



Ruff draft: A rendering of a future dog park in Chicago's Lincoln Yards development. Sterling Bay/Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Are Dog Parks Exclusionary?

KRISTON CAPPS FEB 28, 2019

In Chicago and other cities, the demand for pet-friendly public space has boomed. But many communities see off-leash parks as heralds of gentrification.

This is what a park for very good doggos looks like.

When it's completed over the next decade or so, the dog park nestled inside Lincoln Yards, a much-discussed \$6 billion mega-development now taking shape on Chicago's waterfront, could be the toniest pet playground in the nation. With its splash pool and pug-mug video installation—an homage to Millennium Park's famous Crown Fountain—the only thing SOM's design for Chicago puppies is missing is an oversized mirrored bone.

Humans living in Lincoln Yards will enjoy amenities as well: Plans call for a sledding hill and recreation fields among its 70-story skyscrapers. But the dogs really have it made.

"Wow, that's a luxury dog park," says Anjolie Rao, editor of Chicago Architect. "That's insane to me. I have a dog—she deserves only the best—but that's a luxury dog park." She adds, speaking of the sunny rendering of Lincoln Yards, "My first visual reaction is: That is a lot of white people with dogs."

Outside Chicago's North Side, dog parks are much harder to come by. Just one city-sanctioned dog-friendly area can be found across the entire South Side, although a few are now in the planning stage, as Zach Mortice points out in a new report on the city's stark dog park divide in *Landscape Architecture*. There's a DIY agility track called "Jackson Bark" in the park of the same name (how cute is that?). Otherwise, half of the city is poorly served by public amenities that cater to canine residents.

The other half can't live without them. In Chicago and beyond, dog parks are a reliable font of neighborhood drama, serving up listserv friction week after week, such as the stand-off between professional walkers and the local owners who consider their dog parks theirs and theirs alone. Local theater aside, dog parks represent a cherished public amenity that serves only some of the neighborhood, and can generate problems for others. Fraught or friendly, off-leash parks lead the way among the fastest-growing parks in America's largest cities.



This splashy boi competes in the DockDogs Western National Dog-Jumping Championships—not a joke—in Redmond, Washington's Marymoor Park, known to locals as "Doggy Disneyland." (Ted S. Warren/AP)

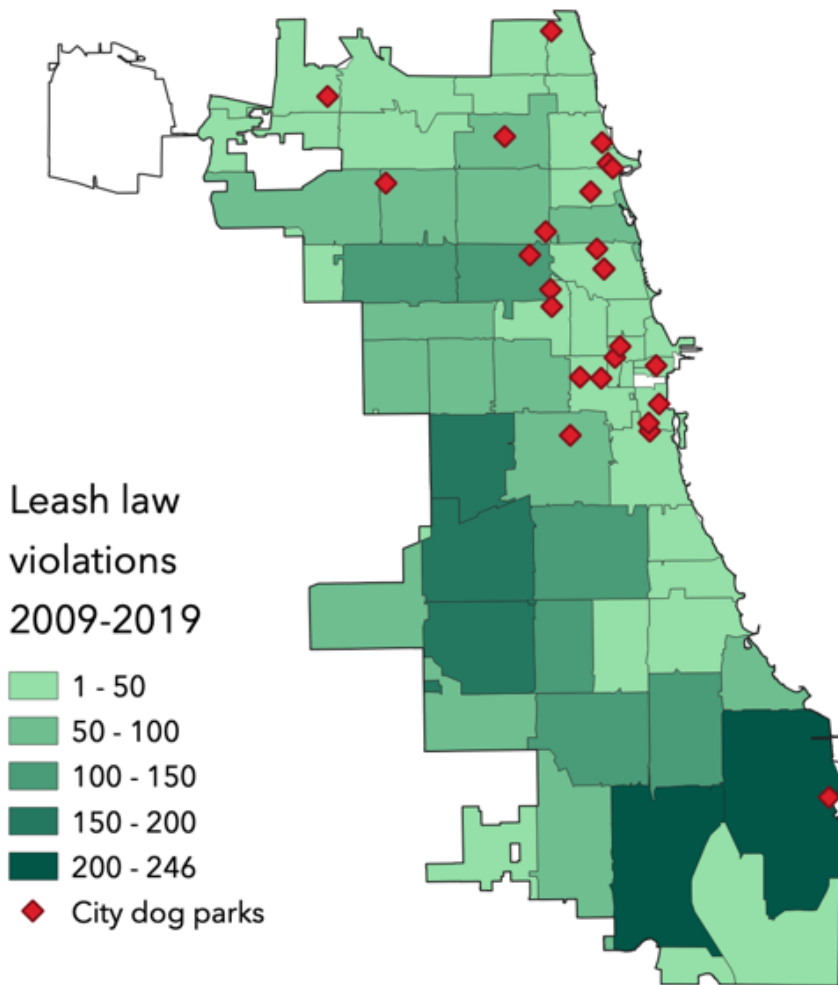
Parks and recreation departments face tremendous pressure today to dedicate more and greater space for the nation's fur-babies, even in cities where there aren't enough local parks for actual children. The rise of dog parks—up 40 percent over the last decade—has consequences for neighborhoods that have them as well as those that don't. More than half of the nation's parks departments now boast a dog park.

