Vietnamese Americans in Fields Corner:  
The Development of a Community and its Prospects for the Future  

A Working Paper  
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This paper utilizes secondary sources to describe the development of the Vietnamese American community centered around Fields Corner, a district in Dorchester, the largest neighborhood in Boston. It also draws upon existing public data to assess the community’s current profile as well as its vulnerability and sustainability. There are many gaps in the documentation of this community. The authors have issued this report in the hopes of catalyzing further input to develop a fuller portrait of the community’s development and current status.  

Migration Context  
After the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, over one million Vietnamese fled Vietnam as stateless, homeless refugees. This mass post-war exodus was part of a greater flight of Southeast Asians including Lao, Hmong, and Cambodians from their homelands. Before 1975, an estimated 15,000 Vietnamese resided in the United States (Dang, 2008). By 1990, there were over 600,000 Vietnamese living in this country (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).  

Scholars usually describe Vietnamese migration to the U.S. as a series of “waves,” one sometimes overlapping the other. About 125,000 people arrived during the first wave in 1975. Most scholars have characterized the first wave as mostly elites and high-ranking military and government officials (Le, 2007). Van Bia Le (1989) contends that another significant if not majority segment of the first wave to Boston was lower ranking, less educated soldiers. The second wave was comprised of diverse socio-economic segments of Vietnamese society, including ethnic Chinese, poor farmers and fishermen, and people released from the country’s re-education camps. This group of over 400,000 came in the late 1970s to the early 1980s, often under harrowing circumstances, and are commonly referred to as “Boat People.”  

The third wave, animated by the U.S.-Viet Nam Orderly Departure Program, overlapped and is sometimes conflated with the “Boat People” wave. Beginning in 1980, the U.S. responded to the plight of “Boat People” by providing for the secure departure from Vietnam for former U.S. employees and relatives of Vietnamese in the U.S. Subsequent waves up until the 2000s left and came to the U.S. through official governmental programs, mandated by legislation such as the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Largely through the opening of refugee flows, Vietnamese Americans were the fastest growing Asian American ethnicity from 1980 to 1990 (Hing, 1993).  

In 1995, the U.S. restored diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Immigration procedures began to displace refugee procedures for migration from Vietnam. By the end of the 20th century, more migrants from Vietnam entered as immigrants than as refugees.
Settlement in Dorchester

Initially, Vietnamese refugees to Boston were resettled in Brighton and East Boston, as well as Chinatown. An Ton-That, a prominent Vietnamese American resettlement worker, noted that Catholic Charities was the primary resettlement agency in the early days (An, 1999). Many of the first wave refugees were practicing Catholics, and authorities resettled them in strong Catholic neighborhoods. The wave of “Boat People’ and rising rents in these areas led to a search for alternative neighborhoods. Other resettlement agencies such as the International Institute of Boston and the International Rescue Committee became involved and helped to identify Dorchester as a resettlement site (An, 1999) (Vu, 2006). Others have said the Fields Corner area may have been attractive because of the availability of public transportation, and the area’s welfare office branch and employment centers.

The Field Corner area’s low rents came from its reputation as a declining neighborhood. Formerly a working and middle-class area of Irish and Italian public workers, Fields Corner in the 70s and 80s saw the migration of white families to the suburbs and an influx of African Americans and Latinos. The police regarded the neighborhood as a high crime area beset by arson (Brady, 1983) (Carr, 1982) (Vennochi, 1982).

Dorchester quickly developed a significant Vietnamese American community. The community may have lost much of its potential social capital, however; a state agency commented that, due to internal community conflicts, many of the more educated Vietnamese refugees in the first wave had left the Boston area, leaving behind “a low income, non-English speaking class during the period between 1975 and 1979 (Le, 1989, 4)”

The 1980 census, which surveyed the area in 1979, identified 1% of the population or 452 residents of Dorchester as “Oriental” (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2000). On the other hand, Long Nguyen, Executive Director of a large Vietnamese American community agency, claimed that by 1980, 2,000 Vietnamese lived in Dorchester (Riebadeneira, 1999). Whatever the actual number, Vietnamese Americans were so sufficiently concentrated in the area that the newspaper The Boston Globe noted in 1983 that “Dorchester… last year replaced Brighton/Allston as the primary site of resettlement (Higgins, 1983).” The establishment of the first Vietnamese American social service agency, the Vietnamese American Civic Association (VACA) in Fields Corner in 1984 confirmed this status. VACA would play an important role in the development of the Vietnamese community. Through 1994, the state received federal funding of $1.2 million to create mutual aid associations such as VACA for the influx of refugees (Johnson, 2015, p. 80).

