Identifying High-Opportunity Neighborhoods in the Greater Boston Area for Section 8 Voucher Holders

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Tufts

Introduction

HUD's Section 8 (Housing Choice Voucher) Program is the nation's single largest federal housing program. Created in 1974, one of its goals was to give low-income renters greater choice in where they live and thereby facilitate the deconcentration of poverty. However, despite the program's emphasis on housing choice and mobility, a significant percentage of Section 8 voucher holders continue to live in high-poverty neighborhoods. This has prompted policymakers and scholars to look for ways to help Section 8 voucher holders move out of high-poverty neighborhoods and into what have been called "high-opportunity" neighborhoods. Although there is no consensus on what exactly characterizes a high-opportunity area, researchers often identify these neighborhoods as those with low poverty rates, low crime rates, and high-performing schools.

For this research project, I was interested in identifying high-opportunity towns in the greater Boston area that might be particularly advantageous areas for low-income families. I then wanted to assess how realistic it would be for Section 8 voucher holders to move to these high-opportunity towns, based on the number of Section 8 voucher holders already living in each town and the median rent for each town.

Methods

In order to assess each town's level of opportunity, I created five indices:
1. **Poverty index** (based on poverty rate)
2. **Crime index** (based on violent crime rate)
3. **Education index** (based on school ranking)
4. **Employment index** (based on unemployment rate)
5. **Transportation index** (based on distance from closest MBTA station)

