

# *Peer Communities of 2004*

from the Vision 2020 Fiscal Resources Task Group

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**What is a “peer community”?** Ideally, a community which is like Arlington and to which Arlington may compare itself.

**Why did the Fiscal Resources Task Group do this study?** Town officials and their consultants, community-based groups and residents often compare Arlington to other communities. The communities chosen are seldom the same group. The goal of this study is to identify a group of peer communities that could serve for most if not all comparisons.

**What was the result?** We were unable to define a satisfactory all-purpose group of peer communities. We think the reasons for this and the data we collected are interesting. Based on what we learned, we offer a few suggestions for anyone beginning a study that compares Arlington to other communities.

**How can peer communities be useful?** When Arlington is considering some issue, it would be helpful to know how other similar communities have handled the issue. For example:

To show the impact of providing utility services at the local level, a group of communities that have established municipal light services are chosen.

To show the impact of water and sewer infrastructure projects on taxes, a group of communities that are served by the MWRA are chosen.

To show the effect of alternate approaches to redeveloping a former hospital site, a group of communities with this experience are chosen.

**Can comparison to peer communities be misleading?** Consider the following possibilities:

To show the wisdom of increasing the size of fiscal reserves, a group of communities with higher bond ratings is chosen.

To show the need for increasing employee salaries, a group of wealthier communities is chosen.

To show the need for a larger public safety department, a group of communities from around the State with large public safety departments is chosen.

**How should peer communities be selected?**

Should they be bordering communities with which we compete for residents and sometimes share services (MWRA, MBTA)?

Should they be communities with similar wealth, population, and level of public service?

Should selection of peers be done by an impartial body using sophisticated numerical techniques?

**About this study** The Peer Community Study of 2004 is based on information available from public sources and has two parts.

**Part I Bordering Communities:** An analysis of Arlington compared to the six bordering communities (Belmont, Cambridge, Lexington, Medford, Somerville and Winchester). Through the uses of tables and bar graphs, these communities are ranked from lowest to highest for each of 18 quantitative characteristics as follows:

- |                            |                                    |                                      |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Population              | 7. Equalized Valuation Per Capita  | 13. % Single Family Housing Units    |
| 2. Area                    | 8. Median Family Income            | 14. % Subsidized Housing             |
| 3. Population Density      | 9. Police & Fire Budget Per Capita | 15. \$ Per Student                   |
| 4. Population Age<18       | 10 Public Works Budget Per Capita  | 16. \$ Per Teacher                   |
| 5. Population Age 18 to 65 | 11 Education Budget Per Capita     | 17. Student Teacher Ratio            |
| 6. Population Age > 65     | 12 General Gov't Budget Per Capita | 18. % Graduates To Further Education |

**Part II All Greater Boston Communities:** This part of the study uses the same 18 quantitative characteristics from Part I, however the community comparison pool is expanded to include the 102 greater Boston communities recognized by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (See list on page 12). For this study, Arlington is ranked in the middle and the three closest communities above Arlington are listed together with the three closest communities below Arlington.

**What does this set of data say about the idea of peer communities?** Here are a few observations that we did not appreciate before starting this study.

The bordering communities usually do not include the communities that are most like Arlington in any one characteristic.

There is a big difference between Arlington and the bordering communities in most of the 18 characteristics.

Arlington tends to rank in the middle of the bordering communities as measured by the 18 characteristics (Refer to chart on page 10).

No community is similar (among the 6 most like Arlington) in more than a few of the 18 characteristics (Refer to chart on page 11).

Although much data is available on web sites sponsored by public interest groups and both State and federal governments, this data may not be directly comparable or up to date. For example, Arlington includes the cost of crossing guards in its school budget while other communities may place this expense in the police budget.

It is difficult to weigh the relative importance of the varied characteristics such as median family income, population, education budget, number of housing units, though we believe each is important.

### **Our conclusion?**

The idea of a standard set of peer communities is doubtful.

A reader should carefully evaluate the choice of communities when comparisons are made.

### **What are some questions to ask when a proposal presents community comparisons?**

How similar are the communities in other ways? (If, for example, a proposal requires an expenditure, do the communities to which Arlington is being compared have similar wealth?)

If the comparison is to the average (or median) of a group of communities, does the whole group share similar values for relevant characteristics? (If, for example, a public transportation system improvement is proposed, does the group chosen for comparison have area and population density characteristics like Arlington? )

Where did the data presented come from? How reliable is the source of the data?

**Our recommendations?** Despite our conclusion, it is likely that officials, consultants and others will still use the community comparison approach. We suggest they consider the following common sense observations.

Massachusetts communities outside the greater Boston area are much different from Arlington in size, population density, and wealth.

The communities chosen should be both better and worse than Arlington in the characteristic of interest in the study.

Communities should be chosen so that relevant characteristics other than the characteristic of interest are similar (for example population density when a study recommends expansion of public property).

If bordering communities are used, they should all be used.

Source and age of data should be provided.

### **Data sources**

Massachusetts Department of Revenue (<http://dorapps.dor.state.ma.us>)

Massachusetts Department Of Housing And Community Development (<http://www.mass.gov/dhcd>)

Massachusetts Department Of Education (<http://finance1.doe.mass.edu>)

Metropolitan Area Planning Council (<http://www.mapc.org>)

U.S. Department Of Justice (<http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov>)

Municipal Benchmarking LLC ([www.municipalbenchmarking.com](http://www.municipalbenchmarking.com)) \_\_

Population and Geographic Characteristics  
Bordering Communities

I. Population	
Community	Population
Cambridge	101,355
Somerville	77,478
Medford	55,765
Arlington	42,389
Lexington	30,355
Belmont	24,194
Winchester	20,810

