2025

CHICAGOLAND'S SOLAR LANDSCAPE

Despite headwinds and pressures, demand for solar power remains strong, and solar installation is a promising workforce pathway.

WORLD BUSINESS CHICAGO | THE RESEARCH CENTER

GCEP Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership

COOK COUNTY BUREAU OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Cook County Solar Synergy
Building an equitable solar sector

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY SOLAR AWARDEE™

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Federal investments, statewide initiatives, and expanded capacity and demand in Chicagoland have prompted investment in the region's solar industry. Specifically, the establishment of **Cook County Solar Synergy — initially funded through a $1.1 million grant awarded to Cook County through the U.S. Department of Energy's Solar Energy Technologies Office's Advancing Equity through Workforce Partnerships program** — intends to serve the region as a knowledge hub for solar industry stakeholders to advance an inclusive workforce and small business ecosystem.

The Research Center at World Business Chicago and the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development (BED) partnered through the Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership to author this landscape assessment of the solar installation industry in Chicagoland, including its current state and projected growth. We identify local demand for talent, as well as risks and opportunities for recruiting or skilling workers.

NEW FEDERAL PRIORITIES

Research for this report began in 2024 and continued throughout 2025, between the end of the Biden Administration and the first year of the Trump Administration. Despite a reduction in federal funding availability and tariff-related supply chain changes, demand for solar power continues, especially as costs have plummeted. Our analysis still finds the solar installation industry to be a promising workforce pathway.

The passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) in July 2025 represents a significant shift to the federal policy landscape for solar. The law scales back or sunsets several key federal incentives and programs that had driven record growth in the solar industry under the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), including the Solar for All program. In addition to curtailing financial incentives, the OBBBA and subsequent administrative actions have introduced new permitting and compliance requirements that could slow project deployment. In parallel, trade policy adjustments and renewed emphasis on domestic sourcing have introduced cost pressures. Industry forecasts suggest that, while near-term growth will continue due to projects already underway, total solar installations through 2030 are expected to be lower than pre-OBBBA projections.

Despite these federal shifts, states and regional markets continue to advance solar adoption and overall demand for solar energy remains resilient. Rising power needs from data centers, increasing utility rates, and growing interest in energy independence may keep solar deployment strong even as federal incentives decline. Solar and battery storage continue to play a central role in meeting these demands because of their scalability, cost-competitiveness, zero-emission profile, and alignment with state and regional energy goals. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, renewable sources of energy accounted for 85% of new generation capacity in the second quarter of 2025, with solar as the largest portion.

The changing policy landscape signals both headwinds and opportunities for solar, as reduced federal incentives are balanced by regional momentum, evolving market forces, and the sector's continued role in meeting growing power demand.

FINDINGS

1 **Chicagoland's solar capacity is increasing.** Between late 2025 and the end of the decade, the Chicagoland region is poised to more than double its existing solar capacity by adding 601,581 kilowatts (kW) — having already increased capacity 20-fold since 2020.

2 **Chicagoland's solar electric power generation industry is poised to outpace national growth.** In 2025, the solar electric power generation industry employed 269 people in Chicagoland ranking 17th among metro areas. Between 2025 and 2035, this industry is projected to grow by 167% in Chicagoland, compared to 160% nationwide. By 2035, the Chicagoland region is projected to rise to 16th place nationally for industry employment.

3 **Despite currently lagging behind peer cities, increasing demand for solar power generation means occupations in solar installation also outpace national growth.** In 2025, Chicagoland is home to 167 solar photovoltaic installers, ranking 35th nationwide. By 2035, the number of workers is projected to grow by 46% nationally but 84% in Chicagoland.

4 **The solar installation industry overlaps with construction — especially electrical contracting and wiring — making analysis multi-faceted, especially as these industries and occupations are less competitive nationally and projected to decline.** The electrical contracting and wiring industry is projected to grow 7% nationally, but Chicagoland is expected to decline by 4% (losing 990 jobs) between 2025 and 2035. Between 2025 and 2035, Chicagoland is expected to experience an overall decline of 849 jobs (1%) across target occupations requiring solar-related skills.

5 **Solar installation occupations pay less than related occupations — which could challenge recruitment and upskilling efforts.** The median annual earnings for solar photovoltaic installers is $39,000, which is lower than all other occupations associated with solar-related skills. Less than 10% of related occupations make less — related occupations are more likely to require advanced training as well.

ABOUT SOLAR SYNERGY

Synergy was created to identify the needs of the solar marketplace and develop solutions that will improve access for service providers and talent.

In 2024, Cook County's BED entered into a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Solar Energy Technologies Office (SETO), to pilot a program to expand, strengthen, and diversify the solar sector in the Chicagoland region. Cook County was one of 12 organizations selected by SETO's Advancing Equity through Workforce Partnerships program to facilitate the rapid deployment of solar energy technologies by growing and supporting an inclusive workforce with opportunities for union membership. The $1.1 million grant award allowed Cook County to partner with HIRE360 and OAI to establish Solar Synergy to identify needs and develop solutions to support the emerging market and increased demand for solar installation.

The establishment of this program was a result of federal and state actions to boost solar capacity, such as:

- Illinois legislation like the Future Energy Jobs Act in 2016 and the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act in 2021 that aimed to grow the green economy.
- Federal funding made available in the previous federal administration. The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) earmarked federal funding for solar energy intended to have a significant effect on the national green economy, including the Solar for All program. Various federal initiatives have been geared toward increasing the United States' global competitiveness in the green energy space. Although the priorities of the current administration have pivoted, the clean and climate tech industry space is still growing; the U.S. Energy Information Administration expects 32.5 gigawatts (GW) of new utility-scale solar capacity to be added nationwide in 2025.

Cook County intends to continue the initiative's primary objective of positioning Solar Synergy as the table that brings stakeholders together to share resources and information, promote and build sustainable long-term partnerships, and further our collective investments to advance talent and business opportunities in solar installation. It is expected that workforce availability would have to triple to meet demand by 2027. Furthermore, the U.S. renewable market is expected to attract around $700 to $800 billion in capital investment, particularly impacted by the fact that many large megawatt solar projects are in rural areas with a lack of workforce availability. Cook County has one of the densest labor forces available in the nation and can be a leader in solving this gap.

Cook County
Solar Synergy
Building an equitable solar sector

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This landscape assessment is a baseline from which Solar Synergy can strengthen the region's solar installation industry.

The Cook County BED partnered with the World Business Chicago (WBC) Research Center through the Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership to develop a landscape assessment of the region's solar installation industry. This report gives Solar Synergy a baseline from which to convene, align, and leverage the diverse stakeholders in the solar installation, small business and workforce ecosystems. It also outlines a baseline from which to improve access to and strengthen workforce training pipelines, and to align with local solar industry demand, while centering on quality jobs.

The solar industry landscape assessment seeks to highlight the current market, existing programs, and gaps within the industry. Also, the report aims to present opportunities and pathways for collaborative engagement through partnership to promote economic growth. The potential for this new and emerging industry, coupled with diversification in investments in green energy technology, presents an opportunity for exponential growth as an emerging industry that will continue to develop nationally and within Chicagoland.

With the upskilling of the labor force, there is a chance to engage underrepresented communities and increase affordable access to reliable green energy, such as residential solar. This cooperative agreement seeks to bridge the gaps that currently exist and aid in the equitable and sustainable disbursement of green energy technology throughout the nation.

Landscape Objectives	Key Results
Increase workforce availability in the solar industry	• Determine the scale of labor upskilling needed to meet solar demand within the Chicagoland region • Identify the gap in skills in the current workforce
Buildout public-facing knowledge hub to increase institutional knowledge	• Provide data analysis of the current national and regional solar market • Increase community awareness of solar industry terminology and current trends, and access to opportunities
Establish a framework report for the Solar Synergy Advisory Board	• Produce a report to be reviewed by industry experts to capture, share and retain regional knowledge of the solar industry for stakeholders

ABOUT THE REPORT

Survey assessment of existing Chicagoland businesses provides additional context for the quantitative data presented in this report.

The program team at the Cook County BED conducted individual interviews focused on small businesses within the solar sector. This included small installation businesses, business service providers, and local chambers of commerce.

Small business owners spoke highly of workforce development programs, including contractor accelerators that many have participated in. Further work is needed to connect small and emerging firms with opportunities within workforce development – small firms that are looking to give back to their communities but are not able to access federal funding.

Business owners also spoke about challenges with access to capital. In particular, residential solar projects have a lengthy sales cycle (6+ months) and state incentive programs require contractors to float capital from the beginning of a project and await reimbursement after grid connection, a process that can take up to 120 days post-completion.

In 2025, the BED program team distributed a survey to more than 750 known businesses through the Cook County Small Business Source, which led to targeted programming, such as one-on-one business advising, for contractors and solar entrepreneurs interested in accessing the solar installation marketplace.

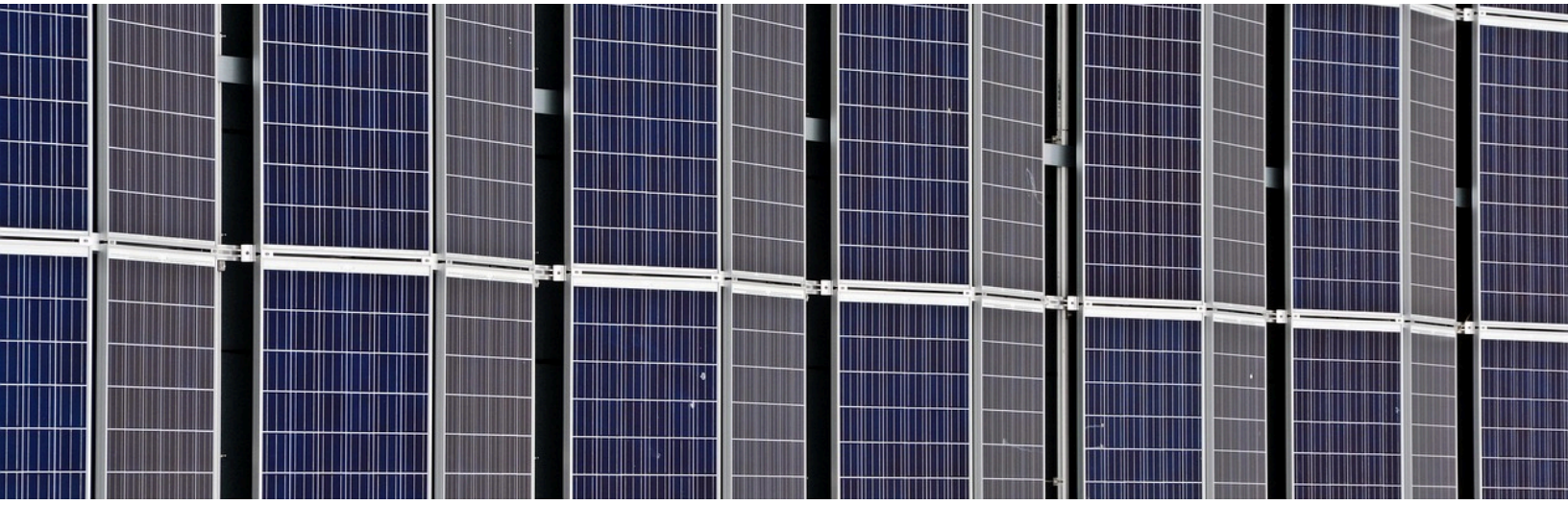
DEMAND FOR SOLAR POWER

The U.S. solar industry continues to show demand, and is bolstered by growth and increased manufacturing capacity from previous years — however, the sector faces soft spots and declining installations.

