

SOUTH KERN



2018 **BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES**

ADVANCEMENT PROJECT CALIFORNIA



PARKS & RECREATION

ABOUT BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES SOUTH KERN

Since 2010, Building Healthy Communities – South Kern (South Kern BHC) has been working diligently through the Comunidades Unidas (United Communities) Action Team led by Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability (LCJA), the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment (CRPE), and the Central Californian Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN) to improve health and the environment for low-income county residents living in unincorporated communities. Specifically, the South Kern BHC has been advocating for more parks, improved air and water quality, and street and sidewalk infrastructure investments to be located in the unincorporated areas of the County such as Lamont, Greenfield, Weedpatch and the incorporated City of Arvin.



INTRODUCTION

Local governments have the power to shape communities by deciding where programs, services and infrastructure projects will be located. County officials, for example, decide how limited capital project and maintenance dollars are put to use and where to locate new parks, housing, roads, and jails. Capital projects are new structures, facilities, or land acquisitions while maintenance projects are smaller scale projects such as upgrades or improvements to current facilities. Government decisions have a multiplier effect that can either raise property values, improve people's health, and create local jobs – or make communities undesirable and polluted. Given the power government officials hold, they have the responsibility to improve low-income areas by locating positive infrastructure projects in their communities.

Using an equity-based approach, local officials should take into account community health and economic indicators to dictate how to best use public infrastructure dollars. For example, an equity-based approach can take into account where low-income residents live and focus resources on those areas rather than spreading resources out equally. Moreover, local officials can work with community members to determine the types of investments that residents would most benefit from. Engaging with the community in the process of identifying the best use of infrastructure dollars will improve community relations by building trust and a sense of mutual cooperation.

The purpose of this brief is to highlight the lack of infrastructure investments made in low-income communities of color by Kern County over the last decade and to provide policymakers with recommendations for how to ensure future investments are spent equitably to low-income communities. A series of policy briefs will shed light on Kern County's historical public infrastructure spending practices from Fiscal Year 2007- 2017 for parks and recreation facilities, public safety, water, and streets and roads, with an added focus on low-income disadvantaged communities living in rural areas.

