

2018

# CENTRAL SQUARE CAMBRIDGE

**COMMERCIAL DISTRICT ASSESSMENT**



Prepared by:  
**Community Development Department  
Economic Development Division  
City of Cambridge**



# Acknowledgments

## Executive Office

Louis A. DePasquale, *City Manager*  
Lisa Peterson, *Deputy City Manager*

## City Council

Marc C. McGovern, *Mayor*  
Jan Devereux, *Vice Mayor*  
Dennis J. Carlone  
Craig A. Kelley  
Alanna M. Mallon  
Sumbul Siddiqui  
E. Denise Simmons  
Timothy J. Toomey, Jr.  
Quinton Y. Zondervan

## Community Development Department

Iram Farooq, *Assistant City Manager*  
Sandra Clarke, *Deputy Director*  
Christina DiLisio, *Associate Economic Development Specialist*  
Lisa Hemmerle, *Director of Economic Development Division*  
Michael Rosenberg, *Intern, Economic Development Division*  
Pardis Saffari, *Senior Economic Development Specialist*

## Business Association

Central Square Business  
Association

## In this Report

Existing conditions, business data, opportunities, and qualitative depictions of the neighborhood were gathered from more than 500 surveys of neighborhood merchants, shoppers, workers, and residents. Additional data gathered in this report comes from data collected from a .25 mile walking distance (also known as a walk-shed) around the commercial district. Boundaries of the Central Square trade area data can be found on page 14 of this report.

### *Jump to...*

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## **Purpose of the District Assessment**

The purpose of the Central Square Commercial District Assessment is to highlight the neighborhood's existing business landscape and consumer characteristics.

Understanding the current business landscape provides the City and local business associations with a better knowledge of how Central Square visitors and residents utilize the district and how they would like the district to evolve in the future.

Data in this report will also assist business owners seeking a location in Central Square, and help current business owners understand potential opportunities for growth.

Key issues and opportunities identified through this assessment will help prioritize the city and local business associations initiatives and serve as an informational and marketing resource for the neighborhood.

# ABOUT CENTRAL SQUARE

## Background

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Central Square serves as the traditional downtown for Cambridge, playing many roles as a vibrant, mixed-use district. It is central in many ways—it is the seat of City government, it is mid-way between Harvard to the west and MIT to the east, and it is surrounded by four dense, livable neighborhoods.

The character of Central Square changes along the length of Massachusetts Avenue, with a strong institutional presence at either end. At the heart of the Square, City Hall and the Lombardi Building form the center of Cambridge city government, with the City's Senior Center across the street, adjacent to the YMCA. Nearby are the YWCA (Temple Street), and offices for the Cambridge Learning Center, Multi-Service Center, and Cambridge Housing Authority in the historic old police station building (Western Avenue). Continuing eastward, in the block between Prospect and Pearl Street, Central Square Station is one of the busiest on the MBTA Red Line, complemented by bus stops for the many lines that link the Square to the broader region.

There are several mixed-use blocks between the Station and Lafayette Square at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street (also known as Jill Brown Rhone Park). Altogether, the Square features a vibrant arts and culture atmosphere created by its numerous ethnic restaurants, interesting shops, small offices, and diverse nightlife. In the daytime, there is a strong business presence in buildings throughout the length of the Square, with a mix of life science, technology and other professional services. In 2012, the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) designated the Square as a Cultural District, one of the first fifteen cultural districts in the state.

## Demographics

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More than 25,000 residents (ESRI Community Analyst, November 2017) of varying ethnicities and incomes call Central Square home. The Square has a large population of Asian (21.2%), African American (15.1%), and Hispanic (10.5%) residents, making it one of the most diverse commercial districts in Cambridge. The Square also includes a large daytime worker population (24,652), bringing in thousands of workers to the Square every day to shop, dine, and explore. For more information on Central Square demographics, refer to page 12 of the report.

## Future Opportunities

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Central Square's growth as a district is tied to a unique set of characteristics that have been cultivated over time: a strong history, transit connectivity, and cultural and social services assets. In recent years, new commercial and residential activity has brought new economic activity to the neighborhood, with more in the pipeline, such as Mass and Main, 10 Essex Street, and 907 Main Street. Meanwhile, the City began implementation of such projects as bicycle safety improvements to Massachusetts Ave. and Western Ave., improvements to storm-water management through the Port Infrastructure Improvements Project, a Warming Center (for unsheltered adults), and the development of a new Cambridge Police Central Square Reporting Station. Through initiatives like the redesign of River Street/Carl Barron Plaza, the community continues to collaborate with public and private partners to ensure these new investments translate into economic opportunity for all Central Square residents and business owners.

