

Real life, and then some

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When you walk through the garden, better watch your back. That lyric, from the Tom Waits song [Way Down in the Hole](#), was constantly running through my head last autumn when I began reporting [a story](#) about witness intimidation in Baltimore.

The song serves as the opening theme to *The Wire*, producer David Simon's brilliant urban drama, which has been acclaimed in [the UK](#). *The Wire* is both set in and filmed on the streets of Baltimore. And, like so much of the show, *Way Down in the Hole*, is spot-on - an anthem that perfectly captures the danger that permeates almost every block in Charm City (a Baltimore tourism slogan that stuck but which seems purely ironic today). Baltimore is a place that encapsulates all of the intractable problems of urban America: drugs, violence, race, poverty and secular economic decline.

It is difficult to overstate the realism of [The Wire](#). Simon, a former journalist for *The Baltimore Sun* and still a city resident, is dedicated to authenticity. He spent a year following Baltimore homicide detectives for his 1991 book, *Homicide*. He spent another year hanging out on one of the city's drug corners for a 1997 book, *The Corner*.

It also helps that one of his co-writers and producers, Ed Burns, spent two decades as a Baltimore cop and then seven years as a teacher in its decaying public school system. The incidents *The Wire* portrays - and even many of the character names used on the show - are drawn from life. (For instance, Stringer Bell is a composite of two infamous West Baltimore drug lords, Stringer Reed and Roland Bell.)

To an outsider, particularly someone unaccustomed to America's inner cities, the exceptional violence depicted in *The Wire* might seem pure Hollywood. But, as I discovered during my reporting forays to the city, this too is real - with devastating consequences for many of the city's residents.

According to the census takers, East Baltimore lost a third of its residents between 1990 and 2000. This was on top of already steep population declines stretching back to the second world war, the cumulative toll of white flight, the late 1960s riots, job losses and the twin epidemics of crack and heroin. The people left but the blocks of low-rise apartments and row houses remained.

In some portions of East Baltimore, 50% of the buildings are vacant. Others have been demolished, leaving behind rubbish strewn lots. In these vacant and abandoned properties, the drug trade - and its incumbent addiction, prostitution and violence - have flourished. Only 45,000 people live in East Baltimore and in some years the police have made 25,000 arrests.

I had come to East Baltimore to follow the story of John Dowery Jr, a 38-year-old former heroin addict who had become a witness in a murder investigation. Dowery's story is one that would not seem out of place on *The Wire*. He had watched from his porch as a friend robbed a drug dealer named Reds who worked out of vacant lot down the block. The friend timed his escape poorly - just as he was leaving he ran into Boo-Boo, an athletic 20-year old with his hair in corn rows and his thin beard and moustache meticulously groomed.

Boo-Boo was allegedly a key enforcer in the local drug organization. About 30 minutes later, the friend was dead: pumped full of lead on a nearby corner. He was the 229th murder of the year in a city that would rack up a body count of 278 before the clock struck midnight on December 31. (This is typical for Baltimore, which consistently has one of the highest per capita murder rates in the country.) Dowery would claim he later heard Boo-Boo and his younger half-brother, whose nickname is Moo-Moo, boast of murdering the man.

In the hope of getting a lighter sentence on an existing handgun charge of his own, Dowery had agreed to testify against Boo-Boo and Moo-Moo. In Dowery's neighborhood, people soon became suspicious: they accused him of being "a snitch", which can be tantamount to a death sentence in East Baltimore and many other inner city neighborhoods where cooperation with the police is seen as an act of treason against the community.

Dowery largely shrugged off the accusation - and the risk. But then one day in October 2005, two men met Dowery in his front yard as he was returning from work; one of them had a gun. They chased Dowery around his house, shooting him six times before leaving him for dead.

Remarkably, Dowery survived. The police helped relocate him and his immediate family outside of Baltimore. And he went on to testify against Boo-Boo and Moo-Moo. But the other witnesses were not so brave. Many changed their stories on the witness stand and in the end, the jury deadlocked. The judge declared a mistrial and the case soon became part of a larger federal drug investigation. Meanwhile, Dowery had gotten his life on track: he had kicked his heroin habit, had a new job and a new house in the suburbs.

But he missed his old neighbourhood. Like many in Baltimore, he had spent his whole life in a few city blocks. All his friends were there. So too were most of his family. So this past November, he decided to go back to the old hood to celebrate Thanksgiving at his aunt's house.

After dinner that night, he nipped across the street to get a beer and a smoke at the Kozy Korner, a local dive. There he ran into a former girlfriend and began chatting with her at the bar. He apparently didn't notice when two men slipped into the bar behind him. They leveled guns at his head and opened fire. John Dowery was dead. And though the bar was crowded that night, no witnesses have come forward to say they saw a thing.

Today, Boo-Boo and Moo-Moo are facing federal charges for a host of drug-related offenses along with several co-defendants who allegedly ran a large East Baltimore drug ring, fitting called "Special Heroin". It's not far off the Barksdale organisation depicted in *The Wire*.

So yes, *The Wire*, is great television. But it's not escapism. In fact, it's exactly the opposite: a journey into a violent and tragic world from which too many Americans cannot break free.

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