

The Role of Nonprofits in Improving Access to Parks in Los Angeles

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Thank you

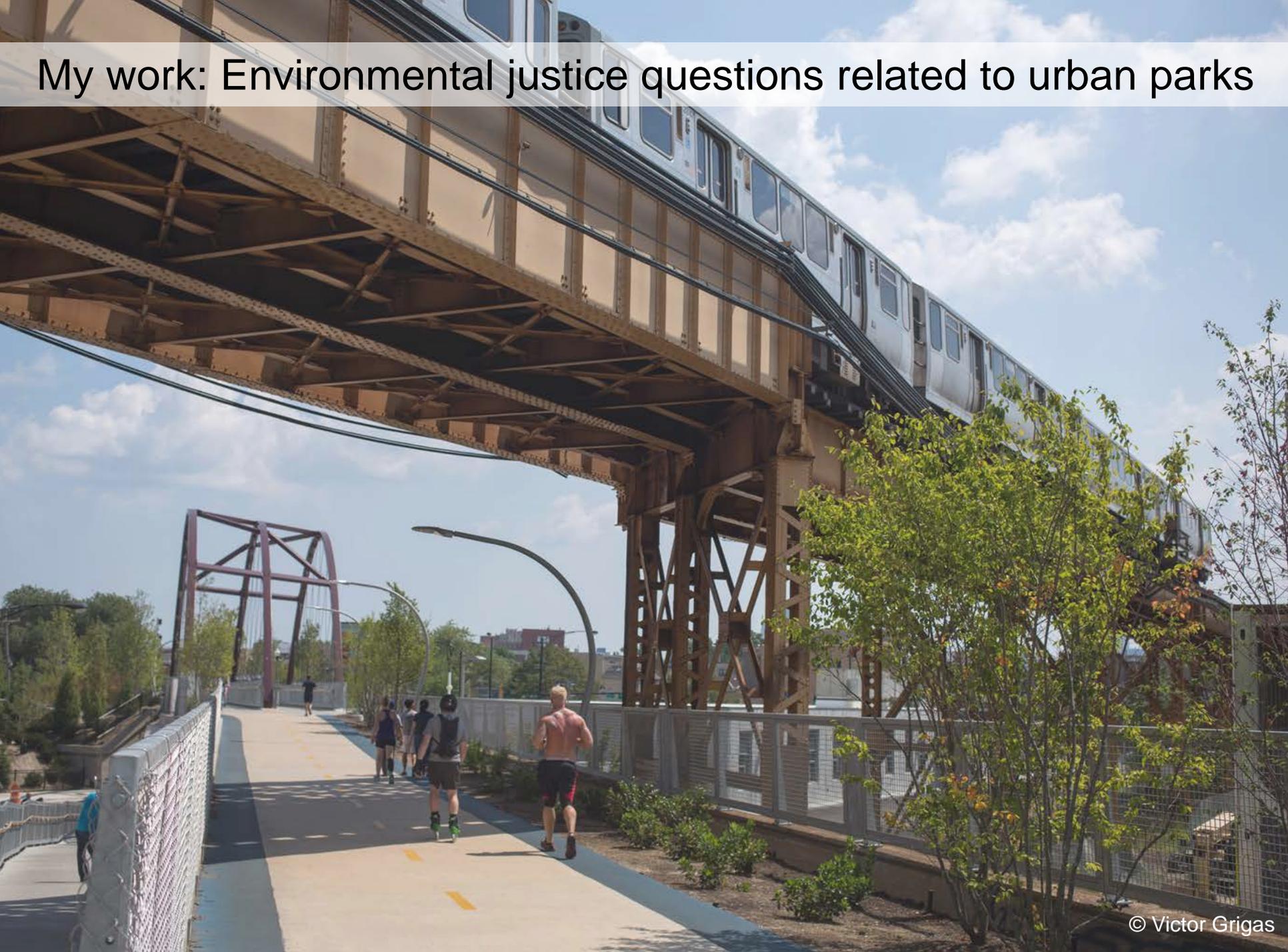


Human
Interaction
Research
Institute

Staff of park
nonprofits and
park agencies

Students and
colleagues

My work: Environmental justice questions related to urban parks



Introduction and background

Why studying park nonprofits matters



**Inequities in
access to parks**
(low-income people of
color are
disadvantaged)



**Parks promote
physical and
mental health**
(could address health
inequities)



**Shrinking
park budgets -
nonprofits have
stepped in**

What park nonprofits do (literature)

- Help public park agencies acquire land for new parks
- Help improve dilapidated parks by adding or renovating amenities
- Bring capital improvement funding to public park agencies
- Maintain and operate flagship parks (e.g., NYC Central park; park conservancies)
- Create and operate park programs (sports, cultural events, etc.)

