

# AFRICAN AMERICANS IN GREATER BOSTON: CHALLENGES, IDENTITIES, LEGACIES AND MOVEMENTS

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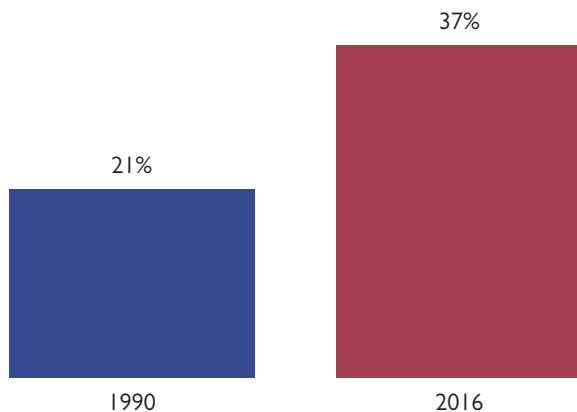
**W**hile Boston's share of African American residents has remained somewhat stable in recent decades, the community has expanded, diversified and dispersed beyond Boston's urban core. From 1990 to 2016, the Black population of Greater Boston expanded by about 125,000, from 215,193 to 340,318. Of those new Black residents of Greater Boston, just 13,150 live in Boston proper, causing the share of the region's Black population living outside of the city to increase from 36 to 56 percent.

African Americans are contributing positively to their communities, but they too often remain living in areas that are segregated, under-resourced and otherwise marginalized. More often than not, they are renters, not homeowners and are thus targets of gentrification and displacement. And while African American

communities in Greater Boston leverage a legacy of civil rights mobilization, a lag persists in educational access and attainment, political and economic representation and inclusion for both native and immigrant African Americans.

In the 21st century, Greater Boston also reflects the significant and dynamic global diversity within the Black community. During the Great Migration of the 20th century, Blacks moved to Boston from the southern states, drawn by the city's abolitionist roots and reputation as a place of opportunity. In more recent decades, a new Black migration has changed the face of the area, with many newcomers from the Caribbean and Africa. In fact, the share of Greater Boston's Black population that is foreign-born has almost doubled over the short 27-year period from 1990 to 2017 (Figure 3.1).

**FIGURE 3.1**  
**The foreign-born share of Greater Boston's Black population has almost doubled since 1990.**  
 Foreign-born share of Greater Boston's Black population.



Source: 1990 Census. 2017 1-year American Community Survey.

**FIGURE 3.2**  
**Haiti is the most common country of origin among the region's Black immigrants.**  
 Top 10 places of birth, foreign-born Black residents of Greater Boston. 2016.

Country of Origin	Population
Haiti	47,961
Cape Verde	13,854
Jamaica	11,484
Nigeria	5,666
Kenya	5,344
Trinidad and Tobago	4,538
Ethiopia	3,957
Barbados	3,495
Uganda	3,229
Somalia	2,694

Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

Greater Boston has become a destination for a growing number of Haitians, with Boston's 75,600-strong Haitian population (U.S.- and foreign-born) making up close to 9 percent of all Haitians living in the United States. In fact, Massachusetts overall has the third largest Haitian population of any U.S. state. Immigrants from the African continent are also adding to the diversity of the Black community in Greater Boston (**Figure 3.2**). The largest and longest-standing African immigrant community in the area is Cape Verdeans, who began arriving in the 1800s to work in the whaling industry (*City of Boston, 2016*), with their numbers increasing in 1965 and again in 1975 after the island nation gained independence. Massachusetts has the single largest Cape Verdean population of any U.S. state.

Socioeconomic data demonstrate the growing diversity across the region's most common African American ancestries, U.S. and foreign-born alike. Black residents who identify with longstanding "African American" ancestry tend to have incomes and educational attainment near the average for the Black community overall. However, Spanish-speaking Black subpopulations and those with African origins tend to have very divergent education and income levels. Black Puerto Ricans and Dominicans have the lowest levels of education and the lowest incomes, while Blacks of Kenyan and Nigerian descent have the highest levels of education and income (**Figure 3.3**). In fact, Nigerian immigrants' average levels of education surpass those of whites and Asians in several U.S. cities, including Boston (*Migration Policy Institute, 2015*).

