

Whose Waterfront? How Boston residents think about their Waterfront as development accelerates

For the last couple of decades, Boston has been reclaiming its Waterfront: tearing down the elevated expressway that cut the Harbor off from the rest of downtown and building a new neighborhood of towers on the piers and parking lots of the Seaport District. But will all this new development once again cut the rest of the city off from the Waterfront and Boston Harbor? And what will happen as climate change threatens the coast with rising seas, storm surges, and coastal flooding?

The Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) has been working on how the city relates to its shoreline. To inform and complement its work in this area, CLF commissioned The MassINC Polling Group (MPG) to survey Boston residents about how they think about and use the Waterfront in their own lives. The results of that survey, of 953 Boston residents, are the basis for this report. (See the appendix for the full topline results and methodology for the survey.)

Use of the Waterfront varies considerably across demographic groups

Most Boston residents have visited the Waterfront, and many with some frequency. A majority (54%) of Boston residents who do not live or work along the Waterfront report visiting at least 3 times in the past year. That includes 37% who have visited 5 times or more. Factoring in those who live or work along the Waterfront, only 9% of Boston residents surveyed say they have not been to the Waterfront at all in the past year.

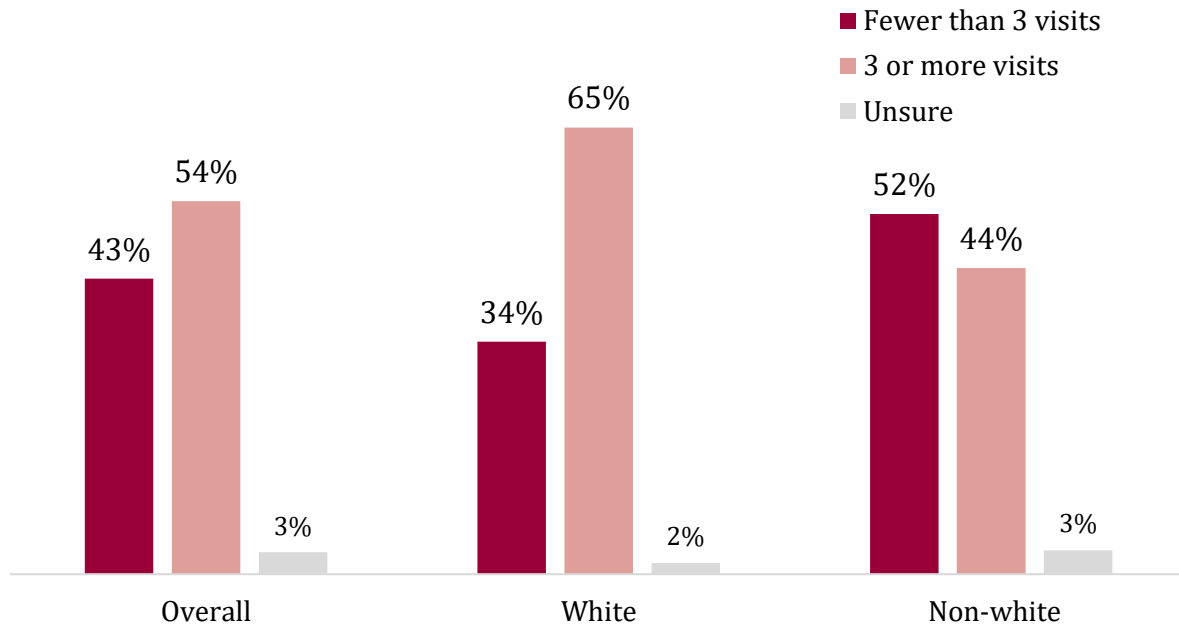
But these overall numbers mask wide separations between residents of different races, ethnicities, neighborhoods, and socio-economic statuses. Among residents who don't live or work along the Waterfront, 65% of white residents say they have visited the Waterfront 3 or more time in the past year (Figure 1), compared to 44% of non-white residents. This same divide is evident at the neighborhood level, with 45% of residents of Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan reporting 3 or more visits. Residents with the lowest levels of education and income are also less likely to visit: 21% of those with a high school education or less and 27% of those from households making \$25,000 or less have not visited the Waterfront in the past year.

