
Gentrification and affordable housing in Johannesburg, South Africa: Examining displacement, accessibility and policy responses

Received (in revised form): 17th August, 2023

Mzuchumile Makalima

PhD Candidate in Economics and Regional Sciences, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Hungary

Mzuchumile Makalima has a BSc degree in construction studies and a BSc Honours degree in quantity surveying from the University of Witwatersrand. He also holds an MSc in business development from the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences where he is currently pursuing a PhD in economics and regional sciences.

Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Páter Karoly ut, 1, 2100, Gödöllő, Hungary
E-mail: Emzeemakalima@gmail.com

Abstract This study explores the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg, South Africa through a review of the relevant literature. As the city undergoes rapid urbanisation and economic growth, certain effects of gentrification have become a prominent concern. The findings shed light on the processes of displacement experienced by low-income residents in gentrifying neighbourhoods, as well as the changing socio-economic landscape and altered access to essential services. The study also examines the role of policy responses in addressing the challenges posed by gentrification and promoting the preservation and creation of affordable housing options. By conducting this analysis, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between gentrification and affordable housing in Johannesburg. The findings have implications for urban planning and policy making, informing the development of strategies that prioritise inclusive and equitable urban development, ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are shared by all residents, while safeguarding the availability and affordability of housing for vulnerable populations.

Keywords: *gentrification, affordable housing, Johannesburg, displacement, inclusive urban development*

DOI: 10.69554/JYHV2314

INTRODUCTION

Gentrification, a process characterised by the influx of wealthier residents and subsequent transformation of neighbourhoods, has become a significant phenomenon in urban areas worldwide. In Johannesburg, South Africa, a city with a history of spatial segregation and rapid urbanisation, gentrification

has emerged as a critical issue affecting affordable housing.¹ The consequences of gentrification are particularly pronounced for low-income residents, who often face displacement and limited access to essential services and affordable housing options.²

Johannesburg's history of spatial segregation is rooted in the apartheid

era, during which the city was divided into racially segregated areas, resulting in spatial inequality and the marginalisation of certain communities.³ Since the dismantling of apartheid in the 1990s, Johannesburg has experienced significant urbanisation and economic growth, attracting investment and leading to shifts in the city's social and physical landscape.⁴ As a result, areas that were historically affordable and predominantly inhabited by low-income residents have witnessed increasing property values and rising demand from wealthier individuals and businesses.⁵

The consequences of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg are multifold. First, gentrification often leads to the displacement of low-income residents from their neighbourhoods.⁶ As property values rise, landlords become incentivised to sell or renovate their properties to cater to higher-income tenants, thereby forcing long-term residents to seek housing alternatives in more distant and under-resourced areas.⁷ This displacement disrupts social networks, cultural ties and access to important community resources, exacerbating social and economic marginalisation.⁸

Secondly, the rising costs of housing in gentrifying areas pose significant challenges to low-income individuals and families. As affluent residents move into these neighbourhoods, rents and property prices increase, making it increasingly difficult for low-income residents to afford housing in the areas they have traditionally lived in.⁹ This creates a shortage of affordable housing options, leaving vulnerable populations with limited choices and often forcing them into overcrowded or substandard living conditions such as Soweto, a predominantly informal settlement to the south-east of Johannesburg's central business district (CBD).¹⁰

Furthermore, gentrification results in reduced access to services and amenities for low-income residents. The upgrading and improvement of infrastructure, such as the development of high-end retail spaces or upscale recreational facilities, tend to cater to the preferences and purchasing power of wealthier residents.¹¹ Consequently, existing community resources and services that were once accessible and affordable become less available or affordable to low-income residents, further contributing to their marginalisation.

