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Article

## **Policing the Void: Recreation, Social Inclusion and the Baltimore Police Athletic League**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we explore the relationship between public recreation policy and planning and the transformation of urban governance in the context of the Police Athletic League centers in Baltimore, Maryland. In light of contemporary discussions of the role of youth programs for sport and physical activity within post-industrial cities, the origination, development, and eventual demise of Baltimore's network of Police Activity League centers is an instructive, if disheartening, saga. It illustrates the social and political rationales mobilized in justifying recreation policy and programming, the framing of sport and physical activity as preventative measures towards crime and juvenile delinquency, and the precarity of such initiatives given the efficiency-driven orthodoxies of neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). This analysis emphasizes how the PAL centers were designed to 'fill the void' left by a declining system of public recreation, thereby providing an example of a recreation program as part of the "social problems industry" (Pitter & Andrews 1997).

### **Keywords**

neoliberalism; police; physical activity; recreation; social problems industry; sport; urban

### **Issue**

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### **1. Introduction**

In May 1996, officials from different agencies and departments—including the Mayor's Office, the city's department of recreation and parks, and the police department—gathered to announce the latest development in the restructuring of Baltimore's public recreation centers: the opening of several Police Athletic League centers (PALs). Over the previous 40 years, the city had invested both capital and programming funds towards an extensive network of centers operated by the public recreation department. However, the PALs program offered a different model of recreation: uncoupled from the previous approach to urban recreation based on publicly-derived funding and support, the PALs were delivered utilizing a public-private partnership model of governance. In this mode, urban communities became

evermore underserved in regard to decreased public recreation programs and facilities. As such, recreation provision became one of myriad expressions of race and class inequality, created by neoliberal processes of devolution and privatization within U.S. cities. In this article, the authors demonstrate that the PAL program should be understood as a particular form of neoliberal intervention within urban communities, one that has had specific impacts for the policy and planning of recreation in Baltimore. The authors therefore adopt a contextual approach to studying urban governance via the "articulation" (Slack, 1996) of policy and planning through various political, economic, and social forces. This approach utilizes a critical discourse analysis of over 500 documents related to the Baltimore PAL program, including official meeting minutes, planning and organizational documentation, and annual and long-term reports from the city's

recreation department, as well as other sources of recreation discourse: community organization flyers, recreation programming forms, and media reports.

Rather than focusing on the provision of recreation experiences and opportunities as a means of enriching lives, the underlying assumptions behind the PAL program mobilized recreation as a vehicle for intervening into, and thereby looking to manage, the lives and bodies of those always already perceived to be “at-risk” (not only to themselves but, more importantly, to the wider Baltimore population living within a climate of historically entrenched racialized fears and anxieties). In this mode, Baltimore’s PAL program demonstrates one example of sports-based interventions that are designed to change individual behaviors, urban spaces, and social interactions between communities and policing organizations (Kelly, 2013), particularly in regard to “hard to reach” (Crabbe, 2007) populations within cities. Further, the PALs were also a “microcosm of American liberal social policy” (Hartmann, 2016, p. 73), since their very development, and ultimate demise, was inextricably linked to the shifting conditions and dynamics of neoliberal urban governance. Originated as an innovative public-private alternative to the perceived inefficiencies of the publicly-funded recreational model, the inevitable fiscal crises that punctuate neoliberalism’s modus operandi—and create legitimizing states of exception (Ong, 2006)—precipitated the inevitable dismantling of the PALs program as the neoliberal urban project revealed its inherent unsustainability in the early 2000s. Driven by the fear-mongering and self-interest driven logics of what Edsall (2012) dubbed the “age of austerity”, exponents of neoliberal urban governance orthodoxies were pathologically compelled to trim the excesses of public service provision and programming. Following Spaaij (2009), neoliberal sport-based intervention programs therefore have often included the potential for social cohesion and individual opportunity, but are simultaneously “aimed at generating social order in disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods” both in the United States and Europe (p. 252).

