

Are rents rising in your neighborhood? Don't blame the baristas

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Baristas who work in specialty coffee shops, along with hipsters more generally, have been referred to as the "[shock troops](#)" of urban gentrification—and it's no different in Philadelphia. These servers of

artisanal coffee contribute to economic and demographic changes in neighborhoods in two ways.

First, they work in coffee shops that appeal to a new wave of [middle-class residents](#) who can afford higher rents—while at the same time alienating longtime and less economically advantaged residents.

Second, these baristas almost invariably live in gentrifying neighborhoods. They don't have much money, but they tend to exude a cool, white middle-class presence. The appearance of specialty coffee shops and baristas signifies that a neighborhood is becoming trendy and more expensive.

As a [professor of sociology](#) at Temple University who is fascinated with urban artistic subcultures, I recently published a book called "[Barista in the City](#)" with co-authors [Keith McIntosh](#) and [Ewa Protasiuk](#). In 2019, we interviewed 61 baristas in a variety of gentrifying neighborhoods in Philadelphia, including Fishtown, Kensington, Point Breeze and West Philadelphia.

We wanted to understand why baristas become gentrifiers and how they view their role as agents of change.

Privileged but low-wage workers

A few baristas whom we interviewed were managers or assistant managers. Some were employed by Starbucks, but the vast majority worked in specialty coffee shops that strive to outdo Starbucks by offering coffee that is slightly more expensive and relatively high in quality, sustainability and fairness to coffee farmers.

We classified most of the baristas we interviewed as either artistic baristas or coffee careerists.

Artistic baristas work in coffee shops primarily because they offer flexible employment that allows time for low-paid artistic activities, or enables them to finance their undergraduate education at art schools or other academic institutions.

Coffee careerists, on the other hand, have a strong interest in artisanal coffee. They aspire to become coffee shop managers, coffee roasters or coffee buyers who travel to other countries in search of the best beans.

Both types of baristas were attracted to the relatively relaxed coffee shop environment. They enjoy chatting with their co-workers and favorite customers. Many stated that they have nothing against those who do corporate work but wouldn't feel comfortable in that environment. "I would probably like lose my mind in a 9-to-5 kind of thing," an artistic barista explained. "I just am not that type of person. I don't like paperwork. I also don't like the feeling of not being able to be myself. ... I just know I would end up hating it."

Most come from middle-class families and have attended, if not graduated, from college. As such, they have rejected relatively well-paid, middle-class positions in favor of an occupation suited to the lifestyle they wish to lead.

Living in a gentrifying neighborhood not only enables them to be near their job, but also to be near emerging art and music scenes, thrift shops or vegan eateries. It also provides relatively low-cost housing that is compatible with their budgets. The average barista in our sample earned \$23,000 per year in 2019 and typically worked 32 hours per week.

On being a gentrifier

The baristas we interviewed tended to view gentrification as a process that is harmful to lower socioeconomic class and mostly minority

populations. A barista who observed affluent university students move into a low-income West Philadelphia neighborhood and displace working-class Black residents stated: "Obviously, it's terrible."

They felt a degree of guilt about being part of this process. But their low-wage employment and need for affordable urban space that is compatible with their lifestyle caused them to feel they have little recourse to make other residential decisions.

"I understand that I'm also part of the problem when it comes to gentrifying an area," one of the baristas said. "My boyfriend tends to disagree with me on that. He's like, 'Well, where are we going to move, then?' And it's true. Like, I don't know, we can't afford to live in Rittenhouse Square. I can just barely afford to live in Fishtown at this point. I thought this would be a good area for meeting other creatives. And I don't want to live in the suburbs."

Many baristas, however, were ignorant of the role that their coffee shop plays in commercial gentrification. They tend to believe that such shops open only after a neighborhood has already gentrified. As one barista put it: "I think coffee shops are a symptom rather than a cause of gentrification. They spring up in neighborhoods that have already been taken over by gentrifiers."

Urban scholarship suggests that the relationship is more complicated, with coffee shops being both a [cause and effect](#) of neighborhood gentrification.

While specialty coffee shops generally present themselves as progressive and inclusive, longtime residents often view them as expensive, culturally alienating, and what American sociologist Elijah Anderson referred to as "[white spaces](#)." Furthermore, these cafes often [displace other retail businesses](#) that long-term residents relied on.

There are, of course, some specialty coffee shops in Philadelphia that have designed their prices, programming and decor to [attract customers and residents that often feel excluded](#) from such shops. These include [Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books](#) in Germantown and [Kayuh Bicycles & Cafe](#) in Francisville. Some, like [Quaker City Coffee](#) and [The Monkey & the Elephant](#) in Brewerytown, employ vulnerable populations such as [formerly incarcerated people](#) and [former foster youth](#). But specialty [coffee](#) shops designed to appeal to those that often feel excluded are rare, and they employ only a handful of baristas.

Blame the barista?

The [coffee shops](#) that the baristas we interviewed work for are not the main drivers of urban gentrification. Such gentrification is pushed mainly by real estate developers and by local governments seeking to [enhance their tax base](#).

Gentrification, furthermore, is fundamentally a result of [larger structural forces](#) such as zoning rules that prohibit multi-unit and mixed-use construction, and government acquiescence to [NIMBY resistance](#) to high-rise buildings. These forces limit the supply of housing in walkable urban neighborhoods. In Philadelphia, such neighborhoods include, but are not limited to, [Chestnut Hill, Germantown, Society Hill, Mount Airy, Strawberry Mansion and Point Breeze](#).

To ease residential gentrification, baristas could relocate. But they are low-wage service workers, and their housing options are limited by affordability issues and the [shortage of urban neighborhoods](#) —issues that zoning boards, community groups and political leaders have [failed to address](#).

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