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## **BUT IS IT *REALLY* “SATAN”?**

*A Sheriff's lament reflects the hopelessness of urban decay*



*For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* “Satan has taken over Bogalusa, and it’s time we take it back.” Louisiana Sheriff Randy Seal’s [memorable words](#) came on May 18, two days after more than five-hundred local residents staged an outdoor memorial service in Bogalusa, a distressed city of about 12,000 seventy miles north of New Orleans. According to authorities, citizens assembled at a major intersection (in violation of COVID-19 restrictions) to mourn the passing of a local resident, Dominique James, 29. Suddenly a vehicle drove by, and a barrage of gunfire rang out. Thirteen were struck by bullets, apparently none fatally.

“I am burying my son and I just think it was heartless for someone to come through and just ring out gunshots,” [said his grieving mother](#), Rena Robertson. Her laments carried special resonance, as her son had recently gone missing, and it took an air search to find his vehicle parked deep in the woods. [Dominique’s murdered remains lay inside.](#)

Our next stop was the [UCR](#). And the story it told was depressingly familiar. In 2018, the most recent year with full data, Bogalusa, pop. 11,730, reported 124 violent crimes. That yields a miserable per/1,000 rate of 10.6, about twice Louisiana’s 5.4 and close to three times the national 3.7. Looking back, 2018 was actually a pretty good year for the town. Its 2010 rate was 14.5; in 2015, it was 13.3. (p.s. the UCR lists rates per 100,000.)

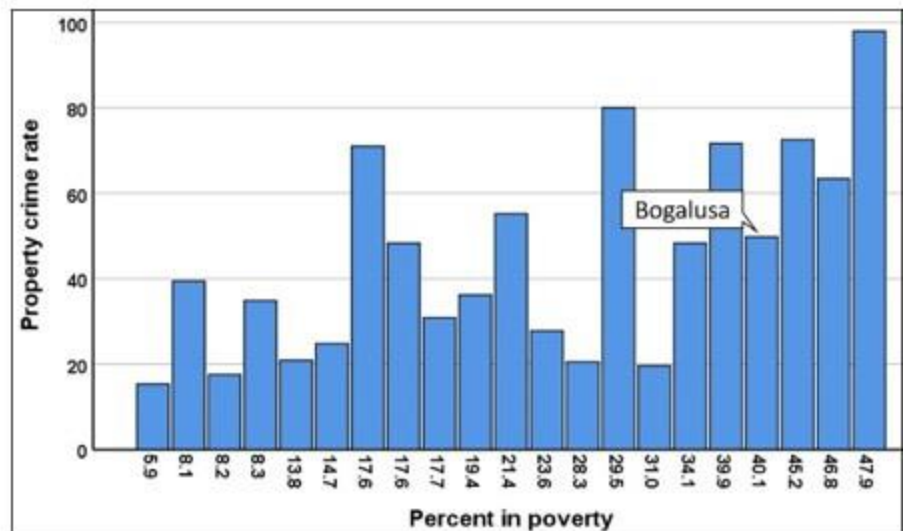
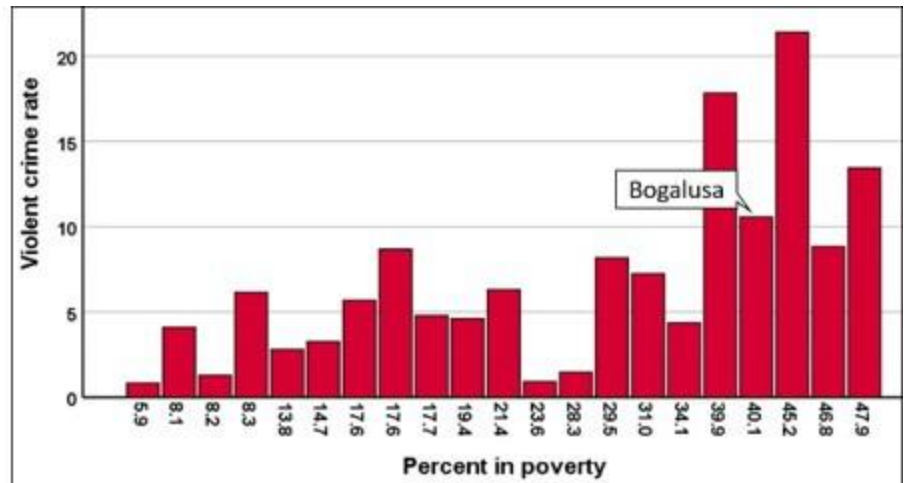
As its readers know, *Police Issues* is very much of the mind that crime and economic conditions are two sides of the same coin. So our very next stop was the [Census](#). No surprise there. In 2018, a depressing 40.1 percent of Bogalusa’s citizens lived in poverty. To compare, it was 11.8 percent for the U.S. and 18.6 percent for Louisiana.

