

STATE OF BLACK ATLANTA SUMMIT 2010

**The State of Black Atlanta
Exploding the Myth of Black Mecca**

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Introduction

The [State of Black Atlanta Summit 2010](#) was held this past Saturday February 20 on the campus of Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, GA. The one-day Summit was convened by the [Environmental Justice Resource Center](#) to coincide with the Black History Month celebration and was part of the center's Smart Growth and Sustainable Communities Initiative (SGSCI) funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation. The Summit organizers commissioned working papers from top Atlanta leaders in academic, public health, business, media, and local community based organizations with the goal of impacting public sector policies around health, environmental justice, civil rights and human rights, transportation and land use, housing and home ownership, wealth creation and business development, equitable development, education, food security, and parks and green access in Atlanta's underserved communities. More than a dozen Summit authors presented a shared vision for leading Black Atlanta into a just, healthy, and sustainable future. The Summit also provided a forum at which diverse aspects of the community can learn about shared priorities for the year. This overview paper represents a synthesis of challenges, barriers, and opportunities facing Black Atlanta.

A City of Paradoxes

Atlanta is the [thirty-third](#) largest city in the United States, with an estimated population of 537,958 in 2008, an increase by 28 percent from the 2000 census. Atlanta has seen dramatic demographic increase in its white population over the past several decades. According to the [Brookings Institution](#), the proportion of whites in Atlanta's population grew faster between 2000 and 2006 than that of any other U.S. city. Only Washington, D.C. experienced a comparable increase in the white population share during the 2000-2006 time period. Atlanta went from being 51.3 percent black in 1970 to 67.1 percent black in 1990 to 61.4 percent black in 2000 to 55.8 percent black in 2008.

The demographic tilt toward a "[whiter Atlanta](#)" is occurring at a time the 20-county Atlanta metro region is becoming more racially diverse. In 2000, whites made up 60 percent of the region's population. By 2006, the white share of the region had shrunk to 54 percent. The shrinking Black Atlanta footprint led some pundits to predict a white mayor after Shirley Franklin's second term. Their prediction was nearly affirmed when African American state senator [Kasim Reed](#) defeated white city councilwoman Mary Norwood for Atlanta's 59th mayor in December 2009. The final margin separating the two candidates was 714 votes out of more than 84,000 cast. Norwood was vying to become Atlanta's first white mayor since 1973.

The 28-county Atlanta Metropolitan Area is the eighth largest region in the United States, and the second largest in the Southeastern U.S., behind Miami-Fort Lauderdale, with more than 5,376,285 residents. Atlanta is a major business and transportation hub. Atlanta's [Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport](#) is the busiest airport in the world. Atlanta has the country's third largest concentration of Fortune 500 companies along with Chicago and Minneapolis.

Metropolitan Atlanta leads all metropolitan regions in attracting African Americans. The city continues to be viewed by many African Americans as the "Black Mecca," and is consistently rated one of the "[Ten Best Cities for African Americans](#)" by *Black Enterprise* each year the ranking is published. Atlanta is one of the top 3 destinations of Black travelers. It has the unique distinction as the only U.S. city with five historically black colleges and universities ([HBCUs](#)). The five colleges that comprise the [Atlanta University Center](#) (Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, Interdenominational Theological Center, and Morehouse School of Medicine) enrolled more than 10,500 students in 2009. The only other cities that come close are Nashville and New Orleans, both cities are home to three HBCUs.

Atlanta is a city of [paradoxes](#). It is home to the fastest growing millionaire population in the United States. The city has the largest concentration of black millionaires. Yet, Atlanta is number three on the list of "Top 101 cities with the most people below 50% of the poverty level, excluding cities with 15% or more of residents in college and with the median age below 28 (population 50,000+)." Atlanta has one of the highest [child poverty rate](#) in the country at 48.1 percent in 2004, higher than Detroit (47.8 percent), Long

Beach (45.8 percent), Miami (41.3 percent), and Milwaukee (41.3 percent). Black Atlanta families are nearly three times more likely than white Atlanta families to be poor. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20.8 percent of Atlanta's black families and 7.4 percent of white families fell below the poverty line in 2008.

