

# Aging and Gentrification: The Urban Experience

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**Background:** Gentrification is impacting urban communities across the globe. Some urban communities have undergone major displacement of longtime residents thus placing older persons at particular risk of social isolation and the loss of social networks. **Objective:** The objective of the article is to bring attention to the impact of gentrification on communities and specifically addresses the impact on older persons, especially as it relates to displacement, social isolation, and social networks. Additionally the article aims to address implications for social work practice. **Method:** A review of the literature was used to gather information on this important topic. Additionally, newspaper articles were reviewed that discussed gentrification in urban neighborhoods. Content analysis was used to gather themes that would inform practice recommendations. Additionally the author used community mapping through personal observation. **Findings:** Gentrification is perceived as both positive and negative, depending on the stakeholder. It also has been associated with negative health effects as well as social isolation and the loss of social networks. Older persons of color are particularly at risk of displacement. Emotional and financial hardships. **Conclusions:** Practice implications include an examination of quality of life factors, introduction of financial counseling and advocacy for policies that respect the quality of life of older persons faced with gentrification.

**Keywords:** gentrification; homelessness; social isolation; social networks; racism

For the past 20 years, I have driven to work in the District of Columbia by way of a middle class community steeped in the pride of African American homeownership. On my weekday trips, I observed older persons out and about on their porches and front yards. On the occasions of my weekend travels, I would often see families gathered with grandchildren and other relatives. Today, my route is the same, but the families are quite different. In the District of Columbia, census tract 93.02 (Maciag, 2015) is characterized as gentrified. I now observe younger White families walking in the morning, riding bicycles, waiting at bus stops, walking dogs, and escorting children with strollers. The transition while gradual has been noticeable. Based on data from the NeighborhoodInfo DC (2016), between 2000 and 2010, this tract has a 9.2% decrease in population and a 40% decline in the senior population (among the highest decline in the District of Columbia).

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Corresponding to this is the increase in non-Hispanic Whites from 1.1% in 2000 to 15% in 2010. The shift in the racial, age, and economic mix of the neighborhoods is occurring across the country as well as globally. My windshield surveys during my commute to work for 20 years has spurred my interest in the topic of gentrification and the experiences of older persons, especially older persons made vulnerable by the cumulative disadvantage of age, race, and lower incomes. These multiple or intersecting jeopardies of growing old in America (Crewe, 2005) beg for an examination of gentrification that takes into consideration the needs of an often-neglected population.

To provide context for understanding gentrification and its impact on older persons, this article focuses on gentrification in urban areas more generally and provides a review of literature and basic tenets of gentrification. It then moves to a more targeted discussion of how older persons are impacted by the gentrification movement. Included in this discussion is dialogue about social isolation and social networks of older persons. In addition, attention is given to the older baby boomers who are gentrifiers as well as those made vulnerable by the gentrification process. And lastly, implications for social work practice and research with older adults and the gentrified communities are discussed.

## GENTRIFICATION

The literature is replete with definitions of gentrification. Although it remains rare nationally, it has accelerated in many urban centers (Maciag, 2015) including where I work, Washington, DC. The nation's capital is among the urban centers in the U.S. where 20% of the neighborhoods with lower socioeconomic households have experienced gentrification since 2000 (Maciag, 2015). This is of special interest to the profession of social work because the key challenges of the profession, according to Delgado (2013) are urban-based and centered including gentrification. So what is gentrification? The term *gentrification* was introduced by British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964. In her book, *London: Aspects of Change*, Glass as cited by (Brown-Saracino, 2013) observed the uplifting of the social status of many residential areas "as the middle class—or the 'gentry'—moved into working-class space, taking up residence, opening businesses, and lobbying for infrastructure improvements" (p. 1). To avoid the conclusion that gentrification was "unambiguously desirable," Glass also noted in her discourse that gentrification was often associated with displacement of small enterprises as well as lower socioeconomic groups.

Definitions of gentrification are often conceptual as well as empirical. Peter Marcuse offers the following empirical definition of gentrification. He states that

gentrification occurs when new residents—who disproportionately are young, white, professional, technical, and managerial workers with higher education and income levels—replace older residents—who disproportionately are low-income, working class and poor, minority and ethnic groups members, and elderly—from older and previously deteriorated inner-city housing in a spatially concentrated manner, that is, to a degree differing substantially from the general level of change in the community or region as a whole. (Marcuse, 1985, pp. 198–199)

According to the Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 2003), gentrification is defined as

the social phenomenon in which homes in formerly poor, overcrowded ghettos are purchased and privately rehabilitated by more affluent families for their personal dwellings or for investment. This has the effect of raising the property values, rents, and property tax rates of all the homes in the neighborhood, forcing the removal of the remaining less-affluent people and their replacement by those who can afford to live there. (p. 178)

Barker (2003) goes on to define displaced populations as “groups of people who are uprooted from their established locations and lifestyles, including *refugees, immigrants, undocumented aliens, migrant laborers, and seasonal workers*” (p. 124). Those who are among the forced “gentrified” residents are also displaced populations.

