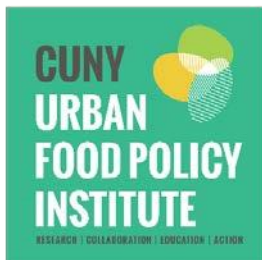


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FEEDING OR STARVING GENTRIFICATION: THE ROLE OF FOOD POLICY



POLICY BRIEF

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Feeding or Starving Gentrification: The Role of Food Policy

By Nevin Cohen

Gentrification has transformed low-income communities worldwide. The process is complex but often follows a consistent pattern: capital flows into low-income neighborhoods, more affluent residents move in, real estate values go up, the housing stock is upgraded, low-income residents are forced to leave, and community character changes to accommodate the newcomers. Gentrification can happen abruptly, with people and businesses displaced through eviction, but more commonly occurs gradually, even over generations, as children of longtime residents leave because they cannot afford to remain in the neighborhood in which they grew up. The impact of gentrification varies, too. Those able to remain in place while their neighborhoods gentrify may benefit from new investments, more political influence, and better infrastructure and services, or they may suffer the loss of place as commerce, culture, civic life, aesthetics, and the people living around them become unaffordable, unfamiliar, or unwelcoming.

Food plays a significant role in gentrification. “Foodie” culture often serves as gentrification’s leading edge by signifying that a community is ripe for investment. Gentrification also changes food retailers that comprise the local food environment, sometimes creating “food mirages,” with abundant, high quality food priced just out of reach of longstanding residents. Food policies play an important role in gentrification by catalyzing the process and protecting against or counteracting its negative effects, and policies that address gentrification can affect local food environments. This brief discusses the relationships between food and gentrification and identifies ten opportunities for advocates to shape the process.

Causes of Gentrification

Gentrification is so ubiquitous that it is easy to overlook the policies that put it in motion. Neighborhoods gentrify when a large gap between existing and potential land values (a “rent gap”) encourages substantial capital investment and an influx of more affluent residents. In some cases, increased land value attracts global investors, leading to warehousing of residential units rather than new housing, a phenomenon increasingly common in New York City (Greenberg, 2017). To date, the impact of these investments on food environments has not been examined.

Rent gaps are created by policies that devalue land, impoverish certain communities, or suddenly encourage real estate investments by allowing denser development. In the post-war era, for example, the federal government financed urban renewal, enabling cities to tear down so-called slums (often neighborhoods inhabited by low-income people of color) to assemble land for new cultural centers, universities, residential towers, and other spaces to serve wealthier people. Opposition to the bulldozing of poor communities and the end of the federal urban renewal program in 1974 prompted cities to use less controversial vacant sites for new redevelopment projects and incentives to encourage private investment in low-income neighborhoods (Fainstein 2011; Hackworth and Smith, 2001). This “new-build gentrification” required fewer evictions yet caused displacement as surrounding property values

increased (Shaw and Hagemans 2015). Cities also created development potential in low-income neighborhoods by “up-zoning” to allow increased density on existing parcels, offering tax incentives and other benefits to developers, and by upgrading infrastructure like subway stations and schools to increase development capacity.

Gentrification also follows amenities that encourage gentrifiers to move to and invest in low-income communities. These may include physical amenities: historic architecture that signifies status; solid housing stock worthy of renovation; parks and waterfront access; a central location; and good transportation infrastructure. Cultural amenities are also important draws: ethnic restaurants; performance venues; or art galleries. Cities create and sustain these amenities through policies ranging from historic district designations to the use of public buildings or vacant storefronts for studios and performance spaces (Smith, 1996). In recent years, cities have engaged in “green gentrification,” funding environmental improvements, from remediated brownfields to park renovations and bike lanes, that trigger capital investments (Checker 2011; Gould and Lewis, 2012) and support activities like cycling and gardening that signify that the neighborhood is healthy and environmentally conscious (Anguelovski 2016; Gould and Lewis 2012; Hagerman 2007).

