

Recreation Center Closings in Baltimore: Reconsidering
Spending Priorities, Juvenile Crime, and Equity

Citizens Planning and Housing Association

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Background

At a time when municipal budgets around the country remain under significant pressure, there has been no shortage of efforts to find cost savings wherever possible. In the case of Baltimore, one target in recent years has been the city's recreation centers. In 2011, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake first announced her plan to close obsolete centers and hand over others to private operators. At the time, the 2012 city budget planned to reduce funding for the Department of Parks and Recreation by over \$500,000, and the savings from consolidation was estimated to be between \$300,000 and \$400,000 per year (Reutter, 2011b). However, even before these recent measures, the trend towards fewer recreation centers in the city has been pronounced; during the 1970s and early 1980s, some 130 centers existed in the city (Reutter, 2011a; Scharper, 2011). By the late 1980s, Baltimore had over 100 such centers, a figure that stood at 76 in 1991, and then a little under 60 by 1997 (Matthews, 1997; Wenger, 2013). Currently, the city's Department of Recreation and Parks operates about 40 recreation centers, with another five operating as part of the public school system, and another seven run privately ("BCRP Recreation Centers", 2014). As recently as the middle of 2012, though, before the closing and privatization process began in earnest, the city itself ran 55 centers, nine of which were former Police Athletic League centers acquired in 2009 and 2010 ("Mayor's Recreation Center Task Force Report", 2011; Reutter, 2012b; Wenger, 2013).

This paper will seek to understand the issues surrounding the closure of Baltimore's recreation centers, focusing in particular on the questions of juvenile crime and the city's spending on public safety. It will first briefly review some of the literature on the benefits offered by recreational programs, and then discuss crime and budget trends at the city level over the last several decades. The paper will also examine some of the issues raised by the closing of four recreation center in West Baltimore specifically, and conclude with recommendations for rebalancing the city budget in a way that recognizes the potential of these centers to prevent instances of youth crime in the first place.

Literature Review

Much has been written concerning the link between the availability of recreational or afterschool activities and juvenile crime. For instance, a paper produced by the National Recreation and Park Association notes that when out-of-school youth programs are well structured and provide both physical and psychological safety, they can help to reduce juvenile delinquency (Witt and Caldwell, 2010). The study highlights various research showing that unsupervised youth are more likely to hang out with gang members, and that bored or unengaged youth can be at higher risk for taking part in negative behaviors. One California study that the paper underscores found that every dollar invested in after-school programs saved taxpayers six dollars in crime costs (Witt and Caldwell, 2010; Brown et al., 2002)

An issue brief produced by the Afterschool Alliance emphasizes the risks that youth face when out of school, noting that habits with alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs are generally developed from the ages of 12 to 15. More so, the brief mentions that teenagers who do not participate in afterschool programs are almost three times as likely to skip classes as those who do take part, and that in San Francisco, crime incidents in the area surrounding a recreation center fell (“Afterschool Programs: Keeping Kids - and Communities - Safe”, 2007).

An earlier study associated with the American Youth Policy Forum points out that because the peak hours for juvenile crime are between 2 PM and 8 PM, afterschool activities and other youth development programs can possibly mitigate such crime (Mendel, 2000). The author mentions several studies that suggest an inverse relationship between positive out-of-school activities (such as a recreation program and a mentoring project) and youth crime. For example, one of the studies cited found that the presence of an afterschool recreation program targeting children in a public housing project in Ottawa, Canada led to a 75 percent decrease in youth arrests, while arrests in a nearby housing project not served by the project rose (Mendel, 2000).

