This document is part of MPC's 'Understanding Our Rivers' research project, which notes how the Chicago river system and its surrounding communities have changed over time. Consistent with the project structure, the findings are organized into the themes of inviting, productive, and living.



Understanding the North Branch/North Shore (Reach 1)

The North Shore/North Branch of the Chicago River is a reach that extends for 10.5 miles from Lawrence Avenue on the southern end and Chicago's border on the northern end. The reach touches seven community areas including: Lincoln Square, Albany Park, North Park, West Ridge, Forest Glen, Norwood Park, and Jefferson Park. This reach weaves its way through busy neighborhood streets and natural spaces alike, like LaBagh Woods and Gompers Park. The North Shore Channel runs through a number of parks as well, like River Park and Legion Park.



KEY TO ICONS

Increasing | Decreasing | Same or Similar | Good | Fair | Poor

How has the area changed over time?

(2014-2022)

Demographics

This reach saw an increase in overall population of 4%, which was more than the population increase for the city as a whole. The population change was driven mainly by an increase in the Asian population, which increased by almost 16% (an increase of nearly 1,900 new Asian residents).

Population change along Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)

	Total population (2014)	Total population (2022)	% Change in population	# Change in population
River tracts - Reach 1	70,396	72,871	3.5%	2,475
River adjacent tracts - Reach 1	102,917	107,916	4.9%	4,999
Citywide river tracts	322,090	346,447	7.6%	24,357
All tracts citywide	2,712,209	2,721,126	0.3%	8,917

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2018-2022 Five-Year Estimates

There were less significant changes for other demographic groups in river tracts. The Black population decreased by 6% along the river, the Latinx population increased by 1%, and the white population decreased by less than 1%.



These population trends were unique to river tracts. By comparison, river adjacent tracts, which give insight into general neighborhood trends, saw a notable increase in Latinx and Black residents (an increase of roughly 6,500 and 1,000, respectively). Contrastingly to river tracts, the Asian population was relatively stable and the white population decreased in adjacent tracts.

Population change by race and ethnicity along Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)

	% Change in total population (2014-2022)	# Change in total population (2014-2022)	% Change in Black population	# Change in Black population	% Change in white population	# Change in white population	% Change in Latinx population	# Change in Latinx population	% Change in Asian population	# Change in Asian population
River tracts - Reach 1	3.5%	2,475	−5.6%	−112	−0.7%	−302	1.1%	154	15.6%	1,897
River adjacent tracts - Reach 1	4.9%	4,999	31.3%	998	−8.4%	−4,951	29.6%	6,507	−0.8%	−119
Citywide river tracts	7.6%	24,357	−0.4%	−156	6.5%	9,326	−5.8%	−5,049	37.5%	16,549
All tracts citywide	0.3%	8,917	−9.5%	−81,381	2.1%	18,473	0.4%	2,784	22.1%	34,061

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2018-2022 Five-Year Estimates

Socioeconomics

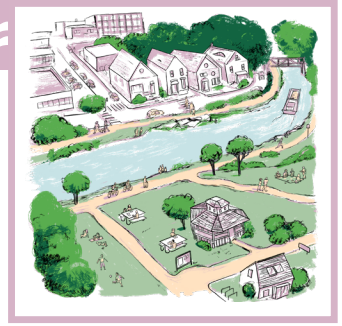
Household income increased at a slightly slower rate (39%) in river tracts than in adjacent tracts (45%) and citywide (49%). Rents increased at a slightly higher rate in river tracts (43%) than adjacent tracts (38%)

At $411,000, the median home value along the river in the North Branch/North Shore reach is notably higher than adjacent tracts ($370,000) and citywide ($329,000). However, between 2014 and 2022, the median home value increased by 25%, which is a lower rate than in adjacent tracts and citywide, where home values increased by 37%.

