

Places, Spaces & People

HOW THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT IMPACTS HEALTH
IN BOYLE HEIGHTS AND EAST LOS ANGELES



Alliance for a Better Community



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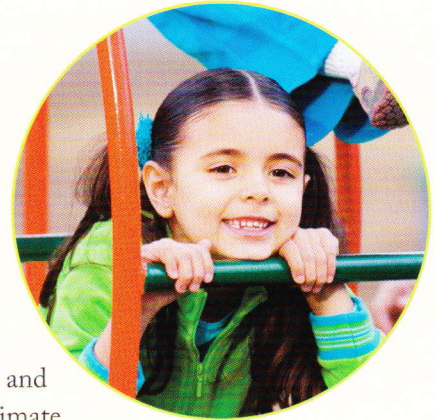
The health of a community is directly connected to its physical constructs, urban design and use of public and private spaces. One's ability to access needed resources, purchase high quality, affordable food and safely participate in physical activity can determine your ability to live a vibrant, healthy life.

One way to ensure the design of an area supports healthy living and meets the needs of the community is to include the community's residents in the planning process. Community members can best identify those measures that would decrease fear, improve health outcomes, and support healthy behaviors in their community.

The following report utilizes this best practice by engaging residents and organizations in the evaluation and improvement of their community.

Foreword

The nation is finally waking up to the critical connection between the built environment and health. First Lady Michelle Obama, in her campaign to end childhood obesity, specifically stresses the importance of improving the built environment in communities by providing them with outlets for healthy food and places where youth can safely play. The federal government's \$400 million National Healthy Food Financing Initiative goes a step further by providing funding to support the establishment and expansion of grocery stores in "food deserts" – under-resourced communities that often lack retail outlets, farmers' markets, and local gardens. Meanwhile, environmental justice groups in California and beyond are highlighting the link between the health impacts of air pollution and climate change on the one hand and communities' truck traffic and land use patterns on the other.



Los Angeles caught this "place matters" wave early. Since its establishment in the early 1990s, the Community Coalition of South LA has mobilized residents to close down over 200 liquor stores that contributed to neighborhood violence. Since 2001, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice has prepared hundreds of community members to speak up against the ravages of pollution from neighboring rail yards. Most recently in 2008, the L.A. City Council passed a one year ban on new fast food outlets in a 32 square mile area, hoping to incentivize healthier food opportunities for over half a million, low-income residents.

With this report, Alliance for a Better Community (ABC) is continuing this tradition of connecting place and health. It highlights the steps that are needed to alleviate the pressures of the built environment on the health of residents in Boyle Heights and East LA – communities ringed by polluting freeways, crisscrossed with hazardous industrial facilities, and lacking basic amenities. The findings are both important and timely – and ABC makes a unique contribution because the community members themselves played a large role in informing the research; 230 residents participated in interactive community mapping sessions, providing not only what they saw as problems, but also what they viewed as potential solutions. The resulting policy ideas are both significant and doable: they stress the importance of schools as epicenters for healthy living and focus infrastructure improvements on creating buffer zones around both schools and parks.

Decisions affecting public health and urban planning can last decades, if not centuries. With the shifting sands of politics, the time for Boyle Heights and East LA to harness the national momentum that connects the built environment with public health is now. Doing so could make a difference for generations to come.

- Manuel Pastor

*Professor of American Studies & Ethnicity Director,
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Executive Summary

The Boyle Heights/East Los Angeles (BHELA) Community Health Assessment explores the nexus between the built environment, public policy, and urban planning in an effort to determine their impact on the health and wellbeing of residents in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles. Through community engagement efforts, four key findings were identified that inhibit residents' ability to live healthy, active lives: 1) inaccessibility to, and shortage of, quality food outlets offering affordable, healthy food; 2) limited access to safe recreation space; 3) a need for greater public safety; and 4) much needed improvements to and maintenance of community infrastructure.

Based on the aforementioned findings and the momentum garnered through local efforts, we propose the following recommendations:

1) Create schools as centers for healthy eating and physical activity.

