

An illustration of a bustling waterfront scene. In the foreground, a large, diverse crowd of people is gathered on a sandy beach and a wooden pier. The people are wearing various colored clothing, including blue, orange, and white. Some are standing, some are sitting on blankets, and others are walking. In the background, the water is a deep blue with several sailboats. One sailboat is in the upper right, and two others are in the lower right. A small boat with a person is also visible. The overall style is a flat, illustrative art style with a limited color palette of blues, oranges, and whites.

BOSTON HARBOR FOR ALL

WATERFRONT
VISITATION & EQUITY STUDY

Executive Summary

How many people visit Boston's waterfront? For years, we didn't know. There is no single entrance to Boston Harbor. Instead, the waterfront is an engaging, wide-open public space that includes the **Boston Harborwalk**, neighborhood **waterfront parks**, the **Harbor Islands**, and a **broad waterfront**, that stretches into multiple neighborhoods. These spaces connect people to nature, one another, commerce, and Boston's maritime heritage.

But there are no ticket sales to tally. And after decades of efforts to connect people to the water, including a **\$20 billion** dollars of public funds, we could not say who was — or was not — benefitting from one of Boston's largest natural and cultural assets. We needed more information to ensure that the Harbor is benefiting everyone.

METHODOLOGY

We looked for a way to meaningfully measure visitation and to understand whether decades of waterfront improvement had delivered on the promise of equitable public access. The options we have historically relied on, including visitor statistics collected by park staff as well as estimates from ferry operators and tourism agencies, fell short and offered little insight into fully understanding who the visitors are, where they're coming from, and who isn't benefiting from the Harbor's public open spaces.

A comprehensive **Visitation and Equity Study of Boston Harbor** was needed to take a holistic look at the factors influencing access and use, incorporating demographic data, accounts of lived experiences of residents and visitors, journal articles, survey data, and other sources. One approach stood out as being far more precise, using the abundant data generated by mobile phones, which is part of a larger collection of what is known as mobility data.

Analyzing mobility data became essential during the pandemic when public health officials were racing to monitor and prevent Covid infections. Data came from Apple, Google, and Meta, the company that owns Facebook. Today, mobility data can be collected from other sources such as rideshare programs and location tagging in social media apps.

As we considered utilizing mobility data, we were concerned about privacy, accuracy, and using the data for the public good. So in 2022, we took these issues into consideration when launching the Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study to analyze mobility data related to Boston Harbor. We worked with Tectonix, our project technology partner, to use their super-computing platform. Veraset, our data partner, provided 170 billion anonymized

cell phone records for the state of Massachusetts that spanned four years, from 2019, a "normal," pre-pandemic year, through 2022. The result was a ground-breaking analysis of visitation data that protected the privacy of individuals while allowing us to gain insights into demographic information such as visitors' income, race, age, education, and hometowns.

For the first time, we could see who was visiting Boston's waterfront. To supplement this analysis, we hired MassINC Polling Group to conduct a sub-study for validation through on-the-ground, in-person surveys of visitors in five of Boston's waterfront parks:

- *Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park located downtown in the Wharf District*
- *Martin's Park in Fort Point Channel*
- *Piers Park in East Boston*
- *Pope John Paul II Park in Dorchester, and*
- *Castle Island in South Boston*

In 2023, polling teams conducted park visitor headcounts and more than 1,550 surveys between August 9th and September 1st, during hours spanning from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., capturing data on daily use of the waterfront. When analyzed using the Pearson model, the MassINC data revealed a strong correlation with demographic findings from the mobility data. This alignment provided valuable information into waterfront usage patterns and informed a deeper analysis

of who is accessing these public spaces. To further enrich this work, we conducted over 50 hours of interviews with nearly a dozen waterfront stakeholders and visitors. These one-on-one conversations gave critical context to the mobility data, surfacing personal narratives, cultural connections, and firsthand accounts of barriers to access. Together, the qualitative and quantitative insights painted a more complete picture of visitation and equity on the waterfront, what’s working, what’s missing, and what must be done to close the gap of who is accessing these public spaces.

