



**Los Angeles County
Department of Parks and Recreation &
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health
Office of Violence Prevention
Trauma Prevention Initiative**



**OUR SPOT Program Evaluation Report
June 2021**

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Introduction

About Our SPOT

Funded by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (Substance Abuse and Prevention Control Program (SAPC) and the Los Angeles County Department of Probation, Our SPOT (Social Places and Opportunities for Teens) provides positive youth development through recreational programs in a safe space at select county parks to teens in grades 7-12. The program, implemented by the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is provided for free and operates Monday through Friday from 3-7 pm.

Recently, DPR adopted a health equity and social justice framework as central to its mission, particularly in the unincorporated areas of the County where equitable allocation of resources and prevention recreation programs can help mitigate some of the systemically rooted effects of community violence, socio-economic inequalities, and racism facing underserved communities. Our SPOT operates in the unincorporated areas of the County, many of which are in communities with concentrated poverty. Our SPOT locations are selected based on the size of youth population, drop-out rate, proportion of households below the federal poverty level, crime index score and parks' needs assessment. This method of park identification has led to the opening of Our SPOT at 13 of 183 (or 7.1%) of DPR park locations.

The Our SPOT program design is grounded in the research literature on positive youth development with a strong emphasis on trauma informed care and integration of health and fitness, social-emotional learning, mindfulness and self-care. Our SPOT utilizes engaging programming in arts and self-exploration, youth leadership, life skills and healthy development, career pathway exploration, educational field trips, mental health and resilience education including substance abuse prevention, and special events promoting self-empowerment.

Our SPOT Locations

At the beginning of the 2020-21 fiscal year, the Our SPOT program operated in 10 community parks across Los Angeles County which included Amelia Mayberry Park, City Terrace Park, El Cariso Community Regional Park, East Rancho Dominguez Park (ERD), Franklin D. Roosevelt Park (FDR), Loma Alta Park, Mona Park, Salazar Park, San Angelo Park, and Stephen Sorrensen Park. During the year, the program expanded to three additional parks: Belvedere Park, Lennox Park, and Pamela Park.

The original 10 parks were operationally organized around three geographic regions: North, South and East. The target youth population ranged in age between 12-18 years of age drawn from the local communities within a few miles of each park.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this report is to document and describe how the Our SPOT program has been implemented, now in its second year (fiscal year 2020-21), and any measurable impact it has had on participating youth. To achieve this goal, the following research questions, continued from the first year of implementation, remain of interest:

1. How was the program implemented?
2. What were the experiences of participants?
3. What were the successes and challenges of the program?
4. How did the program impact participating youth?

The report is organized into the following sections: Introduction, Program Model, Findings and Recommendations. Additional information is also provided in the appendices.

Program Model – A Literature Review of Positive Youth Development

The Los Angeles County Park and Recreation Department's "Our Social Places and Opportunities for Teens" (Our SPOT), is based on the general principles of Positive Youth Development. Using this framework as a foundation, Our SPOT builds upon the strengths-based tenets of positive youth development, and incorporates a myriad of evidence-based and evidence-informed programs and interventions, each of which was selected because of the cultural relevance for teens navigating complex urban environments.

The following literature review provides an overview of the tenets supporting the Our SPOT model. First, this review identifies the *theoretical underpinnings* of the positive youth development framework and provides a summary of the empirical support for similar programs that utilize this framework in their program development and implementation. Second, the review highlights the *strength of evidence* related to the major programmatic components of Our SPOT, including holistic health and wellness (i.e., socio-emotional learning, Cognitive-Behavioral Models, and Mindfulness and Self Care), leadership development, recreation and sports, integration of the arts for self-exploration, as well as career pathways and educational goal-setting. Third, the review explores the *reported impact and effectiveness* demonstrated in specific curricula and other evidence-based interventions that are embedded in the Our SPOT program including Youth Engaged in Leadership (Department of Public Health); Mental Health Promoters (Department of Mental Health); Resilience and Intergroup Solidarity Education (R.I.S.E.) (Human Relations Commission); Say Goodbye to Drugs; and Youth Power. In addition, this review lends empirical support for the implementation strategies employed including

successful youth program leadership strategies, staffing and general programmatic coordination.

Positive Youth Development (PYD)

As described in a recent (2019) theoretical review of the literature, the Positive Youth Development framework begins with a strengths-based perspective, replacing the long-held beliefs of the inevitable “storm and stress” and deficit-based models of adolescence development, and emphasizing instead youths’ potential and developmental plasticity.¹

Positive development models shift the focus for intervention from an emphasis on problems, deficits, or psychopathology towards promoting skills, assets, and psychological well-being as the critical tools in youth development and intervention.² A 2017 meta-analysis of the effectiveness of positive youth development interventions³ concluded that positive youth development is essential to the prevention of adolescent risk behavior and the promotion of thriving. The analysis included randomized controlled design studies that focused on young people aged 10-19 years that implemented positive youth development interventions outside of school hours. The analysis found that the positive youth development interventions included had a significant effect on academic achievement and psychological adjustment. However, no significant effects were found for sexual risk behaviors, problem behavior or positive social behaviors, consequently Our SPOT included additional intensive interventions targeted at those outcomes.

While substantial progress has been made in the theoretical understanding of youth development in the past two decades, this progress is not paralleled in the intervention research literature of positive youth development programs through the use of high-quality evaluation methods. Live Above the Hype: Positive Youth Development is the Our SPOT curriculum that provides socially relevant educational services to support underserved communities in moving beyond the cultural norms of violence, underachievement, and youth disengagement in Los Angeles. The curriculum is based on and integrates the empirically supported philosophy, interventions and implementation strategies described in the literature.

Trauma Informed Approach

Our SPOT programming, including programmatic components and staff training, is based on the principles of trauma-informed care as illustrated in the figure on the next page.

¹ Shek, D. T., Dou, D., Zhu, X., & Chai, W. (2019). Positive youth development: current perspectives. *Adolescent health, medicine and therapeutics*, 10, 131–141. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AHMT.S179946>

² Patrick Tolan, Katherine Ross, Nora Arkin, Nikki Godine & Erin Clark (2016) Toward an integrated approach to positive development: Implications for intervention, *Applied Developmental Science*, 20:3, 214-236, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2016.1146080

³ Ciocanel O, Power K, Eriksen A, Gillings K. Effectiveness of Positive Youth Development Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*. 2017 Mar;46(3):483-504. doi: 10.1007/s10964-016-0555-6. Epub 2016 Aug 12. PMID: 27518860.

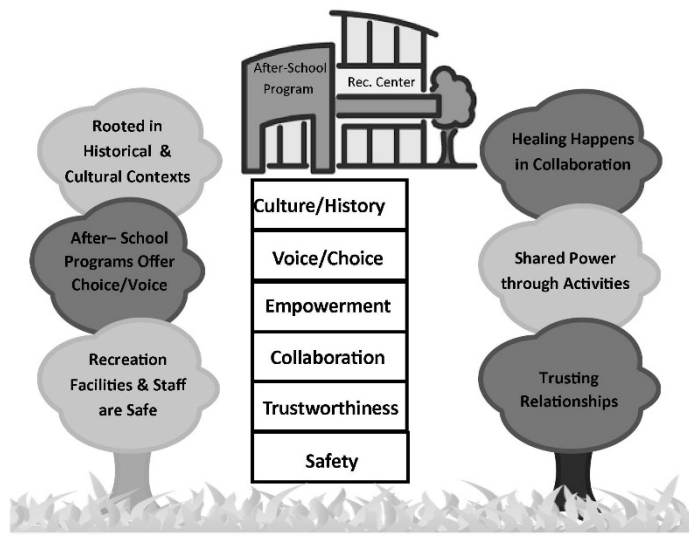


Figure 8. *Trauma-Informed Care Principles Embedded in Urban Recreation Programs (Santoro, 2021)*

This approach offers a human services framework that operates on the belief that, many children have a history of trauma, given its ubiquitous presence in many urban communities, neighborhoods, and homes across the United States.⁴ While it is antithetical to positive youth development models to focus solely on the current and historical experience of trauma as a deficit, focusing on resilience strategies is an important component to trauma-informed approaches to positive youth development.

Holistic Health and Wellness

- **Health and Fitness**

A key aspect of Our SPOT is a focus on holistic health and wellness, which includes intentional interventions and programmatic content that focuses on sports and recreation, physical fitness, and educational supports for healthy decisions. Scholars from multiple disciplines (kinesiology, recreation, education and psychology) identify school and community-based physical activities as viable contexts for facilitating and achieving positive youth development goals. Longstanding research demonstrates that physical activity is a viable setting for promoting positive youth development. The knowledge base documents psychosocial and behavioral benefits of participation, including self-esteem, social relationships, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, leadership, and character development.⁵

Some studies provide evidence that adolescents who participate in organized sports-based recreational activities are less likely to engage in criminal and delinquent acts, less likely to be violent and aggressive, less likely to misuse alcohol and marijuana, and less likely to drop out of school. While it is generally agreed upon that participation in these activities is associated with many positive outcomes (autonomy and identity development, positive social relationships, and learning conflict resolution, academic

⁴ Damian, A. J., Mendelson, T., Bowie, J., & Gallo, J. J. (2019). A mixed methods exploratory assessment of the usefulness of Baltimore City Health Department's trauma-informed care training intervention. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 89(2), 228–236. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000357>

⁵ Weiss, M. R., & Wiese-Bjornstal, D. M. (2009, September). Promoting positive youth development through physical activity. *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest*, Series 10(3), p. 1-8.

success, mental health, and civic engagement), the strength of the empirical evidence is lacking.⁶ Evaluations specifically related to sports is often limited to qualitative studies because they dominate the positive youth development conversation through sport literature, which have yet to be subjected to thorough systematic review. The qualitative studies of PYD through sports are distributed across a range of academic journals and disciplines (e.g., sport/exercise psychology, developmental psychology, education, physical education, recreation, sport management). Individual qualitative studies published across a range of disciplines, in the absence of systematic review, can inadvertently produce a fragmented body of knowledge.⁷ The evidence that is summarized describes a positive correlation with successful outcomes, yet also points to the need to consolidate the contemporary evidence, to identify the developmental outcomes associated with sport participation and to gain a greater understanding of the processes that contribute to the attainment of positive developmental outcomes.

