

FAITH, DEPENDENCY, AND THE AS-IS ECONOMY: NONPROFIT SATURATION AND ECONOMIC STAGNATION IN SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA

Tory MCCOY¹
David S. FOWLER^{2*}

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Abstract

Shreveport, Louisiana, once a vibrant industrial and cultural centre in the Ark-La-Tex region, has experienced decades of population decline, economic stagnation, and fiscal strain. This study explores how the city's unusually high concentration of nonprofit and religious organizations has shaped its civic and economic trajectory. Drawing on archival records from Louisiana State University Shreveport (LSUS), U.S. Census Bureau data, local press archives, and nonprofit sector materials, the paper introduces the concept of the as-is economy, a system of civic and institutional dependency that perpetuates economic inertia. The analysis traces the city's post-industrial transition, from the decline of oil and manufacturing to the expansion of tax-exempt institutions, and situates Shreveport within broader Southern patterns of religious, philanthropic, and service-sector dominance. By connecting nonprofit saturation to diminished fiscal capacity, stalled diversification, "brain drain," and demographic contraction, this study argues that Shreveport exemplifies a broader paradox of the Southern urban economy: a city rich in moral capital and institutional care yet constrained in its capacity for structural renewal. The case of Shreveport suggests that nonprofit expansion, while socially stabilizing, may also reinforce long-term economic dependency when not paired with entrepreneurial growth, public investment, and civic modernization.

Keywords: Nonprofit saturation; Southern cities; urban development; tax-exempt property; as-is economy

¹ Louisiana State University Shreveport, College of Business, Shreveport, LA., U.S.A.,
mccoyt73@lsus.edu

² Louisiana State University Shreveport, College of Business, Assistant Professor of Management,
Shreveport, LA., U.S.A., david.fowler@lsus.edu

* Corresponding author

1. Introduction

Shreveport, Louisiana, stands as a paradox within the modern South, a city endowed with historical richness, industrial heritage, and cultural vitality, yet chronically mired in economic stagnation. Once positioned as a key node of energy production and transportation within the Ark-La-Tex region, Shreveport has faced decades of population decline, persistent poverty, and disinvestment (Pinkney & Johnson, 2026) since the collapse of the oil industry in the mid-1980s. Its economic struggles mirror a broader pattern among mid-sized Southern cities that have struggled to transition from industrial economies to diversified, innovation-driven systems (Brenner et al., 2009; Glaeser, 2012). However, beyond the conventional explanations of deindustrialization and globalization, Shreveport presents an underexamined dimension: the role of nonprofit and religious saturation in shaping its civic and economic landscape.

This paper argues that Shreveport's economic and demographic challenges cannot be fully understood apart from its dense concentration of nonprofit and religious organizations, which, though often well-intentioned and socially indispensable, have inadvertently contributed to what this study terms an as-is economy. This "as-is economy" describes a condition in which a city's institutional framework becomes self-referential and dependent, maintaining existing social and economic structures without meaningful adaptation or innovation. The result is an urban ecosystem characterized by excessive reliance on tax-exempt entities, limited entrepreneurial growth, and diminished fiscal capacity for public investment. While the proliferation of nonprofit and faith-based organizations reflects a deep tradition of civic engagement and moral commitment in the American South (Ammerman, 2005; Robert Wuthnow & Adams, 1988), it also reveals the paradox of a moral economy that often substitutes charitable maintenance for structural transformation.

The religious dimension of this nonprofit concentration is particularly striking in Shreveport. Known historically as "the City of Churches," Shreveport has long cultivated an identity deeply tied to faith-based institutions and charitable service (Brook, 2009). This density reflects a longstanding pattern in Southern civic life in which religious institutions assume quasi-public roles, providing social services, education, neighbourhood identity, and moral leadership (Finke & Stark, 2005). Yet, as this study contends, the very prominence of these institutions, combined with a broader nonprofit ecosystem dominated by healthcare, social service, and charitable organizations, has reshaped the local economy in ways that constrain private-sector innovation and erode the taxable base. The unintended consequence is a civic environment that sustains dependency rather than development, compassion rather than competitiveness.

Shreveport's story is not isolated. Across the American South, cities that once relied on extractive industries or industrial production now grapple with similar transitions. As public institutions weaken and economic diversification lags, nonprofits often fill the vacuum, assuming responsibilities once managed by municipal or private actors (Almog-Bar & Young, 2016; Salamon, 1987). While these entities provide vital social safety nets, they also alter the financial and spatial logic of the city. Nonprofit proliferation consumes land and resources exempt from property taxation, shifts human capital into low-wage service roles, and diffuses leadership across competing missions. In Shreveport's case, this saturation has become both a symptom and a cause of economic inertia, a civic condition in which benevolence coexists with decline.

