



*“In Los Angeles, only one-third of all children live within walking distance of a public park or other open space.”*

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARK ACCESS IN SEVEN MAJOR CITIES

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# NO PLACE TO PLAY



Images © Rich Reid/Colors of Nature (Left) and Tim Hyde (Right)

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A MESSAGE FROM WILL ROGERS  
PRESIDENT OF THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

Close your eyes and picture a happy memory from your childhood. Whether you're playing with friends, enjoying a picnic with your family, or sitting on a bench basking in the sunshine of a warm afternoon, there's a good chance you're imagining something that involved a public park.



Jim Dennis

And that's no surprise. Kids love parks. And kids need parks...to get fresh air, exercise, and just to enjoy the outdoors with friends and family.

Unfortunately, in some American cities, only one-third of all children live within walking distance of a public park or other open space. Instead of meadows and soccer fields, their playgrounds are streets, alleyways, and vacant lots.

Living far from a public park is more than an inconvenience. It's a serious threat to the health of our children and their communities. Children without outdoor places to play are less likely to exercise regularly and may face elevated risks for diabetes, obesity, and asthma. Park-poor neighborhoods are more likely to suffer high crime rates and other symptoms of urban blight. The lack of public park space in many American cities is a crisis that demands urgent attention.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) has created thousands of parks throughout the nation and has proven that cities can make progress toward ensuring park access for all. But no individual or organization can solve the urban park crisis single-handedly. Meaningful long-term solutions depend on a cooperative effort involving the private sector, government leaders, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic groups.

We hope this report—the first in a series—will serve as a wake-up call to community leaders and jump-start park creation all over the nation. Our cities and suburbs need parks now, and our children's future depends upon the planning and investment decisions we make today. TPL is ready to do its part for parks, and we urge civic leaders and interested organizations throughout the United States to join us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Will Rogers". The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

