Park Equity in Los Angeles

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Visiting a neighborhood park, utilizing a local trail, or taking advantage of other recreational spaces seem like simple, uncontroversial activities. The distribution of public parks and green space is not an issue that many urban dwellers often think about. Yet, as with many contemporary issues in the United States, the distribution of public parks highlights a history of racial discrimination, environmental racism, and unequal health and education outcomes. As the United States' second-most populated city, one would hope that Los Angeles possesses enough recreational space for all its residents. However, most parks and other green spaces are concentrated in wealthy, majority-white neighborhoods, or in country clubs with a high economic barrier of entry. This creates a gap in public health, education, and general quality of life. Through tax reform, focused public policy, and increased funding for social oriented projects, the inequity of park distribution in Los Angeles can be a thing of the past.

"Park equity" is defined as safe and easy access to comparable public parks and recreational areas for all communities. Los Angeles (LA) fails to provide this for its residents and has cultivated a system that disadvantages already marginalized communities by denying park access. Public parks and green spaces in Los Angeles are divided by neighborhood, wealth distribution, and race. In a developed country like the United States, it would be expected that something as seemingly trivial as public parks would be plentiful in major urban centers. In Los Angeles, however, this is not the case. Annually, Trust for Public Land ranks the 100 most populated cities in America based on park accessibility and equitable distribution on a 100-point scale. LA received a numerical score of 41, ranking 74th out of 100 (LA County DPH, 2016). For a city whose civic pride runs deep, this may seem shocking. This problem is not new by any means, but in an era with heightened awareness about income inequality and racial inequity, this is one area that deserves more attention and more solutions. Unequal access to parks is not an issue unique to Los Angeles. Park equity affects many cities around the world, but the outcomes and consequences of unequal access remain consistent.

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Outcomes of Park Access

Those resistant to reducing park inequity may say that it is an issue, but not a dire one. Recent data surrounding public health outcomes relating to physical activity suggest otherwise. The most immediate effect of park access is more opportunity and space to be active and get exercise. A lack of access to recreational space and clean outdoor areas can be positively linked to poorer health outcomes, mainly obesity. (Babey et. al., 2007). As previously discussed, lower income communities of color disproportionately lack access to recreational space. These groups are less likely to be able to afford memberships to gyms or other recreation providers due to their economic status. Without the ability to take advantage of private gyms, and no public space to exercise in, their opportunity to exercise is reduced.

This lack of access to recreational space is especially detrimental to the children who live in these lower income areas. A growing problem in the United States is the rise in childhood obesity. The CDC states that roughly 18.5% of American children are considered obese and the number is only rising (Hales, et. al., 2010). Given the severity of this issue it is worthwhile to appreciate the effect that park access has on this. A study by the University of California, Los Angeles found that adolescents between the ages of 12-17 living in areas with a high concentration of poverty in their neighborhood experienced a significant decrease in physical activity, especially when fewer parks were near them (Figure 1). Similar patterns of physical activity were found when analyzing adolescents aged 12-17 but qualifying for the unemployment rate. As with neighborhood poverty, children's physical activity decreases (Figure 2). A similar study

Figure 1

Physical Activity and Park Access by Concentration of Poverty in the Neighborhood, Adolescents Ages 12-17, California, 2003

	Regular Physical Activity	No Physical Activity	Park within 400m of Home and Self-reported Safe Park Near Home
Concentration of Neighborhood Poverty	%	%	%
0-24%	74	5	28
25-49%	70	8*	19*
50% and above	67*	10*	19*

*Significantly different from 0-24%, p<0.05

Note: Concentration of neighborhood poverty refers to the percent of households in the census tract with incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. In 2003, 200% of the Federal Poverty Level was $24,768 for a family of two and $37,620 for a family of four.

Figure 2

Physical Activity and Park Access by Neighborhood Unemployment Rate, Adolescents Ages 12-17, California, 2003

	Regular Physical Activity	No Physical Activity	Park within 400m of Home and Self-reported Safe Park Near Home
Neighborhood Unemployment Rate	%	%	%
Less than 3%	75	4	30
3-5%	69*	9*	22*
6-7%	69	9*	16*
8% and above	65*	9*	11*

*Significantly different from "less than 3%," p<0.05

Note: Neighborhood unemployment rate refers to the percent of unemployed persons age 16 and over in the census tract.

