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## **Black Attitudes in New Orleans: Crime, Safety and the Quality of Life**

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## ***Black Attitudes in New Orleans:***

### ***Crime, Safety and the Quality of Life***

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University of New Orleans  
Survey Research Center

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#### **Summary**

- On a number of measures, black perceptions of the quality of life in New Orleans have improved over the past few years. Blacks are less negative about how things are going in the City, are more optimistic about the City's future, and have more trust in City Hall.
- Three factors are probably responsible for these positive changes, the tremendous popularity of Mayor Marc Morial, the improved image of the police, and the slightly more optimistic economic outlook of black residents.
- The police are more highly regarded by black voters than they have been through most of the past ten years.
- The majority of black residents, however, still believe that crime is increasing (despite statistical evidence to the contrary), and a large proportion do not feel safe around their homes.
- More black residents support the "catch and punish criminals" approach to dealing with crime than support the "social problems" approach.
- Hearing gunfire at night is a regular event for forty percent of black residents, and this experience colors other crime and safety perceptions.
- Hearing gunfire on a regular basis is geographically dispersed throughout most of the black and mixed areas of the city.

## The Survey

Last fall some community leaders commented that the effects of crime on blacks in New Orleans are not given the same attention as the effects on whites. In response, this survey addresses the experiences and perceptions of black residents exclusively, without reference to or comparison with white residents. Many of the questions have been asked by the SRC since 1986 in the Quality of Life series; thus some black attitudes can be tracked over eleven years. In addition, the survey allowed five UNO graduate students, who have been studying minority politics since August, 1996, to explore some of their own research ideas.

The interviewing was conducted between March 11 and March 19, 1997, and 452 black registered voters were surveyed. The survey's sampling error is plus or minus 4.7%.

## General Quality of Life

The general quality of life questions all indicate that blacks' views of the City are improving. This is not to say that perceptions are positive, but rather they are *less negative* than they were three years ago. The low point in general quality of life perceptions occurred in 1994, when 80% of black voters thought conditions in the city had gotten worse. Today only about half, 46%, give that response, suggesting a significant improvement in general outlook. And although the proportion of blacks who think the City has gotten better is only 21%, it still represents an improvement over 1994 and 1996. We should note, however that twice as many black voters think conditions have worsened than think conditions have improved.



Optimism about the future among blacks has varied for the past seven years. It seems that this variable is greatly influenced by events such as the mayor's election, which increased hopefulness, and the bankruptcy of the casino, which diminished it. Today, optimism about conditions in the City improving is a solid 50%, with only 17% believing that conditions will get worse.

