



August 9, 2021

TO: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

FROM: Alex Chen, [Embold Research](#); Clint W. Sabin, [Fifth Star Public Affairs](#)

RE: Residents see opportunities to build lasting quality of life in the region

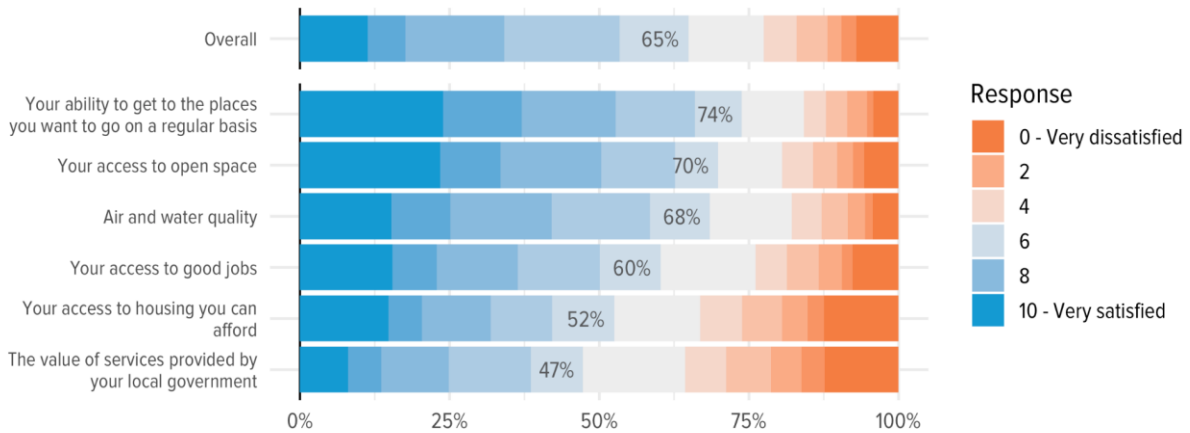
People in northeastern Illinois identify clear challenges facing the region and see opportunities to improve quality of life, according to a new public opinion survey of residents conducted by Embold Research for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) between June 28 and July 5, 2021. Residents value regional attributes like access to open space, ability to get places, and access to amenities. At the same time, they express concerns about congestion, the quality of infrastructure, the economy, and housing. Although a majority think metropolitan Chicago is on the wrong track, [ON TO 2050](#) — the region's long-range plan — provides recommendations for tackling many of these issues.

Most residents satisfied with their quality of life

Asked about their lives in general, 34 percent of residents say they're *very* satisfied, for a total of 65 percent of residents who are satisfied. When asked about specific aspects, residents are most satisfied with their ability to get to the places they want to go on a regular basis (74 percent), their access to open space (70 percent), and air and water quality (68 percent).

They tend to be less satisfied with the value of services provided by their local government (47 percent satisfied, 36 percent dissatisfied) or with access to housing they can afford (52 percent satisfied, 33 percent dissatisfied).

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life these days? /
How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your life?



Residents value connections to open space and other amenities

Asked about what they like the most about where they live, residents frequently mention open space. Residents in urban, suburban, and rural areas alike touch on this theme, whether mentioning parks or trees inside the city or forest preserves and undeveloped land outside it:

- “Rural lots of green space” (Kane County)
- “Los parques, museos y lugares verdes muy bien mantenidos por la Ciudad de Chicago.” [The City of Chicago’s well-maintained parks, museums, and green spaces] (Chicago)
- “Good food, restaurants, shopping, forest preserves are nearby, etc” (Cook County, outside Chicago)

Residents also mention a variety of other amenities — health care, entertainment, shops and restaurants — that they access using a variety of transportation modes:

- “Close to every thing [sic]. You can walk to the library, grocery stores, doctor offices. 1 block from a elementary school about 3 blocks from the middle school, close to all the major hways. Great ethnic restaurants.” (DuPage County)
- “Convenient to shopping, medical care and access to major highways.” (Cook County)
- “The convenience of everything, stores, medical, food, restaurants, etc” (Kane County)

The list of amenities that draw people to the region is long and varied, suggesting a diverse range of factors affect individual quality of life — from the quiet and privacy of rural unincorporated areas to lively urban centers. These responses make clear the role that regional planning can play in ensuring residents and businesses have many choices for where to live and work across the region.

