

# MAPPING SOCIAL WELLNESS

## IN CHICAGO FOR THOSE 55+

ACROSS 77 COMMUNITY AREAS

Mather institute



# TABLE OF CONTENTS


3 Introduction

4 How Was the Study Conducted?

5 How to Use the Map

6 Key Findings

11 Neighborhood Spotlights

16 From Data to Action—Practical Uses of the Map

17 References

# INTRODUCTION

Chicago is known affectionately as a city of neighborhoods, each with its own character, community spirit, and cultural richness. But even in a city with such a vibrant social fabric, many older residents experience fewer interpersonal connections than they would like (Desai, 2025). Social wellness—feeling connected with others and part of a community—is a crucial, yet often overlooked, part of healthy aging. Moreover, research shows that strong social ties are one of the most important predictors of a happy and long life (Waldinger & Schultz, 2023).

Community plays an essential role in social wellness. Neighborhoods shape how people interact, support one another, and build shared identity (Madu & Madu, 2024). Features such as community centers, churches, libraries, walkable streets, and green spaces can encourage people to connect. However, factors like crime, a lack of local businesses, and poverty can hinder these connections.

To better understand how community conditions impact social wellness among Chicagoans ages 55 and better, Mather Institute and NORC at the University of Chicago created a first-of-its-kind interactive map that highlights two key dimensions:

1. **SOCIAL WELLNESS** – How socially connected older adults feel to other people and to their community
2. **COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY** – How supportive each community area is for older adults' social wellness

The map allows users to objectively compare neighborhoods, explore factors that shape social wellness, and identify opportunities to strengthen community life for older adults. This report describes the study that informed the development of the Social Wellness Map, features of the map and ways it can be used, and key findings.



# HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

Researchers used two main sources of information to create the Social Wellness Map: 1) a new survey of older adults representative of each Chicago community area and 2) existing, publicly available community data.

## SURVEY

A total of 4,065 Chicago residents ages 55 and better completed the survey by phone or online. Community areas had an average of 53.5 respondents each. Gage Park had fewer, so it was combined with Chicago Lawn in the map. The survey included questions about social wellness, neighborhood perceptions, individual characteristics, and demographic information. We applied statistical weighting to ensure the results reflected each community area's population. Additional details about how the survey was conducted are available in the full methodology report.

## PUBLICLY AVAILABLE DATA

Community area information came from the American Community Survey, the city of Chicago, and other public sources. These data describe community demographics, economic conditions, safety, walkability, and access to gathering places.

Together, these data help clarify how socially connected older adults feel and how supportive each community area is for building those connections.

# HOW TO USE THE MAP

The Social Wellness Map provides a citywide view of how neighborhood conditions and social experiences vary across Chicago's 77 community areas. It enables users to explore patterns, compare communities, and examine the factors that shape social connection among adults 55+.

Users can explore differences across community areas through a color-coded heat map. This map also provides citywide rankings and side-by-side comparisons to highlight how communities differ. In addition, users can examine relationships between two indicators at once (e.g., to see if social wellness is better in areas with higher walkability). Background factors, including health, income, and age, are also available in the map to help provide additional context for interpreting differences between communities.

### THESE FEATURES MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR USERS TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

- identify neighborhoods with higher or lower social wellness or community connectability
- explore relationships between social wellness, community characteristics, and individual factors
- spot geographic patterns and disparities across the city

## USERS CAN EXPLORE DIFFERENCES ACROSS COMMUNITY AREAS THROUGH A COLOR-CODED HEAT MAP

## COMMUNITY AREA SPOTLIGHTS

Throughout this report, you'll find highlighted community area "hot spots," areas that have surprising results, or areas that are on the extreme end of key measures.



