Gentrification's Effect on Black America

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Abstract

Gentrification is a well-articulated form of segregation that continues to persist throughout our nation today. It is a norm to see a city or parts of a city get "rejuvenated" and many see the process of new businesses and housing renovation as a good thing, as the negatives are clouded by the colorful success that the blind eye can only see. In this essay, I will offer more of an explanation of gentrification and who/where it specifically affects. Additionally, gentrification has heavy effects on perpetuating racially divisive systems of housing, policing, and education. The lack of humanity that occurs as a result of gentrification needs to be acknowledged and tackled rather than overlooked and written-off. Through my research, I have found that this shift can only happen through changing the terminology used, making legal changes in housing and beyond, and fostering cross-racial dialogue as conversation promotes knowledge, and knowledge incentivizes change.

Introduction

It is no secret that our country and institutions thrive on the concept of race. Every institution we see works hand in hand to ensure that White people reach full success and people of color, predominantly Black people in the United States, do not. While these institutions impact all minorities, this paper will particularly highlight how Black communities are affected by the institutions that surround and stem from gentrification. First, gentrification typically occurs in the same pattern of cities to suburbs. Factors such as individuals increasing investment in homes or housing rehabilitation in cities push forward housing displacement as properties continue to get more expensive (Henig, 1980). Additionally, today the legacy of early racist laws, exclusionary zoning laws, discrimination by private actors, and gentrification all work hand in hand to promote the segregation of Black Americans (Dickerson, 2021). Lastly, the prison/policing system and the education system are just two of the many institutions that thrive off of the pattern of gentrification. Policing and education systems ensure that White people succeed while Black people are oppressed. This issue needs to be openly addressed and acknowledged through cross-racial dialogues and a reform of our institutions, and then we can finally move past segregation.

Significance of Topic

Although history teaches us that segregation was a horror of the past, it is still predominant within society. The policies put in place to combat segregation have failed as disparities in wealth, homeownership, incarceration rates, and educational outcomes continue to flourish through the patterns of gentrification (Tempel, 2022). Gentrification is typically looked at as a class issue more than a race issue, however, these two concepts are intertwined due to institutions, such as the education system, that continue to keep White people rich and racial

minorities poor. While gentrification does affect all racial minorities, Black Americans experience a higher percentage of spatial segregation compared to other racial minorities, solidifying that race is a determining factor when considering access to housing (Robinson et al., 2020). This topic is so important because it is clear that society never planned on leaving segregation in the past, instead they just found different, more discrete, ways to ensure that Black Americans never reached true equality. By raising awareness through research, then and only then will real change become a possibility.

Research Questions

For this essay, I plan on focusing my research on answering the following three questions:

1. Why and how does gentrification occur?

2. What institutional factors prevent Black Americans from breaking the housing cycle?

3. In which ways can the issues of gentrification be fixed?

I will organize my paper in the order of these questions. Beginning by answering the broader question of what gentrification is and how it happens will give background to the audience and provide context. Following this, highlighting educational and policing institutions will give two examples of institutions that are in place to keep Black Americans segregated. By ending on possible solutions to this issue, I think the audience will see the problem, and be motivated to fix it.

Trends of Gentrification

Whether it be through media, personal experiences, or friends' experiences, everyone generally has an idea of what gentrification looks like. But why exactly does gentrification happen and how does it happen? In broader terms, gentrification is the process of wealthier

people moving into a poorer urban area (Drew, 2012). In the past, gentrification has always been a class issue more than a race issue, and today it is still marketed as such. However, due to years of segregation, many neighborhoods throughout America are split up based on race. Additionally, many low-income neighborhoods' main demographic is made up of Black people due to institutional practices that force Black people to work ten times harder to get access to the same things White people can. The implications of slavery and segregation are still seen within our current infrastructures and gentrification is a key part in keeping this well-oiled machine of racism going. As a result of gentrification, housing displacement is one of the largest issues seen. Although, many other disparities also arise from gentrification such as food security, education, and businesses. In order to urge wealthier tenants to move into a place, there must be businesses that cater to said people. This results in existing residents being introduced to new food vendors that they cannot afford, and discriminatory practices allow for an increase in the cost of vendor space. Making this process completely exclusionary to the long-term residents in eliminating minority businesses and furthering segregation (Robinson et al., 2020). As long-term residents are forcibly excluded from every aspect of life outside of the home, they are also excluded from housing in itself. There are social policies that respond to the displacement of groups, but not efficiently enough. As new businesses and people come in, housing costs naturally rise.