Urban scholars have also focused on the causes of gentrification. A Brookings Institution paper (Kennedy & Leonard, 2001) focusing on gentrification and policy choices state that the causes are attributed to sociocultural factors including changing family structures, economic imbalances in employment and housing, and a combination of both. Both demand-side and supply-side explanations are prevalent in the literature as well as the statements of advocates on both sides. The key determinants that are identified include the following:

- Rapid job growth, tight housing markets, preference for city amenities, increased traffic congestion and lengthening commutes, targeted public sector policies, public housing revitalization, and consequences of other federal policies (e.g., Empowerment Zones; Kennedy & Leonard, 2001)
- Location decisions, available housing stock (filtering model); and demographics (e.g., neighborhood change; Kolko, 2007)
- Changing economy of the central city, shift from manufacturing to services, polarization of economy, life-cycle of neighborhood, demographic changes including single living (Marcuse, 1985)
- Changing in preferences of upper income persons about living in the city; broader economic changes has increased demand (beyond market) for housing in some cities (Byrne, 2003)
- Concentrated poverty (Hing, 2014)

There are clearly overlaps in their explanatory reasons for gentrification. Marcuse (1985) notes that three sets of interrelated factors are largely the determinants of gentrification. They are as follows:

1. External factors (nonhousing): private changes and governmental actions
2. Housing factors: user need; nonresidential demand; and housing industry actions
3. Neighborhood factors: location; stock; and class

These three factors in turn, according to Marcuse (1985) result in abandonment plus gentrification that equals to displacement.

What are the impacts of gentrification? According to many urban scholars the social dimensions of displacement and destabilization are core to the gentrification process. The following list provides added context to offer both positive and

negative aspects associated with gentrification. Rowland Atkinson (2002) identifies numerous impacts including costs and benefits. He notes that the costs of gentrification (negative aspects) include the following:

- Displacement
- Harassment and eviction
- Community conflict
- Loss of affordable housing
- Homelessness
- Changes to local service provision,
- Social displacement
- Crime rises (different categories)
- Population loss

Rowland Atkinson (2002) also identifies impacts that he feels are positive in the neighborhood. They are as follows:

- Renewal
- Increased property values and tax revenues
- Local service improvement
- Poverty deconcentration

Peter Byrne (2003) offers city-wide improvement as a benefit including enhancement of employment for low income residents. He also notes that gentrification can also “ameliorate the social isolation of the poor” (p. 422). Byrne also offers reduction in violent crimes as well as mutually enhancing relationships between the newcomers and long-term residents.

## **SOCIAL ISOLATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Social isolation caused by the loss of social networks is also a possible outcome for older persons in gentrified neighborhoods. The dangers of social isolation are well documented. In fact, it is 1 of the 12 grand challenges that has been identified by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (Lubben, Geronda, Sabbath, Kong, & Johnson, 2013). According to this publication addressing the eradication of social isolation,

Social isolation is a potent killer. Public health experts now posit that the association between social isolation and health is as strong as the epidemiological evidence that linked smoking and health at the time U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop issued his now famous warning. (p. 1)

When older persons are forced to relocate to different neighborhoods, it can result in disrupted valued social networks. According to Lubben et al. (2015), social isolation can be linked to increased risk for elder mistreatment because of the loss of friends and perceived social alienation from the community. Social isolation is also strongly associated with health. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC, 2013) has documented the health effects of gentrification and displacement. They state that

. . . special populations are at increased risk for the negative consequences of gentrification. Studies indicate that vulnerable populations typically have shorter life expectancy; higher cancer rates; more birth defects; greater infant mortality; and higher incidence of asthma, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. (p. 1)

An International Making Cities Livable (2017) publication entitled *The Other Side of Gentrification: Health Effects of Displacement* also makes clear the association between health and gentrification. This report states,