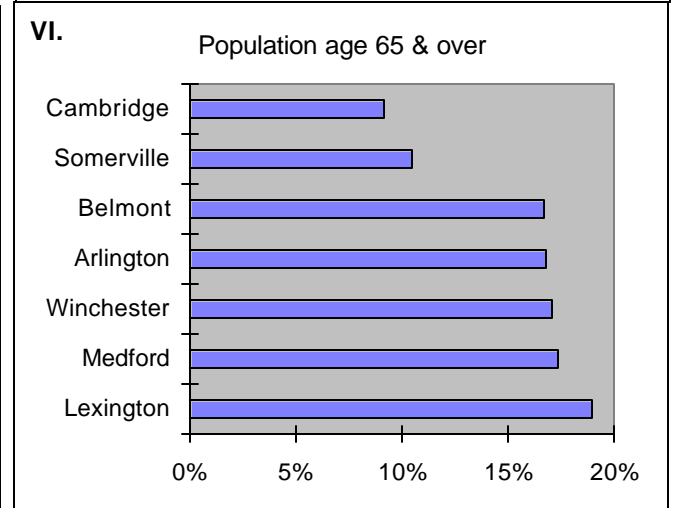
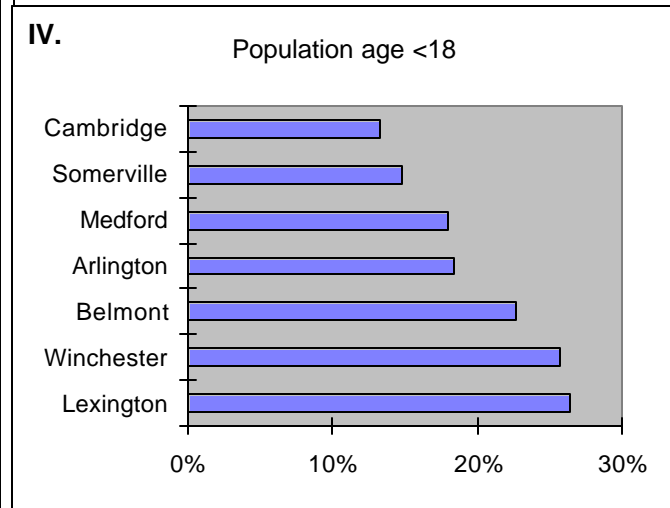
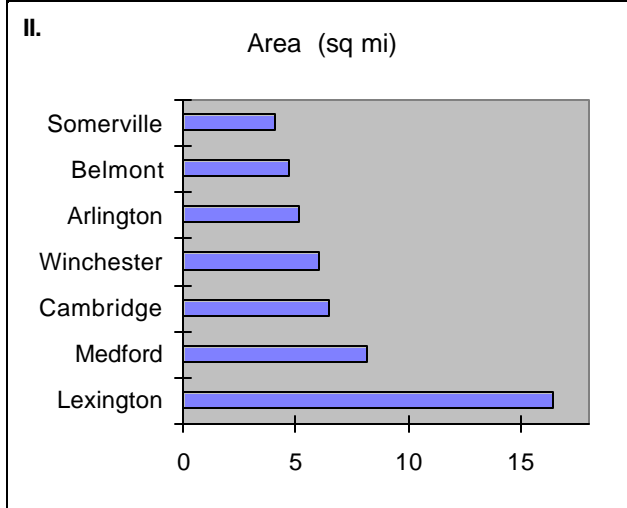
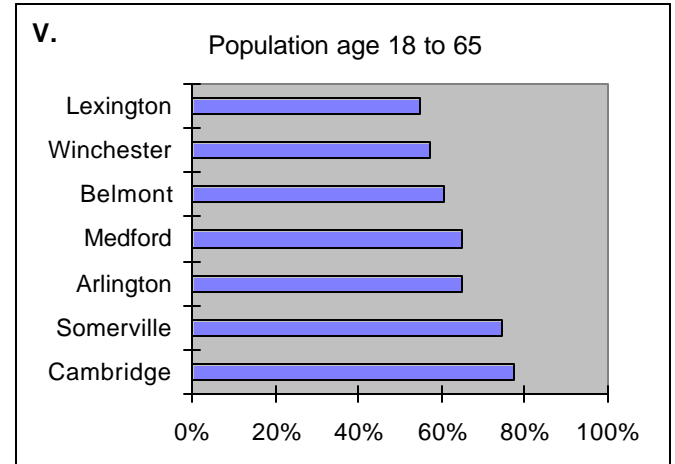
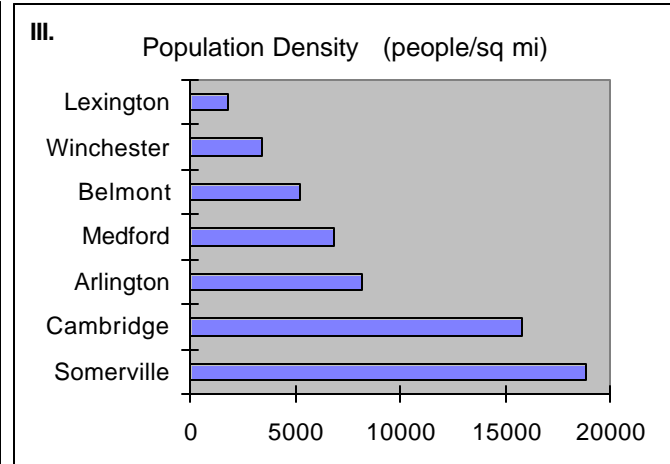
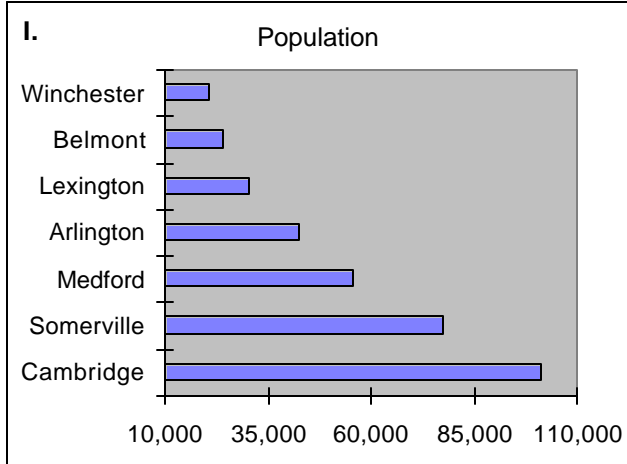
II. Area	
Community	Area (sq mi)
Lexington	16.4
Medford	8.1
Cambridge	6.4
Winchester	6.0
Arlington	5.2
Belmont	4.7
Somerville	4.1

III. Popl. Density	
Community	Population Density (People/sq mi)
Somerville	18851
Cambridge	15763
Arlington	8183
Medford	6851
Belmont	5192
Winchester	3445
Lexington	1851

IV. Popl. Age<18	
Community	Population age <18
Lexington	26.36%
Winchester	25.67%
Belmont	22.68%
Arlington	18.36%
Medford	17.95%
Somerville	14.84%
Cambridge	13.27%

