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Improving Access to Outdoor Dining Opportunities: Analyzing the Constraints of LA Al Fresco

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Improving Access to Outdoor Dining Opportunities

Analyzing the Constraints of LA Al Fresco

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Key Takeaways

- Sidewalks in Los Angeles’s commercial districts vary widely in width ranging from less than 5 feet to more than 10 feet. Downtown Los Angeles, Westwood, Cheviot Hills, and Studio City have some of the widest sidewalks on average and neighborhoods across South Los Angeles have some of the narrowest sidewalks.
- Controlling for income, most neighborhoods with majority people of color have narrower commercial sidewalks than white-majority neighborhoods.
- Narrow sidewalks are a key constraint limiting business participation in LA Al Fresco Sidewalk Dining. While more businesses are able to participate under the city’s relaxed pedestrian clearance requirements, the narrower space may lead to more conflicts between sidewalk dining and ADA access.
- More than half of the city’s sidewalk dining applications are concentrated in 11 neighborhoods, located mainly in higher-income, white-majority neighborhoods.
- High speed limits, combined with narrow sidewalks in commercial corridors, constrain the ability for businesses to participate in LA Al Fresco Curbside Dining, especially in the neighborhoods across the San Fernando Valley and South Los Angeles.



[According to the Los Angeles Department of Transportation](#), LA Al Fresco has been a success, with 1,350 businesses applying for sidewalk-dining permits and another 155 businesses requesting curbside dining in the first 18 months. Consequently, many businesses and elected officials are interested in converting this temporary outdoor dining program into a permanent mainstay in the city.

This research brief examines the relationship between eligibility for LA Al Fresco opportunities and street and sidewalk conditions across the city. We ask the following questions: How do the existing built environment and street characteristics constrain or enable participation in the LA Al Fresco program? How do constraints vary by neighborhood demographics? How do the patterns of eligibility relate to the patterns of participation? Looking ahead, what changes to the program should the city further consider as they make outdoor dining a more permanent part of Los Angeles’s streetscape?

Dining in the street, Magnolia Boulevard, North Hollywood (Photo taken 9/2020 / courtesy of Joe Linton)



The Los Angeles Department of Transportation provided a list of businesses that had applied for sidewalk and curbside dining permits between May 2020 and December 2021 for this analysis. The data are based on completed applications and may not reflect all businesses currently operating sidewalk dining. Some businesses applied but never operated sidewalk dining, while others operated sidewalk dining for a period but are not currently doing so.

Examples of sidewalk and curbside dining installations (Photo taken 2/2022 / courtesy of Madeline Brozen (left) and Claudia Bustamante (right))

