

# ONE REGION REALITY FUTURE



METRO  
ATLANTA  
EQUITY  
ATLAS

A Special Initiative of the Partnership for Southern Equity  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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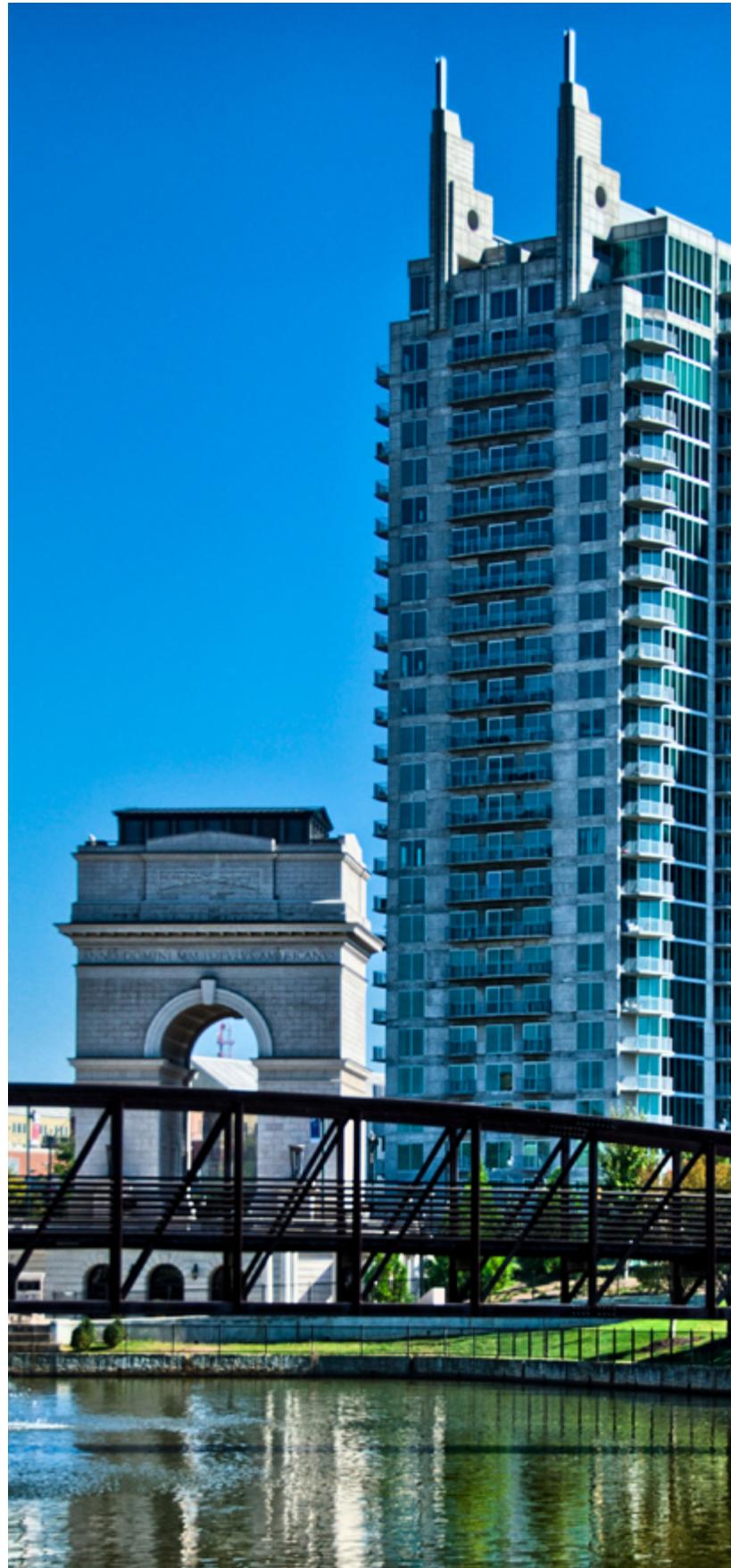
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## **The Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE)**

and its partners believe that equity is the superior growth model for our region, as it undergoes rapid and profound changes. When residents of communities have access to the highest standards of housing, jobs, education, workforce training, and healthy and safe environments, this nation's promise of opportunity begins to ring true. The goal of the Metro Atlanta Equity Atlas (MAEA) is to illuminate how regional prosperity and growth can be unlocked when communities have equitable access to a range of highly interconnected resources.

The MAEA consists of the following eight chapters, covering an array of indicators that comprise a healthy region. For each of these topic areas, the MAEA committee developed brief belief statements which express our visions of what a thriving and equitable community will look like.