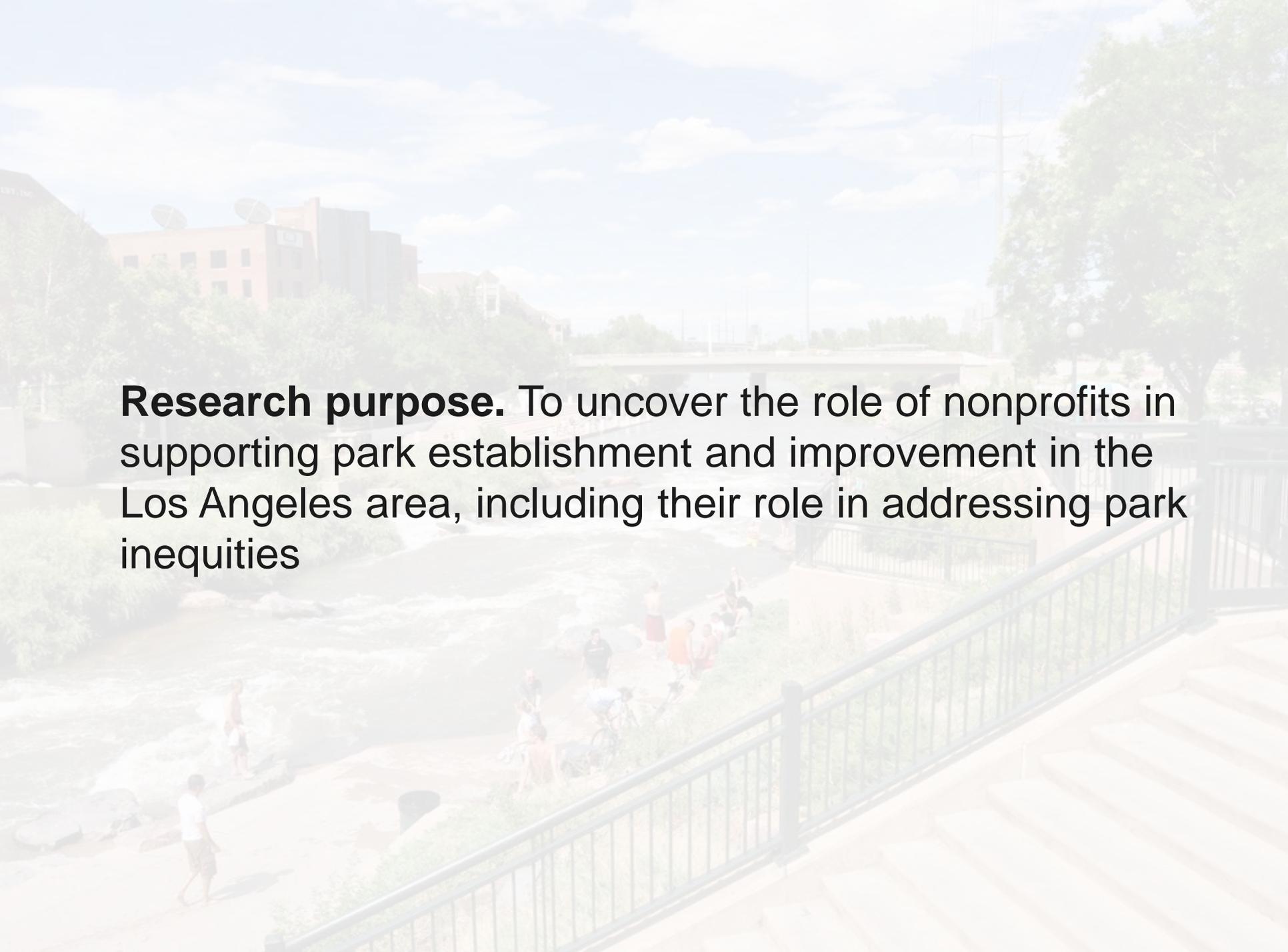
The work of nonprofits is very valuable, but who's benefitting the most from it?

- Nonprofits providing recreation services in Southern California are more active in wealthy, white and suburban communities (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011)
- This might contribute to widening inequities in access to recreation
- These recreation services include organized sports in parks (e.g., little leagues), after school activities, fitness classes, and park programming initiatives related to arts and culture

What we don't know yet about the impact of park nonprofits

- No work on who benefitted from the new parks and improved parks that were supported by nonprofits
- No evidence on neighborhood differences – Joassart-Marcelli et al. (2011) focused on city-level variations
- No investigation has analyzed whether these new and improved parks have made a difference in addressing inequities in access to parks
- No studies have uncovered the reasons why park nonprofits choose to work in different cities or neighborhoods, nor how the nonprofits operate

Research purpose and questions

A faded background image of a park. In the foreground, there are concrete stairs with a black metal railing leading down to a river. Several people are seen walking on the path and sitting on the rocks in the river. In the background, there are trees, a bridge, and some buildings under a blue sky with clouds.

Research purpose. To uncover the role of nonprofits in supporting park establishment and improvement in the Los Angeles area, including their role in addressing park inequities

Research questions

1. Which demographic groups have benefitted the most from new parks and improved parks created with the help of nonprofits?
2. What is the impact of nonprofit-supported parks on park equity?
3. What have been the major contributions of park nonprofits in Los Angeles?
4. How do nonprofits choose to work in different neighborhoods – and to serve various demographic groups?
5. How do park nonprofits operate (e.g., funding and partnerships)?

Methods

A mixed-methods study



Geospatial and
statistical
analyses

Questions 1 & 2

Interviews -
nonprofits and
park agencies

Questions 3, 4, & 5

Integration

How QUAL findings can
help explain the QUAN
results

The geospatial and statistical analyses

- Develop a list of nonprofits (N = 22) that support park establishment, improvement, and maintenance in LA
- Develop a list of nonprofit parks (N = 140) in the City of LA: Search the nonprofit website and contact. Classify each park: new (N = 59), improved, and/or maintained
- Geocode each park based on its address
- Compare demographic variables for census tracts with or without nonprofit parks; and with and without *new* parks supported by nonprofits (Mood's Medians; Q. 1)
- Compare access to parks (proximity, acreage) with and without the new parks supported by nonprofits (Spearman's correlation; Q. 2)

Interviews with nonprofits and park agencies

- Purposive and snowball sampling
- Interviews with 22 individuals from 16 nonprofits and 3 park agencies – phone or in-person
- For nonprofits: Interview questions on their mission, areas of work, sources of funding, geographic areas of focus (and why), and partnerships with park agencies
- For park agencies: Interview questions on partnerships with nonprofits and the main impacts of nonprofits
- Analysis of 115 pages of interview transcripts with constant comparison analysis including inductive and deductive codes (Q. 3, Q. 4, and Q. 5)

Integrating geospatial and interview findings

- Complementarity: How do the nonprofits' missions and constraints and opportunities related to funding and land availability (interviews) help explain why some geographic areas and demographic groups have received more support (geospatial analysis)?



Findings: Which nonprofits are supporting parks and open space in LA?