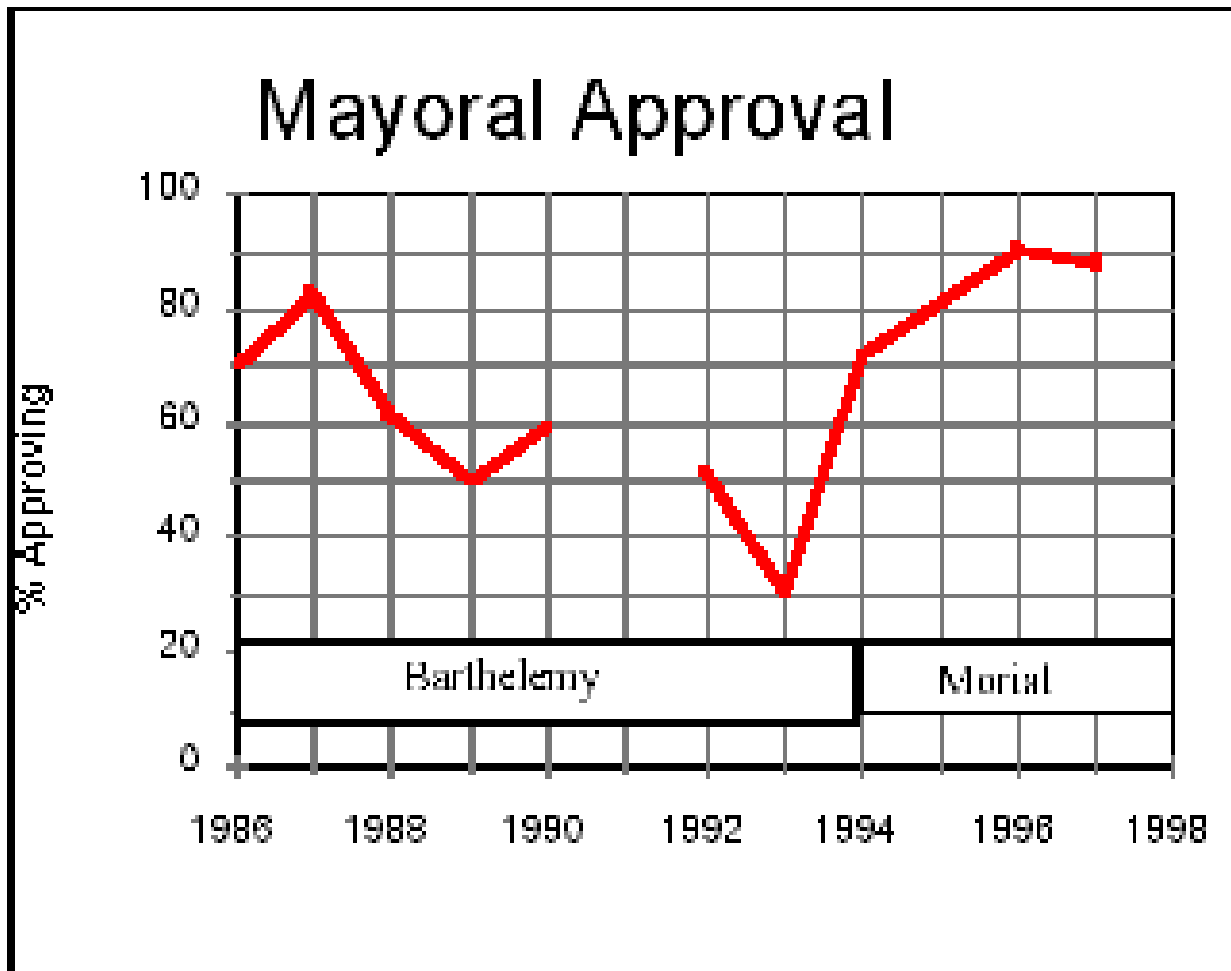


Optimism about the future of the City is an "umbrella" attitude that is affected by several specific factors (see Table 2). Black voters' perceptions of crime as increasing or decreasing and their feeling of safety around their homes both affect optimism about the future of the City. The safer blacks feel and the more they see crime getting under control, the more hope they have about New Orleans. Employment opportunities also affect optimism; those who think opportunities are good are twice as hopeful as those who think opportunities are poor. Finally, trust in City Hall impacts optimism; as trust in City Hall increases, optimism also increases. Thus, future trends in these four factors are important for continuing hopefulness about the City.

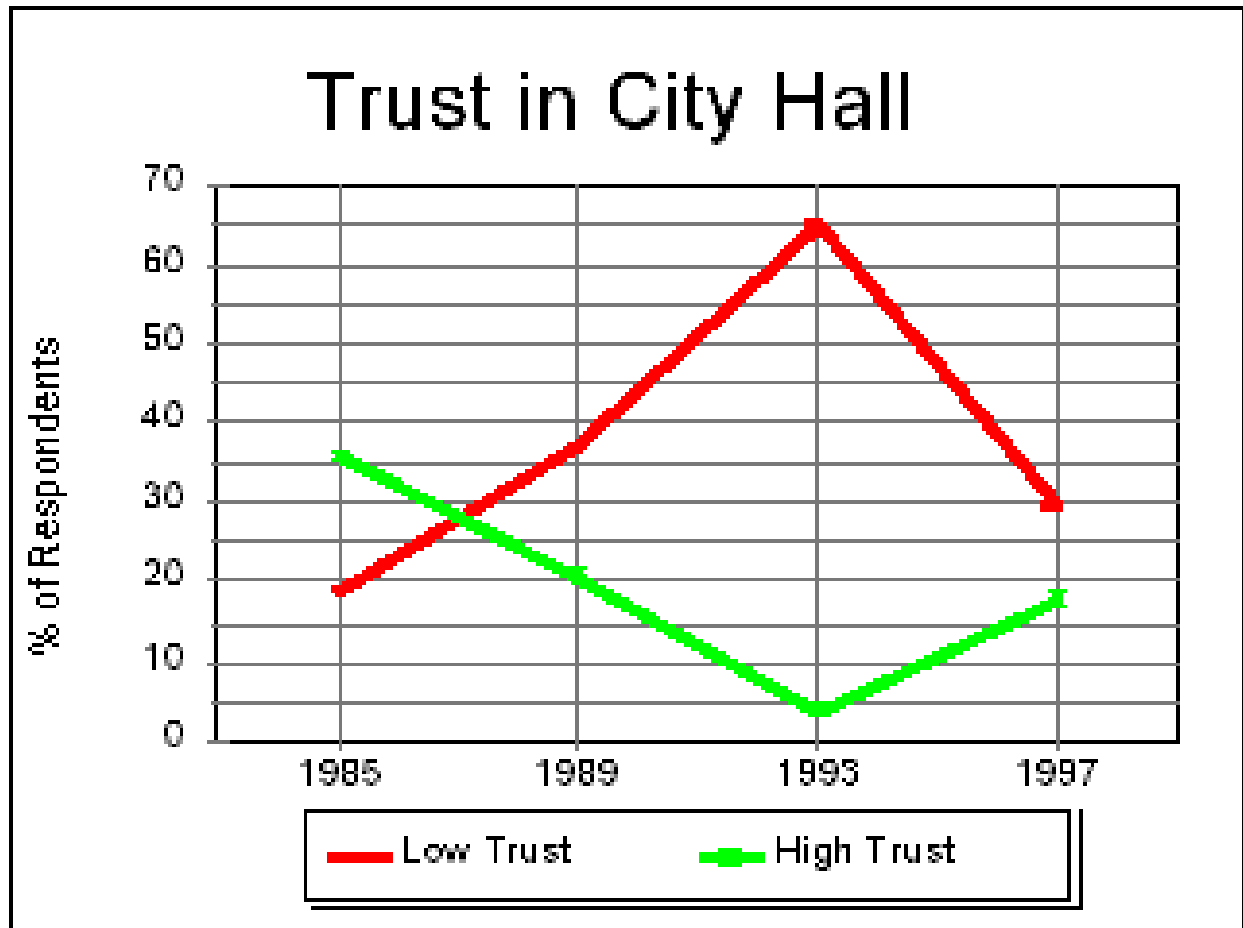
### **The Mayor and Trust in Local Government**

