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May 2013

## **The Pulse of Oakland**

### **Stories on the intersection of health, wealth and race in Oakland neighborhoods.**

In urban areas across the country, many people are getting sick and dying earlier than they should. These causes can be avoided, but right now not everyone has an equal opportunity to be healthy.

Take Oakland for example. In this city, just shy of 400,000 residents, people in low-income areas like East and West Oakland are dying more than a decade earlier than people a few miles away in wealthier neighborhoods. Wealth—and, it turns out, good health—are concentrated in certain parts of the city.

On the hilltop campus of Merritt College in Oakland, Melinda Monterroso is finally reaching her goals. As the first in her family to graduate from high school and someone who grew up on the rough streets of “deep” East Oakland, it was a tough road to get here.

“I got really lucky. I wasn’t supposed to be where I am now,” she says. “I was set up for disaster.”

Living in East Oakland, Monterroso is at greater risk for health problems like diabetes, obesity, asthma and heart disease. She is more likely to be violently assaulted and less likely to find a job that pays her enough to make ends meet. She even had a lower chance of graduating high school than most other Oakland students.

If health was distributed evenly, life expectancy maps “would look like confetti,” says Bina Patel Shrimali, a health equity expert at the Alameda County Public Health Department, with colors sprinkled everywhere. Instead, she says, poor health and short lives are clustered in certain neighborhoods like East and West Oakland.

This is not simply a health issue, points out Sikander Iqbal, director at a community development group in East Oakland called Youth Uprising. It is also a social justice issue, he says, because people living in these areas are, for the most part, not white. West Oakland is predominantly African-American, and East Oakland is majority Hispanic.

And this is not an accident. Historical patterns of segregation pushed minorities into disadvantaged neighborhoods, and cycles of poverty and various policies have left these low-income communities of color ignored—and unhealthy.

“We’ve talked about racial health disparities for many years, and how income level affects health,” says Amy Smith, program manager at the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, a cross-county organization working on environmental health issues.

“Now we have to bring it to the next level, and look at the social and health problems rooted in where people live.”

So how are bad neighborhoods translating to poor health, and early death? And what is being done about it? Let’s visit East Oakland to find out.

This online journalism project consists of six text stories, interactive maps, photos and a short video. I reported, wrote and edited the content. I also designed and coded the maps and website.

The project can be seen online at <http://www.brittanyschell.com/thepulseofoakland/>



# The Pulse of Oakland

By Brittany Schell

Stories on the intersection of health, wealth and race in Oakland neighborhoods.



## I. The Health Gap: Is inequality making us sick?

In urban areas across the country, many people are getting sick and dying earlier than they should.

These causes can be avoided, but right now not everyone has an equal opportunity to be healthy.

Take Oakland for example, a city in Alameda County, California just across the Bay from San Francisco. In this city, just shy of 400,000 residents, people in low-income areas like East and West Oakland are dying more than a decade earlier than people a few miles away in wealthier neighborhoods. Wealth—and, it turns out, good health—are concentrated in certain parts of the city.

Can inequality somehow make us sick? Watch the video below to visit East and West Oakland and learn more.



An African-American born in West Oakland can expect to die almost **15 years earlier** than a White person born in the Oakland Hills.

Alameda County Public Health Department report

## II. Against the odds: Growing up in deep East Oakland

On the hilltop campus of Merritt College in Oakland, Melinda Monterroso is finally reaching her goals. As the first in her family to graduate from high school and someone who grew up on the rough streets of “deep” East Oakland, it was a tough road to get here.

“I got really lucky. I wasn’t supposed to be where I am now,” she says. “I was set up for disaster.”