Food’s Role in Gentrification

Food can promote gentrification in several ways. Policies that create incentives for a new supermarket to locate in a low-income community may increase food access but also make the neighborhood more attractive for more affluent newcomers. Food retailers that market sustainable, healthy products to higher income consumers signal that the community is changing and may cause nearby property values to increase. Food establishments, from cafes and bars to restaurants, can signify that a neighborhood is trendy and ripe for gentrification.

Supermarkets as Development Engines

Over the past half century, many chain supermarkets moved from cities to the suburbs. Between 1970 and 1988, for example, Manhattan and Brooklyn lost half of their large grocery stores (Lavin 2005). As cities began to invest in neighborhoods neglected for decades, city officials and developers recognized that the success of residential projects depended on the presence of supermarkets to attract middle class and wealthy residents.

City officials and developers know that urban amenities -- from movie theaters to specialty grocers -- increase the prices of nearby residential units. One study found that a specialty grocer with services like a butcher, bakery, and florist generates price premiums averaging 17.5% (Johnson Gardner, 2007). This trend, called the “Whole Foods Effect,” contributes to gentrification. A study by the real estate website Zillow found that the typical home near either Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s costs more and appreciates twice as much as the median U.S. home. (Anderson, 2017). In this cycle, food gentrification and housing gentrification are intertwined.

As interest in increasing access to healthy food became politically popular, cities adopted supermarket incentive policies, often framing them as food justice and obesity prevention efforts (Pothukuchi 2005).

These initiatives also support redevelopment strategies. In explaining New York City's supermarket incentive program, the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) initiative, the former New York City Planning Commissioner emphasized its role in residential development: "If you're thinking of moving your family to the Lower Concourse [a manufacturing area in the South Bronx that the Commission rezoned for residential use] you're going to say, like, 'Wow, there is no grocery store here. I'm not going to move here.'" (Cardwell, 2009)

Foodies and Gentrification

Food culture shapes identity and status, and is integral to gentrification (Hyde, 2014; Zukin, 1990; Anguelovski, 2015). New restaurants are signposts of trendiness to attract younger and more affluent residents (Slater, 2006). Restaurants and specialty grocers emphasize ethnic foodways to signify "authenticity" (sometimes ironically) during periods of rapid demographic and socioeconomic change. Coffee shops that emphasize craftsmanship and provenance sell status and serve as "third places" between work and home, and workspaces for knowledge workers and those in the gig economy (Papachristos et al. 2011). Even ethnic, street food, and working-class dishes have been elevated to status-conferring products by businesses catering to affluent residents (Hanser and Hyde 2014; Hyde 2014).

If newcomers reject the food of an existing community it can lead to economic loss, but if gentrifiers refashion these foods and practices, and appropriate them as authentic examples of the neighborhood's culture, they may become attractive to more affluent people but less accessible or appealing to longstanding residents and may lead to the displacement of existing businesses. For example, a study of the restaurants in the low-income but gentrifying Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver found that they offered menus and interior designs that promised "authenticity," in safe spaces with well-prepared versions of the inexpensive food typically found in the neighborhood (Hyde 2014). Symbolic appropriation of the pre-existing food culture can exclude long-time residents who feel they do not fit the identity or cannot afford to patronize the new grocers or restaurants that maintain such an identity (Deener 2007).

Supermarket Greenlining

Supermarket "redlining" is the tendency for grocery chains to avoid or leave low-income communities with perceived low demand, limited purchasing power, and higher operating costs. Supermarket "greenlining" is when grocers with health and environmental halos target gentrifying neighborhoods for new stores, signifying environmental privilege and leaving low-income residents with reduced access to reasonably priced food and welcoming shopping spaces (Anguelovski, 2016). Supermarket greenlining produces inequality and exclusion just as supermarket redlining leaves low-income communities with limited access to full service grocers.

In targeting upper income shoppers, these retailers often go out of their way to market themselves as ethical businesses concerned about the neighborhoods in which they locate. This appeals to young, affluent, socially-conscious gentrifiers who want to act as "ethical consumers" (Szasz, 2007). In much of the popular food literature, social and environmental issues surrounding food have been framed as a

matter of individual consumer choice (i.e., voting with one's fork), and therefore when a supermarket like Whole Foods includes local vendors in its stores (e.g., Hot Bread Kitchen's retail counter in Harlem's Whole Foods, Smorgasburg vendors in its Lower East Side store) the intended effect is to appeal to the food conscious, socially just, and pro-environment identities of its customers.

