

Rooted Connections: Understanding South Los Angeles Community Leaders' Relationship to the Urban Forest

A Report from the USC Dornsife Public Exchange



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Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy or the University of Southern California as a whole.

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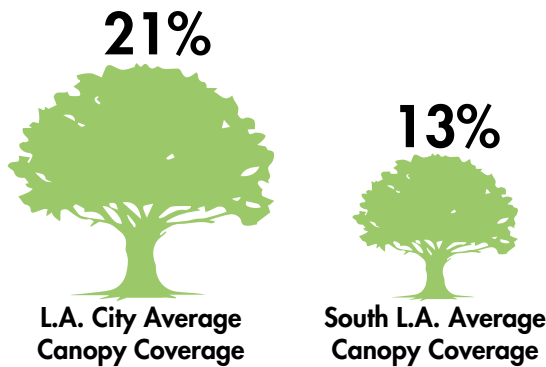
Introduction

The City of Los Angeles faces an equity issue: the distribution of the tree canopy. According to the 2021 Los Angeles Urban Forest Equity Assessment Report, just five block groups hold 18% of the City’s total tree canopy coverage, yet less than 1% of the City’s 3.8 million residents live in these areas.¹ Nine out of the 15 council districts have less than 25% tree coverage, falling short of the 30% target recommended by experts.²

Historically, discriminatory policies have confined racial and ethnic minorities to underfunded neighborhoods, such as South Los Angeles.³ The residents of these areas, who are predominantly low-income and communities of color, have disproportionately experienced the lasting impacts of systemic and discriminatory practices daily in the form of environmental injustices and inequities. This includes an average tree canopy coverage of 13%, with some areas of South L.A. falling as low as 5%,⁴ compared to the L.A. city-wide average of 21%.⁵ The lack of trees contributes to the environmental injustices experienced daily by South L.A. residents.

This study aims to address these issues by exploring urban forestry from the perspective of South L.A. community leaders. While extensive research has documented the patterns of injustices that have led to these inequities in South L.A., few studies have addressed these questions from the perspective of the impacted communities. Through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with community leaders, the South LA Tree Coalition (SLATC), USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, and USC Dornsife Public Exchange explored the perspectives, needs, challenges, and recommendations for future policy and engagement efforts surrounding urban forestry and tree-related interests in South L.A. The key research questions were:

- What are the key needs and priorities related to trees in South L.A.?
- How does tree planning fit within larger planning, policy, and advocacy efforts in South L.A.?



The findings aim to inform tree planning in South L.A. and ensure that the needs of its diverse communities are represented in citywide decision-making processes.

¹ Galvin, M., O’Neil-Dunne, J., Locke, D., & Romolini, M. (2019). Los Angeles County Tree Canopy Assessment. <https://www.treepeople.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Tree-Canopy-LA-2016-Final-Report.pdf>

² Nature Based Solutions Institute. (2023). The 3-30-300 Rule for Healthier and Greener Cities. <https://nbsi.eu/the-3-30-300-rule>

³ CAPA Strategies. (2021). Los Angeles Urban Forest Equity Assessment Report. <https://www.cityplants.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/LAUF-Equity-Assessment-Report-February-2021.pdf>

⁴ TreePeople, Loyola Marymount Center for Urban Resilience (2019). 2016 Tree Canopy Coverage Dataset. Data provided by authors.

⁵ McPherson, G. E., Simpson, J. R., Xiao, Q., & Chunxia, W. (2008). Los Angeles 1-Million tree canopy cover assessment. Gen. Tech. Rep. PSW-GTR-207. Albany, CA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station. <https://research.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/29402>



Research Design

The study team conducted 34 qualitative interviews with South L.A. community leaders and stakeholders to understand their perspectives on urban forestry. The study's sample audience focused on community leaders because they have extensive knowledge of broader community needs and interests across South L.A. communities. For the purpose of this study, Service Planning Area (SPA) 6, as defined by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health,⁵ was used as the bounds for South Los Angeles, which includes the neighborhoods of Athens, Compton, Crenshaw, Florence, Hyde Park, Lynwood, Paramount, and Watts.

