Does a Rising Tide Lift All Boats? Examining BIDs and BID Partnerships in Downtown Baltimore

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Abstract

This paper examines the economic development of downtown Baltimore in recent decades, specifically through the creation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and BID developments. Although Baltimore has invested millions of dollars into transforming its downtown district, is this economic transformation benefiting everyone in the city equally, particularly through job creation and job accessibility? Examining Baltimore's management district (the Downtown Partnership), its BID (the Downtown Management Authority), and their partner organizations reveals that economic growth and job opportunities need to be more equally distributed throughout Baltimore, especially in terms of matching local residents to employment. This research draws on William Julius Wilson's social isolation theory of poverty and Susanna Schaller's neoliberal interpretation of BIDs and offers recommendations on how to make BIDs a more equitable urban renewal strategy.

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, Baltimore was a declining post-industrial city, much like many others in the U.S. Beginning in the 1970s, Baltimore invested heavily in the Inner Harbor, its downtown business and entertainment district, in order to attract outside investment, create jobs, and boost economic growth in a city with a declining population and increasing poverty. Specifically, the city funded two sports stadiums, a convention center, the National Aquarium, and other attractions meant to encourage tourism and spending downtown. According to some urban policy experts, such as Mark Levine of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the "Baltimore Renaissance" made the city a model in how to reverse post-industrial decline (Levine, 2015).

Today, city managers continue to invest in Baltimore, with redevelopment cropping up in several areas of the city. Baltimore uses a variety of funding and marketing mechanisms to advance its projects, including management districts, like the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore (Downtown Partnership); business improvement districts (BIDs), like the Downtown Partnership's Downtown Management Authority (DMA); tax-increment financing districts (TIFs), such as the Harbor Point redevelopment project; and nonprofit economic and community development corporations. Although Baltimore is clearly enjoying millions of dollars' worth of private investment, is this economic transformation benefiting everyone in the city equally? Does everyone enjoy access to the new jobs that are created or the increasing economic wealth? I wanted to understand to what degree local residents near downtown have been able to benefit from Baltimore's BIDs and BID partnerships. In examining the Downtown Partnership, the DMA, and their partner organizations, I believe that economic growth and job opportunities need to be more equally distributed throughout Baltimore, especially in terms of matching local residents to employment. It is not a matter of determining if there is new economic growth in Baltimore; we know it exists. Rather, it is a question of who has access to these new economic opportunities, especially in the thriving downtown area. The distribution of employment opportunities and positive economic outcomes is still unequal, with poverty remaining concentrated on both sides of downtown Baltimore, even as the city's economy steadily grows.

This paper draws on several theoretical frameworks. The first is William Julius Wilson's social isolation theory of poverty. In contrast to the "culture of poverty" theory[1], Wilson explains that the

[1] The culture of poverty theory uses arguments based on behavior to explain neighborhood poverty. It centers on the argument that intergenerational beliefs and habits are passed down among those in poverty, or that laziness, lack of discipline, or a desire for instant gratification keeps those in poverty from making choices that could pull them out of poverty.

economic restructuring of cities "marginalized inner-city residents, reducing their potential employment and earnings" (Jargowsky, 1997, pp. 189-190). He emphasizes that policy improvements in urban areas should focus on job opportunities and overcoming the social isolation that prevents inner-city residents from accessing them. Although Wilson's focal point is not segregation and integration, his theory, and this paper, build on the recommendations of the Kerner Report, which found that "employment is a key problem" that "not only controls the present for the Negro American, but…is creating the future as well" (The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968/2016, p. 14). At the time of the Kerner Report, the black unemployment rate was more than double that of whites. Although there has been economic growth in many American cities, including Baltimore, inner-city black communities have borne the brunt of American poverty in the second half of the 20th century, especially as racially restrictive housing covenants were removed with the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and middle-class blacks left for the suburbs.

As urban governance has transformed over time, and BIDs have become an increasingly common method of transforming the inner city, critics have taken a closer look at their impact. Susanna Schaller argues that BIDs, as a type of neoliberal policy, inherently:

> privilege the rights of commercial property owners and the interests of those entrepreneurial tenants positioned to pay higher lease rates and produce revenues for the city's tax base. In doing so…they turn the public realm into a "club" that is apt to suppress the interests of neighborhood constituents, whose interests do not readily align with…an "outwardly focused" development strategy (Schaller, 2019, p. 11).

