

# In East Boston, pinched between progress and pain



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

**Development of upscale housing in East Boston is affecting working-class people who have long populated the neighborhood.**

**By Nestor Ramos** | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 14, 2016

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Stand far enough out on the pier behind the Maverick T stop and you can almost see East Boston's reflection in the gleaming new Seaport towers across the inner harbor.

Some here wonder whether they're peering into the future.

In a neighborhood that has traditionally been home to an ever-evolving immigrant population, luxury apartments are sprouting up along the waterfront. And even before ground was broken for those projects, rents across Eastie were on the rise, causing longtime residents in the city's most ethnically diverse area to live in fear of eviction notices.

At the same time, a violent international gang is gaining strength: Three East Boston teens have died violently since last September, and a recent raid resulted in dozens of indictments of alleged MS-13 gang associates preying on struggling residents here and in other cities and neighborhoods.

As East Boston shifts from unglamorous outpost to Boston's next big thing, the immigrants and working poor who have long called Eastie home are being squeezed from both sides. They are caught, they say, in a crucible of gentrification and violence in one of the few city neighborhoods they can afford to call home.

"We've always been the immigrant town. We've always been a gateway community," said state Representative Adrian Madaro, a first-term legislator who grew up in East Boston's Eagle Hill neighborhood, just blocks from the recent killings. "One of my greatest fears is that we'll lose our identity."

## The face of East Boston

A look at projects in East Boston being coordinated by the Boston Redevelopment Authority's Economic Development Department:

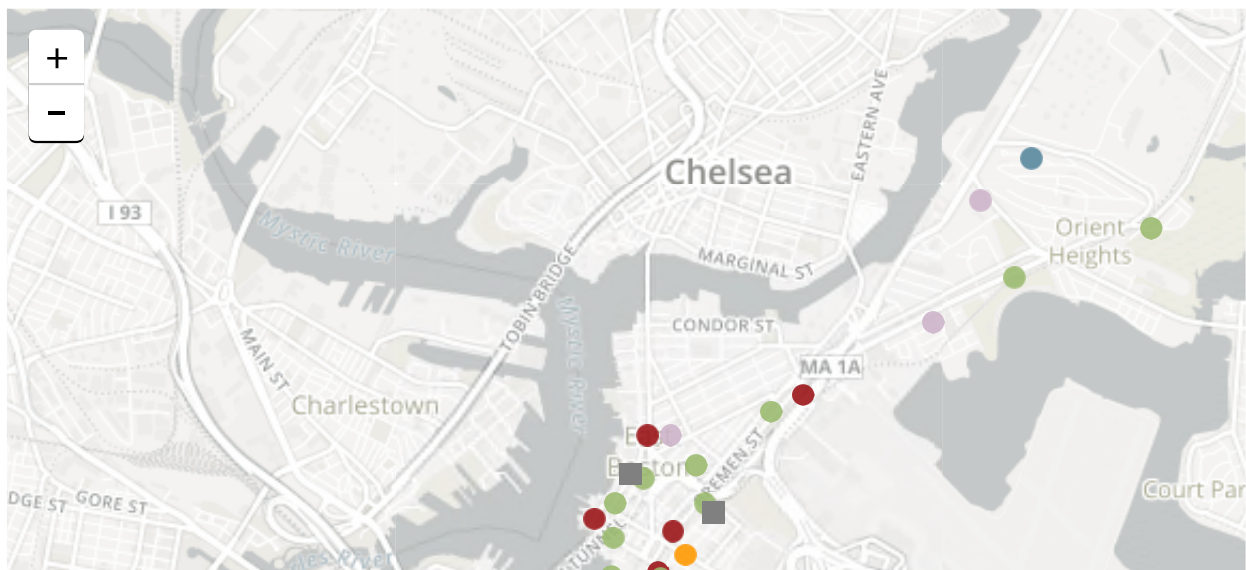
Under construction

Under review

Board approved

Construction completed

Letter of intent submitted



At community meetings in recent weeks, East Boston residents shared fears that reflect the dual threat they now face.

