



# SUMMER NIGHT LIGHTS PROGRAM EVALUATION 2016

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*This report includes the results for the Community Resident Focus Groups, Community Intervention Worker Focus Groups, and Surveys with Youth Squad Members.*

*Permission to use these data was provided by the City of Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD). Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this study, however, are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GRYD Office.*



## Community Resident Focus Group Results

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Summer Night Lights (SNL) is a gang reduction and intervention program that operates from 7:00 PM to 11:00 PM in 32 parks across the city of Los Angeles. The targeted parks are located in communities historically impacted by gang-related violence, during the summer season in which violence tends to peak. Each Wednesday through Saturday night of the summer, the otherwise desolate parks come to life with music, programming, and hot, served food. Children and youth fill the soccer fields and basketball courts while adults and other parents commiserate with plates of food nearby. Programs and activities include music, exercise classes, celebrity and athlete visits, arts and crafts, free bike repairs, and haircuts.

To better understand SNL's impact, feedback forums were conducted with community residents attending SNL in a random selection of six parks:

- Hubert Humphrey Recreation Center (12560 Filmore St., Pacoima, CA 91331)
- Glassell Park Recreation Center (3650 Verdugo Rd., Los Angeles, CA 90065)
- Lemon Grove Recreation Center (4959 Lemon Grove Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90029)
- Green Meadows Recreation Center (431 E. 89th St., Los Angeles, CA 90003)
- Mount Carmel Recreational Center (830 W. 70th St., Los Angeles, CA 90044)
- Sun Valley Recreational Center (8133 Vineland Ave., Sun Valley, CA 91352)

Two other parks (Normandale Recreation Center and Jordan Downs Recreation Center) were selected as well, but the research team was unable to conduct focus groups at the arranged dates and times for various reasons. At Normandale, only a few residents were in attendance on the night we scheduled the focus groups, and at Jordan Downs, the SNL attendees were almost exclusively minors.

Feedback forums participation ranged between 3 and 20 adults from each selected park. Evaluation team members were instructed to recruit a diverse sample of residents and were entered in a raffle to win a gift card. Feedback forums lasted between 45-60 minutes and focused on four topics:

- (1) How safe do residents feel in their communities?
- (2) Where do residents go for help in their communities? What places do they avoid for fear of safety?
- (3) How do residents perceive LAPD officers in their communities?
- (4) What suggestions do residents have for SNL programming and administration?

To answer the first question, residents were asked to classify issues in their communities. To answer the second question, residents were asked to draw a map of their communities and mark spaces of safety with a green pen and spaces of danger with a red pen. Results from this second part of the study were ultimately inconclusive and have thus been left out of this report. Finally, residents were asked to share their experiences with LAPD officers. SNL Evaluation Team members

took detailed field notes of responses to all four questions. In total, 54 community residents participated in feedback forums.

## Problems Faced by Communities near SNL Parks

To understand the neighborhoods near SNL parks, community residents were asked to classify identified issues as a “big problem,” “minor problem,” or “not a problem.” In certain parks, some issues were more salient than others; however, the data may still be useful aggregated to provide a snapshot of the most important concerns to community residents attending SNL.

There are two important caveats to the data presented in this section. First, the chosen methodology called for residents to stand under posters that relate with their answers to the prompted questions. In some parks, it is conceivable that participants just moved with the group, causing a possible inflation of the numbers. In many of the parks, a handful of more outspoken residents led the discussions on these subjects and may have influenced the other participants. Second, the feedback forum in one selected park (Glassell Park) resulted in data that was significantly aberrant to the norm from the other parks, reporting that none of the below topics (except for drug use and sales) were problems in their neighborhood providing few if any comments. Thus, though the total number of community residents who participated in the feedback forums was 54, the data presented below excluded nine from Glassell Park. Data presented also exclude those who abstained from answering. The total number of participants included in the table below is 45.

*Q: Do you think the following issues are a “big problem,” “minor problem,” or “not a problem” in your community?*

	<b>Big Problem</b>	<b>Minor Problem</b>	<b>Not a Problem</b>
Shootings	25 (56%)	10 (22%)	6 (13%)
Drug Use	38 (84%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)
Drug Sales	12 (27%)	12 (27%)	3 (7%)
Fights	13 (29%)	18 (40%)	10 (22%)
Assaults	3 (7%)	12 (27%)	26 (58%)
Alcohol	22 (49%)	0 (0%)	16 (36%)
Gang Intimidation	13 (29%)	6 (13%)	22 (49%)
Gang Recruitment	18 (40%)	12 (27%)	8 (18%)
Domestic Violence	4 (9%)	4 (9%)	33 (73%)
Human/Sex Trafficking	4 (9%)	4 (9%)	20 (44%)

School-Based Violence	2 (4%)	24 (53%)	15 (33%)
Homelessness	38 (84%)	3 (7%)	0 (0%)

Across the parks, the most salient issues were homelessness, drug use, alcohol, and shootings. School-based violence, fights, and gang recruitment were significant issues as well. In Humphreys and Mt. Carmel specifically, shootings and drug use were unanimously classified as “big problems,” and in Green Meadows, Sun Valley, Lemon Grove, Sun Valley, and Mt. Carmel, drinking/alcohol and homelessness were of concern to residents, though less in severity.

