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BOSTON

# GREAT MIGRATION TO GLOBAL IMMIGRATION:

*A Profile of* **Black Boston**

APRIL 2023





## **ABOUT BOSTON INDICATORS**

Boston Indicators is the research center at the Boston Foundation, which works to advance a thriving Greater Boston for all residents across all neighborhoods. We do this by analyzing key indicators of well-being and by researching promising ideas for making our city more prosperous, equitable and just. To ensure that our work informs active efforts to improve our city, we work in deep partnership with community groups, civic leaders and Boston's civic data community to produce special reports and host public convenings.

## **ABOUT THE BOSTON FOUNDATION**

Founded in 1915, the Boston Foundation is one of the first and most influential community foundations in the country. In partnership with community members, donors, the public sector, businesses and nonprofits, we aim to repair past harms and build a more equitable future for our city and region. Supported by the Annual Campaign for Civic Leadership, we publish research into the most critical issues of our time, convene large groups of people to discuss the city's agenda and the region's trends—and use our shared knowledge to advocate for public policies that promote equity and opportunity for everyone. The Boston Foundation is also one of the largest grantmakers in New England, providing support to nonprofit organizations in Greater Boston through our endowment and working closely with our donors to support nonprofits locally, nationally and internationally.

## **ABOUT EMBRACE BOSTON**

Founded in 2017, Embrace Boston envisions a radically inclusive and equitable Boston where everyone belongs and Black people prosper, grounded in joy, love, and well-being. Embrace Boston dismantles structural racism at the intersection of arts and culture, community, and research. Our theory of change aims to influence two key levers in moving Boston towards greater equity and inclusion: public policies and cultural representations.



# GREAT MIGRATION TO GLOBAL IMMIGRATION

## *A Profile of* **Black Boston**

APRIL 2023

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## *Dear Friends,*

The Boston Foundation has set out on a pathway to advance equity and honor diversity in our communities. As we seek actions to erase the racial wealth gap and other inequities in the region, and to best celebrate the cultural richness that has grown here, we must have a thorough understanding of the landscape. That includes the challenges that face us and, more than that, the abundance of potential there is to meet those challenges—where the very people living in our region are our most powerful resources for positive change.

This report contributes meaningfully to that understanding, by clearly outlining past and present demographic trends that illustrate the growing diversity—of identity and ancestry, income, location, and more—within our region's Black population.

It tells a positive story, detailing the expanding Black community of Boston and Greater Boston, and highlighting its uniqueness within the United States. This report puts data to changes we may have learned about in history class and to more recent trends we've anecdotally observed as new faces, cultures, and communities make their presence known in the public and civic life of our region.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge that even with these positive developments, significant socioeconomic disparities persist both between different racial categories and within the Black community itself. Due to a long legacy of government-sponsored and institutionally supported policies and actions that directly discriminated against Black Americans, Black residents today overall hold fewer degrees, make less money, and have significantly less wealth compared with other racial and ethnic groups in the region—and similar stratifications are echoed across Black subpopulations.



This report, then, serves two purposes: First, to quantify past and emerging trends so we have a clear picture of demographics in our region. Second, to highlight the history and policies—both local and global—that have driven these trends. Thus armed with more nuanced knowledge of what brings people and builds community here, as well as the ways in which Boston has been disproportionately challenging for some, we are better prepared to move forward.

*Great Migration to Global Immigration* offers a foundation upon which we may recalibrate how we talk about, count, and recognize our Black population. And, as seen in the conclusion of this report, that foundation can be a platform for well-informed questioning and conversation about matters of concern to all: community organizing and philanthropy, political coalitions and reparations, and how we might as a region embrace and benefit from the courage, resilience, and creativity of our beautifully diverse Black communities.



M. Lee Pelton, President and CEO  
The Boston Foundation

# INTRODUCTION



# Boston's history on racial justice is decidedly mixed.

As a liberal, northern city, Boston served as a relative haven for influential Black leaders like W.E.B DuBois, William Monroe Trotter, and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as for leading White abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child. Boston is where the first branch of the NAACP was chartered. And Massachusetts was among the first U.S. states to abolish slavery and to legalize interracial marriage. Other facts run counter to this positive narrative, however. Boston was a busy port for the slave trade through to the late 1700s, and it remained complicit in the practice for decades after the state's abolition of slavery in 1783. Racist backlash to our growing Black and immigrant populations persisted throughout the 1900s and peaked with the violent resistance to school desegregation during the 1970s. Today, Greater Boston's suburbs remain among the most racially segregated in the country, due in part to a longstanding practice of exclusionary zoning rules that largely remain on the books.

Symbolized by the unveiling of the Embrace Memorial in January of 2023, new efforts have blossomed to help realize the unfulfilled promise of genuine racial equity in our region. Recent political organizing has generated a new class of Black elected leadership, including the first Black woman to hold statewide office in Massachusetts. And the public discourse has shifted, with more residents newly open to considering progressive actions to repair past harms and build new systems that are more inclusive and welcoming.

With this as backdrop, our paper provides an analysis of who makes up Black Boston today, how that has changed over time, and how disparities by income and by wealth manifest across Black communities. We hope that this detailed data on the diverse Black population of Greater Boston proves useful for informing the region's growing efforts for racial justice. The report is organized into four parts.



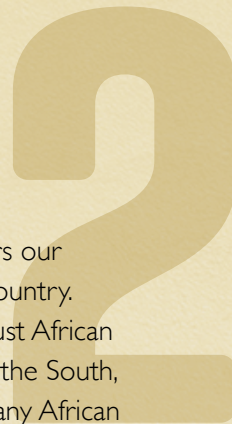
# Report Overview



## **BLACK POPULATION GROWTH ACROSS GREATER BOSTON.**

For a long time, eastern Massachusetts had a relatively small Black population that was concentrated in the city of Boston. But our region's Black population has grown steadily over the past several decades and, in part due to soaring housing prices in the urban core, it has grown rapidly in a few other parts of the region, especially in communities south of Boston, like Brockton, Randolph, and Stoughton. Today, roughly two-thirds of our region's Black population lives outside of Boston. This section explores these trends and shows how longstanding patterns of residential segregation are shaping where Black families are looking to settle down and purchase homes.

## **THE GROWING DIVERSITY OF BLACK COMMUNITIES IN GREATER BOSTON.**



While Boston's Black community was never monolithic, in recent years our Black population has become one of the most diverse in the entire country. The demographic history of Boston's Black community includes not just African American families who moved here during the Great Migration from the South, but also Black families from the West Indies, Haiti, Cape Verde, and many African nations. Additionally, the number of Black residents with Latino/a ancestries (i.e., Afro-Latinos)<sup>1</sup> has grown rapidly. This section details these unique origins and explores trends specific to several of our region's largest Black subpopulations.





## 3 SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES AND WEALTH.


The continuing legacy of structural racism in the United States has left many Black families in a particularly precarious economic position. In this section of the report, we detail how in Greater Boston, socioeconomic disparities for Black families fall along two dimensions: 1) intra-racial disparities across Black subpopulations, such as when disaggregating by ancestry or country of origin; and 2) cross-racial disparities for Black residents in the aggregate when compared to other racial groups.

## SEVEN KEY QUESTIONS.

This report is not designed to advance a specific agenda for policy change, and yet some clear implications emerge from these findings. So, in hopes of sparking conversation and engagement for action, we end the report with seven questions related to public policy, civic involvement, and promising strategies for eliminating longstanding racial inequalities.

# PART 1:

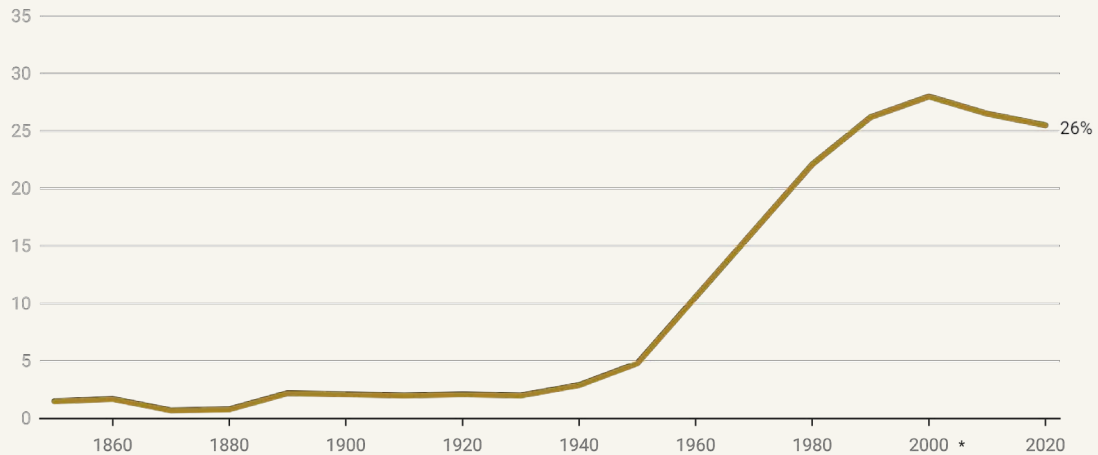
# BLACK POPULATION GROWTH ACROSS GREATER BOSTON



Up until around World War II, Boston had a small but concentrated Black population, made up of people who were formerly enslaved, their descendants, and a smaller number of immigrants born abroad. In 1850, Black residents made up 1.5 percent of the city, roughly on par with the U.S. overall and a bit below the share in other northern cities like New York (2.4 percent).<sup>2</sup> Boston's Black population share remained in the low single digits into the mid-1900s before it started to grow steadily throughout the rest of the 20th century (see Figure 1). This was primarily a result of the massive movement of Black families from Southern states to the Northeast and Midwest known as the Great Migration, and new waves of Black immigration from the West Indies.

**Figure 1: Boston’s Black population increased most during the second half of the 20th century.**

Black population share. Total selecting Black, including multiracial Black and Afro-Latino. City of Boston. 1850 - 2020.



*\*Note: 1960 and 1970 values were not available within the data and are estimated here. Beginning in 2000, respondents to the US Census were allowed to select multiple race group responses. Also, we use Boston rather than Greater Boston here due to more consistent administrative boundaries through census years.*

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 1850 - 2000 U.S. Decennial Census. IPUMS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. 2010, 2020 U.S. Decennial Census. • Created with Datawrapper

Focusing on more recent trends, we see that the Black population of Greater Boston has increased steadily in the last 40 years, reaching just over 477,000 residents in 2020. This growth is new in two important ways: 1) much of it is now being driven by multiracial and multi-ethnic Black and Afro-Latino residents (primarily Afro-Dominican or Afro-Puerto Rican), and 2) since 1980, most of this growth has come in cities and towns outside of Boston (Figure 2).

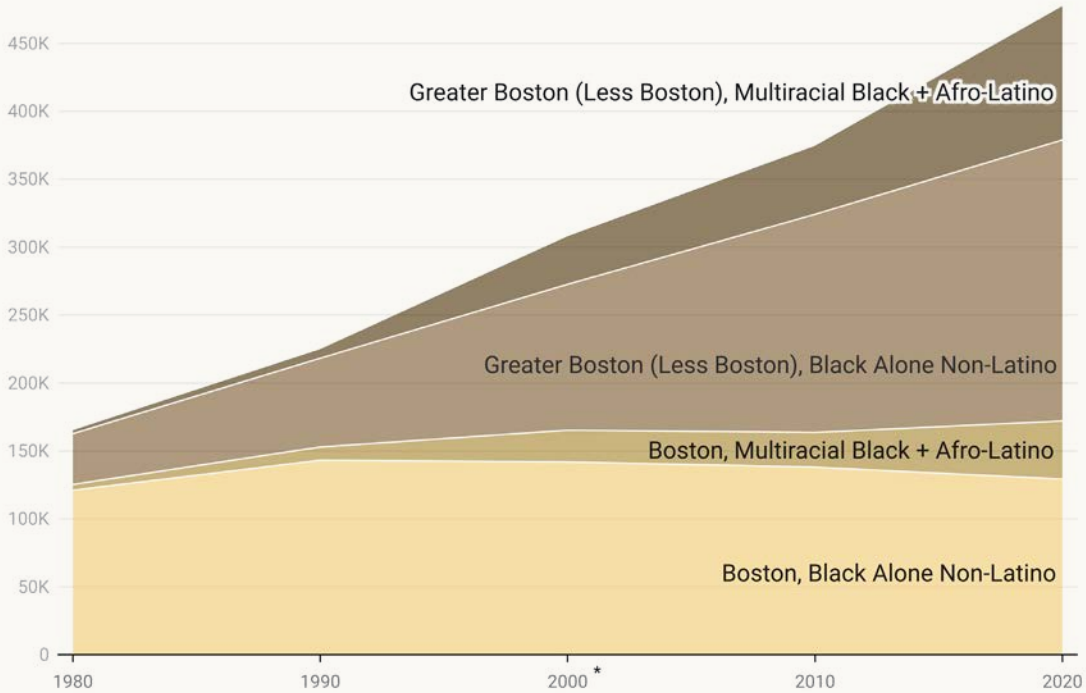
This is a significant shift. For decades, Boston has been the center of Black life in the region, where residents lived in Boston neighborhoods like Roxbury, the South End, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, and the former West End. As recently as 1980, 76 percent of the region’s Black population lived in Boston. Driven by factors like rising housing costs in Boston, this gradually started to change, and in more recent years we’ve seen a growing suburbanization of our region’s Black population (mirroring some national trends<sup>3</sup>). By 2000, almost half of the region’s Black population lived outside of Boston proper; and in 2020 it was almost two-thirds (64 percent).

