

UCLA

Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review

Title

(Un)Sustainable Community Projects: An Urban Ethnography in a Barrio in Las Vegas

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3600k6wr>

Journal

Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review, 35(1)

ISSN

1061-8899

Author

Castrejón, J. Adrian

Publication Date

2017

DOI

10.5070/C7351036943

Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

(UN)SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY PROJECTS: An Urban Ethnography in a Barrio in Las Vegas

J. ADRIAN CASTREJÓN

INTRODUCTION

This essay and the accompanying study are part of a broader project, Southern Nevada Strong¹ (SNS), which seeks to improve housing, safety, transportation, and employment opportunities in areas of high need in the Las Vegas, Nevada metropolitan area. The study examined the living conditions for Chicanx/Latinx residents in Barrio 28th Street, employing urban ethnographic methods as part of the community-input phase of SNS.

Although barrios are cultural and historical places of solidarity for Chicanx/Latinx urbanism and spaces of resistance from white Euro-centric influence, they are also spaces of segregation and repression characterized by poor urbanism and inadequate urban policies. Barrio 28th Street is impoverished, with areas of high need. Resident concerns revolve around safety issues, drug problems, and poor housing conditions. Barrio 28th Street is deficient in all the areas SNS seeks to improve yet, despite the deteriorated condition of housing and profound resident safety concerns, this barrio was not selected for consideration for redevelopment as part of the SNS core plans to revitalize declining and deteriorating urban areas. Furthermore, there is an inherent

* J. Adrian Castrejón is a PhD candidate in the School of Public Policy and Leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His work primarily focuses on the sociopolitical economy of migrant workers, Chicano masculinity and muxerista pedagogies, and barrio urbanism.

¹ Southern Nevada Strong is a federally recognized regional plan and is the result of three years of in-depth research and community engagement that examined issues facing the Las Vegas community. SNS regional planning partners included: the SNRPC, City of Henderson, City of Las Vegas, City of North Las Vegas, Boulder City, Clark County, Regional Transportation Commission, UNLV, Southern Nevada Regional Housing Authority, Southern Nevada Water Authority, Clark County School District, Southern Nevada Health District and the Conservation District of Southern Nevada.

© 2017 J. Adrian Castrejón. All rights reserved.

disconnection between the residents, the community leaders, and the SNS stakeholders' vision for the revitalization of Barrio 28th Street.

The research findings, in conjunction with an analysis of the SNS selection process of the opportunity sites selected for redevelopment, reveal a pattern of neglect and exclusion of low-income communities of color in Southern Nevada in urban development planning initiatives, examined in three areas: gentrification versus improving living conditions, the segregation and criminalization of barrios, and poor barrio urbanism.

The researcher argues that Barrio 28th Street does not represent an area of investment opportunity as put forth by the Site Implementation Strategy; therefore, it was left out of SNS plans to redevelop. Additionally, the underdevelopment of this barrio and the redistribution of funding into other economic favored zones is a result of the legacy of racist practices by policymakers and stakeholders, which fail to implement revitalization programs and adequate urban policies in historically segregated barrios.

I. SOUTHERN NEVADA STRONG PROJECT

A. Study Methodology

This study is part of a broader research project conducted by a team of graduate students from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), in participation with graduate students and faculty from Brown University. The research was organized by the Southern Nevada Strong² (SNS) coalition in partnership with UNLV's School of Community Health Sciences.

The research process deployed researchers to twelve different areas (opportunity sites) in Las Vegas, Nevada to conduct a series of ethnographies. Each area studied was chosen because they represented potential areas for redevelopment.³ The list of sites was developed by a

² "SNS is a collaborative regional planning initiative funded by a \$3.5 million dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Sustainable Communities Program. SNS seeks to build a foundation for long-term economic success and community livelihood by better integrating transportation, housing, and economic development in areas of need. The SNS regional planning process involved in-depth research to assess the conditions and needs of the Southern Nevada region, as well as a multi-year, community-engaged planning process to propose collaborative, innovative and sustainable solutions to meet these needs." S. NEV. REG'L PLANNING COAL. ET AL., 2012 SOUTHERN NEVADA EXISTING CONDITIONS REPORT (2013) 1, http://sns.rtcnv.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Existing_Conditions_01-09-13.pdf.

³ A point put forth by the SNS coalition.

consortium committee, a task group of city officials, which relied on the input of stakeholders⁴ and the public. Subsequently, four of the twelve opportunity sites were selected by SNS for potential future redevelopment. One of the researchers was deployed to the Eastern Avenue and Stewart Avenue intersection, which is located in an urban enclave with a predominantly Latina/o population characterized as 28th Street Gang territory, and popularly known as Barrio 28th Street or *La Veintiocho*.

This essay presents findings from informal conversations and *testimonio* interviews which were conducted with residents from Barrio 28th Street, along with homeless persons that reside within its perimeter, and with staff and community leaders⁵ from public and nonprofit organizations. It also addresses the exclusion of Barrio 28th Street from SNS plans to redevelop and compares and contrasts the visions—and contradictions—of residents, community leaders, and SNS stakeholders for the revitalization of Barrio 28th Street.

Ethnographic research—based on the up-close observation of and conversation with people and communities—was fundamental to the community-input gathering phase of SNS. Ethnography has not been employed in any of the other Partnership for Sustainable Communities⁶ projects and remains rather underutilized in urban planning.⁷ “Throughout its history urban ethnography has drawn unevenly upon a situational approach in one form or another. Such an approach seems to have an obvious appeal for those who have been most preoccupied with the backwaters of our cities, where broad cultural values are lightly

⁴ SNS stakeholders are the members of the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC), the project team that represented the interests of the entire region.

⁵ The concept of community leader here is not used to mean those who carry the agenda of the community—rather, the community leaders were identified by SNS administrators as those who oversee the functions of the for-profit, non-profit, and governmental organizations (the Latin Chamber of Commerce, the Rafael Rivera Workforce Development Center, and the East Las Vegas Community Center) in Barrio 28th Street, and who carry the agenda of their respective organizations.

