

SAFE PLACES TO PLAY

U.S. SOCCER FOUNDATION MINI-PITCH STUDY



NC STATE UNIVERSITY



SAFE PLACES TO PLAY

MINI-PITCH STUDY

Prepared by:
Kyle Bunds, J. Aaron Hipp, Tania Allen,
Katie King, Riley Nelson, Chloe Phillips,
and Jordan Thomas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation is designed to aid the U.S. Soccer Foundation as it continues to install mini-pitches ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup by examining the past, present, and potential future of the U.S. Soccer Foundation’s *Safe Places to Play* program. As of this evaluation, the U.S. Soccer Foundation *Safe Places to Play* program has installed 700+ mini-pitches across the United States. The *Safe Places to Play* program is complex and consists of funding partners, landowners, programmers, school systems, parks and recreation departments, community members, and users. To holistically examine and provide recommendations for the *Safe Places to Play* program, the NC State team, in consultation with the U.S. Soccer Foundation, developed the following guiding objectives.

1. **Determine key demographic and population characteristics of inhabitants near currently installed mini-pitches**
2. **Examine the installation experience and motivations of funding partners**
3. **Assess *Safe Places to Play* programming and programmer experience**
4. **Analyze mini-pitch usage and users**
5. **Evaluate possible future locations for mini-pitches**
6. **Propose recommendations for future practice**

Attending to all objectives required a scaffolded approach consisting of weekly internal NC State meetings, bi-weekly NC State and U.S. Soccer Foundation meetings, scoping review of existing evaluations, geospatial analysis, a partner survey, a programmer survey, and systematic observations of current mini-pitches.

Taking these approaches in totality provided the NC State team with a contextualization of the *Safe Places to Play* program within the larger physical activity and sport literature, a broad view of partners and programmers, an understanding of users and potential users, and a detailed measure of specific mini-pitch usage. In this way, the evaluation was designed to provide the NC State team and U.S. Soccer Foundation with information regarding the microsystem and the macrosystem.

The geospatial analysis, partner surveys, programmer surveys, and systematic observations revealed generally highly satisfactory working relationships with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and evidence that the U.S. Soccer Foundation is reaching its goal of providing access to soccer for those in under-resourced communities. Specifically, approximately 70% of the mini-pitches are located in areas with high youth population density and low childhood opportunity. Partners and programmers both shared the desire to provide access to soccer for those communities that might desire to participate in soccer and those communities that typically do not engage in soccer. The survey results and systematic observations revealed that communities with a large Hispanic/Latino population utilized the pitch during programmed and unprogrammed times. Conversely, the mini-pitches were underutilized in non-Hispanic/Latino population locations during unprogrammed time and in locations with minimal additional assets beyond the mini-pitch.

Considering the evaluation results, the NC State team provides recommendations for future consideration as the U.S. Soccer Foundation continues to invest in and support the expansion of soccer opportunities for all Americans. The following recommendations align with the main sections of the document.

1. **Location Matters** The U.S. Soccer Foundation has done a great job siting mini-pitches in areas with high population and low childhood opportunity. In the future, the U.S. Soccer Foundation should work with partners to understand the ethnic diversity of the mini-pitch locations and prioritize soccer programming in areas where soccer is not a part of the culture.
2. **Participant Engagement** Mini-pitches that have consistent programming and engagement were the most utilized. However, only 7% of observed users were girls or women. The U.S. Soccer Foundation should work with program partners to create girl and women-specific programming and environments.
3. **Partner Engagement** The U.S. Soccer Foundation Partners are overall highly satisfied with the *Safe Places to Play* program. Through the research, the NC State team found that many partners have the capacity to influence the type of programming offered at their mini-pitches. recommend that the U.S. Soccer Foundation engage partners in creating a programming plan before installation. Partners have expressed an interest in receiving data from U.S. Soccer Foundation regarding mini-pitch use and direct community impacts.
4. **Community Benefits** Overall, partners and programmers overwhelmingly view the mini-pitch as a social hub providing benefits to the community. To create those benefits in the future, the U.S. Soccer Foundation should work to site the mini-pitches in accessible areas with multiple assets surrounding the mini-pitch. To address the deteriorating conditions of older mini-pitches, the U.S. Soccer Foundation should work with programmers, partners, and communities to create a maintenance plan prior to installation.

1,000

A BOLD GOAL

The U.S. Soccer Foundation aims to install 1,000 mini-pitches by 2026. This evaluation examines the past, present, and future of the Safe Places to Play program.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The *Safe Places to Play* program has completed the installation of over 700 mini-pitches in the United States as of the writing of this report. The U.S. Soccer Foundation believes that every child should have access to a safe place to play. Therefore, the U.S. Soccer Foundation aims to install 1,000 mini-pitches predominately in underserved areas by 2026. Mini-pitches are designed to serve as community hubs, encourage physical activity, and provide more play opportunities.

Mini-pitches are installed in conjunction with partners and programmers. Partners are the individuals, groups, businesses, or foundations that provide the funding - or, in the case of Musco Sports Lighting, the mini-pitch system itself - for installing the mini-pitch. Programmers are the individuals, organizations, or schools that provide soccer programming on the mini-pitches.

This report is a comprehensive evaluation of mini-pitch usage and community impact. The NC State team evaluated the mini-pitches through a scaffolded evaluation approach consisting of four phases. Each approach was designed to build upon each step whereby additional evaluation steps complement and provide additional depth. In what follows, the team details the scaffolded evaluation approach and the goals of each phase.



PHASE 1 EVALUATION DESIGN

The goal of Phase 1 was to work with The U.S. Soccer Foundation to design the evaluation. In this phase, the NC State team held weekly virtual meetings with the U.S. Soccer Foundation to operationalize key terms, determine the target participants, build consensus around the survey instrument, interview key partners, and determine appropriate communication and outreach strategies. Concurrently, the team conducted a scoping review of relevant literature with the support of one graduate and one undergraduate student. Because community impact and usage are widely utilized concepts, the team believed this would aid in the development of the survey instrument.

Phase 1 set the groundwork for responding to all objectives.

PHASE 2 GEOSPATIAL ANALYSIS

The goal of Phase 2 was to distribute separate partner and programmer surveys and conduct a geospatial analysis of current and potential future mini-pitch locations. In this phase, the NC State team created a nationwide interactive map consisting of all mini-pitch locations overlaid with the childhood opportunity index and childhood population density. The Childhood Opportunity Index is a composite index consisting of 44 indicators in three domains (education, health and environment, and social and economic) and 14 subdomains. Childhood population density allowed the NC State team to know what census blocks have high percentages of children under the age of 18.

The partner and programmer surveys were designed by considering previous literature, conducting 6 interviews with key stakeholders, conversations with the U.S. Soccer Foundation staff, and previous evaluation experience.

Phase 2 attended to all objectives.

PHASE 3 SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATIONS

The goal of Phase 3 was to conduct systematic evaluations in strategically chosen cities across the United States. Systematic observations provide specific data on the use of spaces and can be analyzed at the level of the mini-pitch (how much use does this mini-pitch receive, when, by whom), level of the individual (how often are girls 12-17 years of age using mini-pitches), and level of activity (what percent of use is active versus sedentary). The tool is repeatable and can be deployed seasonally to understand variations. The overall output is an objective assessment of the use of mini-pitches.

Phase 3 attended to objectives 3, 4, 5, and 6.

PHASE 4 ANALYSIS

The goal of Phase 4 was to analyze the findings, synthesize the results, and provide recommendations for future consideration. The analysis for each method is provided in the methodology section at the end of this document.

Phase 4 focused on objectives 5 and 6.

LOCATION MATTERS: PRIORITIZING NEED AND ACCESS



KEY INSIGHT

70% of mini-pitches are located in underserved communities with lower “childhood opportunity” scores

- and -

there are opportunities to grow in communities that do not have a culture of soccer.

LOCATION MATTERS

OVERVIEW

The location of each mini-pitch is based on several factors, including, but not limited to, property owner interest, land donation, existing hard surfaces, and proximity to youth.

The U.S. Soccer Foundation and the *Safe Places to Play* Program in particular, prioritize increasing access to recreational facilities for those in underserved communities. The Foundation’s focus on equity is evident in its statement that “underserved communities are four times more likely to lack recreational facilities. By creating mini-pitches, we are increasing access to soccer and strengthening communities.”

The Geospatial analysis applied in this report showcases that over 70% of mini-pitch locations are achieving the primary goal of increasing accessibility. By looking at the locations according to race and ethnicity, it also suggests that there are opportunities to focus even more specifically on underserved communities that do not have an established culture of soccer (such as predominantly African American communities).

70%
OF MINI-PITCHES ARE IN AREAS
DESIGNATED AS LOW ON THE
CHILDHOOD OPPORTUNITY
INDEX AND HIGH IN
POPULATION DENSITY.

38% OF MINI-PITCHES ARE IN
PREDOMINANTLY HISPANIC/LATINO
AREAS AND **27%** ARE IN
PREDOMINANTLY AFRICAN
AMERICAN AREAS.

6.5M

KIDS IN THE U.S. LIVE
WITHIN 1/2 MILE OF A
MINI-PITCH.

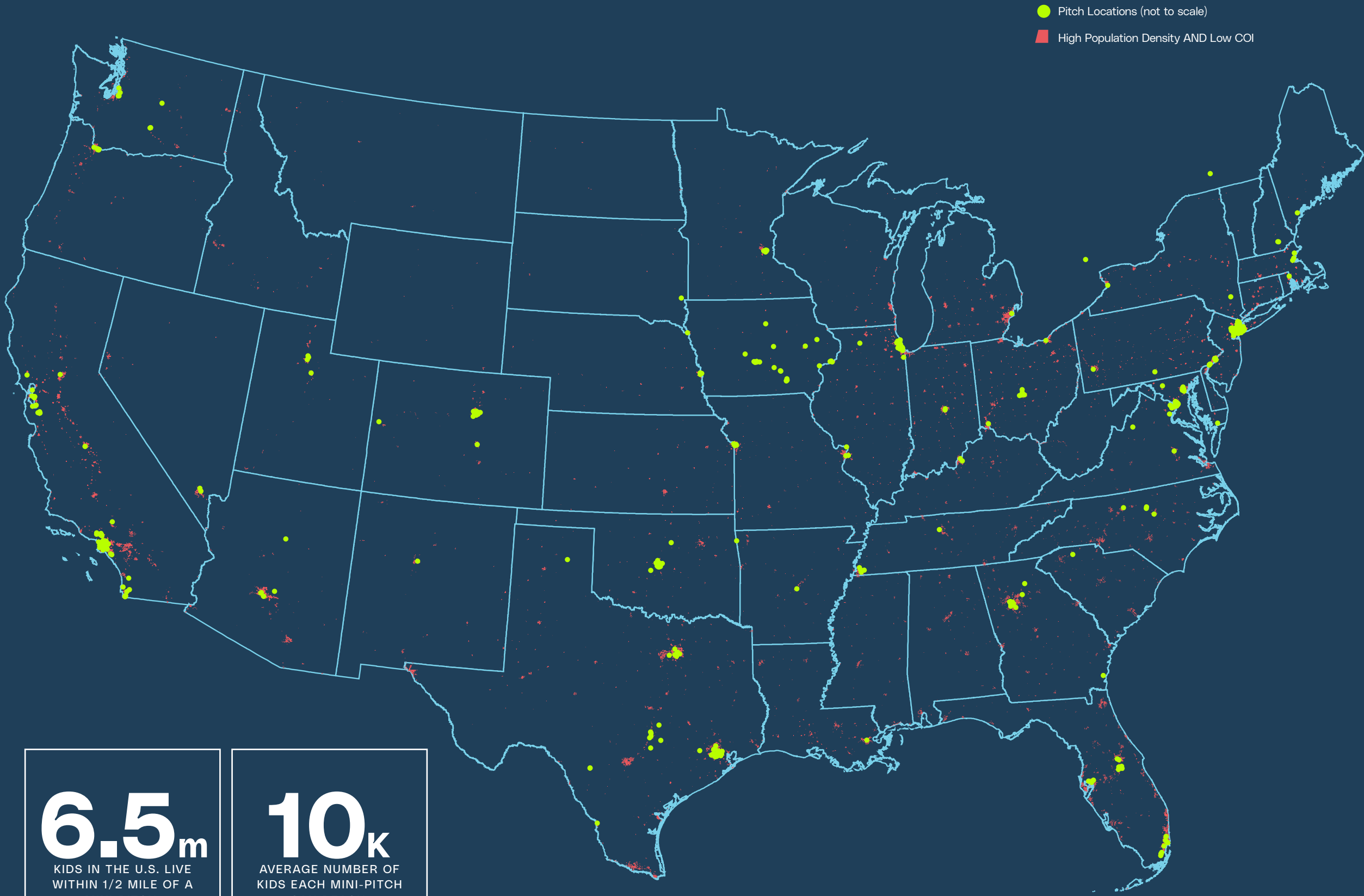
10_k

AVERAGE NUMBER
OF KIDS EACH MINI-PITCH
CAN REACH.