## **POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

We believe that Metro Atlanta's strength lies in its diverse population, and that its future success will come from nurturing and tapping the potential of all of our region's youth, working adults and elderly.

## **HOUSING**

We believe every person in Metro Atlanta deserves access to safe, decent and affordable housing options, which may include renting or owning a home, and living in mixed-income communities of opportunity.

## **JOBS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

We believe every person in Metro Atlanta deserves access to a job that will pay a sustainable living wage and provide career advancement and personal satisfaction. We also believe a growing economy is driven by equitable access to opportunity, which fosters talent, innovation, entrepreneurship and job creation.

## **EDUCATION**

We believe every person in Metro Atlanta deserves access to quality educational opportunities at every level, which will prepare them for their chosen field of work and enable them to be productive contributors to a more globally competitive region.

## **HEALTH**

We believe every person in Metro Atlanta deserves to live in healthful communities with access to healthy food, recreation and green space, and health care services within a reasonable distance.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

We believe every person in Metro Atlanta deserves access to diverse transportation options that link them to their chosen educational, work and recreational opportunities, at an affordable price, and within reasonable distance of their home.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

We believe every person in Metro Atlanta should be able to enjoy clean air, green space and water and expect not to live within dangerous proximity of waste or harmful materials.

## **PUBLIC SAFETY**

We believe that every person in Metro Atlanta should feel safe while in his or her home, as well as in the broader community. When laws are broken, we believe that justice should be administered in ways that are fair and just, and strategies should be initiated to ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals receive supportive services that enable them to become more productive contributors to society.

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# HERE'S WHAT THE DATA TELL US ABOUT THE STATE OF EQUITY IN METRO ATLANTA.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

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Metro Atlanta is growing more diverse, with the fastest growing areas located outside the City of Atlanta. Indeed, most of the population growth in the core counties occurred in suburban areas. Over the past decade, the population of Metro Atlanta grew by one million people (24 percent), doubling over the past 25 years from 2.66 million people in 1985 to 5.28 million people in 2010. The region was the third fastest growing region in the U. S. between the years 2000 and 2010 and is now the 9th largest region in the U.S. overall.

The majority of this population growth occurred amongst the non-White population. Of the total population change over the last decade, 90 percent of the population growth in Metro Atlanta was due to minority population growth. Population growth over the last three decades occurred almost exclusively in suburban areas, as it has over the last three decades. The northern counties of Metro Atlanta generally grew by larger numbers than the southern counties. Gwinnett County grew the most in terms of net population growth.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Economic development is a widespread concern across the region. From 2007-2010, every county in Metro Atlanta lost businesses (from a low of 99 in Spalding County to a high of 1,605 in Gwinnett County). Despite the downturn in the economy and the decline in businesses, Metro Atlanta still showed a 13 percent increase in the number of business establishments from 2000-2010. Yet, the effect of the recession was definitely felt as the number of employees declined by 6 percent from 2000-2010. Total payroll also declined. In regard to the geographic distribution of jobs in 2010, there are concentrations of jobs in almost all the counties.

However, the greatest concentration of jobs per census tract is in the northern Metro Atlanta region consisting of North Fulton, North DeKalb, Mid-Cobb, North Gwinnett, and South Forsyth Counties.

Of greater intensity than the concentration of employment is the concentration of unemployment, primarily in a central cluster area, comprising City of Atlanta, south DeKalb County, and North Clayton County.

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**13%.**

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These areas have levels of unemployment ranging from 16 percent to as high as 58 percent. They are also the areas with the highest concentrations of African American residents, and in North Clayton County, a high percentage of Hispanics.

## EDUCATION

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In Metro Atlanta, thirty-six public school systems serve over 900,000 students. Six county or city school districts serve the majority of these students. Generally speaking, the region's student body is becoming more diverse with dramatic increases in Hispanic enrollment and continued increases in African American and Asian students. The central theme in the data is that outcomes for these student groups remain stubbornly below those of others. While overall performance levels are acceptable, with over 65 percent of

all students scoring at proficient or higher, student subgroups such as language minorities and those disadvantaged or with disabilities, consistently underperform relative to students as a whole. More troubling is the fact that these variations in achievement tend to get worse the longer our students are enrolled.

Many believe that investments in early childhood and pre-Kindergarten programs provide a big payoff, especially for disadvantaged students who often start school with limited vocabularies and poor reading skills. On the surface, there appears to be an abundance of pre-K programs in Metro Atlanta, especially in the most densely populated counties. However, program availability drops off significantly in the outer ring of counties such as Bartow, Cherokee, Clayton, Douglas, Fayette, Henry, Paulding and Rockdale.

