Convenient for Whom?

The contested character of convenience stores in West Philadelphia

Jeffrey Young

Introduction

Convenience stores are the humble workhorse businesses of the city. Known variously as corner stores, bodegas, or mom-and-pops, kids visit them for chips, candy, or soda, while adults come for household essentials, lottery tickets, or cigarettes. Some stores fill an important gap by providing fresh produce in neighborhoods that lack supermarkets. Convenience stores in ethnic enclaves may provide culturally important products or money transfer services.

To some West Philadelphia residents, convenience stores can also be a nuisance. In early 2022, Pam Andrews, leader of the West Powelton/Saunders Park Registered Community Organization (RCO), labeled several convenience stores near Market and 40th Streets as nuisance businesses. Offenses attributed to the stores included selling illegal marijuana or single cigarettes (“loosies”), sporting a provocative business name on an awning (“Dope Stop”), and featuring drug paraphernalia and bright LED lights in windows. Members of the RCO – in full disclosure, I am one of them – responded by protesting in front of the stores, writing letters to the stores’ landlords, and engaging political representatives to help fight the businesses.

West Powelton was not the only place in Philadelphia where conflict had arisen around convenience stores. Across West Philadelphia in December 2020, the Wynnefield neighborhood expanded a zoning overlay district to block all new convenience stores from opening, after convenience stores opened near a school selling drug-related products (Briggs 2021a). In April

2021, Philadelphia City Council, supported by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, unanimously passed a “bong shop ban” updating drug paraphernalia definitions to ease code enforcement against convenience stores selling such items (Briggs 2021b).

Convenience stores can be seen as existing along a spectrum of health, safety, and welfare, with the positive end of the spectrum represented by stores focusing on healthy food and household essentials, and the negative end by those prioritizing tobacco sales and engaging in illicit activities. This framing seems to be present in the legal actions of the city, the discussions of the RCO, and the approach of the Healthy Corner Store Initiative, a project of Philadelphia non-profit The Food Trust with a five-step process to help corner stores gradually introduce healthy products and reduce tobacco promotion (The Food Trust, 2014)**.** Yet this framing often fails to consider the forces that push business owners to one end of the spectrum or the other, including the ways that regulation and local economics and demographics affect the profitability of different products. For example, levying high taxes on tobacco products without cracking down on the black market may incentivize business owners to avoid compliance in low-income neighborhoods with highly price-conscious consumers.

In this paper, I examine the spatial distribution and business practices of convenience stores in five contiguous West Philadelphia census tracts roughly corresponding to the neighborhoods of West Powelton, Haverford North, and Spruce Hill by carrying out in-person observations of each store. My research shows that the business strategies of convenience stores in each area correlate with neighborhood characteristics and are influenced by the regulatory and enforcement environment in which they operate.

Background

Any discussion of convenience stores today must start with their struggles in the past two years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Philadelphia convenience store owners have reported a drop in customers, supply chain issues, difficulties applying for aid, rising violence, and more (Estrada, 2020). According to NACS, the global convenience store and fuel retail association, the number of convenience stores nationally has declined each year since 2018, falling 4.5% from the close of 2017 to the close of 2021, with the greatest losses in 2020 and 2021 (NACS 2022). Meanwhile, sales by the largest U.S. cigarette companies to retailers and wholesalers rose from 2019 to 2020 for the first time in 20 years (FTC, 2021). This snapshot of the industry suggests store owners may be under increased financial pressure after recent losses, with the recent rise in tobacco use a rare point of optimism considering that as of 2020, 99.8% of convenience stores nationally sold cigarettes (Vonder Haar, 2021).

Several articles provide further insight into the Philadelphia context. Dr. Hannah Lawman (2019), until recently a prominent staff member at the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, argued for the "pro-equity potential" of new tobacco restrictions that took effect in January 2017 including limitations on retailer density, tobacco-free school zones, increased licensing fees, and consequences for youth sales violations. Lawman et al (2020) analyzed the effect of these restrictions and found they had caused the number of active tobacco licenses to decline. In the article, the authors equate the decline in licensing to a decline in stores selling tobacco because, they wrote, "Although reliable estimates of the number of stores operating illegally are not available, it is expected to be relatively low" (2020, p. 548).

The Healthy Corner Store Initiative (HCSI) has also attracted research attention. Mayer et al (2016) conducted interviews with corner store owners/managers in Philadelphia and Camden, oversampling high-performing HCSI participants. Nearly all interviewees mentioned the difficulty of buying fresh produce at affordable prices, considering the small volume they could stock. Sherman et al (2015) assembled focus groups of 4th to 6th graders at schools near Philadelphia corner stores where an HCSI trial was to take effect. Many children reported shopping independently by 2nd or 3rd grade and said they were most likely to shop within a block or two of their school or home. A unique contribution of my research to this literature is on-the-ground data obtained through direct observations of convenience store business practices, an approach not taken by any study I found.

A final relevant document I consulted was the Philadelphia City Planning Commission's University Southwest District Plan (2013), part of the city's comprehensive plan. The document recommended zoning changes in the study area including the upzoning of several parcels along Market Street near 40th Street to allow for developments up to 125 feet tall. Current zoning maps show these changes have since been put into effect, concentrating development potential along a corridor dominated by old, unrehabilitated structures of no more than four stories. This creates what Neil Smith called a rent gap, defined as "the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use" (1979: 545). In one of the rezoned Market Street parcels, a seven-story building is under construction, and other development is under discussion. The next section outlines the neighborhood conditions that enabled developers to begin closing the rent gap.

