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‘I want the heart of fierceness to arise within us:’ Maintaining public space to promote HIV-related health with House Ball Community members in an era of gentrification

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Abstract:

The House Ball Community (HBC) consists of sexual, gender and ethnic minority (SGEM) youth who form family-like houses and compete in balls. Many rely on community-based organizations (CBOs) as venues for socializing and accessing health-related resources. In recent years, urban gentrification has challenged the economic survival of CBOs that serve the HBC and community members themselves. From 2016 to 2017, we collected 45 in-depth interviews with houses and gay families in the San Francisco Bay Area and conducted regular participant observation at community events, including balls. Along with forcing CBO's to close or move, rising rents have increased housing instability among HBC members themselves, with some moving to distal locations. Participants felt nostalgia for CBO's that provided HIV-related services and hosted balls in previous years, feeling the loss of space keenly. To maintain community and generate employment, the HBC offers Vogue classes at private dance studios. This allows participants to recruit new house members, welcoming a broader array of individuals into the HBC than those who have historically participated. However, accessing culturally appropriate sexual health services remains difficult. Health advocates should consider that CBOs are necessary for SGEM youth to build community and access HIV-related and sexual health services.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS; gentrification; sexual ethnic and gender minorities;

social support networks; youth subcultures

Background

The House Ball Community (HBC) is a community that, since its inception more than 70 years ago in Harlem, New York, has consisted of predominantly African American and Latinx sexual, gender, and ethnic minorities (SGEM) of low socioeconomic status. Since then, the HBC has expanded rapidly to major US and international cities. The community consists of ‘houses,’ or family-like networks, led by mothers and fathers, who are more experienced members of the community. Houses host elaborate balls that serve as community events where members compete in performative categories and celebrate their SGEM identities. The social meaning of family has been central to this community since members have not been historically privileged with supportive biological kin or other support networks in their communities of origin (Heaphy, 2019). Therefore, the HBC fulfills a need for young people, many of whom consult with their house parents and siblings on issues related to health that they may not typically discuss with their biological kin (Arnold and Bailey 2009).

The HBC has been impacted by the HIV epidemic for decades, with New York-based researchers first documenting a prevalence rate of 17% in the community, with 73% being unaware of their serostatus in 2004 (Murrill et al. 2008). Researchers in Los Angeles found HIV rates of 6% in a venue-based sample taken at balls (Kipke et al. 2013), while 27% of those surveyed in the San Francisco Bay Area self-reported living with HIV, reflecting the demographics of the local HIV epidemic which more heavily impacts Black

and Latino MSM (Arnold et al. 2018, Davis 2014). Additionally, HIV-related risk behaviours, including condomless anal intercourse, multiple sexual partners, substance use, exchange sex, and low rates of PrEP uptake have been observed in the HBC across multiple cities (Phillips et al. 2011, Castillo et al. 2012, Schrager et al. 2014, Lemos, Hosek and Bell 2016). These risk behaviors are not solely associated with membership in the HBC but reflect the lived experiences and structural vulnerability of low income SGEM to HIV, such as limited formal employment opportunities and dense sexual networks (Valdeserri, Maulsby and Holtgrave 2018). In addition, social factors such as HIV-related stigma present challenges to reducing sexual risk behaviours among those who are HIV-negative and engagement in care and treatment for those who are living with HIV (Bailey 2013).

Previous studies have demonstrated that the HBC serves as a mechanism of HIV-related social support for both HIV positive and negative members (Kubicek et al. 2013, Arnold and Bailey 2017). HBC networks provide HIV-related social support that correlates with HIV testing, condom use, and being aware of HIV medication like PrEP (Arnold et al., 2018. Young et al. 2017). These forms of “intravention” are naturally augmented by formal services located at community-based organizations (CBO’s), such as HIV testing, PrEP/PEP, linkage to care, and peer support for living with HIV. However, CBO’s can also be vulnerable to structural factors such as gentrification, which threatens their ability to rent space and provide services to the community (Garcia et al. 2015).

