

Community Development from the Grass Up: Re-centering Community Voice, Data, and Practice

Section 1: Lived Experience as Foundation

Some people have asked how I got into community development. My partner from Pittsburg (*Neighborhood in Atlanta*), the guys on Central Drive (*Citgo in Stone Mountain*), Lil One in Bowen Homes. We would talk about how we were going to “buy the block.” That method wasn’t sustainable, but the idea was there.

I saw it in my grandmother (Nana) opening the hair store and daycare in Newburg, Louisville, KY. I saw it riding with my Uncle Man, who was the maintenance man in the projects, while listening to the first T.I. *In the Streets* mixtapes. I saw it in mom, went from the candy lady to opening a contracting company doing home improvements.

I learned community development from grass roots level. While not formalized they knew that community development was needed, they may not have knew about Urban planning, CDCs, CDFIs or Urban studies but they knew there were a lack of resources, incarceration happening to black boys and fathers and lack of economic opportunity.

Section 2: From Grassroots to Formal Study

Over the past 20 years I have been engaged in grass roots organizing. At 19, I worked to bring together the Eastside and Westside of Atlanta because I saw gentrification coming that was going to remove Bowen Homes (no longer there).

In my 20s, I worked with the Greenhaven Organization to push for cityhood in South Dekalb with a goal of bringing economic development to an unincorporated area. During that movement, I ran for State Office to advance that vision.

When those efforts began hitting roadblocks, I returned to school to study finance and community development. Along the way I read Black Economics by Jawanza Kunjufu which deeply shaped my thinking around community development. The book examines micro and macroeconomics within the black community and contrasts the role of corporate Black Professional with that of the Black business owner.

Section 3: Purpose

In these papers we seek to examine how we bring together the streets, grassroots organizers, the people, educational institutions and financial institutions together to develop community.

We look through multiple lenses:

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- My partners from Pittsburgh Bowen (now gentrified), and Central Drive
- Nana's vision for Newburg
- Institutional resources such as grants, lending capital, and knowledge

We can't do community development and be the "best kept secret." Poor people, minorities and disinvested communities are the last to know, especially when it is a secret.

This work will not only examine community development, but also:

- Design solutions
- Implement strategies
- Analyze outcomes.

These papers will use data and community input to understand problems and identify solutions. All data and working paper will be publicly available.

But before we get there, we must first define community development and establish starting point:

"What Happened to the Southside."

Section 4: Defining Community vs. Economic Development

Community Development is a practice-based profession and holistic process aimed at improving the quality of life, strengthening and empowering residents. It is often used interchangeably with economic development, but they are not the same.

- **Economic development** is a sustainable effort to improve a regions economic prosperity and quality of life of life through job creation, infrastructure investment and rising incomes.
- **Community Development** centers people, focusing on empowerment, relationships, and long-term stability.

Key Distinction:

Economic development → Place and Space

Community development → People and community

This work is part of a broader community development series broken into smaller focus series. The first series is **"What Happened to the Southside."**

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Section 5: Research Focus – What Happened to the Southside

“What Happened to the Southside” is a look at Southside communities, think Southside of cities (South Chicago, South Central LA), Southern parts of a county (South Dekalb, South Fulton), or Global South (South America, Africa).

This series focuses on:

- incomes
- housing
- community spaces
- quality of life
- culture

The goal is to understand how to develop communities with minimal to no displacement, and how we reinvest in communities for current residence.

This approach examines:

- Community skills
- Demographic
- Soul and culture of the community
- How existing strengths can be built upon

Section 6: Initial Case Study – South DeKalb

Our first area of concentration will be Dekalb county particularly South Dekalb.

We are examining the division at Memorial Drive which effectively splits Dekalb into two. Initial data shows stark contrast in:

- Racial demographics
- Housing values
- Income levels

As we dig deeper, we will analyze intersections between:

- Demographics
- Location
- Key data indicators

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We have deployed a community survey to gather input on:

- Community safety
- Community investment
- Access to information

The results will be presented back to community for validation and feedback.

Section 7: Outcomes & Vision

The goal of this work is to bring community back into community development.