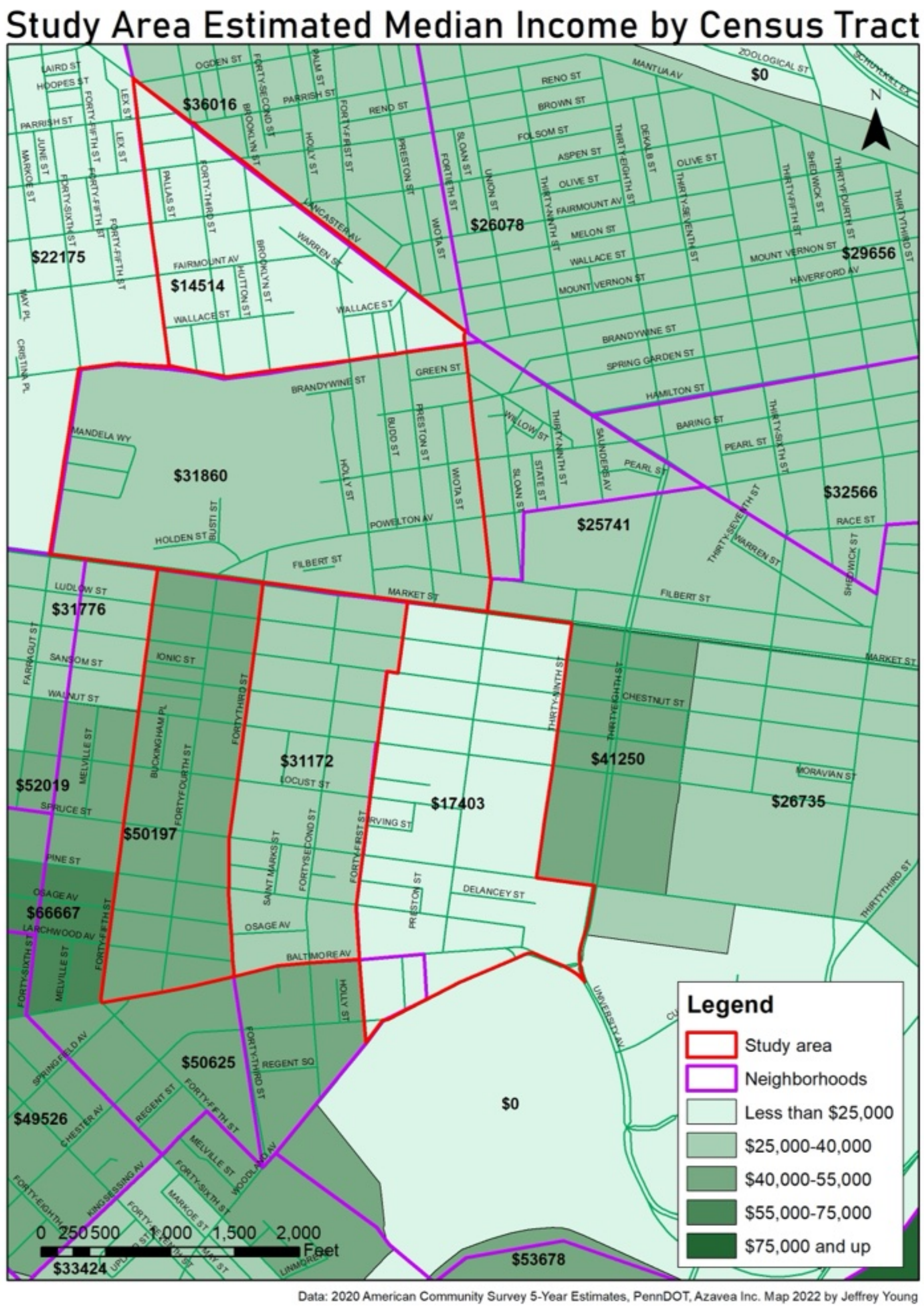
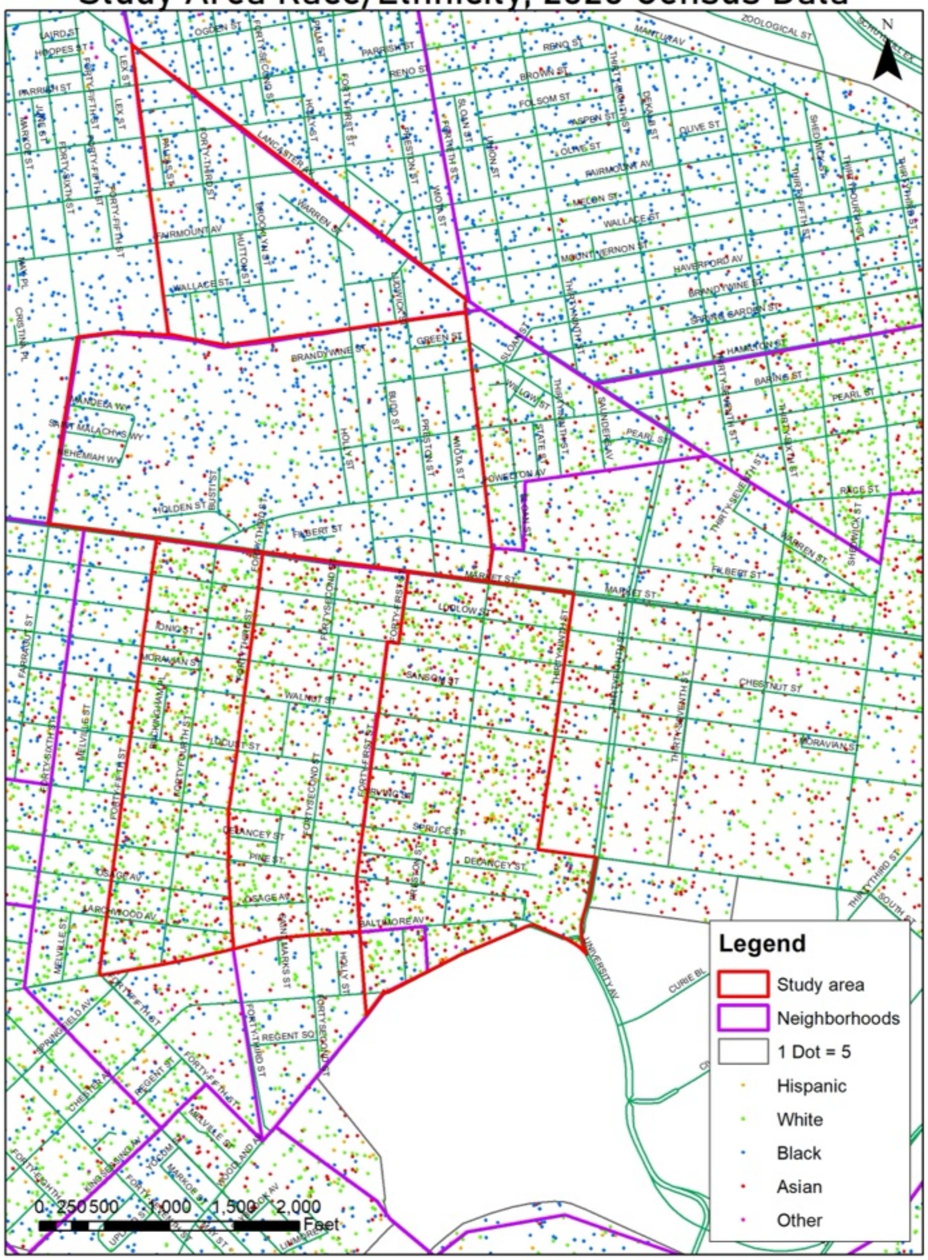