This study draws upon archival research from the Louisiana State University Shreveport archives, U.S. Census Bureau data, labour and crime statistics, local journalism, and nonprofit sector materials to trace how nonprofit saturation emerged and how it continues to shape the city's development. It seeks to answer three interrelated questions:

- (1) How has the proliferation of nonprofit and religious organizations influenced Shreveport's economic trajectory since the mid-twentieth century?
- (2) What structural mechanisms, such as tax policy, land use, labour patterns, and demographic change, link nonprofit density to economic stagnation?
- (3) How does Shreveport's experience illuminate broader patterns of civic dependency and religious economy in the post-industrial South?

By integrating perspectives from urban economics, nonprofit studies, Southern cultural history, and institutional theory, this paper positions Shreveport as a critical case study for understanding the unintended consequences of philanthropic overextension. The findings suggest that while nonprofits and faith-based organizations embody the region's deepest values of community and service, their unchecked growth may also perpetuate structural dependency. Recognizing this dynamic is essential not only for understanding Shreveport's struggles but also for envisioning a more balanced model of Southern urban renewal that harmonizes compassion with competitiveness.

2. Literature review

The nonprofit sector has expanded substantially in the United States over the last several decades, becoming a major institutional presence in service delivery, civic life, and public problem-solving. Foundational scholarship explains this growth partly through sectoral differentiation: nonprofit organizations emerge where market provision is insufficient and where government provision is incomplete or politically constrained.

Weisbrod's (1977) early theory of the nonprofit sector framed nonprofits as responses to heterogeneous demand for collective goods, especially where government underprovides services desired by segments of the population. More recent syntheses by Anheier and Toepler (2022) and by Salamon (2003) show how nonprofits now operate within mixed institutional environments shaped by privatization, contracting, and public-private interdependence. In this sense, nonprofit growth is not simply a charitable phenomenon; it is also an institutional response to the changing boundaries of state and market authority (Anheier & Toepler, 2022; Salamon, 2003; Weisbrod, 1977).

This broader shift has important implications for cities. As public institutions retrench, fragment, or lose fiscal capacity, nonprofit organizations frequently assume quasi-public roles in healthcare, education, social services, and neighbourhood support. Young's framework remains especially useful because it shows that nonprofits may function in complementary, supplementary, or adversarial relation to government rather than simply existing outside it. At the urban level, this means nonprofits can become embedded in governance itself, helping administer need while also reflecting the institutional limits of local public capacity. Guo and Acar further demonstrate that collaboration among nonprofits may mitigate fragmentation, but organizational density can also intensify competition for funding, legitimacy, and influence, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Guo & Acar, 2005; Young, 2006).

2.1 Nonprofit saturation

The present study builds on that scholarship by asking what happens when nonprofit growth becomes not merely substantial, but structurally saturating. The core issue is not whether nonprofits provide value; clearly, they do. The issue is whether a city can become so dependent on tax-exempt, service-oriented institutions that nonprofit density begins to shape fiscal capacity, land use, leadership patterns, and developmental expectations. Salamon's account of the nonprofit sector's resilience is relevant here because it also warns that the scale and durability of the sector can create new risks and institutional distortions. Brandtner and Dunning extend this line of thinking by describing nonprofits as a form of urban infrastructure. That framing is especially useful for the present manuscript because infrastructure can stabilize a city while also locking it into inherited patterns of operation and institutional dependence (Brandtner & Dunning, 2020; Salamon, 2003).

2.2 Religion

Religion is a particularly important part of this institutional story in the American South. Scholarship on American religion has long shown that congregations are not merely spiritual associations; they are durable civic organizations that structure belonging, volunteering, philanthropy, and public identity. Wuthnow's work on the restructuring of American religion, Finke and Stark's religious economy perspective, Ammerman's analysis of congregational organization, and Putnam and Campbell's work on religion and social capital all help establish that religious institutions often function as mediating

structures between individuals and the wider civic order. In places where public institutions are weak or uneven, churches may become especially prominent as providers of trust, continuity, and practical support (Ammerman, 2005; Finke & Stark, 2005; Putnam & Campbell, 2012; Wuthnow, 1990).

For that reason, religion in this study is framed not as the sole cause of stagnation, but as one important component of a broader nonprofit ecology. That distinction matters analytically. The literature supports treating congregations as organizational actors within civil society rather than as purely theological abstractions. Research on congregational social service activity by Chaves and Tsitsos reinforces this point by showing that congregations frequently participate in service provision and partnership networks, especially in response to local social needs. In a city such as Shreveport, where churches appear highly visible in both spatial and civic terms, religious institutions may contribute to social cohesion and charitable capacity while also participating in a larger tax-exempt and service-oriented institutional order (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001).

