



# State Population Profile

## THE LAND OF LINCOLN: IS THERE SOMETHING IN ILLINOIS' WATER?

An NPG Commentary  
by Karen I. Shragg, Ed. D.

### THE LAND OF THE FAMOUS AND INFAMOUS

The list of famous leaders, musicians, artists, and actors who spent a good portion of their lives in Illinois is impressive. When everyone, from Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama to Oprah Winfrey and Walt Disney, can claim Illinois roots, one might ask, is there something in the water? Our entertainment world is so rich because the following talented people came from this Midwestern state: Bill Murray, Betty White, Robin Williams, and Harrison Ford. The Second City Improv Group of Chicago was made up of talented actors who graduated to the national scene on the iconic Saturday Night Live show, including John Belushi, Dan Akroyd, and Gilda Radner. Chicago is home to a rich blues music scene as well. If you appreciate the contributions of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Buddy Guy to American Roots music, you must tip your hat to the rich cultural soil of the windy city on Lake Michigan's shores. Scientists like James Watson of DNA fame, and Enrico Fermi with his work on nuclear reactors, call Illinois home. There were also infamous people attached to Chicago and its reputation for corruption, including the gangster Al Capone and Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley.

### THE LAND OF DEEP HISTORICAL ROOTS

Smack dab in the middle of the country, "Illinois"

is the French interpretation of the Illiniwek Nation which was a confederation of several American Indian tribes that shared a large territory in the Central Mississippi Valley that became the 21<sup>st</sup> state in the US. They called themselves the Inoca, which was renamed by the French who were there as fur traders to the name we know today as Illinois.<sup>1</sup>

Representing a large geographic area, the Hopewell Native Americans have been well studied. They represent pre-contact people who lived and traded in the area prior to 800 A.D. when their culture began to decline. Following their occupation of the area was the Late Woodland Native Americans comprising the Ojibwe, Menominee, Noquet, Sauk, Meskwaki, HoChunk, Miami, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. When the first Western explorers entered the region, these were the people they encountered. French fur traders were the first to colonize the area. The region was claimed for the French by Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette circa 1673.<sup>2</sup>

Illinois became a part of the Union in 1818. Its physical size, shaped by the curves of the Mississippi River on its western border, has not changed from its original 57,914 square miles. Included in that total are 2,320 square miles of water. What has changed is its population. With more than 12 million people, Illinois is the 6<sup>th</sup> most populous state in the U.S., and Chicago is the greatest contributor to that figure especially

when the suburbs are counted. As of 2024, Chicago proper had 2.7 million people in it but the metro area all together has nearly 9.5 million, the largest metro area on any of the Great Lakes. While the vast majority of the metropolitan population resides in Illinois, Chicago's suburban footprint stretches into Wisconsin and Indiana because tens of thousands of people work in the Chicago metro area and commute roughly two hours each way from towns such as Hammond and Gary, Indiana, or Kenosha and Racine, Wisconsin. These towns have less expensive housing and living expenses.

## **THE LAND OF MILLIONS OF SPORTS FANS**

The Chicago metro area is so large that it can support many sports teams. If you live in Chicago, football fans can cheer for the Bears, hockey fans can urge on the Blackhawks, basketball fans can brag about living in the city that is home to the Bulls and the legacy of the iconic Michael Jordan. Only our largest cities can support two baseball teams. Illinois baseball fans have a choice between the White Sox and the Cubs.

## **THE LAND OF MUSEUMS, ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT**

Cultural institutions in the Prairie State are world-renowned and not all of them are located in Chicago. One can visit the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, the capital, and the Anderson Japanese Gardens in Rockford. In Chicago, people come from all over the world to visit the very popular Field Museum, Shedd Aquarium, Museum of Science and Industry, and the not-so-well-known DuSable Black History Museum, the National Museum of Mexican Art, and more.<sup>3</sup>

## **THE LAND OF CHEWING GUM AND BUSINESS MOGULS**

Catalina Island would not be a model of conservation if it weren't for chewing gum, specifically Doublemint, Juicy Fruit, and Spearmint. The Wrigley family, originally from Philadelphia,

made Chicago their base and accumulated a fortune selling and promoting their flavors of gum. They grew their business into a multi-billion dollar company, were very generous with their profits as they supported the troops in World War II, and built Wrigley Field home to the Chicago Cubs. They bought Catalina Island off the coast of California for their summer home and turned much of it over to the Catalina Island Conservancy where it remains a model of conservation to this day.<sup>4</sup> Other notable business tycoons who made their fortunes in the city include Ty Warner, the creator of Beanie Babies; Marshall Field, the retail magnate; and Eric Lefkofsky of Groupon, among others.

## **THE LAND OF ABUNDANT WATER RESOURCES**

With over 119,000 miles of streams, 900 miles of rivers and 91,000 freshwater lakes and ponds, Illinois is rich in water resources. The state has jurisdiction over 1,500 square miles of open water in Lake Michigan as well. The water stored in underground aquifers, referred to as groundwater, is an important source of water supply in the state. At depths of about 1,500 feet below the surface, this potable water is used to supply the needs of 5.5 million people.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, pumping waste from Lake Michigan has replaced use of the groundwater wells due to concerns over water availability and contamination runoff. Among the contaminants are: E.coli bacteria, mercury and PCB exposure to fish populations, phosphorus, algae and siltation. All are responsible for negative impacts on wildlife.<sup>6</sup> Untreated urban runoff contains oil, grease, and toxins from pesticide use and automobiles, which makes its way into both surface and ground water.