In 2024, the country added nearly 50 gigawatts-direct current (GWdc) of new solar capacity — about 21% more than in 2023 — and solar power accounted for roughly two-thirds (66%) of all new electricity-generating capacity added to the grid that year. In 2021, long-term modeling from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory suggested that solar could grow from about 3% of national electricity generation then to 40% or more by 2035.

In the first half of 2025, the U.S. solar industry installed 18 GWdc of new capacity — 7.5 GWdc in Q2, down 24% year-over-year and 28% from Q1 — yet solar still accounted for 56% of all new power generation, and solar plus storage combined made up 82% of new capacity added nationwide. Manufacturing expansion continued, with 4.3 GW of new solar module capacity added in Q2, bringing the U.S. total to 55.4 GW, though no new upstream (wafer, cell, or polysilicon) capacity came online. Performance varied by segment: residential solar fell 9% YoY to 1.06 GWdc, constrained by high interest rates and policy uncertainty; commercial solar surged 27% YoY (585 megawatts-direct current (MWdc)), driven largely by California's remaining Net Energy Metering 2.0 projects; community solar dropped 52% YoY to 174 MWdc as major programs reached capacity; and utility-scale solar— still the largest category — declined 28% YoY to 5.7 GWdc, with slower activity in Texas leading the pullback. Texas, California, Arizona, and Indiana led installations in the first half of 2025.

At the policy level, the OBBBA has reshaped the federal incentive landscape, sunsetting key clean-energy tax credits—Sections 45Y and 48E after 2027 and the residential 25D credit after 2025, as well as programs under the Inflation Reduction Act. New Treasury and Interior Department guidance has also added permitting and timing constraints, requiring personal review by the Interior Secretary and narrowing what counts as "beginning of construction." As a result, analysts have revised outlooks downward: the base case now projects 246 GWdc of new installations from 2025–2030, 4% below pre-OBBBA forecasts, while the low case foresees 202 GWdc (-18%). Even so, developers are racing to complete projects before tax-credit deadlines, and demand for reliable power keeps solar deployment levels historically high despite policy turbulence.



CHICAGOLAND SOLAR CAPACITY

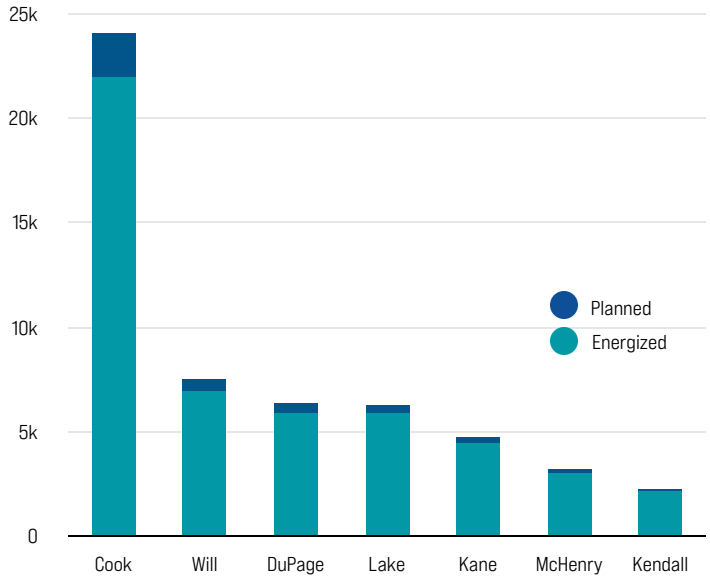
Demand for local solar projects is growing: Chicagoland houses 56% of the state's solar projects and is poised to double its energy capacity by the end of the decade.

As of August 2025, Illinois boasts 90,051 active solar projects and over 4,800 megawatts (MW) of installed solar capacity. This rapid expansion is set to continue, with 5,067 MW planned or under construction across 8,412 projects, more than double the amount currently energized.

The seven-county Chicagoland region, represented by the Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership (GCEP), has 56% of all state solar projects (50,637) and accounts for approximately 14% of Illinois' operating solar capacity (677 MW). Furthermore, 4,132 planned projects are slated for completion — representing nearly half of the state's planned projects. This will add an estimated 602 MW to its solar capacity, enough to power over 400,000 homes.

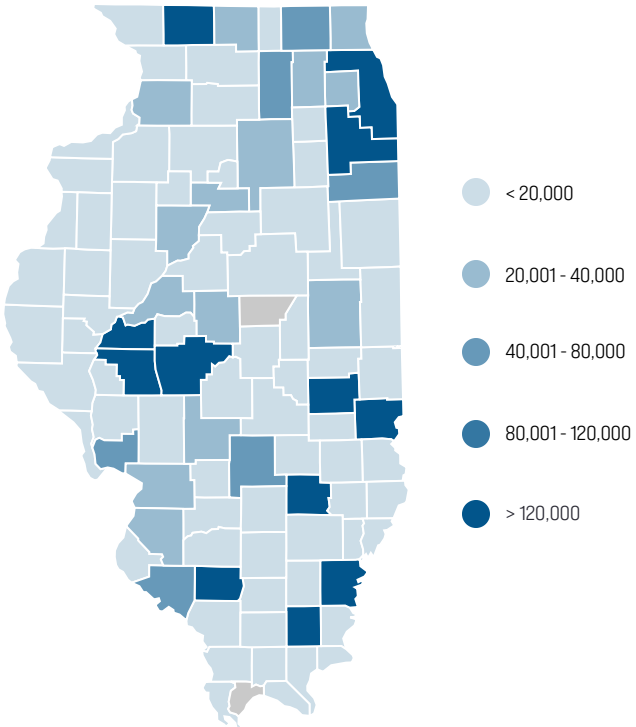
Number of energized and planned solar projects across Chicagoland counties

Illinois Solar Map



Energized kW across Illinois counties, 2025

Illinois Solar Map



Cook County leads the region in the number of solar projects and total operational solar capacity, with 21,997 projects and 236 MW. It is followed by Will County with 7,008 projects and 127 MW. McHenry County has the third largest solar capacity with 95 MW while Lake County has the third largest number of projects with nearly 6,000. However, McHenry, Will, and Kane counties generate the highest average kW per project, producing 30.6 kW, 18.1 kW, and 12.6 kW per project, respectively.

Between August 2025 and December 2029, the Chicagoland region is poised to nearly double its existing solar capacity by adding 601,581 kW. If all planned projects are completed — Illinois Solar Map estimates a >95% likelihood of realization — and current installations remain operational, the region's total solar capacity is forecasted to reach 1,279 MW by the end of the decade.

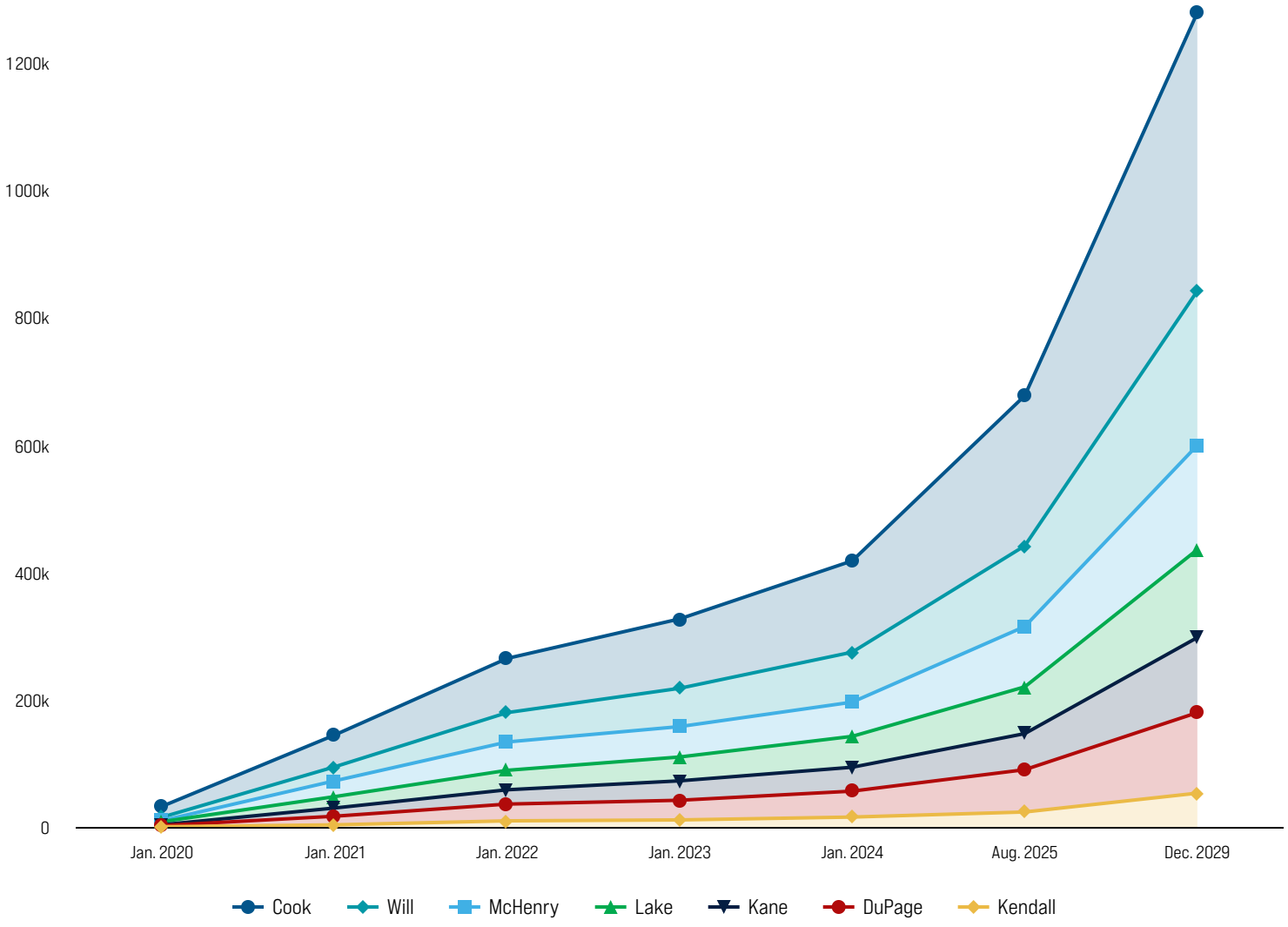
CHICAGOLAND SOLAR CAPACITY

The region's solar capacity grew more than 20-fold from 2020 to 2025.

Between early 2020 and August 2025, the Chicagoland region's solar capacity surged from 32,289 kW to 677,406 kW—a more than 20-fold increase in five years. All counties in the region experienced significant growth during this period.

While already the most significant contributor, Cook County saw its capacity expand tenfold, growing from 17,020 kW to 235,871 kW. Kendall County experienced the most dramatic growth, increasing its solar capacity from 301 kW in 2020 to 23,427 kW in 2025. This impressive growth highlights the rapid adoption of solar energy across the region in recent years, a trend set to continue with the significant number of projects and additional capacity planned for the rest of the decade.

