

THE EAST BALTIMORE NUTRITIONAL ENVIRONMENT:  
Formative Research with Community Leaders

Spring 2003

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to understand the complexity of finding and sustaining solutions to Baltimore City's nutritional issues by looking at the East Baltimore community through the eyes of community leaders and discusses problems that they see, potential solutions that are being or have been attempted, and perceived barriers to sustainable change. Research was conducted using in-depth interviews with community leaders, participation in walking tours, and directly observed stores in the area. The community leaders we interviewed were mostly in consensus when describing the barriers to healthy eating habits, namely, access to healthy foods. Reported barriers to access included quality, cleanliness, pricing, offered selection, location of the store, and size of store, i.e. corner store versus supermarkets. Leaders cited a range of community factors that were barriers to potential solutions, including cohesiveness, efficacy, deterioration, and "powers that be."

## **Introduction**

We were led by an African American man and were engaged in a tour or some observation. Two of us took notes. Our purpose could not have been transparent to the people we were ostensibly observing. We passed middle-aged men with bloodshot eyes and idle young men who, from statistics and our guide's comments about the neighborhood's 'one industry that's always hiring,' may have left high school, been unable to find a regular job, and been selling drugs. The south side of Preston between Greenmount and Homewood was bustling with people in their 20s walking west with elementary-aged children, other young folks sitting on their steps, and older men sitting or standing and talking, sometimes with bloodshot eyes. This intersection seemed to be the transport, social, and commercial hub of the area we toured. Bus line number 8 ran along Greenmount, both males and females of a wide range of ages socialized nearby, and a corner store, liquor store, restaurant, and carry-out were within several dozen meters.

We crossed the street and decided to enter what our guide reported as a medium-sized market. The exterior of the market was flat gray brick with a glass door. Black paint on the whitewashed wood boarding the adjacent door read "WIC." Many colored bandanas hung from a clothesline near the entrance. The checkout counter was encased in Plexiglass, but the cashier window was open during our afternoon visit. We quickly canvassed the store, noting the lack of low-fat milk or any fresh fruits or vegetables. The shelves were filled with canned or boxed foods and cleaning supplies. A small deli counter held meat and cheeses that looked untouched. An older Korean man was stocking the front shelf as we came in. As we purchased our drinks, we tried to ask the man some questions. He had trouble understanding

our English but did proudly state that he had been in the area since the 1960's. As we left the store, our guide told us that the market had been closed several times for health code violations.

We had just passed an elementary school and a community center when one of us saw a young, White man carrying a backpack, unlocking the door to a house and staring at us. Our mutual curiosity felt as though it could be expressed with a simultaneous, "What are you doing here?"

High mortality and morbidity rates for chronic disease in East Baltimore continue despite declines in many other populations. East Baltimore residents have a high incidence of many nutrition-related health problems, including hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, infant mortality, and HIV/AIDS (Graziano et al, 2002). Research indicates that 50 percent of males and females have a body mass index greater than the recommended cut-offs for their gender and age (Kayrooz et al, 1998). Nutrition-related chronic disease is associated with poor eating habits. Eating habits have been associated with the social and economic structure of a community.

The availability of healthy foods affects consumption. Morland et al (2002) found an association between the local food environment and residents' reports of meeting dietary recommendations. Results show that African American living in areas with at least one supermarket had increased fruit and vegetable consumption and reduced total fat and saturated fat. Morland et al (2001) found that the poorest neighborhood had fewer supermarkets; White neighborhoods had four times the number of supermarkets of African American neighborhoods. Availability of healthy foods in grocery stores was related to the reported consumption of these foods by individuals residing within the same zip codes and, conversely, availability of high-fat foods in supermarkets was correlated with consumption in regions near these supermarkets (Cheadle et al, 1999; Edmonds et al, 2001; Havas et al, 1998).

Airhienbuwas & Kumanyika (1996) found that many African American informants were willing to make healthy substitutions for high-fat, salty foods, but they noted major obstacles such as lack of access to healthy foods, the ready availability of foods that are high in fat and salt, and the generally higher costs of healthier alternatives. Extremely limited finances, transportation, childcare, and housing design contributed to difficulty in buying groceries (Travers, 1996). East Baltimore has overt symptoms of poor nutrition (Graziano 2002, Kayrooz 1998), yet the factors perpetuating nutrition related chronic disease are less clear.

Our research objective was to explore the social and economic issues that shape East Baltimore's nutritional environment. The nature of organizations' missions – to meet the needs of the East Baltimore community – guided us to community leaders as a logical pool of informants on the topic of the nutritional environment. Existing literature discusses environmental barriers and individual behavioral barriers to nutrition, yet there was no information on how community leadership see the problem of poor nutrition or their perspectives on possible solutions. East Baltimore has many community organizations and therefore has proven to be a feasible point of interaction. Community leaders by definition are active in addressing issues, meeting needs, and having an intimate knowledge of the communities they serve. As the project evolved, the community leaders uniformly cited lack of access and availability of nutritious foods, so we focused our exploration to elicit the leaders' perspectives on the barriers to finding solutions for those problems.

This paper aims to understand the complexity of finding and sustaining solutions to poor nutritional practices by looking at the East Baltimore community through the eyes

of its current leaders of change. The three key research questions to be discussed in this paper are: what are the nutrition related problems that the community leaders see, what potential solutions are being or have been attempted to address the nutritional problems, and what are the barriers to sustainable change?

## **Methods**

Our group chose to use a qualitative design as opposed to a quantitative design for our study for several reasons. First, the qualitative approach allowed us to capture “thick description” of community leaders’ perceptions of the East Baltimore food and nutrition environment. Second, the iterative nature of qualitative research allowed us to refine our original question according to the direction that our informants were leading us. As our research question changed to focus on Baltimore food stores specifically, so did our methods for obtaining this information about food stores.

