

# How Do You Fence a Cloud?

## Tracking Bourbon Street's Pedestrian Parade

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The spate of shootings on Bourbon Street—at least thirteen incidents in half as many years, leaving six dead and at least 36 wounded—has launched discussions on alternative methods of policing the popular strip. Some have called for periodic security checkpoints with metal detectors, as Memphis does for Beale Street, while others have suggested using pillar-mounted sensors to scan crowds for concealed weapons. Stakeholders are gathering a range of other ideas, and officials have ruled nothing out.

Before making such a decision, it's useful to put some hard numbers on Bourbon Street's human geography: where people walk, how they circulate, how those patterns vary over time, and how these figures relate to the occurrence of crime here.

A few years ago, while researching the history of Bourbon Street, I conducted pedestrian surveys to address those questions. I offer the results here in the hope that they inform the public discussion.

First, some historical background: Where did Bourbon Street's nightly pedestrian parade come from?

The Bourbon Street we know today is traceable to about 150 years ago, when, after the Civil War, "concert saloons" started opening on downtown streets, including the 100 block of Bourbon. Similar venues soon proliferated, and with them came vice and prostitution. In an attempt to curtail this activity, the city in 1898 prohibited the sex trade everywhere except an area directly behind the upper French Quarter, nicknamed "Storyville." When Storyville closed in 1917, the action shifted to the nearby "Tango Belt" on North Rampart, and when police raids closed down this enclave in the 1920s, Bourbon Street gained the advantage by monopolizing a stylish new innovation, the "nightclub."

After World War II broke out, thousands of war-plant workers and troops on leave gravitated to Bourbon's cluster of clubs, and the strip boomed. The next two decades are often viewed as Bourbon's "golden age," when burlesque clubs and extravagant floor shows made the street nationally famous.

In fact, many venues prospered because they were subsidized by illegal gambling and "B-drinking" scams, which sometimes turned violent. In B-drinking scams, female club employees enticed patrons into buying them watered-down drinks, then mugged or otherwise exploited them with the help of co-conspirators.

Another round of police raids occurred in the early 1960s, and they were all too successful: deprived of their illicit income streams, the gaudy clubs closed, and were replaced by tawdry dives. By the late 1960s, club owners struggled to attract patrons, particularly the growing numbers of trekking hippies on shoestring budgets. Bourbon Street was in trouble.

Then, around 1967, someone came up with a clever idea: instead of cajoling people outside to buy drinks inside, why not hawk inside drinks to people outside? Bars and clubs opened tiny outlets in apertures and sold booze directly to pedestrians. Three major hotels opened on Bourbon in this same era, bringing many more feet to the street—so much so that officials in 1971 started closing off vehicular traffic each evening.

By then, the action on Bourbon had largely shifted from indoor space to outdoor space. The pedestrian parade was born, go-cup in hand, and it's been rolling ever since.

To map and measure this river-like flow of humanity, I counted pedestrians once every ten days for a full year, by positioning myself in the middle of each of Bourbon's thirteen blocks and counting all walkers who crossed an invisible line over a period of two minutes. I also enumerated those on balconies per block. The numbers cited below date from 2010-2011, when visitation to New Orleans ranged between 8 and 9 million per year and roughly 350,000 people lived in the city. Today those figures are nearly 10 million and roughly 390,000.

The analysis revealed remarkably structured and predictable pedestrian-flow patterns, quite contrary to the bedlam Bourbon seemingly exudes. Yet complexity and permeability nevertheless characterize the strip's dynamic human geography, and the ease in which a single determined troublemaker may infiltrate such a fluid phenomenon must be kept in mind when considering security options. Some observations:

