

STATE OF OUR YOUTH 2025



15
YEARS

A BETTER
CHICAGO

EST.
2010

INTRODUCTION

Coming of age in Chicago provides young people with unique opportunities and a rich cultural landscape that can shape their lives in profound ways.

The city is home to a diverse array of 77 neighborhoods, each with its own history and sense of community. But for all of Chicago's promise, it can also be a challenging place to grow up.

Too many youth—especially in communities on the South and West sides of the city—experience high rates of poverty, violence, unemployment, and homelessness. These long-standing inequities are reflected in every aspect of achievement and well-being including kindergarten readiness, grade-level proficiency in reading and math, high school graduation, college enrollment, and, ultimately, career success. While these challenges have existed for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many opportunity gaps to widen.

Today, many young Chicagoans are also caught in a volatile political climate in which programs supporting their education, safety, and basic needs are being threatened or cut. Youth are struggling with mental health challenges, community violence, and chronic absenteeism, all of which can have devastating long-term effects. These factors hinder their ability to finish their education and enter the workforce with the preparation and confidence they need to thrive.



NOTE TO READER: Throughout American history, many communities have faced significant barriers to opportunity. Chicago is among the major cities that continues to experience uneven investment and development across neighborhoods, resulting in inadequate access to essential services, and disparities in economic, education and health outcomes. The data in this report reveals how these historical patterns continue to have a disproportionate negative impact on communities of color. Understanding these persistent challenges is crucial for developing solutions that create equitable opportunities for all Chicagoans.

This context provides an important foundation for interpreting the findings presented in this report.

The good news is there have been promising gains across some key academic milestones. Additionally, Chicago's youth are expressing a strong sense of optimism about their future despite obstacles to their success. According to A Better Chicago's annual city-wide youth survey conducted in the summer of 2024, 95% of respondents reported feeling optimistic about what's ahead.

So, how are Chicago's youth truly faring? Has there been meaningful progress since the pandemic? Are they on a path to succeed in education, career, and life? This report will examine the challenges and barriers to their success, as well as the interventions and investments driving positive outcomes. A Better Chicago aims to understand how we can collectively strengthen our support for young people.

The *State of Our Youth* report begins with a demographic overview, offering a "by the numbers" snapshot of Chicago's youth. It then highlights seven key insights that, when taken together, provide a comprehensive view of how young people are progressing across various milestones spanning their development. Finally, the report will outline strategies for supporting Chicago's youth from cradle to career.

"A Better Chicago aims to understand how we can collectively strengthen our support for young people."



This report draws on data and trends impacting Chicago's youth today.

Its findings are based on:

- Publicly available data collected in A Better Chicago's [Youth Opportunity Dashboard](#), sourced from the U.S. Census, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), University of Chicago's To&Through Project, Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and more.
- A Global Strategy Group [survey](#) commissioned by A Better Chicago in July 2024. The online survey of 400 youth, ages 10–24, was followed by three focus groups.
- Research and insights from publicly available studies, partner organizations, and other sources.



KEY INSIGHTS

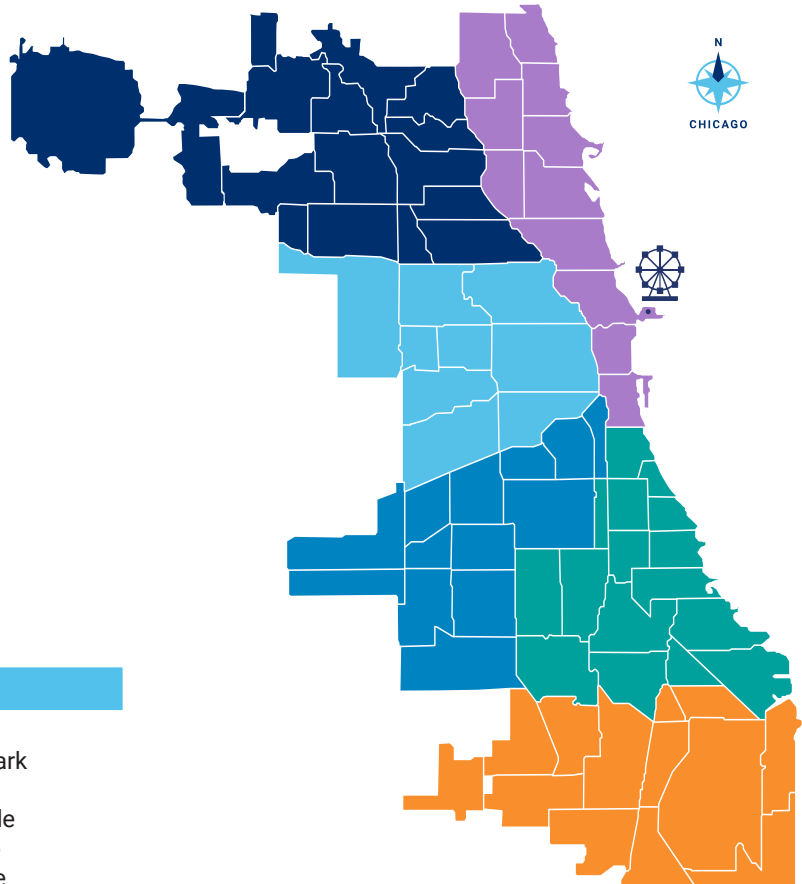
- 1 One in four Chicago youth under the age of 18 live in **poverty**. For Chicago's youngest children (ages 0–5), the poverty rate is even higher at 43.5%, with some communities seeing rates as high as 90%.
- 2 Ninety-four percent of youth survey respondents cite **mental health** as a problem experienced by people their age, and youth have become more critical over time of their community's response to providing mental health services.
- 3 **Community violence** is an all-too-familiar part of life in Chicago, with nearly two thirds of youth witnessing violence in some form, according to A Better Chicago's citywide survey. Nearly 25% of youth report witnessing violence weekly.
- 4 In 2024, almost 41% of CPS students were **chronically absent**. Chronic absenteeism is strongly correlated to lower academic performance and is a key indicator of future educational and economic challenges.
- 5 Eighth grade **reading proficiency** is a bright spot in the data and has increased by nearly 50% since 2019, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Despite some gains in recent years, 3rd grade reading and 8th grade **math proficiency** rates remain below pre-pandemic levels.
- 6 In 2024, CPS's five-year **high school graduation rate** hit a historic high and in 2023, college enrollment rates were the highest since 2017. However, Black male youth have the greatest potential for improvement in both areas.
- 7 Chicago youth rely on **community-based programs** and want greater access to these opportunities. Those involved in out-of-school programs feel more optimistic and are more likely to aspire to a four-year college degree.

CHICAGO'S REGIONS



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Chicago implemented the Healthy Chicago Zones initiative, which divides the city into six Health Equity Zones. This framework, also utilized by A Better Chicago's Youth Opportunity Dashboard, was developed to create targeted strategies that enhance community well-being and reduce the life expectancy gap by race.

The six Health Equity Zones are referred to as "regions" within the context of this report. Each region is comprised of neighborhoods, of which Chicago has 77.



