

LITTLE VILLAGE ECONOMIC & PUBLIC HEALTH ANALYSIS

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The South Lawndale community has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With case numbers and deaths that rank among the highest in the City of Chicago, residents of South Lawndale have faced the negative effects of pandemic as an exacerbation of existing economic and public health inequities. To better understand and address these inequities, this report aims to identify both the key issues faced by residents on these fronts and delineate the policy implications. The successes and shortcomings of policies enacted during the pandemic can serve as data points for future advocacy efforts.

The Little Village neighborhood on the Southwest side of Chicago is a predominantly Mexican American community area with 100,000 estimated residents. Little Village is notably home to a largely immigrant population, with 39% of residents being foreign-born, 29% non-U.S. citizens, and 25% undocumented. Little Village has been recognized as a main Midwest port of entry for Latinx immigrants (Little Village Community Portal, n.d.).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH LAWNDALE

The coronavirus pandemic has had devastating consequences worldwide, with 861,000 deaths reported in the United States as of January 22, 2022 (National Center for Health Statistics COVID-19 Mortality Overview, 2022). The 60623 ZIP Code, which includes the neighborhood of Little Village, has consistently reported some of the highest COVID-19 rates in the City of Chicago throughout the course of the pandemic. As of January 15th, there have been a total of 299 reported COVID deaths and 17,915 (1 in 5) total cases reported in the ZIP Code area. (COVID-19 Cases, Tests, and Deaths by ZIP Code, 2022). These numbers

fall in line with larger national trends of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities (Khanijahani et al., 2021; Mude et al., 2021). The Associated Press reported that 30% of Black Americans and 29% of Hispanic Americans surveyed had someone close to them, either a friend or family member, die of COVID-19, two times more likely than white Americans (Morrison, Stafford, & Swanson, 2021).

South Lawndale has faced one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks among Chicago's 77 community areas. From March 1, 2020, to January 15, 2022, South Lawndale ZIP Codes (60623, 60632, and 60608) experienced some of the highest number of deaths and case numbers in Chicago. As seen in Table 1, South Lawndale has had 1.1 times as many infections as the city, with a rate of 19,782 cases per 100,000 people. Similarly, South Lawndale has had a death rate 1.1 times as large as Chicago (COVID-19 Cases, Tests, and Deaths by ZIP Code, 2022). These disparities in case numbers and deaths can be attributed to existing barriers to public health resources, as well as unique social determinants in South Lawndale that increase COVID-19 exposure such as a high share of essential workers (21.1% of adults) and the prevalence of large multigenerational households (Paul Douglas Institute, 2020; Rush University Medical Center, 2016). Low access to care, due to a high uninsured rate and lack of enough primary care providers in the community, can lead to delayed testing, treatment, and vaccination for many residents.

Table 1. Rate of COVID-19 Cases and Deaths, March 1, 2020 to January 15, 2022

	South Lawndale ZIP Codes	Chicago City-Wide
COVID-19 Cases per 100,000 people	19,782	18,717
COVID-19 Deaths per 100,000 people	280	254

Source: Chicago Department of Public Health. (2022). *COVID-19 Cases, Tests, and Deaths by ZIP Code*. Retrieved from <https://data.cityofchicago.org/Health-Human-Services/COVID-19-Cases-Tests-and-Deaths-by-ZIP-Code/yhhz-zm2v>

This gap in access to public health resources is also evident in the testing disparity that exists between South Lawndale and Chicago city-wide. As of January 15, 2022, South Lawndale ZIP Codes have a testing rate of 252,131 per 100,000 people, while Chicago has a testing rate of 322,716 per 100,000 people. The testing rate in the 60623 ZIP Code was 243,713 per 100,000, making it the 6th

lowest of Chicago's 58 populated ZIP Codes (COVID-19 Cases, Tests, and Deaths by ZIP Code, 2022). Whether scarcity of tests, long lines during the peaks of community spread, or scrupulous pop-up testing sites, South Lawndale residents have been left vulnerable to infection.

