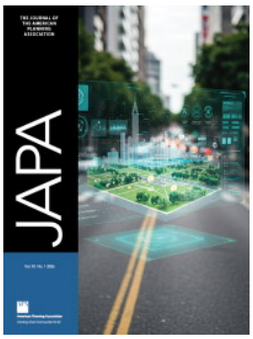

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Building Urban Resilience with *Just* Trees: Addressing Community Interests Within Urban Forestry Planning in South Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Problem, research strategy, and findings: Advancing resilience through the expansion of the urban forest is a critical topic in urban planning practice and research. Urban forestry initiatives that focus on increasing the tree canopy have been particularly important in tree-deficient communities, such as South Los Angeles (South LA; CA), a culturally diverse region where discriminatory policies and practices have contributed to environmental injustices and equity concerns. Despite efforts focused on addressing these injustices by increasing tree canopy coverage, minimal work has explored how tree-related initiatives fit within the broader needs and priorities of vulnerable communities. We have begun to address these dynamics through a qualitative case study analysis of tree planning efforts in South LA. Semistructured interviews with community leaders revealed insights about the challenges associated with maintenance of and engagement with the tree canopy in South LA. Past tree planning initiatives with poor engagement have made trees in South LA symbolic of competition for resources and green gentrification. Despite this, South LA community members are still eager to have *just* trees, or trees that are properly maintained and culturally responsive to South LA's population.

Takeaway for practice: Our findings highlight key factors critical for advancing effective and equitable tree planning efforts in vulnerable urban areas, including the key needs, challenges, and recommendations for current and future planning, policy, and advocacy efforts related to trees in South LA. We recommend adopting more inclusive approaches to tree planning in urban communities that prioritize addressing the long-term impacts and legacies of environmental injustices and inequalities. Planners working to increase tree canopy in vulnerable urban communities should consider the equitable distribution of trees and their benefits in conjunction with meaningful community engagement at all levels of the tree planning process.

KEYWORDS

Community engagement; environmental justice; South LA; tree planning; urban forestry

In the face of growing climate change impacts, urban forestry has gained prominence in urban planning practice and research, given the contributions of the tree canopy to community resilience (Lanza & Stone, 2016; Pramova et al., 2012; Roy et al., 2012). Urban forestry activities frequently focus on planting and maintaining individual trees and tree populations in urban settings, encompassing physical management, spatial implications, and distribution of societal benefits associated with trees (Konijnendijk et al., 2006; Young & Giese, 2003). In this work, the term *urban forest* is inclusive of street trees (trees planted in parkways and the public right-of-way), trees in public spaces, such as parks and gardens, and private trees (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2023; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2024). Building on these definitions, we distinguish tree *planting* (the physical activities associated with planting and maintaining trees) from tree *planning* (the broader decision-making processes and social implications surrounding urban forestry efforts). Our work centers on understanding and improving tree *planning* practices to ensure they are responsive to community needs.

Urban forestry plays a key role in advancing urban planning goals associated with health, safety, resilience, and overall wellbeing. Research has found

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connections between the urban forest and psychological wellbeing (Astell-Burt & Feng, 2019; Papastavrou, 2019), reduction in street-level temperatures (Rahman et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021), ecosystem services (Bolund & Hunhammar, 1999), wildlife diversity and human interactions (Schell et al., 2020), and carbon sequestration and improvements in air quality (Daniels, 2010; Kim et al., 2025). Despite these many benefits, urban trees may also introduce new costs and risks to communities. Resources and labor required for tree maintenance may be costly, and infrastructural damage, from uprooted sidewalks to damage from climate-related disasters like wildfires, are potential disbenefits of urban forests (Roman et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2012). Historical patterns of segregation created a legacy of environmental injustices that positioned the urban forest in wealth and Whiteness, which can trigger gentrification concerns when minority neighborhoods are subject to urban forestry work, especially without consultation (Finney, 2014; Grove et al., 2018).

While wide-ranging benefits are associated with the urban forest, in many large urban metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles (CA), these benefits are not equally accessible to all residents. According to the 2016 Los Angeles County Tree Canopy Assessment conducted by SavATree Consulting Group, University of Vermont Spatial Analysis Lab, Center for Urban Resilience, Loyal Marymount University, and TreePeople, although 25% of the land area in the city of Los Angeles is covered by tree canopy, five census block groups contain 18% of the city's total tree canopy, even though less than 1% of the city's population resides in these areas (Galvin et al., 2019). While disparities exist throughout Los Angeles, specific subregions experience these dynamics even more deeply. One such area is South Los Angeles (South LA), a working-class, majority Black and Latino region of LA, where average tree canopy coverage across communities is significantly lower than LA city and county averages (Table 1). With such staggering inequities in tree canopy cover, South LA is a prime region of interest for urban forestry projects.

South LA is a culturally and economically diverse region southwest of Downtown Los Angeles with a complex history shaped by land use and racial segregation. Much of South LA was zoned for industrial use in the 1920s. Redlining maps created by the Home Owners Loan Corporation, along with racial covenants, confined racial and ethnic minorities to these

Table 1. Tree canopy coverage percentage of sample of South LA communities compared with LA city and county averages.

