# ACKNOWLEDGING CHICAGO'S HISTORICAL INEQUITIES

## Historical acknowledgment is the first step of a reckoning process to repair harms perpetrated against specific groups and to prevent them from occurring again.

**The city's evolution has directly and indirectly impacted generations of racial and ethnic communities, often in negative or burdensome ways and frequently for the benefit of privileged population groups. Harms to Chicagoans were both deliberate and unintentional, often involving the leadership, cooperation or silence of local, state and federal governments, as well as the private sector and other civic institutions.**

At the beginning of the We Will planning process, each pillar research team reviewed Chicago's history and relevant actions to assess impacts on historical and ongoing racial and ethnic inequities. The following are systemic harms that have occurred since the early 20th century. These historical snapshots represent lasting legacies of forces that We Will's vision for the future is seeking to address.

Though not intended to recount every instance of racial and social oppression in city history, these acknowledgments are included to contribute to a larger process of healing and reconciliation among Chicagoans and serve as an outline of some areas the City of Chicago commits to improving.


*Throughout this document, opinions expressed through direct quotations from the engagement process and reports cited do not represent the official view, policy or practice of the City of Chicago government.*

# Land Acknowledgment

## The City of Chicago is located on land that is and has long been a center for Native peoples.

**The area is the traditional homelands of the Anishinaabe, or the Council of the Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi Nations. Many other Nations consider this area their traditional homeland, including the Myaamia, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sac and Fox, Peoria, Kaskaskia, Wea, Kickapoo and Mascouten. The City specifically acknowledges the contributions of Kitihawa of the Potawatomi in fostering the community that has become Chicago.**

**While as a vital urban center, Chicago's history in the post-World War II years saw some notable progress and achievements, there were some dark chapters that also shaped present day Chicago and exacerbated existing racial and economic divides that still resonate today. Some of the most significant policies and practices were:**

## Federal Highway Construction

**In the 1940s and '50s, the construction of U.S. Interstates 55, 57, 90, 94 and 290 harmed dozens of densely populated neighborhoods throughout Chicago.**

More than 6,000 families and 2,200 single people were displaced to make way for multilane roadways that divided many working-class communities and, in certain instances, separated white neighborhoods from Black ones, according to a 2020 Metropolitan Planning Council report. Highway construction also hastened the postwar exodus of primarily white families and white-owned businesses to the suburbs, along with jobs, cultural amenities, financial institutions, housing and other amenities that shrank local tax revenues and the City's ability to effectively address the needs of depopulated neighborhoods.

## Treatment of Native Americans

**The Indian Relocation Act of 1956 provided federal funding to relocate Native Americans to cities in part to address a huge demand for manufacturing labor during the economic boom following World War II.**

Advertising campaigns on reservations championed the benefits of urban life and government recruiters encouraged Native Americans living on reservations to relocate to cities like Chicago. The sales pitches did not acknowledge previous relocation policies that pushed Native Americans to marginal lands, nor how the relocation to cities was part of a broader effort to depopulate and terminate reservations, end federal obligations and erase Native American heritage, according to a 2019 University of Illinois-Chicago report.

## Urban Renewal

**In the 1950s and '60s, federally funded urban renewal projects incentivized the City's demolition of designated slums and blighted blocks with plans for modern multifamily homes, institutions and other large facilities.**

Urban renewal projects occurred throughout Chicago, but families and businesses in poor and Black neighborhoods were uprooted, deepening the city's racial and socioeconomic inequities. By 1966, more than 81,200 Chicagoans were displaced by construction projects intended for middle-class families and individuals, according to a 2018 University of Richmond study.

## Loss of Public Housing

**From the 1950s through the '60s, the City and Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) constructed high-rise public housing projects for thousands of low-income Chicagoans and residents displaced by highway construction and urban renewal.**

Surrounded by paved plazas that were deliberately detached from the street grid, the buildings suffered from decades of deferred maintenance and obsolescence. When the City and CHA issued the "Plan for Transformation" in 2000 that was meant, in part, to address decades of racial segregation, CHA projects represented more than two thirds of the nation's 15 poorest census tracts. The plan demolished virtually all the former high-rises, displacing many Black residents. As of 2017, only 8% of the estimated 17,000 former residents of the demolished buildings were living in mixed-income communities, according to a Northwestern University and WBEZ study from the same year.