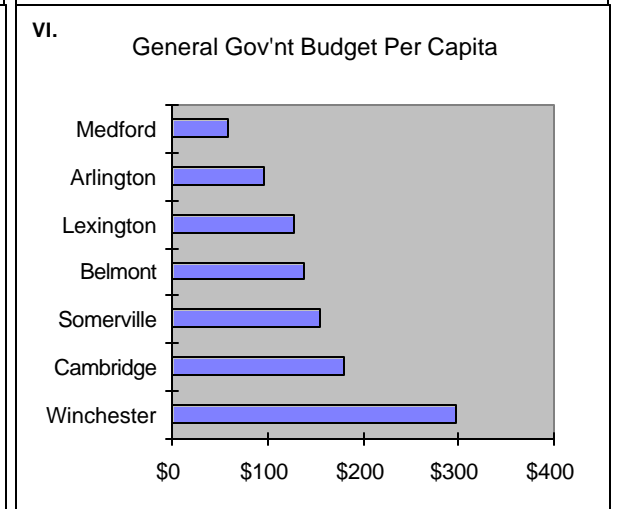
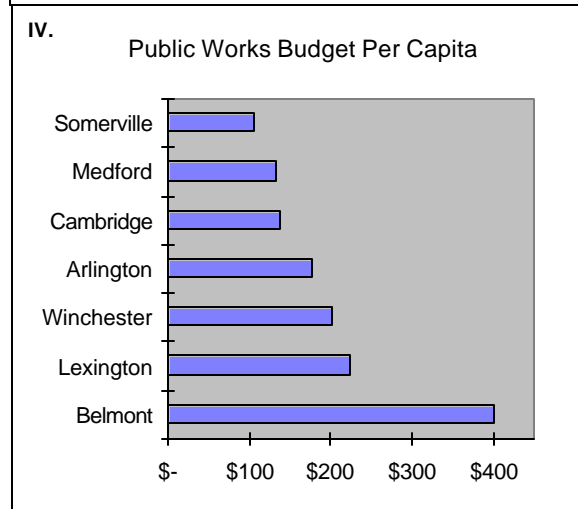
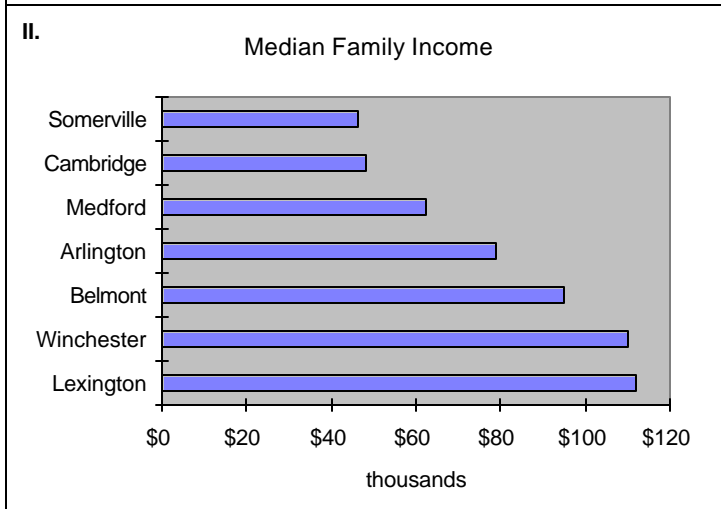
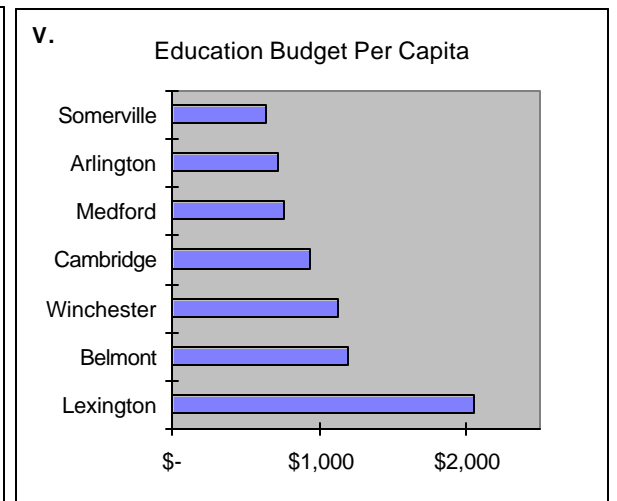
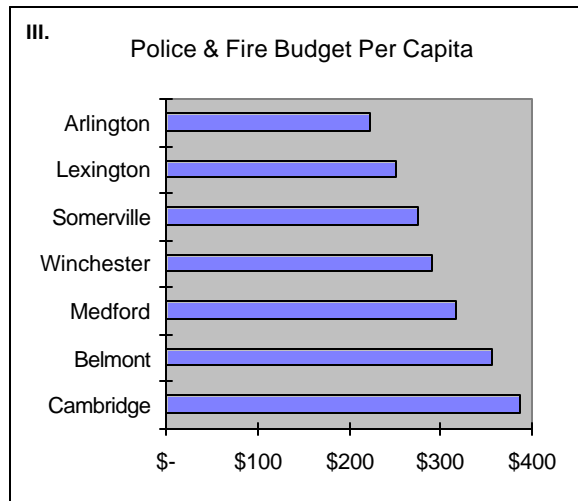
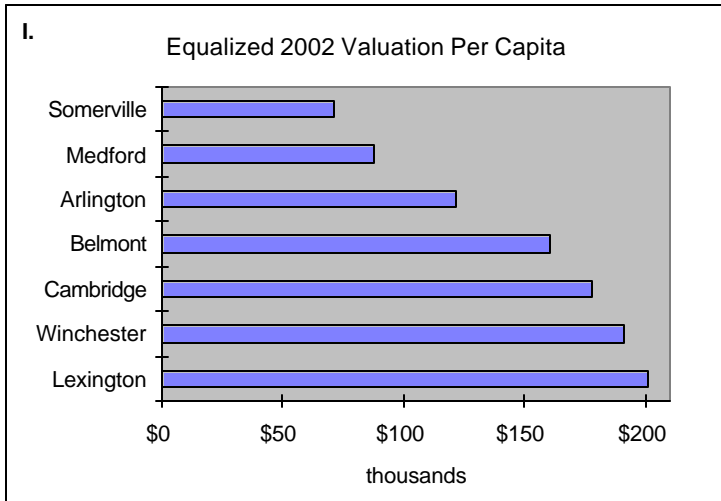
V. Popl. Age 18 to 65	
Community	Population age 18 to 65
Cambridge	77.57%
Somerville	74.71%
Arlington	64.82%
Medford	64.72%
Belmont	60.59%
Winchester	57.24%
Lexington	54.64%

VI. Popl. Age 65 & Over	
Community	Population age 65 & over
Lexington	19.00%
Medford	17.33%
Winchester	17.09%
Arlington	16.82%
Belmont	16.74%
Somerville	10.45%
Cambridge	9.16%



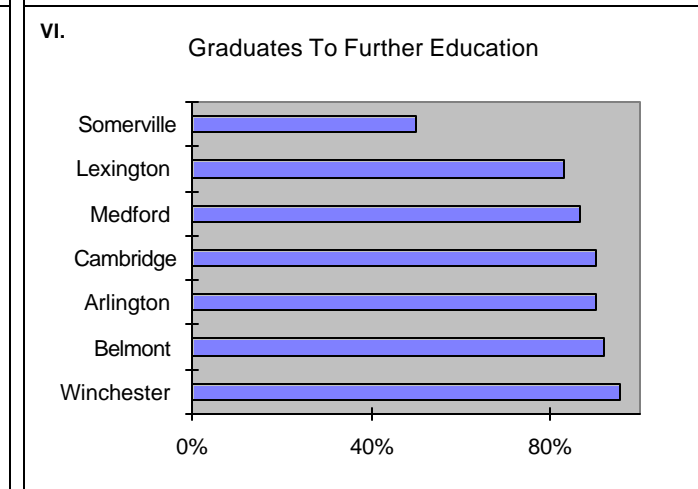
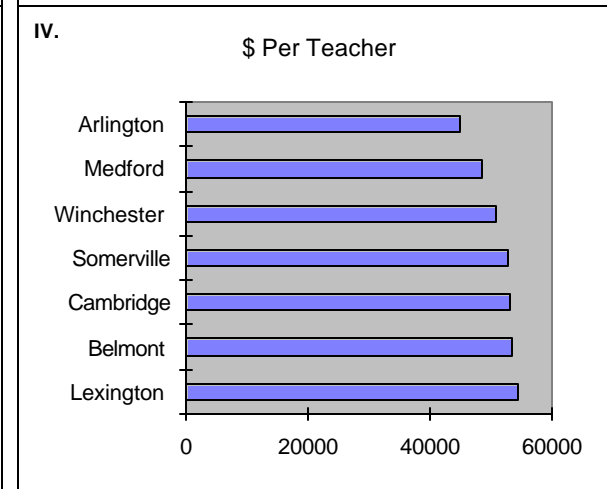
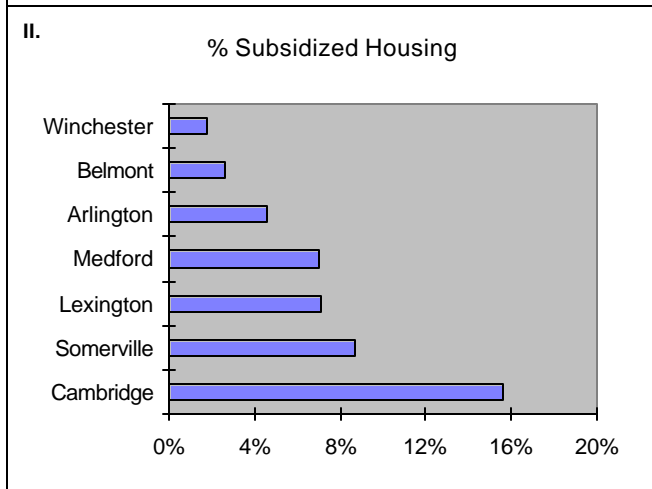
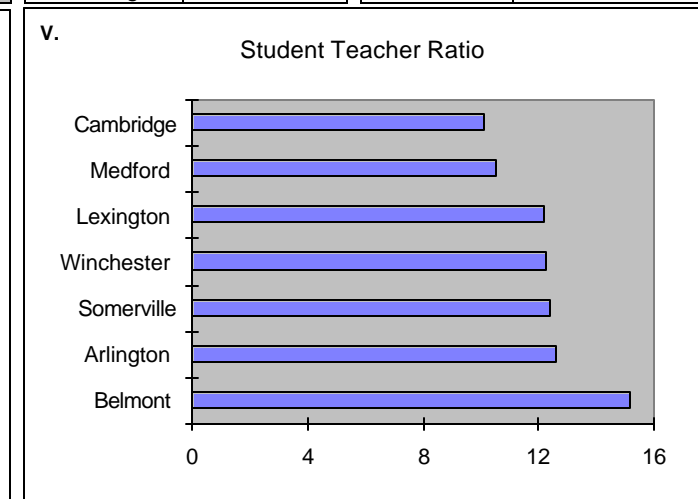
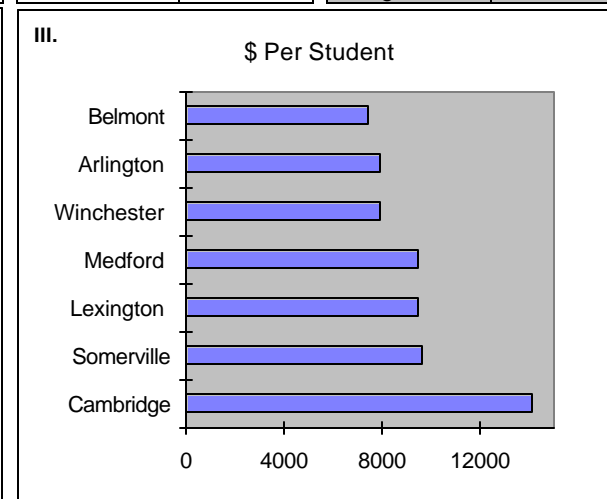
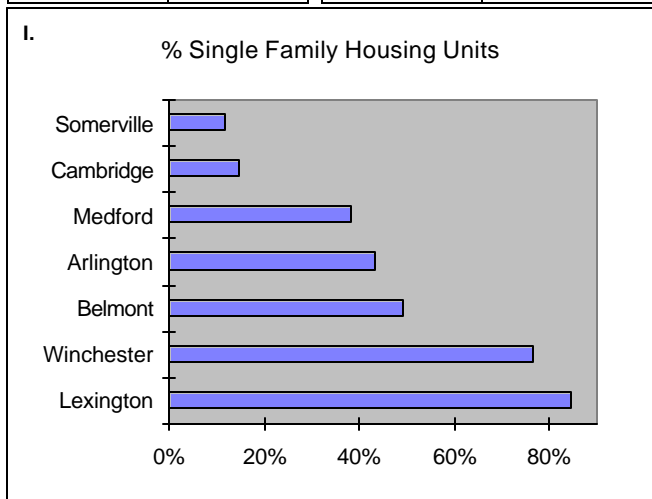
Wealth and Budget Characteristics  
Bordering Communities

