

KOREATOWN ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT



KOREATOWN YOUTH +
COMMUNITY CENTER

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ABOUT KYCC

The mission of the Koreatown Youth and Community Center, Inc., (KYCC) is to serve the evolving needs of the Korean American population in the greater Los Angeles Area as well as the multiethnic Koreatown community. KYCC's programs and services are directed toward recently immigrated, economically disadvantaged youth and families, and to promote community socioeconomic empowerment.

The KYCC Environmental Services vision is to have communities engaged in creating safe, healthy, and beautiful neighborhoods. KYCC beautifies canopy-poor areas of Los Angeles by planting street trees and distributing free trees to property owners through Los Angeles' CityPlants program. KYCC also provides graffiti removal and community clean-up services, free of charge, seven days a week, for Koreatown and surrounding neighborhoods in Central Los Angeles.

KYCC Environmental Services works with volunteers from the community and organizes volunteers from local businesses to run services projects in Koreatown throughout the year. Through community beautification and environmental education, KYCC is helping to make Los Angeles a cleaner, greener, and more livable city.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Over a year ago, I began a research project focused on the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles. I researched tree canopy cover, food desert concerns, local water sheds, and park availability. Initially, the project was designed to summarize Koreatown information for Ryan Allen, the Environmental Services Manager at KYCC. However, as I continued to collect data and do research, the report became much more focused on livability in Koreatown. With my interest in the community and the environment, I wanted to share these results with the people who are affected by them.

With the help of KYCC communications interns Esther Oh and Sabin Kim, and KYCC Communication's Editor Katherine Kim, we put together a report that shares some of the impacts the environment has in our community. We couldn't have finished this report without the generous support and suggestions from the staff and youth of KYCC.

I hope the Koreatown Environmental Report encourages people to plant more trees in their neighborhood, add more free space, and increases access to better food selection and choices. With the community informed, anything is possible.

Emely Lopez
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August 2014



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report, we look at the natural environment of Koreatown. Having a safe, healthy and beautiful neighborhood is important for the children and families who live here. Studies show that daily contact with nature helps child development and lowers stress in adults. Since Koreatown is the community we live and work in, we want to take a snapshot of how we are doing.

This is not a research paper but rather a collection of our observations, interviews and an informal survey of Koreatown residents. Koreatown is a vibrant and exciting place to live and work. We hope that KYCC's Koreatown Environmental Report will remind you that we can all play a part in making our vision a reality.

PARKS

Koreatown has two public parks: Seoul International Park and Shatto Recreation Center. The total area of these parks, including parking, courts, multipurpose rooms, playing fields and open space, is 9.9 acres, or less than 0.6% of the area of Koreatown. This equates to less than three square feet of park space per resident. Koreatown does not offer nearly the amount of park space for the recreational needs of children and families. We should advocate for more natural, open space in Koreatown.

TREES

Tree cover is another important barometer of a healthy environment. In a built-out urban environment like Koreatown, the best opportunity to introduce natural systems is through healthy tree canopy. We found that the tree canopy cover of Koreatown is 7.5%, which is significantly lower than the 21% average for Los Angeles. The cost to residents for installing and establishing trees is very low and the multiple benefits of a healthy tree canopy are significant and immediate. We should continue to encourage planting new trees in Koreatown as well as maintaining our existing trees.

