

# What People Talk About When They Talk About Gentrification

A Focus Group Report

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Gentrification has different meanings to different people. Neighborhoods throughout the United States are having conversations about gentrification -- how neighborhoods change for better or worse and how we can spur inclusive growth. St. Louis is no different.

The St. Louis Association of Community Organizations, City of St. Louis Civil Rights Enforcement Agency, Community Innovation and Action Center (UMSL), and Creating Whole Communities (a partnership of UMSL and the University of Missouri Extension) are collaborating to conduct community conversations around gentrification and strategies for inclusive growth. The first step in this process was to hold focus groups to unpack peoples' perceptions about gentrification. The input from these initial focus groups is the basis for this brief. We have also produced A Guide for Community Conversation, which we hope will be a useful starting point for future community conversations about neighborhood change. This guide is available on the Creating Whole Communities website.

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 17 residents, including five community development professionals, from different parts of St. Louis, gathered at UMSL at Grand Center to explore the meaning of gentrification. Three focus groups were conducted - one for South St. Louis residents, one for North St. Louis residents, one for community development professionals. Kevin McKinney, Todd Swanstrom, and Charles Bryson acted as the facilitators for the three groups. Tonnie Smith, Austin Dial, and Lakeisha Griffin took notes. Participants were insured complete anonymity and were told that there was no "correct" answer. We were interested in their personal perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about gentrification and neighborhood change.

Each focus group followed a script laying out a series of group exercises and questions. Participants were asked to:

- Identify up to six words they associate with gentrification,
- Mark on a map of St. Louis where gentrification has taken place already and where it will occur in the future; and
- Explain how they see the process of gentrification taking place in St. Louis, i.e., what are the causes and effects of gentrification?

Based on detailed notes from the focus group conversations, we attempt here to sum up the discussions and identify common themes. Alan Mallach of the Center for Community Progress listened to the focus groups and presented his thoughts to the group at the end. We drew upon Alan's observations for this report.

### **General Associations**

In response to the question: "When you hear the word *gentrification* what words come to mind?" we asked participants in the focus groups to take three minutes and list six terms. They named 68 words or phrases (some more than once). Table 1 lists 55 of those words broken down into seven categories (13 words did not easily fit into any category). The number of times participants mentioned a word or phrase is in parenthesis.

A few broad themes emerged. Many participants viewed gentrification as an economic phenomenon, but they also viewed it as related to power and race. Gentrification is also linked to "change" -- that is often associated with a sense of loss.

Table 1. Word Associations with Gentrification

Loss (12)	Economic (12)	Physical (5)	Change (10)	Race (5)	Power (8)	Social (3)
Erasing (2)	Economic Privilege	Vacancy	Change (2)	Whiteness (2)	Privilege	Relationship
Loss	Money (2)	Revitalization	Cycle (2)	Race	Pain	Neighborhood Group
Forced Out	Investment	Starbucks	Up and Coming	Racial Divide	Colonialism	Isolation
Priced Out	Capitalism (2)	Housing	Refreshment	Racial Equity	Tension	
Separation	Unaffordable	Rehab	Increase		Outside Influence	
Loss of History	Increased Value		Restoration		Resistance	
Exclusion	Other seeing Value		Renew		Exploitation	
Removed	Poverty (2)		Runaway Train		Invisibility	
Displacement (3)	Taxes					
	Greenling					

### Positive and Negative Associations

By a more than 2/1 margin, we judged the words associated with gentrification to be negative in tone. Overall, we judged 31 of the word associations as negative, 15 as positive, and 22 neutral. Similar negative and positive feelings about gentrification came out when we asked participants about the causes and effects of gentrification, and we have included those responses in the discussion below. (Again, if participants mentioned a term more than once, we put the number in parentheses below.)

### Negative Associations

Many of the negative terms pointed to problems that gentrification posed for lower income residents, using words such as “economic privilege,” “unaffordable,” and “corporation takeover driving increased rents.” A common critical theme was “displacement”(3). Often participants did not connect displacement directly to economics, using words like “forced out,” “exclusion,” “removed,” and “separation”. One person observed that gentrification “took existing grocery store out.” Participants often associated displacement with race, using terms such as “whiteness” (2) and “whitewashing.” When discussing the effects of gentrification, participants used similar terms such as “racial divide” and “black people questioned” (referring to blacks being questioned for behavior that was not questioned before gentrification). There were also negative terms reflecting the idea of displacement that did not refer to race, such as

“loss of history,” “erasing” (2), and “loss of old culture.” One person identified gentrification with “anonymous neighbors” and “isolation.”

