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“This is wrong and we will support you”: The (restricted) role of resident-led, neighbourhood-level planning teams in residential displacement

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Abstract

Using qualitative data collected from 2013–2017, this paper investigates how resident-led planning teams working within Hamilton, Ontario’s Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS) responded to gentrification and displacement. Highlighting case studies of three neighbourhoods, our findings reveal that resident groups can act as both sites of support for gentrification and sites of resistance to residential displacement. Our findings complicate the common narrative that posits residents as powerless in the face of gentrification, showing how residents resisted coercive displacement efforts. The case studies expose concrete strategies used by residents: engaging directly with City Hall and developers, countering exclusionary neighbourhood attitudes through community dialogue, and supporting tenant organizing. However, findings also highlight how differences among residents (particularly class, race, and length and type of tenure) shaped both the nature and effectiveness of resistance in this municipally-supported initiative, and identify the need for more attention to preventing displacement within formal planning processes.

Keywords: resident-led planning teams; Hamilton, Ontario; gentrification; displacement; social inequalities

Résumé

S’appuyant sur les données d’une évaluation quinquennale de la Stratégie d’action de quartier (NAS) de Hamilton, en Ontario, le présent document explore le rôle que les équipes de quartier peuvent jouer pour lutter contre les déplacements résidentiels. La NAS, agissant à l’échelle municipale et composée d’intervenants multiples, a été mise sur pied pour répondre aux inégalités en santé qui se retrouvent au niveau des quartiers; elle soutient les «équipes

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de planification» dirigées par les résidents pour développer des communautés plus saines. À l’aide de données qualitatives recueillies de 2013 à 2017, cet article examine les interventions des équipes de planification dirigées par les résidents envers l’embourgeoisement et les déplacements. En mettant en lumière des études de cas de trois quartiers, nos résultats révèlent que les groupes de résidents peuvent être tout autant des foyers d’appui à l’embourgeoisement que des foyers de résistance aux déplacements résidentiels. Nos résultats compliquent le récit commun qui postule que les résidents sont impuissants face à l’embourgeoisement, en montrant comment les résidents sont intervenus et sont devenus de puissants acteurs pour résister aux efforts de déplacement forcé. Les études de cas divulguent des stratégies concrètes utilisées par les résidents : dialoguer directement avec les élus et le personnel de l’hôtel de ville, de même qu’avec les promoteurs; contrecarrer les attitudes d’exclusion des résidents du quartier par le biais de dialogues communautaires ; et appuyer les locataires dans leurs efforts d’organisation.

Mots-clés : les équipes de quartier de planification ; Hamilton, Ontario ; embourgeoisement ; déplacements évictions ; inégalités sociales

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Introduction

Urban inequity has been a growing feature of urban spaces over the past several decades, and often surfaces in exacerbated neighbourhood-level disparities (Borrell et al. 2013). State involvement in public welfare has also diminished, resulting in the devolution of civic responsibilities to the local level (Theodore 2020; Wilson Gilmore 2009). In the context of both neighbourhood decline and a greater sense of responsibility for stemming decline, local state actors have turned towards participatory revitalization efforts in an attempt to restore economic vitality to underinvested urban neighbourhoods (Atkinson 2004; Uitermark et al. 2007). These local initiatives are highly contextual, but most involve some element of cross-sectoral collaboration, where neighbourhood groups identify ways to improve different elements of their local environment, then work with community partners to achieve their identified goals (Pomeroy 2006). In so doing, these efforts draw on a long history of neighbourhood-level activism: it is at the neighbourhood level that most residents have the knowledge and the motivation to identify collective priorities and engage in/with local governance (Martin 2003).

While often intended to address social inequities by improving under-invested neighbourhoods, these revitalization initiatives have been shown to have the paradoxical consequence of increasing neighbourhood desirability, accelerating gentrification and ultimately displacing existing residents (Sites 1998). At the same time, neighbourhood activism has in some cases been shown to slow—if not totally prevent—processes of displacement that accompany gentrification (Fagotto and Fung 2005; Pomeroy 2006; Edwards 2018; Moro 2018). It is still not well understood in what contexts, and through what specific actions, neighbourhood initiatives – and, in particular, those supported by local governments as part of broader revitalization efforts – can effectively resist displacement.

Drawing on data from a five-year evaluation of Hamilton’s *Neighbourhood Action Strategy* (NAS), this paper explores the role that resident-led neighbourhood groups (in this case, known as ‘planning teams’) can play in addressing residential displacement. We examine three different strategies used by neighbourhood planning teams to resist residential displacement in a rapidly gentrifying Canadian city: 1) engaging directly with potential developers and city planning processes, 2) countering exclusionary neighbourhood goals through community education and dialogue, and 3) supporting tenant rights and organizing efforts. We argue that while gentrification and displacement have complex causes beyond the local realm, resident actors can still play important roles, as either aggravating or mitigating forces. We now turn to a review of the literature on gentrification and resident-led activism to situate our study.

