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# How Gentrification Has Redefined Spanish Cities: Expansion of the Process in the Decade from 2011 to 2021

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During the last decade, Spanish cities have undergone thoroughgoing transformation linked to rising housing prices and the sociodemographic composition of their inhabitants. In this situation, gentrification, understood as the process whereby a population of lower economic status is replaced by one of greater purchasing power, has become established as one of the main drivers of urban and social change. In this issue of *Perspectives Demogràfiques*, published by the Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, we offer a comparative analysis of the intensity and expansion of gentrification between 2011 and 2021 in the ten most populated Spanish municipalities.

The study shows that while Madrid and Barcelona are undergoing the most intense and far-reaching transformation, smaller cities are also registering major changes, albeit in more localised areas. Gentrification is a heterogeneous process that does not proceed in the same way in all cities. It varies in the ways it spreads over territory and in the social groups that drive it. The advance of this process into different cities and neighbourhoods together with its negative consequences draws attention to the need for a political commitment to liveability in urban areas, and the right to the city.

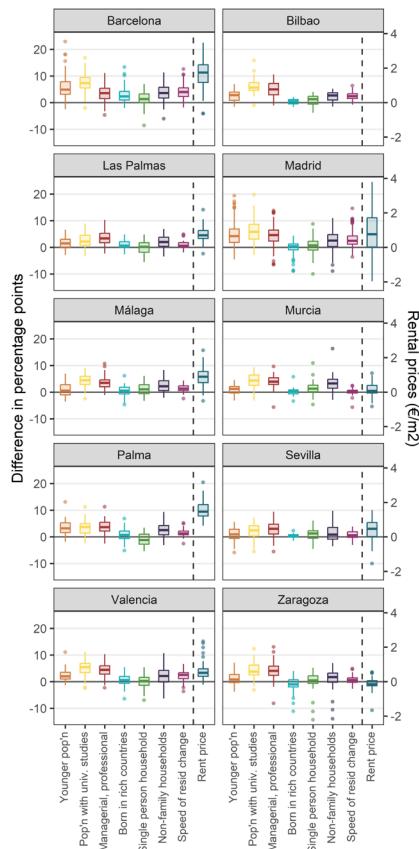
## How are our city neighbourhoods changing?

The sustained increase in housing prices after the 2008 crisis, and the rise of rental as a form of tenure have brought about an urban reshaping that has altered social and demographic structures. Meanwhile, young people and professionals have been attracted to metropolitan areas as centres that concentrate skilled jobs, a process that has led to population replacement in which those who cannot afford city housing prices are forced to seek alternatives in more affordable locations. Gentrification refers precisely to processes in which the arrival of people of higher purchasing power directly or indirectly displaces residents with lower incomes to areas that are increasingly distant from city centres.

Accordingly, we define the more gentrified neighbourhoods as those that exhibit a rises in: (1) the young population; (2) the population with university degrees; (3) the population employed in the highest job categories; (4) the population born in wealthy countries; (5) the population that is living alone or (6) in non-family shared households; as well as (7) fast growing arrivals of people with university degrees; and (8) a sharper increase in rental prices<sup>1</sup>. Graph 1 provides a visual summary of the evolution of these indicators in Spain's 10 most populated municipalities between the censuses of 2011 and 2021. The box plots show the quartile distribution of the 705 Census Clusters (CCs) and the dots represent the statistical outliers. The CCs are spatial units of approximately 12,000 inhabitants on average, which we have generated by grouping census tracts, thus ensuring statistical robustness and comparability over time.

Overall, Spanish cities have shown an increase in these variables between 2011 and 2021, although considerable territorial diversity indicates different degrees of intensity among them. While Madrid and Barcelona lead in almost all aspects of this evolution, other cities stand out for particular features. The two island cities show more rejuvenated populations and appeal for the international population, while Valencia and Bilbao register sharp increases in the university-educated population and that employed in the highest-level jobs, and also a faster arrival rate of more highly educated people. That said, within cities, we also find high levels of

**1.** The information provided by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda in the Rental Price Index does not include data for Bilbao as this source is based on tax information from the Common Tax Territory, which does not include the Chartered Community of Navarre or the Basque Country.



**Graph 1.** Intensity of sociodemographic change between 2011 and 2021 in the Census Clusters of Spain's 10 most populated cities.