2.3 Nonprofit property ownership

Property-tax exemption is one of the most important mechanisms through which nonprofit concentration affects local government capacity. Brody's work on charitable property-tax exemption, the Urban Institute report by Brody, Marquez, and Toran, and Lincoln Institute work by Kenyon and Langley all show that tax exemption can place measurable strain on municipalities because local governments must still provide police, fire, streets, and other services to tax-exempt properties. This does not invalidate exemption as a policy principle, but it does make clear that nonprofit landholding has real distributive consequences for cities with limited revenue options. That literature is especially useful here because it gives the Shreveport argument a stronger fiscal and legal backbone, tying nonprofit density to municipal capacity rather than treating institutional concentration as only symbolic or cultural (Brody, 2010; Brody et al., 2012; Kenyon & Langley, 2010).

2.4 Marketization, path dependence, and institutional persistence

Eikenberry and Kluver caution that marketization can reshape nonprofit identity and weaken civil society contributions when organizations adopt market logics too fully. Mahoney and North provide the theoretical vocabulary for understanding how institutional arrangements can become self-reinforcing over time, even when they no longer produce optimal developmental outcomes. Glaeser's work on cities broadens this frame by emphasizing the importance of dense, productive, innovation-oriented urban systems for long-term prosperity. Taken together, these literatures support the paper's central conceptual contribution: the as-is economy. As developed here, the as-is economy names a civic condition in which a city sustains itself through dense networks of care, relief, and institutional continuity, yet struggles to convert that organizational richness into broad-based economic transformation (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Glaeser, 2012; Mahoney, 2000; North, 2012).

2.5 Study design

Finally, the present study adopts a qualitative-descriptive case study design because the argument depends not only on aggregate trends but also on historical layering, institutional context, and local civic meaning. Yin's case study framework is appropriate for this kind of inquiry because it allows for the integration of archival evidence, demographic change, organizational patterns, and interpretive analysis within a single bounded case. That approach is particularly well suited to Shreveport, where the significance of nonprofit density lies not only in quantity, but in the way nonprofit, religious, educational, and service institutions interact across time to shape the city's developmental trajectory (Yin, 2018).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive case study design, integrating historical analysis, economic data interpretation, and thematic examination of nonprofit proliferation in Shreveport, Louisiana. The case study approach is appropriate given the city's distinctive historical, cultural, and institutional context within the American South (Yin, 2018). Rather than testing a formal causal hypothesis, this design seeks to uncover the structural and cultural mechanisms that have linked Shreveport's nonprofit saturation to broader patterns of economic stagnation.

The analysis draws on three categories of evidence. First, archival and historical materials were consulted through the Louisiana State University Shreveport archives, including local newspaper collections, municipal commentary, and historical materials related to educational conflict, economic development, and civic reform. These sources offer valuable insight into how local actors framed economic problems and proposed solutions across multiple decades. Second, demographic and economic data were used to situate those narratives within larger trends, including population change, labour market composition, crime, and poverty. Third, secondary academic literature on nonprofits, Southern urbanism, and institutional dependency was used to interpret the local case in relation to broader theoretical conversations.

The analysis proceeded through thematic coding of recurring concerns in the archival and narrative material. These themes included industrial decline, religious and nonprofit substitution, fiscal compression, educational underdevelopment, brain drain, demographic aging, and civic pessimism. Descriptive statistics were incorporated not to establish strict causality, but to contextualize and support these themes. The final stage involved interpretive synthesis through the concept of the as-is economy, which functions here as a theoretical lens for understanding how institutional saturation, moral obligation, and economic inertia become mutually reinforcing.

Because this study relies exclusively on archival and publicly available material, no human subjects were involved. The intent is analytical rather than theological or moralizing. Religious institutions are framed here as one component within a wider nonprofit ecosystem, not as the sole cause of Shreveport's stagnation.

4. Findings

4.1 The as-is economy: structural inertia and repeated cycles of stalled renewal

Archival and economic evidence indicate that Shreveport operates within what this study terms an as-is economy, a condition of institutional stability coexisting with long-term economic stagnation. Emerging most clearly in the aftermath of industrial contraction during the 1980s, this equilibrium is characterized by the persistence of legacy systems that maintain social order but resist innovation. The city has not been devoid of initiative or aspiration. Rather, it has repeatedly generated development efforts, public optimism, and institutional responses that fail to produce durable structural transformation. This pattern is consistent with scholarship on path dependence and institutional persistence, which suggests that once a locality becomes organized around a particular set of adaptive arrangements, those arrangements can continue even after they cease to produce optimal developmental outcomes (Mahoney, 2000; North, 2012).