Additional factors contributed to the growth of the Vietnamese population in the area. Vietnamese refugees arrived in a steady stream, averaging 850 annually to the state through 1991 (Office for Refugees and Immigrants, 1992a). In 1986, Cardinal Bernard Law assigned Joseph Diem Nguyen as the first Vietnamese American priest to establish a Vietnamese ethnic apostolate at St. Peter’s Church, consolidating the many Vietnamese Catholics’ attachment to the area (Vu, 2006). The appointment of Dorchester resident Rev. Thanh Van Le in 1989 as the Vietnamese American pastor of the then four-year-old Vietnamese Christian Fellowship of Boston—the only established Vietnamese Church in the Boston area at the time—reinforced Field Corner’s attraction for Vietnamese Catholics. Finally, local figures like publisher Cuong Nguyen used his paper Thang Long to promote Dorchester as a desirable location for the Vietnamese American population.
The Early Community

In 1989 a Massachusetts state department agency conducted a needs assessment of the Vietnamese American population in the state (Le, 1989). With three out of five of the respondents from Boston, the survey, one of the few early studies of Vietnamese Americans, broadly suggests the profile of the Fields Corner population. The study described a Vietnamese American population with numerous challenges and few resources. Their institutional supports appear to have been churches and resettlement communities.

The survey revealed a population that was a distinctively majority male population (57%). This male dominance contrasted with female majorities in both the state’s overall population and the population in Vietnam. The Vietnamese American population was also young, with a median age in the low 20s, compared to the total state population’s median age of 31. Nearly half were minors. Of the small population over 65 years old, the survey found no one living in an institutionalized setting.

The survey also gave a subethnic breakdown of the respondents. The largest subgroup was Vietnamese Americans with Chinese heritage at over 9%. The authors of the survey acknowledged that this could very well be an underestimate since some Vietnamese Chinese identified with the Chinese American community rather than the Vietnamese American community. Amerasians (persons born in Vietnam whose fathers were U.S. citizens) constituted less than 3% of the sample, and all but one were minors.

In religious outlook, Buddhists, the largest group, made up about one-third of the respondents. Catholics comprised the second largest grouping at 29%. A third significant group practiced ancestor worship (Tam Giao) based on Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Those professing no religion numbered less than 9%. Smaller religious groups included those belonging to the Hoa Hao, the Caodaist, and Protestant belief groups.

Socioeconomic indicators pointed to some polarization of the community with challenges for the overwhelming part of the adult population. Fifteen percent of the adults were in college or attained undergraduate or graduate degrees. Seventy-six percent had an elementary school education or were in ESL classes. However, it’s important to note that two-thirds of the sample had attended high schools and universities in Vietnam. Only 8% were in high school in the U.S. Regarding work status of the sample, a full 40% of adults were unemployed; the report did note that some people worked off the books or did piece work at home. Another nearly 9% were not in the labor force. One-third of the sample held full-time jobs, with an additional 4% of the adults holding two jobs. Most of the employed population worked in restaurants, hotels, and factories, or in construction. More than one-quarter of the individuals brought in $400 a month or less, and 30% of families reported $800 or less in monthly income. Over 7% of individuals and 9% of families reported $2,000 or more in monthly income. Over half of the sample was receiving public assistance.

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1 The assessment surveyed about 450 respondents. Two hundred sixty-nine were from Boston. Fields Corner had been firmly established as the center of the Vietnamese American population in the city by this time.

