

Potential Impact of the USACE Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan

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INTRODUCTION

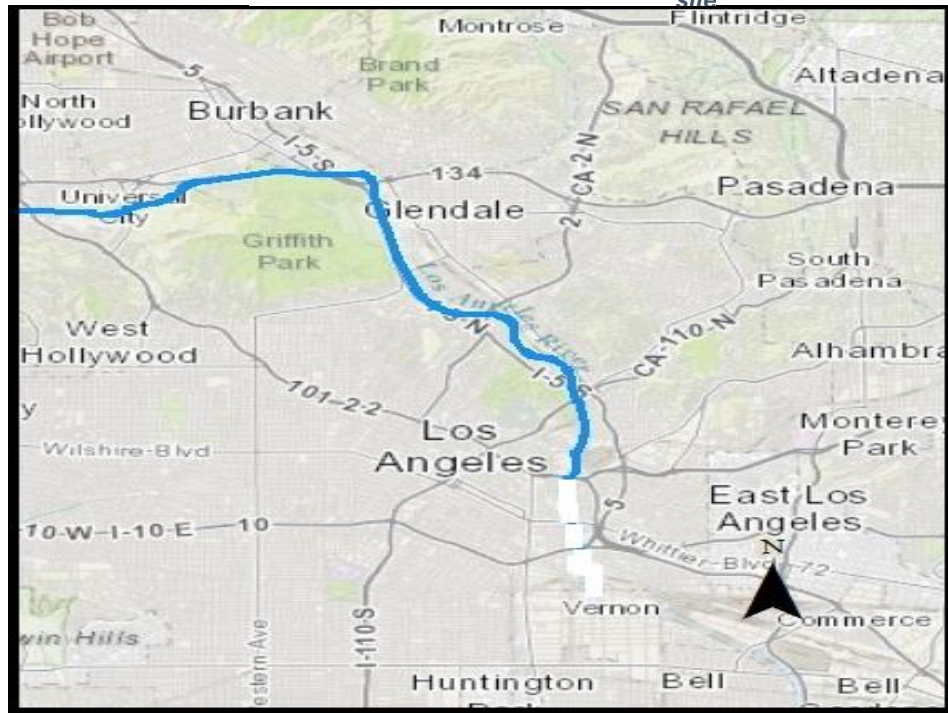
Every day in the United States, federal funds are being spent on social welfare, economic development and community development projects. Federally funded projects, like the Los Angeles River Revitalization Project, deal with design, finance, environmental and most importantly social issues. These federally funded projects must comply with state and federal Civil rights laws to continue their income streams.

The Los Angeles River is a 52-mile long urban river that weaves throughout Los Angeles County from communities in the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach, and out to the Pacific Ocean. After numerous floods, the Los Angeles River was paved starting in 1938, with the project completed in 1960 (County of Los Angeles Public Works, n.d.) Ironically, about 50 years after federal assistance by the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to “channelize” the river, the Army Corps sought \$1.3 Billion in federal assistance to revitalize the Los Angeles River.

The Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan seeks to “provide for the optimization and enhancement of aesthetic, recreational, flood control and environmental values by creating a community resource, enriching the quality of life for residents, and recognizing the river’s primary purpose for flood control” (County of Los Angeles Public Works, n.d). The guiding principles emphasize safety, public access, protection of natural resources, and to ensure fair treatment, all “while maximizing access to and use of the River” (LARiver.org, 2016).