Key Findings

- Use of the waterfront varies among different demographic groups, with 65% of white residents having visited the Waterfront 3 or more times in the past year compared with 44% of non-white residents.
- Seven-in-ten Boston residents (69%) believe that the city's Waterfront is welcoming and accessible to all. But a quarter of Black residents and 20% of Hispanics say not feeling welcome is a major obstacle to visiting the Waterfront.
- Cost – of parking, dining, and attractions -- appears to be a major barrier to residents making more use of the Waterfront. More affordable dining and museum discounts are the most favored ideas for improving the Waterfront, along with improving public transit.
- Gentrification, development, and affordability are seen as the biggest current threats to the Waterfront, while climate change ranks lower.

Figure 1: White residents report visiting the waterfront most frequently

Asked of residents who do not live or work in the Waterfront: In the past year, how often have you visited any part of the Boston Waterfront?



Residents are aware that they have at least some legal right to access the Waterfront. Three-quarters think Boston residents have a legal right to access all (42%) or some (34%) of the Waterfront. But 20% of residents are unsure about their right to the Waterfront, concentrated among lower education, lower income and Hispanic residents. This suggests that a lack of awareness may be contributing to a lack of use among these groups, but it's likely there are other factors, as well. Also contributing are the perception of the expense and exclusivity of many aspects of the city's Waterfront.

