

Housing, Transit, and Gentrification: What's the Link?

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Abstract

Studying the causes and effects of gentrification on communities is vital as the United States faces severe housing challenges, demographic changes, and new rural-urban-suburban dynamics. By using two surveys and American Community Survey data, this study explores gentrification risk, factors that contribute to gentrification, and possible mitigations towards gentrification in the Menlo Park neighborhood of Tucson, Arizona. In Menlo Park, 66% of surveyed residents show strong levels of concern regarding housing prices. While most residents mentioned the role of the streetcar in increasing housing prices, all residents surveyed would support similar transit implementations in other areas. Finally, 64% of respondents in Tucson who are familiar with gentrification show support towards Cottage Court housing in their neighborhoods, with similar levels of support for other middle density housing types.

These findings can help inform future transit implementations in Tucson and provide support towards zoning reform, which would allow for more middle density housing to be created in Tucson. In addition, this study provides an overview of how transit implementation affected a historic barrio community in Tucson, while acknowledging possible ways to mitigate displacement threats.

Introduction

Barrios, in the United States, are neighborhoods that are largely defined by their strong Latino culture and community connections (Nevárez Martínez, 2022). Menlo Park is a barrio in Tucson, Arizona, with 62.6% of its population identifying as Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019)

Figure 1 shows the comparative percentages of Menlo Park’s Latino residents to the City of Tucson and comparisons between years. **Figure 2** provides a map of Menlo Park.

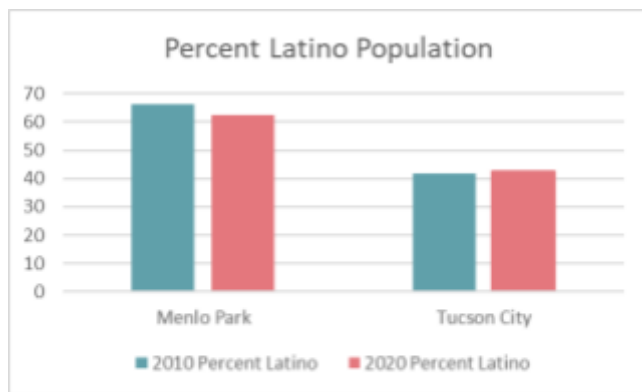


Figure 1: Latino Percentage of the Population in Menlo Park and Tucson, AZ in 2010 and 2020
U.S. Census 2010 and 2020

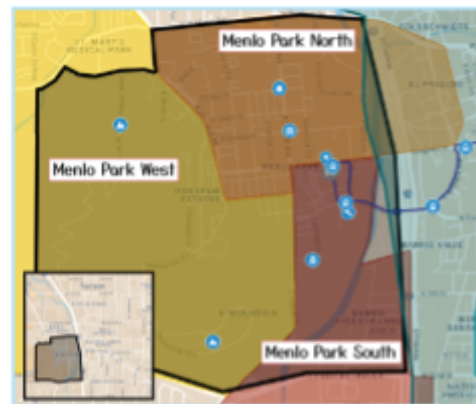


Figure 2: Map of Menlo Park, with Census Tracts, and Points of Interest
Source: Google My Maps located at https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1NEycyXvS_9VmDlo5HUC_CVU43vMKTA&usp=sharing

Menlo Park is currently undergoing gentrification, as understood through an examination of current literature, examination of current housing prices, and interviews with current and past residents. One factor that has contributed to ongoing gentrification in the area is the implementation of the Sun Link streetcar system in the region. The Sun Link was created to connect Downtown Tucson, The University of Arizona, Menlo Park, local business districts, and historic neighborhoods using rail transit (City of Tucson, 2007). The SunLink was implemented with the goal of encouraging transit-oriented development along the 3.9 mile route and gave its inaugural ride on July 25th, 2014 (City of Tucson, 2007). Transit and transit oriented

development, like the SunLink, is viewed as a desirable amenity in urban neighborhoods due to accessibility, which can fuel housing price increases (Zuk et al., 2015).

In order to counteract housing price increases, municipalities can encourage the creation of new housing by rezoning neighborhoods to allow for the creation of middle density housing. Middle density housing refers to building medium-sized homes with multiple units that enhance neighborhood walkability (Parolek, 2010). Examples of middle density housing are duplexes, fourplexes, cottage courts, and courtyard buildings, as shown in **Figure 3**. Overall, this type of housing allows for compact development, which makes it easier to provide quality transit, increase walkability, provide accessible retail, and reallocate land uses.



Figure 3. “Missing Middle Housing.” By Daniel Parolek, 2020, located at <https://missingmiddlehousing.com/>

This survey looks specifically at the role of public investment in fueling neighborhood change. How has the SunLink streetcar's implementation affected Menlo Park residents? Did this type of public investment in Menlo Park fit the needs of the community? What are ways to counteract gentrification and displacement threats that may be fueled by public investment?

Literature Review

Public Investment and Gentrification

Few studies have addressed the role of public investment, specifically transit, in fueling gentrification. Additionally, little research has been done about how transit investment can sometimes catalyze neighborhood displacement and decline. One notable exception is the overarching literature review conducted by Zuk et al., which gathered various studies to better understand the relationship between public investment and neighborhood change (Zuk et al., 2015).