CLICK HERE FOR THE INTERACTIVE MAP

# KEY FINDINGS

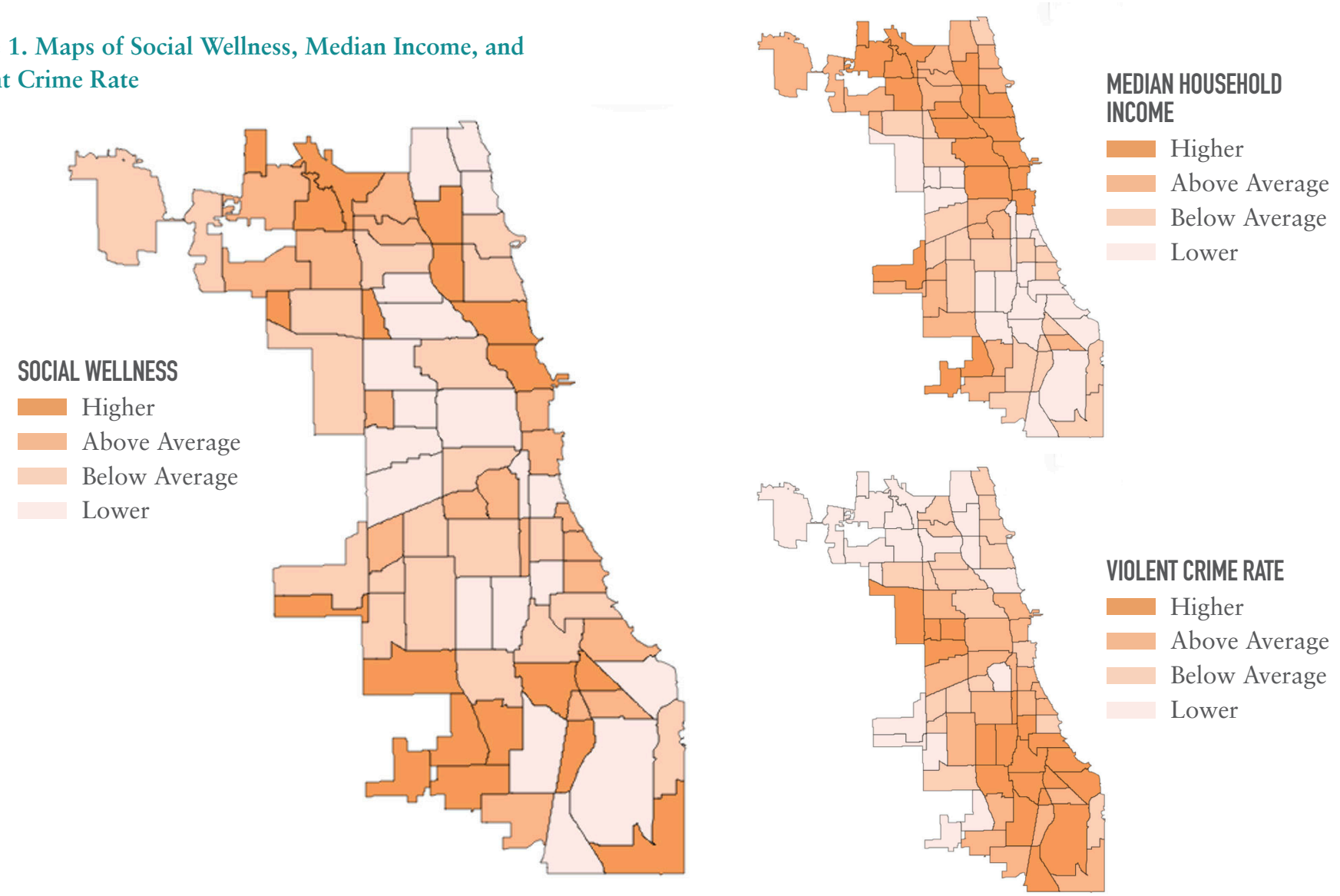
The Social Wellness Map offers many ways to explore how community conditions and older adults' social experiences vary across Chicago's community areas. While many insights can be drawn from the map and its underlying data, we have compiled several key findings that highlight notable patterns, relationships, and opportunities for strengthening social wellness among adults 55 and better.



### 1 ONE NOTABLE FINDING FROM THE SOCIAL WELLNESS MAP IS THAT AREAS WITH HIGHER AND LOWER LEVELS OF SOCIAL WELLNESS ARE SPREAD ACROSS CHICAGO.

This contrasts with some commonly observed geographic patterns, such as those seen for income and crime. As illustrated in Figure 1, income and crime exhibit largely opposite spatial patterns, whereas social wellness displays a more varied distribution across community areas. Although older adults' social wellness tends to be better in areas with higher median incomes and lower crime rates, this map highlights that social wellness reflects aspects of community life beyond economic and safety indicators alone. The 10 community areas with the highest levels of social wellness are displayed in Figure 2.