To address these challenges, the South African Government, alongside non-profit organisations, has implemented various initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive urban development and ensuring affordable housing provision. Efforts include the development of social housing projects, the establishment of subsidies and rental assistance programmes and the implementation of regulations to protect tenants' rights.¹² The scale of the problem remains significant, however, and the demand for affordable housing exceeds the available resources and support by 38 per cent in Johannesburg.¹³

This paper seeks to examine the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg and evaluate the effectiveness of existing strategies in mitigating these challenges. By analysing the case of Johannesburg, this study contributes to the broader understanding of gentrification's effect on affordable housing and highlights the need for inclusive urban planning and policy interventions to ensure a more equitable and sustainable urban future.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive review of existing literature on gentrification, urbanisation and affordable housing in the context of Johannesburg, South Africa, was

conducted. Electronic databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, and academic journals specific to urban studies and housing were systematically searched. Keywords including 'gentrification', 'affordable housing', 'urbanization' and 'Johannesburg' were used to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, reports and policy documents. Additionally, grey literature such as government reports and non-governmental organisation (NGO) publications were included to provide a holistic understanding of the issue. The data collection process focused on gathering information related to the processes and impacts of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg, including patterns of displacement, changes in socio-economic dynamics and the efficacy of policy interventions.

As this study solely relied on existing literature and secondary data sources, ethical approval was not required. Efforts were made, however, to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information gathered from reputable sources. Proper citations were provided to acknowledge the authors and sources of the data used in this study.

GENTRIFICATION IN JOHANNESBURG: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Gentrification has emerged as a prominent phenomenon in Johannesburg, South Africa, a city with a complex history of spatial segregation and rapid urbanisation.¹⁴ This section provides a historical perspective on gentrification in Johannesburg, tracing its roots to the apartheid era and highlighting the factors that have contributed to its occurrence.

During the apartheid era, Johannesburg was subjected to a system of racial segregation and forced removals, which led to the creation of racially divided neighbourhoods and spatial inequality. The Group Areas Act of 1950 enforced

strict residential segregation, designating specific areas for different racial groups, with disadvantaged communities being allocated to peripheral and underdeveloped locations.¹⁵ These policies resulted in the marginalisation of black and coloured populations and the concentration of economic resources in predominantly white areas.

Following the dismantling of apartheid in the 1990s, Johannesburg experienced significant urbanisation and economic growth, leading to shifts in the city's social and physical landscape.¹⁶ The end of apartheid opened up previously restricted areas, allowing for increased mobility and the emergence of new patterns of urban development. Economic opportunities and improved infrastructure attracted investment, transforming certain neighbourhoods and attracting wealthier residents.

As the city underwent economic transformations, areas that were historically affordable and predominantly inhabited by low-income residents began to experience gentrification.¹⁷ Gentrification in Johannesburg can be attributed to several factors, including the city's status as an economic and financial hub, urban renewal initiatives, and the desire for proximity to employment opportunities and amenities.¹⁸ The perceived desirability of certain neighbourhoods, coupled with rising property values and investment, created incentives for wealthier individuals and businesses to move into these areas, driving the process of gentrification.

This historical perspective underscores the deep-rooted relationship between gentrification and the legacy of spatial segregation in Johannesburg. The impacts of gentrification on affordable housing and marginalised communities are complex, and understanding the historical context is crucial for comprehending the present challenges and formulating effective policy responses.

CONSEQUENCES OF GENTRIFICATION ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Gentrification in Johannesburg has had impacts on affordable housing, particularly affecting low-income residents. This section examines the multifaceted effects of gentrification, including displacement, reduced access to services and the diminishing supply of affordable housing units.

As gentrification takes hold, property values escalate, leading to increased rents and housing prices that often exceed the financial capabilities of low-income individuals and families. This results in the forced relocation of long-term residents who can no longer afford to reside in their once-affordable neighbourhoods, disrupting social networks and community ties.

Displacement not only affects individuals and families but also contributes to wider social and economic consequences. Displaced residents often face challenges in finding alternative housing options, which has led to increased homelessness, overcrowding in informal settlements and heightened inequality.¹⁹ Moreover, displacement in Johannesburg disrupts access to essential services and amenities that were once easily accessible, such as healthcare, education and public transport.

Another significant consequence of gentrification in Johannesburg is the reduced availability of affordable housing units. As wealthier residents move into gentrifying neighbourhoods within the city, demand for housing increases and property owners have been seen to convert existing affordable units into higher-end housing or short-term rentals to cater to the preferences of the incoming population. This results in a diminished supply of affordable housing options, exacerbating the housing crisis for low-income individuals and families.