On the general scale, transit and the implementation of transit-oriented development is viewed as a desirable amenity in urban neighborhoods due to accessibility (Zuk et al., 2015). A main finding from the literature review by Zuk et al. is that fixed-rail transit, which is a similar category to the Tucson SunLink, has a positive impact on residential and commercial property values, but the impact changes depending on context (Zuk et al., 2015). Studies have shown that a reduction in transportation costs due to transit-oriented development increases land values and attracts higher income residents (Wardrip, 2011). Additionally, the impact of transit on home values can vary depending on: housing tenure and type, extent and reliability of transit, strength of the housing market, and the nature of development (Wardrip, 2011).

A study that explicitly looked into transit implementations and gentrification in L.A. along L.A. metro stations found that gentrification has a strongly negative and statistically significant relationship with transit ridership and that, while not all stations gentrified, many did (Dominie, 2012). However, not many studies holistically explore income and race, and not many studies have been conducted in barrios.

Gentrification and Barrios in Tucson

United States barrios are neighborhoods that are largely defined by their strong Latino culture and community connections. There are over a dozen neighborhoods in Tucson that can be considered "barrios" and many more that are likely unclassified. One such neighborhood is Menlo Park, which is at high risk of gentrification, especially due to its proximity to downtown Tucson and will be a point of comparison for the survey conducted in this report (Martínez, 2022).

Gentrification is a spatial manifestation of economic inequality and tends to involve housing cost hikes that displace residents of lower socio-economic status (Martínez, 2022; Sutton, 2020). While the concepts of gentrification were vital to this survey, the term is contentious and, at times, difficult to explain. Notable factors of gentrification include: housing price changes, demographic changes, business development, public investment, and the displacement of long-term residents (Way et al., 2018). Menlo Park as a community has witnessed the influx of all of the aforementioned factors, especially after the implementation of the SunLink streetcar. It is important to note that gentrification is: (1) a process that happens over a long period of time, (2) occurs in multiple stages, and (3) people who have been displaced already may not be included in data sets or surveys (Zuk et al., 2015; Atkinson, 2000).

When looking at neighborhoods like Menlo Park in Tucson, we know that they are at risk of gentrification because of the current accelerating costs of nearby neighborhoods in Downtown Tucson. In general, the probability for gentrification is 64% higher for neighborhoods within 0.5 miles of an existing rich neighborhood than those further away (Guerrieri et al., 2013). However, there are other methods of understanding gentrification and factors that contribute to gentrification that can be further analyzed.

Common methods of mapping gentrification include using median home value, home value changes, home ownership rates, and rates of higher education (Way et al., 2018). While studying neighborhoods, it is important to keep in mind that neighborhoods are surprisingly stable and may sometimes take decades for trends to establish. For example, in 2008, only 12% of residents in the United States moved, making it the lowest rate since 1948 (C.S. Fischer, 2009, as cited in Zuk, 2015). Understanding why Americans are moving gives context to cultural and economic separations present in society. When attempting to map gentrification, it is always important to note that tracking movement from a gentrified neighborhood is difficult because residents may have already been displaced.

Barriers to Home Ownership

Low homeownership rates make a neighborhood more susceptible to gentrification and displacement (Zuk et al., 2015; Resseger, 2022). Home ownership for Black and Hispanic households has long been deterred due to a history of discrimination in the housing market. As the United States population boomed in the 1900s, the need for housing skyrocketed. In 1933, in order to accommodate housing demand, and to counteract the economic damages from the recession, the Federal Housing Authority worked with the Home Owner Loan Corporation to standardize ways to provide mortgage loans, avoid risks, and bail out homeowners (Bouie, 2015). This collaboration resulted in redlining: the process of drawing lines on a map to divide neighborhoods into financial risk categories. Redlining as a housing policy heavily targeted Black communities, and affected other minority groups. Redlined areas had expensive or nonexistent loans leading to predatory loans and few sales (Bouie, 2015).

While it's not clear if Tucson had official redlining, official records show other discriminatory housing processes such as restrictive racial covenants—which prevented

homeowners from selling or leasing their homes to people of color—and federally-funded displacement of residents in Downtown Tucson during the 1960s (Brocius, 2019; Otero, 2010). This systemic racism is still present in the housing market today through evictions, gentrification, and zoning rules. The City of Tucson has actively sought to reconcile with racial inequity in housing through the creation of long-term housing plans, such as the Housing Affordability Strategy for Tucson plan, meaning there is forward momentum for having discussions about gentrification in barrios, which were often safe enclaves away from restrictive covenants and predatory housing practices (Zuk et al., 2015; Otero, 2010; City of Tucson Housing and Community Development Department, 2021).

Knowing how public investment fuels displacement is vital to understanding geographies of opportunity, meaning the spatial relationship between high quality housing, jobs, schools, and more. In Tucson, Arizona, it is important to keep in mind previous cycles of neighborhood decline, geographies of opportunity, and periods of disinvestment such as the history of urban renewal, investment in the suburbs, restrictive covenants and more (Otero, 2010).