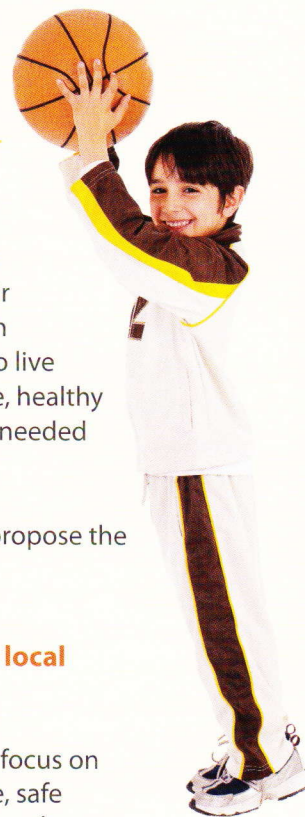
Transform local schools into epicenters for healthy living in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles by increasing physical activity on and around school campuses during school and non-school hours. In addition, schools should be a center for both promoting and providing healthy, affordable food.

2) Establish a Health and Safety Buffer around school campuses.

Infrastructure improvements should be concentrated around campuses to ensure safe routes to schools; the selling of unhealthy food is prohibited /limited while the sale of healthy food options around school campus is encouraged and incentivized; and community policing groups work with law enforcement to increase public safety on and around campuses.

3) Take back local parks.

Efforts should focus on creating active, safe recreation space that accommodates the activities and needs of the community. Advocacy efforts must focus on infrastructure improvements at local parks (i.e. improved lighting, permanent exercise equipment, clean park facilities, etc.) and changing the use of the parks to support community programs for both passive and active recreation.



By leveraging existing collaborative efforts, these recommendations can be realized and would ensure that youth and families are supported in living a safe and healthy lifestyle.



Introduction

Lush green space, bustling commercial corridors, centralized employment centers, and welcoming schools and parks create spaces that not only meet the needs of a community, but also act as the social and economic cohesion that supports healthy living. Inversely, when these elements are absent or removed from a neighborhood, an individual's ability to thrive in their community diminishes. In the communities of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, insufficient access to these much needed amenities are key catalysts in perpetuating the difficulty residents' face in living healthy, vibrant lives.

To better understand the correlation between the physical constructs of a neighborhood and their impact on the health and wellbeing of local residents, the Alliance for a Better Community (ABC) set out to conduct a Community Health Assessment of the Boyle

Heights and East Los Angeles communities. ABC realizes that a healthy community must holistically support individuals and families in their pursuit to excel physically, emotionally, academically, economically and socially. This study seeks to identify the elements of the built environmentⁱ, both positive and negative, that affect healthy living in these two communities, and to provide strategic policy responses.

In what follows, we summarize the methodology, key findings, and policy recommendations of our Community Health Assessment.



Community Profiles

Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles are located in the area generally known as East Los Angeles, nestled tightly between the growing Downtown LA skyline to the west and the sprawling San Gabriel Valley to the East. The Los Angeles River, along with five major freeways (the I-10, State Route 60, US 101, I-710, and the I-5) run through the communities, dissecting them geographically and socially.ⁱⁱ The freeway construction, which occurred during the first half of the 20th century, displaced one-tenth of residents in the East Los Angeles region and created a housing shortage, which ultimately led to overcrowding and poor living conditions in the area.ⁱⁱⁱ

During this same period, the city created a zoning ordinance designating West Los Angeles as a strictly residential area, resulting in the development of east and south Los Angeles as the site for industry and working class families employed in the area. Furthermore, racially restrictive covenants^{iv} excluded non-white residents from living in western portions of Los Angeles, making the eastside one of LA's early ethnic enclaves. These real estate restrictions

coupled with Boyle Heights' and East Los Angeles' affordable housing costs, made these neighborhoods a port-of-entry for many newly-arrived, working poor immigrants.

Despite the turbulent development of these communities, residents have not sat idle in seeking to improve their circumstances. Both communities have extraordinary histories of strong civic engagement, as evidenced by the civil rights movements that have roots in the area. Cultural pride has also acted as a unifying force throughout their history, beginning with the early Japanese and Jewish settlers. This pride is visible through the preservation of ornate cultural centers, nostalgic murals and the spirited residents that understand that the richness of their community goes beyond their collective income.