Changes in household incomes, rents, and home values along Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)

	Average median HH income (2014)	Average median HH income (2022)	% Change in average HH income	Average median rent (2014)	Average median rent (2022)	% Change in average median rent	Average median home value (2014)	Average median home value (2022)	% Change in average median home value
River tracts - Reach 1	$70,977	$98,308	38.5%	$992	$1,420	43.2%	$330,247	$411,439	24.6%
River adjacent tracts - Reach 1	$59,737	$86,657	45.1%	$1,019	$1,402	37.6%	$269,945	$369,640	36.9%
Citywide river tracts	$60,888	$92,926	52.6%	$1,081	$1,499	38.6%	$279,536	$384,242	37.5%
All tracts citywide	$49,019	$73,178	49.3%	$992	$1,316	32.6%	$239,511	$328,859	37.3%

HH stands for Household
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2018-2022 Five-Year Estimates



Land Use

Single family land use predominates the North Branch/North Shore reach, composing 47% of the land in river tracts in this reach. Single family land use declined by 2.6 percentage points in river tracts between 2010 and 2020, which was a decrease of 105 acres of single family uses. Open space is the next most common land use in this reach, making up 14% of the land along the river.

About 70 acres of open space were added to the area between 2010 and 2020. Much of the open space in this area is privately owned, but some is accessible for public use. Industrial uses make up just 2% of the land use, significantly less than the 17% average share of land dedicated to industry across all river reaches citywide.

Land uses along the North Branch/North Shore reach
The share of each tract grouping's total land area comprised of each land use category in 2020

	% share SF residential	% share MF residential	% share commercial	% share industrial	% share institutional	% share open space	% share transportation	% share ROW	% share utility and waste	% share vacant
River tracts	46.7%	11.1%	6.4%	2.3%	10.3%	13.8%	0.2%	7.8%	0.3%	0.2%
River adjacent tracts	55.7%	22.0%	9.7%	1.9%	6.3%	2.4%	0.2%	1.2%	0.0%	0.6%
Citywide river tracts	16.5%	10.8%	10.4%	16.7%	6.4%	9.9%	10.9%	10.2%	4.6%	3.3%
All tracts citywide	32.2%	15.8%	14.2%	9.0%	8.0%	5.4%	4.1%	6.8%	1.2%	3.2%

Excludes the following land use categories: "Other Residential" and "Non-Parcel or Unclassified." SF stands for Single-Family; MF stands for Multi-Family, ROW stands for Right-of-Way.
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Land Use Inventory (2020)

Land use changes along the North Branch/North Shore reach
The change or difference in the share of each tract grouping's total land area comprised of each land use category from 2010 to 2020

	% change SF residential	% change MF residential	% change commercial	% change industrial	% change institutional	% change open space	% change transportation	% change ROW	% change utility and waste	% change vacant
River tracts	-2.6%	-0.7%	-1.0%	-0.6%	0.2%	1.7%	0.1%	5.2%	0.1%	-0.1%
River adjacent tracts	0.5%	1.7%	-0.8%	0.3%	0.4%	-0.5%	0.1%	-1.5%	0.0%	-0.0%
Citywide river tracts	-0.2%	0.6%	-0.8%	0.1%	0.7%	1.5%	-1.1%	1.8%	-0.2%	-1.8%
All tracts citywide	0.1%	0.1%	3.8%	-0.7%	0.7%	-0.3%	-4.2%	1.2%	0.0%	-0.4%

These percentages reflect percentage point changes, or the difference in the share of each tract groupings that are comprised of each land use category. Excludes the following land use categories: "Other Residential" and "Non-Parcel or Unclassified." SF stands for Single-Family; MF stands for Multi-Family, ROW stands for Right-of-Way.
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Land Use Inventory (2020)

Physical Improvements and Access Points

The North Branch/North Shore has extensive trail access, with 98% of its river edge containing a trail. The trails have been made more accessible along this reach over time. Through the USEPA's Great Lakes Fisheries and Ecosystem Restoration program, the Chicago Park District and the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) restored the river edge in River Park on the southern end of the reach. This opened up the existing paved trail so that trail users could have more direct access to the river. This included removing fencing that blocked the view of the river, creating a naturalized river edge with native plants, and a mulch walking path closer to the river. The Park District also added more boat storage covered in murals that feature native wildlife and an accessible boat launch to the park.

