

Palm Springs Police Department - Homelessness and Public Safety in Palm Springs

Title – Homelessness and Public Safety in Palm Springs

Agency: Palm Springs Police Department (CA)

Goldstein Awards Submission 2024

1. Summary

Scanning

Palm Springs has a homeless crisis. Palm Springs has the largest unsheltered homeless population in the Coachella Valley, and the second largest in Riverside County.¹ Palm Springs homeless population leads to a high number of police calls between 2020-2024, at 7- 9% (*See Figure 1*) related to homelessness and associated crimes (drug offenses, theft, assault, etc.). Since 2020, police CAD data indicates homeless arrests have fluctuated over the past few years, with notable increase in 2023, and 2024 with an increase from around 14% to over 28% of all police arrests (*See Figure 2*). Residents report feeling unsafe due to this increase in crime and blight. The increase in arrests is contributed in part to a shift in focus by the police department after the arrival of Police Chief Andy Mills in 2021, who held several community meetings in February 2022 geared toward identifying policing strategies. The increase in arrests, in part attributed to a shift in policing focus since operations began in early 2022, does not necessarily reflect an increase in crime by the homeless population. Community meetings revealed homelessness as the top concern for residents and businesses.

Analysis

Most cities operate off the Point in Time Count (PIT). Our officers did not view it as accurate and sought to collect their own data over a 6-month period. The 2023 PIT count conducted on January 25, identified 239 unsheltered people in Palm Springs, up 8% from the 2022 PIT count.² Our officers identified more than 500. The county PIT reported 30% were drug substance abusers but

¹[Riverside County Point in Time Count](#)

²[Data from Point in Time count shows homeless population continues to rise in Palm Springs](#)

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our officers found that number closer to 90%. Palm Springs faces a significant disparity in how homelessness affects crime and safety. Despite comprising only 1% of the city's 45,223 residents, the unsheltered homeless population generates 7-19% of annual service calls (roughly 4,800-7,000 calls). PSPD data reveals homeless individuals are arrested at a shocking 12-26 times the rate of the general population. This vulnerable group is not just overrepresented in arrests – they are also disproportionately victims of violent crimes. National studies show significantly higher rates of physical and sexual assault against homeless individuals.³ A San Diego study found homeless individuals were murdered at 19 times the rate of the general population and subjected to attempted murder at 27 times the rate.⁴ We also found the homeless have an internal culture including clustering in pods of likeminded homeless individuals. The clustering of homeless individuals highlights another complex dimension within the city's homelessness issue.

Response

The IMPACT team comprised of a Sergeant, three officers, a Community Services Officer, and a Code Compliance Officer implemented a targeted intervention strategy – one that focused on offering services, hot spot enforcement, camp abatement, focused deterrence on frequent offenders and relentless follow up. Our hypothesis: If 90% of the individuals are substance abusers, the goal was to leverage their addiction to present three options: get help, go elsewhere, or go to jail.

Officers made more than 700 arrests. Lastly, the Police Department's IMPACT team established the R.I.S.E. (Resilience, Inclusion, and Support for Ending Homelessness) Initiative.⁵ R.I.S.E.

³ <https://endhomelessness.org/blog/the-disturbing-realities-of-homelessness-and-violence/>

⁴ [Homelessness and Crime by Johnathan Vankin](#)

⁵ [City of Palm Springs R.I.S.E. Initiative](#)

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brings together various city and county departments, local healthcare providers, and other essential service providers in a weekly collaboration.

ASSESSMENT

The strategy produced a significant reduction in homeless encampments, with hotspot locations seeing an over 80% decrease in homeless clustering at those locations. While these areas are occasionally used, they are largely vacant. The initiative also yielded positive outcomes for some individuals: The total population went from 500+ to 150 prior to the Navigation center opening. Reunification: 45 people reconnected with loved ones. Housing: 80 people secured temporary housing. Clean-Up: Over 150 homeless camps were cleared, removing more than 150 tons of trash.

It's important to acknowledge that 22 people tragically died from exposure or drug overdose. The community response has been overwhelming on Operation Relentless Sun. Residents have expressed appreciation for the improved cleanliness and safety citywide. Several people, upon returning to Palm Springs after a year, remarked on the noticeable change.

