More about Curious City

*Curious City* is a show from WBEZ that answers people’s questions about Chicago and the region. You can ask questions, vote on your favorites and join reporters to track down answers. Our stories have been told through video, audio, quizzes, live events — and now a zine! Follow along on our Curious City Facebook page, @WBEZCuriousCity on Twitter, and check out our latest stories at wbez.org/curiouscity or on your favorite podcast app.

More about our questioner

Justin Carrasco is a rising eighth grader at Unity Junior High School in Cicero. He became curious about rats in Chicago after reading a book about the large rat population in New York.

He sometimes spots rats in alleyways, crawling into garbage carts through small holes. One time, one got a little too close.

“It ran in front of me, and I got scared,” he says.

Justin’s favorite class in school is gym, and his favorite sport is soccer. In his free time, he likes to play Grand Theft Auto V. One day, he hopes to pursue a career in mechanical engineering and build sports cars.

Illustrated by Ellie Majia | Reported by Jesse Dukes
Edited by Jessica Pupovac | Designed by Katherine Nagasawa
First, The Numbers:

How Many Rats Are in Chicago?

After some violent chair jostling, my Louisville Slugger sent the little squatter to rat heaven. At the time, I was having a disagreement with my landlord. I decided to blame him for the rat infestation. But... I forgot that dead critters emit gas. So, unfortunately, I turned my dead rat into a rat bomb. It exploded in the hallway, leaving glass and tissue everywhere.

So, I put the rat in a Mason jar, sealed it, and left it by his door with a note.

There is no definitive answer to this question. By their very nature, rats are difficult to track and count. They also reproduce quickly, with a typical gestation period of only 21 days. One popular misconception is that there is one rat for every person in big cities. However, this theory was debunked decades ago.

Today, in Chicago, complaints made to the city's 311 service offer a helpful starting point. According to city data, Chicago received about 39,000 rat complaints in 2018. Conventional wisdom among exterminators holds there are "10 rats for every rat you see," so if you believe that ratio, Chicago could have 390,000 rats.

Chicago biologist Maureen Murray studied whether residents of some neighborhoods more frequently report rat problems. Her team found that there is a correlation between the number of rat complaints and the number of rats. According to the study's results, the most rat-infested neighborhoods are the ones with the most 311 rat complaints. This map shows which Chicago neighborhoods have the most rat complaints, and which have the most rats.

I moved out the next month. But I did take my rat throne with me. And that's my story of the rat chair.
We asked you to send us stories of your wildest encounters with Chicago rats.

Here are some of our favorites.

**Jane Hwang**

Before it was transformed into an office, my old Zorba’s was the perfect spot to catch a rat. I caught a rat in the rat trap in the kitchen. I took him to the root of my building and threw him out of the building... and thought good riddance... until 3-4 seconds later. It just straightened itself and scurried away.

**Pulkit Saraf**

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**Jennifer Ptak**

I saw two rats play and wrestle in the backyard of an empty lot next to a punk house off Archer. The rats chased each other through groups of malcontents drinking beer. They played for nearly an hour. I got a notification there was movement in my camera. It was a rat, not a human. I thought someone was watching me...

**Ian Feigle**

My husband set up a motion-activated camera in our garage to catch intruders. He got a notification there was movement in our garage. It was a rat, not a human. He was scared out of his mind. #nightmaresforweeks

**Your rat tales!**
Q&A With Rat Expert Rebecca Fyffe, Director Of Research At Landmark Pest Management

Where do rats live in the city?
Since rats are a prey species, they need to stay out of sight, which is why they excavate soil and dig under cement slabs to build extensive burrow complexes. They invade our homes, garages and gardens.

What are some fun things you’ve learned about rats?
Rats demonstrate social learning and teach learned behaviors to other rats. Rats are also impressive athletes: they can tread water for three days and can flatten their bodies to squeeze through half-inch openings.

What’s the ideal number of rats in a city?
The ideal number of rats in a city is zero. Norway rats [the kind found in Chicago] reached North America around 1755 on the ships of the settlers, and they haven’t done anything beneficial since. They’re a disease risk, a fire hazard, they cause our sidewalks to collapse and they bite babies in their cribs.

What’s the impact of rats on human health?
Seoul hantavirus, hepatitis E, leptospirosis and flea-borne typhus are just some of the diseases that humans can contract from living in close proximity to rats. Because the symptoms of these pathogens in humans can resemble other common illnesses, scientists think that infection in human populations probably goes underdiagnosed.

What are the best ways to reduce rats in the city?
The only way to meaningfully control rats in the urban environment is to eliminate their access to garbage and to our structures. We need to have construction standards that seal rats out and improve our trash-handling practices to eliminate rats’ nightly buffet.

“I bought a rat chair.”
— Randy Palmer

In the early '90s at the Maxwell Street Market, I came across this amazing chair. It was a beautiful red velvet throne.

So $10 later and back at home, I noticed that my cat would not venture into the same room as the chair.

Inside the chair was a tiny set of eyes and a huge set of screeching teeth. It was a rat.

I grabbed a flashlight, and I crawled under the chair and found out the reason the cat was hissing.

I bought a rat chair.

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