



from the January 25, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0125/p02s01-ussc.html>

As poor families migrate, can aid keep up?

A new report captures the changing dynamics of Chicago's neighborhoods, letting aid-givers know where help is needed.

By **Amanda Paulson** | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

CHICAGO

In the past few years, Mario Garcia has noticed some changes in Chicago's West Town neighborhood where he heads the Onward Neighborhood House, a nonprofit that has provided childcare, after-school programs, and job training to immigrant families for more than a century.

Waiting lists for programs aren't as long, and many of the families he serves have moved out of West Town. Enrollment at the local elementary school has dwindled to half of what it once was.

So Onward is branching out, opening a new location for the first time, in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood several miles northwest, where the number of families in need is booming, and few services exist.

A report released Thursday by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago highlights the many mismatches in the geography of services and need. Families – particularly poor families – are moving away from Chicago's downtown and lakefront to the city's outer edges and suburbs. Meanwhile, the less mobile service providers often remain in the old neighborhoods.

The study is unusual in its depth and immediacy, but experts say such a mismatch is common, especially in large, sprawling urban areas.

Chicago's government is hoping that the study – which will be regularly updated – will provide real-time demographics and predictions that could prove invaluable to nonprofits and city services often struggling to keep up with the families they serve.

"It's not really an issue whether services work or not if you can't get them to the families," says Robert Goerge, a fellow at Chapin Hall and the lead researcher on the study. "Traditionally, Chicago's poor kids have lived in very specific communities – the near south side, the west side. They seem now to be spread out across the city more and more."

His research, which studied public school enrollment, unemployment, age-specific food-stamp figures, and census data, gives a current picture of how those trends are playing out, and projects the shifts through 2010.

A big driver of the recent changes, Dr. Goerge says, is both the growth and high mobility of Hispanics in Chicago. The demolition of Chicago's public housing projects has also dispersed many poor families.

The trends he's spotted confirm what many social-service providers in the city were already beginning to notice. In the gentrifying West Town, for instance, there was a 44 percent decrease in the number of children in poverty between 1990 and 2005, and a 51 percent decrease in the number of Hispanic children.

Meanwhile, the Belmont Cragin neighborhood, where Onward's new building will be opening in June – a bustling mix of modest brick homes, taquerías, and business signs in Spanish and Polish – is seeing some of the fastest growth in the city: a 280 percent increase in the number of children living in poverty, and a 134 percent increase in Hispanic children.

Whereas Mitchell Elementary School, next to Onward's original building is losing students, Schubert Elementary, around the corner from the new building, is bursting at the seams.

It's not surprising, then, that demand for the childcare, job and computer training, and after-school programs that Onward provide is high in the new neighborhood. According to the Chapin Hall study, much of the neighborhood has fewer than 0.07 licensed childcare slots per child – or, in some parts of the neighborhood, none at all within a mile.

The new data "is one piece of many indicators to help us really look at where services need to be in the upcoming years," says Mary Ellen Caron, Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services, which commissioned the study from Chapin Hall.

Still, even with better knowledge, she says responding to the trends isn't easy – especially when the neighborhoods losing children still have a high need for the programs that are there.

"Some of the neighborhoods losing kids still have some of the highest populations of child poverty," Ms. Caron notes. "This just convinces me we need more funds."

In the meantime, she's encouraging nonprofits to move and adapt – not to build or invest in new buildings, but rather to rent or work with the city to find public spaces to use.

Caron's department is working on how to adapt to the new populations – finding more Spanish-speaking workers, for instance, and offering half-day preschool, which seems to fit better with many Latino families' employment.

While the Chapin Hall report just provides a detailed look at Chicago – one that is far more current than the Census figures, which only come out every 10 years and – experts say the challenges it exposes are hardly unique to Chicago.

"Poor neighborhoods [typically] have about half as much access to services than affluent neighborhoods," says Scott Allard, a Brown University professor who is working on a book about the mismatch between services and needs in Los Angeles, Chicago, and the Washington metro area. "We don't think a lot about where we provide social services."

He estimates that between \$100 billion and \$200 billion is spent on social service programs other than food stamps or Welfare every year. But he adds that because the providers are so dispersed, there's very little big-picture thinking that goes into where or how those services are provided, and that nonprofits are typically far less mobile than the people they serve.

Still, a few agencies, like Onward Neighborhood House, are finding ways to adapt. "The challenge for not-for-profits is to remain nimble and adaptable," says Garcia. In this case, he says, the board realized "either we renovate ourselves in light of the changes in Chicago, or we die."

[Full HTML version of this story](#) which may include photos, graphics, and related links