The Impact of Middle Density Housing on Gentrification

Zoning in the United States is unfriendly towards middle density housing. In most places, building middle density housing is illegal due to the city's zoning. In recent years, cities have made ongoing pushes to reform zoning codes and upzone to allow for denser development. Cities like Minneapolis have upzoned by eliminating single-family zoning altogether, meaning no neighborhoods in the city can have exclusively single-family homes; this means more duplexes, triples, accessory dwelling units, and other multifamily buildings (Davis, 2021). Upzoning encourages denser development, increases housing supply, and leads to greater housing affordability (Davis, 2021). For example, a study from 2019 found that new market-rate

housing in low-income areas decreased nearby rents by 5 to 7% relative to locations further away, showing that new housing stock slows local rent increases (Asquith et al., 2023).

However, other studies show that upzoning in cities like Chicago and New York are positively and significantly associated with the odds of a census tract becoming whiter, meaning upzoning could push gentrification pressures (Davis, 2021; Freemark, 2019). Nonetheless, upzoning plans, housing types, neighborhoods, and housing policies vary widely among municipalities. It is established that upzoning improves housing supply, but what happens next is dependent on surrounding municipality policy, such as affordable housing provisions, tenant protections, and community engagement.

Methods

My goal was to gain an understanding of perceptions towards public investment efforts within the Menlo Park community and identify perceptions of the Sun Link implementation in changing community character. The area of focus for this research is the City of Tucson. Overall, three surveys were used for this research.

Survey 1

The first survey had 11 total questions. The survey asked a few demographic questions, as well as a few questions about the subject matter, including knowledge on gentrification and thoughts on middle density housing types. The main goal of this survey was to identify solutions towards mitigating gentrification.

For this survey, I asked several people to fill out my survey while along University Blvd., but most of my responses came from posting the survey on social media from October 16th to October 18th. Posting the survey online was a minor limitation, as it meant a lower response rate

from people who live in Tucson. My survey received 60 responses, half of which were from the Tucson area and there was a strong rate of completion. The last question was a fill in the blank and received several lengthy responses. From this survey, I determined my interest in getting additional responses, especially among different age groups and from Menlo Park specifically. One of the issues in my survey is that while many respondents currently live in Tucson, they listed their parents' residence in other cities or states. Their responses are still useful in determining the support toward middle type housing, especially because gentrification is an issue in several communities across the United States.

Survey 2

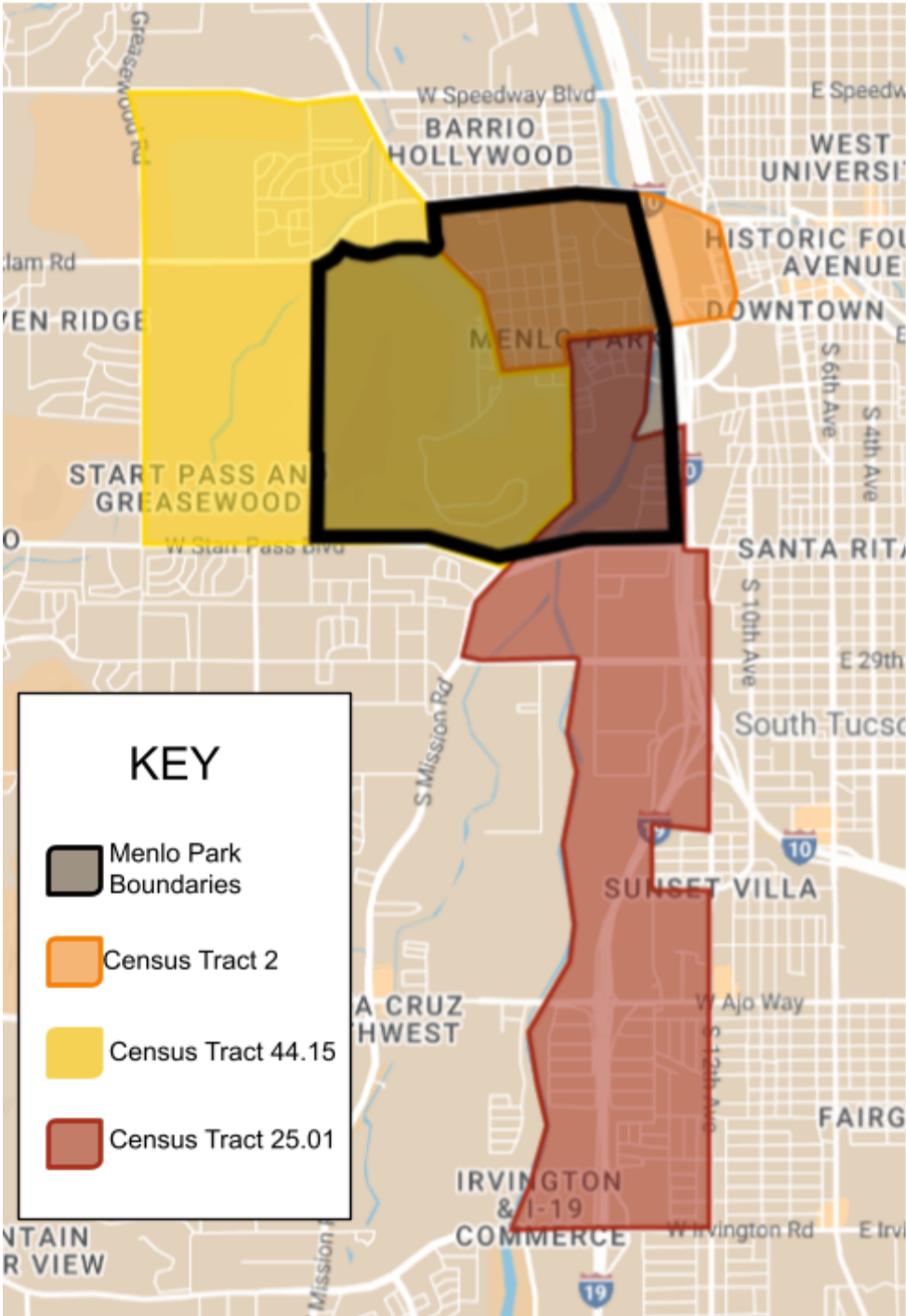
To find out specific community approaches and perspectives on gentrification, I conducted another survey specifically at Menlo Park. I posted a flier at Menlo Park on Wednesday, February 22 at Presta Coffee in the MSA Mercado and distributed the survey to various previous residents of Menlo Park. In addition, I directly collected survey responses for four hours along the Avenida del Convento and Congress Street intersection. My survey had two versions: one for residents and one for nonresidents. The nonresident survey had nine questions, while the resident survey had seventeen questions. The survey asked a few demographic questions, as well as a few questions about the subject matter, such as current evaluations of the neighborhood, transit usage, and more. My questionnaire received fourteen responses, ten of which were from residents. The last question was a fill in the blank and generated conversation with residents. In the future, I would be interested in getting additional responses, especially among different age groups.