It's helpful to note here that a small subset of U.S.-born people who identify their race as Black or African American do not also identify either with "African American ancestry" or an ancestry associated with another country (e.g., Jamaica or Nigeria). These people are represented by the small "Black" circle in the chart on the following page.

In addition to often being highly educated, people with African ancestry in the United States include a high percentage of entrepreneurs, with an attendant

ability to keep dollars in their communities. According to Andrew McCaskill of the Nielsen research organization, "[The Black immigrants] are creating jobs in their communities, they're buying products from their community's entrepreneurs. There typically is a culture of recycling dollars, which contributes greatly to the rising fortunes (*Tisdale, 2015*)." This is certainly true for Cape Verdeans and Haitians in Boston. For example, Haitians are creating a new class of homeowners and landlords that are providing renters in the Black community a low-cost alternative to public housing (*Jackson, 2007; Jackson, 2011*).

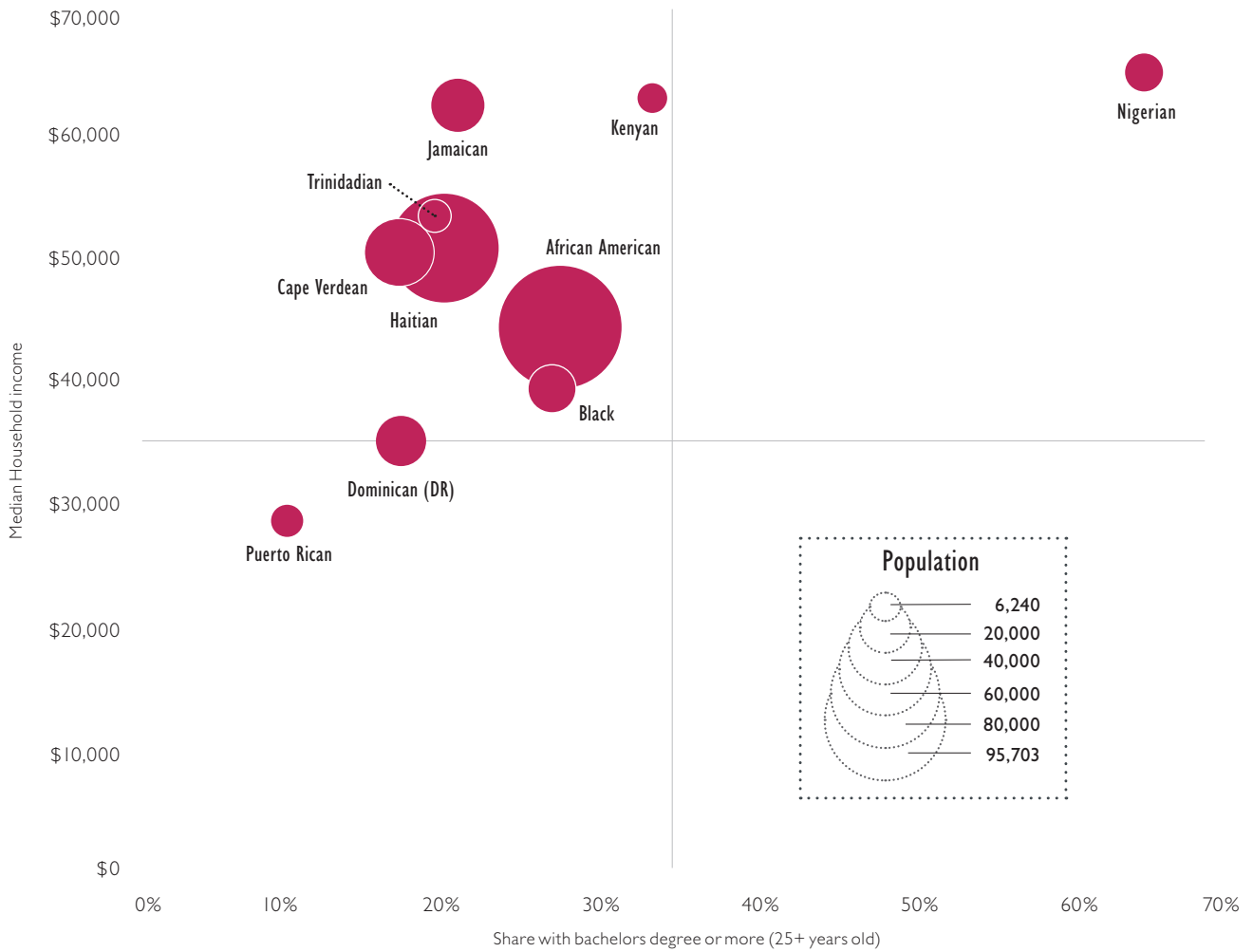
Foreign-born Blacks make significant economic contributions to the region. The total value of Haitian and Cape Verdean (the two largest Black foreign-born groups) economic contributions, estimated by a Regional Economic Model that calculated the value of goods and services consumed on each dollar spent, demonstrate that these communities generated total expenditures of \$137 million in 2014 in Boston, contributing over \$82 million to the regional product, and generated \$4.5 million in state and local taxes. These expenditures supported 590 jobs in the Massachusetts economy (*City of Boston, 2016*).