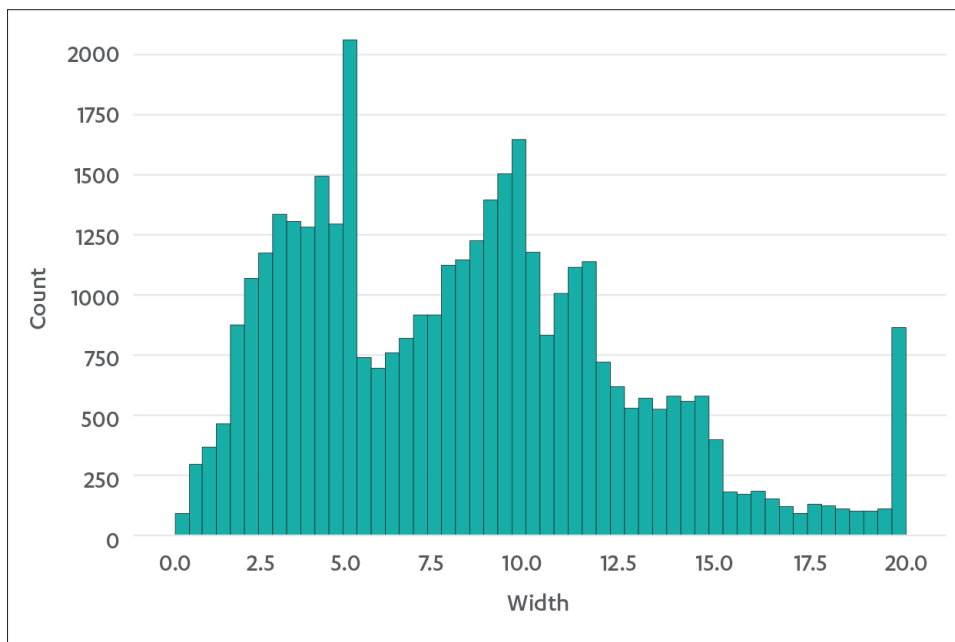


Results

SIDEWALK WIDTHS AND OTHER CONSTRAINTS

We analyzed 977 miles of sidewalks across commercial areas of Los Angeles. The median sidewalk width across commercial districts is 7.7 feet. We relied on median values because of the bimodal distribution of sidewalk widths, as shown in **Figure 1**. We also found a great deal of variation by neighborhood in the median commercial sidewalk width, with Downtown Los Angeles and Westside neighborhoods having median commercial sidewalk widths of 10 feet or wider. In contrast, many areas in South Los Angeles, including Florence, Central-Alameda, and Broadway-Manchester had median commercial sidewalk widths of less than 4.5 feet (**Figure 2**)

Figure 1.
Distribution of commercial sidewalk widths in the City of Los Angeles



Narrow sidewalks meant only a portion of city streets are wide enough to participate in sidewalk dining while still maintaining adequate pedestrian clearance. With the original 6-foot clearance guidelines, 48% of the length of commercial sidewalks in the city could accommodate clearance and a 2-foot-wide table installation. Reducing pedestrian clearance to 4 feet increases the length of the eligible sidewalks to 64% but still omits areas.

Narrow sidewalks combined with high speed limits along commercial corridors prevent businesses from the opportunity to participate in street dining. About 31% of sidewalk length in commercial districts is suitable for curbside dining (30 mph speed limit with appropriate sidewalk clearance), and 87% of sidewalk length in commercial districts citywide is eligible to host dining in the street (35 mph speed limit), but again this does not take into account whether or not the street has two or fewer travel lanes in each direction.

We further examined these eligibility patterns by median household income, and race and ethnicity, singularly and in combination. We found statistically significant differences in average sidewalk width between below-average and above-average income neighborhoods, and between majority white and majority people of color neighborhoods. In both cases, higher-income and majority-white areas had wider sidewalks and a greater length of sidewalks eligible for LA Al Fresco sidewalk dining within their commercial districts (**Table 3**).