A wide gap exists in black-white earnings. In 2008, the median income for white Atlanta households was \$86,156 compared with only \$29,033 for the city's black households. In reality, black Atlantans earn only about a third of the income earned by their white counterparts. A staggering black-white wealth gap also persists. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, in their book [Black Wealth/White Wealth](#), show that the average black family held only 10 cents of wealth for every dollar that whites possess. The typical white family is worth \$81,000 compared to only \$8,000 for a typical black family. In his book, [The Hidden Cost of Being African American](#), Thomas Shapiro says the penalty in net worth for being black amounts to \$136,173, and the net financial asset penalty is \$94,426. The black-white wealth gap widened while the income gap narrowed. For millions of middle-class blacks, hard work, college education, good paying jobs, and owning homes have done little to narrow the wealth gap.

Home ownership is the most critical pathway for wealth creation and transformative assets. As credit dried up in 2008, blacks and Hispanics were more likely to be [denied](#) mortgage loans than whites. About 60-70 percent of America's middle-class families' wealth is derived from their homes compared to over 90 percent for African Americans. Sadly, the American Dream is beyond the reach of thousands of black Atlantans because of closed home ownership opportunities. Only 39.5 percent of Atlanta's black households own their homes compared to 60.6 percent of the white Atlanta households. Studies show that African Americans get less information, less assistance and less favorable terms from mortgage lenders. According to the October 2009 report, [The Continuing Home Foreclosure Tsunami](#), nearly half (48.0 percent) of African Americans homes that are in foreclosure in Metro Atlanta were high-priced mortgages. Blacks in the region were 5.6 times more likely to be placed in high priced mortgages than whites. With 1 in 49 foreclosures, Atlanta ranked ninth out of the 20 largest U.S. cities on home [foreclosures](#) filed during the first six months of 2009—an 11.5 percent change from 2008.

Atlanta has a major black-white unemployment gap—tracking closely with the national unemployment trend with African American workers nearly twice as likely to be jobless when compared with white workers. At [10.1 percent](#), Metro Atlanta's unemployment rate mirrors the 10.0 percent national rate. In January 2010, the national jobless rate stood at 8.7 percent for whites, 12.6 percent for Hispanics, and 16.5 percent for blacks. The national teenage unemployment has hit all-time highs with a 25.5 percent white teen jobless rate compared to a staggering [41.3](#) percent black teen jobless rate. Most academics believe the true unemployment rate, including discouraged workers, is more than 50 percent for young black males age 16 to 19. Some experts even report that fewer than 14 in 100 young black men actually have jobs.

The bleak teenage unemployment rate is compounded by the dismal high school graduation rate in our nation's cities, including [Atlanta](#). According to the [Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap](#) report, Atlanta was one of 16 of the nation's 50 largest cities that had a high school graduation rate lower than 50 percent in the main school district serving the city. Using 2005-2006 data, the report found the [lowest graduation rates](#) were in Indianapolis (31 percent), Cleveland (34 percent), Detroit (38 percent), Milwaukee (41 percent), Baltimore (42 percent), Atlanta (44 percent), Los Angeles (44 percent), Las Vegas (45 percent), and Columbus (45 percent). Students attending suburban school districts in the nation's 50 largest school districts were far more likely to graduate (77 percent) than students attending the nation's urban schools (59 percent). The Sixth Annual [State of the Atlanta Schools](#) reports marked improvements in Atlanta's high school graduation rates over the past several years, from 39 percent in 2002 to 71.2 percent in the 2007-2008 school year.

More than 27,900 students dropped out from the Class of 2008 in Metro Atlanta. According to the 2010 report, [The Economic Benefits from Halving the Dropout Rate: A Boom to Business in the Nation's Largest Metropolitan Areas](#), reducing the number of dropouts by 50 percent (or 14,000 “new graduates”) for the Class of 2008 would result in \$160 million in increased earnings each year, an additional \$110

million in spending and \$40 million in investing during the average year, increased home sales of \$349 million and auto sales of \$14 million each year, 1,200 new jobs and economic growth of \$204 million by the time these new graduates reach their midpoint of the careers, \$19 million in increased tax revenue during the average year, and 57 percent of the new graduates would likely continue on to pursue some type of postsecondary education.