- People do not evenly distribute themselves across the nine main commercial blocks of the street; rather, they cluster on the 200-500 blocks. At any one moment, fully 60 percent of Bourbon's pavement-pounders fall within these four blocks, despite that they comprise only 25 percent of Bourbon's space.
- Foot traffic consistently peaks on the 300-400 blocks, between Bienville and St. Louis streets. On a typical weeknight, people here move at a rate of 45 people per minute. On Friday and Saturday nights, the rate is more than double, 105 per minute, and on Mardi Gras it's well over 200 per minute—so many that the flow often comes to a near-stop.
- The 100 block between Canal and Iberville, despite its gateway position, actually has relatively low foot traffic, more comparable to the 700-800 blocks than to its busier neighboring blocks. This is largely because the 100 block has relatively few attractions for people to gather around. There are exceptions: when street bands play here, or when big downtown events such as football games and festivals release their audiences, foot traffic temporarily surges as people walk through the CBD and funnel onto Bourbon via the 100 block. But once the surge gets ingested onto the strip, a consistent spatial distribution resumes, peaking in the 300-400 blocks, trailing off after the St. Ann intersection, and all but disappearing after Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop at the St. Philip intersection. Iberville is also distinct in that it appears to have the highest percentage of local (non-tourist) traffic, as many service employees and downtown workers use it to get to and from upper-Quarter jobs.
- Otherwise, most pedestrians reach Bourbon Street from the "feeder" streets on its river-side flank, primarily Bienville through St. Peter. Many are tourists who have spent the day exploring the French Quarter, namely the dog-leg-shaped area of upper North Peters/Decatur/Chartres/Royal, through Jackson Square, and down along lower Decatur to the French Market. When the sun sets and they're ready to "do" Bourbon, people generally reverse their route and reach Bourbon from its river side. The 700 block of St. Peter Street is particularly busy as a Bourbon feeder. Indeed, many feeder streets see crowds nearly as dense as on Bourbon, at least in the parcels closest to the strip, begging the question of exactly where a security perimeter would be positioned. Would Preservation Hall's long line on St. Peter Street, for example, be inside or out?
- The Quarter's architecture, too, is marvelously porous: one can enter a building on a side street and exit onto Bourbon, or drive into a hotel parking garage and leave through the Bourbon lobby. Pat O'Brien's has prominent entrances on both St. Peter and Bourbon, linked by a central courtyard, as

do other buildings. There are also balconies, galleries, upper floors and rear quarters, many of them with their own ingresses and egresses. People by the thousands ebb and flow intricately in the three-dimensional space of Bourbon Street. How do you fence a cloud?

- There is a distinct daily cycle to activity on Bourbon. The street is famously vacated in the morning, as sidewalks are hosed and service vehicles ply. Pedestrians begin to arrive around noon on a typical Saturday, moving by at most 15-20 people per minute. This rate declines after lunch and does not pick up again until late afternoon, when it flows at around 50 pedestrians per minute. Then comes another decline, as folks go for dinner or freshen up in their hotel rooms. The nighttime action kicks into high gear after 8 p.m. (75 per minute) and peaks at over 100 per minute from 9 p.m. through midnight. Afterwards, foot traffic declines steadily by 15 fewer people per minute for every hour after midnight, even as crowd composition appears to shift to a more youthful demographic. By dawn, the street is nearly empty again. Given this daily cycle, at what time should a security perimeter go into effect? If at dusk, what's to stop a gun-toting early-arriver from circulating all afternoon on Bourbon and making trouble in the busy evening?
- Balcony occupancy generally mimics street occupancy: higher in the core blocks, lower in the periphery, and about two to three times higher on Fridays and Saturdays than weekdays.
- Seasonally, springtime foot traffic on Bourbon is higher than in autumn, but, contrary to expectations, my 2010-2011 surveys show that summers on whole were actually higher than winters. Seasonal variations, however, were dwarfed by weekday/weekend fluctuations. That is, a Saturday night during the typically slow summer was always more crowded than a Wednesday night during the traditionally busy winter and spring.
- How many people pack Bourbon Street on Mardi Gras? I estimate 12,000-13,000 people on all of Bourbon at any one moment on Fat Tuesday, at times up to 20,000. Crowd composition churns constantly; some spend all day here while others come and go. By the time the police flush out the strip at midnight, the aggregated Fat Tuesday population of Bourbon Street probably approaches a hundred thousand. That's a lot of people to stream through checkpoints, and a lot of opportunities to miss someone who wants to be missed.

Millions of people circulate on Bourbon Street each year. It's among the most densely and consistently bustling urban spaces in the nation. This means that all sorts of humans and human activities occur here in higher absolute numbers; there are more pickpockets, underage drinkers and shootings, but also more accountants, plumbers and Ph.Ds. When one divides the all-too-high number of crimes by the astronomical number of total pedestrians in this space, Bourbon's busiest blocks paradoxically transform from an apparently dangerous place to a relatively safe one—except, tragically, for those who are victimized here.

When viewed in the statistical aggregate, folks are, unfortunately, at greater risk elsewhere in the city. Scarce crime-fighting resources probably ought to be allocated accordingly.

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