A regional geography of gentrification, displacement, and the suburbanisation of poverty: Towards an extended research agenda

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Gentrification is now a common feature of contemporary cities. The process has extended its spatial reach from urban cores into neighbourhoods previously deemed unlikely to gentrify. More recently, scholars have identified an intensifying suburbanisation of poverty reshaping socio-spatial inequalities. In this paper we argue that it is increasingly urgent to integrate analyses of gentrification with those on the suburbanisation of poverty. The two processes are fundamentally related through the displacement and exclusion of disadvantaged populations. Drawing on Dutch full-population register data for the 2005–2015 period, we empirically illustrate the existence of suburbanising poverty alongside urban gentrification in the urban regions of Amsterdam and Utrecht. We further show these are far from uniform processes, eschewing urban–suburban dichotomies. In addition, we find regional differences in the intensity and spatial reach of both gentrification and poverty suburbanisation. Spatial trends are more pronounced in the Amsterdam region, where low-income households are pushed to the furthest parts of the region. By way of conclusion, we outline an agenda for future research.

KEYWORDS
exclusion, gentrification, socio-spatial inequality, spatial analysis, suburbanisation of poverty, the Netherlands

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gentrification is now a common feature of contemporary cities. Following the increasing demand for urban living and supportive state policies, gentrification has developed from a piecemeal process to an important force of urban change (Smith, 2002). No longer restricted to a select number of inner-city neighbourhoods, the process has permeated into a wide range of localities stretching far beyond the urban core (Lees et al., 2008). As the footprint of gentrification has increased, it seems safe to assume that the process has become more important in shaping the social geography of entire cities, or even regions.

One of the key challenges in contemporary gentrification research (still) is to measure the extent of displacement and exclusion caused by the process (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020; Newman & Wyly, 2006). It is perhaps even more challenging to establish where disadvantaged populations move to post-displacement, or where excluded populations divert to instead. In this paper, we argue that in order to grasp the extent and diverse impacts of gentrification and the displacement it
engenders, it is increasingly crucial to move beyond a narrow neighbourhood or urban focus and instead focus on the wider regional geography (see Lawton, 2020).

In recent years, many urban regions have seen an intensifying suburbanisation or decentralisation of poverty (Bailey & Minton, 2018; Cooke & Denton, 2015; Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2018; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Van Ham et al., 2020). It is often the flip side of expanding gentrification as affordable centrally located neighbourhoods disappear. Disadvantaged populations, despite often depending on urban labour markets and social ties, may have to settle in the wider urban region rather than the central city. Such patterns have various implications both at the individual level and meso-level socio-spatial inequalities.

This paper sheds light on the links between gentrification and suburbanising poverty from a regional geography perspective. It first confronts the existing literatures on these topics. Then, it empirically draws on the cases of Amsterdam and Utrecht in the Netherlands to chart micro patterns of low-income population change, and tease out neighbourhood-level variations. These empirics serve as input for a research agenda to study gentrification, displacement, and suburbanising poverty, as well as their interlinkages and impacts.

2 | THEORY

2.1 | The expansion of urban gentrification

Social and spatial inequalities are closely related and mutually constitutive. The increase in social inequality in countries of the Global North over the last three decades (Piketty, 2014) has by and large translated into greater levels of spatial inequality (Tammaru et al., 2020). This is reflected in an increase in socio-economic residential segregation (Musterd et al., 2017; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011), but also in shifting socio-spatial inequalities.

Gentrification – broadly defined as “the production of space for progressively more affluent users” (Hackworth, 2002, p. 815) – has become a force in cities all over the world (Lees et al., 2016). Demand for urban living has increased, not in the least among the middle and upper classes. Increased demand is the product of a range of factors, including the expansion of higher education in cities (Ley, 1996), demographic change, such as the increase in small households (Buzar et al., 2005), and the reconfiguration of urban labour markets around the cognitive-cultural economy (Hamnett, 2003; Scott, 2011). The wide range of available amenities and time-space advantages (Rérat & Lees, 2011) further add to middle-class demand. From a supply side perspective, increasing volumes of capital flow into central urban real estate to capitalise on rent gaps.