2 It’s unclear from the report whether the figure reported applied to the entire adult sample or those working within the sample.
Questions on housing tenure and migration revealed a transitory, recently arrived population in 1989. Over 80% of the Vietnamese American population had resided in the U.S. for five years or less, though nearly two-thirds had been resident for more than two years. Seventy percent of the respondents had changed residences at least once. Of those who had moved, three out of eight residents came from out of state, while the remainder migrated within the state. The low rates of home ownership, as well as movement from initial areas of resettlement, may have contributed to such high rates of in-state changes of residence. Only eight percent of the sample owned homes.

The survey revealed a lack of community infrastructure. Identification with churches and temples was high, but less than 1% reported belonging to groups outside of religious organizations. Thus, few in the community perceived themselves as having a secular network for support.

Additional challenges that the survey identified included a high rate of single men, high birth rates, and mental health issues. Less than half of the adults were married. The survey’s mental health indications were consistent with other surveys of Vietnamese Americans that revealed high rates of mental health needs. Nearly two-thirds of adults, for example, reported severe anxiety.

Community Building

Growth of the population

The Dorchester Vietnamese population increased rapidly to around 3,500 by the 1990 census. One flow came from refugees which continued in the hundreds annually in the city (Office for Refugees and Immigrants, 1992b). By 2000, the Dorchester Vietnamese population approached 10,000 (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2000).

Businesses

The Boston Globe’s first mention of a Vietnamese store was the opening of the Saigon Market on Dorchester Avenue in early 1982. In A Vietnamese American writer noted in 1983 that only “a lone Vietnamese sandwich shop and a few offices bearing Vietnamese names...” existed in Dorchester (Pham, 1992). This time frame thus generally marks the initial establishment of Vietnamese businesses. By the late 1980s, food writers began to review Vietnamese restaurants in the area. In 1989, a food writer identified three Vietnamese restaurants in Dorchester (Patrone, 1988; Levey, 1989). Tom Gannon, the founder of the Fields Corner Civic Association, said that Vietnamese businesses “really picked up steam” in the mid-1990s (McGroarty, 2006, p. 21).

Organizations and Associations

While VACA grew to seven full-time staff and seven VISTA volunteers and ESL teachers in 1991 (Vietnamese American Civic Association et al), the new community founded several voluntary organizations. Among them were the Vietnamese American Women’s League of Massachusetts.

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3 The Vietnamese population is estimated based on the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s use of an Asian Pacific Islander (API) category. However, the overwhelming majority of APIs in Dorchester were Vietnamese.

4 No market of that name survives in Dorchester.
and Vietnamese Catholic associations. Some, like Vietnamese Community of Massachusetts, particularly focused on homeland politics and set a conservative political tone in the community. Some groups began forming around domestic election campaigns but were often transitory.

The total number of formal organizations was not large. In the Asian American Resource Workshop’s directory of Massachusetts Asian American organizations that was first published in 1990 and every few years subsequently, only a dozen Vietnamese American organizations were listed in the state, about half in Dorchester. By 2007, the number had not substantially grown (Asian American Resource Workshop, 1998; Institute for Asian American Studies and Asian American Resource Workshop, 2007). A report produced from the Vietnamese American Community Forum held in 1998 claimed that as many as one hundred community organizations existed in the state (Nguyen 1998), but corroborating evidence could not be found by the authors of this report.

The establishment in 1994 of Vietnamese American Initiative for Development (VietAID), a community development corporation (CDC), was significant for the community. A younger cohort, primarily those who arrived in the U.S. at an early age, founded VietAID. VietAID was a distinctive Vietnamese American organization in that its focus was on local rather than homeland issues. Its leadership in organizing a Vietnamese American community coalition to plan, fund, and build the Vietnamese American Community Center in 2002 was a major achievement. The Center now houses several community organizations, including VietAID and VACA (Riebadeneira, 1999; Sege, 2002).