**Source:** Authors, using the 2011-2021 Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) Population and Housing census 2011-2021 and the Rental Price Index of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda, 2011-2019

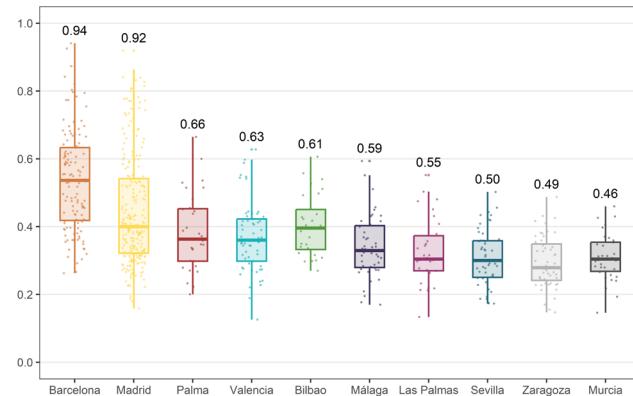
heterogeneity, this being especially pronounced in the more populated ones. As for rental prices, which is one of the key aspects of gentrification, there have been steep increases in all cities with the exception of Zaragoza and Murcia where rising rent is circumscribed to certain very specific areas. Particularly striking are the cases of Barcelona, Valencia, Málaga, and the two island cities where a clear majority of their CCs show increases. The figures for other cities, although with greater internal differences, are also rising.

## A same phenomenon at different speeds

Is it possible to summarise the behaviour of these various dimensions associated with gentrification in a single indicator that would give an idea of the changes occurring in the neighbourhoods of Spain's largest cities? We propose a gentrification index that assigns to each CC a value between 0 and 1 so that we can analyse the advance of this process between 2011 and 2021. In doing so, we have considered the eight variables presented above, normalised from 0 to 1 in accordance with the extreme values of the distribution of all units analysed (covering 98% of the observations). The

arithmetic mean of the eight variables offers for each CC a final value for the change occurring between the two points in time. Since what is important in gentrification processes is not only the change registered between two points in time but also the intensity acquired in each dimension, we used the same methodology to calculate a normalised intensity indicator for the 2021 values. The final gentrification indicator is the weighted arithmetic mean of the change indicator (2/3) and the intensity indicator (1/3). Hence, if a CC scores 1, it means that it shows the highest value for all variables across the 10 cities.

The results of the Gentrification Index are presented in Graph 2, which shows its distribution in quartiles where each point corresponds to a CC. Madrid and Barcelona concentrate the majority of CCs where gentrification has most intensely advanced, which signals a higher degree of consolidation of the process in these two cities in the decade of 2010. In order to find the leading unit outside these two cities, it is necessary to go to the lower figure of 0.66, which is registered in Palma. The intensity of the process in the most affected neighbourhoods of the two major cities is such that the value for the most gentrified CC of Madrid (Universidad, 0.92) is twice as great as that recorded by the highest scoring CC of Murcia (0.46), while the average for Barcelona (0.54) is almost the same as the highest value recorded for Las Palmas (Santa Catalina-Canteras, 0.55). The different speeds of the gentrification process is related with the greater financial, political, and institutional weight of Madrid and Barcelona in the global market. Nevertheless, in many of the other cities analysed, certain specific units approach the levels of Madrid and Barcelona, which confirms that, during this decade, gentrification has ceased to be exclusive to the largest cities and that it has come to affect the medium-sized ones as well.



**Graph 2.** Gentrification Index 2011-2021.

**Source:** Authors, using the 2011-2021 Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) Population and Housing census 2011-2021 and the Rental Price Index of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda, 2011-2019

## Territorialisation of the process: has gentrification reached my neighbourhood?

Until the decade of 2010, gentrification was concentrated in a few neighbourhoods, mostly in old city centres (Duque-Calvache, 2016) that were affected by earlier disinvestment. Subsequent studies showed expansion into other

from the historic centre into adjacent neighbourhoods or, in coastal cities, along the shoreline. In Valencia, gentrification is moving towards Extramurs (0.59) and Russafa in the Eixample district (0.54 – 0.55). The pattern is similar in Málaga, where it extends westwards from the city centre into Trinidad and Mármoles (0.51– 0.55). In Zaragoza, the process has advanced more gradually, southwards from the old city centre into Juntas de Centro and the Universidad

City	Area	Neighbourhood(s)	District	Value	Ranking
Barcelona	Barceloneta	Barceloneta	Ciutat Vella	0,941	1
Madrid	Universidad norte	Universidad	Centro	0,919	3
Palma	Centro este	Mercado - Sindicato - Montesión - Cort - La Seo - Calatrava	Centro	0,665	62
Valencia	El Carme-La Seu-El Pilar	El Carme - La Seu - El Pilar	Ciutat Vella	0,628	75
Bilbao	Indautxu Suroeste	Indautxu	Abando	0,606	89
Málaga	Centro Sur	Centro Histórico - Ensanche Centro - La Merced	Centro	0,593	98
Las Palmas	Santa Catalina - Canteras	Santa Catalina - Canteras	Puerto - Canteras	0,552	123
Sevilla	San Julián - San Gil este	San Julián - San Gil	Casco Antiguo	0,502	172
Zaragoza	Casco Histórico este	La Magdalena	Casco Histórico	0,487	182
Murcia	Pedanías del sur	Pedanías	Pedanías	0,459	204

Table 1. The most gentrified areas for each city during the decade of 2011-2021.

