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# Immigration and the Fortune of New England Cities (Revisited)

by Daniel McCue and Eric S. Belsky, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University

Many events in 2010 underscored that immigration policy and reform are hot button issues in the United States. But with so much attention on seemingly far-off states along the southern U.S. border, New Englanders may not be aware of the impact that immigration has had locally, especially on cities.

New England's largest cities, having declined significantly in both population and economic vitality in the 1960s and 1970s, became home to hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s. The influx counterbalanced losses in the native-born population of many cities and even allowed their population to increase. Immigrants also contributed to indicators of improved economic health in some of those cities.[1] But elsewhere, immigration-led population growth alone was not enough to spark economic revival, and has been associated with growing poverty rates, unemployment, and stagnant property values.

Understanding the contributors to population growth and decline, including immigration, is vital to understanding cities, managing the changing needs of residents, and planning for the future.

## Offsetting Population Loss

For New England as a whole, immigration contributed substantively to population growth from 1980 to 2000. Although only 10 percent of the region's population, immigrants accounted for more than a quarter of population growth since 1980. Immigration was even more clearly a

determining factor in cities' population growth. Absent immigration, the population of all 50 of the largest cities in the region, combined, would have fallen by 50,000 residents over 1980-2000. Instead it grew by more than 200,000. With that boost, many cities managed to recover from population losses in the 1970s. Paul Grogan, of the Boston Foundation, wrote a book about them in 2000, popularizing the term "comeback cities."

After the decline of the 1960s and 1970s, a return to population growth in New England's cities occurred where the number of new immigrants and minorities exceeded losses among native-born and non-Hispanic whites. Cities that continued to lose population in the 1980s and 1990s were largely those that failed to attract enough new immigrant growth. They include smaller, more rural cities such as Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and Lewiston, Maine, and larger, aging urban cities such as Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and Bridgeport, Connecticut. (See "Immigrants and New England Cities' Growth.")

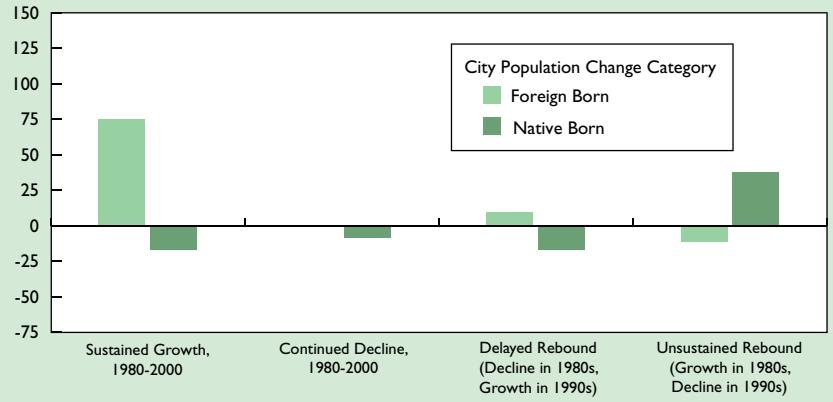
Interestingly, cities that rebounded in population in the 1980s without the help of immigrants actually declined the very next decade when short-lived gains in native-born citizens reversed. These include large cities outside of the route I-95 corridor, such as Springfield and New Bedford in Massachusetts and Hartford in Connecticut. Except for a small number of "consistently growing" suburban cities along the I-495 corridor that failed to see population declines in the 1970s, such as Haverhill and Taunton in Massachusetts, population change within all the largest cities of the region, including all comeback cities, was highly associated with immigration. (See "Change in Population.")

The addition of foreign-born residents and their children also increased the racial and ethnic diversity of New England's cities over the past two decades. Greater outmigration of non-Hispanic whites, coupled with additions of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians through immigration, fueled growth in the minority share of population. From 1980 to 2000, while the region's largest cities saw a decline of 580,000 non-Hispanic whites, the number of black, Hispanic, Asian, and other minority residents increased by 800,000. The minority population in the region's cities more than doubled.

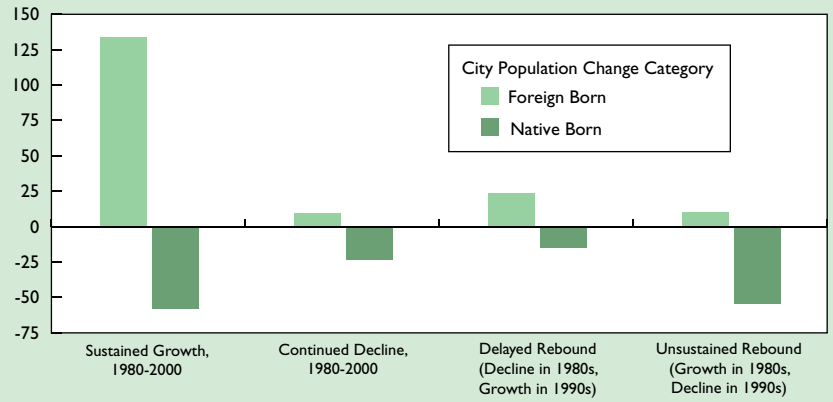
In general, cities that grew the most were those that saw the greatest increases in diversity. For example, cities with sustained population growth in the 1980s and 1990s as a whole had both the largest increases in minority residents and largest declines in

