

In first 3 months of 2021, people hit by gunfire more than doubled compared to 2020

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William DeShone Rosser has plenty of experience fighting violence. He was a former Memphis police officer who worked in several areas of the department before a car crash ended his career after just seven years.

Now, he's fighting violence as a pastor in Springfield.

"Programs don't work. People work. (If) people are dedicated, it's going to work," Rosser said.

Rosser moved to Springfield in 2018 to become pastor of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church on Martin Luther King Drive on the city's east side. He runs programs at his church for young adults and the community to build fellowship and provide safe fun in an area of the city hit hard by gun violence.

In the first three months of 2021, there have been four shootings, one involving a victim, just outside his church.

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City struggles with gun violence

Gun violence across Springfield was on the increase in the first three months of the year. The city recorded 153 shootings according to a State Journal-Register analysis based on ShotSpotter, the city's gunshot detection system. Sixty-nine shootings were confirmed, with 20 people hit and three killed.

By comparison, over the same period of 2020, there were 52 confirmed shootings and seven people hit by gunfire, Springfield Police Department records show.

Shootings have happened throughout Springfield with most on the city's east side inside a box between Ninth Street and Dirksen Parkway and between Clear Lake Avenue and Laurel Street. Other clusters appear near Springfield Southeast High School, Bunn Park, Kiwanis Park and apartment complexes along Westchester Boulevard and Seven Pines Road.

The shootings were not confined to a single time of day either. Most happened after midnight in the early morning hours. But there also were incidents of gunfire in the middle of the morning and in the afternoon.

Gun violence plagues many areas of the country. In some cases, gangs are the problem. Other times, perpetrators have no alternatives but to use their time for violence. Rosser said people who choose violence have “no value for life” and “lack support.

“We’ve got to get our children busy and productive attitudes,” he said.

Alternatives to violence

For Rosser and his kids, sports were their alternative. Rosser said sports meant they had something to fill their time in a productive way. It was also through Little League baseball that Rosser met a police officer who inspired him to become a police officer. However, Rosser also acknowledges it has been hard to provide alternatives recently because of the pandemic.

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“Our children like to sit in the house and play video games. We need to get them out of the house,” Rosser said.

Two 15-year-olds have been arrested by Springfield police in 2021 while in possession of guns.

Enos Brents lives on Springfield’s east side but has another perspective on the gun violence problem facing the city. Brents has combined for 50 years of service between the military and Sangamon County Sheriff’s Office.

“One of the problems is they no longer have confidence in the ability to protect themselves, so the first they do is grab a gun,” Brents said.

“Part of the problem in today’s society is too many parents are trying to be their children’s friend instead of being their parent ... I was taught at a very early age: respect people, respect other people’s property, respect yourself. Some of the problem is we’re not teaching that anymore.”

Brents and Rosser said despite the heavy gun violence on Springfield’s east side, the community is safe.

Community policing

Rosser, who is one of the Springfield Police Department’s chaplains, says there needs to be more community policing, especially to help build trust with the Black community.

“When something is going wrong in your life — when your boyfriend or girlfriend is attacking you, when someone has broken into your house and stolen your stuff — you cannot stand the police, but you’re going to call them because who else are you going to call? You need one another. But you’ve got to get to a point of trusting them and one of the ways of doing that is community-oriented policing,” Rosser said.

As a Memphis officer, Rosser said he frequently rode his bike through neighborhoods just to talk to people. He said it went a long way toward building trust and improving safety. He said Springfield officers are active in Springfield’s east side as members of the community but need to do that more as officers.

Springfield police create taskforce

To combat gun violence, the SPD is taking a more hands-on approach. A new gun violence task force was developed to focus more on investigating cases of gun violence and devoting more officers to investigating shootings.

More:Springfield police develop gun violence task force, ask community to help address shootings

Gun buyback programs, working with CrimeStoppers, and more technology such as license plate readers and cameras are also being considered by the SPD. They're also looking to restart a focused deterrence program that was suspended during the pandemic that takes a broader approach to rehabilitate those involved in crime.

January through mid-April, SPD has made 37 firearm-related arrests and recovered 79 guns.

Brents said the sheriff's department and SPD do a good job. People have to remember the police are often a reactive force that responds when someone else witnesses a crime.

"Law enforcement is not equipped or trained to address all of society's problems. They have a specific job to do and that is to maintain the peace," Brents said. "It's a thankless job and it takes very special people to do it."

Building trust

The community also has a role to play in solving crimes.

Rosser said his church is there to help the community in any way they can, which includes helping the police solve crimes in the neighborhood.

He said this is key to building trust between the community and police to solve violence. That isn't the easiest request as the country tries to answer questions about the relationship between police and people of color.

"Trust is broken and it takes time to rebuild it. If we have those relationships already in place, when something happens in Chicago (that's) bad (or) Minnesota (that's) bad, we're already fortified because (we can say) 'that's not our officers. Our guys are good guys.' How do you know that? Because we've been around them, talked to them," Rosser said.

Rosser also thinks having more Black officers in Springfield officers also would help build trust and encourages Springfield officers to be active in the community to inspire young people to join the police force.

"The whole community needs to get involved. (Violence) is not just a police problem. It's a community problem," Brents said.

Rosser equated strengthening community relationships with the police to Jesus' appearance after his resurrection to a pair of disciples on the road to Damascus in present-day Syria. The disciples didn't recognize Jesus until they sat down to eat with him. Rosser explains this shows how important fellowship is to strengthening a community and solving violence at its roots.

"We've got to have interaction ... People don't realize or perceive who you are until you start eating with them. There's something about table fellowship," Rosser said. "When you sit down with a police officer and you're a citizen, you perceive this (officer) is a real person."