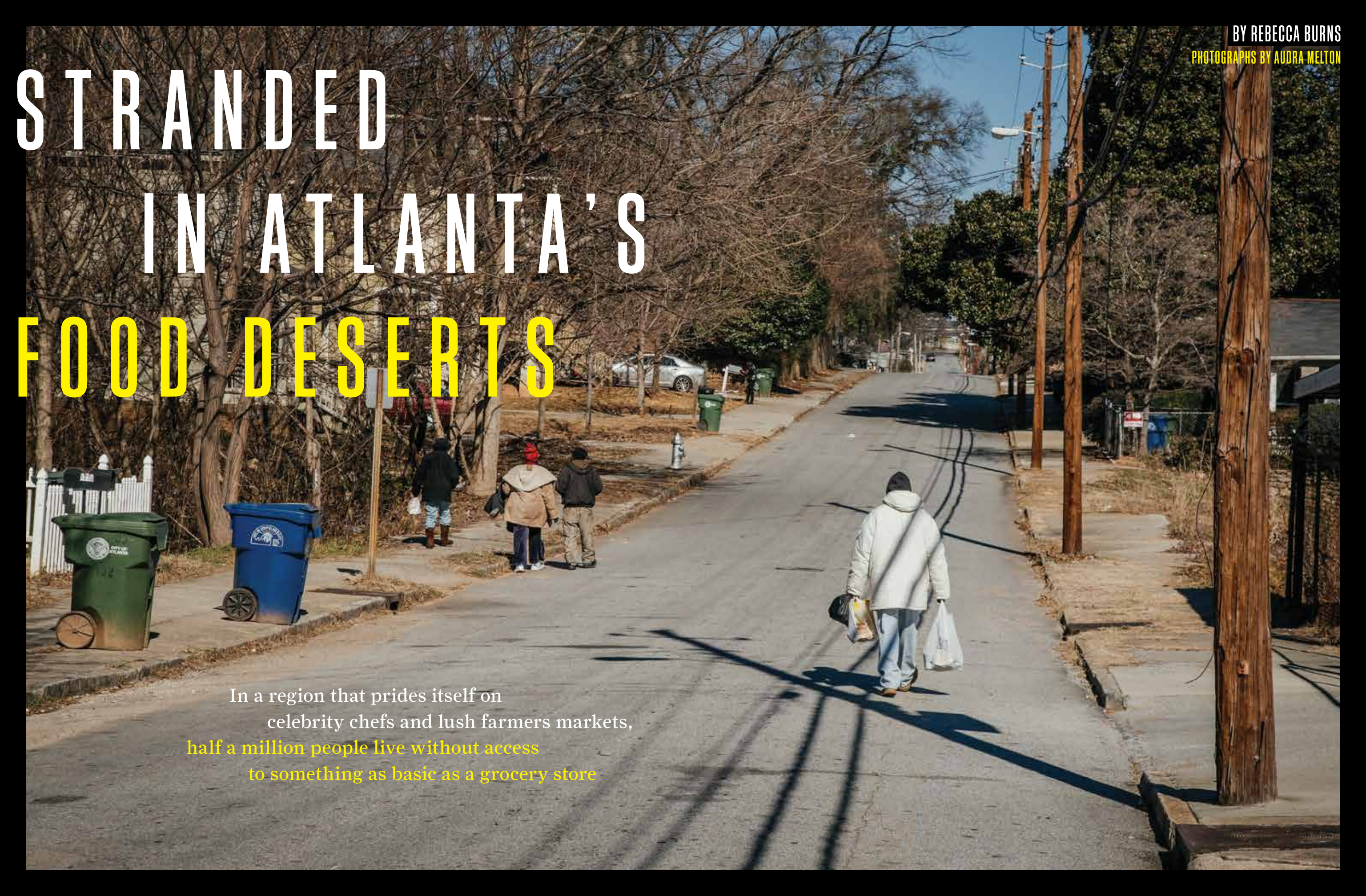


BY REBECCA BURNS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUDRA MELTON

STRANDED IN ATLANTA'S FOOD DESERTS

In a region that prides itself on
celebrity chefs and lush farmers markets,
half a million people live without access
to something as basic as a grocery store





Once a month, Emma and Charles Davis make their “big” grocery-shopping trip. It’s practically an all-day expedition: To travel the twelve miles from their apartment off Bolton Road to the Kroger on Moreland Avenue requires two MARTA transfers, and the journey begins and ends with a fifteen-minute trek between their front door and the bus stop. “The hardest part is all that walking,” said Charles, who suffers from arthritis. They pile their grocery bags in a wheeled basket, and the bus driver lowers the wheelchair ramp to help them board. But pushing the loaded cart gets tiring. “You just buy what you need, because you have to carry it all,” explained Charles.

If everything goes right—the buses are on time and they make every connection—a one-way trip from their apartment to the store takes two hours. But if there’s a glitch, and there’s almost always a glitch, they’re looking at three hours. Each way. By car it takes twenty minutes to cover the same route. There’s another Kroger, half the distance from the one on Moreland Avenue. But the bus to get there is crowded. “No one gives up a seat,” Charles said. “We have to stand the whole way.” Forget the store five miles north in Vinings Village; MARTA service ends at the border of Fulton and Cobb counties.