South LA communities	% Existing tree canopy cover[a]
Athens	9.56
Compton	10.90
Crenshaw	N/A
Florence	9.98
Hyde Park	12.47
Lynwood	14.96
Paramount	12.38
Watts	13.86
LA City average	25%
LA County average	18%

Notes: Data drawn from USC Neighborhood Data for Social Change, which uses the Los Angeles County Tree Canopy Map Viewer, a parcel-level LiDAR-based land cover assessment of LA County compiled by Tree People and the Center of Urban Resilience (CURes) at Loyola Marymount University (LMU). To view further details of tree canopy coverage across Los Angeles County, including mapping details, see the Tree Canopy Map (https://lmu-la.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=8d77f677faba40ce9f51d98e9a3196aa).

[a]The percentage of land area where the ground is covered from above by the leaves, branches, and stems of trees.

disinvested and environmentally vulnerable neighborhoods, exposing residents to environmental hazards like extreme heat, air pollution, and oil wells (Guardaro et al., 2025; Pulido et al., 1996; Shamasunder et al., 2018; Whittemore, 2012). South LA was a predominantly Black region through the 1960s but experienced an outmigration of Black residents and an influx of Latino residents after 1990. Recent metrics have indicated that the population of Black and Latino residents is still higher in South LA when compared with LA County averages (Table 2). In alignment with these findings, scholars have noted the ways in which continuous patterns of disinvestment perpetuate environmental injustices to Black and Brown residents living in South LA who are disproportionately burdened with economic hardship and physical and mental health concerns (Boone, 2006; Comandon & Ong, 2020; Estien et al., 2024).

In response to these issues, citywide and local movements have sought to address specific environmental injustices. For example, in alignment with other larger-scale mayoral tree planting initiatives in the United States (McPherson, 2014), former Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa launched a particularly notable tree-planting initiative in Los Angeles: MillionTreesLA, a campaign to plant 1 million trees across the city (see U.S. Forest Service [USFS], 2007). While the program, which initially targeted planting 1 million trees between 2006 and 2010, was successful in putting trees in the ground, it remains unclear whether the program equitably distributed trees to areas facing disproportionate environmental injustices (Garrison, 2021; McPherson et al., 2011).

Table 2. Los Angeles County and South LA (SPA 6) population estimates (2024).

	LA County		SPA 6 (South LA)	
	Population estimate	Percentage (%)	Population estimate	Percentage (%)
Gender				
Male	4,809,632	48.9%	481,794	48.5%
Female	5,023,052	51.1%	511,230	51.5%
Age group				
0–17 y	1,866,388	19.0%	234,308	23.6%
18–64 y	6,337,870	64.5%	640,424	64.5%
≥65 y	1,628,426	16.6%	118,292	11.9%
Race/ethnicity				
White	2,408,071	24.5%	29,827	3.0%
Black	734,573	7.5%	216,254	21.8%
AIAN	15,889	0.2%	1,208	0.1%
Asian	1,465,223	14.9%	21,543	2.2%
NHPI	18,935	0.2%	1,464	0.1%
Other race	61,951	0.6%	6,161	0.6%
Two or more races	335,863	3.4%	20,125	2.0%
Hispanic	4,792,179	48.7%	696,442	70.1%
Total population	9,832,684		993,024	

Notes: Estimates based on County of Los Angeles, Internal Services Department, Information Technology Services, Geographic Information Systems Section, July 1, 2024. SPA 6 = Service Planning Area 6; AIAN = American Indian or Alaskan Native non-Hispanic; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander non-Hispanic.

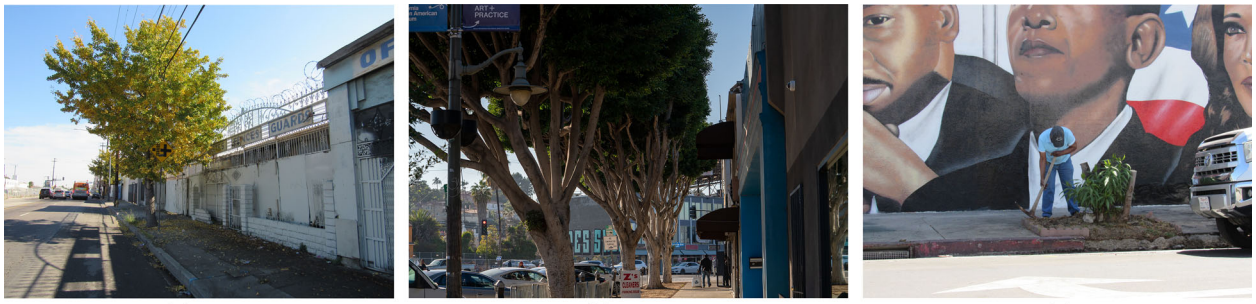
In South LA, much of this work has focused on investing in activities such as tree planting (Figure 1a–c) to increase community resilience and promote a more equitable distribution of tree benefits (Garrison, 2021; Guardaro et al., 2025). In these settings, questions of equitable distribution become even more critical when considering the potential negative consequences of distributive tree-planting investments, such as inciting fears of displacement among long-term community residents. Considering these issues, it becomes important to consider how urban forestry efforts address the broader needs and priorities of local communities in under-resourced urban areas, such as South LA.

