



COMING SOON:

Vintage 2023

Population Estimates

**Boston's Population 2020-2025:
Pandemic Disruption & Recovery**
BPDA Research Division March 8, 2024



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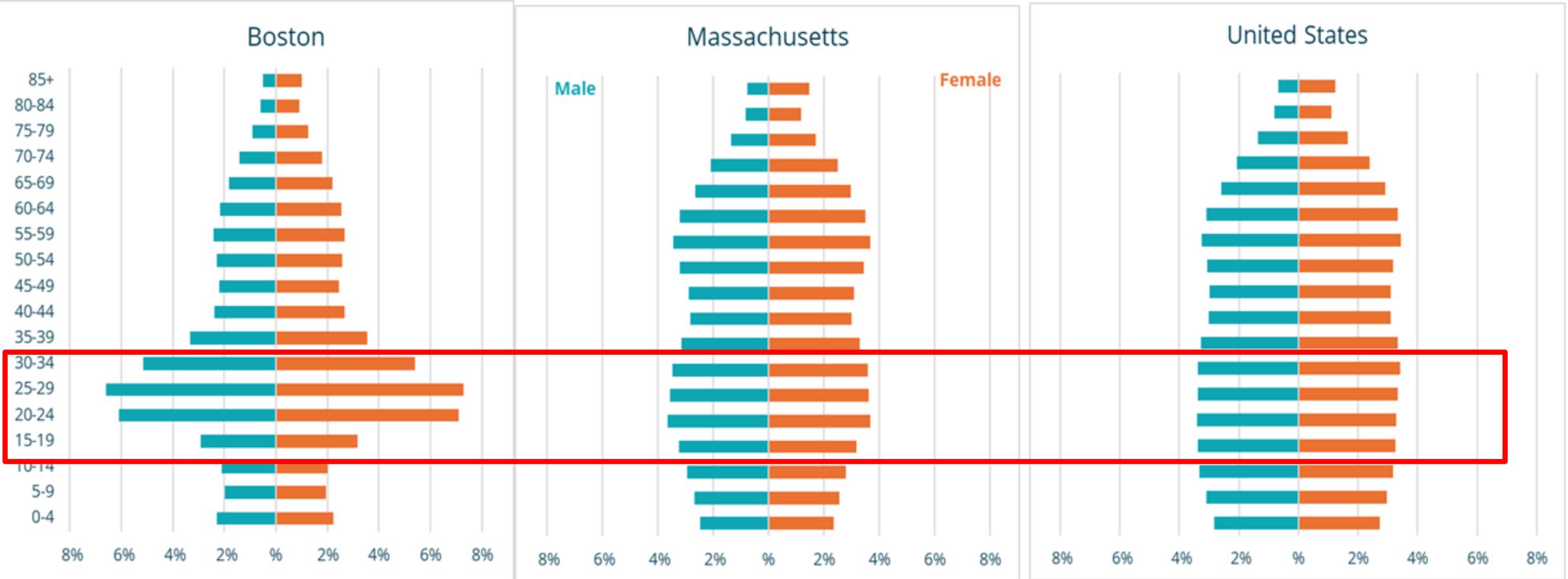
Why is Boston's population so hard to count?

(even without a pandemic)



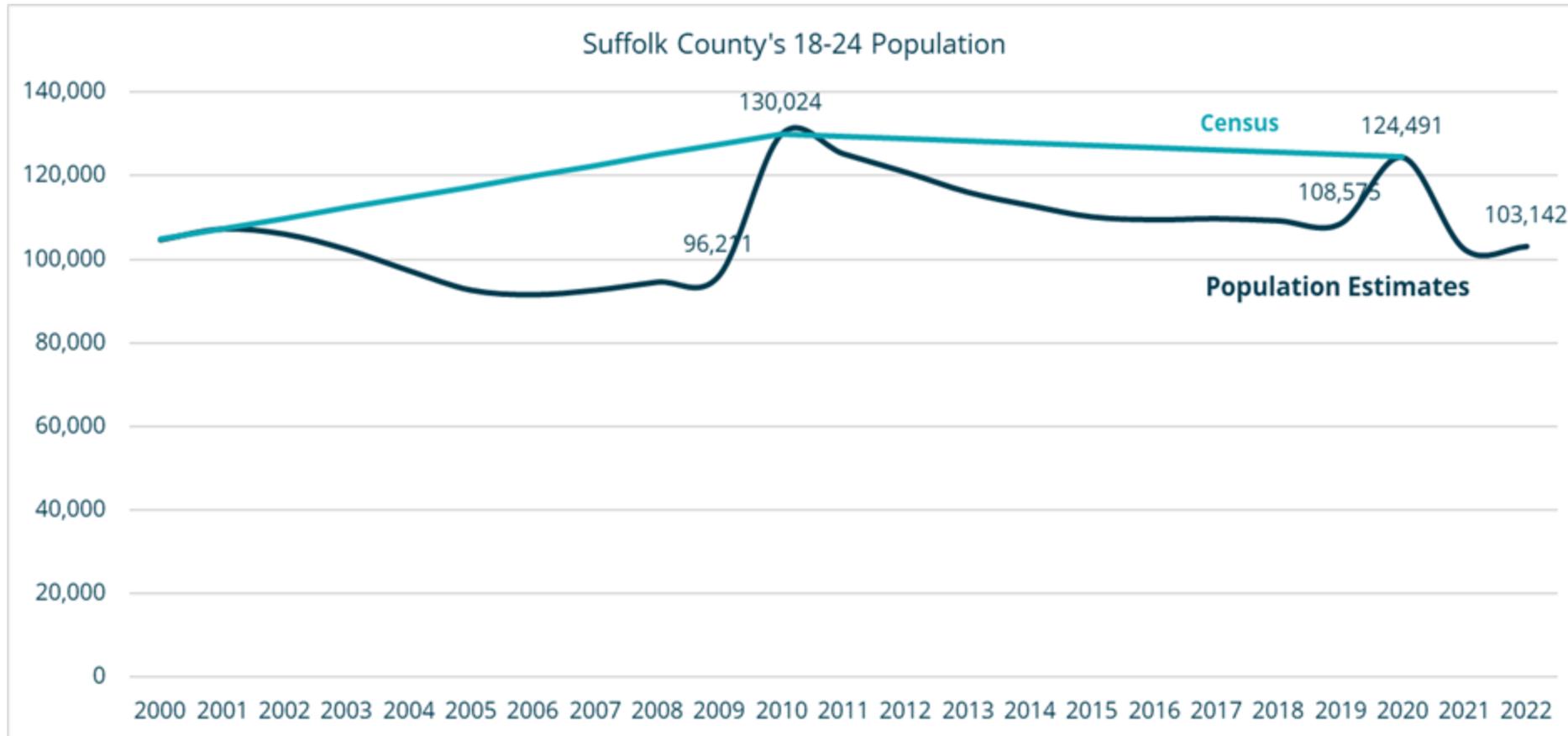
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Boston's large young adult population is difficult to count due to high rates of migration



Source: 2020 Census, BPDA Research Division Analysis

The Census Bureau's annual population estimate methodology consistently undercounts Suffolk County's 18-24 population



Note: 2020 Census also undercounted the 18-24 population



City of Boston, Massachusetts
Office of the Mayor
MICHELLE WU

The Census applies a “college fix” methodology to smaller “college towns” to more accurately capture the annual in-and-out flows of young adult students.

In September, BPDA Research assisted Mayor Wu to request that the Census Bureau develop a “college fix” adjustment methodology for Boston to address the decades long undercount of young adults in the population estimates.

Karen Battle
Chief of the Population Division
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

September 18, 2023

Subject: Applying a “college fix” to Boston’s Annual Estimate of the Resident Population

Dear Ms. Battle,

As you may know, the City of Boston successfully petitioned the Census Bureau in a Post-Census Group Quarter Review because our large college dorm population was incorrectly counted in the 2020 Census due to COVID-19 restrictions. We are grateful for this review, but we still have concerns about the Population Estimate Program’s (PEP) estimate of our college-aged population. The last two decennial censuses have shown significantly higher counts of Suffolk County’s 18-to-24 year-old population compared to the previous year’s PEP estimate. This was true in 2020 despite pandemic-related obstacles to counting the young adult population.

