

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & PUBLIC SAFETY: THE IMPACT OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES GRYD SUMMER NIGHT LIGHTS PROGRAM ON VIOLENT CRIME

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GRYD RESEARCH & EVALUATION BRIEF NO. 8

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GRYD's Summer Night Lights (SNL) Program produced a 3.8% reduction in violent crime calls-for-service and a 3.6% reduction in violent crimes in SNL sites between 2010 and 2019.

In 2008, the City of Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) established the Summer Night Lights (SNL) program as a means of engaging community residents of all ages. The introduction of this initiative was a direct response to recurring spikes in violent crime during the summer months and serves as a fundamental part of the GRYD Comprehensive Strategy.¹ Starting with eight locations the first year, SNL currently operates in 32 parks and recreational centers throughout the city most summers and is generally active from late June through the end of August (for six to eight weeks depending on the year) with programming held on Wednesday-Saturday evenings from 7:00 pm to 11:00 pm.

SNL was developed as a comprehensive response to crime and violence in the communities it serves, and it coordinates programming from the core elements of the GRYD Comprehensive Strategy (community engagement, prevention, intervention, and violence interruption) under the umbrella of a single initiative. The intention of SNL is to have an impact on crime by investing in communities and providing support and activities for residents. In particular, SNL is focused on the following goals:

- Transforming neighborhoods by creating safe and inclusive spaces for community members of all ages;
- Creating opportunities to build a sense of community among residents and between residents and law enforcement and other city departments (e.g., Parks and Recreation);

- Contributing to resident well-being and resilience by providing access to resources and information;
- Creating opportunities for youth employment and professional development; and,
- Preparing youth for the future by exposing them to various careers and connecting them to city departments.

The strategies used to achieve these goals include providing free programming for community residents (which has included free meals, training workshops, sports leagues, arts activities, resource fairs, and health screenings among other activities); hiring young people and emerging adults within the community to help deliver programming; integrating Community Intervention Workers (CIWs) who engage in Proactive Peacemaking and respond to incidents in and around SNL locations; and partnering with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to foster positive community relationships. Delivery of these strategies is supported by a public-private partnership between the GRYD Office, the GRYD Foundation (a 501c3 nonprofit formed in 2012 as an SNL funding and implementation partner), and a number of other city agencies and philanthropic supporters.²

The impact of SNL is to strengthen community assets in the short-term and connect residents to sustainable supportive services by the provision of GRYD prevention, intervention, and violence interruption programming throughout the year. Thus, SNL's long-term impact on communities is multifaceted and embedded within other, related programming. The purpose of the current study is to assess whether SNL significantly reduces fear of crime and violent crime victimization in the areas surrounding participating parks during its implementation.



THE SNL EVALUATION DESIGN LANDSCAPE

In evaluating SNL's impact on violent crime in and around participating parks, four core challenges must be considered when designing an appropriate analysis plan:

- Summer crime trends;
- The concentration of violent crime in SNL park areas;
- The size of SNL park areas; and,
- Program disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SUMMER CRIME TRENDS

Crime increases significantly in summer months regardless of time, space, and geography. Figure 1 illustrates this point. Over the past twelve-years, the average number of violent crimes per week in the City of Los Angeles peaks in mid-summer and was +27% higher than the lowest levels of violent crimes which largely fell in late winter or early spring (Figure 1). This trend is not surprising, and in fact, SNL was intentionally designed to address this trend; however, this trend is a challenge for evaluating SNL because a reduction in crime is more difficult to identify when crime predictably is high during the months it is implemented. In other words, SNL has an "uphill battle" to show a reduction in crime. Positive SNL impact, for example, may be keeping crime rates stable or suppressing crime increases rather than showing steep reductions in crime. It is particularly difficult to find a program effect if the time periods compared are not similar (e.g., comparing SNL to crime rates during the rest of the year).