Survey 3

In addition to the above surveys, I ran a short analysis using Census Bureau data and census tracts 2, 25.01, and 44.15. These census tracts are shown in **Figure 4** below. I used this method based on the literature review to understand gentrification in Menlo Park. Common methods of mapping gentrification, as mentioned earlier, that could use Census Bureau data include using Median Home value, home value change, home ownership rates (Way et al., 2018). Specifically, this method was meant to resemble a pre-post study to examine prices in an area before and after the initiation of transit (Zuk et al., 2015).

I used data.census.gov to access census information for the area of study. First, I needed to match respective geographies. The Census Bureau does not collect data at the neighborhood level, but does so at a tract level. Using the map provided by the Census Bureau I matched the boundaries of Menlo Park to available census tracts (see **Figure 4** for the overlays). Census tracts change every ten years to adapt to demographic changes, so I made sure to track down the proper tracts for both of the years I would be analyzing (2013, prior to operation of the streetcar and 2019 - post streetcar implementation but pre-pandemic). Both 2013 and 2019 are in the same 10-year bracket, so did not experience any boundary shifts. In addition, the data is taken from the 5-year estimates as they are provided on a rolling basis for smaller localities.

Figure 4: Map of Menlo Park Census Tracts for Analysis



I downloaded data through the Financial Characteristics table (s2503). I kept all census tracts and downloaded the 2013 and 2019 data in a zip file. I then entered the data into R

Analytical Software. The variables I used for this analysis were: total occupied housing units, total owner occupied housing units, total renter occupied housing units, occupied housing median household income, median monthly housing costs, and all variables related to monthly housing costs as a percentage of household income within the past 12 months.

I also wanted to see how the Tucson Metro Area compared, so I appended “Tucson City” data to my Excel spreadsheet. This geography includes anything within Tucson city limits. Once I had filtered out the data and variables I would be using, I analyzed the data in R analytical software to make graphs and averages of the demographic data and housing data.

Results

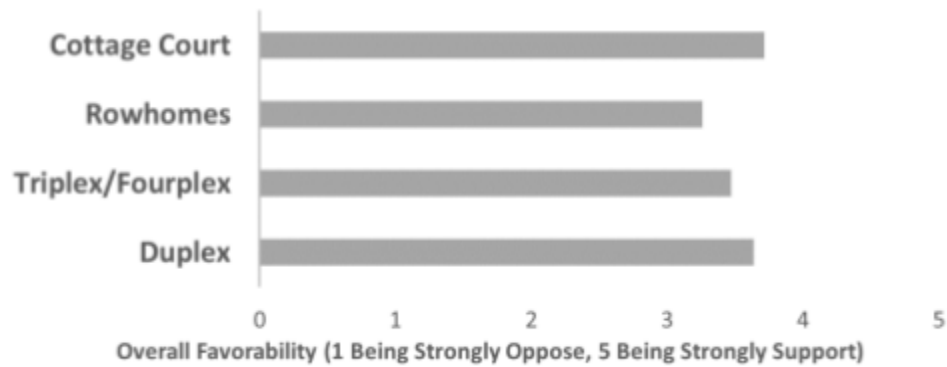
Statistical Interpretation

In the first survey, 44% of the respondents listed their zipcode as a Tucson area household, which means about half of the survey responses provide specific insight relevant in Tucson. That being said, other responses are equally important when it comes to understanding perceptions and desirability of housing types. In addition, 42% of the survey respondents were of Hispanic/Latino descent.

This survey shows that among the survey respondents, there is average to high support for middle density housing types. While different types of middle density housing were polled (ADUs, Duplexes, Triplex/Fourplex, Rowhomes, and Cottage Court), all had similar ratings. The average percentage of people who strongly oppose or somewhat oppose any type of middle density housing is 5.86%. Meanwhile the average percentage of people who strongly support or somewhat support any type of middle density housing 25.4%. Otherwise, most people are fairly ambivalent. When assigned point values, the average opinion towards middle density housing was 3.5 out of 5.0. Of the five different middle density housing types polled, on average the

Cottage Court style housing was most popular, meanwhile Rowhomes were the least popular, as shown in **Figure 5**. This may be due to respondent's favoring privacy and space, something mentioned in text by at least 3 respondents. Generally, for people who oppose middle density housing, the main reason tends to be privacy or wariness of strangers.