In consultation with Susan Strate, the Massachusetts representative of the Federal State Cooperative for Population Estimates (FSCPE), the Boston Planning and Development Agency’s (BPDA) Research Division has prepared the attached memo that identifies concerns about the validity of our college-aged population estimate and demonstrates how these concerns can hinder planning in Boston’s neighborhoods. The City of Boston’s University Accountability Ordinance (UAO) annually requires colleges and universities in Boston to report enrollment data and whether these students live in dorms or housing units in Boston’s neighborhoods. These administrative data could be useful to the PEP staff.

I encourage the PEP to investigate how its current methodology estimates the 18-to-24 population for Suffolk County to check if any changes are warranted. If PEP staff would find Boston’s UAO data helpful in their review, please get in touch with the BPDA Research Division.

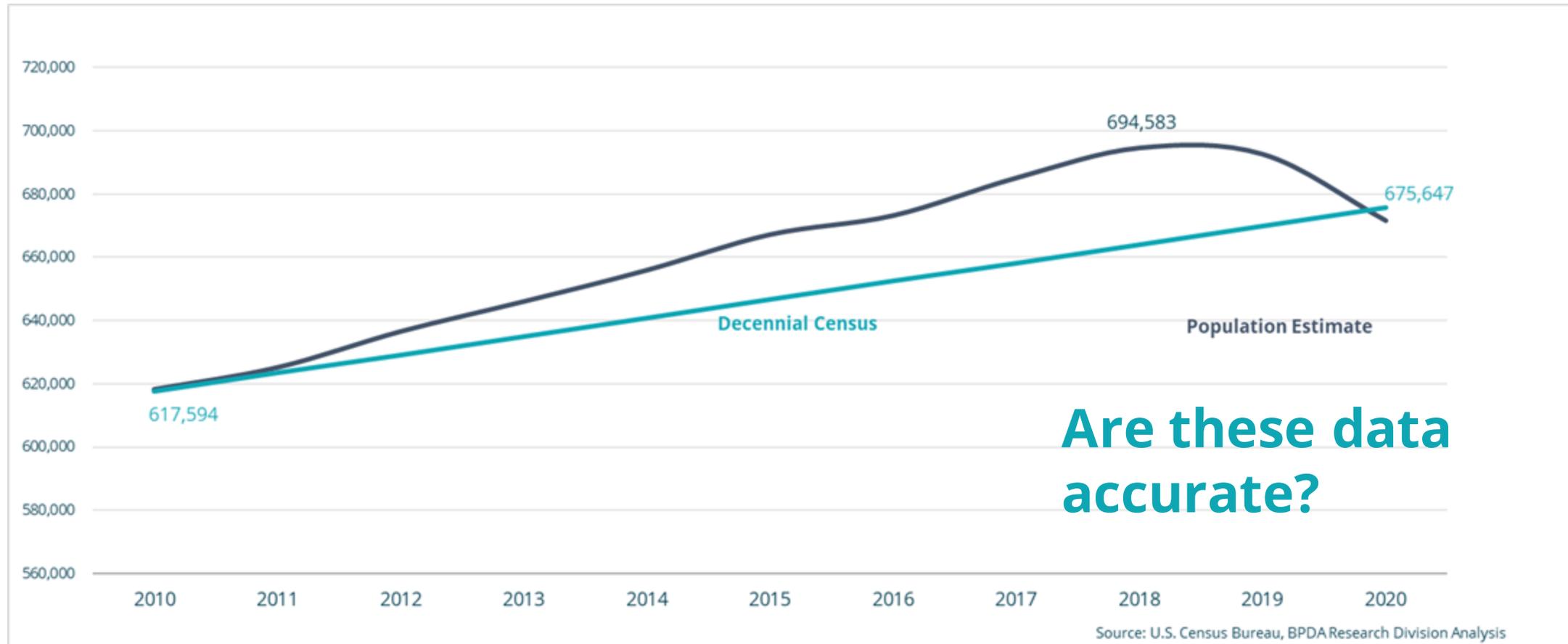
Sincerely,

Michelle Wu
Mayor of Boston



The pandemic made
Boston's population even
harder to count in 2020

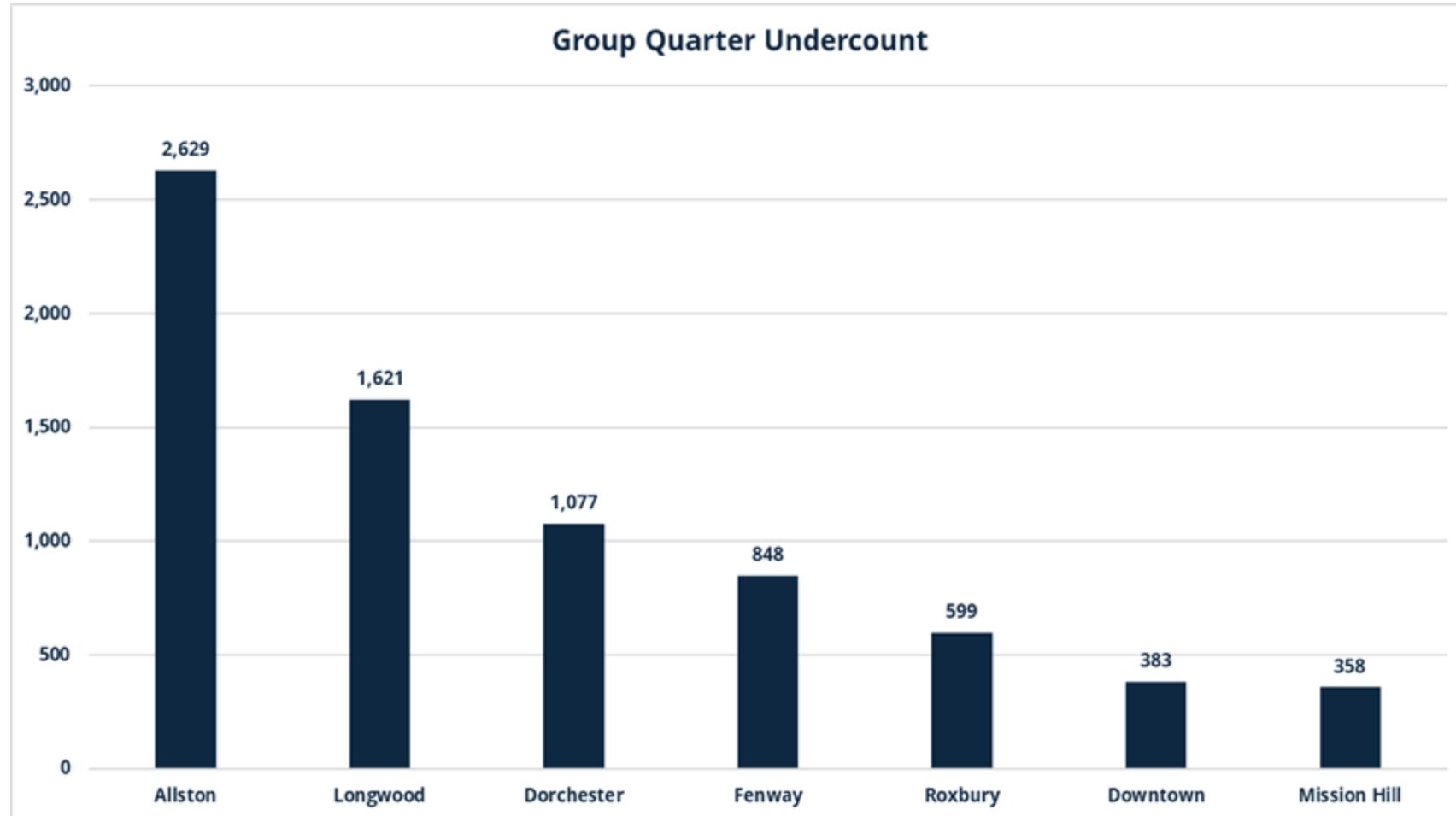
The 2020 Census showed a lower population for Boston than prior population estimates