Cumulative growth of energized and planned solar kW capacity across Chicagoland
Illinois Solar Map



CHICAGOLAND SOLAR CAPACITY

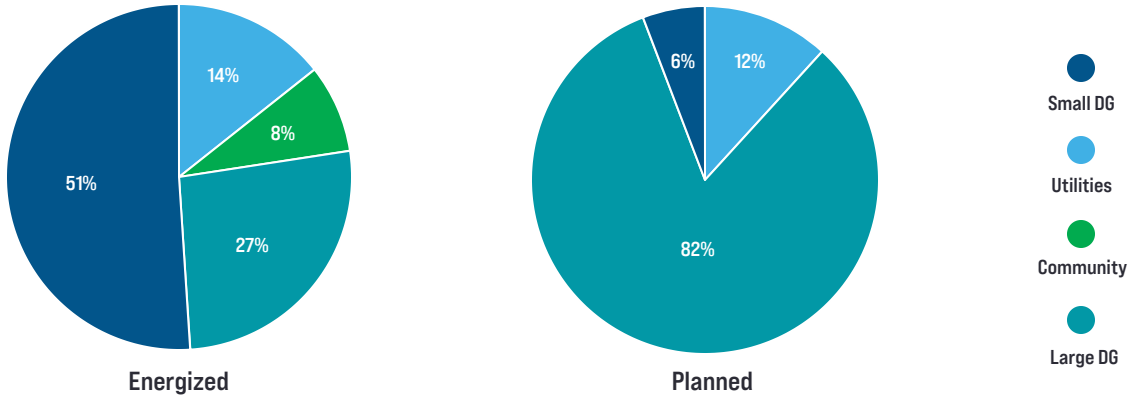
Cook County has a higher concentration of small distributed generation systems compared to outer Chicagoland counties.

Despite its sizable total capacity, Cook County has the lowest average output per project at 10.7 kW. This is due to its higher concentration of small distributed generation (DG) systems — projects up to 25 kW in size, such as those found on residential properties, small businesses, or other structures with lower energy demands. Cook County gets 61% of its total solar capacity from small DG systems, ranking third in this category after Kendall and DuPage counties.

For planned projects, Kendall and Kane are projected to experience the most significant capacity increases, with growth rates of 126% and 108% respectively. These counties have fewer planned projects, with 119 in Kendall and 314 in Kane, due to a smaller share of planned capacity from small DG systems. Instead, their growth is driven by large DG projects — installations exceeding 25 kW and up to 5 MW — such as those powering larger businesses, schools, factories, and high-energy-demand buildings.

Percentage of kW capacity by project category in the seven county Chicagoland region

Illinois Solar Map



Energized and Planned Projects and kW Capacity by Project Category

Illinois Solar Map

	Energized Large DG		Energized Small DG		Planned Large DG		Planned Small DG	
	Projects	kW	Projects	kW	Projects	kW	Projects	kW
Cook	211	62,908	21,722	142,863	201	156,892	1,883	17,212
DuPage	92	25,599	5,816	40,847	44	39,010	455	4,353
Kane	46	13,577	4,445	30,941	27	52,406	285	2,655
Kendall	10	5,691	2,155	15,736	12	28,483	107	1,103
Lake	90	31,478	5,869	42,019	36	54,279	360	3,331
McHenry	40	15,077	3,031	22,666	26	63,830	142	1,366
Will	43	24,389	6,939	50,645	48	100,984	499	4,877

DEFINING SOLAR INSTALLATION

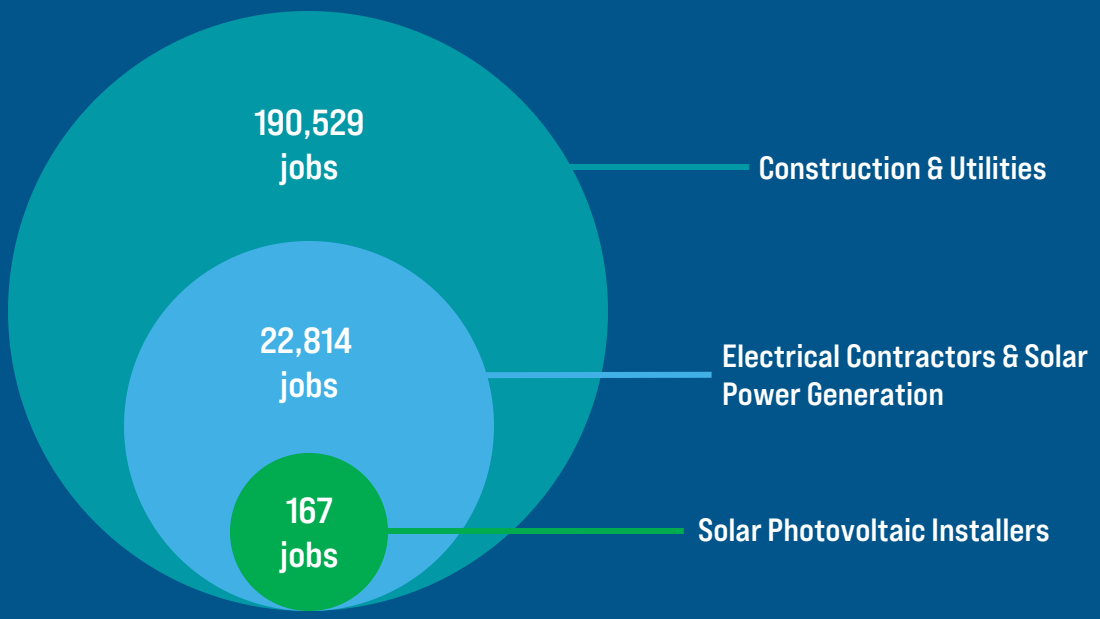
The solar installation industry is nascent and nestled within other traditional construction and installation industries, and requires a unique approach to analyze.

The solar installation industry is still nascent, and industrial or occupational data analysis using categories by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is not straightforward — much of the solar installation industry is found within electrical contracting and related occupations. In this analysis, we take a multi-layered approach to identify the broadest definition of the industry and potential solar workforce.

With data available by BLS-defined industry (NAICS) and occupation (SOC) codes, we start narrowly and expand out to demonstrate workforce availability. Our industry analysis focuses on Solar Electric Power Generation (NAICS 221114) and Electrical Contractors (NAICS 238210) — these make up the bulk of solar installation job postings.[5] The 2024 United States Energy & Employment Report reinforces this: "Residential solar installation establishments are typically labeled as electrical contractors (together with all other traditional electrical businesses) without being identified specifically as solar companies." Additionally, 22% of 828 electrical contractors surveyed reported working on residential or commercial solar projects in 2023.[6]

We also go narrower and broader. We start by looking at occupation data for solar photovoltaic installers (SOC 47-2230); analysis is limited given the small, specifically defined employment pool. We also consider the entire Construction and Utilities (NAICS 22 and 23) industries for trends in a potential employment pool of workers who could be trained for solar installation.

Chicagoland's Solar and Solar-Adjacent Industries
2025 Employment



DRAWING COMPARISONS

Identifying the right set of peer metro areas helps us benchmark Chicagoland's position and opportunities in the solar installation industry.

Peer metro area comparison for Chicagoland's solar workforce helps us to recognize strengths, challenges, and growth opportunities. In particular, peer metros excelling in solar workforce metrics are benchmarks for Chicagoland that support locally informed decision-making, driving continuous improvement and strategic sector growth.

We considered metros with:

- Similar overall economies (Peer Score) — similar labor forces (over 1 million) and demographics
- Similar solar workforce attributes (Industry Score) — similar location quotient (LQ) for solar photovoltaic installers and electricians, as well as median wages for solar installers, adjusted for the cost of living.
- Leadership in the solar industry — metros with high performance in solar installation and electrician specialization and workforce size. Given Chicagoland's lower-than-average performance among comparable metros, this helps us understand factors that may favor workforce growth in certain regions.

We identified the top 11 metro areas in the U.S. by Peer Score and Industry Score. The final peer metro list was developed by combining these indexes and adjusts to ensure balanced weighting between industry performance and metro area similarity (both with a maximum score of 4).

The initial list of top-scoring metros was further refined to avoid duplication by state and to balance geographic representation. We replaced Dallas with Los Angeles due to its high population and retained Houston for its substantial solar workforce. Tampa and Charlotte were removed to maintain a more even geographical spread, ensuring representation across various U.S. climates, and replaced with Philadelphia. To address the absence of Midwestern cities in the top index rankings—attributable partly to lower workforce diversity—we included Minneapolis and Detroit to reflect geographical factors unique to the Midwest.

Final List of Metros for Industry and Peer Comparisons

Metro Area	Region	Industry Score	Peer Score	Final Score
Chicago	Midwest	-	-	-
New York	Northeast	2	4	6.0
Phoenix	West	4	2	6.0
Houston	South	4	1.5	5.5
Boston	Northeast	3	1.5	4.5
Orlando	South	2	2.5	4.5
Washington D.C.	South	2	2	4.0
Atlanta	South	1	3	4.0
Los Angeles	West	2	1.5	3.5
Philadelphia	Northeast	0	2.5	2.5
Minneapolis	Midwest	0	0.5	0.5
Detroit	Midwest	0	0.5	0.5

SOLAR POWER GENERATION

The Chicagoland region's solar electric power generation industry is projected to grow faster than the national average from 2025 to 2035, although employment specialization lags.

In 2025, the solar electric power generation industry employed 269 people in the Chicagoland region. Nationally, the Chicago metro area ranked 17th for industry employment.

From 2025 to 2035, this industry is projected to grow by 160% nationwide. The Chicagoland region is expected to outpace the national average with a 167% increase, adding 448 jobs. By 2035, the Chicagoland region is projected to rise to 16th place nationally for industry employment.

Chicago's employment specialization — location quotient (LQ) — for this industry, currently at 0.45, ranks in the middle among peer metros. While Chicagoland's growth rate is higher than the national and most peer-metro averages, the region's employment concentration still lags behind national average (LQ of 1.0). To reach an LQ of 1.0 by 2035, Chicagoland would need approximately 1,500 people employed in the solar industry, compared to 269 in 2025. Although it may not close the gap on the additional 1,200 jobs required by 2035, workforce development and business support initiatives could help close the gap faster than forecasted.

Due to faster-than-average growth, the LQ for the metro area is expected to improve slightly by 2035. As the proportion of solar industry jobs in Chicagoland increases relative to the national level, its LQ will also rise. However, the metro area (0.49) is projected to remain below the national average.

Solar Industry Jobs and LQ in Peer Metros, 2025-2035

Lightcast

Metro Area	2025 Jobs	2035 Jobs	% Job Change	2025 LQ	2035 LQ
Houston	3,302	9,026	173%	7.45	7.65
New York	1,255	3,387	170%	0.98	1.01
Los Angeles	995	2,517	153%	1.19	1.18
Phoenix	384	974	154%	1.19	1.11
Washington	301	702	133%	0.70	0.65
Chicago	269	716	167%	0.45	0.49
Orlando	186	475	155%	0.98	0.96
Boston	164	416	153%	0.45	0.45
Minneapolis	99	254	156%	0.38	0.39
Detroit	51	135	165%	0.20	0.22
Atlanta	49	113	130%	0.13	0.11
Philadelphia	25	64	155%	0.07	0.07

