

UCLA

Policy Briefs

Title

Living Landscapes: A New Approach for Including Unhoused Angelenos in Park Space and Programming

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2956s50h>

Author

Laborde, Rayne

Publication Date

2021-06-10

Living Landscapes: A New Approach for Including Unhoused Angelenos in Park Space and Programming

Rayne Laborde, MURP, M.Arch. I • 2021

Issue

More than 41,000 Angelenos are unhoused, emphasizing the need for short-term ways to deal with this crisis through means that are dignified, sanitary, and recognize our shared humanity. Parks are often an epicenter for homelessness, and in turn become a point of contention with housed neighbors and park visitors. This policy brief is based on research that addressed two major research questions to develop physical, programmatic, and policy strategies to enhance feelings of safety and welcome for unhoused Angelenos:

- What are the current conditions of unhoused park dwelling in Los Angeles?
- How may parks adapt to support unhoused alongside housed neighbors?

Parks' pre-existing infrastructure — water, power, parking, services, maintenance — make them more appealing than vacant city-owned lands. In Los Angeles, many parks are located in dense areas, meaning they also bring transit connectivity and increase potential access to social workers, case managers, and medical assistance. They are also dignified and welcoming spaces: they are not forgotten or out of sight; they are beautiful and traditionally attached to notions of freedom and play; and, in their fundamental imagining, parks are meant for all. However, California and Los Angeles, in particular, have some of the most aggressive anti-homeless legislation, drawing from a long history of anti-vagrancy laws and leading to today's 32 "anti-homeless" restrictions.

Dedicating parts of parks for living in the midst of a housing crisis with no clear endpoint is a dignified, reparative act, and a recognition that all Angelenos have a place in our city. Doing so with thoughtful design and expansion of services for both

unhoused and housed park visitors stands not only to provide new resources for unhoused Angelenos but also to create new relationships and understandings with housed neighbors through stigma-reduction and acts of care. Additionally, these moves can be a source of funding for maintenance, staffing, and programming that underresourced parks in particular sorely need.

Study Approach

This research consisted of a mixed-methods approach combining spatial analysis of park-based encampment reports in the City of Los Angeles from 2015-20, case studies, a literature review over the history of park dwelling in the Los Angeles region and best practices for conflict mitigation, interviews with park-dwelling unhoused individuals and activists, and analysis of three study sites: Echo Park Lake, Lafayette Park, and MacArthur Park.

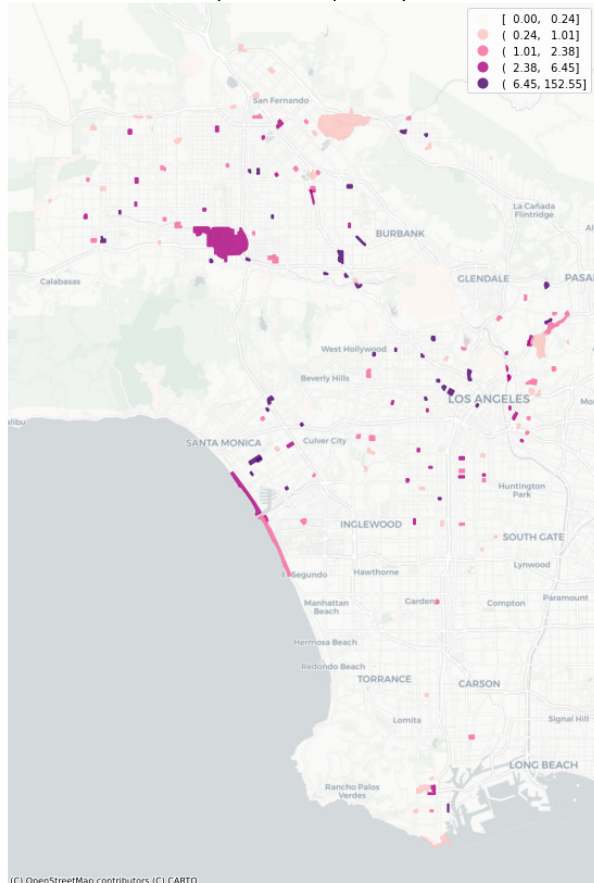
Research Findings

- » 17% of all 311-user encampment reports in Los Angeles are for park areas.
- » Despite frequent framing as a modern problem beginning in the 1980s, encampments have been persistently present in Los Angeles since at least 1870.
- » Interviewees discussed unequal policing, limited services misaligned with needs, social stigma, and lack of sanitation areas in park space. One man shared how policing is a tool not only to remove but also to shame and degrade him: "[gentrifiers] call police to extricate and shame me from the park — they take pictures, ask for more patrols... They insinuate that I'm sick or wrong." Another woman pointed out that there is no place she can go to rest in private without being disrupted by

Figure 1.

A map showing the number of encampment reports per acre in Los Angeles park areas, including a one-half block buffer zone.

LA Park Based Encampment Reports per Acre, 2015-2020



the Los Angeles Police Department: “I need a tent up. I have a health condition; I want to rest without being bothered by LAPD. Other people rest in the park. I just need a place to be.” In all interviews, subjects described the need for guidance from unhoused Angelenos on policy, design, and programming, along with the need for more wellness-based interventions and their right to personhood.

- » Studies show that engaging in shared activities in shared spaces lessens “social othering” which reinforces stigmatizing and morally condemning us-vs-them attitudes between housed and unhoused neighbors common in park space.
- » In Lafayette and MacArthur parks, neighbors describe unhoused park dwellers as outsiders, dirty, or dangerous. By contrast, before a police-led mass displacement in March 2021, the “Echo Park Rise Up” encampment

residents ran their own showers, a community garden open to housed and unhoused, a staffed kitchen and pantry, and a donation-funded jobs training program compensating dedicated sanitation and security workers.

Key Recommendations

- » **DESIGNATED SPACE:** Decriminalize and formalize park-based encampment zones through a pilot program, including supportive infrastructure and design guidelines serving unhoused and housed park users.
- » **PARTICIPATORY PLANNING:** Establish regular, compensated advising opportunities for unhoused Angelenos to provide input on the efficacy of current programs, encampment guidelines, and unmet needs in parks and beyond.
- » **STAFFING & MAINTENANCE:** Improve and augment park staffing through jobs-training partnership programs with designated encampments, including sanitation, maintenance, service (food and health), and public safety roles.
- » **PROGRAMMING:** Promote low-cost, high-impact park-based wellness programming for housed and unhoused visitors to highlight shared needs and benefits.

For More Information

Laborde, R. (2021). Living landscapes: Reimagining the role Los Angeles parks play in communities (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7f38z97r>

Hodgetts, D., Stolte, O., Radley, A., Leggatt-Cook, C., Groot, S., & Chamberlain, K. (2011). “Near and Far’: Social Distancing in Domiciled Characterisations of Homeless People.” *Urban Studies*, 48(8), 1739-1753.

Los Angeles Open Data Portal. (2015-20). “Homeless Encampment Service Requests.” MyLA311 Service Request Data, SP.

Malson, H. & Blasi, G. (2020). For the Crisis Yet to Come: Temporary Settlements in the Era of Evictions. Institute on Inequality and Democracy, University of California, Los Angeles.