178 new units in the middle ring. Outer ring neighborhoods gained 23,768 households and middle ring neighborhoods gained 9,790 households, while the historic sections of the city lost 16,924 households and experienced a “hollowing out” as vacancies increased by 3,282, and 13,642 housing units were removed from the housing stock. Some historic homes were demolished but others were abandoned and became so dilapidated that the Census Bureau no longer considered them housing units.

The spike in abandonment and demolitions in the inner ring between 1960 and 1980 likely reflects a number of significant events. In 1965, Hurricane Betsy roared ashore resulting in levee and power failures that flooded a large portion of the city, damaging and destroying many homes. The construction of Interstate 10 destroyed the streetscape of Claiborne Avenue resulting in the decline of a prosperous African American business district and facilitating access to the suburbs. Then hundreds of homes in Treme were demolished to make way for Louis Armstrong Park and the Mahalia Jackson Theater. In addition, as public schools were integrated, many white families fled to surrounding parishes. All of these events contributed directly or indirectly to loss of housing units in the historic core of the city.

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Between 1960 and 1980, the supply of housing increased significantly, but the number of households increased only slightly, thus, New Orleanians moving to newly constructed homes in the middle and outer rings left behind vacant homes in the city center, and the citywide vacancy rate edged up to 9 percent.

By 1980, less than half of the city's households resided in the historic sections of the city.

**B. New Orleans metro - Jefferson Parish experiences explosive growth.**

From 1960 to 1980, the metro area booms–adding 168,000 households. While Orleans grew by only 16,634 households (or 9 percent), Jefferson Parish gained 100,395 households, and St. Tammany gained 25,268 households. The gain in Jefferson represented a near tripling of households in that parish, while St. Tammany's gain more than tripled its number of households.

By 1980, suburban development, particularly in Jefferson Parish, dramatically shifts the concentration of households toward the suburban parishes.
IV. Oil bust and slow recovery: 1980-2000

A. City of New Orleans - Oil bust sends vacancy rate soaring, flight to outer ring continues, and middle-ring loses households for the first time.

In the 1980s, the oil bust hammered the New Orleans regional economy and the metro area lost 9,390 jobs, or 2 percent of its total jobs.\(^\text{11}\) Over the same time frame, total jobs in the United States and in 57 “weak city metros” increased by 21 percent and 17 percent, respectively.\(^\text{12}\) The New Orleans metro economy struggled to rebound in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2000, the New Orleans metro grew jobs by 16 percent compared to 20 percent for the nation.\(^\text{13}\)

During the economic bust of the 1980s, the number of housing units in the city held steady while the number of households in the city fell by 18,200 and then flat-lined during the 1990s. Meanwhile, the vacancy rate soared from 9 percent in 1980 to 17 percent in 1990. In 2000, the vacancy rate fell to 12 percent but only because 10,482 homes were demolished or became so dilapidated that they were no longer counted as housing units.

Through the weak economy of the 1980s and the sluggish recovery of the 1990s, migration to the outer ring continued, albeit at a slower rate. The outer ring gained 9,655 households from 1980 to 2000, and vacancies declined slightly as new construction in the fringe slowed and demand caught up with the glut of new units built in the previous decade.