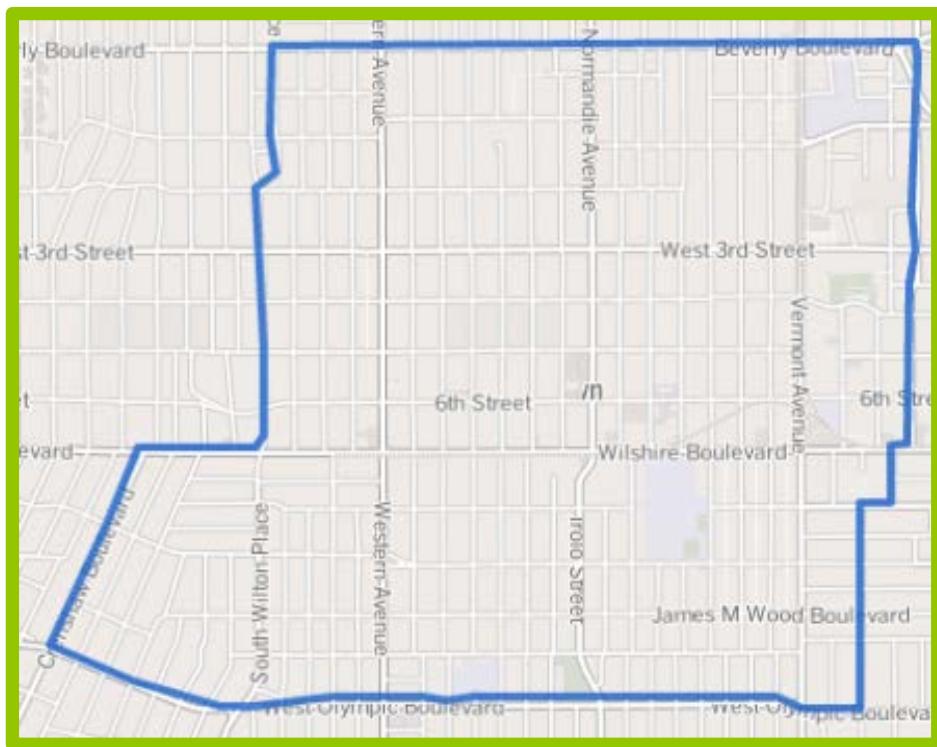
FOOD

Fresh fruit and vegetable access in Koreatown is limited. School-age children suffering from obesity would benefit from a diet that includes more fresh vegetables. With few back yards and fewer community and school gardens, there is almost no opportunity for children and families in Koreatown to grow fresh produce. As our survey showed, there is not a lot of fresh produce at the local markets. One of the best places to find fresh produce is at the Korean-owned markets, but our surveys and observations showed that many residents rarely shop at these markets.

ABOUT KOREATOWN

Located west of downtown Los Angeles, Koreatown is one of the most densely populated areas in the United States, characterized by a high poverty rate and ethnic diversity. With a 2008 population of 124,281, Koreatown has nearly as many people as Pasadena, but in one-tenth the area.

There are many opinions on the boundaries of Koreatown. In this report, we use the boundaries from the Los Angeles Times “Mapping L.A.” website which describes Koreatown as Beverly Boulevard to the north, Virgil Avenue/South Westmoreland Avenue to the east, West Olympic Boulevard to the south, and Crenshaw Boulevard and North Wilton Place to the west.



The estimated 2008 median household income in Koreatown is \$30,558, about one-half of the California median household income of \$61,021. In fact, the average income for clients from Koreatown who come to KYCC's free tax preparation program was only \$18,000 in 2013.

Additionally, 46% of Koreatown residents live below 150% of the Federal Poverty Line. Approximately 54% of residents are Latino and 32% Korean or other Asian ethnicity. Over 60% of Koreatown residents are foreign-born and 83% speak a language other than English at home. Among adults, 44% have a high school level of education or less (about 23% have an 8th grade education or less), and almost 24% of families are headed by single parents.

