The geography of opportunity in Baton Rouge

An introduction to the Opportunity Data Project

Baton Rouge Area Foundation

powered by

Common Good Labs

December 2023

About the Baton Rouge Area Foundation

Among the largest community foundations in the country, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life in greater Baton Rouge and across south Louisiana.

The Foundation pursues its mission by:

- Serving donors to build the assets that drive initiatives and solutions

- Supporting local nonprofits to ensure overall impact and sustainability

- Engaging community leaders to develop appropriate responses to emerging opportunities and challenges, and

- Partnering with others to leverage collective resources and create the capacity to be a stimulus of positive regional change.

About Common Good Labs

Common Good Labs is a research organization that designs actionable solutions to improve communities. We use data science tools to empower leaders at foundations, non-profit organizations, and in government.

Our work focuses on reducing poverty without displacement, enhancing public safety and health outcomes, improving education, supporting small businesses, and other related topics. For more information, visit commongoodlabs.com.

Introduction: How can data help us understand Baton Rouge?

When local residents talk about the community they often divide it into two demographic regions:

- **North Baton Rouge**, which encompasses neighborhoods in and around the northern part of the city and is considered majority Black; and

- **South Baton Rouge**, which includes areas in the southern parts of the parish and is considered majority White.

These two regions are clearly visible in historical data. The top map on the right shows the population of local neighborhoods by race and ethnicity in 2000. The outlined area north of LSU, Government Street, and Florida Boulevard is 78 percent Black; while the outlined area to the south is 77 percent White.[1]
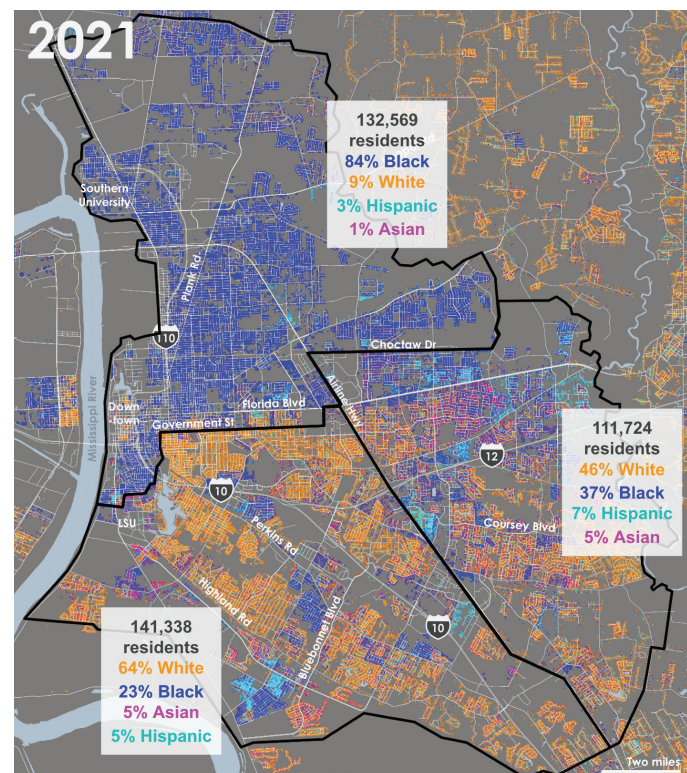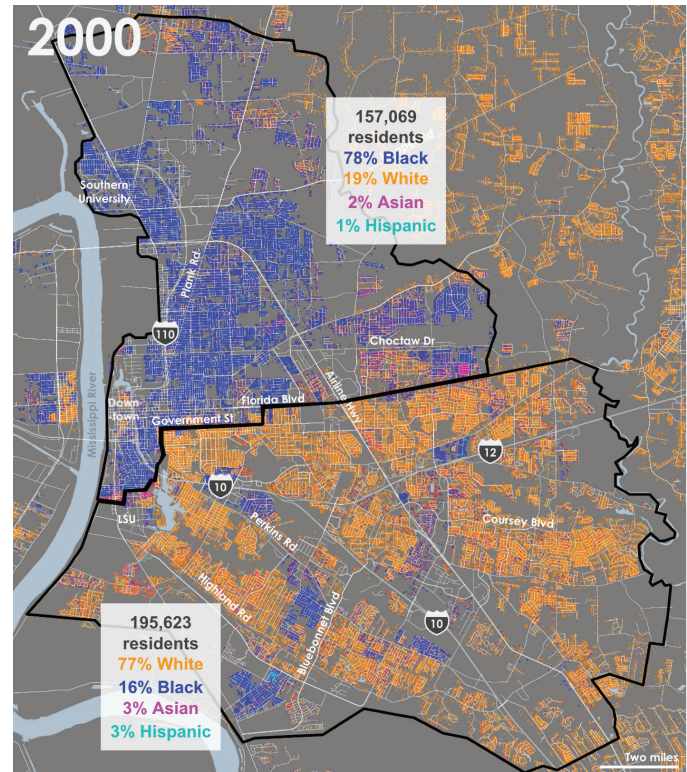
However, new data suggests the traditional way of describing Baton Rouge does not match the current reality. The bottom map shows the most recent population data for the community. The outlined areas north of LSU, Government Street, and Choctaw Drive are still majority Black; and those south of LSU and Government Street, and west of Airline Highway, remain majority White.[2]

