

Tree Ambassador Community Action Toolkit

Los Angeles, California



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Your city. Your voice. Your urban forest.

Tu voz. Tu ciudad. Tu bosque urbano.



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About this toolkit:

This Community Action Toolkit was created to support community members working toward environmental and social justice through the Tree Ambassador Program and beyond. This toolkit honors lived experience as expertise, and it is intended to empower individuals embarking on the work of community building, healing, and advocacy through trees and nature-based solutions. We know that by sharing these concepts and engaging in tree stewardship around the region, our understanding diverse communities across Los Angeles will change and grow. As that happens, this toolkit will also need to change and grow. We invite and welcome other organizations and individuals to adapt this toolkit to empower the communities in which they live, work, play, and learn.

The Tree Ambassador Program is generously funded by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Accelerated Resilience Los Angeles, Dashboard.Earth and the U.S. Forest Service, through City Plants. Special thanks to California Climate Action Corps fellows Bryce Lewis-Smith, Krystle Yu, Amaiya Mason, and Miles Kim Parr for their support in creating this toolkit. This toolkit was designed by Bryce Lewis-Smith with contributions from Krystle Yu.

Thanks to all who continue to strengthen community
through trees and nature-based solutions.



Land Acknowledgement

The Tree Ambassador program is a partnership of organizations working across the City of Los Angeles and throughout Southern California. We acknowledge our presence in the ancestral territory of Tovaangar, the Los Angeles basin. The Gabrieleño, Tongva, Kizh, Chumash, Tataviam, Serrano, Cahuilla, Juaneno, and Luiseno peoples and nations are the traditional land caretakers, and we pay our respects to the Ancestors, Elders, Relatives, and Relations past, present, and emerging. This land acknowledgment is a small step in recognizing how we are connected with and responsible for the environmental injustice perpetuated by settler colonialism. We encourage our Tree Ambassadors to work in this spirit and to be mindful of our relationship with the land.



The Tree Ambassador Model



Tree Ambassadors participate in a paid training program and receive support from urban forestry and climate resilience experts to plant and care for trees in their communities. The Tree Ambassador – Promotor Forestal Program is a grassroots, bilingual community organizing program dedicated to amplifying community voices and stewarding trees in historically disinvested communities in Los Angeles. The Tree Ambassador Program is rooted in a simple idea: Any attempt to close the urban forest equity gap, Los Angeles must center the voices of people most impacted by systemic inequity, and community-led urban forestry must celebrate — and directly compensate — local-level, community-based expertise. This program provides on-the-ground, community-centered support to residents in low-canopy and urban heat-vulnerable regions of the city by paying residents directly to organize for a greener and more equitable future. The Tree Ambassador program seeks to create a trained group of community members that can amplify the voices of their communities to achieve key urban greening goals. By actively participating in the Tree Ambassador program, you will have the tools, knowledge, and connections needed to make this happen.

Each community is unique. You will each encounter different roadblocks and opportunities for growth throughout this program as you work with your neighbors to grow a more sustainable Los Angeles. The Tree Ambassador program will provide you with tools to overcome many of the obstacles you encounter as you work toward fostering climate resiliency in your community. Throughout the program, you will learn how to advocate for the wellbeing of your community and future generations.

Who are Tree Ambassadors?

Tree Ambassadors:	Tree Ambassadors don't:
Identify and communicate needs within their communities	Already have all the answers.
Invest in their communities and foster relationships in their neighborhoods	Already know everyone in their community.
Seek solutions and know when to ask for support	Solve problems on their own.
Spark interest in others to dream together for a better future	Do everything by themselves.
Care about their communities and its future in the face of climate change	Do not have the future of their community in mind.
Inquire about trees in their neighborhoods	Already know everything about trees.
Advocate for the environment, urban greening, climate resilience, and environmental justice	Feel indifferent to the social, political and physical environment of their community.

Neighborhood leadership comes in many forms, but generally, if you see a need in your community and have the desire to seek solutions, you are the right person to be a leader. As a leader in your community, you have been hired to join a group of committed Angelenos to learn about urban forestry and how trees impact your neighborhood. The Tree Ambassador program is designed to provide on-the-ground, community-centered support.

The Tree Ambassador program is centered around peer-to-peer learning with core training and guidance from urban forestry professionals. During the first half of the program, Ambassadors will participate in group training sessions, workshops, and team-building opportunities and hangouts, covering a range of topics from tree care to community organizing and outreach strategies. Ambassadors will get hands-on field experience with support from local experts. The second half of the program will center around in a Tree Ambassador-led Community Impact Project.

What can you expect?

1 Space to share your expertise, learn, & grow

As a member of your community, you hold local knowledge and relationships within your neighborhood. We want to learn from you and give you a space to learn from each other.

2 Group training sessions, workshops & discussions

Online and in-person trainings will be held weekly covering a wide range of issues related to trees and bringing people together in Los Angeles. You will have a chance to practice the things you learn and learn from each other.

3 Expert support, guidance, & advice

For some of our training sessions, we will bring in expert ecologists, community organizers, and city officials as guest speakers. We're here as a resource for you. If any questions or concerns come up throughout your time as a Tree Ambassador, don't hesitate to reach out to us directly.

4 Community Action Toolkit

We created this toolkit to support you in making the greatest impact in your community. We hope you use this toolkit as an aid as you embark on your journey of community empowerment through trees and nature-based solutions.

5 Leadership development & professional experience

Our program is designed to connect you with urban greening organizations and other community organizers throughout Los Angeles to build a foundation for your career as an environmentalist and community advocate.

6 Group Hangouts & Team Bonding Events

Monthly opportunities for Tree Ambassadors to meet with their cohort, share experiences, and collaborate by engaging in a team building activity.

7 Community Impact Project

You'll get the chance to design and implement your own project, tailored to the unique needs of your community.