Recreating Authenticity

Public markets in New York and in cities worldwide serve as forces of gentrification. Vestigial market spaces are often renovated and re-designed to attract affluent consumers interested in experiencing alternatives to the supermarket (Gonzalez and Waley 2013). In the 1970s and 1980s, public markets like Boston's Fenuil Hall and New York City's South Street Seaport were rebuilt as festival retailing sites, offering craft food in restored spaces that resembled traditional public markets in appearance, not function, catering to tourists and affluent residents. Some of the remaining public markets in New York, like the Essex Street Market, have a mix of vendors that emphasizes artisanal over conventional food. Over the past decade, residential developers have also developed artisanal food halls to attract residents to luxury residential buildings. Even farmers markets have served as exclusive spaces of affluent consumers seeking authentic interactions with growers. Only through advocacy to secure government funding for equipment to enable SNAP participants to use their benefits, and discounts to reduce the costs to those with SNAP, have they expanded to serve low-income communities.

Cultivating Gentrification

Community gardens, many built by residents on the rubble of buildings abandoned due to disinvestment that eventually led to gentrification, can raise adjacent real estate prices and make the neighborhood less affordable (Voicu and Been, 2008). Longtime residents and newcomers often worked together to create community gardens, unaware of the effects on real estate values and how the gardens might, over time, create development pressures that would lead to their own displacement (Reynolds and Cohen, 2016). Gardens can also serve as sites of resistance to gentrification. In 1986, the city's destruction of the Garden of Eden, a community garden on the Lower East Side, contributed to the 1988 riot against city policies supporting gentrification in neighboring Tompkins Square Park. More recently, the Friends of Brook Park farm has allied with organizations fighting for affordable housing (Reynolds and Cohen, 2016).

Gentrification's Role in Shaping Food Environments

Effects on Food Budgets

Much of the gentrification literature has focused on residential displacement, but those able to remain in a gentrified neighborhood often face higher rents – and higher food prices. Paying more for rent reduces the amount of household income available for food, making buying healthy food more difficult and increasing food insecurity (Whittle et al. 2015).

Food Retail Displacement

While gentrification does not generally cause rapid retail displacement, in part because commercial leases tend to be long-term (although short-term leases and verbal agreements in lieu of leases are increasingly the norm in gentrifying neighborhoods) and some retailers adjust their offerings to accommodate higher income customers, gentrification can change the food retail environment in several important ways (Meltzer, 2016):

- Gentrification increases retail activity in general, particularly increasing the number of grocery stores. With higher incomes to spend on groceries and restaurants, affluent new residents provide market demand that supports new food establishments.
- As existing businesses market to new residents, changes to their products and prices may exclude longstanding residents. Supermarkets are not all equally affordable; different grocers charge different prices and offer different types of products. Food deserts can turn into food mirages, neighborhoods with the appearance of adequate food access that obscures the social exclusion faced by residents who find the new retail to be too expensive, uninviting, or culturally inappropriate. Grocery shopping may burden low-income households with higher food prices or the cost of time and transportation to shop elsewhere.
- New retailers may out-compete existing businesses or they may increase overall commercial activity in a neighborhood and benefit all businesses.
- Increased commercial rents can hurt longstanding businesses as their leases expire, especially if the businesses cater to a stable or dwindling number of lower-income residents. Higher rents can also make it more difficult for new independent businesses to start.
- The displacement of a community's ethnic population can make it impossible for businesses catering to that population to survive.
- When businesses leave gentrifying neighborhoods, their commercial spaces tend to remain vacant for longer periods than in other neighborhoods, and once leased tend to be occupied not by new independent businesses, but by chains providing different goods and services than the businesses they replaced.