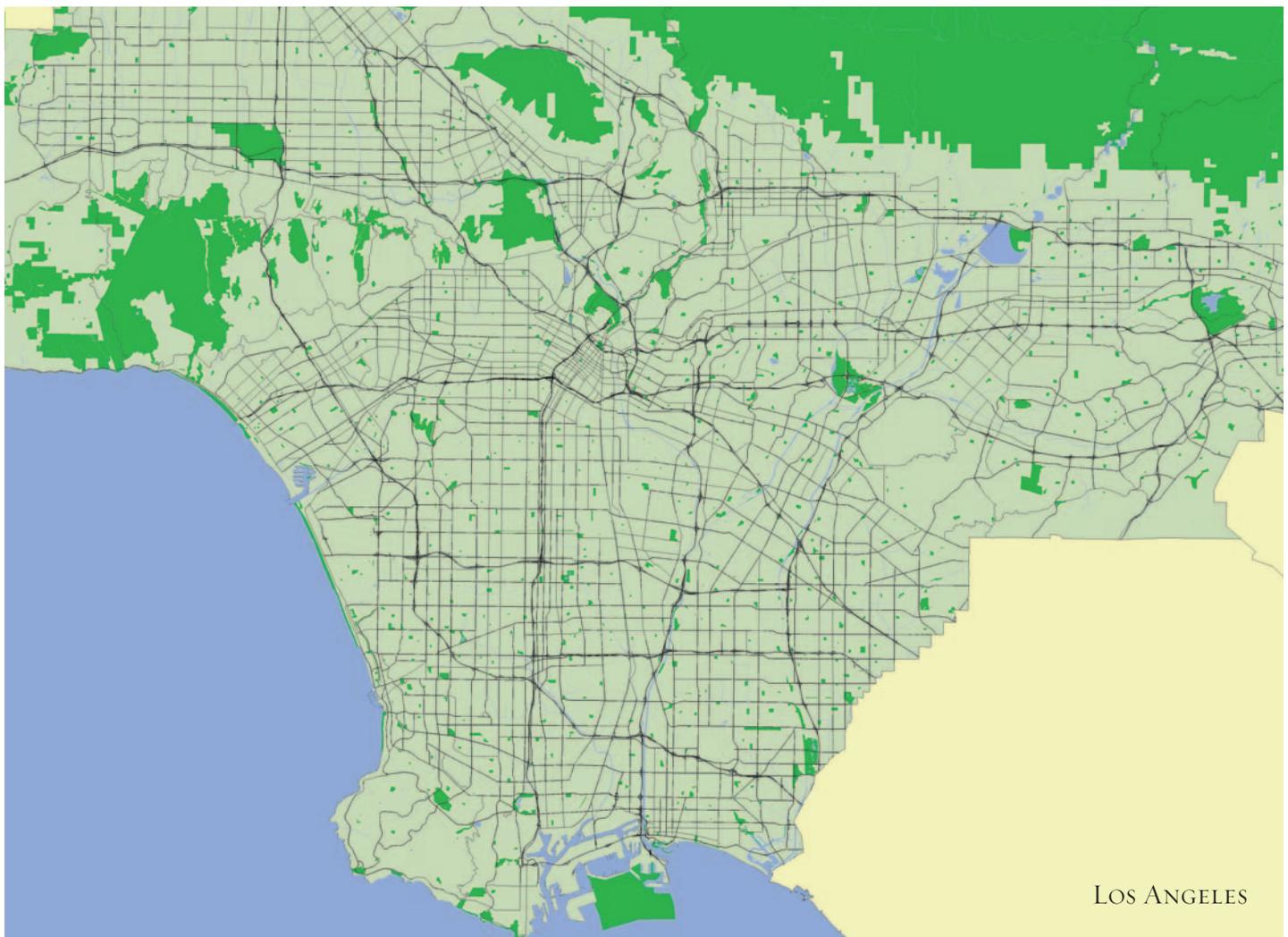
## NO PLACE TO PLAY

There are many ways to measure existing park space in metropolitan environments. The simplest is a per capita measurement—just add up the total park acreage in a community and divide it by the number of people living in the area.

While popular, these park measures can be misleading because they report only park acreage, not park access. When a region's parks are clustered together, some neighborhoods will enjoy easy access to open space, but other

areas will be nearly shut out. For example, Los Angeles offers 9.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, a per capita total close to the national average. However, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and a few other large parks skew these statistics, creating an illusion of adequate park space citywide and masking the reality that only select neighborhoods enjoy easy park access. As illustrated in the map below, the highly populated city center is almost entirely devoid of large public parks.