Although this article is focused on Baltimore’s Police Athletic League program, it would be remiss not to provide a brief contextualization of the PAL more generally. The roots of the PAL can be traced to the reformist paternalism of the early-1900s, specifically various initiatives by the New York Police which sought to use various forms of recreation to encourage good citizenship among the city’s mass ranks of impoverished youth, and nurture a positive relationship between this group and the New York Police Department (PAL, 2015). By the early 1930s, the social and economic turmoil created by the Depression—and most pertinently the perceived threat of rising rates of juvenile delinquency—intensified the focus on youth recreation programs as a mechanism for crime prevention. Hence, the NYPD Crime Prevention Bureau formed the Junior Police Athletic League in 1932, which was reorganized into the Police Athletic League in

1936 (PAL, 2015). From its early twentieth century New York City origins, PAL programs have spread throughout the U.S., oftentimes shifting programmatic structure and focus as dictated by changing urban realities, and associated policy priorities (i.e. the *War on Poverty* in the 1960s, the *War on Drugs* in the 1980s, the *War on Terror* in the 2000s, and the *War on Obesity* in the 2010s).

Nonetheless, and belying the residual influence of its socially reformist beginnings, the PAL program at its institutional core movement continues to mobilize physical recreation (play, games, and sport) as a vehicle for building positive character traits. The program therefore utilizes recreation as a means for the adoption of values which would, it is assumed, assimilate potentially deviant poor urban youth into the social mainstream (Wilson, 1994). PALs today are a vivid institutional exemplar of what Pitter and Andrews (1997) referred to as the “social problems industry”: a complex and diverse formation of publicly and privately-funded, for-profit and not-for-profit, recreation-based crime prevention and public safety programs designed to “serve”—or perhaps more accurately regulate, discipline, or police—America’s historically underserved urban poor. Within the contemporary social problems industry context, “at-risk urban youth” is a racialized euphemism for demonized Black bodies and characteristics, whose pathologized deviance renders them as being “at-risk” to themselves, to their communities, and—inflaming more political purchase—to mainstream (read: White) American society more generally (Cole, 1996). Programs within more affluent suburban metropolitan spaces tend to be justified through their *provision* of physical recreation experiences—and anticipated physical, psychological, and social benefits—to suburban (read: deserving) youth (Pitter & Andrews, 1997).

While doubtless realizing many of these outcomes, programs such as the PALs explicitly targeting the problematized urban poor are never far removed from what populist conservative thinking considers to be such program’s *raison d’être*: using physical recreation *interventions* as means of “controlling and/or containing populations...seen as either ‘at-risk’ or socially disruptive” (Hartmann, 2012, p. 1011). However, while its disciplining logic has been unwavering, the very structure and delivery of the various components of the social problems industry is contingent upon the shifting ideologies and policies of urban governance. Hence, as we demonstrate within this discussion, Baltimore’s PAL centers ultimately became soldiers of fortune to the mode of neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism that increasingly dominated the governance of U.S. cities, such as Baltimore, from the 1980s onwards (Harvey, 1989). Below we detail the emergence of the social problems industry and the relationship between recreation and social inclusion in the late 20th century, before analyzing the scale and scope of the PAL program as a particular form of intervention that had specific impacts on recreation policy and planning in Baltimore.