Northwest

- Albany Park
- Avondale
- Belmont Cragin
- Dunning
- Edison Park
- Forest Glen
- Hermosa
- Irving Park
- Jefferson Park
- Logan Square
- Montclare
- North Park
- Norwood Park
- O'Hare
- Portage Park

North Central

- Edgewater
- Lake View
- Lincoln Park
- Lincoln Square
- Loop
- Near North Side
- Near South Side
- North Center
- Rogers Park
- Uptown
- West Ridge

West

- Austin
- East Garfield Park
- Humboldt Park
- Lower West Side
- Near West Side
- North Lawndale
- South Lawndale
- West Garfield Park
- West Town

Southwest

- Archer Heights
- Armour Square
- Ashburn
- Bridgeport
- Brighton Park
- Chicago Lawn
- Clearing
- Gage Park
- Garfield Ridge
- McKinley Park
- New City
- West Elsdon
- West Lawn

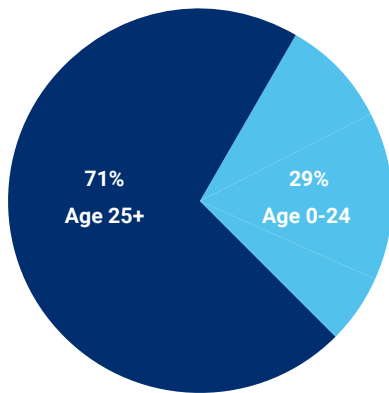
Near South

- Auburn Gresham
- Avalon Park
- Chatham
- Douglas
- Englewood
- Fuller Park
- Grand Boulevard
- Greater Grand Crossing
- Hyde Park
- Kenwood
- Oakland
- South Chicago
- South Shore
- Washington Park
- West Englewood
- Woodlawn

Far South

- Beverly
- Burnside
- Calumet Heights
- East Side
- Hegewisch
- Morgan Park
- Mount Greenwood
- Pullman
- Riverdale
- Roseland
- South Deering
- Washington Heights
- West Pullman

CHICAGO YOUTH BY THE NUMBERS



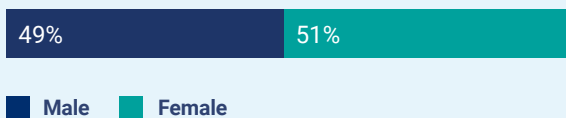
POPULATION AND AGE

Of the **2.7 million people** who live in Chicago, roughly 793,000—**29%** of the total population—are **under the age of 25**, which is how “youth” is defined for purposes of this report. Of this, **19.8% are under 18**, and **5.6% are under the age of five**.

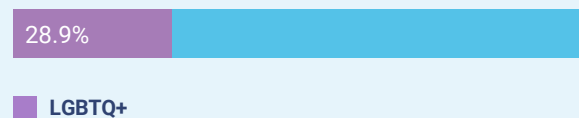
- There are just over **1 million total households**.
- The Northwest region of the city has the largest number of young people under the age of **25 (166,018)**, while the Southwest region has the highest percentage of its population under age **25 (139,424)**, making up **35%** of its residents.
- Out of all Chicago neighborhoods, **Austin is home to the largest number of youth (32,632)**, representing **4%** of the total youth population in Chicago.
- **Riverdale has the highest percentage of youth ages 0–24**, with **51%** of their population comprised of young people.



GENDER



SEXUAL ORIENTATION

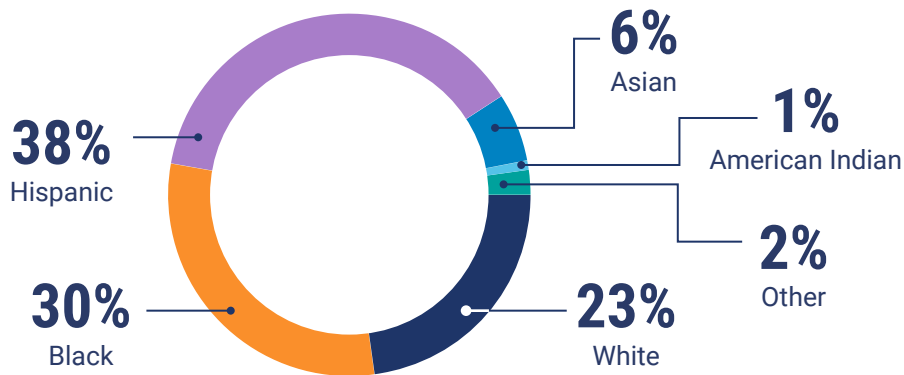


In 2023, **28.9%** of CPS high school students **identified** as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning (LGBTQ+).

Note: figures come from CPS, ISBE, and the most recent U.S. Census data available.

CHICAGO YOUTH BY THE NUMBERS

RACE AND ETHNICITY (YOUTH 0-24)



FAMILY INCOME

16.8% of Chicago residents live below the poverty line.

Nearly one quarter (23.7%) of Chicago youth 0-18 live in poverty.

Poverty is experienced disproportionately across racial groups and geographic regions in Chicago. The Near South region has the highest poverty rate (28%) and the highest Black population (82%), while the Northwest region has the lowest poverty rate (11%) and the lowest Black population (3%).



LANDSCAPE

In 2024, CPS served **over 325,000 students**, which includes charter schools. There are nearly **400** private schools in Chicago, serving roughly **67,000** students, which is about **17%** of the city's K-12 population.

76%

of CPS students come from low-income households

16%

are students with disabilities

24%

are English learners

Over one-third (35.5%) of children five and older live in households where a language other than English is spoken.

Note: figures come from CPS, ISBE, and the most recent U.S. Census data available.

INSIGHT #1 | POVERTY

CONTEXT

Growing up in poverty can have a cascading effect that impacts every part of a young person's life.

Poverty is [associated](#) with homelessness, food insecurity, and inadequate childcare, and evidence shows it negatively impacts cognitive development as well as emotional and health-related outcomes. Children [exposed](#) to poverty in the first five years of life, a critical time for brain development, enter kindergarten far behind children not experiencing poverty. Food insecurity and weakened health often create difficulty for young children to focus and learn, and children living in poverty are [two to three times more likely](#) to be chronically absent from school.

Furthermore, poverty and homelessness are inextricably linked, creating daunting social, emotional, and academic obstacles. Homelessness is defined as the percentage of youth attending schools in a community who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. There is a direct link between students experiencing homelessness and academic outcomes; [for example](#), in Chicago, high school students experiencing homelessness for the first time saw a decline in GPA of about 0.46%. These students missed 6.6 more instruction days than peers who lived in stable housing and were less likely to graduate in five years.

THE CHICAGO LENS

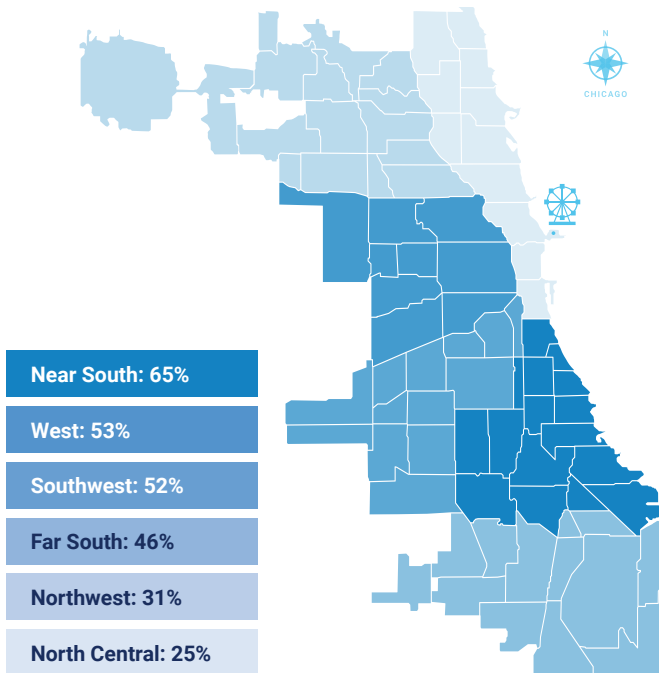
One in four Chicagoans under the age of 18 [live in poverty](#), a troubling figure that nonetheless vastly understates the seriousness of the problem.

For the youngest Chicagoans, that number is even higher: 43.5% of residents aged 0–5 live in households earning less than 200% of the federal poverty line. While that figure remains stubbornly high, it has been on a downward trend since 2019.



PERCENT OF CHICAGO YOUTH (AGES 0-5) EXPERIENCING POVERTY

(children who live in households earning less than 200% of the federal poverty line)



In 2022, the Near South region saw the highest percentage of youth ages 0-5 living in poverty at **65%**, where **83% of residents are Black**.