Gentrification and resident power in the contemporary urban context

Gentrification has become one of the most salient urban trends in cities of various sizes throughout the world (Walks and Maaranen 2008). While gentrification may be perceived, articulated and experienced differently in different

contexts, it has been shown to pattern in predictable ways depending on factors such as housing stock and proximity to other gentrifying areas (Harris et al. 2015; Kearns and Whitley 2017). Here, we define gentrification as an urban phenomenon marked by class and racial shifts. In particular, gentrification occurs when a more affluent and generally white population moves into a previously disadvantaged community, displacing longer term residents who are often working class and/or people of colour (Kirkland 2008). While gentrification is a highly racialized process (Alejandrino 2000; Bostic and Martin 2003), explicit mention of race continues to be notably absent from academic definitions of, and discourses surrounding, gentrification (Atkinson 2003; Hackworth 2002; Kirkland 2008; Vidgor, 2002). Many authors have hypothesized a “classical” gentrification process that begins with risk-taking in-movers (Lees et al. 2007; Kerstein 1990)—often artists (Deutsche and Ryan, 1984; Ley 2003), but also young professionals and “sweat equity” renovators—and is followed by other, more risk-averse but also more affluent in-movers as the neighbourhood “revitalizes”. While this process remains relevant, other examinations have highlighted how state-led interventions (Hackworth and Smith, 2000) and the financialization of housing through real estate investment trusts (REITs) (Lima 2020; August and Walks 2018; August 2020) have created new forces of gentrification and neighbourhood change.

Ideas surrounding the inevitability of gentrification have come to permeate contemporary urban discourses (Slater 2006). Notions of inevitability are easily perpetuated by the setting up of a false choice between gentrification and neighbourhood degeneration (Slater 2006). Implicit in this double bind is the notion that gentrification is necessary in order for neighbourhoods to improve (Glynn 2008). In addition to this, the voices of long-term residents, particularly poor and racialized tenants, have often been scant in academic, policy and public discussions surrounding gentrification (August 2014; Slater 2006). This framing excludes residents as important factors in urban redevelopment projects, ignores their concerns about local affairs, and minimizes their collective power as actors in the gentrification process (August 2016; Lee 2014). The coalescence of these factors has created a common narrative that situates residents as powerless actors in the face of gentrification. Important scholarly contributions have begun to challenge this narrative by illuminating the perspectives and experiences of working-class residents in gentrifying neighbourhoods (Paton, 2014).

The paradoxical power of neighbourhood groups

The dynamics of community organizing in the face of neighbourhood change is a perennial—if somewhat underexplored—topic in the literature. As Garboden and Jang-Trettien note, much of this literature suggests that “the ability of a community to mount a coordinated response is portrayed as fundamental to its survival” (Garboden and Jang-Trettien 2020). At the same time, public participation risks representing the parochial interests of a small, privileged group of residents, often at the expense of more socially marginalized community members (Eisenberg 2017; Fagotto and Fung 2005; Pothier 2016). If the most marginalized residents are not included in local decision-making processes, their voices will be lost, and more powerful residents can make choices that may lead to negative and exclusionary outcomes (Fagotto and Fung 2005; Fraser 2004).

It has been argued that neighbourhood associations have historically been used as vehicles to perpetuate such exclusionary goals, taking actions that largely benefit middle-class white residents (Eisenberg 2017; Moskowitz 2017). In the context of resident-led revitalization initiatives, what counts as ‘neighbourhood improvement’ can be conceptualized differently by the many actors involved in such interventions; exclusionary neighbourhood goals can surface in the prioritization of neighbourhood projects that favour beautification, while ignoring more pressing issues such as housing or food security (Fagotto and Fung 2005). In this way, goals of the neighbourhood that reflect exclusionary and parochial interests can align with ‘improvement’ initiatives that promote the conditions that segregate, isolate and displace marginalized residents (Fraser 2004; Pomeroy 2006). As such, the outcomes of revitalization initiatives can tread a thin line between neighbourhood improvement and gentrification (Pomeroy 2006). Neighbourhood groups must manage the risk of improving their neighbourhood for a different, more affluent demographic, rather than fundamentally changing the conditions for the intended beneficiaries of the intervention (Sites 1998). This tension has been observed in various multi-stakeholder revitalization initiatives in cities such as Minneapolis (Fagotto and Fung 2005), Chicago (Greenberg et al. 2010; Sites 1998) and Boston (Pomeroy 2006). This represents a fundamental paradox in efforts that are focused on inequity, since marginalized residents are the most likely to be at risk of displacement.

However, resident groups (even those that are *not* fully representative of their neighbourhoods) have also used their power to enact a conceptualization of neighbourhood improvement in which the interests of marginalized

residents are advocated for (see for example Lin 2019). There have been examples throughout North America of residents pre-emptively combating speculative gentrification and displacement pressures by securing affordable housing units through the construction of Community Land Trusts (Pomeroy 2006), mandating affordable housing policies in neighbourhood plans (Fagotto and Fung 2005) and organizing rent strikes to protest unfair and above guideline rent increases (Edwards 2018; Moro 2018). The above examples demonstrate the power of residents and neighbourhood groups to effectively advocate in the interest of marginalized residents amidst gentrification and displacement pressures. Neighbourhood groups can therefore be seen as powerful agents in the processes of gentrification, but their role in facilitating or resisting gentrification is not consistent across settings. This paper seeks to elucidate how neighbourhood-level resident organizations can impact gentrification processes using the city of Hamilton’s Neighbourhood Planning Teams as a case study.

