LATINOS IN GREATER BOSTON: MIGRATION, NEW COMMUNITIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF DISPLACEMENT

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The Latino community in Massachusetts is char-acter-ized by two important trends: dramatic population growth overall and increasing intra-Latino diversity in terms of country of origin, ethnicity, culture and language. Between 1980 and 2017, the state's Latino population increased by 475 percent, with many new Latino immigrants moving to Greater Boston as a result of the violence, repression and poor socio-economic conditions in their home countries.[i] With this surge in new arrivals have come changes in the overall makeup of the area's Latino population. Before the mid-1980s, Latinos in the state were primarily from Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. But in the mid-1980s and 1990s, Massachusetts experienced a significant influx of immigrants and refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Colombia—all countries where U.S. intervention contributed to civil wars followed by post-conflict social breakdown and economic devastation. That migration trend has continued in recent years. As of 2017, there were 811,038 Latinos living in Massachusetts, whose diverse origins include South America, Central America, North America and the Caribbean (**Figure 5.1**). Moreover, a recent Gastón Institute statewide projection suggests that our state's Latino population will grow to over 1 million by 2030, then comprising nearly 15 percent of the statewide population.

FIGURE 5.1

Latinos in the Commonwealth hail from a wide range of countries in the Americas.

The 10 largest Latino subgroups in Massachusetts by nativity. 2017.

		Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Total
1	Puerto Rican	334,959	-	334,959
2	Dominican (Dominican Republic)	79,888	92,689	172,577
3	Salvadoran	21,344	38,599	59,943
4	Guatemalan	15,992	26,118	42,110
5	Mexican	29,705	9,614	39,319
6	Colombian	12,701	24,320	37,021
7	Cuban	14,555	3,962	18,517
8	Ecuadorian	5,959	8,831	14,790
9	Honduran	2,162	10,809	12,971
10	Peruvian	3,500	5,261	8,761

Source: 2017 American Community Survey.

By far the largest Latino subpopulation in Massachusetts is the Puerto Rican community, whose members are U.S. citizens whether born in Puerto Rico or the mainland U.S. Taken together, Latinos from Caribbean nations (Puerto Rico, The Dominican Republic and Cuba) make up more than two-thirds of Latinos statewide. The next largest Latino group is of people from Central America—Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans. South Americans are the smallest regional Latino group in Massachusetts, the majority of whom are Colombian.

The unique cultures, languages and highly distinct conditions in the home countries of the various Latino subpopulations tend to relate to their socioeconomic well-being in Massachusetts. **Figure 5.2** maps the

[i] For detailed characteristics of the Latino subpopulations in East Boston and Waltham, the ACS does not provide estimates for these Latino populations. Thus, when examining 2006–2010 or 2012–2016 data, we can only extrapolate that Guatemalans represent their percentage of the Latino estimate of Waltham and that Salvadorans and Colombians represent their share of the East Boston Latino population. This allows for identifying trends for all Latinos from 2010 to 2016, but they cannot be quantified for these three populations.