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Well, maybe Bogalusa is special. Maybe it's not poverty that underlies its struggle with violence. Perhaps it really is the Devil! (Normally we prefer to look at neighborhoods, whose inhabitants are exposed to similar doses of the influencers that propel crime. That's the thought that underlies our "[Neighborhoods](#)" section. But we lack a ready source of within-city crime and economic data for these burg's, so must stick with their overall statistics.) Including Bogalusa, Louisiana has 21 cities with populations of 10,000-20,000. The graphs below depict, for each, percent of residents in poverty from the 2018 Census, and violent and property crime rates per 1,000 pop. from the 2018 UCR. (Violent crimes include murder, non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Property crimes include burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.)

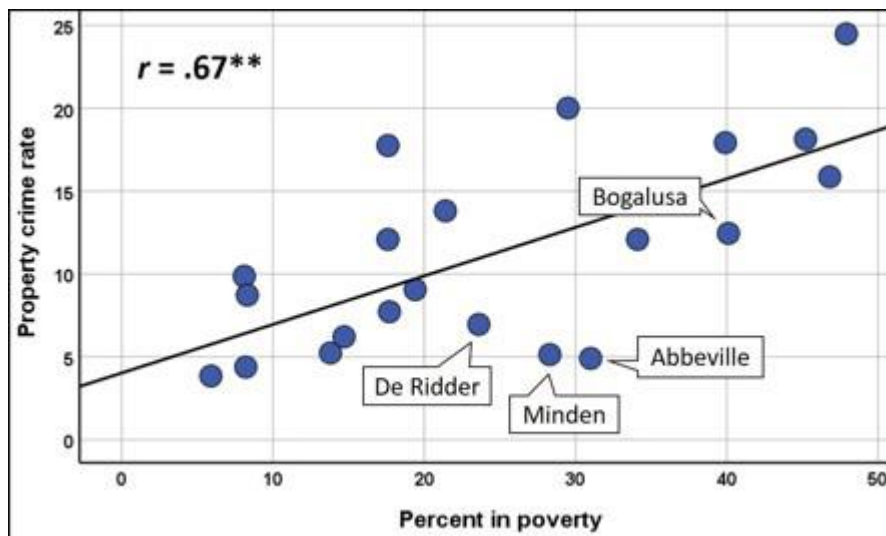
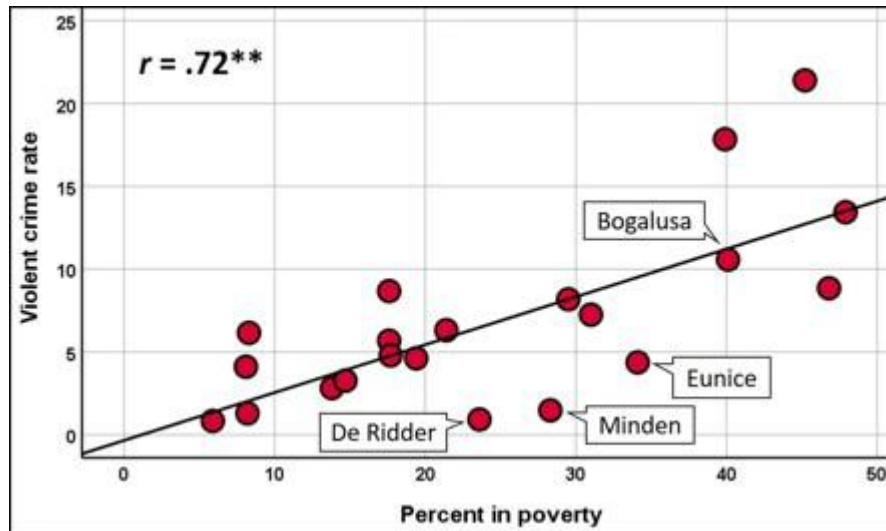
Louisiana cities with populations between 10,000-20,000 (n=21)

City	Pop	PovRate
Youngsville	14370	5.9
Broussard	12672	8.1
Mandeville	12371	8.2
Zachary	17884	8.3
Covington	10658	13.8
Baker	13487	14.7
Morgan City	11066	17.6
Gonzales	10916	17.6
Gretna	17965	17.7
Thibodaux	14745	19.4
Pineville	14415	21.4
De Ridder	10820	23.6
Minden	12215	28.3
West Monroe	12594	29.5
Abbeville	12279	31
Eunice	10073	34.1
Crowley	12779	39.9
Bogalusa	11730	40.1
Opelousas	16262	45.2
Natchitoches	17981	46.8
Bastrop	10270	47.9



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To be sure, there are plenty of ups and downs. Yet one trend is difficult to miss: as poverty goes up, so does crime. To double-check here are the corresponding “scattergrams”:



With a few exceptions – De Ridder, Minden and Eunice for violent crime, and De Ridder, Minden and Abbeville for property crime – poverty is strongly associated with both types of offending. That relationship is evident by the magnitude of the “ $r$ ” statistics. (It’s on a scale of minus one to plus one. Either extreme denotes a lock-step association; zero, none.) Both coefficients (.72 and .67) demonstrate a strong “positive” relationship, meaning that poverty moves up and down pretty much in sync with violent crime as well as property crime. As for the two asterisks, that means the results are statistically “significant,” with a probability of less than 1/100 that they were produced

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by chance. (For a more thorough discussion of such things check out “[Scapegoat \(Part I\)](#)” and “[Human Renewal](#).”)