⁶ Partnership for Sustainable Community is a joint effort between the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency. The Partnership seeks to help communities, nationwide, take an integrated approach to improving livability.

⁷ A report from the General Accounting Office suggests that an ethnographic approach has only played a very small role in policy implementation or design. The GAO report also suggests that ethnographies offer something different from focus groups, GIS, and phone surveys. See generally U.S. GEN. ACCOUNTING OFFICE, *Federal Programs: Ethnographic Studies Can Inform Agencies' Actions* 1 (2013), <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03455.pdf>.

observed.”⁸ Ethnographies can inform our knowledge of communities whose beliefs and behaviors affect the operation of federal programs, and can be especially valuable when such beliefs or behaviors present barriers to the objectives of those programs and projects, which seek to sustain communities, such as SNS.⁹

The data in this study was collected through a series of *testimonio* interviews with residents and community leaders, and informal conversations with the staff from the community centers who are familiar with the interactions and dynamics within Barrio 28th Street through their work. A total of 120 interviews were conducted for the entirety of SNS, ten of which were conducted in Barrio 28th Street. Purpose and snow-ball sampling methods were implemented to identify residents and staff and leaders who live and work in Barrio 28th Street. Observations were conducted in several locations from within the barrio—however, specific areas of focus, listed below, were selected to complete the observations to better illustrate the lives and work that takes place in this barrio. A scouting exercise of some focus areas was also conducted to identify potential significant gathering places for barrio residents.

The residents’ experiences vary in the manner in which they participate in Barrio 28th Street, hence the importance of interviewing residents from diverse facets in this barrio. I conducted *testimonio* interviews with residents from Barrio 28th Street and formal interviews with community leaders from the Latin Chamber of Commerce and the Rafael Rivera Community Center. Additionally, many informal conversations were held with other residents and staff from the community centers. Field observations were also conducted to gather data on the safety, housing, transportation, and employment conditions from the barrio residents. The Alley housing complex, the Sunrise Acres Apartment complex, the Rafael Rivera Park, and the East Las Vegas Community Center (ELVCC) were identified as the focus areas because they are important gathering places where residents spend a significant amount of time, and as prime locations in which to conduct observations and interviews. The *testimonio* interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the participants. Three of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, other interviews were conducted in English, although two of the interviews

⁸ Gerald Suttles, *Urban Ethnography: Situational and Normative Accounts*, 2 ANN. REV. SOC. I, 15 (1976).

⁹ U.S. Gen. Accounting Office, *supra* note 7, at 1.

were conducted in both languages—*Spanglish*. The researcher translated the *testimonios* from Spanish to English.

B. Positionality¹⁰

As activist scholars it is important to share our personal histories before sharing our research, a vision for social justice,¹¹ and in this project a critique of the limitations of SNS. The researcher's positionality in this project was revealing and informative. I spent part of my childhood as a working class Chicano in Barrio 28th Street. The same issues that afflicted this barrio more than 20 years ago seemingly remain the same: poor housing conditions, high crime rates, and the lack of revitalization projects. My experience growing up poor in this barrio and my consequent conscious, *muxerista*¹² and Chicano identity allowed me to locate these disparities as a result of capitalist and racist patriarchal practices that permeate the experience of the urban poor in communities of color in the U.S.

My experience also informed the ethnographic process and confirmed the credibility of the collected data, and overall credibility of the findings. My personal connection to Barrio 28th Street and to the people who helped me in this project drove me to join them in their fight to seek better living conditions. I also encouraged the barrio residents to learn about their rights and protections as tenants and to seek help when their rights and protections are violated. Also, I was careful in revealing the objective of the SNS project to the participants, because of the low probability that this barrio would be selected for potential redevelopment, as it was forewarned and advised by the SNS coalition.

C. Barrio 28th Street

As an urban space, Las Vegas is a superlative text that glorifies excess, but it also ignores those who cannot participate in its opulence.¹³ Beyond this glorification of the excessive exist urban enclaves characterized by

¹⁰ Positionality is a term used to describe our different social-political identities to acknowledge our privileges and oppressions. A point made in a class lecture by Professor Anita Revilla on the importance of our experiences and positions as we enter the classroom and conduct research.

¹¹ Anita Revilla & Jose Manuel Santillana, *Jotería Identity and Consciousness*, 39 AZTLAN: J. CHICANO STUD. 167, 167 (2014).

¹² *Muxerista* is an alteration of the word *mujerista* (from *mujer* and activist[a]) used to refer to a person who identifies as a Chicana/Latinx feminist and activist. *See id.* at 178.

¹³ Simon Gottschalk, *Ethnographic Fragments in Postmodern Spaces*, 24 J. CONTEMP. ETHNOGRAPHY 195, 196 (1995).

poverty, marginalization, and discrimination—*barrios*. Not far from the Las Vegas strip, the reality for many of the locals contradicts the promises of wealth from the casinos against the lack of economic social justice for the working class people of color who do the hardest and lowest-paid jobs in the local casino industry. In his urban ethnographic work in Las Vegas, Gottschalk questions “how to adjust to this paradox between the spectacular flaunting of infinite economic possibilities and the systemic enforcement of violent poverty on designated Others?”¹⁴ The implementation of this (un)sustainable community project (SNS) in Barrio 28th Street addresses this paradox.

Since the 1960s, Las Vegas has experienced an irrational, explosive, and rapid growth as a result of publicity, a compliant local state, cheap land, and an intense period of real estate development.¹⁵ Las Vegas is highly dependent on cyclical markets—tourism and gambling—which impact quality of life and revitalization efforts. Neighborhood revitalization in Las Vegas puts added pressure on already deflated resources when city redevelopment plans, and others like SNS, heavily depend on cyclical market conditions which are often times volatile.¹⁶ Additionally, barrio neighborhoods often lack basic infrastructure.¹⁷ The results have been overcrowded schools, an inadequate transportation system, environmental degradation, uneven development, and a fragmented civic culture, particularly intensified in the barrios of Las Vegas.

