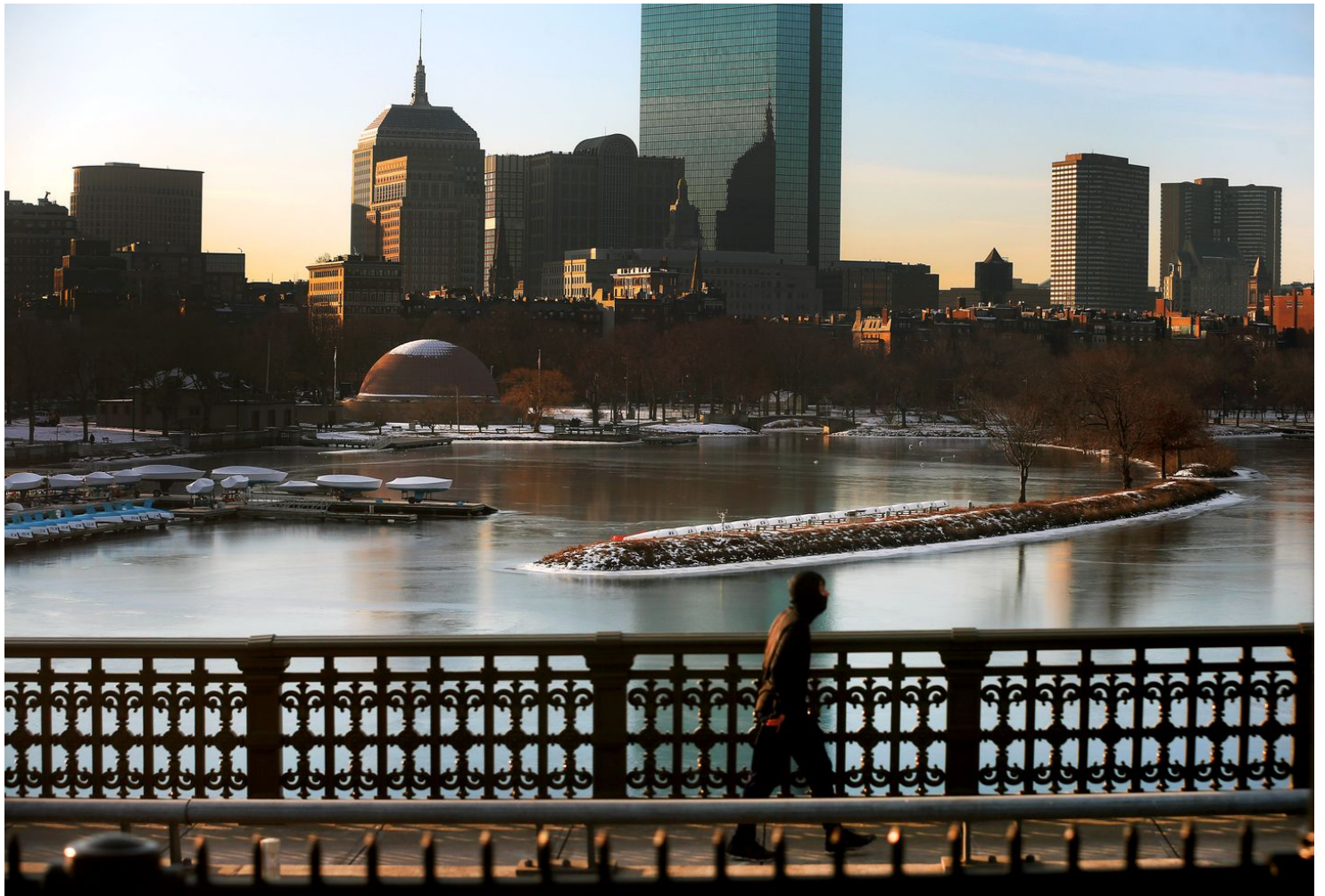


Few families occupy Greater Boston's multi-bedroom homes, report says

Planning council says groups of roommates, older empty-nesters are typical

By **Tim Logan** Globe Staff, Updated February 3, 2020, 5:00 a.m.



