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# Community-Based Organizations in the Fight Against Gentrification

A Study of Logan Square, Chicago

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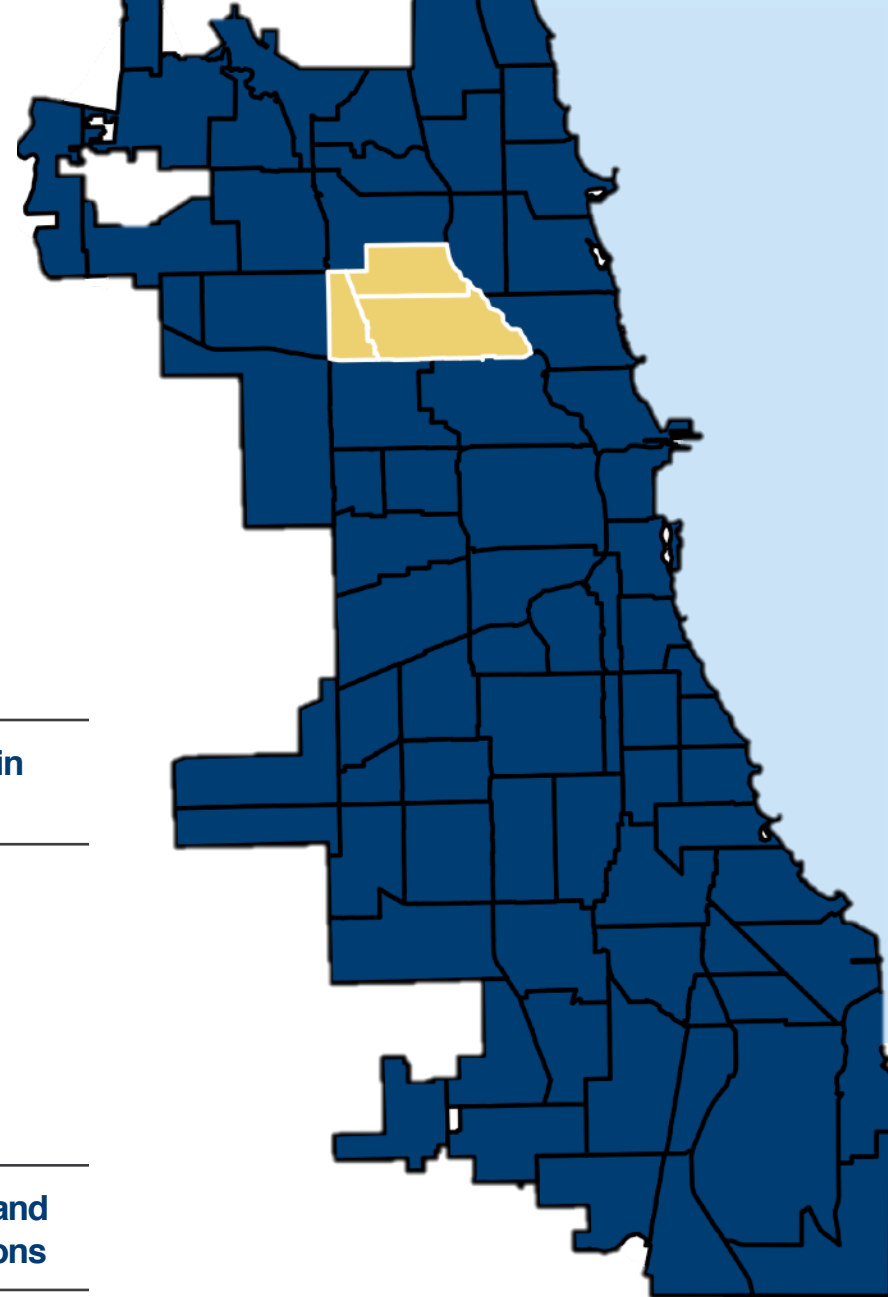
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**Key Findings and  
Action Questions**

