



DISPLACEMENT AND NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE IN DORCHESTER

A Research Synthesis

Partnership with Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation

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Executive Summary

This report examines how small businesses and commercial landlords in Dorchester experience and respond to displacement pressures. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the study identifies key themes related to community belonging, affordability, lease stability, commercial resilience, and neighborhood change. Findings highlight the interconnected nature of commercial and residential displacement and suggest strategies for supporting long-term community stability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The neighborhood of Dorchester, historically, has been one of Boston's most affordable neighborhoods. Changes within Dorchester are extremely prevalent; things like rapid demographic change, rising commercial rents, and accelerating real estate investment have led to the continued effects of gentrification. These issues have reshaped many urban communities across the country, pushing out residents and local businesses alike. As we all know, gentrification and its impact on residential displacement is a well-documented study; nearly half of Boston's renters are housing cost burdened, meaning that half of renters spend at least 30% of their earnings on their living. However, our focus looks at something that isn't really addressed as much, commercial displacement and the pressures facing small businesses and the landlords who lease to them. This is important to us because these businesses have deep impacts on the neighborhood's identity and economic vitality. These local businesses are the engines of many communities and are important in creating a sense of bond and a collective prosperity amongst residents. In our research, we sought to identify the different ways in which small businesses and commercial landlords navigate and respond to displacement pressure. Understanding the perspectives of local business owners and their landlords is essential for community development and better public policy practices.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

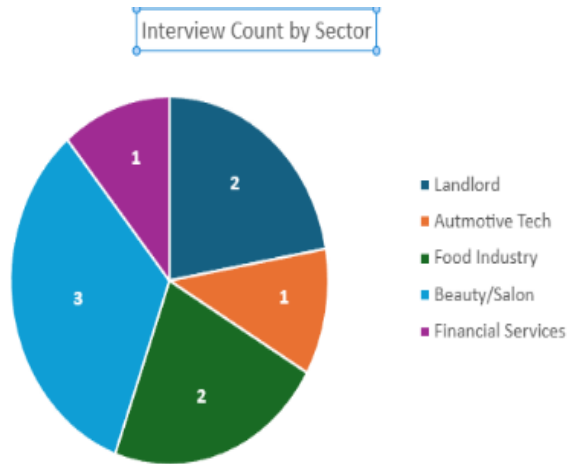
Research Question: How do small business and commercial landlords experience, navigate, and shape displacement pressure in Dorchester's commercial corridors?

Our research explored how small business owners and commercial landlords in Dorchester experience, respond to, and navigate displacement pressures within changing commercial corridors. The study aimed to connect individual stories and lived experiences to broader planning, economic, and neighborhood transformation processes occurring in the area. The project used a qualitative, community-based research approach centered on semi-structured interviews. Rather than focusing solely on statistics or economic indicators, the research emphasized the everyday experiences of people living and working in Dorchester's local business environment. Interviews focused on issues such as rising rents, business stability, neighborhood change, customer shifts, and long-term concerns about remaining in the community.

The research team consisted of one professor and five students. Approximately 90 business-related contacts were collected, and outreach efforts were made to 55 individuals through multiple methods, including in-person visits, phone calls, Zoom meetings, and email communication. In total, interviews were conducted with nine participants, including seven business owners and two commercial landlords. Although the study provided valuable insights into commercial displacement and local economic change, several limitations affected the research process. The project was conducted within a short three-week period, which limited the number of participants who could be recruited and interviewed. The compressed timeline also reduced opportunities for deeper follow-up conversations and broader data collection. Additionally, outreach efforts resulted in lower response rates than expected. Many potential participants did not respond to phone calls or emails, which limited the overall research sample. Some individuals were also hesitant or unwilling to participate in interviews. Concerns related to confidentiality, distrust, and the sensitivity of discussing business and financial conditions likely contributed to this reluctance. Despite these limitations, the research offers important perspectives on how local businesses experience neighborhood change and displacement pressures in Dorchester, while highlighting the human dimensions of local economic development and urban transformation.

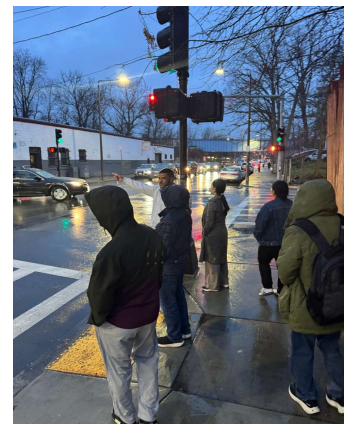
3. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF THE RESEARCH

We experienced quite a few challenges and limitations when trying to conduct interviews with some of the local business owners and landlords. Once our research concluded, we agreed upon as a group on the issues we felt we ran into and came up with three big issues. The first was the time constraint we felt we were under, again, the research was conducted within three weeks,



really restricting the number of participants that could be recruited and interviewed. Obviously, any research is better with more time, but combined with the lack of response and the due date proved challenging. We believe this may have narrowed the scope of data collection and reduced potential opportunities for follow-ups and reaching out to more local businesses rather than corporations with business in the Dorchester area.

