

At What Cost?

How Chicago's Outdated Zoning
and Land Use Systems Thwart
Inclusive Growth

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About MPC

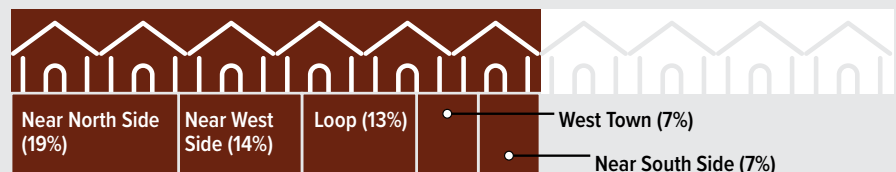
Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) charts the policies, plans, and innovations that build a good life for people in Chicago, its suburbs, and American cities. An independent think tank, we network across divides and drive collaborative action with private and public stakeholders to evaluate policies, design new practices, and advocate for enduring and large-scale change in every area of city living. We believe the American dream will become possible when cities are accessible places to live, work, and get around, and when all residents can experience upward economic mobility.

Introduction

Chicago's zoning code shapes far more than building heights and lot sizes: it determines who can afford to live here, where economic opportunity takes root, and how equitably the city's future growth is shared. This report presents findings from a three-year study by Metropolitan Planning Council, examining how zoning law and regulation have influenced housing availability and affordability, business vitality, and adaptation to climate risks across the city. Grounded in the values of equity, sustainability, and public health, the research draws on an extensive engagement process involving more than 700 individuals from over 450 organizations, including government agencies, community organizations, ward offices, and private sector partners.

The findings reveal a city constrained by its own regulatory framework. Just 11% of Chicago is zoned for multifamily housing¹, while 41% is reserved for the most expensive and land-intensive housing type: detached single-family homes. The consequences of our outdated zoning system are stark and geographically concentrated. For example, 60% of new housing built since 2006 has landed in just five community areas, while 45 of Chicago's 77 community areas have added fewer than 500 new homes in nearly two decades. Meanwhile, Black and Latinx residents have experienced sharp declines in affordability over the last two decades.

60% of the approximately **120,000** new housing units in the city built since 2006 were concentrated in just **5** community areas.



These disparities extend beyond housing into the economic fabric of neighborhoods. Business concentration follows similar patterns of inequity: majority-white census tracts average 14.7 businesses per 1,000 residents, compared to just 8.6 in majority-Black tracts, a gap tied in part to how zoning allocates space for walkable, pedestrian-oriented commercial corridors. Zoning also has tangible impacts on air, water, and land. Our research shows that Latinx Chicagoans make up 50% of the population in the top fifth most air-polluted areas—and that Latinx neighborhoods tend to have more land zoned for industrial use. These disparities pose both health and economic risks for Chicago's population.

This report argues that hyper-local control, absent a coherent citywide strategy, comes at a real cost to residents' lives. What follows are the key findings and policy recommendations to build a more equitable and thriving Chicago.



illustration: Lucie Van der Elst

¹ 8% of the city is zoned Residential Two-Flat, Townhouse, and Multi-Unit (RT), and 3% is zoned Residential Multi-Unit (RM). Many, but not all B, C, and D districts also allow the development of housing units as part of mixed-use development. Some districts require that multi-unit residential development receive special use approval. These districts together cover about 10% of the city.

Citywide problems require citywide solutions: A way forward on zoning and land use

Chicago is a city known for what we've built—and what we've rebuilt. We are renowned for our architecture, our elevated trains, our sweeping public parks, our lakefront skyline, and our people. When the city we had created was destroyed by a historic fire, we marshaled the industry and innovation of the time and built it again.

Our story of rebuilding is also one of segregation and harm. Highways carved up our neighborhoods, rampant redlining and exclusionary zoning practices blocked families in Black and Latinx communities from homeownership and wealth building, and polluting industries left some communities with unhealthy air and contaminated land that is still in need of remediation. Just as we have rebuilt our skyline after tragedy, our task now is to rebuild toward a future that addresses the wrongs of our past.

We need to craft citywide solutions to citywide problems. We are in a time of skepticism about cities. And the challenges are real: new housing is being built in too few neighborhoods, and the costs of housing continue to rise faster than wages. Too many lots and storefronts are sitting vacant, while small business owners struggle to navigate complicated policies to get businesses off the ground. Across Chicago, all residents are exposed to unhealthy levels of air pollution, and some communities still bear a disproportionate burden. All of these are complex land use questions that the city has a responsibility to tackle.

Citywide zoning and land use reforms are a chance to flex our citywide muscle: an opportunity to prove that cities can work, while improving life for all Chicagoans. The recommendations below are informed by MPC and Urban Institute's stakeholder-guided research, and the perspectives we heard from hundreds of Chicagoans over the course of the Zoning and Land Use Assessment—experts and everyday residents alike. These are reforms that take a citywide approach. We can allow the construction of more homes without project-by-project aldermanic approval, like the two-to-four flats that already fill our neighborhoods but remain illegal to build and rebuild throughout much of the city. We can remove the requirement for new small businesses to navigate expensive zoning relief processes. And we can modernize our zoning to allow areas near transit to evolve into dynamic and walkable places to live and work.

The result has been that Chicago is seen as too unpredictable a place to build, housing continues to become more expensive, and segregation continues to divide our city.

Aldermanic prerogative—Chicago's version of hyper-local control—is standing in the way of building a more equitable future for our city. Aldermanic prerogative is a deeply rooted practice here. Through policy and practice, City Council and other government bodies defer to the local alderperson when making decisions about development proposals. Because Chicago's current zoning and land use policies restrict what's possible to build “by-right”—under the current zoning rules—many projects can't advance without the blessing of the local alderperson. This gives alderpersons virtually unquestioned control over what gets built within the boundaries of each of the 50 separate wards. The result has been that Chicago is seen as too unpredictable a place to build, housing continues to become more expensive, and segregation continues to divide our city.

Our neighborhoods have different needs, but aldermanic prerogative is not an effective stand-in for neighborhood desires. Each alderperson approaches their role differently. Some have local zoning advisory boards composed of hand-selected residents, local businesses, or local institutions. Some solicit feedback, hold community

meetings, or encourage developers to hold meetings. And some do none of these things, negotiating directly with developers. Even when alderpersons receive input from residents, there is no mechanism to check whether this feedback is representative of their constituents, or whether it simply represents those with the time and resources to engage. At the same time, there is also no way to ensure that feedback gets implemented—the power remains the alderperson's to wield as they wish.

The current system pushes our politics toward territorialism and zero-sum thinking. Our challenges are not contained within individual wards, and the solutions are not either. The availability and affordability of new homes, the vibrancy of our business corridors, and the role of industry in our neighborhoods are all citywide issues, and citywide zoning and land use policy could be powerful tools to address them. But for over a century, aldermanic prerogative has prevented this citywide approach, keeping our elected officials locked in political infighting rather than common-sense policymaking.

Zoning reform is not a silver bullet. There are generational challenges ahead. Many factors beyond zoning shape our communities, such as public and private investment and disinvestment, community organizations, market incentives, and tax structures. Zoning changes that make room for more homes must be paired with policies that prioritize and incentivize the creation and preservation of homes affordable to the lowest-income Chicagoans. Meanwhile, the unusually large size of City Council for the size of our population, our lack of at-large council members, and our lack of a city charter all fuel our culture of unchecked aldermanic prerogative. And with our piecemeal approach to planning, we lack a way to bring in many voices to conversations about development without getting sidetracked by hyper-local opposition, or piling all of a community's legitimate needs onto a single development. Zoning reform alone will not solve our city's fundamental and interrelated problems of resource allocation and governance.

Yet zoning reform is a worthwhile citywide project. With zoning and land use reform as a foundation, we can build toward a new Chicago. We can reimagine our policies—zoning and beyond—to build a place where the inequitable outcomes we see reflected in our research no longer persist. We can build a place where families of all incomes can afford a place to live; where all Chicagoans have access to transportation that connects them; where vibrant, livable communities replace empty lots and small businesses can grow without unnecessary barriers; and where everyone can breathe fresh air and drink clean water. To get there, we need a new collaborative and forward-looking status quo that empowers Chicagoans—not ward-by-ward, but across the city.



At a workshop, participants review and share feedback on research and policy recommendations developed during the Zoning and Land Use Assessment.





THE CHALLENGE



THE VISION



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

 A worsening affordability crisis is pinching budgets and displacing Chicagoans	 Make space for more homes that Chicagoans can afford (pp. 10-17)	• Legalize 4-flats and ADUs citywide: At minimum, allow housing types with up to four units by-right and additional dwelling units (ADUs) in all residential areas. • Legalize 6 stories near transit: At minimum, allow apartment buildings with up to 6 stories by-right near rail stations and the most frequent and highest-volume bus lines. • Decrease reliance on Planned Developments for multifamily construction: Right-size thresholds for Planned Developments so more multifamily housing can be built by-right. • Use zoning tools to promote deep affordability: Prioritize and incentivize affordable housing (fast-track zoning approvals for affordable development, prohibit reactive downzoning, and protect against the loss of naturally affordable units).
 Jobs and business vitality are inequitably distributed	 Clear the way for vibrant, livable communities (pp. 18-20)	• Zone for a dynamic mix of uses near transit: Allow more opportunities for Chicagoans to live, work, and visit places near transit, especially in areas with fewer jobs and/or higher vacancy rates. • Expand pedestrian streets near transit: Standardize the use of the pedestrian street designation near transit and modernize pedestrian street eligibility and standards. • Bring small-scale business into neighborhoods: Increase the types of businesses allowed in residential neighborhoods, like home-based and small-scale businesses.
 Too many Chicagoans are exposed to unhealthy pollutants and vulnerable to climate impacts	 Integrate healthy air, water, and land into zoning and land use practices (pp. 21-26)	• Update zoning for modern industry: Re-classify manufacturing and industrial uses based on measurable benefits and harms—such as jobs, pollution, environmental impacts, and public health impacts—to encourage low-impact, job-dense industry. • Protect overburdened communities from cumulative impacts: Require a holistic review of the expected health and quality-of-life impacts of all proposed intensive industrial facilities. • Leverage unbuilt land for permeable surfaces: Use zoning to ensure unbuilt land helps counter flood and heat risk, by requiring or incentivizing permeable surfaces and green infrastructure in setbacks open space, parkways, and parking lots. • Target climate-vulnerable areas for mitigation strategies: Prioritize communities most vulnerable to heat and flooding for more green space and remediation.
 Zoning and land use policy is opaque and difficult to navigate	 Clarify and streamline zoning process and categories (pp. 27-29)	• Modernize special uses: Allow most current special use categories by-right, with accompanying use standards. Require Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) review only for uses with likely impacts on health and safety. • Reassess other zoning relief categories: Conduct a review of variation and administrative adjustment requests to determine zoning code updates. • Centralize information about zoning: Provide a central hub for plain-language materials around zoning standards and processes, prioritizing information that facilitates housing and small business development. • Close zoning data gaps: Standardize and publicize data on zoning processes and outcomes.
 Proactive planning is piecemeal and focused on the neighborhood level	 Tie zoning to foundational citywide planning and engagement (pp. 30-31)	• Periodically update zoning to align with a planning vision: Require regular reviews of the zoning code and map based on comprehensive citywide planning that meaningfully engages the public. • Improve public input processes: Create a more standardized, transparent, and equitable public input process on land use.

What can you expect from this report?

In [ABOUT THE ZONING AND LAND USE ASSESSMENT](#), you'll find an overview of the process MPC went through to produce the research and recommendations contained in this report.

In [RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS](#), you'll find a deep dive into MPC's recommended policies for improving zoning and land use in Chicago. The recommendations, which were developed in consultation with stakeholders, are organized by the challenges they respond to: the worsening housing affordability crisis in Chicago, the inequitable distribution of jobs and business vitality, exposure to pollutants and climate vulnerabilities, an opaque and difficult-to-navigate zoning system, and piecemeal planning practices. In each category, you'll find the research findings from the Assessment that relate to the challenge, MPC's specific policy recommendations, additional considerations for policy design and implementation, and example policies from other cities.

In [CONCLUSION](#), you'll find a discussion of the implications of this work.

In [APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL RESEARCH FINDINGS](#), you'll find the research findings from the Assessment that were not included in the body of the report. This includes findings from our analysis of "productive land use" across Chicago neighborhoods; findings on grocery and healthcare availability and zoning; and other findings that did not directly relate to specific policy recommendations but came out of the Assessment's research focus on seven priority outcomes: affordable housing, strong business corridors, limited pollution exposure, accessible public transit hubs, available groceries and healthcare, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and productive land use.

In [APPENDIX: ZONING DISTRICTS](#), you'll find an introduction to Chicago's main zoning designations and their shares of the city's zoned land area. You'll also find a (simplified) zoning map of the city.

In [APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY](#), you'll find a detailed account of how the research was conducted, including data sources, assumptions, and research limitations.

In [APPENDIX: ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY](#), you'll find a detailed account of how engagement was conducted, including a timeline of engagement across the project, example activities, and how input was documented and synthesized.

In [ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#), you'll find the team members, partners, funders, and other contributors who made the Assessment possible.

About the Zoning and Land Use Assessment

What is the Zoning and Land Use Assessment?

Reimagining a new citywide status quo for zoning in Chicago requires a shared understanding of the effects our current zoning and land use policies are having on neighborhoods across the city. That's why MPC—with research support from the Urban Institute—created the Zoning and Land Use Assessment: a collaborative research and engagement initiative designed to explore the impacts of Chicago's current zoning and land use policies, and propose improvements to better serve public health, equity, and sustainability.

Who contributed to the Zoning and Land Use Assessment?

The Assessment was a multi-year project that engaged hundreds of stakeholders. Since the project's launch in 2022, MPC has collaborated with dozens of partners from civic and community groups, government, and the private sector. This engagement took many forms, including one-on-one conversations, focus groups, advisory committees, and public events. Two advisory groups—the Steering Committee and Community Advisory Group—in particular provided essential guidance for the Assessment.

WHO

700+ individuals from **450+** organizations engaged with MPC over the course of the Assessment.

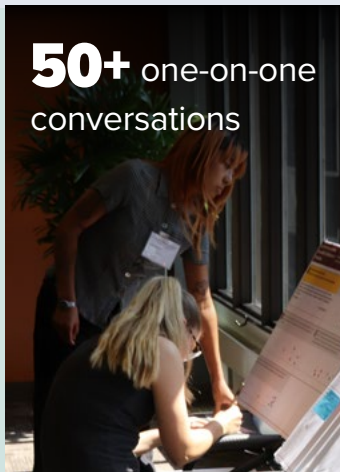
Participants came from: **80+** government agencies and departments, **200+** civic and community organizations, **24** ward offices, and **90+** private sector partners.

14 Steering Committee meetings
+
7 Community Advisory Group meetings
= **21** advisory group meetings

50+ one-on-one conversations

10+ focus group sessions

5 public events and workshops



For more detail on the ways that MPC engaged stakeholders and how stakeholder input informed this work, as well as a list of participating organizations in the Steering Committee and Community Advisory Group, see [APPENDIX: ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY](#).

What is land use? What is zoning?

Land use is how Chicagoans experience the places we live, work, and visit in our daily lives. The apartment building next door, the nearby park, that favorite corner store or local coffee shop, that empty lot or big-box store, the factory or car wash across the street—all are examples of different land uses.



A zine to demystify zoning

For more on zoning basics, a detailed history of zoning in Chicago, and the nitty-gritty of how zoning works, check out MPC's zine, developed as part of the Assessment. MPC collaborated with the Assessment's Community Advisory Group to develop [In the Zone: A Chicagoan's Guide to Zoning and Land Use](#). Available in physical and digital form—and in Spanish and Simplified Chinese—this illustrated resource is for anyone who wants to learn about zoning in Chicago.



Zoning regulates land uses by setting limits on what can be built, and where. In this report, “zoning” includes the zoning ordinance (also known as the zoning code or text) which sets out rules for development in different zoning districts, the zoning map which determines the districts that apply to different areas of the city, and the zoning process—the people and pathways through which decisions about zoning get made.

Together, these things determine which land uses are allowed in specific locations and set limits on new development's size and shape. Zoning controls how tall a building can be and how close it can be to the street. It influences allowable density: how many of something, like homes or storefronts, exist in a space. Zoning also influences how long the development process takes, how much it costs, and who can weigh in along the way.

Zoning reform isn't a silver bullet. Many other factors also play an important role in shaping development and the feel of neighborhoods. This encompasses everything from other regulatory systems like building codes and business licensing, to the market for development (including what financing is available for development), taxes and other revenue structures, and community institutions that anchor neighborhoods.

For more information on Chicago's zoning districts, including each zoning designation's share of city land—plus a map of zoning districts across the city—see [APPENDIX: ZONING DISTRICTS](#).

Why does zoning matter?

Improving zoning means improving life for Chicagoans. Zoning is one of the most direct tools policymakers have to influence how neighborhoods look and feel. As the research in this report shows, our current zoning system does not always result in equitable outcomes. Zoning is part of a long, ongoing history of laws and practices that have contributed to a segregated Chicago, with disinvestment in some neighborhoods and abundant resources in others.

Currently, zoning is controlled through a longstanding practice called “aldermanic prerogative.” Alderpersons have control over what gets built within the boundaries of each of our 50 wards. This approach has not been successful in meeting our challenges: Chicago is seen as too unpredictable a place to build, housing continues to become more expensive, and segregation continues to divide our city. We have an opportunity with zoning to think as a city, moving beyond a ward-by-ward system and taking a bigger-picture policy approach.

For more on zoning basics and the history of zoning in Chicago, read MPC's zine [In the Zone: A Chicagoan's Guide to Zoning and Land Use](#), developed as part of the Zoning Assessment.

How was the Assessment conducted?

This section provides a high-level overview of the process of conducting the Assessment. For more detail, see [APPENDIX: ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY](#) and [APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY](#).

Defining core values and selecting outcomes to analyze

To lay the groundwork for the project, MPC facilitated a series of monthly meetings with the project's Steering Committee, composed of 42 members across a wide range of sectors, including city agency staff, environmental justice and housing advocates, community organizations, architects, planners, and real estate professionals. The Committee created shared definitions for core project values—equity, sustainability, and public health.

Equity

Outcomes and processes that result in fair and just access to opportunities and resources by way of repairing past harms and transforming power dynamics so that everyone, but particularly oppressed groups, both historically and presently, have the power and resources that they need to thrive.

Sustainability

An inclusive, systemic approach that improves and integrates environment, climate, health, social equity, and economic vitality in order to create thriving, healthy, diverse, and resilient communities and natural ecosystems for this generation and generations to come.

Public health

The physical, mental, and social wellbeing of individuals and neighborhoods and populations. All of these are shaped by social and physical structures, conditions, and processes.

The Steering Committee also mapped out the zoning process and identified challenges based on their experiences. Finally, the Steering Committee developed a list of more than 120 outcomes of interest for the research. From that list, they selected 13 outcomes through consensus voting and discussion. Out of those 13 outcomes, based on the likelihood of a connection between the outcome and zoning, plus research feasibility, the research team selected **seven priority outcomes** for the research to focus on. The Steering Committee created shared definitions for these seven priority outcomes.



Affordable housing

Diverse and affordable housing options (subsidized, affordable, workforce/middle, market, and luxury) are available in every neighborhood including for the job insecure and unhoused populations



Available groceries and healthcare

Affordable grocery options and healthcare providers are accessible in all neighborhoods



Strong business corridors

Strong and vibrant business corridors with diverse business opportunities to support the economic needs and resiliency of every community



Mitigation and adaptation to climate change

All communities feature green infrastructure and energy-efficient building stock that both mitigates and adapts to climate change



Limited pollution exposure

All neighborhoods feature low levels of pollution, taking into account cumulative impacts on overburdened communities



Productive land use

All land in communities is used productively, meaning beneficial to local residents and aligned with community needs



Accessible public transit hubs

All communities feature public transit options that are convenient and reliable, and serve hubs with housing, businesses, recreation and other services

Conducting and refining the research

For each of these seven priority outcomes, the research team approached the work in three stages.

Understand the outcome:

What is the current state of this outcome? How have trends shown up across neighborhoods in the city? How has this outcome changed over time?

Understand the zoning:

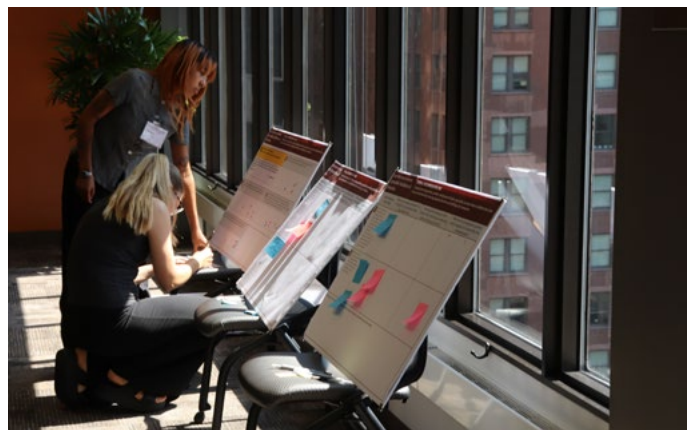
Which elements of zoning could be connected to this outcome? How are those elements distributed throughout the city?

Understand the relationship:

What can the data tell us about the connection between zoning and the outcome?

To complete these analyses, the team first had to assemble foundational data on zoning and data related to each individual outcome. MPC compiled zoning data for three separate points in time: 2003, 2012, and 2023.² Having zoning data for three separate years allowed the team to track trends over time. Then, MPC compiled data on each individual outcome from a variety of sources. Analyses varied depending on available data—for example, some metrics could be longitudinally analyzed, while others could not.

For each outcome, the research team refined the analysis through stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders provided feedback on initial drafts of the research during Steering Committee meetings, Community Advisory Group meetings, or public workshops, and the research team used that feedback to improve the analyses.



MPC collected more than **1,200** pieces of written feedback while developing and refining the recommendations in this report.



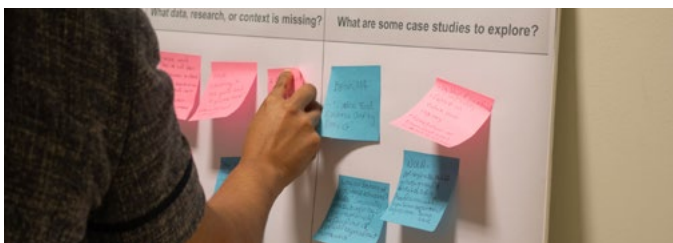
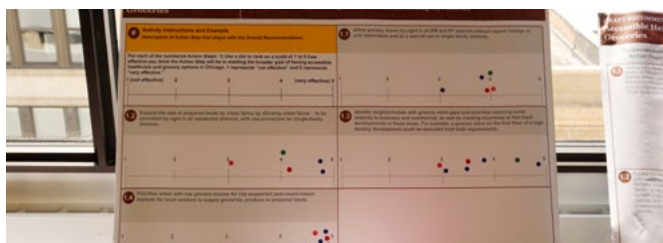
Developing the recommendations

As with the research approach, stakeholders also informed the Assessment's recommendations.