Place Matters: The Built Environment and Health

One of the most important indicators of an individual's health is one's street address, Zip Code, or neighborhood. Residents who live on the "[wrong side of the tracks](#)" are subjected to elevated environmental health threats. Place matters. Place limits access to health care and residential amenities such as parks and green space, full-service grocery stores, farmers markets, and healthy food retail outlets. Atlanta's wealthier neighborhoods have more than three times as many supermarkets as poor neighborhoods, limiting access for many people to the basic elements of a healthy diet. When broken down by race, not just wealth, researchers have found that there are [four times](#) as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods as in black neighborhoods. Low-income residents also pay 10 to 40 percent more for food than higher income residents.

Much of Black Atlanta neighborhoods are saturated with fast food outlets and liquor and convenience stores that make their profits off junk food, beer, wine, and cigarettes. Food redlining forces many Black Atlantans to spend more money and time, and travel farther and accept lower quality and less healthy food. A case in point is the closing of the [Publix Supermarket](#) in Atlanta's Vine City neighborhood on December 24, 2009—stranding thousands of black residents in a "[food desert](#)," an area that large-scale supermarkets have abandoned—leaving the entire community with little or no access to affordable, quality food.

Healthy places and healthy people are highly correlated. The poorest of the poor have the worst health and live in the most degraded physical environments. Race and class factors explain much of the location of the socio-spatial layout of residential amenities in Atlanta and its surrounding suburbs, including the delivery of municipal services, quality of schools, the location of job centers, housing patterns, streets and highway configuration, and commercial development. More than 100 studies now link racism to worse health. More than 200 environmental studies have shown race and class disparities. In 2008, the Congressional Quarterly ranked Atlanta the [16th](#) "Most Dangerous" city among 260 U.S. cities. In 2009, *Men's Fitness Magazine* ranked Atlanta the [21st](#) "Fittest City" of 40 cities ranked. WalkScore ranked Atlanta the [22nd](#) "Most Walkable" city among the 40 largest U.S. cities. Atlanta's most walkable neighborhoods include Five Points, Poncey-Highland, Sweet Auburn, Midtown, and Atlanta-Inman Park.

Atlanta ranked 23 of 28 among comparable cities in the number of park acres per 1000 residents for 2008. In 2007, just half of Atlanta's residents lived within a half-mile of Atlanta's [3,576](#) acres of parkland, only about 4.5 percent of the city's land area. New parks are desperately needed in Atlanta which has only 7.4 acres per 1,000 persons, compared to the national average was 13.7 acres. Black neighborhoods in Southwest Atlanta are the most "under-parked" areas in the city.

A number of Atlanta's other public sector services are [underfunded](#), including health care. According to the Georgia State University Fiscal Research Center, in 2004, Georgia spent \$2 billion on health care. A 2009 Georgia State University policy brief, [Georgia Revenues and Expenditures: An Analysis of their Geographic Distribution](#), found that Metro Atlanta, which contributed 51 percent of that amount, but got just 28 percent of that amount in return. Atlanta's public infrastructure has been under attack in recent years, including its public housing (Atlanta Housing Authority), "safety-net" hospital for the poor and uninsured (Grady Hospital), and public transit (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority). Grady Hospital, where more than 75 percent of the patients are African-American, 11 percent being Hispanic, and less than 10 percent white, is in financial crisis in spite of being [privatized](#) in November 2007. Nearly 1.7 million Georgians, about 20 percent (1 in 5 individuals), are uninsured. There are more than 800,000 individuals without medical insurance living in metro Atlanta. African Americans are two times more likely to be uninsured than whites.

Since 1995, Atlanta has bulldozed about [15,000](#) units, spread across 32 housing projects, including Techwood Homes (rebuilt as Olympic Village in preparation of the Atlanta Olympic Games), the nation's first housing project built in 1936. Many of the demolished units were replaced with "mixed-income" housing. The buzz-words "mixed-income," "in-town living," "live-work-play" have become code words for gentrification and displacement of Atlanta's public housing project residents, of which more than 95 percent are black and poor. City officials hail the Atlanta Housing Authority's dismantling of public housing as a "success story." Most of the displaced families end up in 10 of Atlanta's poorest ZIP codes and only about 20 percent return to their neighborhoods once the mixed-income development are built. Other former public housing residents have been pushed in suburban neighborhoods in Clayton County and Cobb County, where transit is inadequate or nonexistent. The Atlanta Public Housing Authority is playing a "[shell game](#)" with the tenants. "First you see poor people, then you don't."

