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Is there room for children in booming western cities? Empirical evidence from Austin, Denver, and Portland

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ABSTRACT

Austin, Denver, and Portland are all booming cities in or on the edge of the American West. Their thriving economies and natural and urban amenities have attracted large numbers of in-migrants. As housing prices rise, families with children in particular face diminished choices about where to live. This article asks three questions: How have the child populations of Austin, Denver, and Portland fared in recent decades? Is there a link between gentrification and a decrease in family households with children? And finally, to what extent do various housing types associate with more or fewer of these households? In brief, Austin, Denver, and Portland have fared reasonably well in maintaining family life, but neighborhoods with master-planned brownfield or greenfield developments appear to have accounted for a disproportionate share of the growth in their child populations, helping to offset sharp losses in gentrifying neighborhoods closer to the cities' urban cores. As these opportunities begin to diminish in all three cities, the strong association between compact single-family and "missing middle," or middle density, housing types and households with children suggests pathways for these three cities and others like them to retain such households, by using policy to encourage these development types.

Dating at least as far back as Thomas Jefferson, American society has exhibited at best a profound ambivalence towards dense urban places, especially as a suitable environment for raising children (Conn, 2014). This sentiment was particularly strong for most of the 20th century, which saw a shift in the locus of family life within metropolitan areas away from dense city neighborhoods towards car-dependent neighborhoods filled with single-family detached houses. In the 21st century, however, there has been an intense revival of interest in city life in the United States. To date, this has been associated most strongly with an influx of childless young adults and, to a lesser extent, retired persons (Moos, 2016).

What is unclear is whether members of the Millennial generation (born between roughly 1980 and 1996) and rising members of Generation Z (born after 1996) will be able to act on their apparent collective preference for city living—at least vis-à-vis members of earlier generations at the same stage of life—once they have children (Myers, 2016). US cities have recently benefited from a demographic wave of young adults that washed over them starting around the turn of the millennium. However, with the "peak Millennial" year of 2015 now in the past, to remain healthy cities will not necessarily be able to depend on recruiting legions of incoming childless young adults, as they have been doing. Instead, to echo an argument from the planner-demographer Dowell Myers (ibid), they will need to find ways to persuade more members of the Millennial and Z generations to remain committed to city life even with children in tow, and even in the face of forces that continue to exert a strong outward pull towards suburbs.

For decades, arguably, there have been three major obstacles standing in the way of city living as a mainstream, aspirational lifestyle choice for families with children: crime, perceived school quality, and the unwillingness of white people to live near concentrations of people of color, above all African Americans. Violent crime has greatly receded as an obstacle—its meteoric rise across the nation that started in the 1960s went into reverse, for reasons that are not clear, beginning in the early 1990s in most, though not all, large cities (Sharkey, 2018). Progress on improving the real and perceived quality of public education in big cities is more mixed. Despite survey evidence of ongoing stigma against eight central city school districts (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2018), a recent Urban Institute study found that one third of the achievement gap between a set of large urban public school districts and the nation as a whole was closed between 2005 and 2015 (Blagg, 2016). The propensity of whites to flee their neighborhoods once people of color enter in significant numbers has decreased, though certainly not disappeared (Alba & Denton, 2004; Crowder, 2000). On balance city life appears to be more promising for more families with children than has been true for decades. Millions of Millennials and, behind them, members of Generation Z have been enjoying city life for

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years, in significantly greater numbers than their Generation X and Baby Boomer elders, and presumably many of them would like to continue an urban lifestyle even after they become parents.

There is a fly in the ointment, though. Housing prices are now rising faster in and near downtowns than in more outlying areas of metros across the nation, a profound reversal from much of the last century. What is more, where housing has been added in booming urban cores such as Phoenix and Houston, it has mostly taken the form of small units catering to young adults in childless households (Pfeiffer & Pearthree, 2018). New housing catering to families with children is mostly scarce in close-in city neighborhoods; where existing family-sized housing in such locations exists, it is becoming increasingly expensive in many cities, and it often attracts non-family occupants. It is thus plausible that the lack of suitable and affordable housing is becoming a new constraint on the revival of family life in big cities in the United States at just the moment that the traditional obstacles have begun to recede.

To date, there has been little scholarly attention to housing as a possible brake on the revival of family life in booming US cities. For decades the aforementioned issues of crime, schools, and race have received the lion's share of attention, and deservedly so. However, as housing looms as a possible constraint, it may be timely for debates already well underway in Canada, Australia, and elsewhere on what families with children need from urban housing to begin in the United States. My hope is that this article contributes to such an endeavor.