2020 Census had unprecedented difficulty counting young adults due to pandemic disruptions

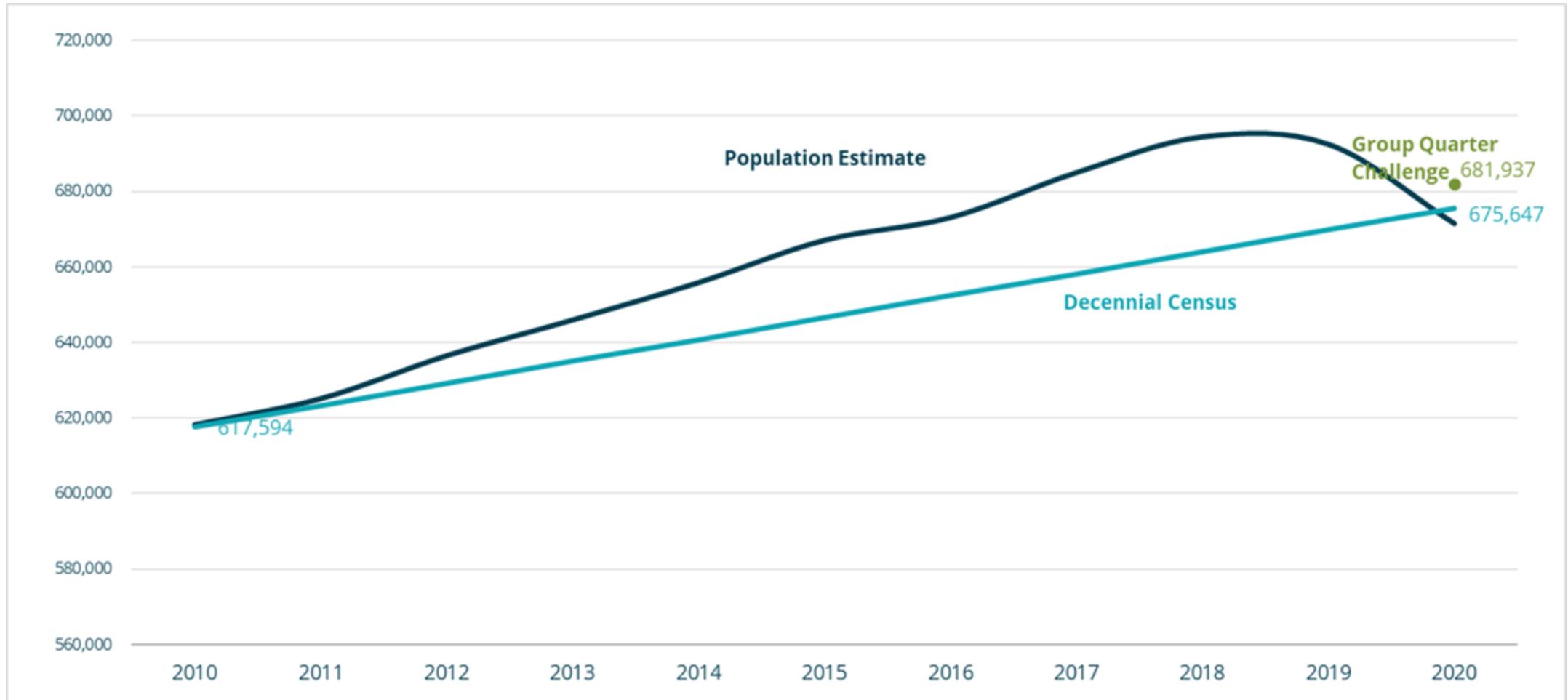
Boston successfully challenged the 2020 Census Group Quarters count.

Data from colleges and universities and the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department show an undercount of 6,290 dormitory and correctional facility residents.



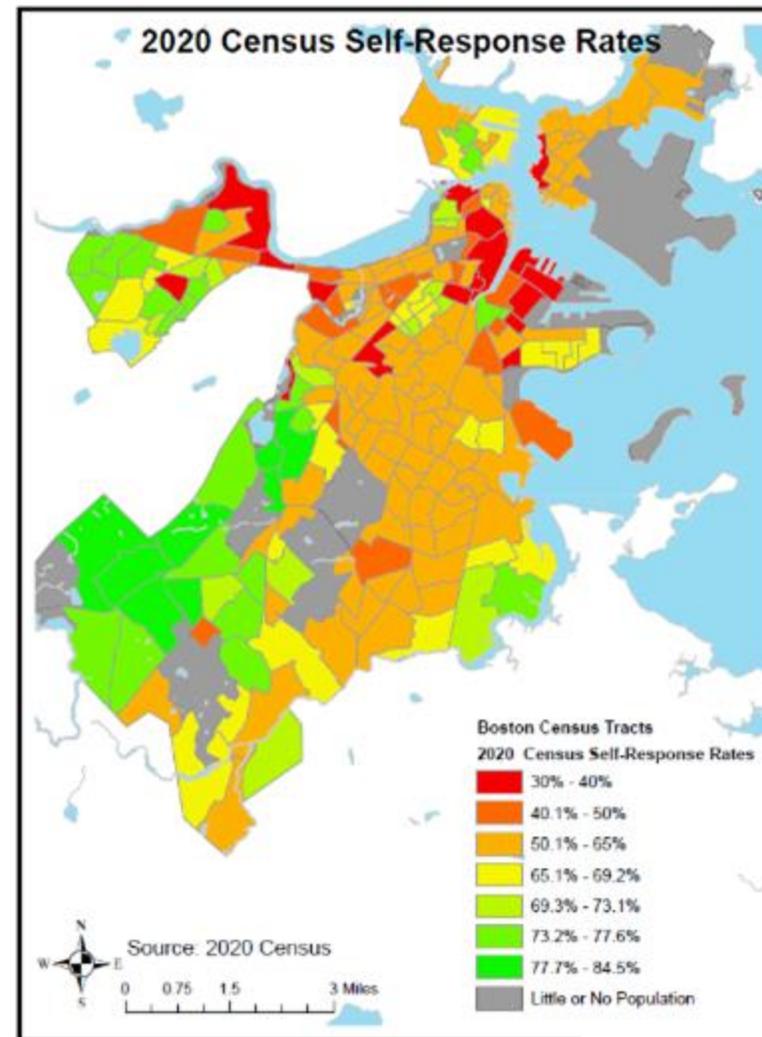
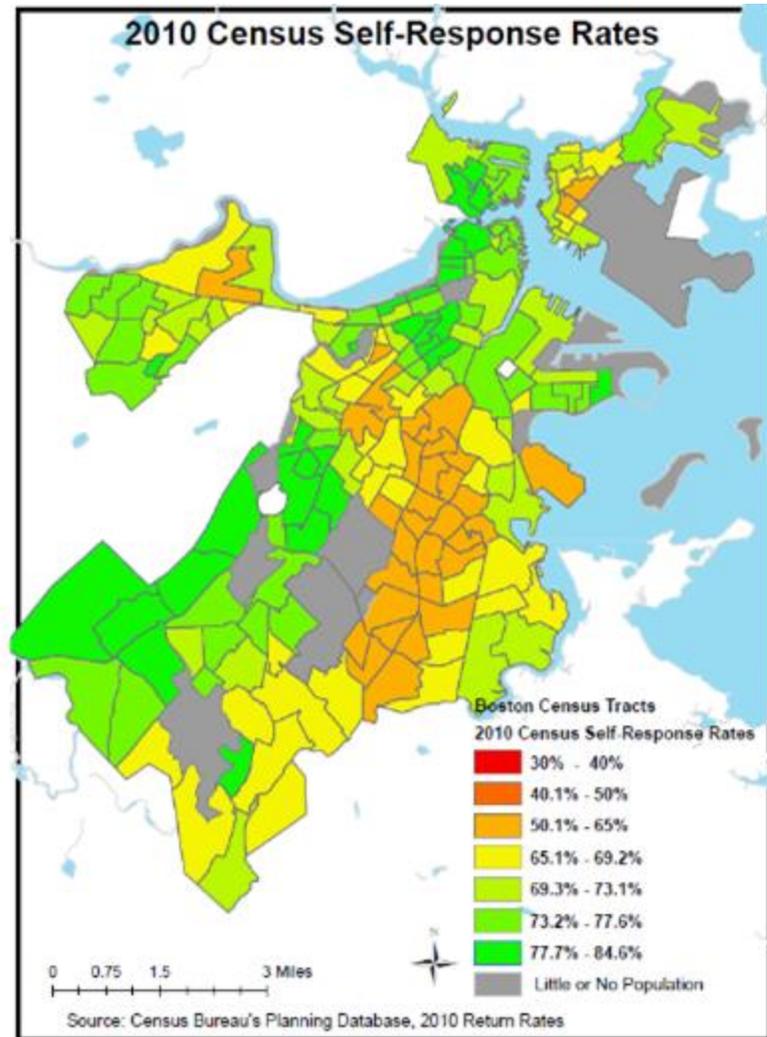
Source: 2020 Census Group Quarters Challenge, BPDA Research Division Analysis

