



Pomona Envisions the Future mural at Second and Thomas Streets in the Thomas Plaza in downtown Pomona.
Photo credit: Manal J. Aboelata

Policy Brief: Healing LA Neighborhoods

A once-in-a-generation opportunity to create thriving and inclusive communities across Los Angeles

By Manal J. Aboelata, MPH

Los Angeles' history of segregation and unequal investment has left a lasting imprint on health, wellbeing, and quality of life in all of LA County's 88 cities, more than 100 unincorporated areas, and for all 10 million residents. For example, a child born today in Westmont, an unincorporated area in south Los Angeles County, can expect to live nearly 14 years less than a child born in Malibu in west LA County. Throughout her lifetime, that child living in Westmont will be at disproportionate risk of preventable illness, injury, and violence compared to the child living in Malibu, in part because the economic and physical environment in Westmont undermines health and wellbeing and in part because growing up in Malibu offers a whole host of protective factors.

The child living in Westmont will have less access to employment, income, and wealth accumulation: 97 percent of Westmont's residents are Latino or African American, and the area has a median household income of just \$32,000, reflecting long term lack of investment in this unincorporated community. By contrast, 90 percent of Malibu's residents are white, and the city has a median household income of \$138,000, in part mirroring robust public and private investment.



Fortunately, the fate of children born today in Westmont isn't set in stone. Right now, LA's public administrators have an unprecedented opportunity to help reverse the lasting effects that unfair zoning, segregation, and lack of equitable investment impose on the lowest-income residents of our County. Though the negative effects of segregation and selective disinvestment fall most heavily on African Americans, Latinos, and other communities of color, systemic inequality harms us all. And, we have evidence that LA County residents—across lines of race, geography, and class—want to invest in closing these gaps.

LA's legacy of codified inequity

A whole host of policies and practices from the mid-20th century segregated Los Angeles, sorting opportunities and resources—not just housing—along racial and economic lines. Redlining, the federal government's practice of grading areas based on biased perceptions of investment risk, provided the basis for banks' and lenders' decisions about where to make loans and investments. In practice, redlining and the lending practices that followed denied goods and services to entire neighborhoods and swaths of cities, predominantly those inhabited by African Americans, Latinos, and other so-called "undesirable" people. But redlining is only one of the mechanisms that codified racial segregation in LA. Racist attitudes, disparate investment patterns, [a policy framework that codified discrimination](#), and a tax structure that drained city reserves as local tax bases eroded, all converged to the detriment of people of color:

- As Richard Rothstein, author of the *Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, noted in a 2017 *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece, placement of federal public housing, federal subsidies enabling (white) suburban flight, and the Internal Revenue Services' [maintenance of tax-exempt status for discriminating nonprofits](#), were just a few ways in which "government's unconstitutional and systematic insistence on segregated housing cemented our separate neighborhoods."
- Local policies and practices entrenched segregation and inequity. These included racial covenants, internment of Japanese-American citizens, removal of Indigenous people from their lands, city-sanctioned intimidation of homeowners of color, and the lack of justice for African Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos, and other people of color who faced hateful acts when they sought to use public beaches, rent apartments, or own businesses in neighborhoods hostile to their presence.
- Racial segregation and other racist housing practices cut off pathways to homeownership and wealth accumulation for communities of color, while effectively discouraging public and private investment in a range of goods and services, leaving entire neighborhoods—mostly low-income, "inner-city" communities—starved for health-promoting infrastructure like parks and open spaces, safe streets and sidewalks, and retail food options. A feature piece on "[Undesign the Redline](#)," an interactive exhibit that traveled through LA in 2019, includes this text: "Investment drained from concentrated 'inner city' zones of poverty, mostly comprised of people of color, while investment poured into the rapidly expanding wealthier, whiter suburbs."

