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Understanding the Barriers to Outdoor Dining in Los Angeles Neighborhoods



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Issue

On May 29th, 2020, then-Mayor Eric Garcetti launched the temporary L.A. Al Fresco program to encourage outdoor dining options for economically distressed eateries during the COVID-19 pandemic. L.A. Al Fresco allowed for expedited permitting and temporarily halted the enforcement of certain zoning regulations. The four outdoor dining options eateries could use in an attempt to stay open during the pandemic were curbside dining, sidewalk dining, dining in the street, and expanded outdoor private property. Since the program's inception, Los Angeles has had the goal of 50% of participating restaurants to come from disadvantaged communities (defined by Senate Bill 535 as communities with a large pollution burden based on geographic, socioeconomic, public health, and environmental hazard criteria). However, the L.A. Al Fresco program could not achieve that goal and always hovered around a 33% participation rate in disadvantaged communities. The barriers that burden underinvested neighborhoods will continue as the city shifts to a permanent Al Fresco program unless policy or action is implemented. This study explored the barriers disadvantaged communities face in applying to the L.A. Al Fresco program and offers solutions to increase program participation in these communities.

Methods

The researcher conducted five in-depth interviews with food and beverage establishment owners to understand the barriers to participating in the L.A. Al Fresco program and the impact of COVID-19. All food and beverage establishments surveyed and interviewed are located in the San Fernando Valley, South Los Angeles, Wilmington, and Harbor Gateway and their owners have not previously applied to the L.A. Al Fresco program. These areas and neighborhoods were chosen because they had a lower participation rate and were coded as disadvantaged communities under SB 535. The researcher examined L.A. Al Fresco application data from May 2020 to April 2023 and percentages of commercial zoning and eatery density per mile by neighborhood. Finally, she compared L.A. Al Fresco requirements with those of its predecessor outdoor dining permit, the Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering's Sidewalk Dining "R" Revocable Permit.

Findings

- On May 29, 2020, the L.A. Al Fresco program launched. Within six months, the program garnered 2,415 completed applications, highlighting it as a needed intervention strategy for economic support.
- More than one-fourth (27%) of active eateries in Los Angeles currently participate in the L.A. Al Fresco program.

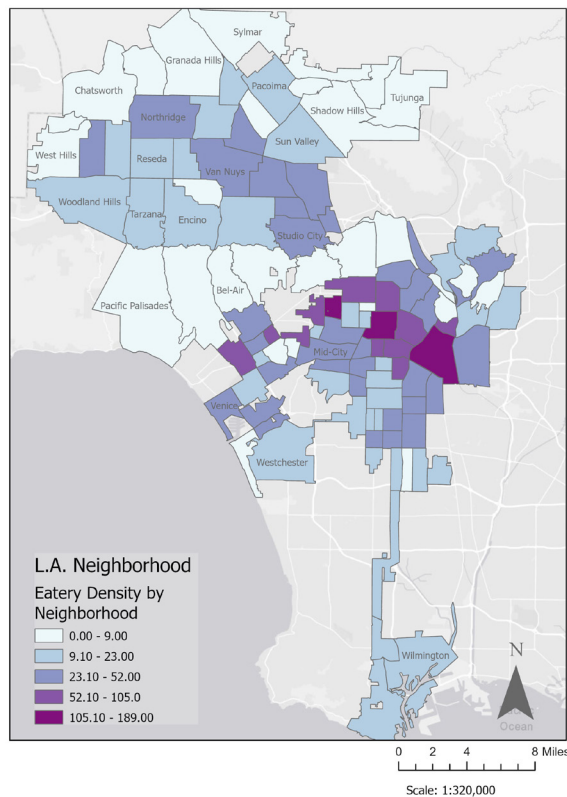


Figure 1: Eateries per square mile by Los Angeles neighborhood

- Downtown Los Angeles has a higher density of eateries per square mile than other neighborhoods across the city (Figure 1).
- Opportunities for space reallocation are concentrated in higher-income neighborhoods, as seen in outdoor dining program data for both Los Angeles and New York City.
- Interviewees expressed that they are still recovering economically from COVID-19, which has been compounded by inflation, leaving them with no interest in expanding their businesses through outdoor dining.
- Interviewees also cited safety concerns and the poor built environment as significant barriers to their business growth and decision to not apply to the L.A. Al Fresco program.



Montaño, B. (2023). Al Fresco in the time of COVID-19: Addressing the barriers to outdoor dining in Los Angeles communities (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9p54s4w8>

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Conclusions

As the L.A. Al Fresco program appeared a successful pandemic intervention strategy with 27% of eateries participating, neighborhoods like Wilmington and Harbor Gateway continue to face barriers to applying. Food and beverage establishments are still recovering from COVID-19, especially eateries that opened during the pandemic and did not qualify for emergency business loans. Most barriers uncovered through the qualitative interviews were concerns about space, customer safety, and the built environment near eateries.

Based on the findings and responses, the researcher proposes the following six recommendations to address the barriers that neighborhoods with low participation face:

- Recruit L.A. Al Fresco participants to become ambassadors for their neighborhoods and encourage their fellow small business owners to apply.
- Develop partnerships with local organizations focused on small business advising and micro-loans to increase the presence of specialized support services.
- Provide accessible graphics and informational videos in Spanish and partner with local Spanish-language media to spread awareness of L.A. Al Fresco.
- Curate FAQs and talking points for landlords to discuss the economic benefits of outdoor dining with their tenants.
- Create an active map of eateries participating in L.A. Al Fresco across the city to bring in new customers and provide visual evidence of a widespread, successful program.
- Build a coalition of nonprofit organizations, food and beverage establishments, business improvement districts, and other stakeholders to coordinate their similar goals and provide each other with support.