

## **Urban Renewal, Gentrification and Food Insecurity in Asheville's Southside Neighborhood**

Erin Daniell  
Anthropology  
University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Heidi Kelley

### **Abstract**

Asheville, North Carolina is well known as a city packed with fantastic restaurants and local food. Yet in this land of apparent abundance, many of its citizens lack consistent, healthy food sources to sustain their lives. Understanding the root causes of this paradox is a major impetus behind this visual ethnographic project. The project focuses on a traditionally African American Asheville neighborhood called Southside, which underwent significant redevelopment when an urban renewal project was carried out in the neighborhood in the 1970s. Prior to urban renewal, the neighborhood boasted 7 grocery stores. Today it is classified as a food desert. The central inquiry of this research is exploring the long-term impacts of urban renewal on long-time and new residents of Southside, seeking to understand their evolving sense of place as Southside transitions into a new period of gentrification today and their relationship with food as a result of living in a food desert. The research is conducted through interviews with residents and observations of the community while working on various community projects relating to local food access and sustainability issues. This project builds upon the author's previous archival research, which examined 100 years of food access data and analyzed food security/insecurity trends in the neighborhood prior to, during and after urban renewal. This research exposed a correlation between the redevelopment of the neighborhood and the loss of its grocery stores. Drawing upon the researchers' photography skills, the ethnographic study will be illustrated with portraits of residents. This project provides a new understanding of the long-term impacts of urban renewal on the individual lives of residents of the Southside community as they experience daily life within a food desert.

**Keywords: Urban Renewal, Gentrification, Food Insecurity**

### **1. Introduction**

Asheville, North Carolina is well known as a city brimming with fantastic restaurants and local food. Yet in this land of apparent abundance many of its citizens experience food insecurity. A neighborhood named Southside, just south of Asheville's downtown is an area where this contradiction is lived out by residents. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines food insecurity as: "[a] situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active healthy life."<sup>1</sup> In the United States today food insecurity can manifest in a multitude of ways; one way food insecurity is experienced is by living in a "food desert." According to the USDA a food desert is "a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store...Low access to a healthy food retail outlet is defined as more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in urban areas and as more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store in rural areas."<sup>2</sup> The City of Asheville is home to nine food deserts according to the USDA.<sup>3</sup> The Southside community lives within the confines of a food desert. The closest grocery store to the center of the neighborhood is a Harris Teeter in north

Asheville, about 1.8 miles away.<sup>4</sup> The closest Ingles grocery store (an affordable Asheville-based grocery chain) is two and a half miles from the center of Southside in west and east Asheville respectively and is a thirty minute ride one way using public transportation.<sup>5</sup> This is despite the fact that there are eleven Ingles<sup>6</sup> within the city that is home to 87,882 people.<sup>7</sup> In recent years a local grocery store named Hopey Co has set up shop on the Northern edge of the neighborhood. However, Hopey Co primarily sells expired goods from other supermarkets and caters to a predominantly hippie crowd interested in the environmental sustainability aspect of this business model. Southside residents confirm that is culturally unappealing to Southsiders, rather, residents are more likely to bus across town to Walmart or Ingles. Ironically, further south of Southside one will find the Biltmore Estate, Biltmore Village and Biltmore Forest. This is a wealthy part of town where one can find affordable grocery stores like Ingles and Walmart and more expensive groceries like Earthfare and Fresh Market.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Southside's food insecurity is surrounded on all sides by areas of food security. It is clear that in Asheville there is a significant inconsistency in the development of neighborhoods with regard to establishing food security for communities. Food access issues have a lot to do with physical proximity, but also are often complicated with issues of race, class and history. Southside, also known as 'East Riverside' in urban renewal terms, was home to a primarily African-American population in the era of segregation in the South. The neighborhood underwent a significant urban renewal project (1960s-1970s) which considerably altered the social and physical landscape as well as food access issues in the neighborhood. Since the age of legal racial segregation Southside has under gone several cycles of dramatic change through numerous institutionalized policies of community destruction.

Southside covers about 400 acres of land, characterized by rolling hills dotted with houses and apartments of all sizes and colors from bold to subtle.<sup>9</sup> Southside is home to the Asheville Middle School, the YWCA, Green Opportunities (a non-profit focused on providing environmentally sustainable job training in the culinary arts and construction), the Dr. Wesley Grant Sr. Southside Center (a City of Asheville recreation center), a gas station/convenience store, a laundromat and four different public housing apartment complexes. The 400 acres of land once housed many grocery stores throughout the decades, yet today it is home to none. Today, Southside is gentrifying; young Whites are moving in for cheap rent and easy access to downtown and West Asheville while long time Black residents are moving out and public housing apartments are being replaced with mix-income housing. The history of urban renewal and issues of food insecurity are compounded by gentrifying forces of today. Together these forces are acting upon a community by creating dissonance between residents falling along racial and class identities.

