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# A case of disappearing hoops in gentrifying neighborhoods

In the last decade the Chicago Park District has removed 12 of 16 basketball courts from neighborhoods that have doubled and tripled in value, further marginalizing communities facing displacement.

By Alison Saldanha @alisonsald

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Fifteen-year-old Katiana Edwards (left) with her friend Maya Wallace at the Mason Park basketball court in Evanston. Without access to a

**O**n a hot sunny Saturday in August, 15-year-old Katiana Edwards, dressed in a grey sports bra, matching shorts, and white shoes, readied herself for a game of basketball. With no access to a court within a mile radius of her home in West Rogers Park, Katiana had to hop into her father Ralph's grey Jeep Cherokee, driving past Chicago's northern boundary to Mason Park in Evanston, for nearly four miles to get here. The point guard joined her friends Dafina Ukaj and Maya Wallace and others, and waited for a few more to arrive from the Evanston Township High School basketball team. The girls huddled around to pick some music on a phone. Katiana fiddled with an old, black loudspeaker plugged into a power outlet at a fieldhouse on the east end of the court, trying hard to minimize the distortion it spat out instead of tunes.

That peak summer noon, the sun bore down on the asphalt painted green and red with white lines to mark the three point arc, the foul line, the half court line, and the boundaries. Lush green maple trees threw little shadows along the edges. Four tall lamp posts dotted the midline of the playing field. Beyond the manicured hedgerow on the north end near Church Street, large three-story houses with red brick walls and grey roof tiles peeked overhead, their window sills and frames freshly painted white. On the southeast end, a few feet away from the din of the sound system, little children ran around a playlot, swinging, sliding, and crawling around colorful play structures. A handful of adult caregivers minded them, occasionally glancing in the direction of the noise.

Fitted with nine rims, the sprawling Mason Park basketball court is an oasis. Not many parks have enough hoops for girls to play without having to ask boys to share, Katiana said. The challenge of finding a place to play was a problem even before the COVID-19 pandemic closed many facilities.

The girls picked a hoop closer to the shade of the maple trees near the soccer field. They circled around and divided themselves into teams. Once the final player arrived with a new battery-powered black portable speaker, Katiana set it on the ground behind the pole anchoring the rim. As the clear beats and synth of rapper Moneybagg Yo's summer hit "Said Sum" drifted over the court, a sense of relief took hold and the girls started to play with a little bounce in their step. Passersby, mostly young boys and men, stopped to watch.

When the city started to reopen in June, Katiana managed to find a few basketball courts closer to home, in other neighborhoods on the city's north side. But at these parks she doesn't feel welcome. For example, she often finds residents walking their

Sometimes when Katiana and her friends go to play basketball in these predominantly white neighborhoods, they find the hoops removed the next day, she said. "See, we used to have basketball runs, so like a lot of people would show up to the parks and we would play games like a tournament. And I think the police or somebody in the area reported that and the next day the hoops were gone. So everybody had to either stop playing basketball or find another place to go to play," she said.

Other times, the police just show up, casually driving up and down the street as the kids try to play a game. "Like when we first show up, they're not there. And then after a couple, like 20 minutes, they'll show up and they'll just be sitting in the area and hanging out," she told me. "I wouldn't say we were necessarily confronted, but like, we were scared off. Just from the police just riding around like constantly back and forth, back and forth—it scares us. 'Cause knowing what the police are doing to Black people, it does scare us." She continued. "Just the looks that they give us just constantly riding around. They're purposely trying to like, get us out of the area."

This is a common experience for Black people on the north side, where Chicago Park District data shows there are fewer basketball rims than the south and west sides of the city.

Others I interviewed similarly described feeling unwelcome when they travelled to gentrified, white neighborhoods to play basketball. Their feelings of exclusion are not unfounded. An analysis of Chicago Park District data obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests shows that the great majority of basketball courts removed over the last decade were located in the north and near west sides of the city, in areas that have rapidly gentrified and that are home to racial tensions.

