

Gun violence spills into new neighborhoods as gentrification displaces drug crime, according to new study

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WVU economist Zachary Porreca compared data on property values and shootings in Philadelphia and found that when one block gentrifies, drug crime migrates to neighboring blocks, escalating in the process. Credit: WVU

Gentrification doesn't erase drug crime and gun violence. Instead, research from West Virginia University economist Zachary Porreca shows that when one urban block becomes upwardly mobile, organized criminal activity surges outward to surrounding blocks, escalating the violence in the process.

Porreca, a WVU doctoral student in the John Chambers College of Business and Economics, analyzed 2011-2020 data on shootings and [real estate](#) across various Philadelphia neighborhoods. His paper presenting the findings, published in the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, is one of the first of its kind to study the impact of gentrification on crime displacement.

"Over the 10-year window of the study, Philadelphia experienced some 5,800 shootings that can be attributed to gentrification," Porreca said. "That means that of the 27,000 shootings that occurred across the city during that decade, almost a quarter may have been spillover effects of gentrification.

"Gentrification increases levels of gun violence in neighbor blocks, even more so when the gentrified block itself has a history of drug crime. There's an average increase of nearly nine shootings in the surrounding neighborhood, or an 18% increase in gun violence on blocks linked to gentrified blocks, as drug crime that existed on a block pre-gentrification is pushed into the surrounding neighborhood by the new development."

The gentrification of drug blocks specifically, as opposed to all gentrifying blocks in Philadelphia, accounted for roughly 2,400 additional shootings during the 10 years of his study. This suggests that some 8% of Philadelphia's gun violence can be attributed to gentrification destabilizing the city's illicit [drug markets](#).

"Those numbers are a striking representation of why it's crucial that

urban development occur responsibly and intentionally," Porreca said. "Forced displacement of priced-out residents has very real effects on the surrounding neighborhoods."

Porreca described gentrification as a "destabilizing force that happens when new residents of higher socioeconomic standing move to a traditionally lower-income neighborhood. Gentrified neighborhoods grow wealthier, more educated, exhibit higher rates of home ownership and experience significant racial demographic changes. This process involves replacing many of the original residents, and that makes it more difficult for a criminal organization to operate openly. Gentrification also leads to increased policing and more punitive policing practices, and overall makes a block less suitable for drug competition."

Porreca emphasized that a [criminal organization](#) displaced in this way won't want to go far. Those with that organization will look for new territory within the immediate surrounding blocks that have not yet begun gentrifying, because the [local area](#) is proven to be capable of sustaining drug activity and "because the organization has the requisite local knowledge, some level of community support and access to a proven clientele."

His research uses data related to shootings, income, housing, home sales and building, zoning and renovation permits to examine gentrification's effect on crime rates on a city's "frontiers," blocks that are newly gentrifying. It shows how [gentrification](#) and rapid [urban development](#) change the urban landscape of a city, as the emergence of new amenities and residents in traditionally neglected neighborhoods causes the shrinking and reshaping of drug markets' boundaries, escalating competition and violence.

Gentrification not only constitutes a "shock" to the total viable territory available to rival criminal organizations, bringing them into closer

proximity with each other, but it also spurs gun violence by forcing intracity migration—"displacing residents from their long-term homes and forcing them into the remaining viable tracts of affordable housing," Porreca said.

"As an anecdotal example, a friend whose neighborhood became one of Philadelphia's trendiest areas told me that his family now lives on the same blocks with families from neighborhoods his original neighborhood once feuded with. These sorts of situations, where disaffected low-income residents are forced to live in unfamiliar neighborhoods surrounded by similarly disaffected and displaced neighbors, have the potential to cause excessive tension. That that can give rise to explosions in [gun violence](#) isn't surprising."

Porreca suggested that police resources could be utilized in the neighborhoods surrounding newly developed blocks.

"City policy may benefit from efforts to stave off the violent spillover effect through deployment of officers and [social workers](#) in areas experiencing significant population displacements," Porreca said. "Those displacements give rise to volatility and violence, and if we want to prevent community [violence](#), then resources should be deployed proactively alongside the forces of development."

More information: Zachary Porreca, Gentrification, gun violence, and drug markets, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2023).
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