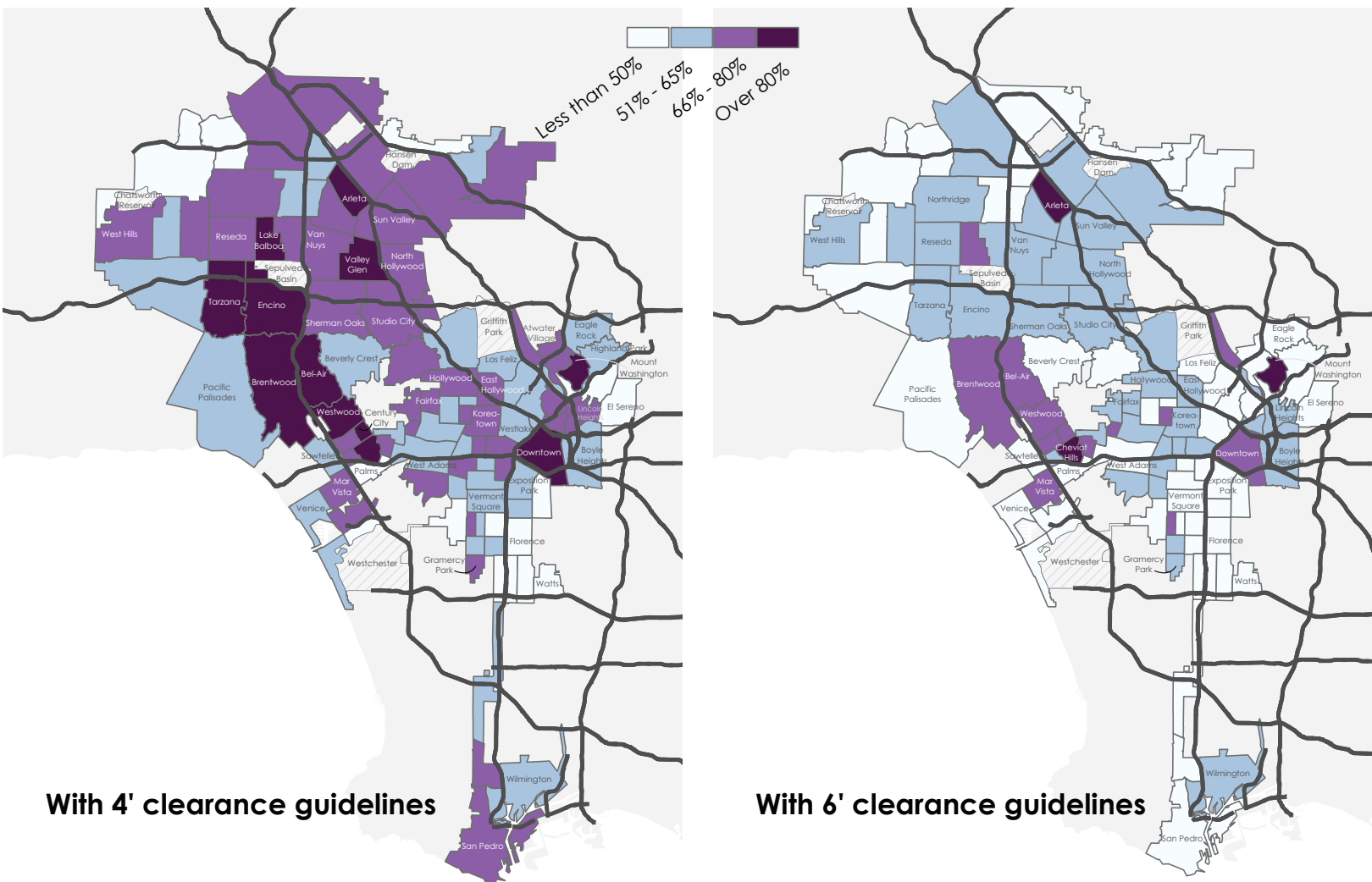
This finding was not, however, consistent across all LA Al Fresco programs. We found higher percentages of eligibility in lower-income and majority non-white neighborhoods for curbside dining and dining in the street options. The lack of eligibility in the curbside dining is a function of both narrow sidewalks and high-speed streets. If curbside dining eligibility was using only speed limit considerations, eligibility would increase to 56% citywide, 58% in majority non-white neighborhoods, 45% in majority white neighborhoods, 60% in neighborhoods below average income, and 43% in neighborhoods with above average income.

Using t-tests, we tested for significant differences between neighborhoods within the same income quartile but with different race/ethnicity compositions as outlined in tests A through D in **Table 4**. We found significant differences in the average sidewalk width in all tests, except for test A which compared lowest-income neighborhoods by race/ethnicity and found more similarly sized sidewalk widths. The overall findings demonstrate that even in areas with similar incomes, sidewalks in commercial districts were likely to be narrower in communities with a higher proportion of people of color.

SIDEWALK WIDTH AND SIDEWALK DINING

We analyzed neighborhood variation in the percent of sidewalk length eligible for sidewalk dining (**Figure 3**). Using the previous 6-foot sidewalk clearance standard, some neighborhoods had a sizable majority of their commercial roads where sidewalks were wide enough for outdoor dining. For example, in Cheviot Hills, Mount Washington, Arleta, Downtown Los Angeles, and Westwood, more than 70% of their sidewalk length was over 8 feet wide. In contrast, in Palms, Highland Park, El Sereno, and Watts, less than 35% of the sidewalk length was wide enough to support sidewalk dining for restaurants along their commercial corridors. After reducing the sidewalk clearance to 4 feet, an average of 14% more sidewalks across the city became eligible for sidewalk dining. Even with this loosening of clearance restrictions, however, some neighborhoods still had a limited portion of sidewalks available. In El Sereno, the percent of eligible sidewalks increased slightly from 29% to 34%. In Watts, it increased from 28% to 44%.

