



HEALTH OF BOSTON DATA BRIEF

Closing the Gap: An Examination of Life Expectancy Among Black Residents in Boston

February 27, 2026

WHY THIS IS AN URGENT ISSUE

All residents of Boston deserve to live long and healthy lives. While progress has been made in addressing life expectancy disparities, Black residents continue to die younger than other residents in Boston. This is particularly troubling in a city with one of the highest overall life expectancies in the country.

How long we live is one of the clearest measures of health and wellbeing. This unjust outcome is not primarily driven by biology or individual behavior, but by long-standing inequities rooted in racism, community disinvestment, and unequal access to resources that shape health across a lifetime.

This data brief is intended for community members, advocates, and decision-makers. The first of its kind, this brief summarizes key findings that describe health inequities experienced by Black residents in Boston. We are issuing this data brief to initiate meaningful dialogue and collective action to address these inequities. This data must inform the actions we all take to ensure communities across the city have access to resources and support they need to live long and healthy lives.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- Black residents have the lowest life expectancy in Boston. From 2013–2024, Black Bostonians consistently lived fewer years than every other major racial and ethnic group.
- The life expectancy gap between Black residents and all other residents has doubled over the past decade. In 2013, Black residents in Boston lived an average of 77.8 years, compared to 80.5 years for other residents; by 2024, this gap had doubled to 6.6 years, with Black life expectancy at 76.2 years and 82.2 years for the rest of Boston.
- Black males have the lowest life expectancy compared to all other groups. Between 2022–2024, Black males lived an average of 71.8 years, about 9.3 fewer years than other males in Boston, who lived 81.1 years.
- Black females have the lowest life expectancy compared to all other women. Between 2022–2024, Black females lived an average of 80.1 years, about 6.4 years fewer than other females in Boston, who lived 86.5 years.
- Preventable deaths before the age of 65 drive much of the gap in the life expectancy among Black people. The leading causes of these early deaths are unintentional overdose, cardiometabolic diseases (including heart disease, stroke, and diabetes), and cancers.

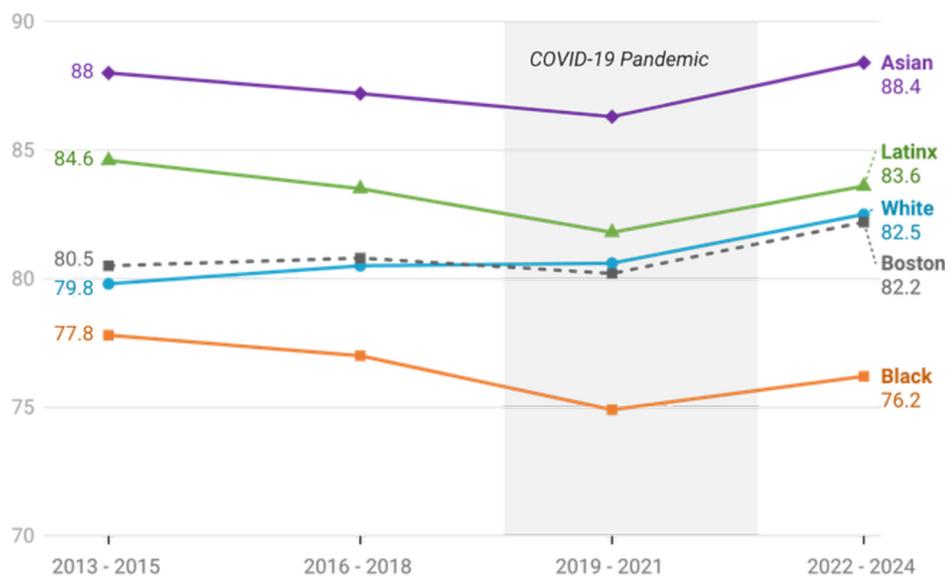
- Because Black Bostonians are diverse, representing a wide range of ancestries and cultures (or ethnicities), the reasons for early death are not all the same and may require culturally informed solutions. Mortality due to COVID-19 was the top leading cause of death among Cabo Verdean and Haitian residents while heart disease was the top cause among Jamaican residents.
- The largest recent gains in closing the life expectancy gap have come from tailored, equity-centered interventions to prevent fatal overdoses.
- Life expectancy projections for the next 10 years suggest a grim truth: without immediate and long-term action, the gap will persist. If Boston does not take sustained action to reduce these inequities, the life expectancy gap between Black residents and other Bostonians will remain the same, around 6 years, in 2035.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Life expectancy trends

