



THOSE WHO STAYED

The Impact of Gentrification on Longstanding Residents of East Austin

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East Austin, once home to the largest concentrations of African-American and Latino residents of the city, has today become synonymous with the term gentrification. Public discussion on gentrification has tended to focus on displacement and the declining numbers of longstanding residents of color. Less attention has been paid to those who stayed. What is the impact of gentrification on longstanding East Austin residents who have not moved out?

I. Executive Summary

Residents throughout all of Austin are being priced-out and displaced from neighborhoods in which they have lived for decades. Gentrification, however, has been particularly pronounced in the residential area just east of the downtown business district, where home sales, renovations, demolitions and new constructions have occurred at unparalleled rates. There is a stark race and class dimension to these rapid changes on the eastside: The area was once home to the city's largest concentrations of lower-to-moderate income African-American and Mexican-American neighborhoods. Since 2000, some of those neighborhoods have seen a quadrupling of higher-income white residents. Meanwhile, the number of residents of color has dropped considerably. Displacement is

the defining feature of gentrification and, as such, East Austin is the focal point for social, cultural, and economic debates over the demographic future of the entire city. Many see the diminishing number of Black and Latino residents on the eastside as a sign of things to come for other Austin neighborhoods, where longstanding residents of all races are feeling increasingly priced out and compelled to move out of their homes.

Lost in the public debate are the perspectives of long-term residents who remain in gentrified neighborhoods, those who did not move out nor sell their properties despite coming under pressure to do so. In East Austin, these are mostly older, retired Black and Latino residents who live in the same homes in which they were raised and in which they raised their own

children. Some of them have lived in East Austin their entire lives, the start of their residency dating back to the mid-1900s, when the racial rule of Jim Crow prevailed throughout the city. One might assume that these residents have stayed because they benefit from the ostensible “upside” to gentrification: higher property values, less crime, new business development, and infrastructural improvements.

The findings presented in this report tell a different story. The vast majority of longstanding residents surveyed hold a negative view of the changes taking place around them. They do not patron new businesses in the neighborhood and their access to essential amenities and facilities has not improved since the onset of gentrification. Many pay higher property taxes without experiencing an improvement in their overall quality of life.

They are also dismayed by what they consider a lost sense of community. Their new neighbors appear disinterested in building relationships with them and among the newcomers are very few families with children. Indeed, the drastic reduction in the number of children is perhaps the most profound and troubling marker of gentrification: the neighborhood we surveyed lost half of its child population between 2000 and 2010. Even as the neighborhood’s general population began to grow again between 2010 and 2015, its proportion of children remained small. This rapid displacement of young people, and its long-term impact on neighborhood and the city, merits further attention.

Nevertheless, these longtime residents remain because they feel a deep sense of connection—a historical rootedness—to their communities. They affirm a responsibility to stay in East Austin and they do so despite gentrification, not

because of it.

II. Background

Austin was the only fast-growing major city in the United States to see an absolute numerical decline in its Black population between 2000 and 2010, according to a 2014 study published by the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis (IUPRA). During this same decade, African Americans were also the only racial group in Austin to experience a decline in numbers, while all other racial groups grew in size and the general Austin population grew by 20.4 percent.¹

In 2016, IUPRA published a follow-up study which revealed that the primary factor driving African-American out-migration from Austin was the rising cost of housing within the city limits, specifically within the eastern part of the urban core undergoing rapid gentrification. After moving out of their East Austin neighborhoods, many decided to relocate to areas outside of the city itself where the cost of housing was considerably cheaper; this trend accounts for Austin’s net loss of African Americans between 2000 and 2010.²

Gentrification-driven displacements, although not unique to East Austin or to African Americans, had a disproportionate impact on historically Black neighborhoods, owing to the city’s history of racial segregation. In 1928, in an effort to reinforce the residential segregation of Austin’s Black population, city officials authorized, promulgated, and implemented a “Negro District” in East Austin. To compel African Americans to move there, they placed the only public schools that Black residents could attend within this area. They also refused to run utilities (water lines and meters) in established Black communities of central and

¹ Tang and Ren, “Outlier: The Case of Austin’s Declining African-American Population,” 2.

