



Landmark study of waterfront visitation trends shows strong usage, highlights need to continue expanding access across diverse and underrepresented communities

Harborwalk, Harbor Islands and Waterfront Parks draw over 11.3 million visits per year, but visitation does not equitably represent Boston's demographic base

(Boston MA) Though Boston's waterfront assets cumulatively draw 11.3 million visits per year, new data released by Boston Harbor Now shows that waterfront visitation exhibits wide equity gaps, skewing whiter than Boston's population. *Boston Harbor for All: The Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study* reinforces the importance of Boston Harbor Now's highly focused efforts to increase equitable access to waterfront resources via programming, policy and advocacy, and widespread investments in resiliency.

The data underpinning *The Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study* was derived from a groundbreaking analysis of statewide mobility data (drawn from 2019 to 2022 cellphone usage patterns) and a companion "ground truth" study conducted by MassINC Polling Group to create the first comprehensive report of visitation trends. A Steering Committee representing more than 20 public and private waterfront stakeholders helped guide the project methodology and subsequent report, reflecting Boston Harbor Now's inclusive model for planning and engagement.

"For nearly a decade, Boston Harbor Now has been working to assure that the tens of millions of taxpayer investment that cleaned up the Boston Harbor and depressed the Central Artery to reconnect our City to its Harbor equitably benefited our entire region. The data surfaced by our waterfront visitation and equity study shows that while we have made progress, more expansive and innovative efforts are needed to address the gaps in access for many residents," said Kathy Abbott, President and CEO of Boston Harbor Now. "These findings have directly influenced the way we are structuring programs, policy and engagement for optimal impact."

Among key findings (see attached fact sheet for more background)

- 63% of the people who visit all waterfront areas (Harborwalk, Harbor Islands, and waterfront parks) are white and 37% are people of color. The disparity is even more stark on the Boston Harbor Islands alone, where 70% of the visitors are white.
- While seven in ten Boston residents believe that the City's waterfront is welcoming and accessible to all, 25% of Black residents and 20% of Hispanic residents say not feeling welcome is a major obstacle to visiting.
- Just three neighborhoods—Dorchester, East Boston, and South Boston—account for 50% of all Harborwalk visits. More than 10 neighborhoods fall below 3% visitation, concentrated in Boston's western and southern areas (including West Roxbury, Mattapan, Roslindale, and Jamaica Plain).

"One of the key goals of the intensive data collection and analysis efforts behind this project was to create a resource that could be used by diverse non-profit, government and community groups to drive change," said Christian Merfeld, Boston Harbor Now's Communications Director and lead on

the *Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study*. “We’re excited to see what other insights and strategies can be drawn from this data and how it is used in practice to improve parks, paths, and beaches for everyone.”

Boston Harbor Now is currently undertaking several key initiatives that align with the report findings, including: hiring its first ever Harborwalk manager; conducting a survey of the Boston Harborwalk usage to guide future programming and policies; advocating for improved transportation options and affordability; developing activities, events, and outreach efforts that address the needs of underrepresented communities; and identifying and promoting policies and investments that prioritize equitable access and climate resilience.

“Boston Harbor — including its harborwalk and islands — are a wonderful community asset for everyone in the city,” said Brian Swett, Chief Climate Officer for the City of Boston. “As we invest in coastal projects to make our communities more resilient against climate change, we look forward to working with Boston Harbor Now and organizations across our waterfront to make these incredible destinations more accessible to more Bostonians.”

“DCR’s commitment to providing equitable and accessible experiences at all its parks requires an accurate understanding of who we serve and what their needs are. Thanks to this collaboration with Boston Harbor Now, we have a clearer picture of who is visiting Castle Island and Pope John Paul II Park, how they are interacting with these spaces, and what we can do to more helpfully engage with communities that have been historically less likely to visit DCR parks,” Nicole LaChapelle, Commissioner of the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

Informed and guided by the Steering Committee, *The Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study* also highlights both current strategies that could address access challenges and reinforced areas where a mix of organizations could contribute to improved outcomes. Among the solutions in practice highlighted in the report were: GreenRoots’ multilingual community walking group that explores open spaces; the Coalition for a Resilient and Inclusive Waterfront’s Wellness Weekends, which feature free public health-centered events designed to appeal to diverse audiences; and The American City Coalition’s Waterways Ambassador Program, which empowers local leaders to foster waterfront belonging with their communities.

“The Boston Waterfront and the Harbor Islands have a long and rich history and if we hope to ensure that their future is as vibrant and diverse as its past, we need to understand how people’s use of these spaces has changed”, said John Walkey, Director of Waterfront & Climate Justice Initiative at GreenRoots. “The many lenses this report applies to different geographies helps us to see where we are achieving our goals at making a more resilient, accessible and equitable waterfront and where we have work to do.”

Though data analysis and trends form the basis *The Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study*, the report also reflects the experiences of several Bostonians who use or advocate for the waterfront. “For many immigrant families, it’s not enough that the waterfront is technically public — language access, affordability, and culturally relevant programming are what make people feel welcome. Without that, the Harbor can feel like it belongs to someone else,” said Veronica Robles, Executive Director and co-founder of the Veronica Robles Cultural Center, in the report.

