

ASIAN AMERICANS IN GREATER BOSTON: BUILDING COMMUNITIES OLD AND NEW

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Nearly 150 years ago, Chinese Americans settled in the area still known as Chinatown, near Boston’s South Station. There has been an Asian American community in Greater Boston ever since those early arrivals. Throughout most of that period the Asian American community was relatively small and primarily Chinese. Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, with the loosening of decades-old restrictive immigration laws and a significant number of refugees escaping war-torn Southeast Asia, the area’s Asian American community began a still-ongoing period of growth and transformation. Today, nearly 70 percent of Asian Americans in Massachusetts are foreign-born.

While Asian Americans have moved to all parts of Massachusetts, most of the dramatic growth in recent years has occurred in smaller, suburban towns within Greater Boston.

While the city of Boston remains home to the largest number of Asian Americans in the state—60,985—its share of the total Asian American population has shrunk from 21 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2016. Sixteen cities and towns in Greater Boston in 2016 had at least 4,000 Asian Americans. These cities and towns are remarkably diverse—urban and suburban, racially heterogeneous and relatively homogeneous.

Asian Americans generally reflect the economic profile of their place of residence, whether affluent suburban communities such as Lexington, Newton and Acton or working class towns and cities such as Quincy, Lynn and Lowell.

The dispersion of the Asian American population is evident in the high concentration of Asian Americans in various cities and towns in Greater Boston. **Figure 2.1** indicates that 16 very different cities and towns had concentrations of Asian Americans of at least 12 percent.

While large cities in Greater Boston generally have larger Asian American populations, places with the most rapid Asian American increases have actually been in smaller, suburban locales. Looking at an even shorter timeframe of 2000 to 2016, as **Figure 2.2** indicates, the

FIGURE 2.1

Asian Americans live in communities throughout Greater Boston.

Cities and towns with the largest Asian American populations. 2016.

Asian American Population		Asian American Share	
Boston	60,985	Quincy	28%
Quincy	26,143	Lexington	25%
Lowell	23,114	Acton	23%
Cambridge	16,534	Malden	23%
Malden	13,925	Lowell	21%
Newton	12,303	Boxborough	20%
Brookline	9,551	Westford	17%
Lexington	8,381	Sharon	16%
Somerville	8,213	Brookline	16%
Waltham	7,585	Cambridge	15%
Lynn	7,113	Burlington	15%
Framingham	5,716	Bedford	14%
Acton	5,416	Belmont	14%
Arlington	4,739	Newton	14%
Medford	4,577	Andover	13%
Andover	4,427	Wayland	12%

Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

percentage rise in Asian American populations was particularly pronounced in suburban towns such as Westford, Weymouth, Sharon, Natick, Braintree, Acton, Bedford, Winchester, Belmont, Lexington and Andover. Indeed, none of the 16 localities with Asian American growth rates greater than 100 percent is a large city.

Not only is our region's Asian American population large and growing, it's also tremendously diverse. The designation "Asian American" suggests a degree of homogeneity that obscures variety, complexity

and inequality across Asian American subgroups. As we've noted, for decades reaching back to the 19th century, Chinese Americans overwhelmingly defined the Asian American community in the region. But this has changed rapidly in recent decades. Our region is now home to large populations of Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Korean, Filipino, Japanese and Pakistani Americans—all falling within the category "Asian American." Indeed, 13 Asian ethnic groups each had at least 2,000 residents in Greater Boston in 2016. While still the single largest group, Chinese Americans now comprise less than half of the overall Asian American population (39 percent).

FIGURE 2.2

Asian American population growth is fastest in the region's smaller, suburban towns.

Cities and towns in Greater Boston with highest growth of Asian Americans. 2000 to 2016.