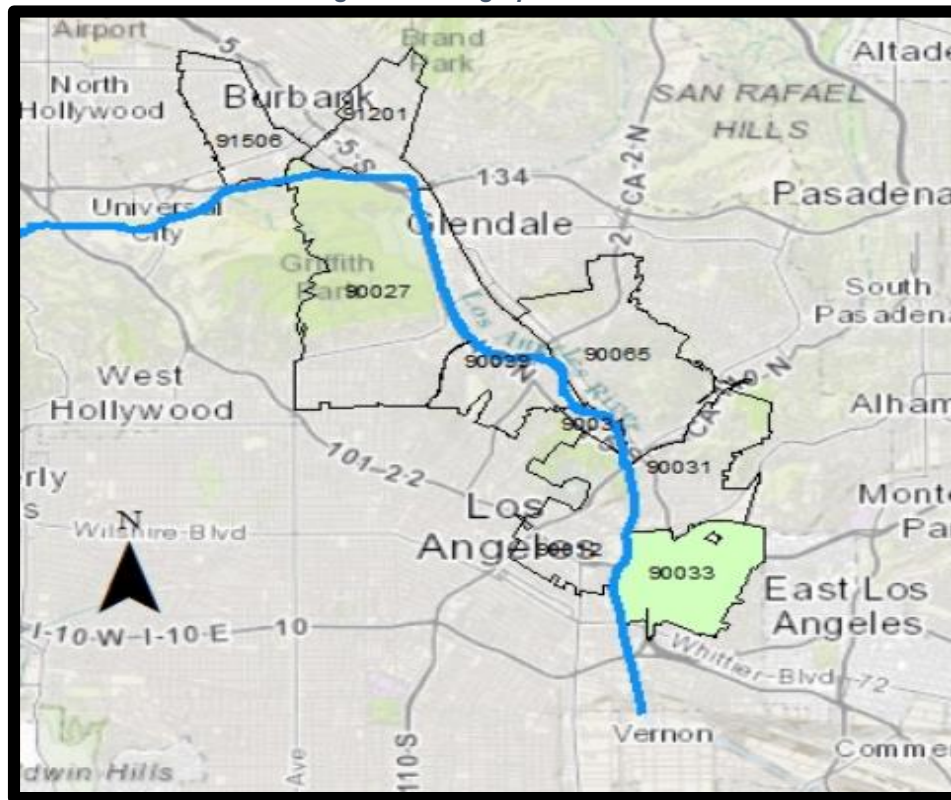
The proposed Project involves restoring 11 miles of the Los Angeles River from approximately Griffith Park to downtown Los Angeles (See **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**).

Figure 1 - Los Angeles River - proposed site



Data Source: ArcGIS Online

Figure 2 - Geographic Area of Focus



Data Source: ArcGIS Online

BACKGROUND

The City of Los Angeles is an urban metropolis, with a diverse geographic area and a multiethnic population. Development in any area in Los Angeles, has environmental, economic and social consequences that can result in displacement, gentrification and other socio-economic disparities. The Los Angeles Metropolitan area already suffers a shortage of affordable and multi-family housing, however tracts eligible for gentrifying in Los Angeles has increased as seen in **Table 1**. There are various socio-economic disparities that revitalization can cause. The issue of revitalization is highly complex in a social context. Distinguishing between the burdens and benefits of revitalization is important in the planning process.

