

## Population Growth in Chicago

*Grade 4 and up*

*Curriculum Connections: Immigration, Industrialization, Progressive Era, Visual Literacy*

This activity is a way to provide a lesson on visual literacy within a history curriculum, as well as an introduction to or exploration of interpreting statistics.

### Process

Display the image, identifying it as a photograph of a part of Chicago in the early twentieth century. Explain that the city was facing a crisis because of overcrowding, lack of sanitation, poverty, and many other problems. For more information about the problems of Chicago and other cities at that time, see the Digital Collection essay “These Are the Women Who Saved the Cities.”



[Edith Abbott, \*The Tenements of Chicago\*, 1908-1915, frontispiece \(1936\)](#)

### Questions

- How many people do you think lived in each building?
- How much space is there between buildings?
- Do you see any yards?
- Do you see a park or trees?
- Where do you think kids played?

### Population Chart

Explain to students that they are going to make a chart showing the population growth of Chicago from 1830 to 1900. You may want to work as a class or in small groups to create the chart. It will be based on a table from the book *The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks, and Reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930*, by Thomas Lee Philpott.



The table on the left page below shows the population of the city from 1840 to 1930. The period we suggest you chart is 1840 to 1910.

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Table 1. <i>Population of Chicago, 1840–1930</i>				
Year	Population	Year	Population	
1840	4,470	1890	1,099,850	
1850	29,963	1900	1,698,575	
1860	109,260	1910	2,185,283	
1870	298,977	1920	2,701,705	
1880	503,185	1930	3,376,438	

Source: *U.S. Census Reports, 1840–1930.*

[Philpott, \*The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks and Reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930\*, 7 detail \(1978\)](#)

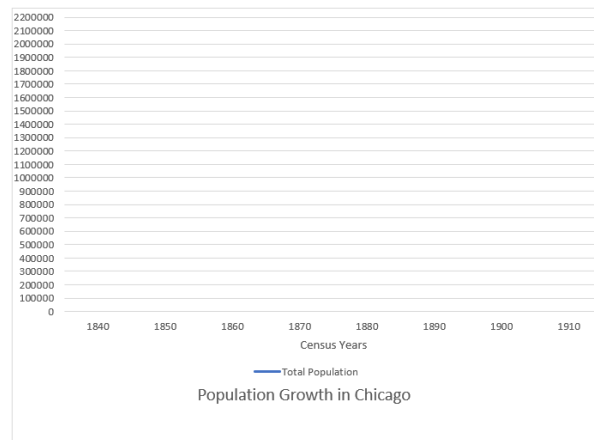
If students are new to creating graphs, explain to students that a line graph has two axes. The horizontal axis is called the x-axis and the vertical axis is called the y-axis. Where the two axes intersect is called a data point. In this chart, the vertical axis will be labeled to show numbers of people and the horizontal axis will show decades. The title of the graph will be “Population Growth in Chicago, 1830 to 1900.” The empty graph could look like the one below.

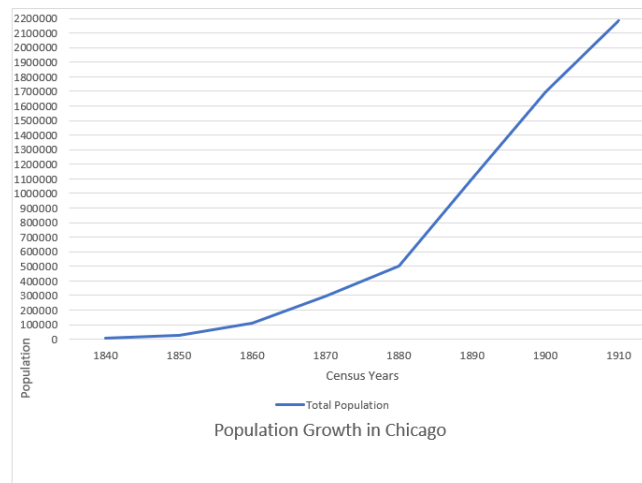
This chart was created in Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Excel has excellent graphing tools. But graph paper is easier and will work very well and will focus students’ learning on the way graphs work rather than on mastering a new piece of software.

Now, have students fill in the chart for total population, using numbers from the table. They will quickly discover that the population totals for the first three decades on the table don’t even

make it up to the first number on the vertical axis. Have students make estimates of where the data points should go and then ask, “What can you learn from the chart so far?” (*The city was small and growing at a slow but steady rate.*)

Continue to fill in the data points for the total population and connect them with a colored line. The chart at this point could look like this.





## Extension Activity

*Recommended for grade 6 and up*

As an extension activity, looking at the table for the population increases of different groups in the table on the right page of the source image can be interesting and thought-provoking. If you decide to chart that table, however, note that the numbers for each decade are for the *increase* in population, not the population itself. Explain that this is similar to acceleration rather than speed.

Table 2. *Sources of Increase in Chicago Population, 1830–1900, 1860–1900*

Decade	Total Increase in Population*	Increase in Foreign-Born Population*	Increase in Black Population*	Increase in White Population from U.S. Outside Chicago**	Increase in Births over Deaths**
1830–1840	4,450				400
1840–1850	25,493		270		2,000
1850–1860	79,297	38,942	632		10,000
1860–1870	189,717	89,993	2,736	63,000	30,000
1870–1880	204,208	60,302	2,789	95,000	50,000
1880–1890	596,665	245,807	7,791	144,000	100,000
1890–1900	598,725	136,446	15,879	265,000	170,000
1860–1900	1,589,315	532,488	29,195	567,000	350,000

Sources: For columns marked \*, *U.S. Census Reports, 1840–1900*; for columns marked \*\*, estimates adapted from Homer Hoyt, *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago* (Chicago, 1933), table 30, p. 284.  
Note: Before 1850 no exact data are available for increase in foreign-born population.

[Philpott, \*The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks and Reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930\*, 7 detail \(1978\)](#)

## **Additional Resources**

[Digital Collection Essay “These Are the Women Who Saved the Cities”](#)

[Interpreting Data Visualizations: The basics. Wake Forest University.](#)

[Interpreting Stories and Graphs. PBS Learning Media.](#)

Lash-Quinn, Elisabeth. *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Philpott, Thomas Lee. *The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks, and Reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930*. Belmont, California: 1991.

Spain, Daphne. *How Women Saved the City*. Minneapolis ; London : University of Minnesota Press, 2001.