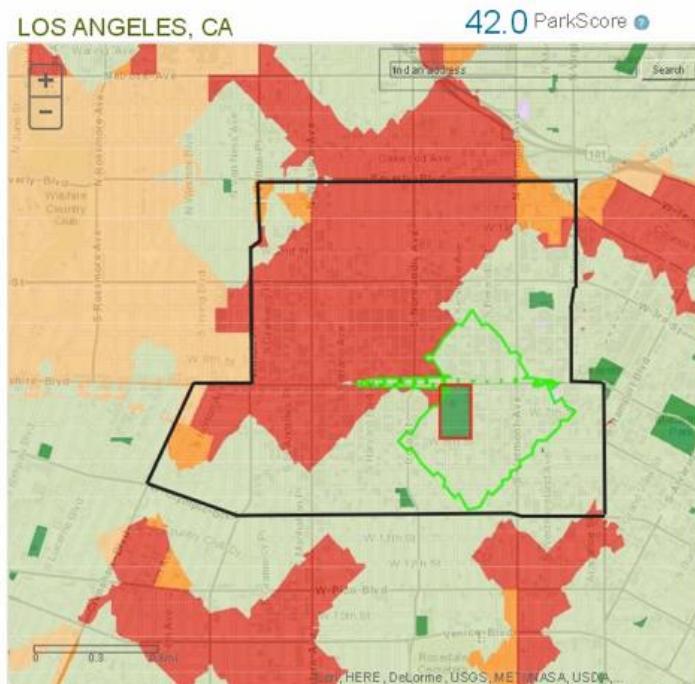
PARKS

Public parks can play a significant role in creating a healthy community. It is where families and friends congregate to celebrate special occasions and where kids can safely play outdoors. It is often the only place where urban residents can experience a natural setting. Spending time in green open spaces can reduce stress and provide relief from fatigue.

Delphina Velazquez, one of our survey respondents, shared what she valued most about Shatto Recreation Center. “I bring my children to the park about two times a week so they can release all their energy here and not at the apartment.”

Assessment

Koreatown has two public parks: Seoul International Park and Shatto Recreation Center. The parks have multiple recreational opportunities, both outdoors and in multipurpose rooms. Both have structured and low-cost activities that are open to all residents. Shatto Recreation Center even has a low-cost preschool.



This ParkScore map shows park accessibility in Koreatown. The red areas are “high need” areas. Regrettably, the rectangle in the middle is not a park, but the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus which, at this time, does not allow access for community recreation. Without this error, Koreatown would be almost entirely red.

Maggie Witt, the park supervisor for Seoul International Park told us, “LA Kids is our most popular program, because the free piano and ballet lessons are activities lacking in low-income neighborhoods. The wait list exceeds 50 children per class.” The parks seem to do a good job utilizing the limited space available.

Our biggest concern is that the two parks make up less than 0.6% of the total area of Koreatown. According to The Trust for Public Land's ParkScore Index, the City of Los Angeles has enough park space to serve 82 residents per acre of park. In Koreatown, each acre of park serves 12,554 residents.

With such limited park space, residents may have difficulty accessing recreation space even if the activity exists at their local park. According to our survey, only one-third of Koreatown residents visited their local parks more than once a month. David Kim, one of the survey respondents, told us, "I go to Pio Pico [outside of Koreatown] for swimming lessons and I only go to Shatto about once a year."



Conclusion:

Koreatown has a severe shortage of park space and insufficient recreational facilities to serve the community adequately. Without grass to play on or trees to picnic under, the children and families of Koreatown cannot benefit from the healthful opportunities found in wealthier communities.

