

To: Anne Fadullon, Philadelphia City Planning Commission Director
From: Michael Clifford
Re: Portrait of “Difference and Change” for Grays Ferry, Philadelphia
Date: September 26, 2023

With its racial diversity, walkable rowhome-lined streets, and growing economic vitality, Grays Ferry embodies many of Philadelphia’s strengths. The composition of the neighborhood is far from stable though. While wealth is growing, it is not solely from the rising fortunes of long-time residents, but a result of a shifting population. Despite rising incomes, many residents still struggle with poverty and the burdens that come with it. It is imperative that the city focus its attention on the most vulnerable groups in Grays Ferry and harness the neighborhood reinvestment that eventually follows rising incomes to share the prosperity with them.

Note: All data used in this study is from the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates for 2011 and 2021.

Grays Ferry Today

Grays Ferry is located at the western edge of South Philadelphia near the Schuylkill River and is home to about 13,000 people. The neighborhood is bordered by Grays Ferry Ave and the Schuylkill River to the north, 25th Street to the east, Passyunk Ave to the south, and the Schuylkill Expressway (I-76) to the west. A broad expanse of active and vacant industrial land separates the river from the western edge of the neighborhood. The area used in this study differs somewhat from this, due to existing Census Tract geometry. Two small exclaves are also part of this neighborhood study, the “Forgotten Bottom” neighborhood and the Pennovation Works development to the northwest beyond I-76, and a small residential area beyond I-76 to the southwest, along Passyunk Ave. Notable landmarks include

Lanier Park at the center of the neighborhood, the Greater Grays Ferry Estates and Wilson Park PHA developments^{1,2} to the southwest, and the imposing elevated rail structure enclosing the neighborhood along 25th street.

