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# Researchers: How to fight racial segregation? End exclusionary zoning in Illinois.



Two-flat buildings in the 2700 block of North Albany Avenue in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood on March 2, 2022. (Jose M. Osorio/ Chicago Tribune)



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Fifty-six years after the Fair Housing Act banned redlining and racial discrimination in housing, economic and racial segregation [remains entrenched across our state](#). Indeed, Illinois ranks first among the 50 states in the share of Black residents living in census tracts that are at least 90% Black. By some measures, Chicago remains the most segregated large city in America.

Across political lines, residents of our state acknowledge the aftershocks of decades of legally sanctioned racial segregation that denied millions of people proper access to public services, education and housing opportunities. Many of us in comfortable circumstances are less comfortable acknowledging other policies that perpetuate equally stark economic and racial divides and that specifically exclude low-income families from our own communities.

In large swaths of Illinois' towns and cities, exclusionary zoning laws block the construction of affordable multifamily housing. By limiting housing supply, these laws raise housing costs throughout our state, excluding families with limited financial resources from many neighborhoods, quietly entrenching economic and racial segregation. In Chicago, at least [two-thirds](#) of residential districts are [zoned for single-family homes only](#), prohibiting construction of more affordable multifamily homes such as duplexes, fourplexes or townhouses.

Such exclusion is even more pronounced in many surrounding suburbs. Research has consistently found that exclusionary zoning policies [increase rents](#), needlessly raise [home prices](#) and aggravate [homelessness](#).

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Despite recent legislative efforts to encourage affordable housing construction, Illinois faces a shortage of at least [289,000 affordable homes](#). Nearly half of Chicago renters are classified as “rent-burdened,” paying more than 30% of their income on housing. In many neighborhoods, affordable housing stock is rapidly declining; neighborhoods such as Logan Square, Avondale and West Town have each lost [nearly 15%](#) of their affordable housing stock in recent years. As market pressures raise rents, affordable two- and four-flats disappear, often due to [conversion into single-family houses](#). Amid such shortages, it is deeply unwise to keep laws on the books that ban the creation of affordable types of homes.

Moreover, given local laws and regulations that block creation of new affordable housing, many families are locked out of the communities where their children would have the greatest opportunities for high-quality education and upward mobility. As academic literature has documented, poverty is most harmful to children when it is geographically concentrated, as children are blocked from the opportunities that come with proximity to wealth and opportunity. Harvard University's Opportunity Atlas draws upon decades of census and tax return data to analyze differences in social mobility across the generations. As the Atlas [reports](#), social ties to peers and neighbors in different economic circumstances are the best single predictor of whether a child raised in a low-income household will achieve upward mobility later in life.



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Concentrated poverty also brings pernicious political effects. When poverty is far away and out of sight, it becomes much easier for the well-off to neglect or ignore, whatever our professed political allegiances. Indeed, every morning within our own liberal milieu of educational and economic privilege, we and our colleagues pass long lines of cars with “COEXIST” bumper stickers transporting youngsters to excellent schools effectively inaccessible to low-income students.

For decades, housing experts across the ideological spectrum have noted the harms associated with exclusionary zoning. Yet for obvious reasons, most cities have been slow to change these laws and practices. This pattern reflects the outsize political influence of current homeowners, who have a vested economic interest in constraining local affordable housing supply. Within a housing market that [penalizes racially and economically integrated](#) communities, exclusionary zoning can also quietly reward the members of the privileged class, allowing them to build moats around their communities and exclude less prosperous families, including young parents trying to give their children the best start.

Responding to such problems, cities such as [Austin, Texas](#), and [Minneapolis](#) have taken steps to eliminate exclusionary zoning. While rents throughout the country continue to rise, rents in Austin have actually decreased, falling [12.5%](#) in the past year, while rent increases in Minneapolis remain [below](#) the national average.

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We are gratified that the Tribune Editorial Board [has endorsed local efforts to address this problem](#). Given our state's checkerboard pattern of local governance and land-use authorities, addressing this problem requires something more: coordinated action at the state level. Last legislative session, state Rep. Kam Buckner and co-sponsor Rep. Theresa Mah introduced several bills to limit exclusionary zoning in Illinois, including [a bill to end the practice of single-family-only zoning restrictions](#) in cities with populations of more than 100,000 people. Under this bill, cities would no longer be allowed to decree that only the most expensive housing — single family homes — can be built and must allow the construction of multifamily housing on residentially zoned land.

Chicago's state legislators should put their full support behind this bill. It's a show-don't-tell moment for all those who claim to support housing affordability, equal opportunity and the need to address the legacy of racial and economic segregation.

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