

Walking in New Orleans

Online Tools Find People Outside in Greater Numbers

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A change is afoot in the streets of New Orleans—literally.

There's no pat term for it. It's tough to measure. We miss it when it disappears, and encourage its return. It ranks among the most basic and important elements of city life.

It's people in the public space: pedestrians, stoop-sitters, *flâneurs*, window-shoppers, cyclists, dog walkers, joggers, chess players in the park, children at the playground—folks outside, interacting, participating in this thing we call city life.

"City," incidentally, comes from the Latin *civis*, which means citizen, and cities work best when their citizenry interacts in the cityscape.

Talk to any elders and they will likely speak warmly of how the streets of New Orleans once abounded in people. Shop-lined arteries like Dryades Street and St. Claude Avenue teemed with life; kids played in the streets; and neighbors conversed across porches with their "eyes on the street," as famed urbanist Jane Jacobs phrased the invaluable civic engagement played by people in public.



1935 scene of Lafitte Street in the Fifth Ward, by Walker Evans, Library of Congress.

Fast-forward to the latter decades of the 20th century, and except for the French Quarter and a few other spots, people had largely withdrawn from the streetscape. Factors such as television and air-conditioning lured them into private spaces, while violent crime and the drug trade scared them out of the public domain.

White flight, followed by a broader middle-class exodus to the suburbs, led to a diminished tax base

and inner-city divestment, which in turn helped shutter local businesses—giving people one less reason to walk around their neighborhoods. The folks who remained in parks and on intersections tended to be those with no other place to go.

As for the suburbs, they were pointedly designed for the automobile. Many subdivisions didn't have sidewalks, and most new houses had no porches. They endeavored to take the *civis* out of the cityscape.

You may have noticed this has been changing recently, at least in the heart of New Orleans. People seem to be returning to the streets, many on bikes.

At least this was my hunch. Curious about whether it would hold up to scrutiny, I sought a way to measure and map people in the public space—not just on certain streets or in certain neighborhoods, but comprehensively, across time, to see if and where it had changed substantially.

“People mapping” is surprisingly difficult. We have census data telling us where we live; labor statistics for where we work; traffic data for where we drive; and we can surmise where we study and shop by mapping schools and retailers. But where we're out walking or stoop-sitting at any given time is tough to quantify citywide, unless you've got a thousand research assistants. I had one, graduate student Elliott Petterson of the Tulane University School of Architecture, where I teach. Elliott and I devised a methodology whereby we would use that amazing little geographer in your pocket, Google Street View, to count people in public.

To be sure, Google Street View—those seamless 360-degree street montages capturing nearly every artery in America—is an imperfect data source for this purpose. The Google camera may catch a particular block when it is unusually busy, like at lunch hour, or atypically quiet, like during a rainfall or on a Sunday. But such anomalies are likely to occur in any surveying methodology, and are far outnumbered by moments that are reasonably representative.

As for its advantages, Google Street View is free, convenient, often updated and rich in visual information—including people, cyclists, traffic and more. Streets in the heart of New Orleans have been covered up to a dozen times since 2007, giving us detailed photographic records of street life going back to the early years of the Katrina recovery.

To turn these Street View scenes into people maps, we distributed nearly 1,400 sampling points evenly across New Orleans in our computer mapping system, from the river to the lake and from the Jefferson Parish line to the Industrial Canal plus the Lower 9th Ward and Algiers. Next, we logged on to Google Street View and drove “Pegman”—that little yellow icon—to each of those points, and following strict protocols, counted all the visible people around that point, be they walking, jogging, biking, standing or sitting, including on porches and balconies but excluding those in vehicles. This was done for the 2007 images and repeated exactly for the 2016 images, the latest available at the time.

The data collection took a long time, and there were plenty of quirks and irregularities to work out. But in the end we had a pretty comprehensive snapshot of who was where in the streets of New Orleans across nine very tumultuous years. The results, published in [Places Journal](#) under the title “People-Mapping Through Google Street View: A New Orleans Experiment” are summarized here, with the editors' permission.