Name	Focus	Parks	New	Website
Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust	Park equity	20	13	http://www.lanlt.org/
Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative	Park equity	14	8	http://lani.org/
The Trust for Public Land	Park equity and open space	10	8	http://www.tpl.org/
The City Project	Park equity	9	4	http://www.cityprojectca.org/
Pacoima Beautiful	Park equity	3	2	http://www.pacoimabeautiful.org/
From Lot to Spot	Park equity	1	1	http://fromlottospot.org/
Los Angeles Parks Foundation	Park improvements	28	5	http://www.laparksfoundation.org/
Friends of the Los Angeles River	Environmental - LA River	1	1	http://folar.org/
River LA	Environmental - LA River	2	2	http://www.riverla.org/
Amigos de los Rios	Environmental - watershed	1	0	http://www.amigosdelosrios.org/
The River Project	Environmental - LA River	2	2	http://www.theriverproject.org/
The Village Gardeners	Environmental - LA River	1	1	http://www.villagegardeners.org/
Tree People	Environmental	N/A	0	http://www.treepeople.org/
North East Trees	Environmental	8	7	http://www.northeasttrees.org/
Friends of Griffith Park	Environmental	1	0	http://www.friendsofgriffithpark.org/
Audubon Center at Debs Park	Environmental	1	0	http://debspark.audubon.org/
Friends of the Ballona Wetland	Environmental	1	0	http://www.ballonafriends.org/
Silver Lake Reservoirs Conservancy	Environmental	1	1	http://www.silverlakereservoirs.org/
Restore Neighborhoods LA	Housing - new parks	4	4	http://www.rn-la.org/
Los Angeles Conservation Corps	Job training - environmental	1	0	http://lacorps.org/
Shane's Inspiration	Special orientation - play	30	0	http://www.shanesinspiration.org/
LA 84 Foundation	Special orientation - sport	1	0	http://la84.org/
Barnsdall Art Park Foundation	Special orientation - art	1	0	http://barnsdall.org/

Three types of park nonprofits

A circular graphic with a black border containing a faded background image of a park with trees and a fence.

Park equity and EJ

LANLT, Pacoima
Beautiful, The City
Project, et al.

A circular graphic with a black border containing a faded background image of a river flowing through a wooded area.

Environmental – LA River

River LA, FOLAR,
Tree People, et al.

A circular graphic with a black border containing a faded background image of a traditional Japanese building with a thatched roof.

Specific orientations

Shane's Inspiration, LA
84 Foundation, et al.

What park nonprofits do in Los Angeles

- Fundraise for capital improvement projects on parks (public and private money)
- Conduct community outreach for park projects
- Act as park developers
- Acquire land for new parks and transfer it to cities
- Provide planning and design services
- Conduct park maintenance and programming
- Advocacy: Organize campaigns for policy change or ballot measures, education efforts, research providing evidence for advocacy, and complete demonstration projects that show best practices

Findings, Q. 1: Who benefits the most from the work of park nonprofits?

For all parks supported by nonprofits (new, improved, and maintained):

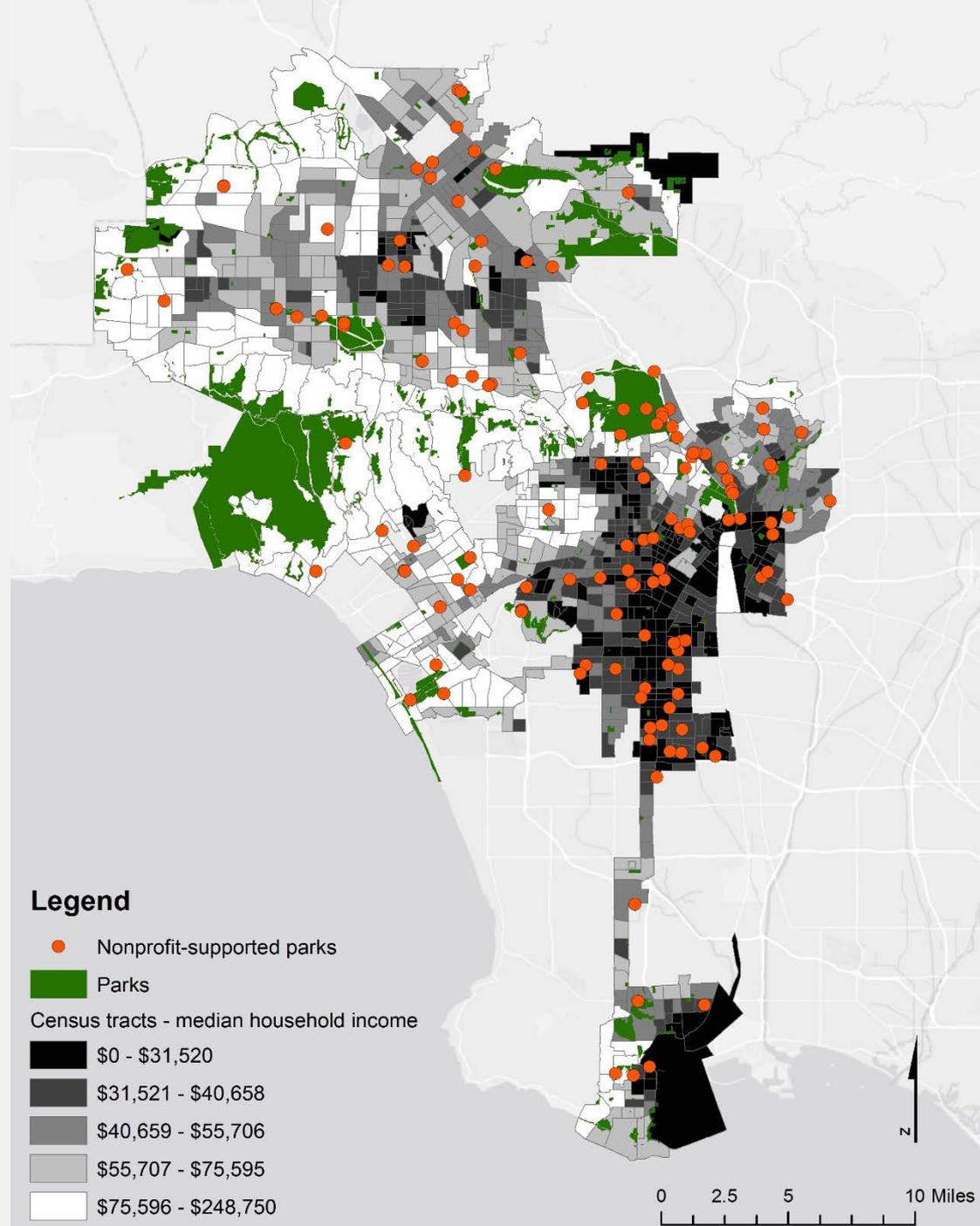
- Census tracts within ¼ mile of a nonprofit-supported park have higher socioeconomic disadvantage and larger percentages of ethnic minority people than tracts without access to such parks