Shreveport's modern economic trajectory reflects a sequence of partial recoveries followed by renewed stagnation. During the early 1980s, the city benefited substantially from the oil and gas economy (Hein & Lessoff, 2021). Energy-related activity supported local business confidence, construction, and regional growth. Yet the collapse of oil prices in the mid-to-late 1980s destabilized the city's industrial core. Major employers that had provided economic ballast either retrenched or departed, leaving not merely a loss of jobs but a deeper crisis of civic direction. Later periods of apparent renewal, including the rise of riverboat gaming, healthcare expansion, local technology initiatives, and the temporary boost associated with Louisiana's film tax incentives, generated episodic momentum without producing a sufficiently diversified and durable growth model (Button, 2021; Klebanow & Gallaway, 2015).

This pattern suggests not simply decline, but adaptive stasis. Shreveport has developed a civic order that is highly capable of absorbing disruption, yet less capable of converting those disruptions into renewal. New institutional layers have accumulated, but many function primarily to manage the effects of stagnation rather than to overcome its causes. In this respect, the as-is economy names a developmental condition in which relief, patchwork adaptation, and institutional continuity substitute for broad-based reinvention.

4.2 Historical roots of institutional dependency: education, governance, and underdevelopment

Shreveport's institutional dependency is historically deep and cannot be reduced to recent economic decline alone. Archival evidence from the mid-twentieth century reveals that key structural tensions, especially those involving education (Reber, 2007), public authority, taxation, and civic coordination, were already visible decades earlier. Local debates surrounding school desegregation, public funding, and private institutional alternatives reflected more than the politics of race and resistance. They

also exposed a broader pattern of fragmented civic responsibility and uneven commitment to building durable local capacity under shared public authority.

These historical tensions matter because they help explain why later institutional responses in Shreveport so often took the form of workaround arrangements rather than coordinated developmental systems. The city's educational and civic infrastructure evolved within a context marked by contested authority, uneven investment, and recurring uncertainty about who should bear responsibility for long-term institutional development. As a result, Shreveport's later struggles with talent retention, workforce alignment, and public-private coordination did not emerge in a vacuum. They were layered onto longstanding structural weaknesses.

The city's postsecondary landscape also reflects this broader issue of local capacity. Shreveport possesses important educational institutions (Banta, 1996; McCray, 2011; Morgan, 2008), yet questions of institutional embeddedness, regional authority, and developmental alignment remain central. A city seeking renewal typically requires robust educational anchors capable of producing talent, shaping regional strategy, and functioning as engines of innovation. Where such alignment is partial or fragmented, the local economy is more likely to drift toward maintenance-oriented institutional forms. In Shreveport, educational underdevelopment and fragmented civic authority have contributed to a broader developmental pattern in which institutional continuity has often been easier to achieve than institutional transformation.

4.3 The religious and nonprofit footprint: civic stabilization and sectoral saturation

A defining feature of Shreveport's civic landscape is the scale and visibility of its nonprofit ecosystem, particularly its religious institutions. The city's nonprofit landscape is not merely large in numerical terms; it is culturally central. Faith-based, charitable, and service-oriented organizations occupy a disproportionate share of local civic space, organizational attention, and public trust. This institutional density reflects a longstanding Southern moral economy in which churches and nonprofits serve not only as providers of relief, but also as mediating structures of identity, belonging, and local (Ammerman, 2005; Finke & Stark, 2005; Putnam & Campbell, 2012; Robert Wuthnow & Adams, 1988).

This concentration has helped stabilize the city through repeated periods of hardship. Churches, hospitals, charities, and service organizations have become alternative infrastructures of care in a city where market dynamism and public capacity have often proven insufficient. In this sense, Shreveport's nonprofit ecosystem has functioned as a form of urban infrastructure, shaping not only service delivery but the broader institutional order of the city (Brandtner & Dunning, 2020). These organizations sustain social cohesion, provide practical assistance, and preserve continuity in the face of prolonged instability.

At the same time, the density of this organizational landscape creates a form of sectoral saturation. The issue is not whether nonprofit and religious institutions provide value; they clearly do. The issue is whether the cumulative growth of such institutions can become so extensive that it begins to define the city's dominant mode of adaptation. In Shreveport, nonprofit and faith-based entities increasingly perform functions that might otherwise be shared across stronger public, commercial, and educational systems. This produces a civic substitution effect, in which tax-exempt and service-oriented organizations do not merely supplement the city's institutional life; they increasingly structure it. Such substitution may improve short-term welfare while simultaneously reducing long-term developmental flexibility (Salamon, 2003; Young, 2006).

