



Park Equity, Life Expectancy, and Power Building

Community Profile for South Los Angeles

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Photo credit: National Health
Foundation – Genesis Productions

Since 2016, voters have enacted two countywide parcel tax measures in Los Angeles County (Measure A and Measure W) and a statewide bond (Proposition 68) to develop new parks and green spaces or improve existing ones. Combined, these public finance initiatives will generate hundreds of millions of dollars each year for parks and green spaces in Los Angeles County. This community profile focuses on the positive impact these funds could have if invested in South Los Angeles. It provides advocates and community leaders with information they can use to make the case for reversing the historic and pervasive park inequities experienced by Latino and Black residents. By building the power and capacity of the residents who are most impacted by park inequities, they will be able to seize this unique moment to ensure fair and just park investments.

About South LA

South Los Angeles in the City of Los Angeles (hereafter referred to as South LA) has a rich history of Black culture and tradition showcased in culinary, artistic, musical, and architectural achievements. Located just south of downtown Los Angeles, South LA has a vibrant heritage and well-recognized legacy of community organizing which continues to this day in the form of advocacy and community-building initiatives

being advanced by innovative Black-Brown coalitions. Over time, South LA has transitioned from a predominately Black population to a majority Latino community. In the late 1980s, crime and violence intensified during the crack cocaine epidemic. Concerning levels of homicide catalyzed community activists and leaders to explore tangible ways to stop the substance abuse and violence that was affecting the community. While Latino business owners and community organizations are emerging in South LA, the region remains deeply reliant on and indebted to Black leaders, especially in the realms of politics, healthcare, cultural arts, and faith-based institutions.

As a consequence of living in one of the most park-poor areas of LA County, South LA residents have been denied opportunities for physical activity, respite, exposure to nature, and the other health benefits associated with parks and green space.

South LA residents face increased risk for health problems compared to other areas in LA County due to present-day social, economic, and environmental conditions. The built environment is characterized by an overconcentration of liquor stores and hazardous land uses that emit toxic pollutants as well as the lack of quality, affordable housing. The absence of grocery stores and sit-down restaurants serving fresh food contribute to high rates of heart disease, diabetes, and premature death among South LA residents. As a consequence of living in one of the most park-poor areas of LA County, South LA residents have been denied opportunities for physical activity, respite, exposure to nature, and the other health benefits associated with parks and green space.¹

These park deficits have been—and continue to be—produced by racially biased policies and practices that date back to Jim Crow laws, such as residential segregation, redlining, racially biased planning decisions, exclusionary zoning policies, and racial covenants. These policies and practices translated into disinvestment of public infrastructure in South LA, as well as imbalances in political and economic power, technical knowledge, and opportunities to affect the allocation of park resources.

In 2016, the Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive Park and Recreation Needs Assessment (PNA) examined a number of factors—including park acreage, access, and condition among others—to determine park need for 188 distinct study areas across the county. The PNA designated South LA as having primarily ‘high park need’ and ‘very high park need’ neighborhoods, with an average of 1.6 and 0.7 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, respectively. In comparison, the Los Angeles countywide average is 3.3 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, and ‘very low park need’ communities have an average of 52 acres per 1,000 residents.

Adding park acreage can increase life expectancy in South LA

Prevention Institute, in partnership with UCLA, [National Health Foundation](#), [Community Coalition](#), [Esperanza Community Housing Corporation](#), [Social Justice Learning Institute](#), and three other base-building organizations, recently partnered to conduct research and develop advocacy tools to build upon the PNA's findings to better understand the relationship between access to parkland, existing tree cover, and life expectancy. Life expectancy is the average number of years a person can expect to live calculated by averaging across the population. Life expectancy serves as one indicator of overall community health.

Increasing park acreage in areas of LA County that face park deficits and low levels of tree canopy has the potential to considerably increase life expectancy in those areas.