## Figure 1. Maps of Social Wellness, Median Income, and Violent Crime Rate



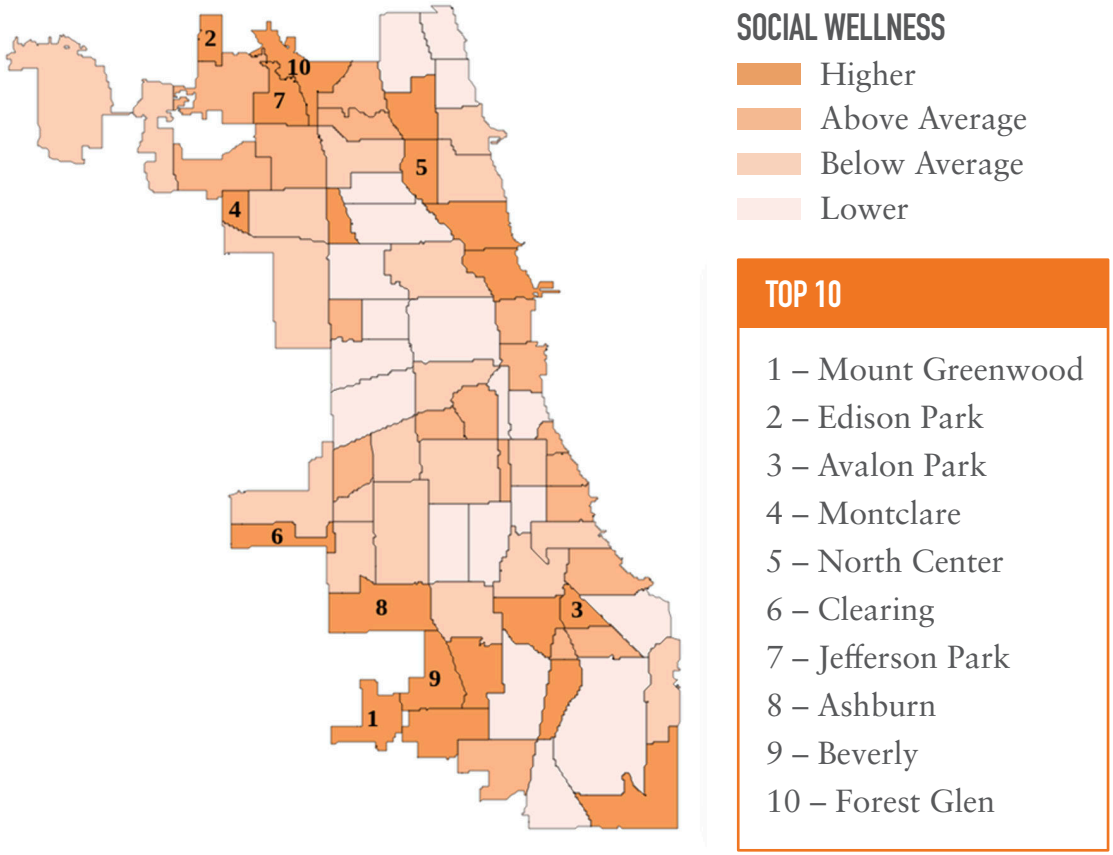
## 2 AS EXPECTED, SOCIAL WELLNESS TENDS TO BE HIGHER IN COMMUNITY AREAS WITH FEWER RESIDENTS AT RISK OF SOCIAL DISCONNECTION.

The Social Disconnection Risk score captures several factors associated with limited social contact, including being unmarried, living alone, having fewer trusted individuals to share experiences and concerns with, and infrequent participation in social activities such as volunteering and group meetings.

## 3 SOCIAL WELLNESS IS ALSO RELATED TO BETTER HEALTH AND WELLBEING MORE BROADLY.

Community areas with higher social wellness tend to have residents who are happier and healthier, with a greater sense of meaning in life. Social wellness also tends to be higher in areas with lower reports of feeling depressed, anxious, and stressed. This is consistent with evidence that strong social connections are beneficial because they can provide practical and emotional support, help reduce stress, and encourage healthy behaviors (e.g., Holt-Lunstad, 2024).

Figure 2. Top 10 Community Areas for Social Wellness



## 4 COMMUNITY AREAS WITH HIGHER COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY TEND TO HAVE RESIDENTS WITH STRONGER SOCIAL WELLNESS.