LOCATION MATTERS

GEOSPATIAL ANALYSIS

Geospatial Analysis was used to gain an overarching understanding of the current locations of mini-pitches and the demographics of individuals located near the mini-pitches. The process involved creating a shapefile that marks the currently built mini-pitches. From there, data from the Childhood Opportunity Index (COI) was uploaded to the map. The Childhood Opportunity Index uses several factors to calculate a score to show how many opportunities are available within each block group across the United States. Child Opportunity Scores group neighborhoods into one hundred ordered groups, and assign numeric labels from 1 (lowest opportunity) to 100 (highest opportunity) Census data was then uploaded, the census data included the population for individuals age 5 to 17 in each block group across the United States. The Childhood Opportunity Index was then sorted by quartiles, and the lower quartile was selected to be used for the analysis. The population data was also sorted by quartiles, and the upper two quartiles were selected for the analysis. The population quartiles and the childhood opportunity index quartile were combined to find block groups that had high population and low childhood opportunity index. A buffer of half a mile was added to each mini-pitch to show possible areas for future mini-pitches.



6.5_m

KIDS IN THE U.S. LIVE
WITHIN 1/2 MILE OF A
MINI-PITCH.

10_k

AVERAGE NUMBER OF
KIDS EACH MINI-PITCH
CAN REACH.

See the interactive map here: go.ncsu.edu/ussoccerfdtngisfindings

LOCATION MATTERS

EXAMPLE: LOS ANGELES GEO-ANALYSIS

The greater Los Angeles area includes 15 towns and cities and has 36 mini-pitch installs; 100% of the mini-pitches are in high youth population density areas and 27 are also in low Childhood Opportunity Index (COI) areas. The average neighborhood COI within ½ mile of a mini-pitch is 22.1 (out of 100), and the average COI outside of the ½ mile buffer is 43.1. The COI is 50% less within a half-mile of a mini-pitch, showing consistent placement in areas of Los Angeles with the greatest need for assets supporting healthy children. Overlaying additional demographic information, the majority of the mini-pitch installs in the greater Los Angeles area are reaching the Hispanic/Latino community. Fewer are reaching African American and other communities of color that historically do not have soccer-centric cultures. The buffer of half a mile around each mini-pitch also reveals possible areas for future mini-pitches.

36

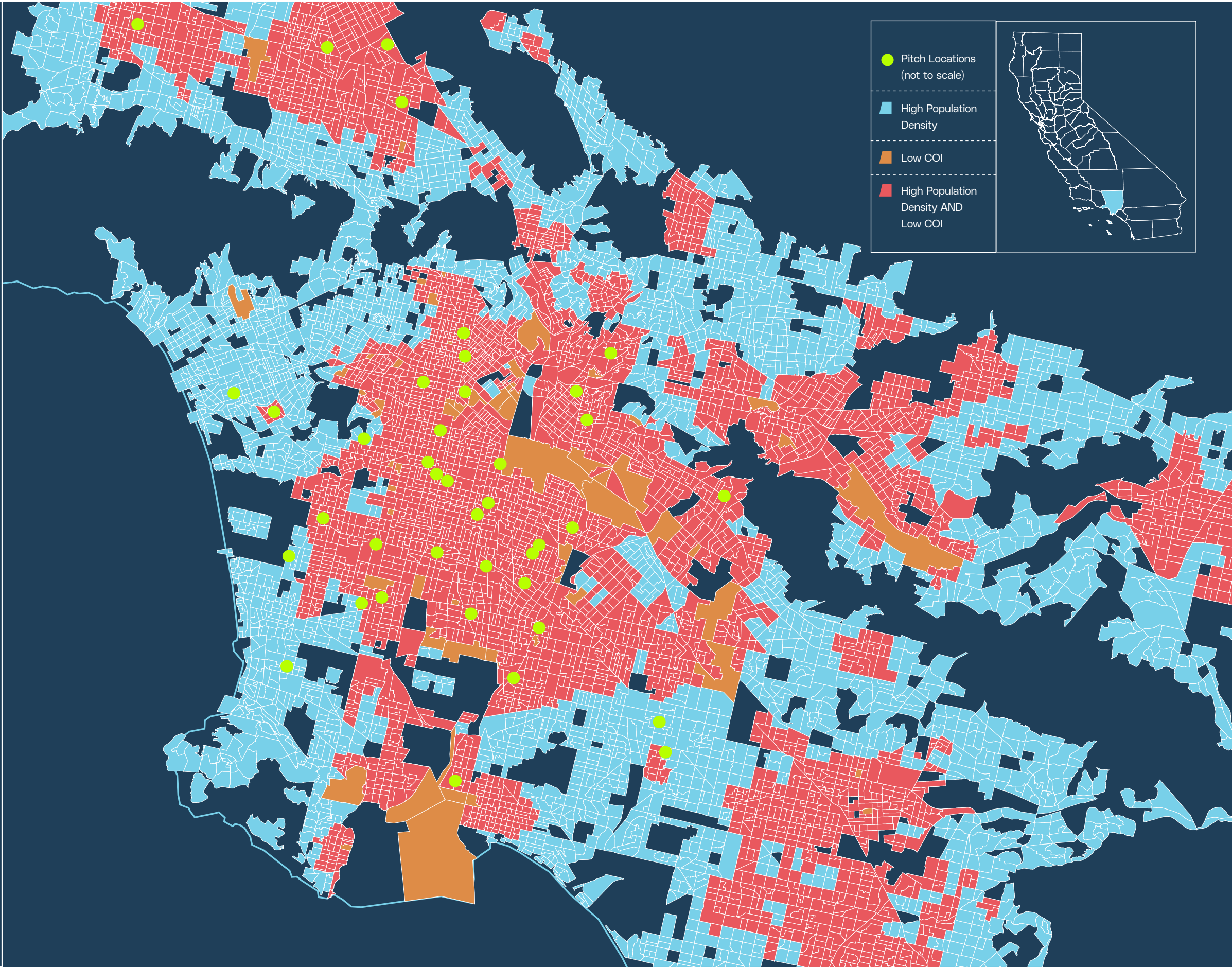
MINI-PITCH INSTALLS

32

IN LOW COI AND HIGH DENSITY

100%

IN HIGH DENSITY AREAS (>50% DENSITY)



LOCATION MATTERS

INSIGHTS

The Foundation has done an excellent job of siting the mini-pitches in areas directly related to their mission in under-resourced communities. This is particularly effective in locations with communities that have an established soccer culture already in play. There are incredible opportunities for the Foundation to focus on areas without an established culture of soccer, including predominantly African American neighborhoods where life expectancy disparities and general health disparities have been increasing, especially as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The types of locations that many mini-pitches occupy, namely parks and recreation locations, schools and educational facilities, and non-governmental organizations (such as church grounds) offer different opportunities and limitations. Breaking the data into these groups allowed us to analyze it as a complete data set and examine the uniqueness of each organization type. Insights from each organization provide the U.S. Soccer Foundation an opportunity to effectively and efficiently communicate challenges and opportunities of each type to current and potential partners. Collaborating across sectors enhances the likelihood of “creating stronger communities by improving the health and well-being of children” which directly aligns with the Foundation’s goals. A core benefit of diverse programming partnerships is the ability to build relationships within neighborhoods and reach community members where they are, enabling them to be targets of change and agents of change in their community.

Each of the three organization-type groups can enhance their programming through community engagement. Another viable avenue is seeking collaborators. Partnerships can provide opportunities to reach a wider range of community members, provide or share funding, and assist in ways that may be specific to a practitioner’s community. Parks and recreation departments have a built in structural system that helps facilitate public and ongoing use, which is particularly good for programming but can lead to more immediate wear and tear without the necessary resources to support high level ongoing maintenance. Schools and education centers offer a “captive audience” which makes them highly active during the school sessions but can limit access after hours and in the summer, and non-governmental organizations are often easy to set up but can lack the programming and maintenance that is necessary to encourage continued use.

Initial installation conversations should include maintenance and upkeep transparency with the organization responsible for the labor and funding of keeping the mini-pitch a safe place to play.

A SNAPSHOT OF MINI-PITCH LOCATIONS BY TYPE

75



PARKS AND RECREATION

39



SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION CENTERS

15



NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS



It has helped revitalize an under-used and deteriorating park.



The...mini-pitch has significantly increased the utility of the park space, as the location was previously derelict and unusable. The mini-pitch also represents a significant enhancement of school district facilities.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF PROGRAMMING



KEY INSIGHT

Consistent use by players varies dramatically across Mini-Pitch locations and many rely on both formal and informal programming to generate consistent and ongoing activity.

- and -

more support and ongoing engagement around programming would help maintain their sites activity and vitality.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

WHO USES THE MINI-PITCH AND HOW?

The programmer and partner surveys in conjunction with the systematic observations gave some keen insights into who is using the mini-pitch and how. It also gave insights into how this engagement could be expanded and sustained through increased programming.

The majority of mini-pitch users were under the age of 18 and a large majority were male. The majority of users were Hispanic/Latino or Caucasian, even in areas where the demographics might include a large Asian or African American population. This points to an increased need for building awareness of the mini-pitches through short and longer-term programming. Girls are a valuable demographic to build programming around and to continue the U.S. Soccer Foundation’s commitment to increasing girls soccer, especially in under-resourced communities where it already has robust success outpacing global increases.

Currently, the majority of play time on the mini-pitches is unprogrammed or free time. While this is a vital part of the *Safe Places to Play* program, it also leaves the pitches vulnerable to unsupervised wear and tear. As the Foundation continues to target specific areas and populations for installation, attention to sustainable programming is equally as important, which could be as simple as introducing the importance of programming in the early phases of site selection with partners, or the development of suggestions, guidelines and best practices for *Safe Places to Play* programming as a part of the development process.