Figure 1. Study Area Estimated Median Income by Census Tract

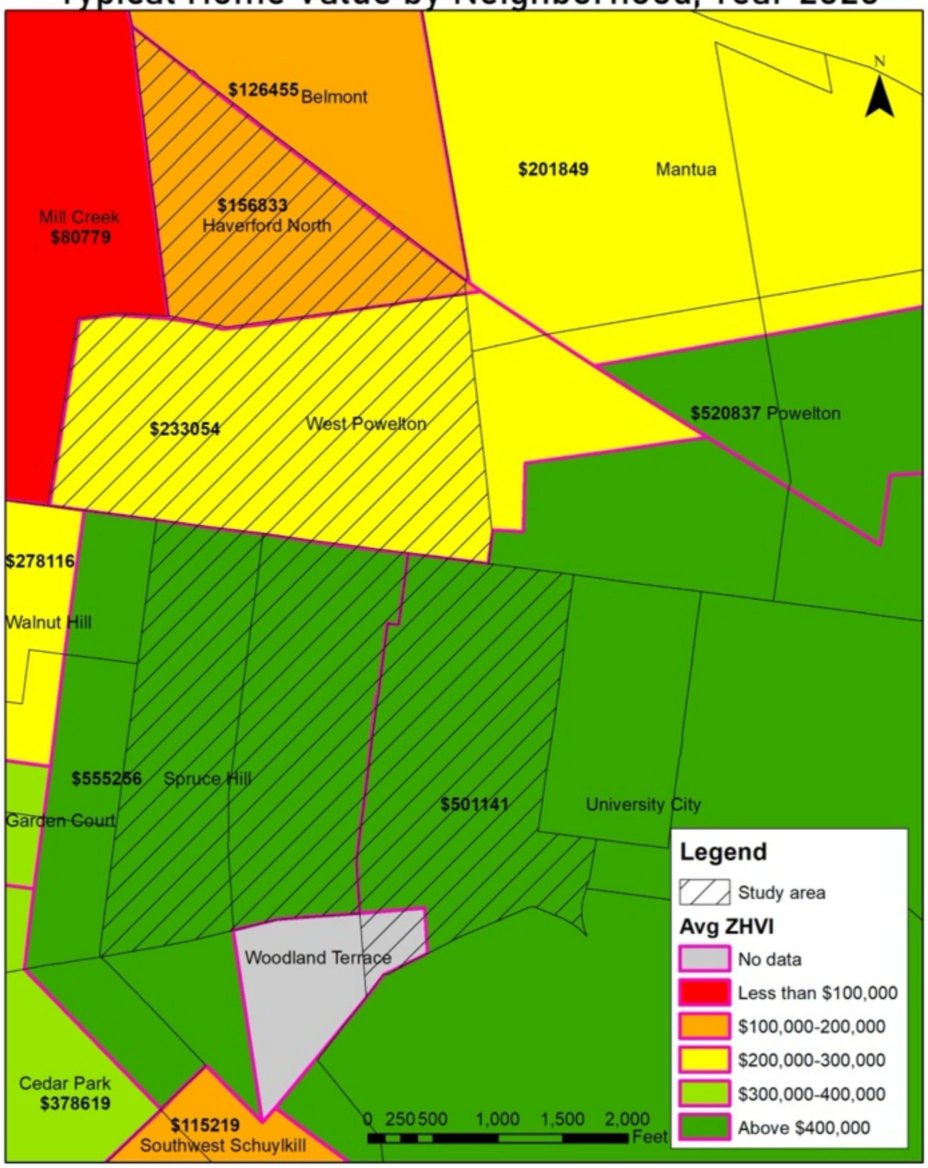
Study Area Race/Ethnicity, 2020 Census Data



Data: 2020 U.S. Census, PennDOT, Azavea Inc. Map 2022 by Jeffrey Young

Figure 2. Study Area Race/Ethnicity, 2020 Census Data

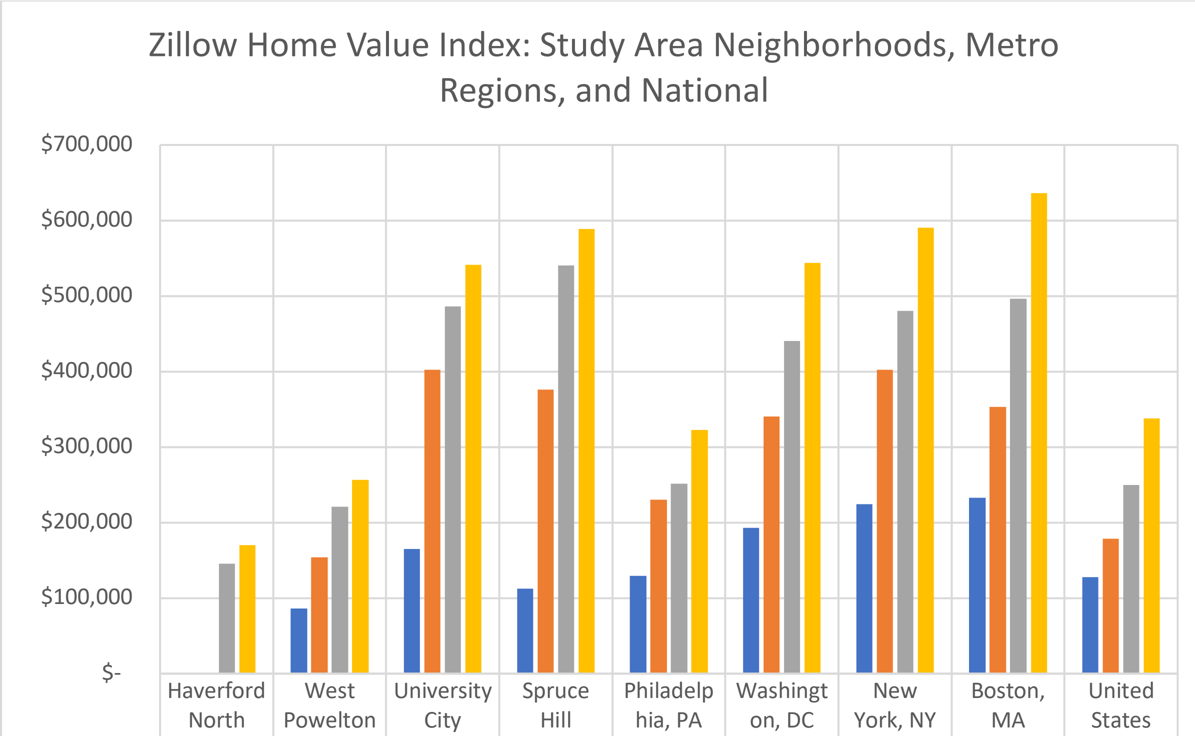
Typical Home Value by Neighborhood, Year 2020



