

New report examines gentrification, housing affordability and quality of life in Houston

October 1 2015, by Amy Mccaig

Regional confusion with population size is affecting affordability in the city of Houston and is just one of the sustainability topics addressed in a new report from Rice University's Shell Center for Sustainability.

"The Fifth Houston Sustainability Indicators Report: Opportunity Among the Houston Districts" examines gentrification, [housing affordability](#) and quality of life and how they impact living in the city's 11 council districts. This study challenges a few prevailing notions, including designations for preferred living locations and housing affordability. Lester King, a research fellow at the Shell Center for Sustainability, authored the study.

Growth and gentrification

According to the research, Houston has experienced modest growth from 1980 to 2013 by gaining almost 540,000 people. However, the region encompassing Brazoria, Chambers, Galveston, Fort Bend, Harris, Liberty, Montgomery and Waller counties has experienced tremendous growth of approximately 3,500,000 people during this same time frame.

"The recent marketing efforts of the city have confused growth within the municipal boundary of the Houston (which is modest) with growth in the wider region, which is much larger," King said. "This confusion has contributed to concern among residents in inner-city neighborhoods regarding gentrification and possible negative impacts on their

communities, such as unaffordable increases in land value and unwanted land uses."

King said his research indicates that gentrification is not really occurring at all, but that Houston is experiencing more of a mixing of communities and growth of the Hispanic community in particular. The modest growth in Houston is largely due to an influx of 700,000 Hispanic people. (During the same time period, the city also gained approximately 60,000 African-Americans and lost approximately 270,000 Caucasians).

King said his findings suggest that the diversity in Houston can be largely explained as the tremendous growth in the Hispanic population.

Although the overall population has grown between 1990 and 2013 (the time period in which King analyzed data to look for signs of gentrification), the report suggests that there is little evidence of gentrification in the city, when a major change in race or ethnicity is used to identify gentrified places. Between 1990 and 2013, there were very few areas in Houston that became gentrified, as defined as more than a 50 percent change in race or ethnicity.

"In the historic African-American community of the Third Ward, a frequent fear is that this area will become gentrified just like the Fourth Ward has become," King said. "However, between our study period of 1990-2013, there were no signs of any part of the Third Ward undergoing more than a 50 percent change to any other race or ethnicity. The Third Ward community remains firmly majority African-American, partially as a result of Highway 288 acting as a physical barrier to the eastern spread of inner-city development."

Quality of life

According to King, prior research demonstrates that convenient access to

parks and to supermarkets that sell fresh fruits and vegetables enhances healthy lifestyles and reduces incidents of chronic disease such as obesity; as a result, such access improves the overall quality of life of a city.

In 2012, Houston ranked 32nd among the 63 largest cities in the country for pedestrian activity and incentives to walk. According to the Shell Center's findings, per-capita access to parks will decline in Houston since parkland acquisitions are not scheduled to increase in proportion with population growth. Between 2010 and 2013, park access per capita dropped by 3.6 percent.

King noted that even though the number of people served by each park acre is expected to increase by 2020, the Bayou Greenways 2020 project to add 1,500 acres of parks and 80 miles of trails will be an "excellent addition" to quality of life in the city.

"Additional options for increasing the park inventory in Houston might include a dedicated parkland acquisition fund, since this is a crucial issue that should also be pursued by elected officials," King said.

Addressing another quality-of-life issue, King said that the grocery industry and city leaders are working diligently to bring more supermarkets to the city. This effort is expected to decrease the size of Houston's food deserts, urban areas that lack access to fresh fruit and vegetables. However, more needs to be done in districts K, D and E since these are communities plagued by underdevelopment, he said.

Housing affordability

Houston is regularly touted for its affordable living, but it ranks only 26th nationally when cities that have more than 250,000 people are compared, according to King's analysis. King used a combination of data

from the 2010 U.S. Census and from the Center for Neighborhood Technology. National standards of affordability from the U.S. Department of Transportation suggest that individuals should not spend more than 45 percent of their household income on combined housing and transportation spending. By that standard, Houston lies on the threshold of affordability, with 46 percent of the average Houstonian's salary going toward housing and transportation.

In 2013, selling prices for homes in the Houston metro area increased 10.2 percent over 2012 prices. Home sales in 2013 increased by 17.4 percent in Harris County, which is higher than the prerecession record set in 2006.

Houston is also experiencing a significant amount of high-end development; however, King said much of the new development is occurring on the west side of Houston's Inner Loop (specifically, council districts C and G). Almost all of these areas being developed offer housing that is unaffordable by national standards of affordability.

King said, "Based on our analysis, there is no factual basis for continuing to refer to the 'Inner Loop' of Houston as the most-coveted real estate. This rhetoric should be replaced with 'the West Inner Loop.' Council districts C and G contain the West Inner Loop and Houston's most coveted real estate, according to recent development and [real estate](#) patterns."

With the city elections right around the corner, King said he hopes the report will provide Houston residents with factual data on issues and opportunities in their communities, while at the same time encourage politicians to consider these three opportunities that so greatly impact [city](#) living.

More information: For more information or to download a copy of

the report, visit www.HoustonCommunitySustainability.org

Provided by Rice University

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