



Promise Heights' Response to the Challenges Created by COVID-19

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April 2021

Since 2012, the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood initiative has offered a rich set of services to the Upton and Druid Heights neighborhoods on Baltimore's west side as part of the US Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods initiative. Promise Heights focuses on improving the developmental, educational, health, and career outcomes of the families who live in the two neighborhoods and whose children attend five schools in the communities. This work includes helping meet the community's health, social services, and educational needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this work more challenging—and the need more pressing. In this brief, we describe the innovative ways the university-led community initiative responded to the challenges created by the pandemic.

The Promise Heights initiative's work in 2020 offers insights into how human service providers that have relied on face-to-face engagement can adapt school- and neighborhood-based outreach and services to virtual platforms during the pandemic's public health and economic crises. When lockdowns began and Baltimore schools closed in mid-March 2020, Promise Heights, like many organizations, had to figure out how to continue delivering services and respond to the emergency. Promise Heights adapted quickly, shifting its priorities to providing residents with emergency resources such as food, diapers, cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE), rental assistance, computers, and internet hotspots. It also shifted all regular programming, in-school work, partner programming, collection of student data, and community outreach and events to online platforms while offering a limited number of socially distanced, in-person activities.

The Urban Institute is assessing the longer-term success of Promise Heights. Details on the ongoing process study are provided in box 1.

BOX 1

About the Urban Institute's Process Study of Promise Heights

In 2018, the Urban Institute began a process study of the Promise Heights initiative, documenting the five-year implementation of its Promise Neighborhoods grant and supporting the Promise Heights team's work to adjust and refine programming.

Through interviews, focus groups, program observations, social media archiving, and interactive dialogues and data-sharing sessions, Urban collects qualitative data about Promise Heights, including insights from Promise Heights staff members, program participants, AmeriCorps (PromiseCorps) members, school leadership, and nonprofit partner organizations.

In March 2020, the process study expanded to include documenting Promise Heights' response to the impacts of COVID-19 on the community it serves.

Promise Heights Overview

In 2009, the University of Maryland School of Social Work established the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood initiative in Upton and Druid Heights. After receiving a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant from the US Department of Education in 2012, the School of Social Work used additional grants for implementation before receiving a federal implementation grant in 2018.

Upton and Druid Heights are home to approximately 10,000 people, a third of whom are children. The community is 91 percent Black/African American, 43 percent of households have an income of less than \$15,000, and 65 percent of children live in poverty.¹ The Promise Heights footprint is just south of North Avenue and borders the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood where Freddie Gray was arrested in 2015 (his death after being injured in police custody sparked a community uprising). Neighborhoods in this footprint were redlined by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation,² and they continued to see racially restrictive covenants on homes until the Fair Housing Act passed in 1968. The effects of historical redlining and restrictive covenants are still felt today. West Baltimore has higher poverty rates³ and less access to the internet than other areas of the city, making it all the more vulnerable to the challenges created by COVID-19.