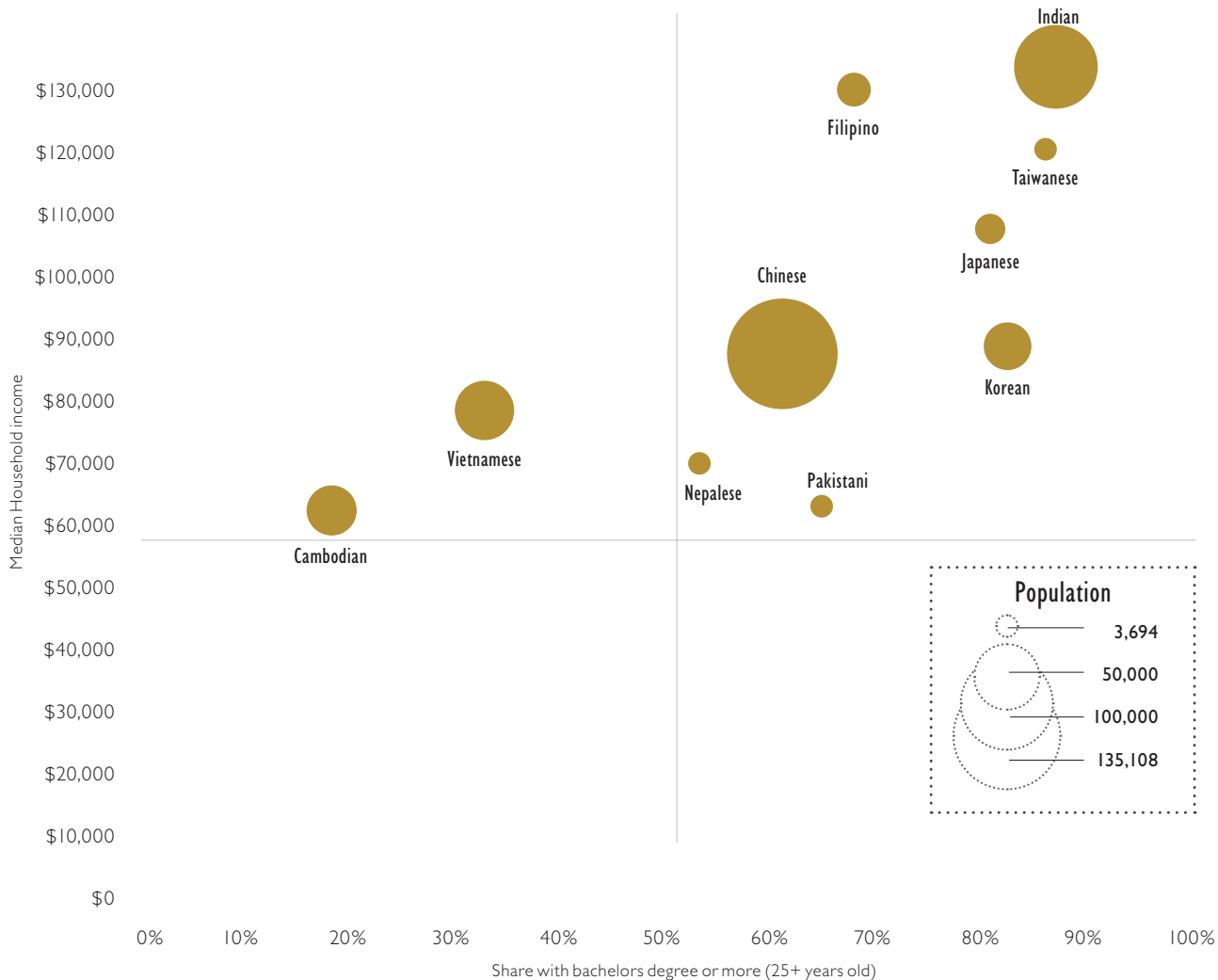
City or Town	Percent Population Change
Westford	298%
Weymouth	265%
Sharon	249%
Natick	220%
Braintree	215%
Acton	210%
Bedford	198%
Winchester	180%
Belmont	159%
Lexington	154%
Andover	148%
Everett	145%
Needham	143%
Arlington	126%
Billerica	115%
Medford	113%

Note: For municipalities with more than 2,000 Asian Americans.
Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

This rich diversity within the Asian American community extends beyond just ancestry to education and income levels as well. The scatterplot in **Figure 2.3** demonstrates this wide variation visually, showing population size, median household income and educational attainment for the 10 largest Asian American subgroups in Greater Boston. For example, over 80 percent of Indian Americans in Greater Boston have at least a college degree, with median household income of around \$120,000 per year. In stark contrast, Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans land at the other end of the spectrum, with much lower shares of college degree holders, and incomes almost half that of Indian American households.

