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# Some see housing stock and affordability as underlying reasons why migrants landed in Black Chicago neighborhoods

By Corli Jay

APR 10 2025

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Graphic by Ash Lane for The TRiBE®

Lifelong South Shore resident Natasha Dunn said she, like many Black Chicagoans, felt overlooked and disrespected when city officials looked to her neighborhood as an option to place asylum seekers in temporary shelters.

"I was not happy at how the government handled this process of placement of migrants in our community," Dunn said.

"I've lived in this community all my life," Dunn said. "And I've seen it go down. We are now at a point in our community where things are just, it's been a lot of chaos for the past few decades."

Migrants living in South Shore wouldn't be an issue if the community did not already deal with longstanding disinvestment and looked more like other communities up north, she said.

Dunn described how the area, which consists of **92% Black residents**, has dealt with foreclosures, high eviction rates, and a lack of school resources. Additionally, the **eradication of public housing** years ago in other parts of the city led to displaced Black residents moving to South Shore. This resulted in an onslaught of new renters to the neighborhood.

It's now been three years since thousands of asylum seekers from Latin America were bused to Democrat-run sanctuary cities like Chicago, New York and Boston by the Republican governors of Texas and other bordering states. Between August 2022 and December 2024, over 51,000 migrants arrived in Chicago, according to the city's **New Arrivals Dashboard**

Initially, Chicago officials struggled to accommodate the migrants; with an overwhelmed and under-resourced shelter system, migrants were camping inside and outside of police stations. In December 2022, the state began providing rental assistance for migrants. The state initially oversaw some migrant-only temporary shelters but eventually handed the responsibility of identifying, opening and operating the shelters in neighborhoods across Chicago to the city. Mayor Brandon Johnson's administration integrated the migrant-only shelters into a unified shelter system.



Chicago Urban League senior vice president Kafi Moragne-Patterson speaks during a press conference at City Hall to defend Chicago's sanctuary status. Photo by Tyger Ligon for The TRiBE®

Brian Mullins, a lifelong South Shore resident, says neighbors resent the influx because they feel state and city officials have ignored their needs while finding resources to help noncitizens.

"South Shore was the largest recipient of the migrants because we had vacant housing," Mullins said. "But again, that's manufactured, in my opinion, right? Our communities are manufactured a certain way, and now we're the only place they can go. So then they justify bringing them there."

## Black communities bear the brunt of housing migrants

Starting in 2022, migrants who largely came from Venezuela were placed in temporary shelters throughout the city. When they began moving into permanent housing in predominantly Black areas, community members felt put on the back burner once again.



Baltazar Enriquez, president of the **Little Village Community Council**, a nonprofit that has provided aid to new arrivals, said migrants have been housed in the predominantly Black communities of South Shore, Englewood and North Lawndale. The council, together with **Woodlawn Diversity in Action** in early 2023, urged city officials to **place new arrivals** in areas like Little Village that better aligned with their cultural background.

Enriquez suggested the cynicism that drove Republican governors to send migrants northward is the same brand of toxicity that pushed them into Black neighborhoods.

"We saw it as a tactic to say, 'Well, let's put them in this neighborhood so they could have a bad experience,'" Enriquez said. "So, like, they could tell the other people that are coming from Venezuela or Ecuador or Colombia, 'Hey, don't come to Chicago because they will place you in a neighborhood that is not [like] our neighborhood.'"

Both residents and newcomers have felt the burden of integration. Chalkbeat Chicago highlighted **difficulties migrant students faced** attending schools in South Shore that didn't have bilingual services and already lacked critical services for students.

To better understand Chicago, Enriquez said the council educated newcomers on the history of segregation. Many migrants were confused as they didn't live in segregated communities in their home countries, according to Enriquez.

Mullins said he's seen the makeup of South Shore change from all Black to being mixed racially and ethnically, and feels that diversity is being forced on the area: "Man, nothing in the world works like that," he said. "It's intrusive, basically, it's a change. Nobody else would accept that, which is why they put them in our neighborhood."

