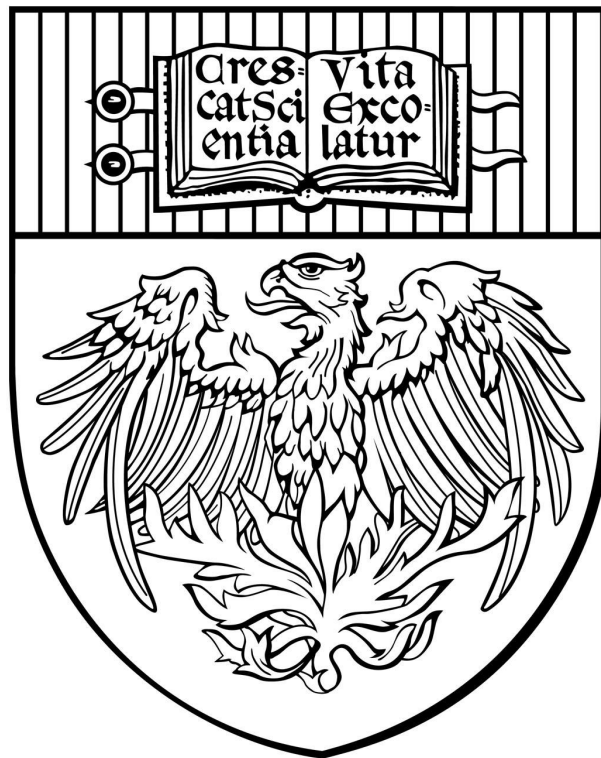


**Using the Allotted Space: Community-Based Green Space Creation through the
Repurposing of Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots in Chicago**

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Abstract

The City of Chicago holds over 15,000 abandoned lots throughout the city, sitting idle, gathering dust and debris as decades of neglect plague these spaces. These lots are a product of redlining, urban renewal projects, and other policies against low-income communities of color that have shaped Chicago into the city it is today. These lots can be seen throughout Chicago, but have a significantly higher concentration in low-income communities of color, with a large portion of the concentration of abandoned lots in the Westside. Though these lots are the physical embodiment of inequality and disinvestment, they stand to provide an unparalleled resource within the city: available land. With spatial inequality affecting not only socioeconomic factors but also having environmental and ecological effects, neighborhood-scale green spaces can provide a space that addresses these issues. I propose that the city of Chicago utilizes these vacant lots in inner-city community areas and transfer them into the Chicago Parks District, creating a block park system that is already integrated into the neighborhood blocks. Rather than keeping these spaces vacant, a series of protocols can be created to garner community support and engagement to fill these lots with a purpose: to provide entertainment, rest, community engagement and environmental benefits to the neighborhood. I will be using the community area of North Lawndale as my case study neighborhood to delve into the implementation of this proposal, and to showcase how these vacant lots can be easily integrated into the Chicago Parks District as well as the surrounding community and block with deliberate community involvement.

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Introduction

Vacant lots proliferate in the city of Chicago, with notable concentrations in the South and West Side of the city. Though the plots of land sit idle, these are charged spaces created by historical policies of Chicago. Whether it was a product of a lack of investment or failure to build, Chicago has over 15,000 empty lots, with almost half of them being city-owned property.¹ Five percent of all land in Chicago is classified as vacant and undeveloped, highlighting how vast and widespread this land issue (or potential) is.² Many measures and movements have been made to lessen the number of abandoned lots in the city. Most notably in recent history, the Large Lots program created a system where city-owned lots of land were sold for one dollar to applicants. The program had high hopes, focusing on low-income neighborhoods with a high concentration of vacant lots, such as Englewood. This program has highlighted how community-based real estate investments have a helping hand in decreasing crime rates around the empty lot, as well as how neighborhood communities seek change in the role of these lots. One requirement of this program was that each applicant is a same-block landowner. Notably, the landowner did not have to be a resident of the block.³ During the pilot run of the program from 2014 to 2017, the Large Lots Program sold over 1,248 vacant parcels in low-income neighborhoods with high concentrations of vacant lots. The program was shown to be successful in decreasing crime in vacant lots. However, there were differences in effects depending on the landowners relationship to the block and neighborhood.⁴ Over 31% of parcels were purchased by

¹ Chicago Data Portal. "City-Owned Land Inventory - Map."

<https://data.cityofchicago.org/Community-Economic-Development/City-Owned-Land-Inventory-Map/y5ck-7s96>

² Holden, Lillian. "The Vacant Lot Phenomenon: How Vacant Lots Affect A Community's People, Places, and Ecosystems." *Openlands*. 23 November 2020.

<https://openlands.org/2020/11/23/the-vacant-lot-phenomenon-how-vacant-lots-affect-a-communitys-people-places-and-ecosystems/>

³ Stern, Matthew, Lester, T. William. "Does Local Ownership of Vacant Land Reduce Crime? An Assess of Chicago's Large Lots Program" *Taylor & Francis*. 27 August 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1792334>

⁴ Stern, Matthew, Lester, T. William, "Does Local Ownership of Vacant Land Reduce Crime? An Assess of Chicago's Large Lots Program"

buyers who did not live in the neighborhood of the lot they had purchased. In a recent study analyzing the effects of the Large Lots Program found that there was a 3.4% decrease in crime in lots purchased by non-neighborhood buyers, versus a 6.8% reduction in crime with same-neighborhood buyers.⁵ Though the program was an overall success, there are several implications and lessons from the pilot run of the Large Lots program. First is the sheer quantity of lots the city is handling. The first run had overwhelmed the Department of Development and Planning, causing the program to shut down in 2017, despite support from then-Mayor Emmanuel.⁶ The program was reinvented in late 2022, with applications opening again in 2023. The city took a five-year break of the Large Lots Program to manage all applications. Second, the relationship between the lots and residents has an impact on the outcome of each lot. This disparity in reduction of crime in relation to landowner residence highlights the need to base the repurposing of vacant lots with direct community and resident engagement.

Though the city is covered throughout with empty lots, almost 15% of all empty lots are located in the Garfield Park and North Lawndale neighborhoods, and the majority of the empty lots are located on the West and South Side.⁷ As a product of discrimination and disinvestment, these lots are a physical embodiment of the history of urban policies stacked against low-income communities of color. Though vacant lots can be seen throughout the city, it is the high concentration of vacant lots in a handful of neighborhoods that highlight this disparity. This historical context will be explored later in this thesis. With tens of thousands of empty lots in the city, it is impossible to create a blanket solution to the empty lots. Each neighborhood requires a thorough evaluation of its demographics and needs.

⁵Stern, Matthew, Lester, T. William, "Does Local Ownership of Vacant Land Reduce Crime? An Assess of Chicago's Large Lots Program"

⁶ Mayor's Press Office. 2018. Mayor Emanuel Announces Major Expansion of Large Lots Program. Chicago. https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2018/may/LARGELOTSPROGRAM.html

⁷ CMAP Data Hub. "Land Use Inventory for Northern Illinois." *Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning*. <https://datahub.cmap.illinois.gov/dataset/land-use-inventory-for-northeast-illinois-2013>

Though these lots have been abandoned, they provide immense potential for a multitude of ecological services. As soil deposits and potential locations for green spaces, vacant lots already provide stormwater surge prevention and temperature regulation.⁸ Further revitalization of these spaces can provide more ecological services such as bee sanctuaries and homes for native flora and fauna, as well as mediating some of the effects of environmental racism in urban spaces. In scholarly literature, environmental racism refers to the geographic associations between low-income or minority communities and pollution, waste, and other negative environmental factors.⁹ However, recent studies have proposed a more comprehensive and flexible definition of environmental racism that considers the historical processes of the formation of segregated spaces.¹⁰ This notion is critical to my thesis because it addresses environmental racism and disparity specific to the historical processes of Chicago and how vacant lots are a product of these processes. The concentration of vacant lots in specific neighborhoods causing environmental and social harm are all intrinsically linked to environmental racism and the historical urban policies that created these spaces.

There are direct correlations between the green space disparity, vacant lots, low income, and race in Chicago. In fact, this concentration of vacancy has been described as de facto segregation, with the segregated communities of Chicago being most affected by this phenomenon.¹¹ By repurposing vacant lots into community green spaces and requiring community engagement in this revitalization project, the previously abandoned spaces can

⁸ Herrmann, Dustin L., William D. Shuster, and Ahjond S. Garmestani. "Vacant urban lot soils and their potential to support ecosystem services." *Plant and soil* 413, no. 1 (2017): 45-57.

⁹ Holifield, Ryan. "Defining environmental justice and environmental racism." *Urban geography* 22, no. 1 (2001): 78-90.

¹⁰ Pulido, L., 2000, Rethinking environmental racism: White privilege and urban development in southern California. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 90, 12-40.

¹¹ Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the rust belt: A green infrastructure model for right sizing America's shrinking cities." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 74, no. 4 (2008): 451-466.

become an integral part of a neighborhood community. The integration of community spaces into the residential block will change the movement of residents, opening up condemned spaces into walkable, welcoming areas. Studies have shown the revitalization of vacant lots — even by simply de-weeding the space and putting up a more welcoming entrance — have drastically changed the perception of these spaces by locals.¹² This in turn, can have a butterfly effect on the community. Increased walkability due to changed perception of safety can improve the health of residents; many studies have linked access to green spaces to overall better health in residents in inner-city communities.¹³ Having accessible green space by utilizing a previously unused space that represented the continued disinvestment in a neighborhood can change the fabric of the neighborhood.

In my thesis, I will create a viable policy framework based on community engagement that outlines how vacant lots can be repurposed into green space within the city's legal structure. With many residential neighborhoods lacking access to community green spaces, how can an empty lot provide adequate green space to serve its community and its constituents? What legal processes are necessary to create a community space for historically underserved areas? Though these empty lots have been a painful reminder of historical disinvestment to the neighborhood community, they also hold massive potential for community building, increased green infrastructure, revitalization of urban environments, and more. By creating a policy guideline on how this can be implemented throughout the city through continued community engagement and neighborhood-scale surveying, my thesis will also provide an implementation framework through the case study in North Lawndale. My policy framework will not address the specific

¹² Branas, Charles C., Eugenia South, Michelle C. Kondo, Bernadette C. Hohl, Philippe Bourgois, Douglas J. Wiebe, and John M. MacDonald. "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 12 (2018): 2946-2951.

¹³ Branas, et. al.

economics of creating green spaces in vacant lots, but rather focus on the legality and community support of the issue. The issue of urban vacancy has been addressed by many scholars through a real estate, economic, and legal lens. However, I hope to address the gap of how Chicago can face this clear urban disparity and implement community surveys as a means for green space construction. By conducting interviews with community leaders and residents in North Lawndale and taking a closer look at the legal framework and publicly available data, I have created a policy recommendation framework specific to this city and the Westside and Southside communities that are adversely affected by vacancy. I believe the repurposing and integration of vacant lots to the Chicago Park District through community surveying can be a small solution to a pervasive urban issue of Chicago.

Background

The History and Impact of Empty Lots in Chicago

Vacant lots came about due to deliberate policies against low-income communities of color, starting in the mid-20th century. They are a product of mass urban renewal projects spearheaded by the city government and other powerful local institutions such as the University of Chicago alongside the national movement against urban density in inner-city neighborhoods. These overtly discriminatory policies were justified through a national movement to clear out “blighted areas” as stated in the 1949 Federal Housing Act, giving local governments eminent domain.¹⁴ In Hirsch’s *Making the Second Ghetto*, he outlines the policies the city of Chicago pushed upon its black residents to clear out dense affordable living spaces, as density was viewed as working hand-in-hand with poverty and crime: “a cluster of high-rise buildings that housed 27,000 and came to symbolize the way postwar public housing nationwide concentrated black

¹⁴ Hirsch, Arnold R. 1949-2018. “Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960.” *University of Chicago Press*, 1978.

poverty and exacerbated segregation.”¹⁵ The Urban Renewal policies cleared out blocks of high-density communities of color Chicago up until the 1980s. Hundreds of thousands of acres were cleared, leaving behind a forever-changed urban landscape. The effects of these racist policies are not linear. Decades of disinvestment, starting with Urban Renewal and redlining policies have left these communities of color in a cycle of poverty, with a lack of access to basic needs such as healthy food options, healthcare, green spaces, and more — alongside countless empty lots visually, culturally, and emotionally affecting their neighborhoods. What was originally a movement to decrease crime and devaluation ultimately left these communities without adequate affordable housing and drove out populations, leaving neighborhoods financially and socially decimated.

We see the effects of these urban renewal and redlining policies in just a couple of decades. In the 1990s, the broken windows theory influenced urban policy, specifically targeting low-income neighborhoods that had a history of drugs and crime.¹⁶ Rather than utilizing the theory to create policies that helped communities affected by vandalism, public-drinking, and other minor crimes, the city departments misused this theory in policy making and targeted these areas that were already experiencing economic hardship and housing crises. The broken windows theory and following policing policies proved to be unproductive in significant crime reduction, and weakened public-police relationships due to intense racial profiling and aggressive methods of policing.¹⁷ The violent, aggressive policing methods also changed the public perception of targeted neighborhoods under the broken windows theory policing. Not only did residents of the neighborhoods feel an increased sense of danger, suggesting that broken

¹⁵ Brian McCammack, “Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago.” *Cambridge: Harvard University Press*, 2017

¹⁶Kelling, George L., and James Q. Wilson. "Broken windows." *Atlantic monthly* 249, no. 3 (1982): 29-38.

¹⁷Braga, Anthony A., Brandon C. Welsh, and Cory Schnell. "Can policing disorder reduce crime? A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 52, no. 4 (2015): 567-588.

windows policies had adverse effects, but residents across cities had changed perceptions of these neighborhood communities as spaces to avoid.¹⁸

In almost every stage of Chicago's history, policies have been set in place intentionally or unintentionally to increase vacancies in plighted areas and decrease the sense of the community or feeling of safety in these neighborhoods. Vacancies in low-income neighborhoods were then exacerbated by the financial crisis of the early 2000s.¹⁹ Cities across the United States, including Chicago, experienced a spike in housing vacancies. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy explores the phenomenon of 'hyper-vacancy,' where vacancy rates in a specific zip code, area, or even city reaches 20% or more, indicating the major deterioration of market conditions and higher rate of abandoned properties rather than reused or sold properties.²⁰ This study also takes a look at the process of how vacancies often lead to vacant lots in areas that lack the demand or wealth to keep vacant properties, leading to more vacant lots in blighted areas. Through the historical processes starting from the urban renewal and redlining policies of the 50s and 60s, we now see hyper-vacancy in specific pockets of Chicago, and only in neighborhoods of low-income and residents of color. Though it is difficult to calculate the exact ratio of vacancies, North Lawndale (my case study area) has a total square mileage of 3.2 mi², and the vacant lots in North Lawndale is approximately 1.01mi².²¹ This does not take into consideration abandoned and vacant properties, but vacant lots take up at least 30% of land in North Lawndale, making it a neighborhood of hyper-vacancy. This level of hyper-vacancy can be seen throughout the handful of neighborhoods in Chicago's West and Southside that hold the high concentration of publicly-owned vacant lots. The issue of hyper-vacancy is not just an economic and real estate

¹⁸Hinkle, Joshua C., and David Weisburd. "The irony of broken windows policing: A micro-place study of the relationship between disorder, focused police crackdowns and fear of crime." *Journal of Criminal justice* 36, no. 6 (2008): 503-512.

