More than a Pastime:
Informal Arts Improve Communities
and Increase Formal Arts Participation

Final Report

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Introduction
Street festivals, art fairs, and a wide variety of other cultural activities that take place in libraries, church basements and city parks may be found in just about every Chicago neighborhood. These are called "informal" arts activities to differentiate them from more formally established public and private cultural organizations and institutions, like The Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago Architecture Foundation or the Chicago Theater, that are also key components of Chicago's vibrant cultural community. Because many more people participate in informal arts activities than "formal" ones, they are an important indicator of neighborhood quality of life and patterns of economic development in the City of Chicago.
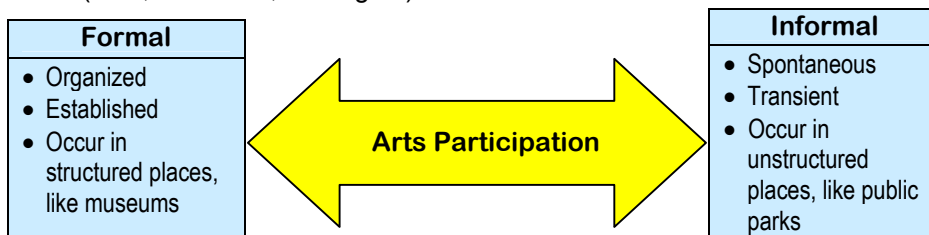
MCIC recently partnered with The Urban Institute in Washington DC to evaluate local datasets and measure community participation in arts and cultural activities in the City of Chicago. The research goal was to integrate arts and culture-related measures into neighborhood quality of life indicator models.

Background
In recent years, researchers studying quality of life have been increasingly interested in artistic and cultural participation. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released findings from the "2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts" showing a surprising four-in-ten Americans reported personally performing or creating art (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004). Participation varied from singing in a choir, to acting in public performances, to public display of paintings, sculptures, and photographs.

In the MCIC report "Arts Participation in the Metropolitan Chicago Region: Growing Audiences in Region of Cultural Over-Achievers," based on data from the NEA study, MCIC researchers found that 60% of all residents in the metropolitan Chicago region participate in the formal arts in some way, compared to 55% nationally (Ives & Dykes, 2006). Similarly, 40% of residents in the metropolitan Chicago region participate in arts festivals, compared to 33% nationally (Ives & Dykes, p. 5). These findings sparked further questions. Why do so many people choose to devote their leisure time to artistic pursuits? What enables them to negotiate different schedules, resources and identities to create large group productions, exhibits and recitals?

In 2002, the Chicago Center for Arts Policy (CCAP) released findings from an ethnographic study led by Alaka Wali, which placed different types of arts participation along a continuum from formal to informal (Wali, Severson, & Longoni).

Formal		**Informal**
• Organized		• Spontaneous
• Established	**Arts Participation**	• Transient
• Occur in structured places, like museums		• Occur in unstructured places, like public parks

She organized participant observation of 12 informal arts groups from church choirs to drum circles, including over 500 individuals. As if in answer to the questions raised by the NEA study, CCAP found that informal arts participation *leads people to interact across social barriers such as ethnicity/race, class, gender and age* (Wali et al., p. x). Furthermore, participants *acquire skills useful for building community capacity, such as greater tolerance of difference, trust and consensus building, collaborative work habits, use of innovation to solve problems, the capacity to imagine change, and the willingness to work for it* (ibid). Finally, Wali found that informal arts participation strengthens the formal arts sector and vice versa.

The CCAP study was also one of the first attempts to map arts participation (formal or informal) in the City of Chicago. Researchers collected clippings from 13 different newspapers posting notices of informal arts activities around the city. They mapped the addresses of these activities

comparing them with those collected from ethnographic fieldwork. Interestingly, the locations derived from newspaper listings were concentrated in a few neighborhoods, mostly on the North Side of the city. However, the locations derived from field interviews were far more evenly distributed across the City.