While Figure 2.3 illustrates the striking differences across subgroups, it masks another important layer of diversity, which is the often wide range of socio-economic attributes within these individual groups. The bubbles show median household income for a given group but they do not show the distribution on either side of that median. For example, our region is home to Chinese Americans from diverse backgrounds, some whose attributes are similar to the median Indian American's and others with attributes more like the median Cambodian American's.

FIGURE 2.3
There’s tremendous diversity within Boston’s Asian American community.
 Ten largest Asian American subgroups by population size. 2017.



Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

In the cities, towns and neighborhoods where Asian Americans have settled, these rapid changes have been both embraced and contested. The remainder of this section examines two areas that provide examples of changing demographics, challenges and opportunities. One is the city of Quincy, just outside of Boston. The other is Fields Corner, which is part of Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood.

Quincy: A New Population Transforms a City

For decades, Quincy’s private and public decision makers have been focused on how best to undertake much-needed alterations to the city’s physical infrastructure. The challenge is a familiar one: revitalizing once vibrant downtown areas eviscerated by suburban shopping malls more readily accessible

from major highways. After much delay, the seeds of change have been bearing fruit. New traffic patterns, condo and apartment complexes, offices and retail establishments are finally beginning to change the face of Quincy. But as city planners consistently looked to a future of modern buildings and redesigned roadways, Asian Americans seized the moment. Without waiting on those long-planned improvements, they have moved to the City of Presidents, bought homes and opened businesses, transforming Quincy in ways unimagined by local policy makers.

Since its founding centuries ago, Quincy had been a nearly all-white enclave. But in the last few decades, a rapidly growing Asian American population has altered Quincy's demographics. In 1960, only 100 Asian Americans lived in the city. By 1990, there were 5,490 Asian Americans in Quincy. A little over 25 years later in 2016, the city's Asian American population had grown nearly five times, to 26,143—and 28 percent of the city's total population. **Figure 2.4** reflects the changes across race and ethnicity in Quincy since 1990.

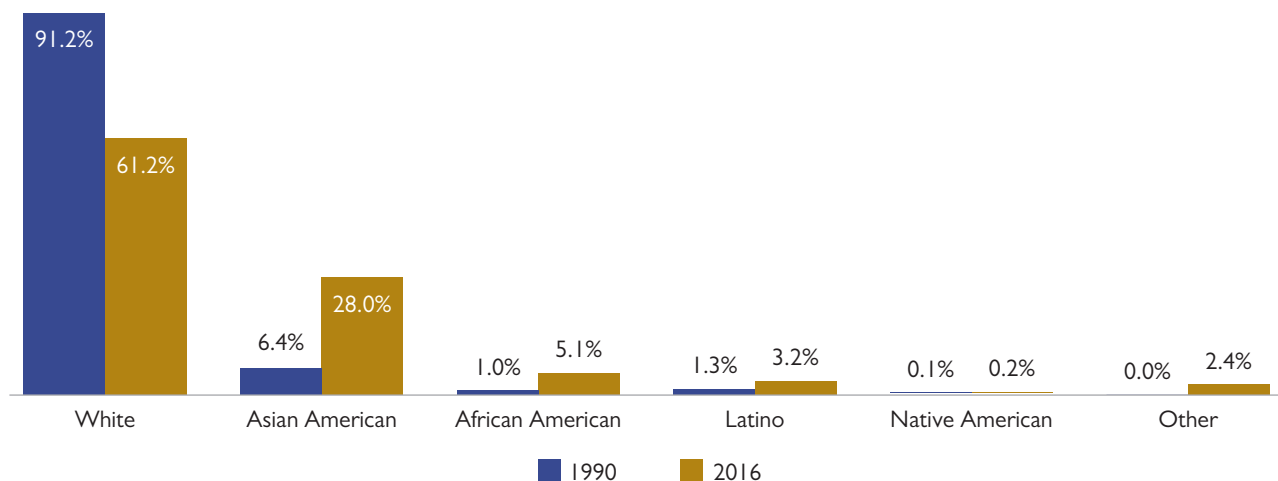
This is the highest concentration of Asian Americans in any city or town in Massachusetts.

