



# FOREIGN BORN IN BOSTON: JAMAICANS

*City of Boston Planning Department Research Division*

*“Imagine all the people” is a series of publications produced by the City of Boston’s Planning Department’s Research Division for the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Advancement. As the East Boston mural above depicts, Boston’s foreign-born communities make numerous contributions to the city’s social, cultural and economic landscape. This series is part of an ongoing effort to celebrate Boston’s foreign-born populations and gain insight into how they shape our city.*

## OVERVIEW OF JAMAICANS IN THE UNITED STATES

There have been three significant waves of Jamaican immigration to the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. The first occurred between 1900 and 1924—when the National Origins Act severely restricted immigration to the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Caribbean immigration to the United States would plummet from 10,630 in 1924 to 321 the following year. The second wave picked up steam during World War II: starting in 1943, migrant workers were brought in to help with the U.S. war effort by working in agriculture. At first, most migrants were directed to Florida, but many would relocate to other states. Many tobacco workers who were working in Connecticut chose to move to Boston and New York after their contracts expired in 1950 instead of returning to the Caribbean. Post-war migration to the United States was again reduced in 1952 with the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act, which upheld the quota system, and much of

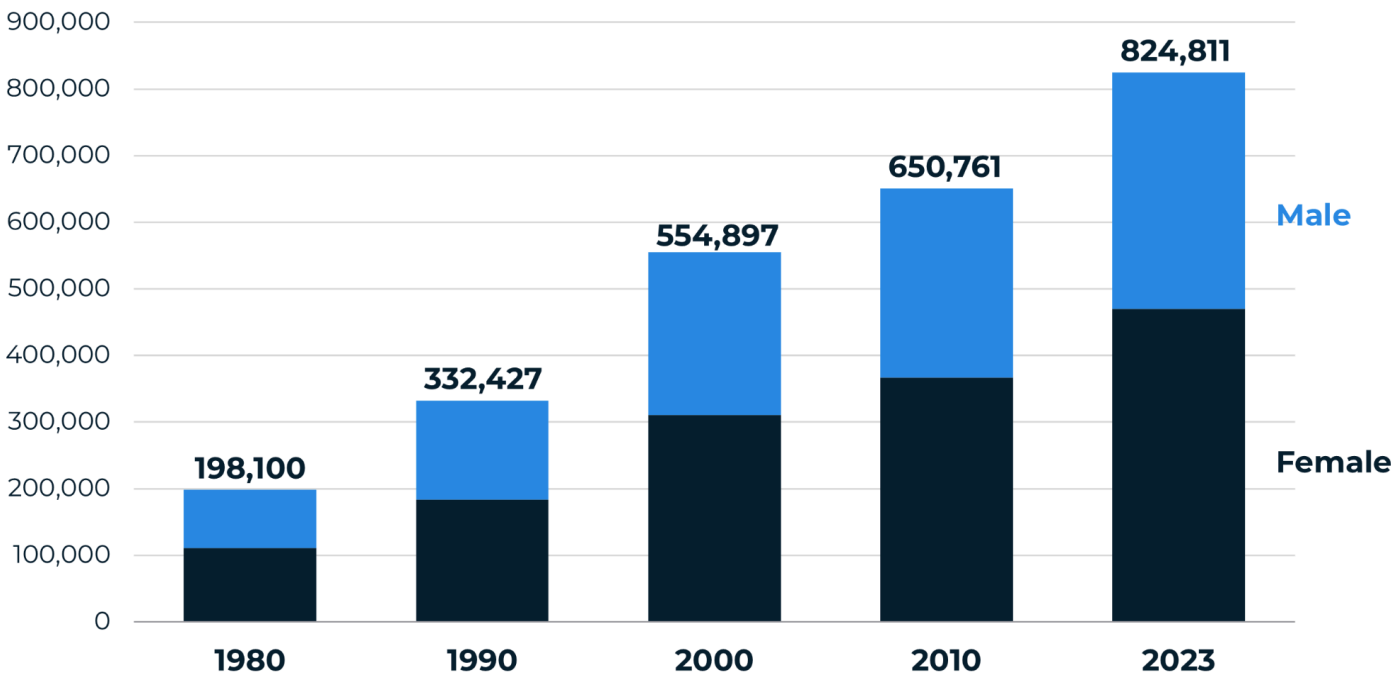
<sup>1</sup> Vickerman, M. (2005). Jamaicans in the United States. In: Ember, M., Ember, C.R., Skoggard, I. (eds) Encyclopedia of Diasporas. Springer, Boston, MA. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-29904-4\\_91](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-29904-4_91)



Caribbean emigration was rerouted to Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> The third wave began with the 1965 passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which led to increased Caribbean immigration to the United States, especially as Great Britain had begun to block immigration in 1962. As a result, Jamaican immigration to the United States almost doubled from 1970 to 1980.<sup>3</sup> Because the U.S. economy needed more service workers to fill roles previously filled by U.S. women who increasingly entered the labor force during this period, the foreign-born Jamaican population has greater shares of females.<sup>4</sup>

## FOREIGN-BORN JAMAICANS

Population growth in the U.S. from 1980 to 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980–2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2010 and 2023 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/jamaica-diverse-beginning-diaspora-developed-world>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.everyculture.com/multi/Ha-La/Jamaican-Americans.html>

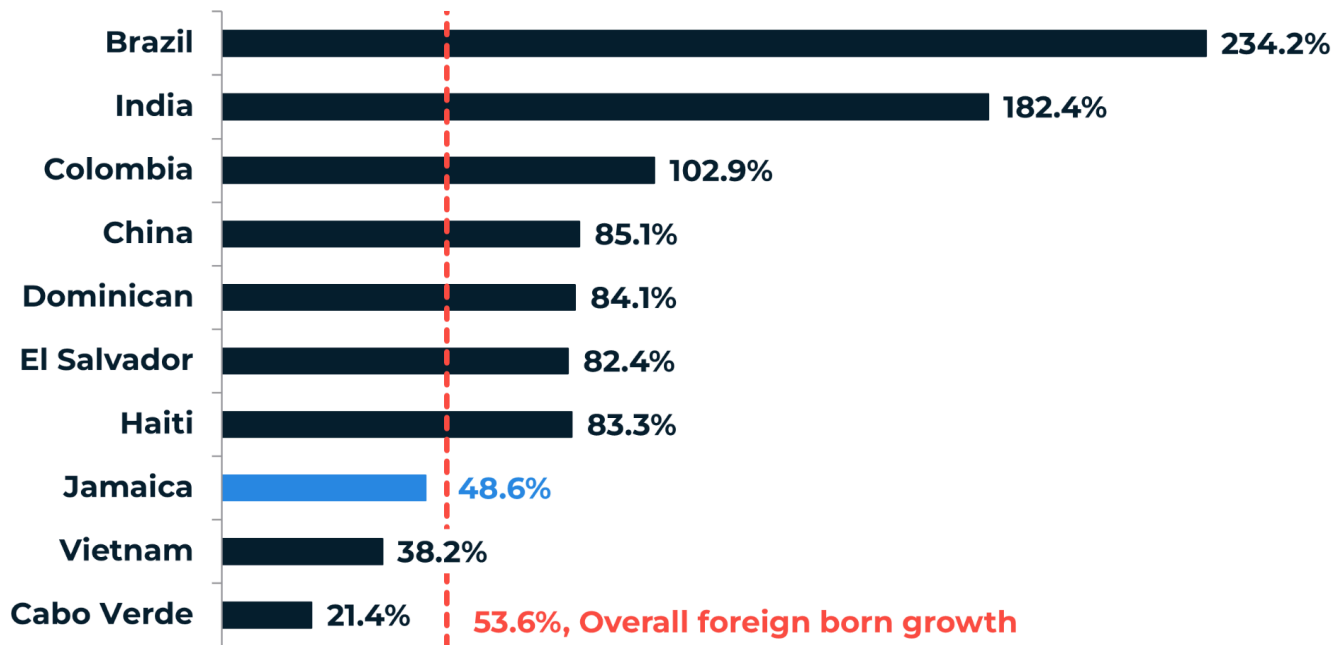
<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the U.S. economy needed more service workers, who filled roles previously filled by U.S. women who were entering the labor force at higher rates.



However, from 2000 to 2023, foreign-born Jamaican population growth slowed, increasing 49 percent over this period, compared to 53.6 percent growth for the foreign-born population overall.

