**What Sparkles Does Not Always Shine**

A Study of Segregation and Gentrification in the Neighbourhood of

Runnymede-Bloor West Village as it Relates to the Wider City of Toronto

**Introduction**

When I first arrived at Runnymede-Bloor West village, I was greeted with the sights and sounds that are familiar to any resident of Toronto. As I walked east along Bloor street, shivering in the late January cold, I observed the many shops and restaurants that form the core of what is known as Bloor West Village. These businesses were as diverse as the city of Toronto prides itself on being. There were restaurants from all over the world: Japanese, Mexican, Indian, Thai, Italian, French. Many of the windows displayed advertisements for events that celebrate Toronto’s multicultural identity: “Ukrainian cultural festival next month!”, “Indian street food in a week!”, “Irish dance lessons sign up today!”. Walking north on Jane revealed a residential area that seemed to be the picture-perfect vision of the Toronto middle class lifestyle, with large houses, nice lawns, and a car in every driveway. At first glance, Runnymede-Bloor West Village appears to be everything that Toronto projects to the world. Multicultural, affluent, and open for business.

However, closer inspection reveals that this image is only part of the story, and that the reality is more complicated and less perfect for a magazine advertisement. In many ways, Runnymede-Bloor West Village is a microcosm of many of Toronto’s problems. For every successful immigrant-owned business, there is a business that has failed and closed-up shop. For every diverse local, there is an increasingly segregated neighbourhood. Everywhere the price of housing, food, and electricity climbs as the creeping effects of gentrification make themselves felt. In this paper, I will study the effects of the intersection of gentrification and segregation in the neighbourhood of Runnymede-Bloor West Village, compare it to trends in Toronto at large, and try to see if the neighbourhood follows the trend or is an exception to it. I will first walk through much of the literature on this topic and its related concepts, namely gentrification and segregation in Toronto. I will then use firsthand observations and publicly sourced data from statistics Canada and Toronto’s neighbourhood profiles tool, found on its website, to analyse Runnymede Bloor West Village and make conclusions. Finally, I will make recommendations based on my findings and the findings of experts.

**Literature Review**

Gentrification is a prominent theme in the findings of this paper, and therefore, a review of the material I collected on gentrification is in order. One of the most important development in the study of gentrification is that the definition of gentrification has been expanding. Gentrification scholarship has traditionally been focused on the neighbourhood, primarily analysing how the influx of affluent people has resulted in the local cost of living going up, displacing the less affluent population of the neighbourhood in the process.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is a belief that while this is certainly a worthy approach to the topic of gentrification, other avenues of research can also be justified, such as a more macro approach to the topic. This approach observes patterns of gentrification across an entire city or region, documenting patterns of ‘supra-neighbourhood’ gentrification. This is often due to the policies of regional and municipal governments, meaning that there is a need for gentrification scholars to study their policies in addition to the policies of neighbourhood officials.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One of the key findings in regard to gentrification in Toronto is that the city is divided into three cities, split along income lines. City number 3 is where Toronto’s less affluent live - primarily located in the suburbs, far from the downtown core. City number 1 is the opposite: Much of the city’s wealth is concentrated here, and it is located in or near the downtown core and Toronto’s subway stations. City number 2 is between these two extremes, and it is where the middle-class lives.[[3]](#footnote-3) There was a time when city number 2 was by far the largest area in Toronto, but recent research, documenting housing costs and income levels, has shown that as wealth pours into Toronto from the outside world and concentrates in certain areas, city number 2 has shrunk dramatically, being replaced by city number 1 in some cases but mostly by city number 3.[[4]](#footnote-4) This demonstrates that Toronto is experiencing an increase in income inequality and its subsequent polarization, as the city divides itself between clearly identifiable rich and poor areas and the middle class shrinks.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Research demonstrates this is due to a disinvestment in some areas, mostly the suburbs, and investment in others, mostly in the downtown area. Furthermore, the investment in the downtown area typically comes in the form of gentrification.[[6]](#footnote-6) This dynamic has the effect of polarising the city even more, as the effect of gentrification force those with lower income to leave the downtown area for the cheaper suburbs, and higher property values and more amenities attract higher income people to the downtown area from the suburbs.[[7]](#footnote-7) This begins a cycle: Investors are attracted to the affluence of the downtown area and away from the suburbs, their investment adds to gentrification of the downtown area, their disinvestment from the suburbs makes them poorer, and the richer and poorer population sort themselves accordingly.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Research has also shown that much of this gentrification is because of the ways in which certain actors in city politics and society have tried to portray an image encompassing a desire to rebrand large swaths of the city as family friendly, affluent, and open to the world. This has resulted in the “othering” of things that do not fit neatly with this image, and the displacement of those who have been othered for this reason.[[9]](#footnote-9) This applies to everything from which art projects get approved to which businesses are allowed to open.[[10]](#footnote-10) There is also evidence that the effects of gentrifications are not just related to housing costs. The character of local businesses also changes to reflect the tastes of gentrifies as they move to the area.[[11]](#footnote-11) This change comes with an increase in costs, for two reasons. First, business owners adjust their prices and products to the buying power of the new middle- and upper-class residents. Second, businesses that catered to the lower-class residents of the neighbourhood that do not adjust their prices and products go out of business and are replaced by those who do.[[12]](#footnote-12) This dynamic has a phycological effect, as well as an economic one. Residents with lower incomes will begin to feel alienated from their neighbourhoods as local businesses change to fit the tastes of the gentrifiers.[[13]](#footnote-13) This is a contributing factor to root shock, as the places where people grew up become unrecognisable and no longer friendly to the way of life they had grown used to.[[14]](#footnote-14)