Across Metro Atlanta, 60-80 percent of the population has a high school diploma.

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# Based on **2007** records, if Georgia were a nation, it would rank **26th** in the world for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

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Only a few census tracts exhibit higher graduation rates, while a number of census tracts exhibit lower rates. While this figure puts the region at about the national average, some might argue that the region must increase the percentage of high school graduates in order to significantly increase the college attendance rate. Metro Atlanta also has one of the largest postsecondary education infrastructures. There are 57 colleges and universities serving upwards of a quarter of a million students. Atlanta now ranks 10th or better nationally among metropolitan areas in higher education expenditures, research expenditures and enrollment growth. Additionally, overall enrollment of students of color has expanded in higher education.

## ENVIRONMENT

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Georgia suffers from a range of environmental challenges that impact the quality of its land, water and air. Three common contributors to land pollution in urbanized areas are

brownfields, landfills and hazardous waste sites. The data show that solid-waste landfills, superfund sites, and other potentially toxic sites are concentrated in the counties surrounding the City of Atlanta. More affluent counties such as Fayette, Henry, Paulding, and Cumming have a substantially smaller proportion of these sites.

Water pollution in Metro Atlanta is the result of overflows and spills caused by aging infrastructure, vandalism, cooking grease clogging pipes, and local authority practices. An analysis of state data by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution found that local agencies in Metro Atlanta paid nearly \$6 million in fines over the past dozen years for sewage spills and wastewater overflows into rivers and creeks. Consequently, there are several streams, creeks, and rivers that are stressed and suffer from an alarming amount of water pollution. Data suggest that a disproportionate number of those tributaries flow in and around low-income and minority communities.

When it comes to air pollution, Metro Atlanta often fairs poorly. According to the

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American Lung Association report on air quality, State of *THE Air* 2012, Metro Atlanta ranked 25th for worst ozone depletion and tied for 24th for worst soot. Based on 2007 records, if Georgia were a nation, it would rank 26th in the world for CO2 emissions.

## HEALTH

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Health equity is defined as “providing all people with fair opportunities to attain their full health potential to the extent possible.” In our society, there are many people whose circumstances and environment make it difficult for them to make good decisions about their health. In addition, there are specific populations that are more at risk for poor health than others, because of where they live, their socio-economic status, or their race or ethnicity. Health inequities inevitably create health disparities, leading to individuals and communities who are more susceptible to health problems placing a significant burden on our health care systems. The additional burden on these systems – e.g., medicines and emergency room services – impact everyone, as we either pay higher insurance rates or taxes to support the health care of these individuals.

While Georgia has not made the “top 10 most obese states” list, the Trust for America’s Health reports that close to 30 percent of the population is obese, moving from a rate of 28 percent in 2010 to 29 percent in 2012. Looking specifically at Metro Atlanta, there are several counties that have obesity rates higher than the state average, most notably Clayton and Rockdale Counties. A major contributor to obesity is lack of access to quality food.

Interestingly enough, food deserts, areas with limited healthy food outlets, tend to be the greatest threat in the region’s outlying counties.

Another health area where Atlanta has struggled is sexual health. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Georgia recorded 2,522 diagnoses of HIV Infection in 2011, which made the state 5th in the nation after California, Florida, Texas, and New York. Fulton and DeKalb Counties ranked 1st and 2nd respectively for HIV infections. The two counties likewise lead the state in the rate of sexually transmitted infections.

## HOUSING

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Metro Atlanta’s housing sector has seen some of the most devastating effects of the foreclosure crisis. The hardest hit neighborhoods were already struggling to overcome a history of disinvestment and the widespread loss of home values and housing wealth only added to those burdens. Across the region, Black-White residential segregation has decreased. In fact, unlike other large Southern metropolitan areas with persistent segregation, Atlanta has experienced a dramatic decrease. Yet, while these broader regional changes are suggestive of positive trends for Atlanta, they also mask growing city-suburban disparities as well as stagnant population growth within the urban core.

The potential impact of a household’s location was starkly illuminated in the wake of the recent foreclosure crisis and Great Recession. While White homeowners typically made economic gains through homeownership, Black

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# One in 9 African American children has an incarcerated parent, compared to 1 in 57 White children and 1 in 28 Hispanic children.

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and Hispanic households did not recognize the same level of gains, due in large part to the very different neighborhoods in which they live.