Supporting resident-led revitalization? The example of the Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS)

While neighbourhood-level inequity has complex causes that extend far beyond the scope of the municipality, urban actors are nevertheless charged with the task of responding to structural inequity that manifests locally. Many municipalities have been responding to these challenges through resident-led strategies that target specific neighbourhoods for community development efforts.

One such effort was the *Neighbourhood Action Strategy* (NAS) in Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton is a mid-size, post-industrial centre, located approximately 70 km from Toronto. The NAS was a resident-led initiative that operated in 11 low-income neighbourhoods. Created in 2011 as a joint partnership between the City of Hamilton and local service providers, the NAS sought to empower residents to address local neighbourhood-level inequities through the provision of resources such as community development support and small grant funding.

Each neighbourhood was represented by a ‘planning team’ comprised of residents, service providers and other local partners (such as city staff, business owners, etc). The balance of residents, service providers and local partners varied by neighbourhood; however, residents always formed the core of the planning team, and were supported by at least one Community Developer. While the NAS provided an overarching structure, the composition and internal logistics of planning teams varied considerably across neighbourhoods. Typically, a resident became a member of a planning team by 1) verbally confirming that they were a neighbourhood resident (i.e. that they live within the boundaries of that particular NAS neighbourhood), and 2) attending planning team meetings. While all residents were welcome to attend the planning team meetings in their respective neighbourhood, many planning teams struggled with resident participation and engagement (Neighbourhood Action Evaluation 2018). Representation was an ongoing challenging for many planning teams, as many teams did not reflect the diversity of their neighbourhoods at large. For example, tenants, as well as Black, Indigenous and other people of colour, were often underrepresented in planning teams across NAS neighbourhoods. To address these representational challenges, some planning teams tried to reduce barriers to participation by providing supports such as childcare, bus tokens, and/or dinner; however, these supports were not consistently provided across all 11 NAS neighbourhoods (Neighbourhood Action Evaluation 2018).

The resident-led planning teams were heavily supported by Community Developers (CDs), workers who helped the teams with neighbourhood outreach and establishing neighbourhood priorities. The priorities set out by the planning teams were articulated in their Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAPs): these plans identified neighbourhood goals and outlined the specific actions that would be undertaken to achieve them. Some planning teams hired external consultants to help them identify their collective goals and develop their NAPs; however, the type of supports planning teams received for NAP development varied across neighbourhoods. NAPs included projects related to food security, housing, beautification, education, and overall neighbourhood improvement. Once planning teams finalized their NAPs, they had the opportunity to have it endorsed by the Hamilton City Council. The planning teams met regularly to discuss how to move their plans forward, as well as other neighbourhood issues and activities.

As briefly mentioned above, many neighbourhoods in Hamilton were rapidly gentrifying during our evaluation of the NAS. Planning teams learned about redevelopment plans in their neighbourhood in different ways. While some planning teams developed a subcommittee to address development issues, others received information informally through word of mouth, while others did not discuss gentrification or redevelopment at all. Although the values of equity and resident leadership were central to the NAS, some NAS actors grappled with the reality that ‘improvement’ efforts could fundamentally alter the demographics of the neighbourhood and contribute to a process of gentrification.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on responses to urban inequity at a time of intensifying gentrification and residential displacement in urban centres. First, we aim to shed light on the paradoxical effect of efforts to invest in previously underfunded areas to alleviate poverty and social inequities, given that increasing ‘desirability’ can lead to displacement of the very residents these initiatives were created to support. Second, while understanding gentrification as a complex process with causes far beyond the municipal scope, we argue that residents can be central in gentrification processes, and can either embrace or stand against urban processes that contribute to displacement. In so doing, our research seeks to challenge the idea that gentrification is inevitable, and that cities and residents are powerless to stop it. By providing examples of resident-led groups intervening in gentrification, we demonstrate that citizens can be powerful actors in resisting residential displacement.

Methods

In order to explore the role of neighbourhood planning teams in responding to gentrification and displacement, we draw on qualitative data collected from 2013–2017 from our team’s evaluation of the Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS). Our data includes: 117 interviews with NAS participants (residents, service providers, and City staff involved in the NAS), participant observation at monthly neighbourhood meetings and special events, and public documents such as NAS annual reports, neighbourhood plans, meeting minutes, terms of reference and newspaper articles. All data was collected in NVivo and analyzed thematically drawing on concepts from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1996). Drawing on the work of Foucault and others, CDA seeks to systematically explore the relationships between discursive practices and wider social structures, and to investigate how such practices (including events and texts) arise out of relations of power and struggles over power (Fairclough 1995; Locke 2004).

