

# *GENTRIFICATION IN PHILADELPHIA*

*Sarah DeGiorgis*

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## **Gentrification in Philadelphia**

**Key Words:** Gentrification, Philadelphia, housing, education, displacement, neighborhoods

### **Abstract**

This paper looks at gentrification in Philadelphia through an educational attainment lens: which census tracts have increased their percentage of highly-educated (graduate or professional degree) population? Using this methodology, I identify three census tracts that have gained the most highly-educated population from 2010 to 2016. I then explore what other factors may have influenced this influx of highly educated populations in these areas and point to future research directions for exploring gentrification in Philadelphia and beyond.

### **Introduction**

This paper seeks to understand neighborhood change in Philadelphia. Neighborhoods are changing in Philadelphia, and many are gentrifying. Gentrification, “the invasion by relatively affluent households into marginal neighborhoods, with the concomitant rehabilitation of housing and the displacement of previous residents” (Beauregard 1990), has happened in cities around the United States and around the world and has been happening in Philadelphia for many years now. There are, however, many studies that show that gentrification is not happening in Philadelphia (Pew [2]). The “previous residents” noted by Beauregard are typically lower-income, meaning that gentrification puts a large financial burden (moving) on populations that are already financially-strained. There are policy measures that could mitigate this displacement, like tax abatements for long-term residents, if implemented correctly. Being able to predict which neighborhoods are likely to gentrify could help implement these programs in ample time so that the people who needed them could take advantage of them. Also, understanding which neighborhoods are most experiencing gentrification could aid in this as well.

### *Gentrification in Philadelphia*

Although Philadelphia is the poorest of the ten largest cities in the United States (Pew Charitable Trusts, 1), 52.2% of housing units are owner-occupied (see Table 1, below).

Additionally, almost 40% of all owner-occupied units in Philadelphia do not have a mortgage, which could mean that many of those homeowners are only paying monthly utility payments, making their housing very affordable. For someone living on a fixed income (social security payments, for instance) only having to pay for utilities monthly is no small thing: it could mean the difference between being able to stay in your house versus being forced to move.

Affordable housing is a luxury in many parts of the United States and Philadelphia should be taking steps to preserve this relatively large stock of affordable housing through tax abatement programs to protect long-term homeowners from rising property taxes.

**Table 1: Percent of Owner-Occupied Housing Units in Philadelphia vs. the United States and Selected Cities**

Location	% of Housing Units that are Owner-Occupied
<b>Philadelphia</b>	<b>52.2%</b>
United States	63.8%
New York City	32.6%
Baltimore, MD	47.4%
Washington, DC	41.7%
Boston, MA	35.3%
Chicago, IL	44.6%
Los Angeles, CA	36.8%
San Francisco, CA	37.3%

Source: American Community Survey 2016 5-year Estimates

Recent studies of gentrification in Philadelphia have focused on income: in 2016, Pew Charitable Trusts published a report on gentrification in Philadelphia but based their definition of gentrification on income, thus excluding some eligible tracts from their analysis (Pew [2]). In 2016, Lei Ding, Jackelyn Hwang, and Eileen Divringi, in “Gentrification and residential mobility in Philadelphia” use a methodology to determine gentrification based on income and education, but still exclude many census tracts. Since there is no exact definition of gentrification, this paper looks at education instead of income as a marker of gentrification.

I argue that education, especially graduate or professional education, is a more precise measure of gentrification. Gentrification is certainly a financial process, but it is also a cultural one and looking at it from a financial angle risks overlooking the social aspect of gentrification. This paper expands on recent studies of gentrification in Philadelphia by looking at the change in educational attainment over time as an indicator of gentrification.