### Relationships with LAPD

Focus group participants were forthcoming about their relationships with the LAPD officers in and around their neighborhoods. Responses tended to be polarized by park; in some parks, residents seemed to have reasonably communicative relationships with LAPD, and in others, residents expressed intense antagonism to law enforcement efforts in the area. To evidence this split in the data, consider the following comments made at three of the six parks in the study:

- “The [officers] here are so awesome. They interact with the kids.”
- [Translation from Spanish] *“The relationship has changed for the better. If we have a question, we can ask them and they answer.”*
- [Translation from Spanish] *“They are good people. They play with the kids, do Zumba, talk to us. We have confidence in them.”*
- “I used to be afraid of cops, but now I feel safe when I am around them.”

In all of these parks, some residents expressed knowing LAPD officers and others interacted with officers in the context of a problem or only in passing.

In contrast, residents in other parks expressed deep distrust with law enforcement, evidenced by the following comments:

- One participant stated that what the officers were doing was wrong, just “shooting up Blacks and Mexicans.” Another agreed that they “don’t trust the police.”
- Another remarked that there was “no freedom” and there are “more police shootings” than there used to be.”
- [Translation from Spanish] *“There is no relationship [between the community and LAPD]. We don’t know if it’s improved or worsened.”*
- One gentleman agreed that there is no relationship [between LAPD and the community] and that it has gotten worse. [...] He stated that it is “not safe” and “everyone keeps their distance. He also stated that the tension is high on the streets.
- [One woman said that] they are around, but not always when you need them. When asked [to explain further], none of them were open to sharing their opinions further.

In parks where residents reported fewer community problems, relationships with LAPD tended to be more neutral or positive, whereas in parks with greater perceived neighborhood problems,

residents held more antagonistic views of LAPD. Overall, it can be concluded that community perceptions of LAPD vary greatly between parks, depending on the disposition of individual officers, the unique composition of social problems around specific parks, and other social forces.

## **Recommendations**

Based on responses from focus group participants as well as the limitations of the research design that emerged as the study progressed, the following recommendations are provided:

1. LAPD should prioritize sending community-oriented officers to SNL parks.
2. In light of the range of problems faced by SNL communities, perhaps funding and programming should be administered in tiers. In communities more imminently concerned with gang-related shootings and violence, increased funding may be focused toward violence prevention and collaboration with LAPD.
3. To adequately evaluate programming in SNL parks, a more aggressive research design is necessary, requiring greater funds and personnel.



## Community Intervention Worker Focus Group Results

Community Intervention Workers (CIWs) serve a critical role in reducing gang violence around SNL parks. CIWs main responsibilities include de-escalating conflict between local gangs, strategically working with communities to reduce gang violence, and connecting communities to relevant services. CIWs are often from the neighborhoods they serve, some having been raised on the same blocks as SNL parks.

To gain the perspectives, the SNL evaluation team conducted a focus group with ten CIWs. All ten serve as leads for their teams. Though the findings below are not broadly generalizable, they provide insight into the relationship between intervention agencies and SNL operations. CIW participants were asked to reflect on three questions:

1. What are the main issues and problems faced by the communities around your assigned SNL parks?
2. What comments do you have about your relationship with LAPD?
3. What are the relationships like between you and SNL partners (e.g., the GRYD Office, and other involved entities)?

The focus group lasted approximately two hours. To protect participants, names and identifying information about the parks they serve have been removed from this report.

### Problems Faced by Communities near SNL Parks

When asked about the main issues in and around SNL parks, CIWs discussed the increase in homelessness, prevalence of graffiti, drug and alcohol abuse, human trafficking, gang recruitment, and nearby shootings. None felt that these issues had increased in severity from the previous year, and most discussed the matter casually, noting that social problems were the reason SNL operated in those parks in the first place. When discussing drug and alcohol abuse, gang recruitment, and shootings, CIWs provided comments on whether LAPD had given them “space” to handle emergent situations, to be addressed in more detail in a later section.

Focus group participants noted homelessness, human trafficking (referred to as “prostitution”), and graffiti as general problems, though none remarked that it impacted SNL programming. One CIW noted that because “there were no longer any more benches, there were no longer any places where they can [hang around].” Another said, “Homelessness is in our community, but it isn’t close to the park.” A third participant added, “We have had problems in the past with homeless people, but now they’ve been kind of staying away.” On the topic of human trafficking, one CIW noted, “There’s a little bit of prostitution, not a lot, but it’s away from the park.” Finally, commenting on the graffiti around parks, one CIW remarked, “The graffiti was bad—I mean, in that area, it’s always pretty bad. I know we use the 311 app and report it, but it just comes right back. [T]here’s not much we can do about that.” Homelessness, human trafficking, and graffiti posed significant problems but did not appear to impede CIWs’ work in SNL parks.

In contrast, speaking about drug and alcohol abuse, gang recruitment, and shootings, participants expressed serious concern. One CIW said, “There’s a lot of alcoholics. People [...] are really hooked into alcohol.” Another noted that this past summer, “There was issues with alcohol, [...] but LAPD gave us our respect to deal with it.” In reference to gang recruitment and activity, one participant said, “In every one of the communities we represent here, there’s always going to be some kind of recruitment whether it’s subtle or upfront.” One commented:

“We had a good hang on what we were going to do throughout the summer, [...] until we started having shootings. There [were] no hits, but there [were] shootings.”

On the same issue, another participant remarked:

“We ended up having a homicide from some taggers that actually were beefing it with each other. [...] Toward the end, [...] we were starting to wrap up and sure enough, there was another murder about three blocks up. [...] We had to cancel [a neighborhood barbeque and resource fair] for safety reasons so [...] we transported them out.”

Notably, one CIW remarked, “In the park, it’s safe when SNL is going on. But when that’s not happening, then it’s a very ‘active’ neighborhood.” Another said:

“We had a lot of incidents right before the beginning of SNL, [but] we were able to be proactive and bring some peace to the neighborhood.”