## 2. Recreation, Social Inclusion and the 'Social Problems Industry'

By the early 1960s the postwar economic surge in the U.S. had largely come to a halt, resulting in a growing social inequality within many American cities, as realized through economically-driven racial segregation and the "white flight" of suburbanization (Harrington, 1962). In this context, the inner city increasingly referred not only to the core of the city, but also to the minority and predominately black populations inhabiting urban spaces challenged by the intensifying struggles of joblessness, decaying infrastructure, and criminality (Sugrue, 1996). As Corburn suggests, the 1960s thus signaled the advent of the 'urban crisis' within American politics, policy and planning, as cities were commonly viewed as the locus of social problems linked to economic inequality and racial and ethnic divisions (2009, p. 54). Recreation spaces, facilities and programs were also included in this policy and research focus on urban America, as evidenced by the growing disparities in the amount and condition of facilities and programming between different areas of the city and suburbs. In this context, the "inner city" increasingly referred not only to the core of the city but also to the minority and predominately black populations of these areas—and the struggles of joblessness, decaying infrastructure and the stigmatization of the urban underclass were disproportionately endured by these populations (Sugrue, 1996). Further, recreation became an increasingly crucial aspect in terms of serving as a progressive means of building community, and improving the quality of life in urban neighborhoods, leading to an "era of growth" for public recreation in Baltimore and other American cities in terms of funding, programming, and facilities (Deppe, 1986).

However, this era was followed by larger shifts in the politics and modes of governance of American cities, and these shifts were to have particular and important effects on the formation and implementation of urban recreation policy, and within the operation of city recreation departments. As Biles (2011, p. 202) explains, the processes of federal and state "disinvestment" in urban centers meant that by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, many American cities and their citizens were essentially left to "fend for themselves" in comparison to the peak of social services funding and programming, especially in regard to federal programs and policies. The changes to these rationales resulted in Baltimore's recreation system being reconstructed with unprecedented financial and political support, but also left this same system in a state of nearly permanent struggle in regard to operations, staffing and maintenance once this support had waned. In short, the 1970s signaled the "high-water mark", or period of peak support and implementation, and subsequent gradual decline of public recreation as an essential social service for citizens of Baltimore and other American cities.

Following Harvey (1989), the shifts within the governance of Baltimore during the 1970s evidence a larger

transformation in the methods and ideologies of American urban governance, specifically in the differing approaches towards operating and administering city services signaled by a shift from "urban managerialism" to "urban entrepreneurialism". Intertwined with the processes of deindustrialization and suburbanization that changed the city's population level, economic potential and demographic makeup, Harvey's (1989) analysis marks the transition away from the "managerial" Keynesian model of social service provision via public funding and support, and toward "entrepreneurial" strategies centered on inter-urban competition for tourism and consumption, often driven by attempts to re-imagine specific areas of the city as hubs of capital growth and economic redevelopment. In Baltimore, this reorientation of the aims and models of urban governance was constituted primarily through the renewed emphases on economic redevelopment projects, and the concurrent de-prioritization and reduction of public services, including recreation. Thus, on the one hand, Baltimore engaged in the processes of privatization and public-private partnerships in order to complete tourist-focused projects such as the Inner Harbor, professional baseball (Camden Yards) and football (M&T Bank Stadium) stadia projects, and Baltimore Convention Center, among others, as part of a "renaissance" strategy that aimed to promote the city's downtown area as a center of consumption and entertainment (Harvey, 2001). On the other hand, this focus on downtown development occurred simultaneously with the retrenchment of social services and decline in population and housing for many of the city's neighborhoods. By the late 1990s, these processes had constituted the formation of what Levine (2000) recognized as the 'three Baltimores' of 1) the suburbs, 2) downtown and the Inner Harbor, and 3) the multitude of underserved neighborhoods, as the city and region were increasingly characterized by both racial and class inequalities and different realities in regards to economic and social opportunity (p. 140).

Meanwhile as Deppe (1986) explains, in many American cities by the mid-1980s "recreation as an end to itself was totally unsalable" in regards to local, state, and federal government policies (p. 34). In part, this was due to the severe changes in demographics for many deindustrializing cities like Baltimore, as urban populations were increasingly characterized by economic and social disparities. The impacts of suburbanization, especially in regard to social stratification along racial and classed lines, reshaped Baltimore as a post-industrial city that was losing both economic opportunities and parts of its population at the same time that federal and state governments disassembled social service policies and programs (Durr, 2003; Levine, 2000). This meant that as many American urban centers were increasingly characterized by "a deteriorated economy, an inability to provide needed services, political indifference from state and federal authorities, and a forecast of increasing concentration of local poverty," recreation programs and

funding were increasingly less a priority, and more a persistent thorn in the side of municipal governments faced by other seemingly more pressing issues (Shivers, 1981, p. 44). An efficiency-driven entrepreneurial approach to public recreation would also develop within this era, as the city worked to support existing and potential new partnerships in relation to special facilities, while also attempting to sustain a decreasing number of often inadequately staffed and poorly maintained neighborhood-based facilities.