To address these questions, we explored community interests and concerns about the urban forest through a qualitative case study analysis of tree planning efforts in South LA. Our research focused on assessing what community leaders identify as key needs, challenges, and recommendations for current and future planning, policy, and advocacy efforts relating to urban forests and tree-related interests in South LA. Thus, the takeaways from this study work to improve not only tree planning activities in communities like South LA but also contribute to increasing the representation of diverse communities' needs and interests in tree-related policy and decision-making processes in other urban areas facing similar challenges.

Background

Tree Planning in the City of Los Angeles

Like other large urban regions, tree planning activities in the city of Los Angeles involve a diverse range of public, nonprofit, and public–private partnerships. In terms of public agencies, this work in large part is overseen by the City of Los Angeles's Office of Forest Management (OFM; formerly under



(a) (b) (c)

Figure 1. (a, b) Tree conditions in South LA. (c) Tree planting in South LA.

the umbrella of the Board of Public Works, currently within Los Angeles City Planning Department), which "oversees the development, implementation, and tracking of data-driven decision-making for the Los Angeles urban forest, which includes trees on both public and private property" (Los Angeles Department of Public Works, 2025). Current key priorities identified by the OFM include (1) developing the city's first Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP); (2) addressing long-standing tree canopy equity issues; and (3) improving tree preservation policies and implementation (Los Angeles Department of Public Works, 2025). In addition to these broader goals, the OFM also engages in emerging tree and urban forest–related activities affecting residents in the city of Los Angeles. For example, in the wake of the January 2025 wildfires, OFM provided preliminary information on trees and urban forest considerations for fire recovery (OFM, 2025). Beyond the OFM, another key public agency involved in tree planning activities in the city of Los Angeles is the Department of Public Works, Bureau of Street Services, Urban Forestry Division (i.e., StreetsLA), which manages and maintains street trees and trees in the public right-of-way, and responds to tree-related emergencies (Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services, 2025).

Community engagement and outreach have become frequently noted priorities of urban forestry activities in Los Angeles. The OFM is currently developing its UFMP in collaboration with nonprofit and community-based organizations, which was scheduled to launch in 2025 (see City Plants & Dudek, 2018; Los Angeles Department of Public Works, 2025). Furthermore, beyond municipal UFMPs, many community partners and nonprofits have undertaken tree planting and stewardship initiatives to expand the urban canopy in tree-poor communities (Elton et al., 2023; Rigolon et al., 2024; Young, 2011).

In addition to work by public agencies, the City of Los Angeles relies heavily on public–private partnerships with nonprofit partners to plant trees and help raise the funds necessary to support this work. For example, City Plants is a nonprofit organization operating as a public–private partnership between the city and six other nonprofit organizations that "works in partnership with community groups, residents, and businesses to coordinate tree planting and care throughout Los Angeles" (City Plants, 2025). Partnerships such as this assist the city in growing the urban forest on public and private properties (which is outside the purview of the city), and further highlights the critical role nonprofit organizations play in advancing urban forestry goals throughout the city of LA.

Environmental Justice Frameworks and Tree Planning Approaches

Environmental justice typically encompasses distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice (Pérez Figueroa & Ulibarri, 2024). *Distributional justice* refers to the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities across groups, with a particular emphasis on allocating environmental benefits and resources to under-resourced communities (Rigolon & Németh, 2018). *Procedural justice* emphasizes the involvement of stakeholders at all stages of the decision-making process (Carmichael & McDonough, 2019). *Recognitional justice* acknowledges the lived experiences of communities facing systemic injustices as valuable knowledge to address barriers, thereby amplifying their voices in decision-making spaces (Rigolon et al., 2024). Environmental justice conversations in environmentally unjust spaces must also incorporate *restorative justice*, where perpetrators and victims work together to repair environmental injustices through reparations (Minguet, 2021). In addition, just capabilities reinforces the fact that people facing disproportionate harms from environmental injustices are not just passive victims, but active participants in reconciling environmental injustices (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010).

Despite extensive investment in tree planning, scholars such as Rigolon et al. (2024) have found that many urban greening policies prioritize distributional justice over procedural and recognitional justice. When applied to tree planning activities, distributional approaches frequently focus on planting trees in communities that lack them. While distributional approaches can be highly beneficial, they may overlook other aspects of the planning process that are necessary for fully addressing environmental injustices. A procedural justice approach prioritizes engaging affected communities in meaningful conversations about their tree-related needs and interests: conversations that directly inform the broader planning process. Initiatives that center procedural justice can strengthen relationships between community members and urban forestry management, reveal local knowledge that may otherwise be overlooked, and improve long-term tree stewardship (de Guzman et al., 2018; Papastavrou, 2019). In urban forestry, recognitional justice would center around designing green spaces that are culturally

responsive alongside community members, often amplifying their desires for environmentally just places and practices (Rigolon & Németh, 2018; Rigolon et al., 2024), while restorative justice and just capabilities build on community members' existing methods of maintaining urban forestry.