Negative associations also had a political or power dimension, such as “colonialism,” “resistance,” and “exploitation.” Focus group participants associated gentrification with biases in city services, as city government being more responsive to the newcomers and “over-policing” becoming a problem after gentrification. Participants saw “systemic racism” as a cause of gentrification, with one person observing that “African Americans [are] not invited to the table.” When talking about the causes, or process, of gentrification, participants often mentioned how outsiders drove it – such as “outside private funders,” “people from outside,” “planners, not residents,” the “rich and powerful,” and “NGA land grab.”

### **Positive Associations**

Interestingly, the same aspects of gentrification that focus group participants called out negatively were also mentioned positively. Referring to economic change, focus group participants used words like “increased (property) value” and “investment.” They also mentioned “increase in construction,” “money coming in for rehab,” and “neighborhood improvement.” People pointed to generally positive processes, such as “refreshment,” “restoration,” “renew,” and “revitalization.” Participants singled out “middle-class African Americans” as benefiting from gentrification and people noted that gentrification resulted in “more retail” and “coffee shops, dog parks, etc.” On the political side, even though gentrification was associated with “over-policing” and racially biased policing, gentrification was also associated positively with “better policing” and with crime and drugs being “pushed out” of the neighborhood. People pointed out that gentrification resulted in “better quality schools/education,” and “schools [held] accountable.”

### **A Conflictual Process**

People’s contradictory, or ambivalent, attitudes toward gentrification can largely be explained by the fact that they view gentrification as benefiting some people (newcomers, whites, higher income groups, homeowners) while harming others (longtime residents, blacks, lower income groups, renters). Overall, focus group participants viewed more people suffering harm from gentrification than benefiting from it.

The participants in our focus groups generally viewed gentrification as an inherently conflictual process. As one participant put it: “Newcomers have things that old-timers don’t have.” In a gentrified neighborhood, one respondent observed, people “ask white people to call the police because people of color are afraid of the police.” According to one participant, politicians are more attentive to the needs of gentrifiers: “Politicians act more attentive to new gentrified class in order to please and be re-elected.” This person indicated that part of the reason is that the newcomers know how to play the game: “[New] residents seek that same accountability, new people challenge accountability.” This person admitted that longtime residents need to educate themselves about how politics works, but it is the “job of aldermen to get natives involved ... residents are not engaged due to barriers.”

Gentrification seems to rub raw the wounds of economic and racial inequality. As one participant put it: “People [gentrifiers] get more attention, they get everything, don’t pay fair

market prices, tax abatement ....” One participant noted the sudden disparity: “[All of a sudden] “across the street houses [sell for] tens of thousands of dollars higher.” The extravagance of the gentrifiers was noted critically:

“It’s not that people are rehabbing, it’s that the rehab is worth \$500,000. A huge influx in construction cost makes a difference. There is a difference in adding a room or redoing a portion of the house and re-doing the whole block.”

By bringing people from different walks of life, economic classes, and races into close contact, gentrification seems to lead to heightened awareness not of commonalities but of differences. One person stated: “[The residents] do not integrate, [gentrification] hurts disparities, no matter what race.”