Source (Figures 1 and 2): 2003 California Health Interview Survey, 2000 United States Census and Tele Atlas North America Inc./Geographic Data Technology Inc.

analyzing a much larger sample size, Los Angeles County, found near identical results (Woloch et. al., 2011). The scientific studies clearly show that more access to public parks and recreational space will help lower rates of childhood obesity.

While childhood obesity is the most observable effect that low park access has, it is not the only one. Low park equity can also have detrimental mental health outcomes. Looking at the state of mental health in this country shows that around 46 million Americans suffer from any form of mental disorder (Heller & Young, 2019). Roughly 20% of them suffer specifically from depression (Heller & Young, 2019). Many hold a common belief that being in and around nature can improve mental health and lower feelings of depression. There are studies that prove this beyond just common belief. The National Recreation and Parks Association found that people living less than a mile from green space had a 44% higher rate of physician-diagnosed anxiety or depression than those who lived close to green space. This was heavily concentrated in areas with an average household income below the median (Sallis & Spoon, 2014). Beyond reasons of equality and equity, park access is an issue that should be addressed from a public health standpoint as well. Failure to redistribute green space in Los Angeles perpetuates a system that disadvantages poorer families and most often, families of color. A good first step to realizing social equality among all classes is to ensure that they all have the same access to fundamental resources, such as public parks and recreational areas.

Public health outcomes are the most easily visible result of park inequity, but the problem also affects socioeconomic factors. Neighborhoods with little to no access to public parks do not only lose an area to exercise, but a place for public gatherings. Many parks are used for picnics or family outings that have nothing to do with exercise, rather they allow for social capital to be built among community members. The importance of social capital for lower income communities is significant. Creating connections and building trust and cohesion among neighbors is the primary way that grass-root organizations can unify to advocate for collective change. Building social capital is only possible with adequate public spaces for neighbors to congregate. A study conducted in Chicago showed that public parks specifically, have been positively linked to an increase in what is called "park-based social capital" in urban communities (Broyles et. al., 2011). Park-based social capital is a way for communities to build recreational groups for children to play, or sports teams and neighborhood work-out groups. This improves both social stability but also can decrease levels of obesity (Broyles et. al., 2011).

A much broader result of park inequality is the exacerbation of existing class-based inequalities in urban populations. In most major cities, there are already differences in amenities and luxuries that are afforded to more affluent or to more low-income areas. As previously stated, green space is an inequality commodity that is given to affluent neighborhoods more than the poorer ones. Among health and socioeconomic consequences are the furthering divide between social classes. A lack of access to green space can create negative health effects, which can reduce one's ability to work, and can cause economic instability from health care costs. Both reduce the likelihood that someone below or near the poverty line can rise above it. While many other factors such as a wage gap, national healthcare policy, and social justice initiatives can affect these results, there is evidence that park equity places a significant role in reinforcing class divides (Yu et. al., 2020).

A study conducted in Nanjing, China researched the availability of public parks relative to household income, poverty distribution in neighborhoods, and housing prices. The results showed that higher-income communities with a higher average housing price and low levels of poverty had the closest availability to public parks (Figure 3). Low-income, high poverty, and low housing price neighborhoods had much less access to public parks (Figure 3). The researchers concluded that areas with higher levels of park access create a feedback loop of high property values that allow parks to be better funded, thus increasing the property value further (Yu et. al., 2020). The same is true in the reverse for areas with less park access. While there are other contributing factors, park access alone is enough to maintain the current class-based inequalities in urban settings.

Park Equity in Los Angeles, California

A problem that is often overlooked when initially assessing Los Angeles is that there is a severe lack of parks and publicly available green space for those who live in lower income and predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhoods. When looking at the distribution of parks in terms of median household income and levels of poverty, the difference is staggering. Areas with a median household income of over $40,000 and less than 10% of residents below the poverty line can enjoy between 18-21 park acres per 1000 residents. Areas with a median household income between $20,000-$30,000 and between 20-40% below the poverty line have access to only 1 park acre per 1000 residents (Woloch et. al., 2005). These numbers show that the vast majority of LA's green space and public parks fall in areas that have more money, while neglecting lower-income neighborhoods.

