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# Gentrification and Crime

## Theoretical explanations and methodological problems



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Gentrification is one of the central areas of conflict in current urban development. The term describes the replacement of lower-status residents in a neighborhood by higher-status groups. While the criminogenic effects of socio-spatial segregation are empirically well documented, the connection between gentrification and crime-rate trends in German-speaking countries has not yet been studied. Criminological approaches and theories suggest both falling and rising crime rates in gentrifying areas. In US studies, there are conflicting findings that also point in both directions. However, the results are only applicable to the situation in Germany and Austria to a limited extent. Starting from an overview of the current state of research, the present article aims to contribute to the conceptualisation of gentrification processes in the context of spatial criminology.



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-spatial conditions of urban neighbourhoods have always been the focus of environmental explanations of criminal behaviour. The social environment of the neighbourhood is thereby accentuated as a development context which culturally transforms the attitudes and behaviour of the people living there and can thus contribute to the development of crime. At the same time, the spatial nature of criminal behaviour is reflected in the attractiveness of crime targets and the different crime opportunity structures of certain places where characteristic environmental features favour specific crimes to be committed. Empirical studies show positive interaction effects between the two perspectives (Gerstner/Oberwittler 2011, 171), according to which favourable opportunity structures and concentrated social disadvantage in urban areas mutually reinforce each other.

In urban policy discourses, crime in socially disadvantaged city districts is a frequently cited argument for promoting social mix. The federal, state and local governments can draw on a wide range of urban development, housing and welfare instruments to maintain or promote a social mix and are doing so in view of increasingly tense housing markets (Rink/Egner 2020). The concept of social mix is deeply inscribed into the DNA of German urban policy and is even used by institutional housing providers to justify the selection and mix of tenants. (Harlander/Kuhn 2012, 421; Hanhörster et al. 2020). From a scientific point of view it is still unclear what an ideal mix should actually look like and whether it makes sense to mix at all (Friedrichs 2015). Nevertheless, the ideal mix is still regarded as a panacea for a large number of crime-related

problem areas, especially in social strategies of urban crime prevention (e.g. DIN 2007, 34).

Aiming at the stabilisation of socially disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, urban development strategies of social mixing are not free of ambivalence (Schnur 2015). The growing demand for inner-city housing can trigger processes of gentrification in socially disadvantaged areas (BBSR 2019). Under these circumstances, social mix policies can become catalysts for gentrification (Bridges et al. 2012). Many former and current revitalisation areas and areas covered by the German program „Soziale Stadt“ are gentrifying or are already gentrified. (Üblacker 2018, 117 ff).

Hartmut Häußermann (Häußermann 2003, 642) also describes gentrification as the search for “security and stability in homogenous communities”. Matters of public safety and security and local governance are “often embedded in urban gentrification strategies” (Wiest/Kirndörfer 2019, 584), so in this article we ask how gentrification and crime rate trends are connected (Kirk/Laub 2010).

## 2. DEFINING GENTRIFICATION

The increasing demand for inner-city housing and the paradigm shift in the promotion of urban development in the 1970s towards cautious urban renewal are key conditions both for the initial gentrification processes in German city centres and for research on these processes. Even before the term was introduced in the first empirical study in Hamburg (Dangschat/Friedrichs 1988), studies on the social effects of redevelopment statutes (e.g. Seute 1979) or the role of tax benefits in the acquisition of old housing (Ellwein 1979) dealt with the consequences of these processes for residents. Since its first mention, the concept of gentrification has become increasingly

popular in scientific, political and everyday discourses, sometimes helping to consolidate its reputation as a “chaotic concept” (Beauregard 1986).

Although there is no broad consensus on the exact definition of the term in either international or German-language research, comparative observations of empirical studies show that one feature is the replacement of lower-status residents by higher-status ones in a residential district (Friedrichs 1996; Üblacker 2018, 178). In addition, more complex definitions have become established over time, which also include price appreciation and physical renovation as well as commercial and symbolic change, and which are partly understood as necessary conditions for a gentrification finding (Glatter 2006).

Gentrification areas are characterised by high fluctuation and the influx of higher-status households. Accordingly, average education and income increase in residential areas, while poverty decreases, i.e. the vertical differentiation of the social structure initially increases in the course of the process, before it decreases again in a later phase and the higher-status newcomers are largely among themselves. However, characteristics of horizontal differentiation are also important with regard to the structure of social networks and the collective efficacy of the neighborhood. Compared with the long-time residents, the newcomers have different norms, values, lifestyles and consumption styles, which change the social and cultural character of the neighbourhood. These specific milieus are mentioned, for example, in the debates on “studentification” (Sage et al. 2012) or “family gentrification” (Karsten 2014) and are explored in more detail with regard to their needs and behaviour in the neighbourhood.

