



# Parks After Dark

Preventing Violence While Promoting  
Healthy, Active Living



# Introduction

City and County parks offer people a place to gather together and to engage in healthy recreational activities. In some neighborhoods and communities, the presence of violence and crime often prevent individuals from enjoying the use of their local parks. The County of Los Angeles “Parks After Dark” program was designed to keep parks open during summer evening hours when crime rates are highest and youth have fewer social and recreational opportunities because schools are closed, summer school programs have been cut, and programming for youth is limited. Parks After Dark is an example of how cross-sector collaboration can result in decreased violent crime, increased opportunities for physical activity and better community cohesion—improving the health and well-being of the County’s most vulnerable communities.

Initially conceived as a violence-prevention strategy, Parks After Dark has grown into a promising model for health promotion. Originally modeled after the City of Los Angeles’ successful Summer Night Lights program, Parks After Dark was developed as the prevention element of Los Angeles County’s Regional Gang Violence Reduction Initiative. The need for summer parks programming was specifically identified by community members residing in the initiative’s demonstration site communities. The Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation coordinates Parks After Dark in collaboration with the



Board of Supervisors, the Chief Executive Office, Department of Public Health, Sheriff’s Department, and many other Los Angeles County and community partners.

Parks After Dark currently takes place at six unincorporated county parks and offers opportunities for community residents and youth to participate in outdoor activities in a safe environment. All ages, from young children to older adults can participate in the range of recreational activities such as basketball, baseball, soccer, golf and tennis lessons, martial arts, dance classes, Zumba®, bike rides, and access to community pools and gym facilities. Parks After Dark also offers entertainment programming, including movies, talent shows and concerts, and incorporates a variety of educational programs addressing topics such as healthy cooking, literacy, parenting, arts and crafts, the juvenile justice system, and computer skills. Moreover, in communities that often lack such access, Parks After Dark connects people with health and wellness, economic, legal, and social services through resource fairs. These resource fairs engage a wide range of sectors to provide outreach to the community. Participation from Los Angeles

County departments includes: the Arts Commission, Community and Senior Services, District Attorney, Human Relations Commission, Probation, the Public Defender, Public Health, the Public Library, and Public Works. Local law enforcement, fire departments, radio stations, community- and faith-based organizations, local businesses, elected officials, and professional sports teams also participate in Parks After Dark.

During Parks After Dark events, County Deputy Sheriffs not only patrol the parks, but also participate in activities alongside community members. Their involvement sends a strong message that crime and violence are not tolerated and provides opportunities for youth, community members and law enforcement to interact in a positive context. Gang involved community members are encouraged to attend and participate in activities as long as they do so with their families.

## Community Violence Impacts Health Outcomes

In low-income communities throughout Los Angeles County, people are living with ongoing violence that puts them at a disproportionately higher risk of becoming victims of homicide and other violent crimes. Because of the threat of violence, many people in these communities do not engage in outdoor physical activities like walking through the neighborhood or allowing their children to play at local parks.

People who have high exposure to neighborhood violence or who perceive their neighborhood to be unsafe are more likely to be physically inactive and overweight.<sup>1</sup> According to a 2010 report by the Prevention Institute, violence and activity-related chronic diseases are most pervasive in disenfranchised communities, where they occur more frequently and with greater severity, making them fundamental equality issues.



In 2011, homicides in Los Angeles County claimed the lives of 611 individuals,<sup>2</sup> and approximately 37% of these homicides were gang-related.<sup>3</sup> While violent crime rates for Los Angeles County and the nation as a whole have shown a general downward trend since crime rates peaked in the 1990s, there are still communities in the County that continue to be impacted by high rates of violent crime. For example, in South Los Angeles, homicide is the leading cause of premature death, disproportionately affecting youth ages 15-24, and Hispanic and African American males. South Los Angeles also has the lowest percentage of adults in the County who believe their neighborhood is safe from crime.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, South Los Angeles has the highest childhood obesity prevalence and the lowest percentage of children with access to a safe place to play.<sup>4</sup> While studies have shown that access to parks is important for the well-being of children, particularly for those living in low-income urban areas, there is often an inequitable lack of green and open space in these communities.<sup>5</sup> These communities do not have the resources often found in higher income areas to encourage physical activity and social gathering, such as access to backyards, green and public space, and opportunities to participate in health clubs or sports programs. Public parks have the capacity to serve as meeting spaces for residents to come together, socialize, be physically active, and access health, social services, and education resources. Parks present an opportunity to reach residents with valuable information and resources while at the same time creating safe environments for families and children to play and be physically active.