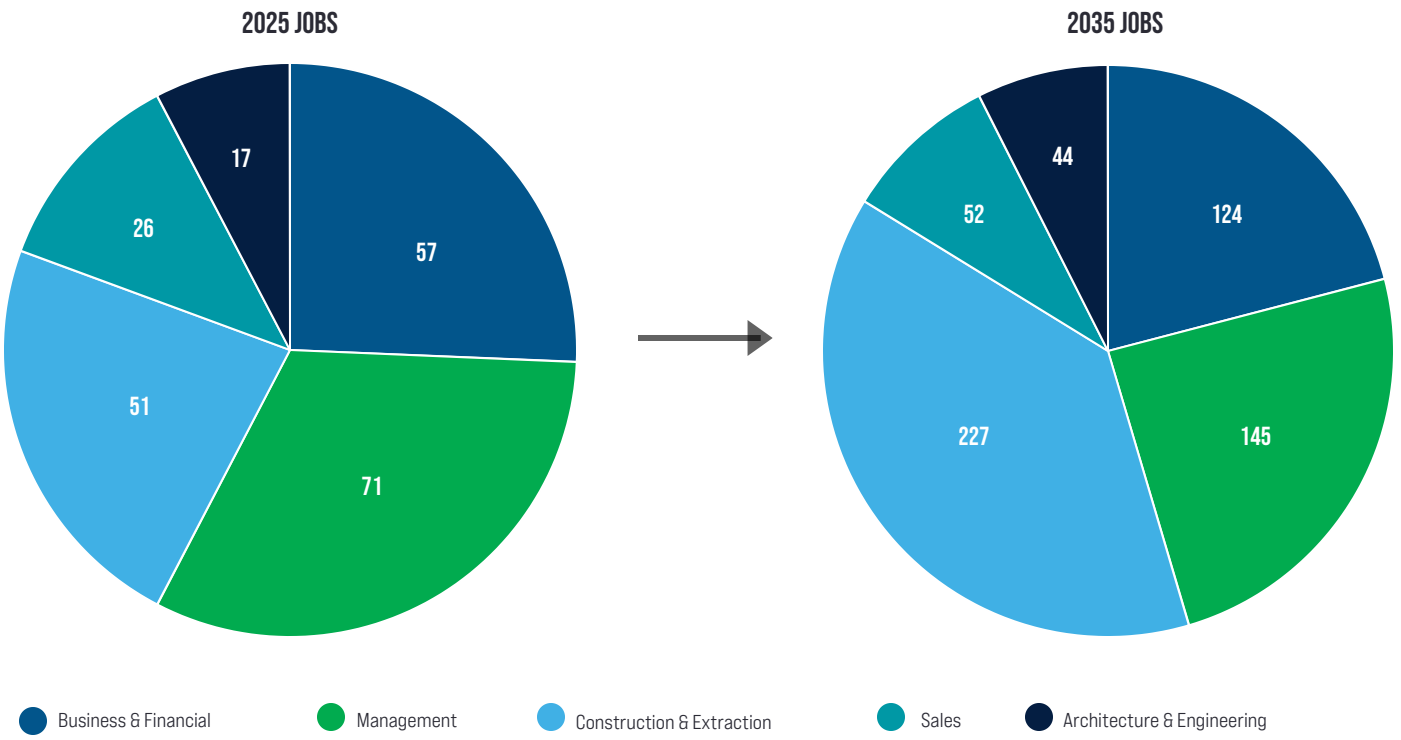
SOLAR POWER GENERATION

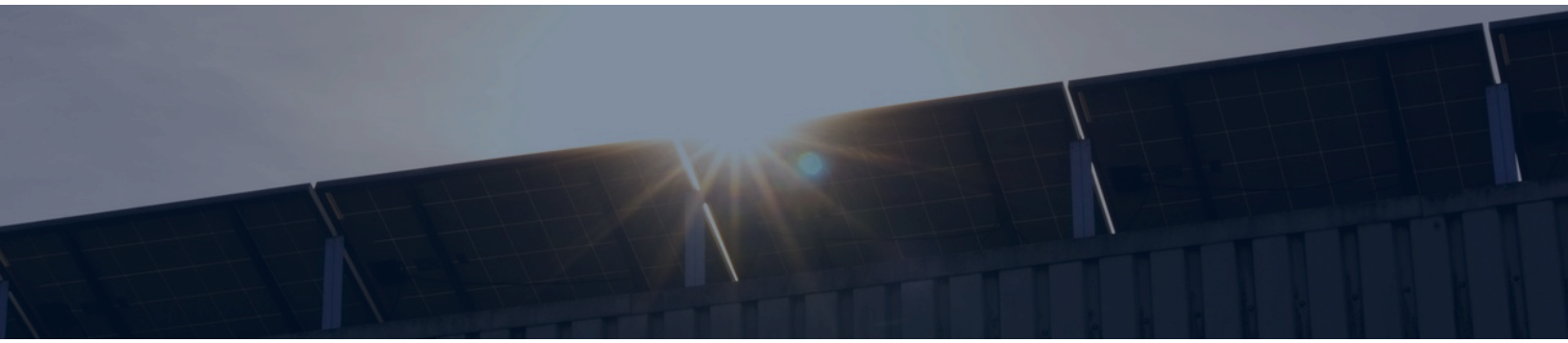
Construction and extraction jobs are projected to be a larger share of the solar electric power generation industry by 2035.

Chicagoland's solar electric power generation industry primarily employs workers in business and financial operations, management, and construction and extraction occupations (at the 2-digit SOC occupation code level).

In 2025, management roles are the largest group, with 71 jobs. By 2035, construction and extraction roles will dominate, driven by a forecasted increase of 111 solar photovoltaic installer positions out of 176 total new jobs. This shift underscores the region's growing demand for installation-specific skills while highlighting the importance of operations, sales, and management roles in supporting broader industry growth beyond installations.

Top 5 Occupational Groups Employed in Solar Electric Power Generation, 2025-2035
Lightcast





ELECTRICAL & WIRING

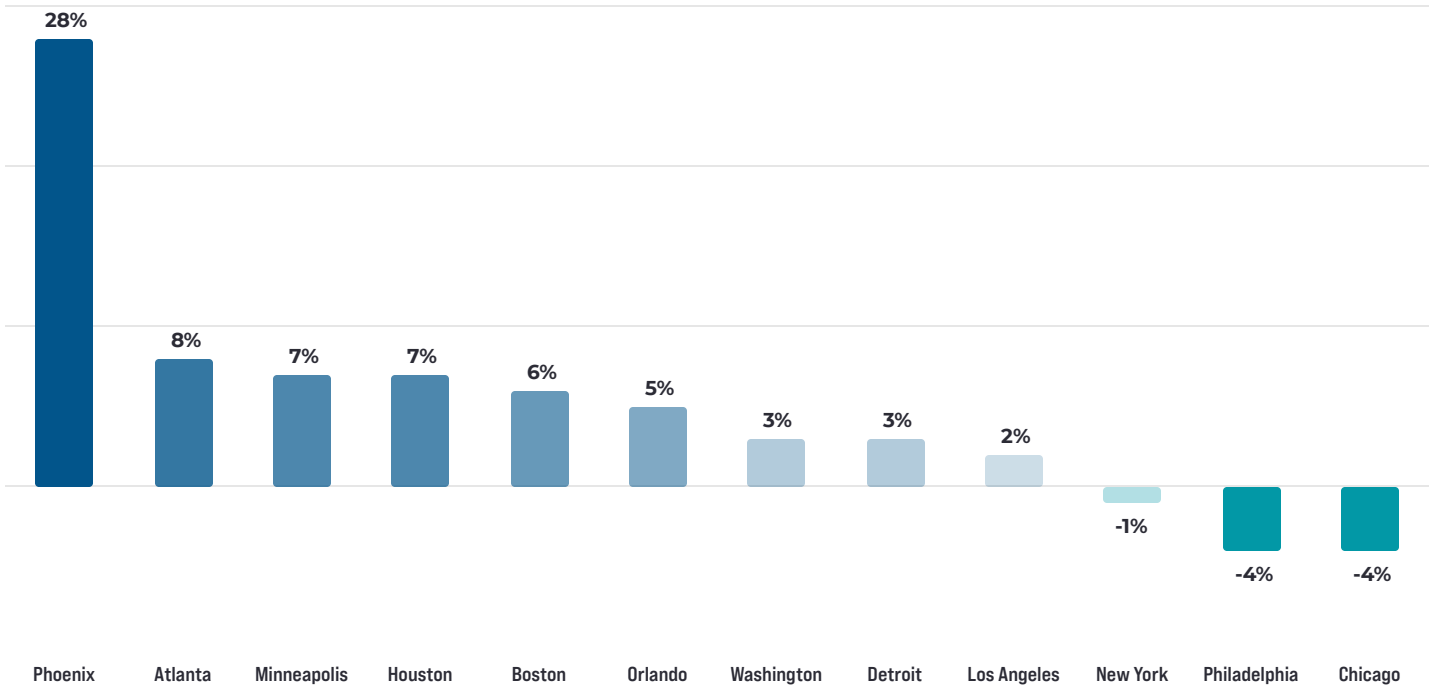
Chicagoland's electrical contractor and wiring installation industry — a key industry employer of solar panel installers — is projected to decline by 4%, despite the industry growing nationally.

In 2025, the electrical contractor and wiring installation industry employed 22,546 workers in the Chicagoland region. Nationally, the Chicago metro area ranked 8th for employment in this sector. From 2025 to 2035, this industry is projected to grow 7% nationally, but Chicagoland is expected to decline by 4% (losing 990 jobs). Additional analysis is required to determine what contributing factors may explain this decline.

For historical context, between 2015 and 2025, job numbers in the Chicagoland region grew by 4% (adding 947 jobs), although they trailed the national growth rate of 32%. In 2015, the region held the fifth-largest employment base for the industry nationally. Between 2024 and 2025, the industry in Chicagoland declined by 58 jobs.

Most peer metros are forecasted to experience average growth of 6% from 2025 to 2035. New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago are expected to decline, with Chicago and Philadelphia facing the steepest percentage drops. Phoenix stands out as an outlier, projected to grow by 28%, significantly outpacing national and peer metro averages.

Change in Total Jobs in the Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Industry by Metro Area, 2025-2035
Lightcast



ELECTRICAL & WIRING

Office and management jobs in the electrical and wiring industry are projected to make up most of the industry decline in the region.

Of the projected decline in the electrical and wiring industry in the Chicagoland area, office-related and management functions are expected to see the largest decrease in jobs. The number of Electricians (SOC code 47-2111) in the metro area is projected to remain the same in 2035, but decline 3% in Cook County. Although they represent the largest occupational base in this industry, half of the metro area's electricians are employed in the County.

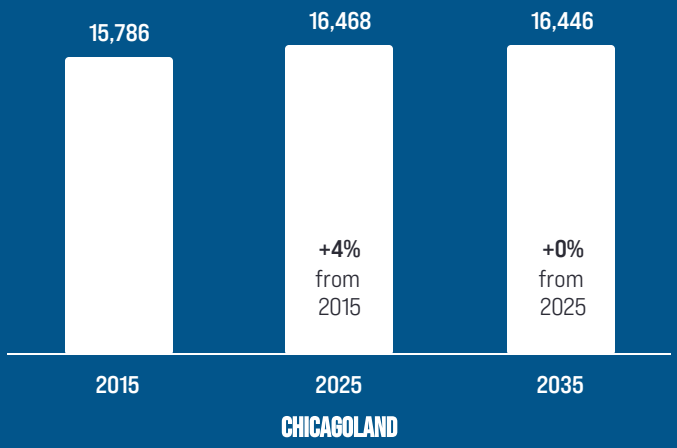
Electrical Contractor Industry Employment in Chicago MSA and Cook County, 2025-2035
Lightcast

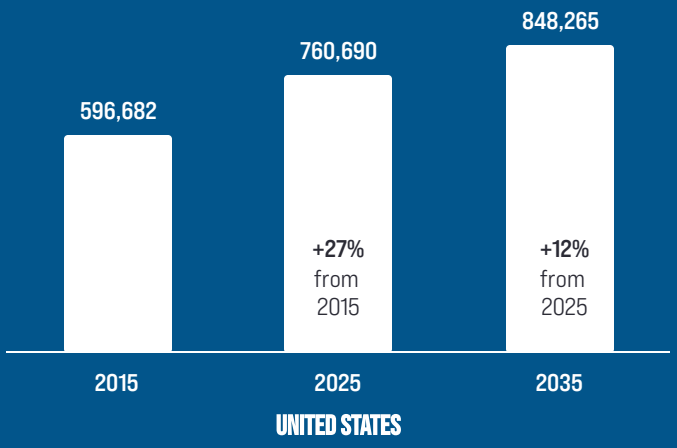
Occupations	MSA Employed in Industry (2025)	MSA Employed in Industry (2035)	County Employed in Industry (2025)	County Employed in Industry (2035)	Metro Area Change	County Change
Total Industry Employment	**22,546**	**21,556**	**11,010**	**10,188**	**-4%**	**-7%**
Electricians	11,317	11,294	5,549	5,360	-0%	-3%
Office Clerks, General	713	598	339	274	-16%	-19%
General and Operations Managers	780	702	418	367	-10%	-12%
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants	325	280	174	147	-14%	-16%
Construction Managers	674	623	353	318	-8%	-10%

ELECTRICIANS

The number of electricians is projected to remain the same in Chicago after slight growth since 2015, lagging behind national growth projections.