Program Goals



Raise awareness within their communities on the intersections of climate change, urban heat, urban tree canopy, and public health while promoting place-based, local solutions



Learn how to access free tree programs in the City of Los Angeles



Master best practices for planting, caring, preserving young trees



Strengthen and cultivate bonds with neighbors and community champions within your community including key stakeholders



Listen to the needs of fellow community members and provide support in response



Work to secure street tree applications from neighbors, community members, and businesses



Work to secure yard tree applications, ensuring that recipients understand the care needed to ensure the tree's survival



Host & lead at least one community tree adoption in partnership with a partner organization



Participate in and support at least one tree planting event and/or tree care event in partnership with a partner organization



Identify potential career pathways in urban greening, urban forestry, community organizing, and equitable city planning

Learning Objectives



Describe the various benefits of trees and the key role they play in a community to combat climate change, specifically urban heat and energy efficiency.



Identify strategies for developing an asset map of key stakeholders and urban greening resources within the community.



Perform and demonstrate listening strategies to work with the community and provide needed support as a response.



Complete the process to secure street tree applications or "Commitment to Water" or "CTW" forms from neighbors, community members, and businesses.



Complete the process to secure yard tree applications for private property.



Describe the steps to take to ensure the right tree is in the right place for the right reason.



Complete the process of hosting a tree adoption, tree planting, and/or tree care event.



Design and execute a Community Impact Project tailored to the specific needs of their unique neighborhood.



Guide other community members in correctly planting trees according to best practices.



Identify potential career pathways in the area of urban greening, community organizing, and sustainable and city building.

Toolkit Chapters



Direct Benefits of Trees

Cleaner Air

Trees are nature's air purifiers. Their leaves filter harmful pollutants in the air and produce oxygen for us to breathe.



Water

Trees help filter and capture precious stormwater water as it makes its way through the watershed. Trees recharge groundwater supplies.



Climate Change

Trees absorb carbon dioxide, a harmful greenhouse gas contributing to climate change.



Biodiversity

Trees, especially native trees like oaks and sycamores, provide critical habitat for urban wildlife.



Public Health

People living in polluted urban areas are far less likely to be admitted to hospitals with asthma when there are lots of trees in their neighborhoods.



Beautification

Trees beautify our neighborhoods and make the places we live in feel like home.



Save Energy

Trees properly placed around buildings can reduce air conditioning needs by up to 56% and can save 20-50% in energy used for heating.



Cooling Shade

Shade from trees can combat the urban heat island effect & prevent heat related deaths. A single mature tree can provide the cooling equivalent of 10 air conditioners operating 20 hours a day.



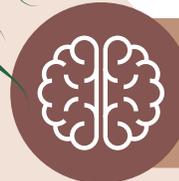
Community

By planting trees with members of your community and spending more time outdoors you build relations and get to know your neighbors.



Mental Health

People living in neighborhoods with less than 10% tree canopy cover are more likely to report symptoms of depression, stress, and anxiety.



Better Learning

Trees and their cooling effect lead to improved concentration, learning, and academic performance.



Green Economy

In 2009 urban forestry supported 60,067 jobs in California resulting in \$3.3 billion in individual income. By planting trees, we are creating green jobs for the future.



Safer Streets

Trees have been shown to slow traffic which therefore increases both driver and pedestrian safety. More walkable neighborhoods also encourage different modes of transportation.



Improved Fitness

More walkable neighborhoods encourage exercise and improves physical and mental health. Shaded streets are a welcome site to runners and bikers alike!



Indirect Benefits of Trees

Chapter One: Introduction to Urban Forestry



Why Trees?



“Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer

Trees offer many benefits to our communities. They store carbon dioxide and produce oxygen, combat **climate change**, increase **biodiversity**, and improve public health. Planting and caring for trees fosters a more livable city. Most notably, urban trees can offset the **urban heat island effect**. Increased temperatures intensify heat waves in cities, which results in increased mortality. Heat-related illness and death have a greater impact on communities of color, the elderly, low to middle income households, workers, and the unhoused. Extreme heat can worsen chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, heart, respiratory, and autoimmune conditions. Trees lower surface and air temperatures through **evapotranspiration** and cooling shade. Everyone deserves access to trees.

Strategically planting shade trees in public spaces and on private property can provide life-saving shelter from the heat, reduce energy use, improve air quality, and enhance our overall quality of life. Your work as a Tree Ambassador will impact the lives of generations to come.

1 Climate Change: Long-term changes in the average weather patterns that define Earth’s local, regional, and global climates.

2 Biodiversity: The variety of life in the world or a particular habitat or ecosystem.

3 Urban Heat Island Effect: When an urban area is hotter than the surrounding rural areas. This effect is caused by a lack of trees and by paved surfaces and roads trapping and holding heat from the sun and radiating it back into the air throughout the day and night.

4 Evapotranspiration: A process that all plants do where water is transferred from the ground to the atmosphere through evaporation from the soil and by the exhalation of water vapor from plants’ leaves.

LA's URBAN FOREST



Street Trees and Medians.

Trees planted in the public right-of-way such as sidewalks and medians offer opportunities for increasing the tree canopy in Los Angeles. Although the palms are iconic throughout the city, trees with fuller crowns and more leafy foliage, such as sycamores or jacarandas, actually provide more benefits with shade and reductions in heat island effects and carbon emissions.

Plantings on Private Property.

Trees and plants on private property, including yards, rooftop gardens, and living walls around homes and apartment buildings, make up 90% of Los Angeles' urban forest, and offer many opportunities for greening the city.

The City's Urban Forestry Division maintains 700,000 street trees across the City.

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Native trees such as the coast live oak, black walnut, and sycamore support local wildlife and encourage biodiversity.

and Sidewalk Planters.
Trees in the public right-of-way and medians increase the livable space of the urban areas. These areas require regular maintenance to provide a healthy and vibrant environment for people and planters.

Parks and Open Space.
Trees and landscaping in city parks and open space areas offer many benefits to people and wildlife alike. There are nearly 300,000 trees in Los Angeles city parks that require regular maintenance, but are vital green space and cooling centers in the community.

Why Now?

It's Getting Hot in Here

Heat is the nation's deadliest weather disaster, killing as many as 12,000 people a year (Shindell 2020). Annually, extreme heat causes more deaths than hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and lightning combined. More than 7,800 official heat-related deaths occurred in the United States from 1999 to 2010. Los Angeles is expected to get hotter and hotter in the coming decades as climate change brings even more intense heat waves.

