

The Many Benefits of Parks



by Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP

How can protecting open space and parks – and ensuring equitable access to them – help us recover from COVID-19 and also fare better as a society in the years to come? It turns out that there are significant health and community benefits to time spent outdoors in contact with nature. During this pandemic and time of civil unrest, when stress and anxiety levels run high, [science](#) tells us that a simple 10-20 minute stretch of time outdoors can deliver mental health benefits, while many of the activities we tend to do outdoors – walking, running, playing – increase cardiovascular health. The healthy lifestyle promoted by parks can make a person less susceptible to the dangerous complications of a COVID-19 infection. All of this may seem obvious; in fact, the health benefits of parks and open space are so well recognized that cities have been constructing such spaces for well over a century in order to support residents' well-being. But today, as this [pandemic hits hardest](#) certain groups of Americans – namely the poor and people of color – it is important to address the fact that these same groups have often had the most limited access to green spaces for exercise and enjoyment and the accompanying health benefits. This unequal access stretches back for generations and has been due to a lack of nearby parks in certain communities as well as segregation practices and policing that make certain people feel unwelcome or unsafe in these public spaces. As communities across the country adapt to life with COVID-19, how can we prioritize the things that work to keep our population healthy, and improve the situations that clearly leave some sectors of the population at higher risk for health complications?

The United States has long held up the idea that society should be structured in such a way that each person can realize her full potential in life, and have access to the public amenities

that support individual and community well-being. This shared understanding of our democratic ideals has fueled many impressive projects over the generations, including national parks and public schools and libraries, as well as legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to protect access for all. One of the nation's most famous parks – New York City's Central Park – was designed in the 1850s by the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. who believed that such spaces are critical to a democratic society. Olmsted designed Central Park and numerous other parks across the country with the express purpose of providing relief from the stresses and pollution of city life, rejuvenation of the body and spirit, and shared community spaces where people of all walks of life could interact and thereby strengthen community ties. Olmsted believed that time spent enjoying a beautiful natural scene



Map detail, Central Park, 1879. [Library of Congress image.](#)

helps fulfill one of the key claims in the Declaration of Independence by not only providing “pleasure for the time being,” but more significantly, by increasing a person’s “subsequent capacity for happiness.”

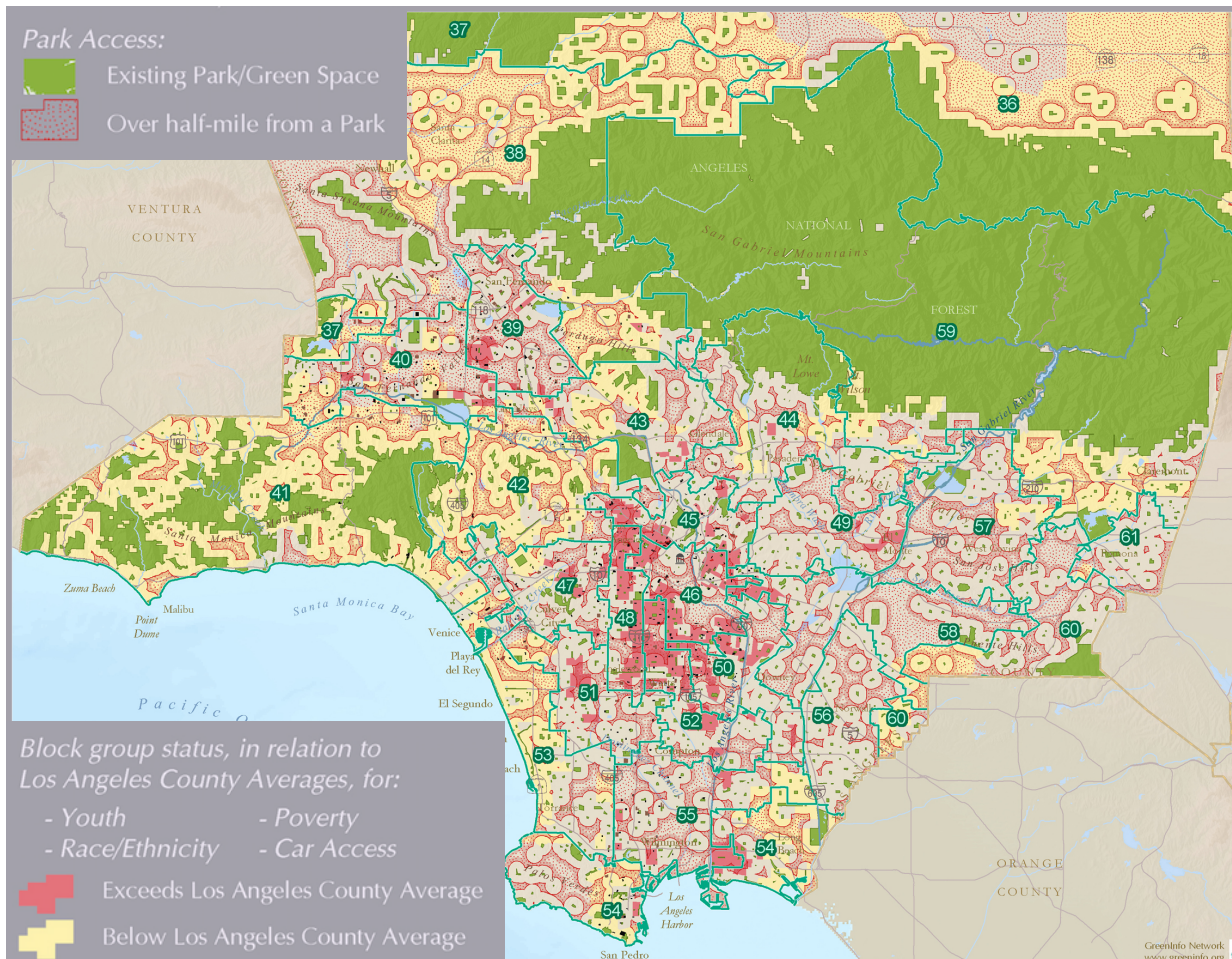
These same principles helped drive the creation of the country’s national parks, beginning with Yellowstone in 1872 – the world’s first national park. Inscribed upon the entrance gate to Yellowstone are the words “For the benefit and enjoyment of the people,” a line taken from the legislation that created the park. Coming just a few short years after the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States, this 1872 federal legislation was worded in such a way as to include *all* Americans. Shelton Johnson, an African-American national park ranger, explains the importance of these words to him and how they relate to our democracy in this [short video](#).