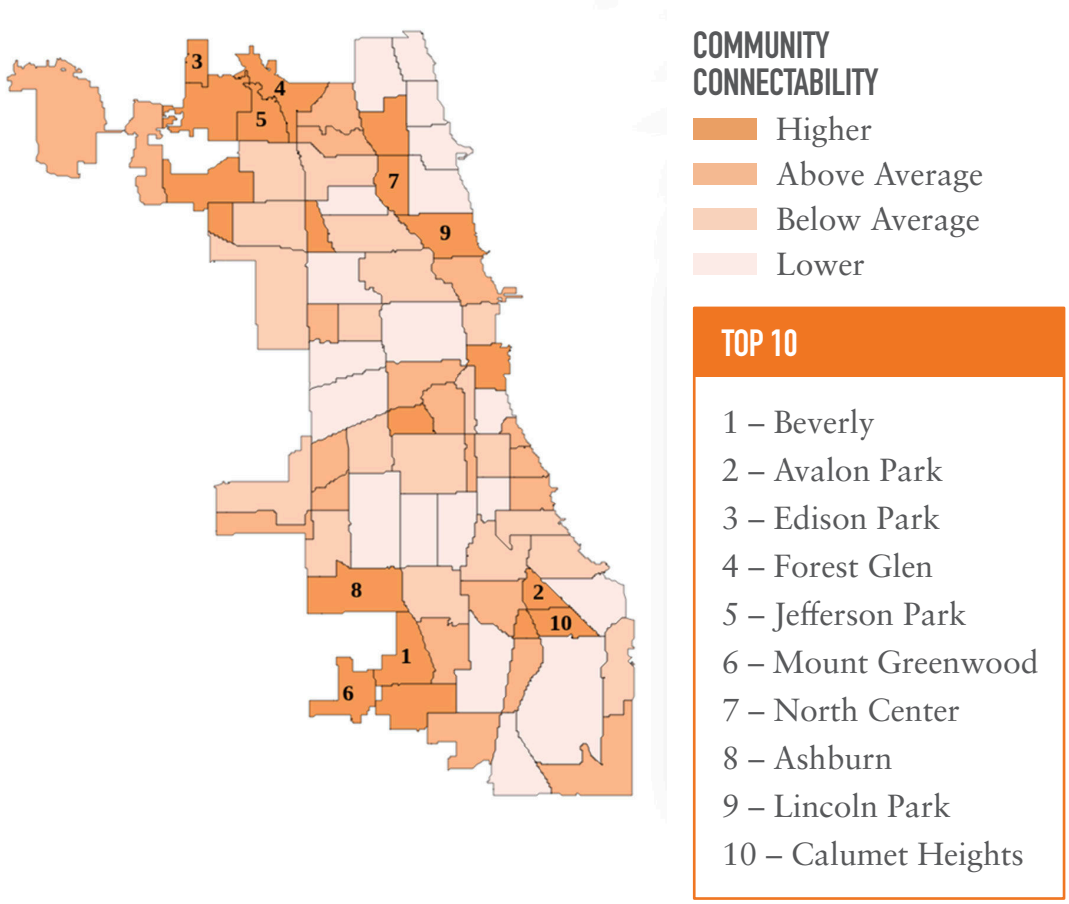
Figure 3 displays Chicago community areas with higher community connectability.

## 5 ACCESS TO SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES AND GATHERING SPACES IS A KEY COMPONENT OF COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY.

Social wellness tends to be higher in neighborhoods that are more walkable and offer convenient access to stores and other services. Prior research shows that "third places" (i.e., gathering spaces outside of home and work) play an important role in supporting older adults' social interaction (Sugiyama et al., 2023).

Interestingly, the map revealed a complex relationship between social wellness and number of third places. Community areas with more libraries, senior centers, grocery stores, and places of worship often had lower social wellness. This pattern likely reflects broader community conditions. For example, gathering spaces may be more common in higher-density areas, community resources may be intentionally located in higher-need areas, and older

**Figure 3. Top 10 Community Areas for Community Connectability**



adults may rely on gathering places outside their neighborhood. In addition, access to a small number of meaningful or preferred gathering places, such as a single place of worship, may be sufficient to support social connection, with additional nearby options providing limited added benefits.