According to the Pew Hispanic Research Center, Latinxs account for 29.7 percent of the total population in Las Vegas, and 42.7 percent among the population under 18 years of age, and is the largest growing ethnic group in the city. Additionally, 78.4 percent of the total Latinx population in Las Vegas is of Mexican-origin.¹⁸ In Las Vegas there are at least five neighborhoods, characterized as *barrios*, with a high concentration of Chicana/Latina residents—Barrio 18th Street, Barrio 28th Street, Barrio Grand Vista, Barrio Naked City, and Barrio San Chucos.¹⁹ Yet, of

¹⁴ *Id.* at 205.

¹⁵ See generally Mark Gottdiener et al., *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City* (Blackwell ed., 1999) at 111.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 256.

¹⁷ See David R. Diaz, *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning, and American Cities* 36 (Routledge ed., 2005).

¹⁸ *Hispanic Population and Origin in Select Metropolitan Areas, 2014*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Sept. 6, 2016), <http://www.pewhispanic.org/interactives/hispanic-population-in-select-u-s-metropolitan-areas>.

¹⁹ See Jackie Valley, *3 Las Vegas Neighborhoods on List of Nation's 'Most Dangerous,' LAS*

the twelve opportunity sites identified for redevelopment consideration by SNS, only one of those selected is known as a *barrio*—Barrio 28th Street, at the intersection of Eastern Avenue and Stewart Avenue. This is a highly concentrated area of poverty, with some of the region’s largest percentage of Latinxs and residents with limited English proficiency.²⁰

Diaz defines a *barrio* as a central space of culture and resistance through political mobilization and cultural solidarity that is the basis for Chicana urbanism in the US—“*el barrio* is the reaffirmation of culture, defense of space, an ethnically bounded sanctuary, and the spiritual zone of Chicana and Mexican identity.”²¹ Barrio 28th Street embodies this culture, and its exclusion from SNS is its reaffirmation of an ethnically bounded reservation (and sanctuary). Unknowingly, Barrio 28th Street residents are engaged in a collective effort to improve the living conditions of this ethnically bounded space, which in and of itself is an act of resistance even as this *barrio* was excluded from SNS plans to redevelop.

D. *Contradictions of SNS*

I argue that Barrio 28th Street was not selected for potential redevelopment by SNS because it does not represent an area of opportunity for investment²² the same way that the four selected areas represent investment opportunities.²³ According to SNS, the areas which were selected represent opportunities for investment, which is a key action necessary to support redevelopment,²⁴ even though investment was not expressed an area of interest for community residents during the community-input phase of SNS. Investment in some of the areas selected is characterized by SNS as untimely.²⁵ Regardless, investment strategies

VEGAS SUN (Oct. 4, 2010 12:35 P.M.), <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2010/oct/04/3-las-vegas-neighborhoods-list-nations-most-danger>.

²⁰ S. Nev. Reg’l Planning Coal. et al., *supra* note 2.

²¹ DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 3.

²² Policymakers and stakeholders are seemingly committed to investment opportunities, even if community investment does not necessarily translate into community revitalization which focuses on improving the living conditions for community residents. An example of this was the selection for further evaluation of the Boulder Highway/Gibson Opportunity Site, despite the site’s own admission that “market conditions do not call for transit-oriented development at this time, especially given the lack of supportive infrastructure.” S. NEV. STRONG, BOULDER HIGHWAY/GIBSON OPPORTUNITY SITE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY 14 (2014), <http://sns.rtcnv.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/SNS-Boulder-Highway-Final.pdf>.

²³ Investment opportunities refer to SNS perceived market opportunities to invest private and public funds.

²⁴ S. NEV. STRONG, *supra* note 22, at 14.

²⁵ *Id.*

were developed for the areas selected for potential future redevelopment, which do not include addressing community safety concerns and the revitalization of housing in the residential areas.

Of the twelve opportunity sites selected, four are predominantly residential areas, but only the Eastern Avenue and Stewart Avenue site (Barrio 28th Street) and the Historic West Las Vegas site (The Westside) are residential areas with a majority minority community—however, the Historic West Las Vegas site covers a large area that is not residential. Therefore, Barrio 28th Street is the only predominantly-residential area with a majority of people of color in the SNS project. Neither of these communities was considered for potential future redevelopment. The Downtown North Las Vegas site is also an area with a high percentage of Chicaxs/Latinxs; but again, the area selected to conduct the ethnography in this site expanded beyond its residential areas. Although the four sites selected for potential redevelopment have residential areas, they're not highly concentrated areas of living space, the same way Barrio 28th Street is residential. SNS failed to include the revitalization of residential areas to improve living conditions in their plans to redevelop, even as it was explicitly planned.

I argue that the needs of Barrio 28th Street are recognized and manifested by the efforts of the non-profit organizations, the work of its residents, and the community leaders' endeavors to bring change. However, my findings indicate that there is an inherent disconnect between the community leaders' vision for the redevelopment of Barrio 28th Street and the Barrio residents' vision of revitalization concerning housing, drug-crimes and addiction,²⁶ and also police activity deemed as harassment. I also argue that the residents seek the residential revitalization of Barrio 28th Street, and manifest resistance to the gentrification that is taking place across Las Vegas, which could potentially affect their community and subsequently its residents. However, the community leaders have a redevelopment vision for Barrio 28th Street that closely parallels the gentrification that has taken place in downtown Las Vegas. Old historic downtown Las Vegas has experienced aggressive gentrification through the Downtown Project (DTP) over the past ten years misleadingly labeled as a "renovation" project. As a result, many residents from

²⁶ Drug crimes are conceptualized by Barrio 28th Street residents as violence that is the result of the sale of, use, and consequent addiction to controlled substances, particularly crystal methamphetamine in their community.

downtown Las Vegas were displaced and relocated to urban core areas and barrios. Barrio 28th Street is juxtaposed next to historic downtown Las Vegas²⁷—thus many of the residents have directly or indirectly experienced the displacement that has occurred.

