



STATE OF  
OUR YOUTH  
2026

A BETTER  
CHICAGO

# LETTER FROM CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER AND BOARD PRESIDENT

## Dear Friends and Partners,

At A Better Chicago, we believe alleviating poverty begins with creating opportunity for young people. We are the city's only venture philanthropy, raising and pooling capital to invest in the most promising nonprofits serving youth across Chicago. Since 2010, we have deployed more than \$50 million in unrestricted funding and hands-on support to help organizations expand their reach to more than 60,000 youth and deepen the impact of their programs—from early literacy and mentoring to college access and workforce pathways.

Chicago is a city of extraordinary promise, and the trajectory of our city is inseparable from the future of its young people—nearly 800,000 under age 25. Yet, opportunity remains out of reach for far too many youth, especially those in Black and Latinx communities on the South and West Sides. Longstanding inequities and under-resourced systems, compounded by the pandemic and ongoing social, economic and political pressures, continue to shape young people's lives in uneven ways.

For the second year, A Better Chicago's State of Our Youth report brings together public data with the lived experiences of our city's young people shared through surveys and focus groups. In 2025, 95% of youth told us they feel optimistic about their futures. That hope is powerful, but it cannot erase the barriers too many of them face, including poverty, violence, housing instability, and growing mental health challenges. These barriers are not abstract—they show up in classrooms every day.

Staying engaged in school remains one of the strongest predictors of long-term success and a pathway to a family-sustaining wage. That is why, through our new [Every Day Counts initiative](#), we are focused on strengthening attendance and belonging—helping ensure more students are present in school, connected to peers and trusted adults, and

supported by their communities. With a minimum \$10 million commitment over the next five years, we are investing in innovative community-led solutions, developed alongside school leaders and educators. We are directing these efforts to at-risk elementary students and already chronically absent high school students in Austin, Englewood, Garfield Park, South Lawndale, South Shore, and Woodlawn—Chicago neighborhoods where chronic absenteeism remains high. Focused investment and coordinated action can make a meaningful difference and accelerate the work already being done by committed local partners to support families and youth in these communities.

The challenges facing our youth are significant, but they are not insurmountable. Chicago's young people are ambitious and resilient, and they are clear about what they need: safe spaces, trusted adults, strong schools, and real pathways to opportunity.

Every year we wait is a year a young person doesn't get back. For 16 years, A Better Chicago's work has been rooted in partnership—with nonprofits, donors, community leaders, government agencies, and policymakers—and that commitment has never been more urgent. We invite you to join us, to invest boldly and collaborate deeply, so that every young person in our city has the opportunity to thrive.

With gratitude,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth Swanson".

Beth Swanson  
CEO



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Beard".

Steve Beard  
Chair, Board of Directors

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

The State of Our Youth report starts with a demographic overview that provides a “by the numbers” snapshot of Chicago’s youth. It then highlights seven key insights that together show how young people are doing across key stages of development. The report ends with recommendations for how we, together, can better support Chicago’s youth from cradle to career.

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 Summer 2025. The online survey of 400 youth, ages 10–24, was followed by three focus groups conducted with youth affiliated with organizations in A Better Chicago’s portfolio.
- Research and insights from publicly available studies, partner organizations, and more.



**Chicago’s young people  
are ambitious and resilient,  
and they are clear about  
what they need...**



# KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM:** Chronic absenteeism continues to be a critical barrier to learning and one of the most pressing challenges facing Chicago youth. Just over 40% of CPS students missed more than 10% of the 2025 school year. Absenteeism spikes at key transition points—particularly from 8th to 9th grade and again in 12th grade as students prepare for life after high school.

***Why it matters:** Students must be present in school to access academic, social-emotional, and enrichment supports. Addressing absenteeism is foundational to every other strategy in this report.*

- 2 POVERTY:** Nearly one in four Chicago youth under age 18 lives in poverty. Children experiencing poverty are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent and often face compounding challenges, including food insecurity and housing instability. In communities with limited resources, missed instructional time can have lasting consequences.

***Why it matters:** Reducing poverty-related barriers is essential to improving attendance and keeping students connected to school.*

- 3 SAFETY AND BELONGING:** Community violence remains a daily reality for many Chicago youth, with nearly one in four reporting that they witness violence weekly. In addition, fears related to immigration enforcement and deportation—particularly within Hispanic/Latinx communities—have disrupted students’ sense of safety and stability. When young people feel unsafe in their neighborhoods or uncertain about their families’ stability, their engagement in school is affected.

***Why it matters:** Students are more likely to attend and engage in school when they feel safe and supported both inside and outside the classroom.*

- 4 MENTAL HEALTH:** Ninety-five percent of youth surveyed say mental health is a serious issue affecting their peers. Anxiety, depression, and stress are influencing students’ ability to focus, engage, and consistently attend school. While access to school-based mental health supports has increased, gaps remain—particularly for Black and Latinx youth who face disproportionate barriers to care.

***Why it matters:** Strengthening school connectedness and expanding culturally responsive mental health services are critical to improving both attendance and academic outcomes.*

- 5 MEETING BENCHMARKS IN READING AND MATH:** Reading and math proficiency rates in CPS are just now returning to or exceeding pre-pandemic levels, with notable gains in both 3rd and 8th grade reading since 2022. However, the majority of students still fall short of grade-level proficiency in key transition years. Academic recovery remains uneven across communities.

***Why it matters:** Early literacy and middle-grade math are pivotal milestones. Students who are present, supported, and proficient are more likely to graduate prepared for success in high school, college, career, and life.*

- 6 OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS AND SPACES:** Chicago youth rely on out-of-school and community-based programs as safe spaces for connection, skill-building, and mentorship. Young people involved in out-of-school programs report higher optimism about their futures and greater aspirations for four-year college degrees.

***Why it matters:** Expanding access to high-quality community-based programs supports belonging, reinforces attendance, and equips youth with the tools to thrive.*

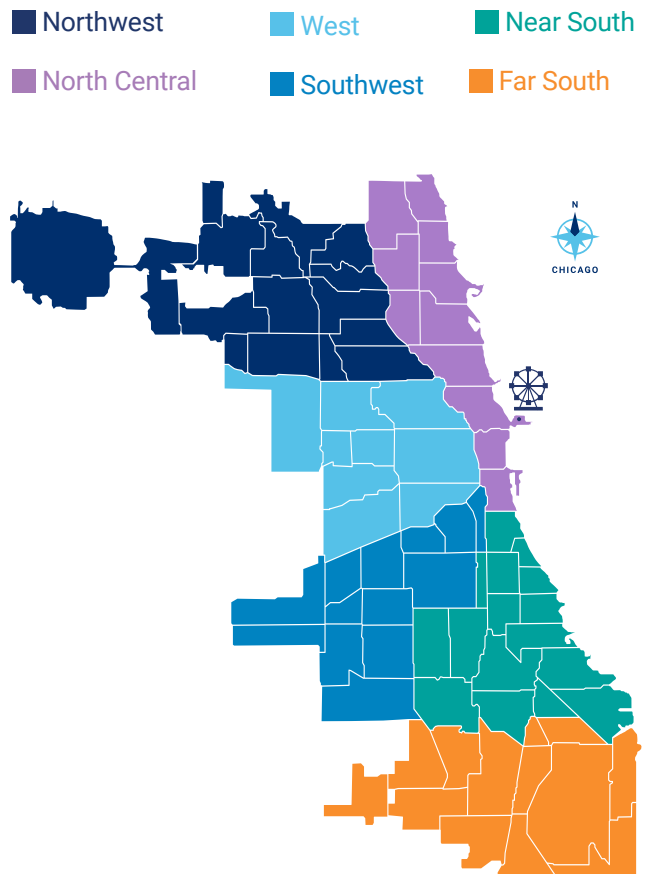
- 7 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT:** CPS continues to demonstrate strong high school graduation and college enrollment rates. However, disparities persist, particularly for Black male students, who show the greatest potential for improvement in both areas.

***Why it matters:** Closing equity gaps in high school graduation and college enrollment rates is essential to ensuring long-term economic mobility for all Chicago students.*

# 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

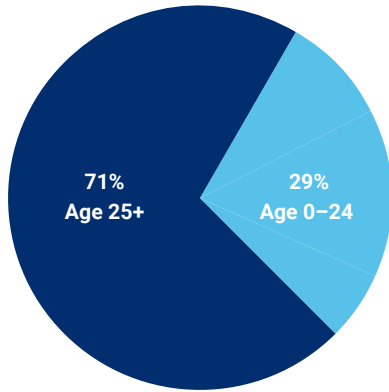
## Near South

- 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

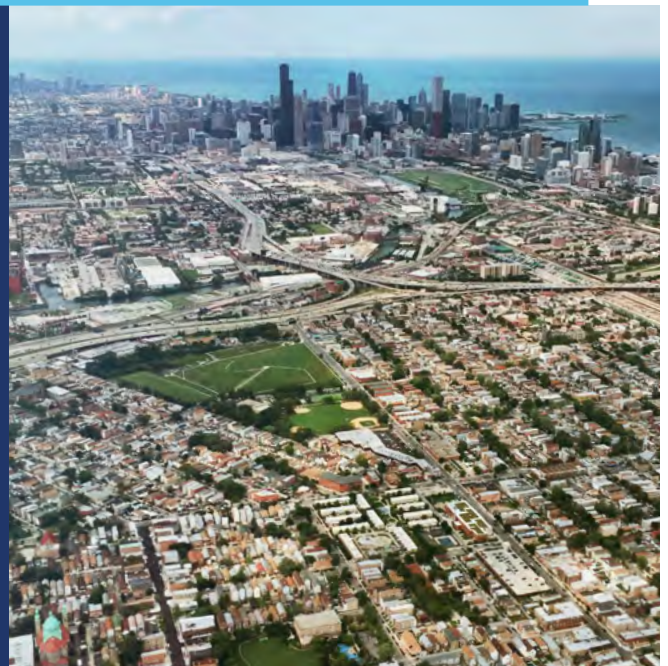
# CHICAGO YOUTH BY THE NUMBERS



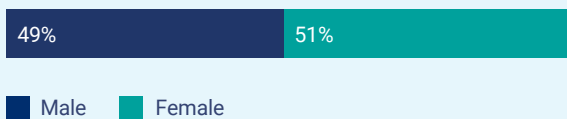
## POPULATION AND AGE

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—19.4% are under 18 and 5.3% are under the age of five.