In response to initial drafts of research results, stakeholders weighed in on which policy implications stood out to them, creating an initial list of possible policy directions. To further ground policy development, MPC also conducted a national scan of zoning best practices. MPC staff teams worked together to synthesize the research findings, policy implications from stakeholders, and best practices into preliminary policy recommendations.

MPC teams then solicited feedback on these preliminary recommendations in a series of stakeholder workshops. Using dot boards, participants voted on the effectiveness of each recommendation, and provided written feedback on how the recommendations might impact their communities and how they might be strengthened. MPC collected more than 1,200 pieces of written feedback in response to the preliminary recommendations.

MPC staff used this feedback to further refine the recommendations. As recommendations were finalized and themes emerged, the team moved from an outcome-based structure into the structure you see in this report, which aligns policy recommendations and research findings with five separate challenges and visions for zoning and land use.



² To compile the 2003 zoning data, the team digitized physical maps archived at the Chicago Public Library. The 2012 and 2023 maps were available digitally, though they required some preparation to analyze.

Research Findings and Policy Recommendations

This section contains research findings and recommendations organized around five key zoning and land use-related challenges Chicago faces right now.



research findings



recommendations

For more information on the data sources and methodology that informed the research findings, see [APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY](#). Additional research findings from the team's analyses of groceries and healthcare and productive land use are available in [APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL RESEARCH FINDINGS](#). For comprehensive research findings across all outcome analyses, see the [Zoning and Land Use Assessment](#) web page.



The challenge:

A worsening affordability crisis is pinching budgets and displacing Chicagoans

Terms you'll see in this section

affordable: spending 30% or less of household income on housing costs

by-right development: development that falls within current zoning rules, without the need for rezoning or applying for zoning relief from the city

downzoning: changing an area's zoning from a higher-density zoning district to a lower-density district

Planned Development (PD): a zoning review process that involves directly negotiating elements of development with the city, and requires approval by City Council and the Chicago Plan Commission

zoning envelope: the total number of housing units the zoning code allows in a given area, sometimes referred to as "zoning capacity"

As most households' largest monthly expense, the cost of housing affects everyone.³ MPC and the Urban Institute's research found that the problem is worsening: housing has become significantly less affordable over the last 20 years, particularly for Black and Latinx residents. One key explanation is that we do not have enough housing in Chicago to meet demand, and we do not have enough affordable housing: the Chicago metro area is short 230,000 affordable rental homes for very low-income renter households.⁴ But Chicago's zoning code limits how much new housing can legally be built: it is illegal to build new multifamily housing on most of the city's residential land without a zoning change, and most new multi-family housing gets built as Planned Developments—a process that adds time, money, and complication for developers. Our work also confirms what research⁵ on downzoning and historic preservation in Chicago has shown—that these tools have functioned to create more exclusionary neighborhoods over time.



Over the past two decades, housing has become increasingly unaffordable for all Chicagoans. By 2022, the typical Chicago household (a household with the median

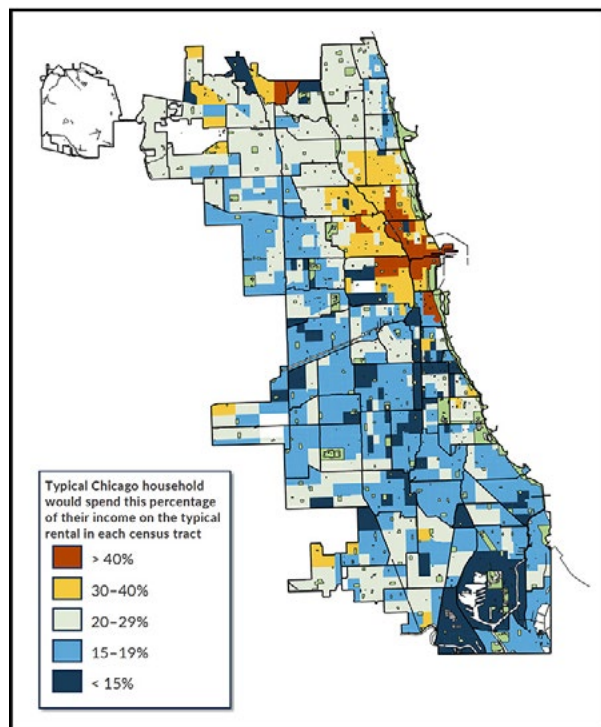
citywide income) could not afford to buy or rent the median home on much of the North and Northwest sides, because of these areas' high housing prices. And across much of the South and West sides, households with typical income for a neighborhood would need to spend more than 30% of their income to rent the median home in that neighborhood.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[Consumer Expenditures—2024](#)," December 2025.

⁴ National Low Income Housing Coalition, "[The Gap: Illinois](#)," 2024.

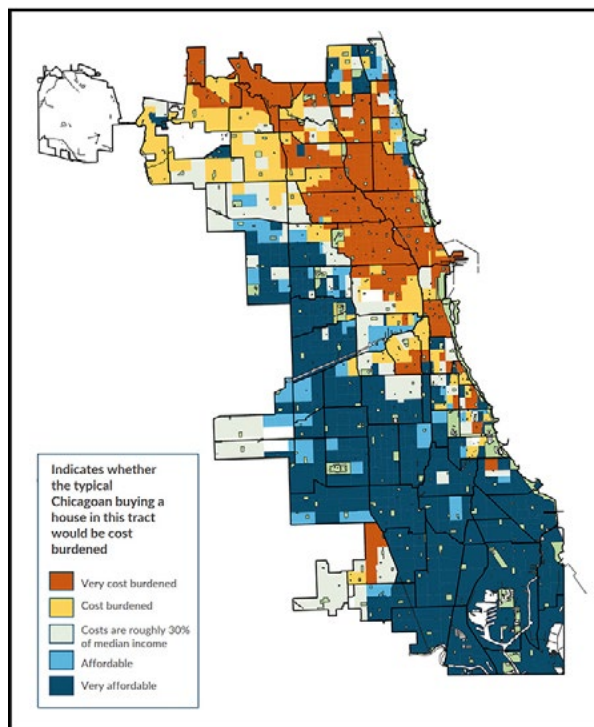
⁵ Shriver Center on Poverty Law, "[A City Fragmented](#)," 2018; Freemark and Kiesel, "[Downzoning Chicago: How Local Land Use Policy Has Reduced Housing Construction and Reinforced Segregation](#)," Urban Findings, November 2025.

Housing affordability for the typical Chicago renter in 2022



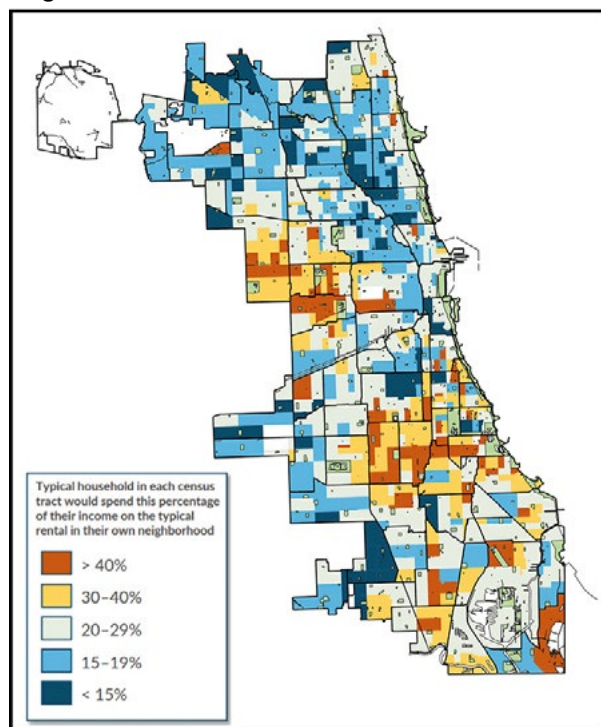
The percent of income the median Chicago household would spend on the median rent by census tract.

Housing affordability for the typical Chicago homeowner in 2022



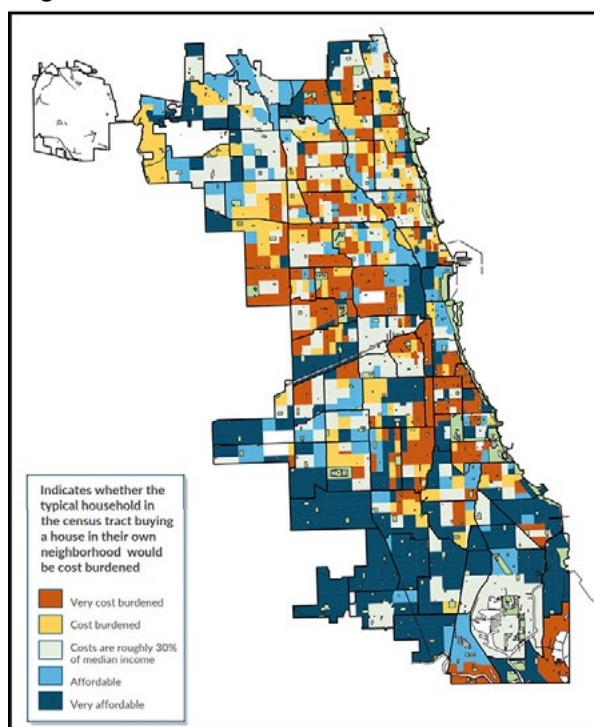
The ratio of affordable monthly mortgage payment for the median Chicago household to median home value purchase price, by census tract. Assumes 27% of monthly income to principal and interest, 20% downpayment, and 7.05% interest rates in 2022.

Housing affordability for renters in their own neighborhoods in 2022



The percent of income the median Chicago household in each census tract would spend on the median rent in the same census tract.

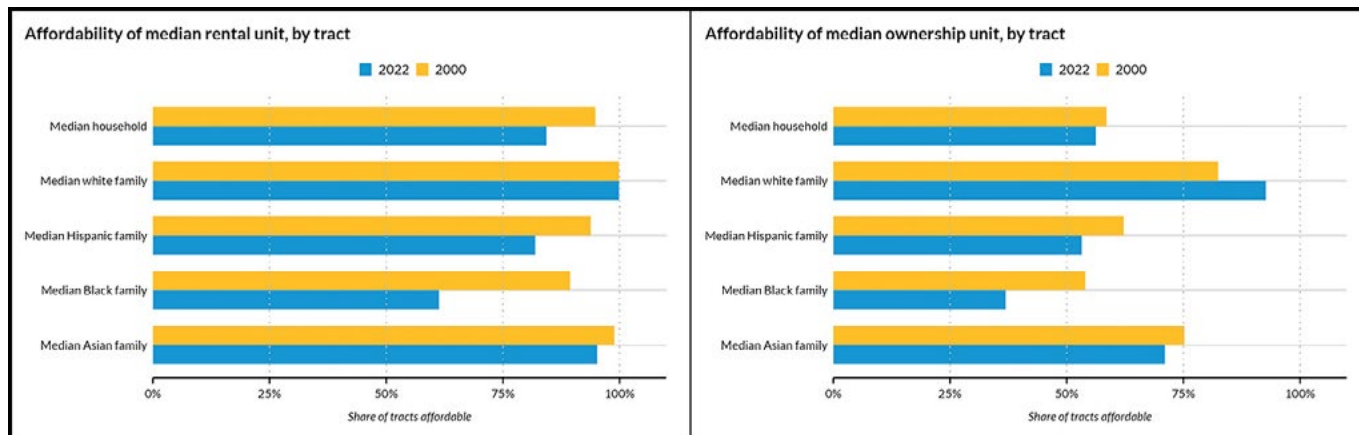
Housing affordability for homeowners in their own neighborhoods in 2022



The ratio of affordable monthly mortgage payment for the median Chicago household in each census tract to median home value purchase price in the same tract. Assumes 27% of monthly income to principal and interest, 20% downpayment, and 7.05% interest rates in 2022.

Created by Urban Institute. Source: Census ACS 2018-2022

» **Black and Latinx Chicagoans have experienced the most significant drops in affordability.** Typical Black and Latinx households (median income by race/ethnicity citywide) have seen the greatest declines in housing affordability, seeing a decrease in the share of the city that is viable for renting. In 2000, the median Black household could afford the median rental in 90% of census tracts in the city. By 2022, the median Black household could only afford to rent in 61% of census tracts. For the typical Latinx household, this drop was from 94% to 82%. Across the same period, the median white household could afford to rent in every neighborhood (100%).



The percent of census tracts where the median household by race and ethnicity in Chicago can afford the median rent (left) or buy the median home (right) in that tract.

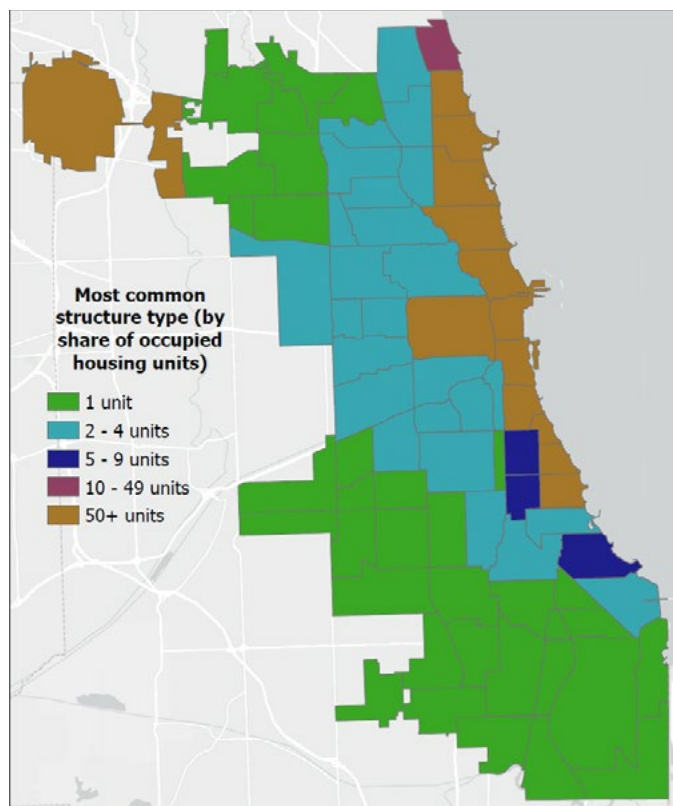
Note: 2000 median incomes: All households: \$38,625; White families: \$62,680; Hispanic families: \$37,166; Black families: \$32,776; Asian families: \$47,838
2018–2022 median incomes: All households: \$71,673; White families: \$154,749; Hispanic families: \$68,370; Black families: \$53,587; Asian families: \$89,416

Created by Urban Institute ; Source: Census 1990–2010; Census ACS 2018–2022, both via National Equity Atlas.

» **Chicago’s zoning code limits the amount of new housing that can be legally built in the city. Though half the city is zoned to allow homes, most of that land only allows very low density development.** 53% of Chicago is set aside for homes through residential zoning. Most of that land (41% of the city) is zoned Residential Single-Family (RS), a zoning district that allows the construction of only single family homes, or two-flats in some limited circumstances.⁶ This means 41% of the city is zoned to nearly always allow only the most expensive type of housing: detached single family homes.

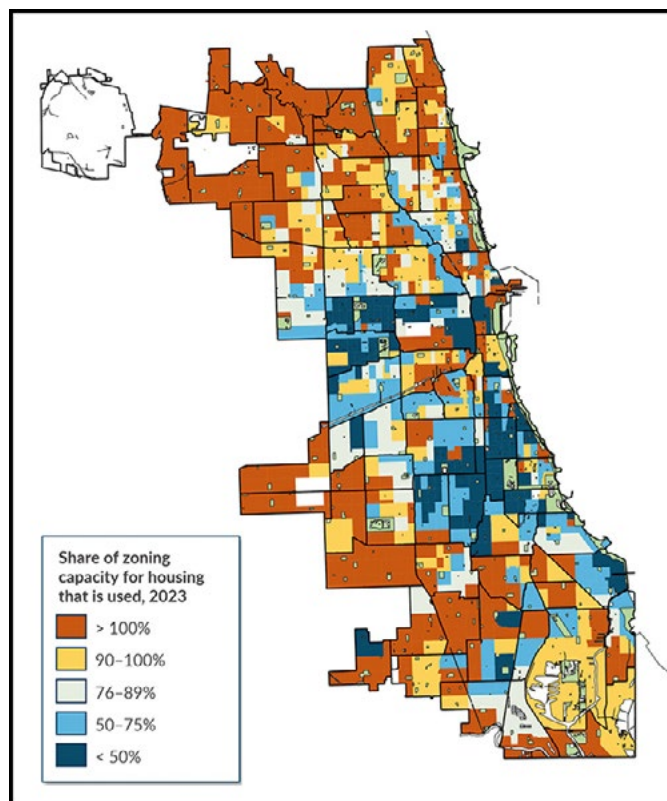
6 Under current zoning rules, two-flats are not permitted in the RS1 and RS2 zoning districts. In the remaining RS district, RS3, two-flats are allowed only under specific circumstances. On a standard RS3 Chicago lot, a two-flat is allowed only when either (1) the lot is within the boundaries of the “Predominance of the Block” district (a portion of the Northwest side), or (2) at least 60% of lots on the block contain multifamily housing. Because two-flats are allowed only in these very limited cases, in this report we refer to RS districts as single-family districts.

Multifamily housing is the predominant type of existing housing in many community areas



Source: Census ACS, 2020-2024 estimates

Chicago zoning limits room for new housing: many community areas are completely built out under current regulations



The percentage of zoning capacity, or room for housing, that is used by housing already built. Note: Does not include parcels zoned for PD or PMD. Does not account for zoning bonuses.

Created by Urban Institute. Source: Chicago zoning 2023

» **It is illegal to build new multi-family housing in much of the city without a zoning change.** Just 11% of the city is zoned for multifamily housing development: 8% is zoned Residential Two-Flat, Townhouse, and Multi-Unit (RT), and 3% is zoned Residential Multi-Unit (RM).⁷ This restrictive zoning policy leaves very little room to build new housing in large swaths of the city. This also means that across substantial portions of the city, much of the housing that already exists, such as two-to-four flats, would be illegal to build according to today's rules. Significant portions of the city—the periphery of the city, as well as much of the Northwest side—have fully utilized the current zoning envelope, meaning current zoning cannot accommodate any more housing units in those areas. Other areas—the mid-South side and much of the near West side—do have room in the zoning envelope for housing development.

» **Low-density residential zoning predominates even near transit.** About half of Chicagoans live within a half-mile of a CTA 'L' station, and just 15% live within a quarter-mile, meaning they can get to a transit station by walking or using a mobility device in 5 minutes or less. One factor limiting the number of people who can live in transit-accessible housing is that a large amount of land near transit (26% of land within a half-mile of an 'L' station) is still zoned to allow only low-density residential development (RS), limiting access to both transit and housing. Citywide, a total of about 15 square miles of land is both within a half-mile radius of a CTA rail station and zoned RS.

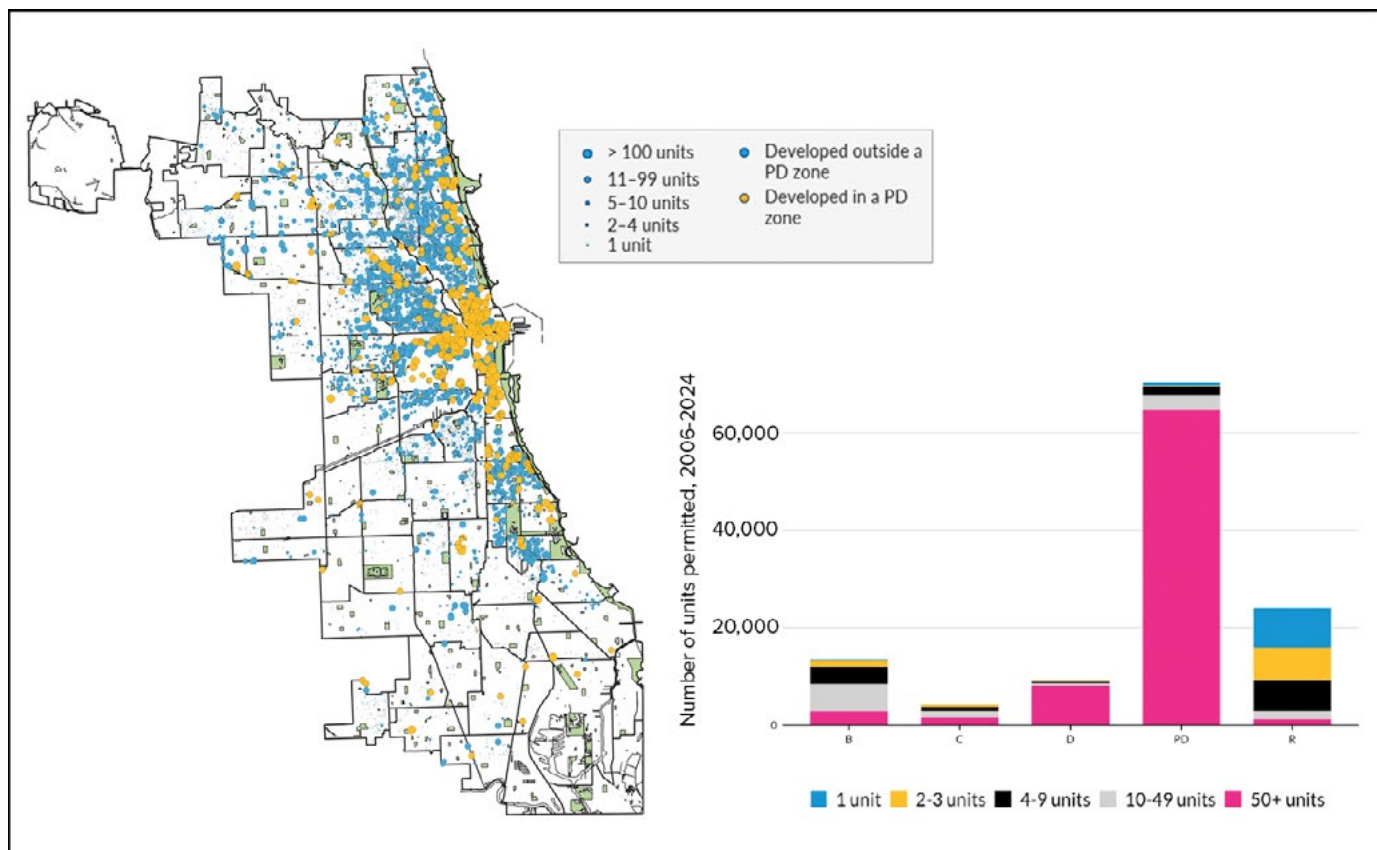
⁷ Many, but not all B, C, and D districts also allow the development of housing units as part of mixed-use development. Some districts require that multi-unit residential development receive special use approval. These districts together cover about 10% of the city.