Operation Relentless Sun

Managing the Behaviors of the Unhoused and Addicted Population

2. Description

Scanning

Approaching the Problem

The West Coast, from Eureka to San Diego, faces a significant challenge with homelessness. Across cities, both large and small, the issue has had a substantial economic impact, costing billions. Palm Springs, a tourist haven, heavily reliant on a pleasant city environment, is no exception. The growing homeless population threatened the city's economic viability. In fact, Palm Springs held the unfortunate

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distinction of having the largest homeless population in the Coachella Valley and the second largest in Riverside County. The homeless population lead to a high number of police calls, **7-9%** (*See Figure 1*) related to homelessness and associated crimes (drug offenses, theft, assault, etc.) each month. Homeless arrests in **2020 - 14.6%, 2021 – 13.6%, 2022 – 14.4%, 2023 – 22.6%, and 2024 YTD 28.6%** of all arrests. This data suggests homeless are 12-26 times more likely to be arrested than the general population in Palm Springs. Residents reported feeling unsafe due to the increase in crime and blight. The high call volume related to homelessness suggested a strain on police resources and a potential community safety concern. The variety of crimes listed indicated a complex issue requiring a multifaceted approach. Resident complaints highlight the negative impact on the community's quality of life. In addition, there was no clear communication with any city entity on how the homeless problem would or should be addressed, leading residents to feel even more frustration with who to call for these problems.⁶

Research

In an effort to understand public safety concerns, the PSPD held community meetings in five council districts using a nominal group technique (*See Figure 3*). 294 community members gave input at these meetings. Each of the meetings was broken into three segments, and each meeting lasted for approximately one hour.

In the first part of the meeting, attendees participated in a prioritization exercise. They received three colored pieces of paper, each representing a top priority for police services (red-highest, blue-medium, yellow-lowest). Five large posters displayed different police service categories (Quality of Life, Nuisance Crimes, Traffic, Property Crimes, Violent Crimes). Attendees placed their colored papers on the posters to indicate their priorities. They could also write specific details about their concerns on the papers. This allowed residents to directly voice the issues impacting their communities. *The behaviors of*

⁶ [Community Partnership on Homelessness](#)

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the homeless emerged as the clear top public safety concern, with a staggering 49.3% of respondents identifying it.⁷ (See Figure 4)

In review of the countywide bi-annual homeless count, 239 people were identified as homeless individuals in Palm Springs, but police surveys conducted over six months revealed a much larger number, exceeding 500.⁸ (See Figure 5)

Police Department surveys considered someone a resident if contacted more than three times during that period, recording them by location, name, and date of birth for accuracy. Over 90% of those contacted reportedly struggled with substance abuse or co-occurring disorders, and a majority had felony convictions.

Additionally, police worked with city and county officials to get an understanding of the available resources, and reviewed communication among city, county and service providers, and communication of available resources and homeless strategy to the community. Police databases, and the city's reporting databases⁹ regarding homeless issues were all analyzed to better understand the trends and problems.

Discussions focused on how to better work together to create a holistic response that addresses both public safety concerns and the underlying needs of homeless individuals. Service providers highlighted existing resources like housing programs, street medical teams, and food banks – critical elements in connecting homeless individuals with the support they need.

Furthermore, service providers shared valuable data on the demographics, specific needs, and potential service gaps within the homeless population. This information was instrumental in refining the

⁷ [PSPD Holds Community Meetings](#)

⁸ [Summary of Riverside County 2023 Point in time count.](#)

⁹ [MyPalmSprings Smartphone App](#)

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understanding of the issue and guiding the development of a more comprehensive approach to homelessness in Palm Springs.

Our team also reviewed P.O.P. best practice guides relevant to homelessness and crime.¹⁰

From this research, the following key points were established:

Offender

- Data suggests homeless individuals are involved in crimes in Palm Springs like theft, assault, public intoxication, drug sales, drug possession, and burglary from homes and vehicles. PSPD data suggests they are 12-26 times more likely to be arrested than the general population.
- Contributing factors may include:
 - Survival needs - Theft of food or basic necessities.
 - Substance abuse - Funding drug or alcohol habits.
 - Mental health issues - Erratic behavior or violence.
 - Self-defense or protection of belongings.
- Repeat offenders pose a challenge, highlighting the need for:
 - Leverage deterrence - Linking services to responsible behavior.
 - Addressing underlying issues like addiction or mental health.

This focuses on the criminal behaviors associated with homelessness and potential motivations, while acknowledging the need for addressing the root causes to reduce recidivism.

Target/Victim

- The homeless population is a vulnerable group and is frequently targeted by criminals.

¹⁰ [P.O.P. Guide on Homeless Encampments](#)

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- Additionally, public perception casts the homeless population as a source of crime, impacting the overall sense of safety in the community.

