Mobile / Mobile County, AL:
A Composition of Place
Introduction

What does it mean to be “Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice”?

In urging all Jesuits to a renewed emphasis on the mission of reconciliation and justice, the 36th General Congregation reminds us that “reconciliation is always a work of justice, a justice discerned and enacted in local communities and contexts” (GC 36, d. 1, no. 21).

This document intends to invite Jesuit communities and works to engage in that discernment and enactment, sensitive to the ways in which God labors in their local context. By bringing to light the call for reconciliation in all its forms, “reconciliation with God, with one another, and with creation” (GC 36, d. 1, no. 21), we hope to help bring about the “profound spiritual renewal” of the Society to which God invites us in this and in all times (GC 36, d. 1, no. 18).

The study comprises two parts. Part I takes a deep look at the social and economic dimensions of Mobile, a look that “allows us to understand reality more deeply and thus to serve more effectively” the people of the city (GC 36, d. 1, no. 33, quoting Adolfo Nicolás, SJ). The data below are meant to train our eyes of faith on the daily “suffering, vulnerable faces of people, indeed in the suffering of creation,” in Mobile (GC 36, d. 1, no. 20).

Part II presents questions that are meant to inspire reflection on how we can know and follow God’s will for us in light of the social and economic challenges of Mobile set forth in Part I. By holding up the reality of the city to the call of the Gospel to attend to the cry of the poor and the earth, they are meant to promote “apostolic audacity” and a “generous personal response” as a life and mission (GC 36, d. 1, no. 19).
PART 1: Local Context

Population

The City of Mobile is the third largest city in Alabama with a population of nearly 194,000 (Birmingham is the largest with over 212,000, followed by Montgomery with over 201,000). It is part of Mobile County, which has a population of about 414,000.

Figure 1: Mobile Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Change From 2005</th>
<th>Median Age</th>
<th>Youth Share</th>
<th>Female Share</th>
<th>Foreign-born Share</th>
<th>Limited English Proficiency Share</th>
<th>Married Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile:</td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama:</td>
<td>+5.9%</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Census American Community Survey 2016 5-year Averages, U.S. Census Bureau’s Statistical Atlas, and LEP.gov.
Notes: 1 – Figure represents the proportion of the population that is under 18. 2 - Figure is for households reporting limited English-speaking ability, 2014. 3 – Figure is for Mobile County. 4 – Figure includes persons 15 years and older.

Figure 2: Population by Race/Ethnicity

Mobile

- Non-Hispanic White: 50.5%
- African American: 16.9%
- Hispanic: 3.9%
- Asian: 1.3%
- Other: 1.3%

Alabama

- Non-Hispanic White: 66.2%
- African American: 26.5%
- Hispanic: 1.3%
- Asian: 1.6%
- Other: 1.6%

United States

- Non-Hispanic White: 62%
- African American: 12.6%
- Hispanic: 3.3%
- Asian: 5.2%
- Other: 3.3%

Source: U.S. Census American Community Survey 2016 5-year Averages and the Census Bureau’s American FactFinder.
Notes: 1 - Latino/Hispanic persons are not included in any other race category.
Religion

The number of Catholics in Mobile County decreased by about 11% from 2000 to 2010. Their share of adherents fell from 9% to 7.7%. Adherents are defined by the U.S. Religion Census as the most complete count of people affiliated with a congregation. In 2010, there were about 32,000 Catholics in Mobile County. There was also a significant decline in mainline Protestants, while the real growth (about 12%) was among Evangelical Protestants. In 2010, there were nearly 150,000 Evangelical Protestants in Mobile County.

Figure 3: Mobile County Religion: 2000 and 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>“Nones” Share</th>
<th>All Denominations</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Congregations</td>
<td>Adherents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>412,992</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>253,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>399,843</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>212,931</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1 - Data from the Religion Census is provided by county. 2 - “Nones” refers to those respondents who did not identify with any formal religion. This includes non-believers, as well as believers who are unaffiliated with any faith/denomination.

