

# Park Equity, Life Expectancy, and Power Building

Community Profile for Boyle Heights and Unincorporated East Los Angeles

September 2020

Photo credit: Office of Los Angeles  
County Supervisor Hilda Solis

*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 the predominantly Latino communities of Boyle Heights and unincorporated East 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 Boyle Heights and unincorporated East Los Angeles**

The Boyle Heights community in the City of Los Angeles and unincorporated East Los Angeles (hereafter referred to as East LA) have

figured prominently in the history of Mexican Americans. Located east of the Los Angeles River, Boyle Heights and East LA are thriving cultural centers and home to one of the largest Latino populations, including Mexicans, Central Americans, and South Americans, in the United States. Both communities are recognized for their enduring legacies of community activism and social change. Among the historic civil rights milestones that took place on the Eastside are the student walkouts of 1968 and the Chicano moratoriums of 1969-1970. The walkouts brought attention to the educational inequities facing Latino students and the moratoriums reframed opposition to the Vietnam War as a civil rights issue. From a cultural standpoint, the 1970s mural movement brought greater visibility and international recognition to both East LA and Boyle Heights. These movement milestones and cultural landmarks put a spotlight on critical social issues facing these communities, made important contributions to a broader Latino struggle for self-determination, and resulted in important advances in education, employment, and the arts.

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Despite important gains in civil rights and education, present-day social, economic, and environmental conditions put Eastside residents at increased risk for health problems. The built environment features an overconcentration of polluting land uses, such as the former Exide battery recycling plant, and freeways next to homes, schools, and daycare centers, which contributes to high rates of asthma, chronic lung disease, and premature death. At the same time, well-documented park deficits in Boyle Heights and East LA deny residents opportunities for physical activity, respite, exposure to nature, and the other health benefits associated with parks and green space.<sup>1</sup> 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 both East LA and Boyle Heights, 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 Parks 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 Boyle Heights and East LA as having primarily ‘very high park need’ neighborhoods, with an average of 0.7 acres of parkland per

1,000 residents. (Boyle Heights also has a small geographic area that is categorized as ‘high park need,’ with an average of 1.7 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.) 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 East LA and Boyle Heights

*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.*

Prevention Institute, in partnership with UCLA, Promesa Boyle Heights, and six 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.

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 Boyle Heights and East LA, where the median life expectancy is 80 years, well below the upper bound for the county as a whole.<sup>2,3</sup> About 15 miles away in the community of Beverly Hills, the life expectancy is about 90 years—ten years higher.<sup>4</sup>

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 resident living in those tracts.<sup>iii</sup> 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.<sup>iii</sup> 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,

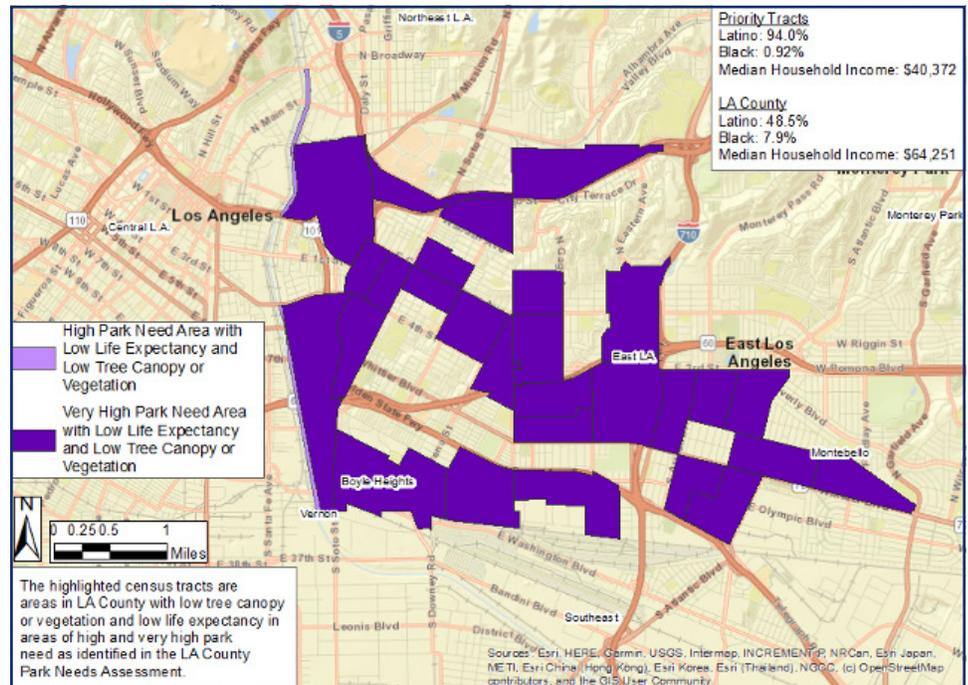
<sup>i</sup> Low tree canopy refers to below the median level - in this case, half of the census tracts in LA County have tree canopy coverage above 15.7%, and half have below 15.7%. (TreePeople and Loyola Marymount Center for Urban Resilience 2016 Tree Canopy Coverage [2019]).