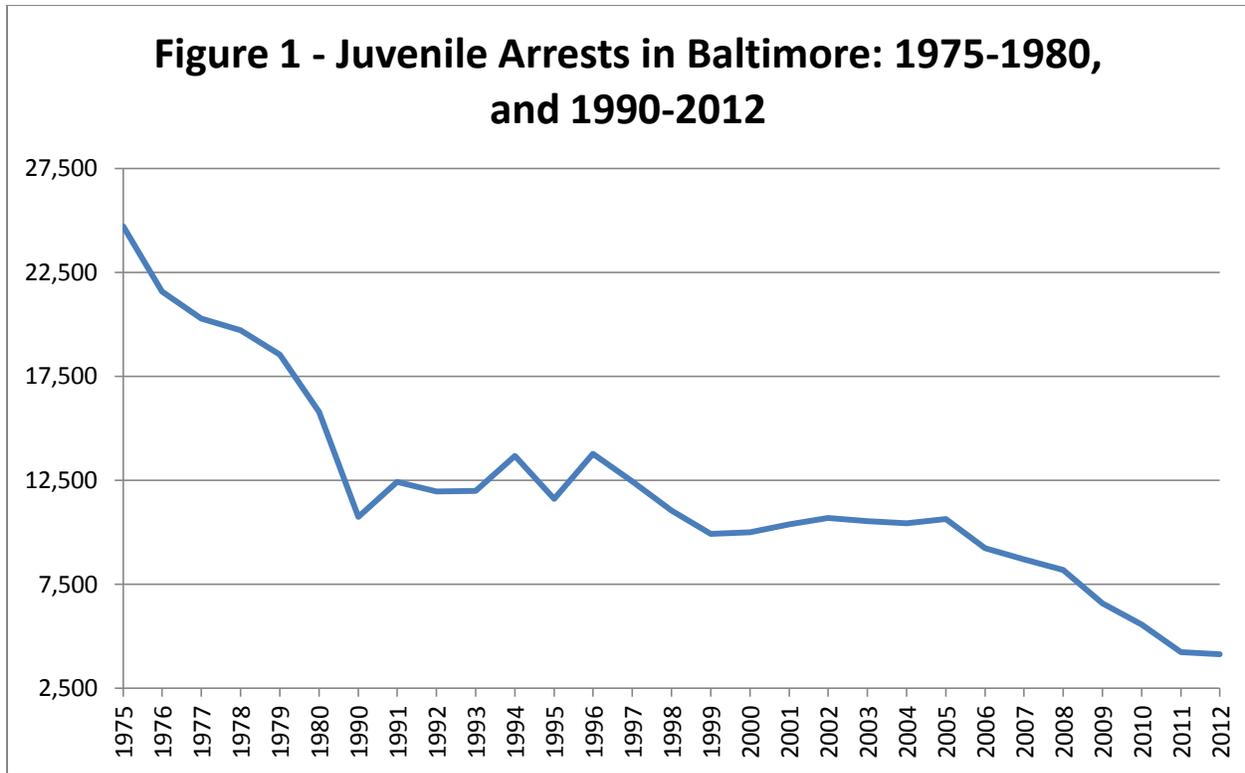
Finally, a 2008 paper illuminates the role that youth sport can play in alleviating juvenile crime. The author asserts that organized sport programs that engender feelings of competence and empowerment are the most likely to reduce youth crime (Carmichael, 2008). He also draws attention to several studies conducted in the 1990s, one of which found that a midnight basketball program in Kansas City, Missouri reduced juvenile crime by one-third to two-thirds in those areas served. In another case, a running program sponsored by the Road Runners Club of America in Alexandria, Virginia led to a decrease in crime by young women (Carmichael, 2008).

Despite these positive findings, however, a separate study showed that organized sport could in fact lead to delinquency, and that among a group of several hundred adolescents in New York, self-identifying as a jock was predictive of delinquent behaviors (Miller et al., 2007).