But analyses indicate a third region of the community has emerged.[3] This area is neither majority Black or White. Instead, it is highly diverse, with residents from different racial and ethnic groups often living next door to each other. "Eastern Baton Rouge," for lack of a better name, includes the neighborhoods east of Airline Highway and south of Choctaw. Around 37 percent of residents in this area are Black and 46 percent are White. The region is also home to significant numbers of Hispanic and Asian residents, many of whom have immigrated to Louisiana from countries such as Honduras, Mexico, and Vietnam.

Demographics of Baton Rouge

Each dot represents one resident of the city and surrounding areas, classified by their race or ethnicity.

2000

157,069 residents
78% Black
19% White
2% Asian
1% Hispanic

195,623 residents
77% White
16% Black
3% Asian
3% Hispanic

2021

132,569 residents
84% Black
9% White
3% Hispanic
1% Asian

111,724 residents
46% White
37% Black
7% Hispanic
5% Asian

141,338 residents
64% White
23% Black
5% Asian
5% Hispanic

Source: Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2021.

1

The demographic comparisons on the previous page are one example of the ways that data can help local residents better understand the Baton Rouge community. The rest of this brief will use similar sources of information and analytical techniques to examine access to opportunity in the capital region.

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation and local stakeholders recently identified six key pillars of opportunity in the capital region:

- **Economic prosperity**: members of our community achieve meaningful upward mobility, and Baton Rouge becomes a magnet to attract talent to our community

- **Excellent education**: every child has excellent learning options from cradle to career so they can unlock and fulfill their potential

- **Healthy families**: Baton Rouge's health outcomes are among the fastest improving in our country

- **Quality of life**: Baton Rouge is the best place to live and work

- **Strong and safe neighborhoods**: every corridor has a plan to spur investment, improve safety, and secure quality housing

- **Regional resiliency**: we don't wait on the next crisis to prepare and strengthen our infrastructure and community ties

In order to channel its leadership and impact in these six areas, the Foundation partnered with Common Good Labs to create the Opportunity Data Project. **The project aims to use new data and analytical tools to identify ways to measure and improve each pillar of opportunity in the capital region.**

The next nine pages of this brief offer analyses of Baton Rouge's current performance based on poverty levels in local neighborhoods as well as data related to each pillar of opportunity.

Opportunity and neighborhood poverty are closely linked in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Measuring opportunity in East Baton Rouge Parish
Income in early adulthood among local children born between 1978 and 1983

A child who grew up in a...

$34,256
average income
as a young adult

Poor family and a **neighborhood that was middle-income or above**

A child who grew up in a...

$29,953
average income
as a young adult

Middle-income family and a **neighborhood that was poor**

Source: Analyses of data from Opportunity Insights, and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Researchers have found that growing up in a neighborhood with high rates of poverty significantly reduces children's opportunities later on in life. It causes them to earn less money as adults, become less likely to complete college, and be more likely to go to prison.[4]

Data shows this is particularly true in East Baton Rouge Parish. **As the illustration above shows, growing up in a poor neighborhood can be more harmful than growing up in a poor family.**[5]

A local child who grew up in a low-income family and a middle- or upper-income neighborhood went on to earn around $34,000 as a young adult, on average.

A local child who grew up in a middle-income family and a poor neighborhood went on to earn less than $30,000.

Opportunity continues to be closely related to neighborhood poverty and wealth in Louisiana's capital. As the analyses in the rest of this brief will illustrate, residents' access to many of the six pillars of opportunity often depends on where they live.

Neighborhood poverty in Baton Rouge follows a patchwork pattern.