477,480

**Black residents in Greater Boston in 2020.**

**Figure 2: Greater Boston’s Black population has grown continuously since 1980, while Boston’s has largely leveled off.**

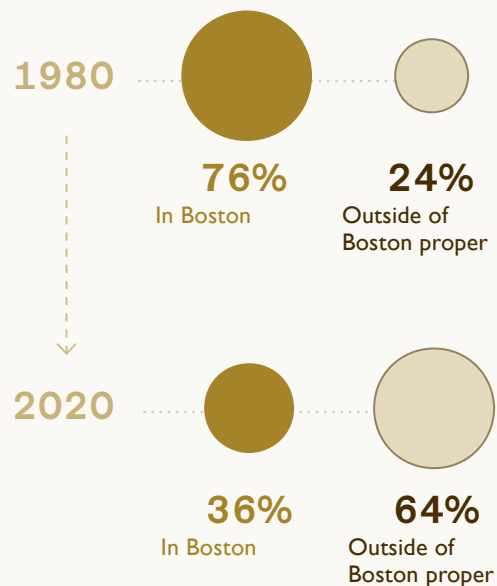
Black population totals by subgroup. 1980-2020.



\* Note: Beginning in 2000, respondents to the Census were allowed to select multiple race group responses. These multiracial Black populations, along with Afro-Latino populations, are included in the "Multiracial Black + Afro-Latino" areas.  
 Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 1980 - 2000 U.S. Decennial Census. IPUMS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. 2010, 2020 U.S. Decennial Census. • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2 details total Black population growth, and it is worth noting here that the definition of who is “Black” used in this report sometimes differs from common approaches to reporting population trends by race using census data. Researchers often subtract “Afro-Latino” and “multiracial Black” populations from the total to arrive at a narrower “Black alone, non-Latino” population figure. One of the key findings of this report, detailed more fully in Part 2, is the unique diversity of our region’s Black populations. This diversity is often overlooked when reporting “Black alone, non-Latino” totals, and it also serves to report significantly lower Black population estimates for the city and region.<sup>4</sup>

**A Shift to the Suburbs**



Therefore, we often show both approaches, or default to “All Black” population estimates, which counts *all* individuals who select “Black” on census forms, regardless of Latino ethnicity or whether they have selected Black in combination with another racial group.

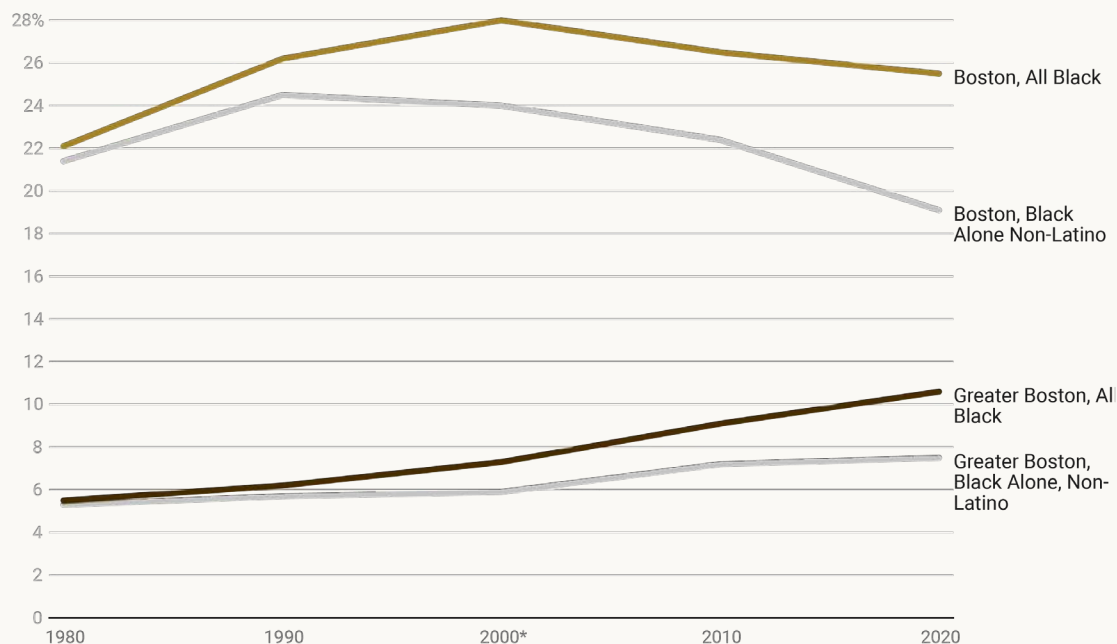
Deciding how to measure Black populations can present very different pictures of growth, as Figures 2 and 3 highlight. Looking only at the “Black alone, non-Latino” subpopulation for Boston in Figure 2, for instance, we see a population decline of 8,809 between 2010 and 2020. But incorporating Afro-Latino and multiracial Black populations shows that the city’s Black population grew modestly over the decade by about 8,400 residents.

The data in Figure 2 presents Black population totals, but this growth came during a period of significant population growth for other racial groups regionwide as well. To understand Black population growth in this context, we next look at these same Black population estimates as a share of the total population (Figure 3). Regionally, these shares echo the overall growth trajectory of the Black population—from 5.5 percent in 1980 to 10.6 percent in 2020.

However, the trend is a bit different when looking just at the city of Boston. Using the more inclusive definition, Boston’s Black population peaked at about 28 percent in 2000 and declined to about 25.5 percent by 2020. Under the narrower definition of “Black alone, non-Latino,” Boston’s Black population dropped to below 20 percent for the first time in several decades.

### **Figure 3: Black population share has grown steadily since 1980 in the region, but has declined from a peak in 2000 in the city of Boston.**

Population share of Boston and Greater Boston. “All Black” counts all residents identifying as Black, including multiracial Black and Afro-Latino.



\* Note: Beginning in 2000 respondents were allowed to select multiple races on the U.S. Census.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 1980-2000 U.S. Decennial Census. IPUMS, University of Minnesota, www.IPUMS.org. 2010-2020, U.S. Decennial Census. • Created with Datawrapper

As Greater Boston's overall Black population growth is substantial, it's useful to view this growth in the context of other metropolitan areas. In 2010, the Boston metro area had the 20<sup>th</sup> largest Black population in the country, at around 380,000. By 2020, the Boston metro jumped to the 17<sup>th</sup> largest, adding more than 100,000 residents, bringing the total Black population to just over 485,000.<sup>5</sup> Much of this growth is a consequence of immigration, something that will be discussed in Part 2.

## Reflecting historic patterns of segregation, Black populations have grown fastest in pockets north and south of Boston.

The region's Black populations have grown steadily outside of Boston over the course of the past generation, but growth has been concentrated in a subset of cities and towns (Figure 4). Many of the region's higher-income suburbs continue to be less welcoming, either explicitly through exclusionary zoning rules or implicitly through cultural norms and institutions that are less appealing for Black families looking to create community. Outside of Boston, the region's largest Black populations live in Brockton, Randolph, and Lynn, with Brockton becoming the first municipality in Greater Boston to become majority Black.

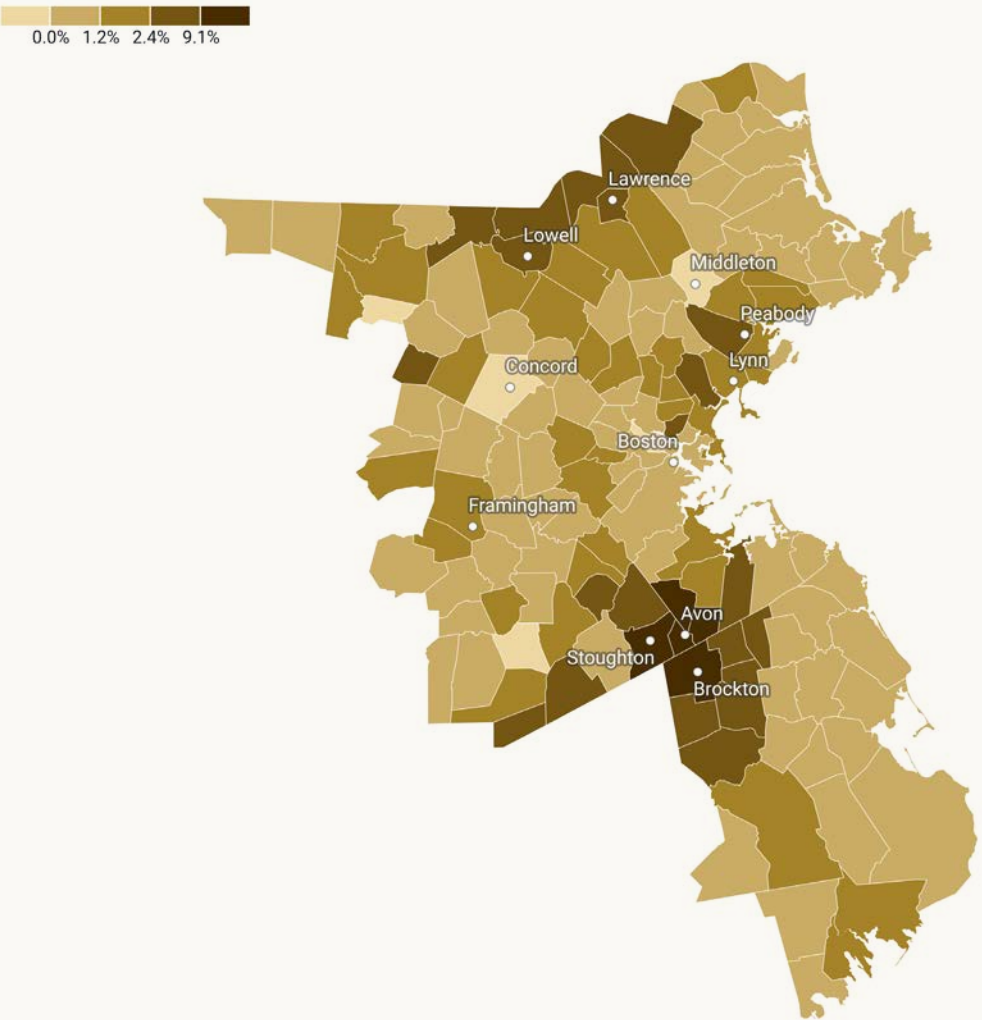


The class of 2022 Brockton High School graduates reflect the city's evolving demographics. Photo: Marc Vasconcellos for [Enterprise News](#).

This marks a striking increase, with Brockton's Black population up 17 percentage points in just 10 years and nearly 30 percentage points from 2000. While Brockton has seen the largest Black population growth in the region, it's part of a cluster of communities south of Boston where new Black communities have emerged. Randolph, Stoughton, and Avon's Black populations have all increased significantly over the past decade, with Randolph's Black population share close behind Brockton's at 49 percent.

**Figure 4: Recent Black population growth has been modest in Boston, but has expanded rapidly in clusters north and south of the city.**

Percentage point change in Black population share. Greater Boston. 2010 - 2020.



Note: Black population here includes all respondents who have selected "Black" alone or in combination with other racial or ethnic groups.  
Map: Boston Indicators • Source: 2010, 2020 U.S. Decennial Census • Map data: MassGIS • Created with Datawrapper

One factor driving these increases is middle-income Black families seeking relatively more affordable opportunities to purchase their first home. In 2019, for example, Brockton, Randolph, and several surrounding towns had the highest share of new home loans going to first-time Black homebuyers in the state.<sup>6</sup>

This growth has contributed to the Black population shares we see today. In Table 1, we highlight 20 of the largest cities and towns in Greater Boston. Only five municipalities have Black population shares of more than 20 percent (out of 147 total in Greater Boston). Other than Boston, each of the others in the top five is part of the cluster of communities south of Boston that have seen the most meaningful Black population growth in recent years.



Black families increasingly settle outside Boston as other areas prove more affordable to first-time homebuyers. Photo: Tima Miroshnichenko for [Pexels](#).



## Table 1: Greater Boston Cities/Towns by Black Population Share

Top 20 cities and towns with the largest share of residents that identify as Black, Massachusetts. 2020.

