



Family Homelessness and Gentrification in San Diego

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Approximately 30 percent of San Diego City's Census tracts have gentrified since 2000. Gentrification is the process by which lower-income, and sometimes deteriorating, housing is repaired or replaced with higher-quality and higher-priced homes for middle-class and affluent residents. For the low-income, working families who occupy this housing, gentrification results in higher rents that they simply cannot afford. The unaffordability of housing is one major contributor to San Diego's housing crisis: the City of San Diego is home to the fourth largest concentration of homelessness in the country, including 1,545 individuals living in unhoused families. As the housing stock improves and increases in price, affordable housing options have not been built to house displaced families. According to a report issued by the Corporation for Supportive Housing in October of 2019, San Diego's affordable housing production is far behind the needs of very low, low and moderate income households: a reality that has forced a trend of "down renting" as moderate income households compete for the same scarce resources and squeeze very low income households out of the housing market.

Existing Services Provide Short-term Support

Government programs are in place to prevent the loss of housing that can be caused by gentrification. For example, the Federal government has provided housing assistance through the McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 which federally funds and oversees housing programs and other forms of assistance for the unhoused (HUD 2018). The services funded through McKinney-Vento have assisted hundreds of San Diego families each year through the provision of emergency shelters and transitional housing units and, more recently, through rapid rehousing and preventive measures. These, and other temporary solutions like bridge shelters and safe parking lots, address the immediate needs of unstably housed families. More must be done if the City of San Diego is to provide long-term solutions.

What We Can Learn from Unhoused Families in San Diego

Family homelessness in San Diego is significantly driven by the lack of affordable housing in the city. Many of the families seeking assistance are headed by single mothers who experience higher rates of poverty. Even if a single parent works full-time at minimum wage in San Diego, they are unable to afford rent on unsubsidized apartments. This is true in areas of the City where these families previously lived. As areas have gentrified, families in poverty cannot afford rent, which pushes them into homelessness. High rental costs also prevent them from bettering their situation once they lose housing. With incredibly long waitlists for section 8, most families in transitional housing programs are forced to look in the private housing market. Thus, in San Diego, the lack of affordable housing both pushes families into homelessness and keeps them there.

In light of this fact, housing programs traditionally offered through McKinney-Vento like transitional housing cannot end family homelessness because they do not add new, subsidized housing to the rental market. Transitional housing programs have been shown to be most effective when there is affordable, permanent housing to which families can transition. If more affordable housing options are not created in San Diego, then more families will enter a cycle of homelessness. Solutions to this problem would include both the production of new affordable housing options and the expansion of access to existing stock. While transitional housing programs have traditionally been used, and while they typically offer the longest length of support, we must question the effectiveness of this intervention especially in cities experiencing affordability crises. Rental assistance programs that prevent homelessness in the first place or quickly secure permanent housing for families may be a better short-term option. For those families that need the extra support of transitional housing, rental assistance upon exiting the program would be a further recommendation.

How Building Additional Housing Can Soften the Impact of Gentrification

Adding subsidized housing to the rental market will not only prevent certain families from becoming homeless in the first place, it will create more avenues out of homelessness. The proposed bond measure to generate \$900 million dollars for the purposes of creating low-income housing in San Diego has been estimated to support the creation of 7,500 units of affordable housing for veterans, seniors, persons with disabilities, low income families and persons experiencing homelessness. Such a move would not only support the recently composed City Action Plan on Homelessness, which calls for the creation of approximately 700 housing units for low-income families, but it would cost the average home owner approximately \$6 a month – the current price of a latte at most coffee shops in the city - in increases to their property taxes. Combined with Measure C, a measure to raise hotel room taxes with some of the funds allocated to homelessness, the bond measure can soften the impact gentrification has had on housing affordability and homelessness in the region. Only affordable, permanent housing paid for through the bond measure can both reduce the likelihood that families become homeless or are unable to exit homelessness permanently due to gentrification-related price increases.