Another limitation we agreed upon, which we've just mentioned, is the lack of responses we received throughout the period. The outreach we conducted unfortunately resulted in lower-than-expected response rates. Many potential participants did not reply to phone calls and emails, limiting the size of the research sample. This, along with the fact that the time in which we had to conduct the research was relatively short, really felt like it hampered the pool of interviewees. Our last agreed-upon challenge was in the instances we were able to get hold of potential participants; many were just unwilling to participate and be a part of the study. Some contacted individuals declined or were apprehensive to take part in the study.



It was understood that random people coming into a store asking the owners to participate in a study, having no prior briefing, could be concerning, particularly to communities where English is not the primary language or where relations with institutions/agencies are shaky. We believe concerns around confidentiality, distrust, or sensitivity around business and financial matters likely contributed to reluctance from some of the community members. We believe much of our luck with obtaining interviewees occurred through the connections of Codman Square Redevelopment Corporation, showcasing the good work that's been done in educating and assisting the local community businesses.

4. CODING THEMES

To give context into our work, our qualitative analysis of our interviews highlighted four key themes we felt were imperative to local economic development. These themes touch on the importance of what each respective landlord and business owner values and the unique and key issues they face in the changing times.

The first theme we wanted to touch on was the Advantages the interviewees felt they had being in Codman Square. This theme was established to understand what made this area better than others. Essentially, what we wanted was insight on what makes this area so beneficial and attractive. We feel that highlighting the unique assets of Codman Square and the broader Dorchester community is important so that when reflecting on actions to take we can focus on what makes business prosper and grow, this is something that has meaningful draws for both businesses and residents alike. The second theme we established was Sense of Belonging where interviewees had expressed deep emotional ties to the Dorchester community, sharing their experiences and history with the area. A big cause to the longevity and prosperity of many local businesses are their ties to the community establishing trust and a bond that is further than transactional.

Our third theme is Challenges; this helped us identify significant pressures and difficulties faced in recent years. Every community is different and unique and sometimes the issues and challenges they face are too, were explored the challenges the interviewees face to use Codman Square Redevelopments knowledge to address and identify known issues. Our last theme was the business strategies that the interviewees conducted. With this theme we searched through the interview transcripts to understand how participants described adaptive strategies on how they have continued to navigate displacement pressure.

5. BUSINESS OWNER FINDINGS

The business owner interviews revealed how deeply connected small businesses are to the social, cultural, and economic life of Codman Square. Across the seven interviews, business owners discussed both the advantages and challenges of operating in Dorchester while also reflecting on the increasing pressures created by rising costs, displacement, and neighborhood change. Although participants represented different industries and backgrounds, several common themes emerged throughout the interviews, including sense of belonging, affordability, community relationships, lease instability, and strategies for remaining in the neighborhood despite growing uncertainty.

Throughout this and the landlord section, participants are identified as P1, P2, and so on in order to maintain confidentiality.

5.1. SENSE OF BELONGING

One of the clearest themes across all seven business owner interviews was how deeply connected people felt to Dorchester and Codman Square. These businesses seem like they are more than workspaces in the sense that they are places where business owners feel connected to and tied to a community. For many business owners, the neighborhood is tied to their cultural identity, memories, and sense of purpose. Business owners described Dorchester as home. That connection shaped why they opened businesses there and why they continue trying to stay even as conditions become more difficult. Community relationships were central to this sense of belonging. One owner, P2, who has operated in Dorchester for over 23 years, explained, “I know the people here.” The importance of a business owner knowing the community and having an established business there for decades means that they are able to get to know their clients and build as well as foster long-term relationships with their clients. Another, P3, shared that Dorchester was “the area I knew the most and I was comfortable here.” This specific business owner spoke of originally living in the Dorchester area and then felt comfortable enough to open up her business there. P7 described this connection in especially personal terms, “It feels like I'm around my people...I get to really understand them.” These responses showed how business owners viewed their businesses as closely tied to the people and relationships around them.

Several business owners also described long histories in the neighborhood. Businesses represented in the interviews had operated in Dorchester anywhere from 10 to 35 years. One owner, P7, shared that customers still come in and say: “Hey, I knew your dad when he was 20.” Another owner, P6, explained, “I have been here so long and have never left.” These long-term relationships contributed to a strong sense of stability and attachment to place. As outsiders, seeing the long-time rootedness of these businesses, it really put into perspective what a special place Dorchester is to so many and how much people really value the community and want to continue staying in the city.

Cultural identity also emerged throughout the interviews. Several businesses specifically served Haitian, Vietnamese, Caribbean, and immigrant communities and some identify with these backgrounds as well.. P5 explained: “I’m the only Haitian business in this building. If I am forced to leave... that changes the cultural representation.” This highlighted concerns about how commercial

displacement could also reshape the cultural identity of the neighborhood. For many residents and customers, businesses that reflect their culture, language, and community provide a sense of familiarity, visibility, and belonging.

Maintaining these businesses within the neighborhood was therefore viewed as important not only economically, but culturally and socially as well. Many business owners also described giving back to the community in meaningful ways. P5 discussed giving away approximately 200 turkeys during Thanksgiving. P7 described donating to churches, schools, shelters, and local events. P8 explained: “If someone cannot afford a repair, I try to help as much as I can.” These actions reflected how many business owners viewed themselves as active members of the community rather than simply business operators. These business owners give back to their community because they understand that their businesses make a meaningful impact on their communities and they’re happy to serve others.

