Areas At-Risk of Homelessness: Homeless Shelter Locations and Proximity to Resources
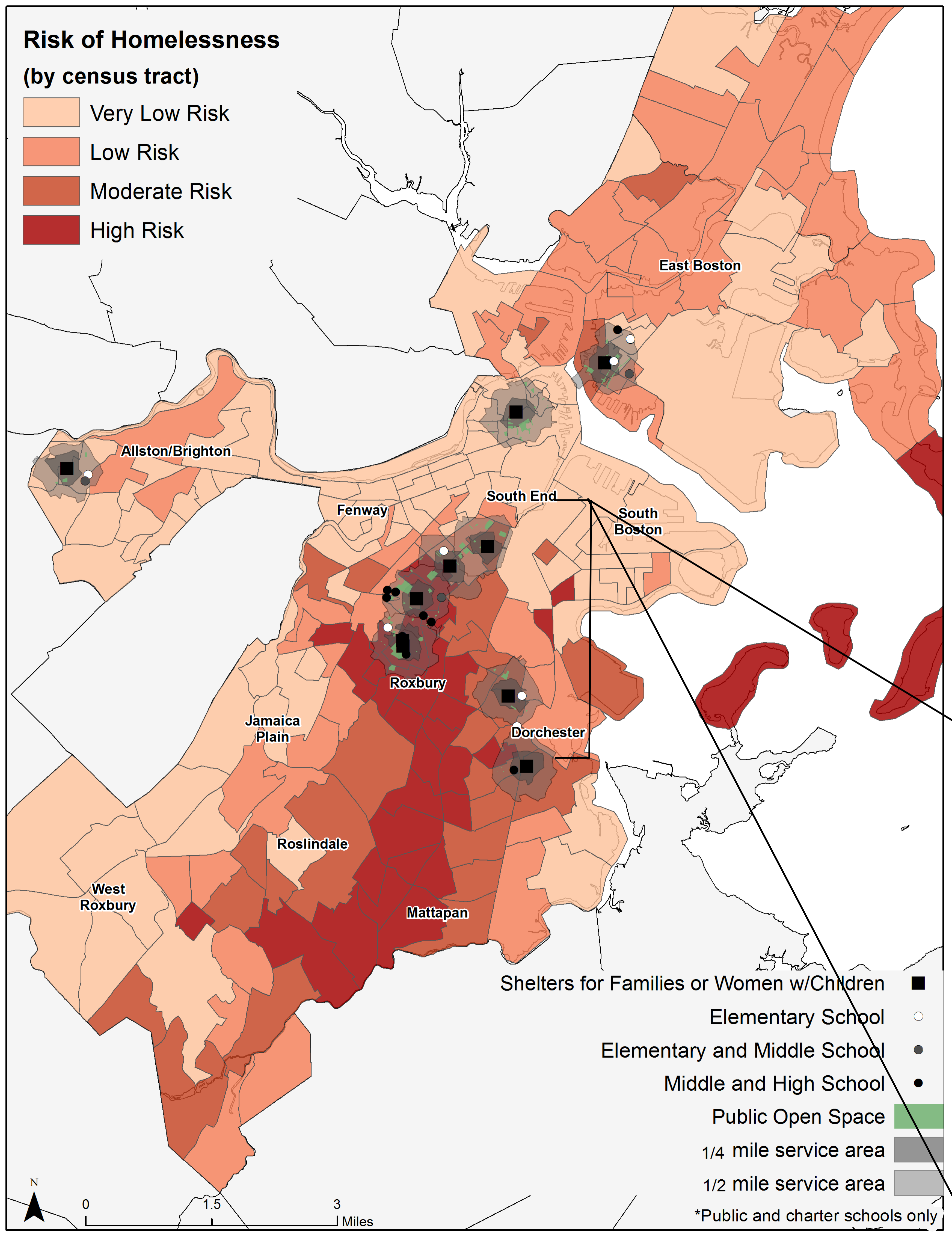
Resources within Service Areas of Family Shelters

Risk of Homelessness
(by census tract)

- Very Low Risk
- Low Risk
- Moderate Risk
- High Risk

East Boston

Allston/Brighton

Fenway

South End

South Boston

Roxbury

Jamaica Plain

Dorchester

Roslindale

West Roxbury

Mattapan

- ■ Shelters for Families or Women w/Children
- ○ Elementary School
- ◦ Elementary and Middle School
- • Middle and High School
- Public Open Space
- 1/4 mile service area
- 1/2 mile service area