Although investment in transportation and economic development were at the core of SNS objectives, so was housing revitalization. Yet housing, especially in areas where housing is severely deteriorated, continued to suffer from neglect and was eventually removed from SNS plans to redevelop. Policymakers and stakeholders intentionally selected areas in which investment is possible (and some in which it is not), while profound concerns for safety and housing from the residents in these areas were ignored. The selections uncover the intention to invest rather than to revitalize the communities. Furthermore, SNS failed to discuss the ways in which investment in the four opportunity sites selected enhance the living conditions for the residents in those communities.

The Boulder Highway Corridor²⁸ serves as a high-speed arterial road, characterized by old commercial development and undeveloped acreage that is set back from the highway. The investment strategy includes demonstrating public commitment to the area through infrastructure investment, maintaining a strategic hold until future investment opportunities arise, and attracting future residents and investments.²⁹ Significantly, the plan does not include the revitalization of residential areas to improve the living conditions for the communities adjacent to the corridor, even when this was a major component of the SNS planning initiative as a foundation to community livelihood.

Although the Las Vegas Medical District is not characterized as a residential area, it was also selected as a potential area for redevelopment. The investment strategy of the medical district seeks the implementation and coordination of public and private investment, the expansion of parking, and place-making to create a branded identity for the district. No consideration was given to the living conditions of the residents of nearby neighborhoods, which are characterized as areas of high need.

The Maryland Parkway Corridor is the third area selected by SNS. The Implementation Strategy for this site identifies projects, policies,

²⁷ Fremont Street runs through downtown Las Vegas directly to Eastern Avenue, where Barrio 28th begins.

²⁸ S. NEV. STRONG, *supra* note 22, at 1.

²⁹ *Id.* at 3.

and programs to stimulate economic development and private sector investment, which would be undertaken by public agencies, private sector partners, and community interest groups. Consequently, I argue that the residential areas and its residents within this site only play a small role in the future of Maryland Parkway as a transit corridor.³⁰

Lastly, Downtown North Las Vegas has a high proportion of Chicax/Latinx residents and businesses that cater to the needs of the residents. Yet Downtown North Las Vegas was identified as an area with significant investment opportunities, rather than an area with a high need for neighborhood revitalization. I argue here that the focus, again, shifted to investment rather than on improving housing and safety to improve the living conditions for the residents.³¹

The policymakers and stakeholders involved in the implementation of the SNS project failed to recognize the needs of the residents in four of the twelve opportunity sites selected from the input of the community through the ethnographic work. The communities characterized as areas with high need, such as Barrio 28th Street, were not selected for further consideration to implement redevelopment and revitalization of these communities—seemingly because these areas do not represent investment opportunities.

The legacy of racism on barrio urbanism and urban policy (and arguably in Barrio 28th Street) is manifested in the underdevelopment of barrios, the redistribution of funding into other favored economic zones, the underperformance and undirected mismanagement of policymakers and stakeholders, the historical failure to implement revitalization programs in barrios since the 1960s, and in the top down model of planning policy.³² Thus, I argue that the legacy of segregation in Las Vegas has further marginalized and as a result neglected the living conditions of the residents of Barrio 28th Street.

³⁰ S. NEV. STRONG, MARYLAND PARKWAY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY REPORT (2014), <http://www.rtcsv.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/SNS-Maryland-Parkway-Implementation-Strategy-Report.pdf>.

³¹ S. NEV. STRONG, DOWNTOWN NORTH LAS VEGAS IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES REPORT (2014), http://sns.rtcsv.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NorthLasVegas_Implementation_Strategies_Report_120314.pdf.

³² DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 161.

II. BARRIO URBANISM

Key characteristics of barrios are substandard and overcrowded housing, in which families tend to reside in one or two bedroom units.³³ Thus the study focus shifted to the tenants that reside in the housing complexes within Barrio 28th Street, drawing on individual *testimonio* interviews of eight barrio residents (two of them homeless men who stay within the parameters of the barrio) and two community leaders (the director of the Rafael Rivera Workforce Development Center and the president of the Latin Chamber of Commerce). Ethnographic research was required of the UNLV research team to examine the ways in which Barrio 28th Street met the requirements of SNS for potential selection for future redevelopment because the SNS coalition agreed that ethnographies can inform us about communities by observing the community, engaging with its members, and interviewing them in their “natural” setting—*el barrio*.

The relationship between redevelopment policy and urbanization of communities of color has resulted in the constant decline of barrios in the Southwest.³⁴ Since the “War on Poverty” was declared by the Johnson administration, the barrios and *colonias* remain remarkably unaltered.³⁵ Only scant social and economic changes have followed the redevelopment policies enacted in the 1960s; instead, the results have been contentious relationships among community leaders, policymakers, and the community, which is also evident in the process selection of SNS and the exclusion of Barrio 28th Street as a potential area for redevelopment.

Diaz characterizes the “War on Poverty” as a period of wasted funding and wasted opportunities because only a few barrios have experienced a substantial level of redevelopment and change.³⁶ Major changes have resulted in the destruction of some areas of barrios for

³³ Although barrios are powerful spaces of independence and resistance from white Euro-American influence, they are also historical, spatial zones of segregation and repression characterized by key themes of urbanism and urban policy in the U.S., including uneven development, inflated rents, low-wage labor, lack of housing, economic inequalities, racial injustices, and the worst abuses of urban renewal. Barrio 28th Street meets all of Diaz’s characteristics of *el barrio* and is recognized as such by its residents, outsiders, and the SNS coalition and stakeholders. *Id.* at 3.

³⁴ *Id.* at 161 (questioning whether urban redevelopment policies have ever comprehensively addressed the urban crises in the barrios).

³⁵ *Id.* at 166.

³⁶ *Id.* at 187.

redevelopment projects and freeways, while barrio business districts remain neglected.³⁷ The structural condition of commercial business districts and housing in the barrios remain in a constant state of decline.³⁸ The same narrative of limited redevelopment and change to barrios applies to the current state of Barrio 28th Street, as future plans for redevelopment were not achieved.

