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Philadelphia a city of extremes: High incomes, high poverty, report shows

by [Alfred Lubrano](#), Updated: December 19, 2019- 12:01 AM



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Philadelphia is becoming more and more a city of extremes, with prosperity growing in some neighborhoods and poverty deepening in many others.

That's the takeaway from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) [Five-Year Estimate](#) for 2014 through 2018, released on Thursday morning.

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The survey looks at poverty and median household income by neighborhood over five-year periods, and is considered to be the most granular and thorough federal report of socio-economic factors within communities.

Compared to the first Five-Year ACS, which covered 2005 through 2009 (including the recession years), the new report shows that incomes rose in 15 Philadelphia neighborhoods and fell in 39, including every section of the Northeast except Bridesburg.

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At the same time, poverty decreased in 17 neighborhoods and jumped in 38 others.

More Neighborhoods Going Down Than Up

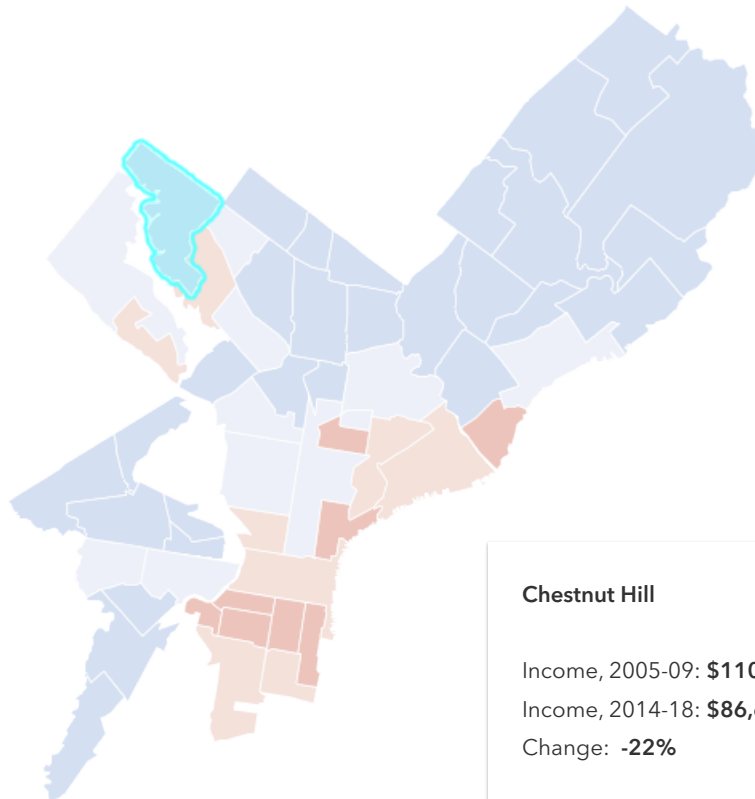
More than half of Philadelphia's neighborhoods have had declines in median household income of at least 10% over the last nine years, including every neighborhood in Northeast Philadelphia except for Bridesburg (an increase of 19%) and Tacony/Wissinoming (a decrease of 6%).

Roll over the map for more information.

Change in median household income

From 2005-09 to 2014-18, adjusted to 2018 dollars.

■ -29% to -10%
 ■ -9% to 0%
 ■ +1% to +9%
 ■ +10% to +58%



Chestnut Hill

Income, 2005-09: **\$110,439**

Income, 2014-18: **\$86,662**

Change: **-22%**

**All figures are adjusted for inflation*

SOURCE: Inquirer analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data

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While improvements brighten Philadelphia every day, with new houses going up around Temple University, Point Breeze, and in Kensington, there remains a [dense mass of poverty](#) that seems to exert a gravitational pull on a city otherwise poised to soar.

“Philadelphia embodies the problem of the gap between the haves and have-nots,” said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody’s Analytics. “If you took a snapshot right now, it feels like trends are moving in the right direction, with places in the city coming alive with development.”