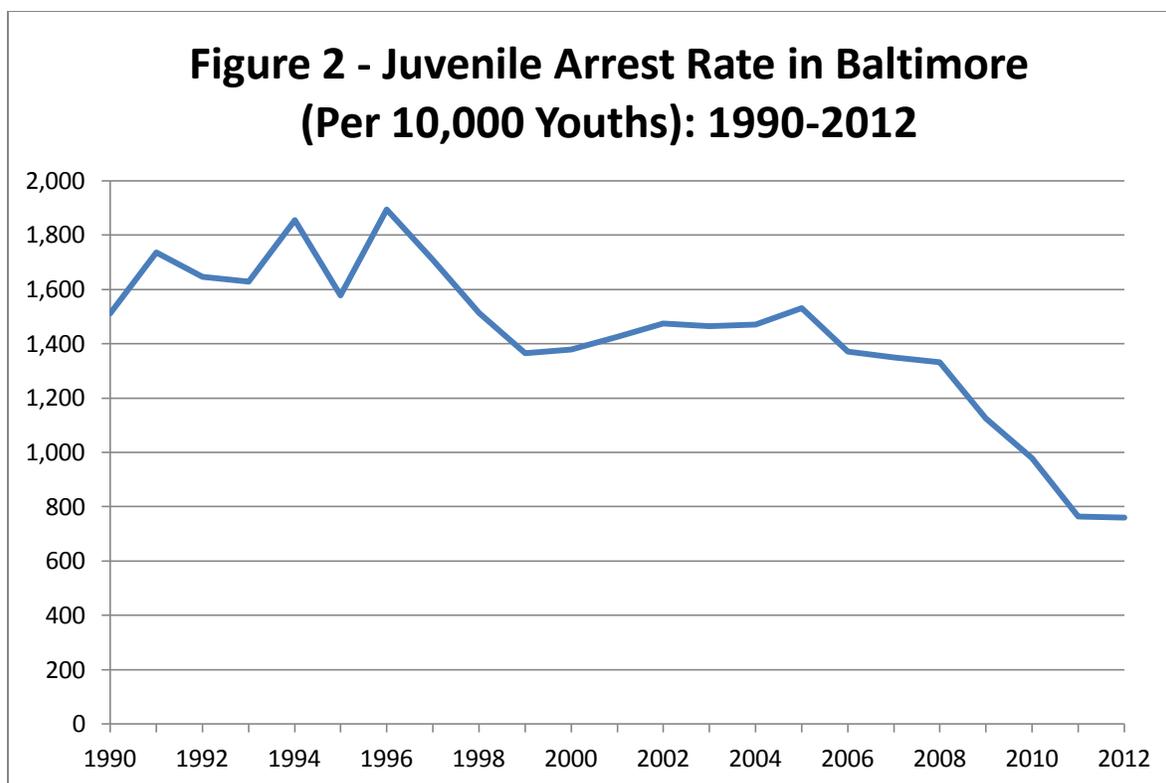
Historical Crime Trends

Since the 1990s, the United States as a whole has enjoyed a period of declining crime, a phenomenon that has manifested itself in a number of major cities across the country. For example, New York City and Washington, D.C. have seen dramatic decreases in violent crime over the last two decades, in part due to the end of the crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980s (Tucker, 2012). While Baltimore has also experienced a general decrease in crime over the same period, such as a drop in homicides from a peak of 353 in 1993 to a record low of 197 in 2011, it has not enjoyed nearly the same reduction that other cities have, and has also witnessed a recent spike in homicides that belies the longer term trend (Fenton et al., 2013; “Homicides jump 10% as overall city crime drops”, 2013).

With respect to juvenile crime, Baltimore has similarly been a beneficiary of national trends. In the United States as a whole, the juvenile arrest rate peaked in 1996, and has since fallen by over 40% (“OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book”, 2012). Baltimore too saw its worst year of juvenile crime in recent memory in 1996, when nearly 13,780 juvenile arrests were made. However, the trends have been largely positive since then; not only did the city see the number of juveniles shot or killed drop from 128 in 2007 to 42 in 2011, but juvenile arrests decreased by nearly 70 percent from 1996 to 2012 (Fenton, 2012; “State of Maryland Uniform Crime Reports”, 1975-2012). Despite what appeared to be a stagnant trend at the end of the 1990s and during the first half of the 2000s, juvenile arrests fell significantly after 2005 (Brash, 2004). Figure 1 on the next page shows the pattern in the total number of youth arrests during the late 1970s, as well as for the period from 1990 to 2012 (data for the 1980s was not readily available online).



While the city's drop in the number of juvenile arrests has been significant, a more accurate measure would be the rate of such arrests, which takes into account the city's declining population, and thus the smaller youth population as well. Figure 2 on the next page shows the juvenile arrest rate per 10,000 youths aged 10 to 17 from 1990 to 2012.