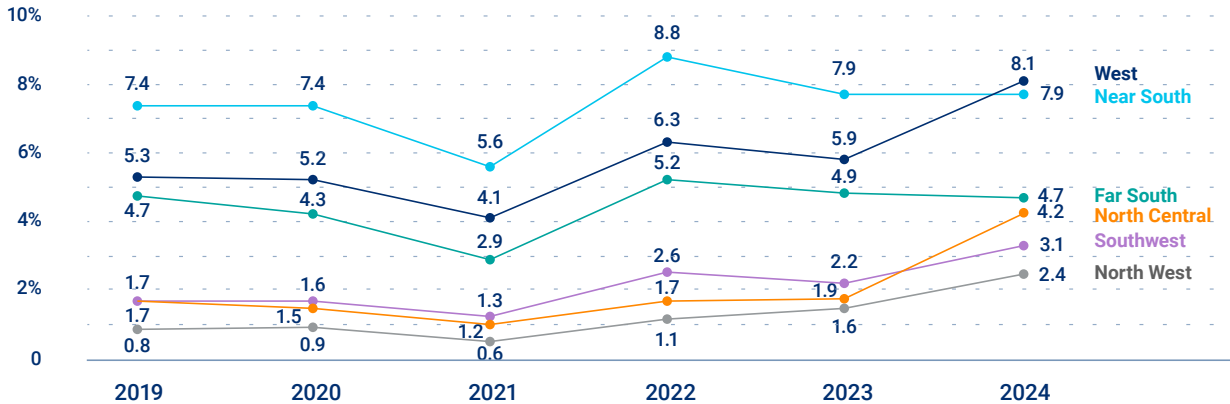
The North Central and Northwest regions both saw a slight uptick in the percentage of youth living in poverty even though the household median income in these areas is significantly higher than the citywide average, which speaks to the complex—and often nuanced—picture for youth across the city.

Citywide, the areas that have the highest percentage of youth experiencing poverty tend to have the lowest number of young people who are considered “On-Track” in elementary school, which measures students’ GPA and attendance. Students who are On-Track in middle school are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.



YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

In every Chicago region, youth homelessness in 2024 was above where it was pre-pandemic. This is acutely true in the West and Near South regions of the city, where the youth homelessness rate is 8%.



Overall, the data indicates a trend of a significant drop in reports of youth homelessness during the pandemic school year of 2021, with alarming increases in the West and Near South regions of the city in subsequent years.

★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- In some neighborhoods—**Hegewisch, Riverdale, West Englewood, and West Garfield Park**, for example—the percentage of youth 0–5 living in poverty is **considerably higher** than the citywide average and ranges between **80–90%**.
- Nearly 8% of youth attending schools in both the **West** and **Near South** regions experienced homelessness in 2024. In **Avalon Park (17%), Rogers Park (15%), and North Lawndale (14%)**, the percentage is even higher.
- **Washington Heights**, on the city’s Far South side, has seen a **promising decrease** in the youth homelessness rate over the past few years. In 2024, the rate was **5.3%**, down from a high of **9%** in 2022.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. One in four Chicago youth (age 0–18) live in poverty and for Chicago’s youngest residents (age 0–5), that figure is as high as 90% in some neighborhoods.
2. The West and Near South regions of the city experience both the highest rates of youth poverty and youth homelessness. Youth in these same communities are less likely to be considered “on track” in elementary school when compared to their peers elsewhere in the city.
3. In every region of Chicago, homelessness was higher in 2024 than before the pandemic.

INSIGHT #2 | MENTAL HEALTH

CONTEXT

Mental health is an urgent and escalating concern for youth across the nation; even before the pandemic, there were noted increases in depression among Americans ages 12 and older, [according](#) to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Across the country, 2 in 5 high school students reported struggling with persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2023, and in the 10 years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, that rate increased by about 40% among high school students. Youth 10–24

account for 15% of all suicides across the country, the second leading cause of death for this age group.

Research shows that Black and Latinx children face disproportionately high barriers to mental health treatment. Further, exposure to environmental adversities such as food insecurity, lack of stable housing, and violence all contribute to worsening mental health, compounding an already urgent problem. In 2023, female and LGBTQ+ students [experienced](#) more violence, and showed more signs of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts than their male, cisgender, and heterosexual peers.



THE CHICAGO LENS

Chicago's youth are not immune to the nationwide mental health crisis that has steadily grown over the past decade. Consistent with national trends, data from the 2023 CPS Youth Risk Behavior Survey [shows](#) that **40.6% of high school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness**, 27.7% reported their mental health was "not good" most of the time or always, and 15.7% seriously considered attempting suicide. These numbers are even higher for female and LGBTQ+ students. For younger students in middle grades, nearly 1 in 5 made a plan about how they would attempt suicide, with that number jumping to 1 in 3 for LGBTQ+ students.

Youth ranked the biggest challenges to their mental health

- 1 Depression
- 2 Stress
- 3 Anxiety
- 4 Body image
- 5 Self-esteem

Source: A Better Chicago's Youth Survey

- In A Better Chicago's [citywide survey](#), **94%** of youth said mental health and well-being is an issue for people their age, and **74%** said it's a major problem.
- **Fewer than half** of respondents said they've received mental health services, and **a third** of those who have not received help say they wished they had.
- In 2023, **55%** said the community was doing a good job of addressing their mental health needs. That number fell to **50%** in 2024.
- Older youth (20–24) were more likely to list **discrimination** or **drug and alcohol use** among the biggest problems their peers face, while younger respondents (10–14) were more likely to say **bullying**.
- In focus groups, youth said mental **health issues are the biggest barrier** to their academic success. They also said schools don't focus enough on teaching social and emotional skills or helping them learn to tolerate unpleasant feelings or stressful situations. They reported mental health issues as a **major reason** for missing school.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. Mental health and well-being are huge areas of concern for the vast majority of young people, and even more so for females and LGBTQ+ youth, with depression, anxiety, and stress being major contributors.
2. Most young people aren't accessing the mental health services they need, and most believe communities are not doing a good job of addressing their mental health concerns.
3. Mental health challenges are a barrier to academic success and a contributing factor to youth missing school.

INSIGHT #3 | COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

CONTEXT

Exposure to violent crime, which can include homicide, criminal sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and aggravated battery, impacts young people’s social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth, whether or not they are directly involved or are victims.

While many forms of violent crime have [declined](#) over time across the country, 2023 was the third-highest year on record for gun

deaths (46,278 total), trailing only the two previous years.

Youth who experience higher incidences of violent crime are [in danger](#) of long-term impacts to mental health and cognitive development and may have fewer opportunities to contribute to their communities. For those who live in or near places where violence is common, the daily risks can take a toll on physical and emotional health, [according](#) to the University of Illinois Chicago School of Medicine.

THE CHICAGO LENS

Violence is an all-too-familiar part of life for Chicago youth.

According to data from the City of Chicago compiled by the [Chicago Tribune](#), while homicides and nonfatal shootings continued to decrease in 2023, Chicago saw a rise in robbery and carjacking incidents, which contributed to an overall increase in violence.

There were 573 homicides in 2024—45 fewer than the previous year—but 93 of those deaths were young people under the age of 20.

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the youth respondents in A Better Chicago’s citywide survey said they have witnessed community violence in some form—including shootings, fistfights, domestic violence, and carjackings—and **almost one in four (22%) said they witness violence weekly**. In focus groups, youth said extra-curricular programs would help keep their peers from engaging in violence, but almost 1 in 3 said those programs aren’t easy to find. While most youth

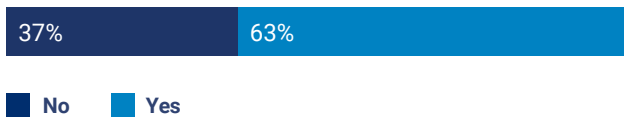
did not report feeling unsafe in schools, participants said that safety measures including increased cameras, security officers, and metal detectors would put them more at ease.