An Our Great Rivers grantee project, funded by the Chicago Community Trust and led by the North River Commission, leveraged funds from the Lawrence/Kedzie TIF District to make additional improvements to River Park and Ronan Park. A significant outcome from that project is a new public plaza that is under construction as of 2025 in the Lawrence Avenue entrance to Ronan Park that leveraged funds from the Lawrence/Kedzie TIF District.

Access to trails along Chicago's river system

	Length of existing trail (ft)	Length of river edge (ft)	% Share of river edge with a trail	# Total river trail access points
Citywide river edge	245	669	37.0%	313
Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)	129	132	98.0%	43
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island)	33	84	40.0%	186
Reach 3 (Main Stem Downtown)	23	38	60.0%	58
Reach 4 (South Branch)	17	90	18.0%	17
Reach 5 (Calumet)	14	258	6.0%	4
Reach 6 (Des Plaines)	28	67	42.0%	5

Source: Chicago Department of Transportation, Chicago River Edge Access Study (2024)



Office, Industrial, and Multifamily Development

The average sale price per square foot for office, industrial, and multifamily property along the river in this reach is $40 higher than the city average at $171.50 per square foot. Rental costs, on the other hand, are $10 lower than the city average at about $16 per square foot.

This reach saw the greatest decrease in vacant office, industrial, and multifamily property units across the reaches with an 11 percentage point decrease between 2015 and 2025.

Development conditions and property sales activity along the North Branch/North Shore reach

Vacancy rates, asking rents, and sale prices for all office, industrial, and multifamily properties located 2 blocks of the North Branch/North Shore reach from 2015 to 2025

	Average vacancy rate (2015)	Average vacancy rate (2025)	% Change in vacancy rate	Average asking rent/sqft (2015)	Average asking rent/sqft (2025)	$ Change in asking rent/sqft	Average sale price/sqft (2015)	Average sale price/sqft (2025)	$ Change in sale price/sqft	# Total for sale properties (2015)	# Total for sale properties (2025)	# Change in for sale properties
City of Chicago	8.8%	13.8%	4.9%	$19.60	$25.52	$5.92	$178.25	$131.00	-$47.25	3,810	3,231	−579
Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)	12.1%	1.3%	−10.9%	$11.65	$15.63	$3.98	$99.00	$171.50	$72.50	27	6	−21
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island)	5.3%	24.1%	18.8%	$15.45	$20.85	$5.40	$117.50	$340.33	$222.83	41	97	56
Reach 3 (Main Stem Downtown)	12.0%	23.2%	11.2%	$33.97	$41.79	$7.83	$264.25	$103.00	-$161.25	124	91	−33
Reach 4 (South Branch)	8.9%	2.3%	−6.6%	$7.28	$18.31	$11.03	$51.00	$63.50	$12.50	42	25	−17
Reach 5 (Calumet)	6.1%	6.2%	0.1%	$5.73	$9.06	$3.32	$28.00	$33.50	$5.50	18	16	−2
Reach 6 (Des Plaines)	7.3%	15.0%	7.7%	$14.86	$19.92	$5.06	$100.25	$71.33	-$28.92	63	46	−17

City of Chicago includes the entire city. Source: CoStar Group, costar.com.

Vacancy

In the North Branch/North Shore reach, vacant parcels, meaning lots with no development, decreased by 17%, or 23 total parcels between 2014 and 2022. Tracts adjacent to the riverfront tracts saw a 1% increase in vacant parcels, meaning the decrease in vacancy along the river is distinct from broader neighborhood trends in this area.

