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International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdr

The rise of hazard gentrification

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Natural hazards
 Climate gentrification
 Housing justice
 Housing policy
 Land use
 Zoning

ABSTRACT

This report conceptualizes *hazard gentrification*, a distinct form of gentrification that occurs when a natural hazard destroys a significant proportion of a community, and its inhabitants become displaced by wealthier residents. We differentiate this phenomenon of disaster capitalism from other forms of climate, environmental, green, and resilience gentrification; summarize its structural drivers; and review trade-offs for municipalities, environmental sustainability, and housing equity. We conclude with implications for municipal governments, who increasingly face post-disaster decision-making during the rebuilding process.

1. Introduction

Several frameworks have evolved to explain phenomena of residential displacement and capital investment in the context of climate change, hazards, and disasters. Disaster capitalism refers to how capitalist actors, including but not limited to corporations and government entities, leverage disaster contexts to consolidate power and resources by exploiting communities during disaster recovery periods when they are the most vulnerable and least able to resist—a process increasingly exacerbated by climate change [1]. Disaster capitalism's mechanisms include various forms of gentrification, such as climate, environmental, and green gentrification, in which human adaptation and resilience-based interventions to climate and weather stressors can create pathways that displace lower-income residents and ultimately increase housing inequality [2–4].

Quinton and Nesbitt [5] recently reviewed seven different gentrification concepts used to describe processes related to climate change and the environment, analyzing the frequency of terms and their respective definitions, drivers, and discourses throughout the scientific literature. They propose summarizing the terms—green, environmental, eco, and ecosystem gentrification (GEEE), as well as climate, carbon, and resilience gentrification—under the umbrella term *sustainability gentrification*, defined as “the role of climate change, and the use of sustainability/resilience-building responses to it, in the production of space for progressively affluent users” [5]. These changes are not limited to post-disaster contexts and can be anticipatory in viewing climate change as an opportunity for (re) development of communities purportedly facing inevitable climate doom (ideas often facilitated by elite narratives), a related concept known as “anticipatory ruination” [6]. Changes can also reflect the decisions of single actors, such as homeowners or landowners, within particular policy contexts.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2025.105618>

Received 18 March 2025; Received in revised form 28 May 2025; Accepted 30 May 2025

Available online 30 May 2025

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These updated conceptualizations of gentrification, which reflect key areas of scholarly inquiry in the literature, are too new to have achieved consensus in the scientific community. But this ongoing discourse obscures a long-occurring—but increasingly frequent—phenomenon that we call *hazard gentrification*. This specific, often punctuated, form of sustainability gentrification (see Fig. 1) is triggered when a hazard or extreme weather event destroys a significant portion of a community’s housing stock, and residents become permanently displaced in the rebuilding process due to price signals or other political and economic measures that commandeer power and resources. Typically, hazard gentrification manifests as (re)development to attract newer, wealthier residents at the expense of those displaced (generally due to their financial inability to rebuild or pressure to sell property), or lower-income populations who remain in place. Hazard gentrification can operate through several mechanisms, including but not limited to.

- **Regulatory:** selectivity or reprioritization of permitting for rebuilding lost housing, strengthening of building codes, or instituting zoning changes that promote higher-income housing units, subsequently limiting the ability of certain property owners to rebuild and incentivizing property sales;
- **Insurance-based:** the sudden increase in pricing, or withdrawal, of financial services such as private insurance in high-risk areas (known as “bluelining”) after a hazard or disaster that increases housing costs [7];
- **Displacement:** selective migration on the basis of socioeconomic status, with wealthier residents displacing vulnerable households.

Hazard gentrification warrants distinct attention from sustainability (and other processes of) gentrification for two important reasons. First, it tends to happen faster than other forms of sustainability gentrification because it may be linked to higher-urgency disaster recovery operations. Second, hazard gentrification is more likely to entail mass displacement of residents who have suffered material losses and psychosocial harm and may be experiencing peak vulnerability. Neoliberal policies can facilitate and accelerate particularly exploitative forms of hazard gentrification due to fiscal pressures on local government. Municipal governments are incentivized to attract high earners, as these populations provide the largest pool of tax revenue needed to restore or improve local services [8]. This incentive is propelled by competition among municipalities vying to retain wealthy residents or attract new ones [9]. Post-disaster contexts tend to feed these processes, especially when federal financial assistance or other funding mechanisms fail to provide resources for building back communities.

