UC Irvine
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RESILIENCE

"IF WE GET KICKED OUT, THE CULTURAL STORES WILL GET SHUT DOWN"

EXAMINING THE IMPACTS OF GENTRIFICATION ON LATINO COMMUNITIES IN COSTA MESA, CA

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Acknowledgements

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About UC Irvine Joe C. Wen School of Population & Public Health
Wen Public Health is dedicated to the achievement of health equity for all populations through research, teaching, service, and public health practice – locally and globally.

About Resilience Orange County
Resilience Orange County is a multigenerational grassroots organization rooted in youth and immigrant justice organizing in Orange County. Formed in 2016, Resilience OC builds the leadership and power of working-class communities of color through participatory organizing, participatory research, civic engagement, leadership development, and cultural work. By centering youth, immigrants, and system-impacted residents, Resilience OC strengthens multigenerational movements for racial, economic, and transformative justice across the region.

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Executive Summary

Gentrification is perceived as an increasing threat to health and economic well-being among Latinos who reside in California urban regions. An academic-community collaboration between UC Irvine's Wen School of Population and Public Health and Resilience Orange County conducted a project to identify the potential impacts of gentrification on residents and their food environment in Costa Mesa, CA.

We recruited 37 participants who identify as Latino/a/x (ages 13 years or older) in the city to engage in a participatory mapping study to map areas of food access and neighborhood change in 2025. Participants mapped a total of 337 points that represent places they purchase prepared and non-prepared food and areas where they have identified neighborhood change.

Results reveal 1) perceptions of high food prices and responsive coping strategies, 2) limited access to culturally relevant food, and 3) discrepancies between newly available housing and existing community needs. Recommendations include integrating commercial anti-displacement measures that target businesses that provide culturally relevant ingredients and items and rent stabilization policies at the city and state levels to reduce housing insecurity risk and prevent worse health inequities for Latinos in the region.

Background

Gentrification, defined as "*commercial, demographic, and real estate price changes due to local, national, or global investments geared toward higher-income and white residents*",[1] has increasingly become a concern for communities across the United States (U.S.). Gentrification can displace long-time residents (particularly those who rent) through increased rents and decreased affordability and access to local goods and services, with disproportionate impacts on low-income, racial/ethnic minority communities.

Limited housing availability is a key outcome of gentrification, which includes availability of new or existing housing stock. Additionally, this concept incorporates housing that may be available but not affordable for lower income households. In Costa Mesa, California, gentrification was identified as a threat to the health and wellbeing of Latino residents in the community as a result of the current lack of housing availability.

Furthermore, limited work has been conducted to examine how gentrification might contribute to neighborhood changes in the food environment. As new residents move into a neighborhood, local businesses may also change to meet new residential needs or preferences, including new food retailers. While nutritious food access may improve for all community members as a result of these changes, it is unclear whether existing residents can also access or afford these new options. Affordability and cultural relevance of available foods are important aspects to promote food access among food insecure populations,[2] which have been understudied in existing work on gentrification and food environments. Lack of access to culturally relevant foods has been associated with poorer mental health and well-being outcomes.[3]

These food accessibility concerns make it essential to analyze the current food environment, specifically addressing the potential impacts of shifting food environments and gentrification, such as displacement or future exclusion. Understanding these shifts is crucial for at-risk residents to remain in the community and maintain access to resources they need. To investigate the current food environment and gentrification for Latino residents in Costa Mesa, we used a participatory mapping approach to identify barriers and facilitators to food access and the built environment; and to assess neighborhood change impacts. This research brief provides key findings and policy and programmatic recommendations to improve food access and support health for existing residents.

Approach

We recruited Latino residents ages 13 years or older, who live and/or attend school in Costa Mesa's city limits. We used participatory mapping sessions, where residents map areas where they access food (both in and outside of Costa Mesa) and identify neighborhood change (within Costa Mesa only). Data was collected on MyMap, a Google Maps tool, with accompanying field notes on community member discussions.