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- Given our society's fixation on the powerful mythology of the "free market," one might assume that all the investment that "poured" into suburbs and away from inner cities was private money invested by for-profit interests. But public dollars also fueled the investment in suburban growth at the expense of urban centers at the discretion of public administrators working under the watch of city mayors, county supervisors, and state governors.
- In "[Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity Mapping Analysis](#)," Jennifer Wolch and her coauthors state: "In Los Angeles, low-income and minority areas have had a history of undesirable land uses, especially industrial installations with their attendant pollution of air, water, and soil. For example, the City of Los Angeles' 1904 zoning code, the first in the nation, protected the affluent, predominantly Anglo Westside from such industrial uses. Higher density housing, commercial, and industrial activities were allowed to locate in the city's eastern and southern areas in which lower income workers, including people of color, were concentrated. Public parks, as well as other urban services were, however, disproportionately targeted to other parts of town." Whether by cause, effect, or correlation, "redlined communities also sat closer to industrial areas, vice districts, and environmentally compromised settings, exposing residents to health risks and crime," according to a KCET article, [Segregation in the City of Angels: A 1939 Housing Map of Housing Inequality in L.A.](#)

Present-day inequity

The legacies of unfair zoning, segregation, and unequal investment are still with us today. Racial inequality in home ownership is only one glaring result, but this segregation from opportunity has had far-reaching consequences that plague Angelenos to this day:

- A [groundbreaking report](#) by LA County's Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness found that, in 2017, Black people represented only nine percent of the general population in Los Angeles County yet comprised 40 percent of the population experiencing homelessness. The committee concluded that the "impact of institutional and structural racism in education, criminal justice, housing, employment, health care and access to opportunities cannot be denied: homelessness is a by-product of racism in America."
- A [2019 study](#) conducted by researchers at UC Berkeley and UCSF looked at historic redlining maps of Los Angeles (and seven other large cities) alongside present-day air-quality data from CalEnviroScreen 3.0 and emergency-room data and found that: "Residents of red or 'high risk' neighborhoods visited the emergency room for asthma-related complaints 2.4 times more often than residents of green or 'low risk' neighborhoods. Measures of diesel particulate matter in the air also averaged nearly twice as high in red neighborhoods compared to green neighborhoods." Anthony Nardone, the student researcher who led the study, interprets the findings: "What it suggests is that real estate policy that was enacted over 80 years ago, enforced in part on the basis of race, both shaped our neighborhoods and may still be impacting respiratory health outcomes today."
- The Los Angeles City Department of Transportation [found](#) that nearly 50 percent of LA's streets with the highest concentration of severe traffic collisions and fatalities are in neighborhoods that also have the worst health outcomes and economic conditions. Almost two thirds of all severe and fatal traffic collisions involving walkers are

concentrated on just six percent of LA city streets. These high-injury streets are concentrated in South LA and the Northeast San Fernando Valley. A similar pattern exists on unincorporated County roads where, according to the [LA County Vision Zero Action Plan](#), “fifty percent of fatal and severe injury collisions occurred on approximately 3.8 percent (125 miles) of the roadways managed by the County.” Again, these unsafe roads are disproportionately concentrated in South Los Angeles, specifically the unincorporated community of Westmont-West Athens.

- Los Angeles’ 2016 Countywide Comprehensive Park and Recreation Needs Assessment documented significant inequities in access to parks and open space in LA County. [Results](#) showed a startling gap between areas like Westmont with “very high” park need (averaging just 0.7 acres of parks/open space for every 1,000 residents) and areas like Malibu with “very low” park need (averaging 52 acres of parks/open space per 1,000 residents). LA County Department of Public Health’s *Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County: A Cities and Communities Report* also found that across LA County, African-American and Latino residents are more likely to live in neighborhoods that have less park space per capita compared to whites and Asian Americans.

These vast differences in health and safety across LA neighborhoods, by race and income, have been reinforced—and, in some cases, created—by housing, land-use, and economic policies and discriminatory investment patterns. The broad range of policies and practices that buttressed segregation reflect racist attitudes that many consider—or would like to believe—to be bygone. Yet many policies and practices are now embedded in the way our society operates, so that the status quo today reproduces inequality under the guise of “the way things are” or “the way things have always been done.” To reverse current-day patterns of inequality, LA will need to implement, in Rothstein’s words, “measures designed specifically to remedy government’s earlier imposition of segregation.”

The political will to close the gaps

Within a 24-month period beginning November 2016, Los Angeles County voters passed three ballot measures in rapid succession: [one to fund the transportation system](#), a [second to finance parks and open space](#), and, in March of 2017, a third measure passed to [fund homelessness services and housing](#). In November 2018, a fourth measure passed to [fund infrastructure to clean and capture stormwater and prevent flooding](#), bringing the total revenue from these four measures to \$1.5 billion per year. Taken together, the passage of these four measures within a 24-month period could be viewed as a voter referendum in favor of a more livable, sustainable, and equitable Los Angeles.

