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The Different Speeds of Gentrification in Spain: A Comparative Approach

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the evolution and spatial dynamics of gentrification in Spain's ten most populated cities between 2011 and 2021. While early research on gentrification in Spain focused on central neighbourhoods of Madrid and Barcelona, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis – characterised by renewed housing financialization and rising international mobility – triggered a broader and more complex urban transformation. Despite growing academic attention, empirical analyses from a comparative perspective between neighbourhoods and cities have been scarce. To address this gap, this research develops a systematic and comparative approach to measure gentrification intensity and expansion across 10 major Spanish cities.

We construct a Gentrification Index integrating eight indicators that capture demographic, socioeconomic, and housing market prices from Census and Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda data. The analysis, based on 705 spatial units for 10 cities, identifies both the pace and spatial diffusion of gentrification. Results reveal that Madrid and Barcelona remain the epicentres of urban transformation, showing the highest intensity and speed of gentrification, largely due to their global economic and political prominence. Nonetheless, the process has increasingly extended to medium-sized cities, indicating a nationwide spread of gentrification beyond traditional urban cores.

Spatial patterns reveal a progressive expansion from historic centres toward adjacent and well-connected neighbourhoods, often reaching formerly working-class areas and reshaping long-standing social and spatial divides. In coastal cities, gentrification tends to advance along coastal areas. Overall, the findings show that the 2010s marked a decisive phase in the diversification and territorial expansion of gentrification across the Spanish urban system.

Keywords: gentrification, neighbourhood change, housing market, speed of change

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic research on gentrification in Spanish cities has become increasingly relevant and popular, forming a rich and diverse body of literature today. During the first decade of the 21st century, these studies focused their attention on central neighbourhoods given the spatial concentration of the phenomenon. The 2008 crisis marked a turning point. Political support for a new cycle of housing financialization and increased transnational mobility fuelled a new wave of gentrification that expanded its reach to new neighbourhoods and cities.

Despite growing interest, empirical research on gentrification in Spain has faced significant limitations, particularly with regard to the availability of longitudinal data and the accurate measurement of population flows at the census tract level. Furthermore, the focus of previous literature on case studies of central neighbourhoods in large cities has left unaddressed a study of the progress of gentrification at the urban and national levels with sufficient geographical detail to identify (1) the patterns of expansion of this process across the territory and (2) the different intensities and speeds of the process in each neighbourhood and city. This article seeks to fill this gap by taking a systematic approach to the phenomenon of gentrification in Spain.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Spain, until the 2010s, gentrification processes had developed in only a few neighbourhoods and were mainly confined to historic centres (Duque Calvache, 2016), usually linked to previous disinvestment processes (Sorando & Ardura, 2016). There have been numerous studies on gentrification in Spain, especially during the last decade, and they have mainly focused on case studies of particular neighbourhoods and areas and, on rare occasions, have extended to the entire central metropolitan municipality. Much of this research has focused on the country's two main cities: Madrid and Barcelona (López-Gay, Sales-Favà, et al., 2021). With the passing of the waves of gentrification, the focus has shifted both to neighbourhoods outside the urban centres of these two cities and to other Spanish cities. Nevertheless, a comparative approach between them has not yet been undertaken, nor has a conceptual framework for their expansion been established.

3. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this work is (1) to measure the evolution of gentrification in the 10 most populated Spanish cities throughout the 2011-2021 decade, (2) deep in the expansion patterns of each city and (3) compare the different speed and intensity between neighbourhoods and cities.

Thus, for this purpose, we define the most gentrified neighbourhoods as those in which the following are recorded: (1) an increase in the young population, (2) with university degrees, (3) employed in the highest occupational categories, (4) born in rich countries, (5) living alone or (6) in shared non-family households, (7) an acceleration in the arrival of people with university degrees, and (8) a more pronounced increase in rental prices.