Findings from this research show that increasing park acreage in areas of LA County that face park deficits and low levels of tree canopy has the potential to considerably increase life expectancy in those areas. This is especially important in communities like South LA, where the median life expectancy is 77 years, well below the upper bound for the county as a whole.^{2,3} About 15 miles away in the community of Beverly Hills, the life expectancy is about 90 years—13 years higher.⁴

According to the research, if all of the census tracts in LA County with park deficits and low tree canopy levels had an increase in park acreage up to the median for LA County tracts (about 54 acres within a two-mile radius of each census tract), LA County would likely see an average gain of two-thirds of a month of life expectancy for each LA County resident living in those tracts.ⁱⁱⁱ This translates into a gain of approximately 164,700 years in life expectancy across the population of all people living in census tracts in LA County with park deficits and low tree canopy levels.ⁱⁱⁱ Targeted investments in park infrastructure would significantly benefit the health of Latino and Black residents living in LA County, who comprise almost 72% of the gain in life expectancy (118,000 years). When examining vegetation, there are similar life expectancy benefits, providing further evidence that in less green areas, increasing park access could extend life expectancy.^{iv}

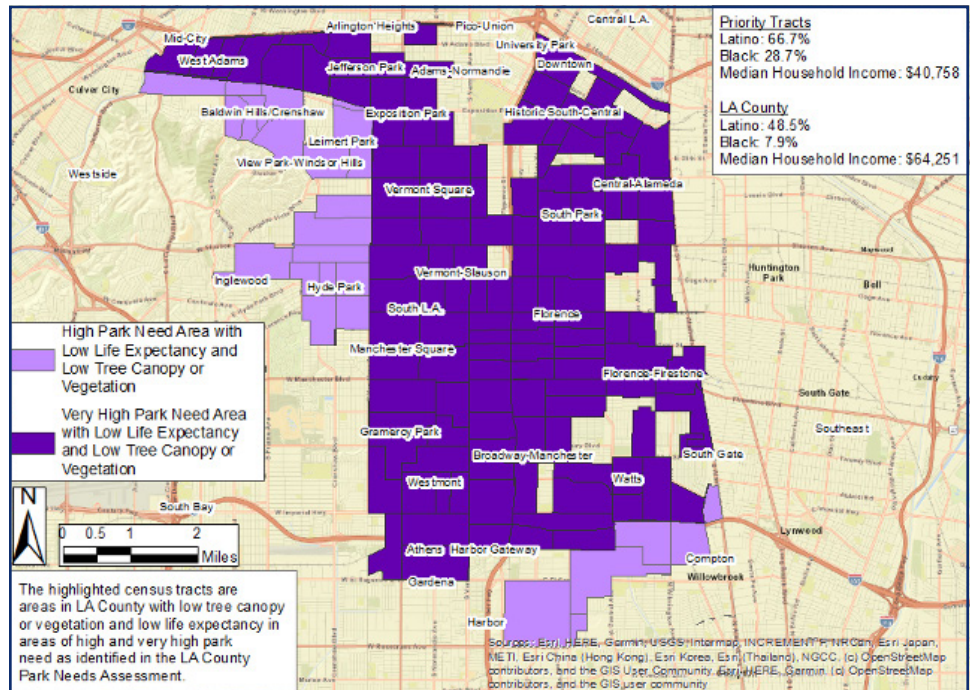
ⁱ Low tree canopy refers to below the median level - in this case, half of the Census tracts in LA County have tree canopy coverage above 15.7%, and half have below 15.7%. (TreePeople and Loyola Marymount Center for Urban Resilience 2016 Tree Canopy Coverage [2019]).

ⁱⁱ Park deficit refers to below the median level of available park acres- so in this case, half of the census tracts in LA County have above 53.8 available park acres on average throughout the tract, and half below 53.8 available acres. The available park acres metric used here was derived from the Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive Parks & Recreation Needs Assessment. This variable estimates the number of park acres that individuals living within a certain area have access to, based on the buffers of how much people are willing to travel for parks—with a 2 mile maximum distance—of different sizes (the assumption being that people will travel further for a larger park). This data was one factor used to determine the final park need for the assessment.

ⁱⁱⁱ These values represent years of life expectancy added for individuals living in tracts with both low park acreage and low tree canopy. An average of two-thirds of one month for each person, multiplied by the total population in these specific tracts, equates to a total gain of 164,700 years.