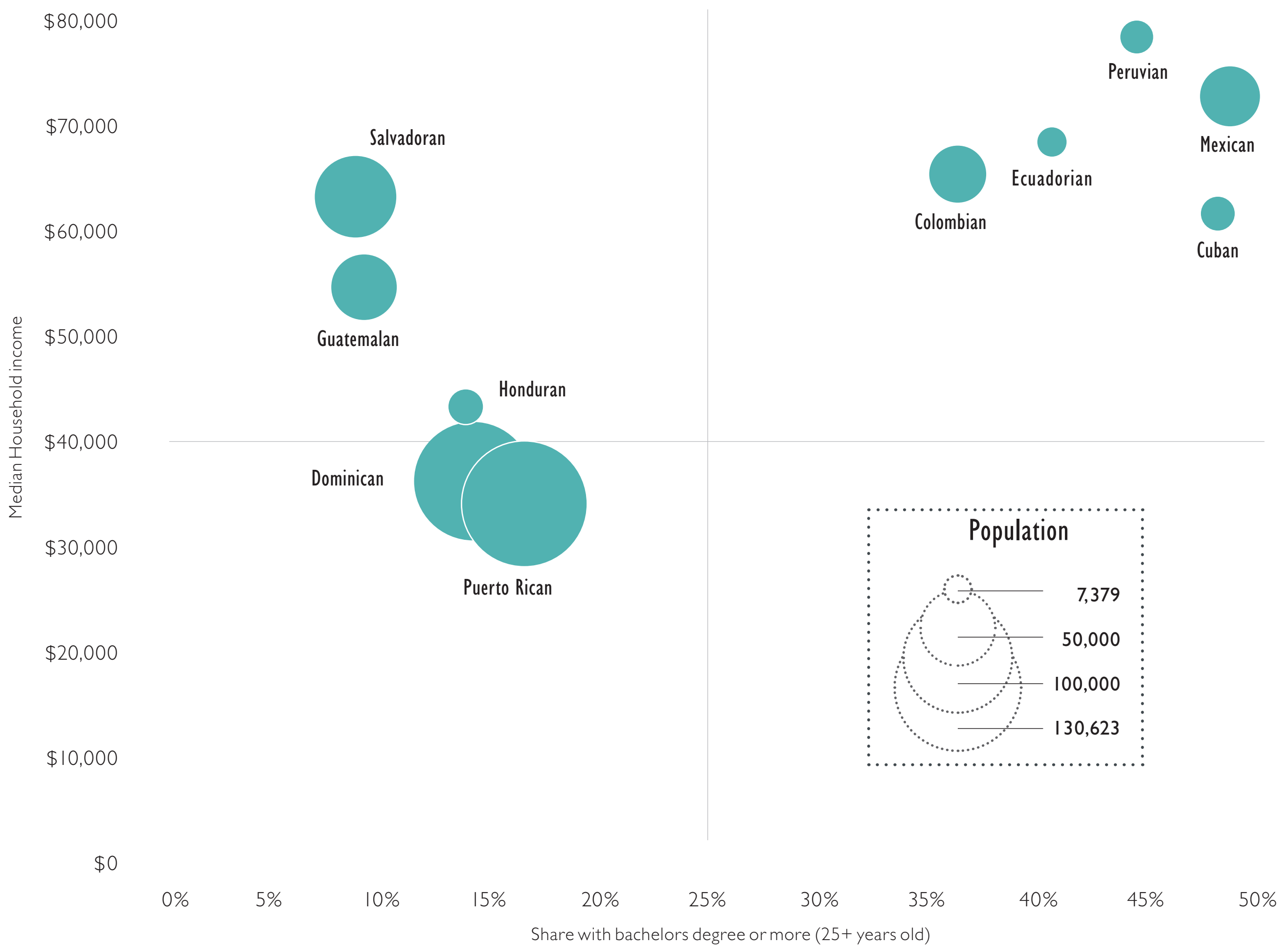
population size, educational attainment and median household income of the 10 largest Latino subpopulations in Massachusetts. The data illustrate how those with relatively poorer and less stable countries of origin or ancestry (Central America and the Caribbean) tend to cluster at the lower end of the skills-income distribution, while those from relatively more stable and prosperous countries (South America) have attained a greater degree of economic well-being here in Greater Boston.

In this section, we focus on two communities where Latino population growth has been especially rapid: Waltham, with its significant Guatemalan population, and East Boston, where Colombians have recently concentrated. In both of these locations, a large share of the population growth since 2010 can be attributed to Latino migration, facilitated by a gradual consolidation of Latino social networks and relationships that paved the way for new arrivals to succeed. These two populations illustrate the ways in which Latino

FIGURE 5.2

There's significant diversity *within* Greater Boston's Latino community.

Top 10 countries of ancestry for Latinos. 2017.



Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

subgroups can be characterized by important cultural differences and disparities in quality of life. For example, only 8 percent of all Guatemalans in Greater Boston have a bachelor's degree or more and their median income is $52,155. The situation for Colombians is quite different: 32 percent have a bachelor's degree or more and their median income is $62,639. But despite such differences, the similarities are striking. Both groups have made significant contributions to the economic growth of their communities. Both suffer from the lack of Latino representation and leadership in the political, corporate and nonprofit spheres and share a need for more culturally and linguistically responsive services, particularly in areas whose Latino populations have grown rapidly in the past decade. Both also have been critically impacted by the high cost of housing, with increasing rents pushing them out of communities where they have put down roots, raised families and built social networks that have helped them thrive.

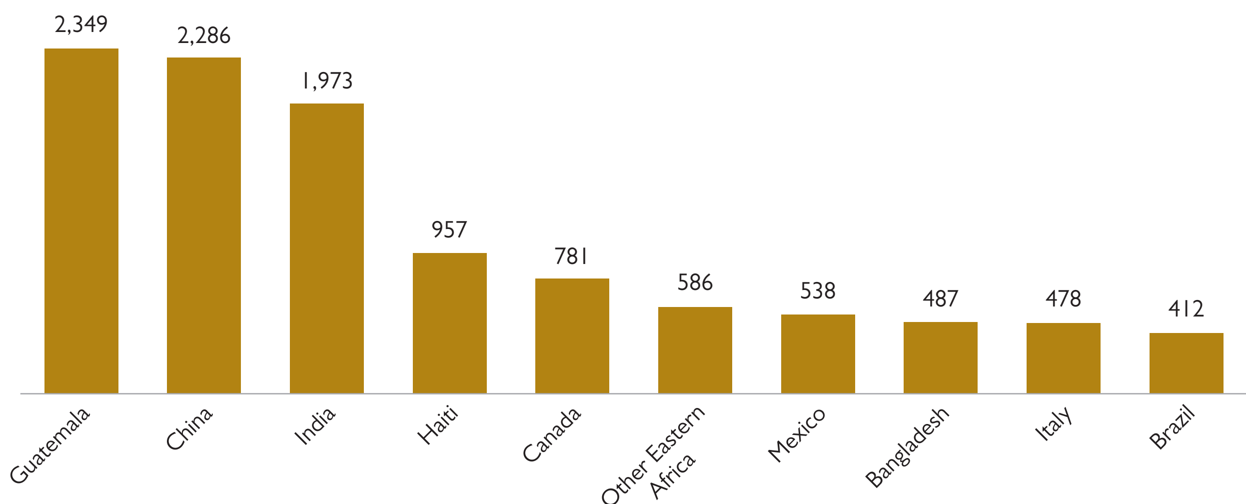
From Guatemala to Greater Boston: Chapines in Waltham

Founded in 1738, Waltham was a leading center of the American Industrial Revolution. The Charles River runs through the city, and its waters powered textile mills like those of the Boston Manufacturing Company, the first mill in the world to mass-produce cotton cloth "from start to finish" (*Mannon, 1978: 7–8*). In the 19th century, the Waltham Watch Company was the world's largest watch factory. In the 20th century, Waltham became an early home for computer and electronics companies, site of the first critical inventions of microwaves and lasers. Today, the city remains a hub for the technology industry in Massachusetts. Nevertheless, though surrounded by some of Greater Boston's wealthiest towns, Waltham itself has remained relatively affordable, with a downtown known for its wide variety of ethnic restaurants and retail establishments. Among these are Latino markets, bakeries and restaurants that cater to an emerging population of Central American origin, the majority of whom are Guatemalan (**Figure 5.3**).

FIGURE 5.3

Immigrants living in Waltham come from many parts of the world.

Top 10 countries of origin for foreign-born Waltham residents. 2017.



Note: The American Community Survey does not specify Uganda, which is noted anecdotally as having a large presence in Waltham, and so for this region the "Other Eastern Africa" category is included here.

Source: 2013-2017 American Community Survey.

Waltham has long been a destination for international migrants, and today it has a greater concentration of foreign-born residents (28 percent) than the Commonwealth as a whole (16 percent). Immigrants living in Waltham come from many parts of the world, including Latin America, Asia and Africa.

