

City Service Disparities in the City of Los Angeles

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On August 14, 2015, The L.A. Times published an article, *Many Poorer Areas of L.A. Get Less Trash Service, Analysis Shows*, that has since caused a citywide discussion on the quality of service that the city provides and the possible prejudices that are woven into the discrepancies. What the authors, Ben Poston and Peter Jamison, intended on doing was to create a model to monitor the performance of the Sanitation Department's 'Bulky Item Pick Up' service, and then to comment on the results. The key pattern they noticed inspired the headline of the article which then blew up into a misappropriation of causation from the correlation. It was then my intention to verify the validity of the model and then tackle the underlying assumptions made by the public and other news sources in their reaction to the published article.

With the election of Mayor Eric Garcetti in 2013, City Hall has been led by the Mayor's Offices to go *Back to the Basics* in exploring simple yet elegant solutions to the city's toughest problems. One of the newly introduced ideas is to bring the data-driven management techniques of CompStat to all city departments. One of the first departments to take on the initiative was 311 operators (the non-emergency hotline for city residents to report a complaint or request a service from the city). Because of this the city routinely collects data on all 311 operations to more quantitatively measure internal performance. The L.A. Times authors were able to leverage the *Freedom of Information Act* (FOIA) to adjure the city's data on all requests made by the public via the 311 service and the data regarding whether services were followed up with and completed.

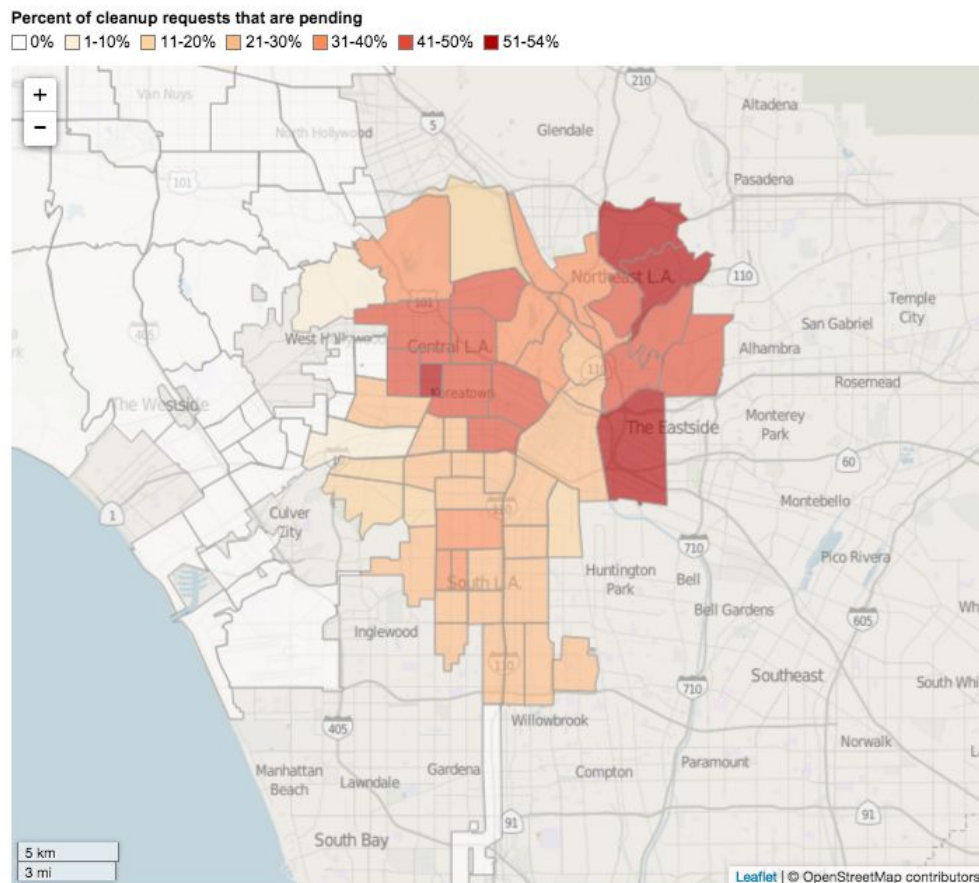
This effort on behalf of the journalists was inspired by a 47-page report on *Improving Livability in Los Angeles* as written by the City Council's *Clean Streets LA* program. One of the concerns outlined was how the city's worldwide brand was threatened by the trashed streets: littered with furniture, crumbling asphalt, and unkempt sidewalks.