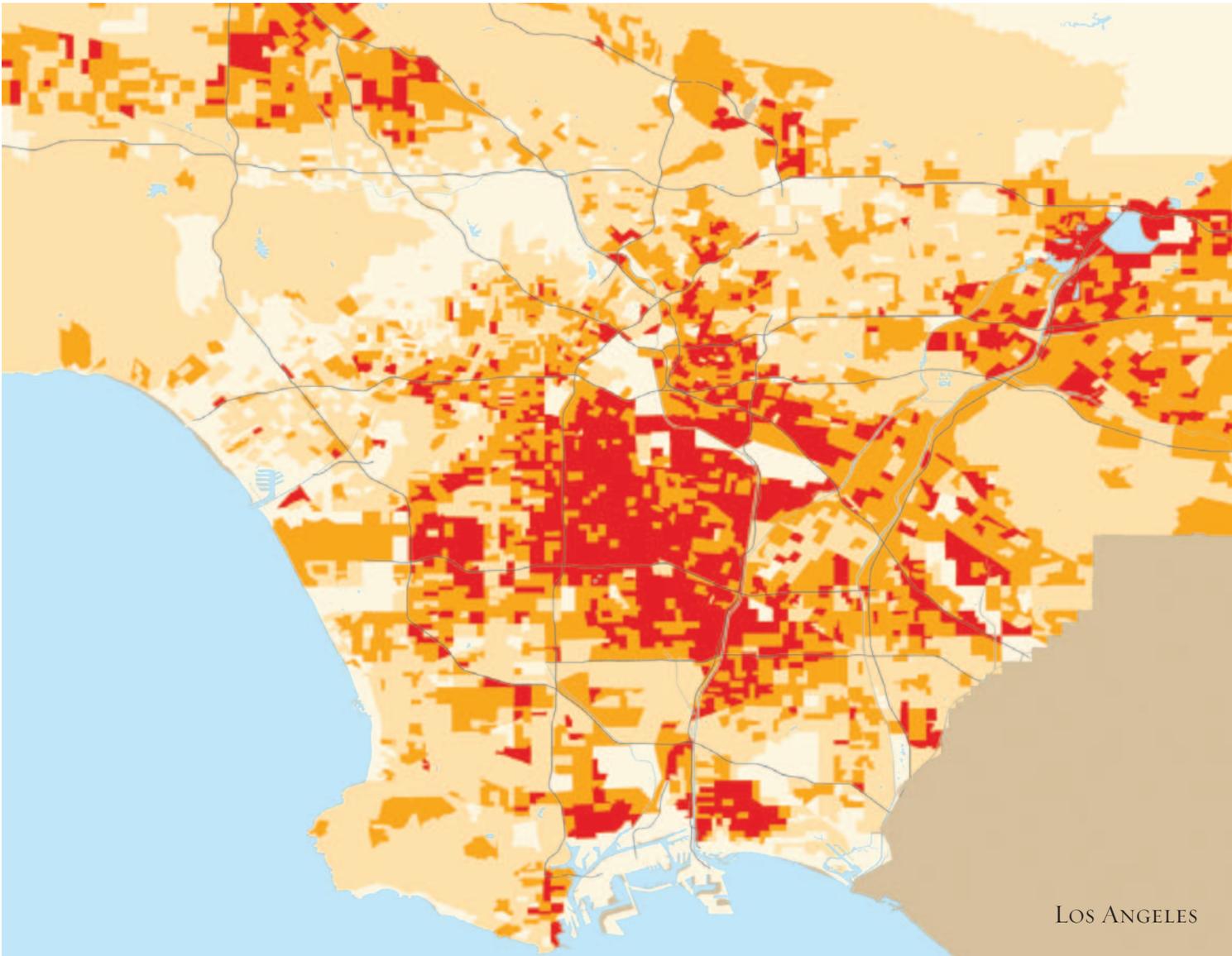
 Public parks and open space



*Parks in Los Angeles are concentrated far from the city center.*

# THE NEED FOR PARKS IS GREATEST IN AREAS WHERE MOST CHILDREN LIVE

- Children are 33-69% of total population per acre
- Children are 25-32% of total population per acre
- Children are 14-24% of total population per acre
- Children are 0-13% of total population per acre

