



Boston: Still a magnet for young adults

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BETWEEN 2000 AND 2004, MASSACHUSETTS GAINED MORE THAN 67,000 RESIDENTS, WHILE THE CITY OF BOSTON LOST NEARLY 20,000 RESIDENTS, ACCORDING TO THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU. SUCH DATA HAVE FUELED SPECULATION (INCLUDING IN THIS JOURNAL) ABOUT THE NEGATIVE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF OUT-MIGRATION AND SLOW POPULATION GROWTH. BUT THE BOSTON REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY'S CHIEF ECONOMIST LOOKS MORE DEEPLY (AND FURTHER BACK) INTO CENSUS DATA AND SEES A DIFFERENT STORY LINE.

Boston has long been known as a city that is especially attractive to young adults. The presence of so many colleges and universities and the job opportunities generated by the region's leading industries are key factors in this attraction, as are a plethora of social, cultural and recreational assets in and around Boston that make the area a place where young adults want to live, learn and work.

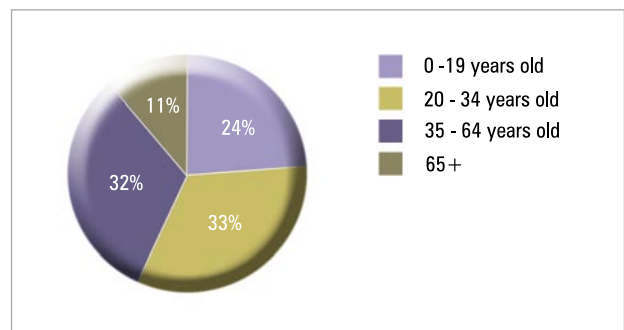
So when the 2000 U.S. Census reported that the number of people between 20 and 34 years old in Boston between 1990 and 2000 had declined, fears were expressed that Boston might somehow be "losing" its attraction for young people — or that other cities were managing to lure them away. That concern continues in some policy circles. It was cited, for example, in *Preventing a Brain Drain: Talent Retention in Greater Boston*, a report by the Boston Foundation and the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce.

A true decline in this important age group would indeed be a cause for concern for Boston and Massachusetts: this age segment of the population is particularly suited to the knowledge-based and technology-oriented jobs of today's economy. With their significant discretionary incomes, this age group is also valued as consumers. But a closer examination of the census data shows that Boston is not suffering from such an exodus of 20-to-34-year-old residents. The numbers indicate that the decrease in this age group between 1990 and 2000 was caused by the decline of Boston's birth rate 20 to 34 years earlier — and that Boston is actually *increasing*, not *decreasing*, its ability to attract 20-to-34-year-olds from elsewhere. In

the year 2000, this age group accounted for the highest percentage of the city's population at 33 percent, and that figure is more than 150 percent higher than the national average of 21 percent.

Boston, in short, continues to be one of the most young-adult centered cities in the country.

Figure 1. Boston's Age Distribution, 2000



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

Behind the numbers

It is true that Boston's 20-to-34-year-old population, which increased by about 20,000 from 1980 to 1990, decreased by 13,736 between 1990 and 2000. But this decrease should have been expected because of the dramatic decrease ten years before of Boston residents between 10 and 24 years old: Between 1980 and 1990, the number of people in this age group fell from 173,095 to 143,596, a drop of more than 17 percent. This decline is explained by a dramatic drop in the fertility rate between

Figure 2. Boston's Population by Age Group

Age	1980	1990	2000
0-19	151,238	134,087	141,951
20-34	188,496	208,582	194,846
35-64	151,961	165,707	191,008
65+	71,299	65,906	61,336
Total	562,994	574,282	589,141

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

1966 and 1980 not only in Boston but across the country, which led to fewer people in the 10- to 14-year-old group in 1990. In other words, the fact that 30,000 fewer residents were available to “age into” the 20-to-34-year-old category a decade later is the key to understanding the decrease in this age group in Boston in the year 2000.