Boston Harbor Now expects to co-host a Boston Harbor for All summit this spring in partnership with the Coalition for a Resilient and Inclusive Waterfront (CRIW) to advance some of the key themes in the report into action and build shared strategies for addressing the gaps identified in the study. The study’s full report and open data resources can be found on Boston Harbor Now’s website at <https://www.bostonharbornow.org/waterfrontdatapoint/>.

“As Boston Harbor Now and its partners translate data into action, the question becomes: *What can we do, together, in the next three to five years to make the Harbor truly belong to everyone,*” said Abbott. “On our end, we plan to continue maximizing data-driven insights, experience in programing, public policy advocacy and coalition building to assure that we make a meaningful difference in successfully bringing all Boston residents to the waterfront.

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STEERING COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study was guided by a robust Steering Committee composed of more than 20+ public and private entities, reflecting Boston Harbor Now’s robust array of partners and collaborators. The below represents a sampling of feedback from key members:

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– **DCR Commissioner Nicole LaChapelle**

“Boston’s waterfront belongs to every neighborhood and everyone should feel connected to our most treasured asset. The data in this study is crucial to ensuring we continue breaking down barriers to our Harbor whether they be transportation, affordability, or belonging. From East Boston down to Dorchester and beyond, this work is about ensuring that Boston’s shoreline is a place of inclusion, resilience, and shared ownership for generations to come.”

– **Gabriela “Gigi” Coletta Zapata, Boston City Councilor District 1**

“As both board chair and an urban planner, I know that resilient cities aren’t just about physical infrastructure, they’re about social resilience too. This study sets a vital benchmark for Boston and the region by using real human stories and solid datametrics to guide how we invest in our public parks and waterfront spaces. It’s about making sure these places are thriving, truly welcoming and a resource for all. I’m proud of Boston Harbor Now’s leadership on a project that will help shape a more socially resilient waterfront for our entire community.”

– Kishore Varanasi, Principal, CBT Architects

"At Tectonix, we were honored to support this work, helping leverage mobility data to better understand the impact of Boston's Waterfront on the communities it serves. This project represents the best use of technology: uncovering truths that often go unseen, and turning data into insights that can genuinely improve people's lives. Working side-by-side with Boston Harbor Now and the broader coalition to illuminate these equity gaps was both powerful and deeply meaningful for our team. We hope these findings help guide continued efforts to create a waterfront that truly welcomes every community in Boston."

– Elliott Bradshaw, Co-Founder & Principal, Tectonix

"CRIW's vision for a resilient and inclusive waterfront requires deeper understanding of how people actually use and experience these public spaces. The Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study provides that foundation. Its novel data helps identify where access and inclusion are thriving—and where more work is needed. With these critical insights, we can better connect wellness, equity, and resilience so that every community can feel welcomed at Boston waterfront."

– Ian Karby, Senior Advisor, Coalition for a Resilient and Inclusive Waterfront

"The Greenway has long been part of Boston's commitment to reconnect the city to its waterfront, transforming spaces that were once barriers into places for the community to gather. Here at the Greenway Conservancy, we are grateful for Boston Harbor Now's leadership through the Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study, and we look forward to supporting and building on these efforts—working together to ensure Boston's waterfront and the surrounding areas are welcoming, inclusive, and accessible to everyone."

– Chris Cook, Executive Director, Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy

"At The American City Coalition, our goal is to ensure that Roxbury and Dorchester residents equitably share in the health and economic benefits of living in a coastal city. We work closely with the community to understand barriers to accessing and utilizing the waterfront and to implement targeted strategies that reduce those barriers. With the release of the Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study, we now have an important data-driven snapshot of who is visiting the waterfront—insights that will be helpful in guiding our efforts to expand equitable access to waterfront spaces and increase benefits in the communities we serve."

– Willie Bodrick II, President & CEO, The American City Coalition.

As longtime advocates for access to a clean and resilient Boston Harbor waterfront, Conservation Law Foundation is continuously seeking to ensure that all members of the community feel welcome on the water. With a nuanced, data-driven understanding from this study of who visits the waterfront, who does not, and the reasons why we can advocate more effectively for programs and amenities that protect every person's right to access and enjoy the waterfront.

– Julia Carlton MacKay, Director, Community Resilience, Conservation Law Foundation

"The Boston Waterfront and the Harbor Islands have a long and rich history and if we hope to ensure that their future is as vibrant and diverse as its past, we need to understand how people's use of these spaces has changed. The study conducted by Boston Harbor Now provides vital detail not just on the what, where and how but, critically, the who as well. The many lenses this report applies to different geographies helps us to see where we are achieving our goals at making a more resilient, accessible and equitable waterfront and where we have work to do. Together with Boston Harbor Now, I have full confidence that we will be able to do that work together."

– John Walkey, Director of Waterfront & Climate Justice Initiatives, GreenRoots