Change in vacancies along Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)

	Total vacant parcels (2014)	Total vacant parcels (2022)	% Share of parcels vacant (2014)	% Share of parcels vacant (2022)	% Change in vacant parcels	# Change in vacant parcels
River tracts - Reach 1	132	109	0.7%	0.6%	-17.4%	-23
River adjacent tracts - Reach 1	185	187	0.9%	0.9%	1.1%	2
Citywide river tracts	4,562	4,396	6.3%	6.1%	-3.6%	-166
All tracts citywide	32,227	33,712	5.3%	5.6%	4.6%	1,485

Source: Cook County Assessor's Office (2014 and 2022)

Jobs and Businesses

Jobs increased by 11% in river tracts in this reach between 2012 and 2021, but this is a lower rate of increase than in adjacent tracts, indicating job growth was somewhat slower along the river than in other parts of the neighborhoods near this reach.

Unlike with jobs, businesses declined across the board, however, the number of businesses declined at a faster rate (35%) in river tracts than in adjacent tracts (23%), following citywide trends.

Change in businesses and jobs along Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)

	Total businesses (2013)	Total businesses (2023)	% Change in total businesses	# Change in total businesses	Total jobs (2012)	Total jobs (2021)	% Change in total jobs	# Change in total jobs
River tracts - Reach 1	1,241	805	-35.1%	-436	15,873	17,614	11.0%	1,741
River adjacent tracts - Reach 1	1,934	1,483	-23.3%	-451	16,701	20,679	23.8%	3,978
Citywide river tracts	14,629	10,106	-30.9%	-4,523	651,406	712,116	9.3%	60,710
All tracts citywide	56,115	42,171	-24.8%	-13,944	1,279,376	1,320,135	3.2%	40,759

Source: City of Chicago data portal business licenses (2013 and 2023); U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (2012 and 2021)



Water Quality

The North Branch/North Shore reach had 475 combined sewer overflow (CSO) events between 2016 and 2021. The number of CSO events, however, has declined over time with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District's (MWRD) efforts in the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), that built large, deep tunnels and reservoirs that store stormwater and sewage until it can be treated, mitigating CSO events. The TARP reservoir that affects this reach is the McCook Reservoir. The first stage of the McCook Reservoir began operations in 2017. It is located between the Des Plaines River and Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal in Bedford Park, and captures stormwater along the Des Plaines River, Salt Creek, Addison Creek, and the Chicago River from the North Branch and North Shore Channel, through the Main Steam, South Branch, Bubbly Creek, to the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. This first stage of the McCook reservoir was designed to contain up to 3.5 billion gallons. The second stage, set to be completed in 2032, has capacity for an additional 6.5 billion gallons. The tunnels and reservoirs built under TARP have played a major role in reducing CSOs in Chicago's water system. The number of CSOs notably declined across all Chicago river reaches and the Des Plaines reach after the McCook Reservoir became operational in 2017. In 2021, the North Branch/North Shore reach did not experience any CSO events. CSO events are complex: the severity of each event depends on the location, amount of impervious surfaces that exacerbate runoff, weather conditions, and other factors. Our region has not seen a complete elimination of CSO events, and some years continue to see more severe CSOs than others. It is important to continue to make ongoing efforts to reduce stormwater runoff and mitigate CSO events, as the effects of climate change, such as the heavy rainfall events we saw in the summer of 2026, continue to pose pollution and flooding challenges to the Chicago region.

Combined sewer overflows along Chicago's river system

The total number of Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) across all outfall locations along Chicago's river system by reach, 2016 to 2021

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	# Total CSOs (2016-2021)	% Change in total CSOs (2016-2021)
City of Chicago	1,025	1,879	601	494	244	33	4,276	−97%
Reach 1 - North Branch/North Shore	161	197	61	44	12	0	475	−100%
Reach 2 - North Branch/Goose Island	462	923	218	238	113	8	1,962	−98%
Reach 3 - Main Stem Downtown	122	234	36	39	1	3	435	−98%
Reach 4 - South Branch	248	484	264	153	90	12	1,251	−95%
Reach 5 - Calumet	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0%
Reach 6 - Des Plaines	32	40	22	20	28	10	152	−69%