*Please see page 18 for map of
East L.A./ Boyle Heights project area.*

Boyle Heights

The community of Boyle Heights is home to approximately 110,000 residents, living in the most eastern part of the City of Los Angeles.^v From the early 20th century to present day, Boyle Heights has long been an entry portal for recently arrived immigrants who were often unwelcomed in other parts of the city due to discriminatory real estate practices and overt social prejudice.^{vi}

In the 1940's and 50's Boyle Heights was a largely Jewish community with booming businesses and immense civic pride. During those same years, Japanese-Americans and Latino immigrants began to settle in the community, forever changing the look and feel of this once isolated, hill-top community. After the 1942 internment of hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Americans and the later banning of racially restrictive covenants, Boyle Heights was changed once again. Many of its Jewish residents began migrating westward toward more affluent sections of the City and its Japanese-American residents were displaced and forced to find homes elsewhere after returning from the internment camps.^{vii}

Today, Boyle Heights is home to an ever growing concentration of Latino immigrants who make it their first, and sometimes only, stop in their migration into the United States. As an entry port, population growth in Boyle Heights has surpassed Los Angeles County rates.^{viii} Between 2000-2008, Boyle Heights experienced a population growth of 14% radically higher than the County rate. Although many Boyle Heights residents are immigrants, a large segment of the population has lived in the area for



generations, establishing strong roots in this dynamic community. Boyle Heights is a largely poor, Latino community with a median income of about \$33,570, with 30% of families living below the poverty line and a homeownership rate that hovers just below 30%.^{ix}

The figures on traditional health indicators are also troubling. Boyle Heights suffers from high rates of obesity and overweight, with over 33% of local residents deemed overweight and 23% obese.^x These findings are significant because rates of obesity can be directly linked to other chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, hypertension and an overall poor quality of life.^{xi} In 2008, heart disease was identified as the leading cause of death among residents. Heart disease, among other ailments, has been directly linked to an individual's obesity and fitness levels.^{xii}

Individuals with low-educational outcomes also tend to have poor health outcomes.^{xiii} This is a concern in Boyle Heights where 68% of residents have less than a high school education and less than 17% have a high school diploma.^{xiv} At Roosevelt High School, Boyle Heights' largest high school, only 45% of 9th graders who were enrolled in 2005 graduated four years later in 2009.^{xv}

In addition, Boyle Heights also suffers from a deficiency in park space with only 161 acres of open space, much of which is actually cemeteries.^{xvi} This is distressing given the County standard for the provision of parkland is 4 acres of local parklands and 6 acres of regional parkland per 1,000 residents; Boyle Heights rates fall well below that standard.^{xvii}

"Boyle Heights also suffers from a deficiency in park space with only 161 acres of open space, much of which is actually cemeteries."

East Los Angeles

As Boyle Heights' eastern neighbor, East Los Angeles is home to approximately 123,000 residents and is an unincorporated community that is governed and supported by the County of Los Angeles.^{xviii} As with Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles has also been marked with a history of rapid growth, poor planning and deteriorating infrastructure that has exacerbated the poor health and social outcomes of the community.

High density rates have contributed to these issues. East Los Angeles has a density rate seven times that of Los Angeles County and double that of neighboring cities. Between 2000-2008, the area had a population growth of over 11% which is significantly higher than the growth rate of the rest of Los Angeles County.^{xix}

The East Los Angeles community is fairly young with a median age of 32, five years younger than the Los Angeles County median. This dense, urban community is largely young, Latino, transit dependent and poor.^{xx} The median income in East Los Angeles is \$34,883, almost \$20,000 less than the Los Angeles County rate, with 27% of families living below the federal poverty line. Additionally, East Los Angeles' homeownership rate is just slightly higher than that of Boyle Heights at 34%, which is



significantly lower than the County rate at 50%. In addition to the low homeownership rates, East Los Angeles has been unable to meet its demand for its affordable housing units. According to the areas affordable housing strategy, East Los Angeles failed to meet its demand for 15,146 affordable housing units in 2008.^{xxi}