Relations in the Neighborhood

The settlement of Vietnamese in Fields Corner did not occur without problems. While inexpensive, Fields Corner in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a run-down, deteriorated, high crime community. As early as 1981, the Boston Globe reported on vandalism directed at Vietnamese who moved into the area. Homes were firebombed, cars were vandalized, and students beaten in these early years. About twenty incidents were reported annually. Local toughs beat Vietnamese on the street, a few fatally. Arson continued in the area, and the Fire Department often blamed incidents on the Vietnamese as well as other people of color. In 1983, the Boston police reported at midyear 14 racial crimes against Asian Americans, most in Dorchester. These incidents continued through much of the decade (Boston Globe, 1981; Brady, 1983; Higgins, 1983; Frisby, 1983; Boston Globe, 1983; Howe, 1987). Future rapper/actor Mark Wahlberg was one white resident who, as a local teenager, was convicted of assaulting Vietnamese Americans in 1988.

Over time, the Vietnamese became more accepted into the area. The number of vandalism and assault incidents declined. Mainstream agencies integrated Vietnamese outreach programs in their activities.

Political Evolution

Anti-communism was one factor that held the early Vietnamese American community together (Le, 2009). The activities of older leaders focused on preventing any relaxation of anti-communist attitudes within the community. For example, among their campaigns were protests of an artist’s image on a local utility’s gas storage tank near Fields Corner. Some
claimed that the highly visible work included a profile of Ho Chi Minh, the communist leader of the Workers Party of Vietnam. One local community leader compared Ho to Hitler (Bombardieri, 1999) (Aguilar-San Juan, 2009, p. 72). Initially, activism in electoral politics revolved around candidates’ attitudes toward communist countries, particularly Vietnam.

The Vietnamese American community’s local civic engagement emerged through a series of episodes. A catalytic incident came when City Councilor Albert (Dapper) O’Neil was captured on local television commenting on the growing Vietnamese enclave. As he was riding past Vietnamese businesses on Dorchester Avenue during the annual Dorchester Day Parade, he remarked:

I thought I was in Saigon for Chrissakes. For Chrissakes, it makes you sick, for Chrissakes... I told them I'd come back tomorrow with the checks. (Rezendes, June 11, 1992)

Boston Globe articles in the following two weeks outlined community outrage over this incident, but O’Neil refused to apologize. Subsequently, the community staged a rally outside city hall on June 15, 1992. University of Massachusetts Boston Professor Peter Kiang remarked,

The rally represented the first time in Boston that I’m aware of that the Vietnamese community rallied around an issue related to local politics rather than Vietnamese politics. (Sege 1992)

This incident was critical in the formation of a unified Vietnamese American community political voice in the city. Community organizations played important roles in the mobilization. It moved the community beyond its reluctance to make claims on U.S. governmental domestic officials or policies. Nguoi Viet Boston, Tuan Do’s paper, ran an editorial titled "People’s Paper Tabloid Galvanizes Hub’s Vietnamese." Do wrote

I think we have to say 'thank you' to Dapper. His bad statement brought us together, and not just Vietnamese but all people in the city. It made people understand more than us. We have more friends than before Dapper O'Neil spoke." (Tuan Do, quoted by Bennett, June 18, 1992)

Among these new efforts was building relations with office holders. In Boston, the office holders tended to be overwhelmingly Democratic. Maureen Feeney, City Councilor for the district, was a particular champion and a typical example.

The Vietnamese American community has steadily built their voter base. A coalition of funders created the Civic Engagement Initiative (CEI) that organized voter registration and voter mobilization efforts in selected disadvantaged communities beginning in 2002. VietAID was one such participant, representing the Fields Corner area. They launched an initiative called Viet-Vote, working with some other Vietnamese American organizations. Subsequently, CEI funded non-Vietnamese groups in the area as well. In both initiatives, increases in Fields Corner turnout were among the highest among various city neighborhoods (Clark, n.d.) (McGroarty, 2006, p. 59).

The Viet-Vote initiative led to a supplementary campaign that became its signal success. It came in the passage of a City Council resolution that recognized a "Freedom Flag," the flag of the former South Vietnam government, as the official symbol of the local Vietnamese community. Councilor Maureen Feeney introduced the resolution. A hundred-strong
demonstration at City Hall and a sharp increase in Vietnamese American voter turnout helped drive the city council’s vote of support in 2003 (Bui, Tang, & Kiang, Summer/Fall 2004) (McGroarty, 2006).

