

Final Research Report: Gentrification and Racial Disparity in Oakland, California

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## **I. Introduction**

As cities across the United States continue to experience the massive social, political, and economic phenomenon of gentrification and residential displacement, it is imperative to conduct thorough research to not only understand the processes and factors that contribute to ongoing gentrification, but how marginalized communities continue to be disproportionately affected by it. In the past twenty years, the Bay Area has experienced one of the worst housing crises in the country as the tech boom deindustrialized San Francisco and Oakland city centers, thus driving outward suburbanization at incredibly high prices. My CSRE research fellowship with the Changing Cities Research Lab (CCRL) and Associate Professor Jackelyn Hwang of the sociology department at Stanford University this summer primarily focused on how forces of gentrification in Oakland affect low-income residents' residential stability before and beyond displacement. In the context of this research, gentrification refers to the in-migration of middle-and high-SES residents and influx in investment in previously disinvested neighborhoods. In relation to displacement, "before displacement" indicates strategies/sacrifices taken by residents to avoid displacement while "beyond displacement" references how residents navigate the housing search/moving process after being forced to move. While of course the Bay Area, and Oakland in particular, offer very particular case studies that cannot necessarily be applied universally throughout all cities in the United States, research on the adverse effects of gentrification on communities of color proves significant in providing further knowledge of the public and private interests driving displacement in the housing market, as well as critical analysis of why residents of color experience this at alarming rates when compared to whites. In conducting this research with the CCRL, we ask: 1) what are the ways in which Oakland residents experience residential instability before and beyond displacement, and how do these

vary by race; and 2) what are the mechanisms driving racial disparities in residential instability before and beyond displacement?

While the Changing Cities Research Lab (CCRL) pursues a multitude of different research projects, I primarily worked on the Bay Area Displacement Project, which partners with the City of Oakland's Housing and Community Development Department and interviews nearly 100 community members in Oakland on their experiences with housing, landlords, and related matters. Ultimately, interviewing these community members and conducting follow up surveys/conversations allowed our research team to engage directly with populations experiencing displacement and the pressures of gentrification. From these extended conversations and relationships, we were able to better understand how different factors related to residents' racial identity, including language accessibility and access to social/familial networks, significantly affected how residents experienced rising rents, landlord exploitation, the housing search, and other signs of residential instability. While prior quantitative research conducted by members of the Bay Area Displacement project indicated trends toward residential crowding, eviction filings, and other forms of residential instability in census tracts primarily composed of people of color, this qualitative and community-oriented approach allowed me to engage with a variety of different Oakland residents, code for patterns in responses, and understand what neighborhood conditions, landlord practices, and other factors have facilitated these racial disparities in residential patterns.

## **II. Understanding Gentrification in Oakland:**

To fully understand the context of contemporary gentrification in Oakland, it is integral to reconceptualize Oakland as a prime subject to the political and economic forces that took hold of the Bay Area, San Francisco in particular, from the 1990s through the 2010s. [The tech boom, or](#)

the dot-com boom, that transformed the San Francisco Bay Area into the global hub of tech capital it exists as today can be fundamentally understood as the driving force of housing prices and thus gentrification in Oakland (Owens). As the city of San Francisco offered major tax cuts for technological development in the 1990s and 2000s, the largest tech companies began relocating their headquarters to the Bay Area, universally driving up housing and rent prices throughout the entire region. While San Francisco and cities on the west side of the Bay initially saw the largest price hikes, these economic shifts soon took hold in Oakland and the East Bay, as middle income and wealthier tech workers employed in San Francisco moved across the Bay for cheaper housing (Levin).

Historically, due to urban renewal, gentrification, and exclusionary zoning policies, Oakland and other cities in the East Bay possessed much greater populations of low income Black and Latinx residents now being pressured by realtors and incoming wealthier residents to move out. The tech boom, coupled with the ongoing deindustrialization of steel and iron manufacturing centers in east Oakland, has facilitated a repurposing of the land through zoning, such that previously zoned industrial land becomes residential, and long term, working class residents find themselves both unable to find a job and unable to afford the newly constructed expensive apartments (Causa Justa, 31). As a result of these forces, Oakland has become one of the fastest gentrifying cities in the country, with longtime Black residents being the primary victims: in the past 40 years, the Black/African American population of Oakland has dropped from nearly half of the city's total population to just 16% (Chamings; Levin). Even Oakland's conventionally most wealthy neighborhoods in the northern part of the city have seen rapid displacement of existing Black, Latinx, and Asian residents, while the single-family zoning policies initially aimed at excluding racial minorities have additionally made public/affordable

housing development extremely difficult (Orenstein). The Urban Displacement Project, an initiative started by Karen Chapple of U.C. Berkely and the University of Toronto, collects comprehensive data revealing which neighborhoods are actively undergoing gentrification, as well as which neighborhoods appear particularly susceptible to gentrification. In overviewing an interactive map of Oakland, one can find that nearly every neighborhood in central Oakland is either currently experiencing gentrification or has become extremely susceptible to it. Additionally, the data reveals that nearly all of these neighborhoods have been historically redlined and are composed primarily of people of color (Chappel).