Table 1 – Gentrifying Tracts in Los Angeles

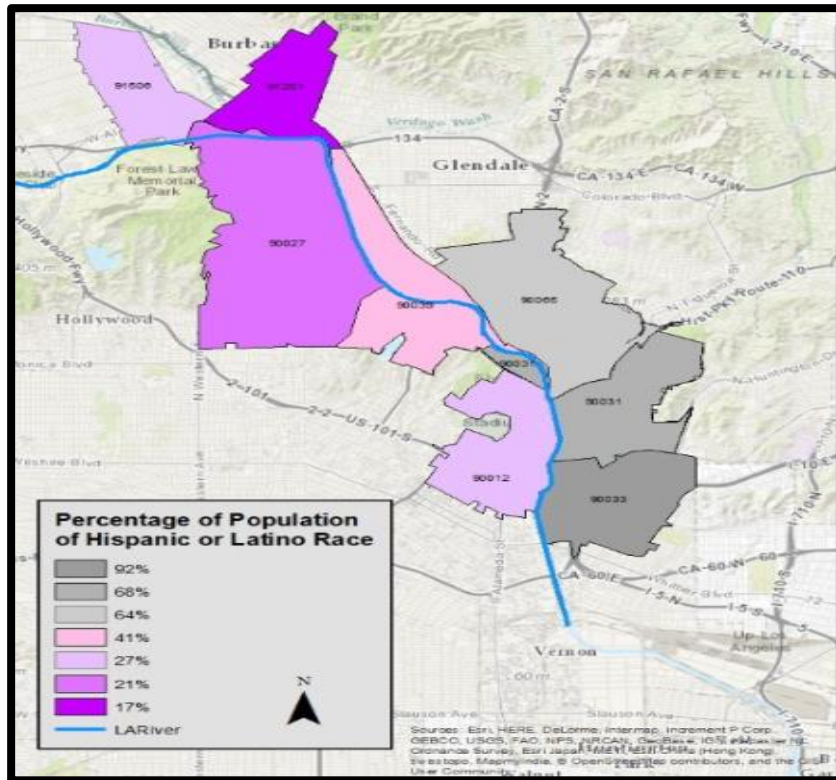
	Share of Eligible Tracts Gentrifying	Tracts Gentrifying	Did Not Gentrify	Not Eligible to Gentrify	Total Census Tracts
Since 2000	15.1%	51	287	661	999
1990-2000	2.9%	10	340	649	999

Source: Governing analysis of [2009-2013 American Community Survey](#), [US2010 Longitudinal Tract Data Base](#)

RATIONALE

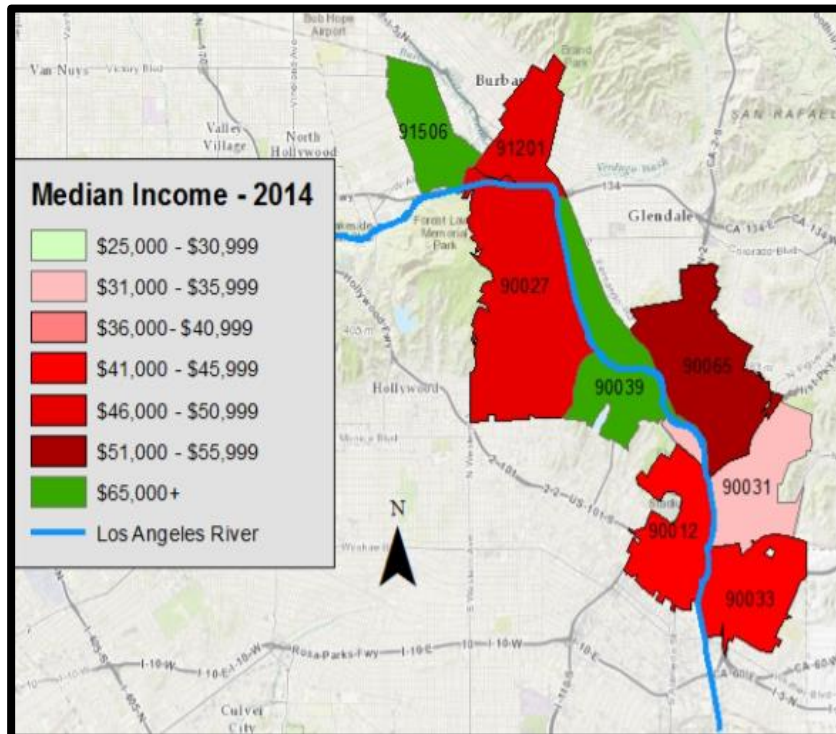
River revitalization projects aim to improve and restore natural resources. Advocates state river revitalization projects also improve quality of life and have other positive social implications. However, these projects also create social inequalities in the same communities they were meant to improve. In turn, these social inequalities create the need for social justice. The immediate communities surrounding the 11-mile stretch of the proposed revitalization project and the other 41 miles of the river, tend to be poor and of color (see **Figure 3**). Five out of the eight (**Figure 4**) communities earn less than the median household income of \$51,939 as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau for September 2014 (Census.gov, 2016). These communities are already marginalized and revitalization projects, as other government intervention plans, can create further negative social implications by widening the gap for opportunities and success. However, The USACE states in the study that the “factors such as gentrification, poverty rates, and local businesses can affect the local economy and land uses, but no clear trends have emerged at the time of this assessment. No meaningful changes in health related to social equity issues are anticipated as a result of the project.” (USACE, 2015, 5-154).