The Western US cities of Austin, Denver, and Portland are ideal for examining relationships between children and big city housing. Some of the aforementioned obstacles to big city family life are less in evidence in them than in other large cities. Violent crime (at least the homicide rate) is comparatively low in all three. There is somewhat greater middle class participation in the cities' public school systems. And in part because none of them were historically major industrial centers, they lack the extreme racialized concentrations of deep poverty and urban abandonment so common for so long, in some cases right up to the present day, in many cities in the East. Indeed, Austin, Denver, and Portland are now routinely viewed as among the most economically successful central cities in the nation, with vibrant cultural scenes and nearby scenic wildlands as part of the winning formula that attracts large numbers of domestic in-migrants, particularly young adults.

However, Austin, Denver, Portland and cities like them are in some ways becoming victims of their own success, particularly for those struggling to cope with their escalating cost of living. The broader question of this article is quite simple and stark: will there be a place for children in revitalized urban cores? This question seems particularly urgent within the context of the American West, where forward-thinking civic cultures and robust investments in civic assets offer opportunities for advancement for a rising multiracial generation of young people in many cities—but only if their parents can find an affordable place for them to live.

In this research, I conduct an empirical analysis at three spatial scales. First, I examine trends in overall population and in the population of children and youth (which I define as all persons under the age of 18) in the three cities. Next, I test whether there is a relationship between gentrification and loss of children over time at the neighborhood level. To do so, I rely on studies done for all three cities that categorize census tracts according to whether or not they are gentrifying, and if so at what stage. Each of them uses a variant of a typology developed by Lisa Bates (2013). Finally, using American Housing Survey (AHS) microdata, I quantify the role that different housing unit types (e.g., large lot vs small lot single-family detached vs. townhouse, etc.) play in providing homes to households that include children.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly review literature on housing for children in cities as an emerging area of concern. Next, I provide details on the analytical methods used. I then present results from each of the three analyses. In the conclusion, I summarize my findings and present some policy implications. In brief: Denver, Portland, and Austin have met with success, in recent decades, in recovering, maintaining, and growing their child populations, respectively. However, the growth in children in all three comes disproportionately from neighborhoods containing master-planned developments on greenfield or brownfield sites. Greenfield development inside of city limits seems to have played a particularly important role in the growth of the child population in Austin, whose ability to expand its boundary outward has been much greater in recent decades than in Denver and Portland. This growth of children in master planned brownfield and greenfield developments has been offset by significant losses of children in gentrifying neighborhoods near the urban cores, raising questions about whether family life can thrive in the most centrally-located and best transit-served neighborhoods.

As opportunities for large scale master planned developments inside city limits begin to dwindle, specific strategies will be needed for retaining families with children, in particular the prioritization of compact yet still family-friendly housing types. These include small lot single-family detached houses, townhouses, and other ground-oriented housing forms—possibly even in areas where market pressures would otherwise lead to taller buildings with elevators. As I will argue, policies and programs that incentivize housing development of the densest housing types, such as high-rises, with higher bedroom counts in some of the units—underway in at least some US cities such as San Francisco (Gabbe, 2015)—may not, on their own, be enough for cities to retain their child populations. Instead, city leaders may need, as argued by Markus Moos and his coauthors for Toronto, to take steps to spur the production of ground-oriented, medium-density housing types that directly appeal to people with children (Moos, Woodside, Vinodrai, & Yan, 2018).

1. Children and city life in the United States

Living as part of a nuclear family in a spacious, freestanding, single-family house, likely in a quiet suburban neighborhood, has long been viewed in US society as the culminating phase in an individual's life (Perin, 1977). This view of the proper life course is so deeply embedded that it symbolizes the “American Dream.” By contrast, for much of the 20th century, raising children in a dense city neighborhood was decidedly outside the mainstream (Groth, 1994). For generations public policy has focused on supporting the growth of family life in the suburbs. At the federal level, the most consequential actions dating from the time of the New Deal era have been subsidies for mortgages for newly-built single-family houses and later the construction of freeways opening up land for their development (Jackson, 1985). At the local level, for the past century, zoning and other land use regulations have been used to set aside most privately-owned land within most communities for single-family, detached houses on spacious lots (Hirt, 2015).

Following perhaps three quarters of a century during which US central cities lost ground to their suburbs in economic, cultural, and quality of life terms, city life is back. In a process dubbed by one commentator as the Great Inversion, the growth in housing values in many urban cores is now outpacing that of more outlying areas (Edlund, Machado, & Sviatschi, 2015; Ehrenhalt, 2012; Juday, 2015). Though the urban revival began haltingly, confined to a short list of large coastal cities such as San Francisco and New York, it has now spread to all regions and all types of cities, gathering particular force after the turn of the current century. With each passing year, the long decline of cities during the 20th century is beginning to look more like an aberration, and the Great Inversion more as a return to the historical and global norm where proximity to the concentrations of jobs, amenities, and cultural cachet offered by cities is coveted by those with the privilege and wealth to access them.

One might suppose that the return of wealth to central cities will include a substantial return of wealthy households with children to those locations. This may be true. However, there are reasons to believe