Gentrification should also be seen as the product of active state promotion. States have vigorously pushed gentrification as an urban policy instrument to attract capital and talent, drive local economic growth, and dilute existing poverty concentrations (Smith, 2002; Uitermark et al., 2007). Governments can promote or facilitate neighbourhood gentrification in a myriad of ways, though a particularly pertinent strategy is the expansion of market-rate housing at the expense of de-modified units. In Amsterdam, national housing policies and local urban policies promoted the sale and liberalisation of social-housing units, essentially facilitating population upgrading and gentrification in central neighbourhoods (Hochstenbach, 2017; also see Hamnett, 2010).

The result is an intensification of gentrification. Where in previous waves it remained a relatively small-scale and spatially restricted process, it has expanded into neighbourhoods previously deemed unlikely candidates for gentrification (Hackworth & Smith, 2001). Progressing gentrification may have different repercussions for low-income populations: they may make starker trade-offs to remain in place (cf. Newman & Wyly, 2006), concentrate in the few affordable neighbourhoods that remain or settle outside the city altogether.

2.2 | Suburbanisation of poverty

William Julius Wilson (1987) influentially argued that the “truly disadvantaged” lived in the de-industrialising and disinvested American inner cities with little access to suitable employment. The degree of centralisation was considered a potential measure of spatial disadvantage (Massey & Denton, 1988). Social, political, and economic changes have structurally changed this metropolitan landscape.

Processes of suburbanising, or decentralising, poverty have mainly been identified in urban regions in Anglophone countries (Bailey & Minton, 2018; Cooke & Denton, 2015; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Randolph & Tice, 2014). It is not only the outcome of urban gentrification though, but also of the decline of some suburbs. In a Canadian study, August and Walks (2018) for example found suburban decline was structured by landlords buying up housing to rent out to squeezed populations. Neil Smith and colleagues linked the decline of inner suburbs in New Jersey to the “systemic withdrawal of
capital investment” (2001, p. 498). These studies argue that the suburbanisation of poverty is not the cause, but outcome of structured suburban decline.

We should be wary not to apply the concept of suburbanisation of poverty too simplistically. Although many suburban neighbourhoods remain middle class and closely linked to the central city, suburbs overall have diversified in terms of resident class and ethnic composition, and their functional roles (Charmes & Keil, 2015; Van Gent & Musterd, 2016). The suburbanisation of poverty exists alongside continuing middle-class suburbanisation and even the gentrification of some suburbs (Le Goix et al., 2019; Markley, 2018; Paccoud & Mace, 2018), while still other suburbs experience stability. A study of the Dutch suburb of Almere for example shows that the city used to be highly dependent on middle-income suburbanites from Amsterdams, but increasingly attracts residents with various class positions from elsewhere (Tzaninis & Boterman, 2018). We thus see a blurring of the lines between the urban and suburban, as the latter matures and fragments (Keil, 2018).

Suburban diversification clearly poses a challenge in conceptualising and defining what actually constitutes the suburbanisation of poverty. Some scholars therefore prefer to speak of the decentralisation of poverty, measuring how far away populations live from the urban centre (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2016). This approach can, however, also be problematic in diversifying and polycentric urban regions (Van Meeteren et al., 2016).

To overcome these issues, it is key to be attentive to micro-level geographies while applying different measures such as urbanity and centrality. Then, it is also important to emphasise that the suburbanisation of poverty does not imply that all suburban localities are, in fact, becoming poorer in the same way that urban gentrification does not mean that all urban neighbourhoods are becoming richer.

2.3 Displacement and exclusion

Gentrification and the suburbanisation of poverty are materially linked through the residential moves of low-income populations – specifically displacement and exclusion. Displacement has proven notoriously difficult to quantify (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020). Part of this has to do with data availability, as the displaced tend to disappear off the radar, or reasons for moving may be unknown. Indeed, some low-income households will choose to suburbanise for positive reasons. It is also a definitional issue: some limit displacement to evictions while others follow the broader definition by Peter Marcuse (1986). For him, displacement for example also includes gentrification-induced exclusion due to rent increases and softer displacement pressures. Definition issues lead to continuing disagreement about the extent to which gentrification triggers displacement (e.g., Freeman & Braconi, 2004; Newman & Wyly, 2006; Slater, 2009).

