Baltimore Rallying To Fight Its No. 1 Enemy-Housing Hazards

A City Battles Against Slums

By LOUIE ROBINSON

Asleep on the third floor of his Vine St. home, a 6-year-old boy's small, snub nose twitched nervously in the darkness with the smell of smoke.

Suddenly he sat up and shook the girl lying beside him. Switching on the light, the boy's large brown eyes roamed the smoke-filled room, helplessly.

On the floors below, a raging fire was snuffing out the lives of four other member of the family. Miraculously, the two children escaped from their fire-trap dwelling.

This happened on March 11 of this year.

Thirty teen-agers at a birthday party in the 1200 block of Dallas St. barely escaped injury Feb. 29 when the living room floor collapsed, dumping them into the cellar.

Rat Victim

On March 31, an ailing 101-year-old man died of gangrene the day after he was bitten by a rat in his run-down, overcrowded apartment in the 500 block W. Barre St.

The house has long since been ruled unsatisfactory for human habitation because of sanitary and building conditionGs by the City Health Department's Hodsing Bureau.

In July, 1951, a small girl died of lead poisoning after nibbling at the window sill of her home in the 200 block of Biddle St.

A laboratory report later showed that 96 per cent of the bedroom paint and the first floor stairway paint was lead-based.

These are thing that happen in slum areas, and they happen far more frequently than is ever reported.

In Baltimore, slums comprise only about 10 per cent of the total land area, but out of this small area comes a startling story.

Approximately 46 per cent of the population—343,284 people—live there. OUT OF THAT L A' comes 55 per cent of our juvenile delinquency; 60 per cent of the tuberculosis victims; 50 per cent of the disease; 50 per cent of the arrests; 45 per cent of our major crimes and 35 per cent of the fires.

Old Age Hurts

The slums eat up 40 per cent of the city budget but contribute only 6 per cent of the real estate tax revenues.

These 10 per cent slums—Baltimore's No. 1 enemy—rob the city of money and sound citizens. In cold, hard cash, the city is losing an estimated $14,3000,000 a year from blighted areas.

An old city, 91,244 homes in Baltimore were built before 1900. Consequently, 61,050 of them are without central heating systems, 48,943 have no private toilet, 26,718 have outside toilets, and 25,772 are without bath or shower.

At least 21,753 of our dwelling units are in need of major repairs.

Because Baltimore leads the six largest cities in the United States in these slum problems, it could probably rank as the nation's filthiest.

'Blight'-A Nicer Word

There is a nicer word for slums that has recently come into popular usage. The word is "blight." It isn't quite as offensive as the word "slums," but it means almost the same thing.

Blight applies to overcrowded, dilapidated buildings that invite fires and accients. It means outmoded or totally absent health and sanitation facilities.

A blighted area is a blight upon the whole city.

What's Being Done

Fortunately, Baltimore, working with aroused citizens, is staging a three-pronged attack on blight. Our slums are being fought throu public housing, redevelopment and housing law enforcement.

The public housing program began in 1937 when the City Council created the Housing Authority of Baltimore city to clear slums and build and operate low-rent public housing for people who cannot obtain decent housing in the private market.

A family's income and the number of children who are dependent on that income determine how much the family is able to pay. The HABC adjusts its rents to family circumstances through aid from Federal and city governments.

This program obviously costs millions of dollars, and here just isn't enough public funds to go around.

Redevelopment

An attack upon Baltimore's blight was made from a new source in 1945 when the Baltimore Redevelopment Commission was established to enlist the aid of private enterprise in clearing slums and rebuilding the areas.

In 1947, after eight slum areas had been earmarked by the City $5,000,000 bond issue was authorized by citizens to provide funds to absorb part of the acquisition costs involved in clearing the slum areas so that the land could be leased to private builders at a moderate price.

The first two projects under the redevelopment program are now underway. One will clear an 11-block, tightly-packed area of substandard row houses. It will provide residential facilities for the Johns Hopkins medical institutions and moderate-rent garden apartments for colored, along with many modern facilities.

The Baltimore Plan

The third program fighting Baltimore's blight might be called one of law-enforced good housekeeping. It is a program of neighborhood rehabilitation through the enforcement of health, housing, sanitation, building, fire and zoning ordinances on a block-by-block basis. Designed to improve living conditions in sub-standard housing areas, it also is aimed at preventing formation and growth of slums.