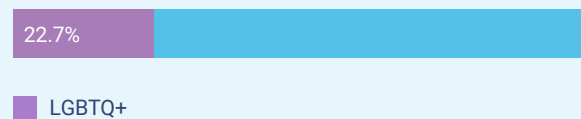
- There are over 1 million total households.
- The North Central region of the city has the largest number of young people under the age of 25 (167,015), while the Southwest region has the highest percentage of its population under age 25 (136,555), making up 34% of its residents.
- Out of all Chicago neighborhoods, Austin is home to the largest number of youth (33,008), representing just under 4% of the total youth population in Chicago.
- Riverdale has the highest percentage of youth ages 0–24, with 53% of its population comprising young people.



## GENDER



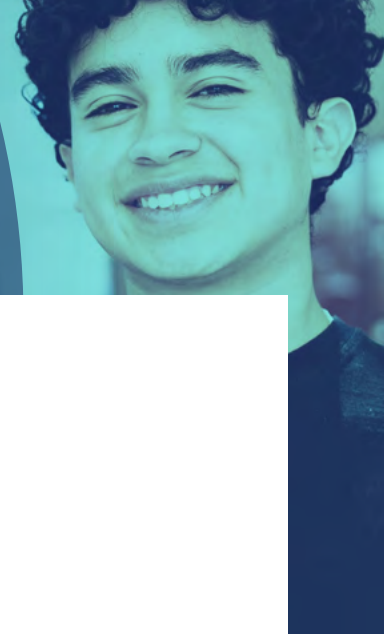
## SEXUAL ORIENTATION



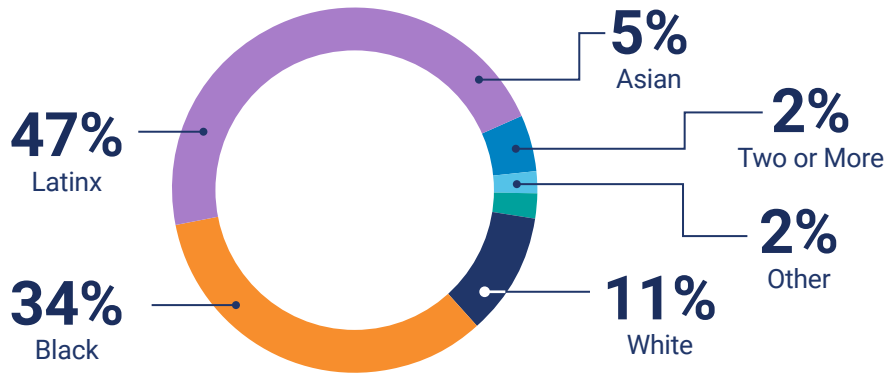
22.7% of CPS students identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning (LGBTQ+).

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.

About one quarter (**22.7%**) of Chicago youth 0-18 live in poverty.

Poverty is experienced disproportionately across racial groups and geographic regions in Chicago. The Near South region continues to have the highest poverty rate (**28%**) and the highest rate is among the Black population (**81%**), while the Northwest region has the lowest poverty rate (**11%**) and the lowest Black population (**3%**).



## LANDSCAPE

During the 2024-2025 school year, 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.

<p><b>74%</b></p> <p>of CPS students come from low-income households</p>	<p><b>16%</b></p> <p>(41k) are students with disabilities</p>	<p><b>28%</b></p> <p>are English learners</p>
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**Over one-third (35.4%)** 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 | CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

## Context

Chronic absenteeism—defined as a student missing 10% of the school year—has emerged as one of the most persistent post-pandemic challenges for schools across the United States. Before the pandemic, roughly 15% of students were chronically absent during the 2018-19 school year. Following the pandemic, that number rose sharply, peaking at 25% percent during the 2022–23 school year—an increase of about 66% over pre-pandemic rates. An estimated 22% of public school students nationwide were chronically absent during the 2024–2025 school year.

Nationally, chronic absenteeism begins early, with an estimated 24.6% of students in kindergarten through grade 3 chronically absent in 2025, which is associated with lower math and reading performance in 1st grade. Poor attendance makes it less likely that a student will read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade.

Frequent absences—even in early grades—are a serious impediment to academic success. Children living in poverty are especially at risk, as their families and communities often lack the resources to help them catch up.

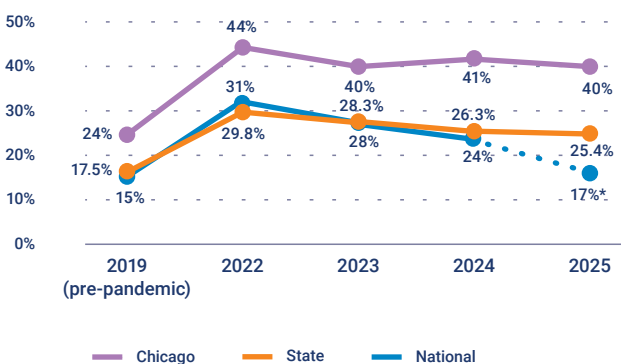
Chronic absenteeism can signal an increased risk of dropping out of school as early as 6th grade. For example, in the Baltimore City Public Schools system, students who were chronically absent in the 6th grade graduated from high school within one

year of their expected graduation year at a rate of just 36.3%. In high school, missing just one week per semester as a freshman reduces the likelihood of graduation by more than 20%.

Research shows that even students with strong attendance records are affected when their classmates are frequently absent. Teachers often must repeat or review lessons so all students can move forward, slowing progress for the entire class.

School climate, including safety, belonging, trust, and positive relationships among students, teachers, and families, is strongly linked to student attendance. Measures of a positive school climate, such as supportive peer and adult relationships and a sense of safety, are associated with higher attendance and lower rates of absenteeism.

**ABSENTEEISM TRENDS FOR NATIONAL, ILLINOIS, AND CHICAGO YOUTH**



\*Rand Data for US, and includes only a partial year.



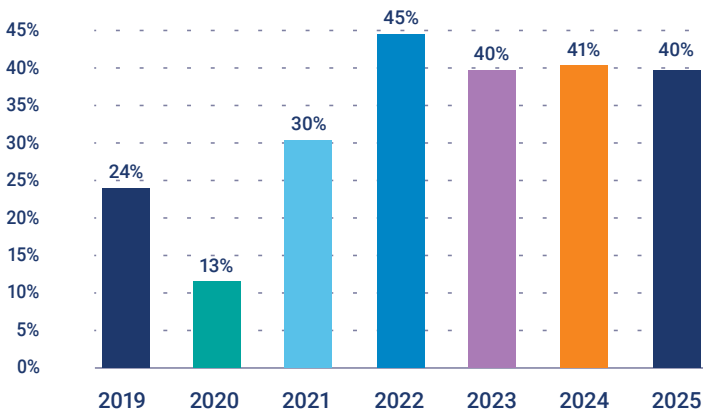
## Chicago Lens

In Chicago, principals responding to the Chicago Public Education Fund’s annual engagement [survey](#) identified “chronic student absenteeism” as the top factor impacting their schools—ranking it above even budgetary concerns. Sixty percent of principals and 51% of assistant principals report that absenteeism is significantly affecting their school communities.

A January 2026 [study](#) from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that absenteeism has a measurable impact on learning: the more school days students miss, the lower their test scores and grades. The study also highlights the importance of “relational trust,” finding higher attendance in Chicago Public Schools where students reported strong relationships with teachers and peers, and where teachers reported positive relationships with parents.

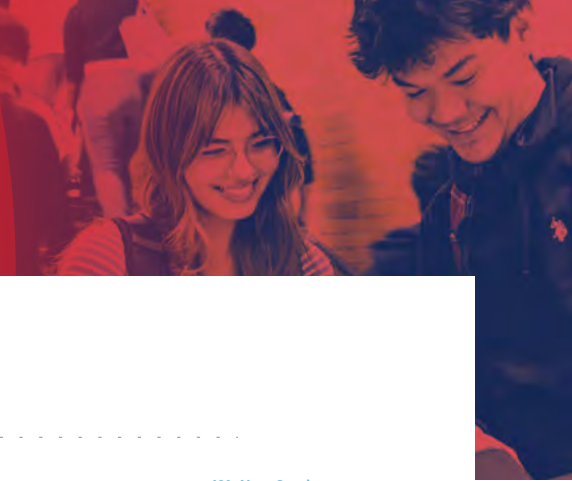


## CITYWIDE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATE

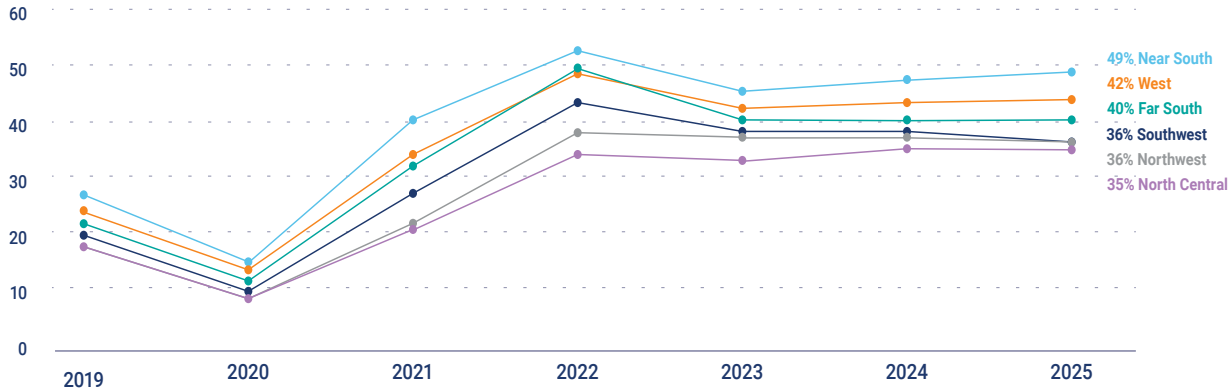


Chicago mirrors national trends, but the scale of the challenge locally remains acute. Chronic absenteeism in Chicago spiked after the pandemic and remains elevated. In 2019, 24% of Chicago Public School students were chronically absent. In 2022, the rate peaked at nearly 45%. By 2025, it had declined to 40%—a slight improvement from 41% in 2024.

