

Eviction, Gentrification, and Renter Displacement

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TAKEAWAYS

Stories about residential displacement often place the blame on gentrification and neighborhood change, without considering the geography of evictions and other mechanisms of forced displacement.

Displacement is common and consistent—especially in low-SES neighborhoods—while gentrification is relatively rare.

Evictions are often concentrated in segregated Black communities and can be considered a racialized phenomenon.



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Residential displacement—or being forced out of the place

where you live—is a consistent dynamic of neighborhood life across the United States. In both academic research and popular discourse, gentrification is often cited as a leading cause of displacement. As our research strongly suggests, however, displacement is far more common in stable, low-socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods compared to those that are gentrifying.¹ In the summary below, we draw important distinctions between the broader topic of gentrification and specific underlying drivers of displacement—such as evictions—in low-income neighborhoods throughout the nation.

In 2018, about 3.6 million eviction cases were filed in the United States.² Contrary to popular narratives about the dynamics of displacement for renter households, most evictions occur in low-SES neighborhoods that are not gentrifying. No one argues against the existence and potential harms of gentrification, but eviction cases simply are not concentrated in these spaces. Evictions act as a far greater driver of displacement in neighborhoods with majority low-income residents. This is especially true in majority-Black neighborhoods throughout the United States. We analyzed 72 of the largest 200 metro areas in the nation and found that 1 in 16 renter households face eviction each year in majority-Black neighborhoods compared to 1 in 38 renter households in gentrifying neighborhoods. Given robust evidence across decades of data, we consider eviction to be a racialized phenomenon, one very often concentrated in segregated Black communities.³

Gentrification and Evictions

Using multiple measures of gentrification and various robustness checks to overcome limitations of prior research, our results support the assertion that eviction acts as a stronger and more consistent driver of forced displacement in low-SES neighborhoods compared to gentrifying neighborhoods. Data from 2000 to 2016 offers no evidence of gentrifying neighborhoods experiencing higher eviction rates than non-gentrifying low-SES neighborhoods.

A broad research agenda studying forced displacement in low-SES urban neighborhoods might ask fundamental questions such as:

- Why have rents in low-SES neighborhoods accelerated at such a fast pace?
- Are evictions diffuse across low-SES neighborhoods or concentrated in specific blocks or buildings?
- Where do people go after being displaced from low-SES neighborhoods?
- How does residential instability affect daily life in low-SES communities?

Within our cross-sectional sample of over six million eviction court records, we find virtually no correlation between gentrification and eviction at the metropolitan level. Across all the cities in our study, about 13% of neighborhoods were considered gentrifying; these neighborhoods saw nearly 12% of the evictions we tracked. In contrast, the 45% of neighborhoods that we classified as non-gentrifying low-SES neighborhoods saw over 60% of evictions. While eviction rates varied by neighborhood racial composition, we consistently found significantly higher rates in low-SES neighborhoods compared to gentrifying neighborhoods.

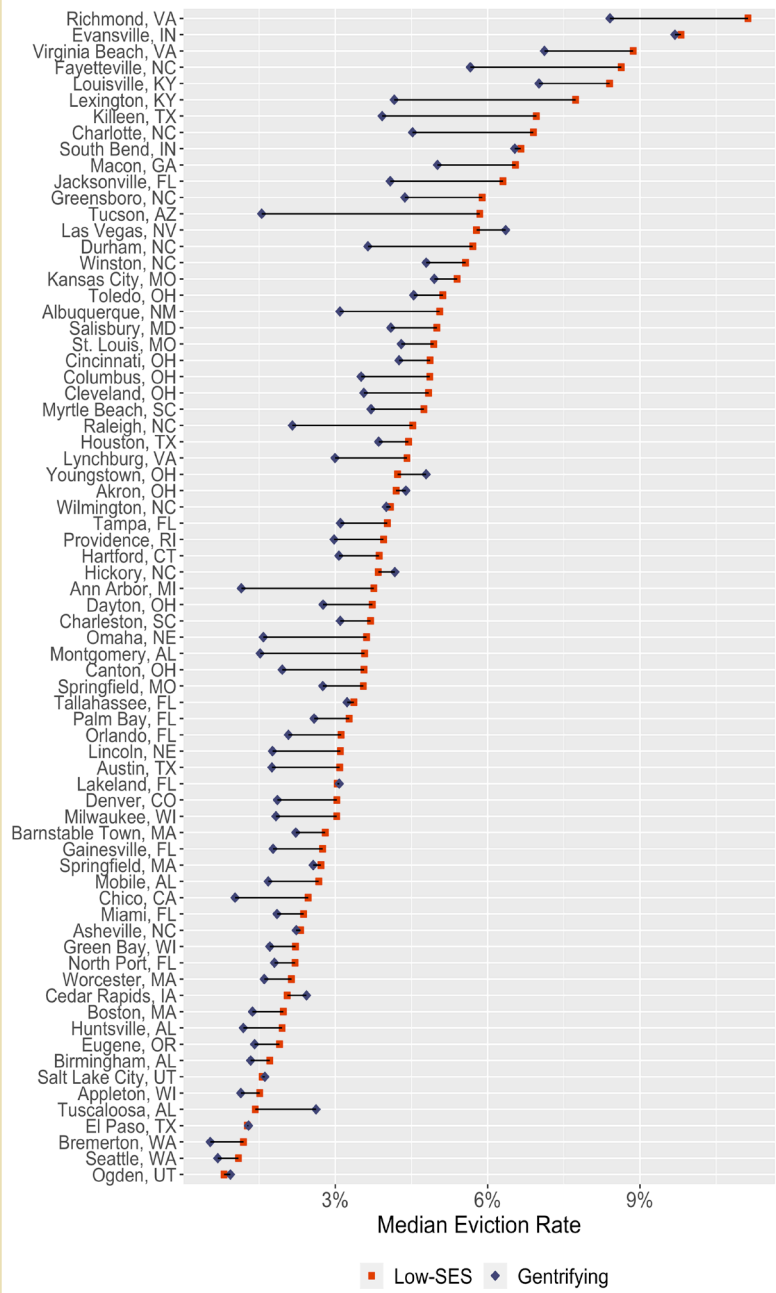
Six of every seven metro areas in our study saw higher median eviction rates in low-SES neighborhoods than in gentrifying neighborhoods (see Figure 1). In Tucson, AZ, for example, the median eviction rate in low-SES neighborhoods was 5.85%, compared to just 1.55% in gentrifying neighborhoods. Several large metropolitan areas had notable differences in this direction, including Charlotte and Raleigh, NC, Jacksonville, FL, and Austin, TX. Median eviction rates were higher in low-SES areas both in metropolitan areas where eviction is common (e.g., Richmond, VA, Durham, NC) and in those where it occurs much less often (e.g., Seattle, WA, Birmingham, AL). Given significant between-metro differences, however, we caution against drawing overly broad conclusions based on single-site studies.