Widespread access to services, amenities — with notable disparities

The vast majority of residents (about eight in 10) say it's easy for them to travel to destinations like groceries, parks and open space, and shops and restaurants. A somewhat smaller proportion says it's easy to travel to arts, culture, and entertainment (53 percent easy, 20 percent hard), or their place of work (69 percent easy, 14 percent hard among those who are employed). Nearby access to shops and restaurants are fairly important to perceived quality of life — asked about the ideal street to live on, the second most common factor that respondents said would be important to their quality of life is nearby shops and restaurants (31 percent), without large differences in preference between different parts of the region.

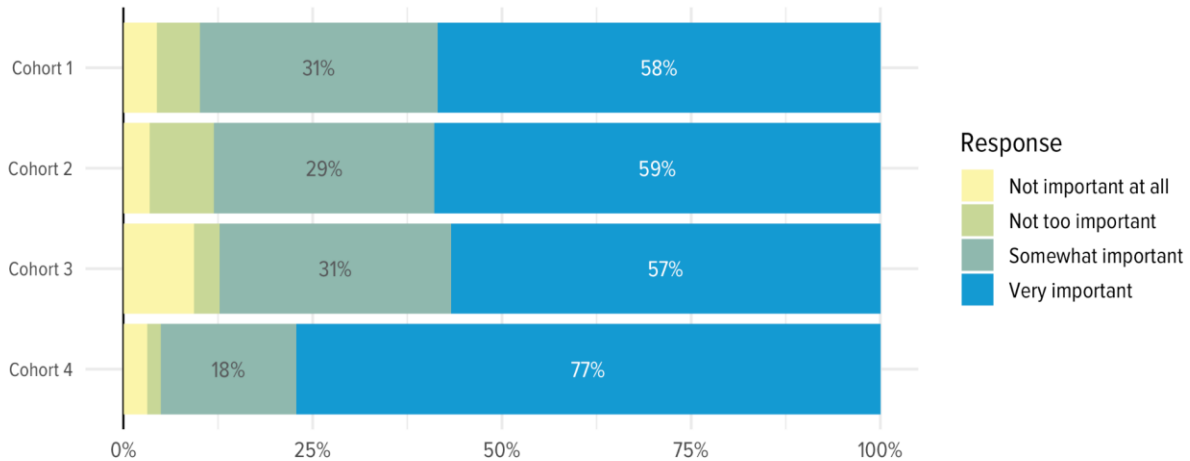
Residents living in community cohort 4 areas, identified as “very high need” by CMAP based on tax base, population, household income, and economically disconnected/disinvested areas, are less satisfied with their access to good jobs, open space, and air and water quality. People of color are twice as likely as white residents to say it's hard for them to get to their place of work.

Residents within Chicago or Cook County are slightly more likely than others to say they have difficulty accessing various destinations. In Cook County, 16 percent of currently employed residents said it is hard to travel to their place of work, while just 11 percent of those in other counties said so. A moderately higher proportion of Chicago residents say it's hard to travel to groceries (12 percent hard in Chicago, 4 percent hard outside Chicago) or shops and restaurants (13 percent hard in Chicago, 5 percent hard outside Chicago).