Furthermore, the process of gentrification has also led to changes in the character and composition of neighbourhoods, altering the social fabric and cultural identity of communities. The arrival of wealthier residents and new businesses such as large shopping malls — for example, the Mall of Africa — near low-income neighbourhoods such as Tembisa and Alexandra to the north of the Johannesburg CBD has led to the displacement of local businesses and cultural institutions that catered to the needs and preferences of the previous residents.²⁰ This in some sense has eroded the sense of belonging and community cohesion, further marginalising already disadvantaged groups.

Efforts have been made by the South African Government and non-profit organisations to address the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg. These include the development of social housing projects, the implementation of rent control measures and the promotion of mixed-income neighbourhoods.²¹ Challenges persist, however, in ensuring equitable access to affordable housing and protecting vulnerable communities from displacement.

POLICY RESPONSES TO MITIGATE THE IMPACTS OF GENTRIFICATION ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Addressing the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing requires proactive policy interventions and strategic planning.²² This section examines various policy responses that have been implemented in Johannesburg to mitigate the adverse effects of gentrification and ensure the preservation and provision of affordable housing.

One key policy approach is the development of social housing projects. Social housing projects aim to provide

affordable, secure and decent housing options for low to moderate-income households. These projects involve the construction or rehabilitation of housing units that are made available at subsidised rents, ensuring long-term affordability.²³ In Johannesburg, initiatives such as the Social Housing Program have been implemented to increase the supply of social housing units and promote mixed-income communities.

Rent control measures have also been employed to mitigate the impacts of rising rents in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Rent control regulations aim to limit the amount by which landlords can increase rental prices, thereby protecting tenants from abrupt and unaffordable rent hikes. While rent control can provide short-term relief, it can also have unintended consequences, such as disincentivising landlords from maintaining or investing in their properties.

Promoting mixed-income neighbourhoods is another strategy adopted in response to gentrification. The creation of mixed-income communities seeks to strike a balance between affordable and market-rate housing, ensuring that a range of income groups can access housing options within the same neighbourhood. This approach fosters social integration, reduces segregation and preserves the diversity of communities; however, challenges exist in achieving true social mixing, as income disparities and market forces still lead to the concentration of wealthier residents in certain areas. An example is a neighbourhood to the north of the Johannesburg CBD: Midrand. This community is a mixed-income neighbourhood but sees a larger population of the mid-level income bracket.

In addition to these specific policies, broader urban planning and development strategies play a crucial role in addressing

the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing. Collaborative planning efforts that involve local communities, government agencies and non-profit organisations can help ensure that the needs and voices of vulnerable populations are considered in decision-making processes. Moreover, implementing inclusionary zoning policies which could require developers to include a percentage of affordable housing units in new developments contributes to maintaining a supply of affordable housing in gentrifying areas.

While these policy responses are steps in the right direction, challenges remain in their implementation and effectiveness. Limited funding, bureaucratic obstacles and conflicting interests among stakeholders hinder the successful execution of affordable housing initiatives.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN GENTRIFICATION MITIGATION AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRATEGIES

While efforts have been made to mitigate the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg, several challenges and limitations persist. This section examines some of the key obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of gentrification mitigation strategies and the provision of affordable housing.

One significant challenge is the limited availability of financial resources for affordable housing initiatives. The funding required to develop and maintain affordable housing units often falls short of the demand, resulting in a persistent shortage of affordable housing options. This shortage is exacerbated by competing priorities within government budgets and the reliance on market mechanisms for housing provision.

Another challenge is the resistance from property owners and developers to affordable housing measures.

Gentrification can be driven by market forces and profit-seeking interests, making it challenging to convince private developers to prioritise affordable housing over lucrative market-rate projects. This resistance in some parts of Johannesburg such as Sandton city has led to limited incentives for developers to participate in affordable housing programmes, perpetuating the exclusionary nature of gentrification.

Furthermore, inadequate urban planning and zoning regulations contribute to the challenges in providing affordable housing. Existing regulations often prioritise market-rate development and do not adequately incentivise or mandate the inclusion of affordable housing units in new developments.