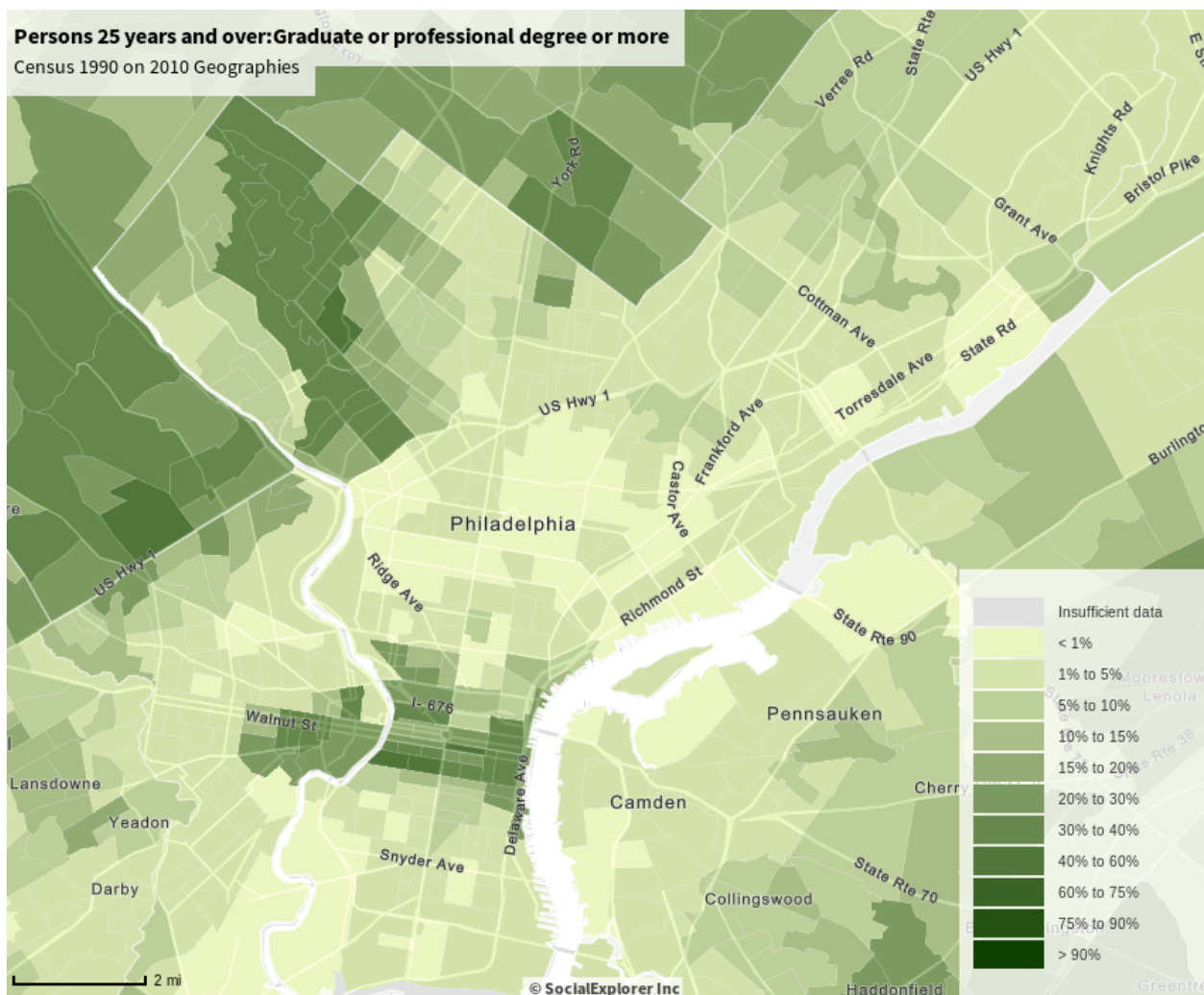
As many studies of gentrification point out, isolating one variable or even multiple variables to account for gentrification is hard, both because of the unclear and various meanings

of gentrification and also because of that fact that gentrification variables such as house values are often endogenous (Ding and Hwang 2018). I have chosen education as the variable because I think it highlights areas that an analysis based on income or home values miss.