So after a series of FOIA Requests and several months of bureaucratic processing, the data was zipped-up and emailed to the Times staff. For the various services offered by the city, the journalists calculated response rates, response times, and request frequencies by various relevant geospatial levels: neighborhood, council district, and zip code. They found random discrepancies between the various services, but within a specific service, Bulky Item Pick Up, they noted a very interesting trend:

“The data show that residents receive dramatically different levels of street-cleaning service depending on where they live: More than one-third of pleas to remove refuse from dozens of neighborhoods in Central, Northeast, and South L.A. were ignored even as sanitation workers responded to 99% of requests in other parts of the city.

While some wealthy areas suffered from poor service, the majority of neighborhoods with unmet requests were low-income.

For example, Venice generated a similar number of trash-pickup requests as Pico-Union, but less than 60% were complete in the central city neighborhood, compared with nearly all requests in the affluent Westside hot spot.”¹



Needless to say, this quickly became a dominating issue in City Hall; all news sources were catching on and making their own headlines and the public was given the time to make their own conclusions while city officials were helpless in giving a proper explanation. Within the public, the question changed from ‘why is there such a disparity of service’ to ‘how could the government let something like this happen’; the correlation became the alleged causation.

I was able to briefly speak with one of the journalists, Ben Poston, who recounted to me the process in constructing their model. In addition, I was able to eventually get a copy of the 311

¹ Poston, Ben, and Peter Jamison. "Many Poorer Areas of L.A. Get Less Trash Service, Analysis Shows." *Los Angeles Times* 14 Aug. 2015: n. pag. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 14 Aug. 2015. Web. 28 Nov. 2015.

data and thus had the opportunity to play around with the data myself. What interested me was to look for a way to quantitatively say what are possible predictors that influence the decision to follow up with the pick up request or not. Unfortunately, and now quite obviously, there is not enough data on the skipped illegal dump sites because they were indeed skipped; no sanitation worker went to the site to record the condition of the site, the estimated weight of the trash, or if it even exists. I was able to confirm that the results of The Times model is indeed reflected by the data, but the more important question of ‘why’ lingers.

To continue the conversation of causation and correlation, I did a little bit of journalism myself and tracked the history of Sanitation’s Bulky Item Pick Up service. In an effort to reduce spending, the responsibility of picking up abandoned trash was transferred from the Bureau of Street Services to the much smaller Bureau of Sanitation in 2012. This cut in regular funding made itself evident in trash buildups throughout the city, but this still doesn’t account for the clustering of the buildups in the poorer communities. What may explain this though is the type of trash left illegally deposited on the sidewalks or alleyways of these neighborhoods. In recent years, it has become a trend for construction/demolition crews to transport their waste to these poorer neighborhoods and then dump them there.² After accumulating, these illegal dumps can reach up to ten tons, in theory making it very difficult for a small team of sanitation workers to clean up such a site in addition to the other sites tasked for that given day (the eighteen workers from Sanitation are assigned to over 2,000 illegal dumps every month).

Perhaps then the analysis should focus more on the scale of the waste for each pick up. What needs to be done though, is that each reported site with pending requests needs to be followed up to characterize the the dump site and then see if there are any commonalities between the pending sites by quality instead of by location.

My recommendation to the task force, internally assembled by Mayor Eric Garcetti in response to the initial Times article, is to consider the possibility of waste tonnage and investigate for the origins of the trash as the main predictors in pending pick up requests. If there are any dominating trends in the source of the waste then possibly the city could launch measures to better enforce proper construction waste disposal. In addition, it is recommended to continue the Bulky Item Pick Ups, but also consider a systematic plan to slowly, but sustainably, tackle the cleanup of the larger illegal dump sites.

² Zahniser, David. "2 Angelenos Demand Answers after Their Alley Gets Trashed." *Los Angeles Times* 23 Mar. 2015: n. pag. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2015. Web. 28 Nov. 2015.