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**“I mean, fuck, look what we’re up against...  
We’re talking about generations of disinvestment.  
We’re talking about a broken system. I can’t just  
give you a handout and everything’s magically better.  
[We need] organizing, that’s collective power. You  
can’t build collective power in a silo.  
I just don’t see any other way, frankly.”**

**- a Logan Square Community Leader**

# Introduction

In Chicago and in cities across the world, community-based organizations are working to protect and bring resources into their neighborhoods. They provide services, advocate with governments and businesses, and address pressing local problems. In Logan Square, a network of community-based organizations (CBOs) is working to push back against gentrification and ensure that the Latinx families that once made up the majority of the

neighborhood can still thrive there.

The neighborhood has had many recent wins in this effort—more affordable housing, a community-funded mental health center, a newly established land trust, a pause on housing demolitions—but the neighborhood has continued to gentrify.

This study seeks to understand how community-based organizations in Logan Square

build collective power and what structures get in their way.

The goal of this community report is to provide community leaders and residents with the main findings of this study. It also hopes to provide community-based organizations with information they can use to reflect on their strategies and relationships.



## Study Location

Logan Square is an economically and ethnically diverse neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago.

Although the focus of this study is Logan Square, people often group the neighboring community areas of Avondale and Hermosa with Logan Square. Therefore, the boundaries of “Logan Square” in this study are fuzzy and include discussion of surrounding neighborhoods.

In 2000, **65%** of Logan Square residents were Latinx. Between 2000 and 2014 **almost 20,000 Latinos left Logan Square** as the cost of living increased and businesses came in to cater to the growing young, White population.

# Study Description

This study is based on:

21

in depth interviews with

23

leaders and staff from

16

from CBOs in and around Logan Square

The CBOs included nonprofits, churches, schools, volunteer organizations, independent political organizations, and local government.

Participants ranged in age from twenties to late sixties.

Half of participants identified as Chicana, Mexican American, Hispanic, or Latinx.

Findings are also drawn from over 50 hours of participant observation with organizations in the neighborhood.

Interviews focused on experiences of gentrification, their organization's work, and how they worked with other organizations in Logan Square tackling the same issues.

This study also draws its findings from social network surveys with 17 participants. The structure of our social networks—not only who our friends are but also who our friends' friends are—affects how we think, feel, and act. Participants identified the people they often work with outside of their own organizations. The survey mapped out the respondent's professional social network and relationship dynamics in their network.

A community-based organization is any public or nonprofit organization whose mission is to represent or improve a local community or neighborhood.

Collective efficacy refers to neighborhood residents' capacity to work together to solve local problems through social cohesion and shared expectations for action. CBOs foster collective efficacy, which has been connected to lower rates of illness and crime and better student achievement in schools.



# Gentrification in Logan Square

To understand people's work, you have to understand the context that they work in. In Logan Square gentrification and displacement are the story of the neighborhood and affect many of the area's key social issues from housing and education to immigration and mental health.

Logan Square's community leaders and CBO staff know the history and process of gentrification in Chicago better than any textbook. They explained the march of redevelopment that began with urban renewal in Lincoln Park, cut through Lakeview and the Near West

Side, and is making its way through Logan Square towards Hermosa, displacing Latinx families. They discussed the pushes from businesses and city government that created speculative investment as well as the way new White residents began shaping the neighborhood in their image.

In their words, gentrification is not natural. It is not the gradual changes that neighborhoods go through all the time, but a change enacted through business deals, zoning approvals, neglect, and selective investment. Gentrification is also a trauma—a loss of home, belonging, and community.