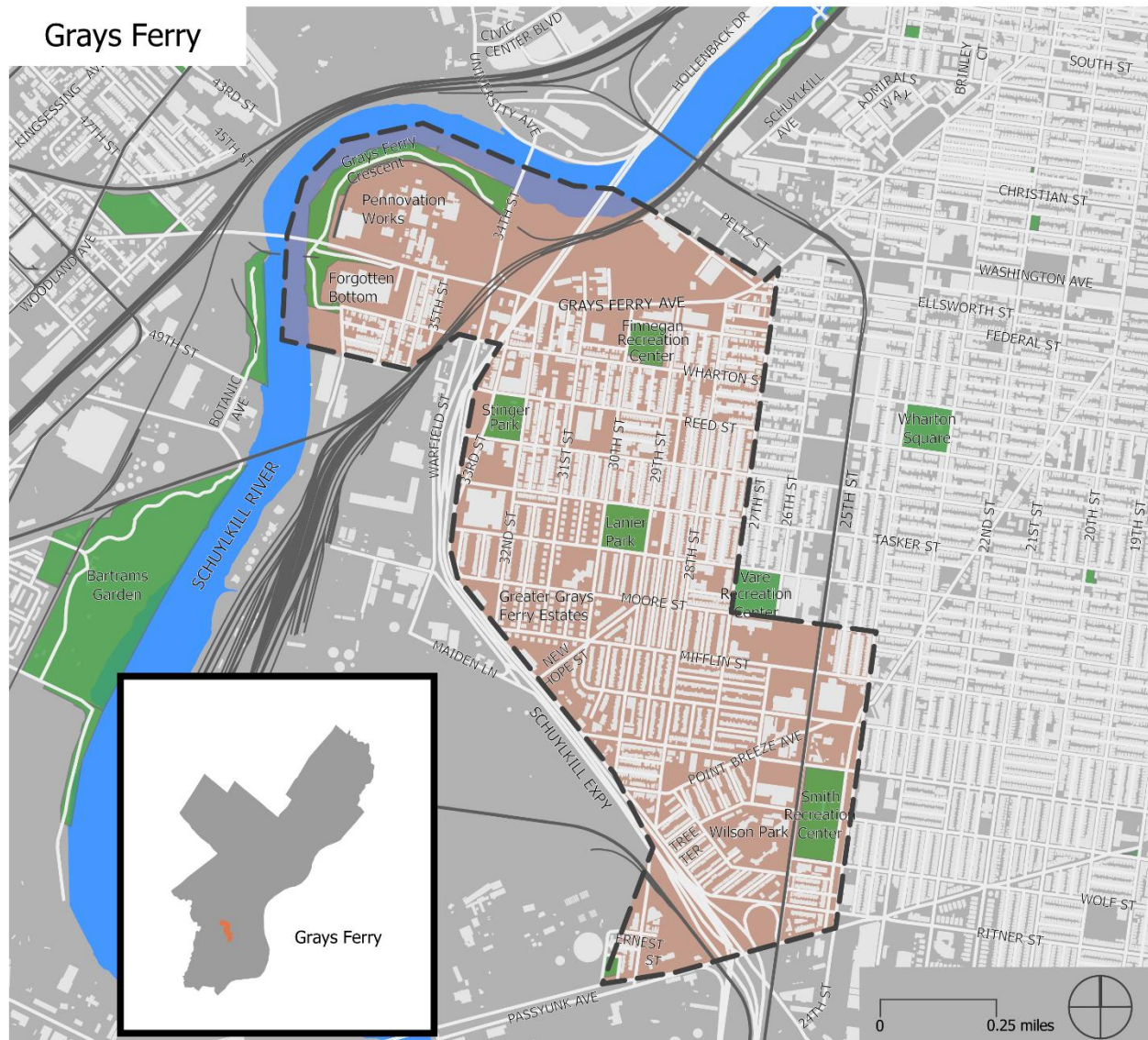


Figure 1: Map of Grays Ferry, Philadelphia.

Grays Ferry is a diverse neighborhood, both in its racial/ethnic composition and in the types of households its residents have formed. Like the wider City of Philadelphia, it has a racial plurality, with

Black residents forming the largest group at 46%, followed by Whites (31%), Asians (12%), and Hispanic/Latinos (9%). About 12% of residents are foreign born, the majority (58%) being from Asia, with significant minorities from Africa and Latin America. The population pyramid shows a stationary dynamic, with a bump around residents in their thirties. Most households, at 58%, contain families, just over half of which are headed by a single female. Over a quarter of households have school-age children, and children enrolled in school comprise one-fifth of the total population. An additional 30% of households contain single residents. There are also many newcomers to the neighborhood. More than half of householders moved in since 2010, and one in ten moved in since 2019, mostly from within Philadelphia.

The neighborhood is working class, though many struggle with poverty. The median household income is \$47,639. Twenty seven percent of all residents and 44% of children under eighteen subsist on incomes below the poverty line, and about a third of households receive SNAP benefits. The labor force participation rate is 66%, and residents of Grays Ferry work in a variety of industries, mostly in the private sector, with the largest by far being “educational services, health care and social assistance”, capturing 30% of the work force. Unemployment is high though, with 15% of the labor force out of work, compared to 9% of all Philadelphians and 6% of Americans. Workers commute in a variety of ways, reflecting the dense urban form of the neighborhood, with 32% driving alone, 30% using transit, 22% carpooling, and the remainder either walking, working at home, or using other means.

Grays Ferry is a rowhome neighborhood with an old housing stock. The large majority (83%) of Grays Ferry housing units consists of single-family attached homes, including the ubiquitous Philly rowhome, as well as the suburban-style duplexes of the Greater Grays Ferry Estates and attached homes of the Wilson Park community, both PHA developments. About a third of the neighborhood’s housing units date to before World War II and another third to the 1950’s, bolstered by the 1954 Wilson Park project³. There has been little new housing built in the neighborhood, with only 5% of units dating

to the new millennium. Households are almost evenly split between renters and owners. The median rent is \$843/month, while the median owner with a mortgage pays \$1118 per month. The burden of these costs is high, with one-quarter of mortgage holders and nearly one-half of renters paying 35% or more of their monthly income on housing. Fourteen percent of units are vacant and 96% of households average less than one resident per room, indicating an adequate housing supply for the current population.



Figure 2: A rowhome-lined street in Grays Ferry. Taken by the author.

Neighborhood Change (2011 to 2021)

Since 2011 Grays Ferry has become more racially and ethnically diverse, moving from a majority Black community to a plural one. At just over 13,000, the total population is almost unchanged since

2011, meaning this shift is the result of a raw decrease in the number of Black residents and an increase in other groups. A 17% drop in the under-ten population, along with the fact that 55% of householders have moved in since 2010, means this is not due to higher birth rates of non-Black children, but that a large non-Black population is moving in from elsewhere while Black residents move away. As there has been little housing built since 2011 (estimates are within the margin of error) and about half of the neighborhood rents, there must be significant turnover in existing housing stock, with non-Black households replacing Black ones.

