



# Los Angeles Countywide Parks Needs Assessment

Embedding health equity in park planning and funding distribution

Key Themes | Social Connection & Safety, Health & Climate Change

## SUMMARY

The **Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment** (Needs Assessment) was a historic undertaking, led by the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, to address health equity and collaboratively engage all communities within Los Angeles County to gather data and input for decision making on parks and recreation. The primary Needs Assessment goal was to engage the public, cities and unincorporated areas, community based organizations, and other stakeholders to quantify the need for parks and recreational facilities, and determine the potential costs. Additional work by the County's Department of Public Health led to publication of a **Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County** report that found an association between health disparities and park access.

## LEAD AGENCY AND PARTNERSHIPS

- » Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation
- » Los Angeles County Regional Park and Open Space District
- » Consultant: PlaceWorks

**“The assessment data highlighted the urgency to address the park needs of communities most impacted by health disparities.”**

Norma E. Garcia, Acting Director  
Los Angeles County Department Of Parks & Recreation



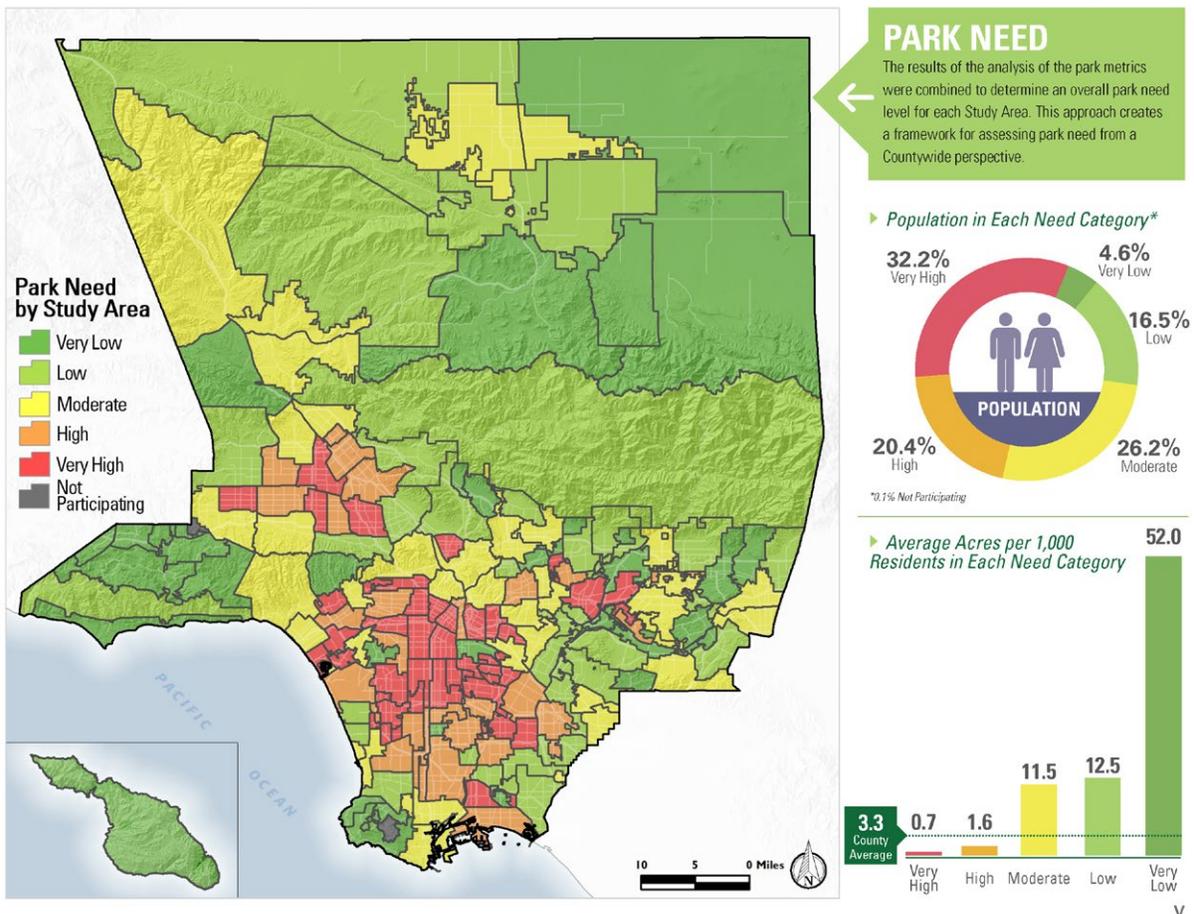
## DRIVERS

With an evolved understanding of health equity and social justice, and the need for meaningful data on equity and justice indicators to help inform policy decisions, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors (BOS) directed \$3.5 million to the County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to bring its 10 million+ residents together to complete the Needs Assessment in November 2015. It was the first parks needs assessment to engage the community and a broad-based coalition emphasizing park equity. DPR brought on a consultant team, led by PlaceWorks, to assist with the development of the Needs Assessment.

