

Formative Research on East Baltimore Corner Stores

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this project was to conduct qualitative research for our class assignment. The results would inform a faculty member's larger formative research project for a store-based intervention to increase availability and promotion of healthier foods and reduce the risk of diet-related chronic diseases in East Baltimore. (See Appendix B for detailed description of the research questions and framework for the larger formative research project and intervention.) We conducted 13 in-depth interviews with storeowners at six stores and a male representative from a Korean small business owners' organization, as well as direct observation in 3 stores. We used the constant comparative method and multiple readings with hand coding of our transcripts for analysis. (See Appendix A for in-depth discussion of our data collection and analysis methods.) Because of the limited scope of our data collection, for the purposes of this paper we chose to focus on description of the context and nature of the relationship between storeowners and customers and how this influences food choices. We believe this information will contribute to a more effective intervention by increasing understanding of the socio-political setting of stores and how this has influenced their structure and the interaction of owners with customers.

First encounters with the neighborhood and corner stores

So there we were, three middle-class young women who clearly did not belong in this low-income inner-city neighborhood, looking for a corner store. As one informant put it, "White people shouldn't be here. They come for drug." Actually, only Amy was "white" by U. S. Census Bureau standards, Cristina being Brazilian and Lara being Chinese-American. But in any case, we were the distinct minority in this almost completely African-American neighborhood. While we all shared an interest in nutrition and the community surrounding school, our levels of familiarity with East Baltimore varied: Cristina had been in the U. S. for two years, but commuted to Baltimore from Washington, DC; Amy had moved to Baltimore last September; and Lara had been living in Baltimore for almost three years. Perhaps this would be to our advantage in demonstrating "cultural ignorance" with informants and eliciting rich, detailed

information. More likely, as strangers asking for interviews, we would feel conspicuous rather than adept. And so, on that windy Friday morning, we ventured forth into East Baltimore in search of a corner storeowner willing to entertain the questions of inexperienced graduate students. We were keenly aware of how our previous life experiences and reactions would influence the outcome of our project. We shared these thoughts as we walked and soon became discouraged as blocks went by with no corner stores in sight. Boarded up rowhouses and groups of young men loitering on the corners increased the sense of desolation and neglect. Until, finally, one store! Was it open? Was it too small? Was it really a corner store or just another liquor store? The sign read “Groceries and Meats,” so it seemed promising. Deliberations ensued from across the street. We decided to go in, notebooks and pencils in hand, JHU badges hanging from our necks.

Together we entered the tight, crammed space. There were no windows and the dim light made it hard to see the products on the shelves, some of which were completely empty. Trying to act cool and relaxed, we looked around and at each other, wondering what to do next. A petite Korean woman stared at us from behind thick glass. So, who was going to talk to her? Amy approached and explained our purpose. The perplexed look on the woman’s face revealed what we presumed to be a language barrier. Amy tried to speak slowly. We did not seem to be getting through to the woman and she declined to be interviewed. Once that was established, she seemed to open up and revealed that she owned the store and had been there for 11 years. She kept repeating “been here eleven years, eleven years.” We were not sure whether the language barrier was at the root of the refusal, or whether it was simply suspicion and aversion to strangers. We left the store, realizing the difficult task ahead of us.

We continued wandering for some time against a cold wind that stung our faces and sent trash flying through the streets. Enthusiasm waned. Our first effort to locate potential informants had been a near failure. We passed more rows of abandoned homes, an occasional liquor store, but no more corner stores. Just as we decided to head back to school, we spotted a corner up ahead where people were milling around the entrance to a store. Our hopes rose and we quickened our step. As we approached, we noticed a white sign with faded red lettering that read, “Lulu’s Store”¹. The walls of the building were covered in protective wire and no windows were visible, giving the impression that the store was closed. But a man opened the front door and we filed in behind him to find ourselves in another cramped entryway. There was a rotating window to our right and a bulletproof door directly in front of us. A poster advertising a selection of frozen treats covered the wall to our left. The man ordered a cup of coffee at the rotating window, above which a sign read, “Watch your wallet while you are in this store. We are not responsible for stolen money.” Attempting to get a glimpse of what lay behind the door, we saw a room filled with cases and shelves of undistinguishable items. Once the man was served, it was Cristina’s turn to approach the rotating window and introduce the reason for our visit. A plump Korean-American woman with short wavy hair let us into the store and Cris again explained our mission. She seemed a little confused, and seeing Lara, attempted to speak to her in Korean. When she discovered that Lara was not Korean-American, she smiled in a friendly manner, but could not hide her skepticism. We glanced over the shelves, the drink cases, the deli case, and were surprised at the wide selection of items, which included canned foods, macaroni and cheese and other boxed meals, sandwich meats and cheeses, cleaning items and many varieties of chips, cookies, cakes and sodas. After explaining that we were participating in a school project, we managed to arrange for an interview, although we were not able to establish a specific time. The

¹ Names of stores and individuals have been changed.

storeowner simply allowed that we return in the morning when she was not busy. We parted the store and on our way out noticed a small poster board covered with pictures of African American children displayed behind the bulletproof glass. Once we stepped out into the street, we started sharing our impressions. We wondered how the customers knew what to purchase if they could not go in the store and whether it was necessary for the store to be protected with bulletproof glass. The store environment gave us the impression that the storeowners were afraid of the community that surrounds them. But then, who were the children in the pictures? Our first trip to the field left us intrigued.

Our initial visits involved identifying corner stores and finding storeowners willing to be interviewed for this research project. This task was more difficult than we had anticipated. Some storeowners spoke little English, and others simply did not want to be interviewed. We had no connections to storeowners or customers, and shared little in common with them. After four months at school, only one of us had walked more than a couple blocks from campus, even though we were there for several classes a week. We did not know how to begin reaching storeowners other than by simply entering stores we came upon during our walks.

