RACE, RACISM, AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD IN CHICAGO

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To fully understand the experiences and prospects of young adults in Chicago, we must reckon with the city's history of racial exclusion and institutional racism. These histories come together to make Chicago an epicenter for the study of race and inequality in the United States. As will be shown in this section, race—the idea that people are members of distinct groups based on differences in skin color, hair texture, and other features—is among the most powerful concepts shaping American society.[5] Race, of course, has no biological basis. But systems and institutions use race to sort and confer differing levels of advantage and disadvantage. In doing so, systems and institutions give the idea of race social meaning and unimaginable influence over social, political, and economic outcomes.[6]

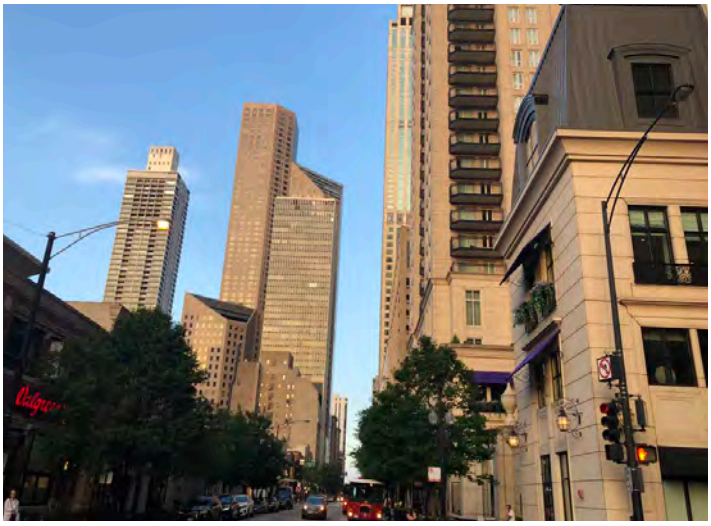
The way most of us think about racism, however, is extraordinarily narrow and limited. People typically think of racism as interpersonal prejudice or individual beliefs about the superiority of one racial group over another.[7] But this individualized view of racism as prejudice is woefully insufficient for understanding how racism shapes material conditions and functions in our nation's schools, courts, hospitals, neighborhoods, and other systems.[8] To address this reality, we instead view racism as including those *institutions*, *structures*, and *practices* that justify, validate, and reproduce the advantages of one racial group over another.[9] By maintaining racial disparities in access to healthcare, quality schooling, decent employment, and other important domains, our institutions, structures, and practices continue to perpetuate race as an organizing concept and racial inequality as a social fact.

Race and racial inequality are also deeply spatialized in the United States, shaping where people live, work, and attend school.[10] A city of neighborhoods, Chicago exemplifies this geographic division and the increasing spatial concentrations of wealth and poverty.[11] White, African American, and Latinx Chicagoans, on average, live in neighborhoods where the majority of the neighborhood population is of their same race or ethnicity.[12] Asian Americans, concentrated in particular areas around downtown and the Southwest and North Sides, also experience moderate levels of segregation from whites and high levels of segregation from African Americans and Latinxs.[13] Moreover, people are less or more vulnerable to health problems, exposure to violence, and contact with the criminal justice system depending on where they live in the city.[14] Some researchers refer to this as the "racial-spatial divide"—the overlapping inequalities of race and place in cities like Chicago that determine the disparate needs, vulnerabilities, and resources available to different young adults.[15]

Why Focus on Race and Racism in Chicago?

Many Americans believe that the United States is post-racial (beyond race) and that we should be colorblind. For instance, a 2013 poll of the Wall Street Journal/NBC News found that a majority of whites and Latinxs agreed that "America is a nation where people are not judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," compared to less than 20% of African Americans who said the same.[16] Some point to "millennials"—young adults in their twenties and thirties—as forerunners of a new, progressive America where race and color will not matter.[17] Millennials are the most racially diverse and reportedly liberal and racially progressive adult generation.[18] According to one assessment by the Pew Research Center, a majority of millennials have interracial friendships and nearly all support interracial dating and marriage.[19] In short, some data indicate that Americans in general, and young adults in particular, are eager for race to matter less than it did in the past.