We use this data to explore specific counter-displacement activities by neighbourhood planning teams using a series of case studies. A case study approach was selected for its ability to draw out the nuances and power relations inherent in complex phenomena like contested urban spaces (Flyvbjerg 2006; Merriam 1998). We selected three distinct neighbourhood examples to reflect different experiences of gentrification within the city: (a) neighbourhoods in the downtown core where a “classic” process of arts-led gentrification (Deutsche and Ryan 1984; Ley 2003) was occurring; (b) neighbourhoods adjacent to gentrifying neighbourhoods, but not currently experiencing the same level of residential investment and housing turnover; and (c) neighbourhoods further from the downtown core, but where displacement pressures are nonetheless occurring (e.g., due to financialization of the rental housing market—see Fields 2017; Albers 2019). We selected one neighbourhood from each type to highlight how responses and strategies against displacement differ depending on their specific gentrification pressures.

In order to protect the identities of the residents involved in the planning teams, we have used pseudonyms for each neighbourhood. We focus in on residents and resident-led planning teams who have attempted to proactively intervene to reduce the displacement of existing residents. These examples demonstrate the ways in which resident-led planning teams can bolster the voices of marginalized residents and mitigate—although not completely prevent—or support displacement.

Centretown: ‘This is wrong and we are here to support you’

Centretown is a neighbourhood in the midst of what has been categorized as an arts-led gentrification process (Ryan 2018; Carter 2018; Hamilton Artists Inc 2019). It is a historic community located in the downtown core that, having become a destination for small art galleries, has been increasingly targeted for residential and commercial development. The neighbourhood is residentially mixed, with single family dwellings, above storefront apartments, several relatively low-rent high-rise apartments, and most recently, condo developments. Its proximity to amenities, services and public transit hubs make the neighbourhood appealing to new residents arriving from outside communities, who have been increasingly coming to the city for its relative affordability (Berman 2017). These changes mean that the demographics of Centretown have been shifting rapidly and that existing residents are increasingly at risk of displacement. The Centretown Planning Team (CPT) is a mix of longer-term residents and newer (and often younger and university-educated) arrivals.

In early 2015, the Centretown Planning Team (CPT) heard reports from local tenants about ‘renovictions’ from a local high-rise. This term refers to a process where property managers propose major renovations, usually in order to ‘clean up’ apartments, attract higher-income tenants and raise rents with the intent of evicting existing tenants

(Hager 2016). Existing tenants are offered financial incentives to leave or are so disrupted by renovations that they must leave. In the case of the Centretown high-rise, the tenants were being offered a \$2000 incentive to vacate their apartments, and there were reports of intimidation and scare tactics being used by property managers, who were accused of taking advantage of tenants who were new immigrants, refugees and/or living with disabilities or on social assistance. The leadership of the planning team, by contrast, was largely white and middle-class—a fact that was acknowledged by team members.

It emerged that many tenants were unaware of their rights, and in particular some tenants were unaware that by leaving, they would be forfeiting the rent subsidy provided by the municipal housing corporation. Meanwhile, the CPT discovered that the property managers had applied to exceed provincial rent increases for a number of buildings in the neighbourhood.

In response, the CPT worked with local social service agencies to host a public meeting to educate the public and offer emotional and organizational support for tenants. The meeting included representatives from various legal and housing organizations, other service providers and partners, community development workers, resident tenants, CPT members, and the media. The opening remarks from the CPT made their stance clear: “This is wrong and we are here to support you.” The meeting gave residents a venue to share their experiences, connect with the service agencies in attendance and collectively brainstorm solutions to the challenges faced. It also allowed the CPT to publicly denounce coercive displacement efforts and visibly mobilize around tenant rights. Around this time, in response to an influx of proposed developments in the rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood, the CPT also started a new sub-committee to deal directly with proposed developments and relations with property managers in their neighbourhood.

In early 2017, it came to light at CPT meetings that the property managers of the Centretown high-rises were continuing their efforts to redevelop the properties. This time, the property managers proposed major renovations to remove dozens of three-bedroom units and replace them with one- and two-bedroom units. CPT members and residents understood this as a move against families, particularly the many immigrant and refugee families occupying the three-bedroom units in these buildings. The property managers first approached the local city councillor, who referred them to the planning team as a first point of contact for resident opinion and endorsement. The CPT took a public stance against the proposal and vowed to support tenants and engage in ongoing negotiations with the property managers. After several encounters between the CPT, property managers and tenants, both at public meetings and in private, the property managers eventually agreed to keep 10 of the three-bedroom units. At another meeting, the property managers insisted that they wanted to work with the community, but told the CPT that they could ‘litigate or cooperate’—in other words, they could support the proposal to keep 10 three-bedroom units, or they could challenge the proposal legally. The property manager representative stated:

Litigation builds a bit of a wall ... cooperation is much more, I think, win-win for everyone concerned, but you’re going to have to decide which strategy works best for you.

Some CPT members interpreted this statement as threatening and misleading; the representative responded: ‘The decisions you make will build the relationship or make it more difficult.’

