

# Community Assessment of Wilde Lake and Harper's Choice, Columbia, MD

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This paper presents the findings of a community-wide assessment of Harper's Choice and Wilde Lake villages in Columbia, MD. This assessment was commissioned by the Columbia Association and Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) and was conducted by a group of six Master of Social Work students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. The students performed a literature review, data search and analysis, low-level participant observation, and interviews with neighborhood residents and stakeholders. The group's findings suggest a lack of bridging social capital within each community. In other words, there is seemingly minimal interaction between the diverse groups living in each of the two villages - older and younger residents in Wilde Lake, and race/ethnic groups in Harper's Choice. The preliminary recommendations included in this report focus on building intergroup collaboration and community engagement, with the ultimate goal of enhancing community identity and revitalization.

### **History and Description of Study Area**

Columbia, Maryland is a planned community born during the "new town" era of the 1960s. James Rouse of Howard Research and Development recruited experts in a variety of fields to envision an ideal community that would meet the needs of its people through housing, jobs, recreation, education, health care (Columbia Association, 2015). The team created Columbia with four main goals (Howard County Tourism, Inc., 2015): meet various needs including: housing, education, health etc. of people living in the community; respect the land by incorporating nature throughout the town; support the "growth of people" through caring communities and non-profits; and make a profit: encourage and maintain flourish economic development. Today, residents call this history and vision of Columbia, the "Columbia Dream" and refer to it proudly as a harking back to a time when people sought to live among diversity and thrive as a community.

The focus of this assessment is Wilde Lake and Harper's Choice, two of the ten Columbia villages. Wilde Lake was the first of the ten villages and is considered Columbia's historic district (Wilde Lake

Community Association, 2015). The village is named for its man made reservoir created by the Rouse Company. Wilde Lake's Community Center is called Slayton House and is home to a theater, art gallery, and the community association's offices (Columbia Villages, 2015). Other assets in Wilde Lake include Wilde Lake High School and Columbia Swim Center. Wilde Lake is also located very close and within walking distance of Columbia mall. Harper's Choice is located directly west of Wilde Lake and was developed in the 1970s with a mix of housing and businesses and underwent a major renovation in 1998. Harper's Choice still mixes residential, retail, and office space and is known for its emphasis on providing communal spaces for outdoor activities and fitness (Columbia Villages, 2015). The Community Center is called Kahler Hall and other assets include the Florence Bain Senior Center, The Athletic Club, Columbia Sports Park, and Hobbit's Glen Golf Course. Harper's Choice is also located very close to Howard Community College.

## **Findings**

### **Demographics**

The group compared the demographics of Wilde Lake and Harper's Choice to those of Columbia as a whole and Howard County. Historically and at present, Harper's Choice and Wilde Lake have higher proportions of racial minorities. The largest minority group in both villages is African Americans, at 33% in Harper's Choice and 34% in Wilde Lake, compared to 25% in Columbia as whole (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Noteworthy in Harper's Choice is the higher proportion of Hispanic residents. Census 2010 data reported a Hispanic population of 9%; however, Census data is likely low as it often fails to capture undocumented immigrants who are reluctant to interact with representatives of the government. School enrollment may provide a more accurate picture and to this end - Harpers Choice Middle reports 16.5% Latino enrollment (Howard County Public Schools, 2015). Following national, state, and county trends, both of these race/ethnic groups are projected to grow in the next twenty years (Columbia Association, 2013).

Wilde Lake is home to an older population than Columbia as a whole, with a higher proportion of residents over age 65 (19% compared to Columbia’s 11%) (Columbia Association, 2013). Similar to the rest of Columbia, household incomes in both villages skew toward middle- to high-income levels, but Wilde Lake and Harper’s Choice are also home to a higher proportion of lower income households. Both villages have a higher proportion of single female-headed households (around 16% in both villages compared to Columbia’s 12%) (Columbia Association, 2013).