Figure 3 – Percentage of Hispanic or Latino Population



Data Source: Census.gov, 2016

Figure 4 – Median Income



Data Source: Census.gov, 2016

In October 2015, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) released the final Los Angeles River Ecosystem Restoration Integrated Feasibility Report. After reviewing the proposed plan and the feasibility report, it was noted there is a lack of research on the possible consequences of the revitalization project on riverside communities along the proposed site. The LA River will present both benefits and burdens to the current corridor residents that must be further evaluated. This paper will focus on the burdens that may arise from the revitalization project, more specifically concerns about the potential displacement of residents and can be done to combat the risk of residential displacement. The primary research question is: How can the USACE Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan incorporate issues, as well as possible solutions, of residential displacement?

DATA

This analysis is based on the analysis of potential impacts the Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan by the USACE can have on the local residents. In order to create applicable maps to convey emerging trends and current demographics of the geographic area, a gray scale basemap of Los Angeles was obtained from ArcGIS online. Data from the United States Census was utilized to develop the basemap and shapefiles to develop a visual representation of the geographic area of focus and the demographic maps. The basemap, community shapefiles and Excel data tables were utilized to develop the maps and tables included in this analysis. It should be noted that Excel files were developed to organize the data obtained and to assess for any changes. Additionally, Excel was utilized to organized data prior to the development of the GIS maps. The data was obtained from the Census Website and from the LA County GIS Data Portal. The data was combined to show changes in population and to illustrate demographic profiles. The development of the maps was not easy, though after working with ArcMap for months, this researcher is not by any means proficient in this software or the application of such. This researcher was able to manipulate the data and convey the desired information through multiple attempts, however some competency on importing data, working with attribute tables, symbology and layouts was established. Moreover, the data and discussion developed here have provided a great basis for additional research and illustrative techniques for this researcher. It should also be noted that the topic of this study was changed from Title IV-E funding, as comparative data was not available for that topic, therefore the researcher's personal research on the LA River Revitalization was analyzed here.

DISCUSSION

Displacement occurs when vulnerable community members, especially senior citizens, low income residents, and disabled people are forced to move out of their original residential places. This occurs as residents are no longer able to afford to live in new redeveloped areas (Becker, 2003). Additionally, displacement can be defined as the replacement of one group by another, in some relatively bounded geographic area in terms of prestige and power. This includes the ability to affect decisions and policies in the area, to set goals and priorities, and to be recognized as outsiders as the legitimate

spokesperson of the area (Brown-Saracino, 2013; Kumar, 2011). Social displacement is then a typical accompanying feature of physical displacement.

Gentrification occurs as a neighborhood has desirable qualities and becomes more desirable to higher income households (Bates, 2013). The social phenomenon of gentrification is often associated to urban inequality, displacement of low-income residents by an influx of higher-income newcomers, and increased economic investment (Kleinhans, 2004). Gentrification shifts the neighborhood identity as the housing market, resident demographics, and local economy change (Bates, 2013). However, the lasting effects on society are not always clear.

The Los Angeles River revitalization and the social inequalities it can potentially create is caused by government intervention, public policy and economic regulation. Though the Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan is marketed as a means to improve natural resources and increase quality of life for the neighboring communities, the creation of riverside parks will not address the social implications such projects have on marginalized communities. Additionally, the working class communities along the Los Angeles River already face daily challenges and government projects that promote gentrification and displacement create burdens on the social goals of liberty, equity and security. Thus affecting available resources, political power and social structure, which in turn affect what communities look like.