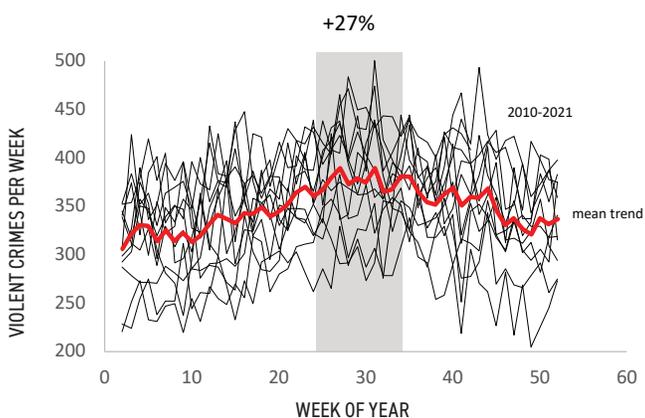


Figure 1. Violent crimes per week for 2010-2019 for the City of Los Angeles. The mean trend for the ten-year period is shown as a red line.

Design Implication: To address this issue, the research design for this study divides time into periods of activity and inactivity and utilizes more comparable time periods for comparison. SNL was implemented approximately seven weeks each year between 2010 and 2019 (mean = 6.583 weeks), leaving approximately 45 weeks of the year when SNL was not active. To create more comparable time periods, the analysis was restricted to the six weeks prior to the onset of SNL (control), the period during which SNL was active (treatment), and the six weeks after SNL ended (control). The control periods were selected because it is assumed that the patterns in violent crime calls-for-service and events are more similar in the periods immediately preceding and immediately following the treatment period compared to mid-winter patterns. Figure 2 illustrates the arrangement of pre-treatment control, active treatment, and post-treatment control periods assumed for all SNL sites between 2010 and 2019.

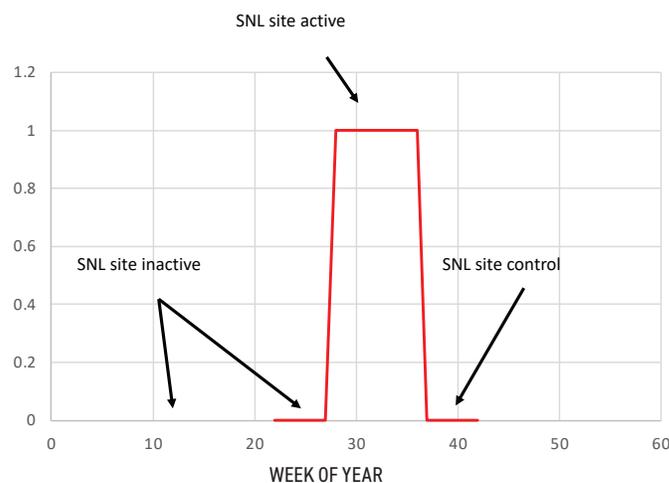


Figure 2. The temporal relationship between periods of inactivity and active SNL treatment, with control periods identified in the six weeks prior to and after the period of SNL site activity.

THE CONCENTRATION OF VIOLENT CRIME

The focus on times and places where crime is concentrated means that SNL is also "fighting an uphill battle" with crime because its parks are located in communities with concentrated levels of gang-related crime. Similar to the timing of SNL, its parks were strategically selected to impact crime in the areas most affected by it. There were 469,565 aggravated assault calls-for-service, 131,292 robbery calls, 94,273 shots fired calls, and 604,421 simple assault calls, for a total 1,299,551 violent crime calls for service over the ten-year study period citywide. Over the same period there were 2,773 homicides, 83,854 robberies and 92,701 aggravated assaults, for a total 179,328 reported violent crime city wide.

SNL sites account for a substantial share of these calls and events. For example, SNL sites account for 13% of all homicides, 11% of all aggravated assaults and 10% of all robberies. Overall, SNL RDs see 3.9 times more homicides than what would be expected at random.³ SNL sites combined with neighboring areas account for 76% of the homicides, 70% of the aggravated assaults, and 69% of the robberies, despite representing only 19.6% of all RDs (Figure 3). Calls-for-service are also concentrated in SNL sites and their neighbors, overall accounting for 53% of aggravated assault calls, 54% of robbery calls, 50% of shots fired calls, and 51% of simple assault calls.