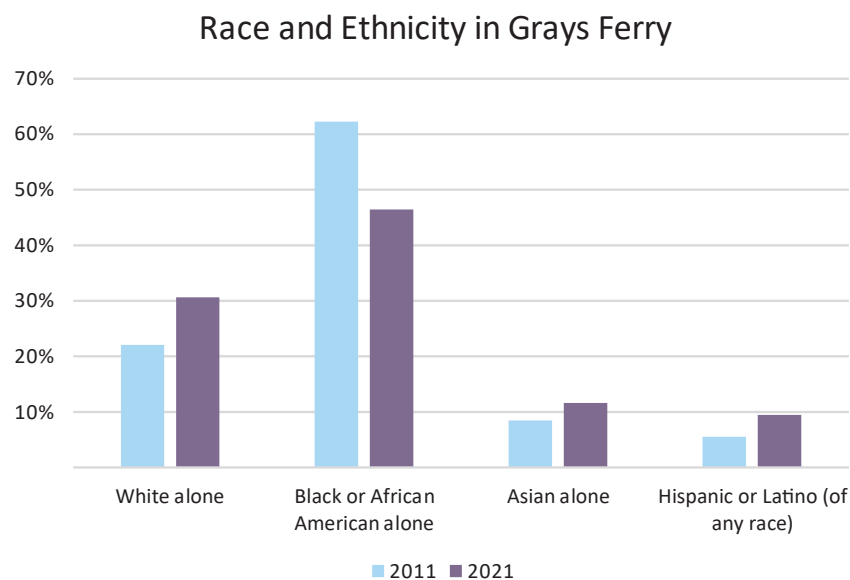


Figure 3: Race and ethnicity as a share of the total population in Grays Ferry, 2011-2021.
Source: 2011 and 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates.

Grays Ferry has been losing its youth as families get smaller. As shown in Figure 4, the moderately expansive population pyramid of 2011, supported by a large childhood cohort, has changed to a stationary one, with a peak at residents in their thirties. The number of children in the neighborhood has dropped by 20% since 2011, especially in the under-five and teenage years, with high

school enrollment dropping by 57%. This indicates a low birth rate in recent years, and that many families with children approaching high school have chosen to leave the neighborhood while