It is possible to use data on local poverty rates to classify residential areas within East Baton Rouge Parish into four categories or segments.[6,*]

#1. Neighborhoods where poverty is relatively low. These are areas where less than 30 percent of residents are poor. Around three-fourths of neighborhood residents in the parish currently live in this segment.

#2. Neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated, but decreasing. These are places where 30 to 50 percent of residents live in poverty, but poverty has declined by 10 percentage points or more since 2011. One in 20 neighborhood residents live in these areas.
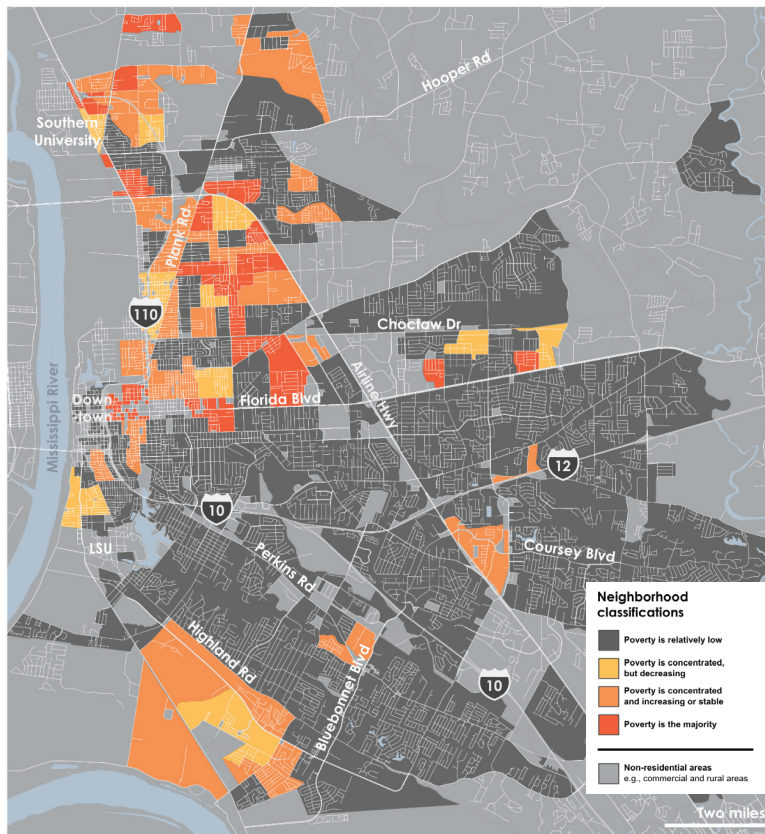
#3. Neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated, and increasing or stable. These are places where poverty rates are between 30 and 50 percent and have been flat or growing in the last decade. Around one in eight local neighborhood residents live in this segment.

#4. Neighborhoods where poverty is the majority. Over half of residents in these areas live in poor households. About one in 12 local neighborhood residents live in these areas.

The map on the right illustrates how wealth and poverty form a patchwork pattern across Baton Rouge. Many neighborhoods with relatively low poverty are adjacent to places with concentrated poverty and even areas where poor households are the majority. This pattern can influence local residents' access to opportunity across the six pillars identified by local stakeholders.

Poverty in East Baton Rouge Parish

The colors below classifiy each local neighborhood into one of four segments based on its poverty levels and trends.

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Residents in households with incomes below the poverty line	10%	34%	38%	63%
Total population	267,000	12,000	38,000	24,000

Note: Around 110,000 residents of East Baton Rouge Parish live in outside of local neighborhoods, primarily in less dense, rural areas and on college campuses. Source: Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021.

* The government defines someone as poor if they live in a household that earns less than the federal poverty threshold, which varies depending on the number of people in a household. For example, in 2022 a family of four was considered poor if they earned less than $29,678 and a single person was considered poor if they earned less than $15,225.

Pillar #1: Economic prosperity

Middle- and upper-income families are found across Baton Rouge, but are less common in areas with very high poverty.