Public health birth data showed that during the so-called “Baby Bust” generation, the fertility rate declined by 57 percent in Boston, by 54 percent for Massachusetts and by 45 percent nationally. So it is therefore not surprising that a city that experienced a drop in the number of 10-to-24-year-olds at the beginning of one decade would have fewer 20-to-34-year-olds ten years later. What is surprising is that a decrease of 30,000 people between 10 and 24 years old between 1980 and 1990 led to a decrease of only 13,000 people between 20 and 34 years old a decade later. The reason the decrease was not larger is that even while Boston was experiencing a sharp decrease in the number of its home-grown young people, it was attracting an increasing number of young adults from outside the city.

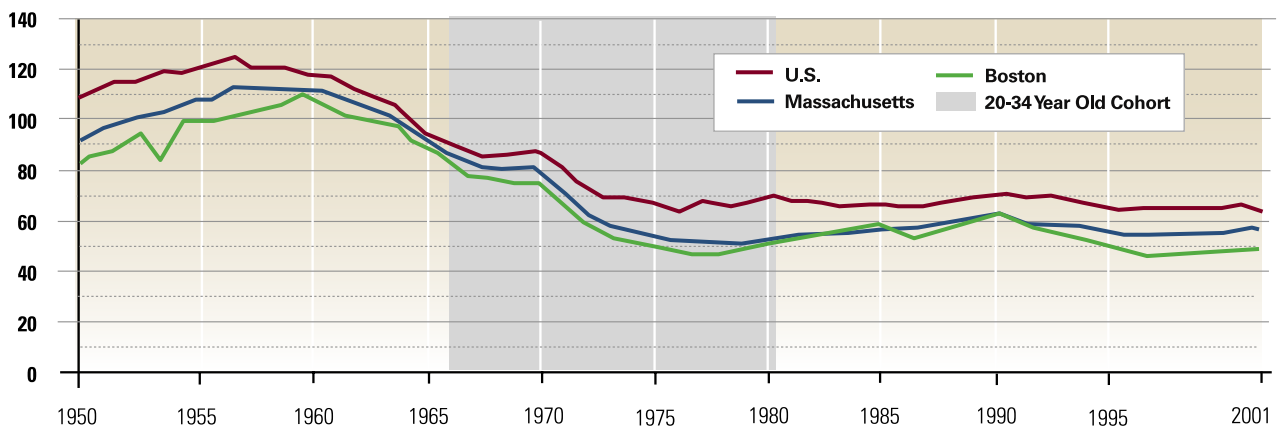
Nearly 173,095 people were born in Boston between 1956 and 1970, making them 10 to 24 years old in 1980. That figure increased to 208,577 people in 1990. While the Census cannot identify how many of the actual 10-to-24-year-olds counted in 1980 remained in the city to be counted as 20-to-34-year-olds ten years later, Boston can be said to have “attracted” 35,482 more 20-to-34-year-olds in 1990 than could have expected based on the 1980 Census. Similarly, Boston attracted 51,250 more 20-to-34-year-olds in 2000 than it could have expected based on the 1990 Census (143,596 10-to-24-year-olds in Boston in 1990 and 194,846 20-to-34-year-olds in 2000). The net in-migration to Boston of 51,250 persons who had aged into their 20s and early 30s during the 1990s was 44 percent greater than it was during the 1980s, when 35,482 young adults were attracted to the city.

Summary

Rather than a significant and disturbing exodus of 20-to-34-year-olds from Boston, a closer look at U.S. Census data shows that the decline of this age group has little to do with any decrease in Boston’s magnetism and everything to do with a national phenomenon: the reduced number of the members of the so-called “Baby Bust” generation born 20 to 34 years before. And in fact, the 2000 Census shows that people between 20 and 34 years of age make up the largest single share of the city’s population — and that this share (33 percent) is far higher than the national average.

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Figure 3. Fertility Rate Chart for U.S., Massachusetts and Boston
(number of births per 1,000 women age 15-44 years)



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census