Frequently observed side effects of gentrification are increases in property values

and cultural changes in commercial and public infrastructures. Although investment and price appreciation are not necessary preconditions for gentrification, numerous studies have observed a simultaneous occurrence in residential districts. This aspect describes, on the one hand, the visual changes in the area, for example in the form of the renovation of the housing stock or the redesign of public and green spaces. On the other hand, it refers to rent increases, tenure shifts from renting to owning, increased transaction volumes and a more profit-oriented management and investment behaviour due to the structural changes of the housing suppliers. The cultural changes in turn are most clearly reflected in new businesses (Glatter/Sturm 2019), the disappearance of long-established initiatives and associations (Shaw/Hagemans 2015) or the changed social composition in local educational institutions (Butler et al. 2013). Some studies describe how these cultural changes affect local networks, increase social disorganisation and (temporarily) reduce collective efficacy in the neighbourhood (Kennedy/Leonard 2001; Nyden et al. 2006).

### 3. GENTRIFICATION AND CRIME RATE TRENDS

Looking at the linkage between gentrification and crime, research on possible causal relationships is essentially based on three prominent approaches that have proven to be significant for the theoretical explanation of spatial crime distributions (Barton/Gruner 2016; Bogges/Hipp 2014). Here the focus is on the degree of informal social control and the perceived opportunity structure for crime (Quel 2020, 82), which can change under the conditions of gentrification and thus lead to a decrease or increase in crime.

#### 3.1 Theory of social disorganisation

Seen from the perspective of the theory of social disorganisation, it could be assumed that gentrification processes lead to a decline in crime. A robust finding of empirical analyses of inner-city distribution of crime is the close connection between the local level of social disadvantage and the level of crime, which is evident both in official statistics on recorded crime and in research on the dark figure of unreported offences. A statistically positive effect of social disorganisation on crime rate trends is mainly explained by the fact that a lack of social integration or local social capital reduces the potential for exercising informal social control. For example, Sampson et al. (Sampson et al. 1997) postulate that the heterogeneity of the population increases the probability of criminal events, because reduced collective efficacy tends to be found in socially mixed urban districts. Longitudinal studies also show that crime “leads over time to an increase in socio-structural disadvantage, for example as a result of the selective migration of those who can afford it”. (Oberwittler 2018, 320).

Viewed from this perspective, falling crime rates are a prerequisite for the influx of higher-status population groups (Ellen et al. 2017), which in turn will have positive effects on crime rates. The influx of more affluent households and the increasing homogenisation of the population structure in a later phase of gentrification leads to a decline in crime, as homogeneous population structures enable social trust while social cohesion is a key element of informal social control. On the other hand, the stabilisation and linkage between gentrification and crime of living conditions can also reinforce social disorganisation in an early phase of gentrification, when population fluctuation makes the formation of social networks and lasting

social relationships more difficult (van Wilsem et al. 2006).

In the gentrification process, the relationship between newcomers and the existing population plays a decisive role. Resentment towards the new residents opens up the possibility of criminal offences out of indignation about the perceived displacement pressure (e.g. in the form of violent protests and conflicts, cf. Naegler 2013), and can prevent social control in the district from becoming effective at all. In the course of gentrification, new relationships must be established that allow for the exercise of social control, while long-term residents are no longer willing to take over social control and responsibility for the neighbourhood as a result of the dynamics of change that are perceived as unfair (Freeman 2006).

### 3.2 “Routine activities” approach

The routine activities approach (Cohen/Felson 1979), which focuses more attention on opportunity and control structures, could be used to argue that gentrification processes lead to an increase in crime, since the influx of higher-status population groups means a rise in promising opportunities for crime, thereby encouraging property crime in particular. While the theory of social disorganisation considers social structures as a key element of crime control, the “routine activities” approach conceptualises crime as the result of a spatial-temporal convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target and the lack of effective guardianship. This perspective allows various assumptions to be made about the relationship between crime and gentrification.

