

# **THE ETHNIC HANDBOOK FOR THE CHICAGO AREA**

**A Guide To The Cultures  
And Traditions of Our Region's  
Diverse Communities**

**Second Edition**

**Edited by  
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# INTRODUCTION

In 1997 the Illinois Ethnic Coalition (IEC), published the first edition of *The Ethnic Handbook: A Guide to the Cultures and Traditions of Chicago's Diverse Communities*. As an organization whose membership comprised the many ethnic and racial communities participating in civic life, IEC focused on helping the wider public better understand diversity. We worked under IEC to produce the original Handbook and other publications that were widely distributed in our city and beyond.

In the wake of 9/11, a near economic collapse in 2007, a historic 2008 presidential election, and the introduction of controversial immigration legislation in Arizona and other states, familiar nativist winds blew in: Who was a "real" American and what right did "they" have to be here? We knew it was time to update the Handbook. We did so under a new nonprofit, Chicago Area Ethnic Resources (CAER).

Much has changed since the first edition, and the need for cross-cultural understanding is even greater. The 2010 Census revealed that the city proper lost approximately 215,000 residents, the overwhelming majority of them African American. Latino and Asian groups significantly increased their numbers both in Chicago and statewide, with Latinos surpassing blacks as Illinois' largest minority and Asians becoming the state's fastest growing minority.

By 2020, minorities will make up more than 50% of the Chicago metropolitan area's population, according to the New Metro Minority Map released by the Brookings Institution in 2011.

We are fascinated by the many ethnic, racial and cultural groups here, newcomers as well as the more established communities that once faced their own varying degrees of prejudice and discrimination. And despite decades or centuries of assimilation and acculturation, yesterday's immigrants, the indigenous populations and those who were brought here in chains have and continue to leave an indelible mark on "American" culture. Together with more recent arrivals, they define our region.

The U.S. Census ranks Illinois sixth in the nation for percentage of foreign-born (almost 14%). Unlike earlier cohorts, many immigrants now are bypassing the city altogether and transforming suburban and once-rural enclaves. The Illinois State Board of Education reports more than 136 language groups in the state's public schools; Spanish, Polish, Arabic, Urdu, Pilipino (Tagalog), Korean, Gujarati, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Russian are the top 10 spoken by English Language Learners.

We think it's important to provide a roadmap for all of us grappling with change. Much of the literature on racial and ethnic groups is the domain of academia, think tanks and advocates. For that reason, it is often inaccessible to the general public. We designed the Handbook to be a user-friendly resource for the mainstream, and to provide a counterpoint to the sound-bite portrayals that often accompany this difficult topic. While ethnic groups are indeed different, they share many commonalities, as you will see on these pages.

This second edition of the Ethnic Handbook contains many updates, all new demographic information and four new chapters on Bosniak, Iranian, Muslim and Pakistani Americans. All four chapters focus on the growing Muslim presence in the area; the Muslim chapter itself, although it crosses many ethnic and national boundaries, is included because of the level of misunderstanding and discrimination that this religious community often confronts.

A project of this magnitude would have been impossible if not for the many scholars, community leaders, CAER board members and donors who helped us pull it all together with their time, expertise and financial resources. We are especially indebted to the Walter S. Mander Foundation for its major funding. Matthew Holzman contributed hundreds of hours to the design and layout of the Handbook and website. Zach Gephardt, Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, worked tirelessly to provide the Census data. Brandon Campbell advised on social media strategy. Finally, our friends Alexander Domanskis, Anthony Fornelli, Emile Karafiol, Jae Choi Kim, and Mark Peysakhovitch provided encouragement and support. We thank them all.

**Jeryl Levin**

President

**Cynthia Linton**

Editor



## AFRICAN AMERICANS

### Chicago population:

887,608 (African American alone)

960,756 (alone or in combination with other races)

### Metro population:

1,645,993 (alone)

1,721,578 (alone or in combo)

### Foreign-born:

About 3% in both city and metro

## Demographics:

In 1990 Chicago African Americans made up about 40% of the population. By 2010, with considerable migration to the suburbs, it's closer to 33%. Most are concentrated on the South Side, from 26th Street to 131st Street and from Ashland Avenue to Lake Michigan; on the West Side from Garfield Park to the city limits, between Lake Street and Cermak Road; and in a relatively compact settlement on the near North Side, west of Halsted and south of Division Street. These three areas are contiguous and form the condition

### *The first Great Migration from the South to Chicago came during and just after WWI.*

that caused population experts to call Chicago "the most racially segregated city in the United States." In these areas there is a considerable amount of education and affluence and a tremendous amount of poverty. There are African Americans, Africans and Afro-Caribbeans throughout the city, including the far North Side, but an estimated 90-95% live in these three areas. No other ancestry group is so segregated.