When they need to restock between their monthly trips, the Davises venture to Super Giant Food on Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway, about three miles from their apartment. On weekdays, the trip to Super Giant takes three-quarters of an hour—thirty minutes of walking and fifteen on the bus. But on the weekend, MARTA schedules are reduced, which means waiting up to an hour for the bus.

I met the Davises one frigid morning in January as they left Super Giant Food. Charles wore jaunty alligator shoes and a heavy leather jacket decorated with patches, mementos from his Army years. Emma, bundled in a green jacket and a cozy fleece hat, pushed their wheeled basket to the curb. “The prices can be higher here than at Kroger—especially for meat,” said Charles, squinting down at the plastic bags bundled in Emma’s basket. “But it seems like everywhere is getting higher, just when everyone’s food stamps are getting cut.” Still, the couple, who are in their sixties, prefer Super Giant to the only close alternative: convenience stores. “The smaller corner stores nearby are a waste of time and money,” Charles said. They navigated the empty parking lot slowly, Emma clutching the handles of their wheeled cart and Charles leaning on his cane. They crossed the four lanes of Hollowell Parkway and then stood at the bus stop, waiting.

Inside Super Giant, owner Sam Goswami was overseeing the installation of a new produce case. An electrician was perched atop a ladder, the whirring of his drill blending with the gospel music that poured through the store’s sound system. The Super Giant is light and airy. It sparkles—quite literally—thanks to six-foot strips of mirror tile wrapped around the top of each pillar that supports its roof. The tiles cast disco-ball twinkles over the neatly stocked display shelves and wide aisles.

That seventies decorative touch was in place when Goswami bought Super Giant back in 2003. A hotelier who’d worked in San Francisco and then Hiawassee, Georgia, before moving to Gwinnett County, Goswami never planned to get into the grocery business, but was intrigued when the Super Giant came on the market. His friends and family, on the other hand, were skeptical. The store adjoined a onetime Kmart that housed a flea

market, surrounded by six acres of asphalt in the epicenter of Bankhead, a west Atlanta neighborhood best known for blighted housing projects, sketchy auto parts shops, and a dance called the Bankhead Bounce.

But Goswami was undeterred, and over the past decade, a funny thing happened: He fell in love with Bankhead. When you’re in the hotel business, your customers come and go. As a grocer, you see the same people week after week, year after year. You watch them select ingredients for daily suppers, plan birthday celebrations, stretch

“You just buy what you need, because you have to carry it.”

their budgets during lean times, and try to follow the doctor’s orders and eat more vegetables.

“I am really *into* this community,” said Goswami with a bemused grin and a broad shrug. “I love it.” We sat in his office, an upstairs aerie with a wall of windows that allow him to scan the store, where on this winter morning shoppers lingered in the produce aisle, inspecting the mustard greens—a special at eighty-nine cents a bunch. Wearing a sweater vest, plaid dress shirt, and steel-rimmed glasses, Goswami exuded a professorial air as he explained his plans: to redevelop the Kmart property, which he purchased in 2008; add a health clinic in partnership with Emory; put in a coin laundry and gas pumps; plant a community garden; and almost double the size of Super Giant Food—from 22,000 square feet to 42,000.

Goswami’s ambitions are an exception, said Dale Royal, senior project manager with Invest Atlanta, the city’s economic development agency. Few independent grocery operators invest in their properties like Goswami has, and even fewer chains will *consider* opening stores in places like Bankhead. “They are laser-focused on demographics and just do a simple

CONTINUED ON PAGE 110

Below: Store owner Sam Goswami bags groceries at Super Giant Food. Bottom: Tiara Hart and her mother-in-law, Mechelle Burston, scrutinize prices while shopping at Super Giant. Between them, the women have seven children to feed. Opposite: The store is the only one for miles; many customers travel an hour or more by bus.



