
*“This is one of those rare moments in our city’s life,
a time when we have a chance to reinvent Boston
and preserve the best of it for many years to come.
And if we work together, there is nothing we can’t do!”*

**Mayor Thomas M. Menino, State of the City Address
January 11, 2000**

Preface

Planning for the future has never been a strong point for Americans. Perhaps it is time for a change. The United Nations estimates that by 2025, nearly two-thirds of the Earth’s population, or five billion people, will live in cities. Sustainable, equitable solutions to the challenges of urban life will take center stage in the 21st century. Boston, although a small city, can lead the way.

Boston is America’s urban success story. It is also a city at a crossroads, never stronger economically but facing new challenges bred from that success. This report, *Boston’s Indicators of Progress, Change, and Sustainability*, is designed to guide change and to measure progress along the way. Boston College is committed to hosting a Boston Citizen Seminar every two years from the year 2000 through 2030, Boston’s 400th anniversary, to review progress and to set new civic goals.

In 2030, a young Bostonian who is fifteen years old in 2000 will be turning 45, the age at which he or she may move to the highest levels of civic leadership. A child born in 2000 may be raising a family of his or her own, and thinking about how to get involved in community life. By 2030, leaders in the year 2000 will have passed on their wisdom to younger men and women. The residents of Boston in 2030 will inherit the fruit of the choices we make today.

The year 2000 in Boston represents an unprecedented opportunity.

Boston’s unemployment, crime and vacancy rates are all at record lows. Public confidence is





high, and future projections are generally positive. In many ways, Boston is already close to becoming that elusive “city on a hill” — an urban center that offers the best of America’s promise to its residents, workers, and visitors. This is the result of decades of hard work in every sector and neighborhood, as well as a period of sustained economic expansion.

But Boston is also facing a number of challenges. As detailed in this report, Boston’s positive statistics on average mask a deeper reality. In the midst of generally rising prosperity, the cost of living has outpaced wages for many Bostonians and has created a negative economic undertow. Racial and class disparities in access to quality health care, schools, housing, technology, and transportation continue to reflect historic patterns of disadvantage which have not changed in proportion to Boston’s economic success. These realities, in an era of almost unparalleled growth, call for civic imagination and action.

In areas such as public safety, the environment, jobs, public health, cultural life, technology, and civic health, Boston has made great progress through innovative programs and the engagement of residents, with a deepening spirit of collaboration across sectors.

But questions remain for Boston in the year 2000:

- Can a city extend the benefits of economic success to all of its residents and neighborhoods?
- Can it retain a vibrant mix of income, ethnic and age diversity even as it attracts higher income residents?
- Can it create pathways to educational and economic success for all its young people?

The challenges outlined in this report are shared by many municipalities throughout the region: a shortage of affordable housing and rising cost of living; under-performing schools; insufficient training opportunities for jobs in the new economy; a shortage of skilled workers. Progress on these challenges will require statewide policies and regional collaboration. Many of these challenges are also shared by cities around the country and around the world.

Boston, with its wealth of social and intellectual capital, its cultural diversity, its environmental and other resources, may have what it takes to succeed. Some would go so far as to argue that if it can’t be done in Boston, it can’t be done.

This report is designed to help the people of Boston chart a wise course of action for the future. It allows us to “measure what we value and value what we measure” in ways that traditional reports do not. It brings together data from many sources and promotes a collaborative approach to analysis and action.

It also clarifies the interaction among the social, economic and environmental factors that influence outcomes in any one area. This allows for a comprehensive look at community life and for a more holistic approach to individual decision-making and public policy.

The Wisdom of Our Choices is designed:

- **to provide information** to assist with community planning and problem-solving;
- **to help business, government, community, and civic leaders** find effective points of intervention and collaboration;
- **to build relationships across traditional boundaries:** sectors, races, neighborhoods, generations, levels of government, and between Boston and its metropolitan neighbors;
- **to tell the story of Boston’s successes and challenges in ways obscured by conventional measures,** so that problems can be assessed within the context of our social, economic and environmental assets; and,
- **to market Boston not only to newcomers but to Bostonians,** who, with the help of the media, tend to see our glass as only half full when we compare ourselves with other cities and regions.



A Collaborative Civic Project

The *Indicators Project* was initiated early in 1997 by the City of Boston’s Sustainable Boston Initiative and the Boston Foundation’s Community Building Network. It was also supported in part by the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

More than 300 Bostonians from diverse sectors, neighborhoods, levels of government and racial/ethnic groups have participated in working sessions to conceptualize this report and to develop and then narrow lists of proposed indicators and measures. Many others have helped to find and format relevant data.

A draft of the report was released at a 1999 Boston Citizen Seminar, hosted by Boston College and co-sponsored by the Boston Foundation, the City of Boston, Boston 2000 and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. Mayor Thomas M. Menino gave the keynote address, highlighting the usefulness of the indicators as a way to measure progress. The Mayor’s address was followed by a panel of civic leaders who discussed major issues facing the city. Then, with 25 facilitators drawn from the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Action for Boston Community Development, and many other organizations and institutions, 250 participants engaged in deliberation at their tables about the future of the city and the region.

The draft report was subsequently distributed to an additional 700 residents, public agency staff, academics, and civic and community leaders for review and comment. In this final edition, these comments and suggestions have been incorporated, the charts and maps reworked, and data updated where possible.

The goal of the *Indicators Project* is to create a shared tool for data collection, analysis and reporting that can be used by stakeholders in Boston to “tell the story” of how Boston, its neighborhoods and region are doing, and to guide and measure change.



A Continuing Opportunity to Monitor Progress

As soon as is feasible, the report will be made available on line to increase access by the public and other civic users. Through their engagement with the indicators and measures presented here, and with continuing dialogue about how best to achieve the future we want, *Boston's Indicators of Progress, Change, and Sustainability* will be refined and adjusted over time.

A second *Indicators Report* will be released at a Boston Citizen Seminar in 2002.

The Boston Foundation, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the Codman Square Health Center, and a number of other organizations are already exploring ways to integrate the indicators into their own planning and assessment processes.

Some groups and institutions are also collaboratively funding an Annual Boston Survey by the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The survey will gather qualitative data to inform and update the indicators in areas such as technology and cultural life that currently have few sources of consistent, accurate information.

The indicators as they stand are designed to monitor change — not drive it. In the coming months, the Boston Foundation and other civic institutions will coordinate a number of committees to review the indicators in order to create a shared *Civic Agenda*. Using the Indicators as a way to inform opportunities, promote collaboration and evaluate impact, Bostonians will be better equipped to build on our strengths in times of both challenge and opportunity.