¹⁹ Mallach, Alan. "The empty house next door." Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (2018).

²⁰ Mallach, Alan. "The empty house next door."

²¹CMAP Data Hub. "Land Use Inventory for Northern Illinois."

issue. The issue is “so extensive and so problematic that they change the character of the immediate area.”²² The high concentration of vacant lots change the fabric of a neighborhood community, creating spaces for littering, crime, high policing, drug usage, etc. as well as changing the perception and engagement of one’s neighborhood.

Literature Review

Green Space Disparity

Chicago is the second most racially segregated city in America, and is also the third most populated city in the US.²³ The scale of spatialized racism and economic disparity is staggering, affecting almost all socioeconomic factors: health, infrastructure, access to food, and green space. Green space disparity has been a long-standing issue in Chicago, with the Chicago Park District being involved in multiple cases of racial and economic discrimination in the allocation of funding and parks. Most notably, the Federal Government sued the Chicago Park District in 1982 for a wide range of racial discrimination against black and Hispanic neighborhoods, leading to a three year consent decree and investigation.²⁴ Thirty years later, this nationwide scandal ultimately did not lead to fundamental change within the Chicago Park District and urban green spaces in the city. In 2011, the Park District spent \$500 million, with over half of the annual budget going into just 10 of the city’s 77 neighborhoods. Unsurprisingly, seven out of the 10 neighborhoods were predominantly white, affluent neighborhoods who had access to third party funding when requesting for additional park space creation.²⁵ Race, income, and green spaces are

²² Mallach, Alan. "The empty house next door."

²³ Council, Metropolitan Planning. "The cost of segregation: lost income. Lost lives. Lost potential, viewed 5 March 2018." (2016).

²⁴ United States District Court For the Northern District of Illinois Eastern Division. "United States of America v. Chicago Park District, et. al." Civil Action no. 82 C 7308.

<https://www.fotp.org/uploads/1/3/3/6/133647985/consent-decree.pdf>

²⁵ Chicago Park District. "Chicago Park District 2014 Budget Summary."

https://assets.chicagoparkdistrict.com/s3fs-public/documents/page/2014_Budget_Summary.pdf

intrinsically linked, and still to this day we can see how public investments heavily favor wealthy neighborhoods, despite low-income neighborhoods have a much higher need for investment.

In a recent study on urban green space access and socioeconomic factors, Liu et. al. found a direct correlation between race, income, and accessibility. In this census tract-based study, Liu found that black and Hispanic neighborhoods lacked green space accessibility, with Hispanic-majority census tracts having less than half of green space accessibility compared to white census tracts.²⁶ In the 2018 “State of the Parks” report created by the Friends of the Parks, these green space and related economic disparities are outlined. The South region of Chicago has the fewest number of parks.²⁷ The South region has technically the most acreage of park space, but it also has the highest numbers of nature preserves, passive parks and unimproved parkland. This leaves residents with fewer spaces for structured recreation and these large spaces are not as accessible as neighborhood parks. The total acreage of park space rather skews other statistics on accessibility as it does not accurately represent the usage of park spaces in practice. Also, there are no dog friendly access areas South and West of Chinatown. This clear disparity in green space can potentially be slightly remedied through the integration of vacant lots into the Park District. With the South and West regions lacking accessible, neighborhood scale green space, utilizing the land available and within government jurisdiction can be the first step in remediating deep rooted, spatialized inequity.

Why Vacant Lots?

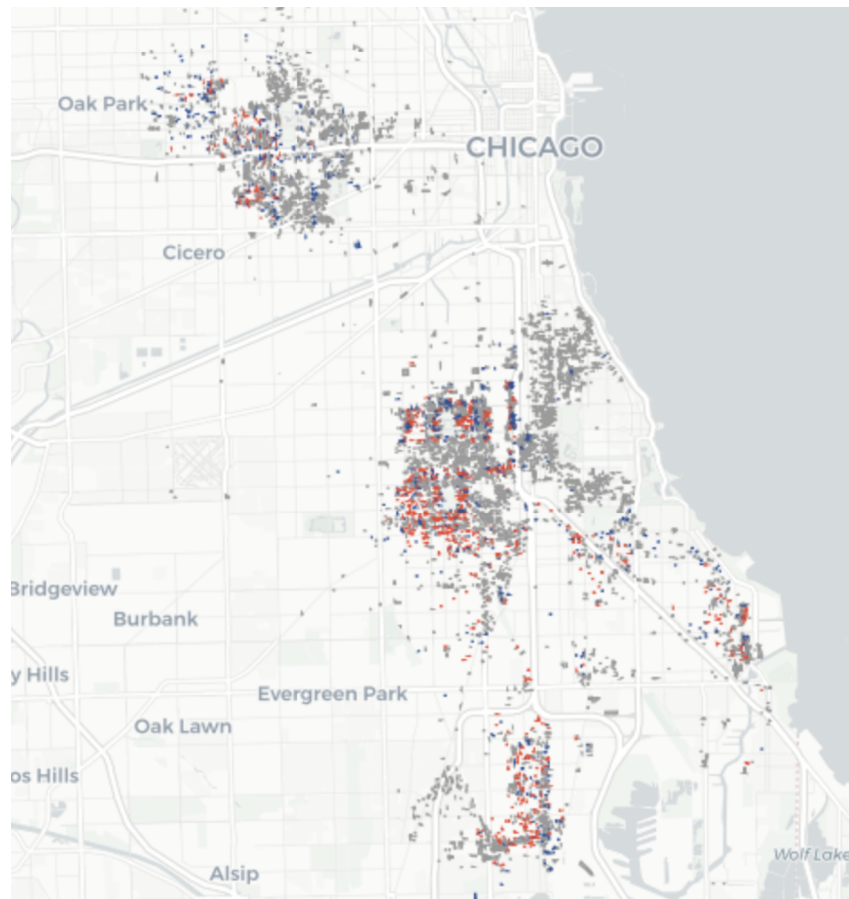
With socioeconomic disparities being clearly spatialized in Chicago, how can something like vacant lots help and alleviate their effects? Why choose the form of lots to integrate them

²⁶Liu, Dong, Mei-Po Kwan, and Zihan Kan. "Analysis of urban green space accessibility and distribution inequity in the City of Chicago." *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 59 (2021): 127029.

²⁷ Friends of the Park. *State of the Parks 2018*. Chicago.
<https://www.fotp.org/uploads/1/3/3/6/133647985/state-of-the-parks-2018.pdf>

into the Park District and what benefits does this approach provide? The choice of using vacant lots is determined by location, availability, and ecological potential. Low income neighborhoods have a much higher rate of vacant lots. As products of urban renewal and difference in historical investment, the concentration of city-owned vacant lots drastically differs in the North side versus the South or West side communities. This disparity is extremely visually apparent.

Figure 1: Map of City-Owned Vacant Lots in Chicago

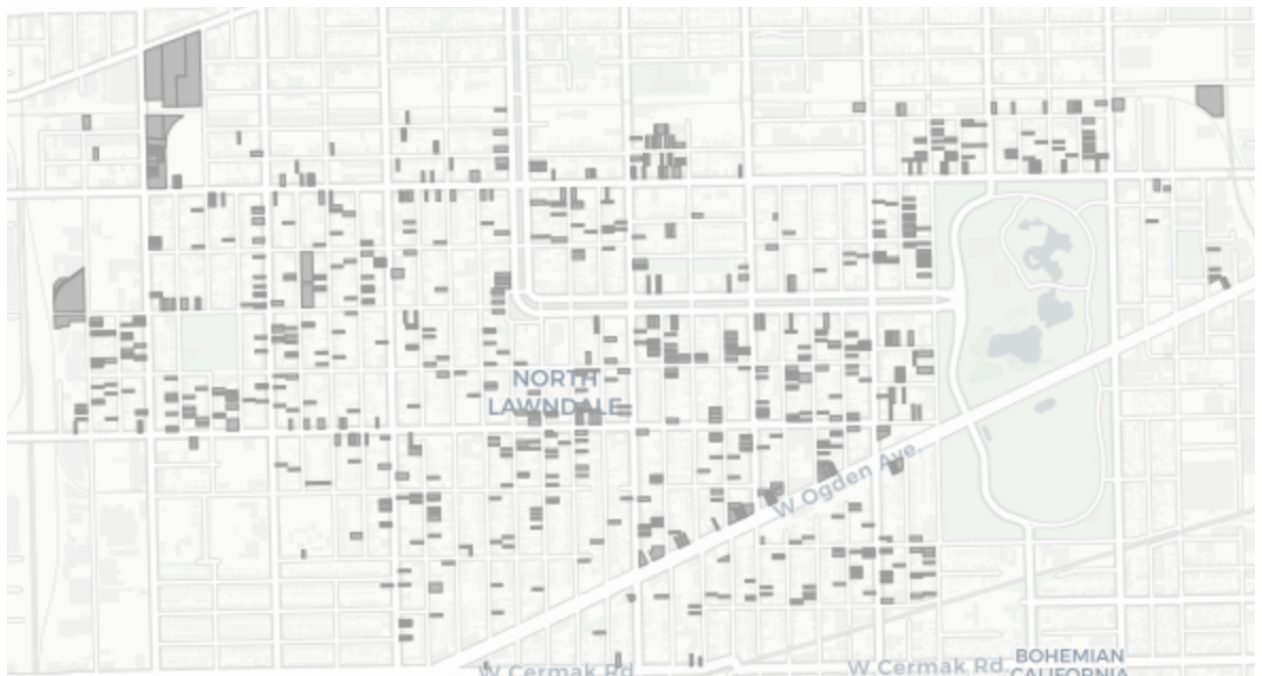


Map created by Chicago Block Builder

This map visualizes the high disparity and concentration of vacant lots across the city. The cluster to the West of the Loop is where North Lawndale is located. I have cropped out the Northside of Chicago due to the lack of vacant lots in that area.

In a low income neighborhood such as North Lawndale, there are hundreds of vacant lots scattered throughout the neighborhood. These lots are well-integrated into residential blocks, even making up the majority of a residential block in some areas. There are currently 833 city-owned lots listed on chiblockbuilder.com, a website created in 2022 to promote the sales of city-owned vacant lots.²⁸ However, there are more unlisted vacant lots that the city of Chicago owns in North Lawndale, and other public data portals such as the Chicago Data Portal have conflicting information on the exact number of vacant lots in Chicago, especially in neighborhoods with high concentrations of them like North Lawndale and Englewood.²⁹ This discrepancy in information highlights the nature of how this amount of land is handled by the City of Chicago. With thousands of parcels of land to manage, high concentrations of vacant lots occur in conjunction with the continuous disinvestment in these low-income neighborhoods.

Figure 2: Map of City-Owned Vacant Lots in North Lawndale



²⁸ Chicago Data Portal. “ChiBlockBuilder.”<https://chiblockbuilder.com/>

²⁹ Chicago Data Portal. “City-Owned Land Inventory - Map.”

<https://data.cityofchicago.org/Community-Economic-Development/City-Owned-Land-Inventory-Map/y5ck-7s96>

Map created by Chicago Block Builder

In this map of North Lawndale, the high rate of vacant lots can be visualized. Large lots the size of city blocks sit empty, as seen in the North West corner of North Lawndale. These lots are not available for sale due to their zoning laws. The city is currently only selling vacant lots listed under zoning code R, the residential zoning code.³⁰ Several streets in North Lawndale house more vacant lots than they do houses or buildings — highlighting how hyper-vacancy affects residential life. This level of disinvestment and lack of urban planning affects the residents’ relationship to their built environment, changing walkability, neighborhood relations, and more. The pervasive and integrated nature of vacant lots in the North Lawndale neighborhood is evident when taking a closer look at 16th Street, a large neighborhood street containing several shops, bus stops, and apartment buildings. Despite being a heavily trafficked street, within six blocks, nine vacant lots are visible when walking down 16th Street from Millard Avenue to Hamlin Avenue, with several more vacant lots in the side streets that are not visible on 16th Street.

Figure 3: Map of 16th Street in North Lawndale



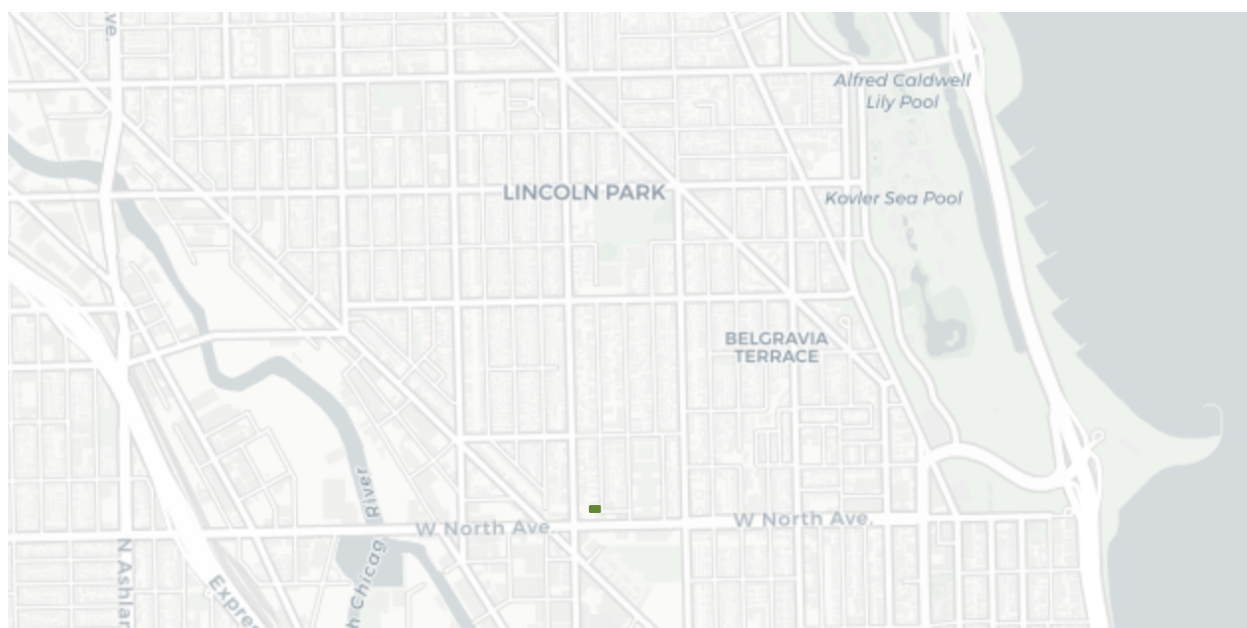
³⁰Chicago Data Portal. “City-Owned Land Inventory - Map.”