Chinese Americans have largely been at the forefront of Asian American growth in the city. They currently represent 68 percent of Quincy's Asian American residents. However, there are notable populations of Vietnamese Americans (3,400) and Indian Americans (2,227), along with a small but established Filipino American community (fewer than 2,000).

Because it's located on the MBTA's Red Line, Quincy was once characterized as a convenient way station for Asian Americans squeezed out of Boston. Many longstanding residents with ancestral roots in Ireland, Italy, Scotland and Scandinavia considered the newcomers a passing nuisance or curiosity. But instead of being temporary sojourners, Asian Americans followed a path more similar to that of other immigrants who settled in Quincy throughout its history. They began to establish themselves in the city and to see their children—and even their grandchildren—call Quincy home.

FIGURE 2.4
Quincy's Asian American population has grown dramatically since 1990.

Population share by race and ethnicity.



Note: "Other" includes "Two or More Races," which was not an option in Census 1990, "Some Other Race Alone," and "Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander."

Source: U.S. Census 1990. 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

SEEKING PARTICIPATION AND POWER IN THE CITY OF PRESIDENTS

As is true for most largely immigrant communities, the process of civic engagement has been challenging for Quincy's Asian American residents. Slowly but surely, however, Asian Americans have begun to make an impact in civic and political realms. Joseph Shea, Quincy's recently retired city clerk, has kept track of Asian American electoral participation in the city for years. In 1992, he found only 1,518 Asian Americans on the voting rolls—a mere 3 percent of Quincy's registered electorate. In 2017 that number had increased to 9,313, constituting almost 16 percent of the city's registered voters (*Cotter, 2018*). The potential size of Quincy's Asian American electorate is even more substantial. If considerably more Asian Americans clear the citizenship hurdle and register to vote, their impact on the political landscape could be immense.

Quincy's Asian Americans have not just settled for being voters, however. They have also been willing to run for public office. Tackey Chan's election in 2011 to a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives was a historic breakthrough, as he was the first Asian American elected to that body. Since then, Representative Chan has won reelection four times, and now serves as Chair of the Joint Committee on Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure. Notably for Asian Americans in the state, he was a founder of the legislature's Asian Pacific American Caucus, which currently has six members. Tackey Chan's election paved the way for two other Asian Americans, Nina Liang and Noel DiBona, to make history as well by successfully running for the Quincy City Council in 2016.

However, in several areas, Asian Americans are still underrepresented at the municipal level. Asian Americans constitute 39 percent of Quincy's public school students, and in several schools students of Asian descent are the majority (*Ronan, 2016*). Yet the teachers in front of the classrooms do not reflect the diversity before them. Only 3.5 percent of Quincy teachers are Asian American. Similarly striking is

the lack of representation in Quincy's police and fire departments. In 2016, the police force was 207 strong, yet only six officers were Asian American. There were 198 firefighters in Quincy and only two were Asian American (*Ronan, 2016*).

Asian Americans have made an impact on Quincy's business climate. In 2016 Asian Americans owned about one in five of Quincy's small businesses (*Ronan, 2016*). Indeed, as far back as 15 years ago, the *Patriot Ledger* dubbed Quincy "Chinatown South," noting that it was home to Asian-owned businesses that were both large—such as the sprawling and bustling Kam Man Food marketplace—and small—including nail salons, bakeries and countless eateries (*Patriot Ledger, 2003*). The expansion of businesses catering largely, but not exclusively, to Asian Americans has on various occasions met with resistance, sparking complaints about traffic and congestion. At times such complaints at zoning hearings and council meetings have raised concerns that racially motivated factors have been behind them.