There has also been research into segregation in Toronto. Toronto is rightly regarded as one of the most multicultural cities in the world, with of 48 different ethnic groups containing more the 5000 members.[[15]](#footnote-15) Segregation in the city is not based on overtly discriminatory practices, as any forms of explicitly discriminatory practices by landlords and realtors were made illegal in Canada by the adoption of the charter of rights and freedoms in the 1960s.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nevertheless, Toronto has a good deal of segregation that is driven by economic factors such as the more subtle forms of discrimination present in the job market.

Studies have shown that racialized workers only make 81 cents for every dollar earned to those who are not racialized. This number is even more pronounced for racialized women.[[17]](#footnote-17) Additionally, racialized immigrants were shown to make less than non- racialized immigrants, disproving the argument that this is simply newcomers struggling in a new country.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is likely related to findings that indicated racialized people in Toronto were far more likely to find work in insecure, low paying jobs then they were to find work in jobs that offered better pay and job security.[[19]](#footnote-19) This may be because of the biases held by many employers in Toronto. For example, a study found that employers were less likely to hire someone if their resumes had a non-English name and contained experience from outside the country. Employers justified this by citing concerns about language ability, with no evidence of such language issues in the resumes they were provided and having not conducted any interviews.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The result is that the patterns of gentrification take on a racial character. Since immigrants and racialized people have lower incomes on average due to the factors we have just discussed, they are subject to the pushes and pulls of Toronto’s steadily increasing income-based polarisation, with those making less relegated to some parts of the city and the wealthy concentrating in others. Furthermore, the influx of affluent non-racialized people into diverse neighbourhoods that are classed as city number 2 causes gentrification. This dynamic makes the cost of living unaffordable for the generally less affluent racialized residents, forcing them to move to neighbourhoods in Toronto that are classified as city number 3. Therefore, as gentrification causes city number 2 to shrink, City number 3 is becoming more racialized, city number 1 in becoming increasingly non-racialized, and segregation grows.

**Methodology**

Research for this paper was conducted in a few ways. The first was a trip to the neighbourhood of Runnymede-Bloor West Village on Sunday, January 26th, 2020, to make observations and write down my initial interpretations. This method was important to do, as it is all too easy to get a distorted view of a place when just looking at statistics. For example, if one was to just look at statistical sources like Statistics Canada, one would not have known that the neighbourhood has a variety of businesses along Bloor and at major intersections. It was also a good way to get a spatial understanding of the area, observing what the buildings looked like, what kind of people were out and about at the time, and the kind of aesthetic those who make decisions for the neighbourhood wish to project to the world.

The main drawback of this method was weather related, as it was cold and rainy on the day of my study. This not only had an effect on my personal discomfort, but also likely reduced the amount of people walking about on the street. This forced me to be a little more proactive, observing people through the windows of restaurants and other establishments. This required a bit of subtlety, and probably altered my first impressions of the area. It is also entirely possible that the nature of physically observing an area was challenging as well. While I tried to cover an area that was diverse, I may have missed some areas that would have given me more insight.