Known as the Baltimore Plan of Housing Law Enforcement, it is still in its developmental stages, operating in blighted areas that cannot presently be cleared by ether private or public funds.

Actually, housing law enforcement originated in the City Health Department late in 1939. It began to roll in 1945 when joint inspections and enforcement of the fire, building and city housing codes were made in a structure-to-structure campaign in a single block.

Housing Bureau's Job

Responsibility for the Baltimore Plan is now centralized with the Housing Bureau of the Health Department.

By 1950 the Baltimore Plan had rehabilitated 100 blocks. With the change in housing conditions came a change in the living habits of the population and whole new attitude on cleanliness and beauty.

Brightly-painted steps, doors, window frames, fruit crates, along with flowers and plants, sprung up where the old yard toilets, high wooden fences and piles of trash once stood. The insides of the houses were kept bright by the use of paint and the scrub brush.

Blocks began working together to beautify and decorate their homes. School children started making gardens and playgrounds where rubbish-laden, rat-infested lots once stood.

This success led to the choosing of a 27-block blighted neighborhood in East Baltimore as a target for a "Pilot Program." All of the area was not a rock-bottom slum, but it nevertheless presented new problems for the Baltimore Plan.

While in other areas the majority of the landlords were absentee owners who could be forced to renovate their property, in the Pilot Area over half the residents owned their own homes. Some of the homeowners, already financially over-taxed by mortgage or contract of sale payments, plus the high cost of living, couldn't scrape up the cash for improvements.

But a Fight Blight Fund, Inc., was established to help, and into the Pilot Area went law enforcement, education and social service committees. A neighborhood committee, composed of residents and leaders in the area, was formed to interpret the program to the neighborhood and bring the needs of the people to the agencies working in the program.

A steering committee was also set up, and experts were chosen for project analysis and as community consultants.

These groups, as the Pilot Area will now attest, have been getting the job done.

Clean Block Campaign

Operating on a somewhat smaller scale for many years has been the AFRO-AMERICAN Newspaper's Clean Block Campaign, organized by Miss Frances Murphy.

Some of the blocks rehabilitated through the law enforcement program have won prizes in the Clean Block Campaign. It, too, is a cooperative effort that envelopes men, women and children in a new spirit as their children played in swings, see-saws and the fresh, open air. It took outside help, housing law enforcement, and the will of the people to do it.

There are many problems that lie ahead in ridding Baltimore of its blighted areas problems that only the combined efforts of a neighborhood can overcome.

But the ball is rolling.

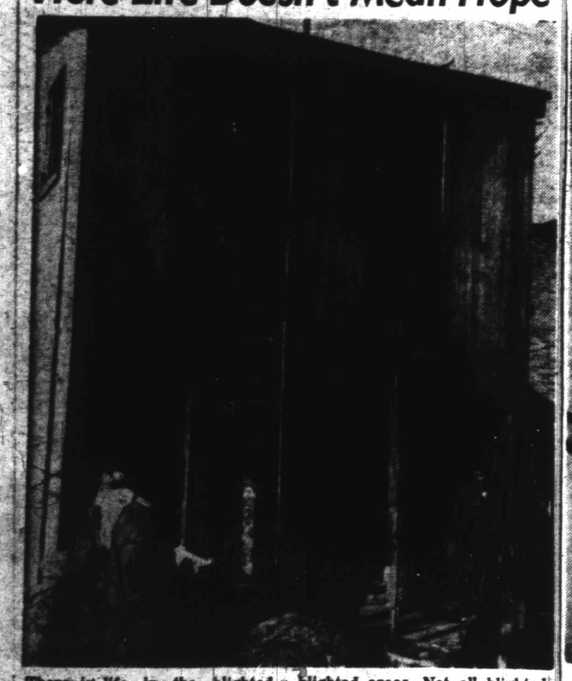
Do Your Kids Play In Alleys Like This?

Thousands of Baltimore youngsters, colored and white, use only the dangerous streets of run-down back alleys of blighted areas for their playgrounds. In alleys such as this, tin cans and rusty nails menance small, bare feet; tumbling buildings invite accidents, and filth spreads disease. In the alleys and streets of this city's slums, 55 per cent of Baltimore's entire juvenile delinquency is bred. A direct result of neglect, blight has engulfed 10 per cent of the city, and in these blighted areas, about 28 out of every 1,000 children are delinquents. Approximately 74 of every 1,000 infants die soon after they are born. If your kids play in the slum alleys, they flirt with danger at every step.