	Median household income	Percentage of people in poverty	Percentage of children in poverty	Percentage of people without a car	Percentage of Non-Hispanic Whites	Percentage of Hispanics/Latinos	Percentage of Non-Hispanic Blacks
Tracts with access to nonprofit park (N=164)	\$41,233*	23.67%**	33.95%	12.11%*	7.90%***	64.02%**	3.91%
Tracts without access to nonprofit park (N=844)	\$48,335*	19.26%**	26.61%	10.09%*	23.16%***	46.31%**	3.87%

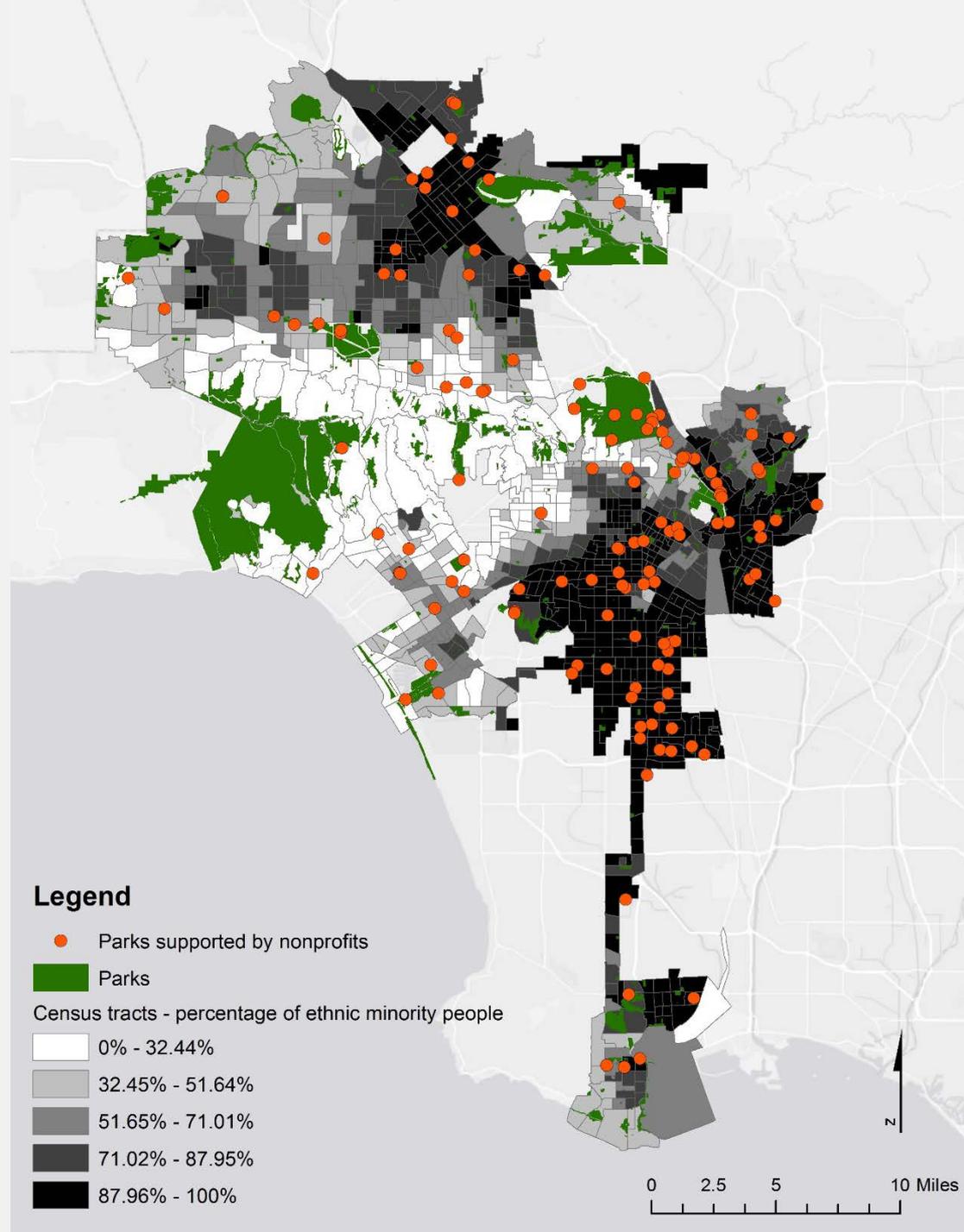
*: $p < .05$; **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$

All parks

Five income classes



All parks Five ethnicity classes



For the new parks supported by nonprofits:

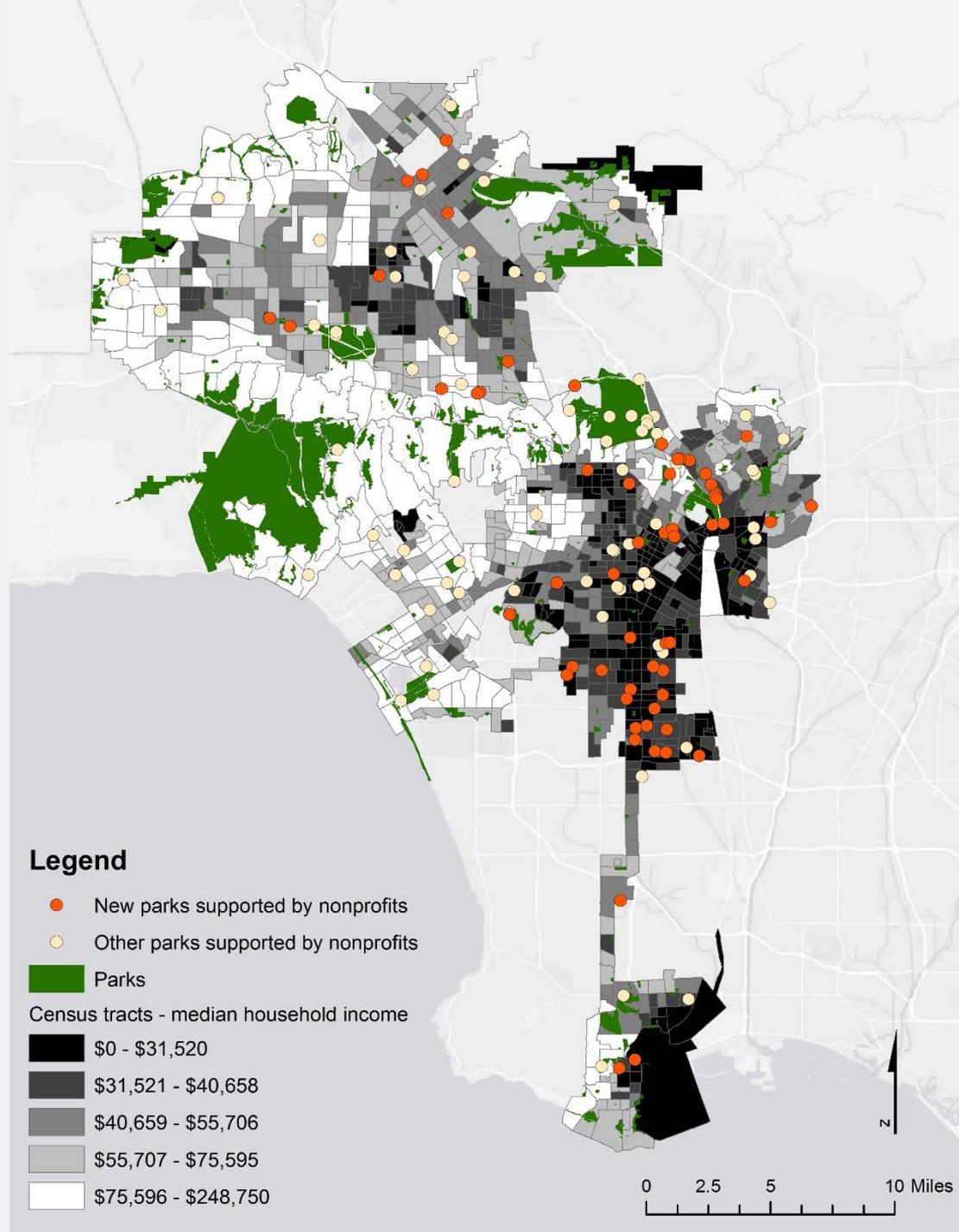
- Census tracts within ¼ mile of a new park supported by a nonprofit have higher socioeconomic disadvantage and larger percentages of ethnic minority people than tracts without access to such parks. Disparities are much larger compared to all parks

	Median household income	Percentage of people in poverty	Percentage of children in poverty	Percentage of people without a car	Percentage of Non-Hispanic Whites	Percentage of Hispanics/Latinos	Percentage of Non-Hispanic Blacks
Tracts with access to new nonprofit park (N=64)	\$35,745***	29.78%***	40.61%***	14.96%**	4.90%***	70.50%***	9.48%*
Tracts with no access to new nonprofit park (N=944)	\$48,550***	19.39%***	26.18%***	10.11%**	22.76%***	47.29%***	3.77%*

