

West Side Story

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Lawndale (sometimes referred to as North Lawndale) is a historic area on Chicago's far West Side. Leaders of industry, musical innovators, and organizers of social change have all chosen to make Lawndale their home over the years. However, the neighborhood has also seen its share of struggle, from white flight in the 1950s to rioting in the 1960s and de-industrialization in the 1970s. Recently Lawndale has gained the attention of neighborhood development groups interested in promoting its fascinating history and architectural diversity, which includes the largest percentage of greystones in the city.

- **Just the Facts**
- **Then and Now**
- **The Park is the Place**
- **Home Sweet Home**
- **What's on the Menu?**
- **Best Shopping Stops**
- **Mark Your Calendar**
- **Getting Around**

Just the Facts

Location: Approximately 6 miles west of the Loop

Boundaries: Eisenhower Expressway (I-290) to the north, Western Avenue and the edge of Douglas Park to the east, Roosevelt Road (along the northern tip of Douglas Park) and Ogden Avenue (between Kedzie Avenue and the city limits) to the south and Kolmar Avenue to the west. A panhandle area extends at the western edge of the neighborhood between the Eisenhower Expressway and 12th Street which ends at Austin Boulevard.

Demographics: For zip code 60623 which includes Lawndale neighborhood

Median household income: \$28,203

Median Age: 25.1

5.7% of population 25 and over have bachelor's degree or higher

White: 21.2%

Black or African American: 34.8%

Hispanic: 62.9%

American Indian and Alaska Native: 0.5%

Asian: 0.1%

Some other race: 40.6%

Two or more races: 2.7%

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000)

Crime Statistics: Go to <http://gis.chicagopolice.org> to search specific streets and areas for crime incidents

Then and Now

Before Lawndale was established, one of the current boundaries, Ogden Avenue, was a portage trail from Lake Michigan to the Des Plaines River. By 1848 the route was so well traveled that it had an official name, Southwest Plank Road, and soon was a busy method of transporting goods from the Dutch and English farmers of what was then Cicero Township to the bustling streets of downtown Chicago.

The area north of Southwest Plank Road was annexed by the city in 1869, and the streets were plotted and fitted with proper drainage that would sustain a new development called Lawndale that had been planned for the land. Developers built homes mainly of fireproof brick, which—after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871—attracted many people and businesses wary of wood structures. The majority of the residential

property in the neighborhood today still dates from the early developmental period when brick was the favored construction material.

One of the first corporations to call Lawndale home was the McCormick Reaper Company—later International Harvester—which occupied a large plant in South Lawndale. (South Lawndale, the area south of Cermak and Ogden, is now called Little Village.) The openings of a Western Electric Plant in nearby Cicero in 1903 and the headquarters of Sears, Roebuck & Company in 1906 had a huge impact on Lawndale’s populace. Boosted by the relocation of employees who came to work in the massive plants, the neighborhood’s population climbed to 46,225 by 1910.

In 1913, a street-naming proposal was executed (and subsequently abandoned) which aimed to give each street a name based on its distance from the Illinois-Indiana border. Streets starting with a “K,” the eleventh letter, were supposed to encompass the eleventh mile, which is why, in the area of Lawndale known as K-Town, the names of the streets include Karlov, Kedvale, Keeler, Kenneth, etc.

The early 20th century saw the neighborhood become a mecca for Russian Jews and Eastern Europeans. The Maxwell Street Market area further east often attracted those who had just arrived in the city, but many immigrants were unhappy with the conditions in that cramped neighborhood and began exploring territory further west, including Lawndale. The population increased rapidly over the next 30 years, so that by some estimates there were roughly 120,000 people in the neighborhood during the 1940s, half of them Jews.

In 1950, two cultural phenomena started irrevocably shifting the landscape of Lawndale: Many Jews were attracted to neighborhoods further north, such as Albany Park and Rogers Park, which had started gaining popularity with the upwardly mobile; and there was an influx of African Americans from the South Side who were being displaced by urban renewal projects. Over the next 10 years, the Jewish population dwindled as the African American population boomed.

In contrast to previous residents of Lawndale, most new residents could not find work in the neighborhood. Lawndale’s industries now employed people who commuted to the neighborhood only for work. Consequently, the local consumer base became much poorer, and tensions grew between the Caucasians who worked in Lawndale during the day and the African Americans who lived there. The disparity drew the interest of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who moved to the neighborhood in 1965 and publicized the poor housing conditions and suffering of many of the residents.

Unfortunately, after King’s assassination in 1968, rioting destroyed many of the businesses along Roosevelt Road. Further exacerbating the problems in the neighborhood was the shuttering of its major industries. International Harvester relocated in 1969, and then in 1974 Sears departed for its gleaming new office tower downtown. Zenith and Sunbeam followed suit in the 1970s, and finally Western Electric left in the 1980s. Housing deteriorated or was abandoned, and Lawndale experienced a loss of almost half of its residential units.