Between 2013 - 2024, average life expectancy in Boston has been slightly more than 80 years (Figure 1). In the three-year window of 2019 through 2021, which includes the first two COVID-19 pandemic years, average life expectancy dropped to 80.2 years. Since then, overall life expectancy in Boston has risen to an all-time high of 82.2 years.

Figure 1. Trends in Life Expectancy at birth: 2013 - 2024¹



Note: Life Expectancy calculations for 2024 are based on preliminary data and may be subject to change.
 Chart: Boston Public Health Commission. Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

1. Black residents in the report are those who identified themselves as Black and non-Hispanic. Due to data limitations primarily relatively smaller population sizes we have been unable to calculate life expectancy for Native American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or bi/multiracial groups. Hence Figure 1 in the data brief includes life expectancy calculations only for Asian, Black, Latinx, and White racial/ethnic groups.

KEY TERMS

Life expectancy: the average number of years of life a person is expected to live and is dependent upon the rates of death across age groups.

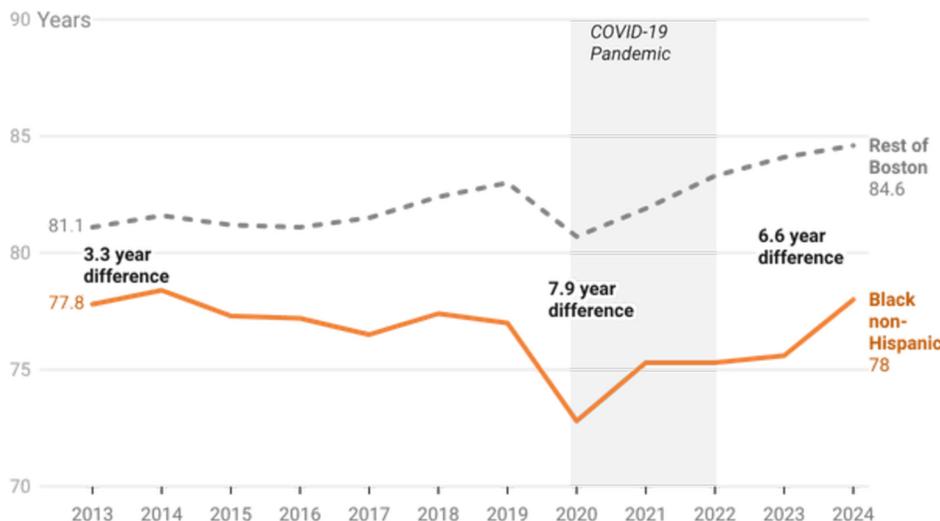
Premature mortality: deaths among residents under age 65 years.

Age-adjusted pre-mature mortality: Age-adjusted rates to allow for comparisons that mitigate the impact of differences in age distributions of populations. The resulting comparisons show observed differences in factors other than population age differences.

Rest of Boston: residents who identify as White, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, or another race or ethnicity.