## INCREASE IN FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION

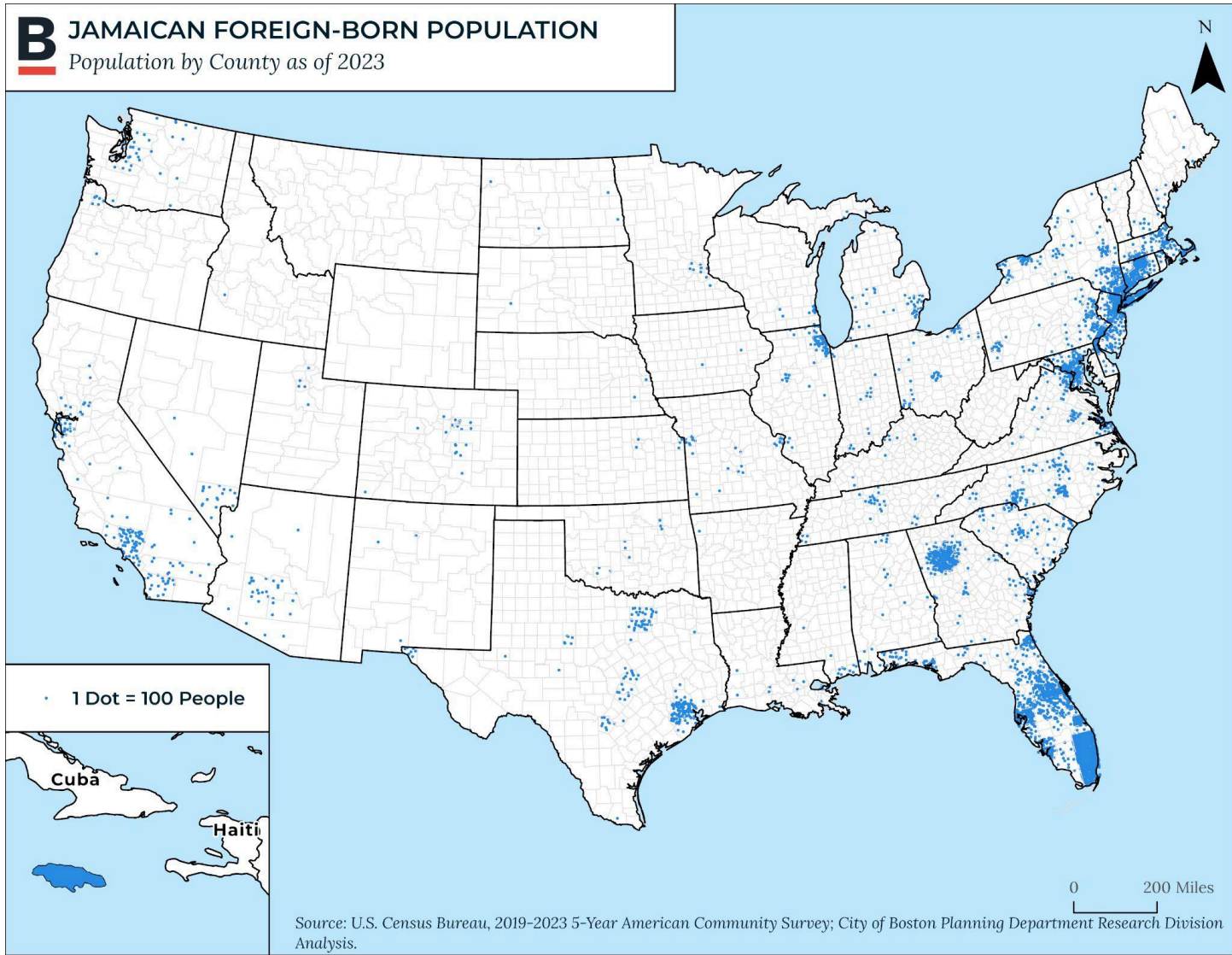
Percent increase in foreign born populations in the U.S. from 2000 to 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980-2000 Decennial Census (IPUMS), 2023 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

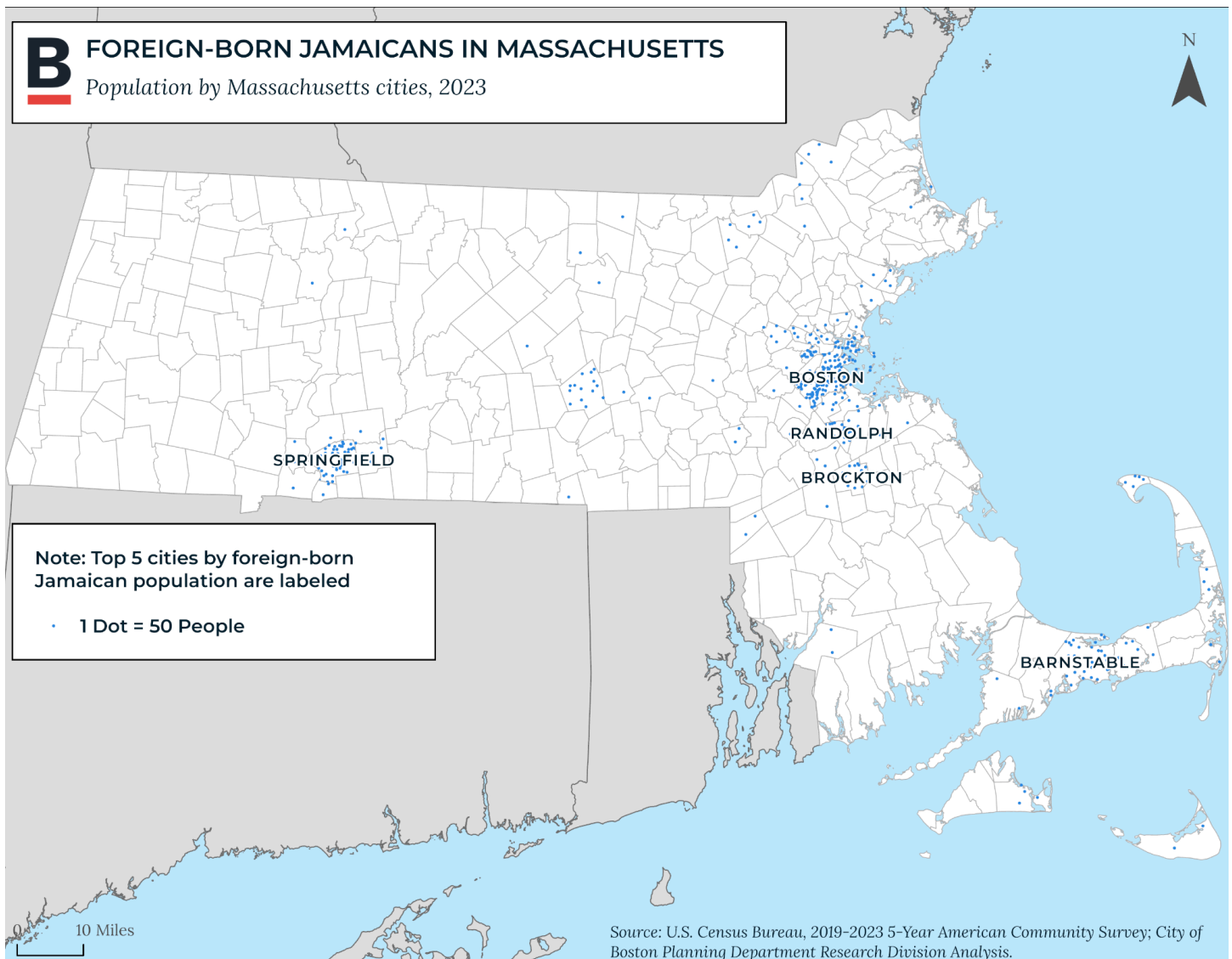


Estimates from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) show that 817,294 foreign-born Jamaicans reside in the United States, which has been the leading destination for Jamaican emigrants. Other primary destinations include the United Kingdom and Canada. Massachusetts has the ninth largest foreign-born Jamaican population in the country behind Florida, New York, Georgia, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Texas.





In Massachusetts, Boston (34 percent) has the largest share of the state's total foreign-born Jamaican population followed by Springfield (13 percent), Barnstable (8 percent), Brockton (5 percent), and Randolph (4 percent).



# FOREIGN-BORN JAMAICANS IN BOSTON

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Because of its position in the trade triangle which operated between Europe, Africa, and the Americas from the 16th to 19th centuries, Boston has been home to a Jamaican population since



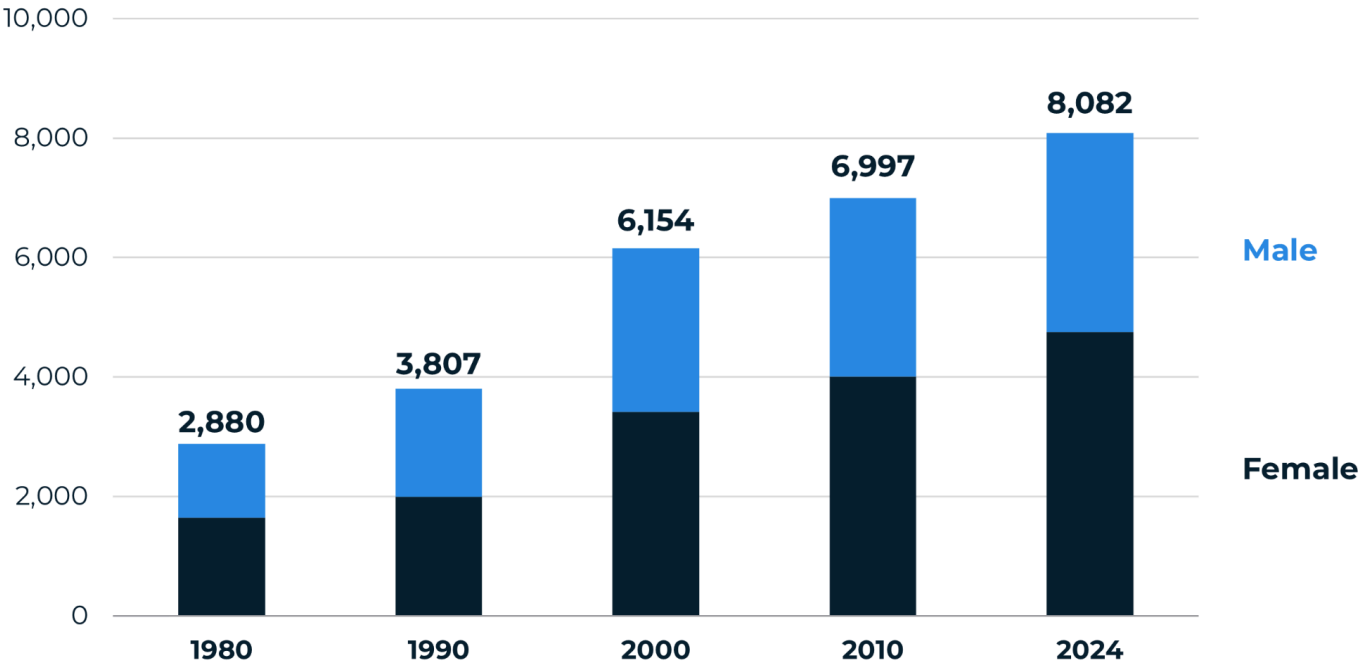
colonial times.<sup>5</sup> During the first wave of twentieth century migration, Jamaicans traveled to Boston on Caribbean steamship transportation of the United Fruit Company, which was headquartered in Boston from 1899 to 1938.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1980, Boston has seen a large increase in its foreign-born Jamaican population. In 1980, there were roughly 2,880 foreign-born Jamaicans. In 2024, the City of Boston Planning Department Research Division estimates that 8,082 Jamaicans reside in Boston, which is a 289 percent growth from 1980.