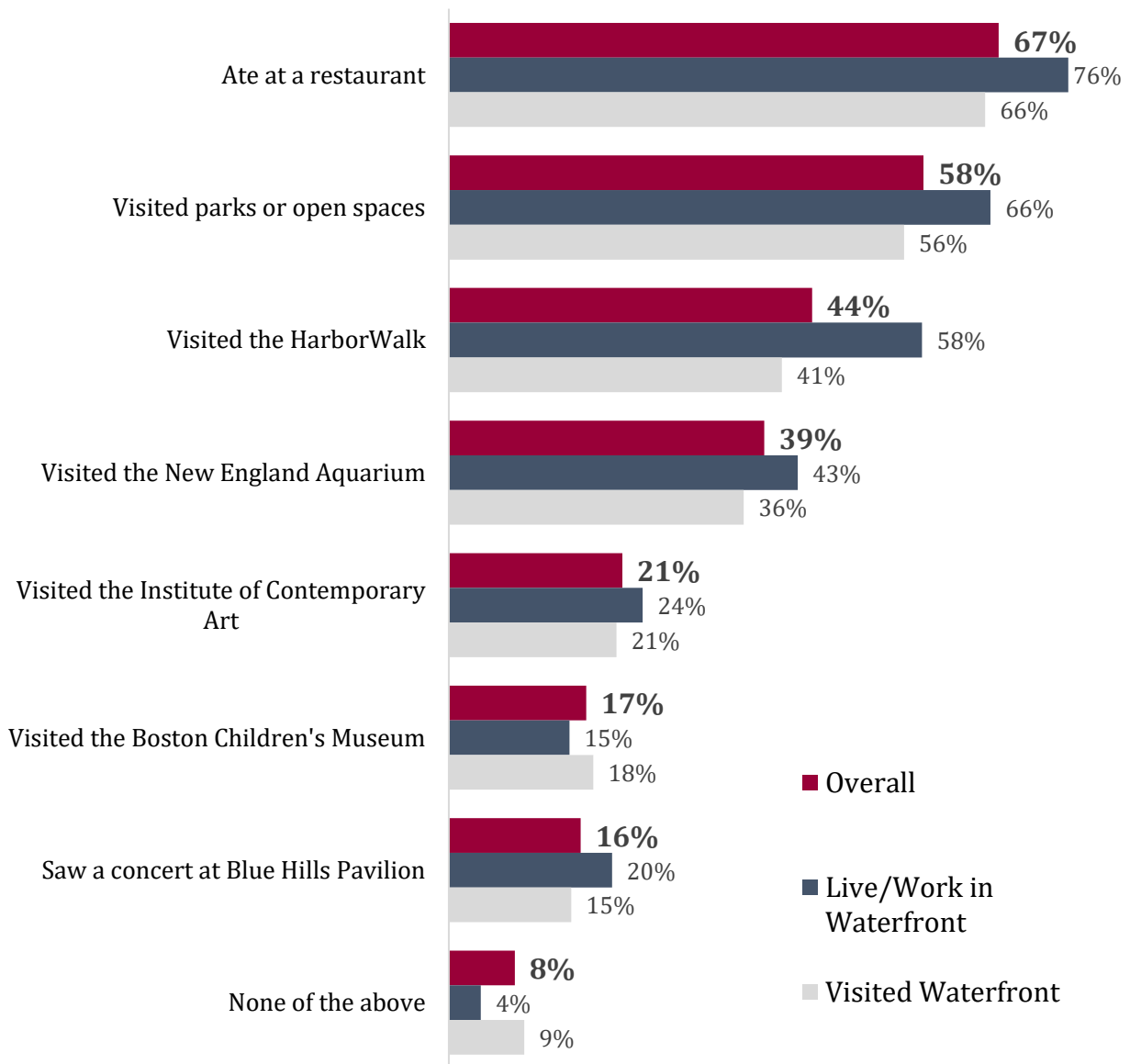
First impressions of the Waterfront

Open-ended responses to a question about general thoughts on the Waterfront ranged from descriptive to critical. "Cool breeze, walking around, seeing boats, eating ice cream, going to the aquarium," wrote one respondent, as if recounting a typical day there. When asked what came to mind when thinking about the Boston Waterfront, 20% mentioned the ocean, cruise ships, boats, or other activities on the water; 15% cited specific attractions, most commonly the New England Aquarium. Nearly as many (13%) talked about a specific neighborhood, while another 11% named the Seaport District specifically.

The primacy of the Seaport in the responses suggests, that for some residents, that district is what they most associate with the Waterfront. White respondents were more likely to mention the Seaport (14%) than non-whites, and higher income residents were more likely to mention it as well. On the other hand, some saw the development of the Seaport as a welcome contrast to other parts of the Waterfront. "I think of the Harbor and how it's nice that you can go to the Seaport and have a bunch of shops and restaurants on the water, or how you can go to Southie and go to a beach or park on the water," wrote one respondent.

Figure 3: Dining and visiting open space are the most common activities in the Waterfront

Q: On your visit or visits to the Boston Waterfront in the past year, which of the following



or open space, and 44% have used the Harborwalk. Below those were the waterfront’s cultural institutions: the Aquarium, the ICA, the Children’s Museum, and the Blue Hill Pavilion. This rank order is largely the same among residents who live or work in the Waterfront and among those who have visited from elsewhere in the city, but the former group are a few points more likely to engage in each activity, with the exception of visiting the Children’s Museum.

More respondents said they stay on dry land, reporting more onshore activities than on the water. Indeed, a majority (56%) said they had not done any of the water activities offered, while 23% had taken a harbor cruise or whale watch and 19% had taken a boat out to the Harbor Islands. Only 10% or fewer had gone swimming, fishing, sailing, or kayaking.

When asked what other activities they had done on the Waterfront, the top open-ended response by far was to go walking, either generally or on the Harborwalk. Nearly four-in-ten (38%) responses mentioned walking. Dining and nightlife (17%) was another popular response, particularly among younger residents. Nearly a quarter (23%) of Bostonians under age 30 said they had gone out to eat or for drinks on the Waterfront.

The same demographic differences apparent in residents' visits to the Waterfront apply to some, but not all, of these activities. Residents with higher education and income levels are more likely to have eaten a meal, visited a park, walked the Harborwalk, or visited the ICA. There is no such pattern, however, for visiting the Children's Museum or the Aquarium, perhaps because of the appeal of those two institutions for families of all means. Residents with children were much more likely to say they had gone to the Aquarium and the Children's Museum in the past year, but *less* likely to have visited the ICA, or to have eaten at a restaurant.

The relative cost of these activities explains part, but not all, of the difference in how residents are using the Waterfront. It seems that expense may be a factor in whether residents are getting a bite to eat in the district, but lower income residents are actually *less* likely to utilize free activities like parks and the Harborwalk. Meanwhile, museums with relatively high ticket costs are utilized about equally by high and low income residents.

This suggests a possible divide between "neighborhood" amenities, like parks and the Harborwalk, and "special occasion" amenities. Those who live in the neighborhood – largely white, higher income residents – use the parks and Harborwalk as their backyard. Those who visit the Waterfront but don't live there come for a particular attraction, and either may not know about the parks and open spaces, or may not feel they are "for" them.

