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HARD TIMES IN “THE BIG EASY”

In New Orleans, poverty and crime go together like, well...



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Louisiana’s largest city occasionally draws our attention over the behavior of its cops (click [here](#) and [here](#)). As former mayor Mitch Landrieu [noted](#) when the Justice Department stepped in over a decade ago, “I have inherited a police force that has been described by many as one of the worst police departments in the country.” DOJ soon issued [a massive report](#) that upbraided officers for making unwarranted stops and arrests, using excessive force, and demonstrating bias against women and minorities. Managers weren’t ignored. They drew considerable scorn for a preoccupation with numbers, which “diverts attention and resources from quality arrests, community engagement, and more considered problem-solving.” In 2018 the city entered into an elaborate [consent decree](#) that required NOPD fundamentally change its way of doing business, both within *and* on the streets.

We’ve cautioned about the consequences of pushing numerical productivity. Indeed, *Police Issues* has a special section on “[Quantity and Quality](#).” So was *that* the cause of NOPD’s alleged dysfunction? Or is something more fundamental at work? DOJ’s slap-down offered an intriguing clue:

Some argue that, given the difficulty of police work, officers must at times police harshly and bend the rules when a community is confronted with seemingly intransigent high levels of crime. Policing is undeniably difficult; however, experience and study in the policing field have made it clear that bending the rules and ignoring the Constitution makes effective policing much more challenging.

As it turns out, those “intransigent” levels of crime have beset The Big Easy for a very long time. Unfortunately, our recent probe of Louisiana (“[But is it Really Satan?](#)”)

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altogether ignored the State's largest city. So imagine our despair when we recently came across the *Wall Street Journal's* splendid (and deeply sobering) piece, "[New Orleans Has America's No. 1 Murder Rate. 'We're in a Crisis.'](#)" Based on [data recently published](#) by the Major Chiefs Association, it reports that New Orleans' homicide rates aren't just in the pits – they're the worst in the land!

We decided to check for ourselves. MCCA published violent crime numbers for the first six months of 2021 and 2022 for seventy major U.S. cities and metro areas. Using 2021 population estimates from the Census (click [here](#) and [here](#)) we computed homicide rates (per 100,000 pop.) for every place surveyed by the Chiefs. And the results definitely bear out the Journal's despair. On the left are the most murder-ridden areas, rate-wise. On the right is a comparo between the nation's murder capital (New Orleans) and five major cities that frequently appear in our posts. Really, if being worst counts, The Big Easy "easily" earns the trophy.

Rank /70	City	Pop	Hom 2022	Rate 2022
1	New Orleans	376971	155	41.1
2	Baltimore	576498	179	31.0
3	St. Louis	299310	86	29.3
4	Detroit	632464	133	21.0
5	Memphis	628127	121	19.3
6	Milwaukee	569330	109	19.1

Rank /70	City	Pop	Hom 2022	Rate 2022
1	New Orleans	376971	155	41.1
9	Philadelphia	1576251	257	16.3
10	Washington DC	670050	104	15.5
18	Chicago	2696555	311	11.5
44	Los Angeles	3849297	186	4.8
56	New York City	8467513	207	2.4

