



Research Brief for Resource Managers

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Fire Protection Inequality in Urban and Suburban LA

Davis, M. 1995. The case for letting Malibu burn. Environmental History Review 19(2):1-36.

In Los Angeles, California, whether you are a poor *operadora* sewing in a downtown sweatshop or an affluent movie star in the Malibu hills, you both share the risk of cataclysmic fire. Ironically, though, the risk of dying in an inner-city fire is much greater than in a chaparral fire on the outskirts of the city. Davis' 1995 review is a colorfully written historical account of two different Los Angeles experiences with repeated fires between 1930 and 1993.

Between those years, the Downtown and Westlake parts of LA had "the highest urban fire incidence in the nation", while Malibu was considered "the wildfire capital of North America and, possibly, the world." Both segments of the city were known to be at risk, but many more people died in the impoverished tenement fires (118 people in 12 buildings within one square mile) than in the large wildfires of affluent Malibu (16 people in 2000 buildings over 10,000+acres).

Davis shows that in the political history of fire in Los Angeles nobody advocated for the poor when it came to fire safety, even when the life-saving fixes were relatively simple and well understood. Tenement fires could have been avoided at a relatively low cost if legally required inspections had been conducted, existing building codes had been enforced, and life-saving laws had been

Management Implications

- Financial resources for public protection are unequally distributed between wealthy communities and poor inner city communities.
- Increasing development of fire prone hillsides is becoming a significant public expenditure, as the costs of wildfire suppression to protect wealthy communities and is borne by all taxpayers.

enacted. In contrast, homes in wealthy Malibu were protected by an army of firefighters and supported by an extraordinary range of insurance and disaster relief subsidies.

Both politicians and the press largely ignored the essential land use issues and the right to build in fire prone landscapes was not generally questioned. Davis argues that this allowed "the rampant, uncontrolled proliferation of fire suburbs" around Los Angeles.

Davis's concluding point is that protecting Malibu and other luxury enclaves was becoming one of the state's major social expenditures, while "there is no comparable investment in the fire, toxic, or earthquake safety of inner-city communities. Instead, as in most things, we tolerate two systems of hazard prevention, separate and unequal."