



June 11, 2016

Why Chicago is flourishing and dying at the same time



Photo by iStock

If you're trying to figure out your future, it's usually good to start by deciphering your past, at least the recent past. That's what I'm going to try to do today regarding Chicago.

As you may have heard, Crain's is sponsoring a conference June 15 called the **Future of Chicago**. A rather eclectic and impressive crew will be there, ranging from a former head of Los Angeles public schools and rapper Rhymefest to New York financial expert Richard Ravitch and the co-head of the Chicago unit of Black Lives Matter. Hopefully you can make it.

...
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The bottom line truly is a tale of two cities inside one. But there is a lot of nuance, ranging from very promising to absolutely abysmal.

The numbers, drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau, cover changes in educational attainment, household income and home value from 1980 to 2014, all the way down to the census tract level. They were compiled for me by a demographer who, for work reasons, doesn't want to be named. But I have verified and cross-checked a sample of these findings and run them by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and noted local demographer Rob Paral. Both say they look right.

The most obvious conclusion is that different parts of the city are headed in entirely different directions, a trend that likely explains why certain neighborhoods are as safe as Toronto and others are as scary as Caracas.

The leading indicator is education, how far you've gone in school. With factory work largely either outsourced or automated, your chances of earning a good living vary dramatically based on whether you've graduated from college.

Back in 1980, only a relatively small portion of the city (those sections in blue on the accompanying maps) had a higher percentage of adults age 25 and up who had obtained at least a college degree than Cook County as a whole. The exceptions were almost all within a mile or so of the lakefront, or on the city periphery. Much of the city (in orange) was just below average.

By 2014, a lot more of the city was better educated. Most everyone living east of a line that runs diagonally from O'Hare International Airport to Hyde Park had above-average levels of education, with a minimum of 69 percent holding degrees. But go a mile west when you get south of Irving Park Road, and the percentage plunges to no more than 17 percent with a post-high school degree.

PERCENTAGE OVER 25 WITH BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER

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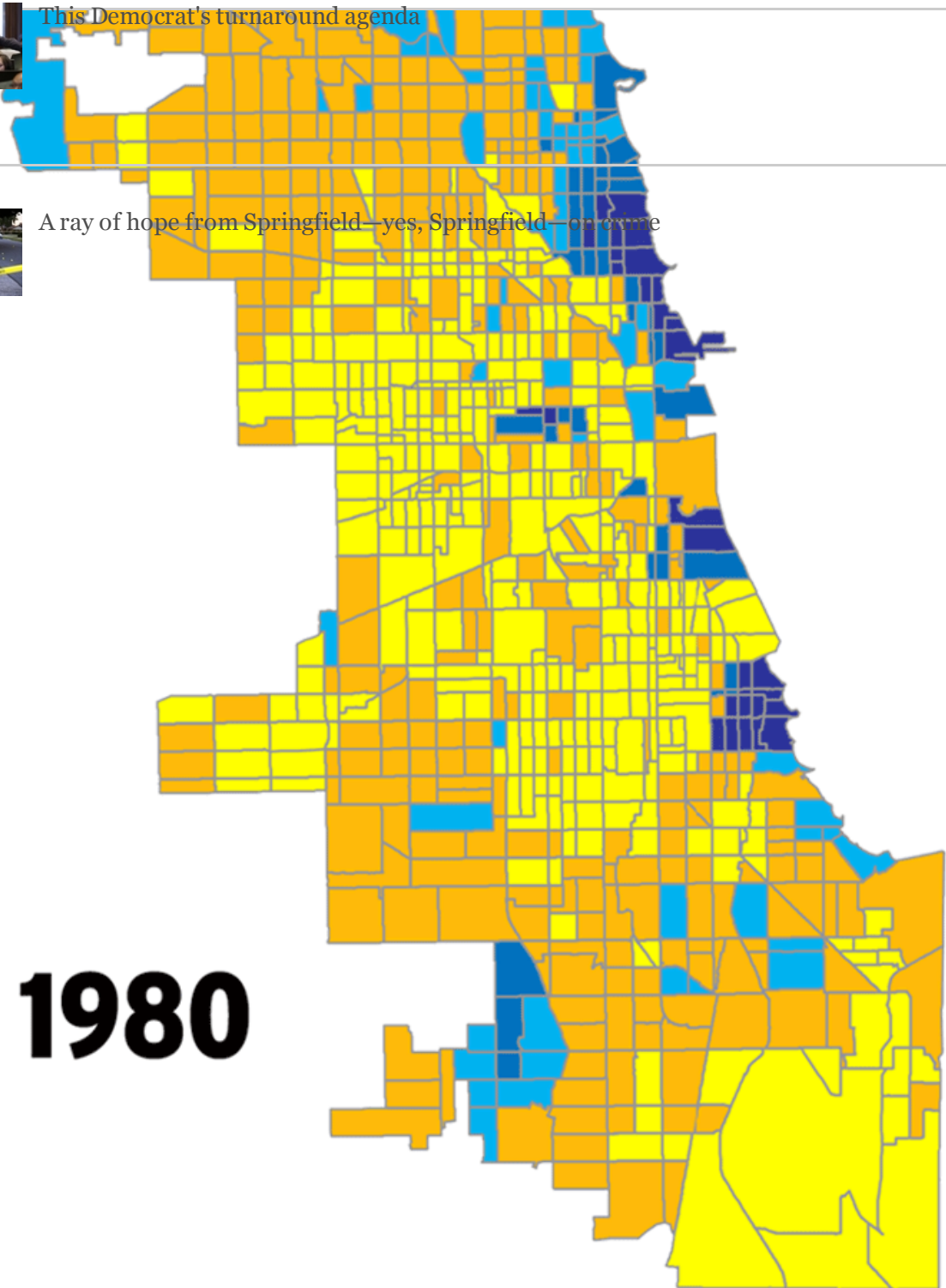
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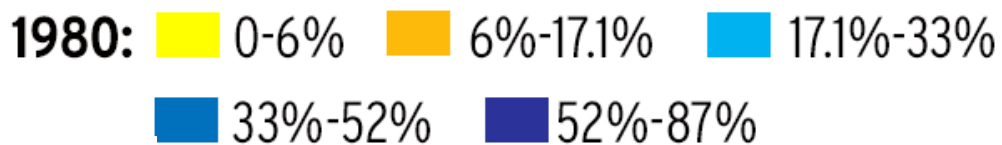
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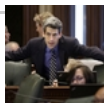
1980