# INSIGHT #1 | CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

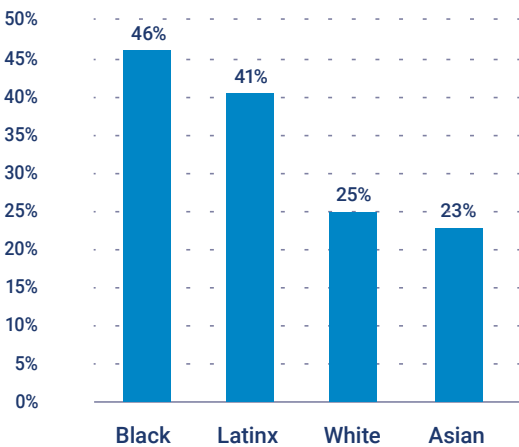


## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY REGION 2019–2025



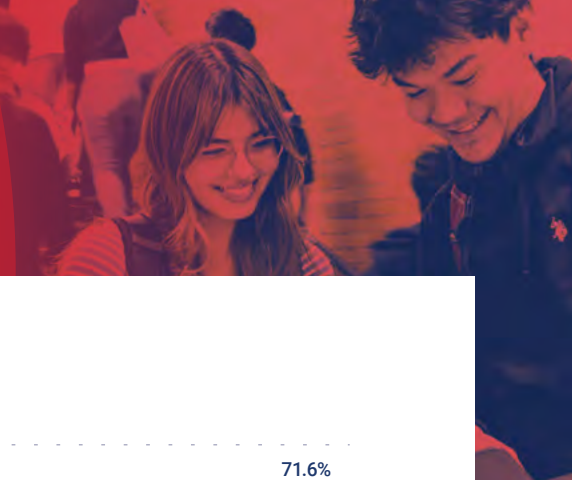
Since COVID, chronic absenteeism has increased by more than 20% citywide, with some regions nearly doubling their pre-pandemic rates. In response, CPS district leaders, school communities, and local partners have implemented targeted strategies to improve attendance, and early data suggests incremental progress. From 2023 to 2025, all regions of the city except the Near South have seen modest declines in chronic absenteeism.

## 2025 CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY RACE

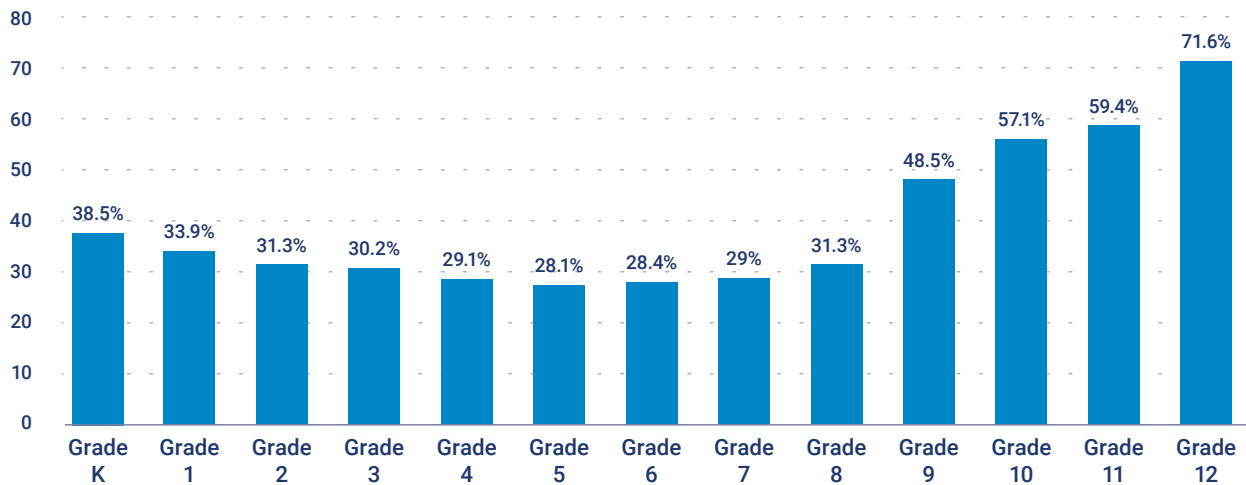


Chronic absenteeism rates vary widely by race





## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY GRADE LEVEL

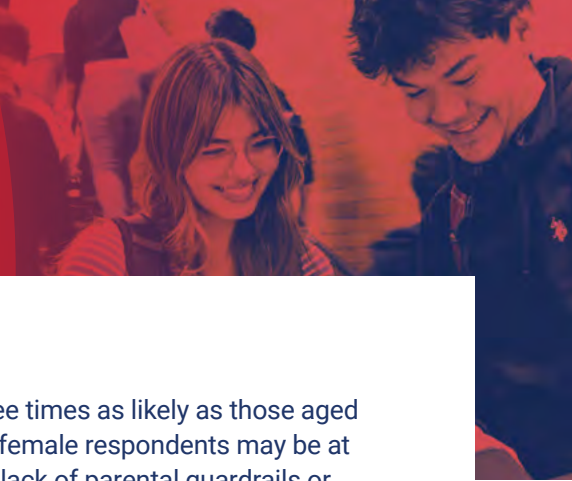


Data shows that chronic absenteeism increases during key transition points, particularly between 8th and 9th grade and again in 12th grade as students prepare for life after high school. In contrast, absenteeism rates in elementary school show no consistent pattern, suggesting that the factors driving absences among younger students may differ and be more localized to individual schools or circumstances.

### ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- Absenteeism rates remain highest in the Near South and West regions of the city, and lowest in the North Central region. Black and Latinx youth in these regions are disproportionately affected.
- In 2025, nearly two-thirds of Chicago's community areas saw year-over-year declines in chronic absenteeism, with improvements exceeding 5% in West Elsdon and Rogers Park. The largest year-over-year increase was observed in Kenwood, located in Chicago's Near South region.
- Fuller Park, Douglas, South Shore, Woodlawn, and Archer Heights have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, while Edison Park, Forest Glen, and Armour Square have the lowest. Fuller Park and Armour Square sit directly next to one another on the map, yet fall on opposite ends of the spectrum in absenteeism rates.





## Youth Voice

In A Better Chicago's youth survey, overall, respondents aged 15–19 were three times as likely as those aged 10–14 to report that they often miss school, with data suggesting that Latina female respondents may be at elevated risk. In both the survey and focus groups, little sense of belonging, a lack of parental guardrails or engagement, and transportation access (including concerns about safety) also surfaced as leading reasons students miss school.

### TOP REASONS YOUTH BELIEVE THEIR PEERS MISS SCHOOL

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

Source: A Better Chicago's Youth Survey

### TOP REASONS YOUTH ATTEND SCHOOL

- 1 Enjoy learning
- 2 Learning meaningful content
- 3 Being with friends
- 4 Positive environment
- 5 Safe place to be

Source: A Better Chicago's Youth Survey

## In Their Own Words

*"Probably my coaches [are who I trust the most], because we're around each other every day at some point, so I just have a building trust with them and I feel like I can tell them anything and they would help me and I trust them."*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR

*"One of my friends, that I know that skips school... He just stays home from school because he doesn't like to go to school... We do the same thing every day. I don't know why you don't want to come back."*

—HIGH SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"I think they're in an environment that they don't think suits them. They don't think they belong there, so they lack the sense of belonging, and they're like, 'I just belong in my bed at home in my specific community area.'"*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Students must be present in school to access academic, social-emotional, and enrichment supports. Addressing absenteeism is foundational to every other strategy in this report.

# INSIGHT #2 | POVERTY

## Context

Growing up in poverty can have a cascading effect, shaping nearly every aspect of a young person's life. Nationally, U.S. Census data shows that approximately one in six children—16%—live in families with incomes below the official poverty line. For a family of four in the 48 contiguous states, that means a household income at or below \$32,150 in 2025.

Poverty is [associated](#) with homelessness, food insecurity, and limited access to stable childcare, and research links it to negative cognitive, emotional, and health-related outcomes. Children [exposed](#) to poverty in the first five years of life, a critical period for brain development, often enter kindergarten significantly behind their peers. Food insecurity and poor health can make it difficult for young children to focus and learn, and students living in poverty are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent from school.

Poverty and homelessness are closely intertwined, creating significant social, emotional, and academic challenges. Students experiencing homelessness

are defined as those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. In Chicago, high school [students experiencing homelessness for the first time](#) saw an average GPA decline of about 0.46%, missed 6.6 more instructional days than peers in stable housing, and were less likely to graduate within five years. Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) data indicates that chronic absenteeism among Chicago Public Schools students experiencing homelessness exceeded 50% during the 2024–25 school year—this compares with 40% citywide.

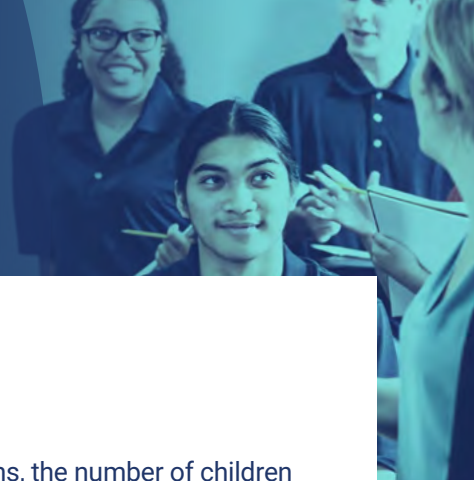
## Chicago Lens

Nearly one in four Chicagoans under age 18 lives in [poverty](#)—a rate that underscores the scale of economic hardship facing families across the city. For Chicago's youngest residents (age 0–5), that figure is as high as 90% in some neighborhoods.