Again, in these responses, CIWs referenced collaborative relationships with LAPD in addressing emergent situations as they arose. Importantly, many expressed that SNL provided the neighborhoods respite from gang-related violence.

## Relationships with LAPD

Focus group participants were forthcoming about their relationships with the LAPD officers assigned to their parks. When asked what their relationships were like with LAPD, one participant said, “Not a problem,” and the majority of the participants in the room nodded in agreement. The overarching sentiment was that when officers’ goals aligned with the goals of SNL staff and CIWs, the relationships between all involved parties proceeded smoothly.

As referenced earlier, several focus group participants expressed pride that law enforcement shared authority with them in handling emergent situations. Either concomitant to or preceding LAPD intervention, CIWs seemed to appreciate the “space” and respect to manage neighborhood violence. One CIW said:

“There was a lot of communication with LAPD. Working back and forth, they let me handle the situation before [they did]. So they gave us a lot of respect on that end; of course, we give them respect then too.”

After recounting the circumstances around an unpredicted shooting during the summer, the same CIW noted that when the community saw an increase of police in the neighborhood, the CIWs made sure to alert the community of what was happening without getting into too many details. In his testimony, the reciprocal relationship between CIWs and LAPD officers is emphasized.

Though all focus group participants agreed that their relationships with LAPD officers were generally cooperative, two narratives highlight important considerations. On his interactions with a particular officer, one CIW said:

“We had an officer that literally just went into the crowd and said, ‘hey, I’m going to visit you in a couple weeks. Mentioned his name and everything. [...] I mean, come on...”

For this CIW and the others in the group, the main issue is whether or not assigned officers bring a community-building perspective to their work in the park. Explaining further, he commented:

“We’re not here to oppress. We’re there to build a community and help the community rise up. But if they’re [referring to LAPD] coming in with the mentality, ‘oppression is suppression,’ it doesn’t work. [...] We don’t need that.”

Another CIW echoed this sentiment, detailing some of the interactions with one officer assigned to their park:

“We had an officer that was really good with the kids, [but] the only thing he didn’t want is CIWs talking to him. He thought that was a bad look; ‘what were the kids going to say?’ [He didn’t realize that for] some of these kids—that’s their older brother, that’s their older cousin. [...] That same officer was only assigned to be at the park until 11:30 [PM]. It was 11:35, [...] and he was already like, ‘what’s going on over here? It’s already past 11:30 and I got things to do.’ [...] I know they go through trainings [...], but I don’t think they quite understand that for us, those officers are just assigned to our park.”

Speaking about other officers at the park, the CIW continued:

“[The] officers assigned to our park—they kind of showed their human side. They weren’t being suppressive. [They were] engaged in the community, helped give out popcorn. And I think that was due to their command. [...]”

Many CIWs agreed that the relationship between LAPD and intervention agencies had changed in recent years, as LAPD officers seemed better trained and amenable to collaborating with CIWs in preventing violence around SNL parks.

## Relationships with GRYD and Rec & Parks

Focus group participants noted discrepancies between parks with regard to certain SNL administrative tasks. When asked about their perspectives on SNL administration, responses centered on three issues: the SNL staff hiring process, relationships with Recreation & Parks, and disparities in budget administration by park.

Many CIWs expressed frustration with the hiring process for SNL staff. Speaking about the hiring of cluster and site coordinators, one CIW said:

“The support staff should be returned to the agencies. [...] They should allow the agencies to hire those park coordinators [from the community]], because not only

do they know the community, they know the people. [...] [GRYD decided to] directly do the hiring. When you ask your agencies to send us those who are qualified, what are you doing? We don't know how to hire people or what?"

Another participant expressed concern about the attitude of the cluster coordinator hired at his park. Connecting her actions to the fact that she wasn't originally from the neighborhood around the park, he commented:

"It's kind of hard when you're trying to do the work and [...] you're working with people that don't know our community. [...] When you're telling the community, 'Oh, you're lucky I'm giving you this'—[...] you're telling them [they're] worth nothing. [...] This is the time we need to show them better and equip them, help them."

About the structure of management in each SNL park, one CIW said:

"This year, they gave the park coordinators, not the cluster coordinators, the authority to manage the support staff. [...] They were telling [CIWs], 'you sit right here by the restroom and make sure no one tags.' [...] We're not here to do this. [...] We're here to keep you safe."

Some CIWs also noted a tension between SNL and Recreation & Parks staff that encumbered their work with SNL. One said, "A lot of things that we were able to do we couldn't do. [...] It seems like there's a battle between the Rec & Parks [referring to Recreation & Parks] and SNL." Another mentioned casually amidst other comments that it seemed like parks and recs is trying to take over. "They want to run it." A third participant commented, "The Parks and rec—it seems like it's different this year than it was in past years. They're fighting [...] to have the whole program for themselves."

A final concern for CIWs dealt with how funds were distributed for SNL-related work. Some noted that their budgets for SNL didn't come in until a week after programming had begun. One complained:

"It was very confusing. I didn't know until we were already there [that] you had to go through the cluster coordinator—they were the ones directing the money."

Many CIW participants complained about the application process to have funds approved. For example, a CIW said:

"They have more regulations as far as you couldn't buy gift cards. You had to go through the cluster coordinator. [...] And they don't tell you that if you don't spend the money at a specific time that it doesn't roll over. You lose it. [...] You have to submit requests as well. If you're going to spend over a certain amount of money that same week, you have to send out a request."

Another mentioned that when SNL staff at their park decided not to buy condiments, he took on the cost himself. "It came out of my pockets to go buy ketchup, to go buy mayonnaise, to go buy onions," he said, adding, "You have to feed the community."