A 2012 Forbes Magazine article written by Emory University Professor Dorothy Brown shared research showing that homes in majority Black neighborhoods do not appreciate as much as homes in White neighborhoods. The 2008 financial crash and subsequent foreclosure crisis intensified this inequity, with White homeowners' median net worth decreasing by 16 percent compared to 50 percent among Black homeowners. Prior to the crash, predatory lending was concentrated in minority neighborhoods. Such practices steered borrowers to loans with higher interest rates, excessive fees and inflated property values based on fraudulent appraisals.

Between 2010 and 2012, most of the counties

in Metro Atlanta experienced decreases in the percentage of foreclosures, with Bartow, Cherokee, and Henry Counties having the largest decreases and Fulton County the smallest.

A 2013 report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, written by Elora Raymond and Carl Hudson, indicates that while the Atlanta region's housing market is recovering, this rebound is not evenly distributed. Places with greater minority populations are doing worse than places with majority White populations.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

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The rates of arrest and incarceration in Georgia have made it, and in fact Metro Atlanta, one of the largest jailers in the U.S. In 2011, prison incarceration rates in Metro Atlanta ranged

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from lows of 190-250 individuals per 100,000 in Forsyth, Paulding, and Pike Counties to a high of 1000-1050 per 100,000 in Meriwether and Douglas Counties. With the exception of Spalding County, prison incarceration rates in all of the other Metro Atlanta counties range from 500 to 750 people per 100,000.

While African Americans comprise 31 percent of Georgia's population, Georgia's prison population was comprised of 63 percent African Americans in May 2013. Sixty-three percent of all imprisoned males are Black and 44 percent of the females are Black - numbers hugely disproportionate to their representation in the population. As a result of the high incarceration rate, in 2012 the State of Georgia spent 9 percent of its total budget, or \$1,542,126,919, on public safety, which included corrections, pardons and parole, and juvenile justice. Approximately \$40,500,000 went to housing and care for incarcerated individuals.

This reality has had a drastic impact on some of the most vulnerable children in the state. One in 9 African American children has an incarcerated parent, compared to 1 in 57 White children and 1 in 28 Hispanic children. Access to counseling to minimize the damage and the pain of separation from a parent is minimal.

## TRANSPORTATION

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As demographics shift around Metro Atlanta, transportation has become both a critical community challenge and an asset. The most apparent challenge throughout the region is an inaccessible transportation system. Far-flung and extremely spread out development has made

it difficult to provide effective transportation. The Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority's (MARTA) heavy rail runs in DeKalb and Fulton Counties, providing nearby residents with fairly frequent, high-speed public transit. The heavy rail system is supplemented by an extensive system of MARTA buses operating over a vast coverage area but providing less frequent service. Cobb, Gwinnett and Cherokee Counties each operate their own bus services for commuters traveling into Atlanta. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) also operates a regional express bus service for suburban commuters traveling into key employment centers during rush hour.

A region's transportation system determines its winners and losers, and defines the opportunities available to residents. Metro Atlanta's economy has suffered from inequitable transportation investment that has created unbalanced growth in the region, which exacerbates traffic congestion and decreases economic development. Public transit has been significantly underfunded, further limiting our region's ability to compete in the global economy. Inadequate transportation options impact the safety of our community, as the lack of pedestrian infrastructure and limited transit service often leaves seniors, people with disabilities, and families without cars navigating unsafe streets.

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# CONCLUSION:

*Moving forward from here*

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This **Metro Atlanta Equity Atlas** represents a starting point for a deeper conversation about where inequities in infrastructure, education, and opportunities are perpetuating marginalized neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are living symbols of the social and economic potential not being realized in Metro Atlanta. Amir Farokhi, founder of Georgia Forward, captured the social cost of inequitable conditions this way:

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“Where there is low social connectedness – reflected in simple things like talking to your neighbors, giving and receiving favors and eating dinner with family – there is greater economic vulnerability. Civic engagement creates places where neighbors look out for neighbors and challenges are solved together. The alternative is to live with a level of mutual distrust, separated by silos and governed by rules that neglect instead of protect.”

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Each of the indicators represented in this equity atlas can be improved by a range of specific policy interventions but it is clear that they are all interconnected. Improving health outcomes will require taking action to locate homes, schools and jobs in healthy neighborhoods with access to nutritious foods, green space and primary care options. Reducing unemployment will mean taking action to improve elementary and middle school performance, supporting families in extending learning beyond the classroom and surrounding children with positive options for after school activities that push back against poverty and crime. Expanding transportation options so that more people have access to jobs and housing that does not disproportionately consume their paychecks will require political will, collaborative approaches and genuine community engagement.

All of these are complicated tasks, but they must begin or be supported more robustly if Metro Atlanta is to become a truly prosperous region, offering hope and success to all who work and live here. ■



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