UK COLLABORATIVE CENTRE FOR HOUSING EVIDENCE

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Estate renewal in London: an assessment of regeneration-induced displacement

Policy Briefing

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Summary

Council estates in England are being demolished and replaced with newly built, denser, mixed income developments. In London C21st council estate renewal has displaced and continues to displace long time council estate residents and communities, resulting in social, economic, cultural, and public health impacts on them.

Amidst talk of the social cleansing and gentrification[1] of London, our 33-month project explored the impact of council estate renewal on those residents being 'decanted' from their homes to allow for demolition and redevelopment[2]. As well as compiling quantitative evidence of the scale of the renewal of estates in London, the geography of the associated displacements[3], and the amount of demolition which has been undertaken, the project used qualitative methods to explore the impacts of decanting on different resident groups.

[1] Here we define 'gentrification' as the displacement of pre-existing low-income communities by wealthier in-movers (see Davidson,M. and Lees,L. 2005: New Build 'Gentrification' and London's Riverside Renaissance, *Environment and Planning A*, 37 (7) 1165-1190, for a detailed discussion of the definition of gentrification).

[2] Hubbard, P., and Lees,L. (2020) Gentrification, displacement, and council estate renewal in London, in Baeten,G. et al. (eds) *Beyond housing displacement: conceptual and methodological issues*, Routledge: London.

[3] Easton,S., Lees,L., Hubbard,P., and Tate,N. (2019) Measuring and mapping displacement: the problem of quantification in the battle against gentrification, *Urban Studies*, DOI: 10.1177/0042098019851953

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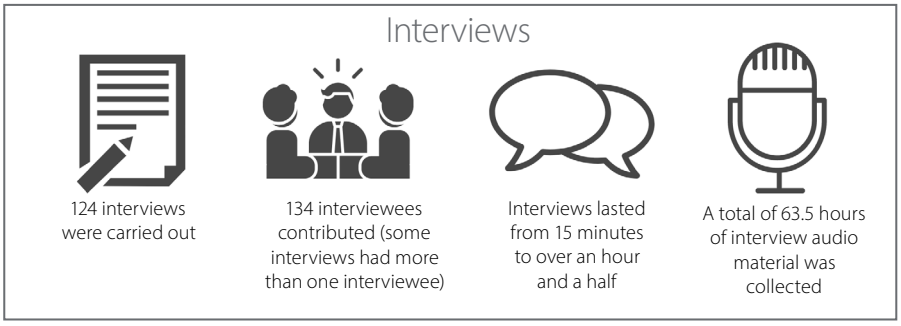
Background

England's council estates are facing a 'new' urban renewal that threatens to repeat many of the mistakes of post-war urban renewal which disrupted local communities and exacerbated the social problems slum clearance was meant to solve. Now it is the large inner-city estates of the 1960/70s that are slated for demolition: council estates are stigmatized as sites of concentrated social dysfunction and with austerity limiting their ability to bring existing estates up to Decent Homes standards, local authorities are being encouraged to cash in on their underlying land value to finance more social housing[4]. The number of households 'decanted'[5] from these estates is considerable and the cumulative negative impacts on residents, both tenants and leaseholders, problematic. Although occurring in cities across England, from Manchester to Birmingham and beyond, we report here specifically on the impacts in London where the number of estate renewals have been especially high and even Boris Johnson, when Mayor of London, voiced his concerns over the end result - social cleansing.