² Tang and Falola, “Those Who Left”

south Austin, insisting that they would do so for this population only within the Negro District. By the mid-to-late 1930s, approximately 80 percent of the city's Black population was compelled to relocate to the eastside. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, the area would continue to be home to the largest concentration of African Americans in Austin.

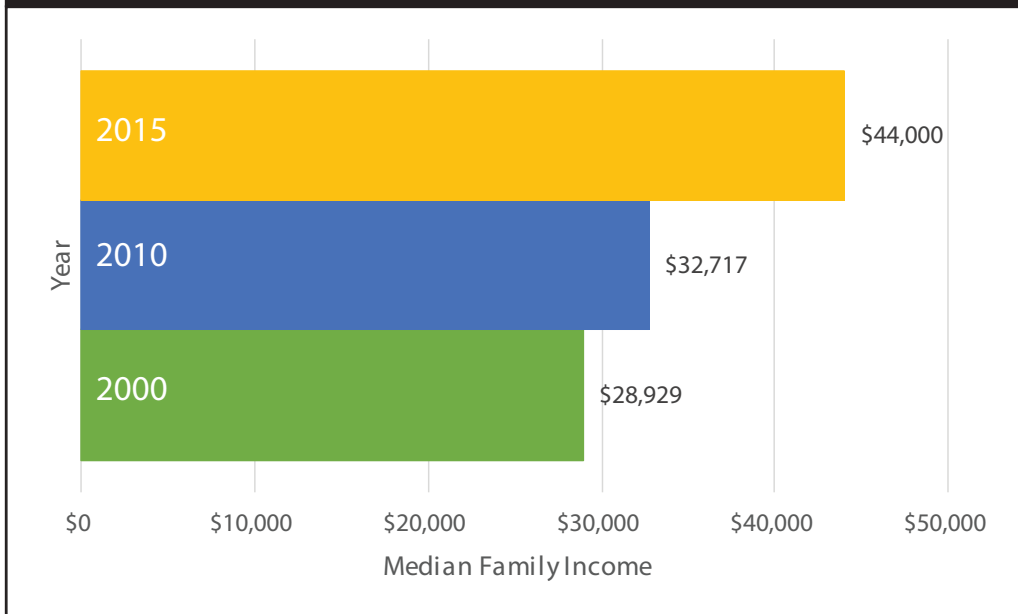
Following urban renewal efforts and post-civil rights era divestments, Black neighborhoods on the eastside became prime targets of gentrification during the late-1990s. As land in the Negro District became coveted by new business owners, developers, and high-income earners, African Americans who were previously so singularly confined to East Austin became singularly displaced by gentrification. If Black communities had been allowed to flourish in other parts of Austin, then perhaps African Americans would not have been the only racial group in the city to see a net population loss during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In the heart of the erstwhile Negro District, and within the 78702 zip code, is a neighborhood identified by the U.S. Census Bureau as census tract 9.01, block group 1. The changes that have occurred here since 2000 are consistent with the gentrification phenomenon:

Gentrification Trends

- Between 2000 and 2010, this neighborhood's Black population decreased by 66 percent, its Latino population decreased by 33 percent, and its white population increased by 442 percent.
- In the same period, the neighborhood's total population decreased from 1,003 to 792 before climbing back to 961 in 2015. Contrary to popular belief, gentrification does not bring about greater density nor population increases to neighborhoods previously considered undesirable and underpopulated. In its initial phases, gentrification displaces longstanding residents, particularly lower-to-moderate income families with young children, leading to overall population decline.
- The most significant population decline in the neighborhood occurred among children under the age of 17 years. In 2000, these children represented 30 percent of the neighborhood. By 2010, they made up only 12 percent. Even as the general population then began to rise as higher income residents moved in, the share of children in the neighborhood remained far lower than it was prior to 2000. Between 2010 and 2015, the neighborhood saw a net gain of only 6 individual children.
- Finally, the Median Family Income (MFI) in the neighborhood increased significantly between 2000 and 2015: 2000 = \$28,929; 2010 = \$32,717; 2015 = \$44,000.