South Shore became the top neighborhood where asylum seekers found permanent housing through a state-run program called the Asylum Seeker Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ASERAP). The Illinois Housing Development Authority confirmed that the top three ZIP codes where new arrivals found permanent housing were 60649 in South Shore, 60623 in Lawndale, and 60619, which encompasses parts of Chatham and Greater Grand Crossing.

The program gave asylum seekers rental assistance with the help of Catholic Charities, which stipulated that housing costs meet the organization's description of affordable. The migrants initially received six months of state-funded rental assistance. As the money dried up, rental assistance dropped to three months. Catholic Charities did not respond to questions about the process of choosing property owners to participate in the program.

The program ended in 2024, and the last check was cashed in December, according to the Illinois Department of Human Services in an emailed statement sent to *The TRIIBE*.

*The TRIIBE* reached out to Gov. J.B. Pritzker about if and how he plans to remedy the impact



of the new arrivals on the Black community, but representatives with his office did not respond to the inquiries.

Data on whether migrants are still staying in rentals in predominantly Black Chicago communities is not available, since they, like anyone else, can move about freely.

Luciana Diaz, a Venezuelan-born activist and president of **Panas en Chicago**, which provides aid to Venezuelans, said some new arrivals are still in apartments on the South and West sides, and after rental assistance stopped, multiple families started to live in one unit to help share housing costs.



Members of E.A.T. (Equity and Transformation), Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) and other local community-based organizations gathered at City Hall on Dec. 6, 2024. Photo by Ash Lane for The TRiBE®

"Can you imagine 12 people in one apartment? It is a lot of people in one house or in one apartment or three rooms," Diaz said.

Newcomers are building community through church attendance, according to Diaz, noting that many Venezuelans come from Christian backgrounds.

"Christians are being super helpful," she said. "A lot of Venezuelans go to Christian churches on the West Side, South Side. They don't understand nothing; some people have translators, and they are there because they feel good."

Outside of welcoming faith communities, migrants have faced mixed reactions to their presence in majority-Black spaces, according to Diaz. Some people have been told to "go home."

"Some people are educated and they want to understand what's going on," Diaz said. "And some people, they want to scream at us."

## Housing insecurity affects all South Shore residents

The South Shore neighborhood is 76% renter-occupied with the majority of its housing stock comprising buildings with five or more units, according to the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University.

The area had an unemployment rate of 16% from 2018-2022 compared with the city's unemployment rate of 8.2%, according to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Data from 2018-2022 also shows 57.6% of renter-occupied households in South Shore are cost-burdened, meaning residents spend more than 30% of their income on rent or household needs. The area was also No. 1 in Chicago for eviction filings in 2019, according to the most recent figures available from the Law Center for Better Housing.

On the far North Side, Rogers Park has a similar housing stock. The community is comprised of nearly 60% of buildings with five or more units, and 53% of renters are cost burdened. However, the difference in housing affordability is apparent. According to the online rental marketplace, Zumper, average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Rogers Park is \$1,433. In South Shore, it is \$1,036. Rogers Park's population is 44.9% white.

Joy Adams, director of operations for the Phoenix Foundation, NFP said she thinks more can be done to help housing-insecure Chicagoans and address concerns of Black residents who feel overlooked by policymakers.

"Chicago needs to do a better job in allocating resources to people who have been here," said Adams, whose organization works to end generational homelessness by providing homeownership education and supporting affordable housing initiatives. "We need to make sure we are given the equitable amount of resources to our citizens, as we do the migrants who come in."

For example, Phoenix Foundation offers an equitable process by prioritizing people based on the amount of time they've been in the system, Adams said.

Ending generational homelessness, "that's not just for one race. That's for everybody," Adams said. "When we look into what's equitable, what's equitable is the people who have been here, who have been waiting on these services for years and years and years. It's only right that we prioritize their needs first."

