

Alewife

Cambridge Commercial District Assessment



**CITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

Community
Development
Department

Economic
Opportunity &
Development

2026

Acknowledgments

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**Customer Intercept Survey
conducted by
*Agency Landscape and Planning***

City Council

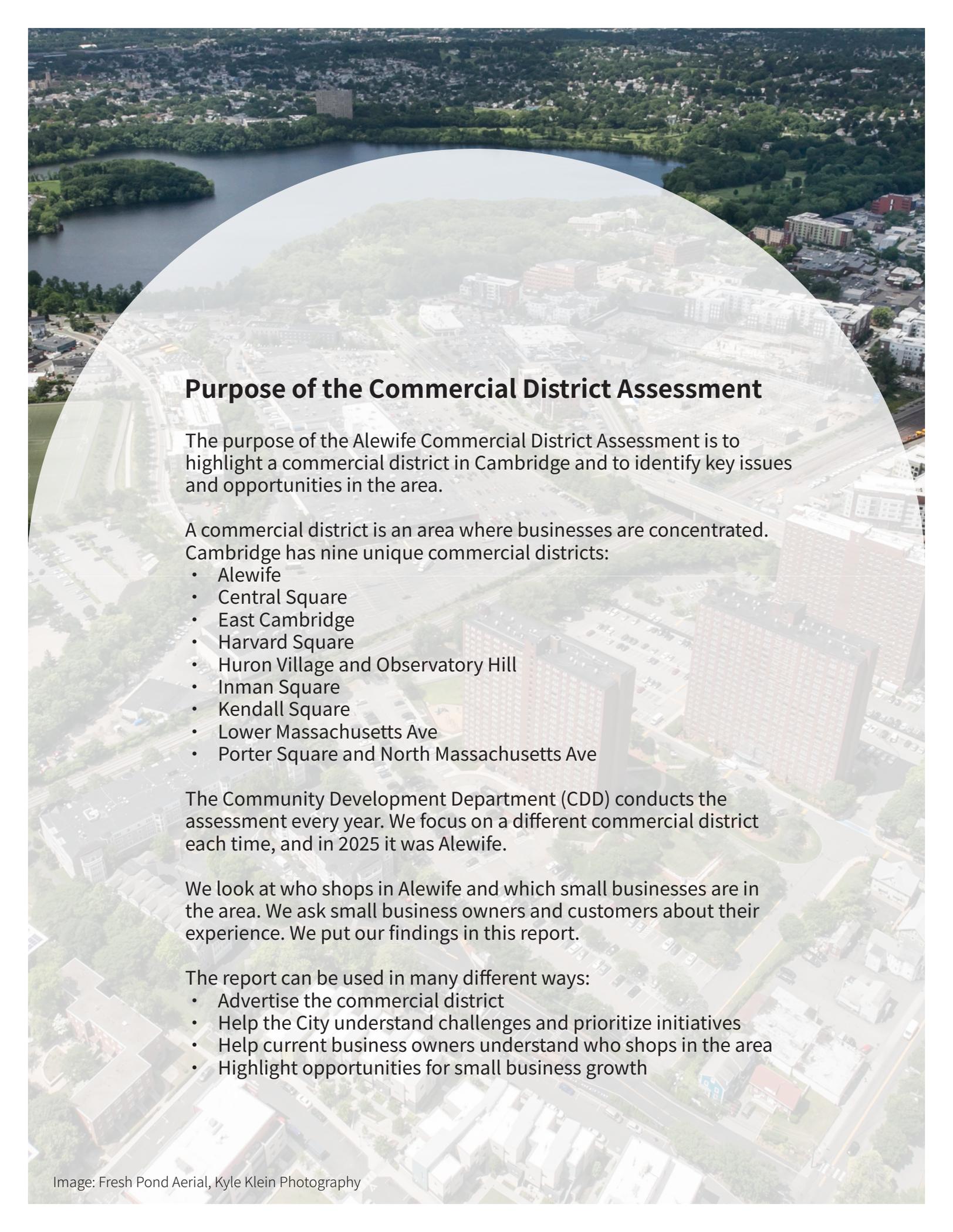
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Purpose of the Commercial District Assessment

The purpose of the Alewife Commercial District Assessment is to highlight a commercial district in Cambridge and to identify key issues and opportunities in the area.