To address environmental injustices, many cities have undertaken urban greening projects aimed at advancing the urban forest through a distributional justice framework. Our study examined the benefits and shortcomings of distributional tree strategies in South LA, from the community members directly affected by these strategies, and explored how community members can be integrated into South LA urban forestry initiatives to promote the other pillars of environmental justice.

In response to these concerns, community engagement and outreach approaches are frequently presented as tools for providing a voice and opportunities to local community members. Research on the benefits of public participation in urban forestry gained prominence in the early 1990s, with studies showing that residents involved in the planting and maintenance of a tree on or near their property were more satisfied with the tree and felt a greater sense of community benefits than residents whose tree was planted by an organization or developer (Dwyer et al., 1992; Sommer et al., 1994a, 1994b). More recently, there has been a shift toward community engagement in tree planning at formative stages. However, municipalities and organizations often opt for engagement strategies that are less time and resource intensive yet qualitatively limiting, such as surveys or town hall meetings (Baker et al., 2021; Jaluzot, 2018; Tung, 2016). Alternatively, in-depth and iterative communication with community members about urban forestry planting and stewardship has positively affected community attitudes toward trees and improved stakeholder relationships (Carmichael & McDonough, 2019; de Guzman et al., 2018; Papastavrou, 2019). These conclusions further emphasize the importance of understanding community members' perspectives more thoroughly, thereby gaining greater support for tree planning at various stages of development.

Histories of Environmental Injustices Surrounding Trees

A growing focus in the urban forestry and tree planning literature has examined the relationship between tree planning and environmental justice and equity considerations. Urban greenspace, including urban forests, were a way to "escape from the evils of the city" for those who could afford it, mainly those who were wealthy and White (Cranz, 1982, p. 5). In turn, perceptions and access to urban forests were reserved for White people, both implicitly and explicitly (Byrne, 2012; Finney, 2014). Practices such as redlining and exclusionary zoning led by the federal government and private agencies have contributed to long-standing environmental inequalities in communities of color (Grant et al., 2023; Rigolon et al., 2022), such as communities having fewer resources invested into environmental amenities and an overabundance of environmental disamenities, such as waste sites and highways (CAPA Strategies, 2021).

As a result of these histories, low-income communities of color today have less access to green space and urban tree canopy coverage (Locke et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2015). When tree canopy is present, it is often poorly maintained and underfunded (Danford et al., 2014; Wolch et al., 2014). The inequitable distribution of tree canopy in low-income communities of color is an environmental injustice because the benefits of trees, such as urban heat mitigation and mental or physical health impacts, are not afforded to the vulnerable communities that need them the most (Chiotakis, 2023; Grove et al., 2018).

Environmental Gentrification Surrounding Tree Planning

It is important to consider not only the distribution of trees but also the potential long-term implications that may emerge from investments focused on greening urban communities, such as environmental gentrification. *Environmental gentrification*, often used interchangeably with *green gentrification*, refers to structural changes and demographic shifts that occur in response to environmental investments and improvements—such as brownfield remediation and expanded green amenities—that elevate property values and housing prices and drive the displacement of long-term and economically disadvantaged residents (Curran & Hamilton, 2012; Fox, 2019). Urban greening projects may contribute to green gentrification when an environmentally undesirable neighborhood is subsequently perceived as more attractive due to the presence of green amenities, leading to higher housing costs and demographic shifts such as higher median

incomes and higher percentages of White residents (Donovan et al., 2021).

Cities and developers often frame urban greening projects as being "universally beneficial" (Rigolon et al., 2022, pp. 1–3); however, these narratives can overshadow voices that oppose these projects due to concerns for gentrification. Greening projects that are poorly executed may fail to acknowledge the historic and persistent inequities in green spaces across low-income communities of color, further reinforcing racial power dynamics and green gentrification (Rigolon et al., 2022). In the case of urban forests, these common narratives may undermine the community's agency in shaping their urban forests, leading to trees potentially becoming signifiers of gentrification (Grant et al., 2023). Despite these narratives, the extent to which trees alone contribute to patterns of gentrification is unclear, as studies have shown potential minor increases in housing prices, but unclear shifts in other socio-demographic variables (Donovan et al., 2021; Li, 2023; Wolf-Jacobs et al., 2023).

Furthermore, past research has theorized ways to mitigate green gentrification, such as through *just green enough* frameworks and robust engagement across community members, nonprofits, municipal governments, and private investments (Curran & Hamilton, 2012; Papastavrou, 2019; Shoup, 1996). Regarding green gentrification specifically brought on by trees, the literature has recommended community consultation and addressing individuals' past negative experiences with tree stewardship and interests to combat gentrification concerns (Carmichael & McDonough, 2019; Grant et al., 2023). However, despite the extensive past research on green gentrification more broadly, there continue to be questions about the effects of urban greening initiatives on urban communities, such as South LA, specifically regarding how these concerns affect residents' interest and commitment to tree planning efforts (Byrne, 2012; Gerrish & Watkins, 2018).