4.4 Fiscal compression, land use, and the opportunity cost of tax-exempt dominance

The expansion of nonprofit and religious institutions has important fiscal and spatial consequences for Shreveport. One of the most significant is the narrowing of the local tax base through the expansion of tax-exempt property. In municipalities with limited revenue flexibility, concentrated nonprofit landholding can reduce the fiscal capacity needed to support infrastructure, policing, education, and redevelopment. Scholarship on charitable property-tax exemption and payments in lieu of taxes has shown that cities routinely confront this tension: tax-exempt institutions may provide socially valuable services while simultaneously reducing the municipal revenue available to sustain the public systems on which cities depend (Brody, 2010; Brody et al., 2012; Kenyon & Langley, 2010).

This issue is especially acute in a city where nonprofit, healthcare, educational, and religious institutions occupy a visible and substantial share of the civic landscape. The consequences are not merely fiscal but geographic. Land devoted to tax-exempt institutional use shapes the city's development possibilities. Churches, hospitals, and other nonprofit facilities may occupy strategically important parcels that could otherwise support taxable commercial or mixed-use redevelopment. In a city already struggling to diversify and attract investment, the opportunity cost of land use becomes especially consequential.

Fiscal compression also interacts with organizational concentration. When large nonprofit systems, especially in healthcare and allied services, dominate revenue and institutional influence, the nonprofit sector may begin to mirror the concentration patterns of the wider economy (Bromley & Meyer, 2017). Smaller organizations, despite their local importance, command only a limited share of resources relative to large institutional incumbents (Markman & Waldron, 2014). The result is not simply a large nonprofit sector, but a hierarchical nonprofit order in which institutional scale and tax-exempt dominance shape both public finance and developmental possibility.

4.5 Crime, poverty, and the burden of maintenance

Shreveport's nonprofit expansion is closely intertwined with the city's enduring social distress. High rates of poverty, persistent public safety concerns, low educational attainment, and limited economic mobility generate sustained demand for intervention. In this sense, nonprofit density is partly a response to long-standing local need. Yet the relationship is not merely reactive. As more organizations emerge to address recurring harms, the city becomes increasingly oriented toward mitigation, response, and care rather than prevention, production, and transformation.

Crime, in particular, functions not only as a public safety issue but as a developmental one (Akinbobola, 2021; Jaggers et al., 2016). Persistent violence and property crime can deter investment, weaken neighborhood confidence, strain municipal budgets, and reduce the city's attractiveness to both firms and households. Where crime combines with poverty and educational underperformance, the city's institutional energies are pulled toward stabilization rather than long-term renewal. This dynamic deepens the burden of maintenance. Institutions multiply around need because need remains structurally unresolved.

The consequence is a feedback loop in which social distress justifies institutional expansion, while institutional expansion becomes increasingly devoted to managing the effects of unresolved social distress. This does not imply that nonprofits produce poverty or crime. Rather, it indicates that in a city without sufficient economic diversification and public reinvestment, the organizational response to distress can become both necessary and self-reinforcing. The as-is economy thus operates not only through fiscal and institutional arrangements, but through the normalization of maintenance as the city's dominant civic task.

4.6 Demographic decline, brain drain, and the aging of the civic order

Demographic change is one of the clearest indicators of Shreveport's long-term stagnation. Population loss, outmigration, and the erosion of working-age cohorts point to a city that has struggled to retain momentum across generations. This pattern matters not simply because fewer residents remain, but because the composition of the remaining population shapes the city's institutional order (Pearman, 2020). When younger, educated, and entrepreneurial residents leave, they take with them not only labour, but future tax revenue, civic leadership potential, and innovation capacity.

The concept of brain drain (Beine et al., 2001) is especially useful here. A city that loses its younger and more mobile talent becomes less attractive to employers seeking a dynamic labour force. In turn, the absence of diversified, higher-wage employment pushes more residents to leave. This compounding dynamic is particularly damaging in urban systems that rely heavily on lower-wage service and care sectors. Where healthcare, education, and social assistance constitute a growing share of employment, the local economy may provide stability without creating sufficient pathways for upward mobility.

Demographic aging intensifies these pressures. As older residents require more healthcare and social support, demand for nonprofit and service institutions expands even as the tax base narrows and the pool of working-age residents contracts (Bloom et al., 2010; Wang & Wang, 2025). The city becomes increasingly organized around systems of care, dependency, and institutional continuity. In this sense, demographic change does not merely reflect stagnation; it institutionalizes it. The as-is economy is therefore not only fiscal or organizational, but demographic. It is a civic order shaped by population loss, the outmigration of growth-oriented cohorts, and the increasing dominance of institutions designed to stabilize decline rather than reverse it.