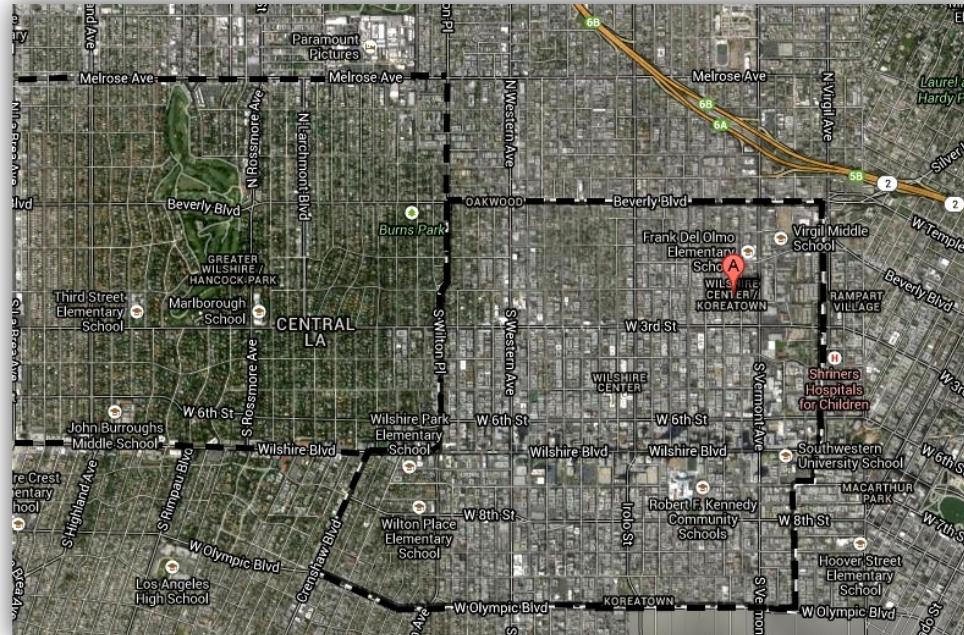
Purchasing land in a gentrifying Koreatown is an ongoing challenge. Our community lost an opportunity to build a park at the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Hobart Boulevard that could have added another acre of park space in Koreatown. There is little undeveloped land left and it will take community advocacy and the support of our local officials to make increasing park space a priority.

TREES

Trees are the best local solution to counter the high temperatures of our long summers. Trees provide shade for pedestrians and transit users and create a natural buffer from traffic. They absorb the sun's rays for photosynthesis, which creates oxygen. The leaves collect damaging particulate matter and capture carbon dioxide. A mature urban tree is estimated to absorb around 50 pounds of particulate matter per year.

Assessment

KYCC conducted an I-Tree canopy analysis in 2013 using 900 data points and calculated that Koreatown has a 7.5% tree canopy cover. Compared to the surrounding neighborhoods, Koreatown's canopy is one of the lowest in Los Angeles. The contrast between the grey of Koreatown and the green of Greater Wilshire (26.9%) is clearly visible through satellite imaging.



A large majority (86.5%) of Koreatown's land is covered with roads, roofs and parking lots. The sun heats these surfaces, which in turn radiate the heat throughout the day and night. With longer and drier summers caused by climate change, this problem will only get worse. More tree cover will provide shade to businesses, homes and other heat absorbing surfaces, reducing the need for air

conditioning. Nationally, it is estimated that the shade from trees saves \$2 billion in annual energy costs.

For Koreatown's many commercial streets, more trees would mean better business. Lining the streets with trees slows traffic, allowing drivers to pay more attention to the storefronts. Shoppers are willing to travel greater distances to visit shopping districts with attractive, mature trees. Once there, shoppers stay longer and spend between 9 to 15% more for products and services.

Conclusion

Summers in Los Angeles can be hot, and are only getting hotter. Many of the low-income homes and apartments in Central and South Los Angeles have little or no air conditioning. Many residents in these areas take public transportation and have to walk and wait in the heat. Increasing the tree cover by planting more trees and taking care of the trees that we already have will make our neighborhoods more livable and healthier.

KYCC, CityPlants and other nonprofit partners plant free street trees on residential parkway strips and will deliver up to seven shade trees to the homes of those who request free trees. This is a free service to the residents of Los Angeles.

Residents who do not want trees often express concerns about damaged sidewalks and sewer lines and the cost of water to establish the new trees.

In addition to these apprehensions, our survey found that although the vast majority of residents love the shade that trees provide, 80% are concerned about the leaves and other droppings left by street trees. We are working to provide solutions and education around these issues because the long-term benefits of trees are so great.