Source: Authors, using the 2011-2021 Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) Population and Housing census 2011-2021 and the Rental Price Index of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda, 2011-2019

neighbourhoods, revealing how gentrification had begun to colonise additional spaces, as had already happened in other western cities where the process was more advanced. To illustrate this development, we present two tools, a table showing the neighbourhoods with the highest index score in each city, and an [interactive map](#) of the ten cities and their CCs with the corresponding indicator value for each one. The [map](#) confirms that gentrification has expanded from the areas presented in Table 1 to traditionally unaffected areas, especially in Barcelona and Madrid. In Barcelona, gentrification has spread into neighbourhoods like Sagrada Família, Sant Antoni, and within districts like Sant Martí and Sants-Montjuïc, where CCs with scores above 0.7 are found. In Madrid, the process is making inroads in the traditionally working-class districts of Tetuán in the north and Arganzuela in the south. Moreover, relatively high values of around 0.50 – 0.55 are observed in the districts of Carabanchel and Latina, which are located on the far side of the M-30, the city's traditional socioeconomic frontier (Ariza & Sorando, 2025).

In middle-sized cities, gentrification is mostly concentrated in the old centres, although it is starting to extend to other areas. This pattern, common in several cities, advances

district, with values below 0.44. In Sevilla, it spreads from the old centre into the Triana neighbourhood (0.40 – 0.43). In the island cities, the most gentrified CCs are in the old centres (0.66 in the eastern part of Palma's city centre) and coastal areas, especially in the case of Las Palmas (0.55 in Guanarteme). In Bilbao, the most gentrified CC is in Abando (0.60), the district there the city's economic activity is concentrated, and this is followed by the old centre (0.56). Murcia presents the most complex case. Its highest CC score (0.46) is found with a group of local districts that belong to the municipality but are not connected with the rest of the urban area. The western part of the city centre shows the highest CC value (0.43) although the patterns of expansion are not very clear.

## On gentrification and urban social (in)justice

Until now, most studies have focused on specific neighbourhoods and few have considered all the neighbourhoods of a city or made comparisons between cities like Madrid and Barcelona (López-Gay et al., 2021). The index presented for 2011-2021, however, can be considered as a gauge of the phenomenon and allows us to draw

conclusions about three key elements: diversity, intensity, and territorialisation.

First, gentrification takes different forms in each city and it can be driven by a range of actors. In some cities, the international population has a greater impact while, in others, the speed of residential change and human capital are more determinant in the process. Second, analysis reveals the uneven prominence of gentrification both between cities and within them. Barcelona and Madrid are in the forefront of these transformations and show consolidation of the process across much of their municipal areas. Even when showing clear signs of advancing, gentrification has been less intense in other cities. Finally, gentrification is spreading, although with varying degrees of intensity, from city centres to adjacent neighbourhoods. Geography and the particularities of each city are factors here. In some cases, gentrification extends towards the coast and other desirable areas of the city. In places where these processes are most pronounced, gentrification has spread to neighbourhoods that seemed to be on the margins because of their geographical location and social composition, for example the districts of Tetuán, Carabanchel, and Latina in Madrid, and Sants and Poble Sec in Barcelona.

In this regard, distribution of the index allows us to

anticipate the paths of expansion that will be taken by the phenomenon. After the pandemic, these processes have intensified as the result of new hikes in housing prices, the globalisation of transactions, and financialisation of housing, which makes access more difficult for the average person. We are heading for increasingly exclusionary cities that are displacing the more vulnerable people from their neighbourhoods and growing socio-spatial segregation and urban inequalities in metropolitan regions (Nel·lo, 2021). Given this situation, tools like those presented here could be valuable when it comes to designing public policies that guarantee the right to the city, especially in areas where gentrification is beginning to take hold. The changes observed in this study represent significant challenges for urban planning, with ramifications that range from social justice to managing competition for residential space among people who are facing this situation with unequal resources. In some cases, these factors lead to urban renewal processes, which highlights the need for planning approaches that consider both urban transformation and existing inequalities. In this context, ensuring residential use of housing and preventing eviction of people from their homes become fundamental priorities for constructing a more equitable and just urban society.

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