Several large-scale US natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina [10] and Hurricane Sandy [11], have been widely studied for post-recovery gentrification or “disaster recovery gentrification” [12]—terms which implicitly acknowledge exploitation of communities during times of duress. These development trajectories are becoming increasingly frequent, as seen in the gentrification of St. Augustine, FL, after 2016 and 2017 Hurricanes Matthew and Irma [13]; Paradise, CA, following the 2018 Camp Fire [12,14]; and attempted land grabs after the 2023 Lahaina, HI, fire [15]. Hazard gentrification can follow human-made disasters such as brownfields [16] or Superfund sites [17], but similar effects can also occur due to policies intended to harden communities against risk in the absence of a disaster event. Either way, hazard gentrification is not inevitable. Community engagement through participatory planning can limit displacement as seen in Joplin, MI, after the 2011 record tornado [18]; Coffey Park, CA, after the 2017 Tubbs Fire [19]; and Duwamish Valley in remediating the Lower Duwamish Superfund Site near Seattle, WA [20].

There is limited scholarship about the factors that shape these different trajectories, which may be related to structural and racialized gentrification patterns [21], the nature and extent of the disaster itself, and other local sociocultural factors. Hazard gentrification is poised to become more prevalent with the increasing frequency and intensity of storms, floods, and fires and may

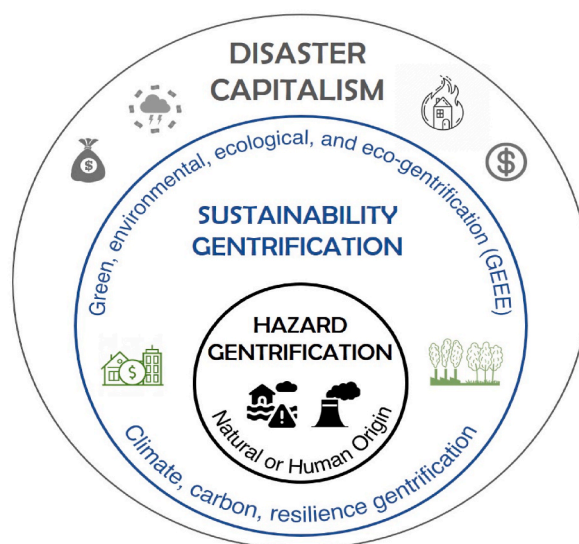


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of hazard gentrification: a discrete form of several of the gentrification processes collectively known as sustainability gentrification (per Quinton and Nesbitt, 2024), and an example of the larger umbrella process of disaster capitalism.

present potential trade-offs between disaster resilience and housing justice. This article reviews these trade-offs—i.e., what is gained and lost through hazard gentrification—in hopes of promoting more equitable paths to disaster recovery and climate resilience.

2. What is gained

Municipalities, developers, and sometimes even longtime community members stand to gain financially from hazard gentrification. Post-disaster relief efforts often attract significant reconstruction funding from federal and state governments, as well as private sources. Replacement infrastructure funds and pressure from the public may prioritize building resilience against future disasters. Although this imperative can be at odds with the need to rapidly re-house displaced persons and replace critical infrastructure, there are undeniable benefits to the logic of “building back better” [22]. Advances in urban planning and building technology, along with an improved understanding of climate associated risks, can result in structures that are more resilient to impacts of climate change [23].

Jurisdictions often revisit regulatory mechanisms, such as building codes and zoning, in the aftermath of a disaster. Building codes evolved considerably in recent decades to incorporate technologies that improve energy efficiency and resilience against future hazards such as wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes [e.g., 24–26]. Local governments experimented with using rezoning as a strategy to potentially curtail development in or around high risk areas such as the wildlands-urban-interface in favor of more resilient spaces [27,28].