The distinction between displacement and exclusion – or direct and indirect, exclusionary displacement, following Marcuse – is a useful one when thinking through the links between gentrification and suburbanising poverty. In a previous study, we distinguished between a direct suburbanisation of the poor and a more indirect suburbanisation of poverty (Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2018). While the former entails low-income populations moving from gentrifying urban neighbourhoods into the surrounding region, the latter also includes low-income populations moving to suburban neighbourhoods from elsewhere because they are unable to find affordable housing in the central city. Both displacement and exclusion are important to take into account. Even though displacement engenders the greatest hardship and deprivation for individuals (Desmond, 2016), systematic exclusion can be similarly traumatic. At the meso level, displacement and exclusion may eventually lead to very similar or even identical socio-spatial outcomes.

In this theoretical section we have explained how intensifying gentrification and the suburbanisation of poverty are fundamentally related through displacement and exclusion. Although there are pitfalls in the application of any of these concepts, they are key processes shaping contemporary urban regions and therefore deserve scrutiny.

3 CASE, DATA, AND METHODS

This paper empirically illustrates the shifting regional geography of poverty using register data from the System of Social-statistical Datasets (SSD) from Statistics Netherlands. These data contain individual-level, longitudinal, and geocoded data for the entire population registered in the Netherlands. This paper focuses on the metropolitan regions of Amsterdam and Utrecht – the largest and fourth city of the Netherlands respectively.

Amsterdam and Utrecht were selected because they are the two cities in the Netherlands experiencing the most forceful gentrification, as for example evidenced by rapidly escalating house prices (Hochstenbach & Arundel, 2020). We therefore expect these two cities to show relatively pronounced shifts in socio-spatial inequalities. Both cities are home to a relatively large population of young and highly educated residents, higher education institutions, and a strong service-based economy (Musterd et al., 2020).
All analyses are conducted at the household level. For reasons of data availability we confine our analyses to the 2005–2015 period. We define households as low income when they earn a gross income below 22,100 euros per year for single-person households, and 30,000 euros for multi-person households. These income levels are based on eligibility for tenant subsidies in the Netherlands, thus shaping access to the most affordable housing segments. Our analyses are restricted to households where the main earner is aged between 22 and 65. Lower minimum wage criteria apply below the age of 22, while 65 represents retirement age for most Dutch citizens. As a robustness check we also conducted all analyses for low-income households earning up to 34,911 euros gross – the maximum income (in 2016) to be eligible for entering social-rental housing. These analyses return similar though slightly less pronounced outcomes. Our analyses include 758,646 and 797,490 households in the Amsterdam region in 2005 and 2015 respectively, and 261,801 and 275,207 households in the Utrecht region for the same years.

We map residential distributions at the neighbourhood level, following the classification by Statistics Netherlands. These are typically delineated by major infrastructure or natural boundaries, and are stable over time. Scarcely populated neighbourhoods (with less than 200 households in 2005 or 2015) are excluded. Our analyses include 881 neighbourhoods in the Amsterdam region (316 in the city) and 269 in the Utrecht region (86 in the city).

FIGURE 1 The share of low-income households in the Amsterdam region in 2005 (top map) and 2005–2015 percentage point change.
We further explore the suburbanisation of poverty by linking percentage-point changes in low-income households to key neighbourhood characteristics. Here we present data for neighbourhood urbanity (based on number of addresses per square kilometre) and distances (as the crow flies) to the city halls of Amsterdam and Utrecht. While the former is a better indicator of suburbanisation, the latter is a better indicator of decentralisation. We also pay attention to neighbourhood-level 2005–2015 changes in real-estate values (Dutch: WOZ), linking population change to gentrification.

4 | EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

4.1 | Spatial patterns

Despite the deep global financial crisis, the share of low-income households living in the municipalities of Amsterdam and Utrecht decreased between 2005 and 2015, by 1.83 and 0.08 percentage points respectively (see Appendix S1). In their surrounding regions, their share increased by 1.76 and 1.43 percentage points respectively. This crude dichotomy suggests a suburbanisation of poverty in both regions, though one that is more pronounced and absolute in Amsterdam.
Mapping these changes in the social geography of both regions highlights important variations. In both the Amsterdam region (Figure 1) and Utrecht region (Figure 2), the strongest concentrations of low-income households in 2005 were in peripheral neighbourhoods of the core cities. Low-income shares tend to be clearly lower in the surrounding regions, but important exceptions exist: poverty rates are above average in higher-density satellite cities.