Figure 4: Transportation, cost are top obstacles to residents' visiting Waterfront; significant minorities of Black, Hispanic residents don't feel welcome along Waterfront.

% saying each is a "major obstacle" to their visiting the Boston Waterfront

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic
There's not enough affordable parking	47%	45%	49%	49%
The activities and dining there are too expensive	37%	32%	36%	53%
Public transportation takes too long to get there	33%	34%	28%	28%
I would rather go elsewhere in Boston for recreation	17%	12%	22%	14%
I don't feel welcome on the Waterfront	13%	6%	24%	20%
I don't know what there is to do on the Waterfront	12%	8%	15%	14%

Cost and transportation top lists of obstacles and improvements to Waterfront use

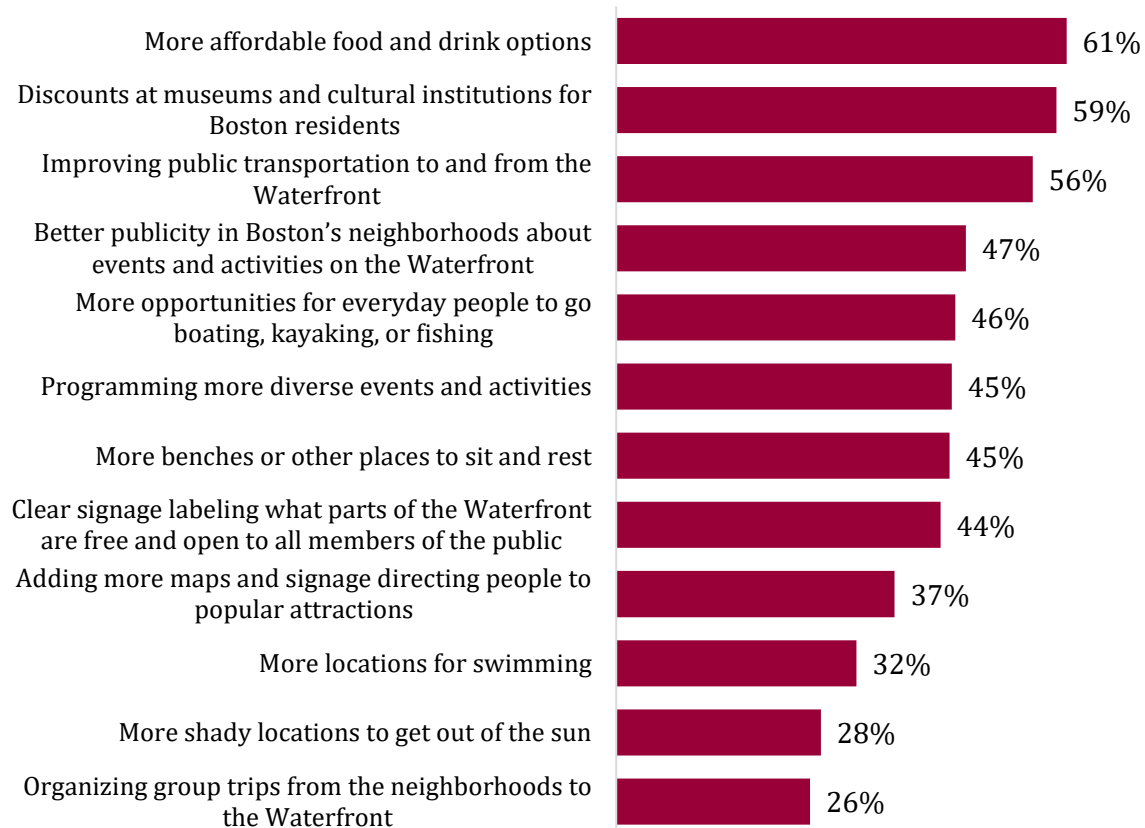
Cost is a factor in the top two obstacles to residents visiting the Waterfront more often. Nearly half (47%) cited a lack of affordable parking as a major obstacle to their visiting the district while another 37% said that activities and dining are too expensive (Figure 4). Cost was not the only factor, though. A third (33%) cited the time it takes to get to the Waterfront via public transit as a “major obstacle”.