Reconstruction investments can also expand the capacity for local jurisdictions to plan for and respond to future threats. Small municipalities may face high hazard risk, but face everyday barriers such as staff turnover and program delays that lower their capacity to develop a hazard mitigation plan and obtain the funding needed to implement it before a disaster occurs [29]. Similarly, institutional vulnerability may limit coordination, communication, and resource mobilization among disaster management officials and reduce public engagement in preparedness and recovery efforts [30]. But a coordinated, major disaster response across local, state, and federal agencies and private contractors may result in capacity-building through the formation of research-policy networks. These entities provide local governments with the technical expertise to complete mitigation plans, opening the door for future grant funding and economic development opportunities [31].

Similarly, it is a losing proposition to *not* invest post-recovery, as disaster-affected communities are left worse off than before. Gentrification is most likely to occur in neighborhoods that are the most extensively damaged after a disaster [10], which also need the most investment to recover. Economic development has upsides for some residents, including increased property values for long-term homeowners. Evidence from a panel study of neighborhoods in Philadelphia found that, after accounting for length of residence, residents of gentrifying areas were not more likely to move out, and long-term residents who remained in gentrifying neighborhoods saw signs of increased financial well-being [32,33].

Post-disaster recovery and mitigation can play a role in improving equity by making investments that close the gap in vulnerability and environmental quality between communities. Policies, such as financial incentives for building improvements that improve resilience, and tax relief for long-term homeowners in areas experiencing gentrification, can reduce the likelihood of financial harm and displacement from hazard gentrification [34,35]. However, to avoid exacerbating existing inequities, policy makers need to consider how they might affect the well-being or displacement of marginalized residents.

3. What is lost

Whereas institutions and business interests tend to benefit from hazard gentrification, residents at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder tend to bear the brunt of its negative effects. When hazards and disasters displace people temporarily, many factors affect whether individuals, households, or communities will return and when [36,37]. For many, displacement becomes permanent due to the loss of affordable housing, usually stemming from a combination of heightened risk and increasing costs [38]. More affordable housing, such as manufactured homes, tend to experience higher rates of damage and the potential for total loss [39,40]. Due to this damage, affordable housing stock decreases, driving up prices in post-hazard areas [41]. Further, housing relief post-hazard is negatively associated with renter status and poverty [42], possibly leading to the higher rates of evictions seen after a hazard [43]. Residents in affordable communities thus tend to be disproportionately displaced after disasters.

Low-income households who have been negatively affected by historical patterns of disinvestment and inequity may face additional structural barriers during government-led disaster recovery efforts [44]. Marginalized communities face higher losses and slower recovery [45], with lower income households often having higher post-disaster sheltering needs because they are more likely to live in more vulnerable housing stock, lack insurance or other financial capacity to rebuild quickly, and have fewer social networks for temporary housing [44]. Public housing residents may face additional specific challenges due to current assistance policies and funding obstacles [46]. Low-income communities are therefore less likely to return to their previous communities after evacuating from a disaster [47]. Marginalized communities face significant barriers to access resources post-disaster, including navigating bureaucratic processes without transparent guidelines, exclusion from the recovery decision making process, and prioritization of homeowners over renters [45]. Begley et al. [48] found that the Small Business Administration’s disaster-relief home loan program denied more loans in areas with higher income inequality and larger proportions of minorities.

Macro-level forces can create environments of worsening inequities. Political officials “push their own agendas” over equitable recovery, usually “due to pressures from affluent stakeholders” [45]. Recovery continues to reflect social inequalities, including uneven power, reinforcing private interests under a facade of equity [49], such as “build back better” policies that are not necessarily “good for all” [50]. In this sense, resilience becomes equated to wealth, reinforcing cycles of climate injustice under the guise of “sustainable development” [51,52]. “Top-down,” engineering-led solutions for resiliency such as urban greening expansion can be

coercive [53] and lead to displacement of communities of color [54]. Displacement can also lead to increase in poverty over time [55] and potentially violate the Fair Housing Act if displacement results in resegregation of minority residents [56], thus reinforcing cycles of inequity.