Subsequent neighbourhood changes between 2005 and 2015 reveal some striking patterns (Figures 1 and 2). In both Amsterdam and Utrecht, the share of low-income households decreased in most central-city neighbourhoods. Their shares increased in the municipal periphery and, in fact, most neighbourhoods in the surrounding regions. Notable examples include the new towns of Almere and Lelystad in the east of the Amsterdam region. Although there definitely are suburban
neighbourhoods following different trajectories, we clearly see an increase in low-income shares in suburbs. Previous research suggests these patterns follow from both direct and indirect (exclusionary) trends of suburbanising poverty (Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2018).

These patterns belie notable differences between different types of low-income households. A common trend in both regions is that suburbanisation trends were strongest among the unemployed, while the low-income self-employed households particularly increased their presence in central urban neighbourhoods, muting aggregate trends. An explanation may be that the self-employed are willing to make starker trade-offs to live in these neighbourhoods, that they are upwardly mobile or possess high cultural capital (cf. Rose, 1984).

4.2 Neighbourhood trajectories

Further analyses confirm a clear and significant statistical association (for all presented: $p < 0.001$) of changing low-income shares with various neighbourhood characteristics. Scatter diagrams plot different neighbourhood characteristics against neighbourhood-level percentage point changes (Figure 3, also Appendix S1).

Neighbourhood density shows a clear negative association with changing low-income shares, in both the Amsterdam (−0.41) and Utrecht (−0.31) regions. Only 17% of the highest density neighbourhood decile in Amsterdam saw an increase in poverty, while this was 35% in Utrecht. Compare this to over 80% of neighbourhoods in the lower-density seventh decile in Amsterdam, and ninth decile in Utrecht. When we consider density as a close proxy for urbanity, then these trends clearly indicate a suburbanisation of poverty.

Likewise, distance from city hall is positively associated with percentage point changes in low-income residents (0.35 in Amsterdam, 0.21 in Utrecht). Those neighbourhoods closest to the urban cores are gentrifying and saw strong decreases in poverty, while those further out saw increases. In both regions, the vast majority of neighbourhoods further out saw increasing poverty shares.

Additionally, as may be expected, a negative association with change in real-estate values exists (−0.44 and −0.27). The scatter diagrams show that neighbourhoods with increasing real-estate values overwhelmingly concentrate in the
Amsterdam and Utrecht municipalities, suggesting the central role of urban gentrification in triggering regional socio-spatial restructuring, including the suburbanisation of poverty.

Figure 4 further charts the percentage point change in low-income residents across distance and density deciles. These analyses underscore the wider spatial reach of gentrification and the more pronounced suburbanisation of poverty in the Amsterdam region. In contrast to Amsterdam, the strongest increases in poverty in the Utrecht region were among still rather central and high-density neighbourhoods (third and fourth decile respectively). By and large, these are peripheral neighbourhoods within or close to municipal borders signalling at least a decentralisation of low-income presence.

5 | CONCLUSION: A RESEARCH AGENDA

In this paper, we have argued that it is increasingly urgent to integrate analyses of gentrification with those on the suburbanisation of poverty. The two processes are fundamentally related through the displacement and exclusion of disadvantaged populations.

Our empirical analyses demonstrate a clear suburbanisation of poverty existing alongside urban gentrification in the Amsterdam and Utrecht regions, using measures of urbanity, centrality, and real-estate valuation. Yet, these are far from uniform processes: many neighbourhoods, both urban and suburban, show deviant developments. Indeed, the suburbanisation of more affluent households also continues (Booi & Boterman, 2020). We also highlight regional differences in the intensity of both gentrification and poverty suburbanisation, as well as their spatial reach. In Amsterdam, lower-income groups are pushed to the furthest parts of the region, while in Utrecht the strongest increases can still be found somewhat closer to the central city. An integrated analysis therefore requires a regional geography perspective while also being attentive to important neighbourhood-level variations to avoid false urban–suburban dichotomies (Charmes & Keil, 2015; Tzannis & Boterman, 2018). The suburbanisation of poverty explored here represents a remarkable break from recent history, when most suburbs were decidedly middle class, and begs for further scrutiny. Here, we suggest a (non-exhaustive) research agenda consisting of five key lines of inquiry.