These statistics are very similar when classifying park acres according to race instead of income. Areas where over 75% of residents identify as Caucasian can enjoy 31.8 park acres per resident. Looking exclusively at children, that increases to 192.9 park acres per 1,000 children (Woloch et. al., 2005). Areas that are predominantly Caucasian have an overwhelming majority of the green space in Los Angeles. A common sight to see are suburbs with vast tree coverage while urban areas have little in the way of greenery. In communities where over 75% of residents identify as Latino, African American, or Asian-Pacific Islander (API), those numbers reduce to anywhere between 0.3-1.7 park acres per 1000 residents and 1.6-6.3 acres per 1000 children. Areas with the least number of parks are API and Latino communities, with African American communities only barely increasing their acreage by roughly 1. 9% (Woloch et. al. 2005). Urban density and suburban sprawl play a big role in defining where these parks are. As LA's population grows, there is an increase of people moving to already crowded neighborhoods in the inner-city areas. The less dense and more spacious suburbs are secluded by a wall of high property prices. Urban density highlights both class struggle through property values but also racial disparities. Communities of color are in the inner-city urban areas with less physical space but a much higher density, 2-5 times denser to be exact (Woloch et. al., 2005). White-dominated neighborhoods are in suburbs with more open space that can be developed into parks.

Figure 3

	District	Total	Inner-City	Suburb
Accessibility level	Sum	2609	1227	1382
Very good access (<5 min)	Number	473	277	196
	Percentage	18.13%	22.58%	14.18%
Good access (5~10 min)	Number	1104	611	493
	Percentage	42.32%	49.80%	35.67%
Poor access (10~15 min)	Number	754	339	415
	Percentage	28.90%	27.63%	30.03%
Very poor (>15 min)	Number	278	0	278
	Percentage	10.66%	0.00%	20.12%
Within a 10-min walk	Number	1577	888	689
	Percentage	60.44%	72.37%	49.86%

Source (Figure 3): An Assessment of Urban Park Access Using House-Level Data in Urban China: Through the Lens of Social Equity. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2020.

Factors Creating Park Inequity in Los Angeles

To properly respond to a lack of park equity, it is crucial to understand what led to this point. Simply put, Los Angeles has yet to establish initiatives that create an equal distribution of public parks and recreational space. This issue rose concurrently with Los Angeles itself. As the population increased, and more white families left the urban center during the "white flight" period, development of parks stopped happening in urban areas. More money was being diverted into the growing suburbs while the inner-city was left without proper funding. The main reasons that park equity never happened were redlining, industrialization, the Quimby Act, Proposition K, and most recently, Proposition 13. Each one gradually laid the foundation for racial and economic lines to be drawn. Thus, dividing the greenery of Los Angeles, and ensuring that it was given to the wealthy and the white.

In the aftermath of World War II, the population of Los Angeles increased dramatically, with more GI's returning to the States to build a family. This was paired with a new influx of Mexican-American workers moving to Los Angeles to seek jobs in a city growing with post-war industrialization. With migrant families entering a predominantly white urban space, the families of white veterans left and sparked rapid suburbanization in a phenomenon called "white flight" (Schneider, 2008). As the wealthier, middle class families left, so did the financial resources that they carried with them. This led to a quick decline in infrastructure for urban areas that were now dominated by minority populations. As redlining became common practice under the government sponsored Home-Owners Loan Corporation, many Latino and African American families were denied access to these newly developed suburbs. With no social mobility to help them escape lower-income communities, these people were stuck. This becomes relevant to parks when realizing that funding for public parks can be tied to property value and the associated taxes. So, if minority populations were essentially forced into lower-income areas, the funding necessary to build new parks would never arise (Perry & Harshbarger, 2019). This lack of funding was further extended by the Quimby Act.

The Quimby Act was passed by the California State Legislature in 1965 and was enacted in 1971. It required housing developers to build a park or recreational space within 2 miles of the development or pay a fee in lieu of building the park (Woloch et. al., 2005). In theory, this would create more equity distribution of parks and help these communities. However, it disproportionately advantaged the white-dominated suburbs. Property developers were only building new apartment complexes and new housing developments in the suburban areas where they could charge higher rent. So, they were free to just pay the "in lieu" fees and avoided having to build new parks altogether. Even when there were new housing projects being built in urban spaces, it was easier to avoid setting aside land in already dense areas by just paying the fees. The "in lieu" loophole allowed for this problem to worsen since more and more urban developments lacked recreational space.

Proposition K is another big contributor to park inequity in Los Angeles. Prop K is a 1996 property tax that sets aside funds to be given out through an application-based grant for the sole purpose of funding public parks (Woloch et. al., 2005). The main issue with this is its ease of access. Low park equity areas generally do not have very robust community-based organizations (CBOs) and lack the resources to adequately apply for these grants. The system favors higher-income areas with more social capital and more influential CBO's that annually apply for these grants. Those areas already have expansive public parks, so most Proposition K's funds are not being used to build new parks, but to improve existing ones (Woloch et. al., 2005).

