

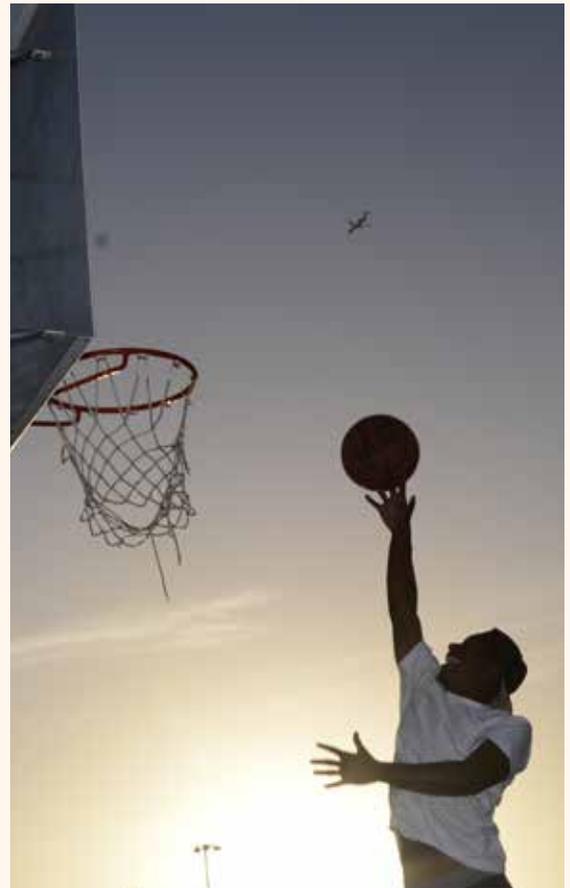
# Parks After Dark Turns Parks Into Safe Havens That Promote Community Cohesion and Healthy Physical Activity

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**Louie Guerrero,**  
Watkins Park staff member

*“Parks After Dark was nothing but love. Parents came back and said: ‘Thank you for taking a chance on our kids. No one has done this before. How do we keep this going? Please don’t stop.’”*

**Meliza Hernandez,**  
Loma Alta Park staff member



**W**hen neighborhoods and parks are seen as violent and unsafe, most residents make a rational choice: they stay indoors. For far too many Los Angeles County residents, this means forfeiting access to physical activity and community resources. Being inactive increases a person’s risk of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Staying indoors is isolating — forming a barrier to the kinds of social connections and civic engagement that support a sense of well-being, cornerstones of a healthy community. Parks After Dark challenges this dynamic by revitalizing parks in neighborhoods with high crime rates, physical inactivity, and economic hardship, into key resources for health promotion and community resilience.

Parks After Dark began with three parks in 2010 as a prevention strategy of the county’s Gang Violence Reduction Initiative. Parks After Dark is modeled after the Summer Night Lights program in the city of Los Angeles. It soon became clear that the program was also an excellent way to promote health in communities that are deeply affected by violence and by chronic health conditions related to a lack of physical activity.

## Key Accomplishments

- More than 187,000 visits were made to the six parks that had the Parks After Dark program from 2010 - 2013.
- Three out of four program participants engaged in physical activity.
- Serious, violent crime in the communities surrounding the original three parks declined 32% between 2009 and 2013 compared to an 18% increase in nearby communities where the program didn’t operate.
- Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents said they felt safe at Parks After Dark.
- Parks After Dark built strong partnerships between the community and county departments in charge of parks, public health, and public safety.



*“The community as a whole feels more connected. People often approach staff and express how the atmosphere has changed from one of fear to one of joy and hope. People who remember when the parks were run by gangs and gang activity cannot believe the change.”*

**Lorraine Martinez,**  
Pamela Park staff member



In 2012, with funding from a federal Community Transformation Grant, the Department of Public Health (Public Health) helped to sustain and expand Parks After Dark, to six parks in unincorporated parts of the county. Today Parks After Dark is a model of collaboration, led by Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation in partnership with Public Health, the Sheriff’s Department, and many other county departments and community organizations, with support from the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the Chief Executive Office.

## **What’s the Problem?**

Research shows that people who perceive their neighborhood to be unsafe or who are exposed to high levels of violence in their community are less likely to be physically active. LA County data demonstrates this: South Los Angeles has the lowest percentage of adults who believe their neighborhood is safe from crime and the lowest percentage of children with access to safe places to play. This fear of violence is understandable. Homicide in South Los Angeles, as in urban areas across the United States, is the leading cause of premature death, especially affecting Latino and African American males and youth ages 15 to 24. Additionally, South Los Angeles has the highest obesity prevalence. Obesity, which has climbed to nearly 24 percent of all LA County adults in 2011, is even higher – 31 percent – among African Americans and Latinos, increasing their risk for chronic diseases, such as diabetes. Attempts to improve community health often don’t acknowledge the links between community safety and health, limiting the effectiveness of interventions in precisely the communities most in need.