Focus group participants expressed concerned about the broader disparities between SNL parks. Several said that only parks that were equipped to leverage local donors were able to carry out regular SNL programming that matched attendees' interests. Nodding in agreement, another CIW remarked:

"What we usually do [is] raffle off some bikes, toys for the kids, and then the other thing that people are always looking forward [to] is the *loteria*. [Before,] we had a budget that we were responsible [for]. As long as we showed our receipts on what we spent the stuff for—and not only that, but when we gave it away, we took pictures [and] we took signature for the receipts. [...] This year, [...] it was totally different. It was just like no spirit. [...] You couldn't count on the money the opening day because you got to put in a request and see I they will approve it."

On the overall budget, two CIWs noted that they were able to make \$150 a week last the summer through donations. One said, "I'm just blessed that we have a board that is really active in [getting donations]."

Additionally, parks where attendees were able to contribute to the programming were privileged. As one CIW explained:

"You have the 'haves' and you have the 'have nots'. The 'have nots' still have nothing, and the 'haves' get rewarded for being part of the softball team [or] soccer team before the summer. So what happens is that when Summer Night Lights comes around, they get rewarded. You don't have to pay memberships. [...] So the 'have nots' don't have the opportunity to be a part of the soccer. They don't have the opportunity to be a part of the softball."

Echoing the concern that families who pay for extracurricular activities during the school year are automatically prioritized in the free summer programs, another participant shared:

"People that have been able to pay before Summer Night Lights [know that] when they come back, 'We're going to give you this and you gotta pay for so much, but then during the summer you're not going to pay anything.' So, [the enrollment lists] are already occupied, [...] and the have nots have nothing."

Another agreed, noting:

There [are] some communities that it's difficult to leverage resources for whatever reason; [...] there's other communities that are blessed [...] because they have good neighbors.

Reflecting on the budget issues for the summer, the CIW continued, "There was no training on [...] how do I leverage donors [...], how do I leverage corporations to invest." Another supported this critique, saying, "There was a training at city hall, [...] but they never touched up on stuff like that. [...] They should have given us the proper training during that time."

## Recommendations

Based on responses from focus group participants, several recommendations emerge:

1. Continue offering SNL programming, possibly expanding it beyond the summer.
2. Continue building collaborative relationships between SNL, LAPD, and Intervention Providers.
3. Establish greater transparency for both SNL staff and CIWs about the structure of management and reimbursement policies.
4. Provide training to CIWs to effectively raise funds and procure donations for SNL programming.
5. Monitor participation rosters and rates across parks to ensure equal opportunity to all SNL attendees.
6. Provide opportunities for SNL staff to work collaboratively with CIWs on SNL administration.



## Youth Squad Member Online Survey Results

In order for Summer Night Lights to run effectively, each individual hired by SNL plays a different role in ensuring the program creates an inclusive and safe environment for its community members. On average, approximately 300 young people were hired to work for SNL each year, known as the Youth Squad (YS). The YS members are in essence the backbone of programming, given they are responsible for cooking meals, running program activities and interacting with the community residents. The purpose of this section is to provide a basic idea of who were the YS, as well as their perceptions of the community and of the SNL program.

### Methods

In order to participate in this study, the YS had to meet the following conditions:

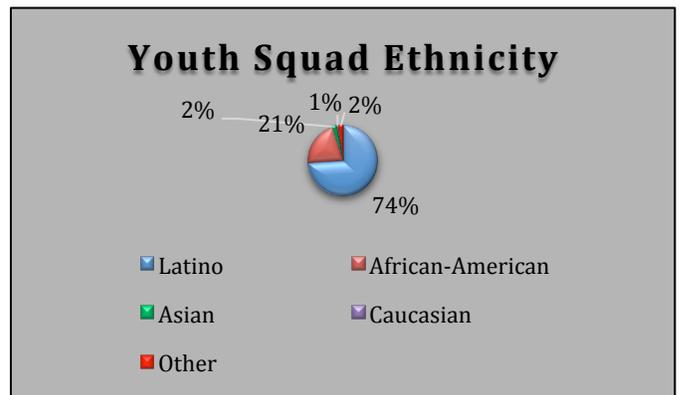
- All YS had to be employed by SNL at the time of the study.
- All YS had to be 18 years of age or older at the time of the study.

Youth Squad who met the conditions to participate in this study were invited<sup>1</sup> via email to complete a survey designed through SurveyMonkey. The first 80 participants received a \$5.00 electronic Starbucks gift card as compensation for their time. Two weeks after the survey went live, the evaluation team closed the survey and exported all responses for analysis. In total, 124 YS participants (37%) out of 334 completed the survey this summer.

### Youth Squad Demographics

The Youth Squad (YS) were employed by SNL each year to run the program in their respective parks. They were easily identifiable by their notorious grey shirts, but most importantly through their interactions with the community. In their respective parks, the YS were responsible for cooking the meals SNL served on a nightly basis and often led SNL program activities.

This year, the majority of YS employees (61%) self-identified as female, with 40% self-identified as male. Their ages ranged from 17-25 years old, with an average age of 21 years old. Out of the 124 participants who completed the survey, 29% were 19 years of age; 17% were 17-18 years of age; 13% were 22 years old; 10% were 20 years of age; 9% were 21 years of age. The ethnic composition of the YS included 76% Latino, followed by 22% who identified as African-Americans.



<sup>1</sup> There were some delays in receiving Youth Squad emails from the GRYD Office. Therefore, the survey was administered in the last few weeks of SNL programming.

