



Salt Lake City's TRAX light speed rail, seen here at the Fort Douglas Station on the city's east side, has extended its service to the west side along North Temple Street, where many new development projects have been approved or are in progress.

## RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

# A Mixed Picture of Gentrification

**A**BOUT TWO MONTHS AGO, a reporter from my local NPR affiliate wanted background on the “threat” that gentrification poses to minorities living on the west side of Salt Lake City. The city has extended our light-rail system, TRAX, to the airport on the far west side, made streetscape improvements to North Temple Street on which TRAX runs, and is now seeing residential reinvestment in the corridor. The reporter’s premise was that lower-income minorities would be forced out of their homes either by rising rents or condo conversions. She equated gentrification with residential displacement.

The reporter and I were joined by Ivis Garcia-Zambrana, an assistant professor in our planning department at the University of Utah who has studied gentrification in the Salt Lake Valley. Using longitudinal American Community Survey data, Garcia-Zambrana has found no evidence of gentrification anywhere, including the west side. In fact, on the west side, income has declined and the minority population has grown. It was clear during the three-way conversation that she also viewed gentrification in negative terms, but the fact is that the west side could use some gentrification, as I’ll soon explain.

Shortly thereafter, I was watching the PBS News Hour, and Paul Solomon was interviewing Richard Florida on his new book, *The New Urban Crisis* (Florida spoke at APA’s Policy and Advocacy Conference in September; learn about his presentation and watch the discussion at [planning.org/blog/blogpost/9134467](http://planning.org/blog/blogpost/9134467)). The urban revival predicted in Florida’s earlier book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, is causing a crisis, according to Florida, as young professionals move to redeveloping neighborhoods and displace low- and middle-income minority residents. Solomon was interviewing Florida on

New York’s High Line, amidst new condo and apartment towers with sky-high prices and rents, using gentrification and displacement interchangeably.

You get the idea. Gentrification is an issue of growing significance for planners and is usually represented as a threat rather than an opportunity. Another colleague of mine at the University of Utah, Associate Professor Michael Larice, calls gentrification a “game changer,” and not a positive one.

The purpose my column this month is to provide a more nuanced take on gentrification and to report on some recent research on the subject by Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Silvia Gonzalez, and Paul Ong of the UCLA Department of Urban Planning. I have always been impressed with Loukaitou-Sideris’s research. Their article, upcoming in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, uses mixed methods research to study gentrification in four transit-station centered neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Regular readers of this column will recall that mixed methods research combines quantitative and qual-

itative methods to triangulate to conclusions (see “Mixing Methods for Clearer Results,” February 2013: [planning.org/planning/2013/feb/research.htm](http://planning.org/planning/2013/feb/research.htm)).

### **Gentrification versus displacement**

Gentrification is most often defined as a process of renovation of deteriorated urban neighborhoods by means of the influx of more affluent residents. It can occur through displacement, wherein rising rents and condo conversions force lower-income households to move out as higher-income households take their place. But it can also occur for other reasons: first, if incomes of existing residents rise; second, if new higher-income housing is constructed on vacant land or underperforming commercial parcels; third, if low-income residents move out of a neighborhood for the normal reasons people move (marriage or divorce, job change, having children, and so on).

In a seminal article on gentrification, published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* in 2004 ([tinyurl.com/y9vkj5p2](http://tinyurl.com/y9vkj5p2)), Lance Freeman of Columbia University and Frank Braconi of New York City’s Citizen Housing and Planning Council find that at the time of the study, mobility rates (out-movement rates) were actually lower in gentrifying neighborhoods of New York City than in nongentrifying neighborhoods.

“The reduced mobility rates we find in gentrifying neighborhoods are inconsistent with a process dependent on the massive displacement of disadvantaged residents,” the authors note. “Rather, demographic change appears to occur primarily through normal housing succession and may even be slowed by a below-normal rate of exit by existing residents (in gentrifying neighborhoods).”

They further speculate that all the benefits of gentrification for a neighborhood—more job opportunities, better public services, and lower crime rates—cause longtime residents to choose to remain in gentrifying neighborhoods, despite rising rents. Vigdor, Landis, Gould-Ellen and O’Regan, and others

have reached similar conclusions.

In Salt Lake City, we do not have access to household-level mobility data like New York’s. However, we can assess development and redevelopment on the west side along the airport TRAX line. A map from the Salt Lake City Planning Department shows all approved multifamily projects in the transit corridor. One project is replacing single-family housing with multifamily housing. Another is replacing a mobile home park with multifamily housing. All the rest (and there are many) are replacing vacant lots, parking lots, vacant office parks, and other marginal uses with multifamily housing. Take Orange Street Apartments within a block of the 1940 West TRAX Station. Almost 300 market-rate apartments are being built on what was an abandoned office development. This is an example of gentrification, but it should not cause displacement.

### **Using mixed method research**

Now to the *JPER* paper by Loukaitou-Sideris and coauthors. They didn’t study displacement, per se, for lack of data, but they did study gentrification in four station neighborhoods “vulnerable to gentrification”—read: displacement—because they are occupied by large numbers of low-income and minority residents. Their study employed mixed methods, using measures based on census data, visual surveys of individual properties, and interviews with community organizations and public agencies.

They “triangulated” the assessments of gentrification in the four neighborhoods based on the three sets of data. For two neighborhoods, the three methods pointed in the same direction. 103rd/Watts has experienced no gentrification, while Hollywood/Western has experienced commercial and residential gentrification near its station. In Chinatown, census data shows signs of residential gentrification at the edges of the neighborhood; a visual survey also shows residential gentrification nearer the station, while the interviews confirm the observations but also show early signs of commercial

gentrification. Finally, at Mariachi Plaza, census data shows no residential or commercial gentrification, but visual observations and interviews point to early signs of both. The paper confirms that gentrification may come in stages—one stage of which may be displacement.

In sum, there is a tendency to equate gentrification, which can be good, with displacement, which is bad. I suspect that there are more examples like the west side TRAX line in Salt Lake City than the High Line in New York City. Salt Lake City’s west side would actually benefit from more gentrification of the type that is currently occurring. And mixed methods research is a powerful approach to studying gentrification, displacement, or just about any other planning issue you can name. This is a call for more nuanced research on gentrification. ■

—Reid Ewing

Ewing is chair of the Department of City and Metropolitan Planning at the University of Utah, an associate editor of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, and an editorial board member of the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* and *Landscape and Urban Planning*. Sixty past Research You Can Use columns are available at [mrc.cap.utah.edu/publications/research-you-can-use](http://mrc.cap.utah.edu/publications/research-you-can-use).

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### **Doing design right**

In *Design for Good: A New Era of Architecture for Everyone*, architect and author John Cary presents 29 multinational case studies from 10 countries and seven U.S. states in which professionals allied with disenfranchised and poor people work to produce buildings and plans that serve and dignify their needs. The projects include a hospital in Rwanda, a health center in China, a cluster of 50 houses for homeless people in Dallas, and a center for social justice leadership at Kalamazoo College in Michigan.

Besides telling their stories in some detail, the author confronts two difficult problems. First, most people don’t consciously recognize design and how it can affect lives and attitudes; it’s more like