CCAP findings are important for the study of neighborhood quality of life because they not only answer the questions of "Why," but also "How" and, to a certain degree, "Where." Wali concludes that part of why so many people choose to devote their leisure time to arts and cultural activities is because it allows them opportunities to interact with master artists and with peers with whom they might not have otherwise. They are able to do this by learning the skills of collaboration, innovation, and goal setting. Wali concluded that informal arts activities located in widely recognized "arts rich" neighborhoods on the North Side stood to benefit more economically from participation and therefore attract more attention and greater visibility. It is no surprise these activities receive disproportionate media attention. Yet, people participating in less visible programs receive the same intrinsic benefits.

In 2006, the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago released its own study of audience participation in the formal arts, entitled "Mapping Cultural Participation in Chicago" (LaLonde, et al). Sixty-one arts and cultural organizations shared their organizational databases with researchers, resulting in a single database of 1.4 million addresses. Each address represented at least one financial transaction with one of the organizations. When mapped, geographic analysis of the addresses confirmed many of the findings of the CCAP study.

photograph courtesy of the University of Hip Hop Web site

Participation in Chicago's 12 largest cultural institutions (such as The Art Institute of Chicago) was largely limited to several predominantly White, affluent, North Side communities. Meanwhile, participation in ethnic arts and cultural institutions (such as the DuSable Museum of African American History) was concentrated in south and south central neighborhoods with relatively little density in the north, or on the lakefront. Likewise, 73% of those who participated in ethnic arts and cultural institutions did *not* participate in *any* of Chicago's 12 largest cultural institutions.

Findings from both Chicago-focused studies seem to indicate that as participation in the arts moves toward the formal end of Wali's continuum, participants are increasingly concentrated in several North Side neighborhoods with predominantly White, affluent populations. Meanwhile, there was some evidence to suggest that informal arts activities were more spread out across the City. MCIC researchers reasoned that to accurately study the benefits of informal arts participation across the City of Chicago, they must be measured by locating those venues with the broadest appeal to the broadest and most diverse audiences. Therefore, we set out to create an updateable database of those informal arts venues with as much information on participation as possible.

Methodology
The CCAP study began by mapping the geography of informal arts participation, based on the locations of sites where informal arts activities take place, such as churches, parks and public libraries. Building on Wali's research, our research team focused on the Chicago Park District (CPD), the Chicago Public Library (CPL), and Chicago Coalition of Community Culture Centers

(CCC) address listings. However, MCIC broadened its scope to evaluate several other sources, in an effort to determine the potential for mapping this important segment of arts participation.

MCIC chose to investigate potential sources of recurrent local information on the following six forms of informal arts participation:
1) enrollment in arts/culture classes or programs
2) participation in festivals and parades
3) coverage of arts/culture activity in the media
4) participation/membership in arts/culture clubs or associations
5) purchase of artistic products; and
6) purchase of materials for creation of artistic products.

Taking the definition of "informal arts" directly from Wali, MCIC sought datasets listing locations of unstructured venues with unstructured, public spaces for rehearsal or performance. The project team also chose to seek data sources with address-level information as well as attendance/enrollment rates and sales volume to enrich the potential for analysis.

MCIC began by attempting to acquire data sets from the three previously identified sources: CPD, CPL, and the Chicago Coalition of Community Culture Centers (CCC). We then consulted with local experts (some in conjunction with ethnographic field work), who were able to identify additional potential sources. Finally, the project team scoured the Internet to identify additional datasets.

> **Four-in-ten Americans reported personally performing or creating art**

Locational data from the Mayor's Office of Special Events (MOSE), CPD, Chicago Artists Coalition (CAC), Chicago Theater Communications Group (CTCG), Chicago Artists Resource (CAR), and the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) were downloaded from agency websites. MCIC also sought agencies and organizations with data not readily available on the Web. Individual contacts were identified either through expert consultants or from publicly available information about the agency or organization.