Corner stores and East Baltimore: political economy, culture, and history

Our experience as outsiders is better understood in the context of historic socioeconomic and political divisions in East Baltimore. Intertwined with the political economy of Baltimore are cultural and historical forces that shape the situation of corner stores and impact the behavior of storeowners and customers. Most corner stores in Baltimore are operated by immigrants, primarily Korean-Americans, who moved to this country in search of business opportunities after

the relaxation of immigration laws. Today they are concentrated in low-income areas of a city that is over two-thirds African-American and highly segregated (LaVeist 2000).

To consider the relationship of Korean-American corner store owners with their East Baltimore African-American customers we must look at the historical and economic context in which the corner stores operate. Farmer states that although the large-scale forces of history and political economy are often not apparent to ethnographers, they may be essential to understanding the phenomenon of interest and the social responses to it (Farmer 1992). The informant himself may relate his experience as shaped by history, as one of our informants did. When asked about the Korean community in Baltimore he responded with the question, “Do you know the history of Baltimore?” and proceeded to relate the economic development of Baltimore since World War II as it shaped the environment for corner stores. Another informant directly attributed the problems of her African-American customers to the history of racism in the United States:

African-American...history long time...too much white people...make race...that's makes problem...outside...

The history of Baltimore is similar to much of the East Coast “rust belt.” During World War II, industry created thousands of manufacturing jobs that were filled by an influx of African-Americans leaving lives of sharecropping in tidewater Virginia and North Carolina and white workers leaving mines and farms in Appalachia. Baltimore’s population peaked at just over 1 million in 1950, although it has declined to under 600,000 fifty years later (Taylor 2001). As numbers of poor increased and low-income housing projects were built, more affluent residents began abandoning their neighborhoods for the suburbs. Jewish owners continued to run most of the corner stores in the city, but they too moved out of the apartments above their businesses for residences in the county.

Riots in 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. destroyed most of the Jewish owned stores (Simon 1997). The U. S. Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 and Korean government promotion of immigration to the U. S. in the late 1960s brought a wave of Korean immigrants who took over many of the corner store businesses left by the Jewish exodus. The Korean owners moved into neighborhoods that were becoming increasingly impoverished and unsafe in the 1970s as affluent residents continued to leave for the suburbs and poor residents felt the impact of the decline in the manufacturing industry. Between 1970 and 1995 a total of 90,000 factory jobs were lost leaving a shrinking population with fewer economic opportunities (Taylor 2001). This population was increasingly elderly, African-American, and unemployed (Taylor 2001). Moreover, by 1990 only 22% of the total population lived in integrated areas, while 45% lived in predominantly African-American areas and 32% lived in predominantly white areas²(LaVeist 2000).

Prior to migrating to the United States, most Koreans experience with African-Americans was limited to contact with American soldiers during the Korean War. Images of African-Americans were often shaped by American media that portrayed a dominant white class and a violent, low-income African-American class(Park 1995). For the first generation of Korean-American storeowners, language and culture could pose a barrier to developing relationships with customers. All of the storeowners we encountered spoke English as a second language. “Body posture, demeanor, eye contact, etc. are sometimes viewed by African-Americans as the most important determinants of communication outcomes” whereas Korean-Americans may value what is said(Stewart 1993). In some cases, first generation Korean-Americans may value what is not said. One informant characterized second generation Korean-Americans as more “like Americans, they will tell all, they tell everything.” Korean-Americans business owners

² integrated (25-75% black), predominantly (>75%).

interviewed in Los Angeles after the 1992 riots that destroyed many of their stores complained that African-American customers used bad language and had loud, aggressive behavior (Stewart 1993). We found that storeowners in Baltimore expressed these sentiments as well:

One, two times...they cuss...you know, bad word, I can't accept.
The older boys come in and curse. All that cursing. I don't like it.

Some bad people we don't let in the store...We find something bad. Like stealing,
cursing. We tell them not to come in the store for a little while.

Storeowners are unable to accept this kind of behavior on the part of customers, but they report that customers believe they have reasons for swearing at the storeowners:

They say, corner store you make all the money. You high [prices]. He gives a hard time. The first time, I fighting this. Now I don't care. I say "if you don't want to buy, just leaving. Fine." And they cuss, just cussing.

The same informant reveals that despite accusations of high prices, people come back:

That's the difference between white and black people. White people are not satisfied and they don't like you. They don't come. Black people are not satisfied, they tell you...But they turn around and come back. It's harder to run business in white areas. People don't come back. It's different here. Those who say they won't come are the ones who come back. It's personality I think.

Based on our prior assertion that there are societal forces greater than individual personality that shape the behaviors of customers, we return to examination of the settings in which these interactions occur.

Today East Baltimore storeowners complain of drugs, crime, and decaying neighborhoods. Although major economic declines occurred in the 1970s, the perception is often that the advent of cocaine and crack trafficking in the 1980s marked an increase in crime. Korean-American storeowners have encountered this first-hand as victims of robberies and shootings (James 1992; Hermann 1998; Briggs 2001). The decline of East Baltimore neighborhoods was apparent when we visited stores. Walking from school to an informant's store, one of the authors was asked if she was looking for drugs. Even more obvious is the stark contrast of this neighborhood with the JHMI campus. This excerpt from one of the authors' field notes describes the mismatch:

After finishing my interview, I packed up my bag and purchased an orange juice in preparation for the ten-minute walk back to school. I exited the inside of the store and moved through the small glass-enclosed chamber where a heavy-set woman was purchasing multiple lottery tickets at the rotating window. I stepped into the cool morning air and paused for a moment to take in my surroundings, shielding my eyes from the bright sun. Weeds sprouting from a buckled section of the sidewalk provided the only break in the concrete walks and streets that stretched indefinitely in either direction. I looked to the row houses that lined the street for signs of life, but other than a few people waiting at a nearby bus stop and a few passing cars, I was alone.

I started moving quickly, disturbed by the emptiness of the streets and buildings surrounding me and anxious to reach a busier neighborhood. I passed an abandoned brick building with small dark windows that covered an entire block, and picked up my pace as I walked under a bridge where noxious fumes were coming from a liquid filled gutter. I wondered how often the city did maintenance in these neighborhoods.