Meanwhile, the middle ring lost households for the first time as residents moved to the outer ring, outside the city, or to other metros. As the secondary ring lost 10,033 households, vacancies increased by 3,147, and 6,886 housing units were lost to demolition and dereliction.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupied Inner ring</td>
<td>110,248</td>
<td>96,149</td>
<td>93,324</td>
<td>75,364</td>
<td>75,518</td>
<td>62,708</td>
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<td>Middle ring</td>
<td>69,399</td>
<td>74,675</td>
<td>79,189</td>
<td>71,890</td>
<td>69,156</td>
<td>44,839</td>
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<td>Outer ring</td>
<td>10,154</td>
<td>20,538</td>
<td>33,922</td>
<td>40,981</td>
<td>43,577</td>
<td>34,611</td>
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<td>Citywide</td>
<td>189,801</td>
<td>191,362</td>
<td>206,435</td>
<td>188,235</td>
<td>188,251</td>
<td>142,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant Inner ring</td>
<td>7,991</td>
<td>10,399</td>
<td>11,273</td>
<td>20,652</td>
<td>15,077</td>
<td>22,910</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle ring</td>
<td>3,162</td>
<td>4,499</td>
<td>5,550</td>
<td>10,810</td>
<td>8,697</td>
<td>16,196</td>
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<td>Outer ring</td>
<td>1,689</td>
<td>2,264</td>
<td>3,194</td>
<td>5,876</td>
<td>3,066</td>
<td>8,632</td>
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<td>Citywide</td>
<td>12,842</td>
<td>17,162</td>
<td>20,017</td>
<td>37,338</td>
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<td>Total Inner ring</td>
<td>118,239</td>
<td>106,548</td>
<td>104,597</td>
<td>96,016</td>
<td>90,595</td>
<td>85,618</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle ring</td>
<td>72,561</td>
<td>79,174</td>
<td>84,739</td>
<td>82,700</td>
<td>77,853</td>
<td>61,035</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outer ring</td>
<td>11,843</td>
<td>22,802</td>
<td>37,116</td>
<td>46,857</td>
<td>46,643</td>
<td>43,243</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citywide</td>
<td>202,643</td>
<td>208,524</td>
<td>226,452</td>
<td>225,573</td>
<td>215,091</td>
<td>189,896</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{11}\) GNOCDC analysis of data from Moody’s Economy.com Database (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: CES, QCEW). Economic cycles do not coincide with decades, thus the effect of the oil bust on jobs is somewhat masked by comparing 1980 and 1990. Job loss in the New Orleans metro between the 1981 job peak and the 1987 job trough was 54,350 jobs, or 10 percent of total jobs. During this same period, the United States and the 57 “weak city metros” increased their jobs by 12 percent and 11 percent respectively.

\(^{12}\) GNOCDC analysis of data from Moody’s Economy.com Database (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: CES, QCEW). The 57 “weak city metros” were selected from a 2007 Brookings report, *Restoring Prosperity: The State Role in Revitalizing America’s Older Industrial Cities*. In this report, Brookings identifies New Orleans among a group of 65 older industrial cities that have experienced decades of economic decline. The 65 weak cities yielded 57 “weak city metros” because some cities were in the same metro area.

\(^{13}\) GNOCDC analysis of data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
The inner ring experienced a steep decline of 17,960 households from 1980 to 1990, but began to reverse course very slightly, gaining 154 households from 1990 to 2000. The Lower Garden District, which includes part of the Warehouse District, and the Central Business District (CBD) gained 562 and 369 households respectively during the 1990s. Several adjoining historic New Orleans neighborhoods from the Bywater to Touro also gained, adding between 33 and 163 households. But several other historic neighborhoods continued to decline. For example, Leonidas, Tulane/Gravier, Treme/Lafitte, and Seventh Ward all lost between 58 and 191 households from 1990 to 2000. Despite the small turnaround during the 1990s, gains in historic neighborhoods and downtown areas were very small compared to their losses in the previous decades. Between 1980 and 2000, the historic core lost 14,002 housing units to demolition or dereliction and by 2000, the Census counted more than 15,000 housing units as vacant.

Some historic neighborhoods gain households between 1990 and 2000.

Change in occupied housing units, 1990-2000

New Orleans’ historic core

![Heat map of New Orleans' historic core showing change in occupied housing units, 1990-2000](synth.png)

Source: GNOCDC analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.14

14 The use of white on the map indicates very little or no change. GNOCDC normalized the 1990 and 2000 census blocks using the intersect tool in ArcGIS 10.0 in order to conduct a statistical analysis of occupied housing unit trends within a 3,000 sq. ft. radius of each individual census block. The resulting “heat” map demonstrates overall trends within an area; however, there are pockets of loss within areas of overall growth and pockets of growth within areas of overall loss.
B. New Orleans metro - Growth in exurban parishes picks up pace.