The other method employed for this paper was the gathering of statistics from online sources, like Statistics Canada and the neighbourhood profiles on the City of Toronto’s website. These sources of data were a fantastic way to either confirm or correct the impressions I got when I went to the neighbourhood. They also served as a way to reveal things that were not immediately obvious and to explain and give context to some of the observations. The data that was available online was excellent when describing the neighbourhood’s demographics. There was a cornucopia of data concerning statistics like income levels, housing costs, ethnicity, gender, and family structure. However, there was not a huge amount of data available that pertained to the businesses that cluster along Bloor Street and some of the major intersections. Some data can be tangentially linked to them, such as building rental prices which can be linked to their financial success, but there is little data to be found about them specifically. I found StatsCan to be of limited utility. I could not find a way to get data on the neighbourhood level and was only able to find data about the city of Toronto as a whole. It could therefore really only be used to compare the data found in the Neighbourhood demographics tool to the city in its totality.

Additional information and context were found by looking up the policies of the City of Toronto and their effects in academic journals. This provided the wider context needed to have a full understanding of what was happening in Runnymede-Bloor West village, showing what was happening at a city wide, macro scale. This context was important because it allowed me to get a fuller view of the city as a whole, instead of just observing the neighbourhood of Runnymede-Bloor West Village in a vacuum. It also served as a springboard, providing ideas for what to look for in the data I collected. The drawbacks of this were that the unconscious biases of the authors may have shaped my own understanding of the neighbourhood and city, as my own biases were shaped by the data they chose to highlight.

**Findings and Analysis**

In some ways, Runnymede-Bloor West Village is quite different from the rest of Toronto. The principal example of this is the neighbourhood’s diversity, though perhaps a better way to put it is the neighbourhood’s lack of diversity. The vast majority of the residents are of European decent, specifically from the British Isles, and were born in Canada. This can be observed in a few ways.

A screenshot of a cell phone

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This image, on the left, displays the percentage of people living in the neighbourhood who were born in Canada. The green bar signifies the population in the neighbourhood, the grey bar signifies the number in the city of Toronto as a whole. We can see that a disproportionately large percentage of the population of the neighbourhood was born in Canada: ¾ of the population of Runnemede-Bloor West Village was born in Canada, an outlier in a city where that is true for slightly less than half the population. In fact, this number appears to have grown slightly over the years, with the population of the neighbourhood that was born in Canada increasing by 3% between 2011 and 2016.

**Figure 1.** Number of people born in Canada living in Runnymede-Bloor West Village Compared in comparison to Toronto, 2016. Source: Toronto’s Neighbourhood Profiles tool

A close up of a map

Description automatically generatedEvidence of the population’s European decent can be seen in the map to the right. We can see that the vast majority listed their ethnic origin as European.

**Figure 2.** Parts of the world residents of Runnymede Bloor-West Village have listed as their ethnic origin, 2016. Source: Toronto’s Neighbourhood Profiles tool

A screenshot of a cell phone

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Furthermore, we can see in the graphic on the left that the population is not only mostly ethnically European, but also that a majority are ethnically from the British Isles. Around 79% of the residents listed their ethnic origins as either English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, or British Isles origins n.i.e. This is not counting those who listed their ethnic origin as Canadian, though due to this area’s history of colonization by the British it is likely that at least some of the residents who listed this as their ethnic origin are ethnically British as well.

**Figure 3.** Top 15 ethnic origins in Runnymede Bloor-West Village, 2016. Source: Toronto’s Neighbourhood Profiles tool

A picture containing screenshot

Description automatically generatedFinally, this graph demonstrates the resident’s mother tongue. The overwhelming majority’s first language is English, and the percentage of people in Runnymede Bloor-West Village whose mother tongue is not English consists of only half of the percentage for the city, further suggesting that the majority of the residents of Runnymede Bloor-West Village were born in Canada or came from a place that spoke English.

**Figure 4.** Residence’s listed mother tongue, 2016. Source: Toronto’s Neighbourhood Profiles tool

Runnymede-Bloor West Village is also a higher-than-average income area and is only becoming more so with time. These two images, the one on the left from 2011, the one on the right from 2016, tells this story in the most obvious way.