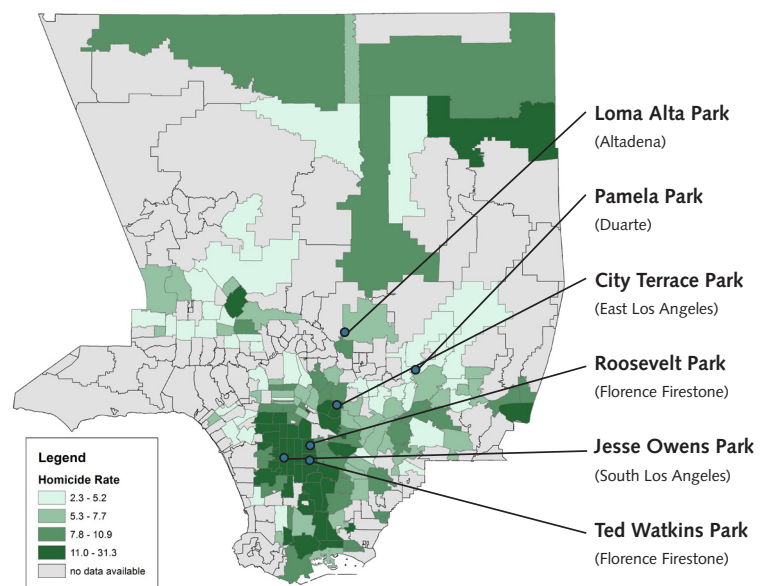
## Making the Link Between Violence Prevention and Health Promotion

Since 2010, Parks After Dark has provided community members with a safe place to gather. Residents have experienced increased physical activity, improved social cohesion and decreased violent crime in the neighborhood. Serious and violent crimes in the communities surrounding the original three parks declined 32% during the summer months between 2009 (the summer before Parks After Dark started) and 2013. At the same time, serious and violent crimes increased 18% in the nearby communities with parks that did not have the program.

The perception of safety among community members was also very high. Surveys conducted at participating parks showed that 97% of respondents felt safe while they attended Parks After Dark.

Recognizing the importance of Parks After Dark for violence prevention and its role in health promotion, Public Health

**Homicide Rates by Zip Code in Los Angeles County, 2007-2011**



has provided resources to Parks and Recreation, including direct funding, and in-kind staff support. Public Health's Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention, Injury and Violence Prevention Program staff assist Parks and Recreation staff in the strategic planning process to enhance and expand Parks After Dark. They also conduct ongoing evaluation and coordinate outreach. The partnership provides unique and critical resources such as access to health services and health information. Public Health programs involved include: the Division of Community Health Services, Office of Women's Health, Division of Environmental Health, the Nutrition and Physical Activity Program, PLACE Program, Tobacco Control and Prevention Program, Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Veterinary Public Health Program, Immunization Program, and the Division of HIV and STD Programs. Additionally, the Division of Community Health Services' Area Health Office staff participate every week in park activities, coordinate resource fairs, and conduct health education sessions during weekly walking clubs at each of the parks, one of the program's most successful components.

## Parks After Dark Builds Community Cohesion

Parks After Dark provides opportunities for neighbors to build community cohesion as illustrated by the following examples:

- A local bike club, Eastside Riders, organized a community bike ride from Roosevelt Park to Ted Watkins Park. Community members reported that they did not previously feel safe visiting different parks due to gang rivalries between the neighborhoods. However, the successful event included 42 bike riders and 33 cars that caravanned between the two parks.
- Deputy Sheriffs organized a basketball tournament with local teenagers at Roosevelt Park. The teenagers won the last three years, receiving positive media coverage in a community that had previously received much media attention for homicides and shootings. In summer 2013, a kickball tournament with several teams made up of Deputy Sheriffs, park staff, local community organizations, youth, and families competed together.



## Beyond Summer Fun: Sustaining Safe, Healthy Communities

Significant decreases in crime, increased opportunities for physical activity, and participant survey results demonstrate the positive impact of Parks After Dark. Residents desire to see the program continue. Public Health and Parks and Recreation will continue to work together to sustain Parks After Dark by engaging the support of local leadership, leveraging partnership opportunities, and collaborating with other agencies and jurisdictions. Public Health will continue to evaluate the program's impact on reducing violence, improving social cohesion, and promoting safe physical activity. Parks After Dark is a promising example of how public safety and public health intersect to address violence prevention and health promotion.