U. S. Soccer Foundation has strong partnerships within the community, and a depth of knowledge in youth soccer, that makes them **the ideal partner to deliver mini-pitches to our region.**

78%
OF OBSERVED USERS WERE
TEENAGED AND UNDER

93%
OF OBSERVED USERS
WERE MALE

13
AVERAGE OBSERVED
USERS PER HOUR
AFTER 5PM

62%
OF USERS WERE OBSERVED TO
BE ENGAGED IN MODERATE TO
VIGOROUS ACTIVITY

69%
OF PROGRAMMERS
STATED THE MINI-PITCH
HAS INCREASED ACCESS
TO SOCCER

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

SUSTAINING CONNECTIONS

The lifespan of the mini-pitch has three distinct areas of activation: initial installation, programming and site maintenance. Active and ongoing engagement by users of the mini-pitch can be affected by how consistently attended each of these areas are. When the mini-pitch wears or programming becomes more static, new strategies for activation are necessary. The initial installation of a mini-pitch occurs with input from U.S. Soccer Foundation partners. Partners are critical for establishing the location of the mini-pitch and providing funding for the mini-pitch installation. The NC State team found that partners are predominately very satisfied with the installation process, communication, branding, and community engagement they derive from the mini-pitch. Once the installation process is complete, except for involvement in a grand opening ceremony, most partners are not directly involved with the mini-pitch.

The introduction of new programming and the ongoing support of existing programs that are tailored to the needs of the community is the primary way for the mini-pitch to stay activated. Community needs are subject to change over time, so communication and transparency with the communities or community representatives are critical for developing a clear, forward-thinking plan, which includes actionable steps such as regular monitoring and maintenance of the pitches, establishing SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely) goals, conducting periodic check-ins to strengthen relationships, and actively promoting programming by equipping and supporting programmers.

It's critical to not only know the needs and desires of the community in developing programs but also understand how equipped they are with the proper resources to facilitate this engagement.

“

The community loves to watch their children play on the mini-pitch and the game brings diverse people together.

“

The mini-pitch has been integral in helping these students socialize, take part in a familiar, relatable sport, and connect with others.



“

The mini pitch helps community members build lasting relationships.



“

Another great way for children and young adults to be active and enjoy the game of soccer.

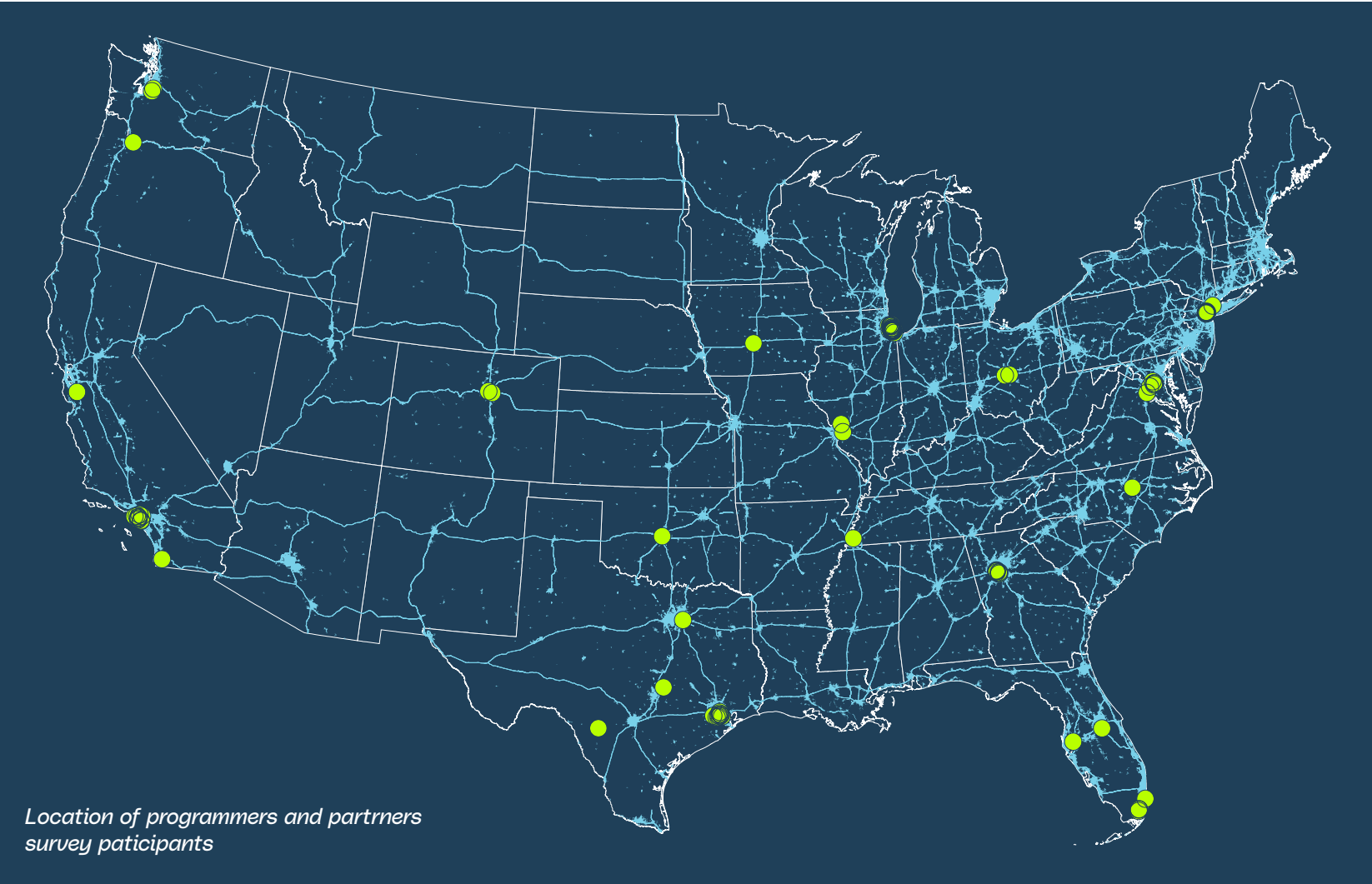
THE IMPACT OF PROGRAMMING

INSIGHTS

Since the most common goal for the program from programmers, partners and the U.S. Soccer Foundation alike is to increase physical activity, programming is increasingly critical to achieving this goal.

Of the 129 survey respondents, 106 offer soccer programs. Almost 1/3 of programmers offer non-soccer programming. Additionally, 1/3 of respondents desire to offer more soccer programming. Of the 106 soccer programs offered, only 21 charge for program participation. Therefore, 80% offer free programming. Scholarships or a sliding scale is available at 7 of the 21 fee charging organizations, which results in 87% of programming offered free or at a reduced rate. The mini-pitch was the first soccer-based programming at 66% of the sites and 49% believe their community is more active due to the mini-pitch. Results show an average of 9 hours of programmed play and 43 hours of open play per week. Non-soccer programming is facilitated on the mini-pitches by 29% of programmers surveyed. Looking ahead, 29% of programmers stated they are actively looking to expand programming with 14% specifically interested in increasing programming aimed at diverse users.

The three most common methods users access the mini-pitch are walking, car/driving, and biking. When asked if respondents wanted to provide any additional text information, 13 of the 25 who answered mentioned maintenance issues or lack of budgeting for maintenance costs. Overall, programmers are satisfied with communication with U.S. Soccer Foundation and desire additional information regarding the U.S. Soccer Foundation soccer programming.



66%
OF PROGRAMMERS REPORTED
THAT THE MINI-PITCH WAS THE FIRST
SOCCER-BASED PROGRAMMING

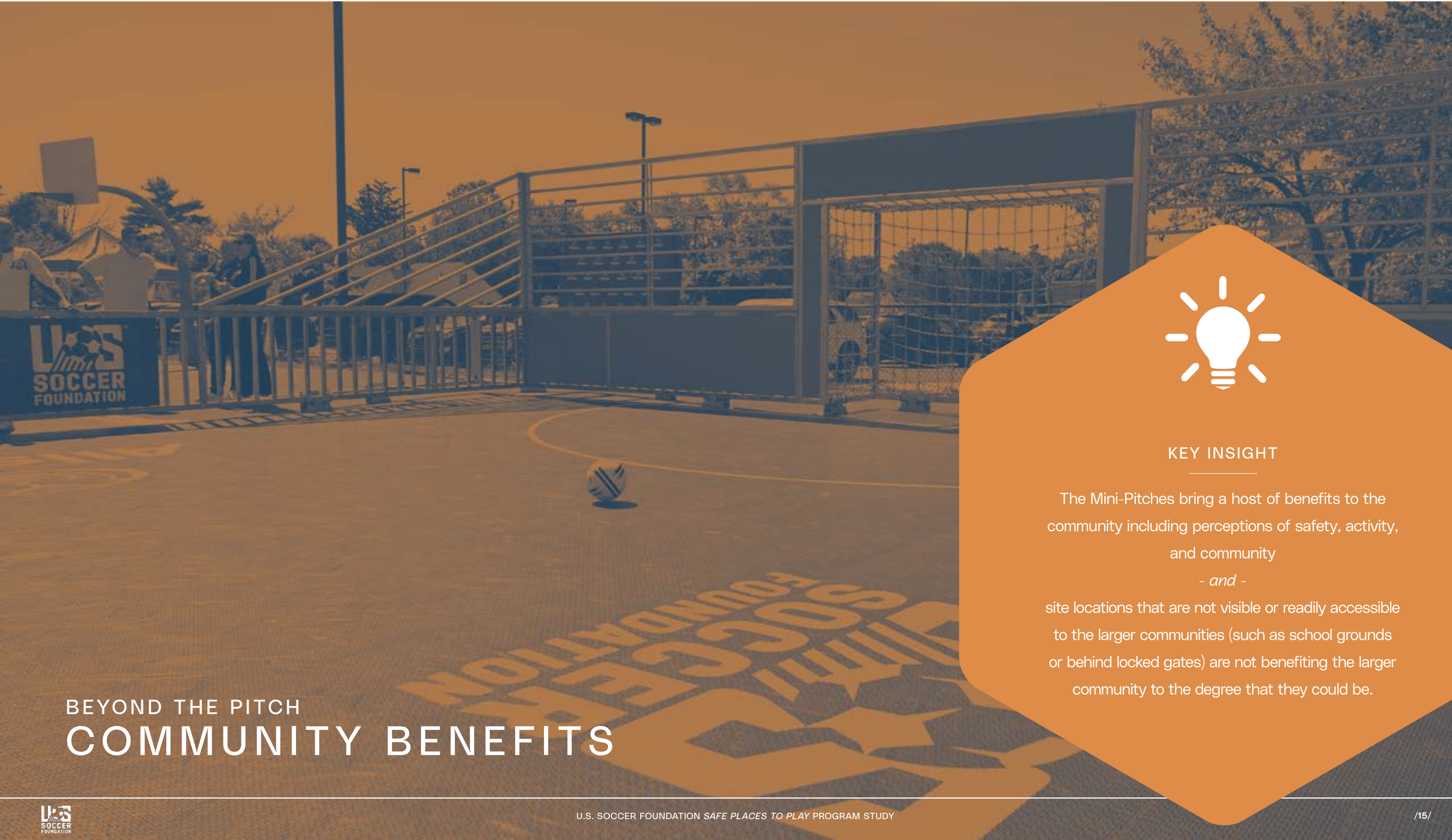
80%
OF PROGRAMMING IS FREE

43 hrs
AVERAGE OPEN
PLAY PER WEEK

300
weekly users reported
during open play

“
New and
diverse players
are being
exposed to
the sport.