## 6 SAFETY AND ORDER CONTRIBUTE TO AN AREA'S LEVEL OF COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY.

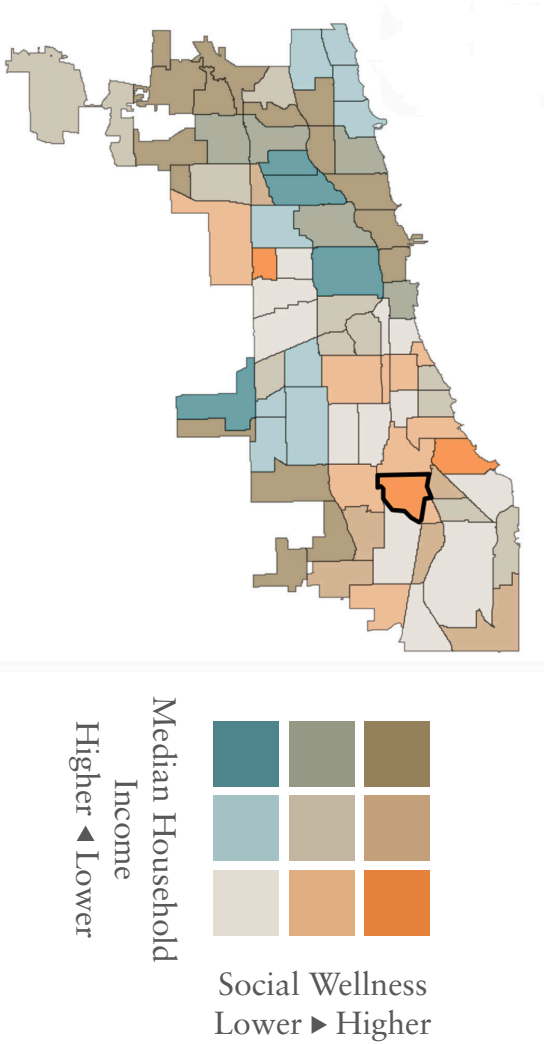
Community areas with higher violent and nonviolent crime rates tend to have lower social wellness. Social wellness is also lower in areas where there's greater "perceived disorder," which indicates that neighborhoods feel less safe and clean. These findings suggest that improving safety and neighborhood conditions may support social connections among older adults.

## 7 STRONG COMMUNITY TIES ARE ALSO AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY.

Older adults' social wellness tends to be higher in community areas where residents have lived in the neighborhood longer and where more people own their homes. Social wellness is also higher in areas where people trust and support one another (i.e., greater social cohesion). This pattern likely reflects how repeated interactions over time help relationships grow, emphasizing the value of having opportunities for neighbors to come together as a community.



# NEIGHBORHOOD SPOTLIGHT: CHATHAM




## LOWER INCOME, HIGH SOCIAL WELLNESS

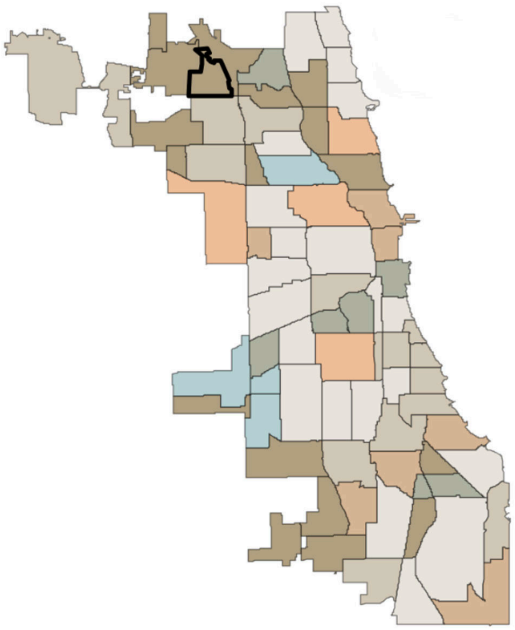
Chatham is a historically Black and middle-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, defined by bungalow residences and a restaurant strip along 75th Street anchored by local institutions like Lem's Bar-B-Q and Brown Sugar Bakery. The neighborhood has long served as a center of Black cultural life and is home to public plazas honoring figures like Mahalia Jackson, who lived here for much of her career, and to the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection at Woodson Regional Library, one of the largest archives of African American history in the Midwest.

