Gentrification has become deeply ingrained into popular understandings of how cities function in the United States. It connotes meanings beyond the ‘textbook definitions’ from urban planners and policymakers, making gentrification both an emotionally triggering and difficult to define topic. Generally speaking, gentrification describes the process whereby new residents move into historically low-income neighborhoods, driving up rents and property values and thereby pushing out long-time residents. This often looks like whiter demographics, the breaking of community support networks, and a loss of cultural identities. Gentrification can sound like different music at the grocery store, or look like the arrival of dockless bikes 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, some of the components associated with the process include: 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 higher-wealth residents (“the gentry”) moving into working class neighborhoods and replacing poorer residents. But gentrification is not such a binary nor linear process. The ways that neighborhoods change in U.S. cities today is different from what Glass observed 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 Federal 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 too big to capture block- or street-level displacement, and too infrequent to capture fast-paced change respectively.

Researchers have used 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 working 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 is a process in 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: What made the “original” neighborhood look the way it did? Why was the land undervalued and the housing more affordable? What economic and political structures have historically neglected or harmed that neighborhood while pouring resources into others? Why do many legacy residents face limited economic mobility? Why is the neighborhood receiving investment — whether public or private — now? Who are those investments meant to serve?

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.

In other words, to critique gentrification is not the same as critiquing neighborhood improvements or neighborhood change at large. Rather, critiquing gentrification is about pointing out the disparity between those who benefit and profit from those improvements, and those who face harm as a result.

Further Reading on Gentrification

- 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)