2,525
AVERAGE PROGRAMMED
USERS PER DAY



BEYOND THE PITCH
COMMUNITY BENEFITS



KEY INSIGHT

The Mini-Pitches bring a host of benefits to the community including perceptions of safety, activity, and community

- and -

site locations that are not visible or readily accessible to the larger communities (such as school grounds or behind locked gates) are not benefiting the larger community to the degree that they could be.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

OVERVIEW

The primary goal of the *Safe Places to Play* program is to provide a safe place to play in neighborhoods. Mini-pitches serve as community hubs, encourage physical activity, and provide more opportunities for play. Through building upon or introducing a culture of soccer in communities, the *Safe Places to Play* program directly contributes to the overall health and well-being of these communities. Understanding the mini-pitch is part of a larger community “system” includes examining the amenities that are accessible to players on the mini-pitch, or that might make a diversity of use in and around the mini-pitch more available and attractive.

Programmers had positive responses when asked about the impact of the mini-pitch on the community. In survey results, open-ended responses, and conversations with programmers, the programmers highlighted the mini-pitch as a social hub that helped increase social connections and a sense of community for those in the immediate vicinity of the mini-pitch. The majority of programmers noted that soccer access has been increased and the mini-pitches are perceived to be welcoming and accessible to all in the community.

In the observed locations with the most consistent traffic, players used the mini-pitch in a variety of ways--for both formal and informal play, for soccer, and other sports. They were also located in areas that had a variety of amenities such as bathrooms, grills and picnic areas, playgrounds, and walking trails. And they were easily accessible by multiple forms of transportation -- car, bike, walking, etc. In these cases, the mini-pitch becomes a central part of a larger community gathering place that extends beyond the single soccer use, and (in theory) can engage participants who might come to the location for other reasons but find interest in soccer play through the proximity to the mini-pitch.

Throughout the systematic observations that the NC State team conducted, the mini-pitches that were used the most regularly and fully included many people who were not there because of the mini-pitch but would find their way to it from another activity they were doing, such as picnicking or grilling, playing at the playground, playing basketball or another sport, riding bikes, etc. This highlights the importance of choosing locations with multiple amenities and in public spots that are easily visible and accessible.



We have a significant increase in the population of the Hispanic/Latino community. Soccer is a highly favored sport for many of these community members. The mini-pitch has been integral in helping these students socialize, take part in a familiar relatable sport and connect with others.



[The mini-pitch] provides a great place for community connection using a sport that is widely accepted by a diverse community.



Students and families feel welcomed to play anytime during open hours and they do! It has been a great addition to our community and has helped us get students and families on school property for a positive reason.

90%

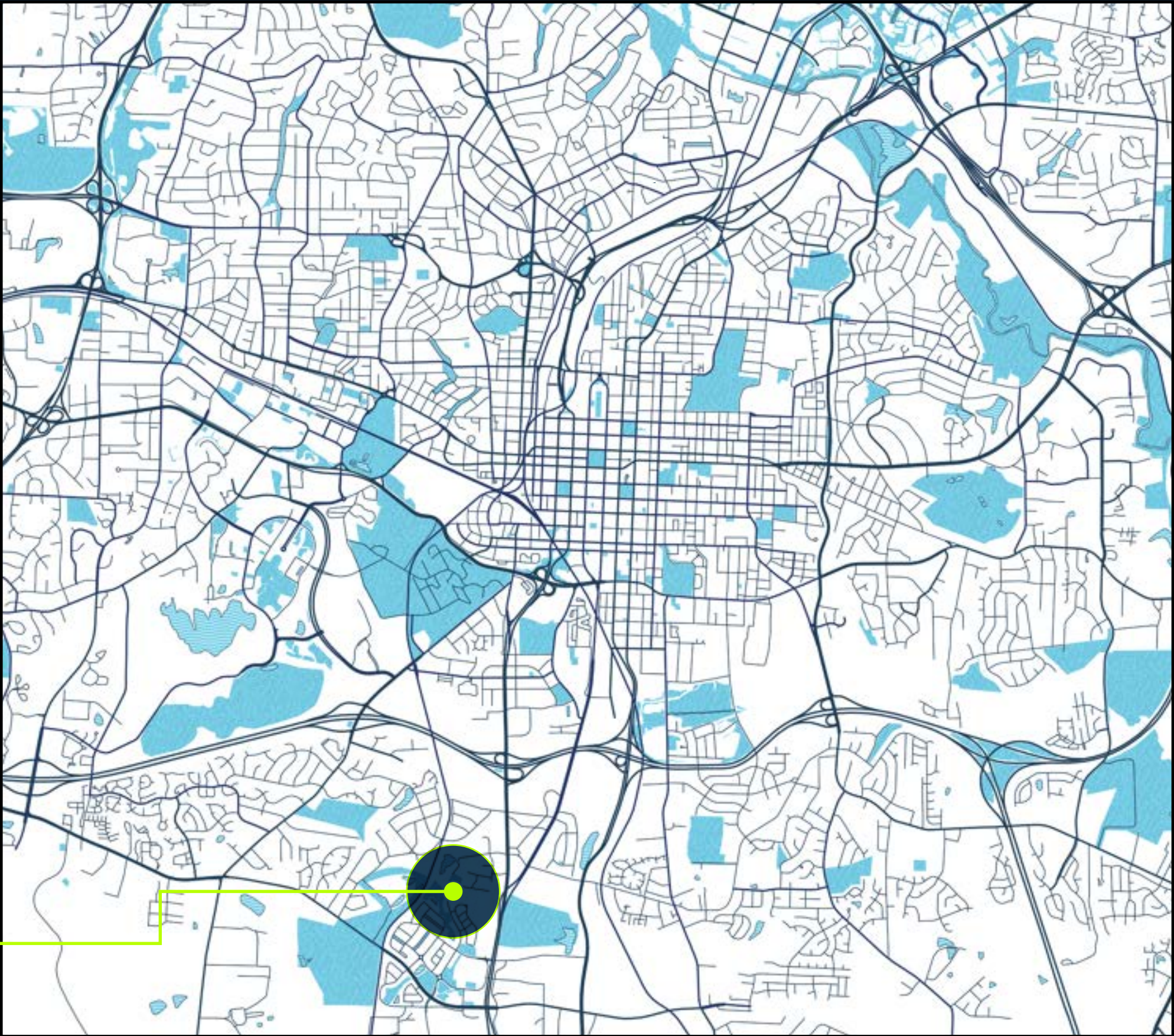
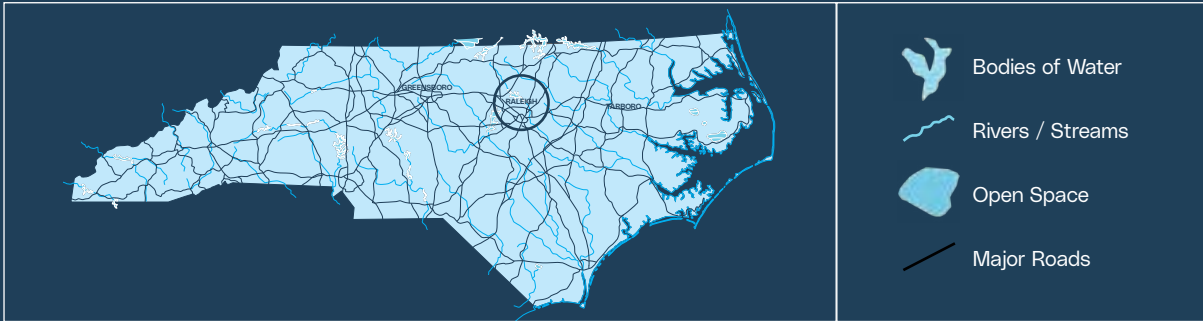
OF SAFE PLACES TO PLAY PROGRAMMERS SURVEYED OFFER OPEN PLAY OPPORTUNITIES

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

PEACH ROAD MINI-PITCH RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

The NC State team completed 28 hours of observations at three locations in North Carolina. Observations took place July - September on weekdays/evenings and weekends. The team intentionally observed at different times of day including morning and evening hours.

Systematic observations were conducted at Peach Road from August to September 2024, totaling eight hours of observation time. During this period, 32 players were recorded, averaging about 13 players per hour. Of the players observed, less than 10% were female, while the remaining 90% were male. Approximately 59% of the players were teenagers or younger, with the remaining 41% being adults. Soccer was the primary activity observed, particularly among males ranging from five years old to adulthood. Usage increased noticeably as the day progressed, particularly from later afternoon to early evening. A parent or caregiver was present 100% of the time when adolescents used the mini-pitch, suggesting that parents likely monitor multiple children simultaneously while taking advantage of the pitch's convenient location and surrounding amenities.



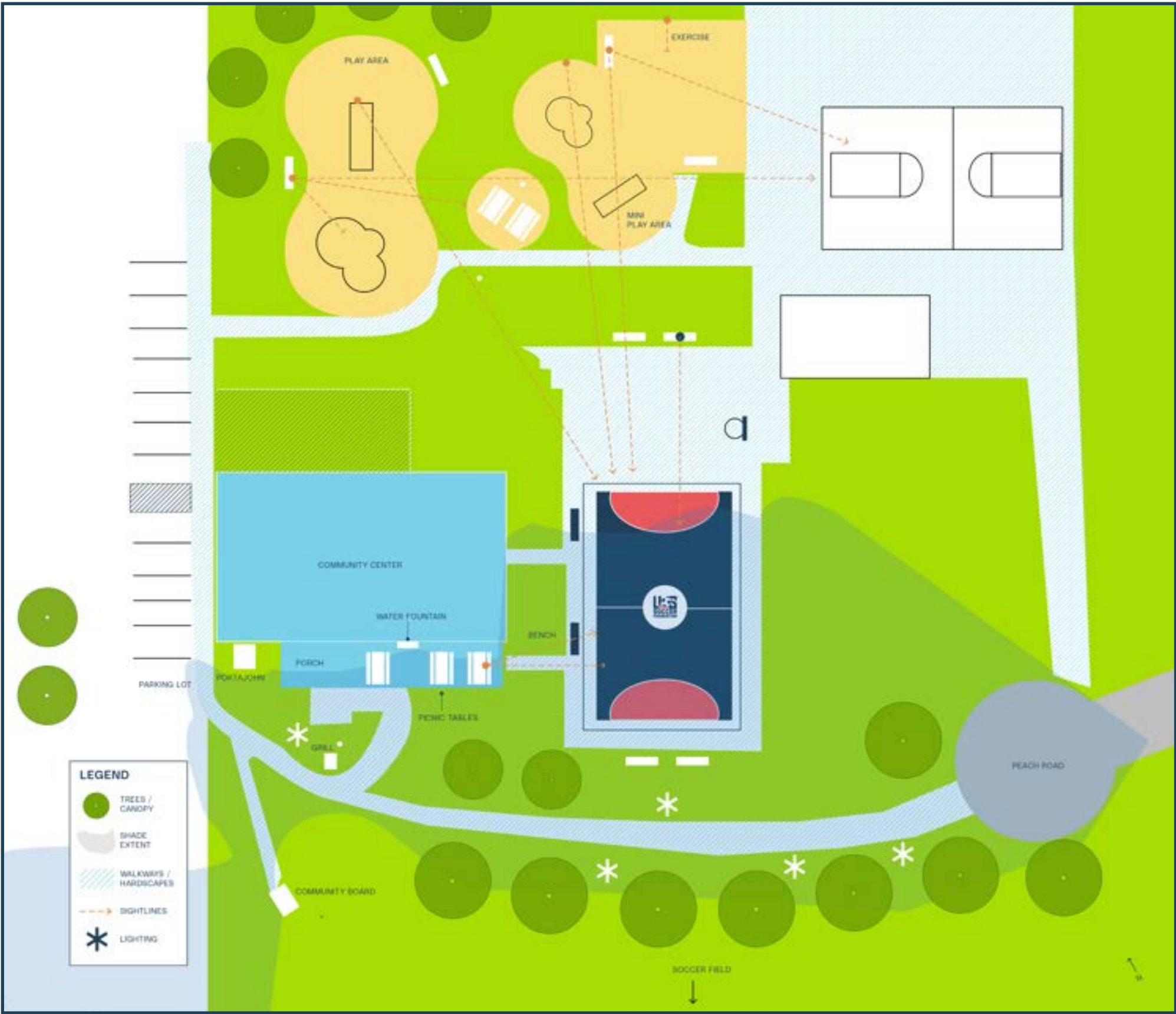
COMMUNITY BENEFITS

PEACH ROAD MINI-PITCH RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

The mini-pitch located at the Peach Road Cultural Center in Raleigh, NC, provides an opportunity for deep exploration. In an effort to consider all possible factors impacting mini-pitch usage, the NC State team conducted a holistic analysis of the mini-pitch location, programmers, partners, assets, transportation networks, and usage.