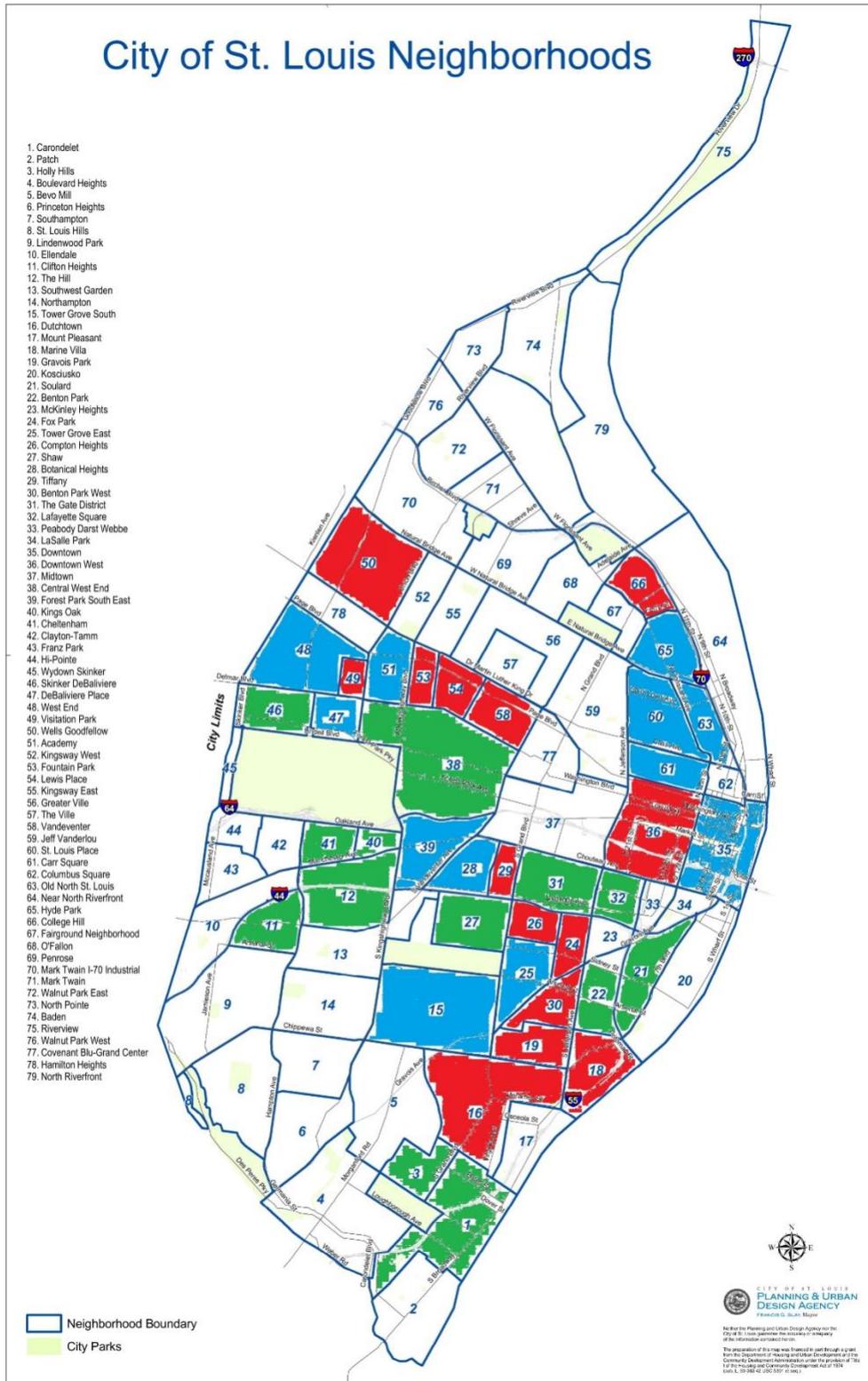
### **Gentrification Extends Across Space**

Continuing the theme that gentrification was associated with conflict and inequality, we were struck by the way conversations about gentrifying or economically improving neighborhoods segued almost seamlessly into conversations about neighborhoods experiencing disinvestment and depopulation (seemingly the opposite of gentrification). Talking about gentrification seems to heighten awareness of inequalities across neighborhoods. When talking about economically improving neighborhoods, participants repeatedly pivoted to talk about economically declining neighborhoods. Focus group participants clearly saw the two as related.

Here are some representative quotes highlighting the connection between gentrification and decline.

- “Gentrification pushes the bad things north (crime, drugs, etc.)”
- [Gentrification] “takes resources from other places.”
- “In some ways, corporate takeover [under gentrification] can cause deterioration ....”
- “Blighted areas; then whites move in which causes displacement.”
- “Loans given in Southside versus Northside; cannot get a loan for a \$300,000 house in Northside but more likely to get same loan in Southside.”
- “Arabs are in all neighborhoods looking forward to gentrification ... If African Americans wanted to open these stores, we couldn’t.”
- “No one wants to invest when they see black people so they rerouted buses so tourists and other white people won’t see black [people], cutting the buses out, cutting Northside people from getting to colleges and hospitals.”
- “Why don’t we have Starbucks but so many Family Dollar stores? White man fighting on 21<sup>st</sup> St. to get [build] Family Dollar; 300 [-person] petition from native residents [who] don’t want Family Dollar but [are] ignored and they build anyway. [White man] controlling the poverty neighborhoods and what businesses can move forward. We [blacks] don’t know how the government works so we cannot build.”

We asked focus group participants to go to map and indicate which neighborhoods were presently gentrified and which ones they thought would gentrify in the near future. Below is the map they produced.



Participants identified already gentrified neighborhoods as being located in the Central Corridor and in historic neighborhoods to the south of the Central Corridor. They clearly believe that gentrification is going to spread to many more neighborhoods in the Southside. Participants viewed four neighborhoods north of downtown and near the future site of the forthcoming National Geospatial Agency (NGA) headquarters as either already gentrified or will gentrify soon (St. Louis Place, Old North, Carr Square, and Hyde Park). They also believe that gentrification has already come or will come soon to a swath of neighborhoods north of Delmar, including the West End, Visitation Park, Academy, Fountain Park, Lewis Place, and Vandeventer. With important exceptions, all these neighborhoods in the Northside are presently experiencing high vacancy rates along with low housing demand and prices. The way focus group participants mapped out present and future areas of gentrification is consistent with the way they linked declining neighborhoods to gentrifying neighborhoods. In many ways, the participants view neighborhood decline as a precursor of gentrification -- and perhaps even a deliberate strategy to drive down the price of properties to facilitate future gentrification.