According to researchers Phillip Granberry and Priyanka Kabir, the growth rate of the Latino population in Waltham is similar to that of rates reported for Latinos statewide. Guatemalans are a significant factor in the city's overall Latino growth, currently representing 30 percent of the city's Latino population. Waltham's Guatemalan residents are part of the fourth largest Spanish-speaking Latino subgroup in the state, numbering roughly 42,000; in the Greater Boston MetroWest area (of which Waltham is a part), Guatemalans are the second largest subgroup of Latinos (*Granberry and Kabir, 2015*).

POLARIZATION, INEQUALITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Waltham's Guatemalan community benefits from proximity to some of the wealthiest towns in the area, where workers find job opportunities in landscaping, construction, snow plowing, cleaning and domestic work. According to the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA), "more than 43 percent work in service occupations, and 28 percent work in blue-collar jobs such as construction, transportation, production, installation and maintenance" (*BPDA, 2017: 8*). Between 2010 and 2016, the number of Waltham Latinos working in service jobs declined, while the real wages of workers increased by about $3,000. This trend is even more pronounced for full-time year-round workers, who experienced an increase of almost $10,000 in Waltham. These numbers suggest that Latinos in Waltham may be doing better than those in other areas. Nevertheless, there are serious economic issues affecting Latinos, and in particular the Guatemalan community, in Waltham.

Waltham faces some critical challenges when it comes to serving its Guatemalan immigrant population. A 2006 Brandeis University assessment noted the need for more immigrant-friendly, Spanish-speaking services in the city (Sier, 2006). Currently, Waltham's Family Resilience Network mobilizes resources to improve the well-being of Waltham's immigrant families; members include Reach Beyond Domestic Violence, Peers Against Violence, Charles River Health Services and Jewish Family Services. A variety of additional agencies provide services to immigrant youth and families, including Waltham Partnership for Youth, the YMCA, More Than Words, Boys & Girls Club and the Waltham Family School. But Guatemalans in Waltham face critical barriers to accessing such services. This is because many Guatemalan families are undocumented or of mixed immigration status. Even though Latinos in Waltham have actually gone from being 60 percent foreign-born to majority native-born since 2010, many still live in fear of deportation. This fear has been exacerbated by Trump administration rhetoric and policies; people are often reluctant to engage with service providers and government agencies or to reach out for assistance when they need it.

Prominent among the quality of life issues affecting Waltham's Latinos is a lack of affordable housing. According to one leader interviewed by the Gastón Institute, the quality of life for Waltham's Latinos is diminishing due to increasing rents and home prices. With a median gross rent of $1,507 in 2017, multiple families are sharing living spaces, and extended families and non-related individuals are sharing apartments. Some community leaders feel that landlords are taking advantage of immigrants and charging them higher rents. Some believe that the next Census will show a significant drop in Waltham's Guatemalan population, as Guatemalans move to areas such as Framingham, Marlborough and Lynn because they can no longer afford to live in Waltham.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Another challenge for Waltham's Guatemalans is finding a stronger voice in the larger community. One Latino—Carlos Vidal, a Peruvian—sits on the Waltham City Council. Casa Guatemala founder Elvis Jocol is the only person of color to serve on Waltham's Chamber

of Commerce. Key community members interviewed by the Gastón note that while a handful of individuals have emerged as charismatic leaders in the Latino community, they tend to act on their own rather than be based in established nonprofits or agencies. Collective leadership needs to be strengthened if Latinos, and Guatemalans in particular, are to increase their representation in the city. In addition, Guatemalans face particular barriers to greater civic engagement. For some, the expectation that they will someday return to their homeland makes them less likely to focus on civic participation in the United States. Several Waltham leaders described Guatemalans as unlikely to "resist or organize" against discrimination or oppression, a reluctance rooted in traumatic memories of political repression and government-sponsored violence against their communities.

