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Leveling Inequities Across Unincorporated Los Angeles

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Issue

The Office of Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell represents the 2nd Supervisorial District (SD2) in Los Angeles County, comprising nearly 177 square miles from the South Bay north to Koreatown. This area includes 11 cities, Los Angeles’ historic South Central neighborhood, 19 unincorporated communities, and approximately 2 million residents of various racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Unlike people living in cities, residents of unincorporated communities rely on the larger county for public services such as fire safety, law enforcement, zoning, sanitation, recreational programs, and street maintenance. However, the rich histories and distinct needs of these unincorporated communities, coupled with the county’s complex political structure, present Supervisor Mitchell with the challenge of creating opportunities that yield truly equitable outcomes for her constituents.

The existing system of governance creates differences in how residents live, work, and thrive in their respective neighborhoods, significantly impacting their quality of life. Often, residents of unincorporated communities feel unheard, with services stretched thin, as opposed to the tailored municipal services and programs available to incorporated communities. To create a more just and equitable county, the office of Supervisor Mitchell seeks multifaceted policy approaches that will improve the quality of life and increase representation for her constituents who have historically been left behind. Accordingly, this report seeks to answer the question: Which policy interventions will improve the quality of life and increase equitable outcomes for residents of unincorporated communities across SD2?

Study Approach

The researchers compared the unincorporated areas of Florence-Firestone, Lennox, West Rancho Dominguez, Westmont/West Athens, and Willowbrook (pictured in Figure 1) to neighboring cities with similar characteristics. In doing so, they aimed to determine if an improved quality of life can be attributed to cityhood. Through a mixed-methods approach, researchers conducted 31 interviews with scholars, public officials, and community members to develop a theory of equity in unincorporated communities that centered the perspectives of local residents. Further, they executed hypothesis tests to examine the effect of cityhood against unincorporated areas across a range of defined socioeconomic variables.

Research Findings

- The perception of unincorporated areas as an economic burden, often due to low property values and a lack of commercial development, continues to sway city governments from annexing areas of high need.
- Compared to cities, the populations in unincorporated areas are significantly more rent burdened, experience higher unemployment rates and face ongoing food insecurity.
- Based on data from USC’s Neighborhood Data for Social Change, residents of unincorporated communities had worse mental and physical health outcomes in 2020 than those in cities. To assess whether this could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from 2018 was also analyzed, and similar conclusions were reached.
- The rate of students eligible for free and reduced lunch is higher in unincorporated communities than in cities — demonstrating both the issue and importance of food security in unincorporated areas.

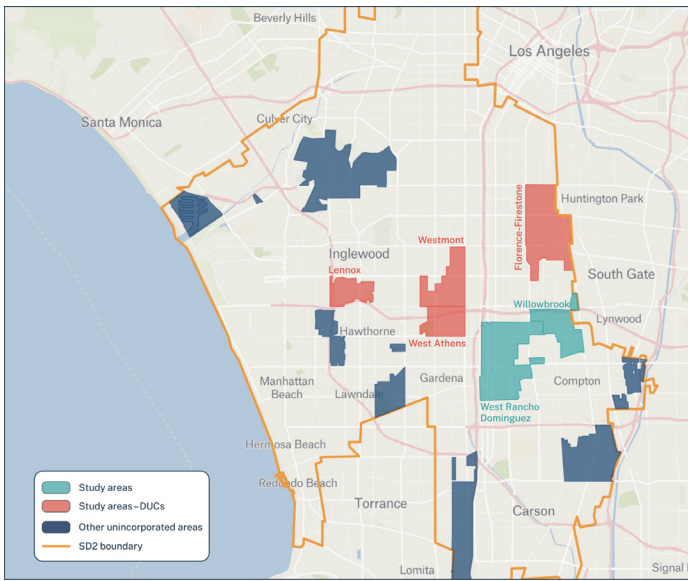


Figure 1.

A map of Los Angeles County 2nd District highlighting the unincorporated areas within it. The three unincorporated communities highlighted in red are recognized as disadvantaged unincorporated communities (DUCs), or unincorporated areas where the average annual household income is less than 80% of the statewide median household income.

- Academics and public officials cited the combination of low tax revenue and the high cost of service provision as an ongoing obstacle for unincorporated communities, serving as a further deterrent to annexation.
- Community leaders said that transparency about government processes and follow-through regarding funding requests, even when denied, is crucial for building deeper trust in the supervisor’s office.

Recommendations & Conclusion

Based upon their findings, the researchers recommend enhanced infrastructure financing districts (EIFDs), opportunity zones, expanding the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, and town councils to address ongoing inequities. EIFDs are tax increment financing projects that cities and counties use to fund economic development projects. Often, they are seen as a sustainable and equitable solution to community infrastructure and economic development challenges. Meanwhile, opportunity zones are community revitalization projects in unincorporated communities that advance economic mobility, health, and stability by connecting

county supervisors with community-based organizations and private investors to develop projects. Expanding the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to more than five members would increase the political representation of residents of unincorporated communities by reducing the number of constituents per supervisor. Finally, town councils would be a county-level adaptation of the neighborhood council model pioneered by the City of Los Angeles.

Using carefully developed criteria, researchers scored each policy option to rank alternatives and determine the best fit for the communities of study. Of the four policies, EIFDs and town councils scored the highest. Such findings indicate that EIFDs will serve as a powerful tool to address the infrastructure and economic needs of the communities —creating a long-term funding source for vital projects, such as affordable housing and the creation of public amenities. In addition to the EIFDs, town councils are a direct channel for community members to actively engage in the local decision-making process, empowering them to have a voice in the policies that directly impact their lives.

Ultimately, EIFDs and town councils offer tremendous potential for improving equitable outcomes in the unincorporated SD2. If community input is prioritized throughout the process, Supervisor Mitchell’s implementation of these policy options has the potential to shift the status quo, bridging the gaps created in the past and paving the way towards a more equitable future.

For More Information

Cervantes de Reinstein, J., Pearson, T., Perez, S., Peyush, A., Webb, T., & Woods, E. (2023). Unincorporated Los Angeles: Leveling Inequities in Supervisorial District 2 (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qz6f7vr>