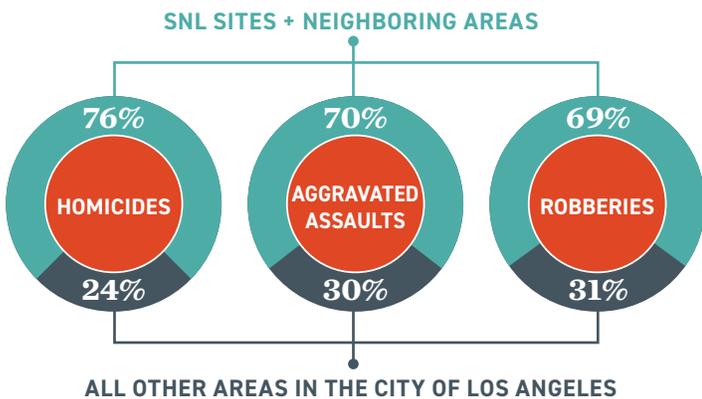


Figure 3: Percent of homicides, aggravated assaults, and robberies occurring within SNL Sites and Neighboring Areas combined compared to those occurring within other areas in the City of Los Angeles.

Design Implications: This challenge was addressed by adopting an analytical strategy used previously to evaluate the impact of the GRYD Comprehensive Strategy on crime.^{4,5} The strategy divides the geography in and around SNL sites into three types of units. The areas, measured by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) reporting districts (RDs), that include SNL parks were considered the treatment locations. The RDs immediately adjacent to treatment locations were considered spillover areas, and the RDs immediately adjacent to the spillover areas were considered control areas. This approach assumes that control areas are sufficiently close (in space) to treatment sites to have similar violent crime problems, but they are not close enough for SNL to affect their crime rates. Spillover areas are assumed to have similar crime problems as the treatment sites, and it is highly likely they will experience some impact from SNL because of their close proximity. This impact may be the displacement of crime and disorder to spillover areas (i.e., an increase in crime) or a diffusion of the SNL benefits (i.e., a reduction in crime).^{6,7} Figure 4 illustrates the arrangement of treatment, spillover and control RDs for the SNL site at the Mount Carmel Recreation Center in South Los Angeles.

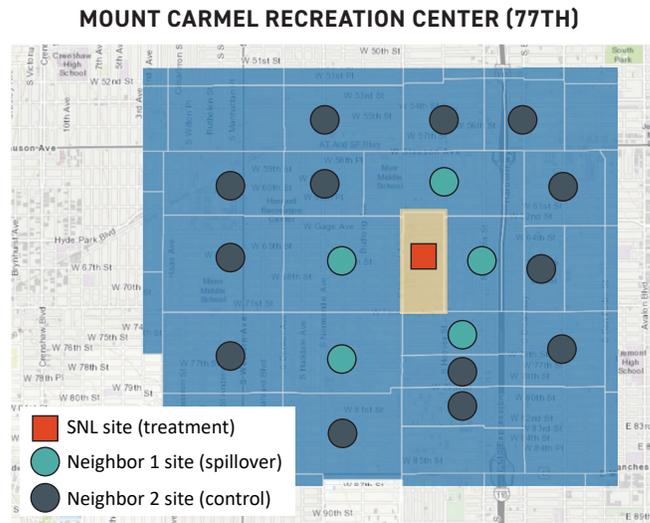


Figure 4. The geographic arrangement of treatment, spillover and control reporting districts (RDs).

THE SIZE OF SNL SITES

Another challenge facing the evaluation of SNL is the size of SNL sites. Even though violence is concentrated and high in these areas relative to other areas of the city, these areas are relatively small in their geographical footprint. As mentioned above, SNL sites and the neighboring areas represent only 19.6% of RDs; SNL sites alone account for only 3.5%. As a result, the actual number of crimes occurring per week in and around SNL sites are also relatively small.⁸ Because the numbers of events are relatively small, it is not possible to identify effects for SNL sites in isolation, or even in groups of SNL sites by council district. Similarly, it is not possible to identify the effects of SNL for individual periods of time or in isolated years.



Figure 5: Percent of RDs included in SNL Sites and Neighboring Areas relative to the City of Los Angeles.