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“But broadly speaking, the city is struggling with poverty, and it’s not gotten better in the last decade.”

‘Terrible news’

To be sure, there are incremental advancements to note with some optimism: The city’s poverty rate decreased from 25.7% in 2016 to 24.5% in 2018, federal figures show. And overall median household income (adjusted for inflation) increased from \$43,372 to \$46,116.

But the Five-Year ACS is “a terrible bit of news,” said sociologist Maria Kefalas, a poverty expert at St. Joseph University. “We can have a lovely lunch in a nice neighborhood like the Graduate Hospital area while the rest of the city goes into catastrophic free fall.”

As neighborhoods such as Point Breeze gentrify, disenfranchised residents who can no longer afford the area are forced to relocate. Experts say it’s possible that gentrification accounts for 5,326 people in poverty moved into Lawncrest since the first survey — the largest single increase of low-income people in the city.

Gentrification piles “even more people in poverty into a handful of areas already weakened and under pressure,” Kefalas said. “You then have concentrated, concentrated poverty.”

Illustrative of the city at its apex, the [Graduate Hospital area](#) (also called Schuylkill/Southwest Center City) registered a 58% increase in income between the first Five-Year ACS and the new report: from \$64,565 to \$101,834, the highest median household income in the city.



MONICA HERNDON / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mary Addison stands on Pine Street in Graduate Hospital. A U.S. Census Bureau survey says the neighborhood has the highest median household income in the city.

“This is a sophisticated place, with more established people,” said resident Mary Addison, 26, a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania who enjoys the neighborhood of in-vogue shops and sumptuous homes. “Most people are a little older and dress well. The cars are nice, also.”

On the other end of the scale, the largest income decreases occurred in Hunting Park (down 29% to \$23,800), Tioga/Nicetown (down 28% to \$21,269), and Southwest Philadelphia (down 27% to \$27,433).

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The lowest median household income in the city, \$18,722, was recorded in [Fairhill](#), which also has the highest poverty rate at 55%.

That's down from 63% in the 2005-09 Five-Year ACA, but it's "hardly a victory" to say that 45% of a neighborhood *isn't* poor, said Emily Dowdall, policy director of the Reinvestment Fund in Philadelphia, a financial institution that helps low-income residents.

"How do people ignore how bad this place is?" asked Siria Rivera, 34, the newly installed executive director of Fairhill's Providence Center, which offers education programs for children and adults in the ravaged neighborhood of meager chances. Rivera was born in Fairhill, but grew up in Camden and Pennsauken. "We are servicing families with PTSD just from living in a community like this — no space, no heat, no food, no quiet time."

"How isn't this a focal point in political campaigns? How could it not be more in the news? We have resources to help people, but without cars or bus passes, how do they get to us? I see signs of distress in children here who don't even have funding to address."

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Enormous inequality exists between places such as Graduate Hospital and Fairhill, said Judith Levine, director of the public policy lab at Temple. "Fairhill's poverty is astronomical and is a real crisis," she said. Levine said a child's life chances depend on where he or she grows up. What chances, Levine asked, does a Fairhill child have?

Income Levels for Philadelphia Neighborhoods		
Estimates of median household income for the 2014-18 five-year period.		
Schuylkill/SW Center City	\$101,834	
Northern Liberties/Fishtown	\$89,593	
Chestnut Hill	\$86,662	
Fairmount/Spring Garden	\$85,683	
Center City	\$82,104	
West Mount Airy	\$75,749	
Roxborough	\$73,497	
Manayunk	\$72,274	
Bella Vista/Southwark	\$67,351	
East Falls	\$65,312	
Queen Village/Pennsport	\$64,982	
Somerton	\$63,718	
Northeast Philadelphia	\$62,281	
Bridesburg	\$61,492	
Fox Chase/Burlholme	\$58,217	
East Mount Airy	\$56,806	
Torresdale	\$56,668	
Mayfair	\$50,152	
Bustleton	\$48,679	
Rhawnhurst	\$47,728	
Oak Lane/East Oak Lane	\$47,078	
Overbrook	\$46,894	
South Philadelphia/East	\$46,566	
South Philadelphia/West	\$45,714	
Cedarbrook/Stenton	\$45,453	
Holmesburg	\$45,232	
Tacony/Wissinoming	\$44,907	
Port Richmond	\$43,086	
Eastwick	\$42,960	
Point Breeze	\$41,923	
Lawncrest	\$41,522	
Oxford Circle/Castor	\$41,477	
University City	\$41,425	
West Oak Lane	\$39,728	
Germantown	\$39,421	
Olney	\$37,706	
Kensington	\$37,552	
Wynnefield	\$37,033	
Juniata Park/Feltonville	\$34,224	
Grays Ferry	\$33,627	
West Philadelphia/Cobb Creek	\$33,275	
Frankford	\$31,740	
Logan/Queen/Far Rock	\$30,599	