Education

About one in six Mobile County children (5-18) are in private/parochial school. A closer look reveals that a significantly larger proportion of white and Latino children (about one-quarter of them) attend private or parochial schools than Black children (6.7%). Diving deeper into the data, we find that nearly three-quarters of all private school students are white, while 45% of public school students are white.

Figure 4: Mobile County Private/Parochial School and Public School Enrollment Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public School</th>
<th>Private School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census American Community Survey 2016 5-year Averages.
Notes: 1- The percentages refer to the proportion of all children ages 5-18 in Mobile County. Children not represented here may be homeschooled or not in school.
Educational attainment differs by race/ethnicity in ways that are similar to the national divide—minorities are more likely to be limited to a high school diploma or less and whites are more likely than others to have a college education. One significant exception is the fact that nearly 29% of all Hispanics in Mobile County have a bachelor’s degree or higher, which is a greater percentage than we find among whites (25.4%). This progress notwithstanding, there is still cause for concern, given that roughly half of all Hispanics have no more than a high school diploma, which is a similar percentage we find in the black community. Research indicates that educational attainment greatly impacts economic well-being. The lifetime earnings of the average person with a bachelor’s degree are roughly twice as high as the earnings of a person with a high school diploma. Although there are racial and gender gaps in pay that exist even after controlling for educational attainment, nevertheless, it is true across racial/ethnic groups and for both men and women that lifetime earnings are clearly much greater for those with more education.

**Figure 5: Mobile County Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Hispanic White</th>
<th>Black/African American</th>
<th>Hispanic/Latino</th>
<th>Total (All Races/Ethnicities)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N/A, No School</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No H.S. Diploma or GED</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Diploma or GED</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree or Higher</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Today’s prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others’...who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors.* – Pedro Arrupe, S.J.

In 1973, this address was delivered to a group of Jesuit high school alumni who were predominantly male. We have adapted the text to include “men and women” to make its powerful message applicable for a contemporary Jesuit alumni audience.
The median household income for non-Hispanic whites in Mobile County is about $54,100. This is significantly more than the median income for black/African-American households, which stands at about $28,600. For Hispanics/Latinos it is about $41,100.

Regardless of race, we know that half of all the income earned in Mobile County goes to households in the top 1/5 (quintile) of income earners. The bottom 1/5 saw just 3.1% of the income in Mobile County (similar numbers are found nationally). This income inequality significantly impacts people's lives and life chances. The income Figure 6 further summarizes the overall income distribution in Mobile County.

Figure 7 summarizes the overall income distribution by race/ethnicity in Mobile County. Matching the national reality, incomes are clearly higher in the white community than in communities of color. For example, 16.1% of all white households have incomes in the top fifth, whereas only about 7% of black households and 12.8% of Hispanic households have incomes at that level. Conversely, just over 17% of white households have an income in the bottom quintile of income earners, but over 41% of black households have incomes at that level, almost three times higher.

Source: U.S. Census American Community Survey 2016 5-year Averages.
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rate for the 3rd quarter of 2018 was 3.8%. For Alabama, it was 4.1% and slightly higher at 4.2% for Mobile.

The African American unemployment rate (7.1%) was nearly two-and-a-half times the white unemployment rate (2.9%) in Alabama.

Of course, having a job is just one step toward economic security. That job must come with a living wage in order for it to truly bring economic well-being. Specifically, state data from May of 2016 indicate that Alabama was tied with Louisiana for 45th in median hourly wages ($15.43).

Alabama does not have a minimum wage, and therefore the federal rate applies, which is $7.25 per hour. A person who works 40 hours a week for 52 weeks a year at that wage will earn an annual income of just $15,080. This is not enough to get a family of 2 above the official poverty threshold in 2018.