*Data collection and sampling.* Our study took place between February and May 2003 in the East Baltimore area of Baltimore, MD. We wanted a diverse group of leaders that could represent some of the key types of organizations in the community. We loosely defined a community leader as a person who directs, commands, or guides a group or activity on behalf of a community, the people living in a particular district. We used purposeful sampling to choose initial informants and often used a cascade method of identifying subsequent informants. We also used purposeful sampling to choose observation venues among both East Baltimore grocery stores and corner stores. Our research was approved by the Committee for Human Research of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. A written disclosure statement was read and given to all study participants.

The research team was a group of individuals commonly associated as students at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Our diversity was beneficial in terms of the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences that we brought to our work; it also likely influenced the information we were each individually able to access. Our group consisted of ten individuals: five Caucasian females (one from Europe), two Asian females (one from Asia and one Asian American), one Asian male and one African American female. As a group, we collected data using participant observation, direct observation, and walking tours. Our primary method was unstructured interviews.

*Unstructured interviews.* We conducted thirty-four interviews with twenty-six community leaders. Informants included leadership from community service organizations, community advocacy and development organizations, schools, churches, medical clinics, the health department, and city government. Our interviews took the form of an initial in-depth and exploratory interview and were sometimes followed by a second, more focused in-depth interview. A field guide of questions was developed for these interviews, which served as a guide. We attempted to allow informants to dictate the direction of the interview. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

*Participant observation.* As our research question became more clearly defined to concentrate on East Baltimore food stores, our group conducted ten observations at seven stores. The participant observations were conducted at East Baltimore grocery and corner stores. Observations generally involved strolling through the store as an everyday shopper would. We observed shopping patterns including the general flow of people in and out, the method of transportation used, what people were buying and how much, and how people were paying for their items. We also took note of the selection, quality, and

prices of store items, as well as the sanitation and customer service of the store to be compared across individual observations. Two additional participant observations were conducted at informant organizations.

*Community walking tours.* Finally, in addition to the unstructured in-depth interviews and the participant observations, six of the ten researchers participated in a community walking tour of the Johnston Square neighborhood within East Baltimore, led by a local community advocate. He took us around the boundaries of the neighborhood, told us the history of the area, gave us the opportunity to ask questions, and brought us into one of the neighborhood corner stores. One researcher participated in a walking tour of the Monument Street corridor in Middle-East Baltimore. The informant also provided a history of the corridor, present achievements, challenges and future hope for the area.

*Data management and analysis.* Expanded raw field notes from all three forms of data collection were analyzed by each researcher individually and then presented to the group as a whole. Three key topic areas were discovered through this process: consumer issues, community issues, and store-related issues. To visually display and conceptually analyze our data, we developed three separate matrices for each of the topic areas (not shown in this document). Through group discussion, emergent themes in each topic area were decided upon. The emergent themes were placed on one side of the matrices and the type of community leader on the other and supporting quotes were extracted from the interview transcripts and write-ups of observations and tours.

## **Results**

### *Setting*

East Baltimore is situated between the harbor waterfront neighborhoods and the beginning of affluent residential neighborhoods south of the Baltimore County line.

Guilford Avenue, Erdman Avenue, Sinclair Avenue and Pulaski Highway delineate East Baltimore. The physical environment is dominated by boarded-up row homes. Leaders in the community point to the seventeen public schools, a few private schools, the Baltimore City Detention Center, and the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions as the potential community resources.

East Baltimore's total population dropped 23 percent from 1990 to 2000. The area is 96 percent African American, and 57 percent of households are headed by women with no husband present. The community is evenly distributed across age groups, with the only substantial proportional increase noted for those over the age of sixty-five. The median household income by neighborhood ranged from \$11-13,000, and 22 to 36 percent of households with children having incomes below the poverty line. Twenty-one percent of the housing units are vacant, and three quarters of the vacant units are currently not for sale or rent. (Baltimore Neighborhood Indicator Alliance. Accessed May 8, 2003, <http://www.bnia.org>).

### *Perception of Problems*

The community leaders generally saw nutrition related chronic conditions and obesity as a serious problem in East Baltimore. Limited availability and access to nutritious foods and lack of education on healthy preparation of foods were cited as reasons for poor nutritional practices.

### Availability

*Quality:* There was a consensus by all informants on store environment and quality of the products offered in East Baltimore. The general impression shared by many was the lack



of fresh produce, low quality of meats and fish and the plethora of high-fat, unhealthy items especially found in corner stores. As one informant summarized,

“All of the markets around here are what I call suspect, at best, and many of them have meats, if you look at them, they are not tested and so forth like some of the other large markets.” (African American, male, director of a community service organization)

“Just open the door to the supermarket and you can smell it. If they sell fish, it smells like fish. Fish, chicken blood, I don’t know if everyone can smell it, but I can. If you go to Giant, you don’t get that” (African American, female, activist and director of a community center)

Many informants perceived cleanliness of the stores to be a problem in East Baltimore.

The strong bad odor was one issue mentioned by many and confirmed during store observations by the research members.

*Selection:* Community advocates perceived area corner stores and grocery stores as having poor selection and “specializing in junk food.” They mentioned the limited variety of food products that is predominated by packaged foods and some canned items. Products were not perceived as fresh or healthy, but “just *convenient* stuff” including “almost anything you might run out of.” Observations noted the pervasive availability of fried chicken wings, frozen meats, junk food and sodas or sweet beverages amongst an otherwise sparse selection. In response, store owners have been noted to say, “Anything I put, they buy,” which evokes an impression of insensitivity to customer needs. Several storeowners also rationalized stocking patterns by citing purchasing that is higher at the beginning of the month than at the end of the month.

Leaders identified quality and selection as problems in the existing East Baltimore stores. Sparse selection and poor quality of food items clearly inhibit residents from consuming nutritious diets.

