COMING SOON: Vintage 2023 Population Estimates

Boston’s Population 2020-2025: Pandemic Disruption & Recovery
BPDA Research Division March 8, 2024
Why is Boston’s population so hard to count?
(even without a pandemic)
Boston’s large young adult population is difficult to count due to high rates of migration.

Source: 2020 Census, BPDA Research Division Analysis
The Census Bureau’s annual population estimate methodology consistently undercounts Suffolk County’s 18-24 population.

Note: 2020 Census also undercounted the 18-24 population.

Source: Decennial Census and Annual Estimate of the Resident Population, BPDA Research Division Analysis
The Census applies a “college fix” methodology to smaller “college towns” to more accurately capture the annual in- and-out flows of young adult students.

In September, BPDA Research assisted Mayor Wu to request that the Census Bureau develop a “college fix” adjustment methodology for Boston to address the decades long undercount of young adults in the population estimates.
The pandemic made Boston’s population even harder to count in 2020
The 2020 Census showed a lower population for Boston than prior population estimates. Are these data accurate?

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis
2020 Census had unprecedented difficulty counting young adults due to pandemic disruptions

Boston successfully challenged the 2020 Census Group Quarters count. Data from colleges and universities and the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department show an undercount of 6,290 dormitory and correctional facility residents.

Source: 2020 Census Group Quarters Challenge, BPDA Research Division Analysis
Successful group quarters challenge brought Boston’s 2020 population to 681,937.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis
Low household self-response rates in 2020 Census due to pandemic led to undercounting of household population

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, BPDA Research Division Analysis
Who may have been missed? The 2020 Census had low self-response rates in areas with high shares of young adults and renters.
BPDA Research estimates that about 6,200 young adults living in households were missed by the 2020 Census.

Source: University Accountability Ordinance, BPDA Research Division Analysis
BPDA Research created a 2020 estimate that incorporates undercounted populations

Source: 2020 Census and BPDA Research Population Estimates  https://bpda.box.com/s/h2y8tqo6497b2j0a0b25or9ihr9ve4cb
Adjusting for undercount of the household population brings Boston’s population in 2020 to almost **700,000**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis
What happened to Boston’s population after 2020?
The 2021 and 2022 Census population estimates suggest that Boston’s population has fallen significantly.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis

Is this accurate?
A ‘demographic perfect storm’: Suffolk County had one of the steepest population declines in the US, census data show

By Matt Stout and Martin Finucane, Globe Staff, Updated March 24, 2022, 7:54 p.m.

Will Boston spiral into the ‘urban doom loop’? Not if we act.

Remote and hybrid work are here to stay, office towers are half empty, and downtowns are turning into ghost towns. Boston is less vulnerable but its relative security could pose its own danger: complacency.

By Carlo Ratti, Updated June 17, 2023, 3:00 a.m.

Population dips in Mass. and Rhode Island, Census figures say

By Danny McDonald, Globe Staff, Updated December 29, 2022, 4:00 p.m.

TALKING POINTS

Massachusetts’ population is growing again

Updated December 19, 2023, 7:41 p.m.

Suffolk County has lost 30,000 residents since start of pandemic, according to US Census

By Travis Andersen and Ashley Soebroto, Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated March 30, 2023, 1:10 p.m.
The media picked up Census data that shows declining Boston population through 2022, but College and Housing data suggest a brief decline in Boston’s population, followed by recovery in fall 2021.
Residential vacancy and rent data suggest Boston’s household population may have fallen in 2020, but rebounded by fall 2021.

Source: for units in buildings with 5+ units from CoStar.
Low vacancy rates and increasing rents despite growing number of housing units suggest a growing household population.

Source: New housing construction data from Mayor’s Office of Housing. Housing units for 2024 and 2025 estimated from those currently under construction.
Data from colleges suggest the Boston student population fell in fall 2020, but then rebounded in fall 2021.
However, while data suggest that college student enrollment has returned to pre-pandemic levels, pre-K to 12 student enrollment declined steadily 2019-2023.

Population of young children is strongly affected by both birth and migration trends.

Source: University Accountability Ordinance data on college students attending Boston institutions and living in Boston; Boston Public Schools data on school-enrolled children living in Boston (including private and charter school students). 2023 data are preliminary and subject to change.
Boston’s population was undercounted in the 2020 Census, then fell during the pandemic but rebounded by 2022 - a recovery the Census estimates have not yet captured.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis

2023 Census population estimate comes out in May
So, what population numbers should I use?
Best estimates of Boston’s total population

Best total population estimate: BPDA Research 2020 estimate: ~700,000

Best estimate by sex and age group: BPDA Research 2020 estimates
box link to spreadsheet

• will be undercount (totals 681,937 for city)
Best estimates of Boston’s population by race/ethnicity and household characteristics

2020 Census

- displayed at MyCensus Viewer
- available at small geographies
- estimates will be undercounts, but best data source available
- present as percentage shares where possible to mitigate undercount
Best estimate of Boston’s population by income, language, education, etc

2018-2022 American Community Survey

- displayed at MyCensus Viewer
- available by tracts and neighborhoods
- estimates will be undercounts, but best data source available
- present as percentage shares where possible to mitigate undercount
What’s next?
2023 Census population estimates

- New 2023 population estimates and revised 2021 & 2022 population estimates
  - released in March for Suffolk County and May for Boston
  - should incorporate group quarters challenge
  - likely still significant undercount
  - based on undercounted 2020 Census household population
  - no “college fix” to capture young adult students
Upcoming Friday presentations

- March 22nd: Global, National, and Regional demographic trends affecting Boston’s future
- April 5: Revised 2050 Boston population projections by age cohort