Design Implication: This challenge requires grouping SNL sites in analysis and identifying the average effect of SNL over the long-term. Consequently, this study examines SNL's collective impact on violent crime in SNL sites between 2010 and 2019.

PROGRAM DISRUPTIONS DUE TO COVID-19

A final challenge to assessing the impact of SNL is the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. SNL programming was substantially modified in 2020 and 2021 because of public health pandemic restrictions. In 2020, SNL programming was restricted to the provision of Grab-n-Go events (consisting of food items and activity kits) and virtual workshops on topics including offerings such as cooking, self-care, art, etc. Further, the Grab-n-Go events were held at a reduced number of sites (20), seven of which were non-traditional locations such as community partner offices or city facilities, with each SNL location limited to hosting the Grab-n-Go events on two evenings rather than holding ongoing programming throughout the summer. SNL returned to 34 parks and recreational centers and was somewhat normalized in 2021 with the return of limited in-person sports programming and the provision of COVID testing and vaccination opportunities. However, other activity was limited to the continuation of Grab-n-Go events on two evenings at each site and virtual offerings. Additionally, the pandemic has contributed to an unusually high level of violent crime throughout the city and particularly in areas traditionally served by SNL.

Including data from these years would not produce an accurate account of the role SNL plays in addressing crime in these areas. Not only is there insufficient data to examine the effects of SNL for the truncated time period of the pandemic, but the impact of the different public responses to COVID-19 on crime is poorly understood.^{9,10,11} The situation is sufficiently complex that an analysis runs the risk of being very misleading.

Design Implication: As a result, the current study restricted its analysis to crime data between 2010 and 2019, excluding data for 2020 and 2021.

With these challenges in mind, expecting SNL to single-handedly eliminate crime entirely is not a reasonable benchmark for program effectiveness. But given its comprehensive and concentrated focus, SNL is expected to contribute to the overall effort of city interventions to increase public safety in communities that experience high rates of violent crime. The goal of this study, therefore, is to assess and document SNL's contribution on reducing violent crime in the City of Los Angeles during the summer.

DATA AND METHODS

Although SNL is currently delivered in 32 parks in most years, this study includes all SNL parks that operated between 2010 and 2019 (hereafter referred to as the "SNL study period"). Over this period, 38 different parks hosted SNL activities at least once. The data used in this study were secured from the GRYD Office and from the City of Los Angeles Open Data Portals. GRYD Office data included the location of each SNL site and their operational dates for each year of the study period. Police calls-for-service, reported crime, and the geographic structure of police reporting districts was extracted from the City of Los Angeles Open Data Portal (<https://data.lacity.org>). The LAPD collects information on the time, location, and event type for calls to the police and verified crimes. These data are aggregated and released on a regular basis in anonymized form through this public access website. The locations where both calls-for-service and crimes occur are recorded at the level of LAPD reporting districts (RDs). These are small census-tract size regions that are designed to encompass approximately the same number of people. The geographic relationship among RDs is also known from public data available on the City of Los Angeles Open Data Portal (<https://geohub.lacity.org>).

Analyses in this study are limited to violent crime calls-for-service and violent crime events occurring between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2019. Violent crime calls-for-service include any instance where a member of the public called the police about an aggravated assault (e.g., shooting with a victim), robbery, simple assault (e.g., fist fight), or "shots fired." Violent crime events include any instance where the police have verified the occurrence of a homicide, aggravated assault, or robbery.

Police calls-for-service and reported crime are related to one another, but also track different features of community safety. Police calls-for-service are related to the victimizations that people experience, but they also reflect broader social and psychological processes including individual and community perception of disorder and fear of crime.^{12,13,14,15} Calls-for-service offer a window into a community's perceptions about crime. Reported violent crime includes events where a member of the public has called the police and the police have verified that a crime as occurred. Reported crime therefore offers an assessment of victimization. It is important to recognize that every call for service does not generate a verified crime nor does every crime generates a call-for-service. As a result, calls-for-service represent only an incomplete record of the crime and disorder that communities experience, and reported crimes only a fraction of the victimizations experienced!^{16,17}

PROPOSED HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis guiding this study tests whether SNL programming had an impact on violent crime in the areas in and around SNL parks. If SNL has an impact on violent crime, we expect to find the following:

- Violent crime calls-for-service and violent crime events will either increase at a lower rate or decrease in SNL park areas (SNL sites) compared to spillover areas and control areas.
- The effect on violent crime calls-for-service and violent crime events will be greater in spillover areas than in control areas.
- The effect on violent crime calls-for-service and violent crime events will be confined to SNL treatment periods.