Figure 5: Survey 1 - Perceptions on Middle Density Housing
AVERAGE OPINION TOWARDS DIFFERENT TYPES OF MIDDLE DENSITY HOUSING



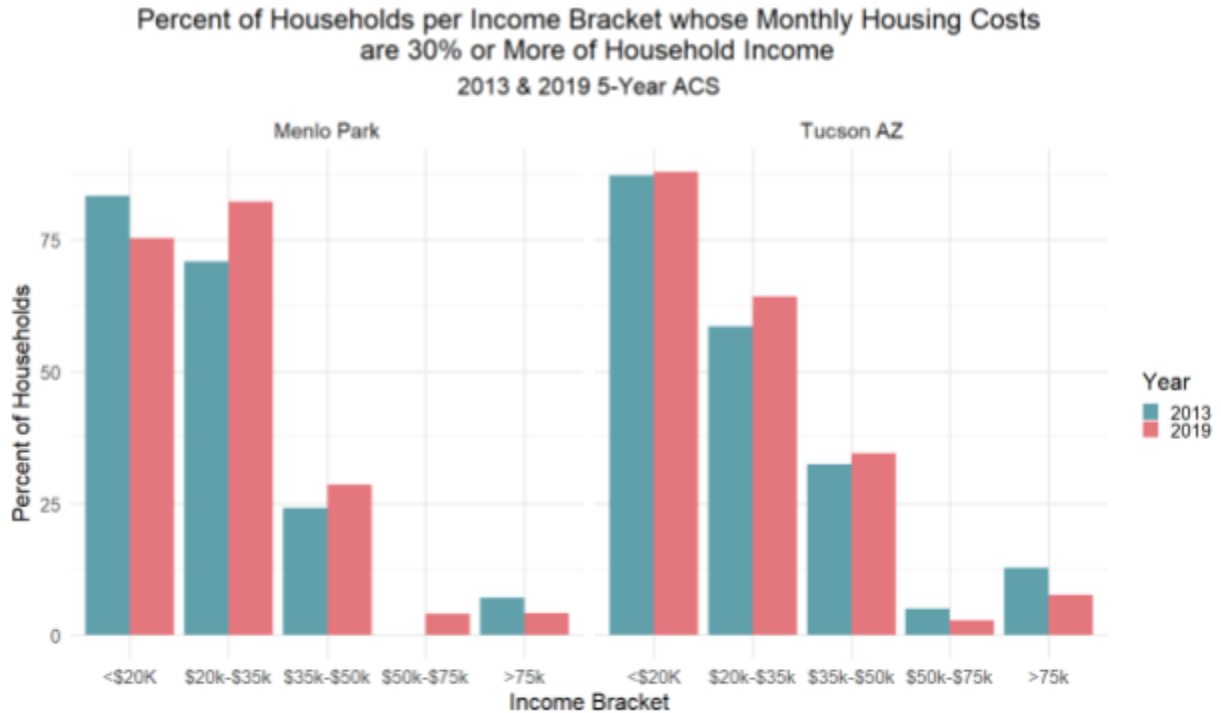
In Survey 2, 66% of surveyed Menlo Park residents show strong levels of concern regarding housing prices, as shown in **Figure 6**. The Sun Link was mentioned as a displacement driver, but all respondents recommend similar transit improvements in other areas.

Figure 6: Survey 2 - Resident Concerns about Housing Prices



Finally, Survey 3 revealed that a higher percentage of households in Menlo Park making \$20k to \$50k have higher levels of housing stress (30% or more of household income) in 2019 compared to 2013, as shown in **Figure 7**.

Figure 7: Graph Demonstrating Housing Cost Stress per Income Bracket



Discussion

Analyzing gentrification trends in neighborhoods requires a multi-pronged approach, which is demonstrated by the variety of surveys conducted in this report. Overall, from discussions with Menlo Park residents, the literature review, and the survey results, affordability and access are key to preventing displacement. From direct survey questions and demographic analysis, there is a clear trend showing displacement concerns in Menlo Park. In order to combat

these gentrification concerns, a rising solution from the first survey is the creation of more middle density housing, likely through zoning reform.

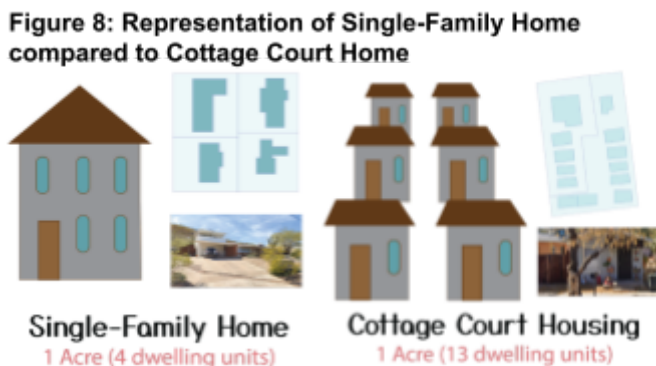
Overall, there is strong support for middle density housing as a method of providing more housing supply. However, lack of housing supply is not the only factor fueling gentrification. Affordability, rent control, long term plans, and culture all mentioned by residents as factors that should accompany public investment. While residents enjoy and support public investment such as the streetcar, its role in displacement is commonly mentioned.