Parks After Dark transforms parks that once had a strong gang presence into vibrant and safe public spaces for residents to enjoy. People of all ages can engage in free, fun and safe recreational activities, facilitating positive interactions among community members and improving social cohesion. In addition, Parks After Dark brings together a variety of partners to provide a wide range of outreach, education, and community-building strategies in a centralized location, allowing individuals access to multiple resources at one time in their neighborhood. Ultimately, the vision for Parks After Dark is to strengthen parks as community centers, and to help transform low-income communities into resilient places that promote environmental change, violence prevention, and health through cross-sector, multi-jurisdiction collaboration.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> Broyles, S.T., Mowen, A. J., Theall, K. P., Gustat, J., Rung, A. L. (2011). Integrating social capital into a park-use and active-living framework. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 40(5):522-529.  
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- <sup>2</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Injury & Violence Prevention Program (Jan 2013). Number and Rate per 100,000 of Homicides Among LA County Residents by Year, 2007-2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Gang Homicides in LA County, 1980-2010. LA County Department of Public Health, Injury & Violence Prevention Program. April 26, 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology. Key indicators of health by service planning areas. March 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris, A. and Stieglitz, O. (2002). "Children in Los Angeles Parks: A Study of Equity, Quality and Children's Satisfaction with Neighborhood Parks," *Town Planning Review*, 74(4): 467-488.

# Parks After Dark: A Vital Community Program

Since implementation in the summer of 2010, Parks After Dark has provided significant community benefits, including increased physical activity, improved social cohesion and decreased violent crime

## Serious and Violent Crimes

Serious and violent crimes in the communities surrounding the original three parks declined 32% during the summer months between 2009 (the summer before program start) and 2013...

32%

Parks with  
PARKS AFTER DARK program

VS

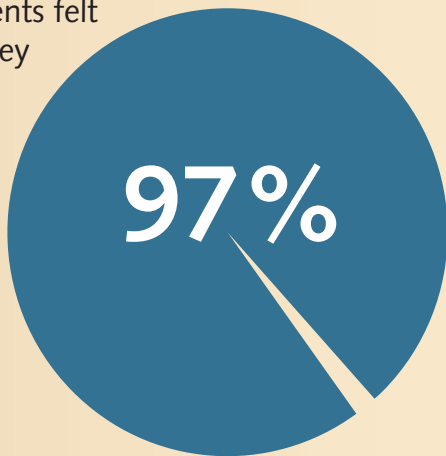
18%

... compared to an 18% increase in serious and violent crime during this same time period in nearby communities with parks that did not have the Parks After Dark program.

Parks without  
PARKS AFTER DARK program

## Safety

The perception of safety among community members was also very high. Results from a 2013 participant survey showed that 97% of the respondents felt safe while they attended Parks After Dark.



## Satisfaction

More than 97% of participants surveyed each year indicated they would participate again in the Parks After Dark program.

## Visits

From summer 2010 to summer 2013, during the months of June, July and August, more than 187,000 visits were made to the six participating parks.

187,000



16,000

## Physical Activity Participation

In summer 2013, more than 16,000 community residents participated in physical activities, including many people who indicated that they have a sedentary lifestyle or low levels of regular physical activity.



**Los Angeles County**  
**Department of Public Health**  
 Injury and Violence Prevention Program  
 695 S. Vermont Ave. South Tower, 14th Floor  
 Los Angeles, CA 90005  
 (213) 351-7888

**Los Angeles County Department of Public Health**

**Jonathan E. Fielding, MD, MPH**  
 Director and Health Officer

**Cynthia A. Harding, MPH**  
 Chief Deputy Director

**Steven Teutsch, MD, MPH**  
 Chief Science Officer

**Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention**

**Paul Simon, MD, MPH**  
 Director

**Tony Kuo, MD, MSHS**  
 Deputy Director

**Linda Aragon, MPH**  
 Chief, Programs and Policy

**Andrea Welsing, MPH**  
 Director, Injury and Violence Prevention Program

**Kelly Fischer, MA**

**Isabelle Sternfeld, MSPH**

**Nicolle Perras, MA, MPH**

**Celeste Del Valle, MPH**

**Christine Li, MHS**

**Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors**

**Gloria Molina**  
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**Mark Ridley-Thomas**  
 Second District

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 Third District

**Don Knabe**  
 Fourth District

**Michael D. Antonovich**  
 Fifth District

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