A Broader Research Agenda

Models of urban displacement developed in recent decades often center on the dynamics of gentrification alone. Based on our data, however, we argue that such theories must explore a broader range of phenomena. Displacement is common and consistent—especially in low-SES neighborhoods—while gentrification is relatively rare. Majority-Black neighborhoods are often resistant to gentrification.⁴ But these neighborhoods, in cities nationwide, consistently see rising rents and high rates of forced displacement, even when gentrification is not occurring.

Results from this work lead us to support calls for a broader research agenda documenting the dynamics of urban displacement.⁵ Understanding how concentrated poverty in cities emerges from disinvestment—or routine abandonment of urban neighborhoods—requires a

Figure 1. Median eviction rate by neighborhood gentrification classification and metropolitan area (2012–2016).



Source: Hepburn, Louis, & Desmond (2024).

shift away from gentrification as a central focus and towards a more robust sociology of displacement. Research along these lines might explore the reasons for skyrocketing rents, the ebbs and flows of low-income rental markets, and how cities and suburbs manage the segregated coexistence of both poor and affluent neighborhoods.⁶ The main drivers of housing loss in low-SES neighborhoods, rather than periodic and external forces associated with theories of gentrification, are routine and internal to these neighborhoods. Residential churn and housing loss are, unfortunately, normalized features of low-SES neighborhoods. Recognizing and trying to address this routine displacement would forestall considerable suffering for families now and in the future. ■

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Sources & Methods

Type of analysis: Quantitative

Data source: Court records of 6,007,475 eviction cases.

Time frame: Years 2000 to 2016

Sample definition: Purposive sample drawn from eviction cases filed in 72 of the 200 largest metro areas in the United States; displacement documented by eviction judgments against tenants.

Limitations: Data on evictions vary by location and timeframe; reliability concerns arise when drawing upon such data sources. This research examines a specific period for 72 U.S. cities; relationships between gentrification, eviction, and displacement may differ at other times and in other locations. Underlying causes of eviction vary and can be difficult to determine; while this research examines heterogeneity in the relationships between gentrification and displacement, there is no attempt here to explain the causes of such variation. This work evaluates eviction and displacement risks for renters but does not address similar risks for homeowners.

¹Hepburn, P., Louis, R., & Desmond, M. (2024). Beyond gentrification: Housing loss, poverty, and the geography of displacement. *Social Forces*, 102, 880–901. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soad123>

²Gromis, A., et al. (2022). Estimating eviction prevalence across the United States. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 119(21), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116169119>

³Hepburn, P., Louis, R., & Desmond, M. (2020). Racial and gender disparities among evicted Americans. *Sociological Science*, 7, 649–662. <https://doi.org/10.15195/v7.a27>

⁴Hwang, J. & Sampson, R. J. (2014). Divergent pathways of gentrification: Racial inequality and the social order of renewal in Chicago neighborhoods. *American Sociological Review*, 79(4), 726–751. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122414535774>

⁵Brown-Saracino, J. (2017). Explicating divided approaches to gentrification and growing income inequality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 43, 515–539. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053427>; Cornelissen, S. & Jang-Trettien, C. (2023). “Housing in the context of neighborhood decline.” In *The Sociology of Housing* (B.J. McCabe & E. Rosen, Eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Hwang, J. (2016). While some things change, some things stay the same: Reflections on the study of gentrification. *City & Community*, 15(3), 226–230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12188>

⁶Hwang, J. (2015). Gentrification in changing cities: Immigration, new diversity, and racial inequality in neighborhood renewal. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 660, 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716215579823>

IRP Related Resources



On Eviction and the Rental Housing Crisis in the Rural United States. Carl Gershenson. July 2024. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/carl-gershenson-on-the-rural-eviction-crisis/> Interview draws from: Gershenson & Desmond, 2024, Eviction and the Rental Housing Crisis in Rural America. *Rural Sociology*, 89(1), 86-105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12528>



Webinar: Policy and Practice Approaches to Supporting Low-Income Renters at Risk of Eviction. Michael Lens, Eva Rosen, & Jennifer Prusak. June 2024. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/policy-and-practice-approaches-to-supporting-low-income-renters-at-risk-of-eviction/>