60% of all new homes added in Chicago between 2006 and 2024 were in just **5** of Chicago's 77 community areas: Near North Side, Near West Side, Loop, West Town, and Near South Side

» **New housing is concentrated in just a few neighborhoods.** Most community areas (45 out of 77) have built fewer than 500 new homes since 2006. The majority (60%) of the approximately 120,000 new housing units built in the city since 2006 were concentrated in just five community areas: Near North Side (19%); Near West Side (14%); Loop (13%); West Town (7%); Near South Side (7%).⁸

» **Most new housing is being built through the Planned Development process.** From 2006 to 2024, 58% of new housing units—and 68% of new housing units in projects with five or more units—were built as part of a Planned Development (PD), a type of zoning amendment and in-depth project review, as opposed to built under by-right zoning. This means Planned Developments are playing an outsized role in our development environment. For more on PDs, see [page 17](#).

Permits for new housing, by project unit count, 2006-2024



*New units permitted between 2006 and 2024. Most new multifamily units were constructed in Planned Development areas.
Created by Urban Institute. Source: Building permit data, City of Chicago*

⁸ For more on the concentration of housing units in and near downtown, see Urban Institute, [“Zoning Restrictions and Demand Have Divided Chicago into Three ‘Cities,’ Limiting Housing Availability.”](#) Yonah Freemark, December 2024.

- » **Designated affordable housing options are limited and distributed inequitably across Chicago.** Some of the most common affordable housing units—federally subsidized units with guaranteed affordability for households with low and moderate incomes—are concentrated in a few communities on Chicago’s South and West sides and are sparse in the areas with predominantly white and high-income populations.
- » **Downzoning and historic preservation create more exclusionary neighborhoods.** In the decades since 1970, City Council tended to downzone or designate for historic preservation areas with higher housing values and with predominantly white residents.⁹ Compared to other neighborhoods, these areas had lower rates of housing construction, neighborhood demographics shifted to a higher share of white residents, and housing costs increased. This finding aligns with previous research about the impacts of downzoning and historic preservation in Chicago.¹⁰
- » **Deconversions of multifamily housing stock into single family homes results in housing supply losses that the city cannot afford.** The DePaul Institute for Housing Studies found that between 2010 and 2023, the city lost nearly 23,000 units in two-to-four unit buildings, with the largest losses in lower-cost neighborhoods.¹¹ With so little of the city currently zoned to allow new two-to-four flats, the city has been unable to compensate for this housing loss.



The vision: Make space for more homes that Chicagoans can afford



Legalize 4-flats and ADUs citywide: At minimum, allow housing types with up to four units by-right and additional dwelling units (ADUs) in all residential areas.

To create space for more housing, MPC recommends legalizing building types of up to at least four-flats on residential land across the city and updating accompanying bulk and density requirements to allow these types of construction. MPC also recommends legalizing additional dwelling units (ADUs) on all residential land. ADUs are additional homes connected to or outside an existing building (like a basement or attic apartment, or a coach house). Chicago’s City Council expanded ADU allowances in 2025,¹² but in the ongoing tradition of aldermanic prerogative, this expansion requires alders to opt-in any area zoned RS in their wards, rather than allowing ADUs by-right citywide.

Allowing housing to be built more densely across the city would allow for more units that are typically more affordable than single family homes, while still fitting the current character of Chicago, where two-to-four flats and coach houses are common housing types.

City Spotlights: Cities are making room for more housing

Cities across the country are making changes to zoning to address the need for more homes. Some examples:

- [Portland, OR](#) (2020) passed zoning reforms allowing four-to-six unit buildings and ADUs in its lowest-density zoning districts.
- [Cincinnati, OH](#) (2024) passed a zoning reform called Connected Communities, allowing up to four-unit housing near transit.
- [New York City, NY](#) (2024) passed the City of Yes zoning reform plan, a change expected to enable the creation of 82,000 homes over 15 years.
- [Madison, WI](#) (2025) passed a proposal to allow two units of housing on any residential lot.
- [Tulsa, OK](#) (2024) made both citywide and neighborhood-specific changes to its zoning code to encourage more types of housing development.
- [San Francisco, CA](#) (2025) passed the Family Zoning Plan, which created capacity for more than 36,000 additional homes by increasing building height limits and allowing more homes to fit within existing height limits. The legislation also includes provisions for displaced legacy businesses, preservation protections for historic resources, and tenant protections.

9 Freemark and Kiesel, [“Downzoning Chicago: How Local Land Use Policy Has Reduced Housing Construction and Reinforced Segregation.”](#) Urban Findings, November 2025.

10 Shriver Center on Poverty Law, [“A City Fragmented.”](#) 2018.

11 DePaul Institute for Housing Studies, [“Rental Affordability Challenges.”](#) October 2025.

12 City of Chicago, [“Additional Dwelling Unit \(ADU\) Program.”](#)



Legalize 6 stories near transit: At minimum, allow apartment buildings with up to 6 stories by-right near rail stations and the most frequent and highest-volume bus lines.

There is room to allow more housing near transit, where residents have greater access to amenities and lower transportation costs. MPC recommends allowing six story multifamily buildings by-right in close proximity to transit, with an option to include commercial uses on the ground floor, and updating accompanying bulk and density requirements to allow these types of construction.



Decrease reliance on Planned Developments for multifamily construction: Right-size thresholds for Planned Developments so more multifamily housing can be built by-right.

The Planned Developments process was originally designed for larger, more complex developments like medical campuses, but the process is currently used for most new multi-family development in Chicago. In addition to other recommendations in this report that make it easier to build multi-family housing through the zoning code, increasing the thresholds that trigger the Planned Development process can help ensure Planned Development review is reserved for development types that require more review (such as certain manufacturing types, development on or near waterfronts, large institutions, or other sensitive development types). Apartment buildings, on the other hand, expand access to housing, do not reduce local home values, and fit into Chicago's existing built form. As such, with minor exceptions, they should not undergo special review. For more on Planned Developments, see [page 17](#).



Use zoning tools to promote deep affordability: Prioritize and incentivize affordable housing (fast-track zoning approvals for affordable development, prohibit reactive downzoning, and protect against the loss of naturally affordable units).

Zoning changes that make room for more homes should be paired with policies that prioritize and incentivize the creation and preservation of homes affordable to the lowest-income Chicagoans.

Even if we move towards affordability by addressing our supply challenges, market-rate housing will not meet the need for deeply affordable housing. Zoning changes that make room for more homes should be paired with policies that prioritize and incentivize the creation and preservation of homes affordable to the lowest-income Chicagoans. Though zoning cannot achieve this goal on its own, it is one part of a larger strategy.

In addition to maintaining the city's Affordable Requirements Ordinance, which requires certain multifamily development to include a set-aside number of affordable units, MPC recommends updating zoning policies to further support the creation of new income-limited affordable housing units. This could mean fast-tracking zoning approvals for affordable developments, and prohibiting downzoning in reaction to proposed affordable developments.

Promoting affordability also means taking active steps to preserve existing affordable units. This requires funding to support acquisition and rehabilitation of properties. Without this funding, preservation strategies will be limited in their effectiveness. Nevertheless, zoning and land use policies can play a role: for example, expanding and strengthening the existing "Predominance of the Block" approach—which uses the housing already on a block to determine a context-appropriate density floor for development—could help protect against deconversion of multifamily housing, which tends to be more affordable, into single-family homes, which tend to be more expensive. This approach is currently only used in Chicago within designated geographic boundaries. Other protections could also be explored to specifically target local conditions in areas experiencing ongoing disinvestment or gentrification pressures.

Understanding Planned Developments

Some developments in Chicago go through a zoning process called the Planned Development process: a type of zoning amendment that must pass the Plan Commission and City Council for a development to move forward. This process was designed for large and complex projects, allowing developers and the City to directly negotiate and customize elements of development the zoning code usually regulates directly, via a unique agreement that covers multiple buildings across a site. This includes land uses, bulk and density, and open space or other public amenities that are included as part of a development. The PD process also mandates that the developer hold at least one public meeting on the project.

The PD process is a required step for some unusual types of developments on lots above a certain size, like hospitals, airports, universities, and sports arenas. Depending on the zoning district, the process can also be required for buildings that are taller than a designated height, or include more than a designated number of housing units, among other situations.¹³ Some developments have the choice of going through the PD process, or opting out.

Planned Developments are now the main pathway for housing development in Chicago:

58% of all new homes added in Chicago between 2006 and 2024 were added through the PD process

» **PDs have become the most common zoning pathway for housing development in Chicago.** From 2003 to 2023, Chicago created more than 600 PDs, together replacing by-right zoning with the Planned Development designation on an additional 5.8 square miles of land. By 2023, there were a total of about 1,400 PDs in Chicago. These PDs cover about 13% of zoned land. In recent years, PDs have been the main pathway for adding new housing units in the city. Urban Institute found that 58% of all new homes added in Chicago between 2006 and 2024 were added through the PD process, meaning each project was individually reviewed by the Plan Commission and City Council. In addition, most dense residential development happened through the PD process: among new housing units added in projects with five or more units, 68% were part of a PD.

» **Smaller PDs are increasingly common.** Most of the new PDs added over the last 20 years (about two-thirds) are relatively small in terms of their land area, covering less than 150,000 square feet. In 2003, there were more medium- and large-sized PDs (above 150,000 square feet) than smaller ones; by 2023, it was more common to see smaller PDs.

PD by land area (square feet)	2003		2023	
	Number of PDs	Total area (square feet)	Number of PDs	Total area (square feet)
Large (ex: O'Hare, UIC) ≥ 3.75 million	17	411.5 million	19	423.3 million
Medium (ex: Foundry Park) $\geq 150K$ and <3.75 million	454	265.6 million	674	397 million
Small (ex: single building) $< 150K$	335	25.7 million	733	52.6 million
Total	806	702 million	1,426	866 million

» **The data on PDs is currently limited, but MPC is developing a dataset to better understand how PDs fit into Chicago's development landscape.** Currently, information about PDs is only accessible by reviewing individual Planned Development Agreements, rather than a central dataset. For this reason, PDs were a gap in our research for the Zoning Assessment: our calculation of the total residentially-zoned land in the city, for example, does not include PDs, since each PD varies in use type, and that information is not centralized by the City. MPC is currently building a dataset to better understand PDs, and we anticipate sharing findings from this dataset in the future.

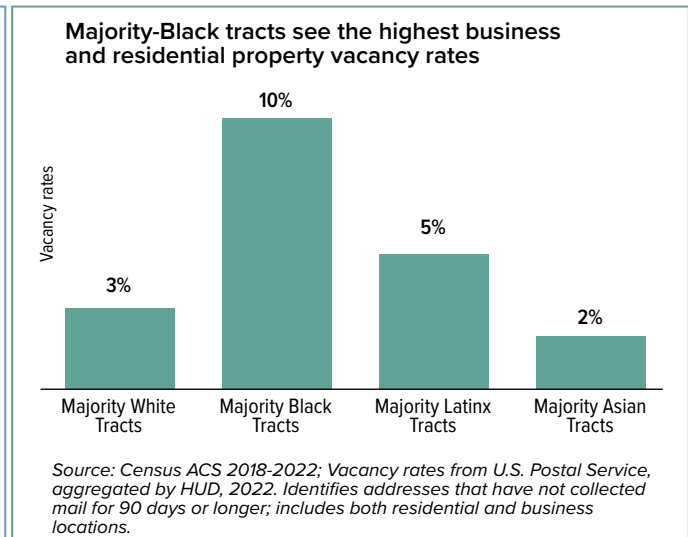
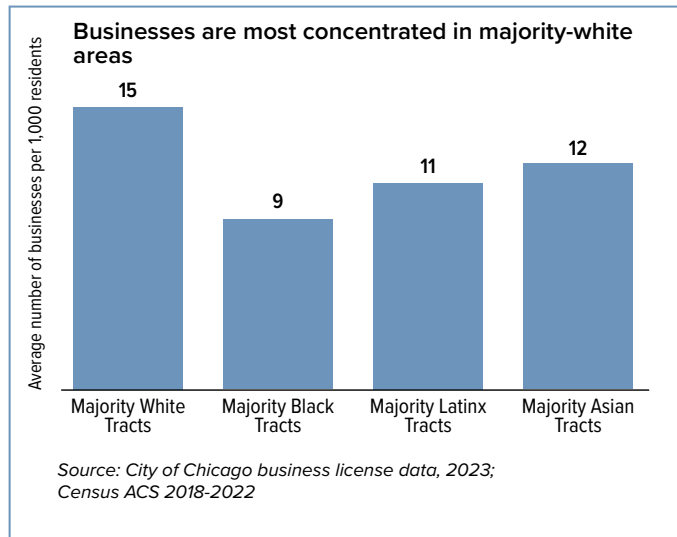
¹³ The number of housing units that triggers the PD process varies widely by zoning district—30 to 40 units in RT districts, 50 to 100 units in RM districts, 30 to 100 units in B and C districts, and 90 to 250 units in D districts. The height thresholds that trigger the PD process for residential development range from 75 feet (in C5 and B5) up to 600 feet in one of the densest D districts. While many cities use lot size thresholds to trigger a PD, Chicago is unique in having triggers based on multiple factors: use, height or size by districts, and other factors such as air rights.



The challenge: Jobs and business vitality are inequitably distributed

Strong transit-connected business corridors provide employment and wealth-building opportunities, neighborhood amenities, and walkable shared space. But MPC research shows that business and commercial activity—measured through business concentration and vacancy rates—is inequitably distributed across Chicago. Although zoning is not necessarily the exclusive cause of these outcomes, our analysis identified inequities in the distribution of pedestrian-oriented zoning designations and zoning for car-dominated businesses—highlighting the opportunity to take a citywide approach to encouraging walkable, vibrant pedestrian-oriented business corridors. These corridors can be cornerstones of economic growth, tools to reduce vacancies, and landing places for small businesses.

- » **Businesses are more highly concentrated in census tracts with higher shares of white population and lower shares of Black population.** In majority-white census tracts, there were an average of 14.7 businesses per 1,000 residents in 2023, compared with 8.6 businesses per 1,000 residents in majority-Black census tracts.
- » **Combined business and residential property vacancy rates show similar disparities across racial and ethnic groups,** with majority-Black tracts possessing vacancy rates (10%) over three times greater than majority-white (3%) and five times greater than majority-Asian census tracts (2%) in 2022.



City Spotlight: Mixed-use zoning

When [Columbus, OH](#) began updating its 70-year-old zoning code, it was clear that building more housing alone wouldn't create vibrant communities. Columbus's "Zone In" plan, adopted by its City Council in 2024, approached development holistically, establishing mixed-use districts citywide. 140 miles of key corridors across the whole city will allow 88,000 more units of housing alongside more spaces for businesses and essential services. With different zoning allowances across six types of mixed-use districts, Columbus created more flexibility to build complete communities: more homes supporting affordability, more customers for local businesses, more jobs and lively streets, anchored around transit that allows people to save time and money when moving around the city.

- » **Black and Latinx Chicagoans are more likely than white and Asian Chicagoans to live near zoning for auto-oriented business (B3 and C zoning), as opposed to other business districts that encourage retail for pedestrians.** Citywide trends show correlations between greater shares of the more automobile-oriented zoning districts (B3 and C) and more businesses, jobs, and consumer spending. However, B1 and B2 zoning, which are not oriented toward car traffic, can help contribute to business corridor vibrancy.

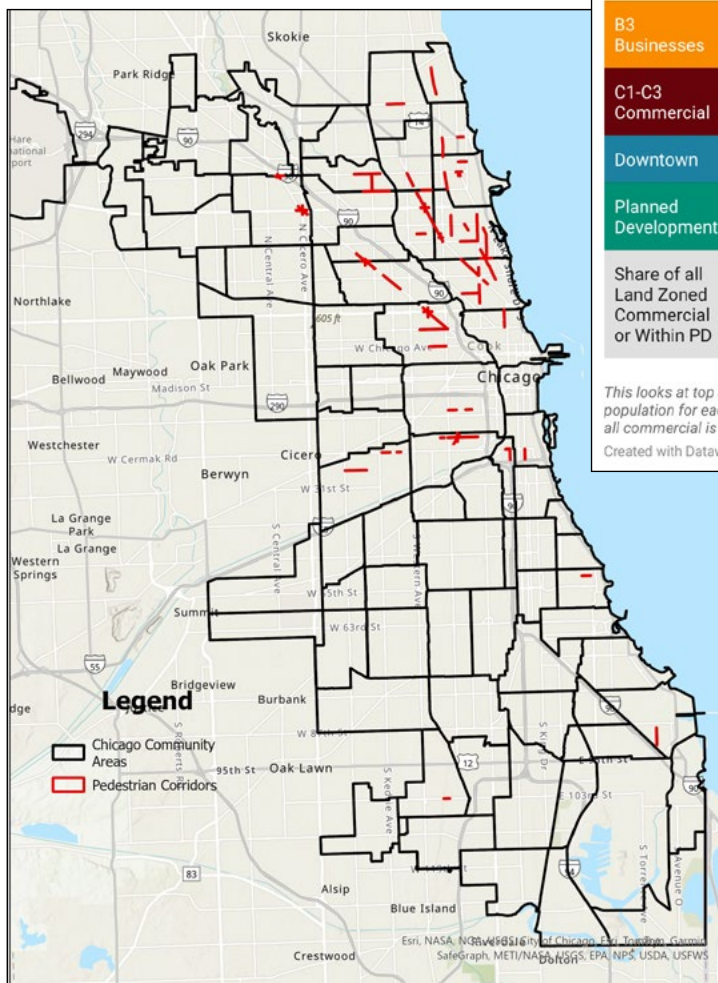
» **Zoning for “pedestrian streets,” areas designed as walkable business corridors, is concentrated on the North side.**

Pedestrian streets are streets designated in the zoning code that must follow certain pedestrian-friendly street design standards. Making a street an official pedestrian street currently requires a zoning change, in which individual alders opt in a specific street in their ward. Importantly, only some business corridors—those with high concentrations of stores and restaurants, and with low vacancy—are currently eligible for the designation. Pedestrian streets are concentrated on the North side. Of Chicago’s 62 pedestrian streets outside of downtown, only 12 are not on the North side.

» **Zoning districts that allow businesses and mixed-uses—B, C, and D districts—tend to concentrate near transit. However, a significant amount of low-density residential zoning still exists near transit.**

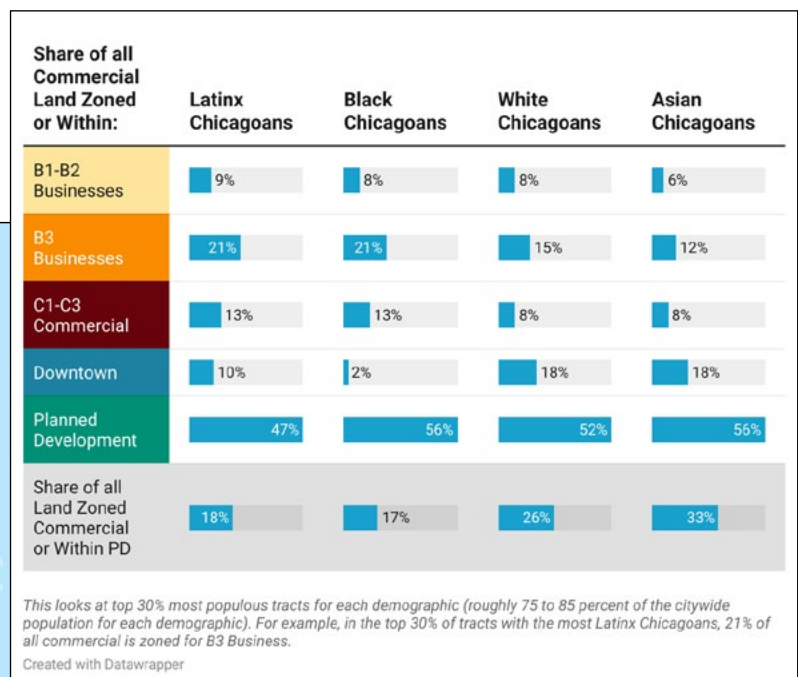
Of the total land in the city that is zoned to allow businesses and mixed-use development (B, C, and D districts), 41% is within a half-mile of a CTA rail station. By comparison, 25% of all zoned land in the city is within a half-mile of a CTA rail station. However, a large share of the total land near transit stations (26%) is still zoned to only allow low-density residential development (RS), limiting the potential for transit-connected businesses and more housing. Citywide, a total of about 15 square miles of land is both within a half-mile radius of a CTA rail station and zoned RS.

Zoning-designated “pedestrian streets” are concentrated on the North side



Source: City of Chicago zoning map, 2023

Business zoning types vary across demographic groups, showing auto-oriented zoning is more common for Black and Latinx Chicagoans



Source: Census ACS 2018-2022; City of Chicago zoning map, 2023.



The vision: Clear the way for vibrant, livable communities



Zone for a dynamic mix of uses near transit: Allow more opportunities for Chicagoans to live, work, and visit places near transit, especially in areas with fewer jobs and/or higher vacancy.

In addition to allowing more housing near transit (see [page 16](#)), MPC recommends adjusting zoning near transit to support the development of mixed-use employment hubs and business corridors, especially in areas with fewer jobs and higher vacancy rates where minimizing barriers to development is one step towards revitalization. This may require reevaluating business and commercial zoning district categories to ensure that districts are flexible enough, allowing both residential uses and a wide enough range of commercial uses.



Expand pedestrian streets near transit: Standardize the use of the pedestrian street designation near transit and modernize pedestrian street eligibility and standards.

Currently the “pedestrian street” designation is a limited, preservation-oriented tool, allowing individual alders to opt-in to pedestrian friendliness standards for specific, eligible streets. This treats pedestrian friendliness as an exceptional case requiring additional legislation and approvals, while streetscapes that are hostile to pedestrians are considered the status quo. Our current approach has had inequitable outcomes, with pedestrian streets concentrated on the North side.

