



# Dougherty County, Georgia

Historically part of the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy,” Dougherty County has a rich history tied to agriculture, America’s early Indian culture, and the Flint River. Led by the Albany Movement—a desegregation coalition formed in the county seat for which it was named—the county played an important role in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.



Pecan Grove / University of Georgia Extension photo

An urban county rich in natural features, Dougherty County has a diverse agricultural sector and is famous for its quail plantations, which date back to its founding. Hunting and fishing remain popular pastimes. The county’s 329 square miles are fed by the Floridan Aquifer, which replenishes the area’s rivers and creeks and fuels its economy.

Dougherty County’s population is nearly 94,000 but has been declining due to lack of employment opportunities for young adults. The U.S. Census Bureau reports 68% of the population is Black alone, 29% is White alone, and 2% is foreign born. In addition, about 2,300 people identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. The county struggles economically with a median household income of \$31,458 and 32% of the population living below the poverty line.

## Dougherty County Agriculture

Number of farms <sup>1</sup>	121
Percent of land in farms <sup>1</sup>	42%
Percent of land with high quality soils <sup>2</sup>	73%
Percent of farms that are small <sup>1</sup>	88%
Average market value of agricultural products sold per farm <sup>1</sup>	\$278,000
Average age of farmers <sup>1</sup>	62 years old

Sources: <sup>1</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012 Census of Agriculture; <sup>2</sup> USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. General Soil Map, 2007

**Agriculture and Food Production** With more than \$545 million in annual agricultural output, Dougherty County has great potential to support local farmers and expand food production. Farmers have strong support from Fort Valley State University College of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Program and University of Georgia (UGA) Extension Office. The county’s

large plantations produce cotton, pecans, and peanuts, but most of this commodity production is shipped out of the county—or even the country. Other products include wheat, beef, and feed crops including corn, soybeans, and hay.

Of the county’s 121 farms, 88% are small (USDA’s classification for a farm grossing less than \$250,000 in cash farm income annually), and what they produce is quite diversified, including watermelons, satsumas, honey, and vegetables. The county has four poultry houses and a handful of goat and sheep operations. However, small farmers struggle to find markets, and with a couple of notable exceptions, processing, aggregation, and distribution facilities for adding value to local crops are limited. That said, two of the county’s major industries are food processors—MillerCoors and Mars, Inc. In recent years, Mars has worked with local growers to produce the variety of peanuts needed for its famous candy bars. The county also has facilities to process game.

Lending practices and land use patterns impede efforts to increase the county’s food production. While the county has high quality soils, scattered development is breaking up farmland into smaller and smaller parcels, reducing commercial viability. Restrictions on water availability have created barriers to expanding irrigated agriculture. Georgia and Florida are embroiled in litigation over rights to the Floridan Aquifer. As a result, in 2012, the Department of Environmental Protection enacted a moratorium on metered water for large-scale agricultural purposes. This is not as much of an issue for small farms, as residents are allowed to use up to 70 gallons per minute without a permit.

**Food Access** More than 20% of Dougherty County’s population is considered low income and food insecure. In 2013, 82% of children qualified for free and reduced lunch, and the school



board voted to offer free lunch and breakfast to all students beginning in 2014. Food insecurity tends to be concentrated in eastern and downtown Albany but rural residents – especially the elderly – also suffer due to limited transportation options.

### Dougherty County Population

Area <sup>3</sup>	329 sq. miles
Population <sup>4</sup>	93,890
Percent of population below the poverty line <sup>4</sup>	32%
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch <sup>5</sup>	82%

Sources: <sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts; <sup>4</sup> 2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; <sup>5</sup> Georgia Department of Education, Dougherty County, 2013

Home gardening, hunting, and fishing contribute to subsistence, and zoning allows for agriculture inside the city of Albany. Dougherty County also has an effective emergency food system. The Second Harvest of Southwest Georgia food bank has a commercial



Community Garden, First United Methodist Church, Albany

kitchen that is used to prepare food, which churches and food pantries help to deliver. Strive to Thrive, a group that helps families move toward self-sufficiency, and a Headstart program both work to improve access to healthy food. The county has started gardening activities in eight schools, including a pizza garden curriculum and pizza truck. UGA Extension runs an active Master Gardeners program and supports a growing system of community gardens. The farmers market at Tift Park has three vendors able to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

**Growing Food Connections** Dougherty County was selected to be one of eight Communities of Opportunity across the country to participate in Growing Food Connections (GFC), a 5-year initiative funded by USDA-NIFA to improve community food security and support local agriculture and food production. County leadership demonstrated a need and a strong commitment to strengthening the county's food system and created a steering committee of local government representatives and food system stakeholders to accomplish this work. This steering committee works with the GFC team of researchers and technical assistance providers to identify and address local policy opportunities and barriers to achieve its food system goals.

The steering committee is dedicated to strengthening the food system by increasing economic sustainability, cooperation, diversity, education, and access to healthy and locally grown foods. Its goals focus on creating economic opportunity throughout the food system, sharing knowledge and information, and increasing access to healthy food. Its vision is to:

**"Connect community to create viable and sustainable food systems that economically and culturally nourish our community with access to local food and education through partnership with government, producers, and consumers."**

May 2016

### DOUGHERTY COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE

<b>Angie Barber</b> Phoebe Putney Network of Trust & School Nurse Program	<b>Michael McCoy</b> Dougherty County Board of Commissioners
<b>Pam Barkley</b> Landmark Auto Sales	<b>James Morgan</b> Dougherty County Extension
<b>Amber Bell</b> Southwest Georgia Project	<b>Anne Mu'min</b> Muhammad's Farm
<b>Rozanne Braswell</b> City of Albany	<b>Juby Phillips</b> Food Coalition Advocate
<b>Stephen Brimberry</b> Tift Park Community Market	<b>Barbara Reddick</b> SWG Regional Commission
<b>Cindy Drew</b> Dougherty County Farm Bureau	<b>Daayah Salaam</b> Albany Technical College
<b>Jana Dyke</b> Sylvester Farmers Market	<b>Carolyn Segers</b> Development Services and Code Enforcement
<b>Paul Forgey</b> Development Services and Code Enforcement	<b>Shirley Sherrod</b> Southwest Georgia Project
<b>Charlie Grace</b> Fort Valley State University	<b>Justin Strickland</b> Albany/Dougherty Economic Development Center
<b>Remy Hutchins</b> Dougherty County Health Department	<b>Doug Wilson</b> Georgia Water Planning & Policy Center
<b>Cornelius Key</b> Federation of Southern Cooperatives	

### GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP



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