First, project team members called contacts, introducing themselves as MCIC researchers studying informal arts participation. Contacts were offered and, upon request, sent detailed information on the background, scope, and methodology of the project. Then, we asked contacts about the kinds of data they collected from their members, affiliates, or locations. Finally, team members asked contacts if they would share their data for the purposes of the project.

Mapping
MCIC identified 15 updatable databases from 11 unique sources. Of these, we were able to map addresses from 7 datasets: CPD, CPL, CCC, CTCG, CAC, CAR, MOSE, and DCA. Mapping was based on street address and ZIP code information, unless latitude and longitude were available. All datasets included street and ZIP code fields except for MOSE records of neighborhood festivals and parades. These datasets describe locations using bordering streets or beginning and end points. To map these addresses, the project team first determined the center-point of each "street address" by hand, using Internet mapping tools (Google maps).

Having geocoded a substantial number of addresses at which informal arts participation takes place on an ongoing basis (or has recently taken place), MCIC plotted these points on a map of local/informal art activities in the City to see how closely the concentrations of these locations matched the densities depicted in maps from previous studies (see map: Informal Arts and Culture Activities).

Findings
All the sources fell into one of two categories: public/government agencies or professional associations. MOSE and DCA are both departments of the City of Chicago government. CAR,

CCC, and the Cultural Network are all programs of DCA. CTCG is the Chicago chapter of the national Theater Communications Group, a professional organization whose mission is to strengthen, nurture and promote the professional not-for-profit American theater. CAC is a visual arts organization whose mission is to fulfill four basic needs: the education of the general public regarding the value of the visual arts to society; the advocacy of visual arts issues for members and the art community; the provision of professional and educational services for artists and the arts community; and the improvement of the environment in which artists live and work.

All the sources discussed above provided, with varying degrees of difficulty, datasets that included descriptions and locations of course offerings, club meetings, performance venues, neighborhood festivals, or arts fairs. Where appropriate, days or dates and times were made available, but not coded for mapping purposes. Generally, enrollment/attendance numbers were much harder to come by, with available data provided by only a few sources.

It was often difficult to determine the frequency with which many of these datasets are updated. While some datasets were available for a snapshot in time, other datasets were much more comprehensive and current.

The MCIC mapping exercise revealed an unsurprising density of informal arts participation in the Chicago Loop, but more interestingly, it revealed multiple clusters of informal arts activities all over the city as predicted by the previous studies (see map: Concentration of Informal Arts and

Culture Activities). Looking at community area boundaries for example, one can immediately see three public libraries, three neighborhood festivals or parades, a culture center, and a public park in Austin on the far West Side. The three CCAP informal arts maps depict one or no activity in Austin (Wali et al., p.28-30). Furthermore, MCIC maps reveal the challenges of using conventional boundaries (community area, ZIP code) to capture the clustering of informal arts participation in a meaningful way. Fortunately, having multiple databases of address-level information will allow researchers to analyze density at any level: block, tract, corridor, etc.

iO Theater, formerly the Improv Olympic

Conclusions/Discussion
In answer to the question of "Where," initial analysis shows that informal arts activities take place over a much wider geography than formal arts activities. Our evaluation of the available information reveals there are viable datasets that allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the geography of informal arts participation within the City of Chicago over time. Valuable information was acquired from sources gleaned from Wali: the Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Library, the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Mayor's Office of Special Events. In addition, MCIC augmented this list with datasets from Chicago Artists Resource, Chicago Artists Coalition, the Traffic Management Authority (see map: Street Closures for Block Parties), and the Chicago Theater Group.

