

INTRODUCTION

IN SPRING 2002, the cover of *Time* magazine featured a controversial new book that claimed to “tell the truth” to ambitious young women hoping to have children. The book, *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*, was written by economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett to “break the silence” about age-related infertility. Most professional women believe that female fertility doesn’t begin to decline until after age forty, but Hewlett claims they are tragically wrong. Shockingly, she reports, the actual age is twenty-seven, and because of their misperception, large numbers of high-achieving women are left involuntarily childless. Having a baby “was supposed to be the easy part, right?” quips the *Time* cover story. “Not like getting into Harvard. Not like making partner. The baby was to be Mother Nature’s gift. Anyone can do it; high school dropouts stroll through the mall with their babies in a Snuggly. What can be so hard . . . ?”¹

Hewlett’s *Creating a Life* portrays involuntary childlessness as a tragedy for successful women who have played by the rules for the way a professional woman’s life should unfold: get a college diploma, get even more education, get established in a career, get married, get more solidly established in that career, and then have a baby. But achieving these goals takes time—apparently more time for some than the biological clock allows.

Creating a Life didn't just make the cover of *Time*; it received extensive coverage in most major newspapers, including a three-part series in the London *Times*, and was named one of the ten best books of the year by *Business Week*. Hewlett appeared on *60 Minutes*, *The Today Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *Oprah*. All this attention implies a great deal of public sympathy for the affluent highflier who inadvertently misses her chance to become a mother.

Our book also describes a crisis of fertility—one that occurs among a different population for very different reasons, and that draws a very different reaction from the general public. For those middle-class women Hewlett spoke to, the tragedy was unintended childlessness following educational and professional success. For the low-income women we spoke to, the tragedy is unintended pregnancy and childbirth before a basic education has been completed, while they are still poor and unmarried. How ironic that so many “Mistresses of the Universe” (as *Time* calls them) make all the right moves yet find they cannot have children, while those at the bottom of the American class ladder seem to have more children than they know what to do with.² And the plight of these poor women tends to generate not pity but outrage.

In 1950 only one in twenty children was born to an unmarried mother. Now the rate is more than one in three.³ Having a child while single is three times as common for the poor as for the affluent.⁴ Half of poor women who give birth while unmarried have no high school diploma at the time, and nearly a third have not worked at all in the last year.⁵ First-time unwed mothers are also quite young—twenty-one on average.⁶ And the situations of the men that father their children are not much better. More than four in ten poor men who have a child outside of marriage have already been to prison or jail by the time the baby is born; nearly half lack a high school diploma, and a quarter have no job. Thus it is not surprising that almost half of them earned less than \$10,000 in the year before the birth.⁷

But there is another, even more pressing, reason to worry about the growing number of single mothers. Just when new legal and social free-

doms, technological advances, and economic opportunities have given American women immense control over when (and if) they marry and when (and if) they choose to bear a child, social scientists have come to a troubling conclusion: children seem to benefit when parents get married and stay that way. Though many single mothers are admirable parents, it remains true that, on average, children raised outside of marriage typically learn less in school, are more likely to have children while they are teens, are less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college, and have more trouble finding jobs as adults.⁸ About half of the disadvantage occurs simply because their families have less money. Part of it arises because those who become single parents are more likely to be disadvantaged in other ways. But even when these factors are taken into account, children of single parents are still at greater risk.⁹

It is no surprise, therefore, that many Americans believe a whole host of social ills can be traced to the lapse in judgment that a poor, unmarried woman shows when she bears a child she can't afford. The solution to these problems seems obvious to most Americans: these young women should wait to have children until they are older and more economically stable, and they should get married first. Policymakers have been campaigning against teen childbearing for decades, and the downturn has been profound.¹⁰ But because marriage rates for those in the prime family-building years have declined even more rapidly, nonmarital childbearing has continued to increase. Public concern over the rise in nonmarital childbearing cannot be dismissed as mere moralistic finger-pointing, since it is indeed true that if more of these mothers married their children's fathers, fewer would be poor.