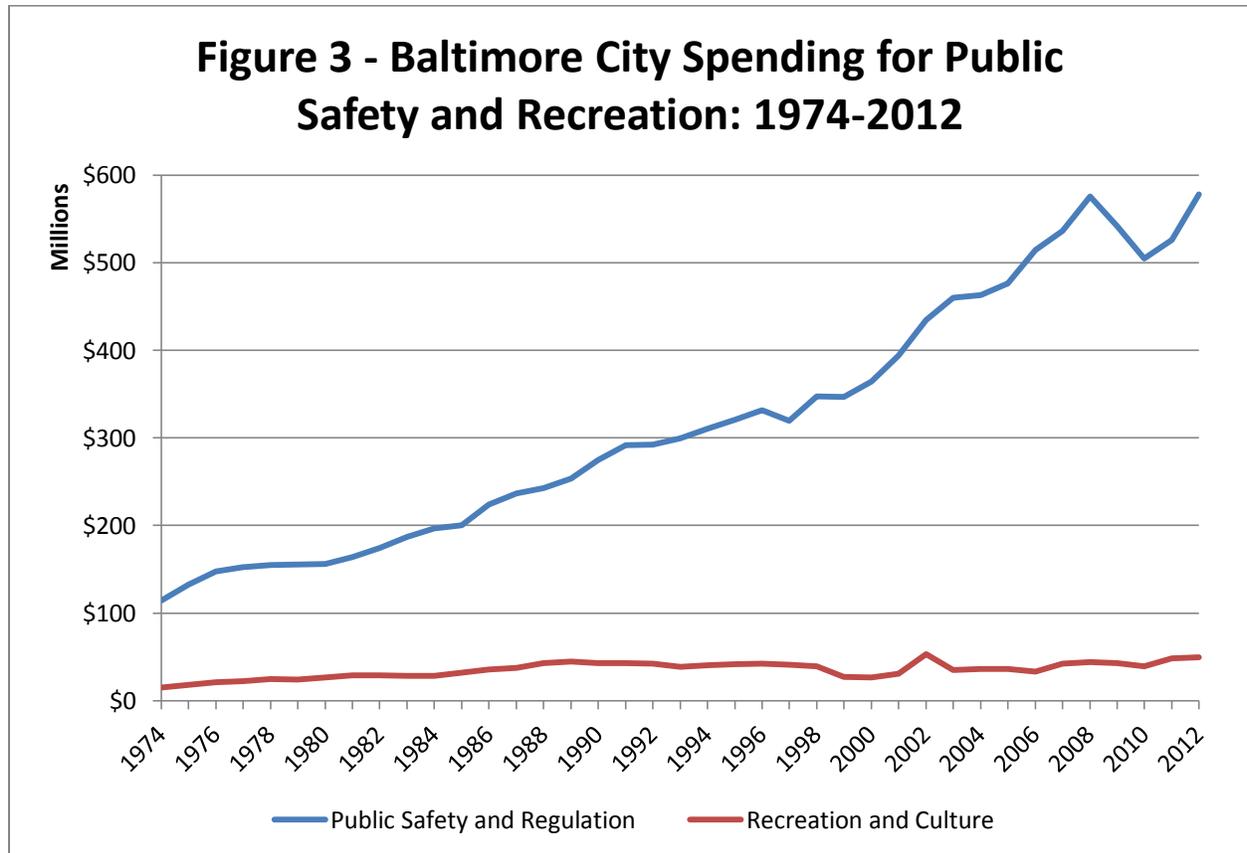


Although a similar picture emerges, it is apparent from this second graph that between 2011 and 2012, there was virtually no change in the juvenile arrest rate. While data is not yet available for 2013, a continuation of the flat trend seen in 2011 and 2012 would be worrisome, and perhaps a sign that the arrest rate could remain at current levels or even reverse its long-term downward trend.

Budget Trends

Over the last several decades, Baltimore has funded public safety and recreation at very different levels. In Fiscal Year 1974, the city spent about \$114 million on public safety and regulation while spending just under \$15 million on recreation and culture. By Fiscal Year 2012, expenses for the former were about \$578 million, while the same figure for the latter was only a bit over \$49 million. At one point, in 2000, spending for recreation and culture was as low as \$26.7 million, compared to public safety spending of over \$364 million in the same year (“Documents & Reports”, 2014). Over the entire 1974-2012 period, the public safety and regulation budget grew by a little over 400%, while the recreation and culture budget only

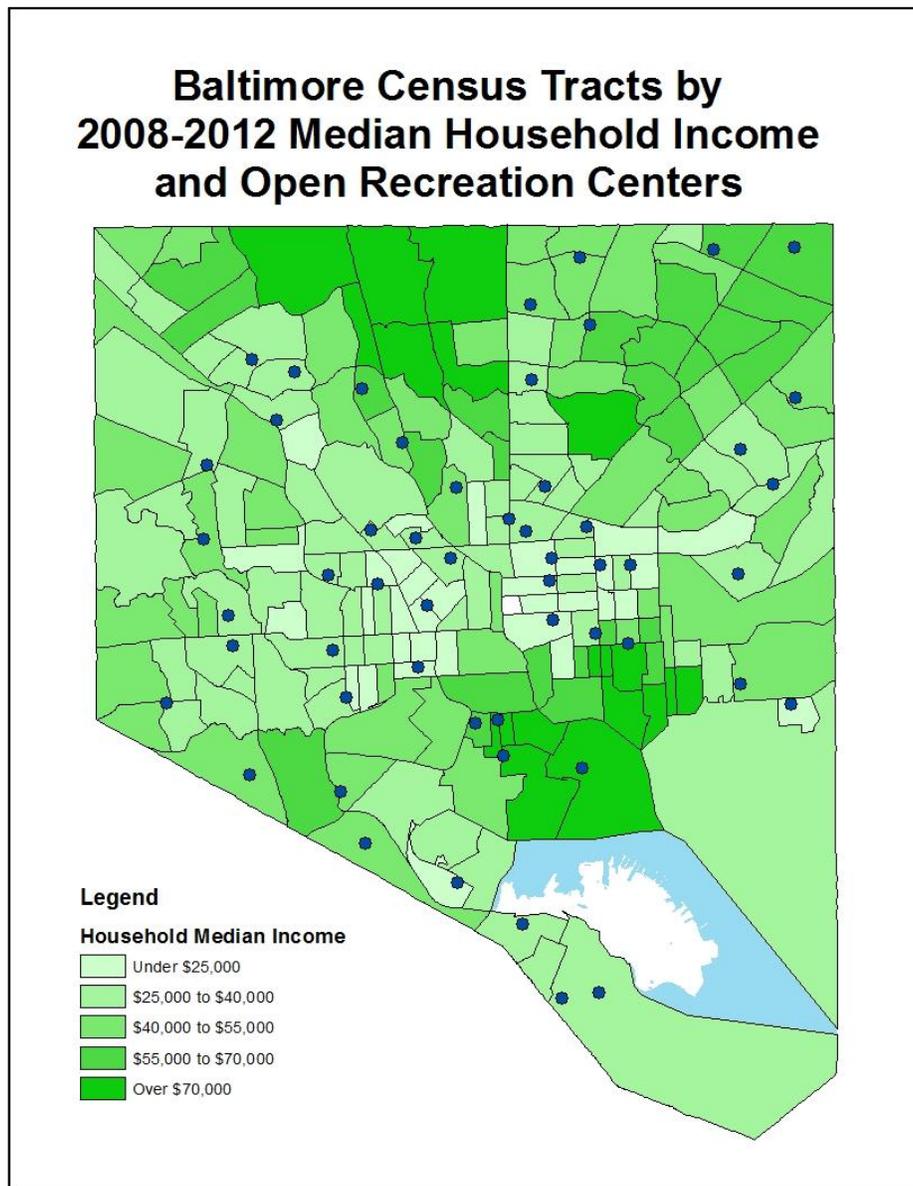
increased by about 230% (“Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports”). These historical levels of spending are shown in Figure 3 below.