City or Town	Total Population	Total Black Population	Percent Black
Brockton	105,643	54,320	51%
Randolph	34,984	17,121	49%
Boston	675,647	172,039	25%
Avon	4,777	1,068	22%
Stoughton	29,281	6,423	22%
Holbrook	11,405	2,195	19%
Everett	49,075	8,696	18%
Malden	66,263	11,376	17%
Lynn	101,253	16,725	17%
Milton	28,630	4,509	16%
Cambridge	118,403	15,212	13%
Lawrence	89,143	11,280	13%
Lowell	115,554	12,942	11%
Canton	24,370	2,704	11%
Chelsea	40,787	4,222	10%
Shirley	7,431	764	10%
Medford	59,659	6,046	10%
Bridgewater	28,633	2,710	9%
Norwood	31,611	2,970	9%
Framingham	72,362	6,138	8%

Note: Black population here includes all populations alone or in combination with other racial or ethnic groups.

Table: Boston Indicators • Source: 2020 U.S. Decennial Census • Created with Datawrapper

## Table 2: Largest Black populations by city and town in Greater Boston.

Top 5 cities/towns per category. Greater Boston. 2020.

All Black	Black, Single Race, Non-Latino	Black, Multiracial, Non-Latino	Afro-Latino	Total Black Population Share
<b>Boston</b> 172,039	<b>Boston</b> 129,264	<b>Boston</b> 19,516	<b>Boston</b> 23,259	<b>Brockton</b> 51%
<b>Brockton</b> 54,320	<b>Brockton</b> 35,656	<b>Brockton</b> 15,942	<b>Lawrence</b> 8,898	<b>Randolph</b> 49%
<b>Randolph</b> 17,121	<b>Randolph</b> 14,662	<b>Cambridge</b> 1,990	<b>Lynn</b> 4,387	<b>Boston</b> 25%
<b>Lynn</b> 16,725	<b>Cambridge</b> 12,016	<b>Lynn</b> 1,603	<b>Brockton</b> 2,722	<b>Avon</b> 22%
<b>Cambridge</b> 15,212	<b>Lynn</b> 10,735	<b>Randolph</b> 1,514	<b>Lowell</b> 1,974	<b>Stoughton</b> 22%

Table: Boston Indicators • Source: 2020 U.S. Decennial Census • Created with Datawrapper

There are important nuances we must address when describing Black populations that Table 1 elides. Identity is complicated, of course, and no population is a monolith. Certain Black population groups may well be more concentrated in some towns than others, and the above table is one attempt at detailing how Black identity plays out across Greater Boston.

In Table 2, we see that Boston has the largest Black population regardless of subpopulation, but after Boston, non-Latino single-race or multiracial Black populations tend to live in one of Brockton, Randolph, Lynn, or Cambridge. Afro-Latino populations, by contrast, are more likely to live in Lawrence and Lynn, with Lowell also making it into the top five.

**While Boston’s Black population grew modestly over the last decade, much of that growth is concentrated in just a few neighborhoods.**

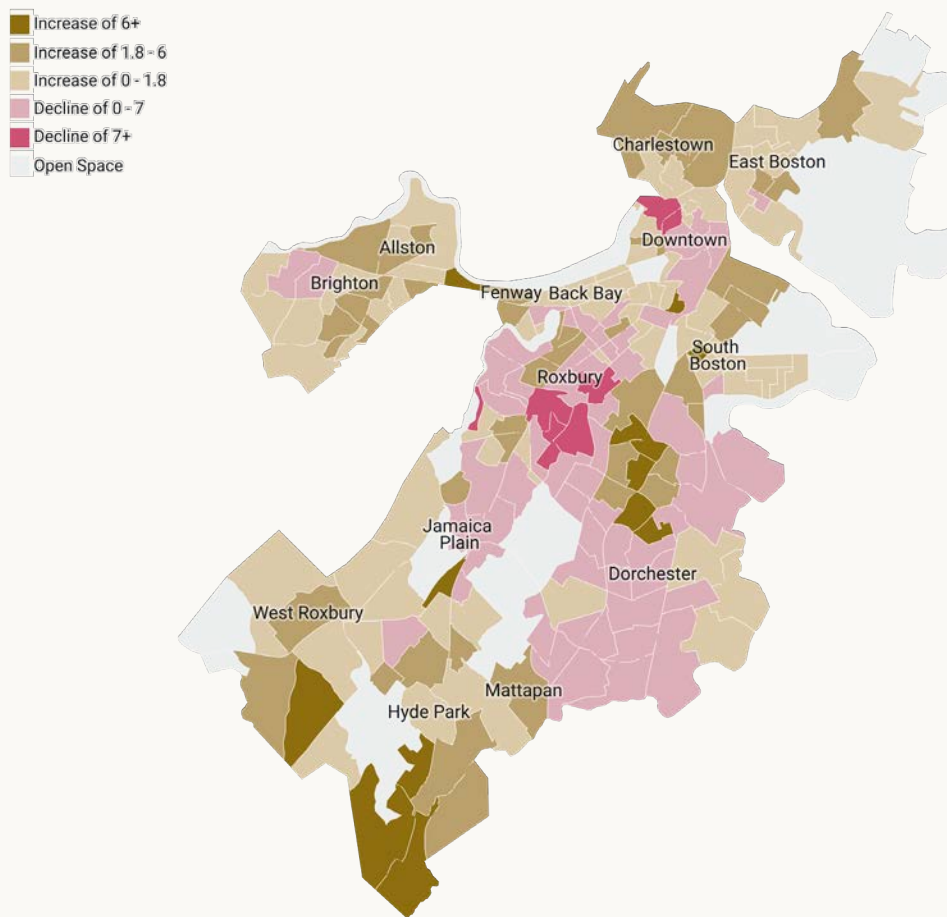
As the largest city in Greater Boston, and as the historic center of the region’s Black community, it’s worth returning to Boston to look at how these shifts have played out across the city’s various neighborhoods. Even as Boston’s housing costs surged and more Black communities grew outside the city over the last decade, Boston’s Black population increased 5 percent (up by 8,410 residents from 2010 to 2020)..

Most of this growth, however, was concentrated in parts of Hyde Park, Mattapan, and

Dorchester. The map in Figure 5 details this, highlighting the change in Black population share by census tract. By contrast, gentrifying parts of Jamaica Plain, Roxbury, and the South End all lost Black residents between 2010 and 2020. In a few areas we've also seen Black population growth despite an overall decline in Black population share. Indeed, many of the light red tracts in Dorchester that show declines of 0 to 7 percentage points in fact gained Black population in absolute terms since 2010. Yet Black residents make up a smaller share of these areas than they did in 2010 because overall population growth among other racial groups outpaced Black growth.

**Figure 5: Since 2010, Boston’s Black population declined in some neighborhoods (like Roxbury), while it grew in others (like Hyde Park).**

Change in percentage point share of Black population. Boston Census tracts. 2010 - 2020.



Note: Map uses census tracts with 2020 boundaries. 2010 populations are arranged by block groups and weighted to 2020 tract boundaries for comparison purposes. Black population here includes all populations alone or in combination with other racial or ethnic groups.  
 Map: Boston Indicators • Source: 2010 - 2020 U.S. Decennial Census. Crosswalk courtesy of IPUMS NHGIS University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org • Created with Datawrapper

# PART 2

# THE GROWING DIVERSITY OF BLACK COMMUNITIES IN GREATER BOSTON

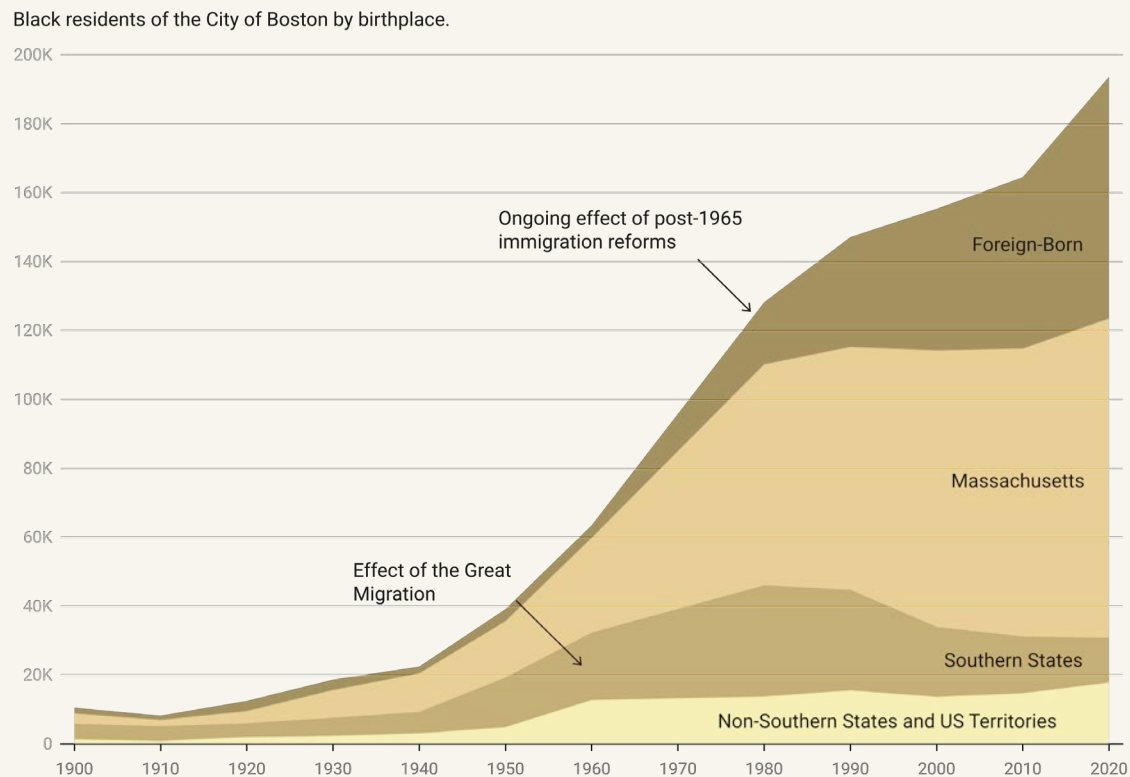


This section of the report offers an overview of the changing demography of the Black population in Boston and Greater Boston over several decades. It shows that this is not a monolithic population but one inclusive of multigenerational Black Americans, and shaped by a range of groups from the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa. And it explores the explosive growth of the Afro-Latino population, hailing from countries across nearly all these regions, adding dramatically to a smaller group that had long been present here.

All the groups that today comprise the Black population reflect different—though connected—histories, languages, and schooling levels. And while some live in the city that has been most associated with their presence, Boston, today newer Black groups are beginning to reside in many places outside of Boston.

The graph below shows the birthplace of Black residents in Boston between 1900 and 2020, grouped by region of birth (Figure 6). It shows that the genesis of the Black population has long been varied, being composed of people with roots in the American South, but also other places in the U.S.; foreign-born immigrants; and those born in Massachusetts.

### Figure 6: Black residents of Boston by birthplace, back to 1900.



*Note: Data are not available for 1970. 'Southern States' included those individuals born in: SC, MS, FL, AL, GA, LA, TX, VA, AR, TN, and NC. Multiracial Black populations are included only post 2000 due to data limitations. In addition, because the graph goes back to 1900, it only looks at the City of Boston rather than all of Greater Boston. Census definitions of the region have shifted over time and the vast majority of the region's population lived in Boston proper for much of this timeframe.*

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 1900-2000 U.S. Census. 2010, 2020 5-Yr American Community Survey. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org). • Created with Datawrapper

Black migration to Boston increased significantly after the Civil War and especially during the Great Migration of the 20th century—the movement of 6 million Black Americans from the South to some Northern cities between 1910 and 1970. There were two major waves of the Great Migration: 1910 to the First World War and after, and then 1940 to 1970. The impetus for moving was not just to escape from racism and the extreme racial violence in the South, but also to seek job opportunities in the North. These decades of Black migration northward fundamentally shaped Boston's Black population: Between the 1900s and 1930s Southern-born Bostonians made up the largest component of the Black population. But that was still small relative to other parts of the country where, in places like New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago, a much larger number of Southern-born Black people had relocated.

Since the end of the Great Migration, the origins of our region's Black population have changed dramatically. After 1970 and 1980, the part of the Black population in Boston that is foreign-born grew rapidly and has become significant in size.