## **2. Methods**

This study of Southside's experiences of urban renewal, food insecurity and gentrification was conducted with the use of almost a century's worth of Asheville City Directories, owned by the UNC Asheville Special Collections. Each city directory includes a section in which every street is listed and each residential and business address is listed subsequently. This study focused on seven main thoroughfares, all in Southside: Asheland Ave, Clingman Ave, Depot St, South French Broad Ave, Livingston St, McDowell St, and Southside Ave. From 1915 to 2013 the number of grocery stores and restaurants found on each previously mentioned street was tallied every five years. The research garnered from the archival data has been corroborated with ethnographic data based in neighborhood observation and interviews with Southside residents.

To better understand the history of Southside's experience of both food security and insecurity, the neighborhood's history can be broken up into three eras of significance: Segregation (post-reconstruction-1960's), Desegregation and Urban Renewal (1960's-1980's) and Post Urban Renewal (1980's-present day). These eras do not have definitive beginning and end dates for it is rare that an area would experience a concrete moment of transition, rather they fade into one another as policies and people's lives slowly change.

## **3. Segregation Era**

According to Priscilla Ndiaye, a former resident of Southside and present day researcher of the area, in the era of legal segregation Southside was a central place of Black-owned business and residence in Asheville.<sup>10</sup> This was also readily apparent in the Asheville City Directories, where the seven main thoroughfares boast a wide variety of businesses; restaurants, groceries, laundromats, barber shops, and beauty parlors.<sup>11</sup> Southside was home to several cultural institutions that were important to the Black community. The Blue Ridge Hospital was such an institution. In 1927,

the first African American hospital in Western North Carolina was moved from west Asheville and rebuilt on Clingman Avenue in Southside.<sup>12</sup> A booklet published by the hospital writes,

To be consistent in our aims and institutional life, we feel that the Blue Ridge Hospital is the logical place for all Negroes needing hospital treatment in the city and county. As a rule the colored nurse is better qualified by nature to minister to her own race; with her there can be no thought of prejudice.<sup>13</sup>

Despite obvious problems associated with a society living in segregation; Black cultural institutions in Asheville were sources of great pride to the Black community, and important in serving the needs of a community socially. Two other examples of such institutions found in Southside were Livingston Elementary and South French Broad High School; both were segregated Black schools.

Hanaan Shabazz is an African American woman who has lived in Southside on and off since 1966. Today she is a chef and teacher at Green Opportunities, and has long been an active participant in the Southside community through service. Shabazz discusses the era of Segregation as a time of food security for Southside. There were corner stores, fruit trees, and gardens scattered throughout the neighborhood. She said “We had access, but of course they [corner stores] were twice as expensive as grocery stores [super markets outside of Southside].” This study is focused on the small grocery stores and corner stores present in the neighborhood for decades. These access points were likely significant sources of food prior to the introduction of the super market. Shabazz grew up in Asheville in the era of the super market; she made it clear that people were doing most of their shopping at super markets, but that corner stores were also important to the community because they helped people cover their basics if they couldn’t get out to a super market and maintained a credit system, allowing people to pay for groceries later if they couldn’t pay upon purchase.

This era of Segregation in Southside was found clearly illustrated in the decades of City Directories. From 1915 to 1952 the city directories used symbols like (\*) or (c) to denote people of color. The introduction to this part of the directory would begin with an explanation like “\*Star before names generally means that such persons are colored.”<sup>14</sup> This practice’s purpose was never explained and came to an end with no explanation in 1953. This custom allowed for the collection of an interesting data set, illustrated in figure 1.