Built environment and social conditions in places where people live and interact with others have significant impacts on health and well-being. When neighborhoods change rapidly, pushing existing residents to the margins, disparities in health often widen. This becomes evident in health outcomes such as cancer rates, incidence of asthma, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, as these marginalized residents are often priced out of neighborhoods with healthy housing, healthy food and healthy urban environments. (p. 1)

The report also cites *Root Shock*, the seminal work of Mendi Fullilove (2004) that addresses social loss. She states,

Long-time neighborhood residents commonly develop deep social ties and strong social support networks within the community. When the neighborhood and social connections therein are broken up, this “social loss” creates excess stress and psychological effects, which in turn have effects on physical systems that we rely on for resilience against disease and chronic conditions. Cultural institutions, culturally relevant businesses and a general feeling of having a place in the city to call home provide many social and health benefits beyond the face value that we often find in the gentrification debate. (p. 1)

Because of the increased health challenges as one ages, the link between health and gentrification is particularly relevant.

A specific focus on the impact on older persons is relatively absent in the literature reviewed and when mentioned is most often tied to displacement and the difficulty of finding affordable housing in the same neighborhood that many have resided in for years. An analysis of news articles on gentrification offer some additional insight from persons in the community and provide context for some of the issues that are particularly salient for older persons. These accounts of gentrification show the essence of the disagreement that rages in many communities. There are polar extremes—those vehemently believing that gentrification is an assault on the poor and vulnerable as well as a human rights violation (Bartholomew, 2016; Hansen, 2016; Knafo, 2015; Madden, 2013; Older, 2014), whereas others believe that the newcomers (gentrifiers) improve the quality of life for their longtime neighbors and is generally not all bad (Buntin, 2015; Hampson, 2005; Sullivan, 2014; *The Economist*, 2005; Wiener, 2014). In the midst of these impassioned narratives are older persons who for better or worse have to adjust to the new circumstances created whether they move or stay. When the move is forced, then expectedly there is the accompanying grief and loss, and maybe even anger. For those remaining, staying until the end, they likely experience some concern about the displacement of lifelong friends and businesses that have been instrumental in their quality of life.

## URBAN AGING, BABY BOOMERS, AND GENTRIFICATION

Baby boomers are among the groups returning to the inner center areas and are a special cohort of gentrifiers who are usually in the higher socioeconomic status. According to Keates (2013), in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*,

Between 2000 and 2010, populations of baby boomers (those born between the years 1946 and 1964) declined at a far steeper rate in the areas 40 to 80 miles outside the city centers of the 50 largest U.S. cities than in the areas within 5 miles of these centers, according to an analysis of U.S. Census data by online real-estate brokerage Redfin. (p. 1)

The rationale for their move is often that they are empty-nesters and are interested in downsizing, proximity to work, and an active lifestyle. And some have a social justice motive—the belief that they are contributing to improving neighborhoods and embracing more diversity than they found in suburbs. This is an important research aspect of gentrification, however, the scope of this article is more focused on the long-term older residents who find themselves in the midst of the gentrification process that is forced on them. Many of these older persons are in a very different situation than their gentrifier baby-boom cohort and are a more economically dependent and part of the fabric of the neighborhoods. For them, this spatial restructuring or revitalization sometimes come with displacement and loss (Petrovic, 2007). These are critically important domains for social work practice and intervention. For these older persons, gentrification can bring with it uncertainty as well as more acute problems including homelessness. An older resident of Jamaica Plains, a gentrified community in Boston, Massachusetts, described her angst when after 15 years, her landlord wanted to sell her unit and she was faced with moving out of the neighborhood (Larson, 2015). Her feelings were “we have worked real hard in this neighborhood to make it change, and all we are seeing is displacement” (p. 1). Whereas some displaced residents are able to locate affordable housing, others have to rely on senior-designated public housing and other programs that often have closed or lengthy waiting lists. Other homeowners in these communities are concerned about the increased tax burden because of the elevated value of the property in gentrified communities. Another concern voiced by long-term residents is the loss of the neighborly culture that they have been a part of. One resident wants to make sure that the old-timers are welcomed by the newcomers in their own neighborhoods. He states that he chose to stay in the predominantly minority neighborhood to avoid the indignation of suburban neighborhoods and reflects on his good neighbors and how some are struggling to hang on given higher taxes and repair costs (Larson, 2015). The threat of displacement and hardships loom heavy with some of the older residents. Lifetimes of creating networks and fictive kin neighbors, are all interspersed with gentrification and represent the adverse effects for some older persons.