Social

The USACE River Revitalization Plan developed and compared multiple plans and ultimately the Los Angeles River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility study identified Alternative 20 as the recommended plan. Alternative 20 will restore 11 miles of the Los Angeles; a total of 719 acres.

The study found that the USACE employed:

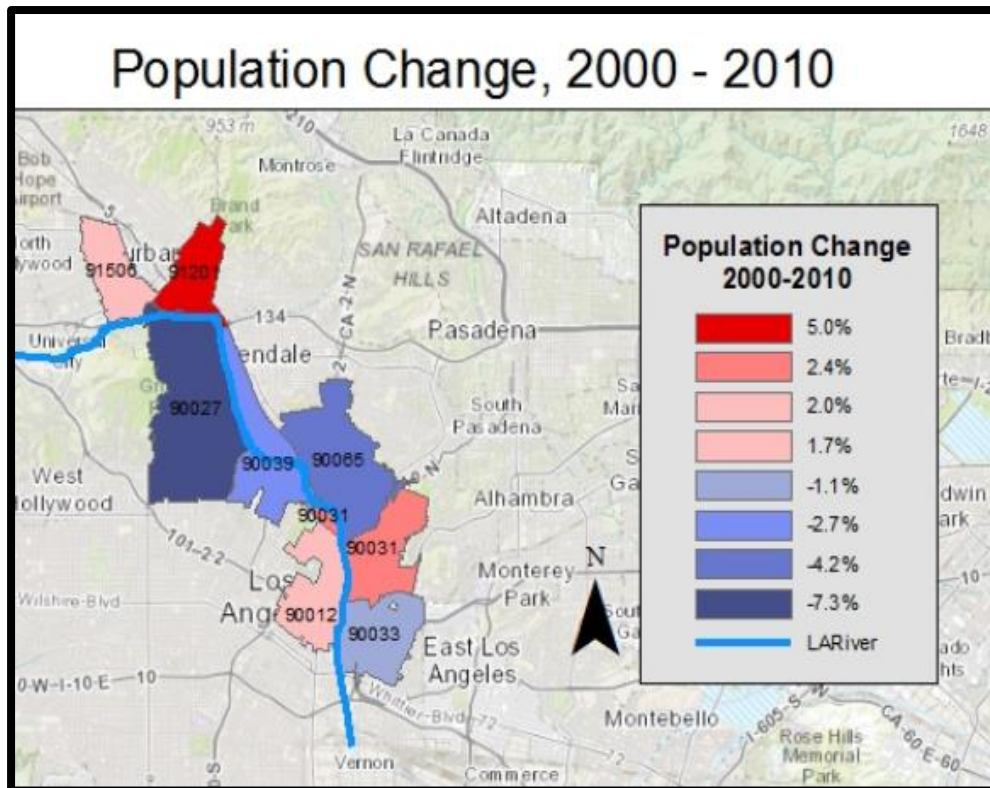
“an open, transparent process that respects views of in of individuals and groups...Throughout the study process, the Corps and the [Los Angeles] City have sought the views of individuals, agencies, and non-governmental organizations on the best ways to restore the river ecosystem...Over 500 comments and two petitions were received. Public comments generally focused on whether complete benefits of habitat and hydrologic connectivity were not captured or were underestimated and/or expressed preference for Alternative 20.” (USACE, 2013)

The recommended plan includes ecosystem and habitat restoration and its secondary purpose is to provide recreational opportunities, both of which have a direct impact on the neighboring communities, yet the feasibility study found that the plan fails to include socioeconomic and environmental justice considerations. The study repeatedly highlights that assumptions will be made regarding the effects of redevelopment and restoration because they have not been quantified, yet the study also states that the “socio-economic effects [of the plan] are less than significant (USACE, 2013).

