



PLACES OF FREEDOM, SAFETY, AND JOY

Matthew D. Nelsen

Shifting Narratives in Chicago

Chicago is frequently portrayed as a city of deficits: gang violence and homicides capture the attention of media outlets and the entertainment industry alike;²⁰⁰ bond-rating firms label the city's credit as "junk;"²⁰¹ and schools are portrayed as "crumbling" and "failing" despite academic gains.²⁰² As previous sections of this report have emphasized, these

challenges are real and worthy of scrutiny. However, addressing these topics in the detail they deserve risks painting a unidimensional portrait of the city. One study finds that many Chicagoans feel that media coverage of the city is too negative and does a poor job of capturing what is actually happening in their neighborhoods.²⁰³ This is especially true among residents living on the city's South

FIGURE 1: CHICAGO RESIDENTS WHO AGREE "STORIES ABOUT MY NEIGHBORHOOD ARE TOO NEGATIVE"

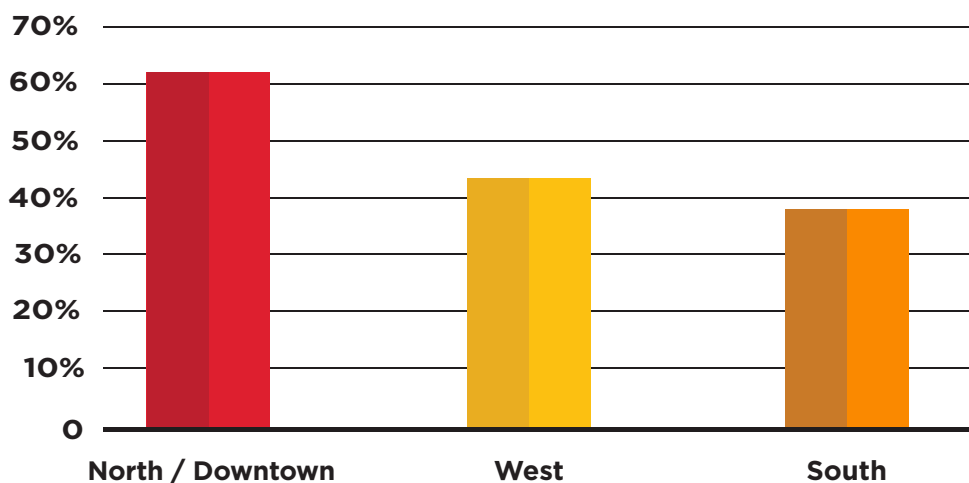


and West Sides (see Figures 1 and 2). Our conversations with young Chicagoans allow us to identify stories that typically go unrecognized. Young people of color in particular are well aware of the challenges facing the city. However, they also remind us that individuals living on the city’s South and West Sides continue to experience joy, exercise agency, and possess a great deal of pride in their communities even in the face of harsh inequities. Alternative representations of what it is like to live on the South and West sides of the city not only complicate our image of Chicago but lend important insights to policymakers. As the city grapples with continued population loss, city leadership should be attuned to the emotions young people ascribe to their communities.²⁰⁴ Freedom, agency, and feelings of safety and joy play an important role in how young adults envision their futures in Chicago.

Freedom

Freedom is central to the work of youth led-activist groups. Thus, understanding how individuals conceptualize freedom is a necessary step in identifying policies that aim to improve the lives of young people of color in the city. Our conversations reveal that young people across Chicago define and experience freedom differently. As previous sections of this report have emphasized, economic resources, education, interactions with the police, and violence all shape how young people experience life in the city. These factors permeate their sense of freedom as well. A plurality of white young adults claimed to feel free everywhere in Chicago. For example, Jeffrey, a 22-year-old living on the North Side explained: *“I feel [free] anywhere ... I just feel comfortable, I guess, all over the city.”* Several of the young white adults we spoke to mentioned this mobility,