Having identified the scope of available data on informal arts participation, as well as the even distribution of informal arts activities across the city, future investigation should return to the questions of "Why." Why do communities benefit from participation in the informal arts? Why do people choose to participate in informal arts activities? Future research should focus on revealing any correlations between existing measures of neighborhood vitality (population stability, homeownership rates, ethnic diversity, etc.) and informal arts participation. Researchers, public agencies, and organizations interested in either the arts or community development will want to understand what, if any, relationship exists between the intangible benefits of informal arts participation and the bricks-and-mortar measures of community vitality.

How does this information benefit arts and cultural institutions?

Potential Collaborations. Institutions may want to target programming efforts to places where informal arts activities take place. These represent untapped audiences for formal arts participation as well as networks for organizational outreach and collaboration. Imagine a block party with mobile exhibits, performances, or programs sponsored by a cultural museum.

Cross-Promotion. Sites and organizations that facilitate informal arts participation often lack a forum to expand outreach. Meanwhile, formal institutions often have trouble reaching out to communities, in which informal arts activities take place. Cross-promotion would increase audience participation on both ends of the continuum, such as satellite exhibitions at local galleries, coffee shops or community centers that build on themes of a current exhibition at a major cultural institution.

Program Gap Analysis. Using information on program type and attendance described in this report, MCIC can perform cross tabulations with U.S. Census information to determine the need for various types of programming. In this way arts and cultural institutions can identify market niches for specific programs, like painting classes for high school students from low-income households in communities with no fine arts offerings

Identify Opportunities for Audience Diversification. Research on formal arts and culture audiences suggests they are much more homogenous than the regional population. Collaborations, cross promotion, and networking with informal arts organizations will help these institutions understand what diverse populations are looking for as they make decisions about where to participate in arts and cultural activities.

**How does this information benefit community developers?**

Take Advantage of Social Capital Nexuses. We have shown that participation in the informal arts develops the skills necessary for community development: the ability to cooperate across differences of identity, envision change, and work to achieve it. Public agencies, service providers, and community organizations should tap into informal arts activities as venues for volunteer recruitment, leadership development, programming, planning and collaboration. For example, many community planning organizations have already begun to incorporate artistic participation into their strategies for improving quality of life[1].

Identify Policy Levers to Bolster the Informal Arts. Not only do informal arts activities build social capital, they also bolster the formal arts and culture economy. For these reasons, city governments have an interest in maintaining and facilitating them. As existing policy levers seem to have limited success providing assistance to informal arts groups, adjustments or innovations may be necessary. For example, funding could be designated to encourage partnerships between capital-rich city agencies (Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Libraries) and social capital-rich informal arts groups. In this way informal groups would gain funding, rehearsal space, performance space, and fiscal agent partners for grant administration. Meanwhile, City agencies would draw new users and bolster their public programming portfolios.

