What is Displacement and How Should We Measure It?

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Neighborhood revitalization is a process by which a formerly disinvested and distressed neighborhood begins to attract private investment, often catalyzed by deliberate public investment in a public or private asset. **Gentrification** occurs when that revitalization process results in neighborhood change by which residents of a dominant race or class move into an area that has been historically inhabited by a marginalized race or class.[2] The City of Atlanta has launched the *Achieving Fairness of Place* plan, a neighborhood revitalization effort, which aims to transform distressed neighborhoods into healthy and inclusive ones.[3] The goal of this effort is to promote the development of thriving, mixed-income neighborhoods while at the same time ensuring these neighborhoods remain accessible and welcoming to low-income residents of color.

While revitalization can attract new business and expose residents to more social and economic opportunities, it can also result in the displacement of residents. **Displacement** is characterized by its *involuntary* nature- it is the relocation of residents from a home or neighborhood where residents would otherwise have remained if not for socioeconomic and environmental pressures making it unfeasible or undesirable.[4] The challenge for policymakers is to prevent displacement as the Achieving Fairness of Place plan is implemented, as displacement can destabilize social networks, children's education, and employment; it also prevents legacy residents from accessing the new economic, health, and environmental benefits that accompany revitalization.[5] Displacement can happen in three ways:[6]

- *Direct displacement:* when residents are forced to move because their home is no longer affordable, no longer livable, or is being renovated
- *Exclusion:* when housing choices for low-income residents are limited

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[2] Cohen, Mychal, and Kathryn LS Pettit. "Guide to measuring neighborhood change to understand and prevent displacement." *Washington, DC: National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP). https://www. urban. org/research/publication/guide-measuring-neighborhoodchange-understand-and-prevent-displacement* (2019).

[3] Center for Urban Research. "The Atlanta Case." *https://urbanresearch.iac.gatech.edu/neighborhood-flourishing/atlanta-case*. 2025.

[4] Ryan Cohen, "Shelter-in-Place: Reducing Displacement and Increasing Inclusion in Gentrifying Neighborhoods," *Harvard Law and Policy Review* 13 (2018): 273–326, available at https://harvardlpr.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/02/20180813-1_Cohen.pdf.

[5] Dorazio, Justin. "Localized anti-displacement policies." *Center for American Progress.* (2022).

[6] Easton, Sue, et al. "Measuring and mapping displacement: The problem of quantification in the battle against gentrification." *Urban studies* 57.2 (2020): 286-306.

- *Cultural displacement*: when legacy residents move because the neighborhood has changed in a manner such that they no longer feel a sense of belonging

To take strategic decisions to prevent displacement, the city of Atlanta needs to be able to define and measure it. There are thus three policy questions that need to be addressed:

1. *How should the City measure and track **direct displacement** in neighborhoods?*

Direct displacement is caused by increases in rent, increases in property tax, the renovation or closing of housing complexes, and the deterioration of housing to the point of unlivability. The City of Atlanta has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to mitigate direct displacement, including property tax relief, homestead exemption, legal aid for tenants, and the Safe and Secure Housing Initiative which strengthens the City's code enforcement capacity, in part to prevent the closing of housing complexes. The city is concurrently investing in homeownership assistance as well as home rehabilitation support, senior will support, and heirs property title clearance assistance to stabilize residents and decrease their vulnerability to predatory investors. The underlying hypothesis is that programs which ease financial pressure allow households to accommodate the price increases that accompany revitalization. Research suggests that improving conditions in distressed neighborhoods motivates residents to remain in their current neighborhood by providing higher quality housing stock and improving the quality of life in that neighborhood.[7] Thus, programs that provide financial support can help residents stay put.

[7] Ellen, I. G., & O'Regan, K. M. (2011) "How Low Income Neighborhoods Change: Entry, Exit, And Enhancement." Regional Science and Urban Economics, 41(2), 89-97.

Table 1: Metrics to Measure and Track the City of Atlanta's Anti-Displacement Strategy

Goal	Activity	Output	Short-term Outcomes (1-5 years)	Long-term Outcomes (5-20 years)
Prevent direct displacement	<u>Homeowners</u> ○ Homeowner Rehab ○ Property tax relief ○ Heirs property title clearance ○ Senior Wills Initiative ○ Homestead exemption <u>Tenants</u> ○ Homebuyer assistance ○ Safe and Secure Housing Initiative ○ Legal aid	○ % of eligible households supported through property tax relief, homeowner rehab, homestead exemptions, heirs properties title clearance, senior wills initiative, legal aid, and homebuyer assistance ○ Reduction in % of multi-family units with code violations	○ Increase in homeownership rate ○ Increase in average length of stay in neighborhood ○ Decrease in percentage of residents reporting they plan to move because of cost burden ○ Low levels of direct displacement (within 1 standard deviation of city average)	○ Increased residential retention ○ Decreased mobility rates
Prevent Exclusion	○ Development of mixed-income housing ○ Blight eradication	○ # of housing units produced or activated by affordability tiers and by tenure	○ Decrease in vacant housing ○ Increase in population of neighborhood ○ Increase in the % of units that are affordable to low-income households	○ Permanent floor of accessibility
Prevent cultural displacement	○ Establish neighborhood working groups (NWG), neighborhood partner organizations (NPO), neighborhood associations (NA)	○ # of NPOs, NWGs, NAs functioning and sustainable ○ Attendance at NA & NWG meetings, by length of stay in neighborhood	○ Strengthened mobility-enhancing networks ○ Strengthened neighborhood connectivity ○ Active leadership in the neighborhood ○ Decrease in percentage of residents reporting dissatisfaction in the trajectory of the neighborhood, by length of stay in neighborhood	○ Strong collective efficacy and sustained civic stewardship ○ Preserved neighborhood cultural identity

*Note- the data used to capture these metrics includes programmatic data, population data (e.g. Census, ACS), and survey data (e.g. Flourishing Neighborhood Index).

