

## Fact Sheet

# *Murder in New Orleans: Back to the Bad Old Days*

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In the aftermath of Katrina, murder rates in New Orleans appear to have increased even beyond the exceedingly high levels seen in the mid 1990s. Figure 1 provides murder rates for New Orleans compared to Baton Rouge and several other major cities around the country, using 1995 as a starting point. Back in 1995 the murder rate in New Orleans was 74.5 per 100,000, which was about 9 times the national average at the time, and well above other major cities in the United States. But following a decline in crime for the nation as a whole, New Orleans rates declined as well. By the year 2000, the murder rate was 43.3 per 100,000, or nearly half its prior rate.

The destruction of hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the massive flooding that followed, gutted large swaths of the city and reduced the population to less than half its pre-hurricane level. A year and a half later, many areas remain uninhabited, while other areas continue their struggle to regain some semblance of community life. To the extent that murder rates reflect underlying social problems, the revitalization of New Orleans appears to be off to a bad start. Using Louisiana Recovery Authority population estimates for New Orleans for November 2006 (200,665), we estimate the murder rate for New Orleans for this year

compared to Baton Rouge and the nation as a whole. According to our estimate, murder rates over the last year have surged dramatically. In 2006 the rate in New Orleans climbed to an estimated 76.7 per 100,000. This is 12 times the national rate and over 3 times higher than the rate in Baton Rouge.

Contrasting the New Orleans experience with that of Baton Rouge is instructive. The massive influx of evacuees turned out to be a short term shock to Baton Rouge. Our surveys reveal that those seeking shelter - or even a permanent home - in Baton Rouge were seeking relief by invoking existing ties to the community through family and friends (see CAPER Factsheet # 3, April 2006). In other words, those arriving in Baton Rouge already had stakes in the community, and so their arrival did not set off ancillary changes that can potentially disorganize communities. In contrast, significant parts of New Orleans, while containing a few residents, lack both the physical infrastructure and the social networks that define a community and which regulate daily life. Some areas, far from being communities in the social sense of the term, appear to be geographic zones of warfare between competing gangs - - if the anecdotal

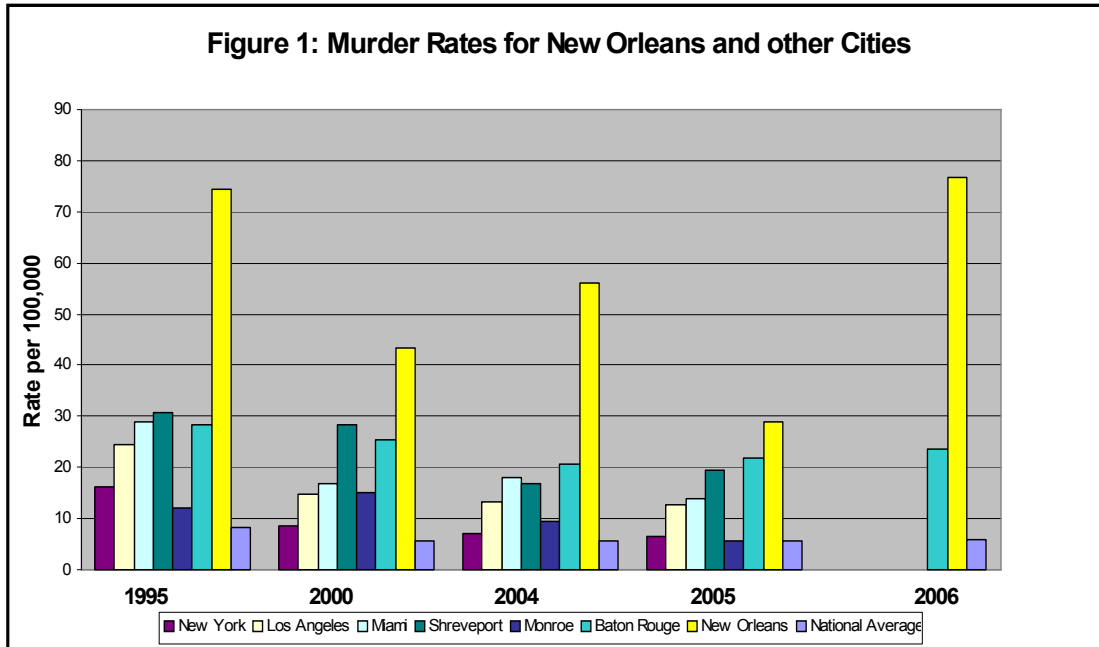
evidence has any merit. The recent infusion of federal resources into New Orleans to address this issue is a testament to the assertion that violence in New Orleans is a serious problem. If current trends continue, crime will likely be the leading public policy challenge for the city.

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