Mayor Marc Morial is extremely popular among black voters; 88% approve of the way he is handling his job. This level of approval indicates a *personal popularity* which goes beyond simple job performance. The confidence we observed in the Mayor is undoubtedly a major

reason for the upturn in trust in local government (see below) . Mayor Morial's popularity is higher than that of the last mayor at any point in his two terms.



Trust in City Hall has increased substantially since its low point at the end of the previous administration. Between 1985 and 1993 confidence in local government among black voters plummeted, driven by two factors, the allegations of corruption in the Barthelemy administration and the overall decline in the quality of life in the City. Trust in local government increased considerably after the election of Marc Morial in 1994. This attitude is closely tied to evaluations of an incumbent mayor, and the current mayor's high approval ratings are the main reason confidence is up (see Table 3). Confidence is not as high as it was in the last days of the Dutch Morial administration however, because at that time crime was not a significant problem, and overall evaluations of the quality of life were higher than today.

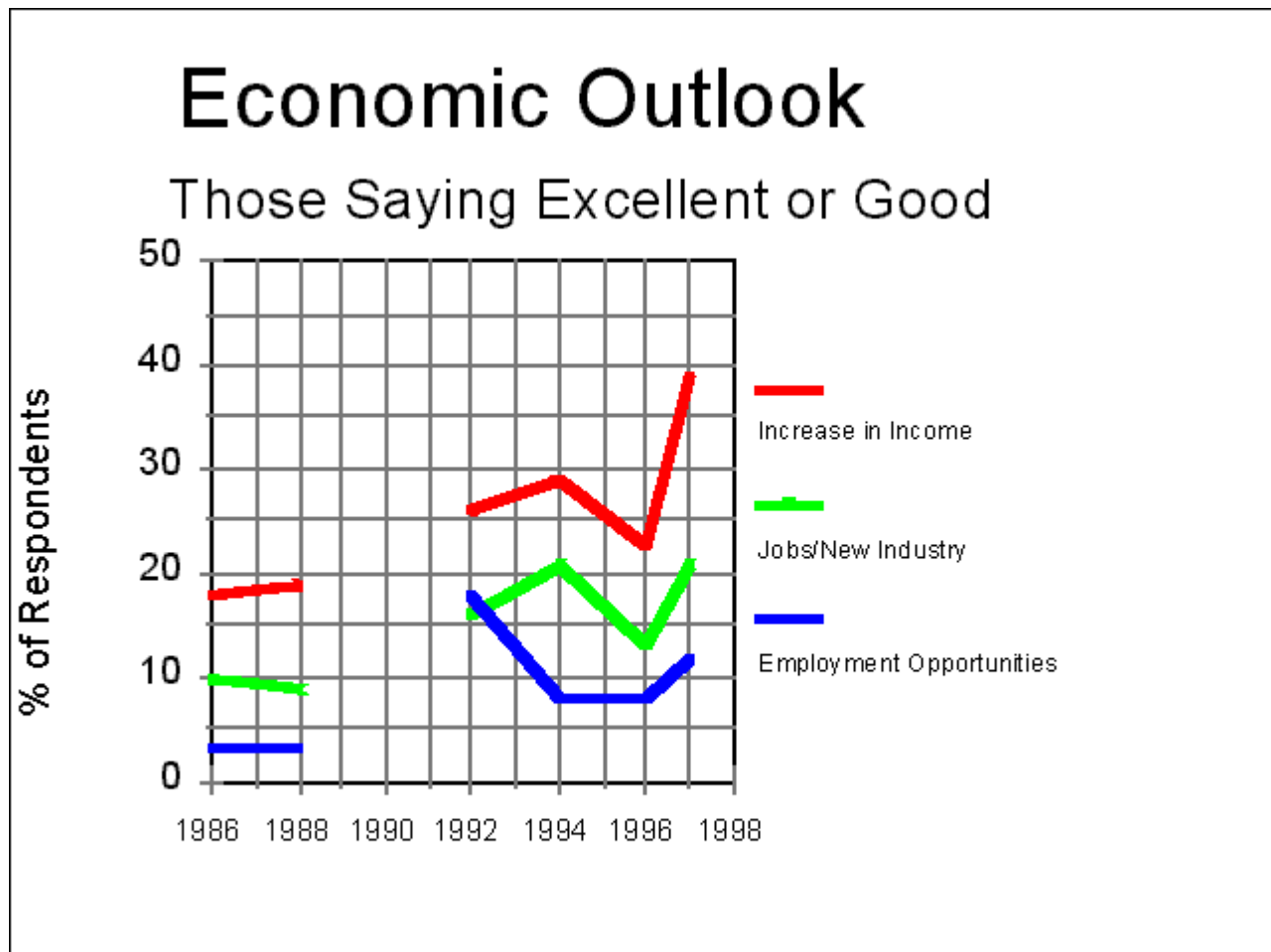


Trust in local government involves more than just approval of the Mayor. Evaluations of police protection and employment opportunities also affect trust in City Hall (Table 3). Black voters who think police protection is "poor" are four times more likely to distrust City Hall than those who think protection is "good" or "excellent". Similarly, black residents with pessimistic views of the economy are also distrusting of City Hall. Thus, trust in local government is influenced by non-governmental as well as governmental factors.

(Note: In this survey trust in local government is a scale composed of four items: belief that the city wastes money; trust in city decisions; perception of corruption, and; perceived power of big interests).