The project

Our overall aim was to contribute to wider understandings of the social change, gentrification, and displacement associated with council estate renewal in London. The project[6] involved an initial 'extensive' phase of secondary data analysis to identify and quantitatively map broad patterns of demographic displacement, gentrification, and estate redevelopment across London. Freedom of information requests, analysis of planning databases and trawls of websites led us to identify 161 estates in London of more than 100 households where there has been a scheme to demolish and redevelop housing since 1997. We estimated that 190 regeneration[7] schemes on these 161 estates entailed the demolition of at least 55,000 homes, with the 'average' scheme involving the decanting of 274 households prior to demolition and rebuild. 2 schemes had more than 1000 units demolished, suggesting that in some cases very large and established communities were being broken up by processes of displacement. Local authorities were unable to furnish us with reliable information concerning the rehousing of council tenants and the out-migration of leaseholders (bar data obtained for the revised Aylesbury Public Inquiry in 2018). This meant we had to use 'Linked Consumer Registers' (LCRs), which augment administrative records (e.g. from voter registries) with consumer-derived data (e.g. from loyalty cards or credit reporting agencies), and make it possible to infer household relocations at an appropriate temporal and spatial scale. Following this mapping, we explored the impacts of decanting on residents, 124 interviews (see below) were conducted with households on six estates across London: the Aylesbury Estate (Southwark), Carpenters Estate (Newham), Love Lane (Haringey), Gascoigne (Barking & Dagenham), Ocean Estate (Tower Hamlets) and Pepys Estate (Lewisham). Focusing on questions of health and well-being, these included randomly sampled residents from different tenures, at different stages of life, and at different stages of the estate renewal (i.e. threatened by displacement; already displaced; and a small number who had returned to the footprint of the estate). Some respondents also offered photographic reflections.



[4] Lees,L. (2014) The urban injustices of New Labour's 'new urban renewal': the case of the Aylesbury Estate in London, *Antipode*, 46:4:921-947.

[5] 'Decanting' is the term used by councils when they move council estate residents out due to major works.

[6] The project findings can be found on https://estatewatch.london/

[7] 'Regeneration' here refers to the renovation or reconstruction of (in this case council) housing in order to improve the quality of life of residents.

The impacts of displacement

We found strong evidence that relocations from unregenerated estates are significantly different from those of estates renewed since 1997. Comparison of out-migration from estates undergoing renewal and those not undergoing renewal, as well as in the five years before and after renewal, shows, in general, that fewer leaving estates after decanting tend to remain in-borough or in London than is the case for the 'voluntary' moves before decanting begins. As the maps below (Figures 1-3) show[8], many moves after decanting begins are in an outward direction, suggesting that the renewal programme is rolling the gentrification frontier in an outwards direction.