FIGURE 2: CHICAGO RESIDENTS WHO AGREE “STORIES ABOUT MY NEIGHBORHOOD DO A GOOD JOB OF SHOWING WHAT IS GOING ON”



suggesting that freedom is something they experience across neighborhoods. Moreover, when white young adults discussed feeling free, they often stressed the various opportunities provided by the city. Some of these opportunities reflect broader trends in how Chicagoans perceive North Side neighborhoods: A



study that drew from a representative sample of Chicago residents found that the North Side and downtown were often described as places that were safe, beautiful, trendy, and quiet. These characteristics were mentioned by white young adults as they explained why these areas of the city provide them with a sense of freedom. When asked how the city contributes to his sense of freedom, Jared, 22, shared the following: “[In] every way I can think of. Tons of jobs. Tons of park space. Tons of music in the park. The

street fest. The museums. The libraries. Lakefront path. Beaches. The 606 Trail here. Just the people here, I think, are really awesome.” In many ways, responses such as these are not surprising. The fact that white young adults like Jared express a high degree of freedom in the city is indicative of the educational and economic opportunities discussed in earlier sections of this report, as well as the high concentrations of funding allocated to North Side neighborhoods. While other North Siders framed these discussions with an acknowledgement of their privileged position, they frequently discussed South and West Side neighborhoods as lacking, mirroring the ways that media often portray these neighborhoods.

For example, when asked about who has less freedom in the city, Connor, a 26-year-old white man, presented an account of black and brown communities that emphasized deficits and downplayed agency. “I think there’s a lot of people that are locked into where they are and there’s this [youth organization] that I’m kind of tangentially involved with. I think it’s the simplest and best idea I’ve heard. What it does is take kids from neighborhoods in Chicago—some of these kids have never even been on an elevator. Never been on an elevator in their whole lives and they’re in high school. They just take them on explorations throughout the city ... and just say ‘hey, this is literally three

hide that anywhere.” Rather than being “locked in,” young African Americans we interviewed frequently embodied a sense of self-efficacy that spanned beyond neighborhood boundaries. These conversations also complicate narratives that exclusively emphasize absence in South Side communities.

According to one study, 54% of South Side residents believe that media portrayals of their neighborhoods are too negative.²⁰⁵ Specifically, many South Siders feel the media typically emphasizes violence and crime over other topics. Young people like Kennedy, a 20-year-old African American woman in Englewood, challenged this narrative by locating her own neighborhood as a place of freedom. *“I’m [most free] by myself in my backyard ... because don’t nothing really be back there but my hometown and my tree that I grew up with. It’s like a little tree in my backyard that I had a lot of childhood memories from, and they make me feel like I’m safe and you could be whoever you want to be back there.”* While neighborhoods such as Englewood are typically cast in a negative light, young African Americans in our study challenged this notion in their reflections on freedom and place.

Young people in Pilsen echoed many of these sentiments. Latinx young adults also challenged media portrayals of their neighborhoods. Again, as earlier

sections of this report discuss, young adults in Pilsen are well aware of the unequal distribution of resources across geographical contexts and frequently described the ways in which white youth in the city are afforded more opportunities. However, they also approached questions of freedom in terms of self-definition. Like Jerimiah in Englewood, Edgar, a 23-year-old Latino, described a sense of internal freedom that he experienced all the time. *“[I feel free] all the time. I feel like, for me, it’s like I know who I am and I’m not going to not be myself. I feel like all the time whenever I am around my neighborhood, let it be Pilsen, let it be downtown, I feel like I’m ... always going to be happy because I’m living life.”* María, a 21-year-old Latina from Pilsen, shared a similar perspective. She suggested that her school pushed her

“I feel like I’ve become more comfortable now that I’ve gotten older and it’s at a point where [I feel free] anywhere.”

to think critically about marginalization, which has subsequently allowed her to feel empowered by her identity. *“I feel like I’ve become more comfortable now that I’ve gotten older and it’s at a point where [I feel free] anywhere. I know women in general, but especially black or brown women, feel like they have to make*