As New Orleans lost 18,814 households from 1980 to 2000, the number of households in St. Tammany nearly doubled to 69,253. Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles and St. John increased their combined number of households from 49,133 to 64,849. Although Jefferson Parish’s growth rate slowed to 13 percent, it gained 20,549 households and ended the century with almost as many households as Orleans Parish. Thus, the concentration of households in the metro continued to shift toward suburban parishes with Orleans’ share dropping to 38 percent by 2000.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>55,290</td>
<td>95,512</td>
<td>155,685</td>
<td>166,398</td>
<td>176,234</td>
<td>169,647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orleans</td>
<td>189,801</td>
<td>191,363</td>
<td>206,435</td>
<td>188,235</td>
<td>188,251</td>
<td>142,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaquemines</td>
<td>5,516</td>
<td>6,533</td>
<td>7,750</td>
<td>8,213</td>
<td>9,021</td>
<td>8,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Bernard</td>
<td>8,109</td>
<td>13,709</td>
<td>20,591</td>
<td>23,156</td>
<td>25,123</td>
<td>13,221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Charles</td>
<td>5,251</td>
<td>7,591</td>
<td>11,487</td>
<td>14,333</td>
<td>16,422</td>
<td>18,557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John the Baptist</td>
<td>4,331</td>
<td>5,770</td>
<td>9,305</td>
<td>12,710</td>
<td>14,283</td>
<td>15,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Tammany</td>
<td>10,427</td>
<td>17,834</td>
<td>35,695</td>
<td>50,346</td>
<td>69,253</td>
<td>87,521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans Metro</td>
<td>278,725</td>
<td>338,312</td>
<td>446,948</td>
<td>463,391</td>
<td>498,587</td>
<td>455,146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V. Katrina and the levee failures: 2000-2010

A. City of New Orleans - The levee failures significantly hollow out the middle ring.

Between 2000 and 2010, the effects of Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures are clear. Households citywide fell by 46,093 and the vacancy rate doubled to 25 percent. In addition, some 25,195 housing units “disappeared” from the housing stock altogether. Lost housing stock may have been demolished (including many public housing sites under redevelopment) or left open to the elements such that they are not counted as housing units by the Census Bureau.

More than 25,000 housing units disappear from the city’s housing stock yet population declines even more, thus, vacancies increase after Katrina.

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15 Vacant housing units include flood-damaged homes that are boarded up, homes that have been re-built but are not occupied, as well as vacancies in undamaged or newly constructed housing units.

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The recovery of occupied housing units varied across and within neighborhoods, depending on the extent of flooding, resident and neighborhood resources, and public policy decisions in the storm’s aftermath. The flooding of New Orleans East neighborhoods caused the outer ring's first ever loss of households. By 2010, the outer ring had regained only 79 percent of the number of households it had in 2000. Among all outer ring neighborhoods, West Lake Forest and Pontchartrain Park exhibited the lowest recovery rates with only 41 and 55 percent respectively of their 2000 number of households. But non-flooded outer ring neighborhoods on the West Bank gained households. New Aurora/English Turn experienced 13 percent growth in households. Old Aurora grew 9 percent. And Tall Timbers/Brechtel grew 3 percent. Meanwhile, 3,400 units were lost to demolition or dereliction in outer ring areas.

Heavily flooded middle ring neighborhoods had 24,317 fewer households as of April 2010 or only 65 percent of the number of households counted in this ring a decade earlier. Beyond public housing sites, a large number of middle ring neighborhoods lost a significant share of households. As of April 2010, St. Anthony had recovered only 64 percent, West End recovered 63 percent, Milneberg recovered 61 percent, Plum Orchard and Filmore each recovered 60 percent, and Lakeview recovered 59 percent of their 2000 count of households. The Lower Ninth Ward had the lowest recovery rate among all middle ring neighborhoods, at 22 percent as of April 2010. In addition, 16,818 housing units in this secondary ring were lost altogether from the housing inventory. The demolition of public housing sites located in the middle ring—including the St. Bernard Development (now Columbia Park), Florida Development, and Fischer Development—accounts for only some of the loss in total housing units in the secondary ring.

Inner ring neighborhoods, where flooding was very uneven, experienced a decline of 12,810 occupied housing units. Excluding public housing sites, the badly flooded historic neighborhoods of Holy Cross and Seventh Ward had the lowest recovery rates as of April 2010 at 52 percent and 65 percent, respectively. The two flooded neighborhoods of Mid-City and Tulane/Gravier have fewer households overall compared to 2000 but gained households in some areas (see map below) where new multi-unit residences were constructed with the support of special post-Katrina tax credits. But several inner ring neighborhoods that experienced little or no flooding lost households. For example, Bywater lost 22 percent of all households; Uptown lost 10 percent; West Riverside and Irish Channel each lost 5 percent; East Riverside lost 4 percent; and on the west bank, McDonogh lost 9 percent of its households. In fact, only three historic east bank neighborhoods that did not flood after Katrina—the Central Business District, Lower Garden District, and St. Thomas Development (now River Gardens)—had more households in 2010 than in 2000. The losses to unflooded historic New Orleans neighborhoods more than erased gains the inner ring neighborhoods experienced in the previous decade.