Methods

In this study, we conducted semistructured interviews with community leaders to explore their relationships, observations, needs, and priorities with the urban forest in South LA. In the following sections, we outline our sampling, outreach, data collection, and analysis approach.

Participant Recruitment

We developed our sample list using a multiphase sampling approach, which took place between November 2023 and March 2024. In defining the South LA region, we use the boundaries of Service Planning Area 6, as established by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (2023),[1] which includes the cities of Athens, Compton, Crenshaw, Florence, Hyde Park, Lynwood, Paramount, and Watts. We first developed a list of stakeholders with the guidance of the South Los Angeles Tree Coalition (SLATC), a community-based organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing the urban forest in South LA. The criteria for participation in the study included (1) participants being residents, stakeholders, workers, and community members, or having a meaningful connection to/in South LA; and (2) participants being older than 18 years of age. After developing this initial list, we expanded our sample by searching for additional community organizations in South LA through Google and Guidestar searches, as well as in-person community meetings and events in South LA (i.e., neighborhood council meetings, local association meetings, housing and homeless service meetings, and urban forestry meetings). Last, we recruited participants using snowball sampling methods. Prospective participants were invited to participate in the study via email, which included information about the study and compensation for participation ($50 virtual gift card). Research protocols were conducted in English and virtually (email, Zoom, etc.), based on recommendations from our community partner regarding the language and technology access of the community leaders targeted for inclusion in this study. However, we acknowledge that this may not be reflective of the language diversity and technology access of all community members; thus, we encourage readers to be mindful of the ways in which our study findings may (or may not) apply across the entirety of South LA community leaders.

Data Collection and Analysis

We interviewed 34 participants over Zoom between November 7, 2023, and March 8, 2024.[2] Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Participants were offered a $50 virtual gift card as compensation for their participation. We used a semistructured interview guide to elicit flexible and diverse conversations with participants (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was developed based on an iterative review process

between the research team and our community partner (see Online Appendix 1). Interview questions were divided into several sections, including participant background and connection to South LA, participant experiences or interactions with the urban forest, perceived challenges and limitations with local urban forestry initiatives, and future hopes and visions for urban forestry in South LA. Interviews were initially transcribed via the audio transcription platform Otter.ai, then individually reviewed and updated by the research team to ensure the transcripts' accuracy before beginning the qualitative coding.

All data were coded in ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software to identify broader themes and findings. An inductive qualitative content analysis approach was used to identify salient themes from the data (Saldaña, 2009). All transcriptions were coded by one lead coder. The coding scheme used by the lead coder was established through an iterative review process between both members of the research team. Specifically, this involved conducting an initial round of coding to identify topics related to our broader research questions and emerging topics of interest, such as connections to South LA, tree-related experiences, impacts of trees, tree challenges, and recommendations for future tree planning efforts. These codes were shared across the research team to establish key topics of interest and code definitions. Then, the lead coder grouped similar codes into broader themes based on identified patterns and associations. Last, both team members met to analyze these coding groups and determine final themes based on agreed-upon patterns and connections in the data.

Results

Our analysis identified several key themes critical to understanding community needs and interests surrounding tree planning in urban areas. This includes community discussions of (1) the positive benefits of trees, (2) the difficulties faced in prioritizing urban forestry interests amid cumulative environmental and social considerations, (3) the association of trees with gentrification and patterns of exclusion, and (4) the desire for promoting *just* trees in future planning efforts.

Trees as Sources of Positive Benefits and Disbenefits

In our discussions with community leaders, participants shared the many perceived benefits they associated with trees in their community. This included frequent discussions about the positive benefits associated with environmental impacts and health improvements, such as reduced temperatures and improved mood and mental health. For example, one participant stated, "[Trees] give people a different perspective, when they're running and riding bikes. When they see the trees, it does something to the psyche," highlighting how trees can benefit a community's mental and physical health.

Especially in comparison with other cities with more expansive tree canopies, participants felt the stark benefits when in a place with a substantial tree canopy. As one participant shared,

> I was in [a city with many trees] two weeks ago, and I was telling my sister, "I feel like these people don't even have to use their AC because there's so much shade all over the houses." It was cold just walking through that area! At home in South LA, it's so hot, you have to have fans running because there's not trees around [to] make it nice and shady.

Moreover, participants who acknowledged the benefits of tree canopy in other cities expressed the desire to achieve those same benefits through trees.

Beyond these environmental and health impacts, participants also discussed how trees contribute to building community connections to place and developing broader community unity and cohesion. One participant described tree planting as "an extremely forward act, because it means that you will be here as that tree grows," emphasizing how trees can be tools for placemaking, especially in fast-paced urban environments that are subject to frequent change. Another participant shared that tree planting events are a "really good way … to get people to come together" and engage in community discourse.

Some participants also discussed how trees in South LA become neighborhood symbols, instilling a sense of sentimentality and pride in the community. One participant shared an example of the joy that comes from a lush and diverse urban forest:

> People can say, "Hey, we're the [neighborhood of] yellow trumpet trees! We're the neighborhood of all the Hong Kong orchid trees!" It is beautiful. You look down a certain street, and you see all the jacarandas bloom at the same time. You're like, "Oh, wow, what harmony!"