MPC recommends standardizing the proactive use of the pedestrian street designation on business corridors near transit citywide, while making allowances for preexisting uses and exceptional situations, like transit along highways. MPC also recommends strengthening the definition of the pedestrian street designation itself. This means including a list of prohibited and explicitly allowed uses in the definition, limiting future downzonings, and updating eligibility criteria to allow pedestrian streets to be used as a forward-looking planning tool citywide. A standardized, expanded set of pedestrian streets could also be anchors for citywide planning efforts discussed on [page 31](#).



Bring small-scale business into neighborhoods: Increase the types of businesses allowed in residential neighborhoods.

Currently, only a very limited number of businesses—such as bed and breakfasts and vacation rentals—are allowed in residential districts (and even then, only in some districts). “Business Live/Work Units” and “Artist Live/Work Units” are only allowed in areas zoned for business and commercial use, often also requiring approval by the Zoning Board of Appeals. Allowing small-scale, low-impact businesses like corner stores, cafes, small-scale retail, and artist studios is a step toward improving the livability of neighborhoods and supporting small business development.



The challenge: Too many Chicagoans are exposed to unhealthy pollutants and vulnerable to climate impacts

Terms you'll see in this section

pollution: waste that contaminates our air, land, and water; in this analysis, measured through an index that includes many different types of pollution, released by U.S. EPA

air pollution: small particulates in the air, also known as PM2.5, known to have harmful effects on health; in this analysis, estimated using satellite data, from researchers at the University of Illinois Chicago

combined heat + flood susceptibility: an index combining multiple data sources on flooding and felt heat (accounting for both all-day temperature and humidity), compiled by MPC

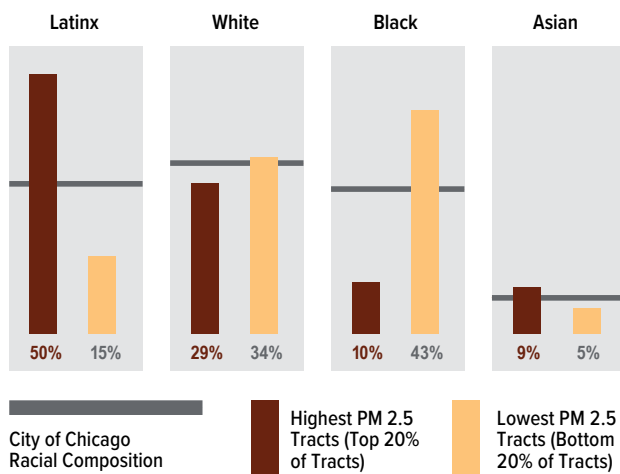
Environmental hazards like pollution, heat, and flooding are major threats to Chicagoans' health and well-being.¹⁴ Our analysis shows that all Chicagoans are being exposed to air pollution at unhealthy levels, but some populations, particularly Latinx Chicagoans, are much more exposed than others. Susceptibility to heat and flooding are likewise inequitably distributed, with Black and Latinx Chicagoans overrepresented in the areas more likely to experience climate impacts.

The majority of land in Chicago with high heat and flood susceptibility is zoned for residential use, meaning adapting residential land to also address

climate change through both mitigation and adaptation will be essential to combat these climate risks. The research also shows a strong correlation between manufacturing zoning and pollution levels. Black and Latinx Chicagoans tend to see larger amounts of land zoned for manufacturing, and a greater likelihood of heavier manufacturing in their neighborhoods.

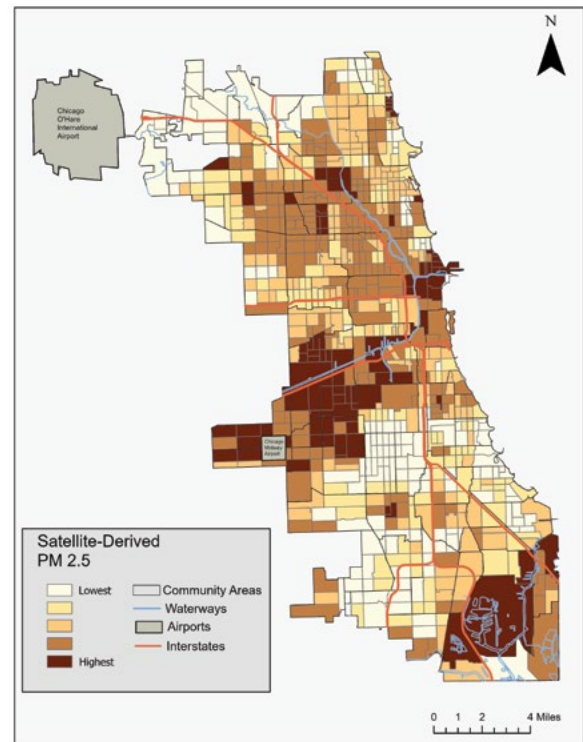
» **All Chicagoans breathe unhealthy air.** All across the city, Chicagoans are exposed to small particulate air pollution at higher levels than recommended by 2024 US EPA public health standards for long-term exposure (9 micrograms per cubic meter). Estimated levels across Chicago range from about 9 to 12 micrograms per cubic meter on an average summer day.

Racial composition in highest and lowest PM 2.5 tracts



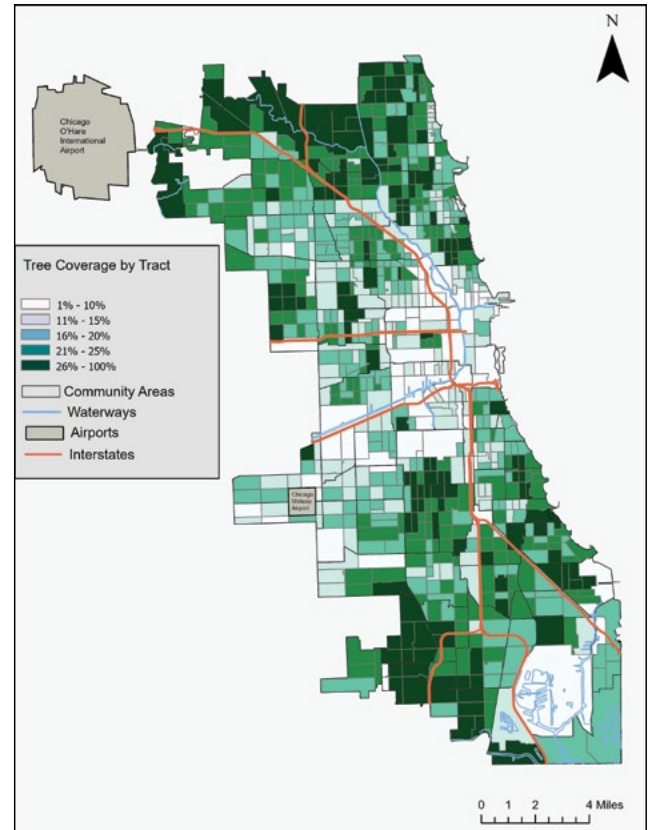
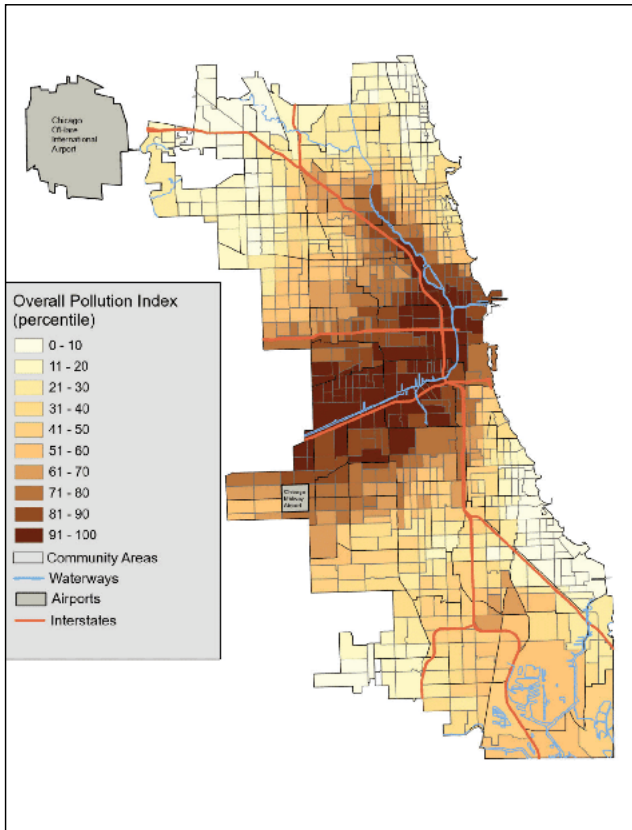
Source: University of Illinois HeRoP Lab; Data collected between 2014 and 2018

Small particulate air pollution exposure citywide

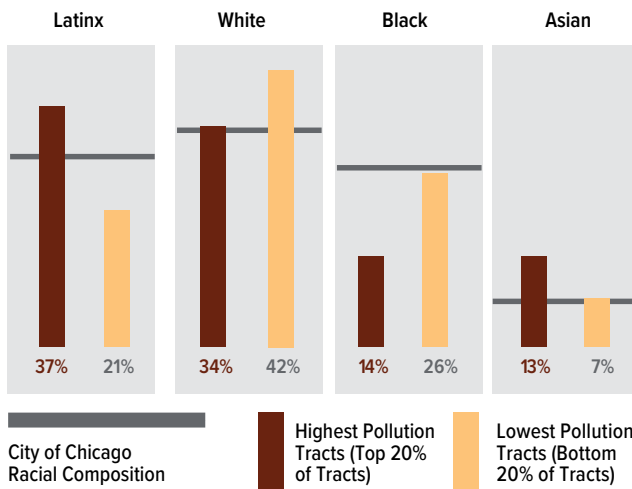


¹⁴ For example, PM2.5 air pollution causes an estimated 5% of all premature deaths in the city. See City of Chicago, ["Air Quality and Health Report."](#) 2020.

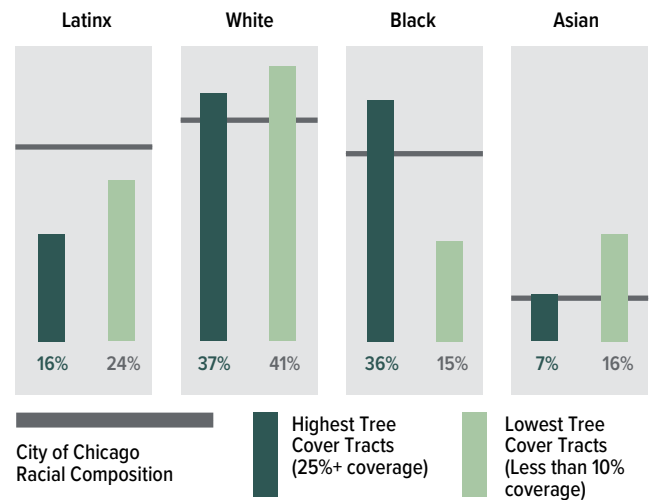
Pollution is concentrated where tree coverage is sparse



Racial composition in highest and lowest pollution tracts



Racial composition in highest and lowest tree cover tracts



Source: EPA EJ Screen; Year: 2019-2023

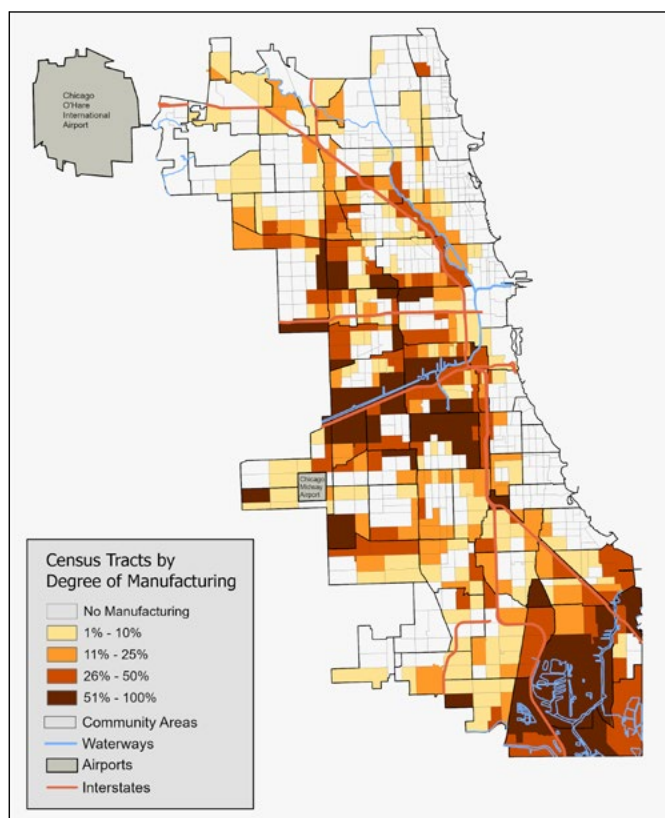
*varies by pollution source; the index reflects the variety of ways people encounter pollution, from breathing it in to living near a waste site.

Source: Chicago Region Trees Initiative; Year: 2017

» **Latinx Chicagoans experience the most pollution exposure—and the least tree coverage, which can be a protective factor against pollution, as well as heat and flood risks.** Though Latinx populations make up 30% of the citywide population, they comprise 50% of the population in the highest (top fifth) air pollution census tracts and 37% of the population in the highest (top fifth) overall pollution tracts. The parts of the city with higher pollution levels—near downtown, along expressways, and along major industrial corridors—also tend to have low levels of tree coverage. In the areas of the city with the most tree coverage (canopy coverage of 25% or more), only 16% of the population is Latinx.

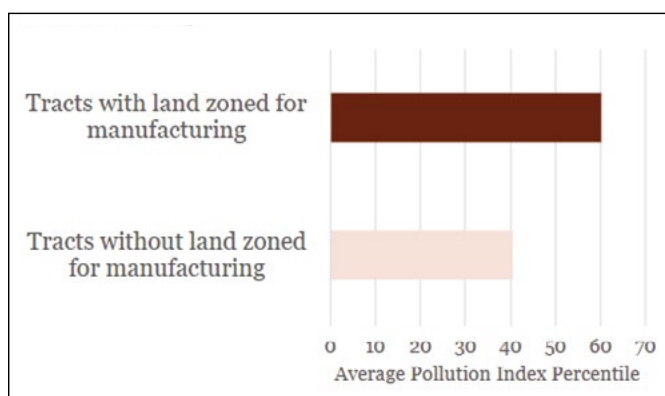
» **Areas with manufacturing zoning tend to have higher levels of pollution.** A substantial portion of the city—17% of zoned land—is zoned for manufacturing (M or PMD zoning). Manufacturing zoning and pollution levels are correlated: a greater share of manufacturing zoning within a neighborhood tends to correspond to greater exposure to pollution in that neighborhood. Census tracts that contain manufacturing zoning have a higher pollution index, on average, and pollution levels tend to increase as the share of the tract zoned for manufacturing increases.

Concentration of manufacturing zoning districts citywide

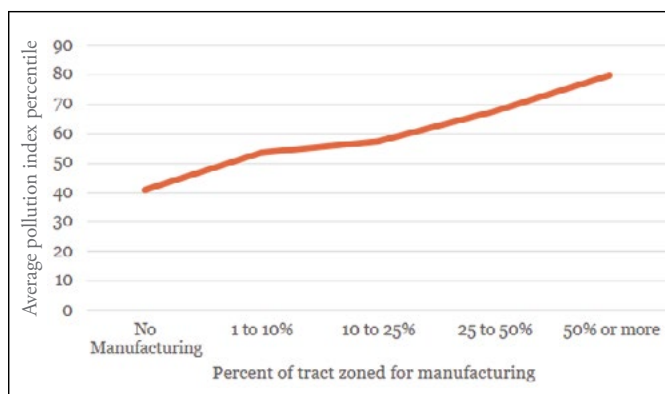


Source: City of Chicago zoning districts, 2023

Average pollution index near vs. not near manufacturing



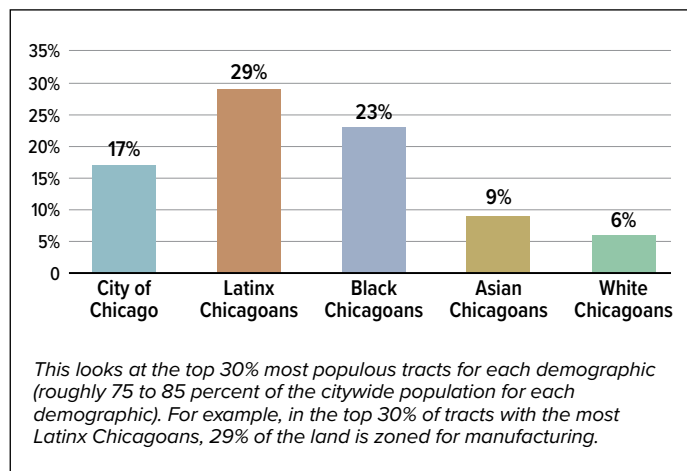
Average pollution index by share of tract zoned for manufacturing



Source: EPA EJ Screen; Year: 2019-2023

*varies by pollution source

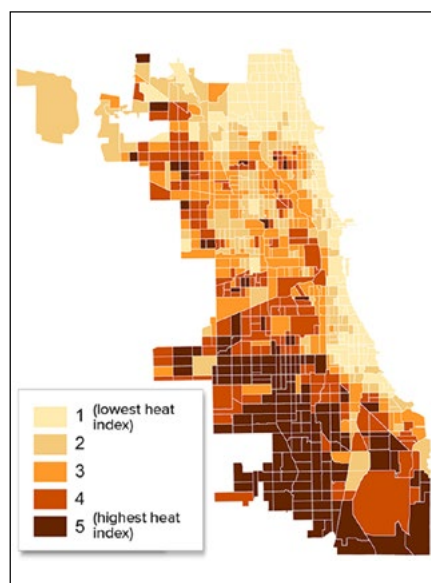
Share of land zoned for manufacturing in most populous areas for each demographic



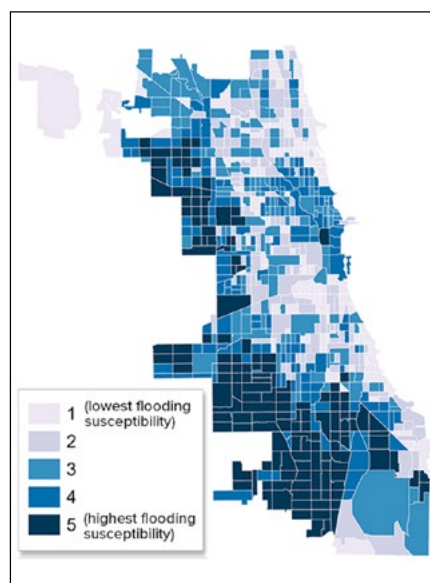
» **Latinx and Black Chicagoans tend to have more land in their neighborhoods zoned for heavy manufacturing, and manufacturing overall, compared to other groups.** 23% of land is zoned for manufacturing in areas most populated by Black Chicagoans, while 29% of land is zoned for manufacturing in areas most populated by Latinx Chicagoans.¹⁵ This compares to only 6% and 9% of land zoned this way in areas most populated by white and Asian Chicagoans, respectively. In areas where most Black and Latinx Chicagoans live, manufacturing zoning is also much more likely to be for heavy industry (M3 zoning).

» **Different neighborhoods face different types and levels of climate challenges, which require different solutions.** Some neighborhoods face urban heat challenges, others experience urban flooding challenges, and some face both. Multipronged mitigation and adaptation strategies are required to adequately address climate challenges. Neighborhoods also have different types and availabilities of land for implementing mitigation and adaptation strategies, such as vacant land, City-owned properties, and land uses with a large amount of pavement (like industrial land and heavy arterials).

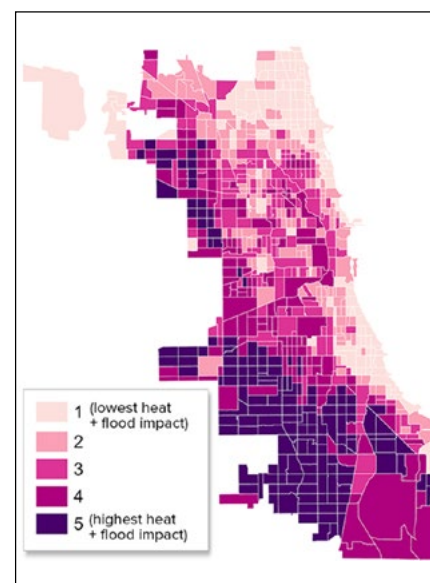
All-day heat index



Flooding index



Combined heat and flooding index



Source: City of Chicago 2023 Cool Chi/Heat Watch, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), City of Chicago data portal

¹⁵ This refers to the top 30% most populous tracts for each demographic (roughly 75 to 85 percent of the citywide population for each demographic).

» **Black and Latinx residents are overrepresented in the areas more likely to see climate impacts.** In the top fifth of tracts for heat and flood susceptibility, Black and Latinx Chicagoans comprise 83% of the population, despite comprising 57% of the city's total population. Meanwhile, white Chicagoans are underrepresented in those same tracts. While white residents make up 33% of the city's total population, they make up only 14% of the population in the top fifth highest heat and flood susceptibility tracts.

Racial and ethnic composition by combined heat + flood index

Heat + Flood Susceptibility Quintiles	Percent Black	Percent Latinx	Percent White	Percent Asian	Percent Other
Above the 80th Percentile of Tracts (Greatest Susceptibility)	50%	33%	14%	1%	2%
60th to 80th Percentile	27%	43%	22%	6%	2%
40th to 60th Percentile	20%	33%	38%	6%	3%
20th to 40th Percentile	20%	20%	45%	11%	4%
Below the 20th Percentile (Lowest Susceptibility)	22%	15%	47%	11%	5%
City of Chicago	28%	29%	33%	7%	3%

Source: Census ACS 2018-2022

» **The majority of land in tracts with high heat and flood susceptibility are zoned for single family homes.** More than 60% of land in the top fifth most heat and flood susceptible tracts is zoned RS (Residential Single-Unit), which is the lowest-density residential zoning district. The disparate susceptibility in low-density districts could have implications for long-term affordability for individual homeowners as costs rise in these areas, but further exploration of the impacts is needed to understand this finding and what it means both for affordability and for adaptation and mitigation strategies. On the flip side, areas zoned Parks and Open Space, particularly along Lake Michigan, are least susceptible.