A commercial district is an area where businesses are concentrated. Cambridge has nine unique commercial districts:

- Alewife
- Central Square
- East Cambridge
- Harvard Square
- Huron Village and Observatory Hill
- Inman Square
- Kendall Square
- Lower Massachusetts Ave
- Porter Square and North Massachusetts Ave

The Community Development Department (CDD) conducts the assessment every year. We focus on a different commercial district each time, and in 2025 it was Alewife.

We look at who shops in Alewife and which small businesses are in the area. We ask small business owners and customers about their experience. We put our findings in this report.

The report can be used in many different ways:

- Advertise the commercial district
- Help the City understand challenges and prioritize initiatives
- Help current business owners understand who shops in the area
- Highlight opportunities for small business growth

About Alewife

Transportation



18 Bluebikes stations



6 Bus routes
62, 67, 76, 77, 83, 350



5,316
Daily riders
Alewife
MBTA Red Line



Mixed
Public meter
parking spaces
and free lots

Transit Scores



88 Bike



72 Walk



67 Transit

Background

Alewife has long been a hub of industry and transportation. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Alewife was home to brickmaking. Companies like the New England Brick Co. excavated pits up to 90 feet deep, providing materials for iconic structures like Harvard's Sever Hall. The Charlestown Branch Railroad reached the area in 1842 for ice harvesting, followed by the Fitchburg Railroad in 1843, which fueled industrial growth. By the mid-19th century, the brook's proximity to the local tanneries and sewers ended its use as a major fishery due to pollution. This period marked the shift from a rural, wetland landscape to an industrial area that eventually paved the way for the development of North Cambridge.

In the 1890s, the Alewife Brook Parkway was reenvisioned as a recreational link in the regional park system. The Alewife Brook Reservation was established in 1900. In the 1970s, plans for a "Route 2 Extension" highway were canceled in favor of public transit. Built on a former brickyard, the Alewife station opened on March 30, 1985, as the Red Line's northwestern final stop. Nearby Danehy Park was created atop a former clay pit that had been used as a city landfill until the early 1970s.

Since 2004, the "Triangle" west of the parkway has seen thousands of new housing units and high-tech lab buildings replace older industrial sites. The City's water treatment facility is at Fresh Pond Reservation. Alewife is also home to the City's public golf course.

Demographics

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 6,075 residents live in the district. A lower percentage of the Alewife population is White (47.1%) as compared to the overall Cambridge population (54.3%). There are slightly fewer Black residents in Alewife (9.9% vs. 10.9%) and residents of Hispanic Origin (8.7% vs. 9.8%). There are substantially more Asian residents (31.7% vs. 21.2%). The median household income is higher (\$142,268 vs. \$134,144).

Future Opportunities

Alewife has the opportunity to grow, with nearly 3 million square feet of development potential. There are active projects creating new retail, residential, laboratory, office, restaurant, and community spaces. There are also projects taking place in Alewife to improve mobility and enhance public spaces. The Pedestrian & Bicycle Crossing of the Fitchburg rail line and the Belmont Community Path are currently in the design phase. Linear Park, an open space corridor, is under construction. There is also a forthcoming renovation of Rafferty Park.

Sources: Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority; Walk Score, Inc.; U.S. Census Bureau. Esri forecasts for 2025 and 2030. Esri converted Census 2010 into 2020 geography and Census 2020 data; City of Cambridge Open Data

Neighborhood Context Map



Top row: Danahy Park; Tobin Vassall School construction; Jazz Fest: Kyle Klein Photography.

Bottom row: Fresh Pond aerial, Kyle Klein Photography; Just a Start Mobility Hub, Justin R. Valadez of Dellbrook|JKS.