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## Searching for Home

A Poem by Logan Lu

Inspired by the words of  
study participants

Listen to full poem

[-Link-](#)

*Together we march  
down our streets  
For everyone to see  
That our memories  
will not be forgotten  
That all of our voices  
will be heard  
Across the city for all  
communities  
Fighting for their right  
to stay  
Today and always*

Pictured: A new development on  
Milwaukee Avenue in Logan Square

# How do CBOs in Logan Square take collective action?

## Collective Network Capacity

Past studies have found that neighborhoods with more local organizations have more collective efficacy. This study looks not at the number of community-based organizations in Logan Square but how they are connected and how they work together. It is the totality of these relationships that gives this neighborhood pathways for collective action. The *structure*, *reach*, and *strategy* of interorganizational relationships have created a robust capacity in Logan Square for collective problem-solving



**Structure:** Describes how people are tied together and the strength, history, and character of those ties.



**Reach:** Refers to the diversity of allies and resources the neighborhood has access to through all of its connections.



**Strategy:** Explains how people actually use their professional relationships and to what end.

# Structure



How are CBOs in Logan Square connected to one another?

Network science has shown that the structure of relationships within communities affects the flow of resources, how fast information travels, and more. These are the features of the Logan Square CBO network that facilitate collective action

*Collective power in Logan Square—what this study refers to as collective network capacity—relies on:*

- *trusting relationships*
- *the ability to connect with a wide range of allies*
- *a small group of close allies and supports*

Number of ties: CBO staff surveyed had on average 16 people in their professional social network. Most of these relationships focused on cross-organizational projects and campaigns.

Strength of ties: A strong tie refers to a very trusting relationship with frequent interaction. Only 38% of all relationships reported by participants involved strong ties, but the importance of so-called “weak” ties should not be overlooked. In Logan Square, the less close, more infrequent alliances that develop play an important role in building collective power.

Trust: Previous research indicates a high degree of trust amongst organizations in Logan Square. This study confirms that most people report complete or almost complete trust in other people and organizations.

History of ties: Despite the long history of inter-organizational work in Logan Square, most CBO staff had only known each other for less than five years. Interview participants described a lengthy history of collaboration between organizations, but many of the relationships formed as a result of those joint efforts are relatively new. This implies new ties between organizations continuously form.

# Reach



What resources do CBO leaders and staff in Logan Square have access to?

CBO staff and leaders in Logan Square have dense, interconnected relationships with one another. While relationships within the neighborhood are very important and may facilitate internal cooperation, having allies outside of the neighborhood is also a key part of negotiating and fighting for resources. In the map on the next page, each dot represents an organization represented in the study and the lines illustrate the relationships reported between organizations. 58% of ties reported

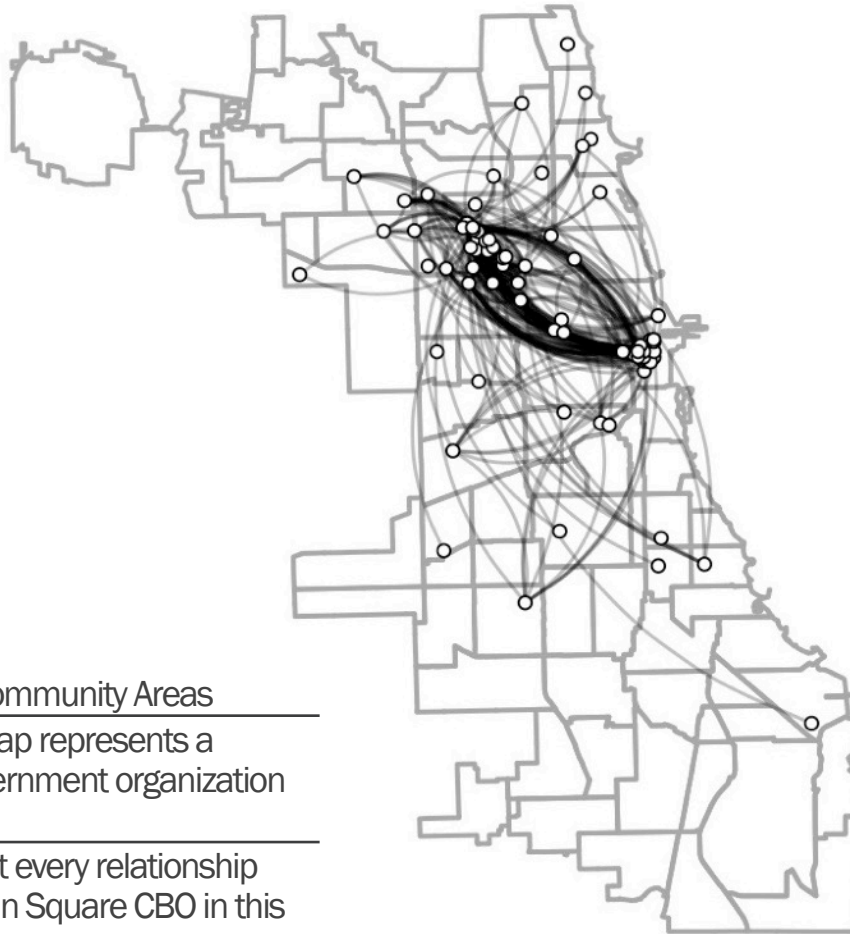
by participants were to other organizations based in and around Logan Square. Logan Square CBO's maintain dense ties within the neighborhood and a wide range of ties to influential Chicago organizations across the city. Information, resources, and action spreads faster and farther in this type of network.