- ***Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL)***

A recent national panel reviewed core components that improve programs and interventions, highlighting the importance of SEL programs that provide positive impact on a variety of health behavior outcomes over a lifespan. Programs that also involve parents and communities appear to reduce disparities in health outcomes.⁸ Although the majority of research conducted on the effectiveness of SEL learning has been conducted on in-school based models, a meta-analysis of after-school programs⁹ that sought to enhance the personal and social skills of children and adolescents indicated that, compared to controls, participants demonstrated significant increases in positive self-perceptions, positive social behaviors, academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors. One important lesson from the findings was that after-school programs should contain components to foster the personal and social skills of youth because youth can benefit in multiple ways if these components are offered. Not surprisingly, research also suggests that programs are most successful when they address the needs of the whole child, including social and emotional learning goals offered in structured curricula that provide opportunities for explicit skill building.¹⁰

⁶ Witt, Peter & Caldwell, Linda. 2020. The Rationale for Recreation Services for Youth: An Evidenced Based Approach. National Park Association. <https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/witt-caldwell-full-research-paper.pdf>

⁷ Holt, Nicholas & Neely, Kacey & Slater, Linda & Camiré, Martin & Côté, Jean & Fraser-Thomas, Jessica & MacDonald, Dany & Strachan, Leisha & Tamminen, Katherine. (2017). A grounded theory of positive youth development through sport based on results from a qualitative meta-study. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. 10. 1-49. 10.1080/1750984X.2016.1180704.

⁸ Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century.” Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25552>. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020.

⁹ Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Pachan M. A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *Am J Community Psychol*. 2010 Jun;45(3-4):294-309. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9300-6. PMID: 2030082.

¹⁰ Stephanie Jones, Rebecca Bailey, Katharine Brush, Jennifer Kahn. December 8, 2017. *Social and Emotional Learning for Out-of-School Time Settings*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Many of Our SPOT programs and interventions integrate socio-emotional learning and staff are taught interventions to promote mental health and wellness.

- ***Cognitive-Behavioral Models***

Our SPOT staff are trained to support the positive development and socio-emotional learning skills of youth through the use of the Cognitive Triangle, which is focused on the dynamic interrelatedness of what we think, how we feel and what we do. The Cognitive Triangle is based on the general principles of cognitive psychology on which cognitive behavioral therapeutic (CBT) interventions are largely based. CBT is one of the strongest evidence-based treatments to address anxiety¹¹, depression¹², PTSD¹³, and behavior issues¹⁴ in youth and adolescents. The inclusion of teaching youth about the Cognitive Triangle as a way to provide education about socio-emotional learning has not yet been broadly empirically evaluated, but there are a number of “teach the triangle” curricula, activities, videos and professional development trainings available. Our SPOT staff were trained to “teach the triangle,” a training that was positively evaluated by participating staff.

- ***Mindfulness and Self Care***

The integration of mindfulness techniques was particularly important when Our SPOT was forced to operate virtually and necessarily had to address the impact of the pandemic on the emotional health and well-being of the enrolled youth in the communities, most of which were under-resourced to address the impact of COVID-19. This included Yoga, mindfulness and meditation exercises. The use of mindfulness techniques has been successfully evaluated in clinical settings¹⁵ as well in non-clinical settings, such as out of school community-based programs. In non-clinical settings, research syntheses point to moderate effects for mindfulness in addressing a myriad of

<https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Social-and-Emotional-Learning-Out-of-School-Time-Settings-Brief.pdf>

¹¹ Villabø, M. A., Narayanan, M., Compton, S. N., Kendall, P. C., & Neumer, S. P. (2018). Cognitive-behavioral therapy for youth anxiety: An effectiveness evaluation in community practice. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 86(9), 751–764. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000326>

¹² Oud M, de Winter L, Vermeulen-Smit E, Bodden D, Nauta M, Stone L, van den Heuvel M, Taher RA, de Graaf I, Kendall T, Engels R, Stikkelbroek Y. Effectiveness of CBT for children and adolescents with depression: A systematic review and meta-regression analysis. *Eur Psychiatry*. 2019 Apr;57:33-45. doi: 10.1016/j.eurpsy.2018.12.008. Epub 2019 Jan 16. PMID: 30658278.

¹³ de Arellano, M. A., Lyman, D. R., Jobe-Shields, L., George, P., Dougherty, R. H., Daniels, A. S., Ghose, S. S., Huang, L., & Delphin-Rittmon, M. E. (2014). Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for children and adolescents: assessing the evidence. *Psychiatric services (Washington, D.C.)*, 65(5), 591–602. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201300255>

¹⁴ Lochman, John & Powell, Nicole & Boxmeyer, Caroline & Jimenez-Camargo, Luis. (2011). Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Externalizing Disorders in Children and Adolescents. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*. 20. 305-18. 10.1016/j.chc.2011.01.005.

¹⁵ Perry-Parrish, C., Copeland-Linder, N., Webb, L., Shields, A. H., & Sibinga, E. M. (2016). Improving self-regulation in adolescents: current evidence for the role of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. *Adolescent health, medicine and therapeutics*, 7, 101–108. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AHMT.S65820>

mental health issues relative to control groups (no treatment, treatment as usual, or active control) including interventions such as meditation, Yoga interventions, breathing, journaling, and others.¹⁶ Taken together, the existing literature is beginning to show promise for the effectiveness of adapted mindfulness interventions in youth across of number of settings.

The Arts and Self-Exploration

Our SPOT also utilizes the arts as part of its dynamic and engaging programming for positive youth development. Various forms of expressive arts are known to have associations with positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes in addition to offering important therapeutic benefits for children and adolescents. “Creative Youth Development”(CYD) is a recent term for a longstanding theory of practice that integrates creative skill-building, inquiry, and expression with positive youth development principles thereby fueling young people’s imaginations and building critical learning and life skills. CYD is a diverse field. Programs include a constellation of creative disciplines and genres, including film making, sound engineering, styles of dance from step to modern to ballet folklórico, an array of two- and three-dimensional visual arts from comic book design to photography to sculpture, graphic design, game design, playwriting, theatrical production, music performance and composition, journalism, and creative writing.¹⁷ This report surmises that the creative process at the heart of CYD programs contributes to tremendous, often transformative, personal growth for participants since, as young people create their own work in the arts, humanities, and sciences, they build the personal, social, and intellectual capacities they need to succeed in school, career, and life. Our SPOT infuses the arts via podcasting workshops, visual arts workshops, poetry and creative writing workshops, music production & song writing workshops, film, TV and broadcasting workshops, contemporary dance, Hip Hop classes and traditional African drum circles.

Even though there is body of research published about the impact of the arts, there has been limited knowledge developed regarding specific expressive arts interventions for promoting positive youth development and preventing problematic behaviors in youth from urban, low socioeconomic neighborhoods. A 2016 study¹⁸ was conducted to evaluate an expressive art intervention offered to youth through a positive youth development program located in several public housing neighborhoods. A quasi-experimental design was applied to test the impact of a poetry-focused art intervention on self-reported perceptions of academics, social competence, and multicultural attitudes of a culturally diverse sample. The arts intervention was found to have a statistically significant impact on these variables. The study provided compelling support

¹⁶ Perrier, MF., Gurgel-Juarez, N., Flowers, H.L. et al. Mindfulness-based interventions for children and adolescents across all settings: a scoping review protocol. *Syst Rev* 9, 286 (2020).

¹⁷ Montgomery, Denise. Spring 2020. Trends in Creative Youth Development Programs: An Overview https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://www.niost.org/images/afterschoolmatters/asm_2020_spring/Trends_in_Creative_Youth_Development_Programs.pdf

¹⁸ Forrest-Bank, S., Nicotera, N., Bassett, D., & Ferrarone, P. (2016). Effects of an Expressive Art Intervention with Urban Youth in Low-Income Neighborhoods. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 33(5), 429-441.

to further explore the efficacy of expressive arts on influencing attributes of positive youth development among urban adolescents.

Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Curricula

Our SPOT utilized several evidence-informed curricula that have been developed to address specific areas related to youth development including leadership development, mental health and resilience and respect for diversity and inclusion. These evidence-informed interventions implemented as part of Our SPOT are summarized below.

- ***Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning, Dept. of Public Health***¹⁹

The Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) was developed by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) in October 2000. This curriculum is aimed at promoting and supporting youth as leaders, recognizing that leadership is contextual and there are many ways it can be demonstrated and cultivated. Youth leadership within the YELL curriculum includes the development of youth voice, youth participation, youth civic engagement, youth decision making, and youth empowerment, among others. Six years of research on YELL has shown that a broader, more flexible vision of leadership can play to different strengths, improving the likelihood that youth will engage in their communities in meaningful and authentic ways. While this curriculum focuses on youth as leaders, it is ultimately about creating lasting social change where youth are valued and have the opportunity to be productive and connected citizens who make meaningful contributions and youth and as adults.
- ***YouthPower Activities***²⁰

YouthPower is expanding the evidence base for what works in positive youth development and applying improved approaches across programs and sectors. As an USAID-funded activity and set of projects, YouthPower seeks to improve the capacity of youth-led and youth-serving institutions and engage young people, their families, communities, and governments so that youth can reach their full potential. YouthPower's philosophy is that young people are at the heart of solutions to the world's greatest challenges. By helping young people pursue their aspirations, YouthPower activities empower them to contribute to, and benefit from, the creation of a more peaceful and prosperous community. YouthPower uses a positive youth development approach to implement programs within and across sectors.
- ***Peer to Peer Leadership Opportunities***

Although leadership ability is part of the full range of competencies or outcomes achieved through the youth development process, youth leadership is a distinct area of

¹⁹ [Anyon, Yolanda. \(January 2007\). Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning YELL A Handbook for Program Staff, Teachers, and Community Leaders. Stanford University, John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities. <https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/youth-engaged-leadership-and-learning-yell-handbook-program-staff-teachers-and>](https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/youth-engaged-leadership-and-learning-yell-handbook-program-staff-teachers-and)

²⁰ <https://www.youthpower.org/>

youth development with a primary focus on mastery of certain competencies necessary for effective leadership, including responsibility, teamwork, and vision. Our SPOT provides opportunities for peer to peer leadership and informal mentorship.