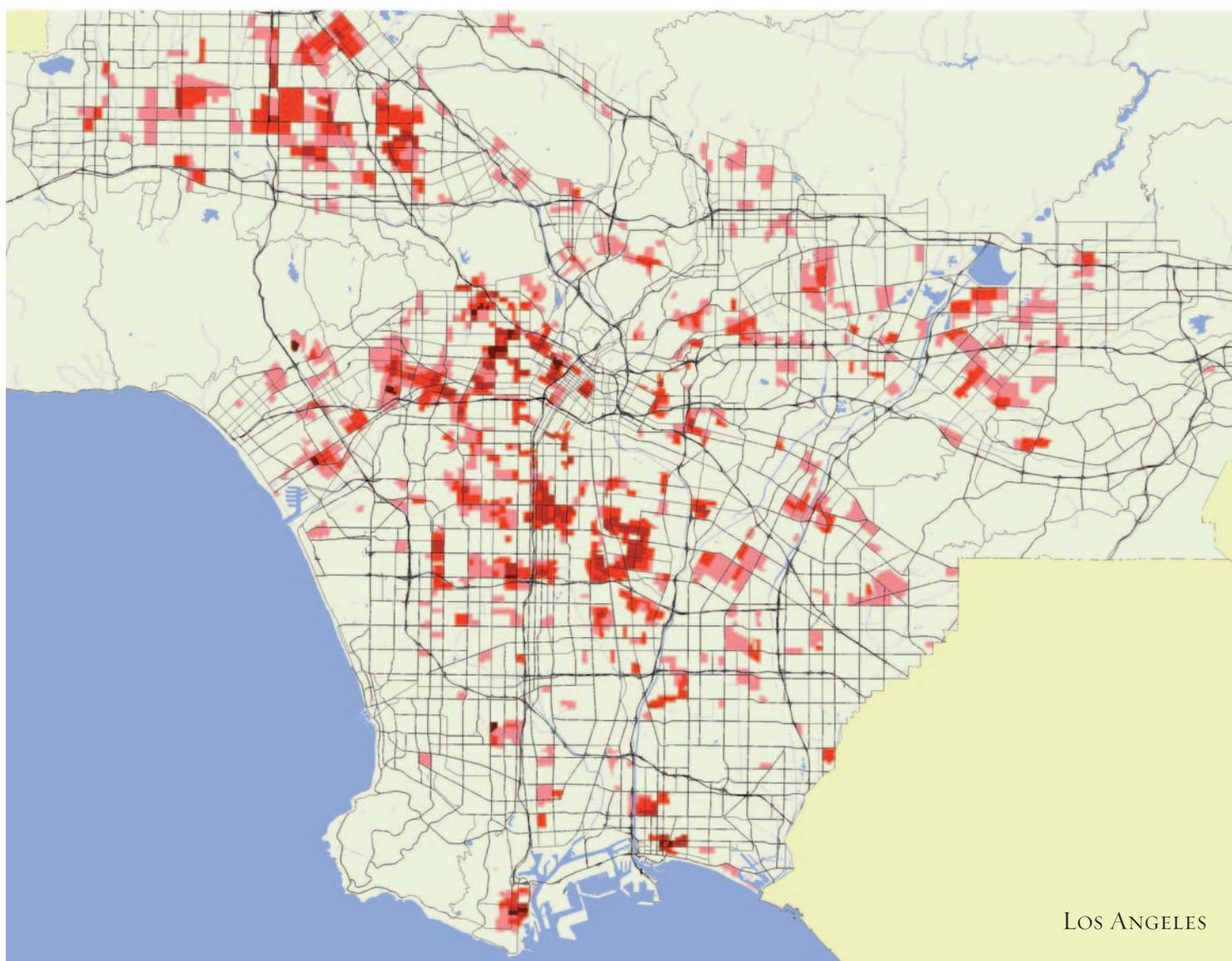


*Areas shaded red indicate high children's population density zones.*

The map at left shows children's population density in Los Angeles County. Areas in darker shades of red depict neighborhoods with high concentrations of residents under age 18. The map at right pinpoints those neighborhoods with lesser access to parks or other open space. The darkest shades of red indicate communities with the worst access to open space.

Together, these maps illustrate an ironic fact

about park placement in Los Angeles and other major cities: *parks are least likely to be located in areas with high concentrations of young children.* Los Angeles' youngest residents—those who need parks the most—have no place to play. Although this pattern is especially pronounced in Los Angeles, similar situations exist in communities throughout the nation.



*Areas shaded red indicate neighborhoods with the greatest need for new parks.*

## AREAS SHADED GREEN ARE LOCATED WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE OF A PARK

The table at right lists key details about park access in the eight metropolitan areas evaluated by this report. The differences it uncovers are dramatic.

For example, New York City offers 4.6 park acres per 1000 residents, considerably less than Los Angeles' 9.1 acres. But because New York's parks are more equitably distributed, more than ninety-one percent of its children live within walking distance of a park, compared to one-third of all children in Los Angeles.