On average any Logan Square CBO is about “two handshakes” away from anyone else in the network. This means even if a CBO leader

does not know someone in the neighborhood or does not have an important political connection, someone they do know can quickly make that introduction for them.

Ties to large nonprofits and city and county officials located downtown provide Logan Square leaders a diverse set of advantageously situated allies and resources. Many of these are nonprofits, foundations, and agencies that do work in the areas of housing, immigration, and education.

# Logan Square CBO Network Map



*With many partners inside and vast reach outside the neighborhood, information or requests for assistance can travel quickly across the network.*

*The reach of this network facilitate collective action in Logan Square.*

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Map of Chicago Community Areas

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Each dot on the map represents a community or government organization in Chicago.

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The lines represent every relationship reported by a Logan Square CBO in this study.

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# Strategy



How do CBOs in Logan Square actively use their professional relationships to build collective power?

## Thinking like an organizer

Even if an organization did not explicitly engage in community organizing, participant's experience with community organizing led them to apply that approach to their professional relationships.

*"I tend to think like an organizer. So it's like who are my allies? Who are the right people to be aligned with? Who are the right people who we should strategically align ourselves with and do work with in order to get the thing that we want to get done? So...It's almost, it's almost like it's not collaboration. It's partnership but with a very specific purpose. It's ally-ship."*

## Increasing access to resources

Participants described the practical necessity of forming relationships with other organizations to get the resources and information they needed to do their work.

*"That's really how these relationships often boil down: who or what you can get and you're offering something in return. It's quid pro quo. Now it might just be your support. It could be like a chip. I might need you down the road for something, or you watch my back."*

# Strategy



Some described working in Logan Square as a clique, which sometimes feels too intense, but lets organizations quickly request and offer support to one other.

## Bringing in newcomers

The history between Logan Square CBOs can be intimidating. However, when seasoned staff orient newcomers they pass down their connections and strengthen the overall network.

## Building numbers and clout

Many participants talked about the necessity of forming relationships with other organizations to demand attention from city leaders or to have the capacity to carry out projects.

*“ I’m all about partnership. We’re a congregation of 50 people. 50 people isn’t going to be able to do anything—that’s David and Goliath. We’re just a tiny group of people compared to the masses. So if we’re going to be able to do anything, we have to do it in partnership.”*

# Obstacles to Collective Power

Conflict and political power structures pose challenges to the interorganizational network created in Logan Square.





“

*“So I can look at every one [of the people I work with in Logan Square] and say there’s conflict...There’s always going to be conflict, but are we ultimately working towards the same goal? I would say yes for all of them, but there are some priority conflicts along the way.”*

”

## Expecting Conflict

Participants discussed conflict as an inevitable but surmountable obstacle if people address issues respectfully and share a collective goal.

