



Park Equity, Life Expectancy, and Power Building

Community Profile for Pacoima, Panorama City, and Sun Valley

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 Northeast San Fernando Valley communities of Pacoima, Panorama City, and Sun Valley. 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 Pacoima, Panorama City, and Sun Valley

The communities of Pacoima, Panorama City, and Sun Valley are located in Los Angeles' Northeast San Fernando Valley, 20 miles northwest of downtown LA. Lesser known than its identity as a classic American

suburb in popular culture, the San Fernando Valley's multicultural history dates back more than 1,500 years to the settlement of the Pacoima area by the Tataviam people. In the late 1800s, following European and American colonization, small groups of Mexican Americans, Black Americans, and Japanese Americans settled in Pacoima, attracted by employment opportunities in agriculture and the railroads. In the 20th century, orchards and farms were cleared to make way for manufacturing and suburban housing, whose ownership was restricted by the covenants and zoning regulations that codified racial segregation. These dynamics politicized communities of color in the San Fernando Valley and prompted what became their enduring legacy of community activism. Today that activism is centered on environmental, social, and economic justice for low-income residents of neighborhoods that have been contaminated by abandoned aerospace and other industrial sites.

Well-documented park deficits in the Northeast Valley deny residents opportunities for physical activity, respite, exposure to nature, and the other health benefits associated with parks and green space.

Present-day social, economic, and environmental conditions put Northeast Valley residents at increased risk for health problems like asthma, skin cancer, miscarriages, and premature death. Housing covenants and other discriminatory actions segregated the Northeast Valley and its residents, who are largely people of color, from more affluent white neighborhoods. Racially biased land use decisions have resulted in toxic and other hazardous sites being located within or adjacent to residential areas of the Northeast Valley. Consequently, these communities are now home to a disproportionate concentration of landfills, rock quarries, incinerators, auto dismantlers, trucking yards, rock cutters, salvage yards, and auto body shops. Many of Los Angeles' landfills and large recycling facilities are located in the Northeast Valley. At the same time, well-documented park deficits in the Northeast Valley deny residents 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 the Northeast Valley, 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 the Pacoima and Sun Valley communities as primarily ‘high park need’ and the Panorama City community as ‘very high park need’, 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 the Northeast San Fernando Valley

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.

Prevention Institute, in partnership with UCLA, Pacoima Beautiful, 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 Northeast Valley communities, where the median life expectancy is 80 years, well below the upper bound for the county as a whole.^{2,3} About 20 miles away in the community of Beverly Hills, the life expectancy is about 90 years—ten 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%

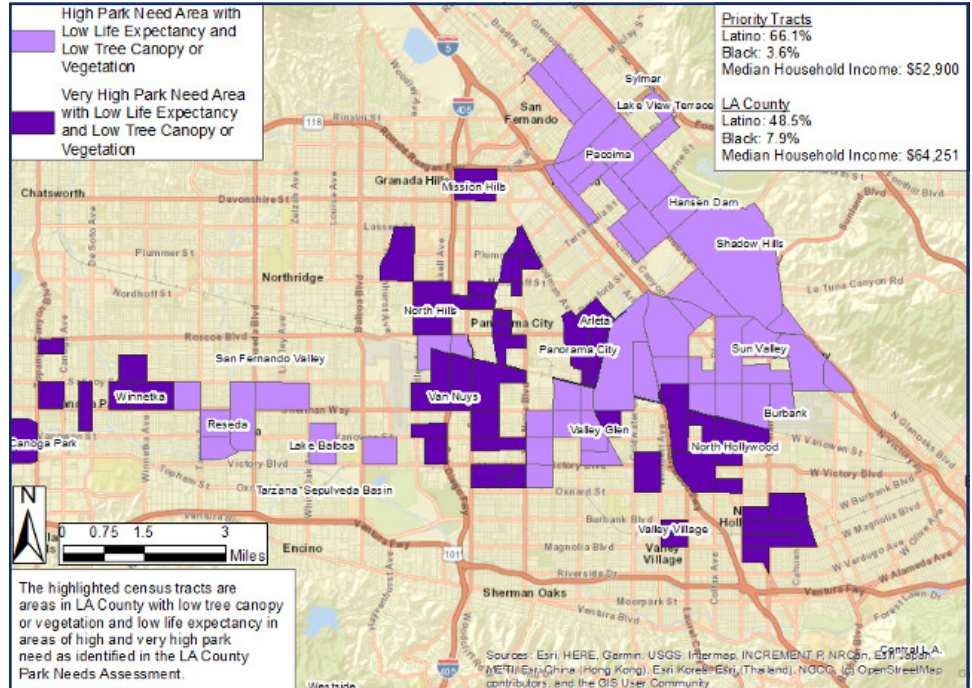
ⁱ Low tree canopy refers to below the median level - in this case, half of the census tracts in LA County have tree canopy coverage above 15.7%, and half have below 15.7%. (TreePeople and Loyola Marymount Center for Urban Resilience 2016 Tree Canopy Coverage [2019]).

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.

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}

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 San Fernando Valley 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)

There are 431,660 people living in the park-poor census tracts identified in Figure 1.^{vi} The median household income in these

^{iv} When we used normalized difference vegetation index (NDVI) as the green space metric in our analysis, which looks at vegetation, the results were similar.
^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 the Northeast Valley communities is calculated for all census tracts with any portion in High Park Need and Very High Park Need areas.