Going Green and Sustainable As Black Atlanta Shrinks

Efforts are underway to make Atlanta green and sustainable. Atlanta's [sustainability](#) ranking jumped from 38th out the 50 most populous U.S. cities in 2006 to 19th in 2008. However, greening Black Atlanta remains a challenge. According to the University of Massachusetts report, [Green Prosperity: How Clean Energy Policies Can Fight Poverty and Raise Living Standards in the United States](#), investment in "green jobs" in a clean-energy economy, including weatherization, would produce 31,658 jobs, over 17,000 for metro Atlanta workers with high school degrees or less, and cut unemployment by over one percentage point. In Atlanta, construction jobs are expected to increase by 15 percent for the city and 52 percent for the metro area by the year 2014. In 2007, while most of the region was declining in the number of building permits issued, the City of Atlanta had a 12 percent increase, revealing a continuous demand for skilled construction workers.

However, just because green jobs, including clean energy and construction jobs, are available in the region does not automatically translate into jobs for Black Atlantans. A 2008 study, [The Road to Good Jobs: Patterns of Employment in the Construction Industry](#), found that of the largest 25 metropolitan areas in the country found that African Americans were employed in construction at rates well below their participation in the overall workforce. If African Americans were employed in construction at the same rate that they are employed in the overall workforce in 2006, over 137,044 more blacks would be employed in construction in the twenty-five metropolitan areas. Atlanta had the largest gap (18 percent), followed by Baltimore, Dallas, and Houston—all southern cities in right-to-work states.

Spatial Mismatch, Transportation, and Access to Opportunity

African Americans continue to be the most [isolated](#) group in the country when it comes to proximity to jobs. Black/white residential segregation plays a major role in creating a spatial mismatch for black residence and the location of jobs centers. The majority of entry-level jobs in metro Atlanta are not within a quarter-mile of public transportation. Only 11.3 percent of Metro Atlanta's [jobs](#) are located within a 3-mile radius of the CBD, 38.1 percent are located within a 10-mile radius, and 61.9 percent are located outside the 10-mile ring. Having a car in Atlanta can make the difference between employment and unemployment. According to the 2003 national study, [Moving to Equity: Addressing Inequitable Effects of Transportation Policies on Minorities](#), only 7 percent of white households own no car, compared with 24 percent of African American households, 17 percent of Latino households, and 13 percent of Asian-American households. Nearly 35 percent of Black Atlantans do not own cars compared with less than 10 percent of whites.

The economic isolation of Black Atlanta is complicated by inadequate [public transit](#) (limited, unaffordable, or inaccessible service and routes, and security and safety concerns), lack of personal transportation (no privately owned car available to travel to work), and spatial mismatch (location of suitable jobs in areas that are inaccessible by public transportation). Addressing transportation equity in Metro Atlanta will have positive impacts beyond improved mobility and access to opportunity, but will have added health benefits by reducing deadly air pollution, decreasing automobile dependency, and shrinking the region's carbon footprint while mitigating climate change.

When the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority ([MARTA](#)) was conceived in the 1960s and began operation in the 1970s, many whites jokingly referred to it as "Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta." The system was originally conceived to cover five counties (Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Clayton, and Gwinnett). Only Fulton and DeKalb residents voted to join MARTA and pay the one-cent sales tax. Atlanta city residents pay eight cents on a dollar in sales tax: four cents for the state, three cents for Fulton and DeKalb, and one cent for the City of Atlanta's water treatment fund.

A 2006 rider survey revealed that 76 percent of MARTA's rail and bus riders are African Americans and other people of color. More than 63 percent of users have a household income of less than \$30,000. Only Fulton and DeKalb County residents pay for the up keep and expansion of MARTA with a one-cent sales tax. The regular [one-way fare](#) on MARTA is \$2.00, up from \$1.00 in 1992. MARTA is projected to have a \$588-\$634 million shortfall over the next decade.