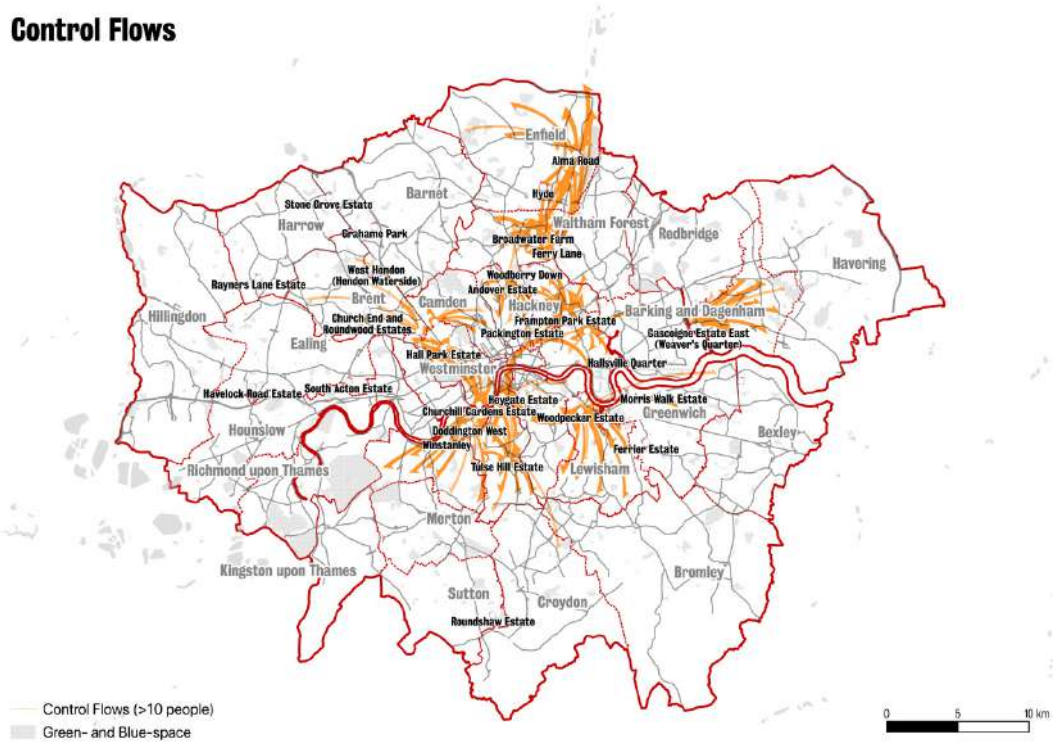


Figure 1 Control estates *not* undergoing renewal

[8] Suppression criteria have been applied — no flows of <10 are shown, the rest have been banded and converted to a percentage of 'all flows' to protect privacy (where 'all' == either the estate, or all out-migrations from London estates, depending on the data source).