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themselves small and be hypervigilant and hyperaware of how loud they're talking or how much space they're taking up or attracting attention. ... I just feel like, knowing that, it's made me really confident in who I am and really happy with myself and how I am as a woman. ... I love being a Latina and a woman especially. I'm just proud of that." Like South Siders, nearly 70% of West Side residents feel that media portrayals of their neighborhoods are too negative. When asked how the media represents their neighborhoods, West Side residents named issues such as poverty, gangs, drugs, and violence. However, when asked about freedom, many Latinxs in our study specifically discussed locations in Pilsen as free spaces. Constanza, a 23-year-old Latina, shared a side of Pilsen often overlooked in media portrayals of Chicago's West Side. "There is this [spot], a garden on

Carpenter. It's a couple blocks down from where I live. It's always been there ever since I moved here, since I was like five. It is just this little place; it's a tiny little garden called *El jardín de las mariposas*, which is garden of the butterflies. There's usually never anybody there. I worked on the painting and the murals when I was a little kid. I feel like that specific place is where I can feel myself because I can just grab a book, sit there all day, and nobody will be bothering me." Young Latinx adults living in Pilsen discussed numerous conceptions of freedom, but consistently stressed a state of self-acceptance and appreciation—whether that appreciation was for one's self, one's identity, or neighborhood art.

Other young adults associated freedom with economic prosperity. This was particularly pronounced in Chinatown-Bridgeport, where young Asian Americans frequently discussed freedom alongside financial aspirations and vocational achievements. Jessica, age 18, explicitly associated the allocation of resources to degrees of freedom. "Money is the pathway to freedom. It's just like the sea or the ocean. It's kind of like a pirate on the sea. You can do whatever you want, whenever you want. You're free from the law. It's like complete freedom, [and] with money it's the same thing. If you have a lot of money you can do whatever you want. ... Basically, the more money you have, the more freedom you have." Brendan, a

26-year-old Asian American resident of Chinatown, also linked freedom to financial independence. When asked when he felt most free, he explained it was *“when I was in college ... I was able to do everything for myself independently. Got my bills paid, tuition was taken care of, my classes [were] fine, extracurriculars [were] fine. I was still able to work full-time and then I was able to contribute to my family, like help my mom pay bills, help my sister pay tuition ... I was happy doing all of that. ... As busy as it was, it didn’t feel like an obligation, it didn’t feel stressful. They [were] all really good experiences.”* While young adults living on the city’s South and West Sides experience numerous challenges, these conversations also highlight moments of self-efficacy, ambition, and freedom that enhance our understanding of Chicago’s neighborhoods.

Safety, Joy, and Staying in Chicago

Safety

As leaders and policymakers grapple with Chicago’s persistent population loss, it is important to explore factors associated with one’s attachment to the city and to one’s neighborhood.²⁰⁶ In our

conversations, we found that young adults hold mixed feelings regarding whether to stay in Chicago. Young African American adults in Englewood, for example, were the most likely to say that they eventually wanted to move away. As other sections of this report have emphasized, factors such as violence, aggressive policing, and unequal access to educational and economic resources all contribute to how young people assess what is possible in their neighborhoods. Given the multifaceted nature of disinvestment experienced by Englewood residents specifically, it is not particularly surprising that a plurality of young African Americans we spoke to reported wanting to leave the city. In fact, our conversations reveal that those intent on remaining in Chicago for a long period of time are those who generally feel safe in their neighborhoods.

Young adults are not alone in sharing these concerns. A recent study finds that 57% of Chicago residents identify crime and law enforcement as the most important issues facing the city’s neighborhoods.²⁰⁷ While these are policy domains traditionally associated with public safety, young adults

TABLE 1: CHICAGO OUTLOOK AMONG STUDY PARTICIPANTS

	I want to Move Away Eventually	For a Long Time/My Entire Life	I Don’t Know
Albany Park	35%	32.5%	32.5%
Chinatown-Bridgeport	25%	47.5%	22.5%
Englewood	42.5%	20%	32.5%
North Side	32.5%	35%	25%
Pilsen	35%	30%	22.5%