Similar to Boyle Heights, the health outcomes of East Los Angeles can be directly linked to residents' economic and educational attainment.^{xxii} The leading cause of death in East Los Angeles' in 2008 was heart disease, with cancer second. Comparable to Boyle Heights, more than 65% of the population in East Los Angeles has less than a high school education and only 17% has a high school diploma. At Garfield High School, East Los Angeles' largest high school, only 54% of 9th graders who were enrolled in 2005 went on to graduate four years later in 2009.^{xxiii}





In addition to these community challenges, available park space in East Los Angeles falls short in meeting the demand of the area. East Los Angeles contains less than 60 acres of park space while cemeteries in the community cover approximately 147 acres.^{xxiv} East Los Angeles falls far short of meeting the County suggested park provision, with a deficit of local park space of 145 acres and a deficit of regional park space of 195 acres.^{xxv}

Despite its many impediments, East Los Angeles has significant potential to develop into a healthy and robust community. Its long history of activism

coupled with its many local and regional resources can be used to address the difficulties it faces due to rapid population growth, sluggish economy and weakening infrastructure. One current effort that continues the legacy of activism is the push for cityhood in East Los Angeles. A group of residents are currently pursuing the prospects of incorporating the region into a city with the aim of enhancing localized civic participation, and public resources and services.

“East Los Angeles falls far short of meeting the County suggested park provision, with a deficit of local park space of 145 acres and a deficit of regional park space of 195 acres.”

Community Profiles Conclusion

Despite their tumultuous development, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles have survived due to their overwhelmingly rich social capital, historic pride and steadfast community spirit. In addition to these intangible and unique assets, this region is also home to local resources that can, and should, be leveraged to enhance the built environment and support and sustain a healthy lifestyle for all residents. Some of these physical assets include East Los Angeles Community College, the California State University of Los Angeles, the newly constructed Metro Gold line, local and regional parks, the newly built LAC+USC County Hospital, White Memorial Hospital, three new area schools and a large newly developed civic center, among other important social and physical assets. These areas are also home to a large social service network that provides a foundation to build off of and improve.

Study Design

In 2009-2010, the Alliance for a Better Community (ABC) conducted a Community Health Assessment of the Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles communities to determine the impact of the physical environment on the overall health,^{xxvi} wellbeing, and vitality of the community. The area of study is the Greater East Los Angeles area which includes ZIP codes 90022, 90023, 90033 and 90063, and encompasses the neighborhoods of Boyle Heights (City of Los Angeles), City Terrace (unincorporated LA County), Wellington Heights (unincorporated LA County), and Belvedere (unincorporated LA County), among other unincorporated East LA communities.

The purpose of this study is to identify the urban elements that contribute to health disparities within these communities, and the urban planning strategies and public policy tools needed to mitigate them. Although a wide array of environmental issues were identified, ABC chose to narrow its focus to *access to healthy food options at local grocery outlets and safe recreation space on and around school campuses*. This was due in part to our strong school networks, expertise in the field, success in mobilizing school communities for change and the current momentum and capacities around these issues. Rather than providing a general overview on all topics, our study sought to delve deeper on a select few in an effort to achieve immediate changes. As a result of this narrowed focus, we were unable to elaborate on the many other important environmental factors that were identified by residents and stakeholders as significant, these include: air quality and pollution, transportation hazards, water quality (specifically the high levels of manganese found in the local water^{xxvii}), health hazards in the home, and environmental toxins. ABC fully understands the magnitude of these issues and strongly encourages additional efforts to address these critical health concerns.



Building Healthy Communities

BOYLE HEIGHTS

In mid 2009, the California Endowment launched Building Healthy Communities as a 10-year initiative which focused on strategic investments in 14 communities across the state of California. The goal of this initiative is to support the development of communities where kids and youth are healthy, safe and ready to learn. Investment in the 14 selected sites will concentrate efforts on systemic changes that will meet the immediate health needs of residents and address long term health issues.

As part of the Building Healthy Communities Initiative, each selected community underwent an extensive year-long planning effort where residents and stakeholders were brought to the table to identify community priorities and develop a strategic plan to guide investment. Between June 2009 and June 2010, Boyle Heights underwent this planning process and developed a comprehensive report that outlines community priorities based on the feedback of thousands of residents and stakeholders.

For more information please visit www.calendow.org/healthycommunities