Residents support equitable investments for roads, bridges, and transit

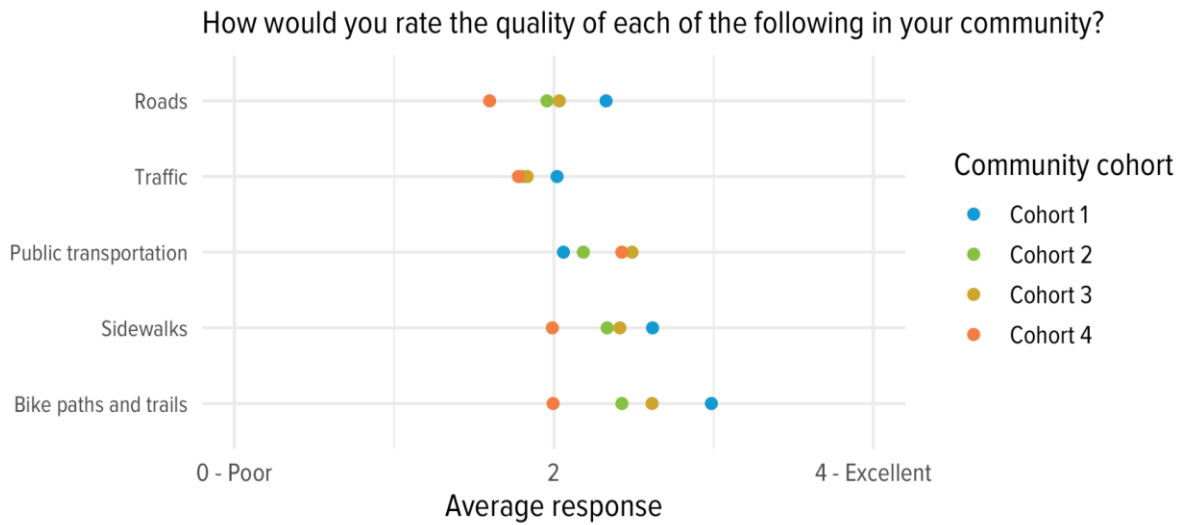
90 percent say that it is very important or somewhat important that investment in roads, bridges, and transit go toward communities with the greatest needs. This view is broadly shared: majorities of both those outside and inside Cook County, of white residents and residents of color, and in each major income bracket say that this is very important. Among residents living in cohort 4 communities, this sentiment is particularly intense.

When thinking about investing in roads, bridges, and transit, how important is it that money go toward communities with the greatest needs?



Residents offer moderate ratings for transportation infrastructure in their own communities. The average rating hovers around the midpoint for roads, traffic, sidewalks, and public transportation, compared to higher ratings for parks, recreation, and open space. Road surface quality is also seen as a traffic safety problem: Asked about traffic safety concerns, 30 percent include “poor quality of roads” among their top two concerns when in a car, second after “drivers who are distracted” at 51 percent.

CMAP’s community cohorts display geographical disparities throughout the survey. Here, for perceived quality of roads, sidewalks, and bicycle infrastructure, those living in cohort 1 communities — identified by CMAP as “low and very low need” — rate infrastructure quality much higher than those living in cohort 4 communities, identified as “very high need.” There is much less variation among cohorts for traffic. For public transit, the direction of the gap is reversed: cohort 4 communities give higher ratings than cohort 1 communities.



Residents depend on a variety of transportation modes

Residents relied on a variety of transportation modes for regular travel prior to COVID-19 restrictions. Public transit use is concentrated in Chicago, with half of Chicago residents taking some form of transit multiple times a week and just 13 percent of those outside Cook County doing so. Likewise, a third of Chicago residents say they used rideshare multiple times per week, while just 12 percent of those outside Cook say so. Correspondingly, driving or riding in a car multiple times a week is lower among Chicago residents (67 percent), compared to in the rest of Cook (82 percent) or in other counties (88 percent).

Residents perceive more urban and more rural parts of the region to be disconnected. 48 percent of those outside Cook say it's hard for them to travel to the City of Chicago, while 31 percent of those inside Chicago say it's hard for them to travel to destinations in the suburbs.

Uncertainty around transportation patterns, streetscape when things return to normal

Just under a third of respondents said they worked from home instead of their place of work since March 2020. Among these workers, there's high demand for continued remote or hybrid models. Three-quarters of those who worked from home at any point since March 2020 say they would *want* to work from home half of the time or more when things return to normal, if they could choose. Just 50 percent say they *expect* to be working from home when things return to normal.