**Housing**

Owner-occupied housing in both villages is relatively well maintained and highly valued. Although the median list and sale price for homes in both villages is lower than those of Columbia as a whole, homes for sale in both villages command a higher price than that at which they are listed, which suggests a continued demand for housing in the area. As the first of the ten villages, Wilde Lake’s housing stock is the oldest in Columbia, which is likely the cause of its lower valuation. Given this and the fact that Wilde Lake’s population is aging, home maintenance may be a challenge moving forward (see Table 1, below).

Table 1.

	Harper's Choice	Wilde Lake	Columbia
<b>Median List Price</b>	\$350,000.00	\$202,000.00	\$357,000.00
<b>Median Sale Price</b>	\$357,000.00	\$268,000.00	\$373,000.00
Source: Redfin (last 90 days) as of 11/29/15			

Another potential challenge moving forward is the concentration of lower value homes in two of the four census tracts (6055.03 and 6054.02) that encompass Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake villages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These census tracts are the two nearest the villages respective centers and the Columbia Mall. It is noteworthy that crime rates are higher in these two census tracts than those with

higher valued homes as well as Columbia as a whole. These two geographic areas might be at higher risk of decline if property values decrease and crime rates continue to increase in the future (see Table 2, below).

Table 2.

	W. Harper's Choice (6055.02)	E. Harper's Choice (6055.03)	NE Wilde Lake + Dorsey's Search (6054.01)	SW Wilde Lake + Town Center (6054.02)
<b>Median Home Value</b>	478,400	318,400	396,100	279,800
Source: American Community Survey, 2013				

Affordability of rental housing is an issue in Wilde Lake and Harper's Choice, as it is across all of Columbia. As of 2013, nearly 45% of renters in the two villages were spending more than 30% of their income on housing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Rental housing is scarce in both villages, particularly for households that qualify for federal housing subsidies. The two rental facilities in Harper's Choice that accept Housing Choice Vouchers are not currently accepting applications as their waiting list is over two years long. Wilde Lake will soon have a higher number of rental units, associated with the recent redevelopment of the Wilde Lake Village Center, but these luxury units will rent for market rate. Rental affordability for both subsidized and unsubsidized households will continue to be an issue going forward.

**Crime**

Crime can be a determining factor regarding economic development. Tables 3, 4 and 5 (below) demonstrate that aggregate non-violent and violent crime rates are higher in both villages than in Howard County as a whole. Crime occurs more frequently in Harper's Choice than in Wilde Lake. Crime

rates are generally higher in the areas with lower home values and nearest the commercial centers (East Harper’s Choice and Southwest Wilde Lake). West and East Harper’s Choice experienced less non-violent and violent crime than Southwest and Northeast Wilde Lake. Theft and vandalism appear to be the two nonviolent offenses with the most occurrences. Burglary and drug violations are the third and fourth most occurring offenses in both Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake.

Regarding violent crime, aggravated assault and robbery are the top two offenses reported in Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake.

Table 3.

	HARPER’S CHOICE				WILDE LAKE				TOTAL HOWARD COUNTY			
	2012	2013	2014	% Change	2012	2013	2014	% Change	2012	2013	2014	% Change
Aggravated Assault	11	20	18	64%	17	18	14	-18%	359	373	368	3%
Homicide	0	0	0		0	1	0		4	4	5	25%
Rape	0	3	0		0	1	2		34	40	39	15%
Robbery	9	7	11	22%	6	15	7	17%	177	204	200	13%
<b>TOTAL VIOLENT</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>574</b>	<b>621</b>	<b>612</b>	<b>7%</b>
Burglary	27	35	33	22%	43	48	52	21%	1185	1032	869	-27%
Disorderly Conduct	18	21	18	0%	11	4	17	55%	301	321	284	-6%

Drug Violation	28	17	47	68%	30	32	35	17%	1057	1040	974	-8%
Theft	121	118	136	12%	147	120	136	-7%	4913	4829	4605	-6%
Vandalism	45	39	85	89%	65	53	93	43%	1614	1548	1284	-20%
Vehicle Theft	8	3	10	25%	14	6	7	-50%	312	254	229	-27%
Weapons Violations	1	3	5	400%	8	3	3	-63%	113	91	83	-27%
<b>TOTAL NONVIOLENT</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>9495</b>	<b>9115</b>	<b>8328</b>	<b>-12%</b>

Table 4.