Beautiful natural environments have long been celebrated as a hallmark of the United States. Today, [84,000,000 acres of land are preserved in national parks](#), nearly [19,000,000 acres in state park lands](#), and approximately [1,500,000 acres in city parks](#). Though much smaller in acreage, city parks are

essential to Americans’ access to open space; it is estimated that seven times as many people per year visit New York’s Central Park as Arizona’s Grand Canyon National Park. Despite the wonderful quantity of parks across the United States, it is [clear](#) that not all Americans can easily access even city parks, let alone the state and national parks that require time, money, and transportation to reach. Take the following 2010 map of the county of Los Angeles, where the green denotes existing park or green space, and the pixelated pink denotes neighborhoods further than a half mile from a park. Note that the areas with the smallest amount of green space correlate with the areas of greatest poverty and communities of color (marked in red). In fact, while the county-wide average of parks in L.A. is 3.3 acres per 1,000 residents (and much higher in much of the county), these areas in red generally have fewer than one acre of parks per 1,000 residents. Some residents make do by designating space for their own family or neighborhood outdoor gatherings and activities. These impromptu spaces often lack the amenities that can make a park such a satisfying and healthy place to spend time, such as shade cover and play and exercise equipment.

L.A. County Park Access for Children of Color Living in Poverty with No Access to a Car

LA County map: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cityprojectca/969989319> (derived from the Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Green Access and Equity for Los Angeles County 2011 report: <http://www.mapjustice.org/images/LosAngelesENGLISH.pdf>)



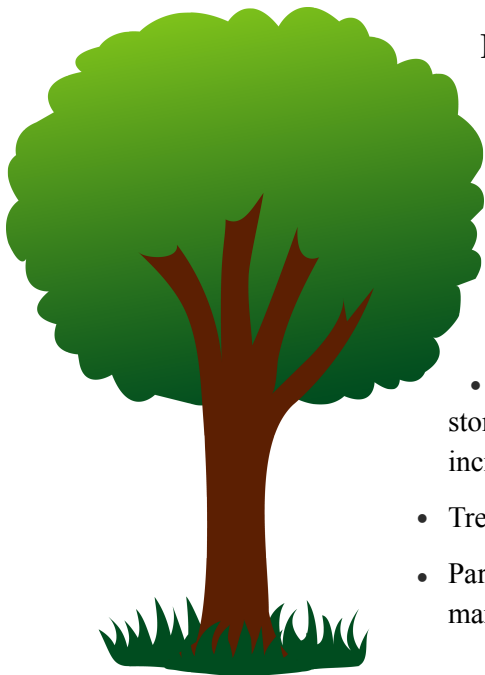
Los Angeles is far from the only county where such inequities exist. Across the country, city parks are generally most numerous and well-maintained in [areas where residents have high income and education levels](#). At the same time, environmental pollutants are often concentrated in low-income communities, such as those near oil refineries or commercial ports. Nationally, approximately [sixty percent](#) of African-American, Hispanic, and American Indian youth live in low-income communities. The upshot is that certain Americans experience an unfair amount of the environmental burdens brought by our industrial society, while at the same time enjoying too few of the benefits, such as access to green spaces. These conditions contribute to a higher rate of many serious diseases among people of color, including [diabetes](#), [heart disease](#), and [lung disease](#). [Research indicates](#) that other injustices - such as racial profiling by police - increases anxiety and stress and therefore make a person more susceptible to the above-mentioned diseases. Tragically, these particular diseases also make a person much [more likely to die from a COVID-19](#) infection or the [flu](#).

