

What can cities do to correct racism and help all communities live longer? It starts with city planning, says researcher

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The average life expectancy [in the U.S. is 76.1 years](#). But this range varies widely—a child raised in wealthy San Mateo County, California,

[can expect to live nearly 85 years](#). A child raised in Fort Worth, Texas, could expect to [live about 66.7 years](#).

Race, poverty, as well as related issues like the ability to find nearby [grocery stores](#) and [easily visit clean parks](#), all influence health.

This means that a person's ZIP code is often a better predictor of their [life expectancy than their genetic code](#).

The air people breathe, the streets they walk, and their general sense of safety and happiness are all shaped by city and town plans.

Making city and town plans more inclusive has been at the forefront of California politics since a 2016 state mandate required that local jurisdictions address what is often called "[environmental justice](#)." This term generally means that all people are treated equally when it comes to [environmental laws and policy](#), including cities' plans for where and how developers can build housing, businesses and parks.

I am a [scholar of human ecology](#) and urban design. Part of my research is focused on trying to answer a complex question about eliminating the health and life-expectancy gap people experience in the U.S.: What can cities and towns do—and what is actually working—to correct racist legacies and help people live longer lives?

Brief history of environmental justice

Environmental justice stems from a [1980s social movement](#) that protested [toxic waste](#) being dumped in predominantly Black neighborhoods in the South.

Long-term inequalities in public spending and design choices to concentrate lower-income housing near hazardous waste facilities have

meant that children of color growing up in those neighborhoods near toxic waste sites disproportionately suffered from chronic health problems, like [childhood cancer and asthma](#).

There are some efforts underway to counter this trend.

The Biden administration, for example, convened an [environmental justice advisory council](#) in 2021 to track local disparities in health, environmental and economic impacts.

But [environmental justice](#) progress ultimately depends on local work.

City and county plans and zoning codes determine where new housing will be developed, at what density, and where commercial or industrial properties are situated. Plans also direct public funding for new parks and environmental cleanups.

Together, zoning and land-use plans set noise levels and air pollution limits.

It's no coincidence that local jurisdictions place more low-income housing in the same places where they also tolerate higher [levels of noise and pollution](#).

These same neighborhoods are [often home to communities of color](#).

California's housing policies

Los Angeles, for example, has [exclusionary zoning policies](#) that can make it harder for low-income people to purchase homes in particular neighborhoods. The zoning policies require the construction of single family homes with large yards in many neighborhoods. Low-income people often cannot afford such homes.

As a result of the zoning policies, nearly [80% of apartment buildings with two to four units](#) are concentrated in low-income neighborhoods that are primarily inhabited by residents of color.

This is a [vestige of redlining](#), a racist U.S. government policy that took root in the 1920s and 1930s. The policy made it difficult for people of color in certain areas to get mortgages, insurance loans and other financial services.

The zoning code concentrates poorer people into particular neighborhoods, which generally results in poorer health outcomes for residents, because these same neighborhoods do not receive proportionate funding for libraries, schools, parks, roads and other public projects, given their populations.

[Seventeen of the 88 cities](#) within Los Angeles County have developed policies to address these disparities. For example, Inglewood's 2020 plan adopts an inclusionary zoning policy to construct affordable housing in the same locations as market-rate housing.

Other places in California, like the the city of Richmond, have introduced [a Health in All Policies approach to combat inequality](#). This means that Richmond [carefully considers health outcomes](#) for all zoning and planning decisions.

Analyzing California city plans

[I led a team](#) at the University of California, Davis [Center for Regional Change](#) to find out how California communities address environmental justice.

We collected over 500 finalized California city plans from 2020 through 2022. Plans are required to be updated every three to eight years, but we

found that some places are still running on plans drafted in the 1970s.

City plans are often hard to find on individual city and county websites—or they are buried in the shelves of municipal libraries.

Local communities spend years in public meetings finessing the details of city plans. Would it be better to provide cooling stations in every bus stop or prioritize building more apartment complexes?

Yet, communities often debate these points without knowing much about what other places have successfully executed when it comes to policy.

It is also often difficult to compare plans across different communities. Plans can be hundreds of pages long, deterring even the most ardent policy wonk.

To simplify, my team and I often search city plans for specific terms like "racism." From there, we consider which policies are proposed, over what time frame, by which staff and with what funding to address this issue.

Luckily, computational methods can help us speed-read. To find out how many California cities are addressing environmental justice, we extracted the text from local plans, covering over 8 million words. Then, we created a [search engine](#), [PlanSearch](#), which allows users to find out how many plans use a specific term and locate it within the plan's maps, images and tables.

Addressing environmental justice

We found that only three of California's 482 cities—Milpitas, San Luis Obispo and La Mesa—mention the term "[racism](#)" in their city plans.

By comparison, 360 cities' plans mention the term "golf."

I think that actively planning for golf more often than the problems of racism, toxic exposure or segregation reveals just how much more work there is to do in California and elsewhere.

Of course, including the exact term "racism" in city plans is not the only way to address underlying issues. We also [searched for synonyms](#), like segregation, that address environmental justice and anti-racism.

Through this, we uncovered the various ways that some California cities addressed environmental justice.

In just seven cities, including Coachella and Fresno, [we identified a smorgasbord of 628](#) related policies.

National City, for example, focused on promoting healthy diets by placing new corner stores and [grocery stores](#) in lower-income neighborhoods. Cities located in more rural or agricultural areas—like Arvin and Woodland—plan for housing for farm workers near public transit to be developed over the next five to 10 years.

Ultimately, the answer to how cities can plan to be anti-racist, address health equity or promote environmental justice rests with concerned constituents and council members crafting a feasible plan of action. What is considered feasible often hinges on what has been piloted to success in similar communities. No matter the topic, reading and comparing plans helps give those concerned constituents somewhere to start the discussion.

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