

GREATER BOSTON CHURCH PLANTING PROFILES

City of Chelsea, Massachusetts

GEOGRAPHY

Chelsea is a city located two miles north of central Boston. It sits across the Mystic River from the Boston neighborhoods of East Boston to the southeast and Charlestown to the southwest. Chelsea borders the cities of Everett to the west and Revere to the north.

Although Chelsea is the smallest city in Massachusetts by area at less than 2 square miles, it has a population of over 35,000. This makes Chelsea one of the most densely populated cities in America, with over 17,000 people per square mile.

HISTORY

Settled in 1624 as a trading post, Chelsea was the first permanent English settlement in the Boston Harbor area. Chelsea was a part of the city of Boston until it incorporated in 1739. In 1775, the second battle of the Revolutionary War was fought at Chelsea Creek.

Throughout the nineteenth century Chelsea developed as an industrial center, producing various rubber and elastic goods. Chelsea became a center for immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Poland, including many Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe.

Chelsea had the misfortune of suffering two major fires in the twentieth century, one in 1908 which destroyed nearly half of the city, and another in 1973 which consumed 18 city blocks. The city was successfully rebuilt each time.

The Tobin Bridge, opened in 1950, promised a convenient route between Boston and its northern suburbs. Its effect on Chelsea, however, was arguably more devastating than the 1908 fire. The bridge and its elevated expressway cut Chelsea in half, many homes were destroyed or relocated, and much of Chelsea was left in its shadow.²

Socially, a major shift took place in the early 1970's as Chelsea became a center for Latino immigration. Racial conflict and tension became a regular part of life in Chelsea – tellingly, the city did not hire its first Spanish speaking police officer until 1992.³ By the early 1990's, Chelsea was both the poorest and most dangerous city in Massachusetts.⁴



Chelsea became an extreme example of government and law enforcement corruption. Corruption in the local government brought Chelsea to the brink of financial ruin, and in 1991 the state of Massachusetts intervened. The state placed the city of Chelsea into receivership, taking over control of its government. It was the first time since the great depression any state in America had taken such drastic against a municipality.

Since this time Chelsea has experienced a slow and steady turn around. The state rebuilt the city's government and implemented creative ways of improving the schools and police force. Though the poverty level remains high, significant improvement has occurred, and violent crimes are down from their peak levels. Immigration tendencies begun in the 1970's have continued, and Chelsea is now more than half Latino.

¹ http://www.ci.chelsea.ma.us/Public_Documents/ChelseaMA_WebDocs/about, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chelsea,_Massachusetts#Demographics, <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/179866.pdf>, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/timeline.htm>

² <http://brockworld.wordpress.com/2008/06/>

³ <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/179866.pdf>

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NEIGHBORHOODS AND POINTS OF INTEREST

Chelsea and Bellingham Squares are the historic and commercial center of the city, roughly running southeast to northwest along Broadway. Several newer big-box retail stores can be found in the northern and western edges of the city. Most of the waterfront along the Chelsea and Mystic Rivers is industrial.

The majority of Chelsea's residents live in traditional New England triple-decker houses, with one or two separate units on each floor. Most of these were built in the early twentieth century and neighborhoods are characterized by small blocks and high density. The area east of Chelsea Square is considered a National Historic District. Chelsea Soldier's Home is a state run veteran's hospital in northern Chelsea.

DEMOGRAPHICS⁵

Chelsea is home to roughly 35,000 people. The ethnic breakdown is 56% White, 9% Black, 2% Asian, and 33% other or mixed. 56% of residents are Latino. 38% of residents were not born in America. 62% speak a language other than English at home. The largest immigrant communities are from Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and Honduras. 72% of Chelsea residents have no education beyond high school.

The median household income in Chelsea is \$40,477 (2008), and the median family income is \$48,994 – almost 20% below the national average. 83% of residents live in multifamily homes, and only 39% of people own the home they live in. The Median home price is \$343,100 (2008), and the median monthly rent is \$950 – both at least 25% above national average. 15 percent of families and 20 percent of individuals are below the poverty level.

TRANSPORTATION

Chelsea has access to public transportation, with many bus lines crossing the city and a commuter rail station offering service to downtown Boston. Chelsea does not have a link to the regional subway system. Route 1 is a



⁵ <http://factfinder.census.gov>

limited access highway that cuts through the western portion of the City of Chelsea. The Tobin Bridge, a major regional transportation artery, carries Route 1 from Chelsea across the Mystic River to Charlestown.

RELIGION

Approximately 15 known churches worship in Chelsea. This includes 3 Roman Catholic parishes, an Episcopal church, a Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Salvation Army, a Russian Orthodox church, a Congregational church (United Church of Christ), a Baptist church and several pentecostal churches. Of these, only the Baptist, Salvation Army and pentecostal churches might be considered evangelical. Most churches worship in both English and Spanish.

CHURCH PLANTING OUTLOOK

Despite its recent resurgence, Chelsea continues to retain its gritty, urban, inner city identity. Like other municipalities around Boston, immigration has played a central role in Chelsea life for the past several decades. In fact, immigration has reversed the trend of population loss in the city and fostered growth, cultural life and community.

A church plant in Chelsea will need to understand the ongoing tension that exists in Chelsea between old and new and recognize the very particular needs of the city's diverse population. A church planter will need to be gifted in cross-cultural ministry and creating partnerships, with a high degree of determination and even greater humility.

In the end, only God can effect the kind of gospel renewal needed in this city. Our prayers and church planting efforts would be well-directed toward the end of seeing His Kingdom come in Chelsea.

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