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 South Branch/Bubbly Creek (Reach 4)

This reach includes the South Branch of the Chicago River, the Sanitary Ship Canal, and Bubbly Creek. It touches the community areas of Chinatown, Armour Square, Pilsen, Bridgeport, Lower West Side, Little Village, McKinley Park, Brighton Park, Archer Heights, South Lawndale, and Garfield Ridge. The South Branch/ Bubbly Creek is characterized by it's industrial legacy and ongoing, active industrial uses today alongside residential developments. Parks, including Ping Tom Park in Chinatown and Park No. 571 in Bridgeport, and trails have been added over time, but the industrial character still predominates.



KEY TO ICONS

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

How has the area changed over time?

(2014-2022)

Demographics

Between 2014 and 2022, the South Branch/Bubbly Creek reach maintained a steady population, however, population change looked different by racial and ethnic groups.

Population change along Reach 4 (South Branch)

	Total population (2014)	Total population (2022)	% Change in population	# Change in population
River tracts - Reach 4	67,441	67,298	−0.2%	−143
River adjacent tracts - Reach 4	149,693	143,890	−3.9%	−5,803
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

Population growth was greatest along the river among Asian residents at 20%, a net increase of nearly 2,900 residents, followed by white residents at 12%, or a net increase of 1,250 residents.

Latinx population loss was similar along both the river and adjacent tracts (12% and 9% respectively), indicating a broader neighborhood trend of Latinx population loss.

Population change by race and ethnicity along Reach 4 (South Branch)

	% 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 4	−0.2%	−143	0.9%	62	12.0%	1,256	−12.2%	−4,149	19.6%	2,879
River adjacent tracts - Reach 4	−3.9%	−5,803	1.9%	125	7.7%	1,526	−9.2%	−9,967	11.9%	1,615
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

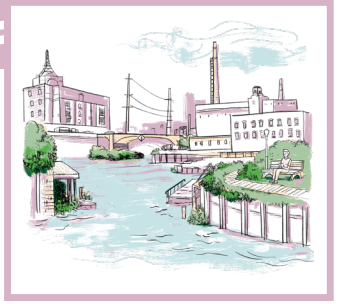
Socioeconomics

The median household income, rent, and home value all increased along the South Branch at similar rates to citywide overall. However, rent and home values increased at a higher rate along the river than in adjacent neighborhood tracts, by 37% and 46% respectively.

Changes in household incomes, rents, and home values along Reach 4 (South Branch)

	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 4	$38,088	$59,752	56.9%	$827	$1,128	36.5%	$200,895	$293,073	45.9%
River adjacent tracts - Reach 4	$37,159	$60,672	63.3%	$822	$1,033	25.6%	$201,756	$270,558	34.1%
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

Industrial land use predominates the South Branch, making up 40% of the share of land in river tracts 2020. For comparison, the next most common land use type is single family housing, which makes up just 14% of land use in this area.

Industrial land use decreased between 2010 and 2020, by about 1.3 percentage points and 61 acres, but it remains the most common land use along the river here. Commercial land use is the fastest growing, up 2.4 percentage points and 112 acres. In 2020, commercial land use made up 10% of the share of land in the area.

The predominance of industrial use in the reach limits access to the river for recreation. Much of the Chicago Community Trust's Our Great Rivers grant recipients' work focused on making the South Branch more inviting. A particularly impactful example: Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) partnered with the Southeast Environmental Task Force and the Natural Resources Defense Council to develop a map showing the cumulative effects of environmental and social stressors, identifying the most burdened communities in Chicago. This helped set the groundwork for Chicago's Cumulative Impact Assessment and Environmental Justice Action Plan, which includes specific policy changes to protect neighborhoods from the cumulative impact of environmental burdens.