**O**verseeing 8,800 acres of park space, the Chicago Park District is the largest municipal park manager in the United States. Between 2010 and 2020, the park district decommissioned 260 sports amenities across city parks, according to data received through a FOIA request. Basketball courts, along with tennis courts, made up the largest numbers of decommissions, and the neighborhoods from which both were removed seem to have significance in a city where virtually every aspect of public policy and daily life is infused with a legacy of segregation and inequality.

Basketball courts and backboards were removed primarily in gentrifying neighborhoods where in many cases the white population is increasing and Black population is decreasing. That means it's often hard for people on the north side, like

private property, but these are often inaccessible to neighborhood residents. The park district data doesn't include these facilities, though sources I spoke to say the same trends follow here too.)

In the last decade, 16 basketball courts and 42 backboards have been removed from Chicago parks. Twelve of the 16 courts were removed in Rogers Park, Albany Park, the Near West Side, East Garfield Park, Bronzeville, and West Town. Prices of single family homes in these neighborhoods have doubled and tripled since 2000, the steepest rises among all neighborhoods in Cook County, according to an analysis of DePaul University's House Price Index for the region. Another court was removed from Washington Park, adjacent to the high-profile Hyde Park neighborhood, home to the Obamas and former Mayor Harold Washington among others. Housing prices here grew over 75 percent, the index showed. With gentrification often comes tensions around class and race, and the influx of higher-income residents in these parts has not led to general, communal prosperity.

A median 44 percent of renters in these seven neighborhoods live below the poverty line, often in unaffordable units as rents rise, according to an analysis of data from the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. In fact, the share of renters below the poverty line now living in unaffordable housing in these neighborhoods has grown 6.3 percentage points between 2012–2014 and 2015–2017.

Residents and experts say it seems clear that basketball courts are being removed because some residents—perhaps newer, predominantly white ones—feel threatened when they see Black people hanging out. The official response on why these courts are deactivated, however, is harder to find. I checked the minutes and agendas of the park district's board meetings, available online for the last seven years, to see if there had been any discussion on the closure of basketball courts at these parks, but could find none.

Based on data I received through an earlier FOIA request, I trained my search on four courts that the park district provided details on the year of closure: Willye B. White basketball court in Rogers Park, Jane Addams court in the Near West Side, and the court at Gately Park in the less gentrified Pullman neighborhood on the south side along with Edgebrook court in Forest Glen. I perused meeting agendas for the year preceding their closure, ran keyword searches, and supplemented this research with FOIA requests to the Chicago Park District to see if there were any records available.



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preceding their shutdown. The park district said there are no such documents or files related to the basketball courts at Pullman, Forest Glen, and the Near West Side.

For the basketball court in Rogers Park, deactivated in 2018, the district has asked for more time. Separately, I filed a FOIA with the Chicago Police Department to see if any 911 calls were recorded in the year preceding its closure. The police have shared information on two 911 calls reported at Willye B. White park in 2017: one was a complaint about males gambling at the recreational center, and another call about a 24-year-old male playing basketball with a broken ankle.

Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2020 the park district removed 64 tennis courts across the city, mostly from Black and Brown neighborhoods on the south and west sides. Inevitably, these decisions, however innocuous they may truly be, reinforce the stereotypes associated with tennis as a predominantly white, exclusive sport. When contrasted with the data on deactivated basketball courts, their racial underpinnings become starker.



The Loyola Park basketball court in Rogers Park without rims in August 2018. Loyola Park does not feature on the Chicago Park District's list of inactive courts, and it is unclear why the rims here have not been restored here since Chicago resumed park access in its phased reopening.