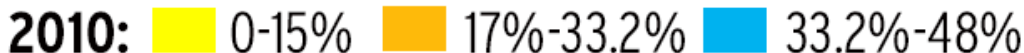
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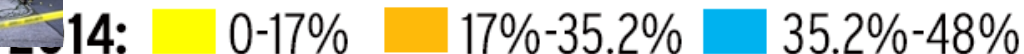
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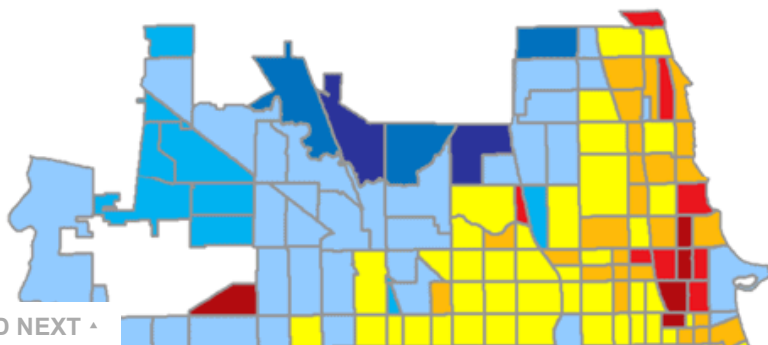


Education levels explain much of the data on median household income. The clustering isn't quite as stark but is still pretty clear. Most of the North and Northwest sides and part of the Southwest Side are well above the county median. Wealth no longer is confined to just a tiny handful of neighborhoods such as Edgebrook, Beverly and the Gold Coast. It's pushed west, well west, nearly as far as Kedzie Avenue in some neighborhoods.

But the share of red tracts, those with a median household income of less than 60 percent of the county figure, has grown, too.

In other words, likely driven by education, Chicago simultaneously has grown richer and poorer. We can debate which trend is rising faster, but they're both accelerating.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME AS A PERCENTAGE OF COOK COUNTY MEDIAN



