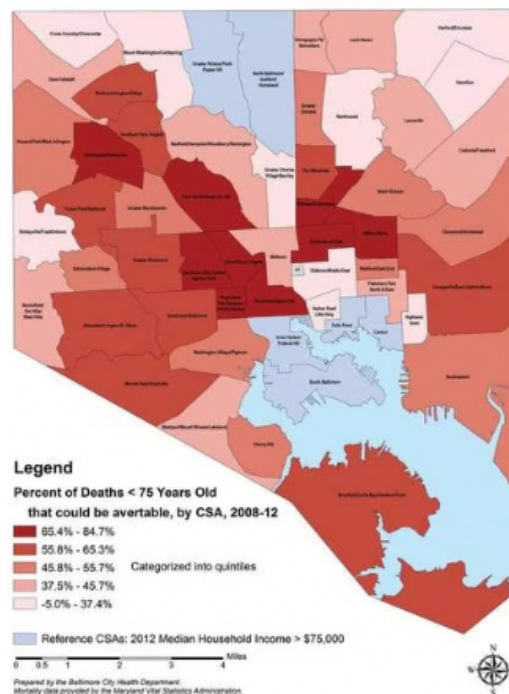


# Walking in Butchers Hill and Middle East

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(Emilie Gilde)

**When I came to Baltimore from Washington, D.C. in 2012**, my "commute" became a seven-block walk from Butchers Hill to Johns Hopkins. This fifteen-minute walk up Chester Street was a daily reminder of the "two Baltimores" D. Watkins wrote about in a 2014 essay published in Aeon: white Baltimore and black Baltimore with shared and blurred borders.

As a new Baltimore transplant working in public health and community engagement, the walk was fascinating. But it soon brought dissonance. The commute started in what the Baltimore City Health Department's 2011 Neighborhood Health Profiles considered the Fells Point neighborhood. When I left my front door each morning, birds chirped in the leafy trees and the bright brick houses with their tended and plant-adorned stoops lined shady streets. Despite the cars and buses plowing down Lombard Street, it was quiet and bucolic in an urban kind of way.

When the health department conducted its assessment, the black population in Fells was 8 percent, the Hispanic population 15 percent, and the white population 76.7 percent. With a median household income over \$62,000, it's safe to say the neighborhood was white and wealthy.

A couple minutes after stepping off my stoop and heading north on Chester, I walked through the imaginary neighborhood boundary into Perkins/Middle East when I crossed East Baltimore Street. At this point, I not only crossed the north-south divide of the city, I crossed the socioeconomic and racial divide. In most cities, segregation is visible, but more expansive where large swaths of affluent, whiter neighborhoods exist far away from the poorer, browner communities. In Baltimore, though, they exist side by side.

The street past Baltimore Street always seemed just as peaceful as the block before, but there was an ever-so-slight shift where the trees, which provide shade and muffle sound, grow smaller and the din from the traffic grows louder. Across that invisible line, the demographics flip to 87 percent black and 7.5 percent white

and the median household income drops to just over \$18,000. That's a difference of an entire middle-class salary.

By the time you hit Fayette, you are waiting at the light on a completely shadeless sidewalk, choking on exhaust fumes. On hot summer days, where there were trees in this part of Middle East, they struggled to survive. Sodden plastic bags, murky soda bottles, and the occasional used condom flanked the curbs. Up past Orleans Street the ratio of abandoned to occupied homes increases and a vacant serves as a dumping ground for garbage piled up in the tiny backyard.

But in my habitual walk through Middle East on my way to work, I also saw a vibrant neighborhood. I saw kids playing football in the street while the watchful adults gathered and laughed on a nearby stoop. I saw entrepreneurial young pre-teens selling sno-cones with an impressive assortment of syrupy flavors to their neighbors. And I saw the joyful woman who wished me "a blessed day, honey!" as she passed.

By this time, I had crossed over to Castle, a potholed yet quiet side street. There, a handful of homes still seemed occupied, staking out ground among the encroaching vacants. I passed by a home with beautifully tended potted plants—a lonely, cared-for home, consumed by a block's worth of buildings with boarded up windows and demolished stoops. The vacant lot density is 2,166 per 10,000 housing units in Middle East and a mere 210 per 10,000 housing units in Fells Point.

In 2013, community organizer Cham Green used a map of vacant properties in Baltimore and overlaid the location of homicides that year, showing that they occurred most frequently near large clusters of abandoned buildings and lots. The health profiles show this connection, too, simply through the number of homicides that occur per neighborhood. While Fells Point saw 8.9 homicides per 10,000 people between 2005-2009, Middle East saw 61 homicides per 10,000.

"We were called the most deadliest neighborhood in Baltimore City," said Glenn Ross in a 2015 interview on ABC2. Ross, a friend and former colleague with whom I worked at Johns Hopkins University SOURCE (Student Outreach Resource Center), is the former President of the McElderry Park Community Association. To attest to the challenge, the neighborhood was awarded a grant from the U.S Department of Justice to help solve the crime problems in the neighborhood.

Despite the designation as a deadly neighborhood, Ross said, "residents and the community stakeholders there, we have been doing the best we could to try to keep things going in McElderry Park." The simple fact that the community was awarded the grant is a testament to the active local community. Priorities and projects—which were decided by a committee of residents—focused on targeting the root causes of the crime they saw regularly through workforce development, youth and mentoring programs, and environmental improvements.

While this grant is focused on decreasing the number of homicides, it's also addressing the community health as a whole. Like Fells Point, heart disease and cancer are the greatest killers here, but because of higher poverty, the chance of dying of these diseases is much higher in Middle East.

These are precisely what public health professionals look at when talking about social determinants of health—overlapping factors that include race, class, zip code, education, etc. It's not just walking over those invisible boundaries on the sidewalk that make you more likely to die earlier (an average of six years earlier if you live in Middle East rather than Fells Point); rather, it's living or having to live within those boundaries.

These boundaries, of course, were not created randomly. I was even more aware of this as I walked to work at the institution that, in some ways, had a hand in this disparity. On these walks, I recalled learning about the redlining, and the racist mortgage lending, and the active displacement of people from vibrant areas by the powerful institution that resides in the neighborhood.

It'd be easy to hurry through the community, ignoring what was around me. It would be even easier just to pay the ridiculous parking costs and glide right through it in my car. But walking through these streets with their statistics visible to the naked eye, I was seeing the disparity in which I participated.

