

Desirable Homes, Undesirable Schools: Gentrification and Education

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Abstract

As America is moving away from the industrial revolution, a transformation within the working class is occurring. Low-income urban areas comprised of people of color are undergoing an economic shift due to the influx of middle-class families. These changes, called gentrification, are affecting the neighborhoods and schools children inhabit. Although gentrification markets itself on the increasing economic value of a neighborhood, it fails to recognize that it puts low-income schools at risk of being defunded, widening the achievement and potential performance gap between public and private schools, and continues to reinforce the segregation of public schools. Instead of giving underfunded schools the help that they need, public schools are being torn down and left behind in an effort to keep up with the rise of gentrification which puts the educational ability of students of color at risk. Gentrification is inevitable, but there are ways to ensure that it occurs in a sustainable way that protects low-income students of color.

Introduction

During the late 60s, cities in American neighborhoods saw an extreme racial demographic shift. As Black Americans grew tired of the lack of jobs and racial tensions in the South, they began to move away from rural areas and towards urban cities. White Americans who were unsettled by the increasing amount of African-Americans in their neighborhoods began moving their families from the cities to the suburbs. Coined as White flight, this phenomenon has resulted in tremendous effects on the neighborhoods it impacts. "White flight

often results in lower property values, more vacant homes, and the general decline of the neighborhood” (Trapasso 2019). Cities left behind during the height of White flight experienced an influx of people of color and set up a standard of segregation within neighborhoods, its most common practice being through redlining, that is still upheld today.

The rise of technology has spurred a movement away from the industrial revolution and the “general disappearance or transformation of manual labor in productive industries from farmers to fishermen to factory workers” (Brown-Saracino 2009). As America is moving away from the industrial revolution, a transformation within the working class is occurring. Low-income urban areas comprised of people of color are undergoing an economic shift due to the influx of middle-class families. This process, called gentrification, has been cited as a way to “increase a city’s tax base, and a public policy tool that can improve economic opportunities for the poor” (Stillman 2011). Although these are valid benefits, an aspect of gentrification that is commonly overlooked is that “housing market pressures associated with gentrification also have the potential to force longtime, low-income residents and residents of color to move out of gentrifying neighborhoods” (Mordechay and Ayscue 2019). As gentrification arises, problems of inequity, especially in the education sector have been unearthed.

Thesis Statement

Although gentrification markets itself on the increasing economic value of a neighborhood, it fails to recognize that it puts low-income schools at risk of being defunded, widening the achievement and potential performance gap between public and private schools, and continues to reinforce the segregation of public schools.

Research Question

This paper will answer the following question: How does gentrification impact the access to the quality of education of low-income students of color?

Methodology and Review of Literature

All of the data for this paper was collected through secondary research. Scholarly search engines such as Google Scholar, Duke Library, and UNC Library, were used to find literary works that highlighted the relationship between gentrification and education. Because gentrification does not affect cities equally, this paper will look at the correlation between gentrification and education as a whole with small analysis into certain areas in America.

Limitations

As stated before, gentrification does have positive impacts that can help revitalize dying neighborhoods and their surrounding economies. However, this paper will focus on the negative effects of education and how this relates to low-income students of color. The conclusions of this paper were made through the usage of pre-existing data.

Analysis of Data

The Underfunding and Defunding of Public Schools

Public schools in America are funded through state, federal, and local taxes. According to a study done by Bowling Green University, "Local property taxes often make up the majority of a school's funding, sometimes making up for over half of total funding" (Rosenblat 2015). The process of funding schools based on surrounding property taxes is one that has caught criticism due to funding inequality. Schools that are in wealthier areas receive more property taxes. With

more money in these schools, more resources are available, and thus student performance is better as teachers have adequate funds to properly teach their students. School districts that are low in property wealth are not receiving the same amount of money as those in wealthier areas.

Gentrification brings “a growing number of young middle-class families” into a low-income neighborhood and a majority of the racial demographic of the gentry (those who have actively participated in gentrification) are white (Trespaso 2019). Although these families are investing in their new neighborhoods, they are not taking that same chance with the surrounding public schools. “Public schools experience gentrification as middle and upper-middle-class gentrifiers reshape them in their own image.” Due to the lack of funding for public schools in low-income areas, gentry parents (parents of student-aged children who have assisted in the process of gentrifying their area) are reluctant to send their children into those institutions. Gentrification does not begin and end within a neighborhood. “Specifically, ethnographic accounts increasingly highlight commercial gentrification, the role of urban institutions—such as schools, city government, and marketing firms—and other mechanisms, especially in intensive and advanced gentrification projects” (Brown-Saracino 2017). Gentrification is quickly becoming commercialized and focuses on building up certain areas that make it a vacuum for profits. Instead of giving underfunded schools the help that they need, public schools are being torn down and left behind in an effort to keep up with the rise of gentrification which puts the educational ability of students of color at risk.