5.2. ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

Despite the challenges facing small businesses in Codman Square, business owners also described several advantages that have helped sustain their businesses over time. These advantages explain why many business owners originally chose Dorchester and why they continue trying to remain there despite growing uncertainty. One of the most frequently mentioned advantages was the neighborhood’s visibility and consistent activity. Dorchester Avenue was described as a busy commercial corridor that brings regular foot traffic and customers into the area. This was especially important for businesses that rely heavily on walk-in customers, including restaurants, repair shops, and barbershops. One business owner, P8, explained that “Dorchester Avenue was a good choice because there is always traffic, and many people in this area need their vehicles for work and daily life.” Another business owner described the area simply as “a very busy area.” Business owners viewed this activity as essential to maintaining a stable customer base.

Affordability was another important advantage, particularly for owners reflecting on when they first opened their businesses. Several participants explained that Dorchester offered a realistic opportunity for entrepreneurship at a time when they had limited financial resources. P8 stated that when they first moved to Dorchester, they didn’t have much money and finding an affordable space for their business was important: “When I first started, I didn’t have a lot of money, so I needed a place that I could manage financially.” Similarly, P2 described the area simply as “affordable,” especially compared to other commercial spaces across Boston. For many immigrant and minority business owners, Dorchester provided a more accessible entry point into entrepreneurship and economic stability. In many ways, business owners described Dorchester as functioning like a gateway community, offering opportunities for small business ownership that may have been difficult to access elsewhere in the city. The diversity of the neighborhood also emerged as a significant strength. Business owners described serving customers from many racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and viewed this diversity as one of the reasons their businesses had remained successful over time. One owner explained: “Dorchester is very diverse. I have customers from many different backgrounds... Some people have been coming here for many years,

and now they bring their children or relatives.” These intergenerational customer relationships created a sense of continuity and loyalty that owners valued deeply.

Although many business owners described strong ties to the neighborhood, they also spoke openly about the increasing difficulties of operating a small business in Codman Square. The challenges discussed across the interviews were often interconnected, creating ongoing uncertainty for business owners trying to remain financially stable.

Parking shortages emerged as the most consistent challenge across all seven interviews. Business owners described parking as a daily issue that affects both customer access and overall business activity. P3 stated: “There is limited parking in the area. We do have limited parking here. We’re lucky because we have a small lot out back. But the parking is used by everyone in the area. And that causes me some problems because sometimes when my customers come and want to park, someone else is already using the space who isn’t part of any of the businesses here. It’s not fair to our customers.” P2 explained that “because of the parking limit, they can’t [stay longer]” talking about limited parking session time. P8 described the impact directly: “Parking can be difficult, and traffic has increased. For an auto repair shop, access is very important.” The fact that business owners from different industries raised the same concern suggests that parking has become a broader infrastructure issue affecting the entire commercial corridor.

Rising costs were also described as a major source of stress. Business owners discussed increases in rent, insurance, supplies, utilities, and taxes that have made operating a business more difficult over time. Several participants also noted that their customers are struggling financially, which affects spending habits and overall sales. P8 explained, “The biggest challenge is cost. Everything is more expensive now: parts, tools, rent. It’s harder to manage than before.” The cost of supplies, the cost of labor, the cost of living- all of these are increasing, making it difficult for business owners to stay afloat. P7 described changing customer behavior, which is affecting their slow seasons by stating: “Barbecuing has become a luxury now, not just a regular thing. People are only buying necessities. In the past, someone might experiment with a new cheese. Now it’s, ‘I don’t need that, I’m not buying it.’ So the combination of rising costs and people cutting back is definitely being felt.” P2 noted, “People don’t come as often, because obviously...prices are going up.” Business owners consistently described feeling pressure from both increasing operating expenses and declining customer purchasing power, creating financial uncertainty for many small businesses in the neighborhood.

Lease instability also created significant uncertainty for many businesses. Several business owners described operating under short-term or month-to-month lease agreements that made long-term planning difficult. P5 explained: “My lease is short, about one-and-a-half to two years. That’s not enough stability for long-term planning.” Another owner, P4, described initially feeling anxious about operating month-to-month, explaining, “I’m actually month-to-month now. Because I’ve been there so long, I stopped signing a lease a few years ago. I’m not really sure why the landlord is doing that, but that’s what they have me on now. I got scared at first, but it’s been fine so far.” P4 connected lease instability directly to investment decisions, stating: “I have some savings...but I’m holding onto it. If I knew I could stay here long-term, I would invest that money into growing the business. But right now, it feels too risky.” These concerns affected owners’

willingness to renovate, expand, hire additional staff, or make other long-term investments into their businesses. In this way, lease instability extended beyond housing uncertainty and became an economic development issue as well. Businesses that might otherwise grow, improve storefronts, or expand services were instead operating cautiously due to fears of displacement or unexpected lease changes.