- ***Mental Health Promoters, Department of Mental Health***²¹

The Promoters, trained by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, are independent contractors. Their role is to provide educational workshops to individuals and families seeking needed resources on prevention and early intervention in mental health. Topics covered include Mental Health Stigma, Stages of Grief and Loss, Familial Violence, Drug and Alcohol Prevention, Symptoms and Treatments of Depression, Anxiety Disorders, Child Abuse, Suicide Prevention and Childhood Disorders. Although this particular training has not been directly evaluated, the positive impact of mental health education and workshops is well documented in the literature and does have an impact on the early identification of mental health issues and behavioral problems. Research has also found that programs such as this with more targeted contact-based workshops and interventions reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behavior more effectively than broad public awareness campaigns.²² Our SPOT incorporated several selected topics ranging from mental well-being, substance abuse and other topics designed to promote prevention. The curricula were delivered by community leaders who focused on culturally relevant content. This program empowers young people to seek programs and services to prevent negative developmental outcomes that grow out of exposure to stress and traumatic experiences. Ultimately, removing the stigma associated with seeking help will encourage youth to promote positive development for themselves, peers and families by creating awareness and knowledge on how to access resources.

- ***Resilience and Intergroup Solidarity Education (R.I.S.E.), Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission***

The Greater Los Angeles Area is characterized by its social diversity in terms of ages, ethnicities, cultures and sub-cultures, and language groups; economic classes; sexual orientations; gender identities, religions and faith expressions; lifestyles; and abilities. While many Angelenos eagerly embrace diversity, there are also many others who actively resist at least some of its expressions. The resulting tensions characterize far too many of our communities and institutions, including our schools. The continued existence of interpersonal and intergroup tension and conflict compromise our sense of security and can contribute to chronic trauma, especially in youth. Developed by the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, Resilience and Intergroup Solidarity Education (R.I.S.E.)²³ is a program implemented in schools and youth-serving

²¹ <https://www.nlacrc.org/Home/ShowDocument?id=10033>

²² Stuart H. (2016). Reducing the stigma of mental illness. *Global mental health (Cambridge, England)*, 3, e17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2016.1>

²³ <https://hrc.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/RISE-Guidebook.pdf>

organizations to address these conditions. R.I.S.E. offers ways to help youth learn alternatives for responding to tension and conflict and ways to encourage their appreciation for diversity. Through R.I.S.E., schools and youth-serving organizations foster resilience, promote respect and inclusion, affirm human rights, and mobilize youth to seek justice and actuate peace.

Principles of Successful Youth Program Implementation and Staffing

Grounded theory on Youth Development has identified certain key aspects of youth development planning, implementation and leadership. These characteristics are summarized below.

Research has identified eight program characteristics associated with promoting Positive Youth Development:

- (1) safe and health-promoting facilities
- (2) clear and consistent rules and expectations
- (3) warm, supportive relationships
- (4) opportunities for meaningful inclusion and belonging
- (5) positive social norms
- (6) support for efficacy and autonomy
- (7) opportunities for skill building
- (8) coordination among family, school, and community efforts.²⁴

These principles are mainstays for the Our SPOT implementation strategy.

A concern in the field of youth development is that many frontline staff, begin with little training, and develop their professional skills in isolation. Evidence shows that professional development is most effective when it occurs in ongoing learning communities, is based on an empowerment rather than a transmission model, and is deliberative when it helps practitioners apply knowledge to the complexities of diverse situations²⁵ Practitioners learn from participating in reflective spaces where they are invited to articulate, discuss and examine the experiences and thinking they do every day, a process that helps them become more explicit regarding the underlying assumptions and theory of practice that guide their actions. Our SPOT training and professional development is based on these principles, which was challenging due to COVID-19, yet professional development was still provided. Our SPOT frontline staff and DPR supervisors and managers participated in 40 hours of training in August 2020 and May 2021.

²⁴ Holt, N. L., Neely, K. C., Slater, L. G., Camiré, M., Côté, J., Fraser-Thomas, J., MacDonald, D., Strachan, L., & Tamminen, K. A. (2017). A grounded theory of positive youth development through sport based on results from a qualitative meta-study. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 10(1), 1–49.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2016.1180704>

²⁵ Reed W. Larson, Kathrin C. Walker, Natalie Rusk & Lisa B. Diaz (2015) Understanding Youth Development From the Practitioner's Point of View: A Call for Research on Effective Practice, *Applied Developmental Science*, 19:2, 74-86, <https://DOI:10.1080/10888691.2014.972558>

Topics were selected to support staff’s ability to implement positive youth development curriculum and to meet the social and emotional needs of teens. Topics ranged from leading curricula intended to promote human relations, youth leadership, substance abuse prevention, promoting mental wellness, LGBTQ+, creative youth development, positive youth development and suicide prevention. Subject matter experts from within and outside the County supported the delivery of the training.

Staff and leaders are at the heart of every youth program. Researchers argue that after-school programs should be repositioned, through research and policy, so they articulate more clearly how they support positive youth development by leveraging the roles of staff through the relationships they have with program participants. According to survey results detailed in Afterschool Alliance’s (2020a) *America After 3PM* report, the top reasons for placing children in after-school programs were access to knowledgeable and caring staff and safe environments.²⁶ Recruiting and retaining experienced, qualified individuals and giving them the support and training they need is a primary challenge for every organization. Researchers found three themes in the research about how youth workers contribute to the social and emotional development of program participants. First, effective youth development program staff play a key role in recruiting young people to participate in the first place and encouraging them to continue. This means that staff turnover likely hurts youth recruitment and attendance. Second, staff with higher levels of preparation tend to be more engaged in the programs themselves and to be more successful at engaging young people. The same is true of staff who receive more—and more effective—professional development. Third, the relationships that develop between program staff and young people are key to the development of character and social and emotional learning, the primary tenets of positive youth development models.²⁷ Further, using empirical studies as case examples, research demonstrated that the presence or absence of developmental relationships between youth and staff was a distinguishing factor that differentiated effective and ineffective interventions for diverse populations across developmental settings. Developmental relationships are characterized by reciprocal human interactions that encourage enduring emotional attachment and lead to progressively more complex patterns of joint activity and communication.²⁸ The Search Institute created a Developmental Relationships Framework that is an excellent tool to assist with decision-making for hiring, training and supporting the most effective staff to maximize the impact of youth development programs.²⁹

²⁶ Philip, K. D., & Gill, M. G. (2020). Reframing after-school programs as developing youth interest, identity, and social capital. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 7(1), 19–26.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219892647>. Santoro, M (2021). Dissertation.

²⁷ National Academies Press: Approaches to the Development of Character: Proceedings of a Workshop (2017). Chapter: 5 Developing a High-Quality Staff. <https://www.nap.edu/read/24684/chapter/6>

²⁸ Li, J. and Julian, M.M. (2012), Developmental Relationships as the Active Ingredient: A Unifying Working Hypothesis of “What Works” Across Intervention Settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82: 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01151.x>

²⁹ Roehlkepartain, E. C., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A. K., Sethi, J., Sullivan, T. K., & Scales, P. C. (2017). *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. <https://sites.ed.gov/nsaesc/files/2017/07/12758351-0-FINALRelationships-F1.pdf>

Evaluation Overview

The purpose of the evaluation was to compile information regarding the implementation of the program to highlight successes and challenges of the provision of the program and to better understand how the youth experienced the program and the extent to which the program impacted participants. To achieve this goal, the following research questions, continued from the first year of implementation, remain of interest:

1. How was the program implemented?
2. What were the experiences of participants?
3. What were the successes and challenges of the program?
4. How did the program impact participating youth?

Methods

To address the research questions stated earlier, we conducted a non-experimental process and outcome evaluation with mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, including:

- A review of selected evaluation and academic literature
- A review of the evaluation conducted in the prior year and other agency related documents
- An analysis of enrollment and attendance data
- Pre and post youth surveys, and focus groups or interviews with key stakeholders from across the 10 parks of interest in this evaluation.

The chart below highlights data sources for each research question.

Research Question	Data and Information Source
1. <i>How was the program implemented?</i>	Literature Review Service descriptions Enrollment and Attendance Demographics Stakeholder Focus Groups (Staff)
2. <i>What were the successes and challenges of the program?</i>	Staff training survey Stakeholder focus groups (Staff, Youth, Parents)
3. <i>What were the experiences of the stakeholders?</i>	Stakeholder focus groups (Staff, Youth, Parents) External partner interviews
4. <i>How did the program impact participating youth?</i>	Stakeholder focus groups (Staff, Youth, Parents) Pre and Post surveys

To describe the theoretical basis upon which the Our SPOT program was developed, a literature review and screening on the effectiveness of similar Out of School Time programs was conducted by identifying scholarly and peer-reviewed publications, papers, dissertations, and publications by nonprofits and think tanks published over the past 14 years (detailed in the

previous section of this report) We conducted multiple iterations of title and key word searches that resulted in a combination of 39 publications and hyperlink sources.

To determine the size and scope of the program implementation, the evaluation team looked at youth enrollment and attendance data collected by staff for each park. Data indicators included enrollment, attendance, dosage of some programs, gender, ethnicity and race of participants. We selected fiscal year 2020-21 during the period of July, through April, 2020 in particular, despite some challenges with the completeness of data available for analysis. For attendance, we obtained data available for each site for each month and aggregated the information into a single file that allowed us to analyze descriptive statistics to show some trends.

To obtain information on the program’s effect on youth attitudes and perceptions, we conducted a pre and post survey with youth participants across all 10 parks, who self-reported on key constructs of interest to the program. The same survey was utilized in the first year of the Our SPOT program, in fiscal year 2019-20. No changes to survey items were introduced in this second year. Non-sampling errors in surveys may occur when respondents interpret questions differently or do not provide honest responses, but also when data collection and processing errors occur. To minimize these errors, survey questions were based on existing measures that capture the theoretical underpinnings upon which the program is based. These scaled measures have been tested and reported (with high reliability) in the peer reviewed literature. The table below shows the constructs of interest to the Our SPOT program and the respective measures, the dimensions and number of survey items incorporated into the youth survey.

Constructs	Measures	Dimensions	# of survey items
Youth empowerment (e.g., self-efficacy, positive identity),	Brief Inventory of Thriving ³⁰	Thriving	10
Resilience	Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM) ³¹	Resilience	12
Substance use	CRAFFT	Use screening	9
Positive Youth Development	PYD-VSF ³²	Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring, Connection	17

³⁰ Su, R., Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2014). The development and validation of Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) and Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT). *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being*.

