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### Security Districts in New Orleans

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## **Enhanced security only benefits neighborhoods in New Orleans who pay for them**

By Deonna Anderson, Kara Chin and Emily Siegel

April in New Orleans is the end of pleasant weather and the beginning of hot and sticky weather. A warm wind blew through the wealthy Lakeshore Crime Prevention District when Marita Clofer, a supervisor at Metro Security Services, was patrolling the neighborhood on April 15, 2015.

At around 1:00 p.m., Clofer was driving along her usual route. That's when she saw a man she'd never seen before in the front yard of a house.

"You know who goes to work, who doesn't work, who's home all day and who's not home all day," Clofer said.

As she pulled her vehicle over, she noticed his brown gloves with large white snowflakes on them.

"I know that it's out of place," Clofer said. "It's mid-April. Why do you have gloves on?"

She questioned the man and became suspicious. She said he tried to escape in his car so she grabbed his shirt. He punched her arm to release her grip but she held tight and called Metro headquarters with her other hand. NOPD was on the way but he eventually broke free and sped off.

She checked the home and spotted a pile of valuables next to the door. She had interrupted the theft of televisions, computers and jewelry. She gave a description of a blond-haired white male to the police. She later identified a man named John Jennings in a photo lineup, which led to his arrest.

This attentive level of security is not available to many, often poorer sections of New Orleans. For nearly 20 years, neighborhoods in the city's wealthier sections have voted to impose higher taxes only on themselves for additional security that benefits their own neighborhoods. These added patrols supplement the city's often criticized police.

Once approved by the state legislature and local voters, the districts often hire private security companies to provide armed guards to patrol the neighborhood. Last year, security districts raised nearly \$6 million in additional revenue that isn't shared with the rest of the city.

No other major city has implemented a publicly funded law enforcement system that allows voters to funnel tax dollars for additional security that is not shared with the city at large.

A mere block away from established security districts are poorer neighborhoods that struggle with much higher incidents of murders, according to a CUNY analysis of reported homicides since 2012.

“It's a lot of killing around here, shooting, selling drugs,” said Shawn Berry, 47, a resident of the Seventh Ward, an area that does not have a security district. “It's just so much killing.”

It is unlikely that residents in the Seventh Ward could afford 24-hour patrols with a median household income of around \$21,000.

### **SECURITY DISTRICTS FOR THE WEALTHY**

Nearly \$6 million was collected in 2015 from residents' fees by New Orleans security districts, according to audit reports. Local residents and businesses in security districts pay anywhere from \$100 to \$2,643 per household beyond their usual taxes.

“If you look across the city, you're gonna have more affluent neighborhoods that have the security districts,” said Shelley Landrieu, administrator of four security districts within the Garden District. “But it's not just because they have the money. It's because they're also more stable and they have the money and they're trying to protect now what they have.”

About a quarter of New Orleans' residents live in areas with security districts. They are richer and whiter than the rest of the city, an analysis of US Census Bureau statistics shows.

The population of wealthy households is higher within security districts. More than 35 percent of households in security districts made 100,000 or more per year while less than 15 percent of non-security district households made \$100,000 or more per year, according to the 2015 American Community Survey.

The majority of the population in New Orleans does not have security districts. About 99,000 residents live in an area with security district patrols, while nearly 277,000 residents live without them.

The population of areas with security districts is diverse, with a 47 percent white and 47 percent black population. Plus, 21 out of the 38 census tracts that overlap with security districts are over 60 percent white. The racial makeup of areas without security districts are much different: 63 percent are black and 29 percent are white.

### **HISTORY OF SECURITY DISTRICTS**

Security districts started forming in 1998, when residents in the Lake Forest Estates Improvement District voted to pay for patrols in addition to New Orleans Police Department officers assigned to the police district. Since then, more than 30 neighborhoods established their own security districts.

Residents who want to create a security district must first set up how it would be governed. The proposal must include boundaries, the number of commissioners, and a parcel fee amount per household. Once the security district is drawn out, it must be approved by a state legislator and governor. Then it must pass by a majority vote by the community.

The pervasiveness of the security districts throughout the city is without precedent across the country, according to those who have studied the issue.

A 2013 report by New Orleans Office of Inspector General found that these security districts do not exist anywhere else on such a grand scale.

The report raised the question of whether public safety should be regarded as “a private good at the neighborhood level” or as “a public good at the city-wide level.”

### **HOW SECURITY DISTRICTS WORK**

“I think security districts are worth having,” said Romona Baudy, president of Lake Willow Homeowner's Association. “I wish the police were as visible as security districts are. You feel a little safer, especially in the winter when it gets darker quicker.”

Lake Willow Subdivision Improvement District uses private company L&R Security Services for its patrols around the peaceful residential streets that border Lake Willow. Its population is about 98 percent black and the median household income is about \$23,700.

In fact, most security districts hire private security companies rather than pay on-duty officers from the NOPD, as the Lakeview and Mid-City security districts do.

In Lake Vista Crime Prevention District, privately hired security officers from Metro Security Services patrol the neighborhood for 18 hours per day in a small Nissan pick-up truck.

Metro Security Services staffs seven other security districts in addition to Lake Vista.

Tom Long, president of Lake Vista security district, said patrol officers may be requested to escort a resident to their home at night or check on their homes while they're away.

“They respond to calls of all sorts, including loose pets,” Long said.

In the Mid-City Security District, three to five NOPD officers can be spotted throughout the day in the 1.69 square-mile expanse. As the biggest security district, it collected more than \$940,000 in 2015 from more than 22,000 residents and spent \$888,322 of that money on patrols.