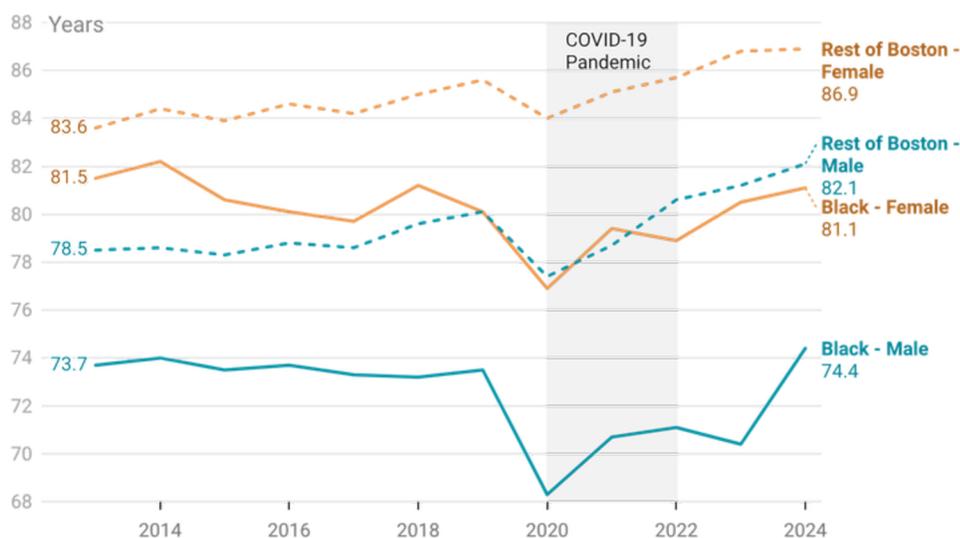
Black Bostonians have not had the same experience as their non-Black neighbors. In this report, “Black residents” refers to non-Hispanic Black residents. Black residents were already experiencing a widening life expectancy gap before the pandemic. Since 2020, life expectancy among Black residents has partially recovered but the gap between Black residents and other Bostonians continues to grow. While the rest of Boston has *gained* roughly one year of life expectancy every three years, Black residents have *lost* about one year every four years over the same period. These opposing trajectories amplify the urgency of addressing the widening health disparities between Black residents and the rest of Boston’s residents.

Figure 2. Trends in Life Expectancy among Black and Rest of Boston Residents: 2013 – 2024



Note: Rates are calculated per 100,000 residents. Life Expectancy calculations for 2024 are based on preliminary data and may be subject to change Chart: Boston Public Health Commission. Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

Figure 3. Trends in Life Expectancy by Sex among Black and rest of Boston residents: 2013 – 2024²



Note: Rates are calculated per 100,000 residents. Life Expectancy calculations for 2024 are based on preliminary data and may be subject to change Chart: Boston Public Health Commission. Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

WHY COMPARE BLACK BOSTON RESIDENTS TO EVERYONE ELSE?

This report takes a closer look at life expectancy among Black residents and how it compares with the rest of Boston. Most analyses compare Black and White residents, but this report uses a broader comparison for two reasons. First, the goal is to understand overall trends in life expectancy among Black residents in the context of the entire city. Second, while White residents make up a large share of Boston’s population, they do not have the highest life expectancy, so comparing Black residents to all other groups provides a clearer picture of inequities in Boston today.

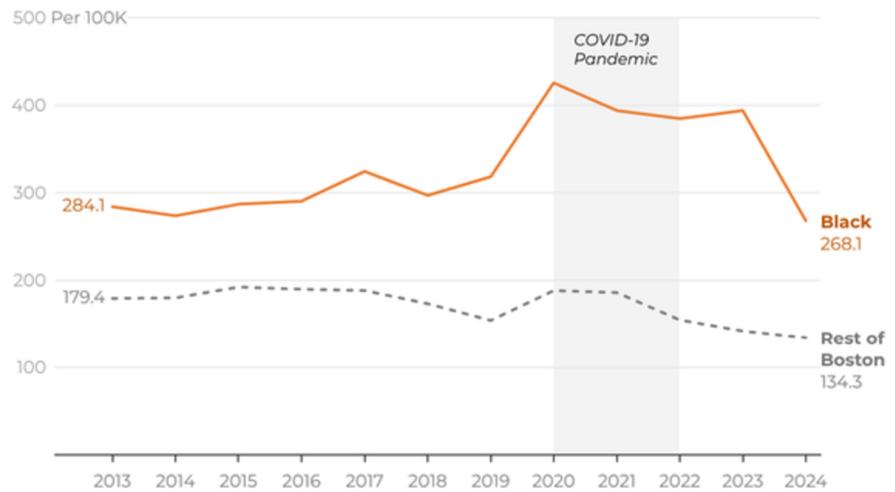
2. Population estimates are limited to male and female sex groups and due to these data limitations, we are unable to make life expectancy and mortality rate calculations for non-binary residents.