The NC State team began this analysis by conducting several conversations with both the Raleigh Director of Parks and Recreation and the Director of the Peach Road Cultural Center. Information gathered from these two individuals allowed us to gain insight into usage trends, the local community, barriers, and opportunities. From there, the team mapped the Peach Road Park with the Childhood Opportunity Index and population density metrics, while also examining transportation networks. The transportation networks include a bus stop within walking distance, walkable streets and sidewalks from homes, a greenway connecting to the mini-pitch, and a parking lot located directly in front of the cultural center.

The next step included asset mapping of the playspace. This involved the NC State team using satellite images to understand placement and distance, then going to the Peach Road Cultural Center to count and map the assets on site. As part of this and other systematic observations, the team included line of site assessments from other assets to the mini-pitch. For example, the team considered whether it was possible for a parent to watch one child on the playground and one child on the mini-pitch from any location within the park.



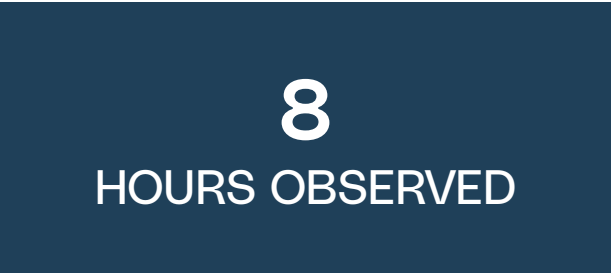
COMMUNITY BENEFITS

INSIGHTS FROM PEACH ROAD

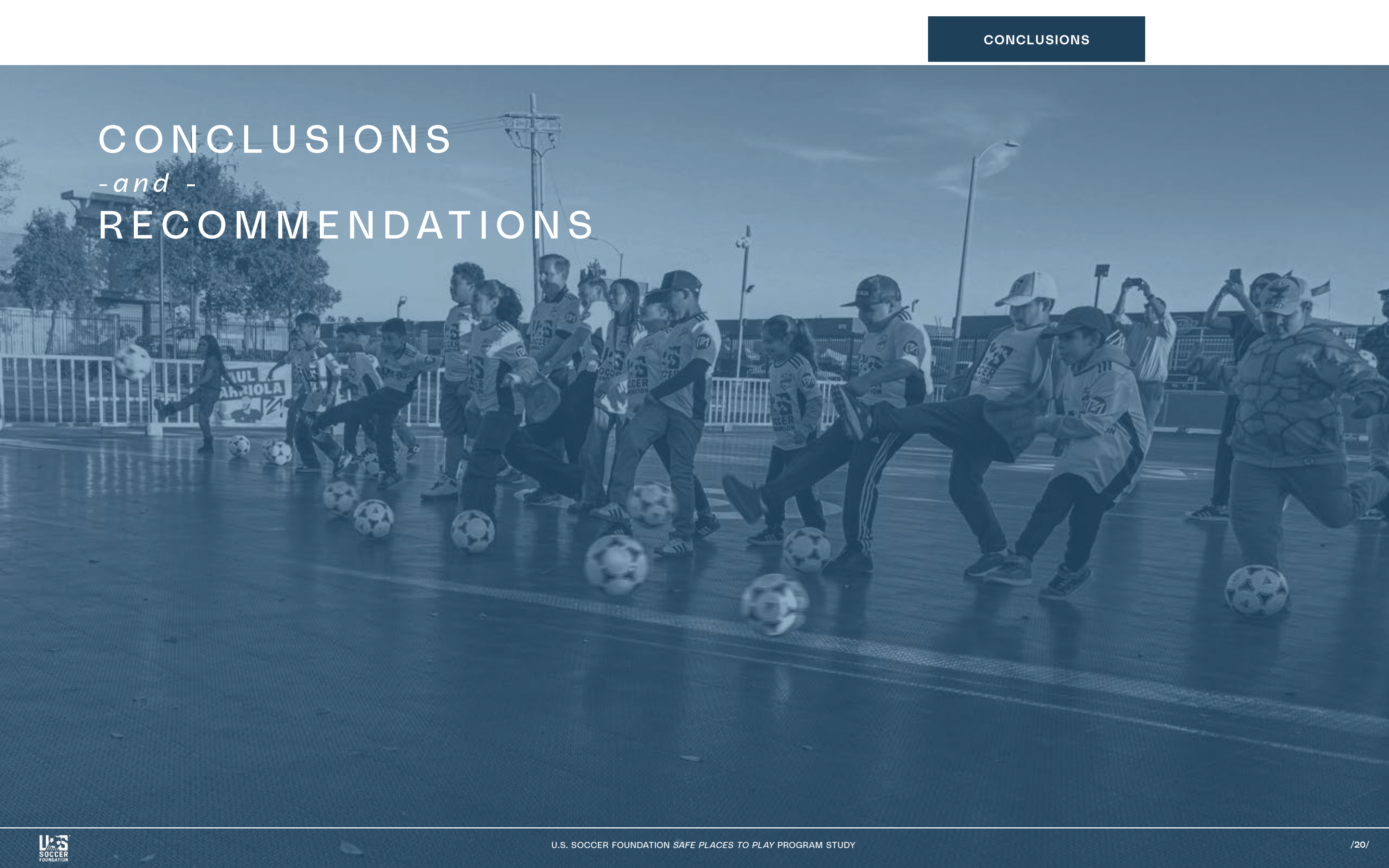
The mini-pitch at Peach Road Park in Raleigh, NC, is in both a great city location and visible within-park location. Peach Road Park is located in a predominately Mexican-American and Guatemalan-American neighborhood, two communities with a rich history of playing soccer. The park has multiple access points including on-street parking, a parking lot, sidewalk access, and connection to the city and regional greenway system. It is also located close to multiple multifamily developments and apartments, providing a nearby population and easy access. Within the park, the mini-pitch is by the Cultural Center which provides access to a water fountain, restrooms, seating, and shade. The mini-pitch is also visible from the nearby full-sized pitch and playground, allowing a family with multiple ages and interests to enjoy the park.

The mini-pitch is located in a convenient location where it acts as a hub for the community. During observations, it was common to see large families or groups of people show up to grill food and enjoy the park. Oftentimes, children were drawn to the mini-pitch to play while the adults would cook. Usage increased as the day progressed, with fewer people engaging with the park or mini-pitch during morning hours. Adults engaged with the pitch more during the later afternoon and evening hours, while children and teens stayed consistently engaged with the pitch throughout the afternoon.

In conversations with the Cultural Center’s Director, the mini-pitch is heavily used and is often programmed. For instance, there are multiple times per year ‘World Cup’ tournaments with adult male futsal teams comprised of immigrants from a variety of Central and South American countries. In this way, the mini-pitch serves as a space of connection for the local community, acting as a hub for social interactions where individuals can build informal support networks.



CONCLUSIONS *- and -* RECOMMENDATIONS



CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

WHAT WORKS FOR OUR LONG TIME AND CONSISTENT PARTNERS?

The geospatial analysis, partner surveys, programmer surveys, and systematic observations revealed generally highly satisfactory working relationships with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and evidence that the U.S. Soccer Foundation is reaching its goal of providing access to soccer for those in under-resourced communities. Specifically, approximately 70% of the mini-pitches are located in areas with high youth population density and low childhood opportunity. Partners and programmers both shared the desire to provide access to soccer for those communities that might desire to participate in soccer and those communities that typically do not engage in soccer. The survey results and systematic observations revealed that communities with a large Hispanic/Latino population utilized the pitch during programmed and unprogrammed times. Conversely, the mini-pitches were underutilized in non-Hispanic/Latino population locations during unprogrammed time and in locations with minimal additional assets beyond the mini-pitch. Systematic observations also revealed only 7% of users were perceived to be female, and 16% were over the age of 18, providing additional user groups to be better integrated into programming and free play.

Based on the results of the evaluation, the NC State team recommends the following for future installations and programs.

LOCATION MATTERS

Future Installation Location Considerations

The U.S. Soccer Foundation has done well installing mini-pitches in areas with a high youth population density and low Childhood Opportunity Index. The team recommends that the U.S. Soccer Foundation continues to work with landowners and programmers to understand the ethnic diversity of mini-pitch installation locations. It was observed by the NC State team that in locations where soccer is traditionally a highly prioritized sporting activity

(e.g., heavily Hispanic/Latino populations), more open play and programming have taken place. In locations where soccer is not highly prioritized, it is important to make sure programming is taking place with individuals knowledgeable about soccer. On a site location basis, the team understands the U.S. Soccer Foundation has little control over the specific location of the mini-pitch, however, the team observed many mini-pitches in corners of parks, behind swimming pools, etc., - less than ideal locations. To better set up mini-pitches for visibility, use, and success, earlier and community-engaged conversations with local sites may increase the ideal siting of mini-pitches.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

Programmatic Recommendations

The U.S. Soccer Foundation should seek to involve programmers as early as possible. Ensuring that those programmers on the ground receive adequate advanced notice and involvement in the installation process can be critical for creating positive and sustainable community impacts. Mini-pitches that have consistent programming and soccer expertise are the most utilized. This includes not just engaging with the local school system or parks and recreation department, but also community-based youth and sport organizations.

Regarding usage, only 7% of observed users were female. This data shows where targeted action is needed. Encouraging participation from girls and women could help make mini-pitches more inclusive. Specific efforts are required to provide a safe and welcoming environment for girls and women to play, leading to a larger and broader community impact. The U.S. Soccer Foundation could partner with organizations focused on women's sports to create girl and women-specific programming and environments and tailor programming based on location-specific needs and wants to create opportunities for diverse users. Engaging with the community will provide valuable insight for *Safe Places to Play* programming success.

PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

Partner Considerations

The U.S. Soccer Foundation's partners are very pleased with their experiences working with the U.S. Soccer Foundation. They highlight the individuals working for the Foundation as the key to the relationship's success. At the same time, the partners desire more information about the users of their mini-pitches. The U.S. Soccer Foundation should consider adopting language in their agreements with landowners and programmers that request annual user data that the Foundation can in turn share with partners.

It was also evident that across types of programmers (Parks and Recreation, School, or NGO), partners have the potential to influence the types of programming that might be offered. Therefore, the NC State team recommends that the U.S. Soccer Foundation work with partners to create a programming plan with programmers before installation and an evaluation plan that benefits all parties.



