

# Boston is made for walking, study finds

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Northeastern researchers created a performance metric to determine the social equity of the 57 WalkUPs in the Greater Boston region. Credit: Northeastern University

Metro Boston is on the leading edge of a national shift away from drivable suburban living and toward walkable urbanism, according to a report released Wednesday and co-written by researchers at Northeastern's Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy.

The report found that average premiums for walkable urban [real estate](#)

in 2014 were 37 percent more than premiums for drivable suburban real estate. And from 2009 to 2014, 36 percent of the region's income property [development](#) occurred in walkable urban places, or WalkUPs.

The researchers noted that this shift toward walkable urbanism has major implications for real estate investors and policymakers, and that if the trend continues, drivable suburban real estate values are at risk of continued stagnation while values in walkable urban neighborhoods will likely continue to rise. They noted the findings can inform public policy and development plans moving forward as zoning and building regulations evolve to meet the walkable urbanism demand.

"The findings from this report allow us to be more systematic and intentional about guiding upcoming development and policy," said Anna Gartsman, a research associate at the Dukakis Center who worked extensively on the report. "We've identified the locations where market forces are pushing development; now we need to make sure that we both encourage this development, by maintaining existing infrastructure such as the MBTA, and that we support current residents by instituting proactive housing policies to prevent further displacement."

While investments in walkable urban infrastructure and public transit are expensive, the researchers stressed that they pay off, noting that their findings indicate walkable urban development generates higher [economic development](#) and fiscal returns than drivable suburban development. They said the investments must be coupled with a plan to achieve social equity, using tools such as expanding the current tax credit programs for rehabilitation, inclusionary zoning, and community benefit agreements.

"We know that these places are economically prosperous," Gartsman said. "We wanted to determine their strengths and weaknesses based on accessibility, housing affordability, economic opportunity, and schools."



A map of established and emerging WalkUPs in the Metro Boston area, as identified by the report.

The Dukakis Center released the report in partnership with the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at the George Washington University School of Business and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. The report will be released at the New England Leadership Summit today in Boston.

For their part, the Northeastern researchers created a performance metric to determine the social equity of the 57 WalkUPs in the Greater Boston region to ensure economic opportunities grow for disadvantaged residents, as the popularity of walkable urbanism increases.

The metric ranks the WalkUPs from best to worst—platinum, gold, silver, and copper—based on affordability, accessibility, and

opportunities. The researchers studied data including the proportion of the region's working-age population that can access the WalkUP by transit within 45 minutes, job density, and school reading proficiency.

Boston neighborhoods such as Roxbury, Chinatown, and Mission Hill earned platinum rankings because of their proximity to job centers and to retain traditionally affordable units.

Of the 57 WalkUPs, ones that earned the lowest ranking included Brockton, Marlborough, and Lower Allston. Many of those communities are only served by the MBTA commuter rail or regional transit, have fewer job opportunities, and high unemployment, according to the report.

"WalkUP communities that aren't in the Metropolitan Boston 'core' near Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville have an access problem," Gartsman said. "You can afford to live there, but you really can't get to and from there easily. And for places that are serviced by the commuter rail, the schedule is not conducive to shift work like a chef in a restaurant or a nurse."

Boston is the third pilot city in this study of walkable urban places, along with Atlanta and Washington, D.C. The plan is to expand the study to dozens of other cities, which will be analyzed in part by Northeastern's social equity metrics.

This report is part of a larger initiative at the Dukakis Center to bring its housing development and transportation teams closer together like never before and make Northeastern University a central hub for future [housing development](#), according to Barry Bluestone, founding director of the Dukakis Center and the Stearns Trustee Professor of Political Economy.

"What makes Northeastern and the Dukakis Center special is that our focus is on the local and regional level, and that gives us a base to build on," Bluestone noted.

**More information:** The report is available online:  
[www.smartgrowthamerica.org/doc ... e-up-call-boston.pdf](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/doc ... e-up-call-boston.pdf)

Provided by Northeastern University

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