

Urban Gentrification In The United States

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I recently found myself at a community meeting aimed at addressing one problem: me. As a moderately-affluent white person who had recently moved to the Harlem neighborhood of New York City for work at Columbia University, I had unintentionally become part of an issue that affects neighborhoods across America. People like me are driving up rents in Harlem and its surrounding neighborhoods, making it hard for lower-income (generally immigrant and racial minority) communities with deep roots there to remain intact. Columbia is even more notorious for its [plans to build a new campus in Harlem](#), displacing residents and business in the process.

My position in Harlem exemplifies a phenomenon in American cities that has been unfolding over recent decades: gentrification. Gentrification is a process in which neighborhoods become more desirable and expensive – and thus more unaffordable to those who may have lived there for years. It's a major issue in the United States as the country rebounds from a long history of urban neglect, and it is also directly relevant to two mega-trends: migration and governance. The migration here is mainly within metropolitan areas but can also be global. The governance concerns how we handle gentrification. The issue is also closely related to two other mega-trends: climate change and natural resources, because the type of place we live in has a huge impact on greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption. People in urban areas drive less, use less heating and air conditioning, and buy less in the way of consumer products, all because their residences are smaller and their neighborhoods are higher-density than their suburban counterparts.

To understand gentrification in America, it helps to have some background on the history of urbanization here. We're a relatively new country, so we have only a handful of neighborhoods old enough to be designed for people to get around on foot, such as the narrow, windy streets of downtown Boston and the Lower Manhattan financial district. More neighborhoods were built for people to get around via public transit. These are the "streetcar suburbs" built from the late 1800's until around World War II, such as Regent Square, the Pittsburgh neighborhood I grew up in. But most of our neighborhoods are "automobile suburbs" built mainly after WWII under the assumption that whoever could afford it would get around via private automobile. Automobile suburbs continue to be built (more slowly since the recent housing crisis), but in the last 20 years or so, there has been a trend towards wealthier people moving back into dense urban areas. The trend is strongest in cities that already had a vibrant urban core: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, and San Francisco. This recent urbanization trend drives gentrification.

If you care about climate change and fossil fuel depletion, then you should be thrilled that wealthier Americans are returning to urban areas where they have small residences and don't drive everywhere. The high-rise luxury condo buildings popping up in downtown Boston, Philadelphia, and even here in Harlem are reducing carbon footprints by the thousands. It is no coincidence that the cities with the most gentrification are also the cities with the highest portions of non-car commuters and car-free households, as seen in the [Carfree Census Database](#).

But if you care about social justice, then the fact that poorer people are being displaced by people like me is a problem. (To be sure, climate change is a social justice issue too.) The community group I visited for this meeting, the [Mirabal Sisters Cultural and Community Center](#), describes efforts by landlords to displace existing tenants and gain new tenants like me who are willing to pay higher rents. One tactic, as it was explained to me, involves neglecting maintenance so that the current residents get frustrated and leave; another involves inserting clauses into paperwork that tenants may unwittingly violate, thus getting themselves kicked out of their homes. Recent immigrants with limited English skills are particularly vulnerable to the latter.

So, what can we and should we do?

First, high rents in urban areas are driven by a supply shortage in certain locations. Increasing supply helps pull people from suburbs while keeping rents low, as I discussed in a 2004 [article](#) for a street magazine in Boston. New construction can sometimes be concentrated on sites that are not being used. Second, education and employment opportunities can *sometimes* help existing residents raise their incomes and better afford higher rents. But both of these are tricky proposals which will not always work. These issues must be addressed on a case by case basis. Therefore, it is most important for those who are affected by these urban design decisions to work together towards improving neighborhoods.

And that's why I showed up to the community meeting. I might be part of the problem, but I can also be part of the solution. To a large extent, the problems with gentrification stem not from anonymous housing market forces but from lack of community dialogue. I attended the meeting as a new neighbor interested in making the most of gentrification. I mainly just listened, but I'll be sharing what I heard with my neighbors, my colleagues at Columbia, and also of course Future Challenges. Community dialogue can't solve all the problems that come with gentrification, but it can be a very effective component of urban governance. For the sake of the neighbors and of the planet, this is an important task.