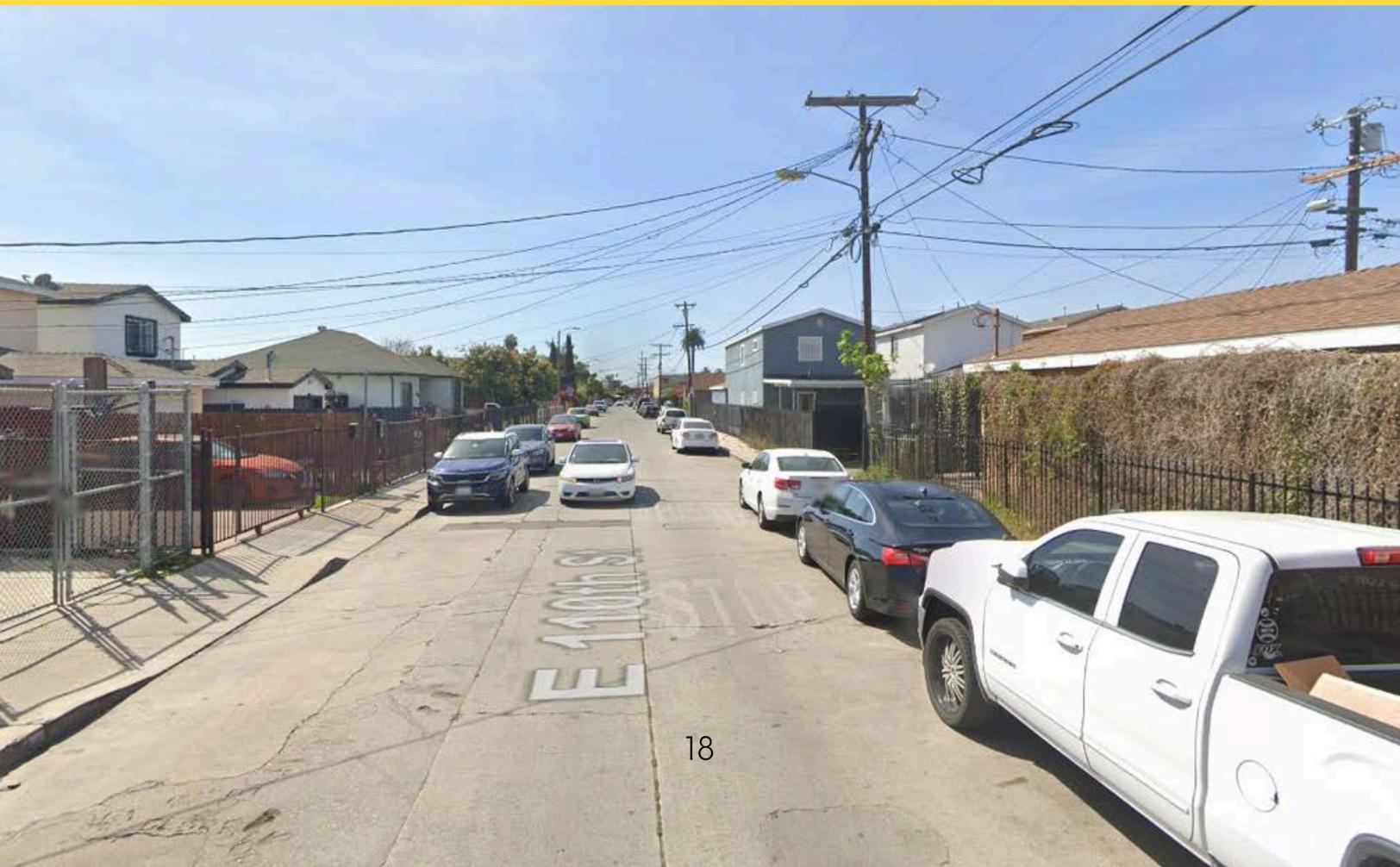
Our Urban Forest is Inequitable & Under Threat

Our city has lost thousands of trees due to drought, pests, and development. Many more are reaching the end of their life cycles in the coming decades. We are losing trees at a time when we need them the most. The City's Urban Forestry Division estimates our neighborhoods will lose up to 50% of our street trees due to old age in the next 40 years (Sauceda 2015).

Trees are Key

Trees protect our communities and grow climate resilience. We must plant strategically and aggressively now to ensure future generations are equipped with a cooling canopy of healthy, mature trees — even during the drought.







Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

- The Environmental Protection Agency

As we've previously discussed, vibrant urban forests help create healthy and connected communities. Unfortunately, access to resources has never been equitable in this country. We must always acknowledge that our country is built on stolen Indigenous land, and Los Angeles in particular is built on Kizh-Gabrielino and Tongva land via **settler colonialism**. As a system founded upon violence against people of color, racism continues to shape our cities. These practices were prevalent in Los Angeles County and their effects are still seen today. Let's explore how a historic, racist housing policy called **redlining** led to lasting **disinvestment** in communities of color.

Settler Colonialism: The removal and erasure of Indigenous peoples by settlers who establish a new society on stolen lands.

Redlining: a discriminatory practice where banks, insurance companies, and other money-holding institutions, refuse or limit loans, mortgages, insurance, etc., to specific communities based on their racial makeup.

Disinvestment: purposefully withdrawing investment from communities, meaning developers and builders no longer spend their money to improve neighborhoods, businesses, or public spaces in the community.