The proposal to eliminate all but 10 three-bedroom units went before the City’s Committee of Adjustment as a ‘minor variance.’ The CPT vocally objected to the proposal as ‘minor,’ arguing that the proposal would in fact remove a significant number of the three-bedroom units in the entire downtown core, would displace potentially dozens of families, and could seriously compromise school enrolment at the local elementary school. The members of the planning team and tenants prepared to speak and ‘load the room’ with supporters in order to demonstrate to council how strongly the residents felt about this issue. At least 60 people were in attendance—including residents and affected tenants, housing advocates, service providers, concerned neighbours, and CPT members. Attendees filled the room and overflowed into the lobby. A committee member noted that given the significant interest and large public attendance at the meeting, this was clearly a bigger issue that should be put before council, not the committee of adjustment, due to the need for advanced policy guidance far beyond the scope of a ‘minor’ variance. The committee unanimously voted to deny the property manager’s minor variance application.

Over the next several months, the property managers and the CPT were involved in intense negotiations. Through the negotiations, the parties settled on maintaining 35 three-bedroom units and a minimum of 25% of total units as two-bedroom, and signing an agreement to not evict any of the remaining families occupying the current three-bedroom units. Going forward, the CPT agreed to lead meetings with tenants to inform them of the develop-

ment and their rights. At a public meeting, the CPT leadership attributed their success to ‘time, money and good will,’ but also stated ‘we don’t want to have to do this kind of intervention in each development.’ Members insisted that although they wanted their voices heard, they did not have the capacity or desire to be the arbiters of new developments or complex proposals. In 2017 alone, the CPT had been approached for input by developers at least a dozen times, and many of their monthly meeting agendas were dominated by developers seeking endorsements. While the CPT continues to work directly with developers and City Hall on emerging proposals, the CPT also voted to send a representative to the Hamilton Community Benefits Network, a coalition working towards agreements for new developments, ensuring some level of accountability and community benefit. Members stated that ‘we may not be able to stop them,’ but expressed a wish to ensure that developers provide something of value back to the community.

This account of the CPT’s response to the proposed removal of three-bedroom apartment buildings presents one strategy for countering a displacement effort. The CPT mobilized to support tenants, connect with service providers and publicly denounce displacement efforts. The fact that the property managers were referred to the CPT by the City council and other partners indicates that the CPT is an important actor in this process. So too is the CPT’s success in initiating official negotiations with the property manager above and making concrete demands to avoid the displacement of individual residents and families.

The CPT demonstrated how resident-led groups can confront displacement through direct involvement with developers and City actors. Importantly, the white, middle-class leadership of the CPT was not affected directly by the ‘renovictions,’ but likely made the group more able (and more willing) to navigate the bureaucracy of City policies and collaborate with multiple actors: they were able to mobilize their race and class privilege to facilitate their advocacy.

At the same time, the negotiated settlement was not considered a complete ‘win,’ as a number of three bedroom units were lost, and rents continued to increase. In addition, CPT members expressed concern that it would not be possible for them to consistently expend this level of effort in resisting displacement; this suggests that while resident organizing can be effective in the face of specific challenges, it is unlikely to stem an ongoing wave of developer pressure. While the city government’s referral of items to the planning team was an encouraging display of confidence in resident leadership, it also required an ongoing, significant commitment of volunteer resources from the resident group. This calls into question the utility of resident-led organizing as the de-facto response to gentrification, and suggests the need for a stronger position from municipal decision-makers (such as the City’s Committee of Adjustment) with respect to changes that might contribute to displacement.

Hillboro: From exclusionary to neighbourly through group learning

Hillboro is located just outside of the downtown core and has been experiencing some residential and commercial development, though not to the extent seen in Centretown. Hillboro is a historic residential community with tree-lined streets and large Victorian homes, some of which are now multi-unit rental properties and some are residential care facilities (RCFs). More than 70% of Hillboro residents are renters (Social Planning Research Council of Hamilton 2012). The Hillboro Planning Team (HPT) has a long organizing history dating back to at least the early 1990s, beginning as a ‘Neighbourhood Watch’-style group focused on neighbourhood disorder, and eventually transforming into an NAS planning team. This history has shaped the internal dynamics at the planning table; although all residents are welcome to join, there have frequently been tensions between homeowners and renters, and some of their goals could be seen to reflect the “exclusionary and parochial interests” that neighbourhood associations have been critiqued for (e.g., Fraser 2004). Below, we present a case study of the Hillboro Planning Team (HPT)’s evolving response to displacement pressures, highlighting its relationship with residential care facilities (RCFs). HPT’s case study demonstrates another strategy for countering displacement and exclusionary neighbourhood goals through community education and dialogue.

Residential care facilities (RCFs) have been a point of contention in several downtown neighbourhoods in Hamilton, including Hillboro, due to what is seen as a concentration of RCFs in the area. RCFs can be defined as facilities that provide accommodations, meals, care, and supervision for residents who require various levels of support, including the elderly, those with disabilities, those formerly incarcerated or those experiencing mental health issues. In Hillboro, RCFs often take up residence in large converted Victorian-style homes. Perceptions of RCFs in Hamilton are complicated by media stories about RCF mismanagement or neglect. In Hillboro, we observed

ambivalent discourses about RCFs and their residents, who are marked both as targets of ‘inclusion’ efforts and also targets of displacement to further revitalization goals.