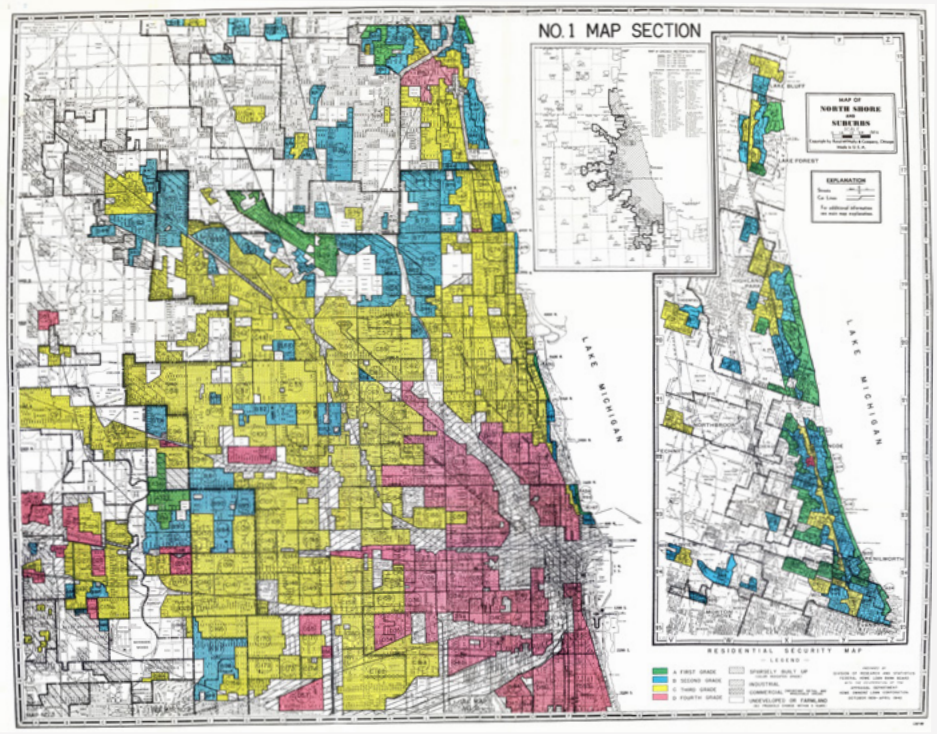
## Redlining

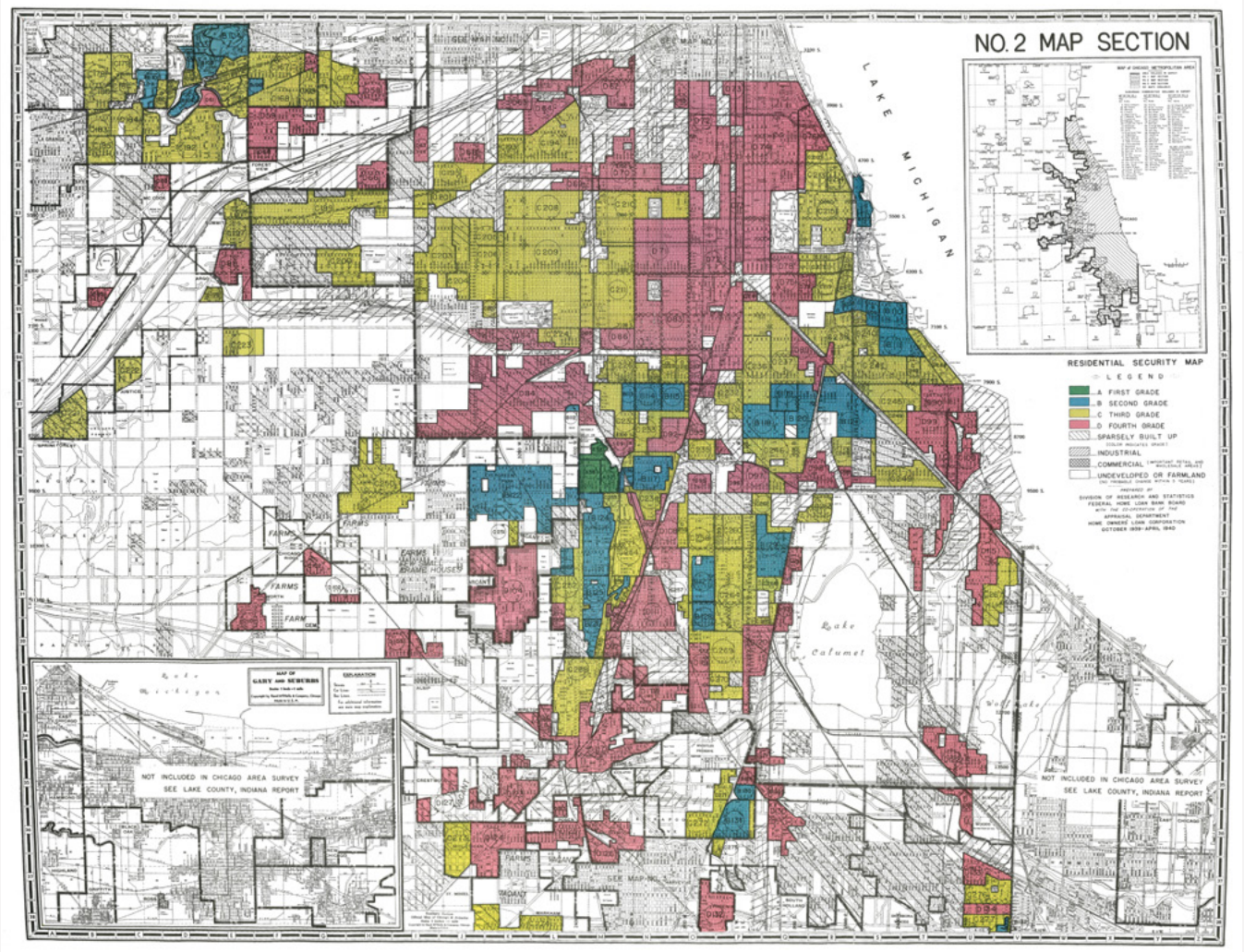
**Starting in the 1940s and continuing into the '70s, a coordinated effort by local and national financial organizations and other government and non-government entities prohibited the use of federally backed mortgage loans for home**

## HISTORY OF REDLINING IN CHICAGO

*1940*

- First Grade (considered "best")
- Second Grade
- Third Grade
- Fourth Grade (considered "hazardous")



**purchases in select neighborhoods.**

Primarily comprised of Black people and low-income residents, these areas were often represented on maps in red to alert finance professionals that they were believed to represent risky investments for loans guaranteed by the Federal Housing Administration. As a result, redlining directly incentivized banks not to approve loans for Black and some Latino applicants, resulting in Black households receiving less than 2% of all federally insured loans at the time, and predominantly white neighborhoods and suburbs receiving preferential access to financing, according to a 2014 DePaul University report.

## Contract Sales

**In the 1950s and '60s, predatory housing contracts robbed Black families in Chicago of an estimated $3 billion to $4 billion, according to a 2019 Duke University analysis.**

The wealth was extracted by real estate speculators, investment syndicates and other financial entities that sold properties to Black homebuyers through contracts instead of traditional mortgages. The contracts included large down payments and inflated interest rates that produced little or no equity over their terms. The contract sellers could also evict buyers at any time until payments were complete with minimal repercussions. Contract sales exploited an estimated nine of every 10 Black families who purchased homes in Chicago during the era, resulting in negligible family-wealth-building compared to families who enjoyed conventional mortages.