Successful group quarters challenge brought Boston's 2020 population to 681,937



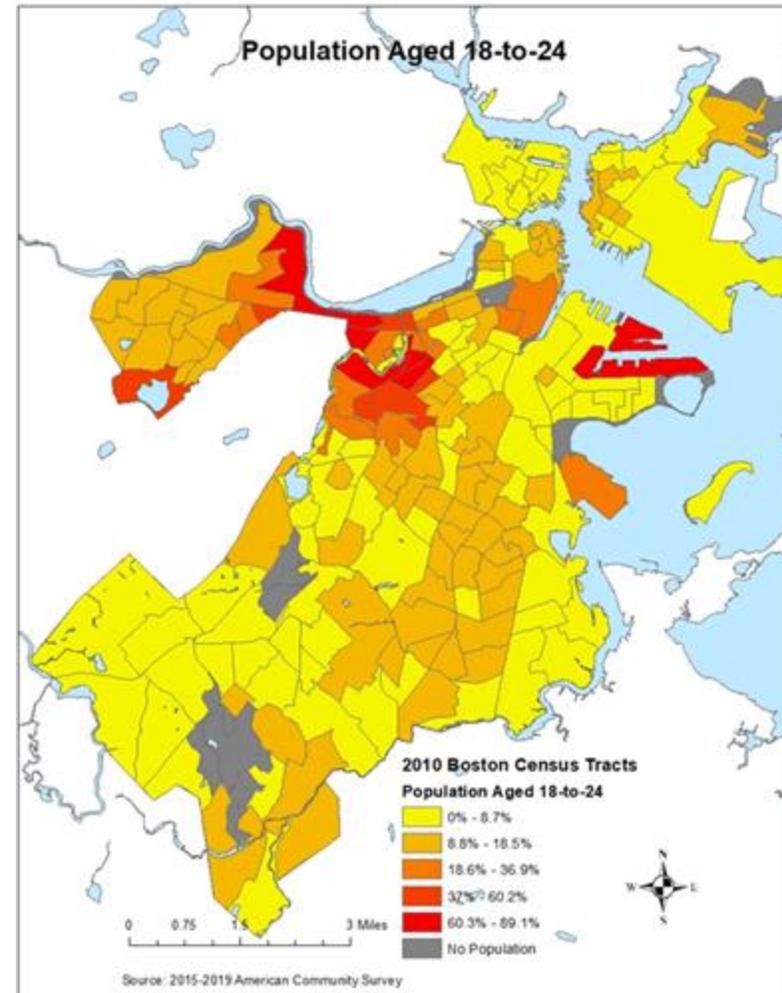
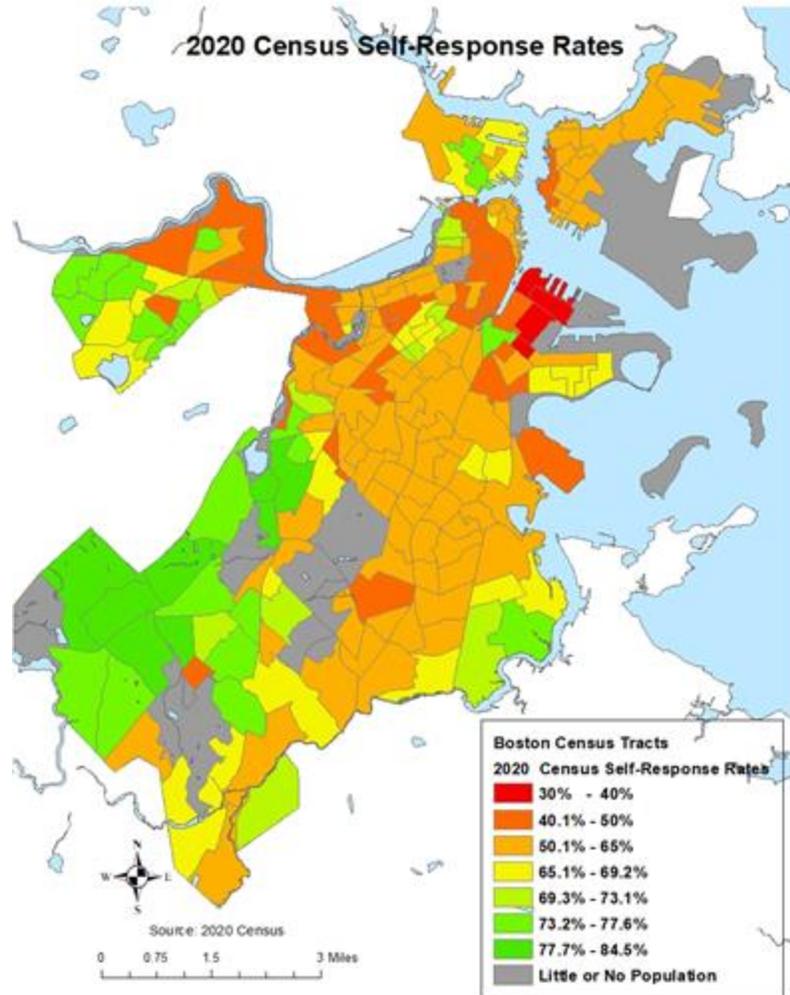
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis

Low household self-response rates in 2020 Census due to pandemic led to undercounting of household population

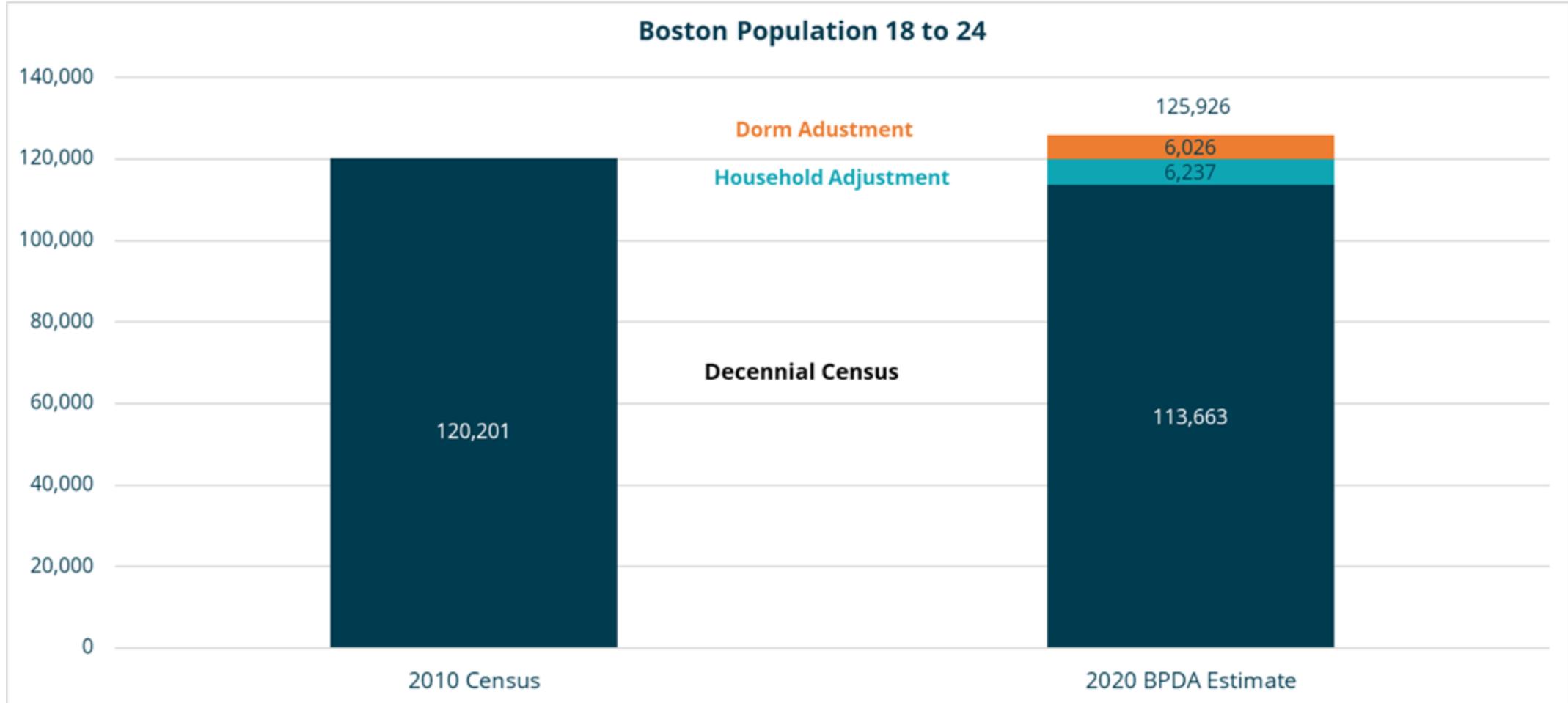


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, BPDA Research Division Analysis

Who may have been missed? The 2020 Census had low self-response rates in areas with high shares of young adults and renters.