The ambivalence towards RCFs in Hillboro has been observed across all types of NAS partners, including homeowners, staff and managers. One of the Hillboro planning team’s stated goals is to build strong relationships with local RCFs and ensure that the facilities and the residents feel welcome in the community. The planning team residents have invited some RCFs to public meetings and once had a summer student dedicated to making connections with local facilities. Yet, the last section of their RCF goal is to investigate zoning restrictions for group homes ‘to reduce the number of RCFs.’ This stated aim of reducing the number of RCFs amounts to a call for the removal of (at least some) RCFs and thus the displacement of their residents.

In early 2015, the Hillboro Planning Team (HPT) was visited by the manager of a local residential care facility (RCF) to seek support from the planning team residents. The facility, located one block away from official Hillboro boundaries, proposed to temporarily move into Hillboro while its building was renovated. Even though the proposed renovations and move would not increase the number of facilities or tenants, it was perceived that by ‘helping’ a residential care facility (i.e. allowing renovations to modernize the building), it would set a precedent of accommodating and welcoming RCFs. This proposal was initially resisted by the HPT and the City councillor for the area. However, at the meeting, the manager of the facility was accompanied by the City councillor, who suggested that he had a change of heart. The councillor admitted that he and others at the City had wrongly tried to put up barriers to prevent the facility from renovating, due in part to concerns from residents about being ‘inundated’ with care facilities.

This meeting was the first time many residents had heard about the proposed one-block move, and many expressed concerns. Questions for the RCF manager included: Who are the clients? How many of your clients will stay in the neighbourhood? Will there be signage to indicate what the facility is? To the latter point, residents were concerned that the proposed new building, located centrally on a main street in the neighbourhood, would be bad ‘advertising’ for the neighbourhood. However, other residents argued that the RCF residents were ‘model neighbours’ and that the facility was run by a reputable social service agency, and so deserved the community’s support. The residents in attendance decided to reach out to the broader neighbourhood for input, and suggested a separate meeting where the RCF manager could present their case and take questions from the wider public.

This began a process of engagement and learning that began with planning team members. The HPT began meeting with the RCF management, and was also going through a parallel process of learning about how to apply an equity lens and collaborative conflict resolution (this training was undertaken as part of the City’s support for the PTs). As this engagement progressed, the HPT became more supportive of RCFs in general and more skilled at negotiation and conflict resolution.

Several months later, the HPT hosted a public meeting about the proposed RCF move. The planning team engaged the City councillor, RCF management, and other community members. With more than 50 people in attendance (compared to the usual 15–20 at regular meetings), the proposed move clearly elicited a strong response from local residents. Over the course of the event, the general consensus in the room shifted from concern, to ambivalence, to support for the RCF. Initially, there were dozens of members of the general public in attendance who were not in support of the facility. The RCF manager and the councillor fielded similar questions to the first meeting at the HPT. Many felt that the neighbourhood was already ‘inundated’ or ‘overrun’ with RCFs, which were considered to cause ‘problems’ for the neighbourhood. A property manager in the neighbourhood complained generally about RCFs and their residents, including complaints of noise, cigarettes, and vandalism. The RCF manager responded, ‘We see terrible things too’ and expressed that their residents should not be scapegoats for any neighbourhood problem. A resident suggested that the facility could move to the neighbourhood, but ‘maybe fence it off’ to prevent any potential effects on the rest of the neighbourhood. Some attendees became boisterous, interrupting the RCF manager. At this point, HPT members stopped the session to restate the values of the planning team, including respect, collaboration and inclusiveness. Continuing on, one resident said that he had lived beside the facility for years with no issues and joked that he had only one concern with the RCF residents: that they regularly did neighbourhood cleanups and ‘adopted’ the alleyway beside the facility. He stated that he ‘1000% supported’ the facility and its residents. While certainly some individuals in attendance were still against the proposed move by the end of the meeting, there was a palpable shift in the room, and once again, an ‘atmosphere of support’ for the RCF from the general community. Ultimately, the proposal went ahead.

Hillboro's interaction with the RCF serves as an example of how neighbourhood groups can evolve in their response to equity issues and displacement, and that both connection (in this case, with RCF managers) and education (provided through the auspices of the overarching Neighbourhood Action Strategy) are important to this evolution. Although many members were initially wary of the RCF proposal, the HPT used their meetings as spaces for community education—first for themselves, and then for the community as a whole.

As a neighbourhood adjacent to a rapidly gentrifying area but not currently experiencing much change, the HPT's initial response to displacement pressures played out in particular ways. Unlike Centretown, where the planning team focus has been on responding to a seemingly endless number of proposed developments, Hillboro's attention had remained focused on community engagement, attracting homeowners, cleaning up the 'image' of the neighbourhood, and dealing with internal 'issues' such as residential care facilities (RCFs). An interesting tension arises here: while the HPT's eventual acceptance of RCF's into the neighbourhood intervened in a potential physical displacement, the planning team efforts described above may, in fact, set the conditions for exclusionary displacement to occur (Marcuse 1985). Exclusionary displacement occurs when a low-income household is unable to access a unit that was previously affordable because the surrounding area has been gentrified (Marcuse 1985). In this way, the low-income household is excluded from living in an affordable housing unit, which would have otherwise housed that family had gentrification not occurred. While the change in heart regarding RCF's certainly mitigated displacing RCF residents, many of the HPT's neighbourhood goals, such as beautification efforts and attracting homeowners, also set the conditions for exclusionary displacement.

