

911 and the Failure of Police Rapid Response

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*Now I dialed 911 a long time ago,
Don't you see how late they're reactin'?
They don't care 'cause they stay paid anyway.
Thinkin' you are first when you really are tenth.
You better wake up and smell the real flavor
Cause 911 is a fake life-saver.
911 is a joke in yo' town
911 is a joke.*

—Public Enemy, 1988

The primary job of the patrol officer is to answer 911 and 311 calls for service. The problem of misuse and abuse of 911 has been broken down into unintentional calls, misdials, hang-up calls, and prank calls (Sampson, 2004). This article examines all dispatched police calls for a period of one year in Baltimore's Eastern District. While the Eastern District is by no means a typical police district—98% African American with high levels of poverty, drugs, crime, and blight—it provides a snapshot into the world of 911 and rapid response. This study combines a quantitative analysis of 911 and 311 calls for police service with a qualitative analysis of the worthiness of these calls and the effectiveness, if any, of police response. I served as a uniformed police officer in the district for the period of the research.

Police departments are committed to responding to every citizen's call for police service. More than any tactical strategy or mandate from the police administration, citizens' telephone calls control the majority of police services. The emphasis on radio calls means that in busy districts, officers can do little other than answer dispatched calls for service. A system allowing all citizens unlimited and equal access to police services, is, at its core, very democratic. The reality, however, is anything but. Police service is not unlimited. Access must inevitably be controlled. Police respond to the most overt manifestation of a problem or to the location at which one citizen, justified or not, demands repeated police presence (Force, 1972).

The advent of patrol cars, telephones, two-way radios, "scientific" police management, social migration, and social-science theories on the "causes" of crime converged in the late 1950s. Before then, police had generally followed a "watchman" approach: each patrol officer was given the responsibility to police a geographic area (Wilson, 1968). In the decades after WWII, motorized car patrol replaced foot patrol as the standard method of urban policing. Improved technology allowed citizens to call police and have their complaints dispatched to police through two-way radios in squad cars. Car patrol was promoted over foot patrol as a cost-saving move justified by increased "efficiency" (Wilson & McLaren, 1972).

Those who viewed police as provocative and hostile to the public applauded reduced police presence and discretion. Controlled by the central dispatch, police

could respond to the desires of the community rather than enforce their own arbitrary concepts of “acceptable” behavior. Police officers, for their part, enjoyed the comforts of the automobile and the prestige associated with new technology. Citizens, rather than being encouraged to maintain community standards, were urged to stay behind locked doors and call 911.

Car patrol eliminated the neighborhood police officer. Police were pulled off neighborhood beats to fill cars. Levels of motorized patrol—the cornerstone of urban policing—have no effect on crime rates, victimization, or public satisfaction (Kelling, Pate, Diekman, & Brown, 1974). Lawrence Sherman (1983) was an early critic of telephone dispatch and motorized patrol: “The rise of telephone dispatch transformed both the method and purpose of patrol. Instead of *watching to prevent* crime, motorized police patrol became a process of merely *waiting to respond* to crime” (p. 149).

A quick response time became an end in itself rather than a means to crime prevention. In order to respond quickly, police must be available to receive dispatched calls. Police are pressured to be “in service” as much as possible. Parked alone in the middle of an empty parking lot—the ominous police car and the long walk discourage pesky citizens from approaching—a police officer is considered “in service.” When dealing with people—the essence of the job, some might argue—police are considered “out of service.” David Bayley (1994) explains this police prime directive:

Despite what police say, the prime directive of patrolling is to be available rather than to respond adequately to the myriad calls for service. For police managers, therefore, patrol officers are “working” when they are simply cruising around. . . . Police forces must store capacity, and they do so in patrol. For patrol officers as well as for commanders, claims of being busy are a way of disguising the invisible burden of always being ready. (p. 46)

Because patrol officers spend most of their workday sitting in a police car or driving around, officers develop a car-centered method of policing their post. Officers learn most of their knowledge of an area through the window of a patrol car. Even in an area where most crime occurs on the sidewalk and most residents do not own a car (much less drive to work), officers are more attuned to pot holes and stoplight timing than to street crime and quality-of-life issues. The high volume and low content of 911 calls further discourage any routine nonconfrontational interactions between the police and the public.