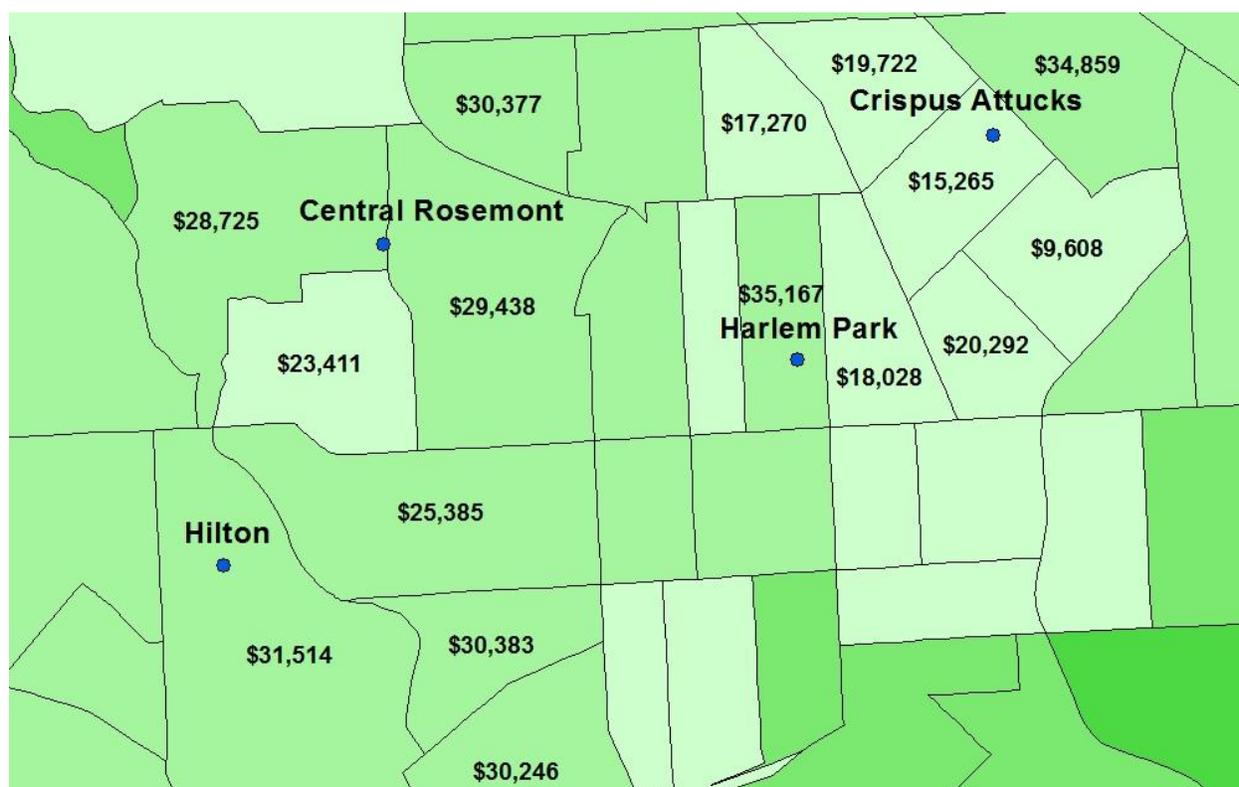
More specifically, in 1991, the city spent around \$8.7 million on its recreation centers compared to \$10.6 million in 2013 (Wenger, 2013). However, the \$8.7 million figure in 1991 would have had to be close to \$15 million in 2013 to keep pace with inflation. Thus, in real terms, the city spent significantly less (about 30%) on its recreation centers in 2013 than it did almost two decades earlier (“CPI Inflation Calculator”, 2014). Just as worrisome, the historical lack of auditing within the Department of Recreation and Parks has arguably diminished accountability; an opinion piece in *Baltimore Brew* last year noted that the department had not allocated enough funds in the recent past for maintenance of the city’s recreation centers, and had instead been overspending on capital development. The result was the closing of run-down centers, a situation that might have been avoided had there been a rebalancing of funding within the department (Delaporte, 2013).