For each index, I classified towns into five classes and then labeled each class as very low, low, medium, high, or very high. Next I added up all the scores for each town to create a composite "opportunity score." I then classified the opportunity scores into five classes to create the "**opportunity index**." The last step involved putting the opportunity index in context by mapping the number of Section 8 voucher holders in each town and the median rent for each town.
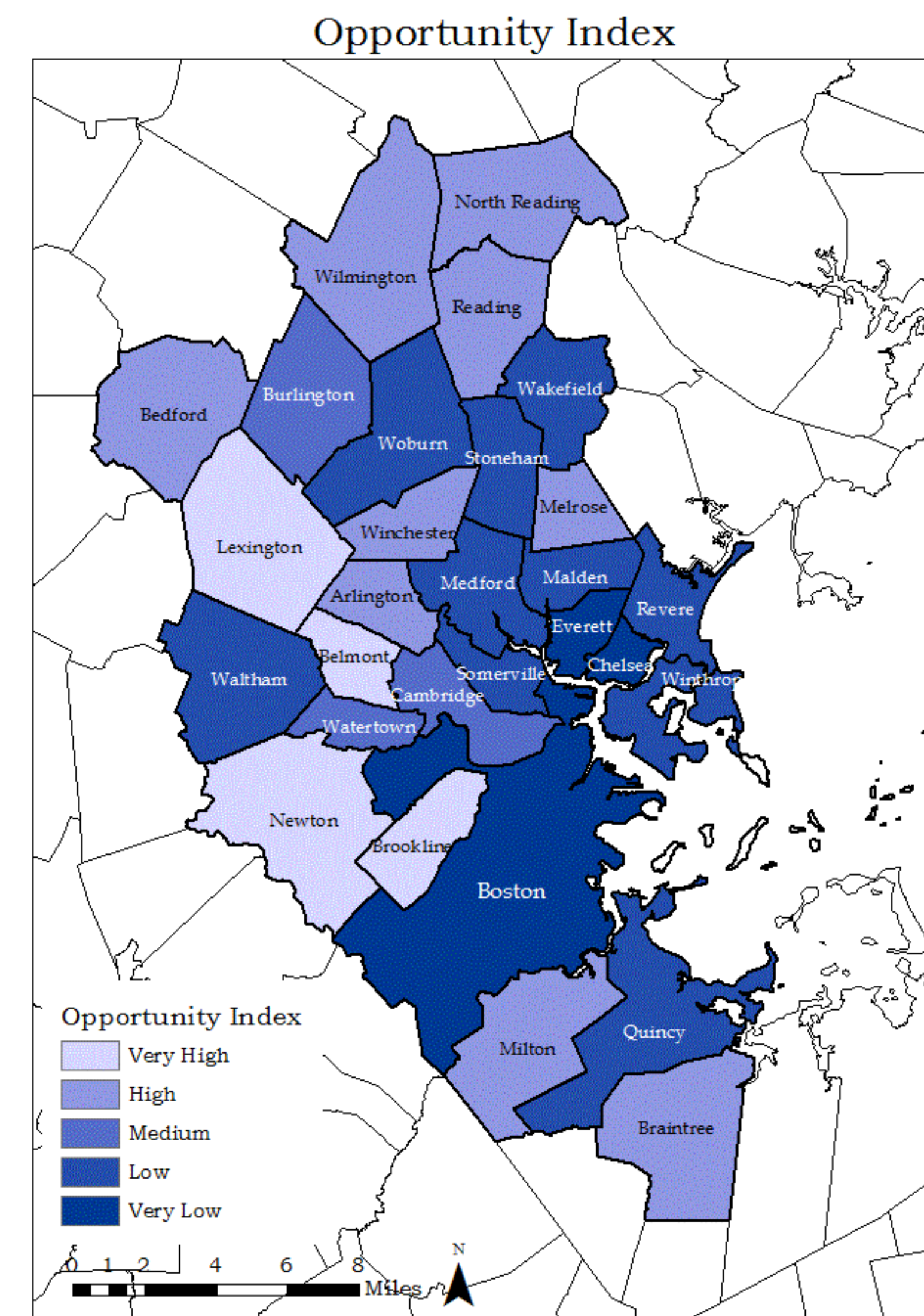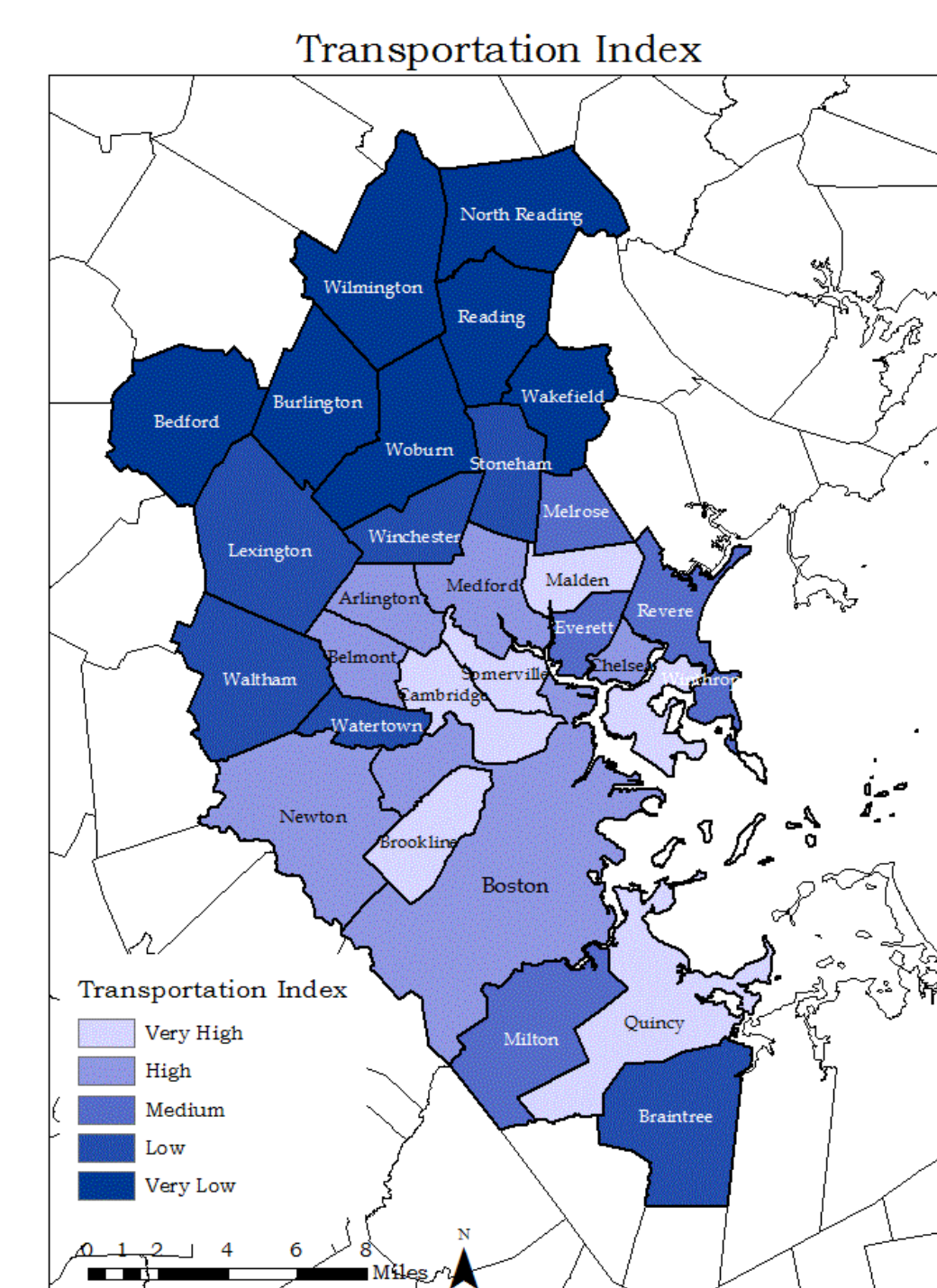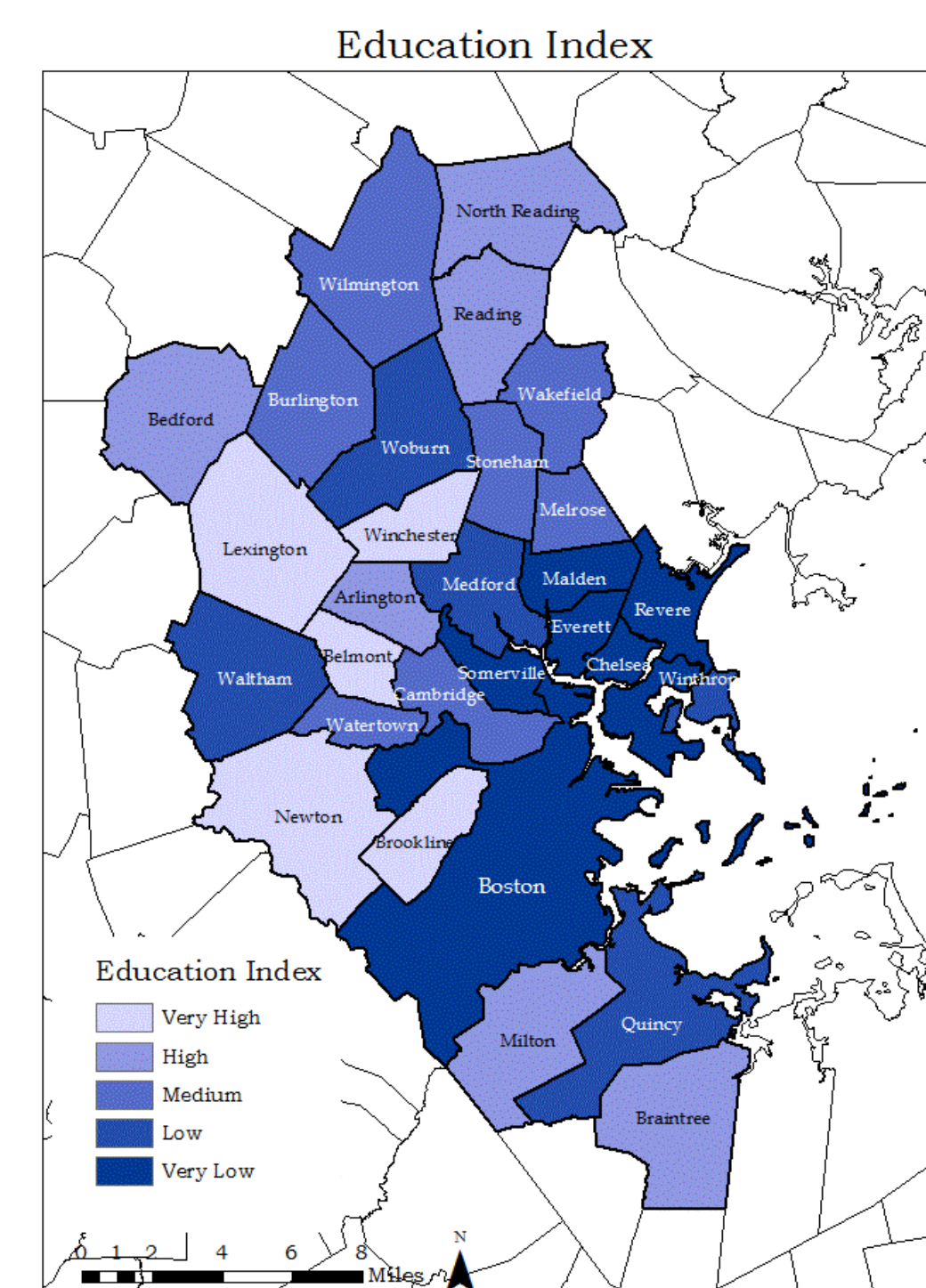