

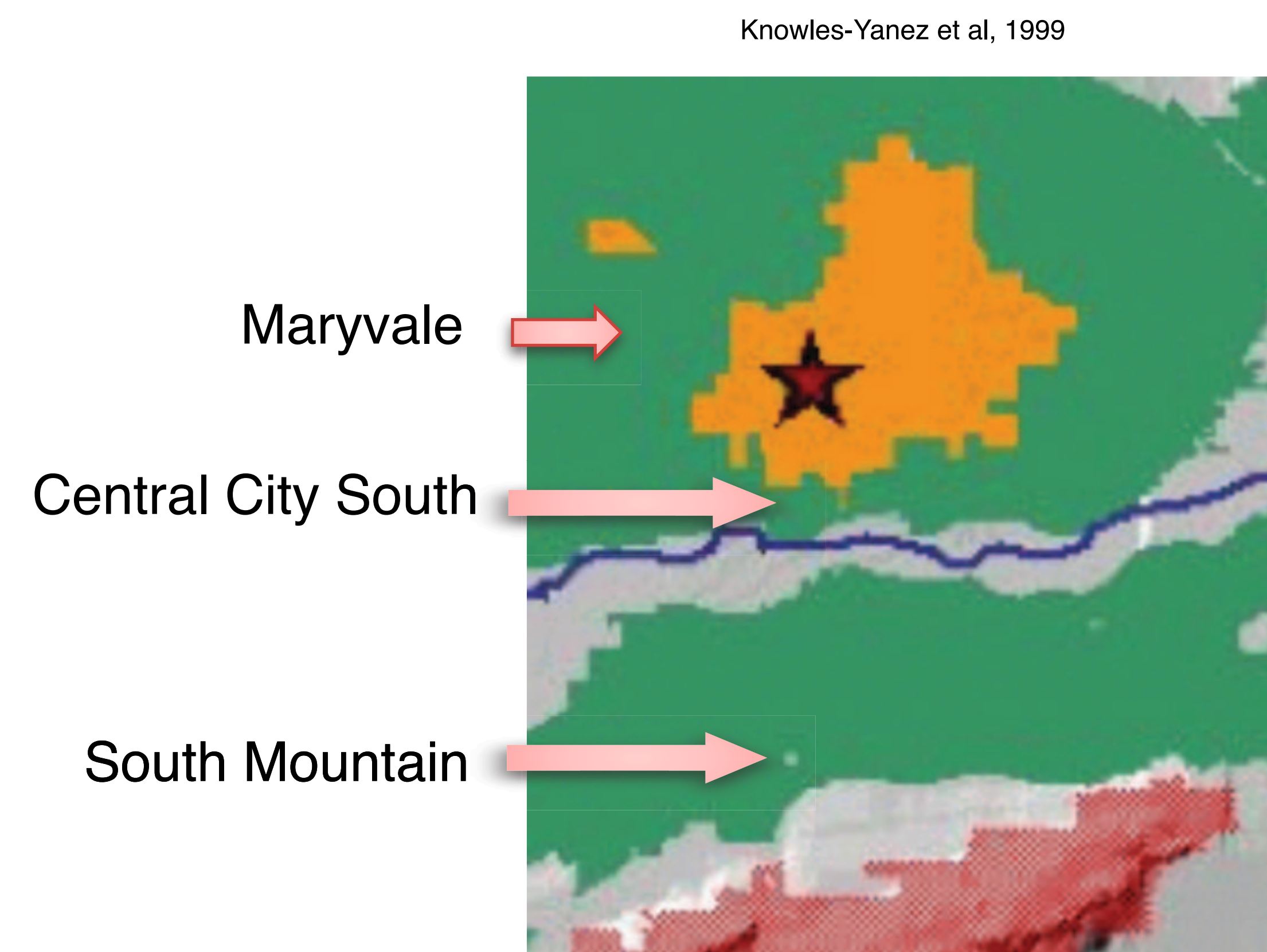
# The formation of an urban food desert: Struggle for a just food system in Phoenix, AZ.

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## Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food desert as: *a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store* (USDA, 2011). Understanding urban food desert formation is an increasing priority for low-income communities, academics, and institutions such as USDA (Walker et al, 2009). This study will examine the historical development of three communities in Phoenix, Arizona, that have been classified as urban food deserts by the USDA and independent ASU research groups. The predominantly Hispanic and African American communities, located in historically Mexican-American areas to the south and west of the municipal center, are struggling with poverty and access to resources.



The three communities in the study area originated as food producers.