Key Findings



La Saison, Kyle Klein Photography.



Traffic on Alewife Brook Parkway, Jaheim Harding Photography.



Pedestrians cross at an intersection in Cambridge Highlands, Nicolaus Czarnecki.

We surveyed 300 customers, residents, workers, and visitors in Alewife. We also surveyed 21 small, ground floor businesses in Alewife. The geographic boundaries and the survey methodology can be found in the Data Appendix (p.12). We found several themes in survey responses.

Beautification

Customers (“customers” includes residents, workers, and visitors) and small ground floor businesses are interested in:

- Cleaner sidewalks, improved storefronts, and welcoming outdoor community spaces (p.9, p.11).
- Less trash on the streets. There are concerns about trash related to drug use, particularly near the MBTA Alewife station. More trash cans throughout the district are desired.

Customers specifically want:

- Cleaner sidewalks to improve the pedestrian experience.
- Additional greenery for commercial areas (p.11).

Mobility improvements

Customers and small businesses find the heavy traffic in Alewife to be an issue for customers to be able to get to and spend time in the area. Customers and small businesses want:

- More infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists (p.9, p.11).
- Reduced car traffic, improved bike safety, improved pedestrian safety, and more bike and car parking.
- More reliable public transportation.

Local initiatives aim to mitigate traffic in Alewife through multimodal options, such as the Alewife Transportation Management Association’s CarPool Incentive, commuter challenges, and shuttle services like the Alewife Loop shuttle.

The City is planning for additional off-street paths and bridges to link the eastern side of the Alewife area, such as the Danehy Park Connector. Everyone benefits when it is easier to get to and around Alewife.



Fresh Pond Bikeway.



Residential buildings, Kyle Klein Photography.



Danehy Family Day, Kyle Klein Photography.



55 Wheeler St. Park.

Strengths

- Number of daily visitors increasing
- Recreation and transportation hub
- Ongoing investments in the neighborhood
- Existing paths for walking and recreation

Challenges

- Heavy traffic
- Trash, including hazardous waste, left in public spaces
- Difficulty navigating from place to place

Opportunities

- Mobility improvements for pedestrians, cyclists, and cars
- Clear signage and directions to retail and restaurant clusters and to public parks and plazas
- Additional trash cans and more greenery
- Grocery, restaurant, and retail options at more price points
- More emphasis on shopping at small, local businesses



Privately owned public spaces (POPS) are spaces for community members and visitors to use that are privately owned and maintained. POPS are created through land use restrictions, development agreements, or zoning. The park at 55 Wheeler St (pictured left) is one example.