A screenshot of a cell phone

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**Figure 5.** Income levels in Runnymede Bloor-West Village, 2011. Source: Toronto’s Neighbourhood Profiles tool

**Figure 6.** Income levels in Runnymede Bloor-West Village, 2016. Source: Toronto’s Neighbourhood Profiles tool

We can see that there are not very many low-income people living in the Runnymede Bloor West Village, and the number has more than halved between 2011 and 2016. Households making less the $ 20,000, those living at or below the poverty line, went from 12% in 2011 to 5% in 2016. The middle class has also shrunk by a substantial degree, shrinking by 11%: The brackets of $ 20,000 - $48,000 and $ 50,000 - $ 79,000, or those who have enough to live comfortably but not luxuriously, both went from 20% in 2011 to 15% in 2016. Those doing a little better and able to afford larger houses, making $ 80,000 to $124,000, also went down a little, from 21% in 2011 to 19% in 2016. However, the most dramatic and telling statistic in these two graphs in the bracket of $125,000+, people who are firmly in the upper income bracket and could consider themselves wealthy. The number of households making over $ 125 000+ a year has ballooned from 26% in 2011 to 46% in 2016, an increase of 20 percentage points.

Despite these differences from the city of Toronto as a while, the findings actually appear to show that the neighbourhood actually does follow the trends that have been observed in Toronto, and it is the exception that proves the rule. While Runnymede Bloor-West Village is an outlier in Toronto in terms of diversity, it also shows that it is part of a trend in Toronto: increasing segregation. It is worth noting that there is no evidence that this is due to any overt policies of discrimination on behalf of the city government, property realtors, or local landlords. Instead, the neighbourhood appears to have been shaped by the racial character of income inequality that has formed in Toronto due to the biases, unconscious or otherwise, of employers. Racialized immigrants often struggle to find employment outside of low paying, insecure jobs in sectors like the service industry.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is despite the fact that almost all immigrants who arrived under the points system, roughly half of all immigrants to Canada, have post-secondary degrees. Studies show this is not a problem faced by non-racialized immigrants in anywhere near the same numbers.[[22]](#footnote-22) This means that those with lower incomes tend to be racialized, while those with higher incomes tend not to be. This could actually be observed during my trip to the neighbourhood; the vast majority of these working in the restaurants and shops were racialized, while their patrons, those with enough disposable income to shop and eat out, generally were not. Therefore, as the neighbourhood gentrifies dramatically, with people in the highest income bracket edging towards being the majority of residents, the neighbourhood becomes less diverse as well.

This data also shows that Runnymede-Bloor West Village is part of the trend of income polarisation that has been observed in Toronto. As mentioned earlier, the top income bracket, households making more the $124 000 a year, was 46% of the neighbourhood’s population in 2016. That income bracket was 26% in 2011, showing that it has been growing rapidly at the expense of all other income brackets. It is therefore likely that today, in 2021, that income bracket is either the majority of the households in the neighbourhood or is very close to becoming the majority. This means the wealth is concentrating in the area and pushing lower income brackets out as housing and living cost increase, transforming Runnymede-Bloor West village from city number 2 to city number 1.

The neighbourhood also displays the trends in gentrification that can observed in the rest of the city. My trip to the neighbourhood revealed that “lower class” businesses, such as hardware stores and fast food restaurants, appeared to be struggling, while “higher class” businesses did not. Much of this could be attributed to the time of day, the weather, and the fact that my in-person survey was conducted on a Sunday. However, while this could explain the lack of customers in the lower-class businesses, the fact that many of the stores seem to have closed permanently suggests that the lack of customers is the norm, not the exception. The neighbourhood can therefore be seen as part of the trend of businesses in gentrified areas either changing to fit the new, higher class clientele or going out of business due to their earlier clientele leaving, because of an increase in building rental costs, or a combination of the two.

What is to be done, then? I hope that I have identified that as the neighbourhood gentrifies and the cost of owning or renting a house, apartment or building goes up and up, both residents and businesses will struggle to function as more and more of their income goes towards their primary residence or place of business. This has the effect of locking out those who cannot afford to be there, a bar that is getting steadily higher as time go by. This also has the effect of increasingly segregating the neighbourhood, as racialized people are locked out of the area due to the economic struggles they face.

