

Overview and Key Findings

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

There are more than 750,000 children in Chicago, or one out of every four children in Illinois

Chicago is known as a city of neighborhoods. These local communities weave a fabric of support for the families who make their homes there. They are places where children grow and learn, parents work and neighbors come together to solve problems. Chicago’s neighborhoods are home to more than 750,000 children under 18 or one out of every four children in Illinois. The role that communities and the people who live in them play in providing all children the opportunity to succeed cannot be underestimated.

Like the entire city, Chicago’s child population is changing. This brings new challenges and new opportunities to broaden support of innovative programs that are working for kids. This report, coupled with the searchable online database of statistics at www.voices4kids.org/chicagokidscount.htm, attempts to capture the quality of life for children in each of the city’s 77 community areas and highlights solutions that can be replicated.

As the data shows, Chicago’s neighborhoods and the children who live in them have seen improvements. But far too many children do not have equal opportunities when it comes to education, safe and healthy environments and secure families with adequate incomes. Every child deserves to reach his or her full potential. For this to happen, their fundamental needs must be met. Parents certainly shoulder this responsibility, but relatives, neighbors, teachers, doctors, coaches, grandparents and many others all influence children and can help support parents so that they can do their job well. Data in this report and online are a resource to help Chicagoans respond to needs and changes, and to do what we can to improve the lives of all children.



Changes in Child Population

Chicago's child population held fairly steady from 1990 to 2000, but has started to shrink slightly. The city's birth rate of around 50,000 babies a year fell 1 percent from 2000 to 2001. And the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey reported Chicago experienced a 2 percent decline in children age 19 and younger from 2000 to 2002, a drop of 17,000. At the same time, the city gained 38,000 45- to 59-year-olds. Families with children are leaving the city—most likely for the suburbs, where suburban Cook County and the collar counties are seeing an increase in families with young children—while “empty nesters” are moving in.

Chicago's collar counties are seeing rapid growth in both the child population and the number of families with children. From 1990 to 2000, McHenry and Will counties reported more than

40 percent growth in both the child population and families with children. Kane and Lake counties experienced around 30 percent growth in both populations. The rate of growth was slower in DuPage County, which saw its child and family populations increase around 15 percent, and Cook County, which experienced less than 10 percent growth in both children and families, largely outside of Chicago.

Changes in child population also are occurring at the community level in Chicago. From 1990 to 2000, communities experiencing the biggest booms in total child population were largely clustered on the Southwest and Northwest sides, while the North Side, near West Side and South Sides experienced a decline (see map on page 29).

About 50,000 babies are born every year in Chicago

Service providers and policy-makers need to be aware of cultural differences among Chicago's diverse population, and to appreciate and build upon the strengths of the many different cultures represented

Since 2000, the handful of communities that have been most affected by the Chicago Housing Authority's elimination of public housing high-rises have seen significant drops in child population. For example, the Douglas, Grand Boulevard and Washington Park communities have seen a 30 percent or greater decrease in the number of 6-year-olds attending Chicago Public Schools from 2000 to 2002 (see map on page 30). Those children are largely moving to the Englewood, West Englewood and South Shore communities.

These shifts in child population have implications for the provision of services. As families move, their needs follow them—but service providers can't always respond as quickly. Population increases in a community will be accompanied by growth in the demand for services, while sudden drops in population can leave programs with a shrinking pool of clients who still need services. Organizations like the Chicago Youth Centers have had to close programs, including its site at Cabrini-Green, which had served families for 40 years.





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—Reginald Jones, executive director of the Steans Family Foundation

About half of the staff is bilingual, including Principal Kathleen Mayer, who switches between the languages when talking with students, parents and staff.

“Cultural understanding facilitates communication and builds trust,” Mayer said. “It’s about relationships. All staff members—even those who don’t speak Spanish—are culturally sensitive and make sure that they treat family members with respect.”

These changes underscore the need to pay close attention to the needs of the growing population of Hispanic children and families. Service providers and policymakers need to be aware of cultural differences among Chicago’s diverse population, and to appreciate and build upon the strengths of the many different cultures represented. And all children—no matter their racial or ethnic background—deserve the opportunity to succeed.