The Stigma Against Public Schools

Through the movement of middle-class families into low-income neighborhoods, gentrification allows for an opportunity for parents to allow their kids to mix with others that do

not share their same racial or economic statuses. When families move, they face a new task of deciding where to send their children to school. Although a clear solution would be to send their children to the local public school, this option is often not the first choice. Some gentry parents hold a fear that putting their children into low-income schools could lead to their failure.

According to a 2015 article from the Atlantic, “Because newcomers tend to send their kids outside of the local system, often to private or charter schools, gentrification tends to have a neutral or even negative effect on neighborhood schools, at least in the short term” (Rosenblat 2015). As middle-class families do not have secure generational wealth, they are intentional in cultivating a successful path for their children. Unfortunately, this process is done through the gatekeeping of educational opportunities that are not open for every student.

School choice is a privilege that most inhabitants of low-income communities are not afforded. “Good schools and options within the public school system are important in the global competition to attract highly skilled knowledge workers, to entice investors to gentrification projects and to subsequently market gentrified and gentrifying areas to new middle-class residents” (Bridge and Butler 2014). Affluent families have a privilege in choosing schools that fit educational, emotional, and convenience needs for their children. They have the economic ability to invest in the schools that will positively impact the educational wellbeing of their children. “Parents with greater resources [can] more effectively navigate the local political system, making it easier to secure a greater share of school spending for their children” (Shores and Simon 2017). Families from lower economic situations do not have this privilege. With the inability of school choice, the only option for these families is to send their children to low-income, underperforming schools, widening the achievement gap.

Segregation in Public Schools

Another impact of gentrification on the American educational system is the modern-day segregation of public schools. Many people argue that gentrification is not a race issue, rather an economic one. However, according to a study by Japonica Brown-Saracino, “recent analyses suggest that gentrification does occur in certain racially heterogeneous spaces”. Hwang & Sampson find that “racial heterogeneity is indeed positively and significantly correlated with gentrification” (Brown-Saracino 2017). As White families move into low-income housing areas and begin to renovate, it drives up property taxes and drives out low-income families that were formerly their neighbors. A study published in the Urban Affairs Review showed that ascending neighborhoods (neighborhoods with gentrification on the rise) became more populated with white people. The racial majority changed in 18 to 30 percent of minority neighborhoods that were on the rise, compared to less than 12 percent whose socioeconomic status did not improve (Staff 2018).

It would be remiss to discuss gentrification and education and fail to recognize the effects that it has on students of color. When families of color are displaced and have to find other places to live, the students miss out on the revitalization that is occurring in their own communities. “Neighborhoods that gentrify usually benefit from new services and amenities like grocery stores and other retail within walking distance, better public transit connections, reduced crime, and perhaps most importantly, attention from local government” (Mordechay 2018). These amenities are essential in helping build a positive educational experience for students but when they are displaced, they are left out and deprived of these resources as they have to move, usually into areas of a lower economic status than where they lived.

Durham, North Carolina is a city where gentrification is on the rise. According to a methodology used by trade magazine Governing Magazine, five of Durham County’s 60 census

tracts have gentrified and another 13 tracts have the potential for gentrification (Vaughan et. al 2018). Durham has a 48 percent white population, yet they only make up 19 percent of the racial composition of Durham Public Schools. In fact, 77 percent of the minority enrollment of Durham is compromised in public and charter schools (2018). Although the gentry are quickly occupying neighborhoods, they are not sending their children to the neighboring schools- continuing the trend of segregated schools.

Conclusion

The rise of gentrification has unearthed the internal issues among the United States educational system. As public schools struggle to draw in the wealthier white population that came in from gentrification, they continue to lose funding and face risks of closure and underfunding. Due to the displacement families of color face, they are unable to experience the benefits of attending school in a gentrified area. Gentrification is inevitable, but there are ways to ensure that it occurs in a sustainable way that protects low-income students of color. "Perhaps the most pressing need is for collaboration of scholars, housing and education planners, and communities affected to begin to develop a program that addresses the economic, cultural/ideological and political dimensions of poverty and marginalization in urban areas" (Lipman 2014). In order to remedy a growing educational inequality and move gentrification into a benefit for everyone, the help of many professions working together is required.

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