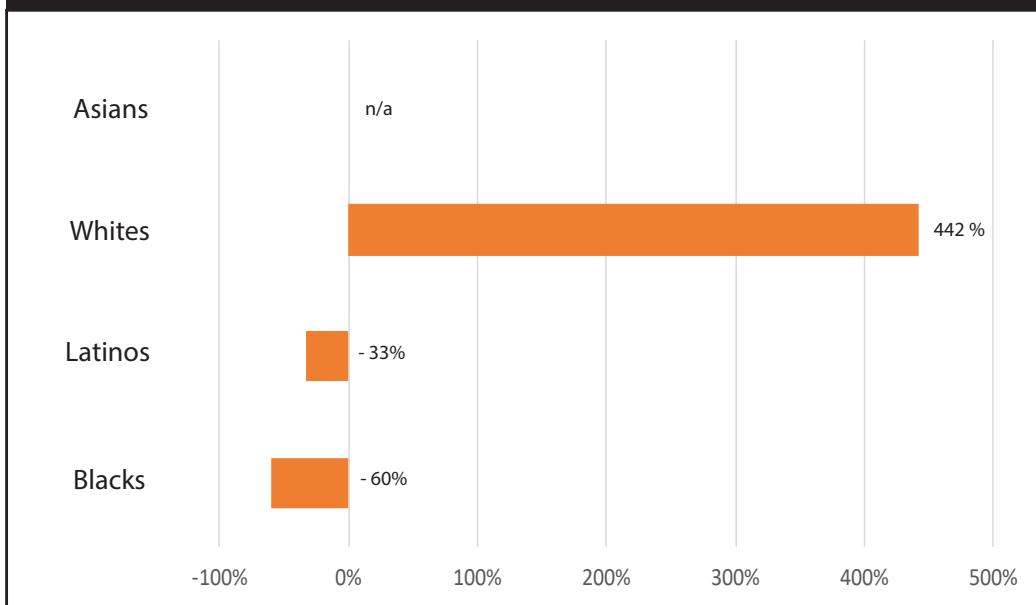
Increase in Median Family Income



** 2000 and 2015 data based on U.S. Census Data for Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1*

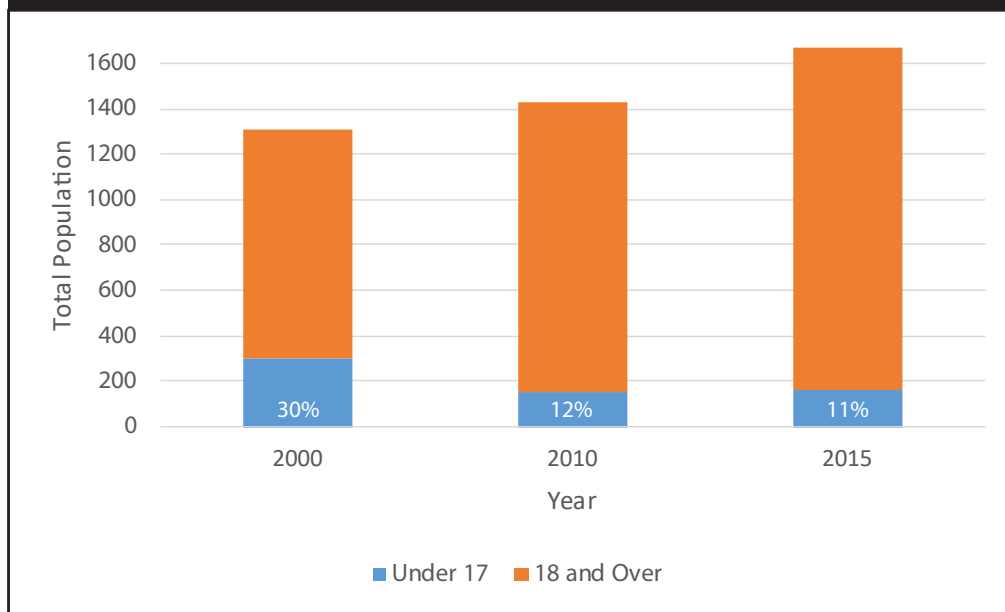
** 2010 data based on American Community Survey Data for Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1*

