

Gentrification draws more whites to minority neighborhoods

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Residents and anti-gentrification activists tend to fear gentrification will lead to displacement by white residents while some experts believe it's an optimistic sign of an economic boom that would enable people to rise up economically.

A new USC study of census data shows that nationally, neighborhood ascent—a broad definition of gentrification—is associated with racial or ethnic change. In a nutshell, the researchers conclude that gentrifying neighborhoods become more white, altering minority communities.

"When white neighborhoods experience socioeconomic ascent, they retain whites. And when minority neighborhoods experience it, they become more white," said Ann Owens, the study's lead author and a sociologist at USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

"Our study indicates that socioeconomic ascent is actually perpetuating existing racial inequality within and between neighborhoods," Owens said.

Such a trend has been reported and observed in areas such as Highland Park in Los Angeles, the high-ground neighborhoods in New Orleans years after Hurricane Katrina, and in high-density metropolitan areas such as New York City.

For the study published on April 20 in the journal *Urban Affairs Review*, Owens and study co-author Jennifer Candipan, also of USC,

examined Census and American Community Survey data in 380 metropolitan areas spanning from 1990 to 2010 to determine how frequently a neighborhood's rise in economic status corresponded to a drastic change in its racial and ethnic makeup.

They identified 25 percent of the neighborhoods as "ascending"—their median incomes had doubled, their share of residents with a college degree had increased by 14 percentage points, their share of residents working white-collar jobs had increased 15 points, and housing costs had doubled.

In the study's 20-year period, the ascending neighborhoods became more populated with white people. The racial majority changed in 18 to 30 percent of minority neighborhoods that were on the rise, compared to less than 12 percent whose socioeconomic status did not improve.

Minority-majority neighborhoods on the rise were much more likely than those that weren't ascending to experience a change in racial makeup, the researchers found.

For example, among neighborhoods that were not experiencing a boom, less than 1 percent of mainly black, Asian and Hispanic neighborhoods became majority white, and white population share in these non-ascending neighborhoods declined

By comparison, ascending neighborhoods on the rise became more white, although they rarely became the majority. The researchers found that whites became the majority among 11 percent of the ascending, majority-black neighborhoods, 5 percent of the ascending, majority-Asian neighborhoods and 6 percent of the majority-Hispanic neighborhoods.

Most ascending neighborhoods that were primarily black or Hispanic

became mixed race if they did not stay majority-minority. In turn, mixed-race neighborhoods that ascended were nine times more likely to become mostly white than the initially mixed-race neighborhoods that did not rise economically.

Meanwhile, predominantly white neighborhoods tended to remain so as they improved socioeconomically. Three-quarters of predominantly-white neighborhoods remained mostly white, compared to 58 percent of white neighborhoods that did not ascend.

Owens said the findings show that elected officials, policy makers and communities are facing difficult questions and tradeoffs when it comes to gentrification.

"How do you revitalize neighborhoods without changing the character of the area or displacing people?" she said. "How do you invest in a place and walk that tightrope between attracting new resources to it while acknowledging and preserving its existing community?"

Owens noted that some cities have turned to tactics such as freezing property taxes or laws that preserve affordable housing so that residents are not squeezed out of the rental market.

In a blog post for the journal, Owens concluded that ascent may not provide permanent advantages for minority neighborhoods.

"Ascent may be a process that reinforces, rather than disrupts, existing racial/ethnic hierarchy among [neighborhoods](#)," she wrote.

More information: Ann Owens et al, Racial/Ethnic Transition and Hierarchy Among Ascending Neighborhoods, *Urban Affairs Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1078087418770810](https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087418770810)

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