This year<sup>2</sup>, 72% of the YS who completed the survey stated this was their “*first time*” working for SNL. The remaining 35% of YS indicated they had worked for SNL in the last four years. Additionally, 58% of the YS have lived in their respected communities “*all their life*”, followed by 17% who have lived in their communities for at least 11 years. Given that 75% of the YS had lived in their communities for 11+ years, 82% stated they felt “*somewhat*” or “*very strong*” sense of belonging to their respected communities.

### Youth Squad Curriculum

The opportunity for employment was not the only benefit SNL provided young people over the summer. For example, before programming officially kicked off, SNL dedicated one whole week of training and workshops. The workshops ranged from financial literacy to effective communication skills. To gauge the impact of the workshops, all YS were asked to reflect and think about the skills they gained over the summer. Overwhelmingly, 88% of YS stated the biggest skill they gained were “*working with children*”, followed by 83% who stated one of the skills they also gained was “*creativity*” and “*working with youth*.” Similarly, 80% of the YS gained skills “*working with families*” and “*teamwork/collaboration*.”

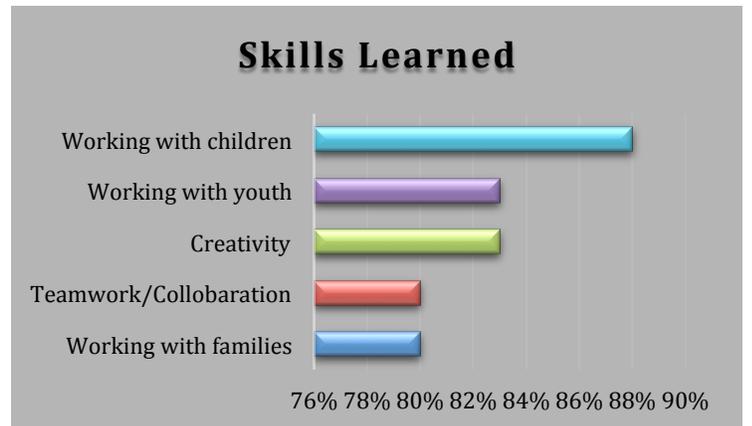
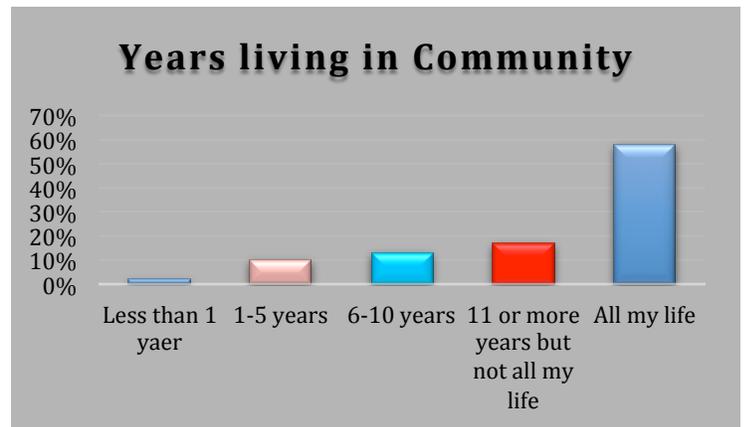
Additionally, the survey prompted the YS to highlight trainings/workshops they found the *most helpful* to their personal/professional development and these were their responses:

- Budgeting/Financial Management
- Interviewing Skills
- Working with Children
- Leadership
- Effective Communication

### Youth Squad and the Community

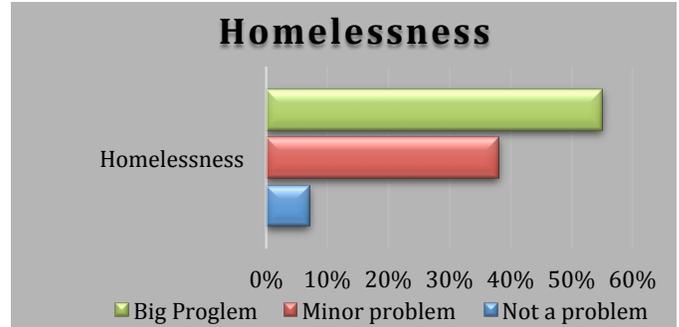
In order to understand the community perceptions beyond the surface, we asked them to identify the safety concerns they saw in their communities. These safety concerns included “*shootings*”, “*drug use*”, “*drug sales*”, “*fights*”, “*assaults*”, “*drinking/alcohol*”, “*intimidation by gang members*”, “*gang recruitment*”, “*domestic violence*”, “*school-based violence*”, “*homelessness*”, “*human/sex*

<sup>2</sup> YS who have worked for SNL previously were promoted to Lead Youth Squad, Site Coordinators and Cluster Coordinators depending on individual site needs.

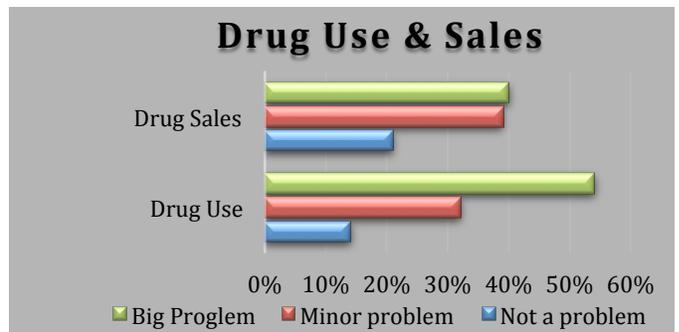


trafficking.” For each of these safety concerns, YS assessed whether the concern was “not a problem”, “minor problem” or “big problem” in their communities. As a reader, it is important to understand the results to follow only represented the YS perceptions of their communities and do not necessary reflect actual crime rates.