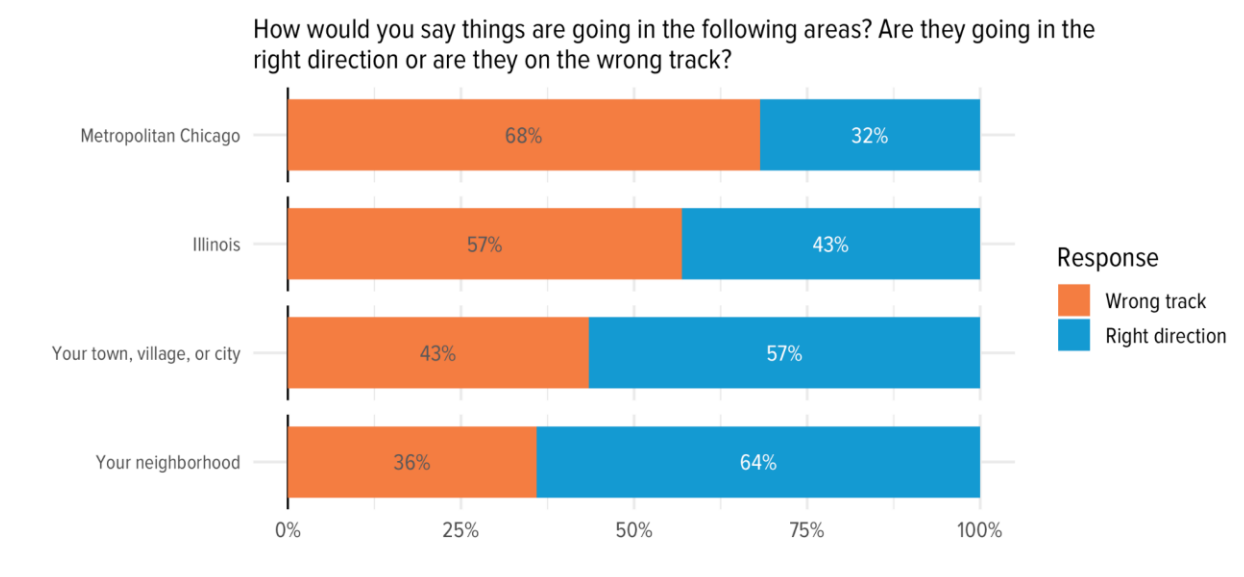
This could affect demand for housing across the region: 63 percent of employed respondents would live elsewhere if they no longer had to commute, with a preference for less urban areas.

Countering the potential impact of more remote or hybrid work on daily commutes, 27 percent of residents say they expect to be driving or riding in a car *more* frequently after things return to normal than before COVID-19 restrictions; 64 percent say they expect to drive or ride about the same as before. This pairs with over a quarter of residents who say they expect to use public transportation less frequently than before restrictions, including 22 percent of people who said they took transit multiple times a week pre-pandemic. These changes could add to residents' existing concerns about traffic congestion.

33 percent say they expect to walk, run, or hike more often than before COVID-19 restrictions when things return to normal. 21 percent say they expect to ride a bicycle more than before (somewhat balanced out by 17 percent who say they expect to ride a bicycle less than before). A majority support the continuation of enhanced neighborhood streets to support walking and biking and dedicated areas for curbside pickup for food and shopping when things return to normal. More are unsure about street or parking spaces used for outdoor dining or events (48 percent should continue, 35 percent should not), with residents of Chicago, Cook County, and Lake County slightly more inclined to believe they should continue.

Residents most optimistic about their neighborhoods, local communities

After over a year of COVID-19 restrictions, residents express some pessimism about how the region as a whole is doing. Majorities are optimistic about their own neighborhood (64 percent right direction) and their town, village, or city (57 percent right direction), but only 32 percent think that things in metropolitan Chicago are headed in the right direction.



Residents are also more likely to feel they belong to their local communities: 65 percent say they feel at least a moderate sense of belonging to the town, village, or city where they live, while just 41 percent feel the same about northeastern Illinois.