## Access

*Prices:* Community leaders pointed to low income as one of the major barriers that keeps community members from accessing nutritious and healthy food. People with low incomes may try to obtain more food for less money, since they have so many other operating costs in daily living:

“I know budget affects food of choice because when people think in terms of going to the grocery store and they want to get...they want to stretch dollars as much as they can. So, often times, they buy the cheaper things.”

In this way, a tight budget can result in the purchasing un-fresh or non-nutritious food. Healthy or not, low-income individuals tend to spend a higher percentage of their budget on food.

In an effort to cope with the lack of grocery stores in the immediate area and with the difficulty accessing larger supermarkets, some residents depend on nearby corner stores. The prices in those stores are higher compared to other supermarkets.

“...the corner store, but they're no good because their prices are sky-high... They price you for whatever the market can bear. Grits may be 62 cents in the Safeway, then when you go to the corner stores you pay two dollars.”

Leaders reported cost being an issue even for residents who could make it to the supermarkets.

“ Cost, right, right, cost is major because even if you do go to the supermarket, to the store, and you find the food that's really nutritious or the things that are better for them, they're more expensive, they're more expensive to buy, and you know this is not an affluent community.”(African American, female, health worker)

According to the literature, people are more likely to select food seen as tastier and cheaper even if it has less nutritive value (Glanz et al,1998; French et al, 1999; French, 2003). For people with limited financial resources, leaders reported cost as being a significant barrier to consumption of healthy foods.

*Transportation:* While community leaders cited problems with corner stores, they also acknowledged the reasons consumers would use them for shopping. Because supermarkets are often far from consumers' residences, poor transportation is a barrier to food acquisition. One person described the situation:

“No, not any major supermarkets around, but also a lot of people in the community don't have transportation, major transportation like cars to get to the other supermarkets that are in other areas.”

Supermarkets tend to be even farther for people in East Baltimore, who have less access to private transportation, than for people living in other parts of Baltimore. Instead, East Baltimore residents use public transportation more often than people living in other wealthy areas to get to large, chain supermarkets like Safeway and Giant that serve Baltimore and surrounding areas:

“Well usually a lot of people have to take the bus to go to Safeway or Giant... People in single-family homes in other parts of Baltimore only have to go 5 or 6 blocks before they find a Safeway or a Giant. There are people around here who on average must go 20 or so blocks to find a place where they can buy fresh fruits and vegetables, which is very unfair to them.”

This person is commenting on the unequal distribution of places like Safeway and Giant throughout the city. By mentioning the relative proximity of “people in single-family homes” to supermarkets, he is referring to placement of more supermarkets in wealthier areas. This can be complicated and can limit the purchase of specific types of food, such as fresh produce.

“A low-income, non-car owning individual can find the trip to the supermarket to be a daunting, time consuming task.”

This leader did not actually suggest that a person would forego a trip because of the hassle, but simply characterizes the magnitude of the “task” of getting to a supermarket.

*Safety:* In addition to location and transportation issues, consumers also take into account the potential dangers they face in moving between their homes and supermarkets as part of this task. The locus of danger is generally the streets:

“When I suggest to people that they walk, then they’ll say, ‘The streets are dangerous, you can’t walk on the streets.’”(Ugandan male physician)

Such fear was attributed to compromises to personal safety occurring while walking in the street or, as at least one other person mentioned, by using pirate taxicabs. Specifically, crime was one important threat named:

“Nutrition is important, but ... people don’t like to be out after dark, they don’t carry purses in fear of crime. Even the drug reps say they don’t want to get caught there at night.” (African American female physician)

The desire to obtain healthy food may be diminished by the perception of high costs and threats of danger on the streets.

The perceived expense of the corner stores, added expense of transportation, and safety concerns were identified as the salient environmental barriers to the purchasing of healthy foods. The community leaders felt that economic factors greatly influenced the choices that individuals in the community made, and that the location and transportation issues compounded the economic hardships that residents face. Though many of the leaders we spoke with address these issues in their jobs, some continue to feel that conditions are getting worse.

### *Historical Barriers to Solutions*

To understand the issues around current food availability and the lack of grocery stores in the area of East Baltimore, one must reflect on the history of the area – the way things were before. As in many urban areas of the country, much change has occurred in

East Baltimore affecting the residents of the communities that remain, including neighborhood demographics and socioeconomic status resulting from job availability and the deficit of social and economic resources. The “us” and “them” phenomenon of differentiating people and sometimes portraying “them” as adversaries can be seen throughout East Baltimore’s past and present, affecting also what the future might hold for the residents of this community.

### Community in Crisis

“The community has changed over the years. I would definitely like to say not for the better because there are a lot of vacant homes in the community which brings a lot of crime. There is a lot of drug activity in the community and it doesn’t make for a pretty place to want to live.”

Many of the community leaders we interviewed shared feelings similar to the above respondent. It happens that East Baltimore with its historic landmarks, such as the row homes and marble steps, is in a state of ruthless transition.

Leaders related environmental barriers without explicitly indicating notions of “old” and “new” in relation to food acquisition. They mentioned that the area historically did have supermarkets, and they spoke of deterioration in not only food stores but also job opportunities and housing over the last several decades. Environmental barriers to food acquisition have probably come about as relatively new phenomena in the community’s history, yet no portrait of the “old” was painted in contrast.

Discussion of the deterioration of the community evoked nostalgia for the past. According to informants relationships between merchants and patrons had been different. In the past, the relationship was personal, in which they would help each other and look after each other. The produce was local and the butcher would sell sides of beef, lamb, buffalo, instead of pre-cut meat. In the old times, one person said:

“...There was camaraderie and everyone looked for each other. They don’t do that now. There was never a bank, tobacco or lottery. There were many good people. Before the eastern market was renovated in 1984-85, there were more produce stands and more chicken stalls, but after the renovations, fast food increased. Historically, the North East Market there were few carryout markets, there were deli meats, two meat shops, one Korean hat shop.” (White, female, specialty food stall owner)

*Changes in Community Membership:* Leaders reported that the change in racial mix of the neighborhood has contributed to the changed relationship between consumers and merchants.