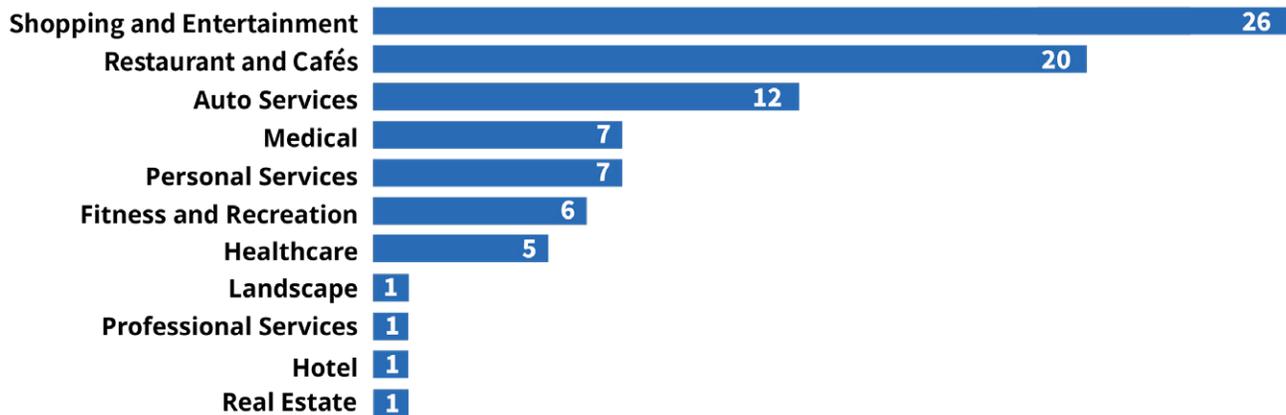
Business Landscape

Ground Floor Business Inventory

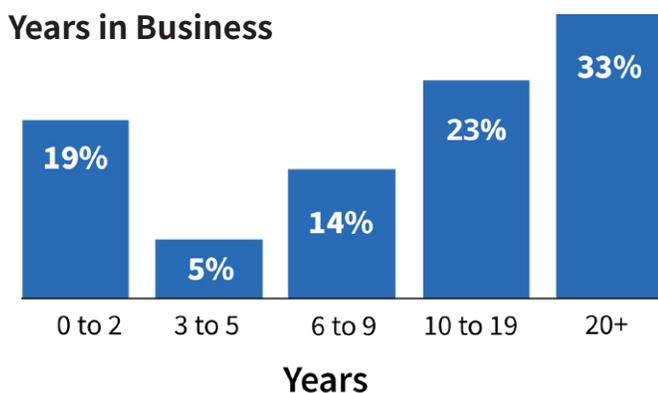


*Note: Numbers are based on a ground floor storefront survey conducted in September 2025. Some of the vacant properties were under lease negotiations or construction at time of the survey. For a more information about vacancies, <https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/economicopportunityanddevelopment/vacantstorefrontresources>

Storefront & Retail Mix



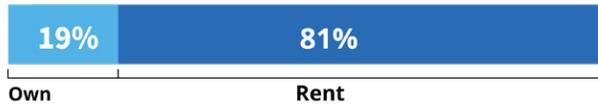
Characteristics of Small Businesses Surveyed



Source: Alewife Storefront Inventory (December 2025); Alewife Small Business Survey (December 2025)

What We Heard From Alewife Small Business Owners

Do you own or rent your property?



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



What changes (if any) need to occur in Alewife to attract more shoppers?*

	% Businesses
Parking	62%
Community Events or Marketing	57%
Storefront Improvements	33%
Safety	24%
Sanitation	14%
Business to Business Communication	10%

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

	% Businesses
Marketing Support	71%
Financing	24%
Training for Staff	24%
Legal or Lease Support	19%
Assistance with Regulatory Compliance	5%

As a business owner, what changes would you suggest to improve Alewife for residents, pedestrians, and shoppers?*