After passing under the bridge, I heard voices up ahead and noticed people entering and exiting a corner store at the next cross street. The sight of people comforted me and soon I was passing a group of three elderly men occupying a couch that lined the sidewalk. They greeted me as I walked by, seemingly confused by my presence. I smiled and returned the greetings.

Walking for several blocks, I passed rowhouse after rowhouse painted in different subtle shades of white, grey, and beige. While they appeared uniform from afar, differences became strikingly obvious up close. Passing one house, I noticed that the entrance had once been sealed up with particle board, but it had been kicked in, leaving a jagged entry way. A look inside revealed a hallway littered with cans, bottles, and fast-food wrappers. Moving on, I passed a house with a sturdy door covered with multiple locks and a floral decoration, cleanly swept steps, and a pot of flowers in the window. It appeared warm and inviting.

Nearing school, the buzzing of cars became louder and the streets became busier, although many of the row houses remained abandoned. Soon I passed the market, followed by well-kept row houses with spotless glass doors that bore the name of some Johns Hopkins center or another in tasteful white lettering. Just one block later, I was swept through the revolving door entrance to the School of Public Health and found myself in the spotlessly clean atrium.

The striking contrast between impoverished neighborhoods of East Baltimore and Johns Hopkins is not lost on locals. Recent talk of taking over a six block plot to build a biotechnology park has instigated discussions about Johns Hopkins' role in the community and ethical issues behind displacing people from their homes. Resentment towards the institution is evident, and may have played a role in the difficulty we encountered in finding informants. At a forum at the School of Public Health in 2000, one community member declared:

East Baltimore is a feeling...Hopkins has been buying houses in my neighborhood for thirty years without understanding the feeling that goes along with it. That house means something to us, but you tear it down for a parking lot and expect us to understand your needs. We want you to understand why we want to stay on our block...this is where people live; they've been here a long time(Harbison 2000).

Although this quote expresses a positive attachment to the neighborhood, it is an example of how its residents have watched outsiders intrude into and erode their community without invitation.

Despite the intrusions, East Baltimore endures, albeit with changes. Some storefronts are closed, but there is no lack of liquor stores, which have been associated with a number of health problems(LaVeist 2000). In fact, the impact of social structure on food intake and health has been the focus of many studies, particularly in the area of nutritional and medical anthropology(Himmelgreen 2001). For example, even though the United States is a food rich nation, with extensive systems of direct and indirect food assistance programs, some segments of the population, such as low-income minority groups, experience limited availability of nutritionally adequate food. Other groups may suffer from an excess of negative factors. A 2000 study of Baltimore census tracts found that even after adjusting for socioeconomic status there was a higher concentration of liquor stores in African-American neighborhoods(LaVeist 2000). What is absent in these neighborhoods is supermarkets, or cars to get people to supermarkets. A multi-site study confirmed our observations that wealthier, white neighborhoods have more supermarkets and fewer liquor stores than poorer, black neighborhoods (Morland 2001). We might conclude then that it is not just "personality" that causes black customers to return to stores despite their complaints, but lack of other available options in neighborhoods that have evolved over decades of segregation and economic decline. Finally, this larger societal limitation on what choices of stores are available to African-

American customers is mirrored inside the stores where food selection is limited and physical restrictions are placed on customers' access to owners and products.

The structure of corner stores

Commonalities in the physical design of stores are striking. Patrons, confined to a small anteroom, are separated from the cashier and items by a bulletproof wall or door. Money and purchases are exchanged through a window with a rotating door. In some stores, customers are buzzed inside if they wish to purchase larger items on the shelves. However, the majority of items, located behind the cashier's bulletproof glass, are inaccessible to the customers without assistance. Even in open stores, the owner serves the customer from behind a bulletproof glass booth. There is no enticement to shoppers in the form of displays or decoration, besides candies strategically located around the cashier and cigarette ads plastered to the door.

While the environment of the stores implies storeowners' fear or suspicions of the people they serve and their community, we occasionally witnessed friendly conversation between them or noticed pictures of customers posted in the store. Then what does the bulletproof glass say about this relationship? Understanding the dynamics of this interaction and how it determines purchasing, promotion, and access to goods is essential to the development of a nutrition intervention in the stores

The corner store and the community

While reluctant to talk about store operations, most storeowners were very willing to share opinions about the community in which they worked. These were often complaints, but also included positive comments about helping and being helped by the community.

While storeowners were aware of the socioeconomic deprivations faced by their customers and the unsafe surrounding environment, they tended to discuss this in terms of how it affected the store. On the outside, it could affect patronage:

Because of that [drug dealing], community not shopping in corner store anymore, North, Northeast, Southeast, every where this problem. The elderly does not shop in the corner store because of the danger[...] Ask relative to drive outside county, buy food outside.

Inside the stores, according to a representative of Kagro, an association of Korean-American owned groceries and food-related businesses, security is the number one problem for storeowners, who are regularly confronted with robbery attempts, problems related to drugs, and other types of crime. The storeowners themselves reiterated this concern. One storeowner had been in the business for six years and although she was happy with her work, she worried about the dangerous store environment:

It's dangerous, but making money. It's dangerous. It's like I gave up my life and came here. A lot of people shot you know...Do you see the news? It happen all the time. All the time in the news. That's why I came here, making money. They come in, take money, shot and run. See the news. Some storeowners are shot.

Other storeowners reported being robbed at knifepoint and gunpoint multiple times and having their stores broken into at night. Stealing was also cited as a problem in stores where customers had access to products.

Kagro's representative also mentioned that Korean owned stores have been suffering from the effects of local economic decline. In discussing the history of these stores in Baltimore, he compared the current situation to that of previous years:

Houses all occupied and a good income population. Large steel industry, a lot of demand for corner stores, old businesses booming. But now, business go down, quality of life reduced, low-income neighborhoods, people are moving out, leaving. But corner store still there.

Residents who remain may shop less as they stay inside more often out of fear for their personal safety. In addition, corner stores are primarily a secondary source of food, selling mostly cigarettes or "snacks" such as chips, doughnuts, candy, and soda.