» **Certain land use factors can be protective against climate challenges, and others can worsen susceptibility—but climate patterns are complex, not straightforward.** In general, tree canopy, green stormwater infrastructure, and energy-efficient buildings function as protective factors against heat and flooding susceptibility. Impervious surfaces, older housing stock, and heavy traffic patterns can worsen susceptibility to climate challenges. These factors are not determinant—they don't automatically translate to risk levels at a citywide level—but we can see impacts at a neighborhood level, particularly looking at tree coverage as a cooling factor that helps with heat events.

Chicago's fractured tree governance

Trees are powerful infrastructure, providing a host of benefits to neighborhoods: cleaner air, shade and cooling, greener streets, and protection against growing climate risks. But addressing gaps in tree coverage is an ongoing challenge. One element of this challenge: Chicago has a complex and fractured system of tree governance.

Many of Chicago's trees sit in the parkway, the area between the sidewalk and the street. City law says that the City owns these trees. However, a part of the zoning code called the Landscape Ordinance requires that developers undertaking certain types of new construction or rehabilitation projects plant trees in the parkway. In those cases—usually residential development of more than three units or parking lots above a certain size—developers must get approval for their planting plans from the Department of Planning and Development. To do the planting, developers must hire a contractor specifically licensed to work in the public way. Developers need clearance from the Department of Transportation to excavate, and a permit from Department of Streets and Sanitation's Bureau of Forestry, which regulates trees in the parkway. After planting, the Landscape Ordinance gives the responsibility for routine maintenance of these required trees to property owners—except for tree trimming, removal, and other work affecting a tree's health or structure, which is handled by the Bureau of Forestry.

To further complicate the picture, plenty of trees are outside the parkway. Chicago Park District stewards trees on park land. Chicago Public Schools controls trees on school property. And trees on street medians, usually arterial streets medians or roundabouts, are the responsibility of the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) or in some cases, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT).





The vision: Integrate healthy air, water, and land into zoning and land use practices



Update zoning for modern industry: Re-classify manufacturing and industrial uses based on measurable benefits and harms—such as jobs, pollution, environmental impacts, and public health impacts—to encourage low-impact, job-dense industry.

The zoning code currently classifies manufacturing and industrial uses into four categories (Artisan, Limited, General, and Intensive). These categories are based on use, rather than impact. The zoning code currently does not attempt to estimate the benefits and burdens of a proposed industrial development, which may be a complex mix of positive and negative impacts for workers, residents, and the city—factors such as jobs, pollution, environmental impact, and public health. MPC recommends modernizing the zoning code to holistically account for the ways industrial land uses impact their surrounding communities. This could include air pollution, noise pollution, truck and transportation impacts, wages, and job creation.

In addition, MPC recommends separating heavier industrial uses from residential areas and maintaining minimum distances between these uses, as well as other protective strategies like stronger requirements for vegetative buffers around industrial uses, which can help mitigate pollution exposure.



Protect overburdened communities from cumulative impacts: Require a holistic review of the expected health and quality-of-life impacts of all proposed intensive industrial facilities.

The Chicago Department of Public Health has developed a cumulative impacts assessment that measures how multiple environmental burdens and social stressors combine to affect health across neighborhoods. MPC recommends using this tool to evaluate future heavy industrial developments, particularly to ensure that highly intensive industrial facilities do not cause additional harms to overburdened communities. Additional layers of zoning review for heavy industrial facilities—through special use approval or the Planned Development process—can provide the opportunity to conduct this evaluation.

City Spotlight: Washington DC

Washington, D.C.'s Green Area Ratio (GAR) is a zoning regulation implemented in 2013 to reduce stormwater runoff, improve air quality, and mitigate urban heat. Based on a property's zoning district, the GAR sets a minimum score that new construction or major renovation projects must meet. Starting with a minimum lot area requirement for landscaping or sustainable site design, the GAR assigns multipliers to different strategies, like tree planting, permeable pavements, or renewable energy systems, based on their impact. Project teams must show that their site design will fulfill a property's required GAR performance score as part of their building permit application. Since the program's inception, over 184 hectares of green infrastructure have been built, which is nearly one-and-a-half times the size of Grant Park.



Leverage unbuilt land for permeable surfaces: Use zoning to ensure unbuilt land helps counter flood and heat risk, by requiring or incentivizing permeable surfaces and green infrastructure in setbacks, open space, parkways, and parking lots.

The zoning code requires properties in some zoning districts, primarily residential, to retain unbuilt space as “setbacks” or “open space.” These are areas like front yards, back yards, and side walkways. The current ordinance does not require that these spaces include permeable surfaces or green infrastructure. Incorporating these as requirements or incentives could help reduce the impacts of heat and flooding.

The code also regulates landscaping in and around parking lots and parkways, which are the space between the sidewalk and the street. Parking lots smaller than 1,200 square feet do not require screening from the street, and lots smaller than 3,000 square feet do not require internal planting. Parkway trees are not currently required for the development of single-family homes (our most common zoning district), two-flats, or three-flats. MPC recommends strengthening the requirements for permeable surfaces and planting in these spaces to increase the city's resilience to heat and flooding challenges.



Target climate-vulnerable areas for mitigation strategies: Prioritize communities most vulnerable to heat and flooding for more green space and remediation.

Heat, flooding, and pollution exposure are not equally distributed across the city. As MPC's research in the section above shows, Black and Latinx communities are most likely to face climate impacts. As part of a comprehensive planning process, areas disproportionately affected by climate impacts should be prioritized for investment in climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, such as converting city-owned vacant land to green space, targeted remediation funding, and green infrastructure projects.



The challenge: Zoning and land use policy is opaque and difficult to navigate

At least **28** geographic overlays exist in the zoning code, layered on top of standard zoning districts.

Navigating zoning in Chicago can be extremely complex. There are at least 67 zoning districts,¹⁶ with at least 28 geographic overlays layered on top of these districts.¹⁷ At least 180 specific land use types are listed in the zoning code, and at least five government decision-making bodies¹⁸ make official decisions about zoning. Contingencies and overlay geographies written into the code can make identifying specific requirements, like setbacks and other bulk and density requirements, a mazelike task. Adding to all this complexity is the reality of aldermanic control over zoning decisions, which takes a variety of forms across wards, as well as the increasingly common use of Planned Developments as a development vehicle (see [page 17](#)).

For a resident interested in understanding how zoning impacts their neighborhood, excess complexity can make city government inaccessible, which erodes trust. And when complexity becomes standard, even for types of development that meet citywide goals, the result is added costs and delays, creating an unpredictable development environment. Those with the resources to navigate the system and weather delays—such as land use attorneys and/or surplus financing—are the ones who benefit.

One place this dynamic plays out is the zoning landscape for small businesses. To better understand how zoning complexity impacts small businesses, MPC examined processes like the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)¹⁹, a quasi-judicial voting body that the city must have for property owners to appeal zoning decisions. The ZBA reviews requests for certain types of “zoning relief,” specific exemptions from zoning rules: special uses, which are land uses allowed with additional review in specific districts; variations, which are designated changes to bulk and density requirements; and appeals of zoning decisions made by the Zoning Administrator at the Department of Planning and Development. MPC’s research found that:

11 out of **12** applications that are reviewed by the Zoning Board of Appeals are approved



The Zoning Board of Appeals approves most applications it receives.

The ZBA approves 92% of applications and explicitly denies only about 3% to 4%, with the remainder being withdrawn from consideration by the applicant. ZBA members rarely disagree, with members voting unanimously in 96% of the votes the board takes. The majority of applications are variations (56%) or special uses (43%) and a very small number (less than 1%) are appeals.

¹⁶ Includes Residential, Business, Commercial, Downtown, Manufacturing, Parks and Open Space, and Transportation districts, including individual bulk and density designations. Does not include PMDs, which are each established as individual districts, or PDs.

¹⁷ This includes special character overlay districts, designated areas like multi-unit preservation districts, and 10 separate ADU-related zones. It does not include non-zoning geographic overlays that affect development, such as ARO areas, special sign districts, landmark districts, and the lakefront zones identified in the Lakefront Protection Ordinance.

¹⁸ City Council; City Council’s Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards; Department of Planning Development and the Zoning Administrator’s office; Zoning Board of Appeals; and the Chicago Plan Commission. In addition, depending on the ward, there may be ward-level decision-making bodies such as ward advisory groups in the mix. For more on the roles of each of these decision-making bodies, see [In the Zone: A Chicagoan’s Guide to Zoning and Land Use](#).

¹⁹ This analysis is based on Zoning Board of Appeals data from April 2011 – October 2023. For more information on this analysis, see APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

Although officially, alders are not part of the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) decision-making process, in practice, they hold major sway. These applications often require political support to move forward.

» **The special use process is a barrier for small businesses.** Most special use applications (78%) come from business-oriented (B and C) zoning districts. These are applications for a range of uses, including beauty salons, tattoo shops, outdoor patios, and community centers. Guided by recommendations provided by the Department of Planning and Development, the ZBA reviews an average of approximately 230 special use applications every year. Despite improvements to the application in recent years, navigating the ZBA is a complex, lengthy process, often requiring the help of an attorney. The opacity of the process and lack of consistent

guidelines for the ZBA end up favoring applicants with time and resources to navigate the process, creating a pay-to-play system. And although officially, alders are not part of the ZBA decision-making process, in practice, alders hold major sway in the outcome of a ZBA application, so these applications often require political support to move forward. Additional costs and delays can stall or shutter a small business that's otherwise ready to open. The outcome is a system that favors applicants with greater access to resources.

» **Beauty and nail salons and barber shops are particularly affected by the ZBA.** 27% of special use applications are for hair, nail, or beauty salons or barber shops, which are approved by the ZBA (95%) and decided in their first hearing (90%) at even higher rates than special uses overall. These businesses are typically permitted by-right in B districts—but only if they are not within 1,000 feet of another hair salon, in which case they need special use approval from the ZBA. This is a requirement that likely disproportionately affects woman-owned and immigrant-owned small businesses.²⁰

» **Variations are impacting residential development, particularly in areas zoned for more density.** Most variation applications (68%) during the time period in our dataset came from residential districts. Variations also disproportionately originated in higher-density residential districts (RT and RM). While only 11% of residential land in the city is zoned RT or RM, 61% of variations from residential districts came from RT or RM districts. Additional research is needed to better understand these trends and how variations may be impacting housing development.

27% of special uses applications are for hair, nail, or beauty salons or barber shops, **95%** of which are typically approved by the ZBA

» **Data about zoning decisions is not generally released to the public in a standardized, searchable format.** In the case of ZBA meetings and Planned Development agreements, information is released in the form of individual meeting-by-meeting or project-by-project PDFs. In both of these cases, in order to better understand these processes, MPC needed to compile unique datasets manually by pulling information from hundreds of PDFs. No publicly searchable dataset exists, which could be helpful for a potential small business owner to find examples of previous special use applications. In the case of administrative adjustments, no information is released publicly at all. Meanwhile, zoning amendments occur in the form of individual ordinances passed through City Council. These are accessible to those who know how to navigate the City Clerk's website, but there is no public dataset that would allow for a systematic review of zoning amendment applications, which could have important implications for zoning policy.

20 90% of cosmetology program graduates are women (The Century Foundation, "[Cosmetology Training Needs a Makeover](#)," July 2022). 91% of workers in the hairdresser, hairstylists, and cosmetologists workforce are women (DataUSA.io, "[Hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists](#)," data from 2024). Workers in the nail salon industry are predominantly (79%) born outside of the U.S. and self-employment rates are high (30%) in this workforce (UCLA Labor Center and California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, "[A Study of Nail Salon Workers and Industry in the United States](#)," November 2018).



The vision: Clarify and streamline zoning process and categories



Modernize special uses: Permit most current special use categories by-right, with accompanying use standards. Require ZBA review only for uses with likely impacts on health and safety.

For uses with likely impacts on health and safety—uses like heavy manufacturing, waste processing facilities, and adult-oriented uses, among others—the additional layer of review and transparency that the ZBA provides is warranted. But for the majority of uses that currently go through the special use process—including but not limited to uses like salons, live-work spaces, and community centers—this zoning review is serving as a barrier for small businesses. Instead of imposing exceptional review for these uses, MPC recommends that they be regulated like all other business types, and permitted by-right in the zoning districts where they are currently only possible as a special use. When businesses are subject to ZBA approval, the process should be simple enough to navigate without the need for a lawyer.

MPC recommends removing the requirement that single-room occupancy buildings, shelters, and other group living quarters seeking to open in many zoning districts obtain special use approval. This requirement delays or blocks a necessary housing option that offers health and safety for our lowest-resourced neighbors.



Reassess other zoning relief categories: Conduct a review of variation and administrative adjustment requests to determine zoning code updates.

Broadly, variations and administrative adjustments (another type of zoning relief approved by the Zoning Administrator at DPD) tend to be requests for exceptions to bulk and density limits, such as setbacks or open space requirements. A thorough review is needed to understand the complexities of variations and administrative adjustments, particularly their impact on housing development. When these changes become commonplace, it's often a signal that the zoning code and map need to be updated, and these relief mechanisms have become pay-to-play loopholes. A review is needed to better understand the nuances of specific types of variations and administrative adjustments, including whether zoning relief also plays a role in facilitating the deconversion of multifamily housing into single-family homes, decreasing housing supply.

One clear opportunity for improvement is the variation for businesses seeking public place of amusement licenses near low-density residential districts. This is an outlier among variations, as it is a use type, rather than a bulk and density requirement. Bizarrely, applicants who are seeking a business license must legally argue they are not applying for the variation “based exclusively upon a desire to make more money out of the property”—a requirement that unnecessarily limits potential small businesses seeking to establish “third spaces” in neighborhoods.



Centralize information about zoning: Provide a central hub for plain-language materials around zoning standards and processes, prioritizing information that facilitates housing and small business development.

Zoning gets very technical, very fast. The Department of Planning and Development has been making significant strides in making zoning accessible, as demonstrated by their production of the *Zoning Design Guidebook*, which provides information on zoning regulations for property owners and developers in multiple languages.²¹ The City can build on this milestone by centralizing this and other resources about zoning and development—such as a more user-friendly zoning map, resources on business zoning and business licensing, and information on financial supports for development—in a single online hub, and optimizing this hub for web searches.

Where it is not possible to explain zoning rules in plain language, MPC recommends that the standard or process be re-evaluated, as excessive complexity can be a barrier to entry for newer and smaller-scale developers.



Close zoning data gaps: Standardize and publicize data on zoning processes and outcomes.

The lack of standardized data on zoning processes, including Zoning Board of Appeals applications, Planned Development agreements, and zoning amendments, is holding Chicago back. Up-to-date, standardized, and searchable datasets would build trust in government by increasing transparency into opaque processes, while advancing research that can improve zoning policy.

21 City of Chicago, “[Zoning Design Guidebook](#),” May 2026.



The challenge: Proactive planning is piecemeal and focused on the neighborhood level

In Chicago, our efforts to update zoning tend to be piecemeal—and always at the discretion of the local alder—rather than guided by citywide planning and citywide goals.

» **Chicago does not regularly engage in comprehensive citywide planning.** The [We Will Chicago Plan](#), adopted by the Chicago Plan Commission in 2023, was Chicago’s first citywide plan in more than 50 years. Chicago doesn’t lack ambitious aspirations for its future: We Will Chicago set out more than 40 goals and 150 objectives for the next ten years. But the Plan was not designed as a “comprehensive” plan, meaning it does not offer specific land use reforms to help translate its goals into reality or carry any statutory requirements for implementation. There is also no requirement for regular updates or review of the We Will Chicago Plan, which was tied to a mayoral administration, rather than an ongoing city strategy. Chicago’s last comprehensive planning effort dates back to 1966.²²

» **There is currently no mandate to comprehensively plan or regularly update zoning and land use policies as the city’s needs change.** Instead, zoning changes often happen in response to specific development proposals—through rezonings for individual projects or through the Planned Development process—and through localized corridor planning initiatives. Currently, these changes require passage through City Council, which virtually always means deferring to the local alderperson. Without citywide planning directives to steer development decisions, each ward fends for itself. Public input may occur during public meetings of decision-making bodies, community meetings, and ward-level zoning advisory councils, but this is contingent on project specifics and on each alder’s interest in—and approach to—public engagement.

Without a comprehensive planning process and a citywide approach, it is difficult if not impossible to make the changes we need at scale.

» **Local corridor planning is valuable, but limited in its reach.** Between 2024 and 2026, DPD has worked with local alders on corridor-by-corridor zoning changes, leading 16 rezoning efforts across 17 wards and encompassing at least 5,300 parcels. These initiatives are meaningful and show the benefits of moving beyond a parcel-by-parcel approach to zoning. Still, corridor planning is valuable but not sufficient: MPC estimates these rezonings cover less than 1% of total parcels in the city. Without a comprehensive planning process and a citywide approach, it is difficult if not impossible to make the changes we need at scale.

» **Currently, zoning decisions ostensibly allow for public input, but a multiplicity of meetings and lack of clarity makes for a complex and inaccessible system.**²³ Because these meetings are subject to the Illinois Open Meetings Act, they are open to the public and must include an opportunity for public

comment. But that’s just about where the similarities end: whether public feedback actually matters for the decision itself, how the meetings are scheduled and publicized, and how public comment works varies widely. Plus, other meetings that also have an influence on zoning decisions, like ward-level zoning advisory councils, may or may not be subject to the Open Meetings Act.

» **Without intentional and broad-reaching effort, public input often fails to be representative.** There are persistent problems with public feedback that need to be proactively addressed. A public meeting on an individual rezoning, for example, tends to leave out some important groups: those who would like to weigh in but don’t have the resources; the unknown number of people who may feel small-scale harm or benefit, which can collectively add up to a large impact; and any future residents of any development enabled by the rezoning, who don’t live there yet. Research on public engagement patterns in Louisville showed that public speakers in rezoning hearings are more likely to be residents from whiter and higher-income neighborhoods.²⁴ This tracks with other research showing that opposition to development is more likely to come from older, white homeowners than others who live in a community.²⁵ Engagement that is larger than a single-project scope can begin to address some of these shortcomings, bringing in some of the voices that are missing when the conversation is limited to a single development.

22 Metropolitan Planning Council, “[Looking Back to Move Forward: Chicago’s Planning Landscape, Defined](#),” Jordan Bailly, October 2020.

23 This includes City Council meetings, City Council Committee meetings, Zoning Board of Appeals meetings, Chicago Plan Commission meetings, Commission on Chicago Landmarks meetings, and Community Commission Development meetings.

24 Urban Institute, “[Influencers, Bias, and Equity in Rezoning Cases](#),” Lydia Lo and Yonah Freemark, November 2022.

25 Katherine Levine, Glick David M, and Palmer Maxwell, *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America’s Housing Crisis*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019.



The vision: Tie zoning to foundational citywide planning and engagement



Periodically update zoning to align with a planning vision: Require regular reviews of the zoning code and map based on comprehensive citywide planning that meaningfully engages the public.

MPC recommends that Chicago regularly engage in comprehensive citywide planning and meaningfully engage the public in coordinated neighborhood planning that connects to a citywide comprehensive plan. Comprehensive planning could reconcile competing priorities; guide the development of vibrant, walkable business corridors across the city; buffer high-impact industry from homes; address our climate-related vulnerabilities; and make room for the homes that we need as a city to address our affordability crisis. Comprehensive planning can also be a tool to guide public investment. It is essential that this comprehensive citywide planning be durable and long-term enough to extend beyond individual mayoral administrations; tied to mandated corresponding land use updates; and reliably budgeted and staffed by the City.



Improve public input processes: Create a more standardized, transparent, and equitable public input process for public input on land use.

City Spotlight: Minneapolis, Minnesota

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Minnesota state statute requires local governments in the Twin Cities metropolitan area to keep their comprehensive plans up to date and consistent with zoning rules and regional planning goals.

- Local governments must review their comprehensive plans at least every 10 years.
- The local governments must update their plans as needed to stay consistent with the regional planning organization's plan.
- Zoning and other local regulations must generally match the comprehensive plan.
- When plans are updated, neighboring communities and affected public agencies get an opportunity to review and comment. In 2019, Minneapolis' 2040 Comprehensive Plan included recommendations for major land use reforms, like the legalization of duplexes and triplexes citywide, and increased density allowance along transit and commercial corridors. This comprehensive planning process led to concrete changes to the zoning code.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In 2007, the Minneapolis City Council adopted the Core Principles of Community Engagement from The International Association of Public Participation. These principles were expanded in the "Blueprint for Equitable Engagement" in 2015. The City of Minneapolis' Neighborhood and Community Relations Department follows this blueprint department-wide, and it was used to facilitate meaningful public engagement in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

MPC envisions shifting away from the status quo of project-by-project community meetings as projects wind their way through various decision-making bodies. Instead, we recommend that public feedback occur at the neighborhood and city level, feeding into coordinated neighborhood and city planning.

With this shift, there also needs to be an updated approach to public engagement itself. Where there are opportunities for public input on neighborhood and city planning, this engagement should be conducted in standardized and predictable ways across neighborhoods or wards, guided by a central coordinating agency. Within the bounds of predetermined policy must-haves, such as the need for more affordable housing, participants should be able to meaningfully change the outcome, and that process should be genuinely accessible to all who are interested in participating.

This could mean, as a starting point, approaches such as:

- clear messaging in advance about what is being decided, how the public can weigh in, and what can or cannot legally be considered in that decision
- holding meetings in neighborhoods, rather than City Hall, and at a time outside of traditional business hours
- intentionally recruiting participants through local organizations and institutions
- reducing barriers with support for transportation, childcare, translation, or compensation.²⁶

26 For more on best practices for equitable public engagement, see ["Exploring zoning-related public engagement | Part 2/2"](#) on MPC's website.

Conclusion

Chicago's current zoning and land use system is not working at the scale or speed our challenges require, nor is it producing equitable outcomes.

Much of this report is technical by necessity. It recommends changes to: what can be built by-right; when discretionary review should be required; how uses are classified, and how zoning decisions are made. But those changes add up to a larger civic choice: whether Chicago will continue to manage change parcel-by-parcel and ward-by-ward, or build a more equitable land-use system capable of responding to citywide needs.

Making that shift will require addressing aldermanic prerogative and the ward-by-ward decision-making it reinforces. Too many land use decisions are still made reactively through individual exceptions and local negotiations. That leaves Chicago poorly equipped to address challenges that cross neighborhood and ward boundaries. Housing affordability, economic opportunity, environmental health, and climate resilience are citywide concerns; the policies that shape them should operate at a citywide scale.

A more intentional approach would put a citywide framework in place before a specific development is on the table. Chicago could establish clearer citywide expectations, reserve discretionary review for projects that genuinely require it, and give residents a meaningful role in shaping the plans and standards that guide change. Neighborhoods have different histories and needs, and citywide policy should respond to

those differences. But local variation should exist within a framework that also reflects Chicago's shared responsibilities.