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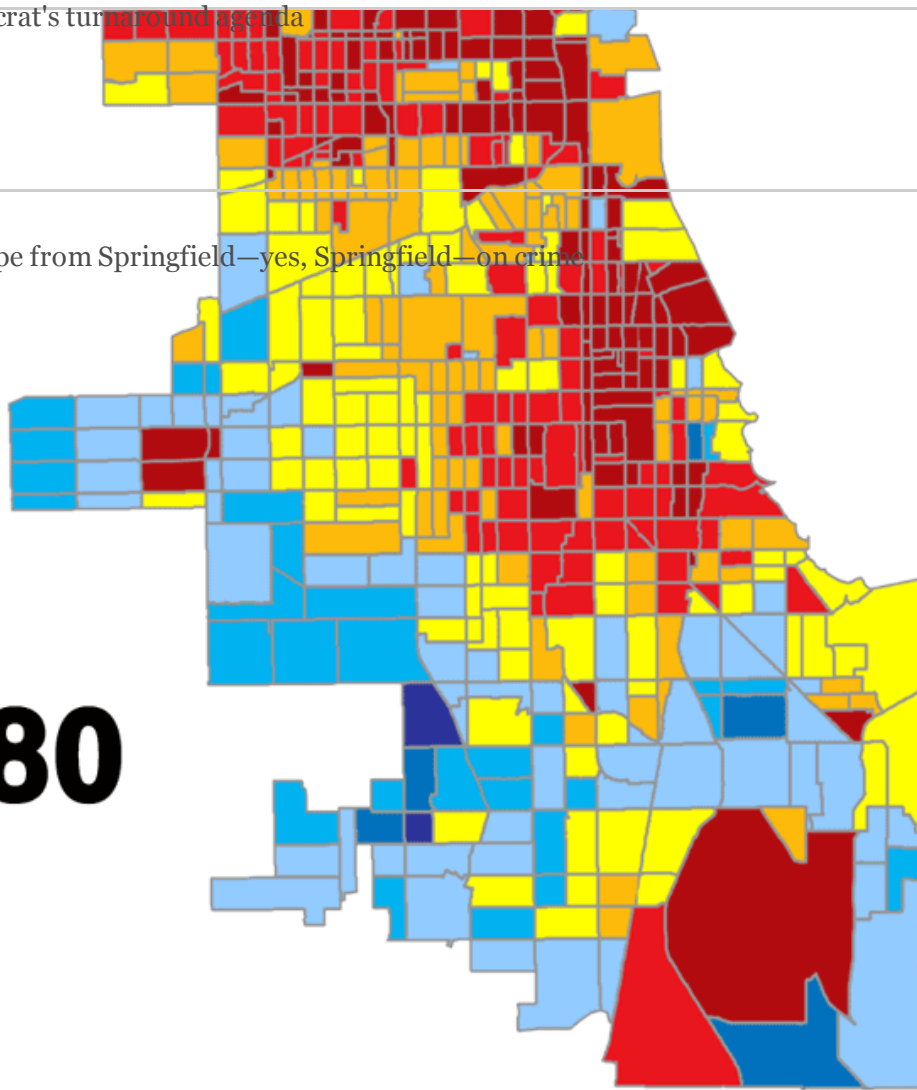
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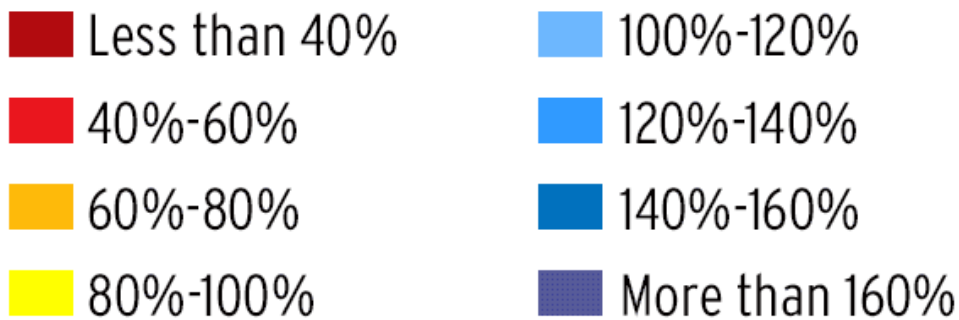
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1980



Paral, whom I worked with a few weeks back in reporting that Chicago's white population now appears to be growing while **African-Americans are fleeing town**, points out a couple of other things of interest.

For one, the keys in the maps were designed to show everything above and below the countywide average. So