What we know from the polling results is that a super majority (over 66.67 percent) of participating voters saw the promise of these measures. Presumably, voters agreed to tax themselves because they believed in campaign promises that

Measure A—the Safe, Clean Neighborhood Parks and Beaches Measure—funds local parks, beaches, open spaces, and water resources.

Measure H provides roughly \$355 million per year to address homelessness and the need for affordable housing in LA County.

Measure M funds transit, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure, and other transportation projects.

Measure W—also known as the Safe Clean Water Program—funds projects to capture, treat, and recycle stormwater.

the measures would funnel resources to address urgent needs. Homelessness had reached epidemic proportions. Inaction on climate change seemed unconscionable, particularly where flooding, fires, and persistent environmental pollution harm local neighborhoods. Road congestion and long commutes impacted millions, and pedestrian fatalities still plagued a disproportionate number of corridors in communities of low income. Easy-to-understand maps showed that parks and open space were shamefully absent in concentrated parts of the County while others were rich with recreational facilities and preserved ecological areas.

In his article, [Helping Los Angeles Tackle the Need for Park Equity](#), author Matt Ball notes that “the County is the most populous in the nation and one of the largest, with 10 million residents across 88 cities and an area of more than 4,751 square miles. There are 3,024 parks that cover 900,000 acres; however, most of the acreage is currently in mountain parks, and urban centers are left lacking.” These measures promised solutions to improve safety, reduce congestion, curb gang activity, improve the quality of life for children and seniors, help people get off the streets, and promote environmental sustainability.

We also know that LA voters who favored the tax measures were willing to pitch in their own hard-earned resources for a greater public good. In her 2019 article, [Los Angeles Passed a Historic Transit Tax. Why Isn't It Working?](#) Laura Bliss cites a UCLA survey that found that “people voted for Measure M as an expression of their political beliefs, and in support of a broader social good.” In response to any number of factors—political beliefs, the ballot measure campaigns, clear data, their own lived experiences, trust in local politicians, or media coverage—voters saw these tax measures as providing meaningful relief to glaring problems. Voters put their trust in processes that would deliver results for LA County. It’s unlikely that they were only voting in their self-interest. If so, why agree to pay taxes? Why agree to pay *County* taxes? Taxpayers voted the way they did to make a dent in inequality and improve LA for all of us. To squander the opportunity to close historic and present-day inequities—frustrating the faith voters have entrusted in our public administrators—would be negligent and inexcusable.

Economists Manuel Pastor of the University of Southern California and Chris Benner of UC Santa Cruz have been conducting research on the topic of economic inequality for years and repeatedly find that income inequality and residential segregation stall economic growth; and that “regions that work toward equity have stronger and more resilient economic growth for everyone.” They call this the “just growth” frame and conclude that, based on the growing body of evidence, we can now “make the business case for infusing equity into development, because the economy only hums when everyone is included. Now we can make the case for government to put equity at the heart of planning, because the entire region will profit. Equity is not a special interest; it is a common one.”

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-Manuel Pastor
and Chris Benner in *Just Growth: Inclusion and Prosperity in America's Metropolitan Regions*

Healing LA neighborhoods: What will it take?

Given the once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in a more equitable future for LA, our public administrators should proactively invest our public resources to repair past harms, address current-day inequality, and avoid the future damage that failing to do so will most certainly cause. But creating thriving and inclusive communities for all Angelenos isn't just a matter of funneling money into our most historically marginalized neighborhoods. Moving money to areas of greatest need is a good start, but there are several structural problems that

our efforts must address to rectify racist policies of the past and current-day injustices. Here are six recommendations to those problems:

1. Create clear funding guidelines and earmark funds that prioritize historically disinvested communities.

Many of the measures will allocate resources through competitive grant application processes. The request for proposals and scoring rubric for any competitive grant program signals the priority of the agency. Agencies can choose to reinforce patterns of inequitable investment and the legacy of segregation or choose to proactively invest in priority communities. Prioritizing historically disinvested and marginalized communities works. In September 2019, Jon Christensen of UCLA [looked back](#) on the implementation of Proposition 1, a ballot measure approved by California voters in 2014 to fund improvements in water systems, and reflected: “We looked at Prop. 1—a \$7.5 billion bond—when it was midway through implementation and asked, ‘How is it going? What’s working? What’s not working? Are there improvements to be made looking forward to potential future bonds?’ We found some good news. When a funding measure prioritizes disadvantaged communities, earmarks funding for them, and sets guidelines to make sure projects go where they’re intended—it works. In every case where there was a specific funding target set, that target is being exceeded by the current trends in spending. And these projects improve water systems in communities that have historically not benefited from these kinds of investments.”