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[1] see the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago New Communities Program Quality of Life Plans
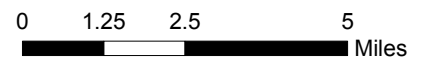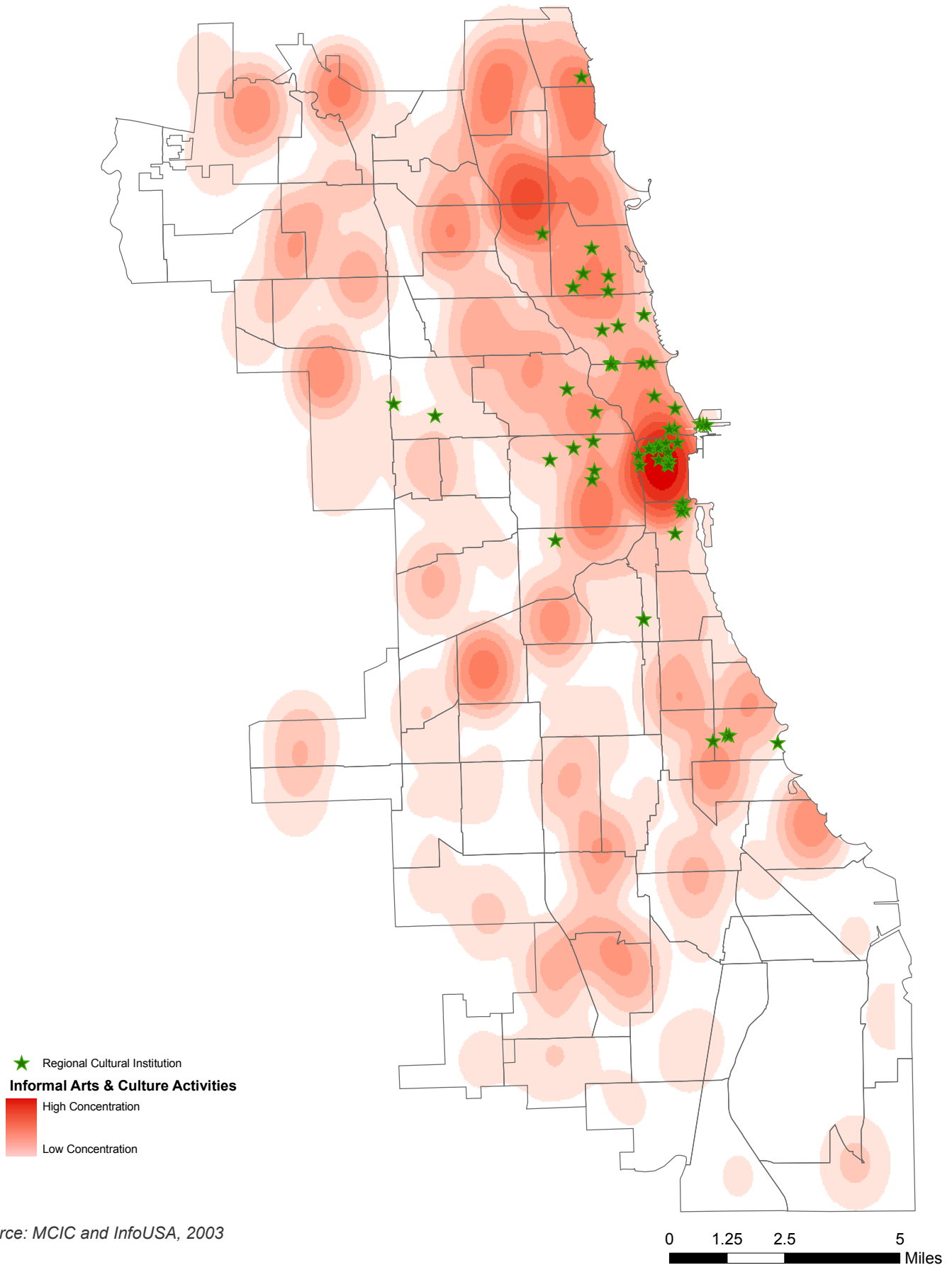*http://www.newcommunities.org/index.asp*

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Wali, A., Severson, R., & Longoni, M. (2002). *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places.* Retrieved October 24, 2006, from Columbia College, Chicago Center for Arts Policy Web site: *http://artspolicy.colum.edu/images/articles/informalArtsReport.pdf*