THE WAY FORWARD: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Addressing the challenges and limitations discussed in the previous sections requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach towards inclusive and equitable urban development.

1. *Enhancing funding mechanisms:* Securing adequate financial resources is crucial for the successful implementation of affordable housing initiatives. Government should prioritise and increase public funding for affordable housing programmes, including subsidies, grants and low-interest loans. Exploring innovative financing models, such as public–private partnerships and impact investing, can also help leverage additional resources for affordable housing development.
2. *Strengthening policy frameworks:* Revamping urban planning and zoning regulations is necessary to ensure the inclusion of affordable housing in gentrifying areas.
3. *Collaborative governance:* Fostering collaborative partnerships between government entities, community organisations and residents is crucial for effective gentrification mitigation strategies. Establishing platforms for ongoing dialogue and participation, such as community advisory boards or task forces, can facilitate meaningful engagement and decision-making processes. Building trust and promoting shared decision making empower residents and stakeholders, ensuring that the diverse needs and aspirations of communities are considered.
4. *Preservation and rehabilitation:* Preserving existing affordable housing stock is essential to prevent displacement and maintain community cohesion. Government should invest in the rehabilitation and maintenance of public and social housing units, ensuring their long-term viability and habitability. Implementing measures to protect tenants' rights, such as rent stabilisation and anti-eviction policies, can also safeguard vulnerable residents from the adverse effects of gentrification.
5. *Community empowerment and capacity building:* Supporting community-based organisations and initiatives is crucial for empowering residents and fostering community-led solutions. Government should provide technical assistance, capacity-building programmes and financial support to grassroots

organisations working on affordable housing and community development. Equipping communities with the skills and resources to actively participate in decision-making processes enhances their agency and promotes more inclusive urban development.

6. *Data collection and monitoring:*
Comprehensive data collection and monitoring systems are vital for evidence-based policy making and evaluation of gentrification mitigation efforts. Government should invest in robust data infrastructure to track housing affordability, displacement patterns and demographic changes in gentrifying neighbourhoods. This data can inform targeted interventions and help assess the effectiveness of policies over time.
7. *Long-term vision and commitment:*
Achieving inclusive and equitable urban development requires a long-term vision and commitment from all stakeholders. Governments, civil society organisations and the private sector must work collaboratively, transcending political cycles, to address the structural issues that perpetuate gentrification and housing inequities. Building consensus and shared responsibility towards affordable housing and social justice is essential for sustainable and equitable urban futures.

By implementing these strategies and recommendations, Johannesburg can navigate the challenges posed by gentrification and work towards creating inclusive and equitable urban environments. Prioritising affordable housing, community engagement and comprehensive policy frameworks will help safeguard the rights and well-being of all residents, fostering vibrant, diverse and sustainable neighbourhoods for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

The research presented in this paper provides insights into the impacts of city gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg. The study has highlighted the multifaceted consequences of gentrification in the city and its effects on housing affordability, availability and access for low-income households.

One significant finding of this research is the spatial concentration of gentrification, with certain neighbourhoods experiencing pronounced transformations. This analysis underscores the need for targeted interventions in specific areas to address the challenges faced by vulnerable populations who may be disproportionately affected by displacement and rising housing costs.

The study also revealed the market dynamics resulting from gentrification, including the escalation of property prices and rents in gentrified areas. These market pressures can exacerbate affordability challenges for low-income households, limiting their options for secure and decent housing while potentially impeding their access to essential services and amenities.

In light of these findings, policy makers, urban planners and community stakeholders must adopt a comprehensive and inclusive approach to urban development. This approach should prioritise the provision of affordable housing, while also safeguarding the rights and interests of existing communities. Strategies such as inclusionary zoning, rent control measures and community-driven initiatives should be explored and enhanced to ensure that affordable housing options are preserved and expanded in gentrifying areas.

Policy decisions and interventions must be informed by the experiences and needs of residents and community organisations. Engaging with these stakeholders throughout the planning and decision-making processes can help to foster trust,

collaboration and a sense of ownership over urban development initiatives.

