

# Advocacy Letter to Mayor Karen Bass

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May 1, 2023  
The Honorable Karen Bass  
200 N Spring St  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Mayor Bass:

As a Los Angeles resident and a constituent, I am writing to you today to urge you to support an increase in funding for the Summer Night Lights (SNL) program run by Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD). This is a community-based effort that extends the hours of operation in 43 parks and recreational centers across Los Angeles. The program runs from mid-July through early September because that is when gang violence tends to increase (Butchiredyari, 2019).<sup>1</sup> SNL prioritizes at-risk kids and offers them safe alternatives to gang membership such as free meals, sports leagues with over seven different options, arts and crafts, and various fitness exercises. They also facilitate the development of positive social connections with neighbors, law enforcement officers, religious organizations, community leaders, nonprofits and educational officials, to replace those forged in gangs (Dunworth, Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, SNL is committed to reinvesting in the community by providing employment opportunities for both youth and adults from the same neighborhoods it serves. A summary report published by Harder+Company Community Research on SNL in 2022<sup>3</sup> indicates that the program has achieved notable success and delivered meaningful benefits to the community. The report highlights that the program distributed 179,755 hot meals, had 111,876 community members in attendance, and created 503 jobs where 203 at-risk youth were hired.

In 2014, after six years of SNL implementation, the program was credited with reducing gang-related crime by 15% and gang-related homicides by 35% (LA2050, 2014).<sup>4</sup> While stricter laws and higher law enforcement presence have been introduced, the program is paramount due to its anti-gang efforts provided by community members and the opportunity to connect with police officers outside of the courthouse. It has been proven by David Pyrooz (CU Boulder), Scott Decker (ASU) and James Densley (MSU) that at-risk youth respond to anti-gang efforts when they are provided by community members rather than law enforcement (*On Gangs*, 2022).<sup>5</sup> Since SNL hires from its serviced neighborhoods, youth are being mentored

<sup>1</sup> Butchiredyari, L. (2019). Heat Waves Precipitate More Crime in Poor Areas, Study in L.A. Finds Violent crime rises by 5.7% when temperature tops 85 degrees— But not in wealthier neighborhoods. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/los-angeles-heat-wave-could-lead-to-crime-wave-in-poor-neighborhoods-study-says-11561392032>

<sup>2</sup> Dunworth, T., Hayeslip, D., & Denver, M. (2011, July). Y2 Final Report: Evaluation of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development Program. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from The Urban Institute Justice Policy Center: <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412409-Evaluation-of-the-Los-Angeles-Gang-Reduction-and-Youth-Development.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> (n.d.). 2022 *GRYD Summer Night Lights Summary Report*. Harder+Company Community Research. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://harderco.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/GRYD-SNL-2022-Summary-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Advancement Project California (n.d.). *Disrupt Violence: Hot Zones into Play Zones*. LA2050. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://la2050.org/ideas/2014/disrupt-violence-hot-zones-into-play-zones>

<sup>5</sup> Densley, J. A., Pyrooz, D. C., Decker, S. H. (2022). *On Gangs*. Japan: Temple University Press.

by individuals who they might know and who understand the struggle. This approach allows for kids to feel connected to the program and trust their mentors. Furthermore, police officers are able to engage with the community in a manner that is not seen as intimidating, but rather constructive. Through their participation in SNL, officers are given the chance to construct trusting relationships with at-risk youth and their families in the neighborhoods they serve. A 2016 report asked participants how they feel about the presence of LAPD where one respondent mentioned, “I used to be afraid of cops, but now I feel safe when I am around them” (Ananth and Hernandez, 2016).<sup>6</sup>

A report conducted on SNL in 2021 mentioned that \$2.1 million was invested in the program, where \$770,000 was provided via public funds through GRYD and \$1.4 million was supplied via the generous support of foundation and corporate donors through the GRYD Foundation (Juvenile Justice Research, 2021).<sup>7</sup> With all costs considered, SNL spends roughly \$250,000 a year per site.<sup>8</sup> Funding should be increased by \$2 million which would allow SNL to serve even more communities in Los Angeles. Although the 43 serviced neighborhoods make up some of LA’s most violent neighborhoods, there are still many more locations that require SNL services. This includes communities around West Adams Blvd, Skid Row, and Watts,<sup>9</sup> to name a few. The significance of this program is further highlighted by California’s gang enhancement laws, which aim to impose harsher penalties for crimes linked with gangs and gang-related activities.<sup>10</sup> By preventing youth from joining gangs, SNL can help reduce the likelihood of these individuals acquiring criminal records that can lead to employment hardships, unstable living conditions, and social stigma. These afflictions, in turn, contribute to the cycle of gang membership. The obstacles society places before individuals with criminal records can make it difficult for them to find legitimate opportunities for survival. With positive youth development programs such as SNL provide kids with the support, skills, and resources they need to develop into productive and engaged members of their communities. By supporting this program, you are preventing violent behaviors, promoting healthy relationships, and curating emotional well-being, all of which contribute to positive outcomes for individuals and communities alike. In short, this is an investment in underserved communities.

I urge you to allow SNL to keep making a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable population, the youth. Kids lack the experience, knowledge, and skills needed to navigate complex social challenges, which makes them more susceptible to negative influences. We have the power to change the path that at-risk youth are on. They are the future of our country. Rather than letting gang culture influence them, let’s continue showing them the right path.

Thank you for your consideration.

<sup>6</sup> Juvenile Justice Research. (2020). Summer Night Lights: 2016 Evaluation Report. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from [https://www.juvenilejusticeresearch.com/sites/default/files/2020-08/Summer%20Night%20Lights%202016%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.juvenilejusticeresearch.com/sites/default/files/2020-08/Summer%20Night%20Lights%202016%20Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Juvenile Justice Research. (2021). Gang Reduction and Youth Development: Summer Night Lights 2021 Summary Report. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from <https://www.juvenilejusticeresearch.com/sites/default/files/2021-12/GRYD%20SNL%202021%20Summary%20Report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> GRYD representative. Personal communication. May 8, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> PropertyClub.nyc. (2021, August 31). Most Dangerous Neighborhoods in Los Angeles. PropertyClub.nyc. <https://propertyclub.nyc/article/most-dangerous-neighborhoods-in-los-angeles>

<sup>10</sup> Los Angeles Criminal Lawyer. (n.d.). California Penal Code Section 186.22 PC – Gang Enhancements. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://www.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/california-penal-code-section-186-22-pc-gang-enhancements.html>