Foreign-born Jamaicans have the highest share of women in their population when compared to the other largest foreign-born populations in Boston. About 59 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans identify as female. Only 52 percent of all foreign born in Boston identify as female.

## FOREIGN-BORN JAMAICANS

*Population growth in Boston, from 1980 to 2024*

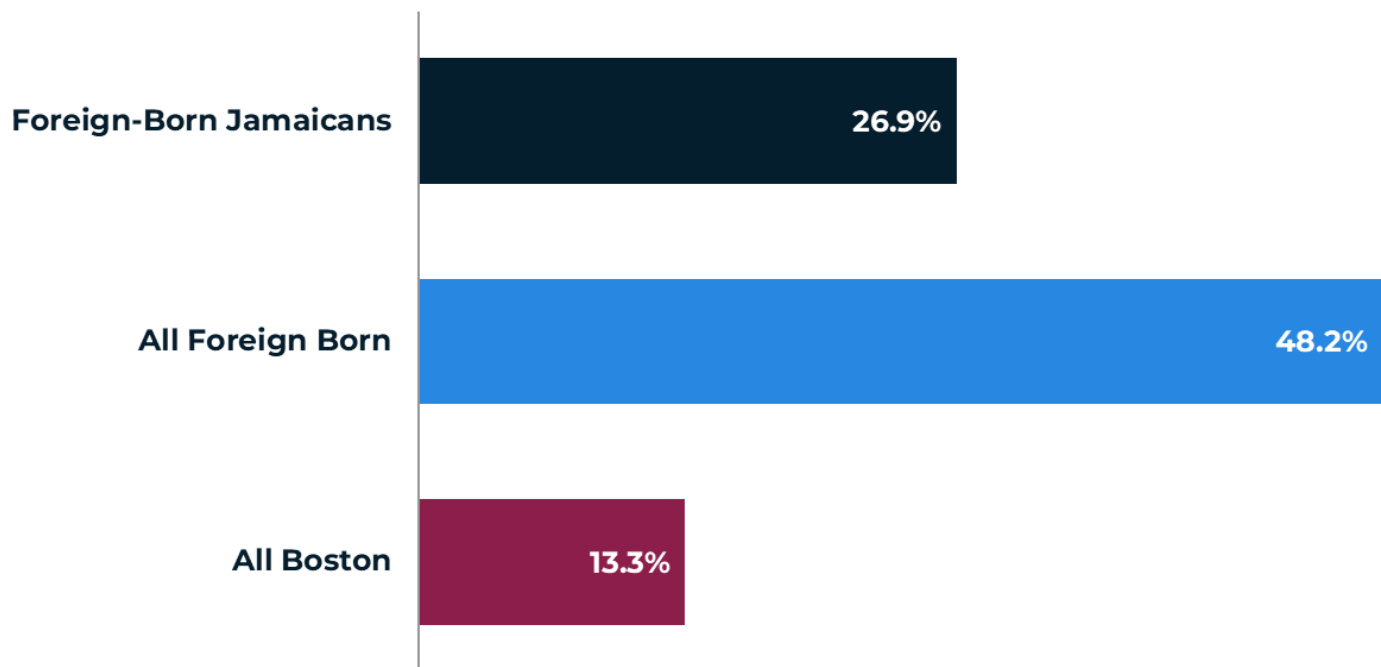


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2010 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.islandinstitute.org/working-waterfront/slaverys-ties-to-new-england/>  
<sup>6</sup> <https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/ethnic-groups/west-indians/>

Foreign-born Jamaicans have relatively high rates of naturalization. Because of their length of time in the United States, the majority of Jamaicans in Boston are naturalized citizens. Only 27 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans are noncitizens, lower than Boston’s foreign-born population as a whole (48 percent).

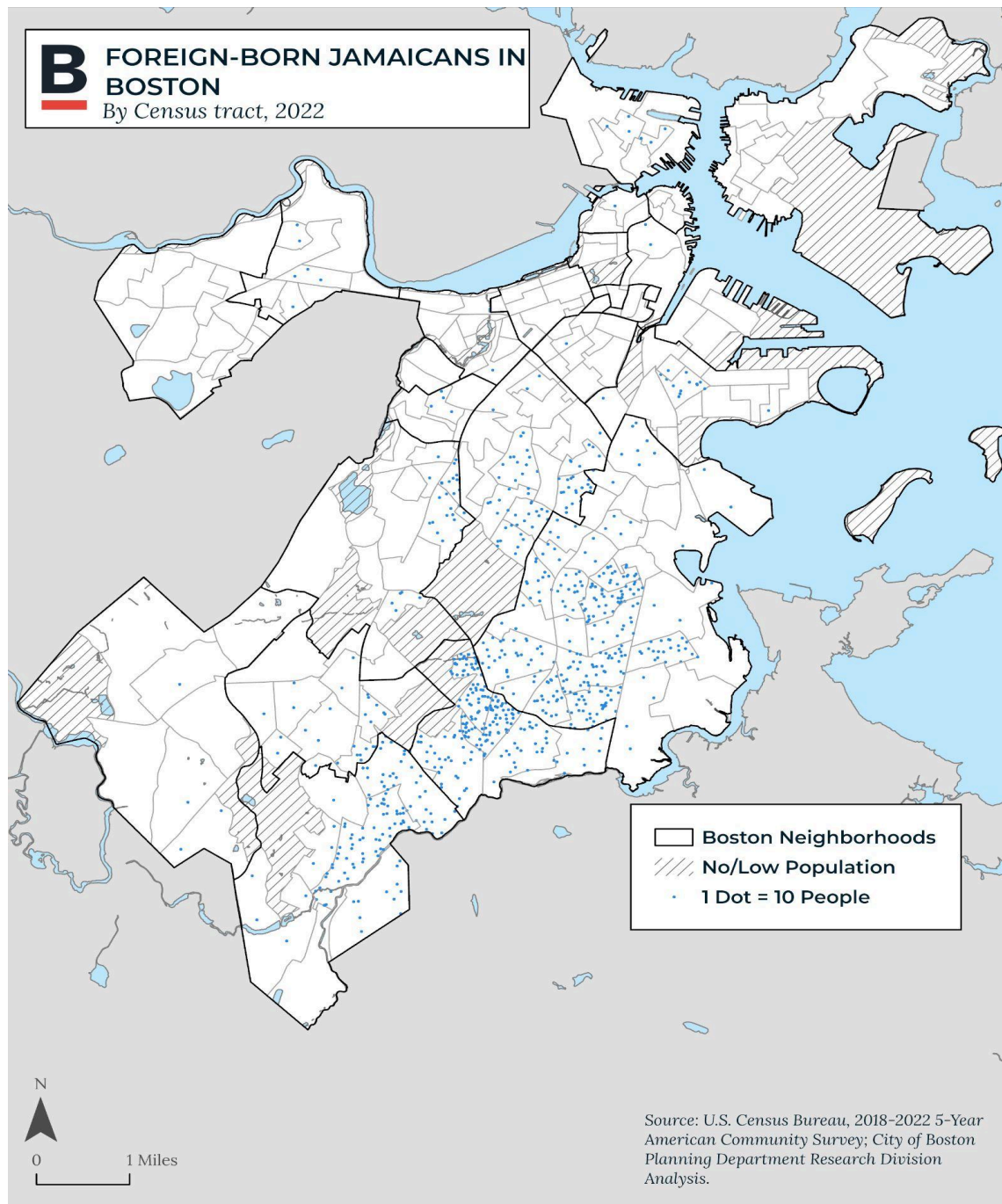
**NON-U.S. CITIZENS**  
*Share of non-U.S. citizens*



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Jamaicans benefited from the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group’s efforts in the late 1960s and 1970s to increase Black homeownership in Mattapan.<sup>7</sup> Jamaicans predominantly live in Mattapan, but there are also significant Jamaican populations in Dorchester and Roxbury. Today, Dorchester (47 percent) and Mattapan (27 percent) have the largest share of the total foreign-born Jamaican population in Boston.