This survey showed the general popularity of middle density housing, specifically Cottage Court style homes. Cottage court style homes provide more density, but require more acreage than other middle density housing types due to the detached nature of the homes. However, even cottage court style homes will allow for a larger supply of housing, which means more affordability and, possibly, lower rates of displacement. This survey shows that there is some support for middle density housing, especially from people who are aware of or experiencing gentrification. In addition, this survey shows the more popular types of middle density housing, which can be used to begin proposing plans in different lots within the community.

This survey is limited by factors mentioned above, such as sampling strategy, as well as question framing. The most common response to the Likert scale question about different middle density housing types was “Neither Agree nor Disagree.” It’s possible that people may be more negative towards middle density housing if it directly impacts their property values or generates more traffic, which was mentioned by one of the survey participants, but they were not outright quantifying those factors.

While not directly quantified in the survey, one respondent highlighted the importance of Section 8 housing in allowing him to continue to be able to live in Menlo Park, of which he was a longtime resident. Currently, there are 694 Section 8 Voucher Program homes in Ward 1, where Menlo Park is located (Making Action Possible AZ, n.d.). While this study looks into the idea of increasing affordability and housing stability by increasing housing supply through middle density housing, it does not account for “affordability” specifically. A study looking specifically into Section 8 housing and other affordable housing types would be a possible course of action in the future to continue to understand solutions to gentrification and displacement concerns.

Regardless, increasing density does have positive effects on preventing displacement and supporting Latino communities. A study from 2022 found that restrictive single-family land uses, which often exclude middle density housing, negatively impact minority population shares; this study found that by increasing the allowable density by ten dwelling units per acre, that increases the block’s Hispanic population share by 5% (Resseger, 2022). **Figure 8** shows a representation of land-use occupied by an acre of single-family homes (left) and the land-use occupied by an acre of cottage court housing (right). An increase of ten dwelling units per acre is attainable through the implementation of middle density housing. In places like Tucson, where most of the land-use is single-family, updating zoning would allow for more middle density housing types, like cottage courts, which are already prevalent in some parts of Menlo Park.



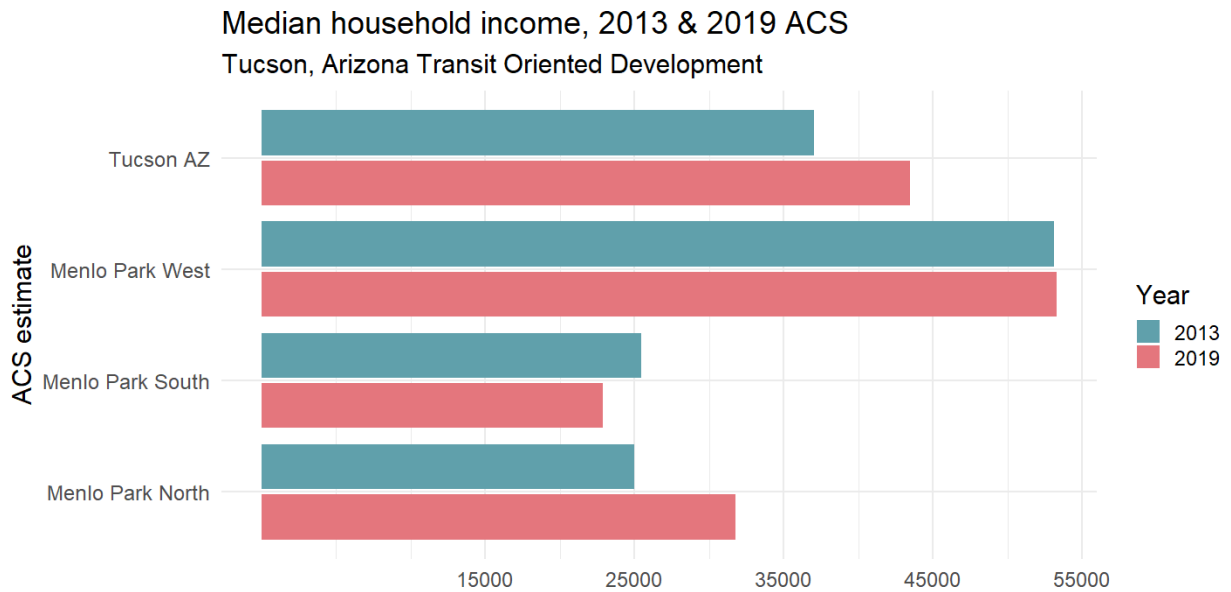
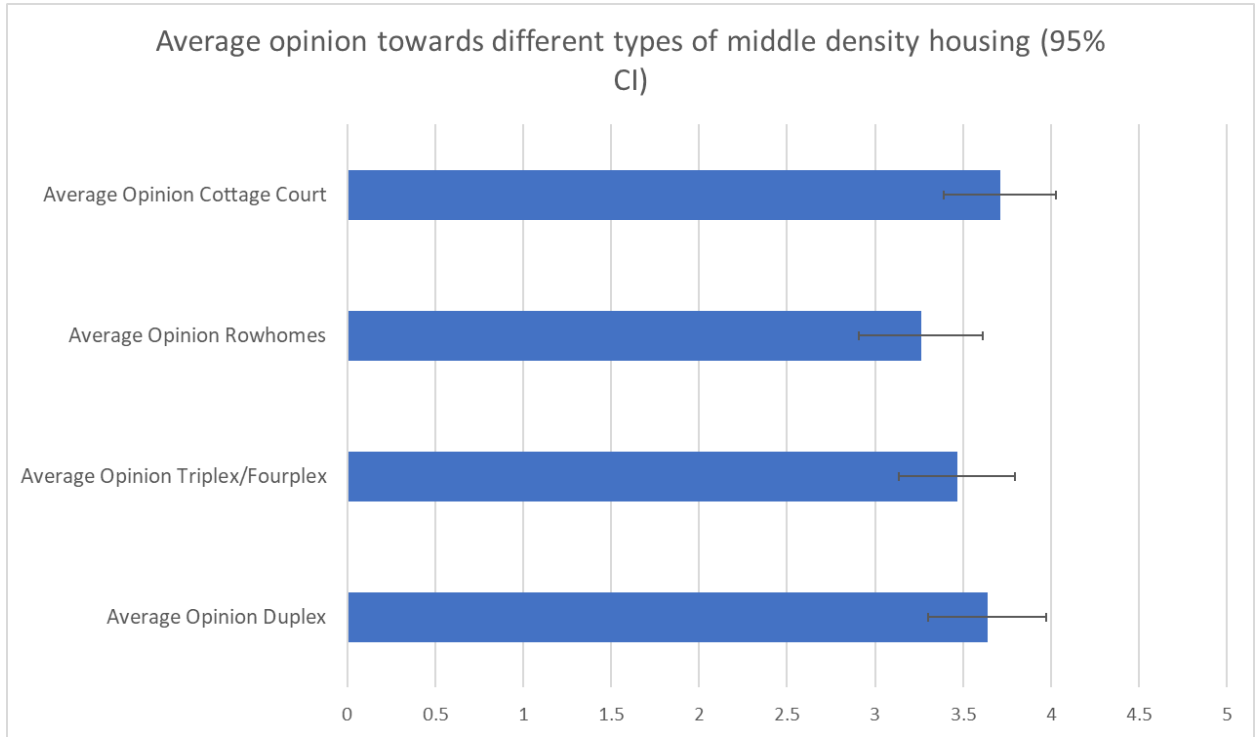
Conclusion

