



Written by [James Murphy](#) on February 12, 2019

An Ill Wind of Corruption Blows in Windy City

A [report](#) from the University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC) has ranked the Midwestern metropolis as the most corrupt city in the United States. The State of Illinois is the third-most-corrupt state in the union, surpassed only by Louisiana and the District of Columbia, which is listed as a state for reporting purposes.

The findings are based on Department of Justice (DOJ) reports on corruption arrests from 1976 through 2017, the most recent year for which records are available. The report shows that the Northern District of Illinois, which includes Chicago, suffered 1,731 convictions for public corruption from 1976 through 2017. In total, the State of Illinois recorded 2,102 convictions for public corruption.



Other DOJ districts with serious corruption problems over the same time period included Central California (Los Angeles) with 1,534 convictions, New York Southern (Manhattan) with 1,327 convictions, Florida Southern (Miami) with 1,165 convictions, and the District of Columbia with 1,159 convictions.

Dick Simpson, the head of UIC's political science department, authored the report along with Thomas Gradel and Marco Rosaire Rossi. "For a long time — going back at least to the Al Capone era — Chicago and Illinois have been known for high levels of public corruption," Simpson said. "But now we have statistics that confirm their dishonorable and notorious reputations.... The two worst crime zones in Illinois are the Governor's Mansion in Springfield and the City Council Chambers in Chicago."

More than 30 Chicago City Council members have been connected to cases of public corruption since the 1970s. The report does not include the case of [Alderman Edward Burke](#) of Chicago's 14th Aldermanic District, who on January 3 of this year was charged with extortion for allegedly trying to strong-arm a local restaurant owner into using his law firm in exchange for a remodeling permit. Burke allegedly threatened to "play hardball" with company executives.

The extortion charge comes on the heels of two FBI raids on Burke's office in late 2018. Burke has served on the Chicago City Council for 50 years. He now faces a possible prison term of 20 years.

Illinois has a long history of political corruption. Otto Kerner, a Democrat, and governor of the state from 1961 to 1968, was convicted on 17 counts of mail fraud, conspiracy, perjury, and related charges while sitting as a judge on the federal court. He was sentenced to three years and was forced to resign from the bench.

The 39th Governor of Illinois, George Ryan, a Republican, was sentenced to six and a half years in prison in 2006 for crimes of fraud and racketeering while he served as governor and secretary of state.



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The 40th governor, Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, was the first governor of the state to be impeached after it was found he tried to sell or trade an appointment to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat. Blagojevich was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

And the City of Chicago is worse than the state house. In 2017 alone, there were 25 convictions for public corruption in the Northern District of Illinois, almost all of them in Chicago.

On April 28, 2017, Barbara Byrd Bennett, the chief executive of the Chicago Public Schools, was sentenced to four and a half years for mail fraud. In the 20th Ward, Alderman Willie Cochran has been indicted on 15 counts of wire fraud, bribery, and extortion. He faces trial later this year.

Former police sergeant Ronald Watts was convicted of stealing thousands of dollars from a drug dealer who turned out to be an FBI informant. Watts was sentenced to 22 months in prison. It was later determined that Watts had framed literally dozens of men who are currently serving prison time. The state attorney's office is currently reviewing these cases and [releasing wrongly convicted prisoners by the fistful](#).

"The city's ethics training is a joke," Simpson said at Chicago's City Hall. "We need real ethics training, because the people in this building don't seem to have it."

Ethics training can't hurt, but the problem in Chicago and all the other large metropolitan areas with corruption problems speaks to a culture that looks the other way when corruption takes place. When bureaucracies are engrained with the notion that activities such as bribery and extortion are just part of doing government business, cities and states fall into apathy, which leads to neglect.

In Illinois, both Republicans and Democrats must take the blame for problems in the state house. But in Chicago, Democrats have monolithically run the city since the mid-20th century.

Without a revolt at the ballot box in these places, nothing will change.

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