While other socio-economic factors help explain the disparity in health outcomes between different economic classes, races, and ethnicities, a lack of access to green space is one important factor and one that may be relatively straightforward to address. In so many cities across the country there are vacant lots, industrial waterfronts, and out-of-use railroad lines that have the potential to be transformed into green and open space for the community. The non-profit Trust for Public Land is working to support the creation of



Waterfront park in Portland, Oregon

additional parks so that cities (where 80% of Americans live) provide their residents a park within a ten minute walk from home. (You can learn more about this initiative, and how you can be involved, by [clicking here](#)). Balancing communities' environmental burdens and benefits is a matter of environmental justice. Striving to ensure that all Americans are welcomed, treated equally, and made to feel safe in these spaces will increase the advantages that these public spaces bring to our society. Providing more parks will not alone fix the environmental and other social inequities in our society, but such spaces will help improve individual and community health and such progress opens doors to even more opportunity - just as our democracy is meant to do.

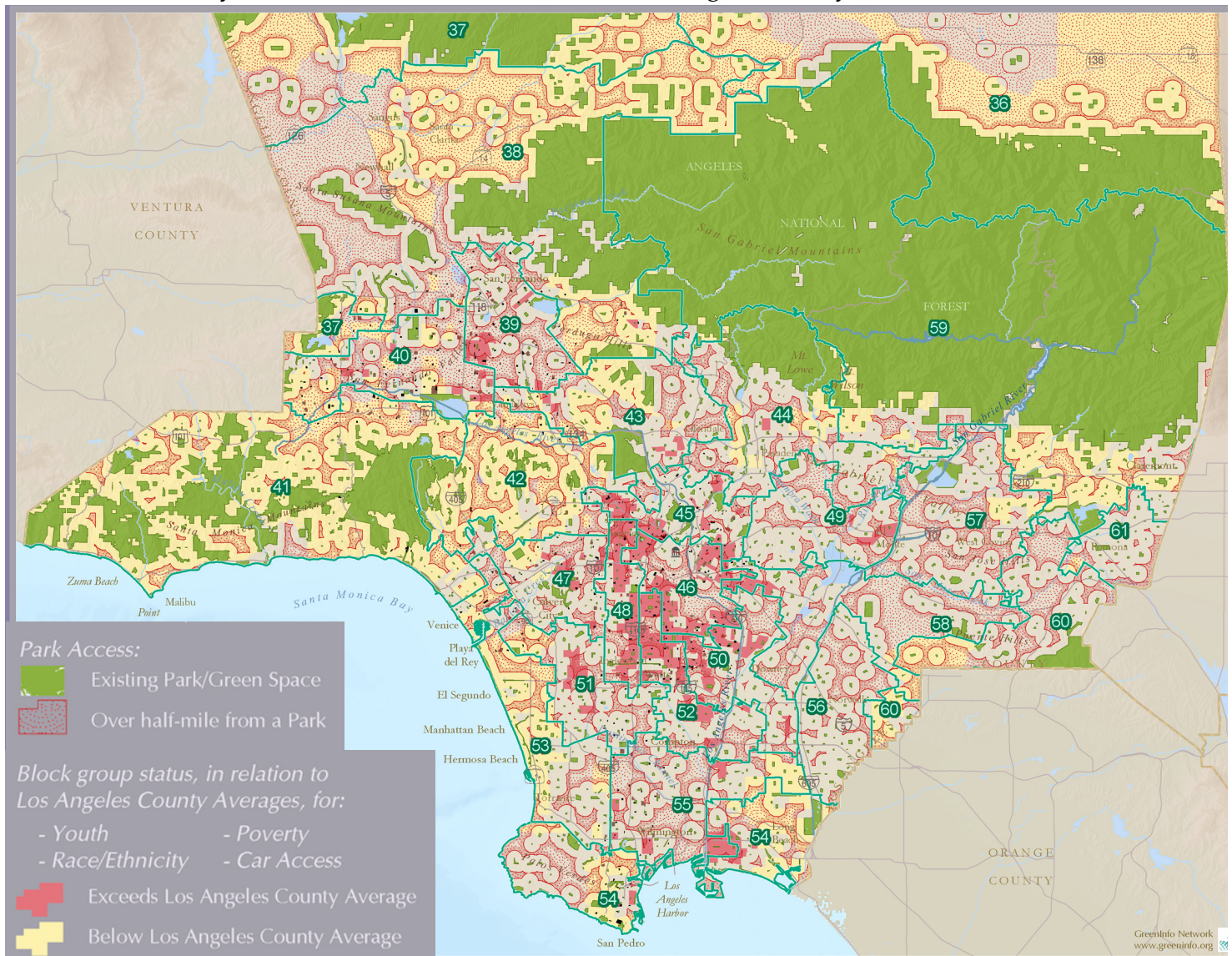


Environmental Benefits of Parks

Prioritizing the protection of green spaces and access to them will not only improve overall community health, but will also moderate some of the more damaging effects of climate change and help to improve urban environmental conditions:

- As climate change brings higher temperature averages, the vegetation in parks and open space offer relief from the [urban heat island effect](#) by providing natural cooling that paved roads, concrete, and buildings cannot.
- The soil, vegetation and waterways in parks can absorb rain and reduce loads on cities' storm water systems, which is especially important when scientists tell us to expect an increasing number of, and more intense, storms due to climate change.
- Trees (in parks and elsewhere) [remove air pollution](#).
- Parks can provide critical habitat for wild animals that are increasingly pushed to the margins of new developments.

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Select Data for Assembly Districts in Map

A select number of assembly districts are highlighted in the following data set. The assembly district number is highlighted in green in the map. Use the map and data to answer the questions below.

Assembly District #	% of People under Age 18	% of People of Color	% Living in Poverty	% with a Lack of Car Access
40	26.5	55.5	15.5	9.5
46	32.2	95.9	35.4	38.2
54	24.3	47.6	15.4	11.2
55	31.6	77.8	19.9	13.5