A total of n=37 participants contributed across two mapping sessions with four groups. A total of 337 data points were collected, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: 337 data points collected from the mapping sessions in Costa Mesa, CA

Key Findings

Rising Food Prices and rent are increasing cost burdens for existing residents

Mapping sessions reveal that existing residents and families primarily purchase food in the city of Costa Mesa where they are experiencing high prices for food, rent, and other basic needs (Figure 2). In response, several residents said they prioritized food sales/discounts to mitigate rising costs, which could mean multiple trips to a store in a week. Some residents shared they went shopping for food items multiple times in a week (i.e., up to four times a week, to target sales prices for specific items like meat/protein) across local food retailers. An adult resident shared they would purchase items "*depending on what's cheaper between El Super and Walmart.*" Residents expressed visiting non-brick-and-mortar retailers to access groceries, such as the Swapmeet in Orange Coast College, to not "*pay taxes*" or "*pick their own produce.*"

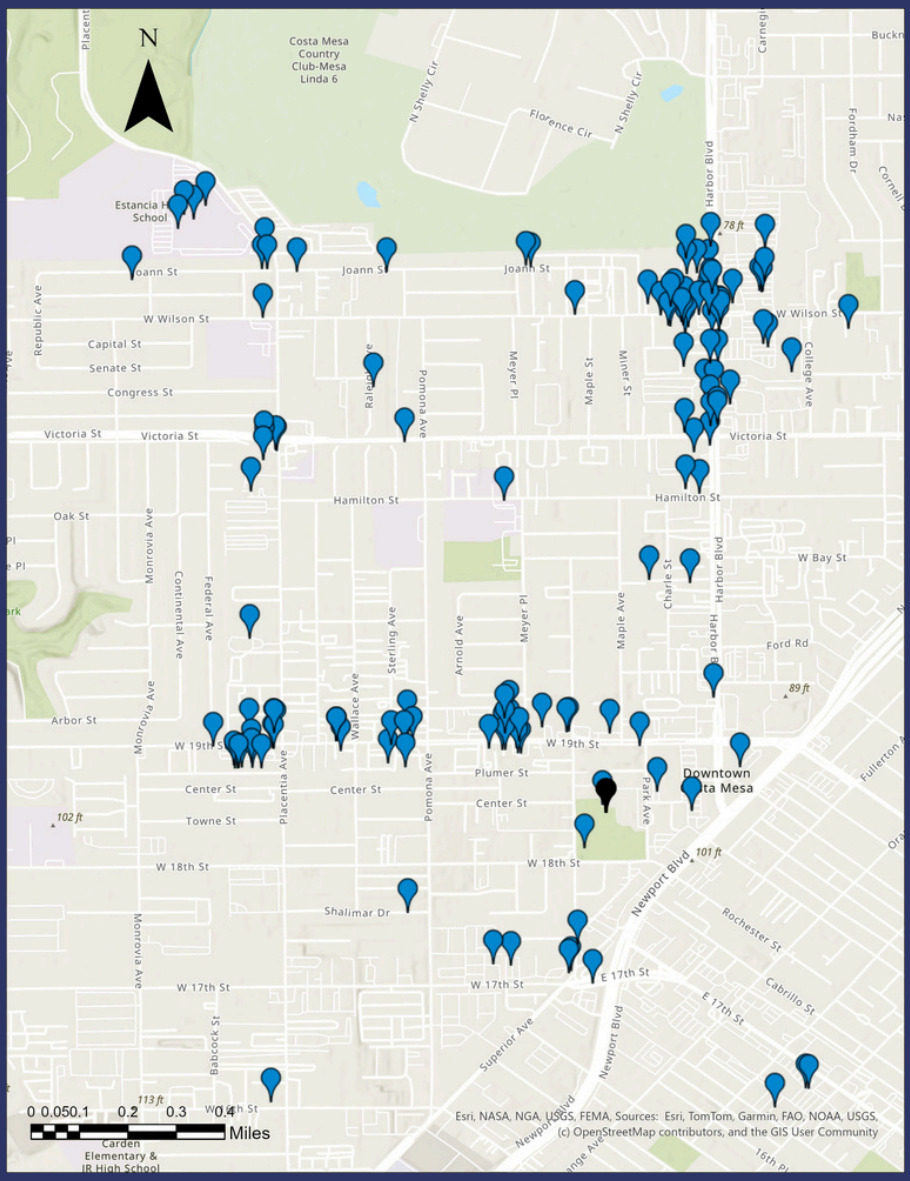

Figure 2: Map of high-density areas of food access for all participants in Costa Mesa, CA

Residents also said they accessed public transit, shared vehicles across households or shopped for multiple households to reduce costs. Another adult resident shared they use the Costa Mesa GOAT which "*helps so much getting to [Trader Joes on 17th St].*" Other resource sharing efforts were sharing Costco membership cards across households to access less expensive, non-food basic needs items, like toilet paper or hygiene products.

