

Potential Costs and Health Benefits of Parks After Dark *Executive Summary*

September 2014

About this Health Impact Assessment

The Department of Public Health recently conducted a rapid health impact assessment (HIA) to inform decision-making around the County of Los Angeles (County) Parks After Dark (PAD) strategy. Parks After Dark is a summer evening park program that started in 2010 and is coordinated by the County Department of Parks and Recreation in collaboration with DPH, the Sheriff's Department and other partners. With declining resources and funding, the future of PAD is uncertain. Ongoing dialogue among PAD leadership and partners is now underway to determine how to re-prioritize County resources to support this model as part of a formal strategic planning process. The rapid HIA contributed to this decision-making process by examining three alternative planning options: 1) continue PAD programming as is, 2) expand PAD to include additional parks, or 3) discontinue PAD. The rapid HIA sought to synthesize existing program data and research on the potential impact of PAD on crime, perception of safety, physical activity, and cross-sector collaboration.

Communities with High Crime and Obesity

Disadvantaged communities across Los Angeles County and nationwide are disproportionately impacted by violence and chronic disease.¹ If the community does not feel safe, they are less likely to be physically active and engaged in the community, resulting in social isolation and poor health. PAD and similar Safe Summer Park programs connected to gang violence reduction efforts in the County have shown potential to reduce crime, increase physical activity, and address health inequities.²

PAD began as the violence prevention strategy of the County's Gang Violence Reduction Initiative at 3 parks in 2010. It has since evolved into a cross-sector collaboration to promote healthy and active living through increased access to a wide range of recreation programs, cultural and educational activities, youth leadership opportunities, and health and social services.

Due to PAD's initial success in reducing violence, high attendance, and community and County leadership support, it was expanded to 3 additional parks in other communities with high crime rates and obesity prevalence. Expansion was possible through a Community Transformation Grant, which has ended two years earlier than anticipated. To assist with future planning options, the rapid HIA identified 10 potential expansion parks in communities with high rates of violence, obesity prevalence, and economic hardship (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Current and Potential Expansion Locations for Parks After Dark

Current Locations

- City Terrace (East Los Angeles)
- Jesse Owens (South Vermont)
- Loma Alta (Altadena)
- Pamela (Duarte)
- Roosevelt (Florence-Graham)
- Watkins (Florence-Graham)

Potential Expansion Locations

- Athens (Willowbrook)
- Belvedere (Monterey Park)
- Bethune (Florence-Graham)
- East Rancho Dominguez (Compton)
- Enterprise (Willowbrook)
- Mona (Willowbrook)
- Obregon (East Los Angeles)
- Robinson (Palmdale)
- Salazar (East Los Angeles)
- Washington (Florence-Graham)

Crime and Health

Violent crime has public health consequences beyond physical injury and death – it affects brain development, mental illness, and chronic diseases.^{3,4}

- Parks and recreation centers with supervised programs that engage youth and families during evening hours have been found to help decrease crime.⁵⁻⁷ Violence prevention, gang intervention and case management services have been key to the success of these efforts.
- The rapid HIA found a decrease in crime around original PAD parks. This was likely related to coordinated prevention and intervention activities initiated through the 2010 County Gang Violence Reduction Initiative, including resource/employment fairs, youth mentoring programs, and juvenile re-entry services.
- Compared to pre-PAD crime levels, the decrease in crime in 2013 around original PAD parks could save an estimated \$460,000 per park annually in costs of crime (law enforcement, supervision/custody and legal adjudication) to county government.

Table 2. Summary of Crime Data near PAD Parks Compared to non-PAD Parks⁸

Original PAD Parks (began in 2010)

Part of the Gang Violence Reduction Initiative



Crimes decreased by 32% in PAD park communities, and increased by 18% in nearby non-PAD park communities from 2009 to 2013. This translates to 14 fewer crimes per park since the original PAD began.

Newer PAD Parks (began in 2012)

Not part of the Gang Violence Reduction Initiative



Crime decreased in 1 out of 3 new PAD parks. This park had higher male youth participation as compared to other PAD parks.

Overall, there has not been a clear change in crime in newer PAD parks between 2011 and 2013, as compared to non-PAD parks.

Perception of Safety

Fear of violence can be a barrier to park use and active living, and fear varies by demographic characteristics. For example, safety issues have been found to discourage women from being physically active and outdoors.⁹

- Community policing and supervised recreational activities have been shown to increase neighborhood perception of safety and promote park usage,^{10,11} both of which can lead to healthier outdoor lifestyles and better social cohesion.
- PAD participants reported that the presence of Deputy Sheriffs during evening hours encouraged them to visit the park. Of those participants who regularly do not feel safe in their neighborhood, 80% felt safe during PAD.¹²
- Survey responses from community members and partner agencies suggested that expanding PAD could increase opportunities for residents to get to know each other, improve social cohesion, and make communities safer.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Cross-sector collaboration can provide more efficient delivery of health and social services and improve population health.¹⁶ Additionally, a cross-sector preventative approach that provides health and social services is a best practice to reduce community and gang violence.^{17,18}

- Stakeholders reported PAD increased collaboration across many agencies and community organizations, which may improve access to services and positively impact the health and quality of life of community members.
- Key informants identified additional opportunities to build cross-sector collaboration, such as stronger partnerships with local organizations that offer employment and youth development services.