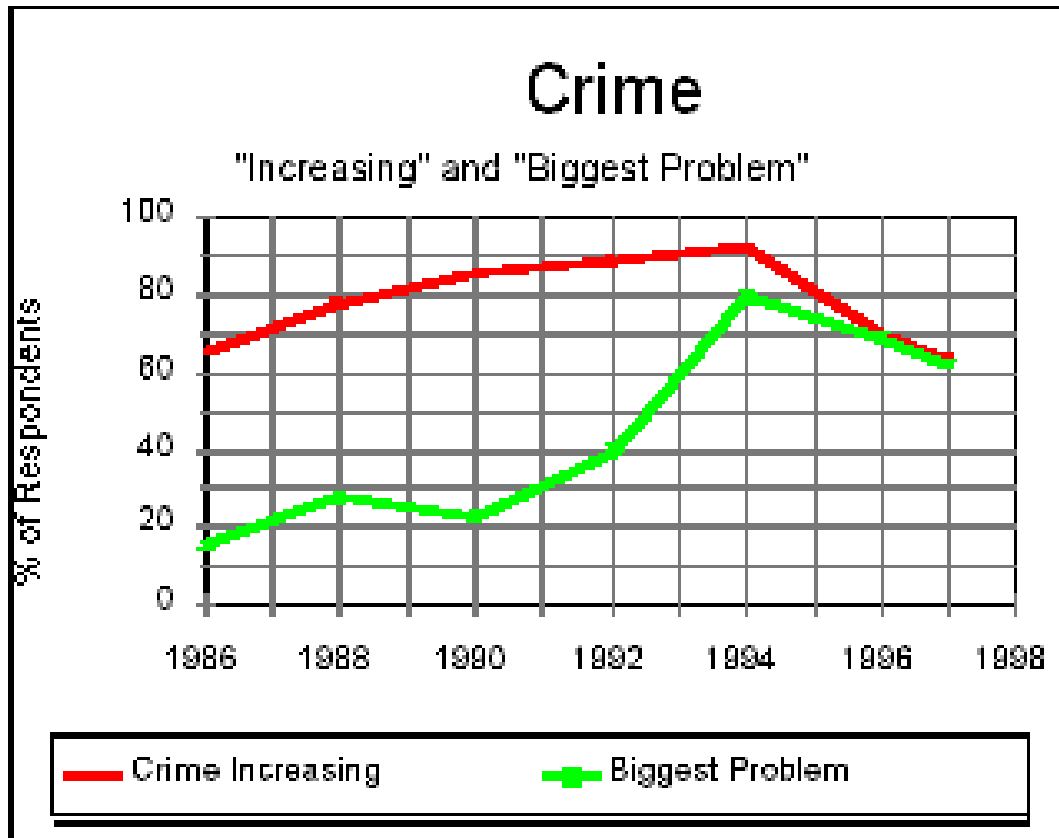
### Economic Outlook

The outlook of blacks on the economy of the parish has improved, especially when compared to the "oil bust" years of the eighties. This increase in optimism about the economy is probably due to the real economic improvements we have recently experienced. The improved outlook should be viewed with a note of caution, however. There are still many black voters who feel that there is only a "poor" chance for new employment opportunities, new jobs, and increasing their income (see Table 4). It is unrealistic to expect any low to lower-middle income group to have very positive views of their economic prospects, but at least in New Orleans there has been some recent improvement.