*Public and charter schools only

N

0   1.5   3 Miles

Objectives

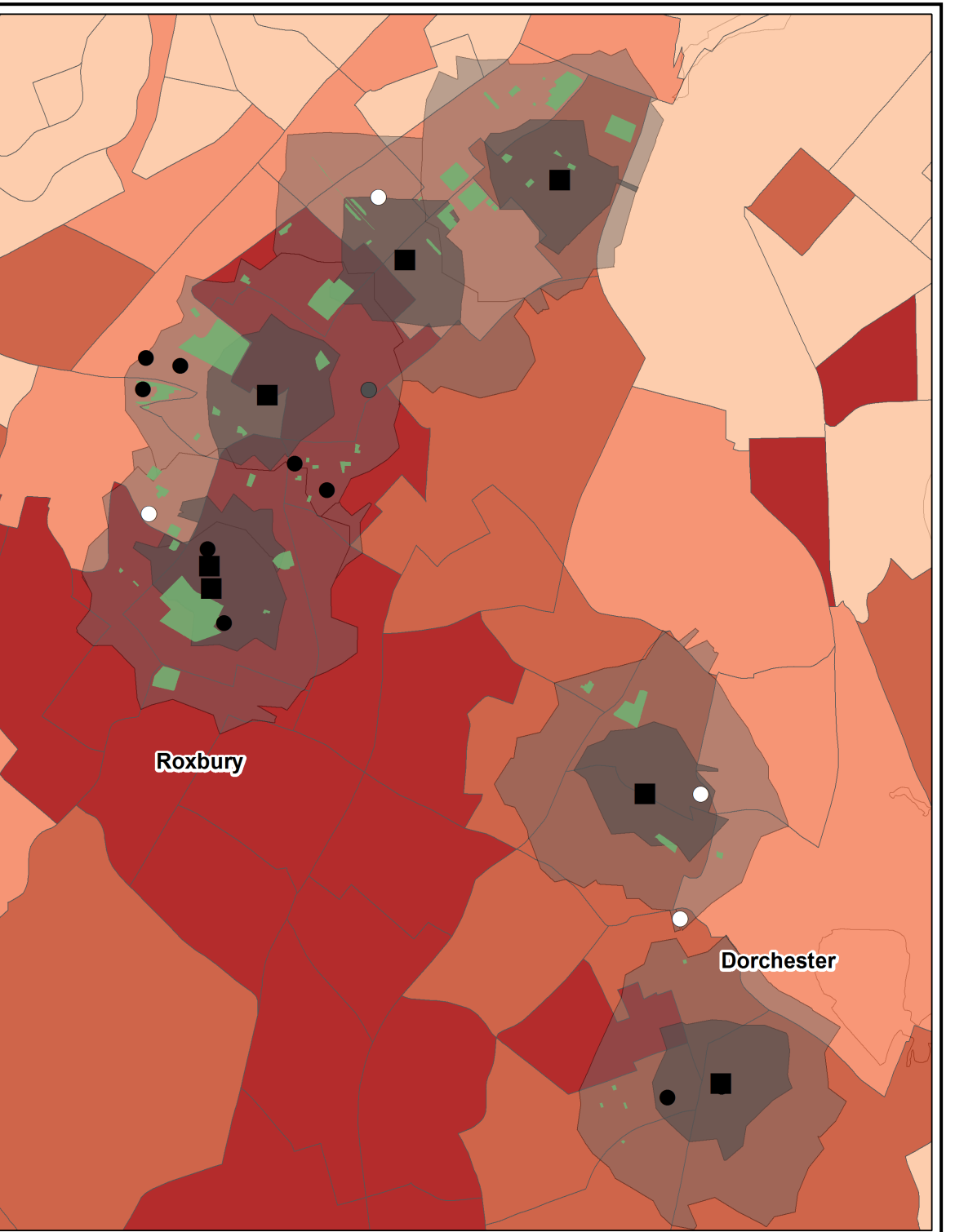This project aims to answer three spatial questions:

1. Which areas in Boston are most at-risk of being homeless?
2. Are homeless shelters located in those at-risk areas?
3. Are shelters that accept families with children located near important resources for children (i.e. schools and parks)?

These questions stem from a larger literature which explores the trade-offs that families face when entering homeless shelters. While having a roof over one's head is likely worth the trade-off, it can mean uprooting children from their schools, leaving social support systems, moving to a neighborhood with high-crime, and moving farther from work, among other challenges. The instability of living in a homeless shelter—especially one far from integral resources--can make it more difficult to return to economic self-sufficiency and stabilized housing. This project aims to explore these issues as they relate to Boston, Massachusetts, and better understand how shelters are meeting the needs of the populations than utilize them.

Methodology

Based on a review of existing literature, I used seven criteria to determine what constitutes an at-risk area. High concentrations of:

1. Female-headed households with children
2. Low-income households
3. Welfare recipients
4. Latino populations
5. African-American populations
6. Disabled populations
7. Veterans

Identifying At-Risk Areas:

Using census tracts, a map was created for each characteristic (see maps at bottom of poster). For a given characteristic, each tract was ranked from one to four, with one being the lowest concentration and four being the highest concentration of the variable. For each tract I then summed the rankings for all seven variables to yield an overall ranking. The tracts with the highest ranking were the most at-risk of being homeless.