Land cover map of Phoenix in 1934  
 Orange = Urban development  
 Green = Farmland  
 Gray = Desert  
 Red = South Mountain Park

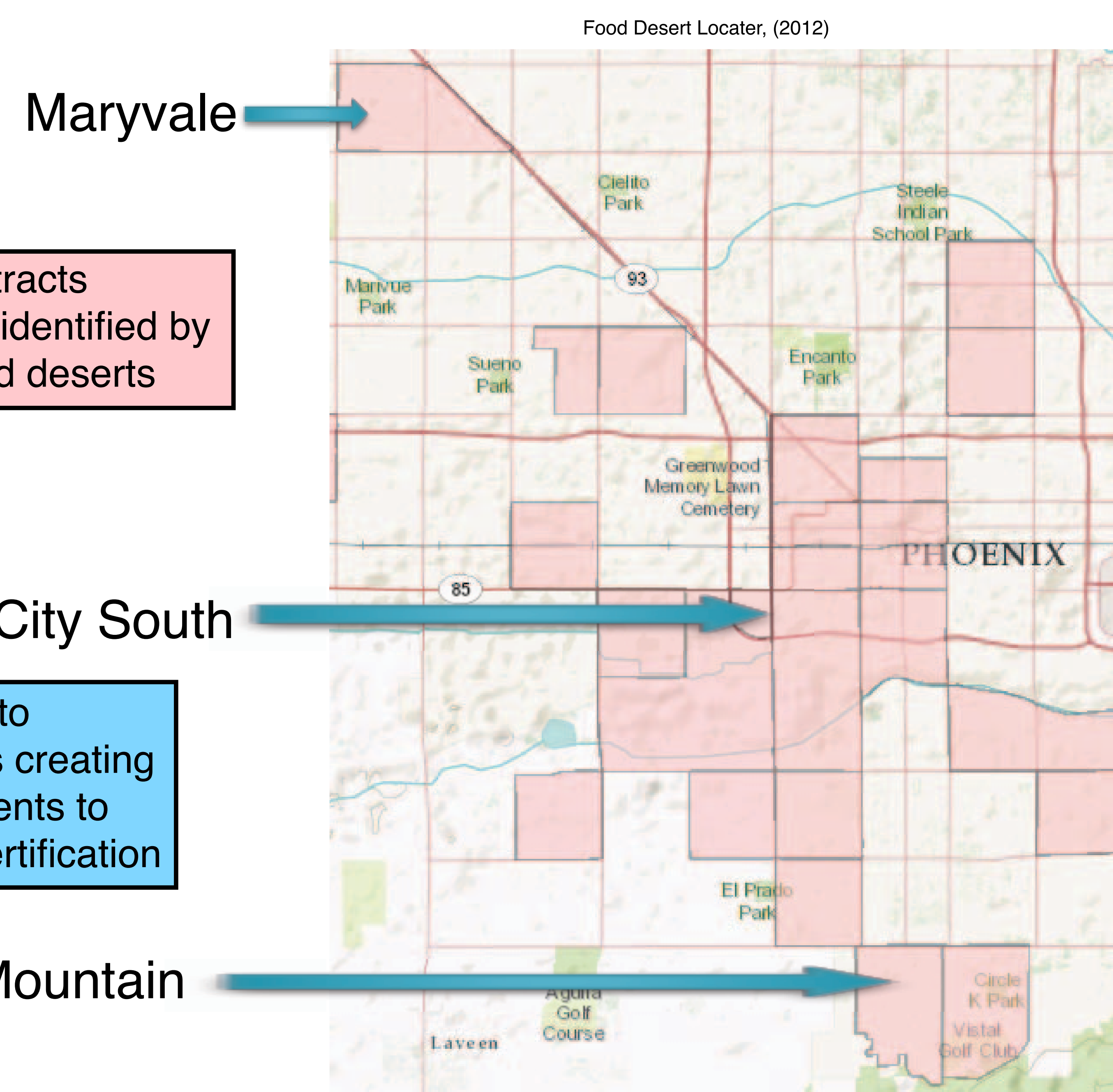
## Second Case: 1940 - 1979

Large tracts of farmland are subdivided and sold to individuals and land developers increasing dependence on imported food.

Small community grocery stores begin to be replaced by large supermarkets forcing grocers to find new lines of work. (Asian American Historic Property Survey, 2007, 31).



Phoenix small grocer. (n.d.) City of Phoenix – Asian American Historic Property Survey. Retrieved on January 11, 2012 from: <http://www.azhistory.net/aahps/index.php>



Pink census tracts signify areas identified by USDA as food deserts

Blue arrows point to three communities creating local food movements to mitigate food desertification

## Methodology

Comparative historical analysis generally uses a qualitative historical recount to build a convincing argument and a quantitative element verifying the causal effects outlined in the historically based argument.

Qualitative argument:  
 If cases of historical structural violence\* took place across all three communities they may have set the conditions for modern food deserts.

Quantitative measurements:  
 Historic home ownership versus renting (shows absentee ownership).  
 Historic car ownership (shows ability to get to work and markets).  
 Historic poverty rates.

\*Structural violence is injury caused "where there is no actor committing the violence or where it is not meaningful to search for the actor... it is said to be built into the structure."  
 Lane et al, citing Galtung (2007, [1969])

## Third Case : 1979 - present

Large chain supermarkets begin to go out of business in surrounding neighborhoods. (interview and focus group data, 2011)

Many of the small stores left in these neighborhoods specialize in liquor with little fresh food available.