Another boost for the Vietnamese American community’s civic engagement came from the achievement of bilingual ballots in the neighborhood in 2006. Initially a temporary remedy to election abuses, the state legislature made bilingual ballots permanent in 2014. Young Vietnamese American activists had joined the Chinese American community’s efforts to lobby the state legislature for a home rule petition mandating ongoing bilingual ballots. The ballots liberalized access to the voting process for many older Vietnamese Americans and recent immigrants (Dezenski, 2014).

Economy: Business and Occupation
The number of Vietnamese businesses in the neighborhood has grown quickly, though the exact trajectory of this growth is hazy. From the handful described in the early 1980s, a Vietnamese business directory listed thirty-five businesses in the city in 1991. A neighborhood leader estimated 46 area businesses in 1995 (Coleman, 1995). A Vietnamese American community forum reinforced this estimate, claiming 50 businesses in 1998 (Nguyen, 1998). In a 2005 report, the Institute for Asian American Studies identified 126 Vietnamese-owned businesses out of 225 total in the Fields Corner area (Borges-Mendez, Liu and Watanabe, 2005).

Vietnamese Americans established niches in the nail cosmetic industry and construction industry, particularly floor sanding. The nail salons are well dispersed, though Dorchester hosts a nail supply wholesaler and training schools. Despite these niches, the Vietnamese American population overall is in diverse occupations. Small construction contractors are common in Dorchester. There are numerous retail stores—florists, drugstores, donut shops, sandwich shops, restaurants—and a growing number of professional offices staffing doctors, lawyers, accountants. This economic diversity will broaden as younger Vietnamese Americans decide among a broader range of career possibilities. There were some failures. Fishing, a common occupation in Vietnam and Vietnamese American enclaves along the Southern U.S. coast, was attempted but ended in the late 1980s (Coughlin, 1989).

Vietnamese Americans in Dorchester Today
Note: Because of limitations on available data on Vietnamese Americans in the Fields Corner area, statistics cited in these next two sections cover a range of related geographical areas. When possible, data from the ten census tracts with the largest numbers of Vietnamese Americans in Dorchester in 2010 was used. These are centered around Fields Corner. (See tracts with two darkest shades in the map on next page.) Some data applies to comparable zip code areas or the city of Boston as a whole, as indicated in the text.

Characteristics of the Population
The last decennial census in 2010 enumerated 11,670 Vietnamese Americans in Boston, the majority residing in the Dorchester neighborhood. Within the ten census tracts studied, the number of Vietnamese Americans increased slightly from 6,800 in 2000 to over 7,000 in 2010, even while the total population in those tracts decreased by 6% to 46,450. Since the Vietnamese began settling in Boston, the composition of this population has changed. Like the rest of the
U.S., the share of older residents is increasing, while the number of families is decreasing. For Vietnamese Americans in the Fields Corner area, this shift is perhaps more dramatic than for other groups. From 2000 to 2010, the U.S. census reported that the number of those 65 years or over rose over 150%, alongside the sliding numbers and percentage of younger cohorts. The percentage of Vietnamese American households that are made up of families, though still high, declined from 88% to 84%.

Change in Vietnamese (alone) Population in 10 Census Tracts by Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>-3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–17</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td>-6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>-5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–44</td>
<td>2,426</td>
<td>2,259</td>
<td>-6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–64</td>
<td>1,488</td>
<td>1,664</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>153.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6,796</td>
<td>7,034</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2010 Decennial Census

The initial settlement of Vietnamese in the state had a male majority, according to the 1989 survey, a significant divergence from the female majority in the home country. This male dominance of the Vietnamese American residents continued for decades through the 2000 U.S. census. In the 2010 U.S. census, female Vietnamese Americans in the Fields Corner area outnumbered male ones for the first time, primarily in the working age population.