Guatemalan newcomers who hail from indigenous Maya communities were targeted for genocide and repression during the country's long and brutal civil war. Many Maya who come to the U.S. speak one of Guatemala's 21 Mayan dialects as their primary language—most likely, in this area, Maya Q'iche. Receiving communities may find it particularly challenging to meet the needs of these newcomers, who bring not only unique linguistic needs but a cultural experience that is rich but little understood. Latino leaders interviewed by the Gastón Institute were quick to cite these challenges. One noted that he was hired to provide medical interpreter services, only to find that the family he was trying to help did not speak Spanish, but rather a Mayan dialect. The school system, as well, has been challenged by an influx of students and families who speak a Mayan language as their mother tongue.

Nevertheless, Guatemalans have had an unmistakable impact on the city's schools. In 2018–2019, 41 percent of all students in Waltham Public Schools were Latino. At Waltham High School (WHS) an estimated 12.5 percent of Latino students have immigrant status. Seventeen percent of WHS students are English language learners, and many of these are classified as Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education. Latino students, including many Guatemalans, make up a large proportion of these categories. Latino students have the school district's highest dropout rate at 16 percent, and lowest college enrollment, 59 percent. Such low college enrollment very likely is the result of a large share of Latino households being economically disadvantaged and their students being English language learners. While it is impossible to accurately count undocumented individuals and families, advocates believe that the majority of Guatemalan students in Waltham's public schools are undocumented.

One leader interviewed by the Gastón criticized the schools for having an "assimilationist" approach, and posited that Waltham is experiencing "white flight" due to the shifting student population. But at least at the high school level, there have been concerted efforts to address the needs of the district's Latino and other immigrant students. These include a Newcomer Academy and a program to train Guatemalans to act as Maya Q'iche interpreters and partner with family engagement coordinators on outreach to Guatemalan families. Such efforts suggest that the schools have the potential to be a critical pathway for Guatemalans to both find their place and make their mark in the larger Waltham community.

Recognizing the need for more public education about Guatemala's history and rich cultural diversity, Elvis Jocol, a Guatemalan civic leader and, as mentioned, the only person of color to serve on Waltham's Chamber of Commerce, co-founded Casa Guatemala in 2009. Its website explains that Casa Guatemala was "founded by young Guatemalan leaders who understand the struggle of balancing two worlds while trying to succeed in one. To ensure a better future without forgetting the past, Casa Guatemala aims to preserve and celebrate Guatemalan culture and at the same time empower all Latino youth to become the future leaders of tomorrow."[ii] With the help of volunteers from Brandeis

[ii] http://www.casaguatemalaboston.org/.

and Bentley universities, Casa Guatemala offers after-school tutoring and college readiness for Latino youth and their families. Every September, the organization sponsors the annual raising of the Guatemalan flag at City Hall, along with a concert and cultural festivities in collaboration with Latinos en Acción and other local organizations representing Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, Colombians and Haitians. (*Valienti, 2016; Whelan, 2016*).