Improved Mobility
24%



Traffic
19%



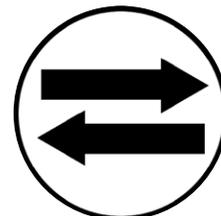
Safety
14%



Sanitation
9.5%



More Emphasis on Shopping Local
9.5%



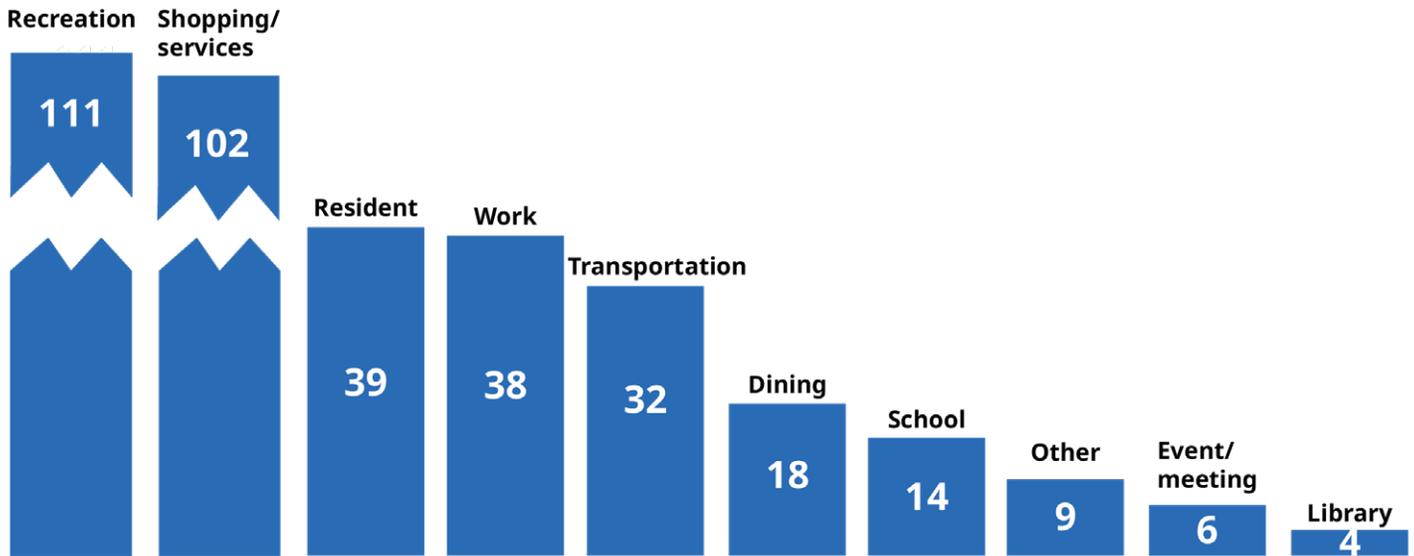
Wayfinding
5%

Source: Alewife Small Business Survey (December 2025); Improved Mobility icon from artshuvo - stock.adobe.com.
*Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer, totals may be more than 100%

Customer Outlook

What We Heard from Customers in Alewife

What is your primary purpose for being in Alewife?*



✓ 99% responded ⓧ 1% did not respond

What are the most common items you purchase in Alewife*

Item	% Customers
Food or Groceries	95%
Wine, Beer, or Spirits	17%
Clothing	16%
Beauty or Personal Care Products	14%
Home Goods	14%
Accessories	5%
Arts or Crafts	4%
Electronics or Gifts	4%

✓ 98% responded ⓧ 2% did not respond

What are the most common services you use in Alewife?*

Service	% Customers
Pharmacy	46%
Restaurant (Take-out)	41%
Restaurant (Sit-down)	24%
Medical	13%
Dental	9%
Music or Performance Venue	7%
Hair Salon/Barber	2%
Other	4%

✓ 82% responded ⓧ 18% did not respond

If not Alewife, where do you shop?

Elsewhere in Cambridge

48%

Online

20%

Greater Boston Area

36%

✓ 43% responded ⓧ 57% did not respond

Source: Alewife Storefront Inventory (September 2025), Alewife Customer Intercept Survey (2025)

Note: Each percentage is based on the total responses for a question.

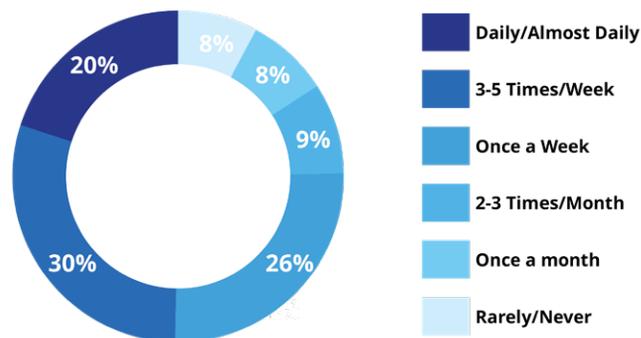
*Respondents could choose more than one answer so totals may be more than 100%.

How do you usually travel to get to Alewife?*

	% Customers
Walk	48%
MBTA	28%
Bus	14%
Subway	14%
Bike	29%
Own	25%
Bluebikes	4%
Drive	60%
Alone	48%
Uber/Lyft/Taxi	4%
Carpool	8%
Company Shuttle	1%

✓ 99% responded ⓧ 1% did not respond

How often do you usually go shopping in Alewife?