As primary aspects of the formation of public recreation governance in this period, the partnership model and necessity of a solution for the declining system of neighborhood-based recreation facilities converged in the form of an effort at restructuring the department, and the general administration and provision of recreation services in Baltimore. This resulted in the reinvention and expansion of PAL recreation centers, which utilized the neighborhood-based model of recreation facilities but were staffed and programmed by city police officers rather than public recreation personnel. The PALs program had been operating in other cities, including New York and Philadelphia, for several decades before being implemented in Baltimore, and while Baltimore's police had previously had limited youth-directed programming, it wasn't until 1995 that the PALs program was officially developed and implemented in the city, in part as the personal project of police Commissioner Thomas Frazier ("Police fill rec center void", 1996). Specifically, the PALs initiative was a response to the "link between juvenile delinquency and inadequate youth programs" in many of Baltimore's communities, especially in the context of the "glaring inadequacy of city recreation centers in some neighborhoods that need them most" ("Police fill rec center void", 1996). These developments reflect the impact of neoliberal urban governance on black communities in Baltimore, as many of the neighborhoods in which the first 10 PAL centers had been organized were already facing issues in regard to recreation facility closures and decreases to staffing and programming. The turn to the PAL program and facilities therefore signals the formation of an alternative to recreation services administered by and through a city recreation department.

On the one hand, the partnership model was deployed in regard to both an "inter-agency" partnership between recreation facilities and police staff, as well as in relation to the primary funding of the PAL centers through non-profit grants and private donations ("Police fill rec center void", 1996). On the other hand, the PAL centers also directly incorporated the rationale of volunteerism—specifically in the context of decreased funding and support for neighborhood-based recreation services and facilities—by supporting volunteer efforts at the centers through community engagement. Thus, the initial strategy was to implement a PAL center in each of the city's 29 police districts over the next several years, each of which would be funded entirely by grants and

donations, and staffed by at least one full-time police officer at each center, "with other roles filled by volunteers" ("Police fill rec center void", 1996).

However, aside from serving as another example of the processes of privatization and devolution, the PALs initiative also signals another intersection of Baltimore's public recreation governance and broader political and social restructuring of the period. The implementation of the PAL centers points to the development of another aspect of privatization in the shift from the support and funding of recreation services through government resources and programs, to the provision and administration of recreation primarily through private, non-profit and volunteer-based facilities and services. That is, this analysis recognizes that the PAL centers and strategy represent the re-emergence of the "prevention" rationale for urban recreation services, as the PAL approach was based on the re-prioritizing of recreation as an especially efficient deterrent for juvenile delinquency and general community disassociation in city neighborhoods. While the prevention rationale had been central to the approach towards urban recreation that centered on recreation as a particular 'intervention' for and within urban communities, the structure and organization of the recreation-based interventions of public-private recreation in the 1990s differed from previous models. As Hartmann (2001, p. 340) notes, the re-emergence of recreation as "prevention" and as "intervention" in the 1990s was marked by two inter-related developments. First, an increase in the scope, scale and number of public-private partnerships within public recreation departments and organizations; and second, the focus of many of these partnerships on the perceived relationships between neighborhood-based recreation programs and community stability, safety, and social inclusion.