Some came to a Paris Street church basement clutching eviction notices; a few days later, they came to a local high school to voice concerns about crime. As the gangs recruit and kill their children, the only thing more troubling than staying put is being forced to leave.

Marta Velasquez, who said she has lived in the same three-decker on Chelsea Street for 10 years, started getting letters in November.

At a meeting this month, her 13-year-old daughter at her side, she burst into tears. The people on the first floor had already left, she said, but she has nowhere to go.

Her daughter doesn't like to walk home from school alone these days — two boys she knows were shot and stabbed, she said — so she bolts for the library after school and stays there until her mother can pick her up.

At school, where gangs have been recruiting kids her age and younger, she tries to steer clear of trouble. She's not sure what would happen if she and her mother were forced to move.

Around Eastie, such stories are common. Residents describe rents that sometimes double in a single year, or eviction orders that arrive without even the opportunity to pay more to stay.

Data from the real estate database Zillow show the median monthly rent in Eastie has climbed more than 40 percent in four years, reaching \$2,255 in December, bringing the neighborhood in line with rental prices in the rest of the city, according to Zillow's rental index. Boston rents as a whole increased about 20 percent in the same period.

That's a big change for East Boston, which was in the grip of the housing crisis of a different kind as recently as 2007 and 2008.

Back then, the city was in the position of having to urge developers to move forward on stalled projects that had received permits years earlier, said Rich McGuinness, a waterfront planner for the Boston Redevelopment Authority. The resulting 1,000-plus new housing units are just beginning to become available.

But those developments were conceived 15 years ago, back when nobody imagined unfashionable Eastie would soon be en vogue.

The apartments were to be modern, market-rate rentals that would raise sagging property values without adding to what was then a glut of affordable housing.

The situation at the time was so different from today's predicament, McGuinness said, that the city might have even been talked into lowering the number of affordable units required in each new project. Fortunately, that did not happen and some of the new units will be affordable, in keeping with city policy.

Adding more than 1,000 new units could also eventually drive down prices, helping the neighborhood meet the increased demand from college students and young professionals. But in the short term, the modern waterfront development has only added to Eastie's up-and-coming status — and the higher rents that come with that.

“Did we kind of predict that it would create a pressure on the existing residents with increased rents?” McGuinness said. “I don't think we really thought that through.”

So far, the new developments boast of luxury few immigrant families here can afford. The fencing around one under-construction project offering “new luxury rental apartments” is adorned with alluring slogans: Set out on your own path. Forge your future.

Since the water that separated its five original islands was filled in and the neighborhood was annexed in the 19th century, Eastie has been drawing those seeking to do just that.

And despite a recent influx of college students and young professionals, it is still largely a community of immigrants: 51 percent of the neighborhood's population was foreign-born, according to the 2009-2013 American Community Survey, the most recent available estimate from the Census Bureau.

# East Boston demographics

## By age, 2010

Under 9

13.7%

10 to 19

11.1%

20 to 34

30.8%

35 to 54

28.3%

55 to 64

7.3%

65+

8.7%

## By race, 2010

White

37.2%

Hispanic\*

52.9%

Black or African American

3.2%

Asian

3.5%

Other

3.3%

## By place of birth and citizenship, 2009-2013

US citizen, born in the United States

46.1%

US citizen, born in Puerto Rico or US Island Areas

2.4%

US citizen, born abroad of American parent(s)

1.1%

US citizen by naturalization

10.1%

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Not a US citizen

40.4%

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**\*Hispanic is not a racial category reported by the US Census Bureau. Instead, data for the Hispanic population were obtained by subtracting out all individuals from each racial category who self-identify as Hispanic and aggregating them.**

**SOURCES: Boston Redevelopment Authority; US Census Bureau; 2009-2013 5-Year American Community Survey**

PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF

Pockets of the Italian immigrants who were once the dominant group in the neighborhood still live here. But today's immigrants come largely from South and Central America; Velasquez is from El Salvador. According to the same survey, 30 percent of East Boston residents over 5 years old speak Spanish — an estimate some believe is probably low.