Yet we cannot look to nativity alone as a means of understanding recent changes in the Black population. We must also consider ancestry, and how individuals identify. To do so, we rely on data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). According to the ACS's 2021 *Subject Definitions*,

**“Ancestry refers to a person’s ethnic origin, heritage, descent, or ‘roots,’ which may reflect their place of birth or that of previous generations of their family. The intent of the ancestry question was not to measure the degree of attachment the respondent had to a particular ethnicity, but simply to establish that the respondent had a connection to and self-identified with a particular ethnic group.”**

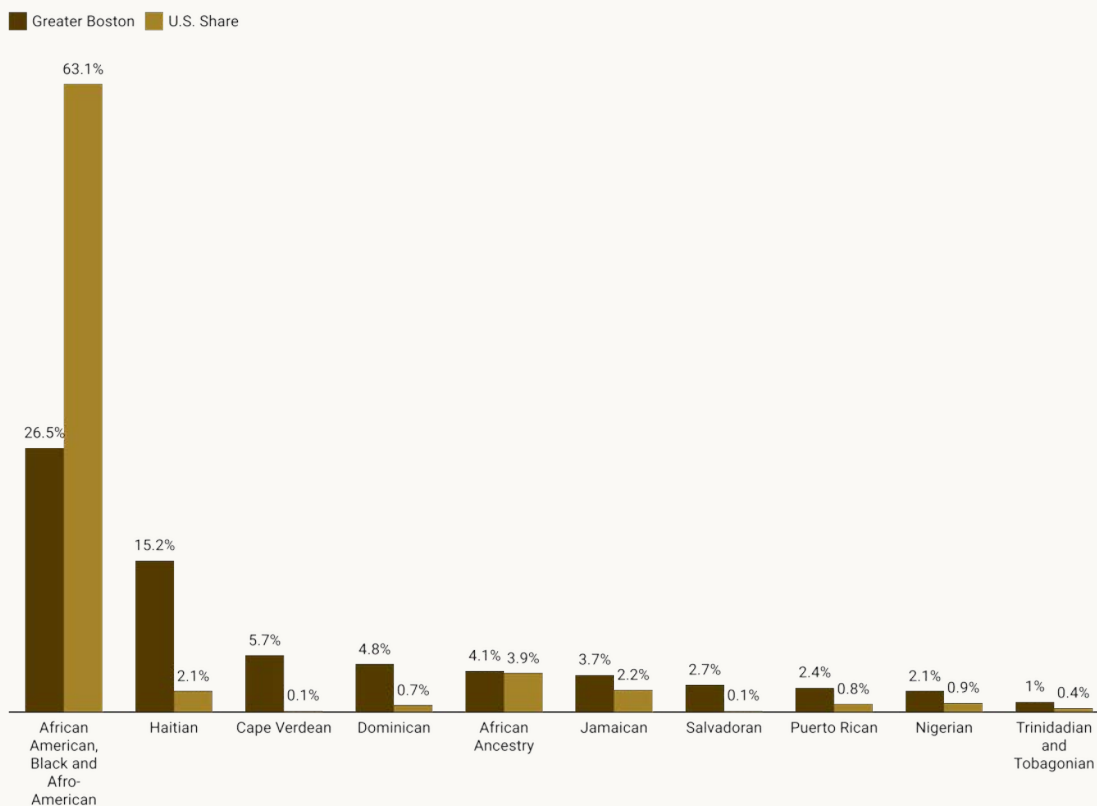
Respondents self-report their “ancestry” through a write-in box, reflecting subjective judgments about how they identify their family roots.



Chelsea Black Heritage Festival is one of many events across the region that elevate cultural richness and diversity. Photo: Darlene DeVita for the Boston Foundation.

The Black populations in Boston and Greater Boston reflect a wide range of ancestries from the West Indies region, Caribbean, and Africa. But there are clear differences between Boston and Greater Boston. For one thing, there is significantly greater ancestry diversity among Black residents outside of Boston. Also, some Black ancestries are bigger in size in Greater Boston. These include Haitians, Cape Verdeans, Nigerians, and other groups. The graph below details the top 10 Black ancestry groups in Greater Boston (including Boston), by share of the Black population, as compared to the same ancestry group nationwide (Figure 7). In every case, Greater Boston's share is larger than it is nationally. Respondents who report their ancestry as "African American," "American," or "Black," represent 26.5 percent of all Black people in Greater Boston selecting ancestries. But this is a relatively small selection when examined at the national level, where two-thirds of all Black respondents use these same demographic descriptors.

**Figure 7: Black residents of Greater Boston are far more likely than Black Americans nationally to report ancestries connected to other countries.**



*Note: Black population here includes all respondents selecting 'Black,' whether alone or in combination with another race. 'African Ancestry' is a general choice that is presented alongside, and is mutually exclusive of, specific countries of ancestry like 'Nigeria.' This chart excludes respondents who did not fill in an ancestry.*  
 Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2016-2020 ACS, IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. • Created with Datawrapper

With this data on birthplace and ancestry as context, the remainder of this section discusses six major subpopulations that comprise Black communities in Greater Boston. These categorizations reflect imperfect judgment calls, and in identifying these six we looked largely at relative size in the region and recent rates of growth.<sup>7</sup> It's also worth noting the significant overlap across these Black subpopulations. Many Black families who have been here for multiple generations, for instance, have origins in the West Indies, and many Afro-Latinos are also foreign-born.

**THE MULTIGENERATIONAL BLACK POPULATION.** We begin with an overview of Black families with roots in the United States across multiple generations. A large share of these families have direct ties back to the period of enslavement. Others have ties to ancestors who initially came to the United States from other countries, like Cape Verde or countries in the West Indies, in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Because their families immigrated here generations ago, their experiences are distinct from those of more recent immigrants. As the data shows, many of these multigenerational Black families came to Boston as part of the Great Migration from Southern states during the height of Jim Crow segregation.

The data provides some insight about the birth places of earlier generations of Black residents continuing to the current period. We present data showing the wide range of ancestries that collectively compose the Black population today. This section also describes major demographic developments in the ancestry diversity of the Black population in Boston and Greater Boston, which looks very different from other places across the nation. Some of these ancestry groups include earlier immigrants from the African diaspora including Cape Verdeans and Haitians—both groups have a very long immigration history residing in a few cities in Massachusetts.





**THE FOREIGN-BORN BLACK POPULATION.** The data shows that in the last two decades Boston and Greater Boston have experienced significant changes and growth in the Black foreign-born population. A foreign-born component has always been an integral part of the U.S. Black population, and especially so in Boston. What is new, however, is the recent explosive growth of the foreign-born Black population as well as its increased intra-diversity in terms of ancestries. The ancestries of Black people residing in the U.S. over generations and foreign-born Black residents today overlap to a degree. But more recent periods show ancestry diversity has increased within the Black community.

**AFRO-LATINO/AS.** It is no longer possible to overlook the growing numbers of Afro-Latino residents in Boston and Greater Boston. They are an integral part of the story about the changing Black population today. Their numbers have increased significantly in the region over the last two decades, resulting in Boston and Massachusetts becoming one of the leading U.S. regions in this demographic development.

**WEST INDIANS.** Many residents with ancestry in the West Indies region can trace their immigration to U.S. cities during the 1800s and 1900s, and to Boston and Greater Boston specifically in the last two decades. In this section we highlight Haitians and Jamaicans as they are among the largest West Indian subpopulations in the region.

**CAPE VERDEANS.** One of the oldest immigrant Black populations, Cape Verdeans first made their way to Massachusetts by way of New Bedford's fishing and whaling industries. They expanded their presence post-Cape Verdean independence in 1975, dispersing across Greater Boston.

**RECENT AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS.** Since 2000 there has been a major increase in the number of Black immigrants from Africa, including Nigerians, Ethiopians, and Somalians, and many other groups. A significant part of this development is occurring in Greater Boston rather than Boston.



## THE MULTIGENERATIONAL BLACK POPULATION

**For the purposes of this paper, we loosely define the multigenerational Black or African American population as persons who have long-time roots in the United States, tracing origins primarily to Southern states via the Great Migration, and to a lesser extent the Caribbean in earlier periods.**

While in the Boston area this part of the Black community is declining proportionately in the context of increasing numbers of Caribbean and African diasporic Black residents, it still makes up a majority of the region's Black population. Furthermore, since their roots go back further, multigenerational Black families represent a fundamental part of the social, cultural, economic, and political history of Black people in Boston. Indeed, it represents a foundation upon which Black immigrants from around the world could arrive and thrive in Boston and Massachusetts.

This foundation is remarkable, for the context in which it was built was not only slavery, but also post-slavery periods where Black inequality was systematized socially, economically, and politically. In *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein shows that this racial inequality was embedded in a range of institutions and public policies at the national and local levels.<sup>8</sup> And the private sector was a strong bulwark to this inequity. This is a history with impacts that are still being felt today via continuing discrimination in many areas, including housing and a persistent racial wealth gap.

The first enslaved Black people were brought to Massachusetts from the Caribbean as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Beginning in 1638 Massachusetts played an integral role in the slave trade in New England and was the first colony to legalize the practice in 1641—but also the first state to outlaw slavery in 1781. As one of the earliest free communities, Boston's Black population thrived, relatively speaking, producing scholars, businessmen, and prominent political figures.

This relative freedom served as a beacon for African Americans across the country and for Black people born abroad. As a matter of fact, by 1860 more than 1 in 10 Black residents living in Boston were foreign-born—greater than in New York and New Orleans. Foreign-born Black immigration to Boston did slow through the 1930s and '40s due to the racist U.S. quota system limiting immigration from non-Western European countries. But the Black population continued to grow naturally. It was largely Massachusetts-born residents that powered Black Boston's growth in the 20th century. Still, some of the Black Southerners moving to Northern cities seeking better work, more pay, and racial safety came to Boston, and those who made it to this city tended to be educated and prepared to join Boston's Black professional class. The late historian Adelaide Cromwell documented the social experiences of Black residents considered elites, or members of the "Negro upper class," when she wrote about "Black Brahmins." These were mostly New England based, but still included many prominent individuals who were Southern-born, or with Southern roots.<sup>9</sup>

A major channel for both Southern-based and Caribbean Black arrivals streaming to Boston in the late 1800s and early 1900s was the Black Church. In 1913, St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church became the first Black-built church in Roxbury. As the historian Robert Hayden stated about St. Cyprian's, "The Church served as a haven for original immigrants from the West Indian Islands—Jamaica, Barbados, and some other smaller islands—during the early years of the 1900s. In fact, immigration from the West Indies to Boston was arranged for and developed with the help of the Church." Likewise, Black West Indian and Caribbean immigrants were so enmeshed in Boston's civic life that they contributed directly to the creation of several newspapers, including *The Boston Chronicle* and William Monroe Trotter's *The Guardian*. Interestingly, the *Chronicle* focused on local experiences and politics of the Boston's growing West Indian population; the *Guardian* tended to report more on national and international Black news events. After these two newspapers closed and the *Bay State Banner* was founded in 1965, both foci found a place in the new newspaper.<sup>10</sup>



The Great Migration happened on foot, by car, by ship, and notably by rail, as this segregated waiting room at Jacksonville's Union Station in 1921 depicts. Photo: [Florida Memory](#).

# THE FOREIGN-BORN BLACK POPULATION

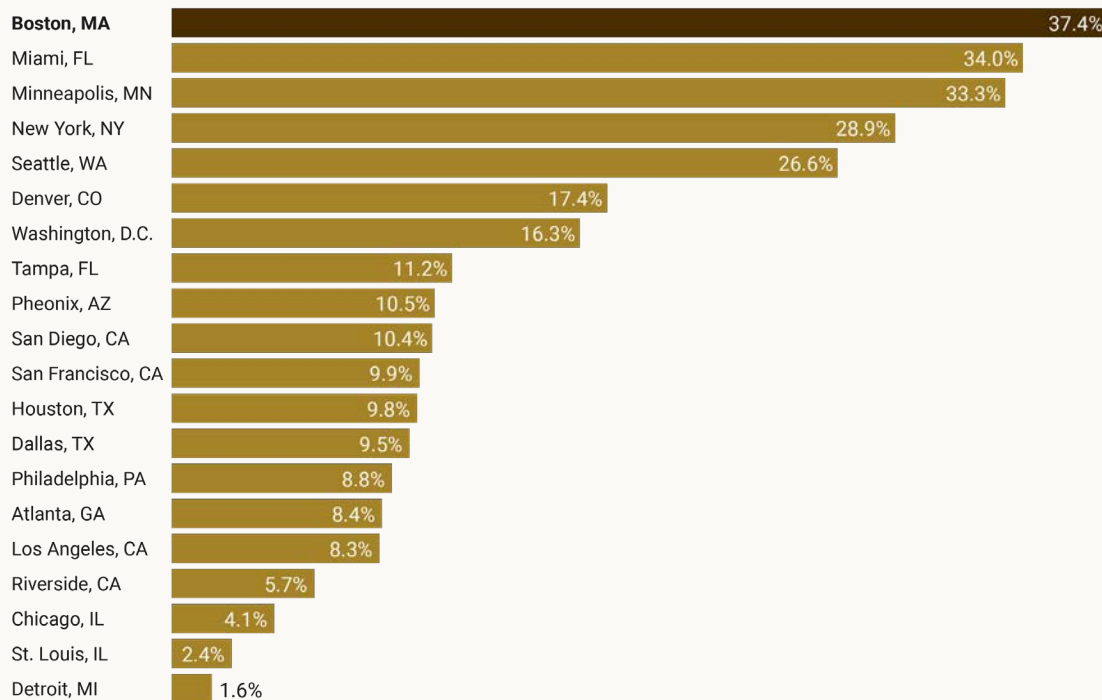
The passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 (also known as the Immigration and Nationality Act), helped to spur foreign-born growth to the region and precipitated a dramatic increase in Boston's Black population. The city served as a destination for Haitians, Dominicans, and people from other groups facing political and economic displacement, many of these joining already extant communities in and around Boston.