<sup>7</sup> <https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/ethnic-groups/west-indians/>

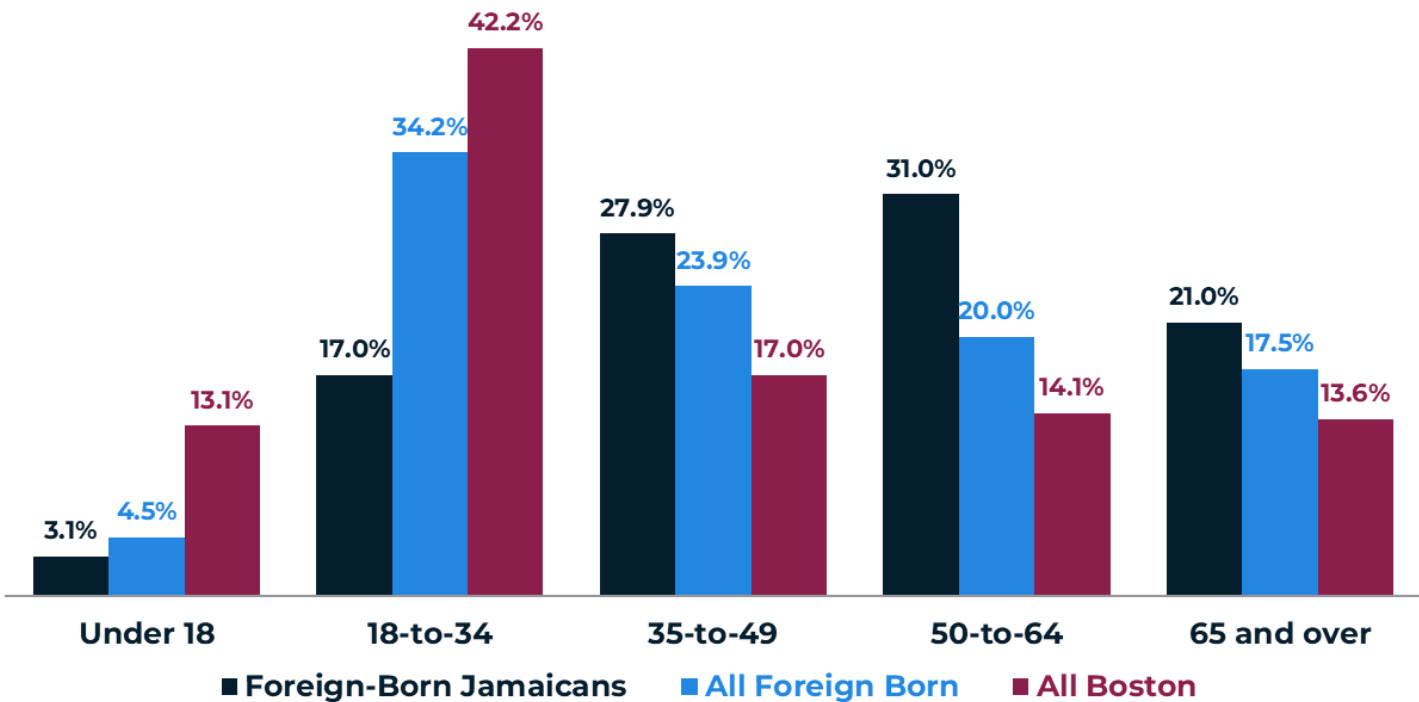




Foreign-born Jamaicans are a relatively older population. Only 17 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans are aged 18-to-34 and 80 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans are 35 years and over. In comparison, 42 percent of the Boston resident population are 18-to-34 and 45 percent are 35 years and over.

## AGE DISTRIBUTION

Share of population by age group



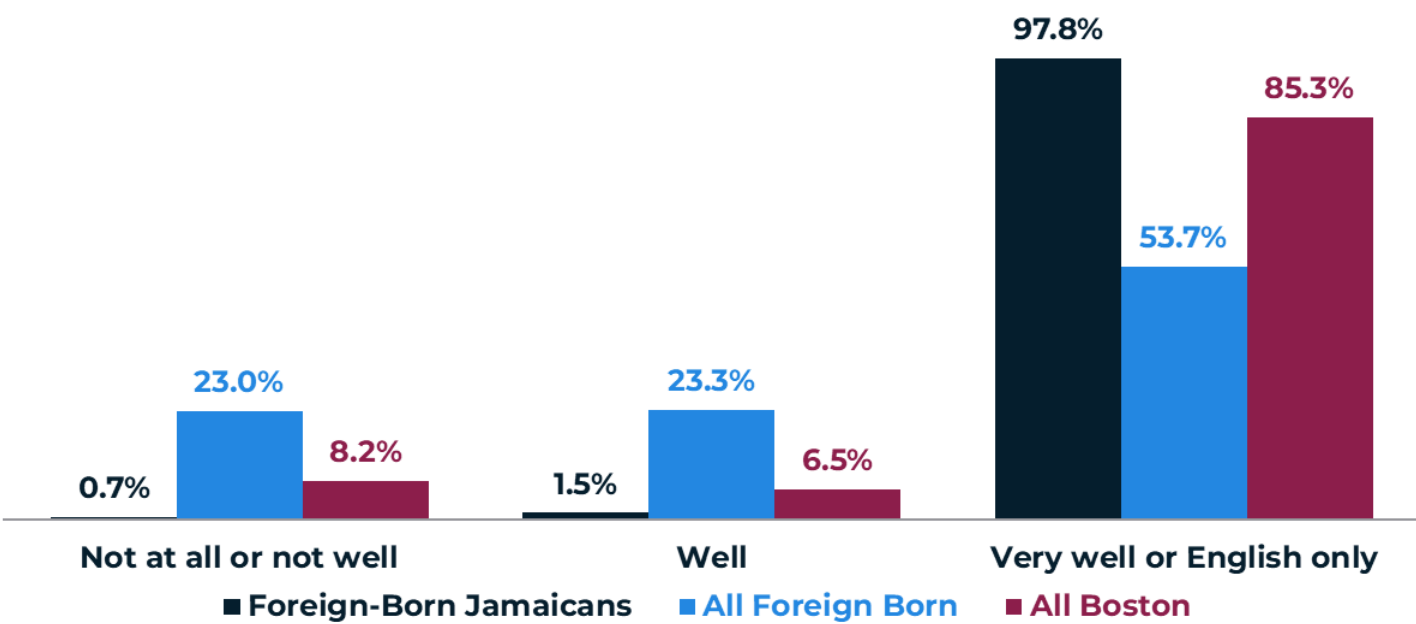
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

# LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Almost all foreign-born Jamaicans speak English very well or only speak English. Approximately 17 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans speak a language other than English at home. Of the foreign-born Jamaicans, 83 percent speak only English at home, 13 percent only speak Jamaican Creole, otherwise known as Jamaican Patois, at home, and 3 percent only speak Igbo or Tigrinya at home.<sup>8</sup>

## ABILITY TO SPEAK ENGLISH

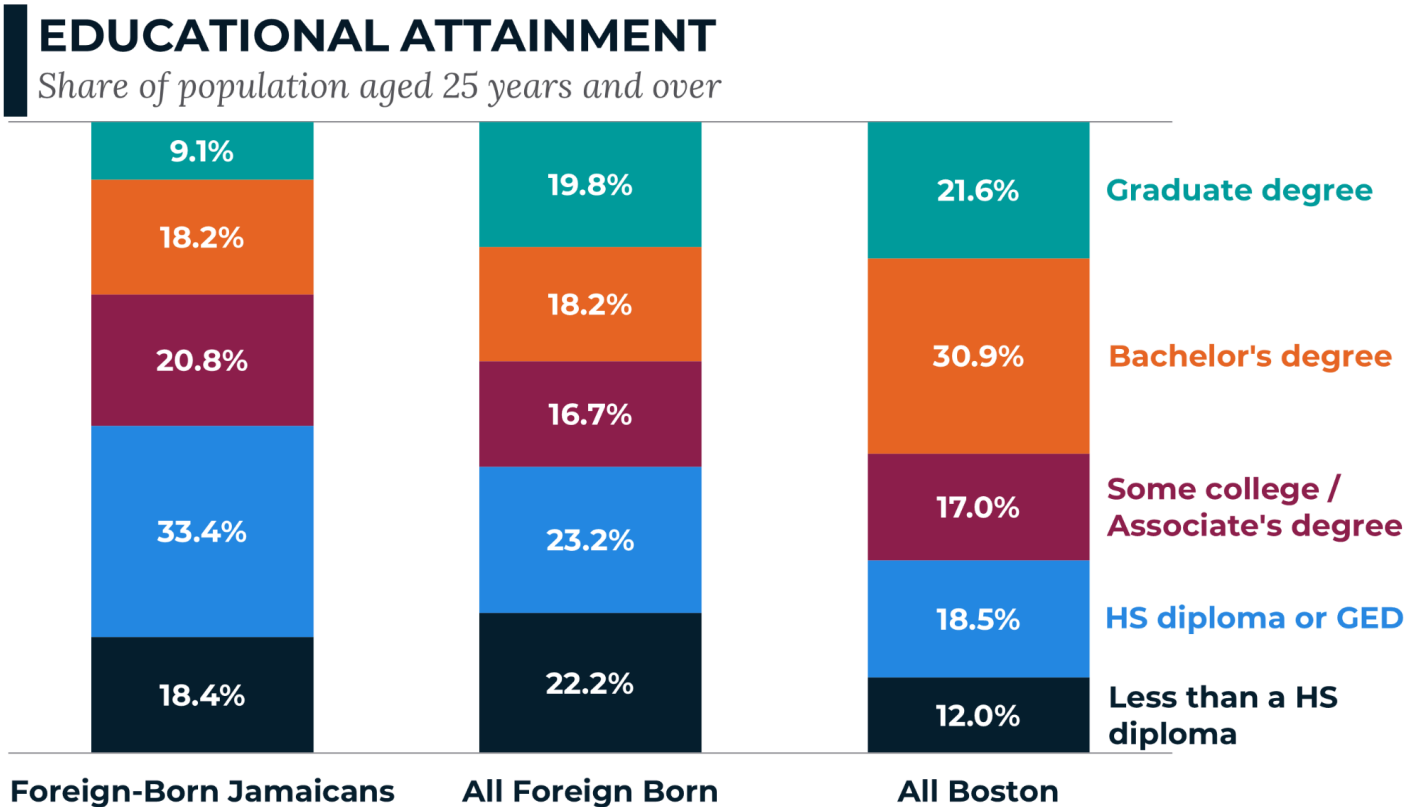
Population shares of those aged 5 years and over