	W. Harper's Choice				E. Harper's Choice			
	2012	2013	2014	% Change	2012	2013	2014	% Change
Aggravated Assault	7	6	4	-43%	4	14	14	250%
Homicide	0	0	0		0	0	0	
Rape	0	1	0		0	2	0	
Robbery	3	2	4	33%	6	5	7	17%
<b>TOTAL VIOLENT</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>-20%</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>110%</b>
Burglary	15	12	11	-27%	12	23	22	83%
Disorderly Conduct	11	14	12	9%	7	7	6	-14%
Drug Violation	12	6	16	33%	16	11	31	94%



Theft	64	62	54	-16%	57	56	82	44%
Vandalism	24	10	30	25%	21	29	55	162%
Vehicle Theft	3	2	6	100%	5	1	4	-20%
Weapons Violations	0	1	2		1	2	3	200%
<b>TOTAL NONVIOLENT</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>71%</b>

Table 5.

	W. Harper's Choice				E. Harper's Choice			
	2012	2013	2014	% Change	2012	2013	2014	% Change
Aggravated Assault	7	6	4	-43%	4	14	14	250%
Homicide	0	0	0		0	0	0	
Rape	0	1	0		0	2	0	
Robbery	3	2	4	33%	6	5	7	17%
<b>TOTAL VIOLENT</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>-20%</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>110%</b>
Burglary	15	12	11	-27%	12	23	22	83%
Disorderly Conduct	11	14	12	9%	7	7	6	-14%
Drug Violation	12	6	16	33%	16	11	31	94%
Theft	64	62	54	-16%	57	56	82	44%
Vandalism	24	10	30	25%	21	29	55	162%

Vehicle Theft	3	2	6	100%	5	1	4	-20%
Weapons Violations	0	1	2		1	2	3	200%
<b>TOTAL NONVIOLENT</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>71%</b>

(Howard County Police Department, 2015).

When asked about the overall crime in Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake the Officer stated, “Crime has increased everywhere.. crime here isn’t like Baltimore City but we have crime. No place is without crime.”

Howard County has crime prevention programs in place such as Coffee with a Cop, which is a community outreach event that occurs on the first Thursday of every month. Programs like these can promote healthy relationships between the police and community. Howard County Police run a Community Action Center located in the Harper’s Choice Village Center. This too can help building police-community relationships, but could also signal that crime is a problem in the area and stigmatize the community in the eyes of outsiders. Programs like these can promote healthy relationships between the Police and the community.

**Commercial**

Like all of Columbia’s ten villages, Wilde Lake and Harper’s Choice villages are home to commercial centers that are referred to as “Village Centers”. The Wilde Lake Village Center recently underwent a \$17.6 million redevelopment. KIMCO, a national for-profit developer, managed the redevelopment including the leasing of retail spaces to various businesses. The Village Center, which was previously considered to be in decline, is now home to high end stores and restaurants including The Melting Pot, David’s Natural Foods, and Absolute Wine and Spirits. The Harper’s Choice Village Center is similarly anchored by a grocery store, but it and the other businesses there seemingly serve a lower income market. The anchor grocer in Harper’s Choice is Safeway and it’s alcohol retailer is a liquor store. The potential result: higher income households shop at Wilde Lake Village Center while lower income

households shop in Harper’s Choice. As with housing and crime in Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake, this apparent geographic separation of groups creates a higher risk of decline in some areas.