Initially, both the new higher-status residents and the new businesses that will open during a later stage of gentrification are suitable targets. Both have economic resources and coveted goods that make

them attractive in the eyes of potential offenders. Nevertheless, both the new residents and the new businesses have sufficient resources to take appropriate precautions. Households moving into the area can be assumed to have a higher average income (Üblacker 2018, 69), which basically allows them to equip their homes with special security and surveillance technology, which could reduce the number of home burglaries in the gentrifying area, for example.

While the theory of social disorganisation is based on the assumption that social control is created primarily informally by the residents in the neighbourhood, the “routine activities” approach allows for a broader understanding. If it is assumed that the collective efficacy of the incoming higher-status residents is initially insufficient to informally assert their ideas of security and order against the long-established population, they will try to resort to formalised forms of control, which will ultimately be manifested in an increased number of complaints and an increased presence of police and public order authorities in the area. In this respect, policing gentrifying areas appears to be less the result of an internal demand of the police, but rather an “urban and domestic policy project at the request of residents and business people with the power to complain” (Künkel 2013, 194), who in this way lay the foundations for the prerequisites of a continued influx of higher-status groups (Üblacker/Lukas 2019).

### 3.3 “Broken windows” approach

A third approach also emphasises the importance of behaviour below the threshold of punishability (e.g. begging or homelessness) and physical-material manifestations of disorder (e.g. graffiti or vacant buildings), which affect the social organisation of neighbourhoods. This perspective is

particularly prominent in the “Broken Windows” approach (Wilson/Kelling 1996), in which so called incivilities are regarded as visible signs of a disturbed social order, within which generally accepted norms of behaviour hardly apply and the mechanisms of formal and informal social control are largely rendered ineffective. The logic of the “Broken Windows” approach is that residents react to this situation with great uncertainty and set in motion a downward spiral in which more and more stable households move away and are followed by socially weaker families. In this way, the social cohesion of residents, which is an important resource for controlling deviant behaviour, erodes and prepares the ground for an increase in crime (Oberwittler et al. 2017, 182).

As already pointed out by Neil Smith (Smith 1979, 543 ff) in his analysis of the emergence of investment gaps in the housing stock, phases of disinvestment and selective relocation are a prerequisite for reinvestment and gentrification in inner city areas. Gentrification can therefore be understood as a reversal of the proclaimed downward spiral. The question that remains hitherto unresolved, however, is whether this reversal is due to demand or supply-side developments (Hamnet 1991). Ultimately, a response can only ever be of a temporary nature and must take into account the economic and social conditions prevailing in the respective spatial-temporal context of both explanatory approaches. In order to possibly clarify the connection between gentrification and crime rate trends, the question arises from this perspective as to whether economic reinvestment in the area or the influx of higher-status groups is decisive for a reduction in crime. While the former would initially be accompanied by an elimination of physical-material decline, the latter would set in motion the mechanisms

of social control known from the theory of social disorganisation.

### 3.4 Empirical review

The connection between gentrification and crime is still largely unexplored in Germany and Austria (Lukas 2017, 47). In the empirical assessment of the path dependencies presented, we therefore need to rely on the results of US studies, which, however, reveal an inconsistent and sometimes contradictory picture. Starting from theories of social disorganisation, Taylor and Convington (Taylor/Convington 1988) found in a previous study that violent crime increases at the local level when the social status of the residents rises. Using the city of Baltimore as an example, they observed an increase in the frequency of homicides and grievous bodily harm between 1970 and 1980, particularly in areas where census data suggest rising real estate prices and higher levels of education among the population. Lee (Lee 2010) arrives at similar results using the example of Los Angeles. He operationalises gentrification as the acquisition of owner-occupied property by better-off sections of the population in socially disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods and identifies a short-term increase in bodily injury, robbery, car theft and theft from cars between 1990 and 2000. In particular, he interprets the increase in property crime as a confirmation of the “routine activity” approach. In contrast, O’Sullivan (O’Sullivan 2005) reports contrary findings from Portland: The greatest decreases in crime have been observed in these statistical spatial units, which underwent the most significant changes in social composition and educational levels in the time between the years 1992 and 2000. In addition, Papachristos et al. (Papachristos et al. 2011) note very different trends in various neighbourhoods of Chicago between 1991 and 2005 depend-