I. Equalized Valuation		II. Median Income		III. Police & Fire		IV. Public Works		V. Education		VI. General Gov't	
Community	Proposed 2002 Equalized Valuation Per Capita Thousands	Community	1999 Median Family Income Thousands	Community	FY03 Police & Fire \$ per capita	Community	FY03 Public Works \$ per capita	Community	FY03 Education \$ per capita	Community	FY03 Gen Gov \$ per capita
Lexington	\$201	Lexington	\$112	Cambridge	\$ 388	Belmont	\$ 400	Lexington	\$ 2,045	Winchester	\$298
Winchester	\$191	Winchester	\$110	Belmont	\$ 357	Lexington	\$ 224	Belmont	\$ 1,197	Cambridge	\$179
Cambridge	\$178	Belmont	\$95	Medford	\$ 317	Winchester	\$ 202	Winchester	\$ 1,131	Somerville	\$155
Belmont	\$160	Arlington	\$79	Winchester	\$ 290	Arlington	\$ 178	Cambridge	\$ 938	Belmont	\$138
Arlington	\$122	Medford	\$62	Somerville	\$ 276	Cambridge	\$ 137	Medford	\$ 756	Lexington	\$127
Medford	\$88	Cambridge	\$48	Lexington	\$ 251	Medford	\$ 134	Arlington	\$ 725	Arlington	\$97
Somerville	\$71	Somerville	\$46	Arlington	\$ 223	Somerville	\$ 105	Somerville	\$ 641	Medford	\$60



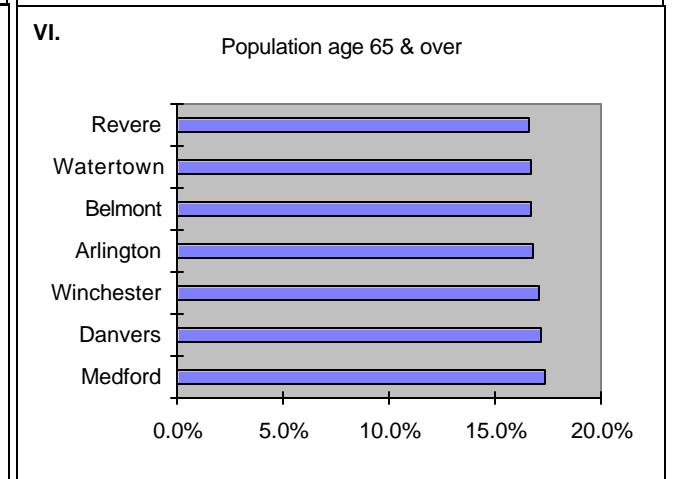
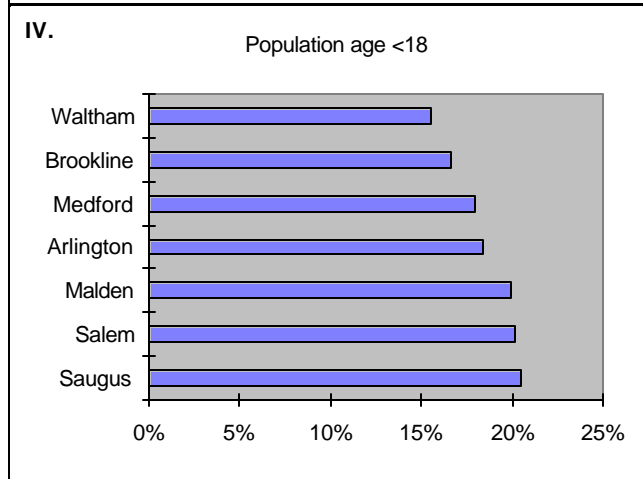
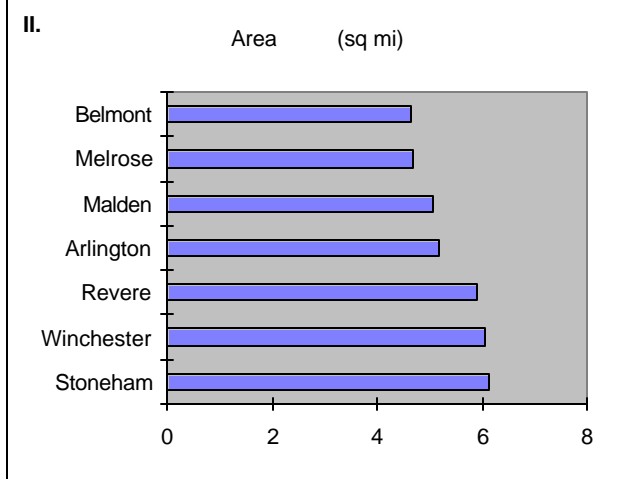
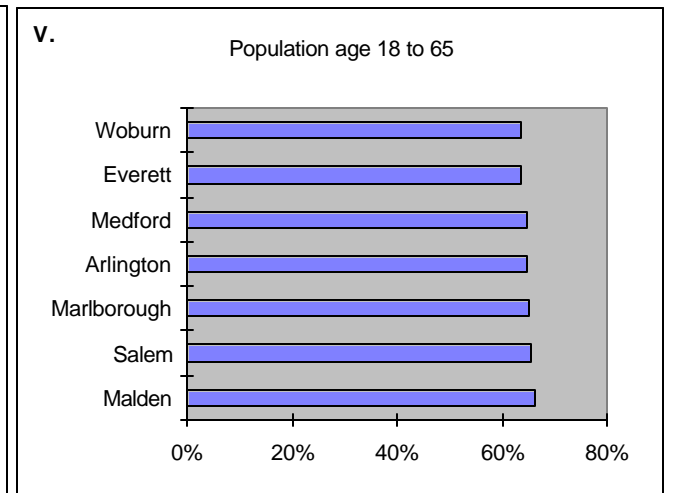
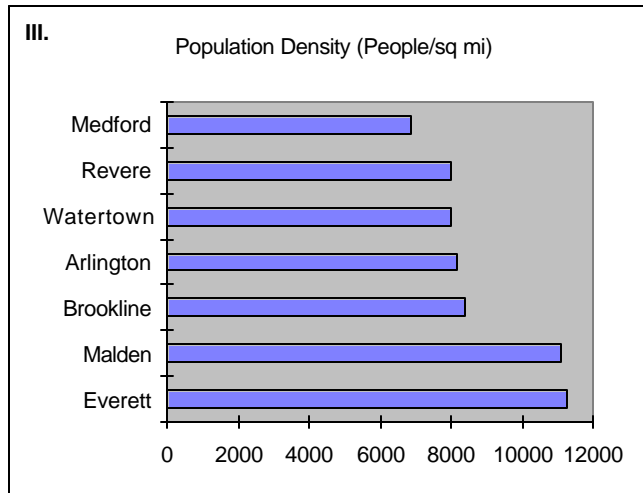
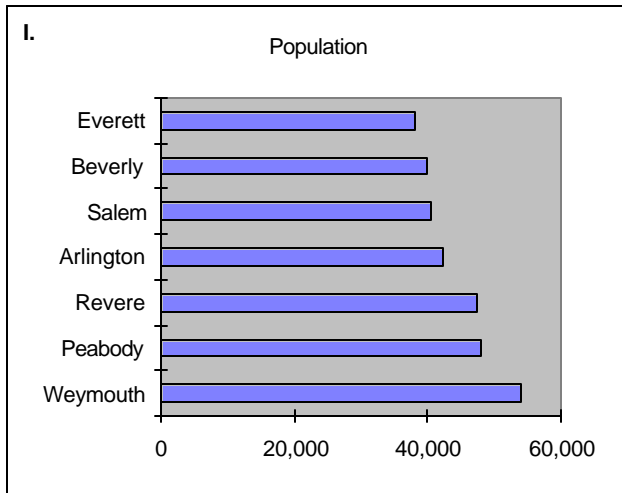
Housing and Education Characteristics  
Bordering Communities

