



# Improperly-zoned, spatially-marginalized, and poorly-served? An analysis of mobile home parks in Los Angeles County



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## ABSTRACT

More than 6% of Americans live in mobile homes, and yet there has been limited scholarly attention to mobile home location or quality of life compared to conditions in other housing types. There has not been a single comprehensive study to date that assesses where mobile home parks (MHPs) are located within metropolitan areas, that explores why some neighborhoods have a greater concentration of MHPs than others, or examines what environmental or basic service conditions are like in those neighborhoods. In California, more than 1 million residents live in mobile homes, with the vast majority (75%) of these living in MHPs rather than standalone units. We answer two questions in this study. First, are MHPs in “worse” neighborhoods in terms of socioeconomic status, zoning, local land uses, accessibility to jobs, and environmental quality? Second, which neighborhood factors are most strongly correlated with MHP locations and concentrations? We answer these questions using data for all mobile home parks in Los Angeles County, California. We find that MHPs are more likely to be located in lower density neighborhoods and at the urban fringe. More than 41% of MHPs are in areas zoned for commercial or industrial purposes rather than residential uses. Not surprisingly then, we find that MHPs are located in areas with more environmental hazards. A multivariate analysis of neighborhood factors confirms our hypotheses. Moreover, we find that MHPs’ access to public services is worse than the average neighborhood in the county. We recommend that policymakers engage in targeted efforts to address disparities in service access and mitigate environmental hazards.

## 1. Introduction

Although mobile homes comprise 6.2% of the American housing stock and house 5.6% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), scholars have paid little attention to this housing type. In California – the most populous and economically productive state in the U.S., where one might expect less prevalence of this housing type, more than 1.1 million residents live in mobile homes (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2016), with the vast majority (75%) living in mobile home

parks (MHPs) rather than standalone units (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011).<sup>1</sup> The state had 5238 active mobile home parks in 2017 which are registered with the California Housing and Community Development Department (HCD),<sup>2</sup> with 11% of MHPs<sup>3</sup> located in Los Angeles County (California Department of Housing and Community Development, 2017). Despite reports of their demise, mobile homes – and the parks in which they are often located – remain an inexpensive and unsubsidized housing type hidden in plain sight. The residents of MHPs are poorer and more likely to be Hispanic or non-Hispanic White

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<sup>1</sup> Nationally, the trend is reversed, with two thirds (4.38% of total) living in standalone mobile homes, and 2.42% living in mobile home parks (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> We recognize that the term “mobile homes” is often used to refer to a variety of housing types with varying quality of construction and spatial permanency. These types can range from recreational vehicles which are truly mobile, to panelized homes, kit homes, modular homes, and manufactured homes which are rarely if ever moved after installation. In this study, we do not explicitly distinguish between types of units which are located within mobile home parks which the California HCD regulates, but recognize that unit quality within and across them varies (see Dawkins and Koebel, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> We focus on mobile homes located in parks rather than standalone units for both conceptual and practical reasons. First, we can identify the exact address and neighborhood location of parks, as opposed to standalone units. Moreover, we expect that parks are more prevalent in the metropolitan regions of interest than standalone units, and this intuition is borne out by suggestive data from the 2011 American Housing Survey, which shows 75% of LA County mobile home residents are located in parks. Moreover, as discussed more fully below, zoning regulations make it more likely that parks (but not standalone units) will be located outside neighborhoods zoned for residential use, and thus have worse environmental quality and access to services. Finally, even within the same neighborhood in urban areas, units located in parks are more likely to experience lower service quality due to the mediating service management role often assumed by park operators (Pierce and Gonzalez, 2017).

(NHW) than the average American (AHS, 2011). Therefore, understanding the locational characteristics and access to services associated with mobile home parks is an important social justice concern. We argue, drawing on the work of Ashwood and MacTavish (2016), that institutional structures have implicitly excluded mobile home parks through local land use regulation and housing affordability policy designs that focus on single-family homes and multifamily rental units, and these unjust practices have been normalized over time.

Despite the central role mobile homes play as a source of low-cost and unsubsidized housing, there are few studies in the rich literatures on urban household residential location and affordability patterns which examine the spatial distribution of MHPs, or the quality of neighborhood services available to them (Dawkins and Koebel, 2009). We know generally that mobile homes tend to be located in rural areas and the peripheries of urban areas, where substandard or scant public services have been documented (Baker et al., 2011; Aman and Yarnal, 2010; Shen, 2005; Wubneh & Shen, 2004; Hart et al., 2002). Yet no single study to date has examined the factors that explain the types of neighborhoods in which MHPs locate, or the characteristics of environmental or basic service conditions in neighborhoods which house MHPs.

We hypothesize that, as with other types of vulnerable housing settlements, the location of parks within a metro area is likely to be non-random but rather driven by historical, market, and regulatory forces. We also hypothesize, drawing on the work of Morello-Frosch et al. (2011) to document cumulative impacts in environmentally unjust communities that MHPs are systematically located in lower-density, lower-income and lower-rent areas, with worse neighborhood services, environmental conditions and opportunities relative to neighborhoods without MHPs.

