

Boston's Emerging Ethnic Quilt: A Geographic Perspective

by

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Notes

The 15 full-color maps that are integral to this presentation

can be viewed as the Boston Ethnic Atlas on Professor Turner's web site:

www.csun.edu/%7Ehfgeg005/eturner/gallery/Bostonatlas/Bostonatlascover.html

Due to word limits this on-line version has been greatly reduced in length. The original

with full references can be requested from James Allen. Email: james.allen@csun.edu

Introduction

Research purpose. Where do different ethnic groups live within the Boston area? Census 2000 data make it possible to answer this question quite effectively. This paper presents the distributions of some important ethnic groups. It is a descriptive, exploratory study in that we do not attempt a comprehensive explanation of the patterns.

In contrast to most urban research that tends to focus on the larger aggregations—White, Black, Latino, and Asian—we look at individual nationalities or ancestries. Among recent immigrants, the social networks represented by different nationalities are usually quite distinct. Thus, the neighborhoods to which new arrivals are directed by friends and relatives and the type of employment that immigrants take usually vary a great deal from one nationality group to another.

Methods. Although the mapping techniques and Internet-based census data make it possible to cover a large number of ethnic groups, we focus on only twelve. We selected groups that were among the largest Asian, Latino, and other recent immigrant groups in the Boston PMSA, as well as three that were historically important in the area. While we have prepared our maps and tables with a careful use of census data, this paper does not attempt the usual statistical analysis of variables.

Recently Arrived Ethnic Groups

Asian Indians. Many people in this group are connected with high-tech industries or run their own businesses. They have the highest percentage of college graduates and highest household income of all the groups we examined. The location of many high-tech companies in the periphery of Boston, such as near Route 128, may have influenced the residential choices of some Asian Indians. In Cambridge and Boston, the distribution suggests many Asian Indians are students or professors at Harvard, M.I.T., and Boston University.

Chinese. Boston's Chinatown has increasingly become a multiethnic Asian center for personal and professional services, shops, and restaurants, which serve Boston-area Asians more than tourists. Quincy is, for many Chinese, the first step up economically from Chinatown yet still easily accessible to Chinatown. Reflecting the growing importance of Quincy as a center for Chinese, in 2003 the Chinese Super 88 Supermarket chain chose Quincy for their first store in suburban Boston.

Vietnamese. Vietnamese are very highly clustered. Half of the Vietnamese in the Boston PMSA live in the city of Boston, and most of these live in Dorchester—an area with many older moderately priced, triple-decker apartment houses. Such a residential concentration is probably related to the fairly recent arrival of most Vietnamese in Boston, the refugee origins of many, and the fact that over 75 percent are foreign-born. Some Vietnamese live in other parts of Boston and some work in Chinatown.

Dominicans. A 20-block section of Jamaica Plain, once dominated by Irish, has become the main settlement concentration. Nearby Franklin Park is the scene of occasional Caribbean music and dance festivals. Most Dominicans in Jamaica Plain lack the educational attainment that would prepare them for good jobs. Over half work at night as cleaners of office buildings, resulting in a very low median income.

Mexicans. This group has much higher median household incomes and over twice the percentage of college-graduates of our two other Latino groups. The map shows Mexicans living at M.I.T. and Harvard University and nearby, where many are probably students. Chelsea,

Revere, and East Boston have definite Mexican enclaves, most as part of wider Latino settlements.

Puerto Ricans. In 2000 this group's very low median household income, and the fact that almost half of Boston's Puerto Ricans had been born on the island suggest that little progress has been made up the economic ladder in Massachusetts. Within Boston, Puerto Ricans live in Jamaica Plain, as do Dominicans.

Brazilians. Because Brazilians quadrupled their numbers in the Boston PMSA during the 1990s, it is not surprising that this group has the highest percentage foreign-born of our twelve groups. Brazilians commonly work as domestic servants and in restaurant kitchens, but many others are porters and maids in hotels. Framingham has become the strongest Brazilian enclave, with many immigrants starting businesses that have helped rejuvenate the formerly declining Framingham Center.

Cape Verdeans. In the 1950s some Cape Verdeans began to settle in mostly Black sections of Boston—Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester. Like Haitians, Cape Verdeans have their own national ethnic and Catholic identities yet identify also with American Blacks because of their common racial heritage. These characteristics are evident geographically in that Cape Verdeans, Haitians, and Dominicans, too, all show separate neighborhood enclaves within the mostly Black and Latino sections of Boston between Dorchester and Hyde Park.

Haitians. Over half the Haitians in the metropolitan area live in Boston city, but Cambridge, Somerville, and Waltham also have enclaves, mostly in low-income areas. In Boston itself Haitians are most concentrated in Mattapan and Hyde Park, and their presence has rejuvenated local Catholic parishes, which had contained mostly Irish parishioners before their departure in the 1950s and 1960s. There is also a Haitian settlement in the more distant town of Randolph—a modestly priced suburb accessible both to Boston and the Haitian community in Brockton, just south of Randolph.

Long-Established Ethnic Groups

English ancestry. A slight English-ancestry association with the countryside and less urban places remains today. It results partly from both the continued English-ancestry predominance in those rural areas of Massachusetts that had few jobs to attract Irish and later immigrants. It also reflects the continuing retreat of many affluent English-ancestry urbanites to more bucolic settings. To illustrate, English-ancestry percentages are highest in less urban and smaller places, such as Sherborn, Marblehead, and Concord, the latter hidden on the map by the legend box. Although not presented here, other maps of Eastern Massachusetts show English-ancestry percentages are particularly high in the rural areas between the larger towns, as well as on Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. In the Boston area, there is a slight tendency for people of English ancestry to live in more prestigious and expensive neighborhoods, such as Beacon Hill, Back Bay, Brookline, and in Cambridge, the area near Harvard University.

Irish ancestry. The best-known in-town Irish area—South Boston—is still strongly Irish, and the same is true for Charlestown and Roslindale, West Roxbury, and the western side of Jamaica Plain. To the east, Irish percentages are lower as the neighborhoods become more ethnically and racially mixed. The strong tendency of many Irish to remain in these older neighborhoods and not move to suburbs may relate to the identity and loyalty of people to their family’s specific Catholic territorial parish. Such a cultural influence seems to have retarded Irish retreat to the suburbs, in contrast to Jews and the mostly Protestant people of English ancestry, who found it easier to leave their neighborhoods.

Italian ancestry. People of Italian ancestry have tended to move north of Boston, a pattern that contrasts with the Irish suburbanization somewhat more to the southeast of Boston. This slight ethnic difference in general suburban distribution may result from the blurring over time of earlier work-related Irish and Italian distributions. It may also reflect the cumulative effects of thousands of social networks, partly ethnically based, that guide people toward some suburban areas as more desirable than others. The North End of Boston, famous today among Bostonians for its Italian restaurants, still stands out as Italian, though not as strongly as East Boston, Everett, Revere and other cities.

Conclusion

We hope this abbreviated geographical exploration of Boston’s ethnic groups has provided a bit of a different view of the people of greater Boston than most demographers usually see. For

us, the findings presented on our maps have raised more questions than answers, but perhaps they will stimulate some in the audience to further research.