³¹ Liebenberg, L., Ungar, M., Leblanc, J. (2013) The CYRM-12: A Brief Measure of Resilience. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*

³² Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Almerigi, J., Theokas, C., Phelps, E., Gestsdottir, S. Naudeau, S., Jelicic, H., Alberts, A. E., Ma, L., Smith, L. M., Bobek, D. L., Richman-Raphael, D., Simpson, I., Christiansen, E. D., & von Eye, A. (2005). Positive youth development, participation in community youth development programs, and community contributions of fifth grade adolescents: Findings from the first wave of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 17-71.

After school time	The After-School Corporation (TASC) Student Survey ³³	Time use, academic self-concept and attitudes, perceptions and opinions about the program, feelings about peers in the program, and perceptions of positive effects of program participation.	18
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The pre and post surveys were administered online using Survey Monkey. The pre-survey was conducted between October 5, 2020 and November 23, 2020, and received 64 responses in total. The post-survey was conducted between June 5, 2021 and June 26, 2021 and received 64 responses in total. The data collected presented several challenges. A true pre and post analysis was limited because the following factors may have had outsized effects on youth responses and park comparisons: (1) timing of survey administration (pre-survey was conducted during county shutdown order due to the pandemic, while post-survey was conducted after county reopening), (2) high variance in the distribution of responses by park with some parks having stronger response rates than others, and (3) youth who did not include their program ID which made it difficult to sort youth by park location. We analyzed the pre and post surveys based on a sub-sample of youth in one region who completed both surveys.

To describe the experiences, thoughts and feelings and attitudes of youth, we conducted a total of three virtual Zoom focus groups, one for each park region as shown below, drawing from the youth in the parks for that region. A total of 24 youth participated. Youth were recruited to participate in focus groups via invites from program staff. A gift card for \$25 was provided as an incentive for their participation. Consent and assent were verified before participation.

Region	Park
NORTH	El Coriso; Loma Alta; Sorrensen
SOUTH	ERD; Mayberry; Mona Park; Roosevelt
EAST	City Terrace; San Angelo; Salazar

Although the focus groups encouraged conversational interaction, each focus group followed a semi-structured interview protocol to solicit information about the key topics of interest. Please see for Focus Group Protocol. Using a simplified content analysis approach, focus group data across groups were analyzed to provide an overview of emerging thoughts and themes. Due to the relatively low number of participants, certain salient points are included in the summary if they were mentioned by two or more participants across groups, a lower threshold than typically used in focus group analysis. We conducted a simplified content analysis with the help

³³ Geiger, E. & Britsch, B. (2003). Out of School Time Program Evaluation: Tools for Action. Northwest Regional Education Laboratory

of three independent analysts to ensure high levels of interrater reliability in identifying Prevailing Themes.

To obtain staff's perspective and attitudes about the program implementation and impact, we conducted a total of 10 focus groups with staff that included front line staff, supervisors, managers, assistant directors and director level staff from Our SPOT parks. Each focus group followed a semi-structured interview protocol to solicit information about the key topics of interest. Please see for Focus Group Protocol as well as detailed summaries and notes. Using a simplified content analysis approach, focus group data across groups were analyzed to provide an overview of emerging thoughts and themes. We conducted a simplified content analysis with the help of three independent analysts to ensure high levels of interrater reliability in identifying Prevailing Themes.

Additionally, we conducted a staff survey which was administered in June, 2021, and had a 100% response rate. The survey was a web-based questionnaire with 15 fixed choice and open-ended questions. We asked staff about their work history with the Department of Parks and Recreation, with the local park, and with youth, the motivations and challenges in working with youth, expectations for as well as the impact of staff training received.

To obtain perspective and attitudes about the program implementation and impact of parents, we conducted two virtual Zoom parent focus groups. A total of five parents participated. Each focus group followed a semi-structured interview protocol to solicit information about the key topics of interest. Please see for Parent Focus Group Protocol. Using a simplified content analysis approach, focus group data across groups were analyzed to provide an overview of emerging thoughts and themes. Due to the relatively low number of participants, certain salient points are included in the summary if they were mentioned by two or more participants across groups, a lower threshold than typically used in focus group analysis.

To obtain perspective and attitudes about the Our SPOT program from partner schools, we contacted a sample of feeder schools for the 10 park sites by telephone and email to briefly interview school principals or representatives from the principals' office to solicit information about the key topics of interest. Response from the feeder schools was limited due to a lack of response from those individuals sought for input as well as the timing of the interviews vis a vis the end of the school year. In only one case, did the staff contacted report knowledge of the Our SPOT Program which may have been related to the small sample of school administrators who are not closely involved at the program level. However, one Principal requested additional information and was particularly interested because the program did not require any expenditure from his school. Please see for Focus Group Protocol. We successfully reached 8 contacts. A simplified content analysis approach was used to draw emerging thoughts and themes. Due to the relatively low number of participants, certain salient points are included in the summary if they were mentioned by two or more participants across groups, a lower threshold than typically used in focus group analysis.

Findings: Program Implementation

According to the U.S. Census, 73% of residents in Los Angeles are people of color with 83% among them being youth of color. The county itself spans more than 4,000 square miles. As the steward of 183 parks and other amenities and facilities throughout the County, the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation shoulders the enormous challenge and responsibility of providing equitable recreational programs and services across the county in spite of recent challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, and countywide budget cuts.



Our SPOT Park Profiles in Underserved Communities

It is within this context that the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, through its various funders, offers the Our SPOT program in select parks under its purview. As part of its equity challenge, the program invests in underserved and poor communities with high populations of youth of color where existing community resources and services do not always meet the demand for low cost or no cost prevention programming.

Region	Park	Target zip code	Youth 10-17	Unmet Need
NORTH	El Cariso	91342	11,109	<p>Need for Out of School Programs is high:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target zip codes where park programs are located indicate a high youth population between the ages of 10 to 17. This age group represents 9-15% of the overall population in these communities with a mean rate of 12.5%. Other Out-of-School programs (RISE, SHOUT, LAUSD Beyond the Bell, All Stars, YMCA, College Track, City Year, Think Together and TELACU as a few examples) operate in the target zones. However, no one program can accommodate the entire target population.
	Loma Alta	91001	3,331	
	Sorrensen	93591	1,027	
SOUTH	ERD	90221	7,293	
	Mayberry	90605	4,865	
	Mona Park	90222	4,185	
	FDR	90001	8,572	
EAST	City Terrace	90063	6,624	
	San Angelo	91746	2,924	
	Salazar	90023	6,713	

Our SPOT parks draw youth from key public schools in the same communities. The chart on the next page shows the high population of eligible youth who can attend Our SPOT. Youth from these school communities have some of the highest Free and Reduced-Price Meal (FRPM) eligibility, a rate often used as a proxy indicator of poverty. Nearly all the parks draw youth with FRPM rates significantly greater than the Los Angeles County as a whole (68.7%).

Demonstrated Need around Local Parks for the Our SPOT Program

	Total youth	Park Feeder FRPM % ³⁴	African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Filipino	Hispanic or Latino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races	Not Reported
Salazar Park	3668	96.7%	0.6%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	97.4%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%	0.1%
Pamela Park	1242	77.9%	3.3%	0.1%	3.1%	3.3%	83.0%	0.1%	5.7%	1.2%	0.3%
Sorensen Park	6149	77.9%	8.4%	0.4%	0.5%	0.4%	79.9%	0.1%	7.9%	2.3%	0.1%
Loma Alta Park	9050	66.7%	12.2%	0.2%	4.3%	2.0%	60.5%	0.2%	17.5%	2.7%	0.3%
El Cariso	7070	89.8%	1.1%	0.1%	0.5%	0.5%	95.1%	0.1%	1.7%	0.4%	0.5%
City Terrace	1210	94.9%	2.1%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	95.9%	0.0%	1.0%	0.2%	0.3%
San Angelo Park	1324	92.7%	0.4%	0.1%	3.2%	1.7%	93.7%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%
ERD and Mona Park	6091	92.6%	15.9%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	82.5%	0.4%	0.1%	0.2%	0.6%
Roosevelt Park	4993	97.2%	8.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	90.6%	0.0%	0.9%	0.2%	0.0%
Mayberry Park	8354	61.7%	1.0%	0.3%	1.6%	1.1%	88.4%	0.2%	6.9%	0.3%	0.2%
Los Angeles County		68.7%	7.10%	0.20%	7.90%	2.20%	65.70%	0.30%	13.30%	2.70%	0.60%

Source: California Department of Education 2020-21

³⁴ Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals offered at public schools provides a measure of poverty among youth.

The parks are also in communities of color. The overwhelming majority of youth at all of the Our SPOT parks are Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American compared to county rates of 65.7% and 7.1% respectively.

Our SPOT operates in unincorporated communities of Los Angeles County impacted by high levels of violence. The chart below illustrates the heavy burden of crime and the need for prevention programming and services to buffer against their effects and offer an alternative positive narrative to youth and families.

Unincorporated Communities Heavily Impacted by Violence³⁵

Unincorporated Community	Parks in Community Area	Violence Score ³⁷	Homicide Score ³⁸	Assault Trauma Center Visits		Serious Violent Crimes ³⁶	
				Rate	% Gun	Rate	% Gang
Willowbrook	Mona	25	24.9	147.5	53.3%	95	13.8%
Florence-Firestone	Franklin D. Roosevelt	25	14.9	88	47.0%	81.8	11.8%
East Los Angeles	Ruben F Salazar	25	10.0	50.4	46.4%	52.3	14.2%
	City Terrace						
East Rancho Dominguez & Rancho Dominguez	East Rancho	24	29.1	133.5	37.5%	128.6	13.4%
	Dominguez						
Avocado Heights	San Angelo	24	7.2	50.9	47.1%	60	10.8%
Whittier & West Whittier/Los Nietos	Sorenson	21	8.2	15.6	40.0%	28.6	12.0%

Source: 2021-22 Business and Operations Plan, Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation

Program Dosage

The Our SPOT program is grounded in evidence-based curricula related to positive youth development (please see this report’s Literature Review for details). As part of this general curriculum, the Our SPOT program provides: (1) health, fitness, sports and recreation, (2) social-emotional learning with life skills, promotion of healthy development, mindfulness and self-care (3) mental health promotion including substance use prevention, (4) Arts, culture and self-exploration through the Actor’s Gang, Bold Ink Writer, VeraStyle Dance Company, Jail Guitar,

³⁵ El Cariso, Loma Alta, and Mayberry Parks have high violence score ratings as well but are not the most impacted by violence as their peers in this chart.