Rather than examine if BIDs and BID partnerships in downtown Baltimore have led to gentrification and displacement, I sought to determine the opposite: to what extent can local residents benefit from this economic activity, whether through employment, increased income, or other means? Lastly, this paper draws on Derek Hyra's forthcoming work examining how repeated urban renewal in the same area, particularly downtown Baltimore, contributes to high poverty concentration in neighborhoods near the inner city, especially when redevelopment is not intended to alleviate such poverty (Hyra, forthcoming).

Motivation for Downtown Redevelopment

As noted above, Baltimore has experienced, and continues to experience, significant population decline. Since maintaining a substantial population is imperative for a strong tax base, this remains a concern for the city. According to experts, "Baltimore lost 30 percent of its population in the second half of the 20th century, including 11.5 percent in the 1990s alone," which was the second highest rate of decline of any major city in the U.S. (Zielenbach, 2008, p. 316). This is especially concerning when one considers that Baltimore had a population of 949,708 in 1950, ranking it the 6th largest U.S. city (Rich & Tsitsos, 2016). Even today, there are concerns as preliminary Census estimates suggest that Baltimore's population may fall below 600,000 people for the first time since 1918 (Baltimore Sun Editorial Board, 2020).

Various other factors have motivated redevelopment of the downtown. Violent crime has always been a major deterrent to living in the city, with perceptions of crime worsening after the 1968 race riots (Nix & Weiner, 2011). Although there has been a decrease in crime in the past two decades, Baltimore still has one of the highest violent crime rates in the country (Zielenbach, 2008). In addition to population decline, Baltimore suffers from a high rate of unemployment and high inequality that concentrates that unemployment within certain parts of the city, such as West and East Baltimore. In 2005, only 56 percent of able-bodied, working-age Baltimore residents were in the labor force, and the city had a 22.6 percent poverty rate (Zielenbach, 2008). As recently as 2019, Urban Institute stated that Baltimore's poverty rate was 23.1 percent, double the national average, with high poverty concentrated in neighborhoods west and east of downtown (see Appendix A) (Urban Institute, 2019).

Around the same time of the Inner Harbor redevelopment, the Downtown Partnership was born. Downtown Partnership, a nonprofit corporation, is a self-described management district that prides itself on being the city's connection to all things business and culture (Visit Baltimore, 2020). Its main activity is overseeing the DMA, the downtown BID that covers 106 blocks of the central business district.

Businesses in the DMA are taxed an annual surcharge of 22.39 cents for every $100 of assessed property value, and these funds also support the Downtown Baltimore Guides, Clean Street Ambassadors, and Outreach Teams (Downtown Partnership [DP], 2020b). These teams are standard features of BIDs and are composed of people who clean, beautify, and patrol the streets, as well as serve as tour guides. Downtown Partnership puts on the biannual Baltimore Restaurant Week, provides public concerts, funds the Charm City Circulator (a free bus that goes around downtown), and conducts holiday monument lightings. It also plays a significant role along with the city in capital investment projects, such as redesigning downtown streets and plazas, and fostering economic development, such as by creating the Bromo Arts District. Lastly, it provides the research and tracking needed for business initiatives and real estate planning, developing an inventory database and a pipeline of projects in the works. It's worth noting that, according to reporting documents on its website, Downtown Partnership projects are not limited to downtown, despite its name (DP, 2020c).

These are great improvements for any city facing population and economic decline. And as young millennials continue to choose to live in the city and enjoy these amenities, it sends a message to Downtown Partnership and its partners that people are happy with the improvements. But it is clear that these improvements come at a cost, the first of which is a lack of transparency about what entities are involved in these public-private partnerships and the exact role of each. In my research, I found that Downtown Partnership works with Visit Baltimore, the main marketing and tourism organization for the city; the Baltimore Development Corporation (BDC), the nonprofit economic entity for the city; the Waterfront Partnership, the management district for development along the waterfront; and its BID, the Waterfront Management Authority. The roles of these entities are overlapping and unclear, and details about funding from private investors are not always disclosed in their information online. Moreover, Downtown Partnership and the DMA boards share many of the same members, creating potential conflicts of interest. Legal experts note that in the past, Downtown Partnership has asked for exemption from the Maryland Open Meetings Act, claiming it was a private entity, "even though 85% of [its] budget came from a municipal special tax district" (Tondro, 2010, p. 56). Similarly, the BDC "has strenuously resisted all public inquiry and oversight" under the guise that privacy is needed to successfully negotiate with businesses (Tondro, 2010, p. 1). Also troubling is the fact that the narrative about these partnerships and projects seems to come solely from the entities themselves in the annual reports and development overviews they publish online; there does not seem to be much written by the city government about these projects. It is easy to think that everyone is happy with Downtown Partnership and the other organizations if there is only one voice in the dialogue.