The most debate surrounding park equity is surrounding Proposition 13. Prop 13 mainly limited property taxes in the state of California. Passed in 1978, it froze the tax rate for any property built that year or before. The only way for those property values and their associated taxes to be reassessed was if they changed hands. This disadvantaged newer communities that were sprouting in the city and allowed more wealthy residents with deep fa-

milial roots to benefit from lower taxes.

So, how does this affect park access? In an episode of his podcast Revisionist History, Malcolm Gladwell addressed this very issue. He points the blame towards one of LA's bedrock institutions: private golf clubs. All the golf courses in Los Angeles take up roughly 2,300 acres, most of which is empty greenery with few people utilizing it (DiMauro, 2016). Despite their prevalence and associated wealth, their property tax is stuck at the 1978 level, all because of Proposition 13. Gladwell points out that despite new members being added to golf clubs on a regular basis, the city does not count that as a change in ownership (Gladwell, 2017). Therefore, the property tax rates of these clubs are never reassessed, creating a massive amount of private land that is exclusive to a small class of people (Gladwell, 2017). These clubs only pay a fraction of what their "true" property tax should be when adjusted for decades of inflation and increased property values. This leaves inner-city communities near some of these clubs left with a small tax base to support the already scarce parks.

Potential Solutions to Park Inequity

Policy approaches to solving park equity have been discussed for many years in California. Recently, the 2020 election in California included one proposed measure to repeal Proposition 13, but this initiative failed. Passing such a measure down the road could reinvigorate Los Angeles' tax base by requiring higher income neighborhoods with higher property values to pay a fairer share of taxes. More property tax income for the city would allow for higher investment into lower-income communities that are desperate for park development. The Quimby Act and Proposition K have also received heightened public attention regarding their effect on park inequity. For Proposition K, the prospect of repealing the measure seems unlikely. A more plausible solution is to establish more robust and politically powerful CBO's in poorer neighborhoods. Doing so would allow them to better apply for park project grants under Proposition K. The Quimby Act could be easily amended to close the "in lieu" fees loophole. Requiring new housing developments to include recreational space, instead of giving them an option to opt-out for a fee, would essentially force development companies to address park inequity. On a much broader scale, decoupling park funding from property tax would go a long way towards reducing the prevalence of park-poor neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Allocating funds on a need-based system rather than property values ensures that parks are built where they should be.

Aside from policy approaches, one of the most common solutions to park inequity is to simply build more parks. Perhaps the most important impediment to remedying inequity is the lack of space for potential parks. Especially in Los Angeles, the neighborhoods that are most affected by park access are denser than others. As previously stated, inner-city neighborhoods are 2-5 times more densely populated than suburban neighborhoods (Woloch et. al., 2005). Since these neighborhoods desperately need more public parks, new solutions to the land issue need to be created. According to Alessandro Rigolon, the three most important issues when trying to decide where to build new parks are proximity, acreage, and quality (Rigolon, 2016). The easiest to combat is proximity. If the goal is to provide green space close to underdeveloped areas, then smaller parks with less amenities can be built into housing developments, or in small residential lots that have been abandoned (Rigolon, 2016). While this leaves much to be desired in terms of quality, it nicely solves the issue of proximity. Acreage and quality go hand in hand as the harder of Rigolon's three issues. In dense urban areas, residential lots are not large enough to accommodate sports fields or large recreational areas. One solution proposed it to build near transportation hubs such as bus stops or metro lines, or near stormwater infrastructure (Rigolon, 2016). These commonly have open space to accommodate parking and other municipal functions. However, this solution is double ended as it solves the problem of park equity but exposes residents to potentially hazardous emissions from stormwater and heavy traffic from public transportation.

Three solutions specific to Los Angeles seek to reimagine the city's current infrastructure and make it more accessible and park friendly. The first proposed plan is the Los Angeles River Re-

vitalization Master Plan (LARRMP), seeking to utilize the waterway as a public good through multiple different projects. The collection of proposals seeks to correct years of inequity for lower-income communities and communities of color. One of the more expansive projects championed by the city's planning office is Albion River Riverside Park Project (Figure 4). The Albion Riverside Park would provide open green space and multiple sports fields to the communities near Dodger Stadium and Lincoln Heights (Reyes et. al., 2007). While it does not directly utilize the river itself, it repurposes

Figure 4

Source (Figure 4): Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan, Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River, Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering. 2007.