The Journey from Don Matías: Colombians Make Their Mark in East Boston

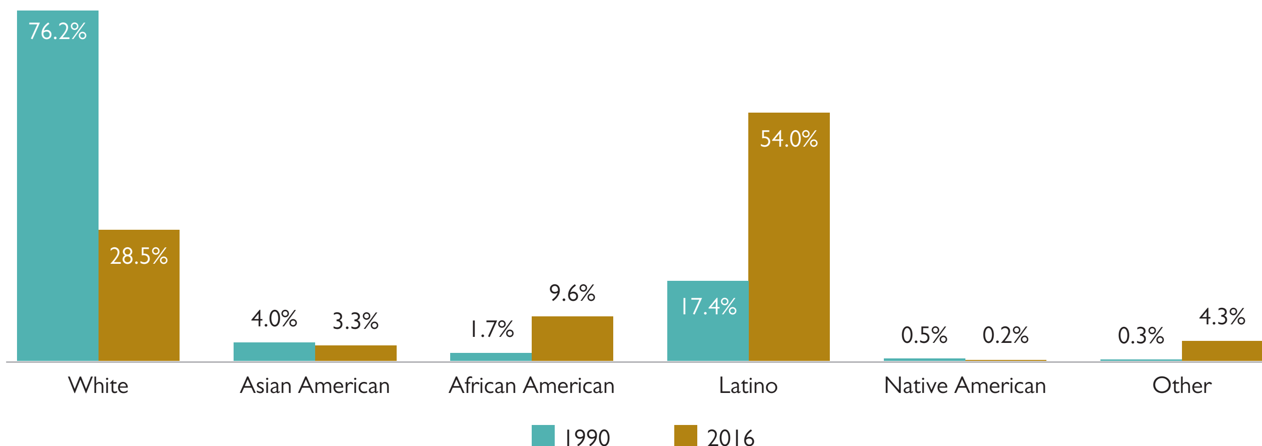
Founded in 1636, East Boston once comprised "five separate islands—Noddle, Hog, Governor's, Bird and Apple islands. The area supplied firewood and open land for grazing cattle throughout the 17th and 18th centuries" (*Sammarco, 1997: 7*), according to a popular history of Eastie. Since then, the neighborhood's story has been one of continual development and displacement. Over 633 acres of upland and marsh were filled in by the East Boston Company on a massive project that developed Jeffries Point, Eagle Hill and Orient Heights. In 1836 the Eastern Railroad Company was established with a terminal in East Boston's Maverick Square and then in 1839 the Cunard Line of ships established its first port in the United States in Maverick Square. In the 1920s the development of Logan Airport led to the demise of Wood Island Park, and continued expansion by MassPort through the 1960s led to the bulldozing of homes and displacement of families. By 1976 Logan had become an international airport and quadrupled in size (*Sammarco, 1997: 92*), and today it takes up most of the land in East Boston. Yet for those who live in the neighborhood today, change in the form of gentrification is a looming presence.

Change has also been a theme in regard to the neighborhood's demographics. Nowhere is this more evident than in East Boston's Latino population. In 1970, the neighborhood had fewer than 500 Latino residents. In the 1980s, a stream of refugees from El Salvador's civil war settled in the neighborhood, whose existing population was primarily Italian with some Cambodian, Vietnamese and Brazilian immigrants. Today, more than half the residents of East Boston, 54 percent, are Latino (**Figure 5.4**).

FIGURE 5.4

East Boston's Latino population has grown more than 3x since 1990.

Population share by race and ethnicity.



Note: "Other" includes "Two or More Races," which was not an option in 1990, "Some Other Race Alone," and "Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander."
Source: U.S. Census 1990. 2012–2016 American Community Survey

While Salvadorans are the largest Latino subpopulation in East Boston, we focus this case study on the neighborhood's Colombian population, which is growing rapidly (**Figure 5.5**). Also, the Gastón Institute has done longstanding research on Colombians in the region and they have received less attention in the public discourse than some other Latino groups.

FIGURE 5.5

Salvadorans and Colombians make up the largest Latino populations in East Boston.

Populations with Hispanic or Latino origins. East Boston. 2016.

Origins	Total Population
Salvadoran	13,022
Colombian	4,930
Guatemalan	1,820
Mexican	1,770
Puerto Rican	1,416
Dominican	1,044
Peruvian	679
Honduran	440
Costa Rican	204
Argentinian	139

Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

According to the Boston Planning and Development Agency: "Colombian migration to the U.S. has taken place in phases, fueled by civil war in the 1950s, drug-related violence in the 1980s, and collapsing social institutions in the mid-1990s. While the 1980s migration was primarily from rural areas, 1990s migrants were more urban and included more professionals. As a result, the Colombian population in the United States represents diverse segments of the country's population" (*BPDA, 2017: 3*). Massachusetts has the seventh largest Colombian population in the United States. Boston is home to a quarter of Massachusetts' Colombians, 61 percent of whom live in East Boston (*BPDA*).