Recent Downtown Partnership Projects & Results

One of Downtown Partnership's proudest accomplishments for 2018 was securing a $4 million, multi-year investment to make improvements to certain streets and plazas downtown, "after receiving zero dollars for capital improvements in the city budget three years ago, and only $200,000 this past year" (DP, 2020a). Clearly, they are strong lobbyists and have particular financial interests as their priority. This money was used in the central business district to coordinate trash pickups to limit illegal dumping, landscape E. Pratt Street, remove more than 50 old signs, reinstall sculptures along the expressway, and install a new sign, lighting, and lawn area in McKeldin Plaza. Another significant project will be the redevelopment of the historic Lexington Market in West Baltimore, although groundbreaking for it did not begin until February 2020 (Young, 2020). While not the focus of my research, it is important to point out that housing projects are a main component of Downtown Partnership's redevelopment, with approximately 5,800 units constructed between 2017 and the next couple of years (DP, 2020c). Whether these housing units qualify as affordable housing is another question, however. In any case, Downtown Partnership uses housing as a strategy to draw people to stay downtown, and it seems to be working: in 2019, Downtown Partnership reported that downtown "has Baltimore's most dense and fastest-growing residential neighborhoods" (DP, 2020c, p. 5). This ranked Baltimore as the eleventh most populous downtown in the country, with 42,913 people living downtown (DP, 2020c). This focus on housing and residency demonstrates the continued concern municipal stakeholders have in maintaining a strong residential base.

In terms of jobs, downtown Baltimore employed 119,690 people in 2018, ranking it 14th across the country in employment (DP, 2020c). However, although these jobs are within the one-mile radius Downtown Partnership defines as downtown, not all are necessarily attributable to the organization and its work. While there is an obvious correlation between the projects they are working on and how much job creation there is in the city, one cannot get the exact number of jobs created by them from the report. The report also states the *average* household income of downtown as $101,057 (ranking 14th in the country), different from the usual statistic of *median* household income, which probably skews the figure to be greater than it would be otherwise. Lastly, it states that 8,587 households downtown earn over $75,000, ranking it 13th in the country (DP, 2020c). Together, these paint a picture of a strong Baltimore economy.

But although downtown Baltimore seems to be doing well, what about the areas around it? Is downtown a good proxy for the economic reality of other areas in Baltimore, including those close to the central city? Research from the early 2000s showed that even when there were increases in property values and decreases in violent crime rates in Central West Baltimore, "much of the new development…[had] not yet had significant, positive spillover effects on the surrounding communities" (Zielenbach, 2008, 319). A 2015 *Baltimore Sun* article after the riots resulting from Freddie Gray's death stated that poverty in Baltimore was still three times as high as the rate in the surrounding suburbs (Rodricks, 2015). And if the aforementioned 2019 research from the Urban Institute shows that poverty is still concentrated in neighborhoods west and east of downtown, we need to examine what mechanisms have kept change from happening and what might make a difference.

Effects of Redevelopment on Local Residents

I consider what I have discussed so far to be the immediate results, or, in policy language, outcomes, of the Downtown Partnership's projects. Unfortunately, in my research, I was not able to find much information about the actual impact of the projects on local residents. The Baltimore city government also did not have much to say about the Downtown Partnership aside from a few press releases on its website. More research needs to be done specifically about the effect of projects and initiatives by the Downtown Partnership, the DMA, and their partners on local residents. The Downtown Partnership and the city need to release more primary data that includes employment numbers, employee demographic characteristics, salaries, and related metrics. Qualitative interviews would also fill an important gap. However, we can make some educated guesses even without this information to reach some conclusions.

