Equipping Chicago Locals for the Modern Age: Data Transparency through Neighborhood Change Statements

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THESIS
Chicago City Council should publish and disseminate yearly “neighborhood change statements” in communities where residents face economic displacement to serve as tools for community transparency and grassroots promotion of affordable housing.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS
Urban centers from Atlanta to Detroit are encountering a new, subtler form of modern economic segregation.1 As neighborhoods meet with an influx of more affluent residents, neighborhood developments raise the overall demand for housing in the neighborhood, forcing out low-income and minority populations through rising rent and evictions.

In the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, for example, this phenomena is having an intense impact on the local community. While named after the Czech city of Plzeň, by 1970, Pilsen became the first majority Latino neighborhood in Chicago.2 Though frequent community mobilization ensured that development remained inclusive through the 1990s, weakening local resistance and a more powerful city government eventually brought sweeping growth to the neighborhood that largely catered to a more affluent population.3 Most notably, despite fierce and active opposition from the Mexican-American population, the historic Thalia Hall was bought and transformed into a bar, restaurant, and music space largely inaccessible to the longtime, lower-income, Latino Pilsen residents.4 From 2000 to 2013, more than 10,000 Hispanic residents left the neighborhood, while the white population grew by nearly 1,000.5 This is undeniably related to the fact that the proportion of Pilsen households paying over 30 percent of their incomes for rent or mortgage increased from 26 percent for renters and 35 percent for owners in 2000 to 50 percent of renters and 52 percent of owners in 2010.6

TALKING POINTS
• Neighborhood inclusivity for low-income residents in Chicago cannot be fully exercised through rapidly rising property values and cost of living.
• Low- to middle-income families, long-established minority populations, and immigrants have shown a marked decline from Pilsen, being displaced from economically secure neighborhoods and destroying ethnic identities tied to such neighborhoods.7
• Neighborhood change statements equip policymakers and grassroots activists with up-to-date neighborhood information to craft informed actionable responses.
• Neighborhood change statements frame community economic inclusivity as a public good, similar to drinking water, with the hopes to expand racial and economic displacement as larger voter issue.
POLICY IDEA
Chicago City Council should implement independent yearly studies of changing neighborhood housing costs and demographic shifts to be published to the public to increase transparency for equitable housing, known as “neighborhood change statements.” Aldermen representing gentrifying neighborhoods should be required to update, maintain, and disseminate open-source data on gentrifying metrics to the residents of their respective ward similar to yearly drinking water quality statements. Also, new developments in gentrifying neighborhoods would be required to submit any data that would pertain to affordable living costs.

POLICY ANALYSIS
Current policy solutions from City Hall have been criticized by local policymakers and community advocates as being insensitive to the economic needs of a diverse Chicago. As an alternative to the top-down policy approach, neighborhood change statements function as a way to bridge the informational gap for policymakers and voters.8 The serious need for reliable housing data has been addressed through unofficial actors publishing their own versions of demographic and affordable housing data,9 but no such undertaking has been explored on a large municipal level.

Reliable, well presented municipal data offers an opportunity to empower grassroots organizations and local policymakers fighting to protect low-income and minority populations. Pilsen has historic roots as a major socioeconomic gateway for new immigrants and low income populations in Chicago. But since 2000, first-generation households, families living with children, and Hispanic residents have plummeted in the area, erasing significant cultural and economic milestones, along with further distancing lower-income residents from needed economic and social resources.

This residential displacement is not solely an economic issue. As America’s cities are getting whiter, Black and Latino voters are forced largely into the suburbs, limiting their ability to have a real impact on the local politics that affect them.10 A robust local advocacy presence has played an integral part in organizing against gentrification, and with such data will promote grassroots activism and the notion that community inclusiveness and economic security functions as a public good.

NEXT STEPS
The Chicago City Council should introduce a pilot program requiring Pilsen aldermen 22nd ward officials to analyze and publish open source data on the state of housing inclusivity and equity in Pilsen. Pilsen aldermen should work with private partners, like Zillow, Accela, and Esri, to ensure that data is as accurate and up-to-date as possible.11 The specific metrics to be published by Pilsen can be determined in partnership with nonprofits, Chicago-based universities, and engaged community leaders, such as the Pilsen Alliance12 and the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago.13 Additional resources may be needed to instate a full time affordable housing advocate to further integrate published data into policy. To further integrate this policy idea, grassroots advocacy and academic partnerships can be formed through the University of Illinois at Chicago’s College of Urban Planning and in-house policy institutes such as the Natalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Involvement.14

KEY FACTS
• From 2000 to 2013, over 10,000 Latino residents left Pilsen, while the white population grew by nearly 1,000.15

• The proportion of Pilsen households paying over 30 percent of their income for rent or mortgage increased from 26 percent for renters and 35 percent for owners in 2000 to 50 percent of renters and 52 percent of owners in 2010.16

• Nationally, over 20 percent of low-income movers from gentrifying neighborhoods ended up in a neighborhood with a lower median income.17
ENDNOTES

3 Betancur and Kim, “The Trajectory and Impact of Ongoing Gentrification in Pilsen.”
5 Betancur and Kim, “The Trajectory and Impact of Ongoing Gentrification in Pilsen.”
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
15 Betancur and Kim, “The Trajectory and Impact of Ongoing Gentrification in Pilsen.”
16 Ibid.