³⁶ Serious violent crime rates are per 10,000 population and sourced from Los Angeles County Sheriff Department and California Department of Justice. Population data for generating the rates are sourced from US Census, American Community Survey (2015-19 estimates).

³⁷ Violence score is calculated by (1) rank ordering cities/communities on each of the 5 indicators, (2) rating them on each indicator from 1-5 with the highest 20% scored a 5, the next 20% scored a 4 and so on, and (3) adding their cumulative ranked score for a maximum violence score of 25.

³⁸ Homicide rates and Assault related Trauma Center Visit rates are per 100,000 population and sourced from Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner (2015-2019) and Los Angeles County Emergency Medical Services Agency respectively.

Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory, Street Poets, and visual arts and crafts, (5) youth engagement in leadership development including peer to peer leadership, (6) self-empowerment through Youth Power, (7) Resilience and Intergroup Solidarity Education (RISE), and (8) career pathway and education. During this past year, while many programs closed due to COVID-19, Our SPOT remained open with many of the programs and activities moved online for youth to be able to access from home. For some activities, particularly the arts and culture programming, Our SPOT staff provided weekly Grab N Go materials that youth collected at their local Our SPOT site in order to participate in guided learning virtually.

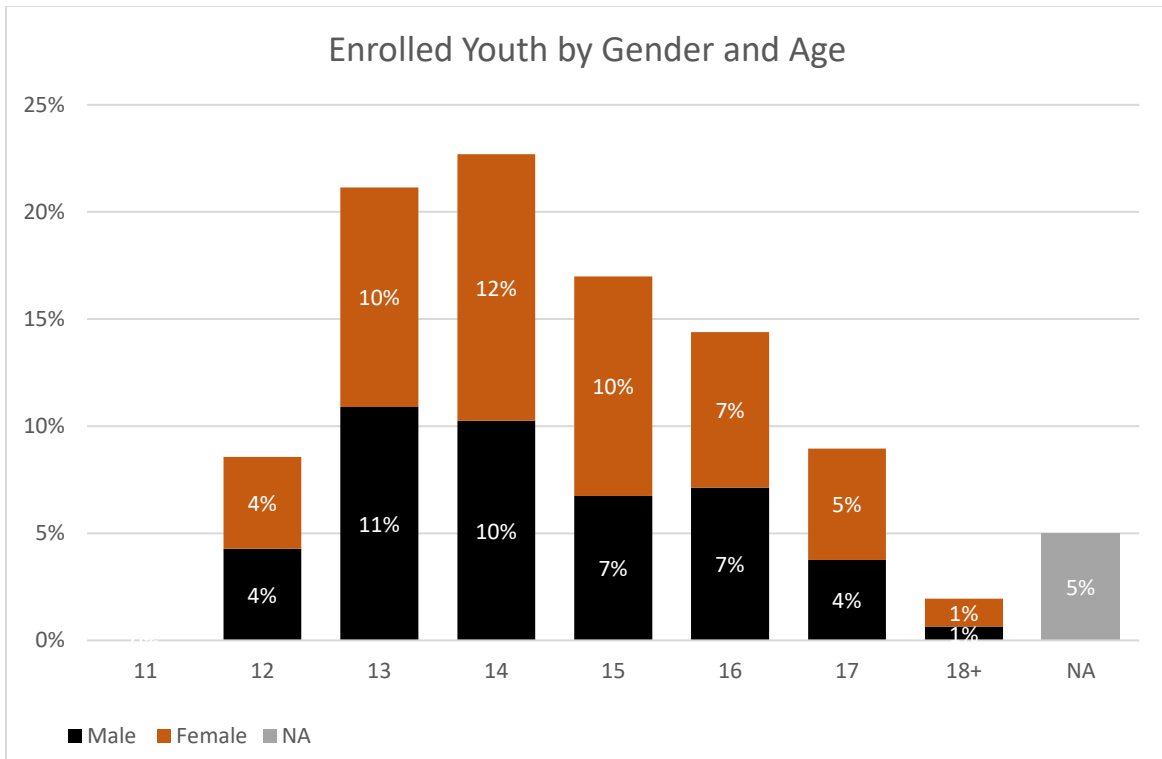
During a six-month period, Our SPOT provided rich and diverse content and activities to engage youth during the county’s shutdown order.

Six-month Snapshot

Programs	Activity Description	Dosage Total Hours
Arts and Culture: Each site selected one of the arts and culture programs as part of their summer programming. All sites provided visual arts and crafts with the start of the school year.		
Armory	Art classes of different cultures and styles	24
Actors Gang	Theater and production	24
Bold Ink Writers	Writing workshops, mentorship for young girls including college preparedness	24
Somos LA Art	Visual arts and cultural knowledge with artistic impressions	32
VeraStyle Dance Co	Learning Hip Hop dance	24
Jail Guitar	Learning to play guitar	24
Boyle Heights Arts	Multi-media including broadcasting and digital content creation	24
Street Poets	Creative writing, creative speaking embedded with enhancing leadership skills	24
Visual Arts & Crafts	Various arts & crafts including silk screening, painting	51
Youth Power: All sites		
Self-empowerment topics included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategize, organize & mobilize; transforming school and community, youth organizing for power • Power of voice, public speaking, growing in numbers • Life vision and goal setting, community and its values, SMART goals 		23
Career Pathway and Education: All sites		
Virtual trips to universities		20
RISE: All sites		
Resilience topics included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional impact of denied power, Stereotypes and bias, setting personal limits and goals to accomplish, celebrating diversity 		22
Fitness: All sites		
Outdoor fitness (e.g.: Upper & Lower Body Circuit Exercises) following all Covid-19 guidelines and restrictions.		33

Participant Demographics

- Majority of enrolled youth are between 13-14 years of age
- Equal numbers of males and females are enrolled and represented by age. The program enrolled 401 males (52%) and 372 females (48%).
- Approximately 78% of enrolled youth identified their ethnicity as Latino/Hispanic.



Participant Age (years)

Enrollment & Participation

During the 2019-20 year Our SPOT provided services to approximately 843 unduplicated youth. Attendance in Year 2 of this program fluctuated due to COVID closures.. The Our SPOT Program sites were officially closed and programming was moved online March 23, 2020 to provide some continuity. While the program did start the new fiscal year with a loss of Our SPOT youth, the program overall did make up the setback with an overall gain of 12.4% in enrollment with a total of 773 identified as enrolled by the end of April 2021.

Park Region	Enrollments	
	July 2020	April, 2021 Net Gain
North	285	+18
South	282	+49
East	197	+18
		12.4% Enrollment Increase

Program Access

Youth Attendance: While many youth programs across the county were closed, Our SPOT remained operational, albeit virtual, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between July 2021 and April 2021, the program was open 186 days, averaging 18-19 days of programming per month.

During that time, the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) across 10 parks was 37 youth. The chart below presents ADA by region. During this 10 month period, the lowest attended month was December 2020 when COVID-19 rates across the county were at their highest levels, while the best attended month was April 2021 when vaccinations were already well underway and the county parks began to reopen for limited use. Mayberry Park had the highest attendance while Loma Alta had the lowest attendance.

Average Daily Attendance (July 2020 to April 2021)

All Parks	37.0
North Region	10.0
South Region	17.3
East Region	9.7
Highest Attended Month	April, 2021
Lowest Attended Month	December, 2020
Highest Attended Park Monthly	Mayberry
Lowest Attended Park Monthly	Loma Alta

PARK SNAPSHOT

	At least 1 day	At least 5 days	At least 10 days
April 2021-High Attendance Month			
Mayberry	40	20	13
Loma Alta	8	0	4
December 2020-Low Attendance Month			
Mayberry	18	12	3
Loma Alta	8	0	0

Snapshot Summary:

- Youth attendance was significantly higher for high attended park (Mayberry) but remained unchanged for low attended park (Loma Alta).
- Program dosage improved between low and high peak months for both the lowest and highest attended parks with more youth attending Our SPOT multiple days within a month

Staff Views on Youth Attendance

Although the program is meant to recruit and assist at-risk/at promise youth, specifically those who may be prone to gang-violence, this goal is hard to track and meet because at-risk is a generalized term. There is a need to streamline the definition of what at-risk entails. For the most part,

- The program supports lower-income Black and Latino students who may have general exposure to gang violence and experience with trauma. According to staff, boys from the ages of 12-15 years old tend to be attracted to the program and attend the most.
- Attendance varies at each park. However, a consistent theme is attendance being linked to the curriculum. The curriculum is very structured so students will attend if they are interested in that day's curriculum.
- The program is not mandatory which is why attendance is also sporadic. Recruitment for younger kids might be easier because they don't have as much autonomy from their parents. Nowadays, physical marketing campaigns such as flyers are not as effective as digital ones.

Youth also had access to specialized events, programs and workshops held online. Examples of such programming included:

Event	Description	Dosage (in days)	Average Attendance
Teen Summit	Youth and Social Justice, Justice 4 Floyd, Say Goodbye to Drugs, LGBTQ and Youth, Youth Empowerment	5	*
Say No to Drugs	Truth about Drugs, Truth about Marijuana, Truth about Synthetic Drugs, Alcohol, Ecstasy, Inhalants	6	*
Let's Talk Workshop	Social Justice	1	643
CWH COVID-19	COVID-19 Youth Outreach Program with Department of Public Health		*
Chicano Moratorium	Chicano Moratorium and Chicano Rights Movement	8	35.9
Stop the Spread of COVID-19	Stop the Spread of COVID-19	3	46.7
Girl Empowerment		3	46.7
Youth at Work	Youth interning at Department of Public Health over the summer 2021		48

* Data not available

Youth Motivations to Participate: Youth reported on their motivations and interests to participate in Our SPOT in surveys and focus groups, which revealed making friends/socializing, program activities and staff as key draws. Parents concurred with youth reporting stating the opportunity to engage, interact, and socialize with others as the key motivations for attendance. More specifically, the following were noted:

1. Opportunity to socialize and interact with friends was a motivating factor in their decision to attend Our SPOT activities, according to youth focus groups. Parents specifically stated that the program offers opportunities for social interaction and has served to help their children feel more confident in opening up to others, expanding their social circle, and approaching others.
2. Getting out of the house and not being locked inside at home emerged as a salient theme as well, perhaps because focus groups were conducted immediately after the COVID-19 stay at home orders were lifted in the County.
3. Youth also mentioned program activities as motivators, and with the exception of one focus group, did not specifically identify which activities motivated their attendance.