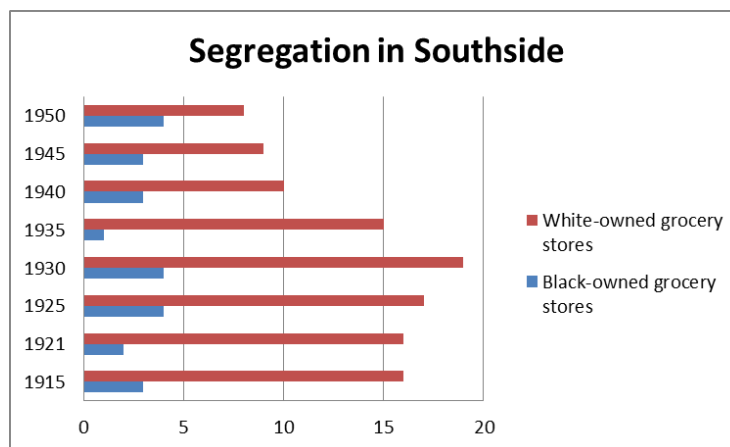


Figure 1: Groceries in Southside from 1915-1950<sup>15</sup>

As one can see there is a significant disparity between the amount of grocery stores owned by African Americans and Whites in this predominantly African-American neighborhood, which by 1966 was 98% Black.<sup>16</sup> Black-owned grocery stores never reached above four stores at one time in this study, while White-owned groceries reached as high as nineteen in 1930. The highest concentration of grocery stores in Southside was also in 1930, there were twenty-three total within the neighborhood’s borders. In 1935, it is clear that the Great Depression hit Black-owned grocery store owners harder than White store owners as the amount of Black-owned groceries drop from four to one. While White-owned groceries dropped as well, the significance can be found in the percentages, as Black-owned groceries dropped from twenty one percent of all grocery stores in Southside to just six percent. However, after 1935 numbers climbed and by 1950, the last year in this data set, the numbers of Black-owned groceries returned to their peak number of four and made up thirty-three percent of the total amount of grocery stores in Southside.

#### 4. Desegregation and Urban Renewal

The era of Desegregation and Urban Renewal was a time of great upheaval for the residents of Southside and the broader African American community of Asheville. In 1965, city wide desegregation of schools began. In Asheville the burden of desegregation was placed on and greatly disrupted the Black community. Every African American institution of learning was closed, and students were bussed to schools that were originally White in the segregation era.<sup>17</sup> In Southside this meant Livingston St Elementary was closed and South French Broad High was eventually changed into the Asheville Middle School that remains today. When the High School was originally desegregated Asheville High still celebrated the achievements of the school when it was exclusively White with no mention of the achievements of Stephens-Lee High School or South French Broad High School (highly regarded segregated Black high schools). Few Stephens-Lee/South French Broad teachers were hired to teach at Asheville High, and as a result, Black students lost the strong role models they once had in the classroom. The erasure of prominence and loss of sense of history and pride created a student body festering with anger. This anger and dissatisfaction subsequently sparked two race riots in Asheville. First, on September 29, 1969 Black students walked out in protest of the problems mentioned above.<sup>18</sup> The police were called and in the midst of the chaos, damage was inflicted upon the building. The school was shut down for a week and a citywide curfew was established in response to the race riot. Secondly, on October 18, 1972 a race riot broke out over an interracial couple. Eight students were hospitalized in the fight between Black and White students.<sup>19</sup>

The era of desegregation and urban renewal created a time of flux for Southside never experienced previously. Old institutions were closed and new were opened. Homes were torn down and public housing was built. Streets were closed and then significantly altered. In 1970, Asheville began to carry out, now infamous, urban renewal projects around the city. Southside became the site of the East Riverside Project, the largest urban renewal project in the city and the entire southeast.<sup>20</sup> According to Dr. Mindi Fullilove, a professor of public health and clinical psychiatry and expert on urban renewal, the phrase “urban renewal” came out of the Housing Act of 1949, and in the Housing Act of 1954 “urban renewal” became an official project of the United States government.<sup>21</sup> Cities all over the United States were tasked with pinpointing areas of “blight,” and then creating “revitalizing” plans for such areas that coincided with “post-war progress” to be approved and then funded by the federal government.<sup>22</sup> According to Fullilove, these urban renewal tasks of defining blight and creating new plans most often fell in the laps of wealthy white men and often, if not exclusively, blight was found in the traditionally African American neighborhoods in these cities across the country.<sup>23</sup> Cities then used eminent domain to acquire land, tear down homes and rebuild the area anew without the people who had called it home and made community there for decades. This is all true of Asheville’s history with urban renewal. While Asheville began its urban renewal projects decades after some cities, the effects on the neighborhoods and communities were no less disastrous.