The impact of structural factors, such as gentrification, on the well-being of marginalized communities can be detected in the current demographic trends in the San Francisco Bay Area. San Francisco's low corporate taxation policy has led to a growth of tech giants and created an overheated housing market that has reduced affordability for long-time tenants who are forced to leave (McNeill 2016). As low rent, socially marginalized areas of urban centres are remade to accommodate professional, middle to upper-middle-class citizens, fewer existing working class, ethnic minority residents remain in the area (Hwang and Sampson 2014). While gentrification attempts to integrate existing residents by creating new job opportunities, people living with HIV (PLWH) can be negatively impacted. As housing prices increase, PLWH in San Francisco have had to spend a higher portion of their fixed household income on rent rather than on food (Whittle et al. 2015), and a reported 12% of PLWH in California are homeless or unstably housed (Nelson, Sundback and Kaine 2017).

The HBC has traditionally consisted of the people who are most vulnerable to gentrification, low income African American and Latinx communities (Sutton, 2018). The Bay Area median monthly rent increased by 40% between 1990 and 201l, and the proportion of African Americans in all Oakland neighborhoods, a historically Black city that is home to the HBC, decreased by nearly 40% over the same period, with many residents moving to more distal cities, such as Vallejo, to find affordable housing (Causa Justa--

Just Cause 2014). Business corridors within Oakland have also seen dramatic changes with local “mom and pop” businesses being pushed out in favor of larger commercial retail outlets that cater to the needs of a more affluent and educated residential population (Urban Displacement Project 2018). Gentrification and higher rents have also impacted CBOs that have provided HIV prevention services to SGEM, pushing them out of centrally located business districts to more distal areas of Oakland that are not as well served by public transit (AIDS Project East Bay 2019). In this article, we explore the changes experienced by the HBC and the CBOs that have provided safe space and services to its members, as the San Francisco Bay Area experiences vast demographic shifts and changes in the context of gentrification.

Methods

Data collection took place between August 2016 to December 2017. We conducted 45 in-depth interviews with HBC leaders, house members, and gay family members who attended balls. A team consisting of a white female anthropologist, and two gay men of color research assistants conducted the interviews. Eligible participants were: part of a house or a gay family, gay, bisexual, transgender or otherwise non-gender conforming identified, sexually active as measured by anal intercourse with a man in the past year, Bay Area residents, and at least 18 years old. Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Topics included history of

house/gay family involvement and dynamics, support available through families, HIV-related stigma, and HIV prevention suggestions. Questions included: Tell me about your experience being in the ball community or in a gay family, What have you heard from your house about HIV, and Tell me about a time when you got support from your house or gay family. Interviews took place in private offices at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), the California Prevention Education Project (Cal PEP), a community-based organization in Oakland, CA that collaborated on the project, or at a private location of the participant's choosing. Interviews proceeded until theoretical saturation was achieved, with no new themes emerging in our analysis (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). Study participants all provided verbal consent and received $40.00 to compensate for time and travel. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the UCSF Institutional Review Board.

In addition to in-depth interviews, one research assistant was trained to conduct regular participant observation that took place at balls, dance studios, gay pride events, nightclubs, bars, art museums, and other community spaces, and generally lasted between 4-6 hours on a weekly basis. During these events, he would identify himself as a researcher, participate in activities (if appropriate), engage in informal conversations, and take jottings to record his impressions of the social interactions and environment. Fieldnotes detailing interactions, community norms, and other social cues were written up immediately following each observation activity

and saved on a secure server. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts were then uploaded to an online qualitative data analysis programme, Dedoose (Version 8.0.35, 2018).

To explore our data, we followed procedures from thematic analysis, developing and defining thematic codes to capture data segments related to gentrification, health services, house ball socialization, and social support (Miles and Huberman 1994). Themes were developed using a deductive (based on topics in the guides) and inductive (emergent findings) approach to characterize the data. Meeting regularly, the authors organized the thematic areas into a defined set of codes. We then applied the codes to a subset of transcripts, until code application was consistent across coders. The research assistant then coded the remaining transcripts, and he and the senior author conducted cross-case comparisons across the entire data set to ensure consistency of the coding structure. Analytic memos summarized meeting discussions and coding decisions. Participants are identified using pseudonyms.