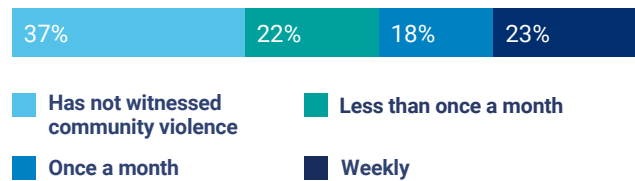
The impact of violence on young lives is apparent in Chicago. A 2019 Erikson Institute [analysis](#) found that more than half—nearly 60%—of children in Chicago under the age of 5 live in communities that experienced more than 3 homicides, raising serious concerns about their physical safety and mental well-being. A [study](#) of CPS students’ test scores found that children who live in areas where violence is prevalent fell behind peers from safer neighborhoods as they progressed through school.

And although Chicago’s population is nearly evenly divided between Black, Latinx, and white residents, violence in the city disproportionately affects people of color. “Black residents remain disproportionately impacted by gun violence, being 22 times more likely to be killed compared to white residents,” according to the [latest data](#) from the University of Chicago Crime Lab.

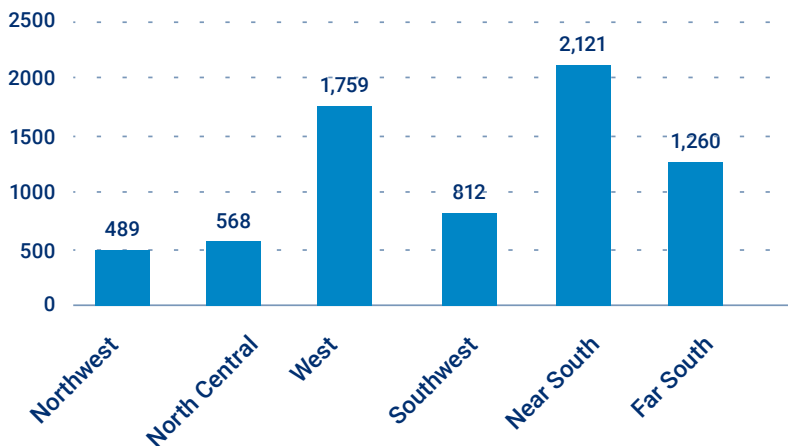
HAVE YOU EVER PERSONALLY WITNESSED VIOLENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



HOW OFTEN DO YOU WITNESS OR SEE VIOLENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



VIOLENT CRIME PER 100K PEOPLE (2023)



The citywide violent crime rate—the number of violent crimes per 100,000 people—was **1,253 in 2023, up from 1,086 the previous year.**

The city’s **Near South and West** regions experienced the highest number of violent crimes per 100,000 people at 2,121 and 1,759 respectively.

Much like poverty, there is a likely correlation between exposure to violent crime and Elementary On-Track outcomes for youth. The Near South region has the highest rate of violent crime and the lowest percent of Elementary On-Track, while the North Central region is the inverse.

Source: A Better Chicago’s Youth Surveys



★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- In 2023, the **violent crime rate was highest** in **Fuller Park** (4,431 per 100K people), **West Garfield Park** (3,991 per 100K people), and **Englewood** (3,772 per 100K people).
- In 2024, **Austin**—the neighborhood home to the largest number of youth—saw the **highest number of homicides**, totaling 47.
- Out of all Chicago neighborhoods, **West Englewood, Armour Square, Woodlawn**, and **West Lawn** recorded the **largest declines** in violent crime from 2022 to 2023.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. Chicago youth are witnessing community violence at alarming levels, with nearly 1 in 4 youth in A Better Chicago’s survey saying they witness it weekly.
2. Exposure to violence impacts young people’s social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth, whether or not they are directly involved.
3. Youth say they want more visible safety measures in schools and neighborhoods, and more community programs to help them stay busy and out of trouble.

INSIGHT #4 | CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

CONTEXT

Chronic absenteeism—defined as a student missing 10% of the school year—has emerged as one of the thorniest post-pandemic challenges for our schools.

Before the pandemic, roughly 15% of the student population nationwide was [deemed](#) chronically absent during the 2018/19 school year. After the pandemic, that number grew at an alarming rate; an estimated 26% of public school students were chronically absent in the 2022/23 school year. What’s new about chronic absenteeism is that it now impacts students across a wide range of demographic backgrounds, including those in suburban, rural, and urban areas alike

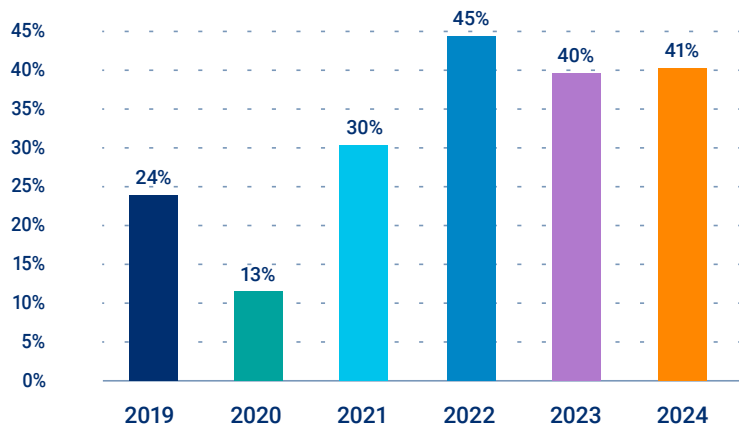
Frequent absences, even in early grades, are a serious impediment to academic success, and children who live in poverty are [especially at risk](#) because their families or communities often don’t have the resources to help them catch up. Chronic absenteeism in kindergarten [leads to](#) lower grades in math and reading in the 1st grade, and poor attendance makes it less likely that a student will read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade. By 6th grade, chronic absenteeism [signals](#) a child may drop out of school. In high school, one week of absences per semester as a freshman reduces the likelihood of graduation by more than 20%.

THE CHICAGO LENS

Chronic absenteeism in Chicago spiked after the pandemic and remains stubbornly high. In 2019, 24% of Chicago Public School students were chronically absent. **In 2022, the rate peaked at nearly 45%, and in 2024, the rate was 41%.**

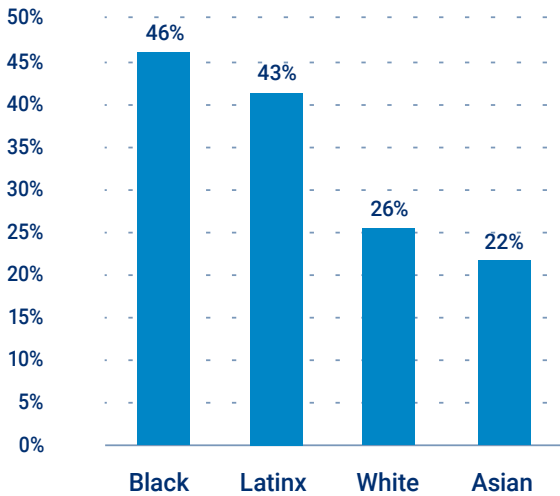
Reversing the post-Covid surge is an urgent concern for students who are still making up for learning losses incurred during the pandemic.

CITYWIDE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATE



Chronic absenteeism rates vary widely by race. For more information on absenteeism and out-of-school suspensions, visit the [Youth Opportunity Dashboard](#).

