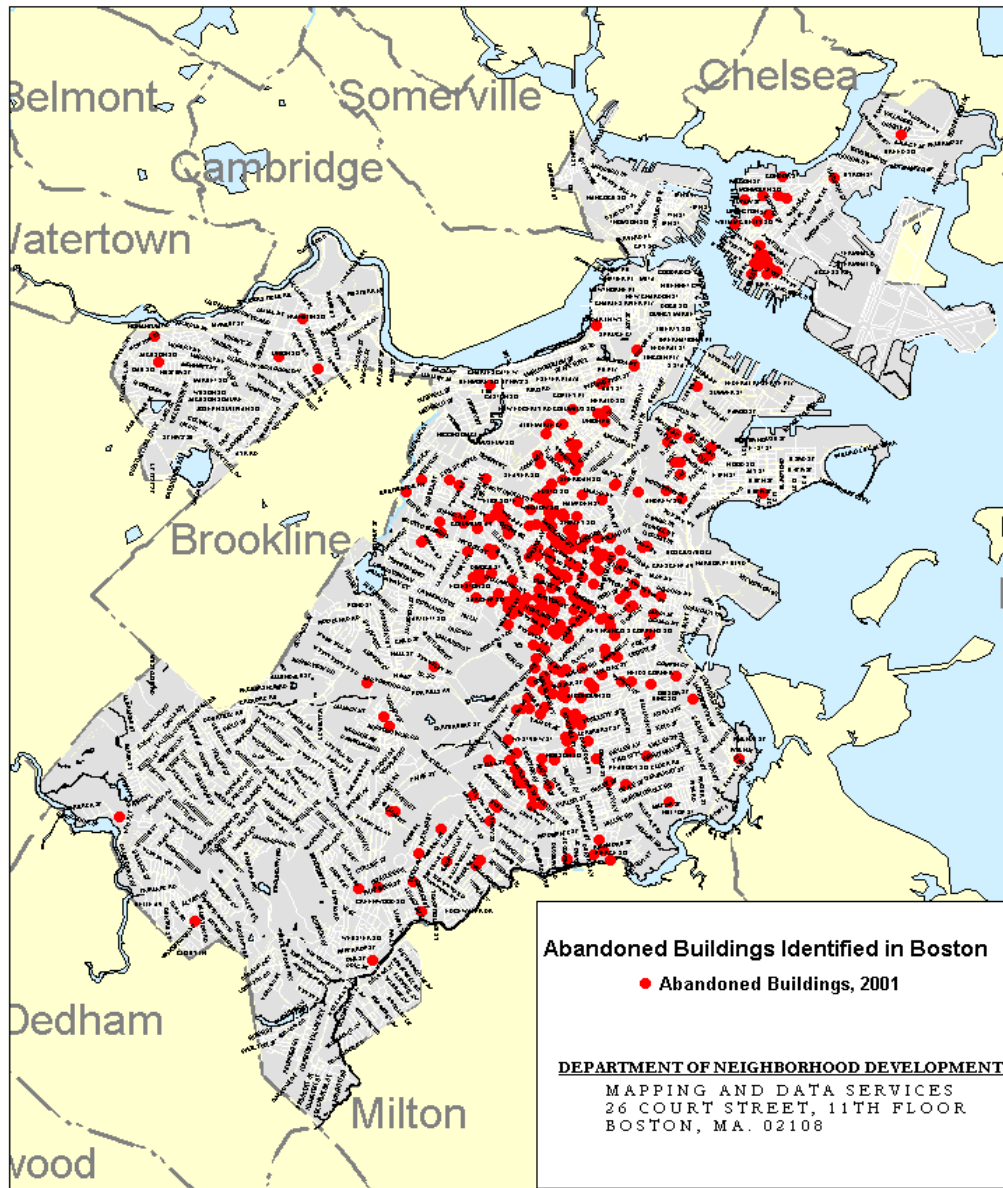


2001 Abandoned Building Survey



City of Boston



Thomas M. Menino, Mayor

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2001 Abandoned Building Survey Results

Introduction

Boston benefited from the long economic boom that extended from the mid-1990s to early 2001. Both downtown and the neighborhoods profited from this upswing, with a substantial increase in property values and a decrease in crime rates across the cityⁱ. Long neglected local business districts are once again vibrant and homeownership rates have increasedⁱⁱ. This prosperity is reflected in the number of abandoned buildings, which has decreased 64% since 1997. Fewer than 400 such buildings, or less than one percent of Boston buildings are abandoned, while cities such as Baltimore have more than 12,000 abandoned units.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even though Boston's number of abandoned buildings is relatively small, the existence of *any* represents the loss of a commercial or residential resource. In addition, property abandonment is the most visible sign of a community in distress. At best, these buildings are an eyesore. At worst, they discourage the upkeep of adjacent buildings and become the focus of drug dealing and other crime, creating a downward spiral that can radically alter an entire street and its neighborhood.

