

January 2019

Exploring Gentrification: Finding a Path to Inclusive Development

A Guide for Community Conversations

Produced by:

Saint Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO)
Civil Rights Enforcement Agency (CREA), City of St. Louis
Community Innovation and Action Center (CIAC) at UMSL
Creating Whole Communities (CWC) at UMSL

Gentrification has different meanings to different people. Neighborhoods throughout the United States are having conversations about gentrification and grappling with how to spur inclusive growth – neighborhood reinvestment that benefits everyone. 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 a series of community conversations around gentrification and strategies for inclusive growth. As a first step in this process, on October 16th we held three focus groups to unpack peoples' perceptions about gentrification. The input from these initial focus groups is the basis for this *Guide for Community Conversations*. The full report on these focus groups, *What People Talk About When They Talk About Gentrification*, is available on the CWC website: <https://cwc.umsl.edu>.

What Do People Associate with the Word “Gentrification”?

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. By a more than 2/1 margin, the words associated with gentrification were negative in tone. Overall, 31 of the word associations were judged as negative, 15 positive, and 22 neutral.

Negative Associations

Negative associations mainly dealt with issues of displacement and political power. Discussions on displacement were about:

- **general displacement due to economic issues** such as affordability and corporations driving increased rents which affected low-income residents. Focus group participants were also explicit that
- **displacement connected to race** using terms like “racial divide” and an increase in “black people questioned.”
- **cultural or social displacement**, 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. Feelings around an imbalance of power centered on:

- city government as **more responsive to newcomers**.
- how **outsiders drove gentrification** – such as “outside private funders,” “people from outside,” “planners, not residents,” the “rich and powerful,” and “NGA land grab.”
- “systemic racism” being connected to gentrification, with one person observing that **“African Americans [are] not invited to the table.”**

Positive Associations

Interestingly, the same characteristics of gentrification that focus group participants called out negatively were also mentioned positively.

- **Economic change** was tied to words like **“increased (property) value” and “investment.”**
- People pointed to generally **positive processes, such as “refreshment,” “restoration,” “renew,” and “revitalization.”**
- 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.”**

Table 1. Word Associations with Gentrification

Loss (12 Words)	Economic (12 Words)	Physical (5 Words)	Change (10 Words)	Race (5 Words)	Power (8 Words)	Social (3 Words)
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)				Invisibility	
Displacement (3)	Taxes					
	Greenling					

Where Do People Think Gentrification has Happened and Will happen?

Focus group participants were asked to go to a map and identify which neighborhoods were already gentrified and which they believed would gentrify in the next ten years (see map below). Participants identified already gentrified neighborhoods as being located in the Central Corridor and in historic neighborhoods south of the Central Corridor. They clearly believe that gentrification is going to spread to many more neighborhoods in the Southside.

Participants also viewed four neighborhoods north of downtown and near the future site of the National Geospatial Agency (NGA) headquarters as