2. Design technical-assistance programs to prioritize support of historically under-resourced communities.

A technical assistance program is typically designed to provide technical support to prospective applicants and grantees. An effective technical assistance program should proactively establish relationships in jurisdictions identified as “high need” and build a pipeline of new applicants from high-need, historically disinvested areas. Using an approach that relies on people to request technical assistance will usually lead to more support going to the most well-organized, well-established, well-resourced jurisdictions.

Given LA’s diversity, cross-cultural communication and ability to work with people of color and people living in low income neighborhoods would be important qualifications for technical assistance program providers. Jon Christensen of UCLA makes the point that, “Technical assistance—providing funding for disadvantaged communities that lack civic infrastructure—is paying dividends. These places typically lack funding and staff for things such as planning, public engagement, and engineering to compete on a level playing field with wealthy communities like Santa Monica that have large planning staffs that can put together a proposal to apply for this kind of funding. Smaller communities or cities might have one person whose job it is to put together plans and proposals—or maybe none at all.” Administrators should proactively develop and implement best-practice technical assistance programs to support disinvested jurisdictions.

3. Remove barriers for community-based organizations.

In Wolch’s paper on parks and park funding in LA, which looks at the implementation of the City of Los Angeles’ Proposition K, she makes several important points about the ability of community-based organizations (CBOs) to engage with public agencies in developing projects with measure dollars. She says, “Requests for Proposals (RFPs) may be difficult for community-based organizations to complete because of their length and detailed, time consuming questions. In addition, CBOs must have a proven

track record, making it difficult for new organizations to get started in the . . . funding system, and in some cases, they must have or be able to identify additional resources to maintain facility improvements. Even if a group qualifies for consideration, their proposal still must be approved. A CBO must compete directly with . . . other public agencies with extensive experience in applying for public funds.” Wolch’s points are just as true for all four of the recent LA County tax measures as they were for Proposition K.

For historically under-resourced cities and unincorporated areas, CBOs often ‘stand in the gap,’ fulfilling key administrative and technical roles that strapped city officials or overextended county staff can’t or don’t play when it comes to pursuing funding for innovative investment projects that residents may want or need, like a bike path or a water retention basin that serves as open space. It’s not unheard of for a nonprofit CBO to apply for funds on behalf of their city only to be completely left out of receiving any of the financial benefits once the municipality is awarded funds.

Another problem is that there are too few successful and thriving CBOs operating in some of the County’s most disinvested neighborhoods. Of those that do exist, even fewer are capable of taking on the issues that infrastructure bond and recent tax measures fund: supportive housing, parks and open space, stormwater infrastructure, and transit. It will take a concerted effort to build the number of organizations in our most disinvested communities and strengthen the ones that are there. Short term, private philanthropy can play an important facilitative role. and public administrators need to modify their procedures and remove barriers to entry for organizations that could engage in this work now. Laying the foundation for long-term work is critical, because several of these tax measures will continue to generate revenue in perpetuity.

4. Expand the network of engaged resident leaders.

In tandem with strengthening the base of locally grounded CBOs able to engage in the work of building local capacity and physical projects in disinvested communities, public administrators should support CBOs to expand resident leadership and participation. Through concentrated efforts, including door-to-door organizing and public education, youth and resident leaders, especially from communities of color, can and should be engaged to weigh in on the policies and processes that slow the flow of resources to communities that have not historically received their fair share. In a March 2019 article, [“The Legacy of Redlining in Los Angeles: Disinvestment, Injustice, and Inefficiency Finding a Path Forward in 2019 and Beyond.”](#) Jamie Tijerina, budget advocate for LA City Region 8, suggests that one path forward is “educating the public to be able to recognize and reject policy positions that echo the errors of the past.”