Figure 3.
Percent of commercial sidewalks eligible for sidewalk dining by neighborhood



Using the data provided by LADOT, we mapped the number of applicants for sidewalk dining by neighborhood (**Figure 4**). We found a high level of neighborhood concentration in LA Al Fresco sidewalk dining: Half of the city’s sidewalk dining locations were concentrated in 11, or 10%, of LA’s neighborhoods: Downtown Los Angeles, Koreatown, Hollywood, Venice, Beverly Grove, Sawtelle, Sherman Oaks, Fairfax, Studio City, East Hollywood, and Silver Lake. These neighborhoods had more than 30 sidewalk dining applications each. In contrast, 14 neighborhoods had zero sidewalk dining applications. Of those, seven neighborhoods were located in and around South Los Angeles.

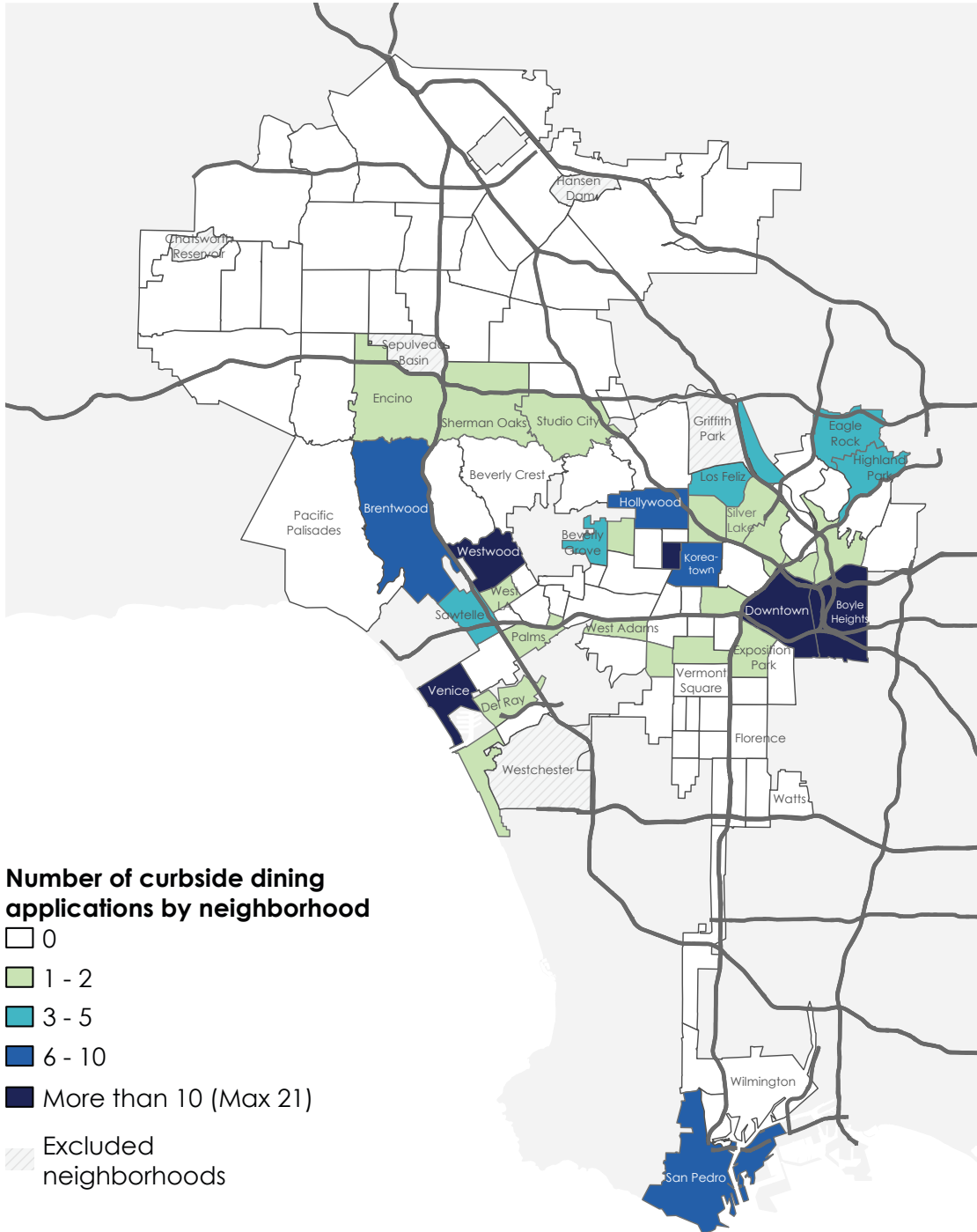
We found both expected and unexpected trends when comparing the percent of sidewalks eligible to the number of applicants per neighborhood. Downtown Los Angeles had the highest number of sidewalk dining applicants and the highest percent of commercial sidewalks that could be eligible (based on both the 4-foot and 6-foot clearance). This was also true in Westwood with wide sidewalks and a lot of sidewalk dining. But neighborhoods with a high percentage of eligible commercial streets did not always have a high number of sidewalk dining activations. Conversely, neighborhoods with a lot of sidewalk dining like Silver Lake did not have a high percent of eligible sidewalks. We found a 2% to 5% correlation in the relationship between percent of eligible sidewalks and applicants likely meaning there are other factors relating to the participation in the sidewalk dining program beyond sidewalk space alone.