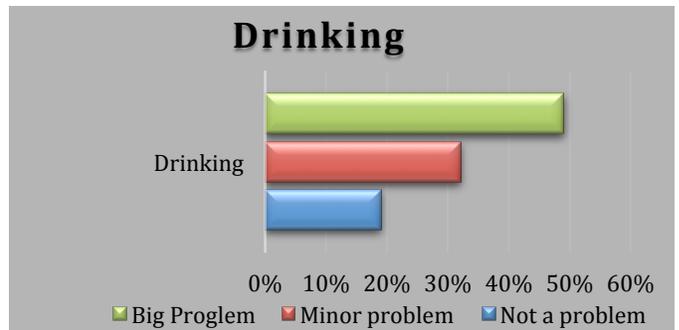
**Homelessness.** Similar to the findings presented in the Community Intervention Worker focus group results, the biggest concern YS identified in their communities were related to homelessness. Slightly more than half (55%) of the YS perceived homelessness as a *big problem* in their communities.



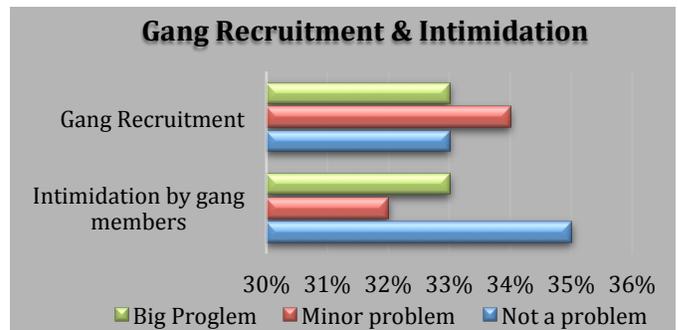
**Drug Use & Sales.** The second biggest perceived safety concerns through the eyes of the YS were “drug use” and “drug sales.” With 54% of YS stated drug use was a “big problem” in their communities, followed by 40% who saw drug sales as a *big problem*. It is important to note that last year, the YS perceived drug use and drug sales as the number one concern in their communities, which differed from this year.



**Drinking.** With 49% of the YS perceived drinking/alcohol as a *big problem* in their communities, drinking alcohol ranked in as number three, as a pressing concern in the communities.



**Gang Recruitment & Intimidation.** Split evenly at 33% the YS agreed that gang recruitment and intimidation was a *big problem* in their respected communities. Interestingly enough, the YS appeared to vary in responses in regards to how big of a problem gang recruitment was. For example, 33% stated it was a *big problem*, while 33% stated it was *not a problem*.



Youth Squad were also asked to describe their communities. Their responses revealed that despite apparent problems, majority of them expressed tremendous pride and sense of belonging to their respective communities. From the responses, it is apparent that YS perceived their communities as part of an “*extended family*” that is hurt and needs support. For example, YS often used the word “*love*” when describing their communities:

*“I love my community, I know it is not the best, but I will not give up on it. Every community has its flaws.”*

*“I love my community it just needs healing.”*

Some YS stated they were “*grateful*” to be a part of the communities they were born into, despite the many structural issues low-income communities of color have historically faced. To these YS, their communities were resilient and hardworking in the face of adversity because they had to support their families. Others stated they will not “*give up*” on their communities because every community has its flaws, while others stated their communities have “*bad times, but also—many good days.*”

*“My community is full of strong and hardworking members that are willing to do everything to overcome struggles and support families.”*

*“I would say my community is always busy and on the go. There’s some unity but not fully. Also hustle would be a good way to describe my community because people are always working hard to make ends meet.”*

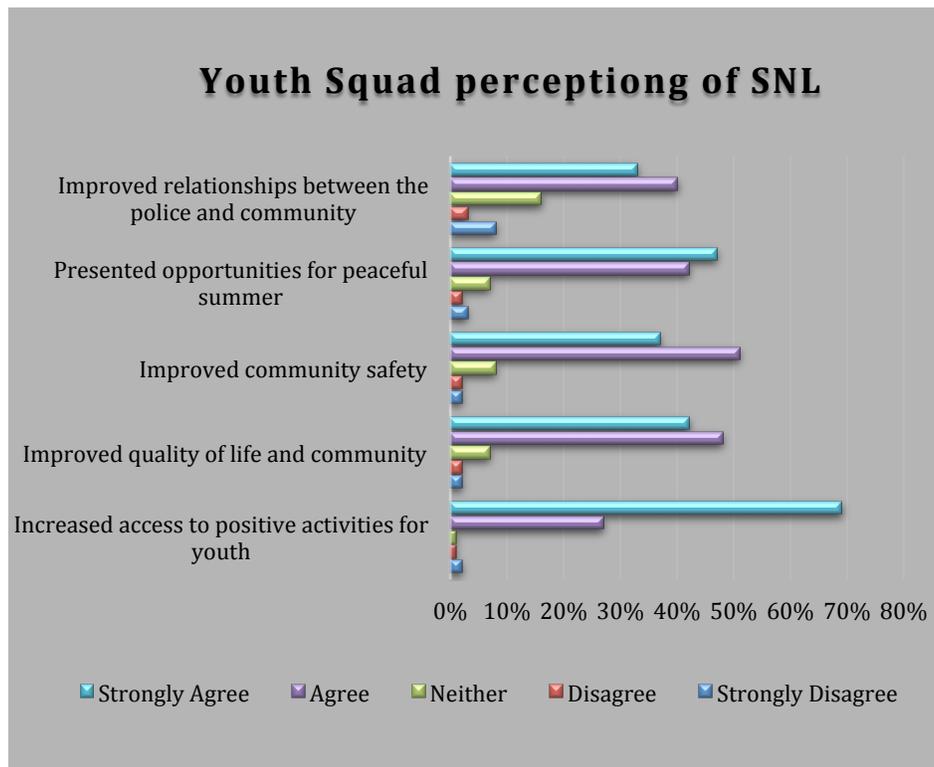
Despite and overwhelmingly positive response to the way YS perceived their communities, these communities also faced challenges. For example, some YS stated their communities had a lot of room for “*necessary improvements.*” Youth Squad stated that sometimes their communities are only defined by the negative problems it has historically faced such as: “*violence*” and “*low education.*”