While participants rated most relationships with other organizations as trusted ties, 36 percent of all ties involved conflict either past or present. Relationships with perceived gatekeepers, often politicians and local leaders, had the most conflict. Most disagreements related to “priority conflicts” between organizations, where

the specific goals of one group did not align with another’s on a project or campaign. The long history of organizations working with one another has left a long history of past conflicts. However, CBO staff and leaders in Logan Square largely had confidence in their ability to work through conflicts.

# Navigating Conflict

Participants said they were able to work through disagreements either 1) because they were starting from the same values or goals, 2) because they had private, direct conversations about the issue, or 3) because they held the organizing value “no permanent friends, no permanent enemies.” The less frequent, serious conflicts between people often related to underlying value differences or experiences of discrimination and typically occurred with people not in Logan Square.

Conflicts are also a way that the Logan Square organizations negotiate with one another and hold each other accountable. Disagreements can be worked out or moved past unless it is about a fundamental difference or stance that is pro-gentrification, anti-immigrant, or racist. Competition between organizations for funding or influence rarely came up as a source of conflict. Some issue areas breed competition more than others.<sup>1</sup>

“

*[As long as] they're shooting in the same direction, I'm okay with it. You need all the help you can get...Basically we're all on the same side.*

”

“

*I think part of what's contributed to the culture of trust here is when we have an issue, when we have conflicts, we never go public. When I have a beef with one person, I call her up and say, “Hey, let's go out for tea,” and she probably knows what's coming, but we talk through it or vice versa.*

”



# Political Power Structures

If Logan Square has such a strong anti-gentrification network, why has the neighborhood still seen so much displacement?

- Ward boundaries.
- State laws.
- City council bureaucracy.
- Opponents in politics and the business community.

These are all facts of life and politics in Chicago that community-based organizations must work around. Even with strong collective network capacity, formal political power structures can greatly advantage or disadvantage local campaigns.

What follows are three examples of political power structures that have shaped the wins and losses in Logan Square.

# Bureaucracy Slows Affordable Housing

In 2020, the Emmett Street project will finally break ground after over six years of campaigns to build affordable housing on an underused city parking lot. Throughout those six years, community leaders fought through numerous public meetings, city council meetings, and lawsuits to keep the project alive. The campaign almost failed multiple times as the Chicago city administrators and politicians blocked or sat on attempts to move it forward. The bureaucratic politics of affordable housing are one reason why former LSNA Director Nancy Aardema says housing successes take decades to achieve.

*“What you constantly are dealing with are these layers and layers that have an agenda. And if your agenda for affordable housing doesn’t match their agenda for what they want the community to look like ultimately, then it’s not going to happen. There are barriers every step of the way.”*





# State Law Speeds Path for Mental Health Clinic

In 2019, community-based organizations in Logan Square with the help of the Coalition to Save Our Mental Health Centers, successfully passed a ballot initiative to establish a community-funded mental health center serving Logan Square, Avondale, and Hermosa. In less than a year, they led a successful signature and education campaign to convince 87% of local voters to increase their property taxes by a marginal amount to permanently fund the clinic. The campaign owes its success to the organizing of residents and local leaders, but also to a state law that allowed them to put a binding referendum up for a vote.

*“There’s not a lot of opportunity for it to get blocked by politics. It’s voted in. It’s put on the ballot by the community. It’s voted on by the community. The only way program can be dispersed or disbanded is to have another referendum to get rid of it...There are all of these built-in checks and balances that don’t even allow for the opportunity for it to be subject to the whims of politics.”*



## Gerrymandered Wards Complicate Collective Action

Chicago conducted its last once-in-a-decade redrawing of the city's wards in 2011. Before 2011, most of Logan Square sat in one ward—the 35th—represented by one alderman. Now Logan Square is chopped into six different wards. Logan Square CBO staff suspect the new wards were intended to leverage development deals and hinder the neighborhood's ability to organize its residents.