In addition to the gap in life expectancy between Black residents and the rest of Boston, there are differences among Black individuals by gender. Black males have the shortest life expectancy (74.4 years) compared to all other men in all other racial and ethnic groups (82.1 years). While Black females have a longer life expectancy (81.1 years) than Black males, their life expectancy is significantly shorter than all other females in Boston (86.9 years) (Figure 3).

Premature mortality (death before age 65)

Premature mortality, defined here as death before age 65, contributes to shorter life expectancy. Dying by the age of 65 contributes substantially to the life expectancy gap among Black residents. Black residents are twice as likely to die before age 65 compared to all other Bostonians. Young and middle-aged Black adults, especially men ages 40–64, account for much of the gap.

Figure 4. Age-Adjusted Premature Mortality Rates Among Black and Rest of Boston Residents: 2013 – 2024

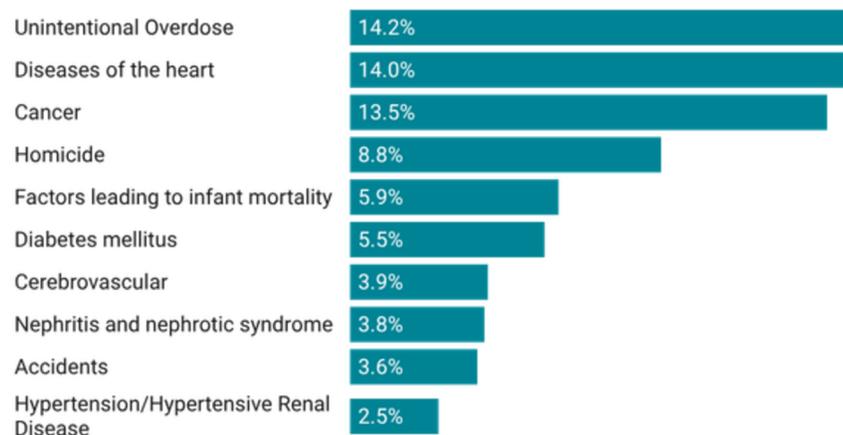


Note: Premature mortality rates represent preventable deaths per 100,000 population among residents age 65 and under. Estimates for 2024 are based on preliminary data and may change as records are finalized. Chart: Boston Public Health Commission. Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

What is driving premature mortality for Black Bostonians?

For Black men, the three leading causes of death are 1. unintentional overdose, 2. heart disease, and 3. cancer. These three leading causes of death account for 42% of the life expectancy gap between Black men and other men in Boston.

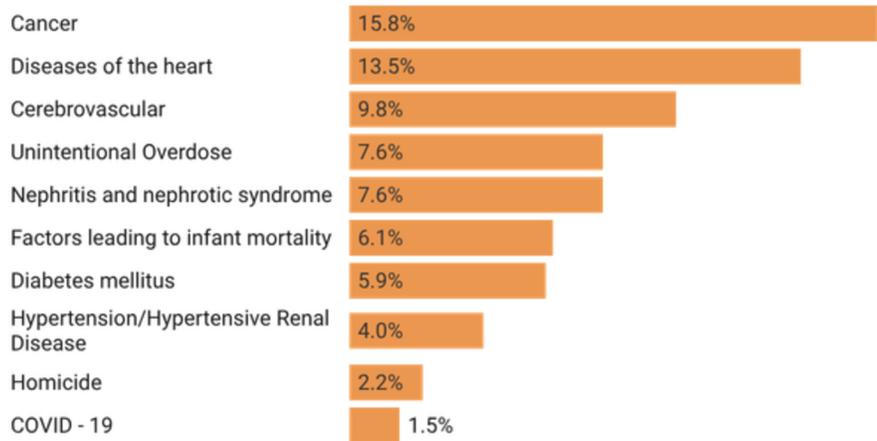
Figure 5. Percent contribution of top 10 leading causes of death to disparity in Life Expectancy. Comparison of Black male to rest of Boston’s male residents: 2022 – 2024



Note: For 2024, BPHC has received preliminary data that may be subject to change. Chart: Boston Public Health Commission. Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

The three leading causes for early death for Black females in Boston are cancer, heart disease, and cerebrovascular disease. These three causes account for approximately 40% of life expectancy gap for Black females.