— Or In Safe Playground Areas Like This?

In an experimental blighted area in East Baltimore, a group of citizens with community pride through the guidance of the Health Department's Housing Bureau have cleaned up their surroundings. Alleys like the one at left were cleared away to be replaced by safe, roomy playground areas like the one above. Crumbling back yard fences and outdoor toilets were removed. Wire fences or new, freshly painted wooden ones went up. Many back yards began to sport flowers and shrubbery, houses got bright coats of paint, and the residents took on

Here Life Doesn't Mean Hope



There is life in the blighted areas, but in the worst of them, life does not always mean hope. For people forced to live in places like this, hope for a better way of life often dies long before breath leaves the body. Of more than 900,000 Baltimoreans, 343,284 of them live in blighted areas. Not all blighted areas are as bad as the house above, but many of them are. For 91,244 homes in this city were built before 1900, 21,753 need major repairs, 26,718 have outside toilets which are against the law- and 25,772 homes are without bath or shower.

What Can Be Done?

And this is the job that can be accomplished through the Baltimore Pain of housing law enforcement. Once clean, sanitary facilities and bright surroundings are established, the new pride taken in their homes by families usually does the rest. The improved health conditions that result pay off in actual dollars and cents. Where home owners cannot afford to make their own repairs and improvements, a Fight Blight Fund Inc., is being set up to help them over the financial hurdles.

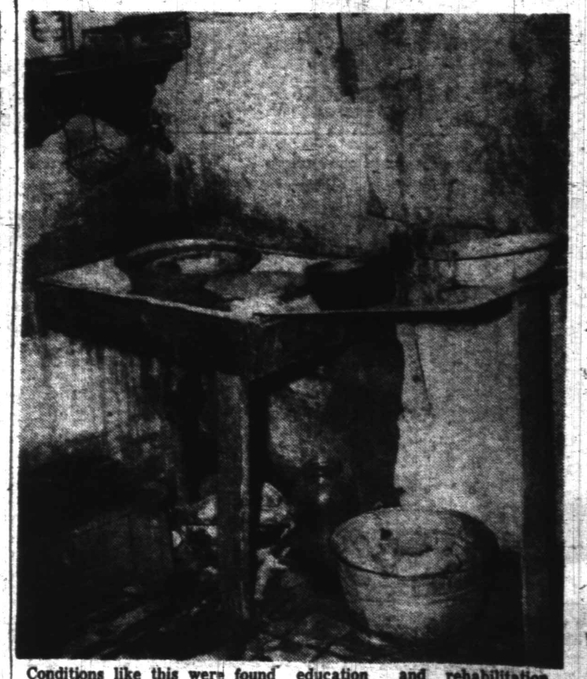
Clean Block Campaigners Fight Blight

A strong force in the fight against blight is the AFRO-AMERICAN Newspaper's Clean Block Campaign, now in its 18th year. Among its many aims is that of establishing colorful surroundings for neighborhoods comprised of low-income families. Held during the summer months, the campaign is successful largely because of its attraction for school-age youngsters with time on their hands. Financed by The AFRO, Baltimore City, and donations from citizens and organizations, the kids help by giving street fairs, suppers and entertainments during the winter.

Your Child's Playmate?

Called man's worst friend, the rat is an ever-present danger in slum areas. An inhabitant of the filth of attics and cellars, cracks and crevices, he raids garbage cans for his livelihood. Many diseases have been spread by rats. They have started fires by gnawing at matches and electrical wiring. Their bite has meant death to infants and adults alike. Wherever there is neglect of property, the brown rat, Baltimore's own particular variety will make his home. He is a prime reason why blighted areas represent the city's No. 1 enemy.

A Job To Be Done



Conditions like this were found by Housing Bureau inspectors when they went into blighted areas to begin the Baltimore Plan of law-enforced good housekeeping. For thousands of people the only homes they've ever known look like this inside. In such instances a program of education and rehabilitation must go along with the clean-up program. An aroused community spirit is needed to go along with the trained workers in order to clean up blight and halt the formation and spreading of slums.