Population Change by Race



** Data based on U.S. Census Data for Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1*

Population Change Among Those 17 years and Under



** 2000 and 2015 data based on U.S. Census Data for Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1
 * 2010 data based on American Community Survey Data for Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1*

III. Methodology in Surveying Those Who Stayed

Surveys were conducted with 63 heads of household in Census tract 9.01, block group 1, and two contiguous blocks north of the block group. The majority of the surveys were conducted between February and May of 2015. Additional surveys and follow-ups to the original batch were also conducted in January 2017.

Surveyors knocked on the doors of every occupied housing unit within the block group. To be eligible for the survey, respondents had to have lived at the same address since 1999 (the year that data for the 2000 Census was collected). This was the study's sole criteria.

Having thoroughly canvassed the block group, eliminating ineligible households in the process, the survey team was able to interview 46 heads of household who fit the criteria. For validation, the team interviewed an additional 17 eligible people in the immediate area north of the block group, for a total respondent number of 63. To contextualize this number, and to confirm it against the door-to-door canvassing, we examined the public land records of all 341 residential housing units in the block group. We found that only 78 homes (or 23 percent of all residential units) showed no recorded deed changes since 1999.

Seventy-eight was our proxy indicator for the total number of eligible homes (i.e., those that have presumably maintained the same, or familial, ownership since 1999).³ We were able

³ The provenance of the data is Travis County Property Tax records and Travis County Clerk Public Records. Deed transfers to family members (e.g., inheritances, family trust transfers) were included as parts of the eligible 78 homes.

to survey a majority of that number.⁴

Who was surveyed?
A demographic overview

Race:
Black: 71 percent
Latino: 21 percent
White: 5 percent
Other: 3 percent

Gender:
Men: 55 percent
Women: 45 percent

Age:
Range: 19 - 109 years⁵
Average: 56 years

Retired/Receiving disability, and on fixed income: 38 percent

Average residency: 38 years

Multigenerational householders (second-to-fourth generation): 55 percent

What did we ask respondents?

Respondents were asked to grade on a scale of 1 to 4 the following variables: access to key neighborhood amenities; their relationship to neighbors, police, and local businesses; and the portion of their income spent on mortgage payments (or rent) and property taxes.

Respondents were asked to grade each data item

in two time periods: the past (1999 and earlier) and the present. We compared the past versus present grade given to each item in order to determine if respondents experienced: a) change for the better; b) some change for the better; c) no change; d) some change for the worse; or e) change for the worse.⁶

The survey also contained a qualitative section in which individuals were asked to provide a general assessment of the changes underway in their neighborhood.

IV. Key Findings

A 74 % NEGATIVE PERCEPTION OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

When asked to provide an overall assessment of the changes in their neighborhood, 74 percent of residents rated the changes negatively. The remaining 26 percent rated them positively.