For generations, U.S.-born Blacks have had to battle against institutional racism, such as in predatory lending, which some more recent immigrant groups have not experienced to the same degree. It remains an open question whether the same socioeconomic and psychological disadvantages will hamper Black immigrant achievement in the long term.

On the whole African Americans in Greater Boston have lower household income than that of the region overall. However, cities and neighborhoods with relatively high densities of African American residents have smaller income disparities than neighboring communities. Even still, these areas also tend to have comparatively lower incomes. The largest income gap between Black households and the total population occurs at the regional level, where median household income for all households in Greater Boston is nearly

**FIGURE 3.3**  
**There's significant diversity within the African American community.**

Top 10 countries of ancestry for African Americans in Greater Boston, 2017.



Source: 2013-2017 American Community Survey

\$80,000, compared with just \$46,412 among Black households. Income disparities also track alongside homeownership and residential trends.

In Greater Boston, the African American homeownership rate is half the overall homeownership rate (30 percent versus 64 percent for the region); however, much like household income, there are smaller gaps between Black homeownership rates and total homeownership rates in communities with a higher

concentration of African American residents. As noted in the Regional Analysis section of this report, racial discrimination in homeownership and wealth-building programs may not be policy, but old biases remain—in housing and in other systems. The Massachusetts Community and Banking Council (MCBC) 2017 annual report on home lending by race in Massachusetts found much higher home loan denial rates in Greater Boston in 2017 for African Americans and Latinos than

for whites. These gaps remain even when looking just at applicants of similar income levels: “Denial rates for applicants with incomes between \$101,000 and \$125,000 were 10.2 percent for Blacks, 7.4 percent for Latinos, and 3.7 percent for whites” (*Campen, 2018: iii*).

They also find a high concentration of home loans granted to Black and Latino buyers in just a few select Massachusetts cities and towns. Brockton is perhaps the most striking community highlighted in the report, accounting for 18.4 percent of all home loans to Black borrowers statewide, even though Brockton accounts for just 1.7 percent of total statewide loans. This data confirms what we’ve observed on the ground: an emerging cluster of African American families south of Boston, moving there to find affordable home ownership opportunities.

A historically disenfranchised community, African Americans in Greater Boston do not enjoy the same levels of political or civic representation as their white neighbors do. A December 2017 five-part series on race in Boston by the *Boston Globe’s* Spotlight Team noted just this—unlike sizeable Black populations in comparable cities, Blacks have not commanded significant economic and political power in Boston (*Wen et al., 2017*). Until 2019, there were no Black faces among Massachusetts’ congressional representatives until Ayanna Pressley surged forward to national prominence. The only African American to win election to statewide office since 1972 is former Governor Deval Patrick, who was reelected to a second term. Still, Boston has never had a Black mayor. In the private sector, just 1 percent of board members among Massachusetts’ publicly traded companies are Black, and only two of 200 companies surveyed have Black chief executives. Most major law firms have few if any Black partners. Greater Boston has only one Black leader of a major union, and the powerful group of chief executives known as Massachusetts Competitive Partnership has no Black members (*Wen et al.*).