### Notable Places



GRAFFITI ALLEY



CENTRAL SQUARE T STOP

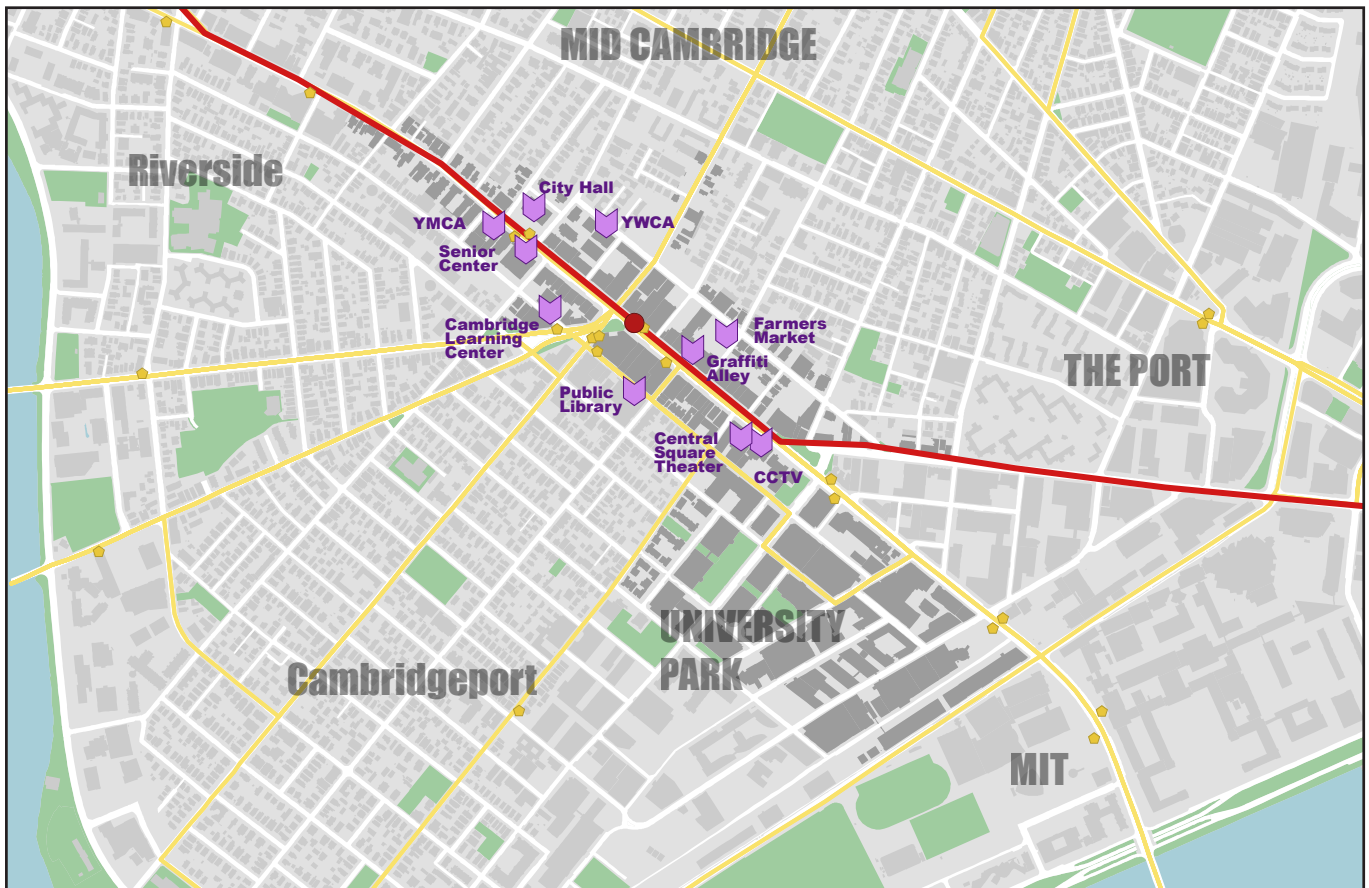


CITY HALL



CENTRAL FLEA

# NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT



## Key Items



## Transit Scores

Bike Score

**99**



Walk Score



**97**

Transit Score

**72**



## Transportation



**5** Hubway Stations



**1** Subway Station

Weekday Riders **15,326**



**7** Bus Routes  
1, CT1, 47, 70A  
91, 64, 83

## Parking\*



**4** Public Parking Facilities  
3 Lots & 1 Garage

**405** Parking Spaces

\*Note: These numbers do not include the parking lots under construction nor the street metered spaces.