Case Study: West Baltimore

Although the recreation centers that were targeted for closure were deemed to be older or otherwise obsolete facilities, it is nonetheless important to examine what groups of residents have been most affected by these closings. The map below depicts each recreation center in Baltimore that is currently open as a blue dot. The map also shows the level of median household income over the 2008-2012 period at the census tract level (in adjusted 2012 dollars), data that comes from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

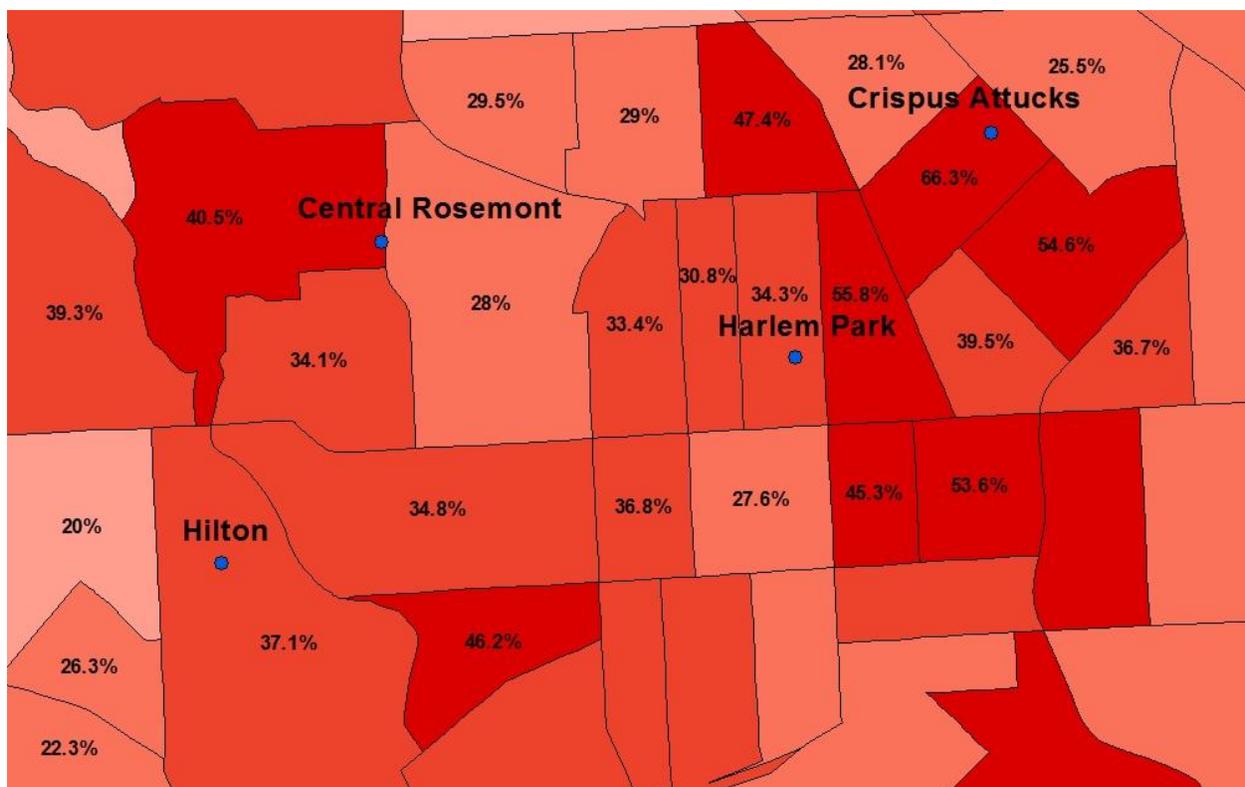


Although the distribution of centers appears fairly equitable, with a number of recreation facilities located in poorer parts of the city, the recent closures have arguably impacted low-income residents to a greater degree. After all, the closing of recreation centers during the last several years has not been geographically uniform, and four of the centers that have closed since 2012 were located in West Baltimore. These facilities, shown in the following map (along with the level of median household income in select census tracts in 2008-2012), were Harlem Park, Central Rosemont, Hilton, and Crispus Attucks.