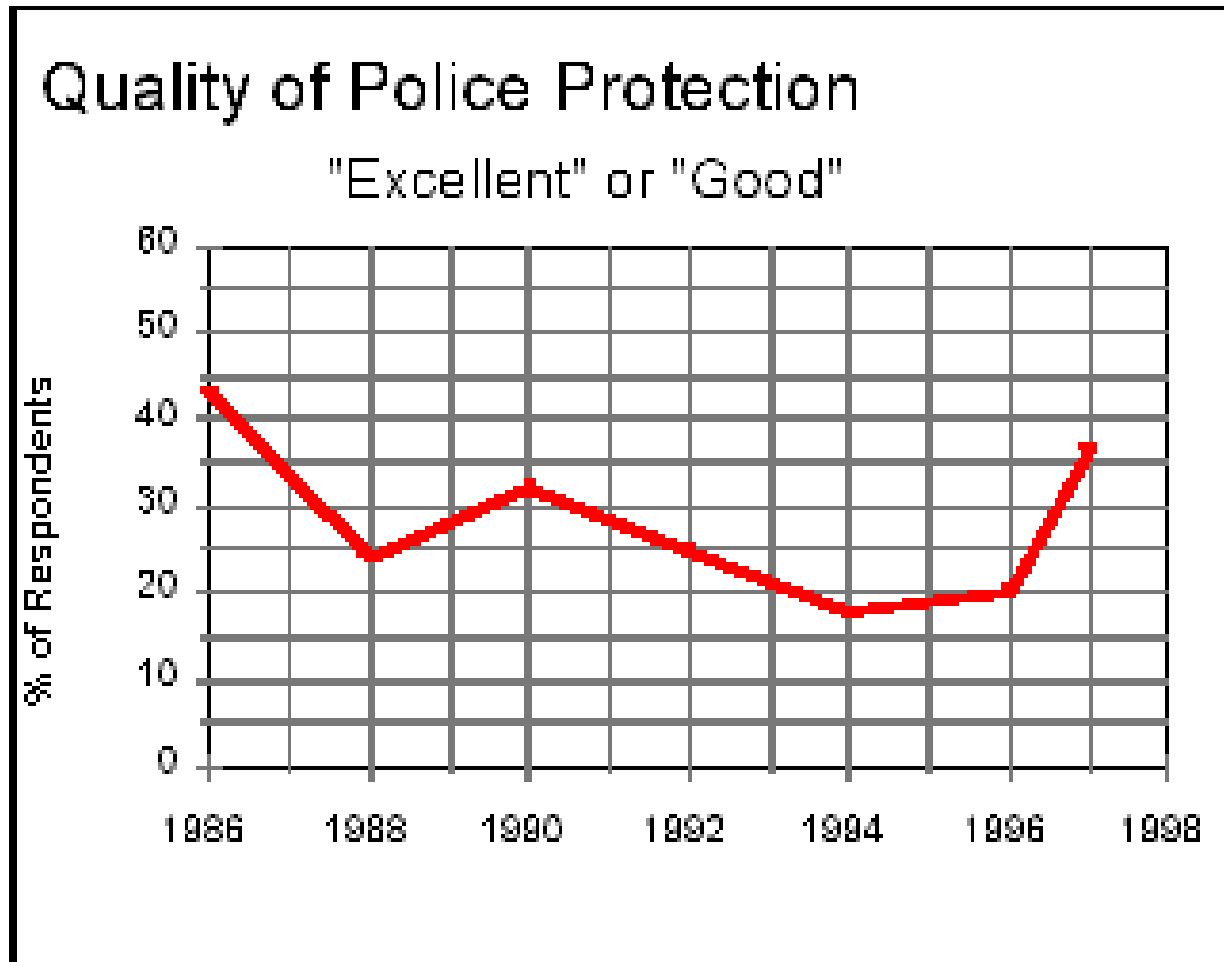
## Crime and Safety

It is almost a cliché to say that crime is the biggest problem facing the city according voters. While the overall picture is still negative, some of the crime perception indicators show improvement. For example, three years ago (1994) almost all black voters believed that crime was increasing, whereas today 63% hold that opinion. Similarly, in 1994 crime was spontaneously mentioned as the biggest problem by 80% of black voters, but today the figure is 62%. Of course, crime still overwhelms the other problems facing the City according to black voters.