Another important component of representation that is explored further in the subsequent sections is representation in education. Many Greater Boston schools have become increasingly diverse, paralleling population change; others are falling back into segregated patterns of the past. Lagging teacher diversity in Greater Boston unfortunately compounds a trend toward re-segregation in the region.

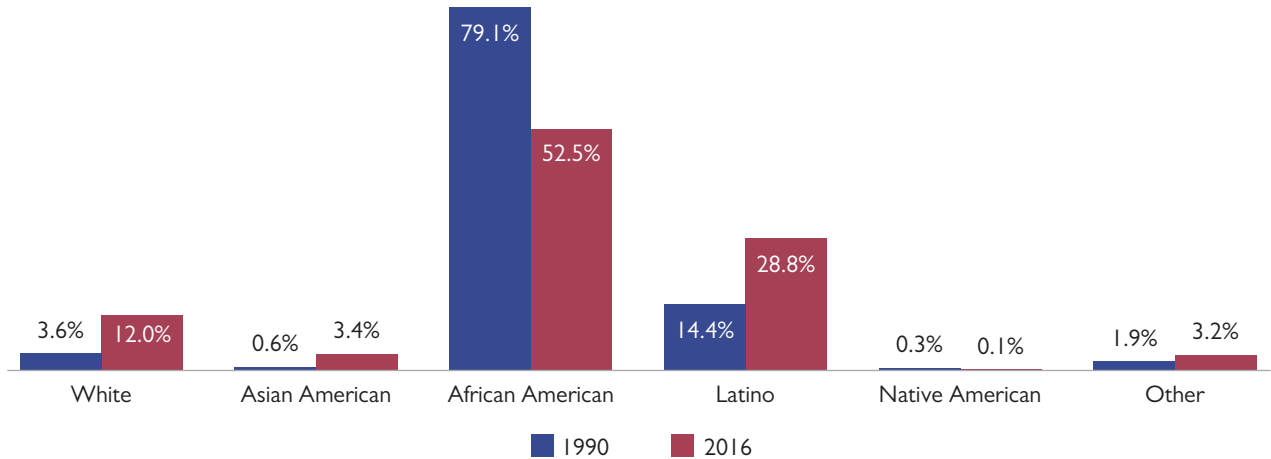
So far we have looked at regional trends among African American communities in Greater Boston. Next, through the following two sections, we examine how the themes of residential patterns, socioeconomic polarization and representation are playing out in Roxbury—the Boston neighborhood with the highest concentration of African Americans—and in Brockton—a city 25 miles south of Boston that has seen dramatic growth in its African American population since 1990.

### Roxbury

During the Civil Rights era, Roxbury became Boston’s newest home for Black families, whether up from the South, from the Caribbean or from other countries and continents. As the 1960s gave rise to the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, Roxbury was recognized internationally as the residential heart of Boston’s Black community, which had moved from the North End in the 17th and 18th centuries, to Beacon Hill in the 19th century, then to the South End in the first half of the 20th century. In 1950, 25 percent of Roxbury’s population was Black, surrounded by a majority white community which included a substantial Jewish minority. Starting in the 1950s, whites, including the Jewish community, began a mass exodus to the suburbs and other Boston neighborhoods, with more Blacks moving in. By 1980, 79 percent of Roxbury’s population identified as Black; that figure had declined to 53 percent by 2016 (**Figure 3.4**). Between 2010 and 2016, the white share of Roxbury’s population increased modestly as the Black community declined to just over 50 percent of the neighborhood.

**FIGURE 3.4**  
**While it's declined since 1990, the African American share of Roxbury's population remains above 50 percent.**

Population share by race and ethnicity. Roxbury neighborhood.



Note: "Other" includes "Two or More Races," which was not an option in Census 1990, "Some Other Race Alone," and "Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander."

Source: U.S. Census 1990, 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

The neighborhood is increasingly foreign-born and 42 percent of Black residents are foreign-born. Cape Verdeans and Haitians constitute significant populations in Roxbury, accounting for 12 percent and 10 percent of the neighborhood's foreign-born, respectively. Of the Black immigrant population in Roxbury, 26 percent identify continental and coastal Africa as a place of birth (Figure 3.5).

**INCOME, HOUSING AND WEALTH CREATION**

In Roxbury, median household income is slightly higher among Black households than it is for the total Roxbury population. However, income generally is much lower in Roxbury than it is citywide. Income among Black households in Boston overall is more than \$10,000 higher than it is for Black households in Roxbury.