In the short term, one of the best ways to deal with the issue of housing costs and racial segregation would be to ensure that affordable housing in Runnymede-Bloor West Village becomes the rule, not the exception. The achieve this, more affordable housing must be built. This would address the problem in two ways. As supply meets demand with housing that is affordable, the housing princes in the rest of the neighbourhood will, in theory, go down as well to compete. It also addresses the struggles of the local businesses. These places are perfectly situated to be the nucleus of a thriving community; there is a variety of restaurants and other places to gather such as clubs and bars, and there are stores of all kinds. They are all within walking distance of each other, and public transportation is close and accessible. All they lack is people. More affordable housing would not only introduce more people to the neighbourhood but would also introduce people who had enough disposable income to spend money shopping and eating out, instead of spending that disposable income on their rents and mortgages. That said, it may not be enough to simply build more housing. It may also be necessary to block the construction of housing designed for higher incomes, as well as block the conversion of affordable housing to unaffordable housing through either extensive renovation or through the simple raising of prices. This would be done to apply further downward pressure on housing prices. This halting of the rising costs of living will also hopefully end to increase in segregation that has been creeping into the neighbourhood at a steady pace. Keeping the cost of living low will act to stop the income based racial segregation that has become a trend in Toronto in the short term. This could act as an acceptable stop gap to address segregation until a more permanent, equitable solution to race-based income inequality can be found.

It is worth noting that this course of actions requires the participation of local government, as much of this proposed solution would have to happen through tools like zoning laws to stop the building of, or conversion to, unaffordable housing. There will also be a need for government subsidies and other incentives to encourage developers to build this affordable housing. Alternatively, the local, provincial, or even federal government could develop the housing projects itself, as it was in business of doing until the early 2000s. It would therefore be necessary for the neighbourhood to organise politically and form alliances with other communities to get a government elected that is willing to be an enthusiastic partner in this endeavor.

Such an approach has been shown to work in other neighbourhoods in Toronto. The Neighbourhood of South Riverdale is a place that, for a long time, was able to resist the gentrification that had radically altered the nearby area of North Riverdale. This was despite a constant media narrative that South Riverdale was economically ‘up and coming’ and referred to the diverse working-class people who lived there with condescension. There was also a sharp increase in real estate speculation.[[23]](#footnote-23) This was done through a variety of means, but one of the most decisive factors was the actions of the majority progressive city council that came into power in the early 1970s. This new city council ended several ‘urban renewal’ projects in the neighbourhood that threated to price out it’s residents, instituted zoning laws that prevented the kind of development that led to gentrification, implementation rent controls, and opened the planning process to local participation.[[24]](#footnote-24) This allowed Sousth Riverdale to remain an affordable place to live for much of the last few decades of the 20th century. South Riverdale is also an example of what can happen when such progressive policies are removed. In the mid 1990s rent controls were removed for vacated properties. This incentivised landlords to evict low-income tenants, replacing them with tenants with increased rent prices. This has been a major contributing factor to homelessness in Toronto.[[25]](#footnote-25) This example serves as a valuable lesson to Runnymede Bloor-Wes Village, showing what can be achieved as well as what can happen should nothing be done.

It is important to note that addressing the cost of housing is not a silver bullet that will address every issue that can be found in Runnymede-Bloor West Village. There are transformative solutions to the issues of income inequality and racial segregation that have been discussed, that range from attempts at cultural change to address the biases of employers to a guaranteed minimum income. However, these solutions are much grander in scope and require systemic changes that are too far reaching to properly address in this paper. The solution of more affordable housing, on the other hand, is something that can done relatively quickly and will have immediate, positive effects. Furthermore, it is far easier for people to make positive changes in their lives when they have an affordable place to live. Affordable housing therefore serves as a foundation upon which further positive changes can be made.

**Conclusion and recommendations for further study**

Runnymede-Bloor West Village is a neighbourhood that is being shaped by the forces of gentrification and segregation that effect the city of Toronto as whole, resulting in it transitioning from a middle-class neighbourhood to an upper class one, pushing out residents and businesses who do not keep up and adding to Toronto’s racial segregation through the push and pull of Toronto’s race-based income inequality. There is a need for more affordable housing be part of the solution, at least in the short term. There is also a need to prevent the building of more unaffordable housing, as well as the conversion of affordable housing to housing whose price makes it out of reach of the neighbourhoods’ current residents. The cooperation of the local government would be instrumental in achieving this, as the example of South Riverdale demonstrates. In theory, this would be a good solution to the problem of housing unaffordability in the area, and its effect of segregation. However, the effects of introducing affordable housing into an increasingly wealthy neighbourhood should be studied to see if this is indeed the case. It would also be worth looking at if there are social tensions that come with this introduction, or if local business will adapt to serve these new, lower income residents or if they maintain their current practices, making them essentially unavailable to lower income people. This research would allow us to discover if this is in fact a way to address the problem, or if another solution must be found.

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