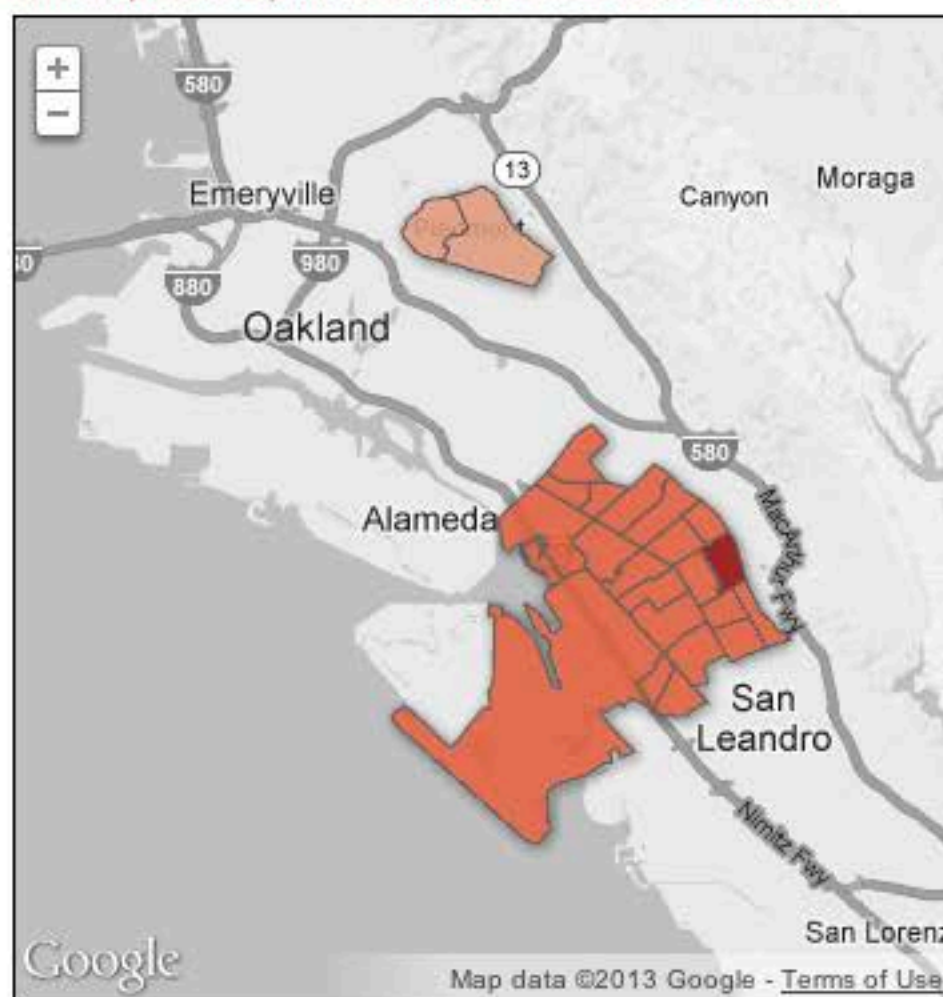
As you drive through Castlemont, the neighborhood where Monterroso spent most of her life, the sun beats down on the pavement and the road is rough, pockmarked with potholes. The BART train doesn’t have a station out here, so people wait on benches for the bus to arrive. There’s a liquor store on nearly every other corner, set among the vacant storefronts. The neighborhood Safeway moved out more than a decade ago.

### Something about Castlemont is threatening to cut Monterroso’s life short.

“Where banks, grocery stores and restaurants once lined the streets, now liquor stores, check-cashing businesses and fast food establishments have taken up residence,” says a report on Castlemont from community group Youth Uprising. They built a youth center on the vacant Safeway lot in 2005, and have been working since to develop the surrounding neighborhood.

Living in East Oakland, Monterroso is at greater risk for health problems like diabetes, obesity, asthma and heart disease. She is more likely to be violently assaulted and less likely to find a job that pays her enough to make ends meet. She even had a lower chance of graduating high school than most other Oakland students.

#### Life Expectancy in Piedmont and East Oakland



Piedmont is light pink, and Castlemont is dark red. Data from 2008-2010.

Source: Alameda County Public Health Department

[See more interactive maps of data here.](#)

For a baby born in Castlemont today, the average life expectancy is 74 years, **12 years less** than a child who is born in Piedmont.

Alameda County Public Health Department

For a baby born in Castlemont today, the average life expectancy is 74 years, according to the Alameda County Public Health Department—12 years less than a child born in Piedmont, a small and wealthy city set in the middle of Oakland a few miles north of Castlemont. The mortality rate in Castlemont is more than twice the rate of death in Piedmont, meaning Monterroso is more likely to die from a number of causes while she is living in the deep east.