Alongside testing, immunization is the most important tool to protect the health of Chicago residents from COVID-19 complications. As of January 23, 2022, South Lawndale's ZIP Codes and Chicago have made substantial progress in increasing vaccine uptake but are still far from reaching the 86% to 90% immunization coverage that provides broader community protection (Dong, He, & Deng, 2021; Kadkhoda, 2021). As seen in Table 2, the percent of residents of all ages who have received at least one dose (74.2%) or completed their vaccine series (65.6%) is about equal to the city-wide numbers (COVID-19 Vaccinations by ZIP Code, 2022). The continued emergence of new COVID-19 variants throughout the pandemic and the reduced efficacy of single vaccine doses with time make completed series or booster shots (not captured in Chicago data) even more critical.

According to the Chicago Department of Public Health's COVID-19 Vulnerability Index, South Lawndale faces a high risk of lower vaccine uptake. Aside from access to care barriers that can drive down immunizations, vaccine hesitancy is an issue among segments of Black and Latino populations across the country (Khubchandani, et al., 2021). Providers in Chicago understand that connecting community members with vaccine ambassadors and health professionals can ease concerns about vaccine safety, which are prevalent in these communities due to ongoing issues of discrimination and negligence in healthcare settings (Paton, 2021). The city's efforts to enact such a strategy through the Protect Chicago Plus program has been successful in increasing vaccine uptake in South Lawndale, with a jump in one dose vaccination coverage from 6.7% of adults in February 2021 to 54.3% of adults by May 2021 (City of Chicago, n.d.). The Chicago Department of Health's door-to-door canvassing campaign to promote vaccination has yet to enter South Lawndale, but such a hyperlocal effort could make a difference in encouraging residents to get vaccinated or complete their vaccine series (Runes, 2021). Expansion of this vaccine promotion campaign into South Lawndale could significantly benefit the community's vaccination uptake and demonstrate that the City of Chicago understands the importance of outreach in such a heavily affected area.

Table 2. Percent of COVID-19 Vaccinations, March 1, 2020, to January 23, 2022

	South Lawndale ZIP Codes	Chicago City-Wide
Percent Vaccinated with At Least One Dose	74.2%	74.6%
Percent Vaccinated with Complete Series	65.6%	66.3%

Source: Chicago Department of Public Health. (2022). *COVID-19 Vaccinations by ZIP Code*. Retrieved from <https://data.cityofchicago.org/Health-Human-Services/COVID-19-Vaccinations-by-ZIP-Code/553k-3xze>

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LITTLE VILLAGE

In 2015, Little Village’s 26th Street corridor was named the second highest-grossing commercial strip in Chicago following the Magnificent Mile. The commercial strip consists of roughly 500 businesses – most small family-run shops – within a two-mile radius (Silets, 2015). With 17,000 people living per square mile, it is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the city, allowing the area to have immense purchasing power. The rich Mexican culture and vibrant community of the Little Village neighborhood area attract people from all over to shop in its commercial strip which helps drive its significant revenue earnings. The Little Village economy also uniquely consists of many individuals employed in the informal economy. This unregulated economic sector refers to cash-based self-employment, including jobs like babysitting, street vending, house repairs, etc. often taken on by individuals whose social circumstances such as documentation status, criminal records, or low levels of education do not allow them to be employed in the formal economy (Raijman, 2001). The distinctive qualities of the Little Village commercial corridor and economic sector allow the community the opportunity to build wealth through its cultural and social capital.

COVID-19 Economic Impact on Small Businesses

Mandated lockdown policies began at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 as the COVID-19 virus ran rampant. Subsequently, we saw a drastic downturn of the United States economy. Throughout the year to date, businesses throughout

the country have struggled to remain afloat. A survey conducted by the Little Village Chamber of Commerce in February 2021 showed that of the 438 small businesses surveyed 36 of those had closed permanently due to the pandemic (Jimenez & Allison, 2021). Given the City of Chicago extended business licenses to two years due to the pandemic, businesses were not required to report their closing rather making the documentation of this impact difficult to assess accurately.

The temporary closure of in-person operations at many businesses due to stay-at-home orders left many businesses financially fragile, with many small businesses resorting to layoffs and wage cuts to remain afloat. Government assistance for small businesses, such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan, a forgivable loan backed by the U.S. Small Business Administration, was meant to provide relief for struggling small businesses and prevent closure during the time of the pandemic. These funds were to be used for payroll, benefits, mortgage, rent, and utility costs. Although there was existing support for businesses, accessing these funds proved to be a challenge for many businesses in communities of color. Access to banking institutions, especially for businesses in communities of color who often don't have relationships with larger banking institutions made it difficult to access those funds in a timely manner, with an analysis from treasury data showing that small businesses in majority Black and Brown communities received funds in 31 days, while those in majority white zip codes received funds in 23 days average (Liu & Parilla, 2020). With many Hispanic and Black small businesses being unbanked or underbanked, they were structurally excluded in the distribution of this government assistance. In Little Village 53 small businesses and community organizations received over \$150,000 in PPP loans with reported data showing the majority of funds were used to pay for payroll of employees (Policy Map, 2021).