### **Schools**

There are two middle schools and one high school districted for Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake. All three schools have a higher proportion of minority students than the villages in which they are located. The schools also have a relatively high proportion of students receiving free and reduced lunches. Several of the schools reported having affinity groups for minority students. While these groups are critical in building connections within minority groups, they may not support the development of connections between groups. The school has special programs for a variety of groups including a partnership with Howard County Office on Aging, which provides senior citizen mentors.

A main theme throughout this project has been the issue of younger professionals moving out of Columbia while the rest of the population is aging. If the schools can continue to please parents, which in turn means the students are likely enjoying their experiences, it could go a long way into getting students to want to stay and return to Columbia in their 20s after college. With schools as ethnically diverse as Harper’s Choice Middle School, Wilde Lake Middle School, and Wilde Lake High School, it is important to have successful and productive schools that are welcoming for all ethnicities so that these students will want to remain in Columbia and help keep Columbia a productive and ethnically diverse community for years to come.

## **Interviews and Observations**

### **Wilde Lake: Gaps Between Generations**

Through interviews conducted at Wilde Lake’s Community Center, Slayton House, researchers learned that a gap exists between the older “pioneer” generation of Wild Lake residents and younger families new to the village. As noted above, Wilde Lake contains the highest proportions of residents who are 65+ compared with Columbia as a whole. Kristin Shulder and Kitty Brice of Slayton House expressed

many challenges inherent in being an “older” village, but emphasized the following dynamic: while younger families cannot afford to live in Wilde Lake and are not attracted to Wilde Lake due to its older population, older families struggle to maintain their homes and increasingly move to senior living facilities which are located outside of Wilde Lake. Thus, Wilde Lake struggles to address the needs of either, let alone both, groups of residents. Slayton House staff identified that their greatest challenge to develop a plan to bring younger families into Wilde Lake while also addressing the needs of older residents has to do with disconnects in perception, communication, and values.

For example, the village board (comprised exclusively of white residents 50 years+) is interested in attracting younger and more diverse families to Wilde Lake through the redevelopment of their downtown. Though the new apartments are “market value,” they are geared towards upper middle class and upper class. When asked what type of new residents Slayton House staff thought the developments were geared towards, they answered young professionals with high income careers (“not teachers”): doctors and lawyers as well as empty nesters when they no longer need/can maintain larger homes. They also thought the developments were geared towards bringing in military families from Ft. Meade. The staff members emphasized that there is no middle ground for middle-income families, though they can more likely afford in Wilde Lake than in other Columbia villages. An important perception disconnect leading to this dichotomy (the desire/need for younger families but overall unaffordability) is the perception among some older decision makers that home ownership is the only way to guarantee community investment, while younger families need more diverse housing options in order to afford to live in Wilde Lake. While the older residents cling to decades old value in homeownership, trends nationally show that the homeownership rate for young adults is currently at about 36%, compared to 43 a decade ago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The reasons for such a decrease are abundant, most having to do with lower wages and higher debt for the generation born between 1980-1995 (Goldman, et. al. 2015). Data also suggests that young adults choose to settle down later, enjoy being more transient than

their past counterparts, and value the flexibility that renting, rather than owning a home can afford them (Goldman, e. al., 2015). As discussed above, diverse housing was part of the original Rouse plan and is valued by the older generation in Wilde Lake. Potential younger residents also value diverse housing options, particularly those which cater towards their particular barriers. Thus, the disconnect remains a perceptions issue which could begin to be worked out by bringing younger, diverse voices to the decision making tables of Wilde Lake's Village Board and Community Association.

### **School Systems**

Gail Williams, a mother of three, whose kids all attended Wilde Lake Middle School, had generally positive things to say about the school. When asked to describe her overall impressions on Wilde Lake Middle School, Williams said, " I think all my kids enjoyed their time there. It was always a diverse school as far as I could tell but the ethnicity breakdown you read to me makes me believe that the school has become even more diverse since my last child left WLMS (in 2008). As a teacher myself in a different county, I thought for the most part the teachers all did a nice job and were open to communicate with parents.