Mapping Shelters:

I then mapped shelter points over the map of at-risk areas. I categorized the shelters into five types based on who the shelter accepts: (1) families, (2) individuals (3) men only (4) women only, and (5) veterans. The map to the right shows shelter locations in relation to the at-risk areas.

Analyzing Resources in Service Area:

In order to understand if the shelters were located near resources, I created a 1/4 miles walkable service area and a 1/2 mile walkable service area around the shelters that accept families and women with children. I focused on these shelters because families have a very high need for resources like schools and parks so that their children have as much stability as possible. I then mapped school points (categorized by school type— elementary, middle, and high school) and public parks and open spaces that fell within the service areas to visualize their proximity to the shelters.

Roxbury

Dorchester

N

0   1.5   3 Miles

Conclusions

Which Areas at At-Risk of Homelessness?

My analysis shows that the areas most at-risk of homelessness fall within Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester, with some parts of Jamaica Plain and East Boston having moderate risks. The census tracts in deeper pink on the map below show these areas.
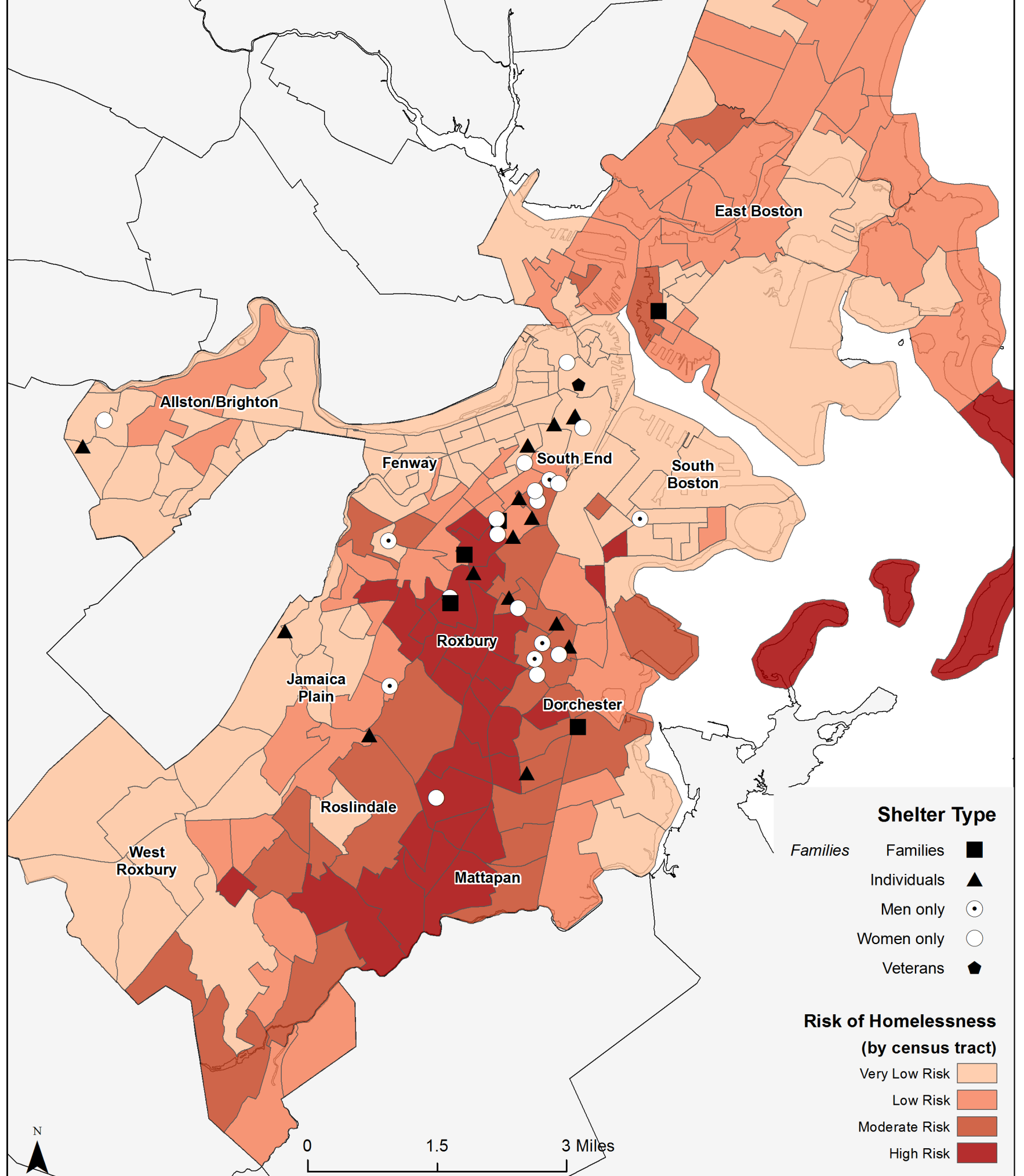
Are Shelters Located in Those At-risk Areas?