The number of electricians in the Chicagoland region has grown over the past 10 years, although it is projected to stay consistent through 2035. This contrasts with data nationwide, which shows significant growth since 2015 and projected to 2035 — especially in states like Texas, California, Florida, and Arizona (+95K between 2015 and 2035 in those states combined.)





Chicagoland's electricians are represented by both union and non-union labor.

One of the strengths of Chicagoland's electrical wiring industry is its union labor — often creating more value added for the quality of work provided. Unions like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) also offer rigorous apprenticeship programs, versing future electricians in strict safety protocols and new technologies. National data shows that 13.7% of installation, maintenance, and repair occupations are represented by unions; similarly, 14.2% of workers in Illinois are represented by unions.

SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC INSTALLERS

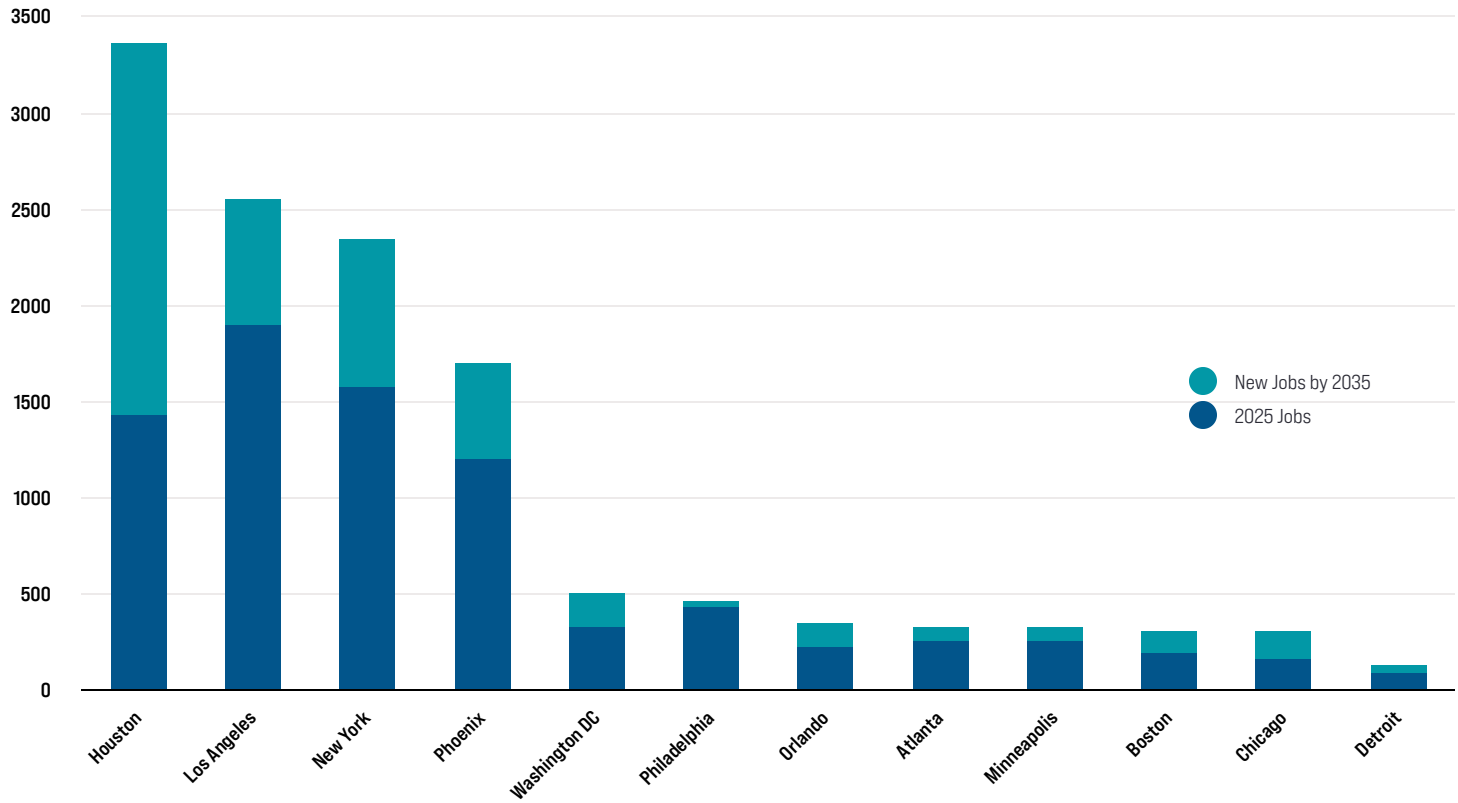
The region's supply of solar photovoltaic installers is below the national average, which could pose challenges to meeting future workforce demands.

In 2025, Chicagoland is home to 167 solar photovoltaic installers, ranking 35th nationwide. Chicago is underrepresented in this occupation. Compared to peer metro areas, Chicago ranks second-to-last in the number of solar photovoltaic installers. Chicago is above only Detroit (97), despite being the third-largest U.S. city by population and workforce.

From 2025 to 2035, the solar photovoltaic installation occupation is projected to grow by 46% across the U.S., with peer cities expected to experience a slightly higher average growth rate of 47%. In comparison, the Chicagoland region is projected to see an 84% growth rate — an addition of 140 jobs for a total of 308 jobs by 2035. This is the second largest growth rate among peer metros, only behind Houston with a growth rate of over 135%. Despite this high growth rate, by 2035, the region is only expected to grow from 35th to 33rd nationally.

The region's supply of solar photovoltaic installers is below the national average. An area of this size would typically have 868 employees. As demand for installers in the solar industry continues to grow, this shortage may pose challenges for finding qualified candidates.

Solar Photovoltaic Installation Jobs in Peer Cities, 2025-2035
Lightcast



SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC INSTALLERS

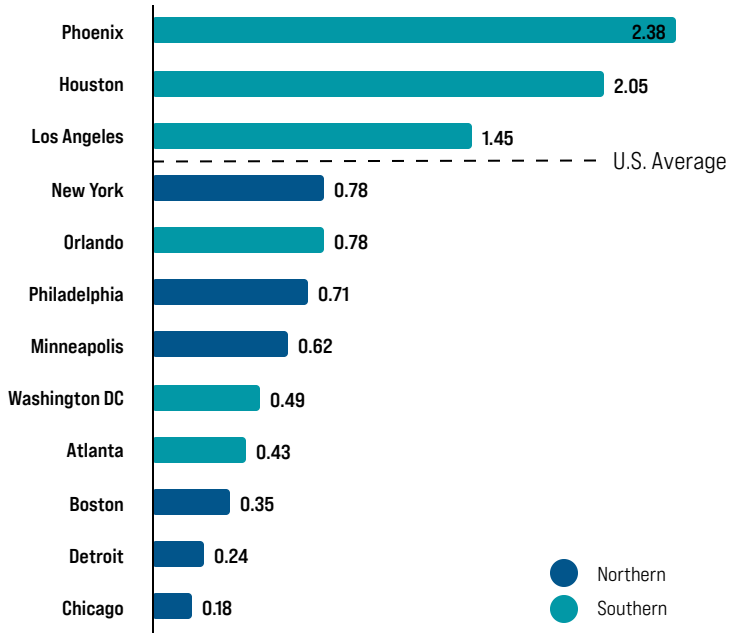
Chicagoland has the lowest location quotient of peer cities, indicating its workforce is not specialized for this occupation.

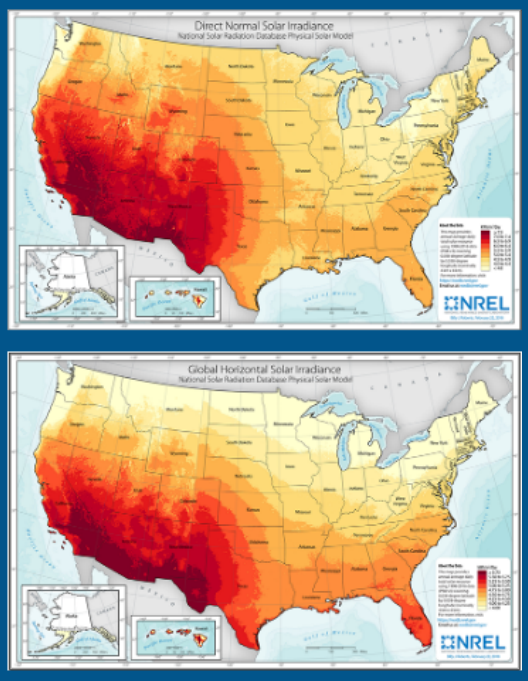
Almost all peer metros in the Northeast and Midwest regions have a location quotient (LQ) below 1.0 — the national average —reflecting their relative disadvantage due to their geographical location. However, not all southern metros have an LQ above 1.0, as Orlando, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., also fall below this benchmark, suggesting that factors beyond geography could be influencing their growth.

Chicagoland has the lowest LQ, at 0.18, just behind Detroit's 0.24. This indicates that solar photovoltaic installers are significantly under-represented in the region, with a concentration equal to just 18% of the national level. This metric is only expected to grow to 0.23 over the next decade, underscoring the metro area's lagging growth and expected shortfall in this workforce.

2025 LQ for Solar Installers in Peer Metros

Lightcast





National Renewable Energy Laboratory

NATURAL DIFFERENCES

On average, northern peer metros, except Chicago, are growing slower in solar installation than their southern and southwestern counterparts, with growth rates of 44% versus 57% over the same period. This disparity may stem from geographical differences in solar energy resources. Solar photovoltaic collectors rely on global solar radiation, comprising diffuse (scattered) and direct solar radiation. The U.S. average annual solar radiation is measured in kilowatt-hours per square meter per day (kWh/m^2/day) for direct normal irradiance (DNI) and global horizontal irradiance (GHI). Northern peer metros have a DNI between 4.0 and 4.9, while southern metros range from 4.9 to 6.9, with a few exceptions like Houston and Washington, D.C., which fall within the 4.5–4.9 range. Similarly, northern peer metros tend to have a GHI below 4.25, while southern metros generally exceed that threshold.

SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC INSTALLERS

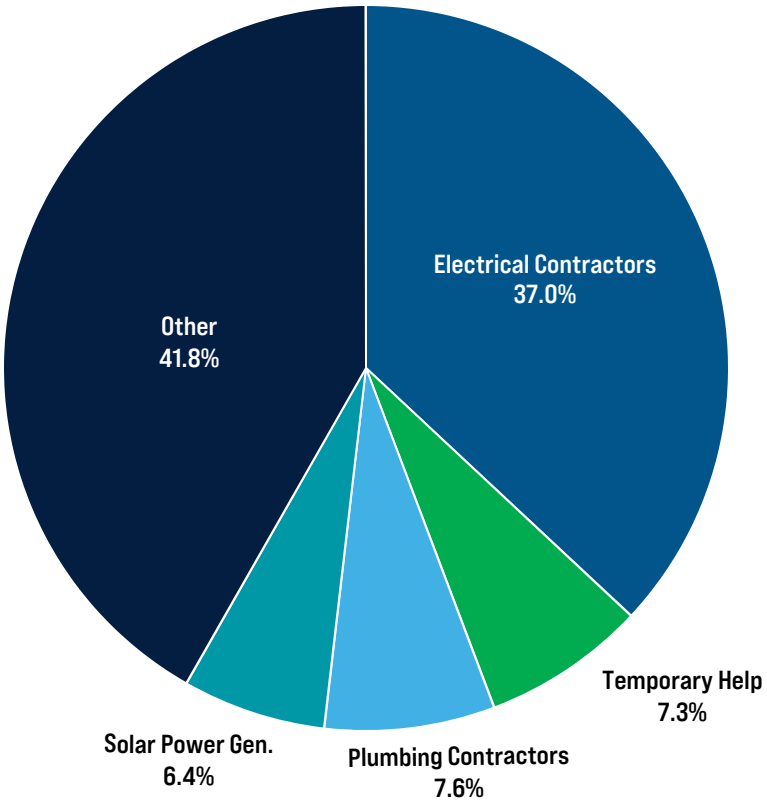
Solar photovoltaic installers are primarily employed by electrical contractors, temporary staffing services, and solar electric power generation companies.

Inverse staffing patterns for the solar photovoltaic installation occupation reveal that the top four industries employing solar photovoltaic installers are electrical contractors, plumbing contractors, temporary help services, and solar electric power generation. These industries also dominate the staffing of this occupation nationwide. However, by 2035, the number of solar photovoltaic installation jobs in the solar electric power generation industry is projected to surpass those in the electrical contractor industry in the region and plumbing contractor industry nationally.

As the solar industry matures over the next decade, a more significant proportion of solar photovoltaic installation jobs is expected to be concentrated in the solar electric power generation industry, accounting for a larger share of total employment. Although solar photovoltaic installers make up a small percentage of the workforce within the electrical contracting industry, both locally and nationally, the industry's size, maturity, and overlapping skill sets suggest that it will remain a large employer of solar photovoltaic installers through 2035.

Temporary work is common in the solar industry due to the significant labor force required during the construction phase, which includes installing solar panels, setting up infrastructure, and ensuring system functionality. However, once a solar field becomes operational, labor demands significantly decrease, as ongoing maintenance and operations require far fewer workers.

Solar Photovoltaic Installers Jobs in Industry in Chicagoland, 2025-2035
Lightcast



Industry	Occupation Jobs in Industry (2025)	Occupation Jobs in Industry (2035)
Electrical Contractors	62	78
Plumbing Contractors	13	16
Temporary Help	12	14
Solar Electric Power Generation	11	122

SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC INSTALLERS

Chicagoland's solar photovoltaic installer workforce is less diverse than national and peer city averages.

Chicagoland's demographic profile of solar photovoltaic installers shows lower overall diversity, with 41% diversity in the occupation, compared to 54% nationally and 49% in peer cities. Among its peer metros, Chicagoland ranks second in diversity for northern metros, following New York at 49%, and surpasses other metros in the Midwest and Northeast. However, southern metros generally have higher diversity levels in this workforce.

This increased diversity in southern metros can be attributed to a higher proportion of Hispanic or Latino populations employed in solar photovoltaic installation. However, Chicagoland is a leader in the representation of Black or African American workers in the occupation at 25%. This is only behind Atlanta at 30% and far ahead of the national average of 10%.

Diversity of Solar Photovoltaic Installers in Peer Metros
Lightcast

Metro Area	% Diverse	% White	% Hispanic	% Black
Los Angeles	76%	24%	59%	6%
Houston	69%	31%	45%	16%
Phoenix	64%	36%	46%	7%
Orlando	61%	39%	38%	17%
Washington D.C.	55%	45%	27%	21%
Atlanta	52%	48%	16%	30%
New York	49%	51%	27%	14%
Chicago	41%	60%	10%	25%
Philadelphia	30%	70%	11%	14%
Boston	30%	70%	14%	9%
Detroit	28%	72%	Insf. Data	16%
Minneapolis	23%	77%	8%	6%
Peer Average	49%	51%	29%	14%
National Average	54%	46%	35%	10%

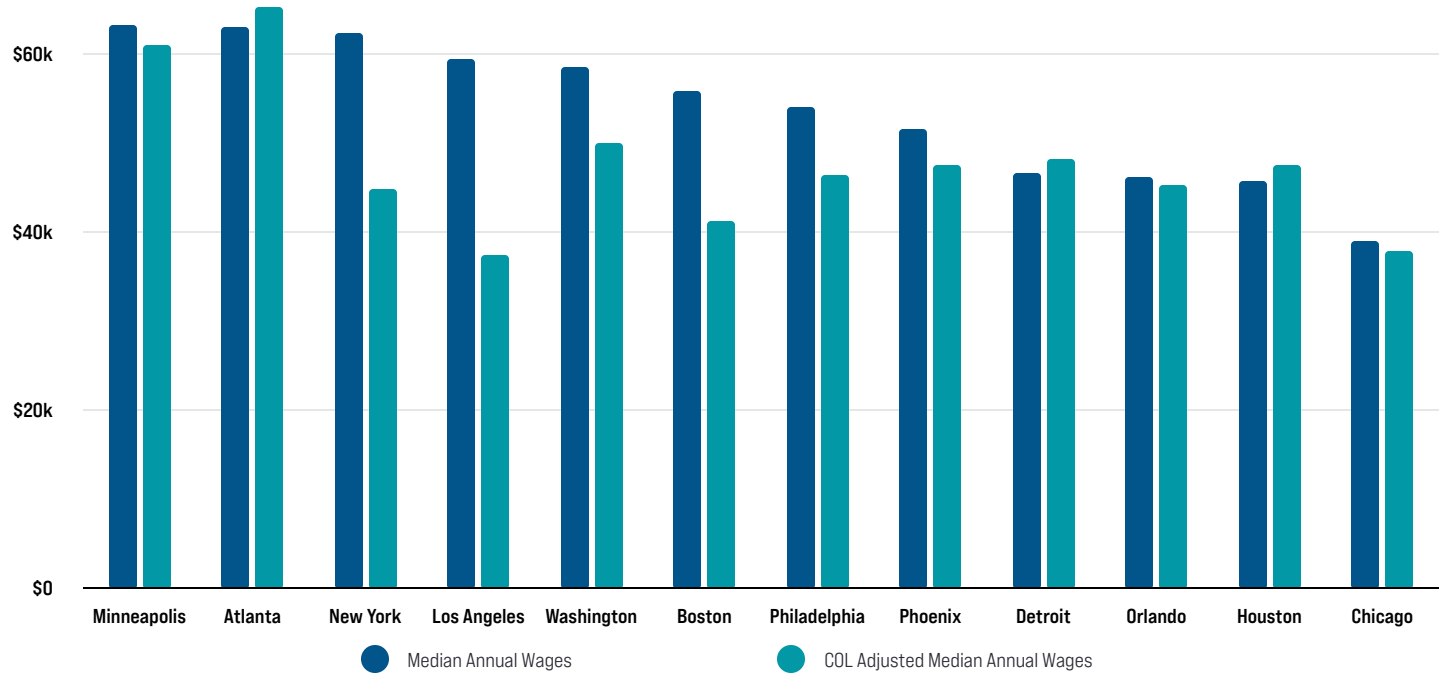
SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC INSTALLERS

Chicagoland's solar photovoltaic installer compensation was 25% lower than the national average, driven further down when adjusted for cost of living.

In 2025, the median annual earnings for solar photovoltaic installers in Chicagoland was $39,000, approximately 25% lower than the national average of $51,854 and the lowest among peer metros. When adjusted for Chicagoland's cost of living (COL), which is 17% higher than the national average, the take-home pay for Chicagoland workers in this occupation was about 27% lower than the national median, at $37,864.

At $55,178, peer metros had higher median annual earnings than Chicagoland and the national average. Peer metros also have a higher cost-of-living-adjusted take-home average than Chicagoland, but these figures are still 6% lower than the national median. Only two peer metros — Atlanta and Minneapolis — have higher cost-of-living-adjusted median earnings than the national median. This suggests that smaller towns or rural areas may be driving up national median earnings due to higher wages, lower costs of living, or a combination of both.

Median Annual Wages for Solar Photovoltaic Installers
Lightcast



SOLAR INSTALLATION BY SKILLS

A skills-based analysis of Chicagoland's solar workforce broadens the pool of potential talent by identifying occupations with overlapping skill sets that could be re-skilled to meet the growing demands of the local solar industry.

To conduct this analysis, we examined job postings from January 2024 through September 2025, focusing on solar photovoltaic installers (SOC Code 47-2231) employed within the solar electric power Generation (NAICS 221114) and electrical contracting and other wiring installation (NAICS 238210) industries. We further refined the data by filtering job titles, excluding those not directly tied to either industry or the occupation. Titles like "proofreader" and "driver helper" were omitted to provide a clearer view of skills most relevant to solar photovoltaic installation roles. This process resulted in 97 unique job postings for solar photovoltaic installers within the specified period.

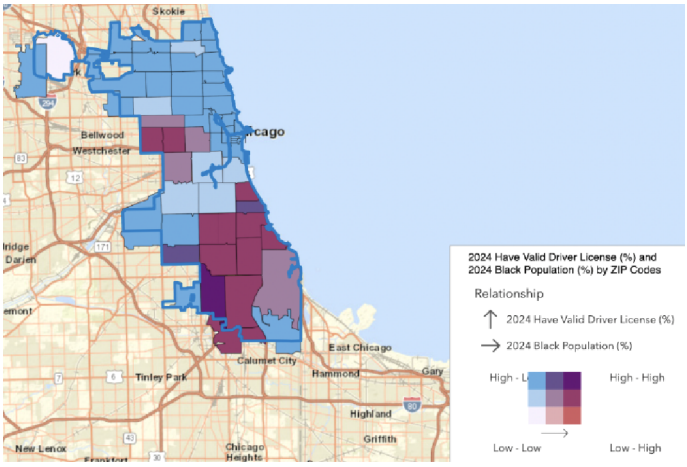
From this refined data set, we identified 15 specialized skills (right) that appeared most frequently across the job postings for the time frame.

Mentions of Skills in Job Postings
Lightcast

Specialized Skills	# Mentions (1/2024 - 9/2025)
Roofing	65
Solar Energy Systems Installation	61
Construction	40
Electrical Wiring	32
Electrical Equipment	27
Electrical Systems	25
Salesforce	23
Fall Protection	21
Materials Transport	21
Ability To Distinguish Colors	21
Personal Protective Equipment	21
Shingling	21
Solar Panel Assembly	20
Project Planning	20
Power Tool Operation	19
Total Job Postings	97

POTENTIAL BARRIERS FOR ENTRY: VALID DRIVER'S LICENSES

Although not a specialized skill, a valid driver's license was the most commonly required qualification in job postings. The lack of a valid driver's license can be a significant barrier to entry for this occupation. Additionally, it is important to note that the communities within the city of Chicago with the lowest recorded prevalence of a valid driver's license were predominantly across the south and west sides, which have the highest concentrations of Black or African American residents.



RELATED OCCUPATIONS

Skills for roofers and electricians overlap the most with skills needed for solar installation.

Using a refined methodology, we identified five occupations with a combined workforce of 110,697 with transferable solar skills:

- **Roofers:** Since 2024, 71% of all roofing job postings required solar skills. Additionally, roofers had all 15 solar skills mentioned in at least one job posting.
- **Electricians:** Job postings for electricians also show that about two-thirds of all job postings for the occupation required solar skills, with 14 of the 15 solar skills mentioned at least once, with the exception of solar panel assembly.
- **Other:** Carpenters, construction laborers, and maintenance and repair workers share some overlap with solar skills. However, given the smaller share of solar skills, these occupations would require more significant resources to re-skill than roofers and electricians.