I. % 1 Family Units		II. % Subsidized Housing		III. \$ per Student		IV. \$ per Teacher		V. Student Teacher Ratio		VI. % Grads to College	
Community	% 1 family units	Community	% Subsidized Housing	Community	\$ per student	Community	\$ per teacher	Community	Student teacher ratio	Community	Grads going on to college or other ed
Lexington	84%	Cambridge	15.60%	Cambridge	\$14,084	Lexington	\$54,564	Belmont	15.1	Lexington	98%
Winchester	77%	Somerville	8.73%	Somerville	\$9,649	Belmont	\$53,371	Arlington	12.6	Winchester	95%
Belmont	49%	Lexington	7.06%	Lexington	\$9,482	Cambridge	\$53,202	Somerville	12.4	Belmont	92%
Arlington	43%	Medford	7.02%	Medford	\$9,440	Somerville	\$52,916	Winchester	12.2	Arlington	90%
Medford	38%	Arlington	4.61%	Winchester	\$7,937	Winchester	\$50,976	Lexington	12.2	Cambridge	90%
Cambridge	15%	Belmont	2.64%	Arlington	\$7,870	Medford	\$48,463	Medford	10.5	Medford	87%
Somerville	12%	Winchester	1.79%	Belmont	\$7,397	Arlington	\$44,789	Cambridge	10.1	Somerville	50%