Map created by ChiBlockBuilder

It is also important to note that not a single one of the city-owned vacant lots along 16th Street and surrounding area are available for sale. This means that the important neighborhood street is unable to create additional housing, business, green spaces and more.

In comparison, Lincoln Park, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Chicago with a median income of \$117,00 (almost triple the median income of North Lawndale), has only one city-owned vacant lot.³¹ This is the case in many high-income neighborhoods such as Hyde Park, Near Northside, and the Loop, which have single-digit numbers of vacant lots.

Figure 4: Map of the City-Owned Vacant Lot in Lincoln Park



Map created by Chicago Block Builder

This stark disparity and high concentration of vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods is the focus of my thesis. Though my topic does not touch on the potential of economic development from city-owned vacant lots, I have chosen to focus on the potential of community building and

³¹ CMAP Data Hub. "Lincoln Park:Community Data Snapshot Chicago Community Area Series July 2022 Release" Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/documents/10180/126764/Lincoln+Park.pdf>

change in neighborhood perception vacant lots provide. Rather than focusing on economic development and potential gentrification of historical disadvantaged areas, creating parks from vacant lots through community engagement can give these spaces a purpose based in the neighborhood and its residents.

Utilizing vacant lots and repurposing them is common practice across American cities. The potential for economic, community, and green space building in vacant lots has been explored academically, as well as in pilot programs in various cities. In a study conducted by Schilling and Logan at North Carolina State University, Schilling compared three different implemented green revitalization plans in Toronto, Philadelphia, and Lawrence. The three projects were focused on ecosystem redevelopment on a waterfront, community-based reclamation of vacant lots, and brownfields redevelopment, respectively. Though each plan had varying locations, politics, and end goals for the project, Schilling analyzed the impacts of these implemented plans. He stated that ‘shrinking cities,’ defined as a “special subset of older industrial cities with significant and sustained population loss (25% or greater over the past 40 years) and increasing levels of vacant and abandoned properties, including blighted residential, commercial, and industrial buildings,” face a urban crisis through these blighted areas, but solutions can be implemented and reap benefits across multiple factors.³²

Through analyzing three successful vacant lot repurposing projects, Schilling concluded that the repurposing of vacant lots was an effective method in achieving the goals of each project, precisely due to the nature of these vacant lots. Vacant lots are modular and generally integrated within industrial and residential areas of cities, especially ‘shrinking cities,’ making it an appropriate space to fulfill various functions.³³ Furthermore, he argues that green

³² Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the rust belt: A green infrastructure model for right sizing America's shrinking cities." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 74, no. 4 (2008): 451-466.

³³ Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the rust belt"

infrastructure planning was a productive means to strategically repurpose resources and land management. Though the specific plans analyzed by Schilling differ in details and purpose of my proposed policy framework, the Philadelphia Neighborhood Initiative has shown immense success in community-based green space creation in vacant lots. This study sets a precedent on the success of repurposing publicly owned vacant lots into green infrastructure. Much like the three analyzed revitalization projects in Toronto, Philadelphia, and Lawrence, my policy proposal caters to Chicago-specific issues and bases all decisions on the residents of a specific neighborhood community.

This, alongside green space disparity in low-income communities of color, make vacant lots ideal land to repurpose for the community. Additionally, because low income neighborhoods have higher rates of city-owned vacant lots, the change in land ownership from the City of Chicago to the Park District can be more streamline than transfership of privately owned land parcels. This legal process of land transferring and donating will be explored in my data section. Many cities have used this approach to create more green spaces and parks and have shown the potential of vacant lots, with a notable study conducted in Philadelphia.

Ecological Benefits of Vacant Lots

Vacant lots have proven to be an efficient form of land to repurpose for green space usage due to their sizes, legal ownership, and concentrations. However, they can also be community and ecological pillars.³⁴ Lillian Holden, a North Lawndale resident and Openlands' Education and Community Outreach Coordinator, recalls her childhood experiences playing in these abandoned lots. In pockets of the North Lawndale community, abandoned lots have become pseudo gardens in areas that severely lack accessible green spaces.

³⁴ Holden, Lillian. "The Vacant Lot Phenomenon"

“During those times, the oak tree, my grandmother’s concrete front steps, and the pavement in front of my cousin’s porch made up the essence of my childhood. Although we had fun running around the block playing games like cops and robbers, tag, rock teacher, bottle top, double dutch, and hide-and-peek, roaming the vacant lot and climbing the branches of the oak tree for a sunbath felt like the ultimate escape [...] My place of play within North Lawndale juxtaposed places of play in communities like Edison Park. Oddly enough, my neighborhood vacant lot felt like a complicated oasis.”³⁵

With no gardening and environmental management, these lots have been filled with local flora and fauna and have even grown to become sanctuaries for bees and other pollinators.³⁶ These lots have unintentionally grown to alleviate many effects of urban inequality, even creating pseudo-green spaces. This is not to discredit the harm caused by vacant lots to neighborhood communities, but rather to highlight a silver lining that came about due to this urban phenomenon. Not only do these lots provide habitat to local species and a pseudo park to younger residents, but they also produce oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide, especially in areas affected by highway construction (ie. Westside communities along the Dan Ryan). Furthermore, low-income communities of color experience a drastic disparity in their access to greenspaces, leading to the urban heat island effect. These empty lots reduce the urban heat island effect even without intentional landscaping.³⁷ The urban heat island effect (UHI) is the phenomenon of urban temperature varying from less developed surrounding areas (surrounding suburban and rural areas) due to built infrastructure increasing temperature.³⁸ Like many cities, Chicago also experiences urban UHI due to lack of green space, canopies, and increased urban development without UHI in mind. During two heat events in the summer of 1995 and 2010, land use and land cover accounted for 91% of each block’s air temperature, proving that appropriate land cover and

³⁵ Keenehan, Sean. "The Intricate Ecology...of Vacant Lots." WTTW.: <https://interactive.wttw.com/urbannature/intricate-ecology-vacant-lots#!/>

³⁶ Keenehan, Sean. "The Intricate Ecology...of Vacant Lots."

³⁷ Stewart, Iain Douglas. "Redefining the urban heat island." PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2011.

³⁸ Stewart, Iain Douglas. "Redefining the urban heat island."

green space development is crucial to creating healthy urban living environments.³⁹ For every 10% of additional impervious surface area (artificial built surface area like concrete, brick, etc.) there was an increase of 0.75°C, whereas an additional 10% tree canopy led to a temperature decrease of 0.2°C.⁴⁰ This effect is intrinsically linked to spatialized socio economic issues (the same issues that are the main focus of this thesis). This study used data from the historic 1995 heat wave, where Chicago experienced 739 heat-caused deaths in a five day period in July. A majority of these deaths were in low-income black communities, heavily affecting black elderly. Lack of air conditioning, perceived danger in public spaces, poorly constructed low-income housing caused these avoidable deaths.⁴¹ The urban heat island effect is not synonymous with the absence of vegetation. It is rather, the lack of deliberate vegetation and canopies in conjunction of materials that exacerbate UHI.⁴² Dozens of heat related deaths in the 1995 Heat Wave happened in Westside neighborhoods, which have a higher level of vegetation than wealthier, denser Northside neighborhoods, yet experienced a much higher rate of heat-related deaths and illnesses during these two weather events. UHI is just one factor on how deliberate planning and repurposing of vacant lots can provide long term ecological benefits to the neighborhood community. As plots of land with plantable soil, the vacant lots have immense ecological potential.

A study conducted by the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education Research highlights another potential ecological benefit vacant lots have been continuously providing. In this study, Herrmann, Shuster, and Garmestani studied the soil properties of vacant lots in Cleveland and Detroit to measure their ecological services in hydraulic conductivity for

³⁹ Coseo, Paul, and Larissa Larsen. "How factors of land use/land cover, building configuration, and adjacent heat sources and sinks explain Urban Heat Islands in Chicago." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 125 (2014): 117-129.

⁴⁰ Coseo, Paul, and Larissa Larsen.

⁴¹ National Weather Service. "Historic Hyly 12-15 Heat Wave." National Weather Service. 2021. https://www.weather.gov/lot/1995_heatwave_anniversary

⁴² Coseo, Paul, and Larissa Larsen.

stormwater retention, topsoil depth and soil nitrogen level for support for plant growth, and soil carbon content for C storage. Both Cleveland and Detroit are neighboring Midwestern cities to Chicago, sharing similar weather patterns and soil make up as Great Lakes cities. The study's findings state that both Cleveland and Detroit have lots of usable soil that have been providing these ecological services to their cities. Though each city has different levels of soil water retention, C levels, and N levels, overall both city's vacant lots have been sources of stormwater retention and flood prevention, as well as ready homes for greenery.⁴³

The findings of this study can not only be applied to Chicago, but also highlight how vacant lots can be a great addition as available land that is appropriate for revitalization and planting. Herrmann et. al. states, "Since soils are the basis of terrestrial ecosystem functioning, urban landscapes where the soil is not capped by buildings and pavement have great potential to provide ecosystem services."⁴⁴ An ecological service to Chicago would be stormwater retention: "At the city-scale, an ecosystem service of vacant parcels is the retention of stormwater to regular urban hydrology to prevent water pollution."⁴⁵ The significance of this statement lies in not the stormwater retention of vacant lot soil, but rather the disparities in urban flooding in Chicago. When rain levels reach a high, the City of Chicago reverses the flow of the Chicago River and allows overflowing sewage to go into Lake Michigan, which is the primary water source of the city. Furthermore, flooding frequently happens during these high tides of stormwater, primarily affecting low-income neighborhoods. In a study conducted by the Center for Neighborhood Technology, it was found that only thirteen zip codes represented three-fourths of flood damage claims paid in Chicago between 2007 and 2016. 93% of residents in these zip

⁴³ Herrmann, Dustin L., William D. Shuster, and Ahjond S. Garmestani. "Vacant urban lot soils and their potential to support ecosystem services." *Plant and soil* 413 (2017): 45-57.

⁴⁴ Herrmann et. al., "Vacant urban lot soils"

⁴⁵ Herrmann et. al., "Vacant urban lot soils"

codes were people of color.⁴⁶ These were the numbers for flood damage claims that were paid, therefore it is highly likely more damage occurred in these areas that either were unclaimed or not paid by insurance companies. With low-income, flood damage, and high densities of vacant lots being related, renovating these vacant lots with increasing storm retention in mind could have massive economic impacts on these neighborhoods. Not only would these vacant lots be serving a critical ecological function and preventing urban flooding, it would be another method the lots can contribute to breaking the cycles of poverty in these areas, since so many socioeconomic, ecological, and urban factors are intrinsically linked. Herrmann et. al. outline how changing urban landscapes and increasing green infrastructure such as constructed wetlands can be extremely effective in stormwater retention, affecting the city's water quality and the lives of those most affected by flooding due to poor infrastructure and high levels of rain.⁴⁷ These facets of empty lots highlight the immense potential these spaces provide for Chicago neighborhoods. They are not simply spaces of lost potential to lay barren throughout the Chicago landscape; they now provide a physical space for reparations for communities that have experienced decades of disinvestment.

Crime and Perception of Safety in Vacant Lots

Though vacant lots have a massive potential to change the community and ecological factors of a neighborhood, crime within these spaces is an important issue to address. Vacant lots in Chicago (and across the United States) experience more crime than other spaces, including official park spaces. From 2005 to 2012, crime in empty lots increased by 48%, even when the city as a whole experienced a 27% decrease in overall crime.⁴⁸ The relationship between crime

⁴⁶ Center for Neighborhood Technology. Assessing the Disparities of Urban Flood Risk for Households of Color in Chicago. 2014. Chicago. https://cnt.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Draft_Flooding_Disparity_6-10-19.pdf

⁴⁷ Herrmann et. al., "Vacant urban lot soils"

⁴⁸ Podmolik, Mary Ellen. "Crime in Chicago's vacant property soars 48% since 2005." Chicago Tribune. 30 April 2013:

and vacant spaces is complicated, as the countless factors that cause crime means that a claim of causation between the space and crimes committed can not be made. However, there are studies claiming a strong correlation between increased crime rates in spaces with high pre-existing vacancy rates and resource deprivation.⁴⁹ In an empirical study analyzing crime rates in vacant and abandoned properties in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, they found that foreclosures alone had no effect on crime, but found a 19% increase on violent crimes on foreclosed homes that became vacant or vacant lots.⁵⁰ This effect increased with the length of vacancy. Minor and violent crimes were more prevalent in areas that had vacancies before the foreclosure crisis of the early 2000s, highlighting the effects of historic policies in these neighborhoods. Community areas like North Lawndale have faced these historic policies that have shaped crime and the perception of crime in vacant spaces. It is not the recent foreclosure crisis causing an increase in crime in vacant lots, but the long time period of these vacant lots remaining abandoned that draws in crime into these spaces.

Perception of crime and danger (alongside the presence of crime) in these spaces changes the relationship between residents and their built environment. Especially in neighborhoods with hyper-vacancy, where vacant lots are integrated within residential blocks, the avoidance of these spaces leads to decreased walkability and engagement with the neighborhood. Parents feel uncomfortable sending their children out to play, and this feeling is combined with the significantly lower rate of accessible green spaces in low-income neighborhoods in Chicago. This perception of danger, coupled by children being exposed to community violence creates a generation of children who feel uncomfortable spending time outside in their own neighborhood,

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-xpm-2013-04-30-chi-chicago-vacant-property-crime-20130430-story.html>

⁴⁹ Cui, Lin, and Randall Walsh. "Foreclosure, vacancy and crime." *Journal of Urban Economics* 87 (2015): 72-84.

