

## Best Practice 03 Urban Planning



# Chicago's open data portal: A gateway to smarter city planning

Digitalization and open data strategies have become key enablers for smarter and more resilient city planning across North America and Europe. In the United States, the [Federal Data Strategy](#) and initiatives at the municipal level promote the use of interoperable, machine-readable data to enhance transparency, civic engagement, and data-informed decision-making. [Canada's Digital Government Strategy](#) similarly emphasizes open-by-default data policies and modern digital infrastructure to support efficient and accountable governance. In the European Union, the newly adopted [International Digital Strategy](#) (June 2025) marks a significant evolution in external digital action, positioning the EU as a global partner in promoting inclusive, secure, and human-centric digital transformation. This strategy builds on previous frameworks such as the [Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030](#) and the [Digital Compass](#), while placing stronger emphasis on trusted data flows, digital cooperation, and alignment of values with international partners.

As digital transformation accelerates globally, cities are becoming key players in driving innovation at the local level. Moving beyond broader national or regional plans, they are actively shaping digital progress through local regulations, smart city projects, and innovation support. By staying close to citizens, cities are able to create inclusive, people-focused digital solutions, aligning with the EU's principles of subsidiarity and multilevel governance. This highlights the essential role of local governments in making digital policies more responsive and relevant to everyday needs.

## A new paradigm from Chicago

In this context, Chicago has developed the [Chicago Data Portal](#), an open-source, public-facing platform launched in 2012. It represents a new paradigm around "government as platform" whereby the city creates readable data to provide infrastructure for developers and civic innovators. In 2011, Chicago was among the first large cities in the U.S.A. to appoint a Chief Data Officer, signalling a formal, lasting commitment to data-driven government. Forming the basis of the Portal is [Chicago's Executive Order No. 2012-2](#) calling

for timely release of public data in machine-friendly formats and making available channels for public input on the quality of city data.

Shortly after the portal's launch, the city and civic developers partnered with the MacArthur Foundation to organise an ["Apps for Metro Chicago"](#) (2011-2012) design competition. During this event, developers created and produced over 70 civic applications, from bilingual park maintenance to automated reminders for residents when their street is being swept, showcasing both developer engagement and the practical use of open data.

Nowadays it hosts over 600 datasets presented in easy-to-use formats about City departments, services, facilities and performance, covering various civic domains: housing, zoning, public health, crime, transportation, and more, allowing people in Chicago to improve their communities. It lets people find city data, facts about neighbourhoods, create maps and graphs about the city, and download the data for further analysis.

One of the most remarkable milestones along this journey into the Portal's history was the publication of [daily incident-level crime data](#), over five years of daily reports. This dataset was one of the first ones actively published and opened by a city government in the U.S.A., providing much more meaningful access to information than traditional aggregated crime data. Its release paved the way for the openness of crime and other civic data to journalism, research and/or community groups.

After recognising the barrier that data can be to usability, the Portal is now equipped with [OpenGrid](#) integrated with [GitHub](#) for API code samples and civic tech collaboration. An interactive mapped interface successfully combines spatial datasets (building permits, potholes, transit feeds, etc.) to make them more accessible to non-technical users and also enabling neighbourhood-level measurements.

The Data Portal is updated daily with new and revised figures on its various sets. This transparency-driven initiative supports civic innovation, third-party apps, academic research, and evidence-based policymaking.

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### Strengths and challenges of the Chicago Data Portal

The Chicago Data Portal is a model of transparency and accessibility. This transparency encourages evidence-based decision-making, fosters civic engagement, and holds public accountability.

One of the biggest advantages of the portal is its interoperability. Data is machine-friendly or human-readable to provide a wider access to a range of users, including policymakers, planners, and developers (CSV, JSON, APIs). The portal also facilitates civic innovation. It powers tools like the [Affordable Requirements Ordinance \(ARO\)](#) compliance dashboards, the [Chicago Health Atlas](#), and flu-shot locators. These examples illustrate how data informs real-world applications within public service and urban planning.

However, the portal is still facing challenges. Users of the ARO Dashboard have no access to unit-level rental availability or precise geolocation data; also, data quality issues (lack of information related to the age, height or footprint of buildings), limit its use.

### Strategic objectives and use cases

The Chicago Data Portal has a strategic role in many areas of city planning and civic life. One of its main objectives is to inform about zoning and housing policy.

The Portal helps to make developer compliance and ARO data publicly available for policymakers to evaluate their present practices, assess gaps, and develop data-driven reforms such as the ["Development for All"](#) agenda.

Regarding public health planning, the availability of neighbourhood-level demographic and health data allows planning to be more equitable and more focused on real necessities. It allows city officials allocate resources more efficiently and develop interventions based upon specific community needs.

Civic engagement is also fostered by the Portal facilitating access to public data for residents, researchers, and developers who can create their own tools to track initiatives in their city and hold government officials accountable through public data.

Finally, making interoperable datasets publicly allows the development of new and innovative urban tools, such as [flu-shot locators](#), [building-age mapping](#), and [real-time](#)

performance dashboards for transit and municipal services.

### Main Outcomes

- The Portal hosts [over 600+ datasets](#), updated
- It has tracked [\\$124M](#) in in-lieu fees.
- The development of [444 affordable housing units](#) built via ARO addressing the city's housing crisis.
- The portal supports a range of data driven tools: [CHI Health Atlas](#), CTA performance dashboards, flu-shot locators apps.
- Regular civic audits support data transparency and equity ([Employee Equity Dashboard](#) [Violence Reduction Dashboard](#)).

### Developer tools and civic innovation

APIs and Data Access: the Portal uses the Socrata SODA API, offering interactive tools (e.g., City API console, sample code, GitHub examples) for direct querying and bulk downloads. This infrastructure has enabled third-party projects such as Chicago [flu shot locators](#) and [building-age visualizations](#).

[Community Engagement](#): users are encouraged to suggest datasets and share use-cases via GitHub or social media. Developers and planners use this data for civic hacking, academic analysis, and municipal dashboards.

### Coming next!

Stay tuned for our next featured Best Practice from Montreal, Canada, highlighting the internationally acclaimed Grow Home model—an innovative, adaptable, and affordable housing solution that has influenced sustainable urban development around the world. This upcoming case will broaden the series' scope and reinforce our commitment to showcasing diverse experiences across North America and Europe.

### References

Chicago Data Portal: [City of Chicago | Data Portal](#) | [City of Chicago | Data Portal](#)  
 University of Chicago: [Chicago Data Portal](#) | [Chicago Studies](#) | [The University of Chicago](#)

