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Op-ed: Tennis and NYPD partner to offer young people active alternatives to violence

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For most New Yorkers, the impact of tennis in New York City ended with the end of the U.S. Open, which was the highest-attended Grand Slam tournament of all time, generating hundreds of millions of dollars for the economy. But tennis supports our city both on and off the court, providing opportunities for young people to remain physically and socially engaged. Sports, now more than ever, are safe spaces to proactively keep young people safe and out of trouble, especially as the country grapples with gun violence.

An increase in youth violence can be driven by many factors, but providing more community-driven programs is a potential solution. With the nation's widening income gap, fewer and fewer children from low-income families are [participating in sports and fitness programs](#), meaning that many young people are missing out on the [social and emotional benefits](#) that come with sports participation and are also left out of constructive activities to keep them busy.

That's why [New York Junior Tennis & Learning](#), the largest nonprofit youth tennis and education organization in the nation, provides free tennis lessons and after-school programs for kids in underserved communities across all five boroughs each year, reaching nearly 90,000 youth: We want to ensure that these youth realize their full potential and contribute positively to their communities — and we believe that tennis is a gateway to this realization.

So when the city's Department of Youth and Community Development asked NYJTL to offer its Cary Leeds Center for Tennis & Learning as the first tennis

site for [Saturday Night Lights](#) – the agency’s partnership with the New York Police Department to provide free, high-quality indoor sports programs to New Yorkers ages 11 to 18 – NYJTL was thrilled to participate.

Now offered at more than 130 gyms citywide, Saturday Night Lights shows how we can work together to shrink the physical-activity divide – opening spaces for programs without the constraints of costly fees or inaccessible locations that prevent students from participating. The program ensures that no indoor gyms are closed on Saturday nights – the time where most New York City youth are available and need activities to keep them off the streets. Saturday Night Lights is just one of Mayor Eric Adams’ upstream solutions to combat gun violence and provide young people safe places to engage with their peers and caring adults.

Critically, Saturday Night Lights gives kids the opportunity to practice physical fitness alongside police officers, allowing them to bridge not only the physical-activity divide, but also the divide that too often exists between law enforcement and the community. This is a model that NYJTL also uses in its [Serve and Connect](#) program, and it has been so successful that kids come back every week and ask for more opportunities to spend time with the officers. Serve and Connect brings together NYJTL youth and uniformed police officers to create informal mentoring and relationship building, and to teach life skills to take off the courts. And it has proven to be effective: Two of our Serve and Connect participants were awarded college scholarships at our 2023 Mayor Dinkins Cup, receiving over \$6,000 towards their education over the course of four years of study.

NYJTL does not just operate in the South Bronx at its Cary Leeds Center. The nonprofit is a citywide asset, with programs across all five boroughs of the city – and it doesn’t always host its activities inside a facility space. Notably, we also have a Community Tennis Program partnership with the NYPD in Springfield Park North in southeast Queens. Through this partnership, we have had youth in the community participate in the NYPD Summer Youth Academy who were also provided demonstrations in the areas of law, behavioral science, drug prevention and gang resistance.

The success of all of these kinds of programs – no matter where or through what medium they take place – demonstrates the need for more programs like this to exist around the city, and to support nonprofits and community organizations that make these programs possible.

Each community may offer different kinds of programs best suited for its people. But no matter what the program looks like, by working together to provide kids the space and the resources to practice amongst their peers for free, and alongside public safety officers, we can ensure kids are set on the right path toward a lifetime of success.

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