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How Governing got it wrong: The problem with confusing gentrification and displacement

By Joe Cortright | 6.2.2015

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Here's a quick quiz: Which of the following statements is true?

- a) Gentrification can be harmful because it causes displacement
- b) Gentrification is the same thing as displacement

d) All of the above

If the only studying you did was a reading of the latest series on gentrification from *Governing Magazine* (<http://www.governing.com/topics/urban/gov-gentrification-definition-series.html>), you'd have answered "d." And of course, you'd have a tough time defending your answer.

In attempting to assemble a strong, data-driven definition of this controversial buzzword, a set of feature articles in its February 2015 issue entitled "The 'G' word—a special report on gentrification," *Governing* succeeds only in making the tortured debate over gentrification even more contentious and unclear.

The most basic flaw of its analysis is coming down squarely on all sides of whether "gentrification" is the same thing as "displacement." While the authors claim that these two terms are different things, all of the harms from gentrification that they point to involve displacement: the problem of previous, generally poor residents being forced out of a neighborhood as it changes.

Governing has impressive maps and data—but maps and data are only as sound as the assumptions they are built on. The assumptions here—that gentrification can be accurately measured solely by looking at changes in house prices and education levels in relatively poor city neighborhoods—are flat out wrong, if we are concerned, as *Governing* tells us we should be, about the displacement of the poor.

There's precious little evidence that there has been, in the aggregate, any displacement of the poor from the neighborhoods *Governing* flags as "gentrifying." If there were displacement, you'd expect the number of poor people in these neighborhoods to be declining. In fact, nationally, there are more poor people living in the neighborhoods that they identify as "gentrifying" in 2013 than there were in 2000. Here's the math*. *Governing's* gentrifying neighborhoods have gained poor AND nonpoor residents according to Census data. And even after "gentrifying," these neighborhoods still have higher poverty rates, on average, than the national average.

Careful academic studies of gentrifying neighborhoods, by Columbia's Lance Freeman (<http://uar.sagepub.com/content/40/4/463.abstract>) and the University of Colorado's Terra McKinnish (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20161532>), show that improving neighborhoods actually do a better job of hanging on to previous poor and minority residents than poor neighborhoods that don't improve. The University of Washington's Jacob Vigdor (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067387>) has estimated that even when rents go up, existing residents generally attach a value to neighborhood improvements that more than compensates for the higher costs.

This confirms our own analysis of 1,100 urban high-poverty neighborhoods over the past four decades (<http://cityobservatory.org/lost-in-place/>). Only about one in twenty of the census tracts we analyzed saw their poverty rate drop below the national average, and three-quarters stayed very high poverty, but didn't improve or stay the same: they continued to deteriorate, losing on average 40 percent of their population over 40 years.

In contrast to gentrification, which is rare and seems to be seldom associated with actual displacement, concentrated poverty is real—a growing and devastating challenge that is damaging the futures of millions of Americans, especially children of color. In the past forty years, the number of high-poverty urban neighborhoods has tripled and their population has doubled, to 4 million. Growing up poor is difficult; growing up in neighborhoods where a large fraction of your neighbors are also poor is worse, exposing kids to higher crime and lower quality schools, results in increased mental health issues, fewer job and educational opportunities, and—according to new research by Patrick Sharkey (<http://press.uchicago.edu>)

Governing got it wrong: The problem with confusing gentrification with displacement is that it promotes a false alarm about gentrification. The problem with confusing gentrification with displacement is that it promotes a false alarm about gentrification. <http://cityobservatory.org/how-governing-got-it-wrong-the-problem-...> <http://books/book/chicago/S/bol4365260.html>), Raj Chetty (<http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty> mobility geo.pdf) and Jonathan Rothwell & Doug Massey (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cge.12072/abstract>)— permanently lowers life prospects relative to otherwise similar kids who grow up in mixed income neighborhoods.

Raising a false alarm about gentrification is the policy equivalent of shouting “fire” in a crowded theatre: it promotes mindless panic and does nothing to help us understand and tackle our real urban problems. A magazine that calls itself “Governing” should know the difference between sensationalism and thoughtful analysis.

Here’s the math:

Mathematically it’s clear that *more* poor people live in the *Governing’s* “gentrified” tracts today than in 2000: according to *Governing* between 2000 and 2009-13, the poverty rate in gentrified tracts declined by 7%, while the total population of these tracts increased by 6.5%. Assuming the poverty rate in these tracts exceeded 13 percent in 2000, the population living below the poverty line in these tracts had to have actually increased between 2000 and 2013: hardly evidence, on its face, of widespread displacement.

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