Prospects in Lawndale had always hinged on its ability to balance the needs of both industrial and residential stakeholders. Once the industries had moved on, the neighborhood’s landscape was divided among two-flat apartments and the massive industrial complexes that now sat empty. However, in the 1990s signs of revitalization started taking hold. The declining population stabilized, and new housing initiatives created renewed interest in the area as property values started to rebound. A mixed-use commercial development called Lawndale Plaza in nearby Homan Square opened in 2003. As a result of the neighborhood’s easy access to the expressway and mass transit, affordable housing, and several spacious parks, Lawndale is again becoming a desirable residential neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side.

The Park is the Place

Lawndale has a long history as a place for creative park design. Jens Jensen, an acclaimed designer was responsible for the unique look of the neighborhood’s Franklin Park, and two other good-sized parks give neighborhood residents plenty of room to stretch their legs.

Altgeld Park (515 S. Washtenaw Ave., 312-746-5001) was donated to the City of Chicago by real estate developers Frank W. and James L. Campbell in 1873, and the city in turn transferred the park to the West Park Commission in 1915. Now five acres, the park was renamed for Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld, an early labor proponent.

It's a fun place to enjoy a picnic or participate in a baseball or softball game at one of the designated fields. If swinging a bat isn't up your alley, hit one of the basketball courts to hoop it up. The park also has a soccer field for those who like to *bend it like Beckham*. If it's too hot to do anything but relax in a cool spot, head to the park's outdoor pool and spend a few hours relaxing in comfort. There are also swim classes available for children aged 6-12 from June to August, so your little fishes can learn the strokes.

Around the same time that Altgeld Park was reborn in the early 20th century, **Franklin Park** (4320 W 15th St., 312-747-7676) was being planned by renowned landscape architect Jens Jensen, who also worked on other Chicago neighborhood parks such as Lincoln Park and Douglas Park. Franklin Park had some innovative design features such as irregularly shaped ponds, which were radical for the time. Most of these features were lost, however, when the 8.5-acre park was expanded.

Today it's easy to swing by for a leisurely game of baseball, or head to the gymnasium for a solid workout. If you are looking to plan a neighborhood meeting, the fieldhouse also has an assembly hall available. And when the kids start whining about the summer heat, bring them to the water playground and let them cool off while splashing about in cool refreshment. During the summer months (June to August), there are also several basketball clinics and leagues on the basketball courts.

Once night falls on those warm summer nights, Lawndale parks fill up with lawn chairs, wagons full of tots, blankets spread across the grass, and the smell of popcorn. Both Altgeld Park and Franklin Park participate in the "Movies in the Park" program (see Mark Your Calendar).

Home Sweet Home

Although it is necessary to look past some unsightly empty lots, Lawndale has come a long way in the last 15 years, as many developers are realizing the wealth of available quality housing and the potential for residential revitalization.

The Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative is a neighborhood revitalization and housing reinvestment program in Lawndale. Greystones are limestone-clad homes, typically more than 100 years old and often found contiguous with Chicago's famed park and boulevard system. The Greystone Initiative provides homeowners with financial and technical resources to preserve, restore and modernize their historic residences.

Families taking part in the program have led to a renovation boom in the last few years, but property prices are still reasonable, which makes the area very alluring to first-time homebuyers and young families. This West Side Chicago neighborhood is rapidly growing, and new and rehabilitated properties are appearing on the market every day. Younger buyers are looking to Lawndale for good value in a neighborhood on the rise.

Condominium conversions have also been gaining in popularity over the last several years, but few are actually on the market to buy. Generally, the average sales price for a two-bedroom condo in Lawndale is around \$125,000, although there are units available for much less. The average price for a detached single-family home with three bedrooms in Lawndale is about \$136,000. Some of the bigger places, with a bedroom or two more space, go for between \$150,000 and the low \$300,000s.

North Lawndale Residential Real Estate Info (Includes Lawndale Neighborhood)

Type of Housing	Average Sales Price 2005-2006	# of Units Sold	One Year Price Change	Price Change Since '94
Single Family Detached	\$139,403	32	↑165	↑34

Single Family Attached	\$181,959	37	na	na
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Source: Multiple Listings Service of Northern Illinois

What's on the Menu?

Lawndale has a flavorful history of food, and today there are several places to dig into it, from barbecues to an Internet café.