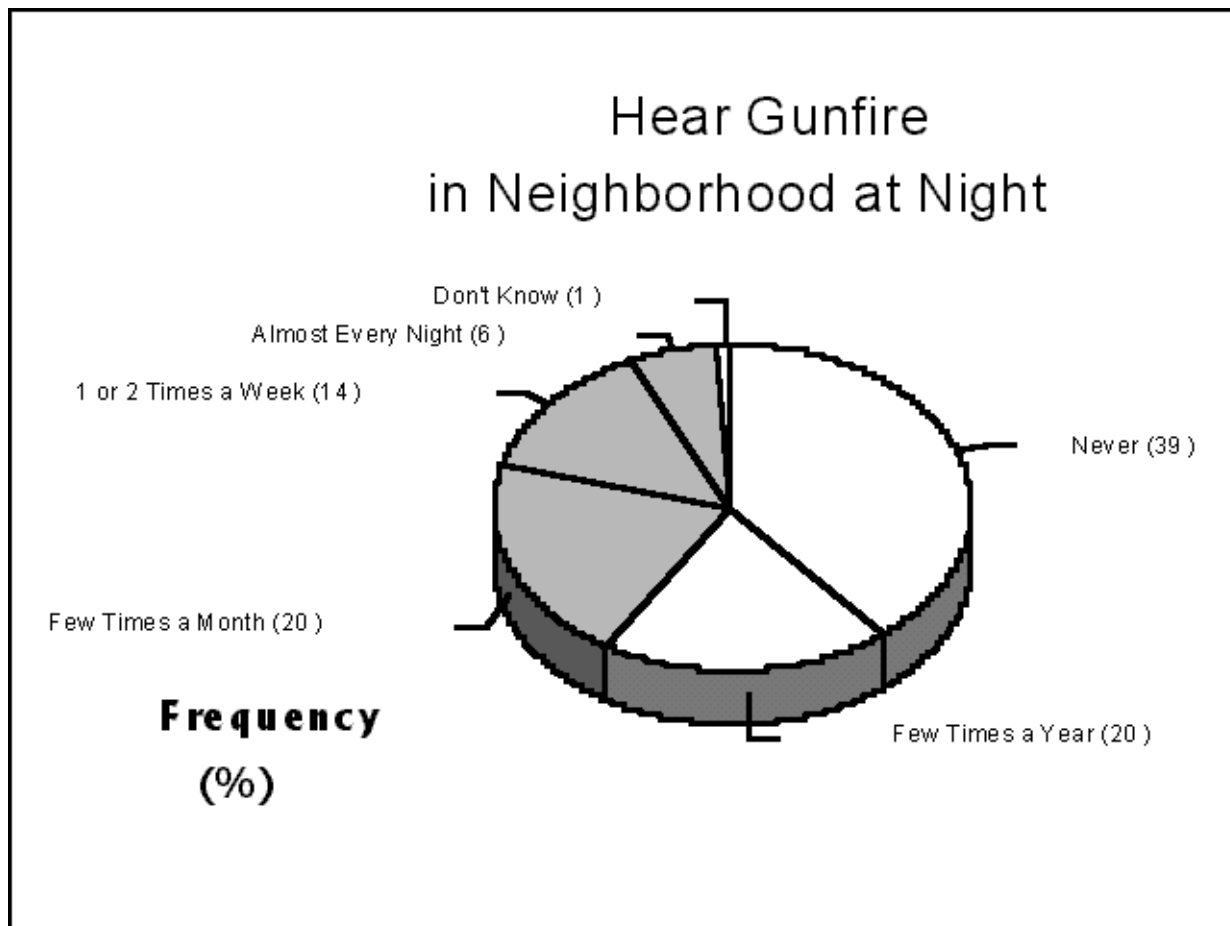


In addition, the police are regarded more highly by black voters than they have been through most of the past ten years. Evaluations of police among blacks reached a low point in 1994, when only 18% gave them a positive evaluation. Today over a third believe that their police protection is good or excellent, and only 21% think police protection is poor (see Table 5). Undoubtedly, the high regard for Chief Pennington and some actual police reforms are responsible for this upswing.