Average Zillow Home Value Index represents the typical price of a mid-range property in the area, averaged over the 12-month period. Neighborhoods are the smallest geographic area for which ZHVIs are available. The average ZHVI for the whole U.S. in the year 2020 was $257,585, which falls around the middle of the middle housing bracket shown here.

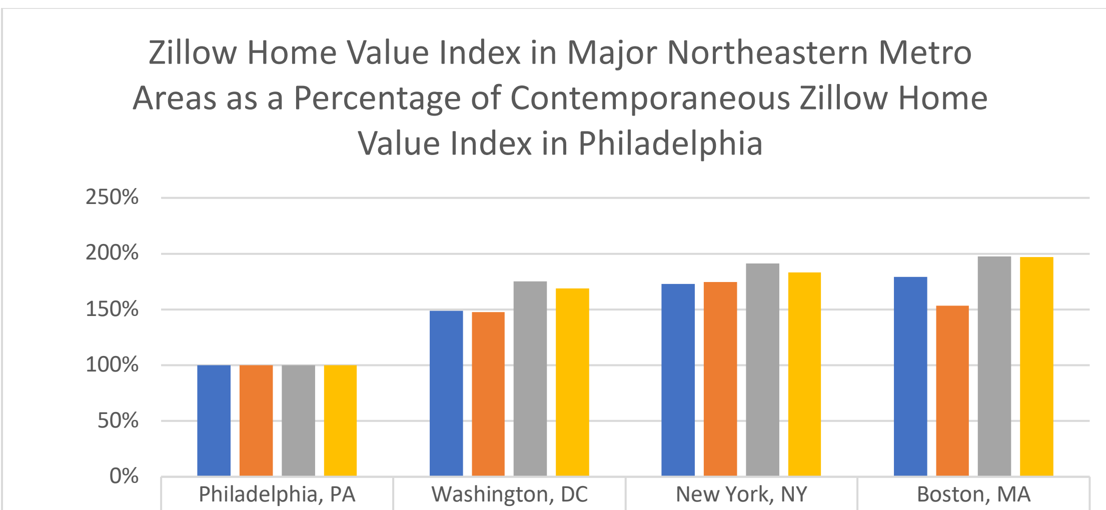
Data: Zillow Home Value Index, U.S. Census, PennDOT, Azavea Inc. Map 2022 by Jeffrey Young

Figure 3. Typical Home Value by Neighborhood, Year 2020



	Haverford North	West Powelton	University City	Spruce Hill	Philadelphia, PA	Washington, DC	New York, NY	Boston, MA	United States
1/31/00		$86,655	$164,700	$112,795	$129,719	$193,023	$224,282	$232,529	$127,772
1/31/10		$153,790	$402,756	$376,378	$230,124	$340,365	$402,313	$353,232	$178,721
1/31/20	$145,765	$221,049	$486,461	$540,101	$251,091	$440,179	$480,342	$496,592	$249,893
3/31/22	$170,002	$256,960	$540,983	$588,844	$322,475	$543,698	$590,839	$635,813	$337,560

Figure 4. Zillow Home Value Index: Study Area Neighborhoods, Metro Regions, and National



	Philadelphia, PA	Washington, DC	New York, NY	Boston, MA
1/31/00	100%	149%	173%	179%
1/31/10	100%	148%	175%	153%
1/31/20	100%	175%	191%	198%
3/31/22	100%	169%	183%	197%