By the 1980s Boston's Black population with long-time Southern U.S. and some Caribbean roots is joined by other groups from Africa and Central and South America. This change includes increasing numbers of those identifying as Afro-Latino/a and who primarily come from—or are born to—families who've left the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and other Spanish-speaking places.

Compared with other metropolitan areas, by 2020 Boston and Greater Boston stand out as places with high shares of foreign-born Black residents, as shown in Figures 8 and 9. In Figure 8 we see the 20 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, arranged by proportion of foreign-born individuals within the Black population.

## Figure 8: The Boston metro area has the largest foreign-born Black population share of any large metro area in the U.S.

Foreign-born Black population share of the 20 largest U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA)



Note: Boston metropolitan boundaries here include parts of New Hampshire for the sake of comparison to other U.S. metropolises. These are not the same boundaries we use throughout for Greater Boston, which is bounded by Massachusetts. Black population here includes all respondents selecting "Black" whether alone or in combination with another race or ethnicity.

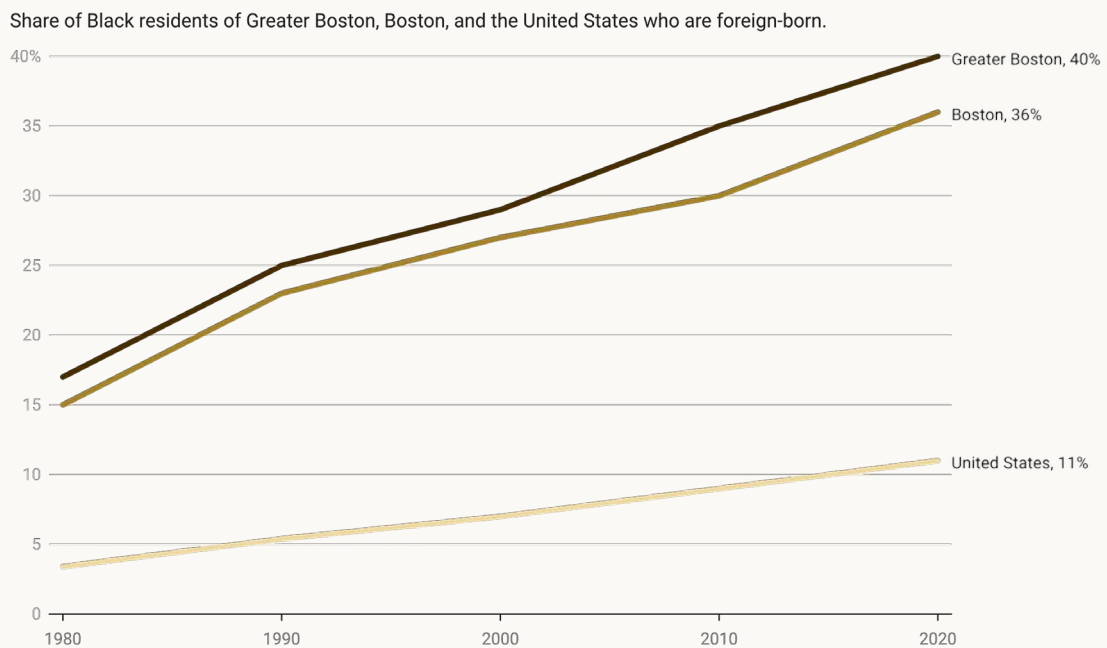
Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey • Created with Datawrapper

The Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metropolitan Area, which includes Greater Boston and Boston, reports the highest proportion of Black residents who are foreign-born, at more than one third (37.4 percent) of total Black population for this area. Only the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL Metropolitan Area (34.0 percent) and the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI Metropolitan Area (33.3 percent) come close, the latter reflective of a major influx of people from Somalia.

Figure 9, below, shows that the share of the Black population that is foreign-born is much higher in Boston and Greater Boston than in the rest of the U.S. The proportion of Black foreign-born persons within the overall Black population increased much faster in Boston and Greater Boston than in the entire U.S. between 1980 and 2020. And the proportion of the Black foreign-born in Greater Boston also increased faster than in Boston, especially after 2000.

Even within Greater Boston there are several places where the proportion of the Black foreign-born population is very high. In Revere, Chelsea, and Winthrop, for example, the Black population was 21,234 in 2020, of which more than half (52.5 percent) are foreign-born.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 9: Black residents of Greater Boston are 4x as likely to be foreign-born as Black Americans overall.**



*Note: Includes all residents who identify as Black, including Latino Black. Multiracial Black residents included beginning in 2000. We arrive at a slightly different estimate for Greater Boston's foreign-born Black population share here than in Figure 8 due to population weighting differences.*  
 Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 1980 - 2000 U.S. Decennial Census. 2010, 2020 5Yr ACS. IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. • Created with Datawrapper

## AFRO-LATINO/AS

While *Afro-Latinidad*—the collective experiences of Black people with Latino origins and roots—has a long history, even before the founding of the United States and other nations in the Northern Hemisphere, it is only in the last decade that its presence has been acknowledged in some places, including Boston and Massachusetts. At times Afro-Latinos have been invisible even in discussions about the significant growth of the overall Latino/a population in Boston and other places. At the national level this invisibility is explained by political scientist Sharon D. Wright Austin: “Because of strict racial categories in America, Afro-Latinos have been classified as either Black or Latino rather than as both or neither.” In Boston, it was also a case of census definitions not being adequate to capture the number of Black residents.<sup>12</sup>

As concluded in a recent Gastón Institute (University of Massachusetts Boston) report on the experiences of this group and based on earlier census data: “Afro-Latinx communities suffer from invisibility, misrepresentations, marginalization, and racism from the broader society.” Further, gross disparities in occupation status and education, work in service industries, unemployment rates, and homeownership rates were documented between Afro-Latinos/as and non-Black Latino/as.<sup>13</sup>

Today the presence of this group within the Black population—or the growing Latino population—can no longer be ignored. One reason for not overlooking this group is that the continual growth of the Afro-Latino/a population in Boston has given rise to a degree of political power. Today two councilors of the Boston City Council are Afro-Latina: Julia Mejia who twice won city-wide races, and Kendra Lara, recently elected to represent the 6th District. Both these individuals are of Dominican ancestry. And there are others across Massachusetts.

**The dramatic growth of Afro-Latinos is evident across the entire state of Massachusetts. In 2010 Afro-Latinos numbered 61,422 persons or 12 percent of the state’s total Black population of 508,413 persons. This number increased to 95,600 Afro-Latinos in Massachusetts in 2020, or 14.3 percent of all Black people in the state. This represented an increase of 56 percent between 2010 and 2020.**



Begun as a Puerto Rican pride event, Festival Betances in the South End has become a celebration of Latinidad. Photo: Yuder Mezarene Aldi for the Boston Foundation.

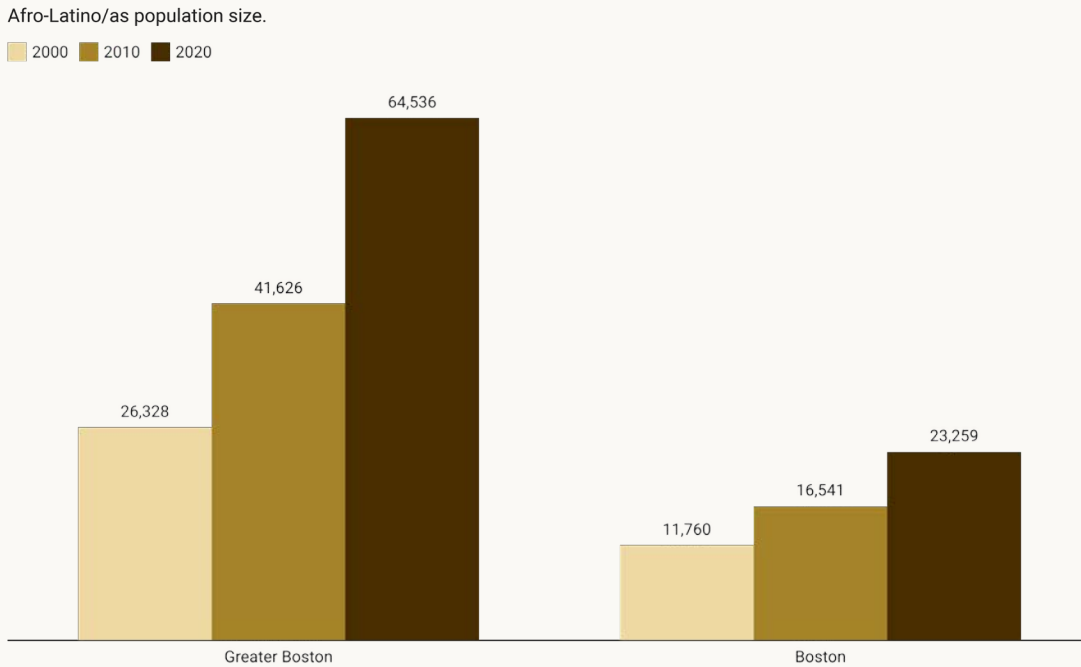
The growth in the number of Afro-Latinos in Greater Boston continues to outpace the number and growth for Boston. And the size of the Afro-Latino community is larger in Greater Boston than in Boston for both 2010 and 2020. Figure 10 shows that the 2000 decennial census counted 11,760 Afro-Latinos (then identified as “Hispanic/Latino Black/African American Population”), or 7.2 percent of all Black persons in Boston. Not shown in the graph, it also counted another 14,568 Afro-Latinos in Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk counties (not including Boston) in this same decennial year. This represented about 10.4 percent of the total Greater Boston (less Boston) population at the time.

Census figures show that in Boston the 2010 population of Afro-Latinos stood at 16,541 and grew to 23,259, or 41 percent, by 2020. These Afro-Latinos represent about 13.5 percent of the 172,039 Black persons in this city reported by the 2020 decennial census. In Greater Boston the increase was also high: In 2010 there were 41,626 Afro-Latinos and this grew to 64,536 by 2020, or an increase of 55 percent. Together, Afro-Latinos/as in Greater Boston represent approximately 13.5 percent of all 477,480 Black persons in this region.

### WHO IS AFRO-LATINO/A?

In a seminal work, *The Afro-Latino/a Reader*, Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores define this group: “They are people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the U.S. whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean.” (Duke University Press, 2010)

**Figure 10: Since 2000, Afro-Latino/as have doubled in number across both Boston and Greater Boston.**



*Note: Includes all respondents who have selected "Black" and "Hispanic or Latino ethnicity," alone or in any combination of other racial groups.*  
 Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2000, 2010, 2020 U.S. Decennial Census • Created with Datawrapper

The Afro-Latino/a population is dispersed over several cities and towns in Massachusetts. Municipalities with the highest number and proportions in Greater Boston include cities in Suffolk and Essex counties: Revere, Chelsea, Lawrence, Haverhill, Methuen, and Lynn.

Three groups are primarily represented among Black people who identify as Latino: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Salvadorans. This was the case in 2010 and remains the case in 2020 when these three groups composed 72 percent of all Afro-Latinos, but the rank order is changed and now Dominicans hold the highest proportion, followed by Puerto Ricans<sup>14</sup> and then Salvadorans. Most Black respondents in 2020 selecting a Latino ethnicity in Boston chose Dominican

### ON BOSTON AND GREATER BOSTON COMPARISONS

Throughout the remainder of Section 2, we subtract Boston populations from Greater Boston populations in order to provide a more granular view of settlement patterns within ancestry and ethnic groups. Thus when we refer to "Greater Boston" populations in the remainder of Section 2, it indicates populations of the five counties of Greater Boston minus the city of Boston. Unless otherwise noted, up to this point and in Part 3 we include Boston's population in Greater Boston's to look at these groups holistically.



(35 percent), followed by Puerto Rican (22.1 percent), and then Salvadoran (15.1 percent). Honduran is a distant fourth at 6 percent. This is only slightly different from Greater Boston. Among Black individuals who self-identified as Afro-Latino in 2020, 32.4 percent selected Dominican, 23.9 percent Puerto Rican, and 15.6 percent Salvadoran. In Greater Boston it is Guatemalans who hold fourth place at 5.4 percent.

A little more than a tenth (10.7 percent) of Afro-Latinos in Boston held a bachelor's degree or higher for the entire population. Another 3.5 percent held an associate degree. Education attainment is essentially the same in Greater Boston, with 10.3 percent of Afro-Latinos holding a bachelor's degree or higher, and 4.3 percent holding an associate degree. Except for Black Cape Verdeans, these ranges are lower than education attainment for the other groups highlighted in this report: Black residents with Haitian, Jamaican, and especially Nigerian ancestry in Boston and Greater Boston. While some of these characteristics are discussed in the next section, it is interesting that these lower levels of education attainment are associated with some groups who have been in Massachusetts for longer periods of time.