Results:

Several dynamic shifts took place within the HBC as the broader Bay Area experienced significant structural changes under gentrification. First, we describe the historical character of the Ballroom scene in the Bay Area up until the closing of a local CBO, Sexual And Gender Minority Youth in the East Bay (SAGMY, a pseudonym), that hosted balls, and provided sexual health services to HBC members. Then, we discuss the demographic and social

changes taking place in Oakland due to gentrification and the challenges these pose to maintaining safe space for SGEM youth. Next, we describe a more commercialized form of Vogue that is currently appreciated and performed by middle-class consumers, or the new residents of gentrifying Oakland and San Francisco. Finally, we examine how SGEM are learning to adapt to these changing times, in order to rebuild the HBC and return to a sense of family and health promotion efforts.

The Intertwined History of the Bay Area HBC and SAGMY

Until 2015, SAGMY, an Oakland CBO, served as the gathering point for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-identified and other sexual minority youth of color. Serving an especially vulnerable population in the Bay Area, SAGMY provided HIV prevention education and testing, case management, mentoring, and hosted Ballroom-related activities for participants who went to the centre. For many of our participants, SAGMY was a safe space where they could feel comfortable receiving essential health services when they were young.

> A lot of people who live in Oakland, we all grew up with SAGMY as the only real gay outlet…. That's where a lot of people grew up going to afterschool…it would be a place where you could openly be yourself…a lot of people grew up knowing each other from SAGMY, so the gay scene out here is really small… [SAGMY] was a big place with a lot of rooms, a lot of counselors, a lot of people who did HIV prevention; but it was a center. They had community. They hosted health classes… It was just something that we went to everything so freely. (Stephaun, House member)

SAGMY also fostered a culture where youth could socialize and be introduced to the HBC. Multiple participants cited learning about Ballroom

from practicing their categories with house members at SAGMY and from the balls that SAGMY often hosted. These balls were essential for house parents to recruit newcomers, celebrate their respective houses, and build community. Jamila discussed how essential that sense of belonging and acceptance was during a turbulent time in her life.

> I went to SAGMY when I was like 19 it was just like the Ballroom, it was so more… like over the top… It was really like a safe haven for all the kids that didn't have family and friends and stuff. When I was approached I was mainstreaming out of foster care. ... I had no idea about Oakland, no idea about who you'd be able to trust. (Jamila, House member)

Looking for a strong sense of acceptance, Jamila had switched from a youth organization in San Francisco to SAGMY in Oakland because the cultural, racial, and economic demographics of SAGMY's staff mirrored her community. She wanted to affiliate with those who could better understand her experiences.

> When we were going to SAGMY it was kind of like, it's a lot more of color kids here and we're able to actually get along and not have to feel like we're being judged so much from like the counselors just because we come from like places, like that we grew up from. (Jamila, House member)

Multiple participants expressed that it was because of SAGMY that they were exposed to role models and house leaders in the HBC who transformed them into more confident individuals. Alex, now a house leader, described how these gay affirming spaces were especially necessary, given the homophobic environment where he grew up.

> I have several role models, I mean in the Ballroom Scene…I didn't really have confidence before I came into the Ballroom Scene so actually walking Balls it helped build pride…They kinda

> helped that creative side come out in me…I was not really accepted being gay…I had to act straight at school and then I would leave and I would come down to like SAGMY... and then I formed friendships with like all these people. (Alex, House leader)

Most of our older participants who joined the HBC as youth came from economically underserved, African American and Latinx communities that often were homophobic and transphobic. Through SAGMY, they received services and support not otherwise available, and gained access to the HBC where they would develop a sense of family and confidence that would be passed down to the next generation.

The Loss of SAGMY and Deterioration of Affordable Housing

SAGMY was damaged by a fire in 2012 and then officially closed in 2015 when the leadership could no longer afford to rent space near its previous location in downtown Oakland, leaving few spaces for SGEM youth in Oakland to socialize or to receive HIV-related services. Because SAGMY previously hosted Balls and provided practice space for houses, its closure led to fewer balls, which translated to decreased participation in houses as well. By the time SAGMY closed, several prominent African American leaders in the HBC were also being displaced by rising housing prices in Oakland and were moving further inland to communities such as Vallejo, Antioch, and even Sacramento in order to find affordable housing.