Figure 6. Percent contribution of top 10 leading causes of death to disparity in Life Expectancy. Comparison of Black female to rest of Boston’s female residents: 2022 – 2024



Note: For 2024, BPHC has received preliminary data that may be subject to change. Chart: Boston Public Health Commission. Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

Boston’s Black communities are rich in diversity; they are not monoliths

Boston’s Black population is diverse, with roots across the Caribbean, West Indies, and Africa. We analyzed age-adjusted mortality data by ethnicity for the top three diasporas in Boston: Haitian, Cabo Verdean, and Jamaican.

When compared to the rest of Boston, we found:

- Haitian residents experience the highest mortality rates among the groups analyzed.
- Cabo Verdean residents have lower overall mortality but face elevated risk from unintentional overdose.
- Diabetes is a major contributor to mortality among Haitian and Jamaican residents.

These differences highlight the importance of culturally responsive and community-specific strategies.

Table 1. Top 5 Leading Causes of Death for select Black Ethnic groups: 2020 – 2024³

| Rank | Cabo Verdean | Haitian | Jamaican | Rest of Boston |
|------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | COVID-19 (34) [140] | COVID-19 (108) [140.6] | Diseases of the heart (46) [281.6] | Cancer (2930) [121.4] |
| 2 | Diseases of the heart (53) [125.9] | Cancer (139) [127.9] | Cancer (63) [259.9] | Diseases of the heart (2410) [110] |
| 3 | Cancer (60) [106.6] | Diseases of the heart (102) [121.2] | Cerebrovascular (15) [95.1] | COVID-19 (985) [56.5] |
| 4 | Cerebrovascular (14) [105.5] | Cerebrovascular (57) [97.1] | COVID-19 (21) [94.8] | Unintentional Overdose (846) [45.8] |
| 5 | Unintentional Overdose (13) [29.2] | Diabetes mellitus (39) [92.4] | Diabetes mellitus (15) [88.8] | Cerebrovascular (557) [26.5] |

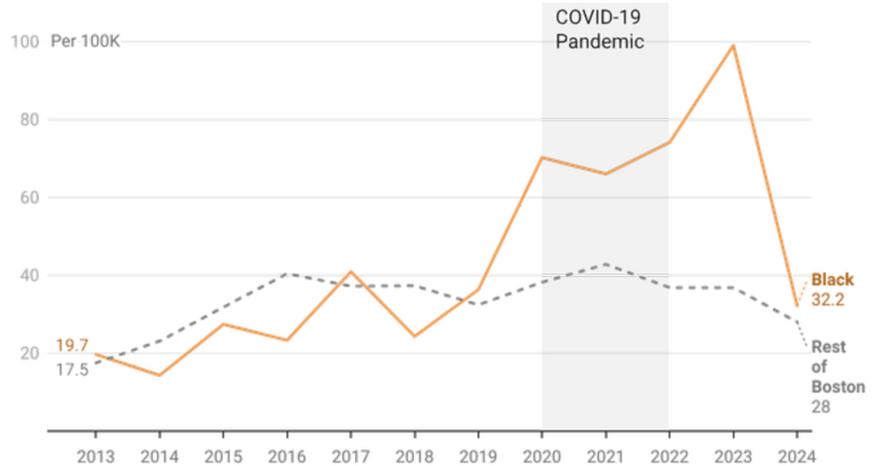
Data Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health
 Note: Ranked by age adjusted rates. Numbers in square brackets and white font are age adjusted rates. Numbers in parentheses are death counts.

3. Black diaspora data reflects Black residents’ ancestry meaning their ethnic, heritage, descent, or roots identified as either of Cape Verdean, Haitian, or Jamaican origin.

Overdose Prevention Is Driving Recent Progress

The largest recent gains in closing the life expectancy gap have come from tailored, equity-centered interventions to prevent fatal overdoses. Black residents in Boston, especially younger residents under age 65, have been disproportionately affected by overdose deaths. Over time, overdose mortality increased sharply among Black residents while remaining largely unchanged for the rest of the city. With focused and collaborative efforts supporting Black residents experiencing substance use disorder, overdose deaths among Black residents declined in 2024.