The partnership model was implemented in varying degrees and towards different goals in relation to Baltimore's recreation system throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with the PALs program being an example of a multi-partner "partnership" that incorporated the process of privatization by effectively removing recreation services from the city-operated and funded department and transferring this service to an arrangement of public, private and non-profit organizations. However, the PAL centers also demonstrate the relationship between the partnership model and the re-emergence of the prevention and interventionist rationales as a primary justification for the support and funding of neighborhood-based recreation programs, as the program was organized with the direct goal and purpose of reducing crime and juvenile delinquency, in particular in poorer communities. Commissioner Frazier explained the PALs strategy was appropriate for Baltimore as a city characterized by the social polarization of "haves and have-nots", and conditions that were "a recipe for civil disorder," as PAL centers were sites where the police could directly intervene into the lives of children and adolescents and provide an alternative to delinquent and criminal activities (as



quoted in Hermann, 1996). In Frazier's view, the PAL sites were in a better position to offer recreation services as the program depended on private and non-profit funding rather than the city budget, and the centers served as opportunities to build "social capital" with youth and within communities, constituting the police as not only law enforcement but as "part of the social fabric of the city" (Hermann, 1996). The PALs program thus signals a re-articulation of the prevention and interventionist rationales for recreation services in this period, uncoupled from the previous formation and approach of urban recreation based in government funding and support, and instead linked specifically to the partnership model of public-private recreation. Further, the PALs qualify as one aspect of "social problems industry" (Pitter & Andrews, 1997) that emerged within the context of American cities in the 1990s, often in response to the descaling and decline of public social services.

In light of the decline of public recreation services and facilities, many communities, families and individuals instead were faced with two alternatives in regards to recreation provision: the private, fee-based model that was not accessible or affordable for all city residents; or, the "new brand of social welfare" in the form of neighborhood-based recreation through private and non-profit organizations and programming that were often premised on the rationale of recreation as a method of preventing social ills (Pitter & Andrews, 1997, p. 86). However, and in contrast to the 'universalist' approach included within the formation of urban recreation that sought to implement recreation programming for all city residents, the "social problems" organizations of the 1990s also most often incorporated the rationales of "prevention" and "intervention" into recreation programming that was specifically organized towards children and young adults, including the popular and controversial "midnight basketball" programs that were developed in many American cities during this period (Hartmann, 2001, p. 99). The PAL centers also were organized around these ideas, as each center included a "midnight" or evening basketball league for young adult males as part of its programming, which was most often limited to children and adolescents during the afternoon and evening operating hours (Matthews, 1997a). As Hartmann (2001) notes, these programs may allow for forms of social inclusion to develop between participants; however, and as we emphasize in the following section, the PALs program in Baltimore can be primarily recognized as a specific form of urban neoliberalization. Following Kelly (2011), neoliberal interventions involving sport and physical activity often emphasize individual social behaviors and "deficits", and serve to discount structural inequalities including the reduction of public services (p. 145).

### 3. Neoliberalization and the PALs in Baltimore

Following Peck and Tickell (2002), neoliberal policy changes and initiatives are often interconnected to the

rolling-back of public services within urban spaces, and yet are differentiated by particular rationales and logics. Roll-back neoliberalization signaled the wider transformation of American urban governance in regard to the erosion and dismantling of the Keynesian approach of an earlier generation. Roll-out neoliberalization emerged from this ideological shift, in the form of localized policies and initiatives that sought to construct an alternative form of social service delivery and provision, simultaneously addressing the "recurrent failures...of deregulation and marketization" (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 43) strategies that unerringly arose. Thus, as Brenner and Theodore (2002) illustrate, roll-out neoliberalization developed in relation to the "immanent contradictions and crisis tendencies" of neoliberal policy itself, as cities invoked other neoliberal strategies in an attempt to engage with the realities of disinvestment and privatization (p. 34). The transformation of urban policy within roll-back neoliberalization effectively created the break for alternate approaches to urban governance, often in the form of other neoliberal policy strategies that were enacted, or "rolled-out", in order to address the shortcomings and tensions of the rolling-back and dismantling of a previous form of governance.