A FOOD DESERT FIELD GUIDE

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

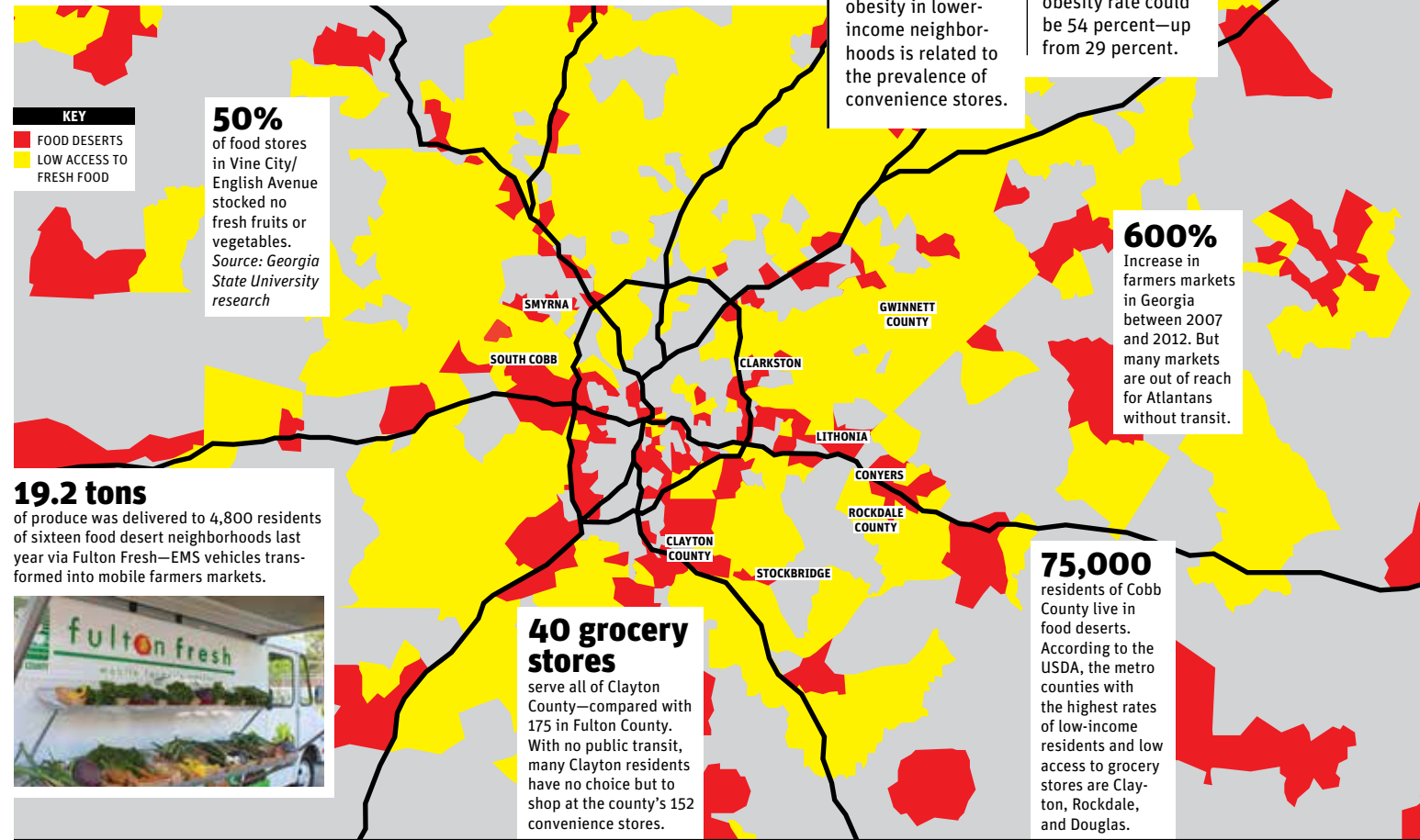
The USDA scored every census tract in the country by location of grocery stores and income distribution. Metro Atlanta is no land of plenty.

Food Deserts
Shaded in red, these are areas with at least a 20 percent poverty rate and in which at least a third of residents live a mile from a grocery store. Food deserts in the city include

the neighborhoods near Turner Field, downtown Atlanta, and Sweet Auburn. Suburban food deserts include Lithonia, Stockbridge, Clarkston, Conyers, South Cobb, and parts of Smyrna.

Low Access to Fresh Food
Shaded in yellow, these are neighborhoods where at least a third of residents live more than one mile from a grocery store (ten miles in rural areas). Intown communities

that fall under this classification include Cabbagetown, Grant Park, portions of Druid Hills, and Oakhurst. Large sections of suburban Fayette and Gwinnett counties are designated as low access.



THE PERILS OF "FOOD SWAMPS"

When the only food available is high in calories and low in nutrition, health suffers.

357
The average number of calories in snacks bought by grade-school children at urban corner stores, according to a study in *Pediatrics*. Those calories were cheap: Kids spent an average \$1.07—on candy, chips, and sweetened drinks. The conclusion: The rate of childhood obesity in lower-income neighborhoods is related to the prevalence of convenience stores.

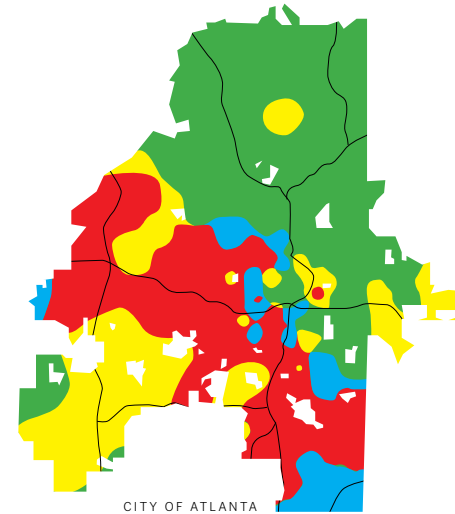
70%
Rate of obese children who have at least one cardiovascular disease risk factor; 39 percent have two or more.

\$2.1 billion
The amount spent annually in Georgia to treat obesity-related diseases. By 2030, the adult obesity rate could be 54 percent—up from 29 percent.

A POOR DIET CAN BE DEADLY

Food Trust analysis of diet-related deaths and income: red indicates high diet-related death rates in low-income areas; yellow indicates high diet-

related death rates in high-income areas; blue and green areas indicate lower death rates for low- and high-income Atlantans, respectively.