“Fifty years ago, there were only Poles, Italians, Bohemians. Twenty years ago the population was 50-50 black and white.”

The food sold in the market was also different:

“[Before] the merchants made homemade food, 90 percent by scratch. Now there is fried food. No ‘oriental’ then.” (White, male, community organization activist)

Most of the informants in the study expressed that vacant housing has facilitated negative presences such as high crime and drug problems, which have in turn transformed the once very proud historic community into an unsafe community. This point is well illustrated by the following informant’s statement:

“People come from different communities into this community to sell drugs-why? Because they hide in a vacant house, they can stash their drugs in a vacant house. You can kill somebody, I mean, you can hide bodies in a vacant home here.”

To community leaders, the vacant housing serves as a source of danger, as well as a discouraging neighborhood fixture. Historic East Baltimore is suffering from the problems of abandonment and low demand, and community leaders believe this stems from the area’s diminishing social and economic resources. The turnover of population is extremely high in these neighborhoods because it is difficult to manage and economically challenging to live in a community that has been suffering from long-term structural decline. The following statement describes the negative impacts on those living and working in the area:

“I think unfortunately when this change [vacant houses, increasing crime, and trash] started coming about, I think some of the people in this community left because they couldn’t hang in there anymore. So they moved out to the county and because they weren’t getting the help that they might have needed from the government or from other partners in the community until it got to this status and so they left to save their children.”

The statement above exemplifies the community’s response to the urban decay in East Baltimore. Migrating out of the city is one way residents cope with the current problems.

Unfortunately, the people in the community that leave to seek better opportunities elsewhere further contribute to the structural deterioration of East Baltimore.

“The current retail ‘sucks.’ The reasons for that are that the surrounding neighborhoods contain highly mobile populations, except for the people who can’t go, as well as the sources of employment are limiting, being the port, steel and cottage industries.” (White, male community organization advocate)

*Change in Economic Opportunity:* Exodus of industry from the city has limited job opportunities and increased population mobility. Supermarkets, too, have left the area:

“And through the years, I know within Baltimore, I am from Baltimore growing up, there were supermarkets chains, major ones in the city but they’ve moved out, or they sold their markets to other smaller chains, smaller companies.”

The shift in types of food stores has been accompanied by disappointment in store ownership. One store employee felt that blacks wanted to see black ownership, but for many black owners, “business is business; they aren’t looking to give out charity and many leave if they have better opportunities.”

This community, a once-thriving, working-class neighborhood, has been dependent on jobs that have been eliminated through economic hardship, such as the steel industry, or they have been ignored when new development demands employees, such as Harbor Place. Jobs that exist are inaccessible to the residents of the city.

“35 percent of the entry-level jobs in the Baltimore area are inaccessible by public transportation, you know. And that’s over a third, that you can’t get to from here, and that’s a very real problem. So there’s those kinda forces that are beyond the control of people who are seeking jobs.” (African American male director of a community center)

In addition to transportation issues related to entry-level jobs, the suffering quality of institutions like schools contributed to the state of the neighborhood:

“Essentially what you have is a lot of economic slavery, people are trapped. You know you can’t, the ... system doesn’t get you the job you like, the school system isn’t getting people there, that’s a bit of a failure, 6000 kids drop out of school each year.” (African American male director of a community center)

Leaders felt that for this reason, severe poverty and unemployment rates are difficult for the residents to escape and overcome.

The result of fleeing economic resources and diminishing quality of the “human capital” is a polarized city with powerful economic divides between the “haves” and “have-nots.” As people continue to migrate out of East Baltimore, people that remain in the community are pulled into a rapid downward spiral by insufficient social and economic resources. Furthermore, community leaders have expressed that disinvestments by the central government and the private sector preserve economic stagnation.

Leaders reported that East Baltimore has the reputation of being unwelcoming and inhospitable to owners and consumers. Owning a store in East Baltimore is complicated by the high crime rate and robberies of retail stores.

“That’s a problem around here, the Rite-Aid closed, stores are closing because I think they, they tend to rob them and they miss out, because when the markets go away, they have to travel further to get food, and that’s a problem”

Leaders felt that creating a feeling of belonging and investment could prevent such robberies. As an organizer of a previously existing food cooperative proudly added:

“The food store was never robbed... Because I don’t think, I think, I think it was very apparent that we were part of the fabric of the neighborhood.” (African American, male director of a community center)

The difference seems to be whether the store is “accepted” in the community.



In contrast, *transient* stores, defined by their short-term presence in the community, would report multiple events of robbery crimes. The owners of these stores (i.e. corner stores) are perceived as ‘outsiders’ of the community. As an ‘outsider,’ one could be of a different race or someone from outside of Baltimore City, or even East Baltimore, establishing business inside the East Baltimore community. The prevalence of crime plagues stores owned by those perceived as ‘outsiders’ to the point that many of them are driven out of the community. Although there is a strong need for large grocery stores or supermarkets in the East Baltimore community, high crime incidence seemed to deter large chain stores from establishing business in the area. When a store security guard was asked why other major stores do not exist in this area, he simply replied: “Crime, drugs, and rape...all that stuff goes on here.”

The changes are not just ethnic: crime incidence increased, as did the cost of insurance to cover events of robbery or theft. Some noted that even stores placing security guards, state-of-the-art registers, and surveillance cameras still experience theft. In order to overcome the stigma of being an ‘outsider,’ one privately owned supermarket tried to develop personal ties with the community by sponsoring local teams, offering free van service to customers who purchase more than \$75 worth of groceries and a free van to the senior center.