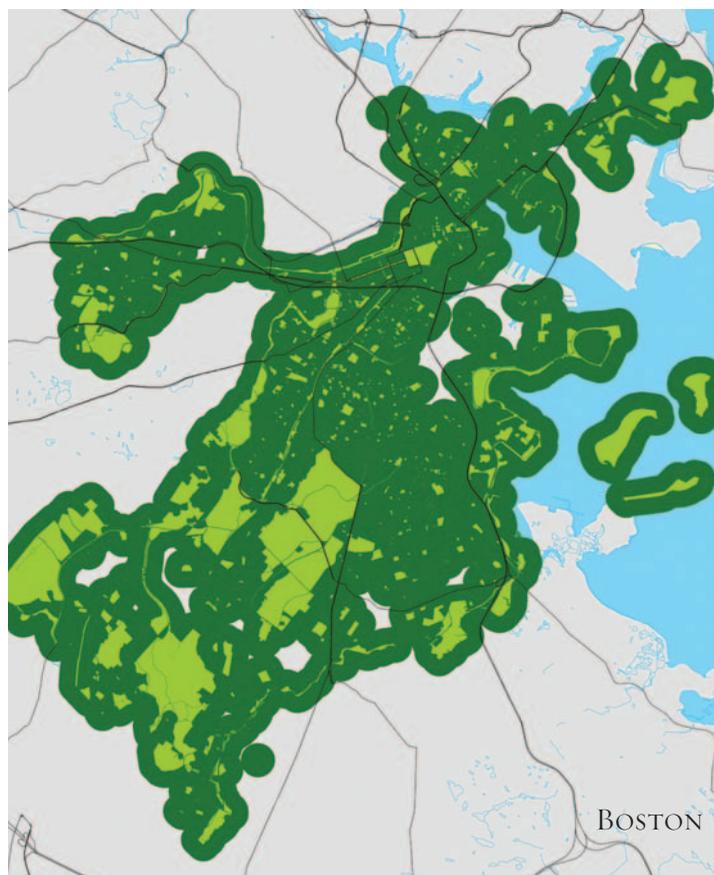
These differences are even more striking when comparing maps of park-poor cities to maps of urban areas with better access to open

space, as depicted on the maps below. Areas shaded green on these maps are located within one-quarter mile of a park or other open space, the distance generally recognized as walking distance. Children living in unshaded areas do not live within one-quarter mile of public open space.

With its high concentration of open space in areas far from its most densely populated communities, Los Angeles offers its children the worst access to parks among the cities evaluated. Boston and New York rank among the best cities studied.



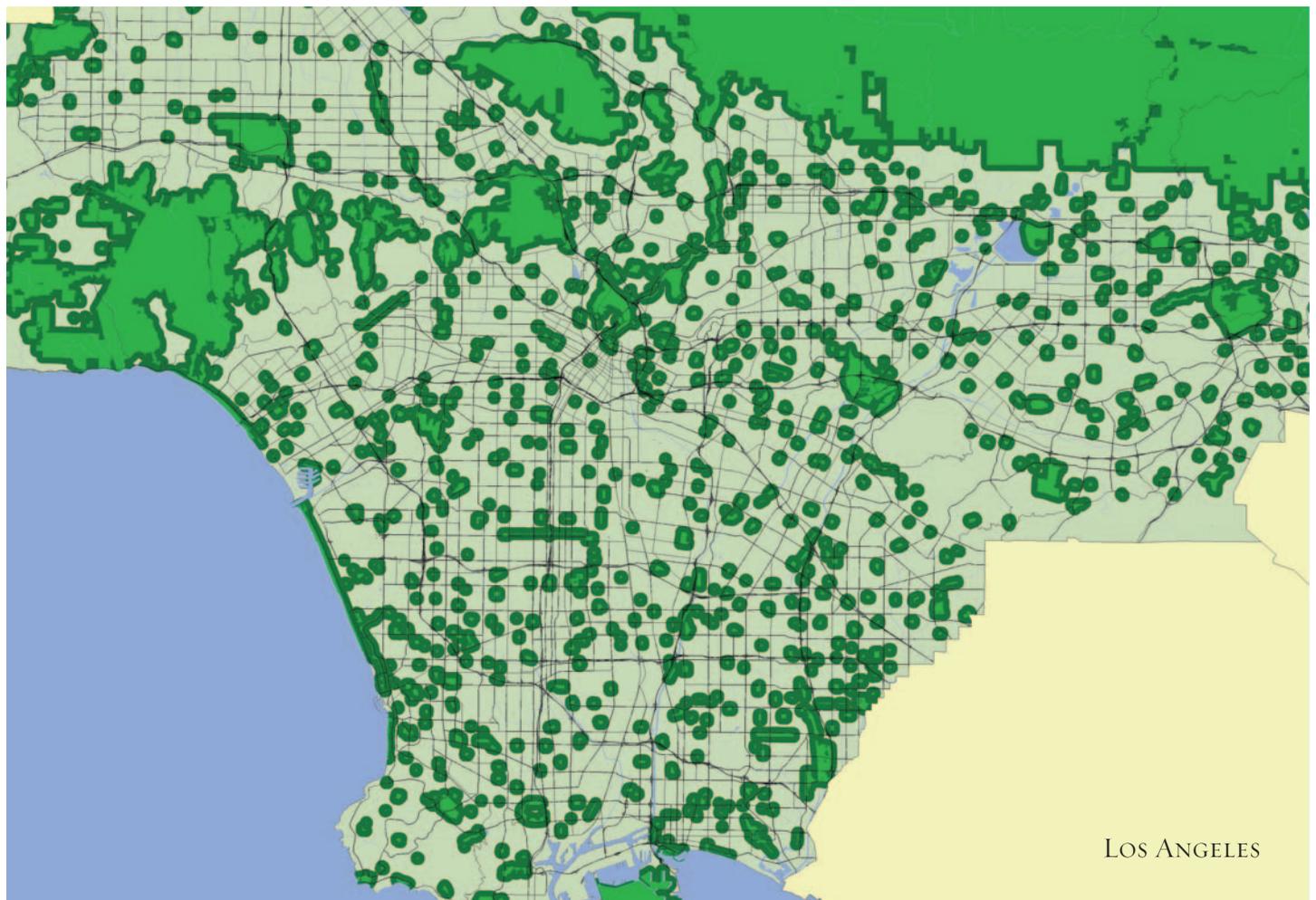
*Most children in New York enjoy easy access to parks.*