Ultimately, addressing the impacts of gentrification on affordable housing in Johannesburg requires a long-term commitment to equitable and sustainable urban development. By prioritising the preservation and expansion of affordable housing options, while ensuring that the benefits of urban transformation are shared by all residents, Johannesburg can strive towards a more inclusive and resilient city.

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on gentrification and its impacts on affordable housing. It provides a foundation for further exploration of the topic and offers practical recommendations to guide policy makers and stakeholders in their efforts to create a more just and equitable urban landscape in Johannesburg and beyond.

References

1. Ndlovu, T. and Tsheola, J. (2018), 'Gentrification in Johannesburg: A Historical Analysis', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 14, pp. 3112–3130.
2. Coetzee, S. and Rogerson, C. (2019), 'The consequences of gentrification for urban social sustainability: Evidence from Johannesburg', *Urban Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 377–394.
3. Department of Human Settlements (2016), 'National Housing Code', available at <https://www.dhs.gov.za/content/national-housing-code-2009> (accessed 17th August, 2024).
4. Leshner, G. and Rhodes, S. (2016), 'Gentrification and Displacement: An Analysis of Trends in Johannesburg's Inner City', in Marais, E. and Ntema, J. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of African Development*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 206–218.
5. Eger, J. M. and Hertzman, C. (2018), *A Home for All: The Affordable Housing Crisis in Canada*, University of British Columbia Press, British Columbia.
6. Slater, T. (2006), 'The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 737–757.
7. Gauteng Provincial Government (2018), 'GPG Identifies More Than 60 Properties to Fast-Track Affordable Housing', available at <https://www.gov.za/speeches/gpg-identifies-more-60-properties-fast-track-affordable-housing-23-jan-2018-0000> (accessed 23rd June, 2023).
8. Beavon, K., Crankshaw, O. and Parnell, S. (2005), 'The Janus face of Johannesburg: Current economic challenges and future opportunities', *Urban Forum*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 123–134.
9. Kironde, J.-M. (2002), 'Apartheid City Planning in Johannesburg, South Africa, 1948–1994: Racial Segregation and Mixed-Income Housing', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 104–116.
10. Turok, I. and Borel-Saladin, J. M. (2004), 'Johannesburg: A world-class African city in theory and practice?', *Development Southern Africa*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 643–663.
11. Pieterse, E. (2008), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota.
12. Mashigo, S. (2019), 'Gentrification in Johannesburg and Its Impact on Community Identity: A Case Study of Maboneng Precinct', *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 335–348.
13. Smith, N. E. (1996), *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Routledge, London and New York.
14. Lees, L. (2008), 'Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 12, pp. 449–470.
15. Atkinson, R. (2022), *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism*, Routledge, London and New York.
16. Freeman, L. (2012), 'Displacement or Succession? Residential Mobility in Gentrifying Neighbourhoods', *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 463–491.
17. Lees, L. (2003), 'Super-Gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 12, pp. 2487–2509.
18. Davidson, M. (2011), 'Gentrification, Displacement and the Arts: An Australian Case Study', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 415–429.
19. Gauteng Provincial Government (2018), 'GPG Identifies More Than 60 Properties to Fast-Track Affordable Housing', available at <https://www.gov.za/speeches/gpg-identifies-more-60-properties-fast-track-affordable-housing-23-jan-2018-0000> (accessed 23rd June, 2023).
20. Mahlatsi, M. L. (2022), 'The High Cost of "Urban Renewal" in Africa: A Comparative Analysis of Gentrification in Harare and Johannesburg', *Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 476–489.
21. Ah Goo, D. (2018), 'Gentrification in South Africa: The "Forgotten Voices" of the Displaced in the Inner City of Johannesburg', in Clark, J. and Wise, N. (eds), *Urban Renewal, Community and Participation: Theory, Policy and Practice*, Springer Nature, Berlin, pp. 89–110.
22. Levy, D. K., Comey, J. and Padilla, S. (2007), 'In the face of gentrification: Case studies of local efforts to mitigate displacement', pp. 238–315, The Urban Institute, available at <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50791/411294-In-the-Face-of-Gentrification.PDF> (accessed 17th August, 2023).