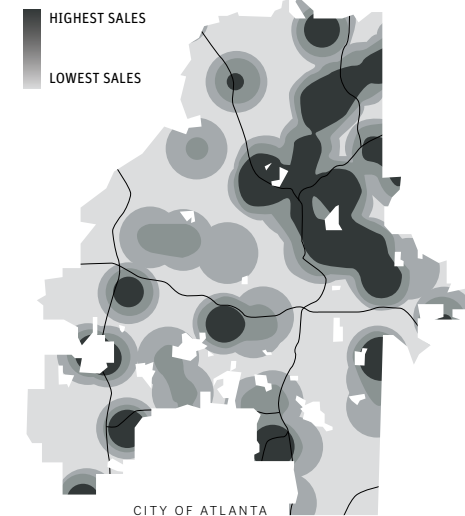


A GROCERY TRADE IMBALANCE

The Food Trust showed supermarket spending disproportionately occurs in northeast Atlanta; the darker areas are where

sales are highest. An estimated \$300 million is spent by people who must travel out of their neighborhoods to buy groceries.

SUPERMARKET SPENDING



APPLES TO APPLES

Statistics and white papers tell you only so much. To get a hands-on feel for what's available, I comparison-shopped at stores in west Atlanta, looking for staples and the ingredients for a simple spaghetti dinner. On my list: bread, milk, eggs, peanut butter, cereal, spaghetti, sauce, ground beef, some kind of green salad, and, naturally, apples. I visited all four stores on January 14. At each I tried to find the highest quality and healthiest groceries at the lowest price—for instance, whole-grain cereal in a cheaper store brand.



WALMART SUPERCENTER
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DRIVE
I could have spent even less at Walmart, but I sprang for a bag of salad greens (\$2.98) and the leaner ground beef (\$3.08/pound). A pleasant discovery: a loaf of baked-in-store whole-wheat bread—a frugal \$1.68.



SUPER GIANT FOOD
DONALD LEE HOLLOWELL PARKWAY
While my outlay here was barely more than at Walmart, I got slightly less beef (fourteen ounces versus a full pound) and half the amount of pasta. I did spring for organic Ragu (\$3.49) but saved on salad greens, just 89 cents.



SHOPPERS SUPERMARKET
JOSEPH E. BOONE BOULEVARD
While nondescript from the outside, this tiny store is well stocked—with a loaded produce case. Apples were only sold in prepackaged foursomes (\$1.69) and there was no low-fat milk. My big-ticket item? Cheerios; \$4.49 compared with \$2.18 for Walmart's Great Value box.



SIMPSON FOOD MART
SIMPSON ROAD
The closest thing to an apple at this corner store was the Tropicana, and no V8 to stand in for the veggies. Honey Bunches of Oats was the lowest-sugar cereal in stock. I do hope no one would actually pair "meat-flavored" sauce with canned ham (\$4.99).

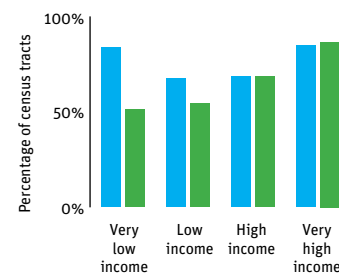
FRESH VS. FAST

While food desert analysis focuses on the scarcity of supermarkets, the abundance of fast food is another major public health concern. In 2011 the Atlanta Regional Commission analyzed the locations of more than 400 supermarkets and 1,200 fast food spots in the twenty-county metro region. Some of the notable findings:

More poverty, less fresh food

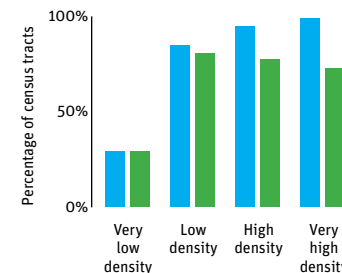
While almost equal percentages of Atlanta's poorest and wealthiest areas have greater than average access to fast food, the difference is striking when it comes to fresh food: 86 percent of very high-income areas have greater than average access to fresh food.

■ Census tracts with greater access to fast food
■ Census tracts with greater access to fresh food



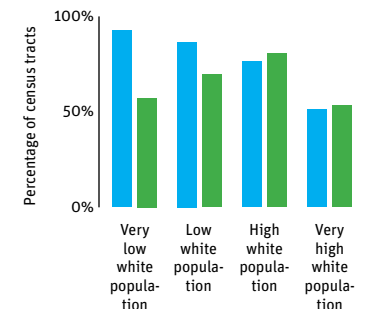
Sprawl, vacant lots, and reduced food options

Neither fresh nor fast food is easy to find in exurban areas with low populations or urban areas with high vacancy rates.



Race and fast food

Metro Atlanta's fast food restaurants are disproportionately located in communities with many people of color. The more white people in an area, the fewer the fast food locations.



8%
Of African Americans live in census tracts with supermarkets, compared with 31 percent of whites.