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

<sup>8</sup> 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates

Foreign-born Jamaicans have varied levels of educational attainment. Approximately one third have a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of education, and 27 percent have a Bachelor's degree or higher.



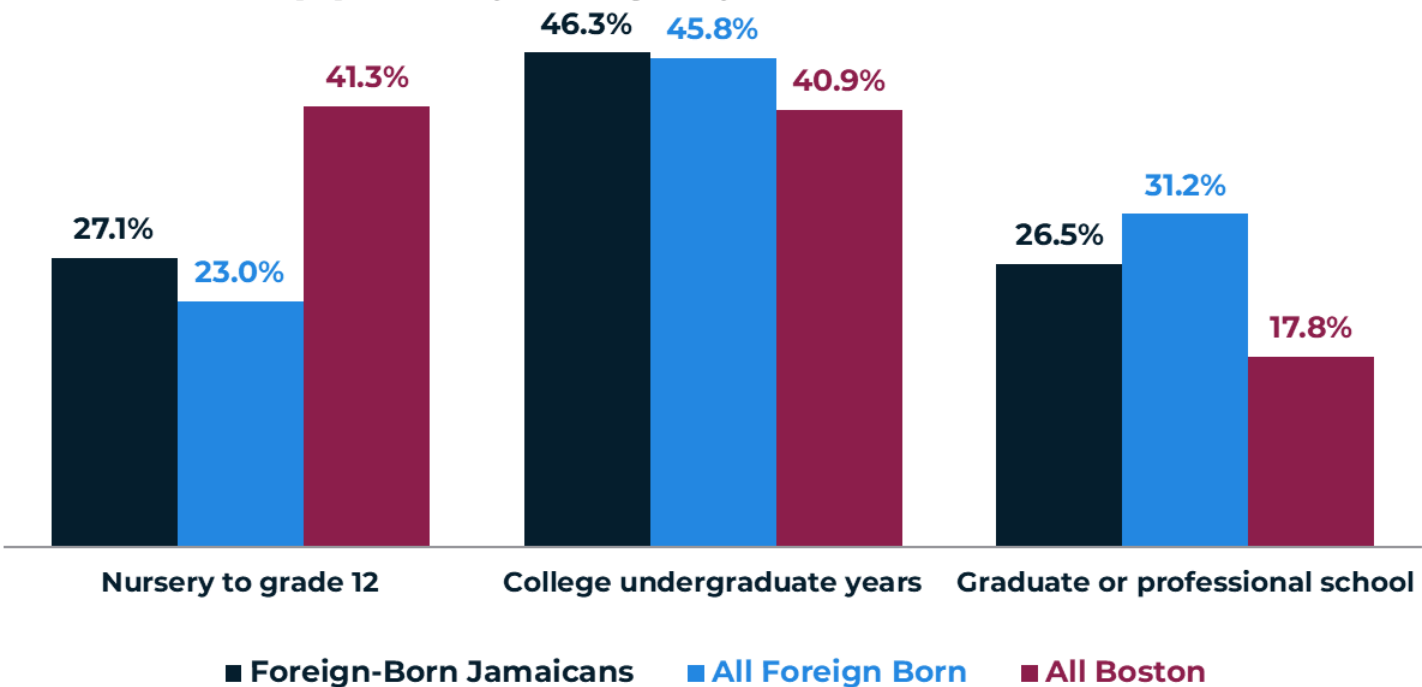
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis



Approximately 46 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans who are enrolled in school are in college or undergraduate school, which is a higher share than both all foreign born in Boston and all Boston residents. There is a similar share of foreign-born Jamaicans who are enrolled in nursery to grade 12 (27 percent) and graduate or professional school (27 percent).

## SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

School enrolled population by level, aged 3 years and over

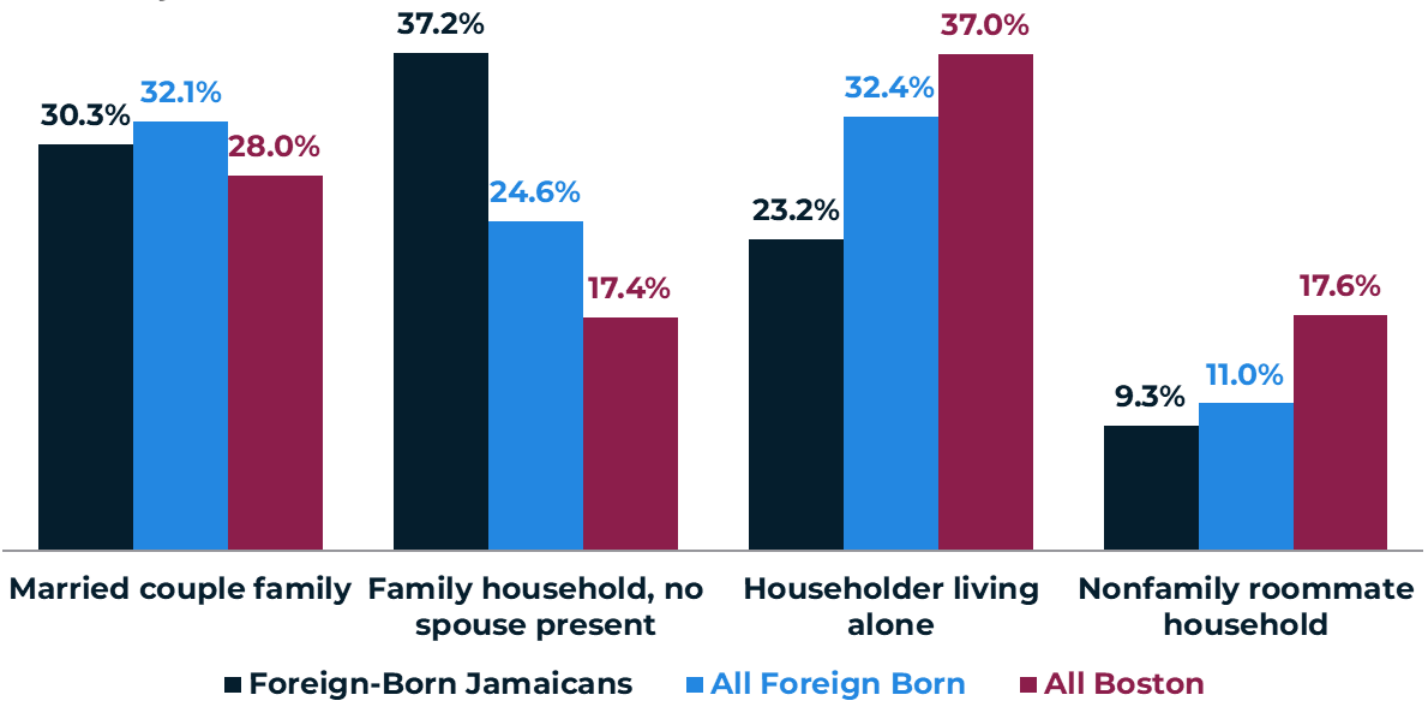


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Approximately 37 percent of foreign-born Jamaican households are family households without a spouse present, and 30 percent are married-couple families.

## TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD

Share of households



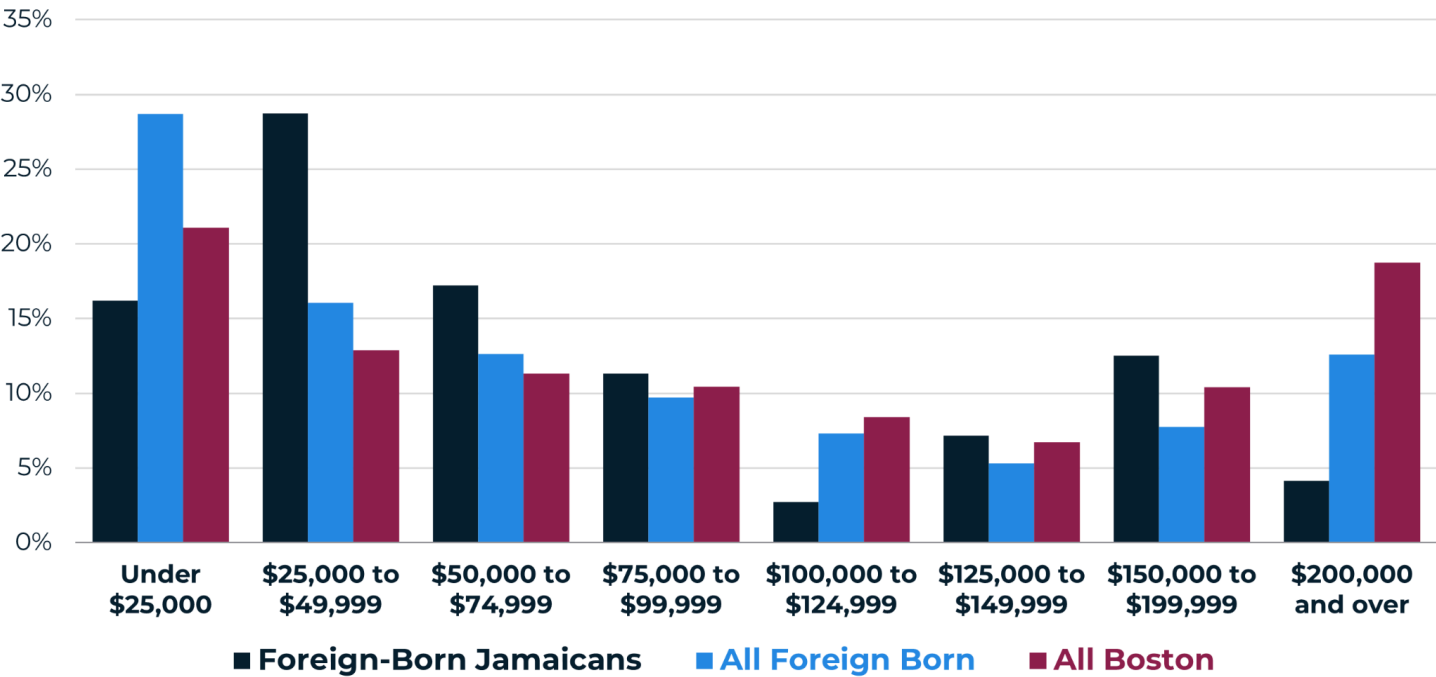
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis



Around 46 percent of foreign-born Jamaica households have a household income between \$25,000 and \$75,000, and only 16 percent of the households earn less than \$25,000.

## HOUSEHOLD INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Share of households

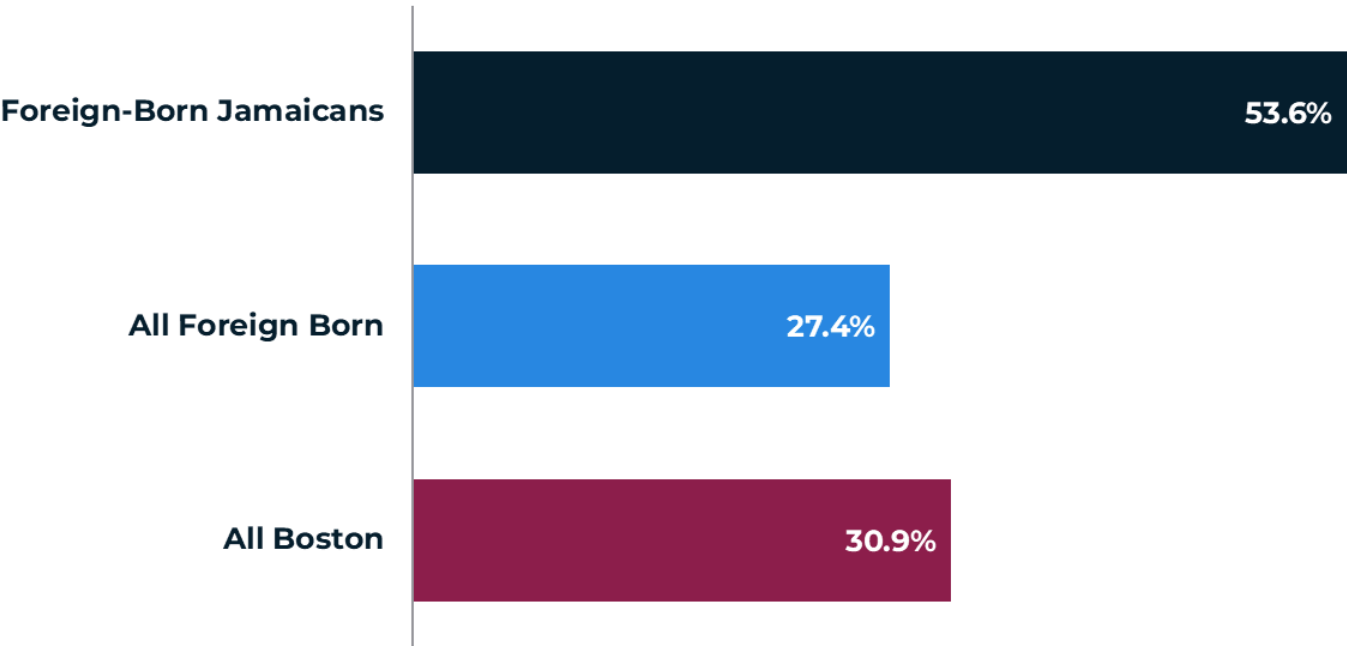


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Foreign-born Jamaicans have relatively high rates of home ownership. The majority (54 percent) of foreign-born Jamaican householders are owners of their residence.

## OWNER-OCCUPIED HOUSEHOLDS

*Share of householders that own their residence*

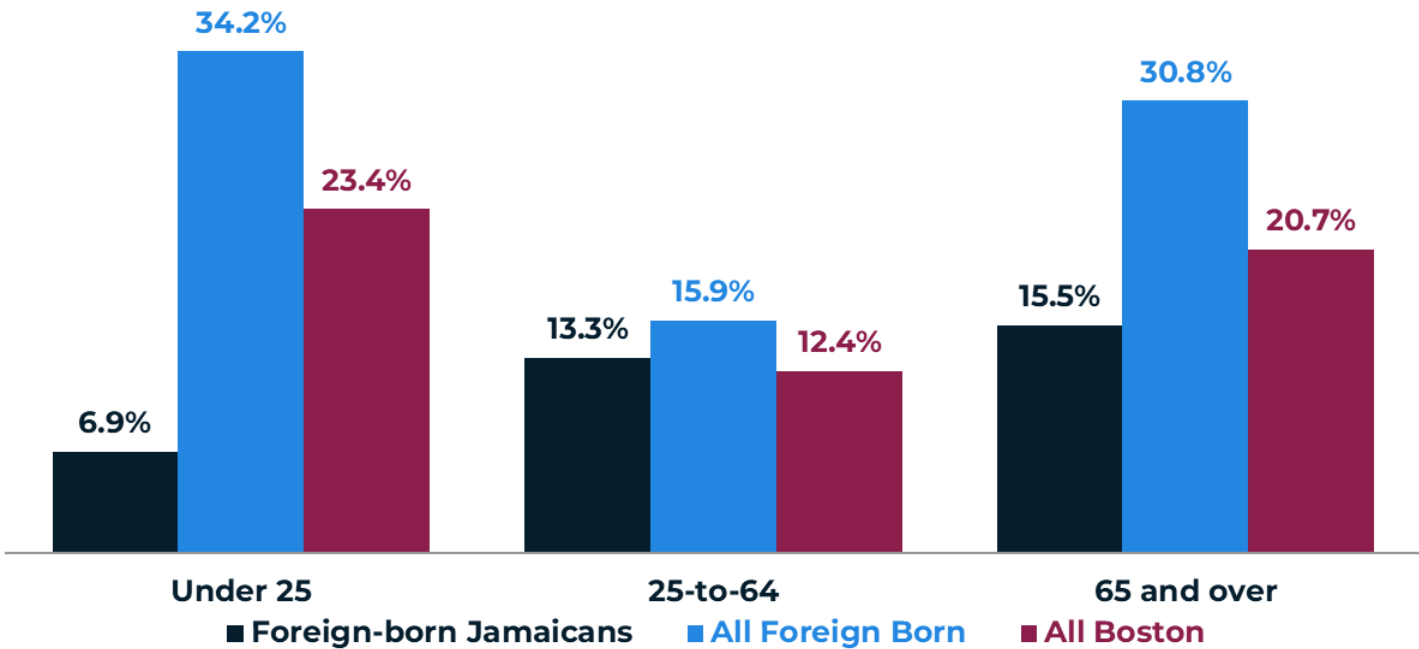


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Foreign-born Jamaicans have relatively low rates of poverty. Around 13 percent of all foreign-born Jamaicans live in poverty, which is lower than the city of Boston’s rate of 17 percent. Across each age group, foreign-born Jamaicans have a lower share of individuals living in poverty than that of all foreign born in Boston.