Figure 5. Zillow Home Value Index as a Percentage

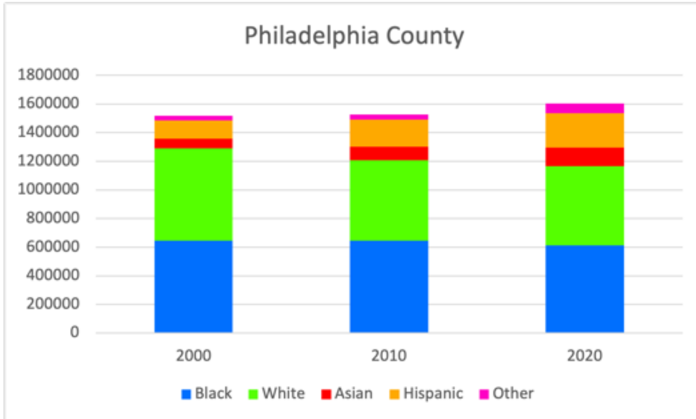


Figure 6. Race in Philadelphia County

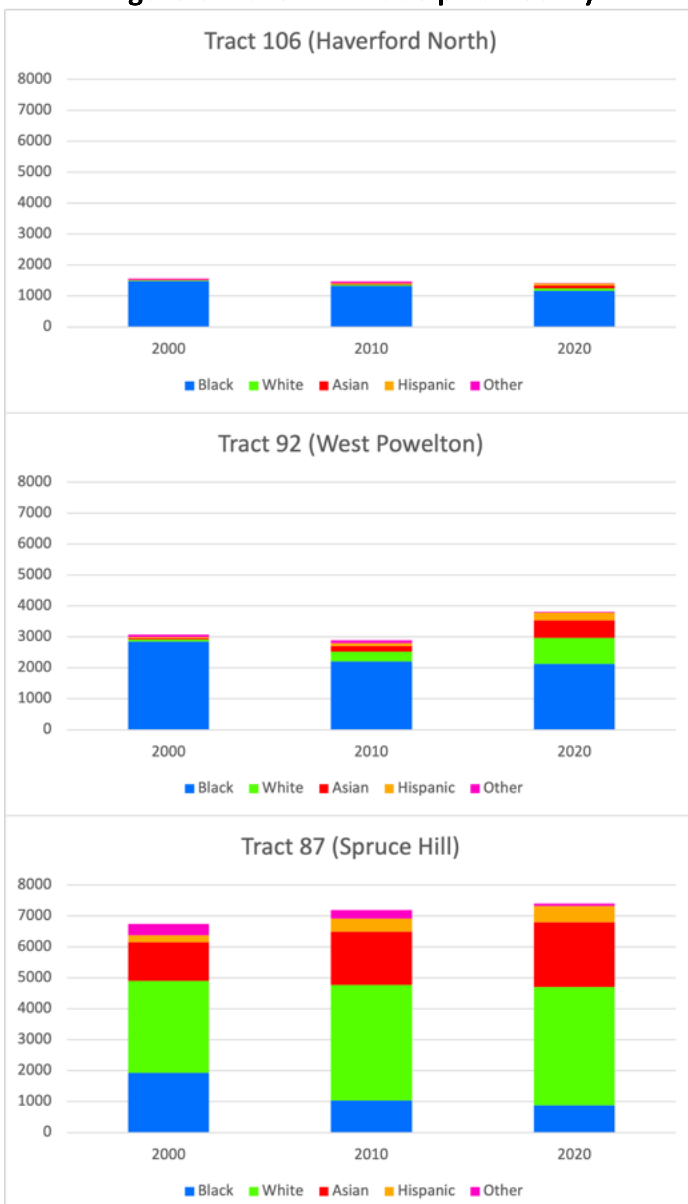


Figure 7. Study Area Race/Ethnicity

Study Area Characteristics

To characterize the five census tracts that defined my study area, I gathered data from several sources. 2020 American Community Survey data shows that the northern and southeastern parts of the study area are both low-income. Incomes in the study area grow as one moves southwest toward Spruce Hill (Figure 1). Racial/ethnic data from the 2020 U.S. Census correlate with this income pattern, with Haverford North, the lowest-income area, being much sparser in population and mostly Black. By contrast, higher-income Spruce Hill is denser and has a high percentage of White and Asian residents. The southeastern tract's demographic similarity to Spruce Hill despite its low-income status can be explained by the large number of University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University students in that area, who skew the income data. West Powelton's racial balance splits the difference between Haverford North and Spruce Hill (Figure 2). Finally, data from Zillow show that the value of a typical home rises from north to south along with race and, for the most part, income (Figure 3).

I next looked at how race/ethnicity and home values have changed over time. Turning first to the city level, I note that since 2000, typical homes in Philadelphia have been similar in cost to typical homes in the U.S. overall and consistently cheaper than typical homes in New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C, although home values in all cities are rising (Figure 4). Expressing the home values in all four northeastern cities as a percentage of homes in Philadelphia (Figure 5) shows Philadelphia homes are comparatively an increasingly good deal. Perhaps partly due to its rising affordability, the city has reversed decades of population decline with 0.6% growth from 2000 to 2010 ramping up to 3.8% growth from 2010 to 2020. This growth has been driven by an increase in Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and “Other” categories, compensating for the continued slow decline of the White and Black populations (Figure 6).

Unlike in the city overall, the White population in the study area is growing, but the racial/ethnic trends in different tracts diverge (Figure 7). Haverford North has been consistently low population and mostly Black and is only incrementally becoming more diverse. West Powelton was mostly Black in 2000, then lost significant Black population in 2010 before exploding in 2020 across all racial/ethnic categories but Black. Meanwhile, Spruce Hill has lost most of its Black population, while White, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino populations have been growing significantly. Turning to home values, I note that compared to not just Haverford North and West Powelton but to Philadelphia as a whole, the rise of home values in University City and Spruce Hill has been meteoric (Figure 4).

The statistics confirm my intuition as a resident of West Powelton. Pressures in the regional housing market are driving home value and population growth in Philadelphia overall. Most of Haverford North’s residents are Black and low-income, and home values are low. West Powelton shows signs of active gentrification and displacement, although it is still a moderate-income area. Finally, Spruce Hill is becoming increasingly elite and is likely exerting upward pressure on rents in surrounding areas, including West Powelton.

Methodology and Results

In my study, I defined a convenience store as “a small business in a commercial property that sells a range of consumable products. It is not primarily a grocery store, smoke shop, restaurant, or coffee shop but may combine elements of several of these categories. It does not primarily sell goods associated with a foreign nation or ethnicity." Based on this definition, I used keyword searches and visual scans of Google Maps and Street View to create a list of stores in the study area to survey. I created a Google Form (see Appendix A) to document a range of business practices including the location of each store, its exterior appearance, its interior assets, and what was for sale. I familiarized myself with the items identified as drug paraphernalia in the Philadelphia Code so I could visually identify them on site visits.

On April 16 and 17, 2022, I visited the 18 businesses I had identified. I filled out the Google Form on my phone while standing in front of and inside each store. From the form, I obtained a spreadsheet of form responses, which I analyzed in that form and by geocoding addresses in ArcMap.

The first map I produced overlaid the stores on a base zoning map of the area (Figure 8). Numerous businesses meeting the study's convenience store definition were found in Haverford North (10 stores) while very few existed in Spruce Hill (2 stores). Stores clustered in commercially zoned areas. The four stores closest to Market and 40th Streets were all located in the rent gap area discussed in the background section above, indicating their landlords may be under development pressure. This raises the question of how long-lived the landlords and business owners expect these stores to be.

My second map (Figure 9) shows study area stores overlaid on a map of the tobacco-free school zones (TFSZs) established in 2017 that extend within 500 feet of any K-12 school. Stores in a TFSZ with active tobacco licenses before 2017 were grandfathered in and allowed to maintain their licenses, but no business owner in a TFSZ can seek a new tobacco license. Of the stores in TFSZs observed to be selling tobacco products, two existed before 2017 but did not