*Boston's extensive park system reaches 97% of the city's children.*

	Percentage of children within one-quarter mile of a park	Number of children without access to a park
Boston	97%	2,900
New York	91%	178,500
San Francisco	85%	16,700
Seattle	79%	18,600
San Diego	65%	102,300
Dallas	42%	182,800
Los Angeles	33%	657,700
Los Angeles County	36%	1,694,400

*Children's park access in seven major cities.*



*Only one-third of children in Los Angeles live within walking distance of a public park, the lowest percentage of any area evaluated in this report.*

# THE MAYWOOD RIVERFRONT PARK: A CASE STUDY



*Before*



*After*

Creating new parks in heavily urbanized areas can present financial, environmental, and land use challenges. However, in public-private joint ventures throughout the nation, the Trust for Public Land has demonstrated that meaningful progress is possible. TPL achieved one of its most recent successes in Maywood, California, an incorporated city located in a heavily urbanized section of Los Angeles County.

With about 30,000 residents in a 1.14-square mile area, Maywood is considered the most densely populated city west of the Mississippi River. Located in the industrial heart of Los Angeles,

Maywood is home to only three small public parks, but it houses numerous abandoned and polluted former factory sites, including one on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund National Priorities List.

In collaboration with the City of Maywood, TPL is acquiring six adjoining industrial parcels, occupying more than seven acres along the Los Angeles River. TPL contractors are removing dangerous pollutants from the property and are developing a complex of playing fields, picnic areas, and open space adjacent to the riverfront. Ultimately, TPL expects to formally transfer Park ownership to the City of Maywood.

Though not completely finished, the new Maywood Riverfront Park has already dramatically affected this low-income community. Neighbors have joined forces to plant gardens and plan for new recreational facilities. Families playing outside together—once a rarity—is now a common sight. “I would never have imagined that a single park could make such a difference in our lives,” said George Martinez, Mayor of Maywood. “Our community has been forever changed for the better.”

## A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA PROPOSITION 40 CREATES LIMITED-TIME FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The high cost of land is often the primary obstacle to park acquisition and development. But in Los Angeles, funding for land acquisition is available now, waiting to be claimed for urban parks and other open space.