## Neighborhood Merchant Group



## Community Events

Central Flea  
Dumpling Festival  
City Dance Party

Sources: MBTA, Walk Score  
Photos: Central Square Business Association, Hubway

# KEY FINDINGS

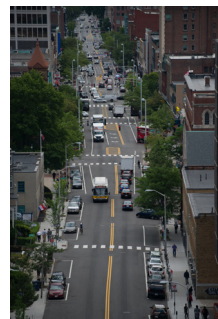
Identified through District Assessment Surveys

## Strengths

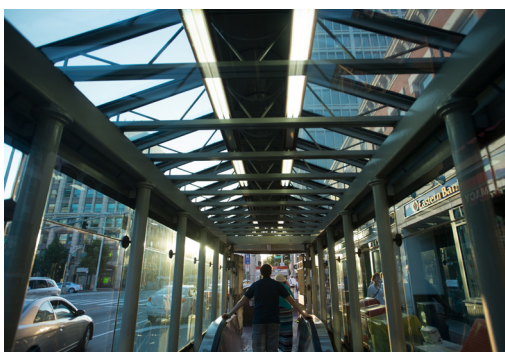
- Many long standing local businesses
- Various governmental and social services available
- Accessible to four diverse residential neighborhoods
- Excellent transportation accessibility via subway, bus, car, and bike
- Businesses and educational institutions that bring thousands of workers
- State Cultural District Designation
- New residential development bringing in new customers to local businesses

## Challenges

- Rapidly increasing commercial rents apply pressure to local businesses and their ability to offer affordable goods
- Real and perceived safety concerns, both day and night
- Large disparity between the number of retail and food options
- Considerable foot traffic from social/governmental services and transportation hubs contribute to the strain on public realm maintenance
- Changing demographics and consumer preferences require longstanding businesses to adapt in order to grow and better serve a changing clientele



Photos: Kyle Klein (Top Left, Bottom Right) and Gretchen Ertl (Top Center & Right, Bottom Left & Center)



## Opportunities

- ◆ Attract new businesses to vacant storefronts that meet neighborhood demand for local businesses, affordable food options, and clothing and other general merchandise retailers
- ◆ Create and market a unified cultural district identity for the Central Square district, including more arts and culture events
- ◆ Develop wayfinding materials and guides to direct more workers, residents, and visitors to the full array of local retail and restaurant options
- ◆ Continue to clean and maintain the streets and sidewalks across Central Square
- ◆ Program existing private and public open spaces and add new streetscape amenities and beautification elements
- ◆ Continue to support services for business owners that plan on growing in place

# BUSINESS LANDSCAPE

## Ground Floor Business Inventory

**163**

Total Number of Storefronts

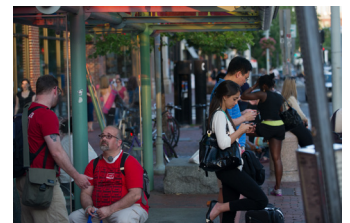
**5%\***

Storefront Vacancy

\*Note: Numbers are based on a ground floor storefront survey conducted in October 2017, some of the vacant properties were under lease negotiations at time of the survey

## Storefront & Retail Mix

Restaurants/Bars	46
Commercial Banks	9
Hair, Nail, & Beauty Salons/Spas	9
Professional Services & Real Estate Offices	8
Medical Services	8
Vacant/Under Negotiation	8
Religious	7
Music/Book/Art Supply	7
Other Services	7
Bodegas & Liquor Stores	7
Café	6
Laundry Services, Tailoring, Shoe Repair	6
Social/Governmental Services	5
Hardware & Home Goods Stores	5
Dance/Theater/TV	4
Gyms & Recreation	3
Recreation Retail	3
Vintage/Secondhand	3
Groceries, Supermarkets	3
Health & Personal Care Stores	2
Electronics & Cell Phone Stores	2
Gas Stations	1
Flower Stores	1
Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers	1
General Merchandise Stores	1
Hotel	1

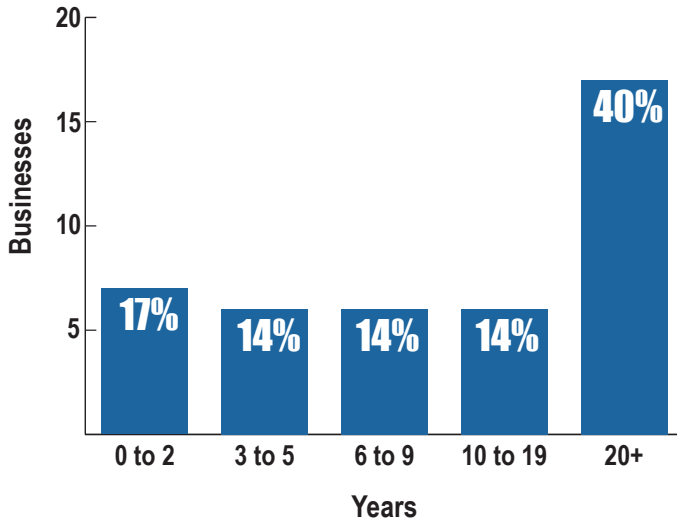


Source: Based on Storefront Inventory Survey October 2017  
Photos: Gretchen Ertl



# What We Heard From Central Square Merchants

How many years have you been in business here?



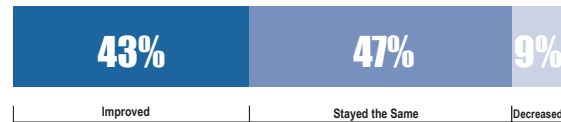
How many employees do you have?