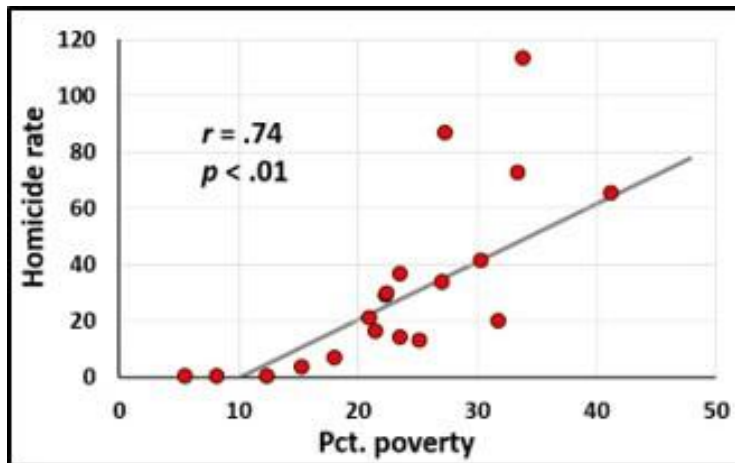
Full stop. For the past decade, essays in our [Neighborhoods](#) special topic have warned that results of such comparisons may not be as meaningful as one assumes. After all, cities *are* artificial constructs. New York City brags about its safety. According to the table, its homicide rate does seem benign. But as we pointed out in "[Fix Those Neighborhoods](#)", the Big Apple's peaceful character doesn't extend to its poorer districts. Say, Brownsville (pop. 86,000), which sports a deplorable murder rate of 29.1.

We don't look on economic conditions as the ultimate cause of violence. Poverty rates, though, seem to function as a surrogate for an unholy alliance of factors (e.g., unemployment, lack of child care, ill-behaved peers) that can collectively make life miserable. And get folks killed. So instead of simply wagging our finger at The Big Easy, let's look *within*. Our main source, New Orleans P.D.'s "[Electronic Police Report 2022](#)" provides basic information on "all Police Reports filed by NOPD officers". To align our results with the Major Chiefs data, we focused on the first six months of 2022, from

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January 1 through June 30, selecting every entry coded as “HOMICIDE” and where victim status was “FATAL.”

That process yielded 101 homicide victims. For step 2 – *where* in New Orleans? – we queried the incidents’ street locations in Google. That yielded sixteen ZIP codes (the city has nineteen principal ZIP’s, but three – 70121, 70123 and 70124 – had no homicides during our timeframe.) We then turned to the [Census](#) and gathered 2019 ACS estimates for each ZIP’s population and percent in poverty: cumulative, “White alone” and “Black or African American alone.” (And yes, we share. Click [here](#) for the data.)

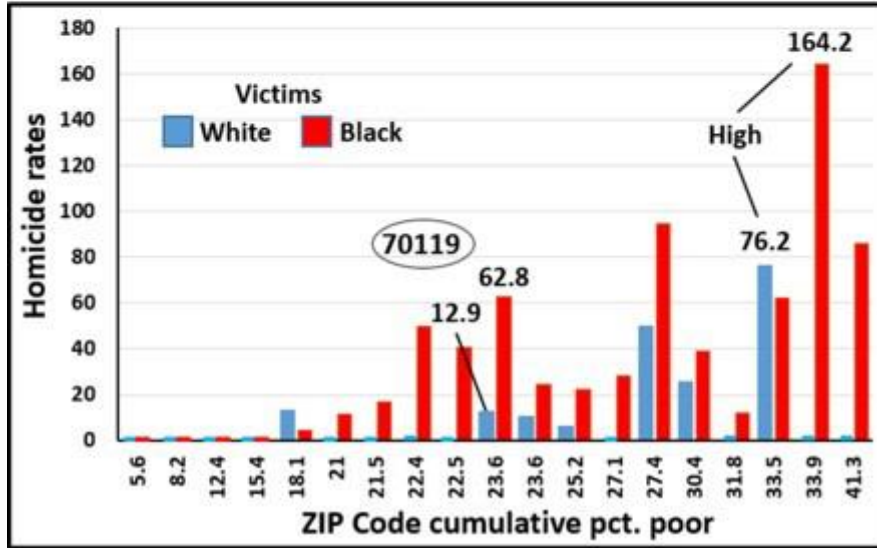
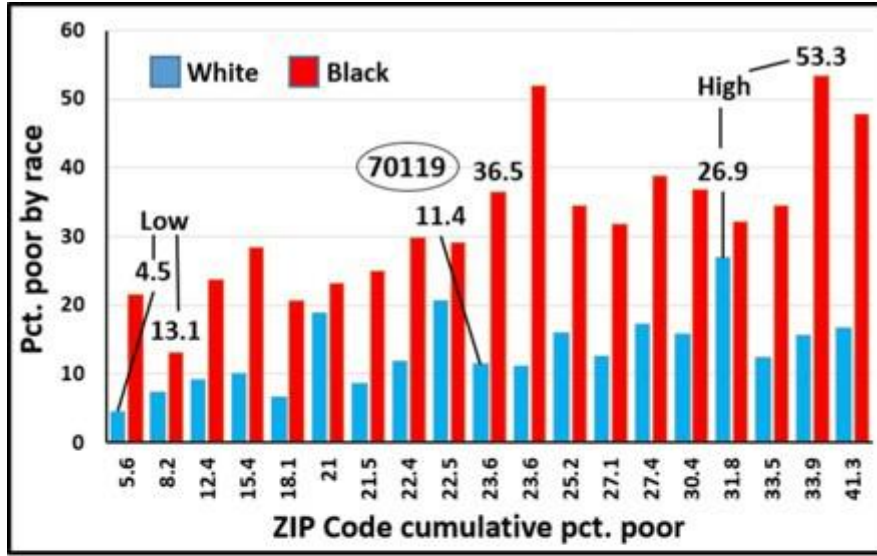


