

Boston Tenants Fighting Displacement

Chinatown, Boston, USA

Boston has been identified as one of the most rapidly gentrifying cities in the United States and the city with the third highest rate of income inequality. In Fall 2015, as part of its graduate course *“Responding to Displacement: Strategies, Methods, Tools, Outcomes”* (11.S938)¹ the Displacement Research Action Network (DRAN)² at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) DRAN is engaged in an in-depth practical research project with the Boston based Chinese Progressive Organization (CPA)³ to bring critical attention to the displacement crisis facing the Chinatown neighborhood of Boston.

Founded in 1979, the CPA is a grassroots community organization which works for full equality and empowerment of the Chinese community in the Greater Boston area and beyond. CPA is part of the local and national Right to the City Alliance.



Gate to Boston's Chinatown

Chinatown in Boston is at the front-lines of gentrification happening in the city. According to Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund Report *“Chinatown Then and Now”*, this is seen in the dwindling Asian population- from 70% of Chinatown in 1990 to 46% in 2010- and in the changing value of land in the neighborhood- in 1990 housing values in Chinatown were approximately the same as in Boston overall, by 2010 they were nearly double the Boston average. This gentrification is also visible in the structural landscape of Chinatown- where 15-20 years ago there were few high rises, the neighborhood now has one of the highest concentrations of high-rise luxury residential properties.

The goals of the collaboration between DRAN and the CPA are twofold: 1) to co-produce maps that visualize the rapid gentrification taking hold in the neighborhood along with the land use changes that have brought about such impacts 2) to work with CPA members and staff to conduct an Eviction Impact Assessment (EVI) to demonstrate the quantitative and qualitative human rights impacts residents have faced, or are likely to, due to gentrification induced displacement..

¹ For course description see: <https://dusp.mit.edu/subject/fall-2015-11s938>.

² See: <http://mitdisplacement.org/>.

³ See: Chinatown Progressive Association, *“Chinatown fights hotel proposal and displacement of residents,” Sampan* (2 September 2017), at: <https://sampan.org/2017/02/chinatown-fights-hotel-proposal-and-displacement-of-residents/>. See also Chinatown Progressive Association website, at: <http://cpaboston.org/en/home>.

The intention of the MIT class was to generate documentation, based on mapping exercise and the implementation of the EvIA to assist in the advocacy work being carried out by CPA to counter the arguments by Boston city officials for the continued rapid gentrification of Chinatown.

Students at MIT were trained on the use of the EvIA and conducted field visits to understand the gentrification trends in Boston's Chinatown. The students subsequently worked with activists from the CPA, including through class exercises, to simplify the HLRN EvIA to suit the needs of the community. Through a participatory process of engagement with CPA, the survey was adapted to focus on collecting data on impacts/costs most pertinent to the conditions facing the Chinatown community.

Beyond data at the household level, extensive consideration was given to accounting for assets and impacts at the neighborhood scale. CPA identified these assets in consultation with leaders in the community. After understanding the dynamics of survey development from the Discussions on how to set up survey outreach in a way that is representative of the different experiences with displacement in the community was an important component of the initial set up of the survey- criteria was developed to ensure perspectives such as those of elderly residents, families with children are included.



Boston's Chinatown residents protesting urban transformation by hotel construction project.

The survey work currently underway is focused on tenants who are facing eviction, who have been threatened with eviction or who are generally concerned with being displaced from their home and the neighborhood.

The experience thus far in the use of the EvIA, including the application of the simplified survey tool, in Chinatown has now become a general support to CPA's housing rights and anti-displacement work in the city. CPA as an active member of the Boston Right to the City Alliance, is using the EvIA and mapping experience, gained from work with the team from MIT, to bolster efforts to pass municipal legislation- a Just Cause Eviction ordinance- to protect Boston tenants from the growing epidemic of profit driven evictions. Currently, Massachusetts law allows landlords to evict tenants "no-fault." This means that renters with no lease can be evicted at any time- without any reason given- and renters in privately owned, non-subsidized housing can be evicted after their lease expires. The campaign for Just Cause Eviction is coordinated by the Boston Right to the City alliance.

The EvIA currently underway is assisting to provide narrative and testimony basis to another Boston based project focused on collecting the personal narratives of tenants across the city who have been evicted from their homes or are facing eviction.

See the [interactive map of Boston renters' stories](#). It tells a tale of evictions and displacement in our increasingly upscale rental market. Who is getting pushed out as rents rise and higher-income earners move in? These stories don't represent the scale of no-fault evictions in Boston (complete and accurate data on no-fault evictions not possible to represent at this time), but they begin to illuminate the human impact. Also, this small sampling of stories is just the start of this project. Exact pin locations have been adjusted slightly for privacy reasons.

For further information, go to Displacement Research Action Network (DRAN) [Chinatown Displacement Mapping Project](#)