Gentrification has become deeply ingrained into popular understandings of contemporary urban life in the United States. It connotes meanings beyond the ‘textbook definitions’ from urban planners and policymakers. Generally speaking, gentrification describes the process whereby new residents move into historically low-income neighborhoods, driving up rents and property values that push out long-time residents. It is a process that often includes whiter demographics, the breaking of community support networks and a loss of cultural identities. But it is easier to describe what gentrification feels like than to describe what it is. Gentrification can sound like different music at the grocery store, or look like the seemingly-overnight arrival of dockless bike littering the sidewalk. It can feel like social disconnection marked by new neighbors that don’t make eye contact or the closure of a long-time community gathering place. Rather than trying to distill a single definition of gentrification, we will offer some of the components associated with the process, including: race, class, mobility, land-use, investment patterns, cultural markers, and neighborhood desirability.

THE STUDY OF GENTRIFICATION

While processes of displacement and spatial exclusion have been happening for a long time, the term “gentrification” was first coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s. The word “gentrification” indicated a process of “the gentry” moving into working class neighborhoods and replacing poorer residents. But gentrification is neither a binary nor static process. The ways that neighborhoods change U.S. cities today is very different than what Glass studied in mid-century London.

Academics have used differing methods to understand gentrification as a temporal process. Early studies posited that gentrification occurred in patterns of “invasion and succession” or “neighborhood life cycles.” Later scholars theorized “stages” of gentrification using economic markers. Despite these different models, we can understand gentrification through a few common factors: systemic and racialized disinvestment, narratives around neighborhood decay, reinvestment through property speculation, and physical, cultural and/or community displacement.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF MEASURING GENTRIFICATION

Measuring gentrification is complex not only because of multi-layered and interlocking social dynamics, but also because of limitations in the available data. Most gentrification research relies on census tract data, a unit of measure that the Census Bureau uses nation-wide. But census tracts don’t necessarily match up with the ways that people define and experience their own neighborhoods. In addition, the scale and recurrence of data collection is both too big to capture block- or street-level displacement, and too infrequent to capture fast-paced change.

Researchers have relied on a wide variety of methods and metrics to understand these neighborhood changes with inconsistent results. Discrepancies come from differences in characteristics used to describe neighborhood change, the scale at which change is measured, and how one tracks levels of displacement. Despite these differences, some of the key ways that gentrification is quantitatively tracked over time include changing racial demographics, income levels, educational attainment, speculative property purchasing, levels of tenant harassment, and rent burden.
GENTRIFICATION IS A CONTESTED CONCEPT

While gentrification has been increasingly incorporated into mainstream political discourse, to many it is still a scary word fraught with controversial social implications. Some embrace gentrification as a means towards economic revitalization and neighborhood improvement. Those that do may resist the negative connotations of gentrification, and dismiss naysayers as simply anti-change. Furthermore, the rates at which gentrification physically displaces residents through eviction, raising rents, or other barriers is highly debated. But while gentrification may have its proponents, it is increasingly at the center of community mobilization in cities around the country. From local activists to national coalitions, these organizations are going to ensure that the question of gentrification - and the right for low income communities and communities of color to thrive in urban settings - is not going anywhere.

CONTEXTUALIZING GENTRIFICATION

Gentrification doesn’t happen outside of its historical context. It’s not just about individual artists or yuppies who decide to move into a refurbished warehouse. There are structural systems at play. When neighborhoods change and long-time residents are forced to leave, we must ask several questions, including:

Why does a neighborhood look the way it does? What makes the land undervalued (or more affordable)? What economic and political structures have historically neglected or harmed that neighborhood while pouring resources into others? Why is the neighborhood receiving investment - whether public or private - now? Who are those investments meant to serve? Why do many current residents face limited economic mobility?

It is important for us to understand this context, because we need to be able to differentiate between structurally racist economic systems and neighborhood improvements that residents want and deserve.

Further Reading

- Gentrification: Framing Our Perceptions (Enterprise Community Partners)
- In the Face of Gentrification (The Urban Institute)
- Gentrification Explained (Urban Displacement Project)
- Shifting Neighborhoods (National Community Reinvestment Coalition)

LEARN MORE

Visit the Resources page at create.umn.edu to connect this information about gentrification to key concepts like Speculative Development and Green Gentrification, as well as more context through specific case studies and anti-displacement policy tools.