The social impact of the USACE L.A. River Revitalization Plan is far-reaching, with the largest impact on the public that resides in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project. The communities along the Los Angeles River are comprised of children and families of color, who disproportionately live in poverty (CityProjectLA, n.d.) These communities face social inequalities in such things as access to quality education, green space, economic opportunities and environmental problems (Flynn, Slovic & Mertz, 1994; Bullard & Lewis, 1996). Additionally, inadequate planning has negative effects on cultural and local marginalized people who feel safer with the familiarity of their communities (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

Gentrification and displacement can manifest itself in various ways. Gentrification-induced displacement is notoriously difficult to quantify (Atkinson, 2002; Shaw, 2005). It can be assessed through an analysis of population changes, as seen in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5 – USACE Proposed Site



Data Source: American Community Factfinder, 2016

Inadequate urban planning can present various challenges to local residents through changes to the distinctive local character, changes in the social structure and ultimately on the social capital of residents in riverside communities (Gertler & Wolfe, 2004). Davidson (2009) argues that displacement starts from a relational and socially constructed definition of place rather than the simple equation of place with location. If a place changes, feelings of displacement can be experienced. This perspective has

implications for gentrification-induced displacement which is problematic for low-income minorities and therefore the social capital of these communities should be supported through the analysis of urban change and justice (Sliwinski, 2015; Mayer, 2003). Supporting and maintaining social capital through local activism and civic engagement promotes sustainable development and economic growth (Mayer, 2003).

Furthermore, the local residents will endure the burden of the revitalization plan, both during and after construction, as they will experience construction and reduced or eliminated access to the L.A. River. The USACE Feasibility Study (2013) states that the “growing disparity of access to and use of open space resources, including natural areas by those living in historically underserved communities” is of concern to the City of Los Angeles. However, the study found that the impact of closures and limited access are “less than significant, effects to environmental justice communities are not disproportionately high and adverse. Improved habitat value, aesthetic quality, and quantity of passive recreation resources, and improved accessibility would provide beneficial effects for residents, but the project would result in the displacement of existing businesses.” (USACE 2013). Alternative 20 will result in land acquisition and displacement, but it was found to be less than the other alternatives. Also, since land acquisition and relocation costs would be high, the City of Los Angeles proposed to waive reimbursement of real estate costs that exceed its statutorily required 35 percent share of total ecosystem restoration costs. The Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works) has granted the request to waive reimbursement (USACE, 2013). The Corps and City would cost share the recreation feature costs 50-50, and other costs would be governed by the partnership agreement, thus the City has agreed to displace residents and businesses, but justifies these actions by sharing the cost with the federal government.

Cultural

Gentrification can lead to the displacement of residents and the slow displacement of communities, resulting in the loss of culture and a changing cultural landscape. This changes stem from potential building demolition, eviction, property transfers and increased housing and neighborhood costs (Newman & Wyly, 2006). Additionally, gentrification - induced displacement allows for the infiltration of more affluent people into low-income and working class areas (Byrne, 2002). Those that can afford the increased costs often find that their community networks and culture is displaced by the dilution of the areas’ cultural heritage and removal of cultural artifacts (Newman, et al., 2006). Those that suffer physical displacement end up in unstable, declining and economically isolated from employment opportunities and economic growth (Powell & Spencer, 2002).

Economic

Though the USACE and proponents of the revitalization of the Los Angeles River argue that these plans will have multiple benefit, they fail to report on the ill effects of revitalization on the local communities along the proposed site. People who are

politically underrepresented and powerless, tend to benefit least from gentrification. (Powell, et al., 2002; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). According to the Los Angeles Times (2014), there has been an influx of commercial development along the proposed revitalization communities because of the potential for economic profit. Economic profit can be seen as a benefit of revitalization, however “rents are rising sharply in river-adjacent communities, many of them home to low-income residents who say they have heard nothing from the city to ease their fears of being forced from neighborhoods they will no longer be able to afford” (Sahagun & Saillant, 2014). The liberty of the communities that face potential displacement and limited access are also affected in that their ability to live freely is constrained by the development of new public policy. It is not uncommon for government intervention to seek to privatize access to public goods, but privatizing natural resources has far-reaching and long-term social implications and communal rights should be considered (Gilmour, Day & Dwyer, 2012). Additionally, privatization of access to natural resources, can reduce local control and public rights.