Cassandra Norris, left, manager of Shoppers Supermarket, drives to Forest Park to get produce. Convenience stores like Simpson Food Mart, above, which carries no fruit or vegetables, are more common. Former Army Ranger Quincy Springs runs the Vine City Walmart.



analysis of [shopping] data,” Royal said. The chains consider factors like median income and density, and they make decisions based on what they see on paper, compared with Goswami, who “really has his heart in it,” Royal said. Consider this: There are four supermarkets in the zip code 30318, three of which—Kroger, Publix, and a Walmart Supercenter—are clustered within a half mile of each other at Howell Mill Road, the eastern edge of the zip’s boundary, close to Buckhead’s Bitsy Grant Tennis Center. The fourth store is Goswami’s Super Giant, the only supermarket in a four-mile radius. For tens of thousands of people who live on the south and west side of Atlanta, going to Super Giant, whether by bus or car or cab or foot, is the only way to get fresh food at all.

When he bought this store (bargain priced at just \$750,000) in a part of town ignored by most developers, Sam Goswami had no idea he would become the accidental operator of an oasis in the middle of one of Atlanta’s food deserts—communities where many people are poor and live more than a mile from the nearest supermarket. Indeed, more than *half a million* people in the city of Atlanta and the ten counties that surround it live in neighborhoods the U.S. Department of Agriculture classifies as food deserts. You don’t find these nutritional wastelands only in places like Bankhead; it’s even harder to get fresh, healthy food in the suburbs. In Cobb County, 75,000 people are food desert residents, as are 124,000 in Clayton. Emma and Charles Davis’s trips to the store aren’t easy, but at least they can catch a bus. Transit in Cobb is limited; Clayton grounded its bus service in 2010.

Living in a food desert doesn’t just make it tough to get your daily servings of fruit and veggies. A 2011 Food Trust geographic analysis

Getting fresh food isn’t only a problem for the poorest Atlantans.

enclaves around Grant Park, for instance—are labeled “low access” by the USDA, meaning at least a third of the people who live there have to travel a mile or more to get to a grocery store. My zip code, 30312, includes Boulevard Heights, half of Cabbagetown, and much of the Old Fourth Ward. It does not have a single supermarket. My husband and I travel two and a half miles to the same Kroger on Moreland Avenue where Emma and Charles Davis shop. Of course, we have a car.

In most of the world’s densely packed urban areas, you can pick up fresh produce at a stall on the way home from work, or buy bread, meat, and staples at the corner shop across the street. But in sprawling metro Atlanta, where the model is mega markets surrounded by mega parking lots, very few of us have the option of a quick dash

of income, access to grocery stores, and morbidity rates concluded that people who live in metro Atlanta food deserts are more likely to die from nutrition-related sicknesses like diabetes and heart disease.

Getting fresh food isn’t only a problem for the poorest Atlantans. Areas most of us would hardly consider underprivileged—the middle-class suburbs of DeKalb County or the gentrified

to the store. When you’re trying to figure out what to fix your young children for dinner and you realize you need milk and eggs and a bag of salad greens and chicken breasts, and you have no choice but to load everyone in the minivan and drive five miles through traffic to get

to the store, you’re feeling the impact of development patterns that have made Atlanta the third-worst urban food desert in the country (behind only New Orleans and Chicago).

In Atlanta, the ninth-biggest metropolis of the world’s richest country, thousands of people can’t get fresh food, and some are getting sick—even dying—as a result. Which raises a simple question: Why can we build multimillion-dollar highway systems and multi-billion-dollar stadiums but not more grocery stores? If we can build a museum dedicated to a soft drink and one that celebrates college football and another that trumpets civil rights, can’t we help Emma and Charles Davis with what seems to be a most essential and basic right: putting an affordable and healthy dinner on the table?

When you talk about Atlanta’s food deserts, you have to talk about the three themes entwined in every civic issue in this region: race, class, and sprawl. The fact is, food deserts are more prevalent in non-white neighborhoods. In poor communities, food is more expensive. And here’s an irony: Much of the local produce prized by the city’s finest chefs is grown in urban farms in poor neighborhoods—produce that is often trucked across town to farmers markets in wealthier enclaves. But of all the factors, none is more important than transportation. Our low population density combined with a lack of comprehensive public transit means that many people simply cannot get to places where fresh food is available.

Atlanta’s west side, with its stark contrasts of wealth and poverty,

is a microcosm of the region’s food desert dilemma. It’s also a place where—motivated in part by the impending construction of the new Falcons stadium—a handful of potential solutions are being tested. One of the answers can be found at, of all places, Walmart.

Quincy L.A. Springs IV, thirty-three years old and a Washington and Lee graduate, spent eight years as an Army Ranger. His last post was in Afghanistan, where he was a logistics combat adviser. Embedded with a tactical team, he helped train 850 Afghani soldiers for antinarcotics missions. “The Taliban weren’t too happy about their poppy fields being destroyed,” he told me. We were walking the aisles of the Walmart Supercenter in Vine City, where Springs has been general manager since the store opened in January 2013.

Springs, striding with a soldier’s impeccable posture, paused to tap a Mylar balloon decorated with the signature Walmart smiley face. It hovered near racks of fleece jackets and \$39.86 peacoats. “That balloon’s not filled up enough,” Springs said. “It needs to be replaced. Plus, the ribbon’s too long.”

