

**Section 6:**  
**Focus Group Summary**  
**Report**

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# *City of Columbia, Missouri*

## *Focus Group Summary Report*

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### **OVERVIEW**

ETC Institute conducted two focus groups with residents who live in the City of Columbia. The focus groups were conducted as a follow-up to a citizen satisfaction survey that ETC had previously administered for the City. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather more in-depth information from residents regarding issues related to public safety services provided by the City.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The focus groups were held at 5:30pm and 7:30pm on April 7<sup>th</sup> at the Activity and Recreation Center. Focus group participants were selected at random from a list of households who had previously completed a citizen satisfaction survey for the City. The focus group was designed to gather detailed feedback about the following issues:

- 1) General Perceptions of Public Safety Services
- 2) Perceptions of Police Services
- 3) Perceptions of Safety in Columbia
- 4) Perceptions of Fire Services
- 5) Planning for Growth
- 6) Final Comments

A total of 19 residents attended the focus groups. The focus groups were each 90 minutes long and were moderated by a representative from ETC Institute.

A summary of the topics and major findings of the focus group are provided on the following pages.

## FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS BY TOPIC

### ***Topic #1: General Perceptions of Public Safety Services***

#### **General Perceptions of Public Safety Services**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate what types of services come to mind when they think “public safety services”. Listed below are the services that were mentioned:

- 9-1-1 Dispatch
- Ambulance
- City maintenance
- Community relationships
- Community policing
- Emergency medical services
- Fire
- Laws and regulations
- Local emergency planning
- Neighborhood watch & social media groups
- Police
- Protection of rights and livelihood
- Road services
- Sanitation
- School safety
- Street lights
- Water services

Participants were then asked which item from the list they feel is the most important to their overall satisfaction with the quality of public safety services provide by the City. Thirteen (13) of the 19 participants listed “police” as the most important service; 3 participants listed “fire” as the most important service, and water, community relationships, and neighborhood watch and social media each had 1 participant list it as the most important.

#### **Contact with City Public Safety Officials**

Focus group participants were asked if they’ve had contact with public safety officials in Columbia in the past year. Eleven participants indicated they have had contact with public safety officials in the past year. Of the 11 participants that have had contact with public safety officials, nearly all of them described their experience as “positive”. Listed on the following page are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- Our house was broken into. The officers that come out to our house were very willing to help and answer any questions we had.
- We took our kids to a fire safety education class, and the firefighters did a great job working with the kids. The class was very informative.
- We called the police when our house was robbed. Officers came to our house quickly and were very professional and friendly. They did a great job.
- Some mailboxes in our neighborhood were knocked over, so the police were called to investigate. I thought they were very helpful and did a great job.

## ***Topic #2: Perceptions of Police Services***

### **Satisfaction with Police Services**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate overall how satisfied they are with the police services provided by the City. A total of 7 participants are “very satisfied”, 5 are “satisfied”, 5 indicated “neutral”, and 2 are “dissatisfied”.

Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who are “very satisfied” with police services.

- In my neighborhood the police are visible, respond quickly, and are very helpful and friendly.
- In my experience, the police are always quick to respond when needed.
- I’ve had nothing but very positive interactions with the police.
- I recently moved to a new part of the City, and I feel more safe and comfortable than I ever have before because the police are very visible.
- The police are always very nice and willing to help.
- The police do a great job working with our neighborhood watch group. They’re very supportive and willing to answer any questions we have.
- Police officers have a lot of really tough situation to deal with, and overall I think they do a great job.

Listed below and on the following page are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who are “satisfied” with police services.

- Overall the police response time is very good, but there have been times when it could have been better.
- I feel like the commitment from police officers is there, but sometimes the resources they need aren’t available.

- My interactions with police have always been very positive; I just think a City of this size needs a larger police force.
- I think the police officers to a good job overall, but I don't feel they get enough support from upper management.

Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who rated police services as “neutral”.

- The perception I get from the media is that morale is low among police officers. It doesn't seem like there's very good leadership.
- Sometimes it takes a while for police officers to show up when there's been a crime committed. In this case, the crime was destruction of property.
- I feel like the leadership is “top heavy”; it seems like there are more commanders and not as many officers as there should be.
- Generally I think the police do a pretty good job, but I do know of an incident where there was an altercation between family members, and one of the officers used too much force.
- It seems like crime related to drugs has increases, and it's not as safe to go out at night as it used to be.

Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who are “dissatisfied” with police services.

- The response time to a robbery in our neighborhood was unacceptable (it took an hour for an officer to show up), and the officer that showed up was new and inexperienced.
- I feel like there's too much going on at night, and not enough of a police presence to manage it all. There's a lot of drugs in the parks and no police around. I think the police department is understaffed.

### **Police Efforts to Prevent Crime**

The moderator informed focus group participants that on the citizen satisfaction survey recently conducted for the City, “police efforts to prevent crime” was rated by citizens as the number one public safety priority. Participants were then asked if they have any concerns with the City's efforts to prevent crime. A total of 10 participants indicated they do have concerns with efforts to prevent crime, and 9 participants do not have concerns. Listed on the following page are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who have concerns about the City's efforts to prevent crimes.

- It seems to me that the police department is understaffed. The City keeps growing, but it doesn't seem like the size of the police department has kept up.
- I feel like there are too many guns in the City.
- I would like to know the crime statistics for the City. This information should be available.
- I would like to know how many illegal immigrants are in the county and in the City.
- I feel like the City has a shortage of police officers, and I think it's caused delayed response times.
- It seems like there's a perception that it's better for a police officer to work for Boone County rather than the City of Columbia.
- I feel like there's a disconnect between upper management and the officers. I think this has led to problems with morale among police officers.

### **How Quickly Police Respond to Emergencies**

The moderator informed focus group participants that on the citizen satisfaction survey recently conducted for the City, "how quickly police respond to emergencies" was rated by citizens as the second highest public safety priority. Participants were then asked if they have any concerns with how quickly police respond to emergencies. A total of 12 participants indicated they do have concerns with how quickly police respond to emergencies, and 7 participants do not have concerns. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who have concerns with how quickly police respond to emergencies.

- Now a lot of times I see two police officers per car instead of one, which means fewer cars on the streets. Was this change necessary? Has it changed for safety reasons?
- Sometimes I wonder if officers are taking more time on calls to give the appearance that they need more officers.
- Response times are especially slow when there's a traffic accident and a police report needs to be filed.
- Dispatch many times will affect how quickly police respond. If the dispatcher doesn't categorize the calls correctly, this has a domino effect on how quickly police respond.
- Sometimes the response time seems pretty good, other times it seems slow. Needs to be more consistent.

### **Trusting Police Officers**

Focus group participants were asked if they trust City of Columbia police officers. Fifteen of the 19 participants indicated that they trust City police officers. Listed below is a summary of the comments that were provided.

- My interactions with police officers have always been great.
- It depends on the officer. Most police officers seem trustworthy, but I can't say that all of them are.
- They've always seemed trustworthy to me.
- I think diversity among the police force needs improvement. There also needs to be more diversity training provided for police officers.
- I think the police officers do a great job, and I trust them completely.
- I would like to see more transparency regarding arrests, and the demographics behind them. More statistics would be great.

### **Topic #3: Perceptions of Safety in Columbia**

#### **Victim of Crime**

Focus group participants were asked if they or anyone they know has been a victim of a crime in the City of Columbia in the past two years. Seven of the 19 participants indicated that they or someone they know have been a victim of crime in the City in the past two years. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- Our house was broken into. They rifled through drawers and beat on the gun safe, but luckily they couldn't get it open. They took a container of loose change. The police came and filed a report, and were professional.
- A car was broken into in our neighborhood at night.
- Our son's windshield and back window were smashed in with a brick.
- Some mailboxes in our neighborhood were vandalized.

#### **Feeling Safe in Your Neighborhood at Night**

Focus group participants were asked if they feel safe in their neighborhood at night. Fourteen of the 19 participants indicated they feel safe in their neighborhood at night. Listed below and on the following page are a summary of the comments that were provided for those who don't feel safe in their neighborhood at night.

- I sometimes hear strange noises at night, and see people walking around that look suspicious. There have been times when things that were left outside have been moved to a different spot by morning.



