

## 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](http://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.

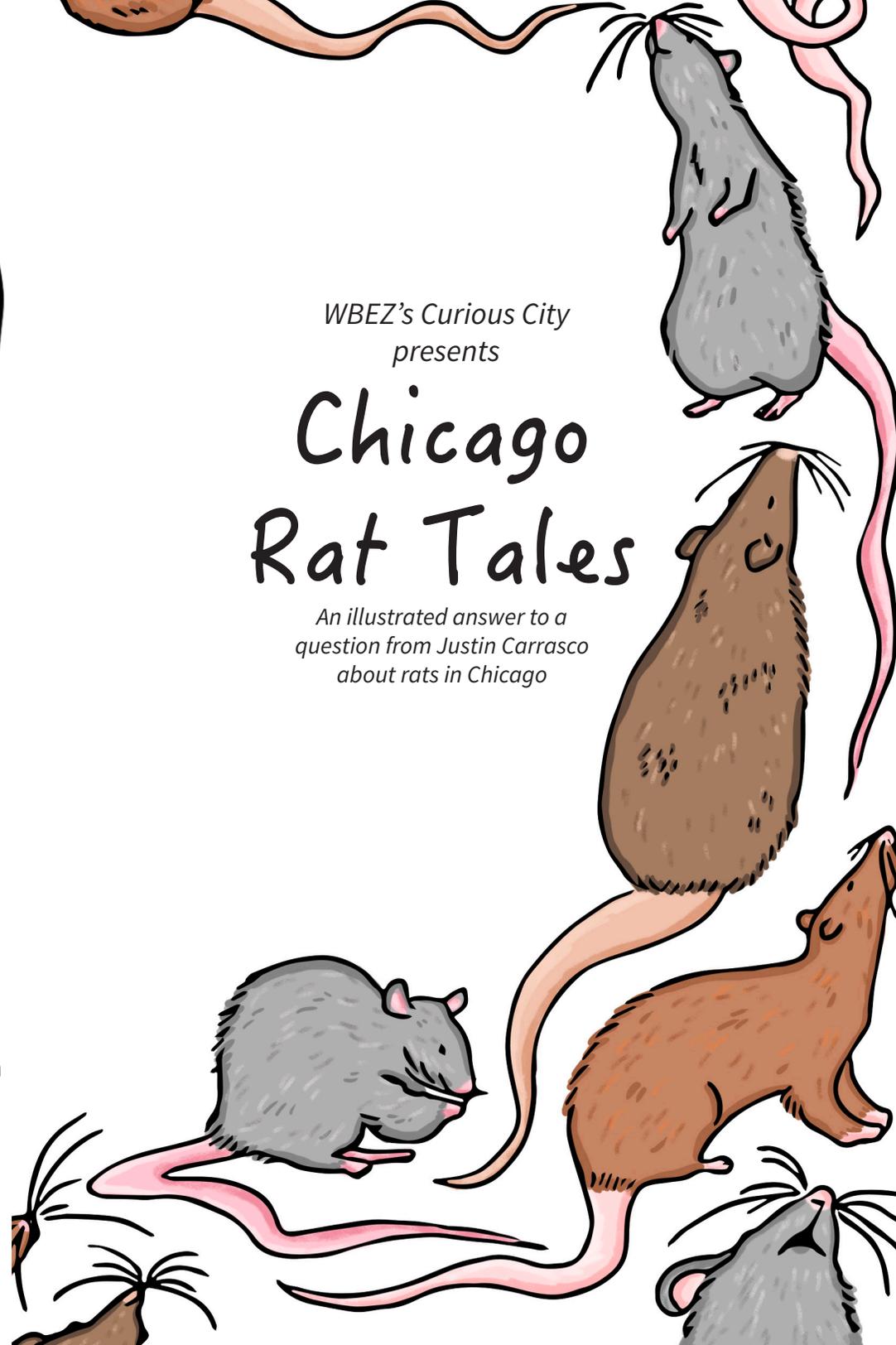
Justin's favorite class in school is gym, and his favorite sport is soccer. In his free time, he likes to play *Grand Theft Auto V*. One day, he hopes to pursue a career in mechanical engineering and build sports cars.

Illustrated by Ellie Mejia | Reported by Jesse Dukas  
Edited by Jessica Pupovac | Designed by Katherine Nagasawa

WBEZ's Curious City  
presents

# Chicago Rat Tales

An illustrated answer to a  
question from Justin Carrasco  
about rats in Chicago

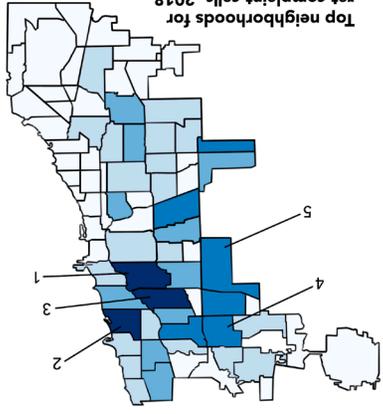


# First, The Numbers: How Many Rats Are In Chicago?

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.