Transit investment without anti-displacement tools fuels gentrification, as shown by the 66% of residents concerned with housing costs and the high levels of housing cost stress on residents making less than \$35,000 a year. One way of combating gentrification is to increase housing supply, which can be done by implementing middle density housing. Middle density housing generates affordability, supports marginalized communities, and is generally popular among the public, with an average rating of 3.5 out of 5 among all middle density housing types.

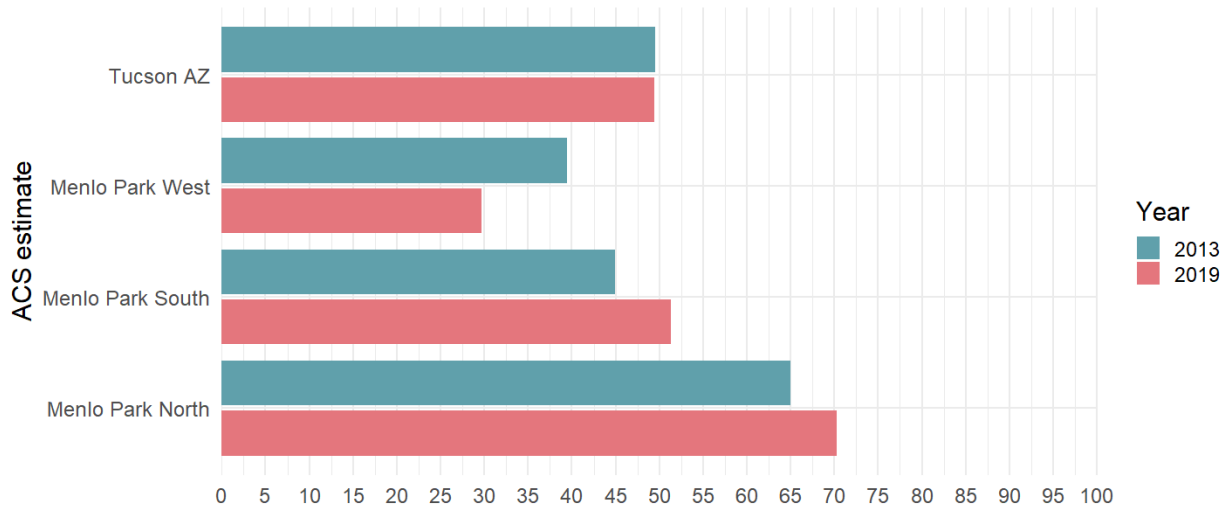
Overall, this report offers a positive perspective on middle density housing and that the City of Tucson should prioritize providing affordable housing in the form of middle density housing. However, a more representative sample of the community with a higher sample size should be used to draw definitive conclusions. Additionally, more specific questions and implementation strategies should be provided to the general community. If affordability is one of the issues the City of Tucson seeks to address as the city continues to grow, cottage court style homes tend to be more favored than other types of middle density housing.