Accordingly, we combine data from multiple sources to examine two questions for the universe of active mobile home parks ( $N = 601$ ) in Los Angeles County census tracts ( $N = 2346$ ). First, are MHPs located in “worse” neighborhoods in terms of socioeconomic status, zoning, local land uses, accessibility to jobs, and environmental quality? Second, which neighborhood factors most strongly correlate with MHP locations? Our methods are applicable to other U.S. counties, many of which have more MHPs per capita than Los Angeles.

To answer these questions, we map and describe the location of MHPs across city boundaries and by zoning classifications within Los Angeles County. We next use multivariate regression modeling to identify and examine the characteristics tied to the presence of an MHP, and the number of MHPs, across neighborhoods. We further examine service conditions in neighborhoods with MHPs.

We find that MHPs are commonly located in neighborhoods with lower population density, and which are situated outside of the county's large cities. We also find that a high proportion of MHPs are located in areas zoned for commercial or industrial purposes rather than residentially-zoned areas. Not surprisingly, we find that MHPs are located in areas with more environmental hazards. A multivariate analysis of neighborhood factors confirms our hypotheses. We also provide evidence that access to basic services and economic opportunities within MHP neighborhoods is worse than the metropolitan average.

Our results have implications for both policymakers and planning researchers. For policymakers, we make the case for more targeted efforts to address disparities and mitigate environmental hazards for MHPs, given that they are spatially identifiable as opposed to standalone mobile home units. We encourage scholars to replicate and expand this analysis in the context of other metropolitan areas to better understand the effects of local policies, including zoning decisions, on MHP locations.

## 2. Existing evidence about mobile home park locations and service conditions

Mobile homes were introduced in the United States in the 1930s,

and were first viewed as temporary housing. Short-term construction was particularly common after World War II when mobile homes were used as emergency housing for servicemen and defense plant workers (Furman, 2014; Tremoulet, 2010; French & Hadden, 1965). Subsequently, many of these dwellings were converted or upgraded, and mobile homes became an increasingly popular form of permanent housing. Over the decades, drastic increases in quality, amenities, size, and an average sale price under \$70,000<sup>4</sup> have made these dwelling units attractive and suitable for permanent living and have contributed to the mobile home becoming ironically rather immobile. About 6% of the U.S. population lives in mobile homes, and more than one-third of these are situated in mobile home parks (ACS, 2016), we have little empirical evidence about the location of or living conditions in MHPs. Following is an overview of what we know.

The rapid increase in the number of mobile homes after WWII led to a short-lived interest by scholars of that era to argue for the need to do research on the siting and characteristics of mobile home parks, and the impact and special problems created by their “mobileness” to surrounding communities (French & Hadden, 1965). Scholarly interest in mobile homes has periodically revived, but largely to document their alleged decline (Wallis, 1991) and how much about them is unknown (Hart et al., 2002). The interest was likely in part due to MHP communities portrayed by the popular image of factory-built residences as “ramshacks” and its residents as “trailer trash” – an enduring image for these communities (Furman, 2014). However, residents of mobile homes see the quality of their homes to be comparable to traditional site-built homes but at a lower cost (Boehm, 1995). Moreover, manufactured homes built since 1974 are required to be compliant with the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Code, a national building code which governs the construction of manufactured homes but not other forms of factory-built housing (Dawkins and Koebel, 2009).

Today, scholarly research on MHPs in the U.S. is largely outdated (McCarty, 2010). In fact, we maintain that the words of Boehm (1995) over twenty years ago bear repeating: “after years of unsatisfactory attempts at development of a housing policy that would improve the quality of housing for low income families, it seems appropriate to explore the merits of an often-ignored alternative – manufactured housing (or mobile homes)” (373–374).

Research in the past decade has focused mainly on criminal activity (e.g., McCarty, 2010; McCarty, 2013) and, likely due to the housing bust of 2007, the persistence of negative equity for owners of manufactured units (Carter, 2012), as well as other challenges to home-ownership (e.g., Aman and Yarnal, 2010). Other research has included discussions on the use and conditions of mobile homes as temporary housing in emergency management (Evans-Cowley & Canter, 2010) and to house migrant workers (Larrance et al., 2007). More recent scholarly research has only begun to touch on the quality of life issues facing mobile home communities, particularly those in rural America (e.g., Baker et al., 2011), as well as accessibility to quality public services like drinking water (Pierce and Gonzalez, 2017). The contemporary social justice implications of living in this type of housing have only been explored, including the inability to move by those that own their mobile homes, the lack of sense of community in parks, and discrimination against residents by surrounding neighborhoods (MacTavish, 2007; Salamon & MacTavish, 2017).

### 2.1. Regional location and local land uses

Mobile homes have been stigmatized in American culture and the development of MHPs is met with public resistance rooted in perceptions about the occupants as well as the design and quality of the

<sup>4</sup> According to census data reported by the Manufactured Housing Institute, price excludes cost of land but includes typical cost of installation. See Manufactured Housing Institute, 2016.

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