## Immigrants and New England Cities' Growth

Change in Population, 1980-1990 (Thousands)



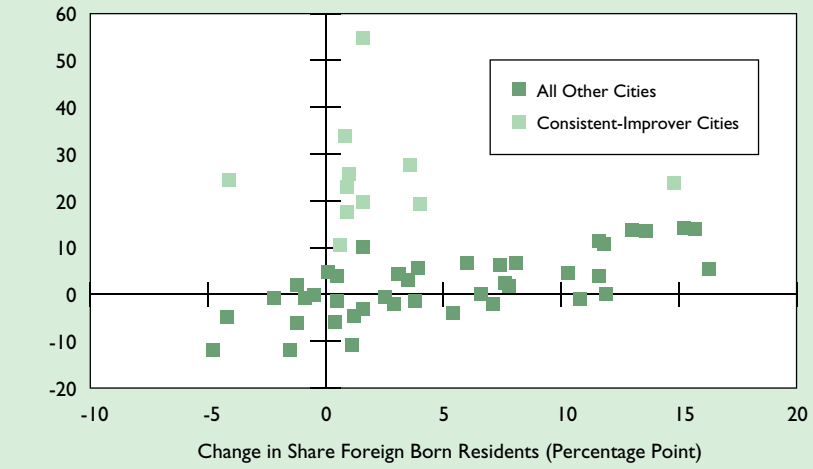

Change in Population, 1990-2000 (Thousands)




Source: Eric S. Belsky and Daniel McCue, "Comeback Cities or the New Melting Pots: Explorations into the Changing Large Cities of New England" (presentation, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 2006), http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/communitydevelopment/w06-7.pdf.
Note: Data limited to New England's major "comeback" cities that experienced population declines in the 1970s.

## Change in Population

Change in Population (Percent)




Source: Eric S. Belsky and Daniel McCue, "Comeback Cities or the New Melting Pots: Explorations into the Changing Large Cities of New England" (presentation, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 2006), http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/communitydevelopment/w06-7.pdf.
Note: Consistent-improver cities are defined as those with population growth in the 1980s and 1990s that did not have population declines in the 1970s.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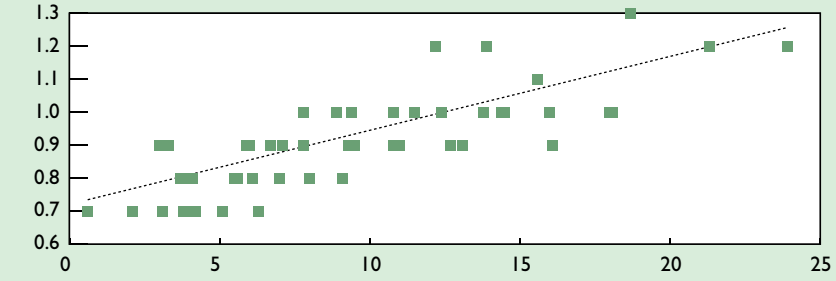
## College Graduates Lift City Incomes and Home Values

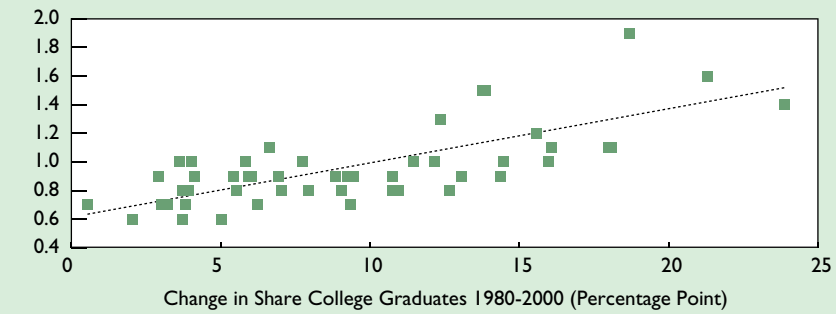
### Household Incomes

Ratio of City to State Median Household income Growth, 1980-2000




### Home Values

Ratio of City to State Median Home Value Appreciation, 1980-2000

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non-Hispanic whites, with 450,000 new minority residents offsetting losses of 300,000 non-Hispanic whites. These cities also witnessed the greatest growth in their shares of foreign-born residents, which increased a dramatic 10 percentage points—from 12 percent of the population in 1980 to fully 22 percent in 2000. At the same time, foreign-born shares for cities with consistently declining populations barely changed during that period, and in 2000 were only half the level of sustained-comeback cities.