Back in the day, "a dog park wasn't a thing" says Kathryn Ott Lovell, commissioner of Philadelphia Parks & Recreation. "You walked your dog around the neighborhood. You took your dog around the block. Standards and expectations for dog owners have shifted. The culture of dog ownership has changed."

The fancy-town dog park in the early designs for Lincoln Yards might be among the least-divisive features of this project, which closed in on as much as \$1.3 billion in public funding (through a [tax-increment financing scheme](#)) last week. But it is nevertheless a small marker of disparity in the city—one that can be found all over. It’s a pattern whose consequences range from worrisome sign of neighborhood gentrification to outright structural inequality.

In Chicago, the unequal distribution of dog parks is more than a problem for cooped-up pooches. A city ordinance imposes a \$300 fine for off-leash dogs, who are legally welcome only in the city’s dog-friendly areas. Police disproportionately assign tickets for off-leash violations in the city’s predominantly African-American South Side, most of which is a “[dog park desert](#).”

Most Chicago leash law tickets in areas with few dog parks



Source: City of Chicago
(David H. Montgomery / CityLab)

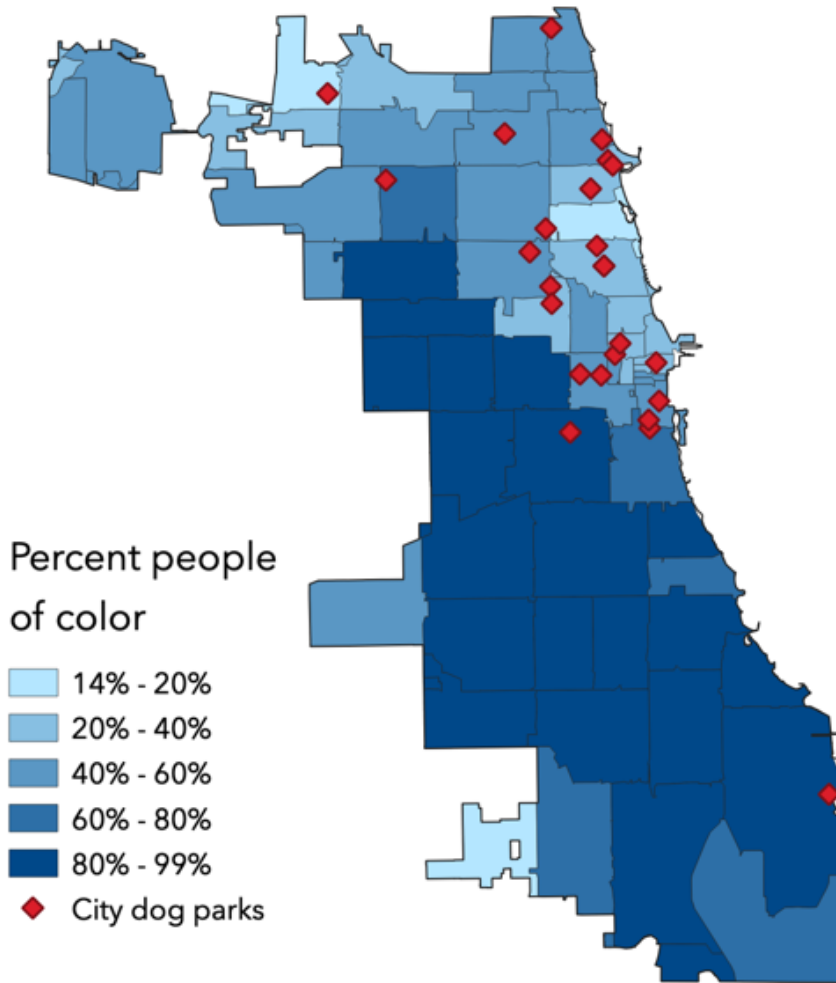
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Almost all of Chicago's dog parks fall in areas that are majority white, though such neighborhoods make up a relatively small part of Chicago's geography. Dog parks are such a North Side cultural force that they even have their own newsletter (*Fetch!*), a product of the nonprofit South Loop Dog Park Action Cooperative and possibly the bougiest thing since bottomless mimosas.