"I shouldn't have to **leave my home** to be a healthier person."

Lala Mann, East Oakland resident



#### IV. Short of breath: Living with pollution

Lala Mann has lived all over East Oakland and surrounding areas. She grew up in "Funktown," a neighborhood close to Lake Merritt, near Highland Hospital. She has lived in San Leandro, San Lorenzo and Dublin, all cities just outside of East Oakland. And now she lives in Castlemont—and she does not plan on raising her 15-month old daughter here, she says.

"As you get deeper into East Oakland, it's more and more deserted as far as what you need as a human being," Mann says. "It really sucks."

When she compares her experience in a place like Dublin to East Oakland, the description is stark. Dublin is cleaner, she says, with nice houses, grocery stores and parks. "You have everything you need right there. This place is a dump in comparison," she says, referring to Castlemont.

Mann says that even Funktown was better than Castlemont, because it was closer to the Grand Lake neighborhood and downtown Oakland. The life expectancy at birth in the Funktown area is 78 years, five years longer than someone born in Castlemont, but still shorter than someone in Piedmont.

"It's sad to say, but if I lived in Berkeley, if I lived in Piedmont, then my health would be a lot better," says Mann. "But I didn't get that luxury."

### The residents of East Oakland inhale some of the most polluted air in the Bay Area.

High blood pressure and diabetes run in her family, she says, as does asthma—Mann and her father both suffer from asthma attacks, especially on smoggy days in East Oakland.

A recent statewide map called CalEnviroScreen shows that nine of California's most polluted communities are in the Bay Area, identifying cities like Richmond and areas like East Oakland in the top 5 percent. The map used data from various sources to identify ZIP codes with schools and



"That garden saved my life," Monterroso says. And she is referring to more than the benefits of fresh produce. She helped plant the garden in 2010, and says having this leadership role at school made her realize she could do more. "It made me feel important, like I was part of something," she says. "I think all kids want to find purpose."

## Monterroso is the first in her family to graduate high school and go to college.

Statistically, Monterroso should not have made it to the hills of Merritt College, where she is now enrolled. She got a lucky break, she says, when she entered high school. Instead of going to Castlemont High, she enrolled in the Leadership Public School, a charter high school on Castlemont's campus. She got involved with Youth Uprising and another community group, the East Oakland Boxing Association. Teachers and mentors took an interest in her success, encouraged her to do better in school and helped her plan for her future.