⁵⁰Ibid

as well as several cognitive and psychological symptoms.⁵¹ Children are especially sensitive to their environment and several studies have been published on how neighborhood violence causes deep-rooted trauma amongst children in the Southside and Westside in Chicago, severely affecting their mental health, school work, ability to socialize, future substance abuse and more.⁵² However, studies have shown how changing the built environment, specifically vacant lots in inner city neighborhoods, have drastic improvements on children's psyche, reduction of crime, and change in perception of place. Place-based solutions such as greening of vacant spaces, creating green infrastructure, making playgrounds, or even cleaning up vacant lots have huge impacts on a community, starting with the decrease of crime, then the impact of this decrease on children.⁵³

Placed-based solutions take a holistic look at specific disadvantaged neighborhoods to create solutions catered to the area. This method can be applied to greening vacant spaces in areas of hyper-vacancy. In a study in Philadelphia, multiple methods of place-based solutions were implemented, but the most consistent improvement to neighborhood perception and decrease in community violence was housing and blight remediation of buildings and land.⁵⁴ This indicates how impactful revitalization and repurposing of vacant spaces in inner city neighborhoods can be. In Baltimore, an environmental intervention plan of creating playgrounds in vacant lots showed increased neighborhood engagement, walkability, and social interaction

⁵¹ Sieger, Karin, Angela Rojas-Vilches, Cliff McKinney, and Kimberly Renk. "The effects and treatment of community violence in children and adolescents: What should be done?." *Trauma, violence, & abuse* 5, no. 3 (2004): 243-259.

⁵² Voisin, Dexter R. *America the beautiful and violent: Black youth and neighborhood trauma in Chicago*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

⁵³ Vidal, Carol, Colin Lyman, Gwen Brown, and Briony Hynson. "Reclaiming public spaces: The case for the built environment as a restorative tool in neighborhoods with high levels of community violence." *Journal of community psychology* 50, no. 5 (2022): 2399-2410.

⁵⁴ Kondo, Michelle C., Elena Andreyeva, Eugenia C. South, John M. MacDonald, and Charles C. Branas. "Neighborhood interventions to reduce violence." *Annual review of public health* 39 (2018): 253-271.

within the neighborhood of high community violence.⁵⁵ These statistics highlight how these abandoned spaces are not simply idle spaces in a community. The notion of abandonment — characterized by the lack of investment, growing apathy for the space from the neighborhood community and more — over decades has created an identity of these spaces that affect its neighboring areas. Thus, the surplus of unmanaged land can be repurposed to serve the community, rather than be a source of a blight in a neighborhood. As seen in other studies in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and more, community-specific solutions can be implemented within vacant lots to target and minimize the effects of neighborhood crime and perception of danger. This is the first step of creating a more engaged community in a neighborhood that has experienced a difficult history with their built environment. These vacant lots can serve another purpose and potentially alleviate the ripple effects of the several historic policies that have shaped these communities.

Case Study: Restoring Blighted Vacant Land in Philadelphia and its Effects

In a experimental study, Branas and his team restored 110 vacant lots throughout Philadelphia to see the impact of simple physical renovations on the felt experience of the vacant lots to nearby residents. Branas' team also interviewed 445 participants who live near the restored vacant lots. In initial research, Branas found tensions between residents and vacant lands. Especially in low-income neighborhoods, residents perceive these lots as spaces of crime and threats to their health and safety. He noted frequent drug dealings being conducted in broad day light in front of the vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods, as well as some vacant lots being hubs for heroin and other drug use.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Vidal et. al., "Reclaiming public spaces"

⁵⁶ Branas et. al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land"

Branas' team conducted different types of renovations, with each lot being assigned a random treatment. The treatment ranged from removing trash and grading the land (most common treatment), planting new grass through hydroseeding, planting trees to create a park-like setting, to installing low wooden perimeter fences. All parks were then regularly maintained throughout the postintervention period.⁵⁷ The results of this experiment were clear: residents near renovated vacant lots felt much safer and crime rates in the lots decreased. "Significantly reduced perceptions of crime" came about due to the shift of use in these spaces. With more people visiting the lots as parks rather than abandoned lots, more legal, friendly social interactions were had in these spaces. The "eyes on the street" effect was achieved through cost-effective methods: "The physical environmental shift of vacant lots resortation may have thus also led to a social environmental shift."⁵⁸ Residents of more blighted and poorer areas responded extremely positively to the experiment, welcoming the renovations and expressing their resentment for government entities' disinterest in their communities.⁵⁹ Furthermore, there was a 29% reduction in gun-related crimes in or around these lots, which could translate to over 350 fewer shootings annually if the statistic were to be scaled slightly to be applied to the whole city of Philadelphia. Notably, Branas stated there had been no evidence that crimes had shifted to another area, but rather these declines were real decreases in crime.⁶⁰ This tangible decrease in crime was revolutionary, as it has a longer lasting impact than crime-reduction programs in the same neighborhood as the study. This study attenuates how crime reduction policies that are not based in crime punishment but rather the betterment of built environments have a stronger impact on communities.

⁵⁷ Branas et. al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land"

⁵⁸ Branas et. al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land"

⁵⁹ Branas et. al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land"

⁶⁰ Klinenberg, Eric. "The Other Side of "Broken Windows"." *The New Yorker*. August 23, 2018.

This study highlights the critical potential effects of this policy framework. Though each vacant lot does not necessarily a hub for crime and drugs, many do, or many *feel like* they do to the residents around them. Having an uninviting space that reeks of abandonment does not foster community or neighborhood engagement, rather drives residents away from these spaces. For many residents in North Lawndale, Garfield Park, Englewood, and several other neighborhoods throughout Chicago, they cannot simply get distance from these vacant parcels. They are integrated within their blocks, serving as constant reminder to the historic disinvestment of their communities. This Branas study shows how even a small change to these plots can have large impacts of communities. Practices like these “can have significant and lasting effects on seemingly intractable public safety issues such as gun violence and fear.”⁶¹ Branas also notes how these benefits were most pronounced in the poorest city neighborhoods, and how policymakers should take clear note of how to reduce socioeconomic disparities without disrespecting a neighborhood and continuing its neighborhood culture and feel. Branas states the great potential practices like his study can provide: “As this experimental study has shown, direct changes to vacant urban spaces may hold great promise in directly breaking the urban cycle of violence, fear, and abandonment and doing so in a cost-effective way that has a broad citywide scalability.”⁶²

Chicago is impacted by similar socioeconomic issues in vacant land as Philadelphia. The success the Branas study has seen goes to show the potential in vacant lots in Chicago. With the vacant lots being spatially integrated into the socioeconomic disparities of Chicago, it can become part of the solution by serving multiple purposes. Perhaps the greatest benefit this plan could provide is physically embodying neighborhood values that have gone so long without

⁶¹ Branas et. al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land"

⁶² Branas et. al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land"

official, government enacted embodiment. As seen in Philadelphia, simply changing these spaces to be welcoming can have ripple effects into the whole neighborhood, decreasing perception of crime as well as decreasing crime rates in these areas overall. Now imagine a throughout revitalization of these spaces, starting and ending with community engagement and representation. Rather than simply clearing these spaces, these lots can fulfill neighborhood needs and preferences and become hubs of community engagement rather than of blight.

Data and Methodology

Data Sources

In order to create a legitimate policy framework for the repurposing of vacant lots, I have created a three-pronged approach in my data. First, I will be analyzing the Chicago Park District Act, Illinois State law that grants the Chicago Park District legal sovereignty from the City of Chicago. By analyzing this law, we can see how a park can be created and if it will be legally viable for a transfer of ownership of vacant lots from the City of Chicago to the Park District. The Chicago Park District Act will also outline what park management will look like and who will be financially responsible for a park.

Second, I examine the available data on city-owned vacant lots in North Lawndale. This information is provided in the Chicago Data Portal, where all city-owned vacant lots are listed. This data can be a look into the management of these parcels of land, as well as their locations and concentrations. This data is critical because of the weight of the information it holds. By taking a closer look at the managing organizations of the hundreds of vacant lots in North Lawndale, we can see how the City of Chicago furthers the cycle of poverty and disinvestment in these neighborhoods by preventing economic growth and community building. It is also important to note that I chose to analyze public data precisely due to its inconsistent information.

Though the Chicago Data Portal allegedly states that this data will include the coordinates, address, managing public organization, and zoning type, many of the vacant lots have missing or incorrect information. There is also a discrepancy between the Chicago Data Portal and chiblockbuilder.com, which supposedly uses the same data source.⁶³ ⁶⁴ On chiblockbuilder.com, there are 831 listed city-owned vacant lots. However, in a public data sheet from the Chicago Data Portal, there are 913 vacant lots. The astounding 91-lot discrepancy in just one community area between two public data sources highlights the large-scale issue of the management of public land. By taking a closer look at what information is provided as well as not provided, we can further analyze this urban issue.

Third, to gauge community support for the idea that parks from repurposed city-owned vacant lots in North Lawndale would be supported by the local community, I conducted a 10-person qualitative study with community leaders and residents of North Lawndale. This policy is grounded in community building and engagement, therefore all participants are neighborhood residents of North Lawndale. Furthermore, to understand the community fabric, the participants of this study will be residents of the neighborhood who have either lived in the neighborhood for an extended period of time or community leaders. I also visited North Lawndale multiple times for interviews as well as guided tours by my interviewees and collected observational data on specific vacant lots throughout the neighborhood. I chose North Lawndale to be the case study for multiple factors. First, North Lawndale houses more than 7% of all city-owned empty lots.⁶⁵ With only 77 community areas, North Lawndale, similar to its neighboring areas, has a much higher concentration of vacant, unused, city owned lots. It is

⁶³ Chicago Data Portal. "City-Owned Land Inventory - Map."

⁶⁴ Chicago Data Portal. "ChiBlockBuilder."

⁶⁵ Chicago Data Portal. "City-Owned Land Inventory - Map."

<https://data.cityofchicago.org/Community-Economic-Development/City-Owned-Land-Inventory-Map/y5ck-7s96>

important that the lots match these criteria because the policy proposal requires these lots be repurposed and given over to the Chicago Park District from other city departments (i.e., Department of Housing, Chicago Housing Authority, Department of Planning and Development).

Although North Lawndale has Douglas Park, a large city park located in the eastern border of the neighborhood, the rest of the relatively large neighborhood lacks green space. Large parks such as Douglas Park skews the park acreage to 1,000 resident statistics, providing an inaccurate representation of green space access — making neighborhoods with less green space seem like there is a higher rate of green space accessibility. Even with a large park, many residents do not live within a half mile walk to a park, which is the metric of park accessibility the City of Chicago uses to calculate park access.⁶⁶ Third, the population of North Lawndale has a higher rate of children than that of Chicago. In North Lawndale, 28.3% of the population is under the age of 19, whereas the Chicago average is 22.8.⁶⁷ There are several public schools in Lawndale, which helps frame where the potential park would be placed. Children are a critical demographic for green space, especially when community engagement is at the core of the park designs. As mentioned above, children are especially sensitive to their built environment and huge impacts on their psyche and wellbeing can be made. Lastly, as highlighted in my literature review, communities of color, specifically black and Hispanic neighborhoods, experience disparity in both pre-existing green space and capital requests.⁶⁸ My policy framework was created with these current socio-political restrictions in mind, and the high concentration of

⁶⁶ Friends of the Park. State of the Parks 2018.

⁶⁷ Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "North Lawndale Community Data Snapshot Chicago Community Area Series." CMAP. 2022. <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/documents/10180/126764/North+Lawndale.pdf>

⁶⁸ Chicago Park District. "Chicago Park District 2014 Budget Summary."

vacant lots, lack of accessible neighborhood scale green spaces, and socioeconomic disparity makes North Lawndale an ideal candidate for a case study.

Data Collection

To identify participants who qualified as community leaders and residents, I reached out via email to several North Lawndale based grassroots organizations, public schools, churches, and non-governmental organizations. After reaching out to these organizations, I adopted the ‘snowball approach,’ where finding one participant led to the introduction of another, as many of these community organizations and members are well acquainted with one another. As mentioned above, all participants are required to be residents of North Lawndale. Having participants who know the neighborhood well also will help determine which block will be chosen as the case study block for a potential park system. This chosen block has a mock-up design of what the parks would look like when the ideas of community members are showcased.

For a free-flowing, comfortable interview, I provided a consent form modeled on the University of Chicago’s Internal Review Board to all participants. All participants were given the option of remaining anonymous or to have their name highlighted. If chosen to be anonymous, the participant was given a pseudonym. Many participants opted for publicity rather than anonymity. Participants were given a choice between in-person or virtual interviews. All interviews were recorded. I also took notes throughout the interview. All recordings were deleted post-transcriptions and all transcriptions, notes, and videos were deleted after data analysis.

All interviews followed the same framework of eight questions. However, because the interview is to hear the personal relationships with vacant lots and the neighborhood community, if participants strayed from a question or added a personal anecdote, it was not discouraged. In fact, these personal stories were important in highlighting the relationship between vacant lots

and residents of North Lawndale. For a detailed description of interview questions, see Appendix A. These interviews answer two larger questions that this thesis addresses: 1) Do residents of Chicago neighborhoods believe that the repurposing of vacant lots into parks would be useful to their community? 2) If so, what would Chicago residents like to have included in parks? Using the data collected from my interviews shaped my policy proposal and list of amenities for the proposed parks (ie. playgrounds, community gardens, dog parks, etc.).

Data Analysis

For the Chicago Park District Act, I will be quoting specific laws within the act that align with my policy framework, as well as explaining how the Chicago Park District works as a separate taxing entity from the City of Chicago. For the data on vacant lots provided by the Chicago Data Portal, I will be using a statistical analysis approach and analyze the breakdown of zoning classes and managing organization.

I used grounded theory for the data analysis for my interviews. My methods of data analysis were based on *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* and *The Methodological Dynamism of Grounded Theory*.^{69 70} After conducting the 10 interviews, I created preliminary analytical memos to help consolidate and organize important motifs and concepts. I utilized the open coding method from grounded theory to create my memos. From there, I used the grounded theory method to go from memos to concepts to categories. I also created a hierarchy for these categories, based on the number of participants who brought up similar ideas; the more support a category received, the more priority I gave it in the hierarchical system.

Researcher Positionality

⁶⁹ Bryant, Antony, and Kathy Charmaz, eds. *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. Sage, 2007.

⁷⁰ Ralph, Nicholas, Melanie Birks, and Ysanne Chapman. "The methodological dynamism of grounded theory." *International journal of qualitative methods* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1609406915611576.

