

Trees can promote... environmental justice

Tree have a role to play in social equity

Research has shown there is a positive relationship between urban greenness and the well-being of city residents. But greenness is often unevenly distributed across a city, raising environmental justice issues.

In the Pacific Northwest, for example, our research has shown a positive correlation between the socioeconomic status of urban residents and the abundance of the urban forest.

Environmental justice is an important issue in urban forestry, because of the broad range of benefits we get from trees. The social benefits of trees can be more difficult to quantify than the biophysical benefits (such as increasing property values or shade).

Not giving adequate weight to the social benefits of trees may not only underestimate the total value of trees, it could also lead to inefficiently designed urban-forestry programs.

Policy implications for tree-planting programs

Our research suggests that tree-planting programs should be tailored to specific neighborhoods.

Canvassers should be selected with care, and it may be appropriate to offer greater tree-planting incentives to residents of poorer neighborhoods.

Specifically, it might be effective to hire canvassers from the neighborhoods where a program is being implemented.

Finally, a sliding scale could be used for tree costs.

Tree planting and environmental justice

Many cities have policies encouraging homeowners to plant trees. For these policies to be effective, it is important to understand what motivates a homeowner's tree-planting decisions.

To help address this issue, we assessed whether some demographic groups (e.g., those with higher incomes) are more likely to participate in, and benefit from, a tree-planting program.

We found that homeowners with street trees and those living in older homes were more likely to participate in a local tree-planting program. Homeowners who had owned their homes for longer, and those who live in census-block groups with lower high-school graduation rates, were less likely to participate in the program.

These results suggest that tree-planting programs may inadvertently exacerbate environmental inequality.



Trees and gentrification

We evaluated the hypothesis that urban tree planting increases neighborhood gentrification in Portland, Oregon. Using tree-planting data from the Portland nonprofit [Friends of Trees](#), we found that each new street tree planted was associated with a \$131 premium in median house sale price. That \$131 premium did not appear until 6 years after planting: as trees age, the association between trees and neighborhood desirability goes up. Overall, we found that only 1.3 percent of the price increase for homes in desirable neighborhoods was due to the presence of neighborhood trees.

Making a neighborhood more desirable can have unintended negative consequences such as displacing low-income residents, often people of color. But in light of the health and quality of life benefits trees bring, we should not stop planting trees. That said, tree planting shouldn't happen in isolation but should be done in concert with affordable housing providers and city offices or nonprofits that provide rent assistance or help people purchase their homes.

Bottom line: Trees bring profound benefits to a neighborhood, and are not the primary driver of gentrification, which stems from many other features that contribute to a neighborhood's desirability. Withholding trees would compound the disadvantages that low-income residents already face.



Donovan, G.H., Prestemon, J.P., Butry, D.T., Kaminski, A.R., Monleon, V.J., 2021. [The politics of urban trees: Tree planting is associated with gentrification in Portland, Oregon](#). *Forest Policy and Economics* 124: 102387.

Mills, J.R., P. Cunningham and G.H. Donovan. 2016. [Urban forests and social inequality in the Pacific Northwest](#). *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 16: 188-196.

Donovan, G.H. and J. Mills. 2014. [Environmental Justice and Factors that Influence Participation in Tree Planting Programs in Portland, Oregon, US](#). *Arboriculture & Urban Forestry* 40(2): 70-77.

There's more . . .

A healthy urban forest is an asset for the entire community. In addition to positively affecting social equity, trees can reduce crime, decrease energy use, increase property value (thereby raising city revenue), and perhaps most importantly, improve individual health outcomes from cradle to grave.



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