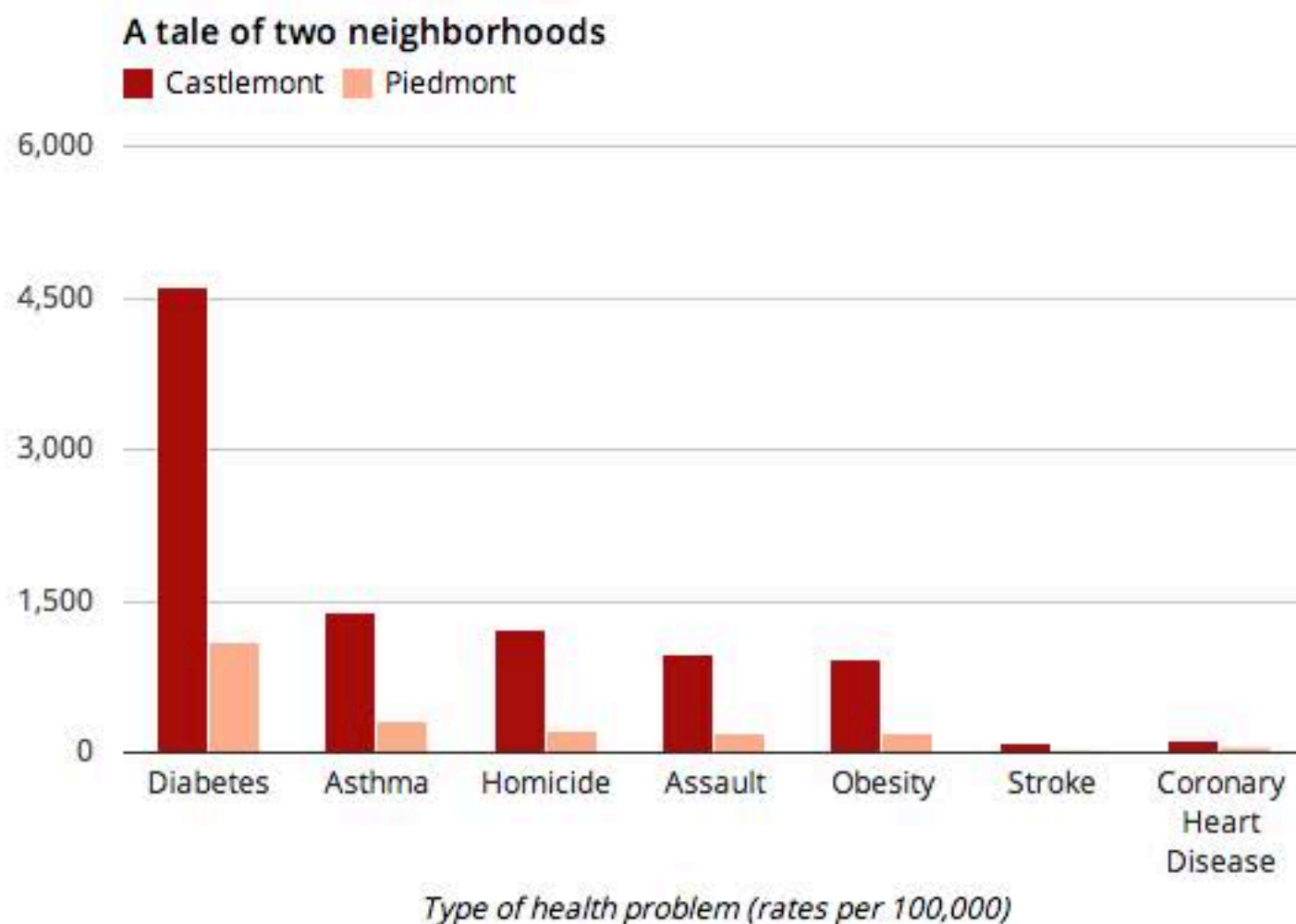
The youngest of five children, she is the first in her family to graduate high school and go to college.

Her siblings did not see the value of education, she says, because they did not know anyone who went to college. When you don't have parents and school counselors encouraging you, and when you live in a violent, unhealthy neighborhood, it can be hard to believe in yourself, Monterroso says. "We think we're not smart enough for college," she says. "It's hard to overcome that. I know a lot of people that have, but I know more people who haven't."

She gives the standard line about her success in school, saying that opportunities will come to you if you open the door. But then she stops to think. "The difference out here," she says, "is that no one ever told you there was a door. You never knew about the door, there's no light on it. You just have to walk around blindly and open it."

This mental barrier to success is one of the insidious aspects of neighborhoods like Castlemont that are difficult to quantify, Shrimali says, and it's hard to calculate all the ways living in a blighted area affects health. "You think about a neighborhood where there are good schools and parks, nicely maintained homes and retail opportunities," she says. "But where there is blight and trash on the street, it sends a really different message about your value living in that neighborhood."

And in the end the impact of these disparities can be quantified—as a difference in life expectancy.