The Kagro representative also acknowledged the impact of government policies on store business when he commented that business was lost when food stamp funding was cut. One storeowner extrapolated the impact of reductions in food stamps to an increase in crime. She postulated that people who relied on food stamps as a source of income that could be used for drugs and clothes as well as food would become more desperate and “dangerous” as food stamps were withdrawn and their income decreased.

Storeowners often associated the deterioration of the neighborhood with changes observed in those living in the community. Many storeowners spoke fondly of the older people who had lived there a long time, but were dissatisfied with the young and the new residents. For example, one woman who had owned her store for 19 years talked about how things had changed over the years.

1983 was nice. Every year different, so bad now. Long time ago different. Nice black people...All working very hard...We've been here...very good friend with old people, new people don't know...most problem [do] drug, night and day, winter, summer, don't matter they [do] drug.

While many storeowners complained about the community in which their store was located, some had nice things to say. Positive comments often came from those who had been there the longest. When asked about the community where she has owned a store for 20 years, an informant replied:

We have been here a long time. We don't have a problem with the community. Any neighborhood has someone die and want donation, we help them. If anyone asks, we help. That's the kind of relationship we have now. Not a big donate...police, church...If they ask, we help.

But this same informant also considered crime the most difficult part of running her business and spent quite some time discoursing on the subject. Elicited from several storeowners, such contradictory statements reflect that, despite crime and other negative experiences, the storeowners feel connected and concerned with the community in which they work.

In discussing the relationship between storeowners and the community, we must not ignore how customers feel about storeowners. Even though our research did not include interviews with customers, therefore precluding any conclusive statement about their opinions, comments from storeowners provide some insights into this topic. One storeowner mentioned that customers complain about high prices, accusing corner stores of “making all the money.” When describing comments made by angry customers, she included “You make all the money here and you back to Korea.” While observing in stores, we often heard customers complain about prices. The perception of being exploited, expressed by such comments, has been described in reports on the role of corner stores in low-income sections of Baltimore and other cities (Briggs 2001). This sentiment may be reinforced by a long history of discrimination and exploitation against African-Americans in the South.

Corner stores and their customers

While discussing their relationship with the community, storeowners often referred to individual relationships with customers who regularly visit their store. The number of “regular customers” varies between stores and appears to depend on location. Stores in isolated areas, with limited shopping alternatives, are likely to have many regular customers while stores in busy areas, for example, near bus stops, are likely to have fewer regular customers. The storeowners often see these customers on a daily basis and have some kind of relationship with them. One store located in an isolated area depended largely on regular customers. When asked to describe them, the storeowner said, “Some customers very nice. Some customers very nasty.” Other storeowners made a similar distinction and discussed the relationships they had with these different kinds of customers. The two recurring types of relationships that we identified were

negative relationships with “bad” customers, and helping relationships with “nice” customers or friends in the neighborhood.

Storeowners had many complaints about the behavior of their “nasty” or “bad” customers. One of the most common complaints was about young people, who were described as having a bad attitude and not respecting the rules. Young boys appeared to be particularly problematic because they cursed and stole. There was also a general attitude that this group was difficult to serve. One storeowner was observed spending about ten minutes ringing up multiple small purchases for a group of six boys between the ages of five and twelve who were swearing, arguing with each other, and even asking the storeowner to give them something for free. After they left, the storeowner lamented, “They give headache.”

Complaints about older customers often stemmed from problems with stealing and drugs. One store had many large items displayed on shelves and allowed customers to browse, resulting in items often being stolen. The storeowner described the consequences of stealing::

C: Sometimes we tell them not to come into the store. Most times we argue with each other. Most customers we know and just tell them not to do it. If it’s really bad, we call the police.

Many problems with customers were attributed to drugs. Storeowners complained about the drug problems in the community as well as the “drug people” that patronize their stores. One woman strongly articulated her problems with this group. She said, “I can’t stand the drug people” and described how they, “Don’t know what to do. They want Pepsi, then they want something else.” Another woman explained the conflicts she had had with people who were affected by drugs:

We watch customers. They acting strange. We watch them and they’re angry. Sometimes they’re drunk, they’re drug. They don’t know what they’re doing. We tell

them not to do something, but they don't understand. They are not normal because drunk, drug. We have an argument in the store.

The negativity brought about by the behavior of “drug people” and others who misbehaved was offset by discussion of customers with whom storeowners had good relationships. Several long established storeowners had forged friendships with some of their neighbors. One woman pasted pictures of neighborhood children in the window of her store and described them as “her friends.” Others talked warmly about longtime neighbors, describing the mutual concern and helping nature of their relationships.

Sometimes this sense of caring overlapped with criticism of “bad” behavior. During one interview, two African-American youths, a boy and a girl, around 12 years old, entered the store. The informant silently pointed at them, stretching her lips and raising her eyebrow as if saying “Do you see this?” The clock showed 10:15 am and these kids should have been in school. Our informant, OC, signaled the interviewer to pay attention as she approached the boy with whom she was obviously already acquainted.

OC: Why you not in school?
 Boy: Shut up. [Grabbing a beef jerky.]
 OC: Been suspended?
 Boy: Yeah, so what? [Walking to the cashier.]
 OC: [Whispering to interviewer.] See? [Nodding.] He is acting bad.

When asked to expand on the meaning of “acting bad”, OC replied, “Sexual activities, like an adult.” Probed for further clarification, OC explained it was “a problem” with a few other kids in the neighborhood, including this boy. According to OC, the girl was fine. When asked about “the problem” OC elaborated:

Acting...what they do at night...see in media...sneaking out at night, hide behind doors...kids nowadays they do a lot, learn on media, not kids anymore.

In the meantime, the boy had returned with a bag of chips in hand and asked, “Mama, how much it is?” At the sound of “mama,” OC turned around, smiling and affectionately touching his shoulder and brushing off his jacket. The two continued conversing, smiling and chuckling at times.

