

Tight housing, immigration are shifting pressure onto Seattle's black neighborhoods, sociologist finds

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Jackelyn Hwang examined gentrification in two very different cities: Chicago and Seattle. Credit: Steve Gladfelter

A competitive housing market combined with the rapid rise of immigration is driving gentrification in Seattle's low-cost black neighborhoods, according to a new study by Stanford sociologist Jackelyn Hwang.

While gentrification—which Hwang defines as an influx of investment and middle/upper-income residents into previously [low-income neighborhoods](#)—is more likely to occur in areas with higher populations of African Americans, areas with higher populations of Asians have not seen that same level of redevelopment in Seattle—a divergence Hwang's data suggests is attributed to immigration. Her findings have been published in

City & Community.

This research follows similar work Hwang has carried out to better understand the relationship between neighborhood change and inequality in US cities. Hwang hopes this research could help policymakers to consider long-term implications of economic redevelopment and investment, especially its effect on housing for disadvantaged residents.

Here, Hwang found that arriving immigrants, who are predominantly Asian in Seattle, have concentrated in [neighborhoods](#) with more Asians, which has deterred gentrification in those areas. Combined with tight housing constraints, pressure has shifted to low-cost African American neighborhoods where an influx of investment and of middle- and upper-middle-class residents has led to demographic changes, Hwang said.

"The results suggest that increased immigration to a [city](#) with a tight housing market may have unintended consequences on black urban neighborhoods," said Hwang, an assistant professor of sociology in the Stanford School of Humanities & Sciences. "Because black urban residents may disproportionately face displacement and subsequent disadvantages on the housing market, the findings have implications for the future prospects of housing for blacks."

Seattle as a case study

The study grew out of an earlier study Hwang conducted on gentrification in Chicago, a historically highly segregated city. Hwang found that the higher the percentage of African Americans in a neighborhood, the less likely it was to gentrify. She found that a threshold of 40 percent black residents in a neighborhood limited gentrification.

Hwang wondered whether the same pattern she found in Chicago would occur in a city with lower levels of segregation that was also undergoing gentrification. Seattle was a compelling city to examine, Hwang said.

"Because it has low segregation levels, Seattle doesn't really have neighborhoods with these high concentrations of minorities. It actually has diverse neighborhoods that should satisfy these preferences," Hwang said.

Drawing on U.S. Census data, Hwang found that in the 1970s and 1980s, the same tendency to avoid neighborhoods that are primarily made up of minorities that she found in Chicago also occurred in Seattle: Gentrification was more likely to occur in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of whites.

But in the 1990s and 2000s, a different trend emerged in Seattle.

Unlike Chicago, Hwang found that gentrification began happening in neighborhoods with greater numbers of African Americans. However, she did not see the same pattern in Seattle's areas with more Asians.

Hwang wanted to know what led one minority area to gentrify over the other. So, she examined a wide set of possible explanations, including racial preferences of neighborhoods, race-based biases related to neighborhood quality, socioeconomic differences among African Americans and Asians in Seattle, and state policies such as transit options and public housing. Hwang found that none of those factors had an effect—except one: neighborhoods where immigrants were settling did not gentrify.

Seattle's Asian population has rapidly increased, said Hwang. In 2013, 14 percent of the total population was comprised of Asians, double its size in 1980. Hwang's analysis showed that a 1 percentage point increase in a neighborhood's share of Asians in 1990 was associated with a 3.9 percent decrease in the odds of a neighborhood gentrifying by 2013.

However, when there was a 1 percentage point

increase in a neighborhood's share of African Americans it was associated with a 3.4 percent increase in the odds of a neighborhood gentrifying.

Unintended consequences

Hwang found that as neighborhoods with higher shares of African Americans gentrified, these same areas also experienced large declines in their black populations.

As cities transform, Hwang calls for policymakers to consider long-term implications and the unintended consequences of economic redevelopment and investment, especially the impact on housing for disadvantaged residents.

"Given the long-standing inequities that blacks face when it comes to residential inequality and the [housing](#) market, the findings of this study call for targeted interventions to stem processes of neighborhood change exacerbating disadvantage for black urban residents," said Hwang, noting that policies and programs should address racial wealth disparities.

"Although black neighborhoods were once neglected and in decline, the recent investment and socioeconomic upgrading in these areas should not benefit only its landlords and newcomers."

While Seattle's ethno-racial groups may be distinct from groups in highly segregated cities often studied in gentrification, her findings may extend to other diversifying cities in the United States with low levels of segregation and experiencing gentrification, such as Portland, Oregon, and Portland, Maine, Hwang said in the paper.

Hwang is currently working on a national and multilevel analysis to check whether these patterns are happening elsewhere, as well as a nationwide study on [gentrification](#)'s consequences on segregation.

More information: Jackelyn Hwang et al. Divergent Pathways of Gentrification, *American Sociological Review* (2014). DOI: [10.1177/0003122414535774](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122414535774)

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