In response, the Bush Administration resolved to restore marriage among the poor. Ironically, this controversial new domestic policy initiative has found encouragement in the work of liberal social scientists. A new landmark study of unwed couples, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study,¹¹ surveyed unmarried parents shortly after their child's birth. The results show that, contrary to popular perception, poor

women who have children while unmarried are usually romantically involved with the baby's father when the child is born, and four in ten even live with him. More surprising still, given the stereotypes most Americans hold about poor single mothers, the vast majority of poor, unmarried new parents say they plan to marry each other.¹² But the survey also shows that their chances for marriage or for staying together over the long term are slim. It seems that the child's birth is a "magic moment" in the lives of these parents. And it is at this magic moment that Bush's marriage initiatives aim to intervene.

The "marriage cure" for poverty that the Bush Administration launched has infuriated many on the political left. The *Village Voice* exclaims, "It's as if Washington had, out of nowhere, turned into a giant wedding chapel with Bush performing the nuptials." A left-leaning columnist for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* insists, "Many of us don't believe that the traditional family is the only way to raise a healthy child. . . . A growing number of us will 'just say no.' And no amount of law is going to change that." The *San Jose Mercury News* editorializes, "It's impossible to justify spending \$1.5 billion on unproven marriage programs when there's not enough to pay for back-to-work *basics* like child care." And on the web, a *Women's eNews* headline reads, "Bush Marriage Initiative Robs Billions from the Needy." Yet, a *Washington Post* editorial recently chided liberals for their "reflexive hostility" to the "not-so-shocking idea that for poor mothers, getting married might in some cases do more good than harm." "Why not find out," they ask, "whether helping mothers—and fathers—tackle the challenging task of getting and staying married could help families find their way out of poverty?"¹³

Even those who support the political agenda with regard to marriage acknowledge that if it is to succeed, we need to know why childbearing and marriage have become so radically decoupled among the poor. All policy should be based on a sound understanding of the realities it seeks to address. Since these trends first became apparent, some of the best scholars in America have sought answers, using the best survey data social science has at its disposal. They suggest several intuitively appealing

answers—the extraordinary rise in women’s employment that presumably allows them to more easily live apart from men, the decline of marriageable men in disadvantaged groups, or the expansion of the welfare state. Even taken together, however, these explanations can account for only a small portion of the dramatic break between marriage and child-rearing that has occurred (see our conclusion). So the reasons remain largely a mystery—perhaps the biggest demographic mystery of the last half of the twentieth century.

What is striking about the body of social science evidence is how little of it is based on the perspectives and life experiences of the women who are its subjects. Survey data can, of course, teach us a great deal, but surveys, though they have meticulously tabulated the trend, have led us to a dead end when it comes to fully understanding the forces behind it. Social science currently tells us much more about what *doesn’t* explain the trend than what *does*, and it tells us next to nothing about what will make marriage more likely among single mothers.¹⁴

We provide new ideas about the forces that may be driving the trend by looking at the problems of family formation through the eyes of 162 low-income single mothers living in eight economically marginal neighborhoods across Philadelphia and its poorest industrial suburb, Camden, New Jersey. Their stories offer a unique point of view on the troubling questions of why low-income, poorly educated young women have children they can’t afford and why they don’t marry. *Promises I Can Keep* follows the course of couple relationships from the earliest days of courtship through the tumultuous months of pregnancy and into the magic moment of birth and beyond. It shows us what poor mothers think marriage and motherhood mean, and tells us why they nearly always put motherhood first.

