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Funding Disparities for Local Parks and Recreation Resources in the Los Angeles Region

INTRODUCTION

Growing evidence suggests that the built environment—where people live, learn, work, and play—impacts levels of physical activity. Parks, recreational programs, bike trails and sidewalks represent components of the built environment that allow for exercise and active living.

Recently, a 10-year study of more than 3,000 children living in 12 communities of southern California found those who lived closer to parkland and recreational programs had much lower rates of obesity at 18 years of age than comparable children who lived further away.[1]

Yet despite the popularity of policies to improve access to parks and recreation, we have limited knowledge of the factors that cause geographic disparities in the distribution of these critical resources.[2]

Parks and Recreation Funding Gaps Affect Communities of Color and Low Income Neighborhoods

A new study of the Los Angeles region sheds light on the allocation of park and recreation funding from all levels of government and from non-profit organizations. The results reveal profound inequalities, with the poorest, most-densely populated cities allocating the lowest levels of parks and recreation funding compared with the wealthiest cities in the same region.

The study found that funding sources for parks and recreation facilities are highly localized, with nearly 75 percent financed by municipal governments.[3] Cities with high poverty have limited fiscal capacity and greater need for urban services. Often, parks and recreation programs are the first to be

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cut in tough economic times.[4] In contrast, wealthier cities may experience broad-based support for parks and recreation funding to meet resident demands, increase property values and promote development.[5] Consequently, disparities in local fiscal capacity may shape the number of parks and recreation programs, resulting in adverse public health outcomes in low-income communities.[6]

Though state grants often target low-income cities, they fail to equalize gaps in municipal funding.[7] Application processes often require detailed proposals and matching funds, leaving low-income communities at a disadvantage. As a result, state grants may wind up going to wealthier cities with the fiscal and institutional capacity to pursue additional funding.[8]

The non-profit sector, which finances 10 percent of all parks and recreation expenditures in the Los Angeles region, also tends to favor middle-income and affluent communities, further increasing park and recreation disparities among cities.[9]

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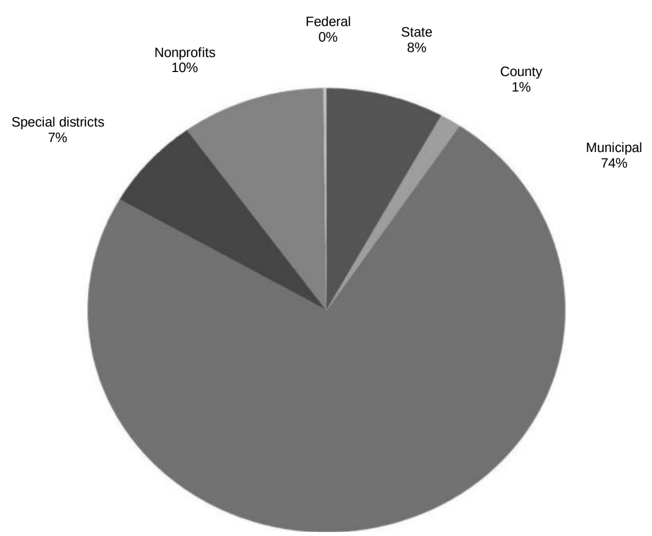
Non-profit sector financial support for parks and recreation is strongest in wealthier municipalities, where an average of $21 per capita is spent annually compared with less than $5 per capita in poorer cities.[10] This suggests that institutional and fiscal capacities, which differ across municipalities, may not be equalized either by higher-level funding streams or non-profit resource allocations.[11]

Figure 1. **Total park and recreation expenditure, by source—Southern California (2001–03)**



Methods Summary

In a study focused on the Los Angeles region, researchers mapped the distribution by city of park and recreation expenditures made by government and non-profit sector sources. Expenditures were combined into a single measure for each municipality, and statistical analysis was employed to estimate the effects of fiscal capacity and demographics on total per capita park and recreation expenditures.

Municipal spending on parks and recreation within the Los Angeles region was obtained from the California State Controller's Cities Annual Reports (2001 – 2003b). Federal expenditures were compiled from the Consolidated Federal Funds Reports (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001-2003). Information on non-profit expenditures was sourced from the 2003 National Center for Charitable Statistics digital data.

State expenditures were gathered from two sources: (1) state-allocated grants to local governments including Proposition 12, Proposition 40 and parts of Proposition 50; and (2) expenditures to support the California Park System described in the California Department of Parks and Recreation's State Park System Statistical Reports (2001-2003).

County expenditures were excluded for two reasons. First, disaggregated data were unavailable for individual parks and recreation facilities. Second, counties primarily provide services to unincorporated areas; therefore, their inclusion was less relevant to an investigation of municipal resource allocation.

Demographic information including race, ethnicity, income and poverty was collected from the 2000 Census of Population and Housing. Five measures were then created to describe housing stock, employment density, and income: (1) urban centers; (2) inner suburbs; (3) edge cities; (4) bedroom communities; and (5) privileged enclaves where the median income is above the 90th percentile, or $81,153.

Key Research Findings

- Funding resources for parks and recreation facilities in the Los Angeles region are largely from local sources, with limited assistance from other levels of government. Nearly 75 percent of expenditures are municipally-financed.[12]

- State grants to localities, such as those financed by Proposition 12 (2000) and Proposition 40 (2002), represent only 8 percent of total resources to local parks and recreation facilities.[13]

- Though the region is home to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Death Valley National Park, Channel Islands National Park, Mojave National Preserve and Joshua Tree National Park, the federal government's contribution to municipalities is extremely small.[14]

- Per capita total expenditures range from $0.55 to $593, suggesting large disparities across cities.[16] Low-spending cities are clustered, including those south of downtown Los Angeles, the eastern part of Los Angeles County (i.e., Baldwin Park, San Gabriel, Temple and Pomona) and spreading far into San Bernardino County along the main transportation corridor, with some low-expenditure cities north of Santa Ana in Orange County. This suggests residents in park-deficient jurisdictions are unlikely to find opportunities for recreation in surrounding cities.[16]

- On average, 80 percent of city spending on parks and recreation was directed to support operating expenses, with only 20 percent available for capital investment for new or improved public parks or recreational facilities. In the poorest cities, capital spending represented only 12.6 percent of parks and recreation expenditure compared to 26.1 percent in the wealthiest cities.[17]

- As the percentage of Latinos and Blacks in a city increases, per capita expenditure on parks and recreation decreases from all sources.[18]

- Income is significantly associated with per capita expenditure on parks and recreation. This suggests low-income areas with the greatest need for public parks and recreation programs are less likely to create and sustain programs compared to high-income cities.[19]

What Can Policy-makers do?

Since the majority of parks and recreation spending originates at the local level, cities with limited fiscal capacity are less able to dedicate resources than cities that are more affluent. State and local governments, as well as voluntary organizations, have the opportunity to redress local funding disparities for parks and recreational programs to improve active living in communities of color and low-income. This policy brief recommends strategies to support these objectives, such as:

- Pursuing policies that increase parks, recreation facilities and programs in inner-city areas with underserved populations;
- Establishing statewide standards for parks and recreational programming with higher-level governmental support for cities that fall below minimum standards;
- Amending grant application policies that require matching funds from fiscally-challenged cities with mostly low-income populations; and
- Encouraging non-profit organizations to direct their resources toward low-income, densely-populated cities where residents have little or no private outdoor space and, therefore, the greatest need for public parks and recreation services.

Acknowledgements

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Sources

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