Other storeowners also talked about the positive relationships they had with their customers. When asked to describe them, one storeowner smiled and spoke with pride about her “nice” customers:

Some customers are very nice. They are really close. Like friend... They're nice, friendly, smiling. Tell us their problem. They stop by every day. We see each other. We've been here twenty years. They were babies and we see them growing up.

A number of storeowners felt a similar fondness for those customers they had known for years. Some of them even made an effort to help these customers by supplying special items or doing other favors for them. One storeowner explained that they carried supplies to the home of their elderly, ill customers. Other storeowners said that they would find items for their customers if they did not already stock them. One woman was particularly proud of the special services she provides her customers:

Customers ask for things and I buy it for them. They ask, I go to Mars and find it and put it here on the shelf. They see it and they are happy.

From the way in which storeowners talked about some of their customers, it was clear that the helping relationship was reciprocal. There were many instances in which storeowners explained how customers helped and showed concern for them. Most stores are open seven days a week and owners explained that customers worry that something is wrong if they close unexpectedly. Others said that their customers help by carrying items or sweeping outside the store. Most often, customers helped storeowners by watching after them and their stores. One woman

explained that she liked the elderly neighbors who watch after her car and tell her if she is going to get a ticket. Another explained that customers watch her store and will call the police in case there is a burglary at night.

Relationships and the store environment

Once we began to gain an understanding of the relationship between storeowners, their customers and the larger community, we started to consider how these relationships affect customers' purchasing habits. Clearly, these interactions affected the store environment considerably, as problems with crime had resulted in a store design that limited the customers' shopping experience and impacted business. In turn, these protective measures also affected the relationship of the storeowners with customers.

The majority of stores we visited served their customers through the rotating window and did not allow customers to touch any items prior to purchase. Storeowners recognized that this prevented customers from varying purchase habits and impulse buying, but acknowledged that it was the tradeoff for personal security. Storeowners related specific experiences that contributed to their decision to close off their shelved items. After being robbed three times, one storeowner installed a bulletproof barricade. The device increased safety, but decreased sales because it prevented customers from browsing:

The door was not here [points to the bulletproof door that prevents customers from touching shelved items] and a man came in. I moved over here [to the shelves] and the man goes to the cash register and takes 135 dollars. The door was not here, but now no one comes in here. We lose some business because customers can't come in to look and touch the food, but safety, safety.

Those stores that did have items out in the open used a variety of strategies to prevent crime.

Cameras were used and storeowners paid careful attention to the customers in their stores.

Others used a selective system of buzzing customers into the premises. A couple of stores had an

anteroom with a rotating window, allowing only selected customers inside to browse the shelves. One storeowner explained:

Customers can come in. If we find out they did wrong things a couple times, we serve this way [points to the rotating window in the anteroom].

Another said:

We use it to keep out people. We can look at them and if we don't like how they look we don't buzz them in.

These barriers mean that customers cannot easily see what is available and must ask for the items they wish to purchase. This system may induce customers, only aware of what is typically stored, to request the same items in following visits. Such an attitude can in turn result in a system of food supply that appears to be demand driven, when in reality demand may be defined by the current stock. This distortion is supported by storeowners who often claimed that they only stock what the customers want. Depending on the financial implications, this may sometimes be true. On one occasion, an interviewer witnessed an informant complaining to a vendor about the cake he had "left" there the week before: "Did you bring the one with the icing? People don't like with no icing. The one you brought last week, people don't like it." At the same time, more than one storeowner said they would never carry lowfat milk despite getting a few requests for it because they believed that most customers would never buy it and it would just have to be thrown away. The Kagro representative argued that storeowners do not have much choice in the foods they provide to their customers. He explained:

...corner store don't have much saying to serve, for example, particular low sodium, low fat food. See, we serve food already existing, already produced, we sell what consumer like and consumer like it.

Another owner revealed:

People looking, people buying same stuff. Sometimes they ask for stuff. This store blocked [by glass keeping customers in the front anteroom], they can't come in. So people buy same stuff.

In addition to limiting food choices, these barriers limit the interactions of storeowners and customers. The size of the anterooms restricts the number of customers in the store at one time and overcrowding may encourage customers to purchase quickly and inattentively. The combination of a language and a physical barrier often resulted in communications filled with shouting and misunderstanding as non-verbal cues were unable to be perceived.

Discussion

Daily interactions and relationships between corner storeowners, their customers and surrounding community clearly shape a corner store environment, often limiting customer contact with the products and their ability to browse and choose foods freely. Yet, the products on the shelves, the setup of the store and quality of service provided to the community is the end result of a long chain of events, the final convergence of reciprocal forces that shape and are shaped in return. Such influences that ultimately affect consumer's behavior and health can be traced many levels beyond daily interactions with customers.

The model depicted in Appendix C is useful to organize aspects related to the functioning of corner stores and clarify the relationship between them. In this model, at least three levels can be differentiated: (1) the macro environment in which the store is located, (2) the community or neighborhood surrounding the store, and (3) the micro level of daily interactions within the store.

The first level embraces structural and environmental forces in which the community and the corner store function. Factors in this level are national and state policies regarding income, education, housing, food availability, among others. As many of our informants declared, changes in food stamp policies impact consumer's income, ultimately compromising corner stores' profits, or even sustainability. The larger social structure influences the declining state of the neighborhood affecting the community demographics, income, availability of local services,

maintenance, crime, and commitment of the city to the area. The kind of services provided by the corner store and variety of goods available will in turn be shaped by these changing conditions. Media and advertisement are an all-encompassing factor, greatly determining suppliers marketing and selling strategies, customer's demand and owners stocking criteria. Cultural and historical factors deserve attention as well, as they shape how African-American customers and Korean storeowners will perceive, react and interact with each other.

The second level of our model, the community or neighborhood, includes those aspects of the surrounding environment such as availability of other local markets and levels of crime and violence. These factors can influence a store environment in many ways. Counting on the availability of larger supermarkets in the proximity, some corner stores owners may give preference to stock foods such as snacks, sodas and candies. Rising levels of crime and violence create increasing levels of tension and suspicious among owners, which further separates them from the community.