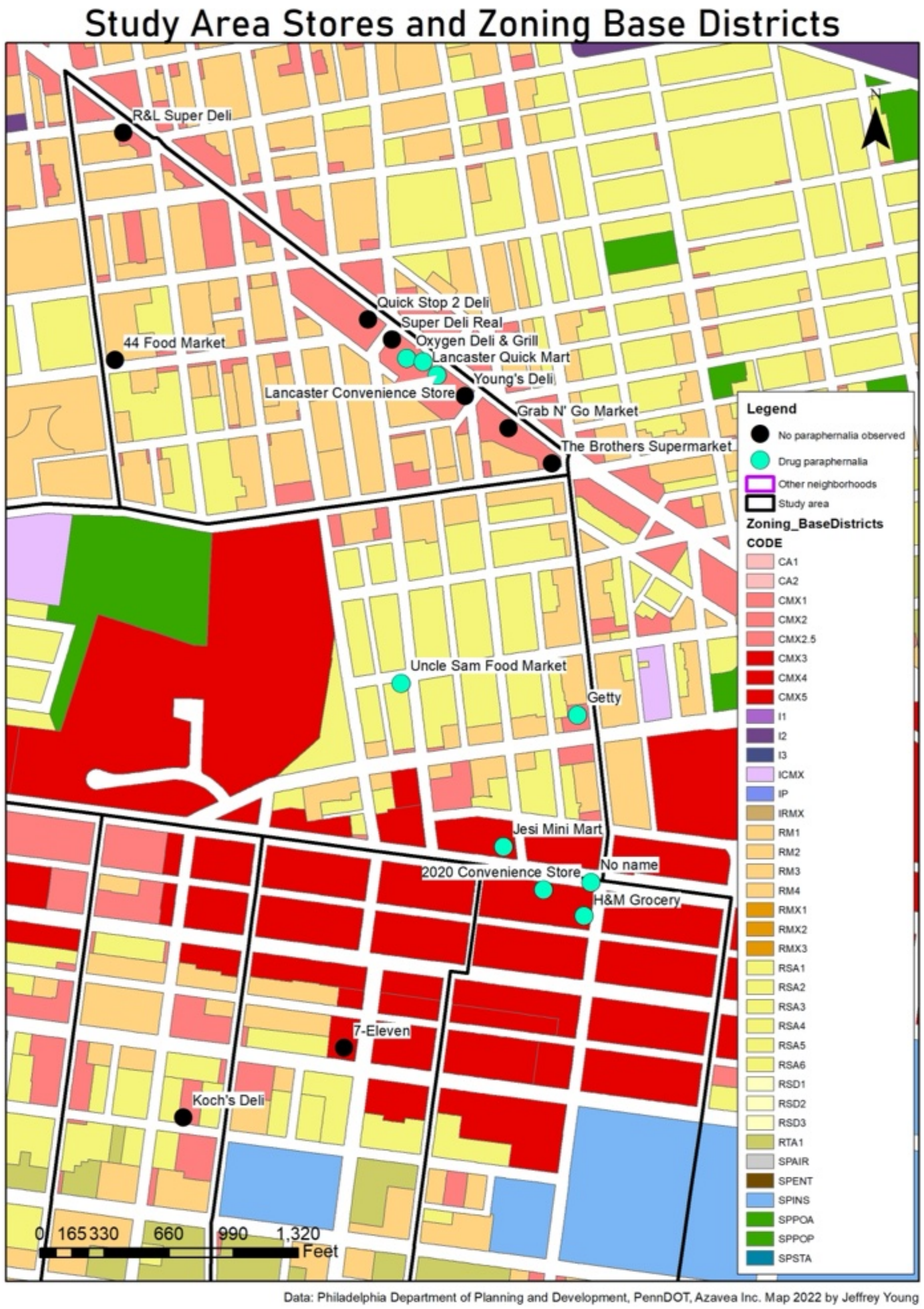


Figure 8. Study Area Stores and Zoning Base Districts

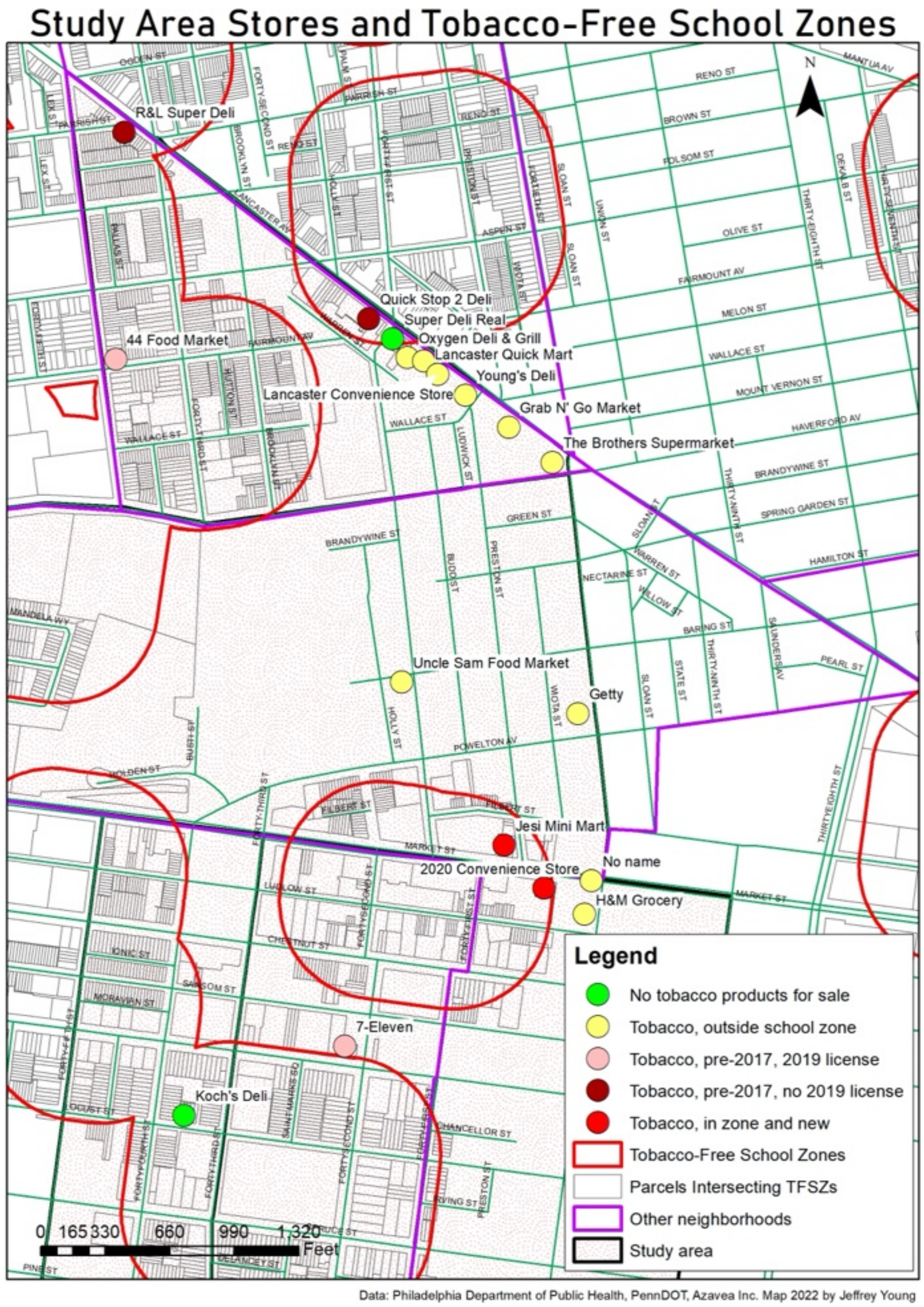


Figure 9. Study Area Stores and Tobacco-Free School Zones

Store	Census Tract	Prepared food	Produce	Frozen meals	Tobacco	Slots	Flashing lights	Paraphernalia	Delta-8 or THC	Beer/wine	Food retail license	Food prep license	No food license	TFSZ issue
44 Food Market	106 (Haverford North)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes						Yes		
R&L Super Deli	106 (Haverford North)	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes							Yes	Yes
Quick Stop 2 Deli	106 (Haverford North)	Yes										Yes		Yes
Super Deli Real	106 (Haverford North)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes						Yes	
Oxygen Deli & Grill	106 (Haverford North)	Yes			Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes		
Lancaster Quick Mart	106 (Haverford North)				Yes		Yes	Yes					Yes	
Lancaster Convenience Store	106 (Haverford North)				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes			
Young's Deli	106 (Haverford North)				Yes					Yes			Yes	
Grab N' Go Market	106 (Haverford North)				Yes								Yes	
The Brothers Supermarket	106 (Haverford North)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes						Yes	
Getty	92 (West Powelton)				Yes	Yes		Yes					Yes	
Uncle Sam Food Market	92 (West Powelton)				Yes			Yes	Yes			Yes		
Jesi Mini Mart	92 (West Powelton)				Yes			Yes	Yes		Yes			Yes
H&M Grocery	88.02 (University City)				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes			
[no name]	88.02 (University City)				Yes		Yes	Yes			Yes			
2020 Convenience Store	88.02 (University City)				Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes			Yes
Koch's Deli	87.01 (Spruce Hill)	Yes	Yes				Yes					Yes		
7-Eleven	87.02 (Spruce Hill)	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes						Yes		

Table 1. Google Form spreadsheet results (selected columns)

have active tobacco licenses in 2019, and two had opened since 2017. I could not procure tobacco license data more recent than late 2019, but I am nearly certain these four stores are selling tobacco without a license.

In examining the spreadsheet (partly reproduced in Table 1), I found very little overlap between stores selling prepared food and those selling paraphernalia, with only one store selling both. Every store that sold either produce or frozen meals also sold prepared food. Almost all stores sold tobacco products, many a huge variety of products including cigarettes, cigarillos, e-cigarettes, vapes, and hookah tobacco. A significant number of stores appeared to be selling either Delta-8 or illegal cannabis products, including colorful packets labeled "cannabis flower." While Delta-8, a milder version of THC, is not currently an illegal product, as of early April 2022 the Pennsylvania Senate was working on a Delta-8 ban (Schad and Nichols, 2022). Finally, I determined that every store but 44 Food Market and the two stores in Spruce Hill was out of compliance due to either selling city-defined drug paraphernalia (which requires a variance), having no active food license, or selling tobacco in a Tobacco-Free School Zone without being grandfathered in.