



# INFORMING PUBLIC HEALTH

## RESEARCH BRIEF

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# Exploring the Opportunity Atlas, a New Tool for Tracking Social Mobility Outcomes

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## Background

Harvard University and Brown University collaborated with the Census Bureau to build an interactive tool, which makes it easier to explore an impressive amount of available data regarding social mobility across the United States. This tool, “the Opportunity Atlas”<sup>1</sup> compiled anonymous data from the Census and Federal income tax returns on 20 million Americans who were tracked from childhood through adulthood.

The Opportunity Atlas uncovers outcomes at the state, county, city, and even neighborhood levels. The hope is that by studying the differences in adult outcomes in relationship to their childhood neighborhoods, we may more effectively identify barriers to social mobility and help communities brainstorm solutions to assist more children to rise out of poverty across the course of their early lives.

We were curious about the Opportunity Atlas’ ability to unveil local trends in social mobility across our local city of Atlanta, GA. While we report average income differences and overall visual trends in this brief, we did not assess any significance levels of these differences, and therefore our aim is more to promote this exciting tool and provide examples of its applications rather than make formal remarks on our findings.

Even so, the findings we unveiled in a short matter of time using the Opportunity Atlas are informative for future researchers and policy makers who may want to take a closer look.

## Methods

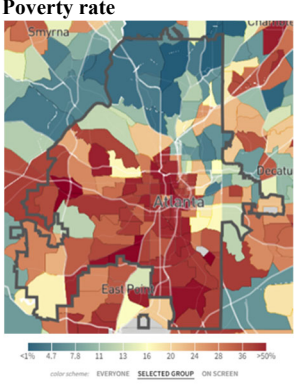
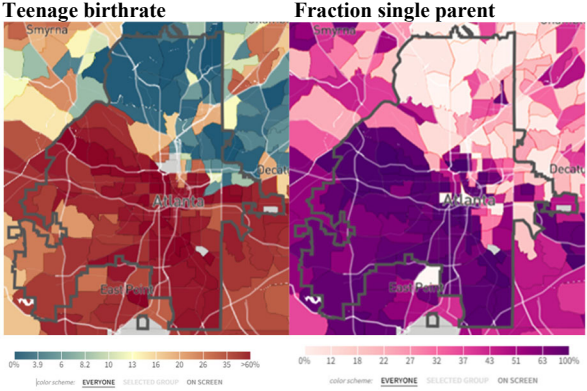
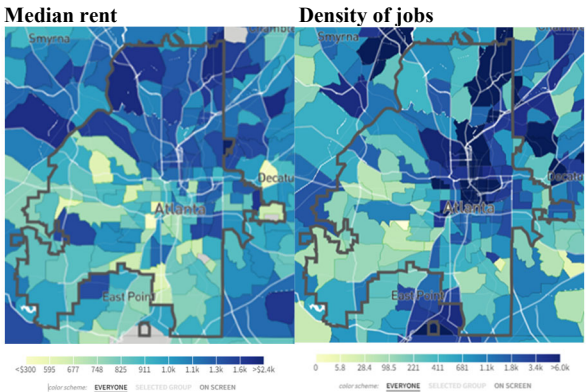
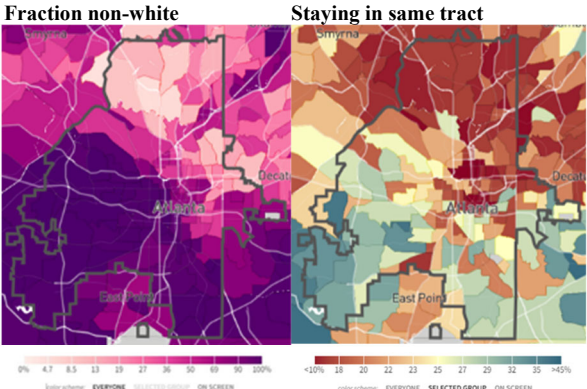
We used the Opportunity Atlas to view differences in adult outcomes by familial income when they were children. Our main interest was how familial income during upbringing affects income outcomes later in adulthood. We also explored several adult outcomes related to wealth including teenage birthrates, single-parent homes, and unemployment rates.

Outcomes reported in the Opportunity Atlas may be filtered across three demographic subgroups: parental income levels, child race, and child gender. We explored each of these filters while observing data across Atlanta, GA.

## Findings

Lower parental income as a child is visibly associated with lower hourly wages later in life. Across Fulton County for instance, children whose parents were in the lower income bracket (25<sup>th</sup> percentile) averaged \$15 as a wage rate in adulthood, compared to \$17 for those from middle-income upbringings, and \$19 from high-income upbringings.

By zooming in on the map, we may view a wide range of neighborhood characteristics spanning from teenage birthrates and single-parent homes to average income levels and overall employment rates. While some of the outcomes listed have large margins of error between individual census tracts, clear and consistent trends do emerge; especially, when looking at the bigger picture of Atlanta as a whole.



Areas of Atlanta that are south of downtown are visibly associated with more detrimental outcomes compared to areas north of downtown.

For southern Atlanta, we see overlapping struggles related to employment, income, and familial support. The Opportunity Atlas illustrates that southern Atlanta is associated with more single parent households (2012-2016), higher poverty rates (2012-2016), lower job densities (2013), and lower median rent prices (2012-2016).

Underlining the pervasiveness of racial inequity, each of these detrimental outcomes visually overlap with the least White saturated areas (2010).

### Discussion

The Opportunity Atlas serves as a stark reminder that long holding wealth inequalities in the United States still heavily influence the trajectories of young people’s lives. These trends highlight how inequality at the beginning of one’s life affects the trajectory of opportunities for financial success in adulthood, they also emphasize how such inequalities are still strongly associated with race.

As witnessed in the Opportunity Atlas, Atlanta, Georgia has longstanding gaps in development, with southern areas experiencing slower growth and less job opportunities. A report in 2000 from the Brookings Institution Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy prioritized three elements for Atlanta to narrow these disparities: investing in public transportation, expanding affordable housing across all areas, and leveraging public and private investments within slower growing areas.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 20 years later Atlanta has struggled to make sustainable improvements to development and transportation. The metro Atlanta economy has experienced multiple recessions since 2000, with less affluent areas struggling to rebound in comparison to more developed areas. A Bloomberg report from 2018 rated Atlanta as having the highest income inequality across the United States.<sup>3</sup>

With the help of new interactive tools like the Opportunity Atlas, we can better assess the specific needs in communities associated with

less healthy outcomes later in life. These insights allow for more informed planning of development, affordable housing, public transportation, education, and other outreach efforts aimed at narrowing disparities in social mobility and financial independence. Take a look for yourself, [www.opportunityatlas.org](http://www.opportunityatlas.org).

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Chetty, R. Friedman, J. Hendren, N. Jones, M. Porter, S. *The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility*. 2018. NBER Working Paper No. 25147
- <sup>2</sup> Pugh, Margaret. *Moving Beyond Sprawl : The Challenge For Metropolitan Atlanta*. n.p.: Washington, DC : Brookings Institution Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy, c2000., 2000. GEORGIA STATE UNIV's Catalog. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Foster, S., & Lu, W. (2018, October 10). *Atlanta takes top income inequality spot among U.S. cities*. Bloomberg.com. [https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-10/atlanta-takes-top-income-inequality-spot-among-american-cities?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=business&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_campaign=socialflow-organic&cmpid=socialflow-twitter-business#xj4y7vzkg](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-10/atlanta-takes-top-income-inequality-spot-among-american-cities?utm_medium=social&utm_content=business&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&cmpid=socialflow-twitter-business#xj4y7vzkg)



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