The Vietnamese American population has made significant strides in socioeconomic indicators since the early survey in 1989. In the first decade of the 21st century, nearly a third of the adults 25 years and older in Boston attended college or attained undergraduate or graduate degrees. Twenty percent of the three-year-and-older population was in high school, nearly three times the 1989 rate. The unemployment rate for Vietnamese Americans in Boston was 15%. Forty-three percent of this 16-year-and-older population, however, were not in the labor force (2010-2014 American Community Survey).

Educational Data for Vietnamese (alone) in the City of Boston 2010–2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL ENROLLMENT</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population 3 years and over enrolled in school</td>
<td>3,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery school, preschool</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school (grades 1-8)</td>
<td>1,139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (grades 9-12)</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or graduate school</td>
<td>1,336</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Significant obstacles remain, however. The poverty rate for Vietnamese Americans in Boston remains high, with 29% below the poverty line (U.S. Census, 2010-2014 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample).\(^5\) Poverty is highest among the young and elderly. The low-income Vietnamese American tends to be less likely to be highly educated and more likely to have poorer English language ability. They are most likely to be found in light manufacturing work if they are employed. If they are not in the labor force, they have higher rates of supplemental security income and public assistance and significantly lower rates of social security utilization. (Liu, Tran and Watanabe, 2007)

Though Vietnamese Americans are still primarily a population of renters, their homeownership rate has increased significantly from about one-quarter (26%) to one-third (32%) in the ten-census-tract area (2010 Decennial Census). Accompanying that increase, Vietnamese American ownership of property in general in the Fields Corner area has grown. In 2014, Vietnamese Americans owned over a thousand parcels out of 9,000 individual owners or 12% of the parcels. In 1999, individual Vietnamese Americans owned parcels in the area numbered about half that number.\(^6\)

**Business and Occupations**

Lists from Fields Corner Main Streets and the 2014 Vietnamese Business Association indicate that 145 businesses of 259 in the Fields Corner are Vietnamese-owned, 56% of the total.\(^7\) Of these businesses, over 40% were in services, including health services such as doctor and dental offices, and professional services such as legal offices, tax preparation, and financial services, alongside the more well-known personal service sector of nail and beauty salons. A third of the businesses were in retail, particularly food retail trades. Other areas include construction (including developers), FIRE (financial, insurance and real estate) and wholesale trades.

\(^5\) This would be significantly more dramatic with a realistic poverty standard. Many researchers use a poverty line two times that of federal guidelines (see Liu, Tran and Watanabe 2007).

\(^6\) In arriving at this estimate, we reviewed the city’s assessor’s database. Partnerships and corporations owned some of the parcels. The estimates that we made excluded parcels owned by such entities and only included individual owners, whose names could indicate their identities.

\(^7\) In total, 351 unique businesses were counted of which 35 were non-profits. For the remaining businesses, the owner’s ethnicity could not be identified.
Site: Dorchester Avenue near Fields Corner
## Vietnamese-Owned Fields Corner Area Businesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIRE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail (including restaurants)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Professional Services</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and Other Services</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Indeterminate</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the businesses operate along Dorchester Avenue from Columbia Road to Melville Avenue south of Fields Corner. The map below illustrates this linear distribution.
Occupationally, the largest numbers of Vietnamese American residents in Boston work in services, followed by production, transportation, and material occupations. Vietnamese Americans are significantly underrepresented in management, business, science, and arts occupations, and overrepresented in service, construction and maintenance and production.

### Occupations of Vietnamese Americans 16 Years and Over in Boston

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Margin of Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management, business, science, and arts</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Office</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources, construction, and maintenance</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production, transportation and material moving</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2006–2010 American Community Survey

**Community Infrastructure**

The growth of Vietnamese American organizations has not matched the growth of the Vietnamese American economy. The number of Vietnamese American community-based organizations appears to have stabilized or even declined. VietAID is now the most established Vietnamese American community organization, and most others are centered around the Vietnamese American Community Center (VACC), which is run by VietAID. The Vietnamese American Civic Association, once the community’s major multi-service organization, now operates out of one room in the VACC. On the other hand, long-established, mainstream Dorchester neighborhood agencies like Bartholomew Family Day Care, Neponset Health Center, Dorchester House, and Kit Clark Senior Services have developed programs directed at the Vietnamese American population (Vietnamese American Civic Association et al).