African Americans also are found in growing numbers in many south, west and southwest suburbs, such as Maywood, Oak Park, Harvey, Dolton, Country Club Hills, Flossmoor, Olympia Fields, Robbins and Ford Heights, and in north suburban Evanston and North Chicago. Early moves to the suburbs in most cases were met with stiff resistance. That is no longer true. The median household income of metro-area African Americans is \$36,192, about \$24,000 below average. In the city it is \$30,512. Nearly 80% of those over the age of 25 in the city have a high school diploma, 83% in the metro area. Some 17% in the city have a bachelor's degree (low compared with other groups) and 20% in metro. In Chicago 6.4% have a graduate or professional degree, with a similar 7% in metro. About 27% of those in the labor force in Chicago are in professional or managerial positions, and 29% in the metro area. Nearly one-third of African Americans in Chicago live at or below the poverty line, while about one-fourth do in the metro area.

*(Ed. note: Population figures are from the 2010 Census. Other demographic data, on education and economics, come from the 2007-09 Census Bureau American Community Survey.)*

## Historical background:

The first permanent settler in Chicago was a black man from Haiti by the name of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, who was a trader here in the 1770s. He later moved, but blacks have lived in the area since that time and have formed a small but important part of the population since 1840.

The first Great Migration had its strongest momentum during and immediately after WWI, with the population growing from 44,000 in 1910 to 277,000 by 1940. Migrants came from the South for basically the same reason millions left Europe before WWI: better economic conditions. Many saw opportunities, including an adequate education, denied them in the South. They also left because of the Jim Crow system of discrimination, fleeing political and economic repression and physical terrorism.

What they found in Chicago was less than they hoped for but better than they left. They found racial prejudice, segregation, and discrimination in housing, jobs and social conditions; but they also found political freedom and economic opportunities they never dreamed of in the South, and took full advantage of both. The sudden mass arrival of African Americans created new tensions and problems for the old residents and recently arrived immigrants from Europe. The competition for jobs, housing and recreation space intensified. It was during that time that the Chicago race riot of 1919 broke out, when whites at the 35th Street Beach stoned black swimmers because they had crossed an imaginary line. The riots lasted four days, leaving 38 dead, 520 injured and thousands of homes damaged.

Blacks were confined to the “Black Belt,” stretching from 26th Street to 47th Street and from the Rock

*In the ‘70s, schools deteriorated, tension increased, and white flight accelerated.*

Island Railroad tracks to Cottage Grove Avenue, concentrated at 81,000 per square mile compared with 19,000 for the rest

of the city. Their work generally was in menial jobs in the Stockyards, where they could make 10 times what they had made picking cotton, and in the steel mills of South Chicago, International Harvester and small businesses inside the Black Belt. Later that area was to take on the names of “Bronzeville” and “Black Metropolis.” Bronzeville was a self-supporting community, distinguished by notable accomplishments in both business and politics. Thriving businesses included Robert S. Abbott’s Chicago Defender, Jesse Binga’s first state-chartered African American bank in the U.S. and Anthony Overton’s cosmetics business.

By the mid-1920s, Chicago was the black business capital of the country. In politics, three congressmen — Oscar DePriest, Arthur Mitchell and William Dawson — were elected before Harlem ever elected Adam Clayton Powell. There was fun, friendship and joyful noise all over the ghettos of the South and West Sides. But it was much too crowded for human health, so there was pressure to move beyond its confines and constant, sometimes violent, resistance from those on the outside who wanted to confine this population.

The second Great Migration came with the U.S. entry into WWII. Hundreds of thousands of blacks and poor whites left the cotton and tobacco fields of the South for better-paying jobs in the war industry. Chicago’s black population skyrocketed to near one-half million in 1950. A Chicago Renaissance occurred on the South Side from about 1945-60 that included the South Side Community Arts Center, the writings of people like Margaret Walker, Margaret Burroughs and Gwendolyn Brooks, gospel music and urban blues, the Johnson Publishing empire, and the founding of DuSable Museum.