These stories suggest that solving the mystery will demand a thorough reevaluation of the social forces at work behind the retreat from marriage, a trend affecting the culture as a whole, though its effects look somewhat different for the middle class than for the poor. But while members of the middle class delay marriage, they delay childbearing

even more.¹⁵ The poor also delay marriage—or avoid it altogether—but they have not delayed having children.¹⁶

The growing rarity of marriage among the poor, particularly prior to childbirth, has led some observers to claim that marriage has lost its meaning in low-income communities. We spent five years talking in depth with women who populate some of America's poorest inner-city neighborhoods and, to our surprise, found astonishingly little evidence of the much-touted rejection of the institution of marriage among the poor. In fact, these mothers told us repeatedly that they revered marriage and hoped to be married themselves one day. Marriage was a dream that most still longed for, a luxury they hoped to indulge in someday when the time was right, but generally not something they saw happening in the near, or even the foreseeable, future. Most middle-class women in their early to mid-twenties, the average age of the mothers we spoke to, would no doubt say the same, but their attitudes about childbearing would contrast sharply with those of our respondents. While the poor women we interviewed saw marriage as a luxury, something they aspired to but feared they might never achieve, they judged children to be a necessity, an absolutely essential part of a young woman's life, the chief source of identity and meaning.

To most middle-class observers, depending on their philosophical take on things, a poor woman with children but no husband, diploma, or job is either a victim of her circumstances or undeniable proof that American society is coming apart at the seams. But in the social world inhabited by poor women, a baby born into such conditions represents an opportunity to prove one's worth. The real tragedy, these women insist, is a woman who's missed her chance to have children.

THE STORIES THE MOTHERS TELL

Young women like Antonia Rodriguez, who grow up in the slums of Philadelphia's inner core, first meet the men destined to become the fathers of their children in all the usual places: on the front stoop, in the

high school hallway, in the homes of relatives and friends. Romance brings poor youth together as it does their middle-class peers. But rather than “hooking up,” carefully avoiding conception, or ending an unwanted pregnancy, inner-city girls often become mothers before they leave their teens. Chapter 1 tells of romantic relationships that proceed at lightning speed—where a man woos a woman with the line “I want to have a baby by you,” and she views it as high praise; where birth control is quickly abandoned, if practiced at all; and where conception often occurs after less than a year together. Stories like Antonia’s reveal why children are so seldom conceived by explicit design, yet are rarely pure accident either.

Mahkiya Washington, whom we introduce in chapter 2, illustrates how the news of a pregnancy can quickly put a fledgling romantic relationship into overdrive. How does the man who can do no wrong become the deadbeat who can do nothing right, even though his behavior may not change much at all? And how does he feel when his admiring girlfriend is transformed into the demanding woman who is about to become his baby’s mother? The experiences of women like Mahkiya illustrate how an expectant mother uses pregnancy to test the strength of her bond with her man and take a measure of his moral worth. Can he “get himself together”—find a job, settle down, and become a family man—in time? What explosive confrontations result when he doesn’t? Why do some men who once prodded their girlfriends toward pregnancy end up greeting the news with threats, denials, abandonment, and sometimes physical violence?

Yet the most remarkable part of the stories many mothers tell is of relational transformation at the “magic moment” of birth. Few couples escape some form of relational trauma during pregnancy, and for some the distress becomes extreme. So how does it happen that by the time the baby is ready to leave the hospital, most couples have reunited and committed themselves to staying together? The euphoria of the birth may suddenly resolve the tumultuousness of the previous nine months; even a father who has tried desperately to avoid impending fatherhood—by

demanding that his girlfriend abort the baby or by claiming the child is not his, thus branding her as a “cheater” or “whore”—may feel a powerful bond with his newborn, so much so that he may vow to mend his ways. The mothers are all too eager to believe these promises.

Still, despite these young couples’ new resolve to stay together, most relationships end long before the child enters preschool. In chapter 3, when we first meet Jen Burke, Rick, the father of her two-year-old son, has just proposed to her. Now, with a second baby on the way, he says he is ready for marriage. Surprisingly, when we run into Jen a couple of months later, Rick is no longer in the picture at all. What accounts for the high rate of relationship failure among couples like Jen and Rick? The lack of a job can cause strain, but it’s seldom the relationship breaker. Sometimes, it’s the man’s unwillingness to “stay working” even when he can find a job—that was one of Jen’s problems with Rick. Or he may blow his earnings on partying or stereo equipment. But most women point to larger problems than a lack of money, such as Rick’s chronic womanizing. The stories these women tell uncover the real sources of relational ruin.