This issue of displacement has been growing for years and is continuing to worsen. In the past, "white flight" – or white people fleeing minority-populated urban spaces– led white people to move out of cities into a white-picket fence, cul de sac neighborhoods, but that process has transitioned into white people moving into minority-populated areas. In the article Gentrification and displacement within cities: a comparative analysis, author Jeffrey R. Henig analyzes gentrification trends in 1980. It is important to look at articles and studies done in the past to

compare them to trends now. Henig labels the housing displacement in 1980 as being less sudden and visible than the publicly mandated urban renewal of the 1950s and 1960s, however, U.S. cities are losing people, mostly white middle-class people, to the suburbs. This foundation allowed for gentrification to continue to ruin lives quietly, since there were and is no governmental mandates making people do this. The pattern of white-middle class people moving into the suburbs has continued but today areas that were deemed unlikely to gentrify are now being gentrified (Hochstenbach et al., 2021). Companies continue to grow and families continue to want to move out of the city, and space is limited. This results in areas that are lower-income and previously not likely to be gentrified, continuing to push people out of their homes. Businesses and landlords continue to target these low-income neighborhoods because they can buy cheap, and sell expensive, making their profit margin huge.

Demographics

Along with knowing exactly what gentrification is, it is important to know exactly who it affects. As mentioned before, gentrification typically targets low-income Black Americans as middle to high-income white people move into predominately Black neighborhoods. In the article Whitest City in America: A Smaller Black Community's Experience of Gentrification, Displacement, and Aging in Place, author, Raina Croff, studies exactly what demographic of people are affected by gentrification. Croff looks at Portland, Oregon, one of America's fastest gentrifying cities with the smallest metropolitan Black population. The study yielded that the majority of participants within gentrifying historically Black neighborhoods were at least 65 and had lived in their neighborhoods for at least 21 years. Showing that smaller, aging, long-term Black residents are the most susceptible to being impacted by gentrification.

This offers a further issue, in targeting long-term older Black residents, the accessibility to pick up and move is limited. As technology advances, a lot of older generations cannot keep up which prevents many people from accessing the internet to help them find housing, keeping their housing, hiring a lawyer, etc. With age also comes physical restraints. For some people, the idea of packing up one's entire life and moving is physically impossible. Additionally, having long-term residents be faced with this vast of a culture shift is unheard of. Restaurants or businesses these residents may have gone to their whole lives are now stripped away as new businesses take over. Gentrification pushes for a complete lack of familiarity among long-term residents, leaving them practically in the dark.

Education Institution

At this point, it is clear that gentrification is an issue, but it is necessary to highlight institutions that perpetuate this vicious cycle. One of the largest most oppressive and exclusionary systems is the education institution. Today, there are no forms of legal segregation through education, however, it still happens. In looking at school districts, post-Jim Crow laws led to some schools being majority White and some schools majority Black. Efforts were made to desegregate the schools and offer a more diverse community amongst schools, but efforts failed as it is unlikely for people to move neighborhoods to different schools. However, the funding for schools is left in the hands of the district, the districts are often run by white middle-class parents, and the funding then goes to white middle-class schools. Off the bat Black people are set at a disadvantage in accessibility to technology, programs, and the quality of education overall.

This issue continues to fester when looking at higher education. The highest paying jobs today require a bachelor's degree and even after that either a master's degree, Ph.D., law school,

or medical school. In looking at accessibility to college in general, Black people tend to already be at a disadvantage due to the financial aspects. In looking at the article Parents' Financial Assistance for College and black-white Wealth Disparity, author Yunju Nam analyzes the financial disparities of college. Familial wealth is something that White people are more likely to have than Black people. College in itself is not affordable and a lot of the time requires parental assistance. Black people do not receive as much parental financial assistance as their white counterparts, maintaining the Black-White wealth disparity across generations (Nam, 2021). Low socioeconomic students are graduating from college at rates five times less than their high-income peers, and only 52% of low socioeconomic high school students enroll in college as compared to 82% of their high-income peers" (Oleka et al., 2022). Along with this, almost two-thirds of jobs in the United States will require post-secondary education (Oleka et al., 2022). Furthermore, high-school advisors are purposefully swaying Black students away from college. In the article, High School Counselors as Social Capital for Low-Income Students in a Career Academy High School Model: A Case Study, authors Onyejindu Oleka and Donald Mitchell Jr. explore this idea with their study yielding that high school counselors are not giving their students proper information and access to post-secondary options. There is a lack of information about scholarships, schools, and so much more that higher-income students do receive.