Locations (See Figure 6)

- Four hotspots were identified: Vista Chino/Sunrise Way, E Palm Canyon/Sunrise Way, Walmart, and Gene Autry Wash.
- Three hotspots clustered near businesses, restaurants, and food/water distribution points. This suggests proximity to resources influenced concentration.
- The outlier, Gene Autry Wash, offered a secluded environment with natural cover and makeshift shelters.

Partners

A number of partners were identified (*See Figure 7*). Social service providers, mental health professionals, housing agencies, and law enforcement collaborated to offer comprehensive support and reduce crime associated with homelessness.

Defining the Problem

After scanning the problem an initial problem statement was identified:

“Homeless individuals living in palm Springs seize crime opportunities for continued substance abuse and clustering in locations that create hot spots for police activity and crime.”

Analysis

The Problem Analysis Triangle

We analyzed the data using the Problem Analysis Triangle (*Figure 8*) to understand the root causes of the ongoing homeless crisis and explore potential solutions.

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Offender

Homeless as Offenders:

- Homeless individuals are involved in crimes like theft, assault, public intoxication, and drug offenses at disproportionate levels. [*Rational choice theory*](#) helped provide some insight into their motivations: *Survival, Addiction, Mental Health, Self-Defense, and Competition for resources.*

Important Considerations:

- **Victims, Not Just Offenders:** Homeless individuals are significantly more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators.
- **Diverse Population:** Motivations for criminal behavior vary greatly within the homeless population.

Target/Victim

Homelessness and Crime in Palm Springs: A Look at the Victims

This analysis examines how homelessness and crime intersect in Palm Springs, focusing on the impact on various community members.

Residents: People living near homeless encampments or frequent panhandling areas are most affected. These include families, elderly residents, and women living alone. They experience petty theft, public intoxication, and vandalism, leading to feelings of fear, anxiety, and avoidance of local businesses.

Businesses: Small businesses in high-homeless-activity areas, like convenience stores or restaurants, suffer from shoplifting, disorderly conduct, and vandalism. This results in financial losses, property damage, and a negative customer experience. One Starbucks closed due to the impact of petty crime at that location.

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Homeless Individuals: This vulnerable population experiences violent crime, theft of belongings, and hate crimes due to their exposed living situation and lack of support. These crimes cause physical injury, emotional trauma, and loss of essential items, making it harder to access services and reintegrate into society.

Locations *(See Figure 6)*

A police analysis revealed four key hot spots for homeless activity:

- Vista Chino/Sunrise Way
- E Palm Canyon/Sunrise Way
- Walmart – Crowley and Ramon
- Gene Autry Wash

Interestingly, three out of these four locations share a common characteristic: they are situated near a high density of:

- Businesses: This could include stores, restaurants, or service providers.
- Fast Food Restaurants: These offer potential access to food or discarded scraps.
- Organizations Known for Distributing Essentials: This might include charities or shelters that provide water or free meals.
- Places to steal items for survival.

Risk Terrain Modeling helped explain the proximity to potential sources of sustenance (food), income generation (panhandling near businesses), and public amenities (like restrooms) helps explain why these locations became hotspots for the homeless population.

However, the fourth hotspot, Gene Autry Wash, stands out. Located in an open wash with abundant brush and trees, it offers a more secluded environment compared to the other locations. This seclusion likely explains the presence of "large structures built by the homeless" in this area.

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Previous Responses

Responses from multiple agencies were evaluated as part of Operation Relentless Sun. Few had been assessed, making it difficult to determine a known successful solution or strategy (*See Figure 9*). We also reviewed the previous Problem Oriented Policing Guides and Goldstein Awards for clues and tips from prior operations.

Understanding the problem's cause

Hypothesis:

The homeless population, much larger than previously thought, could be reduced through leveraging personal needs and comfort to gain behavioral compliance.

The outlier hotspot, Gene Autry Wash, with its secluded environment and makeshift structures, suggests some homeless individuals prioritize safety and privacy over proximity to resources. This might be due to concerns about violence, harassment, or displacement in more open areas.

Obstacles and Barriers:

Mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence all potential factors contributing to homelessness in Palm Springs. Additionally, jail overcrowding and reduced penalties for non-violent crimes may limit the effect of deterrence.

Setting Objectives

Based on the hypothesis, this project aimed to address the interconnected issues of homelessness and crime in Palm Springs. By focusing on the hotspots identified through analysis, we developed a multi-faceted approach. This involved connecting homeless individuals with support services while addressing chronic, low-level offenses through a system of "leverage deterrence" that sends a firm message: Take the services, move elsewhere, or go to jail and disrupt your need for drugs. In other words, we leveraged the idea of being dope sick as a leverage. There was zero tolerance for those staying in the

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four hot spots, and the top 30 problem people. During every encounter they were given opportunity to accept resources.