An important note is that gentrification is not one single process: it looks different and has different outcomes in different places, as can be seen in different neighborhoods in Philadelphia (Beauregard 1990). For this reason, a city-wide definition of gentrification will always be imprecise. This paper will consider two parts of Philadelphia in more detail: West Philadelphia and South Philadelphia.

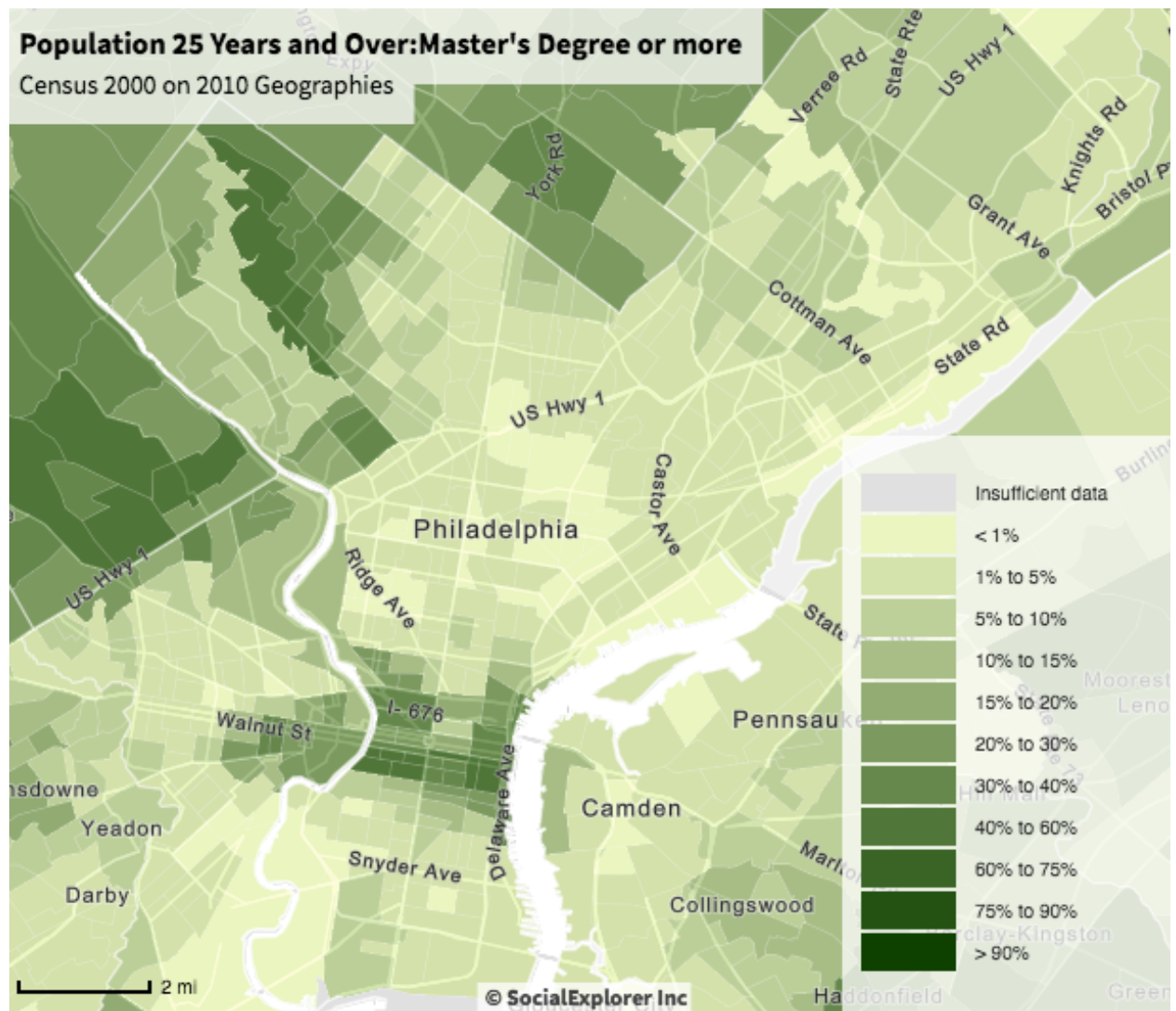
Figures 1 and 2 below show the change in educational attainment citywide between 1990 and 2010. The maps make it clear that populations with higher education are in Center City, West Philadelphia (University City) and Chestnut Hill/Mt. Airy in the far northwest.