### **Residential Instability, Poverty, and Crowding:**

Existing research conducted on the urban landscape of Oakland has attempted to pinpoint multiple key factors and living conditions within neighborhoods of color that allow the associated economic and political forces of the tech boom to effectively transform these neighborhoods and displace their residents. Unsurprisingly, poverty and the increasing wealth gap between residents of Oakland exists as a key condition allowing for gentrification. Existing research revealed that low income Bay Area residents in 2009 had only 50% chance to live in the same neighborhoods by 2018, while wealthy residents had a 67% chance (Patel Shrimali, What We Learned). While not all of these low income residents are displaced forcibly, these statistics align with rates of eviction documented in various Oakland neighborhoods in recent years. From 2018-2019, eviction filings were highest in low income neighborhoods, as well as Black and “multi-racial” neighborhoods located in East Oakland, while filings were the lowest in white, wealthier areas such as Oakland Hills (Hwang, Residential Instability). Since the onset of the 2020 pandemic, and various eviction moratoriums put into place by the federal government, the state of California, and the city of Oakland, these filings have decreased, yet informal evictions

and other moves pressured by rising rent, landlord practices, and renovation still persist throughout various neighborhoods in Oakland. Additionally, further research found that not only were low income residents of color often “doubling up” within units to save money on increased rent prices, but even displaced residents have been moving to more concentrated areas of Oakland and Alameda County due to the housing shortage, creating hubs of overcrowding leading to housing degradation and health risks among other consequences (Patel Shrimali). Additional studies conducted by Causa Justa have indicated that displaced low income residents in Oakland and San Francisco suffer health consequences in being forced to find new medical providers and struggling to obtain prescriptions or medical records due to new surroundings and proximity to health care centers (Causa Justa, 46).

In providing historical summary on the economic and political shifts within the larger Bay Area in recent decades and evaluating the existing research on the state of gentrification and low income neighborhoods of color in Oakland, this literature review sets the context for my research this summer on how residents of color in Oakland experience the economic and social pressures of gentrification before and beyond displacement. The current displacement of Oakland’s residents of color, particularly Black residents, exists as a product of the tech boom and the housing shortage, and can be understood as directly linked to evictions, subsequent overcrowding, and segregation of urban poverty. Throughout the duration of my summer research talking with low income residents of Oakland, I found it integral to understand how these larger forces have shaped the urban and social landscape of Oakland, as well as how these historical and ongoing forces of harm directly manifest in the experiences of the community members we interviewed.

### **III. Methodology**

The research methodology utilized by the Bay Area Displacement project operates as both qualitative and quantitative: with data components as well as comprehensive interviews with longtime residents of color whom the Changing Cities Research Lab develops standing relationships with. The usage of both qualitative and quantitative methods pinpoints two primary components of the research focus: 1) documenting the extent to which gentrification in Oakland exists and 2) what factors or circumstances, such as language accessibility, access to rent relief resources, social/familial networks, influence the residential status/stability of low income populations in Oakland. While my research work included both quantitative and qualitative elements, I primarily focused on qualitative methods involving outreach/flyering, interviewing residents, conducting follow up surveys, and coding interview transcripts for a variety of different themes and patterns.

The qualitative methods component of my research consisted primarily of in depth interviews with residents of neighborhoods in Oakland undergoing gentrification that the Changing Cities Research Lab has documented data on. To recruit respondents for our interviews, I would often commute with members from my research team into various neighborhoods in Oakland to community events and local businesses, talking with locals about what they have observed in their neighborhoods and whether they or anyone they know would be willing to participate in a scheduled interview on their experiences with housing in Oakland. I appreciate how in this way, the sourcing of interview subjects was somewhat random, not selecting the heads of local community organizations or non profits, who may be both misrepresentative of the larger community and invested in the interests of their particular

affiliate. Overall, we found that our recruiting methodology was extremely successful in reaching a diverse array of low income residents in Oakland, successfully obtaining interviews with historically marginalized populations, including seniors, unhoused/formerly unhoused individuals, individuals living in public housing, undocumented folks, and non-English speakers — particularly Spanish and Cantonese speakers. In addition to in-person recruiting, the research team also employed snowball sampling and purposive sampling measures as needed. Snowball sampling appeared rather straightforward: asking respondents and community members if they knew of any events we could attend or people we could contact who would be willing to participate in our study. Purposive sampling often depended on whether we were having trouble reaching a certain demographic and shifted our randomized recruiting approach to a more targeted approach. For example, as we were searching for more Asian community members for our interviews, we attended events in Oakland Chinatown or left flyers with Asian/American community organizations.