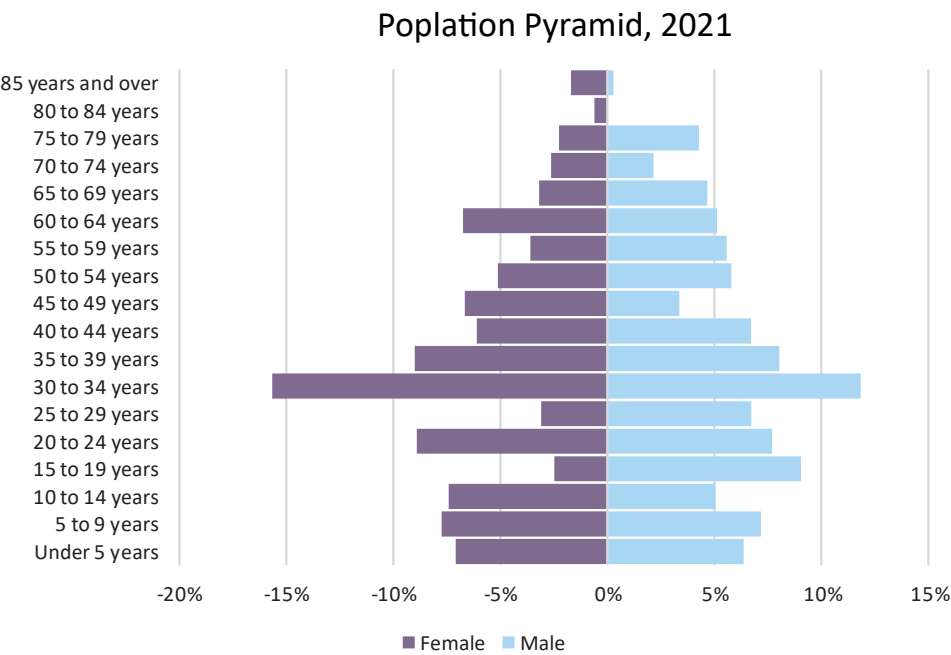
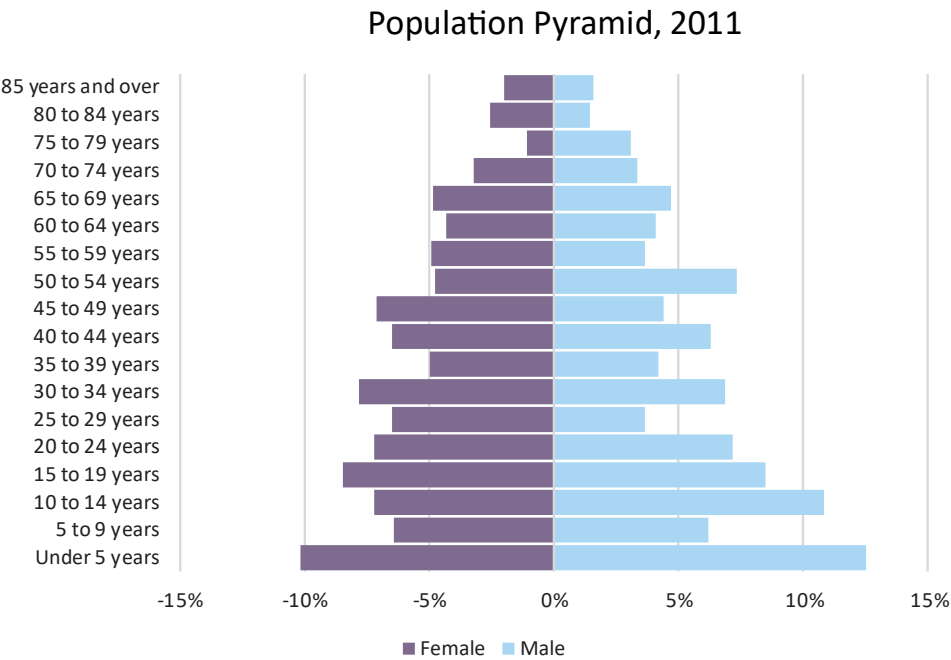


Figure 4: Share of Grays Ferry population by age range, 2011- 2021.
Source: 2011 and 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates.

newcomers bring few children of their own. This trend is reflected in the average family size, which has decreased from 3.8 to 3.2 since 2011.

The neighborhood is doing better economically. Although the total population is almost unchanged since 2011, it has many more workers, who are in turn making higher wages. Economic gains are most evident in the median household income of Grays Ferry, which has increased by 78% from \$26,000 to \$48,000 (adjusted for inflation), while the median city-wide increased by only 19%. This improvement is due to a changing employment situation. The unemployment rate has dropped significantly since 2011 from 26% to 15%, even while the size of the labor force has increased by 39%. This improvement is partially explained by a stronger national economy, with 2011 being only three years after the Great Recession. Additionally, the number of residents with college degrees (bachelor's and higher) has more than doubled, resulting in a higher earning potential for the neighborhood's work force. Unsurprisingly then, the number of workers with "management, business, science, and arts" occupations has more than doubled since 2011, surpassing the lower-paying service sector as the largest occupation type. Growing incomes are in turn increasing the financial security and material conditions of residents. The share of all people living on incomes under the poverty line has decreased by seventeen points, the share of rent-burdened households (paying more than 35% of income on rent) has decreased by ten points, and the share of households with access to a vehicle has increased by eleven points. Economic growth is uneven though, with median incomes for White households growing at 1.5 the rate of those for Black households, and Black residents continue to live disproportionately in poverty.

Grays Ferry in the Wider City and Vulnerable Groups

Grays Ferry stands out from the rest of Philadelphia in some significant ways, highlighting population subgroups that may need special attention. While poverty rates in the neighborhood have dropped significantly since 2011, they remain higher than the city overall, especially for families and

children (by 9 and 12 points, respectively). Connected to this disparity is the prevalence of single-female family households in Grays Ferry, which make up a disproportionate share of all households, as shown below in Figure 5. Access to jobs is another issue contributing to poverty in the neighborhood, with the unemployment rate of Grays Ferry at 1.7 times the rate for Philadelphia. Providing gainful employment for residents and financial assistance to low income single-parent households is one way the city can support Grays Ferry.