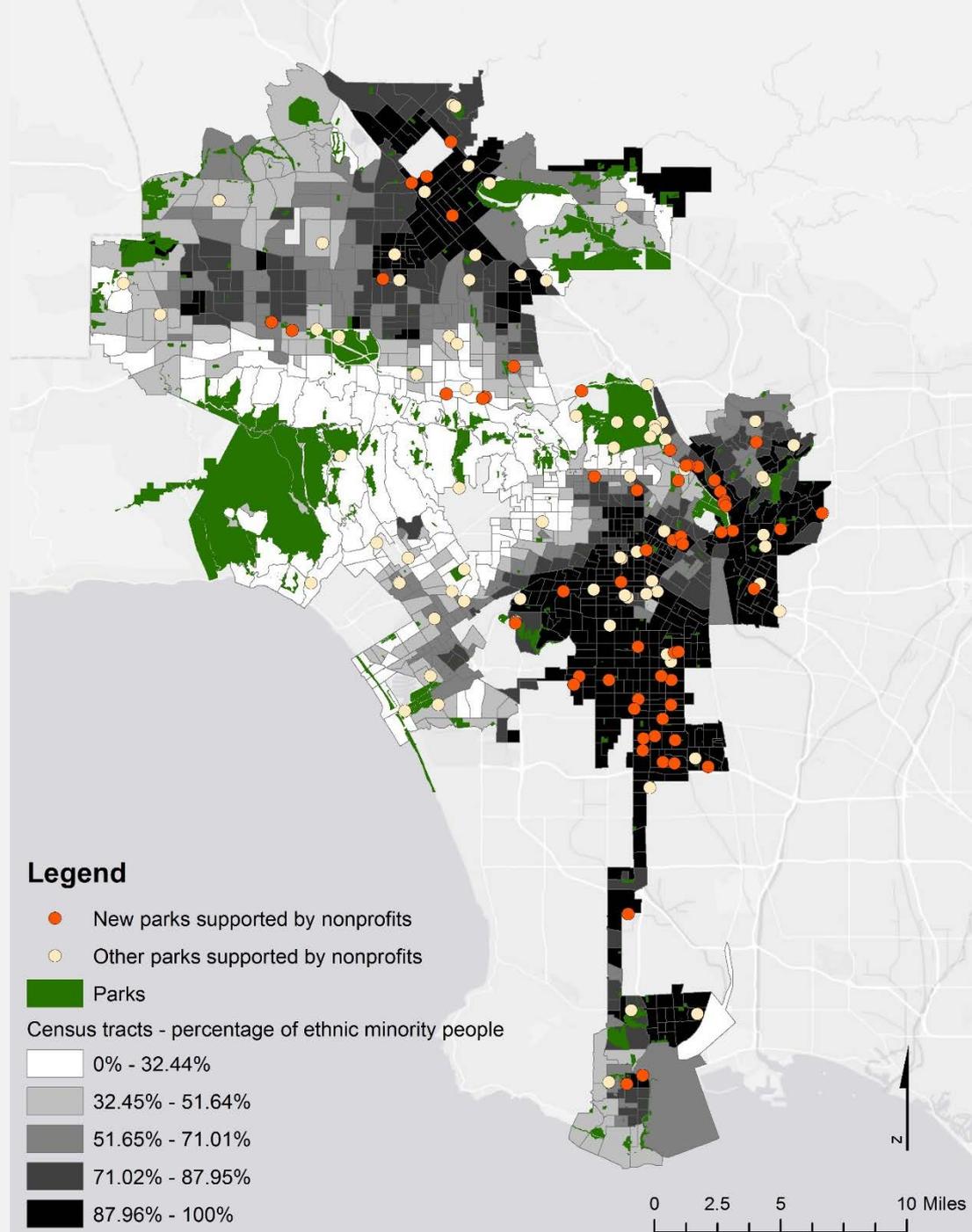
*: $p < .05$; **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$

New parks

Five income classes



New parks Five ethnicity classes



Findings, Q. 2: What is the impact of these new parks on park equity?

Strong and positive impact for park proximity

- Without the new parks supported by nonprofits:
Negative correlation between median household income and park proximity*, Spearman's $\rho = -.121$
- When considering the new parks supported by nonprofits, the negative correlation between median household income and park proximity* strengthens, Spearman's $\rho = -.175$
- This is a 44% increase in the strength of the nonparametric correlation
- This makes a positive difference for park equity

* Percentage of parcels within a quarter mile of a park within each census tract

Strong and positive impact for park proximity

- Without the new parks supported by nonprofits:
Negative correlation between the percentage of ethnic minority people and park proximity*,
Spearman's $\rho = .087$
- When considering the new parks supported by nonprofits, the negative correlation between the percentage of ethnic minority people and park proximity* strengthens, Spearman's $\rho = .156$
- This is a 79% increase in the strength of the nonparametric correlation
- This makes a positive difference for park equity

* Percentage of parcels within a quarter mile of a park within each census tract

Very small impact for park acreage

- Without the new parks supported by nonprofits:
Positive correlation between median household income and park acreage per person*, Spearman's $\rho = .222$
- When considering the new parks supported by nonprofits, the positive correlation between median household income and park acreage per person* slightly weakens, Spearman's $\rho = .208$
- This is a 6% decrease in the strength of the nonparametric correlation

* For each census tract, acres of parks per 1,000 residents

Very small impact for park acreage

- Without the new parks supported by nonprofits:
Negative correlation between the percentage of ethnic minority people and park acreage per person*,
Spearman's $\rho = -.163$
- When considering the new parks supported by nonprofits, the negative correlation between median household income and park acreage per person* weakens, Spearman's $\rho = -.138$
- This is a 18% decrease in the strength of the nonparametric correlation

* For each census tract, acres of parks per 1,000 residents

Many of the new parks established with the support of nonprofits are pocket parks



Findings, Q. 3: What have been the major contributions of park nonprofits in LA?

What are their biggest contributions?

Filling gaps. Nonprofits help public park agencies fill gaps in their provision of services – “we seek them out”

- Acquire land for parks in a quicker way (and cheaper)
- Conduct community outreach
- Bring in capital improvement funds through grants (public) and donations (private) – string together funds
- Build political support for new park projects, policies, and funding initiatives
- Complete demonstration projects
- Act as coordinators between various public agencies

Nonprofits make parks happen. They act as nimble entities that acquire land in a quicker and cheaper way

Several examples of parks and open spaces that could not have happened without nonprofits: (1) nonprofits negotiate with the seller before the city's interest becomes public and (2) this helps avoid the issue of land speculators buying the land after public agencies divulgate their plans

[The Trust for Public Land] “was able to secure the property through an option agreement while we, the [public agency], worked through our process of confirming if the city wanted to acquire the property and getting the necessary approval. Without an organization with the flexibility to do things like that, we wouldn't have been able to acquire that site.”

Nonprofits bring political support to park projects, policies, and funding initiatives

Nonprofits are well-connected to local elected officials and they mobilize many community members for public meetings. Political support for (1) establishing specific parks and (2) policy advocacy

“If you're using public money, what you really need political support. And the way you get political support is to move and engage people, who elected officials can see. A lot of times nonprofits are very well organized in showing political support for projects.”

[Nonprofits] “are critical in getting those items move forward. Measure A... easily because it required such a large advocacy program and that's not something that the government can chime in - we can't... we don't have an opinion. Our hands are tied.”

What are their biggest contributions to park equity?