## Housing Covenants

**As a result of the Great Migration of southern Black people to Chicago in the first half of the 20th century, some predominantly white neighborhoods on the North, South and West sides established restrictive covenants that legally prevented homeowners from selling or renting to Black people and, to a lesser extent, people of Jewish or Asian descent.**

Active from the 1910s to the '40s, these covenants limited where Black families could settle, resulting in fewer housing choices, decreased mobility and limited job options. The covenants also increased opportunities for housing exploitation and discrimination in other neighborhoods through contract sales, redlining and other methods.

## Blockbusting

**With the dissolution of housing covenant enforcement by the 1950s, unscrupulous real estate companies and their sales agents leveraged white homeowners' fears about the potential impact of Black neighbors on their property values, sometimes convincing multiple adjacent households to expeditiously sell their homes and at reduced rates.**

The agents then sold the homes to Black buyers with inflated terms. The nationwide practice, thought to have started in Chicago, victimized both buyers and sellers to the detriment of dozens of neighborhoods across the West and South sides.

## Great Recession

**The 2008 foreclosure crisis was largely driven by global predatory lending practices that reduced the collective wealth of U.S. Black and Latino families by more than half and two-thirds, respectively.**

In Chicago, home prices in predominantly Black communities are still 24% below pre-recession levels, according to a 2011 Pew Research Center report.

## Vacant Lots

**The City's demolition of thousands of abandoned, vacant homes has left many West and South side neighborhoods pockmarked with overgrown lots.**

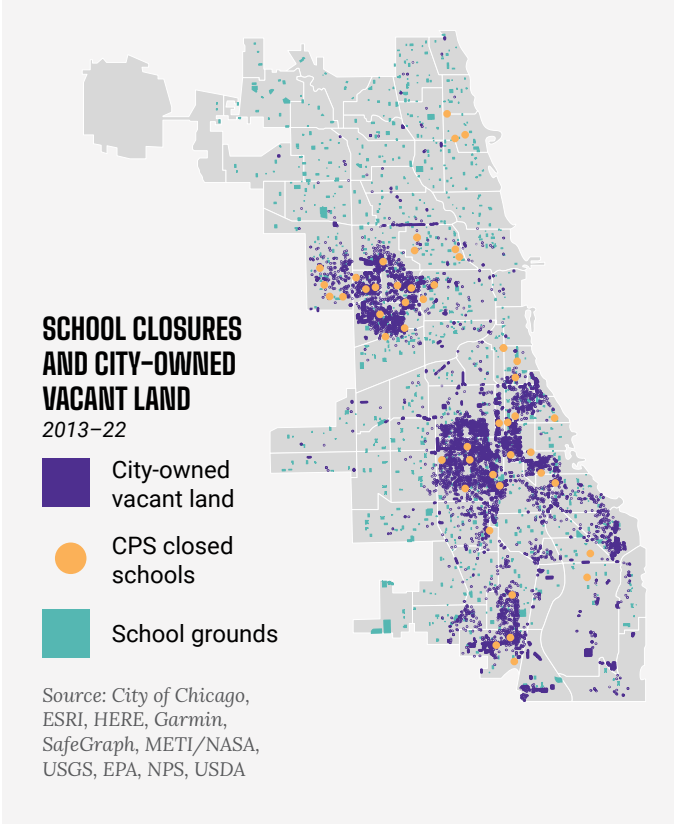
The lots continue to attract public dumping, loitering and other illegal activities that discourage private investment. As of early 2022, the City owned an estimated 10,000 vacant lots, with another 20,000 lots controlled by absentee property owners, banks, financial institutions and other entities with no comprehensive redevelopment strategy. Many vacant

lots, particularly on the West Side, are connected to the 1968 Chicago riots sparked in part by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The riots resulted in more than 125 fires and 210 buildings being damaged, according to independent estimates.

## School Closures

**Following decades of neighborhood disinvestment and depopulation, the 2013 closure of 49 public elementary and high schools due to budget and enrollment issues left hundreds of West and South side families without convenient education options.**

Many students were forced to leave their neighborhoods to attend classes, sometimes through dangerous areas. A 2018 report by The Guardian estimated that 88% of students impacted by the closings were Black. Due to the absence of long-term planning for the security and repurposing of the closed schools as community assets, many buildings were stripped of valuable assets and 19 out of 50 of the buildings have yet to be repurposed to productive uses.