✓ 99% responded ⓧ 1% did not respond

What new businesses would you like to see?*



✓ 67% responded ⓧ 33% did not respond

When do you usually go shopping in Alewife?

	% Customers
Weekdays	37%
Weekday Nights	13%
Weekend Days	27%
Weekend Nights	7%
No Set Time	34%

✓ 99% responded ⓧ 1% did not respond

What would make you shop here more?*



✓ 56% responded ⓧ 44% did not respond

What changes would you like to see in Alewife?*



✓ 64% responded ⓧ 36% did not respond

Source: Alewife Customer Intercept Survey (June 2025); Improved Mobility Icon from artshuvo - stock.adobe.com; Fitness and Rec Icon from Denys - stock.adobe.com.

Note: Each percentage is based on the total responses for a question.

*Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer, totals may be more than 100%

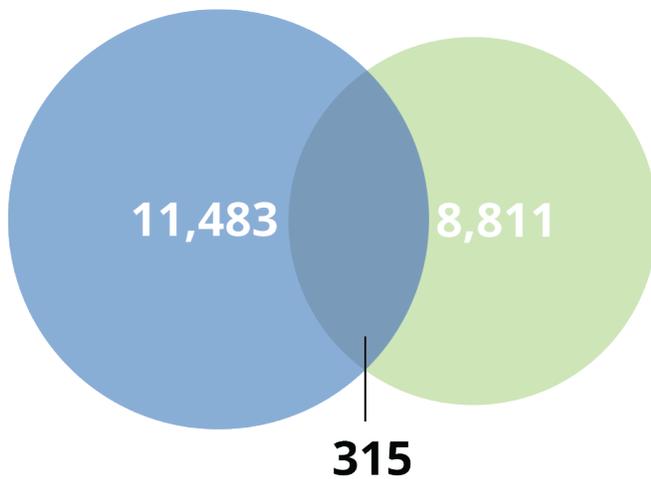
Data Appendix

Survey Methodology

City staff conducted two surveys in Alewife. The first survey was the Customer Intercept Survey. It was conducted by talking with people on sidewalks and in plazas around Alewife. Surveying was done in June 2025 during peak times: morning, mid-day, and late afternoon. We received 300 survey responses. The second survey was the Small Business Survey. It was conducted by talking with owners of small brick-and-mortar retail and restaurant business located on the ground floor. Surveys were collected by emailing, calling, and visiting business owners at their storefront. The business survey was available June through December 2025. We received 21 survey responses.

Demographics

Commuting Patterns



Work in Alewife, live elsewhere	11,483
Live and work in Alewife	315
Live in Alewife, work elsewhere	8,811

Data is based on the trade area.

Total Population

Alewife	6,075
Cambridge	122,567
Massachusetts	7,069,210

Average Household Size

Alewife	1.87
Cambridge	2.05
Massachusetts	2.43

Median Household Income*

Alewife	\$142,268
Cambridge	\$134,144
Massachusetts	\$105,410

*Data does not include people who live in group quarters

Data is based on context area.