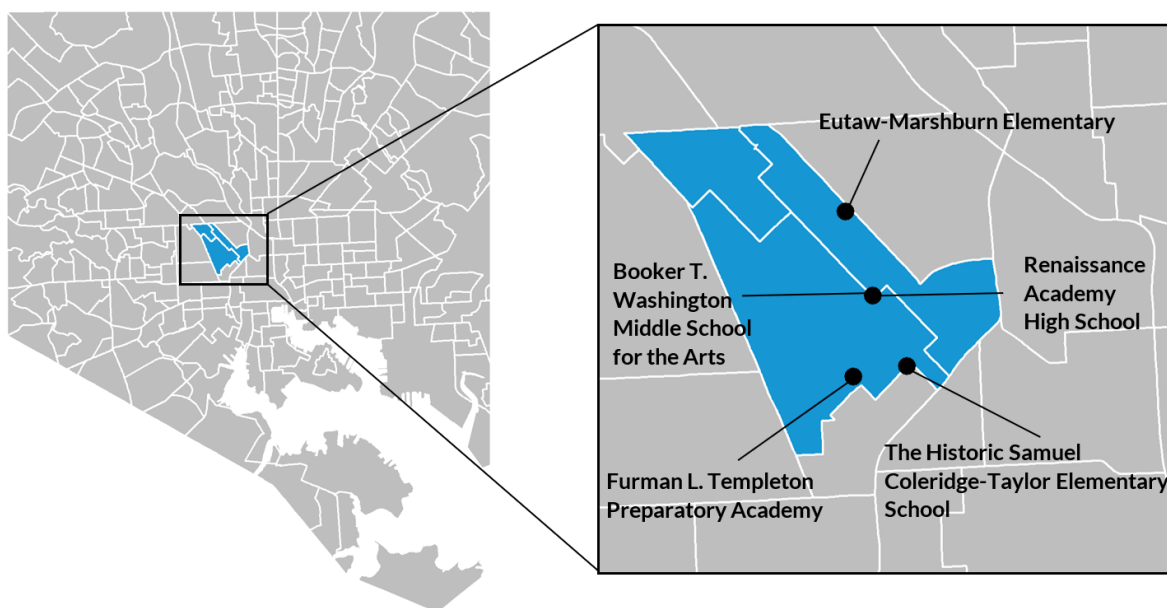
Promise Heights works in five community schools in the Baltimore City public school system (figure 1): Eutaw-Marshburn Elementary School (prekindergarten to 5th grade); Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy, a public, year-round charter school (prekindergarten to 5th grade); the Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School (prekindergarten to 5th grade); Booker T. Washington Middle School for the Arts (6th to 8th grade); and Renaissance Academy High School (9th to 12th

grade). Among its school-based programming is the placement of early childhood mental health consultants (licensed social workers) in elementary schools to work with prekindergarten and kindergarten students and families and Renaissance Academy's Next Generation Scholars Program, in which Promise Heights staff members serve as college and career coordinators for students.

FIGURE 1

The Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood Footprint

Upton and Druid Heights neighborhoods, Baltimore



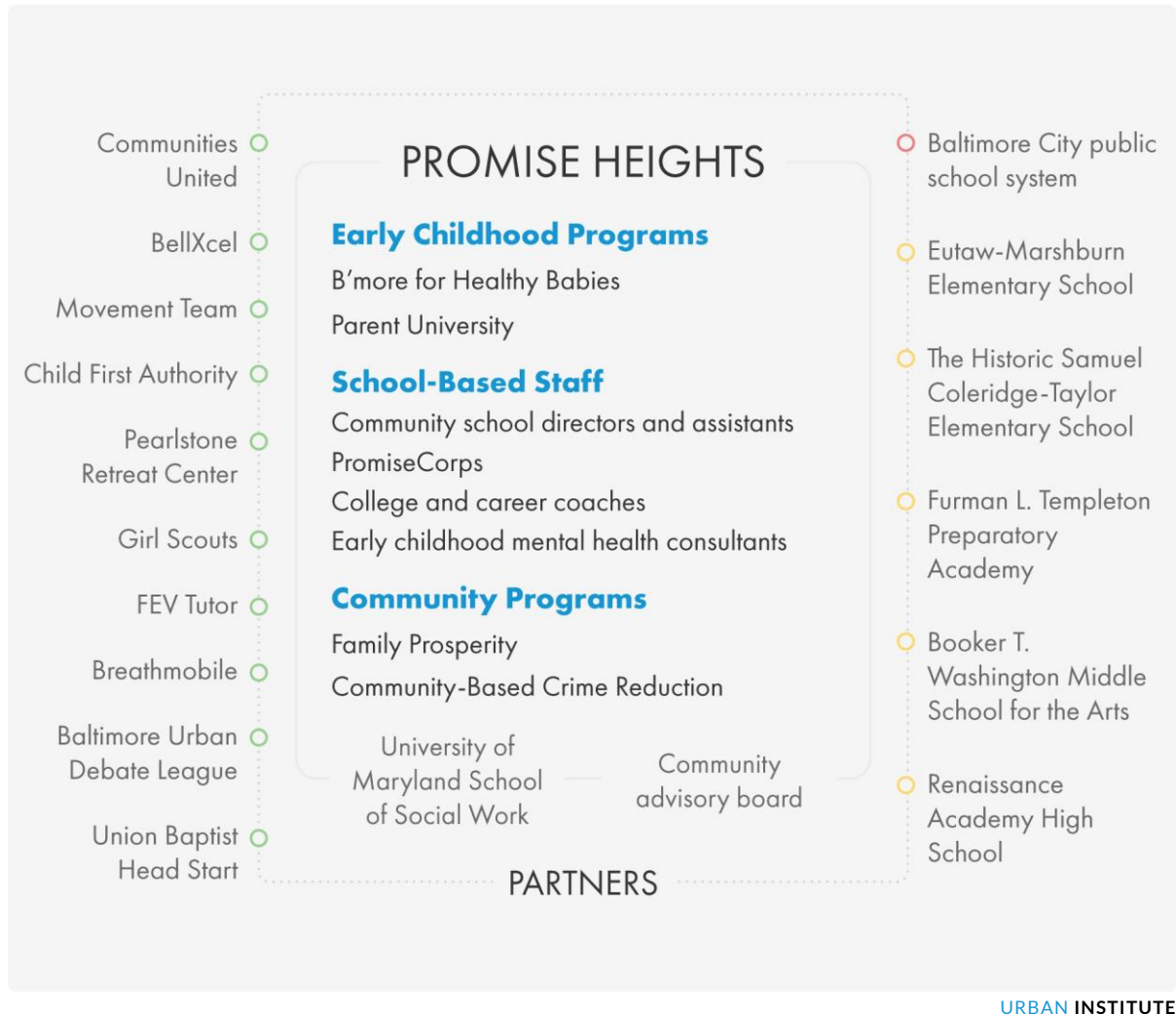
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Source: Maryland.gov.