Starting in the 1970s, schools began to deteriorate, tension increased and white flight to the suburbs accelerated. Industry and business left the city, claiming they needed more trained, disciplined, skilled workers. The result for Chicago in the final decades of the 20th century was an erosion of both the industrial base and the middle-class population, leaving an increasingly unskilled, poor black and Hispanic population to forage for themselves. The increase in disappointment, frustration, anger, poverty, violence and crime seemed to be the natural outcome of these historical economic, social and cultural changes.

## **Current migration patterns:**

Most of the movement is to the suburbs, because of relaxed housing restrictions, better schools, safer streets and relatively inexpensive housing. African Americans accounted for nearly 90% of the 200,000 people who left Chicago 2000-2010. Some also left more expensive suburbs with high home prices, like Evanston. During the decade, south and west suburbs such as Matteson, Lansing, Berwyn, Cicero and Plainfield saw their black populations swell, in some cases more than doubling. Other suburbs with high African American populations include Flossmoor (48%), Country Club Hills (87%), Calumet City (71%), Dolton (90%) and Maywood (75%).

The migration from the South has all but stopped. The reason is economic — the vast industrial base that once attracted migrants to Chicago no longer exists. On the contrary, many African Americans are returning to the South, mainly retirees and young people without jobs going home to live with relatives.

## **Religion:**

Most are Christians of various denominations, such as Episcopal and Methodist or a combination of the

*Nearly 90% of the 200,000 who left Chicago 2000-2010 were African Americans.*

two (African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, A.M.E Zion), and also Baptist, Lutheran and

Catholic, as well as increasing numbers of Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses. There also are growing numbers of traditional Muslims, in addition to those in the Nation of Islam. Churches have played a major role in African American issues, from the vigilance committees of the 1850s that protected runaway slaves to the religious groups that spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement. Many churches have provided food, housing, health care and other social services to the community.

## **Important traditions:**

Religion and extended family are traditionally very important among African Americans. Births and deaths are celebrated, expressing a reverence for life. New babies are cherished, and at funerals friends and family celebrate the life of those who have passed on. For the substantial number in the middle class, there tend to be stable two-parent families who pass along to their children traditions of religion, education, honesty, fidelity and careful spending habits. But for many others, a lack of job opportunities and poverty have had a devastating effect on the African American community and the family. Marriage, in contrast to the past, is at a low ebb. For those who do marry, separation and divorce are frequent, and one-parent families are the norm (also a growing trend in the population at large). Teen pregnancies are high, in part because abortion is not acceptable. For large areas of the city, the infusion of drugs and guns in disproportionate amounts have created an aura of insecurity and instability to all the institutions and traditions of a formerly stable community. In the early days, the entire African American community was like a family. That community support has deteriorated. The relationship between family and economics is strong. The African American family was undermined in large part by the abandonment of the inner city and disappearance of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs since the '60s. Conditions today make it difficult for many families to pass down traditional values to their children.

## **Holidays and special events:**

Birthdays, Easter, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Christmas and now Kwanzaa are important times for

celebration. Kwanzaa, the festival of the harvest (of life) is the coming together of the community to celebrate life and enjoy the fruits of life. A new holiday, Kwanzaa is born out of the African tradition and occurs around the same time as Christmas and Chanukah, but is not a religious holiday. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday (Jan. 15) is celebrated with special programs and at City Hall. It is a state and school holiday (celebrated on the closest Monday). Black History Month (February) is also an occasion when schools, churches and other institutions plan special programming. Juneteenth (in June) marks the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. And the traditional Bud Billiken Parade (second Saturday in August), celebrates the mythical figure who protects children. It was started by the Chicago Defender to honor its newsboys.

### **Foods for special occasions:**

During holidays and celebrations, the preparation and eating of food is important. Aside from the usual

*Turnout for the 2008 presidential election was 72% in Chicago's majority-black wards.*

turkey, ham, chicken, greens, roots, herbs, barbecue and drink at Thanksgiving and Christmas, many families

indulge in a dish called chitterlings (chittlins), which derives from plantation days in the South when blacks had to make do with the leavings of the master's meals. Such dishes were prepared with great care and became almost delicacies.

### **Dietary restrictions:**

None for Christians. Muslims avoid pork and alcohol.