The Gastón Institute interviewed one East Boston Colombian community leader who noted that most of the more than 4,000 Colombians in East Boston come from Don Matías, a small Andean town outside of Medellín, Colombia's second largest city. Migration from Don Matías to Boston began in the late 1960s, with a new wave beginning in the 1980s and 1990s when paramilitaries brought violence and armed conflicts to the area. Don Matías is a center for Colombia's textile factories, and its residents gravitated to work in New England's textile industry, which was declining but still a source of employment for those with the necessary skills (*Chomsky, 2008*). According to blogger Caraballo, who writes about Colombians in East Boston: "When one donmatieño arrives to Boston, finds a job and saves some money, he or she sends it back to Don Matías to help another relative make the journey to the U.S." The newcomers often found housing in the neighborhood's ubiquitous triple-deckers, some of which had been purchased by earlier Colombian arrivals who lived in one apartment while renting the other two to family and friends. This process of migration and settlement "explains why 25 percent of the town's population live in Boston," writes Caraballo, who notes that East Boston's sizeable Spanish-speaking population, relatively affordable rents, accessibility to public transit and closeness to service industry jobs at Logan Airport, hotels and other Boston venues have made it an attractive place for Colombians to settle (*Caraballo, 2015*).

POLARIZATION, INEQUALITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE

The affordable housing stock that drew immigrants to East Boston is no longer a reality. Between 1996 and 2018, home values in East Boston increased by an extraordinary 800 percent, the highest increase for any of Boston's neighborhoods. The median home value is now $476,100 in East Boston. The median rent in East Boston in 2015 was $1,139, compared with $1,320 for Boston as a whole (*BPDA, 2018*).

Activity by private developers who recognize the area's economic potential has driven up housing costs and seems to have exacerbated a gentrification process. According to a 2018 report, East Boston's housing development will continue to grow with 2,828 new units of housing approved between 2010 and 2015 (*BPDA: 17*). But it is unlikely that Latinos in East Boston, including Colombians, will benefit from all this new housing development. The most recent statistics from the BPDA show that "Colombians are less likely to own their own home (13 percent) than other Latinos (17 percent) and non-Latinos (37 percent). More than half of Colombian households (53 percent) are housing burdened and pay more than 30 percent of their income in housing costs" (*BPDA: 8*). In an interview with the Gastón, one Colombian community leader who moved to East Boston in 1983 commented on the impact of recent development in the neighborhood. "The Colombian population is shrinking because of gentrification," she noted. "Many people are moving to Revere. Some cannot afford Revere so they are also moving to Lynn." Concerns about declining enrollment at East Boston High School is a sign of this trend.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Despite the pressures that are forcing many out of the neighborhood, Colombians have made a significant economic impact on East Boston. As of 2015, labor force participation among Colombians was especially high—80 percent—compared with other Latinos and non-Latinos, who participated in the labor force at rates of 66 percent and 68 percent, respectively. Poverty among Colombians was lower than for other Latino subgroups in Boston. Most Colombians work in Boston's service sector and only 8 percent worked in professional or managerial jobs in 2015. However, Colombians have a very high rate of self-employment, which is indicative of entrepreneurial activity (*BPDA, 2017*).

This propensity for self-employment is documented by Gastón Institute research on Latino business owners in East Boston, of whom the majority were Colombian. One informant noted that historically, entrepreneurship has been part of Don Matías' local culture, and residents carry that mindset with them when they migrate: "Anywhere they move… the first thing [they] do is open a business. Look at the amount of beauty salons, restaurants, stores; they are going to start businesses wherever they move." Thus, Colombian entrepreneurs have contributed to "a spatially-consolidated Latino business presence … that is attracting businesses to locate in East Boston as well as incubating new Latino and non-Latino businesses and promoting general commercial stability" (*Borges-Mendez, et al., 2005: 33*). Business owners interviewed by the Gastón described how the expansion of the East Boston immigrant community has increased the number of Latino businesses and revitalized areas such as Maverick, Day and Central squares. Boston Police confirmed the positive impact that such businesses have had on safety and reduced crime.