The theory behind car patrol, still taught in today’s police academies and criminal justice textbooks, is known as the “three Rs.” The first R is “random patrol”: police driving in nonfixed patterns to create the illusion of police “omnipresence.” This stands in direct contrast to the older idea of police walking in a fixed and regular beat. As Professor Carl Klockars (1983) memorably wrote, “It makes about as much sense to have police patrol routinely in cars to fight crime as it does to have firemen patrol routinely in firetrucks to fight fire” (p. 130). Gary Cordner and Robert Trojanowicz (1992) summarized the widely cited Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment (Kelling et al., 1974):

During 1972 and 1973, a year-long experiment was conducted in Kansas City, Missouri, to test the effects of preventive patrol. . . . Fifteen patrol beats were included in the study: five were control beats with normal levels of preventive

patrol; five were proactive beats with 2–3 times the normal levels of patrol; and five were reactive beats, with no preventative patrol. It is important to realize that patrol units would enter the reactive beats to answer calls whenever requested. After handling calls, however, these patrol units would vacate the reactive beats and do their patrolling in other areas. . . . When the data were analyzed, no significant differences were found on any of the indicators between the control, proactive, and reactive beats.

In debunking random patrol and omnipresence, the Kansas City study cast doubt on the previously unquestioned faith in motorized random patrol as an effective and essential means of policing. The impact of the Kansas City Report, however, despite being one of the most heralded scientific police studies, was negligible.

The second of the three *Rs* is “rapid response,” the theory that a quick police response to the scene of a crime will result in the greater apprehension of criminals. For fire trucks and ambulances, the benefit of rapid response is obvious: quick response saves lives. Rapid police response is not designed to prevent crime, however, and its failure to do so should come as no surprise. Though it may seem counterintuitive, rapid police response does not prevent crime and has almost no effect on the odds that a criminal will be caught. Even instantaneous police response would be ineffective, as the vast majority of the time, most 911 callers—whether by necessity, choice, or confusion—wait until a suspect is gone before reporting a crime (Kelling & Coles, 1996; Spelman & Brown, 1981).

But it is pointless to blame the victim. Even if victims were to respond “correctly” or a third party calls police while a crime is in progress, dispatch takes time. If police do not arrive within one minute of a crime, rapid police response has virtually no effect (Bieck & Kessler, 1977; Spelman & Brown, 1981; Tien, Simon, & Larson, 1978). The 911 operator must answer the call, gather the relevant information, and enter it into a computer. This information is then sent to the relevant police dispatcher. The dispatcher then finds time to dispatch the call to a police officer. More often than not, even if police just happen to be in the right place at the right time, callers have been waiting for 5, 10, even 20 minutes.

The illusion of omnipresence and rapid response is usually shattered the moment one calls with a need for police service, yet despite its basic failure, reactive car-based policing is popular on many levels. Radio cars provide a means to account for and control officers; police officers like being sheltered from the street in the comparative comfort of a car; and police administrators generally find it easier to focus on response time than crime prevention.

The third of the three *Rs* is “reactive investigation,” the effective working of the criminal justice system to “solve” crimes and provide deterrence against future crimes. While investigation is rightfully a key part of police work in solving crimes, the public’s beliefs in these techniques is hugely inflated. The O.J. Simpson trial raised the bar too high for the preservation of chaotic crime scenes, and TV shows, most notably *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, portray a faith in technology that, when not absolute fiction, is science-fiction for most police departments. Crimes get solved because people talk. Call them rats, finks, stoolies, confidential informants, cooperating witnesses, or good citizens; it’s the good old-fashioned snitch that

solves crime. Science and technology have a long way to go, and solving a murder isn't as important as preventing the crime in the first place.

Legitimacy of Police Calls for Service

This study is based on a breakdown of all dispatched calls in one police district. This data provides a somewhat crude breakdown that reveals that police are most often occupied with calls with which they should not be involved or can do very little about. While most people don't call 911 once in a year, others call 911 daily. Police in Baltimore's Eastern District handled 113,205 calls for service in 2000, or about 2.5 calls per resident per year. This is roughly four times the national average (Sampson, 2004). Officers respond formally and informally as back-up for many more calls. The total number of primary calls is approximately one call per hour per patrol officer. The frequency of calls per officer increases when other officers are "detailed," "out of service," or otherwise unable to take calls. Call volume is not evenly dispersed throughout the day: 12:00 PM to 2:00 AM is generally busy while 3:00 AM to 7:00 AM is generally slow.

Calls for service have been categorized into three basic categories: (1) requiring a written report and relate to a crime (26% of dispatched calls), (2) resulting in some police service, even if very limited in scope (35% of calls), and (3) unnecessary or illegitimate calls, receiving but not needing any police response (40% of all calls). As coded by responding officers, 39% of calls have no need for police response. An additional one-third of calls are minor matters, not needing rapid response. Just over a quarter of calls involve a crime or require a written report. Drug calls account for one-fourth of all dispatched calls. Citywide, excluding the Eastern District, drug calls account for approximately 7.5% of all calls.

