



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Media

[Levee Home](#)
[Legislative Activity](#)
[Corps of Engineers Levee Tour Nov. 2010](#)
[Levee & Flood Protection Contacts](#)
[Archives](#)

The Economist

New Orleans five years after Katrina

Chins up, hopes high

The budget's holed, the police are bent, but good times keep rolling—somehow

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IT IS still obvious to any visitor—especially one who ventures out of the French Quarter, with its restaurants and night clubs, into the unstarred districts of the city. Something awful happened here in the not-too-distant past. The signs are everywhere: empty lots overgrown by weeds, ramshackle, leaning houses, derelict public buildings still awaiting restoration. Some houses feature “Katrina tattoos” sprayed by rescuers as they completed house-by-house searches in 2005. Nobody at home.

And yet New Orleans has undoubtedly recovered its essence. The old neighbourhoods are almost intact, and the city's irrepressible people have mostly returned. Experts estimate that perhaps 360,000 people now live in a city that was home to around 100,000 more on the day disaster struck. Those who left were probably disproportionately black and poor. Yet the city's large black majority, still there and mostly still poor, has ensured that the extravagant culture of New Orleans has survived the flood unharmed.

Without a doubt, the most drastic and positive transformation has occurred in the public schools. The storm set in motion a massive and surprisingly successful educational experiment. Poorly performing schools, the vast majority, were essentially taken over by the state, which set about converting most into independent, open-admission charter schools. Nearly two-thirds of the city's students now go to these, and the results are broadly positive. To take just one measure, the percentage of pupils attending “satisfactory” schools, as measured by standardised test scores, has doubled since the storm, from 30% to 59%.

Why? Freedom from bureaucracy, which comes with chartering, is certainly a factor. Another is that the link with the teachers' union has been severed, and idealistic, energetic young teachers have replaced indifferent ones. New Orleans will not always have a steady supply of such teachers, willing to work 70-hour weeks for low wages. But their efforts have proved that reform is possible, even in a city that has tended to blame poverty and racism for its appalling schools.

Reforms in other areas, though less dramatic, would still have been unthinkable before Katrina. The regional boards overseeing the river levees, once a patronage playpen, have been restructured and professionalised. Appointment to them now requires some knowledge of engineering and hydrology, not simply a friend in politics. The city's arcane political structure has also been streamlined. New Orleans now has one elected tax assessor—instead of seven, each overseeing his own fief. There is now one sheriff, not two; soon, there will be one clerk of court instead of two. Other irrelevant offices have also been phased out.

A new, can-do spirit seems to have sprung up. It can be seen in the growth of vocal neighbourhood organisations in parts of town that never had them before 2005. The polls, too, have given evidence of disgust with the old ways. Though New Orleanians narrowly re-elected their feckless mayor, Ray Nagin, in 2006, that election now seems an aberration. At the time, many black Orleanians thought their neighbourhoods were being condemned. As the only black candidate of stature, Mr Nagin benefited from their fear.

This year, with the mayor unable to seek re-election, voters opted en masse for the man he beat last time: Mitch Landrieu, the city's first white mayor in over 30 years and the brother of Louisiana's senior senator. Heavy black support sealed his victory. The city also has a new congressman, Anh “Joseph” Cao, who ousted the long-tenured, and corrupt, William Jefferson. An ineffective Jefferson acolyte, Eddie Jordan, was forced out of his post as the city's leading prosecutor. He has been replaced by Leon Cannizzaro, a judge.

But the city's problems are hardly over. Even with new leadership, the criminal-justice system is still in disarray. After the storm it was not reformed, but cobbled back together, and the fruits of that disastrous decision are now being seen. The murder rate is almost flat, but is easily the country's highest. And a series of federal civil-rights cases have exposed a culture of violence and corruption in the city's police department. Officers have

been accused not only of killing three innocent people, but of breathtaking cover-ups. To date, 18 current or former cops have been charged. The only good news is that the federal Justice Department, which is now involved, may insist on reforms.

On the economic front, New Orleans was largely insulated from the early months of recession by the piles of federal cash that had been funnelled into rebuilding. But BP's disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has cast another dark shadow over the region. The spill, though at last contained, has done serious damage to two linchpins of the south-eastern Louisiana economy: oil and fishing. It is unclear what the long-term fallout will be.

The federal government's moratorium on new deepwater drilling is very unpopular in the region. Many Louisianans fret that Gulf-based drilling rigs will decamp for West Africa or Brazil. So far, most have stayed. Many of the state's legendary fishing grounds have already reopened, but fears remain about the oil spill's effects both on species and on customers, who now fear that all Gulf fish are tainted.

While few people in the city itself are employed in oil or fisheries, the two sectors are still crucial to the region's economy. And just last month one of the largest employers in the region, Northrup Grumman, which builds ships, announced the closure of its local operations.

The city's economy, meanwhile, remains weak and undiversified. As ever, New Orleans relies heavily on tourism, with its low-paying jobs and vulnerability to economic downturns. To some extent, the municipal budget—dependent largely on the sales tax—reflects the city's economic health. And the picture is ugly. Mr Landrieu had to announce immediate austerity measures to plug a \$67m hole in the city's operating budget. And dozens, perhaps hundreds, of "recovery projects" will not be completed because of shortfalls in federal financing.

Yet New Orleanians are used to dire news. Despite the latest outbreak of it, a recent survey found that nearly three-quarters of residents think the city is moving in the right direction and are optimistic about its prospects. The mood recalls a letter written in 1870 by the city's most famous chronicler, Lafcadio Hearn, to a friend in Cincinnati: "Times are not good here. The city is crumbling into ashes..But it is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes, than to own the whole state of Ohio."

[A slideshow of New Orleans's renewal](#)

United States

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