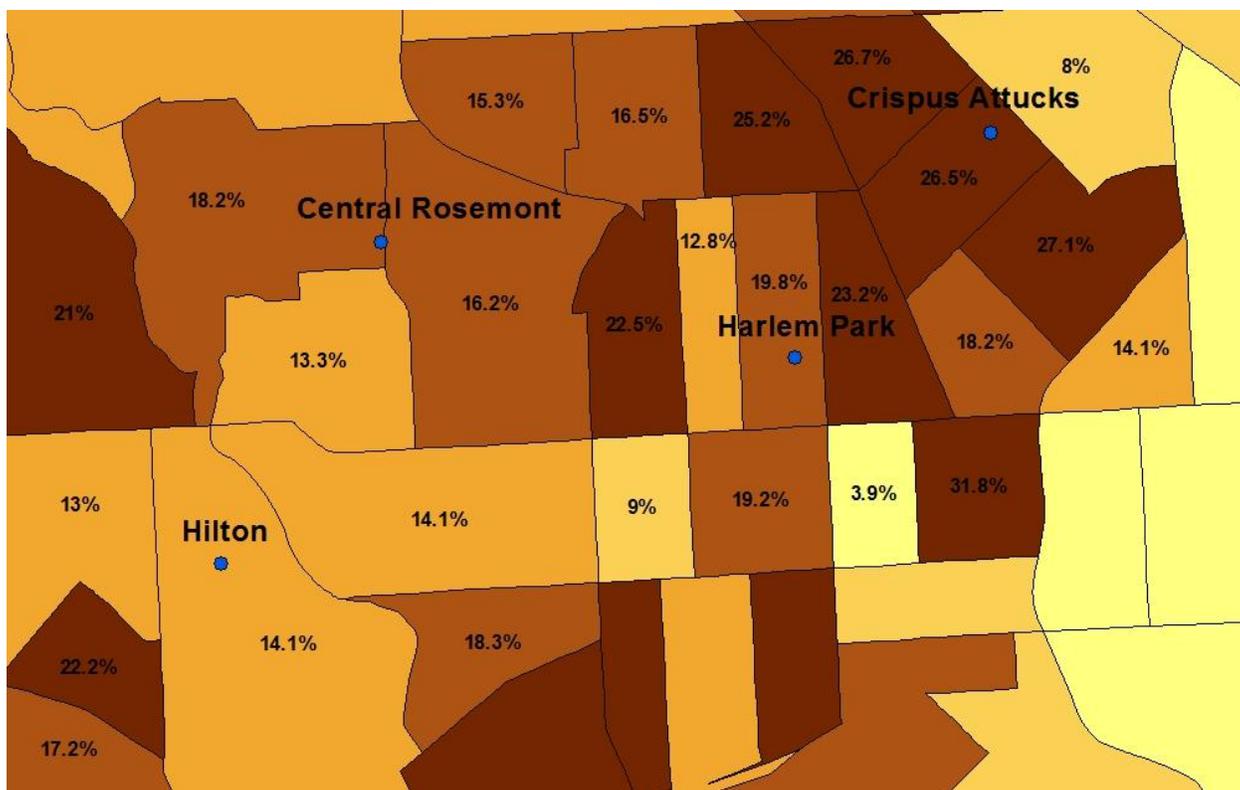


These four centers were largely serving lower-income residents of the city, and the Crispus Attucks center in particular was located in an impoverished census tract in which the median household income was just \$15,265 in 2008-2012. Even the census tract containing the Harlem Park center, which was the wealthiest of the four, had a median household income of \$35,167 in 2008-2012 (“Selected Economic Characteristics for Baltimore City”, 2013). This compares to the national average of nearly \$53,000 during the same period (“Selected Economic Characteristics for the United States”, 2013).

Looking at the poverty rates within these communities offers another view of the economic deprivation that is widespread in this area of West Baltimore. For example, in the census tract that contained the Crispus Attucks center, the poverty rate among all people was over 66% in 2008-2012 (“Selected Economic Characteristics for the United States”, 2013). Although the other three closed recreation centers were located in tracts with somewhat lower poverty rates, it is nonetheless clear from the map below that this part of the city is in significant economic distress. The closure of these four centers has thus affected a number of poor neighborhoods disproportionately.