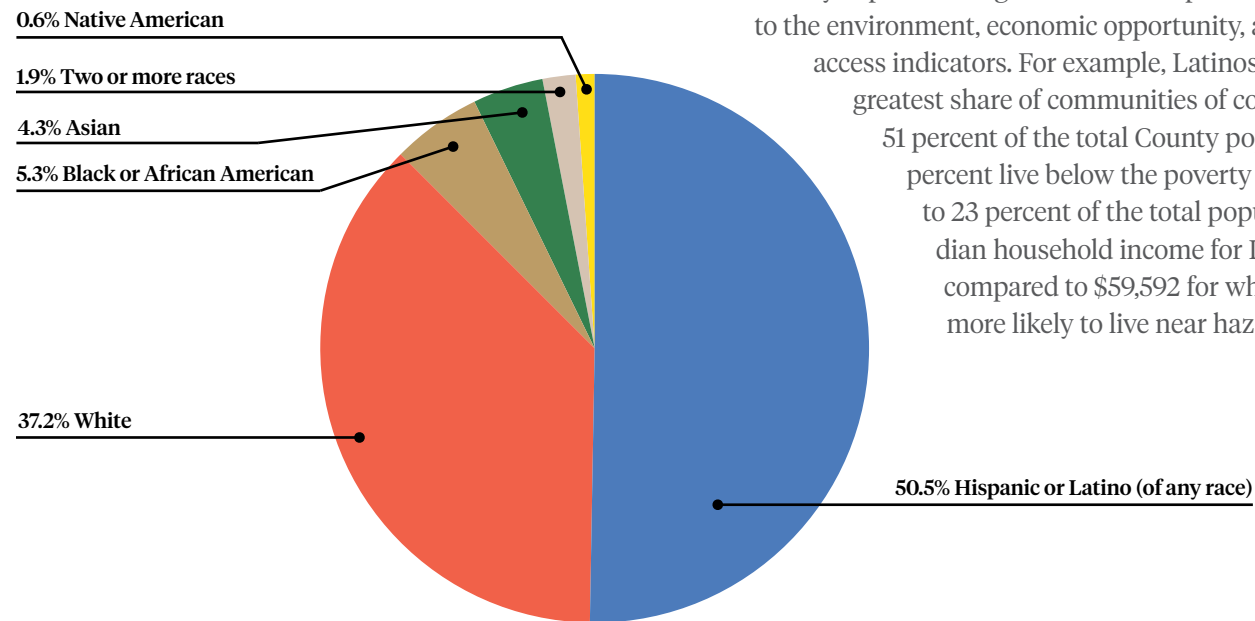
KERN COUNTY PROFILE

Kern County, located in the San Joaquin Valley in Central California, is one of the largest counties in the state, spanning 8,132 square miles¹ and home to 900,000 residents.² The County contains 11 incorporated cities,³ with Bakersfield City being the most populous, containing about 43 percent⁴ of the County's population. On the other hand, thirty-five percent⁵ of the population lives in unincorporated areas of the County. The population has grown by 20 percent⁶ since 2005 and is expected to continue growing at a rapid pace. Agriculture is one of the leading industries in the region employing 22 percent⁷ of the population followed by government jobs at 20 percent.⁸ However, the unemployment rate is 10.3 percent⁹ and 23 percent¹⁰ of residents are living below the poverty level, both rates higher than the state average.

KERN COUNTY RACIAL DISPARITIES¹¹

People of color represent 63 percent of the population in Kern County; nevertheless they experience higher levels of disparities when it comes to the environment, economic opportunity, and health care access indicators. For example, Latinos make up the greatest share of communities of color making up 51 percent of the total County population, yet 30 percent live below the poverty level compared to 23 percent of the total population. The median household income for Latinos is \$39,770 compared to \$59,592 for whites. Latinos are more likely to live near hazardous areas

Kern County Population by Race



compared to other racial groups and only 26 percent of Latinos have access to parks. Latinos are heavily concentrated in the unincorporated areas of the County that are located next to the Bakersfield City borders, more commonly known as metropolitan Bakersfield, and northeastern regions, whereas, whites primarily reside in the northwestern and southern areas of the County. While 60 percent of Latinos are registered voters, they are still politically underrepresented in elected office. Kern County also ranks as one the highest locality in the Central Valley region to have very little diversity in law enforcement personnel, which may explain why 58 percent of residents do not feel safe in their neighborhoods; a rate much higher in Kern County than in any other nearby county.

IMPORTANCE OF PARKS AND RECREATION

Park space and recreation programs are an example of important community assets that contribute to healthier, happier and safer communities. Park amenities, for example, provide families with low-cost physical activity opportunities that can combat life-threatening illnesses caused by inactive lifestyles¹² and provide positive options for youth development.¹³ According to California Department of Public Health Kern County has the highest death rate due to diabetes of any county, at 34 deaths per 100,000 individuals.¹⁴ Access to parks can specifically help minimize health disparities experienced in many low-income communities; studies show that low-income people's health improves with more access to green space.¹⁵ Just as important as providing park space is maintaining the space clean and in working condition so that communities feel safe using the space. When parks are not maintained, residential use drops¹⁶ due to an increased perception that the facility is unsafe.



Parks and Recreation Division

Kern County manages eight regional parks, 40 neighborhood parks, 25 public buildings, supervises three golf courses, and performs landscaping for 76 county buildings. In 2010, the County released the Parks and Recreation Master Plan¹⁷ as a response to the influx of residents and the subsequent rapid development that was expected to put a strain on existing park and recreation systems. The Master Plan put forth a comprehensive analysis of the deficiencies in available park spaces, programming, and maintenance while also uplifting strategies the County could undertake to meet the needs of incoming residents. Top level findings include:

- Demographic changes in the County have led to new set of expectations regarding parks and recreation services.
- There is an inadequate supply of park space for residents of unincorporated communities, specifically 1.6 acres per 1,000 residents although the current standard in the Kern County General Plan is 2.5 acres per thousand.
- Park and recreation facilities have a significant maintenance backlog due to years of deferred maintenance tied to funding shortages.
- Parks and recreation facilities lack independent financing sources, forcing them to rely and compete for dollars from the General Fund.

Since 2010, the County has done little to address the issues uplifted in the Master Plan. Instead, in the fall of 2016, due to countywide budget deficit-cutting efforts, the County dissolved the Parks and Recreation Department and folded it into the General Services Department as a division. According to the County, the merger allowed them to realize efficiencies by better coordinating duplicative maintenance efforts. However, the merger has raised concerns that the larger department's needs will further overshadow parks and recreation facilities' capital and maintenance needs.

Public Infrastructure Project Analysis

Each year the County Board of Supervisors adopts a new budget detailing how they intended to spend public dollars for the upcoming fiscal year. In the process of adopting the budget, the County produces a detailed Recommended Budget, which provides extensive information about the County's revenue sources, department budgets, and a priority list of capital and maintenance projects. The criteria the County uses to prioritize capital and maintenance projects includes whether projects are legally mandated, address health and safety concerns, are preventative, can reduce costs, or provide a direct benefit to the public. However, County officials are not mandated to follow the criteria.