The fact that gentrification is strongly associated with displacement makes older long-term residents more vulnerable when their neighborhood is targeted. Homelessness is daunting at any age. And the prospect of being older and homeless exacerbates an already troubling situation. It is documented that older persons who become homeless (as compared to persons who age in the state of homelessness) are most likely to have inadequate income because of the affordability of housing

(Burbank, 2006). Similarly, other scholars have documented that the antecedents of homelessness for older persons are their homes being sold or expensive repairs (Crane et al., 2005). And especially vulnerable are older adults with lower incomes who are often racial minorities. For them, gentrification can greatly influence whether the last psychosocial developmental stage ends with integrity or despair.

Another related housing issue for gentrified neighborhoods is what is referred to as *tangled titles* associated with properties that belonged to a deceased relative (Geringer, 2017a). This legal matter results in long-term residents who may have been caregivers for the elderly being displaced. Also, many older residents complain about being harassed to sell their property. This makes them anxious in a neighborhood that they have lived in a lifetime. As stated earlier, the loss of social ties is a serious problem, and the remaining older persons experience loss at both the micro level (their neighbors and friends) and the macro level (the businesses and community staples). Long-term residency in these communities has increased their social capital over the years and the changing environment can result in the loss of this treasured status that contributes to one being able to age with dignity and value. Being forcibly relocated is difficult at any age, but for older persons, it can disrupt existing networks that allow for independence.

According to the Poverty and Race Research Action Council (Mathema, 2013), urban scholars over the past several decades have redefined gentrification through acknowledging the “dynamic and multi-layered process in which the roles of different actors and components change over time and space.” In addition, Mathema (2013) notes that the experience of gentrification depends on the varying “social, political, and geographic contexts” (p. 1). The author notes that more recent definitions of gentrifications have attempted to soften the negativity association with displacement. Other terms such as *revitalization* and *renaissance* of cities are also used.

It is critically important that the faces of those being removed be acknowledged in the academic efforts to characterize the series of events that too often displace persons of color. Those who are the “gentrifiers” and the “gentrified” often have different views. Reminiscent of the community rehabilitation programs of the 1960s known as urban renewal by those in power and by those impacted—Negro removal was the descriptor used. The term *negro removal*, coined by James Baldwin, also intimated the federal government as a conspirator in the breakdown of family life and building of distrust (Espinoza, 2016).

## REFRAMING THE DEBATE TO FOCUS ON QUALITY OF LIFE

Responding to the serious impact that gentrification can have on vulnerable older adults requires an appreciation of the conflicting views relative to its value. Passion is on both sides of the debate. The following two statements about gentrification help to unveil the divide through the lens of opposing stances. In an article in the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, the church’s role in a gentrifying neighborhood in Washington, DC is addressed:

In our neighborhood of Logan Circle, the average rent has risen to \$2,700 a month and we have seen rampant displacement of renters. Citywide, we are seeing a rise in homelessness, including a 25% increase in family homelessness. So why is there not



sufficient action to slow the pace of gentrification and try to mitigate the impact on long-term residents and people of color?

The answer is that culturally, we have not accepted that there is a problem; people are merely exercising their choice and freedom to live where they desire. As Daniel Jose Older writes “the standard frame for a story on gentrification pits the upside of ‘urban renewal’ against what’s painted as a necessary byproduct of this renewal; some folks have to move out.” Our failure to slow the pace of gentrification is also due to a failure of cultural imagination around racism. The dominant narrative in America is that racism is comprised of individual acts and require intent. Therefore, even gentrification has a race-based disparate impacts, gentrification is not largely understood as structural racism. (Brau & Vasquez, 2016, p. 1)

The counter position in support of the positive effects of gentrification is presented by a gentrifier in Washington, DC. He states,

Wilson [William Julius] posited that the inner city blacks suffered the consequences of “social isolation” lacking contact with persons of difference class, or with persons of a different class, or with persons of different racial backgrounds, or both, which would concentrate the effects the effects of poverty and shape the life opportunities available, such as “access to jobs and job networks, availability of marriageable partners, involvement of quality schools, and exposure to conventional role models.”