Two smaller districts have only one officer on a 24-hour patrol, such as Twinbrook Security District, which collected just over \$247,000 and Audubon Area Security District, which had a revenue of about \$179,000 in 2015.

There are limitations to what a security officer can do. Private security patrol officers do not conduct investigations. Their presence is a deterrent to crime and they act as an immediate response until NOPD officers arrive on the scene.

“All we can do is stand around and make sure they don't hurt each other ‘til the police get there,” said Lloyd Jarreau, president of Metro Security Services.

He said that his officers can help with civil matters or make a felony arrest or misdemeanor arrest (only on the client's property) but they cannot settle a domestic dispute.

Not all security districts are created equal. Some of them can't afford the expense of a private security company and instead settle on simply having security cameras.

Tameron Subdivision Improvement District spent only \$370 on the use and maintenance of security cameras in 2015. It is among one of the small, relatively safe subdivisions in New Orleans East and one of seven security districts that has no patrols.

### **CRIME IN NEW ORLEANS**

Since security districts are concentrated in areas with already low crime rates, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the additional security.

According to an analysis of security districts in 2012 from the New Orleans inspector general's office, the added patrols reduce property crime but not violent crimes. However, a CUNY review of murders in New Orleans found that about 92 percent of all homicides since 2012 occurred outside of security districts.

While crime tends to be low in security district areas, these areas are not entirely devoid of crime.

Lake Barrington Subdivision Improvement District formed in 2012, after a resident was paralyzed during a household break-in, according to Odile DuConge-Ramsey, commission chair for the district. The district has patrols staffed by Metro Security Services.

DuConge-Ramsey said that the lack of a security district “gave free reign for those who wanted to come in and commit crimes.”

Often a single street divides the crime in New Orleans.

Mardi Gras beads hang from tree branches along St. Charles Avenue, the main drag that runs through the center of Uptown New Orleans. A streetcar filled with tourists heads toward the French Quarter, passing magnolia trees and towering southern mansions.

This is quintessential New Orleans as much as it is a dividing line for rich and poor communities.

“That way is safe. That way is unsafe,” said Louis Gurvich, owner of private security company New Orleans Private Patrol, while pointing in the direction of the Garden District and then Central City while standing on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

The Garden District, which is on the southern side of St. Charles, contains seven different security districts while Central City, a few blocks away, has none.

More than 38 percent of the family population in Central City is living below the poverty level, according to 2015 American Community Survey census data. About 31 percent of its residents have a household income of less than \$10,000 a year.

In 2015, the median household income in Central City was \$18,205 compared to \$82,955 in Garden District Security District.

Central City’s population of nearly 13,000 is 72.9 percent black and 19.6 percent white. The 2,500 residents living within Garden District Security District are 93 percent white and 1.8 percent black.

Lakeview Crime Prevention District, another large security district, has a population of more than 17,000 and its median household income was \$77,054 in 2015. More than 90 percent of its population is white and 5.6 percent is black.

## **POLICING IN NEW ORLEANS**

Ronal Serpas, who served as police chief for NOPD from 2010 until 2014, is an advocate for community policing and community engagement as a way of reducing crime.

“Anything that causes people in a neighborhood to feel more engaged with their neighbors and to go outside and have dialogues and have common interest is the solution,” Serpas said.

He views security districts as a community-led initiative that formed out of a lack of confidence or a dissatisfaction with the NOPD, largely due to their notorious slow response times.

“For me to call the police to resolve a problem, it’s my last resort,” said Kyron Miller, 24, a Hollygrove resident. “It takes a while for the police to come.”

Miller said that four years ago in the Seventh Ward, two men robbed him at gunpoint. His first instinct was not to call 9-1-1.

“The only thing that was on my mind was being: I’m alive, staying alive, getting to safety,” Miller said.

He did not report the incident to the police afterward because he had doubts that the robbery would have been solved by them.

“You can still be confident with the NOPD but you're not satisfied with the response times,” said former police chief Serpas. “Or you could have lost confidence in the NOPD.”

The New Orleans Police Department has a history of corruption that includes unreasonable use of force, discriminatory policing and a lack of sufficient oversight that promotes constitutional harm.

This corruption was brought to public attention in 2010 in a big way. Mayor Mitch Landrieu invited the Department of Justice to investigate the NOPD. The DOJ found a pattern of misconduct and a consent decree was established in July 2012.

At 110 pages, it is the most expansive consent decree in the country. It outlines changes that the police department is required to do to reinstitute fairness and quality in their policing.

Slow response times, sometimes upwards of two hours in 2014, were due to a reduction in the size of its police force, according to Serpas.

New Orleans Police Department staff numbers fell drastically after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 but became steadier in 2009. In 2010, when Serpas began as chief of police, the city as a whole suffered cutbacks in budget that led to a hiring freeze until early 2014.

“Security districts I think will always have a life when people are dissatisfied by the amount of police protection they see,” Serpas said.

“When they make that choice to self-tax themselves, they do it after a lot of reflection and I think it's a reflection that they want more,” he said. “And the legislature in the state of Louisiana gives them an opportunity to do so.”

Kyron Miller said he was robbed at gunpoint in the Seventh Ward and grew up in Hollygrove, two areas that do not have security districts.

He thinks, given the opportunity, that his neighbors would pay an extra tax for added security.

“Our tax dollars go to a lot less important stuff than security,” he said. “And I'm pretty sure more than half of the population would be on board with something with that. Safety is number one. So, why not?”

There is one big obstacle he foresees, however.

“The organization part might be part of a struggle,” Miller said. “That's a different problem.”