Research Brief:

Measuring and Mapping Rural Gentrification

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The term gentrification was coined in 1964 by Ruth Glass to describe the phenomenon of middle and upper-class "gentry" taking over traditionally working-class neighborhoods in London, England. In her original work, she described a process whereby incoming "gentrifiers" renovated once modest dwellings. These upgrades to the housing landscape ultimately drove up property values to the point where original residents could no longer afford to remain. Since Glass's proposal of the concept, a broad and robust field of research has analyzed the relationship between investment, housing infrastructure, and demographic displacement within a wider, global context (Atkinson and Bridge 2004).

Our project seeks to contribute to this larger body of work in two ways. First, because the vast majority of research on this topic has focused on urban environments, we explore the similar (but different) ways gentrification plays out in rural areas. Secondly, we seek to develop a newer and faster method of detecting emerging gentrification so that rural communities can be alerted sooner when demographic change is on the horizon. Although opinions may differ as to whether gentrification is a net positive or negative for residents in any given area, we believe it is important to provide them with the necessary data to alert them to what is coming so that they can base their plan for the future on valid and reliable information.

GENTRIFICATION IN A RURAL CONTEXT

As originally proposed, the term gentrification typically referred to the physical improvement of existing residential structures in urban areas. Glass used "shabby" cottages and downgraded "Victorian houses" as examples of dwellings that can be refurbished into "elegant" and "expansive" residences. Yet, this narrow conceptualization of gentrification offers little guidance on how to measure, interpret, and predict housing development growth in areas currently without residential activity. If blighted properties are demolished and replaced with new and expensive apartments, we can identify the former residents as displaced and their replacements as gentrifiers. But what if the former structures are cleared and not replaced, and the lots where they once stood are left vacant for years? A decade later, are "new builds" on the site considered new "development" or "redevelopment"? While new structures were technically built on top of previously unoccupied parcels, a time-lapse comparison of past versus present would certainly appear to look like gentrification. And if gentrification can occur on cleared land that has been unused for years, what about residential constructed in locations where it has never existed?

Phillips (2004) argues that we should not confine the study of gentrification to urban environments, suggesting that "many of the arguments advanced in urban studies [of gentrification] have quite clear rural parallels" (2004: 7). Proponents of an expanded the definition of the concept look instead to the generic processes that underly gentrification, regardless of whether it occurs in urban or rural settings. These abstract commonalities include: "(1) reinvestment of capital; (2) social upgrading of locale by incoming high-income groups; (3)

landscape change; and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups." (Davidson and Lees 2004: 1170).

Applying these four generic processes to new housing in rural areas can reveal a familiar phenomenon draped in different colors. Rural land tracts may be unoccupied, but they are not without value. They are, by definition, investment opportunities. With enough capital improvement, they can yield surplus-value. Such investment must come from somewhere, and if previous owners had enough reserves to fund such improvements one would think they would have done so already. Thus, investment is more likely to come from non-locals. Accordingly, the outcome of changes to any rural environment, because they are directed from outside capital, are more likely to look foreign or alien compared to the original. Such cultural change can force longtime residents to recalculate whether it is worth it to remain in the area. As investment flows into the area, increased property values mean increased property taxes. Increased cost of living makes staying less appealing and newfound offers from outside buyers make leaving more appealing. Thus, the displacement that occurs can be both direct (involuntary) or indirect (voluntary).

WHY STUDY RURAL GENTRIFICATION?

At its origins, the field of gentrification study in Glass's era was ultimately about economic transformations occurring in urban environments. As new modes of economic production emerged and others faded, the shifting placement of jobs produced changing demand for housing. Areas with declining demand saw decreased economic incentive to invest and rehabilitate aging housing infrastructure, leading to a cycle of neglect and blight. As property

values hit rock bottom, opportunities for real estate speculation emerge. In America, this is why so many high-profile instances of gentrification to place in deindustrialized spaces, effectively re-occupying and repurposing the built environment of our manufacturing past.