KEY LEARNINGS

The Waterfront Data Project produced some exciting insights. We can now say that the Boston Harborwalk receives over an average of **11 million** visits every year. But having this number is just a start. We now also know more about who comes to the waterfront. The analysis revealed year-on-year changes in visitation. Most strikingly, the Waterfront Data Project mapped waterfront usage through the pandemic (March 2020 – May 2021). And we can pinpoint how visitation varied in different waterfront locations. Among the things we learned:

- *The region’s waterfront visitation is robust: A comprehensive analysis of four years of statewide mobility data (2019–2022) shows the broad waterfront from Salem to Hull receives more than 306 million annual visits, with the Boston Harborwalk drawing nearly 11 million, Boston’s 28 waterfront parks attracting 2.4 million, and the Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park welcoming about 367,000 visits across its 34 islands and peninsulas*
- *from 2019 to 2021, the Broad Waterfront saw a 40% drop in visitors from COVID restrictions and changes in commuter patterns*
- *on the Harborwalk and the waterfront parks, the greatest increase in visitors was among Black and Latino visitors, which suggests that more people in these racial and ethnic groups saw the waterfront as a safe place to go during the Covid pandemic.*
- *the percentage of non-White visitors increased across all areas of the waterfront from 2019 through 2021, peaking at about 40% of total visits.*
- *while BIPOC visitation to waterfront public spaces has increased, representation still falls short of reflecting Boston’s demographics. With white visitors making up more than 65% of all visits, closing this gap remains a critical equity challenge for the region’s waterfront*
- *public waterfront visitors’ average household income dropped from \$95,000 in 2019 to \$75,000 in 2021.*



- *visitor levels seesawed on Boston’s Harbor Islands through the pandemic and reopening: increasing by 40% in 2020, then dropping in 2022 when numbers were 75% lower than they were in 2019 (pre-COVID)*
- *in 2022, there were sharp increases in older visitors (age 65 and up), especially on the Boston Harbor Islands*

CONVERTING DATA INTO ACTION

We have woven these insights into Boston Harbor Now’s new five-year **Strategic Plan¹**, setting the foundation for meaningful and lasting change. This plan is not just a roadmap, it’s Boston Harbor Now’s commitment to turning data-driven insights into action that creates a more inclusive and welcoming Boston Harbor.



Among our key initiatives are:

- Partnering with public and private organizations to ensure the Boston Harborwalk’s open spaces are accessible and beneficial to all communities.
- Reducing barriers to the Boston Harbor Islands by improving transportation options and affordability, making these unique destinations more accessible to everyone.
- Developing programs, events, and outreach efforts that address the needs of underrepresented communities while celebrating Boston’s diversity, ensuring their voices, cultures, and connections are represented and brought to life on the waterfront.
- Advocating for policies and investments that prioritize equitable access and climate resilience to protect these spaces for generations to come.

These actions reflect our belief that the harbor should be a place where everyone feels they belong—a place that connects, inspires, and serves all communities of the region.

In this report, we reflect on how the data helps us better understand how people use public spaces on the Harbor in Boston. We explore social barriers to access, and we talk to families who feel a joyful sense of connection to the waterfront and some of the people working at the community level to increase representation and belonging.

“What this study does is help Boston Harbor Now and other institutions reframe perceptions about Boston’s harbor to make sure it works for people across the city and the country and for visitors, and not just for developers,” John Connors says. Connors is the CEO of Boathouse, a marketing and communication consulting firm,

and he serves as Boston Harbor Now’s Marketing Committee chair. “That’s the challenge, asking, Who does the harbor work for? And the data in this report is a nice reminder that we’re serving the people.”

Connors points to **The Boston Foundation**² as a pioneer in using data to understand and address poverty and equity in the city.

“When you quantify something that hasn’t been quantified, you have the power to frame the debate. You can start being much more deliberate. It’s like stepping on the scale every morning.

“Now, with the use of technology, we can quantify who visits the Harbor. Instead of everyone having their own version of Boston, the data helps us see what Boston actually is. Now the opportunity is to continue to quantify this and use that data to drive debate and discussion and make sure there is a greater purpose in what we do.”

To this end, we hope the Waterfront Visitation and Equity Study will serve as a model for organizations striving to better understand who visits parks and public open spaces, and who is not. By identifying patterns of access and gaps in representation, this project demonstrates the power of data to reshape not only how we see public spaces but also how we can create meaningful opportunities for everyone to benefit from them.

Our goal is to inspire others to embrace thoughtful data-driven strategies that inspire tangible actions—breaking down barriers, addressing inequities, and building programs and spaces that serve the full diversity of our communities. **Ultimately, we can collectively reimagine public spaces as places that welcome and serve all people.**