In the midst of city wide desegregation, the urban renewal project for Southside was being planned. The process involved the establishment of the City East Riverside Urban Renewal Project Housing Authority office, at 299 South French Broad Asheville, and creating a strategy of community outreach. The Redevelopment Commission of the City of Asheville asked this office to complete a survey based community study of Southside involving every household in the neighborhood that was willing to participate. This study found that in 1966, 4,000 people lived in 1,300 houses.<sup>24</sup> Southside was home to 7 % of Asheville’s population, 13% of city’s low-income families, and half of Asheville’s Black population.<sup>25</sup> There was a rate of 58 % home ownership among the residents of the neighborhood, which the study noted was high for the demographics of the population compared to the same demographic make-up found in the rest of the city and region.<sup>26</sup> The study touched on many subjects: health, income and employment, patterns of daily life, and attitudes towards: housing, the neighborhood and urban renewal. The survey found that 85% of people shopped at super markets outside of the neighborhood, and that “More than a third [paid] taxi fares to get themselves and grocery bundles home from the supermarkets.”<sup>27</sup> One of the last recommendations the study specifies is that a super market needed to be built in the neighborhood as part of the urban renewal project because there was a clear preference among residents for shopping at super markets.<sup>28</sup>

The study reported, “Although a majority of the structures in the area have been classed as blighted and community facilities are obviously deficient, two out of three people who live here like the neighborhood ‘fine,’ and only one in ten dislikes it.”<sup>29</sup> And that “In leaving East Riverside, respondents feel they would miss people most...”<sup>30</sup> This makes clear that sense of community was important to the residents of Southside in 1966. Never the less the East Riverside

Urban Renewal project was carried out in full and a community was altered forever. Despite finding that residents were dissatisfied with public housing this was the City’s displacement plan. Urban Renewal built four public housing buildings in Southside and despite a call to address food access issues, no super markets were built. Instead, between 1970 and the middle of the urban renewal project in 1975 the amount of groceries in Southside dropped from seven to zero. And as one can see in the graph found in figure 2, the groceries never returned to the area.

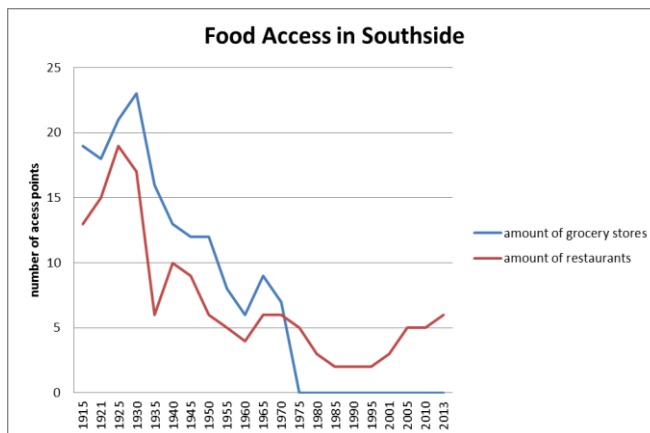


Figure 2: Food Access in Southside According to Miller 1915-58, Hill 1959-83 and Asheville City Directory 1984-2013

In an interview Shabaaz declared,

I was in the middle of urban renewal...I think that they bull-shitted people around in that [urban renewal] time...they took people’s property and displaced them and you know these people had houses and they were run down houses, the majority of them, but never the less they were homes. I felt like they [city officials of the East Riverside urban renewal project] actually put people [Southside residents] in a position, thinking that they were bettering themselves and they wind up losing all of their independence and everything and they start placing them in concentration camps [public housing apartments], is what I call them, because there is one way in and one way out.”

To Shabazz it was the displacement of community that is the worst result of the East Riverside urban renewal project.

The East Riverside urban renewal project tore down hundreds of homes and businesses, and displaced thousands of people.<sup>31</sup> Urban renewal can be observed in the city directories as one sees more and more vacancies listed and entire streets being closed as the whole neighborhood was redeveloped. Amidst the transition of Southside one can imagine businesses being closed as properties were acquired by the city using eminent domain. But why then, did so many never return? Firstly, the community study of 1966 makes clear that at least half of Southside residents were to be displaced.<sup>32</sup> Being displaced can result in a number of entirely new realities for people. Dr. Mindi Fullilove, created the term ‘root shock’ for this experience, specific to her studies of urban renewal. According to Fullilove, “Root shock is the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem.”<sup>33</sup> Dr. Sarah Judson, a professor of history at UNC Asheville, further notes that “it [root shock] results in a rupturing of individual and communal identity.”<sup>34</sup> The residents of Southside lost all kinds of social and economic capital. This of course is the kind of capital that is required to establish and build a new local business like a grocery store.