While home values in Boston increased 391 percent since 1996, the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury experienced disproportionately high growth in home values—on the order of 531 percent. Still, the average

**FIGURE 3.5**  
**Black immigrants to Roxbury come from all over the world.**

Share of Black foreign-born population, by continent and country of birth. Roxbury, 2016.

Country or Continent	Percent
Africa	26%
Nigeria	3%
Somalia	3%
Cape Verde	12%
Haiti	10%
Jamaica	6%
Trinidad and Tobago	5%
West Indies	2%

Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey

cost of a home in Roxbury is about \$100,000 lower than the average citywide. According to a 2016 *Boston Magazine* report, the average price of a single-family home in Roxbury is about \$680,000 (more than double that in Brockton). Furthermore, Roxbury is particularly vulnerable to gentrification since some 81 percent of its residents are renters rather than homeowners (*Boston Planning and Development Agency, 2017*).

### REPRESENTATION

As noted, political representation by African Americans in Massachusetts is gaining ground, with Greater Boston leading the charge, exemplified most recently by the 2018 election of Boston City Councilor Ayanna Pressley as the first person of color to serve as a Massachusetts Congressperson. She represents a majority-minority district that includes Roxbury.

Currently, Roxbury has two Black women in the Massachusetts State House: African American Chynah Tyler, Boston native, elected in 2016; and Liz Miranda, first-generation Cape Verdean and lifelong Roxbury resident, elected in 2018. They joined the ranks of the Boston African Americans who have held seats in the legislature since the 1970s, including Doris Bunte (1973–1984), Shirley Owens-Hicks (1993–2006), Mel King (1973–1982) and William Owens (1973–1974, also a State Senator 1975–1982 and 1989–1992). Marie St. Fleur (1999–2011) was the first Haitian American woman to hold public office in Massachusetts. She was later joined in the House by Linda Dorcena Forry (2005–2013) who also represented South Boston—the traditional Irish-American political stronghold—in the State Senate (2013–2018).

These are great strides, but the fact that we can list them all in this short space suggests a still curtailed political and economic influence. Despite this, African Americans actively participate in community politics, pushing for change in their communities. Roxbury's community-based political organizations articulate their goals in restorative justice campaigns addressing historic and contemporary effects of racism. For

example, the Nubian Square Coalition is working to have Dudley Station renamed Nubian Station, symbolically questioning the celebration of colonial-era slave owner Thomas Dudley to honor instead the Black and African culture and heritage of the community's residents (*Miller, 2018*). Black representatives on Boston's City Council are also addressing socioeconomic challenges such as the impact of gentrification on Roxbury residents. City Councilor Kim Janey has proposed using the property tax from luxury buildings to "offset the cost of housing" in other areas of the city (*Tempera, 2018*) for Roxbury residents displaced by skyrocketing rent and housing costs.

Another key component of representation is in the educational sphere. Research has shown that students of color benefit from exposure to teachers of color (*Villegas and Irvine, 2010*). In Roxbury, however, students are not well represented by teachers who look like them or share their racial identity. These ratios must be understood against a backdrop of persistent educational disparity for Black students in Boston.

### EDUCATION

According to the 2018 statistics provided by Niche, an educational research institute, Boston Public Schools—where Roxbury residents typically attend—rank fourth in diversity in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The system serves 53,653 students in grades Pre-K and K–12, and has a student-teacher ratio of 14 to 1. Yet teacher-student diversity ratios in Boston show an 8.8 percentage point disparity, where there are 31.5 percent African American students and only 22.7 percent African American teachers.

Meanwhile, the shifting student population has gradually created more schools where the majority of the students are white; these majority-white schools are emerging in the same neighborhoods where they had existed before court-ordered desegregation in 1974 (*Hilliard and Williams, 2018; Vaznis, 2018*). In 2016, the U.S. Attorney's office in Boston found that Boston Latin School (BLS), famed as "America's first public school" lacked sensitivity, sufficient seriousness and

paid inadequate attention to racial issues (*Boston Latin School, n.d.; Mosley, 2016*). The BLS case highlighted how racial diversity was sidelined in the Boston Public School system (*Kenworthy, 2016*).