Springs left the Army in 2009 and went to work for Walmart, which was recruiting veteran officers for leadership positions. “I dusted my boots off from Afghanistan and put on a suit,” Springs said. Soldiering in Afghanistan was nowhere near as tough as managing a few hundred Walmart employees, he told me. For some of his staff, this is the first job they’ve ever held. Springs serves as a drill sergeant in customer service and has high expectations. His mission: to prove that a chain store can be successful in a neighborhood that other companies have written off. “I want our customers to expect to be treated the same way and get the same service in the West End as they would in Buckhead,” said Springs, who previously managed the Walmart Supercenter on Howell Mill Road, one of the behemoth retailer’s prototype urban stores. Springs pointed out that the Vine City Walmart ranked | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 152**

Food Deserts

Continued from page 111

second out of the eleven in its region on customer satisfaction surveys for 2013, and said he is even more proud that it ranked third in “associate satisfaction,” meaning the people who work there are happy, no matter how hard he pushes them.

When it moved into Vine City, Walmart retrofitted and expanded space that had been left vacant when Publix moved out of the neighborhood in 2009. As it had done on Howell Mill, Walmart created a scaled-down version of its suburban supercenters—75,000 square feet versus 200,000; thirteen checkout lanes versus thirty. There’s a pharmacy but not a garden center; you’ll find housewares like plates and pillowcases and shower curtains but not patio furniture. There’s no hunting or fishing gear. Since it opened, the Vine City Walmart has been profitable, said Springs. More than 30,000 people shop here weekly, and while they buy paper towels and bleach and other household products, the store’s biggest category is groceries. The top sellers: tilapia, bananas, strawberries (when they’re in season), and chicken leg quarters.

If Walmart could be successful operating in 30314, a zip where the median household income is \$22,400, why couldn’t Publix? The store closed after seven years because it did not see the sales volume that had been projected when it moved to the neighborhood in 2002, according to Publix community relations manager Brenda Reid. One factor that contributed to the low volume was that promised development of nearby property stalled, providing Publix a smaller customer base than anticipated, according to Reid.

Ivory Young, who has represented the Vine City area on the Atlanta City Council since 2001, said that after Publix decamped the city approached Walmart and the retailer initially said no. “But they did their own analysis and came to find they were wrong; the community would support it,” he said.

What Vine City needs—maybe even more than fresh food—is jobs. Most of the Walmart’s 200 to 250 full- and part-time staff live nearby. Springs said that people who are quick to criticize Walmart’s labor practices don’t acknowledge that the giant retailer actually *hires* underemployed and

underexperienced workers. “Why not focus on the opportunity Walmart offers?” he asked. “How about the more than 200 people who didn’t have jobs who now do?”

THE VINE CITY WALMART is located on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, just two blocks from Sunset Avenue, where King once lived. In 1966 King and Ralph David Abernathy joined protests that highlighted the living conditions in Vine City: rat-infested houses owned by slumlords, boarded storefronts, no parks or playgrounds. In the half century since, there have been other efforts to revitalize Vine City and its neighbors, English Avenue to the north, Castleberry Hill to the south, West End and Bankhead to the west. But the neighborhoods continue to struggle, even as other parts of Atlanta rise around them. Since the Georgia Dome opened in 1992, the population of Vine City has declined by two-thirds. Now that a new stadium is coming, the spotlight again is focused on the people who will live in its shadow. When you read about “community benefits agreements” between the City of Atlanta, the Atlanta Falcons, and Falcons owner Arthur Blank, these are the communities everyone’s talking about.

John Bare, who runs the Atlanta Falcons Youth Foundation, a division of the Blank Foundation, said the organization is focusing on fresh foods as part of an overall strategy to promote a healthy lifestyle for children. The foundation has worked on the west side for several years, said Bare, and the stadium project is drawing attention to work that has been in progress. The long-term goal, he said, is “moving away from giving people a box of food so they don’t starve to giving them access to fresh food they can prepare themselves.”

IN THE 1960S, when Martin and Coretta King moved their family into a redbrick house on Sunset Avenue, it was easy to shop for groceries in Vine City. Back then, even though Atlanta’s sprawl to the suburbs had started, most people still lived intown and walked to well-stocked corner stores or shopped at small groceries near bus routes.

Over the past half century, most of those minimarkets have scaled back or shuttered completely. They lost customers with the flight of middle-class Atlantans—white *and* black—to the suburbs. Consolidation in the industry meant suppliers began

servicing just big suburban chain stores. But one throwback remains: Shoppers Supermarket, tucked into Simpson Plaza, a 1963 shopping center on Joseph E. Boone Boulevard, a five-minute walk around the corner from King’s former home. From the outside, Shoppers does not appear particularly promising. Day in and out, men cluster on the sidewalk in front of the laundry next door, smoking and tossing dice. The storefront is dingy, the sign askew, the doors barricaded by thick burglar bars. But inside, the cases are stocked with fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables, a rare sight among corner stores, where refrigeration units are barren or used to store nonperishables. (I visited one store in Summerhill where produce coolers held hair weaves.)

Cassandra Norris has worked here since 1983 and has been store manager for two decades, a steady presence through three ownership changes (the present owners, Joo Ho and Sunhwa Song, bought Simpson Plaza in 1995 for \$465,000). Norris grew up a few blocks away, graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1978, and has watched generations of families buy groceries. “We stock things to make the older people happy,” she said, gesturing toward a meat case that holds smoked meats and ham hocks (\$1.49 a pound). “The younger people are the ground beef generation.” Norris said she strives to keep prices as low as possible; she drives Mrs. Song’s van to the State Farmers Market at Forest Park to pick up all those fresh fruits and vegetables and cut out delivery fees. “I just put it all in the boss lady’s van,” she said.