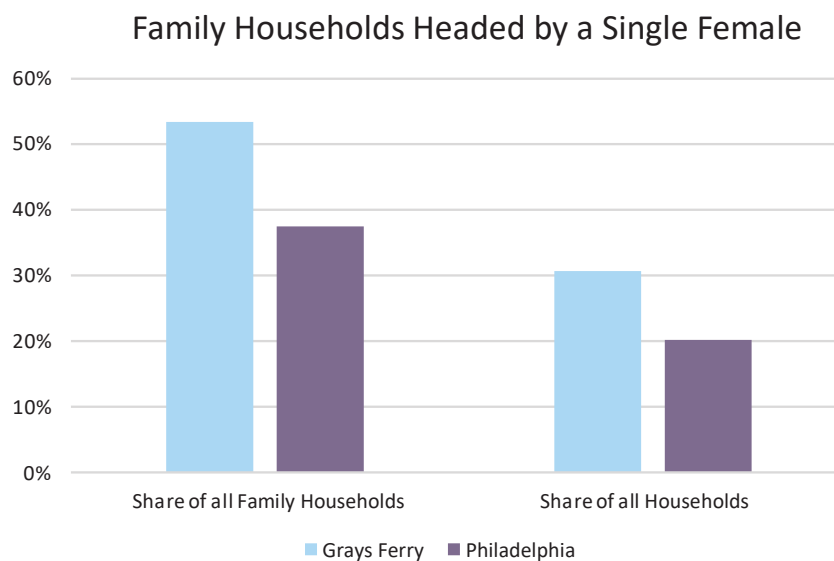


Figure 5: Share of households headed by a single female, 2021.
Source: 2011 and 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates.

The health and well-being of Grays Ferry residents is another concern. Twenty-two percent of residents in Grays Ferry are living with a disability, compared to 17% of all Philadelphians. Grays Ferry already has an elevated rate of poverty, which combined with a disability can make it particularly hard to meet one's basic needs. Furthermore, 11% of Grays Ferry lack health insurance, compared to 7% of Philadelphians. The lack of health insurance can discourage people from taking regular preventative care measures, leading to greater health costs later in life. These costs will be a particular burden given the

limited financial resources of many residents. The city should thus take the time to understand the needs of the disabled population of Grays Ferry and take steps to extend health insurance coverage to all its residents.

Low-income renters in Grays Ferry are another group that deserve special attention. While the median rent in Grays Ferry is below that of Philadelphia, it has increased faster since 2011, at a rate of 18% compared to 13% for the city overall. As discussed previously, the socioeconomic makeup of the neighborhood has been changing in the last decade. This has been accompanied by little growth in overall population or housing stock, indicating a significant population turnover, and incomes gains have not been evenly distributed. Put in this context, increasing rents in Grays Ferry connote the beginning of a process of gentrification in the neighborhood, with higher earners attracted by the low (for Philadelphia) rents and the relative proximity to job centers like University City and Center City. It should be an imperative of the city then to protect remaining long-time, low-income residents from future displacement and help them share in the increased investment that eventually follows the arrival of more affluent residents.

Conclusion

The makeup of Grays Ferry is shifting, and at the surface level it appears positive. Among other things, incomes are rising, unemployment is falling, and the population is becoming more ethnically diverse. The fact that varied groups of people are moving to Grays Ferry underscores its positive qualities, be it the compact rowhome streets, low housing costs (relative to Philadelphia) or the proximity to the city's major job centers, qualities that will allow it to grow in the future. Poverty remains prevalent in the neighborhood though, and the data since 2011 indicates displacement of Black and lower-income residents by newcomers. If rents continue to rise and higher-earners continue to

move in as they have since 2011, displacement of Black and lower-income residents will continue as well without intervention. With Grays Ferry then, the city has the opportunity foster the demographically plural community that is emerging while still supporting long-time residents, guiding neighborhood reinvestment to the benefit of all, not just the new arrivals.

References

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