According to the 2011–2016 ACS data, white and African American people have similar rates of having high school degrees in Roxbury. However, African Americans have lower rates of bachelor's or higher degree attainment.

Boston must consider policy adjustments to address educational challenges as demographics change. For Roxbury in particular, that means asking how successful are schools in creating an environment where a growing diversity of students all feel accepted and appreciated? How successful are they at hiring teachers who will give their students the best chance for success? In what follows we explore some parallel and some divergent trends in the city of Brockton.

### Brockton

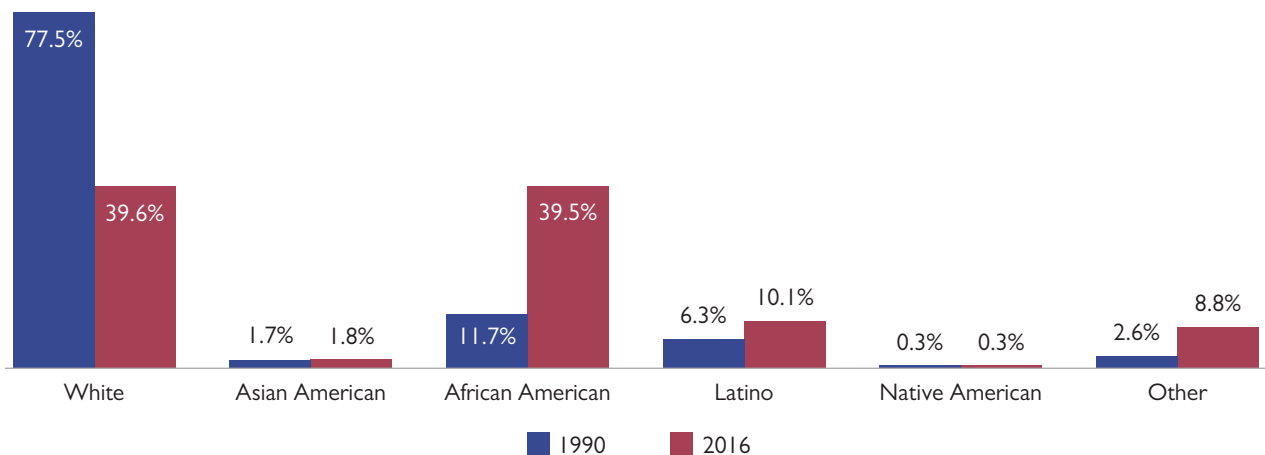
With 23 percent of its population being foreign-born around the time of its incorporation in 1881 (*U.S. Census Bureau, 1890*), Brockton has long been a place of settlement for immigrants. In contrast, its Black population has grown from very small beginnings. In 1900, there were only 600 African Americans in the city, and as recently as 1950, Brockton's population was only about 1 percent Black. By 1990, the Black community had grown to 12 percent, and by 2016 that figure had reached 40 percent (**Figure 3.6**). Blacks have had good reason to be attracted to Brockton—the city is close to jobs, has an excellent public bus system and offers relatively affordable housing, including rental stock, close to Boston (*Bluestone and Stevenson, 2000*). Since 1990, the white share of the population fell by almost half as the Black share more than tripled.

Foreign-born Black residents make up an increasingly large share of the African Americans and of the total population of Brockton—Brockton is now 27 percent foreign-born and 41 percent of Black residents are

FIGURE 3.6

### Brockton's African American population share has more than tripled since 1990.

Population share by race and ethnicity. Brockton.



Note: "Other" includes "Two or More Races," which was not an option in Census 1990, "Some Other Race Alone," and "Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander."

Source: U.S. Census 1990, 2012–2016 American Community Survey.



foreign-born. Cape Verdeans and Haitians have made even more of an impact in Brockton than they have in Roxbury, with Cape Verdeans making up 37 percent of the foreign-born population today and Haitians 27 percent. Of the total immigrant population in Brockton, 43 percent (compared with 26 percent in Roxbury) identify Africa as a place of birth (Figure 3.7). Even amid such diversity, the Black community of Brockton is economically less advantaged relative to the city overall, as in Greater Boston.

