

‘I’ve never had to think about my own safety in this way before’: Shaken by summer looting in affluent neighborhoods, some Chicagoans are moving away.

By CHRISTEN A. JOHNSON

CHICAGO TRIBUNE |

AUG 26, 2020 AT 10:21 AM



Neil Spun stands outside his Edgewater home Aug. 20, 2020. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

They understand why protesters and rioters have poured onto the streets of downtown, and some acknowledge that crime is worse in other parts of Chicago. Some also agree with protesters that something systemic needs to be changed.

But they don't want to wait it out here in the city, fearful of stepping outside at night and hoping for things to maybe get better.

They want out.

“Not to make it all about us; the whole world is suffering,” said Amber, a 30-year-old nurse who lives in River North. “This is a minute factor in all of that, and we totally realize that. We are very lucky to have what we do have.

“But I do think that I've never had to think about my own safety in this way before.”

[\[Most read\] Kyle Rittenhouse charged with murder in Kenosha shootings that killed 2; Jacob Blake handcuffed to hospital bed, uncle says »](#)

Incidents of widespread looting and [soaring homicide figures](#) in Chicago have made national news during an already tumultuous year. As a result, some say residents in affluent neighborhoods downtown, and on the North Side, no longer feel safe in the city's epicenter and are looking to move away. Aldermen say [they see their constituents leaving the city](#), and it's a concern echoed by some real estate agents and the head of a sizable property management firm.

It's still too soon to get an accurate measure of an actual shift in population, and such a change could be driven by a number of factors — from restless residents looking for more spacious homes in the suburbs due to COVID-19, to remote work allowing more employees to live anywhere they please.

But, for some Chicagoans, the chaotic bouts of destruction in recent months have proven to be the last straw.

The day after [looting broke out two weeks ago](#), a Tribune columnist strolled through Gold Coast and Streeterville. Residents of the swanky Near North Side [told him they'd be moving](#) “as soon as we can get out.” Others expressed fear of returning downtown in the future.

[Hearing despair and anger walking through Chicago's Gold Coast on Monday morning. 'What is this city becoming?' »](#)

Rafael Murillo, a licensed real estate broker at Compass whose primary market is downtown high-rises, said he has seen a trend of city dwellers looking to move to the suburbs sooner than initially planned, due in part to the recent unrest in the city.

[\[Most read\] Kyle Rittenhouse charged with murder in Kenosha shootings that killed 2; Jacob Blake handcuffed to hospital bed, uncle says »](#)

“And then you have the pandemic, so people are spending more and more time in their homes,” he said. “And in the high-rise, it starts to feel more like a cubicle after awhile.”

Buyers looking for homes in the Loop, South Loop or Gold Coast have been taking a pause and reconsidering their purchase, Murillo said. And there are more sellers who want out. In recent weeks, Murillo said he has talked with three or four sellers who live downtown and are thinking about moving to the North Shore, to Hinsdale or out of Illinois.

“They want to feel safe,” Murillo said. “They want to be able to come outside their homes and enjoy their neighborhood amenities, whether it's running at the park, enjoying a nice little dinner, shopping. But with everything going on, there are a lot of residents who are not feeling safe right now.”

Chicago has been Neil Spun's home for more than half his life, but recently, the 60-year-old state worker has been conflicted about staying in his Edgewater apartment due to the rioting and looting that started [in late May](#) following the death of George Floyd.

He's looking downstate for his new home, eyeing smaller towns like Quincy, Princeton or Beardstown. The recent downtown looting cemented his decision to leave, he said.

[\[Most read\] Coronavirus in Illinois updates: Number of COVID-19 patients getting critical care highest since late June »](#)

"There have been riots before, and looting," Spun said. "It just seems to me now that the city isn't doing anything about it. I don't see this getting any better, and so I'd like to leave."

Amber, who requested her last name be withheld out of concern for her safety, said she and her husband are actively eyeing a home near the Indiana Dunes National Park, about 50 miles outside of Chicago. The millennial couple, both age 30, currently live in River North, where much of the summer looting has been centered.

"We're just looking for more safety," she said.

Amber's husband also works as a nurse. The pair supports the Black Lives Matter movement and the uprising, Amber said, but living smack dab at the intersection of the downtown unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly difficult.

