

# Fewer trees means poorer, minority areas are hotter — report

Marc Heller, E&E News reporter    Published: Tuesday, June 22, 2021



The lush tree canopy in the Lanier Heights neighborhood in Washington. John Leszczynski/Flickr

Major cities in the United States need to plant more than 31 million trees — and put them in the right places — to overcome decades of racial inequity that resulted in only certain neighborhoods becoming greener, according to a new report.

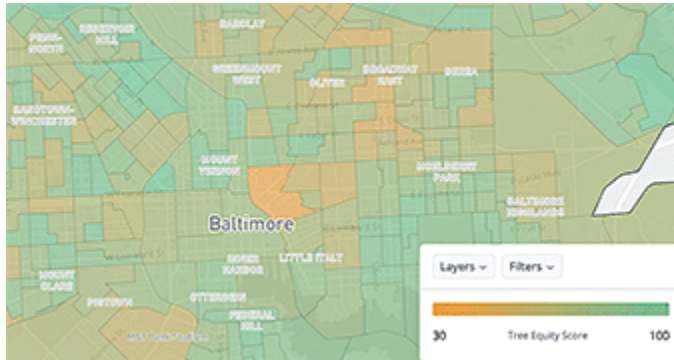
American Forests, a nonprofit group promoting increased tree planting, said planting programs have long overlooked poorer neighborhoods with higher populations of racial minorities — a finding that reinforces work by urban planners and researchers in recent years.

"Simply put, lower-income neighborhoods usually don't have as many trees," the group said.

The lack of tree cover in parks and on city streets correlates with hotter conditions in the summer along with heat-related illnesses, plus higher crime rates, worse air quality and lower property values, according to various studies. American

Forests **said** achieving a tree cover around 43% — an increase of about 10% from the current baseline — would help combat the effects of climate change, as well.

"We need to address these problems because trees play a vital role in human well-being. They cool our neighborhoods, purify the air we breathe and lift our mood. When mature, trees shade buildings in the summer and block wind in the winter, reducing the use of air conditioners and heaters — saving people money on utility bills," American Forests said.



[+] A screenshot from American Forests' tree equity score analyzer, looking at Baltimore. American Forests

Urban tree planting programs face an array of challenges, including tight funding that often calls for help from outside organizations, and the need to maintain street trees through watering, trimming and safeguards against insects and disease.

New York City, Detroit and other big cities have revamped tree-planting programs with a greater focus on areas previously neglected. Officials in Baltimore and Washington have drafted plans to increase tree coverage from 35% to 40% by 2032, according to a **2017 study** published in the journal *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*.

American Forests' interactive map illustrates the challenge in New York City, with 6,221 sections rated. In one part of the Bronx, a tract with 83% people of color, a poverty rate of 43% and an unemployment rate of 17% has just 6% tree cover, out of a goal of 48%. That section ranks 6,204th out of the 6,221 areas.

Across the borough, in the Riverdale section, an area with 33% people of color and an unemployment rate of 2% ranks No. 1 and has achieved its canopy goal of 47%.

In New York, officials are looking to "forest patches" as well as streets. More than 7,000 acres of such space are scattered throughout the city, said Sarah Charlop-Powers, executive director of the Natural Areas Conservancy, a nonprofit group that focuses on natural areas within the city.

Charlop-Powers said her group is seeking to increase public access to those spaces through new trails, for instance. But the forests need work, she told E&E News, to cut back on invasive plants and other maintenance headaches. "It's a huge challenge," she said.

One of the nation's longer-standing urban forestry programs, in Baltimore, is making progress in sections of the city where street trees have only recently become more appreciated, officials say. Baltimore is one of only a few cities in the United States that have years of data on the benefits of urban trees, said Justin Bowers, associate director of the Baltimore Tree Trust, a nonprofit group that plants trees on city streets.

In Baltimore — where officials have spent several years trying to rebalance tree-planting efforts — summer temperatures are sometimes as much as 16 degrees Fahrenheit higher in tree-devoid eastern neighborhoods than in leafy neighborhoods across town, Bowers told E&E News.

Bowers said his organization plants about 1,500 trees a year, mainly oaks, maples and other trees that will grow large enough to shade the streets and sidewalks. Most of those plantings since 2008 have been in East Baltimore, he said.

East Baltimore hasn't always been welcoming to trees. In 1965, the city embarked on a campaign to plant 8,000 trees there, where the city forester noted that sidewalks didn't have openings for them. But as the effort started, officials ran into opposition from "tree rebels" who wanted clean, uncluttered sidewalks, and complained that trees belonged in the country, not the city, according to a [2014 study](#) by researchers at the University of Ohio and the Forest Service.

Years later, bitterness took a different direction, Bowers said. East Baltimore, already short on city services, saw healthy street trees removed in the 1980s and '90s as a precaution against Dutch elm disease and the emerald ash borer, he said. "There's a lot of animosity and mistrust," he said.

In the nation's capital, researchers have figured out that the connection between higher income levels and tree canopy isn't always exact. Gentrification in Washington has boosted development and sometimes led to a loss of trees, according to the same study in the urban forest journal.

"Environmental justice is frequently included as one of the objectives of urban tree canopy goals," the researchers said. "However, merely increasing the investment in new planting in low-income and low-UTC areas may not produce a lasting increase in tree canopy. Preventing tree loss and providing incentives for planting and maintaining trees in residential areas may be as important as new planting implemented by municipalities."