Chicago's racial and economic segregation did not develop separately from decisions about land use, housing, and investment. Those choices have distributed opportunity and burden unevenly across race and class, with effects that

intersect with gender inequality and other forms of disadvantage. Zoning reform cannot undo that history, but it can change rules and processes that continue to reinforce those patterns. A more equitable land use system can help break down barriers between people and opportunity, rather than reproduce them for another generation.

The recommendations in this Assessment offer practical steps that Chicago can take now, while pointing toward a broader shift in how the city plans for growth and change. But

this work also has significance beyond Chicago. The specific solutions will differ from city to city, but the Assessment offers a model for approaching reform: define the outcomes a city wants, examine how existing land-use policies shape them, combine quantitative research with community and stakeholder experience, and translate that evidence into locally grounded policy. Chicago has an opportunity to demonstrate how cities can develop ambitious land use reform through a rigorous and inclusive process, building the capacity to make durable choices at a city scale. We can connect reform with repair, plan more deliberately for Chicago's future, and lead with a model for other cities navigating the same challenges.

A more equitable land use system should help break down barriers between people and opportunity, rather than reproduce them for another generation.

Appendix: Additional research findings

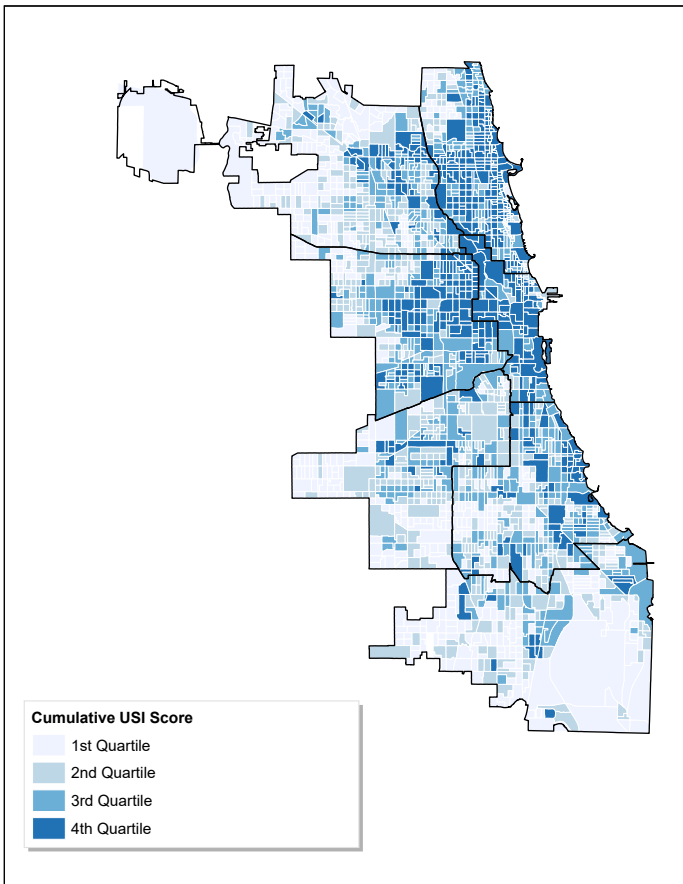
This section contains key research findings for two outcome analyses that were not included in the body of this report: productive land use, and available groceries and healthcare. To view comprehensive research findings for these and other outcome analyses, please visit the Zoning and Land Use Assessment webpage.

For more information on the data sources and methodology that informed the research findings below, please see [APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY](#).

Productive land use

This outcome examined the relationship between infrastructure and density citywide. To understand infrastructure access, MPC developed an Urban Services Index, which combined measures to capture the quality of and the proximity to infrastructure across three categories: Transportation, Education, and Neighborhood Amenities. MPC also developed a Density Index based on population density, job density, and the amount of building space compared to developable land. These indices were calculated and assigned to block groups, which were then ranked by quartile. The rankings were used to identify different typologies related to infrastructure access and density (e.g. Low Infrastructure, Moderate Density).

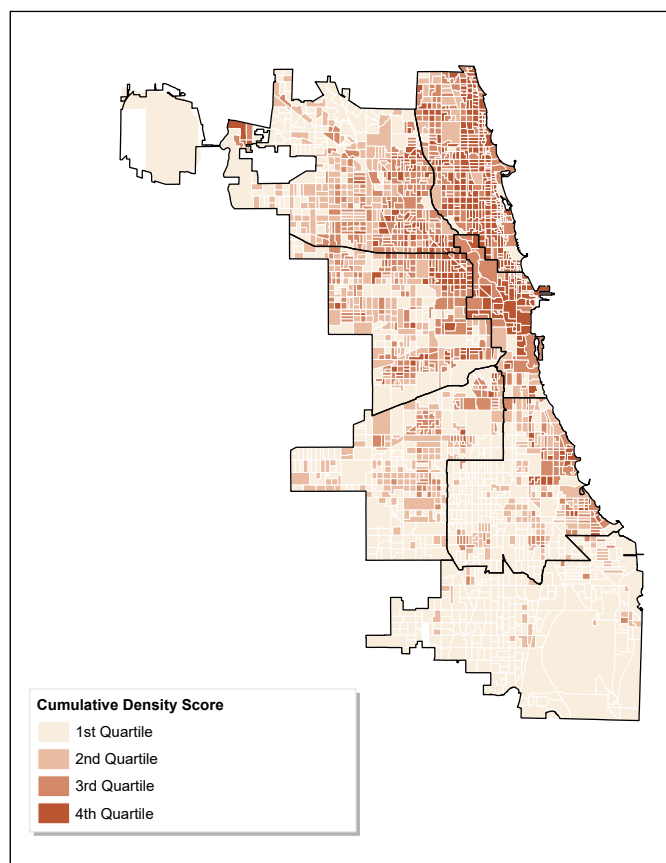
Cumulative Urban Services Index Score



» **Infrastructure access and quality are not universal, but each part of the city has infrastructural strengths.**

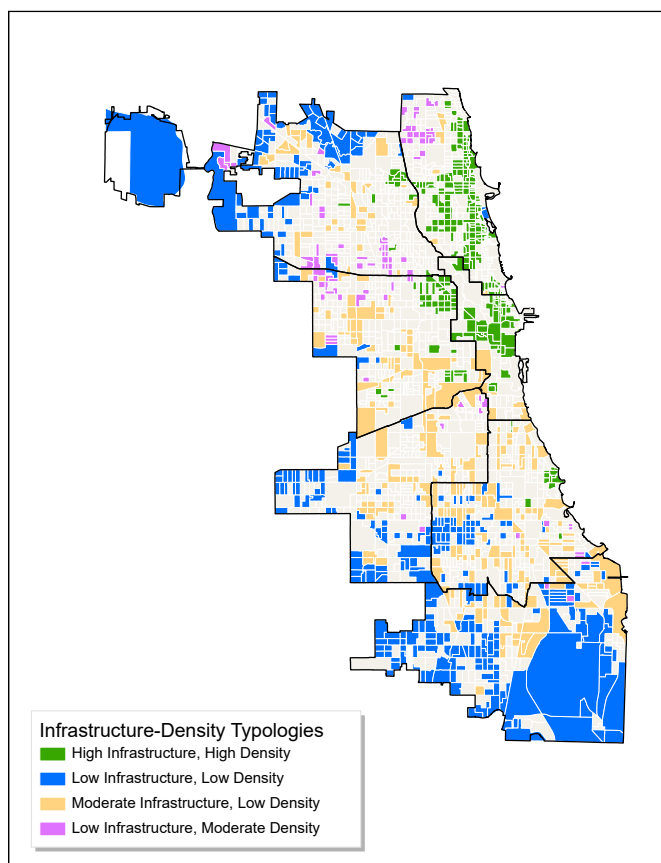
While disparities exist in public services across neighborhoods, every part of the city has strengths to support quality of life and continued growth. Using our Urban Services Index, MPC’s analysis indicated that the Northwest and Southwest sides showed strong scores on education infrastructure, the Central and West sides strong scores on transportation infrastructure, and the North and Southeast strong scores on neighborhood amenities. Top-scoring neighborhoods citywide for infrastructure access and quality include The Loop, Edgewater, Uptown, Kenwood, Near South Side, and Hyde Park.

Cumulative Density Score



» **There are dense places across the city, but the most dense places are in and near downtown and the North side.** While dense areas exist across the city, density—measured through MPC’s Density Index, which captured population, job, and built-space density—is heavily concentrated near the urban core: roughly two-thirds of Chicago’s densest areas are located downtown and on the North side. Not only do the Central and North regions contain the city’s most dense areas, but the dense areas within these regions also have greater population, job, and built-space density than dense areas located in other regions of the city.

Infrastructure-Density Typologies

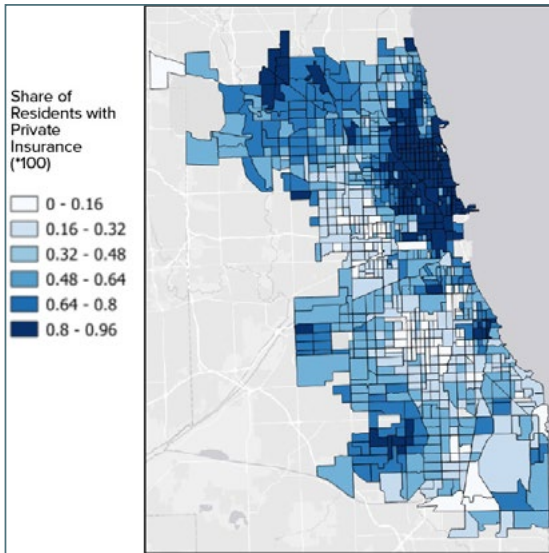


» **Chicago’s densest areas have a significant amount of low-density zoning.** For places in Chicago with the highest levels of infrastructure and density, nearly one-third of land is zoned for low-density residential uses. This compares to 15% of New York City zoned for single family residential, or 0% in Portland. Our areas of existing infrastructural strength offers opportunities to support greater housing supply .

» **A significant portion of the city has more infrastructure than density.** Areas classified as **Moderate Infrastructure and Low Density** comprise nearly 15% of Chicago. These are communities located largely across the West, Southwest, and Southeast sides, which have infrastructure to support more people working, living, and visiting. Gentle increases in density would support growth in these communities.

Available groceries and healthcare

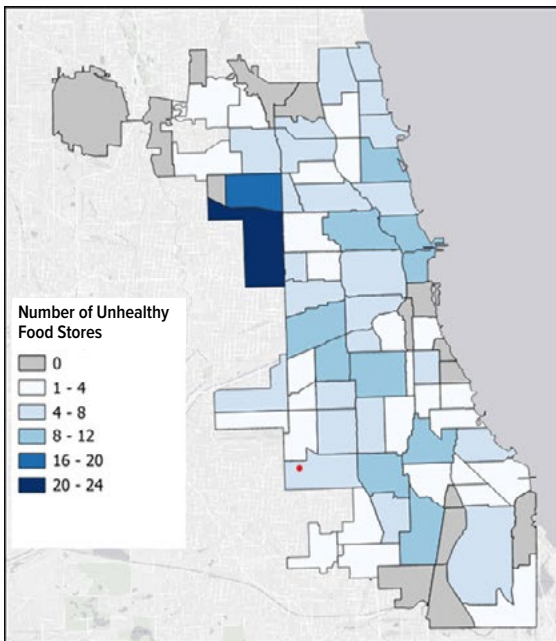
» **Zoning does not appear to be responsible for disparities in healthcare and grocery access.** Other factors like wealth, census tract demographics, antitrust enforcement, and health insurance access seem to be more related. Though zoning itself may not have caused these problems, there may be an opportunity to use zoning policies or other incentives to encourage the siting of groceries and healthcare in places that lack these key amenities.



» **The wealthiest and most diverse tracts tend to have the best access to primary care,** as measured by city-identified primary care clinic locations and self-reported access to doctors. Except for the wealthiest and most diverse tracts, most tracts in Chicago have below the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended density of at least 1 physician practice per 1,000 residents. In 2021, just 20% of Chicago's population lived in a tract with the WHO-recommended physician density. We also found stark gaps in access to pharmacies and the share of residents with private insurance, with both much more likely on the North side than other parts of the city..

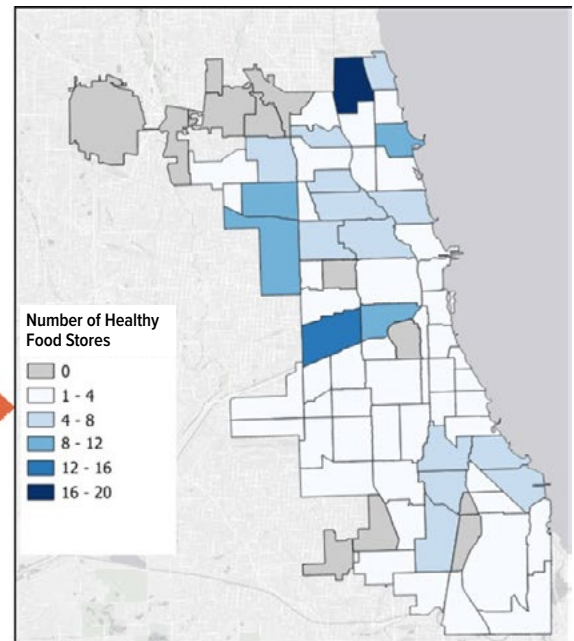
» **Residents on the North side have greater access to healthy food options.** While all census tracts have at least one food store in USDA's SNAP food vendor database, the North side and parts of the West side are more likely to have food stores likely to provide healthier food options (grocery stores, supermarkets, superstores, etc.) in addition to food stores likely to have less healthy food (convenience stores, drug stores, and dollar stores). Poor grocery access for low-income households is strongly correlated with tract racial demographics, especially segregated Black communities.

Northside communities have access to more healthy food stores, and less healthy food stores are evenly distributed



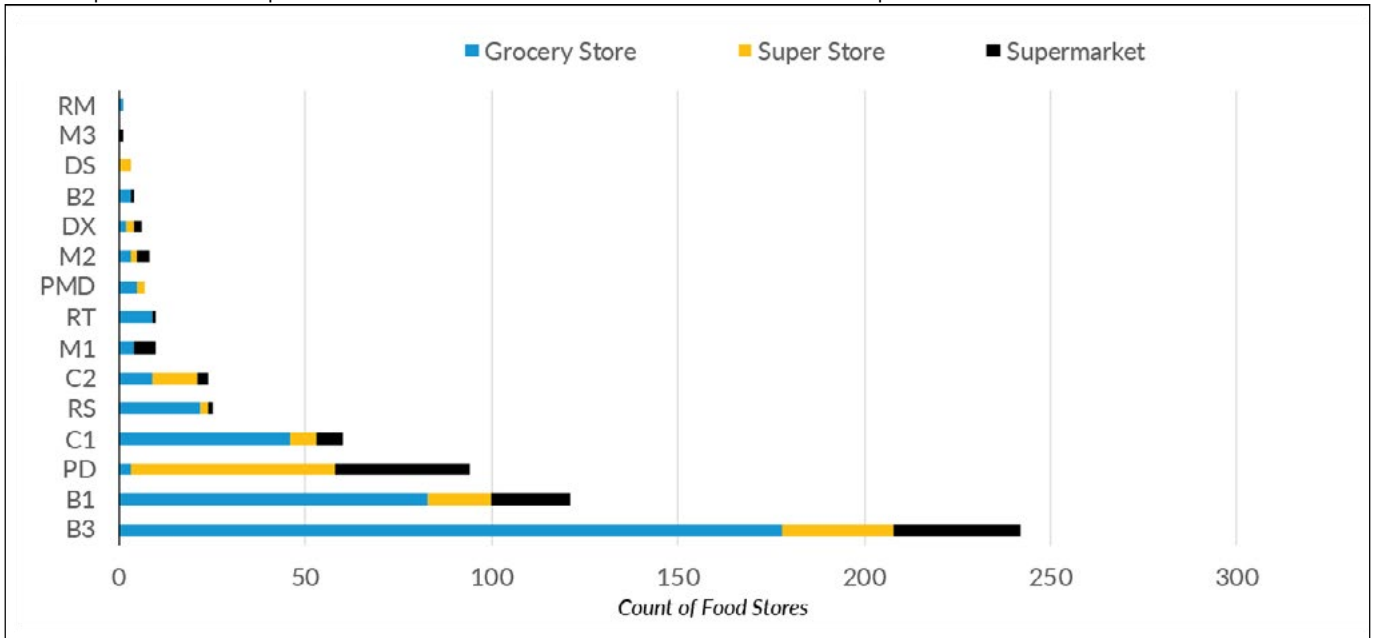
Less Healthy
(Convenience Stores, Drug Stores, Dollar Stores)

More Healthy
(Grocery stores, supermarkets, super stores, farmer's markets, restaurant food centers)



Data: USDA SNAP Food Vendors 2025

» **Food stores overall are most likely to be located in areas zoned B3.** At the same time, the larger food store types—superstores and supermarkets—are most often located within Planned Developments.



Source: 2025 USDA SNAP Vendors (grocery stores, supermarkets, and super stores) and 2023 Chicago zoning data

Note: This excludes specialty stores, pharmacies, corner stores, convenience stores, and farmers markets

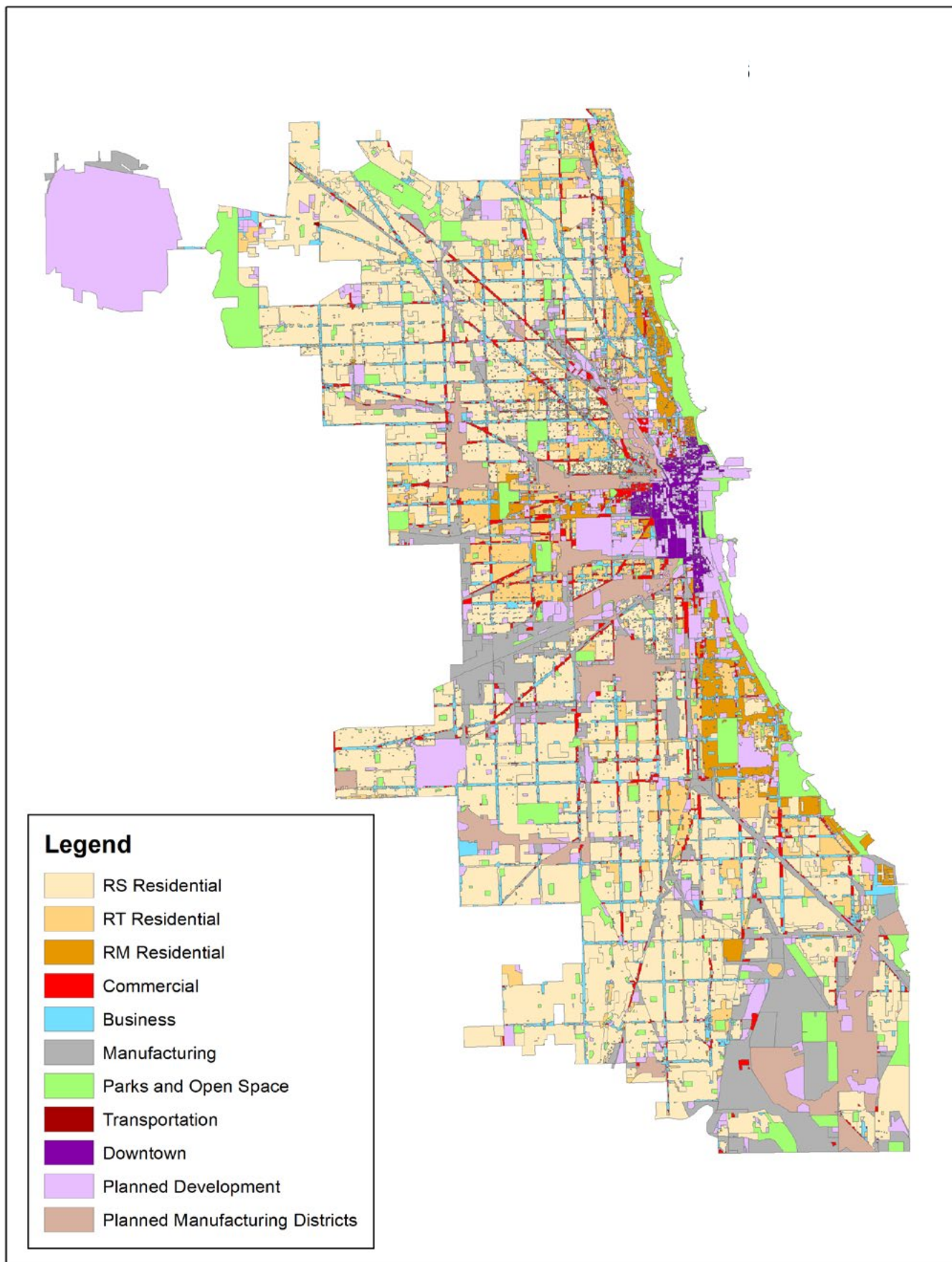
» **Chicago's zoning ordinance widely allows both medical uses and grocery stores in business-oriented zoning districts, but does not explicitly incentivize these types of development.** Medical services is a permitted use in all B and C zones, and all D zones except DR. Food and beverage retail sales is a permitted use in all B and C zones. Other cities use various strategies to incentivize grocery stores in overlay districts (e.g., Tulsa, OK); offer density bonuses to developments that include grocery stores (e.g. Carteret County, NC); or explicitly encourage healthy grocery access (e.g. Madison, WI).