Our first order of business was to look for a relationship between ZIP code poverty percentages and murder rates (per 100,000 pop.) As our graph indicates, their correlation was in the expected direction (more poverty, more murder) and *very* robust. In fact, the “*r*” statistic of .74 turned out to be virtually identical to the .73 “*r*” yielded by our 2021 comparison of poverty and

violence rates for New York City’s 59 Districts (“[Woke up, America!](#)”).

And just like in New York City (and everywhere else we’ve ever looked) the consequences fell hardest on the racial and ethnic groups that disproportionately inhabit the city’s poorer areas. [According to the Census](#), New Orleans’ population of 376,971 is 33.4 pct. White and 59.2 pct. Black. Overall poverty is 24.8 pct., with Black poverty (33.2 pct.) nearly three times that of Whites (12 pct.) Check out these graphs, which arrange New Orleans’ nineteen regular Zip codes by percent of residents in poverty, with the wealthiest Zip (5.6 pct. poor) on the left and the most economically deprived (41.3 pct. poor) on the right:

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	Pop. White	Pop. Black	White Pov.	Black Pov.	White Vict.	Hom Rt White	Black Vict.	Hom Rt Black
70119	15535	15935	11.4	36.5	2	12.9	10	62.8

Black residents are doubly disadvantaged. As ZIP Code poverty rates worsen, their share of the population (top graph) and rate of homicide victimization (bottom graph) substantially increase. Consider, for example, Zip 70119, with a mid-ranked 23.6 pct. cumulative poverty score. Although it has about the same number of White and Black residents, the latter were *three times* more likely to be poor and *five times* more likely to be murdered.

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So are economics entirely to blame for New Orleans' travails? Maybe not. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, and to [a recent article](#) in *The Lens*, the consent decree, and the elaborate internal controls it produced, led many cops to leave. It's also reportedly hampered recruitment, which is in the dumps across the U.S. Specialized NOPD units were stripped to augment depleted patrol ranks, and 9-1-1 responses are interminably delayed. So much so, that many citizens and businesses have taken up arms. Or simply left. Meanwhile the Federal judge overseeing the consent decree announced that, contrary to her recent suggestion, [the end is not exactly in sight](#). According to U.S. District Judge Susie Morgan, problems with "crime reporting data, calls for service and response time" require an "innovative" response. Given [NOPD's severe staffing shortage](#), though, that definitely seems a stretch.

But maybe not. Perhaps that coach-person can pull out a solution from their top hat. So we'll see.