Legend
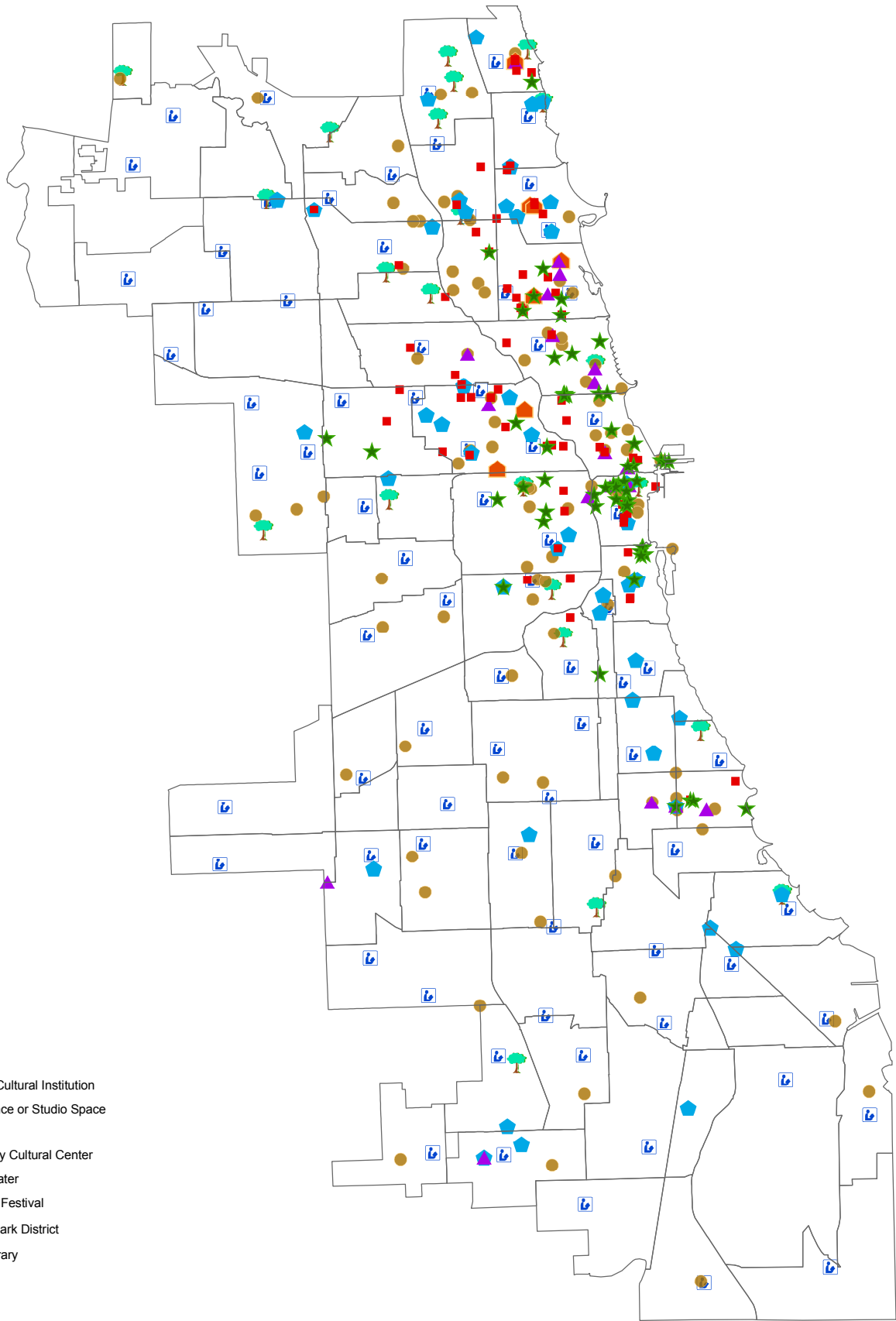
★ Regional Cultural Institution
■ Performance or Studio Space
▲ Art Fair
⬠ Community Cultural Center
⬟ Local Theater
● Parade or Festival
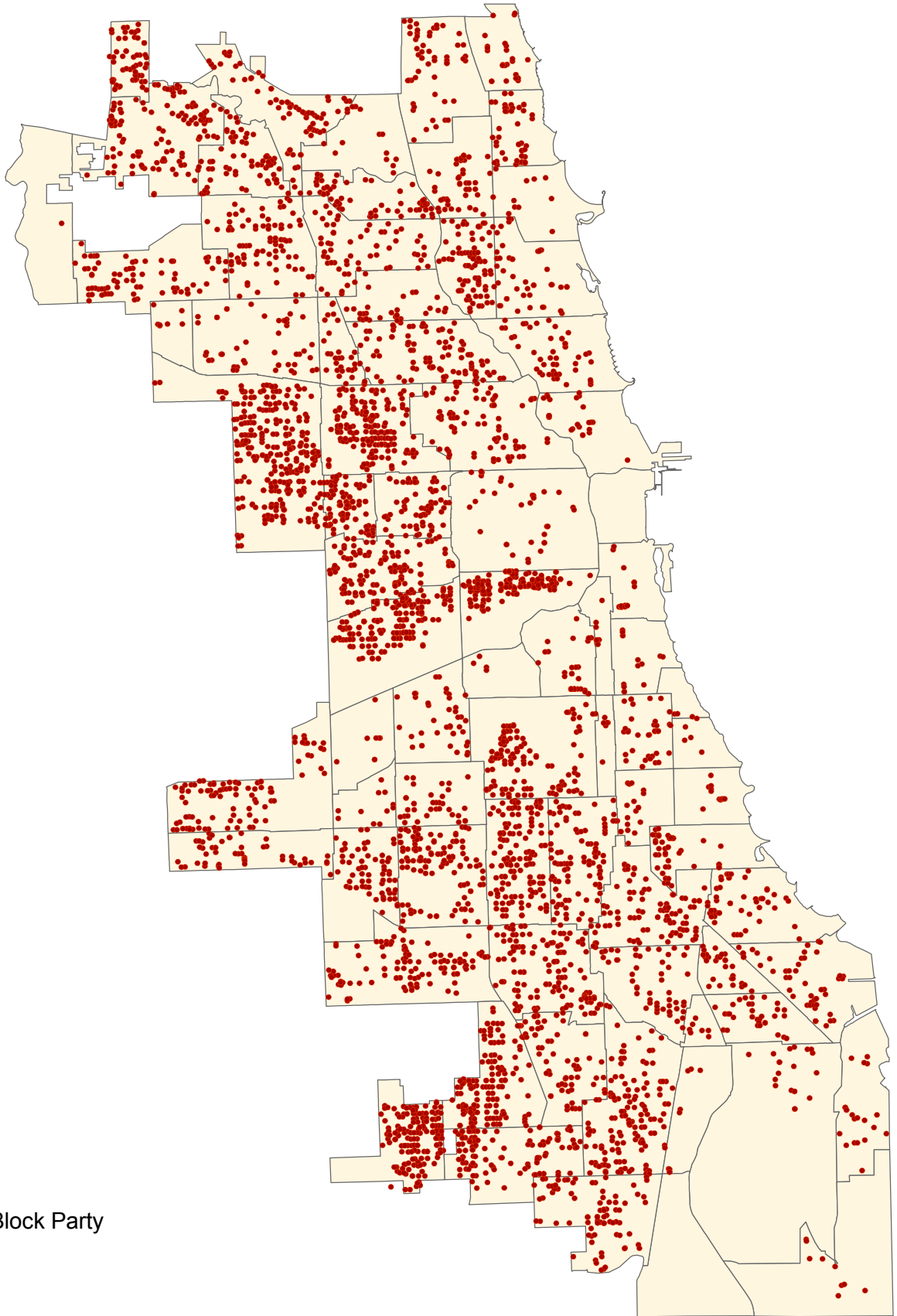🌳 Chicago Park District
ℹ Public Library

Source: MCIC and InfoUSA, 2003

0   1.25   2.5   5 Miles

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Concentration of Informal Arts & Culture Activities   City of Chicago

★ Regional Cultural Institution

Informal Arts & Culture Activities

High Concentration

Low Concentration

Source: MCIC and InfoUSA, 2003

0   1.25   2.5   5
Miles

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Street Closures for Block Parties

City of Chicago

● = 1 Block Party

Source: City of Chicago Transportation Management Authority, 2006.

0   1.25   2.5   5
Miles

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