Response

Recognizing the lack of resources, insufficient shelter options, and a communication gap regarding how to report homelessness or who would respond, the team implemented a three-pronged plan, Operation Relentless Sun, to directly address homelessness in Palm Springs.¹¹ The 3-part plan included:

Response	Description	Outcome
Part 1 – Survey	Officers conducted a homeless outreach survey over several months, collecting data on demographics, homelessness history, and how they arrived in Palm Springs.	Survey found over 500 homeless, 340 regularly in Palm Springs, far exceeding county's count of 239. Most, 90%, struggled with substance abuse and mental health challenges.
Part 2 – Provide Resources	Officers offered resources (pamphlets, outreach teams, crisis units) to connect homeless individuals with support.	Some homeless individuals expressed interest in help, but few followed through, citing various reasons.
Part 3 – Focused Enforcement	Target repeat offenders (vandalism, theft, violence) to protect public safety and free up police resources.	<p>Crackdown in hotspots deterred crime by disrupting patterns and making it harder for offenders to operate.</p> <p>Arrests became opportunities to connect repeat offenders with social services, building trust over time.</p> <p>Using a leverage deterrence strategy, officers worked to discourage crime by using drug addiction as a leverage to link access to services or encourage them to move to their hometowns.</p> <p>High repeat arrests exposed the need for more support, leading to the RISE Initiative.</p> <p>Repeat offenders identified as high-risk received targeted social services to prevent future incidents.</p>

¹¹ [Palm Springs Police Chief shares new plan to address homelessness](#)

Assessment

Measuring the impact

Positive Impacts:

- **Disrupted Crime Patterns:** Focused enforcement in hotspots likely made it harder for offenders to commit crimes frequently. 80% reduction in homeless noticed at the 4 hotspot locations.
- **Increased Service Connections:** Arrests provided opportunities to connect repeat offenders with social services and mental health professionals, potentially building trust over time.
- **Identified High-Risk Individuals:** The data helped identify those who posed a higher risk to public safety or themselves, enabling targeted interventions.
- **Increased Visibility of Homelessness:** The operation identified over 500 homeless individuals, significantly more than the previous county count (239). This brought more attention to the issue.
- **Improved Service Utilization:** The data shows some positive movement towards finding shelter:
 - 90 individuals entered emergency shelters, suggesting the operation may have connected them with these resources.
 - 23 people secured permanent housing, a significant achievement in addressing homelessness long-term.
- **Family Reunification:** Reuniting 35 individuals with family demonstrated a positive outcome for some homeless individuals.
- **Improved Public Perception:** Community feedback following the operation indicated a positive public perception. Residents expressed appreciation for the reduction of blight and a perceived increase in public safety

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Uncertainties:

- **Long-Term Effectiveness:** The report doesn't reveal if the reduced crime rates were sustained or if the connections made with social services resulted in lasting positive changes for homeless individuals.
- **Impact on Repeat Offenders:** It's unclear how many repeat offenders engaged with the offered services or if the leverage deterrence strategy (linking services to good behavior) was successful.
- **Displacement:** The operation prioritized minimizing displacement through offering temporary shelter, storage for belongings, and connections to social services. While a significant number of homeless individuals utilized these resources, others declined them. While outreach efforts have located some individuals at new locations within and outside Palm Springs, a comprehensive assessment of total displacement remains elusive due to limitations in data collection.
- **Financial Impact:** The financial impact of the operation wasn't formally measured. However, significant ongoing costs were incurred due to:
 - Construction of the new \$40-million-dollar navigation center
 - Implementation of a new \$400,000-dollar annual program for encampment cleanup
 - Dedication of 9 city employees (One police sergeant, 5 officers, 1 Community Services Officer, 1 Code Compliance Officer, 1 Homeless Outreach Coordinator and 1 Housing Services Administrator) to address homelessness, which translates to additional salary and benefit expenses.

Data Needed for a More Complete Picture:

- **Crime Rates Before and After:** Data on crime rates in targeted areas before and after the operation would provide a clearer picture of the impact on crime.
- **Service Utilization Rates:** Information on how many homeless individuals used the offered services and the long-term outcomes would be helpful.

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- **Recidivism Rates:** Data on recidivism rates (rearrest rates) among repeat offenders would indicate the effectiveness of interventions for those most at risk.