When looking at higher education such as medical school, the disparity continues to grow. Standardized tests such as the MCAT and LSAT are expensive at 200 dollars minimum. Along with the price of the test itself, studying tools are needed such as books and classes which can accumulate to over 1,000 dollars, and that's just to have a chance of getting into a medical school or law school. In the article Medical school admission policies disadvantage low-income applicants, authors Briana Christophers, Mollie Marr, and Tricia Pendergrast look at the

application process of medical school to show these disparities. Each aspect of the medical school application asks about a student's financial situation, even though they claim to be need-blind. Many applicants from this do not have an equal opportunity to be qualified because of institutional barriers (Christophers et al., 2022). This process leaves many Black applicants in a position where they cannot succeed, and from there not get one of the highest-paying jobs. When it comes to education, Black students are extremely disadvantaged at every step of the process.

Prison Institution

Alongside the education system disparities, over-policing in predominately Black low-income neighborhoods is another factor continuing this cycle of oppression. Impoverished Black communities fall victim to street-level criminalization (Stuart et al., 2018). Policing is rooted in slavery as its original purpose was to maintain the law, and the law at its creation allowed for slavery. The roots of this system are still in effect. Black people in America are more likely to fall victim to death by police than any other country in the world. The idea that lower-income people are more likely to commit crime carries over to the stereotype that Black people are more likely to commit crime, leaving Black neighborhoods over-policed and Black people over-incarcerated (Hirschfield, 2015; Jones-Brown et al., 2021). Having jail time on your record does no good for success in careers, and that is exactly what is happening to Black people across America. Our prison system and policing system allow for oppression to continue, and it is today's version of segregation. Police reform is becoming a top priority among people in America and 2020 left many people forced to see the problem. Some recommend shifting police training to prevent police violence from continuing (Jones-Brown et al., 2021) whilst others push for some defunding and that funding to be reallocated to community projects. Others want policing to be completely defunded. The defunding movement curated much backlash as it

is a lengthy process to defund police agencies. In the article Defunding police agencies, authors Rick Su, Anthony O'Roukre, and Guyora Binder state that the police budget must be put in the hands of the people policed, or no change will happen (Su et al., 2022).

Solutions

The issues of gentrification, the education institution, and the prison institutions are branded into our nation's history, and there are no fast easy solutions to anything. Gentrification is clearly enabling a more discrete legal form of segregation and through that, there needs to be more legal changes made to fully correct the wrongs of the past that continue to harm people today. In the article, Affirmative Action Housing: A Legal Analysis of an Ambitious but Attainable Housing Policy, author Micah Temple looks at the program proposal called Affirmative Action Housing (AAH), which would have "the federal government purchase White-owned homes for sale in neighborhoods that were subjected to racial covenants, redlining, or other unconstitutional policies" (Temple, 2022). This program would allow for the government to sell homes to Black people for a fraction of the current price. In order for this act to be passed, there must be congressional support, it must not receive scrutiny from the Equal Protection Act, it must fall under the Fair Housing Act, and there will be economic and political criticisms to deal with. However, this program is a good start for reparations in ensuring Black people have access to homes. Mechele Dickerson agrees with this approach in the article Systemic Racism and Housing, arguing that post-WWII political leaders enacted policies making it easier for families to buy homes and increase wealth, but this was limited to White people. Today there are no active laws restricting Black home ownership, however, the legacy of segregation leads to racist landlords, renters, and realtors that work hand in hand with red-lining and gentrification to make it difficult for Black people to own homes (Dickerson, 2021). The

only way to remedy the effects of the past is for our government to enact anti-racism laws or
housing accessibility laws such as the AAH.

Along with legal changes, there needs to be a shift in the overall culture of America. This
can only be done by changing the language used along with conversations that prompt
understanding. Terms such as "ghetto" or "hood" tend to always have negative connotations
while terms such as "suburbs" or "renewal" have positive connotations. The language we use to
describe people or places has a real impact on how those people or places are perceived. The
article Placemaking as Unmasking: Settler Colonialism, Gentrification and the Myth of
"Revitalized" Urban Spaces discusses this concept by saying:

> A colorful mural, flowers in bloom, and strings of warm-hued lighting would suggest this
> place, Goudies Lane, means something to someone. Looking for clues, my eyes scan the
> space – the red light of a security camera glows just above the warmth of an Edison bulb,
> people walk past without a moment's pause, a man pushing a cart sits on the curb just
> meters away from picnic tables, and the bus grinds to a stop, though nobody gets off to
> join me. I could be anywhere. This is not beautification as the colorful mural might
> suggest. A generic geography of gentrification. A denial of Indigenous sovereignty. And
> while this place could be any place, it no longer is for anyone. Instead, its newly enacted
> facade makes clear who is no longer welcome. This is not belonging. I'm alone in a place
> made new for the few – but not for all. Rather, this is sanitization. Sanitization is encoded
> through myths of placemaking, community building, and revitalization in order to make
> itself palatable. In order to disguise itself, so as to not evoke violent historic trajectories
> of colonial progress.