Spanish-speaking immigrants are “seeking a place to live, a place to be safe, and a place to work,” when they came to East Boston, said Mary Ellen Welch, a retired teacher, activist, and longtime resident of the Jeffries Point neighborhood — a working-class section that is about as close as Eastie gets to a tony ZIP code.

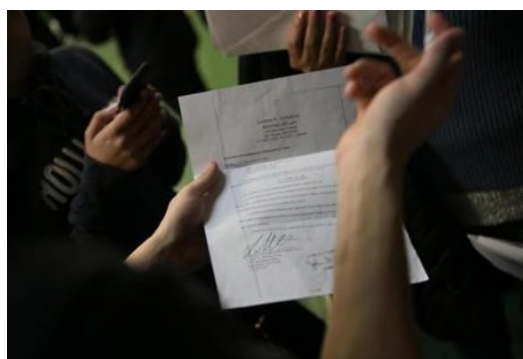
“The gang issue was always there, but it was much more in the background,” Welch said. “Now it seems to be exploding around us. There was graffiti on the walls, but there really wasn't this very noticeable and very awful, terrible violence.”

That gang violence would erupt even as the neighborhood welcomes wealthier new residents would seem to be counterintuitive. But those who study gentrification and gangs say the former can help drive the latter, at least in the short term.

John Hagedorn, a University of Illinois at Chicago professor and author whose recent book, “The Insane Chicago Way,” chronicled 1990 gang wars there, said young people can be left vulnerable and hopeless when they are displaced from their homes — and that’s when opportunistic street gangs can pounce.

“Gangs are all about the lack of hope in traditional mobility. If those avenues aren’t there, the gangs are going to get stronger,” Hagedorn said.

In Chicago, he said, Puerto Rican neighborhoods displaced by gentrification soon became hotbeds of gang activity.



KATHERINE TAYLOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**A copy of an eviction notice.**

With neighborhoods unsettled, Hagedorn said, kids were bouncing from school to school. Their futures were suddenly uncertain. The gangs grew in strength.

Andres Del Castillo, East Boston organizer for the community group City Life/Vida Urbana, said he’s seen the same thing playing out here.

“You’re taking families away from their social fabric, leading to the weakening of the social fabric and the societal problems we’re seeing in East Boston today,” said Del Castillo, who leads weekly meetings at which residents seek legal help with their housing problems.

“Young people are being moved from home to home, school system to school system. . . . All of this puts kids at risk.”



But community groups are fighting to make sure Eastie can remain diverse, both culturally and economically.

Madaro said a concerted effort to provide young people in the area a better support system is underway among community groups. A new antiviolence program is slated to start in schools where gangs now recruit. Police are emphasizing community policing and hosting events. Nonprofits like the arts program Zumix offer after-school activities.

At the largest of those institutions, the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, the neighborhood's changing demographics are evident every day. Doctors and others who once relied on whoever was around to help translate now lean on a department of interpretive services that assisted with 100,000 patient contacts last year, said Steven Snyder, a vice president at the center.

Clients are largely Spanish-speaking, but Italian speakers are still common, and there has been a recent influx of Moroccan immigrants.

Manny Lopes, the health center's chief executive officer, grew up in East Boston, and has deep roots in the community. During a recent interview in the lobby of the center's Gove Street building, he stopped to hug an aunt who wandered past.

Those who know East Boston well, Lopes said, know the recent gang violence is isolated. Most immigrants in the neighborhood "are here to work and provide a better life for their families. I think they still believe this is the place to do that," he said.

That's what brought a 25-year-old man to East Boston from El Salvador four years ago. The problems in his country forced him out, said the man, who identified himself as Dennis at a recent community meeting. He came here in search of a better future for his four-year-old.

Now, he said, his landlord is evicting him. He works in a restaurant and is starting a business building swimming pools, but for now he's dangerously close to homelessness.

"I need the place," he said of the humble apartment he may soon lose. "All my family is in El Salvador."



KATHERINE TAYLOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Members of the community group City Life/Vida Urbana (from left) Annette Diaz, Olga Pasco, and Andres Del Castillo listened earlier this month as Carlos Enao told about being evicted from his home in East Boston after the building was sold.**

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