Reading, PA

Most of us probably had our first introduction to Reading, Pennsylvania, through the Monopoly board game, where the Reading Railroad lies between the Income Tax and Oriental Avenue spaces. But as Sweat makes clear, the Berks County town (pronounced “REDD-ing”) in southeastern Pennsylvania, founded in 1748 by two sons of William Penn, hasn’t been a hot property recently. According to 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data, the city of 88,000 had a larger share of its residents living in poverty—a staggering 41.3 percent—than any other city with a population of over 65,000 in the nation. (The 2013 Census says the figure has dropped slightly, to 40.5 percent.)

A September 2011 New York Times article by Sabrina Tavernise notes that Reading experienced a fast decline from number 32 on the most-impoveryished list at the start of the millennium to the top 10 in 2007. Tavernise cites the shuttering of manufacturing facilities for such companies as Lucent Technologies and car-parts manufacturer Dana Corporation as a contributing factor. Among other employment hurdles, only 8 percent of the city’s residents have a bachelor’s degree, and only 63 percent have a high-school diploma, compared with the national average of 85 percent.

Hispanics, who flocked to Reading from New York and other larger urban areas in search of lower-cost housing and better-paying jobs, now make up over 58 percent of the population per the 2010 census. But they fare worse educationally than their white counterparts, with only 44 percent holding a high-school diploma.

And as unemployment has risen, so has addition to prescription painkillers and heroin. In a 2014 broadcast of BCTV.org’s County Connection program, Berks County district attorney John Adams described the influx of heroin from Philadelphia and the rising number of overdoses in Berks County as “an epidemic.”

Lynn Nottage said in a 2013 interview with Guernica magazine, “I went to Reading, Pennsylvania, to try to figure this out, top to bottom, in one place, in this city that had a thriving industrial background. . . . It began a slow decline when the railroads stopped going through there, then when NAFTA happened, when things started shifting south.”—Kerry Reid