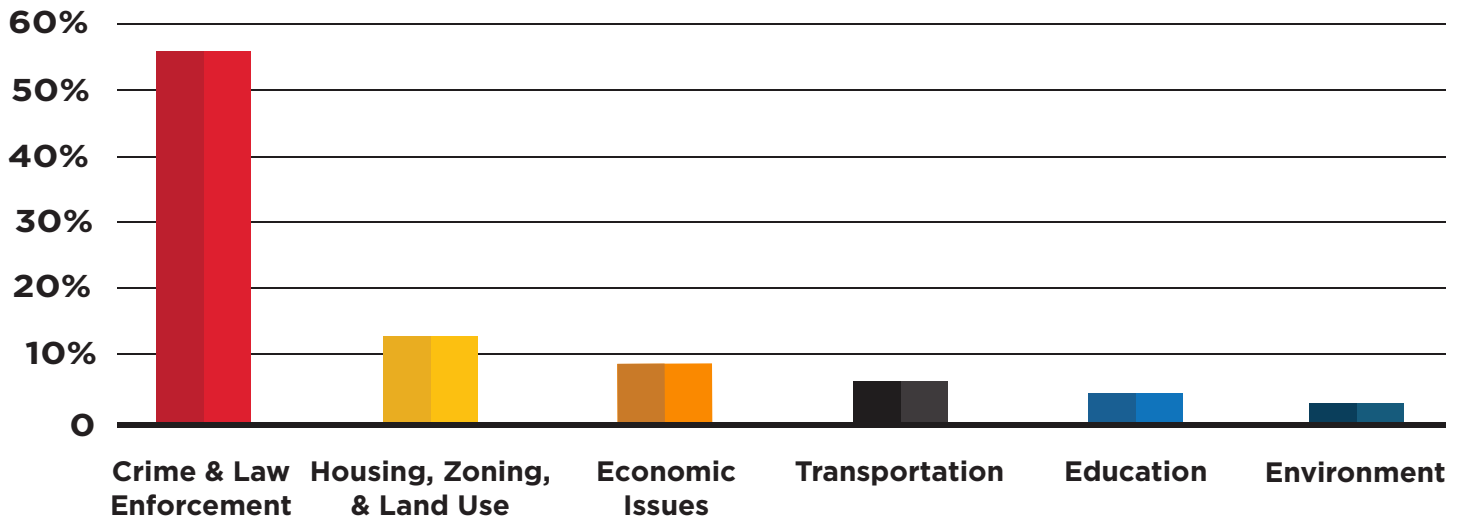


in our study discussed this topic in broader terms. Young people of color in particular offered a conception of safety that included a broader array of factors that often go overlooked in public discourse on this topic.

Young adults in Chinatown-Bridgeport, Englewood, and Pilsen often framed discussions of safety in terms of community connections and familial relationships. Madison, a 19-year-old Chinese American woman who wants to live in Chicago for the rest of her life, reflected upon how frequent interactions with her neighbors contributed to her sense of safety in Chinatown. *“Since I grew up most of my life in Chinatown, it’s really nice to see how ... community-based everyone was. The way I grew up, I would come outside as a little kid, then everyone would have their grandkids outside, and my grandparents would be talking*

to their grandparents, sitting outside, chatting. Then, I would grow up with the neighborhood kids, and everyone would be riding around on their bicycles. It felt really, really safe; you knew your neighbors, you grew up knowing your neighbors, especially the adults and the grandparents who took care of their grandchildren. They would grow up seeing you grow up, and seeing how everyone changes, and how everyone takes care of each other. That’s my favorite part.” Faith, a 29-year-old African American woman, echoed this sentiment. *“You want me to be honest? It is the hood. ... It’s home for me. I love Englewood. As crazy as it sounds with the violence, the lack of education, I know what it’s going to be and I’m holding onto that. ... A lot of people are moving, a lot of people are like, ‘girl, you’re crazy.’ But no. I know everybody. I don’t have problems. What you see on TV, what*

FIGURE 3: MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOODS



people see on TV that says ‘Englewood, you’re doing this or you’re doing that; you can’t walk down the street, you can’t do that.’ I don’t feel that every day.”