Before delving into the findings, it is important to point out my position as a researcher. I am an Asian international student at the University of Chicago. By nature of this position, I come from a place of privilege and reside in Hyde Park, which is notoriously a wealth bubble within the Southside community. I can not and will not claim to identify with the lived experiences of North Lawndale residents. I have also never been exposed to the professional side of park policy and park creation so my policy framework is solely based on the neighborhood community's opinions. Due to this, I received some pushback when reaching out for interviews and some interviewees had a slow process of opening up to me. The highly personal nature and the sensitive topics of lived experiences of disinvestment were difficult topics to address during my interviews after the first few minutes of pleasantries and background information questions. I fully acknowledge my perspective and place as an outsider coming into North Lawndale. I was very up front about this and shared my gratitude to my interviewees. I will note that my outsider presence and perspective could have affected the interview process.

Findings

Creating a Park with the Chicago Park District: A Close Reading of the Chicago Park District Act

With thousands of vacant lots under the jurisdiction of the City of Chicago, many of them concentrated in low income residential neighborhoods, the public offices of Chicago such as the Department of Planning and Development, Department of Housing, and Department of Assets, Information and Services do not have the capacity to invest in the repurposing of vacant lots. With this bureaucratic limit in mind, I propose the repurposed vacant lots be given to the Chicago Park District. The Chicago Park District (CPD) is an independent taxing authority and considered a separate agency to the City of Chicago. As mentioned above, Chicago faces not

only a green space disparity issue, but a green space capital issue. Park proposal plans in low-income neighborhoods of color have a lower rate of approval, exacerbating and continuing green space disparity and disinvestment. By repurposing vacant lots and creating green spaces, these two socioeconomic issues can be addressed. So then, can these city-owned vacant lots have a transfer in ownership from the city of Chicago to the Chicago Park District?

The Chicago Park District Act is an Illinois State Statute that outlines the Chicago Park District's authority on acquiring new property for parks, as well as other limits of the CPD's authority. Under Section 15 from Chapter 105, par 33.15, the Chicago Park District Act delineates how a transfer of ownership in land can happen, making it the first step in creating a park from the city-owned vacant lots. It states:

“The Chicago Park District may acquire by gift, grant, purchase, or condemnation (and may incur indebtedness for the purchase of) any real estate lands, riparian estates or rights, and other property (including abandoned railroad rights-of-way) required or needed for any park [...] and all public works, grounds, or improvements under the control of and within the jurisdiction of the park commissioners, [...] whether the land is located within or without the district, if the land is deemed necessary for park purposes or for parkways, driveways, or boulevards. The Chicago Park District shall have no power of condemnation, however, as to real estate lands, riparian rights or estates, or other property located outside the district, but shall only have power to acquire that property by gift, grant, or purchase.”⁷¹

This law states how the Chicago Park District can accept gifts from any party or individual to create a park space. It also states that the Chicago Park District is responsible for the construction of necessary amenities within the given land to create an appropriate park space. This is a critical piece of statute. By utilizing this law within the Chicago Park District, a program for the transfer of land ownership can occur, thereby creating parks within city-owned vacant lots. Furthermore, under section 7, Chapter 105, par 333.7-04, the statute states, “Such district shall not divert any

⁷¹ Illinois General Assembly. “(70 ILCS 1505/) Chicago Park District Act.” <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=917&ChapterID=15>

gift, grant or legacy from the specific purpose designated by any donor,” stating that the Chicago Park District must accept a donation to be a part of the Chicago Park District.⁷² Meaning, if the city of Chicago were to donate parcels of land to the Chicago Park District to be repurposed into parks, not only would it be legally viable, the CPD would not be able to turn down this ‘gift’ from the city. With thousands of vacant lots under the city’s ownership and land mismanagement only getting worse with time, the Chicago Park District Act brings about a small solution to this large issue. Not all 15,000 lots would be donated to the CPD, but rather specific lots chosen by the neighborhood community can be donated. Also, to create amenities the community would request, these improvements and additions to the vacant lots during repurposing would fall under the jurisdiction of the Chicago Park District, as stated above. The statute also outlines how the CPD can enter into contracts with construction companies as well as issue bonds to build amenities for the park, as stated in sections 15 and 20.⁷³

It is important to note, my policy framework is not arguing for all city-owned vacant lots to be donated to CPD. As highlighted by the high concentration of vacant lots within North Lawndale, if all 15,000 city-owned vacant lots were to be made into parks it would economically decimate these neighborhoods. It would not allow for additional housing or businesses to be created within these spaces, further increasing the cycle of poverty put in place. Rather, I argue specific vacant lots chosen by the residents of a neighborhood should be repurposed into green spaces through the transfer of ownership from the city to CPD.

North Lawndale Vacant Lots Analysis

In order to take a closer look at the vacant lots in North Lawndale and how the city is managing them, I used a dataset available on the Chicago Data Portal listed under, “City-Owned

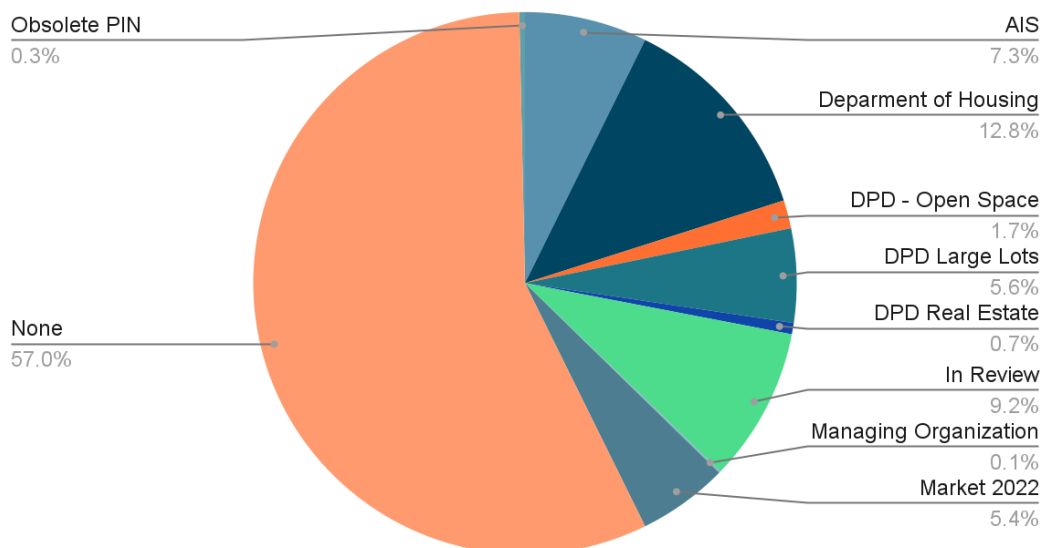
⁷² Illinois General Assembly. “(70 ILCS 1505/) Chicago Park District Act.”

⁷³ Illinois General Assembly. “(70 ILCS 1505/) Chicago Park District Act.”

Land Inventory.” As mentioned above, there were discrepancies between multiple public data sources in the number and location of vacant lots throughout Chicago, but especially in neighborhoods like North Lawndale that have a high concentration of city-owned vacant lots. To address this, I reached out to Maragaret Cassidy, the City-Owned Land System (COLS) Director in the Department of Planning and Development & Department of Housing. Despite my numerous calls and emails explaining this discrepancy and requesting for the shapefile on the chiblockbuilder.com, multiple employees in the Department of Planning and Development, including Maragaret Cassidy, informed me that the data sets on [chiblockbuilder](http://chiblockbuilder.com) and the Chicago Data Portal are the same and the missing information on the vacant lots in the data sets could not be provided to me. This highlights a glaring issue within the city of Chicago and the management of land in low income communities. The public offices that are in charge of this information were not aware of this discrepancy, which shows how these areas continue to be affected by disinvestment from both private and public entities. The hundreds of city-owned vacant lots in North Lawndale not only sit idle within the neighborhood, but also have slowly been forgotten by the city. This discrepancy in one neighborhood may not be in issue to these offices, but are lived experiences of the thousands of residents of neighborhoods with a high vacant lot concentration.

Figure 5

Managing Organizations of North Lawndale Vacant Lots



This trend can be seen when taking a closer look at the managing organizations of the vacant lots. Out of the 913 city-owned vacant lots in North Lawndale, 508 are under no managing organization. This means more than half of the vacant lots in the city have not been delegated to an organization.⁷⁴ This does not take into consideration the 9.2% of lots in North Lawndale that are in review and have not been given a managing organization either. This staggering number highlights the land management issue of the city: the city simply does not have the capacity to take care of the thousands of vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods. With only 12.8% of the vacant lots in North Lawndale under the jurisdiction of the Department of Housing, affordable housing projects are not an urgent matter to the city or the delegation of public resources.⁷⁵ In comparison, only 1.7% of lots in North Lawndale is under the Department of Public Development's Open Space office, which showcases how green space development is even lower in the city's priority.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Chicago Data Portal. "City-Owned Land Inventory - Map." <https://data.cityofchicago.org/Community-Economic-Development/City-Owned-Land-Inventory-Map/y5ck-7s96>

⁷⁵ Chicago Data Portal. "City-Owned Land Inventory - Map."

⁷⁶ Chicago Data Portal. "City-Owned Land Inventory - Map."

Interview Findings: Key Themes and Categories

All interviews followed the pre-set questions (see in Appendix) to gauge how the residents of North Lawndale perceived vacant lots and what role they served to community. Every single participant had at least one vacant lot within their block, showcasing how vacant lots are endemic the neighborhood. One interviewee, Jenny, a janitor at a neighboring public highschool and prominent member of her community church,

“I walk to work. Every morning, every afternoon. One day I noticed how many vacant lots were on my way to work. I mean, this isn’t anything new. I had about four lots on my street growing up, and we used to play in them until it didn’t feel safe anymore. But once I noticed how many lots I passed by in the morning, I decided to count them. Why not? It would make my commute go faster. I think my walk is about 20 to 25 minutes. That day I counted 19 vacant lots on my way to work. Some of them were small and between houses, but a few of them were big. Half a block big. There were multiple large vacant lots in the 19 of them I saw that day. If I take a different route I might see more. I honestly hate them.”

Jenny’s comment highlights how extensive vacant lots are within North Lawndale. Since all participants had a close, personal relationship to vacant lots throughout their neighborhood, I processed their responses into themes. The themes were chosen through the memoing process in grounded theory, where I took extensive notes on the most repeated and emphasized concepts during the participant’s response. Each theme was mentioned by the majority of participant, if not all participants.

Littering and Abandoned Property

Every interviewee had a strong response to vacant lots in North Lawndale. The consensus of the residents was that the vacant lots in the neighborhood served no purpose to the community and were strongly disliked. Some descriptive words that came up multiple times were — in order of most repeated to least — *eyesore, disgusting, filthy, empty, loitering, saddening, trash*. Many participants stated that they have always noticed the empty parcels of land throughout their

neighborhood and the presence of the vacant lots are felt throughout different neighborhood communities. A common response was the discomfort from people loitering in vacant lots. Some participants stated that oftentimes groups will loiter in vacant lots throughout the day and especially at night, making walking during the nighttime more uncomfortable for the residents, despite being in quiet residential areas. Two participants also spoke about cars being left in vacant lots to be parked or even abandoned. This was particularly visible on my tours in North Lawndale. Vacant lots within residential blocks were used as parking, whereas vacant lots in larger streets had several abandoned vehicles left, creating a jarring visual of abandonment within heavily trafficked streets. Broken-down vehicles were a common sight near large public streets, residential blocks, and schools. These responses were similar to that of the Branas Philadelphia study, where participants expressed the feeling of danger in these vacant lots due to littering and loitering.⁷⁷ The success of the Branas project of vacant lot revitalization, which was simply cleaning up these lots, was immensely successful in changing the perception of these spaces to residents. The success of the Branas Philadelphia project sets a precedent on how changing these lots can affect the lived experience of the whole community.

Figure 6: An Image of a City-Owned Vacant Lot on 16th Street and Drake Ave

The abandoned vehicles in this lot had graffiti and missing parts, indicating that they had been left for a significant amount of time. My tour guide Kwanna informed me that she had noticed the grey SUV at least a year ago. This vacant lot is also situated next to a highschool.

⁷⁷ Ibid



Not pictured: the six additional abandoned vehicles along the side of this vacant lot

The most common response to the role of vacant lots in North Lawndale was the high level of littering in vacant lots — every single participant mentioned littering as a major concern. With no managing organization or purpose to these parcels of land, many of them have accumulated trash and litter, adding to the discontent of the residents. This was also visibly apparent during my tours of North Lawndale. One interviewee, Kwanna, a special education teacher at a neighboring middle school, pointed out the high levels of littering throughout the neighborhood. She expressed her discontent and how this makes it difficult to feel safe walking around the neighborhood.

“Everyone just thinks they can throw trash in the lots around North Lawndale. It keeps getting worse. I see some lots with so much trash the grass starts dying. I know some people at my church goes and picks up the trash on Sundays, but I don’t like doing that since I don’t wanna know what I would find out there. I mean, you can just see the trash piling up right now.”

Figure 7: A Close-up of the Littering on a Vacant Lot on 19th Street and Springfield Ave



Note that this level of littering was commonplace through the neighborhood. Many vacant lots had significantly more littering, with even piles of trash accumulating in them. This vacant lot is also situated on the same block as Penn Elementary School and KIPP Ascend Middle School

As many of my interviewees are heavily involved in the North Lawndale community, from Churches to schools to environmental education, I was able to hear about their personal and professional experiences of attempting to clean up some vacant lots. Melonie, a special education teacher at a neighboring highschool, recounted her experiences at Harmony Community Church, which have led multiple efforts to clean up vacant lots around them.

“My church would go out on Sunday afternoons and clean up vacant lots around the church and schools. The trash we would find! Bags and bags would be full before the hour was over. I hate that they’re so dirty. [...] No matter what we did there was so much trash in these lots. The ones with a lot of trash, people know it’s okay to throw stuff away there so it gets worse and worse. Like even the ones we cleaned it would stay clean since people knew someone was taking care of them.”

Littering is a product of these parcels of land experiencing years of disinvestment and abandonment. Participants noted that lots that were empty for a longer period of time tended to have a higher rate of littering. Many of them noticed the vacant lots on their block that were cleared would accumulate trash, but also experience a higher rate of littering. This notion of how abandonment of land over time worsens crimes coincides with the abovementioned studies that saw an increase in crime rates over time in abandoned property. With more vacant lots being added to the North Lawndale landscape than repurposed, this cycle of littering and abandonment of property would only grow.

Deterrents in Public Green Space Utilization

Though all interviewees stated that they want positive change in the infrastructure in their neighborhood, I also analyzed how residents interact with green spaces around them and how additional parks being made would impact the community. This required examining the utilization of preexisting green spaces in North Lawndale. If residents were not using the public green spaces near them, what factors were turning them away? How can the issues be remedied? Note that Douglas Park was not included in my consideration of a local park as most of my interviewees did not live within walking distance and it is not considered a neighborhood park, due to its size. The large size of Douglas Park changes the way people interact with the space compared to a neighborhood park. Only two interviewees mentioned Douglas Park during this section of the interview, and both claimed to have not visited in recent years due to deterioration of the park and lack of upkeep.

