Environmental Survey

THE SEVENTH WARD

Introduction

In the mid-1800s, many free people of color (les gens de couleur libres) began living in the Seventh Ward, establishing a long history of Black life in this neighborhood (The Data Center, 2002). From the mid-19th century, family-owned businesses flourished in this neighborhood accompanying Claiborne Avenue's vibrant black residential and business life (Gershon, 2021). In 1966, the dismantling of this success began with the construction of the I-10 interstate (A Closer Walk). The oak tree-lined street was torn up along with the destruction of 500 homes and a decline in business, forever changing the landscape of the Seventh Ward (Gershon, 2021). Hurricane Katrina only added to the loss in prosperity. Of course, the neighborhood still hosts successful New Orleans institutions such as St. Augustine High School and the Autocrat; however, it has never returned to what it once was.

These historical events are precursors to what we now find in the Seventh Ward: urban blight. Urban blight can be characterized by "the deterioration of real property conditions, which negatively affect surrounding areas and communities … fostering the abandonment or deterioration of real estate, accompanied by a degraded environment, accumulated debris, alleys, graffiti, and broken windows" (Gershon, 2021). Our study tracks instances of urban blight within a 0.66mi^2 area of the Seventh Ward. We note instances of vacant lots, abandoned houses/buildings, blighted/overgrown plants, illegal dumping, absent street signs, and deteriorating sidewalks.

The occurrence of urban blight calls for study as neighborhood and built environment are considered a social determinant of health, as outlined by the Centers for Disease Control. New Orleans has already

exhibited this effect as our home was included in a census survey of 107 American cities in 2003 that studied the correlation between boarded-up housing and health outcomes (Cohen et al., 2003). The study found that "boarded-up housing remained a predictor of gonorrhea rates, all-cause premature mortality, and premature mortality due to malignant neoplasms, diabetes, homicide, and suicide after control for sociodemographic factors" (Cohen et al., 2003). A 2017 research report produced by the Urban Institute cumulates various studies about urban blight and health outcomes, supporting the 2003 study and stating that vacant and abandoned properties have "deleterious effects on area residents, including mental distress, higher rates of chronic illness, sexually transmitted diseases, stunted brain and physical development in children, and mass retreat of area residents into unhealthy eating and exercise habits" (de Leon and Schilling, 2017). New Orleans is considered one of the most unique cities in the world with its rich and vibrant culture. This is not because the city itself creates the culture, its people are the culture. In order for our city to continue to thrive, we must protect the health of its inhabitants. As part of Ubuntu Village's mission to keep our village safe, we point out areas of improvement for the city to act within the Seventh Ward. Our findings are listed below.

Method and Design

Target Area

A 0.66mi^2 area of the Seventh ward

- Bounded North to South by N Broad St with Florida Ave and N Claiborne Ave
- Bounded East to West by St Bernard Ave and Elysian Fields

Method of Study

Staff members and volunteers of Ubuntu Village were placed in pairs and assigned a designated area of 6-12 blocks within the area of study pictured in Figure 1. The survey was split into three phases as labeled on Figure 1 with N Miro acting as the boundary between Phase 1 and Phase 2. Phase 1 took place on December 11th of 2024, and Phase 2 took place on March 7th of 2025. Phase 3 took place on September 6th of 2025. During Phase 3, volunteers worked longitudinally from N Broad and Florida Ave down to N Claiborne taking data.