*“Apart from the gang issues around my area it isn’t much—I am ready to leave it right away.”*

*“Dangerous, untrustworthy.”*

*“Extensive animosity towards police and a lack of well-educated community members.”*

## Summer Night Lights Perceptions



Given that, the Gang Reduction & Youth Development (GRYD) Office's mission is to *strengthen community resilience to the influence of gangs and gang violence*. We wanted to see how YS felt about SNL's ability to transform communities over the course of the summer. Overwhelmingly, 96% of the YS *agreed or strongly agreed* that SNL increased the access to positive activities for the youth. SNL provided the community with a safe space where they can socialize with each other or with members of their communities.

- 90% *agreed or strongly agreed* SNL improved the quality of life of the community.
- 89% *agreed or strongly agreed* that SNL programming improved the community's chance of having a peaceful summer.
- 88% who *agreed or strongly agreed* SNL improved the safety of the parks.
- 73% of the YS *agreed or strongly agreed* that SNL improved the community's relationships with the police.

When the YS were asked to describe in what ways does SNL play a role in strengthening youth/young adults, family, and community resilience to the influence of gangs, YS viewed the SNL program as a mechanism that gave them a sense of purpose because it allowed them to do something for their communities. For example, the YS responses described how this collaboration among SNL and themselves a chance to open community eyes' to the world by teaching them something "*new everyday*."

*"We work together to demonstrate to these individuals on the importance of education and living life in a safe way."*

*“SNL plays a role, because once kids and family come together we all get along. But SNL also influenced me to make a difference in myself and community. SNL has made a big change from helping families eat, and helping kids learn more about themselves. SNL brings a lot of network and doors open to those who participate in SNL.”*

*“I do believe SNL plays a role in this mission, I felt that we did a very good job, whether it was improvised or not, this summer in not only engaging kids with different types of activities but by actually heading their ideas out and bring them come true, actually investing time in them and spending more time with them, teaching and getting emotionally close with them as they felt the same way towards us.”*

Additionally, the YS agreed that SNL effectively lived up to its mission by providing an inclusive environment where community members were accepted regardless of their social status, ethnicity, race and gender. With that being said, in the eyes of the YS, SNL accomplished its goal by first creating a safe and inclusive environment free of negativity and malicious intent:

*“SNL does play a role in the mission of strengthen youth /young adults, and families because it offers a safer environment and activities that I entertains them.”*

*“Yes, it allowed children and families to rely on this program to entertain them and give them an excuse to go out and be in a family friendly environment.”*

According to the YS inside SNL parks, the youth were untouchable by the influence of gangs. Inside this environment, the youth had the opportunity to interact with one another and build connections. However, this environment was not just for the youth, but for the youth’s family as well. In SNL parks, the youth and family had the opportunity to interact with one another and to build relationships that otherwise would not have been built.

*“Yes, in many ways. SNL helps bring the family together and enjoy themselves keeping them entertained with many activities that keeps teens away from hanging around with bad influences. SNL gives teens something to do instead of them being out in the streets getting into trouble.”*

*“Yes, because it gives the children and family something to do for the summer. The cost of having fun is zero when it comes to SNL so people of all backgrounds can come. Activities are facilitated by the Youth Squad who play an important role in their growth. With SNL, children are less likely to wander the streets and less likely to be recruited by gangs. SNL engaged community members. If one were to take several snapshots of our park, we would see smiles and hear laughter.”*

*“Yes, SNL keeps the community active and reduces the amount of crime committing during the summer. It as well helps the community come together as one and have fun regardless of where they come from.”*

The overarching theme that is prevalent in most, if not all of the YS responses is that SNL extended its hand to communities who are often neglected and invisible in our society. Majority of YS were grateful SNL “offered”, “involved”, “brought” and “provided” resources and services they otherwise would have not received for free. The concept of free is key here because SNL operates in communities that are historically low income, meaning these individuals often do not have the resources to engage in recreational activities.

Under the umbrella of free services, the following activities were what the YS perceived as most effective in promoting a sense of community and togetherness.

- **Meals Served-** One of SNL's most sought out activities is the free meals it provides the community members on a nightly basis. This year alone, SNL provided 431, 577 meals across its 32 parks in Los Angeles. With that being said, 92% of the YS stated serving meals was the most effective activity in bringing the community together.
- **Sports-** This year, all 32 SNL parks offered 2-3 sports leagues (e.g., basketball, softball, or soccer) to the community. In total, 9,961 individuals participated in these leagues and the YS took notice of that. Overall, 90% of the YS saw *sports* as the medium that united their communities over the summer.
- **Art Workshops-** Across 32 parks SNL provided art workshops for the children, youth and parents twice a week. Art workshops included, but were not limited to ceramics, illustration and painting. In total 25,913 community members participated in the art workshops offered by SNL and 75% of the YS stated it brought the community together.
- **Exercise Classes (Zumba) -** During SNL programming, Zumba classes were offered to the community members twice a week during the summer. During Fall Nights, the classes were offered once a week. In total, 8,854 community members participated in Zumba classes that promoted health and wellbeing. For the most part, more than two-thirds of YS (69%) agreed that Zumba classes were effective in bringing their communities together.
- **Movie Screenings-** Finally, 68% of the YS perceived movie screenings as an effective medium that brought the community together during the summer. Thanks to its partnerships with Disney and Paramount studios, SNL was able to screen "*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows*" and "*Zootopia*."