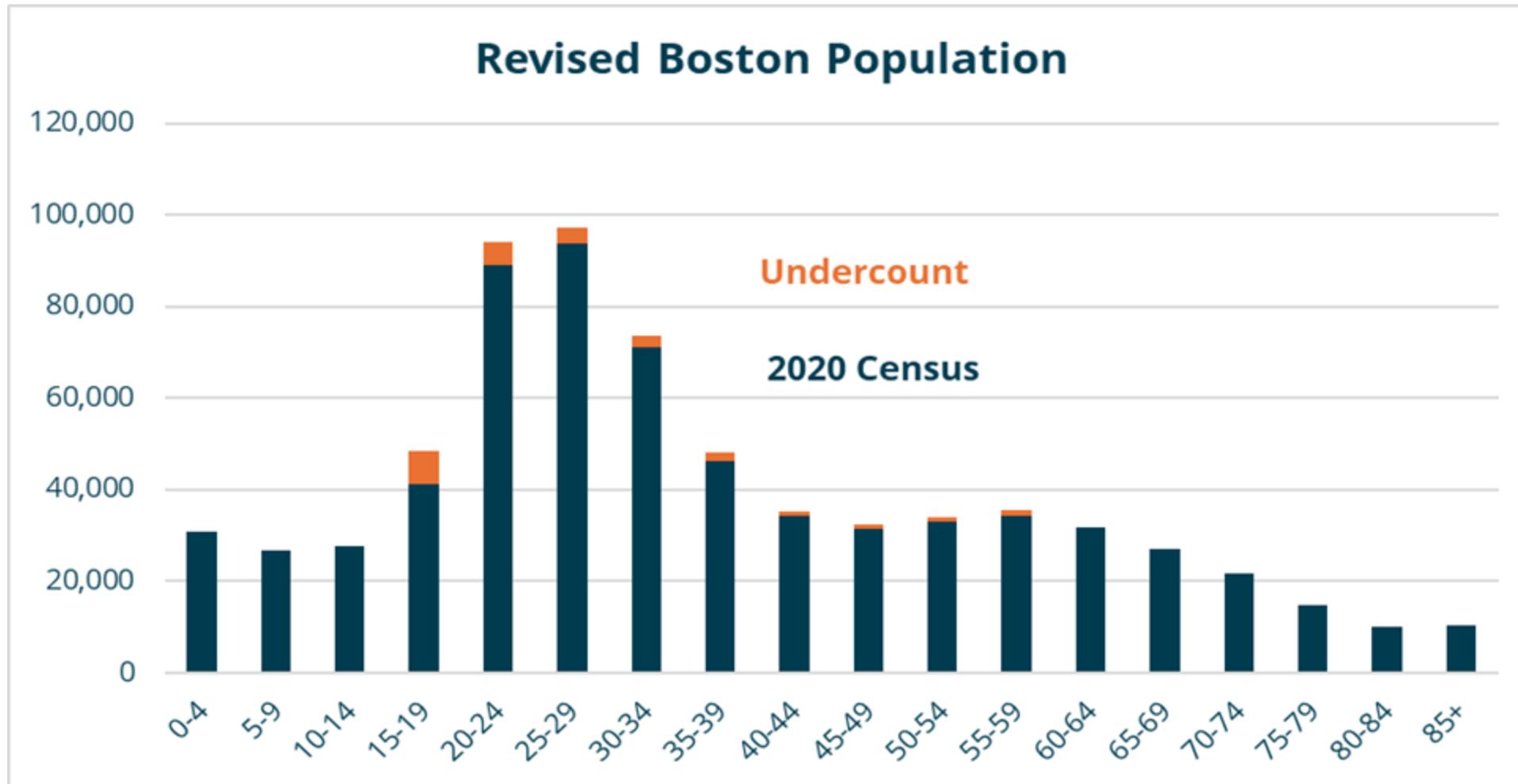


BPDA Research estimates that about 6,200 young adults living in households were missed by the 2020 Census



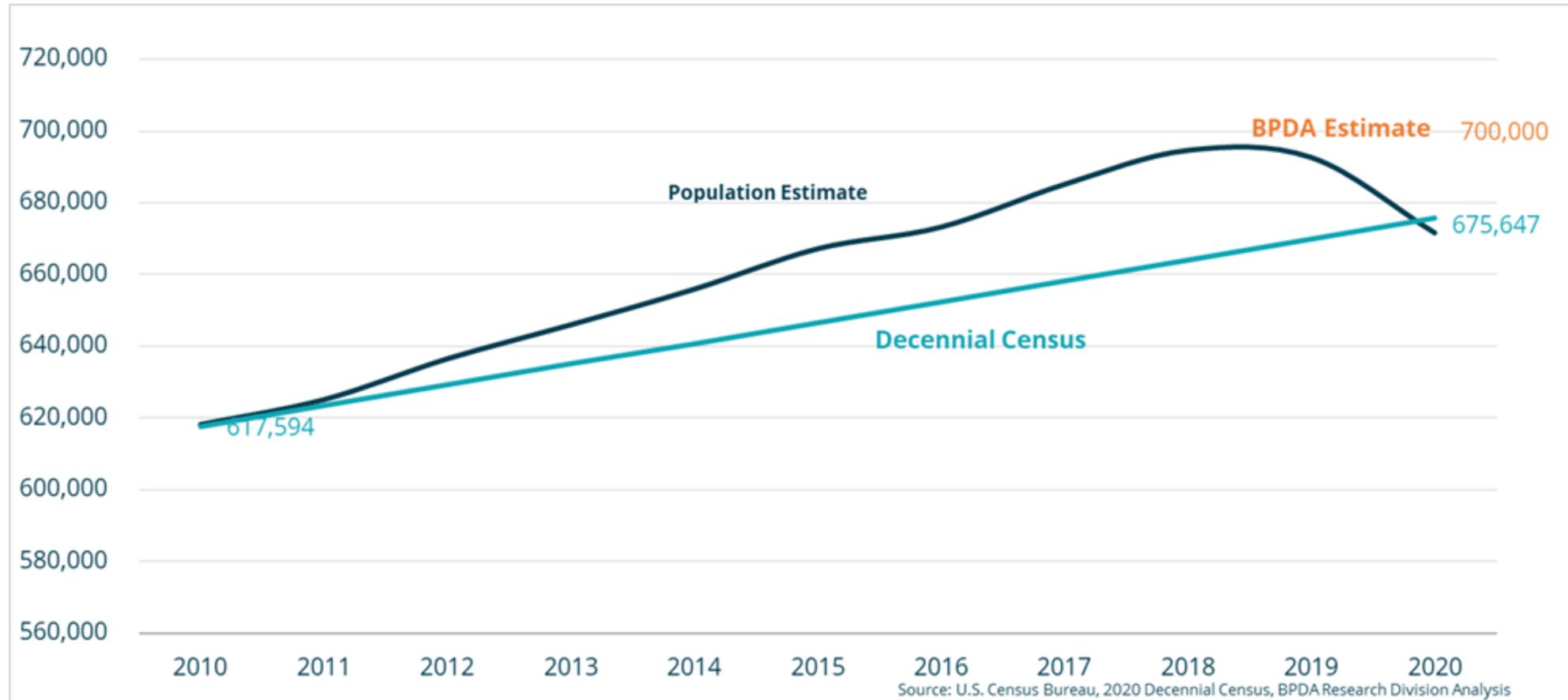
Source: University Accountability Ordinance, BPDA Research Division Analysis

BPDA Research created a 2020 estimate that incorporates undercounted populations



Source: 2020 Census and BPDA Research Population Estimates <https://bpda.box.com/s/h2y8tqo6497b2j0a0b25or9ihr9ve4cb>

Adjusting for undercount of the household population brings Boston's population in 2020 to almost 700,000