**Figure 1: Philadelphia, Percent of Population with Graduate or Professional Degree, 1990**



Source: 1990 Decennial Census Data through Social Explorer

Figure 2: Philadelphia, Percent of Population with Graduate or Professional Degree, 2000



Source: 2000 Decennial Census Data through Social Explorer

**Population 25 Years and Over: Professional School Degree or more**  
Census 2000 on 2010 Geographies

Philadelphia

US Hwy 1

I-676

Ridge Ave

Walnut St

Snyder Ave

Delaware Ave

Frankford Ave

Castor Ave

Richmond St

Cottman Ave

Torresdale Ave

Grant Ave

Knights Rd

Pennsauk

Camden

Collingswood

Yeadon

Darby

Yorke Rd

State St

Mo

Steele Rd

Barry Hill Mail

Barry-Kingston

2 mi

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Insufficient data

< 1%

1% to 5%

5% to 10%

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15% to 20%

20% to 30%

30% to 40%

40% to 60%

60% to 75%

75% to 90%

> 90%

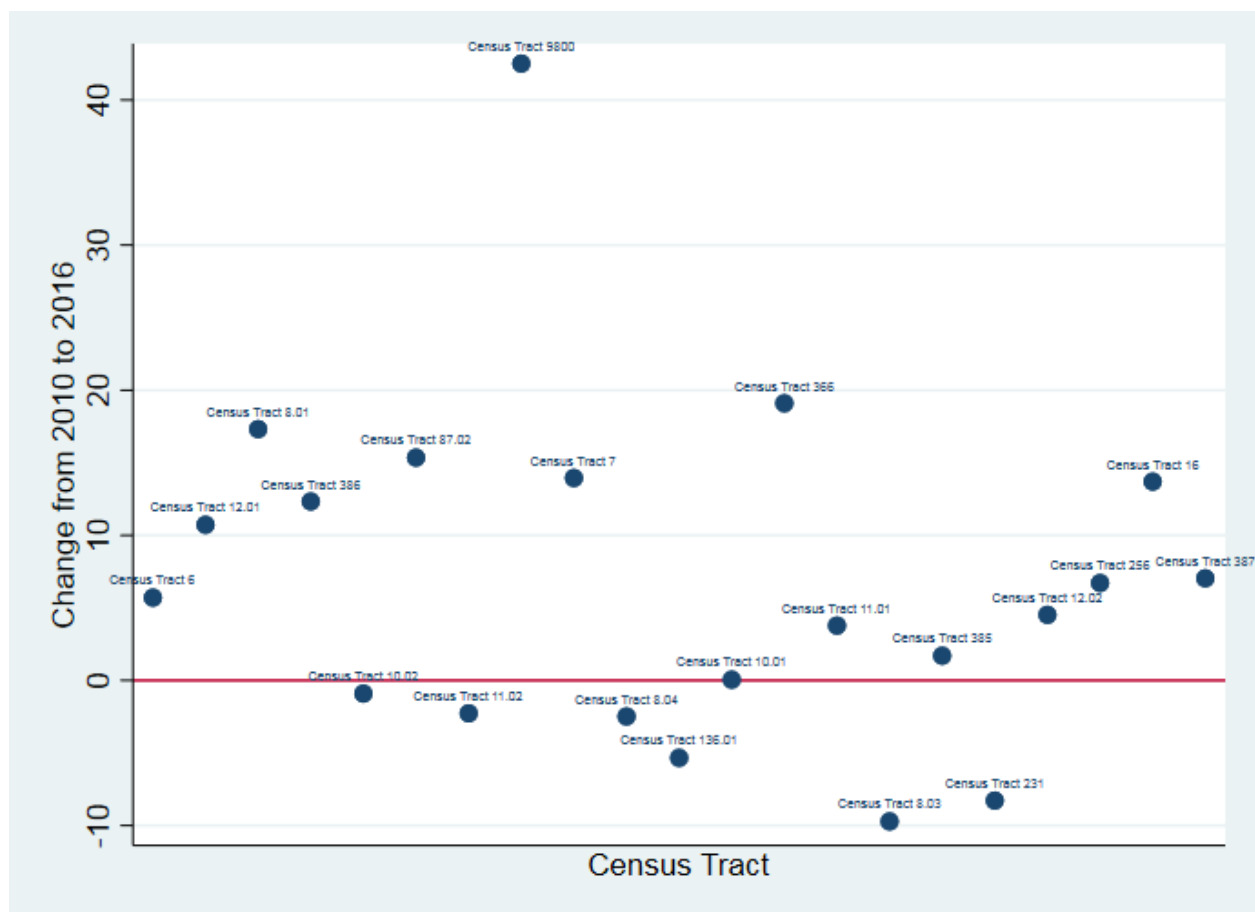
## Methodology

The percent of the population with a graduate or professional degree was calculated for each census tract from 2010 – 2016 using American Community Survey 5-year Estimates for each year to minimize error. Then tracts were ranked by their percent change in education in 2010 as compared to 2016.

## Results

This analysis identified three census tracts that had a large increase in percentage of population with graduate or professional degrees: tracts 16, 87.02, and 366. The graph below shows which tracts had a positive change in percent of population with graduate and professional degrees and which had a negative change (the percent of population with graduate or professional degrees decreased between 2010 and 2016). The red line is at zero, or no change.