Gentrification is often correlated with words such as "beautification" or "revitalization", both words that evoke a positive reaction. When labeling a process with these words and then targeting a place by using language such as "ghetto" gentrification becomes something that is perceived as a good and necessary thing (Burns et al., 2021). The language used coats over the real horrors that gentrification causes and creates a positive mindset about gentrification. By shifting the language to encompass what gentrification actually does, and the spaces gentrification affects, then people may see the real problems. Using words like "housing displacement" and "oppression" will evoke the correct negative reaction when discussing gentrification.

In hand with changes in the language used, there also needs to be conversations as conversations are the only way for people to reach an understanding. In the article Listening through white ears: Cross-racial Dialogues as a Strategy to Address the Racial Effects of Gentrification, author Emily Drew looks at a gentrifying Portland neighborhood. Every year, this neighborhood gathers and the long-term Black residents explain to the new white middle-class residents how the neighborhood has changed, and how their behavior is harmful. This process confronts white denial, puts Black people in the position of being the teachers, and promotes consciousness about systemic racism (Drew, 2012). In holding these conversations and being honest and accepting, the white residents are forced to listen and learn. Of course, this has amazing impacts on the community in working to reach understanding. However, this is just one neighborhood having these conversations. In expanding the floor for conversations nationwide by effort through individuals, organizations, or local government our country would have room to reach understanding and push for reform.

Conclusion

The foundation of our country is one that is rooted in immense trauma. The ramifications of our country being established on the grounds of slavery and oppression continue to spread today. Our history books teach us that oppression is a thing of the past, but it is not. Whilst almost every aspect of American life can in one way or another be traced back to oppression, one of the most notable and vast issues is gentrification. Gentrification negatively impacts Black Americans nationwide, leading to intense housing displacement. The main demographic that is affected by gentrification is long-term-aged Black residents, who are then faced with housing displacement, food insecurity, and even losing their businesses. As white middle-class people move in, so does white business, pushing out Black business overall. A simple solution is just to move, right? Well, the system does not allow for that either. Due to many institutions such as the education and policing systems, Black Americans are at a disadvantage from the moment they are born, forcing them to be subject to poverty at a higher rate than white people. The education system creates barrier after barrier to Black people's academic success, such as costs and high-school advisors not pushing for higher education. The policing system enables a system of oppression in which Black Americans are more likely to fall victim to over-policing, police brutality, and incarceration. These are just two of the many institutions working to keep Black people in place and oppressed. From my research, I found that in order to alleviate the negative ramifications of gentrification, there needs to be legal changes made such as the AAH, a change in the language used from "beautifying" to "displacement", and an expansion of conversation to reach understanding and push for change. These efforts offer a way to address and begin to solve the long-standing issues plaguing our country. The fact that our country treats Black people as second-class and lesser-than is the most vile thing today. A country that prides itself in freedom

for all needs to ensure that it is held true. We have not corrected the wrongs from the past, and we are very far from it, but action needs to be taken now.

When I began my research for this paper, I knew what gentrification was and how I was going to go about writing about it. However, through my research, I found that there were many things I was not aware of that deserved to be highlighted. For instance, I knew gentrification disproportionately affected Black Americans, however, I did not know that long-term aging Black people were the most affected group. This helped me shift my understanding of just how deep this issue goes as I began to think of all the discrepancies that long-term aging residents would face such as accessibility issues. Additionally, through my research, I found it necessary to include two institutions that are affected and effect gentrification cycles. I found that the education and policing systems are two of the most predominant institutions that harm Black America today. My research led me to realize that these issues dive a lot deeper than I originally thought, and through my research, I began to develop a feeling of hopelessness. However, when finding and researching solutions, I realized that there are so many people who are finding ways to tackle this issue socially and legally. The solutions I found offered me hope for a better tomorrow and a more equitable future.

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