ing on the ethnic-cultural composition of the population. Using an indicator that combines the social (census data on social structure) and commercial (number of coffee shops) dimensions of gentrification, they conclude that homicide rates are generally falling in the gentrification areas. This also applies to homicides related to gang rivalry (Smith 2014). However, the frequency of street robbery offences increases when the process of gentrification affects areas inhabited primarily by ethnic minorities. Barton (Barton 2014) is also taking an innovative approach, using small-scale census data and New York Times reporting as the basis for identifying areas of gentrification. This way, he found for New York that significant declines in homicide, assault and robbery are evident in gentrifying districts, and that the correlation between gentrification and crime is also proving stable over time. In contrast, Kreager et al. (Kreager et al. 2011) show a curvilinear crime rate trend in Seattle: While fluctuation initially creates a vacuum of social control in an early phase of gentrification, allowing motivated offenders to exploit this vacuum to commit criminal acts, the positive aspects of the developing homogeneous population structure prevail in the long term, when a high degree of social cohesion and control prevents criminal events. In this context, the development status of the neighbouring urban districts is also important. If these are residential areas with socio-economic structures that have deteriorated due to displacement processes from the neighbouring district, the gentrifying neighbourhoods will also be subject to an increased risk of crime (Stucky et al. 2015). If, on the other hand, the adjacent districts are also undergoing a process of gentrification, according to Bogges and Hipp (Bogges/Hipp 2014) taking Los Angeles as an example, then the rates of

registered bodily injury in the gentrification area will drop significantly more. City-wide effects of gentrification on crime rate trends are seen by Autor et al. (Autor et al. 2017) in a suburb of Boston. The end of local rent control in 1995 led to a major change in the overall population structure, which in turn led to a reduction in crime of around 16 %. Although MacDonald and Stokes (Mac Donald/Stokes 2020) assume in a current overview of the state of research that gentrification processes have a predominantly positive effect on crime rate trends, we think that the conflicting findings of the various studies can be traced back to different operationalisations of gentrification and the respective phenomena of crime.

#### 4. LIMITATIONS OF ANGLLO-AMERICAN CONCEPTS

The application of Anglo-American concepts, theories and findings to the German and Austrian context involves a number of aspects that have both practical and theoretical implications for research. In our view, these include the operationalisations of gentrification established in German-speaking countries, the specific characteristics of the housing market and qualitative and quantitative differences in the crime situation.

The common feature of all empirical research on gentrification is its focus on social change in the neighborhood. In comparison to international approaches to the measurement of gentrification German research accounts are characterised by two methodological approaches and an inadequate data situation (Üblacker 2017). The first approach originates from the tradition of stage models of gentrification from US-American research of the 1980s (e.g. Clay 1979) and combines these with the assumptions of the theory of post-industrial society (Bell 1973). This assumes that with

the transition from industrial to post-industrial society, new forms of households will emerge, which, once reaching sufficient spatial concentration, will constitute the process of gentrification. This means that the progress of gentrification in a residential area can be determined on the basis of the proportion of these “new” households (in German gentrification research operationalised) in the population of the area. Since information on income and educational level is needed to classify the actors and can only be obtained by conducting surveys, only a small number of neighborhoods are usually studied in a cross-section (e.g. Glatter 2007; Thomas et al. 2008). There is no equivalent to this approach in international research.

The second approach is complementary. Using official statistics, a large number of areas are studied over time for changes in fluctuation, duration of residence, age, household and family structure (e.g. Warmelink/Zehner 1996; Holm 2014). However, the social status of an area is only measured by the percentage of households on welfare support. If it is declining, the studies conclude that gentrification is progressing. Comparisons of different income groups are not possible. Moreover, official data are usually aggregate data, which may lead to ecological fallacies. This approach is comparable to the usual aggregate analyses based on census data used in international research (overview presented in Brown-Saracino 2017, 519 ff).

Overall, the two operationalisations reflect different understandings of gentrification. Although neighbourhood surveys enable the operational measurement of pioneers and gentrifiers, gentrification is primarily understood as a process of the influx of higher-status groups. Since most investigations are limited to one or two neighborhoods and surveys often fail to reach respondents of lower social status,

the extent of gentrification could be overestimated here. Aggregate data analyses, on the other hand, tend to equate a decline in poverty with gentrification without taking into account the overall income distribution in the neighborhood. Both approaches have hardly dealt with the course of the horizontal differentiation in the affected areas, which is important for crime trends. In addition, the periods of time studied are often too short to adequately comprehend the course of vertical differentiation.