Overall, losing a stable sense of community and home was difficult for participants. Many participants who grew up with SAGMY felt a sense of nostalgia, describing the resource being central to their mobilization as a

community. A publicly funded agency, SAGMY was especially important in facilitating conversations around health issues such as HIV. Here, Alex shares his concerns that the next generation of SGEM youth will not have the same resources available to him growing up.

> [In] Oakland, SAGMY was all we had, and all the kids had…Now they have like nothing to do. They're just like really on the street…I think that the community is dying because of it … SAGMY's lost their funding [and] we haven't had any kids come to Mizrahi or really to the scene, but I'm starting to see like a lot of kids graduating from high school that are gay and stuff like that. I know they're out there, but there's no SAGMY's. I don't know where they hang out at, I don't know where to find them. Our house members have cut in half. We don't really discuss the HIV thing anymore, without SAGMY being there to educate. (Alex, House leader)

While SAGMY had the public funding to sponsor ball-related events, an elder in the community explains that the cost of building community requires a personal investment, 'West Coast Ballroom is not a moneymaking opportunity where it might be on the East Coast. It has to be from the love of Ballroom' (Jayden, House leader). There have been fewer opportunities to foster the HBC because its members, who typically come from marginalized backgrounds and struggle themselves with obtaining basic essential needs, cannot shoulder the additional costs of a Ball without additional institutional sponsorship.

Along with the loss of CBOs dedicated to the HBC and its health, participants also cited the high cost of living as a significant barrier to remaining present in Oakland and staying together as a community.

> Living here is really expensive … [I think about moving] But I think about the community that I have here …And you can't

> really put a price on that…[T]hey didn't have a place to stay so I let them stay at my place…[Infiniti Member A] has been displaced and so has [Infiniti Member B] and [Infiniti Member C] didn't have a place for a while. And ugh! I think [Infiniti Member D] might be homeless soon too…a lot of affordable places are getting shut down…[Infiniti Member B] got evicted because they were living in the warehouse…they've been like couch surfing for 3 months … I'm holding onto it as much as I can…I actually lost my job because they closed the restaurant that I worked for… The thing is like people like us come to the Bay for refuge…that's really heartbreaking if you think about it. Because historically speaking that's what San Francisco has been. And you know a lot of us, a lot of them moved to Oakland because it's more affordable but now…it's kind of like, damn! Where the fuck do we go? (Roberto, House member)

Participants also recognized the effects gentrification has on the demographics of the HBC. Stewart, who is not originally from the Bay Area, discusses his perspective.

> There are still people that are left over in Oakland whereas in San Francisco it's just gone. [What's gone?] The black communities and the Ballroom Scene…I've only ever seen one Ball while I've been here … That's just the way it is when the black people are gone, the black people's art form goes with it. (Stewart, House member)

Broader economic circumstances, especially housing instability, affected the community and social practices of our participants as they experienced the loss of safe spaces. Yet, we learned that key HBC members were forging new paths to preserve their community and its practices.

The Resiliency, Survival and Evolution of the HBC: House Membership and Activism

The evolution and survival of the Bay Area HBC is characterized by: (1) the commercialization of Vogue, (2) the inclusion of a variety of sexual, gender and ethnic identities, (3) increasing numbers of participants who do not join

houses, also called free agents (4) an emphasis on Ballroom performance as a form of artistic expression, and (5) mobilizing houses as a vehicle for social change.

In response to the lack of publicly accessible space to practice and host balls in, we found that the HBC members had begun to offer Vogue classes at private dance studios around the Bay. Vogue Femme is one particular category in Ballroom competitions and is often associated with a more femininized type of performance, although butch queens also compete in the category. Classes cost from five to sixteen dollars at the door, consist of an ethnically mixed demographic, and focus on teaching specific elements such as duckwalk, catwalk, hands, floorwork, spins and dips. Current house leaders explain the elements, similar to any other dance class. Teachers include white gay men, gay men of color, and cisgender women of color. Classes represent a new avenue for recruiting and maintaining house membership, with less established local houses taking the lead. They also provide a viable source of income for house leaders who teach them. Neil, a new HBC member, provided their perspective about joining.