One of the best ways to measure economic prosperity in neighborhoods is to examine how many people live in middle- or upper-income households — defined in this analysis as earning twice as much as the federal poverty threshold or more. This would be equivalent to a family of four earning around $60,000 or more in 2022, and would include around 72 percent of people in the United States.[†]
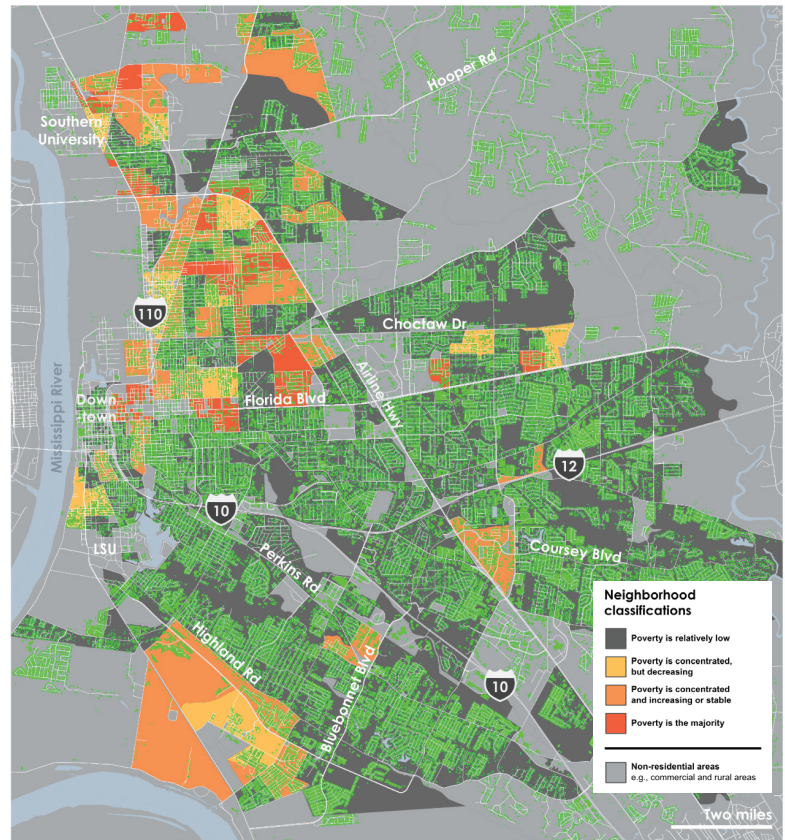
Data indicates that people can be economically prosperous in every part of East Baton Rouge Parish. Middle- and upper-income families are found in every neighborhood. They are most prevalent in areas where poverty is low, but even in the two segments with concentrated poverty there are about as many middle- and upper-income families as there are families in poverty.[7]

The only areas where these higher-earning families are relatively rare are neighborhoods where poverty is the majority. In these places, only around two in ten residents are middle- or upper-income. The local unemployment rate in these neighborhoods is also estimated to be at almost 20 percent.

Middle- and upper-income households

The green dots represent the locations of households with income at least two times greater than the poverty threshold, which is equivalent to around $60,000 or more for a family of four.

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Residents in households with incomes at least two times greater than the poverty line	72%	35%	38%	23%
Unemployment rate	6%	14%	11%	19%

Source: Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021.

[†] Households earning more than the poverty threshold (equivalent to $29,678 for a family of four in 2022), but less than this $60,000 threshold would be considered "low income but not poor," which is generally analogous to the population referred to as "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed" (ALICE). ALICE households are not poor, but they still face considerable challenges affording basic expenses, such as housing, child care, and food.

Pillar #2: Excellent education

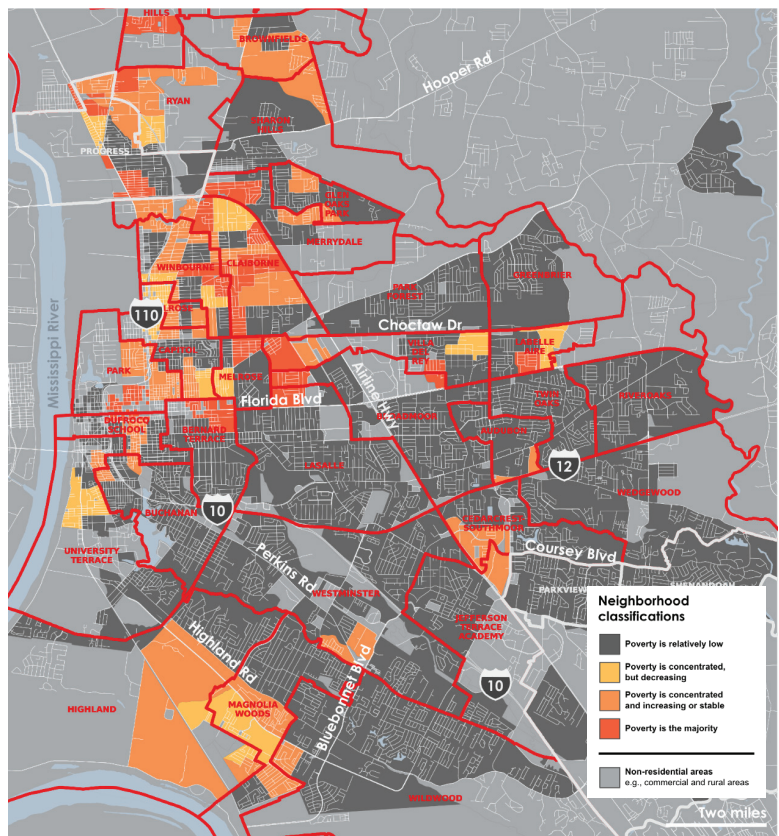# Public elementary schools in almost every part of Baton Rouge are struggling to teach children to read.