In 2002, California voters passed Proposition 40, a \$2.6 billion bond issue that funds environmental and park projects throughout the state. The initiative sets aside funds for urban parks, and establishes a preference for projects funded jointly by the public and private sectors. However, Proposition 40 funds are currently being depleted at a rapid pace, so park-poor communities must act quickly to claim their fair share. This window of opportunity for Los Angeles is closing quickly.

## ARE PARKS IMPORTANT?

Sure, parks are nice. But are they important? Do parks contribute to a community's health and vitality in the same way traditional urban infrastructure does? Recent studies say yes. Parks have a far-reaching impact on neighborhood economics, health, education, and safety.

- According to the Centers for Disease Control, Americans living closer to parks are more likely to exercise regularly, leading to weight loss, increased energy, and better overall health.<sup>2</sup>
- Economic surveys conducted by private and public sector agencies confirm that parks increase residential and commercial property values.<sup>3</sup>
- Studies show that urban parks deliver significant environmental benefits, filtering pollutants from the air and helping to control storm water runoff during rainy seasons.<sup>4</sup>
- Teachers report that parks enhance education by serving as destinations for local field trips and outdoor classrooms that illustrate natural and life science lessons.<sup>5</sup>
- Police departments document sharp declines in juvenile arrests after recreational facilities open in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup>
- Urban planners agree that well-maintained parks improve communities by increasing neighborhood cohesion. After parks open, neighbors are more likely to interact, take pride in their communities, and form neighborhood watch and other local improvement groups.

Parks aren't an "extra" that can be ignored in tough economic times. As a part of the urban infrastructure, they're as essential as roads, bridges, and utilities. A TPL white paper, "Parks for People: Why America Needs More City Parks and Open Space," presents additional research describing the importance of park space in urban areas. The white paper is available at [www.tpl.org/pforp](http://www.tpl.org/pforp).

The leverage on private sector contributions made possible by Proposition 40 is a hallmark of park projects developed by the Trust for Public Land. Including all funding sources, TPL estimates that each private dollar invested in parks development generates five more—an instant 500 percent return on investment.

With such financial resources available, civic leaders in Los Angeles can make significant progress toward solving their parks crisis. All that's needed is modest private sector support and the cooperation and commitment of the region's government, business, and foundation leaders.

## NO PLACE TO PLAY: CONCLUSION

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In too many cities across the United States, children don't have easy access to parks, and the consequences are serious. Kids without parks lose health and recreational benefits, and they may never experience the kind of casual outdoor play that made childhood so memorable for older generations.

But children aren't the only ones who suffer from the urban parks crisis. The damaging effects are felt throughout the community. Planning parks unites neighbors, and spending time together outdoors promotes the kind of community cohesion that fights crime, increases property values, and improves quality of life.

The good news is that communities can make progress toward park access for all, especially when governments work in partnership with the private and philanthropic sectors. In many cities, funding is waiting to be claimed by public-private partnerships with well-designed plans for land acquisition and park development. Meaningfully expanding park access in densely-populated urban areas is difficult, but as the Trust for Public Land has demonstrated in cities like Maywood, success is within our reach.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Trust for Public Land plans to expand this Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis to include additional cities as data become available. We encourage other metropolitan areas to improve their data collection practices and participate in future park access analyses. To stay informed as additional information becomes available, sign up for the Parks for People edition of TPL's LandLink electronic newsletter at [www.tpl.org/newsletters](http://www.tpl.org/newsletters).