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16 When discussing flooded neighborhoods, we describe changes in number of households as percent recovery, because as of April 2010, these neighborhoods were still regaining households as demonstrated by trends in Valassis counts of households receiving mail.
Katrina caused widespread losses in occupied housing units across the city from 2000 to 2010.

Percent change in occupied housing units by census tract, 2000-2010
New Orleans

Meanwhile, total vacancies counted by the Census Bureau grew by 7,833 in the historic core. And 4,977 housing units were removed from the housing stock—largely attributable to the demolition of public housing sites including Lafitte (now Faubourg Lafitte), B.W. Cooper (now Marrero Commons), and CJ Peete (now Harmony Oaks), which were not yet redeveloped at the time of the 2010 Census.18

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17 GNOCDC aggregated 2000 census blocks to 2010 census tracts in order to calculate the change in occupied housing units by 2010 census tract. One census tract in Mid-City is white because it has zero occupied housing units in both 2000 and 2010. Another census tract in Viavant/ Venetian Isles is white because it had zero occupied housing units in 2000 and three in 2010, and thus experienced “infinite” growth.

18 Although redevelopment of many public housing sites was not complete as of April 2010, once redevelopment is complete, most of these sites will have fewer housing units available.
B. New Orleans metro - Katrina accelerates the shifting of households to northern and western exurban parishes.

Katrina inflicted significant losses across several parishes in the southern portion of the metro, in addition to the substantial loss of households from Orleans Parish. Between 2000 and 2010, Jefferson lost 6,587 households, St. Bernard lost 11,902 households, and Plaquemines lost 944 households. St. Bernard took the biggest hit in percentage terms, losing 47 percent of households. Plaquemines and Jefferson ended the decade with 10 percent and 4 percent fewer households than in 2000, respectively.

St. Charles, St. John, and St. Tammany received an influx of evacuees from harder-hit areas that contributed to household gains in these parishes. St. Tammany grew by 18,268 households and had 87,521 households in 2010, a 26 percent increase over ten years. St. John added 1,682 households to reach 15,965 households in 2010, a 12 percent gain. Finally, St. Charles grew by 2,135 households to reach 18,557 households in 2010, a 13 percent increase. However, the growth in these three parishes only equaled one-third of the combined losses in the other four parishes, indicating that many households have moved away from the metro area entirely since 2000.

Researchers analyzing disasters as far back as the 1890s have concluded that disasters tend to accelerate trends already in place prior to the catastrophic event. And in fact, Katrina appears to have accelerated the shifting of households to exurban parishes. Between 2000 and 2010, St. Tammany's share of total households in the metro area increased from 14 percent to 19 percent. As we shall discuss in the next section, Katrina may have at the same time strengthened market preferences for downtown living.

IV. Demand for downtown housing resurges in the 1990s and continues post-Katrina.

Many cities have experienced resurgent downtowns since 1990. According to the Brookings Institution, two-thirds of all "downtown" census tracts gained population in the 1990s, even in cities that lost overall population.20 The demand for housing in New Orleans’ downtown, defined as the Central Business District (CBD) and Warehouse District, surged in the 1990s as well.21 New Orleans’ CBD added 369 households during the 1990s, and had the fastest growth rate among all neighborhoods in the city at 67 percent. In addition, the Warehouse District gained 166 households (35 percent) during the 1990s as many warehouse spaces were converted to apartments and condos. Between 2000 and 2010, the demand for downtown living continued to grow, and the CBD gained another 339 households while the Warehouse District gained an additional 222 households.

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21 The Warehouse District is defined as the part of the Lower Garden District Neighborhood between Magazine Street and the Port of New Orleans Place, and Julia Street and Pontchartrain Expressway. Other definitions of the Warehouse District include extending it into the CBD all the way to Poydras.
From 2000 to 2010, New Orleans’ downtown gains households amidst declines in adjacent neighborhoods.