4.7 Civic pessimism, entrenchment, and the culture of limited expectation

A final finding concerns the cultural dimension of Shreveport's stagnation. Cities are shaped not only by labour markets, property regimes, and institutional density, but also by collective narratives (A. Bell & de Shalit, 2022) of what is possible. In Shreveport, prolonged economic disappointment appears to have contributed to a culture of limited expectation in which decline is normalized, reform is episodic, and civic energy is repeatedly directed toward coping rather than transformation. This pattern is not reducible to apathy. On the contrary, the city remains rich in volunteerism, service, and institutional commitment. Yet resilience, in this context, often functions as a substitute for regeneration.

This cultural entrenchment helps explain why institutional maintenance remains so central. A city repeatedly conditioned by partial recoveries, abandoned opportunities, and fragmented strategies may gradually become more skilled at endurance than reinvention. The result is a civic psychology in which service, relief, and continuity retain moral prestige, while risk-taking, experimentation, and coordinated developmental ambition become harder to sustain.

The as-is economy is therefore not only a structural condition but also a cultural one. It names a civic pattern in which moral commitment and organizational abundance coexist with diminished expectations of transformation. In Shreveport, this culture of limited expectation has not replaced civic pride, but it has narrowed the horizon of what civic effort is expected to accomplish. That narrowing is one of the most consequential findings of this study because it links institutional saturation to the deeper problem of urban imagination. A city may possess extensive networks of care and still struggle to believe in, organize for, and materially pursue its own renewal.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Reframing the problem: Not the absence of care, but the dominance of maintenance

The evidence presented in this study suggests that Shreveport's central challenge is not a lack of caring institutions, but the institutional dominance of maintenance. Churches, hospitals, charities, and service organizations have provided continuity, relief, and social cohesion through prolonged economic instability. These institutions have helped

preserve civic life in a context marked by population loss, industrial contraction, poverty, and uneven public capacity. Their presence should therefore be understood as a source of local resilience rather than as a sign of civic failure.

At the same time, the cumulative weight of these institutions has contributed to a city increasingly organized around care, response, and stabilization rather than long-term transformation. In this sense, Shreveport illustrates a broader urban paradox: the very organizations that sustain a struggling city can also become part of the institutional order that limits its renewal. This is not because care is inherently counterproductive, but because an economy that becomes overly oriented toward relief and maintenance may struggle to generate the conditions required for diversification, entrepreneurship, and sustained reinvestment. The central issue, then, is not whether nonprofit institutions matter, but whether they have come to occupy too much of the city's adaptive capacity.

5.2 The Southern moral economy as strength and constraint

Shreveport's institutional landscape reflects a distinctly Southern moral economy, one in which faith, charity, and service carry deep civic legitimacy. Religious organizations and nonprofits do more than deliver services; they help structure public identity, social trust, and local belonging. In this respect, Shreveport's civic order is rooted in patterns long associated with Southern public life, where congregations and charitable institutions frequently serve as mediating structures between individuals and weakened state or market systems (Ammerman, 2005; Putnam & Campbell, 2012; Wuthnow, 1990).

That moral economy is a source of strength. It helps explain how the city has remained socially cohesive despite prolonged strain. It also helps explain why nonprofit and religious institutions have expanded so visibly in response to need. Yet the same moral economy may become a developmental constraint when trust, philanthropy, land, and leadership are channelled more readily into tax-exempt and service-oriented institutions than into entrepreneurial, research-intensive, or innovation-driven sectors. The issue is therefore not religion itself, but the way a morally dense institutional environment can shape the allocation of civic energy. In Shreveport, the moral economy appears to have supported endurance while also reinforcing an institutional order more adept at care than reinvention.

5.3 Historical continuity and the layering of stagnation

One of the most important implications of this study is that Shreveport's current condition should not be understood as a recent or isolated breakdown. The city's nonprofit saturation is layered onto a much longer history of structural tension involving educational fragility, uneven civic coordination, industrial dependence, and institutional fragmentation. Present challenges are therefore best understood as cumulative rather than episodic.

This historical continuity strengthens the interpretation of Shreveport through path dependence. Once a city becomes organized around a particular set of adaptive

arrangements, those arrangements may persist even when they no longer generate strong developmental outcomes (Mahoney, 2000; North, 2012). Shreveport's present civic order appears to be the product of just such layering. Industrial collapse did not produce a blank slate. Instead, it intensified preexisting patterns of fragmented authority, limited coordination, and institutional workaround. Over time, these patterns accumulated into a civic system that is remarkably durable, but insufficiently transformative. The implication is significant: revitalization efforts that treat current stagnation as a short-term policy problem will likely underestimate the historical depth of the city's institutional configuration.