Several business owners also described space limitations as a barrier to growth. Businesses reported having more demand than they could physically accommodate but lacking opportunities to expand within the neighborhood. P8 explained: “Sometimes I have to turn customers away because I don’t have space.” Another owner described having a large customer base but being unable to grow unless a neighboring storefront became available.

Unequal access to support programs also emerged as a challenge. While some business owners had relationships that connected them to grants or funding opportunities, others either did not know these programs existed or were unsuccessful when applying. P4 explained: “I applied for two grants and nothing came through. No programs have been helping...other than just working hard.” These differences in access highlighted how some businesses were better positioned than others to navigate financial instability. Business owners who lacked institutional connections or familiarity with available resources often relied entirely on personal savings, family support, or increased work hours to keep their businesses operating. This uneven access to support created additional barriers for businesses already struggling with rising costs and uncertainty.

Finally, several business owners described the displacement of residents as something they were already experiencing through changes in their customer base. As housing costs continue rising in Dorchester, owners explained that longtime residents are leaving the neighborhood, reducing the number of loyal customers who regularly support local businesses. P7 explained that whether people are moving away or it’s the high cost of living, their slow seasons have gotten really slow. Another owner observed: “A lot of people move out and relocate... Why? Because it’s all cost-based.” These responses showed how residential displacement and commercial instability are closely connected. Several business owners also described an emotional sense of loss as longtime customers and families they had known for decades were priced out of the neighborhood and forced to relocate.

5.3. BUSINESS STRATEGIES

Despite these pressures, business owners described a range of strategies they use to adapt and remain in Codman Square. These strategies reflected creativity, persistence, and a strong reliance on both formal and informal support systems. Adaptive pricing was one of the most common strategies discussed across the interviews. Business owners described purchasing supplies in bulk, adjusting prices frequently, and negotiating directly with suppliers to manage increasing costs while still trying to keep products and services affordable for customers. P7 described personally shopping for supplies and changing prices weekly depending on operating costs. P4 explained: “I raised prices where it’s comfortable for me and comfortable for my clientele.” P3 described “trying to come up with special ideas... better price deals... to continue catering to my customers and attracting new customers.” These approaches reflected the constant adjustments

owners make to remain financially sustainable. It is also important to note that these strategies were largely carried out by the owners themselves, highlighting the amount of work, flexibility, and problem-solving required to continue serving customers while dealing with rising costs of materials, labor, and everyday living expenses. Community relationships also served as an important survival strategy. Some business owners described receiving support through relationships with Codman Square NDC (CSNDC), which helped connect them to grants and funding opportunities. P7 explained that a contact at CSNDC “shared grants and funding that were available to small businesses, things we had no clue were even options,” eventually helping secure funding for equipment. Other owners relied more heavily on informal community networks. P5 explained: “I’ve been relying on community networks. I’ve asked people to let me know if they hear about available spaces. I’m not actively moving yet, but I’m trying to stay informed.” Family support also played an important role for some businesses, particularly those that relied on relatives to share labor responsibilities and reduce operating costs.

Several business owners also described giving back to the community as a way to strengthen relationships and maintain customer loyalty. Donations, free services, sponsorships, and community involvement were described not only as acts of generosity but also as ways of maintaining strong ties to the neighborhood. A smaller number of business owners described using more structured business strategies related to lease negotiations and market research. P6 explained: “I usually research online to see what the market is, and I try to negotiate and keep my lease terms as close to the market as possible.” Combined with longer-term lease agreements, this strategy provided more stability than many other owners described experiencing.

Finally, several business owners emphasized that trust and reputation remain central to their businesses. Rather than relying heavily on advertising or formal marketing strategies, many focused on consistency, honesty, and maintaining strong customer relationships over time. For several business owners, repeat customers and word-of-mouth recommendations were viewed as more valuable than paid promotion. P8 explained: “I focus on being honest and doing good work. If customers trust you, they will come back.” This emphasis on trust reflected the relationship-based nature of many small businesses in Codman Square, where long-term customer loyalty is built through familiarity and personal interactions. Several business owners described serving multiple generations of families or maintaining relationships with customers who had been visiting their businesses for years. In many cases, business owners viewed trust and word-of-mouth reputation as some of the most valuable assets their businesses had developed over time. These relationships also helped businesses remain resilient during periods of financial uncertainty, as loyal customers continued returning even as prices and economic pressures increased.

6. FINDINGS OF THE LANDLORDS

The landlord interviews revealed that commercial landlords play an important role in shaping whether small businesses can remain stable in Dorchester's commercial corridors. While the business owner interviews showed how small businesses experience rising costs, lease uncertainty, and displacement pressure, the landlord interviews showed how rent-setting, lease terms, tenant selection, and landlord-tenant relationships can either reduce or increase those pressures. Across the two landlord interviews, several key themes emerged, including cultural fit, rent flexibility, community-serving commercial space, rising operating costs, tenant fit, business turnover, lease stability, and balanced rent-setting.

Although the two landlord participants represented different types of property ownership, both interviews showed that landlords are not simply passive property owners. Their decisions affect which businesses are able to stay, what kinds of services remain available, and how much stability tenants experience over time. In this way, commercial displacement is shaped not only by market forces, but also by the relationships and decisions between landlords and tenants.