**20**  
Average  
**10**  
Median

Do you Own or Rent your property?



Over the past year, has your business improved, stayed the same, decreased?



What changes need to occur on or around your corridor to attract more shoppers?\*

	% Merchants
Safety	74%
Sanitation	60%
Parking	55%
Community Events/Square Marketing	47%
Storefront Improvements	33%
Business to Business Communication	24%

What kind of resources would help you grow your business?\*

	% Merchants
Marketing Support	41%
Space Improvements	29%
Assistance with Regulatory Compliance	15%
Training for Staff	9%
Financing	6%
Legal/Lease Support	0%

What changes would you suggest to improve Central Square for residents, pedestrians, and shoppers?



**Police and Safety**



**Cleanliness**



**Help The Homeless**



**More Events**

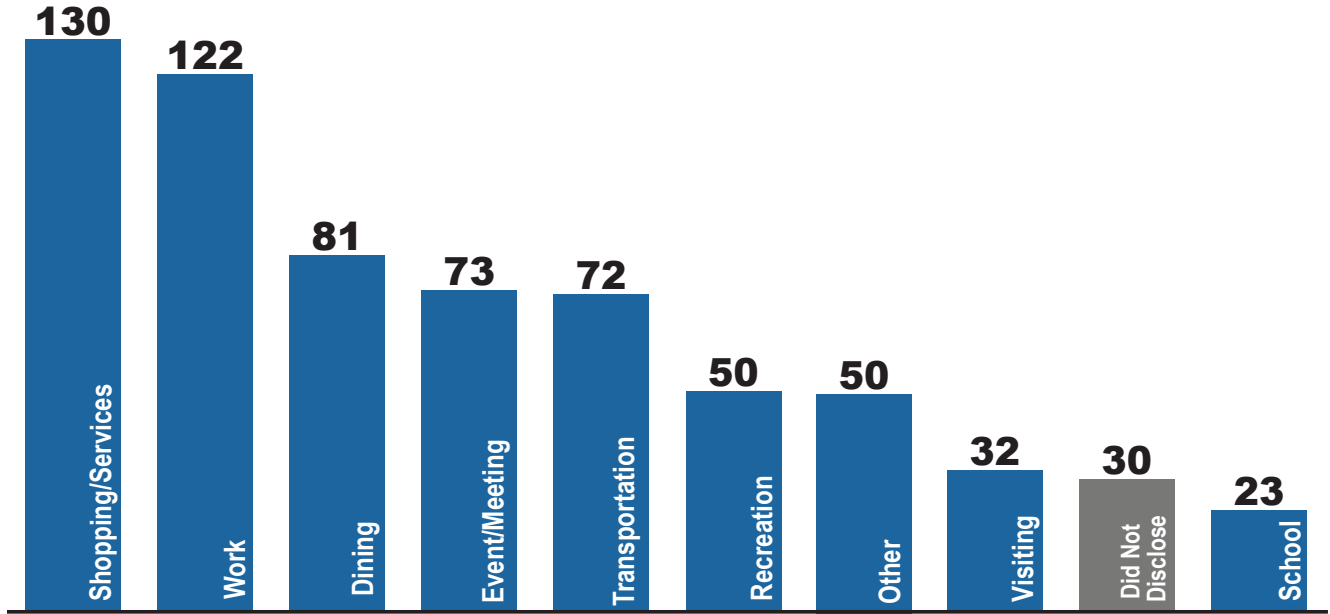
Source: Based on 40 responses to the Central Square Merchant Survey (September 2017)

\*Note: Respondants were allowed to chse more than one answer, totals may be more than 100%

# CUSTOMER OUTLOOK

## What We Heard From Shoppers

What is your primary purpose for being in Central Square?\*



What are the most common items you purchase in Central Square?\*

Item	% Shoppers
Food/Groceries	80%
Beauty/Personal Care Products	23%
Arts/Crafts	22%
Wine/Beer/Spirits	22%
Clothing	19%
Home Goods	17%
Accessories	7%
Electronics/Gifts	6%

What are the most common services you use in Central Square?\*

Service	% Shoppers
Restaurant (Sit-Down)	57%
Restaurant (Take-Out)	49%
Music/Performing Arts Venue	20%
Medical	7%
Other	6%
Pharmacy	5%
Hair Salon/Barber	5%
Dental	2%

If not Central Square, where do you shop?



Online  
**33%**



Elsewhere in Cambridge  
**24%**



Boston  
**20%**



Grocery not in the area  
**16%**



Other Communities  
**13%**



Did not Respond  
**42%**

Note: Percentages for these categories are based on the 58% of survey respondents who responded to this question.