Another problem of applicability relates to the high percentage of tenants in German-speaking countries and possible consequences for housing investment, population fluctuation and crime trends. If the structural dimension of gentrification is considered against the background of the theory of social disorganisation, we assume that increased fluctuation in an area due to conversions, rent increases and changes of ownership leads to increased social disorganisation, reduced social control and thus higher crime rates. But if price appreciation and rent increases proceed without any investment in the (existing) buildings in need of renovation, the “Broken Windows” approach would also assume a “disturbed” social order. This situation would be particularly prevalent in early-stage gentrification areas in particularly tense housing market situations, where there is little incentive for housing suppliers to reinvest the profits generated by rent increases.

If, however, rent increases and price appreciation go hand in hand with housing renovations, the two explanatory approaches compete with each other: While the theory of social disorganisation would still predict a higher crime rate due to increased fluctuation and reduced social control, from the perspective of the “broken windows” approach, there would be some evidence that the elimination of

physical disorder leads to a reduction in crime. It is questionable, however, to what extent structural deterioration can be considered an indicator of a “disturbed social order”. Rather, it seems that this connection is based on the assumption that residents are owner-occupiers and that a dilapidated façade therefore also indicates a socio-economically disadvantaged household. This assumption may well be true in a US housing market characterised by owner-occupiers, but it can only be transferred to the German-speaking world to a limited extent, since, at least in Germany, homeowners and occupants in urban agglomerations are often not one and the same person. Finally, it is therefore conceivable that higher-income households may live in a building that appears to be in need of renovation (or vice versa).

Differences also become apparent for the areas of crime studied, which should be taken into account in the analysis of the effects of gentrification on crime rate trends. While US-American studies consistently focus on homicide rates, equivalent offences are rather rare in Germany and Austria. In contrast to the USA (frequency ratio: 4.7), the frequency ratio for homicide in 2019 is only 0.3 in Germany (BKA 2020, 12) and 0.7 in Austria (BMI 2020, 32). Gang rivalry is also not widespread. When we talk about gangs in this country, we usually mean well-organised gangs of thieves or the organised crime of rival biker gangs from motorbike clubs (Bannenberg/Schmidt 2019), whose spread and threat potential – comparable to that of criminal clans (Rohde et al. 2019) – does not come close to that of US-style street gangs.

Crime is also distributed differently in the urban areas of American municipalities than in German and Austrian cities. Following the zone model developed by Park et al. (Park et al. [1925]; 1967), the

theory of social disorganisation locates high crime rates particularly in the “zone of transition”, a residential area in the immediate vicinity of the city centre, which is most directly exposed to the processes of change resulting from expanding business centres. This area is considered to be socially disorganised per se, as it lacks an overarching consensus of values and norms that could regulate the day-to-day coexistence of the population living there. Since these conditions only exist to a very limited extent in Austria and Germany, early studies on the spatial distribution of crime in the city of Bochum (Schwind et al. 2001) came to the conclusion that crime is not decreasing in a circular pattern around the inner city area, as claimed in the zone model, but rather that various “hot spots” of crime can be found in German cities that are largely equivalent to the town centres of previously incorporated municipalities (“multi-core theory”).

In addition, a decisive factor in the spatial distribution of crime is the mobility of suspects in the area, where the “Routine Activities” approach provides valuable clues for analysis. Indicators of land use, such as the number of pubs, restaurants and shopping facilities, give an indication of the existing crime opportunity structures, which change in the course of gentrification and can attract motivated offenders as an opportunity context. Small-scale analyses of the effects of gentrification processes on crime can therefore not only target changes in the social structures of the resident population in the gentrification area, but must also take into account population movements (e.g. commuter flows) and the respective resident population, which to a certain extent can import crimes in the course of their normal everyday routines or due to attractive targets and opportunities for crime (Oberwittler/Gerstner 2011, 17).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The frequently criticised conceptual vagueness of gentrification means that different approaches can be adopted in analysing the connection between gentrification and crime. The theory of social disorganisation emphasises social change in gentrifying neighborhoods, while the “routine activities” approach extends the scope of explanation to include the potential targets of criminal activity and the opportunity structures, allowing for a link to commercial change in gentrification areas. The “Broken Windows” approach, on the other hand, focuses on the interactions between social and physical aspects and thus builds a bridge to the structural changes and investment processes in revitalisation areas.

The three approaches together provide a theoretically sound basis for analysing crime trends with regard to different dimensions of gentrification. However, the empirical examination is confronted with a number of practical research problems that question the direct applicability of US-American approaches and findings to Austria and Germany. Yet the study of potentially paradox effects in the context of urban development also appears to be necessary in these countries, since findings on the specific causal relationship between gentrification and crime can make a significant contribution to the future conceptualisation of urban crime prevention in gentrifying neighborhoods.

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