But what about the couples that stay together—why don’t they marry? In chapter 4 we tell the story of Deena Vallas, who has had one nonmarital birth and is about to have another. She’s in a stable relationship with the unborn child’s father, a steady worker in a legitimate job who’s off drugs, doesn’t beat her or cheat on her, and eagerly plays daddy to her son, a child from a prior relationship. Yet there’s no marriage. Is that a sign that marriage has no meaning in poor neighborhoods like hers? No. Her story doesn’t indicate a disinterest in marriage; to the contrary, she believes her reluctance shows her deep reverence for marriage. So why does she feel she must avoid marriage for now?

Stories like Deena’s show that the retreat from marriage among the poor flows out of a radical redefinition of what marriage means. In the 1950s childrearing was the primary function of marriage, but, as we show, these days the poor see its function very differently. A steady job

and the ability to pay the rent on an apartment no longer automatically render a man marriageable. We investigate exactly what does.

Poor women often say they don't want to marry until they are "set" economically and established in a career. A young mother often fears marriage will mean a loss of control—she believes that saying "I do" will suddenly transform her man into an authoritarian head of the house who insists on making all the decisions, who thinks that he "owns" her. Having her own earnings and assets buys her some "say-so" power and some freedom from a man's attempts to control her behavior. After all, she insists, a woman with money of her own can credibly threaten to leave and take the children with her if he gets too far out of line. But this insistence on economic independence also reflects a much deeper fear: no matter how strong the relationship, somehow the marriage will go bad. Women who rely on a man's earnings, these mothers warn, are setting themselves up to be left with nothing if the relationship ends.

So does marriage merely represent a list of financial achievements? Not at all. The poor women we talked to insist it means lifelong commitment. In a surprising reversal of the middle-class norm, they believe it is better to have children outside of marriage than to marry unwisely only to get divorced later. One might dismiss these poor mothers' marriage aspirations as deep cynicism, candy-coated for social science researchers, yet demographers project that more than seven in ten will marry someone eventually (see chapter 4). What moral code underlies the statement of one mother who said, "I don't believe in divorce—that's why none of the women in my family are married"? And what does it take to convince a young mother that her relationship is safe enough from the threat of divorce to risk marriage?

Dominique Watkins's story illustrates why poor young mothers seldom view an out-of-wedlock birth as a mark of personal failure, but instead see it as an act of valor. Chapter 5 reveals our mothers' remarkable confidence in their ability to parent their children well and describes the standards they hold themselves to. As we explain, it is possible for a poor

woman to judge her mothering a success even when her child fails in school, gets pregnant as a teen, becomes addicted to drugs, or ends up in juvenile detention. The women whose stories we share believe the central tenet of good mothering can be summed up in two words—being there. This unique definition of good parenting allows mothers to take great pride in having enough Pampers to diaper an infant, in potty training a two-year-old and teaching her to eat with a spoon, in getting a grade-schooler to and from school safely, in satisfying the ravenous appetite of a growing teenager, and in keeping the light on to welcome a prodigal adolescent back home.

Chapter 6 opens with the story of Millie Acevedo, who, like many of her friends and neighbors, believes that having children young is a normal part of life, though she admits she and Carlos got started a year or two earlier than they should have. Millie's story helps to resolve a troubling contradiction raised in our earlier account: If the poor hold marriage to such a high standard, why don't they do the same for childbearing? Shouldn't they audition their male partners even more carefully for the father role than they do for the husband role? Millie's experiences show why the standards for prospective fathers appear to be so low. The answer is tangled up in these young women's initial high hopes regarding the men in their lives, and the supreme confidence they have in their ability to rise to the challenge of motherhood. The key to the mystery lies not only in what mothers believe they can do for their children, but in what they hope their children will do for them.

Through the tales of mothers like Millie we paint a portrait of the lives of these young women before pregnancy, a portrait that details the extreme loneliness, the struggles with parents and peers, the wild behavior, the depression and despair, the school failure, the drugs, and the general sense that life has spun completely out of control. Into this void comes a pregnancy and then a baby, bringing the purpose, the validation, the companionship, and the order that young women feel have been so sorely lacking. In some profound sense, these young women believe, a baby has the power to solve everything.