- I don't necessarily feel unsafe, but there have been car thefts in our neighborhoods at night.
- I don't feel as safe in our neighborhood at night as I used to. I used to take our dogs for a walk as late as 10:00pm, but I don't feel safe doing that anymore.
- The area around our house is wooded, and you never know what's going to pop out.
- I've occasionally heard gunfire in our neighborhood. Our neighborhood has become more unsafe in the past 5 years. I no longer feel safe going out alone at night.

### **Feeling Safe in City Parks**

Focus group participants were asked if they feel safe in City parks. Most of the participants indicated they feel safe in parks during the day, but not at night. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- I feel safe in most parks during the day, but unsafe in most parks at night.
- Most parks have people around during the day so they feel safe. But at night I only see suspicious people at parks, and I rarely see police officers, so it doesn't feel safe.
- We need more lights not just at parks, but throughout the City.
- Parks are great during the day, but I avoid them at night.

### **Feeling Safe Downtown at Night**

Focus group participants were asked if they feel safe in Downtown Columbia at night. Twelve of the 19 participants indicated they feel safe in Downtown Columbia at night. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided by those who don't feel Downtown at night.

- There are too many panhandlers and other random people walking around downtown at night.
- There's not enough of a police presence Downtown at night.
- Most areas of downtown are safe, with the exception being parking garages. Parking garages are dangerous at night, as there is a lot of drug dealing taking place there.
- Downtown is safe most of the time, but after 10pm intoxicated students sometimes make the area feel unsafe.
- If there were more lights and/or a greater police presence Downtown I would feel safer.



### **Media Influence on Perception of Safety**

Focus group participants were asked if they think the local media has influenced their perception of safety in Columbia. Thirteen of the 19 participants indicated that the local media has influenced their perception of safety in Columbia. Participants were also asked if they think that news stories in other communities have influenced their perception of safety in Columbia. Four participants feel that news stories in other communities have influenced their perception of safety. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- The ABC affiliate in Columbia seems to report on crime more than any other station. There's a sense of exaggeration in their reporting of events.
- For a City of this size, I feel like we're heavily covered in the media, with 3 major networks and 2 newspapers. Because of this level of exposure, I'm sure the media has some influence of peoples' perception of safety in the City.
- The media always reports crimes, but they never provide any statistics, so there's no real context to the report. Are these crimes isolated incidents, or is this a common problem?
- Because of the media I feel like there's a perception that crime is increasing when it really isn't.
- In a mall a fight broke out and shots were fired. Of course the story was covered everywhere.
- There always seems to be a "dramatic" reporting of events.
- Obviously the events on campus last year were a huge story not just in Columbia, but nationwide. I think it had a negative impact on peoples' perception of safety in the City.
- I think the Ferguson situation definitely had an influence on some City residents in a negative way.
- The mass shootings across the country have an impact on my feeling of safety in public areas, especially schools. I think about this more often than I used to.
- Obviously the media spends a lot of time covering crimes. It's hard to avoid hearing about it.

### **Topic #4: Perceptions of Fire Services**

#### **Satisfaction with Fire Services**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate overall how satisfied they are with the fire services provided by the City. All 19 participants are either "very satisfied"

(15) or “satisfied” (4) with fire services in the City. Focus group participants were also asked if they trust fire fighters, and all 19 participants said that they do. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- All of the firefighters I’ve encountered try very hard to do the best job they can; as a group they really seem to take pride in their job.
- The fire department has a very positive impact on our community. They host family events, educate the public on fire safety, and provide free smoke detectors.
- There were two separate calls placed to a residence in a short period of time, and both times the situation was handled very well by the fire department.
- The fire department has a long tradition of providing updated equipment and resources to the firefighters. I think this is mainly thanks to a very aggressive fire chief.
- The response time is always really good.
- I haven’t personally had much interaction with the fire department, but I never hear anything negative at all.
- The perception of the fire department is definitely very good.
- One time our kitchen caught on fire, and they came out very quickly, and were very professional and nice. They did a great job.
- The fire education and community outreach they provide is excellent.
- The entire department seems to be well-trained and have exceptional people skills.
- The response time is always very good, and they are fast and competent. It’s clear they know what they’re doing.
- For the police department I feel like the public perception is that the police officers do a great job, but they’re shorthanded and aren’t provided with adequate resources. For the fire department I feel like the perception is that the firefighters also do a great job, and they do have the equipment and resources they need. The perception is that firefighters receive more support from upper management than police officers.
- I’ve always found fire department personnel to be very professional and nice.
- At a class I recently attended they provided some information on hazardous materials that I thought was very useful.