Along with the loss of capital, urban renewal created new and very physical limitations to the establishment of new businesses in Southside. This is most readily apparent when looking at Southside Avenue which was originally the only thoroughfare to cross in diagonal form the neighborhood entirely (this is illustrated in the map found in figure 3) and thus was a major business thoroughfare.

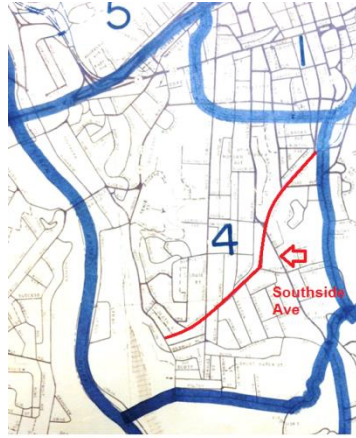


Figure 3: "Map showing study areas, neighborhood analysis study, Asheville, NC, 1965"<sup>35</sup>

Roy Harris, a Black resident of Southside of thirty years, spoke of Southside Ave as the likely namesake of the neighborhood indicating the importance of the business thoroughfare. Throughout the years of 1915 to 1970, Southside Ave was consistently home to the highest concentration of grocery stores found among the streets involved in this study. One can see this made visually apparent in the graph found in figure 4 Southside Ave was home to about half of the grocery stores found in the neighborhood nearly every year. This came to end with urban renewal.

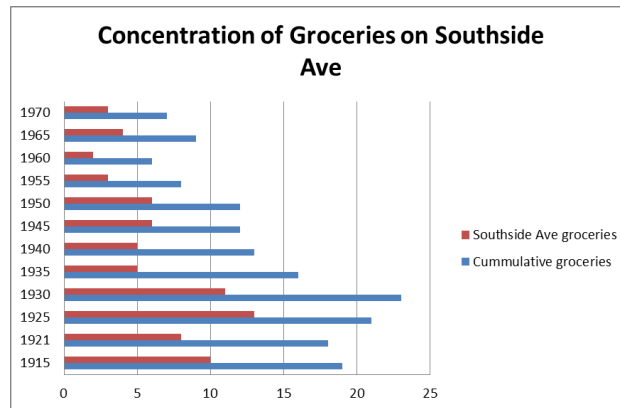


Figure 4: Concentration of Groceries on Southside Ave 1915-75<sup>36</sup>

The East Riverside project significantly altered Southside Ave (see comparison in Figure 5).

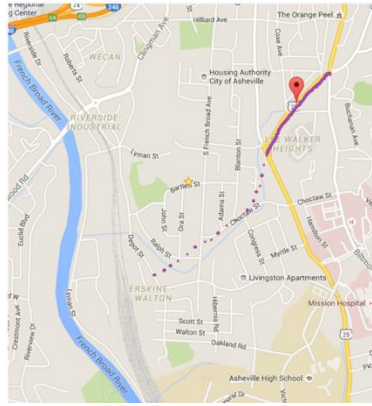


Figure 5: Southside Ave today<sup>37</sup>

After urban renewal Southside Ave no longer crossed the neighborhood entirely and only exists as a third of its original length. As Harris put it, “the city basically rolled up the street.” Thus the advantages of access to businesses provided by the thoroughfare crossing the entire neighborhood have been lost. So not only did residents lose cultural and economic capital because of the redevelopment of Southside, they also lost physical space that was important to the creation and success of local businesses that satisfied the needs of daily activity.

## 5. Post-Urban Renewal Era

The Post-Urban Renewal era is one marked by food insecurity and gentrification. According to this study there has not been a grocery store in the neighborhood for forty years. The only food access point today is a convenience mart named Green’s, which sells mostly processed food items. While the amount of grocery stores in the neighborhood has consistently stayed at zero, the amount of restaurants is on the rise. This rise of restaurant numbers is thanks to only two streets, Depot St and Clingman Ave. These two streets have been an entry point for gentrification in the neighborhood. Today this part of Southside is known as the River Arts District, but pre-urban renewal it was a manufacturing center in Asheville. The River Arts District of today is a central location in the City’s art scene. As galleries and studios started popping up in the address listings in the city directories, so did cafes, nice restaurants and a music venue. While some might say this is a significant improvement of an unused space, others reasonably criticize the development of this part of the area for lacking in integration with the historic Southside community.