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience sampling (where participants were identified through referral of SLATC based on their knowledge and connection to the study topics) and snowball sampling (where respondents suggested additional participants for inclusion in the study).

The criteria for participation in the study were as follows:

1. Participants must be residents, stakeholders, workers, and community members or have a meaningful connection to/in South Los Angeles
AND
2. Participants must be over 18 years old.

We interviewed participants over Zoom between November 7th, 2023, and March 8th, 2024. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. Participants were offered a \$50 virtual gift card as compensation for their participation. After transcribing all interviews, all data was coded in ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software to identify broader themes and findings.

⁵ County of Los Angeles Public Health. (n.d.). Service Planning Area 6. [Lacounty.gov. http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/spa6/index.htm](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/spa6/index.htm)

Results & Findings

Key Finding 1 | Trees in South L.A. play a role in community leaders' perceptions of neighborhood identity, environmental conditions, as well as public health and safety.

The majority of study participants mentioned **tree canopy disparities** within South L.A. Many highlighted these disparities by comparing the area's urban forest to other parts of the city.

"I think one of the biggest things that you notice when you're driving through Los Angeles, especially if you start east and go west, or start southeast and go northeast, or whichever way that you do it, is the tree cover. You drive down a street that is [a] more resource-intensive community, and they have massive trees that are covering the streets and covering the lawns, and in their green spaces [are] big trees and then [in the] parkways [there are] big trees. Then you go to South L.A. and that is not the case. There's just a significant lack of tree cover."

Participants described how the absence of trees and the poor quality of the existing trees is impacting their community's character and residents, citing issues such as **reduced shade and higher temperatures**.

"[less shade and higher temperatures] that's an undue burden. That's another burden ... why should people in the urban, lower-to-poor neighborhoods [carry]... Why should their temperature be 10-plus degrees warmer than somebody that lives in a more affluent neighborhood? Just because [of a] lack of trees or tree cover or shade or shade cover?"

Participants also highlighted the **adverse health effects** due to tree scarcity, including respiratory diseases and negative impacts on mental health.

"So you've got long-term impact[s] as well, which is more heat, which can have physical and mental impacts on people in South L.A., as well as the long-term impacts of just not being in an environment where there's necessarily like amelioration of anxiety and stress."

By and large, participants spoke about how a lack of trees in their area has **implications for society** and the future beyond South L.A.

"So in the absence of trees, you know, there are all kinds of troubles that happen from a[n] ecological standpoint, from a societal standpoint, and from a sustainability standpoint."

Community leaders not only highlighted the overall lack of trees in South L.A. but also the significant **issues with existing trees** in the areas. They discussed problems with certain tree species that are water-intensive or invasive to L.A.'s native environment and expressed concerns about tree health resulting in loss or removal.

Poor tree maintenance was cited as a major concern contributing to infrastructural damage and hazards, such as incidents related to tree droppings.

The connection between tree maintenance issues and broader **safety concerns** was also made. Participants noted safety concerns ranging from road hazards and injuries to feeling more susceptible to acts of crime due to poor lighting from overgrown branches.



Photo credit: Theresa Maysonet



Many participants connected their observations to broader policy initiatives that have impacted tree canopy growth, such as the “Million Trees” Campaign in 2006, or tree canopy decline, like the removal of trees during the parading of the Space Shuttle Endeavor in 2012.

Participants also linked tree planting to **gentrification concerns**.

“I’ve also heard [people] say, ‘When we see white people coming in and planting trees, we know the rents are going up.’ So trees, on some level, represent gentrification, and gentrification means that they are going to have to leave.”

Ultimately, participants provided extensive details about their observations of trees in South L.A., often discussing the variety of trees and how specific species can **symbolize neighborhood identity** and characterize certain areas.

“People can say, ‘Hey, we’re the [neighborhood of] yellow trumpet trees! We’re the neighborhood of all the Hong Kong orchid trees!’... It is beautiful. You look down a certain street, and you see all the jacarandas [that] bloom at the same time. You’re like, ‘Oh, wow, what harmony!’”



