Assessing the risk of gentrification across Boston

### What is gentrification?

The term can mean many different things to many different people. For the purposes of this project, gentrification means the gradual displacement of low-income residents due to economic hardships related to increasing housing costs.

### This project

Many community leaders and scholars have suggested variables that might increase a neighborhood’s risk of gentrification. For instance, in a 2002 article for Race, Poverty & the Environment, Kalima Rose, a Senior Associate at PolicyLink, highlighted some “specific community attributes” which increase vulnerability to displacement, including a high proportion of renters, ease of access to job centers, low housing values, and housing with “architectural merit.”

However, attempts to apply such factors to cities in order to assess the potential for displacement are few and far between. One exception was a presentation given at the 2001 D.C. Policy Forum by Margery Austin Turner and Christopher Snow of the Urban Institute—they identified five “leading indicators for the location of future gentrification” which focus exclusively on low-priced areas, including those adjacent to high-priced areas; those with good metro access; those with historic architecture; those with large housing units; and those with recent appreciation. Turner and Snow then used GIS to apply these factors to Washington, D.C. in order to predict future gentrification in that city.

This analysis considers the suggestions of Rose, Turner, Snow and others to assess the risk of gentrification in neighborhoods across Boston. Because gentrification is defined here as the displacement of low income residents, it focuses exclusively on low income communities (see map, right). It also adds one variable not yet referenced here: the percentage of total housing units with an expiring use subsidy that may expire by 2012—these units have the potential to be rented or sold at market rates very soon, displacing those who depend on government assistance to remain in their present housing. The six factors chosen are aggregated by Census tract, as a Census tract is about the size of the smallest identifiable Boston neighborhoods. Five of the six factors are weighted equally; the six is weighted one-third (see maps along the bottom). The maximum resulting gentrification risk score is 16.

### Results

This analysis finds that the risk of gentrification is not concentrated in any particular region of Boston, but rather remarkably spread among the low income communities throughout the city. However, by far the most at-risk residents are those living in the Census tracts containing Chinatown and Downtown Crossing.

### Who cares?

While no doubt an imperfect science, attempts to predict gentrification at such a micro level can be a useful exercise for local elected officials who need to assess their priorities, residents anxious about the stability of their neighborhoods, community development corporations and other nonprofits who must decide in which neighborhoods to target their resources, and city planners concerned about the potential displacement that could result from their decisionmaking.

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1. http://www.urbanhabitat.org/node/919