Population and Geographic Characteristics  
Similar Communities

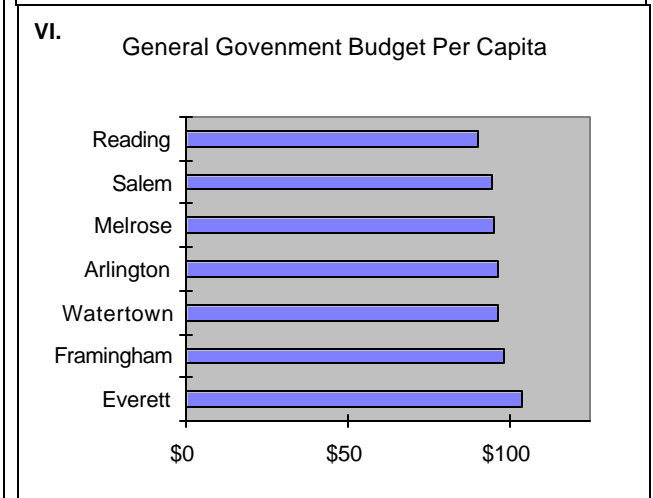
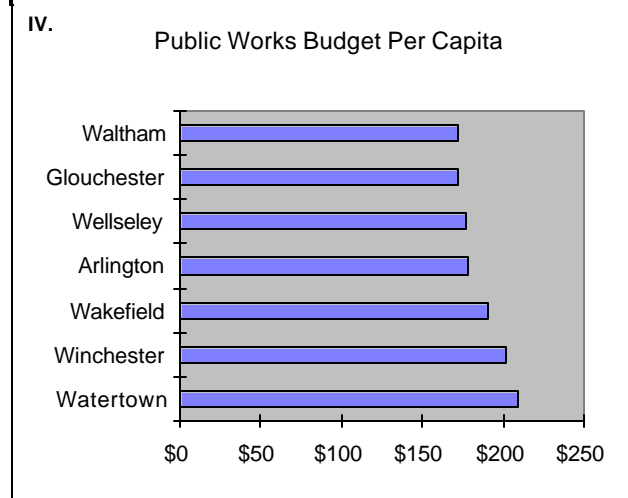
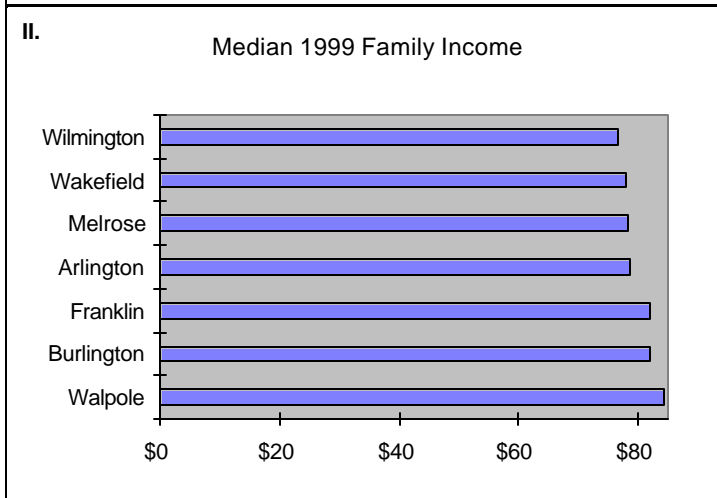
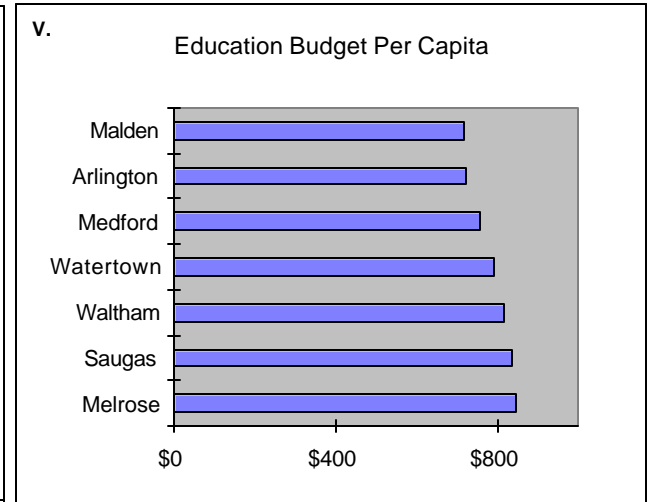
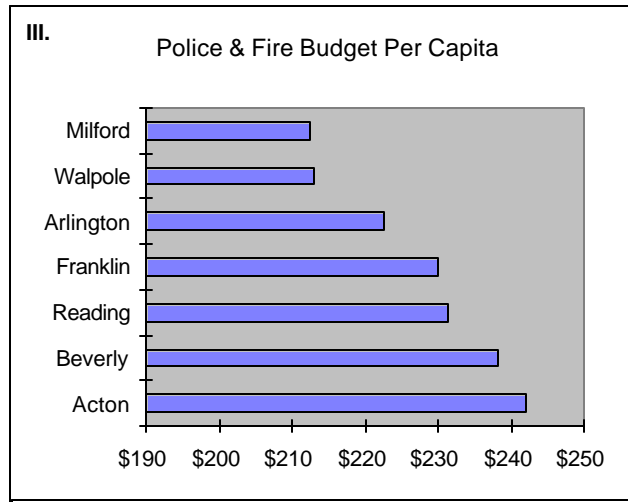
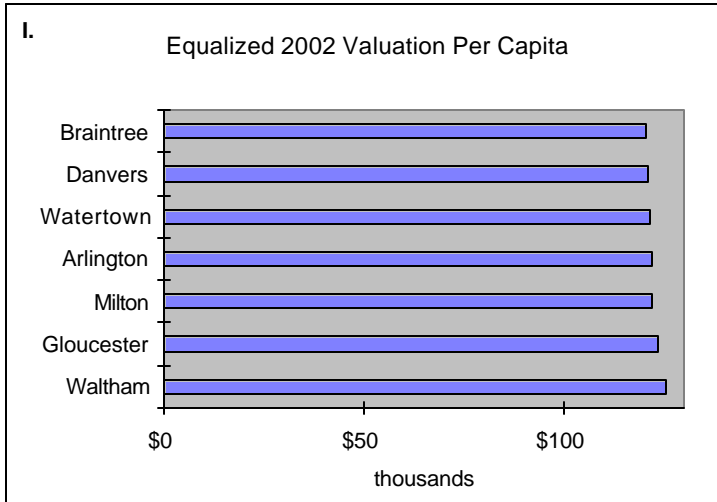
I. Population		II. Area		III. Popl. Density		IV. Popl. Age<18		V. Popl. Age 18 to 65		VI. Popl. Age 65 & Over	
Community	Population	Community	Area (sq mi)	Community	Population Density (People/sq mi)	Community	Population age <18	Community	Population age 18 to 65	Community	Population age 65 & over
Weymouth	53,988	Stoneham	6.2	Everett	11254	Saugus	20.52%	Malden	66.20%	Medford	17.33%
Peabody	48,129	Winchester	6.0	Malden	11112	Salem	20.19%	Salem	65.67%	Danvers	17.18%
Revere	47,283	Revere	5.9	Brookline	8410	Malden	19.95%	Marlborough	65.19%	Winchester	17.09%
Arlington	42,389	Arlington	5.2	Arlington	8183	Arlington	18.36%	Arlington	64.82%	Arlington	16.82%
Salem	40,407	Malden	5.1	Watertown	8026	Medford	17.95%	Medford	64.72%	Belmont	16.74%
Beverly	39,862	Melrose	4.7	Revere	8001	Brookline	16.64%	Everett	63.63%	Watertown	16.69%
Everett	38,037	Belmont	4.7	Medford	6851	Waltham	15.49%	Woburn	63.52%	Revere	16.64%



Wealth and Budget Characteristics  
Similar Communities

I. Equalized Valuation		II. Median Income		III. Police & Fire		IV. Public Works		V. Education		VI. General Gov't	
Similar size towns	Proposed 2002 Equalized Valuation Per Capita Thousands	Similar size communities	1999 Median Family Income Thousands	Similar size communities	FY03 Police & Fire \$ per capita	Similar size communities	FY03 Public Works \$ per capita	Similar size communities	FY03 Education \$ per capita	Similar size communities	FY03 Gen Gov \$ per capita
Waltham	\$126	Walpole	\$84	Acton	\$242	Watertown	\$209	Melrose	\$848	Everett	\$104
Gloucester	\$124	Burlington	\$82	Beverly	\$238	Winchester	\$202	Saugas	\$835	Framingham	\$98
Milton	\$122	Franklin	\$82	Reading	\$231	Wakefield	\$191	Waltham	\$817	Watertown	\$97
Arlington	\$122	Arlington	\$79	Franklin	\$230	Arlington	\$178	Watertown	\$793	Arlington	\$97
Watertown	\$122	Melrose	\$78	Arlington	\$223	Wellseley	\$177	Medford	\$756	Melrose	\$95
Danvers	\$121	Wakefield	\$78	Walpole	\$213	Gloucester	\$172	Arlington	\$725	Salem	\$95
Braintree	\$121	Wilmington	\$77	Milford	\$212	Waltham	\$172	Malden	\$717	Reading	\$90

Similar size communities have Arlington's population +/-50%



Housing and Education Characteristics  
Similar Communities

I. % 1 Family Units	
Community	% 1 family units
Framingham	53%
Marlborough	53%
Belmont	49%
Arlington	43%
Waltham	42%
Medford	38%
Revere	35%