When restrictions in Chicago and the country began to ease, restaurants and other businesses were able to operate with limited capacity and outdoor seating. In Little Village, that proved to be a greater challenge than neighborhoods on the North side of Chicago where major streets were closed off to create space for outdoor seating. Outdoor space for restaurants to operate was limited. Little Village's major commercial street 26th St, which has a mix of retail and restaurant commercial buildings, did not close down for dining like other Chicago neighborhoods out of fear of losing more revenue

from local businesses. These restaurants in Little Village did not have the feasibility to operate “business as usual,” unlike other neighborhoods (Pena, 2021).

The rise of new COVID variants and rapidly changing conditions indicates that the effects of this pandemic will be long term. The real economic conditions of small businesses cannot be fully determined until the surge of COVID is properly contained.

COVID-19 Economic Impact on Households

Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, structural inequality already negatively impacted economic and health circumstances of residents of majority Black and Brown communities. The pandemic only exacerbated financial hardships and widened the racial wealth divide through the impact of unemployment rates, loss of income, and accumulating debts. For many the lack of economic security has made navigating through the pandemic a challenge. During the pandemic, 62% of Hispanic Americans reported loss of household income due to job loss, pay cuts, or unpaid leave (Morrison, Stafford, & Swanson, AP-NORC poll: People of color bear COVID-19 economic brunt, 2021). According to the Illinois Department of Employment Security the leisure and hospitality sector which includes restaurants, bars, hotels, and music venues lost 216,500 jobs over the course of the year decreasing from 628,800 jobs in 2020 to 412,200 jobs in 2021. In South Lawndale 12% of residents reported being employed in the Accommodation and Food Service sector. Seventy percent of Latinx individuals were less likely to have emergency funds for at least three months. The majority said they could not cover expenses by borrowing money, using savings, or selling assets (Lopez et al., 2020). The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) reported that 6% of US households are unbanked, 14% of Hispanic households were five times more likely than white households to not have access to banks. This is significant since households with no access to banks often rely on predatory loans, high interest rates and fees as alternative methods to access financial resources (Gailey & Little, 2021) For undocumented individuals and those employed in the informal economy, it has created more significant financial barriers as they have received little to no government assistance from pandemic relief programs and unemployment benefits when laid off.

The financial uncertainty caused by loss of employment or wages due to COVID left many households dealing with housing insecurity and the accumulating utility burdens throughout the country. Anecdotally, we have heard from residents in the neighborhood that the hardship of keeping up with utility and housing payments often became unmanageable when an employed person in the household, particularly heads of the household, had been faced with COVID-19. This loss of income left the burden of providing financial resources to other members of the home (Ruiz and Ruiz, 2021). Nationally, according to the CBPP, one in seven renters were not caught up on rent, with the most significant hardships reported among renters of color, 24% of Black households and 18% of Latino households in comparison to 11% of white households and households with children reporting difficulty at higher rates simultaneously (Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships, 2021). The federal relief to aid renters with payments and landlords with mortgages has lagged in distribution as many systems did not have the capacity to distribute payments promptly. In the City of Chicago, more than 26,000 households applied for the citywide renter relief program that would pay for up to 12 months of backed-up payments on rent for families who demonstrated hardship during the pandemic and were at risk of dealing with housing insecurity. The funds requested amounted to \$137 million, which surpassed the \$80 million that the City had allocated for relief (Bauer, 2021).