The fact that both parking and public transit rank highly as obstacles highlights the various ways that residents are getting to the Waterfront. A majority (56%) take the MBTA subway system for at least part of their trip, while 41% drive. These figures roughly align with residents’ reported mode share for all trips. It’s a reminder that, even in a dense city like Boston with a significant public transportation network, a large share of residents is driving. Indeed, almost a quarter (23%) report that they never use public transit in an average week, and another 19% use it for “just a few” trips.

Far fewer cited other issues as major obstacles to visiting the Waterfront, including only 13% who said they didn’t feel welcome there. But there are troubling demographic differences on this question. Only 6% of white residents say not feeling welcome on the Waterfront is a “major” obstacle, compared to 24% of Black residents and 20% of Hispanic residents. Adding in those who cite feeling welcome as a “minor” obstacle, 36% of Black residents and 39% of Hispanic residents do not feel

Figure 5: Majorities say changes to address cost, transportation would make them more likely to visit

% who say each change would make them “much more likely” to visit the Boston Waterfront



welcome overall. Nearly as many residents with children (35%) felt the same way, as did residents from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan (34%). The sizable minorities in each group say feeling personally unwelcome kept them away, hinting at a much larger issue for the city and the neighborhood to address.

A majority (53%) of Hispanic residents cited affordability as a major obstacle, and non-white residents in general were more likely to say they didn't know what there was to do on the Waterfront. Black residents were more likely than other demographics to say they simply preferred to go somewhere else in the city for recreation.

The most popular potential improvements to the Waterfront lined up with the most pressing obstacles (Figure 5). Majorities thought three ideas would make them much more likely to visit the Waterfront more: more affordable food and drink options (61%), resident discounts at museums and cultural institutions (59%), and improving public transportation to the Waterfront (56%). Cost and transportation were also the top obstacles residents identified to visiting more frequently.

These are followed by several ideas ranked closely together, including better publicity of events and activities in the neighborhoods, more diverse programming, and more opportunities for boating, kayaking, and fishing. Expanding water recreation was particularly popular with young residents and residents with kids, who were also more likely to favor cultural discounts and more diverse programming.

There are also differences by race and ethnicity. For white residents, the top three items stood out above other considerations. More diverse programming was a top priority for Black and Hispanic residents; two-thirds (67%) of each group thought that would make them much more likely to visit. Black and Hispanic residents were also more likely to say better publicity in their neighborhoods and organized trips to the Waterfront from their neighborhoods would make them more likely to visit.

For residents with lower levels of education and income, better public transportation and better signage, both to attractions on the Waterfront and indicating which areas were open to the public, were important, along with cultural discounts and more affordable food and drinks.

Climate change not seen as a top threat to the Waterfront

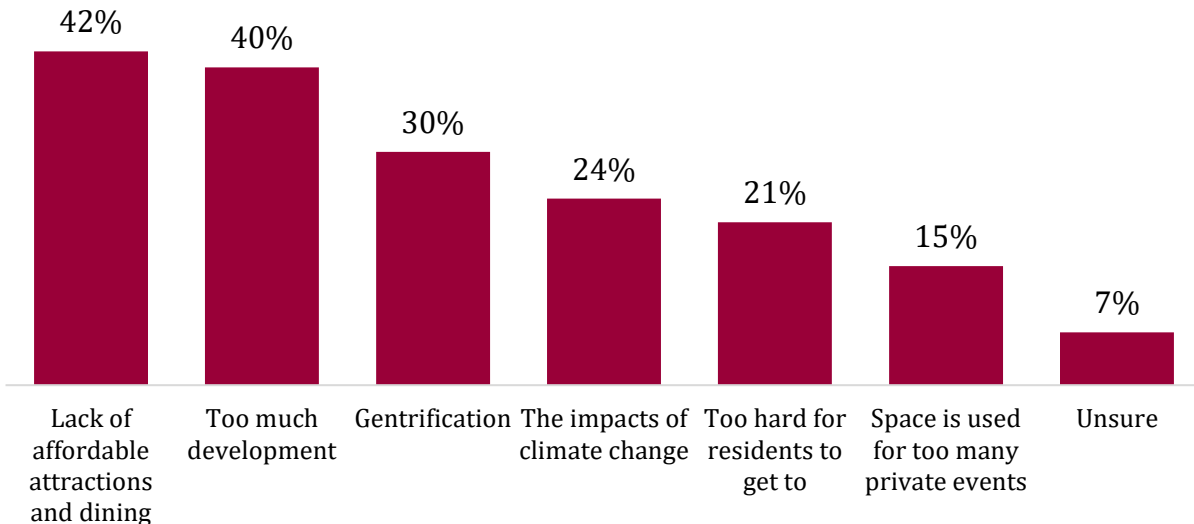
The Boston Waterfront is in a period of rapid development and gentrification. It also faces existential risk from climate change. In this survey, residents focused more on the first two and less on the third, perhaps because of the nature of the rest of the survey.