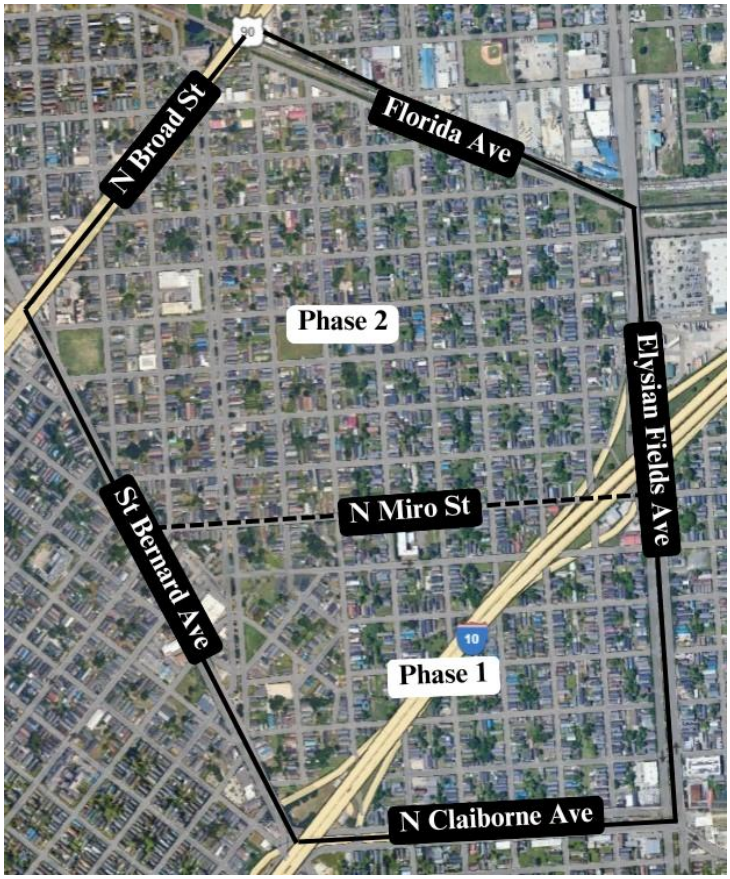

Figure 1. Area of Study

Before surveying, staff were briefed on the definition of urban blight and given guidelines for what can be considered urban blight and should be designated on the map as vacant lots, abandoned houses/buildings, blighted/overgrown greenery, illegal dumping, absent street signs, and deteriorating sidewalks.

Data collection was conducted utilizing the mobile app, Google Earth. Google Earth allows people to collaborate on maps, allowing us to compile data into one map. Staff placed "pins" on the collaborative map when they found an instance of urban blight. In some cases, photos of what they found were attached to the pins. Some of these photos can be found in the appendix.

After data collection was completed, the pins were color coded according to what they were labeled as and labels were standardized. Colored labels listed below correspond to the colored pins found on the map:

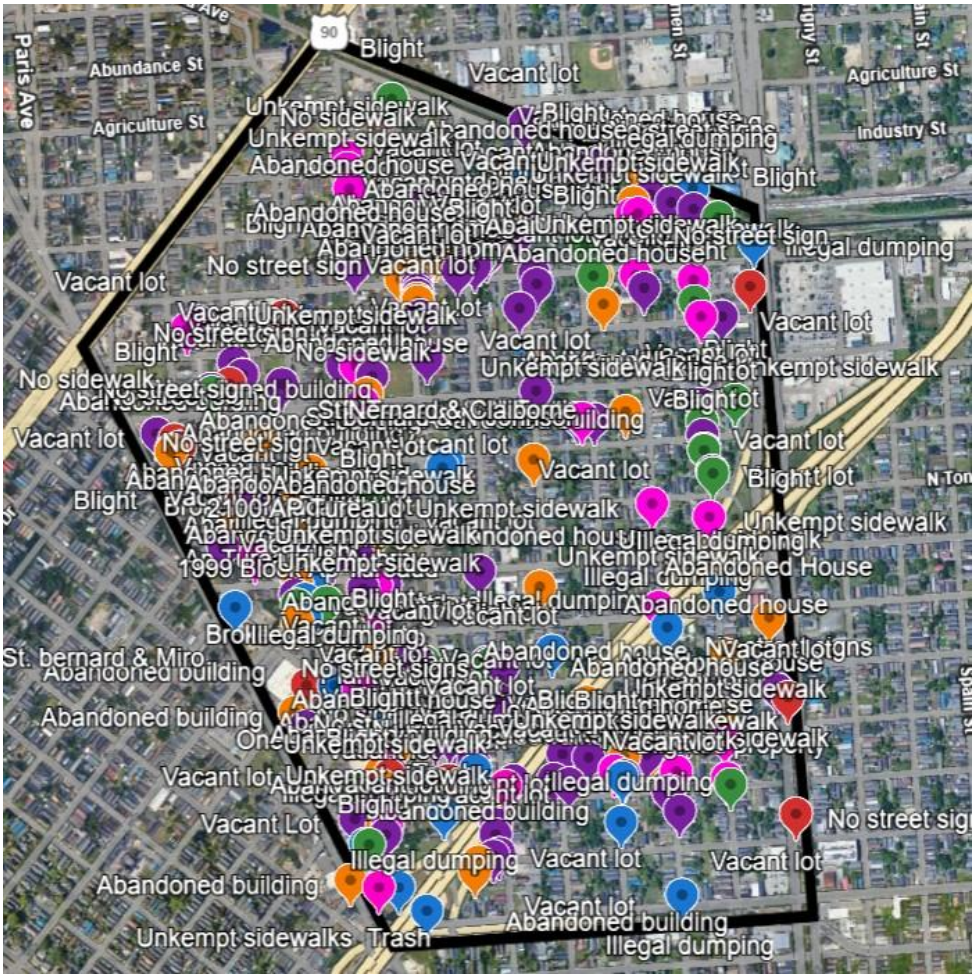

Figure 2. Collaborative Map

Vacant lot

Abandoned house/building

Blighted/overgrown greenery

Illegal Dumping

Absent street signs

Deteriorating sidewalk

Google Earth also allows for map data to be converted into a KML file which was then converted into an Excel spreadsheet. Tables about what we found were then developed from this spreadsheet in order to analyze the data.

Results

The survey findings are visualized in Figure 2, a screenshot of the collaborative map from Google Earth in which staff members placed pins that represent instances of urban

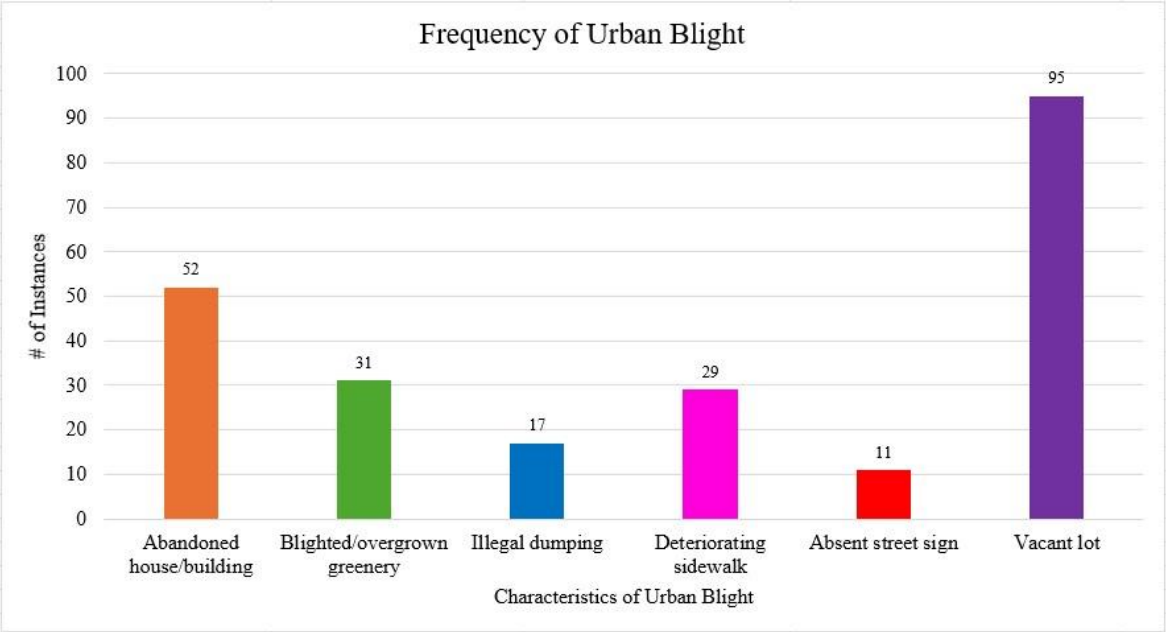

Table 1. Instances of Urban Blight

blight. Table 1 places this data in a bar chart, revealing trends found in this area of the Seventh Ward. Vacant lots were most common with 95 instances of this noted. Abandoned buildings/houses followed with 52 instances. In order to understand the remaining data, standard deviation was calculated and found to be 30.78.