The incorporation and implementation of the PALs program in Baltimore signals one aspect of the refigured approach to recreation; established rationales for recreation re-emerged, but were most often incorporated into the neoliberal processes of privatization, devolution and volunteerism, rather than as a premise for funding and supporting a city-operated public recreation agency. The PALs initiative represents a key element and force in the restructuring of recreation center policy within roll-out neoliberalization, as the department sought to supplement community and non-profit partnerships with a different type of recreation service, aimed at the youth population in particular "problem" neighborhoods. Within the PAL program, city police officers were assigned to "active participation...as role models, mentors, and caring adults for young people," and tasked with developing programming specifically designed for ages 7 through 17 that offered "a combined focus on character development, academic enrichment, arts and cultural activities, and athletics" (Subhas & Chandra, 2004). Operating under the program's motto, "Giving kids in our toughest neighborhoods a chance to succeed", the PAL program sought to display "how law enforcement personnel can have an impact on youth by fostering academic excellence, civic responsibility, creativity, self-regulation, and social values" (Subhas & Chandra, 2004). The initial implementation of the program had immediate effects on the city's recreation system, as several of the first 10 PAL centers were recreation centers that had been closed or were threatened with imminent closure due to budget cuts ("Police fill rec center void", 1996).

The PALs program, like other private and non-profit recreation programs focused on neighborhood-based

crime prevention outcomes, had several advantages over public recreation departments, primarily in regard to the differences in funding and support. While PAL centers attracted tax-exempt donations and grants from local and regional non-profit foundations, the city public recreation department was reliant on continually decreasing budgets and grant-funding opportunities. In July 1996, this “special advantage” meant that while the department was facing an additional \$2 million budget shortfall, and the possibility of further facility closures and staff layoffs, the PALs program expanded to 11 sites that were all former city recreation centers, and was receiving over \$200,000 annually in donations and grant funding for equipment and other facilities. This included a former 7-Eleven on in northeast Baltimore that was offered to the city for \$1 by the non-profit MACHT foundation, with the understanding that it would developed as a PAL site (Hermann, 1996).

The growth and support of the PALs program, while an example of the shifts to private and non-profit “partners” in the place of public recreation provision, also meant that the department was positioned as being inefficiently administered. Later that year—and in addition to forewarning further budget cuts—Mayor Schmoke assembled a 12-person “task force” to examine how the department could address these inefficiencies, by implementing increased user fees, the sale of parkland, and conversion of vacant land towards generating revenue that could help the department “pay more of its own way” (Matthews, 1996). While the “task force” model of recreation planning and policy would emerge again in Baltimore nearly fifteen years later, Schmoke’s utilization of this model signaled the necessity of alternative solutions to public recreation governance within the unfolding neoliberal climate. As the department’s attempts to maintain a “universalist” mission and vision of public recreation faltered (largely due to the reduction in the levels of resources and funding that had made the mission possible), the corollary was a visibly broken recreation system. As Schmoke indicated in announcing his task force, if the current trends of “downsizing” and “consolidation of services” continued, the department would also continue to “dwindle to a level that is unacceptable” (Matthews, 1996). Thus, along with being viewed as a more viable alternative and better-equipped competitor to the department’s recreation centers, PAL sites were often used to explain the inefficiencies of the department and its inability to effectively restructure recreation provision.

The deprioritization of public recreation as a city agency and service provider throughout the 1980s and 1990s symbolized the “slow death” of public recreation in the city, especially in comparison to the earlier generation of federally-subsidized support for recreation initiatives. Budget cuts and subsequent reductions to facilities, staff and programs meant that by 2000, Baltimore’s recreation centers had decreased from over 130 to less than 70, over 80 of the city’s playgrounds were consid-