These findings highlight ways South LA community members value trees for their direct and intrinsic meanings, and overall feel an enhanced sense of place and belonging when around trees. However,

some participants expressed concerns about the disbenefits of unmaintained trees in their neighborhood. For example, participants noted safety as a significant issue with trees that may uproot sidewalks or be left unpruned. As one participant stated:

> I think [unmaintained trees are] … a safety issue because … someone falls and … they get hurt. But I think from the work that we did with residents, I think their concern around safety was [also] that … if there [are] trees or … bushes that are not being kept [up] there's a potential for [crime]. I think that one particular person that I remember speaking to was saying that they knew … a person that … was robbed because someone was hiding behind some of these [tree] areas that were not kept [up]. And so it's kind of … a safety issue for them.

In addition, participants expressed concerns over unmaintained trees causing visual disbenefits to the community, reinforcing historic patterns of disinvestment from green amenities.

Competing Community Needs and Priorities

While community members shared the positive benefits and contributions of trees, they also discussed the necessity of considering the cumulative burdens facing South LA communities alongside tree planning interests. Participants specifically explained how immediate needs, such as food, water, healthcare, and housing, can affect the community's ability to participate in tree planning efforts in both public and private spaces: Immediate needs redirect resources, time, and attention away from pursuing urban forestry goals. For many participants, these immediate needs can present competing priorities for tree planning efforts, as these problems had higher priority than tree planning interests in South LA.

For example, one participant asked how tree planning can be made "equitable for everybody," emphasizing the importance of ensuring residents who "got to worry about other things" can benefit from the urban canopy while still meeting their basic needs. Another participant expanded on their experience navigating these tradeoffs, stating, "[For those who are] just living, going to work and earning a paycheck and taking care of your family, or being unemployed, and wondering where your next paycheck is gonna come from, getting a tree is not a priority." These examples highlight how factors such as financial insecurity can make it difficult and often unrealistic for individuals to prioritize urban forestry interests.

Within these discussions, participants pointed to South LA's homeless crisis as a more pressing need over tree planning, as the region's homeless population currently exceeds 13,000 individuals and continues to grow (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2024). Participants shared concerns regarding the homeless population's health and safety, which speaks to larger issues of welfare inequities in South LA, and was frequently found to supersede urban forestry as a priority. For example, one participant explained that

> [Homelessness] feels very pressing, and very alarming and very immediate. … [People are] sleeping on concrete right there. When it's super hot, they're dehydrated, they don't have access to shade, right? So it's hard focusing on [trees] when that's in my face.

Thus, these examples highlight how tree planning efforts undertaken in urban communities with diverse needs, such as South LA, require consideration in how urban forestry and tree planning issues are balanced among the basic needs of utmost importance for affected communities.

Trees Invoke Fears of Gentrification and Patterns of Exclusion

While community leaders discussed how investments in trees and green space frequently bring positive benefits to the community, many South LA residents discussed the ways "trees constitute a suspicion of gentrification." Many participants expressed concerns that trees are often planted by cities or developers as amenities to attract wealthier residents to South LA, leading residents to view them more as a marketing tactic than an amenity that truly benefits current South LA residents. When discussing the role of trees within green spaces and their relationships to new developments in South LA, one participant explained:

> Because of [new trees], we get green gentrification. Because before, we didn't have any green areas, and now there's like all these green areas, and that's where people want to move. … For the longest [time], long-term tenants have been demanding and have been organizing to get more resources and to get green areas. Finally, those green resources [trees] and green areas are coming. But unfortunately, those tenants are no longer going to be here [due to gentrification].

Participants felt that the trees planted in association with new developments were not planted for them, but for future, wealthier residents who would

reap the benefits of the urban canopy in their absence.

Participants expanded upon these concerns by examining the root causes and expressing the need for systemic reform of government and city planning processes. One participant touched on concepts of restorative justice in the tree planning process, explaining:

> Our lack of trees is not an accident or coincidence, and is a result of historic patterns of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and racist planning practices. And so there is no easy fix. … And I think because it's such a big problem, it's going to take a big sort of solution.

Thus, in linking to historical and systemic planning practices in South LA, such as redlining and urban renewal, participants detailed that tree planting initiatives that do not acknowledge these social and environmental injustices fall short, as they do not holistically address how trees fit into the cumulative burdens facing South LA residents.

Community apprehension about trees was also associated with previous shortcomings in urban forestry and tree-related projects, contributing to feelings of mistrust between residents and agencies or organizations leading tree planning efforts. For instance, participants reported that community members felt a lack of agency over their trees, especially for parkway trees growing in front of people's homes. One resident described their experience with a tree-related agency cutting down the parkway trees in front of their elderly mother's property without their knowledge, and the devastation that emerged from the loss, which could have been mitigated through better communication. Another participant shared their experience of a tree being planted in their parkway without their consultation and the frustration they felt as a result.