In no small part, white neighborhoods are rich in dog parks because they are rich, period. Chicago's parks commissioner didn't respond to a request for an interview, but a spokesperson for the Chicago Park District noted that the city's parks department doesn't fund dog-friendly areas: "These facilities are funded through Aldermanic menu, Tax Increment Financing (TIF), Open Space Impact Fees (OSIF) and community fundraising or a combination of these sources." South Side areas that lack the resources to establish formal dog parks go without them.

Which would be fine, maybe, in a sense. Nationwide, 24 percent of black households own pets, compared to 58 percent among white households. Latinx households (45 percent) and Asian families (23 percent) also have fewer pets than whites, according to Census Bureau data. So community pressure to convert vacant lots to dog parks is unlikely to be distributed uniformly across a city. Yet the consequences of *not* having a local off-leash dog-friendly area fall disproportionately on people of color in Chicago—another example of over-policing historically disadvantaged communities.

Chicago's dog parks are in mostly white neighborhoods



Source: U.S. Census
(David H. Montgomery / CityLab)

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In fact, South Siders are pushing for more dog parks, and five new ones are in the planning stages. They're also struggling to hold on to the ones they have. Jackson Bark, the (unofficial) agility dog-run set up on an unused tennis court, is one of the largest dog parks anywhere in the city, with hundreds of pieces of furniture for pups to practice their parkour. Nevertheless, it may be gobbled up by plans for Tiger Woods's \$60 million golf course. The development in Jackson Park — where officials are also scooping out land for the Obama Presidential Center — might include a replacement dog run. But Rao says she has some doubts as to whether park space in a public-private development will belong to the neighborhood in a meaningful way.

“With private land, there comes more opportunities for the enactment of racism,” Rao says. “People of color tend to be less welcome in private-public spaces like [private] plazas and dog parks on private property. They’re looked at with more scrutiny.”

Around the country, there’s no critical consensus among parks leaders about how, where, or whether to build dog parks. There’s good analysis that shows how much park space people require per capita, says Rich Dolesh, vice president for strategic initiatives at the National Recreation and Park Association, but the right amount of land to set aside for pets is anyone’s guess.

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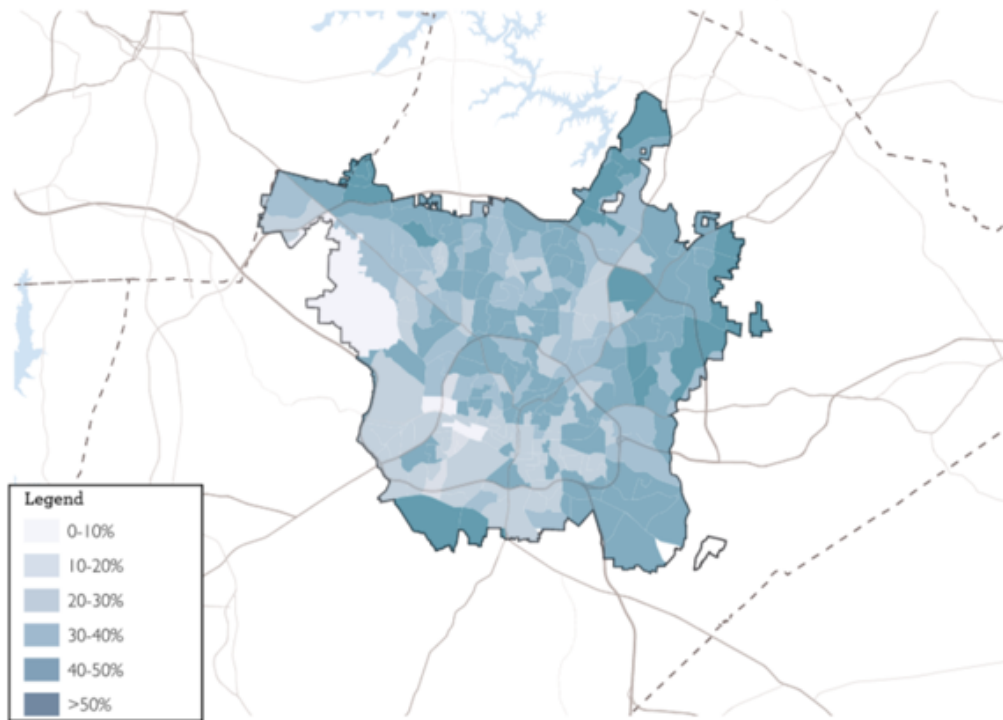
With the population of dogs in the U.S. falling somewhere between 77 million and 90 million, though, cities ignore their canine constituents at their peril. “It’s been a perennial topic among park administrators,” Dolesh says. “Dog park advocates are the most relentless and successful advocates for what they’re trying to do, [compared to] anybody else who crusades a park-and-recreation amenity in their community. We see park directors get together and gnash their teeth.”