Source: Central Square Customer Intercept Survey (September 2017)

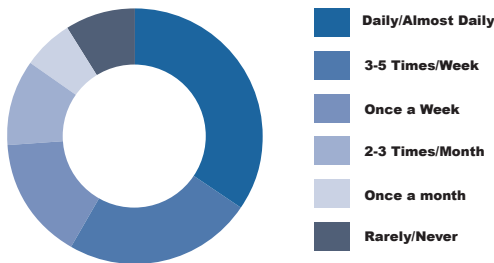
\*Note: Respondants were allowed to chse more than one answer, totals may be more than 100%

# What We Heard From Shoppers

## How do you usually travel to get to Central Square?\*

	% Shoppers
<b>MBTA</b>	<b>68%</b>
Bus	36%
Subway	32%
<b>Walk</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>Drive</b>	<b>27%</b>
Alone	14%
Uber/Lyft/Taxi	8%
Carpool	5%
<b>Bike</b>	<b>19%</b>
Own	16%
Hubway	3%
<b>Company Shuttle</b>	<b>1%</b>

## How often do you usually go shopping in Central Square?



## When do you usually go shopping in Central Square?\*

	% Shoppers
<b>Weekdays</b>	<b>35%</b>
Weekday Nights	18%
Weekends	22%
Weekend Nights	9%
<b>No Set Time</b>	<b>39%</b>

## What new businesses would you like to see?



Did not Respond 29% \*Note: Percentages for these categories are based on the 71% of survey respondents who responded to this question.

## What would make you shop here more?



Did not Respond 43% \*Note: Percentages for these categories are based on the 57% of survey respondents who responded to this question.

## What changes would you like to see?



Did not Respond 42% \*Note: Percentages for these categories are based on the 58% of survey respondents who responded to this question.

Source: Central Square Customer Intercept Survey (September 2017)

\*Note: Respondants were allowed to chse more than one answer, totals may be more than 100%

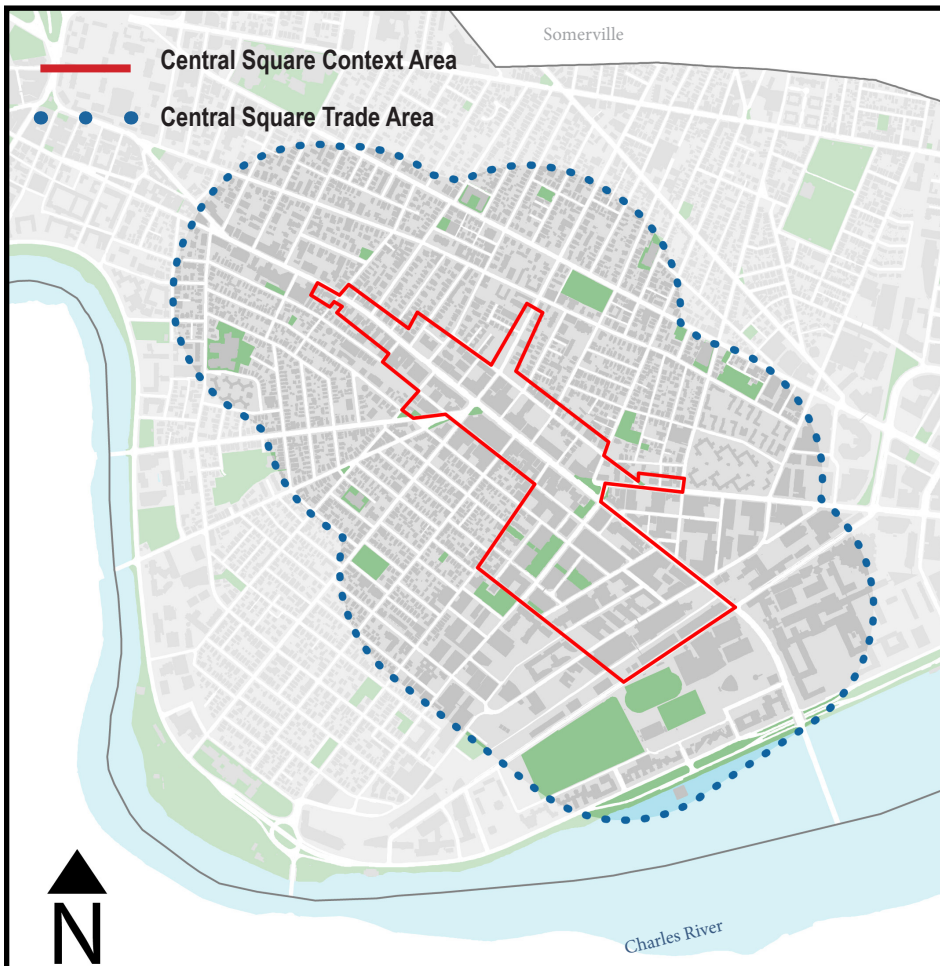
# DATA APPENDIX

## Survey Methodology

A variety of City staff and volunteers surveyed people in Central Square over two weeks in September 2017 during peak times: morning, mid-day, and evening. We received 478 surveys from this effort. Additionally, City staff and the Central Square Business Association conducted a merchant survey. The merchant survey was conducted online and in person, and was available for 4 weeks, starting in mid-September. We received 40 responses to the merchant survey.

