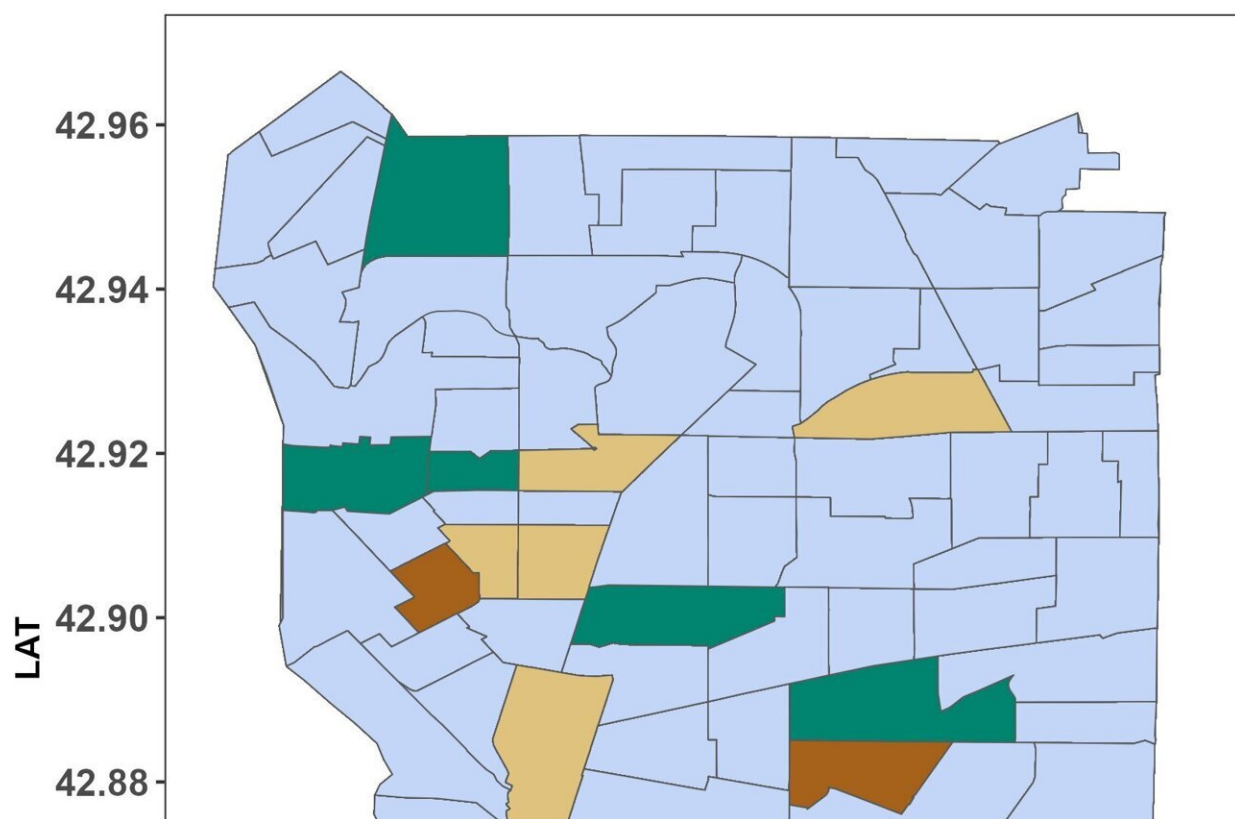


# Study links gentrification to reduced crime, but downsides of gentrification can't be ignored

August 29 2024, by Bert Gambini



Gentrified tracts in Buffalo in 2011, 2015, and 2019. Credit: *PLOS ONE* (2024). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0302832

Neighborhood gentrification in Buffalo between 2011 and 2019 was

associated with a decrease in property crime, independent of a general decrease in similar crime city-wide during those same years, according to a University at Buffalo study.

The findings [published](#) in the journal *PLOS One* could help [city planners](#) and lawmakers faced with balancing issues like neighborhood improvement and crime. The study's authors, however, caution that [gentrification](#) is often accompanied by multiple effects, and the wide-ranging impact of the process demands carefully measured thought ahead of any direct action.

"If well managed, gentrification could be part of a strategy to make neighborhoods safer," says Zhe Zhang, a sociology graduate student in the UB College of Arts and Sciences, and the study's lead author.

"However, it must be emphasized that gentrification is a complex issue, and the countervailing effects of crime reduction must be considered alongside potentially negative outcomes, like displacement of long-time residents."

Since the 1990s, gentrification, which involves the in-migration of a new, middle-class population following a period of economic decline, has changed many urban landscapes in the U.S.

But most research on gentrification has been in large cities like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Because lessons learned in those [large cities](#) do not necessarily apply to smaller cities, Zhang and study co-author Ashley Barr, Ph.D., an associate professor of sociology at UB, expand upon that earlier work by focusing on Buffalo, a mid-sized city.

Buffalo, a characteristic Rust Belt city, prospered through the early 20th century, but then experienced high unemployment and population loss in the 1980s, followed by a surge in development beginning around 2010. This was fueled by state-funded projects and private investment. In

addition to those changing features, Buffalo, in the last 20 years, has become a destination for refugees and migrants.

"By studying neighborhoods in cities like Buffalo, we can look at gentrification in a place that has continued to go through [economic hardships](#) while simultaneously experiencing the hallmarks of gentrification," says Zhang. "Buffalo's unique experience with gentrification, despite its ongoing economic struggles, provides insights that can apply to other, older industrial cities aiming for revitalization."

The current study, which relied on [census data](#) and data from the Buffalo Police Department, also distinguished itself from previous work by not looking at gentrification as a discrete process. Earlier studies have centered on the differences between gentrified and non-gentrified areas, but Zhang and Barr also examine changing [crime rates](#) within neighborhoods as they undergo gentrification.

They studied 79 different census tracts—areas containing 1,200 to 8,000 people—in the years leading up to and following gentrification.

"This approach helps clarify whether crime rate changes are due to gentrification itself or other factors," says Zhang.

Neighborhoods that eventually become gentrified are different in some ways from neighborhoods that are vulnerable but do not gentrify, according to Barr.

"Although both are disadvantaged, the latter are more so. It is important to take these preexisting differences into account if we are to say gentrification matters for crime. By looking at two differences—those between gentrified and never-gentrified tracts, and changes over time within the same tract—our multipronged approach does this," says Barr.

The results were the same across the study's multiple approaches: Gentrification was linked to reduced crime.

"Although this study does not speak directly to policy changes and their effects, plausible ways forward might include affordable housing programs, community engagement efforts and economic support for long-term residents to ensure that the benefits of gentrification, such as reduced crime, do not come at the cost of the most vulnerable populations," says Zhang.

This study is a first step toward understanding gentrification's effects on crime on mid-size cities, but more work is needed.

"We encourage qualitative research—stories from people in these areas—as well as quantitative research like ours, to better understand the underlying reasons behind the link between gentrification and crime and other effects resulting from the process, both positive and negative," says Zhang.

**More information:** Zhe Zhang et al, Gentrification and crime in Buffalo, New York, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0302832](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0302832)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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