Nearly half of Chicago children are African-American, more than a third are Hispanic and less than a fifth are white

These changes mean communities, service providers, policymakers and those who fund services must be mindful of demographic changes and responsive to the ebb and flow of needs. “We have to constantly be mindful of shifts in community dynamics and how we respond,” said Reginald Jones, executive director of the Steans Family Foundation, which targets its funding to build assets in the North Lawndale community. “So we constantly look strategically at the types of programs we have implemented and the outcomes, but we also look prospectively at future challenges and how we can create funding strategies that will be responsive.”

Like the city’s neighborhoods, Chicago kids are a diverse bunch and are becoming even more so. According to the last Census, nearly half are African-American, more than a third are Hispanic and less than a fifth are white. The city’s Hispanic child population grew 35 percent since 1990, reaching more than 290,000 children in 2000. Communities on the Northwest, Southwest and West sides have the highest concentrations of Hispanic children (see map on page 31). The rapid growth in the Hispanic child population has significant implications for service providers.

The Gage Park neighborhood on the city’s Southwest Side saw its Hispanic population boom over the past decade. Rachel Carson Elementary School—whose students are 92 percent Hispanic—created a bilingual education program that helps students develop speaking, reading and writing competence in both English and Spanish.

The three communities that have been most affected by the Chicago Housing Authority’s elimination of public housing high-rises—Douglas, Grand Boulevard and Washington Park—have seen significant drops in child population

Meeting Children's Educational Needs

A good education—one that starts early, provides enriching learning opportunities and challenges young minds—is a key factor in helping children succeed. Children need to be active participants in the learning process, parents need to be involved in their child's learning beginning at birth and policymakers need to create and adequately fund an educational system that addresses all children's needs.

The years before a child enters kindergarten are a crucial time for development and learning. Babies develop learning skills in their first months and years by interacting with parents and caregivers. High-quality early childhood programs such as preschool, child care and Head Start provide children under 5 with the skills they need to do well in school. But shifts in the population of young children affect the demand for these services.

Chicago's under-5 population is holding fairly steady citywide, falling less than 1 percent from 1990 to 2000. But significant shifts have occurred within the city. Several South, West and North side communities reported a decline in the number of young children from 1996 to 2000. Growth occurred in the Southeast, Southwest and Northwest sides (see map on page 35).



"You have to believe kids can do better, and find the critical mass of adults—teachers, parents—who believe that, too."

—Kathleen Mayer, principal, Rachel Carson Elementary School

"Given the rapid population changes, programs need to be ready to make adjustments," said Tom Layman, executive director of the Metro Chicago Association for the Education of Young Children. "They need to be ready to move their locations, or at least start new sites more quickly than they used to. We can't establish sites with the idea that it's forever."

In 2001, Chicago Commons opened a fifth site for its early childhood education programs—the Paulo Freire Family Center in New City—just five blocks from another New City site to better meet the growing demand for infant and toddler care. Chicago Commons targets neighborhoods with the fewest resources where families need support. Each center reflects its community: photos of local children decorate the walls, most of the staff lives nearby and educational projects incorporate what's in the neighborhood.

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“The children will do studies of animals they see in the neighborhood instead of taking a field trip far away to look at animals. Or they’ll do a study of how hands work, and go through the neighborhood getting pictures of hands—working at a pizzeria, handling money in a store,” said Karen Haigh, Chicago Commons’ senior vice president/director of programs. “It’s about making connections to the community.”

Providing access to high-quality early childhood education lays a foundation for academic success. It’s important that throughout their academic career children receive the skills and support they need to graduate from high school. Communities that experienced the highest dropout rate for the class of 2002—areas where more than 30 percent of the class did not complete school—are scattered through the southern half of the city (see map on page 36). The citywide dropout rate for the class of 2002 was 24.2 percent.

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Rachel Carson Elementary School’s recipe for success is based on high expectations of students, dedicated faculty and staff and involved parents. The school is 99 percent low-income and 92 percent Hispanic; two-thirds of students start school speaking little or

no English. Yet the school’s standardized test results meet or exceed national averages. One key factor is that the school is a resource for parents, helping them find the services they need.

“You have to believe kids can do better, and find the critical mass of adults—teachers, parents—who believe that, too,” Principal Mayer said. “But if your families don’t have medical services and a child needs glasses, we cannot be successful. The family needs jobs and support services. Social issues definitely affect students.”

Chicago teens who are pregnant or have a baby can get support for staying in school through Christopher House’s “Partners in Progress” program, offered in several North and West side commu-

nities. Seventy percent of participants are enrolled in an educational program or have graduated, program Director Sara Manewith said. The program also offers onsite G.E.D. classes and provides free transportation and child care for young moms who participate.