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"Mecca" of the sport, hosted the NBA All-Star game. The city's legacy begins with one of the country's first all-Black basketball teams, the Harlem GlobeTrotters, and extends to producing some of the finest NBA players, from Isiah Thomas and Tim Hardaway of the old guard, to Dwyane Wade and Anthony Davis of the last decade. The annual multimillion dollar exhibition event took place at the United Center, where Michael Jordan had led the Chicago Bulls to six NBA championships in the 90s. About two miles away, at Roberto Clemente Park in the gentrifying West Town neighborhood, the basketball court has been removed.

Alderman Daniel La Spata of the First Ward, where the park is located, said public safety is often used as a reason for deactivating basketball courts. La Spata previously worked as a planning and policy associate for Friends of the Parks, a 43-year-old nonprofit watchdog dedicated to protecting equitable park access across the city. He said that while the Clemente hoops were removed before his time in office, he guessed that racial tension was an underlying reason.

"There were young Latinx boys and men who were using the court and who were perceived as creating a public safety threat and I would believe that was why they were taken down," La Spata said. "That's a horrible reason to take down a basketball court, but that is something that frequently happens in the city. The fallout is that's really a collective punishment on the neighborhoods when usually 90-95 percent of folks are doing nothing wrong but still lose access to recreational amenities."

Almost a decade ago, in June 2011, Alderman James Cappleman, then freshly elected to lead the 46th ward that covers Uptown, removed the basketball hoops at Billy Broncho Park for similar reasons. "The police recommended this change to help alleviate accelerated gang activity in the area," Cappleman wrote in a ward newsletter then. He added he was working with youth programs to place the removed hoops at two other neighborhood parks—Clarendon and Chase—or a local alternative high school and Boys & Girls club. The news led to a heated discussion in the comments section of hyperlocal news site Uptown Update.

"We aren't talking about bored youths—we are talking about people dealing drugs and shooting and killing people. Do I want this behavior off my block at the cost of some hoops? YES! Do I care if teenagers have to find another basketball hoop? No. I don't want people get killed [*sic*] in front of my home anymore. This is my home and I feel like I have much more a right to not worry about getting shot than the youth do to play basketball.

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Cappieman restored the broncho hoops a few months later as it continued to garner criticism from his constituents. An investigation by the *Reader's* Mick Dumke found no connection between basketball and reported crime in the area around Broncho Billy. "The bottom line: if there's a connection between the basketball hoops and neighborhood crime, the numbers don't show it," wrote Dumke, after analyzing crime reports from the area before and after the hoops were removed.

In 2016, Carol Quinlan, a trustee of Oak Lawn village, a predominantly white southwestern suburb, appeared before the local park district board to demand that all basketball hoops be removed from the village's parks, local news network Patch reported, after a group of teens clashed over racial slurs in the area a month before. She complained children could no longer use the parks because young adults and teens from Chicago were coming to the area to play basketball. "People aren't feeling safe. I believe that by taking down the hoops . . . it would remove some of that outside element," Quinlan said.

To date there is no conclusive evidence to show removing basketball courts from neighborhoods will make them safer. A 2011 study on Philadelphia's neighborhood parks found that with or without basketball hoops, crime rates are likely to be higher than the city's overall crime rate; this is also true of other public spaces that attract crowds, like shopping malls. On August 18, the park district agreed to respond to a set of questions I sent a week before on removing facilities. I have yet to receive their responses.

In April, a resident of Rogers Park posted a picture of five Black minors on the neighborhood social networking app Nextdoor. The picture showed the children spaced from each other around a basketball backboard rim on private property near Touhy Park. The post complained the children were not practicing social distancing. "Unless you all live together THIS is not social distancing," it read.

Some residents reacted to the post angrily, recommending the user call the police next time; some others pointed out the picture doesn't seem to present any danger. A few suggested she could have politely asked them to disperse. A couple called the children in the picture "assholes" and "morons." Similar exchanges marked Nextdoor conversations around complaints about loud music, transitional housing, or long lines outside Jewel–Osco filled with the "food–stamp crowd."