Redlined LA

As part of the 1930's New Deal, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) created color-coded maps to assess home loan risks. Using a system called redlining, the HOLC helped impose racial segregation and direct financial resources towards white Americans. (Badger 2017)

- █ ↑ More white residents, more single-family housing
- █ ↓ More residents of color more multifamily housing
- █ ↓
- █ ↓ Redlined areas

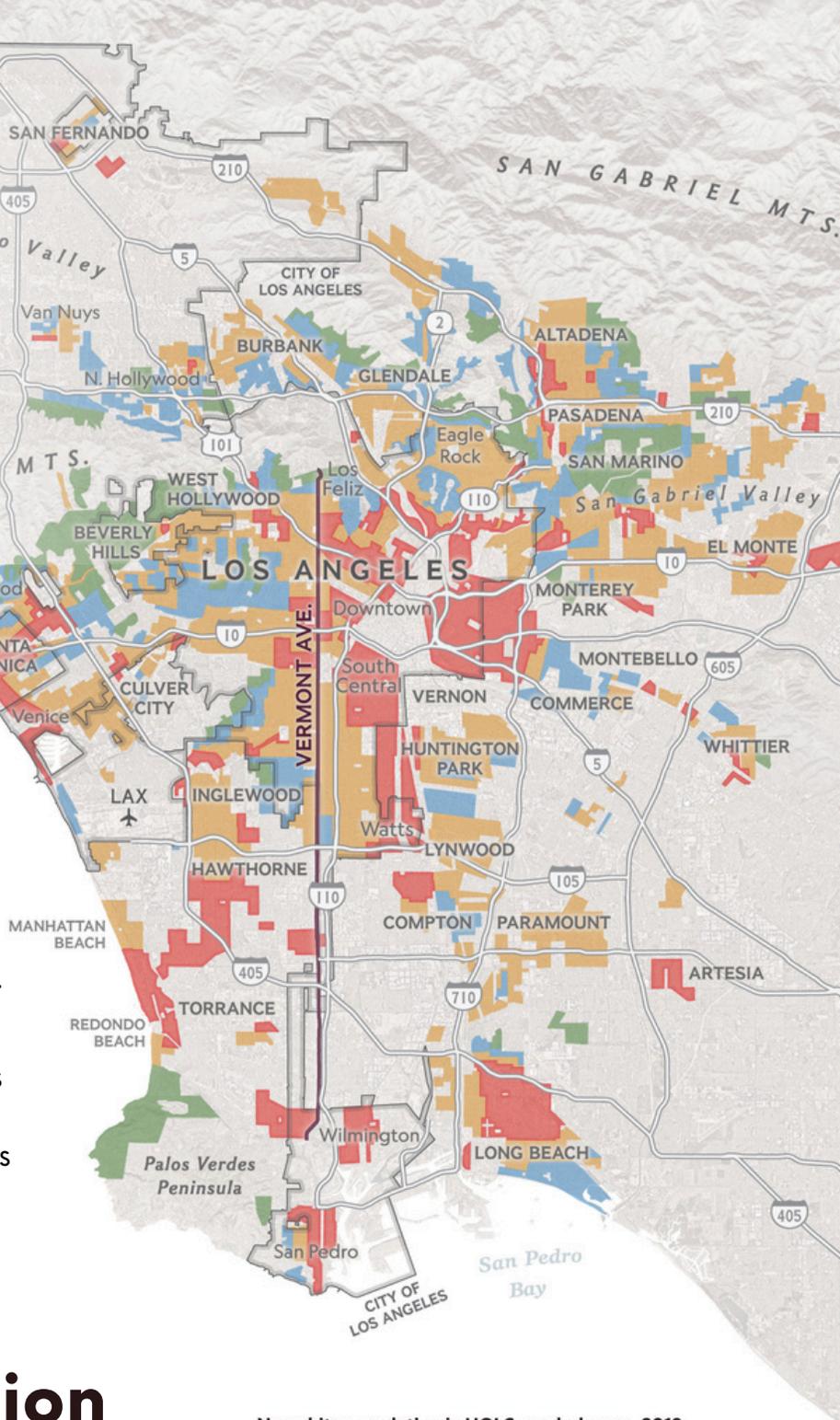
Downgrading Diversity

Race played an explicit role in determining neighborhood ranks. The presence or proximity of "subversive racial elements" sharply devalued neighborhoods in the eyes of the HOLC. Bureaucrats also deemed mixed-race neighborhoods as "hazardous" - leading to residents being denied loans (Franco 2018).

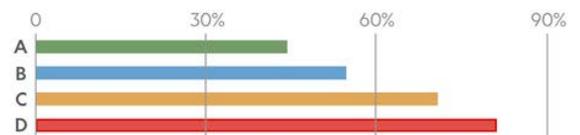
On the other hand, white neighborhoods were rewarded higher area scores for enacting racial restrictions that forbid selling homes in their neighborhood to people of color, reinforcing racial segregation.

How Discrimination Shaped Los Angeles

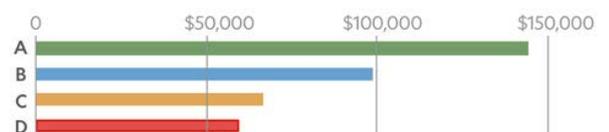
Today, we can still see how redlining concentrated poverty and people of color in some areas, and wealthy whites in others. It is vital that we acknowledge these histories so that we can redress harms caused and center equity in our program.



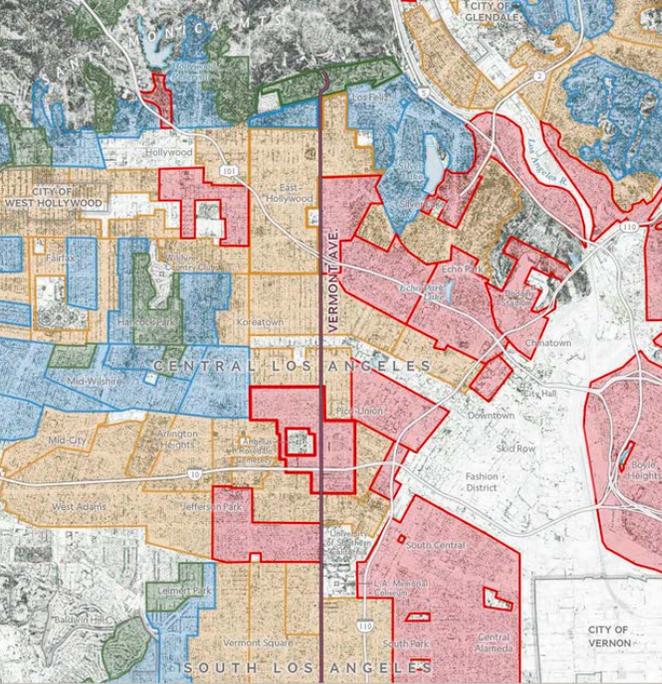
Nonwhite population in HOLC-graded areas, 2019



Median household income, 2019 (USD)



Source: Champine et al., "How L.A.'s Urban Tree Canopy Reveals Hidden Inequities."