## Conclusions

Multiple cases of historical structural violence plaguing these communities have been identified. These communities may never have been food secure and the process of urbanization has only accented their food insecurity. A full history and analysis is underway.

Research question:  
 What local socio-economic and political processes caused 19<sup>th</sup> century rural Phoenix farming communities to become modern urban food deserts?  
 Hypothesis:  
 Historic structural violence inflicted upon impoverished communities is sufficient cause\* for the creation of modern food deserts.

\*Sufficient cause: "the presence of a particular value on an independent variable will always be associated with the presence of particular value on the dependant variable." (Mahoney, 2004)



The Earth, (1907). What Irrigation has done to the Salt River Valley. Retrieved from: <http://uair.arizona.edu/item/294014>

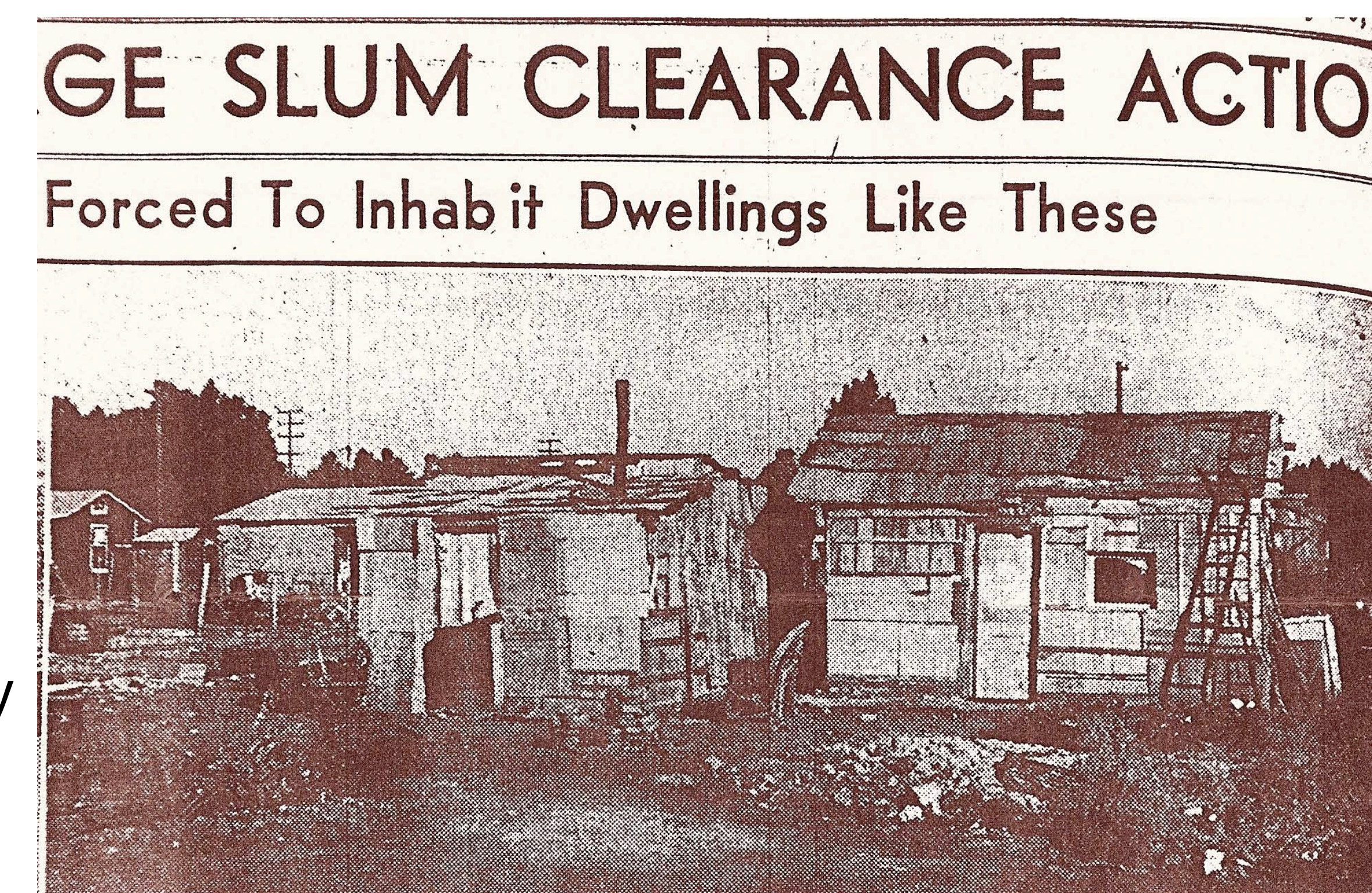
## Three cases of structural violence

### First Case: 1880 - 1939

Boosterism promising riches in farming coaxes immigration to Phoenix

"Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Orientals furnished a permanent low-cost labor pool for employers" (Dimas citing Kottlanger, 1999)

Cotton busts would leave minority labor "starving, literally starving." (Luckingham, 1992, 33)



The Phoenix Gazette, (January 10<sup>th</sup> 1939).

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