Responding to this growth and persistence, a number of well-established Asian American nonprofits in Boston have recently expanded into Quincy. The South Cove Community Health Center opened a clinic in North Quincy. The venerable Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center has opened a site in Quincy, and the Asian Community Development Corporation extended its services to include Quincy residents. South Cove Manor Nursing and Rehabilitation Center relocated to a new, modern facility in Quincy, abandoning its Boston Chinatown location.

In addition to organizations with roots in Boston, Quincy's Asian American community has developed its own nonprofit infrastructure as well. In particular, two nonprofits emerged in response to a comprehensive assessment of Quincy's Asian American community undertaken by Dr. Tom Lun-nap Chung in the late 1990s: Quincy Asian Collaborative and Quincy Asian Resources, Inc. (QARI) (*Chung, 1998*). Since its creation in 2001, QARI has developed a wide array of

services, which its website lists as including “multilingual information and referrals, adult education, youth programming and... acclaimed city-wide cultural events,” and it has entered into strategic partnerships with entities such as the MBTA, YMCA, Northeastern University, UMass Boston and Eastern Nazarene College (QARI, 2018).

THE NEED TO ADDRESS PERSISTENT ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The existence of these organizations is essential for Quincy’s Asian American community as it faces some persistent challenges. Like other communities that have early roots among immigrants largely drawn from the working class, many of Quincy’s Asian American residents face formidable economic struggles. The individual poverty rate for Asian Americans in Quincy is 11.8 percent, compared with 10.3 percent for the total population. The median household income for Asian Americans is \$61,871 compared with \$67,096 for all Quincy residents. In 2016, 44 percent of publicly subsidized residences managed by the Quincy Housing Authority were occupied by Asian Americans (Ronan, 2016). And 29 percent of city residents receiving food stamps were Asian Americans, even though there are strict limitations on the eligibility of those who are not U.S. citizens (Ronan, 2016).

The response of many of Quincy’s longstanding, predominantly white institutions to the growth of the Asian American population has been a mixture of indifference, resistance and, especially recently, acceptance. Asian Americans are clearly no longer simply newcomers. Quincy is their home. Their destiny and the well-being of all of the city’s institutions and residents are inextricably linked.

Dorchester: An Ethnic Enclave Persists in a Changing Neighborhood

Once primarily composed of residents with Irish, Italian and Jewish backgrounds, the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester began to change markedly in the 1960s and 1970s. Today Dorchester is home to an extremely diverse population of whites, African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos that includes people of Polish, Cape Verdean, Haitian and Vietnamese descent.

The Asian American community in Dorchester began to grow in the early 1980s and concentrated around the Fields Corner district. From a population of fewer than 500 in 1980, it grew to nearly 10,000 by 2000 (Boston Planning and Development Agency, 2017),ⁱ and exceeds 13,000 today. As **Figure 2.5** shows, by 2016 the white and Asian populations in Fields Corner were essentially the same size.

Vietnamese Americans, who comprise 75 percent of the Asian American population in Dorchester, began arriving as refugees in 1975 when the U.S. military left Vietnam. While some of the refugees—particularly those in the first wave—were well-educated professionals who spoke English, the majority were less skilled and non-English speaking. As a result, many had difficulties adjusting to life in the United States. Among the challenges the early Vietnamese American community faced were high unemployment, residential instability and family separation, low rates of home ownership, mental health issues and lack of social supports (Le, 1989).