"I think people forget that people do live here, too — it's not just the Guccis and the Jimmy Choo stores," she said. "And I completely support it all. You stealing shoes means nothing to me — that doesn't hurt me at all. It's just the fact that that brings more crime, and that does endanger me."

[\[Most read\] RNC fact check: False claims on COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and more on convention's final night »](#)

Unaware that looting had broken out around her home [early Aug. 10](#), Amber began her usual 4 a.m. dog walk before work, and was met with people jumping out of the store windows below her building, she recounted.

She came back home, and soon after walked back into the commotion to reach her parked car down the street for her commute.

“The cops were just going past, and people had shopping carts full of (stuff), and all you heard were sirens, glass shattering and shouting. And gunshots,” she said. “It was just very jarring.”



Damage at Zara

Damaged windows at the Zara store following early morning looting in downtown Chicago on Aug. 10, 2020. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

As a nurse who works on the South Side, Amber said she isn't easily fazed by "that kind of stuff." And with that familiarity comes an ownership and recognition of the issues with her newfound discomfort.

“I guess I do sound, in a way, a bit privileged,” she said. “That now that it’s by my house, it’s a bit scarier.”

[\[Most read\] Second stimulus check updates: Pelosi, White House resume talks over stalled COVID-19 relief package, but no deal in sight »](#)

Although [Chicago’s population has been declining for years](#) — and Illinois has lost more residents than any state over the past decade — the loss has been largely attributed to [an exodus of Black people](#).

Since 2015, Chicago [has lost more than 35,000 Black residents](#), while the number of white, Asian and Latino residents increased, according to U.S. Census data. The losses were felt most severely in parts of the city with larger Black populations, like Englewood and its surrounding neighborhoods. In media coverage, expats cite the high cost of living, gun violence and troubled schools as cause to leave.

The Chicago real estate market was [hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic](#) before unrest broke out in late May. The number of May home sales citywide fell by 43.6% compared to May 2019, a more severe drop than seen statewide, according to data from the Chicago Association of Realtors. Homes sold about as quickly as they did in 2019, spending an average of 39 days on the market.

The decline in June closings compared to June 2019 was less severe, down 28.4%, and July closings were actually higher compared to last year, which the association suggested meant the market was recovering from the effects of the pandemic.

August figures won’t be released until late September, and because new listings spend weeks on the market, assessing the impact of the summer unrest is still several months off.

[\[Most read\] Grab-and-go pizza slices enjoying a boom in Chicago: Here are the 9 best »](#)

But reports suggest the downtown housing market is experiencing a significant impact. Home sales in the Loop and River North, particularly high-

priced homes, have dropped dramatically this year compared to the decade prior, by as much as one-third in parts of the downtown area, [according to Crain's Chicago](#).

[Real estate reckoning: Removing 'master' from listings is just one step in the fight for racial equity. Here's what comes next. »](#)

A person's decision to move is typically driven by a number of factors, said Philip Nyden, founding director of the Center for Urban Research and Learning and professor emeritus of sociology at Loyola University Chicago.

“One of the things around the immediate reaction to the looting: there is an undertone of race, I think,” he said. “People don't openly say 'those people' from the South and West sides are coming downtown ... (but) in Chicago, the looters shown on television were predominantly young and African American.”

So while a white downtown resident might recognize racial injustice is taking place and support movements like Black Lives Matter, they likely see unrest spilling over into their community through a racial lens, Nyden said.

The episodes of violent property damage and looting are highly unusual in the pricey residential corridors on the Near North Side, where 70% of residents are white, 80% have a college degree, and the median household income of \$99,732 is [almost twice the city average](#), according to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

“Streeterville is one of the richest neighborhoods in the city — probably in the metro area,” Nyden said. The looting of luxury stores on Oak Street earlier this month “sort of freaked some people out,” he added. “It's not an image you normally see. And I think they're reacting to that.”

Even though he thinks race plays a role, Nyden doesn't see these moves as a parallel to white flight, a trend that arose starting in the 1950s, as white people fled racially diverse urban cities on a large scale.

“A lot of white flight was related to pure racism in many cases, or false fears being fed by realtors, who were doing all sorts of things to rev up fears,” Nyden

said. “I’m not seeing that here.” Instead, the pandemic and fears over COVID-19 are playing a role, along with other influences, he said.