Census data further indicates that just over 40% of youth under 18 live in households receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI), cash public assistance income, or SNAP benefits. In addition, nearly three-quarters of CPS students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, which is based on family income and household size. These students may also be living in substitute care or in families receiving other forms of public assistance. While these measures capture different dimensions of economic hardship, together, they illustrate the breadth of financial instability affecting Chicago's children.

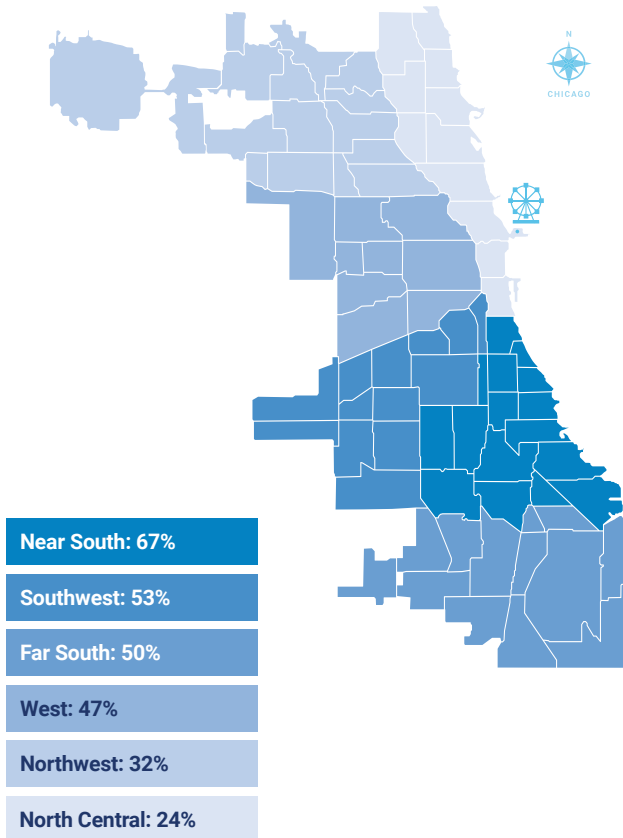


# INSIGHT #2 | POVERTY



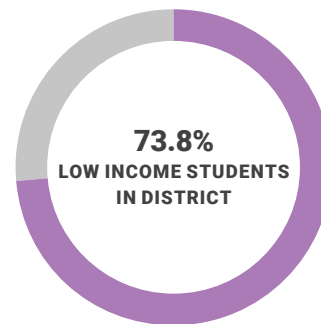
## PERCENT OF CHICAGO YOUTH (AGES 0–5) EXPERIENCING POVERTY

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



For the youngest Chicagoans, the number of children living in poverty is even higher: almost 45% of residents aged 0–5 live in households earning less than 200% of the federal poverty line. For a family of four in the 48 contiguous states, that means a household income at or below \$64,300 in 2025.

## LOW INCOME STUDENTS



Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) data indicates that approximately 5% of Chicago Public Schools students are considered homeless because they do not have permanent or adequate homes.

### ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- In 2024, the Near South region saw the highest percentage of youth ages 0–5 living in poverty at 67%, where 81% of residents are Black.
- In some neighborhoods, Riverdale, Greater Grand Crossing and Pullman—for example, the percentage of youth 0–5 living in poverty is considerably higher than the citywide average and ranges between 80–92%.
- In every region of Chicago, homelessness was higher in 2025 than before the pandemic.
- More than 9% of youth attending schools in both the West and Near South regions experienced homelessness in 2025. In Avalon Park (23%), West Garfield Park (18%) , and North Lawndale (18%), the percentage is even higher.
- Fuller Park in the city’s Near South region and Burnside in the Far South region have seen a promising decrease in the youth homelessness rate over the past few years. In 2025, the rate in Fuller Park was 7.8%, down from a high of 14.1% in 2022. In Burnside, the rate declined from 10.4% in 2022 to 4.4% in 2025.



## Youth Voice

In the survey and focus groups conducted by A Better Chicago during summer 2025:

- Fifty-seven percent of Chicago youth indicated that income is a major problem for people their age, and 49% said the same about housing instability. Two-thirds reported that these factors have a major impact on mental health and overall well-being.

At the same time, young Chicagoans shared that they see the city as offering strong opportunities for jobs, networks, and success—and they are actively seeking tools and resources needed to prepare them for real life.

- A strong majority (79%) said they would like to see more programs that help students secure scholarships, obtain financial aid, and apply for colleges.
- Youth also expressed a desire for practical financial skills, including how to budget, save and invest. More than half (52%) believe schools are not placing enough emphasis on these skills.

## In Their Own Words

*"I feel like we can have programs that just can help people learn, like how to teach, how to save money, how to spend money, spending their money on the right things at the right time..."*

—HIGH SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"I would say there is a gap between like different neighborhoods, maybe due to like wealth or like race... even being at the same school there are still gaps within like how much access to tutoring or resources one has."*

—MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR

*"I think it kind of goes down more to like the environment that people grow up in, like I know, going into like the deeper parts of the South side. There's a lot of like I guess, rundown buildings, and like trash on the roads and stuff, and compared to like the North side, it's like a way different area. And I think that in itself kind of like demotivates the people who live there, and it kind of puts them into this like state of mind that this is who they are, and this is what they deserve, and this is what they'll never get out of."*

—MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR



## THE BOTTOM LINE

Reducing poverty-related barriers is essential to improving attendance and keeping students connected to school.

# INSIGHT #3 | SAFETY AND BELONGING

## Context

Today, more than ever, schools and communities must be both physically and emotionally safe for students—environments that support students and foster a strong sense of belonging.

[Research](#) from the Fordham Institute finds that a positive school environment—including not only physical safety, but also clear rules, a sense of belonging, and positive parent-teacher relations—is associated with lower rates of student absenteeism.

Each year, approximately 60% of U.S. youth [report](#) exposure to violence—either as witnesses or victims, and more than 85% of urban youth report witnessing community violence at some point in their lives.

Research shows that these experiences are associated with negative impacts on social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development.

[According](#) to the University of Illinois Chicago School of Medicine, living in communities where violence is common can take a sustained toll on young people's physical and emotional health.

Beginning in fall 2025, enhanced deportation activity and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids affected young people's sense of safety in communities and schools across the country.

[Media reports](#) documented ICE activity in residential areas near schools, prompting some school officials to enact “soft lockdowns.” Educators and community leaders publicly raised concerns about the impact on students' sense of security and daily routines.

Research conducted in fall 2025 by the [EdWeek Research Center](#) found that, among educators working with immigrant families, half reported that students had expressed fear or anxiety this school year due to federal immigration enforcement efforts. Among those educators, 75% said it interfered with student learning “some” or “a lot.” Twenty-four percent reported reduced student attendance, and an equal share said students were distracted or less engaged in class.

## Chicago Lens

In 2025, the City of Chicago recorded double-digit decreases across every major category of crime and violence, marking the safest year since the 1960s. This progress reflects meaningful investments in community safety and prevention. Yet, despite falling crime rates, perceptions of safety remain uneven, with significant disparities in reported fear of crime. And, while violent crime rates in Chicago continue to decline, the city's [homicide rates](#) remain significantly higher than that of other major U.S. cities, including New York and Los Angeles, and violence remains a consistent reality for many Chicago youth.

A 2024 report by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research [found](#) that students living near a homicide experienced declines in attendance, lower standardized test scores and grade

point averages, and were more likely to have behavioral incidents reported and face suspension or expulsion following a homicide in their neighborhood.

The 2024 Illinois Youth Survey, conducted biennially by the Illinois Department of Human Services, provides additional insight into how students perceive safety and belonging. Among 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade public and private school students in Chicago:

- More than half of 10th graders (52%) and more than two-thirds of 8th (63%) and 12th (64%) graders agreed with the statement, “I feel safe in my school.”
- Nearly two-thirds of 8th (64%), 10th (60%), and 12th (66%) graders agreed that “I feel close to people at this school.”

## INSIGHT #3 | SAFETY AND BELONGING

At the same time, external factors can influence students' sense of safety and belonging. In fall 2025, increased federal immigration and deportation activity throughout the Chicago region affected students' perceptions of safety and belonging in their schools and communities. While there were no confirmed instances of enforcement activity inside Chicago Public Schools during the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Operation Midway Blitz during the fall of 2025, the *Chicago Sun-Times* [reported](#) that between October 20 and mid-December 2025, CPS officials issued more than 100 parent communications and fielded nearly 200 calls for assistance from school leaders reporting ICE activity near schools. Reports included staging in school parking lots, appearing at elementary school soccer games, and detaining individuals on or near school grounds or where students could see them.

In response, some principals moved recess indoors, canceled after-school activities, or implemented other precautions to protect students and staff. Teachers reported disruptions to learning, noting that some students appeared distracted, frequently glancing at classroom doors or expressing concern about family members.



### ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- In 2024, the West and Near South regions experienced higher incidents of violent crime, along with the city's highest levels of chronic absenteeism.
- Austin—the neighborhood home to the largest number of youth—recorded the highest number of violent crime and homicide incidents in 2024.
- School safety emerged as the top operational or system-wide priority for the next CEO/Superintendent in a [survey](#) conducted as part of the Chicago Board of Education's search for the district's next leader. However, perspectives varied by geography. In CPS Board District 2B, which includes neighborhoods on the city's far Northeast Side, only one in five respondents rated school safety as a top priority. In contrast, nearly half of respondents in nearby District 3—which includes Humboldt Park and Logan Square—identified school safety as a top concern.

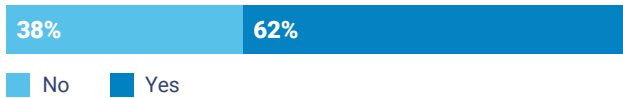
# INSIGHT #3 | SAFETY AND BELONGING



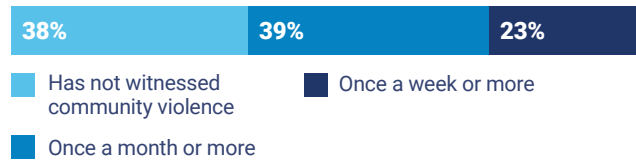
## Youth Voice

Again this year, nearly two-thirds (62%) of youth respondents in A Better Chicago’s citywide survey report having witnessed community violence in some form—including shootings, fistfights, domestic violence, and carjackings. Almost one in four (23%) said they witness violence weekly.