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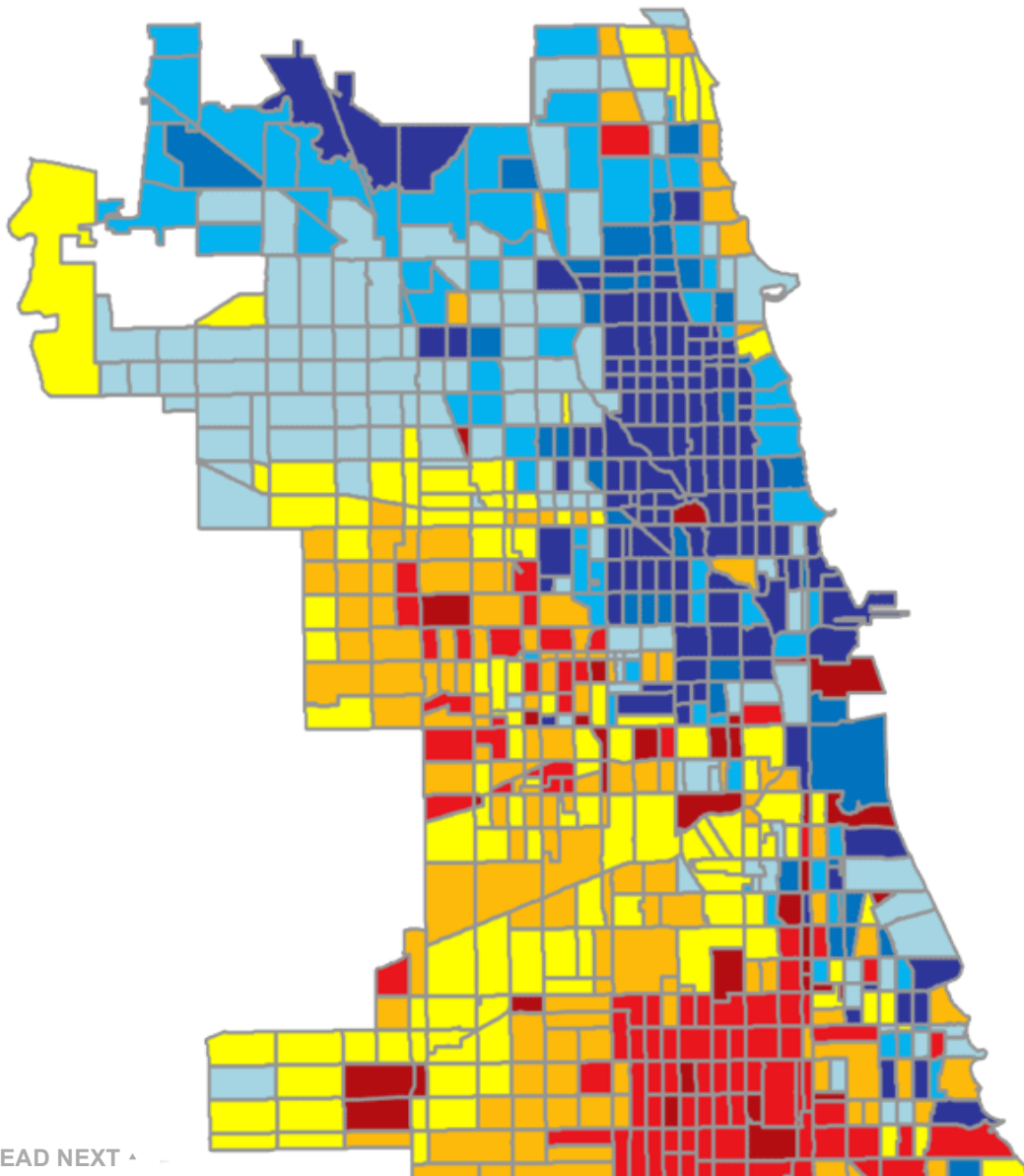


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MEDIAN HOME VALUE AS A PERCENTAGE OF COOK COUNTY MEDIAN



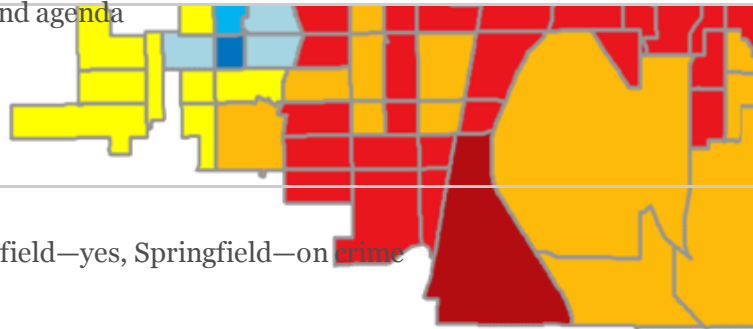
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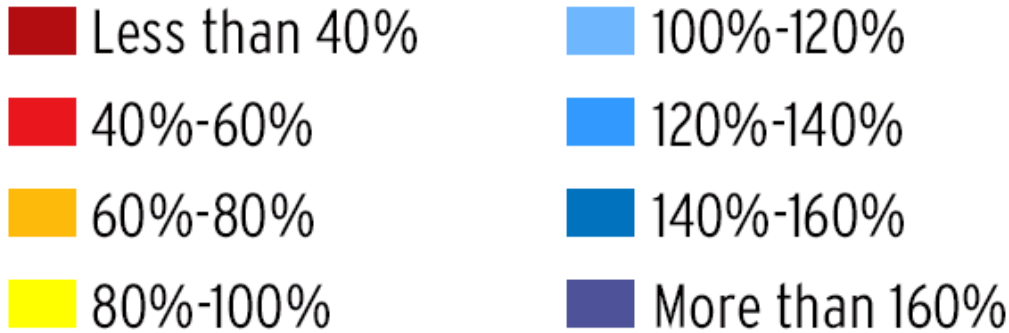
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The data are not either bad or good. They're both, and more. I look forward to our upcoming discussion.

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Cook County Greg Hinz More +

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