Gastón Institute researchers documented a process of immigrant business growth that began when current business owners arrived in East Boston in their teens and earlier twenties, and were mentored by older, more established entrepreneurs from their community. What is remarkable is that these Latino business-owners were almost entirely self-reliant. According to those researchers, "Proudly, business owners in their narratives told stories of saving every penny and of raising funds among friends, employers and family members who had confidence in the future success of the enterprise" (*Borges-Mendez et al., 2006: 36*). Nearly all business owners relied on income from property ownership and equity to obtain additional capital or invest directly into their businesses. Employees often included relatives and Latino workers, but sometimes non-Latinos were hired for specific skills or to provide access to non-Latino clientele. Businesses often relied on Latino suppliers and service providers and some businesses utilized highly particular co-ethnic distribution channels for supplies. City and state officials praised the vibrant Latino business community, but also suggested those businesses were not well connected with local economic development programs. In fact,

since the report came out in 2006, there has been an increased investment by the local Chamber of Commerce and other initiatives to support immigrant entrepreneurs.

A unique contribution made by Colombians and other Latino immigrants to East Boston's economy is the establishment of worker-owned cooperatives—a business model common in Latin American countries that is less familiar in the United States. Luz Zambrano, host of the radio show *Cooperaya* on Zumix Radio 94.9 FM, believes that joining a cooperative is valued and a desirable pathway to economic success for immigrants. Her program highlights successful cooperatives in the fields of arts and crafts, media and technology, catering, and cleaning in East Boston. Often organized by Colombian women, these enterprises provide socio-emotional support as well as basic infrastructure, financing and mobilization of resources for immigrant entrepreneurs who may not have access traditional forms of capital to start their own businesses.[iii]

In addition to their strong leadership in the business arena, Colombians have also made their mark on East Boston's robust nonprofit sector, as staff of nonprofits and leaders of community organizing initiatives. According to Caraballo (2015), "Although Colombians have not formed their own service organizations, they have contributed to pan-Latino organizations, such as the East Boston Ecumenical Community Council (EBECC). Founded to aid immigrants and refugees in the 1980s, EBECC has evolved into a neighborhood-based organization that promotes the advancement of Latino immigrants of all ages through education, services, advocacy, community organizing and leadership development." Two local churches, Most Holy Redeemer and Our Saviour's Lutheran Church are notable for welcoming and advocating for East Boston immigrants; the former is the religious home for many Colombians, and the latter played a key role in the establishment of both EBECC and the Neighborhood Association of Affordable Housing (NOAH), as well as organizing campaigns against gentrification and ICE deportation. In addition, Caraballo notes: "Colombian immigrants sustain their culture through local religious and cultural organizations such as Bajucol, a traditional Colombian folk dance group founded in 1995 by Miguel Vargas, a Colombian immigrant who moved to Boston to attend Northeastern University. El Festival Colombiano, celebrating Colombia's Independence Day in mid-July, was founded as an East Boston event in 2009; its relocation to City Hall Plaza in 2016 is a sign of the growing profile of the city's Colombian population."

Such visibility has not yet translated into political power or representation for the Colombian community—whether in East Boston, the city or the Greater Boston region. Though there are several notable Colombians in leadership positions at City Hall, running for office is not common. One community leader speculates about the reason for this scarcity of candidates, observing, "I cannot speak for everyone. But coming from Colombia myself, I feel change comes from people. We cannot wait for people in power to change anything and that was so true when I lived in Colombia where there is so much corruption and power is concentrated in wealthy families. Why bother trying to run for office when we can make a difference in our school or something like that? Change always comes from the bottom and not the top. Maybe other people when they come here feel the same way."

The challenges Latinos face in East Boston and Waltham reflect some of the universal hurdles faced by many immigrants in Massachusetts. As described in this section, there are important differences and quality of life issues affecting distinct Latino populations. It is critical that we understand more deeply the many socio-cultural differences among Latinos so we can more effectively address their specific community needs. In the cases of Waltham's and East Boston's Latino communities there is a clear need for greater representation, leadership, voice and power in the political, corporate and nonprofit spheres.

[iii] https://www.zumix.org/radio.