Zoning and Food Retail

Zoning, particularly increasing the allowable zoning, is an important tool for spurring real estate investment. If planners consider the effects of zoning on food, they typically focus on policies to increase food access, such as zoning incentives to attract supermarkets to low-income neighborhoods. But the rezoning process has broader and more significant effects on the food environment, even when food is not explicitly considered. By defining the form, size, and uses of parcels, zoning can privilege certain types of food retailers, such as big-box wholesale clubs, over others, such as conventional supermarkets, food cooperatives, or small-scale retailers. More importantly, by increasing allowable development, rezoning raises land values, making it more challenging for food retailers to find affordable commercial space. Rezoning that causes displacement of lower-income residents can contribute to the loss of affordable food stores and restaurants.

Food retail is not the only segment of the food system affected by rezoning. As a neighborhood loses small manufacturing sites to mixed-use residential and commercial buildings, spaces for food production, processing, and distribution, components of a diverse and resilient food system, may disappear, along with jobs on which residents with limited education or English proficiency often depend.

Loss of Food Retail Character

In addition to pricing longstanding residents out of the market, changes in food venues that signify exclusivity based on class, race or ethnicity can make them effectively inaccessible to existing residents. In gentrifying neighborhoods, longstanding residents often feel that gentrification changes neighborhood retail character by reducing mom and pop stores and business that cater to local residents (Pearsall, 2012). Signals used by new retailers, including their product mix, prices, staffing, and music and signage, can appeal to gentry and discourage lower-income shoppers and people of color (Patch, 2008; Zukin et al., 2009).

Strategies to Resist Food Gentrification

Community activists and food advocates can engage in different strategies to stem, or at least influence, the process of food gentrification. Doing so requires acting beyond food policy to address housing, land use, and economic policy. The following ten strategies are not an exhaustive list but are meant to spur ideas for advocacy.

1. Ally with housing organizations (e.g., Right to the City <https://righttothecity.org/>) to advocate for public housing, rent subsidy programs, rent regulations, and services to protect tenants in gentrifying neighborhoods against harassment and eviction. Work with coalitions of independent business owners like United for Small Business NYC to lobby for policies, like Local Law 77 of 2016, to protect small businesses from harassment by landlords and displacement.
2. Environmental justice advocates have articulated a “just green enough” strategy that seeks to balance the need to reduce environmental threats with the need to guard against green improvements that gentrify their communities (Curran and Hamilton 2012). Developing an analogous “just food enough” strategy would engage advocates, city planners and elected officials in developing community-based food interventions that aim to increase access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food.
3. Participate in neighborhood planning meetings and land use review processes to ensure that proposed zoning changes do not disadvantage existing food retailers and encourage the types of food businesses longstanding residents desire. Demand that environmental reviews of proposed rezoning and large development proposals consider the direct and secondary displacement effects on food retail and food manufacturing businesses.
4. Support zoning changes and incentive programs to promote retail diversity, such as the Special Enhanced Commercial District Upper West Side Neighborhood Retail Streets Text Amendment (<http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans/upper-west-side-neighborhood-retail-streets/uws.pdf>) which limits the frontage of new retail and commercial establishments to

promote retail diversity. The New York City Council's recent report, *Planning for Retail Diversity*, recommends additional policies to support independent retail businesses (NYC Council 2017).

5. Urge agencies like the city's Small Business Services and Economic Development Corporation to prioritize neighborhood-serving food retailers.
6. New development projects requiring variances or public funds provide an opportunity for community members and elected officials to negotiate the terms of development, including the size, configuration, and location of commercial space, and how spaces are leased. While such negotiations have typically focused on affordable housing, advocates can also urge the inclusion of neighborhood-serving food retail.
7. Advocate for community benefits agreements with national supermarket chains to secure commitments to local hiring and affordable pricing.
8. Engage community development corporations and other non-profit developers as they plan new projects to ensure that community food needs, such as groceries, community garden spaces, and community kitchens, are incorporated in project designs.
9. Lobby for policies to support the creation of retail food cooperatives and buyers' clubs that can provide affordable food and remain committed to the needs of their members.
10. Protect urban agriculture sites from development, providing permanent or long-term tenure, and demand that farms and gardens that are developed are replaced with equivalent growing spaces in the community.

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