As seen on the map below, homeless shelters are largely located in the South End, Roxbury, and parts of Dorchester. There is a string of high-risk areas in Roslindale and Mattapan that have few or no shelters at all. There is only one shelter in East Boston, and it is only for families with children. This means that if someone in any of these areas becomes homeless, they will need to relocate to a shelter in another community, potentially moving their children to new schools, moving further from a job, or leaving family and friend networks behind. In some instances, this change of scenery can be beneficial; but in others, it can be further destabilizing and difficult to cope with.
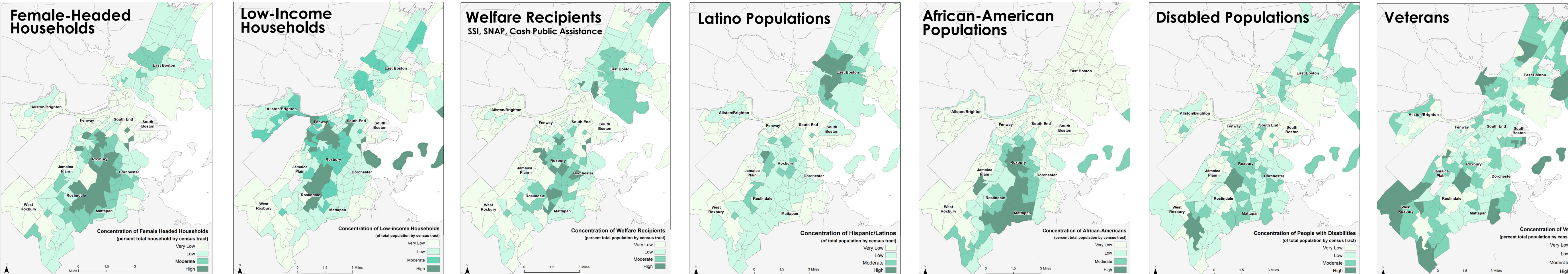
Are Family Shelters Located Near Schools and Parks for Children?

As evidenced on the large map to the left, some shelters have more resources within their walkable service areas than others. The shelter near downtown Boston has essentially no walkable access to schools, and the shelter in Dorchester has little walkable access to schools and almost no access to public parks. Even the shelters with schools within walking distance may not have schools with all grade levels nearby (i.e. there may be 2 middle schools and a high school, but no elementary school). I focus on walkable service areas under the assumption that many—if not most—homeless families will not have access to a car and will rely heavily on services within walking distances. **This analysis shows that shelters are not evenly distributed based on the areas that will likely utilize them most, and many do not have the nearby resources that children need to maintain stability through their families' period of homelessness.**

Homeless Shelter Proximity to At-Risk Areas

East Boston

Allston/Brighton

Fenway

South End

South Boston

Roxbury

Jamaica Plain

Dorchester

Roslindale

West Roxbury

Mattapan

Shelter Type

Families
- ■ Families
- ▲ Individuals
- ◉ Men only
- ○ Women only
- ⬟ Veterans

Risk of Homelessness
(by census tract)
- Very Low Risk
- Low Risk
- Moderate Risk
- High Risk

N

0   1.5   3 Miles

Seven Criteria for Determining Risk of Homelessness:

Female-Headed Households

Concentration of Female Headed Households
(percent total household by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

Low-Income Households

Concentration of Low-income Households
(of total population by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

Welfare Recipients
SSI, SNAP, Cash Public Assistance

Concentration of Welfare Recipients
(of total population by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

Latino Populations

Concentration of Hispanic/Latinos
(of total population by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

African-American Populations

Concentration of African-Americans
(of total population by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

Disabled Populations

Concentration of People with Disabilities
(percent total population by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

Veterans

Concentration of Veterans
(of total population by census tract)
Very Low / Low / Moderate / High

Limitations

The project used data from the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS), which can have substantial margins or error; thus, maps may contain statistical inaccuracies. The seven criteria used to determine at-risk areas are not exhaustive, nor are they absolute determinants of homelessness. Additionally, each shelter has a different number of beds—some with very few—and varying criteria for admission, such as sobriety or mental illness, which are not included in this analysis. Additionally, some shelters (not included in this analysis) do not advertise their address, so more research would need to go into locating those exact locations for a more robust dataset.

Sources

Tufts UNIVERSITY   uep Urban + Environmental Policy + Planning