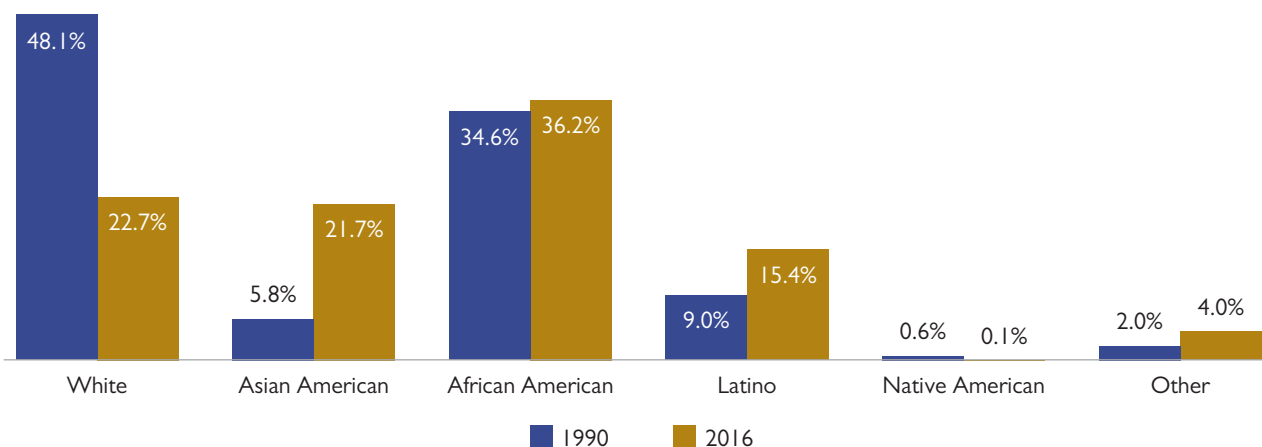
Fields Corner in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before the arrival of large numbers of Vietnamese Americans, was an arson-plagued, high crime area. Early Vietnamese American residents often faced harassment and vandalism (Liu and Lo, 2018). Over the next few decades, however, both the Fields Corner district and the Vietnamese American community experienced significant changes. Acceptance of the

ⁱ The Boston Planning and Development Agency combines Asians and Pacific Islanders in one category, but the number of Pacific Islanders in Dorchester is extremely small.

FIGURE 2.5

Driven by growth in the Vietnamese community, Fields Corner's Asian American population has grown dramatically since 1990.

Population share by race and ethnicity. Fields Corner neighborhood of Boston.



Notes: "Other" includes "Two or More Races" (not an option in Census 1990), "Some Other Race Alone," and "Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander."

Source: U.S. Census 1990. 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

Vietnamese American residents grew and they became an integral part of the neighborhood.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONS TO SERVE IT

Essential to the integration process was an increase in self-advocacy and civic involvement on the part of Vietnamese Americans. Originally the Vietnamese American Civic Association was the primary social service agency serving Vietnamese American residents and the community established several religious and social associations as well. The creation of the community development corporation, the Vietnamese American Initiative for Development (VietAID), in 1994 was a particularly important milestone for the Vietnamese community in Dorchester. Its leadership in convening a group of community members to design, finance and build the Vietnamese American Community Center in 2002—the first of its kind built from the ground up in the United States—was a nationally-recognized accomplishment. Today, VietAID administers a wide variety of services that are utilized by residents of all backgrounds including non-Vietnamese

Americans. In particular, its day-care program and affordable housing projects benefit the community as a whole, and its 18,000 square foot community center provides space for many different organizations and events. In turn, mainstream neighborhood agencies like Bartholomew Family Day Care, Neponset Health Center, Dorchester House and Kit Clark Senior Services have increased their capacities to serve Vietnamese Americans (*Liu and Lo, 2018*).

Ironically, a very public incident of bigotry mobilized the Vietnamese American community to become more civically engaged. In 1992, while riding down Dorchester Avenue for the Dorchester Day Parade, Boston City Councilor Albert (Dapper) O'Neil was videotaped insulting the Vietnamese American enclave. Community members mobilized to protest the indignity and in the process built new relationships with some elected officials. Subsequent initiatives to increase voter registration and turnout among Vietnamese Americans in Fields Corner have been very successful. Another effort that enabled greater civic engagement by the Vietnamese American

community was the successful fight for bilingual ballots in 2006. The measure became permanent policy in 2014 (*Liu and Lo, 2018*).