Promise Heights also administers early-childhood programming, including B'more for Healthy Babies, which provides prenatal and postnatal supportive services; Parent University, which is based on the Chicago Parent Program and focuses on parents and their children from birth to age 5; and a partnership with the Judith P. Hoyer Center Early Learning Hub ("Judy Center") at Eutaw-Marshburn to prepare children from birth through kindergarten for school. Figure 2 shows the school-based partners that work together on the Promise Heights initiative.

FIGURE 2

Promise Heights School-Based Supports and Partners during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Sources: Interviews and documents from the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood initiative.

Finally, Promise Heights supports community-based interventions through grants and partnerships. In 2020, Promise Heights administered the Family Prosperity grant that provided case management services for families in Upton and Druid Heights to help them access housing, health care, food, and employment. A partnership with Communities United supports broader community organizing and resident leadership in the West Baltimore neighborhoods. In addition, partnerships with the Druid Heights Community Development Corporation and Catholic Charities focus on providing reentry support for residents returning from incarceration and expanding the violence interruption and prevention program Safe Streets, respectively.

Since its formation, Promise Heights has focused on creating responsive programming to support families from cradle to career. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff members reshaped how

Promise Heights delivers services and serves as a hub of community resources. Staff moved quickly to provide support to neighborhood families who needed help meeting basic needs and to change modes of communication with students and families.

Expanding Services and Meeting New Needs

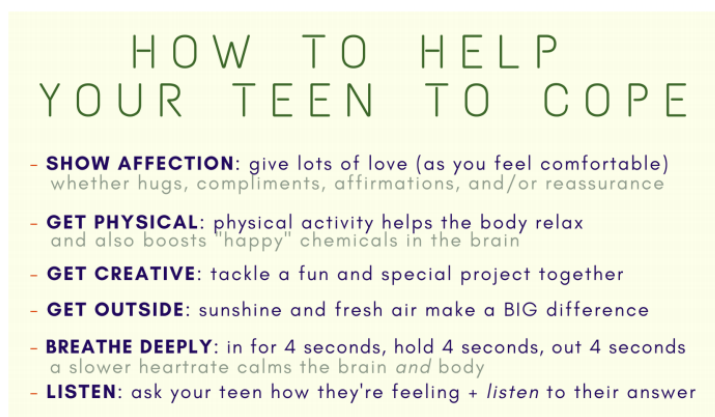
For Promise Heights students and families, the pandemic created numerous overlapping challenges, from job losses to a lack of technology and quiet spaces to study remotely. Promise Heights' response to the pandemic required creativity and flexibility in programming and in funding to create new offerings and partnerships to meet community needs, such as access to food, PPE, technology supports, and expanded mental health and counseling services to address the isolation of both parents and young people. At the pandemic's start, these expanded services included limited in-person engagement to deliver resources to families.