[The Foundation] makes the process very easy by taking on the major parts of working with the city and other partners to make sure things get done.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Since 19% of pitches built before 2020 were rated as “poor” or “very poor” in condition, implementing an annual maintenance schedule could help preserve the quality of the pitch. This may also strengthen the trust between the U.S. Soccer Foundation and programmers, partners, and communities. Currently, some mini-pitches are not in use due to the inability to provide the needed maintenance and upkeep to provide a safe place to play. Transparency regarding maintenance, cost, and funding at the onset of the installation conversations would contribute to the community continuing to benefit from the mini-pitch over time.

It was evident that surrounding assets played a significant role in the utilization of mini-pitches. Mini-pitches located in areas with access to bathrooms, water fountains, seating, shade coverage, grills, playgrounds, and community centers experienced greater activity. This was particularly apparent among large groups and families, highlighting the mini-pitch and its surrounding location as a community hub. While the team understands that the U.S. Soccer Foundation has limited control over the exact placement of mini-pitch, emphasizing the influence of these amenities on usage and their vital role in serving communities is crucial. Communicating with local sites and landowners to prioritize these factors could significantly enhance the success and impact of the mini-pitches.



The positive soccer activity at [the mini-pitch] has helped to increase the park's safety and made it more welcoming [...] many different people are playing together and connecting.

METHODOLOGY APPENDIX

/A/ PROGRAMMATIC SURVEYS

- Partner Profiles
- Programmer Profiles

/B/ SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATIONS

- Overview
- Camden, NJ + Philadelphia, PA
- Houston, TX
- Los Angeles, CA
- Des Moines, IA

PARTNER PROFILES

OVERVIEW

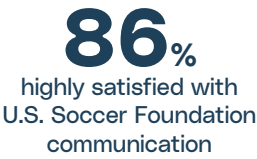
The partner survey aimed to examine the U.S. Soccer Foundation’s relationship with partner organizations, determine partner motivations and goals and explore partners’ desires for information and future opportunities.

Interviews with 6 partner stakeholders revealed that partners were aligned with the U.S. Soccer Foundation’s mission to increase access to soccer and physical activity. Furthermore, the key stakeholders were satisfied with their relationship with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and were interested in gathering further data on mini-pitch data. Based on the literature and the interviews, the partner survey was developed to understand better the broader motivations, goals, and desires of U.S. Soccer Foundation partners. For example, partners were asked to identify and rank their goals for supporting the *Safe Places to Play* program, identify and rank their motivations for supporting the *Safe Places to Play* program, and asked questions such as, “How much do you agree with the following statement, I am satisfied with the community engagement at the mini-pitches.”

The survey was sent to 54 partners. Immediate responses to our email revealed that 4 of those partners would be unable to respond due to various work or personal commitments. Ultimately, 24 of the possible 50 partners completely filled out the survey.



HIGHLY ENGAGED

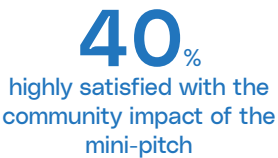


HOW DO WE LEVERAGE THIS?

Highly engaged partners were defined as those with more than 15 mini-pitch installs. Overall, these 14 partners had long-term relationships going back to 2016 on average. These partners prioritize accessibility to soccer and physical activity when installing a mini-pitch. The U.S. Soccer Foundation should engage these partners with data regarding accessibility to soccer for underserved populations.



ENGAGED



HOW DO WE LEVERAGE THIS?

Engaged partners were defined as those with between 4 and 14 mini-pitch installs. The 5 partners have worked with the U.S. Soccer Foundation since 2020. Like the highly engaged, these partners seek access to soccer and soccer programming. This group highly desires more information on soccer programming offerings. The U.S. Soccer Foundation should engage these partners with information and opportunities regarding soccer programming.



READY TO BE ENGAGED



HOW DO WE LEVERAGE THIS?

Ready to be engaged partners were defined as those with between 1 and 3 mini-pitch installs. On average the newest of the partners, this group is different from the other two in that they prioritize community engagement over accessibility to soccer. This group is not concerned with data on physical activity or usage. Rather, the U.S. Soccer Foundation would engage these partners with information on using the mini-pitches for community engagement.

SAFE PLACES TO PLAY PROGRAM FINDINGS

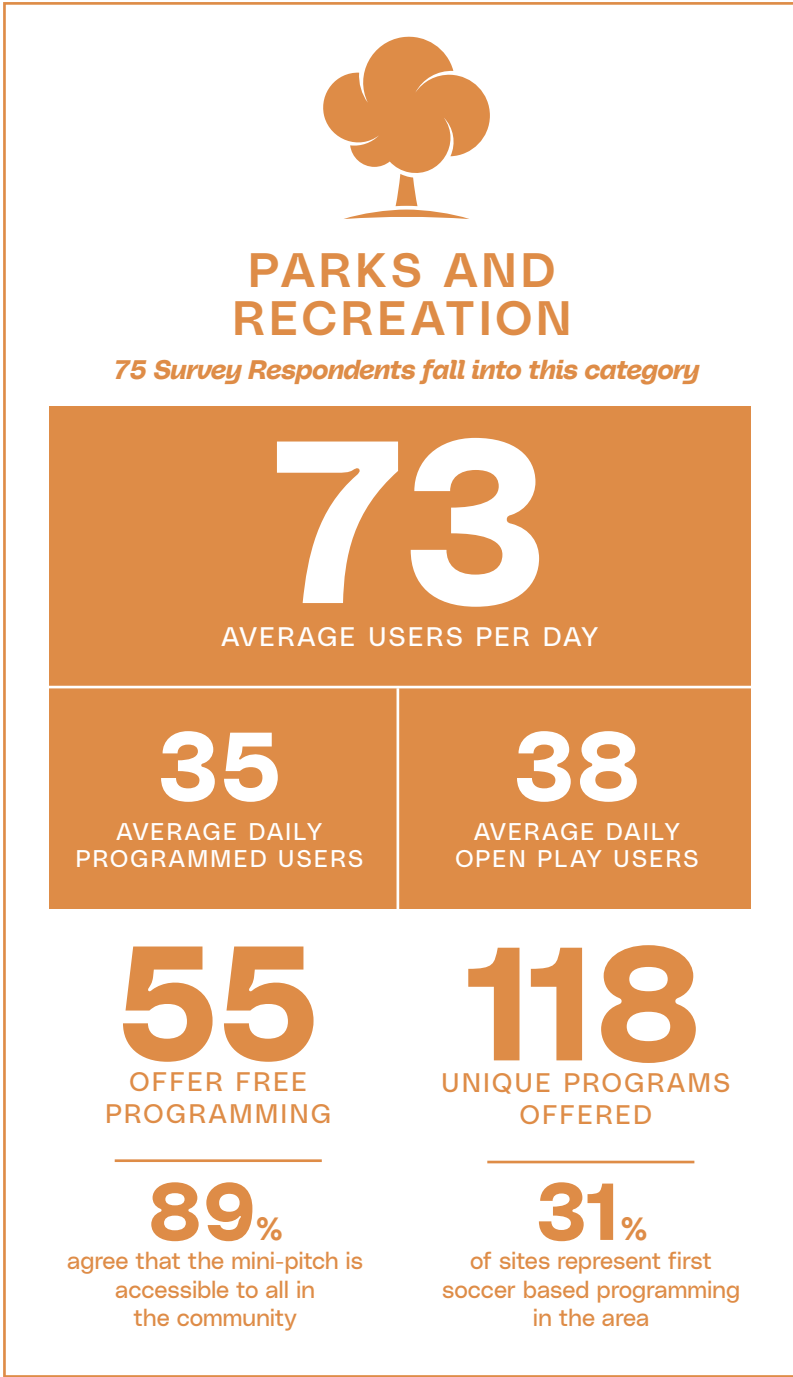
The purpose of this survey is to get a better understanding of what is happening on the mini-pitch by the people who create and manage programming on the pitches. Their input is insightful, unique, and valuable. As geographical locations differ, so does the programming. This survey examines usage, goals and objectives, program planning, data and metrics, communication, community impact and engagement, and motivation.

Safe Places to Play programmers represent schools, parks and recreation departments, non-profits, and other stakeholders. Seeking information from these groups and individuals was essential in providing specific information on how the mini-pitches are being used.

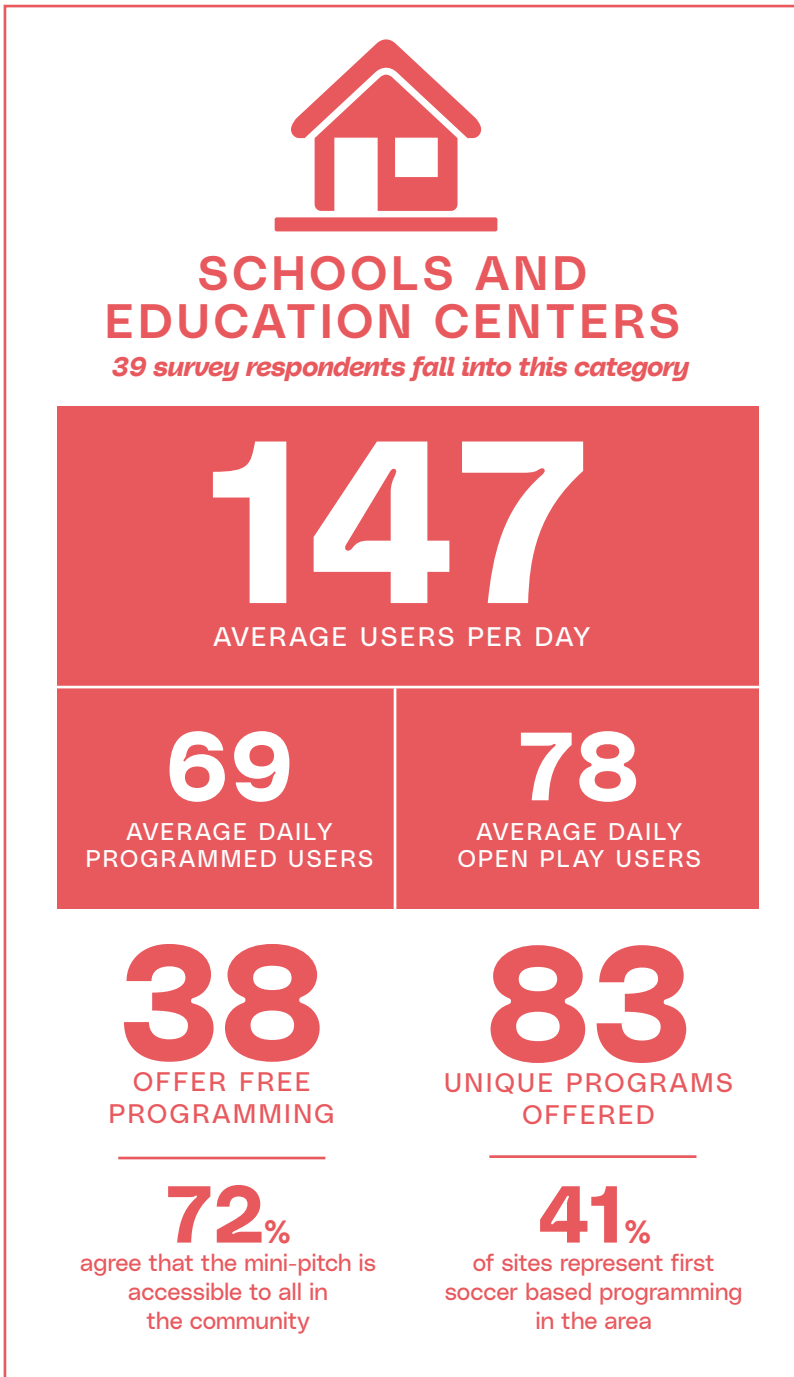
This survey was designed using Qualtrics and consisted of various question types (e.g. multiple choice, likert scales, matrix, net promoter score, short answer). The survey was open for responses for three months.

