

PUBLIC ORDER AND SAFETY

“We can be proud of the strong relationships between law enforcement agencies in our community. This sharing of resources is not only economically sound but also more efficient.”

Jack Merritt, Greene County Sheriff

Springfield and Greene County have joined a small group of U.S. communities recognized for their efforts to become safe communities. On the other hand, as the area’s population increases, the demand for safety services continues to rise, stretching critical resources.

The community is meeting problems head-on, mobilizing to fight gangs and passing a 9-1-1 sales tax, among other efforts. Police staffing and jail overcrowding are challenges that must be addressed.

Springfield is one of three communities in the country recognized by the World Health Organization as a “Safe Community.” Only 110 communities throughout the world have received such distinction. Among the indicators of a WHO Safe Community in Springfield are programs that target high-risk groups and those that promote safety for vulnerable groups.

In addition, Springfield-Greene County was chosen by America’s Promise/The Alliance for Youth as one of 100 Best Communities for Young People. The award is presented to places that have developed programs built on five promises for youth; among them is creating safe places to learn and grow.

The region’s population rise affects police and fire departments and other safety organizations. In 2006, the Springfield Fire Department marked an all time high for service calls and added a twelfth fire station in 2007. Police calls for service have also dramatically increased.

In 2006, more than 36,600 people participated in risk reduction educational programs sponsored by the Fire Department. Fire officials installed 743 free smoke alarms.

PUBLIC SAFETY SNAPSHOT, City of Springfield

	2004	2005	2006
Traffic Accidents	6,898	7,226	6,915
Alcohol Related Accidents	259	225	226
DWIs	1,752	1,415	1,099
Red Light Violations	1,431	1,378	938
Domestic Disturbance Calls	4,877	5,286	5,590
Police Response Time to Priority 1 Calls (in minutes)	8.92	8.16	8.73

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION. The community came together in 2006–07 to aggressively tackle two major problems associated with a surge in crime: gang activity and illegal use of drugs.

The Police Department targeted gang-related activity, resulting in more than 450 arrests and the confiscation of weapons, drugs and cash. The Greene County prosecuting attorney empanelled a special grand jury to investigate gang activity.

A graffiti reporting and paint out program helped eliminate the visual blight that accompanies gang culture. Education programs sponsored by Community Partnership of the Ozarks curbed gang activity. The Gang Task Force brought a national expert to Springfield who spoke to middle and high school students and trained school personnel to respond to the problem.

9-1-1 SALES TAX. To enhance police and fire response and citizen access to emergency services, Greene County voters in 2007 passed a one-eighth of one cent sales tax to support and upgrade the 9-1-1 emergency call center.

CRIME LAB GRANT. The Southwest Missouri Crime Lab received a federal grant for \$1.5 million in 2007 to construct a state-of-the-art \$5.9 million facility in downtown Springfield. The city of Springfield is matching the federal commitment and the state of Missouri allocated \$400,000 to cover the funding gap. Due to open in October 2008, the lab will reduce the time it takes to analyze evidence for investigations and trials. The state’s only other full-service crime lab is in Jefferson City.

JUVENILE OFFENSES DECLINE. The Juvenile Justice system handles a wide variety of juvenile cases, including neglected children and status offenses (acts that are prohibited by law based on age or “status” of the offender, such as disobeying a parent or being truant).

Partnerships among agencies and community groups are addressing the issues young people face. The declining number of

offenses indicates that these efforts are proving effective. From a long-term perspective, this is important since reducing juvenile deviance correspondingly reduces the probability of adult criminal behavior.

REFERRALS TO JUVENILE COURT, Greene County			
Year	Law Violations	Status Offenses	Total
2002	2,693	691	3,384
2003	2,235	666	2,901
2004	2,212	553	2,765
2005	1,808	538	2,346

ICE STORM RESPONSE. Order and safety were challenged this year with an ice storm that paralyzed the area for many days in January 2007. At the height of the storm, three-fourths of the population of Springfield was without power. Public safety and community agencies and volunteers worked around the clock to get the community back to order, with no deaths in Greene County. A multi-agency resource center provided disaster relief services.

POLICE OUTREACH. It's rare that a public safety group seeks input—both good and bad—from the people they serve. Springfield's Police Department each year conducts a citizen survey. In 2006, survey results showed that 83% of those responding believe police are serving the community's needs. Almost three fourths reported they considered their neighborhoods to be safe. Respondents concurred with police that drugs (44%) and gangs (31%) are the two greatest crime problems facing Springfield today.

METHAMPHETAMINE LAB REDUCTION. In 2005, Southwest Missouri had the bleak distinction of being a meth center for the United States. Changes in state law restricted access to cold and allergy medications containing pseudoephedrine, one of the principal ingredients of methamphetamine. This dramatically reduced the number of meth labs in the region.

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Labs Seized	78	37	21	6 (as of June 30)

METHAMPHETAMINE USE. The number of Southwest Missouri methamphetamine labs dramatically dropped by 2007, but undercover drug purchases, possession arrests, and hospital emergency room overdose reports strongly suggest that methamphetamine use is still a very serious regional problem.

While local production declined, the drug is now being brought in from Mexico and other regions and use remains high.

Meth use by parents and caregivers puts children at high risk. It also plays a significant role in the escalating number of property crimes, as users resort to stealing, forgery, and identity theft to obtain money to buy the drug.

Demand for drug treatment remains strong. In Greene County, admissions for meth treatment went from 358 to 512 from 2004 to 2006.

RISING CRIME RATES. Government statistics indicate a rise in violent crime and property crime in Springfield and Greene County during the last few years. This rise has been attributed to increases in both drug use and gang activity. Aggressive steps are being taken by law enforcement, the prosecutor's office and the community to address this problem.

CRIME RATE, City of Springfield			
Year	Violent Crime	Property Crime	Total
2004	857	12,255	13,112
2005	892	12,723	13,615
2006	1,001	13,161	14,162

POLICE RESPONSE TIME. The time required for law enforcement to respond to a citizen's call for service varies based on many factors, primarily related to the seriousness of the crime and the number of available officers.

In Springfield, the police department has a goal of arriving on the scene of the most serious calls in less than six minutes. Unfortunately, Priority 1 response time has steadily increased from 6.70 in 2002 to 8.73 minutes in 2006. The actual impact of a slow police response varies based on the circumstances presented, but this trend clearly has a negative effect. One of the variables impacting response time is staffing, addressed below.

POLICE STAFFING. Area law enforcement agencies are significantly understaffed and face ever-increasing difficulties in their attempts to fill vacancies with qualified applicants. This is a nationwide trend, but one that is especially challenging at the local level, as agencies are unable to compete with the pay and benefits offered by larger departments. Inadequate staffing has a negative impact on public safety and service issues such as response time, crime prevention and the ability to assign cases for follow-up criminal investigation.

CALLS FOR SERVICE, City of Springfield		
Year	Total Fire Calls	Total Police
2003	13,493	118,136
2004	13,933	153,061
2005	14,724	164,334
2006	15,020	153,532

JAIL SPACE. Greene County Justice Center is significantly overcrowded. Steps have been taken to address the situation, but the facility runs at maximum capacity on an almost daily basis. This has a negative impact on public safety, as many suspects who used to be kept in jail are now being released to free up space. This also creates a dangerous environment for the custody staff working there, as the ratio of inmates to jailers steadily increases.