## **Topic #5: Planning for Growth**

### **Familiarity with Plans for Growth**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate how familiar they are with the City's plans for growth. Seven of the 19 participants indicated they are somewhat familiar with the City's plans for growth, and 12 participants indicated they are not familiar with the City's plans for growth. No participants felt they are very familiar with the City's plans for growth. Participants were then asked where they've heard about City plans for growth. Listed below are the sources that were mentioned:

- City planning meetings
- City's website
- Community meetings (2)
- Fliers in utility bills
- "Lunch and learn" events
- Media – multiple outlets (2)
- News stories

### **How Well the City Is Doing Planning for Growth**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate if they feel the City is doing a good job planning for growth. Ten of the 19 participants do not feel the City is doing a good job planning for growth, 6 participants feel the City is doing a good job, and 3 participants feel the City is doing an okay job. Listed below and on the following page are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- I think infrastructure needs improvement, but there's new development taking place downtown. The priorities need to change.
- The fact that the population keeps increasing is a by-product of good planning. Everybody wants to live in Columbia, so the City must be doing something right.
- While certain aspects of growth are being addressed, such as education, other areas such as public safety and infrastructure have suffered.
- Roads, sewers, and streets are all badly in need of updating.
- The unemployment rate isn't as bad in Columbia as it is in other cities.
- The sewer system really needs to be updated.
- There's no maintenance of infrastructure. The City is taking a "Band-Aid" approach to fixing roads. I guess this is okay for now, but it's not going to work long-term.
- Some highway exits are poorly designed. I'd like to see the City partner with MODOT to make road improvements.

- There's a CVS being built downtown, which makes no sense, when there are high rises and parking lots in other areas.
- Overall I think the City is doing a good job. The population continues to increase, and yet the services are still good.
- Roads and traffic are really becoming a big problem. As the City continues to grow, these problems will only get worse unless the City addresses them.

### **Biggest Growth Related Issues for the Next 5 Years**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate what they feel will be the biggest growth-related problems for the City over the next 5 years. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- I think public safety could become a big problem, especially considering that the police department is already understaffed.
- Taking care of baby boomers is going to be a big issue the City will have to face.
- As the City continues to grow, I'd like to see citizens be more proactive with neighborhood watch groups. Our neighborhood has a very strong watch group. Everyone in our neighborhood participates, and we watch out for each other. If the City could encourage and provide support for these groups, there might not be a need to more police officers.
- In addition to neighborhood watch groups, I'd like to see a neighborhood social media page.
- Roads, sewers, and streets are all badly in need of improvement
- Infrastructure improvements will need to be made.

### **Planning and Accommodating for Growth**

Focus group participants were asked to indicate what one thing the City could do better plan for and accommodate growth. Listed below and on the following page are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- I'd like to see better community relationships and outreach.
- I would like to see more green space development. The City has lost a lot of green space over the past 15 years.
- Infrastructure improvements are definitely needed.
- I'd like to see the City establish a real growth management policy. I don't think the City has one right now, and the City's going to continue to grow, so there needs to be a plan in place.
- The City should focus on improving on what already exists.

- I think there's a need to plan for and be prepared to fund future growth. I feel like the City is in a reactive mode rather proactive when it comes to planning for growth.
- As the City continues to grow, I think more focus should be placed on preventing crime and making the City more safe.

### **Topic #6: Final Comments**

Focus group participants were given the opportunity to provide any final comments before the focus group ended. Listed below are a summary of the comments that were provided.

- I would like to see more information on how our tax dollars are being spent.
- Overall I think the City does a great job. I love living in Columbia, and my kids love it also.
- There needs to be more places in Columbia for families to visit.
- I think the police department is understaffed, but just hiring more people isn't the answer. Morale in the police department needs to improve.
- I'd like to see improved communication from the City. I feel like there's a disconnect between residents and City Hall. Maybe there could be more public meetings?
- There's always room for improvement, but I think the City is doing a great job overall.
- I think that staffing the police department should be a priority. The police department is understaffed now, and as the City continues this will become a very important issue.
- Infrastructure improvements will need to be made.