Chatham has a higher social wellness score, 8.14 out of a potential score of 10, despite having fewer resources than other neighborhoods and experiencing long-term population loss, similar to other South and West Side neighborhoods. It has a relatively high crime rate and high median age (41 years). Chatham also has moderate community connectability, 66.41 out of a potential score of 100, and moderate social disengagement (3.38).

Compared to its neighbors, Chatham stands out from those to the north and west (i.e., Englewood, West Englewood, Greater Grand Crossing, Auburn Gresham) on social wellness. It is more similar to Avalon Park to the east, which has higher community connectability, lower violent crime, and higher income (more detail below). Avalon Park is also more middle class today than Chatham or its neighbors.

matherinstitute.com/social-wellness-map

# NEIGHBORHOOD SPOTLIGHT: JEFFERSON PARK






## HIGH SOCIAL WELLNESS, HIGH COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY

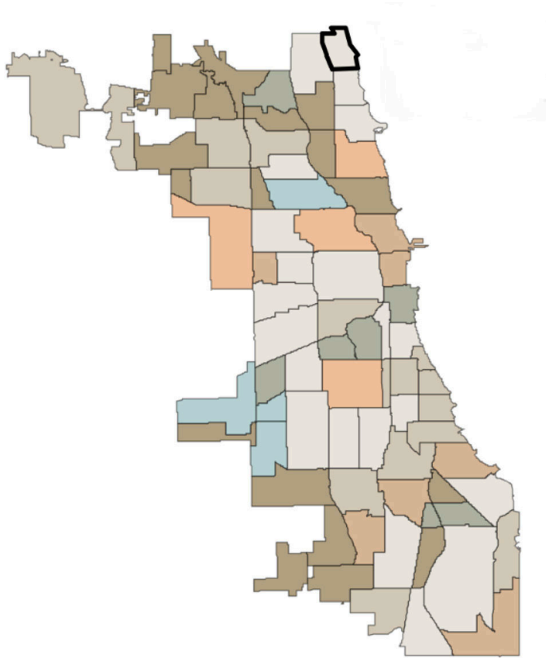
Jefferson Park is a residential neighborhood on Chicago's Far Northwest Side with deep Polish-American roots and a high concentration of city employees, including police officers, firefighters, and teachers drawn by the neighborhood's affordability and easy downtown access via Jefferson Park Transit Center, a major transit hub. The Copernicus Center, an event space set in a restored 1930s movie theater, serves as the neighborhood's cultural heart and hosts the annual Taste of Polonia, one of the largest Polish festivals in the country.

Jefferson Park is a relatively White (78% White, non-Hispanic), economically diverse neighborhood. It has high social wellness (8.37) and high community connectability (89.08), even in comparison to wealthier Far Northwest Side neighborhoods: It reports higher scores than Norwood Park (7.95 and 71.60, respectively) and similar scores to Forest Glen (8.24 and 91.49, respectively), which is a wealthy neighborhood ($138,253 median household income). Norwood Park, in contrast, is more suburban, with lower population density.

In other measures, Jefferson Park has more people who work from home and a higher median age (41 years) than the city overall, but not in comparison with its neighbors. It also has more retail and transit connectivity than its Far Northwest neighborhoods.

matherinstitute.com/social-wellness-map

# NEIGHBORHOOD SPOTLIGHT: ROGERS PARK




## LOW SOCIAL WELLNESS, LOW COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY

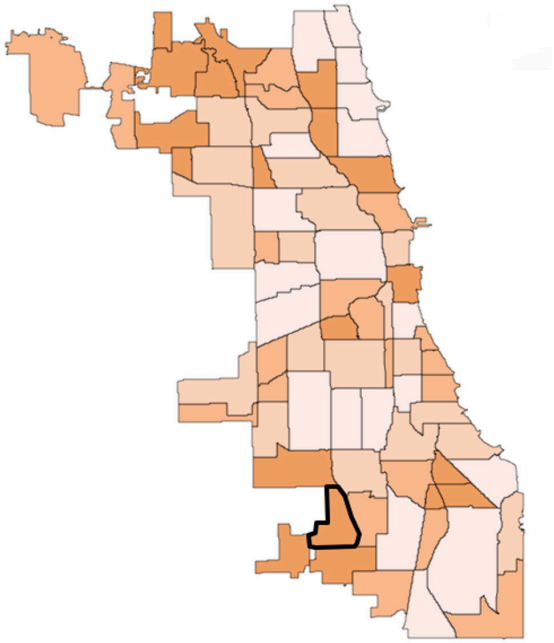
Rogers Park sits at the far northeastern corner of Chicago, where residential streets directly connect to Loyola Beach and Pratt Beach on Lake Michigan. It is one of the few Chicago neighborhoods with this degree of waterfront proximity and ease of access. One of the city's most diverse communities, home to residents from more than 80 countries, Rogers Park includes a string of storefront theaters and murals along the Glenwood Avenue Arts District, a restaurant corridor on Clark Street, and a significant student presence from Loyola University.