The redemptive stories our mothers tell speak to the primacy of the mothering role, how it can become virtually the only source of identity and meaning in a young woman's life. There is an odd logic to the statements mothers made when we asked them to imagine life without children: "I'd be dead or in jail," "I'd still be out partying," "I'd be messed up on drugs," or "I'd be nowhere at all." These mothers, we discovered, almost never see children as bringing them hardship; instead, they manage to credit virtually every bit of good in their lives to the fact they have children—they believe motherhood has "saved" them.

EIGHT PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOODS

As is the case for all Americans—regardless of their circumstances—people's beliefs about the meaning of marriage and children draw first from the family of origin. As children move into adolescence and adulthood, the hundreds of daily interactions they have both within and outside the family—with kin, neighbors, teachers, and peers—further shape their view of what "family" means. America's poor live in a wide array of communities, but since the 1970s, they have increasingly come to live in urban neighborhoods with people who are as disadvantaged as they are. It is these poor urban neighborhoods that have seen the most dramatic increases in single motherhood.¹⁷

The Philadelphia area, the setting for our story, has more than its fair share of such neighborhoods, and a brief glimpse into the colorful economic history of the region will show why. Early in its history, enterprising Philadelphians set out to make the growing metropolis into the leading industrial city in America and one of the most important manufacturing centers in the world. By the mid-1800s they had succeeded. Philadelphia's hallmark was the astounding diversity of its products. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the city that boosters had dubbed "The Workshop of the World" was the largest producer of textiles on the globe. It was also a leading producer of machine tools and hardware, shoes and boots, paper and printed materials, iron and steel, lumber and

wood chemicals, glass, furniture, and ships, as well as a host of other products.¹⁸

Many neighborhoods produced a particular type of product, so that the city contained a number of areas that felt like specialized, industrial villages. One observer described Kensington, the city's leading industrial village, as "a city within a city, filled to the brim with enterprise, dotted with factories so numerous that the rising smoke obscures the sky. [The residents are] a happy and contented people, enjoying a land of plenty."¹⁹

To get a flavor of Philadelphia's rich industrial past, imagine the city at the dawn of the twentieth century. In the Spring Garden neighborhood, the fourteen-block-long Baldwin Locomotive Works, currently the city's largest employer, is turning out three times as many locomotives as any other firm in the world. In Brewerytown, Christian Schmidt is among the more than one hundred German entrepreneurs beginning to try his hand at brewing beer. In Kensington, an astonishing array of products, including the famous Stetson hat, flow from the textile mills. Just north of downtown along the Delaware River, the Cramps Shipyard makes its mark in the manufacture of both merchant and military vessels. The Southwark neighborhood, also on the banks of the Delaware but to the south, is home to the mammoth U.S. Naval Shipyard. In Center City, the Curtiss Publishing Company proudly publishes the *Ladies Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Across the Schuylkill River in West Philadelphia, the Breyers Ice Cream plant churns out delicious summertime treats. In Nicetown, the Midvale Steel Corporation refines steel. In the neighboring area called Tioga, the Budd Corporation manufactures transportation equipment. And across the river from Center City, in the humming industrial suburb of Camden, the Victor Talking Record Company makes records, while the Campbell's Soup Company is about to begin manufacturing a revolutionary new product, condensed soup.

Philadelphia is often known as a "city of firsts." But beyond its proud list of accomplishments (the nation's first capital, first bank, first hospital, first free library, and the first to provide all of its citizens with a pub-

lic education) is a lesser known, less distinguished set of “firsts” that began to plague the city at the start of the twentieth century. Philadelphia was the first major American city to see the effects of job loss to the suburbs when Baldwin Locomotive Works made the decision, in 1918, to relocate twelve miles south of the city. It was also the first major city to suffer from competition with the nonunionized Sunbelt states and overseas trade as the 1920s saw the fortunes of the textile industry begin to fade.²⁰