Kingsessing	\$29,656
West Philadelphia/Parkside	\$27,703
East Germantown	\$27,690
Southwest Philadelphia	\$27,433
Allegheny West	\$27,000
Hunting Park	\$23,842

Armada of lifeboats

Low-income gentrification refugees are flocking to still-affordable neighborhoods such as West Oak Lane driving poverty levels there up from 13% during the first Five-Year ACS to 23% during the current one, experts say.

Like fearful passengers vying for space on a shrinking armada of lifeboats, a diaspora of formerly housed residents are washing up in other neighborhoods, doubling with friends and family, Dowdall said.

“It can put so much pressure on a place like West Oak Lane,” she added.

Tour the city by bicycle to get a better understanding of how much communities change within short distances, said Glenn Bergman, executive director of Philabundance, the region’s leading hunger-relief agency. You come away with a big question: “How can there be so much poverty so close to such development?”

The Five-Year survey lays bare that paradox.

“One neighborhood and another can be like two different countries,” said economist Neeta Fogg, research professor at the Center for Labor Markets and Policy at Drexel University.

“We see the city improving, but it’s sad that no matter how well the economy is doing, there is a segment of the population that is not being helped — the persistent poor mired in a stubborn poverty that always seems to make up about one-quarter of the population.”

Even though, as Dowdall points out, the number of Philadelphians in the labor force is up 10% since 2009, there is a persistently disconnected group that is not working and may never find a job.

“It’s a problem often among young people here,” Fogg said. “Many dropped out of high school and never got work. If you start off detached from the labor market, you will never get in it.”

“They say a rising tide lifts all boats. But if you’re not even in the water, your boat does not rise.”

Mostly low wages

It should be pointed out that even though more people are working, they are laboring for small salaries in service jobs that offer little future, said Kathy Fisher, policy director at the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger.

“Much of the job growth in Philadelphia is concentrated in low-wage positions, and many seniors are living on a fixed income,” she said. “People need help just to afford the basics.”

City officials say they understand the problems.

“We celebrate this period of growth in Philadelphia,” said Maari Porter, deputy chief of staff policy and strategic initiatives in the mayor’s office. “But we need to move faster to get people out of poverty.”

Porter said that initiatives such as [free pre-K classes](#), down payment assistance for first-time home buyers, more affordable housing options for people who are homeless, increased funding for the eviction-prevention program, and greater investments in schools are making a difference. The city also works hard to make sure people sign up for government-aid programs for which they qualify, Porter said.

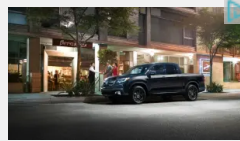
“We are focused on economic growth in the neighborhoods without displacement,” she added.

An important goal, said Ashley Putnam, director of the economic growth and mobility project of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, “is to increase income and access to the jobs that provide economic security.”

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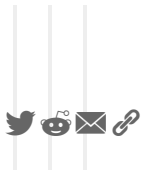
How to get there is hard to say.

“People face so many barriers,” Fogg said. “How to get them working and moving forward, well, that is a Prize-winning question.”

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