
Aging in the Town of Brookline: A Community Needs Assessment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Commissioned by the
Town of Brookline
Brookline Council on Aging
Brookline Senior Center



Produced by the
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Research on Aging**
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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Brookline's older adults were the focus of the [*Brookline Older Adult Community Health Needs Assessment*](#) which identified the needs and strengths of the older adult community. As part of the results, it recommended the need for a much more in-depth examination of issues relating to aging in Brookline involving greater representation of stakeholders and residents.

This report describes research undertaken by the Center for Social & Demographic Research on Aging (CSDRA) within the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, on behalf of the Town of Brookline. The goals of this project were to investigate the needs, interests, preferences, and opinions of Brookline's residents aged 60 or older by engaging the community regarding their experiences and needs relevant to aging well in Brookline. These findings are meant to inform the Town of Brookline and the Brookline Council on Aging (COA) in planning for the future to ensure that programs and services offered by the Council on Aging and Senior Center are aligned with the needs and preferences of Brookline residents.

A broad range of findings are reported in this document, highlighting the many positive features of Brookline, the strengths of existing programs and services, and opportunities for expansion. The key findings from this needs assessment can be summarized into the following themes:

- **Financial insecurity & housing expenses**
- **Current and future programs at the Brookline Senior Center**
- **Communications strategies**
- **Transportation & accessibility**
- **Social wellness and inclusion**
- **Caregiving**

While many of our findings, and the recommendations that follow, intersect with the scope of responsibility of the Brookline Council on Aging, it is understood that **responding to many needs and concerns expressed in the community will require the involvement of other municipal offices or community stakeholders, and some will require substantial collaborative effort.**

For more information and to access the full report, visit:
[**https://www.brooklineseniorcenter.org/**](https://www.brooklineseniorcenter.org/)

METHODOLOGY

The assessment used mixed methods to capture both quantitative demographic trends and qualitative insights into aging experiences in Brookline.

- ❖ **Community Survey of all residents 60+:** 2,259 residents responded (17% response rate)
- ❖ **Key Informant Interviews:** 7 interviews with municipal employees, officials, and community leaders
- ❖ **Demographic Data:** from U.S. Census Bureau—decennial censuses and American Community Survey (2024)—and population projections from UMass Donahue Institute
- ❖ **Focus Groups:** 4 groups with 41 total participants including community stakeholder leaders and older residents

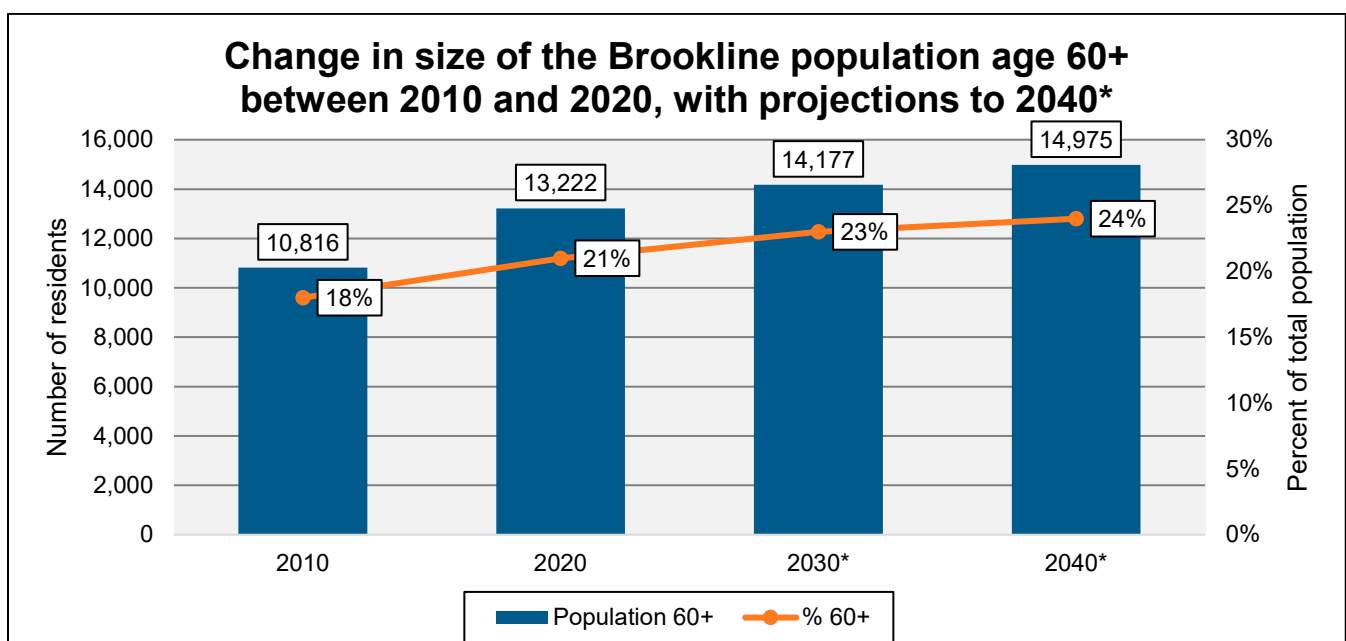
MAJOR FINDINGS

KEY DEMOGRAPHICS



The population of Brookline residents age 60 and older is sizeable and is expected to continue growing.