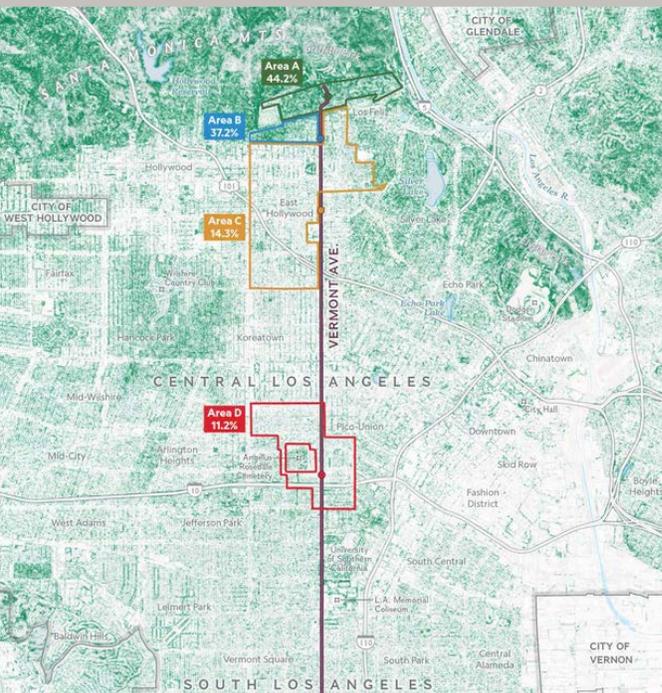


Racist Housing Policies

Today, broad patterns of trees, urban heat, and wealth are influenced by redlining policies from 1939.

Home Owners' Loan Corporation
1939 grading system

Grade: A B C D — Redlined Areas

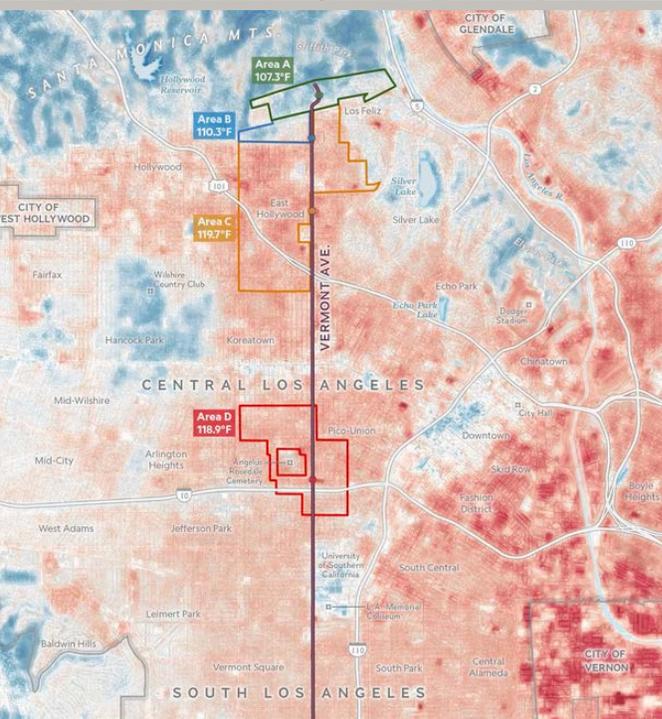


Urban Tree Canopy

Throughout the City of Los Angeles, urban heat is closely associated with low canopy cover. Neighborhoods with fewer trees often experience hotter temperatures while those with dense canopies remain cooler. Typically, higher-rated neighborhoods have higher tree canopy cover than redlined counterparts. In 2019 the **canopy cover percentage** of **Area A** was nearly four times greater than **Area D**.

Tree Canopy in 2019

Urban Tree Canopy (UTC) Cover: percentage (%) of the ground area that is directly covered with tree crowns

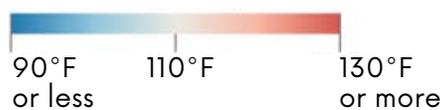


Urban Heat

Satellite imagery shows the disparities in the urban heat island effect. On July 3rd, 2020, the average surface temperature of **Area A** was 11.6°F cooler than **Area D**. This temperature difference could be a matter of life or death.

July 3, 2020

Land-surface temperature



Urban Heat Island: an urban area or metropolitan area that is significantly warmer than its surrounding rural areas due to human activities.

Case Study

Source: Champine et al., "How L.A.'s Urban Tree Canopy Reveals Hidden Inequities," National Geographic, 2021

A six-mile drive from north to south down Vermont Ave reveals how trees on the city's streets change with the income level of each neighborhood. Four areas (graded **A**, **B**, **C**, and **D**) exemplify these urban forestry differences.



Grade A: Los Feliz

At the north end of the avenue, wide-spreading fig trees provide ample shade for single-family homes in this affluent neighborhood.
\$135,000 median household income, 2019



Grade B: Los Feliz

Downhill and half a mile south on Vermont Avenue, small apartment buildings line the street, but there's still room for plenty of trees.
\$103,000 median household income, 2019



Grade C: East Hollywood

About a mile south of Area B, larger commercial buildings and more parking lots begin to appear on Vermont Avenue, with space on the streets for only a few trees.
\$41,500 median household income, 2019