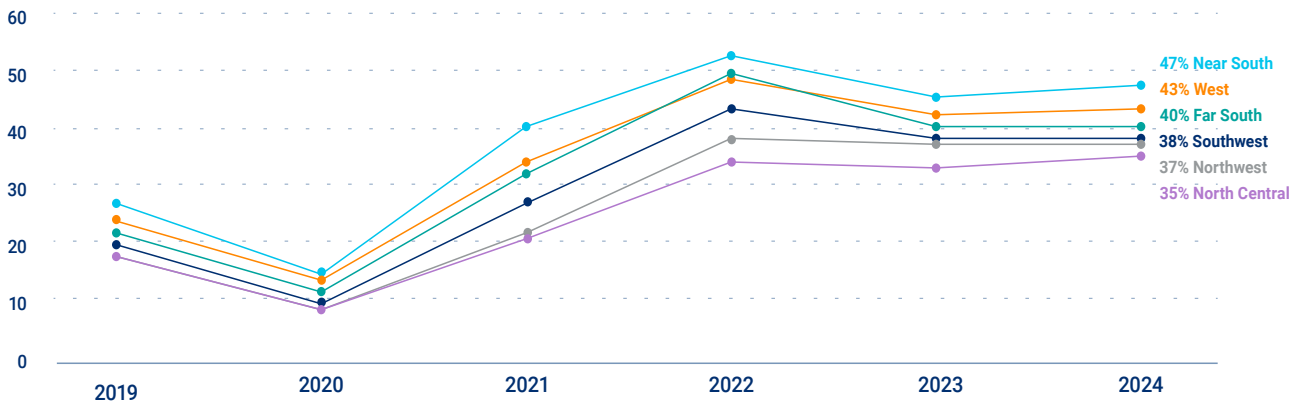
2024 CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY RACE



A concerning increase in out-of-school suspensions—starkly evident in the West, Far South and especially Near South regions—is a contributor to rising absenteeism. Punishments that remove students from their learning environment have cascading consequences and disproportionately affect students of color and those with disabilities.

Chronic absenteeism rates across Chicago’s community areas have increased over time, particularly in the Near South and West regions.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY REGION 2019–2024



In A Better Chicago's youth survey, respondents aged 15–19 were **3 times as likely** as the 10–14 age group to say they often miss school. Mental health issues were among the top reasons with depression, boredom, stress, bullying, drugs and alcohol, and anxiety being key factors.

Separately, in focus groups, youth said lack of transportation was a primary reason for missing school. Community violence also was a factor, as some youth don't feel public transportation is safe. They also cited mental health issues, bullying, and even hygiene as reasons for absences.

Top reasons youth believe their peers miss school

- 1 Depression
- 2 Boredom/dislike of school
- 3 Stress
- 4 Bullying
- 5 Drugs and alcohol

Source: A Better Chicago's Youth Survey

★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- While absenteeism rates are highest on the South and West sides of the city, **increases in absenteeism** are happening citywide.
- In 2024, **every community area in Chicago** experienced an increase in chronic absenteeism except for **Avalon Park**, which recorded a 5% decrease.
- **Fuller Park, Douglas, Woodlawn**, and the **Lower West Side** have the **highest** rates of chronic absenteeism, while **Edison Park, Armour Square**, and **Forest Glen** have the **lowest** rates.
- **Fuller Park** and **Armour Square** are **directly next to one another** on the map, yet on **opposite** ends of the spectrum in terms of absenteeism rates.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. Chronic absenteeism is a major challenge nationwide and Chicago is no exception, with nearly 41% of CPS students missing more than 10% of the 2024 school year. Black and Latinx youth on the city's South and West side are disproportionately impacted.
2. When students become disconnected from their learning environment, the impact is far-reaching; frequent absenteeism has a negative effect on academic achievement, long-term success, and future earnings.
3. The consequences of absenteeism are compounded for students from low-income families who often lack the resources to help children catch up.

INSIGHT #5 | MEETING BENCHMARKS IN READING AND MATH

CONTEXT

Research shows that for reading, 3rd grade marks the shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

Students who fall behind in reading at this crucial point are likely to struggle in other subjects going forward. Similarly, 8th grade math represents the transition from concrete arithmetic to abstract concepts that are the foundation of higher math such as algebra, trigonometry and calculus. Eighth grade math skills are consistently [linked](#) to long-term outcomes including high school graduation and college readiness.



THE CHICAGO LENS

The Education Recovery Scorecard, conducted by Harvard and Stanford universities, ranked Chicago’s 3rd to 8th-grade students 3rd among the 100 largest districts nationwide in reading growth from 2019 to 2023. Significant strides have been made post-pandemic at the district level, but it is critical to analyze literacy and math trends by grade level and region to understand whether youth are on target to hit academic milestones.

While there have been improvements from 3rd to 8th grade in aggregate, 3rd grade reading and 8th grade math are still far below pre-pandemic levels citywide.

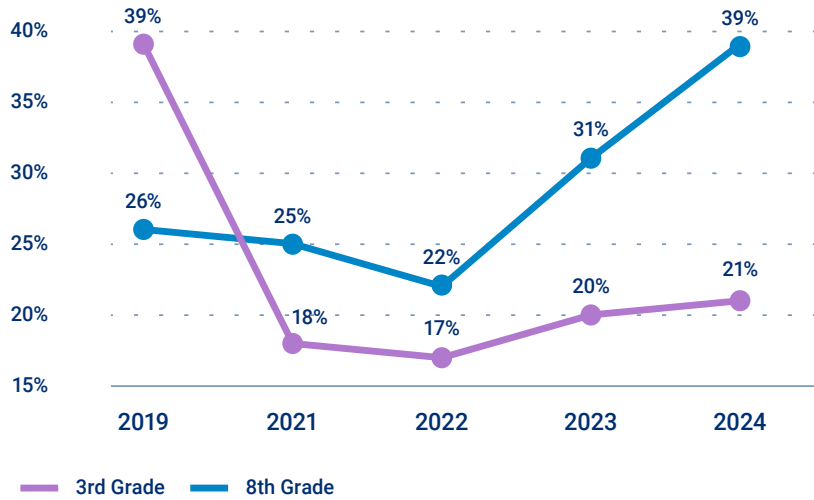
- Prior to the pandemic, almost 40% of CPS 3rd graders were proficient in reading. In 2021, the proficiency rate plummeted by 50% to less than 20%.
- Since then, 3rd graders have made some gains in reading proficiency but still lag their pre-pandemic rate at 21%.
- Similarly, 8th grade math proficiency—which was only at 24% to begin with—remains below pre-pandemic levels at 20%.

Reading scores are rebounding faster than math at both the city and state levels. In recent years, CPS students have demonstrated lower proficiency rates than their peers statewide, but there has been steady improvement.

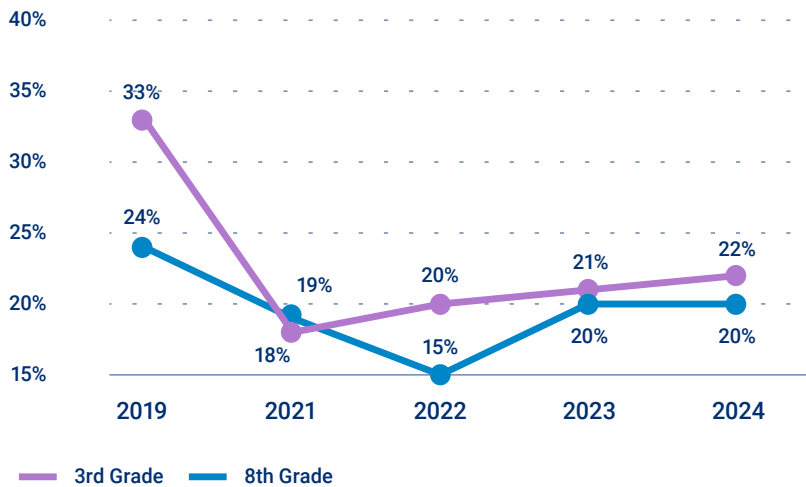
CITYWIDE READING PROFICIENCY 2019-2024

In 2024, **21%** of CPS 3rd graders and **39%** of 8th graders were proficient in reading, meaning the vast majority of students were not meeting state standards.

Eighth grade reading proficiency is a bright spot in the data; over the past five years, it has increased by **50%**.