Generally, displacement can take a devastating toll on communities. Displacement involves not only residents' loss of belonging to a place, but has the added impact of splitting up communities [57] which can lead to socio-cultural displacement, loss of access to public services, and changes to public safety [58]. Loss of social support is associated with depression, anxiety, and disaster distress [59] compounding the broad community and individual health impacts of gentrification [58]. With certain populations already at higher risk of harm due to social, political, or economic vulnerability, strong social and community connections can strengthen resilience while mitigating hazard risk and negative impacts [60].

4. Conclusion

The rise of hazard gentrification lays bare many governance challenges and tensions. A principal challenge involves building resilience to hazards and ensuring that disaster recovery processes are equitable and just. This exists within a larger context of private actors and pressures, de-regulation, erosion of public institutions (including trust in them), and predatory capitalist actors. Government programs with good intentions, such as post-disaster aid intended to help communities rebuild, can inadvertently be weaponized by local government and real estate development interests to push out lower-income residents to maximize short-term profits and longer-term tax bases. The structural forces that propel hazard gentrification go well beyond local land use and housing policy. These forces vary widely and can include unintended consequences from federal assistance programs [42,48], disparities in access to insurance markets and disaster recovery resources [61], and restrictions on annual residential property tax increases that incentivize municipalities to prioritize the tax revenue implications of post-disaster redevelopment over community cohesion and legacy.

Still, hazard gentrification is not necessarily a *fait accompli*. Every disaster triggers rebuild versus relocate decision-making by residents who lose their homes, and there may be communities in less socioeconomically desirable areas that are left to depopulate. This natural sorting process is distinctly different from what happens when aging towns or neighborhoods with low hazard resilience, whether due to historical disinvestment or other contexts, are artificially primed for hazard gentrification by economic interests. It is less clear which combination of factors are most likely to facilitate hazard gentrification; this is a collaborative opportunity for disaster recovery and gentrification researchers. But there are many policies that may limit hazard gentrification without undermining resilience-building efforts, such as community engagement in rebuilding or rezoning decisions, expansion of insurance subsidies and post-disaster assistance for the lowest-income residents, programs that finance the gaps when private insurance reimbursements to homeowners are insufficient to meet updated building codes, or efforts to steer the benefits of hazard gentrification to local residents rather than outside investors.

The destruction wrought in the US by Hurricane Helene in September 2024, and the Los Angeles wildfires of January 2025, were unfortunate reminders of why scientists and policy makers need to understand the dynamics and trade-offs of hazard gentrification. Some of the worst storm-induced flooding occurred in cities like Asheville in western North Carolina that were thought to be climate resilient. Asheville, in Buncombe County, with its booming artist and tourist scene, has been heavily gentrifying for decades. We will likely see very different redevelopment patterns in Asheville's flood-destroyed neighborhoods than in small, devastated towns such as Marshall, just 20 miles north in Madison County, one of NC's lowest-earning counties. Likewise, the redevelopment of Los Angeles' wealthy Pacific Palisades neighborhood will likely play out differently from middle-class Altadena, which was besieged by predatory purchase offers in the fires' aftermath [62].

With each successive disaster, hazard gentrification becomes more relevant than ever. Its preconditions are likely to differ around the country and require different approaches to reconcile hazard gentrification with the needs of displaced residents and recovering municipalities. We hope to inspire more explicit attention to this phenomenon in public policy and practice with the goal of simultaneously improving disaster resilience and housing equity for all communities.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Justin Stoler: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Mary Angelica Painter:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Ethan Sharygin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Sameer H. Shah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Funding

Partial support for this work came from the University of Washington Center for Studies in Demography & Ecology's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development research infrastructure grant (P2C HD042828), and from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) award NA23OAR40505031 to the National Science Foundation AI Institute for Research on Trustworthy AI in Weather, Climate, and Coastal Oceanography (AI2ES).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

This paper originated through collaboration during the 2024 D4 Hack Week: Disasters, Demography, Disparities, and Decisions, a workshop supported by a partnership between the University of Washington's Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology (CSDE), the National Science Foundation AI Institute for Research on Trustworthy AI in Weather, Climate, and Coastal Oceanography (AI2ES), and the University of Washington's eScience Institute.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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