

Advancing Park Equity in California

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Above: Outdoor Outreach youth explore the coast at Cabrillo National Monument in San Diego, California. ([Eh Ler Tha](#))

Introduction

Parks and open spaces are markers of healthy communities. Well-funded and maintained parks can serve as community gathering spaces, attracting residents of all ages to exercise, relax, and engage with nature. Strong programming and organized activities in open spaces facilitate community cohesion and encourage community members to form deeper connections with one another. By providing spaces for physical activity, parks play an important role in the prevention of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic health problems.¹ Researchers have found that the health benefits of parks are not limited to physical health, but also extend to mental and emotional health. A growing number of studies have found that people who live in close proximity to parks or other green spaces experience lower levels of stress and are less likely to experience depression and other mental health problems.²

Parks and green spaces provide several other important benefits. They contribute to strong local economies and provide important environmental benefits. In California, nearly \$16 billion in economic activity was generated by local parks and recreation, and over 118,000 jobs were supported in 2015.³ Parks also have environmental and climate-related benefits. For example, parks can reduce the impacts of heat waves by providing shade and ameliorating the “heat island effect” experienced in urban settings where asphalt reflects and intensifies the heat.⁴ Additionally, according to the LA Department of Public Health, “parks can be designed... to increase sustainability by creating permeable surfaces that absorb rain water and replenish groundwater; capturing rain water through cisterns or rain barrels for use in grounds maintenance; allowing for habitat restoration; and reducing storm water run-off.”⁵

The global pandemic, and resulting economic crisis brought on by Covid-19, has laid bare deep racial and economic inequities. Multiple analyses of local, state, and federal data show that people of color are experiencing a disproportionate burden of Covid-19 cases and deaths. According to the California Public Health Department, Latinx people make up 39 percent of the population but 56 percent of the Covid cases, and 47 percent of the Covid deaths.⁶ Over the last year, millions of households have struggled to cover basic household expenses, balance radically changed work and family obligations, and navigate intense emotional strain. In this context, parks have become even more important to maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle and contributing to reducing the chronic health problems that put people at increased risk of serious complications or death from Covid.

Despite the important role parks play in supporting healthy and sustainable communities, too many Californians are unable to enjoy the benefits provided by parks. For decades, leaders in low-income communities and communities of color have called for increased investment in safe, accessible, and culturally relevant parks and park programming. Their work has increased state-level attention to the need for equitable investment in parks and open spaces, and it has contributed to new state-level funding for a variety of programs aimed at addressing park equity issues. These needs were reiterated by the Parks Forward Commission when they released a [set of recommendations](#) in 2015 to reinvigorate and transform the California state park system to improve access for all, and ensure its sustainability.⁷ Nevertheless, inequities in park access and quality continue to be widespread and there is much work to be done to ensure that every California neighborhood, whether Black or White, rich or poor, benefits from the many positive impacts that parks

offer. This report highlights ongoing park equity challenges, explores how the current Covid-19 pandemic is amplifying the need to deepen our investment in parks, and presents recommendations that California lawmakers can enact now to deliver safe, accessible parks for all Californians.

Californians Support Parks

California has a long history of investing in public parks. Since the 19th century Californians have advocated for, and invested in iconic national parks, an extensive state park system, and thousands of local parks. As early as the 1860s, California lawmakers were setting aside land purely for the purpose of preservation and public enjoyment. From the north coast redwood forests, to the alpine sierras, California’s leaders recognized that natural spaces were a resource to be protected and preserved for the public. In addition to preserving land under state authority, early California leaders worked with Congress to preserve vast parts of the state in national parks and other federal programs. In the late 1920s, California established a State Parks Commission and in 1928 passed the first state-level park bond, with overwhelming voter support.

Since then, Californians have repeatedly voted in support of bond measures, at both the local and state level, to support investment in parks. Today, the state operates a rich network of over 280 parks, natural spaces, and historic and cultural sites that allow Californians to recreate, enjoy natural spaces, and connect to and learn about our natural and cultural history. Similarly, local governments across the state have invested in regional parks and conservancies, and thousands of local parks that range from small pocket parks that bring a spot of nature into the urban environment, to large multipurpose facilities that offer communities a wide range of uses and experiences.