*Change in Societal Values:* Exacerbating the environmental decay specific to the East Baltimore community, is the increased disconnected lifestyle of the family. This family disconnection is associated with changes in food choices, which lead to greater consumption of convenience foods. Like many Americans, community members have busy schedules, sometimes due to long work hours or multiple jobs. This affects food

consumption because people want meals that are quick and easy to purchase and prepare.

Informants were very aware of how this lifestyle impacts an individual's diet:

“Other than milk and juice and eggs, everything else was ‘boil in the bag’ ‘Eat as is,’ ‘instant, microwave-able’... she ain’t cookin’ nothing. And she would tell you that, I don’t know how to cook. Why should I cook? I got a microwave, I got this, I got that...and I kept thinking about that and I said, you know, she wasn’t brought up like that. You know but it’s easier. It’s easier for her.” (African American, male, community organization representative and advocate)

Easy-to-prepare foods became central to many people's diets. As a result of the fast-paced lifestyle, families are not as linked as in the past. Children are spending more time without parental supervision; time when children are with their parents is rushed. Many informants were upset that the focus on family appears to be changing:

“You got other parents, they are really thoughtful parents, but they are working or they’re working two jobs, or their working and going to school, but they got the busy schedules. There’s very few people that quote ‘spend very little quality time doing things for their family.’” (African American, male, community organization representative and advocate)

Informants associated being “busy” or being “lazy” with a loss of family integration. The consequence of being either busy or lazy was defined as a loss in “quality time” between parents and children. It seems that individual behavior, increasing deterioration of the family unit, ties and values are essential components to understanding the barriers that afflict the larger community and slow the development of new resources. This sense of disconnectedness in the family is mirrored in the community, whereby neighborhoods lack a unified voice.

### Lack of Community Cohesion

The lack of neighborhood attachment and community networks was also pervasive in the leaders' reports. Many of our informants stated that business owners often do not live in the community and thus do not have strong ties with the community. This was not the case in years past, as it was expressed by our respondent:

“Okay, I’ll tell you what’s missing in the neighborhood that used to be here. Hardware stores, drug stores... what’s different between a Rite Aid and a Ma and Pa type drug store... the pharmacists knew you and your family. You know what I mean... whereas I can go into Rite Aid and I can get my prescription and pick it up, it’s like...everybody knows me cause I’m a community leader, Whatever... but I notice for other people, they really don’t know the people. (African American, male, community organization representative)

The connection between business and the people has slowly disappeared. When the communication between the storeowners and community organizations becomes difficult, cohesive improvement efforts become more complicated. For instance, a community leader commented on one of the special events organized for the community during which two community organizations battled over which name would be put on the bags for the event. Illustrated by the impression that this conflict made, past actions of associated organization could cause lasting friction that undermine cohesive action and perpetuate territorialism.

“Territorial. Territorial. It is, neighborhoods continue, and unfortunately they’ve been taught this, have come to be territorial. When I was working down in the mayor’s office and I’m doing these neighborhood cleanups ... and I tell the people okay, we’re going to send the truck over here we’re going to get that pile of trash over there and we’ll go to that alley and clean out that vacant house yard. The leadership over on this side say I’m not going over there, that’s another neighborhood association. See you, you live on this block, right. He said yah, but that’s not our association, that’s another neighborhood association. I said but you’re going to do this cleanup here and go home and look out your front window at with all this trash and you don’t want to get it now? But [exasperated] that...has been taught to the community, to be separate...” (African American, male, neighborhood association representative, community organizer, and member)

The community leaders felt that the re-emergence and the presence of a sense of neighborhood attachment will play important roles in the rebirth of neighborhoods in East Baltimore. As one of the community leaders stated,

“I think that if the people that work here and live here and brought their relationship closer together then a lot of those things [health hazards – rats, trash, crime, discrimination] would disappear.” (African American, female, community advocate)

This illustrates the effects of the disjointedness in the efforts of organizations and may provide an understanding for the sluggishness of revitalization.

Racial tensions underlie some of the community disjointedness. In regards to food, two adversarial groups emerged, “us” the Blacks and “them” the Koreans. The Koreans in East Baltimore are seen as dominating the commercial market and forming strong alliances with the city. The network of Korean businesses includes Kagro, a wholesaler working as a lending agent, the Korean Grocery Association with aim to retain ownership within the Korean network, and the Baltimore City Korean Liaison, who maintain good relations with the City. One community advocate commented that “the bombardment of Asian American buying up of the commercial businesses” was due to the large numbers of stores moving out of the East Baltimore community. According to a community advocate:

“The Koreans are very powerful in the city. 25 percent to 30 percent of the 90 businesses are Korean owned. Of the 35 merchants on the corridor, more than half are Korean.” (White, male, community organization representative)

“... some of the complaints about the store were more racially based, that Blacks wanted to see Black ownership. He then stated that for many Blacks, business is business; they aren’t looking to give out charity and many leave if they have better opportunities.” (White, male, community organization representative)

Where consumers choose to purchase their food may depend on the ethnicity of the owner as discussed by these informants:

“They don’t go to Super A Farms or to Safeway in Canton because of the racial tension between black and white and the Hispanics in the Upper Fells Point.” (White, male, community organization representative)

“Most people in the neighborhood expect cultural foods that African Americans eat, not only Hispanic foods.” (White, male, community organization representative)

Problems with communication, territorialism, and racism underlie the lack of cohesion, which was reported by the leaders as a barrier to expanding improvement efforts.

Although the mistrust and misunderstanding that had occurred may be comprehended in light of the recent history of East Baltimore, East Baltimore has been and, according to leaders, has the potential to become a cohesive community.