Since 1997, the Department of Neighborhood Development has conducted annual surveys of abandoned buildings to assess the extent of this problem and to work with neighborhoods on the reclamation of abandoned buildings. In focusing on this matter as a priority, we aim to discourage future abandonment.

This report outlines the survey methodology, survey results, ongoing responses and proposed follow-up actions to the **2001 Abandoned Building Survey**.

Scope and Methodology

The **2001 Abandoned Building Survey** is the result of more than 100 hours of research and fieldwork. Based on the experiences and information gathered in previous years, the survey methodology has evolved. This methodology is based on a three-pronged approach to the discovery and survey process.

1. Creating a master list: A list of potentially abandoned buildings was created for the first building survey by accessing information from a variety of City agencies. The following agencies have provided lists during the various surveys that serve as possible indicators of abandonment:
 - Assessing and Tax Title;
 - The Boston Fire Department;
 - Boston Inspectional Services Department;
 - The Boston Water and Sewer Commission;
 - DND program staff reports of abandoned buildings.
2. Resurveying buildings: All buildings that had been surveyed in the past as abandoned were re-surveyed so as to ascertain their current status.
3. Establishing target areas: In the first year of the survey (1997), all streets were surveyed in wards that contained more than 75 abandoned buildings. In following

years, the survey area has been adjusted in accordance with previously known concentrations of abandoned housing, coupled with areas that have concentrations of potentially abandoned buildings. For the 1999, 2000, and 2001 surveys, DND worked most closely with tax delinquency data to identify potentially abandoned buildings. In 1999 and 2000 the survey included buildings that owed more than \$20,000 in taxes. For 2001, the survey included all properties (land or buildings) that owed more than \$20,000 in taxes, increasing the area covered by the street-by-street survey.

For the purposes of this report, **Abandoned Buildings** are defined as:

Any residential, commercial, industrial or mixed-use building (excluding sheds and garages on residential property) that is not occupied and has visible signs of physical distress (i.e., boarded, burned, open to the elements, otherwise deteriorated, etc.).

The rationale for this specific definition of abandonment is that it best reflects the most problematic form of abandonment in Boston, i.e., that which has the most detrimental impact on the quality of life in Boston's neighborhoods.

Data Gathered

Staff from the Department of Neighborhood Development and the Rental Housing Resource Center fanned out across the City with maps, survey forms and digital cameras to complete the survey during September and early October. Fieldwork provided the following information:

- Abandonment type (abandoned, boarded, burned, or no longer abandoned);
- Specific signs of physical distress (roof, walls, windows, porches, etc.);
- Photographs (documentation of abandonment type).

19 Westminster Avenue, Roxbury

Urban Edge has renovated this building into a four-unit condominium for low- and moderate-income first-time homebuyers with the support of the DND and a number of funding sources.