Top Occupations with Solar Skills Based on Job Postings, 1/2024 - 9/2025
Lightcast

Occupation	2025 Jobs	% Job Postings with Solar Skills (1/2024 - 9/2025)	Skills Diversity (out of 15)
Roofers	4,475	71%	15
Electricians	16,468	65%	14
Construction Laborers	22,868	47%	10
Maintenance and Repair Workers	47,964	41%	14
Carpenters	18,922	38%	11

METHODOLOGY

We mapped the 15 target solar skills (page 19) to other occupation codes to identify a broader range of occupations relevant to solar photovoltaic installers — which could expand employment access and strengthen training pathways. We focused on construction and extraction (SOC code 47) and installation, maintenance, and repair (SOC code 49) occupations.

We then isolated the top occupations based on the volume of job postings during the period, refining the data by tracking how often each target skill appeared within the occupations. This allowed us to calculate the percentage of postings seeking "solar" skills (with some overlap across postings). We then excluded occupations with workforces with fewer than 1,500 workers in 2025, as targeting occupations with smaller workforces could strain those industries and yield limited impact. First-line supervisors were also excluded due to additional training requirements outside this project's scope. Additionally, occupations with less than 20% skill overlap and those with limited skill diversity in postings were removed to focus on roles with more substantial skill relevance.

RELATED OCCUPATIONS OUTLOOK

Chicagoland's solar-related occupations are projected to decline by 1%, driven by losses among carpenters, electricians and roofers.

From 2025 to 2035, Chicagoland is expected to experience an overall decline of 849 jobs (1%) across target occupations requiring solar-related skills. This decrease will be largely driven by a projected loss of 878 carpenters, accounting for nearly the entire decline. Electricians and roofers are also expected to face slight job losses, while maintenance and repair workers and construction workers are projected to maintain current levels.

Preliminary analysis suggests that a higher retirement risk may contribute to the decline in roofers. In contrast, the retirement risk for carpenters and electricians aligns with the national average for an area the size of Chicagoland. Since carpenters and electricians typically undergo apprenticeships, further investigation is needed to determine whether challenges with apprenticeship training programs or other factors contribute to the decline.

Solar Skills Occupation Changes in Chicagoland, 2025-2035

Lightcast

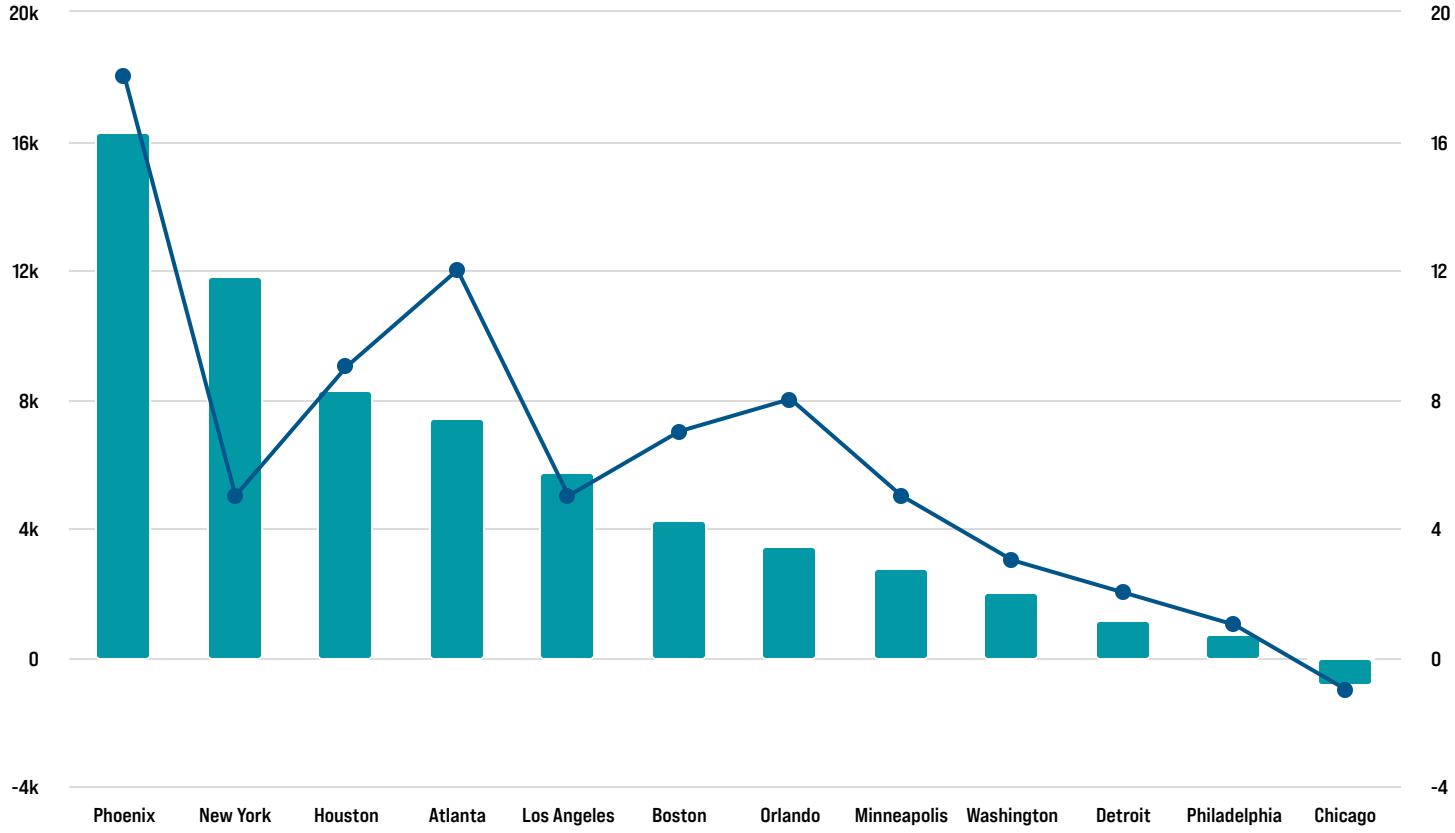
Occupation	2025 Jobs	2035 Jobs	2025 - 2035 Change	2025 - 2035 % Change
Carpenters	18,922	18,044	-878	-5%
Roofers	4,475	4,429	-47	-1%
Electricians	16,468	16,446	-21	0%
Maintenance and Repair Workers	47,964	47,960	-4	0%
Construction Laborers	22,868	22,969	100	0%
Total	**110,697**	**109,848**	**-849**	**-1%**

RELATED OCCUPATIONS OUTLOOK

Chicagoland lags behind the peer metro average by 6%–10% in workforce growth across these occupations, highlighting local factors.

Chicagoland's decline contrasts with national and peer metro trends. While both the U.S. and peer metros workforce in these occupations is expected to grow by 7%, Chicagoland stands alone in experiencing a decline, underscoring the role of local factors in driving these trends.

Change and Percent Change in Jobs across Peer Metros for Target Occupations, 2025-2035
Lightcast



OCCUPATION DETAIL

When comparing specific occupations, Chicagoland underperforms across the board. It is projected to see the largest declines in carpenters and roofers. The largest gaps in growth appear for electricians and carpenters compared to peer metros. Although it avoids the bottom ranking for a decline in roofers, it still ranks second to last ahead of Washington D.C. and tied with New York City.

Occupation	Chicagoland	Peer Metros Average
Carpenters	-5%	4%
Construction Laborers	0%	8%
Electricians	0%	10%
Roofers	-1%	6%
Maintenance and Repair Workers	0%	6%

RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Low median wages for solar photovoltaic installers pose challenges in attracting a workforce with the identified "solar" skills.

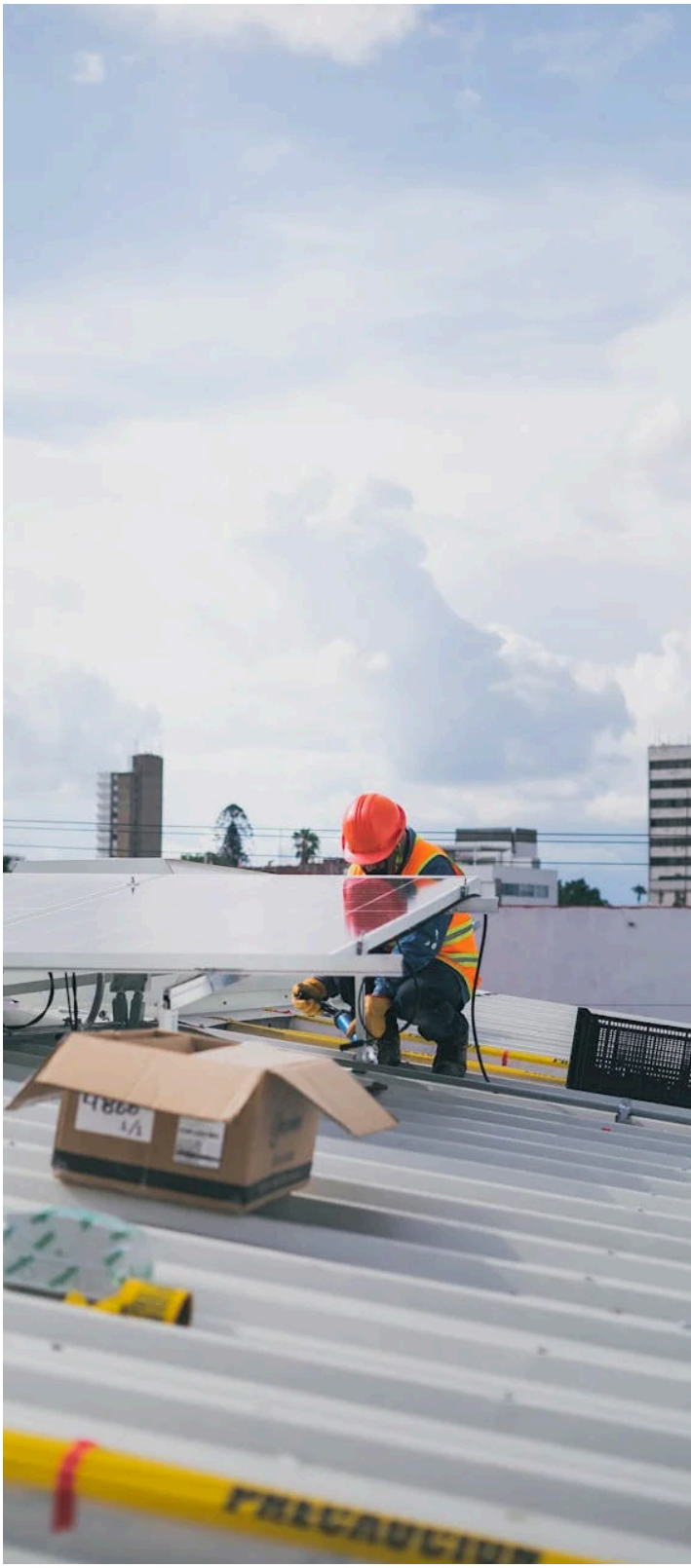
The median annual earnings for solar photovoltaic installers are $39,000, or $18.75 per hour, which is lower than all other occupations associated with solar-related skills. This presents a challenge in identifying a broader workforce with similar skills that could be (re)trained as solar photovoltaic installers — wages may be lower than what workers are already making, deterring talent from transitioning to this field.

Maintenance and repair workers earn the closest wages among comparable occupations, but still make $17,358 more annually or $8.34 more per hour. Electricians, however, earn the highest wages, with average earnings more than double those of solar photovoltaic installers in the Chicagoland area.