### Lack of Leadership and Self-efficacy

Resulting from the transience of businesses and residents in the neighborhood, the prospects for new leadership within the community is lacking. Although inadequate, a few key leaders of the community have attempted to shoulder the burden of representing the community's well-being. But overall, there is little sense of a unified voice among the community members. A lack of solidarity and perception of power has perpetuated an "us versus them" mentality within the community. And consequently, the neighborhood has portrayed a state "of least resistance" to those in powerful positions.

"This is a neighborhood where voter turn-out is very low. And so it's perceived by the city and state that it's the neighborhood of least resistance. So if they wanna do something, right, they don't wanna have people that are so politically empowered that they can vote out anybody and shove these things down their throat, as it were. (African American, male, director of a community center)

Reasons given for the lack of self-efficacy were education, poverty and crime.

One community leader quoted the drop out rate for African American males is up to 76 percent...

"Those numbers are staggering and devastating, 9000 inmates drop out, are dumped out back into the Baltimore streets from their jail and prison cells each year. Most of those can't read and ... to know... histories." (African American, male, director of a community center).

Strong community leaders exist in East Baltimore, but they fear a loss of momentum if strong successors do not exist to take their place.

"There's enormous poverty, there's crime, there's chemical dependence here and I would see all that as, as things that make for broken lives for people who live here." (Caucasian female, parish nurse)

### The Powers that Be: Control from Outside

Our informants articulated awareness of an external power that controls the life situation for the residents. Some felt that poor neighborhoods were made and perpetuated by those that have the power and control. One leader defined those powers to be those

that are involved in a game of power, position and money. This perception of “us” versus “them” could be traced to times of slavery when African Americans had no rights and racism perpetuated that status. Mistrust in Johns Hopkins University, like many research institutions, has also been a point of contention with the community due to past research interactions “on” the community without apparent benefits for the community. But a larger power of city and government who urge members of the community to join forces are included in those “powers-that-be”...

“When I say powers-that-be, these are the people that control what goes on in East Baltimore... that’s Hopkins, uh, politicians, the faith community leaders... there’s too many of them that quote ‘jump out the pulpit’... and others that’s playing a game.” (African American, male, community organizer and advocate)

The reported “powerlessness” that permeates people was associated with the appearance of fragmentation of community, lack of cohesion as a group, and the inability to resist changes that occur without the community’s input.

“They don’t want people to know they have power. Residents forget that the politicians work for them. They actually do. And politicians come off that they have this power, they’ve reversed the role. So they come in and tell people what’s going to be done in their neighborhood, what’s going to happen and people are sitting back and they say, well they got the power.” (African American, male, community organizer and advocate)

Community leaders perceive the everyday manifestations of powerlessness as a lack of city services and police attention in the pursuit to abate crime and drugs from the area:

“The city really doesn’t come through as much to pick the trash up, and you know, it builds up and breeds insects and rodents and disease and you know all bad issues.” (African American, female, community organization liaison)

“I thought that poor neighborhoods are created and the way its created is you take the resources out of the neighborhood, change the principals of the schools, schools start going down, poor city services, property values dropped. When I say poor city services, I mean even police departments, you know, dealing with nuisance neighbors, drug problems, you know just the whole nine yards.” (African American, male, community organizer and advocate)

The current proposal and upcoming Johns Hopkins University development plan for the Biotech Research park area brings both hope for residual benefit into the

surrounding neighborhoods and fear that once again, East Baltimore will be ignored.

Change will occur without the consultation of the community and those changes will not be perceived as advantageous for the residents.

“With the influence of Hopkins and its Research Park, we are currently in a state of transition and not sure what will happen. It’s like when any “Big Brother” moves in – we’ll lose the Mom & Pop shops, which are currently the heart of the community.” (White, female, health clinic administrator)

We detected a sense of desperation to reclaim the “heart” of East Baltimore.

Many others just want to see betterment in the lives of the people of the community through acts of solidarity and demands for a voice at the table. Both voices, one of collaboration and the other of lack of inclusion in these decisions, have spoken loudly.

The theme of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ expressed in city and community relations, also was seen as influencing the number of available supermarkets and grocery stores in the area. According to various informants, the city seems to prefer big-chain supermarkets, such as Save-A-Lot and Safeway, rather than accepting new medium- to large-size privately owned stores. Thus the city eases the entry for large supermarket chains like Giant, which is opening in Waverly. According to one informant:

“Cost of entry is about \$1 million to \$2 million. There is a lot of bureaucracy and obtaining funding isn’t easy for independent stores...They [the city] are trying to bring the chains in and they are cherry picking who they want to open up stores in the area.. It is not profitable for them [the chains] to be located in the city. The city doesn’t have enough space for them, with an acre of parking lot. People are moving out of the city and the revenue is not there. The chains are moving out to the suburbs. The people who live here have no purchasing power. ” (Indian male, store manager)

Community leaders expressed that the inflexibility in city sponsored promotional programs, may be standing in the way of a possible solution to getting quality healthy food into East Baltimore.

*Valiant Efforts and Attitudes Towards Change*

In spite of these structural barriers to obtaining healthy food, community leaders have organized programs to try to improve nutrition in East Baltimore. The city government established the Baltimore Development Corporation, which has been designated with the responsibility of bringing retailers into the city and has had some success. Neighborhood development organizations have formed funding partnerships in order to improve the building facades down the main commerce corridor, helping to foster the image of East Baltimore as a safe community. There are several food give away programs through the organizations with food supplied by the Maryland Food Bank.

The residents, with the help of organizations, have established other means of coping. Organizations and residents sustain community gardens in a few lots in the neighborhood. During the 1980s the community organized a food cooperative, where residents volunteered their time in exchange for shopping for quality foods at reasonable prices. Several of the community leaders reported holding cooking demonstrations and nutrition classes for their members. Residents depend on informal transportation networks such as community drivers and family members as an alternative to more risky transportation alternatives such as hacks and gypsy cabs as a means of getting to the distant supermarkets in the absence of public transportation. Community leaders and organizations have designed leadership training for potential future leaders of East Baltimore. Although relatively small, these efforts have drawn an ethnic mix of community members. Some of these efforts may prove to be sustainable solutions while others may serve as short term coping strategies, nonetheless the community organizations are organizing in an effort to ameliorate problems associated with lack of



access to healthy food. Community leaders feel strongly about the need and possibility of change.