## Context Area

Central Square is defined in two ways in this report. The “Context Area” outlined in the map below refers to the commercial district boundaries identifying the greatest concentration of businesses in the Central Square area. The data presented in the Ground Floor Business Inventory on p.8 refers to businesses located in the Context Area and all surveys were distributed and taken within this boundary. The “Trade Area” represents the location of the residents who live a quarter mile from the Context Area and are most served by the commercial district. Responses from this demographic are reflected in the report’s Appendix, pp.14-16.



## Trade Area Demographics

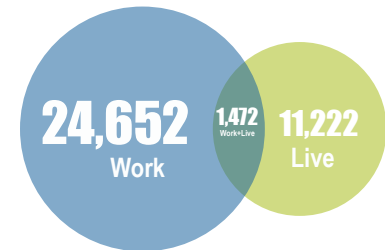
### Total Population

<b>25,788</b>	Central Square
<b>114,866</b>	Cambridge
<b>6,884,028</b>	Massachusetts

### Average Household Size

<b>2.02</b>	Central Square
<b>2.02</b>	Cambridge
<b>2.50</b>	Massachusetts

## Commuting Patterns



<b>24,652</b>	Work in Central Square, live elsewhere
<b>1,472</b>	Live & Work in Central Square
<b>11,222</b>	Live in Central Square, work elsewhere

Source: OnTheMap data 2015  
Data based on Origin Destination Employer Statistics

## Median Household Income

<b>\$75,354</b>	Central Square
<b>\$77,105</b>	Cambridge
<b>\$71,460</b>	Massachusetts

Source: ESRI Community Analyst: US Census 2010 ESRI 2017 Estimates (November 2017)