5.4 The nonprofit city and the limits of substitution

The findings also suggest that nonprofit substitution, while often necessary, has clear developmental limits. Nonprofits can compensate for weak services, soften the effects of poverty, provide social support, and fill gaps left by government and market retreat. However, they cannot fully substitute for a broad taxable commercial base, coordinated public investment, robust private-sector job creation, or durable educational-economic alignment. When substitution becomes systemic rather than supplemental, the city risks becoming dependent on organizational forms that preserve civic order without generating broad-based economic renewal (Salamon, 2003; Young, 2006).

This is especially important in the context of Shreveport's religious and service-heavy civic structure. Churches can provide moral authority, social trust, and practical support; hospitals can anchor employment and service delivery; charities can mitigate suffering. Yet none of these, alone or in combination, can replace the productive functions of a diversified urban economy. A city too reliant on substitution may become institutionally crowded but economically thin. That condition appears central to Shreveport's developmental dilemma. The city is not institutionally empty; it is saturated. The challenge is that institutional saturation has not translated into sufficient productive diversification.

5.5 Educational and institutional capacity as developmental questions

The findings underscore that educational and institutional capacity remain central to any plausible strategy of renewal. Long-term urban revitalization depends not only on attracting capital but also on producing talent, coordinating strategy, and sustaining leadership pipelines across sectors. Where educational systems are fragmented, underfunded, or weakly connected to local development priorities, cities are more likely to default to maintenance-oriented institutional forms rather than future-oriented growth strategies.

In Shreveport, the interaction between educational fragility and economic stagnation appears especially consequential. A city seeking to retain young professionals, attract firms, and support entrepreneurship requires educational institutions that are not only present, but developmentally integrated. This means functioning as talent producers, regional anchors, and partners in workforce and innovation strategy. Where such

integration is partial, nonprofit and service institutions often bear a heavier share of the city's adaptive burden. The implication is not that nonprofits should do less, but that stronger educational-public-private alignment is necessary if the city is to move beyond relief-oriented adaptation.

5.6 Demographic aging and the institutionalization of decline

Shreveport's demographic changes deepen the argument considerably. Population loss and the outmigration of younger, mobile, and skilled residents are not merely symptoms of stagnation; they help institutionalize it. As growth-oriented populations leave, the local economy becomes less attractive to employers seeking innovative labour markets. As employers remain scarce or concentrated in lower-wage sectors, even more residents depart. This compounding effect reinforces the city's dependence on service and care institutions.

Aging intensifies this institutional pattern. Older populations require more healthcare, more assistance, and more service provision, all of which elevate the importance of nonprofits and care-oriented institutions. As that demand rises, the city's organizational infrastructure increasingly adapts around dependency, continuity, and social stabilization. This creates a structural loop in which demographic change and institutional form reinforce one another. In that sense, the as-is economy is not only an institutional pattern; it is also a demographic regime. The city's age structure, labour market composition, and service demands begin to converge around maintenance rather than expansion.

5.7 Policy implications: From charitable maintenance to productive alignment

The policy implications of this study are substantial. The central goal is not to weaken Shreveport's nonprofit or religious institutions, but to connect them more effectively to a broader development strategy. The city does not need less compassion; it needs a more productive alignment between its moral capital and its economic future.

First, Shreveport requires a stronger strategy of economic diversification. Episodic gains in gaming, healthcare, film production, or targeted innovation have not produced sufficiently durable transformation. The city needs broader sectoral development capable of generating higher-wage employment, retaining talent, and expanding the tax base.

Second, local strategy should prioritize public-private-educational coordination. Universities, community colleges, employers, local government, and civic institutions must function less as parallel actors and more as components of an integrated developmental system. Alignment across these sectors is essential if the city is to move from reactive institutional growth toward intentional economic renewal.

Third, larger nonprofit and religious institutions should be understood as potential partners in redevelopment rather than merely as static service providers. Their property holdings, networks of trust, organizational stability, and local legitimacy position them

to contribute meaningfully to workforce initiatives, neighbourhood reinvestment, educational partnerships, and community-based entrepreneurial support. In this respect, the challenge is not to reduce their presence, but to broaden the developmental uses of that presence.

Fourth, Shreveport would benefit from stronger mechanisms for institutional accountability and impact assessment. Counting nonprofits is not enough. A city marked by saturation must also ask whether its institutional density is improving long-term mobility, economic resilience, neighbourhood vitality, and human-capital retention. The broader implication is that organizational abundance should not be mistaken for structural progress.