Addressing Residents' Needs and Meeting Residents Where They Are

At the pandemic's onset, Promise Heights focused on delivering essential items and services to families. This included creating food and cleaning supply distribution programs, delivering PPE, and providing technology support. This was done by coordinating with existing food distribution sites, setting up new distribution sites, and mailing resources to families to help them feel comfortable reaching out for support. Figure 3 is an example of a postcard that the initiative sent to parents—it offers advice on supporting the mental health of teenagers.

FIGURE 3

Family Support Postcard from Promise Heights



Source: Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood initiative.

As residents lost work and had to limit travel to access essentials, food insecurity increased. Promise Heights repurposed the budget for a school field trip to a local organic farm partner, Pearlstone Retreat Center, to prepare and distribute vegetarian meals throughout the summer in the Upton and

Druid Heights neighborhoods. Promise Heights also used a local COVID-19 relief grant to partner with Black-owned food vendors to prepare meals that were then distributed through neighborhood partners. In addition, staff joined forces with a Head Start partner to distribute 200 food boxes weekly to families. Promise Heights' decision to add food distribution to its regular activities reflects staff recognition of the crucial connection between addressing hunger and supporting student learning.

Promise Heights staff members underscored that making deliveries and leaving information at drop-offs allowed for valuable interactions with families and that they saw more engagement from families they followed up with in person. Promise Heights staff members also met with families when they picked up food at local churches and community centers, and these brief meetings helped Promise Heights learn about families' needs beyond food, often spurring referrals to partner organizations that provide housing assistance or mental health counseling. As one staff member told us,

Dropping off information and having a one-on-one conversation [with parents] is best. We call and text. We created door knocker hangers that say, "Please call us, please reach out," and we hear from [parents].

Promise Heights staff also provided informal technological support once schools shifted to remote learning. Promise Heights surveyed families on behalf of the school district to find out which students needed laptops and distributed a limited supply to parents. In addition, they coached parents on how to log onto video call platforms so they could help their children learn online. Through the University of Maryland, Promise Heights distributed about 100 Comcast Internet Essentials subscriptions to residents without reliable access to the internet. These subscriptions cover the cost of 12 months of high-speed internet.

Beyond food and technology distribution, members of Promise Heights' "PromiseCorps"—a federally funded AmeriCorps program that provides students with small-group and one-on-one support in the five schools—began making PPE and virtually connecting with students to support their remote learning. In the pandemic's early months, PromiseCorps members used materials donated by Promise Heights staff to sew more than 300 masks that they then distributed to families.

The pandemic exacerbated the structural barriers that Promise Heights families face. In interviews, most staff members mentioned preexisting barriers to students' education, specifically housing insecurity, community violence, a lack of child care, and limited employment opportunities for parents. These barriers are rooted in West Baltimore's history of systemic racism and exclusion. A school-based staff member said:

What the parents really need we can't really do. We don't have a lot of housing resources. They need their children to be back in school, and we can't do that. But in terms of supplies, workshops, access to information, we get what they need.

Staff emphasized the importance of prioritizing residents' pressing needs. At the pandemic's onset, shifting from programming to community outreach and provision of food and masks enabled Promise Heights to assess residents' other pressing needs. Many of these needs, including for housing resources,

were exacerbated by the pandemic but were not new, and they will likely remain until they are addressed at a systemic level.

Piloting Limited In-Person Engagement

In summer 2020, Promise Heights piloted outdoor engagement events with small groups of parents. A total of 11 of the socially distanced meetings—such as Parent University in the park—were held. They gave staff members the chance to connect with parents in person and to talk with new parents about how they were dealing with the pandemic, and this helped combat isolation. These events, held at lunchtime, also provided another venue for offering food to families.

Promise Heights staff members also engaged in limited in-person work with school-age students. Engagements included delivering care packages to the homes of students at Renaissance Academy, which began piloting hybrid in-person instruction in fall 2020.