Respondents further qualified their overall perception by citing specific changes that they considered either negative, neutral, or positive. Those specific items broke down as follows:

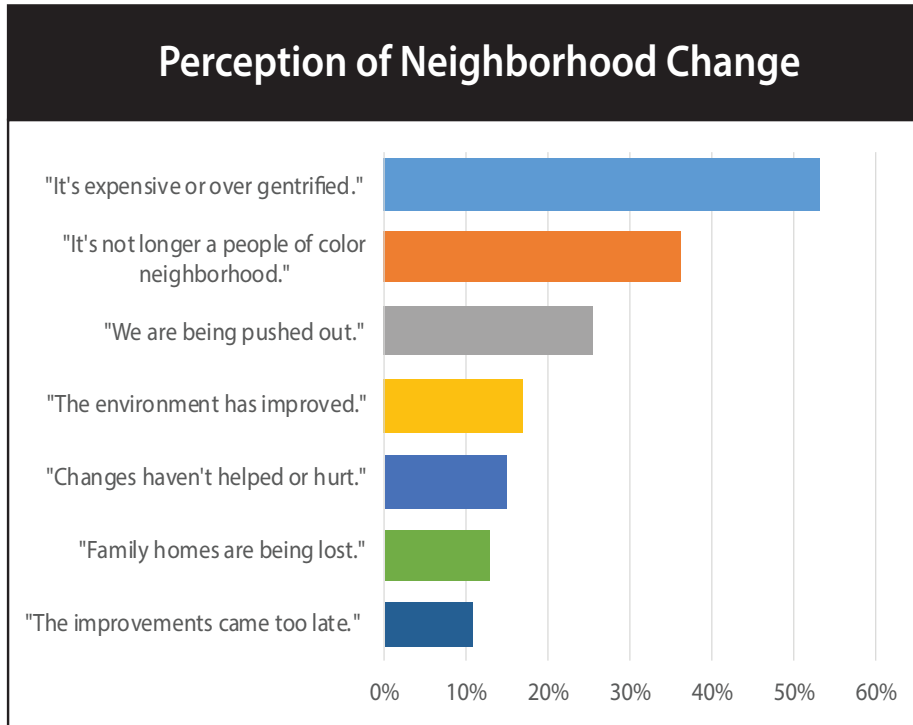
Key Perceptions of Neighborhood Change

- It's expensive and over-gentrified : 53.2%**
- It's no longer a people of color neighborhood : 36.2%**
- We are being pushed out : 25.5%**
- The environment has improved : 17.0%**
- Changes haven't helped or hurt : 14.9%**
- Family homes are being lost : 12.8%**
- The improvements came too late : 10.6%**

⁴ Using this proxy indicator, our 46 respondents represented 59% of the total number of eligible homes. When the 5 respondents who were renters rather than owners were subtracted, that percentage dropped to 52%.

⁵ One of our respondents was Richard A. Overton who, at 111 years old, is the oldest living US war veteran. We interviewed him in 2015 when Overton was 109 years old.

⁶ There was "no change" if 0 - 10 percent of all respondents graded a particular variable differently between present and past. There was "some change", for the better or worse, if the percentage difference was between 11 and 15 percent. There was "change" if the percentage difference was 16 percent or more.



** 63 Households Surveyed
in Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1*

OVER 90 % PERCEIVE PROPERTY TAXES AS TOO HIGH

The overwhelming majority of respondents, including those who rated neighborhood changes positively, pointed to rising property taxes as a big concern. Indeed, 93 percent of all those interviewed stated that their property taxes were too high relative to what they paid in the past (1999 and prior). Only 7 percent said that they paid relatively little in property taxes today.