Tragic Losses: The report highlights the vulnerability of the homeless population with 22 deaths due to exposure or drug overdose. This underscores the need for continued support services and access to healthcare.

Overall, the data suggests the operation had some positive impacts but also highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of homelessness alongside enforcement. The increased visibility of the homeless population emphasizes the importance of long-term solutions like affordable housing and accessible support services.

Looking ahead

Building on the insights from *Operation Relentless Sun*, the Palm Springs Police Department is transitioning to a new approach – *Operation Restore Hope*.¹² This initiative focuses on connecting homeless individuals with the comprehensive support services offered by the newly opened navigation center.

Chief Andrew Mills:

"Well, to transition, we've gone from telling people that we want to know who they are offering resources through pamphlets and so forth, and then doing a lot of enforcement. Now, Operation Restore Hope is, finally, it's here, here's your opportunity to take a bed, here's your opportunity to get into housing to get help. And what we're telling them is, now's the time. And if you don't, there's the consequences. You might be cited and or arrested."¹³

¹² [Operation Restore Hope](#)

¹³ [PSPD share new approach to decreasing homelessness and illegal camping \(KESQ\)](#)

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A Shift in Focus:

Operation Restore Hope prioritizes:

- **Resource Connection:** Connecting homeless individuals with the navigation center's wrap-around services, including housing assistance, mental health support, and addiction treatment.
- **Alternatives to Living on the Street:** Encouraging individuals to utilize the navigation center's resources as an alternative to living on the streets.

Addressing Refusal of Services:

- The program acknowledges that some individuals may initially refuse services. However, the approach will be:
 - **Service-oriented:** Officers will continue to offer resources and explain the benefits of the navigation center.
 - **Consequences for Refusal:** As a last resort, persistent refusal of services and bedding may result in citations or arrests.

Overall Goal:

Operation Restore Hope aims to move beyond a purely enforcement-based approach. By prioritizing access to resources and offering a pathway out of homelessness, the program seeks to create a more sustainable solution for both the homeless population and the community as a whole.

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Agency and Officer Information

Key Project Team Members:

Chief Andrew G. Mills

Captain Mike Kovaleff

Lieutenant William Hutchinson

Sergeant Frank Guarino / Sergeant Marcus Litch

Officer Jorge Diaz

Officer Jordan Belchamber

Officer Chad Brown

Officer Luciano Colantuono

Officer Emmi Kramer

Community Services Officer Destiny Arce

Code Compliance Officer Kristi Smith

Key Contact Person

William Hutchinson, Lieutenant

Email: william.hutchinson@palmsspringsca.gov

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Appendices

Figure 1 – Calls for service (All calls vs. homeless related calls – PSPD CAD Data)

	Year									2023
2ndDispo	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022		1,518
VAG	3,523	5,408	3,491	3,838	3,519	4,675	5,950	4,946		3,972
Grand Total	3,523	5,408	3,491	3,838	3,519	4,675	5,950	4,946		5,490