Leaders vehemently expressed the viewpoint that change can occur in this community if people own their issues and take responsibility and work together. Others feel the community cannot just wait for things to happen, but that the hopes and attitudes will need to reflect the possibilities.

“The neighborhood itself, it’s a blank slate, it represents potential. That’s the strength... The glass is half-full as it were.” (African American, male, director of a community center)

However, there are contrasting views. Historically, programs and special services have been instituted that were merely “big old band-aids”. Unless, the systems of government and the greater structures of society are altered, there will be no “solution” to the problems that plague East Baltimore. One leader states:

“We’re covering up the solution. I see no possibility that there is going to be a solution. I think an enlightened society can fix it by saying we are going to reallocate income, reallocate wealth, and by a tax system that does that” (White, male, director of a food distribution organizations)

Some leaders expressed that lasting change could only occur if the underlying causes of poverty and resource disparities were addressed. In light of the time and power needed to produce wide-scale change, the community generated immediate approaches, like those currently in progress, may prove to be the most feasible means of improving East Baltimore.

Although the issues of poverty, racism and unequal opportunity are powerfully underpinning some of the reasons for the current state of this part of the city, there remains hope and a drive to improve the area. This action can be seen in the activities by key members of the community and the organizations that have had the ‘staying power’ to initiate and follow-through with projects, as well as develop meaningful relationships.

“working together we make the believable achievable” (White, male, community organization representative)

“We don’t just sit around say we can’t do anything about this.” (Caucasian, female, community center director)

The leaders overwhelmingly expressed the need for the solutions to come from the community in order to be successful and sustainable.

“You have to fix it from the inside out. Let them take their responsibility and own it. Own the change. Own what is going on and what’s going to happen and take responsibility for making these changes happen.” (African American, female, community organization liaison)

Creation of way to harness this enthusiasm, generate ideas from the community, delegate responsibility to the community, and expand the change beyond the spheres of one community organization, then becomes the issue.

## **Discussion**

Community leaders saw nutrition related problems as a significant issue in the East Baltimore community. Leaders reported poor product quality, limited selection of healthy foods, transportation problems, cost constraints, and public safety as factors influencing availability and access to healthy foods. The perceived barriers to sustainable solutions were continuing of community decay, lack of leadership and efficacy, lack of cohesiveness within community members and organizations, and deterioration in the relationship between food retailers and consumers.

Although there have been efforts to improve the nutritional environment in East Baltimore, the community still has great need. Community members have tried a variety of behavioral and environmental interventions to improve knowledge about nutrition and access to healthy foods, but overarching social issues such as crime and unemployment, racial tensions, and political tensions impede large-scale progress. Deterioration of the

community, lack of cohesion, lack of self efficacy, and difficulties infiltrating the existing power structure (see Figure 1) impede significant changes that would enable residents to access healthy foods. Social and political changes have resulted in a crisis for this community. Over time, the fabric that wove connections between business owners and the community they served has unraveled. The deterioration of each element hastens the decay of others, making improvement a daunting task. The dichotomy of hope and hopelessness emerges, but great is the need to be hopeful and activate the resources that are available to the community.

To address overall structural change of government and economic systems of Baltimore City and United States seems unrealistic. More immediate solutions are in progress and occurring at micro-levels around East Baltimore. This research documents the barriers that partially explain why the strengths of the community, the people and the spirit of hope, have not been effectively employed to produce lasting solutions to the food access problems. It is our hope that through this formative research, new ideas will emerge to address the issues and overcome barriers to creating a healthy food environment in East Baltimore.

The information obtained from the community leaders can be used to guide future health education programs in the East Baltimore community. Any health promotion program in the East Baltimore setting must consider the status local food environment. Without access to major supermarkets and limited financial resources, some community members would not be able to carry out program recommendations. For example, it would not be feasible for a health program to promote eating five servings of fruits and vegetables per day without clearly stating where and how these foods could be obtained.

Additionally, health programs should recruit and use members of the community to deliver the health information to residents. Community leaders expressed how the community has a certain level of distrust of outsiders and information may be accepted better if it comes from a member of the community. This information would also provide guidance for a health program on family relations in the community. The leaders often mentioned the change and disconnect in East Baltimore family members. A program might try to incorporate family activities in an intervention to possibly help change this problem.

This information could be given to city and state policy makers in order to affect change in the East Baltimore community. Bringing the community leaders views and ideas to the attention of policy makers in this format would be a way of describing many of the area's problems that are usually simply presented as statistics. Giving a voice to these issues may enhance the seriousness of the problems and incite action steps. Policy makers need to be conscious of the impact crime has on community members. Community leaders considered crime and violence to be major concerns among the members of the East Baltimore community. It could even inhibit access to food in cases where residents were afraid to go do food shopping after work when it was dark outside because of the crime. This providing the information collected in this study would also make policy makers aware of how desperately quality food stores are needed in the area. With the interviews and observations that qualitatively describes the effects of poor food stores availability; perhaps steps could be taken to remodel the inventory of current stores so that they are required to stock a certain percentage of healthy food items.

This would diminish the need to bring large food retailers back to the area, which is a much more arduous task. Finally, the information gathered for this project will be distributed to community leaders that we interviewed. Hopefully this research will aid in creating new links between city officials and community leaders who are working to change the current conditions in the community. If these various entities worked together, they would be more effective.

