

Introduction

There is no conventional method of defining rural gentrification and no clear sense of its prevalence across the United States. Most previous research has highlighted extreme rural gentrification, primarily occurring in western states (eg. Beyers Nelson, 2000; Bush, 2005; Ghose, 2004; Power & Barrett, 2001; Rudzitis, 1999), and so although we know precisely how in-migration impacts specific rural communities, we lack a nuanced and nationally-focused understanding of why those communities are hosts to it. To be more specific, the connections between gentrification and the characteristics thought to drive urban-rural migration remain relatively unexplored, as does the process through which gentrification spreads to neighboring communities. Despite a strong tradition of comparative temporal analyses in rural demography, we tend to study rural gentrification as a static occurrence. By looking at gentrification through a consistent lens and identifying its spatial and temporal variation, we can better understand its causes and implications.

This chapter devises a demographic approach for operationalizing rural gentrification and employs a series of analyses to contextualize it vis-à-vis the county characteristics thought to drive rural migration between 1980 and 2000. I begin by assigning a Rural Gentrification Score (RGS) to each county in each decade, which I derive from the US Census Bureau's decennial inter-county migration data. I then use spatial data analyses to examine gentrification's changing footprint. In specific, I look for evidence of two patterns over the course of the study period: diffusion over time, which I refer to as the diffusion thesis, and fluctuation with national and regional economic cycles, which I refer to as the structural flux thesis. I use exploratory spatial data analysis to test for the diffusion pattern, and spatial regression analyses to examine gentrification in each decade, looking for evidence of both diffusion and structural fluidity. Because of their different county sizes, cultural histories, and ecologies, the regression analysis distinguishes between Eastern and Western portions of the country, examining the extent to which gentrification in each portion relates to three defining characteristics of popular rural destinations: natural amenities, proximity to cities, and recreation-dependence. My findings offer insights for the consideration of community development practitioners and rural planners.

Background

Several disciplines have described the troubling social dynamics that surround rural gentrification. While new residents from cities expand rural communities' financial and social capacities, they sometimes do so at the expense of longer-term residents. Studies have shown that aggregate improvements to growing rural communities can belie increasing inequality occurring at the neighborhood and household level (Hunter et al., 2005; Ohman, 1999; Saint Onge et al., 2007). Social consequences that result from this inequality include the erosion of support networks for children, loss of affordable housing, and the displacement of local workers (Bush, 2005; Hammer & Winkler, 2006; Nelson, 1997; Salamon, 2007). Not only do low income households experience social and financial pressure to leave rural destinations, they experience a weakened social safety net if they stay. For example, a report by the National Housing Assistance Council

(2005) suggests that federal incentives for the construction of affordable rural housing are inadequate in rural markets where developers can enrich themselves with private building projects.

Identifying the extent to which these forces are gentrifying the rural landscape nationally has proven challenging. Research has focused largely on individual case studies in archetypical resort destinations. When examining the problem nationally, gentrification measures that focus on outcomes are often sensitive to these archetypical cases because those outcomes are so extreme (P. B. Nelson, Oberg, & L. Nelson, 2010). Examples include resort destinations like Aspen, Colorado, Sun Valley, Idaho, and Park City, Utah- where median housing costs and rents far exceed more average communities. In effect, the celebrity appeal of these destinations engenders gentrification so severe that it can be difficult to compare to more typical rural places. Aspen has so epitomized rural gentrification that the phenomenon is commonly referred to as “Aspenization” (Gates & Pryor, 1993; Janofsky, 1999). Similarly, demography’s focus on rural population growth has tended to focus primarily on national migration patterns, which awards less attention to the phenomenon as it occurs in the East, because the majority of growth occurs in the West. Although we know from previous research that rural gentrification persists outside the extreme resort development in the West, we have not contextualized it a national framework to interrogate the East-West distinction. More problematic from a polity standpoint, gentrification is sometimes confounded or conflated with local economic development and community improvement.

To investigate how gentrification impacts more typical rural communities in the United States, it should be understood as part of a larger system of population turnover (Smith, 2007). Moreover, in tracking the national spread of rural gentrification, regionally distinct trends should be identified, as well as the process through which rural gentrification expands its footprint locally. This chapter endeavors to identify rural gentrification in US counties, to contextualize it in the regional macro-structural migration contexts of the study period, and to explore the spatial mechanism of its spread. I begin by reviewing characteristics shown to drive rural in-migration as well as major changes in regional and national drivers of migration though the decades. I then draw from research on urban gentrification to outline the potential for rural gentrification to spread outward. These literatures provide the background for understanding if, how, and why rural gentrification has changed its footprint over time.