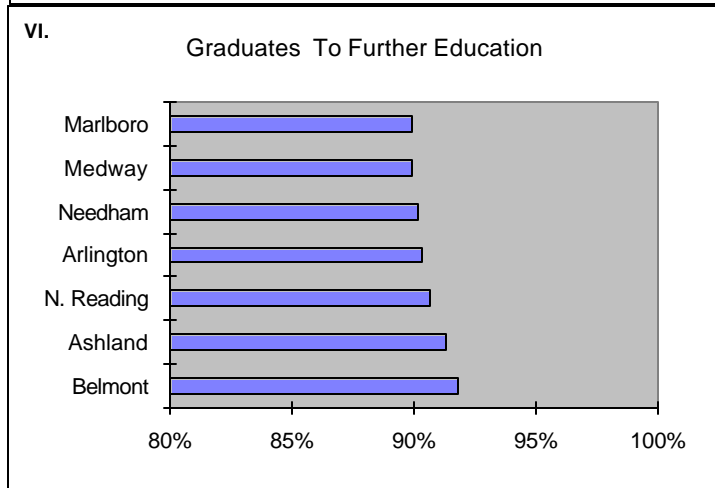
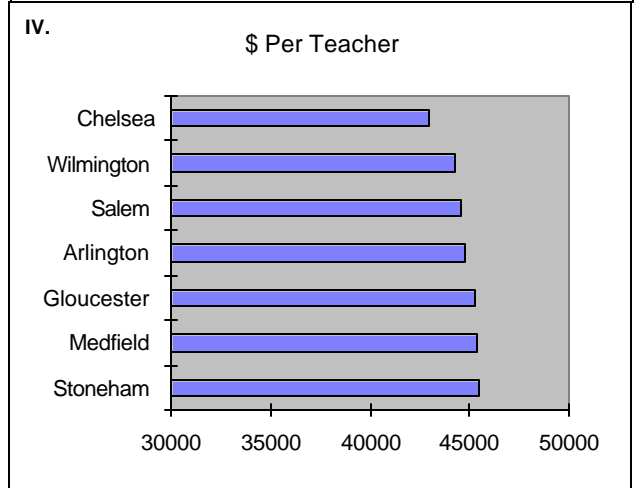
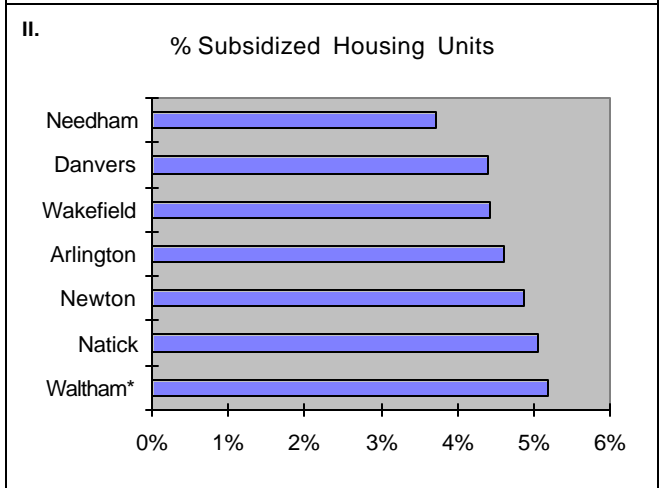
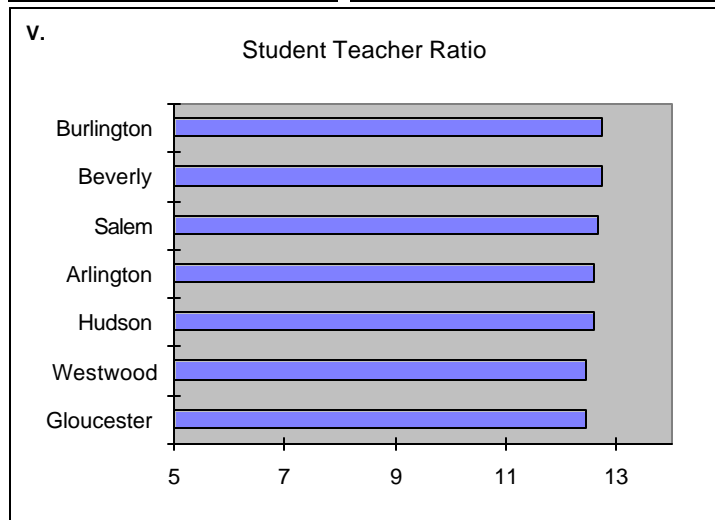
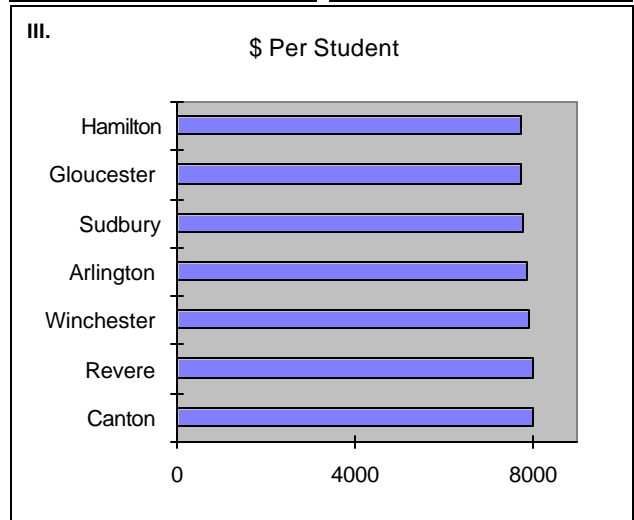
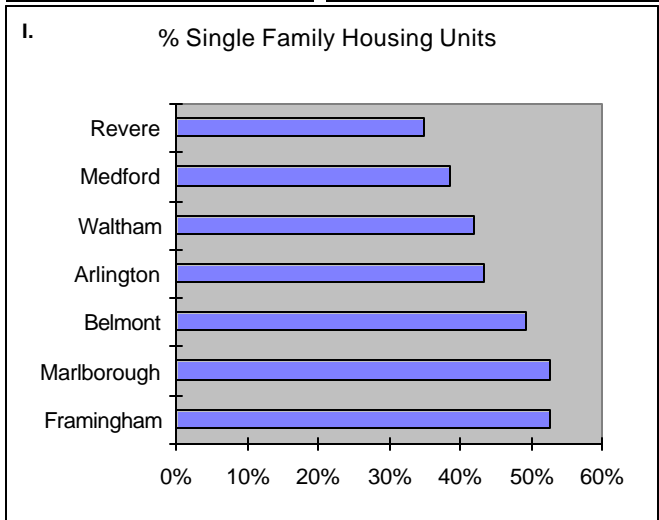
II. % Subsidized Housing	
Community	% subsidized housing
Waltham*	5.20%
Natick	5.05%
Newton	4.88%
Arlington	4.61%
Wakefield	4.44%
Danvers	4.41%
Needham	3.73%

III. \$ per Student	
Community	\$ per student
Canton	\$8,015
Revere	\$7,989
Winchester	\$7,937
Arlington	\$7,870
Sudbury	\$7,806
Gloucester	\$7,759
Hamilton	\$7,721

IV. \$ per Teacher	
Community	\$ per teacher
Stoneham	\$45,477
Medfield	\$45,386
Gloucester	\$45,233
Arlington	\$44,789
Salem	\$44,607
Wilmington	\$44,281
Chelsea	\$42,925

V. Student Teacher Ratio	
Community	Student teacher ratio
Gloucester	12.4
Westwood	12.4
Hudson	12.6
Arlington	12.6
Salem	12.7
Beverly	12.7
Burlington	12.7

VI. % Grads to College	
Community	Grads going on to college or other ed
Belmont	91.8%
Ashland	91.3%
N. Reading	90.6%
Arlington	90.3%
Needham	90.2%
Medway	89.9%
Marlboro	89.9%