The city reached its zenith in the 1940s, when the grandparents of many of the mothers we spoke with were just about to come of age. And despite the losses of previous decades, half of its laborers still had industrial jobs.²¹ But in the 1950s alone, the city lost one hundred thousand manufacturing jobs.²² For much of the five decades since, Philadelphia and its inner industrial suburbs have been in an economic free fall. In these years, hundreds of other textile factories, breweries, and other specialized craft production shops shut down or moved elsewhere, and once-proud working-class neighborhoods lost thousands of residents, leaving behind those who were too poor to escape.²³

As these neighborhoods hit the skids, most whites who could afford to fled to the suburbs, and the city’s rate of nonmarital childbearing skyrocketed. The proportion of nonmarital births in Philadelphia increased from 20 percent in 1950 to 30 percent a decade later, to 45 percent in 1980, and to 60 percent by 1990. In 2000, this figure stood at 62 percent—twice the national rate (see figure 1).²⁴ Increases in some of Philadelphia’s industrial inner suburbs, such as Camden, were equally dramatic. By 2000, in two-thirds of the census tracts that comprise the cities of Philadelphia and its poorest inner suburb, Camden, single-parent households were the rule rather than the exception.²⁵

America’s fifth-largest city entered the twenty-first century with almost a quarter of its citizens, and nearly a third of its children, living in poverty.²⁶ This is precisely why it was a perfect site for our research. Because of the high rates of poverty there, we found poor whites, blacks, and Latinos living in roughly similar circumstances. Though racial minorities often live in high-poverty neighborhoods, cities where whites

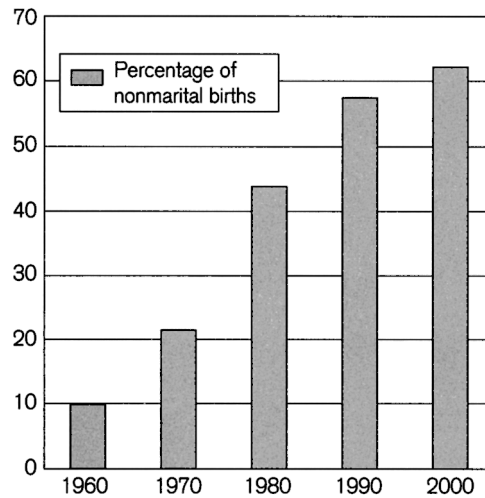


Figure 1. Nonmarital Childbearing Rates in Philadelphia, 1960–2000. (Source: Webb 2000)

live in the same circumstances are rare. The white urban poor usually live in mixed-income neighborhoods, and thus have considerable advantages over the minority poor—better schools, better parks and recreational facilities, better jobs, safer streets, and so on. But in Philadelphia, the high poverty rates in several former white ethnic strongholds—those once-proud industrial villages—create a rare opportunity for students of race and inequality to study whites, Latinos, and African Americans whose social contexts are quite similar. This unique feature of our study may explain why we found the experiences and worldviews of these groups to be so similar, and why class, not race, is what drives much of our account.

We share the stories of the residents of eight hardscrabble neighborhoods across Philadelphia and its inner industrial suburbs: East Camden, Kensington, North Camden, North Central, PennsPort, South Camden, Strawberry Mansion, and West Kensington. The white neighborhoods of Kensington and PennsPort (see figure 2) are located along the Delaware River separating Philadelphia from Camden. Kensington was a flourishing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manufacturing village,