Our analysis confirms there are indeed more people venturing out into the public space nowadays—lots more, and in new places. There are also many more bicycles rolling around. Some takeaways:

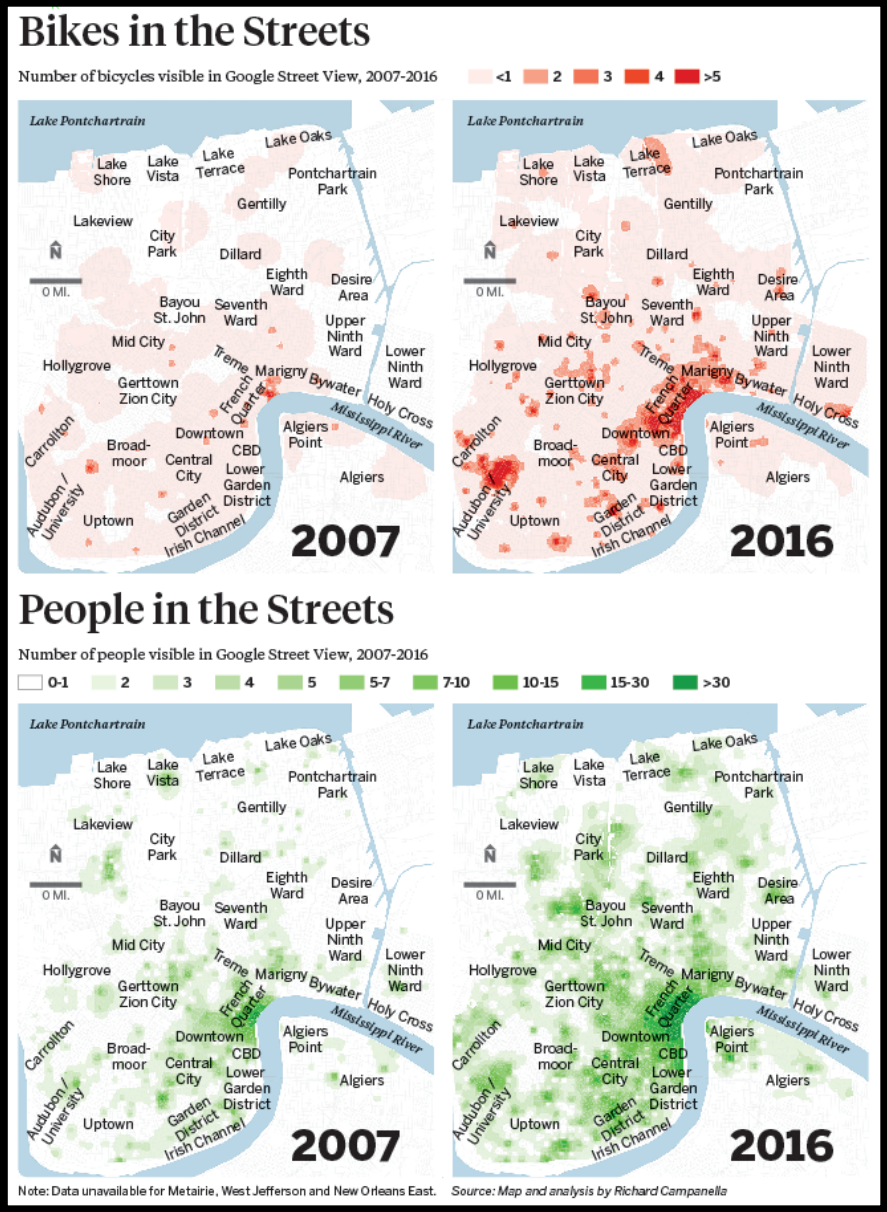
- **Triple the people:** The average number of people on the 1,400 streets in 2007 was 1.1 people per sample point. In 2016, it was 3.5 people, representing a 218 percent increase.

- **Activity in new places:** While much of the increase is where you'd expect, in the historic neighborhoods by the river, there's also new street activity in lower-density lakeside neighborhoods like Gentilly and Lakeview, as well as Algiers.
- **More streets with life:** Fully 59 percent of the sampled streets were completely empty of people outdoors in 2007, and oftentimes the few people who could be seen were workers repairing Katrina-damaged homes. In 2016, that figure dropped to only 37 percent, and very few were repair workers.