As growth in the immigrant population increased the diversity of New England's cities, it also skewed the age of the city-dwellers toward youth. With few exceptions, cities with the largest shares of residents under age 35 in 2000 also had the highest shares of minorities and foreign-born residents. These young residents represented much more diversity than older generations, a trend also experienced nationwide. (Although just 31 percent of all adults in the United States over age 25 today are minorities, 43 percent of people under 25 are minorities, and 45 percent of children under 15 are, pointing to a much more diverse future.)

## Challenges and Opportunities

Immigration-driven population growth has brought added diversity to urban schools. With that change comes the challenge of educating a more diverse student body, many of whom are low-income, non-English-speaking, and greatly in need of higher educational attainment to succeed.

Consider the clear linear association between rising shares of college-educated adults and indicators of economic growth, such as changes in median house values and median household incomes from 1980 to 2000. The association becomes apparent in plots of the relative growth in incomes and home values of each city as a function of the change in share of residents who are college graduates. (See "College Graduates Lift City Incomes and Home Values.") Higher educational attainment is also playing a role in population growth. Cities with consistent population comebacks since 1980, as well as those which returned to population growth only in the 1990s, had both the largest shares of college-educated residents and the greatest increases in those shares.

Given their high and growing share of students who are minority immigrants, New England's cities also face the challenge of the current nationwide white-versus-minority gap in educational achievements, such as college graduation rates. Cities and

urban schools play a key role in bridging this gap, but the challenge is not felt equally among the cities with high immigrant shares. For instance, while many of New England's cities with high foreign-born and minority-driven population growth also have high educational attainment rates and high economic indicators of health, other cities with similar population trends have seen increases in poverty and below-average growth in household income, home values, and educational attainment relative to their peers.

The anomaly suggests that other factors are at play in a city's economic revival. One factor that appears to differentiate high-performing immigrant cities from subpar performers is proximity to a major metropolitan area. Comeback cities with higher incomes and higher homes values were those closest to Boston and New York City, where they participate in large-metro economic opportunities. Determining a more extended array of reasons for the differences among New England's comeback cities and among the immigrants who settle in them is a question worthy of future study.

Over the last two decades, immigration has quietly been a major source of growth and change in New England's cities. Although population growth is only one factor and does not necessarily signal increased economic vitality, changes in age and income distribution resulting from immigration are bound to drive changes in the level and nature of the demand for social and employment services—and to shape the opportunities to build human capital for economic development.

Understanding the nature of the change and the role of immigrants is crucial for informed and effective management, planning, and policymaking. Although Census Bureau interim population estimations contain a high degree of uncertainty, growth in the foreign-born population of both New England and the nation appears to have slowed dramatically during the recession. (See "Slower Immigration Impacts Population Growth.") As a result, the region may be in for a deceleration of population growth. With immigration not expected to return to prerecession levels until the economy and job growth rebound, cities will have to grapple with what that means economically. Understanding the impact that immigration has had in the past decades will help inform management of cities and policymaking at all government levels.

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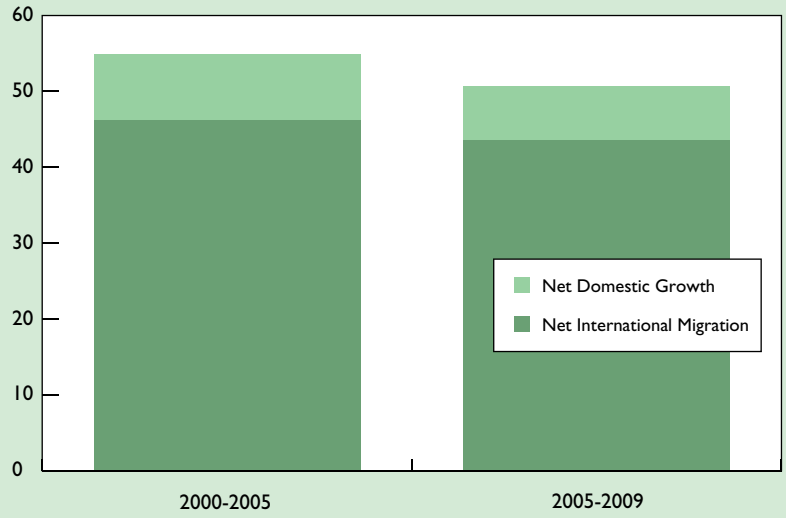
### Endnote

[1] See Eric S. Belsky and Daniel McCue, "Comeback Cities or the New Melting Pots: Explorations into the Changing Large Cities of New England" (presentation, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 2006), http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/communitydevelopment/w06-7.pdf.

### Slower Immigration Impacts Population Growth

Average Annual Population Growth in New England (Thousands)




Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau data.
Note: Net domestic growth is calculated as the sum of natural increases of the population (positive) and net domestic migration (negative).