## WEST INDIANS

People with roots in the West Indies are counted as one regional group in the census that includes the countries of Haiti and Jamaica, as well as Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, St. Lucia, and Antigua and Barbuda. The U.S. census does not include Puerto Ricans or Dominicans, both from Spanish-speaking countries, in this regional category. There are important differences in terms of immigration patterns from these places, as well as where groups settle in Greater Boston and Boston. Here we only highlight two groups: Haitians and Jamaicans.

### Haitians

Haitian immigration is thoroughly intertwined with multigenerational African Americans, starting in the early 1800s.<sup>15</sup> During the mid-1900s Haitian migration to the U.S. was triggered, in part, by political repression and natural disasters in Haiti. These include the repressive regimes of François Duvalier (known as “Papa Doc”) in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier (or “Baby Doc”), in the 1970s and 1980s. Also prompting a wave of immigration was a massive earthquake in 2010 resulting in 217,000 deaths and 1.5 million homeless people in Haiti.<sup>16</sup> Over these decades thousands fled and migrated to settle in Miami, New York City, Boston, and other parts of Massachusetts.

Today there are approximately 24,899 Black people with Haitian ancestry in Boston. This represents major growth from 2010, when 17,672 were reported. The number of Haitians in Greater Boston as of 2020 is much higher at 49,775 persons, an increase from 13,094 persons in 2010.



The United Fruit Company's Great White Fleet ran direct service between Jamaica and Boston—transporting bananas, tourists, and West Indian immigrants in the early 20th century. Postcard of S.S. *Quirigua*: Thomas Crane Library.<sup>17</sup>

Across Greater Boston, people who have Black Haitian ancestry primarily reside in a few cities and towns: Almost a third (32.3 percent) reside in Brockton, Stoughton, and Avon. Another 25.4 percent of Black Haitians reside in the cities and towns of Randolph, Norwood, Dedham, Canton, Holbrook, Malden, and Medford. Black Haitians in Greater Boston also have higher rates of holding a bachelor's degree (17.7 percent) and an associate degree (8.4 percent) compared with those living in Boston. In the latter case, 15 percent of all Haitians hold a bachelor's degree and 5.5 percent an associate degree.

## Jamaicans

Jamaicans have immigrated to Boston over many decades and have assimilated into Boston's Black population. A publication by the City of Boston in 2016 under its *Imagine All the People* series, and prepared for the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Advancement, identified three major periods of Jamaican immigration to the U.S. and Boston: The first was a result of the National Origins Act of 1924, when Jamaican immigration was at a nadir compared to later periods; next a wave of migrant workers were recruited to meet WWII workforce demands; and a third episode with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act again opening doors to immigrants from the Caribbean and other places.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike some other groups from this region Jamaican immigrants have tended to stay in Boston, more so than move to Greater Boston. Black census respondents who select Jamaican ancestry in 2020 are still primarily in Boston, where approximately ten thousand persons reside. This compares to about 7,784 Jamaicans living in Greater Boston.

In Greater Boston, Black people who select Jamaican ancestry have a higher level of bachelor's or greater degree attainment than their city of Boston counterparts (26.7 vs. 12.9 percent, respectively). But in Greater Boston, only 4.5 percent hold an associate degree, compared with 7.8 percent of this community in Boston.

## CAPE VERDEANS

Cape Verdeans are highlighted here because they are among immigrants from Africa with the longest history in the U.S. Cape Verdeans were always more dispersed outside Boston than other foreign-born Black groups in Massachusetts, first settling in places like New Bedford in the late 1800s in response to the call for workers with whaling and maritime skills. But even earlier than this, the connection between Cape Verde and the United States was based on the island's being a key geographic point, among others, for the transportation of captured Africans to enslavement in the Caribbean and United States. After Cape Verdean independence in 1975, migration to Massachusetts and Boston expanded, to a point where today Cape Verdeans represent the largest African immigrant group in Boston's Black community.

In 2010 there were about 7,769 Black Cape Verdeans living in Boston and this number grew to 11,532 by 2020. But Black Cape Verdeans increased much faster in Greater Boston, from 7,626 persons in 2010 to 16,340 persons in 2020.

More than two-thirds of the 2020 Cape Verdean population live in Brockton, Stoughton, and Avon. A small cluster of Cape Verdeans are living in Somerville and Everett, but at a proportion (4.8 percent) far below the other places mentioned here. Education attainment for Cape Verdeans tends to be lower than that of other groups highlighted in this report when looking at all persons holding a bachelor's degree or higher, or an associate degree. In Boston, 8.9 percent of all Cape Verdeans hold the former, and 2.4 percent hold the latter. This increases only very slightly for Cape Verdeans in Greater Boston, where 10.3 percent hold a bachelor's degree and 2.4 percent an associate degree.

## RECENT AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

The Black population is also increasingly diverse with people from the continent of Africa; this is especially the case in Greater Boston. Except for Cape Verdeans discussed above with their long-established roots in Massachusetts cities, some groups from African nations are relatively new, and they are mostly residing in Greater Boston. Just a decade ago, Black residents with Nigerian ancestry—as well as Kenyan, Ugandan, Ethiopian, Ghanaian, and Liberian—represented a very small portion of the Black population in Boston and Greater Boston, but by 2020, they are more visible, especially in Greater Boston. While there is still a relatively low number of Black persons with Ethiopian ancestry in Boston (less than one thousand), there are almost three thousand in Greater Boston. Similarly, Black people with Kenyan ancestry are found almost exclusively in Greater Boston. This is also the case with those with Ghanaian and Liberian ancestries. About three quarters of Ethiopian immigrants arrived in the U.S. after 2000. Almost every Ugandan (92.5 percent) in Greater Boston reported arriving in 2000 or later. That figure for Kenyans is 82.5 percent and for Ghanaians it is 64.7 percent. One of the fastest growing groups of Black arrivals from the African diaspora is Nigerians, and again, they tend to live outside of Boston.

## Nigerians

Black people who identify as Nigerian represent one of the fastest growing of the relatively newer African diaspora groups in Greater Boston, especially in comparison to Boston. In 2010 approximately 1,582 Nigerians were counted in Boston; this number grew to 3,147 by 2020. In Greater Boston, the number of Nigerians was very small in 2010—approximately 500—but by 2020 had increased substantially to 6,905 people.

The Nigerian population is dispersed throughout Greater Boston, but more than a quarter (28.5 percent) of all Nigerians reside in Brockton, Stoughton, Avon, Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen. Black Nigerians also stand out in terms of the ability to speak English Very Well (a technical term for measuring English language ability in the American Community Survey), where 89 percent report this category. This compares to 56 percent of Cape Verdeans and 59 percent of Haitians in Greater Boston who speak English Very Well.

Black Nigerians in Greater Boston further stand out from other Black ancestry groups in this region by their level of higher education attainment. In 2020, 45.6 percent held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 5.3 percent an associate degree. These rates are significantly higher than the other groups described in this report. These figures also include approximately 2,000 persons who hold master's degrees or higher, including doctorates. In Boston the level of education attainment for Nigerians is also high, but lower than that in Greater Boston. Approximately 35.8 percent of all Nigerians held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 12.8 percent an associate degree.


According to Nigerian urban affairs scholar Dr. Paul Udofia, this reflects educational attainment in the homeland that is transferred in their immigration and migration to various parts of the U.S. In other words, they arrive in the U.S. with high levels of education; he also notes that these levels of education attainment are higher than for other immigrant groups from Europe and Asia.<sup>19</sup> Coming from a nation with strong mandatory education and emphasis on advanced schooling, attaining these high levels of schooling for many Nigerians also represents a way to facilitate immigration to the United States.



Newcomers from around the world bring their energy, hope, and pride to Boston, as these Haitian Flag Day celebraters attest. Photo: Seth Daniel for the Boston Foundation.

# PART 3

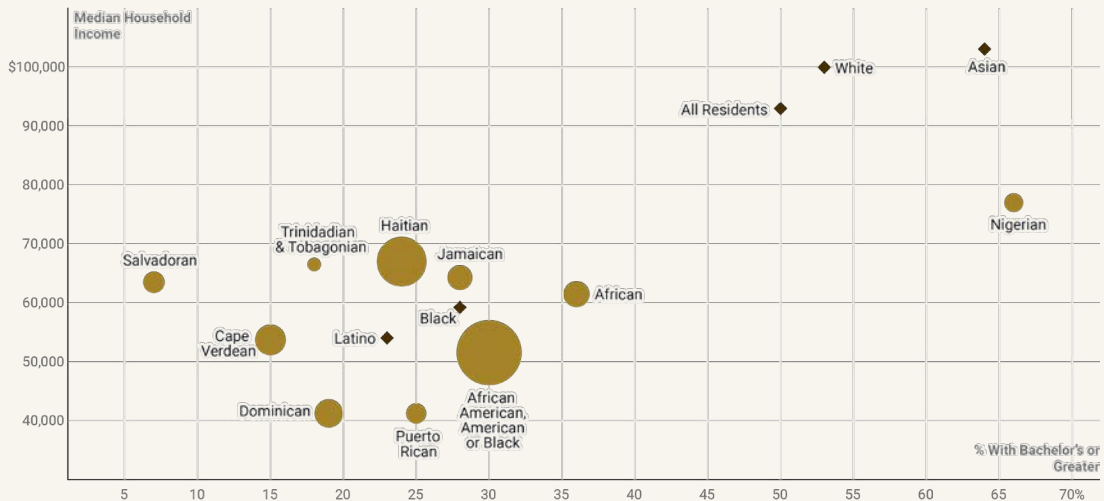
# SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES AND WEALTH



The continuing legacy of structural racism in the United States has left many Black families in a particularly precarious economic position. The same holds true in Boston despite the area's recent growth and prosperity.

## Figure 11: Black residents of Greater Boston experience large socioeconomic disparities.

Median household income (Y-axis) by share of population 25 or older with bachelor's or greater (X-axis). Gold circles represent the 10 largest Black ancestry groups and are sized by relative population. Brown diamonds represent Greater Boston's major racial/ethnic groups, and are not sized according to population. 2020.



Note: All groups include multiracial and Latino populations. Latino includes all respondents who marked "Hispanic or Latino," regardless of race. Other, smaller racial groups, such as Native Americans and Pacific Islanders are not included here in order to simplify the visual display.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey, IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) • Created with Datawrapper

In Greater Boston, socioeconomic disparities for Black families fall along two dimensions: 1) intra-racial disparities across Black subpopulations, such as when disaggregating by ancestry or country of origin (the gold circles in the graph above), reflecting the unique Black diversity we detailed earlier in this report; and 2) significant challenges for Black residents in the aggregate when compared to other racial groups (the brown diamonds). The scatterplot in Figure 11 helps demonstrate both dimensions of these socioeconomic disparities. As a quick aside, when we calculate educational attainment in Figure 11 we are looking only at individuals 25 or older, as compared to the previous section where we present educational attainment across the population groups of Boston and Greater Boston, of any age.

The gold circles disaggregate Black residents by ancestry, with some groups reporting significantly higher incomes and educational attainment levels than others. Two-thirds of Nigerians in Greater Boston, for instance, have earned a college degree, and median household income for Nigerians is roughly \$77,000 a year. This is far higher than educational attainment and median incomes for Black residents from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cape Verde, who are clustered toward the bottom left of the scatter plot. Black residents reporting "African-American," "American," or "Black" ancestry have generally higher education levels, but median household incomes remain lower than most other ancestry groups.