## POVERTY RATES

Share of age group that is living below the poverty line



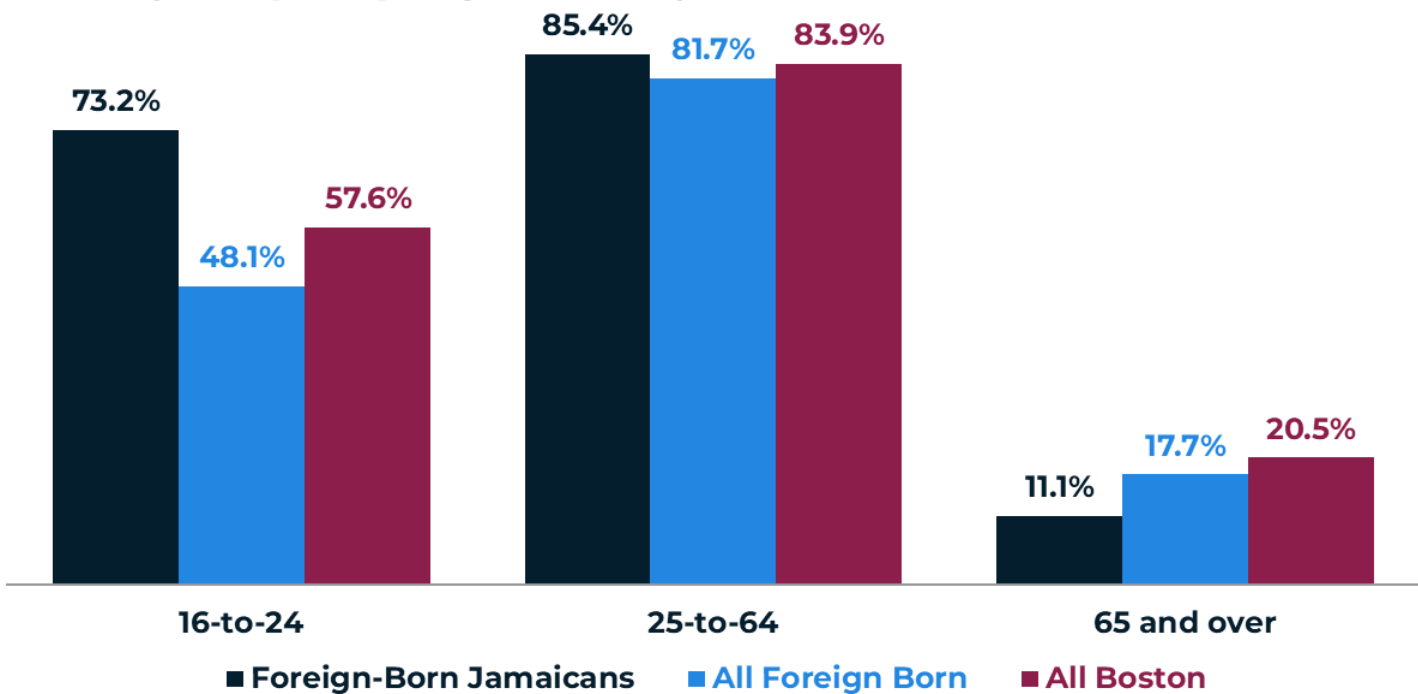
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

# EMPLOYMENT

Foreign-born Jamaicans have high rates of labor force participation for ages 16-to-64. More than 85 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans aged 25-to-64, and 73 percent of those aged 16-to-24 participate in the labor force.

## LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

Share of those participating in the labor force

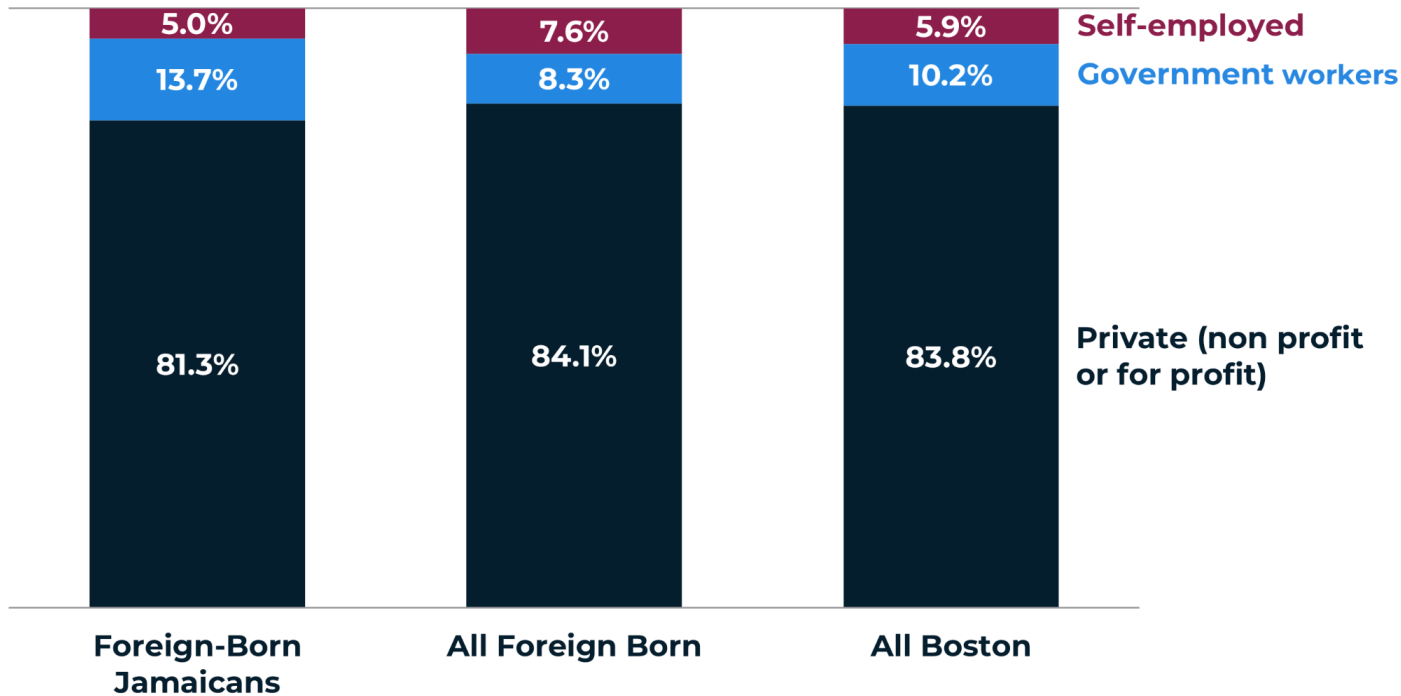


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

The foreign-born Jamaican population has a lower share of self-employment (5 percent) and a higher share of government employment (14 percent) compared to all foreign born and Boston residents.

## CLASS OF WORKERS

Share of those in the labor force, 16 years and over



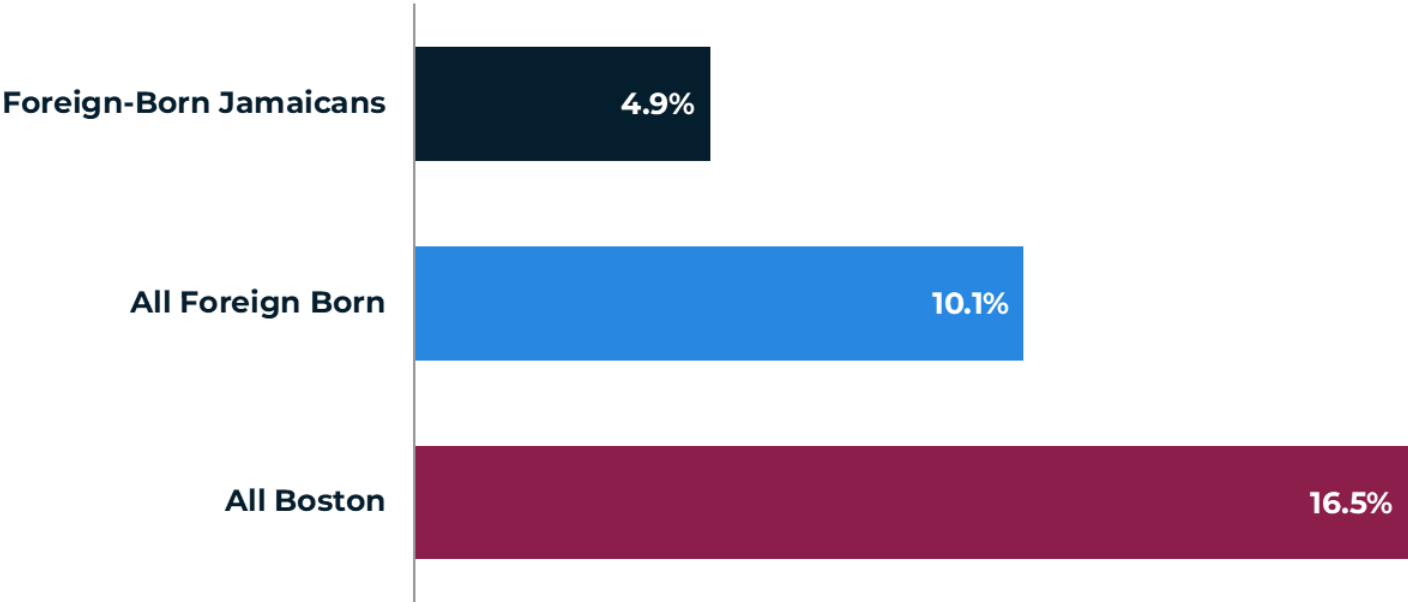
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis



Approximately 5 percent of the foreign-born resident Jamaican workers worked from home. This lower share of Jamaican foreign-born workers working from home compared to all foreign born and all workers in Boston may be related to their work in construction, maintenance, and healthcare support occupations that require them to be on-site.