> I became a member of House of Prolific a year ago, when the house leaders were doing workshops, inviting people to come and train with them—and if they wanted to, to actually become a member. So I did…A year ago was when I started dancing, a year is when I started Vogueing…I've been in House of Prolific since it started…we've had photoshoots of the House just to have these family portraits out of us dressing up together, doing different Vogue [performances] in different parts of the city…I feel like there's lots of people who Vogue who might not necessarily have a house. There's lots of like free agents running around. (Neil, House member)

The presence of Vogue at Pride events, local art celebrations, and dance studios reflects multiple participants' view that 'Vogue is on the rise again' (Jonathan, House leader). The increasing number of free agents also indicates that the culture is becoming more mainstream than years prior when SAGMY was open. As less established houses find their footing in San Francisco and traditional houses from earlier years move out of the area, the cultural meaning of house membership and belonging to the HBC is changing.

As the HBC has adapted, the demographics of the scene have become inclusive of all people willing to participate. These newcomers to the Bay Area HBC vary in socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic identities, and place of origin, social groups that would not have performed nor been part of a Ball in years prior. Jayden expressed excitement around seeing diverse people participating in a Ball in Oakland.

> To see other people of color, not just African-Americans participating in the Ballroom Scene was great to me since we live in such a melting pot of people in the Bay Area. To see them all coming out, the whites, the Asians and actually taking part and not just looking from a distance was great to me. (Jayden, House leader)

Events like the "Way Bay Ball" at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive reinforce this point, as this fieldnote describes:

> I see many people who look like they are Berkeley students, since many were wearing their Berkeley attire. There is a total of maybe about 150-200 people here. There are straight men and women, trans individuals, many gay men. There are people of all ages here. A few of the participants are creatively dressed with facial effects and costumes…. People who were just trying it out were allowed and welcomed to participate. I see like 20% white, 30% Black; 30%

> Hispanic; 20% Asian….I certainly think that the majority of community members appreciate the presence of having these at a venue like the museum and just being able to put it on. People did have to pay $13 which is a concern and barrier to being able to access the space but they do keep it all about community, sass, living your authentic self, and having fun.

While some members of the community belong to houses, many free agents just dance and perform recreationally. Jayden attributes the decline in house membership to the growing acceptance of sexual and gender minorities.

> As a community we are growing as far as acceptance in the world. A lot of youth…don't need [the HBC] in the same way… Their [biological] daddy's okay with them now so they don't need another daddy…they never quite experience the need of the extended family in the same way as in the past…in the past it was needed. (Jayden, House leader)

Nonetheless, our participants saw the HBC as an outlet for freedom in sexual and gender expression, which is not typically embraced in mainstream spaces. Jose discussed a sense of confidence in their ethnic, sexual, and gender identity that they found through Ballroom.

> Learning Vogue [has] opened my world, my expressivity, my sense of power – empowerment in my feminine body and affect…It helped me find and work out some of the biggest insecurities I had around gender. I am gender nonconforming. I have always failed at masculinity…Just seeing that there are so many categories that one can be and inhabit and win at a ball. And be celebrated, not just by winning but by being snapped up…is just like a whole new world. Just basically just the simple context of being of your, of your own gender performativity and being applauded. That's super empowering… I want the heart of fierceness to arise within us. I want the heart of the queer brown and black community, and its power and potential, to really pop off. (Jose, House member)

Jose reflects the belief that Ballroom remains a unique and safe space for sexual and gender minority youth to thrive.

Lastly, in this historical moment of progressive resistance, emerging Houses have established their collectivity as a vehicle for social justice. Embracing all who come from marginalized backgrounds, new houses are aiming to mirror their critical awareness of the world with their actions. Jonathan discusses using his house's art as a way to uplift their community and to remember where they come from.

> We're doing social justice for Black Lives Matter, social justice for the pipeline. We're doing activism for the Native Americans. We have a couple of indigenous people in our house and we're there for them.…We're across the board. Like dancing for the Mission [Women's] building and raising money for Dance Mission. It's a non-profit so we'll like work with kids and work with the community…We also want to get what we stand for as far as like, "Hey, shit's going down and I need everyone to be woke and aware of what's going down." (Jonathan, House leader)

The evolution of the Ballroom scene perhaps mirrors changing social and economic conditions. Despite sweeping economic changes in the Bay Area, community members remain resilient and have learned to respond in a collective way that allows them to survive in a space where they belong.