Median Wages for Occupations

Lightcast

Occupation	Hourly Earnings	Annual Earnings
Electricians	$46.18	$95,055
Carpenters	$35.95	$74,783
Roofers	$32.10	$66,762
Construction Laborers	$31.73	$65,995
Maintenance Workers	$27.09	$56,357
Solar Installers	$18.75	$39,000

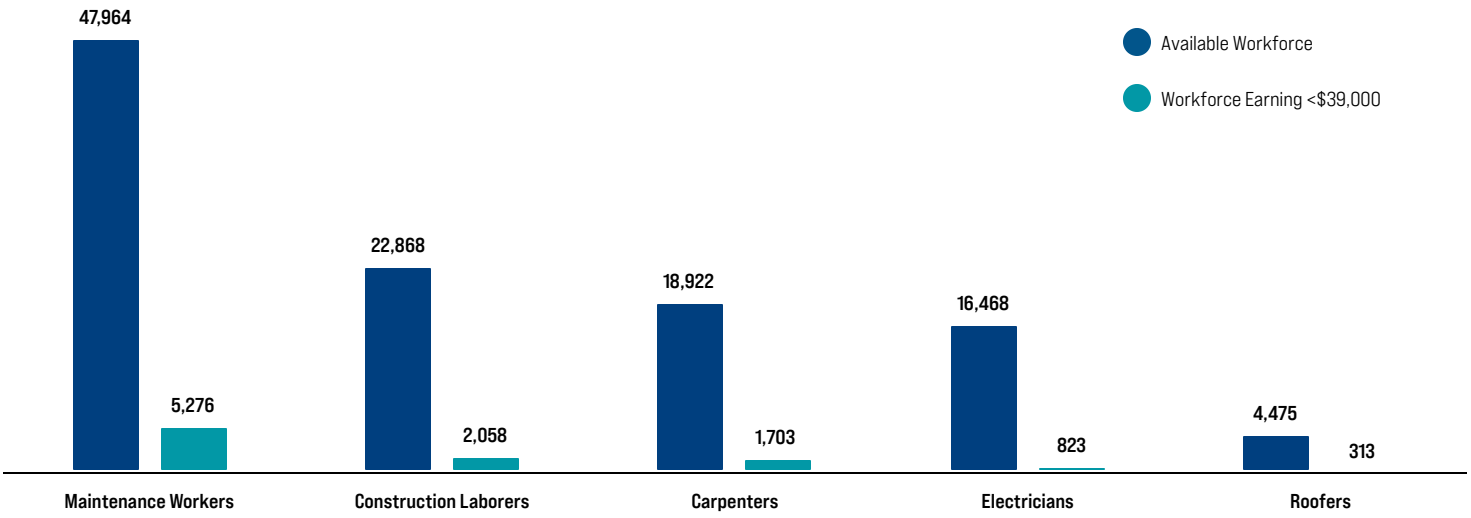


RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Low median wages for solar photovoltaic installers pose challenges in attracting a workforce with the identified "solar" skills.

The pool of available talent for potential re-skilling significantly decreases when workforce availability is adjusted for the median wage of solar photovoltaic installers ($39,000). Of the 110,697 jobs in these related occupations projected for 2025, only an estimated 10,174 — less than 10% — represent workers earning less than this median wage.

Workforce Availability in Occupations at $39k
Lightcast



"GOOD" SOLAR INSTALLATION JOBS

Additionally, concerns arise regarding aligning these wages with the concept of "good jobs." The U.S. Department of Commerce and Department of Labor outline eight principles that define a good job, including the requirement that "all workers are paid a stable and predictable living wage before overtime, tips, and commissions."

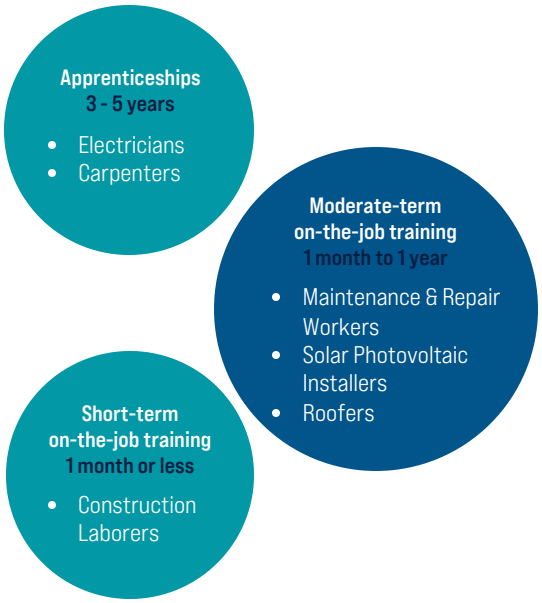
According to MIT's Living Wage Calculator, a full-time worker with no dependents in Illinois needs an hourly wage of $23.56 to meet basic living expenses. This figure increases in Chicagoland counties, ranging from $24.42 in Cook County to $27.66 in DuPage County, underscoring a significant gap between current wages and the regional cost of living. For solar photovoltaic installers in the Chicagoland area, median hourly wages fall short of the living wage in all counties, with the gap widening for those supporting dependents.

Living Wages in Chicagoland Counties
MIT Living Wage Calculator

Chicagoland County	Living Hourly Wage (by County)
Cook	$24.42
DuPage	$27.66
Kane	$25.96
Kendall	$26.58
Lake	$26.19
McHenry	$25.92
Will	$26.31
Chicagoland Solar Installers	**$18.75**

RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Training and occupational requirements for solar photovoltaic jobs can also contribute to difficulties in recruiting a solar workforce.



In addition to wages, the typical on-the-job training required for occupations involving solar skills is generally more than what's needed for solar photovoltaic installers, with the exception of construction laborers.

Solar photovoltaic installers, maintenance and repair workers, and roofers typically undergo moderate-term on-the-job training, which ranges from one month to one year. Carpenters and electricians, on the other hand, complete apprenticeships that demand a significant time commitment — at least 144 hours of specialized technical instruction and 2,000 hours of on-the-job training annually over a period of 3 to 5 years. Given the extensive training requirements and higher wages associated with these roles, it is unlikely that individuals in these professions would transition to jobs in solar photovoltaic installation.

WHY ARE SOLAR INSTALLATION WAGES LOWER?

According to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory's An Updated Review of the Solar PV Installation Workforce Literature (2023), several factors contribute, including:

1. **Non-standard work arrangements:** The solar industry often relies on subcontracting and staffing through temporary agencies, both locally and out-of-state.
2. **Organized labor:** Many commercial and residential solar installers are not unionized, and prevailing wage laws specific to this industry, trade or occupation are generally lacking.
3. **Occupational requirements:** Worker compensation varies based on the level of training, qualifications and experience individuals bring to the job.

Further analysis is needed to determine how these factors—individually and collectively—affect the current wage environment for solar photovoltaic installers in Illinois and Chicagoland. This will help identify interventions or initiatives to address wage-related challenges that may limit the local workforce's growth.

RECRUITMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Chicagoland's projected decline in occupations with solar skills highlights an opportunity to position solar training as a pathway to higher-paying careers.

With numerous planned projects in the region, the hyperlocal decline in occupations requiring solar skills, constraints on solar installation wages and the unlikeliness workers in higher-paying jobs will transition into solar, there is a unique opportunity to position solar photovoltaic installation as an entry point to higher-paying jobs.

Stakeholders across the talent pipeline must collaborate to identify gaps and opportunities — including existing training programs, workforce resources, and partnerships with community, trade, and educational organizations — creating an end-to-end solution that addresses the region's growing solar workforce needs. This effort should also address key issues such as wages, equity, and other factors influencing the occupation's growth and sustainability.

ENTRY POINT OPPORTUNITIES

- **Recruiting from Lower-Wage Occupations:** Targeting workers from unrelated, lower-wage occupations may serve as an effective entry point into the construction and utilities trades. While the available workforce in target occupations represents only a fraction of those earning the median annual wage of solar photovoltaic installers, there is potential to attract a diverse pool of candidates. According to Lightcast, at an annual wage of $39,000 approximately 1,111,556 workers—or 25% of the total regional workforce—could be tapped.
- **Partnering with Reentry Programs:** Creating pathways for unemployed or formerly incarcerated individuals reentering the workforce could further expand the talent pool. For instance, the Renewing Sovereignty Project's partnership with the 548 Foundation successfully reduced recidivism and supported workforce development. Its first cohort of 12 participants, who completed the program in 2023, achieved a 100% job placement rate in solar and related industries.

MIDPOINT OPPORTUNITIES

- **Pre-Apprenticeship Pathways:** Establishing pre-apprenticeship programs can bridge the readiness gap for those transitioning from solar photovoltaic installer roles to higher-paying jobs in trades projected to face declines over the next decade, such as electricians. These programs equip participants with essential skills and knowledge, preparing them for competitive, long-term apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Career Midpoint Certifications:** Developing certifications for parallel skill-building could benefit workers in construction and utility trades by equipping them with solar installation expertise. This approach could address current workforce skill gaps while offering career advancement opportunities or wage incentives to individuals in related roles.

CONCLUSION

Chicagoland's solar industry is positioned for expansion, driven by the potential for increased investments, workforce development initiatives, and enhanced community engagement. Despite the region's progress, critical challenges remain, including the underrepresentation of solar skills in the local workforce, low wages relative to the cost of living, and barriers to scaling employment in related sectors. Furthermore, while Chicagoland demonstrates higher growth rates than its peers in some aspects of the solar industry, its overall workforce expansion is not keeping pace with national trends, highlighting the need for strategic interventions.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, focusing on upskilling the labor force, aligning wages with living standards, improving access to training pathways, and fostering collaborations across sectors. By leveraging its existing strengths and addressing identified gaps, Chicagoland can enhance its competitiveness, promote equitable economic development, and lead the way in the green energy transition. The findings and insights from this report can guide policymakers, industry stakeholders, and community leaders as they work together to build a robust and sustainable solar industry for the region.

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[4] Illinois Solar Map, created by Chi Hack Night with data from the Illinois Power Agency (IPA) and US Energy Information Agency (EIA). https://ilsolarmap.com/

[5] In Chicagoland from January 2023 to September 2024, job postings analytics from Lightcast showed that Solar Electric Power Generation (221114) produced the most unique job postings for this occupation with 50 job posts, followed by Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring and Installation (238210) at 41, Plumbing and Heating Equipment and Supplies (Hydronics) Merchant Wholesalers (423720) at 20 and Plumbing, Heating, and Air-Conditioning Contractors at 14 (238220). The total number of unique job postings for this period was 259, with 62 employers competing. This data reflects similar trends when recreated nationally, with the drivers of job postings primarily lead by Solar Electric Power Generation (1,927 unique job postings) and Electrical Contractors (1,813 unique jobs postings). In this analysis, we excluded results linked to ADT Security System, as they inflated job postings related to Security System Services because ADT's Solar arm closed its solar division at the beginning of 2024.

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ABOUT

This report was authored by the World Business Chicago Research Center through the Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership and in partnership with the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development and Cook County Solar Synergy.

World Business Chicago is Chicago's public-private economic development agency. Our mission is to drive inclusive economic growth and job creation, support businesses, and promote Chicago as a leading global city. Our vision is to ensure that all Chicagoans prosper.

The Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership, or simply GCEP, represents a united strategy by the city of Chicago and the seven counties comprising Chicagoland to work together to drive inclusive economic development.

The Bureau of Economic Development's mission is to enhance the quality of life for Cook County residents through transformative and equitable community and economic development.

Solar Synergy convenes, aligns and leverages diverse stakeholders in the solar installation, small business and workforce ecosystems to share resources and information, promote and build sustainable long-term partnerships, and further our collective investments in solar installation.

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