It should also be noted that housing and RCF advocates have highlighted that public involvement in decisions about the locations of residential care facilities and low-income housing often brings forward discriminatory and exclusionary viewpoints, and often (re)traumatize RCF residents. Advocates have suggested that locational decisions should be "as of right", and not open to public consultation, for that reason (Ontario Human Rights Coalition 2012). While the HPT ultimately educated themselves and the community about inclusion, the use of the HPT as a venue for decisions about inclusionary planning may be misplaced.

Glenville: 'They're going to squeeze everybody out and where are they going to go?'

More than 10 kilometres from the downtown core, Glenville is a neighbourhood of high- and low-rise apartments, along with some smaller single-family homes and townhouses. Here, 84% of residents are renters (Social Planning Research Council 2012). According to one source, Glenville is one of the largest immigrant-receiving neighbourhoods in Canada (Saunders 2015)—most newcomers arriving to Glenville are also people of colour. While Glenville has not been experiencing the kind of physical redevelopment seen in downtown neighbourhoods, residents in the neighbourhood's high-rise apartments have been increasingly at risk of displacement after the buildings were purchased by a real estate investment trust (REIT—see August 2020). Below, we explore how the Glenville Planning Team (GPT) responded to displacement efforts and supported tenant organizing by leveraging the visibility and resources gained through their association with the NAS.

In the fall of 2015, an REIT based outside of Hamilton announced that it had purchased four high-rise apartment buildings in Glenville, comprising more than 600 units, at the cost of \$51 million. The company's press release committed to 'repositioning' the buildings and 'getting the same market rents the company has achieved elsewhere in Hamilton' (Arnold 2015). At neighbourhood meetings and in the media, residents came forward to express concerns about the new REIT's plans to raise rents, and as a result, displace existing tenants. In a newspaper article, one resident commented on the rising rents in Hamilton and named Glenville as the last area with affordable rents. They stated:

With the lack of affordable housing in Hamilton and with the rental situation being what it is, [this neighbourhood] is really the only viable option for a lot of people who are on limited incomes... If management outprices [the rents], they're going to squeeze everybody out and where are they going to go? (Pearson 2015)

In the same article, the city councillor and the NAS Community Developers worried that cash incentives to vacate, similar to those seen in Centretown, could follow.

By February of 2016, Glenville tenants were reporting significant challenges with the new management. Tenants were reporting a number of pressing concerns: skyrocketing rents, baseless complaints against tenants, unannounced unit inspections, fees for air conditioners, harassment of South Asian tenants for displaying religious symbols, a lack of accessibility ramps, dangerous parking conditions and a number of other maintenance issues. Tenants felt that all of the issues were related to a desire to maximize profits by displacing tenants, raising rents, and ignoring other issues. In an interview, one Glenville resident stated:

These buildings have been taken over by new management ... They just want a reason to kick people out. That thing of gentrification is coming in... and then the rents are hiking. For a one-bedroom apartment where the average rent over here [went] straight from \$700, they're going to \$1200, \$1100 plus hydro. I mean, where will the poor people go?

Many participants acknowledged that the kinds of tactics used by the new management to encourage displacement—such as fines, unannounced inspections, unaddressed maintenance issues and harassment—are especially harmful for newly arrived immigrant families in the area, who are more precarious in their housing situation. One resident stated in a news article:

An established Canadian family in a similar circumstance would be able to connect with available resources easily and [would not] allow management to harass them... But newcomers don't have knowledge of institutions and the housing system; they also don't have knowledge of their own rights and responsibilities under the law. (Hayes 2017)

As the months passed, there were increased concerns expressed about the new management by residents, including residents at the Glenville planning team table. The GPT helped bring these concerns to larger organizations, including a social planning agency, a community legal clinic, and a city-wide, grassroots tenant organization. In June of 2016, the city-wide tenant organization hosted a rally for tenants in the four buildings and helped to draft a letter of concerns, which included references to harassment due to religious symbols, accessibility concerns and a host of maintenance issues (Pearson 2016). During that time, the GPT solidified their partnership with the tenant organization, with members from both groups working on addressing increased housing concerns in Glenville.

Later in the summer of 2016, the planning team co-organized a tenant assembly, in partnership with the city-wide tenant group and the local social planning agency. The goal of the event was to bring together Glenville residents to discuss housing experiences in the area, identify areas of major concern, and educate tenants about their rights. A resident reported the following in an interview:

We did a collaboration with the [city-wide tenant organization] and we held a [Glenville] Tenant Assembly. We had a barbeque. We applied for a small grant. ... We had folks from the [tenant organization] who arranged workshops to educate the residents about their rights as residents, how they can fight their landlords.

... We had a good turnout. Around 200 people came out and we distributed information, flyers and really encouraged them that we would like to be in touch with more people and like to hold such events more frequently so that people know the collective power of tenants getting together so that the landlords [can't] take advantage of them.