The County's spending on capital and maintenance projects fluctuates year-to-year depending on available resources and facility needs. For example, in Fiscal Year 2008 the County proposed \$36.7 million in new and rebudgeted capital projects; \$23.8 million of the of the revenue used to pay for the projects was sourced from offsetting revenue or special revenues and the remaining \$12.8 million sourced from County discretionary revenue. As of Fiscal Year 2017, the County proposed zero capital projects and only \$6.4 million in maintenance projects due to budget constraints. The maintenance projects that were proposed, were prioritized because they reduced the County maintenance costs in the long run.



KEY FINDINGS

Recommended Budgets from Fiscal Years 2007 to 2017 show that park and recreation facilities have seen minimal investments compared to other county facilities. To put this into perspective four percent or \$23 million of all the capital and maintenance recommended expenditures by the County in the last decade were directed at parks and recreation facilities compared to 30 percent or \$193 million directed to public safety facilities.

- We identified 78 proposed projects¹⁸ totaling \$23 million dollars. The projects all ranged in cost with the largest, the Buena Vista Aquatic Recreation Area, receiving a combined \$5.6 million in maintenance and capital project improvements over a decade.
 - Fifty-seven percent of recommended expenditures were located within city limits, meaning a majority of park maintenance and capital projects were located within a city.
 - Forty percent of the recommended expenditures were located in unincorporated communities and the remaining three percent did not have a location listed in the budget. Unincorporated communities rely heavily on the County to provide capital and maintenance services.
 - The most common type of projects funded were for general maintenance improvements such as lights, floor maintenance, and parking lot resurfacing. The County did spend a significant amount for wastewater treatment maintenance at Buena Vista Aquatic Recreation Area, nearly \$4 million.

- Regional recreation parks such as Buena Vista Aquatic Recreation Area, Lake Ming and LeRoy Jackson Park, received 63 percent or \$14.3 million of the capital and maintenance dollars whereas community parks only receiving 37 percent or \$8.4 million.
- 2013 was the single-highest year with recommended expenditures for the Parks and Recreation Department topping \$6 million dollars in total allocated expenditures for various parks throughout the County.
- LeRoy Jackson Park, in Ridgecrest, was the only park that saw major improvements totaling \$3 million in the last decade. In August 2016, LeRoy Jackson Park's ownership was transferred to the City of Ridgecrest to maintain and operate moving forward.

When you take into account the County's modest investment in parks and recreation and the amount of those investments being allocated to park and recreation facilities located within city limits, the County has risked further neglecting residents living in unincorporated areas. The County has also prioritized regional parks and tourist attraction recreation areas for the bulk of the maintenance and capital project spending, and in doing so has allowed community park and recreation facilities to go neglected.

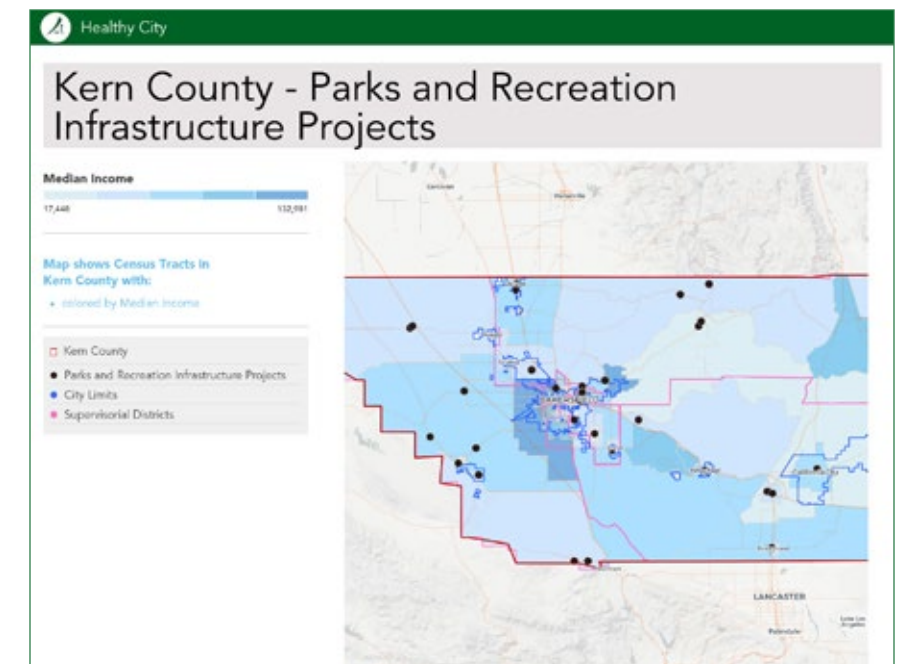


Figure 1. The figure above demonstrates all the park and recreation capital and maintenance projects proposed by the County between the Fiscal Years of 2007 and 2017. Credit: Healthy City, Advancement Project. Map is accessible <http://www.healthycity.org/maps/1351/>

REVENUES FOR PARK AND RECREATION INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Park and recreation facilities in Kern County mostly rely on discretionary General Fund revenues for any capital or maintenance projects. In a few cases, there are some parks that are owned and maintained by independent park districts or community service districts who pay for maintenance, programming and some upgrades to the parks with revenues collected through property tax fees. For example, the Bear Mountain Recreation and Parks District provides parks and recreation services for the communities of Arvin and Lamont in Southern Kern County by operating Weedpatch Park, Bear Mountain Park, Lamont Pool and Arvin Pool. There are ten special park and community districts in the County¹⁹ with only six of them actually imposing some type of land dedication or fee requirement.