Less than 40 percent of three-bedroom homes in Greater Boston's core house families with children, according to the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

People with children often have a hard time finding a place to live in and around Boston, perhaps because much of the housing that's large enough to accommodate families is occupied by people without children.

That's the finding of a study [set to be released Monday](#). According to it, less than 40 percent of three-bedroom homes in the core of Greater Boston house families with children. Residents of the rest are mostly older empty-nesters or younger groups of roommates who share a large apartment to save money.

The report comes on the heels of a Boston Foundation report last month that [the number of school-age children in Boston has fallen nearly 10 percent since 2000](#), partly due to the high cost of housing and the tight supply.

This new study, by researchers at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, looked beyond Boston to include 13 other cities and towns and found, across the board, that there are not enough homes available for larger families. It's becoming a mounting problem for the region's economy and workforce, said study author Tim Reardon, the council's director of data services.

"There's a growing body of evidence that this is discouraging people from coming [to Greater Boston], whether they're younger people who don't want to live with roommates or families who are baffled at the notion of a \$700,000 starter home," Reardon said. "It's very worrisome."

In the area the group studied — it included dense sections of Boston and Cambridge, inner-ring urban communities such as Everett and Quincy, and more suburban towns like Milton and Winthrop — the council found 221,000 houses and apartments with three or more bedrooms. Of those, about 78,000 are home to families with children.

About the same number house just one or two people, many of them homeowners older than 55.

Among rental properties, about 25,000 — more than one-third — are occupied by groups of roommates. Taken together, people with such living arrangements have more spending power than one or two working parents.

The findings, Reardon said, highlight a mismatch in the region's housing supply which exacerbates home prices and rents that are among the highest in the nation. In many suburban towns, older people and couples remain in single-family houses where they once raised children, while in urban neighborhoods, three-decker apartments — originally built for families — often are filled by groups of younger people.

“It stems from the lack of options for those two very different demographics,” Reardon said. “In many communities there's simply very few smaller units for seniors to downsize into that are both attractive and affordable. On the flip side there's this big need from millennials for one-bedrooms, and there are quite a few being built. But many people are priced out of those.”

That's why policy makers such as Reardon suggest the shortage of three-bedrooms can be solved at least as much by adding modestly-priced smaller units — studios and one-bedrooms — as it can by building a surplus of larger apartments.

That's largely the tack the Walsh administration has taken in Boston, where a growing number of developers are experimenting with micro-units and so-called co-living buildings, which city officials have encouraged as a way to relieve pressure on Boston's large stock of three-decker apartments — built a century ago, typically with three bedrooms.

“There are enough large units to accommodate the families we have in Boston. The problem is they’re not all available,” said the city’s housing chief, Sheila Dillon. “That’s why we’ve been very intentional in trying to build smaller units, units for the elderly, and dorms, to free up that valuable family housing stock.”

Boston has built larger units, too. Of the 33,000 homes permitted since 2010, Dillon said, 45 percent have been for two or more bedrooms. In most projects, she said, the city pushes developers to include a mix of unit sizes. And it’s trying to find ways to finance more senior housing, in particular, to provide options for older residents who might want to move out of a large home they’ve lived in for decades.

“We want communities that are integrated. We want families living with seniors and with young people around,” she said. “We don’t want these buildings that are all singles.”

Another way to mix things up is by encouraging so-called accessory dwelling units, which are converted basement and backyard apartments that can increase the housing supply suitable for either seniors or students — without new construction. More municipalities, both urban and suburban, are experimenting with zoning for these sorts of apartments, Reardon said, and that can also free up larger units for families. But, he said, some cities and towns are writing onerous rules for accessory dwelling units that drive up the costs.

The key, Reardon said, is flexibility. Just as three-deckers that were built for families a century ago today house groups of twentysomethings, whatever is built today will probably serve different needs over time. Building just for seniors or students, or even for families with children, could be something the region comes to regret in a decade or two.

“There’s risk in saying housing is going to be built only for one demographic,” Reardon said. “That prevents the kind of fluidity we need to make this region affordable for everyone.”

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