1999



CITY OF BOSTON

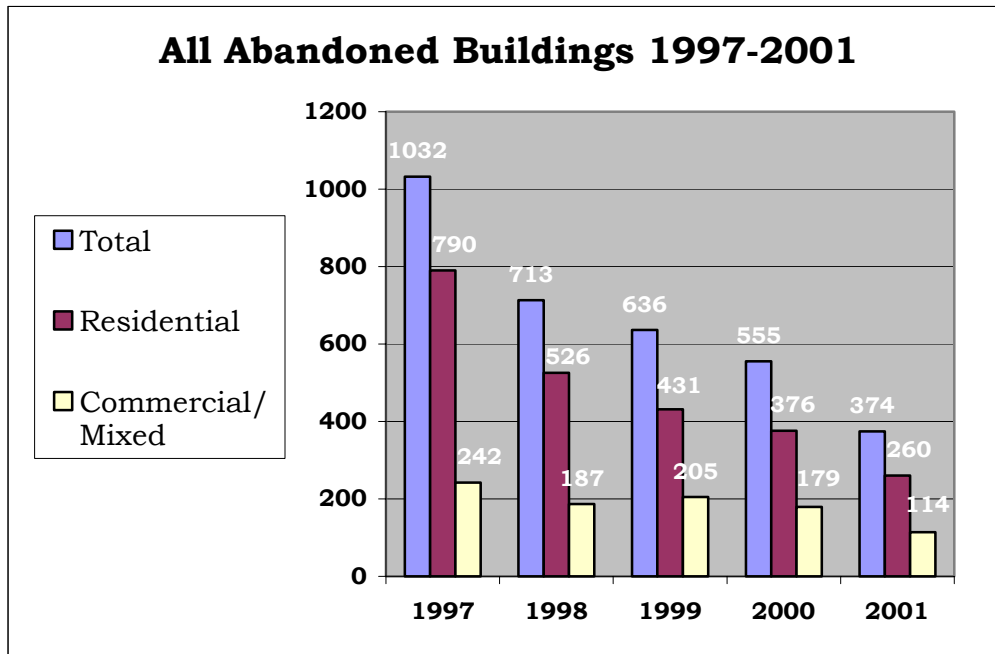
2001



2001 ABANDONED BUILDING SURVEY

Survey Results: Overall

The number of abandoned buildings has decreased 64% since 1997 and 33% since 2000. With a 67% drop in abandonment, residential buildings have outperformed the commercial/mixed-use sector, which experienced a 53% drop in abandoned buildings during the same period.



New instances of abandonment have also decreased over 60%, from 115 in 2000 to 45 in 2001.

Survey Results: Residential

Looking more closely at residential abandoned buildings helps us to draw a detailed picture of not only how many residential buildings are abandoned, but also how many housing units are abandoned. Additionally, these results allow us to reasonably extrapolate which types of housing are more likely to be abandoned, and where we might find concentrations of abandoned buildings.

Summary Statistics

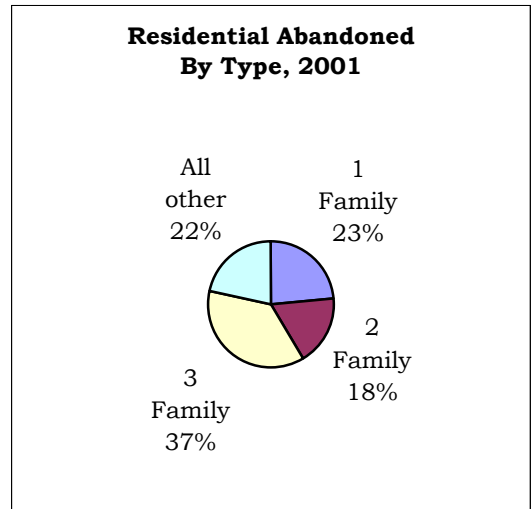
The number of residential abandoned buildings fell 31% in one year, from 376 to 260 buildings. Contributing significantly to this drop were the 128 buildings that had been abandoned in 2000 but were no longer abandoned in 2001. This rate of decrease is consistent with the goal of Mayor Thomas Menino's 2000 housing preservation and production strategy, *Leading the Way*, which pledged to reduce the number of abandoned buildings by 50% (from 376 to 188) over three fiscal years.

Residential Abandonment by Property Type and Number of Housing Units

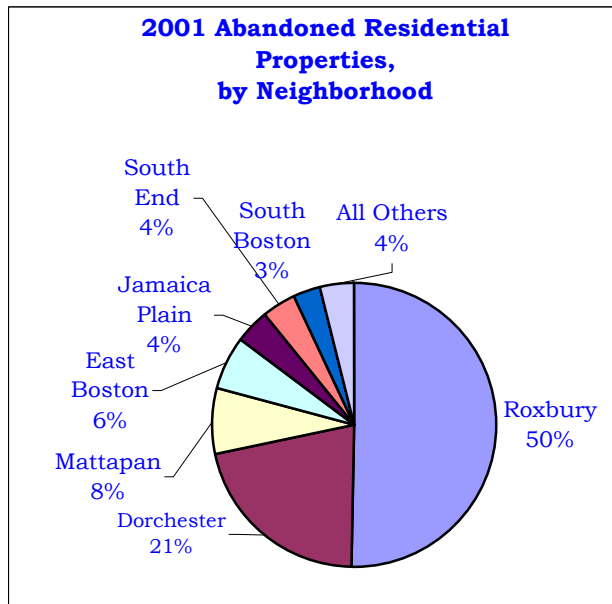
Three-family homes make up the largest share of abandoned residential buildings. This suggests that three-family homes are a residential type where city efforts should be concentrated, especially since they can provide more units of housing, compared to single- or two-family homes.