Used as a space to gather collective power and promote resource sharing, the event featured workshops on gentrification and tenant organizing, and ended in a tenant assembly, which was an open space for people to come and share their experiences as renters in the neighbourhood.

By partnering with this larger, city-wide tenant organization, the planning team tapped into the organizational power, resources and expertise of that group to provide education and support for their own residents. While the residents acknowledged some successes of the collaboration between the tenant organization and Glenville residents in terms of organizing this assembly, planning the previous rally, drafting a demand letter to the management, and garnering media attention, they concluded: 'we're still struggling.' The effects of management tactics used in the

four buildings were continuing to affect the neighbourhood, particularly the recent immigrants who were tenants. Understanding this, the GPT leveraged another partnership with a city-wide social planning agency to support their goals around tenant rights and education, especially for new immigrant residents. Beginning in 2016, a project led by a social planning agency was established to support tenant rights education in the neighbourhood. The project focused on training in housing law for community leaders and service providers in Glenville. The training was co-facilitated by lawyers from a community legal clinic, and covered topics ranging from understanding displacement and gentrification, to tenancy laws, by-laws, evictions and rent increases, as well as filling out forms and documents. The goal of the project was to then have these community leaders work especially with new Canadian tenants in the neighbourhood to ‘increase their capacity to assert their legal and human rights as tenants’ (Social Planning Research Council 2017).

With the new management of Glenville’s four large high-rise buildings, and the subsequent efforts reported by tenants to encourage their departure, the GPT in turn was required to use a diversity of strategies to resist displacement. When faced with skyrocketing rents, harassment, fines, and a host of maintenance issues, Glenville residents responded by reaching out to broader organizations dealing with tenant rights. Despite these efforts, many Glenville residents were eventually bought out of their units and ultimately displaced. However, by collaborating in organizing tenant assemblies, rallies and workshops, the Glenville planning team positioned themselves as actors in the fight against displacement. While the GPT was not ultimately the most important actor in these initiatives—that is, the various agencies and organizations doing the direct organizing and service provision played much more important roles, and rightly received much more credit in the community—the point here is that the GPT worked to support these efforts rather than ignoring or hindering them. In doing so, they worked against displacement rather than exacerbating it, and supported the involvement of a range of residents beyond the affected buildings.

Discussion

Above, we explored the complex role of resident “planning teams” in addressing gentrification and associated displacement. Consistent with the literature on local revitalization efforts, participatory revitalization initiatives must tread a thin line between neighbourhood ‘improvement’ and gentrification. While gentrification is a deeply complex process with causes reaching far beyond the scope of the municipality, we argue that resident groups can nevertheless play an aggravating or mitigating role in processes of residential displacement.

We narrowed in on the role of resident-led planning teams as actors in displacement, adding to similar instances of resident-led efforts against displacement explored elsewhere (Fagatto and Fung 2012; Moskowitz 2017). Using three neighbourhood case studies, we demonstrated how some resident-led groups intervened against displacement. The examples from Hamilton presented above highlight how resident groups in three distinct neighbourhoods were actors in anti-displacement efforts. Each neighbourhood experienced displacement in different ways, and involved different actors, including property managers, REIT’s, City council, local service providers, as well as the resident-led planning teams. The findings highlight the fact that because there are multiple actors and strategies involved in residential displacement, there are in turn diverse actors and strategies involved in resisting displacement.

The cases revealed three different strategies used by planning teams in resisting displacement: engaging directly with potential developers and city planning processes, countering exclusionary neighbourhood goals through community education and dialogue, and supporting tenant rights and organizing efforts. In all three neighbourhoods, there were tangible—albeit modest—consequences of the neighbourhood groups’ respective interventions. The findings highlight that neighbourhood groups, known to be historic supporters of racial and economic segregation (Eisenberg 2017; Moskowitz 2017), can also be powerful forces in resisting displacement and supporting marginalized residents. This is particularly true when they are supported (e.g., through education and community development) to focus on inclusion. However, findings also highlight the ways that other actions by municipalities – in particular, ensuring that maintaining housing is a goal in planning decisions, regardless of the level of resident activism – could more efficiently prevent displacement.

Conclusion

Drawing on data from a five-year evaluation of Hamilton, Ontario’s *Neighbourhood Action Strategy* (NAS), this paper explored the role that resident-led neighbourhood planning teams can play in addressing residential displacement.

Our findings serve to complicate the narrative that positions gentrification as inevitable, and cities and residents as powerless to stop it. In summary, our study shows that responses to urban inequity are complex and contested, and that the stakeholders in such processes—including residents—can be important actors in responding to gentrification and residential displacement. Our case studies offer possible strategies for other communities undergoing gentrification and associated displacement.

As urban centres increasingly struggle to balance development and equity goals, further research on the process of gentrification and successful interventions in displacement will be a meaningful part of the struggle for more equitable urban landscapes. While gentrification is a complex process and residents may not always have control over its processes, the findings here support the idea that residents can be powerful actors in fighting displacement pressure. Rather than being powerless, resident-led groups were found to intervene in concrete ways to interrupt residential displacement.

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