MARTA is the [ninth largest](#) transit system in the country and the only large system that does not receive any significant financial support from the state. Since 1998, MARTA has had to dip into its reserves almost every year to make up budget shortfalls. In 2007, MARTA received no state funding for its \$455.9 million operating funds and only \$2.7 million (2 percent) of the agency's \$195.2 million total capital funds. MARTA is required to use 50 percent of these funds on capital projects and 50 percent on operations. As a result, \$65 million in MARTA revenues the agency desperately needs to operate the system sits in reserve accounts. The allocation of [\\$25 million](#) of 2009 federal stimulus funds from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) regional transportation projects allowed MARTA to temporarily soften the impact of some of the budget cuts. MARTA's FY 2011 budget has a [\\$120 million](#) projected operating gap, up from \$109 million in FY 2010. Because of this serious financial crisis, MARTA officials are warning of [25-30 percent](#) service cuts.

As MARTA goes broke and as Atlanta's black population shrinks, a \$2.8 billion quasi-governmental organization known as Atlanta [BeltLine Inc.](#), is leading one of the largest redevelopment projects in the country that will create light-rail transit, green space, trails, and new development along 22 miles of rail segments that encircle the many of the city's historic urban core. When completed in 2030, the BeltLine Project is projected to create 1,300 acres of new parks, green space, and trail construction, and 28,000 new homes. However, there is a down side. In a 2007 report, [The Beltline and Rising Home Prices](#), Georgia Tech real estate and community development expert Dan Immergluck found city and school property taxes on homes within an eighth-mile of the TAD along the BeltLine's southern side increased 68 percent since the project was announced (compared to 32 percent for a home located a mile from the TAD). In some areas property values skyrocketed as much as 174 percent, especially in heavily black Southwest Atlanta. Professor Immergluck warned that if the city does not set up tax breaks and incentives that support low-income homeowners to keep their houses, the BeltLine will "create a circle of wealth and an outer ring of concentrated poverty."

The BeltLine moved forward with the blessing of Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and other city leaders despite a Georgia Supreme Court [ruling](#) in February 2008 that school property tax money cannot be used to help fund the massive loop of transit, trails and parks around the city's core. The project has fueled real estate speculation by developers eager to build upscale homes near the green space. It has also heightened residents' fears of displacement—even though no track had been laid. Houses that once appraised at \$30,000 now appraise at more than \$150,000. Such sharp increases hit elderly, low-income, and homeowners living on fixed income especially hard—greatly increasing the likelihood they will be pushed out their homes and their neighborhoods. Atlanta's black residents are finding themselves with drastically higher property taxes, or in some cases, on the verge of displacement.

Over the next 25 years, using a tax allocation district or TAD—known elsewhere as tax increment financing (TIF), Atlanta residents can expect to see an estimated \$2.8 billion dollars of investment surge into the old railway line. The storm surge from Hurricane Katrina swept thousands of black families from their homes in New Orleans East and the Ninth Ward. The question in Atlanta is will blacks and low-income families be swept away in the surge created by the BeltLine Project?

Atlanta needs a strong and healthy regional transit system. Transit projects are the most effective way of reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT), congestion, and emissions. Transit projects have a multiplier effect from environmentally friendly technology to renewed development in underserved areas. They also offer a less sprawl-inducing and less costly way to accommodate the anticipated [300,000](#) people that will be added to Atlanta's population by 2030.

Every \$1 invested in public transportation generates \$6 in local economic activity. Every \$1 billion invested in public transportation infrastructure supports approximately 47,500 jobs. Nationally, African Americans businesses are getting [shorted](#) in stimulus contracts under the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ([ARRA](#)). According to statistics from the Transportation Equity Network ([TEN](#)), in December 2009, the U.S. Department of Transportation had awarded \$163.8 million in direct contract, with only \$16.8 million, or about 10 percent, going to minority-owned businesses, \$4.7 million, or about 3 percent, had been awarded to Hispanic-owned firms. No black-owned firm had received a single contract from the DOT stimulus pot of money. The shortchanging of black and other minority firms has trickled down to local governments.

Black businesses also need to be stimulated in these tough economic times. Atlanta's black-owned firms still face [discrimination](#) when it comes to city contracts. This is not a small point since more than 60 percent of the employees of minority-owned firms are people of color. According to a 2006 disparity study, Black and other minority-owned firms accounted for [48 percent](#) of city service contracts in fiscal year 2005, up from 33 percent in 2001. Minority firms won \$150 million of the total \$312 million contracts in 2005 for private construction, engineering and related services. The expansion of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport was fertile ground for contract. However, minority firms received a much smaller share of city goods and commodities contracts.