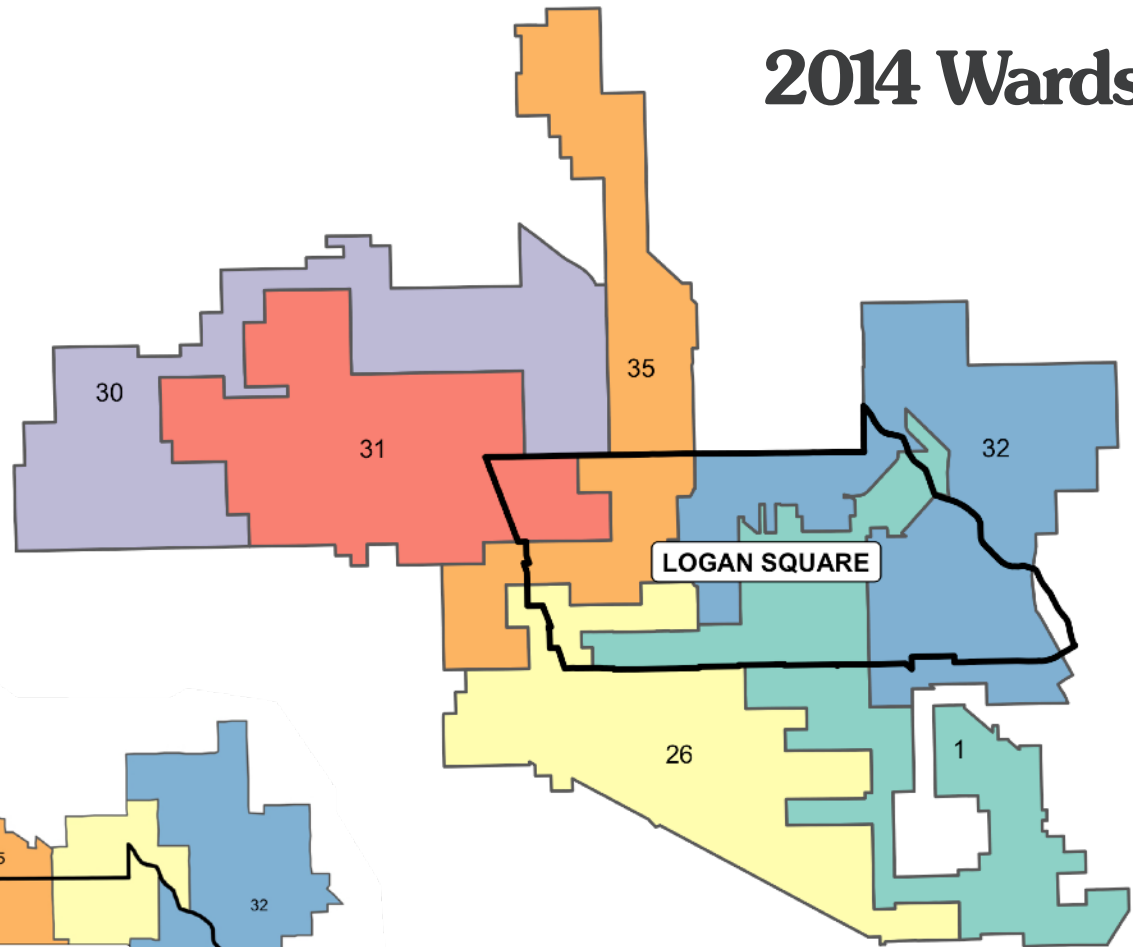
*“[Redrawing wards] was a concentrated effort of diluting power. Because when it was this massive movement of organizations coming together to move the one alderman to do the one thing it was different. Everything is fucking harder now. Now it's like, you want to build scattered site housing in Logan Square? That would almost certainly involve two if not three aldermen.”*