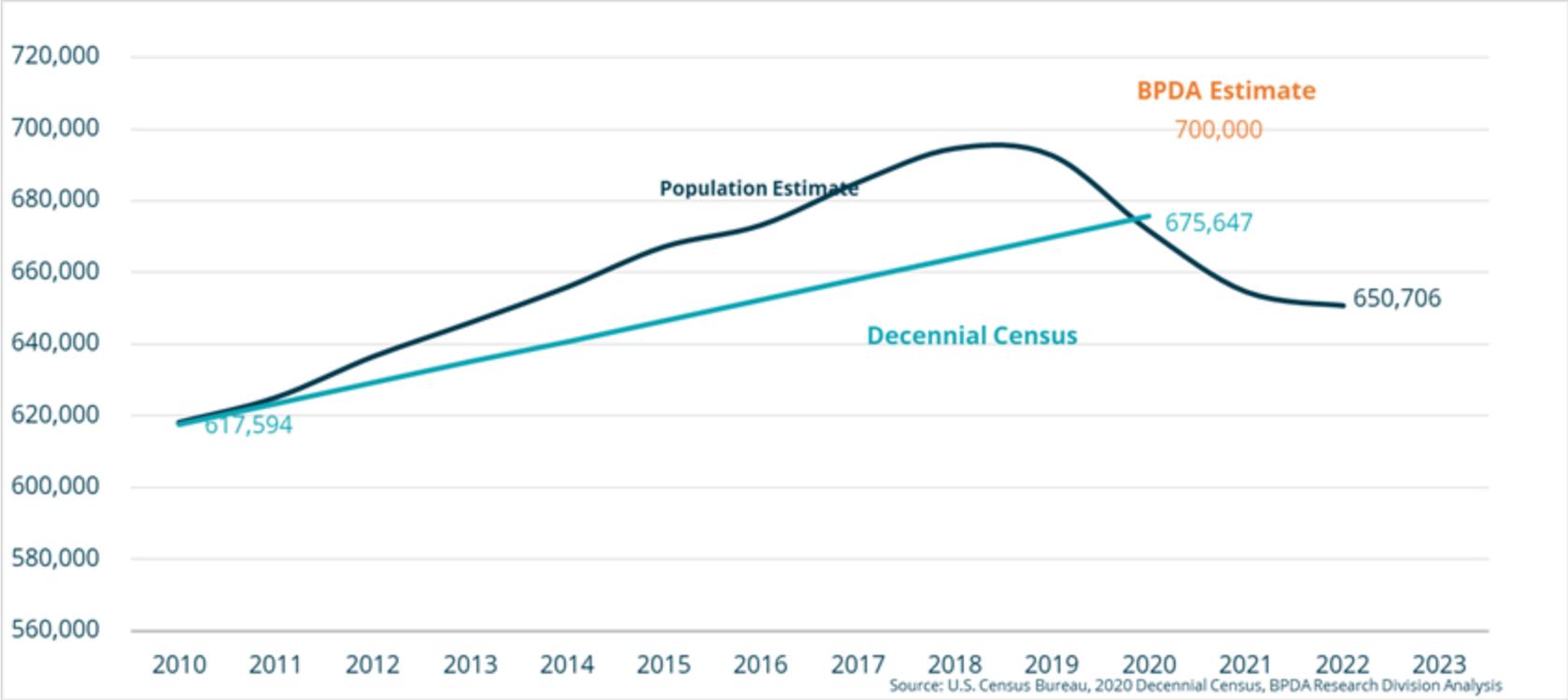
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis

What happened to
Boston's population
after 2020?



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The 2021 and 2022 Census population estimates suggest that Boston's population has fallen significantly



← Is this accurate?

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis

A 'demographic perfect storm': Suffolk County had one of the steepest population declines in the US, census data show

By [Matt Stout](#) and [Martin Finucane](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 24, 2022, 7:54 p.m.



OPINION

Will Boston spiral into the 'urban doom loop'? Not if we act.

Remote and hybrid work are here to stay, office towers are half empty, and downtowns are turning into ghost towns. Boston is less vulnerable but its relative security could pose its own danger: complacency.

By [Carlo Ratti](#) Updated June 17, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



Population dips in Mass. and Rhode Island, Census figures say

By [Danny McDonald](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 29, 2022, 4:00 p.m.



TALKING POINTS

Massachusetts' population is growing again

Updated December 19, 2023, 7:41 p.m.



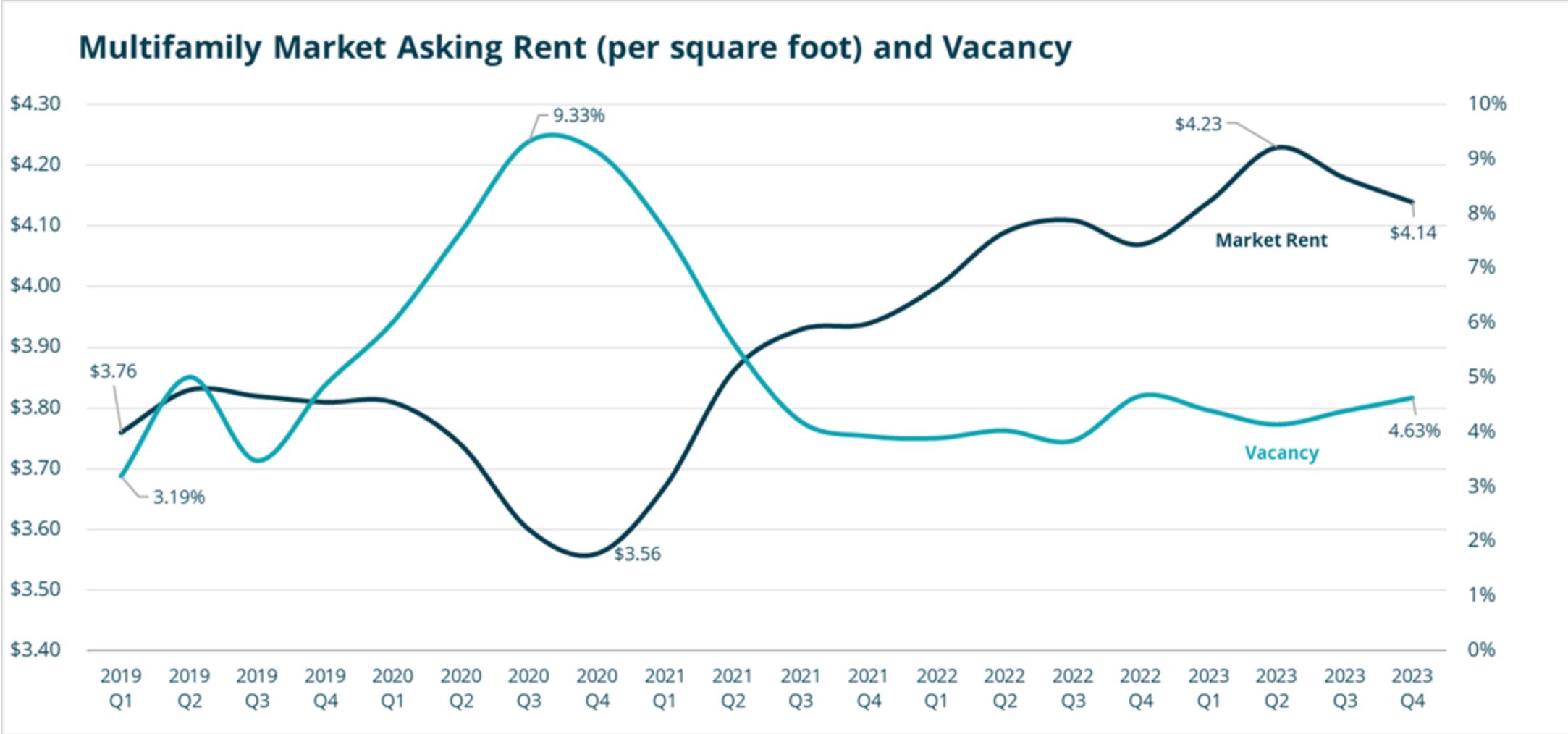
Suffolk County has lost 30,000 residents since start of pandemic, according to US Census

By [Travis Andersen](#) and [Ashley Soebroto](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated March 30, 2023, 1:10 p.m.