To accomplish the objectives, we propose to construct a composed index based on the former variables presented. Those come from the 2011 and 2021 Population and Housing Censuses and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda. The construction of the index entailed the normalisation of the variables from 0 to 1, based on the extreme values of the distribution of the set of units analysed (limiting 98% of the observations). The arithmetic mean of the eight variables provides a final value for each CG for the change between the two points in time. As gentrification processes are influenced by more than just the change recorded between two points in time, but also by the intensity of each dimension, a standardised intensity indicator was calculated for the 2021 values using the same methodology. The final gentrification indicator is the weighted average of the change indicator (two-thirds) and the intensity indicator (one-third). Therefore, if

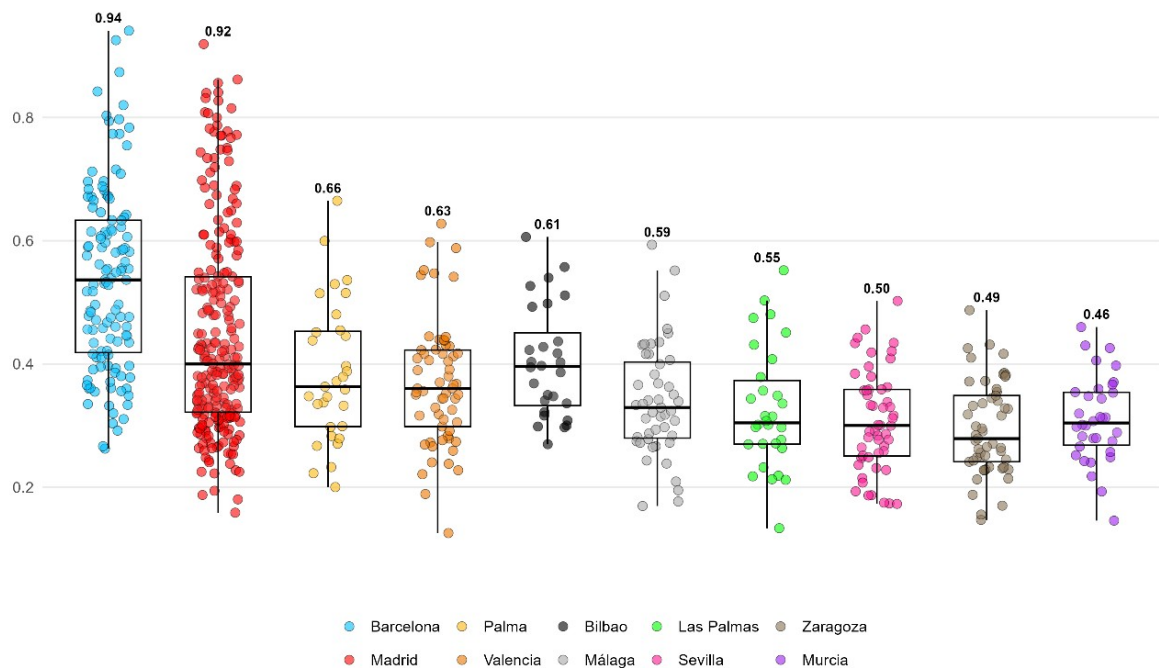
a CG is assigned a score of 1, it indicates that it has obtained the highest value across all variables within the ten cities.

In order to be as geographically precise as possible, we employ a self-developed spatial unit, specially designed to ensure the statistical robustness and comparability between both censuses. A total of 705 of Census Groupings (CG) with an average population of 12 000 have been constructed through the aggregation of census tracts based on urban and income similarity.

