

Stereotype Busting: Some “Bad” Neighborhoods Have Lower Crime Rates than “Good” Neighborhoods

by Ari Meier

In metro Atlanta, Georgia, something interesting is forming and taking shape. Coalescing in southern DeKalb County is a movement that is a) trying to form a city (Greenhaven) to help improve the quality of life of its inhabitants and b) bringing together critical-thinking community members to address the issues and debunk the myths that often gather around diverse areas – in this case the issue of safety. This article shows that if crime is one of the criteria you use to decide where to live, *you are much safer choosing proposed Greenhaven than Virginia Highland, Morningside, Buckhead and Lenox Square,*

Crime is a hot topic. With a multitude of publications ranking the ‘safest neighborhoods’, many understandably make it a priority to peruse these lists and guides with the hopes of not only avoiding a high crime area when researching an area before purchasing a home, but to insure that the chosen neighborhood has a low likelihood of changing. Looks can be deceiving.

The issue is that people rarely get hard data to support this assessment. These labels bring huge economic costs: disinvestment, high unemployment in the community, low economic development potential, and lower home appreciation rates. Some of these communities have median incomes that are similar or close to that of other communities, but the high crime label supersedes any positive information about the community. You can go to much of the U.S. and find this dynamic repeated. A part of metro Atlanta is presented as a case study on this phenomenon and hard data is used to prove that looks are deceiving.

Using DeKalb County Georgia, and in particular, a proposed section that the think tank team refers to as Greenhaven is a case study of perception vs. reality when it comes to crime. The author took zip codes within the proposed Greenhaven and compared them to contiguous and nearby areas that are considered affluent, desirable and high in property value. This comparison was about assessing whether the following quote from a recent article in the major newspaper was reflective of the area.

“In south DeKalb County, where the 20-year-old Campbell lived his entire life, violent deaths of young men are so common that a shorthand term has evolved for the nighttime vigil that follows so many shootings. It is, simply, a candlelight”, declared the recent AJC article, “Life, death and gangs in south DeKalb.”

I hope these young men rest in peace and that their families and other survivors find healing and peace.

The AJC story highlights several young men that were killed since this past summer, and includes a map of where the young men lived and died. One problem: although ‘south DeKalb’ is in the story’s title, based on the story’s map, most of the killings occurred outside of south DeKalb- far outside, as in the Tucker/ Smoke Rise area. Most will agree that a killing is never good no matter where it happens, but in this case, the title of the article doesn’t accurately portray where the majority of these killings occurred.

The news reporting status quo goes something like this: “There was a killing in DeKalb”, “A young woman was murdered in _____”. You are free to insert “DeKalb”, “DeKalb County” or “south DeKalb” onto the blank line. The AJC article and local news stations make it seem as if DeKalb County, specifically south DeKalb, is rife with crime.

South DeKalb has its share of problems, with crime being one of them. The point of this is not to trivialize those who have experienced crime of any type in south DeKalb. This is about correcting when there are errors. According to recent data from Moving.com, a part of the Realtor.com network, the risk of being a crime victim is higher in parts of the Atlanta metro area that you would least expect. ***For instance, in many Buckhead and midtown zip codes, your chances of being a victim of a crime are much higher than in south DeKalb.***

What is crime risk and how is it measured?

From the Moving.com site:

Total Crime Risk - A score that represents the combined risks of rape, murder, assault, robbery, burglary, larceny and vehicle theft compared to the national average of 100. A score of 200 indicates twice the national average total crime risk, while 50 indicates half the national risk. The different types of crime are given equal weight in this score, so murder, for example, does not count more than vehicle theft. Scores are based on demographic and geographic analyses of crime over seven years.

Personal Crime Risk - Index score (100=National Average) that represents the combined risks of rape, murder, assault and robbery.

Property Crime Risk - Index score (100=National Average) that represents the combined risks of burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft.

I've gathered and looked at crime data from 19 zip codes, ranging from midtown, most of Buckhead/ Lenox Square, Sandy Springs, Dunwoody, Brookhaven, Tucker, Atlanta Lavista Road/ North Druid Hills Rd areas, city of Decatur, Virginia-Highlands/ Morningside, Little 5 Points/ Inman Park, Candler Park, much of south DeKalb excluding Ellenwood and Lithonia. Five of the 19 zip codes are in south DeKalb (lying wholly in the proposed city of Greenhaven). The Atlanta, Tucker and city of Decatur zip codes were chosen because they are areas that are stereotypically thought of as great areas and are highly sought out to live in and are entertainment and/ or dining destinations.

Some highlights:

The five zip codes in south DeKalb County (specifically the proposed city of Greenhaven: 30083, 30088, 30034, 30032, and 30035) have an average crime score of 186 for all crimes, the average personal crime score is 151 and the average property crime score is 197. The national crime score average is 100 in all types of crime.

If you are living, working or playing in some of the other zip codes, your chances of being a crime victim increases significantly.

- Out of the 19 studied zip codes, you have the highest chance of being an overall crime victim in zip code 30306 (Virginia-Highland/ Morningside areas). The overall crime score for this zip code is 641. This is more than three times that of the south DeKalb zip codes.
- Zip code 30326 (Buckhead/ Lenox Square) has the highest score for personal crimes with 737. This is nearly a five times greater chance of being a victim of murder, rape, assault and robbery than you would in south DeKalb.
- The Virginia-Highland/ Morningside area (30306) has the highest score in property crime with 671. This is more than three times the chances of being a victim of a car theft, home burglary and larceny than in south DeKalb.

- Stone Mountain zip code 30088 had the second lowest crime score in all categories after zip code 30329 (Lavista Road/ North Druid Hills Road area).

So if south DeKalb is NOT a hot bed of crime, why does the area have this reputation? It may be more about human nature than some great conspiracy. Many will repeat “truths” without experiencing first-hand that which they purport to know about. If your opinion on south DeKalb is formed mainly by the news media, then you will think that its gang and crime ridden.

South DeKalb suffers more from disinvestment than crime. It’s an area that’s seen amazing growth during the 70’s and 80’s and as the ethnic demographics changed (without a drastic change in median income) the area’s reputation became increasingly colored by perception rather than reality. Even neighboring Gwinnett County, which has seen an increase in gang-related crimes, gets better treatment in the media.

The AJC story highlighted very real deaths and associations with gangs by these young men, but to include within the article statements such as: “In south DeKalb County, where the 20-year-old Campbell lived his entire life, violent deaths of young men are so common that a shorthand term has evolved for the nighttime vigil that follows so many shootings. It is, simply, a candlelight.” This is inflammatory writing where the writer chose to go with the status quo of throwing around the words “crime”, “murder”, and “gangs” to stick to an area that least deserves it.

Cityhood doesn’t solve everything as there are a myriad of cause and effect dynamics playing out in south DeKalb which has been slowly transforming the area for two decades; but all of this might not matter if the community is denied a right to vote on being a catalyst for change. There are many in southern DeKalb County that’s lived in the area for decades and have seen the quality of life decline. They want a reset and for them this reset is incorporating the area into Greenhaven.

Don’t deny us the right to vote on whether we want government closer to us or the status quo.

To see the full crime comparison database, double-click below:



greenhaven-atlanta-
crime-risk-comparison

Sources:

AJC. [Life, death and gangs in south DeKalb](#)

Zipmap. [DeKalb/ Fulton County Zip Codes](#)

Moving.com. [Compare cities](#)

Crimemapping. [DeKalb County crimes](#)

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