Youth Motivations & Interests: Attitudes about after school time	
<p>Interests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 93% of youth would like to attend Our SPOT at least 3 days/week • 57% definitely have friends or someone they like at Our SPOT 	<p>Reasons for attending our SPOT:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interesting activities 2. Friends attending
<p>If NOT at our SPOT, youth are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staying at home 2. Watching TV or playing video games 3. Playing Sports or other recreation 	<p>Favorite part of our SPOT:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends/Making Friends 2. Activities 3. Staff

Source: Our Spot Youth Survey 2020-21

Barriers to attendance included homework, school activities, and household chores. No other barriers were mentioned across focus groups or across participants during focus groups, but youth surveys revealed that in lieu of attending, youth stayed home, watched TV or played video games, or played sports and engaged in other forms of recreation instead.

- When asked about park safety, youth expressed that overall, they felt safe at Our SPOT park locations. In one of the focus groups (South LA area), several youth stated that they felt safe in the Our SPOT location within the park, yet they did not feel as safe in other parts of the park. Knowing that park staff were watching them to keep them safe mitigated fears. Youth survey indicated 100% of respondents felt safe at Our SPOT.
- When asked about park access, youth indicated that they lived in close proximity to the parks and walked to the park or get dropped off by parents. Some stated they take the bus, but did not suggest that this was a problematic issue or a barrier. Two participants

across two groups suggested that distance and parental comfort with travel to the park were barriers and parents might feel more at ease if transportation were provided.

Program Quality

COVID-19 Impact

As revealed in staff focus groups, COVID-19 and the local restrictions and closings changed the dynamics of the program in expected and unexpected ways. As expected, it reduced the participation at some sites because students were exhausted by the virtual platform and craved the physical component of the program – especially when engagement, building relationships and intimacy were harder to build for teens via Zoom. However, COVID-19 also brought a need for creativity, and it increased the visibility and audience of the program. The program now has an online platform it didn't have before. Furthermore, Instagram worked in some ways but there were certain logistical issues that made it not as effective, such as one-sided conversations experienced by staff when going live on certain activities.

Benefits of Participation: Youth self-reported the benefits of and their interest in attending the Our SPOT program in a survey and focus groups.

Youth Perceived Benefits

Youth self-reported their perceptions with the Our SPOT program indicating whether they were “somewhat” or “very” much in agreement with the following statements:

Doing better since attending Our SPOT	90%
Happier since attending Our SPOT	90%
Less stressed since attending Our SPOT	87%
Feel comfortable talking to the Our SPOT staff	94%

Youth self-reported benefits can be further grouped into five categories of responses:

1. Helped with friendships and opportunities for socialization with current and new friends

This seemed to be the most prominent way that youth perceive Our SPOT is helping them. This was the only concept that was mentioned in all three focus groups and was mentioned eleven times by separate participants. Youth mentioned the opportunity to have a place to socialize, to meet new friends, make connections and simply “hang out” with their friends was important. It will be interesting to examine if this is still the most frequently reported impact next

“I think that we all share something in common and that’s what makes us bond easier. It could be a video game or a sport, recently we all got close and started learning how to skate.”

Youth comment.

year when social isolation from COVID-19 is less significant. In focus groups, parents stated that they felt safe sending their child to the park particularly because the parks are in the neighborhood, and Our SPOT employees are very hands-on with staff knowing each and every youth in the program.

2. Helped youth with socio-emotional growth

This was mentioned by multiple focus group participants (mentioned nine times), across two focus groups; this was not mentioned at all in the third focus group, which seemed less comfortable talking about socio-emotional/mental health issues. While the youth did not typically use mental health jargon, they used phrases indicative, such as mentioning opportunities to “open up and share feelings,” “feeling like you are not alone”, “learning how to talk things out instead of getting mad” , “ some are hotheads and we learn how to deal with each other” and “mentally learning from activities.” In addition, they mentioned learning how to improve their communication and social skills and that they learned to be more outgoing when interacting with people.

3. Helped youth meet requirements for community service or helped them to get County jobs

This was also mentioned nine times across two different focus groups but not in all three. Participants indicated that Our SPOT helped them to get volunteer hours, complete community service requirements and receive assistance with employment. Two participants also mentioned that participation in Our SPOT helped them to start small side-businesses based on what they learned and observed. This last item seemed to be a valuable benefit and it might be helpful in recruitment materials, if replicable.

4. Provided help with homework/school

Youth reported this benefit less frequently; it was mentioned only three times across two focus groups. Participants did not elaborate except to state that the staff helped them with homework. It is difficult to know if this occurred infrequently or if it was mentioned less frequently since participants perceived other things they mentioned as more helpful.

5. Helped them with more pro-social activities and decision-making.

One of the focus groups spent considerable time talking about the impact that Our SPOT made on factors related to socio-emotional learning and not directly mentioned by the other focus groups. The theme was pervasive among the participants in this group so it is included in the content analysis since more than two participants mentioned it. Three participants in this group mentioned how the program kept them distracted and gave them a place to go so they could stay out of trouble. Participants also reported that the program helped them to spend time with people who were good influences on them.

As an additional benefit of the program, Parents mentioned the opportunity for youth to feel inspired and think about their future. Parents mentioned youth wanting to engage as business owners, as volunteers, ideas that were nurtured at Our SPOT.

Program “Likes” and “Dislikes”: Youth and staff showed some consensus across their respective peer focus groups and across participants on what youth enjoyed and least enjoyed about the Our SPOT program.

Program strengths/The “Likes”

- 1. Range of enrichment opportunities:** In terms of specific activities and topics, the feedback seemed to be reflective of personal interests and experiences. Overall, the youth stated they enjoyed the Our SPOT activities, yet when asked about their favorites and least favorites, there was little consensus across groups and participants other than just a mention by one or two youth. For example, in a single focus group, one participant stated the acting class was their favorite and another listed it as their least favorite. This pattern was also observed with some other activities. This is a typical response set to programs with diversified programmatic content and is reflective of diverse interests. At least one participant from each focus group did remark that they enjoyed being exposed to new things and new experiences, so although something might have made the “least favorite list”, the experience still had value.

Staff also point to the opportunities provided for youth to experience new activities or gain exposure to activities that youth from their background are disproportionately less active in to develop 21st Century skills. Several comments related to the participants’ lack of exposure to opportunities outside of their immediate neighborhood.
- 2. Social relationships:** Both parent and staff reports highlighted youth building social relationships and connections to other youth, socio-emotional skills-building and forming relationships with young adults (the staff).
- 3. Skill and/or college readiness:** Staff reported benefits of the program specifically around skills-building, socioemotional wellness, critical thinking, and leadership development. Other indirect, correlated benefits may include college access and high school graduation.
- 4. Safe Space:** The most reported success of the program by staff is the safe space that Our SPOT offers kids to just be and to spend their time; providing safety for kids who

“You guys have so much potential of where this program can go, and I think that is my favorite thing, because, I look forward to seeing how it continues to grow.” — Parent comment.

may be exposed to unsafe places or people in their homes or in their larger community. Safety is defined here as both physical and psychological.

Program weaknesses/The “Dislikes”

1. **The didactic curriculum:** Generally, youth did not enjoy programmatic content that was didactic and was likened to schoolwork delivered in a manner similar to an academic class. They referenced doing the homework, sitting and listening to lectures that felt similar to how their teachers taught, thus Our SPOT felt like an extension of their school day. Further, some activities had lengthy textbooks, workbooks or worksheets that they did not enjoy in this setting. Youth experience with the curriculum may have been severely impacted by the need to adapt the program quickly to a virtual platform due to COVID-19 and may help explain a desire for more kinesthetic activity and engagement. It is worth mentioning that in one focus group, multiple participants mentioned that some presenters did not seem prepared to deliver the workshops and, in some cases, did not seem to understand the needs of youth and how to interact with them.
2. **Safe Passage/Transportation:** Staff specify that providing safe linkages from schools to parks would allow more youth to participate in the program, especially those youth who are discouraged to participate due to high crime near the partner parks. Partner school stakeholders also noted that the lack of proximity of the school to the park site of Our SPOT could pose a barrier to student participation. The closer the school to the park, the greater the chance of participation. In addition, it was suggested that transportation from the school site to the park site would increase the potential of participation.
3. **Burden of County restrictions/Data Collection:** Some staff observed that County restrictions and requirements required a great deal of staff time. One such example was a focus on collecting a large quantity of data for which they did not see the relevance for the program; and were concerned that these data might not be indicative actual program success. **Some staff mentioned that other indicators, like staff relationships with youth and trust in staff program delivery, may be perhaps as important as the attendance metrics.**
4. **Staff hiring and readiness:** Some staff observed the need for being more intentional with staff selection and appointments to parks. Additional training and staff support, including intermittent program auditing and field observations of staff implementation, may not only help build staff competencies, but also inform content for staff training.
5. **Knowledge of “Our SPOT” among principals of feeder schools:** Among partner schools contacted, only one had any knowledge of SPOT. In two circumstances, the school indicated that they would like information on SPOT. In one case, a Principal was very clear that he would be interested in programs that had no cost to his school.

Effects of participation: In the fall of 2021, Our SPOT youth completed a self-reported survey incorporating measurable scales around the following health outcomes (1) Youth empowerment (i.e. self-efficacy, positive identity) based on a scale on thriving that captures psychological well-being and health outcomes; (2) Resilience as measured by a reduced version of the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM) looking at overcoming challenges and difficulties; (3) Substance use as measured by indicators from CRAFFT, the most widely used screening tool for alcohol and other substance use among adolescent youth; (4) Positive Youth Development with psychometrically sound measures of adolescent attributes around competence, confidence, character, caring and connection.

Thriving

- Youth showed a strong sense of empowerment on every indicator with an overwhelming majority reporting that they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ on having a clear sense of purpose, being optimistic about their future, feeling energized about their activities, feeling good about their life, feeling appreciated by others and a sense of belonging.
- Though still positive, some youth (8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed on whether they were achieving most of their goals.