Regarding schools, a teacher at Wilde Lake High School, who wanted to remain anonymous, was interviewed and asked some questions about their impressions of opportunities for minority students at Wilde Lake and about some of the after-school clubs and programs available. They responded by saying, "I know we have a Hispanic Achievement Club, Black Student Achievement Club and a Hispanic Honors Society. I think there are more but those are just the ones off the top of my head. Since I have been teaching here (they have been there 8 years), I do believe we have seen an increase in Hispanic and African American students. I believe we have done a good job by having these clubs for these students to feel welcome at our school and be able to interact not only with other ethnicities but with people similar to them."

This quote from the teacher supports some of the findings throughout our research. Wilde Lake High School has seen an increase in African American and Latino students over the past couple of years. By having strong organizations and clubs where these students can feel comfortable, the school believes they are doing their part to assimilate these students into Wilde Lake High School's culture.

### **Resident Interviews**

**Interview with Wilde Lake covenant advisor Carl McKinney.** In his role as covenant advisor Mr. McKinney has seen the numbers of Latino residents increase substantially over the last five years. While performing the functions of his job he does come into contact with Latino members of the community, he described them as hardworking. Further he said that if they are coming here (to Wilde Lake/Columbia) the sacrifice they must make to afford to live in the community indicates they want to have a better life and the community should welcome them. He indicated in Wilde Lake there was at least one home he knew of being rented to Latino's by an absentee landlord who may be taking advantage of the resident's legal status to charge above market rent. When asked if he knew of any outreach to this community by the Columbia Association (CA) or the County government Mr. McKinney indicated he did not know of outreach occurring. He indicated that there was little Slayton House had to offer this population in terms of resources and assistance. Further there are no Spanish speaking staff at Slayton House. This conversation highlighted just one of the many challenges Latinos face in Wilde Lake and greater Columbia. Those that have uncertain legal status may fall prey to unscrupulous landlords. For those that do fall into this situation, there is little help available to them within the community. Based on my conversation with Mr. McKinney it appeared that even those with legal standing had little interaction with the CA or community resources.

**Interview with Harpers Choice resident Julia A.** Julia A is a 27-year-old Argentine American. She has dual citizenship and has been living in Columbia for 17 years. She attended Junior High and High School within the community. Julia's family moved to Columbia because of its reputation for safety and

good schools. She was unaware of the founding principal of diversity in Columbia. She has experienced discrimination by staff at both village town centers and the mall through profiling. Despite this she says the community is opening and welcoming of newcomers in general. She said that her family does not engage with the CA regularly but that they do use county and community services. Her family is bilingual. When asked if she had ever noticed gang activity in her neighborhood or schools growing up she laughed and was dismissive of the idea.

**Interview with Owens Brown resident Monica G.** Monica is a 32-year-old woman from Honduras. She is an undocumented immigrant who speaks limited English. She rents a Townhouse in the village of Owen Brown with her 7-year-old American Citizen daughter and two other boarders whom she says are family friends. Monica would qualify for protection from deportation if President Obama's Executive Action were acted on. Monica chose to move to Columbia after spending several years in Baltimore when she first arrived to the U.S. She came to Baltimore because she had family in the city. She says she moved to Columbia because she wanted her daughter to be safe. For her, the cost of living is very high and she has difficulty commuting to her job as an office cleaner in Towson via public transportation. However, she says the inconvenience is worth it for the perceived safety of her daughter. She has had no contact with the CA or Howard County Government. She says she is afraid to interact with the government because of her legal status. She identifies the greatest challenges for her living in Columbia are the general cost of living and commuting to work. She says public transportation within Columbia is sufficient but it is hard to get to Baltimore. She would like to find work closer to home but has not been able to do so due to her legal status. She shops at the Columbia mall and at the town center of Owen Brown.