Alabama is a “right to work” state, which means that workers are allowed to not join a union or pay union dues even if they benefit from a union contract. Such laws undermine unions, and union wages are generally higher than non-union wages.

The official poverty threshold (a level of income below which you would be identified as “poor”) was set decades ago and has only been adjusted for inflation. The original formula is widely seen as outdated and causing a gross undercounting of the population that is truly living in poverty. For example, a family of 4 in 2016 would have to have an income below $24,300 to be considered officially poor. This is extremely low. Yet even by this standard, millions of Americans and over 80,000 people in Mobile County are living in poverty.

People of color are substantially more likely to be poor (see Figure 8). This is true across Alabama and the United States. This is rooted in a history of racism/discrimination at both the individual and structural levels. It is also a fact of social life in America that, in general, the younger you are the greater your chance of being poor. Of all age groups, children are the most likely to be living in poverty.

(continued on next page)
Poverty (continued)

Young families starting out will generally have lower incomes, which is a part of the explanation for child poverty. This is, of course, exacerbated by the discrimination many people experience. Child poverty, as Figure 8 shows, is much higher in the black and Hispanic communities than it is in the white community. In fact, about 46% of black children and over one-third of Hispanic children are living in poverty in Mobile County. Given the stinginess of our family support services (particularly in Alabama, see p. 8), the impact of past and present discrimination, and various other obstacles, many poor people, especially people of color, face difficulties getting out of poverty.

Homelessness

The annual “point-in-time” count of the homeless population in Mobile was last conducted in early 2018. It was organized by Housing First, Inc., an organization that has been serving the homeless and trying to eradicate the problem of homelessness in Mobile and Baldwin Counties since 1996 (www.hfal.org). They identified 452 homeless individuals in the city of Mobile and about another 100 elsewhere in Mobile County and in neighboring Baldwin County. These are folks who are in shelters, transitional housing programs, or found to be unsheltered. The problem of homelessness persists in the Mobile area and across the nation and is due largely to the lack of affordable housing. Also, for a number of homeless, their previous homes were seen as unsafe or unwelcoming. Housing First has announced that they have achieved “functional zero” homelessness among veterans. That is to say, there are no known veterans who are homeless in the area and if some become homeless they are housed within two weeks.

Particularly Vulnerable Populations

The data in Figure 9 include three measurements that depict special challenges faced by many young people and families in Mobile County. Typically, single-parent families must make due with less income and have one parent doing the household and childcare work that can be challenging even for two parents. Single-parent families, then, tend to be poorer and more stressed.

“Disconnected youth” are by definition not in school or employed. They are missing an education and/or income that could clearly improve their short and long term life chances. Many such young people can become alienated and feel hopeless. This, in turn, can lead them to actions and situations that can be destructive of themselves or others.

Many families in Mobile County are considered to be “housing burdened”—meaning they are paying more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage. That means less money to spend on all of the other essentials of life.

Figure 9: Vulnerable Populations (2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single-Parent Household Share</th>
<th>Disconnected Youth Share (Ages 16-19)</th>
<th>Housing Burdened Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Notes: 1 – Figures are for Mobile County. 2 – This number represents the share of all households with children. 3 – “Disconnected” refers to youth who are neither in school nor working. 4 – “Housing Burdened” refers to households that are spending more than 30% of their income in rent or mortgage.
The Social Welfare System

In Mobile County, less than a third (30.1%) of people living in poverty receive any form of cash assistance, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income\(^1\) (SSI). A little over half (56.7%) of those in poverty receive Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (also referred to by its old name, “food stamps”). The bottom line is that many people living in poverty receive little to no public assistance. To access benefits can be difficult. There is stigma attached to receiving benefits and a sometimes intimidating bureaucracy in place that can discourage people from applying for assistance. Eligibility requirements and time limits further reduce the number of people able to get help, regardless of their true need.