With nearly 64,000 firms, Metro Atlanta is home to more black-owned businesses per-capita than anywhere except the nation's capital. These firms employ mostly African Americans. This shortchanging of black-owned firms will likely continue unabated if some type of "set-aside" program and stronger accountability and transparency in tracking the use of all federal funds for economic stimulus and job creation. The awarding of stimulus dollars is one clear signal that we are not living in a "post-racial" society—even with the election of President Barack Obama, the nation's first black president.

Living with More Pollution

In 2009, *Forbes Magazine* ranked Atlanta the nation's most "[toxic city](#)" based on number of facilities that reported releasing toxins into the environment, the total pounds of certain toxic chemicals released into the air, water and earth, the days per year that air pollution was above healthy levels, and the number of times the EPA has responded to reports of a potentially hazardous environmental incident or sites. Enforcing stronger federal ozone standards and providing more alternatives to automobile travel will go a long way in improving air quality, public health and livability in the entire Atlanta metro region.

Nationally, African Americans are [79 percent](#) more likely than whites to live in polluted neighborhoods that pose the greatest health danger. Predictably, lower-income and low-wealth individuals are [exposed](#) to greater health hazards in their homes, neighborhoods, workplace, schools, and playgrounds when compared to the rest of the city residents. Poverty impacts health because it determines how much resources poor people have and defines the amount of environmental risks they will be exposed to in their immediate environment. Persons of low socioeconomic status are disproportionately impacted and are particularly concentrated in low-wealth neighborhoods with the greatest number of environmental health threats from indoor and outdoor pollution.

Pollution and environmental health threats are not randomly distributed across Atlanta's neighborhoods. Race maps closely with vulnerability. African Americans and other people of color comprise about 30 percent of the five largest counties contiguous to Atlanta. However, they represent the majority of residents in five of the ten "dirtiest" zip codes in these counties. Residents in Atlanta-Fulton County are subjected to a whopping 873.9 pounds of toxic releases per person annually, compared to the 10 pound

national average. According to the 2007 [Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty](#) report, African Americans and other people of color in Atlanta comprise 65 percent of the residents living within two miles of the commercial hazardous wastes facilities.

Nearly half (48.6 percent) of Atlanta's air pollution is from cars and heavy-duty vehicles, which each year spew over 1.5 million tons of pollutants into the air. Black Atlantans contribute the least to the region's air pollution problem since they are less likely to own cars. Transportation-induced air pollution sources exact a major financial toll on the Atlanta region, with public health costs estimated to be as high as \$637 million.

Paying the Price for Bad Air

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), Atlanta ranked number 9 in the "[Top 10 Asthma Capitals](#)" in 2009—down from number 4 in 2008. Atlanta's African American residents are [three times](#) more likely than whites to be hospitalized or die from asthma. Nationally, the lifetime asthma prevalence rate in African Americans is 19.4 percent higher than the rate in whites. In 2007, the age-specific asthma prevalence rate was 39 percent higher in blacks than in whites (103.2 per 1,000 persons versus 74.5 per 1,000 persons, respectively). The asthma mortality rate for African-American women is more than 2.5 times higher than white women.

Racial and ethnic differences in asthma prevalence, morbidity and mortality are highly correlated with poverty, urban air quality, indoor allergens, and lack of patient education and inadequate medical care. Cleaning up the air and "fixing" the Atlanta region's transportation problem will have tremendous health benefits. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) reports that the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996 brought about a reduction in auto use by 22.5 percent, asthma admissions to emergency rooms (ERs) and hospitals also decreased by 41.6 percent.

Black Atlanta children are also more likely than their white counterparts to attend schools located in neighborhoods with facilities that report to the EPA under the Toxic Release Inventory ([TRI](#)) program. They also face the highest health risk from schools that have in-door air problems or "sick schools." Poor air quality in schools has been linked to higher absenteeism and increased respiratory ailments, lower teacher and staff productivity, lower student motivation, slower learning, lower test scores, increased medical costs, and lowered lifelong achievement and earnings. According to the [Sick School 2009](#) report, nearly half (48 percent) of Georgia's schools have at least one unsatisfactory environmental factor. At least 12.8 percent of Georgia's school-age children are without health insurance, meaning that it is highly unlikely that their daily environmental exposures are being effectively detected and addressed.