Bonita Nwachukwu, 33, a new resident of south Evanston and former Rogers Park neighbor, asked the chat forum why the police should be called on minors standing around a backboard

the bad things that have been going on in those neighborhoods, law-abiding, long-time residents have wanted those things to change for years," she said. "But complaining about basketball? About someone being constructive with their time? That doesn't make sense."

In 1982 the federal government filed a lawsuit against the Chicago Park District following investigations into racial discrimination over the district's capital improvements, staffing, and programming. This resulted in the 1983 consent decree that set strict standards for construction and improvements of park amenities, especially in disinvested minority neighborhoods.

The decree ran through 1989 and was lifted when the park district convinced the federal government that it had created a five-year plan that would meet the underlying goals of the consent decree.

Two years ago, however, the Friends of the Parks alleged that the park district continues to discriminate in the way it invests across the city. The group's 2018 State of the Parks report found that parks on the south side have significantly smaller budgets compared to the north side, where programming is likely to be more robust than in other parts of the city. Most importantly, the report found that Chicago's Latinx community has the least amount of park access, and that capital improvement requests in Black communities are approved at half the rate as those in white communities. For its part, the park district vehemently denied the report's findings, calling it "incendiary and divisive" and claiming it "distorts" the data.

In the listening tours and community surveys that helped shape the report, Friends of the Parks found a dissonance between the perception of danger in parks and the reality. In 2017, Nearly half of all parks (46.7 percent) reported zero crimes, the report noted. In most or 91.8 percent of the parks where crimes were reported, there were fewer than ten incidents over the course of 12 months.

"There are real concerns about the numbers of crimes that occur on park property creating risks to personal safety," the report said, noting that citizens who participated in the listening tours cited gun violence and gang-affiliated activities as some of the reasons that their parks feel unsafe. "There are also real concerns stemming from the extensive perpetuation of racism and other discrimination that cause park users to continue to feel excluded from using certain parks."

Julia Epplin-Zapf, a former policy associate at Friends of the Parks, who worked on the report's chapter on public safety, said



happened, when would it be allowed to be a public amenity again," she said.

Parks have a tremendous capacity to be a space for people to have freedom, she said. Especially for people who might be excluded from a lot of other areas, who might be policed or experiencing surveillance in so many other areas of life.

**"T**hat's some racist-ass shit right there," Ralph Edwards, Katiana's father and a program manager at community organization Metropolitan Family Services, said of the removal of hoops on the north side. "That's just bullshit—hell no—what do hoops have to do with crime? That's stereotyping and labelling kids who just want to play the sport." A reformed gang member himself, Edwards works with high-risk youth to end gun violence on the north side.

Steven Foy, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, whose research has focused on race, social psychology, and mental health, said the way crime gets racialized in sports facilities or public amenities is often due to "bad statistics."

"Take, for example, drug use: there are pretty decent surveys that suggest that white people are doing drugs as much as Black folks are, but they are getting arrested at much lower rates," Foy explained. "Part of it has to do with wealth and income and part of it is also that some people are actually getting targeted directly as a result of race. Even with the stop and frisk policy, we now know for certain Black and Latinx people are more likely to be stopped by the police."

Elvia Ochoa, director of neighborhood parks at Friends of the Parks, said she has also witnessed an "anti-youth" and racist attitude around basketball in her conversations with stakeholders in the city's neighborhood parks. She found this was especially the case for outdoor courts.

"It was never very overt, but it was always around that language of 'those people' kind of stuff. 'We don't want those people coming into our park,' or, you know, 'Those people that are playing basketball are the ones that are bringing the problems,'" she said. She said she heard similar conversations two decades ago in Pilsen, when the southwest side community was on the cusp of its gentrification boom.