## WORKED FROM HOME

*Share of those in the labor force, 16 years and over*

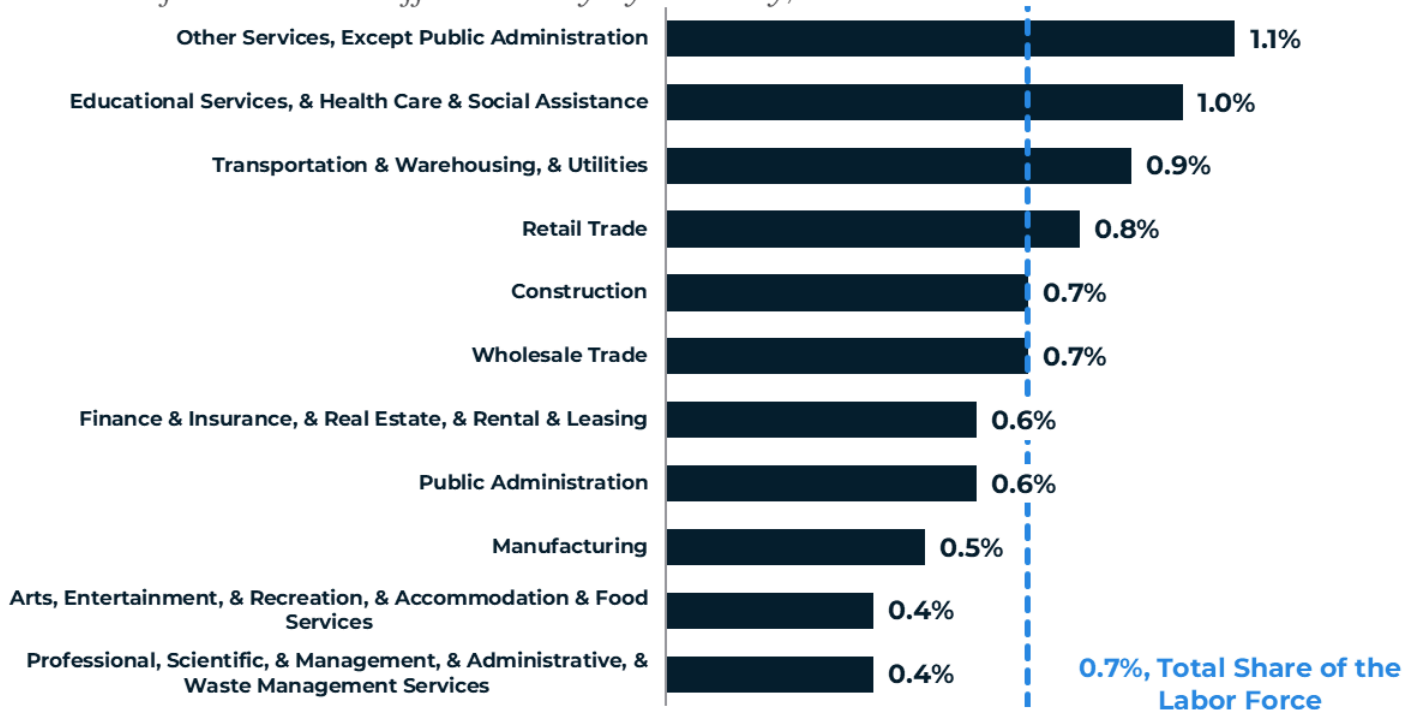


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

There are 7,027 foreign-born Jamaicans employed in Suffolk County, making up 0.7 percent of Suffolk County's workforce. Foreign-born Jamaicans are overrepresented in educational services, health care, and social assistance services. This can likely be attributed to the high share of foreign-born Jamaicans working as nursing assistants and childcare workers. They are notably underrepresented in professional, scientific, and management, and administrative, and waste management services industries, along with arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services industries.

## EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY

*Share of workers in Suffolk County by industry, 2022*



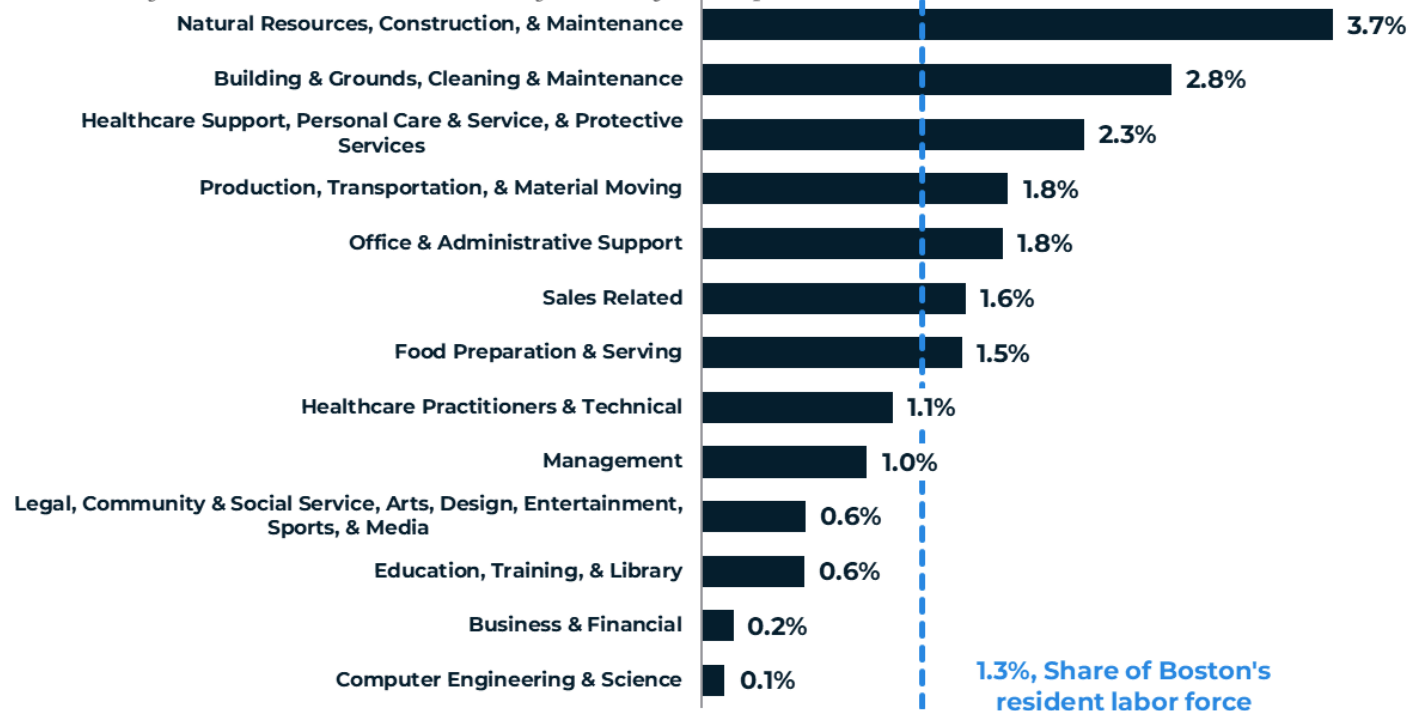
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2018-2022 5-Year American Community Survey (IPUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis



Foreign-born Jamaicans comprise just 1.3 percent of the Boston resident labor force, but they make up 3.7 percent of all natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations. These occupations include plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters, heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers, and construction laborers. Foreign-born Jamaicans are also overrepresented in healthcare support, personal care and service, and protective services occupations, wherein they are most likely to work as nursing assistants, childcare workers, and transportation security screeners. In contrast, only 0.1 percent of computer engineering and science occupations are filled by foreign-born Jamaicans.

## FOREIGN-BORN JAMAICAN OCCUPATIONS

*Share of Boston's resident labor force, by occupation*



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

## STANDARD OF LIVING

Approximately 39 percent of foreign-born Jamaicans have achieved a middle-class standard of living, compared with 44 percent of Boston's overall population, and 34 percent of all foreign born. A family income four times the poverty line is used as a proxy for a middle-class standard of living. The actual income needed to achieve this standard depends on the size and



composition of the family. For a two-person family in 2022, a middle-class income would be at least \$75,600.

## ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Jamaican foreign-born workers contribute to Boston’s economy. Their labor generates an additional 2,337 indirect and induced jobs in Suffolk County.They contribute 1.1 billion dollars to Boston’s GCP. Jamaican foreign-born workers employed in Suffolk County pay \$31 million in federal income tax and \$15 million in state income tax.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While Massachusetts is only the 9th leading state for Jamaicans who migrate to the United States, Jamaicans are the 6th largest foreign-born population in Boston with 8,082 residents. Foreign-born Jamaicans are more likely to participate in the labor force than all Boston residents. Jamaicans stand out for their higher shares of the population living in owner-occupied housing.

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<sup>9</sup>Research Division estimates using Regional Economic Model, Inc., (REMI), PI+ Massachusetts Regions, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