Trade Area and Context Area

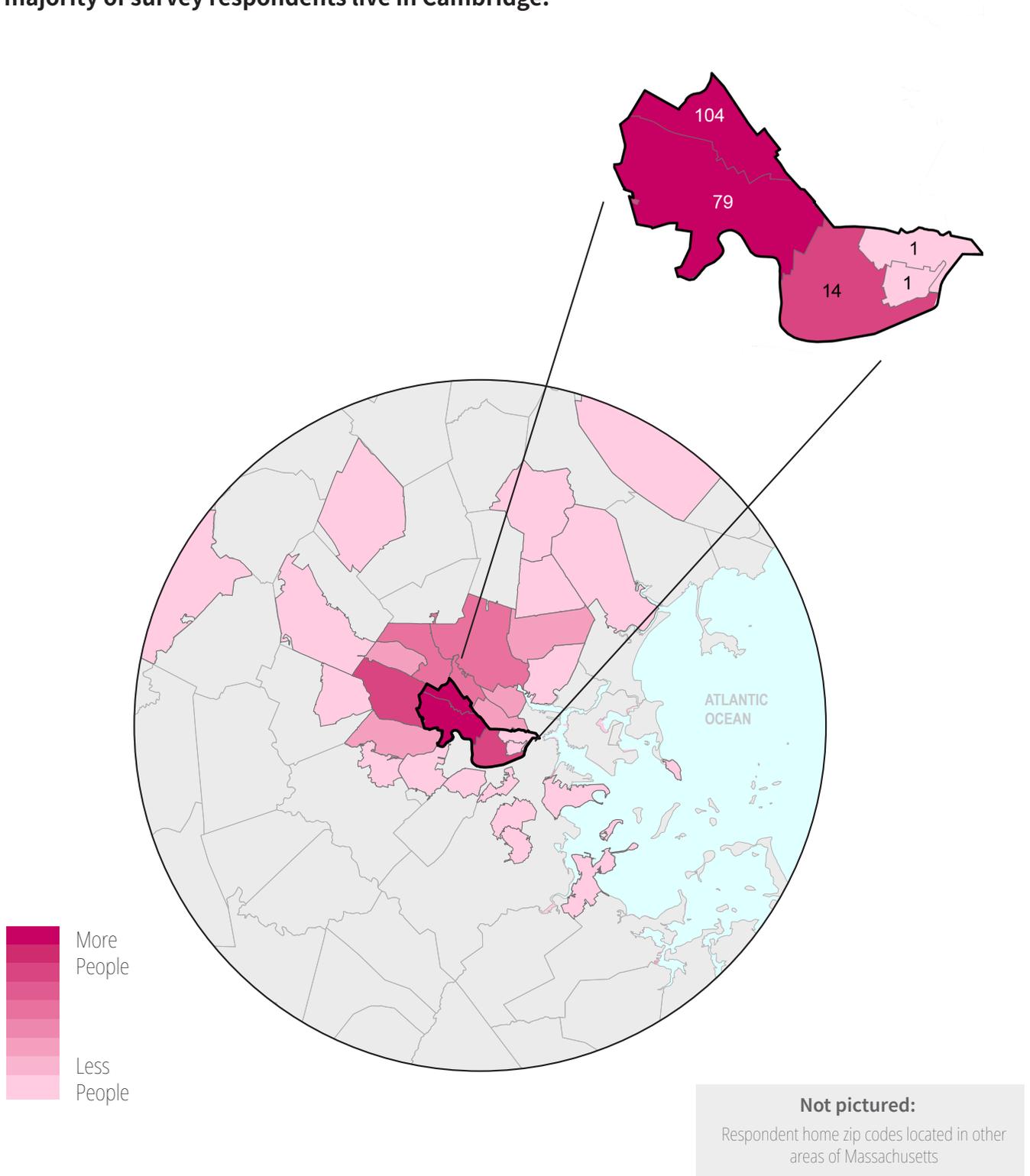
Alewife is defined in two ways in this report. The “context area” outlined in red on the map below refers to the commercial district boundaries. It identifies the greatest concentration of businesses in the Alewife area. The data presented in the Business Landscape (p.8) and Customer Outlook (p.10) each refers to businesses located in the context area. All surveys were conducted within this boundary. The “trade area” represents the location of the residents who live within a quarter mile from the context area and are most served by the commercial district.

Trade Area and Context Area Map



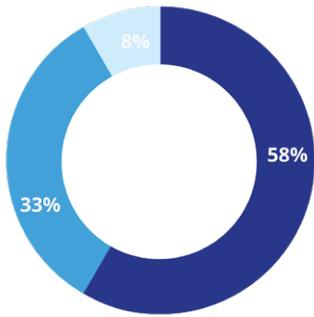
Customer Locations

The map below shows the home location of survey respondents. They provided their home location by zip code and the most frequent are mapped here. Of all 300 respondents, 275 (91%) shared their zip code. **The majority of survey respondents live in Cambridge.**



Customer Demographics

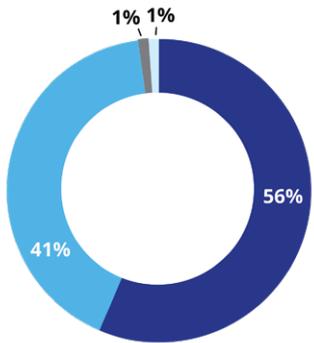
What is your relationship to Alewife?