Parks in California: A Snapshot of Assets and Inequities

California is home to:

28

national parks and
monuments

2

World Heritage Sites

284

state parks

14,000

local parks

47 million acres

of outdoor recreational areas and local parks that are
enjoyed by residents of, and visitors to, the state

1,000

park-managing agencies

Park capital budgets have declined significantly as
a result of the 2008 recession and infrastructure
deficiencies have been on the rise.

\$1.2 billion

estimated deferred maintenance at state parks

\$1 billion

in unmet needs reported by local parks

\$1.8 billion

estimated National Parks Service maintenance backlog
for its parks in California

Access to parks continues to be insufficient.

3 acres of park land

recommended per 1,000 residents by the Department
of Parks and Recreation

62% of Californians

live in areas that do not meet this recommendation

Source: 2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, American Society of
Civil Engineers, <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/california/>

Park Inequity in California

Despite the widespread public support, the benefits of California's parks are not shared equally, and generations of land use, development, tax, and park management policies have created deeply racialized outcomes and park equity issues that continue to significantly challenge communities across the state.

Access: Nearly two-thirds of all Californians live in areas that do not meet the California Department of Parks and Recreation recommendation of three acres of park land per 1,000 residents.⁸ In Los Angeles, half of the county's residents do not have access to a park they can walk to, and 90 percent of these residents come from communities of color.⁹ An ad developed by Fresno Building Healthy Communities highlights similar disparities in park access that exist between lower income neighborhoods and their more affluent counterparts. It points out that the lower income neighborhoods of south Fresno have one acre of park land per 1,000 residents, while wealthier communities in the northern areas of the city have more than four times that amount.

Quality: Inadequate access to parks is not the only park equity issue experienced by low-income communities and communities of color. Studies have found that parks are not only less prevalent in these communities, they frequently contain fewer features or are poorer quality spaces.¹⁰ A series of studies by Professor Michael Jerrett at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that parks in low-income neighborhoods tend to be more polluted, the facilities are not as well-maintained, and there is less park programming.¹¹ A recent study¹² by the Trust for Public Land highlighted how even the size of existing parks varies significantly across communities. Parks in low-income and/or communities of color are, on average, five times more likely to be crowded and half the size of parks that serve White populations. Whether and how someone uses a park is also shaped by the environment within which a park is situated. Researchers in Los Angeles found a significant risk of traffic accidents in areas surrounding parks, with this risk being more pronounced in low-income communities and communities of color, in part because traffic safety infrastructure is insufficient in these neighborhoods.¹³

Opportunity: A somewhat less explored aspect of park equity is the workforce opportunities associated with building, maintaining, and operating parks. Many of these jobs are high-quality public service jobs with opportunities for career advancement over time. Unfortunately, California's park workforce does not reflect the diversity of the state's population. The 2018 Departmental Demographic Report for California's Department of Parks and Recreation found that over 70 percent

of the Department's employees are White, 16 percent are Latinx, and only 2 percent are Black. Native American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander workers also have very low employment numbers in the department.¹⁴ These percentages are higher than employment numbers for people of color in the National Parks Service, where Whites make up 79 percent of the workforce,¹⁵ but still point to a significant need for focused efforts to diversify our parks workforce. There is some indication that workforce diversity may be better at the local level but, major disparities remain in the workforce, particularly in senior-level positions. For example, in the city of Sacramento, the 2018 City Manager's Diversity Report found that White people were significantly overrepresented in the park workforce. While White people make up one-third of the city's population, they represent 42 percent of the workforce in Youth, Parks and Community Enrichment and nearly two-thirds of the workers in management positions.¹⁶