- What do you notice when you analyze the differences between these different assembly districts?
- The “% of people under 18” category has the smallest percentage of difference across these four districts (only 8% points). What category has the largest difference?
- Where are the greatest concentrations of existing park/green spaces? How close are these to the assembly district with the highest percentage of people living in poverty? What is the significance of not having access to a car for the people in this district?
- How close do you live to a park or green space? How do you get to this space? How do you like to use this park space? How might your life be different if you had greater access to parks, or less access?



California Education and the Environment Initiative

A program of CalRecycle's Office of Education and the Environment, EEI lessons are designed to foster environmental literacy among California students. The following EEI units provide learning opportunities for various topics, including environmental health, land use in urban and rural regions, and movements that aim to improve public health, community well-being and ecosystem health.

3rd Grade: 3.1.1-2 [The Geography of Where We Live](#)

4th Grade: 4.1.3/5 [Reflections of Where We Live](#)

5th Grade: 5.8.4 [Nature and Newcomers](#)

8th Grade: 8.4.1 [Land, Politics, and Expansion in the Early Republic](#)

8th Grade: 8.12.5 [Industrialization, Urbanization, and the Conservation Movement](#)

10th Grade: 10.3.3 [Growth of Population, Cities, and Demands](#)

11th Grade: 11.8.6 [Postwar Industries and the Emerging Environmental Movement](#)

11th Grade: 11.11.5 [Many Voices, Many Visions: Analyzing Contemporary Environmental Issues](#)

12th Grade (Gov) 12.2.2/5 [This Land is Our Land](#)

Image citations - Cover image: <https://www.pxfuel.com/en/free-photo-xtpnk>; Central Park: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3804n.pm005990/?r=-0.252,0.107,1.767,0.95,0>; LA County map: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cityprojectca/969989319> (derived from the Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Green Access and Equity for Los Angeles County 2011 report: <http://www.mapjustice.org/images/LosAngelesENGLISH.pdf>); Portland: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waterfront_Park_from_Hawthorne_Bridge.jpg; Tree clipart: <http://clipart-library.com/clipart/1751592.htm>

Current Context: A Publication of the California History-Social Science Project

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For more information about the CHSSP, visit our website, <http://chssp.ucdavis.edu>. Headquartered in the Department of History at the University of California, Davis, the CHSSP is one of nine disciplinary networks that make up the California Subject Matter Projects, administered by the University of California, Office of the President.