In partnership, the U.S. Soccer Foundation, Musco Sports Lighting, and the NC State team distributed the survey. Of the 175 initial responses received, 129 complete responses were retained for analysis, representing a 73.7% completion rate.

Programmers across the three organizational types scored between 9 and 10 (10-point scale) on likelihood of promoting mini-pitches to others. All three shared the most common programming goal of increasing youth physical activity (91% reporting) and the second highest was increasing after school programming (74%).



HOW DO WE LEVERAGE THIS?
Parks and recreation departments are focused on providing programming tailored to their specific community’s needs. Data shows 118 unique programs offered by various departments with 31% stating their mini-pitch provided the first opportunity for soccer programming in their community. Almost half of respondents indicated their funding comes directly from their department. Additional funding opportunities include grants, partnerships, program fees, and donations. Nearly 60% of programmers believe having the mini-pitch has contributed to an increased sense of safety in the community.



HOW DO WE LEVERAGE THIS?
Schools and education centers have the unique ability to engage youth over a specific time period by providing age and skill-appropriate play on the mini-pitch during physical education classes and free time. Soccer was introduced to 16 communities out of the 39 schools for the first time equaling to 41% of respondents. One of the highlights of having a mini-pitch located at a school is the lack of participation fees; 97% of programming was free. Having a mini-pitch on school property allows youth to learn, develop soccer skills, and enjoy free play during recess and before/after school hours.



HOW DO WE LEVERAGE THIS?
Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) have the capacity to operate according to their organization’s mission and goals. The majority of respondents indicated a focus on programming specifically for youth. The data shows 33% of the organizations provided the first opportunity for soccer programming in their community. Partnering with NGOs to provide soccer programming is a good way for the U.S. Soccer Foundation to introduce soccer to new communities.

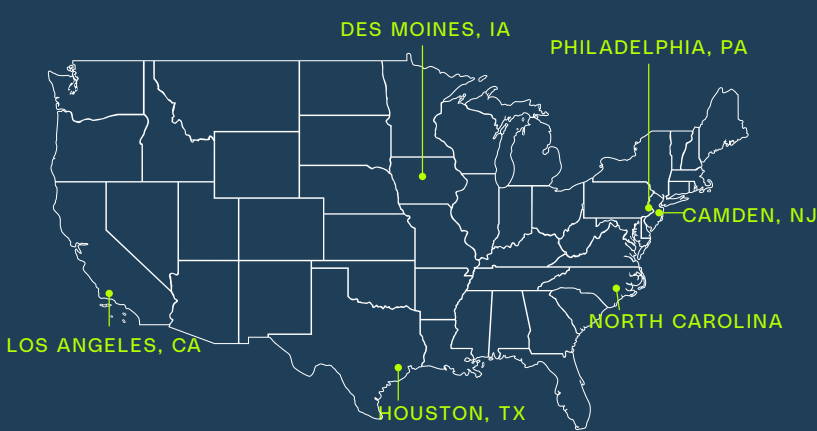
SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATIONS OVERVIEW

WHY WE SELECTED THE LOCATIONS THAT WE DID

The locations were selected based on accessibility and proximity to the NC State team as well as locations that were in Low-COI and high population density zones. Observations were conducted in Des Moines, Philadelphia, Camden, Houston, Los Angeles and North Carolina. Not all Mini-Pitches in each city were observed. Des Moines was ultimately excluded from the final report due to low observation data.

Systematic observations provide reliable information on use of mini-pitches through the direct and standardized in-person counts of community members using the space.

A team of trained researchers observed the use of 19 mini-pitches in 17 parks and schools between July and September 2024. The use, by activity type (e.g., soccer, basketball), activity intensity (e.g., sedentary, vigorous), age, gender, race, and ethnicity was recorded each 15 minutes. In total, mini-pitches were observed for over 165 hours with 640+ distinct observations. Use was observed across each day of the week and from 8:00am until 8:00pm.



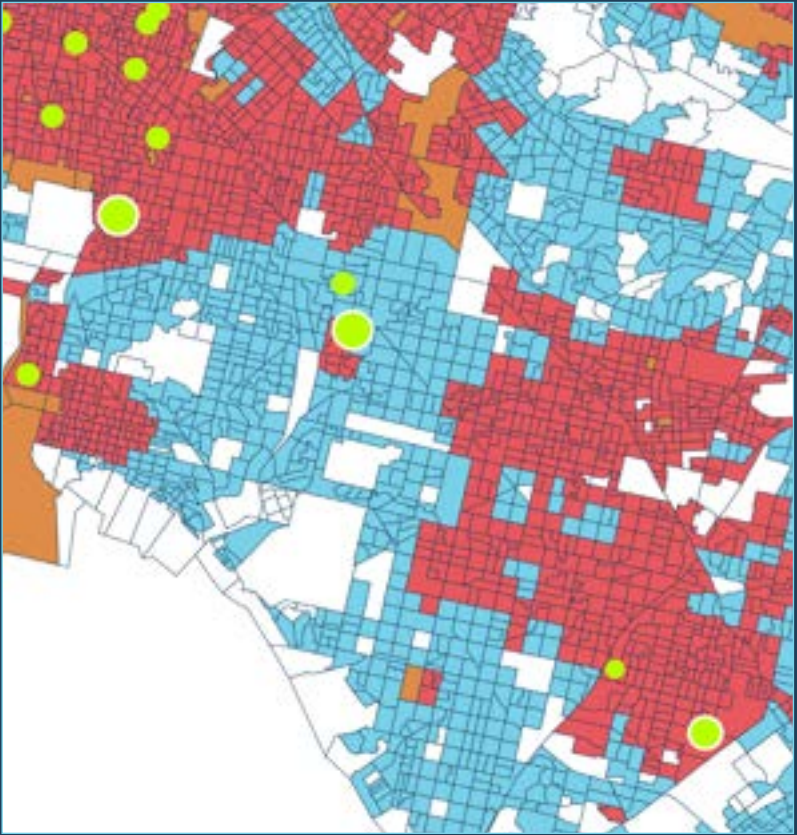
650+
OBSERVATIONS



PHILLY / CAMDEN

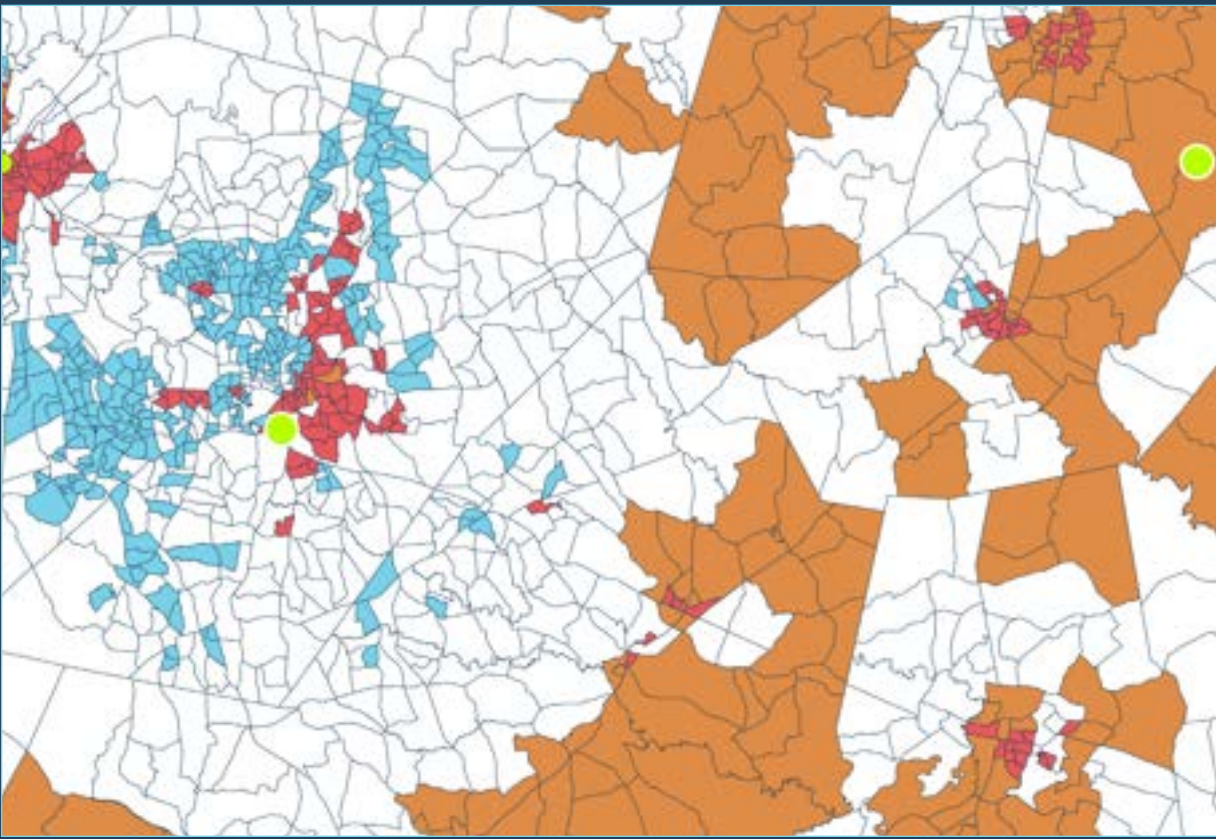


LOS ANGELES

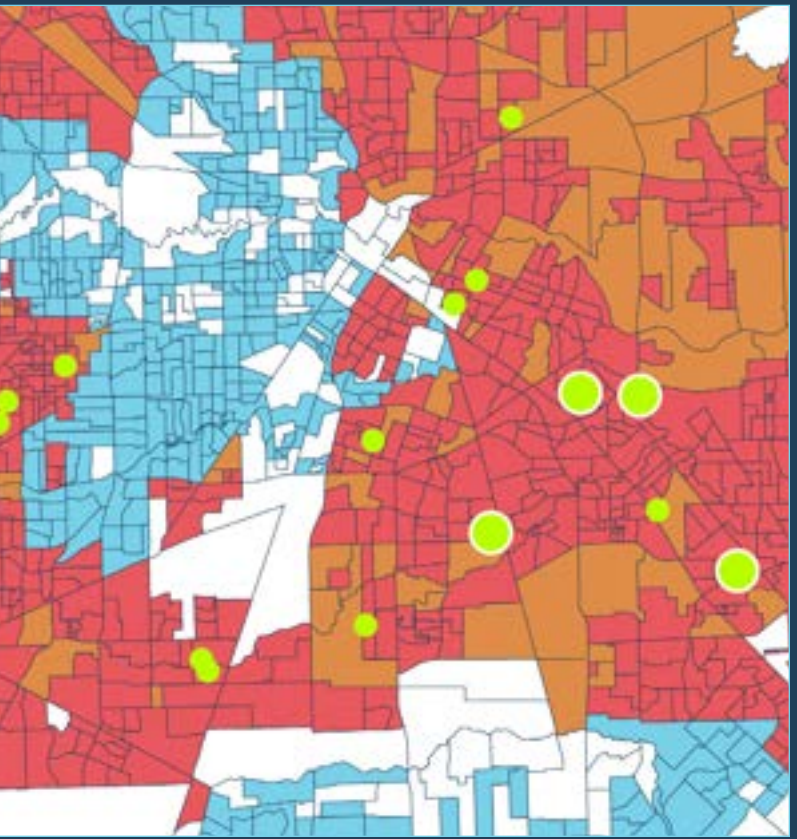


165+
HOURS

611+
INDIVIDUALS
OBSERVED



NORTH CAROLINA



HOUSTON

SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION

CAMDEN, NJ + PHILADELPHIA, PA

The four mini-pitch locations in Philadelphia, PA, and Camden, NJ, were visited over five consecutive days, Thursday through Monday, September 12 - 16, 2024. Later hours (>5pm) were more popular across the four mini-pitches, averaging over 7 users per hour. The NC State team visited the four mini-pitches between 6h45m and 8h45m each and observed the most people on the Heitzman Recreation Center (Philadelphia, PA) mini-pitch (55 users observed during 8.5hrs). This recreation center includes a robust afterschool program that uses the mini-pitch for programming and includes a multi-use mini-pitch that was also used for basketball and dancing. The Von Niede Park (Camden, NJ) mini-pitch was the second most visited and represents a mini-pitch located in a heavily used park within a predominately Hispanic/Latino community.