Studying the demographics of these neighborhoods in West Baltimore is also revealing. With respect to age specifically, the areas surrounding these four centers contain significant youth populations. The map on the next page shows the percentage of those aged 5 to 17 within a given census tract during the 2008-2012 period (“Age and Sex for Baltimore City”, 2013).



The census tracts that are dark brown contain the greatest proportion of youth, while those that are lighter in color contain a lower percentage of 5 to 17-year olds. Though it can be pointed out that the Hilton and Central Rosemont centers had a modest percentage of youths in their vicinity, it is also clear that the Harlem Park and especially the Crispus Attucks centers were surrounded by an usually large proportion of youths. These facts call into question the closing of at least a couple of these centers, as the sheer density of the local youth population would suggest that the centers had many potential users in the immediate area.

Finally, it is revealing to look at patterns of crime around these centers, both before and after their closing. For example, in June and July of 2011, the total number of Part I victim-based crimes in the four neighborhoods in which these centers were located was 135. During the same two months in 2012 (shortly before the closings), the figure was 136, and in 2013 (well after the closings), it was 149 (“Crime”, 2014). Although it would be most telling to look at juvenile arrest data in these neighborhoods, detailed data on youth crime is generally not released to the public, meaning that Part I crime data must serve as a proxy.

Recommendations

Given the evidence that afterschool programming and recreation more generally can potentially reduce juvenile crime, recent efforts to close and consolidate Baltimore's recreation centers would seem misguided. Even though the primary goal of these closures has been to allow for greater funding to improve and modernize other centers, it might be said that an out-of-date recreation center in a lower-income community with few other amenities is better than no center at all. More so, given that the presence of a recreation center in a neighborhood can act as a deterrent to juvenile crime, it would seem that keeping these centers open in poorer communities that suffer from higher crime rates could help stabilize arrests, thus putting less pressure on the city's police budget and reducing the need for patrolling in these areas. In fact, if even a fraction of the city's growing police budget was reallocated towards improving the recreation centers in the neediest neighborhoods, rates of juvenile crime could perhaps be mitigated in the surrounding community. Such an exchange would entail no additional spending within the overall budget, yet the presence of the centers could also help reduce obesity and substance abuse in the immediate area, and even improve the social cohesion of neighborhoods. In other words, to reinvest even a tiny amount of police spending in the city's recreation centers would be not only to tackle juvenile crime in a less heavy-handed (and arguably more effective) manner, but to provide facilities that create a host of other benefits for residents.

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Initial Outline

Literature Review - The Link Between Recreation and Youth Crime:

- [Youth Sport vs. Youth Crime](#)
- [After School Alliance Brief](#)
- [The Rationale for Recreation Services for Youth: An Evidenced Based Approach](#)
- [Less Hype, More Help: Reducing Juvenile Crime, What Works - And What Doesn't](#)
- [Athletic Involvement and Adolescent Delinquency](#)

Recent Crime Trends in Baltimore:

- Baltimore saw [murders drop](#) from 276 in 2004 to a low of 197 in 2011, though [they have increased](#) since that time
- Homicides [increased by 7.3%](#) from 2012 to 2013 (219 to 235)
- Since 2008, juvenile homicides are down 61%, [though they increased](#) from 10 to 15 from 2011 to 2012
- During 1990s the early 2000s, Baltimore [did not experience the dramatic drop in juvenile crime](#) that some other parts of the U.S. witnessed
- From 2007 to 2011, the number of juveniles who were shot or killed [dropped from 128 to 42](#)

Recent Patterns of Crime in Baltimore vs. Crime in Other Cities:

- [Baltimore vs. D.C. Crime](#)
- [Reasons for Declining Crime in D.C.](#)

Trends in Police Budget:

- [\\$205,328,000](#) in 2000 vs. [\\$323,207,000](#) in 2012 (actual expenditures)
- Over a longer time horizon, the police budget has grown from \$182 million to almost \$325 million from 1991 to 2013

Trends in Recreation and Parks Budget:

- [\\$15,781,000](#) in 2000 vs. [\\$26,036,000](#) in 2012 (actual expenditures)
- In 1991, [\\$8.7 million](#) was spent to operate 76 centers; in 2013, [\\$10.6 million](#) was spent to operate about 35 centers

Trends in Number of Open Recreation Centers:

- The mayor's focus has been to have a smaller number of large, high-quality centers rather than to keep older centers open
- As of May 2012, [the city had 55 recreation centers](#)
- In August of 2012, Crispus Attucks, Parkview, Central Rosemont, and Harlem Park were planned to close
- At the present, the city manages 38 recreation centers and eight afterschool centers. Five are part of the public school system, while another seven are managed privately

Case Studies of Specific Recreation Centers:

- ArcGIS map of select centers, surrounding neighborhoods, and economic/demographic info