Photo credit: Pacoima Beautiful

tracts is \$53,490, compared to the countywide median income of \$64,251. Blacks make up 8% of the total LA County population and approximately 4% of the residents in these high need tracts. While Latinos make up 49% of LA County’s population, they represent 66% of people living in these high park need/low life expectancy tracts.⁵

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, LA City Council District 6—which includes Panorama City and Sun Valley—with 1.9 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, ranks 102 out of 113 LA County communities for eating- and activity-related chronic illness among children and 100 out of 120 for premature death from cardiovascular disease.⁶ LA City Council District 7—which includes Pacoima—with 2.9 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, ranks 82 out of 113 LA County communities for eating- and activity-related chronic illness among children and 75 out of 120 for premature death from cardiovascular disease.⁷

The LA County Cities and Communities Health Profile series shows that nearly 11% of adults in LA City Council District 6 have diabetes, compared to only 5% in LA City Council Districts 5 and 11.⁸ Similarly, 10% of LA City Council District 7 adult residents have diabetes.⁹

Moving forward toward park equity

The extreme lack of parks and green space in the Northeast Valley 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 the Northeast Valley 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. Pacoima Beautiful is a Northeast Valley environmental justice organization playing a leadership role in this space.

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 the Northeast Valley 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 Northeast Valley communities 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 Northeast Valley communities.

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 Pacoima

[Pacoima Beautiful](#) is a historically women-led, grassroots, environmental justice organization in Northeast San Fernando Valley, one of LA County's most environmentally challenged and park-poor areas. Pacoima Beautiful provides Northeast Valley residents educational opportunities, advocates for local policy change, and supports local arts and culture on behalf of a healthier and safer Northeast San Fernando Valley. The organization was founded in 1996 by five mothers who wanted to create a safer and cleaner community, especially for their children. Their collective action resulted in Pacoima's first large-scale clean up and tree planting events. In 2016, Pacoima Beautiful was part of a coalition of determined nonprofits and progressive business associations that advocated for the adoption of the City of LA's "Clean Up Green Up" ordinance—a cutting edge environmental justice policy solution that addresses the overconcentration of polluting land uses in three overburdened communities.

Pacoima Beautiful's park equity work centers on advocating to repurpose underutilized land to improve and increase access to parks and green spaces. It emphasizes the need to ensure that all park and green-space projects

are community-led and community-oriented. By uplifting the local community's expertise, Pacoima Beautiful has enabled community residents to boldly re-imagine single-use spaces and transform them into celebrated multi-use public amenities. This approach has ensured that the organization's projects are shaped and supported by community members.

Pacoima Beautiful collaborates with city and county agencies to build safe and fun parks for all to enjoy. One of its successful projects is the Pacoima Wash Natural Park, a 4.7-acre multi-benefit park that was previously a vacant lot but now provides community residents recreational space and wildlife habitat. Pacoima Beautiful is currently gathering feedback from local residents and stakeholders to create a community-driven design that transforms the greater Pacoima Wash area into an asset for everyone who lives in the Northeast San Fernando Valley. Pacoima Beautiful is 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 Los Angeles County's Measure A implementation. For more information, see [Pacoima Beautiful's website](#).

Acknowledgements

This project is supported by the Urban Institute through funds provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We thank them for their support and acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Urban Institute or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Written by Prevention Institute

Principal Authors

Elva Yañez, Director of Health Equity
Manal J. Aboelata, Deputy Executive Director
Jasneet Bains, Program Coordinator

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.

Contributors

UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, Department of Environmental Health Sciences

Michael Jerrett, PhD, Professor and Director of Center for Occupational and Environmental Health
Rachel Connolly, Doctoral Student

Community Advisory Board Members

Scott Chan, Staff Analyst, [Los Angeles County Center for Health Equity](#)
Sarah Chang, Health Equity Programs Director, [Social Justice Learning Institute](#)
Grace Cotangco, Program Manager, [National Health Foundation](#)
Patricia Guerra, Director of Organizing, [Community Coalition](#)
Nancy Halpern Ibrahim, Executive Director, [Esperanza Community Housing Corporation](#)
Naomi Humphrey, Undergraduate Health Equity Fellow, [National Health Foundation](#)
Carlos Leon, Lead Community Organizer, [Community Coalition](#)
Veronica Padilla-Campos, Executive Director, [Pacoima Beautiful](#)
Christine Petit, Executive Director, [Long Beach Forward](#)
Francisco Romero, Senior Organizer, [Promesa Boyle Heights](#)
Nicole Steele, Health Equity Program Manager, [Social Justice Learning Institute](#)

Reviewers

Malcolm Carson, Trust for Public Land
Jon Christensen, UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability
Mark Glasscock, Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation
Elizabeth Goldstein, The Municipal Arts Society of New York
Yvette Lopez-Ledesma, Park Equity Alliance/The Wilderness Society
Rob Baird, Prevention Institute

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



References

1. Prevention Institute. (2020). *Park Equity, Life Expectancy and Power Building: Policy Brief*. Extraído de <https://preventioninstitute.org/tools/advocacy-toolkit-park-equity-life-expectancy-and-power-building>
2. National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS). (2018). *The United States Small-Area Life Expectancy Project (USALEEP)*. <https://www.naphsis.org/usaleep>
3. The *Los Angeles Times*. (2000). *Mapping L.A.* Retrieved from <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods>
4. National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems (NAPHSIS). (2018). *The United States Small-Area Life Expectancy Project (USALEEP)*. <https://www.naphsis.org/usaleep>
5. The U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *American Community Survey 2014-2018 5-Year Estimates*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/acs-5-year.html>
6. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. (2016). *Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County: A Cities and Communities Report*. Retrieved from http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/chronic/docs/Parks%20Report%202016-rev_051816.pdf
7. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. (2016).
8. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. (2018). *City and Community Health Profiles*. Retrieved from <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/ohae/cchp/healthProfilePDF.htm>
9. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. (2018).