- Currently, 21% of Brookline's 63,266 residents are aged 60 and older. That *share* is expected to continue growing steadily to 24% by 2040.
- The *number* of residents age 60+ in Brookline grew from 10,816 in 2010 to 13,222 in 2020 and is expected to continue to grow to nearly 15,000 residents by 2040.



Source: Population figures for 2010 and 2020 are from the U.S. Census.

*Figures for 2030 and 2040 are projections generated by the [Donahue Institute, University of Massachusetts](#)

FINANCIAL INSECURITY & HOUSING EXPENSES



Financial insecurity, driven largely by taxes, is a top concern for older residents.

- **Financial insecurity:** 20% of survey respondents lacked the finances for at least one basic necessity in the past 12 months.
- **Living alone & income disparities:** Older adults living alone have substantially lower incomes than those who do not live alone, particularly women living alone whose median income is \$57,500.
- **Housing affordability:** The most commonly reported concern about being able to stay in Brookline is cost of living—predominately related to home maintenance, taxes and utilities (37% of survey respondents wrote in about these concerns).
- **Housing cost burden:** Half of renters age 65+ spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs, the highest rate of any age group.

“By far, my greatest concern is housing affordability. I rent and prices every year go up tremendously. I will not be able to stay.”

- **Home maintenance challenges:** Nearly half (45%) of survey respondents reported needing home repairs to safely remain in their homes over the next five years, and 14% of those needing repairs said they could not afford them.
- **"House rich but tax poor":** Stakeholders described many residents as "house rich but tax poor" and expressed concern that longtime residents may be priced out of Brookline.

“Taxes are crushing us; cannot keep up with increases; falling behind on paying for services (water, trash, electric, heat expenses)”

SOCIAL WELLNESS & INCLUSION



Residents, especially older adults living alone, can benefit from Town of Brookline programs and services that create opportunities to connect with the community in person.

- **Solo agers:** 42% of respondents age 80+ live alone, compared to 25% of those in their 60s.
- **Lack of connections:** Stakeholders reported increasing numbers of older adults aging independently with dementia, mobility limitations, and mental health challenges but limited support systems.
- **Social isolation:** Residents cited concerns about isolation, loss of social networks, and lacking family nearby to assist as they age.
- **Feeling excluded or unwelcome:** About 19% reported some form of exclusion. About 33% of those respondents cited age as the reason for feeling excluded.
- **Behavioral health:** 22% of respondents report having been affected in some way by substance misuse and 18% by suicide.
- **Mental health:** Rates of depression among Brookline older adults are higher than state (37.8% vs. 34.6%).

"Isolation. Since I live alone in my own house. Neighbors tend to be younger with busy lives. Older friends/neighbors are moving away, getting sick/dementia, etc. Can create "loneliness". Which makes having a great + accessible Senior Center so important."

CAREGIVING



Older residents experience changing physical and psychological conditions, and caregivers to older adults need help managing this care.

- **Caregiving prevalence:** 41% of survey respondents reported providing care or assistance to a disabled or frail person within the past 5 years. The highest percentage of caregivers (50%) is in the age 60-69 cohort, suggesting that some are part of the "sandwich" generation (i.e., caring for children and parents).
- **Caregiver burden:** 57% of caregivers reported that caregiving was somewhat or very challenging to balance with other responsibilities. Approximately 1 in 5 caregivers reported declines in their physical health, mental health, or social life due to caregiving.
- **Support systems:** Caregivers most frequently identified informal support, in-home assistance, and navigation to services as valuable resources.

TRANSPORTATION & ACCESSIBILITY



As the population ages, investments in accessible buildings, sidewalks, crossings, seating, and wayfinding will become increasingly important for maintaining participation in community life.

- **Medical transportation:** Focus group participants repeatedly identified medical transportation as a core service that supports independence, preventive care, and aging in place and expressed concern about the reductions in medical transportation.
- **Medical access issues:** Among respondents who do not drive, 16% reported missing, cancelling, or rescheduling a medical appointment because of transportation barriers.
- **Transportation challenges:** Nearly half of respondents reported at least one transportation challenge, and transportation difficulties increase substantially among those who limit or stop driving.

"I am aging and now use a walker. The sidewalks are unsafe and I often have to walk in the street."

"Getting around if unable to drive as we age. lack of cheaper transport; I don't use the T anymore as it's so jerky and I'm afraid I'll fall; also hard to get into. There are not enough subsidized Lyft rides per month, and not enough medical transport rides. I don't qualify for 'The Ride'."