5.8 Theoretical contribution: The as-is economy as adaptive stasis

The concept of the as-is economy offers a broader theoretical contribution beyond the case of Shreveport. It describes a civic condition in which a city becomes highly organized around care, continuity, and institutional adaptation, yet struggles to convert those organizational strengths into broad-based economic transformation. In such a setting, nonprofits expand because need is persistent, tax-exempt infrastructure becomes central to civic life, public and private developmental capacity remain fragmented, and demographic decline intensifies the city's orientation toward maintenance.

This concept is best understood as a form of adaptive stasis. The city is not static in the literal sense; institutions continue to operate, respond, and accumulate. Yet those adaptations rarely alter the city's developmental trajectory in fundamental ways. The result is a civic order in which moral abundance and material stagnation coexist. Shreveport illustrates how a city can be rich in institutions, rich in service, and rich in organizational care, yet still struggle to generate renewal. That paradox is precisely what the as-is economy is meant to capture.

6. Conclusion

Shreveport, Louisiana, illustrates the complex relationship between civic care and economic stagnation in the post-industrial South. Its contemporary condition cannot be explained solely by the collapse of oil, the loss of major employers, demographic decline, or fragmented public capacity, though each of those factors remains important. Rather, Shreveport reveals what happens when a city adapts to long-term instability through the expansion of institutions designed to preserve continuity, relieve distress, and sustain social order. Over time, those adaptive strengths can become part of the very structure that limits renewal.

The central argument of this study is that Shreveport operates within an as-is economy: a civic and institutional order organized more effectively around maintenance than transformation. In this economy, nonprofit, religious, healthcare, and service-oriented institutions play indispensable roles in sustaining local life. They provide relief, stability, belonging, and moral legitimacy. They help the city endure. Yet their cumulative

dominance also reflects a broader developmental imbalance. As tax-exempt institutions expand, fiscal flexibility narrows. As service provision becomes central, diversification weakens. As younger and more mobile residents leave, the city becomes increasingly organized around care, dependency, and continuity rather than growth, experimentation, and reinvention.

This does not diminish the social value of Shreveport's churches, charities, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations. On the contrary, their importance is one of the clearest findings of this study. The problem is not the presence of these institutions, but the degree to which they have come to carry responsibilities that exceed what a nonprofit-centred civic order can sustainably resolve. A city cannot rely on charitable maintenance alone to generate broad-based prosperity. Relief is essential, but relief without structural transformation risks becoming a permanent mode of governance.

Shreveport's significance extends beyond its local context. The city serves as a revealing case for understanding similar mid-sized Southern communities facing industrial decline, demographic aging, fragmented public capacity, and expanding nonprofit dependence. In such settings, moral capital and organizational abundance may coexist with weak developmental outcomes. The result is not civic emptiness, but civic saturation without sufficient economic renewal. The concept of the as-is economy is meant to capture precisely that paradox: a city rich in institutions and service, yet constrained in its ability to convert those strengths into long-term transformation.

The path forward, therefore, is not to reject the city's moral economy, but to redirect it. Shreveport's nonprofit and religious institutions should be understood not only as instruments of care, but as potential partners in a more productive civic alignment. Their legitimacy, networks, and institutional durability can support workforce development, neighbourhood reinvestment, educational collaboration, and entrepreneurial ecosystems if more intentionally connected to broader redevelopment goals. The challenge is to move from a city organized primarily to manage decline toward one capable of generating renewal.

At the same time, the present study has limitations that should be acknowledged. As a qualitative case study grounded in archival materials, secondary data, and institutional interpretation, it does not claim to establish definitive causal relationships between nonprofit saturation and economic stagnation. Some local counts and historical comparisons require continued empirical verification, particularly where nonprofit density, tax-exempt land use, and comparative city-level benchmarks are concerned. In addition, Shreveport represents a single case, and caution should be exercised in generalizing too broadly across the South without additional comparative study.

These limitations also point toward several productive directions for future research. Comparative studies of similarly situated Southern cities could help determine whether the as-is economy is a broader regional pattern or a more localized institutional formation. Quantitative research on tax-exempt land use, nonprofit density, workforce composition, and municipal fiscal strain could also test and refine the relationships

proposed here. Future scholarship might further examine how religious institutions, healthcare systems, and community nonprofits can function not only as stabilizers of distress but as active partners in long-term economic redevelopment. Such work would deepen understanding of how cities can convert moral capital into developmental capacity.

Ultimately, Shreveport's future depends on whether it can convert resilience into regeneration. Its institutional density, historical identity, and culture of service remain powerful assets. But those assets must be linked to diversification, talent retention, public-private coordination, and measurable developmental strategy if they are to support more than endurance. The city's challenge is not simply to care well for the conditions it has inherited, but to build the institutional and economic capacity to become something more than what it has been. That is the deeper significance of the as-is economy, and the central lesson of Shreveport's unfinished trajectory.

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