There are some programs and laws Baltimore has in place in order to encourage businesses to employ local vendors and contractors in their work (Mayor's Office of Economic Development, 2020). Even so, however, it is not always possible to employ inner-city residents for high-skilled jobs. While the following examples are not Downtown Partnership projects, I believe they can be used in the absence of other research to illuminate the obstacles local residents have to employment. When Johns Hopkins recently opened a biotechnology center in East Baltimore, the hope was that local residents could benefit from the 10,000 new jobs. It soon became clear, however, that residents lacked the skills needed, even for entry-level positions. Specifically for West Baltimore residents, the city's lack of public transportation connecting the east and west sides exacerbated the problem (Zielenbach, 2008). Although the Hopkins biotechnology center is not technically in the central business district, this example highlights the skills mismatch that is so often a hindrance to better employment for inner-city residents and demonstrates how job creation alone is not enough to alleviate unemployment and poverty.

Unlike the Hopkins biotechnology center, the recently built University of Maryland BioPark is located in West Baltimore, near downtown. The BioPark was meant as a way to bring together the medical research being done at the downtown University of Maryland hospital system with biotechnology companies in the area. It was estimated to create approximately 3,000 jobs, but by January 2007, when it had 200 full-time employees, only 38 individuals lived in Baltimore (19 percent), and only five lived in

Central West Baltimore (2.5 percent) (Zielenbach, 2008). In fact, Levine (2015) noted that although the number of jobs in downtown Baltimore has doubled since the 1970s, the majority have gone to suburban commuters. This trend seems to have stayed the same over time because the city's employment woes are rooted in a lack of employable skills and proper matching of jobs, which requires specific interventions.

In late 2006, the *Baltimore Sun* investigated why the BioPark hadn't kept its promise about local hiring. Jane Shaab, the University's BioPark coordinator, explained that the first priority is to fill high-skilled positions in order to "encourage product development and satisfy their investors" (Zielenbach, 2008, p. 331). After that, they can begin filling low-skilled positions. This example demonstrates how private investments inherently have different priorities than employing local residents—naturally, they need to put profit and innovation above employment quotas. Shaab also noted that she was working with MOED and the biotechnology companies to employ residents, but they preferred individuals who had been through the Biotechnical Institute of Maryland job training program, and at the time the article was written, only three individuals had shown interest in it (Zielenbach, 2008).

That brings us to today. We can sketch out a rough picture of what employment possibilities exist for locals through the Downtown Partnership itself. Inner-city residents who can only take low-skilled jobs may be able to find employment through the DMA as Clean Street Ambassadors, Downtown Baltimore Guides, or on the Outreach Team that works with the homeless population. What this really amounts to is work in landscaping, street cleaning, light tourism, and security. Although these new jobs are great additions to the area, in Baltimore, low-skilled workers are disproportionately people of color and will take a disproportionate number of those jobs. Because Baltimore continues to be a highly racially segregated city, local residents suffer the same social isolation that Wilson argued keeps them from good employment. These employment opportunities are limited and do not offer a pathway to better skilled or better paying jobs.

In fact, these public-private partnerships might even make matters worse. In looking at the effects of neoliberal urban renewal policies in Chester, Pennsylvania, Christopher Mele (2011) writes, "state support for enclave-oriented private redevelopment…reinforces and normalizes long-standing patterns of class exclusion and racial segregation. Consequently, deep-rooted urban social and economic problems that pertain to large segments of the city are no longer addressed, nor are there public efforts to attempt to solve them (p. 447)." We can see the same thing happening in downtown Baltimore—private developers are not interested in tackling the complex problems of historic discrimination and exclusion. But by placing the responsibility for economic growth into the hands of private actors who are unconcerned with equity, city governments are able to ignore the problem, which will only get worse as time continues.

The hospitality industry downtown is one last sector worth examining. The Downtown Partnership released a "Food and Beverage Snapshot" in 2018, stating that "nearly half (45%) of all Food and Beverage workers in Baltimore city work at a Downtown establishment where, since 2011, 1,757 industry jobs have been created…of the 182,084 Downtown employees, 7.5% work in the Food and Beverage Industry." Thus, the downtown area is an extremely important hub of the food and beverage industry, and on the other hand, a portion of employees downtown find work in the hospitality field. Again, it's not clear exactly how many restaurant jobs were created directly from the Downtown Partnership and the DMA, but their support of the industry and involvement in it shows that they are playing a role in fostering a vibrant food and drink culture downtown. Recently, the outgoing Downtown Partnership Board Chair, Dr. Jay Perman, raised the starting hourly salary from minimum wage (about $10/hr.) to $15/hr., which is not a small increase (DP, 2020a, p. 3). It is likely that this raise affected many in the hospitality industry. But it is still difficult to have a good standard of living from relatively low-paying hourly jobs, let alone build wealth or lift one's family out of intergenerational poverty. As I write this, the coronavirus pandemic has taken its toll on hourly workers, and we can no longer ignore the financial precarity of their situation, especially in times of economic recession. Without targeted efforts that introduce local residents in concentrated poverty to new job opportunities or expand their skill set, the Downtown Partnership is not doing enough to combat the inequality of economic opportunity in Baltimore. In fact, it may even be deepening existing inequalities by keeping traditionally disadvantaged groups from accessing economic growth opportunities for subsequent generations.