Resilience

- Youth reported resiliency with an overwhelming majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that they have role models, value education, start what they finish, solve problems without harming themselves or others. They also feel fairly treated in their community, have a sense of belonging, feel supported by friends and family, and enjoy their cultural and family traditions.
- A smaller proportion of youth (8-10%) reported not having someone to look up to or feeling supported by friends or family during difficult times.

Substance Use

Our SPOT youth, in general, do not engage in substance use with one important caveat:

- Majority of youth (93% or higher) reported not drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana or hashish, or smoking anything else (including illegal drugs) to get high.
- Majority of youth reported no involvement in other substance use indicators (i.e. substance use to relax, or while alone; gotten into trouble while using alcohol or drugs). However, between 9.5%-12.5% opted to not respond to these questions.
- An additional 7.8% indicated that FAMILY or FRIENDS have in the past told them to cut down on their drinking or drug use. An additional 6.8% indicated that they had ridden a car with someone who was intoxicated.

Positive Youth Development

- Youth reported being happy with themselves most of the time, and glad to be who they are. Youth (more than 20%) were less sure about having lots of friends and feeling comfortable with how they looked.
- Youth reported high ratings on wanting to make the world a better place to live, accepting responsibility for their actions, feeling empathy and wanting to help someone in distress, as well as feeling good about their friends and important within their family. Some youth (22%) felt less sure about being an important member of their local community.

Self-reported Changes over Time: Youth completed the same survey in October, 2020 and again in June 2021. Based on the limitations stated in the methodology section, pre and post comparisons of youth responses are limited. A general downtrend was observed in post-test responses though confounding variables (explained previously) may account for this trend. To have a more accurate pre and post-test assessment, we spotlighted the following park.

Our Spotlight on San Angelo Park

At San Angelo Park, same youth completed the survey both times. Some changes in youth perception were observed over this 8-month period on some of the measurement scales integrated into the survey. No significant changes were observed on remaining indicators between the two completion periods.

On the thriving/self-empowerment scale,

- Youth felt more strongly about achieving most goals and belonging within their community.

On the resilience scale,

- Youth felt more strongly about their family standing behind them during difficult times, but felt less strongly about education being important to them.
- Youth felt less strongly about enjoying their family and cultural traditions.

On the substance use scale

- Reported weighted averages was lower on some substance use indicators including (1) youth drinking any alcohol, (2) youth riding in a car driven by someone (including yourself) who was "high" or had been using alcohol or drugs, (3) Family or Friends telling you that they should cut down on drinking or drug use, and (4) youth who have gotten into trouble while they were using alcohol or drugs.

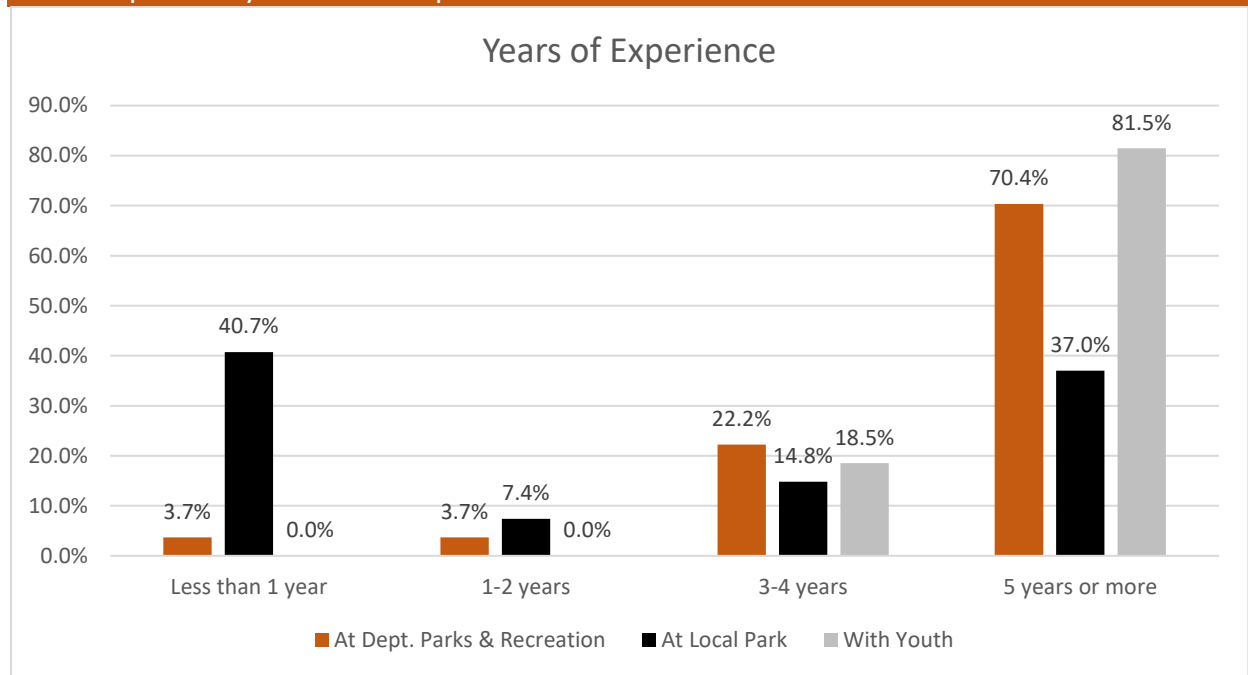
On positive youth development scale,

- Youth reported (1) doing better in their classwork and (2) liking the way they looked but also reported feeling less likely to (1) enjoy being with people of a different race, (2) help someone being taken advantage of, (3) feel sorry for someone being picked on.

Staff hiring & changes:

During the pandemic, Our SPOT staff remained employed because of funding. However, some staff changes did occur due to department efforts within LA County to right size the budget

Though the majority of hired Our SPOT staff have worked 5 years or more for the LA County Department of Parks and Recreation and experience working with youth, only 40% have worked specifically at their local park.



Staff Motivations:

Given the importance of staff to youth participation, hiring staff with the right motivations is essential. Staff responses include:

- Giving back to the community
- Empower, guide, mold, and nurture youth/Positively share their future
- Being a role model and mentor
- Seeing them/their talents grow

“Seeing the relationship you build with them. Most kids see you as a second parent”

—Staff Motivation to work with youth

Staff Training: Our SPOT staff receive weeklong training provided semi-annually on working

Top Staff Challenges working with youth:

1. Keeping their interest/ Getting them engaged
2. Attitude/Behavior

more effectively with youth. A key aspect of these trainings is to impart trauma informed approaches to engage and empower youth. Each day of the training focuses on a specific aspect of program service delivery. In 2020-21, the trainings occurred August 10-14 and May 3-7 with 28 staff members, on average, attending daily. Training themes for this year are provided below.

Each day of the weeklong workshop focused on a specific topic. What staff found beneficial from the most recent weeklong training was the sharing of ideas and experiences from other parks and staff peers.

- Half of staff rated each of the workshops as “very” or “extremely” useful for their day-to-day work at the park. Another third found it moderately useful. Teach the triangle workshop, taught by Stacy Frazier, PhD, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Florida International University, was the highest rated for the week.
- Overwhelming majority (over 90%) of staff “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the workshops were coherent and well organized, and facilitators were knowledgeable and related content to practice. Similarly, staff “agreed” and “strongly agreed” that the group discussion enhanced learning and valued the opportunity to reflect on their experience.
- Some staff found the trainings too long, however, to process the wealth of information provided in the weeklong format. They would have preferred more interactive/hands-on workshops. Some staff, in focus groups, proposed more opportunities for sharing implementation challenges, lessons and strategies across Our SPOT locations.

Trauma Informed Approaches to Youth Engagement	Youth Voice During times of Civil Unrest & De-Escalation approaches to trauma impacted youth	Trauma Informed Approaches - Defining your role in the youth you service	Youth Action Projects & Live Above the Hype	Positive Youth Development and Artist Experience
Straight from Your Peers- Approaches to Youth Engagement and the Promotion of Fun and Engaging Programs	Empowering Youth Leadership: Strategize, Organize, Mobilize, and Change.	College and Career Pathways: Finding Your Strengths & College and Career Readiness	Mindfulness Meditation & Self-Care	Positive Youth Development and OST Programs: Teach the Triangle

Findings Across Perspectives: Themes & Takeaways

The Our SPOT evaluation was designed to capture and describe the evolution of program implementation as well as the resulting successes and challenges in program delivery. Drawn from the data analysis, particularly the prevailing perspectives of youth and staff, the following key themes and takeaways encapsulate the challenges faced, the success achieved, and the lessons learned in program implementation.

Perspectives on Youth Population

THEME 1. Targeting Youth and Developmental Alignments

The Our SPOT program fills a demand for youth programming in underserved communities. LA County stewards 183 parks. Park selection for the program is based on a well-defined set of indicators including high youth population, drop-out rate, proportion of households below the federal poverty level, crime and needs assessment. All ten parks in this evaluation meet these criteria. From the outset, the program has provided services to targeted youth between the ages 12-18 at these parks. However, the program does face some challenges related to the youth population

- The program tries to draw at-risk/at-promise youth, specifically those that may be prone to gang violence or influence. The program assumes that high drop-out rate, high poverty, and high crime within the community are predictors of at-risk youth in attendance, but no specific tracking methods were revealed in this analysis in the recruitment, enrollment and attendance of this “at-risk” population, or the most vulnerable among them.
- While the program does discourage attendance of youth who do not fit the target age group (i.e. siblings of participants who may be underaged), it does not specifically address the developmental differences within the target population in preparation of its curriculum.

THEME 2. Recruitment and Attendance

The Our SPOT program did face some challenges in its recruitment and attendance within the 2020-21 year.

- COVID-19 pandemic impacted program enrollment and attendance in the early phases of the shutdown order, but the program did manage to rebuild enrollment and recoup some of the initial enrollment loss as virtual options became available.
- The program tracking tools lacked consistency in how they were captured making it more difficult to parse out specific patterns in youth recruitment and attendance of the program. Part of this challenge may have resulted from the COVID-19 impact where programming was not in-person, but virtual. Program staff had to adjust to moving programming virtually in a short period of time, and consistent process for participation may have been difficult to document.
- For some youth, the virtual experience at Our SPOT was too similar to their experience academic schooling. Many youth faced online fatigue and did not attend after being online for most of the regular school day.