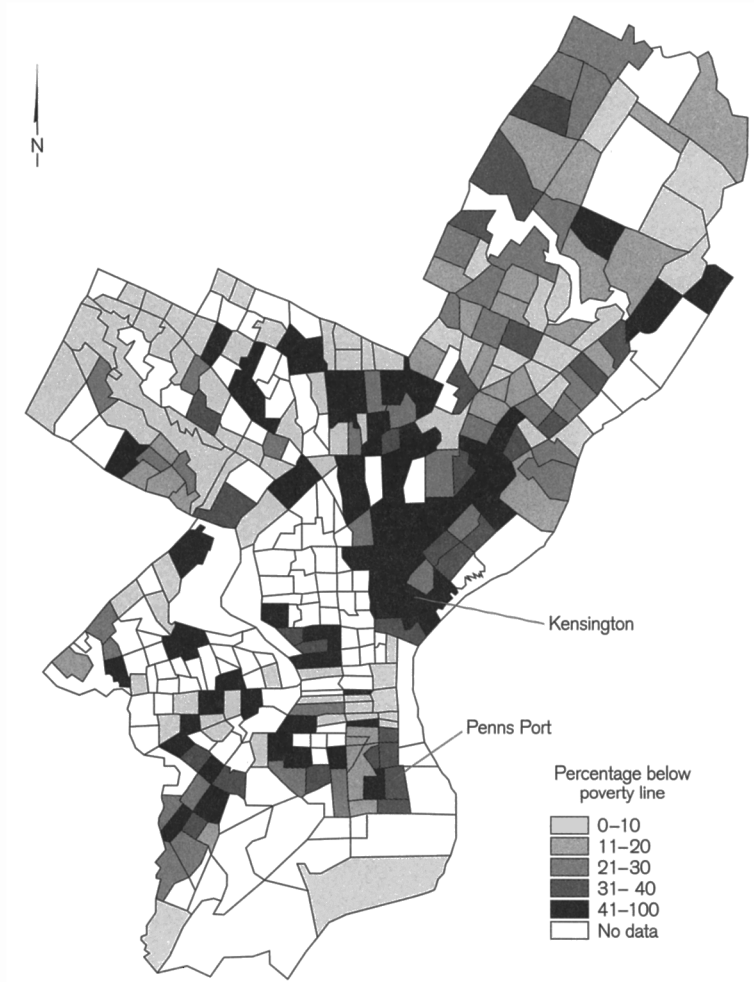


Figure 2. White Female-Headed Household Poverty by Census Tract, Philadelphia, 1990.

which Philadelphia annexed in the 1850s.²⁷ The village was never affluent, so the blocks of row homes are both modest and plain. Once the world epicenter of textile production, by 1980 only a handful of mills remained. The famed Cramps Shipyard, another major Kensington employer, stopped operating shortly after World War II. Perhaps the only

vibrant sector of the local economy in these neighborhoods today is the drug trade.²⁸

Several neighborhoods away, below the city's center, is PennsPort, on the eastern edge of the area formerly known as Southwark, whose tiny rowhouses have housed waves of poor immigrants from across Europe. In this area, the U.S. Naval Shipyard to the south had provided many of the jobs. The workforce of this industrial giant, founded before the revolutionary war, grew to nearly fifty thousand during World War II, and it continued to flourish until the 1970s, when the navy decided to get out of the business of building ships, causing this working-class white neighborhood to fall on hard times.²⁹ Now PennsPort's most notable feature is the famous Mummers, or New Year's, Clubs—the bars and practice halls of the marching string bands, comics, and fancy dress brigades that have competed each New Year's Day for over a century, featuring working-class white men parading down Broad Street decked out in Mardi Gras-like costumes.³⁰

Just west of Kensington is the North Philadelphia neighborhood of West Kensington, once part of the same industrial village as its neighbor to the east. Today, the neighborhood is home to the city's small but growing Puerto Rican population (see figure 3). Here, the bleak rowhouse facades are occasionally brightened by a vividly painted bodega, a fluttering Puerto Rican flag, or a colorful mural of tinted glass shards.

Strawberry Mansion borders the Schuylkill River and stretches eastward on either side of Diamond Street. Further east along Diamond Street and across Route 1 is the very poor community of North Central, which ends at Broad Street where the campus of Temple University begins (see figure 4). The histories of these two primarily African American neighborhoods are closely intertwined. They were not industrial villages but opulent streetcar suburbs in the 1800s and 1900s. Strawberry Mansion was populated by well-off Jews who built the handsome twin homes along Thirty-second Street (colloquially known as Mansion Row), and North Central residents were affluent, white Protestants who built imposing brownstones along Diamond Street.