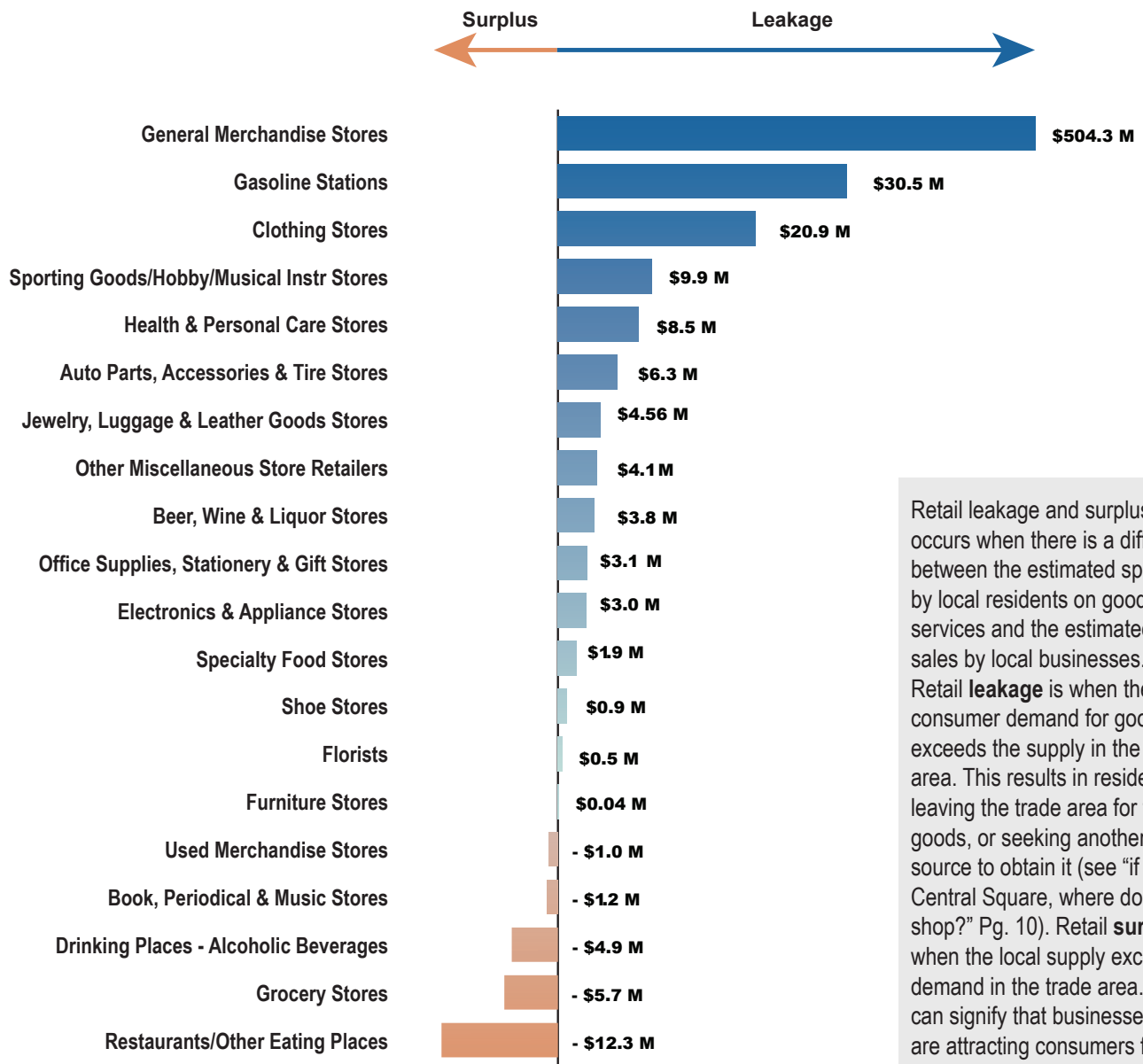
# Central Square Retail Opportunity

Residents Spend  
**\$126 M**  
 each year on  
 goods and services

Local businesses make  
**\$150 M**  
 each year in  
 retail sales

Each year,  
**\$23.9 M**  
 is spent from  
 non-residents

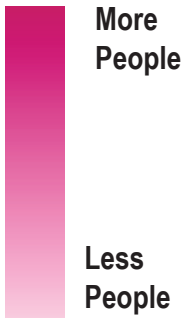
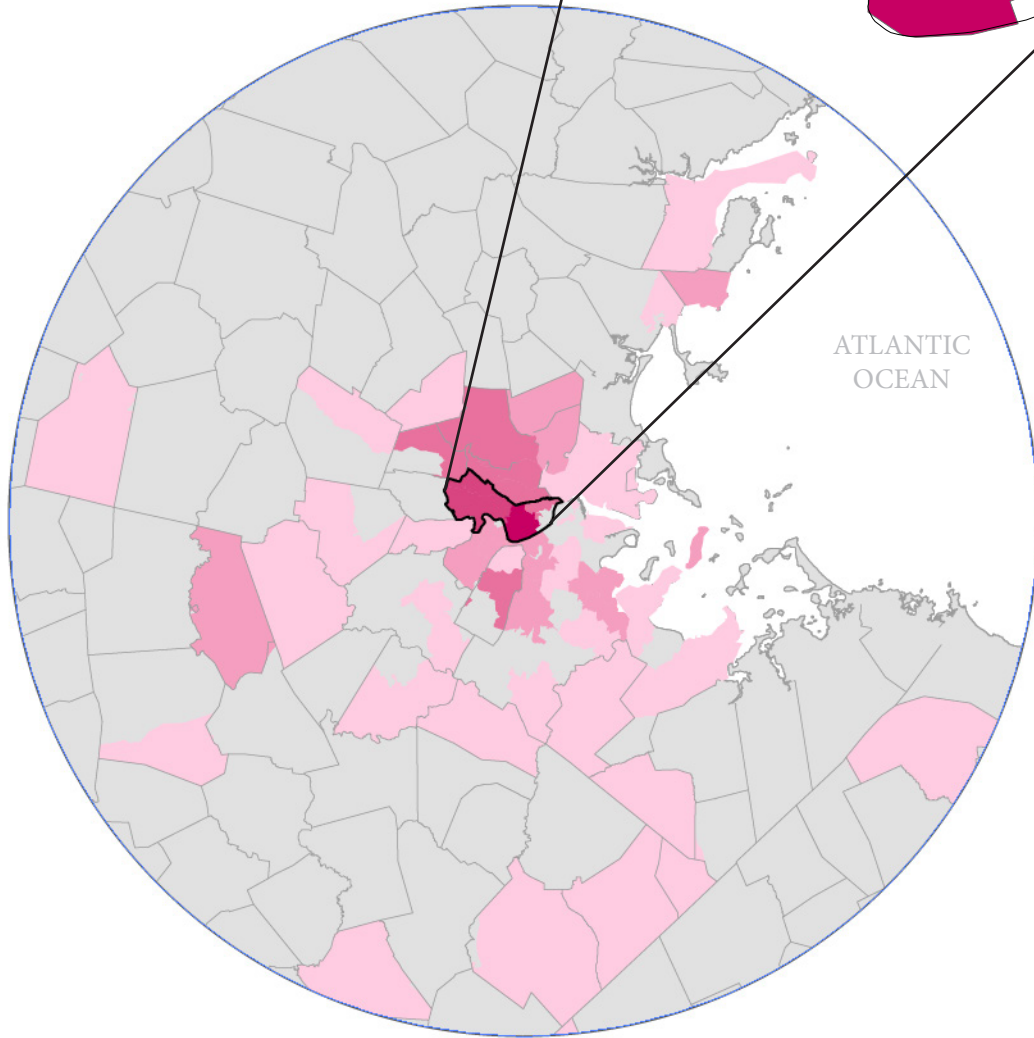
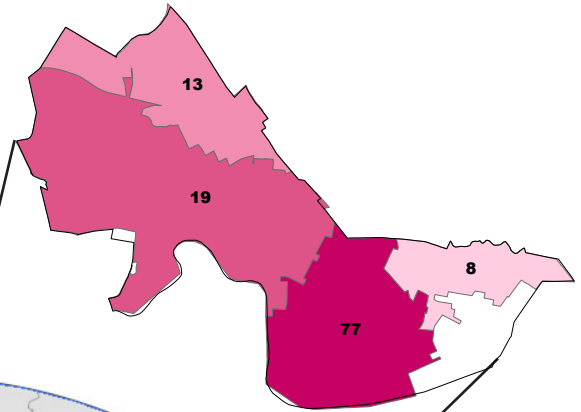
## Retail Leakage & Surplus