ered unsafe, and one maintenance worker was responsible for over 100 acres of city parks (Farrey, 2008, p. 232). However, these changes also normalized neoliberalizing strategies that proved impactful beyond the public recreation realm. First, the highly visible inter-agency transfer of recreation services from the city’s public recreation department to the PAL administration and budget encouraged the further devolution of public services in favor of market alternatives (Tennberg, Vola, Espiritu, Schwenke Fors, & Ejdemo, 2014). Second, modeled after a similar initiative in several other cities including New York and Philadelphia, the PALs also serve as a form of what Peck and Tickell (2002, p. 391) refer to as “interjurisdictional policy transfer”, in which city governments share and incorporate particular elements of neoliberal policy restructuring across different locations. In this mode, the PAL program popularized the social problems industry ethos, in which recreational opportunities were directly correlated with patterns of juvenile delinquency and viewed as a tool that could address the effects and consequences of social inequality. In seeking to adopt some of the same principles in forming the PAL program in Baltimore, Police Commissioner Frazier asserted that the program sought to build “social capital” between officers and neighborhood youth, especially in the context of the city’s socioeconomic environment of “haves and have-nots” (Hermann, 1996). As a form of interventionist policy that was effectively shared by multiple American cities, the PAL program therefore evidences a lack of concern for local conditions, and instead emphasizes a universal understanding of sport as a cure for a variety of social problems, rather than a focus on the particular forces that “*might* lead to desired outcomes for some participants or some organizations in *certain circumstances*” (Coalter, 2010, p. 311).

In August 1997, the contrasting realities of the city’s recreation centers and PAL centers—with recreation facilities facing annual budget reductions, and the possibility of partial or full closures, while PAL centers continued to see increased private and non-profit funding and political support—were evidenced in Mayor Schmoke’s plan to expand the PAL program to another 10 centers, all of which were operating as city recreation facilities at the time of the plan’s announcement (Matthews, 1997b). The decision to simultaneously and directly increase the number of PALs, while reducing recreation centers, provoked tensions regarding the roles and purposes of each of the agencies involved, including criticism regarding the role of staff and a lack of recreation training by police officers charged with operating the PAL centers. However, while a community volunteer at the Robert C. Marshall center in west Baltimore (one of the centers designated for transfer to the PAL program) would describe the plan as “one of the worst mistakes they can possibly make”, the overriding rationale for the transfer of the 10 facilities was provided by the Mayor who stated it would allow the city to “likely get through the year without closing any recreation centers” (Matthews, 1997b). The final

plan would involve not only the immediate transfer of the 10 centers, but also the establishing of at least one PAL center in each of the city's 29 police districts, as the PAL program was again framed as a potential solution to both the issues of a declining public recreation system and the "problems based" context of many urban communities (Subhas & Chandra, 2004). As a form of rolled-out recreation, the devolution of services and facilities from the city's recreation department to the PALs program serves as an example of a policy initiative designed and deployed specifically towards addressing the conditions of rolled-back urban neoliberalization.

Despite public support for the PALs in the intervening years that saw the number of centers expanded to 27 locations by 2000, the program had long faced financial struggles, and Mayor Martin O'Malley was subsequently forced to close several centers in his first two years in office (Craig, 2000). Then in 2003, after the non-profit organization that operated the PAL centers announced that they were no longer financially capable of managing the program, O'Malley transferred control of the remaining 18 PALs to the police department (Wilber, 2003). Thereafter, the program endured several years of financial shortfalls. The citywide budget cuts in 2009 ultimately made the operation of the PAL centers unfeasible for a police department facing its own fiscal challenges. The demise of the PAL program also had immediate consequences for city recreation centers, as the transfer of facilities from the recreation department to the PALs program that had occurred in the mid and late 1990s was essentially reversed (Hermann, 2009). Further, in order to meet budget expectations, the department planned to close two recreation centers of its own, lay off several staff positions, and reduce hours at several centers to "after school only"—the negative public reaction to these planned closures and reductions in services was evident in the dozens of letters and emails that the department received, mostly in protest of the transfers and closures of PAL centers (Hermann, 2009).