58 percent of respondents say that it’s very likely or somewhat likely that they’ll move away from northeastern Illinois in the next few years. While predicted likelihood is different from actual intent to move, the region’s overall population growth has trailed other large metropolitan areas in recent years.

Looking ahead to the next year, a majority (57 percent) of residents say they are worried and uncertain about the local economy. Those who say they are very worried and uncertain (28 percent) outpace those who say they are very confident and optimistic (12 percent) about the local economy. Residents in the region are split on their outlook on their personal finances (47 percent worried and uncertain; 53 percent confident and optimistic). While just 15 percent of white residents say they feel very worried and uncertain about their personal finances, 28 percent of residents of color feel the same.

Cost of living, congestion among top-of-mind quality-of-life concerns

In an open-ended question asking what residents like the least about where they live, over one in five respondents answer with a concern about cost of living — about the same proportion mentions public safety. These responses include concerns about high taxes, the cost of living in

general, and the cost of housing:

- “Las tasas de las casa son muy caras las rentas son muy caras las calles están en muy mal estado el agua es muy cara” [Property taxes are very expensive, rents are very expensive, the streets are in poor shape, and the water is very expensive]
- “... high cost of child care especially in relation to quality paying jobs, and the fact that pay rates have not kept up with inflation, let alone the insane increase in housing costs over the past 30 years.”

In the same question, about one in 10 raises concerns about mobility, primarily citing traffic congestion as well as specific concerns about parking availability, lack of or distance to transit options, roads and infrastructure, and bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure. Examples:

- “Traffic and bad roads” (Will)
- “Access to expressways not easy — lots of traffic” (McHenry)
- “The construction of so many warehouses, the traffic from all the trucks coming in and out of the warehouses. How the roads are needing to be repaired even though they are not that old.” (Will)
- “The city of Chicago puts a big emphasis on driving. Some neighborhoods aren’t serviced by trains and existing ones have bad service. Continues to expand highways as opposed to discouraging urban sprawl. City is not safe for bikers as they continue to be killed by drivers with zero repercussions. The city of Chicago continues to permit developers to tear down multi unit buildings. Not only is the city losing architecture with historical significance but it is getting rid of affordable housing” (Chicago)
- “No hay transporte público, guagua” [There’s no public transportation or buses] (DuPage)
- “Tener una solo línea del metro y que sea muy lenta” [There is only one subway line and it’s very slow] (Chicago)

There’s broad agreement that investing in transit is more effective for addressing traffic congestion than raising fees/taxes to affect demand. After being informed that “there is limited funding and land to build more roads and bridges,” 71 percent of residents say that investing in public transit is the most effective way to address regional congestion out of the choices offered. Much fewer believe that demand-side approaches like charging higher tolls during

busy times (14 percent), adding tolls to existing highways (9 percent), and increasing the gas tax and adjusting it for inflation (6 percent) are the most effective out of the listed options.

The pandemic had large impact on households, personal finances

Nearly three in 10 respondents said they lost income or hours since March 2020. This impact is most keenly felt among those whose households make less than \$35,000 a year, almost half of whom said they lost income or hours, compared to one in five among those who make \$100,000 or more a year.

Over one in five said they had difficulty paying for food, groceries, or essential expenses since March 2020. At a household level, 44 percent of those making less than \$35,000 in household income a year said they had this difficulty. Geographic-level variation by community cohort correlates with response as well: 34 percent of those living in cohort 4 communities said they had difficulty, while 21 percent of those living in cohort 1 communities said so.

Around 12 percent of respondents said they worked less or left the workforce to take care of children or other family members. This proportion is markedly higher among Latino/a residents (17 percent) and Black residents (14 percent) than white residents (9 percent), and is also highest among those in households making \$35,000 a year or less compared to other income ranges. Women are somewhat more likely to report working less to take care of others — 14 percent did so, while 10 percent of men did — and more likely to report losing a job or business — 17 percent did so, while 13 percent of men did.