Recommendations

It is necessary to make recommendations to ensure that BIDs in Baltimore and elsewhere result in jobs and economic opportunity for all city residents, especially the most disadvantaged. Clearly, some jobs exist, but the problem is matching residents to them. In other cases, residents do not have the skills to secure these jobs. So, as existing research shows, an employment approach that focuses both on access to jobs and increased skills and training is the critical first step to making any real difference in employment and poverty (Simms, 2015). I suggest that an employment initiative be created within the Downtown Partnership, much like other for-profit companies have a corporate social responsibility department. They should intentionally market job openings to local residents, especially the many low-skilled jobs the partnership creates. This is not ideal for the long-term, since the goal of economic development is to eventually lift people out of poverty. However, it can immediately reduce unemployment and allow previously unemployed individuals to enter into the labor force again, making them more attractive for future jobs.

Job matching and training programs, whether through the city government or local nonprofits, should be created or expanded to take advantage of these opportunities. While Downtown Partnership interacts with Baltimore's "squeegee kids" through their "monitors," they need to change course from surveillance to taking an active role in giving those unemployed youth work. In 2019, the Downtown Partnership sent a letter to Councilman Robert Stokes drafting a plan for an "experimental day laborer program," modeled after another one in New Mexico (Reed, 2019). However, it's unclear if any progress has been made on this initiative. The Downtown Partnership needs to remain serious about organizing and funding this program so that their initiatives can at the very least provide hope and employment for a group that is ready to receive it. Lastly, if targeted interventions are needed for other adult job matching programs, such as transportation grants, the city should be prepared to provide it or request federal funds for that purpose (Zielenbach, 2008).

Another way to increase access to these jobs, given the increased criminalization and policing in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, is for employers like the Downtown Partnership to be open to accepting applicants with criminal records for employment. The National Employment Law Project has put together a guide to help companies navigate background checks for employment and support applicants' civil rights with respect to hiring (Natividad Rodriguez & Emsellem, 2011). Many BIDs are criticized for the increased policing they bring as part of their marketing strategies, and they could make strides in this area by allowing individuals with records back into the workforce (Meehan, 2019). To increase access in another sense, Downtown Partnership needs to be willing to open up its project pipeline and engage in regular conversations with community organizations about upcoming projects. By increasing communication about its initiatives, it can increase the likelihood that locals will hear about jobs and can ensure a steady flow of job openings to the community. The city government has a role in all this: it should be able to enforce that a certain percentage of BID or BID partnership jobs go to local Baltimore residents, the way that it does with its city contracts. If BIDs act as quasi-government entities, they should be held to the same government standards, at least partially.

Conclusion

These sorts of job creation and employment outcomes may be expected if we believe that public-private partnerships like the Downtown Partnership are not doing anything wrong by prioritizing profit. BIDs are, after all, capitalistic entities. But because BIDs are still part of the public governance structure, they ought to be subject to public critique. By levying taxes, they are exercising a fundamental power of American government (Hyra, personal communication, March 5, 2020). Regardless, BIDs as an urban renewal strategy have only grown more common in the last few decades, both in the United States and internationally, and will probably not disappear anytime soon. As Richard Briffault (1999) writes, "[BIDs] provide [city governments] a means of funding downtown services without raising general taxes…" and there is a "widespread belief that, unlike municipal government, 'BIDs really work'" (p. 370). These beliefs will accelerate the use of BIDs and BID partnerships in coming years as urban cities continue to battle entrenched problems like population decline and disinvestment.