## Policing

**A pattern of racially inequitable policing in the United States and in Chicago is long-standing and well-established. The use of law enforcement to address violence as well as other social ill has led to deep mistrust of the police, allegations of abuse and corruption, and fundamentally has not led to lasting peace.**

A 2017 U.S. Department of Justice investigation of the Chicago Police Department (CPD) found "reasonable cause to believe that CPD has engaged in a pattern or practice of unreasonable force." That investigation led to a lawsuit filed by the Illinois Attorney General against the City of Chicago in 2017. The Illinois Attorney General and the City reached a settlement resulting in a consent decree in 2019. The consent decree covers numerous topics including community policing, impartial policing, use of force, crisis intervention, supervision, training, officer wellness, data, and accountability. It is an agreement to make reforms to ensure that police services are provided to all individuals consistent with state and federal law and to build a foundation of trust between CPD and the communities they serve.

## Industrial Pollution

**Chicago's historic role as an industrial center and its location at the nexus of the country's transportation network have contributed to pollution-related burdens for generations of residents who work at or live near industrial facilities, rail yards, waterways, highways and airports.**

Late 20th century federal environmental regulations helped to mitigate air pollution, but the evolution of last-mile delivery facilities near area interstate highways in the 2010s, coupled with the continued environmental burden of the concentration of industrial facilities, continue to cause public health disparities for Chicagoans. Families living in majority Black and Latino

communities on the Southwest, West and Southeast sides that are near heavy industrial facilities and/or bisected by highways are more vulnerable to the effects of pollution exposure, according to a 2021 Alliance for the Great Lakes study, among other sources.

## Downtown Development

**The City has historically utilized public resources to pursue private and public developments in the central area, which has resulted in the displacement of communities, even as investments have made the area a successful commercial hub.**

In the late 19th century, the Loop included an established Chinatown, but the composition of the neighborhood changed as anti-Asian sentiment rose in the United States and the City forced the Asian American population to relocate to encourage continued development. Since the 1960s the City has sought to recreate the central area as a mixed-use neighborhood, often prioritizing resources to catalyze downtown developments at the expense of other neighborhoods. Guided by formal plans and policies, private sector investments incrementally expanded the footprint of downtown into the Near North, Near South and Near West sides, while public spending revitalized the Loop's cultural amenities and nearby public open spaces.

## Data and Exclusion

**Despite living in Chicago for decades or even before it was incorporated, multiple ethnic groups have been traditionally excluded from the city's historical narrative, undercounted during data collection efforts, and underrepresented as elected officials.**

Though most race-related data collection efforts in the U.S. have historically omitted Native American status, abundant research indicates that Native Americans experience significant disparities in health, education and jobs. In another example of barriers to inclusion, Asian Americans didn't have a City Council representative until 2011 despite constituting approximately 7% of the City's population.

### Population Data in We Will

**Throughout this plan, many data charts and graphs include the available population-level data on economic and social outcomes by race and ethnicity as defined by categories in the U.S. Census.**

It was not until August of 2021 that the Census Bureau initiated questions to ask respondents their sexual orientation and gender identity. Some charts using third-party or non-census public sources do not include specific racial or ethnic groups, such as Native American residents, and not all charts in this plan display outcomes for other identities, such as disability, LGBTQIA, gender identity or status as undocumented.