Rogers Park has lower social wellness (6.37), along with its nearby neighbors of West Ridge and Edgewater. It has relatively high crime, low owner occupation driven by the student population (30%), and high poverty rates for the North Side. It is densely populated with a high proportion of apartments, with many residents living alone (81%). The neighborhood has less retail than would be expected for a densely populated neighborhood.

The median age in Rogers Park is similar to the city overall (36 years), but the median household income is lower than the city average ($60,000 compared to $71,000). Adults report worse mental health than the city as a whole.

Rogers Park's low community connectability (16.50) contrasts with West Ridge, which has a much higher community connectability score (36.55).

# NEIGHBORHOOD SPOTLIGHT: BEVERLY



**COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY**

- Higher
- Above Average
- Below Average
- Lower

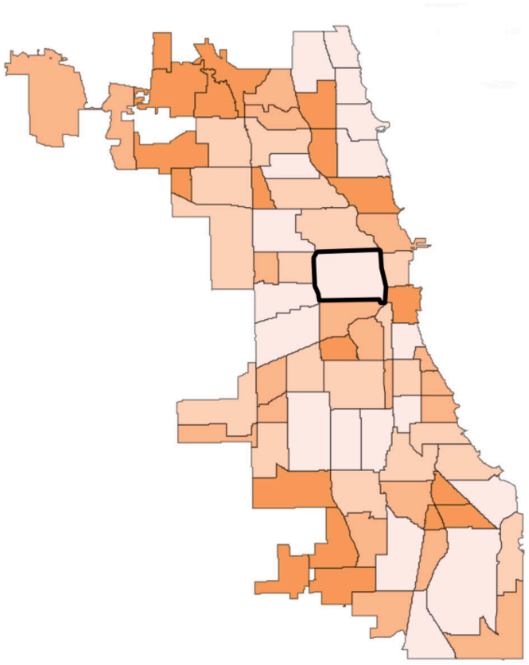
## HIGHEST IN COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY

Beverly is a racially diverse neighborhood on Chicago's Far Southwest Side, distinguished by its unusually hilly topography that sets it apart from Chicago's otherwise flat landscape. It is home to an extraordinary concentration of historic homes along tree-lined streets like Longwood Drive, including five designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Neighborhood life has historically centered on Catholic parishes, and the area hosts the annual South Side Irish St. Patrick's Day Parade, one of the largest community-organized parades in the country, while the Beverly Arts Center provides a 40,000-square-foot hub for visual and performing arts.

Beverly is very connected, with a particularly high rate of belonging. It has low crime rates and an overall strong family culture. It has the highest community connectability score across all Chicago community areas (100), including compared to its lower-income, more African American neighbor Morgan Park (77.91), although Beverly and Morgan Park report similar social wellness scores (8.29 and 8.11 for Beverly and Morgan Park, respectively).

Beverly is also higher in community connectability compared with its lower-density, and nearly all White, neighbor Mount Greenwood (86.02), although Mount Greenwood has a higher social wellness score (8.80).

# NEIGHBORHOOD SPOTLIGHT: NEAR WEST SIDE



COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY

- Higher
- Above Average
- Below Average
- Lower

## LOWEST IN COMMUNITY CONNECTABILITY

The Near West Side encompasses the West Loop, which includes "Restaurant Row" on Randolph Street and its concentration of Michelin-starred establishments. It also includes Fulton Market, an area in which many meatpacking warehouses were converted into luxury lofts and corporate headquarters. Greektown along Halsted Avenue and the historic Little Italy corridor on Taylor Street are additional unique and historical elements. The neighborhood's dramatic development over recent decades reflects a broader pattern of industrial-to-luxury conversion, with newer high-rise residential towers and a highly mobile population of renters alongside longer-established communities further west.