“This high-risk population continues to need community-based supports such as prenatal care and birthing assistance, home visits, peer support groups and academic assistance,” she said.

The citywide dropout rate for the class of 2002 was 24.2 percent for the entire City of Chicago



Keeping Children Safe and Healthy

Providing a safe environment—at home, at school, in parks and neighborhoods—not only allows children to lead happy and healthy lives, it contributes to success in school. Exposure to violence and environmental hazards are among the factors that negatively impact the safety of children.

Lead-based paint often found in old homes poses a threat to children if they breathe or ingest lead dust. Lead poisoning can have a severe effect on children's developing brains—learning disabilities, behavioral problems, lowered intelligence, stunted growth and hearing loss. Illinois law requires children to be assessed for lead poisoning at least once before they begin school, although screening is highly recommended between ages 1 and 2 since early detection is the key to preventing damage (see map on page 37).

Children exposed to violence, even as infants, can suffer from stress and develop aggressive behavior

Neighborhoods on Chicago's West and South sides have the greatest prevalence of children with elevated levels of lead in their blood (see map on page 38). Those neighborhoods are most affected because the housing tends to be deteriorated, said Anne Evens, director of the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program for the Chicago Department of Public Health.

"Even if lead-based paint has been painted over, it can become exposed," she said. "When older windows open and close, friction deteriorates the paint and lead dust appears on the sills. If kids pull themselves up by the sills and then put their hands in their mouths, they can get lead poisoning. And when the windows are open, lead dust blows everywhere."

The Chicago Department of Public Health works to ensure children are tested for lead and parents and property owners are educated on the dangers of lead and ways to remove the hazard. The program provides grants to help low-income property owners make their homes lead safe.

Community based organizations, such as the Westside Health Authority's Lead Awareness and Prevention Project, also are addressing lead poisoning. The project trains residents to be lead sampling technicians who go door-to-door identifying homes with young children and determining the level of lead dust. Technicians provide information on cleaning and lead abatement and refer children under 6 for blood lead screenings, program Coordinator Casandra Alexander said.



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Witnessing violence at home or in a neighborhood also has a harmful effect on growing children. Children exposed to violence, even as infants, can suffer from stress and develop aggressive behavior. Communities experiencing the greatest number of violent crimes—defined as criminal sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault/battery and murder—in 2002 include those on the South and West sides (see map on page 39).

"It is important that there be a universal understanding of what it means for children to be exposed to violence. They need intervention."

—Ann Parry, director of the Chicago Department of Public Health's Office of Violence Prevention

A number of initiatives are trying to combat both the effect of violence and youth involvement in crime or violence. A Chicago Safe Start pilot project is training those who respond to crimes—police, firefighters, emergency medical technicians and emergency room workers—to observe whether kids are present at the scene of a crime and to provide parents with information on the signs of exposure to violence and resources for help. The Shanti Foundation for Peace uses art to share messages of non-violence.



“It is important that there be a universal understanding of what it means for children to be exposed to violence,” said Ann Parry, director of the Chicago Department of Public Health’s Office of Violence Prevention. “They need intervention. There are things adults can and should do to support them.”

Providing children and teens a safe place to go after school is another way to combat violence. The Chicago Youth Centers operate six after-school programs in neighborhoods with some of the city’s highest rates of poverty.

“We’re providing a safe, secure, nurturing environment for children during out-of-school time,” said John Lee, senior vice president for operations. “It’s during that period that children are most likely to get involved in all kinds of inappropriate activities. Considering the possibilities, we have this tremendous opportunity to

Lead poisoning can have a severe effect on children’s developing brains

Communities experiencing the greatest number of violent crimes per square mile in 2002 include those on the South and West sides

contribute to the positive development of kids. Not just get them off the streets, but when they are in our care, how can we help them, what can we do to expose these young people to options that perhaps they would not be able to experience otherwise.”

Mayor Richard Daley has announced plans to expand the city’s After School Matters program to double its enrollment and reach 14,000 teens in 36 neighborhoods by the end of the school year. His proposed fiscal year 2005 budget also includes another \$1.2 million to expand programs that serve teens in the most vulnerable neighborhoods. It is important to expand the entire variety of out-of-school programs—offered at schools, community centers, parks, churches—to ensure that all children who want to participate are able to do so.

