

# Political Mobilization Around Chicago School Closings

## OVERVIEW

In 2012, the Chicago Public Schools board initiated the largest wave of school closures in U.S. history, shutting down 49 out of nearly 500 public schools. These schools were in predominately Black neighborhoods on the city's South and West sides. In the *American Political Science Review*, IPR political scientist and social policy expert **Sally Nuamah** and political scientist **Thomas Ogorzalek** document how the closures changed the political behavior of Black Chicagoans who lived in communities targeted for a school closure. Despite relatively low participation rates in the democratic process before the closures, these citizens—who are from some of the city's poorest neighborhoods—increased their political engagement. Their research supports a model of place-based mobilization, or the process of citizens responding to policy change concentrated in their local community. As many schools around the country were temporarily closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with permanent closures likely to follow, the researchers show that community is an important site of political action for marginalized groups around issues that matter to them.

## FINDINGS

**Black citizens who lived in communities targeted for a school closure became more likely to attend community meetings.** Before the closures in 2010,

## POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- Local issues can motivate low-income and Black citizens to higher levels of political engagement and action.
- School closures, in particular, can increase political resistance in these communities.
- These newly active communities turn out to vote and hold political leaders responsible for their actions.



IPR social policy expert **Sally Nuamah** studies how school closings shape the way communities participate in democracy.

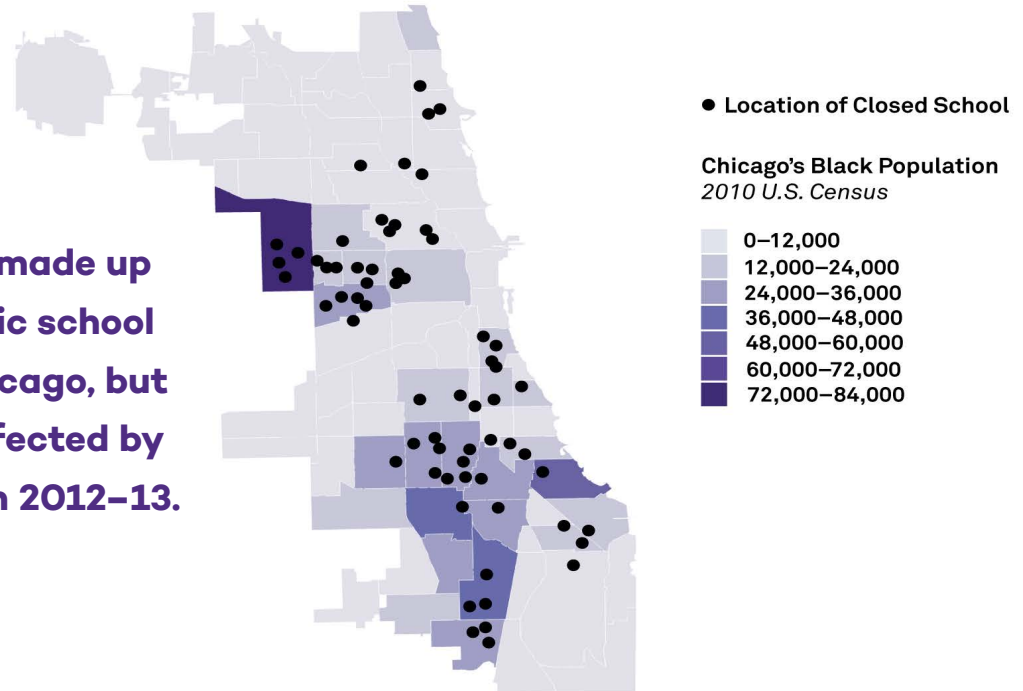
Black Chicagoans in ZIP codes with a closed school were the least likely to have recently attended a political meeting. But after the closures in 2014, they were the most likely demographic to go to a political meeting.

**They also mobilized to add a measure for an elected school board to the 2015 ballot, similar to a referendum added in 2012.** For the question to be included, community members in the precinct needed to gather a certain number of signatures. In 90% of precincts near a closed school, community members gathered enough signatures to add the measure to the ballot, while only 57% of precincts farthest away from a closed school did. Illinois Gov. J. B. Pritzker eventually signed a bill in July 2021 giving Chicago a 21-person school board that will phase in elections for the roles, beginning in 2024.

**Additionally, Black Chicagoans near a closed school voted in larger numbers in the 2015 election and decreased their support for then-mayor Rahm Emanuel, who had control over the school closures and was running for a second term.** In the 2015 election, turnout for the election declined by 2% each mile from a school closure. Support for Emanuel also fell in the closest areas. Each mile away from a school closure, voters were more supportive of Emanuel by about 5%.

## Location of School Closures in Chicago Neighborhoods

**Black residents made up 48% of the public school population in Chicago, but 88% of those affected by a school closure in 2012–13.**



### METHODOLOGY

The researchers used responses to the Cooperative Congressional Election Study to analyze changes in the waves before and after the biggest school closures in 2010 and 2014. They also looked at a dataset based on precinct-level results from the Chicago Board of Elections and census data connecting demography to electoral outcomes, which allowed them to compare changes in behavior from the local elections before and after the closures. To examine voters' and respondents' proximity to a community affected by school closures, they developed an original dataset of schools closed in 2012–13 to construct two measures of community-based experiences with public school closures.

### REFERENCES

Nuamah, S., and T. Ogorzalek. 2021. [Close to home: Place-based mobilization in racialized contexts.](#) *American Political Science Review* 115(3): 757–74.

*Infographic created in Datawrapper using 2010 U.S. Census data from Chicago's Community Areas and the author's school closure list from 2012–13.*

### FACTS AND FIGURES

- In the year after the school closings, affected Black residents were more likely to attend community meetings than any other racial group—increasing attendance by 17%.
- In 90% of precincts nearest a closed school, community members mobilized to put a measure for an elected school board on the 2015 ballot, compared to only 57% of precincts farthest from a closure—a 33 percentage-point difference.
- In the 2015 mayoral election, turnout for the election decreased by 2% for every mile voters lived from a closed school. Those living in areas near a closed school were more mobilized to vote and less supportive of Emanuel compared to the 2011 election.



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