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Does Gentrification Help or Harm Urban Neighbourhoods? An Assessment of the Evidence-Base in the Context of the New Urban Agenda

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There has been a renewed interest in ways of encouraging the middle classes back to the cities that many have left. Gentrification describes an interest in working class and cheaper neighbourhoods by middle class and professional households. The image of trendy Islington has done much to aid the greater currency of the term but gives us some idea of the outcome if little idea of the social costs involved. Recent research for the ESRC Centre for Neighbourhood Research sought to evaluate the relative value of gentrification as a possible route towards an urban renaissance by reviewing all empirical research on the topic for the last thirty years. The review covered more than a hundred pieces of research, predominantly from North America and the UK.

Many authors have written of the ill-effects of gentrification, primarily in terms of its ability to displace poorer households through price and rent increases in the area. However, others have sought to portray gentrification as a positive force for social change which may bring benefits to the wider city through increased tax revenues and a revitalisation of the physical environment. Further, critics have argued that gentrification is a small problem compared to wider issues of suburbanisation and urban sprawl. This paper provides a systematic review of the research evidence to assess the extent and quality of evidence for these positions.

The policy context for the review is the Government's commitment to try and encourage an urban renaissance through private-sector reinvestment in deprived and run-down areas. Some have argued that these aspirations including talk of urban pioneers and encouraging the middle classes back to the city are strongly associated with the boosterism found in American cities in the 70s and 80s and that there is potential for the renaissance agenda to produce similarly inequitable results in neighbourhoods through gentrification.

Methods

The review included material from 1964 (the year that the term gentrification first appeared in print) up to 2001. A full list of these references is available for consultation at:

http://www.neighbourhoodcentre.org.uk/research/cnrpapersword/gent_refs.doc

The review included research from any country in the English language. A total of 114 books, research papers and other empirical literature were included in the final review. No methodological approach was excluded from the review.

Findings: The Neighbourhood Impacts of Gentrification

A. The Costs of Gentrification

The literature demonstrated a much wider set of costs compared with benefits for the process of gentrification, These included household displacement through increased

rent and property prices, community conflict and racial tension, landlord harassment, lower population densities and a greater take on local spending by incoming affluent households. The evidence-base for these problems varied in quality or representativeness but the cumulative weight of research produced in a wide range of cities in several countries and their convergence suggests a high degree of reliability.

B. The Positive Neighbourhood Impacts of Gentrification

In general the positive impacts of gentrification are hard to find and were rarely found by researchers. Further, there was little empirical evidence to back up these assertions. It would appear that there is little evidence of such positive effects although this is not the same as saying that such effects may not occur. The positive effects regularly cited by the literature were as follows: boost to city tax revenues, increased property values, increased social mix, improvements to local services and to the physical environment. However, none of the research examined contained any concrete evidence on these effects.

The Urban Renaissance and Gentrification Impacts

The government is committed to encouraging the revitalisation of our towns and cities in a socially just vision of development. However, there are concerns that encouraging a back to the city movement of the middle classes may lead to gentrification or that similar results may come about if private sector re-investment is encouraged in the most deprived areas through tax relief on conversions and re-use and the decontamination of inner urban land. This section concludes that gentrification is unlikely to be encouraged through public sector action as currently manifest but that there is a danger that gentrification and private sector investment are seen as solutions to the problems of deprived neighbourhoods when the research evidence suggests this has primarily had socially divisive and inequitable results in the past.

Conclusion

The overwhelming evidence from existing research on the neighbourhood impacts of gentrification concern its negative influences and there is a strong cumulative weight to this evidence – particularly with regard to population displacement of the most physically vulnerable and deprived households. While the positive impacts of gentrification have often been alluded to the empirical evidence-base for such an assessment is currently very thin. This is not to say that these effects have not occurred but rather that there has more often been an appeal to rhetoric and intuition than research.