In total, the 280 currently abandoned residential and mixed-use buildings contain 636 units of housing. Of these, 67 buildings (containing 203 housing units) were identified in the field as currently undergoing some level of renovation or repair.

168 residential and mixed-use buildings identified as “no longer abandoned” contain over 500 units of housing.



Residential Abandonment by Neighborhood



As can be seen in this chart, Roxbury has by far the largest number of abandoned buildings. The detailed table on the next page outlines each of the neighborhoods. The following results are significant:

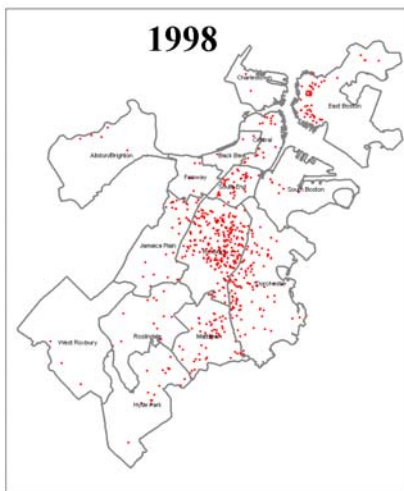
- A number of neighborhoods, including Charlestown, West Roxbury, Back Bay/Beacon Hill, Allston/Brighton and Fenway/Kenmore, have experienced little or no abandonment during the survey years.
- In neighborhoods with a moderate rate of abandonment (including Hyde Park, Mattapan, the South End, Jamaica Plain and East Boston), there has been a significant decrease in abandonment.

Abandonment in Roxbury has been reduced significantly in terms of the number of residential buildings (from 282 to 131), but this has been a smaller decrease (54%) than the city-wide decrease of 67%.

However, the neighborhood statistics do not fully reveal the story. The maps on the next page reveal the way in which abandonment has been reduced over time and how the remaining abandoned buildings are not scattered across a particular neighborhood, but are concentrated in a relatively small area running adjacent to Blue Hill Avenue and Warren Street, affecting a portion of Dorchester and a large section of Roxbury.

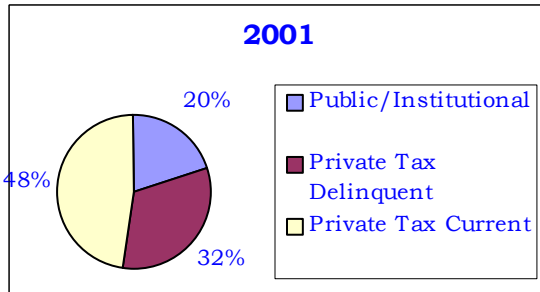
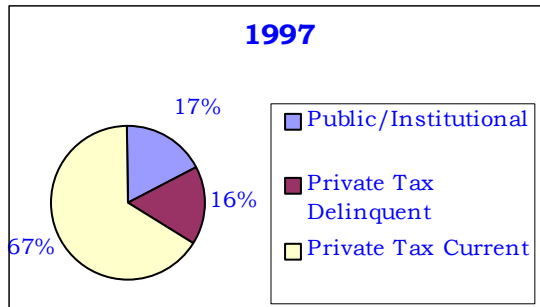
Abandoned Residential Buildings, by Neighborhood					
Neighborhood	1997	2000	2001	% Change 2000 - 2001	% Change 1997 - 2001
Charlestown	1	0	0	0	-100%
Hyde Park	44	3	2	-33%	-95%
Central	12	5	1	-80%	-92%
Mattapan	99	26	20	-23%	-80%
South End	44	17	10	-41%	-77%
Jamaica Plain	37	22	10	-55%	-73%
Roslindale	10	4	3	-25%	-70%
East Boston	50	19	16	-16%	-68%
Dorchester	166	65	55	-15%	-67%
West Roxbury	3	2	1	-50%	-67%
Roxbury	282	169	131	-22%	-54%
Back Bay/Beacon Hill	2	2	1	-50%	-50%
Allston/Brighton	3	1	2	100%	-33%
Fenway/Kenmore	0	0	0	0%	0%
South Boston	6	18	8	-56%	33%
Unknown ¹	31	23	0	N/A	N/A
Total	790	376	260	-31%	-67%

All Abandoned Buildings, 1998, 2000 & 2001



¹ The unknown category includes properties that were unable to be "geocoded" within a neighborhood boundary, which can occur for a number of reasons. For 2001, all properties were successfully geocoded.

Residential Abandonment by Ownership Type and Tax Status



An examination of abandoned residential properties based on their ownership type (public or private) and their tax status gives us further information that can shape DND programs.