Key Finding 2

Competing priorities, limited resources, and lack of awareness present barriers to tree-related planning efforts in the community.

Participants mentioned many different barriers to improving the tree canopy in South L.A. The most common observation was that communities and local organizations are at full capacity and that public and non-profit sectors have **limited resources** to devote to trees, such as funding, staffing, and educational materials.

“A lot of the times people have to hold back or pull back their efforts because the capacity to... establish habitat zones and or tree canopy zones or micro forest is limited. And it's limited, not just at the community level, it's limited at the agency, public department level.”

Participants also noted a need for **more widespread awareness** surrounding tree-related efforts in South L.A. Information-sharing gaps contribute to negative experiences with trees, further isolating community support.

“One morning, I wake up, and a local nonprofit NGO is in front of my house planting a tree that I did not ask for. And I am upset. Because I'm like, you're planting it right in front of my parkway where I get out of my car. I didn't ask for this tree to come in.”

Participants also discussed issues related to **unclear responsibilities and expectations** regarding tree care, attributing it to miscommunication between community members and entities with authority over tree planting and policy making. They also noted that these challenges are often exacerbated by limited space and by challenging homeowners-renter dynamics.

“And, you know, if you're in a high-density area, it's a lot of apartments. Like they're not landowners, they're not stakeholders, they're like, 'I rent, and I want my landlord to clean and trim the trees that we do have, so why would I ask you to put a tree in front of my building? You know, I'm not interested. I'm not gonna water it. I'm not going to come out here and water, there's no irrigation. I don't have the hose. I can't do this.’”

Several participants also highlighted that regulations and restrictions related to **infrastructure and zoning** hinder tree planting and planning in South L.A.

“A lot of the regulations and standards that DWP [Los Angeles Department of Water and Power] requires have a direct conflict with the opportunity to have a healthier urban canopy.”

Additionally, participants pointed out that **competing issues** in South L.A. directly challenge efforts to advance tree planting and policy initiatives. Some suggested that resources should be prioritized for education from elementary through high school rather than for tree plantings. Others noted that corporate developments often make tree-planting options unfeasible altogether.

“I think a lot of times, unfortunately, the opposition... the powers that be... whether it's industry or corporate development... they corner communities into facing this false dichotomy of you can have either or.”

Participants also expressed concerns about **funding challenges**, noting that budgets in South L.A. are stretched thin across various resources and issues, leaving fewer resources available for trees.

“At this point, I think we're competing. And we need to try and grab the money from some areas and pull them into others to help deal with the situation.”

Most frequently, participants emphasized that basic needs such as food, water, and health take precedence over trees in South L.A. Therefore, they advocated for allocating resources and attention to these **immediate needs first**.

“That's something that for me feels very pressing, and very alarming, and very immediate. Because right now, folks are being impacted [by other issues] right? They're sleeping on the concrete right there. When it's super hot, they're dehydrated. They don't have access to shade, right? So it's hard focusing on other things [like trees] when that's in my face when I'm driving home, and I see these folks, literally begging for money, begging for food.”



Key Finding 3

Community leaders value healthy tree canopy in South L.A. and envision a future with equitable and intentional greenery supported by community initiatives and proper maintenance.

Participants described numerous benefits of urban forestry and offered various reasons why trees are crucial to South L.A. Some highlighted how trees contribute to **long-term financial savings**, such as through water capture, shading, and increased property values from greening and beautification efforts. Some also discussed how trees **enhance social and environmental resilience** in South L.A., improving social connections, engaging youth and communities, and promoting health, wellness, and education. They emphasized that more trees would foster residents' **connection to their environment**.

"I feel like trees can connect different groups, different people in so many ways due to how much they can benefit. whether you're in the interest of water capture, water filtration, if you like the scientific aspects, or if [you think], 'trees just need to exist because they need to exist.' But [I believe] if you can find a person who [says], 'Well, I think trees are pretty because they have flowers or because they bear fruit.' Well, we both have something in common. We both like trees... we both found a benefit...and we can bond over that... that's one of my biggest connectors to the communities. Once we find... something of value we can bond over, we're already BFFs. At least we can build upon that."