Today if one were to walk from Depot St to South French Broad Ave one would likely feel as though they were entering a neighborhood entirely different from the area they were coming from despite the fact that they were originally seen as part of the same community. For one would be leaving behind art galleries and restaurants selling twenty dollar specialty pizza and enter a highly residential area speckled with public housing apartments, non-profits and a middle school. Roy Harris discusses the River Arts District and Southside as two different worlds that change into the other “abruptly,” adding “You can see, it’s almost like a dividing line, a rail road track, as they used to say in our culture.” Harris is alluding to the idea that during segregation in the United States communities were often divided by the rail road tracks, with Blacks living on one side and Whites on the other. Harris’ poignant observation is based both in the physical dissonance between the neighboring spaces, as well as a cultural incongruity. So while there are more restaurants they are not necessarily economically accessible or culturally appealing to all the residents living closest to them.

Harris remarked in an interview that, when he moved to Southside all fourteen homes on his street were occupied by African Americans, mostly elder matriarchs and their children. Throughout his tenure in Southside as these matriarchs have passed, new “single Whites, sometimes married, [having] no children” are moving on to his street. Today there are only five African Americans left. He wonders “Are my new neighbors interested in my community and how much are they interested in this community down to the gritty nuances of this community?”

Collin Demos and Sara Brendel are young White residents that have now lived in Southside for nine months. In an interview Demos admitted, “I definitely knew absolutely nothing about the neighborhood [when we moved in].” He says his main reason for choosing his new home was that “it was the cheapest and the nicest for the price.” He and Brendel both relayed that they don’t feel they belong to the community on their street, but that they observe that it



exists especially amongst Black residents. Brendel expressed some envy of this and both wish to some degree that they were more a part of it. Demos said in a giggle, “I picked up a really weird habit from my step dad of looking out the window a lot whenever I hear a noise. But so, I’ve observed the neighborhood...just like people and who’s communicating with who...” This idea of observing rather than participating in Southside recurred several times throughout the interview. For Demos, “My community is a lot in West Asheville, like at Odds (the café he works at), I know a lot of the people that hangout there and I hangout with all my work buddies... That’s [West Asheville] where I met most of my friends is up there and I don’t really know anyone that lives down here [Southside].” He continued, “So I feel like community today is grown more so in, weirdly enough, in consumerist settings or studios settings at that, where people are either consuming or studying.” Demos wondered if his sense of community might be different if he were able to shop at a grocery in Southside and see people that were his neighbors and chat with them.

Demos’ ideas of his community being in West Asheville were well illustrated as the interview neared its end in Southside. Demos received a call from two of his co-workers that were closing Odds Café. They called to ask if he would come down to make sure they were safe as they close because they had a “creepy customer” who was making them uncomfortable. The evening concluded by leaving Southside to drive over to West Asheville so he could be there for his friends/co-workers. It seems deeply meaningful it required Demos and Brendel leaving the neighborhood they live in to complete a warm action of community. Demos observes the neighborhood and community he lives in, but participates in a community he works in, creating a feeling of disconnect for him in Southside.

Harris confirms Demos’ sentiments about the importance of community existing and perpetuating in food centers. He said “If you don’t have those opportunities [shopping and eating along one another] you miss camaraderie.” In this era of gentrification and food insecurity grounded in an urban renewal project of the past, Southside residents live in a common space without a common community. It seems it is especially difficult for new residents to integrate themselves into the community and avoid the negative aspects of gentrification (creating dissonance in a community based on race and class), in part because there are no common food centers in the neighborhood that everyone in Southside frequents which could play a significant role in creating and maintaining community.

## **6. Conclusion**

Southside has a long history complicated with major issues of race and class. These complications significantly affected Southside’s residents’ experience of food security and insecurity. The neighborhood became a food desert in the midst of the East Riverside urban renewal project and has been one ever since. These findings implicate several things about the past and future of urban planning and urban communities. Firstly, this research supports the need for more community oriented and community specific urban (re)development plans. Secondly, this study is evidence of the importance of including food security as an area that needs to be addressed in all urban planning projects. Thirdly, this research implicates the need for more significant community integration among longtime residents and recent gentrifiers; without this effort Southside will only lose more and more of its roots and thus the integrity that has made so many people care for the area for years. This research topic will benefit from further ethnographic research to be carried out through the Summer of 2016, as the researcher moves into the neighborhood and continues to carry out interviews.

## **7. Acknowledgements**

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