<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> 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.

there are similar life expectancy benefits, providing further evidence that in less green areas, increasing park access could extend life expectancy.<sup>iv</sup>

**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 East LA and Boyle Heights 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.<sup>v</sup> (For additional information see: [Park Equity, Life Expectancy and Power Building: Research Synopsis](#))

There are 119,540 people living in the park-poor census tracts identified in Figure 1.<sup>vi</sup> The median household income in these tracts is \$40,372, compared to the countywide median income of

<sup>iv</sup> When we used normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) as the green space metric in our analysis, which looks at vegetation, the results were similar.

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> 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 Boyle Heights and unincorporated East LA is calculated for all census tracts with any portion in High Park Need and Very High Park Need areas.



Photo credit: Promesa Boyle Heights

\$64,251. Blacks make up 8% of the total LA County population and approximately 1% of the residents in these high need tracts. While Latinos make up 49% of LA County's population, they represent 94% of people living in these high park need/low life expectancy tracts.<sup>5</sup>

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. For example, unincorporated East Los Angeles, with 0.7 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, ranks 115 out of 120 LA County communities for premature death from type-2 diabetes.<sup>6</sup> Los Angeles City Council District 14, which includes Boyle Heights, ranks 97 out of 120 LA County communities for premature death from cardiovascular disease.<sup>7</sup>

A study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research found that approximately 36% of adults living in Boyle Heights have hypertension, a leading cause of cardiovascular disease and premature death.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, 28% of adults statewide and 25% in LA County's Service Planning Area (SPA) 5, a higher income West Los Angeles area, have hypertension.<sup>9</sup> The study also found that more than 17% of adult Boyle Heights residents have diabetes, compared with less than 9% statewide and 7% in SPA 5.<sup>10</sup>

## Moving forward toward park equity

The extreme lack of parks and green space in Boyle Heights and East 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 Boyle Heights and East 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. Eastside groups active in this space include From Lot to Spot and Promesa Boyle Heights.

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 on the Eastside 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. These groups 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 Boyle Heights and East 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 Boyle Heights and East 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 in Boyle Heights

[Promesa Boyle Heights](#) (Promesa) is a community-driven, cross-sector collaborative comprised of local residents and more than thirty organizational partners. They are united in a mission to improve conditions for children and families in Boyle Heights, which was originally the land of the indigenous Tongva people. Promesa is building a movement to close opportunity gaps, generate resources for residents, and improve conditions for students and families. Central to everything they do, Promesa fosters local leadership so residents become powerful agents of change.

In 2016, Promesa joined First 5 Los Angeles' [Building Stronger Families](#) initiative in East LA to connect families to resources and increase access to quality programming in open spaces for families with young children. Soon after, residents formed a Parks & Open Spaces Committee. The committee identified needs and assets at six parks in East LA, engaged public officials, built partnerships with allies, and made recommendations to the LA County Board of Supervisors. As part of this work, residents provided ongoing input into park programming and facilities at Salazar Park, which ultimately led to a \$2 million Proposition 68 grant for multi-benefit park improvements including a community learning center and garden space, walking paths, a shade structure, trees, seating, and a greywater irrigation system, among others.

Building upon these successes, in 2018-19, Promesa joined the Park Equity Alliance, a coalition of community-based organizations

that formed to advocate for strong equity provisions in Los Angeles County's Measure A grant funding guidelines. The coalition's advocacy goal was to reverse historic patterns of disinvestment in communities of color across the county. Promesa ensured that the interests and priorities of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles residents were elevated in the Alliance, to the Regional Parks and Open Space District, and to the Board of Supervisor. In fact, Promesa's grassroots organizing and power building were central in securing Supervisor Hilda Solis's support as a champion for the Alliance's policy recommendations.

When the final Measure A guidelines came before the Board of Supervisors in March 2019, the Park Equity Alliance mobilized 300 LA County residents, community-based organizations, and allies to make their voices heard. Nearly 110 individuals, including *lideres* from Promesa's park leadership committee, spoke in favor of the Park Equity Alliance's recommended changes to the document, which ultimately strengthened the guidelines and set the foundation for additional park funding allocations that will benefit residents of Boyle Heights and East LA for generations to come. Most recently, Promesa Boyle Heights secured a grant from First 5 Los Angeles on behalf of the Park Equity Alliance to conduct ongoing oversight of Measure A to ensure transparency and accountability in the management of these public funds—approximately \$95 million per year. For more information, see [Promesa Boyle Heights's website](#).

## Acknowledgements

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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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