1. West Town
2. Lakeview
3. Logan Square
4. Portage Park
5. Austin

Chicago biologist Maureen Murray studied whether there are actually more rats in the neighborhoods with the most 311 rat complaints (or whether residents of some neighborhoods simply complain more than others). By trapping and counting rats in different neighborhoods, her team found that 311 complaints do correspond with the numbers of rats. This map shows which Chicago neighborhoods have the most rat complaints — and according to the study's results, the most rats.



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



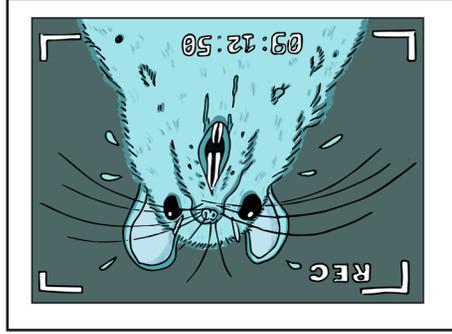
I moved out the next month. But I did fake my rat throne with me. And that's my story of the rat chair.

# Your rat tales!

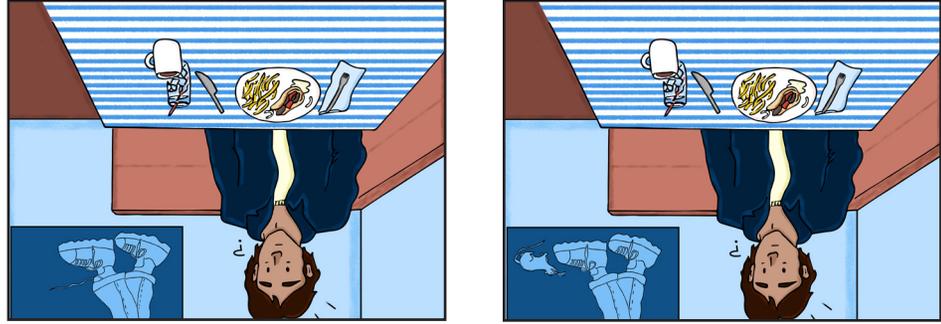
We asked you to send us stories of your wildest encounters with Chicago rats. Here are some of our favorites.

My husband set up a motion-activated camera in our garage to catch intruders. He got a notification there was movement one night, only to have a rat face pop up right in front of the camera and scare the living daylight's out of him. #nightmaresforweek's

— 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 and smoking cigs between sets. They played for nearly an hour; the best show I saw that night. No one cared. — Ian Feigle



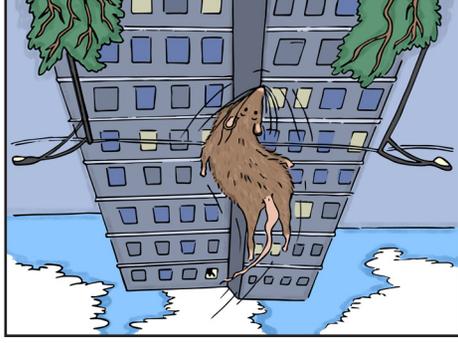
emerged with a cat that he threw it our way. — Jane Hwang

Back in 1993, my friends and I were enjoying a 2 a.m. meal at the old Zorba's in Greektown. A rat came in and crawled up my friend's pant leg. When we all jumped up and screamed, an employee — without skipping a beat — ran into a back office and



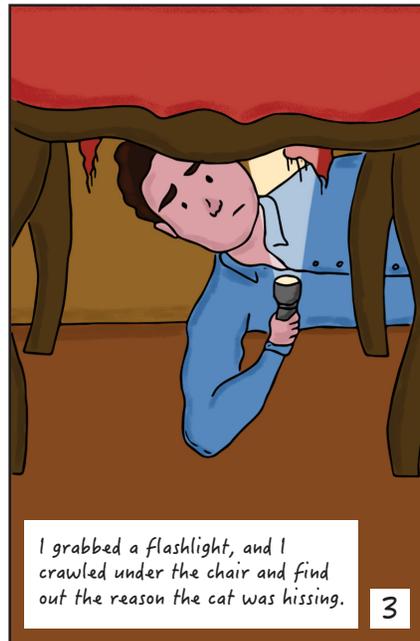
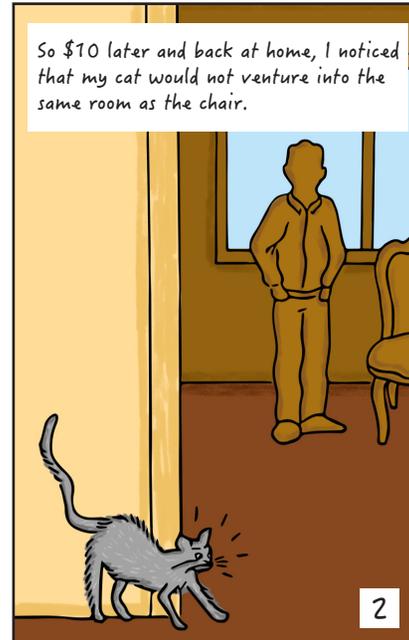
I caught a rat in the trap in the kitchen. [I] took him to the roof of my building [on the] eighth floor, threw him out of the building ... and thought good riddance ... until 3-4 seconds later. It just straightened itself and scurried away.

— Pulkit Saraf



# "I bought a rat chair."

— Randy Palmer



## 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.