### HAVE YOU EVER PERSONALLY WITNESSED VIOLENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



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



Youth also expressed a desire for a safer Chicago, including fewer guns and a stronger police presence—particularly one that reflects their communities and fosters trust. Many report taking extra precautions in daily life.



- Black youth overall and all young women over the age of 15 report being more on-guard than their white and male counterparts during everyday activities.

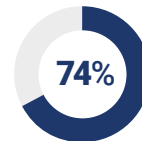
Young people view community programs and activities as an important violence prevention strategy. They believe these programs deter peers from engaging in violence and provide safe, structured spaces to stay engaged. Many desire for more clean, welcoming places to gather and relax, particularly recreation centers and parks.

- Black youth (29%) and youth overall on the South and Southwest Sides (28%) are most likely to say there are not enough places where they feel comfortable and safe socializing with friends.

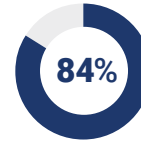
Concerns about immigration enforcement also affected students’ sense of safety even before Operation Midway Blitz was implemented across the Chicagoland region in fall 2025. In A Better Chicago’s June–July 2025 survey and focus groups:

- 43% of youth report that a family member or friend has confided concerns about deportation.
- 58% of Hispanic/Latinx youth over 15 say someone has confided in them about deportation fears.
- High-school girls from immigrant backgrounds described their families as already being on heightened alert, closely monitoring surroundings and daily routines.

Despite these challenges, many young people point to important sources of support within their schools.



Nearly three-quarters (74%) of young Chicagoans say there is an adult at school they trust and have a strong relationship with



84% report that their schools offer after-school and extracurricular programs that match their interests



### In Their Own Words

*"I think, as a girl traveling around the city, I definitely feel like I have to be more vigilant around my surroundings when I'm traveling. One time I talked to my guy friend about this, and he's like, 'Oh, it never crosses my mind to think about who's around me or having to have a friend to go on a train with.'"*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR

*"Have multiple safe spaces to either chill or vent... having people there so you can spill out your problems and have people to talk to, and space to just calm down."*

—MIDDLE SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"I feel like we can have programs that just can help people learn... And also just a better education system and better role models for the community, because a lot of kids nowadays are like, 'Wow I see this man with a gun, he kind of look cool, I want one too.' So, it's kind of like you grow with what you see in your environment... And then the violence starts to happen."*

—HIGH SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"My uncle is scared to pick up my cousin from school, so sometimes she has to walk alone, because they're just scared that ICE might get them."*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR



### THE BOTTOM LINE

Students are more likely to attend and engage in school when they feel safe and supported both inside and outside the classroom.

# INSIGHT #4 | MENTAL HEALTH

## Context

Recent data shows that the United States is facing a serious mental health crisis, particularly among young people. According to the CDC's [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023](#), many high school students are struggling:

- 4 in 10 (40%) students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.
- 2 in 10 (20%) students seriously considered attempting suicide, and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) attempted suicide.

These challenges are even more common among female and LGBTQ+ students than among their male, cisgender, and heterosexual peers.

At the same time, young people are resilient—and support makes a difference. Feeling connected to family, friends, and trusted adults can help protect mental health. A strong sense of belonging at school—knowing that teachers and classmates care about you and your success—is linked to better mental

health and lower risks of substance use and violence. Strengthening these connections remains one of the most effective ways to support youth well-being.

Strong relationships are critically important, but not all youth have equal access to care. [Research](#) indicates that Black and Latinx youth are less likely to receive mental health services, whether at school or through the healthcare system. These disparities are linked to barriers such as cost, insurance coverage challenges, and a shortage of culturally responsive providers, all of which can make it harder to access care when needed.

## Chicago Lens

Consistent with national trends, data from the [2023 CPS Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), which is conducted biennially, 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 percentages are even higher for female and LGBTQ+ students. For middle-grade students, nearly 1 in 5 reported making a plan about how they would attempt suicide, with that number jumping to 1 in 3 among LGBTQ+ students.

Similarly, a July 2024 Voices of Children’s Health report from Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago found that more than two-thirds of adolescents reported sometimes, often, or always feeling stressed. Among the most commonly reported symptoms were worrying a lot (22%), feeling anxious or on edge (22%), feeling fidgety or unable to

sit still (20%), and having trouble concentrating (18%)—all symptoms that can adversely impact students’ ability to successfully participate in school.

The availability of—and willingness to access—mental health support is critical to maintaining youth well-being. In the 2024 Lurie report referenced above, just 34% of youth respondents said they felt extremely or somewhat comfortable attending in-person appointments with a therapist, counselor, or other mental health professional. Only 27% said they were extremely or somewhat comfortable with each of the following: virtual appointments, meeting with a school social worker, or going to a group therapy session with other young people in their community.

## ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- Youth in Chicago’s Northwest region were more likely to list anxiety/depression and self-esteem/body image as top concerns for people their age. Youth in the West region were less likely to flag self-esteem/body image as a major concern.
- Young people living in the South region of the city reported lower availability of mental health services in their community and expressed lower satisfaction with those services.
- Youth in the Southwest region were less satisfied with their schools’ efforts to address students’ mental health needs.

## Youth Voice

Mental health continues to be a growing challenge for young Chicagoans and is closely linked to student absenteeism. In A Better Chicago’s citywide survey:

- Nearly all youth (95%) said mental health and well-being are issues for people their age, and about three-quarters described them as major problems. Concerns are particularly high among older youth (ages 20–24), Hispanic/Latinx youth, and Black females.
- About half of respondents said they have received mental health services. Among those who have not received help, 38% said they wished they had.
- Youth engagement with school counselors has increased from last year, with 36% percent of survey respondents indicating that they accessed support in 2025, compared to 27% in 2024.
- Fifty-seven percent of youth rated the mental health support they receive from their schools as good or excellent. However, some students worry about privacy and said they are hesitant to trust.
- Perceptions of community-based mental health support have also improved. In 2025, 60% of youth reported that their community was doing a good or excellent job—up from 50% the year prior.
- Across racial groups, girls are more likely than boys to report early childhood abuse or trauma, loneliness or isolation, bullying, and the loss of a relationship due to death as major contributors to their mental health challenges.

## YOUTH RANKED THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES TO THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

- 1 Anxiety/depression
- 2 Self-esteem/body image
- 3 Stress
- 4 Peer pressure
- 5 Bullying
- 6 Drugs and alcohol

Source: A Better Chicago’s Youth Survey



### In Their Own Words

*"Mental health awareness is a really big thing, especially in impoverished communities, because usually the people that have the weapons or are doing drugs are usually people who have some sort of mental issues because they weren't really supported, or they didn't have the proper resources to really assess with those kind of things."*

—HIGH SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"I recently started doing therapy two weeks ago. But before that I had really bad issues, I didn't really have any coping mechanisms. I would shut down, bottle up all my problems, until I couldn't handle it no more and I would just bust out crying on a regular basis."*

—MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR

*"For me it's my Spanish teacher, just the fact that we're both Hispanic, and that we're comfortable talking about our culture with each other was something really valuable to me, and the fact that he was always willing to listen and to bring in his own perspective without like, I guess he also didn't fear judgment, and so I didn't fear it either, and so we were able to talk to each other really comfortably."*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR

*"Academic pressure. Being at a highly ranked high school, everyone's trying to get the highest grade possible... Even when someone gets a 90, they still think it's bad. So yeah, there's a lot of stress and anxiety that comes with that."*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR



### THE BOTTOM LINE

Strengthening school connectedness and expanding culturally responsive mental health services are critical to improving both attendance and academic outcomes.

# INSIGHT #5 | MEETING BENCHMARKS IN READING AND MATH

## Context

Third-grade reading and eighth-grade math are two critical “checkpoints” in a student’s academic journey. By [3rd grade](#), students shift from learning to read to reading to learn across subjects. Students who are not reading proficiently at this stage are more likely to fall behind in science, social studies, and other coursework that depends heavily on literacy skills.

Similarly, 8th grade math marks the transition from basic arithmetic to the abstract reasoning that underpins Algebra I and higher-level mathematics. National education [research](#) has emphasized Algebra readiness by 8th grade as a key milestone, and longitudinal analyses show that 8th grade math proficiency is strongly associated with later outcomes, such as high school graduation, college attendance, and degree completion.

NOTE: In August 2025, the Illinois State Board of Education approved changes to the cut scores used to determine proficiency on state standardized tests, lowering the scores needed to be considered proficient in math and English language arts on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness. As a result, comparisons to prior years (including to pre-pandemic performance) must account for the impact of this adjustment. Media reports on the ISBE decision indicated that the revised cut scores would substantially increase the percentage of students classified as proficient: an estimated 53% of students would be considered proficient in English language arts (up from 41% in 2024), and 38% would be considered proficient in math (up from 28% in 2024) under the adjusted standards.

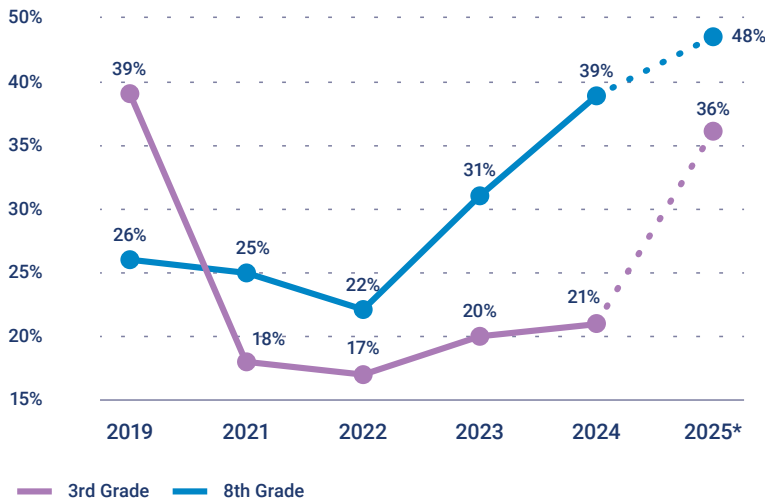
## Chicago Lens

Chicago Public Schools has made measurable progress in literacy and math at the district level since the pandemic. However, examining performance by grade level and region is essential to determine whether students are on-track to meet key academic milestones.