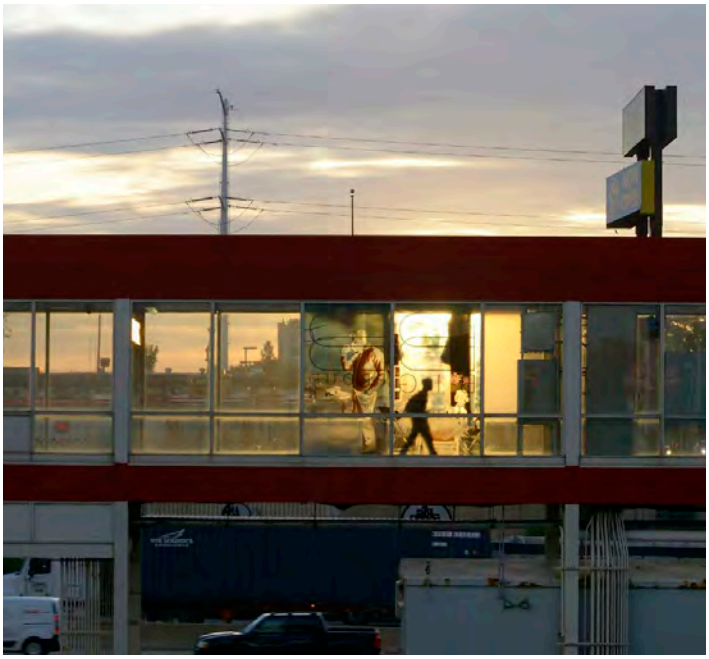
But based on evidence from our nationally representative GenForward Survey of millennials, important racial disparities exist among young adults on government and policy, including the issue of policing



which profoundly affects the young adult demographic. While nearly 75% of young whites, ages 18-30, say they always or often trust the police, around 50% of Asian American and Latinx young adults report similar levels of trust. African American young adults, however, report the lowest levels of trust, with 26% always or often trusting the police.[20]

In our bi-monthly surveys, we at GenForward have also found that African American and (to a lesser degree) Asian American young adults consistently name racism as one of the three most important problems facing America. Latinx young adults repeatedly list immigration as the most important issue to them, whereas young whites consistently cite terrorism and homeland security as among the most important issues.[21] These differences in public opinion are important to note because they often reflect disparities in lived experiences.

Historical and present-day evidence also challenges the colorblind narrative. Consider racial segregation. One of the most powerful forces shaping social life and opportunity in Chicago, racial segregation is neither an accident of history nor an unintended consequence of individual decision-making. For decades, racial segregation has been reinforced and exacerbated by public policies made by city, state, and federal governments and supported by private investors. Many of these policies explicitly excluded African Americans and other marginalized groups. For example, during the second Great Migration, from roughly 1940-1960, African Americans were primarily limited to the segregated "Black Belt" on the South Side of Chicago.[22] Legally binding contracts called "restrictive covenants" were used by whites to prevent home owners from renting or selling to black people.[23] And while the Supreme Court declared restrictive covenants unconstitutional in 1948, real estate speculators took advantage of practices such as block busting and redlining to upcharge African American families.[24] Simply put, the deep, historical legacy of housing discrimination and segregation necessarily fortified racial segregation and distrust in the public schools, in addition to limiting access to jobs and public goods.[25]



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Asian Americans and Latinxs have also faced discrimination and exclusion in housing and employment. Anti-Chinese legislation and exclusion in the 1870s and 1880s, alongside heavy unemployment and harassment, compelled Chinese migrants in California to look for opportunities in cities like Chicago.[26] Many worked in laundry and restaurant businesses not by choice, but because of racial discrimination, hostility, and a sense of competition from other groups. The first Chinese community was located at Clark and Van Buren streets, but high and discriminatory renting practices forced many in the Chinese community to move further south to Cermak Road and Wentworth Avenues—an area in the vicinity of what we know as Chinatown-Bridgeport.[27] But, as with African Americans, the extension of the expressway and the building of a federal prison in Chicago unsettled the Chinatown community and again forced many Chinese Americans to relocate.[28] Discrimination from landlords, banks, businesses, and city government made finding secure, affordable housing—including public housing—a continual struggle for the Chinese community, in addition to isolating many in the community to particular types of employment.[29]