Near West Side is near the middle on social wellness scores (6.68) but very low on community connectability (7.93), which is surprising given it is home to many dining destinations. It is a high-income neighborhood ($110,651 median household income) that is also younger (14% are 55+ years old); it also has higher crime than average. The neighborhood includes the West Loop but also the near west side west of Western Avenue. It comprises newer residents, many renters (only 30% owner occupied), and higher crime toward the western edge. This community has also experienced public housing demolition with the Henry Horner Homes, with a lot of new development in recent decades.

# FROM DATA TO ACTION— PRACTICAL USES OF THE MAP

The online map (matherinstitute.com/social-wellness-map) can help Chicago organizations and leaders make informed, community-focused decisions about how to strengthen social connection among older adults. It highlights where community conditions support social engagement and where additional attention may be needed.

Professionals can use this map to:

- **Identify priority neighborhoods** where lower scores suggest opportunities for targeted investments, such as improving parks, walkability, or transit access to create more welcoming community environments.
- **Learn from strong neighborhoods** by examining high-scoring community areas and identifying environmental or organizational assets that may be replicable elsewhere.
- **Inform resource allocation** by directing programs, staffing, or funding toward areas with the greatest social wellness needs.
- **Guide community-building efforts,** including designing programming or initiatives tailored to community areas where older adults may have fewer social connections or limited access to gathering places.
- **Strengthen partnerships** by connecting with organizations, local leaders, and institutions in areas with higher community connectability to share strategies and programs that have proven successful.
- **Integrate data with local insights,** using the map, alongside community knowledge, resident input, or existing planning efforts, to create holistic strategies for supporting social wellness.

By grounding planning and program development in community-level data, the map supports more effective strategies to improve social wellness across Chicago. When interpreting the map data, it's important to note that the map displays average or typical scores for each community area and that individual experiences may vary. In addition, because the data are from a single point in time, the map cannot be used to test cause-and-effect relationships, such as whether improvements in walkability lead to higher social wellness.

# REFERENCES

Desai, P., Ng, T. K., Krueger, K. R., Wilson, R. S., Evans, D. A., & Rajan, K. B. (2025). Social engagement, depressive symptoms, and loneliness, and longitudinal cognitive decline in a population-based cohort of older adults. *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 6*, 39–48. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.osep.2025.02.004

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2024). Social connection as a critical factor for mental and physical health: Evidence, trends, challenges, and future implications. *World Psychiatry, 23*(3), 312–332. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21224

Madu, S. N., & Madu, J. I. (2024). Social wellness and development: The true essence of humanity. *ANSU Journal of Arts and Social Sciences, 11*(2), 132–155.

Sugiyama, M., Chau, H.-W., Abe, T., Kato, Y., Jamei, E., Veeroja, P., Mori, K., & Sugiyama, T. (2023). Third places for older adults' social engagement: A scoping review and research agenda. *The Gerontologist, 63*(7), 1149–1161. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac180

Waldinger, R. & Schulz, M. (2023). *The good life: Lessons from the world's longest scientific study of happiness*. Simon & Schuster.

Staffed by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, Mather Institute is an award-winning resource for research and information about wellness, aging, trends in senior living, and successful industry innovations. The Institute conducts cutting-edge research, often in collaboration with leading universities, with the goal of informing, innovating, and inspiring. Mather Institute is part of Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating Ways to Age Well.[SM]

**The following people contributed to the development of this report:**

Jennifer L. Smith, PhD, Vice President, Mather Institute
Renae Smith-Ray, PhD, Senior Research Associate, Mather Institute
Cate O'Brien, PhD, MPH, Chief Transformation Officer, Mather

**Additional contributions from NORC:**

Nell Compernolle, PhD, Senior Research Scientist
Ellen Bloss, MA, Research Scientist
Ned English, MS, Associate Director
Lekha Venkataraman, MA, Senior Research Director
Ryan Buechel, Senior Research Director
Martha McRoy, MS, Senior Research Methodologist
Joshua Lerner, PhD, Senior Research Methodologist
Peter Herman, MA, Senior Research Methodologist

(888) 722.6468 | institute@mather.com | matherinstitute.com

mather institute ✳NORC

0726 CB