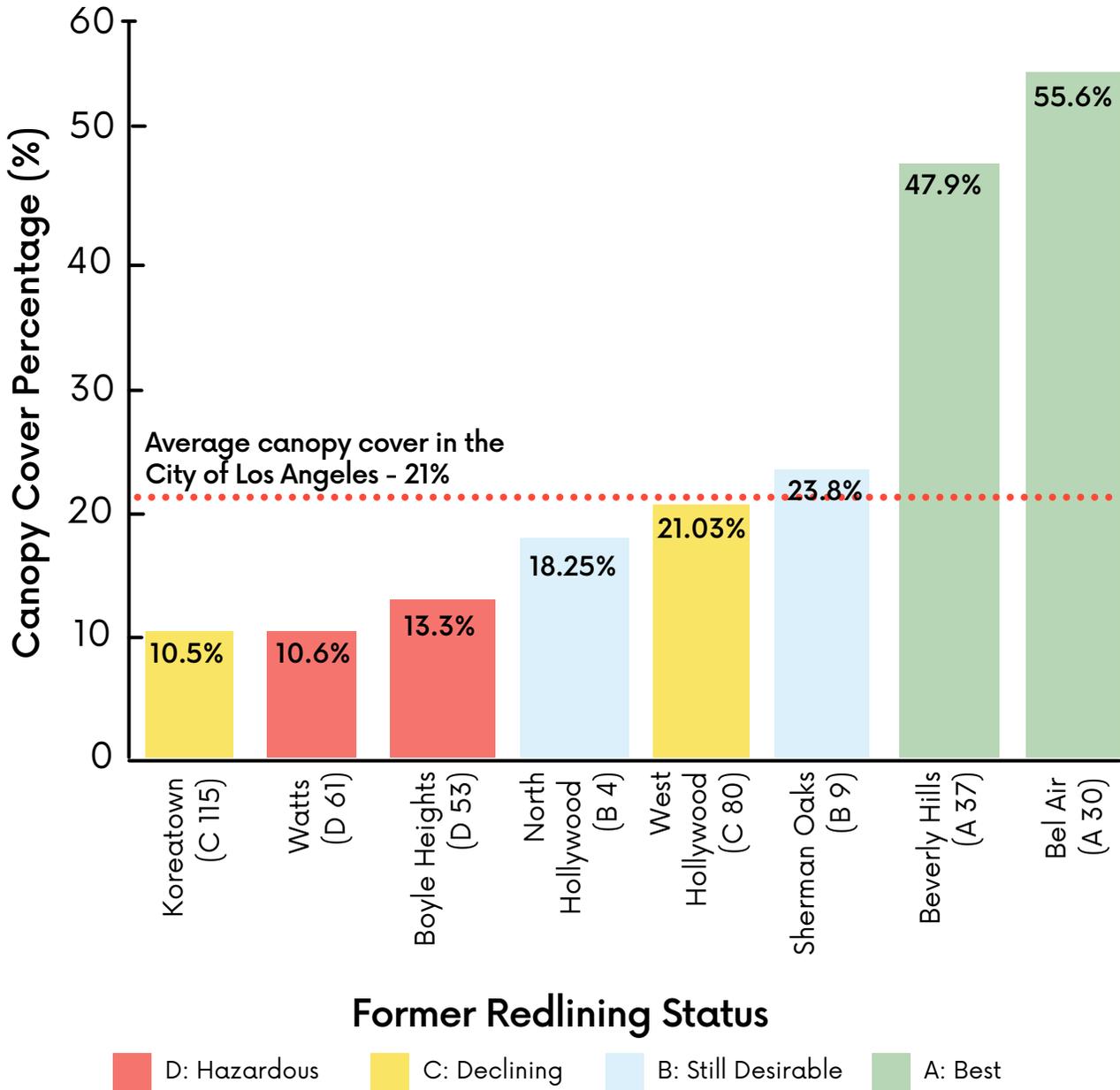
Grade D: Pico Union

Roughly six miles south of shady Area A, trees are all but absent. The Vermont Avenue streetscape is dominated by pavement in this neighborhood.
\$35,500 median household income, 2019



Photo: Champine et al., "How L.A.'s Urban Tree Canopy Reveals Hidden Inequities."