Additionally, some scholars suggest that racist public policy measures have racially stigmatized Mexican residents and have isolated them to *colonias* in rural areas and barrios in urban cities.³⁹ Barrios are the result of racist plans and policies at the local, state, and federal levels that have created high levels of racial segregation, substandard and limited housing, poor schooling, and severely circumscribed economic mobility.⁴⁰ In this way, barrios have always been home to heterogeneous groups of Latinx immigrants grounded on race, class, and national origin.⁴¹ Thus, the barrio continues to be a puzzling and contested space for scholars, artists, activists, and policy makers alike. “As a spatial formation, barrios emerge out of histories of segregation, marginalization, and exclusion-based race, class, ethnicity, and citizenship . . .”⁴²

In *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*,⁴³ Cherrie Moraga suggests that the needs of the urban poor (which are overwhelmingly communities of color) have been completely erased from the national debate in the political arena of the Obama administration. “To speak of poverty and the working poor in the U.S., Obama would have had to face the barbed-wire wall of racist, inhumane immigration policies, and the entrenched violence and resultant ever-expanding prison system that has emerged from the government’s full-scale abandonment of the inner city [barrios].”⁴⁴ Urban poverty has serious consequences in the form of child abuse, the prison of drugs, an apartheid-style education, illegal land occupation, and war for profit; furthermore, poverty has serious consequences on the lives of the urban poor in the form of disease

³⁷ *Id.* at 187.

³⁸ *Id.* at 187.

³⁹ See Gina M. Pérez et al., *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America* 4 (2010).

⁴⁰ DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 3; Cherrie Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings 2000–2010* 60 (2011); Pérez et al., *supra* note 39, at 4.

⁴¹ See Irene Blea, *Chicano Communities: Social-Historical, Physical, Psychology, and Spiritual Space* 1 (1995).

⁴² PEREZ ET AL., *supra* note 39, at 3.

⁴³ MORAGA, *supra* note 40.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 153.

and illness.⁴⁵ Additionally, she argues that because the U.S. federal government does not consider economic rights a matter of human rights, undocumented immigrants, who overwhelmingly live in barrios similar to Barrio 28th Street, have little legal recourse to improve their living conditions.⁴⁶ Overwhelmingly, the community residents feel there is little to do to improve housing and safety in Barrio 28th Street—consequently, their living conditions will remain in a constant state of deterioration.

III. THEMATIC FINDINGS

An analysis of the data—in conjunction with an analysis of the SNS selection process of the twelve opportunity sites selected, and the four sites subsequently selected for potential redevelopment—reveals a pattern of neglect and exclusion of low-income communities of color in Southern Nevada. More specifically, the data illustrates the neglect of Barrio 28th Street (and the rest of the residential opportunity sites) in urban development planning initiatives of low income communities in Las Vegas, highlighting two areas: Gentrifying v. Improving Living Conditions and The Segregation and Criminalization of Barrios.

A. *Gentrifying v. Barrio Revitalization*

Much of the discourse amongst the community leaders involves adopting an entrepreneurial approach to the revitalization of Barrio 28th Street. They support the investments ideals of SNS and the gentrification of Barrio 28th Street. The community leaders' plans, similar to SNS implementation strategy plans for the sites selected, promote aggressive investment to transform Barrio 28th Street into a cultural hub for the Latinx experience in the Las Vegas Valley, while the barrio residents remained focused on the improvement of housing conditions. Furthermore, barrio residents critiqued the community leaders' positionality as outsiders with little understanding of the needs of those who live in Barrio 28th Street. While barrio residents acknowledged the importance of community investment through small businesses and the importance of preserving the Latinx culture, they also expressed resistance to the entrepreneurial investment that will further marginalize them and which will prioritize outsiders as customers and consumers. They are worried about their survival, while the community leaders' attention is instead focused

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 112.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 89.

on investment opportunities that focus on private markets, thus leaving out the concerns of the residents.

Although transiency patterns exist, the barrio residents indicated that they are committed to creating a cultural space in which improving living conditions is a priority and exists in a way that Irene Isabel Blea describes as a social space that allows a population to exist physically, spiritually, and emotionally.⁴⁷ At the same time, the community leaders have failed to acknowledge the needs of the residents. Instead, they have aligned their attitudes and beliefs about the revitalization of Barrio 28th Street to the gentrification efforts that are taking place in downtown Las Vegas.⁴⁸ Community leaders should question SNS stakeholders and challenge policymakers to create policy change, but in this barrio this has yet to happen. In a similar study, findings indicated that residential segregation (into a prescribed social space—*el barrio*⁴⁹) is an economic and social system that perpetuates state violence into the Chicanax/Latinx population in the Southwest.⁵⁰ In the case of Barrio 28th Street this has been carried out through gentrification and other aggressive acts of violence in the form of raids and an intense police presence.

Historically, only a few Chicanax/Latinx communities have experienced a limited level of reinvestment in the U.S.,⁵¹ including Southern Nevada. Policymakers and stakeholders in the U.S. and in Barrio 28th Street have seemingly extorted low-wage labor and relatively high rents from dilapidated housing⁵² and, in the case of SNS, convinced HUD to allocate grants to purportedly revitalize areas of high need in Southern Nevada, which never materialized. The exacerbating housing crisis has become a normative feature of Barrio 28th Street that had not been addressed prior to SNS and has been ignored since. Housing in Barrio 28th Street exhibits signs of serious deterioration. Moreover, the lack of revitalization will further deteriorate the barrio. The sidewalks and streets are in decline, the abandoned lots are unkempt and seemingly

⁴⁷ BLEA, *supra* note 41, at 97.

⁴⁸ See *supra* Part II.C for an in-depth discussion.

⁴⁹ BLEA, *supra* note 41, at 98; DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 3.

⁵⁰ See Pat Rubio Goldsmith et al., *Ethno-Racial Profiling and State Violence in a Southwest Barrio*, 1 AZTLAN, J. CHICANO STUD. 93, 123 (2009).