> This is not how you solve the problem of a lack of trees in Los Angeles! To just plant some random tree without my engagement in front of my house … it was really, in my opinion, just to check a box to say, "We planted a million trees." What was the overall plan?

Participants explained that trees planted in parkways in front of their residences without consultation can burden low-income residents who lack the time and resources to care for the trees properly. Whether it be the addition or removal of trees, a lack of engagement with community members regarding tree-related activities contributes to mistrust and a lack of agency, making it harder to generate positive experiences with South LA's urban forest.

Moving Forward with Just *Trees*

Despite the potential negative considerations, participants consistently expressed the desire and need to expand the urban forest in South LA. Within these discussions, participants frequently emphasized the importance of undertaking tree planning activities in ways that were mindful of the diversity of needs and interests, allowing them to reach the full beneficial effect for the broader community. In other words, participants recognized the need for well-maintained and thoughtfully planned trees in South LA, without any conditions. As one participant aptly stated,

> I think it's like trees with no addendums [conditions]. So a tree that is vibrant and taken care of as opposed to a tree that's … kind of sad looking and dying, or a tree that's on public green space that anybody can go and enjoy as opposed to a tree that's on private property that people can't really enjoy.

South LA does not just need trees, but *just* trees, which are properly maintained and culturally responsive to South LA's diverse population. Like the *just green enough* strategy that prioritizes environmental strategies for existing communities, trees must be planted with maintenance and stewardship responsibilities that are comprehensively communicated to nearby residents and stakeholders, including watering and pruning schedules, as well as streamlined processes for responding when a tree needs servicing. Just capabilities and procedural justice frameworks should be employed to include the community's capacity during the formulation of maintenance plans, rather than simply distributing trees without considering the other pillars of environmental justice. As one participant stated, "Let's [plant trees] with purpose versus just, 'Oh, you want trees? Here's some trees.' There's no long-term plan. There's no long-term tracking. There's no long-term follow-up."

Disappointment and frustration arise from unmaintained urban canopy, especially when compared with wealthier communities with more comprehensive tree coverage. One participant expressed that, despite having mature trees in their neighborhood, maintenance issues detract from the overall benefits received from the trees, making them

hazardous due to infrastructural damage and fallen branches/leaves.

> Most of the trees that are surrounding us here in this community, I don't see anyone nurturing the trees here. They're just there. They've been there for years and years, they were here before I moved over here. I don't see any type of maintenance on them at all.

Participants also discussed the need for more transparency with the agency responsible for tree maintenance in their vicinity, to ensure residents can fully benefit from a healthy and well-maintained tree canopy. As mentioned previously, it can be difficult and even distressing to impose tree maintenance on community members, especially those facing cumulative burdens in South LA. One participant shared their challenges in maintaining the urban forest in their neighborhood: "One time I was just so concerned, so I had my neighbors come and bring pitchers and barrels and whatever of water, because we felt so badly about those trees. But we weren't able to save one of them."

Thus, to maximize the benefits of the urban forest in South LA and prevent undue burdens on community members, participants felt that government or tree-planting entities should work with community members to clarify maintenance expectations and responsibilities. One participant explained:

> I think it's a little more arduous, but it's more beneficial if you actually outreach and directly engage elements of the community in the tree planning, rather than having the city of Los Angeles coming through [top-down] and planting trees … because you don't get the buy-in. And you don't get the true benefit of using the trees… to make stronger, better communities.

Tree-planting locations and activities should be planned *with* residents, rather than *for* residents, expanding the urban forest to be responsive to issues that community members want to address. For example, one resident explained that they would like more trees to "clean up the air … and if the air is cleaner, then people wouldn't suffer so much with respiratory issues," which are more prevalent in South LA. Participants had preferences for large shade trees to reduce street temperatures and cut down on "heating and cooling expenses." Many participants even expressed interest in planting fruit-bearing trees on public land to "relieve the sense of food insecurity." While residents may have preferences for specific types of trees, it is also important to consider species diversity and resource intensity at the street level to avoid tree health issues. In essence, participants envisioned comprehensive tree planning outreach activities that include trees capable of addressing diverse needs in South LA.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to understand how tree planning fits within the broader needs and priorities of local communities in under-resourced urban areas by exploring the perspectives of community leaders in South LA. The interviews revealed insights about the challenges of maintaining a sustainable tree canopy in South LA. For some community residents, trees are not a priority when dealing with more immediate competing priorities. For others who have advocated for more expansive tree canopies, concerns about gentrification and a lack of government trust hinder their ability to feel completely satisfied with current tree distribution efforts. However, despite these concerns, South LA community members still see the value of expanding South LA's tree canopy. Tree-planting initiatives must be comprehensive, iterative, and communicative to be successful in heterogeneous communities such as South LA. As a global city, Los Angeles provides a critical lens through which to examine urban forestry, and South LA's complex relationship with these urban forestry initiatives can inform future green planning practices nationwide.