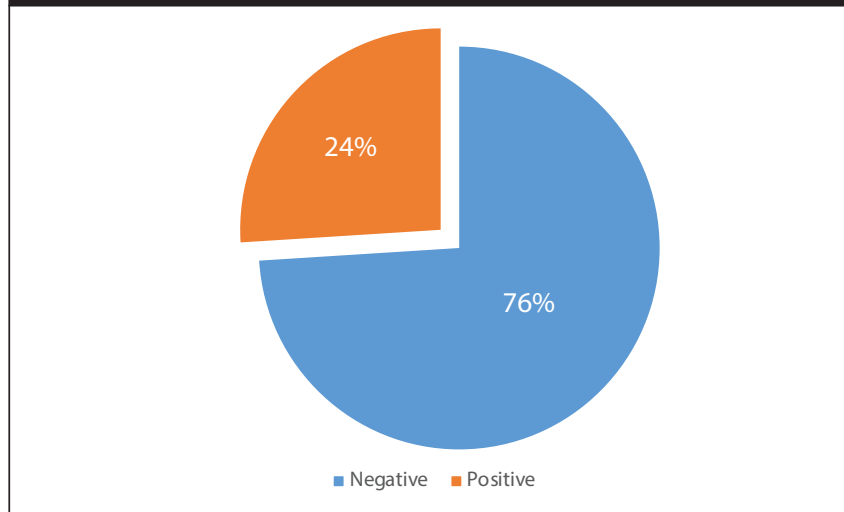
Rising property taxes are particularly burdensome on those who have paid off their mortgages or who are close to doing so. Indeed, 76 percent said that they currently pay “none or a little” on their mortgages. But, having paid off their debts, they now feel new economic pressures brought on by fast-rising property taxes. This is particularly burdensome to the

38 percent of respondents who are on a fixed income because they are either retired or unable to work.

A LOST SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Longstanding residents’ negative perceptions about gentrification were not based in nativism. Rather, they were based in the belief that their neighborhood had lost its “sense of community.” They claimed that they do not know who their new neighbors are, as many newcomers appear disinterested in building relationships with them. Some said they now feel invisible in their own neighborhood. When asked to evaluate their past and present relationships to neighbors, more respondents gave a better grade to the past than they did to the present.

Residents Response to Neighborhood Change



* Data based on U.S. Census Data for Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1

On their new neighbors:

“Next door, I’ve had eight neighbors in the past ten years.” – African-American female, 50

“Now, most of the neighbors are white and the they don’t socialize. And that’s the big difference.” – African-American female, 61

“I don’t know who they are, what they do. I know a few, but everybody is a total stranger.”
– Latino male, 64

ON THE ABSENCE OF CHILDREN

To highlight this sense of lost community, some residents pointed to the fact that the neighborhood was no longer populated with children. That observation is corroborated by census data:

In 2000, there were 390 residents under the age of 17 years old in the block group, comprising 30 percent of the population. By 2010, that number had dropped to 153, or 12 percent. Between

2010 and 2015, as the general population grew by 233 people, from 728 to 961, it only gained six new children. The displacement and absence of children is another defining characteristic of gentrification.

AND THE PREVALENCE OF DOGS

According to longstanding residents, children once brought vibrancy and visibility to their neighborhood; neighbors knew each other through their children, who played with one another on the streets and in playgrounds. These long-term residents now feel invisible to their new neighbors, who pass them by as they walk their dogs.

As one longtime resident remarked: “There are now more dogs in the neighborhood than children.” This observation may actually prove true numerically. Several other respondents made similar comments about how the prevalence of dogs represented to them the insults and indignities they experience under gentrification. In their view, the newcomers, most of whom are white, gave more attention to

their dogs than to the Black and Latino residents who had lived in the neighborhood for decades.

On children and dogs:

“Most people are white. They spend the whole day walking the dogs. They don’t have kids... they have dogs.”

– African-American female, 87

“A lot of people who move here have no kids, so a lot of elementary schools talking about tearing them down. Then going to build them up for the people who can afford it. When I was growing up there used to be a lot of kids. Now a lot more dogs and cats around.”

– African-American male, 55

“[There are] no kids in the neighborhood... They need to put children back in neighborhood.” – African American female, 61

prospective buyers often offer far less than what the property is currently worth on the market. According to some respondents, people making these offers believe that longstanding residents are desperate to sell and/or ignorant about land values. Some individuals stated that they feel harassed by the constant inquiries. It is worth noting that while conducting one of these surveys, our team was interrupted by a real estate agent who asked if the owner of the property was interested in selling it.