	2022	2023	Grand Total
Total CFS	72,436	70,652	126,993
% VAG	6.45%	8.42%	8.22%

Figure 2 – Arrest Data

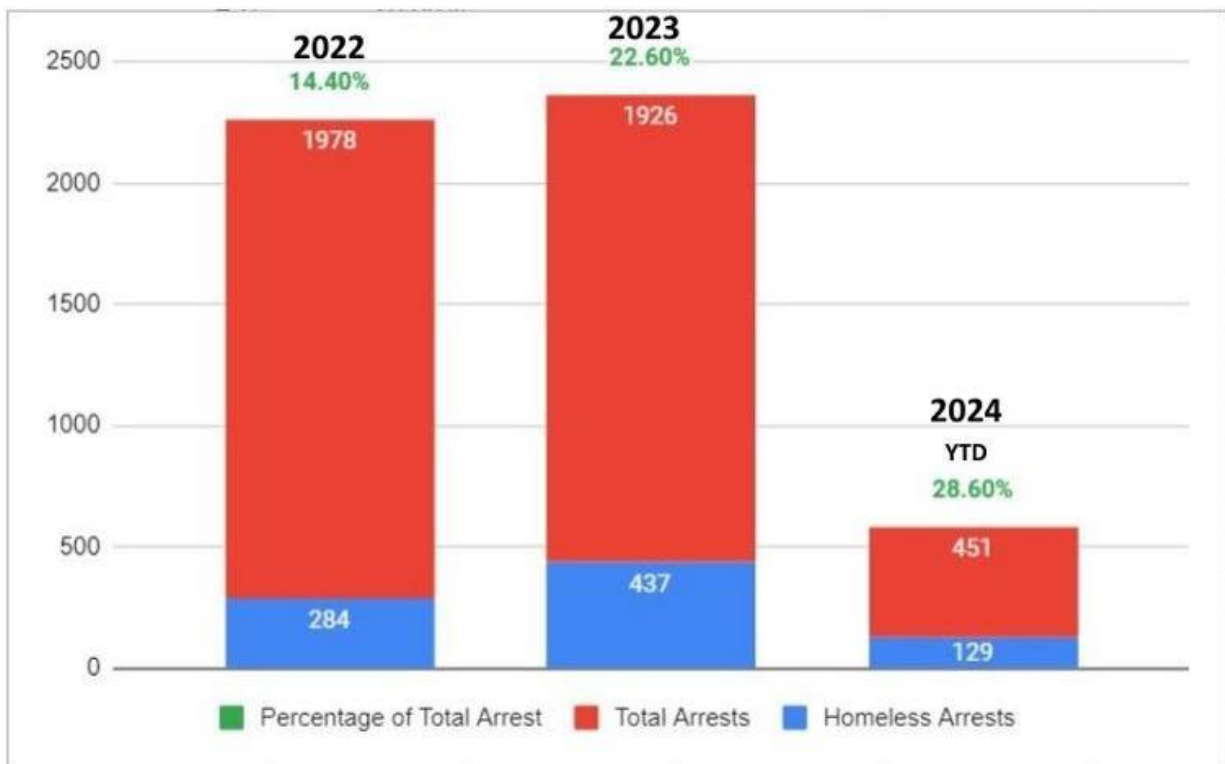


Figure 3 – Community Survey Data on Policing Priorities



Figure 4 – Community Survey Data on Policing Priorities

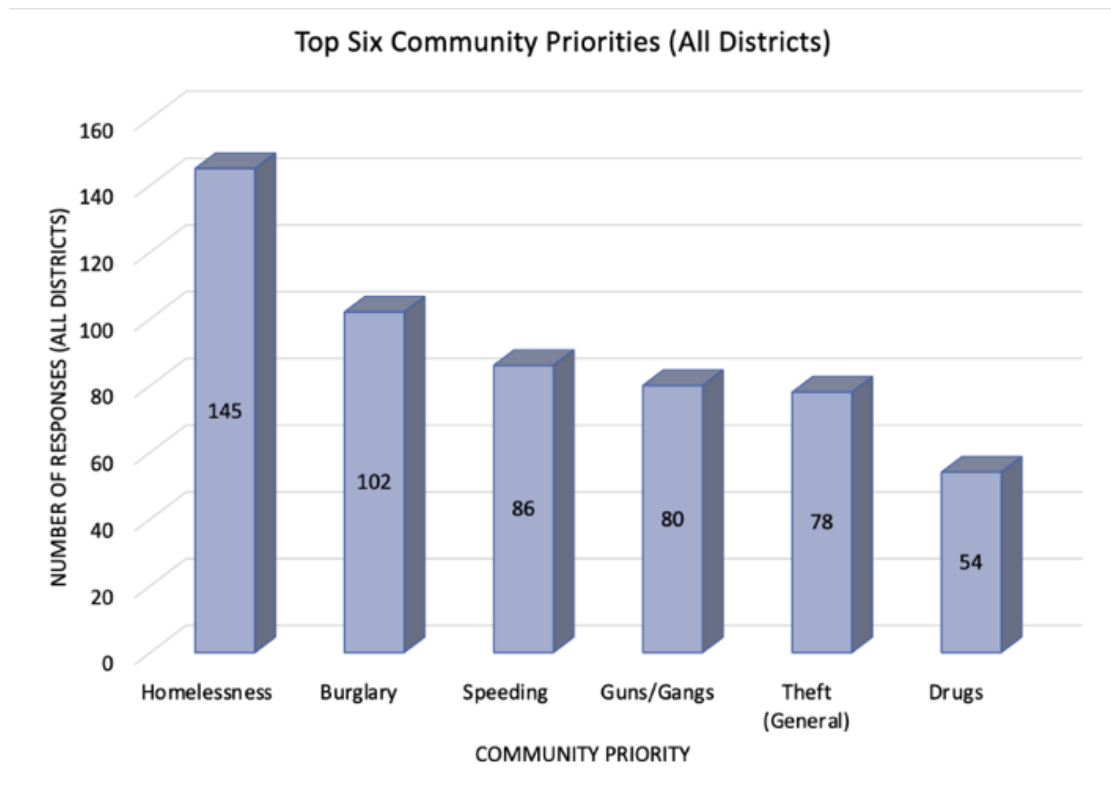


Figure 5 – Police Point-In-Time Count vs. County Point-In-Time Count

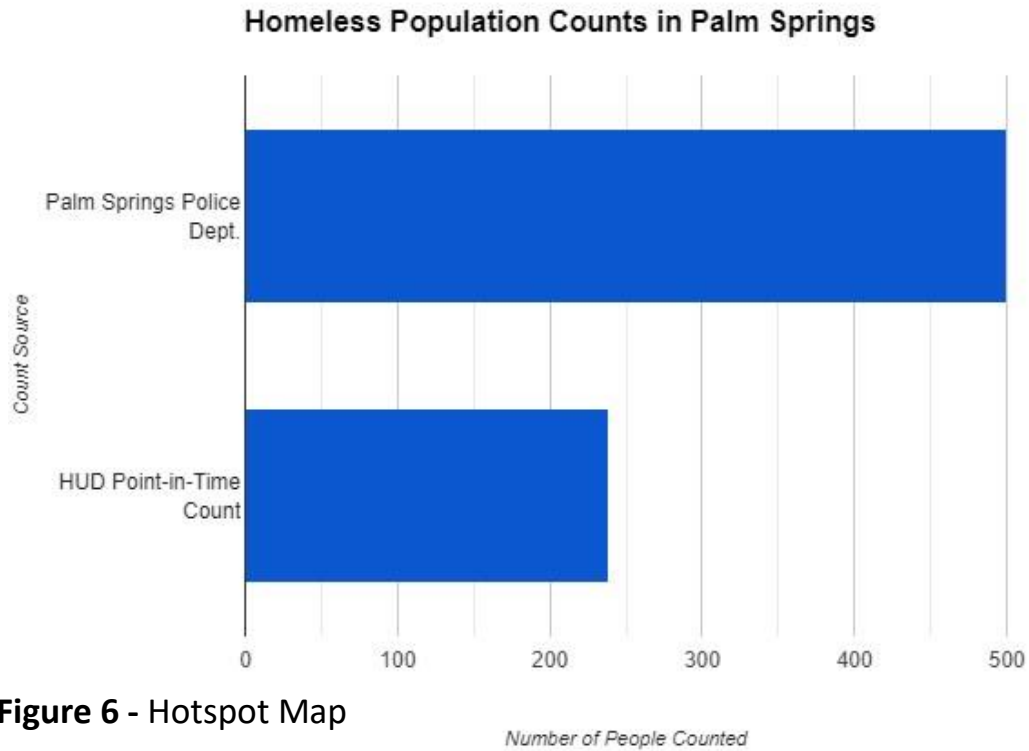


Figure 6 - Hotspot Map

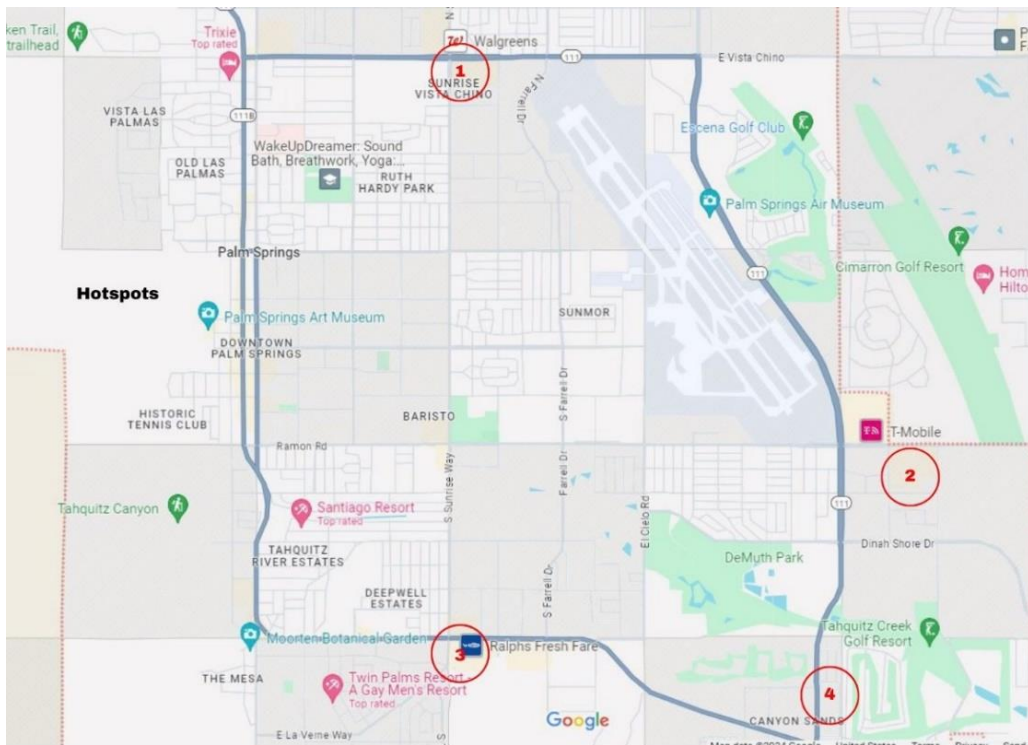


Figure 7 - Partners

<u>DIAL 2-1-1 for the Riverside County Database and Referral Information</u>		DIAL 988 for a 24 HR Crisis Line
Emergency Assistance:		
◆ Catholic Charities (Rent, Utilities, Food):	760-568-5101	
◆ United Way of the Desert (Referrals):	760-323-2731	
◆ Jewish Family Services (Intake, counseling and referrals):	760-325-4088	
◆ Desert Regional Medical Center:	760-323-6251	
◆ PS City Emergency Notification. To sign up visit http://bit.ly/PSEverbridge		
Shelters:		
◆ Desert S.O.S. Referrals:	760-327-4394	
◆ Coachella Valley Rescue Mission (Indio):	760-347-3512	
◆ Martha's Kitchen and Village (Indio):	760-347-4741	
◆ Path of Life Ministries:	760-601-5424	
Mental Health Resources:		
◆ Suicide Hotline:	800-273-8255	
◆ Crisis & Suicide Intervention:	951-686-HELP	
◆ The Path:	760-251-2346	
◆ Telecare (Crisis Stabilization Unit):	760-863-8600	