Key Findings

Latino cultural foods remain available but may not be affordable and decline in availability long-term

Adult residents generally reported that preferred cultural foods remained available amidst neighborhood changes, yet these items had increased in price throughout the city. An example mentioned were different prices for the same food items at Northgate Mercado (Costa Mesa) and Northgate Market (Santa Ana, a neighboring city). A resident said that when considering price, they "*have to drive to Santa Ana and it waste[s] a lot of time so even though it's a little more expensive,*" they will opt to "*go to Mercado (Northgate Mercado) for specific [foods] because it is very expensive.*" *Figure 3* depicts both retailers which are 5.5 miles in distance (estimated to be up to an hour of car-based travel time based on Google Map averaged traffic calculations). Some residents mentioned that other cultural food stores no longer offer the full range of food offerings they might find in a neighboring city (Santa Ana) with a high percentage of Latino residents.

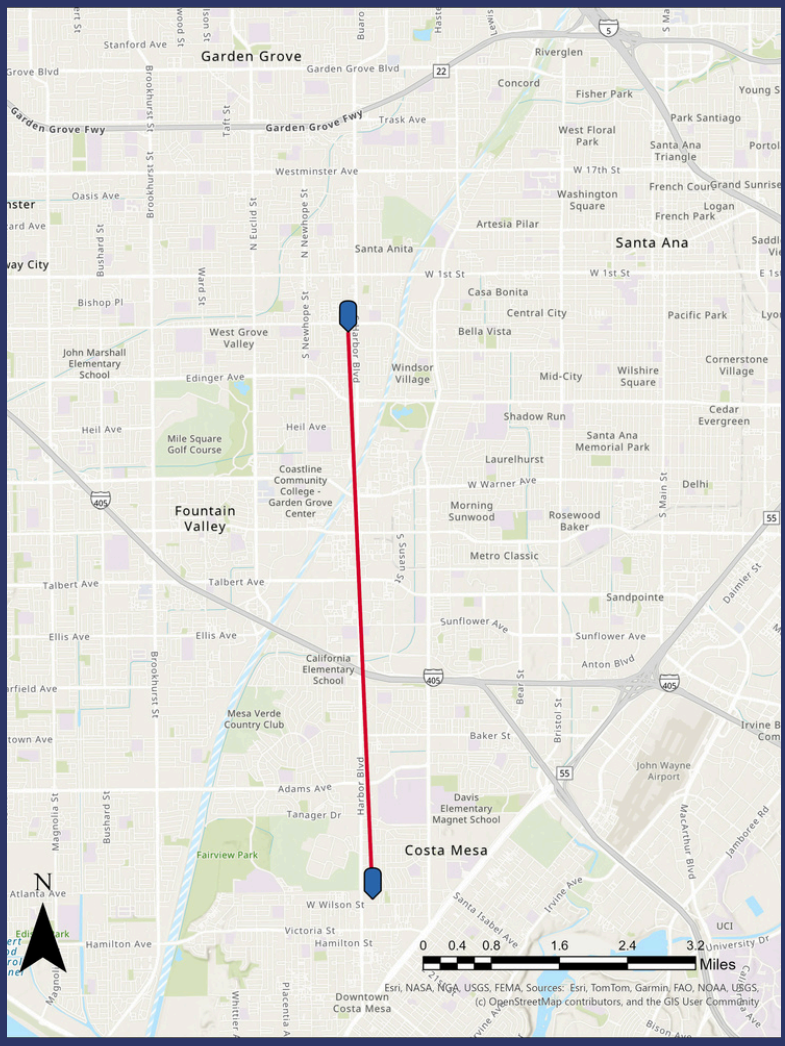

Figure 3: Google map with red line depicting distance between Northgate Mercado (Costa Mesa) and the next closest Northgate Market location

Residents were concerned that, long term, businesses with cultural foods would eliminate the availability of these items due to a change in preferences and perceived declining demand from new residents. One resident said, these items "*won't survive, [because] the White people don't know how to cook that.*" Another adult resident described differences in menu options at a chain restaurant: "*the El Toro location on 19th St in Costa Mesa does not offer lengua (beef tongue) or tripas (beef intestine). El Toro used to sell lengua (beef tongue) and tripas (beef intestine) but it's not on the menu anymore because White people don't buy them…[we] go to Santa Ana to eat tripa and lengua.*"