Others emphasized the **sentimental value of trees** and their role as **symbols in social movements**.

"When you think about social justice and how to actually create movements, planting a tree is a[n] extremely forward act because it means that you will be here as that tree grows."

Regarding environmental benefits, participants noted that trees **provide shade and reduce heat**, addressing heat-related challenges. They stressed that expanding tree coverage would improve mental health and mitigate environmental hazards like air pollution, which disproportionately affect residents' physical health.

"I imagine less pollution, cleaner air, more shade. And also a push for wellness. Because when I think of these garden beds and these trees, I'm also thinking of what herbs are growing, [because there] are different ways that you can literally heal yourself if you learn about it."

Participants offered recommendations for future actions to maximize the benefits of tree canopy and urban forestry in South L.A. A few also cautioned against initiatives that may not align with local conditions and contexts. While environmental, economic, and policy solutions were mentioned, an overwhelming majority emphasized the importance of **community-led efforts** in improving tree planting and planning.

"It's a little more arduous, but it's more beneficial if you actually outreach and directly engage elements of the community in the tree planning, rather than having a top-down [process where] the city of Los Angeles comes through and plants trees...because you don't get the buy-in. And you don't get the true benefit of using the trees to connect communities to make stronger, better communities."

When discussing their **visions for the future** of South L.A., participants imagined a landscape rich with trees and green spaces.

“[The urban canopy in South LA should be] three times what we have now, in the ground and growing and surviving. That would be from a tree standpoint, that would be a huge victory for South L.A. and something that I would be very, very, very happy to see happen.”

Several participants emphasized, however, that the addition of trees must be accompanied by **adequate planning and maintenance** measures.

“I think [we should strive for] trees with no addendums. So a tree that is vibrant and taken care of as opposed to a tree that's been there [and] is kind of sad looking and dying. Even if [a South L.A. resident has access to a tree]...they [often] don't feel safe or comfortable in that area, or [the] trees are on public property and that property [is] a contaminated site or [is] right next to another contaminated site, like an oil field, or refinery or whatever it is. So trees with no addendums would be great.”

Participants also stressed the importance of **addressing the systemic inequities** that have led to these disparities in tree canopy coverage in the first place.

“Our lack of trees is not an accident or coincidence. It is a result of historic patterns of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and racist planning practices. And so there is no easy fix. I think this is the first challenge. And I think because it's such a big problem, it's going to take a big sort of solution.”

“I mean, it's gonna require supervisors, city council members, neighborhood councils to really dedicate themselves towards this. I think it's gonna take a lot of bravery for members of the community to make some tough trade-offs.”

Finally, participants believed that committing to addressing these inequities would demonstrate a larger, more significant **commitment to South L.A. residents** overall.

“If you have stewardship for plants, it's not a big far leap to have stewardship for the people that are surrounding the plants, and you know, it's an entree to connecting to something bigger than yourself.”





Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews, this project explored the relationship between South L.A. community leaders and urban forestry. The findings highlight barriers to tree planting and planning efforts and the importance of community involvement in tree-related initiatives.

This research contributes to understanding tree-related interests and priorities in South L.A. and aims to support future planning, policy, and advocacy efforts by the South LA Tree Coalition and other community-based organizations. Furthermore, our research expands upon the existing literature focussed on tree canopy inequities in Los Angeles by offering direct insight from the communities most affected by this issue.

The next steps for this project include reporting findings to local decision-makers to highlight the impacts, issues, and barriers mentioned by participants. To amplify these insights, the study team will produce a video reflecting the report's findings, highlighting the voices of community leaders. Both written and visual content will be widely shared to elevate the underrepresented voices of South L.A. leaders in the urban forestry space. The study team aims to expand collective action and raise awareness of these findings, thereby increasing the representation of South L.A.'s diverse communities in tree-related policy and planning. As one participant aptly stated:

“It takes a village to get things done, no one agency can build the park, no one agency can maintain the park, no one agency can program the park, no one agency can do any of those things. Together, we can.”