Similar economic transformations are occurring in rural areas in America today. Small scale farming is in a state of decline. The number of family owned farms has been shrinking for decades as corporate entities consolidate farming acreage across the country (USDA NASS 2024). Smaller farms, with their lower volumes of production, cannot enter into global supply chains, limiting their customer base to smaller regional populations. But proximity to local customers is still not enough. Family farms cannot compete on price with larger industrial scale operations, making it hard for rural residents to patronize farms in their community because it is cheaper to drive miles away to a Walmart to buy meats and produce grown across the country.

These transformations in the farming industry have created the conditions for continued rural gentrification for years to come. Smaller, non-contiguous tracts of farmland are unsuitable for consolidation for corporate farming. However, these acres become attractive to home builders looking to offer housing at cheaper prices than in adjacent urban areas.

While the end of a family farm has the notes of a sad song, it may not always be so. Involuntary displacement is generally regarded as harmful to a community. But voluntary displacement can also be a sign that families are cashing in on their family's generational investment. As Guimond and Simard (2004), there are some unexplored positive benefits of rural gentrification that deserve more consideration.

The decline of the small family farm in America is one reason why studying rural gentrification is important, but certainly not the only one. Climate change is certainly like to impact the housing market in unpredictable ways. As climate change hits urban areas, wealthier

city residents with sufficient resources will look for greener, cooler, and more resilient rural alternatives. As Angualovski et al. (2024) argue, these "wealthier, whiter" and "climate-adaptive" pioneers will be on the forefront of investment in property as they escape hot urban landscapes. Beyond climate change, the list of likely social and economic drivers of future rural gentrification could also include the rise of remote work or the prospect of another global pandemic, to name a few.

IDENTIFYING RURAL GENTRIFICATION SOONER

How to measure and map gentrification is a subfield all its own, and for an overview of the literature on the topic, Lees, Slatter, and Wyly (2008) offer a good primer. When it comes to identifying where gentrification is occurring and to what extent, one of the biggest critiques is that the most accurate data is often outdated by the time it is made available to researchers. For example, The American Community Survey (ACS), administered the US Census Bureau offers comprehensive economic and demographic data down to the neighborhood level. However, because the strength of the ACS lie in its rolling average over time (e.g. 5 year estimates), it is ultimately a window into a community's past, rather than present. This makes data sources like the ACS excellent for identifying when gentrification began, but is of little help for community residents wondering about the state of their neighborhood in the moment.

To rectify the weaknesses of other methods, bunten, Preis, and Aron-dine (2024) use more recent data, published on an annual basis to calculate the housing values and incomes of small geographic areas. These data come from the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) House Price Index and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), respectively. Their method calculates

housing and income values in small areas (ZIP codes and census tracts) and ranks them in relation to the housing and income values of the larger geographic area (Metropolitan Statistical Area) in which they sit. The strength of the method is that it assumes that the likelihood of a property rising or falling in value in the future is not tied to its objective amount, but rather to its value relative to surrounding properties in the region. For example, the most valuable house on a block may seem expensive to people living on that block while still appearing as a bargain to someone who across town who lives in a neighborhood with much higher average housing costs.

The predictive power of the method lies in its ability to compare how property values can rise (in relation to the larger MSA) faster than the incomes of people near that property. This first stage of gentrification becomes evident when the data show that relative home values begin to rise faster than relative incomes. This is the point at which real estate speculation has begun. It marks the moment when increased demand for (relative) bargain housing has raised property values even though the average neighborhood income (relative to the MSA) remains the same because original residents still live in the area. Identifying when this threshold is crossed occurs much faster when analyzing annual FHFA and IRS data compared to waiting years after the fact for the ACS 5 year estimates to be published.

For more on how to use and interpret the results of our rural gentrification tool, we have also published a guide. It offers sample outputs and what they mean in terms of whether rural gentrification is about to begin, is actively happening, or has already run its cycle.

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