Figure 1: Perceived Gentrification in St. Louis, MO

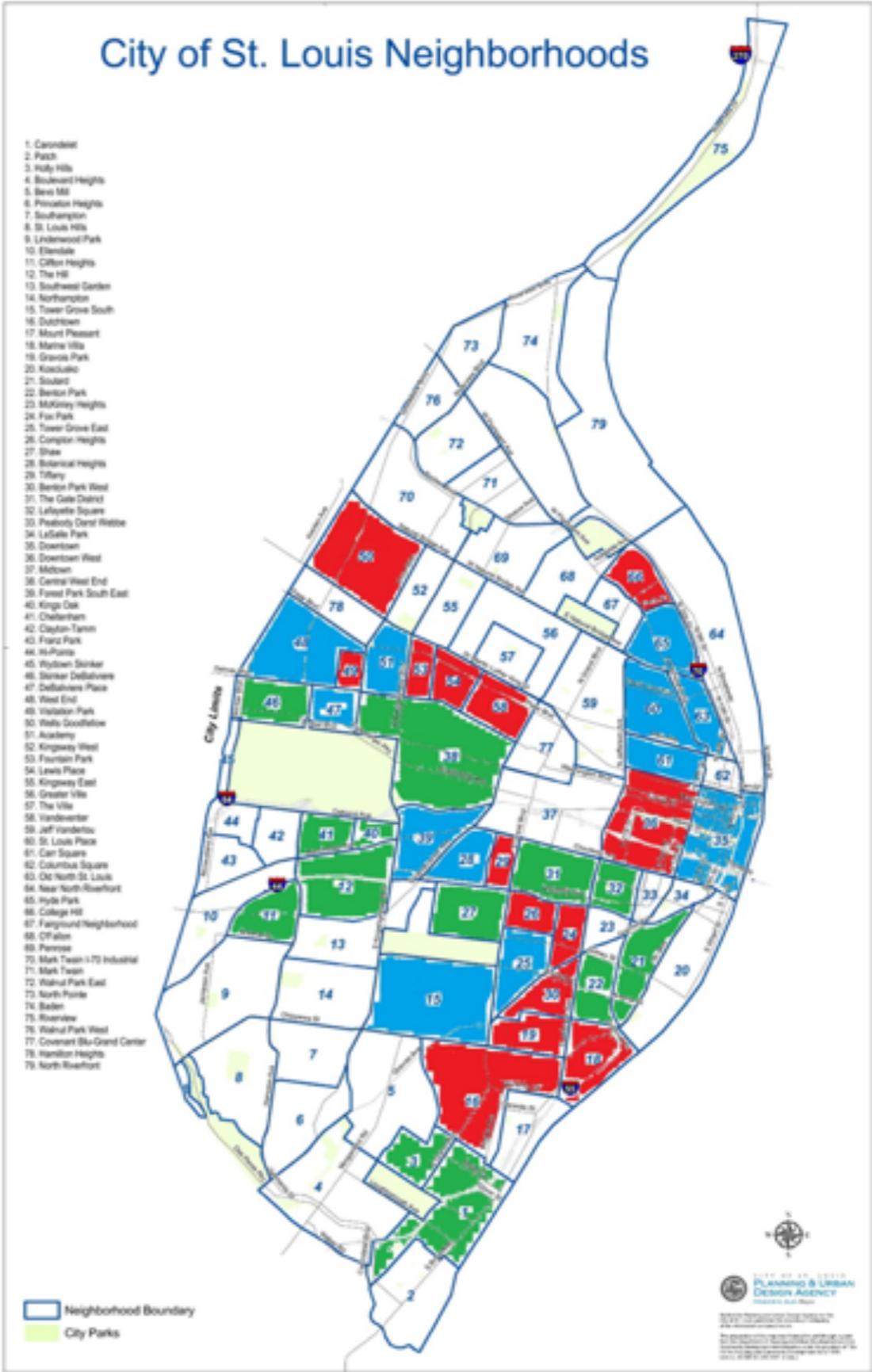
candidates for gentrification – either now or in the near future (St. Louis Place, Old North, Carr Square, and Hyde Park). They also believe that gentrification has already come or will come soon to a swath of neighborhoods north of Delmar, including the West End, Visitation Park, Academy, Fountain Park, Lewis Place, and Vandeventer.

Gentrification and Neighborhood Decline Linked Across Space and Time

Many focus group participants viewed neighborhood decline as a precursor to gentrification -- and perhaps even a deliberate strategy to drive down the price of properties to facilitate future gentrification. When talking about economically improving neighborhoods, participants repeatedly pivoted to talk about economically declining neighborhoods. 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.”
- “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.”

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.



Green = presently gentrified
 Red = will gentrify in the future
 Blue = both gentrified and will gentrify

Here are three quotes that illustrate how the participants viewed gentrification today as linked to the past:

- “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.”

Gentrification as a Conflictual Process

Overall, focus group participants viewed gentrification as a conflictual process with clear winners and losers. People’s contradictory attitude toward gentrification – viewing it as simultaneously positive and negative -- can largely be explained by the fact that the beneficiaries of gentrification (newcomers, whites, higher income groups, homeowners) are distinct from those who suffer the harms (longtime residents, blacks, lower income groups, renters). 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 act more attentive to new gentrified class in order to please and be re-elected.”

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. As one focus group participant put it: “[The residents] do not integrate, [gentrification] hurts disparities, no matter what race.”

Discussion

This brief represents the thoughts and feelings of one set of people. This conversation on gentrification and neighborhood change should continue to be had through out the St. Louis region. Below are starter questions for having a dialogue about gentrification in your community.

- 1) Do you agree or disagree with the way our focus group participants viewed gentrification? What words do you associate with gentrification?
 - What neighborhoods in St. Louis are already gentrified and which ones will gentrify in the next ten years?
 - What are the main causes and effects of gentrification?
- 2) What words would you use to distinguish between different types of economically ascending neighborhoods?
 - Do common associations with the term “gentrification” stifle thinking about ways to promote inclusive neighborhood change? Or do common associations with the word motivate people to think about ways to foster inclusive growth?
- 3) What policies and programs can support neighborhood improvement that benefits long-time residents, renters and homeowners, as well as newcomers?
 - How can we insure that residents are not displaced by gentrification, or, if they are, that they are fully compensated for relocation?
 - How can we preserve a neighborhood’s culture and history as it changes?
 - What are the responsibilities of newcomers, developers, politicians, lenders, and long-time residents in changing neighborhoods?