As to what prompted the looting, Nyden said he “wouldn’t disagree” that inequity across the city played a part.

“One of the organizers from Black Lives Matter was commenting, ‘This looting’s OK because it’s political and it’s justified,’ which wouldn’t sit well with a whole ton of folks,” Nyden said. “You have a society that has gotten more and more unequal, and there are stark differences.”

[\[Most read\] Column: Indiana is open for business as the Illinois Exodus continues »](#)

The racially charged unrest of the 1960s mostly took place in low-income, particularly African American communities, whether it was in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles or Newark. While [a 2005 study](#) by Vanderbilt University showed those communities did experience a drop in population and lowered property values in the decades that followed, there’s a key difference this time around.

“Folks start saying, ‘Well, we’re gonna go to the affluent neighborhoods and loot, and not wreck our own neighborhoods,’ (although) I don’t know if it was quite that conscious politically,” Nyden said.

Nyden acknowledged the nuances and complexities of the matter. While some may have participated as an act of protest, others potentially looted purely as a criminal act, he said.

“It’s sort of brought about a lot of underlying tensions coming to the surface,” he said.

In the days following the Aug. 10 unrest, Steven P. Levy, president of residential management firm Sudler Property Management, wrote a widely circulated letter to Mayor Lori Lightfoot advocating for some 38,000 residents from the 100 local condo associations he represents, stating they “do not feel safe.”

[\[Most read\] Fledgling militia group put out call to arms in Kenosha and 5,000 people responded. Now it's banned from Facebook after fatal shootings during protests. »](#)

“From Hyde Park to the Gold Coast to Edgewater, residents across the city are adjusting their daily routines out of fear,” Levy wrote. “They’re avoiding neighborhood walks after 6 p.m. ... This is not a way to live, and I can’t fault homeowners when they tell me they’re considering leaving Chicago.”

After moving into a South Loop condo 13 years ago after a job transfer, Charlie Ragusa, a real estate client of Murillo’s, fell in love with the city and his neighborhood. When he retired last year, he planned to keep his condo to travel back and forth between Chicago and his home in Boston. But now, the 61-year-old said his plans have changed.

“I don’t feel comfortable here in the city anymore,” he said. While Ragusa said he understands the point of recent protests, “there’s more than one thing going on in the city.”

“People have the right to get their message out there ... whatever it might be. But beyond the protests, we have the violence that’s attached to the protests,” he said. “Often times, we combine the two of them together, because they pretty much happen at the same time. The violence is overpowering the people who have a message to say.”

A regular walker and cyclist, Ragusa said he no longer feels safe doing those activities in and around his neighborhood. He’s afraid to go out at night, he said, and hasn’t enjoyed a leisurely stroll since parts of downtown have been boarded up.

[\[Most read\] Fact check: False and misleading claims aplenty on health care, voter fraud and Biden’s agenda on first night of RNC »](#)

“I don’t like walking the city and seeing the entire city boarded up,” he said. “That doesn’t look like a beautiful city that we’re from; that looks like a third-world country. That’s not a safe, pretty environment. That doesn’t make you feel welcome.”

Frustrated by what he sees as inaction from Lightfoot and city officials, Ragusa said crime in Chicago is out of control. He blames Lightfoot for the continued destruction downtown, he added.

“She hasn’t done her job,” he said of the mayor. “Her job is to protect me and protect the city. And I just don’t see that she’s doing it. I can’t go out at nighttime anymore. I’m afraid to. That’s not normal; that’s not the way Americans are supposed to live.”

Ragusa’s condo is currently on the market, and he said he’ll move back to Boston permanently by October, whether his condo sells or not.

The pandemic did play a role in Spun’s decision to move, since there’s a lot of shared space in his apartment complex.

“I’m just in a unique situation where I live in an apartment that’s owned by Loyola University,” Spun said. “I’m on the seventh floor. I take the elevator, so I’m surrounded by students. It’s a unique problem. I think if I lived in a single-family home half a block away, I wouldn’t be dealing much with students, an elevator, a laundry room, and the mailroom.”

But the bulk of his decision concerns the recent unrest. He sees moving as a way to escape.

“There’s not going to be rioting and looting in a small town,” he said. “It’s just not going to happen.”

chrjohnson@chicagotribune.com