Inclusion and Cultural Relevance: While proximity, condition of facilities, and real and perceived safety all influence whether and how people use parks, culturally inclusive and relevant parks and park programming also impact who uses and feels welcome in our parks. With a state as diverse as California, creating parks that truly serve everyone is understandably a challenge. Many communities have a conflicted history with parks, from Native American communities whose land was stolen to create parks and who continue to fight to access sacred cultural sites that their ancestors have used since time immemorial,¹⁷ to Black communities who have not always felt welcome or safe in parks and public places,¹⁸ in no small part due to the generations of Whites-only parks, pools, and other recreational facilities that locked Black people out and played a crucial role in reinforcing white supremacy culture.¹⁹ Additionally, countless contemporary, urban low-income communities of color have repeatedly called for new investments in their neighborhoods only to see the investments finally arrive leading to gentrification pressures that cause housing prices to skyrocket and people to be displaced from their communities. These complex and painful histories of violence and exclusion have too often been reinforced by programming that at best does not consider the unique history, culture, and interests of Black, Indigenous, and people-of-color communities, and at worst erases or misstates their history while celebrating the historic figures or events that harmed them.

Covid-19 and Park Equity

The global pandemic, and resulting economic crisis brought on by Covid-19, has laid bare the deep racial and economic inequities that persist in every aspect of life in the United States. For millions of Californians who have been sheltering in place over the last year, parks have provided a space to get fresh air, exercise, and meet with loved ones in a physically distanced and appropriate manner. In this context, parks have taken on a renewed importance both as critical to reducing the chronic health problems that put people at increased risk of serious complications or death from Covid, and as invaluable spaces for residents to stay healthy and active while adhering to physical distancing requirements.

Covid highlights the fact that for too long, too many communities have not been afforded the benefits of quality, accessible outdoor spaces. The ongoing park inequities low-income communities and communities of color face are exacerbating the current crisis. While there are no comprehensive studies that address whether the lack of park access has driven up Covid infection rates in communities of color, public health experts note that lack of access is an obstacle to communities of color getting the recommended levels of physical exercise,²⁰ and is consistently linked to poor health outcomes.²¹ These poor health outcomes in turn increase the risks associated with Covid infections.

Covid has also exacerbated inequities in park access. Across the country, as park systems have closed or reduced hours, capacity, or services, or adopted “locals only” policies to facilitate social distancing and stop the spread of Covid, access disparities have become even more pronounced. Wealthier communities adjacent to beaches and other desirable open spaces have been able to retain access to their beaches and vast areas of open space, while lower income people and people of color living in denser urban centers have been limited to smaller community parks that have to be shared by far more users. In California, explicit or implied temporary “locals only” policies have been adopted in an effort to promote safety, but contain a loud echo of the segregated parks of the past and are raising the alarm for civil rights leaders who worry that concerns over the spread of Covid are being used to reinstitute exclusionary policies of the past.²²

Covid-19 brings new urgency to addressing long-standing park equity issues. It also presents new opportunities for experimentation and learning. The public health, mental, environmental, and economic benefits of parks have long been understood, but the Covid pandemic has demonstrated how parks can play an important role in softening the shocks and stressors of a pandemic. Across the country, cities have been adaptive and creative in the expansion and repurposing of public spaces to accommodate the surging need for outdoor space. In California, many cities have adopted Slow Streets to provide people with safe opportunities for physical activity while sheltering in place. These programs use temporary cones, signs, sandbags, and other materials to limit roads to residential traffic and encourage residents to use the streets for walking, biking, running, and playing. While these programs have had mixed results and raise their own set of equity questions, they offer a unique opportunity to rethink how our streets can support multiple uses and provide a more comprehensive set of benefits to community members. A study of Oakland’s Slow Streets program found high support and provides insight into the equity concerns emerging through the program, as well as the opportunities to adapt it to better serve Oakland’s low-income communities and communities of color.²³ Other cities have piloted programs to use parks for Covid testing, homeless shelters, food distribution, and other critical services. In Montgomery County, Maryland, Montgomery Parks partnered with local business groups to pilot “Picnic in the Park.” Park staff set up socially distanced picnic circles and tables and posted signs with QR codes that allow park users to find local restaurants that deliver meals directly to the park.²⁴

Creative approaches have prompted urban planners, city officials, and other stakeholders to think longer term when planning and designing parks and community green spaces. The lessons learned during Covid can shape how we invest in our parks and open spaces in the future, and provide insight into the role parks can play as important supports for community resilience.