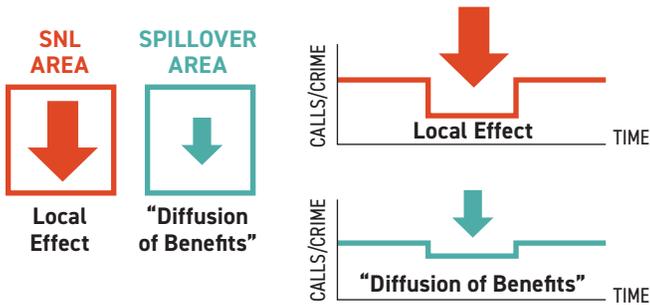


Figure 6. Illustrates the expected geographic and temporal effects of SNL in treatment and spillover areas.

Statistical models commonly used to evaluate observational data with a pre-post structure and untreated comparison group are used in the present case.^{18,19,20} The goal is to assess the unique impact of SNL after controlling for the unique (fixed) features of each reporting district (RD) and the common temporal trends experienced by all RDs. Analyses focus on Poisson regression models with fixed effects for RDs and indicators for the week of the year to control for seasonal trends. Results are presented as the percentage change in violent crime calls-for-service and crime events when SNL was active in treatment and spillover areas relative to control areas.

RESULTS

When SNL was active, violent crime calls-for-service were reduced in treatment sites by an average of 3.8% per week and violent crime events by an average of 3.6% per week relative to the spillover areas and control areas (Figure 7). SNL also produced a reduction in violent crime calls-for-service in spillover areas compared to control areas; however, the magnitude of the effect was greater in SNL treatment sites. Violent crime calls-for-service in spillover areas were reduced by an average of 2.5% per week and violent crime events decreased by an average of 3.3% per week. These findings are consistent with predictions and indicate that the direct local benefits of crime reduction in areas immediately surrounding SNL parks also spread to their immediate areas.

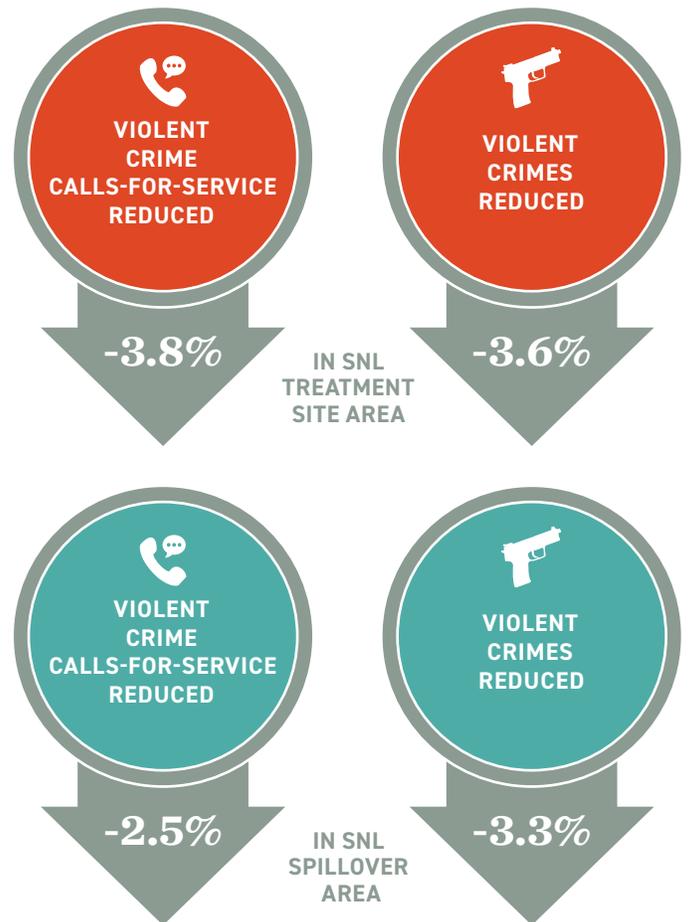


Figure 7. Impact of SNL on violent crime calls-for-service and crime events in SNL RDs and spillover area RDs.