**Figure 4: Census Tracts by Change in Percent of Population  
with Graduate or Professional Degree**



Source: ACS 2010 and 2016 5-Year Estimates

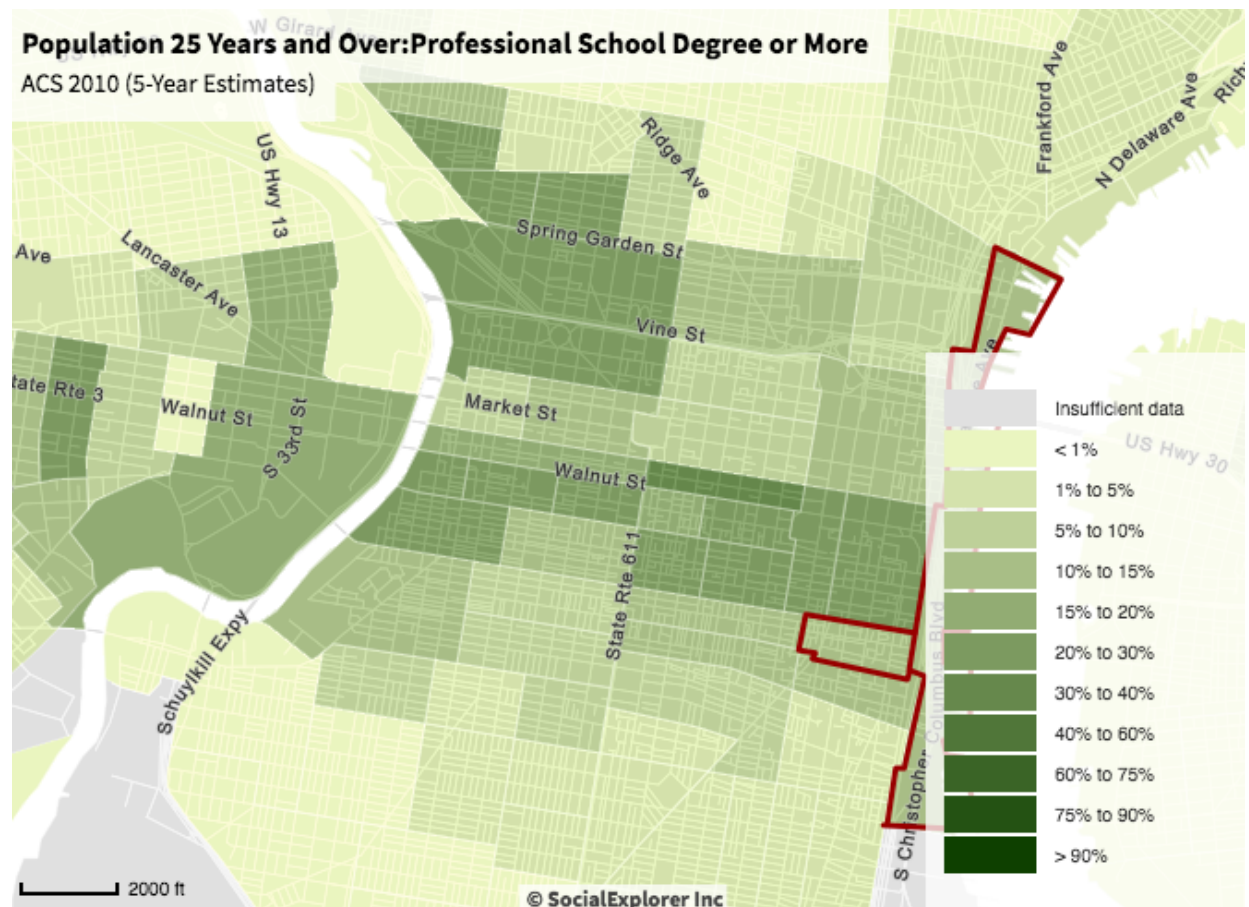
There are some things to note here: census tract 9800, which appears to have had a massive influx of new highly educated people, is actually Fairmount Park, a very large park in the middle of Philadelphia. That tract should be excluded from the analysis because of the very small sample size. Also of note is that some tracts had a negative change in educational attainment; these tracts are in Center City or the far northwest (Chestnut Hill and Mt. Airy) and all had large



percentages of a highly educated population already in 2010. Therefore, a negative change does not represent any sort of outmigration but rather smaller changes in areas with historically high educational attainment.

Of the tracts with positive educational attainment change, the three that are not in areas with historically high rates of educational attainment (Center City and the northwest) are tract 16, tract 87.02, and tract 366. Tracts 16 and 366 are adjacent to each other, and together comprise an area of South Philadelphia called Pennsport, just below Center City and along the Delaware River. Figures 5 and 6 show that tract 366 is very long and narrow, stretching along the Delaware River from Reed Street in the south (Pennsport) up all the way to Fishtown in the north.