An unusual configuration of urban blight was observed, taking the form of a row of abandoned buildings/houses and vacant lots on one block of Allen St. This is pictured in Figure 3. We did not record another instance of multiple vacancies and abandoned buildings neighboring each other in this manner.

Another accumulation of urban blight presented itself as a 0.42 acre section of a block being completely vacant and having blighted/overgrown greenery. This is depicted in Figure 4 in the top left corner of the photo. Additionally, we found that 17 out 95 (17.89%) vacant lots were accompanied by blighted/overgrown greenery. The locations of these lots are noted in Table 2 in the appendix. There was also one known instance of illegal dumping that was recorded during the first phase of the survey that was still present during the second phase; a deteriorating mattress, plywood, and trash were found. This

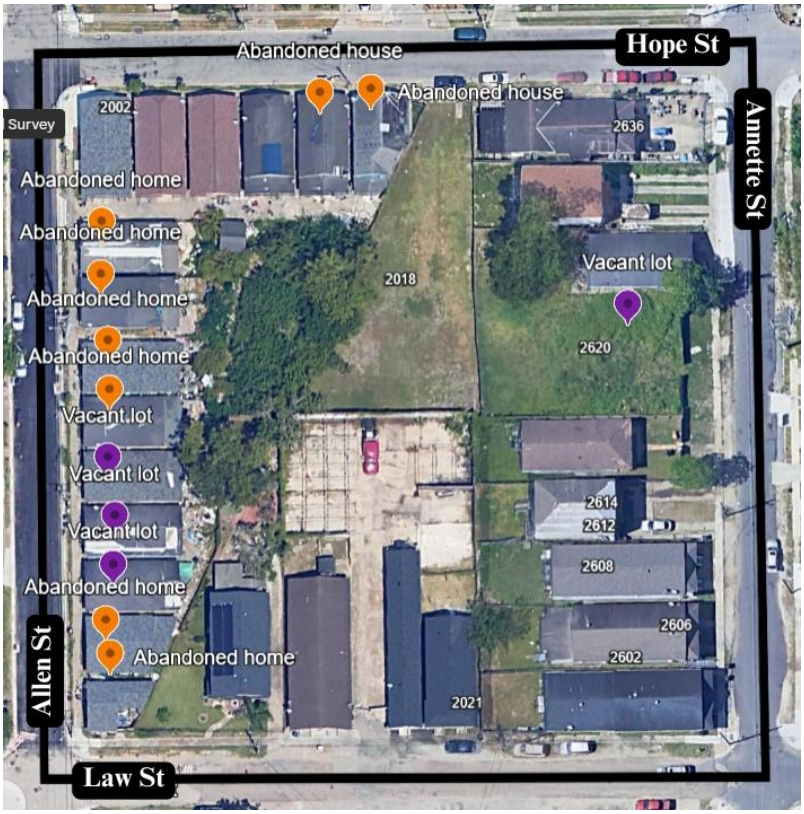

Figure 3. Row of Vacancy and Abandonment

occurred at approximately 2133 A.P. Tureaud Ave.

Discussion

Vacant lots were observed to be the most common manifestation of urban blight in the area that we surveyed. 17.89% of the time, these lots also had blighted/overgrown greenery. The Urban Institute's 2017 Research Report states that vacant lots contribute to the breakdown of a community's social capital. A 2012 study surveyed 50 residents from two neighborhoods in Philadelphia, PA finding this breakdown to present itself as resident's perception of decreasing control over neighborhood life, fractured ties, concerns about crime and safety, and a financial strain on the community (Garvin et al., 2012). Because there is a high-density of vacant lots in this area of the Seventh Ward, it would be beneficial to conduct a survey similar to Garvin's 2012 study. It can be hypothesized that Seventh Ward residents would express similar feelings, and possibly at a more severe level because of the frequency

of vacant lots.