#### **Focus Issue: Social Capital**

The group's findings suggest a lack of bridging social capital in Harper's Choice and Wilde Lake. "Social capital refers to the collective value of all 'social networks' (who people know) and the

inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other... [Social capital is] when a group of neighbors informally keep an eye on one another's homes... Social capital can be found in friendship networks, neighborhoods, churches, schools, bridge clubs, civic associations, and even bars” (Harvard Kennedy School, 2015). Howard County scores highest in access to social capital of all counties in the Baltimore metropolitan area, in part because of its large numbers of highly educated and high-income households. Our findings do not contradict this, but rather suggest that the social capital that exists in these communities is *within* groups as opposed to *between* groups. *Bridging social capital* refers specifically to the connections between heterogeneous groups.

In Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake, there is a lack of bridging social capital between racial and ethnic groups, low and high-income households, and age groups. This perpetuates potentially harmful perceptions, like crime being associated with certain populations, that widen the gap between groups. This division hinders the development shared interests, priorities, and community identity (a feeling of ‘we’ instead of ‘I’) as well as meaningful community engagement. Just as important, this threatens Rouse’s vision of an inclusive and diverse community.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend that the decision makers of Wilde Lake and Harper’s Choice reinvest in Rouse’s original vision of a racially, culturally, economically integrated community through the engagement and inclusion of new and emerging residents, i.e., building bridging social capital. Building social capital would result in creating common interests (ie. neighborhood and home aesthetics), helping to ensure decision-making matches needs of residents, and can improve individual well-being. It is important that Harper’s Choice and Wilde Lake take action to increase bridging social capital now, as both villages are expected to become increasingly diverse in the future.

We suggest that the two villages can utilize their existing systems by increasing the capacity of Community Associations to serve as connectors between groups. The Community Associations should act



to diversify their staff to represent the various demographics of their communities and actively seek to recruit new participants in meetings, task groups, and events. Additionally, the associations should consider incentivizing such participation and seeking the involvement of community members who are already in volunteer positions, such as little league coaches, PTA members, and those volunteering at churches and area non-profits. These individuals who are already active in the community can serve as connectors to new individuals and social networks that otherwise might be disengaged.

Community Associations can begin this process by boosting outreach to Harper's Choice and Wilde Lake residents. The purpose of this is two-fold; first, to gain a deeper understanding of who lives in the villages, and second, to begin to build more meaningful relationships that ultimately lead to community engagement. At present, a primary outreach tactic of both Wilde Lake and Harper's Choice associations is to publish information online and in newsletters. While these may be effective in disseminating information to people who already "follow" the groups, they may be less effective in reaching new constituents. We suggest the associations take a more active approach that aims to meet people where they are. This might include door-knocking and canvassing, or visiting businesses and nonprofits that might be better connected with the groups of interest.

The Community Association in Harper's Choice should be more intentional about outreach to the Hispanic population. Hispanics in Harper's Choice come from wide variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and documentation status varies. Therefore, it is a disservice to treat this population as a homogeneous group. Harper's Choice association staff should conduct outreach to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity that exists within this group. Another outreach tactic related to this group is translation of newsletters and other relevant community information. The Community Association should consider partnering with FIRN, a local nonprofit, to achieve these goals (FIRN, 2015).

## **Conclusions.**

Columbia was founded on the "vision of a better city" that would incorporate the best of city and country life while meeting the various needs of the people in the community, respecting nature, supporting the growth of people and making a profit to encourage economic development. Focusing on Rouse's vision of inclusion of community, engaging the community and focusing on the social capital of Harper's Choice and Wilde Lake would create common interests, ensure the decision making would match the needs of the community and improve overall well-being of these areas. The potential is there to continue and improve the "vision", the potential is in the people.

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