

AT HOME ON THE GREATER WEST SIDE

What housing stock can tell you about the West Side

The types of housing matter to a community



by **Delaney Nelson**

October 3, 2024

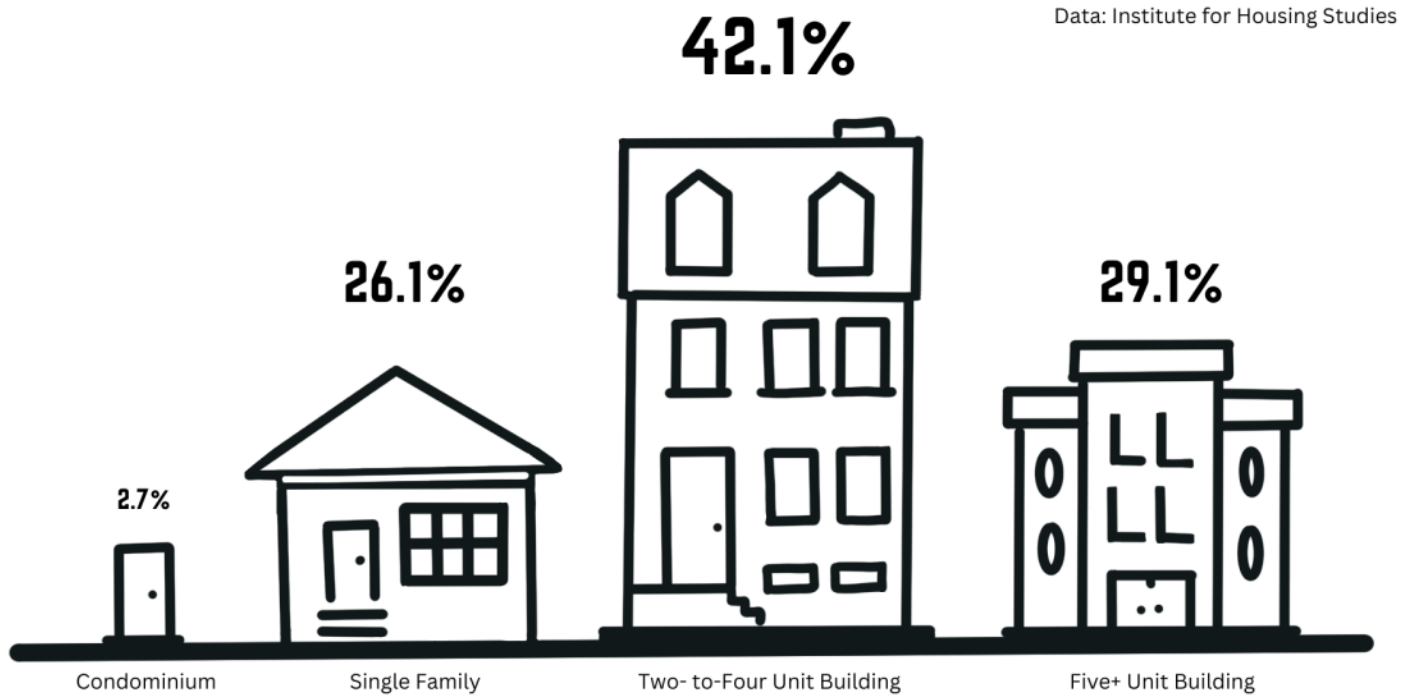


Chicago is known as the city of neighborhoods; it's a place where each community has unique history, struggles, qualities, goals, residents and values. One distinct, but perhaps overlooked, part of each neighborhood's identity is its existing housing stock.

Housing stock refers to the total number of dwellings in a specific area, including single-family homes, condominiums and multifamily units. An area’s housing makeup can be used to strategically address the community’s housing needs. Programs designed to increase homeownership in a neighborhood with a high number of owner-occupied units, for example, will look different from programs for a community with a large percentage of multi-unit apartment buildings.

“If your neighborhood has a lot of two- to-four-unit buildings, and you have a lot of these small rental properties, there may be small-scale landlords who own and run those properties. That’s a different type of consideration than if the neighborhood has all single-family homes, which are more likely to be fully owner-occupied,” said Geoff Smith, executive director at the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. He said two flats, for example, provide owner-occupied homeownership opportunities, as well as affordable rental units.

On the West Side, each community has a unique housing stock composition. Single-family homes [make up](#) 26% of the housing in Austin, which is on par with the city average. But it has a higher percentage of two- to-four-flats than Chicago overall.



AUSTIN HOUSING STOCK COMPOSITION

[West Garfield Park](#) and [North Lawndale](#) look a little different. Both West Side neighborhoods have a lower percentage of single-family homes than Austin, and their rates of two- to four-flats are far above the city average. Here, a homeownership-boosting initiative may include classes to teach two-flat homeowners how to

rent out a unit of their home, Smith said.

A neighborhood's housing stock is closely tied to its location and when the neighborhood was developed, according to Smith. Austin, which was [established](#) in 1920, has many older, smaller multi-unit buildings.

As a result of decades of [disinvestment](#) by the government, banking institutions and developers, many of these properties need rehabilitation, narrowing the selection of move-in ready homes for sale.

“Those buildings require substantial rehab,” Smith said. “So that would mean a flipper or some type of developer would have to come and purchase those properties and improve them. That has been happening, for sure, but there’s just a need for increased investment.

Austin also has some vacant land, which can provide opportunities for new construction. But the financing of such projects isn’t always plain sailing.

“Because of the nature of the cost of new construction versus the value of real estate in some neighborhoods, the economics of those deals are tricky sometimes for market-rate developers to make work,” Smith said.

Today, there are an array of initiatives focused on increasing homeownership and stabilizing affordable housing on the West Side.

Both Austin and West Garfield Park are, for example, designated target areas for the city’s [Micro Market Recovery Program](#), an initiative of the Department of Housing focused on “rebuilding distressed Chicago communities” by reducing the cost of homeownership and reinvesting in vacant buildings. The Oak Park Regional Housing Center hosts [Austin Rising](#), a program designed to help existing homeowners and “improve housing stock without displacement.” The Preservation of Affordable Housing-Chicago, a nonprofit developer focused on building and rehabbing affordable housing, has undertaken two rehab projects in Austin. One of the organization’s acquisitions is the [Austin Renaissance](#), a structure built in 1926 on W. Washington Boulevard.

Even day-to-day conversations with neighbors can be shaped by the way a neighborhood is built. On blocks filled with owner-occupied single-family homes, residents are likely to have more interactions with their neighbors, said Don Washington, director of the Chicago Housing Initiative Coalition.

In turn, these communities may become stronger, cohesive units that can better fight against destabilizing factors like gentrification. A community with more vacant lots and large, spread-out buildings may have a harder time creating the same degree of cohesion, Washington said.

“If the housing stock is mostly apartments and renters, if it’s mostly large buildings, then it’s easy to displace it. Neighbors don’t really know each other,” Washington said. “By displacement, I don’t just mean gentrification. I mean things like, ‘We want to put something in your neighborhood that you don’t like, like a chemical plant.’ But if the neighborhood has people who have investments in their homes, or has a bunch of two- and six-flats scattered among single-family homes, it becomes very hard to displace that neighborhood. You have to build around it, because you’re not going to be able to go through it.”

© 2024 Growing Community Media, NFP

Powered by Newspack