### **Names:**

Formerly, most African Americans continued to use their slave names, such as John, Joe, Robert, Walter and Mary, along with nicknames like Tim, Rob, Skee-ball, Arch and Slim. Since Malcolm X, many of the younger generations have turned to African and other non-Western names such as Tuisha, Aesha and Hakim. Traditional last names came from plantation owners. Some also have changed their last names to African names.

### **Major issues for community:**

Almost without dissent, Chicago's African Americans are united on issues of racism and the denial of equal access to decent affordable housing, jobs, quality education and neighborhood safety. Crime and violence are probably the top issues, followed closely by the need for adequate employment and decent housing, the poor state of the Chicago Public Schools, and the problems of youth in general. There is inadequate transportation to get to where the jobs are. And the jobs themselves have changed, with more in the white-collar and service sector, requiring computer skills. Two other issues hotly debated in the community are the threatened elimination of affirmative action and how much assimilation is too much.

### **Political participation:**

Since Franklin Roosevelt was president, African Americans have voted overwhelmingly for Democrats (before that they were loyal to Abraham Lincoln's Republican party). Participation in politics depends on the issues, the candidates and the section of the city involved. In some places interest is very low; the middle class tends



to be more active. In the campaign and election of the late Mayor Harold Washington, almost every man, woman and child was involved in one way or another. He was elected only because this was so. After his death, candidates did not seem to reflect the needs and concerns of the community, especially the poorer and younger members. Political interest lagged. For many there is a growing distrust of government and a sentiment of “What difference does it make?” In the ‘90s turnout was very low, even among registered voters.

That changed when Barack Obama ran for president in 2008, though he wasn’t as well-known in the community as Washington had been. Majority black wards saw a turnout of 72% of registered voters, just 2 points lower than the rest of the city. In some impoverished black wards turnout was low and pulled down the average. (Nationwide, black turnout increased almost 5 percentage points from 2004, mostly attributable to young black voters, up nearly 9 points.) Election of a black president brought new hopes and dreams to places like Bronzeville. But then came the disappointment when the black president was not able to improve the lives of the less advantaged, who were hard hit by the recession. Technology and fear of violence all but ended the practice of precinct captains and door-to-door canvassing. With the 2012 election pending, community organizations, merchants groups and unions sought to organize and inspire black voters once again.

In city elections, in 2011 Rahm Emanuel was elected mayor with nearly 60% of the black vote, helped by his identification with Obama, for whom he was chief of staff, and the support of the major black politicians. After about 180,000 African Americans left the city the first decade of the 2000s, blacks managed to keep the same number of seats in the City Council but lost influence and patronage jobs. It was clear that African Americans and the growing Hispanic population were now in competition for the same rewards.

## **Links to homeland:**

African Americans have a relationship with the African continent through business, tourism, the arts, folklore and politics. There are strong ties to South Africa, where they long advocated an end to apartheid. Events there, as well as in other African and Caribbean nations, are of particular interest. Some have tried to trace their roots, a difficult task because their ancestors were brought here in chains many generations ago. There is a divide between American-born blacks and the elite African immigrants they rejected as “foreign.”

## **Special health concerns:**

Many blacks in Chicago suffer from a serious lack of health care. Neighborhood hospitals like Provident and St. Lukes are no longer there. National statistics confirm that African Americans as a group face higher death rates than whites for the most common life-threatening diseases. For example, the death rate for diabetes is double, cancer is 25% higher, heart disease 30% higher, and strokes 40% higher, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Health risk factors are high for blacks, as 25% of men smoke (and 18% of women), 37% of men and 51% of women are obese, and 39% of men and 44% of women have high blood pressure. They are 20% less likely to get flu shots and nearly 25% less likely to be vaccinated for pneumonia. Nearly 21% under 65 have no health insurance.

African Americans are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS, with more than half the new cases diagnosed in Illinois. African Americans accounted for 60% of the new diagnoses in Chicago in 2006, and were more than half of the 15,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in the state that year, according to the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. In 2009, three-quarters of the women diagnosed with HIV in Illinois were African American.

Sickle cell disease, an inherited blood ailment that affects those of African descent, strikes one in 500 newborns. Those with the disease have inherited the mutated gene from both parents, making them prone to infections.

There is no cure, but pneumonia vaccinations have helped reduce mortality for children 0-3 by 68%. The 1 in 12 blacks who carry just one gene instead of two are said to have sickle cell trait. They have no symptoms, but pass the gene on to their offspring.

*By Timuel Black, Professor Emeritus of City Colleges of Chicago*