Residents think more could be done to address pollution, climate resilience

Over two-thirds of residents say they've experienced or seen at least one of various impacts of more extreme weather and climate change in the last few years. Of these, the most common are extreme heat (34 percent), more extreme winter storms (31 percent), damage to infrastructure or road closures from extreme weather (29 percent), increased flooding of roadways (28 percent), and increased flooding of properties (26 percent).

Residents are much more likely to think local governments are not doing enough to address climate resilience than to think they're doing too much. Majorities think that local governments are not doing enough to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions or to protect infrastructure from extreme events, and pluralities think that they're not doing enough to

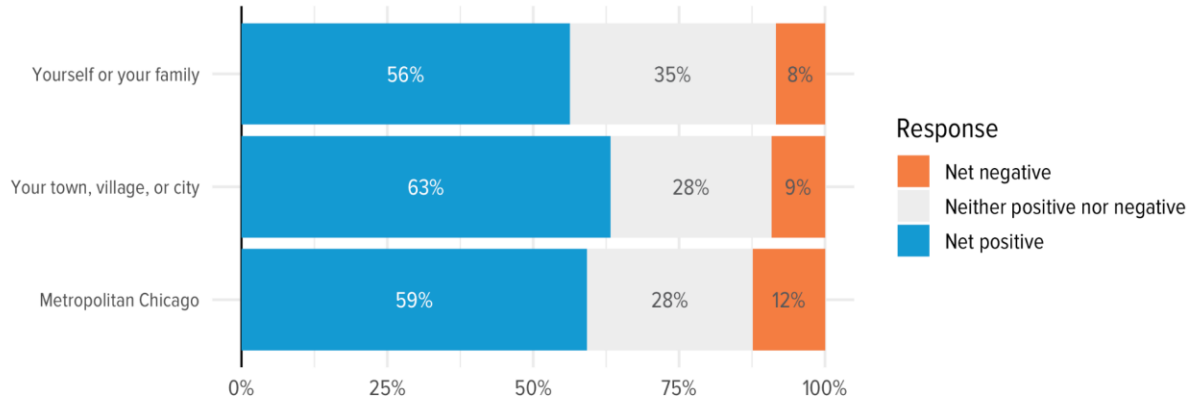
prevent and reduce the damage of floods or to address the inequitable impacts of extreme weather events.

Presented with a list of individual behaviors that could improve air quality and reduce emissions, 33 percent of residents said they would be likely to walk for short trips more often instead of traveling by car, 24 percent said work from home more often, 21 percent said purchase an electric vehicle, 20 percent said take public transit more often, and 17 percent said ride a bicycle for short trips more often. Comparatively few (9 percent) said they were likely to carpool more often.

Conclusion

People across all seven counties are open about northeastern Illinois' assets — strong community ties, open space, and a transportation network connecting housing to jobs, shops, restaurants, and parks. However, they believe at the same time that the region is headed down the wrong track and that these regional resources face threats. Survey results reveal the continuing impact of COVID-19, disparities that reflect historic disinvestment or economic disconnection, the direct impact of pollution and a changing climate, and infrastructure and congestion concerns that demand long-term solutions. Many say they expect to leave the region in coming years. Despite these challenges, residents see a path forward: most think that local governments working together across jurisdictional boundaries will have a net positive impact not just on the region as a whole (59 percent net positive), but also on them and their families (56 percent net positive) and their town, village, or city (63 percent net positive).

If local governments in the area worked together more across county, city, township, or village borders to develop jobs, transportation, and housing, do you think that would have a positive or negative impact on each of the following?



Methodology

Embold Research conducted a survey of 2,340 residents 18 and older across Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties from June 28 to July 5, 2021. The modeled margin of error is 2.6 percent.

Respondents were recruited into an online survey instrument via Dynamic Online Sampling and SMS. Post stratification was done on region, gender, age, race, education, and past vote history with 2020 voters.

Embold Research reaches voters via targeted online ads that point people to an online survey instrument. Our Dynamic Online Sampling establishes and continuously rebalances advertising targets across region, age, gender, race, and partisanship to dynamically deliver large samples that accurately reflect the demographics of a population.