Reading is the foundation for learning every other subject. As experts have noted, from kindergarten through third grade children must learn to read because after third grade they must read to learn. Failure to read by the end of third grade is associated with higher rates of dropping out of high school and future anti-social behavior in students.[8]

This means that one of the most important ways to measure educational opportunity is to examine how students perform on third-grade literacy tests. As the map illustrates, over half of elementary-aged children in the parish who attend public schools are zoned to attend a school with a "D" or "F" in third-grade literacy.[‡]

Even in areas with low poverty, children are not guaranteed access to schools with a strong track record in teaching reading.[9] These problems are compounded by other factors, particularly in areas where poverty is the majority. In these areas, more than one in four local adults do not have a high school diploma, suggesting that many local parents may have limited ability to support children academically.[10]

School performance in third-grade literacy

Red outlines highlight the attendance zones of neighborhood elementary schools with a "D" or "F" on the most recent third-grade literacy exams as measured by the Louisiana Department of Education. White outlines indicate a grade of "C" or higher.

Neighborhood classifications
- Poverty is relatively low
- Poverty is concentrated, but decreasing
- Poverty is concentrated and increasing or stable
- Poverty is the majority
- Non-residential areas e.g., commercial and rural areas

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Elementary-aged children enrolled in public school and living in the attendance zone of a school with a "D" or "F" in 3rd grade literacy	55%	81%	76%	74%
Proportion of adults over 25 years old without a high school diploma	7%	20%	18%	28%

Source: Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) and the East Baton Rouge Parish School System (2022).

‡Magnet schools and a number of charter schools tend to perform better, but do not have the capacity to enroll every public school student.

Pillar #3: Healthy families
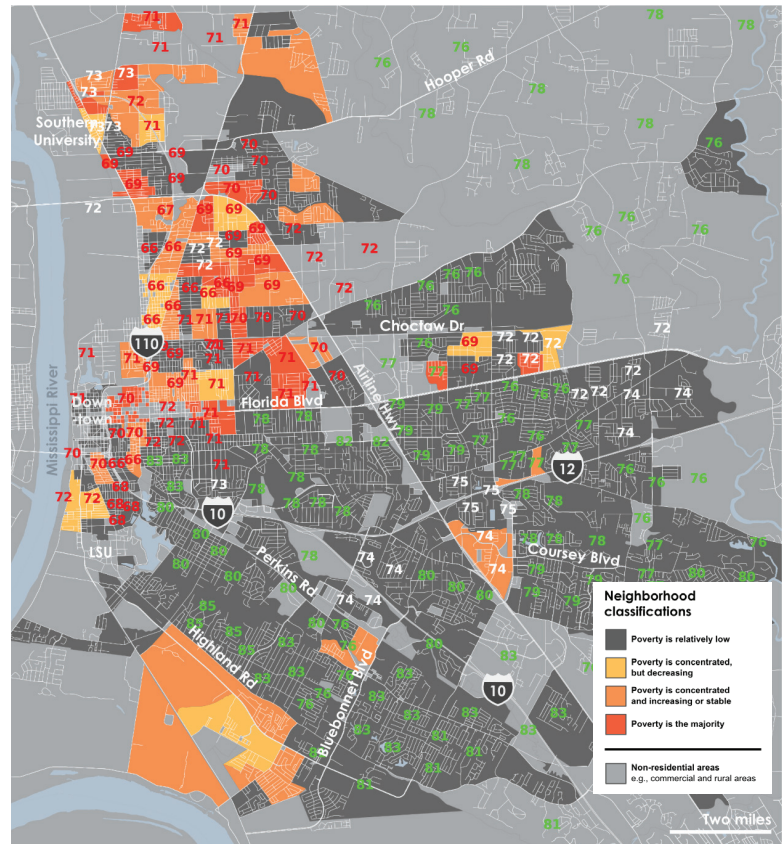# Children have lower expected lifespans in poor neighborhoods within Baton Rouge.