The third level comprises interactions taking place within the store and the owner's perception of such relationships. Corner storeowners expressed a certain degree of concern for their customers' well being, in particular for those considered friends. Yet, they always keep in mind why they are in business in the first place: profit. Our research points to a general lack of perception of the corner store's role in their customer's health. Yet, as we observed, corner stores are far from being a neutral component in people's dietary intake as they can greatly influence the availability and promotion of certain foods to specific groups and neighborhoods. The storeowners also acknowledge the many macro-level social forces that affect them and their customers, such as politics, racism, and poverty.

As depicted in Appendix C, the availability and access to foods result from the dynamic interaction of factors in all three levels. It is crucial to understand and address all these factors when planning and implementing store-based nutrition interventions targeting economically marginalized populations.

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APPENDIX A

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

After identifying our research questions, a data collection strategy followed in which we would collect data from storeowners first and store customers second. Given time constraints, interviews with customers did not happen, but will be a next step in the larger research project. We decided to initially focus data collection on storeowners because their willingness to participate in a food store intervention is crucial for this project. Our first round of interviews provided relatively little information, but follow-up interviews with the same informants elicited more detail. This demonstrated that working with Korean storeowners requires rapport building, a difficult task given the limited time period of this project. Further interviews may be the best way to gather more private information about store operations. However, two team members attempted to return to an informant for a third interview and were turned away.

The selection of the neighborhood north of the School of Public Health for data collection was based on the following criteria : (a) as a low-income area, it will most likely be targeted in an intervention, (b) it has an abundance of corner stores, (c) Lara was somewhat familiar with the area, and (d) it was accessible by foot for team members without transportation.

Class assignments required that we begin our data collection by conducting in-depth interviews. This suited our topic, as it would provide us with detailed information about storeowners' attitudes and practices. After developing an interview guide (see Appendix D) and consent form (see Appendix E), we set out to identify corner stores and potential informants. This proved to be extremely challenging and frustrating. Our method was to walk around East Baltimore searching for corner stores. Since interventions will be targeted only at food stores, those that also operated as liquor stores were rejected. We would enter, present ourselves and

the project, and ask if the owner would be willing to talk to us. Upon reflection this was not an ideal method, but it was the most convenient.

We visited about 12 food stores, but had problems communicating with storeowners and employees, the majority of whom were of Korean descent and spoke little English. We met a couple of storeowners that spoke English fluently, but they were reluctant to speak with us. After being turned away by a few storeowners, we questioned whether the way we presented ourselves was turning people off. It seemed as if storeowners became skeptical when we said “research project” and “Johns Hopkins University.” We considered introducing ourselves in a less intimidating way by stating that we were involved in a “school research project,” but decided against it, feeling an obligation to provide informants with adequate information about our project. After spending an entire morning wandering in East Baltimore, two team members had identified a storeowner willing to be interviewed. It took another entire morning to find two more informants. (Our original team had four students.)

All interviews were conducted at the informant’s store or workplace. We read each informant a disclosure statement. If they agreed to be interviewed we signed and gave it to them. Two interviewers asked to tape their first interview, but the informants refused. All subsequent interviews were expanded from raw field notes.

The first round of four interviews did not turn out quite the way we had expected. The interviews had to be conducted while the informants were working because they were responsible for running the store on their own. While a husband or parent was occasionally present the female storeowner typically had the best command of English and took responsibility for operating the cash register. Conducting in-depth interviews while the informants were working proved difficult, as the flow of the interview was often interrupted by

a customer making a purchase, a delivery man dropping off food items or other store activities. This was particularly frustrating when the storeowner had started to talk about an interesting topic and lost her train of thought while attending to store business. However, the interviews provided an opportunity to observe how the storeowners work and interact with their customers. These interactions sometimes prompted the informant to provide unsolicited observations about customers and store practices.

Another difficulty with the first round of interviews involved language. Storeowners who agreed to participate in interviews were confident enough in their English abilities to feel comfortable speaking with us for an extended period of time and, for this reason, their English was fairly good. However, accents were heavy and getting acquainted to their speaking style took time.

After finishing the first interview, each team member expanded her raw field notes, including as many descriptive comments about the informant, the store and interactions with customers as memory would allow. Domain analysis was then carried out by each team member on her own interview and transcripts were shared with team members. Team members then discussed interviews and experiences in the field and developed a list of topics to be addressed in follow-up interviews.

Four follow-up interviews were conducted with the same informants using the same process. These interviews proved to be more informative than the first, which we attributed to storeowners feeling more comfortable about sharing information now that they were accustomed to us. After conducting domain analysis on each of our own interviews, we performed group domain analysis using all the transcripts. This led to further discussion of emerging themes and topics to explore.

At this point, we decided that direct observation would give us a better sense of what items customers purchase in the stores and how they interact with the storeowners. The three remaining team members (we lost one team member after the second round of interviews) engaged in five participant observation sessions totaling four hours. During these sessions, the observers took detailed notes of store activities, paying particular attention to the items customers purchased and the interactions between storeowners and customers. Detailed description of the store environment was also recorded. It was often difficult to observe for long periods of time because storeowners appeared uncomfortable and concerned about an observer in their stores. During team meetings, the results of participant observations were discussed and contributed to our knowledge of items customers typically purchase in stores.

The direct observation provided us with a general sense of the items people purchase, but it was difficult to make conclusive statements about this. We did not establish guidelines for exactly what to record nor did we aim to have observations evenly distributed through all times of the day. In the end we chose not to focus on purchasing habits for our report and unfortunately did not think to focus more closely on the interpersonal communication between storeowners and customers until later in the analysis. The limited observation time also made it difficult to make any generalizations of the frequency of observed purchases or habits. More structured direct observation could have been enlightening, and may be something to consider for the larger project.

Free listing and pile sorting could have been used with both storeowners and customers to identify which items customers purchase most often. Unfortunately, we realized this towards the end of the project and did not have time to use these methods, which require a large sample size.