California's Parks Are in Need of Investment

Despite ongoing public support, rapid population growth and radical changes to local government finance²⁵ over the last 50 years, spurred by corporate-sponsored anti-tax activism,²⁶ created new barriers to funding the maintenance of existing parks and the development of new parks. Today, California's parks are in serious need of investment. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that deferred maintenance costs at state parks is \$1.2 billion, with an additional \$1 billion in unmet needs at local parks.

The state's residents want this problem addressed. Recognizing the importance of parks and open space, Californians voted to pass Proposition 68, the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018. This \$4 billion bond provides critical funds to invest in the natural, cultural, and historical resources in California's parks, protect our drinking water, and ensure a more climate-resilient future. Roughly one-third—\$1.3 billion—of the bond is dedicated to improving state and local parks, making this the most significant bond commitment California has made to funding local parks.

Building on the lessons of prior natural resources bonds, Proposition 68 took a markedly different approach. Unlike earlier bonds that were often silent on issues of equity, Proposition 68 explicitly acknowledged the need to invest in communities that face a range of barriers to accessing park funding and established equity goals through its various provisions including, but not limited to: improving visitation by and access for low-income communities, people of color, disabled, and tribal populations; expansion of multilingual/multicultural programming, education, and communications; provision of workforce opportunities for disadvantaged communities; and the prioritization of funding for projects that seek to address displacement. Through these provisions, Prop 68 has positioned the state to make progress on equity challenges that have remained unaddressed for too long. While this bond represents an important investment in building, repairing, maintaining, and operating a park system that can truly serve all Californians, policy change and new funding will be necessary to fully deliver on this vision. The following recommendations highlight important strategies to accomplish this.

Below: San Diego youth enjoy adapted programming with Outdoor Outreach in a local park during the COVID-19 pandemic. (*Eh Ler Tha*)



Recommendations to achieve park equity

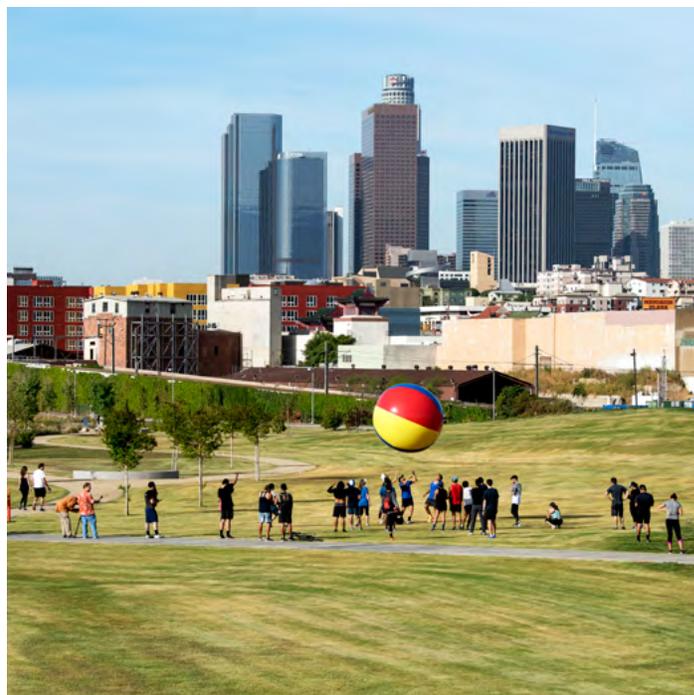
Expand access to state parks and build and repair parks in low-income communities, communities of color, and other underserved communities.

Historically disadvantaged urban and rural communities have received limited investment in parks and recreational programming, while wealthier suburban communities have traditionally seen more parks per capita and more opportunities for recreational activities and programming in their neighborhoods. Admission costs are unaffordable for many low-income families and often only car owners have the luxury of enjoying our state and national parks—which is particularly challenging during Covid, when outdoor recreation is critically important to staying healthy. For all California residents to live healthy, active, and socially engaged lives, agencies must prioritize the most disinvested communities in their implementation of new park and park rehabilitation projects.