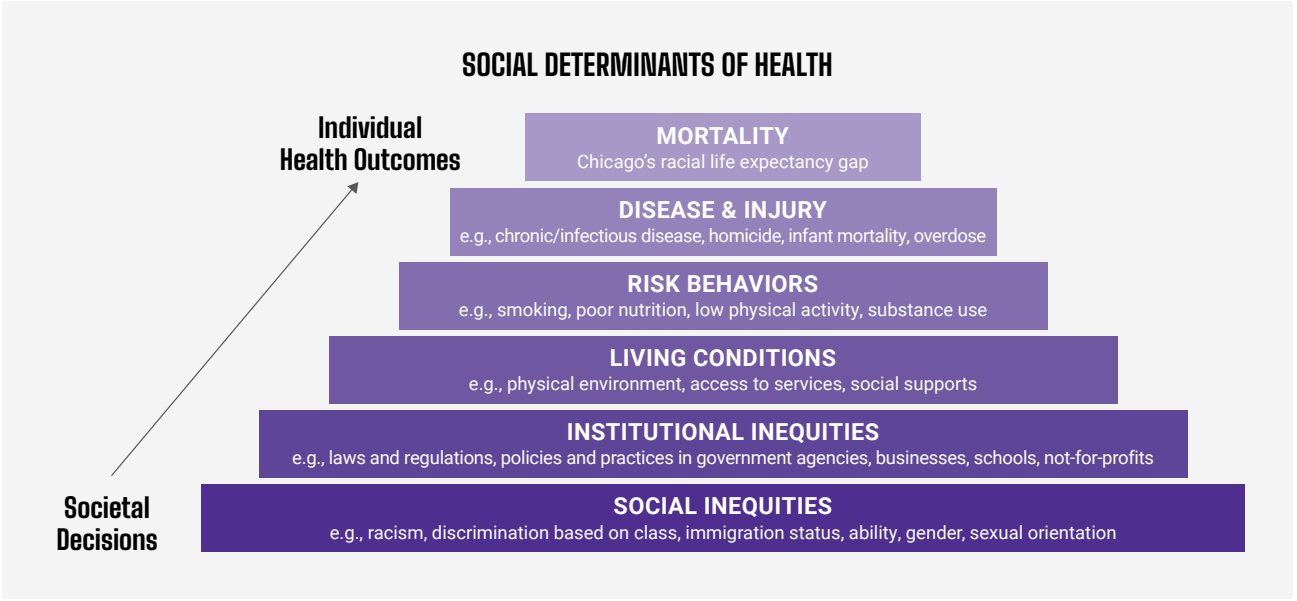
# Addressing the Root Causes of Chicago's Health Inequities

**Adopted September 2020, the City's five-year community health improvement plan, Healthy Chicago 2025, envisions a future where "all people and all communities have power, are free from oppression and are strengthened by equitable access to resources, environments and opportunities that promote optimal health and well-being." This vision has yet to be realized. Chicago has unacceptable disparities in the health and well-being of city residents.**

The City's most significant health disparities involve Chicagoans' life expectancies. For example, the life expectancy gap between white and Black residents has increased from almost nine to 10 years since 2017, while the life expectancies of Latino residents have decreased by seven years since 2012.

Chicago's health disparities are also deeply connected to the neighborhoods where people live. For example, Fuller Park and Hyde Park are both South Side community areas only three miles apart yet their residents' respective life expectancy gap exceeds 16 years.

The conditions in which Chicagoans are born, grow, live, work and age have a bigger impact on health outcomes than their access to medical resources. Approximately 80% of an individual's wellbeing is influenced by social, economic and community factors, compared to 20% by healthcare. Advancing goals and objectives across all eight We Will pillars are needed to improve citywide health disparities.



# Key Terms

**We Will's historical reckoning activities were initiated through a series of Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) and Department of Planning and Development (DPD) workshops in fall 2020 that included stakeholders' review of challenges and successes of other cities producing citywide plans.**

The themes were used to build out the We Will planning process and produced multiple key themes for future study, including Chicago's need to reckon with a history of systemic injustice and build trust with communities harmed.

***The key terms were refined for We Will Chicago below:***

**KEY TERMS**

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|---|---|
| Harm | A negative result or burden on a community or population due to formal or informal policies, actions, events or movements. |
| Historical Acknowledgment | The formal recognition of one or more harms experienced by a group of people and the naming of who perpetrated the harm. |
| Historical Reckoning | An agreement that seeks to rectify a harm, along with policies and measures to prevent the harm from occurring again. |