Over the past eleven years, UNO has been asking voters about their feeling of safety around their homes in the day and at night. As the crime rate rose in the late 80s and early 90s, feelings of safety naturally deteriorated. Today black voters feel safer during the day than they have felt for nine years, but **they do not feel safer at night** (Table 5). Throughout the Quality of Life series residents have felt safer during the day than at night, but the gap between day and night is particularly wide in 1997; 27% feel threatened during the day and 44% feel that way at night. The "safety at night" question stands apart from the other crime perceptions as the only one not showing improvement, and the reason may lie in the answers to the next question.

This year the UNO SRC included a new question, one not typically asked in other crime surveys around the country. We asked respondents if they ever hear gunfire in their neighborhoods at night and, if so, how often. This question is designed to tap the feeling that crime is close to home, and therefore personally threatening. The results were surprising. **Forty percent of black registered voters report hearing gunfire in their neighborhoods at night on a regular basis**, which we define as a few times a month or more often. These are not just low income residents; 28% of black voters with family incomes over \$40,000 hear gunfire on a regular basis. The pervasiveness of this experience surprised us, but it is consistent with Chief Pennington's remarks in the March 16 issue of the *Times Picayune*, "I've never seen a city with so many guns per capita. More than any place I've ever seen in America.....I would say there are twice as many guns here as in Washington." (pg. A-26).



A geocoded map of the addresses of the black voters who reported regularly hearing gunfire confirms Chief Pennington's observation. Each dot on the map represents a respondent who said

he or she hears gunfire a few times a month or more often. Obviously, hearing gunfire regularly at night is not confined to areas around housing projects. On the contrary, it seems to be spread throughout black and mixed residential areas of the City.

Because hearing gunfire is a personal experience, as opposed to the impersonal experience of seeing a crime story on TV, it should be closely related to other attitudes about crime and to feelings of safety (Table 6). Hearing gunfire on a regular basis is associated with believing crime is increasing, with not feeling safe during the day or at night, and with having a low evaluation of police. Thus, there is a whole cluster of "safety" attitudes which are impacted by the experience of hearing gunfire.

The impact of the proliferation of guns in New Orleans goes beyond just safety issues, although safety is certainly important. Recall from Tables 2 and 3 that safety issues and evaluations of police impact trust in local government and optimism about the future of the City. Thus, the experience of hearing gunfire close to home ultimately affects more "distant" attitudes toward City Hall and the City as a whole.

When black voters were asked about what they think is the best way to deal with crime, they were slightly more likely to express the conservative view of catch and punish the criminals than the more liberal view of addressing the social problems (Table 5), which should come as no surprise given the fears about safety and the closeness of gunfire.

### **Black Political Organizations**

There has been considerable change over the past eleven years in the influence of the various black political organizations, specifically COUP, BOLD, SOUL, and LIFE. If we measure "influence" by the number of black voters who have heard of the organizations, the numbers who have heard of COUP, SOUL, and BOLD have dropped significantly (by 23%, 19%, and 19% respectively, Table 7). **Only the LIFE organization showed an increase in its recognition level; 20% more black voters have heard of LIFE in 1997 than in 1986.**

Today three of the black organizations, BOLD, SOUL, and LIFE, share similar levels of recognition. The changes surely reflect the changing political leadership; LIFE is the political organization of the current, popular Mayor Morial, whereas COUP was the political organization of former Mayor Barthelemy who fell into considerable disfavor.

We also asked black voters if any of these organizations seemed to speak for people like them, and again, LIFE has experienced an increase in this type of identification with 13% feeling that LIFE speaks for people like them. We cannot take this figure too literally, however, because there is a general reluctance for anyone to say that an organization, especially one embroiled in controversy or one that operates with some secrecy, "speaks for people" like them. This question can only measure identification relative to other organizations and relative to the past. On this measure, as well as on the awareness measure, three of the organizations seem relatively equal.