We could not pretend to outline objective elements of East Baltimore's nutritional environment without reflecting on our roles as the instruments of research. We collected data while traversing invisible social and geographic boundaries. We crossed these lines at times as individual people. But we also crossed them collectively – literally and figuratively – as young, highly educated, students intent on studying the nutritional environment of East Baltimore. Our ethnographic approach treated community leaders as a population in themselves, not synonymous with – but perhaps representative in some way of – the populations they serve. But some community leaders seemed to see themselves as outsiders as well, despite their intimate knowledge of the community. In this sense, we as researchers were often outsiders speaking with outsiders.

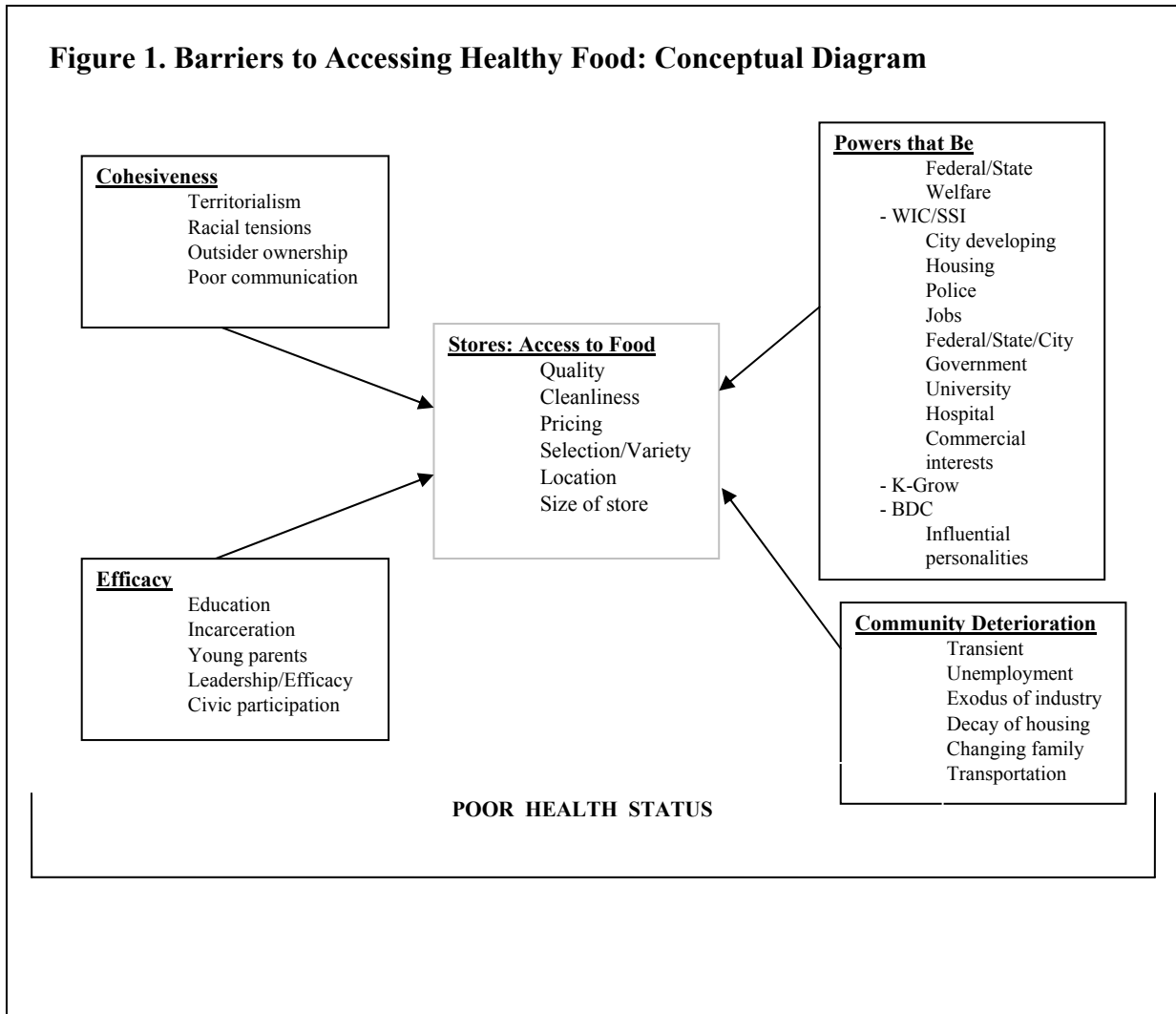
This unique position still did not offer unilateral, automatic *entrée* with the people we spoke with. Our group came at a unique time, in which plans for a Hopkins-affiliated biotechnology park have slated razing of East Baltimore homes and construction of a tremendous industrial complex. The availability of jobs in this new complex has yet to be determined and will either help or harm current

community and city relations. We considered that our project could be seen as just another research agenda that came, used, and left.

A limitation of this research may be the assumption of omniscience on the part of community leaders to speak for the community. The community leaders provide the research team with a perspective of what is happening in East Baltimore. We assume that they are intermediaries who reflect the demands of the community. However, this does not necessarily match the perspective of all the players who directly impact the environment. Although methodological triangulation, including walking tours and direct observation, was intentionally conducted to validate certain findings, we cannot ascertain how closely the statements of community leaders match the experience of consumers, the efforts of politicians, or the barriers of the supermarkets without further research.

Further research would explore the perspectives of politicians and consumers and piece together a more detailed picture of the environment. This may also facilitate the greater understanding of the incentives and disincentives for supermarket chains as well as existing produce distribution channels and the potential for corner stores to tap into them. During the interim of this project, futile attempts were made to contact the politician in charge of supermarket development due to scheduling difficulties. Time was another factor that may constrain the results of the project. Attempts were made to gather as much information as possible during the two-month research window, but those leaders who did not have time, ultimately were excluded.

**Figure 1. Barriers to Accessing Healthy Food: Conceptual Diagram**



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