Retail leakage and surplus occurs when there is a difference between the estimated spending by local residents on goods/services and the estimated sales by local businesses. Retail **leakage** is when the local consumer demand for goods exceeds the supply in the trade area. This results in residents leaving the trade area for these goods, or seeking another source to obtain it (see “if not Central Square, where do you shop?” Pg. 10). Retail **surplus** is when the local supply exceeds demand in the trade area. This can signify that businesses are attracting consumers from outside the trade area.

# Survey Respondent Locations

The map below shows the home location of survey participants. They provided their home location by zip code and the most frequent are mapped here. 451 (94%) survey respondents shared their zip code.



**45%**  
Cambridge Residents

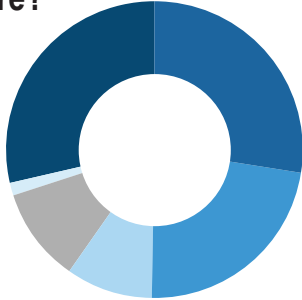
**NOT PICTURED**  
Other Places in Massachusetts  
New York  
California  
Pennsylvania  
Maine

Source: Central Square Customer Intercept Survey (September 2017)

# Demographics

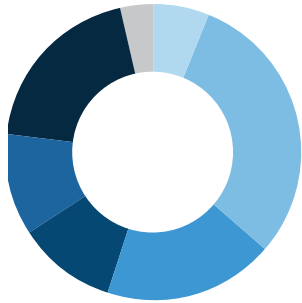
## Shoppers | Central Square | Cambridge

What is your relationship to Central Square?



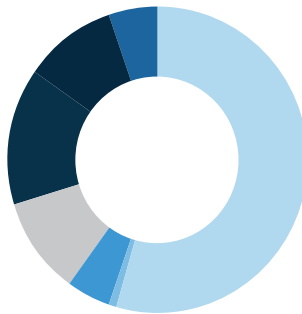
	% Shoppers
Other	30%
Resident	29%
Worker	24%
Student	10%
Visitor	1%
Did not Disclose	11%

What is your age?



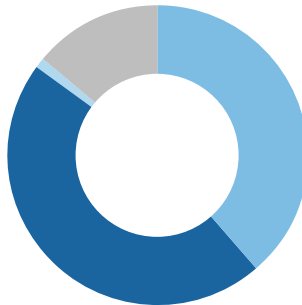
	% Shoppers	% Central Square	% Cambridge
60+	19%	13%	16%
50-59	11%	8%	9%
40-49	11%	8%	9%
30-39	19%	21%	20%
20-29	30%	36%	30%
<19	6%	14%	16%
Did not Disclose	4%	X	X

What is your race or ethnicity?



	% Shoppers	% Central Square	% Cambridge
Asian	10%	21.1%	18.9%
Black / African American	10%	15.1%	12.9%
Mixed	5%	5.4%	5.1%
Hispanic	5%	10.5%	9.6%
Other	1%	2.9%	2.8%
White/Caucasian	55%	55.3%	60.2%
Did not Disclose	14%	X	X

What is your gender?



	% Shoppers	% Central Square	% Cambridge
Female	46%	48.7%	50.9%
Male	39%	51.3%	49%
Other	1%	X	X
Did not Disclose	14%	X	X

# CENTRAL SQUARE CAMBRIDGE

COMMERCIAL DISTRICT ASSESSMENT

## About the Economic Development Division

The Economic Development Division (EDD) is responsible for a wide range of activities designed to meet the City's need for a diversified and thriving economic base. EDD does this through promoting thriving commercial districts; cultivating a supportive environment for small, women and minority-owned businesses; and marketing Cambridge as a location for business and maintaining a supportive business climate. EDD offers various resources and services to the businesses community of Cambridge such as site search and selection assistance, one-on-one meetings with staff, various classes and workshops, expert consulting services in various industries, interior improvement grants, ADA accessibility grants, and storefront improvement grants. For more information on any of these programs visit:

**[cambridgema.gov/business](http://cambridgema.gov/business)**

## Sources

ESRI and Infogroup, INC. November 2017 ESRI Retail MarketPlace Profile.

ESRI and U.S Census Bureau. November 2017 ESRI Community Profile.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2015. OnTheMap Application.

Photo Credits: Kyle Klein Photography; Gretchen Ertl Photography; Central Square Business Association

**[cambridgema.gov/cdd](http://cambridgema.gov/cdd)**