This Vietnamese American community in Dorchester has grown and matured. Although Vietnamese Americans make up only about 15 percent of residents in the Fields Corner area,ⁱⁱ their presence feels larger, due in large part to the visibility of Vietnamese-owned businesses that attract Vietnamese American customers from other parts of the region. From the handful of Vietnamese American businesses that existed in the early 1980s, the number grew to a few dozen by the mid-1990s. By 2005, 126 of Fields Corner's 225 small businesses were Vietnamese American-owned (*Borges-Mendez, Liu and Watanabe 2005*). Currently more than 50 percent of businesses, an estimated 145 of 259, in the Fields Corner area are owned by Vietnamese Americans (*Liu and Lo, 2018*).

THE CHALLENGE OF INEQUALITY AND INCREASING INACCESSIBILITY: INCOME, EDUCATION AND HOUSING

While Vietnamese American residents in Dorchester have made significant economic strides over the last two decades, challenges remain. The poverty rate for Asian Americans in the neighborhood is high at 26.9 percent, compared with 10.6 percent for the total population in Greater Boston. The median household income is \$48,407 compared with \$79,685 for the total population in Greater Boston. And while 46.1 percent of all Greater Boston residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, only 25.2 percent of Asian Americans in Dorchester have a college degree. Only 4.7 percent of Vietnamese Americans in Boston have a graduate degree compared to 20.5 percent for all residents in Greater Boston. English proficiency is also a challenge, particularly for Vietnamese American seniors in Boston of whom 85.1 percent speak English "not well" or "not at all."ⁱⁱⁱ

For many Vietnamese Americans, particularly new immigrants and the elderly who are less proficient in English, living in an ethnic enclave is more than just a comfort; it is crucial to accessing needed services. But like many other low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Dorchester has been experiencing dramatic increases in housing costs in both the rental and ownership markets. Developers have targeted the MBTA Red Line subway corridor in Dorchester as one of the last few undeveloped areas close to downtown Boston with easy access to public transportation. In the past five years (after the housing market recovered from the 2008 recession), median home values in South Dorchester grew by an astounding 76 percent, according to Zillow (*2018*). This is even greater than that experienced by Boston as a whole (51 percent). In South Dorchester, where Fields Corner is located, the median home value was \$496,400 in September 2018.

Residents have expressed concern and fear both about large-scale multi-use developments coming to Dorchester and widespread house flipping that may or already did prompt sharp rent increases and displacement of long-time renters. An executive director of a local Asian American nonprofit organization has observed that Dorchester residents, facing limited affordable housing options, have moved to cities and towns such as Quincy, Randolph, Brockton and Weymouth (*Chou, 2018*).

Currently planned in Fields Corner, for example, is construction of a massive development that was initially slated to consist of five buildings including 362 rental units, about 37,000 square feet of retail space, and a five-story garage (*Smith, 2018*). Spurred by concerns about the real estate purchase, local residents and organizations formed a group called Dorchester Not For Sale that has members of Vietnamese, Cape Verdean, European and African

ⁱⁱ This percentage derives from the 2010 population in 10 census tracts around Fields Corner as defined in Liu and Lo (2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Data on Vietnamese Americans is from the U.S. Census 2015 5-Year ACS.

American descent. The group has sought participation in the planning process for the project to draw attention to housing affordability, job opportunities and protection for small business owners.

Subsequently the proposal has been revised to include more affordable housing units, a park rather than an above-ground garage, and accommodation for smaller retail storefronts (*Logan, 2019*).

In summary, through persistence, resilience and resistance, Asian Americans assuredly strive to solidify their place in Boston's mosaic. The Asian American community has grown and become well-established in Dorchester alongside other racial groups. The future sustainability and well-being of this community, like that of other communities of color in Boston, however, remain uncertain.