^{iv} When the predictive model used normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) as the green space metric in the analysis, which looks at vegetation, the results were similar

FIGURE 1: REDUCED LIFE EXPECTANCY IN HIGH AND VERY HIGH PARK NEED AREAS WITH LOW TREE CANOPY OR VEGETATION



Data sources: Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive Parks & Recreation Needs Assessment (2016), USALEEP Life Expectancy 2010-2015 Estimates (2018), TreePeople and Loyola Marymount Center for Urban Resilience 2016 Tree Canopy Coverage (2019), National Agriculture Imagery Program (NAIP) Aerial Imagery (2016), United States Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2018)

The map in Figure 1 shows the census tracts in South LA where public dollars dedicated for parks and green space should be prioritized to increase health benefits for residents. The map identifies priority census tracts that have 1) low life expectancy, 2) low tree canopy or vegetation, and 3) are also in an area with identified ‘high park need’ (light purple) or ‘very high park need’ (dark purple) as determined by the LA County Park Needs Assessment.^v (For additional information see: [Park Equity, Life Expectancy, and Power Building: Research Synopsis](#))

As Figure 1 shows, 727,468 people live in the park-poor census tracts identified in South LA.^{vi} The median household income in these tracts is \$40,758, compared to the countywide median income of \$64,251. Additionally, while Latinos make up 49% of LA County’s population, they represent 67% of people living in these high park need/low life expectancy tracts. Blacks make up 8% of the total LA County population but represent 29% of the population living in these tracts.⁵

^v In this map, low tree canopy or vegetation refers to falling below the median percent of either tree canopy coverage or the normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) value for LA County. Low life expectancy refers to falling below the median value of life expectancy of LA County, which is 80.6 years. High Park Need and Very High Park Need are defined by the Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment.

^{vi} Boundaries of the study areas in the Park Needs Assessment, boundaries of LA Times Neighborhoods, and boundaries of census tracts do not exactly align. Thus, demographic data for South LA is calculated for all census tracts with any portion in High Park Need and Very High Park Need areas.



Photo credit: Social Justice Learning Institute

Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County, issued by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health around the same time as the PNA, examined the links between park deficits and health outcomes. The report shows that communities with limited park acreage have a high chronic disease burden due to lack of physical activity.

South LA is divided among the Los Angeles City Council Districts 8, 9, and 10, which all rank high for chronic disease burden when compared to other LA County communities. For example, City Council District 8, with 0.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, ranks 114 out of 120 LA County communities for premature death from type-2 diabetes and ranks 119 out of 120 for premature death from cardiovascular disease.⁶ Likewise, City Council District 9, with 0.4 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, ranks 114 out of 120 LA County communities for premature death from cardiovascular disease.⁷ City Council District 10, with 0.6 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, ranks 104 out of 120 LA County communities for premature death from cardiovascular disease.⁸

The LA County Cities and Communities Health Profile series shows that 32% of adult residents in City Council District 8, 33% of adult residents in City Council District 9, and 23% of adult residents in City Council District 10 suffer from eating- and activity-related chronic illnesses, compared to only 10% in City Council Districts 5 and 11, which are higher-income areas in West Los Angeles.⁹

Moving forward toward park equity

The extreme lack of parks and green space in South LA contributes to poor health and shortens the lives of residents who have unfairly shouldered this burden over time and been denied access to the health and environmental benefits they provide. Yet, just as these inequities have been produced, it is possible to create pathways to park and green space equity. Reversing park inequities in South LA is critically important to ensure justice, improve residents' health and wellbeing, and reduce economic losses that result from the costs of treating preventable chronic diseases and premature loss of life.

In the Los Angeles region, the movement to achieve park equity has been advanced by nonprofit organizations focused on park development in low-income communities of color, environmental justice, civil rights, public health, and social justice groups. South LA groups active in this space include the Community Coalition, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, and the National Health Foundation.