Similarly, young Latinxs who intend to stay in Chicago often attributed neighborhood safety to familial relationships. Paola, a 27-year-old Mexican American, intends to stay in Chicago for her entire life to remain close to her family: **“All my family is here. I know, if I ever need something, everyone is just a block or two away. It just feels like home. I always say, even if I’m not technically at home, if I’m in Pilsen I feel safe. It has changed a little bit because I don’t know everyone in my neighborhood anymore, but I know enough people here that, if I was ever in trouble, I would be okay.”** Contrary to white North Siders, African American, Latinx, and Asian American young adults we interviewed provided an important reminder that safety and security encompass a variety of factors, including familial relationships

and community connections. The security these individuals feel within their own neighborhoods is also indicative of their long-term intentions to stay in Chicago.

Joy

When we asked young Chicagoans to describe what brings them joy, many of the participants mentioned pride in their neighborhoods. Feelings of joy and neighborhood pride are also strongly associated with a desire to remain in the

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city. Xiaoming, a 26-year-old Chinese American, intends to live in Chicago for his entire life and takes pride in sharing his neighborhood with his classmates. *“When*

I get to Bridgeport, I'm like, 'I'm home.' When [my medical school classmates] first came to Chicago, I was the one person from the city, so the first restaurant I took them to was Brick and Benny's, which is right down here in Bridgeport, close to Chinatown. And I introduced them to Jackalope and Bridgeport Coffee Shop; we go to Maria's all the time. I bring people to Bridgeport because I love it."

Rafael, a 23-year-old Latino resident of Pilsen, expressed a similar sense of pride in his neighborhood. When asked where he feels happiest in the city, he responded with *"right here in Pilsen. I like seeing people walk around and smelling the bakery, the fresh bread, and seeing people dressed up to go to work and seeing parents drop off their kids and talk to other parents. I feel like there's a strong sense of community when I wake up and I go to work and when I come back from work."*

Rebecca, a 24-year-old African

American Englewood resident, described feeling happiest on her own block, and emphasized the close relationships she has forged with her neighbors. *"I actually feel happiest on my block ... because I've got relationships with my neighbors, being block club president and different things like that. ... I feel pretty happy when I get to just be out and my neighbors say hello to me, and it makes me feel good."*

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The joy and pride that individuals like Xiaoming, Rafael, and Rebecca ascribe to their communities not only reflects their intent to stay in Chicago for a long period of time, but also highlights the



Photo by Tonika Johnson

role neighborhood, friendship, and family connections play in bringing joy to those committed to Chicago.

A New Vision for Chicago

Our conversations with young adults allow for a more complete picture of Chicago. The city undoubtedly faces a number of challenges that disproportionately affect communities of color on the South and West Sides of the city. Yet the young adults included in this study serve as an important reminder that Chicago is more than a city of deficits; young Chicagoans continue to exercise agency, experience joy, and take pride in their communities even in the face of a number of inequalities. Alternative narratives such as these are important to take into consideration in order to gain a multidimensional view of the city and its neighborhoods. These interviews also lend important insights to the city's policymakers.

As city leaders work to address population loss and to foster long-term neighborhood connections, it would be wise to give young adults a role in the policymaking process. While young people of color often experience the city's most pressing challenges firsthand, they are also quick to identify its potential. When asked about his hopes for the future of Chicago, Anthony, a 27-year-old resident of Englewood envisioned *"a thriving, blossoming big city in which everyone, no matter or regardless*



of their socioeconomic background, neighborhood, or religion, can come [to] attain opportunities to get on a path to success. A city that's embrace of all people, inclusive of all people. A city in which you can start from the bottom and honestly make it to the middle or to the top. ... A city [where] there is a place for everybody at the table, a place where violence is eradicated, and crime is stabilized. [A city where] the schools are properly funded, and [where] corporations and elites pay their fair share of taxes." We offer this report as one small piece of the struggle to make Anthony's vision a reality. Only through centering the voices, political work, and lived experiences of young people in Chicago, and especially young people of color, can we hope to make Chicago's future an equal, just, and joyful one.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Nelsen, Matthew D. "Places of Freedom, Safety, and Joy" in *Race & Place: Young Adults and the Future of Chicago* (Genforward at the University of Chicago, 2019), p116-126.