Redlining & Urban Tree Canopy Cover

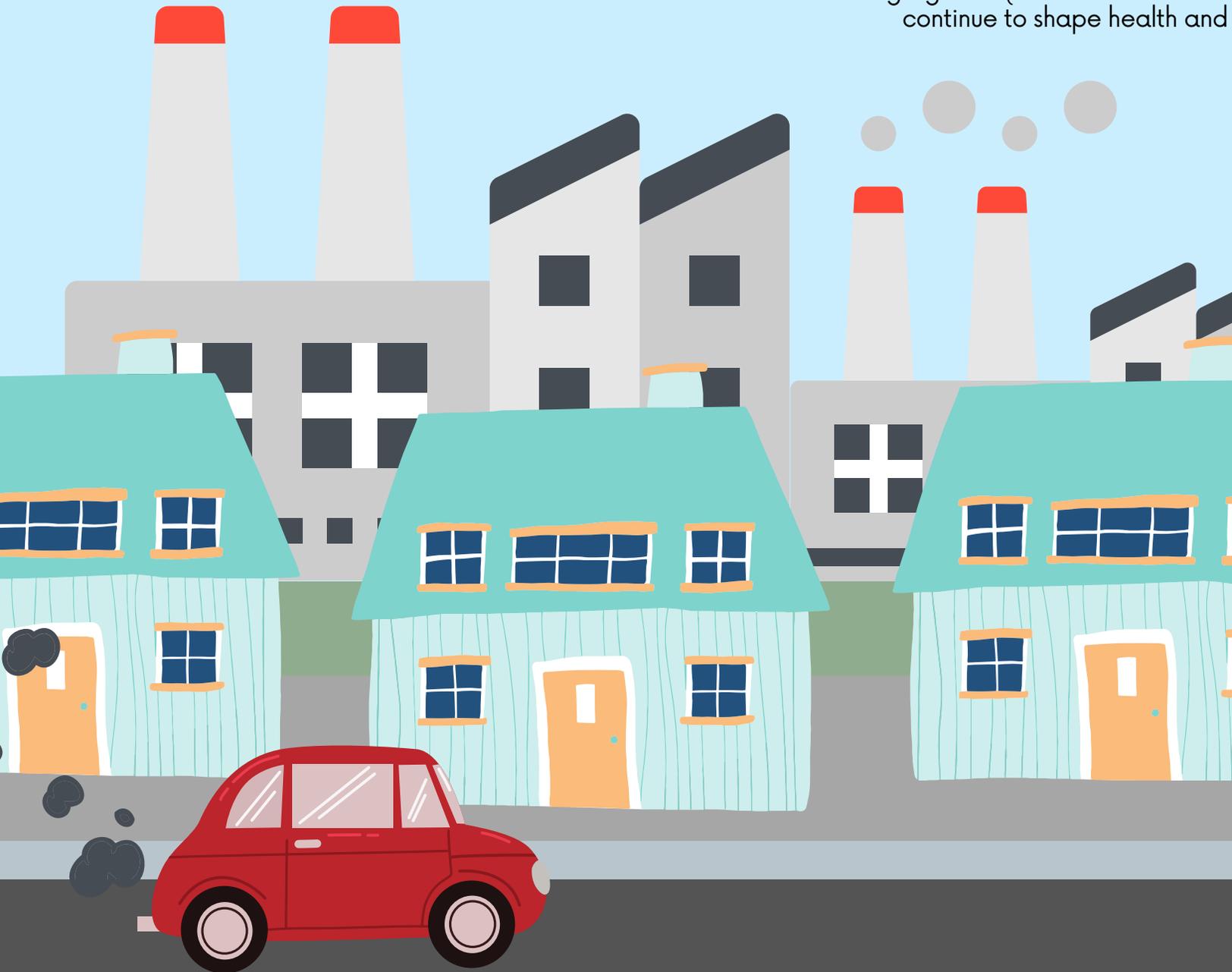


Canopy Coverage Percentage (%)

This bar graph shows canopy coverage percentage (%) in formerly redlined and un-redlined areas within various cities of Los Angeles. These numbers are approximations based on information provided by the LA Tree Canopy tool and the Mapping Inequality Project.

Long Term Effects

Redlining helped reinforce the racial wealth gap and maintain residential neighborhoods based on race. In the United States, it's estimated that it will take 100 years to move to end Black-White residential segregation (Quick and Kalenberg 2019). These effects continue to shape health and

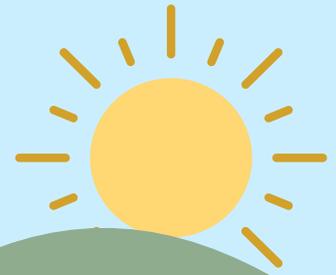


Racial Opportunity Gap

Residential segregation matters because where we live can determine our access to education, transportation, employment opportunities, and more. Folks living in wealthier areas can more easily access well-funded schools because public schools are funded through property taxes. Furthermore, employment opportunities tend to concentrate in whiter and wealthier areas (Quick and Kalenberg 2019).

Effects of Redlining

ential segregation, the physical separation of groups into different
on average, 52.6% of African Americans or whites would have to
erg 2019). This separation, and the disparities that come with it,
d life outcomes today.



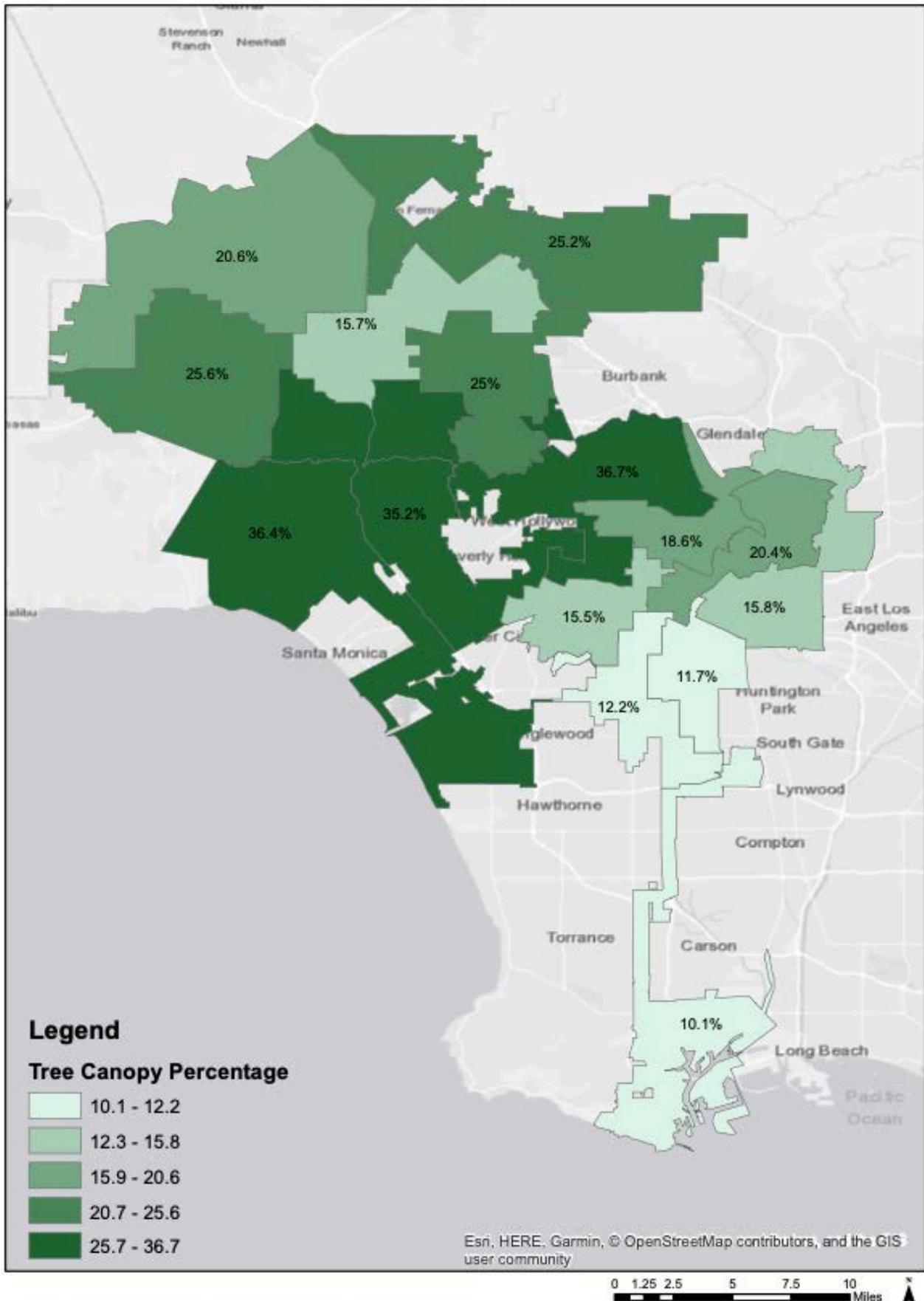
Environmental Racism

Redlined communities being seen as “less valuable” led to cheaper land prices, which made it more cost-effective for polluting industries and freeways to buy the rights to build through these neighborhoods. This, in turn, exposed redlined communities to greater amounts of environmental and health hazards.