Foy suspects the exclusion of Black basketball players and basketball courts in white neighborhoods may also be an indirect response to the sport's increasing identification as a "Black" rather than "white" sport. At the collegiate level, in

players protested in solidarity and moved the multibillion dollar association to embrace the Black Lives Matter movement. "It does make me wonder whether when people are opposed to basketball courts being in their neighborhood, if that's a way of whites kind of under the table saying, 'We don't want Black people in our parks, taking over this sport.'"

Edwards said that in Rogers Park, it's even harder to find basketball courts in gentrifying areas where Black and white people live uneasily together, than in predominantly white parts of the neighborhood where courts are anyway few and far between.

"If you go far into the white neighborhoods, you can see their rims are still up so it's plainly obvious they don't want us playing and they clearly say it too," he said. "They don't want to spell out they don't want Blacks, but they do say, 'We don't want no congregating' you know what I'm saying, so y'all know that Blacks are the only ones basically congregating at these courts."

He likened it to modern-day segregation. "Just the fact that kids are getting up and planning their day, and they want to go play basketball but they end up saying, 'Oh, well, we can't go here, we can't go there, we can't go here' . . . A lot of this stuff going on out here, it creates feelings among us people," Edwards said. "And then society says, 'They're in gangs,' they make it sound like we're stupid or the scum of the earth. They snatch our resources and then they wonder why is there an uptick in violence—it's all a setup man, it's just a setup. Put the goddamn basketball ramp back up. Simple."



Ken Mason (red jersey) playing at the Clarendon Park basketball court in Uptown for the first time in July since the start of the pandemic. Mason had observed gentrified neighborhoods were less policed and impacted during the shutdown compared to the south and west sides of the city.

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One balmy summer evening in July, Ken Mason, 26, and his girlfriend Danielle Woods, 26, headed up to Clarendon Park in Uptown so Mason could play basketball for the first time since the shutdown. Light breezes from Lake Michigan blew over the court and the sun stayed out late. A heavily pregnant Woods, dressed in a light blue tank top and jean shorts, rested on a pillar by the perimeter as she watched Mason, dressed in a red James Harden Houston Rockets jersey, play.

During the shutdown Mason saw the basketball rims were gone, but the tennis and volleyball nets remained. "We couldn't move around in the west and south sides, but they weren't policing people up here," he said. "We found all the white people were just walking their dogs, and going for runs like there was no pandemic."

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they don't have a lot of opportunities or resources there," he said, "Where they do, you don't want to go there because there are gunshots, there are crack addicts, and just a lot of violence. No one wants to go play in the park like that."

Woods, a mental health worker with Heartland Alliance, an anti-poverty organization based in Chicago, lived in Uptown before moving to Logan Square. She said the racial tensions over basketball courts in gentrified neighborhoods often boils down to a lack of empathy and understanding of the realities for Chicago's Black children.

"These kids grow up in neighborhoods where there is a lot of violence, and with that comes a lot of trauma they still don't know how to process," she said. "And white people, they don't know anything about the type of life these kids are living; they are going to look at them different. They're going to look and say these kids are uneducated, they're not the same, they don't deserve much, and this is our land."

Katiana and her friends said that without access to courts in public parks it's harder for girls to find safe places to play and practice basketball. It reduces their opportunity to excel and create space in the world of sports where female athletes routinely find themselves undervalued. In the summer, the girls' school cut their basketball program over COVID-19 concerns though the boys program continued without disruption. The girls said they get why people would want to remove the rims for safety reasons during the pandemic but they look forward to the day they come back everywhere.

"I like playing basketball because there's always new things you could be learning, things you can improve too," Katiana's friend Maya Wallace said. "Like I get really bored if I'm doing the same, like repetitions, but with basketball, you're always learning new things. There's always something else you could do and like."

For Katiana, the sport is therapeutic and offers a support system that is uniquely able to meet the challenges of a growing teen. "It takes my mind off of things, when I feel down I can just come and play basketball. When you play basketball you're not involved in anything else that comes to mind," she said. "You just have your teammates, your sisters, your family, and I love that. I love being with my family on the court." 📍

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