Appendix: Zoning districts

Zoning designation	Uses	Zoning district categories	Share of zoned land, 2023
		<i>Additional bulk and density designations (e.g. M1-1, M2-3) correspond to more specific requirements. As the bulk and density number increases, the zoning code allows bigger buildings. For residential districts, instead of dashes, the bulk and density number is contained in the district name (e.g. RS2, RT4).</i>	Numbers may not add exactly to 100% due to rounding.
Residential (R)	Residential uses (housing) as well as some public and civic uses (such as libraries, fire stations, and schools).	RS (Residential Single-Unit): Detached houses on individual lots, and limited two-flats RT (Residential Two-Flat, Townhouse and Multi-Unit): Townhouses and low-density multi-unit residential RM (Residential Multi-Unit): Multi-unit residential buildings with moderate to high density	52% RS: 41% RT: 8% RM: 3%
Planned Development (PD)	Uses vary	A zoning designation for certain developments that meet thresholds to qualify as major proposals, allowing for flexibility in land use, bulk, and development standards.	13% Areas that are part of a Planned Development are included in this category, rather than their underlying zoning district(s).
Manufacturing (M)	Manufacturing, warehousing, wholesale, and industrial uses (such as factories, grocery wholesalers, and waste disposal facilities).	M1 (Limited Manufacturing/Business Park): Low-impact manufacturing, wholesaling, warehousing and distribution within enclosed buildings M2 (Light Industry): Moderate-impact manufacturing, wholesaling, warehousing and distribution, including storage and work-related activities outside of enclosed buildings; more land-intensive activities M3 (Heavy Industry): High-impact manufacturing and industrial uses, including extractive and waste-related uses	11%
Parks and Open Space (POS)	Public open space, public parks, and public beaches; also includes cemeteries.	POS-1 (Regional or Community Park) POS-2 (Neighborhood Park, Mini-Park or Playlot) POS-3 (Open Space or Natural Area) POS-4 (Cemetery)	8%
Planned Manufacturing District (PMD)	Each PMD has its own individualized set of allowed uses, often industrial uses and some civic and commercial uses. PMDs do not allow residential uses.	Each PMD is its own district with individualized set of uses, generally used for industrial corridors.	6%

Zoning designation	Uses	Zoning district categories	Share of zoned land, 2023
		<i>Additional bulk and density designations (e.g. M1-1, M2-3) correspond to more specific requirements. As the bulk and density number increases, the zoning code allows bigger buildings. For residential districts, instead of dashes, the bulk and density number is contained in the district name (e.g. RS2, RT4).</i>	Numbers may not add exactly to 100% due to rounding.
Business (B)	Retail and service uses (such as cafes and dry cleaners), some public and civic uses, and some residential uses.	B1 (Neighborhood Shopping): Small scale retail and service uses with a pedestrian orientation, permits residential above the ground floor B2 (Neighborhood Mixed-Use): Same as B1, but allows ground-floor residential uses B3 (Community Shopping): Shopping centers, larger buildings, destination oriented for cars	6%
Commercial (C)	Retail and services uses, and more intensive commercial uses and tend to be larger and more oriented to users in cars (such as banks and car washes), with some residential, public and civic uses, plus manufacturing allowed in some districts.	C1 (Neighborhood Commercial): Similar to B3, plus more intensive, car-oriented uses C2 (Motor Vehicle-Related Commercial): High intensity business or commercial, allowing virtually any type of business, service, or commercial use C3 (Commercial, Manufacturing and Employment): High intensity commercial use intended to serve as a buffer to manufacturing districts; does not permit residential uses	3%
Downtown (D)	Only in the designated “downtown” area; a variety of uses with high density, including public, civic, commercial, and residential.	DC (Downtown Core): Allows a broad mix of office, commercial, public, recreation, and entertainment uses, along with mixed-use and residential DX (Downtown Mixed-Use): Allows office, commercial, public, institutional, and residential with vertical mixed-uses that contain active ground floors DR (Downtown Residential): Allows residential and small-scale commercial uses on lower floors, with residential above DS (Downtown Service): Allows a mix of small-scale office, commercial services, public use, transportation and communication services, and industrial uses	1%
Transportation (T)	Uses related to transportation.	T (Transportation): Land used to protect roads, rail, busways, pedestrian and bicycle trails, and minor utilities.	<1%

Chicago Zoning Map (2023)



Appendix: Research methodology

This section provides an overview of the research design, data sources and preparation, analytical methods, and additional research activities that informed the research findings throughout this report. It is organized into the following subsections:

- **Research scope and process:** A brief overview of how the research was designed and conducted and how the research questions across all outcomes were formulated.
- **Data sources and preparation:** Documentation of how all of the data used for analysis was collected and processed.
- **Notes on outcome analyses:** Documentation of how the research for each outcome was designed and conducted, the research methods employed, and important caveats and limitations that influenced the research findings.
- **Notes on additional analyses:** Notes and documentation on additional research activities conducted outside of the longitudinal research detailed in other sections.

Research scope and process

The research scope was determined collaboratively and iteratively with internal team members and the external Steering Committee, resulting in a list of seven priority outcomes. (See [page 6](#) for more on how outcomes were selected.)

For each outcome, findings were grouped into three categories:

- **Understand the outcome:** How is this outcome showing up now and how has it shown up over time? For example, for housing affordability, we asked: Is housing affordable for Chicagoans? How does this play out among different populations and in different neighborhoods?
- **Understanding the zoning:** What are the zoning and land use policies that we think may affect this outcome? For example, for the same housing affordability focus, we asked: What kind of residential development is allowed under our zoning code?
- **Understanding the relationship:** What is the relationship between the zoning and land use policies, and the outcome we see? For example, for housing affordability, we asked: How does zoning impact housing affordability?

Findings were shared at regular intervals with Steering Committee members and at public workshops following this format.

Each outcome analysis went through several rounds of presentation and iterative feedback with Steering Committee members and public event attendees. Stakeholders reacted to initial findings, provided feedback, and raised additional questions. Where feasible, MPC and Urban Institute team members worked to answer additional questions that were generated during presentations. The findings outlined in this report, while not exhaustive of all the analyses that were conducted, represent key findings generated through this participatory process.

Data sources and preparation

Longitudinal zoning data

The keystone underlying the research findings in the Assessment was a longitudinal zoning dataset we created for Chicago. This dataset allowed us to understand how zoning changes over time may or may not have had an impact on each of the different priority outcomes. To create this dataset, we collected zoning district shapefiles across three years: 2003, 2012, and 2023. We collected the accompanying zoning ordinances for those years so we could quantify bulk and density requirements, use tables, and other relevant zoning information associated with each zoning district and append them to the zoning district shapefiles. We also collected three different land use shapefiles from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to understand how actual land uses changed over time, in addition to zoning. Land use data closely, though not perfectly, matched zoning ordinance years: 2001, 2010, and 2020. Zoning and land use variables were used as the primary independent variables across all outcomes. For our analysis of downzoning's historical impacts, we worked with George Kisiel, whose data on parcels that had been downzoned over the course of several decades was invaluable in enabling us to examine outcomes.

ESTABLISHING COMMON GEOGRAPHIES AND UNITS OF ANALYSIS

After collecting all zoning and land use variables, we conducted several data transformation steps to prepare variables for analysis. Once prepared, these tract-level zoning variables allowed us to understand the relationships between zoning and all the other tract-level data collected from different secondary sources, such as sociodemographic information collected from the American Community Survey.

First, we spatially attributed all zoning and land use variables to the City of Chicago parcel level, using a shapefile of tax parcels from Cook County. This ensured that both zoning and land use variables were transformed into a common geographic unit, but it was also necessary in certain analyses that required parcel-level information (for example, calculating the development envelope, i.e., the maximum amount of housing allowed to be built according to the zoning code). Next, since parcel boundaries change over time, we standardized all zoning and land use data to a common geographical reference point: 2012, the midpoint of our three time periods. The result was a City of Chicago parcel-level longitudinal zoning and land use dataset with zoning and land use data from three points in time that was then used across all outcomes. For census tract-level analyses, 2010 tract boundaries were used as the base geographic unit. Since tract boundaries also change over time, for all data associated with 2000 and 2020 tract boundaries (e.g. 2018 - 2022 ACS data), areal interpolation was used to ensure that all data were standardized into the common 2010 census tract boundary reference point.

Parcel-level data was then aggregated to create City of Chicago census tract-level zoning and land use variables to be used in different outcome analyses. Specific independent tract-level variables were created for each outcome. For example, in the Strong Business Corridors outcome analysis, some of the tract-level independent variables related to zoning included the total and percentage of each tract's total area zoned for different types of Business or Commercial zoning districts. For the Limited Pollution Exposure outcome analysis, we did similar calculations for different types of Manufacturing zoning, industrial land use, and so on. Then variables related to changes in zoning and land use categories were created at the tract level (e.g. the percent of a tract that was rezoned from one zoning district to another). The universe of parcels also somewhat varied, and this was another way the land use data was used in conjunction with zoning data. For instance, in the Affordable Housing outcome analysis, we used the land use data to remove parcels that we considered to be “undevelopable,” e.g. airports, civic landmarks, cemeteries, public parks, and even patches of right-of-way (roads, railroads, highways) that overlap with parcels.

THE EXCLUSION OF PLANNED DEVELOPMENTS

A major limitation of the zoning data in the study was that the bulk and density requirements and other zoning attributes and all the changes occurring related to Planned Developments—roughly 13% of the City of Chicago's zoned land—were excluded from our zoning district shapefiles and thus could not be attributed to parcels using the method mentioned above. All information and changes within each Planned Development are described in independent master agreements between the developer and the City of Chicago. Consequently, many of our research findings did not factor in any of these parcels contained within Planned Developments. In our Affordable Housing research, for example, our calculations of zoned capacity were likely significant underestimates in neighborhoods where Planned Developments are more common. In our Strong Business Corridors research, we could not factor in how much business activity and uses were within Planned Developments, and that similarly could potentially skew our research findings. All in all, given that Planned Developments comprise a significant portion of our city's land area, and our research shows that Planned Developments account for most new multi-family housing units, we understand the importance of addressing these gaps. Analysis of Planned Development agreements for their land uses and the resulting relationships with our key outcomes is a subject for future data work and research.

Additional longitudinal variables

Simultaneously, we collected data that was used in different outcome-specific analyses. This included socioeconomic and demographic data from the Census American Community Survey (ACS) that were used in all the different outcomes, but also numerous other data sources that varied by outcome. Most of the data collected was at the census tract level, except for a few instances where block group data was necessary, particularly for the accessible public transit hubs and productive land use outcomes. To the extent possible, we attempted to match the data as closely as possible to the years for which we had zoning data. For instance, we used 2018-2022 ACS data to match 2023 zoning, 2010-2014 ACS data to match 2012 zoning, and 2000 Decennial Census data to match 2003 zoning. Perfect year-to-year alignment was not always feasible depending on the source; however, all sources align closely enough to the zoning time periods to serve as proxies, resulting in a dataset with extensive variables representing three distinct time periods. See the table below for a full list of all the different data sources and years used for each outcome.

Data files

Variable	Data Source(s)	Data Year(s)	Outcomes
Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race (total and percentage of each race/ethnicity)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and Decennial Census	2000, 2010-2014, 2018-2022	All outcomes
Median Household Income	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and Decennial Census	2000, 2010-2014, 2018-2022	All outcomes
Median Home Value	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and Decennial Census	2000, 2010-2014, 2018-2022	All outcomes
Median Gross Rent	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and Decennial Census	2000, 2010-2014, 2018-2022	All outcomes
Subsidized Housing Units (total and percentage)	National Housing Preservation Database	2003, 2012, 2023	Affordable Housing
Downzoning (percentage of tract downzoned since prior decade)	George Kiesel, Okrent Kiesel Associates, Inc.	1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2016	Affordable Housing
Total housing units permitted	City of Chicago Data Portal – Building Permits	2006-2024	Affordable Housing
Business Density	City of Chicago Data Portal – Business Licenses	2023	Strong Business Corridors
Business Vacancy	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, United States Postal Service	2022	Strong Business Corridors
Consumer Spending	Replica	2023	Strong Business Corridors
Employment Density	U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)	2023	Strong Business Corridors, Accessible Public Transit Hubs, Limited Pollution Exposure, Productive Land Use
Employment Diversity	U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)	2023	Strong Business Corridors
Cumulative Pollution Index	U.S. EPA EJ Screen	2019-2023 (depending on the pollution source)	Limited Pollution Exposure
Satellite-Derived PM 2.5	University of Vermont, Chicago Region Trees Initiative	2014-2018	Limited Pollution Exposure, Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Percent Tree Canopy Coverage	Chicago Region Trees Initiative	2017	Limited Pollution Exposure, Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Total Population and Population Change	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2005-2009, 2019-2023	Accessible Public Transit Hubs
Population Change by Race and Ethnicity	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2005-2009, 2019-2023	Accessible Public Transit Hubs

Variable	Data Source(s)	Data Year(s)	Outcomes
Population Density (percent of total city population)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2019-2023	Accessible Public Transit Hubs, Productive Land Use
Total City-owned Land	City of Chicago	2025	Accessible Public Transit Hubs, Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change, Productive Land Use
Access to Jobs (Number of jobs accessible in 30 minutes by transit)	Center for Neighborhood Technology, All Transit Database	2024	Accessible Public Transit Hubs
Racial and Ethnic Diversity	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2019-2023	Accessible Public Transit Hubs
Car Ownership (Total and percentage)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2019-2023	Accessible Public Transit Hubs
SNAP Grocery Vendor data (total number of grocery stores, supermarkets, and super stores)	U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Administration	2023	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Food Access (Percentage of tract population living more than one-half mile from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store)	U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Administration	2010, 2019	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Primary Care Community Health Centers (Total number of hospitals and primary care clinics)	City of Chicago Data Portal, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	2025	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Physician and Outpatient Access (Total number of outpatient clinics and physician offices/clinics)	National Neighborhood Data Archive	2021	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Primary Care Access (Total number of adults who report with at least one personal doctor or healthcare provider)	Chicago Health Atlas, Healthy Chicago Survey	2023-2024	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Uninsured Population (Total and percentage)	Chicago Health Atlas, U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2018-2022	Available Groceries and Healthcare, Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Health Insurance Coverage Type (Percentage of adult residents who have at least one source of private insurance)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2018-2022	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Total Number of Pharmacies	OpenStreet Facilities Pharmacy Designations	2025	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Total Number of Farmers Markets	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Total Number of Community Gardens	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Total Number of Urban Farms	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Available Groceries and Healthcare
Heat Index (Morning, afternoon, night, and average all-day heat index)	Heat Watch/Cool Chi	2023	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Air Temperature	Heat Watch/Cool Chi	2023	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Urban Flooding Susceptibility Index	Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning	2017	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change

Variable	Data Source(s)	Data Year(s)	Outcomes
Flooding Complaints to 311	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Housing Age (Share of homes built before 1970)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2018-2022	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Impervious Surface (percentage)	U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Annual NLCD Collection 1 Science Products: U.S. Geological Survey data release	2023	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Youth and Senior Population (Percent of population under 18 and over 65)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2018-2022	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Disabled Population (Percentage)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates	2018-2022	Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change
Students traveling <15 minutes to school	Chicago Public Schools Annual Regional Analysis	2024	Productive Land Use
Proportion attending Zoned or School in Region	Chicago Public Schools Annual Regional Analysis	2024	Productive Land Use
Academic Variety (Arts, CTE, World Language)	Chicago Public Schools Annual Regional Analysis	2024	Productive Land Use
Early Childhood Programs within ½ mile	Chicago Early Learning	2025	Productive Land Use
K-12 institutions within a ½ mile	Illinois State Board of Education Report Card Data Library	2025	Productive Land Use
Higher Education institutions within a half-mile	National Center for Education Stat	2025	Productive Land Use
AllTransit Performance Score	Center for Neighborhood Technology	2025	Productive Land Use
Job Access by Transit	Center for Neighborhood Technology	2025	Productive Land Use
Bus Frequent Network	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Divvy Bike Density	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Protected Bike Infrastructure	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
High-way On-Ramp within ½ mile	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
CTA Rail station within ¼ mile	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Metra Rail station within ½ mile	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Pace Bus within ¼ mile	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Density of Youth Programming	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Park within 1/8 mile	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Special Service Area within ½ mile	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Library within ½ mile	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Senior Center within ½ mile	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Community Service Center within 1 mile	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use

Variable	Data Source(s)	Data Year(s)	Outcomes
Cook County Forest Preserves within ½ mile	Cook County Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use
Neighborhood Business Development Center within ½ mile	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Productive Land Use

Geographic shapefiles and layers

Layer	Data Source(s)	Data Year(s)	Outcomes
Zoning Districts	City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development	2003, 2012, 2023	All Outcomes
Land Use Inventories	Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning	2000, 2012, 2020	All Outcomes
Special Service Areas (SSAs)	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Strong Business Corridors, Productive Land Use
Industrial Corridors	City of Chicago Data Portal	2024	Limited Pollution Exposure
Historical Downzoning by Decade	George Kisiel, Okrent Kisiel Associates, Inc.mp	1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2016	Affordable Housing
CTA Rail Stations	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Accessible Public Transit Hubs, Productive Land Use
CTA Frequent Bus Network	City of Chicago Data Portal	2025	Accessible Public Transit Hubs
Metra Rail Stations	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Accessible Public Transit Hubs, Productive Land Use
Pace Bus Routes	Regional Transit Authority Data Portal	2025	Accessible Public Transit Hubs, Productive Land Use
Pedestrian Streets	City of Chicago Data Portal	2024	Strong Business Corridors

Notes on outcome analyses

Affordable housing

Steering Committee definition: Diverse and affordable housing options (subsidized, affordable, workforce/middle, market, and luxury) are available in every neighborhood, including for the job insecure and unhoused populations

- **Primary research questions and variables used**

- **Research questions:** How affordable is housing to rent and own across the city, both in terms of comparisons with neighborhood residents and in terms of comparisons with residents of the city overall? How does the location of subsidized affordable housing vary across the city? Where have housing units been built? What is the relationship between zoning policy and housing access? And what is the connection between these variables and race or ethnicity?
- **Primary dependent variables:** affordability, calculated by linking median rent, median housing value, and median household incomes; subsidized housing units; building permits by unit count.
- **Primary independent variables:** city's current zoning policies; historical zoning policies produced by George Kisiel; current building stock; demographic variables (e.g. race/ethnicity).

- **Research and analytical methods**

- **Descriptive statistics:** We conducted baseline evaluations to quantify affordability, housing stock, and demographic data at the tract level throughout the city. We used geospatial mapping to compare outcomes and to evaluate change over time to show how affordability levels are improving or declining, depending on the location. We specifically compared outcomes by tenure (renting versus owning) and by race/ethnicity (since people of different backgrounds have different income levels in the city). We also evaluated the location of new housing building permits and identified their zoning classifications.
- **Modeling:** We developed a model of housing supply in the city with the goal of comparing existing housing units with the potential number of housing units that could be completed if land were built out according to zoning. This comparison provides insight as to the degree to which zoning policies are restricting development, and where.
- **Fixed-effects regressions with time-trends:** To evaluate the effects of changing zoning patterns in the city, we identified neighborhoods that featured downzonings (or historic district designations) between 1970 and 2016. We then used this approach to test the degree to which downzonings were associated with (a) changes in housing supply; (b) changes in housing cost; and (c) demographics.

- **Important assumptions central to the research findings**

- In this analysis, we assumed that housing affordability could be improved over time through additional housing supply. While the broader scholarship provides evidence to point to this conclusion, the relationship is not direct and there is likely to be a delay between zoning changes and housing construction, and then a delay between housing construction and housing affordability.

- **Important limitations of the research**

- Data on housing affordability is generally provided in terms of medians or averages (e.g., median housing cost, etc.). This has the advantage of providing comparability across neighborhoods, but it does not tell us much about the components of these costs. For example, even if the median home rents for \$1,000, there may be homes available at a range from \$500 to \$4,000. As such, further research is needed to explore the degree to which different levels of housing cost are being offered to people at different incomes.
- The research also does not provide us much insight into Planned Development questions. Since PDs are the primary tool by which Chicago enables high-density housing, they need further exploration.

Accessible Public Transit Hubs

Steering Committee definition: All communities feature public transit options that are convenient and reliable, and serve hubs with housing, businesses, recreation and other services

- **Primary research questions and variables used**

- o **Research questions:** How accessible is the transit system to Chicagoans? What levels of density and uses are currently permitted in areas adjacent to the city's transit system, according to the zoning code? What is the association between zoning near transit and certain demographic variables?
- o **Primary dependent variables:** population near transit, including by race/ethnicity, income, and other demographic characteristics.
- o **Primary independent variables:** city zoning policies; land use data (CMAP); data on job accessibility via transit (CNT); transit station locations.

- **Research and analytical methods**

- o **Descriptive analyses:** In this work, we conducted primarily descriptive analyses, combined with geospatial work, to understand the relationships between zoning, transit access, and demographics. This approach made it feasible for us to understand the degree to which the city is currently zoned for high densities in near transit stations, and to specify the mix of zoning allowances for different parts of the city.

- **Important assumptions made that were central to the research findings**

- o We did not control for levels of investment demand. In other words, we assumed in this analysis that all parts of the city should be zoned to accommodate high densities, even though it is likely that in many cases, there is no demand to invest in such projects.

- **Important limitations of the research**

- o We conducted research across a variety of transit modes—bus, frequent bus, L, and Metra—but did not always account for different levels of service. One key area of additional research could be to identify the parts of the city that are zoned for, or already include, high densities, but nonetheless have low levels of transit service.

Business Corridors

Steering Committee definition: Strong and vibrant business corridors with diverse business opportunities to support the economic needs and resiliency of every community

- **Primary research questions and variables used**

- o **Research questions:** How are business and commercial uses distributed across the city, and does this distribution relate to demographics, geography, or other characteristics? How have business and commercial uses changed over time? How much of the city (tracts, area) has seen increased or decreased zoning for business and commercial use? How are changes in business and commercial zoning related to neighborhood characteristics (demographic, income, land uses, proximity to transit, proximity to Loop)? What are the relationships (correlations) between increases/decreases in business and commercial zoning and other neighborhood characteristics? What are the relationships (correlations) between increases/decreases in business and commercial zoning and changes in active businesses or business vacancies?
- o **Primary dependent variables:** business vacancy rate, number of active businesses, business diversity score (index created to indicate the breadth of business type in a census tract), total consumer spending amount.
- o **Primary independent variables:** share of business and commercial zoning, change in share and square footage of business of commercial zoning over time.

- **Research and analytical methods**

- o **Descriptive statistics:** We conducted baseline evaluations to quantify the distribution of business and commercial zoning across the city's census tracts. We used geospatial mapping to evaluate change over time to show how business and commercial zoning had changed across the city over time, and how it had changed within the Special Service Areas (SSAs).
- o **Correlations:** We examined correlations between outcomes of interest (e.g. change in active businesses) and business and commercial zoning, as well as other neighborhood characteristics such as race/ethnicity and household income.
- o **Fixed-effects regressions, Analysis of Variance:** To further evaluate the relationship between zoning changes and outcomes of interest, fixed-effects regressions were used to test whether changes in different types of zoning predicted changes in active businesses and business vacancies, controlling for tract and time fixed effects. One-way ANOVAs were also run to test differences in shares of business and commercial zoning across different types of business corridors.

- **Important assumptions that were central to the research findings**

- o An important assumption made in these analyses is that total shares of business and commercial zoning (both percentage and square footage), as well as the total number of businesses, are meaningful measures of business vibrancy and changes within corridors.