If you want a great deep dish pizza, most Chicagoans know one of the best spots in town is **Lou Malnati's Pizza** (3859 W. Ogden Ave, 773-762-0800). In addition to offering great pizza, Italian favorites like spaghetti and spumoni, and our favorite, the stuffed spinach bread, the Lou Malnati's branch in Lawndale gives back to the area by ensuring a portion of the profits from this restaurant flow back to the community, benefiting children's educational and recreational programs. Somehow that little fact makes each slice of pie taste that much better. Similarly, the huge 4,600-square foot **Academy Bakery** (1231 S Pulaski Road, 773-522-5133) does more than create great coconut cakes, sweet potato pies, apple cobbler and oatmeal raisin cookies. It is also a learning institution, where young neighborhood residents can build confidence while becoming certified bakers. The bakery has comfy couches, café tables and chairs, and even provides free Internet access.

Those who favor vegetarian cuisine won't be disappointed by **I.C.Y. Vegetarian Restaurant and Juice Bar** (3141 W Roosevelt Road, 773-762-1090). Both the restaurant and juice bar offer all the typical meat-free dishes, like the Stakelette, which tastes just like actual steak, and it's even healthier. Early risers should come early and fill up on a breakfast of veggie sausage, tofu eggs, brown rice, scalloped potatoes and biscuits. Be sure to save room for lemon icebox or sweet-potato pie.

On the flip side of the pan, if meat is what you savor, head to **La Quebradita** (4859 W Roosevelt Road, 708-780-8110) for traditional Guerrero cuisine. One popular dish is the goat *barbacoa*, which has a savory flavor most carnivores will enjoy. Also check out the well-marinated skirt steak that goes nicely with the fresh guacamole. This restaurant is BYOB so grab a few bottles of Mexican beer or maybe tequila before stopping in for a bite. Also for those who love meat, check out a few of Lawndale's barbecue joints. Both **Miller's Barbecue** (1806 S Pulaski Rd, 773-762-2662) and **AA Barbecue** (1139 S. Pulaski, 773-265-9380) specialize in Memphis-style BBQ, which features pork ribs slathered in sauce. Or try a succulent pulled pork sandwich, a favorite among the regular clientele.

Best Shopping Stops

Shopping options in Lawndale are somewhat limited at the moment, but with nearby Lawndale Plaza coming into its own, the future seems bright for future shopping prospects.

If you're a musical connoisseur, head over to **George's Music Room** (3915 W. Roosevelt Road, 773-762-8910). You'll find a one-of-a-kind interior: walls pressed with gold and platinum records of artists such as B.B. King and Janet Jackson, who have visited the store over the last 40 years; posters of upcoming releases; and free-standing cardboard cutouts of singers in various stages of undress. In the long glass case along the side of the store there is a fantastic selection of hard-to-find CDs, generally heavy on Hip Hop, old-school R&B, gospel and blues. The store also sells incense, fragrance oils, a few selected book titles, and posters.

The retail opportunities in this west side Chicago neighborhood have not quite kept pace with the residential growth, but there are signs of improvement. The recent development of Lawndale Plaza shopping center in nearby Homan Square includes a movie theatre, a Dominick's, a branch of National City bank, and several small businesses.

Mark Your Calendar

When we're in the mood to get out of the house on a stuffy summer night for a light-hearted movie, we head over to **Altgeld Park** (515 S. Washtenaw Ave., 312-746-5001) or **Franklin Park** (4320 W 15th St., 312-747-7676) to catch one of the films being shown outdoors during the Park District's "Movies in the Park" program. The movies are free but the popcorn is on you. And don't forget to bring a blanket or some lawn chairs, unless you don't mind popping a squat on the grass.

Getting Around

Lawndale has loads of metered street parking on Independence Boulevard, one of neighborhood's main drags, and even on the weekends it's not too difficult to find a spot. Most of the side streets have parking that does not require a permit. But ultimately, many of the residences in the neighborhood have their own garage, so unless you're the packrat type who uses their garage as a second basement for storage, you should be set on parking space.

Assuming you do have a car and intend to use it for travel to and from Lawndale, the neighborhood is accessible via the Eisenhower Expressway (I-290) using the Cicero Avenue, Independence Boulevard or Western Avenue exits. Or from the Stevenson Expressway (I-55) by taking the Cicero Avenue or Western Avenue exits. Remember that this is a large neighborhood and it can be extremely useful to have a car for transportation.

If not, or you prefer to take the scenic route, several Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) bus lines serve Lawndale. On 16th Street, take the #18 to travel westbound to the suburb of Cicero, or eastbound to State Street where you can transfer to the #29 northbound to go downtown. The #53 runs north and south along Pulaski Avenue, connecting with the Pulaski stop of the CTA Pink Line train at Cermak Road and Pulaski. The #52 runs north and south along Kedzie Avenue, connecting with the Kedzie stop of the CTA Pink Line at Cermak Road and Kedzie Avenue.

For starters, it might be easiest just to head to the neighborhood's southern border where you can hop on the CTA Pink or Blue line "E1" (so-named for the sections of elevated track) at Kostner and Pulaski. Following basically the same route, these lines head northeast up to the Chicago Loop or west out to Cicero.