A Board-appointed Steering Committee and a Technical Advisory Committee guided the work. The County Department of Public Health (DPH) played a key role on the Steering Committee and prepared a report, "Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County."

## ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The Parks Needs Assessment was completed in 14 months. A key component of the Needs Assessment was to ensure broad public participation and include the community in the decision-making process. This was accomplished by online flyers and mailings, social media, an interactive website ([www.lacountyparkneeds.org](http://www.lacountyparkneeds.org)), and on-the-ground outreach. The primary method of collecting community input for the Needs Assessment was the series of community workshops held throughout the County between December 2015 and February 2016 for 178 out of the 188 Study Areas. Additionally, an active social media strategy was developed aimed at reaching stakeholders across all geographic regions of the County. The primary purpose was to drive people to the Needs Assessment website, where viewers could use the interactive map to find workshops in their local communities. Nine Facebook advertisements led nearly 20,000 people



to the website and generated about 4,000 clicks on the interactive maps. The effort also benefited from existing online networks, which shared the advertisements 450 times and generated close to 4,000 “likes,” effectively expanding the reached audience to over 1.1 million people. In addition to the online social media efforts, over 60 journalists through the County were contacted, and over 20 articles were published. Based on the circulation numbers of all participating media outlets, the print media effort reached over 1.2 million people.

As a result of the outreach efforts, community workshops were attended by over 5,100 participants across the county. Trained staff (city, county, or community based organization) facilitated the workshops, using a **Facilitator Toolkit** provided in print and digital formats, with a \$2,500 stipend to cover expenses. Translation of materials was available in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Armenian. The County collaborated with several local CBOs to identify High Priority Areas (HPAs) that have been historically underrepresented in civic engagement initiatives and planning processes. The County determined that these communities would benefit from additional approaches to outreach, including print advertisement, targeted online advertisement, and social media.

The Needs Assessment invited input on both projects already being proposed and desired new park projects. Community members identified the top ten local park projects in their Study Area. Additionally, regional park projects were prioritized by the managing agencies of regional recreation parks, regional specialty facilities, and open space/nature centers. With input from several agencies cost estimators and standardized set of costs, cost estimates were developed. Many communities prioritized making improvements to existing parks over building new ones, about 40% of prioritized projects were for maintenance and infrastructure. Cost estimates were developed for each prioritized project, with a total estimate of \$21.5 billion countywide.

## HEALTH, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND/OR CLIMATE IMPACT AREA

Parks and open spaces significantly impact the lives of residents on a daily basis by providing valuable spaces for active and passive recreation, social engagement, and community connectivity. The availability of parks and open space have documented public health benefits, including opportunities for increased physical activity, reduced obesity, improved air quality, and better mental health. Additionally, park spaces also have long-term environmental benefits, such as improving air quality, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing water consumption, improving water quality through less runoff, and increasing habitat in the urban landscape.

## FUNDING SOURCE

On July 5, 2016, the BOS adopted the Needs Assessment final report, and voted to place a parks funding measure on the November 2016 ballot to replace a proposition expiring in 2019. Measure A, titled the “Safe, Clean Neighborhood Parks, Open Space, Beaches, Rivers Protection and Water Conservation Measure,” was approved by approximately 75% of voters. It raises about \$94 million annually through a parcel tax on development, with 13% allocated to High and Very High need areas. Health equity is additionally addressed by the directing approximately 7% of Measure A funds to innovation and oversight, which includes a technical assistance program to help these areas develop plans and support the development of their applications in competitive grant programs.



## RESEARCH AND DATA

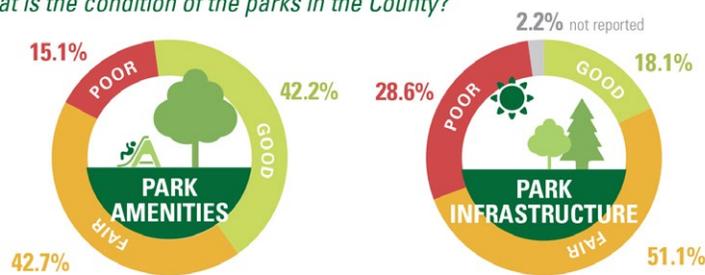
Prior to this Assessment, Los Angeles County did not have a comprehensive uniform set of parks data, which is a key component of equity driven decision-making. Many city parks and recreation departments were still recovering from the recent economic downturn, so while some had resources to provide GIS data, others could not conduct even a basic inventory. Cities with minimal resources to gather data had historically been at a disadvantage in applying for grant funding. DPR ensured these cities received the technical assistance needed. PlaceWorks and GreenInfo Network developed an inventory portal of existing available park data, and made the data available to agencies for validation and completion. Additionally, agencies were asked to rate the condition (good, fair, poor) of all park infrastructure and amenities. For those cities that did not have the infrastructure to validate the data, PlaceWorks worked with them throughout the entire data collection and validation process. The resulting inventory included over 3,000 parks and 9,000 amenities.