⁵¹ DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 165.

⁵² *Id.* at 188.

unsafe, and many of the walls and the overpass bridge of Interstate 515 are marked with territory signage.⁵³

B. *The Criminalization of Barrio 28th Street*

The dual standard of the criminal justice system forces Chicaxs/Latinxs into prescribed social spaces—barrios—by intensifying their presence.⁵⁴ In this way, Barrio 28th Street is a social space for Chicaxs/Latinxs into which they are prescribed and one in which they experience intense police presence which they also perceive as harassment. According to residents, police harassment is ubiquitous in Barrio 28th Street. The residents argue that police presence (and harassment) criminalizes this barrio, and as a result criminalizes the people that experience their presence, oftentimes violently in the form of raids.⁵⁵ They also suggest that although the intended consequences of police raids in Barrio 28th Street are oftentimes unknown, other residents (and outsiders) who learn about the raids understand that these aggressive actions from the police result in the criminalization of this barrio. Barrio 28th Street is a transient social space. Residents partly attribute this to the intense police presence, which is well-known and recorded in the rest of the Las Vegas Valley. Many residents stay in Barrio 28th Street because it is affordable, but they have deep concerns about police presence and raids.

Barrio residents and community leaders understand that there is a correlation between the intense police presence and harassment, the transiency of Barrio 28th Street, and the deteriorated condition of housing units and the resistance from the owners to renovate them. When barrios are criminalized property values suffer.⁵⁶ Although the residents also express deep concerns about drug-related crimes, their concerns focus on the consequences that drug crimes and drug activity have on the people from Barrio 28th Street. According to residents, the police raids have done very little to alleviate drug crimes, and more importantly they fail to address the addiction problems that permeate this barrio. Furthermore, the community leaders also see that there is a disconnection

⁵³ Barrio 28th Street Gang uses signage that depicts the number 28 to mark the territory controlled by them.

⁵⁴ BLEA, *supra* note 41, at 121.

⁵⁵ Interview with Maria. Interview was conducted by the researcher at the Alley housing complex in Las Vegas, Nevada on 8/11/2013. Due to the vulnerability of this population and to ensure their privacy is protected, last names and other identifying markers will not be used.

⁵⁶ DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 66.

between the police department's efforts to reach the community and the residents' conceptualization of the police presence. According to the community leaders, the police department has failed in their efforts to work with the community and bring to action some of the programs that have been developed to build "communication" and "mutual respect" with underprivileged and underrepresented communities, including Barrio 28th Street. Instead, police have further criminalized and segregated this community with their intense presence and aggressive actions.

IV. INTERCONNECTED EXPERIENCES

The research data indicates that high crime activity that involves drug crimes, safety, and housing maintenance and clean up were identified by residents of Barrio 28th as their primary concerns. High levels of police activity was also identified as an area of deep concern for residents. Employment opportunities and reliable transportation concerns were seldom expressed, suggesting that the residents have become accustomed to the hardships of "unemployment" and unreliable transportation. All of the residents interviewed participate in the secondary labor market as *jornaleros*, *vendedoras* (day laborers and bargainers), recyclers, and some even donate plasma. The community leaders propose housing and welfare programs to improve the housing conditions of the area and living conditions of its residents, while the residents seek to humanize their already existing living conditions. For example, it was repeated by several participants that a community swimming pool is a very desirable amenity for the parents of the children of this barrio to help them cope with the scorching summers of Las Vegas, more so than arbitrary, systematic welfare programs that some of the community organizations offer but which the community residents may not be eligible to receive.

A. Housing Maintenance and Clean-Up

Several low-cost housing complexes where the majority of the tenants are Chicanx/Latinx are located in Barrio 28th Street. The majority of these housing complexes are poorly maintained. Sunrise Acres and the Alley are two of the low-cost housing complexes that are severely neglected. The buildings in the complexes are seriously deteriorated, and the tenants feel unsafe. Their residents expressed concern for these conditions. Maria, a tenant living in the Alley, described the profound concerns she has about her children and their living conditions.

I get really worried that my kids don't have a safe and clean place to play. I get really sad when I think about it because I can't really provide one for them. I wish we, at least, had a pool where they can go during summer break. Instead they play in the mud [that accumulates in the front porch] in the summer and in the winter they stay inside. My son is sick, so I have to be very careful with him. It just seems like I have a lot of things to worry about. My older son just moved back in because he's struggling, but we'll make it work. But, living like this doesn't make it easy.

When Maria was asked about her perception of housing in the area she uttered "shit, it's a disaster." She thinks housing is affordable, but inadequate and unsafe. "The area is safer by day than by night," she explained. Maria believes that housing can be improved by fining the owners who fail to maintain and clean their properties. She also reports that the air conditioning and heating systems are old and use too much energy—a common complaint amongst tenants. According to Maria, clean-up is also necessary to improve living conditions. The lack of repairs makes her unhappy to live in her housing unit, but she remains because "it's cheap," and because she values the community comprised of all Latinx tenants.

The Alley is owned by several landlords. The tenants explain that the owners poorly maintain their units and are not held accountable for ensuring proper living conditions and maintenance. The tenants also indicate that there is a great need for clean up, and the landscaping in this complex is also poorly kept and is made up of rocks, dirt, poorly trimmed bushes, and small trees. Monterey, another tenant living in the Alley, explained, "these buildings were constructed many years ago and have never been updated." Monterey also described the disappointment and sadness that he feels for the children who live in this housing complex as a result of the lack of maintenance.

When it rains the dirt becomes mud and the complex becomes unsafe. The kids need a safe place to play. A swimming pool where they can go in the summer is what they need, not mud puddles. I don't have kids of my own, but my girlfriend's daughter, who is like my own daughter, is not safe when she wants to play outside. I don't like to see her playing in the trash, it makes me feel sad.