FOOD

People visit Koreatown for the food and the nightlife. There are approximately 1,278 restaurants, bars and coffee shops in Koreatown. These businesses are a big part of the Koreatown economy but few of them can provide inexpensive and healthy food to Koreatown residents. Low-income households often have to make food choices based on cost instead of nutrition. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the leading cause of death in the United States is heart disease. The biggest factor is diet. Access to fresh and affordable fruits and vegetables is important for the health of Koreatown children and families.



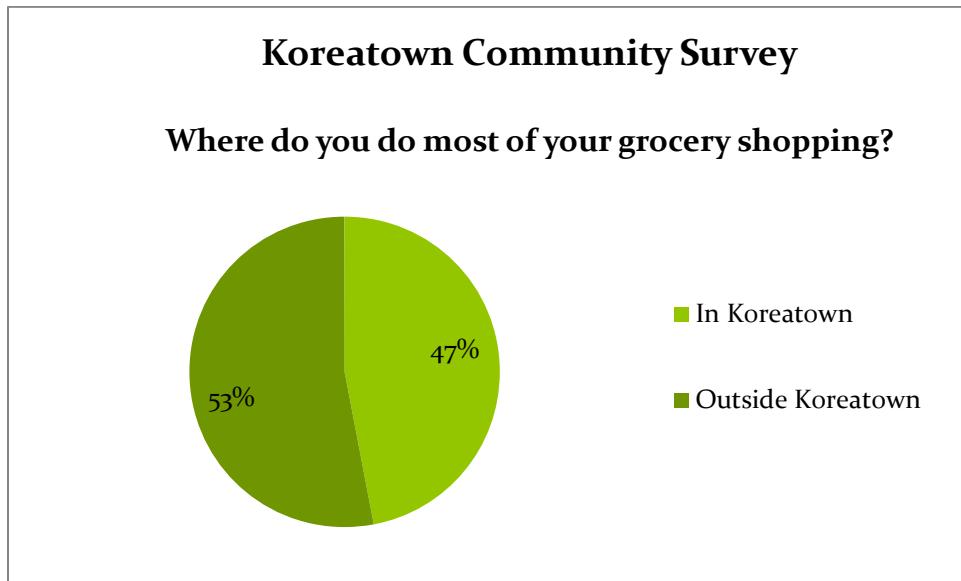
Assessment

The data on obesity is troubling. In a report assessing obesity risk among Korean Americans, the CDC surveyed 492 Korean Americans, and 38% of them were overweight and 8% were obese. In the Latino community, Latinos were 1.2 times as likely to be obese than non-Latino whites; nationwide, obesity accounts for nearly 60% of Latino deaths. Medical care for obesity-related diseases and productivity losses cost California \$21.7 billion annually.

For many Koreatown residents, eating healthy does not come easy. As part of this report, we walked 2.4 miles along Pico Boulevard from Crenshaw Boulevard to Hoover Street. Along this stretch, we identified a total of 47 convenience stores and markets. There were no chain supermarkets. Out of the 47 markets, only three sold a selection of fresh produce.

In our survey, we found that 40% of Koreatown residents walked to their market. The average distance to their market was seven blocks. Korean grocery stores are often the best and least expensive places to find fresh produce, yet over a quarter of residents had never shopped at one.

When we asked residents where they do most of their grocery shopping, 53% said they drive outside of Koreatown for their most frequent purchases.



Conclusion

Changes in shopping, cooking and eating patterns take time and effort. The more nutritional information we can provide to school-age children, the more likely it will help change their behaviors and influence choices at home.

We were happy to see that some residents and organizations have started community gardens in and around Koreatown. Francis Avenue Community Garden and the Yamazaki Memorial Community Gardens provide community members with fresh vegetables, and we are hopeful that more community gardens can be developed. Until affordable fresh produce is available to all Koreatown residents, we should continue to educate children and families and advocate for more healthy and local food choices.

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