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, I showed a strong correlation between the business strategies of convenience stores in an area and the characteristics of that area. In particular, the poorest area in my study had ten stores, while the wealthiest area had only two. In the wealthy area, both stores appeared to be complying with the law and both sold prepared food; in the lowest income area, there was scattered compliance and a mix of sales strategies. Businesses in the moderate-income area did not split the difference: instead, all stores were out of compliance and sold paraphernalia, and none sold hot food. This can be explained by the fact that dynamic gentrification in the neighborhood has activated the closure of a rent gap enabled by zoning. The resultant turbulent economic conditions provide the conditions for opportunistic speculation by legitimate and illegitimate businesses alike.

Although further research on the issue is needed, my study strongly suggests Lawman et al are incorrect that the number of stores operating illegally is low, and there is a serious mismatch between regulation and enforcement. This mismatch can be seen through the lens of urban informality: a complex process, such as that of legally opening a food business, is difficult for the poor to navigate, so people in poor neighborhoods circumvent the process. Their workarounds play a crucial role in shaping the urban environment and can be seen as integral to, not separate from, the workings of state power (Chalana & Hou, 2016: 6). A feedback loop may form where workarounds proliferate, prompting people to create stricter laws, such as Wynnefield's zoning overlay that bans new convenience stores. If the new laws are not enforced, business owners may ignore them, leading to more workarounds. As the cycle iterates, tension can build in the community. The cycle can be broken by streamlining laws or by strengthening enforcement.

Improving enforcement by Philadelphia's Licenses & Inspections department (L&I) can be seen as in line with current movements to shift enforcement from police to other agencies. However, there are many hurdles to overcome. L&I has problems with retention of inspectors and trainees, has long training periods, and doesn't control its own recruitment process (Bond, 2020). The agency is famously corrupt, and like the police, has been said to have too expansive a portfolio (Orso, 2015). Furthermore, inspections are often prompted by resident complaints, so wealthy areas, where people have more agency to complain, often receive more attention, which is likely why Spruce Hill has no stores out of compliance. **Therefore, my first recommendation is to fix L&I – perhaps by breaking it up – and, in the interest of equity, to create a system that is less based off resident complaints. Excess enforcement can be preempted by implementing programs to guide businesses in poor neighborhoods through the licensing process and by streamlining that process.**

My results also indicate that convenience stores selling prepared food are less likely to sell paraphernalia and more likely to stock produce and frozen meals. Unlike tiny grocery stores, convenience stores selling prepared food – i.e. delis – are a common business model today. **Therefore, my second recommendation is that programs like the Healthy Corner Store Initiative should consider delis as a model to encourage.**