- **Important limitations of the research**

- o Additional data sources such as revenue or investment, which were not available for these analyses, could provide a more accurate measure of business activity. In addition, these analyses were limited to by-right zoning changes and did not include business and commercial zoning changes that happened within Planned Developments (PDs). Given that PDs—each of which has its own lengthy master agreement summarizing zoning changes—make up a substantial portion of zoning changes over the study period; results could change when factoring in all zoning changes that occurred within them.

Available Groceries and Healthcare

Part 1 (Groceries)

Steering Committee definition: Affordable grocery options and healthcare providers are accessible in all neighborhoods

- **Primary research questions and variables used**

- o **Research questions:** What is the distribution of healthy grocery options across the city? Does the distribution of grocery options correlate positively with any specific zone types? Are there zones consistently do not have grocery access? How does the distribution of grocery-friendly zones correlate with the distribution of incomes and races across the city? Does the Chicago zoning code encourage grocery locations in any zones?
- o **Primary dependent variables:** tract-level total food stores, total healthy food stores, food store density per 1k population, and binary designation as low-income AND low food access tracts (having a poverty rate of at least 20% and more than one-third of residents more than half a mile from a healthy grocery store). We also looked at farmers' markets, community gardens, and urban farm locations
- o **Primary independent variables:** tract share of single-family zoning, low-density multifamily zoning, high-density multifamily zoning, low-mid density business zoning, high-density business zoning, commercial zoning, share of residents of different demographic groups, median home values, median rents, and racial and income segregation/concentration scores

- **Research and analytical methods**
 - **Descriptive statistics:** Distribution of healthy grocery stores
 - **Correlations:** Healthy grocery options across zone types; Distribution of grocery-friendly zones with incomes and race: Pearsons correlations
 - **Qualitative document review + case studies on alternative models:** Chicago zoning code encouragement of grocery stores
- **Important assumptions made that were central to any of the research findings**
 - The assumptions that informed how the research questions were explored and how the results were interpreted included the fact that grocery siting is only minimally influenced by zoning and instead more broadly determined by legal provisions related to business competition among wholesalers and labor supply dynamics, and that zoning likely only plays a very small role in determining the siting of stores. Consequently, we refrained from any causal investigations that might lead to spurious conclusions. Additional assumptions were present in what data we classified as being “healthy” food stores (i.e., no convenience stores were included nor wholesale marketers or specialty food stores).
- **Limitations of the research**
 - These results are merely correlational, not causational. Significant findings must be treated with caution given that the data are a cross-section rather than panel. Zoning’s influence on grocery store access appears to be moderated by its influence on housing affordability and income/racial distributions. These distributions in turn dictate the dynamics business owners consider, but even beyond that federal anti-trust legislation enforcement has been found to have the most significant effect on grocery store concentrations and locations. Additional limitations to this research include that it was conducted at the tract level rather than a point plus walkshed approach. It also doesn’t capture parking and transit’s intersections with grocery access.

Available Groceries and Healthcare

Part 2 (Healthcare)

Steering Committee definition: Affordable grocery options and healthcare providers are accessible in all neighborhoods.

- **Primary research questions and variables used**
 - **Research questions:** What is the distribution of primary care, physician, pharmacy, and outpatient clinics across the city? Does the zoning code encourage healthcare clinic locations in any zones? Does the distribution of healthcare clinic access correlate positively with any specific zone types? Are there zones consistently do not have healthcare clinic access? How does the distribution of the healthcare clinic access-abundant zones correlate with the distribution of incomes and races across the city?
 - **Primary dependent variables:** count and density of physician practices and outpatient clinics, physician clinic employees (i.e., healthcare capacity), mental health clinic counts, pharmacy business counts, private insurance
 - **Primary independent variables:** tract share of single-family zoning, low-density multifamily zoning, high-density multifamily zoning, low-mid density business zoning, high-density business zoning, commercial zoning, PD-zoned land, share of residents of different demographic groups, median home values, median rents, and racial and income segregation/concentration scores

- **Research and analytical methods**

- **Descriptive statistics:** Distribution of counts and per-capita density of physicians, pharmacies, outpatient clinics, and physician clinic employees per tract.
- **Qualitative document review + case studies on alternative models:** Chicago zoning code encouragement of healthcare clinics
- **Correlations, OLS regressions:** Correlation of healthcare clinic access across zone types; Distribution of healthcare clinic access-abundant zones with incomes and race

- **Important assumptions made that were central to any of the research findings**

- We assumed bidirectional relationships between healthcare access and zoning: The amount of power healthcare clinics might have in negotiations with local planning offices is not measurable, and thus it's not possible to identify whether zoning created healthcare siting or whether healthcare siting desires paved the way for the zoning to be accessible. That is why we restricted the analysis methods to correlations and simple OLS regressions without attempting longitudinal analyses with more complex causal inference mechanisms because it could lead to spurious conclusions that attribute too much influence to zoning when it was in fact negotiated/the other way around.

- **Limitations of research**

- One of the most important limitations in these research findings is that zoning has little influence over healthcare clinic siting (since these appeared to have few restrictions from the zoning code and it seemed likely they would be determined by the amount of money their patients could offer via insurance enrollment rates) and instead zoning's influence on healthcare clinic siting appears to be mostly mediated by its influence on housing affordability/income distributions across the city. The largest limitation of this research is that it was conducted at the tract level rather than the point level, and thus it's nigh impossible to directly associate the location of healthcare clinics with distinctive zones. Additionally, the available data on counts and density of "physician clinics" is a poor identifier of the key outcome as it doesn't standardize an operational definition for what counts as access, but it was the best available data source.

Limited Pollution Exposure

Steering Committee definition: All neighborhoods feature low levels of pollution, taking into account cumulative impacts on overburdened communities

- **Primary research questions and variables used**

- **Research questions:** Which places and people experience pollution exposure? Where is the land zoned for manufacturing? How does zoning affect pollution exposure?
- **Primary dependent variables:** overall pollution (combination of multiple pollution variables from EPA's EJ Screen), air pollution (pm2.5)
- **Primary independent variables:** Chicago zoning districts and policies, amount and share of manufacturing zoning, land use data (CMAP)

- **Research and analytical methods**
 - **Descriptive analysis and geospatial mapping:** We conducted baseline evaluations and used geospatial mapping to understand and visualize patterns of air pollution throughout Chicago, focusing on PM 2.5 air pollution and a cumulative pollution index combining several measures of air pollution. We also conducted similar baseline evaluations and used geospatial mapping to understand and visualize how manufacturing zoning and industrial and other heavy uses were distributed across the city by neighborhood and demographics.
 - **Correlation tests and OLS regressions:** We ran some correlation tests and OLS regressions to understand what factors (i.e. built environment, demographics, geography, etc.) were statistically significant predictors of higher or lower levels of pollution. We ran some correlation tests to determine if there were any relationships between the amount of land zoned for manufacturing across neighborhoods and pollution levels in those neighborhoods.
- **Important assumptions of research findings**
 - In this analysis, we assumed that manufacturing zoning and planned manufacturing districts were the primary zoning districts that would have any significant relationship with air pollution, as industrial uses and other highly polluting uses tend to be zoned as such.
- **Important limitations of research**
 - The pollution data we used was imperfect at the time of our study. EPA data is not as granular for understanding tract-level disparities, and the most granular data we had for pm 2.5 were modelled estimates. We also did not account for all the complexities around air quality measurements and the different sources of air pollution and all of the variables that impact how it spreads throughout neighborhoods. For instance, we did not differentiate between chemical compositions of air pollution to determine whether it came from manufacturing sources vs road or air traffic, trash or wood burning, wildfires, etc. We also did not account for the impacts of wind and weather in how air pollutants disperse throughout neighborhoods. We also largely assumed that all Planned Manufacturing Districts (PMDs) were the same in our analyses and did not account for differences in the intensity of uses and activities within each PMD.

Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change

Steering Committee definition: All communities feature green infrastructure and energy-efficient building stock that both mitigates and adapts to climate change

- **Primary research questions and variables used**
 - **Research questions:** Which places and people are most likely to be affected by climate impacts? How is land zoned and used across neighborhoods? How is the way land is zoned and used across neighborhoods related to climate impacts?
 - **Primary dependent variables:** heat index (average of morning, afternoon, and evening), combined flood susceptibility index (CMAP's urban flood susceptibility index combined with City of Chicago 311 flood-related complaints, and a combined heat + flood susceptibility index)
 - **Primary independent variables:** city zoning districts and policies, CMAP land use data, tree canopy coverage, impervious surfaces
- **Research and analytical methods**
 - **Descriptive analysis and geospatial mapping:** We conducted baseline evaluations and used geospatial mapping to understand and visualize patterns of urban heat and flooding throughout Chicago. We similarly used descriptive statistics and geospatial mapping to understand how vulnerability to urban heat and flooding varied by neighborhood and demographic categories, focusing particularly on relationships with key built environment conditions like tree canopy and impervious surfaces.

- **Important assumptions of research findings**

- o In this analysis, we recognized that the increasing impacts of climate change on neighborhoods, particularly on urban heat and flooding are influenced by larger and global factors beyond zoning, and that zoning reform may not likely be the most effective solution in climate proofing Chicago. In our research, we focused primarily on the relationships between heat and flooding and built environment conditions, and the ways in which zoning policy can help increase tree canopy and coverage and reduce impervious surfaces across the city. Specifically, we focused on elements of the zoning code such as setback requirements across different zoning districts that influence green space within properties, as well as the City's landscape ordinance, which regulates tree planting across the city.

- **Important limitations of research**

- o A major limitation was with the flooding data we had access to. Presently, there is still no data source that accurately captures flooding occurrences at a granular level. For instance, CMAP's urban flood susceptibility index is a probabilistic index. The City's 311 flood complaints are somewhat biased toward single family residential neighborhoods. In our analysis, we combined the two data sources to come up with a more robust index for flooding. Another major limitation is that urban heat and flooding are individually complex and are influenced by many different factors that we could not account for in our research. For instance, with regard to urban flooding, we primarily focused on above-ground risk factors such as impervious surfaces and green infrastructure, despite the importance of below-ground infrastructure, such as the City's sewer system.

Productive Land Use

Steering Committee definition: All land in communities is used productively, meaning beneficial to local residents and aligned with community needs

- **Primary research questions and variables used**

- o **Research Questions:** How does access to infrastructure vary across Chicago? How is density distributed across Chicago? How does zoning vary across typologies of infrastructure access and density?
- o **Defining and Measuring Infrastructure and Density:** We developed an index to measure infrastructure access and quality, as well as a measure of density focused on both built space and intensity of use, which were overlaid to understand typologies across the city
- o **Creating an Urban Services Index (Infrastructure):** Measures of proximity to—and quality of—infrastructure were identified and weighted, in part through feedback from stakeholder workshops, across Education, Transportation, and Neighborhood Amenities

RESPONSIVE: URBAN SERVICES INDEX					
Category	Metric	Geography	Radius	Type	Score
Education (6 Points)	Students traveling <15 minutes to school	Community Area		Quality	1
	Proportion attending Zoned or School in Region	Community Area		Quality	1
	Academic Variety (Arts, CTE, World Language)	Community Area		Quality	1
	Early Childhood Programs	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	1.25
	K-12	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	1.25
	Higher Education	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	0.5
Transportation (6 points)	CNT AllTransit Performance Score	Block Group		Quality	0.5
	Job Access by Transit	Block Group		Quality	1
	Bus Frequent Network	Block Group		Quality	1
	Divvy Bike Density	Block Group		Quality	0.5
	Protected Bike Infrastructure	Block Group		Quality	0.5
	Highway On-Ramp	BG Average	1/2 Mile	Access	0.25
	CTA Rail	BG Average	1/4 mile	Access	1
	Metra Rail	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	1
	Pace Bus	BG Average	1/8 Mile	Access	0.25
Neighborhood Amenities (6 points)	Density of Youth Programming	Block Group		Access	1
	Park	BG Average	1/4 mile	Access	1
	Special Service Area	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	1
	Library	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	1
	Senior Center	BG Average	1 mile	Access	0.5
	Community Service Center	BG Average	1 mile	Access	0.5
	Cook County Forest Preserves	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	0.5
	Neighborhood Bus. Development Center	BG Average	1/2 mile	Access	0.5

- o *Density Score:* Equally weights measures of built space and use of space.
 - Population Density (1 point) – The number of people living in a block group divided by square mileage, based on 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates.
 - Job Density (1 point) – The number of jobs located in a block group divided by square mileage, based on 2022 LEHD LODS data.
 - Built Space Ratio (2 points) – The square footage of building space in a block group divided by total developable land. For example, A built space ratio of 2.5 would indicate for every square foot of developable land, there is 2.5 square feet of building.
- o *Building Space:* Derived from the city's 2018 Building Footprints dataset, multiplying footprint by height while correcting square footage for large and atypically shaped buildings.

- o *Developable Land*: Excluded road, rail right-of-way, trails and greenways, parks and open space, stormwater management, water, landfills, and cemeteries.
- **Research and analytical methods**
 - o **Urban Service Index and Density Score**: The index and score were calculated at the block group level and broken into citywide quartiles. These quartile rankings were utilized to identify typologies of infrastructure access and density, (High Infrastructure-High Density, Low Infrastructure Low-Density, Moderate Infrastructure-Low Density, and Low Infrastructure-Moderate Density). Underlying zoning was examined to understand how land use policy is supporting better use of infrastructure, and future changes to zoning that can support density in high access places.
- **Important assumptions of the research findings**
 - o We assume that people will want to live, work, and visit areas that have proximity to high-quality infrastructure. We also assume that land use policy should support this dynamic by supporting density in areas with high levels of access to public services.
- **Important limitations of research**
 - o Quality of infrastructure is somewhat subjective, and we couldn't systematically capture elements like good state of repair, barriers to use (like language or cost), or community perceptions.
 - o For the Built Space Ratio, we performed quality control on the building footprints dataset but there are likely inaccuracies given the size of the dataset, end date, and given that construction and demolition is perpetually occurring around Chicago.
 - o For density by use, we captured only who lives and works in a place, versus those who are just visiting.

Notes on additional analyses

Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) analysis

MPC compiled a dataset of ZBA applications heard by the ZBA using publicly available meeting minutes from 140 total meetings, from April 2012 to October 2023. Total appearances were deduplicated to unique applications, then further narrowed to “closed” applications that had been decided by the ZBA. Application types (e.g. the frequency of hair and nail salons among special use applications) were estimated using the text available in the minutes describing the application, using a combination of text-search and manual checks.

Planned Developments

For the findings in the “Understanding Planned Developments” section, MPC used publicly available zoning data containing high-level underlying data for all of Chicago’s Planned Developments. The dataset contains both the year a Planned Development agreement was created and its size, from which MPC analyzed PD creation trends by size over time. This dataset does not contain information about which land uses the Planned Development allows or other details about each Planned Development. MPC is currently retrieving key information about land uses, bulk and density, and public amenities from individual Planned Development agreements to build a more meaningful dataset.

Appendix: Engagement methodology

The Assessment was designed as a stakeholder-guided research project. MPC gathered a wide range of decision-makers, thought leaders, and community organizations to learn and problem-solve together. This appendix provides more detail on the engagement conducted over the course of the Assessment. It includes an engagement timeline, example activities MPC used to share information and seek feedback, and a discussion of how MPC documented and synthesized feedback.

Vision Statement created by Community Advisory Group to guide development of zoning resource

“We want to see access to nature in our neighborhoods—trees and plants, an open, public riverfront, parks, and healthy air. We want to walk down safe and accessible streets that are friendly for pedestrians, bicyclists, children, and people of all ages and abilities. We want the places we live and work to feel welcoming and active, with affordable housing options that prevent displacement, do not compete with sustainability needs, and neighborhoods of a sufficient density to avoid sprawl. We want consistent and reliable transit access, fresh food and clean water, cultural events, schools, and a variety of small businesses that serve the community. We aspire to have people of all ages spending time out and about, in clean spaces filled with uses that meet community needs. Finally, we envision a community that is resilient and adaptive to changing climate, social, and economic conditions.”

Participating Steering Committee (SC) and Community Advisory Group (CAG) organizations

Acosta Ezgur LLC (SC)
Alliance for the Great Lakes (SC, CAG)
Alliance of the Southeast – ASE (CAG)
Austin Coming Together (SC, CAG)
Bickerdike (CAG)
Calumet Collaborative (CAG)
Carter Temple Community Development Corporation (CAG)
Chicago Community Trust (SC)
Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights (SC)
Chinese Mutual Aid Association (CAG)
Chicago Department of Buildings (SC)
Chicago Department of Environment (SC)
Chicago Department of Housing (SC)
Chicago Department of Planning and Development (SC)
Chicago Department of Public Health (SC)
Chicago Department of Transportation (SC)
Mayor's Office – BEND (SC)
Mayor's Office – OERJ (SC)
Mayor's Office – Policy (SC)
Communities United (CAG)
DL3 Realty (SC)
Egret and Ox (CAG)
Far South Community Development Corporation (CAG)
Folded Map Project (SC, CAG)
Friends of the Parks (CAG)
Future Firm (SC)
Greater Englewood Chamber of Commerce (CAG)
Grow Greater Englewood (CAG)
IFF (CAG)
McKinley Park Development Council (CAG)
Muse Community Design (CAG)
Near North Unity Program (CAG)
Neighbors for EJ (CAG)
Northwest Side Community Development Corporation (SC, CAG)
ONE Northside (CAG)
Palenque LSNA (SC, CAG)
Perkins&Will (CAG)
Related Midwest (SC)
Rogers Park Business Alliance (CAG)
Taft Law (SC)
Tishman Speyer (SC)
UIC Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy (SC)
Urban Growers Collective (CAG)
1st Ward (SC)
35th Ward (SC)

Engagement timeline

ADVISORY GROUPS

ADDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT

PUBLIC EVENTS

FALL 2022

RECRUITMENT OF STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

MPC identified and recruited a mix of stakeholders to make up the Zoning Assessment's Steering Committee, including representatives from government, civic and community groups, the private sector, and academia to participate in regular meetings to guide the project.

JANUARY 2023 – NOVEMBER 2024

STEERING COMMITTEE MEETINGS

MPC engaged 42 members of the Steering Committee in 14 meetings. The Steering Committee:

- Developed and agreed on key definitions of equity, sustainability, and public health
- Brainstormed a list of zoning process challenges and successes
- Brainstormed a list of more than 120 outcomes of interest for the Assessment
- Selected 13 priority outcomes through consensus voting and discussion:
- Reviewed initial drafts of the research findings
- Provided feedback on policy implications of the research findings

SUMMER 2022 – WINTER 2025

FOCUS GROUPS AND SMALL-GROUP CONVERSATIONS

MPC engaged 51 participants in focus group conversations about zoning and land use. Focus group participants:

- Contributed to a list of zoning challenges and successes
- Reviewed and discussed the research findings
- Provided technical advice on policy ideas and recommendations

SUMMER 2022 YEAR – WINTER 2025

ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATIONS

MPC engaged more than 50 people in direct conversations. In these conversations, we:

- Held individual conversations about zoning and land use challenges and successes
- Learned from experts who had undertaken similar projects and initiatives
- Learned from policymakers, including aldermanic offices, about how they approached zoning and land use

FALL 2023 – WINTER 2023

RECRUITMENT OF COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

MPC recruited representatives from civic and neighborhood groups across the city to support the creation of a zoning resource (zine) for residents and community groups.

FEBRUARY 2024 – MARCH 2025

COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP MEETINGS

MPC engaged 36 members of the Community Advisory Group in 7 meetings. The group:

- Co-created and guided the development of a public resource (zine) for understanding and engaging with zoning, guided by a shared vision statement
- Reviewed the research findings
- Provided feedback on policy ideas and recommendations

JULY 2024 – SEPTEMBER 2025

ZONING ASSESSMENT WORKSHOPS

- Over the course of 4 in-person, half-day workshops, MPC engaged stakeholders on the research and recommendations for the Assessment.
- One of these workshops included a panel discussion, "Untangling zoning impacts and promoting equity through reform," featuring national experts on zoning and land use. Morgan Malone of City Bureau moderated a panel with Sara Bronin of the National Zoning Atlas, Nolan Gray, author of "Arbitrary Lines: how Zoning Broke the American City and How to Fix It," and the Assessment's research partner Yonah Freemark, Director of Urban Institute's Land Use Lab.

JULY – NOVEMBER 2025

YOUTH ZONING WORKSHOPS

MPC held 2 workshops with youth interested in zoning and land use topics through Palenque LSNA and the Teen Coalition for Chinatown. Participants learned about zoning and land use basics and discussed research findings and recommendations from the Assessment.

AUGUST 2025

DRAWN TO ACTION: A ZINE LAUNCH AND PUBLIC CONVERSATION ON ART AND DESIGN FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

MPC held an event at the Chicago Architecture Center to celebrate the launch of our zine, "In the Zone: A Chicagoan's Guide to Zoning and Land Use." The event featured a live illustrator and panel discussion between our zine's illustrator Lucie Van der Elst, artist Tonika Lewis Johnson, Duo's Carlos Robles-Shanahan, and the Architecture Center's Angela Esposito.

JANUARY – MAY 2026

RECOMMENDATIONS REFINEMENT STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

MPC staff re-connected with stakeholders in one-on-one conversations to clarify and strengthen the Assessment recommendations and surface considerations about implementation before finalizing.

JULY 2026 - ONGOING ADDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT: ZONING 101 WORKSHOPS

Through partnerships with local library branches and community groups, MPC is holding free workshops for the public on the basics of zoning and land use and how to engage with development decisions in their communities.

Engagement strategies

- Worksheets and workbooks
- Live presentations
- Recorded video presentations
- Digital surveys
- In-person Menti surveys
- Large group discussion
- Small group discussion
- Pair discussion
- Activity boards with sticky notes
- Dot / voting boards
- Interactive physical maps

Documenting and synthesizing feedback on recommendations

In workshops between 2024 and 2025, MPC collected more than 1,200 pieces of feedback from stakeholders on an initial set of zoning reform recommendations, which were used to update the recommendations to become the revised set that eventually appeared in this report.

In this process, MPC documented each individual piece of feedback received—whether through interaction on an activity board, notes in a workshop workbook, or other feedback channels—in a central spreadsheet for each of the project’s priority outcomes (with the exception of Productive Land Use, which did not have a set of proposed recommendations). Alongside this qualitative feedback on the draft recommendations, voting was used to gauge levels of agreement among stakeholders with each individual recommendation, and votes were also individually tracked and summarized.

MPC staff reviewed and coded the feedback to summarize the themes and issues that emerged most frequently, in these categories: (1) This could be effective because (2) This could be improved by (3) If this was implemented, things to consider (4) What is missing. These themes were used by teams of MPC staff, alongside the voting results, to update recommendations.

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