In any case, food ended up not being the focus of our report for class, so we did not feel that much was lost.

While data from interviews and observations had provided interesting information and themes were starting to emerge, there were many gaps in our data. We decided that a third round of in-depth interviews would be useful for filling in some of these gaps. Five more interviews were conducted; one with a representative from Kagro (an association of Korean-American owned groceries and food-related businesses), three with two newly identified storeowners and one with a previously interviewed storeowner. These interviews were expanded and shared with team members.

At this point, we returned to formal analysis of our data. We felt that the constant comparative method was well suited to our data because in-depth interviews had addressed many relevant topics that could be separated into distinct categories. Furthermore, none of the informants had provided us with lengthy narratives.

Each team member used the constant comparative method to analyze her own interview transcripts (and Lara analyzed Bridget's two transcripts), after which the team met and for further comparison and merging of categories and discussion of combined results. The number of units in certain categories demonstrated that the majority of the information we had collected was about the storeowners' relationship to and attitude toward their customers and the community in which their stores were located. We had pursued many topics during interviews, but storeowners were most forthcoming about this particular topic. We also used selective hand coding of several transcripts after multiple readings to clarify certain themes. | We discussed our data for some time and kept returning to the relationship between storeowners, their customers and the community. We began to identify pieces of information from interviews and participant

Comment: I am pretty sure we all did this... I did and I have a feeling Cris did too.



observation that demonstrated how these relationships have influenced the store environment as well as how this environment influences customers' purchasing habits. After determining that these issues were important to the development of an intervention, we decided to present our results with a focus on these relationships and the store environment.

The constant comparative method worked extremely well for analyzing our in-depth interviews. We found it fairly easy to use and were pleased with the results, as it helped us to organize our data and identify relevant topics and their interconnections. Through regular group meetings which facilitated a continuous sharing of results, experiences, and reflections, our research process was iterative. However, using the constant comparative method earlier in the research process would have ensured that our iterations were more thorough and that subsequent interviews were more focused, addressing all important topics.

Other than contributing to reinforcement of themes, the use of direct observations was minimal. Part of this was because we had not determined a structure or well defined goals for observations which meant that we were not consistent in our methods and did not always record what would have been most useful. This detracted from the quality of this data. Also, since we chose not to focus on purchasing habits for this paper we did not feel the need to carefully analyze our observation data in the end.

APPENDIX B: Formative Research for an Environmental Intervention Program in Baltimore City Corner Stores to Reduce the Risk of Chronic Diseases

Research questions and answers to other questions

The original problem statement for this project was as follows: Obesity is a risk factor for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic diseases (Pi-Suyer 1991) and is an increasing problem among the residents of East Baltimore. This increase in obesity has been observed nation wide and is largely attributable to environmental factors, including food availability, pricing and promotion (French SA 2001). In East Baltimore, corner stores are a common point of food purchase. What is the role these stores play in people's food choices?

The research questions that we initially identified were:

1. How do store owners/managers decide what foods to stock and how to promote them?
2. What are the storeowners' relationships to their customers and the community?
3. What are the storeowners' attitudes towards health and providing healthy foods to their customers?
4. What is the environment of the store and how does it influence food choices?

In the end our data collection addressed questions 1, 2, and 4 and, as discussed, the body of this paper focuses on question 2 and 4. Some results related to question 1 are presented in this appendix. While our research questions changed little through the course of the project, the focus of data collection evolved as we encountered barriers eliciting certain types of information from informants. As mentioned previously, storeowners openly shared information about their customers and the community in which their stores are located, but were less willing to address more personal topics, including how they came to own their stores and specifics about managing their stores. For this reason, much of the information elicited in interviews related to store

customers and the community. Nevertheless, as our conceptual framework indicates, there are many more factors relating to store functioning that are not discussed in the body of this paper. We collected far more data than is presented in the body, and some of the other influences on stores are presented in this appendix.

We had originally planned to interview customers to enrich our understanding of questions 2 and 4, but had difficulty developing rapport with storeowners and, therefore, chose to continue interviewing them in order to gain their trust as well as deeper insight into their situation, rather than confusing ourselves with information from customers.

As we collected data, the framework for the larger intervention evolved and new questions for later investigation were derived. For her internship, Cristina will conduct further formative research, focusing on how store centered interventions can change consumer psychosocial factors and behaviors, and positively impact the sale of healthy foods. She will seek to further understand:

1. The organizational culture, process of decision-making (e.g. around food ordering), and interest in participating in a nutrition intervention in corner stores.
2. The social and dietary significance of the smaller community food store.
3. Factors influencing food selection and purchasing at stores by families.
4. The nature of the relationship between storeowners and managers and the community.
5. Other factors affecting the availability and promotion of healthy foods in corner store, for example, the role of suppliers in the process of food ordering, delivery and promotion.

Other Factors affecting corner stores' functioning and food availability

Relationships and owners' perceptions of their community play a clear role in availability and promotion of foods in the stores visited. In addition, in the course of our research, other factors

affecting corner store's functioning and environment became apparent as well. As already mentioned, the impact of national policies regarding food stamps, employment, and other areas that ultimately diminishes consumer's purchasing power, consequently affect the corner store's income, the choice of products selected for stocking, or even its sustainability. When explaining the declining number of members associated with Kagro, the Korean-American Grocery Retailers Organization, our informant associated the closure of many stores in the last few years with federal cuts in food stamp programs and economic downsizing:

Korean store close, not generate enough income. You know, Korean corner store all over Baltimore. East, West, South, all over. Government cut funds to food stamp, most corner stores depend on food stamps for their income, corner store is small store, in low-income neighborhood. A lot of stores closed in the last few years. You see, we had 1,300 members, now down to 850 member.