6.1 ADVANTAGES AND SENSE OF BELONGING

One important theme in the landlord interviews was the relationship between commercial space and cultural belonging. P1 described Dorchester as a strong location for Vietnamese businesses because the neighborhood had Vietnamese customers and a supportive community. Reflecting on her experience operating a Vietnamese restaurant before becoming primarily a landlord, P1 explained: "Because it was a Vietnamese restaurant, I was able to meet many Vietnamese people and sell Vietnamese food. The customers liked the food, and the Vietnamese community in Dorchester was very good. Many people there were kind, and the area felt suitable for Vietnamese people." This quote shows that commercial space is not only an economic asset. It can also serve as a cultural anchor where immigrant communities find familiar food, language, relationships, and services.

P1 also connected the value of her property to the surrounding community, stating: "The location is very good for business. It is especially suitable for Vietnamese people and Vietnamese businesses. The area has many Vietnamese customers, and the community is supportive." This suggests that landlords may understand neighborhood value not only through rent or property appreciation, but also through cultural fit and customer relationships. In this case, Dorchester's commercial corridor provided a supportive environment for Vietnamese business activity and community connection.

A second major theme was the role of reasonable or below-market rent in supporting tenant stability. P1 described her rent-setting approach as balanced and relationship-based. She explained: "At the same time, I feel the rent is also reasonable for the tenant. It fits their ability to pay, and it works for me too. I try to keep it balanced so that both sides can continue." This statement shows that rent flexibility can help maintain a stable landlord-tenant relationship. Rather than maximizing rent at the highest possible level, P1 described an approach where both the landlord and tenant benefit from keeping the business in place.

P1 further emphasized this point by explaining: “The relationship is very good. I am not too demanding, and I do not try to charge too much. I try to keep the rent balanced with the market. Because of that, the tenant is satisfied, and I am satisfied too.” This finding is important because it shows how landlord decisions can directly affect displacement outcomes. A landlord who keeps rent reasonable may help reduce the likelihood that a tenant is forced to relocate or close.

P9 also described rent restraint as part of a community development approach. Speaking from the perspective of a mission-driven organization, P9 explained that most commercial tenants are local businesses and that the organization tries to charge below-market rent when possible. As P9 stated, they “tend to be charged below the market, typically,” and “if the property can afford to sustain lower than normal rents,” they try to do so. This highlights an important tension: below-market rent can support local businesses, but it depends on whether the property itself can financially sustain that rent level.

P9 also emphasized that commercial spaces should serve the surrounding community. Rather than filling vacant spaces with any available tenant, P9 described a process of thinking carefully about what kinds of businesses residents actually want and need. P9 explained: “When we put together a new project, we will talk to the community and ask them about ideas they would like to see for the commercial retail space. What kind of tenants are they looking for to serve the neighborhood.” This approach frames commercial leasing as part of community planning, not just property management.

One example P9 gave was the community desire for sit-down restaurants. P9 explained that residents often want “a true sit-down restaurant” where someone could walk from home, sit down, have a meal, and walk back home. P9 connected this directly to belonging, explaining: “That’s what we’re trying to bring into a neighborhood where you can create that sense of community and belonging. Where people can congregate in a healthy way and meet each other. That is so important here for neighborhoods.” This finding shows that landlords can influence the social life of a commercial corridor. Tenant mix affects whether a corridor becomes a place people simply pass through or a place where people gather and build relationships.

Together, these findings show that landlord decisions can support community stability when they prioritize cultural fit, reasonable rent, local businesses, and community-serving spaces. The landlord interviews suggest that commercial belonging is partly produced through decisions about who gets access to space and under what conditions.

6.2 CHALLENGES

The landlord interviews also revealed several challenges that affect commercial stability. One of the most important challenges was rising costs. P9 explained that even when a landlord wants to provide below-market rent, rising construction and operating costs make that harder to sustain. P9 stated: “But it is challenging, too, with rising construction and operating costs. It’s challenging to keep those rents below market because those rents, the costs are rising.” This finding complicates the idea that rent increases are always caused by landlords seeking higher profits. In some cases, landlords also face financial pressures that may eventually affect tenants.

This challenge is especially important for community-oriented landlords. If a landlord wants to support local businesses but faces increasing costs for construction, maintenance, insurance, utilities, or property operations, then below-market rent may become harder to maintain. This suggests that anti-displacement strategies should not only focus on small businesses, but also on the financial conditions that allow landlords to keep commercial space affordable.

Another major challenge was finding the right tenant. P9 described tenant fit as one of the central difficulties of managing commercial space. P9 explained that it is important to make sure the business fits both the location and the needs of the community. As P9 stated, landlords must consider whether “the business is a business that the community needs and wants.” This shows that tenant selection is not only a private leasing decision. It affects the success of the business and the usefulness of the commercial corridor for residents.

P9 also warned that placing the wrong business in a space could lead to failure. P9 explained that if a business does not match neighborhood demand, “you’re setting that business up for failure.” This highlights an important form of commercial instability. Even if a storefront is occupied, the business may not survive if it lacks a customer base or does not provide services residents want. In this way, tenant mismatch can contribute to turnover and weaken the stability of the commercial corridor.