Source: Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Chicago, processed by The Field Museum

The biodiversity of the Chicago river system's fish population has come a long way. In the 1970s, there were fewer than 10 species of fish in our river system. Today, thanks to decades of habitat restoration and advocacy from organizations highlighted throughout this website and beyond, there are more than 80 recorded species. The fish diversity is limited in the North Branch/North Shore reach compared to the other river reaches. There were just 4 different species recorded annually on average between 2016 and 2021. Fish move throughout the river system, and the number of recorded species in a given reach provide only a snapshot in time based on when the data was collected. However, the limited number of fish species counted in this reach may be due in part to a dam that was located in the North Branch near the intersection of the North Branch and the North Shore Channel in River Park. Dams block fish from moving upstream to spawn and find food, and slow-moving water creates a warmer, low oxygen environment. The dam also made the stretch impassable by paddlers. Under the USEPA's Great Lakes Fisheries and Ecosystem Restoration program in 2018, the Park District and the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) removed the dam. This effort also involved large scale river edge restoration, establishing a more natural and resilient river edge along the North Branch in River Park, and improving the overall ecology of the reach.

Fish biodiversity along Chicago's river system

	# Total species of fish
Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore) - Albany Ave	4
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island) - Wilson Ave	19
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island) - Diversey Pkwy	14
Reach 3 (Main Stem Downtown) - Wells St	No Data
Reach 4 (South Branch) - Loomis St	14
Reach 4 (South Branch) - Archer Ave	No Data
Reach 4 (South Branch) - Cicero Ave	29
Reach 5 (Calumet) - Halsted St	19
Reach 5 (Calumet) - Indiana Ave	22
Reach 6 (Des Plaines)	No Data

Fish species diversity is based on the annual average of each station between 2016 to 2021. Albany and Wilson Ave stations sit near the border between reach 1 and 2. The MWRD does not monitor fish species diversity in reach 3 or 6.

Source: Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, GeoHub.

Open Space

The North Branch/North Shore reach has the second highest proportion of open space along the river of all the city's river reaches, with 14% of land along the river dedicated to open space. The amount of open space increased between 2010 and 2020 by nearly 70 acres.

Change in open space land use along Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)

	% Share open space (2010)	% Share open space (2020)	% Change in share open space	# Change in acres of open space
River tracts - Reach 1	12.1%	13.8%	1.7%	69
River adjacent tracts - Reach 1	2.9%	2.4%	−0.5%	−14
Citywide river tracts	8.4%	9.8%	1.4%	384
All tracts citywide	5.7%	5.4%	−0.3%	−346

The % Change in open space reflects the percentage point change, or the difference in the share of each tract groupings that were comprised of open space land use between 2010 and 2020.
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Land Use Inventory (2010 and 2020).

Methodology

Research Approach
This project examined how areas (census tracts) along the river changed over time, from approximately 2015 to 2025. Data related to demographic, socioeconomic, and development changes, and ecological and river quality changes, were compiled to understand how areas along the river evolved over the decade. Trends/variables included:

- Population changes by racial and ethnic group
- Rent and home value changes
- Job, business, and vacancy rate changes
- Land uses
- Trails and access points
- Community projects and activations
- Fish count and water quality changes

In addition to breaking down the river geography at the citywide and "reach"-level scale, we examined data by census tracts based on their proximity to the river:

- River tracts: Census tracts that touch a river in the City of Chicago
- River adjacent tracts: Tracts that touch the "river tracts." Data in these tracts act as a proxy to the nearby neighborhood in order to differentiate general neighborhood trends from findings that are unique to tracts that directly abut the river.

Research Questions
For each data area, we asked the following questions, which allow for a nuanced look at how river areas have developed, when compared to other parts of the city:

- How do trends/changes compare across specific river areas (aka "reach areas")?
- How do trends/changes along the river compare to changes in areas immediately adjacent to river census tracts (i.e. comparison group)?
- How do trends/changes along the river compare to changes across the city as a whole (all city census tracts)?