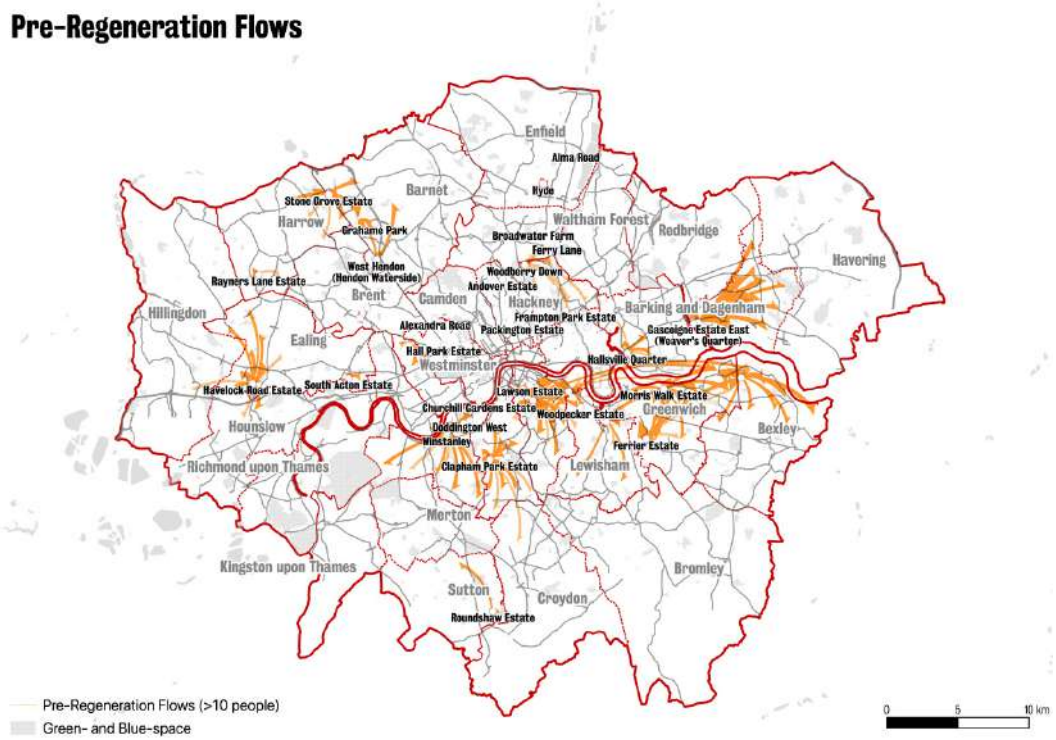


Figure 2 Flow out of estates before renewal

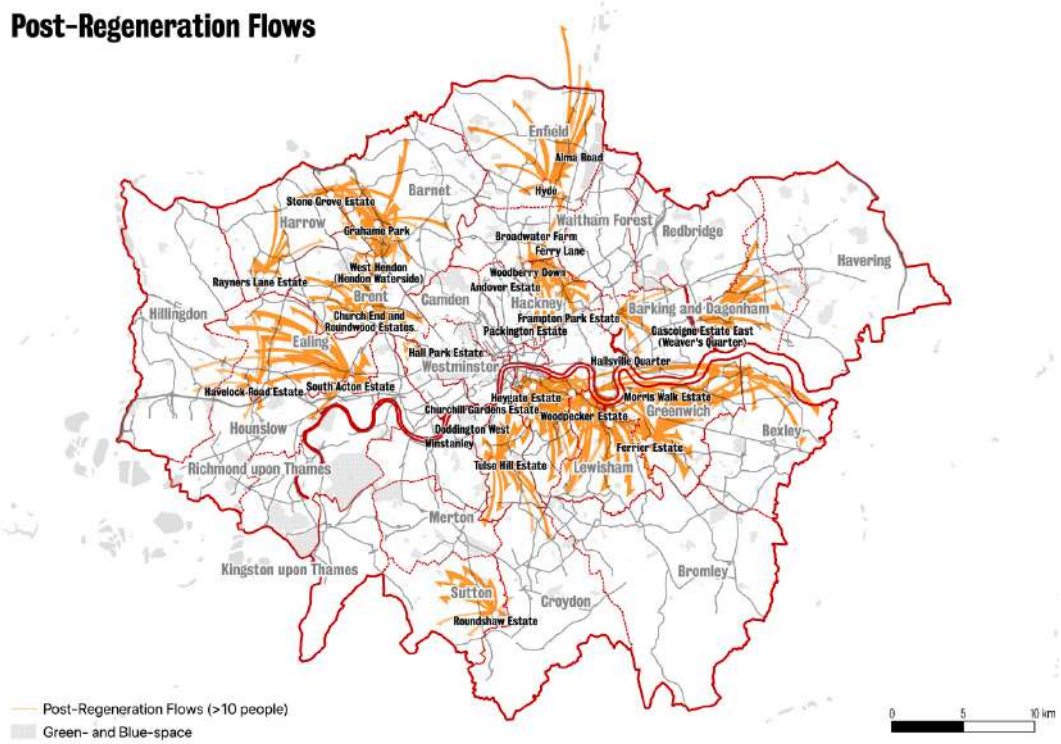


Figure 3 Flow out of estates due to renewal

What complicates the picture here is the difference between tenants and leaseholders, with the two groups exhibiting different patterns of relocation: leaseholders appear more likely to move further afield in the search for a new home because of the rising prices in inner London, as Figures 4 and 5 below for the Aylesbury Estate in London show.