## Why It Matters

Living in violent communities contributes to poor health in ways that go beyond the risk of being assaulted, shot, or killed. When people are afraid of violence, they're less likely to go outside, walk in their neighborhood, engage with other community members, or let their children ride bicycles or make use of neighborhood parks. They're also less likely to grow vegetables in an outdoor garden, or to walk or take the bus to markets that sell healthy food.

Additionally, violence disproportionately impacts communities with high economic hardship that lack resources that wealthier communities have, such as affordable recreation programming, healthier food outlets, and health and social services. Businesses are often reluctant to invest in these communities. Health and safety are closely connected — and for health promotion strategies to be successful in these communities, addressing violence is essential.

## What We're Doing

Parks After Dark tackles two problems at once: the high levels of violence and of preventable chronic diseases that affect low-income neighborhoods by transforming parks into safe, welcoming places where children and adults can take part in physical activity, build social connections, and access health and social services.

Under Parks After Dark, the six parks stayed open for extended evening hours on Thursday, Friday and Saturday during the summer months. A wide range of activities and services to neighborhood children and adults was offered. Staff from numerous county departments worked together to supervise and to ensure the parks were safe. Staff organized activities and helped stimulate community connections. Activities included organized sports and exercise programs; classes on healthy cooking, literacy, juvenile justice, and parenting and computer skills. Participants could also partake in arts and crafts, attend free concerts and movie screenings, and visit health and social service resource fairs. Staff from Public Health's Community Health Services Division helped to organize outreach during the resource fairs and coordinated walking clubs that incorporated healthy living tips.





“People assume that you put a bunch of kids from rival neighborhoods together, all hell breaks loose,” Meliza Hernandez said. “But Parks After Dark was nothing but love. It was awesome. The parents came back and said, ‘Thank you for taking a chance on our kids. No one has done this before. How do we keep this going? Please don’t stop.’”

Parks After Dark hasn’t stopped, drawing almost 187,000 visitors to the participating parks from 2010 to 2013. “We had steady increases all summer long,” said Louie Guerrero, a Park and Recreation Department staff member at Watkins Park. “At night, the whole park was being used; every square inch at once. Teens all had jobs. We had 80 to 100 people out on the tennis courts doing Zumba and aerobics. The energy was contagious.”

Since 2010, Public Health has helped advance the evidence base for Parks After Dark. Public Health developed and analyzed participant satisfaction surveys, compiled Parks and Recreation data, developed presentations, articles, and reports, and worked alongside the Sheriff’s Department to compile crime data. The program evaluation demonstrated impressive outcomes for the communities surrounding the six parks and illustrated the potential of the program to be expanded and replicated.<sup>1</sup>

### **Increased Safety and Feelings of Security**

Serious and violent crimes in the communities surrounding the original three parks declined 32 percent during the summer months between 2009 (the summer before the program started) and 2013. In nearby communities with parks that did not have Parks After Dark programming, serious and violent crime increased 18 percent during this same time period. According to the surveys, 97 percent of people who took part in Parks After Dark reported that they felt safe.

1 The 2014 Rapid Health Impact Assessment was funded by the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trust, and The California Endowment.

## Increased Physical Activity

Three out of four program participants engaged in physical activity and for many people that was a dramatic change from their normal sedentary patterns. In 2013, 70 percent of participants surveyed reported that they generally engaged in less than the 30 minutes a day, five days a week, of physical activity that experts recommend. Yet among this group, 75 percent participated in at least some physical activity during Parks After Dark. Cross-Sector Collaboration and Community Engagement

Parks After Dark is more than just a fun summer event. It's a framework for local agencies across sectors to work together to respond to community needs. Summer park programming was identified as a need and community members help to shape the evolution of Parks After Dark each year. The program built strong partnerships between county departments and demonstrated that expanding and enriching the use of parks — and turning them into safe places — are a high-impact way to advance health equity. This collaboration enabled Parks and Recreation staff to view their work in a new light. It helped to build and strengthen long-term relationships with the communities, leveraging the role of park staff as trusted community liaisons.

## What's Next

To build attendance and good will, park staff formed partnerships with community groups to conduct outreach and began forming youth councils. In 2014, teens and volunteers started using social media to engage others with some success. In 2015, program coordinators plan to build on that success by expanding the youth councils and encouraging social media and community journalism projects.

Parks After Dark evaluation demonstrates that the program helped prevent violence and increase physical activity. The program has the potential for wide-ranging impact on health and social issues in disadvantaged communities. As program staff strategizes how to strengthen Parks After Dark, they are thinking about how to sustain the program after its five years in existence. In early 2014, Public Health, Parks and Recreation, the Sheriff's Department and community partners, began to develop a strategic plan for Parks After Dark with the intent to expand it to additional communities. Currently, the primary goal is to sustain Parks After Dark at the existing six parks for summer 2015 by leveraging partnerships and securing additional funding. The long-term vision is to make parks a hub countywide, thus bringing much-needed health and social services resources, physical activity programming, and space for civic engagement and community building year-round.

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*Photos courtesy of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health*