

# Put LAX Expansion in a Holding Pattern Further Research

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The long-simmering controversy over the expansion of Los Angeles International Airport has once again heated up. For years, airport authorities have stressed that LAX is a crucial part of Southern California's infrastructure and argued that expansion is necessary to keep the region's economy humming.

Leaders in the cities and neighborhoods surrounding the airport have responded that they are already overburdened and have proposed that new air traffic instead be spread to Ontario and other smaller airports and that the former El Toro Marine base be converted to civilian use.

LAX critics recently found new ammunition in a study that concludes that, in fact, it matters little to regional income if traffic is concentrated at LAX or more evenly shared throughout Southern California. The result is not that surprising: Four scenarios developed by the Southern California Assn. of Govern-

ments, or SCAG, show little difference in total flight operations or passengers served, regardless of the balance of air traffic through LAX and other regional airports.

With aggregate benefits a wash, the choice about LAX will depend instead on issues of distribution—that is, which neighborhoods and counties will receive the burdens and benefits. Pointing to the disproportionately minority population around LAX, some activists have suggested that expansion there could raise issues of "environmental justice."

The concern is particularly salient because a long string of studies has demonstrated that Southern California exhibits stark differences by race in exposure to toxic facilities and airborne cancer risks even after taking into account income, land use and other factors.

Will LAX expansion worsen the picture for environmental justice? A memo made available at a meeting of SCAG's Aviation Task Force suggests that the answer is no. Based on projections of airport noise and neighborhood demographics in 2020, the memo argues that dramatically expanding LAX will affect a

larger percentage of minorities, but not by much. It notes that an even larger number of minorities may be affected by other airport expansion scenarios, including one in which El Toro drops out of consideration altogether.

As researchers who have conducted numerous environmental justice studies of the L.A. area, we found this result curious. Aside from the reliance on uncertain projections of neighborhood ethnicity for 2020, think about the unexpected shifts in L.A. communities in recent years. It is interesting that the number of affected residents rises as fewer airports are used and that the heavily minority character of the neighborhoods surrounding LAX do not dominate the overall pattern. Moreover, the underlying analysis seems to ignore the intensity of air traffic, suggesting that there is little difference between a home or school experiencing 100 flights a day and one experiencing 10 flights a day.

We therefore decided to map the existing noise data ourselves and link them to current demographics. We calculated the ethnic composition of those living near airports, arriving

at figures similar to SCAG's. We then measured the percent of the total regional air burden faced by white and minority populations living near airports and finally calculated a "person-impacts" measure that took into account the number of flights affecting each person of a particular ethnicity. The results are striking: Minorities, who make up about 52% of the population living near the region's airports, would experience about 53% of the burden (as measured by flights) under a scenario that spreads air traffic across the region but would experience 59% of the burden if LAX expands significantly, and nearly 62% if El Toro is not converted to civilian use.

As for the impact on individuals, the fact that regional air traffic is heaviest at LAX under any scenario ensures that burdens on minorities would always be larger. A scenario that aggressively expands LAX, however, raises the relative minority-white inequity by about 15% to 20% above that shown by a more even spread of traffic (depending on the radius), and excluding El Toro could worsen the disparity. Interestingly, even whites would benefit from a more regional approach: LAX

expansion poses the highest impacts on individuals simply because it would occur in a densely populated area.

Because SCAG's full data is unavailable to us, our calculations are rough. One key difference is our use of contemporary demographics rather than SCAG's uncertain 2020 projections. We find it hard to believe, however, that whites would find themselves disproportionately attracted to noisy airport locations, therefore reducing the relative exposure of people of color over the next 20 years.

There may many good reasons, such as local economic development and employment, to favor a significant expansion of LAX. But before rolling forward, we need additional research on who will be trading away their quality of life and who will be enjoying easier air travel. If environmental justice is to be taken seriously, LAX's current plans should be held at the gate.

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