Dixon Romeo, South Shore resident and housing organizer with [Southside Together](#), said the bigger issue is that opportunistic landlords are exploiting both migrant families and longtime residents in the housing market.

"None of the new arrivals have the power to shift and change what's going on in that neighborhood," Romeo said. "None of those people left Venezuela or Haiti, or wherever they're from, and said, 'Yeah, man, put me on 79th Street in shorts,' and it's 12 degrees outside."

Romeo's bigger-picture concerns include asking how conditions are created that affect where people live. He asks, "Why is it cheaper for new arrivals to live in South Shore than Pilsen?"





South Shore resident, Dixon Romeo, is the housing organizer with Southside Together. Photo by Ash Lane for The TRiBE®

Gentrification is one answer: Latino communities such as Little Village and Humboldt Park have been **priced out** in recent years, resulting in Latinos moving to the suburbs or historically Black neighborhoods, such as North Lawndale and Austin, which are more affordable.

Unlike Mullins in South Shore, Austin resident Lorne Runnels welcomes diversity.

"Sometimes the people are taking it as they're losing something," Runnels said. "That conversation needs to be had where the residents that have been there for generations and generations; they shouldn't feel like they're losing their community and that sense of home."

## City officials respond to neighborhood changes and challenges

In the Englewood portion of his ward, Ald. David Moore (17th Ward) said new arrivals squatted in abandoned buildings after Mayor Johnson first announced a 60-day shelter stay limit in November 2023.

"After that, they were out because they had no place to stay. I saw that increase, and those calls were coming in somewhere during the fall and winter," Moore said. While the squatting has decreased, he said he sporadically gets calls about it.

Englewood **consists of 47% residential buildings** that have two to four units and 33% of buildings with five or more units. About 63% of its renter-occupied households are rent-burdened.

Moore said a couple of his constituents complained about property managers not renewing their leases to get extra money to house migrants through the state-run rental assistance program. He said he's observed more Latino residents moving in over time.

Moore also said he supports efforts from Johnson to repopulate the city's Black communities through affordability initiatives such as the **Missing Middle infill Housing** in North Lawndale through the city's \$1.25 billion housing and economic bond deal.

"We, as a people, believe in helping people, but we want to help ourselves first," Moore said. "Not until the Lori Lightfoot administration came in did we start seeing economic

development on the South and West Sides with Invest South/West. So we got to keep building where people can see and touch and feel things, and be able to have those amenities in their communities that they want.”

Although Johnson did not respond to specific questions emailed about how to remedy the tensions Black residents feel about the migrants, the mayor acknowledged the decades of disinvestment in Black communities across Chicago and insists the result of housing and job investments would take time for Black Chicagoans to see.

“These crises that people in Chicago have experienced, particularly on the West and South sides, they run deep,” Johnson told *The TRiBE*. “Many of these experiences that folks have had in Chicago where things have been taken away, in order to repair that harm, we have to build and return.”



On Jan. 20, 2025 the people of Chicago showed solidarity in subzero temperatures to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump. Photo by Ash Lane for The TRiBE®

Moore added that creating more homeownership opportunities can help relieve Black communities from burdens such as absorbing new arrivals in crisis. Ald. Ronnie Mosley (21st Ward), whose ward includes West Pullman, Roseland and Morgan Park, said his area didn’t see many migrants with rental assistance because the area consists of mainly single-family housing.

Diaz says she understands the feelings Black people have about how resources are allocated.

"I can't blame the American community, but that's what they want," Diaz said about policymakers. "They don't want us to be together, working together, right? We fighting for money, right?"

For Runnels, reparations are the ultimate solution that every level of government can provide to address the legacy of systemic underinvestment in Black communities.

"We're not making it the Black community versus the migrants," he said. "We have to address the historical harms that the Black community has survived."

***Corli Jay** is a corps member for The TRiiBE/Report for America, covering community investment in Chicago. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.*

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