### **Gentrification Extends Across Time**

Participants also linked gentrification in the present with a long history of neighborhood decline and discrimination against minorities in the past. Many times the participants discussed the history of black neighborhoods that have been trying to improve themselves for decades but suddenly everything changes with gentrification. Here are three quotes that illustrate how the participants viewed gentrification as linked to history:

“We cannot get the resources but they [gentrifiers] come in and already have it, buying properties that have been vacant, vacant properties being removed; we cannot get these properties; people that have come in already have the knowledge and resources that we native residents have been trying to get for generations.”

“Realtors make people follow the money, so offering easiest places to live – south of Delmar, west of I-70. They are still steering ... [a] history of what is a good neighborhood and a bad neighborhood.”

“Redlining – stop giving loans for houses in the ‘hood so people start moving out, then people move out because they cannot afford out-of-code buildings and cannot afford rehab. Stop giving money so that gentrifiers can get properties.”

### **Conclusion: Is There a Way Out of the Dilemma of Gentrification?**

Some kind of gentrification is inevitable in St. Louis. The new knowledge-based economy is growing and some young educated professionals, as well as empty nesters, are going to settle in older urban neighborhoods. The younger generation is looking for pedestrian friendly environments where they can walk to bars, restaurants, and coffee shops. The question is not whether gentrification is going to occur, but whether it will benefit only a narrow slice of the population or whether it will benefit the city more broadly.

When people discuss gentrification, they are not dispassionate observers; based on our focus groups, the gentrification conversation has a great deal of emotion behind it. The primary emotions are negative. Gentrification seems to put St. Louis in a dilemma: neighborhoods

either become locked in decline and disinvestment or they tip over into gentrification, benefiting affluent newcomers at the expense of long-time residents. There does not seem to be much room in the middle.

Our focus group participants viewed gentrification as a conflictual process, pitting rich against poor, white against black, newcomers against long-time residents. Gentrification seems to put a magnifying glass on economic and racial inequality. People sense their relative deprivation. The success of gentrifying neighborhoods reminds people of neighborhoods that are experiencing disinvestment and depopulation. As Alan Mallach said in his summary remarks, it is impossible to talk about gentrifying neighborhoods in St. Louis without talking about the entire city. The language associated with gentrification leaves little room for the possibility that gentrification could be a positive-sum process, with many different groups all gaining at the same time. Moreover, many participants viewed gentrification as a process that operates like a steamroller, with long-time low-income and minority residents having little control. Gentrification is not viewed as subject to community control.

Following this exploration of perceptions of gentrification, we are left with a number of questions. First, we should acknowledge that our focus groups were a small selective slice of St. Louisans. For the most part, they represented residents of St. Louis neighborhoods who are active in SLACO. It would be instructive to do more focus groups with other residents, as well as with business people, developers, and elected officials. Would they view gentrification differently than residents?

Second, the strong implication of the conversation on gentrification in St. Louis is that economically improving neighborhoods inevitably benefit only a select few. The language of gentrification is pessimistic and fatalistic. The gentrification conversation basically depicts one kind of economically improving neighborhood – one that is dominated by newcomers, displaces long-time residents, is not subject to democratic control, and worsens existing economic and racial inequities. In fact, economically improving neighborhoods could come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes. Exactly what is possible is open to debate and discussion, but we should do everything we can to open up the possibilities for inclusive neighborhood change. We are left with three sets of questions – two concerning language and one concerning policies or actions.

Concerning language, is it possible, or desirable, to try to change the way people talk about neighborhood change?

- Do common associations with the term “gentrification” stifle thinking about ways to promote inclusive neighborhood change? Or do common associations motivate people to think about ways to foster inclusive growth?
- What words would you use to distinguish between different types of gentrifying or economically ascending neighborhoods?
- How can the way we discuss neighborhood change promote the empowerment of residents and stimulate policies and programs for inclusive neighborhood improvement?

Concerning policy, what actions can we take to alleviate people’s fears and anxieties about neighborhood change?

- What policies and programs can support neighborhood uplift that benefits long-time residents, renters and homeowners, as well as newcomers?
- What are the responsibilities of newcomers, developers, politicians, lenders, and long-time residents in changing neighborhoods?
- How can we preserve a neighborhood's culture and history as it changes?

*We invite St. Louisans to a democratic dialogue to address these issues.*