CITYWIDE MATH PROFICIENCY 2019-2024



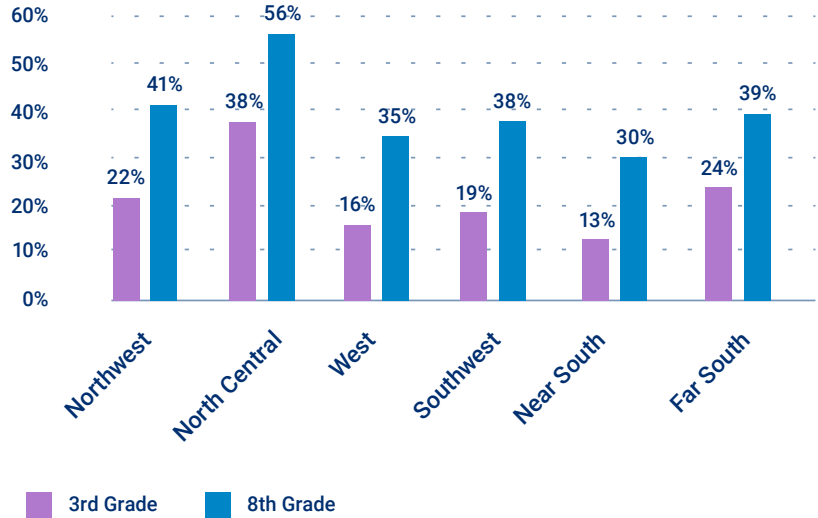
Despite progress in reading, particularly among Black students, math achievement in CPS remains far below pre-pandemic levels. In 2024, **22%** of CPS 3rd graders and **20%** of CPS 8th graders were proficient in math.

2020 data unavailable

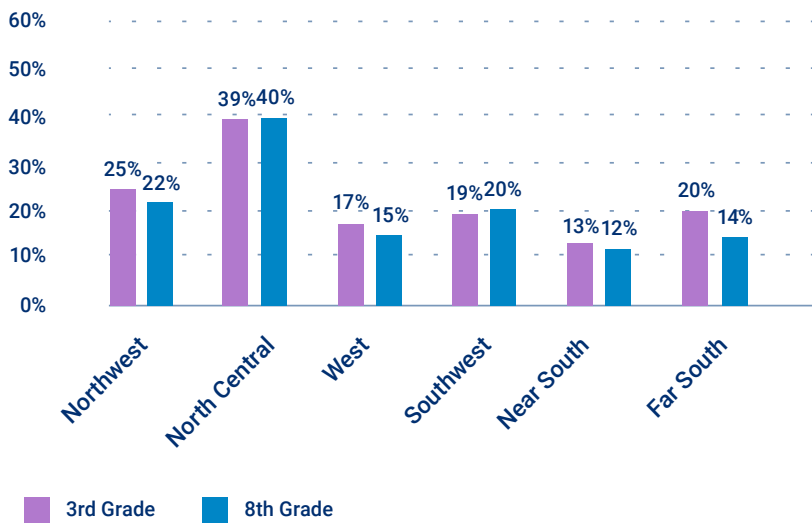


The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results for CPS students underscore how few 4th and 8th graders are proficient in math and reading. In 2024, 24% of CPS 4th graders were proficient in math and 23% were proficient in reading (statistically unchanged since 2022). For CPS 8th graders, 21% were proficient in math while 27% were proficient in reading, an increase from 2022.

2024 3RD AND 8TH GRADE READING PROFICIENCY BY REGION



2024 3RD AND 8TH GRADE MATH PROFICIENCY BY REGION



Kindergarten readiness—the proportion of youth who have adequate academic and social-emotional preparedness to succeed in kindergarten and the early grades—was up **7.5%** in 2023 (30%) compared to 2019. This positive trend means more of Chicago’s youngest residents have a stronger foundation for a robust educational journey.



★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- Third graders in the North Central region performed well in reading, with the **North Center** and **Lakeview** neighborhoods both reaching **55% proficiency**. **Mount Greenwood**, on the far Southwest side, performed best overall with **63% proficiency**.
- **North Center**, **Lincoln Park**, and **Lakeview** recorded the **highest** 8th grade math proficiency levels in the city. In 2024, **Armour Square**, on the city’s Southwest side, had the **second highest** proficiency level in the city.
- **Hermosa** has the biggest opportunity for improvement; after years of steep decline, its 3rd grade reading proficiency is **4%**, and its 8th grade math proficiency is **3%**.
- After making progress over the last couple of years, both **South Shore** (**6.4%**) and **Englewood’s** (**6.1%**) 3rd grade reading levels **declined**.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. Despite gains in recent years, 3rd grade reading and 8th grade math proficiency rates remain below pre-pandemic levels.
2. Eighth grade reading proficiency is a bright spot in the data and has increased by nearly 50% since 2019.
3. A closer look at citywide numbers shows variations in math and reading proficiency at the community and neighborhood level. The North Central region recorded the highest rates of reading proficiency for 3rd and 8th grade, while the Near South region has the most room for improvement in both areas.

INSIGHT #6 | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

CONTEXT

A high school diploma is generally required to pursue higher education or access various career opportunities.

For the purposes of this report, high school graduation is the proportion of first-time 9th graders who graduate from high school in four years, including the summer after their fourth year. The college enrollment rate examines the percentage of graduates who enroll in a two- or four-year degree program in the fall immediately after graduation.

In the 2021/22 school year, the [U.S. graduation rate](#) for public high school students was 87%. This mirrors the [Illinois high school graduation rate](#), which was 87.7% for that same year.

Statewide, [66% of students who graduated](#) with a regular high school diploma from a public high school in Illinois enrolled in a two-year or four-year college in the U.S. within 12 months after graduation.

There is a clear link between educational attainment level, employment, and future earnings. Across all sectors, workers' earnings increase as educational attainment rises, [according](#) to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2022, full-time, year-round workers aged 25 to 34 with higher levels of education earned significantly more than their peers. Those with a bachelor's degree earned 59% more than individuals whose highest level of education was a high school diploma.

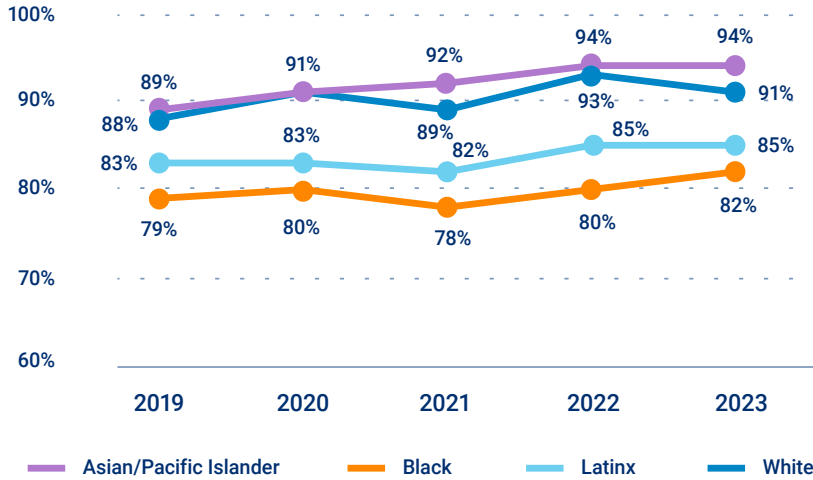
THE CHICAGO LENS

According to Census data, **87%** of Chicago residents over the age of 25 have a high school diploma, while less than half of residents (**43%**) have a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2024, CPS recorded a historic high five-year high school graduation rate of **86.5%**.

- Despite this success, in 2023 (the most recent data available), Black males graduated at the lowest rates among gender and race groups (78%) while Latinx males saw an increase from years prior to 83%.
- The CPS college enrollment rate in 2023 was **63%**, just below the historic high of **64%** in 2017.