Religious organizations and networks are an important part of Vietnamese American life. Aguilar-San Juan found three Buddhist temples in Fields Corner several years back (2009). St. Peter’s is now the primary Vietnamese Catholic parish and St. Ambroise parish also holds Vietnamese services as well. St. William’s, once the primary Catholic parish for Vietnamese American community, closed in 2004.

**Relations with the Larger Community**

The Fields Corner Vietnamese enclave developed and resides within a largely non-Vietnamese environment. Even today, within the ten census tracts with the largest Vietnamese American population reviewed, less than 20% of the residents are Vietnamese. Aguilar-San Juan described some of the issues in being in a multi-ethnic environment in her monograph, *Little Saigons*. She related an interview where an older Vietnamese American activist told her, “We are still struggling with what is community, how do we define community,” and noted for VietAID, the community’s largest organization, a multiethnic organization seems “an inevitable option” (Aguilar-San Juan, 2009, pp. 114-5).

The community has taken various steps to negotiate this delicate situation. One step has been to maintain racially integrated boards of directors in their formal Vietnamese
American organizations. The most prominent Vietnamese American non-profits have always had non-Vietnamese, usually white, members on their boards. The Vietnamese American Civic Association has had at times a predominantly non-Vietnamese board, and the current majority of VietAid’s board, for example, is non-Vietnamese. Another approach towards integration has been for Vietnamese Americans to play a more active role in prominent mainstream organizations. For example, Mary Truong assumed the presidency of the Dorchester Board of Trade in 2006 (McGroarty, 2006). A third step has been to serve the diverse populations of the area rather than just Vietnamese Americans. For example, the majority of tenants in VietAID’s housing developments is non-Vietnamese.

There is a lack of documentation of interactions between Vietnamese Americans and other populations of color. Whites, the largest but a declining proportion of the population in the area, constitute 37% of the ten census tracts. African Americans, at 32%, are the largest non-white population in those same census tracts. The interethnic, interracial dynamics in Fields Corner is a topic that requires further exploration.

Civic engagement

The Vietnamese American community in Boston has two significant political characteristics. First, Vietnamese Americans are among the most highly engaged in electoral activities among Asian American populations in Boston. The city’s Vietnamese Americans exhibit the highest voter registration rates as a percentage of their resident population—over 40%, significantly higher than the next highest registered Asian American subgroup (Watanabe & Liu, 2012). In this study as well, it was found that they Vietnamese Americans turned out to vote at the highest rate among the city’s major Asian American subgroups. In a 2008 survey, Vietnamese Americans indicated that they were much more likely than Chinese Americans to demonstrate, petition, lobby and organize with others (Liu, Lo, and Watanabe 2008, 26). Thus, the community has played an increasing role in local civic affairs.

Second, the community has a generally conservative bent, attributed primarily to the traditional, older community leadership but has adapted to the more liberal local political scene. Among Asian American groups in the state, they register the highest percentage of Republicans, albeit only 16% (Watanabe & Liu, 2012). This Republican support is particularly manifest during national elections. As Boston’s Vietnamese Americans have gotten more politically active, however, they have accommodated themselves to the overwhelmingly Democratic Party dominance of the area, and Democratic Party affiliations have increased. The community has developed close relations with and campaigned for Democratic Party stalwarts such as former City Councilor Maureen Feeney (McGroaty, 2006). Several prominent Vietnamese American Republicans campaigned for the current Boston and Democratic Mayor, Marty Walsh.

The Vietnamese American community continues to expand its voter base. At the time of the Dapper O’Neil incident in 1992, Bui, Tang, and Kiang (2004) estimated the number of Vietnamese American registered voters in the city at less than a hundred in the early 1990s. In the current decade, there are over 3,500 Vietnamese voters in Boston (Watanabe & Liu, 2012). Among the various actors promoting civic engagement today are various individuals, VietAID and the Asian American Resource Workshop.
Younger Vietnamese Americans are trending more liberal and Democratic than their parents. The 2012 analysis found that Democrats now outnumber Republicans among Vietnamese Americans. One indication of this liberal change was the hiring of Trinh Nguyen as the Director of Workforce Development in the Walsh city administration. The elders nevertheless still firmly anchor the community’s conservative orientation. It should also be noted that Vietnamese Americans who are unenrolled far outnumber identification with either party.