Monterey explained that in the Alley the façades of the units are damaged, the paint is chipped, and the doors and windows are either old or non-existent. The parking lot is also poorly kept. Trash overflows despite many large trash containers that are assigned to each housing unit. Some of the Alley tenants report that non-residents use these containers to dispose of large items and large portions of trash; however, there is not an entity within the housing complex that can prevent this from happening. Tenants in the Alley express that the owners must be held responsible for clean-up and maintenance efforts. Additionally, tenants from the Alley and Sunrise Acre apartments propose the creation of hybrid homeowners associations “to deal with irresponsible owners and non-abiding residents.”⁵⁷ They would also like to see more involvement by the city in clean-up and renovation efforts to improve living conditions in the area.

Marcelo, a Sunrise Acres apartment tenant, revealed many of the problems with the housing conditions in his housing unit. He has a bedbug problem, and has repeatedly asked the owner to fumigate. The owner has refused. Marcelo also described the maintenance in Sunrise Acres as “non-existent.” The landscaping has overgrown grass and weeds, and the few remaining trees are poorly kept. He would also like to see the “owners be[] held responsible for maintaining and repairing their housing units, and to be considerate to their tenants.” Marcelo further described that:

The rain creates a mess because the landscaping and trees are not properly trimmed, the branches fall off and the dirt turns into mud. I would like to see the housing units painted uniformly and would like to see some remodeling done to the inside of the housing units. The a/c units and heating units also need to be renewed. Our energy bills are really high because some of the a/c units and heating units are very old, they may have never been replaced and we have to keep them off because we don't make enough money to pay high energy bills. The owners know that maintenance to the housing units is urgent. They don't really help us, but they should.

Marcelo would also like to see the city become more involved in efforts to mitigate the high crime rate and improve the quality of the

⁵⁷ Interview with Maria.

conditions of his housing complex. His other biggest concern is clean-up. He stated that “this area is highly neglected and ignored.” However, Marcelo believes that collaboration between the residents of Barrio 28th Street and governmental entities could improve the appearance and the living conditions for the tenants that live in this housing complex. He believes that these efforts would benefit everyone who lives in this housing complex, including the owners.

According to the staff from the Rafael Rivera Community Center, they proposed housing programs that help owners and their tenants repair their air-conditioning and heating units in order to lower energy consumption and costs. Tenants are aware that these old systems are not energy efficient and foresee the benefits of updating them. Community leaders have proposed that owners and landlords be identified, and to develop programs that foster owner/landlord accountability for their units. They want to “promote open communication between owners and tenants to identify and address the needs of the tenants, and fix some of the problems that afflict them. This in return can improve the living conditions and the quality of life for the residents.” The community leaders agree with the tenants that “it is necessary to work with the city in clean up and maintenance efforts.” They suggest that the residents that live in these housing complexes must be informed of their rights as tenants. “Many of the residents may not know that there are policies in place that protect them and that they have rights that guarantee their safety as tenants of these buildings.” Similar to SNS, although many of these proposals were planned they were not fulfilled.

B. Crime, Safety, and Police Harassment

All the research participants agree that Barrio 28th Street has high crime rates, and that there is an existing drug problem in the barrio—sales, use, and addiction. Participants report that crystal methamphetamine is the major drug of choice in this barrio, that it is readily available, and that many of the barrio residents are addicted to it. According to community leaders, drug crimes in this barrio have become a nuisance. Residents also correlate this high drug activity to high gang activity that they perceive. Many of the residents have personal experience with gang violence—some directly victimized by shootings, killings, and gang violence.

A resident revealed that “two months ago there was a shooting by [the] 28th Street Gang, and a *homie*⁵⁸ was killed.”⁵⁹

Residents also report a high level of police activity, which they consider disruptive. Barrio residents describe the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police as intrusive instead of helpful, cooperative, or effective. Each of the tenants interviewed from the Alley and Sunrise Acres apartments stated that they do not trust the police. However, the homeless persons that were interviewed who reside in the area describe a mutually polite relationship with the marshals that patrol the parks. But they also agree that the drug problems are ubiquitous and that the metropolitan police department can be inconsiderate to the residents of Barrio 28th Street during their interactions. The homeless individuals interviewed also perceive that the housing complexes are in disrepair. Although they do not live in these housing complexes they understand the importance of clean up and maintenance efforts that support safe and healthy living, which is an important objective of SNS. Ivan, a homeless man, disclosed that he has lived at the Rafael Rivera Park for close to two years, and that there is a population of about ten homeless persons that regularly stay there.

The reason why I have found permanency at this park is because I have access to electricity, showers, and stoves. All my friends do too. I’ve also become [friendly] with some of the regular walkers, baseball players and soccer players, and marshals who visit the park frequently. The store is really close to us too. Honestly, I don’t think this is a safe neighborhood, but the park is a safe place to stay.

Marcelo, the tenant from the Sunrise Acres complex, also perceives this area to be unsafe. He is aware that there have been multiple robberies and burglaries that have occurred in his housing complex and acknowledges the serious drug problems in the area. He agrees with the other barrio residents that the prominent drug in the area is crystal meth, but explains that other types of drugs are also available, especially in the Sunrise Acres apartments.

There are a lot of different drugs here, but especially crystal meth. Anything you want you can find it here, even sex. There

⁵⁸ *Homie* is a term used to refer to a perceived gang member.

⁵⁹ In this case, the researcher was unable to confirm the veracity of this shooting.

is a serious [sex-work⁶⁰] problem in this neighborhood. Some of the women that are addicted to crystal meth [engage in sex-work] to be able to earn money to buy their drugs. I see this all the time, but the police don't do anything to help. Nobody does anything to help. There are a lot of problems here and I try to report them to the landlords, but they don't act. For example, there are burglaries happening all the time. I think people break-in to look for drugs and money. I've had to find other places to keep my things safe. Sometimes I carry all the money I have with me, but it's not safe to do that all the time.

When Maria, the tenant from the Alley, was asked about her perception of crime in the area she responded, "When something doesn't look normal, it's not." She alluded to killings in the Alley, and a high level of police activity, indicating that the SWAT unit from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department conducts raids "about once every two months," mostly in connection with drug crimes. She also alluded to high rates of theft in the complex, although she has never been victimized. She believes that some of the residents who are active at night are responsible for the stolen items, stating that "more security would improve the quality of life for the residents."