Prior to beginning the official interview process, I underwent many steps of interview training, including practice interviews with my research team members, sitting in on another team member's interview, and becoming familiar with our Lab's interview guide – a working document with guidelines regarding positionality, language, and interview topics/subject areas. After completing this training, I was able to interview a series of respondents from various neighborhoods and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Generally, these interviews were conducted over Zoom due to IRB and COVID restrictions, and lasted between 60-100 minutes. All respondents were low income renters in Oakland and received a \$40 payment for their time. During these semi-structured interviews, I would ask questions and probe around a series of topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic, neighborhood conditions, landlord relationships, moving, pressures to



move, civic/political engagement and more. Following the interview, I wrote up a comprehensive memo documenting the primary issues surrounding housing affordability and gentrification discussed by the interviewee and later coded the interview transcript through the NVivo software to analyze for patterns in themes, emotions, and experiences related to displacement or pressure towards displacement. Lastly, my qualitative methods included conducting follow up surveys with previous interviewees for our study. This often involved reaching out to previously interviewed Oakland residents to check in with their residential status, mental health, and occupational stability to observe any changes prompted by landlord practices, COVID, or gentrification efforts in their neighborhood. In this way, the Lab's research and understanding of factors contributing to residential instability was dynamic, allowing us to continuously analyze the state of displacement and residential instability across various neighborhoods in Oakland.

#### **IV. Results and Analysis**

Analyzing the common themes and experiences across low income residents of Oakland from different racial backgrounds, my research yielded some preliminary results indicating certain factors or circumstances that drive racial disparities in the residential stability of low income renters in Oakland. Additionally, this analysis provided some additional findings regarding how low income renters of all racial backgrounds in Oakland feel towards the condition of the city and the prospect of moving/forced displacement.

With regard to racial disparities, low income renters of color in Oakland feel far less compelled to reach out to government aid services or rental assistance programs than white respondents. While the analysis of interview transcripts is ongoing, and will be continued throughout the duration of the fall quarter, initial analysis reveals overwhelmingly that low income white renters in all neighborhoods of Oakland are aware of rent relief assistance

programs, the Oakland eviction moratorium, their rights as tenants, how they would pursue legal action if their landlord violated their rights, and an array of other programs/services including available grants, childcare support, healthcare, food stamps, etc. Meanwhile, low income renters of color, particularly non-English speaking Latinx and Asian residents, often remain completely unaware of any relief/government assistance programs that could help with rent, the housing search, expenses involving health and food. This was further supplemented by many low income renters of color not knowing their rights as tenants — whether their landlord could raise the rent by certain amounts, eviction moratoriums or restrictions, and other policies/provisions that would protect them from eviction or pressure to move. Ultimately, this disparity in knowledge and resources can be understood as a result of many factors, but language accessibility, as well as targeted resource dissemination to communities of color appear as focus areas for the city of Oakland to overcome these disparities in the future.

Another prominent racial disparity noted in the initial analysis involved community members' perceptions of governmental entities, the political process, and housing institutions. While white interviewees often held more positive perceptions of government relief programs and COVID era policies to protect tenants, as well as a greater knowledge of how to apply for loans/grants and maintain positive relationships with their landlords, interviewees of color expressed disillusionment with the government services, noting that they often were ineligible or could not locate resources on how to apply for these services. Additionally, interviewees of color generally expressed more negative experiences with landlords or property management companies than white respondents. Whereas white interviewees often felt compelled to work in collaboration with their landlords to create a positive arrangement, or contact their landlords if they needed maintenance, those community members who felt at the will of their landlord and

expressed feelings of hopelessness toward their relationship with their landlord were almost always low income renters of color. These same respondents often could tell endless stories of their own or friend's previous experiences with exploitative landlords and property management companies. With regard to family and personal networks, white interviewees additionally reported being able to rely on networks of friends or family to connect them with resources, job opportunities, or loan money if necessary. While many of the white residents interviewed by the Lab seemed to note having a safety net or network to rely on, respondents of color were far less likely to propose these connections as realistic avenues to avoid displacement.