Business turnover also appeared in P1’s interview. P1 described how businesses on Dorchester Avenue have closed, moved, or been replaced by others over time. P1 explained: “On Dorchester Avenue, there have been businesses that closed or moved. For example, Anh Hong Restaurant moved.” P1 also noted: “Sometimes a business leaves, and another business comes in. Whether the new business succeeds depends on how the new owner runs it. Every business is different. Some succeed and some fail.” This description shows that commercial displacement may not always appear as one dramatic event. It can also happen gradually through closures, moves, tenant changes, and the loss of long-standing community businesses.

Even when another business replaces a former one, the neighborhood may still lose continuity, cultural familiarity, and long-term relationships. This connects closely to concerns raised by business owners, who described their businesses as deeply tied to customer loyalty, cultural identity, and community relationships. When a long-standing business closes or relocates, the loss is not only economic. It can also affect the social and cultural identity of the corridor.

6.3 BUSINESS STRATEGIES

The landlord interviews also showed several strategies that can help reduce commercial instability. One important strategy is lease stability. P1 described a long-term lease arrangement with the current tenant, explaining: “The current lease is a 10-year lease. It started in 2016 and will end in August 2026. The tenant has been there for about 10 years. Since their business is doing well and they want to continue, I plan to renew the lease for another 5 years.” This example shows how long leases and renewals can support tenant continuity.

Lease stability matters because many small businesses need time to build customer relationships, recover from startup costs, and plan for future investments. A tenant with a longer lease may feel more secure investing in improvements, equipment, staffing, or marketing. In contrast, short-term or uncertain leases can make business owners hesitant to invest because they do not know whether they will be able to remain in the space. P1's example suggests that renewal and continuity can reduce uncertainty and help businesses remain rooted in the neighborhood.

Balanced rent-setting was another important strategy. P1 described a flexible approach to rent and tenant needs, explaining: "Yes, in the sense that I try to keep things reasonable. I do not overcharge, and I try to keep the rent balanced with the market. If the tenant needs help and I can help, then I am willing to help." This approach supports both the landlord and the tenant. The landlord continues receiving income, while the tenant has a better chance of remaining financially stable.

P1 also emphasized that she does not create unnecessary difficulties for the tenant, stating: "If they need something, they let me know. I do not create restrictions or make things difficult for them." This suggests that communication and flexibility are also part of tenant stability. A positive landlord-tenant relationship can make it easier to address problems before they become threats to the business.

P9 described another strategy: due diligence before signing a lease. P9 explained that the organization does not simply sign a lease with any interested business. Instead, they review the business's financial information, business plan, and marketing plan. P9 stated: "Any business, we just don't sign a lease. We actually have them send us their financials as well as a business and marketing plan." This process helps determine whether the business is financially prepared and whether it understands the neighborhood market.

P9 further explained: "We'd rather keep the space vacant until we know we have the right fit for the commercial tenant. And that that commercial tenant is a viable commercial tenant." This strategy may seem cautious, but it is intended to reduce business failure and turnover. By reviewing the business before leasing the space, the landlord can help avoid placing a tenant in a situation where they are unlikely to succeed. This makes due diligence an anti-displacement strategy because it supports longer-term commercial stability rather than short-term occupancy.

Overall, the landlord interviews show that commercial displacement is shaped by relationships, not just rent levels. Lease stability, rent flexibility, tenant fit, due diligence, and communication can all help small businesses remain in place. However, rising costs and turnover pressures can weaken these stabilizing relationships. The findings suggest that landlords can either contribute to displacement pressure or help reduce it, depending on how they manage rent, leases, tenant selection, and community needs.

The landlord findings also connect closely to the business owner findings. Business owners described affordability, lease uncertainty, customer relationships, and community belonging as central to their ability to stay in Dorchester. The landlord interviews show that these issues are directly affected by landlord practices. When landlords provide reasonable rent, stable leases, and

thoughtful tenant selection, they can help preserve local businesses and the cultural identity of the corridor. When those supports are absent, businesses may face greater uncertainty, delayed investment, or eventual displacement. Therefore, commercial anti-displacement strategies should support both small businesses and the landlords who are willing to maintain affordable, stable, and community-serving commercial spaces.

7. DISCUSSION

The interviews with business owners and landlords revealed that commercial displacement in Codman Square is shaped by far more than rising rent alone. Across both sets of interviews, participants described neighborhood change as something tied to housing affordability, customer displacement, lease stability, cultural identity, and long-term community relationships. While business owners and landlords often experienced these pressures differently, their interviews frequently overlapped in important ways. Across both sets of interviews, the findings suggest that commercial stability in Codman Square depends heavily on relationships, communication, and community continuity, not simply market conditions.

7.1 COMMERCIAL STABILITY DEPENDS ON COMMUNITY STABILITY

One of the clearest patterns across both business owner and landlord interviews was the strong connection between residential displacement and commercial instability. Business owners described longtime customers leaving Dorchester because of rising housing costs, leading to slower business periods and the loss of loyal customers. Landlords observed similar neighborhood changes, with lower-income families and younger residents increasingly priced out of the area. The findings suggest that small businesses depend heavily on long-term community relationships and neighborhood familiarity. As residents leave, businesses lose not only revenue, but also the social connections that owners described as central to their sense of belonging. Several participants reflected on the emotional loss of watching longtime customers disappear from the community. Overall, the interviews showed that residential and commercial displacement are deeply interconnected, and that commercial stability cannot be separated from housing affordability and neighborhood continuity.

