

# Construction hiring goals not met in Boston

## Firms struggle to diversify workers

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff May 18, 2015

Despite improvements in recent years, construction companies building in Boston are failing to hire the targeted number of women and city residents, according to a Globe analysis of city data.

For the past 35 years, a city ordinance has required construction companies to demonstrate good faith efforts to guarantee that half of all hours worked go to Boston residents, 25 percent to minorities, and 10 percent to women. The goals are to ensure that highly desirable building trade jobs are spread around to reflect the city's diverse demographics.

Construction companies have succeeded in hitting the target for minority hires, but not the targets for hiring Boston residents or women, the records show.

Last year, Boston residents accounted for just 30 percent of hours worked on major private and public construction projects, and women had only 4.4 percent of hours worked.

Minorities, meanwhile, exceeded their target, accounting for 31 percent of hours worked.

"The needle is moving, although not as quickly as we'd like it to," said City Councilor Ayanna Pressley, who has lobbied to increase resident and diversity hiring in Boston since she became the first woman of color elected to the council in 2009.

Construction industry leaders acknowledged that not enough has been done to recruit women and minorities, some of whom might never even consider a career in the field because the sector has historically been dominated by white men.

"The construction industry has long been challenged in trying to recruit a diverse population into its ranks," said Robert L. Petrucelli, president and chief executive of the Associated General Contractors of Massachusetts. ". . . But we look forward to meeting this challenge head on."

Construction is an industry that can offer people in disadvantaged communities a path out of poverty. Its workers in the Boston area make about \$63,000 per year, or roughly \$30 per hour, on average, according to data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The heavy reliance on white men and on workers from outside the city raises concerns as real estate development across Boston reaches historic highs, increasing the need for current residents of limited means to have access to good-paying jobs so they can afford to stay here. Advocates point out that nonwhites in Boston outnumber whites 53 percent to 47 percent, and women outnumber men, 52 percent to 48 percent.

The law allows the city to discipline noncompliant companies, including by suspending payments for any municipal funding tied to the project, removing the company from the project altogether, and banning them from future projects that involve city funding or require its approval. However, city officials said such drastic steps are rarely taken. Noncompliance typically results in a meeting where city officials urge the company to develop plans to bring them into compliance.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh said the city in recent years has increased funding to hire more inspectors to oversee compliance with the resident and diversity hiring policy.

“As we move forward down the road, we’re going to be looking to add more enforcement,” Walsh said in a phone interview this month.

Walsh said he is concerned that the hours worked by women remain below the city’s goal, and he expressed surprise and disappointment at the subpar number of hours worked by city residents.

He said it was encouraging that the 25 percent threshold for minority hiring has been surpassed, but “we can always do better, and we should do better.”

Some argue that the ratio of hours earmarked for minorities is seriously outdated and should be raised to at least 50 percent.

“If development companies would like to be serious about how they want to proceed, especially in 2015 and beyond, the goals should be raised,” said Curtis Rollins, director of organizing at the Boston Workers Alliance, an employment rights advocacy organization.

The organization is one of several groups that make up the Boston Jobs Coalition, which supports increasing the city’s goals for construction hiring for minorities to 51 percent, for residents to 51 percent, and for women to 15 percent.

A detailed dataset that accounts for more than a third of the citywide numbers shows that some contractors, developers, and subcontractors are close to compliance and some are further away. It also shows even some of Boston’s busiest construction companies have fallen well short of the goals and citywide averages.

For example, over the past decade, Turner Construction Co. has hired laborers to work 967,000 hours on projects that qualified for a public “large project” review process by the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Only three general contractors have racked up more such work hours, data from the authority show, according to a Globe analysis.

But Turner Construction’s hiring of city residents, minorities, and women is significantly below average, the Globe’s analysis found. Over the past decade, women accounted for 2.2 percent of hours worked, minorities 15 percent, and residents 12.4 percent.

According to a [2012 article](#) in the *Dorchester Reporter*, Turner Construction has faced scrutiny from the city in the past for subpar numbers.

Turner Construction spokeswoman Alison Stanton said the BRA’s data do not include figures from another set of projects tracked by a different city agency, the Boston Residents Jobs Policy Office. She said that when factoring in those other projects, the company’s work-hour ratios for residents, minorities, and women are on par with citywide averages. She said that on two recent projects, Boston residents accounted for about 30 percent of hours worked, minorities for about 25 percent, and women for about 5 percent.