Public Health Inequities

Zip code is one of the most reliable determinants of U.S. health outcomes (Ducharme and Wolfson 2019). This is because where you live can determine your access to healthy foods, outdoor spaces, and quality healthcare.

Percent Canopy Cover by Council District City of Los Angeles



Map created by Michelle Barton using data from TreePeople and the Center for Urban Resilience at Loyola Marymount University

Resources

Firsts Steps Toward an Urban Forest Management Plan for Los Angeles
tinyurl.com/firststepsLA

Tree People - 22 Benefits of Trees
<https://tinyurl.com/4z6tej3u>

USC News- LAs Urban Forest
<https://tinyurl.com/4ejtstx>

Los Angeles Department of Public Works - Rachel Malarich - Chief Forest Officer Blog
<https://tinyurl.com/ycky9mae>

Forest Service U.S. Department of Agriculture - Urban Forest Connections Webinar Series
<https://tinyurl.com/2p8m7abn>

US Census Bureau QuickFacts (search your zip code)
<https://tinyurl.com/237s6jyf>

Find Your CA Representative
<https://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov/>

Los Angeles Times Mapping L.A. Project
<https://tinyurl.com/42kvbres>

Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archives
<https://tessa.lapl.org/photocol>

Our home on native land - Native-Land.ca
<https://native-land.ca/>

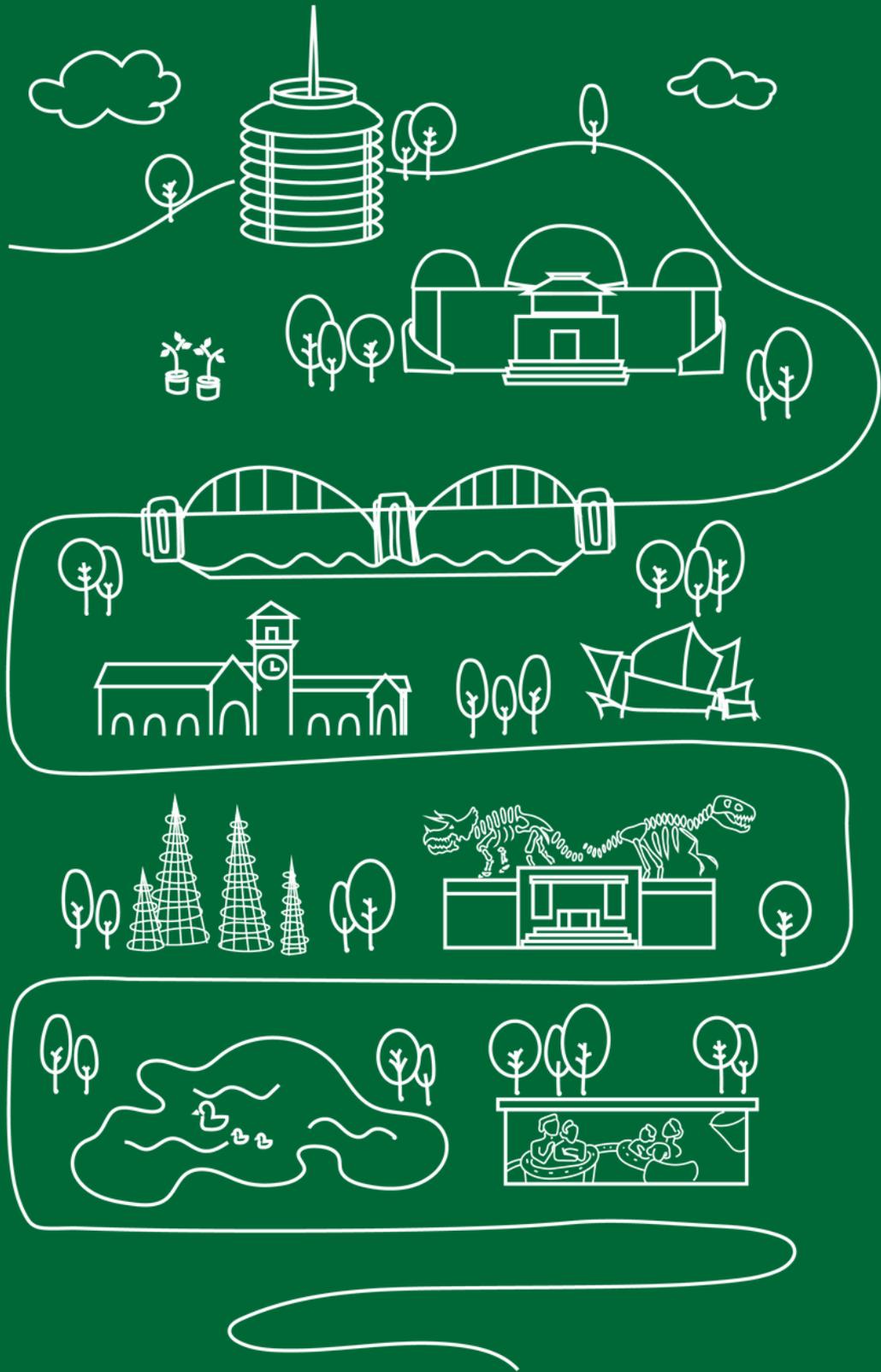
Neighborhood Info
<https://neighborhoodinfo.lacity.org/>

CalEnviroScreen 4.0
<https://tinyurl.com/42kvbres>

Los Angeles Urban Tree Canopy Tool
<https://tinyurl.com/4um6ev8z>

Tree Canopy Lab - Google
<https://tinyurl.com/2s3643j7>

Mapping Inequalities tool
<https://tinyurl.com/4upcbfkv>



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