VII. But vacancies increase in most historic east bank neighborhoods post-Katrina.

The growth in households in downtown New Orleans since 2000 is not surprising given the neighborhood’s upward trend in the 1990s, higher elevation, and less severe flooding after the levees failed in 2005. Yet, nearly every other historic east bank neighborhood with these same advantages lost households over the decade. And, most historic east bank neighborhoods had fewer residential addresses receiving mail in June 2010 and June 2011 than in June 2005, suggesting that these losses may have occurred post-Katrina.

Among the 16 largely unflooded historic east bank neighborhoods, only the CBD, Lower Garden District, Marigny, and St. Thomas (now River Gardens) had more residential addresses receiving mail in June 2011 than in June 2005. However, Marigny netted an increase of only 17 residential addresses receiving mail (+0.8%) and all the growth in the Lower Garden District is attributable to the Warehouse District. Between

For a downloadable spreadsheet with counts of addresses receiving mail from Jun 2005 – Jun 2011 for all 72 New Orleans neighborhoods, be sure to visit: www.gnocdc.org/HousingDevelopmentAndAbandonment/index.html

22 The use of white on the map indicates very little or no change. GNOCDC normalized the 2000 and 2010 census blocks using the Census Bureau census block relationship file in order to conduct a statistical analysis of occupied housing unit trends within a 3,000 sq ft radius of each individual census block. The resulting “heat” map demonstrates overall trends within an area; however, there are pockets of loss within areas of overall growth and pockets of growth within areas of overall loss.
2005 and 2011, residential addresses receiving mail increased 35 percent in the Warehouse District and 79 percent in the CBD.

Meanwhile, the 12 other largely unflooded historic east bank neighborhoods—Irish Channel, Bywater, Garden District, Uptown, East Riverside, West Riverside, Audubon, East Carrollton, French Quarter, Black Pearl, Iberville and Touro—lost residential addresses receiving mail between June 2005 and June 2011. In the case of Iberville, the losses may have been the result of a decision to begin redeveloping this public housing site. In most other cases, these losses were not large - less than 3 percent –although Bywater lost 14 percent and Touro lost 5 percent. Nonetheless, these losses suggest that the levee failures did not increase occupancy in most "high ground" neighborhoods, but instead abandonment has continued here post-Katrina.

Some of these lost residences may have been the conversion of doubles into singles as so often happens with historic New Orleans homes. However, every ten years, the Census Bureau enumerates each individual vacant housing unit, thus eliminating from the count of vacants any double that has been converted into a single. And the number of vacant units has increased greatly in most historic neighborhoods since 2000. Moreover, enumerators distinguish between those that are for sale or rent, those that are for seasonal use, and those that are "other vacant." This last category is the most worrisome, as it accounts for blighted units that are not open to the elements. (Notably, the Census Bureau does not even enumerate housing units that have become so blighted they are open to the elements.) Of the 16 largely unflooded historic east bank neighborhoods, all of them experienced an increase in "other vacant" housing units from 2000 to 2010, with the exception of the CBD, St. Thomas/River Gardens, Lower Garden District, and the Garden District. A rigorous study from Baltimore concluded that each vacant and unsafe property costs tax payers an average of $1,472 per year in additional policy and fire service.

**Historic neighborhoods now have significant densities of abandoned homes.**

*“Other Vacant” housing unit density by census block, 2010*

New Orleans

![Map showing density of "other vacant" housing units](image)

Source: GNOCDC analysis of data from the Valassis Residential and Business Database.

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www.gnoccdc.org
VIII. Single persons are attracted to downtown living, but more households move out of historic neighborhoods than move in.

A comparison of Census 2000 and Census 2010 data by neighborhood suggests that the fast growing Central Business District and Lower Garden District are more attractive to renters, single persons living alone, and households without children. Only 3 percent of households in the CBD have children— the smallest share of any neighborhood except the French Quarter-- and a far smaller share than the citywide average of 28 percent. The share of households with children is also very low in the Lower Garden District at 9 percent.