# INSIGHT #5 | MEETING BENCHMARKS IN READING AND MATH

## CITYWIDE READING PROFICIENCY 2019–2025



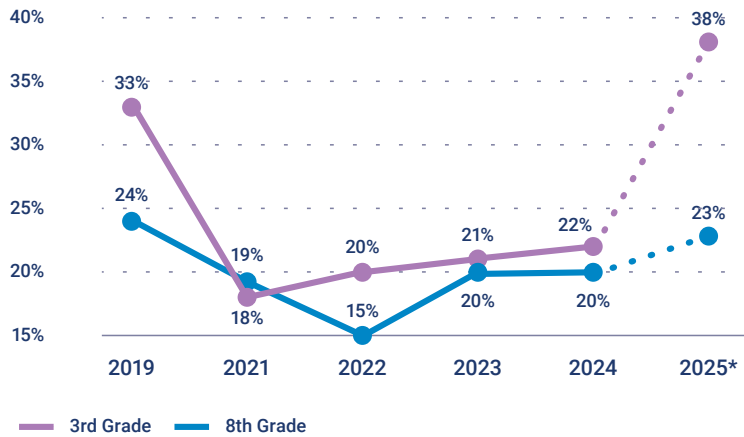
Prior to the pandemic, nearly 40% of CPS 3rd graders were proficient in reading. In 2021 and 2022, that proficiency rate fell by roughly half to less than 20%. Over the past four years, 3rd grade reading proficiency has steadily rebounded and is now approaching the pre-pandemic level, at just over 36%.

In contrast, 8th grade reading proficiency has risen consistently since 2022 and now stands at 48%—well above the 26% proficiency rate in 2019.

Despite these post-pandemic gains, however, the majority of students are still not meeting state proficiency standards in reading at either the 3rd or 8th grade level.

\* 2025 data reflects ISBE reductions to the cut scores necessary to demonstrate proficiency in reading; comparisons to prior years' data should be made in consideration of this change.

## CITYWIDE MATH PROFICIENCY 2019–2025



Third-grade math proficiency now stands at 38%, exceeding the pre-pandemic rate of 33% in 2019. In contrast, 8th grade math proficiency (23% in 2025) is only now approaching its 2019 level of 24%.

As a result, more than two-thirds of students are not meeting 3rd grade state proficiency levels in math, and more than three-quarters fall short of the 8th grade benchmark.

\* 2025 data reflects ISBE reductions to the cut scores necessary to demonstrate proficiency in math; comparisons to prior years' data should be made in consideration of this change.

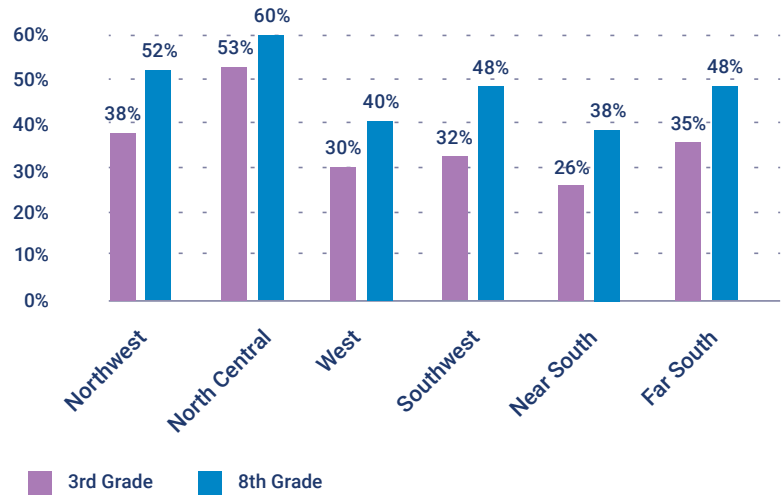
At the regional level, the Near South region shows the greatest opportunity for improvement in both 3rd grade reading and math, as well as 8th grade math. The West region demonstrates the largest gap in eighth-grade reading proficiency. Notably, these same regions also report the highest rates of chronic absenteeism citywide—49% in the Near South and 42% in the West—underscoring the connection between attendance and academic outcomes.

# INSIGHT #5 | MEETING BENCHMARKS IN READING AND MATH

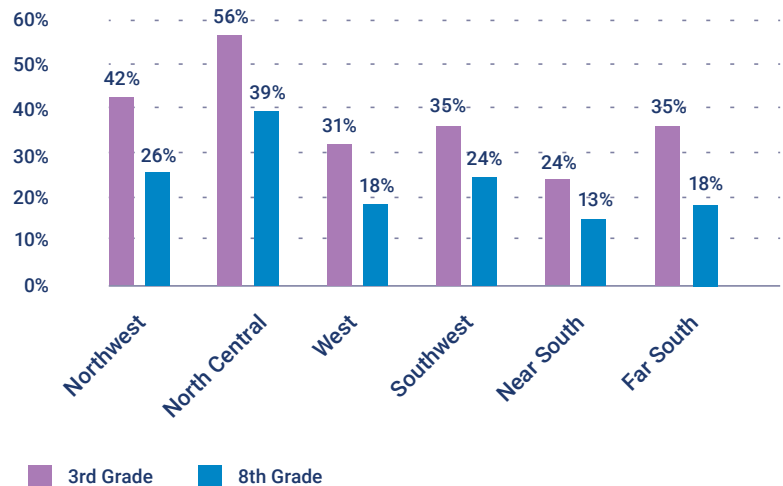
**Kindergarten readiness**—the percentage of children who demonstrate the academic and social-emotional skills needed to succeed in kindergarten and the early grades—increased to 31.5% in 2025, up 9% from 2019. This improvement suggests that more of Chicago’s youngest residents are entering school with a stronger foundation for long-term academic success.



## 2025 3<sup>RD</sup> AND 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE READING PROFICIENCY BY REGION



## 2025 3<sup>RD</sup> AND 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE MATH PROFICIENCY BY REGION



## ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- Third graders in the North Central region had the highest reading proficiency rates in the city, with students in the Lakeview community reaching 71% proficiency. At the community level, Forest Glen on the far Northwest side performed best overall with 67% of third graders meeting proficiency standards.
- The North Central region also recorded the highest 8th grade math proficiency rates. In the North Center community, 73% of students reached proficiency. More than half of students in the Forest Glen and Edison Park communities (Northwest region), as well as the Bridgeport and Armour Square (Southwest region), demonstrated proficiency in 8th grade math.
- The West Englewood community in the city's Near South region represents one of the greatest opportunities for growth in 3rd grade reading, with a proficiency level of just under 10%. Similarly, Burnside in the Far South region of the city shows the greatest opportunity for improvement in 8th grade math, with a proficiency level of under 5%.
- After declines last year, 3rd grade reading proficiency in South Shore (24%) and Englewood (18%) showed meaningful improvement.

## Youth Voice

- Students responding to A Better Chicago's survey believe that their schools are focused on developing skills in mathematics (95%) and reading and writing (93%).
- During focus groups, students identified reading — and especially math—as skills they find most helpful and are most proud of developing in school.
- At the same time, despite ongoing gaps in reading and math proficiency, most young Chicagoans report that they have not participated in tutoring programs. More than one-quarter say they would like the opportunity to do so, particularly youth of color. Of those students who have participated in tutoring programs, 78% did so through programs offered at school.

WHAT SKILLS DO YOU FEEL YOU'VE GAINED IN SCHOOL THAT ARE MOST HELPFUL?

critical thinking  
talk learning future  
science writing  
work hard math world life  
communication  
ability social reading  
responsible time management job  
ask questions musician

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Early literacy and middle-grade math are pivotal milestones. Students who are present, supported, and proficient are more likely to graduate prepared for success in high school, college, career, and life.

# INSIGHT #6 | OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS AND SPACES

## Context

Across the country, community-based programs—often referred to as out-of-school (OST) or afterschool programs—play an important role in young people’s lives. These programs span a wide range of activities, including STEM enrichment, literacy support, tutoring, college access, mentorship, arts, sports and more. Together, they provide youth with a safe and engaging place to learn and grow beyond the school day—exploring interests, building skills, and developing positive relationships with peers and supportive adults in their community.

A growing body of [research](#) shows that participation in high-quality afterschool programs is associated with stronger academic performance, improved school attendance, and healthier social and emotional development. Youth who participate in such opportunities are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors or become victims or perpetrators of violence.

At the same time, access remains uneven. The most recent America After 3PM report finds that demand for afterschool programs is at an all-time high: parents of nearly 30 million children say they would enroll their child if a program were available. Yet three in four of those children—approximately 22.6 million nationwide—still do not have access to such opportunities.

## Chicago Lens

Chicago is home to hundreds of community-based programs that play a crucial role in supporting young people. Some of these programs are sponsored by local nonprofit organizations at community centers, parks, and other neighborhood locations. Many are provided by Chicago Public Schools (CPS), either directly or in partnership with other organizations, and include before/after school care, summer, and enrichment programs offered within CPS schools.

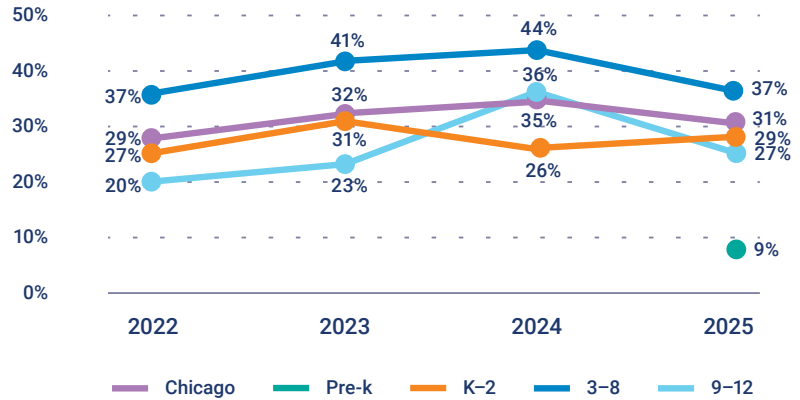
The following data<sup>1</sup> reflects participation in CPS out-of-school (OST) programs for students from kindergarten through high school (though CPS does offer OST for preschool students).