- Prioritize funding projects that increase park access for low-income communities and communities of color in terms of proximity and the quantity of park space available per person. This should include a specific focus on providing resources to rural disadvantaged, unincorporated communities that have struggled to access state-level investment for park space.
- Invest in creating, improving, and expanding programming that serves low-income communities and communities of color. This should include creative strategies to provide programming tailored to meet communities' specific needs, including programs that expand access to healthy food, health services, physical activity, education, art, or other community services that are inaccessible to low-income residents.
- Use transportation and public safety funding to address mobility and safety concerns that limit accessibility and usability of parks by low-income communities and communities of color.
- Establish a funding structure for California's parks that is equitable, consistent, generates revenue, and is maintained by a reliable source of public funding, including funding to support operations and maintenance which is a huge barrier for low-income communities. Strategies to accomplish this could include:
 - Adopt tax-reform policies that generate new revenue for state and local parks. This could involve closing the corporate property tax loophole in Proposition 13, adopting a new millionaire's tax, or placing a tax on corporations.

- Institute an oil tax to fund a range of environmental and public health services, including parks.
- Develop partnerships with other public entities (including water and transportation agencies, schools, and libraries) to align priorities and resources for multiple community benefits.
- Leverage private funding for things public funds cannot accomplish, such as developing formal partnerships with Business Improvement Districts, local philanthropies, and private donors, to support operations, maintenance, and programming that public resources may not sufficiently cover.
- Include technical assistance dollars and upfront support for smaller jurisdictions that apply on behalf of disadvantaged communities.
- Provide funding and technical support for communities that need to create a park district to support effective planning, financing, and management of parks.

Below: A group of people playing with a giant ball in Los Angeles State Historic Park. (©2017 California State Parks)



Engage community members meaningfully in the design and planning of their parks and ensure that parks and park programming provide experiences relevant to the diverse cultures of California.

Community residents know their communities best. By including low-income residents and people of color in the planning, design, implementation, and ongoing management of parks, they can become spaces that truly serve the community. Meaningful inclusion also builds community support and ensures that new parks will have community champions who are more likely to invest in the long-term success of the park. Creating a welcoming and safe environment in which everyone feels included can promote equity and address health disparities by increasing park utilization and building social cohesion. Investment in partnerships with community institutions can also support the ongoing success of organizations providing critical health services, housing, jobs, and other resources. To accomplish this, programs, services, and offerings should reflect the community's interests and needs, and parks and recreation staff should be representative of the community's diversity.²⁷

- Leverage state and local funding sources to provide meaningful opportunities for community residents to shape decisions at each stage from concept to implementation.
- Utilize participatory budgeting processes to align investment with community priorities.
- Recruit, hire, and retain a diverse workforce that is representative of the state to ensure parks are inclusive environments and are better equipped to meet the needs of the diverse communities they serve.
- Partner with schools, neighborhood groups, service providers, faith-based institutions, and other community-based organizations to connect to underserved residents and engage them in decision-making processes.
- Provide funding to state and local government to deepen inclusion and cultural relevance across our park systems:
 - Prioritize partnerships with community-based institutions, artists, and culture bearers who have the appropriate relationships and community knowledge to support successful outcomes.
 - Expand funding for the Cultural Community and Natural Resources Program, which is funded by Prop 68 and allocates resources to culturally relevant and accessible education and programming in parks.

- Engage in marketing campaigns that promote parks as safe and inviting places for communities of color and low-income communities to recreate and enjoy the outdoors.

Support workforce development, jobs, and contracting opportunities for disadvantaged workers and businesses in the parks sector. Careers and contracting opportunities in the parks sector can provide invaluable economic opportunity to low-income people and people of color, and to other disadvantaged workers and businesses. Unfortunately, the parks sector does not reflect the diversity of California. Policymakers should revise hiring, recruiting, and retention policies and practices to address this problem, and invest funding in programs that provide people of color and low-income people with workforce development and job opportunities in the natural resources sector.

- Revise the public service hiring process to increase diversity in the California Department of Parks and Recreation and other natural resource agencies.
- Adopt strategies to address white supremacy culture in state agencies. Some recommendations for where to start are included in the recommendations presented in “A Letter and Action Plan for Racial Change at the California Air Resources Board.”²⁸
- Utilize community workforce agreements and other targeted hiring strategies when building and renovating parks.
- Provide funding for Conservation Corps, Youth Build, and other job-training programs serving individuals with barriers to employment.
- Invest in capacity development of disadvantaged businesses to increase their ability to access and participate in state contracting programs in the parks, green infrastructure, and natural resources sector.
- Develop a comprehensive strategy to train, recruit, and retain a diverse workforce and hire resident leaders to manage and run park programs.