A Return to Family and Health Promotion

Leaders in the HBC see the changing scene as an opportunity to rebuild the community, and have continued to build on traditions of providing HIV-specific social support to their children. For example, Diana, a leader of an emerging house who is openly living with HIV, explains how she integrates HIV into her conversations with her kids.

> Something may come up for somebody. But it's usually, because I live with this disease every day, I'm usually the person that will be like "this or this" around it. Because I just saw my doctor and I'll come to [my kids] and say, "Hey, my doctor wants me to change my meds. What do you guys think about that? " And I'll tell them why, and how long I've been on a certain medication and I don't think I should change because I'm afraid of the side effects or whatever…If a person is curious and they want to know [their status], they are encouraged to go and get tested. And what I say to them is, my story always comes up. I've lived my life by not knowing. And now when I found out I had 66 T-cells. If you have a feeling like you need to get tested, I'll go with you. We'll go get you tested. I'll hold your hand. And you know whatever the outcome may be, you know you'll be alright cuz I'm alright. And if I can bounce back from 66 T cells all the way to being undetectable, to 800 and something T cells now, I know that you can come back and you'll be okay. (Diana, House leader)

Jonathan continues to feel nostalgic for SAGMY and notes the impact it had on the community and on him. He appreciated how the agency married Ballroom culture and health to more easily facilitate conversations around HIV prevention. Now an emerging leader, he feels a sense of duty to give back to his community in the form of bringing back the culture and health awareness.

> First, we started off with [my house father] and myself, we started doing Balls in like 2010. We always wanted to like bring back the Ballroom culture, because I grew up around the Ballroom culture or just going to a couple of Balls back in the day when I was 16…that was like the start of my journey. Being aware of HIV and what it means and how you can prevent it…So, we're trying to bring that back because its kind of died down so I felt like it was my duty as a dancer, as a Vogue instructor to bring back the Ballroom community. (Jonathan, House leader)

Jonathan has helped organize many of the Kiki events and mini-balls and has served as the emcees several times. In addition to being consistently vocal about his pride in social justice causes, he is affirming of

anyone who tries to walk in balls to show that these events are all about love. He recognizes how the overlapping timelines between SAGMY's closure and out-migration hurt the community's ability to thrive but remains dedicated to bringing back the HBC as he once knew it. HBC leaders want to be a part of the necessary coalition building process to continue to make Ballroom a relevant part of SGEM youth lives and health, particularly around HIV.

Discussion:

In this ethnographic examination of the impact of gentrification on the San Francisco Bay Area HBC, we found that participants are both struggling and finding creative means to preserve their community. HBC elders reminisced about the sense of family and community that SAGMY provided during their adolescence, including easily accessible HIV-related services. While gentrification may not have been the immediate reason for SAGMY's closure, its loss contributed to the fraying social fabric of the HBC. The inability of the agency to secure new space in the wake of the fire, along with the relocation of other CBOs and HBC members themselves from central to more distal locations has ruptured social relationships as well as the ability to access HIV-related services. As youth moved and CBOs closed or relocated, house participation ebbed and remaining houses experienced challenges in providing support around HIV prevention and care.

With the loss of SAGMY and safe space, the HBC now recruits members by offering classes in rented dance studios. Recipients of this new landscape

spoke of how Ballroom gives them freedom in gender and sexual expression not obtainable anywhere else. Although some participants may be privileged by virtue of their educational attainment and economic status, they still feel empowered by the sense of queer liberation that Ballroom provides. Like the participants who grew up with SAGMY, these newcomers to Ballroom cherish the ability to express oneself, be affirmed, and be surrounded by community. However, vogue classes cost money and take place in an urban area catering to middle to upper class residents. HBC leaders continue the tradition of providing HIV-related support to their children, however they remain concerned about continuing to reach low income SGEM youth who would most benefit from the safety and support that the HBC provides.