Latinxs, including Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, also faced severe barriers. For example, Mexican newcomers in the early- to mid-20th century were usually offered temporary rather than long-term work. And, like African Americans, Mexican newcomers also faced residential restrictions, segregation, and barriers to receiving social welfare benefits, in addition to cultural discrimination in schools and exclusion from the Catholic Church because they were Spanish-speaking.[30] Puerto Ricans, who came to Chicago for economic opportunity in the 1940s-1960s, were also relegated to menial, poorly paid jobs and segregated housing.[31] Housing discrimination and police brutality have been persistent issues for Puerto Ricans since they first arrived in Chicago.[32] With limited housing options, Puerto Ricans were forced to pay higher rent and live in "barrios" that were subject to inadequate services and high levels of police harassment.[33] As with Asian Americans and African Americans, conditions compelled Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and others to create their own institutions to serve the needs of their communities.

We should note that current discriminatory policies and practices also divide the city's population by race and ethnicity. For example, predatory lending, reverse redlining, land use restrictions, and crime-free rental ordinances were observed in the housing bubble and subsequent foreclosure crisis.[34] These types of racial inequities in housing combine with inequities in other areas that we detail in this report—such as education, violence, and politics—and

continue to shape segregation and human potential in Chicago.

Multiple Domains of Racial Inequality

Race, therefore, remains a defining force in the lives of people in Chicago and across the nation. The evidence is incontrovertible. Consider the persistent, deeply entrenched patterns of racial inequity in the following domains:

Wealth

Chicago is divided into very wealthy and very poor areas. By 2010, the number of wealthy census tracts had increased four-fold in Chicago's predominately white North Side, while tracts with high rates of poverty expanded on the predominately black and Latinx South and far West Sides.[35]

Poverty

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than one-third of African Americans and about one-fifth of Asian Americans and Latinxs in Chicago live in poverty, compared to about one in seven whites.[36]

Public Housing

Nearly 16,000 families who live or lived in public housing have been displaced by the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA) Plan for Transformation, a reform launched two decades ago which demolished or renovated Chicago's 25,000 public housing units in favor of mixed-income[37] housing.[38] About 95% of the displaced public housing tenants were African American, and nearly half were under 15 years old.[39] To date, only 8% of those displaced are living in intended mixed-income housing. Instead, 12% of the displaced population were evicted, and 34% are currently living without government subsidy.[40]

Education

Over 150 of Chicago's public schools have been closed or completely re-staffed since 2002.[41] African Americans make up around 90% of the students displaced by these school actions.[42] The 2013 decision to shutter nearly 50 public schools in Chicago accounted for one-tenth of the total number of schools in the city and affected 47,000 students, including nearly one in four black public school students in Chicago.[43]

Even though Mayor Rahm Emanuel recently pledged nearly $1 billion in repairs, renovation, or new construction for Chicago Public Schools, a *WBEZ* analysis shows that, relative to the number of students enrolled, the budget disproportionately funds schools located on the North Side. Students enrolled in the South Side are thus projected to receive fewer dollars for repairs, renovation, or new construction.[44] Likewise, compared to majority black or Latinx schools, schools with more white students (i.e. schools that are racially

mixed and majority white) received more than double the amount of money per student than the other schools.[45]

Population Change

Although Chicago has faced a widely reported 6% decrease in its population, the net decline in its inhabitants has been concentrated among African Americans and Native Americans. Since 2000, Chicago's black population has declined by 21%—over 225,000 people.[46] One-fourth of its Native American population has also declined during that time.[47] As whites are moving back to the city, African Americans are departing the city, not only to the suburbs but also to southern states.[48]