When construction plans deliberately design healthy indoor environments into conventional green school plans, the health benefits far outweigh energy and water savings (\$63 to \$11). Green schools may be built at cost, or at a very slight increment: on average almost 2 percent more, or \$3 more per square foot, than conventional schools. The financial benefits of greening schools are about \$70 per square foot, more than 20 times as high as the cost of going green. Greening Atlanta Public Schools remains a challenge.

In August 2009, the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) opened [Springdale Park Elementary School](#), the district's first "green school" that serves about 400 kindergarten through fourth-grade students from the Druid Hills, Midtown, Poncey Highlands and Virginia-Highland neighborhoods who were redistricted from Morningside and Mary Lin elementary schools. The new green elementary school, nestled in the predominately white Druid Hills community, is seeking silver [LEED](#) certification for its environmentally friendly campus and programs, including a farm-to-school initiative from harvesting food grown in their rooftop garden, along with recycling and composting programs.

Even in a district where African Americans make up nearly [80 percent](#) of the students and whites make up just 10.9 percent, Atlanta's majority black school board chose to launch its "green school" initiative in an affluent and mostly white community. [Druid Hills](#) is 84.15 percent white, 6.0 percent African-American, 0.16% Native American, 7.34 percent Asian, 0.07 percent Pacific Islander, 0.64 percent from

other races, and 1.64 percent from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race were 2.43 percent of the population. On the other hand, the [demographics](#) of Springdale Elementary School tell the true story of Atlanta's ground-zero school "greening," where 67.2 percent of the school's students are white, 14.8 percent are black, 8.2 percent are Hispanic, 6.3 percent are multi-ethnic, and 3.5 percent are Asian. Even when blacks are in control and in the majority on the school board, they manage to give white students the "best" that they have to offer. Students in Druid Hills deserve a "green school." Similarly, students in Atlanta's West End, Vine City/English Avenue and other black neighborhoods also deserve green schools, healthy foods, and other green programs that improve health and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

For more than four decades Atlanta has served as a magnet attracting African Americans from throughout the United States. As the "cradle of the modern civil rights movement," Atlanta built a mystique around its growing black middle-class, business class, and political elite. The idea of a "Black Mecca" was championed as more public relations and image management than reality. Clearly, Atlanta continues to attract large numbers of African Americans seeking opportunity and a better life. The region is still able to keep many of the young African Americans college graduates who are attracted to city for school.

However, Atlanta is no "mecca" for a large slice of the African American community—families stuck in concentrated poverty with few prospects of escape, students dropping out of high school at an alarming rate, teenagers entering adulthood without ever having a job, workers cut off from suburban employment centers because of inadequate public transit, low-income public housing residents dispersed into neighborhoods where support services are inadequate or nonexistent, health care for poor and uninsured families threatened by closure of the "safety net" hospital, neighborhoods targeted by predatory lenders, food deserts created by supermarket redlining, and land speculation and redevelopment projects that have spawned unchecked gentrification, displacement, and potentially driving families from their homes and their neighborhoods.

Clearly, race underlies and interpenetrates with other factors in explaining much of the socio-spatial layout of residential amenities in our Atlanta and the surrounding suburbs, including the quality of schools, the location of job centers, housing patterns, streets and highway configuration, and commercial development. Many factors in our social environment contribute to or detract from the health and well being of individuals and communities. These factors include socioeconomic status, transportation, housing, access to services, discrimination by social grouping (e.g., race, gender, or class), and social or environmental stressors. Inequitable distribution of these conditions across various populations is a significant contributor to persistent and pervasive health disparities in Atlanta.

Black Atlanta is shrinking demographically and politically at the same time the city's public infrastructure is being dismantled, demolished, and defunded. Although Atlanta's share of the metropolitan population has declined over the years, the health of this majority African American city is still important to the overall metropolitan region's vitality. Atlanta is going green and becoming more sustainable at an accelerated rate that matches its demographic shift away from being a majority black city. If current trends hold, Green Atlanta will bypass Black Atlanta. Atlanta needs a policy surge and renewed commitment to human rights, social, economic, health equity, and environmental justice. It also needs leaders who are willingness to work on and root out those barriers that create, maintain, and exacerbate racial inequality.