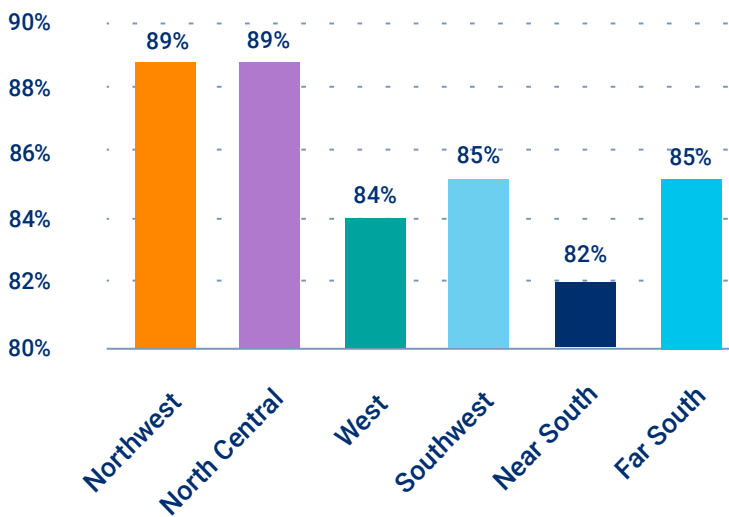
- College enrollment rates for Black students have fluctuated over the years but overall have **remained flat** since 2007, despite the increase in high school graduation rates overall.
- In contrast, Latinx high school graduates have experienced a **22%** increase in college enrollment since 2007.
- College enrollment rates are notably strong in the North Central and Northwest regions of the city (**70%**), while there is significant opportunity for growth in enrollment in the Near South (**55%**) and West (**58%**) regions.

CPS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE BY RACE (2019–2023)



2024 High School Graduation rates by race available in 2025.

CPS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE BY REGION (2023)



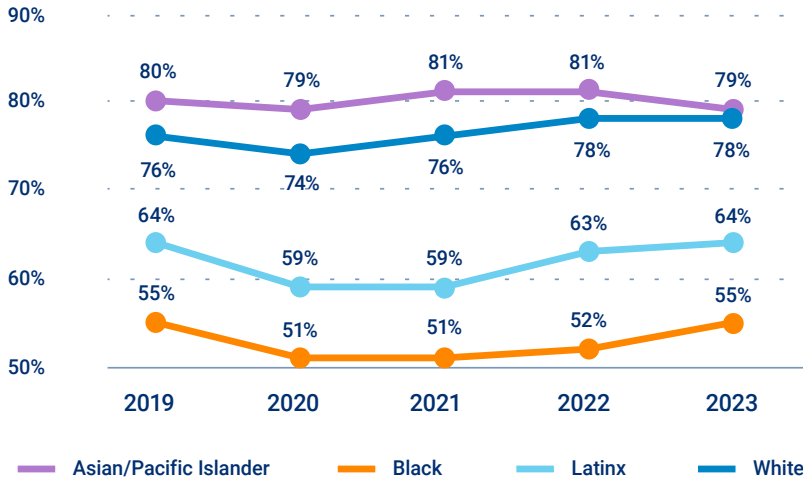
LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

More than **90%** of students in A Better Chicago’s citywide survey said schools are equipping them with skills to succeed in college. But the numbers decline when they are asked if schools are preparing them to thrive in the real world. Focus is particularly lacking in financial skills such as budgeting, investing, or starting a business.



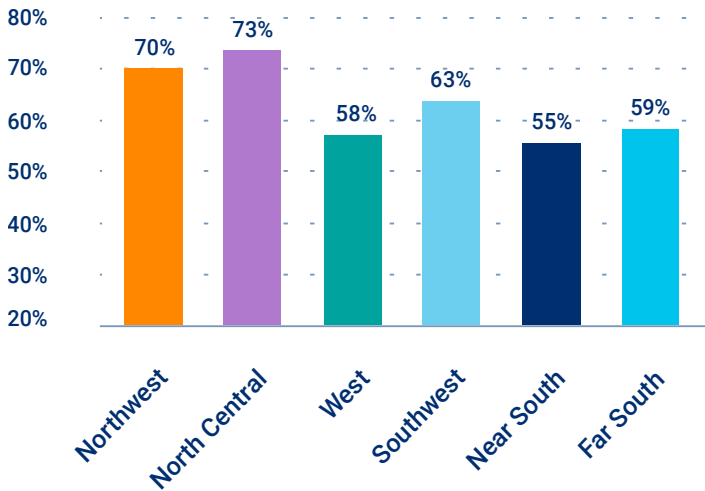
In 2024, **52%** (up **5%** from 2020) of CPS students earned Early College and Career Credentials (ECCC), including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate credits, or career certification. An increase in ECCC earned by students is associated with improved high school graduation and college enrollment rates as students are better prepared to succeed.

CPS COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATE BY RACE (2019–2023)



2024 High School Graduation rates by race available in 2025.

CPS COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATE BY REGION (2023)



★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- Despite challenges in other areas, **Fuller Park's** CPS high school graduation rate was **91%**, which is considerably higher than the citywide average of **85%**.
- **Hyde Park's** **93%** CPS high school graduation rate was its **best in five years**. It was matched by **Hegewisch**, which has made dramatic post-pandemic improvement and is the only other South Side community to reach **93%**.
- **West Englewood** is still challenged with a below-average CPS high school graduation rate (**78%**) but is **up nearly 8%** since 2019 after experiencing fluctuations during the pandemic.
- **Jefferson Park** has shown strong **improvement** over the last five years and posted a **95%** CPS graduation rate in 2023.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. CPS has recently recorded record-high graduation and college enrollment rates, an encouraging trend.
2. While high school graduation and college enrollment rates among Black male students have improved, they have not seen the same growth as their peers in both areas.
3. Communities in the city's Far South, Near South, and West Side regions have the greatest potential for improving high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

INSIGHT #7 | COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

CONTEXT

Community-based programming, also known as out-of-school programming, are a major part of life for youth across the country.

These programs, which can focus on STEM, literacy, tutoring, college access, mentorship, and more, play a vital role in youth development. For the nearly [8 million](#) youth who participate in out-of-school programming nationwide, they are more likely than non-participating peers to experience higher rates of academic growth, avoid risky behaviors, and are less likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence. [Research](#) consistently demonstrates that high-quality afterschool programs have a [positive impact](#) on students' educational outcomes, school attendance, and social and emotional learning.



THE CHICAGO LENS

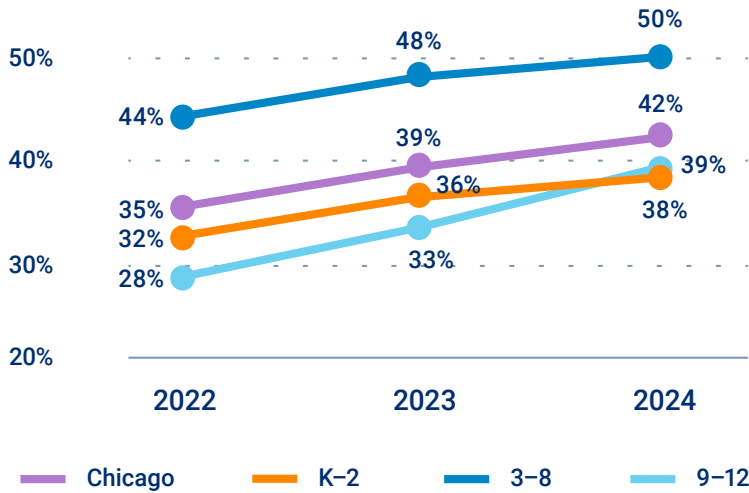
Chicago is home to hundreds of community-based programs that play a crucial role in supporting young people.

- Citywide in 2024, **42%** of CPS youth K–12 participated in out-of-school programs.
- Students in grades 3–8 were the most likely to engage in out-of-school programs (**50%**) compared to K–2 (**38%**) and high schoolers (**39%**).
- In 2024, the North Central (**46%**) and West (**42%**) regions of the city had the highest percentage of K–12 youth engaged in out-of-school programming, while the near South region has the lowest percentage (**40%**).