In addition to emphasizing new or improved park spaces in high-need neighborhoods, these groups focus on building power and organizing capacity among residents most impacted by park deficits and supporting their efforts to advance effective solutions. Power is necessary to bend the arc of ongoing park and green space investments toward equitable, racially just outcomes. Building an ecosystem of power in South LA has enabled local groups to push for government transparency and accountability when it comes to parks and generate the political wherewithal—inside and outside government—to make sure public dollars for parks go where they are needed the most. They have also changed the dominant narrative about parks—from one in which parks are seen as a low priority to one in which they are understood as essential for healthy, safe, and vibrant communities.

By centering health equity in advocacy for park and green space investments, the residents of South LA can leverage their voice, agency, and power in decision-making to close health equity gaps and reverse the biased policies, procedures, practices, and norms that led to disinvestment and park deficits in the first place. Now is the moment to seize this unique opportunity to advance policy and systems change and ensure park equity for South LA.

Specific recommendations for reversing park inequities can be found in the policy brief, [Park Equity, Life Expectancy, and Power Building](#).

Power Building and Park Advocacy Action in South LA

In 2018, a group of 20 youth leaders from the BUILD Health LA Initiative—a program of the National Health Foundation (NHF)—conducted a comparative assessment of park conditions in multiple communities in the region, including their own South Central LA neighborhood. Their findings highlighted the spatial disparities that result from historic disinvestment. Through data collection and storytelling, these youth leaders shared their findings and recommendations with community stakeholders as they advocated for equity provisions in the Measure A competitive grant guidelines.

Naomi Humphrey, an alumna of NHF's BUILD Health LA Initiative and an advocate for park equity and spatial justice for her home community, shares about her experience:

"....my peers and I conducted park assessments on all fourteen parks in our district using an audit tool that evaluates parks based on amenities, the condition of facilities, and accessibility. To see if our parks fared any differently from a neighborhood similar in size and population density, we used the same audit tool to assess parks in Santa Monica. We assigned each park a letter grade, with "A" as the highest score and "F" being the lowest. Santa Monica parks averaged a "C" grade (72%), while parks in Historic South Central averaged an "F" (59%) on our audit tool. Several conditions contributed to the low park grades in my community, including graffiti, damaged equipment, old playground sets, broken lights,

unkempt bathrooms, and limited amenities like volleyball and tennis courts. In addition, Historic South Central has fewer park acres (84 to Santa Monica's 134) despite having a larger population (138,000 to Santa Monica's 93,000).

While seeing the low park grades for my community was disheartening, the truth is, the results were not surprising. Graffiti, broken lights, indecent facilities ... these are all things I have heard about and seen in my parks. Like many of my peers, this was something we had accepted as fact: parks have always been this way, and they probably always will be. However, this information better informed my peers and I about the institutional structures that set the stage for park inequity in my community." (See her blog for more.)

Based in Southern California, the NHF utilizes place-based strategies rooted in community-based participatory research efforts to engage, train, and activate community members to identify barriers to health and establish community-driven solutions. NHF's work on park equity focuses on youth organizing and leadership (e.g. the BUILD Health LA Initiative). Committed to a more just built environment, the NHF is also a member of the Park Equity Alliance, a coalition of community-based organizations from across the LA region committed to spatial justice and ensuring community oversight of Measure A implementation. For more information, see [NHF's website](#).

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Prevention Institute is a national nonprofit with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Our mission is to build prevention and health equity into key policies and actions at the federal, state, local, and organizational levels to ensure that the places where all people live, work, play and learn foster health, safety and wellbeing. Since 1997, we have partnered with communities, local government entities, foundations, multiple sectors, and public health agencies to bring cutting-edge research, practice, strategy, and analysis to the pressing health and safety concerns of the day. We have applied our approach to injury and violence prevention, healthy eating and active living, land use, health systems transformation, and mental health and wellbeing, among other issues.

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Dedication

Prevention Institute would like to dedicate this toolkit to three social, environmental, and health justice giants who fought tirelessly for park equity:

- Robert Garcia—civil rights attorney and park equity advocate
- Lewis McAdams—a godfather of the Los Angeles River
- Dr. Beatriz Solis—philanthropist and health equity advocate



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