Post-Pandemic Resiliency and Recovery

What this pandemic has taught us is that there is a need for robust policy efforts that need to address the necessities of often underrepresented vulnerable populations. Informal workers like street vendors contribute to what makes Little Village so rich in culture and capital, but did not have adequate support through the duration of the peak of the pandemic. Small businesses in Black and Brown communities struggled to attain federal assistance for economic relief throughout the country due to disparities in banking and barriers in language, technology, and access to information. Undocumented families struggled to attain federal assistance and the resources available to these families was not sufficient to sustain the need. There is a need to re-envision policies to ethically and equitably distribute resources to those who are structurally most vulnerable to financial hardship.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LITTLE VILLAGE

Public health issues experienced by South Lawndale residents during the pandemic are not entirely new. Both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, South Lawndale has faced a range of public health disparities present across Chicago’s Black and Brown communities. As seen in Table 1, South Lawndale residents do well in comparison to the City of Chicago on some indicators, such as a longer life expectancy and a lower hypertension rate, but there are still reasons for concern. The hypertension rate for South Lawndale still translates to 1 in 5 adult residents with hypertension. The community’s diabetes and obesity rates, 12.2% and 41.5%, are both higher than the rates for the city, 9.5% and 30.8% (Chicago Health Atlas, 2021). The root causes of these high indicators, such as lack of access to healthy foods, are a cause for concern that community organizations have worked to address (See Food Insecurity and Mutual Aid section).

Table 1. Health Indicators in South Lawndale

	South Lawndale	Chicago
Life Expectancy (2017)	80.5 years	77.2 years
Adult Diabetes Rate (2016-2018)	12.2%	9.5%
Adult Hypertension Rate (2016-2018)	20.5%	27.7%
Adult Obesity Rate (2016-2018)	41.5%	30.8%
Adult Asthma Rate (2016-2018)	6.1%	9.5%
Overall Health Status – Excellent, Very Good, Good Rate (2016-2018)	75.0%	81.4%

Source: Chicago Department of Public Health. (2021). *South Lawndale*. Chicago Health Atlas. Retrieved from <https://chicagohealthatlas.org/neighborhood/1714000-30?place=south-lawndale>

Access to care is the largest public health issue facing residents of South Lawndale and one of the main reasons for the heavy burden of the pandemic on the community. According to the 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, South Lawndale has the highest uninsured rate among all 77 Chicago community areas at 22.52%, more than double the city’s rate of 9.65% more than double the city’s rate of 9.65% (Chicago Health Atlas, 2021). Owing to such a

high uninsured rate, fewer community residents report having a primary care provider (64.1%) than Chicago as a whole (73.1%) (Chicago Health Atlas, 2021). In addition, as of 2020, all census tracts in South Lawndale have been categorized by the Health Resources and Services Administration as Medically Underserved Areas (MUA), a designation used for areas with too few primary care providers (HRSA, 2021). Lack of both insurance and a primary care provider can exacerbate negative health conditions by pushing residents to seek care at later stages or forgo treatment. Residents of South Lawndale face potentially worse health outcomes for chronic health conditions and COVID-19 as a result of these barriers to care.

A major step in closing this gap for access to care was the inclusion of an expansion of Medicare-like coverage to low-income noncitizen seniors in the Illinois Fiscal Year 2021 budget. In a community area with a large population of undocumented residents, this could make a difference for older, low-income residents who are most at risk to the continued spread of COVID-19 (Yousef, 2020). Another positive step has been investment in community health workers (*promotoras de salud*), such as those with Enlace Chicago, that have engaged in vaccine outreach during the pandemic (Campos, 2021). *Promotoras* have been a proven model to engage residents on vaccines and other health care questions, so it would be wise to continue investment in these programs even after the pandemic to address South Lawndale's other public health issues. Further expansion of state health coverage to undocumented residents and investment in community health workers can make some strides in closing the health coverage gap that exists in South Lawndale.

Intersection of Water Justice and Public Health

In addition to negative population health indicators and poor access to care, water justice issues have also had the potential to worsen the public health of South Lawndale residents. Lead in drinking water, a consequence of the 380,000 lead service lines (LSLs) that are present in Chicago, have posed an increased risk to residents as the unique conditions of the pandemic have unfolded. With stay-at-home orders and other factors in place keeping increased numbers of residents at home, including young children attending remote school and younger children without access to in-person child care, safe residential water quality became even more crucial. There is no safe level of lead exposure, especially for young children who are most susceptible to negative health outcomes from high blood lead levels, such as decreased ability to learn and neurologic damage (Courtney et al., 2021). In 2017, South Lawndale

had among the highest percentage of 1-2-year-old children with elevated blood lead levels for a community area. Census tracts in South Lawndale were recorded as having up to 10.5%-15.4% of 1-2-year-old children with elevated blood lead levels (CDPH, 2019). Lead exposure is primarily environmental, either through lead paint in homes or lead in drinking water, and the stay-at-home orders during the pandemic have increased the risk of higher exposure at home while simultaneously driving down the number of children tested for lead in Illinois (Courtney et al., 2021).