**FIGURE 3.7**  
**Black immigrants to Brockton come predominantly from Africa.**

Share of Black foreign-born population, by continent and country of birth. Brockton. 2016.

Country or Continent	Percent
Africa	43%
Nigeria	2%
Cape Verde	37%
Haiti	27%
Jamaica	2%
Trinidad and Tobago	1%

Source: Extracted from Statistical Atlas, 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

**INCOME, HOUSING AND WEALTH CREATION**

Compared with Boston or Greater Boston, the city of Brockton has a much smaller income disparity between African American households and the population overall. And yet, the economic disadvantage among African Americans in the region and in Brockton has a measurable impact on homeownership trends. This is captured both in the stories of those displaced from Boston to Brockton and the lower home ownership rate among Brockton’s African Americans.

Naomi Cordova, a Roxbury resident, did not want to buy a home in Brockton, with its reputation for gang violence. But she ended up in the working-class city despite her job at a tech company in downtown Boston where she earned more than \$90,000 a year. With a home-buying budget of \$275,000, Brockton was the only real choice for Cordova, a 34-year-old

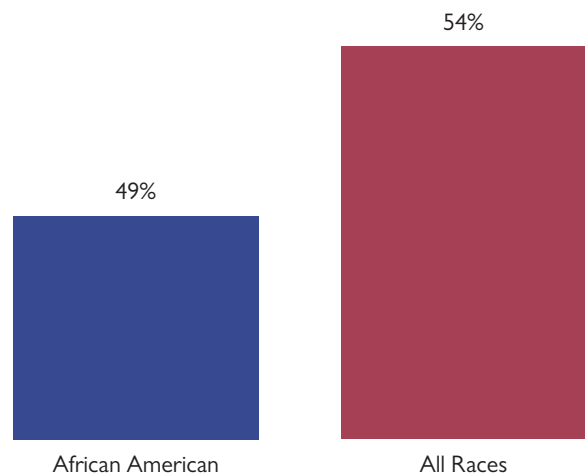
single mother of Puerto Rican and African American descent, who had limited options (Johnson, 2017). Cordova’s story demonstrates how gentrification unfolds along racial and ethnic lines, manifest in the Boston-Brockton artery.

Opportunities for wealth and income growth in Roxbury seem to be on the decline while Brockton becomes a new site of economic opportunity for displaced Blacks from Boston and for new Black immigrants. With a median home value of \$285,200, housing costs remain substantially lower in Brockton than the regional average at \$458,000. Home loans for Brockton are remarkable: 18.4 percent of all home loans to Black borrowers statewide are going to Brockton, even though Brockton accounts for just 1.7 percent of total statewide loans for all races (Campen, 2018).

While in Greater Boston the Black homeownership rate is roughly half the overall homeownership rate, homeownership among African Americans in Brockton is double that of Roxbury and it’s very close to the homeownership rate in Brockton for all races (Figure 3.8).

**FIGURE 3.8**  
**The African American homeownership rate in Brockton is close to the citywide average.**

Homeownership rate. Brockton. 2016.



Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey.



## REPRESENTATION

Political representation has not yet caught up to Brockton's changing demographics, with whites holding 85 percent of the political seats. In 2010, Jass Stewart became the first person of color elected to the City Council. Since then, Brockton has elected a Cape Verdean and a Haitian councilor, as well as Councilor at Large Shaynah Barnes, elected in 2014, the first Black woman to win a council seat in Brockton. Barnes' mother had moved the family up from Alabama several decades before. Barnes had hoped to help change the City Council and unite the city. In 2013, she said:

"I think ... [the Council has] bred apathy and withdrawal. For instance, the Haitian community is very close-knit. They're doing things for their own. But everything is kind of separate. Cape Verdeans as well. They have their own way of... helping one another... the meshing hasn't happened. I'm not in either of those communities, I'm just speculating, but I can see how someone can say, I don't really see [the Council] doing anything that I really want to happen. I'm going to do it for my own community" (Barnes, 2013).

But in 2017, Barnes stepped down, noting that the Brockton City Council hasn't kept pace with the increasingly diverse city for decades.

