Mapping Neighborhood Change: Three Decades of Gentrification in Boston

Gentrification:

n. The restoration and upgrading of deteriorated urban property by middle class or affluent people, often resulting in displacement of lower income people. (Dictionary.com 2009)

Summary: Few terms in urban planning are as fraught or as problematic as gentrification. It is often a flashpoint in debates about urban governance and revitalization, with some arguing that it leads to more stable neighborhoods, and others arguing that it destroys the social fabric of working-class society. At its root, gentrification is the phenomenon of demographic succession (from poor or working-class to upper-income, from less-educated to more-educated, and from minority to white), driven by market forces in poor, minority neighborhoods. As socially mobile residents show increasing interest in diverse, urban neighborhoods close to job centers and creative industries, property values increase in these areas, often leading to residential displacement. This demographic shift also changes the social fabric of the neighborhood, which is a large part of the reason why gentrification is such an emotional issue for so many.

For this project, I aimed to show gentrification over time in the city of Boston. Neighborhoods grow and age, succeed and fail just as the cities of which they are a part. Gentrification is a large, albeit controversial, part of this urban evolution. To understand where we are as a city today, we must understand the path we have taken to get here. Through mapping indicators of gentrification over time, hopefully we can gain a better understanding of the city as it stands today. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these maps do not tell the whole story of what does or does not constitute a healthy neighborhood. That is a complicated matter far beyond the scope of this project.

Methodology: There is no widely accepted method for measuring gentrification. For the purpose of this project, I chose to examine four indicators - two demographic and two in the built environment - that tend to accompany neighborhoods that are considered “gentrified”: Income, educational achievement, newly remodeled units, and newly built structures, and newly remodeled structures. First, I examined the percentage change in average household income from the beginning of each decade to the end. Average household income was used instead of median income because the US Census did not begin measuring median income until the 1990 census. Second, I examined the percentage change in population with a bachelor’s degree or higher. For both of these calculations I used the following equation to measure percent change, (B-A)/L, with B being the last year of the decade and A being the first. After looking at the demographics, I examined evidence of gentrification in the built environment by looking at the number of parcels with newly constructed units as well as the number of parcels with units remodeled during each respective decade. In general, new construction and/or property renovations can indicate that renewal or gentrification is happening in a neighborhood. It is important to note, though, that this is not always the case as the data does not differentiate between types of new construction. For example, the construction of new subsidized housing, which is accepted as a buffer against gentrification, would appear the same as a multimillion dollar condominium complex in the data provided. Once the individual indicator data was established, I assigned ranks that displayed the highest indications of gentrification for each tract. I then added the score for each indicator in every tract to come up with a final score. The tracts with the highest gentrification score for each decade are shown as the darkest red, and those with the lowest scores in yellow.

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