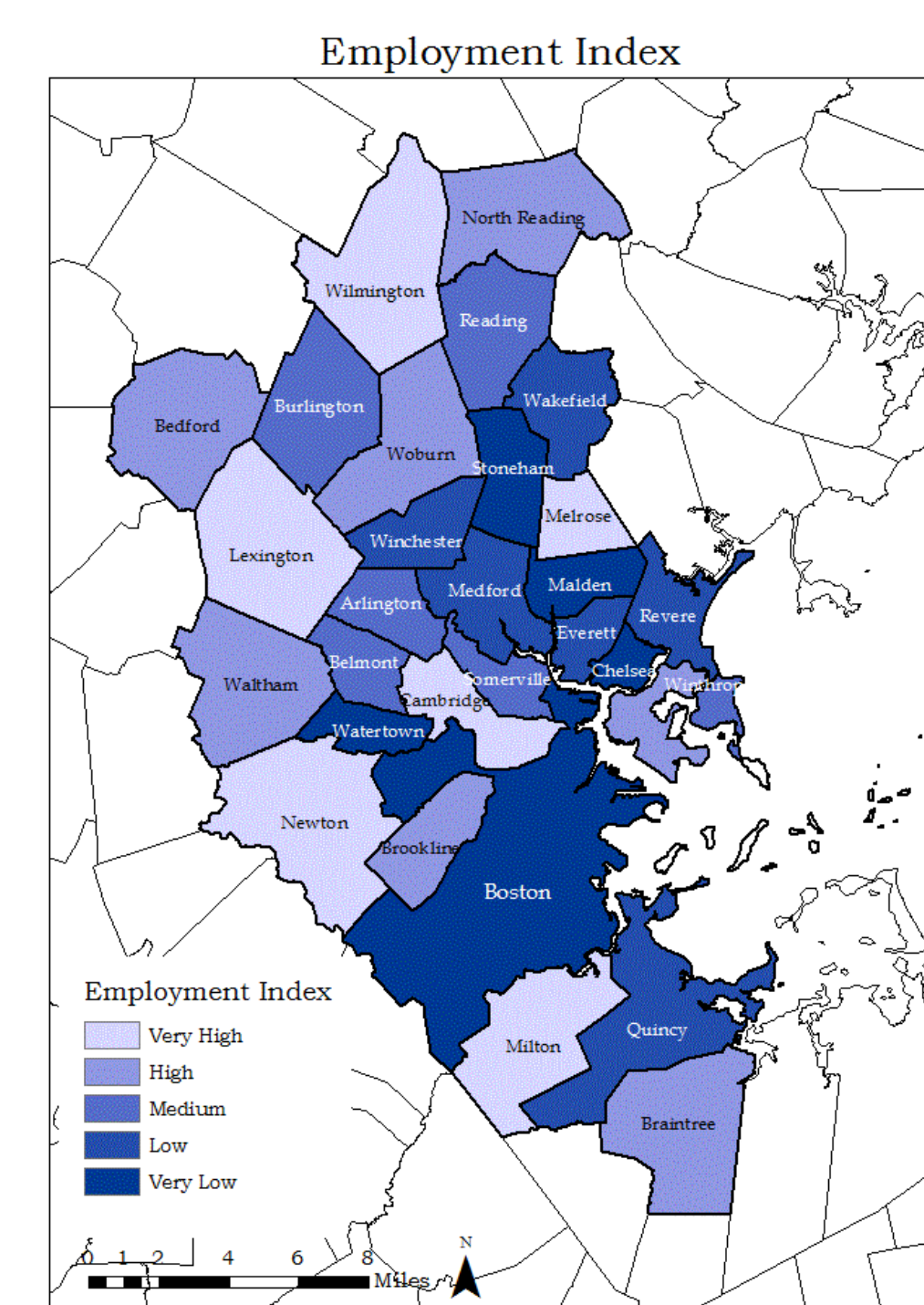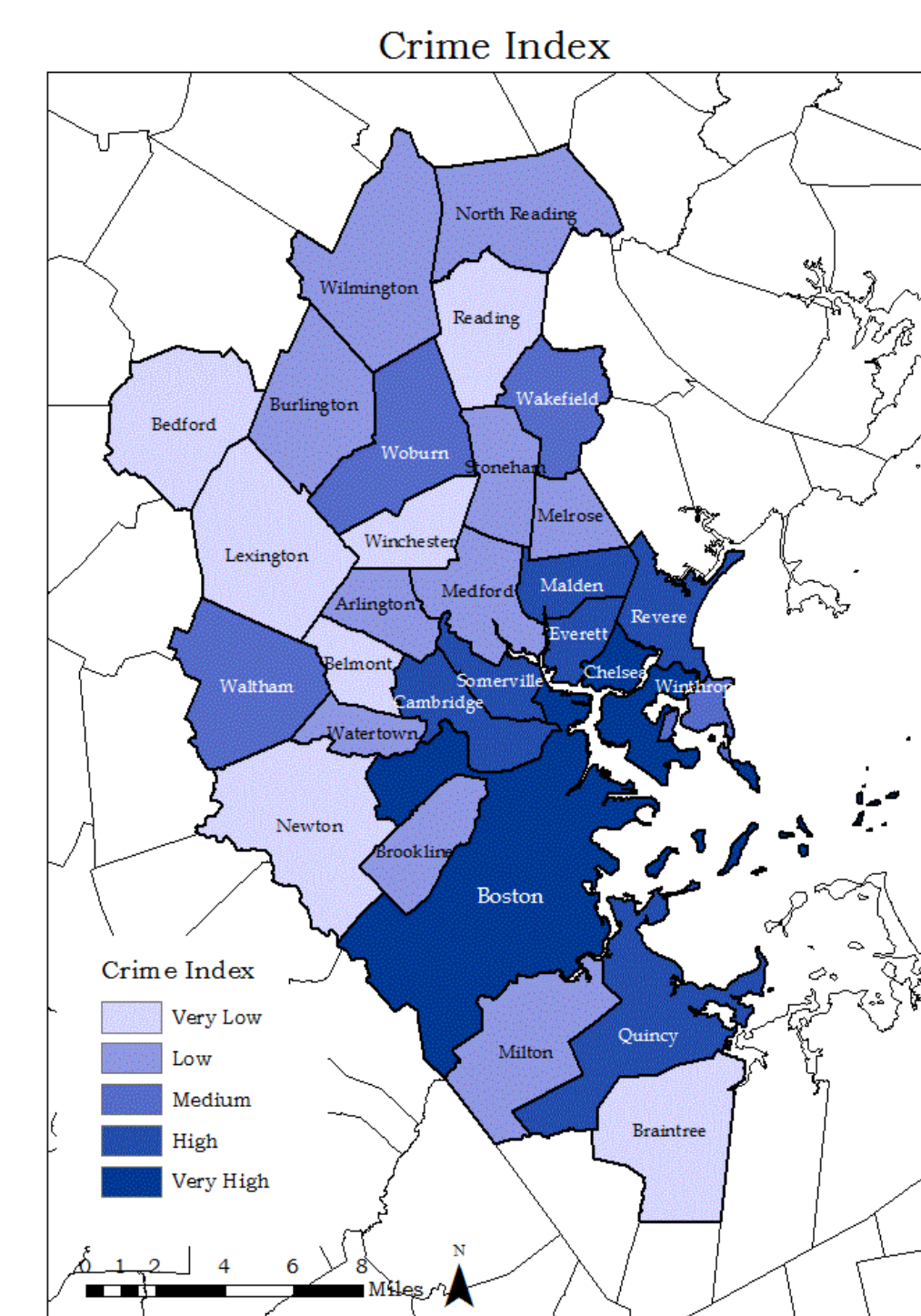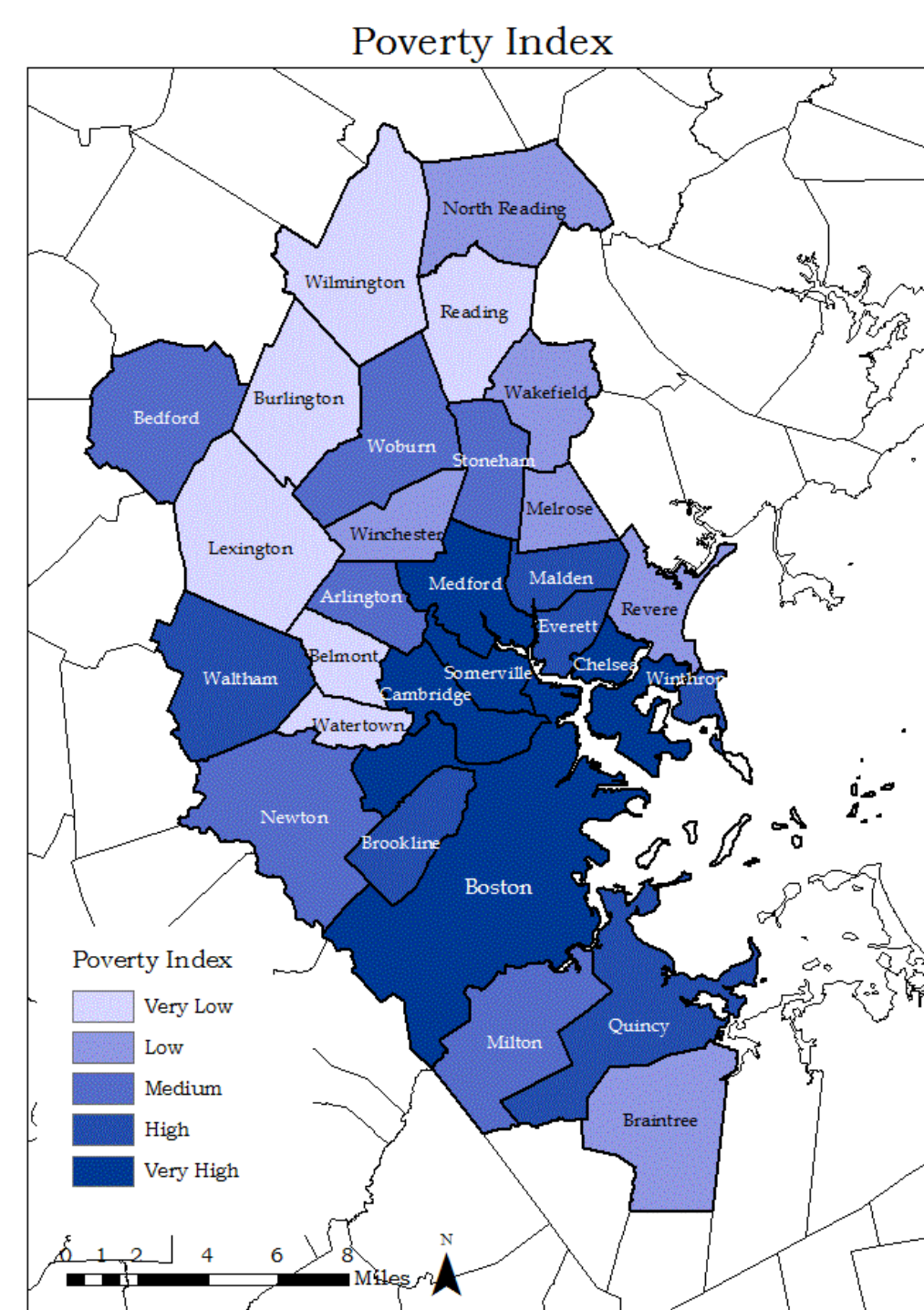
Results