Figure 5

Source (Figure 5): Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan, Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River, Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering. 2007.

previously unused space around the river, owned by the city for storage. This project highlights the main goal of the LARRMP, to use the infrastructure of the LA River as a resource rather than unused space (Reyes et. al., 2007).

There are additional projects within this plan that are impressive in scale but are not without their own complications. One such project is the Taylor Yard G2 River Park Project. While the Bureau of Engineering has three proposals under this project, the most promising one is an island project (Figure 5). It seeks to completely overhaul how the Los Angeles River is used in the Cypress Park neighborhood, an area that is relatively park-poor. It would establish a pseudo-island in the river that would be connected on either side by tree-filled parks with bike paths for recreation. The island itself would be an ecological reserve for species threatened by urban pollution and climate change (Reyes, et. al, 2007). This proposal is a solid foundation for expanded park access for many LA residents. However, skeptics critique the Taylor Yard plan as an open door for gentrification in a historically Latino neighborhood.

Gentrification is an area of heated debate in Los Angeles, and cultural roots in these neighborhoods need to be protected, not washed away. The debate around gentrifying communities of color through park development is a through line in many development proposals but can be rectified. One amendment to the Taylor Yard proposal should be the inclusion of cultural centers or space designated for public gatherings and neighborhood celebrations. Popular among many Los Angeles neighborhoods are block parties where families can gather and participate in cultural practices or simple celebrations. Providing new spaces that are environmentally beneficial can create greater park access while simultaneously encouraging cultural celebration, instead of gentrifying it.

The third prominent solution to park inequity in Los Angeles has to do with the heavily trafficked 101 Freeway. The group named: Friends of Hollywood Central Park have developed a plan to construct a 38-acre park on top of roughly 1 mile of freeway, named Park 101(Figure 6), (Barragan, 2014). As of 2020, the plan has gone silent and seems to be no longer in progress (Sharp, 2017). The details of the dead proposal still give powerful insight to what can become of Los Angeles if given

Figure 6

Source (Figure 6): Downtown Freeway Cap Park Reemerges: New Green Space Above the Downtown Slot Would Reconnect El Pueblo with the Civic Center. Urbanize Los Angeles, Steven Sharp. 2017.

the proper attention. Running from Santa Monica Boulevard to Bronson Avenue, the park would bridge the division that runs through Downtown Los Angeles (DTLA), arguably the area that experiences the most amount of park inequity (Barragan, 2014). This plan would provide much needed green space to the residents of DTLA.

Visitors of Los Angeles might notice the lack of greenery on the busy streets of DTLA, but Park 101 aimed to give respite to pedestrians and provide a rest and recreational space. Potential amenities were dog parks, jogging trails, seasonal markets, and community centers (Barragan, 2014). While the project clearly placed an emphasis on community gathering, there were some proposed amenities that ring the familiar bell of gentrification. Bike shops, art galleries, terrace restaurants, and a bed and breakfast inn threatened to turn a community-based park into a tourist destination for a higher class of LA visitor (Barragan, 2014). Such inclusions would take away from the necessary recreational spaces that the residents of downtown have been historically deprived of.

Solutions to this problem are simple. Without focusing on the potential profitability of Park 101, future iterations of the idea should emphasize need-based amenities. Shaded space, recreational sports fields, biking or running trails, and community gathering spaces are more important for long-term happiness than restaurants or inns. The urge to gentrify new green space in Los Angeles is not a new problem but it is one that needs constant attention to counteract if park equity is to be achieved.

Conclusion

Divisions by race, class, and neighborhood are not new to Los Angeles and they will not be solved simply or quickly. Something as fundamental as parks, green space, and the right to be in nature deserves to be addressed by municipal governments and county administrators. Poor health outcomes for children and adults, negative impacts on mental health, racial inequities and class divisions are all exacerbated by poor access to parks and recreational spaces. While little attention is currently given to solving this problem, it is not for a lack of ideas. Building on existing city infrastructure, repurposing the underused LA River, and creating new space above the 101 Freeway are all imperfect ideas. However, they take significant first steps towards closing the gap in park inequity and deserve attention and implementation. Los Angeles is a hub of civic pride and strong cultural diversity. Public parks should reflect those positive qualities of the city, not work to further divide communities and neighborhoods.

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