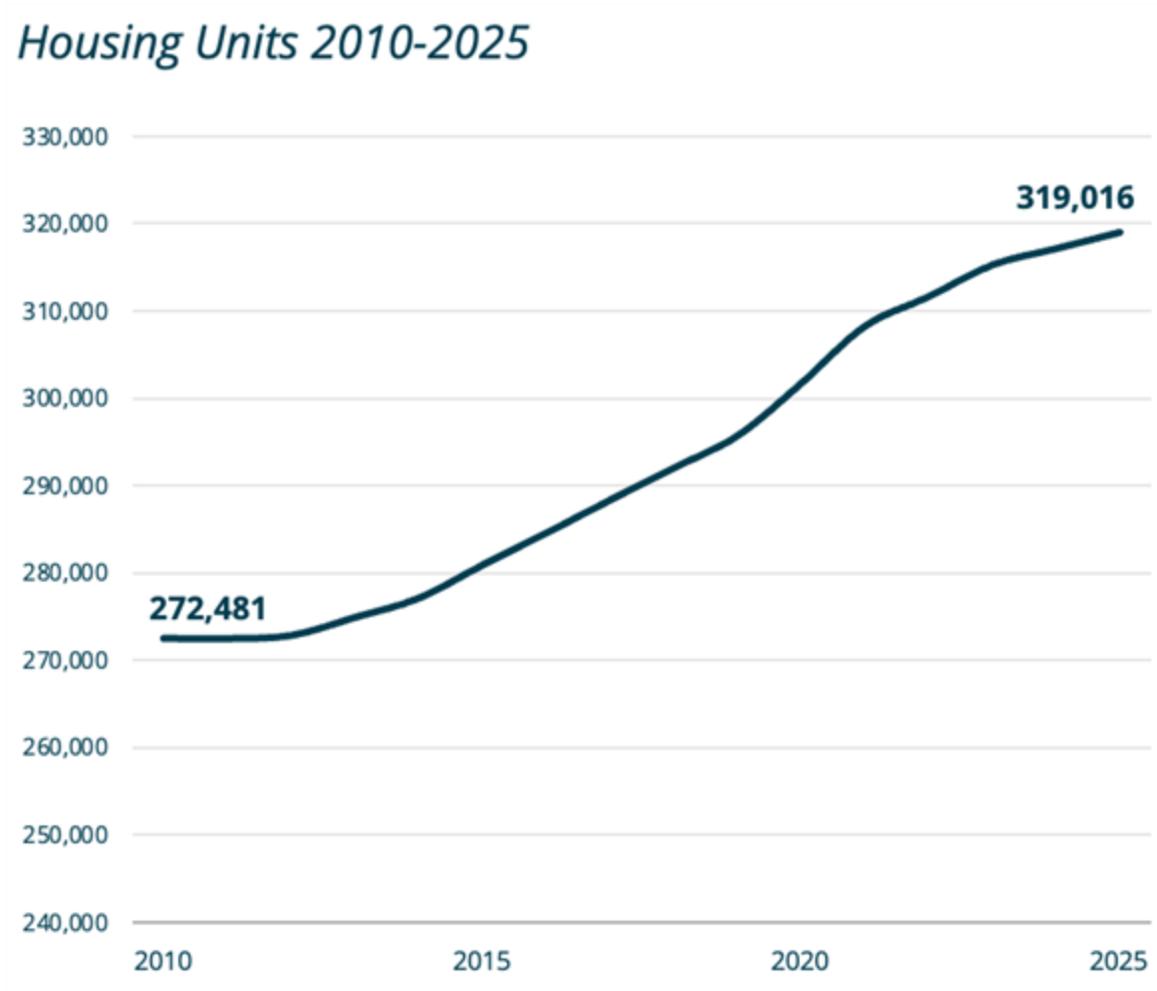
The media picked up Census data that shows declining Boston population through 2022,
but College and Housing data suggest a brief decline in Boston's population, followed by recovery in fall 2021

Residential vacancy and rent data suggest Boston's household population may have fallen in 2020, but rebounded by fall 2021.



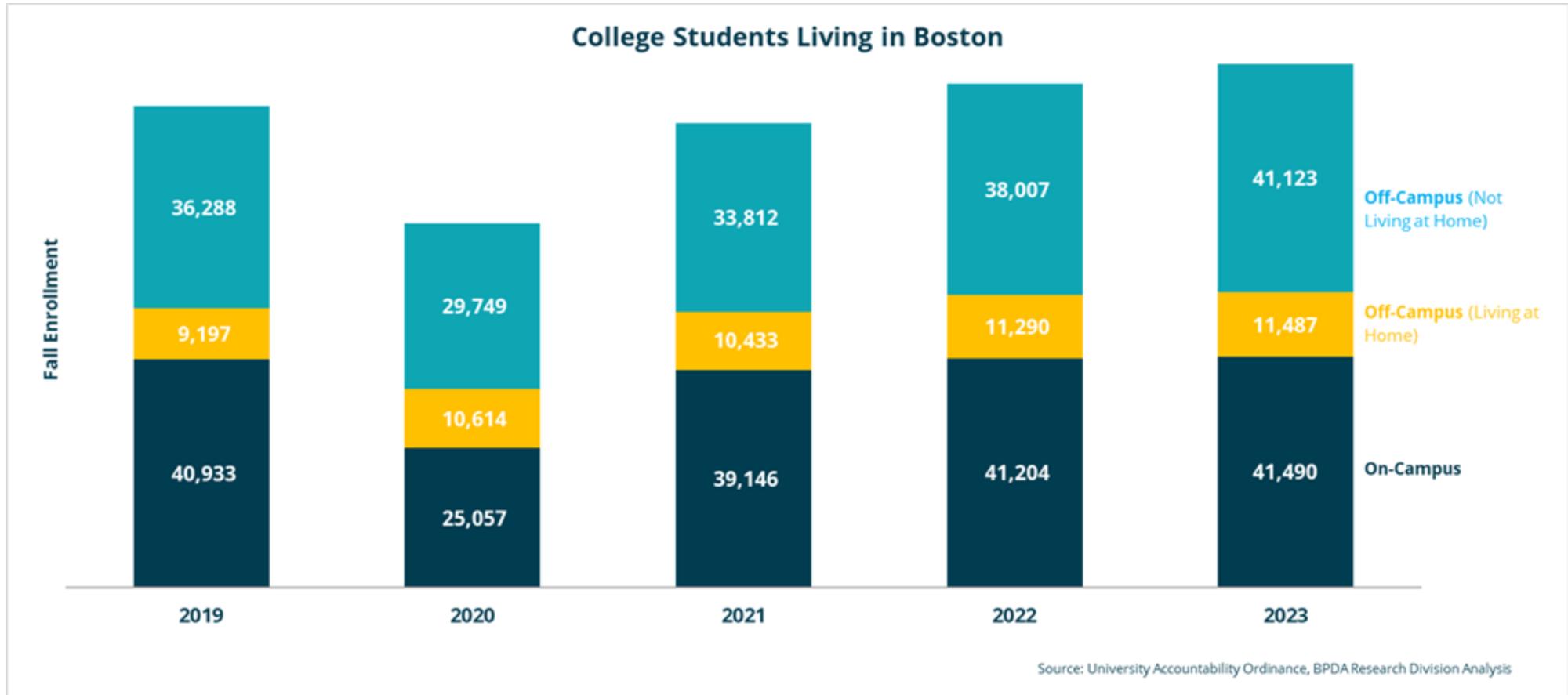
Source: for units in buildings with 5+ units from CoStar.

Low vacancy rates and increasing rents despite growing number of housing units suggest a growing household population