Emerging Youth Perceptions

Theme 3: FUN

In the youth focus group content analysis, the word “fun” appears 15 times and the concept of fun even more. It is quite clear that youth expect the Our SPOT program to be primarily fun – enjoyable, engaging and interesting. This perception is not surprising given that as youth transition to adulthood, much of their developmental milestones and social learning is done through play, which, by definition, is most often “fun.” Further, the program delivery at a park

also adds to the perspective, since youth and families typically think of a park as a place to play and have fun.

However, Our SPOT is not designed as a purely recreational program. As a youth development program, there are aspects which are educational and address uncomfortable topics that youth do not consider “fun.” As such, it would be beneficial for Our SPOT to take into account youth notions of what constitutes “fun” whenever possible in program design, marketing and outreach.

Theme 4: Connection and Socialization with Peers

Another theme emerging across focus groups and across questions asked of participants was the value of socializing, friendship and of peer interaction. The desire for youth to simply “be there” with their friends was a frequent statement. It was apparent that due to COVID 19 and also the structured nature of the way that Our SPOT was implemented, the time that youth had just to “hang out” was very limited.

Theme 5: Authenticity of Connection to a Caring Adult

The youth value connections to caring adults and the staff who assist with the program, as evidenced in youth survey, as well as a long topic of conversation in one focus group, and related references in the others. However, this connection needs to be genuine and authentic. Youth mentioned that, at times, the staff and guest presenters were rude to them or did not seem to relate to them very well. In contrast, youth also enthusiastically shared stories and comments about the staff who were engaged and were seen as role models. The difference between staff who seemed to be caring and staff who were not, was often a deciding factor for youth on whether to attend.

Emerging Staff Perceptions

Theme 6: External Barriers

- **Staffing, lay-offs, reassignment** – County policies and budget cuts, both related to COVID-19 and budget shortages in general, led to staff instability for the Our SPOT programs. In some cases, County staff were assigned to work for the Our SPOT programs, even if they lacked the interest and desire to work with this age group. Further, this dynamic staffing challenge made it difficult to provide the initial training and ongoing professional development that research indicates is crucial to the program.
- **Community safety and park conditions** – Though not reported as a concern by youth, program staff reported that the escalation of community violence, hate crimes, racial tension and police/citizen tension in the target communities had a negative impact at several of the parks. Safety concerns created a barrier to participation in some parks more than others.
- **Funding** – The general availability of funds to run the program was reported as a barrier by some staff in the focus groups. There were limited funds to purchase or replace needed recreational equipment and supplies.

Theme 7: Internal Barriers

- **Program fidelity vs. Program flexibility** – It was noted both in direct comments and in suggestive language that some staff found the curriculum-based interventions challenging. Several staff across park locations referred to the curriculum as being too rigid and non-responsive to the specific needs of each unique community and of each unique student. Focus groups included all levels of staff, from front-line staff working directly with students to director level administrators. It was apparent that the administrators were more committed to ensuring fidelity of the program model while those working directly with youth favored more program flexibility. Some staff indicated that they were actually uncomfortable addressing some of the topics prescribed by the curricula, especially for the younger youth targeted by the program.
- **Program wanted vs. the program needed** – A common theme emerging in the focus groups across all parks and across all levels of staff was the gap between what the youth and the families “wanted” or preferred (they wanted just a safe place to come play, kick it and stay out of trouble) and what the research indicates they “need” in order to foster positive youth development (directed interventions to address substance abuse, leadership, decision-making, and socio-emotional learning). This same dichotomy emerged in the thoughts and opinions of staff as well. Some evidence drawn from focus group comments suggests that not all staff have fully bought-in to the program model and the implementation strategies. This might be a remnant of the issues mentioned above whereby not all staff were oriented and trained on the program model. Maintaining the program model for evaluation is crucial, but equally important is staff being committed to and understanding the model. Any staff doubts or resistance are likely impacting the outcomes for the youth and should be addressed. Staff shared some comments and suggestions related to (1) customizing the interventions to the needs of the youth, separating the younger children from the adolescent youth, (2) involving youth in the planning and (3) having more balance between curriculum-based interventions and “free-time” whereby youth can interact with peers and the park staff in non-directive ways. Though Our SPOT is not a nutrition program, it was also noted more than once, that more food was needed since many youth were hungry and the small snacks provided were not adequate.

Theme 8: External Facilitators

- **Administrative Support and Funding** – Staff recognized and appreciated that the County and The Department Parks & Recreation Department were committed to the project, and despite some funding challenges, the program was able to shift to a virtual program as needed. The program may need to improve buy-in of external facilitators to the program model and have greater administrative support and backbone team in place.

Theme 9: Internal Facilitators

- **Implementation of the Evidence-Based Practices** - While not universally applauded by staff, the curriculum-based interventions were maintained albeit with some

adjustments. Schedules were made and the directors and executive directors were involved in ensuring that the model was followed as much as feasible. Some differences appear between parks on the degree to which the prescribed program was followed as planned.

- **Parental trust** – Reflected more thoroughly in the parent focus groups, the staff believe that the parents trust the program and feel safe leaving their children at the park for the Our SPOT program.
- **Staff Committed to the community and the Model** –staff are generally very committed to the communities in which they work as reflected in focus groups. There is also evidence that some have strong buy-in to the program model and the youth development perspectives.

Stakeholder recommendations for program improvement:

Each program stakeholder was asked to offer suggestions to improve the Our SPOT program. Responses varied significantly by stakeholder.

Youth suggested:

- More field trips; with specific suggestions for destinations (Mentioned 16 times)
- More equipment (mentioned 6 times).
- Making community service more fun (mentioned five times)
- More electronics and video games (mentioned three times).
- More access for food/snacks (mentioned twice).

Parents suggested:

- More activities outside, beyond the park with field trips, and inter-park programming, particularly around youth competitions, and utilization of other park amenities.
- More outreach is needed to publicize the program and get youth participation
- More motivational speakers to open up their mind, and aspire to achieve more, and perhaps even see speakers outside of where youth live, in the speakers' place of work.

One parent mentioned involving parents to be a program or community liaison to help with attendance and programming.

Staff also reported some creative solutions that could support youth attendance and engagement in the Our SPOT program to mitigate some of the challenges stemming from the reported rigidity of the curriculum that resembles the regular school day. The program's curriculum is currently designed to address wraparound services including gang-violence mitigation, but it is not individualized to youth or park demographics.

Staff suggested:

- Leveraging County resources. Staff understand that the County has resources, such as counselors, that could be incorporated into the program. Youth enjoy building

relationships with staff and need socio-emotional support that is trauma-informed. Staff suggested having counselors from the County to support the program.

- Emphasizing Open Houses to outreach to parents.
- Connecting with other CBOs doing similar work and grow partnerships,
- Providing hot meals for students
- Revisiting the idea of creating a thorough needs assessment at each park.
- Building the curriculum to include feedback and design led by youth themselves, and strategies to create breakout groups based on age and activities.
- Incorporating more physical activity, perhaps with more opportunity for inter-park events.

Summary & Implications for the Future

Overall, this second year of the implementation of the Our SPOT program was successful in providing its services and support to its youth participants despite the staggering challenges posed by the far-reaching effects of COVID-19 in having to do so via a virtual platform and amidst budget and staffing changes. The program was able to continue its pivot to the virtual platform and provided much appreciated and effective in providing learning and connecting opportunities to the youth who were isolated and dealing with all the effects of the pandemic and social reckoning. It is important to note that Our SPOT was one of the very programs that was able to continue operations during the stay-at-home mandate. Towards the end of the program year, as COVID-19 restrictions began to be lifted, the program yielded increases in attendance, and it is expected that this upward trend will continue.

The evaluation found strong evidence of the value and effects of the program across data sources and various stakeholders. Participants, parents and staff expressed the critical need for such a program that targets this age group, focused on positive youth development. Given the added trauma and pressures of the pandemic in terms of health, economics, social and community factors, the need for such programs that also operate under a trauma informed rubric for youth in vulnerable communities is ever more critical. The Our SPOT Program, as a well-designed program grounded in evidence based practices and an intersection of leadership, positive youth development and socially emotional learning has tremendous potential for greater measurable results. This evaluation garnered a number of insights into opportunities for enhancing the implementation that in, turn, should lead to greater impact.

The following summarize areas for consideration as the program enters its next year and phase of implementation to build upon the current success of the program.

- **Youth Recruitment and engagement**
 - Leverage County resources and develop additional partnerships with local community-based organizations
 - Consider how to leverage current youth participants as ambassadors of the program

- Develop a career pathway for youth participants in youth development programs in the park and recreation department and specifically in the Our SPOT Program
- Enhance outreach to feeder schools to increase awareness and partnership
- **Staffing & Training**
 - To the extent possible, refine staffing procedures to allow for selection criteria to include specific interest in and qualifications for delivering Positive Youth Development curricula within a trauma informed approach and ensure commitment and desire to work with teens
 - As feasible, ensure that staffing levels allow for adequate time for all facets of the program (training, recruitment, program administration, curriculum development and involvement in tracking and evaluation activities
 - Enhance orientation and ongoing training to ensure that all staff, irrespective of hire date, are provided with foundational and ongoing training that provides opportunities for reflection, practice and feedback
 - Provide opportunity for staff to build on recent training on Teach the Triangle with reflection and practice opportunities
 - Consider additional opportunities for across site peer sharing and mentoring to share successes and challenges
 - Provide support and coaching to supervisors as they oversee staff in balancing program and curriculum demands
- **Program Implementation: balancing program model fidelity and youth engagement**
 - Address the challenge that the curriculum presents by assisting staff in ability to provide disguised learning and clarify expectations required to do so
 - Provide enhanced orientation to outside curriculum presenters so that they are prepared to work with the teens
 - Continue to focus on using a trauma informed approach to address continued stressors related to social isolation
 - Consider suggestions made by parents and youth for activities and ask for additional input during the program year
- **Enhance evaluation methods and practices**
 - Consider options for simplifying and focusing tracking methods and systems
 - Early in the program year, have a workshop for staff to discuss evaluation purpose and opportunities
 - Focus on pre-post assessments and align outcomes with program implementation