- **Disability Prevalence:** 39% of Brookline residents age 75+ report at least one disability.
- **Accessibility:** Stakeholders noted that many homes, businesses, and community spaces remain difficult to navigate for people using walkers or wheelchairs.
- **Infrastructure concerns:** Residents frequently cited concerns about unsafe sidewalks, winter conditions, and pedestrian infrastructure.
- **Age-friendly environment:** Public Works staff identified gaps in the ADA network and aging infrastructure as ongoing challenges.

CURRENT & FUTURE PROGRAMS AT THE BROOKLINE SENIOR CENTER



The Brookline Senior Center is an invaluable resource, and residents want the Center to continue to expand options for participation, but its capacity to serve the diverse needs and preferences of older residents is limited.

- **Participation at the Senior Center:**

34% of survey respondents have attended the Senior Center. Participation in programs and use of services offered by the Brookline Senior Center is more common among older residents.

- **The Brookline Senior Center** opened in 2001, a time when approximately 9,028 residents were age 60 or older compared to 2024, when approximately 13,347 residents are age 60 and older.

- **Senior Center Capacity:** Stakeholders noted that the current facility is “at capacity” and residents described it as “crowded,” with concerns about limited parking and insufficient space for programming

“Senior center is too small for the number of elderly who live in Brookline, Classes in exercise in Brookline are too small and fill up fast. Space is inadequate. A much larger building is needed with parking!”

“I cannot attend usual programs because transportation is not available after 2:30. It is impossible to drive and park in the winter months! I feel very isolated!!”

- **Parking Challenges:** Parking emerged as a significant barrier for many current and occasional users of the Senior Center. Approximately one-third of respondents who attend at least monthly (35%) and those who attend a few times per year (32%) indicated that more parking would increase their participation, making it one of the most frequently cited factors influencing Senior Center use.
- **Programming preferences:** Survey respondents expressed strong interest in expanded educational, cultural, and wellness programming. These findings suggest continued demand for additional space to accommodate fitness, learning, and cultural programming.
- **Weekend Programming:** 37% of respondents would like to see increased weekend programming.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES



Promoting widespread awareness of local services, programs, and resources strengthens the impact of community assets.

- **Lack of awareness:** Among residents who do not currently attend the Senior Center, 55% reported that having more knowledge about available programs and services would make them more likely to participate. It was the most commonly cited factor influencing future engagement.

"I would attend evening activities...but currently, I am not aware of the current programs. More direct outreach to elders in the community is needed (phone/mail)."

- **Preferred information channels:** Non-attendees were more likely to rely on email/text (44%), local online newspapers (34%), and the Town website (33%) than on Senior Center publications.
- **Volunteer awareness:** 38% of adults ages 60–69, 40% of those ages 70–79, and 29% of those ages 80+ said they would volunteer if they had more information about opportunities.

- **Need for coordinated communications:** There is some confusion around the various organizations in Brookline that promote programs and services focused on growing older in Brookline (Senior Center, Age and Dementia Friendly Initiative, Council on Aging, BrooklineCAN, Friends of Brookline Senior Center).
- **Modernizing Senior Center identity:** Focus group participants expressed the idea that many adults do not "feel old enough" to participate at the Brookline Senior Center and yet they still have needs that are relevant to the services provided by the Brookline Senior Center. Positioning the organization as a lifelong community resource that supports residents as they plan for, prepare for, and experience later life may increase engagement among younger older adults and those still in the workforce.

"Brookline is great and could do so much more. The few times I have visited the Senior Center to see what is offered I have felt like I entered an assisted living facility."

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Brookline is encouraged **to actively expand its community efforts** to address the needs of the town's aging population. Key recommendations include:

- **Address financial security** by continuing to review and expand existing property tax relief programs to help older homeowners remain in their homes.
- **Prioritize outreach and in-home supports for adults ages 80 and older**, particularly those living alone or without nearby family support.
- **Expand support for family caregivers** and identify pathways to reach “younger older adults” who would benefit from caregiving support.
- **Prioritize the restoration and expansion of transportation services** that help older adults access healthcare appointments.
- **Conduct an accessibility review of municipal facilities, community destinations, and public spaces** to ensure they can accommodate residents with mobility limitations. Continue to incorporate Age-Friendly principles into all municipal planning efforts across departments and boards.
- **Develop a long-term facilities strategy** that enables more residents to be served by the Senior Center including consideration of renovation, expansion, or alternative and satellite service delivery models.
- **Reposition the Senior Center as a central hub for information, engagement, and community connection** by leading or participating in a coordinated communications strategy using multiple platforms including print, digital, and telephone.

CONCLUSION

As the number of older residents grows, so too will the need for resources, programs, and services that allow them to remain engaged, independent, and supported in Brookline. These insights point toward both the **assets Brookline can build upon** and the **critical areas of investment and dialogue** needed to strengthen the community for its older residents.