First, where most gentrification studies tend to focus on the neighbourhoods going through the process, it is important to bring into focus the impact of gentrification on socio-spatial inequality at the regional level (also Lawton, 2020). This can particularly be done by focusing on population flows rather than static population distributions. A focus on moves across space illuminates functional relations, linking origin and destination neighbourhoods (Coulter et al., 2016). While there are already some studies applying such a focus (Damhuis et al., 2019), a key challenge remains to capture the moves of displaced populations from gentrifying to suburban areas, as well as to chart the residential patterns of excluded populations that are not able to gain a foothold in the city anymore (Hochstenbach & Musterd, 2018). These are important steps to measure and quantify displacement and exclusion, as well as their impact on levels and forms of urban–regional inequality. A dynamic perspective on residential moves can also provide early insight into how systemic shocks and structural transformations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and policy responses, impact socio-spatial patterns.

Second, and relatedly, in studying the links between gentrification and suburbanising poverty, greater attention should be paid to the intersection of individual characteristics pertaining to class, employment, age, life course, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and other domains. Different populations make different residential trade-offs, in which location is included. The outcome can be a selective and variegated suburbanisation of poverty in which not all disadvantaged populations suburbanise, or to different types of suburban neighbourhoods. As urban gentrification continues, middle-income households are also increasingly unable to afford urban house prices, triggering suburbanisation. Furthermore, more focus should be given to the impact of preceding life events triggering residential mobility. These could be evictions (Desmond, 2016) or – especially in cases of strong tenant protection – adverse life events such as job loss or household dissolution that necessitate moving. The typical urgency of such events may negatively shape subsequent residential outcomes.

Third, in studying the residential patterns associated with gentrification and suburbanising poverty, it is important to recognise how these are shaped by broader forces pertaining to both capital and state. The geography of capital flows structures uneven socio-spatial developments, including urban gentrification and suburban decline (Smith et al., 2001). Similarly, states may have the capacity to both facilitate socio-spatial transformations, e.g., by promoting gentrification, or to dampen these. A key research challenge is to link micro-level residential (moving) patterns to a political economy perspective on the role of both capital and the state in gentrification, displacement, exclusion, and suburbanising poverty.

Fourth, while the suburbanisation of poverty has emerged as an important aspect of contemporary metropolitan change, it is far from universal. It is therefore important to understand which neighbourhood characteristics are associated with suburban decline. Subsequently, at a higher spatial scale, it is important to unravel what the implications are for the changing social geography of regions (Musterd et al., 2020) and their functional roles (Meijers, 2008). Previous work has shown the
suburbanisation of poverty to have an overall de-segregating effect (Bailey & Minton, 2018) as poor populations are pushed into previously middle-class suburbs. Yet, new clusters of poverty may still emerge (Tong & Kim, 2019) and overall spatial inequalities may increase (Hochstenbach & Arundel, 2020). A key question then is whether potential reductions in segregation are structural or temporary as class maps are redrawn, and whether these reductions actually amount to greater spatial equity and opportunities.

This brings us to the fifth and final research avenue, which is to chart the implications of suburbanising poverty for (poor) individuals. Suburbanisation may imply less access to regional labour markets and amenities (Zhang & Pryce, 2020), and greater transport costs burdens for low-income populations (Martens, 2016). Essentially, this would entail a loss in spatial capital (Rérat & Lees, 2011). These processes may also be associated with a loss in affordable housing options, aggravating housing-cost burdens. Furthermore, suburbanisation may have a differential effect on low-income populations’ health and well-being, and access to care and welfare services (Bailey et al., 2019). Finally, research can investigate the impact of poverty suburbanisation on residential satisfaction, social ties, and belonging.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper draws on author calculations of non-public micro-data from the Systems of Social-statistical datasets (SSD) from Statistics Netherlands (CBS). Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors on request.

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ENDNOTE

1 All incomes are inflation-corrected to 2016 values.

REFERENCES


**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix S1.** The percentage-point change in low-income households (2005–2015) per neighbourhood type, and the share of neighbourhoods where the share of low-income households increased.

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