◆ Crisis Support System of Care (Riverside University Health System-Behavioral Health)	951-715-5040	
◆ SafeHouse (Emergency Shelter runaway, homeless, and youth in crisis.)	888-343-4660	
◆ Harrison House (Youth 18-24, transitional living)	760-636-4799	
Other:		
◆ Department of Public Social Services (assists homeless, recipients of AFDC, or those earning less than \$607/mo; assists with food stamps, Medi-Cal, and all other County services):	760-770-2300	
◆ Social Security:	800-772-1213	
◆ Riverside County Health Center, Palm Springs:	760-778-2210	
◆ Palm Springs Animal Shelter:	760-416-5718	
◆ Palm Springs Animal Control:	760-323-8151	
Transportation:		
◆ Sundial Transit Agency—Door to Door and Wheelchair Accessible:	760-343-3451	
◆ Riverside County Office on Aging—T.R.I.P. Program for elderly and disabled:	951-867-3800	
Homeless Resources:		
◆ Well in the Desert (case management, phone, mail & referral):	760-656-8905	
◆ Palm Springs Access Center (225 El Cielo Rd):	760-424-8438	
◆ Sycamores (Mental Health, Housing, Youth , Mobile Crisis)	626-395-7100	
Veterans:		
◆ Palm Desert Medical Clinic:	760-341-5570	
◆ Loma Linda Medical Center:	909-825-7084	

Figure 8 – Problem Analysis Triangle



Figure 9 - Previous Responses

Response	Description	Evaluation
Patrols	Targeted patrols.	Few positive outcomes observed, but officers continued to patrol, advise to move along and or arrest with no consistent follow up.
Social Media	Publicize arrests, camp clean-ups, safety when interacting with panhandlers and homeless.	Several social media pieces have been viewed, many of which showcase officers removing homeless encampments, making arrests, but these posts create much debate about the treatment of homeless by the police.
Enforcement Operations	Zero tolerance enforcement of those with warrants, public intoxication, and drug influence.	While these operations were successful in removing people from the street for a short period, they did not provide real long-term solutions.
Housing first model	This approach provides getting people off the street through hotel vouchers for instant relief.	Services need included like substance abuse mental health and mental health treatment.
Hostile architecture	Changing landscape or locations to be less attractive to the homeless. Ex: Bus benches removed and replaced with leaning seats.	While some of these solutions have short term success, some argue these solutions are ineffective, inhumane, and push homeless to secluded areas, while ignoring the root causes of homelessness.

Photos of Operation Relentless Sun



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Clean Up
OPERATION
RELENTLESS SUN



Walmart location

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