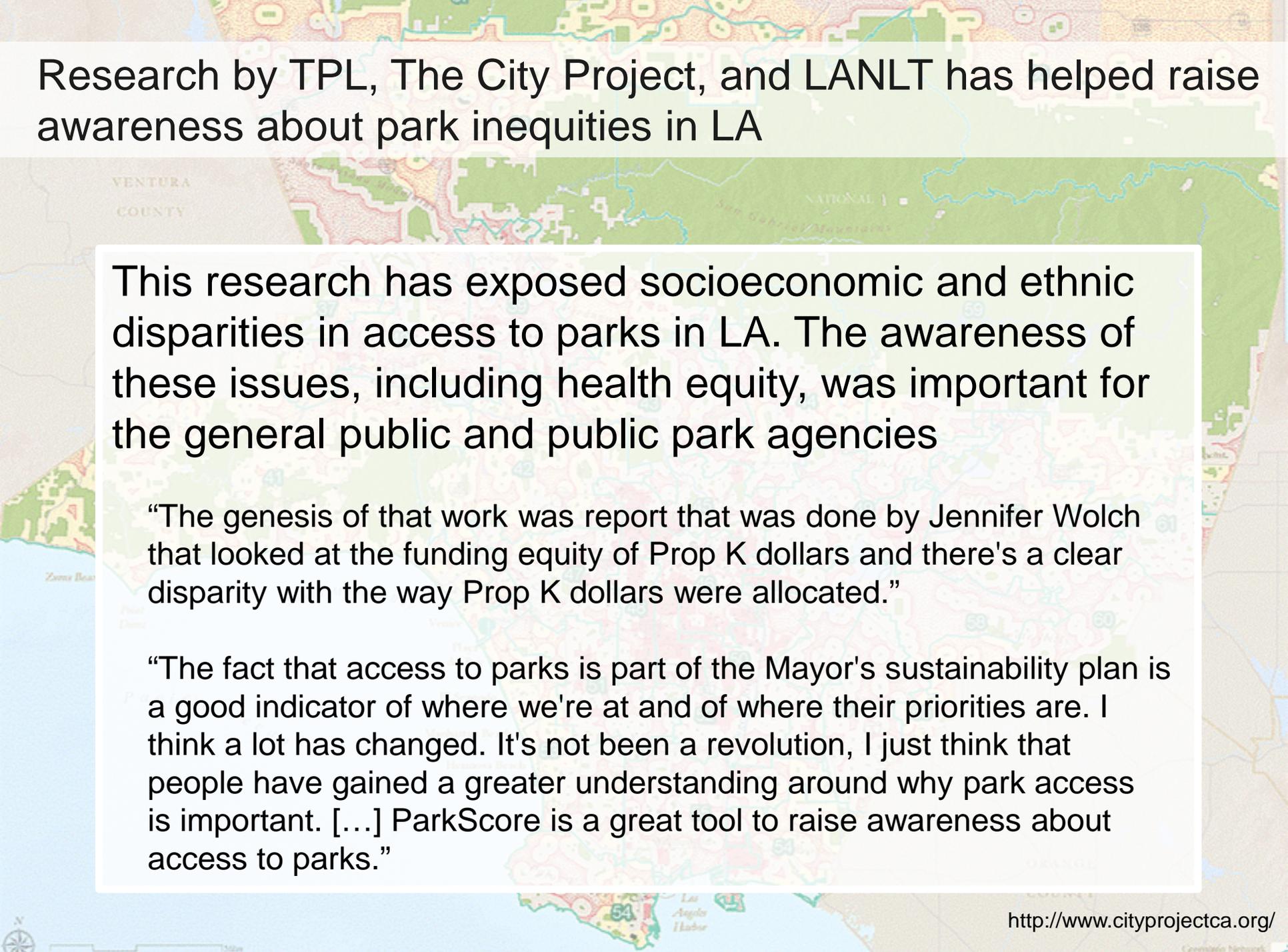
- The court victories of The City project in the early 2000s, which used civil rights and EJ laws as grounds, helped start the "green justice movement in LA"
- Research by TPL, The City Project, and LANLT has helped raise awareness about park inequities in LA
- Nonprofits helped write or advocated for park funding standards that prioritize park-poor, low-income areas
- Several nonprofits help - or push - public agencies to work in low-income communities, including conducting community outreach

The City Project, civil rights, and the new “green justice movement in LA”

The court victories of The City Project, based on civil rights and EJ laws, helped start a local movement and national movement on park equity in the early 2000s.

“I think there's been a change in the culture of Los Angeles over the last 17 years. When we started, nobody recognized that parks were an environmental justice, public health, and civil rights issue. Nobody even recognized that parks were necessary and desirable throughout LA.”

“So the victory [LA Historic State Park] was huge for people, parks, and planning in LA. If we had lost, nobody would take us seriously and they would dismiss park access as a losing issue. But instead, because Secretary Cuomo stepped up and then the State bought the land for a park, we built a momentum to then create Rio de Los Angeles State Park at Taylor Yard along the river.”



Research by TPL, The City Project, and LANLT has helped raise awareness about park inequities in LA

This research has exposed socioeconomic and ethnic disparities in access to parks in LA. The awareness of these issues, including health equity, was important for the general public and public park agencies

“The genesis of that work was report that was done by Jennifer Wolch that looked at the funding equity of Prop K dollars and there's a clear disparity with the way Prop K dollars were allocated.”

“The fact that access to parks is part of the Mayor's sustainability plan is a good indicator of where we're at and of where their priorities are. I think a lot has changed. It's not been a revolution, I just think that people have gained a greater understanding around why park access is important. [...] ParkScore is a great tool to raise awareness about access to parks.”

Nonprofits helped write or advocated for park funding standards that prioritize park-poor, low-income areas

The City Project helped write the grant criteria for the Prop 84, AB 31 competitive grants: money for park-poor low-income areas. LANLT is working to do the same for Measure A. These are higher-level impacts

“Prop 84 includes 400 million dollars targeted or prioritized in communities that are defined under State law as park-poor and income-poor. And we helped craft those standards - that's 3 acres of parks per 1,000 residents, as park poor, and less than 48,000 dollars per year for median household income, as income-poor.”