4. FINDINGS

The results of the Gentrification Index are displayed in Figure 1. It is evident that the cities of Madrid and Barcelona account for the majority of the CGs where gentrification has advanced most significantly during the 2010s. In order to find the first CG not belonging to one of these two cities, it is necessary to go down to a value of 0.66, which is recorded by the most gentrified CG in Palma. The intensity of the process in the most affected neighbourhoods of the two large cities is such that the most gentrified CG in Madrid (0.92) doubles the value of the CG with the highest score in Murcia (0.46), and the average of the CGs in Barcelona (0.54) is equivalent to the highest value in Las Palmas (0.55). The disparity in the pace of gentrification can be attributed to the significant financial, political and institutional influence exercised by Madrid and Barcelona within the global market. However, in many of the other cities analysed, there are also some specific units that are comparable to those in Madrid and Barcelona, thereby confirming that during this decade, gentrification has ceased to be exclusive to large cities and has also begun to affect medium-sized ones.

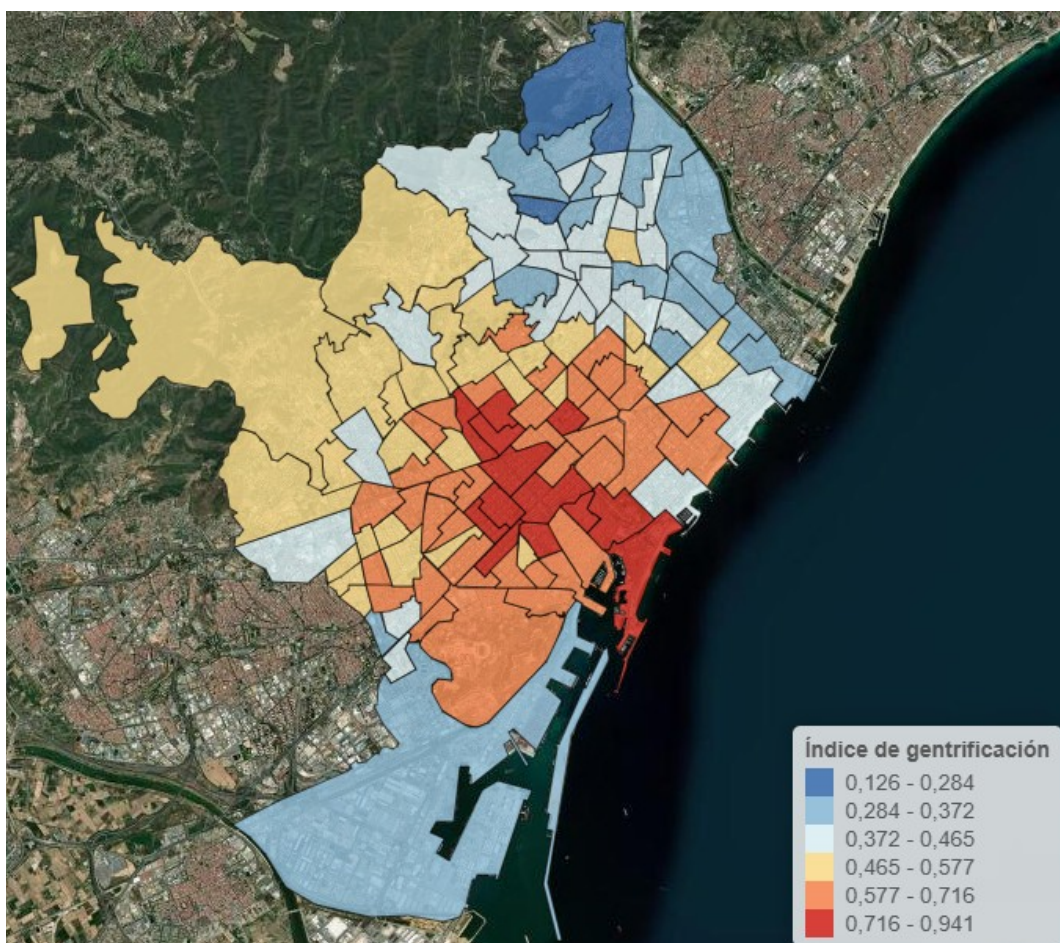
Figure 1. The different speeds of gentrification. Distribution of the Gentrification Index



Source: own elaboration based on the 2011-2021 Population and Housing Census (INE) and the Rental Price Index, Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda, 2011-2019.