**Gentrification and the Future of Dorchester as a Vietnamese Place**

In the past few years, it has become evident that significant changes are coming to Dorchester, raising concerns about the neighborhood’s ability to host a low-income ethnic enclave. The cost of housing both in the rental and ownership markets has increased dramatically, affecting low and moderate income residents of all backgrounds.

Developers have zeroed in on Dorchester, particularly the areas near downtown Boston, as a desirable neighborhood for new construction. The most massive of these is at the corner of the South Bay Mall that will include 475 housing units, a hotel, cinema, and retail and restaurant space. Morrissey Boulevard near UMass Boston has seen the rapid rise of an apartment complex with 1-bedroom units starting at $2,400, and will likely be the site for another large multi-use complex at the former Boston Globe building. Near Fields Corner, an expansive mixed-use complex, “Dot Block,” is planned along Dorchester Avenue between Savin Hill and Fields Corner. It will include over 350 housing units and will significantly change the nature of the local area (Smith, 2016).

Residents around Fields Corner though have noted sharply increasing housing prices and the construction of smaller scale housing developments for the past several years. While measures of gentrification will likely be more evident in the near future, data for the ten census tracts around Fields Corner with significant populations of Vietnamese Americans show early signs of gentrification. Although the data for all the tracts together did not consistently show gentrification on multiple measures, certain locations within this defined area did. A recent study on gentrification in New York City by the NYU Furman Center was used as a model for this report (Austensen, et al., 2016).

The authors of the NYC study, Austensen, et al., used rapidly rising rents to identify gentrifying neighborhoods. They also identified several other characteristics of neighborhoods that commonly accompany gentrification. These indicators include the growth of housing units, increase in average household income, growth in the share of the population with a college degree, growth in the share of the population aged 20–34, a rise in the white population, and a decrease in the poverty rate.

This analysis found multiple indicators of gentrification in the census tracts near the JFK/UMass subway stop (census tracts 907 and 911), in Savin Hill (tract 910.01) and Lower Mills area (tract 1008) when comparing data from the 2000 Decennial Census to the 2010–2014 American Community Survey. In the 907 tract, median rents increased the most of all the ten census tracts, 33.3%, compared to an increase of 14.7% for the ten tract area as a whole and to 13.8% for Boston. The percent of those with a bachelor’s degree increased dramatically, and the

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8 Statistics in this dataset are an average over the 5-year period.
share of those aged 20–34 increased notably. The percent of the population that identified as white non-Hispanic\(^9\) increased in only one of the ten tracts, 911. This tract also saw a notable increase in average household income, 10.4%.

In the Savin Hill area, the share of young adults increased the most percentage points (5.9) of any of the ten tracts, and there was a high increase in the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree, 28.6% to 47.6%. In addition, average household income in this tract increased slightly, and the poverty rate dropped whereas for most other tracts poverty increased.

The Lower Mills area saw the highest growth in the number of housing units of all ten tracts during this time period (11.8% compared to 8.6% in Boston as a whole). In addition, average household income increased while the poverty rate decreased.

One additional measure was examined using data from Zillow, the real estate website: the median home value for single-family residences. Because Zillow produces rental and real estate data by zip code, the zip codes 02122, 02124 and 02125 which encompass the 10-tract area, were examined. The data shows a stunning increase in home values in a 5-year period (1/2000 to 1/2015). In zip code 02125, which includes the JFK/UMass subway stop area and Savin Hill, the median home value climbed by 87%. In area 02122, which contains Fields Corner, the median home value increased by 69%. And in 02124, which encompasses Lower Mills, the value increased by 80%.\(^{10}\) It is uncertain whether or not a low income Vietnamese American enclave be sustained despite these pressures.

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\(^9\) Whites of one race only.

\(^{10}\) www.zillow.com, extracted 7/26/16.
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