Hard data confirms my observation that Norris runs the best-stocked little store in the area. Stephen Barrett wrote his Georgia State University master’s thesis on the availability of fresh or local produce in Vine City and English Avenue. He used an iPhone app to track shelf stock and logged 311 miles by bike as he visited twenty stores. Barrett’s findings are dispiriting: Half of the stores he surveyed carried zero produce. Of the other ten, most stocked only one or two types of fruit—usually apples or bananas, placed up at the cash register along with lottery tickets and cigarettes. Shoppers Supermarket, however, stocked seventeen types of vegetables and eight kinds of fruit; the only nearby store with greater selection was Walmart (ninety-seven varieties of veggies, forty-five fruits).

If Shoppers Supermarket is the best-case scenario for corner stores, a mile down the road, Simpson Food Mart represents the norm. A neatly painted sign touts eggs, milk, groceries, and sandwiches. Inside, however, the tiny store smells like smoke and echoes with the electronic clank of four video slot machines that occupy about a third of the floor space. On one of my visits there, the four black stools in front of the machines were occupied by players, while a handful of observers squeezed behind them. The gaming area might have once held a dairy case; now the few pints of milk and cartons of eggs are stored in minifridges on a counter that also holds wrapped sandwiches. “We don’t stock any fruit or vegetables,” the clerk told me when I asked if he had any apples. The closest thing resembling produce I could find in the store was a pint of Tropicana apple juice.

One of the paradoxes of food deserts is that the people living in them often have the highest rates of obesity—and its associated illnesses. A 2009 study in the journal *Pediatrics* showed that children who live in neighborhoods with lots of corner stores consume more calories and are more likely to be obese than children who live in neighborhoods with supermarkets. When King and Abernathy railed against poverty in the 1960s, many poor people were malnourished and severely underweight. Today they are still malnourished—but overweight.

The communities near the Georgia Dome are served by one supermarket (Walmart), one well-stocked small store (Shoppers Supermarket), and at least sixty convenience stores that carry little but packaged snacks.

A decade ago, Charles Moore, an Emory and Grady physician, analyzed his patient files and found that his worst cases came from one zip code: 30314, home to Vine City and English Avenue. Moore realized that diet contributed to his patients’ health problems and began to write “food prescriptions,” advocating healthier eating and preventive care. In 2005 he founded the Healing Community Center, now a full-service clinic on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.

“INSTEAD OF TALKING about a food desert, the better term is really ‘food swamp.’ There is an abundance of food, but it’s not healthy or varied,” Kwabena Nkromo told me. Nkromo runs a program called Atlanta Food & Farm, which aims to connect local growers,

store owners, and poor neighborhoods. “It’s not a lack of food; it’s a lack of *good* food.” Nkromo studied agriculture and economic development at Tuskegee and Clemson; he presumed that he’d work on famine relief in Africa or some other developing region of the world. He did not imagine that he’d be working on urban farm policies in the American South.

Nkromo’s work underscores another paradox of food deserts, this one particular to Atlanta. While the south and west sides of the city contain some of the neighborhoods most starved for healthy foods, they also are home to at least a dozen urban agricultural businesses—Patchwork City Farms and Atwood Community Gardens, for instance. There’s a higher density of farms and gardens in this section of metro Atlanta—an arc across the south and west sides that has been dubbed the “Fertile Crescent”—than elsewhere, but many of them export their produce to other parts of town.

With the aim of keeping more of that locally grown food closer to home and using urban farms as catalysts for other economic development, Nkromo is organizing a project, also called the Fertile Crescent. One of the group’s pilot projects has been training teens and young adults at a west side shelter called City of Refuge to grow and harvest kale. The trendy green is slated to be processed into Queen of Kale chips—snacks sold online and in places like the Johns Creek Whole Foods store.

Previously, when the west side farms have tried to sell to their neighbors, there were “socioeconomic, cultural, and racial barriers,” wrote Barrett, the Georgia State researcher. He surveyed eleven sites in the area and found that only one had tried to sell produce to local stores. When it came to selling directly, some farmers and garden operators seemed confounded, for example, that locals didn’t subscribe to their CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) plans. But a CSA at Patchwork City Farms costs \$450 for eighteen weeks; at a weekly cost of \$25, that CSA subscription would eat up most of the total allowance for a Georgia resident on food stamps—about \$34 a week. Another farm operated a full season before grasping that the reason its neighbors wouldn’t come to its on-site market was that they could only get there by foot. Walking a mile to market isn’t an obstacle; trekking home with a five-pound melon is.

The growers' disingenuousness was matched by suspicion on the part of locals. Some see the farms as signs of gentrification, literal land-grabbing efforts by middle class—often white—interlopers. The community garden at Lindsay Street Baptist Church in English Avenue is funded by a group of donors, mostly from Buckhead, who also volunteer to plant and harvest produce. Once, when the donors arrived at the church, they were greeted by a picketer holding a sign that read, "Go home, colonialists!" While the encounter was distressing, Lindsay Street pastor Reverend Anthony Motley said that the incident underscored the need for communication and cooperation: "It's only going to happen with a real coalition—across class and color and the rest—creating something together." Focusing on groceries alone will never solve deep-rooted problems, he said. "Food is important, but what's more important is the issue of employment. We can't create a sustainable society when we are just feeding folks. People want to feed the hungry but don't want to ask *why* they are hungry."