Based on the existing street network, GIS analysts determined that only 51 percent of the countywide population lives within half of a mile, or a 10-minute walk, of a park. The analysis also found that the number of park

amenities within the County is below the national average. The condition of park amenities and infrastructure tended to be in fair or poor condition. Overall, County staff found that 79 percent of the population was living in areas with moderate to very high need of parks.

Additionally, the Needs Assessment showed the stark differences between communities. It revealed that more than half of Los Angeles County residents live in areas of Very High or High park need. Very High park need areas have an average of just 0.7 acre of parkland per 1,000 residents and High park need areas have an average of 1.6 acres. Furthermore, DPH's report, Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County, found an association between park space and selected health outcomes. Findings included higher average rates of premature mortality from diabetes and cardiovascular disease, higher prevalence of childhood obesity, and greater economic hardship in cities and communities with less park space per capita. The report also found that African Americans and Latinos were more likely than Asians and Whites to live in cities and communities with less park space per capita. These findings underscore current socioeconomic and racial inequities in park space, and the need to prioritize resources to create safer parks in high need areas to maximize health and emotional benefits.

► *What is the condition of the parks in the County?*



► *How much of the population has access to parks?*



## CHALLENGES

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Challenges around administration processes and time-frame of the project:

**Administration:** large-scale community engagement required, in a short time frame, called for a creative and nimble administrative processes. The County gave stipends to the cities and nonprofit community based organizations (CBOs) staff that implemented the community engagement plans instead of going through a lengthy contracting processes. Each entity signed a funding agreement which outlined what meetings would look like and what accommodations would be made, such as providing food, childcare, transportation, and translation. School data on languages spoken in the home was analyzed to prioritize languages for translation. DPR provided backbone staffing such as: clerical support (printing materials and developing toolkits with area data and an engagement process guideline); support to accelerate administrative processes; technical assistance for cities and organizations new to this approach; and design and implementation of a social media, radio, and newspaper campaign. The consulting team included public engagement experts who trained over 300 facilitators and CBOs countywide. DPH staff helped get the word out broadly about the community meetings and facilitator trainings, monitored meeting attendance, and allocated resources for additional meetings as needed.

**Timeframe:** To reach a significant and broadly diverse number of the County residents in cities and unincorporated areas in a 14 month timeframe was a daunting task. It required a broad-based partnership with many different sectors, regions, agencies, and organizations, including First 5, sports teams, and businesses. CBOs were especially valuable partners in engaging park users. DPR worked diligently to create a shared vision and goals with these partners. Their transparency and flexibility in sharing leadership helped the process evolve into a truly collaborative joint effort.

## OUTCOMES

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The Countywide Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment serves as a model for a clear, replicable process that other jurisdictions across the country can use when they assess their region wide park facilities and needs. Furthermore, the Needs Assessment identified opportunities for new parks and recreational facilities, and ways to enhance and expand existing parks and open space, while also improving opportunities to access for users. Outcomes include:

- » Publication of a **Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County report** that found a relationship between health disparities and inequities in park space, providing valuable health equity data and supporting DPR's recommendation to allocate more resources to park poor areas. Most importantly, the Needs Assessment process provided the County, its jurisdictions, and its residents with a wealth of parks related information and opportunities. Additionally, DPR is using the report to prioritize park acquisition, development, and improvement projects based on the level of park need in a community. It is also being used to seek and allocate funds to meet identified community needs, particularly Very High and High park need areas, while also addressing the specific needs of every community in the county.
- » Adoption by the Board of Supervisors of a Comprehensive Countywide Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment which:
  - » Established metrics to measure park need for 188 study areas, and collected baseline data on park access, availability, variety, and condition of park amenities.
  - » Implemented a robust community engagement process that received the American Planning Association 2017 Public Outreach Awards from the California and Los Angeles chapters.
  - » Created a list of priority park projects and their estimated cost for each study area. Each area included a "Where Are Parks Most Needed?" map.

- » Approval of Measure A, the “Safe, Clean Neighborhood Parks, Open Space, Beaches, Rivers Protection and Water Conservation Measure,” in November 2016 by Los Angeles County voters, with specific allocations for priority park projects and technical assistance in high need areas. DPR and DPH were subsequently involved in Measure A’s Implementation Steering Committee, to ensure park funding is allocated in a way that most impacts health disparities.
- » The Needs Assessment laid the groundwork for making important park planning and funding decisions in Los Angeles County. It created momentum for equity and community-driven policies that guide how resources are allocated in the County.

The Measure A Steering Committee helped guide the Los Angeles County Regional Park and Open Space District in designing and implementing the Measure A grant program, filling in details about funding allocation and distribution to address the needs and priorities identified through the Needs Assessment. The Steering Committee completed all of its meetings. The Measure A grant guidelines were adopted by the Board of Supervisors in March 2019. Local agencies are working to identify innovative solutions, particularly in densely populated communities with no available vacant land. Underutilized properties, utility corridors, and other public spaces are being considered for new parks as well as partnerships for joint use/reuse with schools, hospitals, and others.

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*Case story was adapted for the OPR website from the California Chronic Disease Prevention Leadership Project*

*Partially excerpted from an UrbDeZine Los Angeles article*

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