<sup>2</sup>Increasing Physical Activity: A Report on Recommendations of the Task Force on Community Preventive Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, October 26, 2001, p. 1 ("Increasing Physical Activity"), available at: [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5018a1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5018a1.htm). See also, Emily B. Kahn, Leigh T. Ramsey, Ross C. Brownson, Gregory W. Heath, Elizabeth H. Howze, Kenneth E. Powell, Elaine J. Stone, Mummy W. Rajab, Phaedra Corso, and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services, "The Effectiveness of Interventions to Increase Physical Activity," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2002;22 (4S), pp. 87-88.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, John L. Crompton, *The Impact of Parks and Open Space on Property Values and the Property Tax Base*, (Ashburn, Va.: National Recreation & Park Association, 2000). Mark R. Correll, Jane H. Lillydahl, and Larry D. Singell, "The Effect of Greenbelts on Residential Property Values: Some Findings on the Political Economy of Open Space," *Land Economics*, as cited in "Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenway Corridors," 4th Edition, National Park Service, 1995, p.14, available at: [www.nps.gov/pwro/rtca/econ\\_all.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/pwro/rtca/econ_all.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>USDA Forest Service Pamphlet #R1-92-100, cited in "Benefits of Trees in Urban Areas," Web page, Colorado Tree Coalition, Available at: [www.coloradotrees.org](http://www.coloradotrees.org). See also David J. Nowak, "The Effects of Urban Trees on Air Quality," USDA Forest Service, available at [www.fs.fed.us/ne/syracuse/gif/trees.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/ne/syracuse/gif/trees.pdf), and Jeff Beattie, Cheryl Kollin, and Gary Moll, "Trees Help Cities Meet Clean Water Regulations," *American Forests*, Summer 2000, p.18.

<sup>5</sup>See Peter Harnik, "The Excellent City Park System: What Makes It Great and How to Get There," The Trust for Public Land, 2003 and "Healing America's Cities: How Urban Parks Can Make Cities Safe and Healthy," The Trust for Public Land, 1994.

<sup>6</sup>See Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, "Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods—Does It Lead to Crime?" *Research in Brief*, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Feb. 2001, pp. 1-2. Available at: [www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/186049.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/186049.pdf).

## SOURCES OF DATA

TPL used a variety of public and private data sources to determine the acreage and accessibility of park and open space in the metropolitan areas studied in this report, using GIS. Data sources varied by area and included the following:

New York: NYC Parks and Recreation, New York City Department of City Planning

Los Angeles: Thomas Brothers, Southern California Association of Governments, Geographic Data Technologies, Geolytic

Boston: Department of Neighborhood Development and Metropolitan Area Council, MassGIS

San Diego: San Diego Park and Recreation Department, San Diego Association of Governments

San Francisco: City and County of San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, Presidio Trust, San Francisco Department of Telecommunications and Information Services

Seattle: Seattle Parks and Recreation, King County DNRP

Dallas: City of Dallas Park and Recreation Department, North Central Texas Council of Governments

## METHODOLOGY

Statistics for people and children within one-quarter mile of existing parklands and open space were derived for each county and city using the following GIS methodology:

1. TPL gathered and pre-processed parkland, open space, state and federal lands data, 2000 Census block group boundary files and demographic data on population and age and other base data layers.
2. Using ESRI's ArcGIS 9.0 software, TPL's GIS team created a park access model using ArcGIS ModelBuilder to calculate the total population and number of children under the age of 18 within one-quarter mile radius of existing parklands, open spaces, and state and federal lands using an overlap function.

A quarter-mile park buffer radius was chosen by the Trust for Public Land as an indicator of access. The National Recreation and Park Association and other open space plans around the country use this distance to measure access.

SPECIAL THANKS TO ESRI FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF TPL'S GIS PROGRAM.



#### **ABOUT THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND**

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national nonprofit organization that conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, community gardens, historic sites, rural lands, and other natural places. Since 1972, TPL has worked with willing landowners, community groups, and national, state, and local agencies to complete more than 2,700 land conservation projects in 46 states, protecting more than 1.9 million acres. TPL has helped states and communities craft and pass 192 ballot measures, generating more than \$35 billion in new conservation-related funding.

TPL's work depends on the generous support of donors and volunteers who share our mission of conserving land for people to create more livable communities. *The Wall Street Journal's SmartMoney* magazine, *Money*, *Forbes*, and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* have all rated TPL among the most efficient charities in the United States for keeping fund-raising and operation costs low while meeting mission goals.

For more information about the Trust for Public Land or to receive information about TPL's city parks programs, go to: [www.tpl.org/pforp](http://www.tpl.org/pforp).

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