Gentrification needs to be accessed within this context. Many poor, minority neighborhoods gained this character as a result of white flight and dis-investment. Existing residents have limited resources with which to improve their circumstances, faced with their own problems, and the need to cope with the consequences of their neighbors’ troubles. Urban economic development through the government programs has not been a notable success. Whatever political power poor minorities may wield in the city is often truncated by the financial fragility of the city government and its diminished influence on state and federal government. . . . The arrival of more affluent residents provides a counter movement to this pattern of metropolitan development over these past decades. . . . Although social science proof of the existence of such benefits are scarce, some benefits are apparent from the reversal of the patterns of middle class exodus. The benefits to the low-income residents are economic, political, and social. Some can be realized only in neighborhoods that are economically mixed; others require only that the city as a political and taxing jurisdiction be diverse. (Byrne, 2003, p. 418)

As can be seen from the compelling and passionate responses of two advocates, gentrification raises controversy in neighborhoods as well as among urban scholars. Advocates on both sides of the debate weigh in about perceived and actual results of gentrification. Without regard to the position one holds on the impact of gentrification, social work in urban communities must address the impact that it has on social isolation and social networks among older residents. The debate between the rights and wrongs misses the opportunity for common ground that is critically important to ensuring quality of life for older persons in urban neighborhoods that are facing gentrification. It seems that the ship has already sailed and gentrification is a part of the landscape—like it or not. Thus, the dialogue should be related to sharpening our lens to ensure that social work is proactive rather than reactive and solution focused versus problem focused.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

There is both a written and lived narrative about gentrification. It is likely that the truth about the positives and negatives can be best understood through the social work mantra—“Start where the client is.” To understand the impact of gentrification for older persons and their communities, it is important that social workers use both the micro and macro lenses of practice. Older persons who are forced to move have to address the loss of place as well as the loss of people (social networks) who have been important to their life course. For these older persons, finding a new home is only a part of the equation. The equally important element is place making and quality of life.

Urban social work practice intersects with urban aging to call attention to the importance of the examination of gentrification and older persons. Additional research is needed on this topic. Specifically, the impact on older minority groups such as African Americans is a critical area of needed exploration. Also, the impact on the quality of life of older gentrifiers is an area that also requires greater attention. A better understanding of their motives is critical and how the move influences their quality of life. Also, there is some emerging discussion about how gentrifiers are reaching out to close the racial and ethnic divide. More examples of these positive efforts are critically important to support those older persons who chose to remain in their communities. Examples of such initiatives include community conversations such as the New York City’s Bedford-Stuyvesant STooPs (Stoddard, 2016) annual art event designed to unite the community and form new ties. In addition, other programs such as the Mobile Porch (Double Nickels Theatre Company, n.d.) that focuses on intergenerational dialogue around the history of neighborhoods. Similarly, social dialogue around is promoted around restorative justice through a “Restorative Listening Project” (Mathema, 2013) in Portland Oregon that fosters relationships through conversations around race and community. Programs like this can also address the grief of residents as they mourn the loss (Green, 2016) of the community they knew and inspire newcomers to invest in knowing more about the history of the community they have become a part of.

Social workers can also be very effective in preventing older persons from financial hardships caused by increased real estate taxes. Effective information and referral to programs, such as homestead programs, can offer needed financial relief to long-term residents. In addition, social workers can provide support to older persons who feel targeted by unscrupulous practices that pressure them to sell or to sell at lower prices. Lower income older adults are especially vulnerable because the high amounts being offered. Without financial consultation, the older resident could end up selling without recouping the needed funds to support them during their life span. Some older residents understand this. For example, a resident in Philadelphia (Geringer, 2017) states,

I will not be motivated by money . . . If I had \$200,000, where would I go? If I was paying \$2,400 a month for a two-bedroom apartment around here, that \$200,000 wouldn’t last very long. That can’t give me enough to live the quality of life I have here.

Others may need support in making this financial decision. Another older resident in Philadelphia states, “My taxes went up from under \$1,000 to over \$3,000 . . . I am an old woman on a small pension” (Geringer, 2017b). Financial social

work is a growing area of practice and it is particularly relevant for older persons facing gentrification. It expands self-awareness, sense of self, self-esteem and emotional stability while increasing financial knowledge in order to improve financial circumstances (Center for Financial Social Work, n.d.).

Another critically important role of social work is to advocate for policies that check the growth of gentrification and provide adequate support for long-term residents who are at risk for displacement because of gentrification. This includes the investment in affordable housing for displaced older renters as well as rent control to protect older residents at risk of displacement (Davidson, 2008).

Our social work values social justice, dignity, and worth of the individual, and the importance and centrality of human relationships are inextricably linked to assuming a proactive role in researching and providing both micro and macro interventions to assist older persons who face gentrification.

In closing, I am reminded of the seminal statement by former Senator Hubert Humphrey about how we should treat our older citizens (Hanson, 2012). He stated that the moral test of government was how it treated older persons in the twilight of their lives—we as social workers are indeed faced with this moral test as we act collectively to address aging and gentrification.

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