## LAPD and the Community

Even though 73% of YS *agreed or strongly agreed* that SNL improved the community's relationship with the police there responses to our open-ended question of how they perceived LAPD interactions with the community were not so clear-cut. The YS responses revealed extreme polarization in regards to LAPD as some stated the police interacted with the community, while others stated the police did not interact with them at all.

Some YS perceived LAPD's interactions with the community in a positive light because they were vigilant and engaged with the community during SNL programming. One YS member described how LAPD went beyond their responsibilities because they took several community members to a Dodger game.

*"LAPD were always vigilant and were engaged with the community. Whether it would be a small conversation with a community member or participating in the activities alongside the community, LAPD did a very good job interacting with the community. Once they even took several community members to a Dodger game and also gave out gear for free. LAPD can continue on doing what they do because the community sees them as good people that just want to help out."*

*"We had a great LAPD officer at our site and everyone loved him [including] the children, teens, and parents. He played with the little kids every day, and gave advice to teens and parent of teens who had problems. He also brought in some gift for raffles a couple of times. He inspired many people and told them that anything was possible if they tried hard accomplishing it."*

In contrast, YS also expressed negative sentiment towards LAPD because of the way they interacted with the community. For example, some YS stated the police officers would harass the community members based on their appearance. At other times, the YS observed police officers taking pictures of youth without their consent because of the way they were dressed. Some YS even went further and stated the police just *hanged out* in the corner and supervised the park without interacting with the community. Additionally, they were not very approachable and were only there to fulfill their job obligations, as they did not *"genuinely"* care about the people in the community.

*"I still don't believe that there are enough cops that are interested in or worried about the community. They should actually care. Not just, act or pretend. They should genuinely care. Why white people living decent and us minorities have to be living with crooked cops and negativity that controls our community. There was only one cop that I feel maybe cared from my observations at the site."*

*"LAPD did not really interact with the community. It was a few that would interact with the community and even participate in the activities. There were times where LAPD would harass young kids who looked gang related and take pictures of them without the young teens being aware of it. LAPD should get more involved with the community. They should participate in the activities and not assume or judge people just because of how they look and harass them for no reason. They should be respectful to everyone."*

*"LAPD wasn't really around enough and when they were around they were bothering and harassing the Community members instead of getting to know them."*

Other YS expressed having rocky relationships with LAPD because things did not start off on the *"right foot"*, but eventually changed their perspectives to a more positive light.

*"LAPD at [one SNL site] was amazing, although we started off with the wrong foot, we later saw them reach out to the community and help them in their times of need."*

*"I felt that in my community LAPD was somewhat engage. Some of the officers did tried to engage with the community while others simply avoided contact with the community. I feel that LAPD can be a bit more open minded and try to engage in the activities SNL offers such as reading a book to the kids, do arts and crafts for a while, play a game with the kids therefore the perception the community has will change."*

*"At the beginning of the SNL programming, LAPD were rarely present on site. Later, LAPD were present, yet would be distant, in a way of avoiding interaction with community members. Towards the end of SNL, LAPD showed much improvement on willingness to engage with the community members and being on site as well."*

## Conclusion and Recommendations

To the Youth Squad, SNL stands for much more than just a summer job. To the Youth Squad, SNL is an opportunity for them to give back to their communities and let their communities know there are far better things out in the world. Therefore, Youth Squad offered the following recommendations to improve future programming.

- SNL should be more organized in their day-to-day operations. Many Youth Squad who experienced this dilemma echoed this recommendation. The Youth Squad stated they wanted “*stability in training*” and others stated they wanted better “*organization*” in order for the program to run smoothly.

*“I definitely would like to help SNL improve on its organization and it's budgeting. More so, it is organization. There were times where certain activities were supposed to take place but never happened. Even if we already paid for it. There was always a variable out of place. Either someone didn't bring jumpers for the kids, we had food shortages, or people that was supposed to show up to entertain the community never showed up. There is a lot of other miscellaneous things that SNL can improve on. Organization is a needed improvement area.”*

*“Make sure the paperwork and information on the YS are updated. Just because the person has a file from last year doesn't mean it should not be updated. A lot can happen in a year. Addresses change, life happens so UPDATE THE INFO YEAR TO YEAR.”*

- The Youth Squad wanted a better curriculum set in place because they expressed a lot of wishes for change. For example, some wished they had taken more professional development classes (e.g., leadership, problem solving, and crowd control). Others stated they wished the curriculum included more macro issues affecting the communities and the overall purpose of the Summer Night Lights program.

*“One thing that I would have hoped to learn more about is just the way we affect our community probably like knowing numbers how well or how bad we did so we know how to improve ourselves besides just having supervisors telling us how we did.”*

*“I think that SNL is a great first job for youth, however I don't think that Youth Squad should be treated as high school students by coordinators. Many youth do not respect LAUSD system to begin with; often times it felt like we were being paid to be treated like we were still in the public school system.”*