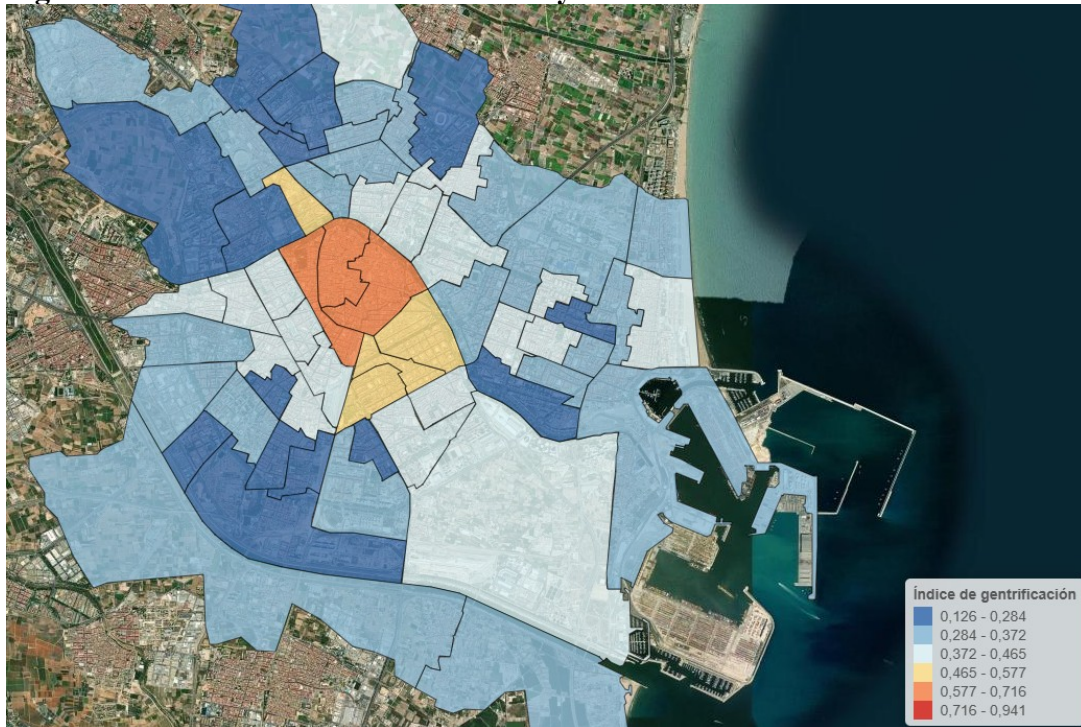
Gentrification spreads, although to varying degrees, from the centre to the surrounding neighbourhoods (Figures 2 and 3). At this point, the geography and specific characteristics of each city come into play. In some cases, the process advances towards the coast or other preferential areas of the city (office areas, well communicated, etc.). Where these processes are most intense, gentrification has reached working-class neighbourhoods that seemed to be alien to the process due to their geographical location and social composition, therefore breaking down historical socioeconomic barriers. In medium-sized cities, gentrification has mainly concentrated in historic centres, although it is beginning to spread to other areas. This pattern, common in several cities, shows an expansion that starts from the historic centre and moves towards adjacent neighbourhoods or, in coastal cities, along the littoral.

Figure 2. Gentrification Index for the city of Barcelona.



Source: own elaboration based on the 2011-2021 Population and Housing Census (INE) and the Rental Price Index, Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda, 2011-2019.

Figure 3. Gentrification Index for the city of Valencia



Source: own elaboration based on the 2011-2021 Population and Housing Census (INE) and the Rental Price Index, Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda, 2011-2019.

5. References

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