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Officials in Raleigh, North Carolina, have taken a first step toward measuring the city’s canine needs with quantifiable precision. In January, Raleigh dropped what may be the nation’s first comprehensive report on dog parks. Complete with spatial analysis for dog adoptions across Wake County over the last decade as well as maps showing the density of dog-friendly apartment buildings across the city, the 2018 Dog Park Study is proof that dogs matter more than cats. (As far as canine censuses go, we rate Raleigh “14/10 would pore over its findings.”)

Raleigh’s 2018 Dog Park Study estimates that the city’s canine population will exceed 100,000 by 2023. By matching census-based household data with market intelligence (pet-food purchases, veterinary services, and so on), the city produced a map (via the mapping company Esri) showing the density of its dog-owning population. Pet demographic data turns out to be way more complicated than you’d guess, but Raleigh’s findings show that city dogs are more or less spread out homogeneously.

Dog Ownership by Household (%)



Dog ownership is fairly equally located across the city of Raleigh, according to a city census on very good boys and girls. (Raleigh Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources)

Based on input from the public, the city set a target: dog park access within a 10-minute drive, pretty much city-wide. Getting there would mean boosting the number of official dog parks from five to nine, focusing on unmet demand in north and west Raleigh.

Downtown represents a bigger challenge: There aren't any dog parks within a 10-minute walk of the densest downtown residential corridors, and there's no obvious place to build them.

"While the park resources within walking distances of these nodes are limited and already under intense pressure for many competing uses, there may be opportunity to provide temporary or permanent dog park access through some of the sites in the vicinity," the report reads. "Future park planning efforts should consider the special need in this area for dog park access."

While the 72-page report is thorough—sweeping as far as municipal reports on pets go!—it makes no mention of race or equity as factors to consider when it comes to planning dog parks. Some of the report's recommendations, from establishing dog parks through public-private partnerships or studying a membership-fee model for using them, could even inhibit access for African-American pet owners. And the data-driven report doesn't invite residents of predominantly black areas into the planning process.

"We need to start considering new ways of using existing park space for dog-friendly activities."

For black residents, ensuring equitable access to parks means more than providing proximity, as CityLab's Brentin Mock has written (about parks in another context). Detroit natives broadly rejected a free tree-planting campaign in 2014 because planners didn't take into consideration that black residents had historical reasons to distrust the city government. Especially in areas where police still use dogs to violently subdue people of color, residents might not welcome a dog park they had no part in planning. Other residents might resent these kinds of amenities, because of what they herald for the neighborhood's future.

"Long-established minority communities that [feel] the hot breath of gentrification on their necks may see [dog parks] as an unwelcome sign of change," Dolesh says. "It's like Starbucks opening in your community. Uh-oh."



A wee dog parklet outside Amazon's offices in Seattle. Prime pups have an HQ, too!
(Elaine Thompson/AP)

Facing up to the growing public demand for dog parks, especially from dog-crazy white communities, means asking big questions about small-scale land use. The questions don't get smaller when the parcels do.

"I am 100 percent pro-dog park," Rao says. "But when you're looking at dropping large dog parks in the middle of neighborhoods, it makes me feel like that land could be used for more useful things. We need to start considering new ways of using existing park space for dog-friendly activities."

Park leaders face tremendous pressure to build dog parks, even as building them triggers tremendous conflict. In affluent areas especially, residents increasingly see dog parks as basic civic infrastructure, up there with sidewalks or libraries. Some 97 percent of Raleigh residents who took part in a survey for the 2018 Dog Park Study said that dog parks "build a sense of community."

But in at least one case, building one community helped erase another one. In October, officials in Norfolk, Virginia, shuttered an establishment called the Hershee Bar as part of a planned revitalization. [Activists spent month trying to convince the city to spare the bar](#), which was Norfolk's only dedicated space for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. The city council had voted for the plan without even debating the impact on the LGBTQ community.

Only after the bar closed its doors did owners, staff, and frequenters learn that one potential plan for the site was a dog park. "I love dogs as much as the next person," one of those activists, Barbara James, told *The Washington Post*. "But our 35-year history is being torn down in this way where the city is essentially saying we're less than a dog."

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Ultimately, dog parks represent decisions about land use, which means that they can benefit some to the detriment of others. If the rise of dog parks also brings about more leash laws or strict enforcement of these codes, then it matters very much where they get built. What doesn't get built also matters: When residents start to demand a dog park that can be described as a "[complex](#)," unless every play space for kids is in tip-top condition, then perhaps pet owners should be brought to heel.

"When you are forced to choose between those two things"—a dog park versus a playground—"it's obvious where the investment has to go," says Philadelphia's Ott Lovell. "When you're a city like us, with very very limited resources and space for that matter, the priority is pretty clear."