**TABLE 1**

Has City Gotten Better or Worse Over the Last 5 Years?	
Better	21%
No Change	29
Worse	46
Don't Know	4

Will City Get Better or Worse Over the Next 5 Years?	
Better	50%
No Change	24
Worse	17
Don't Know	9

**TABLE 2**

**OPTIMISM ABOUT THE CITY GETTING BETTER**

Safety During the Day		
	Feel Safe	Don't Feel Safe
City Will "Get Better"	56%*	36%

Crime Has Increased/Decreased		
	Increased	Decreased

City Will "Get Better"	48%	70%	
<b>Employment Opportunities</b>			
	Excellent/Good	Fair	Poor
City Will "Get Better"	72%	60%	35%
<b>Trust in Local Government</b>			
	High	Medium	Low
City Will "Get Better"	77%	54%	38%

\*To be interpreted as -- of those who feel safe during the day, 56% believe the City will get better.

**TABLE 3**  
**TRUST IN CITY HALL**

Mayor				
		Strongly Approve	Approve	Disapprove (too few cases)
TRUST	Hi	25%	7%	
		27	22	
		29	24	
TRUST	Low	19	47	
Police Protection				
		Excellent/Good	Fair	Poor
TRUST	Hi	27%	12%	9%
		27	26	19
		33	27	20
TRUST	Low	12	35	52
Employment Opportunities				
		Excellent/Good	Fair	Poor
TRUST	Hi	31%	19%	11%
		29	27	21

		24	29	27
TRUST	Low	16	25	40

**TABLE 4**

Economic Outlook Indicators			
	Opportunities for Employment	Likelihood of New Jobs Coming to Parish	Likelihood of Your Family Increasing its Income
Excellent	1%	3%	8%
Good	12	18	30
Fair	43	27	30
Poor	42	47	28
Don't Know	2	4	3

**TABLE 5****POLICE AND SAFETY**

Quality of Police Protection	
Excellent	5%
Good	32
Fair	41
Poor	21
Don't Know	1

Feel Safe During Day/Night		
	Feel Safe Day	Feel Safe Night
Very Safe	22%	13%
Save	50	43
Not Very Safe	19	27
Not At All Safe	8	17
Don't Know	1	0
Best Way To Decrease Crime		
Address Social Problems	31%	
In-Between	21	
Catch and Punish Criminals	42	
Don't Know	6	
Crime is Increasing/Decreasing		
Increasing	63%	
Same	17	
Decreasing	17	
Don't Know	<b>3</b>	



**TABLE 6**  
**GUNFIRE**

"Do You Ever Hear Gunfire In Your Neighborhood At Night?"			
Never	39%		
Few Times Per Year	20		
Few Times Per Month	20	40% Hear	
1 - 2 Times Per Week	14	Gunfire on a	
Every Night	6	Regular Basis	
Don't Know	1		
Hear Gunfire			
	Never	1-2 Times a Year	Few Times a Month or More
Crime Has Increased	54%*	67%	70%
Not Safe in Daytime	18%	22%	39%
Not Safe at Night	30%	38%	60%
Police Protection (Excellent/Good)	48%	38%	26%

\*To be interpreted as -- among those who never hear gunfire, 54% believe crime has increased.

**TABLE 7**  
**BLACK POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Have You Heard of These Organizations:		
COUP, SOUL, LIFE or BOLD		
	1986	1997
COUP	62%	39%
SOUL	78%	59%
LIFE	30%	50%
BOLD	62%	53%
Do Any of These Organizations Seem to Speak for People Like You:		
COUP, SOUL, LIFE or BOLD		
	1986	1997
COUP	8%	7%
SOUL	30%	17%
LIFE	2%	13%
BOLD	16%	14%
Mayoral Approval Rating		
Strongly Approve	57%	
Approve	31	

Disapprove	3
Strongly Disapprove	5
Don't Know	4

**TABLE 8**  
**SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS**

Population Characteristics	
N = 452 Black Registered Voters in Orleans Parish	
Females	60%
Males	40
Median Age	41 Years of Age
Income	
Below \$10,000	15%
\$10,000 - \$20,000	19
\$20,000 - \$30,000	18
\$30,000 - \$40,000	11
\$40,000 - \$50,000	10
\$50,000 - \$75,000	7
\$75,000 - \$90,000	2
\$90,000 or more	4

Don't Know/Refused	14
Highest Level of Education	
Grade School (thru 8th grade)	6%
Grades 9-11	12
High School	27
Some College	31
College Degree	24
Don't Know	1
Margin of Error	+/- 4.7%
Survey Conducted over the following dates: March 10th - March 19th, 1997.	