PRESSURE TO SELL THEIR HOMES

Seventy-one percent of respondents said that they are routinely asked by prospective buyers – including investors, developers, real estate agents, and potential homeowners – to sell their homes. Interviewees described these inquiries as not only aggressive, but insulting, because

What respondents had to say about their access to amenities and public facilities		
Change for the Better	Little to No Change	Change for the Worse
Supermarkets	Swimming Pools	Public Schools
Trails	Parks	Neighbors
Police	Restaurants	Neighborhood Businesses
	Health Clinics	

* 63 Households Surveyed in Census Tract 9.01, Block Group 1

On being harassed to sell:

“All the time. Letters in the mail, notes on my door.” – African-American male, 70

“Yes, three to four times a week. [Last] offer was \$200K with a big lot, \$90K with a smaller lot. You get crumbs, you get robbed.”
– African-American male, 55

“They don’t want to offer you what it’s worth. They think we’re not educated so they don’t offer us nothing.”
– African-American female, age 61

“Once or twice a week they stick ’em on the door. I don’t even think about it... I just throw the letter away.”
– African-American female, age 88

“Everyday. Real estate companies trying to get over you... They ain’t getting it.”
– African-American female, 64

improvement is likely due to the changes made to the trails on the east side of Town Lake.⁷

ACCESS TO QUALITY RESTAURANTS

Respondents claimed to experience no change for the better in their access to quality restaurants. This was surprising to us, considering the emergence of several new restaurants within walking distance of the block group. When asked whether or not they patron those new eateries, a remarkable 93 percent said that they did not. According to these longstanding residents, those new businesses did not cater to their tastes and preferences, and some claimed that the new establishments were specifically unwelcoming to them.

ACCESS TO SWIMMING POOLS, PARKS, AND TRAILS

Respondents described experiencing no change in their access to swimming pools, parks, and local health clinics. These are important neighborhood amenities and those who pay relatively high property taxes expect good access to them. However, as property values and taxes rose sharply in this block group, longstanding residents claimed that they saw no improvement in these amenities nor in their access to them. The one exception was access to good trails. Most respondents described the trails (as distinct from public parks) as better today than they were in the past. This

⁷ In 2014 the City of Austin added a new boardwalk to the hike and bike trail of Lady Bird Lake, much of which spans the eastside of the lake. We might attribute the higher grades respondent gave to their present access to this new development. <http://kxan.com/2014/06/06/boardwalk-set-to-open-saturday/>

On the new restaurants in the area:

“I just don’t go.” – African-American male, 61

“New restaurants, they don’t cater to us.”
– Latino male, 55

“Ehh, [they’re] good but a little too fancy for me. [It costs] \$40 at that place!
– Latino male, 41

“I went in [to a new restaurant] and almost died... they got dim lights, these numbers on the table, all these bottles of wine, fifteen, eighteen dollars... this is not the store to be in. They waiting to be served, wine, all these dim lights, this ain’t the place to be.”
– African-American female, 50

“[It’s] not something I grew up with. I eat at [pre-gentrification establishments] Galloway’s on twelfth [street], Sam’s BBQ, the Mexican Restaurant on seventh.”
– African-American male, 29

“Only ones I go to is [pre-gentrification establishments] Hoover’s and another one on seventh street, Angie’s.”
– African-American male, 70

“No, the food aint like it used to be. Them white folk can’t cook noway.”
– African-American male, 64

ACCESS TO SUPERMARKETS

Respondents experienced some change for the better in their access to supermarkets. They attributed this to the establishment of an HEB grocery store (a statewide supermarket chain) on nearby 7th Street. The grocery store was renovated within the past decade, prior to renovation many residents felt it had underserved them with inferior goods.