Many participants perceived new tree investments as having linkages to gentrification. It is important to note that the research linking displacement and demographic shifts due to trees remains unclear (Wolf-Jacobs et al., 2023). However, our study highlights the importance of recognizing community feelings and attitudes toward these topics, regardless of whether a causal relationship exists between trees and green gentrification. This finding is critical, as the prevailing opinion that trees may cause gentrification in South LA continues to hinder effective engagement with community members in urban forestry initiatives. When fears of gentrification are paired with poor maintenance and management of new trees by responsible entities, new trees become symbols of displacement and mistrust, making community cohesion on urban forestry management difficult.

Despite past struggles, community members in South LA remain eager to introduce robust urban forestry management practices into their

neighborhoods. Participants expressed optimism for a different approach to urban forestry management in South LA, where residents play a bigger role in the decision-making process for tree planning and planting. More than the equal distribution of the urban forest, our research shows that community members value involvement and consultation in urban forestry decisions at all stages of the planning process. South LA community members believe meaningful involvement in urban forestry decisions can mitigate potential green gentrification from urban greening projects. Specifically, urban forestry projects should recognize how cumulative burdens and competing priorities may limit community members' ability to participate actively in the maintenance and stewardship of trees. There is an apparent tension between the barriers to participation in urban forestry faced by South LA residents and the necessity for more comprehensive outreach from tree-planting and government agencies. Rather than shying away from discussions about the urban forest with South LA residents, agencies should facilitate discussions and gather feedback from residents in spaces they frequent, such as schools, churches, and informal gathering areas. In addition, when residents must face tradeoffs between competing priorities in their daily lives, government or tree-planting agencies should have a larger role in maintaining trees.

Limitations and Future Research

While our study findings highlight diverse attitudes toward trees and urban greening initiatives in South LA, it is important to recognize that urban forestry advocacy in South LA was the predominant area of work of our community partner (who guided the development of the list of stakeholders used for interview outreach). For this reason, there may be some bias toward environmentally positive practices that support tree canopy growth, resulting in our data not representing a truly random sample of South LA community members and leaders (Acharya et al., 2013). We encourage readers to be mindful of the potential limitations of our sample size when generalizing to the larger population. Future research on community attitudes toward trees may be expanded by collecting a wider breadth of data with less-targeted outreach measures to lessen bias in favor of environmentally friendly sentiments. Also, as previously noted, we conducted outreach and interview procedures in English and virtually (via email, Zoom, etc.), which may have resulted in a lack of inclusion of non-English and/or technology-limited participants. Future research would benefit from using outreach and interview parameters that address the broader community accessibility needs in South LA. It was also outside the scope of our project to assess differences in participants' viewpoints toward tree planning across different individual characteristics. Future research would benefit from exploring how individual factors such as race, ethnicity, class, age, gender identity, relationship to South LA, and involvement in tree planning activities may affect attitudes and interests toward urban forestry goals.

Recommendations

Drawing on our study findings, we can offer several recommendations for actions that can be used to improve tree planning in South LA. As identified by study participants, planting trees without addressing the systemic inequities that affect residents of South LA is not sustainable. To address issues of competing priorities, planners should approach and communicate tree planning as a tool for meeting intersectional needs identified by community members and speaking to the benefits of trees that those communities seek (Radonic et al., 2025). For instance, planting fruit-bearing trees on private properties or in schools to help address food insecurity, shade trees near buildings and AC units to reduce energy use and save utility costs, and street trees in public spaces to provide critical relief for residents facing health vulnerabilities and those experiencing homelessness (Byrne & Anders, 2024; Pramova et al., 2012). By aligning planting strategies with community-identified priorities, tree planning can serve as a powerful tool for advancing not just environmental justice but also economic relief and public health concerns.

Furthermore, with participants emphasizing community-based solutions as a key to advancing tree equity, we recommend that community members be provided ample opportunities to be involved in all stages of the tree planning process. This is particularly true for community members living in the most disadvantaged communities, which are the most affected and frequently least considered in most tree-planting initiatives. To make this work culturally responsive to a community's diverse populations, nonprofit and community-based organizations should be involved in the development of

tree distribution projects, as they have deeper connections to the complexities and diverse cultural insights of local community members. For this reason, we emphasize the importance of prioritizing holistic approaches to tree planning that are collaborative and iterative, and center the interests of community members and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) alongside those of private- and public-sector players throughout all phases of the decision-making process.

Last, we see our work as contributing to previous tree planning studies by presenting a more nuanced understanding of the diverse and, at times, complex needs surrounding tree planning efforts in historically underserved areas. We believe our study highlights the ways in which addressing tree equity issues is not as simple as planting more trees, as there can be diverse community needs and concerns surrounding tree planning efforts, including (1) balancing urban forestry interests among cumulative environmental and social burdens and (2) being mindful of potential associations between trees and gentrification and/or patterns of exclusion. Through this work, we aim to encourage the consideration of these challenges in ways that do not deter planners from promoting tree planning efforts but instead encourage the prioritization of tree planning efforts that center the restorative justice for local communities.

Notes

1. For more information on Los Angeles County Service Planning Areas, see County of Los Angeles Public Health (2026).
2. This project received human subjects approval by the University of Southern California Institutional Review Board on September 21, 2023.

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