The expected lifespan of a child in elementary school is 76 years in the average U.S. neighborhood. In the parts of East Baton Rouge Parish where poverty is relatively low, local children are projected to live one year longer than the national average.[11]

Unfortunately, those in the other three segments are projected to live to just 70 or 71. **This means that children in local neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty are projected to die six to seven years earlier than those in areas with low rates of poverty, on average.**

Estimates also show that rates of several chronic diseases among adults are common in all four neighborhood segments. However, rates of high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes are especially high in areas with greater poverty rates. In places where poverty is concentrated or in the majority, there are 100 or more expected cases of these three conditions for every 100 adults.[12]

Average life expectancy of local children
The numbers below represent the number of years the average elementary-aged child in each neighborhood is expected to live.

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Average years of life expectancy for elementary-aged children	77	70	71	71
Estimated cases of obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes	81 per 100 adults	104 per 100 adults	100 per 100 adults	113 per 100 adults

Source: Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) and the Centers for Disease Control.

Pillar #4: Quality of life

Resident retention is high in neighborhoods with low poverty. Poorer areas are losing population.

One of the clearest ways to measure how satisfied people are with local quality of life is to examine how many of them choose to move. The map on the right illustrates resident retention within local neighborhoods by highlighting residents who lived in the same home in 2010 and 2021.
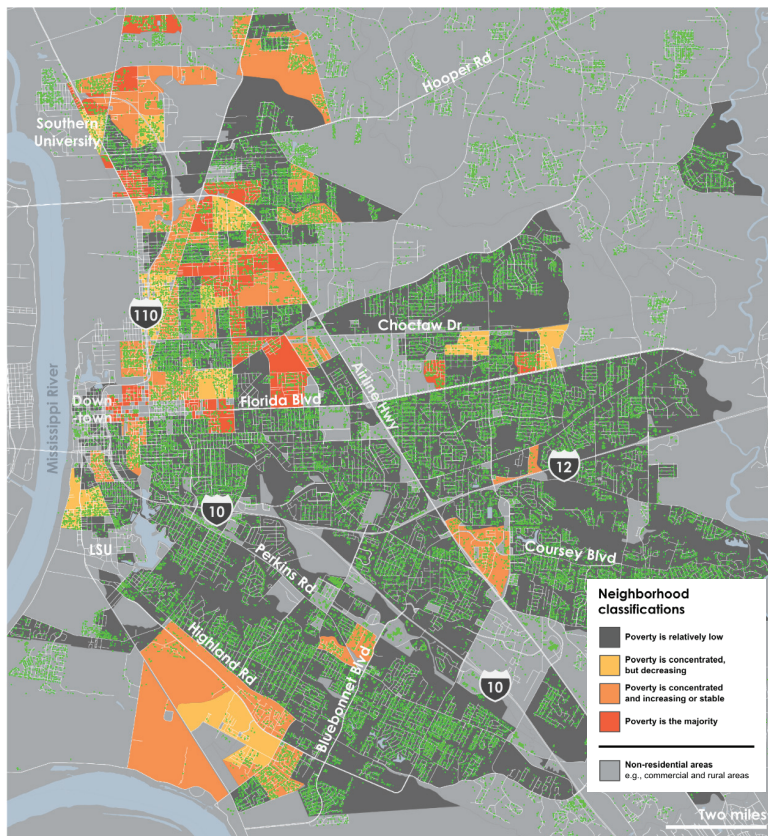
Once again, there are differences between the segments of neighborhoods in the parish. Resident retention in areas with low poverty is roughly equal to the U.S. average, despite the fact that many local families were displaced by the 2016 Flood. These neighborhoods also experienced moderate population growth.[13]

In areas with concentrated poverty or where poverty is in the majority, rates of resident retention are significantly lower. In addition, each of these segments experienced decreases in their overall population.

When local residents leave a neighborhood, it is not possible to track where they are moving to using the data that is currently available. National research indicates that low-income families are more likely to rent and move more frequently than wealthier households. Since the overall poverty levels for the parish have been relatively stable over the last decade and areas with low poverty rates also saw little change, it is likely that most poor families that move are going from one area with concentrated poverty to another.

Resident retention in local neighborhoods

Green dots represent residents who lived at the same address in 2010 and 2021.

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Residents who lived at the same address in 2010 and 2021	43%	34%	38%	28%
Population change from 2010 to 2021	+ 9%	- 15%	- 3%	- 3%

Source: Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021.

