

CU Professor Analyzes NY Gentrification

By [Josh Hudelson](#)

Published December 4, 2003

Columbia Daily Spectator

Low-income residents in New York City are actually less likely to move from their homes if they live in gentrifying neighborhoods, such as Harlem and Park Slope, says a new study co-written by Lance Freeman, an assistant professor in Columbia's Urban Planning program.

But a preliminary publication of the research last year has sparked debate among local community activists and other students of gentrification.

The study, which is scheduled to appear in the winter issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association, shows that low-income households in gentrifying neighborhoods are at least 15 percent less likely to move, even after controlling for factors that can skew mobility demographics, such as marriage, employment status, and education.

One of the concerns critics raised is that the study's official publication comes at a time when such positive views of gentrification could assist Columbia as its administrators attempt to garner support for their plans for expansion into Manhattanville.

"It's no accident that his study is coming out at this time," said Nellie Hester Bailey, the president of the Harlem Tenants Council. "All of this, to me, suspiciously ties in with Columbia University's expansion."

Freeman said that he had no ulterior motives, pointing out that he was surprised by his own findings. "My impression was that gentrification causes displacement. That's what I expected to find when I started the research, but the results came out differently," he said.

Dr. Frank Braconi, the executive director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council and co-author of the study, agreed. "Our research did not start with a political agenda. You find what you find and you take it from there."

One problem, Freeman said, is that most people do not realize how often low-income residents of non-gentrifying neighborhoods relocate. "People move a lot in general. America is a very mobile society."

Freeman and Braconi speculated that as neighborhoods gentrify, better jobs and a nicer environment counterbalance rent increases.

But Bailey argued that just because tenants are not leaving, they are not necessarily happy where they are. She says the cost of relocating is often too high for low-income residents, so households may not have the choice to move.

Taking a different tack, Tom DeMott, a member of the West Harlem Coalition to Preserve Community, wondered if Freeman and Braconi have their logic backwards. He said that gentrification happens because the original community has something special.

"The people who were already here know the neighborhood is nice," DeMott said. "They're fighting for their neighborhood for the same reason people are coming in."

City University of New York Professor Neil Smith, a longtime researcher of gentrification, was also skeptical. "The methodology is a problem," he said, referring to the preliminary study's use of tenant surveys, which ask former residents to explain why they moved. "People are embarrassed to say they couldn't afford the rent."

But Freeman said the crux of his research rests on solid numbers. Using data from the Census Bureau of New York City, he and Braconi monitored changes in apartment ownership throughout the 1990s and created a statistical model representing the probability of tenants relocating.

They are not the only scholars rethinking the issue. Duke University's Jacob Vigdor found similar results from a study of Boston neighborhoods, and researchers at Rutgers University are expanding on Freeman's New York work. Braconi himself had seen inklings of this trend while examining patterns of housing tenure length.

But all this evidence hardly absolves gentrification of its negative consequences.

"I still think it causes affordable housing problems," Freeman said. "Low-income households are the most vulnerable." He said that as rent increases, disadvantaged families have a smaller pool of locations to choose from. And while the study may show that people tend to stick around as a neighborhood improves, this does not mean that low-income families can just as easily move in from a non-gentrifying area.

"Both Lance and I are concerned about the effects of displacement on low-income people," Braconi said.

The study concludes with the suggestion that public housing can help low-income residents keep their homes. Public housing gained a bad reputation from cities in decline, Braconi said. He cites Newark as an example of a city where non-public housing disappeared, leaving the rest in a "sea of decay." In gentrifying neighborhoods, however, public housing may be a necessary bastion for locals as wealthier tenants push in.

The heated responses to Freeman and Braconi's study may be due, in part, to a New York Times article by James Tierney in March 2002. The article used the preliminary study, as well as others, to denounce opponents of gentrification.

"I think that his conclusions were a lot more strident than ours were," Braconi said, adding that Tierney did not misrepresent the data.

Freeman also pointed out that gentrification does not always conform with the popular image. Department stores such as Old Navy and Modell's in Harlem are not necessarily tell-tale signs that an incoming "gentry" is pushing out the lower class. Instead, businesses could be finding untapped markets in neighborhoods they had previously disregarded. Freeman said that chain department stores can sometimes offer apparel at prices well within the reach of less affluent residents.