While privately held tax current property has comprised the largest category of residential abandonment since 1997, the adjacent charts show that this has decreased as a percentage of total abandonment from 1997 to 2001, from 67% to 48%. Tax delinquent property, however, has doubled as a percentage of total abandonment, from 16% in 1997 to 32% in 2001.

Addressing Abandoned Buildings: Next Steps

Efforts to reduce abandoned housing have been successful, but as the report shows, there are areas in which the City of Boston can focus its efforts:

- 1) Three-family homes present an excellent opportunity to increase the number of available housing units. DND is working to create a new three-decker mortgage program that could assist in this effort.
- 2) Privately owned tax-delinquent buildings have failed to respond to the private market or city efforts. Further analysis should be done with tax title data to determine if more aggressive tax foreclosures and/or receiverships may help to reduce the stock of such buildings.
- 3) Roxbury continues to have the highest concentration of abandoned buildings. DND has been working diligently with the citizens of Roxbury to plan the future of the neighborhood, not just in terms of abandoned housing, but also in terms of vacant lots, neighborhood business districts, schools, and other facilities.

These efforts are combined with a range of existing City of Boston programs that assist in bringing abandoned buildings back to use.

- The **Ten Most Wanted Program** focuses the efforts of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to close down houses that harbored illegal drug activities. The vacant buildings are then rehabilitated and sold to responsible owner-occupants as affordable housing.
- The **1-4 Family Program**, administered by LISC and the Boston Community Loan Fund, provides funding to a network of community development corporations (CDCs) to acquire and rehabilitate privately owned abandoned buildings. The CDCs rehabilitate the building and sell the finished house to a first-time homebuyer at an affordable price.

- The **Residential Development Program** takes foreclosed city-owned abandoned buildings and provides grants and loan money, as well as intensive technical assistance, to first-time homebuyers who are required to rehabilitate the property prior to moving in.
- Income-eligible homeowners who wish to re-occupy their abandoned home can utilize **Homeworks**, **Historic Homeworks**, and **Senior Home Repair** funds to assist with making repairs that can make a house livable again.
- The **Hidden Assets Program** provides grant funds for the renovation of smaller apartment buildings (five or more units) for long-term affordable housing.
- DND staff reaches out to abandoned building owners to determine if the department can be helpful to that owner. If outreach is unsuccessful, action can be taken through the **Receivership Program**. Boston's Inspectional Services Department can force otherwise reluctant owners to renovate their buildings.

Predicting the Future of Abandoned Housing

Both the number of abandoned buildings and the number of newly identified abandoned buildings is at its lowest since the first survey was completed in 1997. While the city is making diligent efforts to eliminate existing abandoned buildings, the city is also looking for ways to prevent an upswing in the number of abandoned buildings.

Existing programs, in combination with foreclosure prevention programs such as **Don't Borrow Trouble**, can be used to help homeowners resolve housing problems before they make the choice to walk away from the home. In addition, information predicting increases in abandoned housing can be useful in taking action to prevent a street from spiraling out of control.

It is still unclear how the current national economic downturn will affect the economic health of Boston's neighborhoods. A high demand for housing coupled with low mortgage interest rates may help to hold up the local housing market, but a large increase in underemployment and unemployment can change this picture overnight. Recent data have not given any clear signals as to what will happen to the local housing market, but the DND will be examining the following data in search of indicators of the location and extent of future abandoned housing:

- Partially abandoned and distressed buildings identified through future surveys (DND staff);
- Mortgage "insecurity" measures, including drops in sales prices, as well as upsurges in the following indicators: sub-prime lending, mortgage defaults and foreclosure sales (*Banker & Tradesman* data);
- Health and safety violations (Inspectional Services);
- Water shut-offs (Water and Sewer Commission);
- Crime Statistics (Police Department)

ⁱ Boston's Part One crime rate dropped 48% from 1990 to 1999. Source: 2000 City of Boston Crime Summary Report.

ⁱⁱ The number of owner-occupant homeowners increased 9.5% from 1990 to 2000. Source: BRA compilation of 1990 and 2000 Census data.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is no one definition of abandoned housing. In Baltimore, the definition of an abandoned house is "a chronically vacant and uninhabitable unit whose owner is taking no active steps to bring it back into the housing market. Given the various definitions, Baltimore's abandonment ranges between 12,700 and 42,480 units. Source: Cohen, James, 2001. "Abandoned Housing: Exploring Lessons from Baltimore," [Housing Policy Debate](#), Volume 13, Issue 3, pgs. 415 – 448.

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