CURBSIDE DINING

Regarding curbside dining eligibility, 31% of sidewalks citywide were wide enough and located on streets with speed limits low enough to be eligible. The trends by neighborhood varied significantly and on average, 27% of commercial streets in any given neighborhood were eligible (**Figure 5**).

Curbside dining locations were more concentrated than sidewalk dining (**Figure 6**). Of the 153 curbside dining applications, 50% were located in five neighborhoods: Downtown Los Angeles, Venice, Westwood, Windsor Square, and Boyle Heights. We also found concentration along particular streets in some of these neighborhoods. Larchmont Boulevard hosts all of the curbside dining in Windsor Square, and Cesar Chavez Avenue and 1st Street host all curbside dining in Boyle Heights.

Figure 6.
Curbside dining by neighborhood





Examples of sidewalk dining failing to maintain clearance (Photos taken 9/2020 / courtesy of Rabi Abonour (left) and 10/2020 / courtesy of Alissa Walker (right))

City departments should look to encourage new participation among businesses that need further assistance, rather than institute new parameters that would seek to reduce the number of participants in some areas (such as quotas or maximum number of participants).

3) PLACE GUARDRAILS IN THE LA AL FRESCO APPLICATION TO ENSURE APPLICANTS MAINTAIN ADA CLEARANCE.

Businesses interested in participating in the LA Al Fresco program were required to provide only minimal information on the sidewalk characteristics and their proposed configuration of tables and seating. The requirements did not mandate that applicants measure the width of their sidewalk, tables, or chairs or indicate whether there were any other sidewalk obstructions such as tree wells, newspaper stands, hydrants, etc. It was likely difficult for the reviewing departments, in their haste to pivot quickly during the pandemic, to ensure whether each proposed sidewalk treatment would maintain ADA clearance without such information. As a result, some LA Al Fresco treatments likely did not provide the mandated clearance (e.g., see photos above) and reduced access to those in wheelchairs and other mobility devices. The LA Al Fresco program should require more detailed measurements of sidewalks, obstructions, and furniture in the application itself, especially given the recent reduction in required clearance.

The need for careful consideration of accommodations and inclusion is not limited to sidewalk dining alone. This lack of accommodation often occurs when the curbside dining or dining in the street treatment is not flush with the sidewalk, requiring a step down into the road bed (see photo pg. 20). Overall, the city can also help to enforce sidewalk clearance and non-compliant curbside dining or dining in the street installations by adding a complaint category to existing systems like the MyLA311 system to allow people to file a complaint and initiate an investigation.



Curbside dining installation flush with curb that maintains sidewalk clearance. (Photo taken 2/2022 / courtesy of Madeline Brozen)

Alternatively, the city could also consider reasonable amendments to the speed limit regulations for participating in the curbside and street dining programs. Small, incremental changes would similarly allow more businesses to take advantage of these LA AI Fresco offerings. When more businesses can take advantage of curbside or dining in the street, they can receive the benefits of LA AI Fresco dining without creating sidewalk conflicts. Therefore, a recommended approach is to combine loosening speed limit guidelines and work to reduce speed limits with an eye toward mutually beneficial policies in traffic safety and economic development.

Through a combination of low barriers to entry and quick approval times, LA AI Fresco was able to help support thousands of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely helping many stay afloat. But the existing sidewalk and street characteristics meant that eligibility across businesses and neighborhoods was uneven. Given this, decision-makers must take these disparities into account to ensure more businesses, especially those owned by Black, Indigenous, people of color, take full advantage as LA AI Fresco becomes a permanent part of the city's landscape.



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