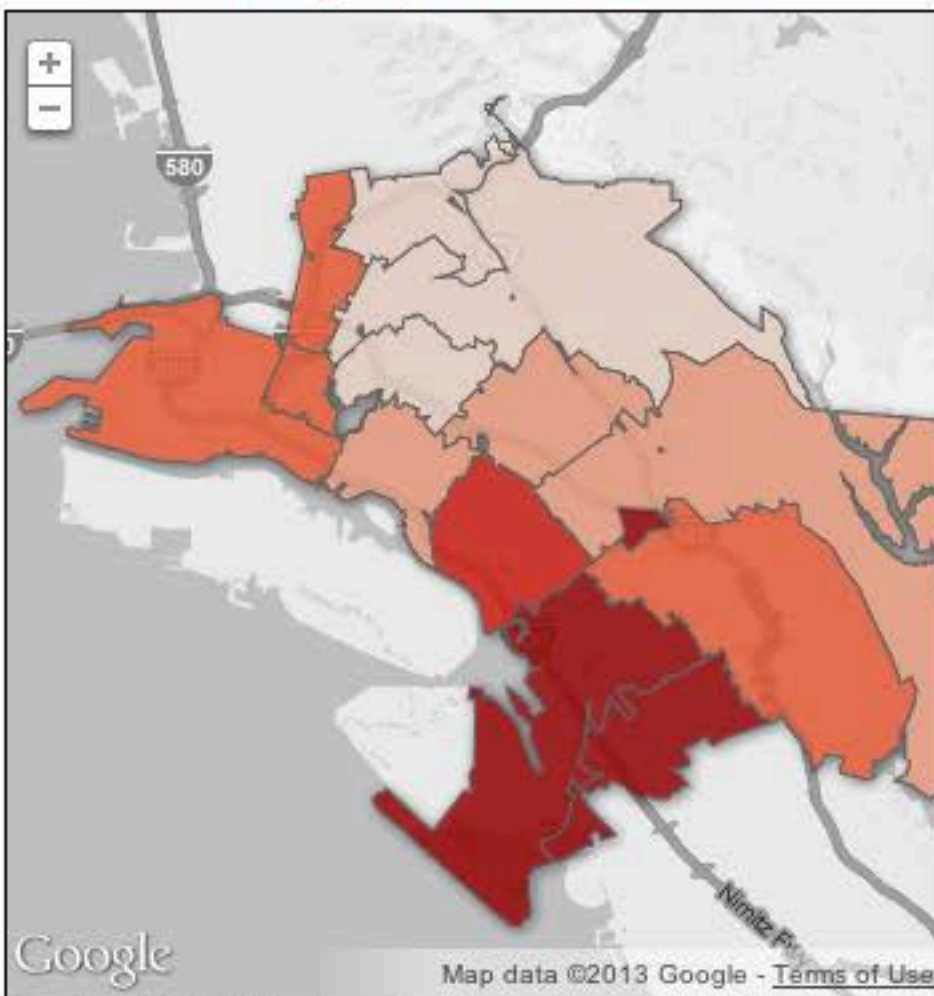


Only a quarter of health outcomes are connected to medical care. Health is determined mostly by **where we live.**

Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative

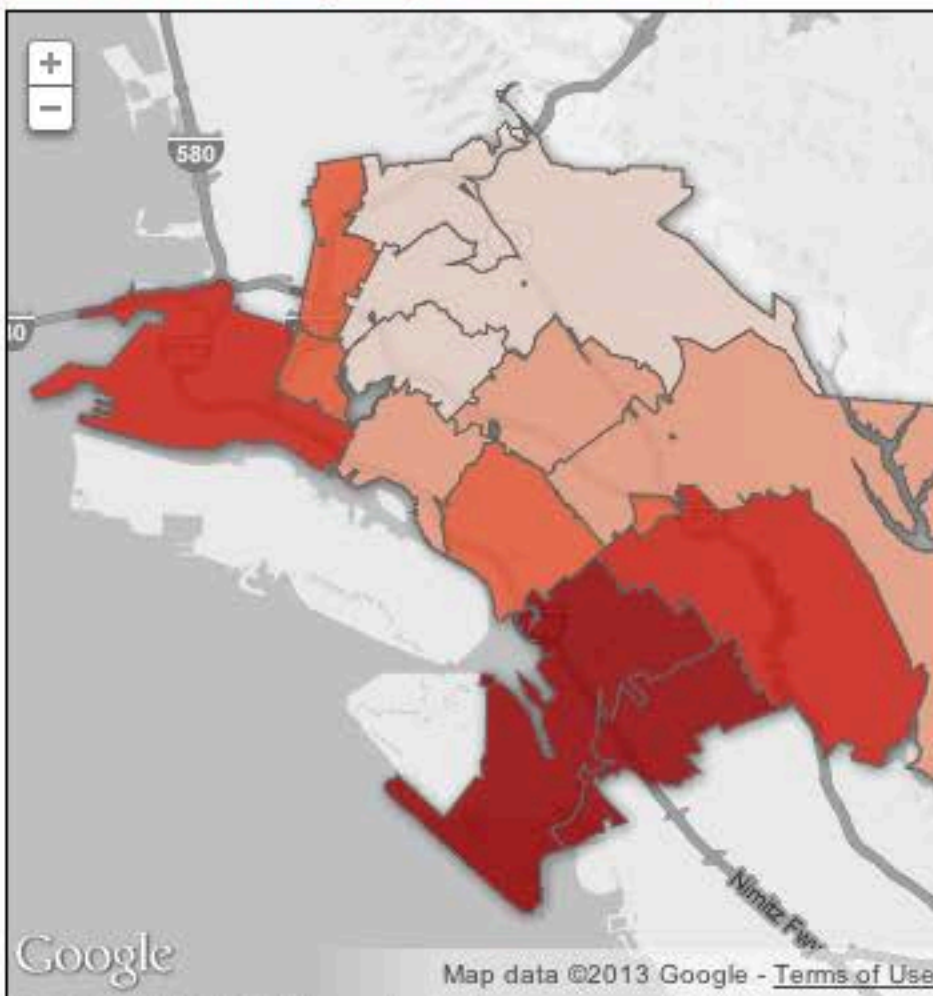


Visits to the emergency room for diabetes



Data from 2009-2011. Age-adjusted rates are per 100,000.  
Source: Alameda County Public Health Department

Visits to the emergency room for obesity

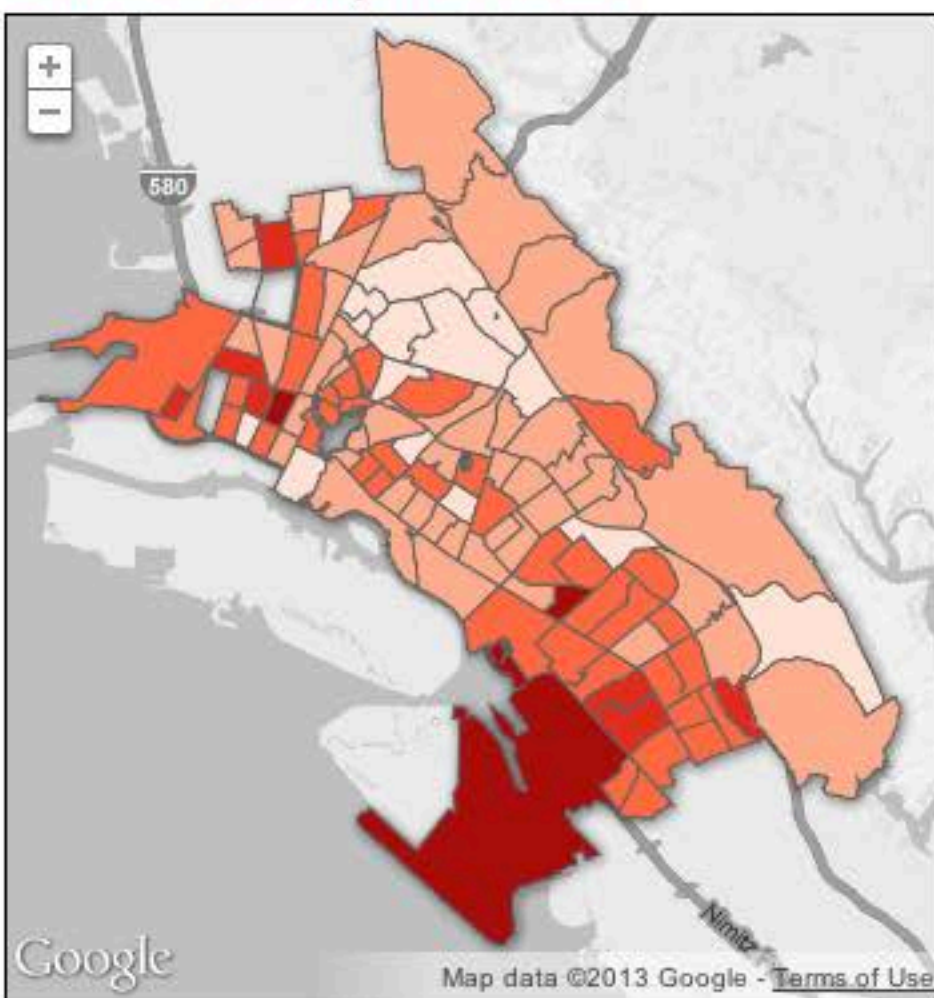


Data from 2009-2011. Age-adjusted rates are per 100,000.  
Source: Alameda County Public Health Department