**Figure 5: Census Tracts 16 and 366, Percent of Population with Professional Degree or Higher, 2010**

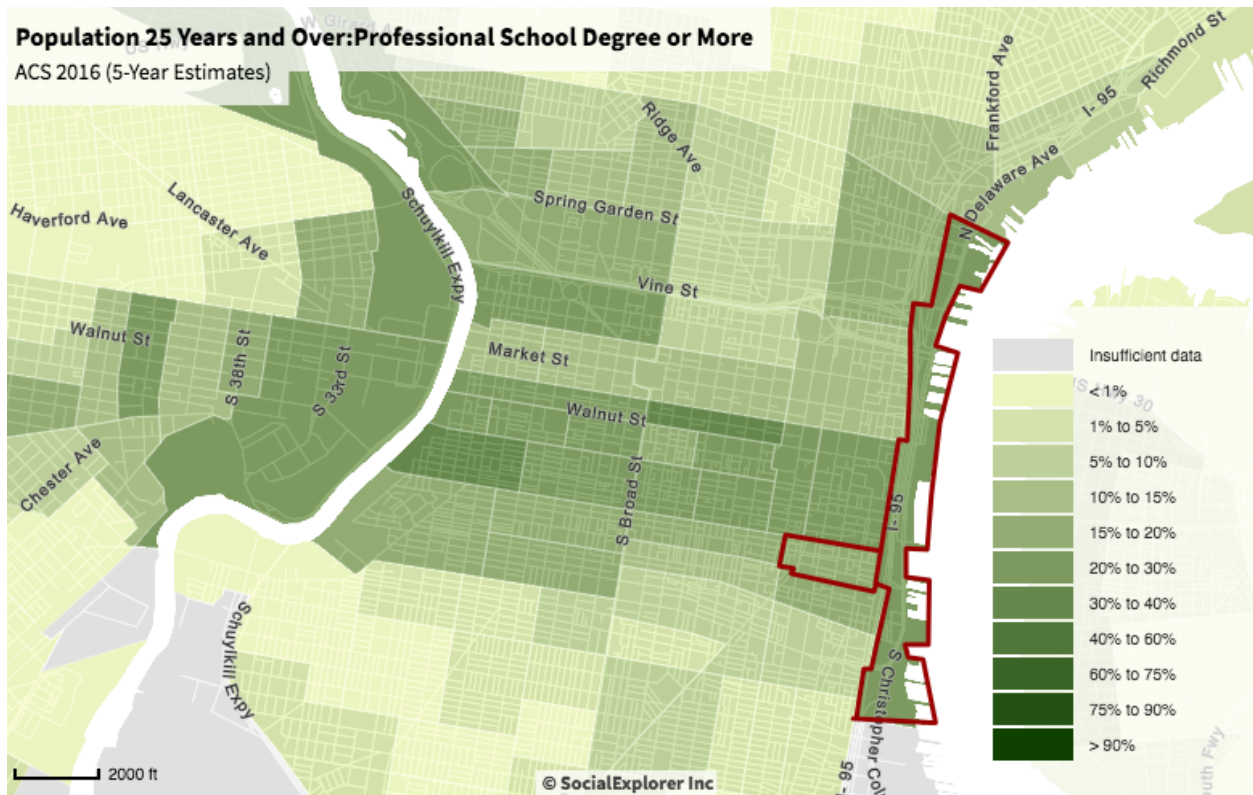


Source: ACS 2010 5-Year Estimates Through Social Explorer

Figures 5 and 6 show how tracts 16 and 366 have changed from 2010 to 2016 in regards to educational attainment.



Figure 6: Census Tracts 16 and 366, Percent of Population with Professional Degree or Higher, 2016



Source: ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates Through Social Explorer