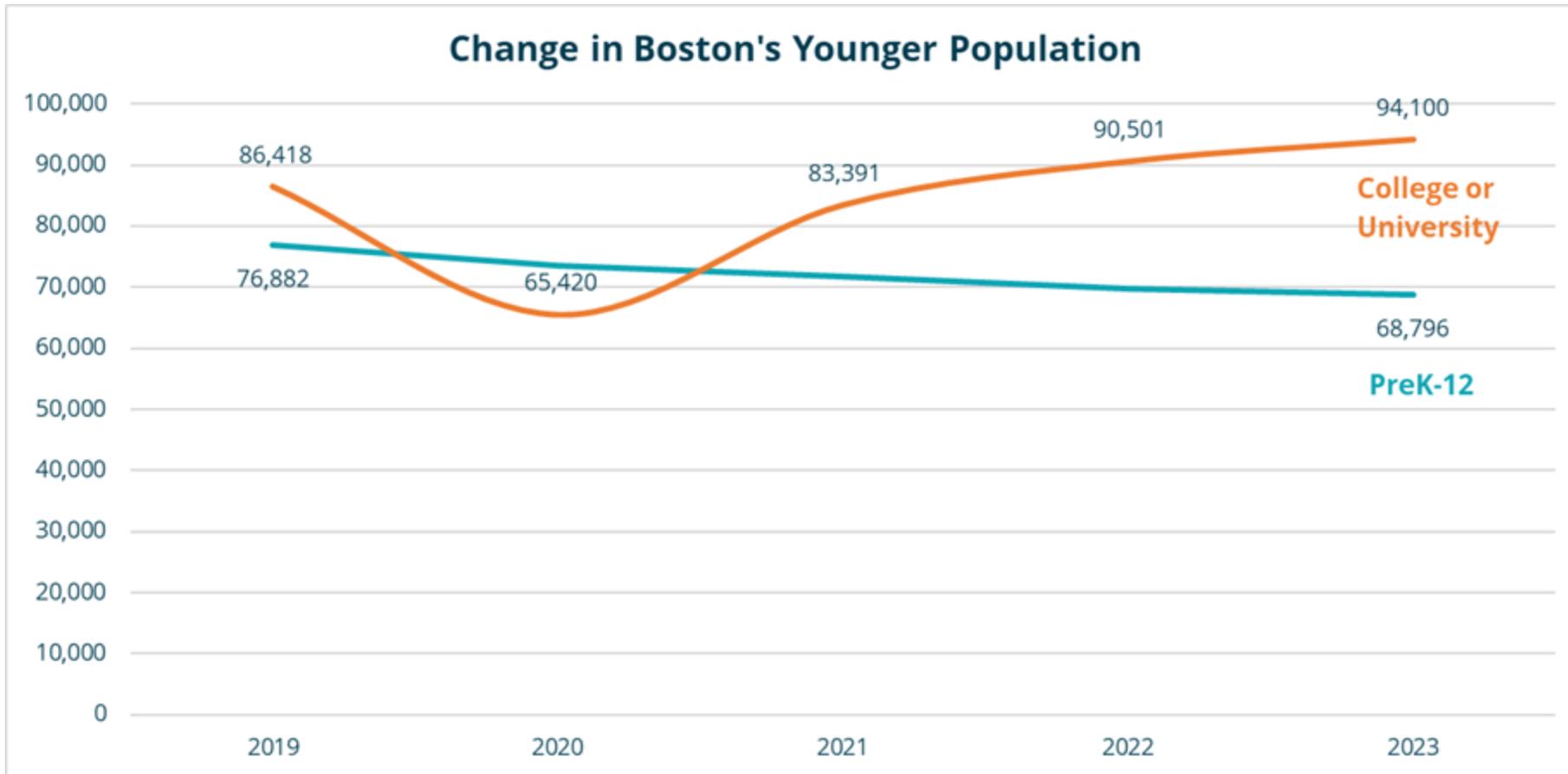
Source: New housing construction data from Mayor's Office of Housing. Housing units for 2024 and 2025 estimated from those currently under construction.

Data from colleges suggest the Boston student population fell in fall 2020, but then rebounded in fall 2021



Source: University Accountability Ordinance, BPDA Research Division Analysis

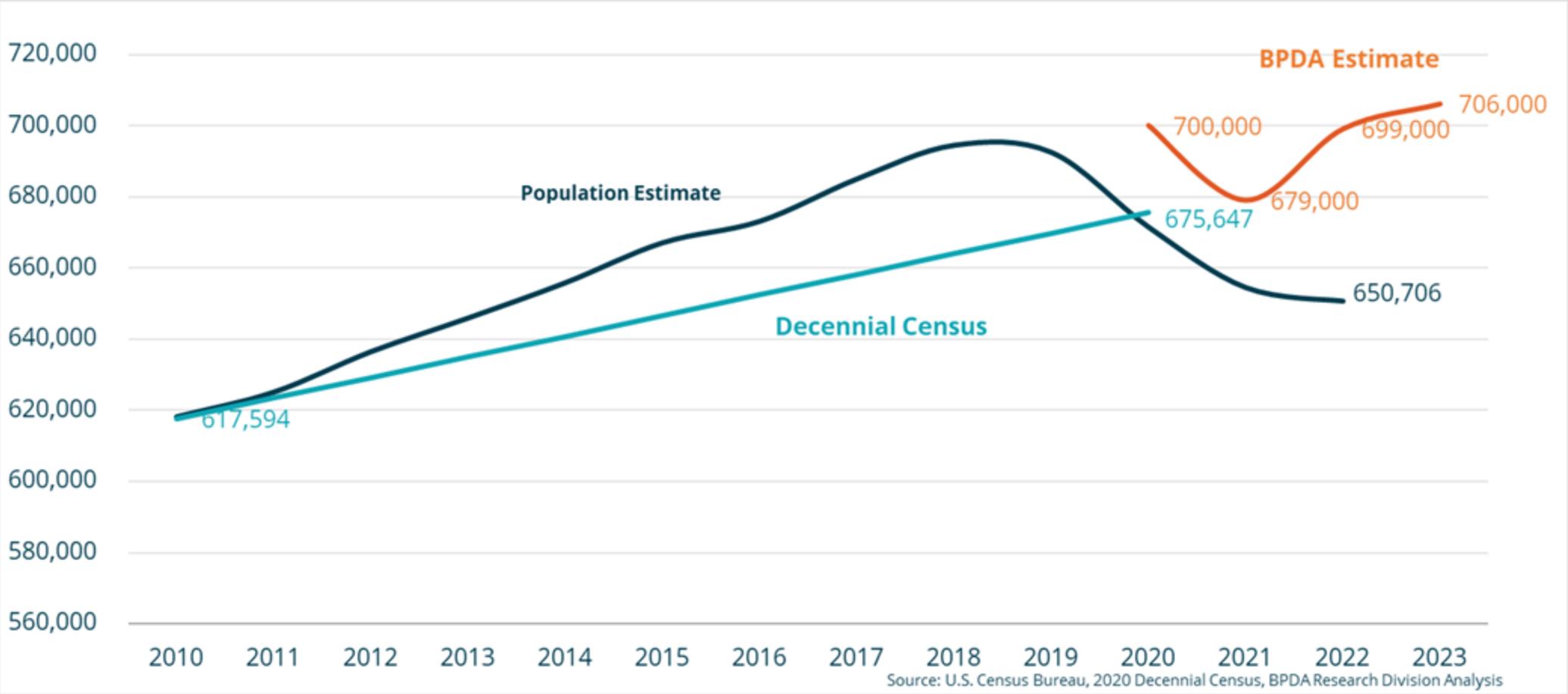
However, while data suggest that college student enrollment has returned to pre-pandemic levels, pre-K to 12 student enrollment declined steadily 2019-2023



Population of young children is strongly affected by both birth and migration trends

Source: University Accountability Ordinance data on college students attending Boston institutions and living in Boston; Boston Public Schools data on school-enrolled children living in Boston (including private and charter school students). 2023 data are preliminary and subject to change.

Boston's population was undercounted in the 2020 Census, then fell during the pandemic but rebounded by 2022 - a recovery the Census estimates have not yet captured



2023 Census population estimate comes out in May

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, BPDA Research Division Analysis

So, what population numbers should I use?

Best estimates of Boston's total population

Best **total** population estimate: BPDA Research 2020 estimate: **~700,000**

Best estimate by **sex** and **age group**: BPDA Research 2020 estimates
[box link to spreadsheet](#)

Best estimate by **tract or neighborhood**: 2020 Census adjusted for successful group quarters challenge in Exploring Neighborhood Change tool -
<https://www.bostonplans.org/research/exploring-neighborhood-change>

- will be **undercount** (totals 681,937 for city)

Best estimates of Boston's population by race/ethnicity and household characteristics

2020 Census

- displayed at [MyCensus Viewer](#)
- available at **small geographies**
- estimates will be **undercounts**, but best data source available
- present as **percentage shares** where possible to mitigate undercount

Best estimate of Boston's population by income, language, education, etc

2018-2022 American Community Survey

- displayed at [MyCensus Viewer](#)
- available by **tracts and neighborhoods**
- estimates will be **undercounts**, but best data source available
- present as **percentage shares** where possible to mitigate undercount

What's next?



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2023 Census population estimates

- **New 2023 population estimates and revised 2021 & 2022 population estimates**
 - **released in March for Suffolk County and May for Boston**
 - **should incorporate group quarters challenge**
 - **likely still significant **undercount****
 - **based on undercounted 2020 Census household population**
 - **no “college fix” to capture young adult students**

Upcoming Friday presentations

- **March 22nd: Global, National, and Regional demographic trends affecting Boston's future**
- **April 5: Revised 2050 Boston population projections by age cohort**