Engaging Virtually

When asked what Promise Heights did well in 2020, most staff members mentioned adjusting its community outreach. Many staff members were proud of the ways they engaged families remotely, including by phone and text and over social media, to connect them to programming and resources. As one staff member put it, “I think the family-and-community-engagement shift to virtual was successful and natural.”

Since the onset of the pandemic, residents have juggled economic instability, illness, and all the other challenges the pandemic has created. Virtual engagement must balance “how to be present [at work] but not overbearing and respect everyone’s personal feelings and space” to ensure that residents are supported while their boundaries are respected. Through Promise Heights’ rapid transition to virtual engagement, staff members maintained relationships with students, parents, and other residents.

Increasing Social Media Use

Social media is a key way that Promise Heights engages with parents and provides the community with information about resources and opportunities. When lockdown began in March 2020, Promise Heights and its partners made an effort to expand their social media presence. A steep increase in followers followed, indicating that the community responded well to these communication efforts. Promise Heights, Promise Heights schools, and the initiative’s partners have posted multiple times nearly every day during the pandemic, sharing information across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that ranged from news updates to virtual meeting opportunities. One staff member said:

I realized that you want to catch as many people through a virtual world...The first thing I thought is we need to reach constituents and partners and kids, which meant giving up-to-the-minute posts of food, jobs, etc.

Table 1 shows which social media platforms the Promise Heights initiative, its B'more for Healthy Babies program, and each of the five schools use.

TABLE 1

Social Media Presence by Organization

Organization	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Promise Heights	X	X	X	X
Eutaw-Marshburn Elementary School	X	X	X	
Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy	X	X	X	X
The Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School		X		
Booker T. Washington Middle School for the Arts	X	X		
Renaissance Academy High School	X	X	X	
B'more for Healthy Babies	X	X	X	

Source: Authors' review of Promise Heights initiative social media accounts.

The Promise Heights Facebook page, in operation since 2012, has seen an increase in posts that include information such as how to entertain children during lockdown and how to create an at-home medical kit. Among their social media platforms, Promise Heights and the schools have the most followers on Instagram, which is primarily used to host live virtual meetings and to share resources such as food drop-off locations, student achievements, and general news about the pandemic. Promise Heights' commitment to social media engagement reflects that providing information and support and creating spaces for parents and residents to communicate about their challenges are important components of Promise Heights' pandemic response.

Engaging Parents and Children with Social Media

Promise Heights has used social media to provide parents with tools and resources and to build community. Staff members created a virtual "story time" to engage young children on Promise Heights' YouTube channel. Figure 4 is a screenshot from that series. Promise Heights also provided parents with tools for activities, such as meditation techniques and instructions for making Play-Doh, and information on reducing health risks, such as the proper way to wash hands.

FIGURE 4

Example of Promise Heights' Virtual Story Time



Super Power #1: Deep Breathing

Source: Promise Heights' YouTube channel.

Promise Heights schools and Promise Heights staff within the schools relied on virtual platforms to host events that previously would have taken place in person. Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy used Facebook Live, in conjunction with Instagram Live, to host parent-teacher organization meetings and parent breakfasts, among other events.

Promise Heights partners used social media creatively to support parents who were overwhelmed with work and child care responsibilities. Partner organizations worked to quickly set up informational content, such as TikTok videos about the coronavirus or the 2020 census, keeping the information bite-size and digestible. Parent support groups, recipe-sharing groups, family painting nights, spirit week, and family movie nights, all sponsored by partners, also helped build a culture of support and community.

Shifting to Virtual Programming and Coordination

Between March and June 2020, Promise Heights and many partners quickly transitioned to virtual programming. By June, B'more for Healthy Babies was hosting postpartum classes, Baby Basics, Circle of Security, Neighborhood Action Team, the "This One Is for You" support group, and Parent Café virtually. Parent University transitioned to virtual programming and adapted its curriculum to include sessions on parenting while children are home full time. Girl Scouts shifted to Facebook events, and the

Baltimore Urban Debate League moved to online sessions and provided desks for everyone in the cohort. Breathmobile, a mobile pediatric asthma and allergy clinic, switched to telemedicine. Child First Authority, which provides afterschool and summer learning programs, offered some virtual enrichment activities.