There is a public health need to provide safe community spaces that are accessible to SGEM in urban centres (Garcia et al. 2015). Cities provide opportunities for members of subcultures, especially sexual and gender minorities, to interact and feel supported by their community, developing social capital that has been shown to have positive effects on an individual's well-being and health (Kawachi and Berkman 2014). When people are pushed out of safe spaces and familiar neighborhoods, they may lose the social ties that can create social and economic opportunities, as well as the health services and HIV-related support that are vital to their health and well-being (Kawachi and Berkman 2014). Safe spaces have been shown to reduce vulnerability to HIV among gay youth (Garcia et al. 2015) and transgender women of color (Graham 2014). When these spaces are lost

through gentrification, community members experience fear and mistrust of public institutions, leading to challenges with engaging services (Sampson 2017). Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that public health professionals must advocate vociferously for preserving community space as a way to address health disparities among those who are socially marginalized (Geronimus et al. 2016).

While urban renewal has historically displaced and socially segregated vulnerable populations, it can also catalyze community building among those who remain. We saw this in the offering of private vogue dance classes and informal HBC events as the community adapted to the changing landscape. Mixed experiences of gentrification are also seen in the literature, with one study reporting that gentrification was positively correlated with collective efficacy, a form of social capital that allows community members to better coordinate to achieve collective goals (Steinmetz-Wood et al. 2017). In our study, we noted that local HBC members were more connected to broad social justice causes and empowered to advocate for their collective rights. Previously, the HBC focused on achieving underground fame within a marginalized population. The recent mainstream emergence of the HBC may provide opportunities to strengthen the social networks of community members, which may lead to more social and economic opportunities and perhaps improved health outcomes.

While dance classes may challenge the ability of low-income people to access the HBC, it may be the most realistic way for the community to

maintain safe space for SEGM youth and resist gentrification through creative means. Emerging houses are also using their art to give back to the community by donating ball proceeds to LBGT youth organizations so that they may continue to keep their doors open and provide services. The HBC is a constantly evolving culture that can flourish within its particular urban region. We see this reflected in the nimbleness of Kiki houses as younger members develop new traditions with changing times (Rowan, Long & Johnson, 2013). Despite the closure of publicly-funded agencies such as SAGMY, the HBC remains resilient as community members adapt and create new forms of family and performance. The more casual, inclusive Kiki events bridge between poor and middle-class members and overall, may strengthen the community membership and resources.

Significant research has explored the development and testing of HIV prevention interventions to facilitate behaviour change amongst people impacted by and living with HIV (Fish et al. 2016). However, our study points to the importance of preserving safe space and communities in order to effectively implement interventions. HIV prevention efforts must consider supporting the HBC itself, given its ability to build resilience among those whose lives are marked by racist and queerphobic forms of exclusion and displacement (van Doorn 2013). Recognizing the structural factors that underpin and drive inequity in health, the preservation of space as a means of disease prevention cannot be overlooked. As more urban spaces experience gentrification, public health professionals may struggle to find

community spaces to actually deliver interventions and connect individuals to resources (Danley and Weaver, 2018). Publicly funded spaces like SAGMY foster community-led efforts around HIV prevention through strong social networks, culturally and linguistically competent services, and fun community-level events. Local CBOs facilitate the gathering of community members that are so crucial to delivering effective interventions, and remain a key piece of the prevention landscape as HBC elders continue to provide HIV-related support to help individuals connect to care and services.

Limitations:

This was a purposive sample, we deliberately recruited both house parents (mothers and fathers) as well as house children to elucidate the dynamics of house relationships and HIV-related social support; it was not a probability sample. While gentrification may be occurring in other urban areas, we do not know if other HBC members have reacted similarly to those in the San Francisco Bay Area. Similarly, while we documented concerns that SEGM youth may experience isolation without connections to houses or local CBOs, we were not able to directly document this phenomenon as our participants were HBC-involved. Gentrification itself is not unique to the San Francisco Bay Area, and we believe that some of the patterns we document are common to other places experiencing similar economic and social changes.

Conclusion:

If we aim to end the HIV epidemic, the impact of structural factors such as gentrification must be considered. Without advocating for safe space and affordable housing, only the wealthy will be able to afford to live in urban cities with close proximity to health services. The most vulnerable members of urban communities, such as SGEM youth who participate in the HBC, will continue to relocate or even lose housing, as will the agencies tailored to serve them. These changes may in fact exacerbate the HIV epidemic as people lose their support networks and proximity to health promotion programming and services, a sobering reality check despite calls to “End the Epidemic.”

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