- Citywide, during the 2024–2025 school year, 31% 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 (37%) compared to K–2 (29%) and high schoolers (27%).
- During the 2024–2025 school year, the North Central (39%) and Far South (34%) regions of the city had the highest percentage of K–12 youth engaged in out-of-school programming, while the Near South region had the lowest percentage (23%).

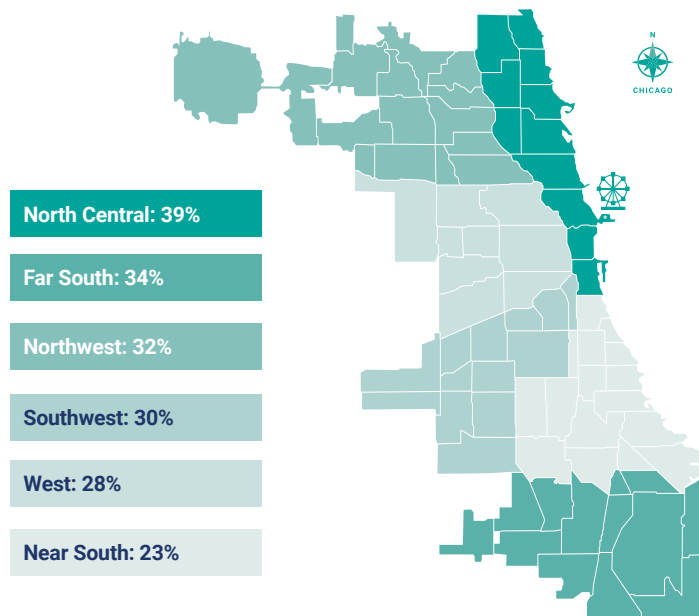
1. This data includes student participation in extracurricular programming funded by CPS Out of School Time, Sustainable Community Schools, and Community Schools Initiative. It does not include participation in CPS Athletics, and it may not be comprehensive about all partner-led program participation.

# INSIGHT #6 | OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS AND SPACES

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



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



### ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- North Center (63%) in the city’s North Central Region, Fuller Park (57%) in the Near South region, and Burnside (53%) in the Far South Region have the highest rate of students engaged in out-of-school programming, substantially outpacing the city-wide average (31%).
- Oakland (11%) and South Chicago (15%), both in the city’s Near South region, have the lowest rate.
- Since the 2021-2022 school year, the communities of North Center on in the North Central region, Hyde Park in the Near South region, Portage Park in the Northwest region, and Clearing in the Near South region have all seen 20+% increases in out-of-school program participation.<sup>1</sup>

1. This reflects updated OST participation data for prior years released by CPS in 2025.

# INSIGHT #6 | OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS AND SPACES



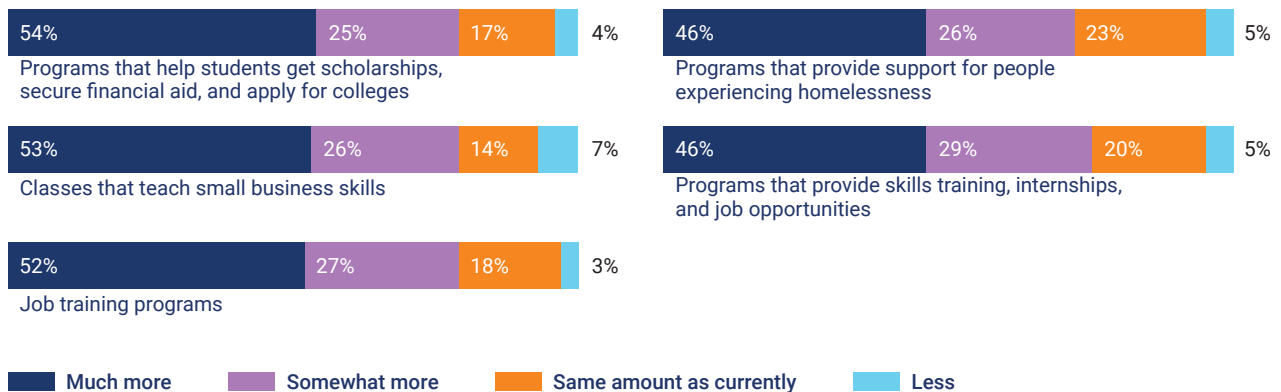
## Youth Voice

According to A Better Chicago’s youth surveys and focus groups, nearly all youth who have participated in community-based programs (99%) report enjoying their experience, and most believe these programs support their social and emotional well-being and help keep them out of trouble.

Several key themes emerge about the impact of community-based programs and spaces:

1. First, there is strong interest across all ages and racial groups in expanding access to community-based programs. Many youth want more opportunities to participate after school (66%) and on weekends (37%). They are particularly interested in programs that build financial and business skills, offer academic programs and peer tutoring, and prepare them for life after high school by connecting them to networks, opportunities, and jobs.
2. Second, participation in community-based programs is associated with greater optimism and clearer postsecondary goals. Youth who participate are more likely to report being very optimistic about their future (63%) compared to those who do not participate (50%). They are also significantly more likely to say they plan to pursue a four-year degree after high school (65% versus 37%).
3. Third, youth expressed a desire for greater access to safe, welcoming recreational spaces that are free to use, such as parks and community centers. Nearly three-quarters (73%) report that they currently spend time in these spaces.
4. Finally, access to academic enrichment also varies by school type. Students attending private schools reported greater access to—and participation in—tutoring and programs that prepare them for college and careers, both during and outside of school hours.

## WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MORE OR LESS OF EACH PROVIDED IN YOUR COMMUNITY? (TOP FIVE)



## INSIGHT #6 | OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS AND SPACES



### In Their Own Words

*"More opportunities for little kids, more stuff to do... more stuff that's up to date."*

**-MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR**

*"Being able to have somewhere to go, like if you don't want to be at home or you don't be at school... Then you could always come here, and we had like movie nights. We had tutors, and there was just resources to make sure that you could succeed at school, and you had pretty much just somewhere else to be."*

**-HIGH SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR**

*"I'm part of... a program where they help bring more healthcare access and healthcare education to underserved communities like Black and brown [areas]... which has really helped me get a head start in my path to medicine because I'm working alongside post-grad students and people in college, and I think they have really inspired me."*

**-HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR**



### THE BOTTOM LINE

Expanding access to high-quality community-based programs supports belonging, reinforces attendance, and equips youth with the tools to thrive.

# INSIGHT #7 | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

## Context

A high school diploma remains a foundational credential for pursuing higher education and accessing a wide range of career opportunities. Educational attainment is closely linked to employment prospects and long-term earnings.

In the 2022–2023 school year, [the U.S. graduation rate](#) for public high school students was 87%. Illinois mirrored that performance, with a statewide graduation rate of 87.8%.

Among Illinois public high school graduates, 65% [enrolled](#) in a two- or four-year college within 12 months of earning a regular diploma.

Educational attainment also correlates strongly with income. [According](#) to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, earnings increase steadily with higher levels of education. In 2024, full-time, year-round workers age 25 or older with a bachelor's degree earned approximately 66% more than those whose highest credential was a high school diploma.

NOTE: For the purpose of this report, the high school graduation rate refers to the proportion of first-time 9th graders who graduate in four years, including the summer following their fourth year. The college enrollment rate reflects the percentage of graduates who enroll in a two- or four-year degree program in the fall immediately after high school graduation.

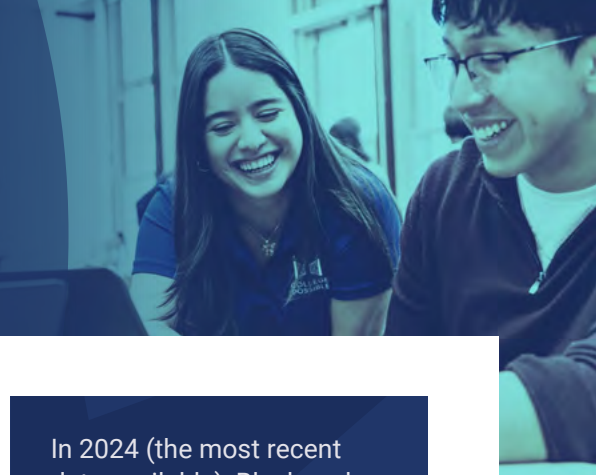
## Chicago Lens

According to Census data, 87% of Chicago residents age 25 and older have earned a high school diploma, while 46% hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

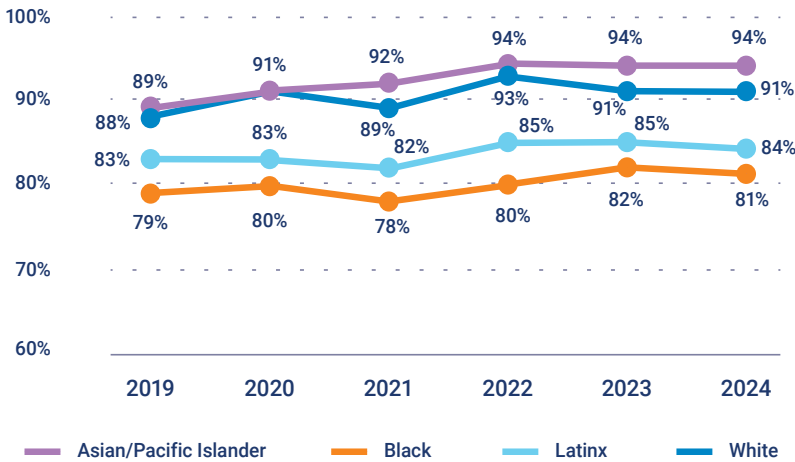
In 2025, Chicago Public Schools recorded a five-year high school graduation rate of 84%.