Land uses along the South Branch 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	14.3%	5.8%	9.5%	40.4%	9.1%	0.8%	3.1%	10.8%	3.2%	2.8%
River adjacent tracts	22.2%	18.6%	13.9%	23.3%	6.2%	1.7%	5.0%	4.7%	0.1%	4.5%
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 South Branch 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	1.0%	-0.1%	2.4%	-1.3%	0.5%	0.3%	-1.6%	-0.6%	0.3%	-0.9%
River adjacent tracts	0.5%	-1.0%	1.1%	-1.3%	0.5%	-1.5%	0.7%	-1.0%	0.1%	1.9%
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

This reach has significantly less trail access than other reaches. Just 18% of the river edge has a trail, and there are 17 access points. Our Great Rivers grant cohort projects have sought to expand trail access and made physical improvements to riverside areas to make them more inviting: Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC) commissioned two large murals inspired by traditional Chinese culture under the Ping Tom Park viaduct, El Paseo Community Garden partnered with the Yollocalli Arts Reach Public Art internship program to create the "Rainbow Bridge" mural on the Loomis Street bridge, connecting Pilsen and Bridgeport over the Chicago River, and The South Branch Park Advisory Council created a Framework Plan for the South Branch Parks to better connect the parks and sets priorities for a South Branch riverwalk. McKinley Park Development Council picked up the plan and developed the South Branch Connectivity Project that lays a framework for extending the riverwalk to Western Avenue. The 2019 updated Chicago River Design Guidelines also expanded trail access in this area by requiring all new riverfront development to establish a 30-foot setback with public access and a pedestrian path.

Prologis' Amazon warehouse on Halsted and the South Branch river, for example, was required to develop a riverwalk that is now open for public access and includes 627 square feet of wetland habitat provided by Urban Rivers' floating wetlands.

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 within 2 blocks of the river in this reach is relatively low compared to other reaches at $63.50 per square foot.

The sale price has increased slightly over the last decade, by about $12.50 per square foot, which is a 25% increase. Rental costs for office, industrial, and multifamily property increased at a much higher rate than other reaches, by about 160%, or $11 per square foot. Vacancy rates in office, industrial, and multifamily properties decreased by 7 percentage points in the last decade. This reach and the North Branch/North Shore reach are the only reaches that saw a decrease in vacancy of this kind of property. The vacancy rate is very low for office, industrial, and multifamily properties within two blocks of the river at just 2%.

Development conditions and property sales activity along Chicago's river system

Vacancy rates, asking rents, and sale prices for all office, industrial, and multifamily properties located 2 blocks of Chicago's river system by 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

The total number of vacant lots in the larger geography of river tracts and adjacent tracts along this reach decreased as well between 2014 and 2022. This may indicate a broader trend of development and decreasing vacant lots in the communities along the South Branch.

Change in vacancies along Reach 4 (South Branch)

	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 4	1,101	956	6.5%	5.7%	-13.2%	-145
River adjacent tracts - Reach 4	1,444	1,234	4.8%	4.1%	-14.5%	-210
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

The South Branch reach was one of the only reaches to see a decline in jobs along the river. The area saw a 6% decrease in jobs between 2012 and 2021, which was about 2,000 jobs. This was a slightly greater rate than in adjacent tracts, which saw a 2% decrease in jobs. Businesses declined at a similar rate to the citywide trend.

Change in businesses and jobs along Reach 4 (South Branch)

	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 4	1,956	1,517	-22.4%	-439	39,661	37,471	-5.5%	-2,190
River adjacent tracts - Reach 4	2,944	2,830	-3.9%	-114	29,639	29,144	-1.7%	-495
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

Combined sewer overflows (CSOs) were more common in the South Branch/ Bubbly Creek reach than in other areas in Chicago's river system. Between 2016 and 2021, this reach saw 1,251 CSO events. Bubbly Creek can be particularly affected by CSO events due to it's nearly stagnant flow. The number of CSO events 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. 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

Urban Rivers partnered with the Shedd Aquarium in 2022 to establish floating wetlands in the area to help restore wildlife in Bubbly Creek.

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. 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. Though there are these limitations to collecting fish species counts, MWRD monitoring station data averages over time show that this reach sustains a diverse fish population. Between 2016 and 2021, the MWRD monitoring station on Cicero Avenue along the South Branch recorded nearly 30 fish species on average annually.

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

As of 2020, the most recent year we have land use data for, the South Branch reach had very limited open space, and the lowest share of open space of all river tracts. Less than 1% of the land in river adjacent tracts is dedicated to open space. Ongoing investment in open space is needed along this reach to give residents along the South Branch greater access to open space that other parts of the river system enjoy.

Change in open space land use along Reach 4 (South Branch)

	% Share open space (2010)	% Share open space (2020)	% Change in share open space	# Change in acres of open space
River tracts - Reach 4	0.5%	0.8%	0.3%	15
River adjacent tracts - Reach 4	3.2%	1.7%	-1.5%	-70
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)?