The Promise Heights attendance team, which provides students with supports and programming to increase school attendance, worked to ensure that the challenges created by remote learning did not prevent students from participating in their classes. The team helped students access devices and reliable internet service and connect with Google Classroom. The team also sat in on virtual classes, supported teachers, and provided students with social-emotional supports, such as one-on-one check-ins, that are difficult for teachers to provide in a virtual classroom.

The pandemic has exposed Baltimore's and the nation's digital apartheid. Although a priority for Promise Heights when the pandemic hit was ensuring that residents could afford their utilities, had reliable internet service, and had access to laptops, tablets, and smartphones that would allow them to get online, the digital divide persists. Some residents still lack reliable access to the internet, experience navigating the internet, or devices other than smartphones (which are not ideal as a primary device for remote learning). During the summer, a school-based staff member said that "over 50 percent of our students don't have the tech they need to access critical learning." Comcast has provided some utility vouchers, but reliance on private entities' resources is not a tenable long-term strategy for addressing disparities in access to digital resources, which have become a necessity. Also, parents and students both struggle with limited access to private or quiet space for virtual school and programming, and child care responsibilities and other household activities compound the challenges to remote learning and programming.

Transitioning to Remote Work

Internally, Promise Heights transitioned quickly to remote work and used a combination of email, Zoom meetings, and calls to coordinate work among staff members. The shift to working from home was relatively quick because Promise Heights staff members did not all work in the same location before the pandemic.

Much of Promise Heights' success can be attributed to staff members' willingness to adapt and work longer hours, their persistence in following up with residents, and their creativity in using multiple avenues of communication for outreach and programming. As the pandemic continues, staff follow-up with residents remains crucial.

Expanding Engagement as the Pandemic Continues

Promise Heights' work in 2020 offers insights into how human service providers can adapt their school- and neighborhood-based services during this public health and economic crisis. Four key insights emerged from Promise Heights' 2020 pandemic programming.

1. **Prioritize meeting the most pressing needs of families even if they were previously outside the scope of the program.** At the pandemic's start, Promise Heights was responsive to critical needs for food and internet access. The disruption to planned programs and events did not stop the organization from collecting feedback from families and shifting programs to meet new and pressing needs amid a public health crisis.
2. **Adapt practices, offer flexibility, and reward creativity for staff.** Promise Heights quickly adapted to provide residents with support and programming. Staff members shifted their outreach methods, creatively connecting with families and developing new virtual programming and supports. Continued acknowledgement of staff efforts and needs remains an important part of building morale and is key to supporting staff who in turn support residents.
3. **Use social media to engage and share information.** In addition to online programming, Promise Heights used social media to provide resources and create support networks. Its social media strategies have been effective for reaching residents during the pandemic.
4. **Acknowledge the impact of systemic racism and the need for advocacy.** Even though Promise Heights, like many direct service organizations, was not built as an advocacy organization, the pandemic has made clear the need to push for systems change. The first steps toward addressing systemic inequities are understanding and acknowledging the challenges that communities face. For Promise Heights, this has meant adjusting the case management process to acknowledge systemic barriers while understanding each individual context and providing families with social-emotional support. Overall, direct service organizations can seek to understand how to shift from providing short-term support to building more equitable systems.

Notes

- ¹ "Upton/Druid Heights," Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, accessed January 20, 2019, https://bniajfi.org/community/Upton_Druid%20Heights/.
- ² "Baltimore, MD," Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=11/39.293/-76.79&city=baltimore-md>.
- ³ Jeremy Ashkenas, Larry Buchanan, Alicia DeSantis, Haeyoun Park, and Derek Watkins, "A Portrait of the Sandtown Neighborhood in Baltimore," May 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/03/us/a-portrait-of-the-sandtown-neighborhood-in-baltimore.html>.

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Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Promise Heights Promise Neighborhood initiative. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We are also grateful to the program staff and leadership of Promise Heights. They came along with us in this learning process, contributing time, energy, and invaluable insights. We especially appreciate the staff and residents who shared their experiences. Without them, this study would not have been possible.



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