When asked to choose the top two current threats to the Waterfront, 42% of residents named the lack of affordable things to do and to eat, 40% thought there was too much development happening in the district, and 30% thought gentrification was a threat to the Waterfront (Figure 6). Taken together these three suggest that new construction and high costs risk cutting the Waterfront off from the rest of the city.

Only 24% named the impacts of climate change as one of their top two threats to the Waterfront. This was mirrored in the open-ended comments about concerns related to the Waterfront. In the open-

Figure 6: Affordability, development seen as top two current threats to the Boston Waterfront

Q: What do you think are the two biggest threats to the waterfront as of now? Select up to two.



Totals add up to more than 100% since respondents could select up to 2 items

ended comments, only 1% mentioned climate change or potential flooding as a concern about the Waterfront. White residents were more likely to name climate as a threat to the Waterfront, as were residents with higher levels of income and education. But even among those groups, cost and over-development were seen as more pressing concerns.

The relatively low ranking for climate is consistent with much issue-priority polling in the city and statewide. Boston and Massachusetts residents believe climate change is real, man-made, and happening now. They also expect the very sorts of impacts – coastal flooding, storm surges, and sea level rise – that have already and will continue to batter the Waterfront. On some questions, there has been an uptick in concern about climate-related issues since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. But when climate is ranked against other concerns, it tends to end up below other issues.

In other policy areas, this relatively low prioritization of climate suggests an indirect approach to achieving climate-friendly policy goals. In transportation, for example, advocacy to improve the MBTA focuses mostly on improving commutes and relieving congestion, rather than the positive effects it could have on greenhouse gas emissions. When the Obama administration introduced regulations on emissions from power plants, they stressed the effect it would have on air pollution and asthma rates, rather than climate. As climate change impacts becomes more apparent, there may be more of an opening for a direct argument, but this survey suggests that linking climate to another concern more prevalent in residents’ minds may be the path of least resistance. These are questions which could be explored in qualitative research that focuses specifically on climate issues.

There are other potential explanations for the relatively low concern about climate in this question. One may be the question wording, which asked about “current” threats to the Waterfront. Even though statewide polls show that most residents think the effects of climate change are already being felt, many still think the worst effects will come farther off in the future. Another possible explanation

is that this question came at the end of the survey, after many questions about residents' personal experience of the Waterfront. It's possible these earlier questions put some respondents more in a mindset to think about threats to *use* of the waterfront rather than threats to its physical condition.

Conclusion

Public opinion on the Waterfront mirrors the changes to the neighborhood itself. On the surface, things look pretty good: it appears that most residents are utilizing the space to some extent, and have mostly positive impressions of it. Residents by and large think they have a legal right to access at least some part of the Waterfront, and that the area is accessible and welcoming to all.

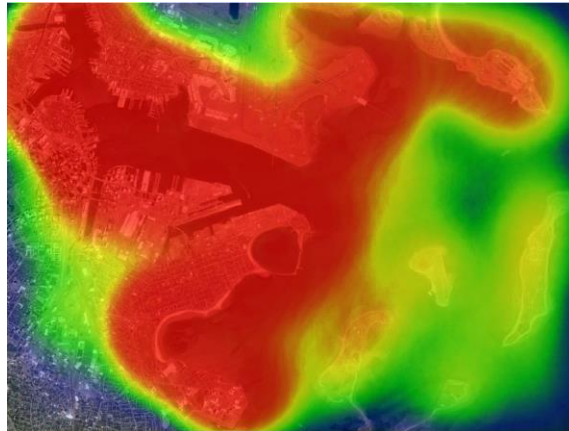
But digging below the topline numbers reveals some real divisions among Boston residents, divisions that raise a fundamental question about whom the Boston Waterfront is really for. White and wealthier residents visit the Waterfront more often than their non-white and less well-off neighbors. Cost – of dining, parking, and transportation – is seen as an obstacle to access. Sizable minorities of Black and Hispanic residents say not feeling welcome is a barrier to their visiting. Affordability and overdevelopment are seen as the biggest threats to the Waterfront, while climate change lurks as a potential future, if not present, danger.