All of the research participants agree that improvements in housing and safety could mitigate some of the drug and gang problems that have afflicted this barrio for many years. The community leaders agree, and suggest that poor housing conditions are correlated to high crime rates. Additionally, the community leaders value some of programs developed by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department that foster good relationships with the Latinx community and provide services to a culturally diverse community. One such program is H.A.R.T. (Hispanic American Resource Team), which encourages interaction between the metropolitan police department and residents of different cultures within the Latinx community of Las Vegas in order to advance mutual understanding and respect.⁶¹ However, the community leaders argue that the city is

⁶⁰ The World Health Organization defines sex work as the exchange of sexual acts for money or goods.

⁶¹ H.A.R.T.'s mission statement is: To encourage interaction between Department members and the people of different cultures within the Hispanic community, leading to mutual understanding and respect. To build and maintain positive relationships between the Hispanic community and the police through compassion and innovative thinking. As with many of the LVMPD's community policing efforts, H.A.R.T. has fostered a partnership with local

not reaching out to the residents in this area, and some of the residents remain unaware of these programs.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that Barrio 28th Street is impoverished, and that its needs are severe. The residents express profound concerns about safety, crime, and the inability to receive proper assistance from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department without further harassment. Barrio 28th Street residents seek improvements in housing, public services, and facilities that would enhance their living conditions. The residents seek a safer community—free of drug crimes, violent gang activity, and police harassment.

The community leaders promote an entrepreneurial approach to the redevelopment of Barrio 28th Street. They support private investment opportunities suggesting that Barrio 28th Street become the hub for Valley residents to witness the “Latinx experience.”⁶² Moreover, the community leaders plan to expand some of the services that their organizations offer, but which many of the residents express they do not qualify to receive. Barrio 28th Street residents express that some of the services offered by the Rafael Rivera Community Center cater to outsiders and they don’t seek the services from some of the other community organizations in the barrio because those services don’t meet their needs or they don’t meet the criteria to qualify for them. In reality, the community organizations do not meet the needs of the barrio residents, and there are no efforts to identify those needs.

The underdevelopment of barrios has many effects—a severe lack of affordable, suitable housing; declining business districts; poor and unsafe infrastructures; and unfavorable levels of job creation and business development—all of which are at the forefront of the SNS project.⁶³ Barrios must be considered important components to local revitalization—not as internal colonies used for low-wage labor and low-rent profits. Barrios must not be used as demographic pawns—used to trick

businesses and civic organizations in support of the program. H.A.R.T. consists of a team of Spanish-speaking officers who are fluent in both Spanish and English (speaking, reading and writing). They currently work out of the Downtown Area Command and provide five-days-a-week coverage. *HART, LAS VEGAS METRO. POLICE DEP’T*, <http://www.lvmpd.com/CommunityPrograms/HART/tabid/138/Default.aspx> (last visited February 23, 2017).

⁶² Interview with Rene Cantu, Director, Rafael Rivera Community Center. The interview took place at the Rafael Rivera Community Center on 07/22/2013.

⁶³ DIAZ, *supra* note 17, at 188.

HUD into allocating subsidies to cities when those subsidies will not be used to improve those same barrios⁶⁴, as has been the case with the SNS project.

[Barrios], precious cultural arenas of resistance confronted by a society structured by racism, subjugation, and discrimination, retain a vitality that planning and urban history has yet to comprehend. This ignorance, which persists in the current period, only serves to complicate policy and allow the continuance of directed mismanagement in resolving the urban crises of the barrio.⁶⁵

This was the case with Barrio 28th Street as it was left out of plans to redevelop despite the obvious necessity of redeveloping to improve the living conditions for the residents. The exclusion of Barrio 28th Street from an opportunity to resolve in some ways the urban crises in the barrio allows the continuance of neglect and discrimination to which barrios like this one are subjugated to. This point highlights some crucial limitations of the community-input gathering phase of the broader SNS project.

SNS would be an ideal and timely resource opportunity to repair and improve the deteriorating conditions of Barrio 28th Street. The lack of political inclusion of barrios in urban planning of reinvestment and structural revitalization—manifested in the areas highlighted in this section—cemented the decomposition of barrios in the Southwest. Likewise, “racism in planning helped to ensure the decomposition of barrios.”⁶⁶ Finally, it is worth noting that racism was displayed throughout the entire SNS community input gathering phase—from excluding Spanish speakers in the project in an overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking community to excluding people of color in the consortium committees, and by excluding communities of color in the selection of opportunity sites for potential redevelopment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the SNS ethnographic project had little impact on the development of urban-revitalization strategies and social policy change

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 120.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 18.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 193.

from policymakers and SNS stakeholders. Attention to the demands and concerns of the Barrio 28th Street residents was confronted with disregard and abandonment by SNS, with no plans to improve areas of high need. In reality, SNS (urban policy) is committed to already economically favored areas, and excludes barrios from the benefits of HUD programs.

Due to SNS requirements and time restrictions only ten formal interviews⁶⁷ were conducted. Additional in-depth interviews are necessary to further understand the needs of the people who live and work in Barrio 28th Street. Despite these limitations, important data was gathered that reveal the need for policymakers and stakeholders to bring attention and raise awareness of the needs of Chicanx/Latinx communities in Southern Nevada. Future qualitative research, in the form of *testimonio* interviews with community residents and stakeholders, could help further understanding of the barrio, especially if the findings are compared and contrasted to quantitative research in public policy and Sustainable Communities projects. Additionally, future research in barrios could contribute to the literature on current community conditions, needs, and opportunities for growth. These detailed observations of barrios could increase the attention of policy makers responsible for planning initiatives of regional needs and possibilities for growth.

⁶⁷ Ten interviews were required by SNS of each researcher to conduct at each opportunity site. A total of 120 interviews were conducted for the totality of the broader SNS project.