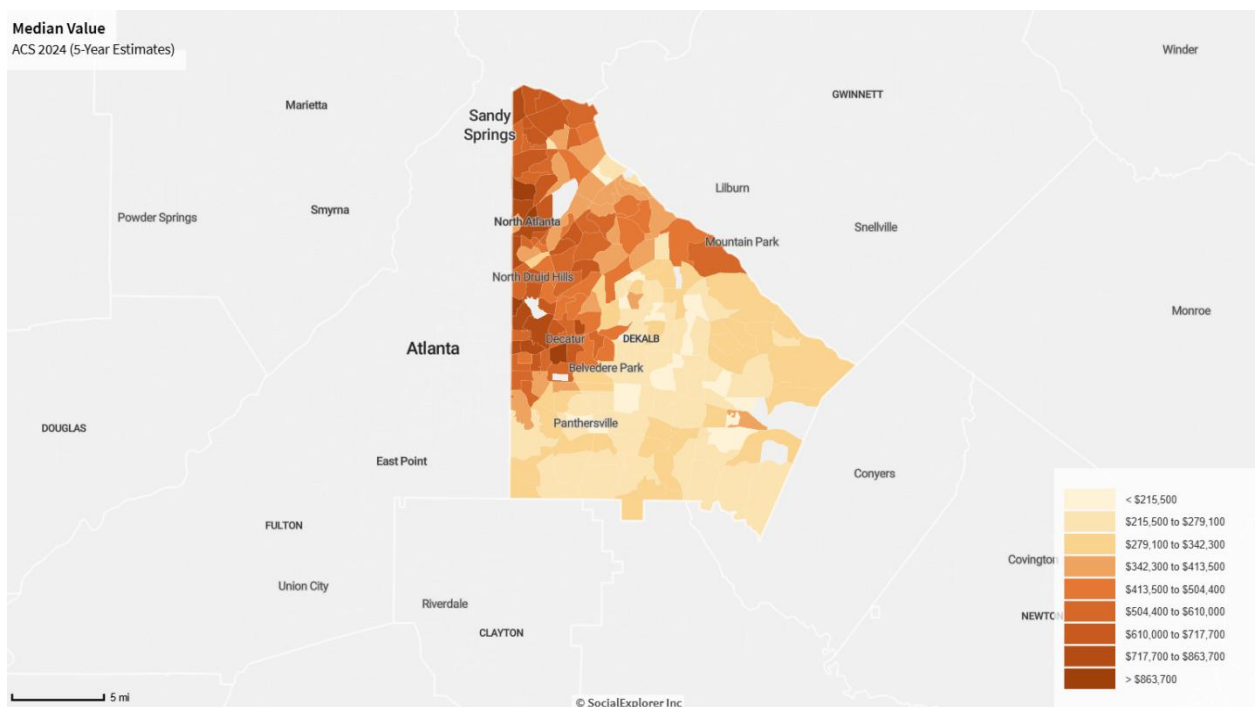
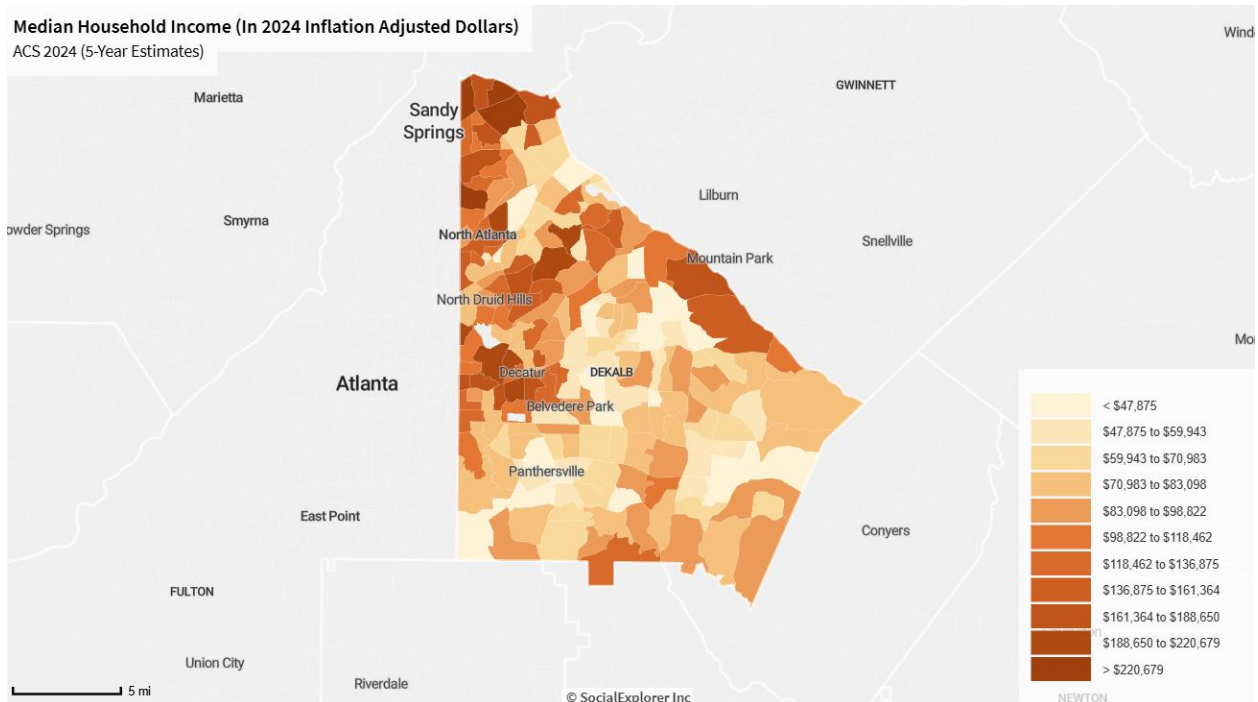
This includes:

- Presenting findings to decision-makers and funders
- Creating third space for community engagement
- Revitalizing disinvested communities **without displacement**

Ultimately, the aim of this work is to ensure that development is not done to communities but with them.

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Appendix



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Total Population: Black or African American Alone
ACS 2024 (5-Year Estimates)