Pillar #5: Strong and safe neighborhoods
Almost all neighborhoods in Baton Rouge face challenges with violent crime.

As many local residents already recognize, even relatively wealthy neighborhoods in the city struggle with violent crime. Almost every neighborhood in the city experienced a shooting during the last four years.[14]

Neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty deal with even more gun violence than other neighborhoods. On a per-capita basis, these places have three to four times more shootings than other residential areas of the parish.
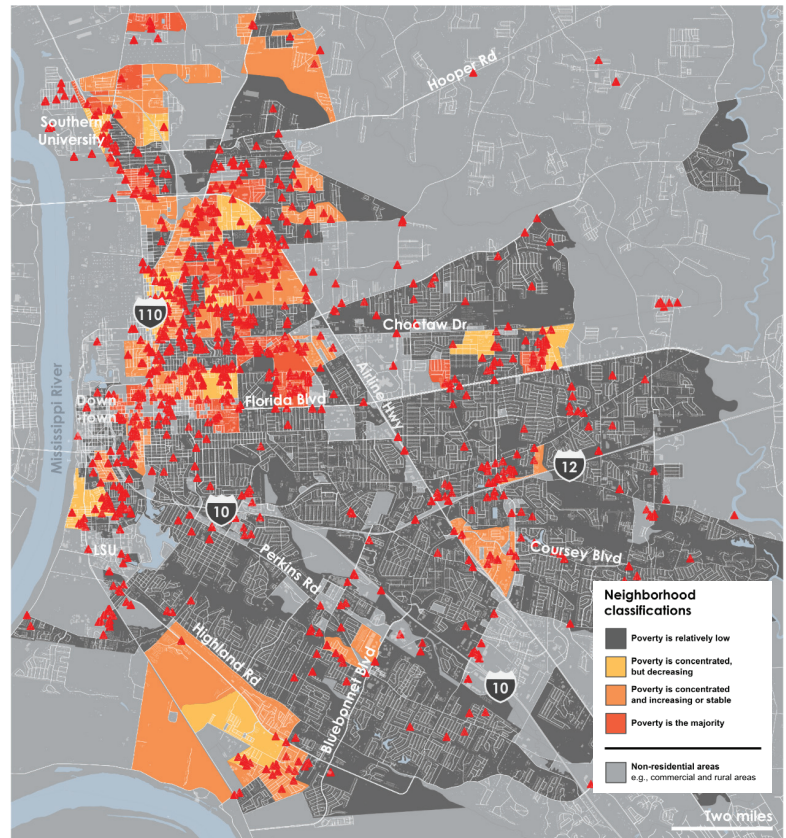
Data from the Baton Rouge Police Department can help to compare violence in the City of Baton Rouge to other parts of the country. Each year, there are around six homicides per every 100,000 residents in United States, and about 12 homicides per 100,000 residents in large U.S. cities.[15]

In local neighborhoods with low poverty rates there were over 20 homicides per 100,000 residents.[#] In the areas with high rates of poverty, there were more than 80 murders per 100,000 residents on average in 2021 and 2022.[16]

Gun violence incidents from 2019 to 2022

Each red triangle shares the location of a shooting reported in the media during the previous four years.

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Shootings per 100,000 residents, average of 2019 to 2022	40	190	111	176
Homicides per 100,000 residents, average of 2021 and 2022 (City of Baton Rouge only)	22	84	83	80

Source: Analyses of data from the Gun Violence Archive (2019-2022), the Baton Rouge Police Department, and the U.S. Census Bureau (2021).

[#] The figures on neighborhood homicide rates in the City of Baton Rouge are based on the average of rates for 2021 and 2022.

Pillar #6: Regional resiliency

The 2016 Flood demonstrated that both wealthy and poor areas of the parish face environmental risks.