7.2. COMMERCIAL SPACE AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Another major theme across both business owner and landlord interviews was that commercial spaces function as important social and cultural infrastructure within Dorchester. Business owners described their businesses as places where immigrant and minority communities feel represented, connected, and culturally supported. Haitian, Caribbean, Vietnamese, and other immigrant-owned businesses were often viewed as spaces that preserve belonging and cultural identity within the neighborhood. Landlord interviews reinforced this idea through discussions about cultural fit and community-serving businesses. P1 described Dorchester as a supportive environment for Vietnamese businesses because of the strong Vietnamese customer base, while P9 emphasized the importance of selecting tenants that contribute positively to neighborhood life and community interaction.

Overall, the findings suggest that commercial corridors in Codman Square serve purposes beyond economic activity alone. Businesses also function as cultural and social spaces that help maintain neighborhood identity, relationships, and community continuity. Several participants expressed concern that displacement could gradually weaken the diversity and local character that many viewed as one of Codman Square's greatest strengths.

7.3. LEASE STABILITY AND DISPLACEMENT PRESSURE

The interviews showed that displacement pressures are often experienced through uncertainty long before businesses are formally displaced. Several business owners described hesitating to invest in renovations, equipment, or expansion because they were unsure whether they could remain in their current spaces. Owners with short-term leases or limited communication from landlords often felt financially vulnerable and uncertain about the future. The landlord interviews also showed how lease arrangements and tenant relationships can either reduce or increase displacement pressure. P1 described maintaining a long-term lease and being flexible with tenants when possible, while P9 explained that CSNDC considers tenant fit, stability, and community needs when leasing commercial spaces. These findings suggest that stable leases, transparent communication, and relationship-based leasing practices can help reduce uncertainty for small businesses. At the same time, landlords also described facing rising maintenance costs, taxes, and operating expenses connected to property ownership in Boston. Overall, the findings demonstrate that commercial displacement is shaped not only by rent levels, but also by relationships, communication, trust, and long-term lease stability.

7.4 UNEQUAL ACCESS TO STABILITY AND RESOURCES

Another important finding was that business owners and landlords do not all have equal access to the resources needed to respond to neighborhood change. Business owners described relying on pricing adjustments, family labor, community relationships, and grant applications to manage rising costs, while several also discussed unsuccessful attempts to access financial support or limited awareness of available programs. The landlord interviews showed similar differences in financial flexibility and institutional support. P9 explained that offering below-market rents is possible in some cases, but rising construction and operating costs make these efforts difficult to sustain over time.

The findings also raised concerns about inequities related to race, access, and opportunity within the commercial corridor. Several participants discussed changes in the racial and cultural makeup of neighborhood businesses and questioned whether resources and opportunities were being distributed equitably. Overall, the interviews suggest that resilience in Codman Square is uneven and strongly shaped by broader structural inequalities.

7.5 THE FUTURE OF CODMAN SQUARE

Both business owners and landlords expressed concern about the future accessibility of small business ownership in Dorchester. Several business owners explained that rising rents, startup costs, and operating expenses have made entrepreneurship much more difficult than in previous decades. Participants questioned whether immigrant and minority entrepreneurs would continue having opportunities to establish businesses in Codman Square. Landlords similarly discussed the challenge of maintaining affordable commercial spaces while facing increasing property expenses and redevelopment pressures. Many participants worried that the commercial corridor could gradually shift away from locally rooted businesses toward businesses serving

wealthier newcomers or outside investment interests. Overall, the findings suggest that displacement in Codman Square affects more than individual businesses alone. Neighborhood change is reshaping community relationships, cultural representation, commercial stability, and the future accessibility of entrepreneurship within Dorchester.

8. RECOMMENDATION

The findings of the research suggest several important planning and policy recommendations aimed at supporting small business stability and reducing commercial displacement pressure in Codman Square and similar Boston neighborhoods. First, the City of Boston and local planning agencies should expand commercial anti-displacement policies that support long-term lease stability for small businesses. Programs encouraging longer lease agreements, mediation assistance during lease negotiations, and protections against sudden rent escalation could provide greater financial predictability for neighborhood-serving businesses. Second, planners and policymakers should strengthen support for immigrant-owned and culturally rooted businesses through multilingual technical assistance programs, legal support services, and targeted corridor preservation initiatives. Many businesses in Codman Square operate as important forms of cultural and social infrastructure and should be recognized within broader neighborhood preservation strategies. Third, increased investment in neighborhood infrastructure, including parking access, transportation improvements, and commercial corridor maintenance, could help address operational challenges repeatedly identified by participants. Improving accessibility and customer convenience may help businesses remain competitive within changing economic conditions. Fourth, greater access to financial assistance and affordable capital is essential for small business sustainability. Many participants described difficulty managing rising operating costs, investing in improvements, or preparing for future uncertainty. Expanding awareness and accessibility of funding opportunities may help businesses remain financially stable and reduce vulnerability to displacement. Several financial resources currently available to small businesses include:

1. The U.S. Small Business Administration SBA 7(a) Loan Program, which provides financing for working capital, equipment purchases, expansion, and lease improvements.
2. The Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation Small Business Technical Assistance Grant Program, which supports underserved and minority-owned businesses through technical and financial assistance.
3. The City of Boston Office of Small Business Small Business Relief Fund and related business stabilization initiatives, which provide grants, training, and emergency support for local businesses.
4. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) small business grants and community development financing programs that support historically underserved entrepreneurs and neighborhood commercial preservation.
5. The Accion Opportunity Fund microloan and flexible lending programs designed to support immigrant-owned and low-income small businesses that may struggle to access traditional bank financing.

Finally, future planning efforts should treat commercial and residential displacement as interconnected issues rather than separate policy concerns. Sustainable neighborhood development requires balancing investment and growth with long-term affordability, cultural preservation, and equitable access to economic opportunity. Supporting small businesses is

therefore not only an economic development strategy but also an important component of maintaining community identity, social stability, and neighborhood resilience.

9. CONCLUSION

The experiences shared by business owners, landlords, and neighborhood stakeholders in Codman Square reveal a commercial district operating under growing economic and social uncertainty. Rising rents, redevelopment pressure, changing customer behavior, and unstable lease structures collectively shape whether small businesses can remain financially viable and socially rooted within the neighborhood. At the same time, participants demonstrated strong emotional attachment to Dorchester and deep commitment to serving their communities. Businesses in Codman Square function not only as economic establishments but also as spaces of cultural representation, neighborhood identity, and long-term social connection. The findings suggest that discussions surrounding redevelopment and economic growth in Boston cannot focus solely on market performance, rising property values, or new investment. Urban planning strategies must also recognize the long-term social value of neighborhood businesses that contribute to cultural continuity, local employment, and community stability. The interviews demonstrate that commercial displacement is deeply connected to broader patterns of residential displacement, affordability pressure, and uneven redevelopment. As residents relocate because of rising housing costs, neighborhood businesses lose long-standing customer networks and experience growing instability. This study also highlights how uncertainty itself functions as a form of displacement pressure. Even when businesses have not yet been physically displaced, concerns regarding redevelopment, rent increases, and lease insecurity influence investment decisions, limit expansion opportunities, and create ongoing anxiety about the future. Without intentional anti-displacement planning strategies, many of the businesses that helped build neighborhood identity and stability may become increasingly unable to remain within the communities they helped sustain.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that commercial displacement is not solely an economic issue but also a social and cultural planning challenge. The future of neighborhoods such as Codman Square depends not only on attracting investment but also on preserving the local businesses, relationships, and cultural institutions that allow communities to remain socially connected and economically resilient during periods of urban change.

10. REFERENCES

Primary Data Sources

- Semi-structured interviews with seven local business owners and two commercial property stakeholders conducted in May 2026.
- Participant recruitment supported through community-based outreach efforts and local business directories.
- Community partnership with Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation (CSNDC).

11. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Outreach Email

Email Subject: (Interview invitation) Sharing experience about anti-displacement in Dorchester

Hi {Name},

My name is xxx. I'm a graduate student in Urban Planning and Community Development (UPCD) at UMass Boston. Currently, I am taking the course Special Topic UPCD 697 Local Economic Development. We are the community partner working with the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation anti-displacement initiative in Dorchester and speaking to residents and local businesses to learn about their experiences living and working in their neighborhoods and the effects of gentrification.

We would be interested in talking to you to learn more about your experience. Are you available to meet virtually for a 40-minute interview?

Here is my availability:

Please know that this is a confidential interview and your identity and response will be kept with us and will NOT be shared.

If you have any questions about the process, please contact our professor Dr. Sua Kim at Sua.Kim@umb.edu.

Best,

Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

1. (Opening question) Do you enjoy being in Dorchester, and how would you describe your time there?
2. (Leading decision) What factors have led to your leasing here?
 - a. Have you considered relocating? Why or why not?
 - b. (To Landlord) How do you decide rent levels or lease terms?

- c. (To Landlord) How do you balance financial returns and community stability?
3. (Rent and leasing structure) Could you describe your current leasing contract or conditions?
 - a. How would you describe your relationship with your landlord/tenants?
4. (Barriers) What are barriers you are experiencing in maintaining your business in terms of space as a business owner/landlord?
5. (Survival strategies) Have you seen your business change in response to rising costs or neighborhood changes?
 - a. Have you taken any actions specifically to stay in this location?
 - b. (To Landlord) Have you taken any actions to help tenants stay (or not stay)?
 - c. (To Landlord) How do you decide whether to keep existing tenants or bring in new ones?
 - d. Are there any programs, policies, or organizations helping you remain here?
 - e. Have you collaborated with other businesses or community groups to resist displacement?
6. (Overall displacement experience) Could you describe what's happening in Dorchester in terms of displacement and how does it influence your business/life?
 - a. Who benefits and who is being pushed out?
7. Do you think the neighborhood is becoming more or less inclusive?
8. (Wrap up) Do you have anything to add?