The share of single-person households in the CBD is the highest of any neighborhood at 67 percent, and among these are a number of elderly (65 and over) living alone. Elderly persons living alone make up 12 percent of CBD households compared to the citywide average of 8 percent. In the Lower Garden District, the share of single-person households is also quite high at 57 percent, however, elderly living alone are somewhat less likely to live in the Lower Garden District at only 6 percent of all households. Both neighborhoods have a lower homeownership rate than the city average suggesting that most incoming residents are renters.

As mentioned earlier, aside from the CBD, Lower Garden District, and St. Thomas (River Gardens), the remaining 13 neighborhoods in the "sliver by the river" have fewer households in 2010 than in 2000. Nearly every one of these neighborhoods has experienced an increase in homeownership, but the inflow of new residents has been overwhelmed by the outflow of old residents.

For example, the Irish Channel lost 85 occupied homes between 2000 and 2010. While the Irish Channel gained 308 white-headed households, it lost 431 African American-headed households. The share of households with children fell by nearly half, from 32 percent to 17 percent. Irish Channel, like the downtown, is showing greater market appeal for single person households. The number of individuals living alone increased by 53 even while the neighborhood lost 85 households overall. However, the number of seniors living alone declined by 12 since 2000.

In East Riverside and West Riverside we see very similar patterns. Together these neighborhoods lost 505 African American-headed households while gaining 277 white-headed households. At the other end of the "sliver by the river," Bywater also lost 621 black-headed households while gaining 115 white-headed households. As in the Irish Channel, the Bywater neighborhood is attracting younger singles while losing seniors living alone. The share of single person households increased in the Bywater from 40 to 46 percent, while the share of seniors living alone decreased from 9 to 6 percent, suggesting that seniors may find it challenging to stay in their Bywater homes. In all of these historic east bank neighborhoods, households moving out were more likely to be families with children or seniors.

Despite their higher elevation and access to transit and job centers, most of New Orleans’ historic neighborhoods have lost more households than they have gained since 2000. Although a new demographic seems to be moving in, it does not appear that they are widely displacing previous residents either directly through moving in to their units or indirectly through rising prices. Instead, multiple forces are affecting change in these neighborhoods.

For example, it is possible that many residents of these neighborhoods evacuated for Katrina, lost their jobs, and/or resettled their children in schools in other cities and chose not to return. Some renters may have left these neighborhoods more recently when multi-family developments opened in other parts of the city. Some

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25 It is important to note that the section of Bywater north of St. Claude Avenue did substantially flood. But this section of the neighborhood is more industrial and less populated. Although this section of the neighborhood lost disproportionately more households than the largely unflooded section south of St. Claude, the losses north of St. Claude totaled only 194 households while the section south of St. Claude lost 306 households from 2000 to 2010.
elderly may have gone to live in nursing homes or assisted living facilities elsewhere. Whatever the reason, as city officials look to reduce blight while at the same time preserving historic architecture, policies that can assist current residents to remain in historic neighborhoods will be equally important as attracting new residents to these neighborhoods.

IX. Conclusion

During the 1960s and 1970s, despite the fact that the number of households increased slightly citywide, the number of new housing units grew even faster, and abandonment spiked in inner ring neighborhoods as many New Orleanians moved to new suburban style homes in middle and outer ring neighborhoods and outlying parishes. Between 1980 and 2000, growth in the outer ring continued and sprawl to exurban parishes increased while both the inner and middle ring New Orleans neighborhoods lost households. The downtown area, defined as the Central Business District and Warehouse District, has emerged as an oasis of growth in a sea of decline. Surprisingly, the majority of inner-ring historic, unflooded neighborhoods experienced renewed abandonment over the last 10 years.

While public policy cannot substantially reverse the long-term trends of suburbanization, it can influence the scale of population change in different types of neighborhoods. In neighborhoods with moderately strong housing markets, most of the rhetoric may be around attracting residents, but these numbers reveal that retaining residents is even more critical for the vitality of these neighborhoods. Understanding the motivations and life circumstances of the current residents will help planners and policymakers consider what mix of services and housing policies are needed to support the retention of residents.

This community discussion could begin by considering how to support households most likely to move due to their stage of life. For example, families in the city with young children will be examining the elementary education options and neighborhood safety. People over age 65, despite strong preferences to age in place, may consider moving to homes that better accommodate their physical limitations. Both groups could decide the suburban jurisdictions offer a better situation than the city can provide, but targeted efforts could sway some residents towards remaining in their homes.