One of the major effects of gentrification is the lack of affordable housing. The Los Angeles Metropolitan area already suffers a shortage of affordable and multi-family housing, however tracts eligible for gentrifying in Los Angeles has increased from 2.9% prior to 2000, to 15.1% since 2000 (Governing, 2016). Although the potential for displacement and gentrification effects have not been quantified by the USACE, the biggest effect of displacement and gentrification that could potentially arise from the USACE’s plan is the loss of affordable housing. This tends to be the biggest effect because a large portion of the household budget, especially for low income people and the home is the focal point of the family’s social, cultural and economic life. It is imperative that the economic and demographic changes embrace the culture of the neighboring communities to alleviate the potential burdens.

Political

Every day in the United States, federal funds are being spent on social welfare, economic development and community development projects. Federally funded projects, like the Los Angeles River Revitalization Project, must comply with state and federal Civil rights laws to continue their income streams, therefore it would be beneficial if housing and a housing affordability threshold became basic rights to help mitigate the effects of changing communities and ensure rights are being protected.

Residents and business have civil rights and human rights that are available to protect against displacement, like the Uniform Relocation Act and Real Property Acquisition Act, but these rights do not protect against changing the social structure, culture and economic opportunities. Additionally, property owners are the only ones with constitutional protection, thus renters are more at risk of assuming the burdens and less likely to be protected by the fifth and fourteenth amendments against the deprivation of life, liberty and property.

LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations surfaced throughout this analysis. The most significant of these pertained to the assumption made by the USACE in their feasibility report that the revitalization plan would not have a significant impact on the residents of the surrounding communities. This assumption prompted this research, however a comprehensive assessment of the social, cultural, economic and political effects of such a project could not be achieved in this study due to the lack of stakeholder involvement. The methodology of the analysis would not have changed significantly, but additional perspectives could have made the discussion and analysis of this data more applicable. Additionally, there were additional demographics that were excluded from this analysis, like the number of owner-occupied and renter-occupied housing units as current data for these were not found. Also, median home values were found for the years from 2007 to 2014, however their impact on the potential for gentrification on the geographic area of focus was not significant and therefore not included.

CONCLUSION

Every day in the United States, federal funds are being spent on social welfare, economic development, and community development projects. Federally funded projects, like the Los Angeles River Revitalization Project, must comply with state and federal Civil rights laws to continue their income streams. Thus, it would be most beneficial if housing and a housing affordability threshold became basic rights to help mitigate the effects of changing communities and ensure rights are being protected. Residents and business have civil rights that are available to protect against displacement. These rights include the Uniform Relocation Act and Real Property Acquisition Act. However, these rights do not protect against changing the social structure, culture, and economic opportunities to ensure equality during community shifts.

Due to the USACE revitalization plan will utilize federal funds, the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition does apply to the impacted communities and not just property owners as highlighted in the USACE's feasibility study (2013). Thus in order to support residents that will be affected by the USACE's revitalization plan, all stakeholders should:

1. Support availability of affordable housing and rent control units (residential and commercial);
2. Empower themselves with or without the help of non-profit organizations to challenge the effects of displacement and gentrification;
3. Ensure that the funds are prioritized for affordable housing, workforce development, and protecting current residents and businesses from displacement; and
4. Policymakers must consider the true cost/benefit ratio of the plan by assessing costs and benefits beyond recreation for the residents and businesses.

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