4

Parks

35%

Users 10 Years and Younger

99

Users Observed

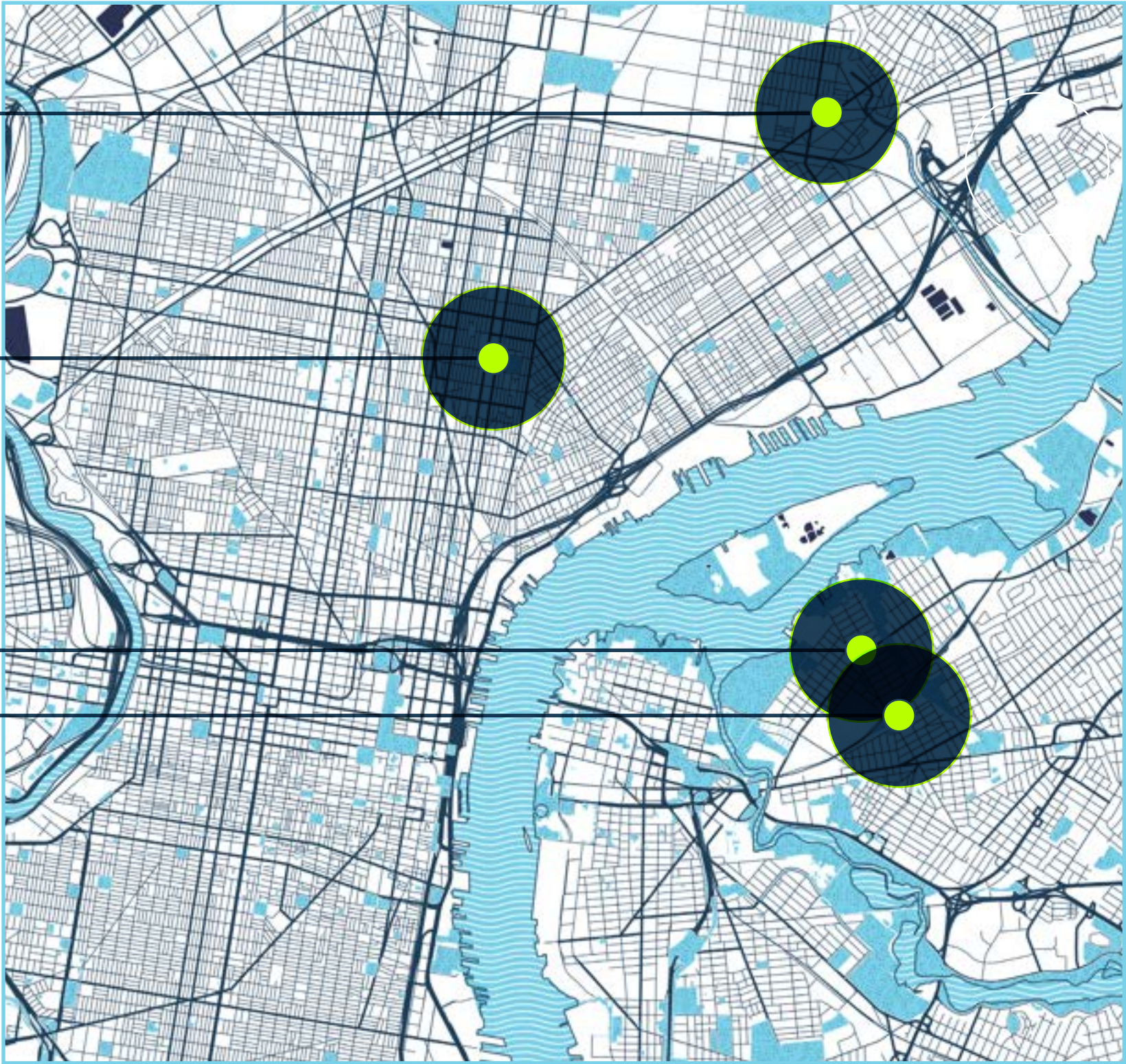
- HEITZMAN RECREATION
PHILADELPHIA, PA

TOTAL USERS: 55
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 40%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 4pm
- FOTTERALL SQUARE
PHILADELPHIA, PA

TOTAL USERS: 11
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 82%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 6pm
- VON NIEDA PARK
CAMDEN, NJ

TOTAL USERS: 28
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 96%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 6pm
- RALPH WILLIAMS MEMORIAL PARK
CAMDEN, NJ

TOTAL USERS: 5
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 100%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 1pm



SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION

HOUSTON, TX

The NC State team conducted systematic observations at four mini-pitch locations in Houston: Charles Milby Park, FM Law Park, Freeway Manor Park, and Ingrand Park. These observations were carried out over a six-day period, from Thursday, September 12, 2024 through Tuesday, September 17, 2024. Weekday observations took place between 10:00am and 6:00pm, while weekend observations extended from 8:30am to 8:00pm, allowing us to document usage patterns across varied times of day. Each park was publicly accessible and observed activity levels provided valuable context for understanding patterns of use and accessibility across different days and times.

4
Parks

6%
Users 10 Years
and Younger

233
Users Observed

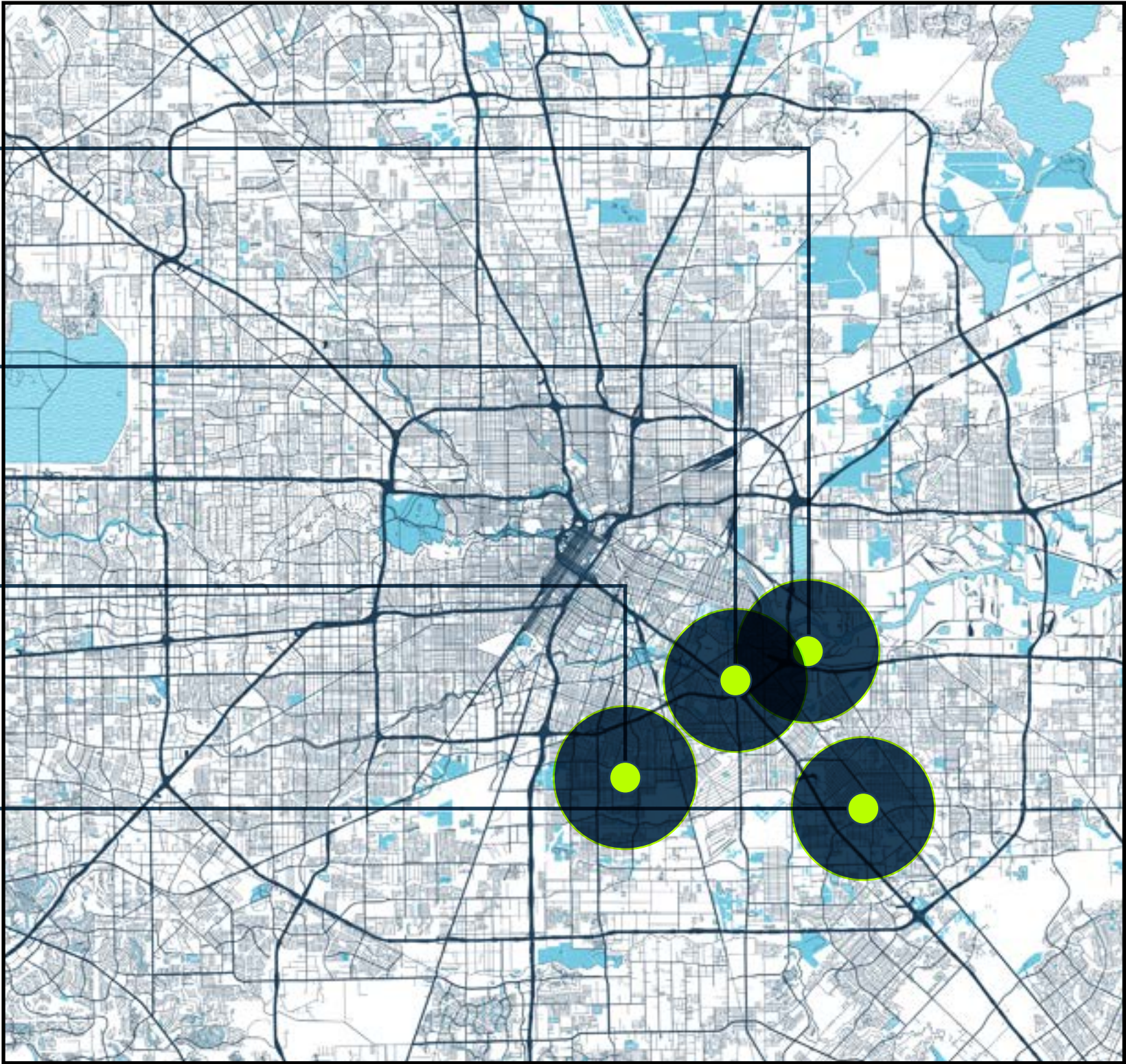
- CHARLES H. MILBY PARK

TOTAL USERS: 40
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 98%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 3pm
- INGRANDO PARK

TOTAL USERS: 88
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 73%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 6pm
- F.M. LAW PARK

TOTAL USERS: 49
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 88%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 7pm
- FREEWAY MANOR PARK

TOTAL USERS: 56
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 75%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 7pm



SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION

LOS ANGELES, CA

Collaborators from Cal State Long Beach and Cal State Fullerton completed 69 hours of observations in Los Angeles and Orange Counties between July 31 and September 25, 2024. Of the three mini-pitches, Delhi Park in Santa Ana, CA, received the most use with 130 users during the 10h15m of observations. This also represents the most used mini-pitch across all 19 observed mini-pitches (representing almost 20% of total observed use). Delhi Park has soccer balls available for free check-out for players who arrive without their own equipment. Palms Park, in Los Angeles County, received the second most total visitors during observations, with 102.

3
Parks

11%
Users 10 Years
and Younger

236
Users Observed

**PALMS PARK AND
COMMUNITY CENTER**

TOTAL USERS: 102
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 98%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 5pm

DE FOREST PARK

TOTAL USERS: 4
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 100%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 2pm

**DELHI PARK
(not shown on map)**

TOTAL USERS: 130
UNDER 18 YEARS OLD: 93%
MOST ACTIVE TIME OF DAY: 6pm

