

How Gentrification could be Impacting your Grandparents



Image sourced from Fort Worth CVD

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New studies find that mental health in older people has a higher chance of deteriorating if the older person lives in a gentrified neighborhood. In addition, the adverse mental health effects are more likely to affect economically unstable older adults.

If you're anything like me, you spend your major holidays visiting your family. On my most recent visit home, I went to visit my grandma and help her bake some pies for Christmas. As I was leaving my parent's house, my dad made some comment about young families moving into my grandma's neighborhood. I didn't think much of it at the time, as nothing had changed in that neighborhood for as long as I could remember. My grandmother and her other grandparent friends had a monopoly on the neighborhood, so it was weird to hear about someone new moving in.

However, as I drove closer to her neighborhood, I saw a vegan breakfast restaurant in the place of an old laundromat and a coffee shop where a hardware store used to be. Once again, I didn't think anything of it. The area was just getting a facelift; how different could the actual neighborhood really be?

I finally got to her house, and as I got out of the car, there was a group of kids playing in her neighbor's front yard. This was odd because one of her closest friends lived there, and as far as I knew, the couple next door didn't have any grandkids.

As I walked in, my grandma was sitting in front of her TV watching *Days of Our Lives* like she normally does around noon. We exchanged hugs and got to work prepping the kitchen. While rolling out pie crust, I asked her about the kids outside in her neighbor's yard and the new businesses in the area. She made some comment about how everything seemed to be changing around her, she told me her neighbors had moved out about three months ago, and the coffee shop bought out the hardware store.

We started making the pie fillings, and she continued on about the changes, but got more and more upset about it as she talked about it. Half of her friends had moved away, her Saturday night bible study had dwindled from 18 to 5 members, and the young families around her were nice, but too loud for her taste.

As we put the pies into the oven to bake, we sat down, and I finally got the chance to ask her how she felt about everything going on. I wasn't sure what to expect, but she told me how sad she was. She said she felt out of place. Most of her friends had moved to nursing homes or smaller houses, and she felt left behind.

My conversation with her started to worry me. I knew gentrification was tough for the residents that lived in an area before modern development, but I didn't think my own grandmother would have a hard time with it.

Upon some investigation of what exactly was bothering my grandma, I came across several studies about the correlations between gentrification and mental health in older adults.

The first study I came across pointed to a lack of familiarity in a place that used to be home as the main issue. The study is called, *Aging in Place in Gentrifying Neighborhoods: Implications for Physical and Mental Health*. While there are some concerns for physical health, the main concern for older people living in neighborhoods undergoing extreme development is their mental health.

The extreme changes to their homes generate alienation from the area because the older generation is excluded from the conversation about what developmental changes will be made to the area. This leads to new businesses moving into the area that are of little to no interest to the older generation in the area. The new businesses replace places that the older residents would typically frequent. For example, the hardware store in my grandma's neighborhood. To the older residents living there, the hardware store was more of a daily store for them. It carried a lot more than just hardware, and most of the older residents would frequent the shop a couple of times a week, my grandma included.

The next study I came across was done in Australia and focused on a lack of familiarity with neighbors as to why the older generation is having a hard time coping with the gentrification of their neighborhoods. Specifically, if older residents could identify with their neighborhood, according to this study, finding identity within their neighborhood greatly buffers any negative effects gentrification may have on mental health. The study defined neighborhood identification as having a tight-knit community in which residents spend time together and participate in neighborhood-wide activities. So in the case of my grandmother, her friends moving away were causing her to lose a piece of herself.

With the result of both studies in mind, it was no wonder why my grandma was so sad when I visited her. She had lost so much familiarity with the new businesses opening up, and her identity had been uprooted with her friends being replaced by younger families. Knowing this now, I have sat and wondered what could solve this issue since my visit. I've come to realize that it is impossible to stop gentrification, but with more care toward original residents during the development process, maybe the change could be something that was welcomed instead of disheartening.