# INSIGHT #7 | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT



## CPS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE BY RACE (2019–2024)

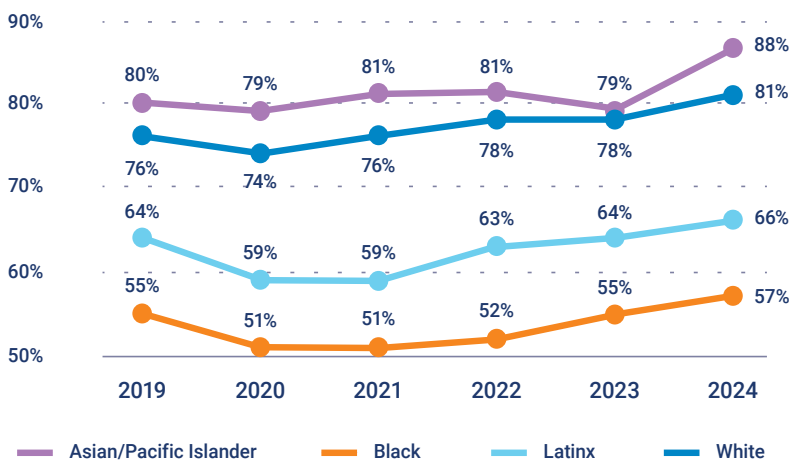


In 2024 (the most recent data available), Black males had the lowest graduation rate among gender and race groups at 77%. Latino males graduated at a rate of 81%, a slight decline from 83% in 2023.



2025 College Enrollment Rate by Race available in 2026

## CPS COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATE BY RACE (2019–2024)

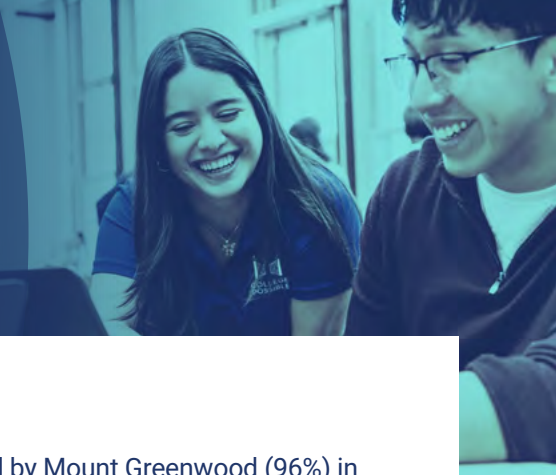


The CPS college enrollment rate reached 66% citywide in 2024, matching the historic high first achieved in 2017.

- College enrollment rates for Black students have fluctuated in recent years and have been at 57% for the past two graduating classes (2022–2023 and 2023–2024), below the historic high of 59% recorded in 2017.
- In contrast, college enrollment among Latinx graduates has increased by 21% since 2009.

2025 College Enrollment Rate by Race available in 2026

# INSIGHT #7 | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT



## ★ NEIGHBORHOOD NOTES

- High school graduation rates were highest in the Loop<sup>1</sup> (100%), followed by Mount Greenwood (96%) in the Far South region, and Norwood Park (95%) and Edison Park (94%) in the Northwest region.
- Communities with the lowest high school graduation rates include West Englewood (76%) in the Near South and New City (both 77%) and Archer Heights (78%) in the Southwest region, followed by Englewood and Washington Park in the Near South and North Lawndale in the West region—all at 78%.
- Since 2018, Grand Boulevard (+15%) and Englewood (+10%) in the Near South, along with Morgan Park (+10%) in the Far South, have experienced some of the largest increases in high school graduation rates.
- College enrollment rates were highest (88%) in Edison Park (Northwest region) and Armour Square (Southwest). Other communities with college enrollment rates well above the citywide average are Forest Glen (86%) in the Northwest; Lake View (85%), Lincoln Park (83%), and North Center (82%) in the North Central region; and McKinley Park (82%) in the Southwest.
- Communities with the lowest college enrollment rates citywide include Riverdale (35%) in the Far South; Fuller Park (42%), Washington Park (44%), and Greater Grand Crossing (49%) in the Near South; and West Garfield Park (45%) in the West region.
- Since 2019, several communities have experienced notable increases in college enrollment. These include Morgan Park (+22%), Bridgeport (+20%), and McKinley Park (+18%) in the Southwest region, as well as the Lower West Side (+23%) in the West region.
- Since 2019, the Fuller Park community in the Near South region has seen the sharpest declines in both high school graduation (-19%) and college enrollment (-31%) rates.

## Youth Voice

Youth remain overwhelmingly optimistic about their futures, with self-belief and family support serving as important drivers of that confidence.

- Most Chicago youth (81%) say they feel confident about graduating from high school.
- A majority of students (57%) report feeling very prepared with the skills needed to succeed in college. However, only 44% say they feel very prepared to succeed in the real world and jobs.
- An overwhelming 91% of students plan to continue their education after high school through college, vocational school, or other job training programs.
- Sixty-six percent agree they can easily access a network of professionals or resources to help them advance or launch their careers.
- Notably, disparities persist:
  - Hispanic/Latina girls (60%) are significantly less likely than other students (80%) to feel they have the tools needed to build a successful future for themselves.
  - At the same time, 88% of Black youth, compared to 68% of their peers, strongly agree with the statement “I will be successful.”

1. Data represents rates for one options school and one charter school within the Loop neighborhood boundaries.

## INSIGHT #7 | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENROLLMENT



### In Their Own Words

*"[I feel] opportunistic, because if you come to Chicago or anywhere in Illinois. I'm pretty sure you could find a job, find something you want to do, find something you like to do."*

—MIDDLE SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"Both of my parents see a lot of potential in me, so they give me the things I need to be successful in the future."*

—HIGH SCHOOL BOY OF COLOR

*"What I feel like my school does good is that they have Career and Technical Education programs. So, there's a medical program, there's culinary, there's gaming... There's different programs you can get into, and you can do entry level, and also certifications that can get you more knowledge about what you're really getting into in the future."*

—HIGH SCHOOL GIRL OF COLOR



### THE BOTTOM LINE

Closing equity gaps in high school graduation and college enrollment rates is essential to ensuring long-term economic mobility for all Chicago students.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting Chicago’s young people in a meaningful way will require better coordination of existing resources and stronger collaboration across sectors. The findings in this report point to clear priorities for action—guiding how resources are allocated, where partnerships can be strengthened, and how investments can be targeted to youth in communities with the greatest need.

Even amid budget pressures and other constraints, expanding youth opportunities and access to school-based and community programs, services, and safe spaces must remain a priority. Investments should be directed toward Far South, Near South, and West Side communities that have experienced longstanding inequities and continue to face the greatest barriers to opportunity.

Our recommendations are structured around three strategic pillars:



## Be Here

Ensuring that students have the structural supports—transportation, safety, mental health resources—necessary for consistent daily attendance and sustained connection to their learning community.



## Belong Here

Fostering school and community environments where students are seen, valued, and connected to peers and trusted adults.



## Thrive Here

Empowering students with the academic, social, and professional tools to shape their futures.



# RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.



## Be Here

- Strengthen and expand early warning systems to identify and support students at risk of chronic absenteeism.
- Invest in structured mentorship programs that provide consistent guidance and accountability.
- Increase funding for programs that address housing instability and food insecurity.
- Expand targeted supports for students experiencing poverty and homelessness.
- Implement restorative justice practices and trauma-informed approaches to address disciplinary issues and encourage positive school behavior.



## Belong Here

- Expand in-school and after-school opportunities—including sports, clubs, tutoring, and study groups—that keep youth engaged in safe, welcoming spaces.
- Increase access to reliable, school-based mental health services, including counselors who understand students' perspectives and are accessible, trustworthy, and willing to listen.
- Invest in safe, clean, and affordable (or free) community recreational spaces where young people can gather, build relationships, and be themselves outside of school and home.



## Thrive Here

- Convene cross-sector collaborators to explore bold ideas to rethink what, how, when and where students learn, particularly at the high school level, to more closely align with their interests and goals. This includes:
  - Curriculum content that builds financial literacy and other real-world skills.
  - Competency-based learning approaches that can accelerate progress.
  - New, engaging pedagogical approaches and instructional technology.
  - Schools and classrooms designed to encourage student engagement and support well-being.
- Scale skills training, internships, and paid job opportunities that introduce young people to career pathways earlier in their academic journey.
- More high-dosage tutoring programs to improve reading and math proficiency, particularly at key transition points such as 3rd and 8th grade.
- Expand access to role models and mentors in schools and communities who can demonstrate positive alternatives to violence and unsafe behaviors.
- Increase opportunities to participate in high-quality community-based programs, especially in under-resourced communities, with a focus on after-school and weekend activities that:
  - Build professional and social skills
  - Support college awareness, applications, and scholarships

# A BETTER CHICAGO

A Better Chicago is changing how Chicago fights poverty by investing in bold ideas that create opportunity for our youth. Since its founding in 2010, A Better Chicago has provided more than \$50 million in unrestricted funding and management support to help the nonprofits in our portfolio grow. 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.

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## 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. 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. 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.

By visualizing trends in outcomes, the Youth Opportunity Dashboard turns data into systematic change and helps identify opportunities for investment to ensure youth in Chicago can reach their full potential.

The Youth Opportunity Dashboard was developed in partnership with The Obama Foundation and the Chicago Public Education Fund. Thank you to Crown Family Philanthropies, The Joyce Foundation, PwC, and Crankstart for supporting the creation and implementation of this tool.

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## ABOUT THE YOUTH SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

A Better Chicago, in partnership with Global Strategy Group (GSG), conducted a survey of 400 Chicago youth ages 10–24 in June–July 2025. 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, school attendance patterns, deportation fears, school engagement, recreation spaces, community violence, mental health, and more. Many 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 with youth affiliated programs in A Better Chicago's portfolio in July–August of 2025.

Youth Voice identifiers featured in this report are based on the self-identification of focus group participants.

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

**For more information, contact**

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VERSION 2, APRIL 2026

DESIGN: BARK DESIGN

**A BETTER  
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