Supporting Families

Children do well when their families do well. And children who grow up poor are more likely to have a range of troubling outcomes: medical problems, developmental delays, learning difficulties. As they get older, they are more likely to drop out of school, have babies in their teens and be unemployed.

The South and West sides house the communities with the highest concentrations of families living in poverty (see map on page 41). These also are among the communities with the highest percentages of families headed by a single parent (see map on page 43). Children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to be poor and experience multiple living arrangements during childhood—factors associated with lower educational attainment and higher risk of teen childbearing. The growing situation of grandparents raising their grandchildren (see map on page 44) indicates a need for support services such as respite care, financial assistance, affordable housing and medical care.

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Several programs provide much-needed support to families that are struggling financially:

- Subsidized child care helps working parents afford the high costs of care. For example, a single mother of two can receive assistance until she earns about \$28,000 a year. Citywide, use of subsidized care has increased 76 percent, with the biggest increases in communities on the South and West sides (see map on page 48).
- The federal Food Stamp Program aims to reduce hunger and improve nutrition among low-income families. The program is an important support for families striving to pay for their basic needs. Use is highest in Chicago communities where there are also high rates of poverty (see map on page 49).
- The Medicaid health insurance program provides insurance coverage to low-income parents and their children. Children who lack health

Simply having a job does not ensure greater family stability or entry into the middle class—working parents need support from programs such as subsidized child care, food stamps and Medicaid

A main reason for this decline is the requirement that welfare recipients work. And as the employment figures indicate (see maps on pages 46 and 47), a majority of Chicago families both with and without children are in the workforce.

Since federal welfare reform began, the number of Chicago children receiving help from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) declined by 75 percent from 1998 to 2003. Still, nearly 42,000 children continue to receive TANF. TANF dependency fell throughout the city, with the biggest drops on the North Side (see map on page 45).

Just because a family is no longer receiving TANF does not mean they have moved out of poverty or are able to pay for all the family's needs. Simply having a job does not ensure greater family stability or entry into the middle class. Thousands of low-income Chicago families struggle to make ends meet and need support from programs such as subsidized child care, food stamps, Medicaid and affordable housing initiatives.

The South and West sides house the communities with the highest concentrations of families living in poverty; these also are among the communities with the greatest prevalence of families headed by a single parent

More than 42,000 Chicago children continue to receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families although the number of children on TANF dropped citywide

insurance are less likely to receive preventive medical care and are more likely to do worse in school than their healthy peers. In Chicago, more than 340,000 children receive Medicaid, and coverage is highest in South and far West communities (see map on page 50).

To do what is best for children, policies must concentrate on moving their families not just into jobs, but out of poverty. That means supporting parents as they get the necessary skills to improve their earnings and boosting the incomes of poor families. Programs such as TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid can be better coordinated to make it easier for a family to apply for benefits. Eligibility can be expanded to help even more struggling families. In another example, increasing the size of the Illinois earned income tax credit to 20 percent of the federal credit will give poor families a bigger financial boost that they can use to pay off debt or put a down payment on a house. Expanding eligibility for Illinois' unemployment insurance program would allow even more families to receive help during tough times.

Building Strong Communities

Every community should ask itself: Are we providing the kind of environment that will allow children to grow into residents who give back to communities? How can we support parents in their important role? Many communities are working to prevent problems before they start by developing neighborhood ties that bring people together. We need to make communities strong for kids.

While the quality of life for many Chicago children is improving, there are challenges ahead. Not all children are progressing at the same pace and accessing the same opportunities. There are disparities by race and ethnicity, income and geography that need to be

We need to make communities strong for kids



It's time that we reached out to each other and created the kind of community that nurtures children

addressed. One important step is to make children a public priority and encourage smart investments of public and private resources. Addressing the policy proposals outlined in this report is another step, but many more issues need to be addressed, such as providing affordable housing, jobs that support families, quality learning, violence-free neighborhoods and much more.

Another is to support the development of programs that strive to meet needs in neighborhoods. The programs featured in this report can provide inspiration for people across the city working to meet the needs of children and their families.

Chicago's neighborhoods are full of adults who all play a role in influencing children and supporting parents. It's time that we reached out to each other and created the kind of community that nurtures children. A community where there are places for kids to hang out and where people have time for children. A place where we all share responsibility for each other and help rebuild the playground, speak out in favor of more money for schools and fight for after-school programs. Providing a good life for Chicago's children will bring a better future for us all.