According to A Better Chicago's youth surveys and focus groups, there are two unmistakable takeaways that demonstrate the impact of community-based programs:

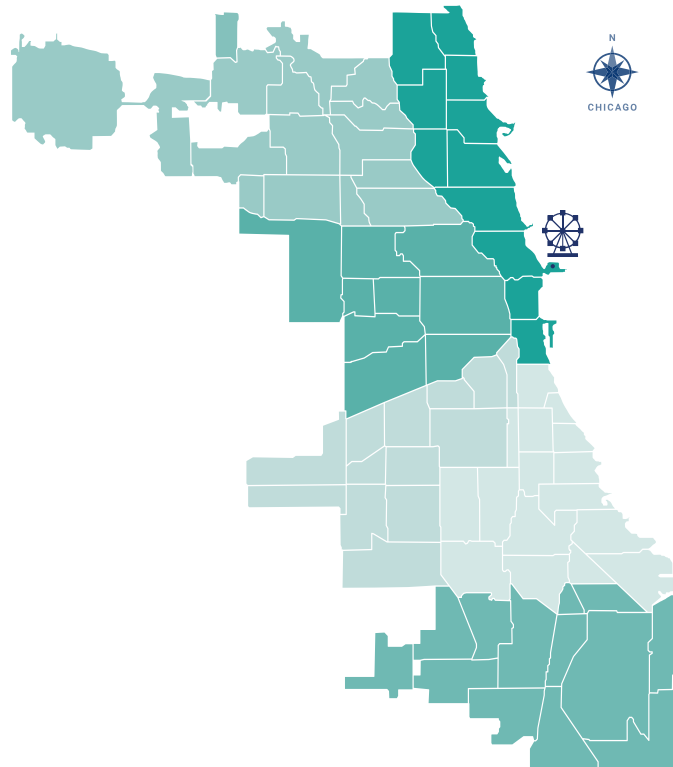
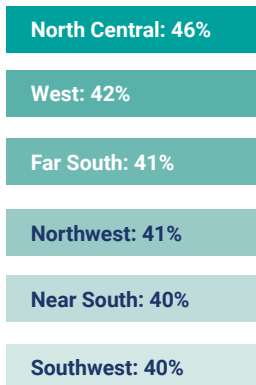
- **First, there is an overwhelming desire among youth of all ages and races to see an expansion of community-based programs**, with many wanting more opportunities to engage after school and on weekends.
- Second, these programs are having a [positive impact](#) on young people, with most believing involvement helps address their social and emotional needs and keeps them out of trouble.

PERCENTAGE OF CPS K-12 STUDENTS ENGAGED IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING



Since 2022, the percentage of CPS high school students participating in out-of-school programs has increased by **50%**, from **28%** to **39%**. In A Better Chicago’s survey, youth who participate in community-based programs were more likely to plan to attend college and aspire to a four-year degree.

CPS STUDENTS ENGAGED IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMMING BY REGION



Other findings include:

- Youth who participate in community programs are **9% more likely to be very optimistic about their future (65%)**, compared to those who do not participate in these programs (56%).
- Youth are **more likely to plan to pursue a four-year degree** after high school (62%) compared to those not active in community-based programs (44%).
- Youth view **community programs and activities as a violence prevention strategy**. They believe these programs help deter their peers from committing violence, and view them as a tool to keep them busy and out of trouble.
- Black and Latinx youth are more likely than white youth to call for **more job training programs**—though Black youth also show high desire for recreational programs and tutoring.
- Students said they needed **more tailored, individualized academic support** that accommodates diverse learning styles.
- Students who attend **private schools reported greater access**, both in and out of school, to academic tutoring and programs that prepare them for college and careers.



★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- **Fuller Park (77%), Calumet Heights (63%), Douglas (56%), and North Center (54%)** have the highest rate of students engaged in out-of-school programming, substantially outpacing the city-wide average (42%).
- **Englewood (28%), Hyde Park (26%), and Archer Heights (24%)**, all on the city’s South side, have the lowest rate.
- In 2024, **Kenwood, Douglas, North Park, Chatham, and Uptown** all recorded double-digit increases compared to recent years.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1. Community-based programs are having a positive impact on Chicago youth; those who participate report being more optimistic about the future and are more likely to plan to earn a four-year college degree.
2. Youth of all ages and races overwhelmingly want more community programs focusing on a wide range of skills, and they want additional access to programs available after school and over weekends.
3. These programs equip youth with valuable life skills they believe schools aren’t teaching. Youth report these programs deter their peers from engaging in violence or becoming its target.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this report provide actionable, strategic direction for resource allocation, partnership opportunities, and targeted investments in high-need Chicago communities.

In order to **holistically** support youth development, there must be better **coordination** of existing resources and collaboration **across sectors**.

Despite real budget concerns and other environmental constraints, additional investments to expand services for young people must be a priority. Resources should be marshalled towards initiatives in the **Far South, Near South, and West side communities** that have faced systemic inequities for far too long.

Specific recommendations include:

INCREASE ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

- High dosage tutoring programs have shown promise as an effective way to **improve math and reading proficiency rates**.
 - Third grade literacy and 8th grade math should be prioritized for support.
- Focus on initiatives that **boost high school and college enrollment**, such as college access organizations that establish school partnerships.
 - Improving Black male outcomes should be a priority.
- Target **chronic absenteeism** to keep students connected to their learning environment.
 - Interventions including early warning systems and structured mentorship programs appear to have a positive impact on school attendance.
- Invest in programs that directly work to **reduce housing instability and food insecurity**.
 - More initiatives that bring support to students experiencing poverty and homelessness are needed.

INVEST IN MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

- Mental health concerns are a major issue for Chicago's youth, yet a majority surveyed never received services themselves.
 - **Increased access to mental health support** is critical for young people to thrive.
- Greater investments in initiatives that address trauma and prevent further harm are needed to keep youth engaged in their education.
 - **Restorative justice and trauma-informed** programs should be prioritized.
- Youth are calling for an increased focus on **social and emotional skill building** to help navigate the challenges they face.

EXPAND THE REACH AND CAPACITY OF COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

- Youth of all ages and races overwhelmingly want **more access to programs in their communities**.
 - After school and weekend programming is critical for keeping young people engaged.
- Expand community-based programs, specifically in under-resourced communities.
 - Those who participate are more likely to have an optimistic outlook on their future and have a **plan to pursue a four-year college degree**.
- Programming should focus on skills training; internship and job opportunities; initiatives that help students get scholarships and apply to college; and training that builds professional and social skills.

A BETTER CHICAGO

A Better Chicago is changing how Chicago fights poverty by investing in bold ideas that create opportunity for youth. Since its founding in 2010, we have provided more than \$83 million in unrestricted funding and management support to help the nonprofits in our portfolio succeed. These organizations are chosen based on their potential to serve crucial unmet needs—and to grow exponentially. Often, they are run by local leaders who live or grew up in the communities they serve.

ABOUT THE YOUTH OPPORTUNITY DASHBOARD

A Better Chicago's [Youth Opportunity Dashboard](#) is a comprehensive tool designed to support decision-making among city leaders, policymakers, philanthropists and youth advocates.

The dashboard is sourced from publicly available data including the U.S. Census, Illinois State Board of Education, Chicago Public Schools, the University of Chicago To&Through Project and other local and state entities.

It is organized around six milestones that form the framework of the Obama Foundation's My Brother's Keeper Alliance.

Dashboard data is updated continuously, and can be broken down by community area, elected school board district, and Health Equity Zone.

By visualizing trends in outcomes, the Youth Opportunity Dashboard helps identify opportunities for investment to ensure youth in Chicago can reach their full potential. Thank you to Crown Family Philanthropies, the Joyce Foundation, and Crankstart for supporting the creation and implementation of this tool.

ABOUT THE YOUTH SURVEYS AND FOCUS GROUPS

A Better Chicago, in partnership with Global Strategy Group (GSG), conducted a survey of 400 Chicago youth ages 10–24 in July 2024. Census data was used to ensure a sample that is representative of the population. The survey asked youth about a range of topics including education, their futures, community violence, mental health, and their general well-being. Some questions also include trend data from a similar online survey of Chicago youth that A Better Chicago and GSG conducted in August 2023 to track change over time. The accompanying focus groups were conducted in October of 2024.

*Thank you to A Better Chicago's
donors and partners.*

For more information, contact

info@abetterchicago.org

ABetterChicago.org