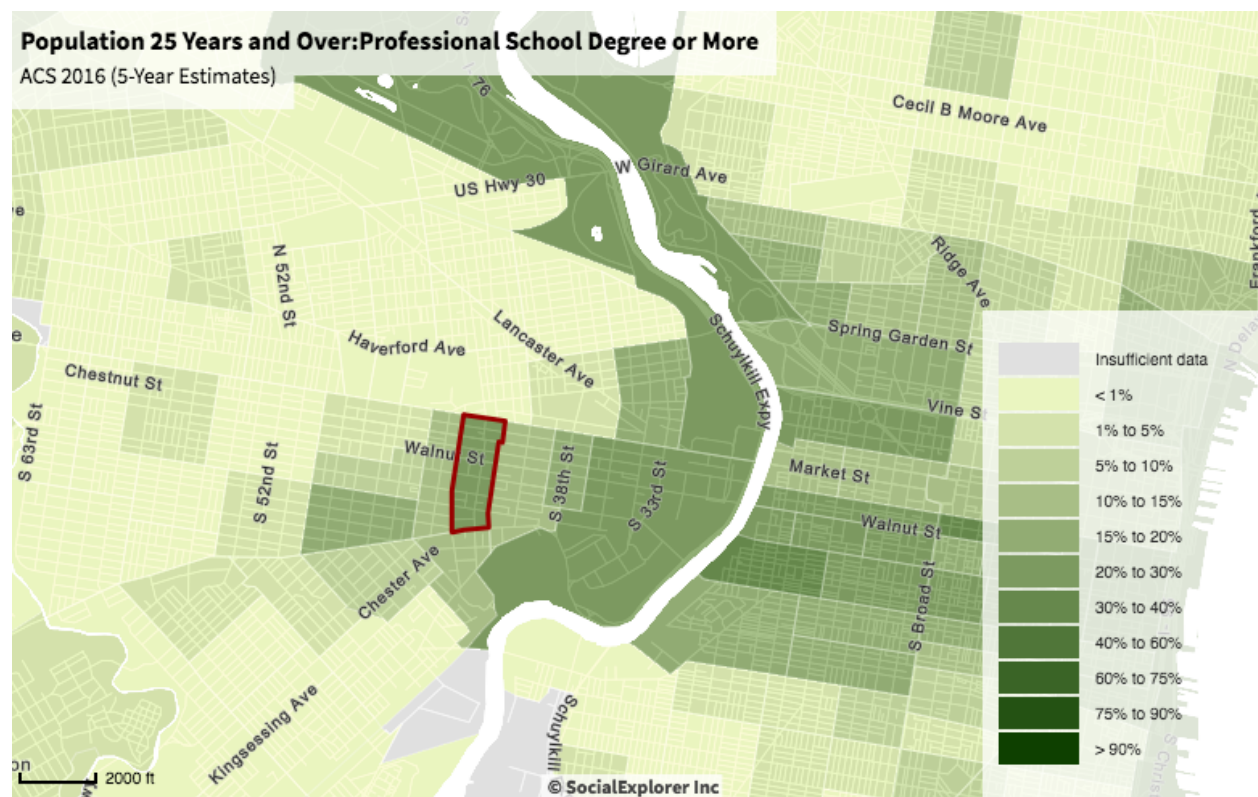
Census tract 87.02 is in West Philadelphia, near University City. Educational attainment also increased in this tract during the time period, though this tract has had fairly high levels of educational attainment historically. Figures 7 and 8 show the change in educational attainment in tract 87.02 from 2010 to 2016.

**Figure 7: Census Tract 87.02, Percent of Population with Professional Degree or Higher, 2010**



Source: ACS 2010 5-Year Estimates Through Social Explorer

**Figure 8: Census Tract 87.02, Percent of Population with Professional Degree or Higher, 2016**



Source: ACS 2016 5-Year Estimates Through Social Explorer

## Discussion

This paper has contributed to the ongoing discussion of gentrification in Philadelphia by examining the city through higher education as a possible marker for gentrification. A next step for this analysis would be to add in income or house values variables to see if there is a fuller picture. The tracts identified by this analysis, however, are worth examining.

The tract in West Philadelphia, 87.02, is partly in the catchment area for the Penn Alexander School, an elementary and middle school that is fast becoming one of the best public schools in Philadelphia thanks to funding from the nearby University of Pennsylvania (Melamed 2018). While unclear in this data, further research into the effect of this school on the surrounding neighborhoods could reveal other consequences. Since property taxes partly fund public schools in Philadelphia and many areas, the links between school quality, house values and gentrification are worth exploring.

The other two census tracts, 16 and 366, are along the Delaware River. Tract 16 is commonly known as Queen Village and is the northernmost point of Pennsport, a working class neighborhood in South Philadelphia along Interstate 95. Tract 366 is basically just the Delaware

River waterfront from Reed Street in the south to Poplar Street in the north, meaning it stretches from Pennsport to Northern Liberties. This area of the city has seen revitalization, especially in the past ten years, with three municipal piers retrofitted into public parks and another new park and beer garden where Spruce Street meets the Delaware. Condos have sprung up along the river so it's no surprise that this tract, which had a relatively low population in 1990, has increased in educational attainment so much.

Gentrification is a complicated process that can be understood in many different ways. This study suggests other ways to study the process of gentrification so that it can be understood more fully, which can in turn inform local policies to combat displacement of lower-income residents.

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