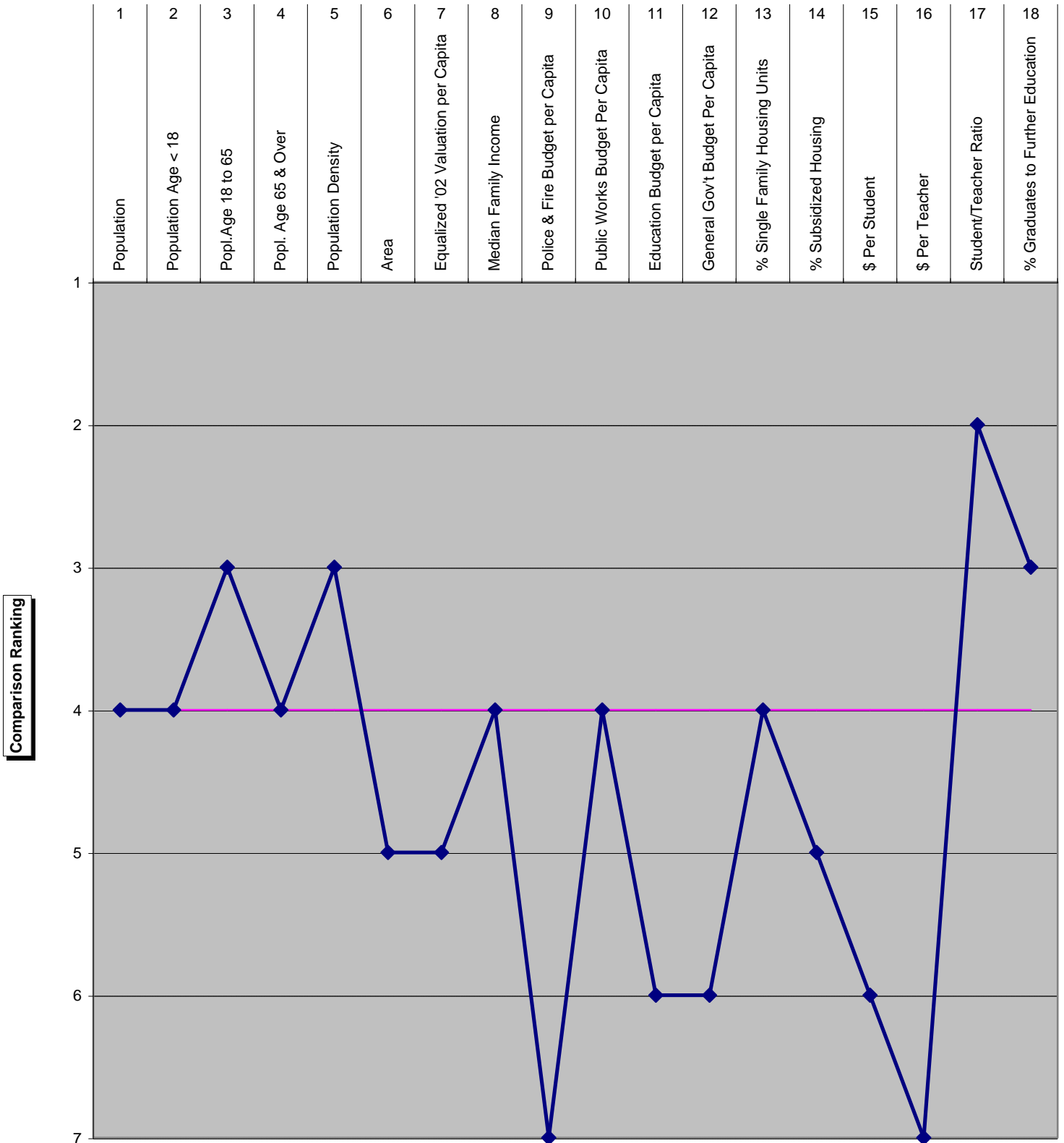


Communities having Arlington's # units +/-50%

School systems having Arlington # students +/-50%

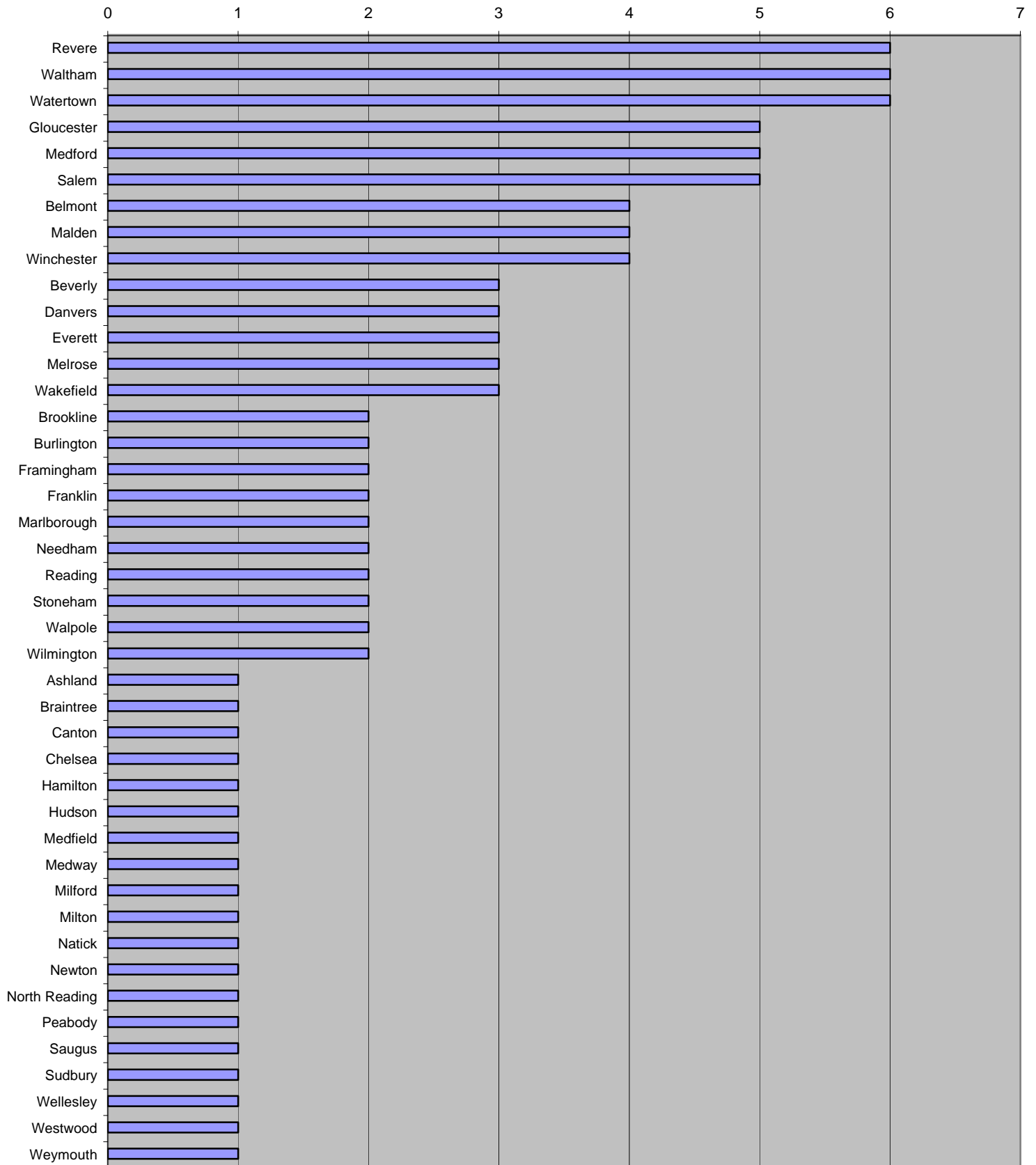
**Peer Community Study of 2004**  
**Arlington's Ranking Versus Bordering Communities**

**18 Demographic Characteristics**



**Peer Community Study of 2004**  
**Frequency of Similar Greater Boston Communities**

**Frequency A Community is within Three (3) Places of Arlington**



## Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) Communities

Acton	Framingham	Melrose	Somerville
Arlington	Franklin	Middleton	Southborough
Ashland	Gloucester	Milford	Stoneham
Bedford	Hamilton	Millis	Stoughton
Bellingham	Hanover	Milton	Stow
Belmont	Hingham	Nahant	Sturbridge
Beverly	Holbrook	Natick	Sudbury
Bolton	Holliston	Needham	Swampscott
Boston	Hopkinton	Newton	Topsfield
Boxborough	Hudson	Norfolk	Wakefield
Braintree	Hull	North Reading	Walpole
Brookline	Ipswich	Norwell	Waltham
Burlington	Lexington	Norwood	Watertown
Cambridge	Lincoln	Peabody	Wayland
Canton	Littleton	Pembroke	Wellesley
Carlisle	Lynn	Quincy	Wenham
Chelsea	Lynnfield	Randolph	Weston
Cohasset	Malden	Reading	Westwood
Concord	Manchester	Revere	Weymouth
Danvers	Marblehead	Rockland	Wilmington
Dedham	Marlborough	Rockport	Winchester
Dover	Marshfield	Salem	Winthrop
Duxbury	Maynard	Saugus	Woburn
Essex	Medfield	Scituate	Wrentham
Everett	Medford	Sharon	
Foxborough	Medway	Sherborn	