There was a mixed batch of responses in terms of the relationship between residents and neighborhood green spaces. Six interviewees stated that they frequent neighborhood parks in their areas, while four interviewees stated that they do not enjoy the local green spaces. The

interviewees who did not utilize neighborhood parks had two reasons that hindered their usage of public green spaces. First, was the lack of accessibility to these parks; participants felt a physical inaccessibility due to distance, but also an emotional inaccessibility. Three participants stated that neighborhood parks were too far to walk to for frequent enjoyment. Others stated that they felt that the parks around them were dangerous and the disappointing state of the neighborhood parks added to the feeling of unsafety. Vanessa, a local college student responded,

“I want to be able to go to a park in my neighborhood. But the closest one is about a mile away and I would not want to walk a mile and back by myself just so I can sit in a park. I wouldn’t feel safe on the way and probably wouldn’t feel safe in the park. I know people use that park every now and then, but I would definitely rather have a nice park by my house that I could feel safe in.”

Crime in vacant lots is the biggest deterrent in the utilization of public spaces amongst the participants. Six participants have witnessed crimes in vacant lots throughout the day, even in broad daylight. Crimes range from robbery to drug usage. Participants also expressed how the overgrown shrubs and leaves in vacant lots create spaces for people to hide illicit products, such as guns and drugs. Two participants have found items like this in vacant lots around their block. The presence of crime heavily influences how these spaces are perceived, leading to general avoidance of vacant lots among participants. One participant expressed how her driving significantly increased when moving to North Lawndale due to her perception of danger around these vacant spaces. Seven participants expressed how creating legitimacy in vacant lots would reduce crimes. Simply having lighting fixtures, trash cans, and operating hours of a park could potentially decrease the crime rates in vacant lots. Though the participants were disdainful of crime occurring in these spaces, many of them were hopeful that genuine change could be brought about if the vacant lots were to be improved. As seen in many cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore, simple renovations to these spaces can curb crime and have a tangible effect to the perception of crime and safety to residents.

Children's Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

One participant stated that she brings her children to a neighborhood in the Northside. She noted that the playgrounds in North Lawndale are too far from her home and would require a car, but the state of the nearest playgrounds from her house were subpar due to lack of upkeep. She also lives on the Westside of North Lawndale, making the trip to Douglas Park approximately a 15 minute drive. Despite the extra effort she prefers going out of her way to a Northside park. This highlights how children of North Lawndale lack the place-making bonds to their neighborhood. Without spaces close to home to walk to, children not only feel unsafe to be in their neighborhood, but they also can not emotionally bond with the built environment around them.

“There are some small parks here and there in North Lawndale, but I live too far from there and would have to drive my kids out. If I’m gonna drive 10 minutes to go to a park, I’m gonna go to another neighborhood that actually has nice things in their parks for my kids. Most of the parks in Lawndale don’t even have a decent playground to play in. So when you bring up changing up a vacant lot, I just want there to be a big playground for the kids. The ones with a nice swing and big things all the new playgrounds on the Northside have now. You walk down 16th street on a weekday you’re gonna find kids just playing in dirt next to cars.”

This response highlights the neighborhood demand for accessible green spaces. Children will always desire playgrounds, yet North Lawndale cannot provide play spaces at walking distance, with some parents driving to a different area of the city to provide their children with adequate play spaces. All participants responded positively and expressed their desire for a new neighborhood park. The reasoning behind this support can be broken down into three parts. First, participants felt that making a space official would change the way the neighborhood interacts with vacant lots. Participants believe bringing in light, benches, trash cans, and amenities will give the space purpose and reduce crime and littering in vacant lots. Several studies across

different American cities have shown not only a significant decrease in crime, but also a decrease in resident interaction and perception of these spaces — two factors that work in tandem to create a more engaged community.⁷⁸ Second, the children of North Lawndale can be given more spaces of recreation. Idleness in children and lack of accessible public space has proven to lead to adolescent crime and lower academic achievement. All participants brought up children as a focus demographic of parks and also stated the high number of children in the neighborhood. This indicates the community's drive for the betterment of children's lives in the area, especially in regards to providing them with safe spaces for enjoyment and enrichment. James, a retired high school math teacher and now volunteer at multiple neighborhood churches in North Lawndale, was passionate about this issue.

“We have so many schools in North Lawndale and even more kids in this town. But every day I see kids hanging out on the streets or in the lots, and the later the day gets the less good they're up to. People don't even like when the kids are all in a big group by the parking lots but they don't got a better place to be. They don't have a nice place to sit by their house or ask a friend to come hang out outside in the summer when schools out. So where do they go? On the streets. Literally and not literally. But how can a neighborhood with so many kids not provide them with spaces they can safely hang out? What about the younger ones? At my church we have kids who almost never play on a playground because they don't have one near them. Imagine. Not swinging around after school with your friends on your block.”

Figure 8: A City-Owned Vacant Lot Located Across North Lawndale College Prep High School

⁷⁸ Ibid



Figure 9: Another Angle of Same Vacant Lot Across the High School



When we drove past this block again, several high school students were hanging out on this lot. A couple of them were using an abandoned vehicle as seating

Several participants pointed out the vacant lots that located near schools. The four schools along 16th Street in North Lawndale all have a vacant lot situated either directly next to or across the street from the school. This was an upsetting subject for the participants, as they expressed their frustration about why these lots needed to be empty, filled with litter, abandoned cars, and potential for crimes. Many participants had children or neices and nephews who attended these schools. I also noticed several groups of students playing in the vacant lots next to their schools on 16th Street. The locality of these lots showcase how specific lots being repurposed could have an immense impact on the community, starting with the children who would have a completely different campus experience without a blighted lot next to their school.

Strong Interest in Creating a New Public Green Space

I structured my interview so I could first understand how residents felt and perceived the vacant lots and then gauge participants' interest in repurposing these parcels. These questions were asked before I mentioned the idea of a neighborhood park. This was so that I could have received more honest, free-flowing answers and ideas on the vacant lots and minimize confirmation bias on my ideas on neighborhood parks. To my surprise, seven participants brought up the idea of repurposing the vacant lots into community spaces, with six out of seven of them suggesting turning these spaces into parks. The community's desire for more green space was apparent, as the participants who brought up more parks had all considered this prospect for their neighborhood beforehand. The neighborhood's discontentment of the vacant lots were very clear, but the residents of North Lawndale also seek change and improvements to their neighborhood.

Melia, a resident of North Lawndale of 46 years, has wanted the vacant lot on her block to be repurposed into a park since the previous apartment building in that location was torn down

and has remained a vacant lot for over 20 years. She spoke out about how she felt helpless not knowing how to go about making this happen for the block community, many of whom are her family and friends. She listed about twenty residents on that block by name and had multiple anecdotes about them. Melia highlights the strong community bonds that exist within North Lawndale and how the physical infrastructure does not support or represent these bonds.

“For a long time, we used to have whole block parties and cookouts on that lot. After I tried to make it a park for about a year or so and not hearing back from the city or the Park District, I said, this is my block. You’re not gonna do anything about this, I’m just gonna start having my cookouts here so I don’t have to go all the way to Douglas Park. When there were a lot of kids on the block it was nice. I cleaned that lot up every week before the cookout and sometimes kids would play there. Now the block is grown and we don’t have the kids. I know a lot less people on the block and less and less people felt safe to just go into a vacant lot. Someone left two cars on that lot a couple years ago. They’re still there. I want these spaces to become official, so we can have stuff like that again. Just even having someone clean the lots up, put in a bench or two, maybe even make it a park like I wanted back in the day. I feel like we have more lots than before, since the old ones aren’t going away and new ones keep popping up. If we can get kids to feel safe in here, with whatever we can do, North Lawndale can be a totally different neighborhood. Where we talk to our neighbors walking down the street and help each other out.”

Melia’s stories tell the history of this community. As the role of the vacant lot on her block ebbs and flows with time, we see how these empty spaces have negatively affected communities. This sentiment was shared with other interviewees. Some participants shared how they felt that the high concentration of vacant lots does not allow for a sense of community to foster due to the perceived danger, trash, and lack of purpose these spaces hold. When asked “How would you feel if these spaces became an official public space?” all interviewees responded positively, on top of the majority of participants bringing up this idea during the first two questions during the interview. Making vacant lots an official space by even adding a trash can indicates that the space is taken care of and there is economic and emotional investment going into it. The

interviews made it clear that the neighborhood community of North Lawndale seeks change and the repurposing of vacant lots would be supported by the neighborhood.

Community Based Opportunities

All participants had a strong desire to increase community bonds throughout North Lawndale and spoke about several ideas on how a pocket park could house an opportunity like this. Several participants shared an interest in community gardening and creating after school programs and environmental education programs around gardening. North Lawndale has a long history of community gardening, with over a dozen community gardens being run by schools and nonprofits. I interviewed two employees at Gardeneers, a Chicago-based nonprofit that creates environmental education opportunities through community gardens. Jhaila, an Americorps employee at Gardeneers shared several ideas on how environmental education can make tangible differences in a block, street, and neighborhood community. As a life-long resident of North Lawndale, she has personally experienced how a pocket park on your block can change your day to day experience. She spoke about Christiana Park, which is a pocket park located on the Eastside of the neighborhood.

“There used to be a community garden in Christiana Park and it was the best. My mom and grandma went there all the time and we would harvest carrots, collard greens, lettuce, and more. I started eating more greens as a kid after we started using the community garden. I will never forget that park. Now no one has taken care of it since COVID and the garden isn’t there anymore. Imagine all the kids that could still be eating out of that garden today.”

Though many participants remained hopeful for the community building opportunities a new park with neighborhood-approved amenities would bring in, some were critical of the participation of the neighborhood. Two participants talked about how community engagement events have had a decrease in interest. This raises important questions on how to create a park

that is not only well suited for its area, but also houses amenities and even events that will attract residents.

One potential amenity that can be placed in a vacant lot is a community garden. North Lawndale has a long history of community gardens, having more than 50 community gardens that have been a part of the neighborhood. Some have deteriorated due to lack of upkeep, but North Lawndale currently has at least 15 community gardens still in use today.⁷⁹ Many of the gardens are affiliated with schools and were pioneered by nonprofit organizations such as Gardeneers. All my interviewees spoke highly of the community gardens in North Lawndale, and every single interviewee expressed interest in adding more to the neighborhood. I also spoke to members of the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council, a group of North Lawndale stake-holders, community leaders, and elected officials that help create various opportunities in the neighborhood by connecting organizations together, including community gardens. Mike, a long-standing member of the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council, expressed his love for community gardens and the impact they have had:

“North Lawndale loves community gardens, always have. I think COVID really made some of them get bad, but before then we had some pretty big ones like the MLK one. I think gardening is a very effective method for environmental education. I mean, you saw what the neighborhood is like. Where would the kids get hands-on experience and get their hands dirty? Most of the community gardens came from vacant lots, so I love this project idea of yours to see what we wanna put in those lots. My kid and his friends would go to the garden next to our house and bring home carrots. It was the only time he would ever eat carrots. I know kids in the neighborhood who never eat fresh food cause they can't afford to. But if they had a big garden they were taking care of and got to bring food home, think about how much that would change his life.”

⁷⁹ Kelley, Jonathan M. "Places and people in "Historic Gardens of North Lawndale" video." North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council. Chicago. October 25, 2020.
<https://nlcccplanning.org/2020/10/24/places-and-people-in-historic-gardens-of-north-lawndale-video/>

Mike's response represents the eagerness the participants and the larger North Lawndale community has for additional community spaces. With support for community gardens already in place, vacant lots can be repurposed into a community activity that has served the neighborhood for a long history.

Upkeep of Green Spaces

A critical aspect of creating community-based infrastructure is making sure that the community voice is heard throughout the process and the new park will have proper upkeep. This notion was shared with the majority of participants. Many current parks of North Lawndale have experienced deterioration due to lack of upkeep and management. Multiple interviewees mentioned how flower beds in local parks have not had new flowers planted, ruining the aesthetic of the space and making it seem less welcoming. This will be a crucial aspect of the policy framework because having an ill-maintained pocket park would reverse the effects of creating a community-directed green space. Some participants even brought up creating job opportunities for park maintenance and management in North Lawndale. This would also create another bond to the community and the neighborhood would also be responsible for the upkeep of the space, alongside the Chicago Park District. As mentioned above, once a donation of land parcels to the CPD has been made, CPD is financially responsible for the upkeep of the park space. However, having partnerships with other private entities would bolster upkeep efforts and help ensure the longevity of the green spaces.

Recommended Policy Framework

Based on the responses from my interviews and the hopes, concerns, and wants of the residents of North Lawndale, I have created a policy framework for the creation of pocket parks through the repurposing of vacant lots. I referenced the case studies in Baltimore and

Philadelphia due to their success in repurposing vacant lots in terms of decrease in crime, increased walkability, increased community engagement, and positive feedback from residents.⁸⁰ I also referenced the policy recommendations from the Schilling et al. paper, as it outlines what factors and entities shape the construction of green infrastructure.⁸¹ Though I was only able to interview one neighborhood in Chicago, several neighborhoods in the South and West Side experience the high concentration of vacant lots and their effects on the community. The policy framework highlights how park creation can be almost entirely community based and the residents of a neighborhood decide which amenities will be included. My interviews indicated how community surveying can be an effective method in park creation; the participants narrowed down the specific locations as well as desired amenities to be placed within the park.

Steps of the Policy Framework for Vacant Lot Park Project

Community Area Requests Vacant Lots to be Repurposed	A neighborhood in the city can apply to this project to have vacant lots in their area repurposed; while all projects should be approved, priority is given to areas with highest concentration of vacant lots (ie. North Lawndale, Englewood, etc.)
Deciding location	Through community survey and spatial analysis of local schools, density of residents, and more, a specific block in a neighborhood is chosen
Deciding Amenities	A survey with a list of amenities is sent out to the whole neighborhood, with special attention to making sure the residents of the chosen area respond. A renter in a neighborhood would also be considered a resident. Land ownership is not a requirement.
Creating Community Programs	After amenities are chosen, specific community organizations (most likely involved in the application) can create programs that tie into the amenities (ie. community gardens and after school programs, basketball court and basketball teams and clubs) Location will relate to the community programs, as proximity to schools would help create afterschool programs.