Fortunately, there are solutions that residents think would make the Waterfront a more inviting place for all Bostonians. Some, like providing lower-cost dining options and better public transit, appeal to majorities of residents. Others, like bringing more diverse programming to the space and better publicizing it in the city's neighborhoods, appeal particularly to populations who are currently less likely to visit. To the extent that these changes can also promote climate-friendly outcomes, so much the better.

The Waterfront has seen tremendous change in recent years, and much about it – including public opinion about it – is very much in flux. There is an opportunity to address problems like inclusion, access and climate now, before they become larger problems, both in reality and in public perception. Doing so will require planning, energy, and political will and leadership. Hopefully this survey will help to lay the groundwork for those next steps.

**The MassINC Polling Group
 Conservation Law Foundation – Boston Waterfront Poll
 May 24 – June 9, 2019**

Please look at the map below and mark with your mouse or finger the areas that you would consider the Boston Waterfront.



Thank you. For the remaining questions in this survey, we are going to be talking about the areas highlighted in the map above/below as the “Boston Waterfront”.

What comes to mind when you think of the Boston Waterfront? **Responses could be coded into more than one category. Totals add up to more than 100%.**

Water / cruises / wharves / islands	20%
Cost / too expensive	15%
Specific attractions (Aquarium, museums, USS Constitution, etc)	15%
Beautiful, scenic, views	15%
Dining, food, nightlife	13%
Specific geography (neighborhood, airport)	13%
Too much development	11%
Seaport District	11%
Transportation (congested, inaccessible, parking)	8%
Gentrification, too exclusive	7%
Hotels, convention center, retail	5%
Walking paths / Harborwalk	5%
Beaches, open space, parks	5%
Flooding / climate change	1%
Other	8%

Do you live or work along the Boston Waterfront?

Live on the waterfront	10%
Work on the waterfront	8%
Live and work on the waterfront	4%
No I do not live or work on the waterfront	75%
Unsure	3%

Next question skipped for those who live/work on the waterfront

In the past year, how often have you visited any part of the Boston Waterfront?

Never	11%
One or two times	32%
Three to five times	17%
More than five times	37%
Unsure	3%

Next 4 questions asked of those who live/work on the waterfront or have visited at least once.

On your visit or visits to the Boston Waterfront in the past year, which of the following activities did you do?

Please select all that apply. Totals add up to more than 100% due to multiple options selected.

Visited the New England Aquarium	39%
Visited the Boston Children's Museum	17%
Visited the HarborWalk	44%
Visited the Institute of Contemporary Art	21%
Saw a concert at Blue Hills Pavilion	16%
Ate at a restaurant	67%
Visited parks or open spaces	58%
None of the above	8%

Which of the following water activities have you done in the last year that started on the Boston Waterfront?

Please select all that apply. Totals add up to more than 100% due to multiple options selected.

Took a boat to the Harbor Islands	19%
Went on a harbor cruise or whale watch	23%
Went sailing	5%
Went kayaking	7%
Went swimming	10%
Went fishing	8%
None of the above	56%

Other than these things, what activities have you done on the Boston Waterfront in the past year? **Responses could be coded into more than one category. Totals add up to more than 100%.**

Walk around / Harborwalk	38%
Dining/ drinks / nightlife	17%
Bike / Run / Play sports	11%
Water activity (swimming, boating, ferry, cruise)	9%
Fireworks / festivals / events / concerts	9%
Take in sights / people watch / photography	8%
Work / Live there	7%
Attractions (Aquarium, museums, Duck Boats, etc)	6%
Beach / park / open space	5%
Shop	4%
Other	8%

How do typically you get to the Boston Waterfront when you visit? **Please select all that apply. Totals add up to more than 100% due to multiple options selected.**

Drive and park	41%
Taxi, Uber, or Lyft	32%
MBTA subway	56%
MBTA bus or Silver Line	24%
Water taxi or ferry	4%
Walked from another part of Boston	38%
Bike	10%
Another way	2%

How much of an obstacle is each of the following to your visiting the Boston Waterfront more frequently than you do?