Figure 6. Trends in Age-Adjusted Premature Mortality Rates (per 100,000 individuals) for Unintentional Overdoses: 2013 – 2024

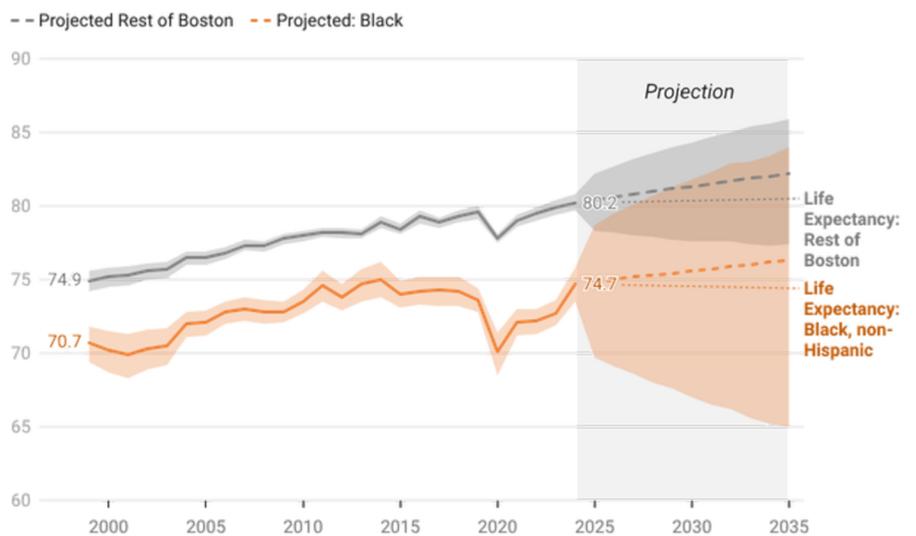


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Time is of the essence: Addressing life expectancy gaps requires urgency

Life expectancy gaps are preventable and, working together, we can reduce them as we have reduced overdose deaths. However, if we do nothing, these disparities will continue or worsen. To understand the implications of inaction, we projected life expectancy until 2035. If we do not expand and sustain efforts to reduce disparities, the gap in life expectancy between Black Bostonians and all other residents of Boston in 2035 will remain the same, around 6 years. This continued gap can be avoided through collective action to

Figure 7. Life Expectancy Projections for Black and Rest of Boston Residents: 2025 – 2035



Note: Solid lines depict average Life Expectancy from 1999 - 2024; dashed lines are projected average Life Expectancy from 2025 - 2035 Chart: Boston Public Health Commission Source: Boston Resident Deaths, Massachusetts Dept of Public Health

address systemic racism and improve the conditions that support health such as access to quality and affordable health care and housing, economic security, and safe and affordable housing.

CALL TO ACTION: Boston's Live Long and Well Health Equity Agenda

We can take concrete steps to improve life expectancy for Boston's Black residents.

We call on our partners in Boston to work together with us to help eliminate life expectancy gaps by 2035 as outlined in the [Live Long and Well Agenda](#). Progress will depend on addressing the root causes that influence how long and how well Black residents live and ensure they have the opportunity to thrive.

Working in partnership with our diverse, culturally rich Black communities, we can identify solutions that build on our Black community's many assets as we work together to dismantle structural barriers to poor health rooted in historically racist policies and systems. Together, we can make sure that all Black people have what they need to live a long and healthy lives. With sustained, coordinated, and collective action and investment, we can build on past successes to increase health and longevity of Boston's Black residents.

COMMUNITY VOICE

In our most recent community health needs assessment, Black Bostonians responded that the primary ways to improve quality of life and health in their community are more affordable housing, access to low-cost healthy foods, access to good jobs and economic opportunities, access to health care, and lower crime and violence.

Asked about their top community health concerns, Black residents responded they are concerned about housing quality, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health, economic security, and diabetes.

LEARN MORE

BPHC's mission is to work in partnership with communities to protect and promote the health and well-being of all Boston residents, especially those impacted by racism and systemic inequities.

BPHC collects data and examines the city's health trends and the health status of residents. All reports, dashboards, and briefs can be found on the BPHC website: boston.gov/bphc-data.