Data on the number of local neighborhood residents who lived in homes exposed to the 2016 Flood can be used to assess regional resiliency. More than 40,000 buildings in the parish were damaged by this natural disaster.[17]
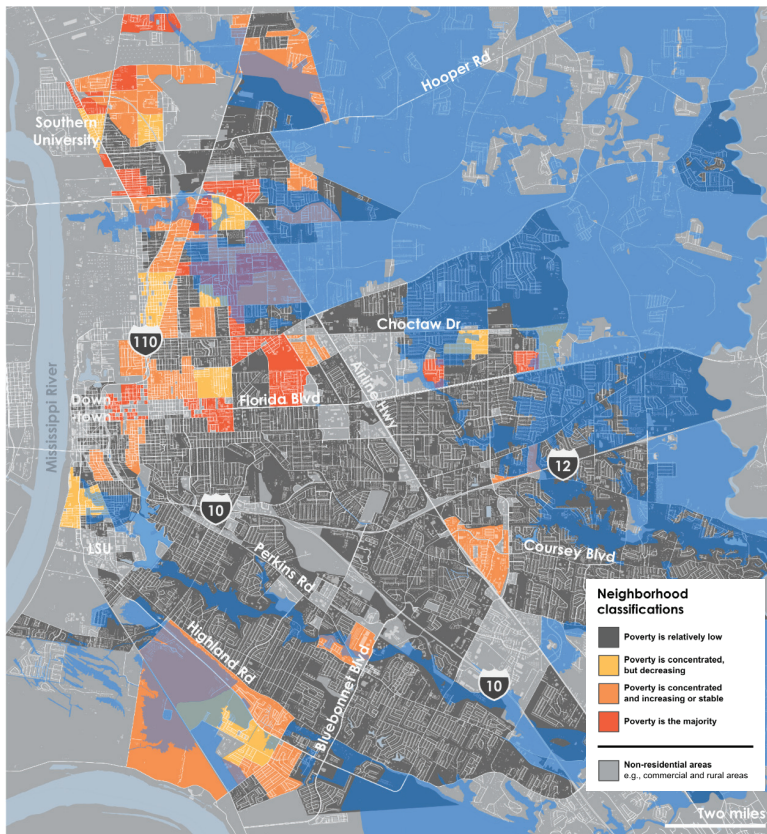
As the map on the right reveals, threats caused by stormwater are a shared challenge across the East Baton Rouge Parish. Between 19 to 24 percent of residents in each segment lived in areas that were flooded in 2016.[18]

The damage caused by the flood illustrates the challenges of climate resiliency for local residents. Events like these have immediate consequences for residents who are displaced and who need to make major repairs to their homes. They can also have additional consequences in later years by increasing the local cost of living if home and building insurance becomes more expensive to acquire.

Neighborhoods affected by the 2016 Flood

Blue areas highlight properties in the parish flooded by stormwater in August of 2016.

Neighborhood classifications

- Poverty is relatively low
- Poverty is concentrated, but decreasing
- Poverty is concentrated and increasing or stable
- Poverty is the majority
- Non-residential areas e.g., commercial and rural areas

Two miles

Neighborhood segment performance

Poverty is...	Relatively low	Concentrated but decreasing	Concentrated and increasing or stable	The majority
Estimated proportion of population living in homes affected by the 2016 Flood	19%	20%	24%	20%

Source: Analyses of data from EBRGIS Open Data and the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021.

Conclusion

Most people in Baton Rouge live in places where access to opportunity is relatively high. Around 74 percent of residents in local neighborhoods live in areas with low poverty. People in these areas often experience outcomes that are similar to the national average or better.

However, there are three universal problems in Baton Rouge: education, crime, and climate resiliency. Residents in almost every neighborhood lack access to public elementary schools with strong track records for teaching reading. Even many of the wealthiest areas of the community have homicide rates that are above the national average and face significant threats due to stormwater.

Neighborhoods with high rates of poverty must face these universal problems in the community while also dealing with additional challenges related to economic opportunity, lifelong health, and quality of life. People in these neighborhoods have greater rates of unemployment. The expected lifespan of local children is shorter and resident retention in these neighborhoods is also lower than in the rest of the parish.

Next steps

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation, in collaboration with Common Good Labs, will release a series of papers taking a deeper dive into the data behind each of the pillars detailed in the previous pages. These papers will help our community understand how to leverage data to change the landscape of opportunity for all citizens.

Endnotes

1 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility, (Chetty, Friedman, Hendren, Jones, and Porter).

5 Common Good Labs analyses of data from Opportunity Insights at Harvard University.

6 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

7 Ibid.

8 What does the research say about the relationship between reading proficiency by the end of third grade and academic achievement, college retention, college and career readiness, incarceration, and high school dropout?, Institute of Education Sciences.

9 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the East Baton Rouge Parish School System.

10 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the American Community Survey.

11 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the Centers for Disease Control.

12 Ibid.

13 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

14 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the Gun Violence Archive.

15 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the Crime Data Explorer, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

16 Common Good Labs analyses of Baton Rouge Police Department data from OpenBR.

17 How much damage did the August 2016 flood do? Data becomes clearer, but gaps remain, (Stole).

18 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the American Community Survey and EBRGIS Open Data.