In response, the final implementation of the strategy to address the future of neighborhood recreation centers saw 12 of the PALs re-incorporated into the system of city recreation centers, with a single center closing and the others transferred to schools or non-profit groups already operating in the facility (Hermann, 2009). However, the transfer of these facilities to the control of the recreation department was not accompanied by an increase to the operating budget of the department, meaning that recreation center staff and services were tasked with an increased number of facilities, on a still-shrinking budget. In many ways, the re-addition of the former PAL sites to the network of recreation centers represented a window into the city's fiscal and administrative crisis: the reabsorption of facilities and services into a system defined by years of declining budgets and support only served to aggravate existing problems in relation to recreation staffing, programming, and maintenance.

#### 4. Conclusions

An analysis of the PALs in Baltimore is also relevant to wider discussions regarding the uneven development of post-industrial cities, as well as the linkages between urban recreation and the goals and practices of social inclusion (Collins, 2014). However, and as this article demonstrates, the shifting relations between public recreation, urban policy and planning, and issues of social inclusion within Baltimore have special importance in the local context; they have often emerged in the wake of tragic events, including the violence following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 and the death of Baltimore resident Freddie Gray while in police custody in 2015 (Efelbein, Nix & Hollowak, 2011; Reutter, 2015).

Within this context, the deprioritization of public recreation—and, within the Baltimore context, the demise of the PALs and continued disinvestment in public recreation—were inevitabilities. The provision of recreation for Baltimore's continually underserved urban populations markedly declined in the period post-2009, a situation brought to the public's attention in the aftermath of the 2015 violence in Baltimore ignited by the unlawful killing of Freddie Gray, wherein some of the city's youth took to the streets in protest. While perhaps not easily attributable to the demise of public recreation within the city, many local politicians asserted this position. For instance, city councilman Bill Henry condemned the decades-long underfunding of public services aimed at improving the lives of young black citizens, including after-school programs, libraries, and recreation centers (Reutter, 2015). In Henry's words, the city's youth no longer attend recreation centers in the numbers they did previously because "They are in awful shape because we haven't put any money in them in any serious amounts for a quarter of a century" (quoted in Reutter, 2015). Tellingly, Henry continued—underscoring the shift toward carceral initiatives indicative of urban governance within the state of exception of neoliberal austerity—"the city has 'purposely disinvested' in young people 'in favor of investing in catching and caging them'" (quoted in Reutter, 2015).

Many scholars have recognized the impact of urban neoliberalization on communities of color, specifically in relation to social inequality and economic opportunity (Wacquant, 2009), as well as in regard to the connections between reduced social support and increased levels of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2012). In his recent, and vivid, contextualization of the Midnight Basketball League, Hartmann (2016, p. 73) refers to this expression of the *social problems industry* as an "example of neoliberal paternalism and the new carceral state, a microcosm of American neoliberal social policy and racialized political culture." As we have demonstrated within this brief discussion, Baltimore's PALs can be considered in precisely the same vein. They emerged and developed out of the conflation of paternalistic and punitive attitudes toward Baltimore's underserved urban populace, which



effectively demonized the very population they were attempting to serve. Despite the unquestionably laudable intentions of many of those working within the PAL program, its very institutional structure and philosophy positioned the urban populace (rather than the broader forces and relations responsible for challenging urban conditions) as an a priori problem that needed to be addressed. In Baltimore and other American cities, issues related to the social (dis)investment in young people of color have been the primary concern of emergent political and social movements, including Black Lives Matter, and the incorporation of these issues into the activism of community organizations holds some promise for a restructured approach to interventionist policies and programs. However, and as we have demonstrated, within the context of the urban neoliberalization of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Baltimore PAL program was often rooted in assumptions regarding the role of recreation in the process of improving the social inclusion of spatially, social, and economically marginalized groups. This analysis therefore suggests that the very real limits of recreation policy need to be taken into account when designing and implementing future interventions, lest we fail to learn from the experiences—and thereby repeat the mistakes—of the not too distant past.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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