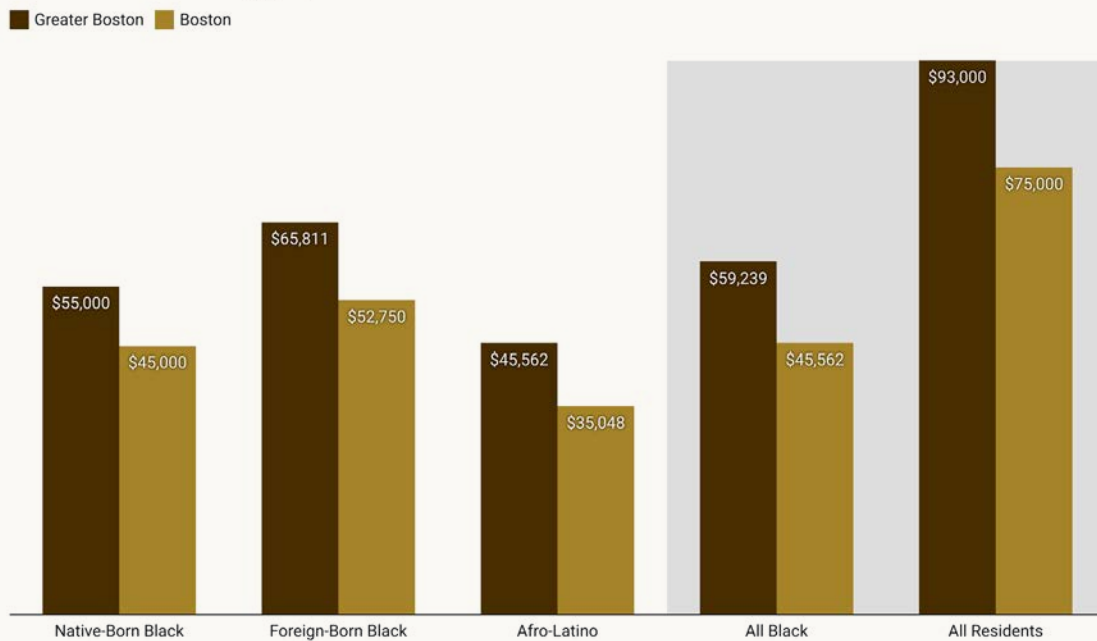
At the same time, however, the vast majority of all Black ancestry groups (the gold circles) have lower incomes and educational attainment than typical White residents, Asian residents, and all residents regionwide (the brown diamonds). White and Asian households at the median both earn more than \$100,000 a year and have college attainment rates of well over 50 percent. Latino residents (technically an “ethnicity” rather than a “race,” for census purposes) have far lower incomes and educational attainment, more in line with characteristics of the typical Black family. This is in part driven by the fact that there’s significant overlap between people who identify as Black racially and as Latino for their ethnicity (i.e., “Afro-Latino,” as described earlier).

Another way to disaggregate within the Black community, as we’ve discussed earlier in this report, is by nativity and by ethnicity, as we do in Figure 12, below.

Consistent with Pew Research Center findings on these trends at the national level,<sup>20</sup> Black immigrant groups have the highest median household incomes for Black households in Greater Boston. Afro-Latinos, by contrast, have the lowest incomes, with typical Afro-Latino households in Greater Boston earning only around \$45,000 a year. Native-born Black households are somewhere in between, at \$55,000 a year. Among the varied causes for this difference is that Black immigrants are likely to have more earners per household. Nationally, roughly 54 percent of Black immigrants live in married couple households, as compared to just 36 percent of U.S.-born Black populations.<sup>21</sup>

### Figure 12: Foreign-born Black households have the highest median incomes among the region’s Black residents.

Median household income by group. Greater Boston and Boston. 2020.



Note: Includes all respondents who selected Black in combination with other racial groups. Afro-Latinos are those who also selected “Latino” ethnicity.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org • Created with Datawrapper



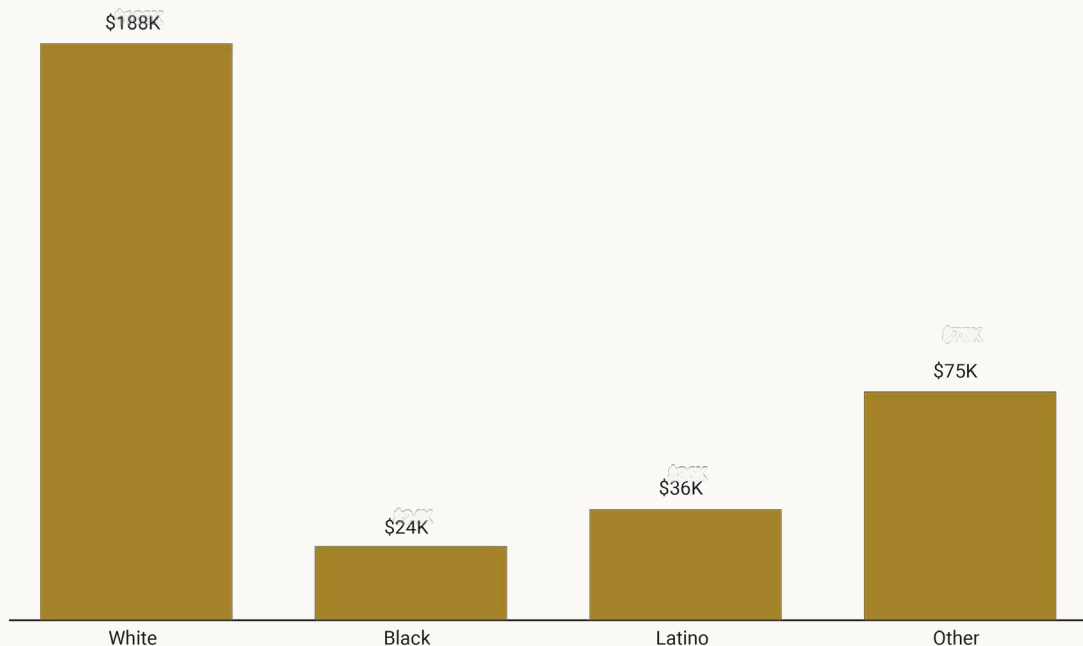
## As troubling as income disparities are, wealth disparities are even larger.

At its simplest, wealth, or “net worth,” is a measure of all assets minus debts. Many households, and especially White households, see wealth accrue over generations as families purchase homes, receive inheritances and gifts, and save or invest income that they don't need for day-to-day expenses. Unfortunately, these wealth-building mechanisms are more difficult for Black families and other families of color. Many Black and immigrant families, for instance, were legally prohibited from participating in key homeownership programs until the latter half of the 20th century.<sup>22</sup> Even now getting a foothold into homeownership remains a serious challenge due to exclusionary zoning rules, low supply, and high housing costs.

These factors and many others contribute to staggering wealth disparities. Nationally, White households hold more than seven times the wealth of Black households, according to estimates from the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), which is the most detailed survey of wealth that's administered at the national level (Figure 13). Of all groups measured, Black households hold the least wealth overall, just under \$25,000 at the median. Unfortunately, the SCF does not have a large enough sample size to allow for estimates by race at the state or local level, so we must rely on a different survey to drill down deeper.

### Figure 13: While most wealth surveys have sample sizes too small to be reliable at the local level, national data from the SCF shows large racial wealth gaps.

Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), household median net worth by race, 2019. United States.



*Due to data limitations, Black and White households are single-race, non-Latino alone. Latino households can be of any race. "Other" households include respondents selecting: Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Pacific Islander, more than one race and respondents who selected 'Other race' alone. Reliable wealth estimates were not possible for these groups individually due to sample size limitations.*

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Adapted from "Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances." • Created with Datawrapper

In 2015 the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston commissioned a novel small survey of wealth in Greater Boston, analyzed in *The Color of Wealth in Boston*,<sup>23</sup> that has since garnered significant public attention. Due to the high cost associated with administering a survey on wealth, researchers surveyed a relatively small sample of families regionwide to estimate net worth by race. It generated estimates of a Black/White racial wealth gap far wider than national estimates from the Survey of Consumer Finances, suggesting that Black households in Greater Boston had a net worth of just \$8, as compared to \$248,000 for White households.

We know this is a rough estimate due to the small sample size. But if the estimate were \$8,000 of wealth for Black families, or even \$80,000, this would still represent a significant racial disparity (versus a point estimate of \$248,000 for White households) that merits the same level of urgency for remedy. This study also presented estimates for a few other subpopulations, including Caribbean Black (median net worth of \$12,000), Puerto Rican (\$3,020), and Dominican (\$0). While all significantly lower than their estimates for White families in the region, these rough estimates do reflect some intra-racial disparities as well. Importantly, a new effort is under way to build on this 2015 survey. It will have a much larger sample size, which will enable some geographic breakdowns across Massachusetts and allow for greater nuance in exploring differences within racial categories.

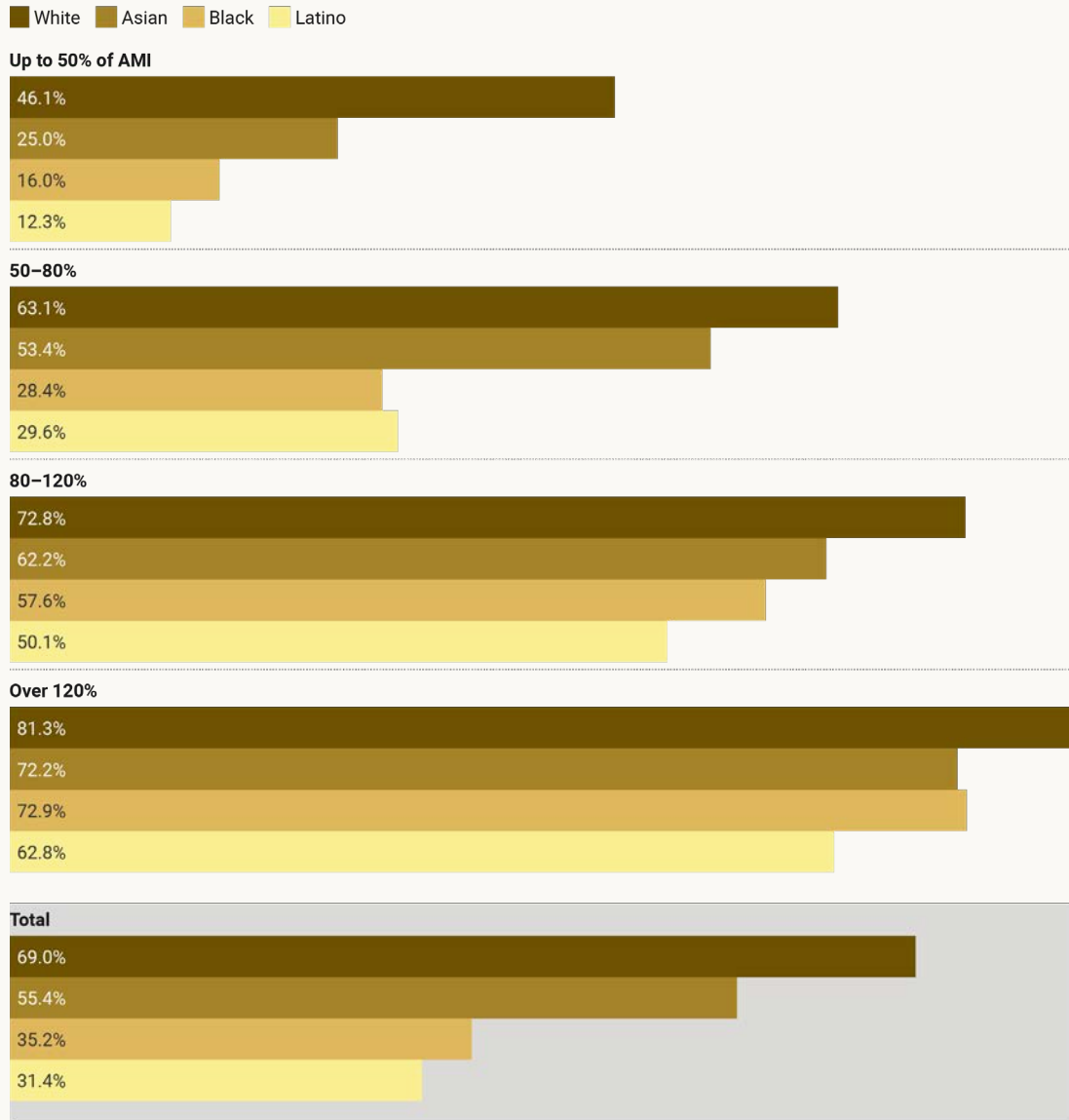
There is little other data available on net wealth at the state or local level, but we can look at individual components of wealth to further analyze racial disparities. Homeownership is among the largest components of wealth for families in the bottom half of the distribution, and, troublingly, we see that Greater Boston has an even larger racial homeownership gap than the country as a whole. Figure 14 shows that not only are these gaps large in aggregate (the Total section shaded in grey), but they're large even when just looking at households of similar income levels.



**Left:** Homeownership is the starting point of generational wealth for most Americans. Photo: Andres for iStock. **Right:** Founder and President Marianne Lancaster runs her thriving logistics company, Lancaster Packaging Inc., outside of Boston. Photo: Richard Howard for the Boston Foundation.

## Figure 14: Homeownership gaps are large, even when comparing families of similar incomes.

Homeownership rate across area median income (AMI) percentiles. Single-race alone. Greater Boston. 2019.