ROTATE ORDER	A major obstacle	A minor obstacle	Not an obstacle	Unsure
There's not enough affordable parking	47%	17%	28%	7%
Public transportation takes too long to get there	33%	30%	32%	5%
The activities and dining there are too expensive	37%	37%	20%	6%
I don't feel welcome on the Waterfront	13%	15%	65%	8%
I don't know what there is to do on the Waterfront	12%	26%	54%	8%
I would rather go elsewhere in Boston for recreation	17%	27%	44%	12%

To the best of your knowledge, do members of the public have a legal right to access the Boston Harbor Waterfront or not?

Yes, all of it	42%
Yes, but just some of it	34%
No, none of it	3%
Unsure	20%

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The Boston Waterfront is a welcoming and accessible place for all Bostonians to visit?

Strongly agree	28%
Somewhat agree	40%
Somewhat disagree	18%
Strongly disagree	9%
Unsure	5%

Here are some ideas for improving the experience for people coming to the Boston Waterfront. For each, please indicate if this would make you any more likely to visit the Boston Waterfront, or if it would make no difference.

	Much more likely	Somewhat more likely	Would make no difference	Unsure
ROTATE ORDER				
Adding more maps and signage directing people to popular attractions	37%	36%	22%	4%
Clear signage labeling what parts of the Waterfront are free and open to all members of the public	44%	35%	17%	4%
Improving public transportation to and from the Waterfront	56%	27%	13%	4%
Better publicity in Boston's neighborhoods about events and activities on the Waterfront	47%	33%	15%	4%
Discounts at museums and cultural institutions for Boston residents	59%	26%	11%	3%
More shady locations to get out of the sun	28%	35%	32%	5%
More benches or other places to sit and rest	45%	31%	21%	3%
More affordable food and drink options	61%	25%	11%	3%
Programming more diverse events and activities	45%	32%	18%	5%
Organizing group trips from the neighborhoods to the Waterfront	26%	25%	41%	7%
More opportunities for everyday people to go boating, kayaking, or fishing	46%	31%	18%	6%
More locations for swimming	32%	26%	36%	5%

What do you think are the two biggest threats to the waterfront as of now? **Select up to two. Totals add up to more than 100% due to multiple options selected.**

Too much development	40%
The impacts of climate change	24%
Gentrification	30%
Space is used for too many private events	15%
Lack of affordable attractions and dining	42%
Too hard for residents to get into	21%
Unsure	7%

Which modes of travel do you use regularly to get around? **Please check all that apply. Totals add up to more than 100% due to multiple options selected.**

Drive alone	35%
Drive or ride with others	39%
Take a taxi, Uber, or Lyft	42%
Take the MBTA subway (Red Orange, Blue, Green, Silver lines)	59%
Take an MBTA or other public bus	40%
Take a corporate or private shuttle	2%
Take a ferry	3%
Take the commuter rail	14%
Ride a bicycle	12%
Walk	51%
Other - Write In (Required)	2%

During the average week, how often do you use public transportation (public buses, subways, trains, or ferries)?

All of my trips	16%
Most of my trips	24%
Some of my trips	17%
Just a few trips	19%
None of my trips	23%
Unsure	1%

Do you have any children under age 18 in your household?

Yes	18%
No	79%
Prefer not to say	3%

DEMOGRAPHICS

Race

White / Caucasian	47%
Black / African American	20%
Hispanic / Latinx	16%
Asian American	10%
All other	3%
Prefer not to say	4%

Age

18 to 29	34%
30 to 44	27%
45 to 59	19%
60+	18%
Prefer not to say	1%

Gender

Male	47%
Female	51%
Transgender male	<1%
Transgender female	<1%
Gender variant/non-conforming	<1%
Not listed: _____	<1%
Prefer not to say	1%

Education

High School or less	33%
Some college, no degree	24%
College graduate (BA/BS)	24%
Advanced degree	17%
Prefer not to say	1%

About the Poll

These results are based on a survey of 953 residents of the City of Boston. Interviews were conducted online May 24 – June 9, 2019 via Change Research and Dynata, Inc. Boston residents were targeted for online invitation, and confirmed based on reporting a Boston ZIP code. Results were weighted to known population parameters on age, gender, race, neighborhood, and educational attainment. The poll was sponsored by the Conservation Law Foundation.