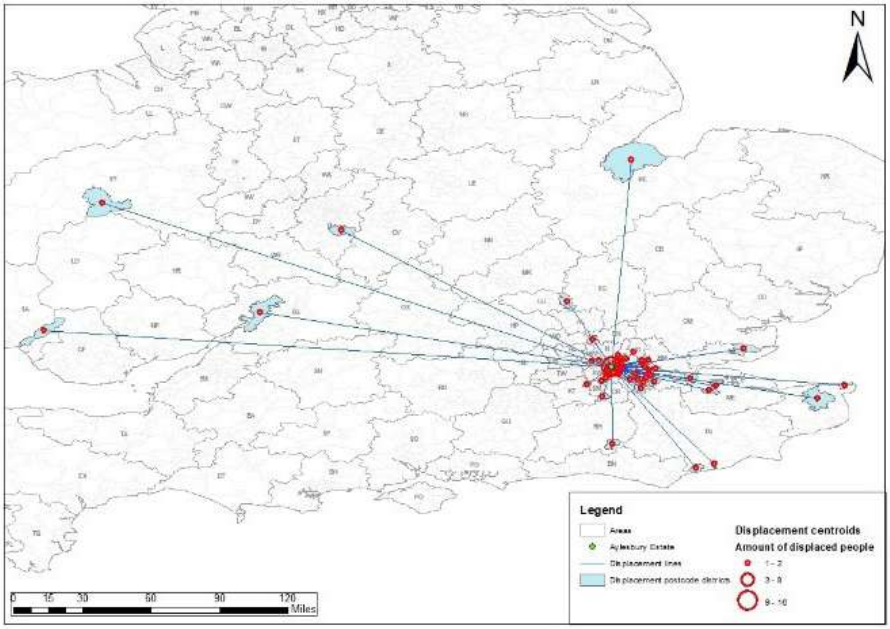


Figure 4 Displacement of leaseholders from the Aylesbury Estate, London

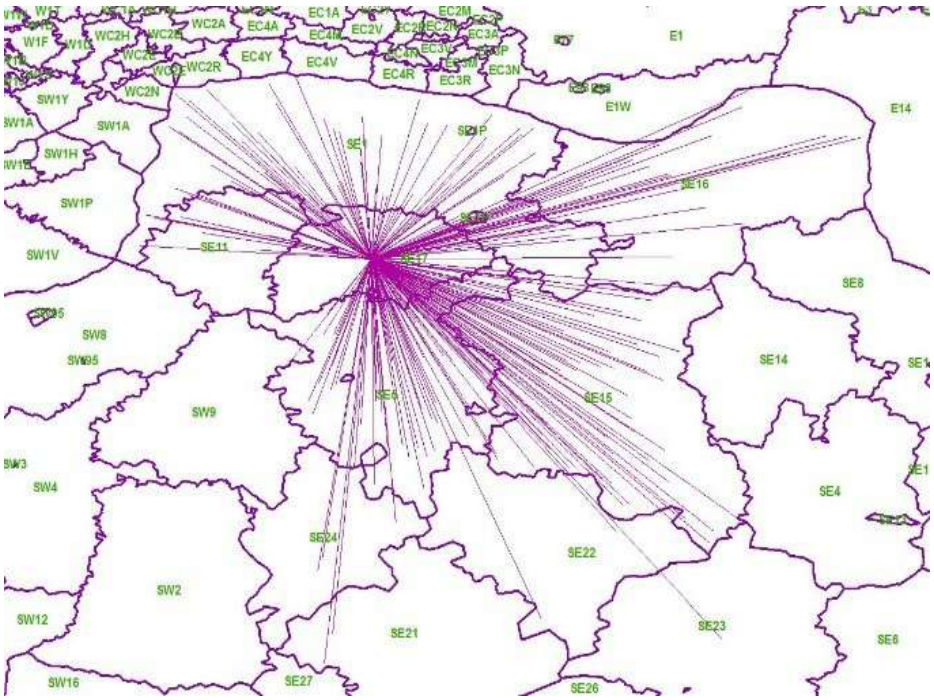


Figure 5 Displacement of council tenants from the Aylesbury Estate, London

On all estates, the overwhelming majority of residents felt that the case for demolition had not been adequately articulated and that they had not been given a real choice about the future. We found that most – but not all – of those being decanted were reluctant movers. Older residents in particular were anxious about the breaking up of community networks, being dislocated from friends, family, and health and community facilities, and experiencing a loss of place identity. Younger residents, and those with children, were more concerned about facing more difficult commutes, losing their jobs, disrupting children's schooling, and the loss of support networks, especially around childcare. There was also concern about moving to a smaller, more expensive home in the future. The majority of our interviewees expressed dismay at their having to move, 52% seeing it as a form of class-based displacement. In addition, 50% of those from non-white ethnic backgrounds (69% of the interviewees were from BAME backgrounds) felt that the renewal of their estate was tantamount to racism, deliberately removing BAME groups to allow for white gentrification. A third of these residents articulated a double displacement process: e.g. leaving their home to emigrate to the UK, then having to leave their home again due to estate renewal. The eight residents of Ocean estate interviewed that got to move back into a newly-developed estate were relatively pleased with their newly-built home but often expressed a loss of sense of place and community. This repeats a theme in much of the established literature on regeneration and renewal, with gains in housing quality often coming at the cost of community relations.