Despite historically limited access and political representation, African heritage activists in Brockton are organizing for more inclusion, voice and representation. Consequently, white elected officials are aware of and sensitive to the imbalance. In her dissertation research on the political incorporation of immigrants, Victoria Show interviewed Cape Verdeans in Brockton. Respondents noted that "[t]he new immigrants are not part of the story Brockton tells about who it is," and that "the European immigrants of the 19th and early 20th centuries were still seen as the real Brocktonians," exemplified by the city's fixation on the boxer Rocky Marciano as the city's favorite son (Show, 2016). Nevertheless, Black immigrants are asserting their presence by forging community

coalitions among ethnic groups to influence Brockton politics. In 2009, a collaboration between Haitians and Cape Verdeans created a radio station called The Brockton Heat, which gives their communities "a whole voice" through announcements on health issues, job opportunities, religion and community programs (Valencia, 2008).

In another important dimension of representation, education, Brockton is also behind. The disparity in representation for Blacks among educators is starkly higher in Brockton than in Roxbury, with 58.2 percent students of color and only 7 percent teachers of color, a difference of 51.2 percentage points (Boser, 2014).

## EDUCATION

The Brockton Public School district ranks fifth in diversity in Massachusetts. The district has 17,154 students in grades Pre-K and K–12, and a student-teacher ratio of 16 to 1. Furthermore, its state test scores show that 41 percent of its students are at least proficient in math and 53 percent in reading. As noted, representation of diversity among teachers is markedly lacking (Niche, 2019).

In Brockton, where a significant and growing minority population is now in the majority, the city is facing issues that cities like Boston faced decades ago. In 1995, Brockton passed a school desegregation plan in response to the failure of four of its schools to meet the Commonwealth's racial imbalance law (Ayscue, Greenberg, Kucsera and Siegel-Hawley, 2013). Brockton's increased diversity, especially among immigrants in schools, is also contributing to mixed educational outcomes for Blacks and African American residents in the city. Increased competition, exposure, interactions and conflicts among the different Black groups have led to efforts to preserve students' cultural differences and the establishment of multicultural educational practices, including bilingual education for Haitian and Cape Verdean student majorities (Brockton Public Schools, n.d.).

In Brockton, the percentages of African Americans with at least a college degree (16 percent) is lower than that for whites (19 percent) and Asians (31 percent).

Brockton, like Roxbury, must consider policy adjustments to address local educational challenges as demographics change. With its high concentration of foreign-born Blacks in the public school system, considerations must include: What effects do multicultural educational models and the immigrant paradox (where recent immigrants often outperform more established immigrants and non-immigrants, despite the numerous barriers they face in achieving successful social integration) have on educational outcomes for Blacks and African American communities? Are Black immigrant youth academically successful compared with children of U.S.-born parents? Does mobility upward or downward depend on the resources immigrant youth bring with them, or on how they are received in Brockton or other destination communities?

## Conclusion

National headlines recently have invoked Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley as representative of a rising tide of women of color challenging historically white male power structures in politics. These women reflect the diversity of their constituents, who have long lacked one of their own in congressional seats or governor's offices. Pressley's slogan, "Change can't wait," has served as a rallying cry for Roxbury and other neighborhoods in the state's only Black minority-majority district.

Pressley's win was the biggest sign yet that a "new Boston" is emerging in the shadow of the city's historically white, union-driven political establishment. This new electorate is powered by minorities, immigrants and young college students, who have flocked to the city's start-ups and tech-friendly industries (Seelye, 2018).

But the sentiment applies as well to Brockton, where a burgeoning Black and majority-minority population cannot help but shape the city's future.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report section would not have been possible without the research assistance of three doctoral students of the McCormack School of Policy and Global Studies the University of Massachusetts, Boston:

Nyingilanyeofori Hannah Brown, Ph.D. candidate in the Global Governance and Human Security Program. Her interests include marginalized populations, conflict prevention and management, corporate governance and responsibility, coexistence, sustainable solutions and project and crisis management.

Olanike Ojelabi, Ph.D. student in the Public Policy Department. Her research interests focus on advancing social justice and equity. She researches issues and policies around immigration, nonprofit organizations and population health.

Tian Wang, Ph.D. candidate in the Public Policy Department. She focuses on organizational and community studies, especially Asian American organizations and their political participation. She is passionate to promote conversations among racial minorities and achieve social justice by research and action.