“Diversity and inclusion are a part of our culture on all of our projects, and it’s something we’ve been working on particularly in recent years,” Stanton said.

Boston’s policy went into effect in 1979, after community activists raised concerns about a study that said an overwhelming majority of construction jobs were filled by people from outside the city and that local construction businesses hired few minorities. The policy was designed to help fight discrimination.

The rules were challenged by some construction companies and unions as being unconstitutional, but the Supreme Court upheld the policy in 1983.

Today, union leaders in Boston say they support the city's goals. And unions said they have, in recent years, taken steps to ensure work goes to city residents, minorities, and women.

"Our message is: 'No matter who you are or what you look like, come join us in the trades,'" said Brian Doherty, head of Boston's Building Trades Council, which runs programming focused on recruiting women and minorities who live in Boston to develop careers in construction.

Such programs include Building Pathways, a six-week training initiative launched by Walsh in 2011 when he ran the council, and Operation Exit, which launched last year to train at-risk city residents for preapprenticeship in construction.

"It's a real lottery ticket," said sheet metal worker Jonathan Rivera, 26, of Roxbury.

One hurdle to increasing diversity, industry officials said, is that many of those who have started careers in construction did so because a parent or another close family member worked in the field.

Industry leaders said many companies in recent years have taken steps to try to promote construction careers to minorities and women, including through training programs, but such initiatives have been relatively small and the progress slow.

Progress has been so slow, advocates note, that in some cases the city's numbers have even temporarily reversed.

Between 1993 and 2008, construction work done by residents dipped from 44 percent to 32 percent, by minorities from 38 percent to 30 percent, and by women from 2.8 percent to 2 percent, according to Globe reports several years ago.

In the years since, the figures have remained relatively stagnant.

Yet some advocates of the policy said they must proceed cautiously because taking a stricter stance could prompt legal challenges that could jeopardize the existence of the policy. In other Massachusetts cities, including Worcester, Fall River, and Quincy, similar policies have been overturned after legal challenges within the past 15 years.

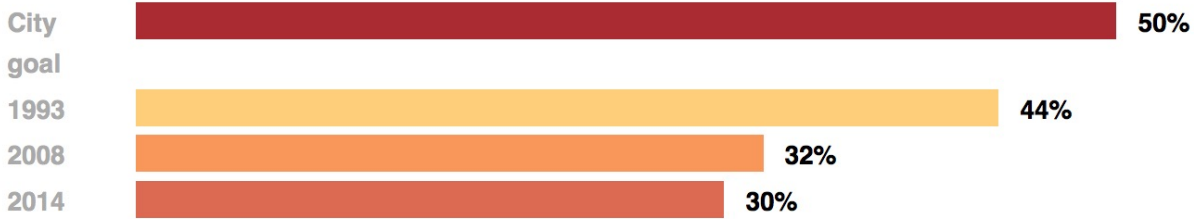
For now, change is coming slowly. Some construction workers say they are still assigned to job sites where they are the only person of color, or the only woman. Tabia Gustave, a 30-year-old elevator constructor from Dorchester, said: "Job sites need to reflect the way this city looks."

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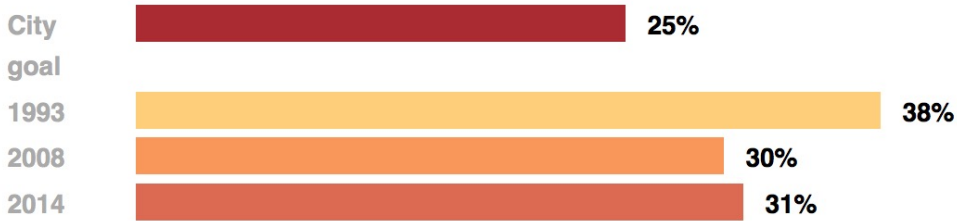
## Diversity in Boston's construction projects still a work in progress

For 35 years, a city ordinance has called on construction companies to ensure that a certain percentage of work hours go to Boston residents, minorities, and women. Companies have gotten closer to the targets, but haven't reached all the goals.

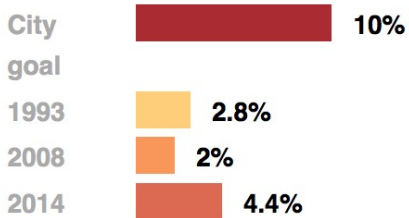
### Residents



### Minorities



### Women



SOURCES: City of Boston, Globe archives

Patrick Garvin/Globe Staff