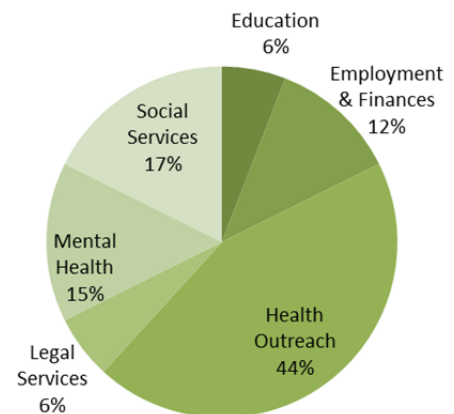
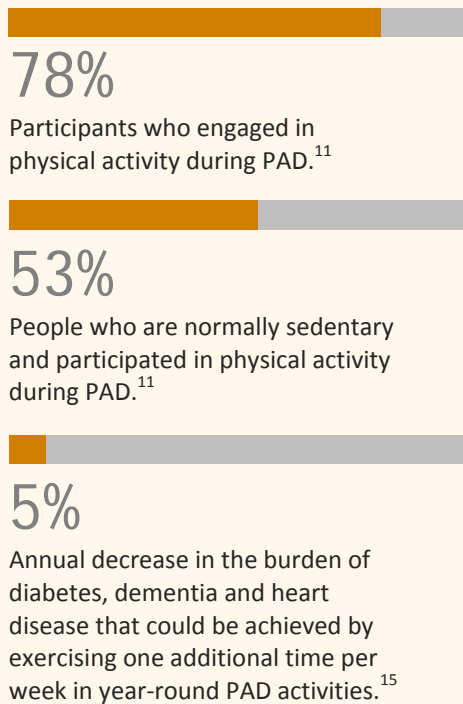


Figure 1. Organizations at PAD Resource Fairs by Sector Type, Summer 2013 (35 total)

Figure 2. Summary of PAD Physical Activity Data



Physical Activity and Health

Increased physical activity has many health benefits, such as reducing the risk of heart disease, depression, diabetes, breast cancer, colon cancer, dementia, and premature death.^{13,14}

- People who exercised at PAD reported participating in team sports, swimming, walking club, exercise class and other dancing activities for an average of 1 to 2 hours per visit.
- If PAD participants continued weekly physical activity on a year-round basis, the resulting decrease in chronic disease could save \$85,000 in direct and indirect costs annually per park. These costs include hospital care, medications, home health care, and productivity losses.¹⁵
- There are significant limitations of the physical activity and health assessment due to the lack of information on frequency of visits and pre- and post-physical activity levels.
- Overall, the rapid HIA found that even a small increase in weekly physical activity can substantially improve health among people who do not regularly exercise. To maximize these health benefits, PAD should continue to have activities that attract women and improve outreach to older adults.¹¹

Conclusions

- Expansion of PAD, as part of a comprehensive violence reduction initiative, could further reduce crime and promote better social cohesion in disadvantaged County communities. Favorable implications for downstream health consequences, such as mental illness and chronic diseases, could be realized through these efforts.
- Expansion of community policing and supervised park programming through PAD could further reduce barriers to park use and physical activity. Increased physical activity may reduce chronic diseases, especially heart disease, depression, and diabetes; however additional program evaluation is needed to track individual participants before and after PAD summer programming.
- The potential cost of crime avoided (based on findings from the original 3 PAD parks) is greater than the average cost of PAD, which includes costs of implementing rapid HIA recommendations (e.g. gang intervention outreach worker.)
- Opportunities for additional cross-sector collaboration and services co-located at the parks could improve access to health and social services, and increase community resilience.

Table 3. Summary of Average PAD Costs

\$132,000
PAD costs include Park staff, Deputy Sheriffs, services and supplies, and HIA recommendations (PAD Coordinator, program evaluation and gang intervention workers). DPH and other County resources are not included in this estimate.
\$460,000
Estimated costs savings to county government from crime avoided in 2013 for each of the original PAD program locations, as compared to pre-PAD crime in 2009*
\$85,000
Annual cost of illness that would be avoided if PAD participants sustain weekly exercise levels throughout the year.

*Based on the 2006 Los Angeles County Law Enforcement budget, and average crime types in PAD reporting districts.

Recommendations

The rapid HIA made 9 overall recommendations to maximize potential health benefits of PAD. Priority recommendations were:

- The County should target expansion of PAD to parks in communities with high crime rates and obesity prevalence that lack evening summer activities for youth and families.
- PAD staff should link participants to existing recreational programs available during other times of the year to sustain increase in park use and exercise.
- PAD leadership should hire gang intervention outreach workers and establish youth leadership and employment opportunities. County leadership should examine whether there is a need to reinstate a coordinated violence reduction initiative.
- The County should dedicate at least one full-time staff person to oversee PAD strategic planning and program implementation year-round, focusing on building partnerships with county and community organizations that offer services for at-risk youth and their families and engaging community.
- PAD leadership should further evaluate and track the costs and benefits of PAD by dedicating resources for a formal evaluation and collaborating with other local Safe Summer Parks programs for a regional study.

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To read the full Rapid Health Impact Assessment, go to www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/plan/hiec

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