[See more interactive maps of data here.](#)

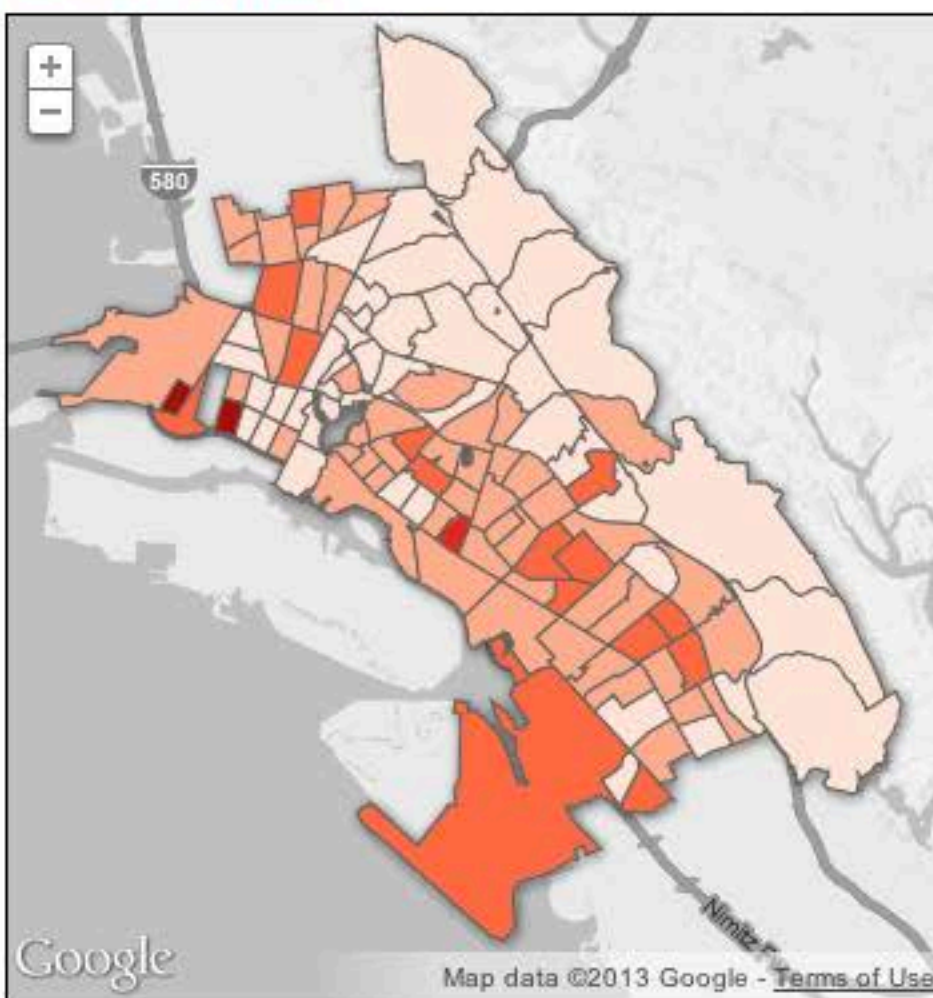
According to data, East Oakland residents have the highest rates of diabetes in the city— for every Piedmont resident who visits the emergency room for diabetes, there are nearly five in East Oakland. This also reflects a difference in access to health care. Piedmont residents are less likely to seek treatment at an emergency room in the first place, because they are more likely to be seeing a primary care physician on a regular basis. The high rates of emergency room visits in the deep east indicates not only that more residents have diabetes, but also that many people are not seeing a doctor to manage the condition properly. East Oaklanders are also more at risk for other problems related to diet and lifestyle like obesity, stroke and chronic heart disease.

Death from coronary heart disease



Data from 2008-2010. Rates are per 100,000.  
Source: Alameda County Public Health Department

Death from stroke



Data from 2006-2010. Rates are per 100,000.  
Source: Alameda County Public Health Department

[See more interactive maps of data here.](#)