Appendix

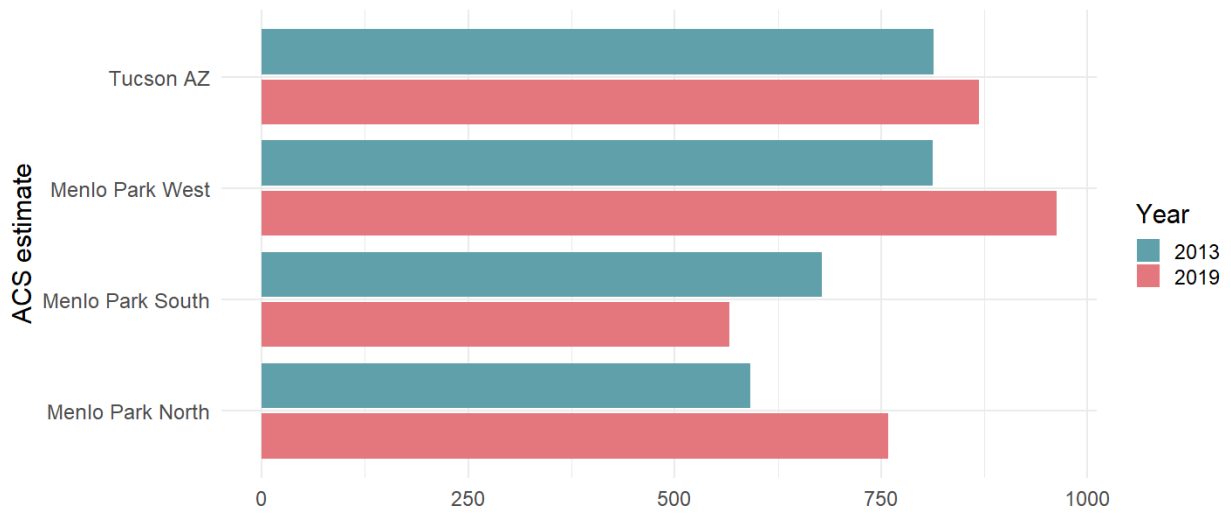
Additional Graphs

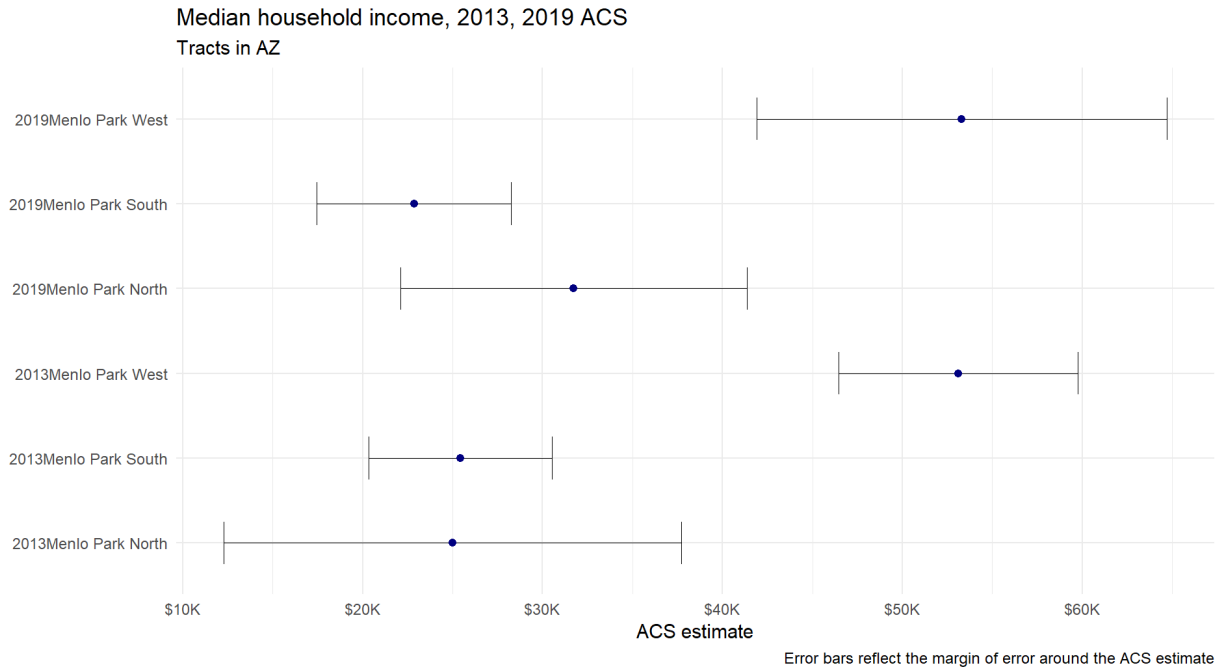


Percent of Renter Occupied Homes 2013 & 2019 5-Year ACS
Tucson, Arizona Transit Oriented Development



Median household costs, 2013 & 2019 5-Year ACS
Tucson, Arizona Transit Oriented Development





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