Of course, the adequacy of policing can also affect crime. We collected [UCR police employee data](#) for each town. As expected, there was a statistically significant association between population size and the number of sworn officers ( $r=.59^*$ ). But that doesn’t necessarily mean that needs were being met. This table compares the four least violent towns (mean/1,000 rate, 1.1) with the four most violent (mean/1,000 rate, 15.8):

City	Pop	Violent Crimes	Violent Crime Rate	Property Crimes	Property Crime Rate	Poverty rate	Sworn officers	Sworn rate/ 1,000 pop.
Youngsville	14370	12	0.8	221	3.8	5.9	25	1.7
De Ridder	10820	10	0.9	301	7	23.6	25	2.3
Mandeville	12371	16	1.3	217	4.4	8.2	37	3
Minden	12215	18	1.5	251	5.1	28.3	32	2.6
Bogalusa	11730	124	10.6	584	12.4	40.1	35	3
Bastrop	10270	138	13.4	1006	24.5	47.9	32	3.1
Crowley	12779	228	17.8	916	17.9	39.9	36	2.8
Opelousas	16262	348	21.4	1180	18.1	45.2	40	2.5

For all 21 cities, sworn staffing ranged from 1.67 to 5.7 per 1,000 pop. But the differences between these two groups was slight. The least violent places – Youngsville, De Ridder, Mandeville and Minden – averaged 2.4 officers/1,000 citizens, while the high-violence places – Bogalusa, Bastrop, Crowley and Opelousas – averaged 2.85/1,000. (Comparing the top four/bottom four for property crime produces only two differences. De Ridder, the second least-violent city, deteriorates to seventh place, while Bogalusa, which is only three steps from being the most violent, improves a bit to fourteenth.)

Mandeville looks peaceful. Let’s contrast it with two burg’s that seem much less so:

- Bogalusa is close in both population and police staffing. It’s also nearly *five times* poorer and has nearly *eight times* the number of violent crimes.
- Opelousas has nearly four-thousand more residents. But it only has *three* more cops – that is, one per shift. Its poverty rate is also more than *five times* worse. With that we’d expect more violence. But more than *twenty times* as much? Yikes.

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Clearly, Bogalusa and Opelousas (and Bastrop, and Crowley) could use more cops. Only problem is: who'll pay for them? "Why, like other small Louisiana towns, Bogalusa is slowly dying" is the title of a [July 5, 2019 story](#) in the *New Orleans Advocate*. According to the well-written piece, it really is all about economics. "The only thing left here is that mill" said a long-time resident who once worked at the city's remaining industrial plant, a large paper mill. But automation displaced most of its workers, and good jobs remain scarce. A block away, a once-booming retail strip "is now a rundown row of storefronts, many of them abandoned, with papered-over windows."

But something important escapes notice. While the town's poverty load and abysmal finances (Alabama placed it under "fiscal administration") get prominent billing, violence draws absolutely no mention. Indeed, the word "crime" comes up only once, in the context of the gunning down of a black sheriff's deputy by white extremists fifty-five years earlier. Yet as its inhabitants well know, armed violence is no stranger to Bogalusa. Less than a year has passed since that [infamous two-week period](#) in July 2019 when the community experienced eleven shootings and six wounded in fifteen days. Police chief Kendall Bullen (he's still on the job) managed the chaos [with an understaffed force and truculent survivors](#). "A lot of the victims are not cooperating," he said. "They don't want to give us information."

Of course, it takes a lot more than cops to effectively counter crime. Poverty, and the crime-generating factors that go along with poverty, have beset Bogalusa for many years. It may be impolitic to mention, but consider that the memorial service's honoree, 29-year old [Dominique Audrell James](#), is likely one and the same as "[Dominique A. James](#)," a 23-year old Bogalusan who was booked into jail in early 2014 for "distribution of schedule II drugs and criminal conspiracy."

We've long argued that urban violence is best tackled through intensive, geographically focused campaigns of socioeconomic renewal. For example, there's [Jobs-Plus](#), a national program that provides residents of housing developments with everything from job training and placement to rent assistance. Or a local variant, Birmingham's (Ala.) "[Promise Initiative](#)," a city-run program that connects high-school juniors and seniors with apprenticeships so they can learn vital skills. Graduating seniors can also get tuition assistance to attend two and four-year colleges.

Sadly, such things seem absent from the current political debate. Other than preaching, we've actually *mailed* several letters (really, in *envelopes*) to politicians recommending that Presidential campaigns connect with, say, Birmingham's mayor to get better informed about the needs of places like, say, Bogalusa, Bastrop, Crowley and

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Opelousas. How can America's many struggling communities be transformed? Really, whoever our next President turns out to be, getting *that* done should be her "job #1."