In all of this, the process of decanting was perceived by most residents to have been excessively drawn out: in many cases, years had passed from the initial announcement about demolition to the point where residents actually understood where they would be moved to. This commits a form of 'slow violence'[9] whereby residents experienced uncertainty about the future over a long duration: for some this had obvious impacts on their mental health[10] and social well-being. Almost a third of respondents also alleged that authorities deliberately neglected essential repairs in the years before demolition, and that this effectively wore-down their resistance to removal. Communities were effectively destroyed at the point that demolition was first announced, with the phased removal of tenants, leaseholders and temporary residents gradually reducing the overall liveability of the estate

Key findings

- The scale of decanting from council estates has been under-estimated: there have been at least 161 schemes in London since 1997 which have involved demolition, and at least 55,000 households (approximately 150,000 to 200,000 residents) have had to move.
- The majority of properties on redeveloped estates are sold at market rate and few meet the definition of 'affordable' housing. Housing association rents are usually higher than council rents, properties are generally smaller, and in being moved into housing association properties council tenants lose the extra protections built into council housing tenure[11].
- The impact of decanting on residents varies according to tenure. For many leaseholders, compensation payments for their properties do not allow them to buy a similar property near to their previous residence; council tenants are often rehoused nearer the original estate but sometimes out of borough.
- Temporary tenants are often moved onto estates in the process of being decanted. Many temporary tenants have ended up living on decanting estates for many years, yet they have no rights in terms of being rehoused on the footprint of the estate, in the new development or nearby.
- Returning to the original footprint of the estate is often impossible for leaseholders given similar-sized properties in the new developments tend to become much less affordable after redevelopment: shared ownership properties are rarely attractive for those who previously bought their property under 'right to buy'[12].

[9] Elliot-Cooper,A., Hubbard,P. and Lees,L. (2019) Moving beyond Marcuse: gentrification, displacement, and the violence of un-homing, Progress in Human Geography, DOI: 10.1177/0309132519830511.

[10] Lees,L. and Hubbard, P. (2020) The emotional and psychic impacts of London's 'new' urban renewal, Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal, 13 (3), 241-250.

[11] Lees, L. and White, H. (2019) The social cleansing of London council estates: contemporary experiences of 'accumulative dispossession', Housing Studies. DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2019.1680814

[12] Elliot-Cooper,A., Hubbard,P. and Lees,L. (2020) Sold Out? The Right to Buy, Gentrification and Working Class Displacements in London, Sociological Review. DOI: 10.1177/0038026120906790

- The process of decanting is often very slow, poorly managed, and badly communicated, and this provokes considerable stress and anxiety for residents. This can have major impacts on their health and well-being.
- Those most adversely affected by decanting tend to display protected characteristics, suggesting local authorities have a duty to properly consider their public sector equalities duties when overseeing and managing the renewal process[13].

Policy recommendations

- We need a robust evidence base on the negative (as compared to the positive) impacts of estate renewal, including better attention being paid to the social and psychological impacts.
- These impacts should be mandated to be included in viability assessments and funding should be made for longitudinal research from the minute estate renewal is mooted.
- A social viability assessment model[14] needs to be developed specifically for estate renewal and/or similar regeneration programmes.
- In addition to tracking the impacts of displacement, it appears vital that residents are always given a voice via estate ballots and actual input into regeneration proposals[15] and in decisions affecting their future.
- Residents should also be presented with unbiased information by the local council on the pros and cons of estate renewal and the tenurial changes associated with it.

Acknowledgements

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[13] Hubbard,P. and Lees,L. (2018) The right to community: legal geographies of resistance on London's final gentrification frontier, CITY, 22:1, 8-25

[14] A 'social viability assessment model' would evaluate the social impacts of council estate renewal on the well-being of estate residents.

[15] https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_cfg_section_8._resident_ballots_-_18_july_2018.pdf