Major food producers, media and advertisement campaigns will also influence the availability of certain foods in corner stores. For example, availability of low fat milk and other low fat, low sugar products is limited in most stores. In our research, all storeowners reported ordering products based on consumer's demand, reporting a common understanding that customers prefer high fat, high sugar products. In reality, such criteria in turn determine demand, as customers may only buy what is available at the store. At another level, these criteria may also shape suppliers' strategies and marketing campaigns towards stores in low-income neighborhoods, which focus on increasing the sales of high fat and high sugar products. As one informant declared, suppliers perceive corner stores as an effective "gate" to targeting certain population subgroups and are willing to make special deals on selected products. Therefore, a cycle is formed between consumers' eating habits, corner stores' stocking procedures, and suppliers vending strategies that ultimately affect the population's health status.

Associations such as Kagro, work to arrange deals with wholesalers and food producers to benefit their members. Its representative explained the logic behind these deals:

See, suppliers have to recognize us as a group with purchasing power. We have program to keep better relationship. Suppliers use us as a front line of marketing, we are the ones who introduce product to the market. For example, a new drink, they produce a new drink, if they aim at ethnic population, we are the ones who deal with them, when consumers want they, they come to us, we are the ones close to their house. Suppliers know when they have new product, very effective using small corner store grocery.

However, during the course of our research, we could not determine whether Kagro offered much support for the small corner store in low-income neighborhoods. Our informants declared either not being associated with the organization or not willing to participate in the events promoted by them, due to long work hours. Therefore, the effect of Kagro, and other similar associations, in the availability of foods in these stores is yet to be investigated.

Wholesalers and vendors appear to be the major suppliers of products. Every informant conducted trips to wholesalers either daily or weekly to refill their stock. In addition, vendors delivered goods such as milk and sodas on a regular basis. The relationship between vendors and storeowners was expressed as being a simple one: "Just we order. They deliver."

However, it is interesting to note that, although storeowners determined what to purchase in wholesalers, such decision-making power didn't really apply to products brought by vendors. During one interview, the informant explained that vendors "bring what they want", usually "snack stuff." Such statement indicates that vendors, or the companies they work for, can directly influence what products are available at the store. A closer investigation on their selection criteria for what to take into the truck and their routes in the neighborhood could further elucidate this relationship.

How consumers make use of local supermarkets can determine what kind of products they look for at corner stores. As one informant defined:

People buy big food at supermarket because price cheaper, not same as corner store. People here buy temporary...snacks, most children, buy soda...

Another informant explained:

This is just like 7-11. Anything they need right away, they come. We are busy, but we don't sell a lot of quantity.

When inquired about the most popular products, our informants were unanimous: chips, sodas and candies. These preferences have clear implications on stocking and ordering procedures.

When asked about their purchasing criteria another informant laughed for what they considered the obvious: "Because customers want it." Another informant agrees:

We don't buy what consumers never buy, only buy popular product otherwise sits there, gets bad, we don't want product to sit there, if not sell, try to avoid stock doesn't move. No one likes stock sitting there (chuckles), you know

Many storeowners expressed a lack of control in changing customers' dietary habits, as the role of corner stores is "just to be there" to provide what they wanted. One informant declared that corner stores had no role in changing diet, since they bought already prepared foods and could not control the ingredients. This informant believed that interventions should target food producers and suppliers. Another informant declared that corner stores could not be the focus of interventions, but individuals should be targeted through nutritional education programs. According to this informant, "people can change," but before altering the environment of the store, customers' habits needed to be targeted.

APPENDIX D: Interview Guide

Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health **Qualitative Research Methods I**

Baltimore Corner Stores Intervention In-Depth Interview Field Guide January 2002

Location of store
Name of interviewee
Date/time

The Store

Tell me about your typical day from the time you get up until you go to sleep

Probe: How did you come to own/manage this store?
Tell me about who works here. What are their responsibilities?
How do you/they do....

Draw me a picture of the store/describe the store to me as if I were not able to see it.

What foods do you promote?
Probe: How do you decide?

What kinds of things do you sell/stock?
Probe: Who decides what to stock?
How do you/he/she decide what to sell?
What are important things to remember when deciding?
Tell me about your suppliers.

Customers/Community

Tell me about what happens when the typical customer comes into the store.
Who shops at your store? Describe your customers to me.
Probe: Age
Gender
Alone/groups
Any special relationship they might have with people in the store

What do they buy?
Probe: What is the most common purchase?
What do children/women/men buy?

How do people pay for their purchases? (e.g. WIC, paychecks, foodstamps, cash, credit)

Tell me about this neighborhood/community.

Probe: What can you tell me about this neighborhood/community?

What do you like/dislike about this neighborhood/ community?

Try to find out if he/she is involved with the community in any other way.

Where do you live?

Probe: Have you lived in this community?

Tell me about any friends who live in the neighborhood.

I. Health Attitudes/Behaviors

Joel's comment : " I'd downplay this. I think you have enough."

Tell me what you ate today.

What are your favorite foods?

Who cooks in your family? What?

Who shops in your family? Where?

What do you/they buy?

Closing

Thank the participant.

Clear up any misunderstandings that may have arisen during the conversation.

APPENDIX E: Disclosure Statement**Baltimore Corner Stores Intervention****DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

Hello, my name is _____. I am a student at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. As part of a class project I'm interviewing owners and managers of food stores in the Baltimore area about their store, their customers and the work they do. The purpose of our project is to gather information that will help us design interventions to make people include healthier foods in their diets. You have been selected for inclusion in this project on the basis of _____ (the store's location, referral by someone). The information I gather here will only be used for my class project and will not be published or shared with the public. In addition, I do not need your name or any information that will link you with the information I am going to collect. In other words, every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of the information you provide.

You are not required to participate in this project. There will be no benefits for you personally if you participate in this project. If you agree to participate, I would like to interview you twice. Your participation will take about one hour today and an hour at a later date to be arranged. We have tried to eliminate sensitive questions and issues in this project. If you feel something I ask you about is too sensitive, please tell me and we can either move on to the next question or discontinue the interview.

Would you be willing to participate in this project? (if response is affirmative, continue). If at any time during the interview you wish to stop, please inform me and we will not continue. Do you understand? (if response is negative, clarify). Do you have any further questions?

Thank you very much!

Signature of the Interviewer: _____

Date: _____