X. Methodology

How we create our estimates of housing units by residential development zone

We primarily relied upon Richard Campanella’s book *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* in order to identify the residential zones developed pre-1900, between 1900 and 1950, and post-1950.26 We also referenced several other historical maps of the city’s development to enhance the accuracy of our development boundaries.27 In addition, we created a digital elevation model of New Orleans to further ensure that areas we defined as pre-1900 development largely followed the elevation of the city. If after checking multiple sources, we were still not clear on the exact boundaries of residential development, we adhered to census tract boundaries.

After making our best estimate of the areas within the city that were developed pre-1900, 1900 to 1950, and post-1950, we turned to creating our estimates of housing units within each development zone. There process entailed several challenges. Because census block and census block group data was not available for all

decades included in our analysis, we had to use census tract-level data. And although the city’s residential development zones aligned very closely with census tracts, there were places of divergence.

When census tracts straddled two development zones, we allocated all housing units within the census tract to a development zone based on the geographic centroid of the census tract. There were four census tracts that straddled two development zones but maintained the same boundaries between 1960 and 2010. Thus, housing unit counts for these four census tracts were consistently counted in the same development zone (that which contained the centroid of the census tract). However, in five areas of the city, census tracts straddled two development zones for a few decades, then split and became aligned with development zone boundaries. Following our methodology, housing units that were previously allocated to one development zone based on the centroid of the old census tract could be re-allocated to a different development zone based on the centroid of the new census tract. As a result, trends between decades could reflect the re-allocation of housing units between zones rather than real gains and losses, potentially altering our findings. In order to check the integrity of our city-wide trends by development zone, we performed a sensitivity analysis by assuming that all housing units should have been counted in the opposite development zone. In every case, we found that city-wide trends by development zone were unchanged, whether each area was considered in isolation or in aggregation.

How we define and interpret trends in total, occupied, and vacant housing units

At the beginning of this brief, we provided a detailed info graphic explaining the U.S. Census Bureau definition of total, occupied, and vacant housing units. As noted in Section II, we employ a definition of the vacancy rate that is substantially different from the vacancy rate typically used by housing market analysts. The vacancy rate as defined in this brief is the sum of all types of vacant units divided by the sum of total vacant and occupied housing units. This definition serves as a useful measure of the demand for housing versus the supply of both habitable and boarded up houses. However, this definition of vacancy rates is materially different from that of housing market analysts who are interested in vacancy rates among habitable homes. Such housing market analysts calculate the vacancy rate as \[ VR = \frac{(VFR + VFS)}{(VFR + VFS + ROU + HOU + RNYO + SNYO)}, \] where VR is the vacancy rate, VFR is the number of vacant units for rent, VFS is the number of vacant units for sale, ROU is the number of renter-occupied units, HOU is the number of homeowner-occupied units, RNYO is the number of rented but not occupied units, and SNYO is the number of sold but not yet occupied units.

An increase in vacant units may reflect new construction and short-term vacancies in areas experiencing growth, long-term vacancies in weak housing markets, or the boarding up of blighted homes. In particular, after Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee failures, houses were boarded up as part of the recovery and response process. A decrease in vacancies may reflect household growth in strong housing markets, the extreme dilapidation of once-vacant housing units in weak housing markets, or demolition and less-dense residential redevelopment. Thus, it is not always easy to interpret changes in housing unit data, and it is extremely important to examine changes in total housing units, vacant housing units, and occupied housing units together, as well as within the context of historical events.
XI. Appendix

Elevation
New Orleans

Note: White indicates no elevation data available.
Neighborhood Boundary Reference Map

Source: GNOCDC analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau.
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About the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center

The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center gathers, analyzes and disseminates data to help nonprofit and civic leaders work smarter and more strategically. By publishing the most reliable data in a highly usable format, www.gnocdc.org has become the definitive source for information about New Orleans and the metro area. The Data Center was founded in 1997 and is used by federal agencies, national media, city and state officials, and local nonprofits. The Data Center is a product of Nonprofit Knowledge Works and is a long time member of the Urban Institute's National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership - local data experts dedicated to community change. The Data Center is supported in part by Baptist Community Ministries, Community Revitalization Fund of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, the United Way for the Greater New Orleans Area, Metropolitan Opportunities Fund at the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and data users like you.