ACCESS TO GOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Those we spoke to experienced some change for the worse in their access to quality public schools. Most claimed that their access to quality public schooling was better in the past than it was for them in the present. However, some qualified their remarks by stating that they no longer had children (or grandchildren) in neighborhood public schools. They based their evaluations on their perceptions that today’s neighborhood schools were under-enrolled and seemingly under-resourced, owing to the general absence of children in the neighborhood.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICE

Interviewees experienced a change for the better in their relationship to the police. Some attributed this positive change to the fact that their past relations with the police had been excessively strained. The majority of respondents were middle-aged and elderly and most claimed that they no longer had frequent interactions with the local police today.

RELATIONSHIP TO LOCAL BUSINESSES

Respondents experienced a change for the worse in their relationships with local businesses. Most said that they had “no relationship” with existing businesses in the neighborhood, especially the new ones. This stood in contrast to their past positive relationships with neighborhood storeowners who were now no longer in businesses.

On Why They Stay:

“Believe me, this is ancestral land. Blacks in Austin, we were raised in East Austin. If we leave Austin, we can’t trace our family.” – African-American female, 42

“[My] home since 1942 and [I’m] not going away ’til I die.” – African-American female, 88

“[This] was my husband’s grandmother’s house. Want to keep it in the family for children. Not giving this up to nobody.” – African-American female, 64

“We’re not choosing to sell it because we know the historical value of the land.”
– African-American female, 41

“Because I like Austin. I like it right here. I was born here. If I won the lottery, I’d still be right here. I gotta be 6 feet under to move. I ain’t leaving here. They forcing people out, forcing Black people out. I love it right here. Right here! – African- American male, 62

V. CONCLUSION: WHY DO THEY STAY?

Why do a small number of longstanding residents continue to stay in this gentrified neighborhood despite being economically burdened by higher property taxes and feeling a diminished sense of community? According to most respondents, there is no apparent upside to gentrification that offsets its negative aspects or significantly increases their quality of life. Most residents experienced no change in their access to key amenities and public facilities, and the few positive changes they noted are not significant enough to explain their desire to stay, especially when one considers the economic incentives for selling their homes in a booming Austin market. Their decision to stay does not align with what some might deem predictable or “rational” economic behavior. Their investments in the neighborhood lie elsewhere.

It is significant that the respondents’ average

number of years of residency was 38 and that the majority of them are second-to-fourth generation householders. This suggests that by 2015, those who remained had a legacy of family homeownership. Most were middle-age residents who had grown up in the neighborhood and elderly residents who had settled to the neighborhood as young adults. In other words, after more than a decade since the advent of gentrification, those who stayed were the ones who had the deepest histories in the community.

They had already lived there through several social eras: segregation, civil rights, desegregation, urban renewal, the drug epidemics of the 1980s and 1990s, and the rezoning and re-development of downtown. With each new turn, they grew more resilient and their desire to stay in the community took firmer root. Indeed, this ineluctable sense of rootedness in the community came across clearly in their responses to the open-ended survey question, “Why do you stay?”

These answers suggest that staying is a matter of resistance. Longstanding residents are asserting their right to stay, or what some scholars call the “right to the city.”⁸ They refuse to succumb to the pressures of those who simply want them to disappear, to be erased from the new Austin urban terrain. They are cognizant that their old neighbors who moved out were compelled to do so, and that many of them would have stayed if the cost of housing had not skyrocketed.⁹

One respondent offered this sobering assessment of what is at stake for her in staying: “I know once I leave, I can’t come back.” In this, she is not only referring to her individual situation, but to that of the broader African-American and Latino communities of East Austin. She realizes that if she and the few others who remain decided to leave, then their communities’ presence may be gone forever. She bears the responsibility of holding out for as long as she can.

8 In our 2016 survey of African American residents who moved out of the city, nearly half of all respondents said that they felt pushed out of Austin, owing to the high cost of housing. So too, nearly half said that they would return to live in the city if things were more affordable. Their desire to return was based in the social, communal and historical ties they feel to their old neighborhoods. See Tang and Falola, “Those Who Left,” 9.

9 Tang and Falola, “Those Who Left”

References

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