The maximum TANF benefit in Alabama for a family with one parent and two children is $215 per month or $2580 per year. The average per person monthly SNAP benefit in Alabama is $120, which comes out to $1440 per year, per person. As for public housing or subsidized rent, most poor people receive no help at all. This level of assistance is quite minimal and waiting lists are very long.

Note: 1- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a program available to low income disabled or elderly individuals who meet certain specific eligibility requirements.

Alabama and Mobile have uninsured rates higher than the national average (see Figure 10 right). This has a great deal to do with Alabama’s refusal to expand Medicaid coverage as provided for by the Affordable Care Act. It has been estimated that over 300,000 Alabamians would benefit from Medicaid expansion.

Health

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**Figure 10: Health Indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile County, AL</td>
<td>12.4(^1)</td>
<td>17(^\text{%})</td>
<td>40(^\text{%})</td>
<td>7.7(^\text{%})</td>
<td>25(^\text{%})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>9.4(^\text{%})</td>
<td>16.2(^\text{%})</td>
<td>40(^\text{%})</td>
<td>6.6(^\text{%})</td>
<td>23.9(^\text{%})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>8.8(^\text{%})</td>
<td>14.3(^\text{%})</td>
<td>35(^\text{%})</td>
<td>8.2(^\text{%})</td>
<td>20(^\text{%})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Birth Indicators

Rates of unintended pregnancies, abortions, and teen births have been on the decline for a number of years across the country and are at or near record lows. The unintended pregnancy and teen birth rates are higher in Alabama than in the nation as a whole. On the other hand, the abortion rate is much lower. Here are the specific numbers for Alabama and the U.S.:

- About 55% of all pregnancies (to women 15-44 years of age) in Alabama are unintended. The national percentage is 45%.\(^1\)
- The abortion rate in Alabama is 8 for every 1000 women, ages 15-44. Nationally, the abortion rate is 14.6.\(^2\)
- The teen birth rate in Alabama is about 28 births for every 1000 females, ages 15-19. The national rate is 20.3.\(^3\)

Sources: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Guttmacher Institute, and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Notes: 1- Data are for 2010. 2 – Data are for 2014. 3 – Data are for 2016.
Infant Mortality

Infant mortality rates in Alabama and in Mobile historically have been very high. In fact, in 2016, Alabama ranked last in infant mortality among the 50 states. That year, there were 9.1 deaths for every 1000 live births. However, infant mortality rates across the state dropped significantly in 2017. Alabama’s new rate is 7.4, placing it in a tie for 45th place. Mobile’s rate went from 10.4 to 6.8. The most dramatic drop in the Alabama infant mortality rate was among African Americans. From 2016 to 2017, the rate for this group went from 15.1 to 11.2. White infant mortality also fell significantly, from 6.5 to 5.5. Infant mortality remains twice as high among African Americans as among whites (similar to the gap nationally).

Figure 11: Infant Mortality Rates: 2017

Maternal Mortality Rate

Maternal mortality refers to deaths due to complications from pregnancy. The rate is the number per 100,000 births. The United States has the highest maternal mortality rate (20.7) in the developed world. Alabama’s rate of 11.9 is significantly below the national rate. In fact, it ranks 7th of the 50 states. There is, however, a particularly large racial gap in Alabama’s maternal mortality rate. For white women, the rate is 5.6. For African American women, the rate is 27.6.¹

Drugs

Alabama, like every other state, has problems with drugs and addiction. However, looking specifically at overdose death rates (Figure 12), we see that Alabama has less of a problem than we find nationally, although it is growing.

Figure 12: Drug Overdose Death Rates (per 100,000): 2016

Firearm Death Rate

The United States has the highest firearm death rate in the developed world. It is not even close. In 2016, there were 11.8 deaths per 100,000 of the population from all firearm related causes—suicide, accidents, homicide. Alabama’s rate of 21.5 was the second highest in the nation (Alaska with 23.3 was number one, while Massachusetts had the lowest rate with 3.4).

Sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Note 1 - The numbers are 5-year averages, 2011-15.
Overall, crime rates in Mobile are significantly above the national and state averages (see Figure 13 above). The murder rate in Mobile is nearly four times the rate for the nation as a whole. The prevalence of street crime in Mobile is largely a confluence of poverty, racial inequity, and limited educational and economic opportunities. The good news is that in Mobile and around the country, crime in general has been in long-term decline (though more recently there has been some small reversal in this trend).

Alabama has higher incarceration rates than the nation as a whole (see Figure 14 above). White incarceration rates are particularly high in Alabama when compared with white incarceration rates elsewhere. There is still a significant racial gap, though much smaller than for the nation because of the unusually high rate for whites. In Alabama, the black/African American incarceration rate is more than 3 times the rate for whites. Nationally, it is more than 5 times.
Alabama’s voter registration and voter turnout rates for whites lag the national rates, but not so for blacks. Black voter turnout rates are higher than they are for whites in Alabama and higher than the national average for African Americans.

**Figure 15: Alabama Civic Engagement: 2016**

- **Non-Hispanic White**
- **Black/African American**
- **Total (All Races/Ethnicities)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter Registration Rate</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter Turnout Rate</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mobile faces a number of environmental challenges. Of particular concern is water pollution. Bacteria from storm runoff and sewer overflows and other dangers such as high levels of mercury and other pollutants have led to beach closings and seafood advisories. These problems are not just threats to human health, but threaten the important tourism and seafood industries. For more information on regional environmental problems and efforts to address them, the reader can check out Mobile Baykeeper (www.mobilebaykeeper.org).

Mobile, like the rest of the world, is also facing climate change. Temperatures are heating up, ocean levels are rising, and more powerful storms will be threatening the region. In coastal Alabama, the greatest threat from climate change comes in the form of hurricanes, which are predicted to grow in intensity in the coming years. Climate change threatens agriculture, industry, and, of course, human health. The financial toll will also be great, from increases in insurance rates to the price of mitigation efforts and clean-ups from storms. There will be different problems elsewhere in the country and world; but few people will be able to escape the pain, suffering, and expense climate change is bringing.

It is important to note that the impact of many of our environmental problems, from pollution to climate change, will be felt most acutely by the poor. They often live in polluted and vulnerable communities and have fewer options to escape or to protect themselves.

Pope Francis, in his Encyclical, *Laudato Si’,*\(^1\) reminds us of the importance of caring for God’s creation: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”

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Note 1 – Among the rich Jesuit resources available on the environment is the International Jesuit Ecology Project. Their educational materials can be found at: www.luc.edu/ijep. Also, the Carmelites have created a useful high school curriculum and an adult study guide to teach *Laudato Si*’. Interested individuals, schools and parishes can check it out at www.laudato-si-for-all.com.
PART 2 - Reflections

Many national, state, and local authorities, businesses, and other organizations make policies that profoundly affect the people of the Mobile area whom we strive to serve in the name of Jesus. As we think on these data, we might reflect upon how we as individuals and Jesuit communities and ministries can become more effectively involved in decisions bearing upon the common good.

So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead (James 2:17).

What is it for which you are spending your life?  
– Sr. Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

Questions for Reflection

1. In view of the fact that nearly 40% of the Mobile population is unaffiliated with any religious denomination (“nones”), and of our significant Jesuit resources, in what new ways are we called to reach out beyond our institutions to bring the reconciling Good News of Jesus Christ?

2. Given the significant educational and social inequalities that exist in the Mobile area, what more might Spring Hill College and the Jesuit community do to challenge these injustices in word and deed and promote greater reconciliation?

3. In light of our environmental challenges such as water pollution and climate change, how can we better care for creation in the context of the Mobile area?

Never, never be afraid to do what's right, especially if the well-being of a person...is at stake. Society's punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way.  
—Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.