The City of Chicago has yet to make significant progress on the removal and replacement of lead service lines that contribute these elevated blood lead levels. In 2020, the Mayor announced a Lead Service Line Replacement (LSLR) Program focused on assisting homeowners with initiating LSLR initiation, equity LSLRs for low-income residents with high lead levels in drinking water, and block level LSLRs in low/moderate income areas undergoing water main replacements (CDWM, 2021). South Lawndale is set to be the pilot community area for the block LSLR, with a project set to begin on the 3100 block of South Ridgeway Ave. LVEJO will be involved in assuring that residents are receiving the necessary information and resources to move forward with a LSLR. State policy is set to support more LSLR programs and provide expanded funding, as the Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act, a bill supported by LVEJO, was signed into law in August 2021 (IEC, 2021). The Ridgeway pilot project, alongside new movement on LSLRs in state law, could serve as a first step in bringing much needed action to address South Lawndale's elevated blood lead levels in young children.

Food Insecurity and Mutual Aid

An increasingly pertinent public health issue that came to the forefront of concerns of South Lawndale residents during the pandemic has been food injustice, specifically, food insecurity. Characterized by the inability to pay for or access adequate amounts of food for a nutritious diet, food insecurity and the risk of food insecurity was present for many families in South Lawndale prior to the pandemic. According to the Greater Chicago Food Depository, 43% of community members were at risk of food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic because of income, unemployment, and renter occupancy status. High risk of food insecurity turned into high food insecurity during the pandemic, as GCFD food pantries in South Lawndale reported an increase of over 64,000 individuals served between January 2020 and August 2020 (GCFD, 2020).

Households experiencing food insecurity face a range of negative health outcomes as a result. Inadequate access to healthy food can lead to low nutrient diets with few fruits and vegetables, leading to or exacerbating diet-related chronic diseases. According to Feeding America, 33% of households served by food banks had at least one member with diabetes (Feeding America, n.d.). The challenges of food insecurity can lead to households making tradeoffs, forgoing payments for utilities, rent, or even medications to pay for food. LVEJO staff members working with the Farm, Food, Familias Mutual Aid (FFF) group report hearing these decisions from South Lawndale residents choosing to fall back on rent or utility payments to afford food (Ruiz and Ruiz, 2021).

With a large share of residents at risk of experiencing food insecurity and already experiencing diet-related chronic diseases, the work that Farm, Food, Familias has accomplished has been vital to the community. FFF started with 50 meal deliveries in May 2020 and has expanded to 350 weekly meals across South and West Side communities (Ruiz and Ruiz, 2021). While there have been individuals who no longer need meal deliveries as they regain employment, FFF has established itself as a food resource for South Lawndale residents in need for the pandemic and beyond. With the recent increase in cases again, largely due to the Delta variant and other COVID-19 variants, there exists a possibility that food insecurity increases may occur again.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Lawndale has been colored by the existing economic and health inequities that existed prior to the public health emergency. While South Lawndale boasts a large, successful commercial corridor along 26th Street, the many residents who work in the informal economy, lack banking services, or lack documentation status faced decreased economic security during the pandemic. Alongside the increased unemployment and lack of access to city and federal aid, the importance of building cultural and social capital in the community has never been more evident. While the need still exists for the City of Chicago to do more for residents facing economic challenges with continued spread of COVID-19, the efforts of mutual aid groups such as Farm, Food, Familias point towards community building that can increase resiliency to neighborhood shocks post-pandemic.

As well as highlighting the need for community investment, the pandemic exacerbated the issues with access to care that South Lawndale residents face. Connecting uninsured community members to primary care providers in the short-term can decrease vaccine hesitancy, while in the long-term it could help treat and prevent other ailments residents face. Expansion of existing policies and programs, such as more healthcare coverage for undocumented residents through the State and vaccine canvassing through the City, stand out as potentially impactful for community members. South Lawndale has much to gain from needed investments in social and physical infrastructure, from health clinics to new Lead Service Lines. The post-pandemic future charted by the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, and federal government must include a vision for a more economically secure, resilient, and healthy environment for South Lawndale residents.

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