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Equity Lenses: Targeting Equitable Community Investment Across Southern California



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Issue

The social inequities we see across Southern California result from decades of systemic racism and historical disinvestment. How governments distribute funding and other resources can directly support efforts to address these issues. At the same time, increased investment has the potential to cause further displacement. With these challenges in mind, the Southern California Association of Governments seeks to improve resource prioritization in communities most impacted by economic, social, and environmental inequities. This research project involves reviewing documentation, interviewing planners, and synthesizing best practices from across the United States. The results will aid SCAG staff in further discussions with stakeholders and policymakers.

The project focuses on four research questions. First, how can SCAG use a data-informed outreach approach and prioritization methodology to identify and encourage disinvested communities to apply for funding? The Sustainable Communities Program, a key technical assistance program from SCAG, currently uses Environmental Justice Areas, Communities of Concern, and SB 535 Disadvantaged Communities as geographies to prioritize funding. Second, how much do these existing geographies overlap? Third, are there additional data indicators to consider that might provide a more holistic picture of the most impacted communities in the region?

And finally, how can SCAG use data to evaluate funding applications and proposals more strategically to target investment to communities with the highest need?

Research Discussion

Other metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) can be an excellent resource for inspiration for incorporating an equity lens, as many have already done a considerable amount of work developing these strategies. Defining equity-focused communities more broadly and with positive language can be more inclusive and uplifting, considering the relative concentration of these populations begins to paint a more detailed picture of our communities. Mapping these populations in a user-friendly interface makes the data more transparent and accessible to less technical audiences. Additionally, when using this data to prioritize projects, considering equity from multiple perspectives acknowledges the interconnectedness of equity issues.

Organizations outside the sphere of MPOs are also a valuable resource and reference point when considering these multiple perspectives. California is fortunate to have several established statewide indexes already in use that encompass a wide range of equity factors. The challenge here is not how to get enough data but having a clear understanding of what to do with it. The creation of new indexes for decision-making is an undertaking

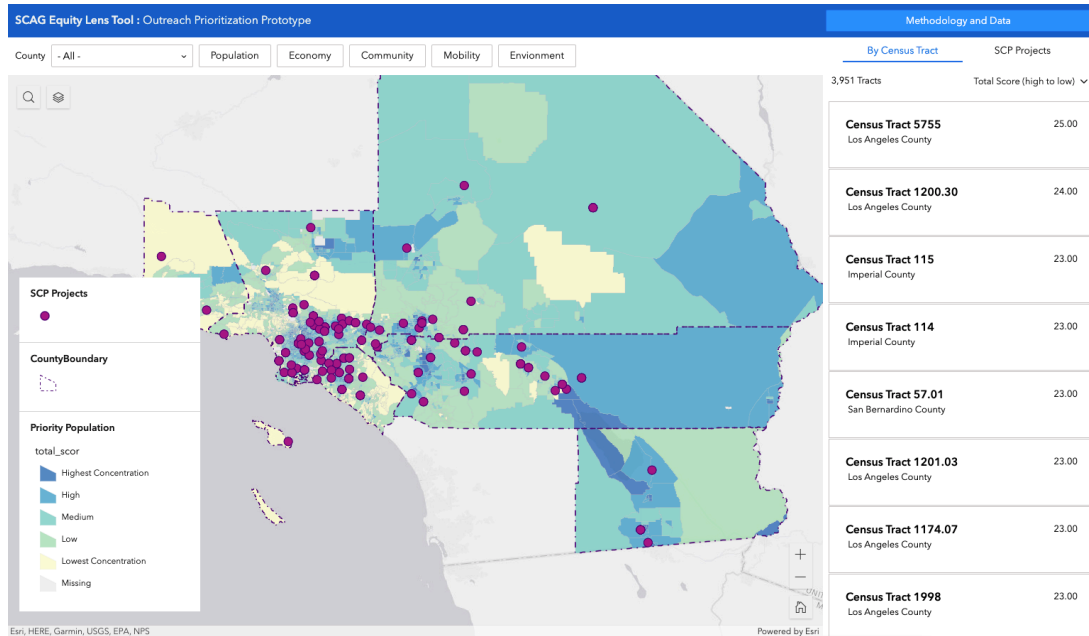


Figure 1. Screenshot of the SCAG Equity Lens Tool Prototype

that SCAG should not take lightly. It should be grounded in peer-reviewed research, data analysis, and community engagement. Even then, it is unlikely that a single index will be the definitive measure of equity for all, but rather the first step in establishing clear goals.

Conclusions

- Determine a core set of indicators for the Priority Populations and each of the four SCAG themes defined in ConnectSoCal: Economy, Healthy & Complete Communities, Mobility, and Environment.
- Operationalize the final list of indicators using the bin scoring method for the priority populations and map those across the entire region. Each of the four thematic areas can appear as different filters on the map, so it's easier for users to explore how other thematic areas and factors intersect.

- For decision-making, SCAG could continue to leverage existing indexes. In future phases, SCAG may want to work on custom indexes for each program based on goals, more in-depth data analysis, and a review of policy implications.
- Combine existing equity frameworks and data from the map centered around Connect SoCal's four thematic areas. Initial sections of the scorecard could include Proposal, Community, Engagement, Benefits, Significance & Alignment, Burdens, and Accountability.

Organizations are yearning for clear guidance on how to go beyond the buzzwords and operationalize equity in a meaningful way. If SCAG can lead by example, they have the potential to inspire other MPOs and multiply their impact beyond Southern California to impact people across the country.



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