Based on this set of criteria, the four towns that had a "very high" opportunity index were Belmont, Lexington, Newton, and Brookline. There were also nine towns with a "high" opportunity index: Braintree, Melrose, Milton, Arlington, Reading, Wilmington, Winchester, Bedford, and North Reading.

Not surprisingly, the towns with the highest opportunity indices tended to have higher median rents and fewer Section 8 voucher holders compared with lower opportunity areas. This suggests that these areas are too expensive and/or not particularly desirable to voucher holders. However, using the maps and the chart, we can identify towns like Braintree and Arlington that have a high opportunity index, are relatively affordable, and already have a relatively high number of Section 8 voucher holders. Areas like these might be the most promising for voucher holders.

Conclusion

It is important to point out one major limitation of this project. The data from the American Community Survey has a high margin of error, so some of this data might not be accurate. (For example, the poverty rate for Revere was listed as 4.6%, but other sources cite Revere's poverty rate as much higher.)

Despite its limitations, this project presents a potential framework for Section 8 voucher holders, housing agency staff, and policymakers alike to better understand the geography of opportunity in the greater Boston area. It also demonstrates the need for higher Section 8 rent guidelines in high-opportunity areas so that Section 8 voucher holders can afford to live in these towns.

Poverty Index

Poverty Index
- Very Low
- Low
- Medium
- High
- Very High

Crime Index

Crime Index
- Very Low
- Low
- Medium
- High
- Very High

Education Index

Education Index
- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very Low

Employment Index

Employment Index
- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very Low

Transportation Index

Transportation Index
- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very Low

Opportunity Index

Opportunity Index
- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very Low

Number of Section 8 Voucher Holders

Legend
- 0 - 80
- 81 - 216
- 217 - 411
- 412 - 989
- 990 - 14,983

Median Rent by Town

Opportunity Index
- Very High
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very Low

	City/Town	Poverty Index	Employment Index	Education Index	Crime Index	Transportation Index	Opportunity Score	Opportunity Index	Median Gross Rent
1	Belmont	5	3	5	5	4	22	5	$1,606
2	Lexington	5	5	5	5	2	22	5	$1,898
3	Newton	3	5	5	5	4	22	5	$1,632
4	Brookline	2	4	5	4	5	20	4	$1,756
5	Braintree	4	4	4	5	2	19	4	$1,210
6	Melrose	4	5	3	4	3	19	4	$1,097
7	Milton	3	5	4	4	3	19	4	$1,220
8	Arlington	3	3	4	4	4	18	4	$1,324
9	Reading	5	3	4	5	1	18	4	$1,315
10	Wilmington	5	5	3	4	1	18	4	$1,660
11	Winchester	4	2	5	5	2	18	4	$1,393
12	Bedford	3	4	4	5	1	17	4	$1,492
13	North Reading	4	4	4	4	1	17	4	$1,375
14	Burlington	5	3	3	4	1	16	3	$1,599
15	Cambridge	1	5	3	2	5	16	3	$1,585
16	Watertown	5	1	4	2	3	15	3	$1,420
17	Medford	1	2	2	4	4	13	2	$1,379
18	Quincy	2	2	2	2	5	13	2	$1,178
19	Stoneham	3	1	3	4	2	13	2	$1,204
20	Wakefield	4	2	3	3	1	13	2	$1,153
21	Waltham	2	4	2	3	2	13	2	$1,327
22	Winthrop	2	3	2	3	3	13	2	$1,272
23	Woburn	3	4	2	3	1	13	2	$1,240
24	Revere	4	2	1	2	3	12	2	$1,186
25	Somerville	2	3	1	2	5	12	2	$1,372
26	Malden	2	1	1	2	5	11	1	$1,211
27	Everett	2	2	1	2	3	10	1	$1,164
28	Boston	1	1	1	1	4	8	1	$1,265
29	Chelsea	1	1	1	1	4	8	1	$1,121