“There will be a public process for these guidelines [Measure A], like a public comment process. You can absolutely expect the land trust and our members to be very involved in this conversations.”

**Findings, Q. 4: How do park nonprofits
choose to work in different neighborhoods?**

Why serve different neighborhoods?

- **Mission:** Their mission specifies where they work – e.g., park-poor, low-income areas or the LA River
- **Funding:** Some capital improvement grants to build new parks (local, state, and federal – e.g., Prop 84) can only be spent in park-poor, low-income areas
- **Local ties:** Some nonprofits have strong relationships with some communities and council district members
- **Contingency factors:** Site availability, bureaucratic issues (with some public agencies), and the contamination levels of different sites
- Coordination with priorities set by public park agencies

Funding for low-income, park-poor areas

“Prop 84 was particularly interesting for that because the funding that did go to the statewide competitive grant program - that measure was drafted by Kevin de Leon, who represents Los Angeles - was specifically written so that the funding prioritized low-income disadvantaged communities. You see that a lot in the State with a lot of projects that prioritize low-income areas: If you're not operating in disadvantaged communities, you take some points off your application. Prop 84 was even more so because having projects in disadvantaged communities was a basic qualification to apply. That was question number one in that competitive grant. And they're talking about doing the same thing for the new program. Kevin de Leon is pushing that agenda. "If you're not a disadvantaged community, don't even apply." It's kind of interesting.”

“And now, because of potential funding that's become available, many mainstream environmental organizations view Los Angeles as a gold rush and a land grab and are trying to take advantage of the public and private funding that's available to create more parks and green space in or order to enrich themselves and improve the area.”

Bureaucracy as a barrier

“We did our first two projects in the City of LA, and then we have specifically worked in the cities in the periphery of the City of LA. Why? Because they're smaller. [...] In Los Angeles the biggest barrier to addressing park equity in terms of getting these projects on the ground is the bureaucracy involved in certain agencies.”

“The other one I would say we really struggle with is LAUSD. If they're involved, it's an incredible struggle. We've had projects that were funded, which were absolutely stopped.”

“Anything that physically touches the river, like a right-of-way, you have to involve the Army Corps of Engineers, which is whole another ball of wax, as you can imagine. That it's a whole bureaucratic entanglement”

But others have more positive views: “The City of Los Angeles, Department of Recreation and Parks, since we started, has been nothing but exemplary in helping us develop our nonprofit. And in fact, if it wasn't for the Department of Rec and Parks of the City of Los Angeles, [the nonprofit] wouldn't be where we are today.”

Findings, Q. 5: How do park nonprofits operate?

How funding influences their operations (1/2)

- Different sources of funding. It is key to distinguish between nonprofits that primarily rely on public funds and those that use mostly private funds (operations and capital improvement money)
- Some nonprofits mostly rely on private funding: grants from foundations, donations, and corporate sponsorship – they rarely build new parks
- Some nonprofits primarily rely on public funding: federal, state, and local competitive grants (e.g., Prop 84, CDBG, First 5 LA, etc.) – they build new parks
- Some nonprofits have a more balanced budget

How funding influences their operations (2/2)

- Local, state, and federal funding sources have really helped nonprofits establish new parks in LA. They provide capital improvement funds through competitive grants – but it is still public money!
- Small nonprofits encounter specific barriers:
 - Most grants do not provide money to operate the nonprofit
 - Fundraising is a big burden
 - Most grants are reimbursement-based
 - Reporting grant expenses to multiple agencies is time consuming
 - Nonprofits that mostly work in low-income communities are less likely to have a base of private donors

Integration

How interviews complement the GIS analysis

- Prop 84 AB 31 funds grant guidelines (prioritizing low-income, park-poor areas) were key in helping nonprofits address park equity issues
- New parks established by nonprofits are more frequently in low-income communities of color because most of these parks were created by EJ park nonprofits (and relying on large public grants)
- EJ park nonprofits mostly helped establish pocket parks (funds and land availability): This improved access for low-income people of color in terms of proximity but not so much in terms of acreage
- It takes a long time to establish partnerships and trust between a park agency and a nonprofit: This is why a few key nonprofits have contributed to the vast majority of nonprofit-supported parks

Implications

How is this useful for public policy? (1/3)

- Public funding and grant guidelines prioritizing low-income park-poor areas are key to park equity. Would this happen in a red state (or county)?
- Competitive grants could include some funds for the operation of nonprofits and provide advance money (not fully reimbursement-based)
- Other cities aiming to acquire parkland in a nimble way could consider establishing a land trust like LANLT or partnering with the Trust for Public Land
- Park agencies and nonprofits should coordinate planning efforts: From an opportunistic approach to the implementation of long-term planning frameworks
- Public agencies should legitimize the role of nonprofits in coordinating different governments

How is this useful for public policy? (2/3)

- The work of nonprofits “on the ground” is important but can only go so far. Nonprofits are aware that policy change can have a larger impact. Equity-oriented elected officials should partner even more with nonprofits for policy change
- The work of nonprofits in policy change is also good for democracy. Nonprofits can mobilize low-income ethnic minority communities, where trust of the government tends to be lower
- Public park agencies cannot advocate for policy change or park funding measures, while nonprofits can. Park agencies could provide data and support for the nonprofits’ advocacy efforts

How is this useful for public policy? (3/3)

- The privatization of park services can be an issue: Public agencies should collaborate with nonprofits, not delegate some tasks to them
- The current funding system and urban park regime have concentrated a lot of power in the hands of a few nonprofits that have helped public agencies establish most new parks. This can be seen as an early warning of a privatization trend and could be addressed by policy and funding guidelines
- Green gentrification can be an issue (e.g., LA River): Nonprofits and competitive grants could prioritize the development of new parks in areas with a high number of housing units that are public or under rent control

Dissemination: One or two papers?

The Role of Nonprofits in Improving Access to Parks in Los Angeles

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