THE IMPACT ON CRIME IN SNL SITES

The current models estimate what *would have happened* in SNL and spillover areas had SNL not been present. These estimates can be compared to the amount of crime observed to produce an estimate of the number of crimes prevented by SNL. An estimated 4,357 violent crime calls-for-service and 634 violent crimes events would have occurred in treatment and spillover areas combined if SNL programming was not available (Table 1). When the effects of SNL programming were considered, the estimated number of violent crime calls-for-service and violent crime events was 4,236 and 623, respectively. Thus, these calculations indicate SNL programming produced 121 fewer violent crime calls-for-service and 21 fewer violent crimes each year in SNL and spillover areas.*

Based on these estimates, the reduction in calls-for-service and crime likely translates into millions of dollars in savings for victims and the city, which is particularly significant given the RDs hosting SNL programming represent only 3.5% of all RDs across the city.²¹ This speaks to the potential impact of SNL programming on crime if the areas receiving SNL were expanded. For example, doubling the size of SNL offerings to cover, on average, 64 parks and community centers across the city, might produce 240 fewer violent crime calls for service and 42 fewer violent crime events per season. At this scale, we would also expect the prevention of at least one homicide. We expect the costs savings to also double, with the prevention of a single homicide alone corresponding to massive savings.

Table 1. Estimated number of calls-for-service and crimes per year in SNL areas and spillover areas with and without SNL programming.

	CALLS-FOR-SERVICE		CRIME EVENTS		PREVENTED	
	Average Per Year without SNL	Average Per Year with SNL	Average Per Year without SNL	Average Per Year with SNL	Calls	Crimes
Homicide	-	-	10	10	-	<1
ADW	1,634	1,589	333	322	45	11
Robbery	436	424	301	291	12	10
Shots Fired	327	318	-	-	9	-
Assaults	1,961	1,906	-	-	54	-
Total	4,357	4,236	634	623	121	21

* Reductions by call and crime type were computed assuming that the calls-for-service and crimes prevented were at the proportions observed for event types in the city overall. For example, homicides make up about 1.5% of serious violent crimes alongside robbery (46.8%) and aggravated assault (51.7%). Thus, of the 21 violent crimes prevented per SNL season, we expect that less than one homicide was prevented per year, but 11 aggravated assaults and 10 robberies were prevented because these crime types are much more numerous overall.

MOVING FORWARD

SNL programming between 2010 and 2019 produced a decrease in violent crime calls for service and violent crime across SNL sites. More specifically, violent crime calls-for-service and violent crimes reduced (by an average of 3.8% and 3.6% respectively) in SNL treatment sites compared to control sites. Violent calls-for-service and violent crimes were also reduced in the spillover areas (by an average of -2.5% and 3.3%), showing that SNL programming not only reduced violent crime at SNL sites but also in the areas immediately adjacent to SNL sites. Such reductions translate into substantial cost savings for victims of crime, the communities in which these crimes occur, and the City of Los Angeles. While these are encouraging findings, the mission and impact of SNL is broader and deeper than a summer reduction in crime alone.

SNL is a long-term, comprehensive, and sustainable investment in building community cohesion and resiliency. Even when operating at reduced capacity due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, SNL still reached thousands of children, youth, and their families. More than 7,500 bags of food were distributed to community members of all age ranges; over 1,000 COVID vaccines were administered through an SNL partnership initiative; and there were just over 2,500 participants in sports events such as basketball, soccer, and softball. In addition, SNL invested in the communities surrounding SNL locations by hiring 83 young people and emerging adults to support outreach and delivery of programming. Finally, community engagement surveys conducted at 28 of the 2021 SNL sites showed that not only does SNL have the power to engage the community; it creates a sense of community as well.²²

Based on the findings from this brief and considering the goals, we recommend the following to support on-going growth and innovation of the SNL program as part of the GRYD Comprehensive Strategy:

1. Continue to fund and implement SNL programming as part of the effort to empower community. SNL supports the reclamation of public spaces, community building, and the provision of resource access and programming to areas with the greatest need across the City of Los Angeles.
2. Consider expanding SNL into additional city parks and recreation centers. As noted in the brief, the footprint of SNL programming is relatively small to the size of the city. A geographic expansion of could serve to amplify the effects of the program should additional SNL locations be brought online.
3. Create a data infrastructure. The introduction of well-designed data collection systems and processes would allow the GRYD Office and the GRYD Foundation to better track data related to hiring, services provided, and community participation in events, which in turn would support the integration of on-going evaluation of SNL. Further, there have been advances in event participation tracking that, if implemented by SNL, would allow for more nuanced data collection related to the numbers of participating community members as well as the types of events they engage in and their frequency of engagement. Knowing these details may facilitate a better understanding of how SNL operates and how engagement works, among other possibilities.
4. Continue evaluating the impact of SNL. The findings from this study offer a look at the impact of SNL on violent crime; however, it must be acknowledged that SNL is part of the wider GRYD Comprehensive Strategy and is primarily implemented at locations within GRYD's areas of service (GRYD Zones). Thus, future analyses should consider the impact of SNL as part of the GRYD Comprehensive Strategy.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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APPENDIX: SNL PARKS ACTIVE AT LEAST ONCE IN 2010-2019

SNL LOCATION	ADDRESS	LAPD RD
Jim Gilliam Recreation Center	4000 S. La Brea Ave.	0391
Ramon Garcia Recreation Center	1016 S. Fresno St.	0478
Cypress Park Recreation Center	2630 Pepper Ave.	1177
Glassell Park Recreation Center	3650 Verdugo Rd.	1135
Mount Carmel Recreation Center	830 W. 70th St.	1248
Ross Snyder Recreation Center	1501 E. 41st St.	1347
Hubert Humphrey Recreation Center	12560 Filmore St.	1602
Ramona Gardens Housing Development	2830 Lancaster Ave.	0448
Lemon Grove Recreation Center	4959 Lemon Grove Ave.	0678
Sepulveda Recreation Center	8801 Kester Ave.	1984
Edward R. Roybal Learning Center	1200 Colton St.	0239
Denker Park	1550 W. 35th Pl.	0356
Nickerson Gardens Housing Development	11251 Compton Ave.	1846
Jordan Downs Housing Development	9900 South Grape St.	1829
Imperial Courts Housing Development	2250 E. 114th St.	1849
Jackie Tatum Harvard Recreation Center	1535 W. 62nd St.	1235
Lake Street Recreation Center	227 North Lake St.	0235
Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center	3916 S. Western Ave.	0376
Lou Costello Recreation Center	3141 E. Olympic Blvd.	0497
Highland Park Recreation Center	6150 Piedmont Ave.	1138
South Park Recreation Center	345 E. 51st St.	1362
Slauson Recreation Center	5306 S. Compton Ave.	1377
Van Ness Recreation Center	5720 2nd Ave.	1211
Delano Recreation Center	15100 Erwin St.	0932
Valley Plaza Recreation Center	12240 Archwood St.	1503
Normandale Recreation Center	22400 S. Halldale Ave.	0507
El Sereno Recreation Center	4721 Klamath St.	0427
Wilmington Recreation Center	325 S. Neptune Ave.	0525
Montecito Heights Recreation Center	4545 Homer St.	0401
Sun Valley Recreation Center	8133 Vineland Ave.	1687
Lanark Recreation Center	21816 Lanark St.	2115
Algin Sutton Recreation Center	8800 S. Hoover St.	1801
Green Meadows Recreation Center	431 E. 89th St.	1805
Toberman Recreation Center	1725 Toberman St.	0299
Lafayette Recreation Center &/or Shatto Recreation Center	625 S. Lafayette Park Pl. &/or 3191 W. 4th St.	2029
Normandie Recreation Center	1550 S. Normandie Ave.	2076
109th Street Recreation Center	1464 E. 109th St.	1836
Hazard Recreation Center	2230 Norfolk St.	0443

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