Segregation

Most of the neighborhoods in Chicago are racially segregated; 61 of the 77 neighborhoods in Chicago feature a racial or ethnic group that is the majority of its residential population.[49] This is particularly the case for whites and African Americans in the city: the average white resident in Chicago lives in a neighborhood that is 72% white.[50] The average black resident in the city lives in a neighborhood that is 66% black.[51] Asian Americans and Latinxs also experience moderate to very high levels of segregation. Latinxs tend to reside in census tracts with few Asian Americans and whites, and far fewer African Americans.[52] Asian Americans—including those who identify as Indian, Chinese American, and Filipino—also tend to reside in areas with few Latinxs and even fewer African Americans.[53]

Policing

Chicago's struggles with racist and racially violent policing practices have played out on the national stage. For example, following the police shooting of Laquan McDonald in 2014, and months of protests thereafter, the U.S. Department of Justice initiated an investigation into problems of police supervision, accountability,

Photo by Tonika Johnson

and unconstitutional excessive force in the city. For many, the Justice Department's findings were not surprising but still disturbing: The Chicago Police Department uses force *about 10 times more often* against African Americans than against whites.[54] Between January 2011 and April 2018, 76% of the incidents involving use of force were against African Americans compared to 8% against whites.[55]

The UIC Policing in Chicago Research Group also found that more than 128,000 individuals' information is stored and tracked in the Chicago Police Department's gang database. Seventy-five percent of those labeled as "gang-affiliated" are black, while 21% are Latinx; 61% are under 30 years old.[56] The vast majority of these individuals have no documented arrests for violent offenses.[57] These kinds of gang databases arguably reinforce the long-term criminalization of young African Americans and Latinxs.

Victimization

According to a 2016 survey of the *New York Times*/Kaiser Family Foundation, 49% of African Americans and 42% of Latinx Chicagoans report that it is very likely that a young person in their neighborhoods would fall victim to a violent crime, compared to 19% of whites in the city.[58] Moreover, nearly half of African Americans personally know someone who was a victim of gun violence in the past few years, compared to about one-third of whites and Latinxs.[59]

Mass Incarceration

In Chicago, mass incarceration is deeply concentrated by place. Data from the Cook County Circuit Court and the U.S. Census Bureau show that rates of imprisonment are highest in predominately black and Latinx areas of the South and West Sides, and below the national average in the predominately white North Side.[60] While most of the North Side has incarceration rates of nearly zero to less than 500 per 100,000 residents, some South and West Side areas of the city have incarceration rates eight times higher.[61]

As shown in these statistics, race and racism play central roles in Chicago's social, economic, and political organization. What is more, young adults are particularly exposed to the effects of racism because they are at an age when wealth, poverty, and education can have particularly strong effects on upward mobility. Additionally, young adulthood is a period when people's contact with law enforcement skyrockets.[62] Young adults are therefore a miner's canary[63] for understanding the effects of race and racism on life outcomes in Chicago.[64] Their experiences alert us to how race continues to matter in the city and how racism continues to take shape in the 21st century.

Photo by Tonika Johnson

Centering the Voices of Young Adults

As we shall see in this report, race is a social force that shapes young people's access to jobs and education, how they experience gender, their exposure to poverty and violence, and their own sense of power, possibility, and value in the city. It affects the lives of young people who are poor and middle class, immigrants and native-born, LGBTQIA and straight, documented and without papers. Even in the face of these challenges, however, many young Chicagoans and their communities have pulled together to support each other, strengthen their community, and take positive steps toward an equitable future for themselves and others. Young adults play a central role in this work, which stretches across different neighborhoods and different cultural and ethnic communities in the city. They are teachers, fast food workers, artists, social service providers, activists, engineers, students, day laborers, health professionals, entrepreneurs—the list goes on. Many of these individuals are working collectively in organizations, associations, clubs, and groups to demand a better future for young people in their neighborhoods.

In this report, we endeavor to provide readers with a glimpse into the complexity of the lives of young people who face many challenges, structural and personal, but who also practice important collective and individual strategies for problem-solving. By centering their experiences, we hope readers will gain a more nuanced understanding of what is wrong, what is good, and what is possible in Chicago.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Knight, David J. "Race, Racism, and Young Adulthood in Chicago" in *Race & Place: Young Adults and the Future of Chicago* (Genforward at the University of Chicago, 2019), p16-23.