5. Hold leaders accountable to transparency and equity.

LA County public administrators and their bosses, the LA County Board of Supervisors, are responsible for stewardship of the \$1.5 billion in annual taxpayer dollars that will be generated from measures passed from 2016 to 2018, not to mention previous measures that continue to generate funds. Advocates and organizers need resources to sustain their involvement and oversight over the long term. The time that elapses between the passage of a measure and the collection and distribution of revenues can be considerable. Few, if any, CBOs—particularly when we look at the smaller, less well-resourced, less established CBOs in historically disinvested communities—are funded adequately over the appropriate timeframes to maintain a watchful eye on how public administrators allocate funds. This is a critical role that CBOs and engaged, educated resident leaders can play, but it demands substantial investments of time and money.

Public agency staff have a responsibility to open processes to the public and make meaningful and consequential community engagement possible, and they should be held accountable when they fail to do so.

6. Make data accessible and transparent in a timely way.

One of the reasons the devastating legacy of redlining is so observable is because we can reflect on maps and data going back more than 80 years when the practice was in place. Today, we have tremendous capacity to process large amounts of data, conduct complex computations, and produce understandable and interactive output in the form of charts, graphs, and maps. Taxpayers deserve to see public data presented in accessible ways, and we deserve transparency and timely access to data depicting how our public dollars are being spent, where they are being spent, and what processes are being used to make determinations and adjustments over time.

Why heal LA neighborhoods now?

We are at a point in our history when we can and should engage in meaningful dialogue and action to repair the harms of past injustices, such as the enduring legacies of slavery and segregation, and scrutinize our current-day policies and practices for how they further or reverse those legacies. We have the data and knowledge to understand our past, see the present, and predict the benefits of a more equitable future. Too much of the national public rhetoric—divisive and harmful as it is—reflects a fear-based and reactionary response to our moves toward becoming a more diverse and pluralistic society. In becoming more racially diverse, we will inevitably reckon with the mythology of white supremacy and be forced to reconcile what it has meant for all of us—the groups of people who have unfairly benefited from it and those who have been unfairly harmed by it.

“An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future.”

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014

From a values standpoint, we have a tremendous opportunity in LA County. Many of us stand for fairness, justice, and equality—and we’ve just taxed ourselves \$1.5 billion per year to underwrite a shared vision of a healthier, safer, and more sustainable LA. Proactively investing in physical infrastructure in historically under-invested Black and Brown communities is one important mechanism for operationalizing the values of fairness and equity to repair past harms and accrue just and necessary benefits to people of color. Even if Angelenos won’t agree on everything, we deserve to have the opportunity to come together in diverse and inclusive forums to take stock of the legacy of segregation, biased land-use practices, and unequal investment patterns, and then to discuss and debate where we are headed and how we plan to get there.

Ironically, the communities that have been harmed the most by the enduring legacy of segregation and disinvestment are the very communities that are now most ripe for investment and most vulnerable to race- and class-based gentrification and displacement in our current economy. Knowing what we know now, it isn’t enough to just invest in new projects. The quality of the process matters: who gets included in discussion and debates, who gets to inform decisions about how and where resources are allocated and invested, and who benefits once resources are distributed. African Americans, people of African descent,

Indigenous people, and other people of color, including youth and low-income people, should be centered in these processes, shaping investments and outcomes. Given the long time horizons associated with these public-finance measures, we have a window of opportunity to put economic, organizational, and policy supports in place to maximize the likelihood that the people who have been investing real dollars, real sweat equity, and real cultural capital to make LA's communities vibrant are uplifted and empowered as new public infrastructure investments come in. Investing *to create thriving and inclusive communities* in neighborhoods that have been wounded by racial segregation and burned by systematic disinvestment is the prescription for healing the whole of Los Angeles, neighborhood by neighborhood.

Author's note: This policy brief was prepared while I was a Stanton Fellow of the Durfee Foundation. I'd like to thank the Durfee Foundation for providing support as I explored opportunities to influence the allocation of public finances generated from tax measures to support equitable health outcomes and healthier neighborhoods. The Durfee Foundation, however, is not responsible for the views I express in this brief.



Ocean Journey is a glass and ceramic mosaic mural depicting an underwater scene at George Washington Carver Park, which serves the communities of Willowbrook, Compton, and south LA neighborhoods in the City of Los Angeles.
Photo credit: Manal J. Aboelata