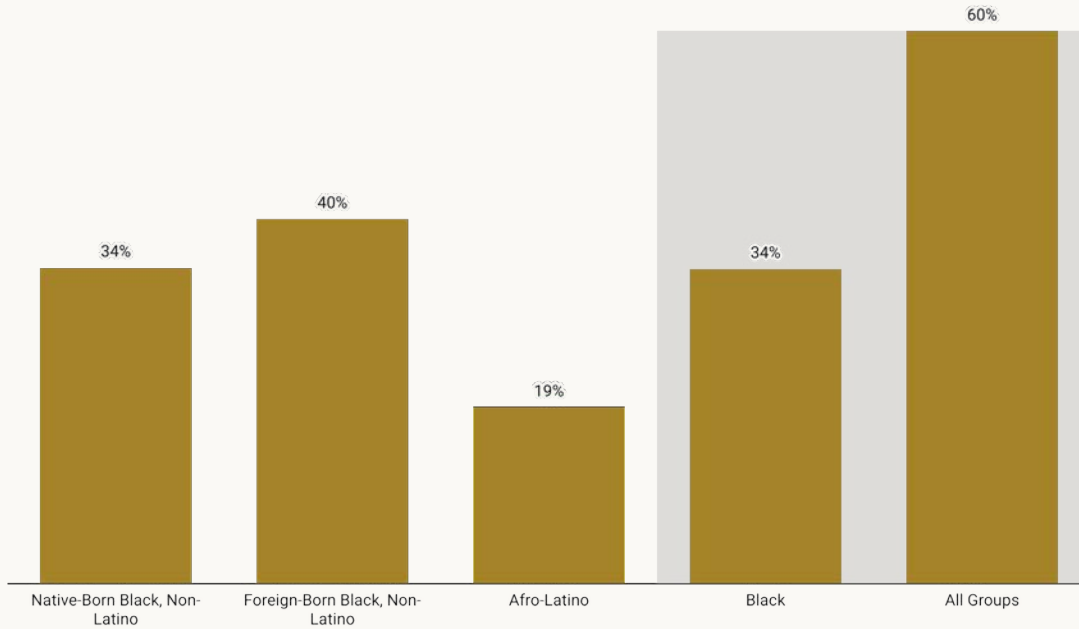


Notes: Adopted from the Greater Boston Housing Report Card 2022 presentation. Race/Ethnicity groups do not include multiracial populations. White, Asian, and Black householders are non-Hispanic/Latino. Native American and Pacific Islanders not included due to small sample size.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. • Created with Datawrapper

## Figure 15: Afro-Latinos have the lowest homeownership rate among Black households.

Share of households that own their own home. Greater Boston. 2020.



Note: "Black" includes native born, foreign-born, and Afro-Latino Black populations.

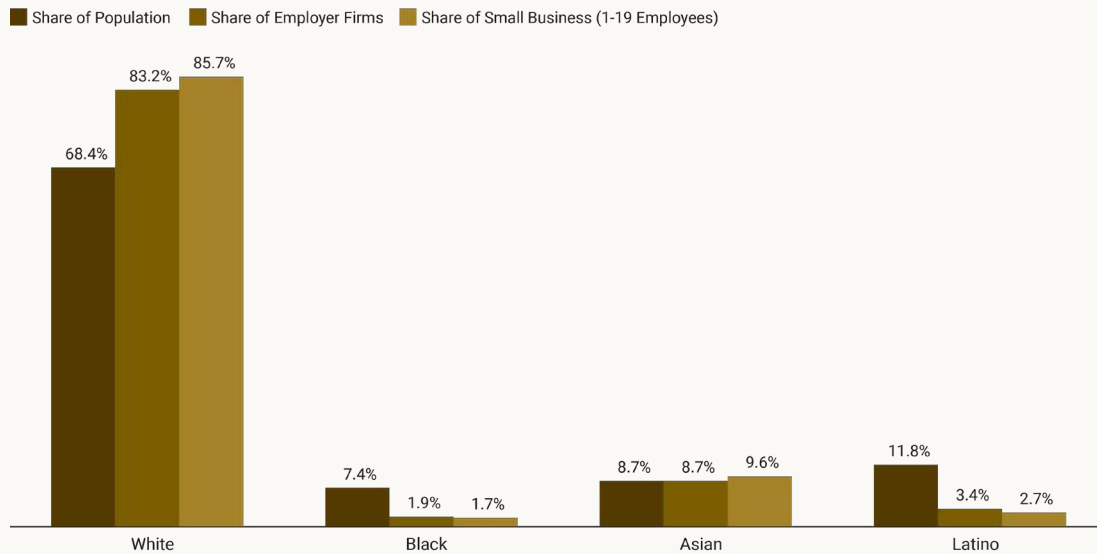
Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) • Created with Datawrapper

While not as large as gaps between racial groups, there are also homeownership rate differences across Black communities. Forty percent of foreign-born Black households in Greater Boston own their own home, about 6 percentage points higher than native-born Black homeowners (Figure 15). By contrast, at the national level, foreign-born Black immigrants and native-born Black residents own homes at the same rate—42 percent, per Pew.<sup>24</sup> The region's lowest Black homeownership rate is within the Afro-Latino population (though some caution should be taken due to smaller sample size). Just 19 percent of Afro-Latino households own their own homes, 15 percentage points below Black householders overall and 41 percentage points below the overall Greater Boston homeownership rate.

Another important component of wealth, for which we do have good local data, is business ownership. There are many different types of businesses, and for this analysis we focus on businesses with at least one employee, so that small sole proprietorships do not skew results. And once again we see large racial gaps, with Black business owners making up just 1.9 percent of all businesses with one or more employees, well below the overall Black share of the population (Figure 16). This is in stark contrast to White and Asian owners, who have equal or greater rates of business ownership than their population share. The significantly lower rate of Black ownership speaks directly to many of the systemic difficulties these owners face. Access to capital, mentorship, and learning opportunities can be much harder for Black business owners to secure, and lower ownership rates may be due at least in part to these challenges.

## Figure 16: Black businesses make up the lowest ownership share overall and among small businesses.

Race and ethnicity by share of population, business and small business ownership. Firms with employees only. Boston Metropolitan Statistical Area. 2020.



Note: Due to data limitations, racial groups are inclusive of Latino but not multiracial members.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2020 U.S. Decennial Census, 2020 Annual Business Survey. • Created with Datawrapper

It's worth concluding this section on socioeconomic disparities with a discussion of poverty. Greater Boston is clearly wealthy enough in the aggregate to ensure that all residents enjoy a basic minimum standard of living, and yet we fail to live up to this responsibility. Greater Boston's populations of color are particularly impacted by the systemic failures that can lead to poverty, resulting in higher poverty rates as compared to White residents. In Boston, the Black poverty rate is around 8 percentage points greater than the White rate, and in Greater Boston the Black poverty rate is double the White poverty rate. Latino poverty rates are even a bit higher than Black poverty rates.<sup>25</sup>

Even more concerning than the current share of Black residents in poverty, however, is that multigenerational poverty is especially persistent among Black families nationwide. Recent research from Richard Reeves and co-authors at the Brookings Institution looks into the persistence of poverty across three generations of a family and finds that Black adults today who are in the bottom fifth of the income bracket have a roughly 21 percent chance of having had both their parents and their grandparents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution. By contrast, among White individuals in the bottom fifth today, only about 1 percent of them have both parents and grandparents who were also at the bottom of the income distribution.<sup>26</sup> This research unfortunately relies on data with smaller sample sizes, which makes it tougher to conduct similar analyses at the local level or for other racial subpopulations.



PART 4

**SEVEN CONCLUDING  
QUESTIONS**



This report shows that the Black population in Boston and Greater Boston is continuing to grow in diversity in multilayered ways—something that started in earlier historical periods but today can be described as unique compared with other parts of the United States in terms of rapidity and size. For example, the proportion of the Black population that is foreign-born is larger and grew much faster than in other parts of U.S. The size and growth of our Afro-Latino/a population stand out for both city and region. And since 2010 Greater Boston is becoming home to a rapidly increasing number of Black people from the African diaspora, representing countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, and other places in the African continent. This growing diversity is contributing to the increase of the Black population in many places.

Let us not forget, today's developments rest on the foundation of a nation that first treated Black people as chattel, like cows. And that later, even with slavery outlawed, ensured de jure or de facto segregation, with national, state, and private sector policies and practices that served to confine physically and economically the masses of Black people. But Black people regardless of their ethnic or ancestral roots fought back continuously. Indeed, migration from the South to the North was a tool of resistance, serving as a beacon for Black people from other parts of the world to also migrate to U.S. cities, including Boston and—more recently—Greater Boston.

The data and information in this report point to at least seven key questions for Boston, Greater Boston, and Massachusetts. These questions have implications for public policy, civic involvement, and strategies aimed at eliminating long-time racial inequalities.

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1

A most basic query that the report raises is **how should we count population changes in ways that avoid a presumption that the Black (or, for that matter, Asian or Latino) community is monolithic?** Within that basic query, more specific questions emerge: Is it justified to count the Black population by looking just at single-race, non-Latino Black residents without acknowledging the other dimensions of its growing diversity? And how do public agencies, especially in areas such as public health or public education, become more cognizant of major demographic changes in the Black population and consider implications for evaluating policies and practices?

Of note, there is an active proposal at the federal level for the Census Bureau to start collecting race and ethnicity information using one combined question. Merging these into one identity question may have some benefits, such as more accurately counting people who identify as Latino but neither White nor Black. But it has risks as well, such as deflating future counts of Afro-Latinos, who currently are able to separately identify both their race and ethnicity. How do we balance these outcomes if the change is enacted?

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2

Another query emanating from the report's findings: **Is the demographic descriptor *African American* a misnomer in places like Boston and Greater Boston?** Growing numbers of people with identification and roots in Haiti, Jamaica, Nigeria, Ghana, Cuba, Panama, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, and other places may not call themselves *African Americans* but will say they are *Black*. Names are important, of course. This report should enable conversations about how to incorporate descriptively the growing diversity within the Black population into ways to highlight this broad population's rich cultural and linguistic resources.

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# 3

Some foundations are designing new initiatives and investment strategies in response to the robust reality of continual racial inequalities and inequities in Boston and other places, as was raised in a recent report by New England Blacks in Philanthropy, *From Moment to Movement*. **How can Great Migration to Global Immigration serve as a tool to advance equity-seeking strategies without creating division within the Black population?** The umbrella called the *Black population* is today quite big and diverse with many subpopulations as discussed above. How will philanthropy incorporate an understanding of extensive diversity within the Black population in Boston and Greater Boston to inform its work and grantmaking for greater impact?

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# 4

**Are there new political issues that Black and Brown leadership must contend with today, based on the findings of this report?** For example, is bilingual education now also a “Black issue,” given that the Black population today encompasses communities from non-English speaking nations? There may be many, many Black children living in households where English is not their first language. Further, what are implications for community coalitions? The report documents diversity and disparity; what are ways political leadership can help to bridge differences and take civic advantage of the growing diversity of the Black population?

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# 5

Given what this report shows, **is there a responsibility for media outlets to consider the expanded Black population diversity in how they report news and cover culture and events?** Increasing numbers of Black residents identifying with various Spanish-speaking countries have pointed out invisibility regarding race in media from their countries of origin. How can we avoid that here, especially when some of those international programs are also broadcast or replicated locally? For example, throughout Latin America a Black or African presence has been scant in the media, especially in the popular and powerful medium of telenovelas. For a long time, Afro-Latino/as were either completely absent in telenovelas or made appearances that were episodic and minor despite their being a significant presence in the establishment and history of countries in Latin America.<sup>27</sup> This is slowly showing signs of changing. As the Afro-Latino population grows in places in the U.S. like Boston and Greater Boston, will this have some positive impact on how this community is portrayed in Latin American countries as it should here at home?

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# 6

**How can this report help to inform the debates and discussions about reparations?** Boston has embarked on an important journey to consider how reparations can be a tool to address historical injustices and harms against Black people. These harms include slavery but also practices in the eras after slavery, where individuals were legally free but whole communities were confined and restricted by government and the private sector. Alas, there is an important ancillary query here: Clearly, African Americans who have lived, survived, and struggled in the U.S. for generations were on the front lines of state-sponsored racial exploitation and even racial terrorism, and denied the basic social, educational, and economic rights afforded to White citizens over all those years. Should they not have some *particular* recognition of this plight? But how is this balanced with the reality that the post-slavery forces supporting racial exploitation and terrorism did not discriminate in terms of the subtle diversity of the Black population? As one example, banks adopting and implementing redlining policies absolutely made no accommodations for the different groups that composed the overall Black population in many urban areas where these kinds of policies and practices were enacted.

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# 7

The final—and perhaps most important—query inherent in this report is inspired by the resiliency and cultural contributions of Black people in Boston and now Greater Boston over generations. And that is, **how can our cities embrace and benefit from what our diverse Black population has given us?** What are the assets and resources, and historical and cultural experiences associated with Black survival and renaissance that can be tapped to create better places for everyone?

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The above key questions are not the only ones that can be raised around issues concerning our region's dynamic Black population, but these are a few that spring readily from this report. Depending on the work of others, whether in education, health, housing, economic development, or youth empowerment, still more questions could emerge from a reading of the report.

In this latter vein, we hope *Great Migration to Global Immigration: A Profile of Black Boston* offers a base to inform questions and hopefully guide answers or strategies toward embracing and channeling the growing diversity of the Black population as a resource in confronting ongoing racial inequalities and inequities in Boston and Greater Boston.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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7. These commentaries do not represent complete historical or comprehensive examination of these groups, but rather summaries primarily about population size and growth, and education attainment. There are comprehensive reports about these groups, and some are listed among the endnotes.
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