Additionally, the increasing use of BIDs as government-like entities is problematic because they fundamentally do not have the social welfare of the public in mind. Lorlene Hoyt and Devika Gopal-Agge (2007) argue that the BID model was born in the 1960s when Toronto business owners wanted to find a solution to the free-rider problem, where other "owners in the area…benefited from the monetary and other contributions that were made by members of the voluntary business association, but…did not contribute to the association themselves" (p. 347). Although Susanna Schaller pushes back against this origin story, it's clear from both the Canadian and American accounts that BIDs prefer that constituents pitch in rather than simply enjoy free riding on social welfare benefits (Schaller, 2019). BIDs are based on the concept of economic competition: they are "located in the more affluent [city] neighborhoods," and they "capture tax dollars that will not be redistributed for welfare purposes outside the district and often with the explicit purpose of making their districts competitive with outlying regional commercial corridors (Dilworth, 2010, pp. 6-7)." Thus, the primary goal of BIDs remains promoting shopping, private investment, and economic competition, not taking care of a city's most economically disadvantaged population.

BIDs are here to stay. BIDs work best in cities that still have something to offer in a post-industrial world, whether that is historical neighborhoods or the ability to pivot to what the Brookings Institution calls "innovation districts," both of which Charm City has and has done (Katz & Wagner, 2014). But it seems that a rising tide does not lift all boats. Cities that want to replicate Baltimore's BID model should ensure greater equity in economic opportunity from the start; only then can they begin to imagine equity of outcomes, as well. BIDs will only wane in power if there is greater federal government support for cities—so that they can decrease their reliance on entrepreneurial initiatives— or if there is a cultural shift towards stewardship of public spaces that moves cities away from the increasing privatization of public services and spaces. This does not seem likely, so careful regulation of BIDs is needed. Otherwise, cities will continue to decline into places where gleaming shopping districts and the most concentrated poverty exist heartbreakingly side by side.

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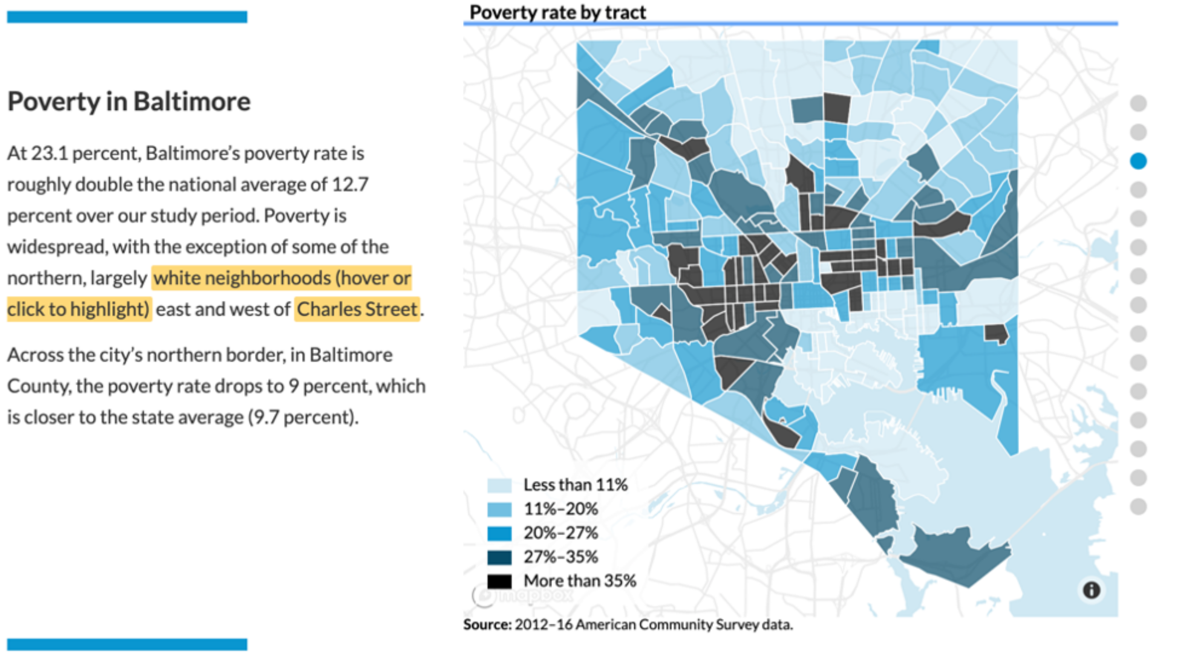
Appendix A



Source: Urban Institute. (2019, February 5). *"The Black Butterfly": Racial segregation and investment patterns in Baltimore.* https://apps.urban.org/features/baltimore-investment-flows/