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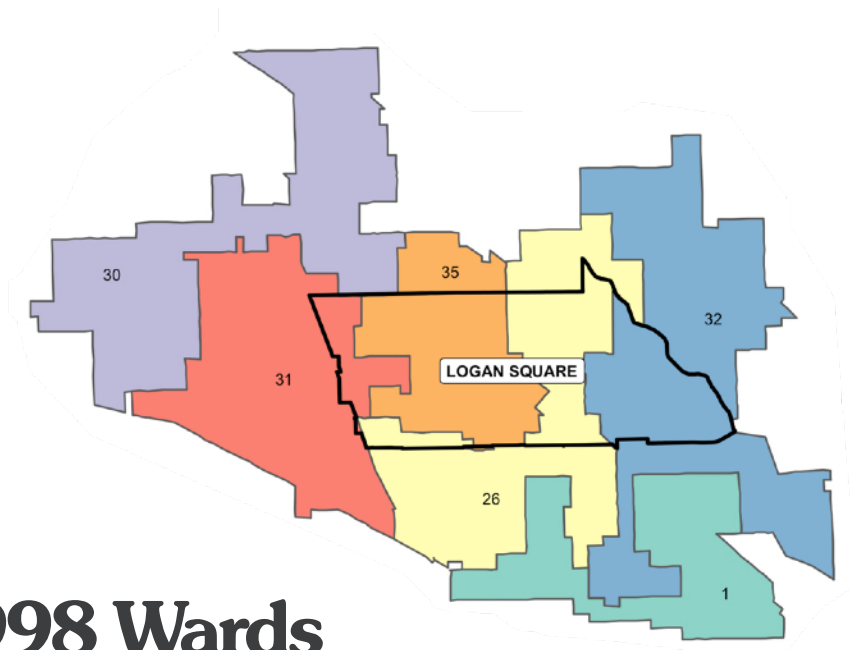
In the 1990s, the 35<sup>th</sup> ward and a couple others contained most of the Logan Square area. As the city redrew ward maps again and again, six wards carve the neighborhood into thin slices. The wards have increasing complex shapes.


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## 2014 Wards



## 1998 Wards





**Who's  
NEXT**

## **Key Findings & Action Questions**





## Summary of Key Findings

**1** Gentrification in Logan Square, and the many ways it affects community life, drives the work of community-based organizations and has fostered shared goals.

**2** Logan Square CBOs build collective capacity by sustaining a dense, trusted network of organizations within the neighborhood and leveraging resources and allies across the city of Chicago.

**3** Logan Square CBO staff and leaders build relationships with other organizations to find allies, increase access to resources, bring in newcomers, and build numbers or clout.

**4** CBO staff and leaders largely address conflict by focusing on shared goals and working through issues directly in private rather than public venues.

**5** Power structures like political bureaucracy or gerrymandered wards hinder collective action in Logan Square, while factors like referendum laws or political allies can greatly advance their campaigns.



## Community Action Questions<sup>2</sup>

**1** What tables or structures exist to foster relationships between organizations in the neighborhood? Are those tables making the best use of people's time and resources?

**2** Which community organizations or leaders have links to important resources or allies outside of the neighborhood?

**3** How can critical relationships between organizations or individuals be sustained over time?

**4** How can new organizations, staff, and residents, be helpfully integrated into existing networks?

**5** What is the level of trust among individuals and organizations working together? Has it strengthened or decreased over time? If it has declined, how can trust be built?

**6** What barriers exist to collective action? How can relationships between organizations be used to overcome or bypass those barriers?

**7** What have been the benefits and challenges of collaboration? How can benefits be enhanced and drawbacks minimized?

# References & Acknowledgements

Thank you to every organization and participant who contributed to this study. I hope these data embody your experiences and reflect the wisdom you shared with me. Further, this study would not have been possible without Christian Diaz, Nancy Aardema, Michael Saelens, Andrew Papachristos, Celeste Watkins-Hayes, Ashley Melzer, Amy Allen, my cohort in the Northwestern sociology department, and funding from the Sociology Department Alumni Fund.

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