Separate from racial disparities, the qualitative analysis of this research project revealed additional findings regarding the state of housing and life in Oakland for low income renters grappling with increased gentrification and pressure to move out. Across all racial demographics, it was clear that renters employ a multitude of strategies to avoid displacement and perceive moving out of their current residence as a last resort. When prompted with moving or being displaced, most interviewees took extensive measures to afford rent and maintain residential stability, including but not limited to: living in substandard conditions, selling their possessions, tolerating abusive landlord relationships, working overtime, borrowing money or taking on loans they cannot afford, having another friend/family member informally move in to reduce their share of the rent. Often it seemed these measures taken to avoid moving had a negative effect on the interviewee's mental and physical health, but still, nearly all respondents expressed they would take any possible action so long as they were allowed to stay in their current residence. Respondents indicated that this was often because they felt that gentrification and decreasing affordability made the housing search extremely inaccessible. Many noted that housing prices in Oakland have skyrocketed in recent years and landlords have been steadily increasing rent prices

to such a point where low income renters feel almost nothing in Oakland is within their price range. Additionally, with so many residents struggling with affordability, public housing has become a lottery, whereby the hopes of receiving housing are slim to none. As a result, most interviewees feel that should they have to move or be displaced, they would not be able to afford or find another realistic housing option and will end up unhoused. This fear of the housing search and any state of residential instability was often compounded by a general dissatisfaction with the level of safety and quality infrastructure in Oakland. In many neighborhoods primarily composed of low income housing, residents reported observing an increase in violent crime over the last 20 years that compelled them to stay inside throughout most hours of the day. The prospect of moving to a “worse” neighborhood or being homeless became even less appealing when interviewees considered the prominence of crime and lack of safe infrastructure on the streets of Oakland. While some interviewees of color noted that crime and violence could be navigated in their neighborhoods, they also generally expressed a stronger resistance to moving due to the difficulties of logistics and networking in the housing search process.

## **V. Discussion and Conclusions**

In evaluating the findings and analysis of gentrification, residential instability, and racial disparity in Oakland from my research with the Changing Cities Research Lab this summer, I feel it important to note that the findings from this summer are preliminary and have not been formalized in any publication or report. At the beginning of my work with Professor Hwang and the Lab, it was clear that the Lab was not looking to publish any formal materials from the Bay Area Displacement Project by the end of the summer. Rather, the qualitative research surrounding community outreach, interviewing, follow up surveys, and coding was the primary focus. By the end of the summer, the Lab had completed a total of 80 interviews, coding a little

over half of the transcripts, from which my preliminary findings and analysis are sourced from. Throughout the fall, I will continue to work with the Lab to continue coding the transcripts, conducting more interviews as they come up, and working with the research team to analyze our findings and reach more concrete conclusions regarding the measures taken by residents to avoid displacement and how gentrification disproportionately affects Oakland's residents beyond just being forced to move.

Despite the preliminary nature of these results, I feel they establish a foundation for understanding how gentrification manifests in ways far more complex than conventional displacement. While Professor Hwang's research on gentrification in the Bay Area has previously established that the political and economic forces of gentrification can prompt urban crowding more so than displacement, the preliminary findings from this qualitative, community oriented research reveals the rippling effects of decreasing affordability on nearly every facet of life for low income renters in Oakland. From the community outreach, interviews, follow up surveys, and coding already completed, it appears clear that gentrification and the decreasing affordability associated with it, have tangibly affected low income renters' relationships with their landlord, housing and neighborhood conditions, occupational stability, need for accessible relief or government aid programs, ability to access these programs, affect toward political institutions and civic engagement. Additionally, this research adopts a clear racially conscious lens — specifically conducting community outreach and interviewing in language accessible ways, while recognizing the disparity in experiences across communities of color. These perspectives and knowledge systems are entirely sourced from those most impacted populations, thus allowing these stories and experiences to be the driving force behind any future publication, policy recommendation, or teach-in with community organizations that the Lab chooses to

pursue. While the quantitative work conducted by the Bay Area Displacement project team illustrates the movement of low income populations across different census tracts, neighborhoods, and living arrangements as a result of larger socioeconomic forces, this qualitative work centering the experiences of these populations presents an opportunity for both the Lab and the City of Oakland to thoroughly understand the everyday ramifications of seemingly massive scale forces such as gentrification. By adopting a community-oriented approach, this research project allows for more thorough analysis of how residents experience gentrification as both the threat of and occurrence of displacement, as well as the racial disparities ingrained within these systems and how Oakland residents respond to them. In the near future, I hope that this analysis can be fleshed out further and disseminated such that preexisting community-based perceptions of gentrification as a driver of not just displacement, but residential instability can be broadly accepted as truth, thus facilitating greater agency for low income renters of color in Oakland to drive future solutions.

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