⁸⁰ Vidal et. al., "Reclaiming public spaces"

⁸¹ Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the rust belt"

Transfer of Land Ownership	The city of Chicago donates the specific parcels of land (chosen by the neighborhood residents) to the Chicago Park District, officially making it a part of the CPD
Creation of Park	Through donations, grants, and the budget of the Chicago Park District, pocket parks are created in previous vacant lots
Upkeep	Several jobs are created for residents in the area within the Chicago Park District for the upkeep and management of the parks; allocation of the Park District's budget is carefully monitored so upkeep can continue to happen
Pocket Park System	Previously littered and unused land within residential blocks are converted to pocket parks

Discussion: Example Vacant Lot Repurposing

With so many socioeconomic and environmental issues to address, what would an implemented park look like? I utilized the data from my interviews to help locate an example pocket park system block in North Lawndale. Due to the fact that my policy framework is theoretical, I sought to create visualizations of an example pocket park system from vacant lots. This can also help illustrate how this policy framework would be implemented, as I follow each step of the framework. The rendered park amenities were also based on participant responses and ideas. This visualization hypothesized how this community-based park making can happen and what the pockets parks would look like. To find the specific city block for the case study design, I used a combination of this qualitative study and spatial analysis to determine the block. I looked at a 5-block radius that the highest number of participants pointed out, and from there used spatial analysis to determine the specific block. First, using the Chicago Data Portal's shapefile on vacant city-owned lots, I narrowed down the area to the blocks with the highest density of vacant lots. Then, I used QGIS to help determine which of these blocks were the furthest from an existing park, using the walking distance inquiry function. This step left me with

two blocks in North Lawndale. From there, I chose the case study block that had a shorter distance to schools, as the pocket park system would service children and after school programs.

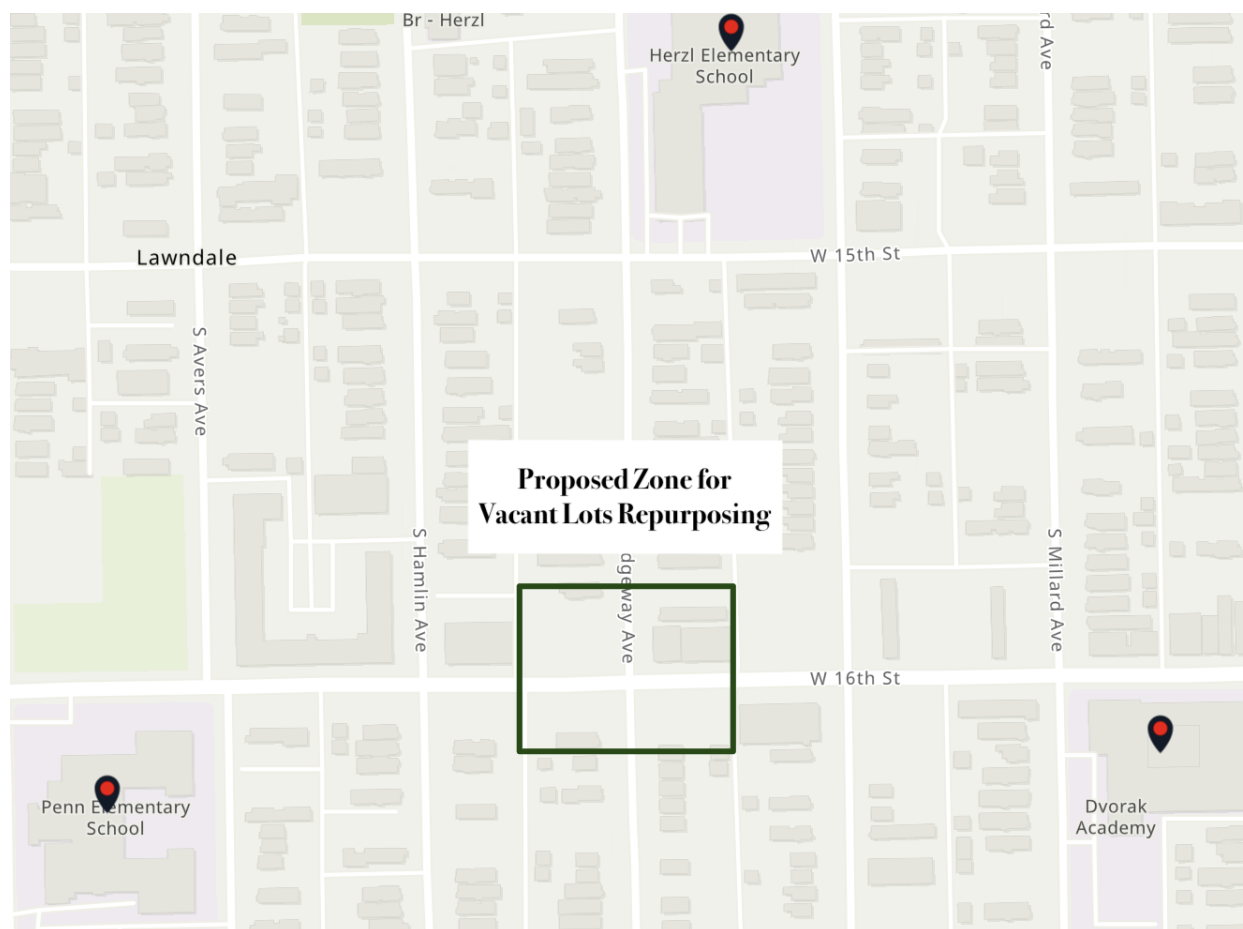
Community Area Requests Vacant Lots to be Repurposed

Based on the support of repurposing vacant lots by North Lawndale residents, I will proceed with the hypothetical park creation with the support of residents. The application system would be on a community area scale rather than a smaller unit, but multiple locations can be requested. For the purpose of this hypothetical, I will only be looking at one location for vacant lot repurposing.

Deciding location

When asked “Where do you think in North Lawndale a pocket park system should be built?” every one of my interviewees pointed to 16th Street for the location of potential vacant lot revitalization. 16th Street is a large central street that cuts through the entire neighborhood, and it houses several businesses, schools, and bus stops. The participants pointed to specific lots along 16th Street from Keeler Avenue to Millard Avenue (from East to West). Seven participants pointed from Hamlin Avenue to Millard Avenue, which is only two blocks apart, so I focused my spatial analysis within that two block stretch. Ridgeway Avenue sits between Hamlin and Millard. This cross section of Ridgeway Avenue and 16th Street is an ideal location of vacant lot repurposing due to the high concentration of vacant lots on the corner compared to other corners of 16th street and its proximity to schools. Ridgeway Avenue is the midpoint between several schools along 16th street; it sits between Smith Elementary School, Penn Elementary School, and Kipp Ascend Middle School on its west and Dvorak Public School and Dvorak School of Excellence to its east. Herzi Elementary School is located one block North. There are four available city-owned vacant lots that are directly on 16th Street.

Figure 10: Area Around the Proposed Location for Vacant Lots Repurposing on 16th Street and Ridgeway



Note the proximity to three school grounds by the proposed location.

I was taken back by how my participants had such similar location suggestions for this project. It showed me how well residents understand the neighborhood community and which spaces were most trafficked and noticed by them. 16th Street is an important cross street where many of my interviewees and their acquaintances dropped off their children, commuted to work, and more, but houses dozens of vacant lots either directly on 16th Street and right along its cross streets. By taking a closer look at which specific intersections had more vacant lots and were closer to schools and amenities, I could easily choose the specific location based off of the responses. This indicates how important community engagement can be in environmental infrastructure creation.

Oftentimes park creation happens without community input, with the CPD working separately from the residents who are supposed to benefit from the additional green space. However, as seen by the similar locations chosen by the participants, we can see how residents are much more aware of which spaces would be utilized and preferred.

Deciding Amenities

Like the specific location of the proposed park, I used the participants' responses to determine what amenities should go into the pocket park. As mentioned above, many participants were in full support of adding a community garden close to schools to create environmental education programs. There were several other amenities listed by the participants; for the full list of listed amenities, please reference the appendix. In order to pick the specific amenities, I looked at which concerns to address through the built environment:

1. Providing children space for outdoor recreation and environmental education
2. Creating more foliage to provide shade and cooling during hot weather as well as stormwater assistance
3. Decrease crime and perception of danger in these lots
4. Increasing community engagement and increasing walkability

Due to proximity to schools, I chose amenities from my responses that were oriented around children and outdoor recreation. Several participants expressed their frustration in regard to the accessibility to green spaces in North Lawndale. By choosing 16th and Ridgeway, students of five schools will only be a couple blocks from school to be able to enjoy the park space after school. There are also two high schools about seven blocks away, which is well within walking distance for highschoolers to enjoy the amenities. The three amenities I have chosen from the

responses are a playground, a condensed basketball court, and a community garden alongside the increased greenery across all of the chosen vacant lots.

Specific plants can be utilized to alleviate the environmental issues such as stormwater management and the urban heat island effect. Although it is an important neighborhood cross street, 16th street has little to no foliage or coverage on the sidewalks, increasing temperatures on hot summer days. An interviewee expressed how uncomfortable the sidewalk can get over the summer, as she takes the bus on 16th Street daily to commute to work. The subject of UHI and plant coverage has been extensively studied, with multiple studies indicating that more plant coverage and vegetation, as well as specific plant usage, can significantly decrease the UHI effects.⁸² ⁸³ For shade and tree coverage, common trees throughout Chicagoland are the European buckthorn, green ash, boxelder, black cherry and the American elm.⁸⁴ Willows are also popular in areas with a body of water. These trees can also help with air pollution, carbon storage, and habitat creation.⁸⁵

Other specific vegetation chosen can also alleviate flooding and stormwater management through utilizing native plants. The native plants of the Midwestern prairies are very efficient in flood prevention compared to commercial grass, which only has an inch of rooting, making it inefficient in flood prevention and stormwater storage.⁸⁶ Shrubs and grass like meadowsweet,

⁸² Tan, Jonathan KN, Richard N. Belcher, Hugh TW Tan, Sacha Menz, and Thomas Schroepfer. "The urban heat island mitigation potential of vegetation depends on local surface type and shade." *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 62 (2021): 127128.

⁸³ Akbari, Hashem, Constantinos Cartalis, Denia Kolokotsa, Alberto Muscio, Anna Laura Pisello, Federico Rossi, Matheos Santamouris, Afroditi Synnefa, Nyuk Hien Wong, and Michele Zinzi. "Local climate change and urban heat island mitigation techniques—the state of the art." *Journal of Civil Engineering and Management* 22, no. 1 (2016): 1-16.

⁸⁴ Nowak, David John, Robert E. Hoehn, Allison R. Bodine, Daniel E. Crane, John F. Dwyer, Veta Bonnewell, and Gary Watson. *Urban trees and forests of the Chicago region*. United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Research Station, 2013.

⁸⁵ Nowak et. al., *Urban trees and forests of the Chicago region*

⁸⁶ Levey, Morgan. "Prairie Plays Key Role in Chicago's Flood Management." *Northwestern Institute for Sustainability and Energy*. Chicago. August 2017. <https://isen.northwestern.edu/prairie-plays-key-role-in-chicagos-flood-management>

little bluestem, and switchgrass have been proven to help with stormwater storage and habitat creation for local butterflies and other insects.⁸⁷ Biofiltration systems can be created in the vacant lots for stormwater storage facilitated by native plants. Not only can native plants help with ecological functions by being used as a main plant source in vacant lot parks, they can also be utilized in the community gardens for environmental education on local flora and fauna.

A playground was the most common response for a requested amenity. Participants stated the need for more accessible playgrounds throughout the neighborhood to support the number of adolescents in the community. They also stated how many of the playgrounds are within school grounds, making them inaccessible afterschool and on the weekends. Reflecting this, a playground can be situated in one of the vacant lots on 16th and Ridgeway, and several school communities (the closer schools being for younger children) can utilize this. Outdoor recreation is crucial for child development.⁸⁸ Providing a space for outdoor recreation also improved children's independent mobility, which is linked to multiple health benefits, including better cardiovascular health, lower risk of depression, and even improved academics.⁸⁹ Also, more academic literature has come out about the importance of children's independent mobility and its benefits. Engaging in non-formalized activity, such as walking to a neighborhood playground, helps not only with children's significant benefits to their physical wellbeing, but also fostering "children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spatial development" that carries into adult life.⁹⁰ The need and want for an outdoor playspace was evident in my interviews, and the

⁸⁷ City of Chicago. "Biofiltration: Rain Gardens." *City of Chicago*. Chicago. https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/water/supp_info/conservation/green_design/bioinfiltration_raingardens.html

⁸⁸ Muñoz, Sarah-Anne. "Children in the Outdoors." *London: Sustainable Development Research Centre* (2009).

⁸⁹ Chaudhury, Moushumi, Melody Oliver, Hannah M. Badland, and Suzanne Mavoa. "Public open spaces, children's independent mobility." *Play, recreation, health and wellbeing, geographies of children and young people* 9 (2015): 315-335.

⁹⁰ Muñoz, Sarah-Anne. "Children in the Outdoors."

academic literature on the benefits of providing recreation spaces for children shows what the impact of a playground can be.

Another amenity to be hypothetically implemented is a condensed basketball court. This half-court design is commonplace in park design, as it requires less acreage than an entire basketball court and is well utilized across urban parks in the United States. This idea was provided by eight participants, with the majority of them knowing children who played basketball in North Lawndale. Basketball is an immensely popular sport in the neighborhood, with North Lawndale High School having one of the best basketball teams in the city.⁹¹ They also have several junior varsity and club teams in the neighborhood, with dozens of students choosing basketball as their main hobby. Amenities like a basketball court highlights how different neighborhood communities want different amenities, depending on what sports and activity is popular in the area.

Lastly, the park would have a community garden, in the location of where the MLK District Garden is located on the Northwest corner on 16th and Ridgeway. The MLK District Garden is currently not being utilized and has slowly deteriorated due to lack of upkeep. However, due to the pre existing infrastructure of the garden on a city-owned vacant lot, we can revitalize this once prosperous garden. Community gardens within vacant lots have shown success in community engagement and healthier eating habits of children. This amenity also provides opportunities for community programs and environmental education. This will be expanded below.

Creating Community Programs

⁹¹O'Brien, Michael. "North Lawndale beats Marshall in West Side city tournament showdown." *Chicago Sun Times*. February 1, 2023.