Illinois is the number one contributor to the "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico due to its leaching of nitrogen and phosphorus into the Mississippi River, the second longest river in North America. This pollution comes from the state's coal mining ash ponds, coal slurry, and runoff from wastewater.

"PFAS" is becoming a more and more important term in the world of pollution. PFAS are best

understood as forever chemicals. It is an acronym that stands for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which contain strong carbon-fluorine bonds. These bonds allow PFAS to build up over time in our bodies and in the bodies of animals which poses health risks. They are ubiquitous and in almost all our products and industries. The list includes 9,000 different sources for PFAS: the textile industry, fire-fighting foams and household cleaning products represent some of the worst sources.<sup>7</sup>

It is sobering that in April 2025, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency alerted 47 community water systems — serving more than 400,000 people — that their water contained PFAS levels exceeding new state limits, following adoption of a federal standard.

## **THE LAY OF THE LAND: THE STATE OF AGRICULTURE**

The main crops grown in the state are corn and soybeans with some wheat, oats, sorghum, and hay, as well as livestock feed, fruits, and vegetables. More than 8.2 billion dollars worth of agricultural products are shipped to foreign countries each year, or 6% of all U.S. agricultural exports. Roughly 44% of the grain grown in Illinois is sold outside the U.S. The trend away from farming as an occupation is indicated by the following facts: today there are 75,087 farmers in the state, down from 164,000 in 1959. Due to technology and the industrialization of farming, the average size of each farm has doubled.<sup>8</sup>

Many do not attribute pollution to industrial farming, but rainfall causes nitrogen and phosphorus pollutants from farming to run off the land and into rivers. Common to most Midwestern states, Illinois is forfeiting much of its agricultural land to development. From 2001 to 2021, Illinois lost 64% of its agricultural land, a total of 155,653 acres.<sup>9</sup>

## **CHICAGO'S INFAMOUS FIRE AND ITS POPULATION IMPACT**

In 1871, Chicago's population was just over 300,000. In that year the city experienced a perfect

storm of drought, expended firefighting equipment, and a plethora of wooden structures in the poorer areas of town, creating the conditions for the two-day devastating fire. It claimed 300 lives and destroyed 17,450 buildings in a 3.5 square mile area. Chicago was in ruins with nearly 1/3 of the city destroyed and 100,000 people homeless.<sup>10</sup>

The people affected by the fire were made up of immigrants. Many of them were famine-fleeing Irish who began coming to Chicago in the 1840s. German immigrants first started arriving in Chicago in large numbers in the 1840s and 1850s, not long after the city's founding in 1833, and at the time of the fire they were the largest immigrant group. While Germans accounted for 1/6 of the population, other groups included Scandinavians, Bohemians, and some immigrants from Poland. There were Blacks living there at the time, but they did not move in great numbers until the Great Migration which began in 1910.<sup>11</sup>

This may come as a surprise, but the fire was not a deterrent to population growth. On the contrary, the city's population exploded. By the turn of the century—about thirty years later—Chicago had roughly 1.7 million residents, and by the 2020 Census the Chicago metropolitan area had about 9.6 million. Currently, Chicago is experiencing another burst of population growth with immigrants from Ukraine and Venezuela. From mid-2023 to mid-2024, Chicago added 22,164 residents, which makes it the seventh largest population gain among U.S. cities.<sup>12</sup>

This contributes to Chicago's legendary traffic congestion, now the worst in the country, in spite of having a rather famous mass transit system called the 'L'.<sup>13</sup> The congestion in the air is no different. Chicago's O'Hare airport is one of the busiest airports in the world, handling 80 million passengers every year.

Illinois has made a mark for itself on so many fronts. It has made remarkable contributions to the country in the arts, sciences, sports and the world of business. It is also home to some of the nation's worst traffic congestion and significant air pollution, predominantly in the Chicago area.

## NOTES:

1. [https://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat\\_amer/post/htmls/il\\_id.html](https://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/post/htmls/il_id.html)
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois\\_Country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois_Country)
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_museums\\_in\\_Illinois](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_museums_in_Illinois)
4. <https://www.lovecatalina.com/blog/post/william-wrigley-jr/>
5. <https://ilenviro.org/clean-water/>
6. <https://www.usgs.gov/publications/us-geological-survey-ground-water-studies-illinois>
7. <https://www.ehn.org/what-are-pfas>
8. <https://agr.illinois.gov/about/facts-about-illinois-agriculture.html>
9. <https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2024/08/agricultural-land-lost-to-development-in-the-midwest.html>
10. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chicago-fire-of-1871>
11. <https://www.wttw.com/chicago-stories/chicago-fire/a-cow-a-lantern-and-a-myth-mrs-oleary-and-19th-century-immigrants-in-chicago>
12. <https://greatcities.uic.edu/2025/05/15/crains-chicago-business-chicagos-population-is-growing-again/#:~:text=According%20to%20newly%20revised%20Census,population%20gain%20among%20U.S.%20cities.>
13. <https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/10-cities-with-the-worst-traffic-in-the-us>

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