	% Customers
Resident	58%
Other	33%
Worker	8%

✓ 92% responded ⓪ 8% did not respond

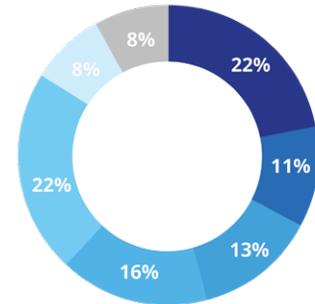
What is your gender?



	% Customers
Female	56%
Male	41%
Non-binary	1%
Questioning	1%

✓ 92% responded ⓪ 8% did not respond

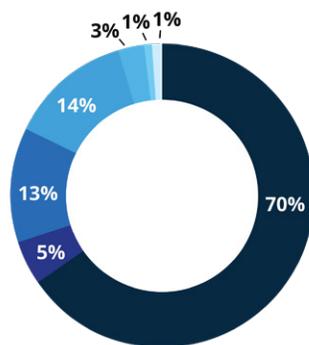
What is your age?



	% Customers
65+	22%
55-64	11%
45-54	13%
35-44	16%
25-34	22%
18-24	8%
<18	8%

✓ 99% responded ⓪ 1% did not respond

What is your race or ethnicity?



	% Customers	% Alewife	% Cambridge
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1%	0.1%	0.3%
Asian	14%	31.7%	21.2%
Black or African American	13%	9.9%	10.9%
Caucasian or White	70%	47.1%	54.3%
Latino or Hispanic	5%	8.7%	9.8%
Middle Eastern or North African	3%	-	-
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%	0%	0.1%

✓ 92% responded ⓪ 8% did not respond

Source: Alewife Customer Intercept Survey (June 2025); U.S. Census Bureau. Esri forecasts for 2025 and 2030. Esri converted Census 2010 into 2020 geography and Census 2020 data

Alewife

The Community Development Department (CDD) is the planning agency for the City of Cambridge. Our mission is to foster a livable, sustainable, just, and equitable community. We work to enhance the character and diversity of the city's neighborhoods, preserve and increase affordable housing, create and promote accessible and sustainable mobility, build environmental resilience, and support sustainable economic growth. Through these initiatives, we strive to enrich the lives of residents, expand their opportunities, and contribute to a healthy urban environment. CDD takes an interdisciplinary approach to manage and guide evolution of our urban environment in a manner consistent with the City's priorities. We engage and collaborate with community partners, other government agencies, businesses and residents to make Cambridge a desirable place to live, work, learn, play, and innovate.

The Economic Opportunity and Development Division is committed to building an inclusive and sustainable economy in the City of Cambridge. The Division is responsible for a wide range of activities designed to meet the City's need for a vibrant, innovative, diverse, and thriving economic base that ensures economic opportunity for all. We offer a variety of resources and services, including site search and selection assistance, one-on-one meetings with staff, business workshops and classes, expert consulting services, and grants for accessibility, interior, and storefront improvements.

For more information:

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/economicopportunityanddevelopment>

Sources

City of Cambridge Open Data
Alewife Customer Intercept Survey (June 2025)
Alewife Small Business Survey (December 2025)
Alewife Storefront Inventory (September 2025)
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
U.S. Census Bureau. Esri forecasts for 2025 and 2030. Esri converted Census 2010 into 2020 geography and Census 2020 data
U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap Application and LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (2022)
Walk Score, Inc.

Images

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Kyle Klein Photography
Nicolaus Czarnecki

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