Community programs can be established through the amenities in the proposed park. The Schilling study in comparing the three vacant lot repurposing programs and their success outlines the factors that lead to success in engagement. Schilling states nonprofit leadership can strongly benefit community programs, as they do not have bureaucratic processes like a public city entity to work through and stakeholders and leaders in nonprofit organizations can provide legal, financial, and organizational matters.⁹² North Lawndale has preexisting relationships with nonprofit organizations that focus on community greening, like Gardeneers, Homan Grown, and the North Lawndale Greening Committee. Furthermore, the chosen location's proximity to schools allows for academic and afterschool programs to be created within the school system. The multiple teachers I spoke to all spoke out about how their schools were interested in creating environmental education programs, but could not find the proper spaces to conduct these programs. A community gardening program in Flint, Michigan has seen success with youth programming and summer sessions.⁹³ Not only did the children experience academic improvements and find a constructive activity, many of them responded that they felt accomplished to contribute to their neighborhood community. There were multiple anecdotes on how the children felt that they "made a difference" and wanted to teach their peers and underclassmen how to garden so that the gardening effort could continue. This sense of community was brought on organically and genuinely affected the younger generation:

"It's like the heart of our community because it's the only thing that we know that everybody comes to. And it's like something that brings our community together. Because without the garden, I think we would be just a little bit more separate. Because this is something we can call our own, the whole community, the whole block, and we

⁹² Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the rust belt"

⁹³ Ober Allen, Julie, Katherine Alaimo, Doris Elam, and Elizabeth Perry. "Growing vegetables and values: Benefits of neighborhood-based community gardens for youth development and nutrition." *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 3, no. 4 (2008): 418-439.

didn't [previously] have anything where we could all come to at once. We know we can depend on it, so it's like the heart of our community.”⁹⁴

This kind of large-scale impact can be made at a relatively low-cost endeavor. Childhood delinquency, loitering, academic distress, and more are directly linked to the social and physical environment of children. Punitive policies on adolescents have been proven to be significantly less effective than community building policies. A small change in the built environment like a well invested community garden can have a huge impact.

Transfer of Land Ownership

Land donations and transfers from various departments of the city to the Chicago Park District have continuously occurred, creating new parks throughout the city. Parks like Ping Tom Park and Brighton Park were recent donations from the city to the CPD. There is a precedent for land transfership from the city to the CPD. Additionally, another piece of literature that supports the acquisition of land from the city of Chicago to the Chicago Park District is the *2016 Chicago Park District Land Acquisition Plan* submitted by the Chicago Park District. This plan states:

“Where there is a lack of land acquisition opportunities in densely populated areas, cooperative efforts should be initiated or expanded upon with other government agencies (such as Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Public Libraries, Chicago Housing Authority, Cook County Forest Preserve, and Metropolitan Water Reclamation District) and possibly public/private partnerships to provide additional open space and recreational opportunities.”⁹⁵

Within this plan, North Lawndale has achieved the goal of 2 acres of green space per 1,000 residents. This is the standard measurement for green space accessibility the city of Chicago has used since the 1990s. Due to this achieved requirement, the CPD stated that “There

⁹⁴ Ober et. al., “Growing vegetables and values”

⁹⁵ Chicago Park District. *2016 Chicago Park District Land Acquisition Plan*. Chicago Park District. 2016.

is no need to pursue open space acquisition in this community at this time.”⁹⁶ This highlights the distance between how the CPD analyzes park space usage and accessibility versus the lived experiences of the residents of North Lawndale. It calls attention to how crucial community involvement and leadership is in the creation of green spaces. As it stands, city officials do not see the need to add more green space in North Lawndale and do not view these vacant lots as viable parcels of land to transfer to the CPD. This puts North Lawndale in a position that has “a lack of land acquisition opportunities in densely populated areas, cooperative efforts should be initiated or expanded upon with other government agencies.”⁹⁷ By working with the department of development and planning (the official owning entity of many vacant lots in North Lawndale), the Chicago Public Schools, and more public/private entities of North Lawndale, a park that reflects residents’ opinions can be created.

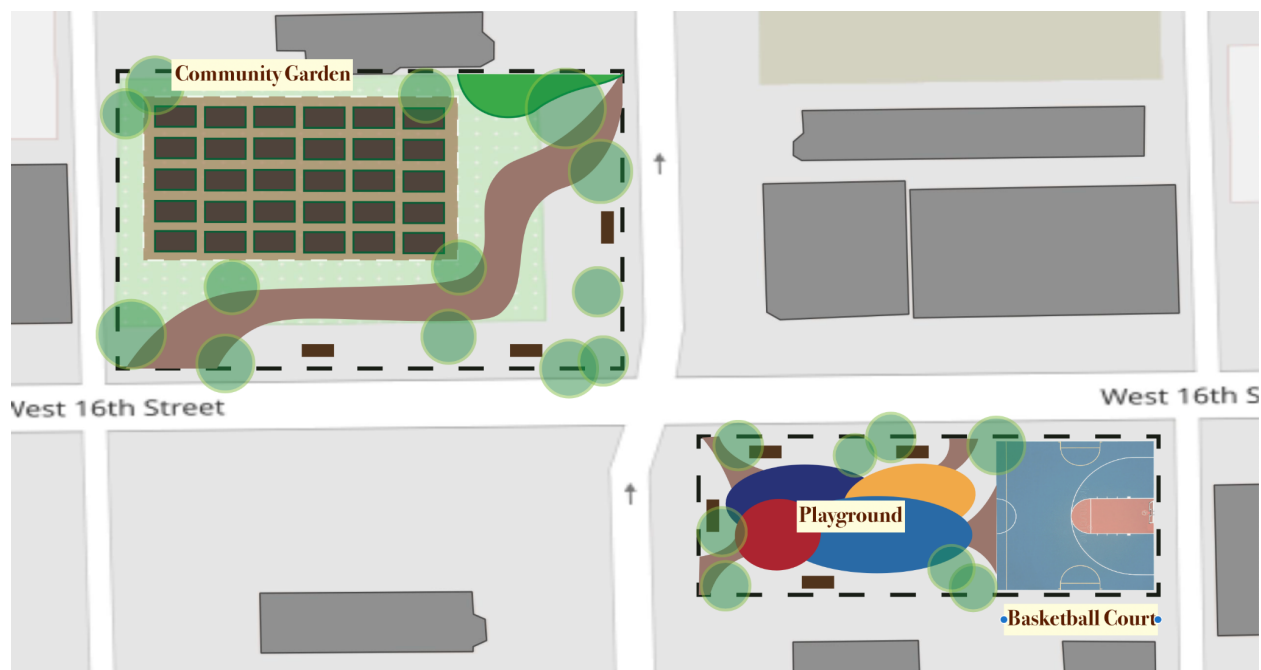
For this hypothetical, we will proceed as though there is a government program such as the Large Lots Program that has an established application system and transfership of the four vacant lots on 16th and Ridgeway as occurred.

Creation of Park

Figure 11: Mock-up of Proposed Park with Amenities

⁹⁶ Chicago Park District. *2016 Chicago Park District Land Acquisition Plan*.

⁹⁷ Chicago Park District. *2016 Chicago Park District Land Acquisition Plan*.



Upkeep

Upkeep is a crucial aspect of the continuation of community-orientated spaces. As seen in my interviews, upkeep is an issue across many spaces in North Lawndale, including Douglas Park, which is one of the largest and notable parks in the city. Many community gardens and community programs have slowly faded out due to lack of engagement and upkeep. Continuous funding is a large hurdle in this effort, as public and private organizations have difficulty providing funds over the years. However, this issue can be remedied and alleviated if considered early on in the development process. The Philadelphia Green Project has seen continued success due to the delegation of resources and funding across multiple organizations. Several nonprofits were involved, which decreased the financial burden on each organization to be continuously involved in the program.⁹⁸ This can also be further assisted through funding and engagement from the neighboring schools. Summer programs were successful in Flint, assisting with idleness and boredom of children over summer break.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the rust belt"

⁹⁹ Ober et. al., "Growing vegetables and values"

Another potential solution to the issue of upkeep is providing employment through nonprofits or the Chicago Park District to residents of the neighborhood. Low-income neighborhoods of color have institutional barriers in employment, from impacts on education and obtaining higher education to stable housing, employment rates are significantly lower in communities of color than the rest of the urban communities across the United States.¹⁰⁰ North Lawndale is no exception. North Lawndale has an unemployment rate of 17.2%, which is more than double the unemployment rate of Chicago's, 8.1%.¹⁰¹ Though the upkeep of the park would only create a handful of job opportunities, it can help alleviate a larger issue of the community, as well as assist in community engagement and continuation of the spaces. This topic will require further examination and will vary from neighborhood to neighborhood.

Neighborhood Park System

When the repurposed vacant lots become an official park in the neighborhood, it can have genuine impacts across different demographics and become a pillar of the community. Its central location, amenities chosen by the residents, and educational programs can bring different groups of residents together to utilize and upkeep the space. Integrated parks like pocket parks rather than large city parks such as Douglas Park in North Lawndale have a different effect on the community. In a study comparing neighborhood parks versus large nature reserves out of the city, the lack of urban arrangements in dense urbanization resulted in a much lower evaluation for standards of living.¹⁰² From environmental benefits such as biodiversity, pollution control, urban heat island effect alleviation, stormwater storage and more, parks can provide a long list of

¹⁰⁰Huynh, Lisa N. "Employment barriers within low-and moderate-income communities." *Monthly Lab. Rev.* 143 (2020): 1.

¹⁰¹ Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "North Lawndale Community Data Snapshot Chicago Community Area Series."

¹⁰²Weismayer, Christian, Ivo Ponocny, Sabine Sedlacek, Bernadette Stross, and Stefan Dressler. "THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURAL URBAN SURROUNDINGS AND RESIDENT'S WELL-BEING." *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management* 12, no. 1 (2017): 21-37.

benefits that extend beyond the environment.¹⁰³ It can serve as a pillar to the community, especially when resident participation is the basis of green infrastructure construction. It changes how residents interact with their built environment, changing the social environment of their communities.¹⁰⁴ This effect has been seen across the world in urban park creation, and with proper engagement from the community Chicago neighborhoods can reap these benefits from previously avoided spaces.

This change in the social environment can also have tangible effects, such as increased walkability and a decrease in crime. As we have seen in the case studies in Philadelphia, the decrease in crime rates in vacant lots were permanent and did not shift to a different part of the neighborhood. The effect of decreased crime and increased walkability can create a feedback loop of improvement to the perception of these spaces, thereby further decreasing crime and increasing walkability. In a location like 16th Street, increased walkability could even impact ridership of public transportation, since the proposed location is along several bus stops. Though the specific impact of this proposed park is not measurable, we have numerous cases across North American cities that face similar socioeconomic urban issues in vacant lots that have seen success.

Conclusion

The high concentration of vacant lots in low-income neighborhoods serves as a reminder of the continuous disinvestment and lack of support these communities have endured. Now, we see how the longevity of disinvestment affects how people interact with vacant lots. Littering and crime define these spaces, with residents feeling unsafe to go outside in their own neighborhood.

¹⁰³Sadeghian, Mohammad Mehdi, and Zhirayr Vardanyan. "The benefits of urban parks, a review of urban research." *Journal of Novel Applied Sciences* 2, no. 8 (2013): 231-237.

¹⁰⁴Pitas, Nicholas AD, Benjamin D. Hickerson, Tammy Koerte, Deborah Kerstetter, and Andrew J. Mowen. "'A unifying force in the community': Perceptions of a neighborhood park renovation." *Community Development* 48, no. 3 (2017): 420-435.

The residents of North Lawndale shared their experiences on how these vacant lots have been taken away from their community and the issue only continues to grow. There is a strong interest in the North Lawndale community to enact change in these spaces and foster community bonds and environmental education. My interviews highlighted the neighborhood's awareness of these spaces. Though the city and residents outside of these concentrations may not feel that this issue is dire, each one of the tens of thousands of vacant lots affect a family, a block, and a whole neighborhood. Even small investments into these spaces can have huge impacts. In another study in Philadelphia, vacant lots were given two treatments: either it was cleaned and greened or it was given a community purpose of mostly community gardens.¹⁰⁵ The study saw a significant reduction in serious violent crimes around the renovated lots. Decreases in burglaries, assaults, robbery, and theft occurred, alongside spill-over crime reduction effects in areas around the renovated lots.¹⁰⁶ We have seen how changing these spaces can tangibly affect crime rates and perceived crimes, thereby increasing community engagement and walkability of a neighborhood. Perceived safety and faith in the neighborhood would allow for more engagement children to explore their neighborhood and what the neighborhood can provide.

Having children feel safe to go out and play on their street rather than avoid lots on their block would not only provide unparalleled enrichment and health benefits, but giving children and adults these spaces would also increase social benefits, perception of the neighborhood, and community engagement. Having children exposed to outdoor recreation have been proven to improve parents' and guardians' perception on youth recreation benefits, health benefits, and most importantly the benefits of communal recreation experiences with families and friends in

¹⁰⁵ Branas et.al.

¹⁰⁶ Branas et.al.

outdoor environments.¹⁰⁷ These changes in perception of public neighborhood spaces can increase public engagement and allow community bonds to grow. Furthermore, by making sure the park location, amenities, and space is a good fit for the neighborhood can improve the way people interact with the space.

My research is a small step in a hopeful future in urban spaces across Chicago. For so long these communities have been forced to endure the challenges of how large-scale policies and laws disadvantage in their community. However, with community-based green space creation, some issues of spatialized inequality can be addressed. Alongside further research conducted in other neighborhoods with high concentration of vacant lots and low access to parks, the city of Chicago can be exposed to the interest and passion for betterment in these communities.

¹⁰⁷ Larson, Lincoln R., Jason W. Whiting, and Gary T. Green. "Young people's outdoor recreation and state park use: Perceived benefits from the parent/guardian perspective." *Children Youth and Environments* 23, no. 3 (2013): 89-118.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What do you think of the vacant lots throughout the neighborhood? Have they affected your quality of life?
2. Do you believe these empty lots currently serve a purpose to your community?
3. How would you feel if these spaces became an official public space? How would you feel if these spaces became a park?
4. Do you think your neighborhood would benefit from a pocket park network?
5. Do you frequent public green spaces? Do you feel that you utilize the parks around you?
6. If there were to be a pocket park network within a residential block in your neighborhood you could walk to, what do you think your neighborhood would want in those spaces?
7. Do you think having official green spaces and parks instead of lots will increase community engagement and walkability?
8. Where do you think in North Lawndale a pocket park system should be built?
9. Do you think residents will use these pocket parks if implemented?

Appendix B: Amenities Listed by Interviewees

<i>Category</i>	<i>Listed Amenities</i>
Recreational	Playground, Reading Park, Dog Park, Swings, Jungle Gym
Exercise	Basketball Court, Tennis Court,
Community-oriented	Community Gardens
Cultural	Statues, Murals, Art, Seasonal Arts Projects
Etc.	Benches, Flower Beds, Drinking Fountains, Public Bathroom