



## Declining Asian Population as Cost of Living Grows

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Since Chinese immigrants first arrived in Boston in 1875, the city's Chinatown has long served as a gateway and cultural hub for new immigrants into American society.

But despite being home to the third largest Chinatown in the country, the Asian population has been dwindling due to the rising cost of living in Boston.

The Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), a social services provider supporting the Asian immigrant and Asian-American community for the past 40 years, fears that the displacement of local residents due to unaffordable housing will exacerbate problems around wellness, safety, and employment.

"Generally, there [are] mental health concerns when people are not connected to community resources," Giles Li, BCNC's executive director, told NBC News.

Asian-owned businesses in the area are also struggling to hold on to their leases. In 2015, Maxim Coffee House, a landmark in Chinatown, closed its doors due to loss of lease after 33 years of business. Down the street, the restaurant Xinh Xinh also closed after 10 years of business due to "irreconcilable differences" with the landlord. Around corner, the McDonalds owned and operated by Carol Chin, an immigrant Chinese woman, shut down after nearly 25 years of leasing the property.

With recent luxury developments, Chinatown currently has the highest median rent of all neighborhoods in Boston—estimated at \$3,381—and the Boston Public Health Commission reported that the population of white residents living in Chinatown grew at a faster rate than that of Asians between 2000 to 2010.

Today, Asians make up less than half of Chinatown's 12,800 residents.

"The future of [Boston's] Chinatown is being determined by people outside the community—and that's not new," Li said citing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Boston Immigration Raid of 1903, and the construction of the I-93 North/South on-ramp in the 1960s, which essentially cut Chinatown in half.



*Maxim Coffee House in Boston closed its doors in 2015 after 33 years, due to loss of lease. Sahra Vang Nguyen / NBC News*

According to a 1970 report by Action for Boston Community Development, "the Chinese were the first ethnic group to feel the effects of a growing anti-foreign sentiment among America's native population," leading many immigrants to seek safety and a sense of community in Chinatown.

But the haven they've created is slowly disappearing. As the "model minority myth" continues to attribute the success stories of some Asian Americans to all Asian Americans, Li says the needs of underserved Asian immigrants—who make up the second highest group of foreign-born residents in the state of Massachusetts—have been generally ignored.

"There are urban, low-income, largely immigrant, linguistically-isolated populations that have significant need but rendered invisible when you're only talking about the top line statistic," Li said.

For example, the Asian population in Boston has the second highest rate of poverty (26.6 percent) in the city, right behind the Hispanic population (34.8 percent) and higher than the city's overall poverty rate (21.6 percent). In Chinatown alone, 24 percent of families fall below the poverty line.



*An old man stretches in front of the Chinatown Gate of Boston. Sahra Vang Nguyen / NBC News*

"There's a significant Chinese population in these city centers but [some people] decide that those stories are not really worth thinking about," Li said.

With a growing and largely Asian immigrant population in Boston (the Chinese immigrant community in Boston is the second largest population in the city, according to Census data), Li believes a Chinatown that serves as a cultural gateway for immigrants is essential for the community's success and well-being.

But with Chinatown's luxury development pricing Asian residents out of their homes, the support system becomes difficult to access.

"Low and working class immigrants would come into Chinatown and when they could afford to, they would move out. Recently, immigrants are skipping Chinatown all together," Li explained. "There may not be a strong community feel that keeps them feeling safe."

Li describes safety as one of his top three priorities when working with Chinese and Asian-American communities in Boston, particularly because research has shown that Asian Americans are three times less likely than whites to seek help for emotional and mental health problems.

"It's not really part of Asian culture to go to people with your problems so when you're isolated, that just makes it even harder," he said.





*Community activists protested for more affordable housing in Boston's Chinatown. Courtesy of Ling-Mei Wong/SAMPAN*

Li adds that the needs of the Chinese and Asian-American community in Boston are often not addressed due to lack of nuance in data collection. While data often focuses on academic standards and criminal activity, Li stresses that problems such as compulsive gambling, lack of help-seeking, and mental health within the community are not surveyed on a city level.

"Whatever the needs are that the Chinese population is facing in Boston, it's kind of shaded because the way that most Asian communities show need is not the way that American society thinks of need," Li said.

In addition to lack of culturally sensitive civic services, linguistic differences create another barrier to reaching and understanding the needs of the Chinese community.

Li emphasizes that BCNC's approach to supporting the community focuses on the overall success of the client's family rather than individual success in the classroom. He believes that pursuing nuance in conversations around Asian-American issues is more important than disaggregating data alone.

"That would be a huge step [to disaggregate data]," Li said. "But it's also — how do you get the data, who's getting the data, what are they studying, and what are the questions they're asking?"