How can we tell if these strategies are effective? This first row of Table 1 provides one approach. We can track the *output* of the City's efforts to ensure that these programs are being utilized- that homeowners and renters are benefitting. In the short-term, we should see four *outcomes*: an increase in the homeownership rate, an increase in the average length of stay in the neighborhood, a decrease in the percentage of residents reporting they plan to move due to cost or livability, and whether the change in households without a college degree by race is within one standard deviation of the city average for the same timeframe.[8] Note that we use "households with a college degree" as a proxy for low-income because the former is a more reliable measure than income, which is more variable. This final measure helps us identify rapid changes in the population relative to what is happening citywide, which helps distinguish involuntary displacements due to revitalization from the standard churn that happens in all

[8] Acharya, Rohit, and Rhett Morris. "Reducing poverty without community displacement: Indicators of inclusive prosperity in US neighborhoods." (2022).

distressed neighborhoods. Distressed neighborhoods are characterized by high mobility rates – generally 20-30% annually - which means that large numbers of residents are leaving these neighborhoods even in the absence of any revitalization efforts.[9] Thus, a relative measure of direct displacement isolates the moves that are happening involuntarily due to displacement from those that are happening *voluntarily,* also known as **residential mobility.**[10] In the long-term, the City should see an increase in the percentage of residents that stay in the neighborhood (residential retention) and a decrease in the mobility rate as the neighborhood stabilizes.

2. *How should the City measure and track **exclusion**?*

A mixed-income neighborhood should have a housing stock that is available to residents of all incomes. Housing affordability is generally determined by three factors. The first is the character of the housing itself: its age, size, quality, and condition. The second is housing supply: the more housing available in a given market, the lower the average price. The third is the degree of public subsidy: public housing or housing funded by low-income tax credits can create a floor of affordability within a housing market that is otherwise subject to market pricing pressures.

The City of Atlanta has committed to the production of 20,000 affordable housing units over the course of eight years.[11] This includes building new properties as well as activating properties through, for example, blight remediation. This also includes inclusionary zoning programs.[12] In the short-term, the City's efforts should result in three *outcomes* as listed in Table 1: a decrease in vacant housing, an increase in the population of the neighborhood, and an increase in the number of units that are affordable to low-income households, both rentals and homes for purchase. In the long-term, the total number of affordable housing units produces a floor of affordability in the neighborhood, preserving a percentage of the neighborhood for low-income populations. Outstanding questions include how large a floor of accessibility should a neighborhood maintain? What does a successful mixed-income neighborhood look like? Are there specific proportions of affordability that are desirable? Ideally, residents of the neighborhood should provide answers to these questions.

3. *How should the City measure and track **cultural displacement**?*

Neighborhoods tend to evolve gradually over time. The mix of residents and the businesses that serve those residents is rarely static. Neighborhoods that are revitalizing often experience dramatic changes in the "look and feel" of the place. These changes are often introduced when new arrivals, who are

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[9] Desmond, Matthew, and Kristin L. Perkins. "Housing and household instability." *Urban Affairs Review* 52.3 (2016): 421-436.
[10] Cohen, Mychal, and Kathryn LS Pettit. "Guide to measuring neighborhood change to understand and prevent displacement." *Washington, DC: National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP). https://www. urban. org/research/publication/guide-measuring-neighborhoodchange-understand-and-prevent-displacement* (2019).
[11] City of Atlanta. "A City of Opportunity for All." https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/mayor-s-office/moving-atlanta-forward-agenda/a-city-of-opportunity-for-all
[12] "Housing Compliance." City of Atlanta. https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/departments/city-planning/housing/housing-compliance. Accessed Sep 9, 2025.

wealthier and able to dedicate time to neighborhood affairs, become increasingly influential in neighborhood associations. Some of these changes may be embraced by legacy residents, while others may be disconcerting.

The policy question is how can neighborhoods protect their "essence": the attributes that give the neighborhood its essential quality. Investing in efforts that prevent direct displacement and exclusion maintains the demographics of a neighborhood, preventing cultural displacement. The City has also established and strengthened civic infrastructure to organize and empower residents in distressed neighborhoods. It has invested in:

- *Neighborhood Partner Organizations:* non-profit organizations focused on revitalizing neighborhoods by coordinating resources, aligning stakeholders, and implementing a holistic strategy for community transformation[13]
- *Neighborhood Working Groups:* a team comprised of neighborhood leaders, neighborhood partner organization members, and a Program Manager from the Department of City Planning which provides dedicated capacity to steward major public initiatives in the neighborhood
- *Neighborhood Associations:* a resident organization which serves as the key constituent element of Neighborhood Planning Units, which have a statutory role in approving development plans, zoning changes, and major public infrastructure projects

The underlying hypothesis is that while change is inevitable, empowering legacy owners to steward the revitalization process protects the essence and identity of the neighborhood and mitigates cultural displacement. In the short-term, if these groups are functioning and sustainable, the City should see strengthened social networks, an increase in the sense of belonging, active leadership in the neighborhood, and a decrease in the percentage of residents reporting dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the neighborhood. In the long-term, the City should see strengthened collective efficacy, defined as a group's shared belief in its ability to succeed at a task.[14] The City should also see strengthened civic leadership and institutions as well as the preservation of neighborhood culture and history.

[13] https://purposebuiltcommunities.org/

[14] Zaccaro, Stephen J., et al. "Collective efficacy." *Self-efficacy, adaptation, and adjustment: Theory, research, and application* (1995): 305-328.