Next, my results suggest convenience stores are not equipped to handle the explosion of innovation in the tobacco/nicotine and marijuana markets today. At multiple stores selling tobacco or marijuana byproducts, I asked if CBD products were for sale, and store workers appeared unfamiliar with the term, in one case directing me to a Delta-8 product. In addition, many tobacco products in the stores appeared to be targeted at kids, with colorful packaging and candy flavors. Studies have shown that 90% of adults who smoke started smoking as kids (FDA, n.d.), and as Lawman (2019) noted, there are issues of health and equity at play. **Therefore, my third recommendation is that although it will hurt the convenience store business model, tobacco products (potentially with marijuana, when legalized) should only be sold in dedicated stores with informed sellers, namely smoke shops.**

Finally, when it comes to the stores labeled as nuisance businesses, RCO leader Pam Andrews suggests that area landlords have purposely installed annoying businesses so developers will buy them out (Pam Andrews, personal communication, 2022). I believe there are other factors at play, such as the pressures on convenience store owners discussed in the background section of this paper. What is certain is that the neighborhood is in transition, due to regional economics and demographic change, the actions of local institutions like Penn & Drexel, and a rent gap enabled by zoning. We know the outcome: displacement and a reduction in affordability for both residents and businesses. Although the city has good reasons to promote dense, transit-oriented development around the 40th and Market transit hub, it has failed to equitably plan for the period of transition toward this goal. **Therefore, my fourth and final recommendation is that the city develop an economic transition plan for the area that promotes sustainable development while protecting vulnerable residents and strengthening, not weakening, local culture.**

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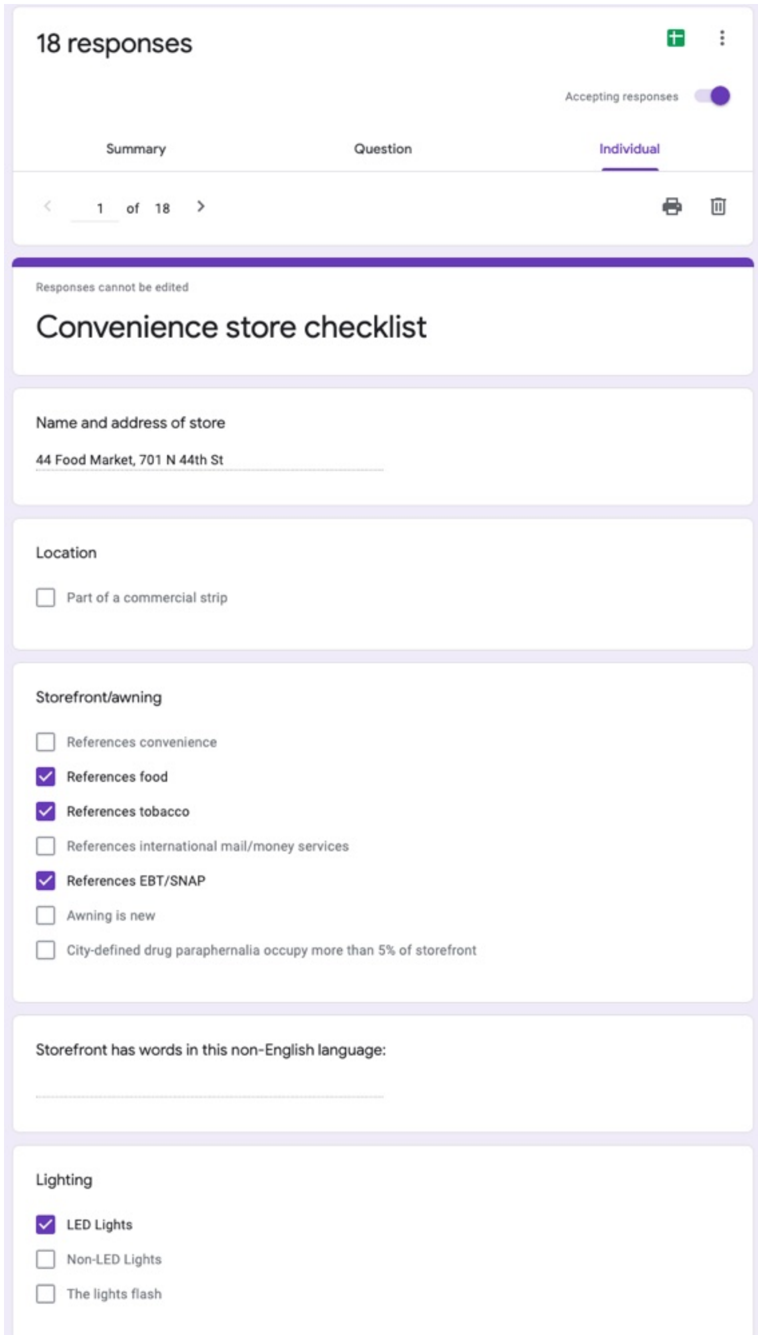
Appendix A: Google Form Example



18 responses

Accepting responses

Summary Question Individual

1 of 18

Responses cannot be edited

Convenience store checklist

Name and address of store

44 Food Market, 701 N 44th St

Location

- [ ] Part of a commercial strip

Storefront/awning

- [ ] References convenience
- [x] References food
- [x] References tobacco
- [ ] References international mail/money services
- [x] References EBT/SNAP
- [ ] Awning is new
- [ ] City-defined drug paraphernalia occupy more than 5% of storefront

Storefront has words in this non-English language:

Lighting

- [x] LED Lights
- [ ] Non-LED Lights
- [ ] The lights flash

Interior has:

- [x] Refrigerator
- [x] Freezer
- [x] Bulletproof glass
- [x] ATM
- [ ] Seating/table(s)
- [x] Slot machine
- [ ] Personal/cultural decorations

For sale:

- [x] Non-alcoholic cold beverages
- [x] Candy
- [x] Salty snacks
- [x] Frozen desserts
- [x] Cigarettes
- [x] Other tobacco products
- [ ] CBD products
- [ ] Delta-8 or THC products
- [ ] Beer/wine
- [ ] City-defined drug paraphernalia
- [ ] Taking up more than 5% of counter display?
- [x] Canned/packaged shelf-stable food
- [x] Frozen meals
- [x] Fresh produce or meat
- [x] Hot beverages
- [x] Prepared cold food
- [x] Prepared hot food
- [x] Household essentials (cleaning supplies, pet supplies)
- [ ] Newspapers/magazines
- [x] Electronics
- [x] Clothing
- [x] Other: Hardware

Store stocks foreign or niche products with labels in this non-English language:

Spanish