While it is useful to have independent park districts cover maintenance and programming costs their ability to do so relies on the revenues collected through property taxes; independent park and community service districts located in low-property-valued unincorporated areas would find it difficult to collect the needed revenues to cover fulltime programming staff or make significant maintenance and capital improvements. Therefore, there still exists an important role for the County provide vital capital and maintenance project services to their parks. Nevertheless, in the absence of the County having a dedicated revenue source, the Park and Recreation Division will continue to rely on discretionary General Fund resources meaning it will have to compete for resources against much larger and more powerful departments such as the Sheriff-Coroner and Probation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Future revenues for capital and maintenance projects dedicated for park and recreation facilities should be allocated according to an equity-based funding approach that prioritizes low-income communities of color with high health and open-space needs.
2. The County should identify a dedicated stream of revenues for park and recreation capital and maintenance improvement projects; possible solutions could be developer impact fees, and or proposing a dedicated funding measure to voters.
3. The County is currently in the process of updating their General Plan, and in the update, the County should increase the current 2.5 acre of park area per 1,000 resident requirement to 5 acres to meet resident demand as was recommended in the 2010 Parks Master Plan.
4. The County currently does not provide any recreation programming at their park and recreation facilities. Given the ample research that shows the benefits of park programming on reducing crime and improving health, the County should hire recreation specialists to provide youth with recreational opportunities. The County can begin by assigning staff members to identify state and federal grants and work in partnership with community organizations to fund said recreation programs.
5. The County should work with cities to establish maintenance cost-sharing agreements for parks located within their city limit boundaries.
6. The County develop a strategy for balancing investment in larger regional parks with spending to support local community parks, bearing in mind the different populations and uses for each.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, Land Area in Square Miles, 2010.
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, July 1, 2016.
- 3 State of California, Department of Finance, Population Estimates for Cities, Counties and the State with Annual Percent Change — January 1, 2016 and 2017. Sacramento, California, May 2017.
- 4 Id at 3.
- 5 Id at 3.
- 6 U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 - 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.
- 7 State of California Employment Development Department - Labor Market Information Division, California Industry Employment.
- 8 Id at 8.
- 9 State of California Employment Development Department - Labor Market Information Division, Local Area Unemployment Statistics for California Areas: Annual Average 2016.
- 10 Id at 7.
- 11 The following information is available through RaceCounts.org, an initiative launched by Advancement Project California, USC PERE, PICO California and California CALLS that includes a comprehensive online tool ranking all 58 counties by seven issue areas critical to California's future to paint a comprehensive picture of racial disparity in California.
- 12 Barrett MA, Miller D, Frumkin H. Parks and Health: Aligning Incentives to Create Innovations in Chronic Disease Prevention. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2014;11:130407. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd11.130407>
- 13 Caldwell, Linda L. Witt, Peter A. The Rationale for Recreation Services for Youth: An Evidence Based Approach. The National Recreation and Park Association. http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/Witt-Caldwell-Full-Research-Paper.pdf
- 14 County Health Status Profiles 2017. California Department of Public Health Center.
- 15 Mitchell R, Popham F. Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study. *Lancet* 2008;372(9650):1655-60. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18994663>
- 16 National Recreation and Park Association, "Creating Safe Park Environments to Enhance Community Wellness." <https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/f768428a39aa4035ae55b2aaff372617/park-safety.pdf>
- 17 Kern County Parks and Recreation Master Plan <https://www.kerncounty.com/gsd/parks/pdf/master-plan.pdf>
- 18 In the cases where the same project was re-budgeted in future years, we kept the later year's project estimate as the recommended project and ultimate cost.
- 19 Special districts include: West Side Recreation and Park District; *Buttonwillow Recreation and Park District; Wasco Recreation and Park District; Shafter Recreation and Park District; *North of the River Recreation and Park District; McFarland Recreation and Park District; *Bear Mountain Recreation and Park District; Bear Mountain Recreation and Park District; *Tehachapi Recreation and Park District; *Rosamond Community Services District; and *Stallion Springs Community Services District. The Districts with an asterisk are those that require some form of land dedication or property tax fee.





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