There are dozens of organizations that feed hungry Atlantans and dozens more that try to help malnourished people eat healthier food or obese people to lose weight. But many of these agencies operate in vacuums. One group zealously promotes organics; another distributes surplus cheesecake donated by a fast food chain. One advocates exercise; another wants to train farmers.

Forging a consistent and logical strategy from those disparate efforts is the goal of a project called the Georgia Food Oasis. Its members include the Atlanta Community Food Bank, the American Heart Association, Georgia Organics, and the Blank Foundation. The group has a lofty goal: eradicating food deserts across the state. It's starting with a pilot, the Westside Food Oasis. Cicely Garrett is the Food Bank's point person on the Food Oasis; last fall she was appointed to the newly created and wonkily titled position of food systems innovation manager. "Being able to feed yourself and your family should not be a privilege in this country," she said. The pilot will test ideas such as mobile farm trucks, incentives for convenience stores to stock fresh foods, urban farms, and wellness education.

All of those innovative ideas are worthy and can contribute to better, healthier food options—for the west side and any commu-

nity. But let's face it: We all still need supermarkets. There's not a substitute for a big store where you can pick up pantry staples and fresh foods—not to mention toilet paper and dishwashing liquid—in a single stop at the end of a busy workday or while running your weekend errands. The Georgia Supermarket Access Task Force—whose members include usual suspects like the Food Bank, the Blank Foundation, and Georgia Organics, as well as less predictable players like A.J. Robinson of the Central Atlanta Progress business association and Mike Worley of Georgia Power—issued a report in 2013 recommending that local, state, and federal governments create incentives for more supermarkets to locate in underserved parts of Georgia and metro Atlanta. Some local governments have already responded; Invest Atlanta, for instance, has policies that make it easier for supermarkets to qualify for tax credits than other businesses.

Solving the problem of our food deserts requires addressing transit and income inequality—people need to get to stores and they need to have money to buy food. Those are intractable, systemic challenges. But when it comes to the third piece of the puzzle, simply making healthy food itself more readily available, there are examples worth replicating. National retailers can change the way they operate and take a chance, as Walmart has done in Vine City. And local governments can support independent store owners like Sam Goswami who are willing to invest in underserved areas.

Goswami was recently approved for a \$500,000 low-interest loan that will help him expand his produce section and the rest of the store. Issued by the nonprofit ACE (Access to Capital for Entrepreneurs), this is the largest Healthy Food Finance Initiative bank loan in Georgia to date, according to ACE director of strategic initiatives Karen Davis. Goswami is in the process of applying for an Invest Atlanta program called New Market Tax Credits, a local and federally funded deal that gives incentives to businesses that open or expand in underdeveloped areas. He showed off an architect's renderings of a community center, a place for cooking demonstrations, maybe even a credit union or pharmacy. He wants to run a jitney service (in partnership with Emory) that would offer rides to people who, like Emma and Charles Davis, have to contend with the vagaries of public transit.

ON A CLEAR but freezing Friday morning, Goswami waited outside a canvas tent erected in the parking lot behind Super Giant Food. Inside, a quartet of longtime patrons huddled near a portable heater, eyeing the tent's door and a wooden planter. They were waiting for congressman John Lewis. The civil rights leader was slated to break ground—ceremonially, at least—for a community garden. Eventually, the garden will occupy twelve large raised beds in the supermarket parking lot. For this morning's ceremony, a four-by-four-foot planter had been assembled for Lewis's use.

Betty Bohanan, who said she had met the congressman several times, moved to Bankhead thirty-seven years ago, and raised seven sons in the neighborhood. For decades, she has shopped at Super Giant, "the only store around here." Bohanan now lives in an apartment nearby, and said she walks to the store a few times a week, about ten minutes each way.

Everyone was nearly numb—an Emory student dug around in her car trunk and found a plush blanket for the ladies to place over their laps—when the congressman arrived. He threw several shovels of dirt over the roots of a sapling an aide held in the planter; come spring it will have a permanent spot in the garden. "This is a fine thing you are doing," Lewis said, shaking Goswami's hand. "I hope this is the first of many gardens we see in our communities that need them," added Lewis.

After the congressman and his entourage drove away, everyone else got a turn to dig in the dirt. Goswami, Emory students and professors, Reverend Larry Hill of nearby Word of God Ministries, and Charles Moore, the doctor who writes nutrition prescriptions, planted carrots and turnips. The garden should be sustainable, said Hugh Green, the project manager and an Emory public health student. The goal is that a third of its harvest will be sold in Super Giant, a third sold directly to Bankhead residents, and a third to chefs at Atlanta restaurants.

"This is very exciting, to see the next step," said Goswami. He dusted off his palms and walked back to the store. Inside, the lines at the cash registers already were deep; the garden might yield produce this summer, but for now everyone wanted the collards and apples for sale at the one food oasis in Bankhead. ■