Invest in parks and recreation projects that build community resilience and increase the capacity of vulnerable communities to withstand the impacts of climate change. Low-income communities and communities of color have been on the front line of climate-change impacts and the fight to combat it for decades. With worsening flooding, drought, and wildfires, and the likelihood of future disease outbreaks, these vulnerable communities must be prioritized in the funding, planning, design, and implementation of projects that mitigate the impacts of climate change and build long-term resilience.

- Increase funding for community resilience planning.
- Work with park districts to develop community resilience centers.
- Include climate resilience planning in new park development.
- Provide funding to park districts to implement strategies that support climate adaptation.
- Provide funding to support basic infrastructure needs (sewer, sidewalks, sanitation facilities, air conditioning, and heating) to support community resilience centers at parks and ensure they are accessible to residents who will need them.

Below: New and improved biking infrastructure brings benefits and requires careful planning in partnership with communities to mitigate the risk of displacement.



Assess the success of current programs and adopt clear equity standards and guidelines for funding, measurement, and assessment in the future. Guidelines for the funding, measurement, and assessment of projects can be confusing and inconsistent. Creating clear equity standards will enable agencies to better assess whether they are fulfilling the requirements set forth by the provisions of existing funding initiatives like Prop 68. Without clear standards, programs will inevitably reinforce the unjust structures that perpetuate inequities. Clear standards and benchmarks will provide opportunities to see where programs have been successful, and where there is room for improvement in providing services and programming to communities.

- Assess the impact that Prop 68 funding has had on park equity in California.
- Establish a set of standards and guidelines to measure equity outcomes throughout the parks system. The [Complete Parks Indicators](#) report by Change Labs Solutions is one model to explore.
- Create and adhere to a set of funding and measurement standards that explicitly prioritize and advance equity.

Consider and take steps to prevent displacement of residents when investing in new parks or substantially rehabilitating existing parks. New park and park beautification and revitalization projects often have the unintended consequence of providing a pathway to gentrification and displacement. New and improved open spaces and bike-friendly infrastructure can increase property values and bring a new allure to a historically lower income neighborhood, causing wealthier residents to move in and an increase in rent and the cost of living. Park projects should therefore include explicit plans for how to mitigate this type of displacement.

- Prioritize funding for jurisdictions that have adopted strategies to prevent displacement of low-income communities and communities of color.
- Invest in projects that have been developed and designed in close partnership with residents most at risk of displacement that include culturally rooted community outreach and programming.

Conclusion

Californians have long prioritized protecting natural spaces and investing in parks. Despite this firmly established commitment, generations of land use, development, tax, and park management policies have created deeply racialized outcomes and widespread inequities. While Proposition 68 and other recent shifts in how California prioritizes park investment demonstrate a growing dedication to addressing these inequities, there is still a great deal of work to do. Too many low-income communities and communities of color are unable to benefit from safe, accessible parks and open spaces. The Covid pandemic has exacerbated these inequities and has brought renewed attention to the important role parks play in supporting community and individual health.

As California struggles to recover from the pandemic and the resulting economic crises, addressing long-standing park inequities offers an important opportunity to build a future that is better than our past. Policymakers must take bold action to forge a new path, one that addresses racial inequities in park access, builds park systems that reflect and embrace the diverse communities of our state, and invests in the infrastructure, programs, and management that will build community health, economic vitality, and resilience. The scale of the work is significant but there are solutions that can be implemented now. From building equity priorities into new and existing bond funding, reimagining how we direct the resources of existing infrastructure programs, or rethinking how the state recruits and retains employees in the park service, policymakers can make meaningful change now. By aligning policies and investments to ensure that all communities enjoy the social, health, environmental, and economic benefits of parks, California's leaders can accelerate our recovery and build a future where all can thrive.

Below: Youth head out to the water to stand up paddle board at Coronado Tidelands Park near San Diego, California. (*Eh Ler Tha*)



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