- **Larger crowds:** The largest crowd enumerated in 2007 was on Decatur Street in the French Quarter, with 42 people. In 2016, it was 219, on Bourbon Street. Keep in mind, these are daytime crowds, photographed by the rolling Google Car camera.

- **More bikes:** In 2007, an average of 0.12 bicycles plied the sampled streets, of which only 9 percent had any bike traffic whatsoever. In other words, you had to travel eight blocks before seeing a single bicycle, even one locked up. In 2016, there were 0.59 bikes per street—five times more, one every other block—and fully 28 percent of sampled streets had at least one bike on them, more than triple from 2007.

- **Bigger bike groups:** The most bicycles seen in any sampled street in 2007 was nine, again on Decatur Street in the French Quarter. Nowadays you can see twice that number in a single group, multiple times, on any Saturday morning in Marigny or Bywater.



So what's going on? Only a full-scale research project, using field data and interviews, can identify exactly why people are increasingly outdoors, as well as who, when and where. But a number of interrelated factors likely explain the patterns seen here.

For one, both New Orleans' residential population and annual visitation have increased substantially over the past decade. Census Bureau estimates put the city's 2007 and 2016 population at 288,113 and 391,495 respectively, a 36 percent jump. Its total visitation, meanwhile, increased from 7.1 million to a record-breaking 10.45 million in that same span. More people in the city makes for more people potentially out in the streetscape.

But note that our average Street View people counts rose by 218 percent, five times greater than the increases in population and visitation. Could homelessness account for the increase? In fact, that figure has actually declined. According to Unity of Greater New Orleans, the number of homeless people in New Orleans peaked around 2007, at over 11,000 people, and has since dropped to a fraction of that figure.

So something else is going on here: People are going outside *in* New Orleans at a pace far greater than they've returned *to* New Orleans, or find themselves relegated to its streets.

That's where gentrification and short-term rentals come in. Intense interest in historical neighborhoods has led to reinvestment, rising real estate values and an injection of newcomers with outside money. New businesses opened to cater to the foot traffic—the number of restaurants in the city went up by over 40 percent during 2007 to 2016—and among the strollers and diners were more tourists venturing farther beyond their traditional French Quarter-to-Garden District realm.

Both the private and public sectors collaborated to make this happen, motivated by the ever-growing interest for inner-city lifestyles and urban cultural experiences. Federal tax credits aided the restoration of old buildings; the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corp.'s "Follow Your NOLA" campaign explicitly encouraged visitors to explore citywide; and zoning overlay districts on streets like St. Claude, O.C. Haley (formerly Dryades) and Freret greenlighted their transformation to pedestrian-friendly hot spots.

As for crime rates, 2007 happened to be a particularly bad year, and while rates have since stabilized at all-too-high levels, certain criminal activity has relocated away from the rejuvenated areas, making them seem safer.



Freret Street scenes, 2007-2016, from Google Street View.

Urban design and planning have also played roles. More parks and green space, new streetcar lines, extensive mileage of interconnected bike lanes, rentable Blue Bikes, and fewer vehicular lanes on certain arteries, with broader sidewalks and neutral grounds, have all helped put people back in the public space. Policies at the federal and local levels have had a comparable impact on the redevelopment of public

housing, which embodied New Urbanism design principles regarding sidewalks, balconies, porches, greenery, individualized access to the street, and seamless integration with adjacent street grids.

Short-term rental apps such as Airbnb, meanwhile, have spread thousands of visitors throughout New Orleans neighborhoods, where they eagerly partake of off-the-beaten-track bistros and venues gleaned from TripAdvisor or Yelp, accessed via Uber or Lyft, and shared via Instagram or Twitter.

And have you noticed all the new festivals?

We can, and do, rigorously debate the degree to which these transformations have been good for all New Orleanians, or only some. Ask any renter who has been displaced by rising rent or crowded out by short-term rentals, and they might not view all the foot traffic as beneficial to their neighborhood.

But one thing seems clear: The roving eye of the Google Street View camera is capturing more people out afoot in the streets of New Orleans, and our public presence is transforming the experience of city living.

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