The Urban Institute offers solutions, mainly focusing on urban greening which are “efforts to renature urban areas by installing various types of green infrastructure” (Warnell, 2023). This can look like the planting of community gardens, urban farms, community maintenance, tree planting, etc. While the data supporting a reduction in crime due to urban greening is inconsistent, many studies support the increase in social cohesion, psychological wellbeing, and a greater perception of safety. It is certainly worthwhile converting some of these vacant lots into areas that provide fresh food or a safe social hub within a neighborhood.

Abandoned houses followed vacant lots in frequency. Abandoned houses also contribute to the breakdown in social capital. Addressing abandoned houses presents more difficulty: however, land banks offer a solution. “Land banks have legal powers to acquire vacant properties, often through expedited municipal tax foreclosure processes, and then reclaim and repurpose them working in close partnerships with community development organizations and nonprofit agencies” (de Leon and Shilling, 2017). These abandoned homes do not need to be immediately transformed into newly built housing; however, this land could use direction as informed by the community.

Illegal dumping, deteriorating sidewalks, and absent street signs are the easiest issues to address and allow for rapid improvement. Table 3 in the appendix lists all instances with addresses of these three characterizations of urban blight for code enforcement to address. We recommend that action is taken as soon as possible to clean up trash from illegal dumping, repair sidewalks, and replace absent street signs.

References

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Appendix

Table 2

Vacant lot with blighted/overgrown greenery
1812 N Miro
1940 Annette St
1660 N Roman
2672 New Orleans St
2716 St Anthony
1862 N Dorgenois
3504 Pauger St
2629 Annette St
2631 Annette St
2639 Annette St
2044 Hope St
1805 St Anthony
1822 New Orleans St
2334 Frenchmen St
2251 Frenchmen St
1902 N Tonti
31171 Old Prieur St

Table 3

*Names in italic are the street signs that need replacement

Immediate Action Items		
Illegal Dumping	**Deteriorating Sidewalks**	**Absent Street Signs***
29.972980, -90.064844 Under the Claiborne bridge, near intersection at St. Bernard	1813 New Orleans St	*New Orleans St & N Roman St*
29°58'23"N 90°03'55"W Hunter's Field, under Claiborne Bridge	1701 Old Prieur St	*Allen St & N Roman St*
2406 Pauger St	1731 Annette St	*Republic St & N Rocheblave*
29.974452, -90.064564 Allen St under the Claiborne Bridge	Hunter's Field on St Bernard Ave	*Law St* & AP Tureaud
Vacant lot next to 2433 Pauger St	1750 N Miro St	*N Dorgenois* & George Nick Connor Dr
1761 N Roman St	2535 Republic St Corner of Law and Republic	*N Tonti* & George Nick Connor Dr
2131 AP Tureaud	2610 Frenchmen St	*Florida Ave & Frenchmen St*
1639 St Bernard Ave	2523 Frenchmen St	*Law St* & Elysian Fields
2132 Florida Ave	2200 Frenchmen St	*Elysian Fields & N Prieur St*
2638 Elysian Fields, under the overpass	2039 Frenchmen St	*Elysian Fields & N Derbigny St*
1701 Old Prieur St	1810 Frenchmen St	*New Prieur & New Orelans St*
2140 Florida Ave	1726 Frenchmen	
2039 Frenchmen St	2650 Touro St	
2010 Touro St	2661 Touro St	
	2612 Touro St	
	2214 Touro St	
	2020 Touro St	
	1735 Touro St	
	1718 Touro St	
	3099 Pauger St	
	2434 Pauger St	
	2721 New Orleans St	
	2719 New Orleans St	
	2701 New Orleans St	
	2504 New Orleans St	
	2419 New Orleans St	
	2215 New Orleans St	
	2111 New Orleans St	
	1800 N Galvez St	
	1730 New Orleans St	
	1706 New Orleans St	

Figure 4. Illegal Dumping

Figure 5. Illegal Dumping

Figure 6. 1700 N Prieur Blighted Vacant Lot

Figure 7. 1805 St Anthony Vacant Blighted Lot

Figure 8. 2121 N Rocheblave Abandoned House

Figure 9. 2429 New Orleans St Abandoned House

Figure 10. 2711 Annette St Abandoned House