Key Findings

New housing is not accessible or compatible with existing residents' needs

Participants identified several newly built housing complexes and increased stock as methods to counter lack of housing availability. However, some of the rental options, like apartments on Wilson St and Harbor Blvd, were said to have multiple physical barriers that prevented entry. Apartments often established limits on the quantity of children and pets, with one youth resident commenting how "*they don't accept more than 3 kids. Or [they] don't all let pets or you have to pay for them.*" Rental requirements were said to be high and exclusive: "*now they are asking you for many requisites, like good credit [and] ID card...they are asking for insurance and salary [too].*" Further, credit requirements and additional fixed costs for entry (i.e., security deposit, first and last month's rent) were said to be too expensive for families. Youth shared they felt these new housing options were unattainable due to cost. They explicitly stated fears that luxury apartments were a sign that Costa Mesa was becoming too expensive for them to remain in the future.

> "Now they are asking you for many requisites, like good credit [and] ID card...they are asking for insurance and salary [too]."

Figure 3: Lux Apartments located on Wilson St and Harbor Blvd, Costa Mesa

Policy Recommendations

1 Integrate commercial anti-displacement standards for culturally relevant food retailers in Costa Mesa

Independent grocers and food retailers, like Tropicana (formerly El Metate Market and Los Novillos) and family-owned restaurants with predominantly Latino clientele, are particularly vulnerable to redevelopment pressures and escalating commercial rents. To align economic development with equity goals, the city of Costa Mesa should incorporate commercial anti-displacement criteria into its planning and permitting processes. Large redevelopment or corridor improvement projects should be required to assess their impact on existing food retailers.

By treating culturally rooted food businesses as vital community assets, the city can preserve both local identity and cultural-food resilience amid economic growth. This approach builds on the principles established in Costa Mesa's Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) and Title VI Plan,[5] which ensures equitable participation of minority-owned firms in public contracting. Extending a similar equity framework to land-use and redevelopment decisions could help to protect food access for low-income Latino families while maintaining the diversity that defines Costa Mesa's commercial corridors.

Photo 1: Spice section at Northgate Gonzales Market El Mercado

Policy Recommendations

Photo 2: Members from Resilience OC, Costa Mesa Unidos, CHAMOY, and Promotoras de Salud OC after a Costa Mesa City Council Meeting

2 Implement a city-wide rent stabilization policy at 3% yearly to strengthen the City of Costa Mesa's Tenant Protection Ordinance

ROC previously identified rent as a top concern among Latino residents in Costa Mesa[10] and has supported capacity-building of Costa Mesa Unidos (CMU), an advocacy group that advocates for tenant's rights and protections for residents. Similarly, United Way, a non-profit organization found that Costa Mesa had the highest proportion of renters (60%) and the fourth-highest eviction rate among all Orange County cities in 2023.[7] The report identified undocumented Latino residents as a high-risk group for facing eviction.[7]

Costa Mesa City Council has made efforts to address these housing issues in recent years. The Just Cause Residential Tenant Protection Ordinance (passed November 2023) aimed to strengthen accountability measures for landlords who evict tenants and requires landlords provide one month's rent at the fair market rate for no-fault just cause evictions.[6] However, Latino city residents continue to experience unlawful evictions (A.A., Personal Communication, 1/5/24). Capping rent raises to 3% annually is consistent with other rent stabilization policies in Orange County[9] and would enable families to plan for rent increases, reduce the likelihood of evictions, and decrease their displacement risk.

Policy Recommendations

3 Advocate and support passage of Assembly Bill (AB) 1157, The Affordable Rent Act, in California to support state-wide rent stabilization efforts

In 2019, California's state legislature passed AB 1482: California Tenant Protection Act, a statewide rent control of either 5% (plus local consumer price index or CPI) or 10% of the current rent, whichever is lower.[8] However, this law is set to expire by the end of 2030.[8] In 2025, Assemblymember Ash Karla (D-San Jose) introduced AB 1157, The Affordable Rent Act, which would reduce allowable rent increases from the existing 10% to a new maximum of 5% or 2% plus local CPI.[9] It would also make AB 1482 permanent with the inclusion of single family homes.

Photo 3: Members from Resilience OC and Costa Mesa Unidos in Sacramento advocating for tenant protections.

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