A written police report serves as a proxy measure for a "legitimate" call. Any call involving a crime, victim, injured person, or property damage results in a written report. Legitimate calls can be major or minor. Examples include a stolen car, a fire in a vacant building, a person shot, an arrest for drug possession, a window broken by a thrown rock, or a man who hits his girlfriend. As an indicator for a legitimate call, written reports tend to overestimate the percentage of legitimate calls because of the inclusion of all "domestic-related" calls.

In Baltimore, "domestic" calls are defined as all situations involving present or former sexual partners, indicated by key words such as *husband*, *wife*, *girlfriend*, *ex-boyfriend*, or *baby's mother*. As there is no specific category for domestic-related calls, all police calls are classified as either domestic- or nondomestic-related. Similar to other categories, a large percentage of "domestic" calls are not legitimate. All "domestic-related" calls, legitimate and illegitimate, require a written report.

Calls for Service in Baltimore's Eastern District

Category of Dispatched Call for Service	Category as Percentage (n) of All Calls	Percentage (n) of Dispatched Calls with . . .		
		No Need for Police Response ¹	Some Police Service ²	Crime Committed or Requiring a Written Report ³
All Calls for Service	100% (113,205)	38.9% (44,003)	35.4% (40,093)	25.7% (29,109)
Drugs	25.6% (28,959)	13.9% (4,027)	67.2% (19,462)	18.9% (5,470)
Disorderly	10.5% (11,874)	28.6% (3,398)	64.9% (7,707)	6.5% (769)
"Other"	8.8% (9,953)	39.3% (3,910)	26.0% (2,584)	34.8% (3,459)
Alarms	8.3% (9,353)	94.4% (8,833)	3.7% (346)	1.9% (174)
Common Assault	6.9% (7,865)	41.3% (3,252)	23.7% (1,867)	34.9% (2,746)
911 No Voice	5.6% (6,341)	90.1% (5,764)	7.3% (462)	1.8% (115)
Larceny	3.8% (4,346)	28.0% (1,219)	12.8% (556)	59.2% (2,571)
Family Disturbance	2.9% (3,277)	25.6% (839)	37.1% (1,216)	37.3% (1,222)
Auto Accident	2.6% (2,990)	23.8% (712)	30.5% (912)	45.7% (1,366)
Burglary	2.3% (2,639)	49.1% (1,297)	12.0% (341)	37.9% (1,001)
Armed Person	1.9% (2,168)	57.9% (1,255)	29.7% (641)	12.5% (272)
Destruction of Property	1.8% (2,059)	27.9% (575)	14.6% (300)	57.5% (1,184)
Aggravated Assault	1.4% (1,580)	48.0% (759)	20.4% (322)	31.6% (499)
Selected Other Categories				
Gunshots	0.9% (980)	59.4% (582)	32.8% (321)	7.9% (77)
Stolen Auto	0.9% (969)	37.9% (367)	7.4% (72)	54.7% (530)
Assault, Shooting	0.3% (324)	51.9% (168)	1.9% (6)	46.3% (150)
Assault, Cutting	0.3% (312)	29.2% (91)	5.4% (17)	65.4% (204)
Rape	0.1% (120)	39.2% (47)	4.2% (5)	56.7% (68)
Carjacking	0.04% (48)	20.8% (10)	4.2% (2)	75.0% (36)
Not Listed Above	15.1% (17,048)	40.5% (6,898)	17.3% (2,954)	42.2% (7,196)

¹ These calls are not legitimate. If no written report is required, police may give a call "oral code." There are six oral codes: (A) call unfounded, (B) unable to locate complainant, (C) no such address, (D) no police services needed, (E) [suspect] gone on arrival, and (F) call abated. For most categories, codes A through E are included in this column. For the categories "narcotics," "armed person," and "disorderly," codes A through D are included in this column, and code E is included in the following column. Gunshot calls coded D are also included in the following column as, by custom, the oral code for gunshots refers to the presence of a victim rather than the existence of gunshots.

² These calls are coded "abated," a catch-all oral code. Some of these calls are legitimate. Calls coded "abated" may (narcotics) but usually do not (auto accident) involve a crime. While no police report is written, calls coded "abated" imply some need for or effect from police services, even if minor.

³ A written police report is required for any property damage, injury, victim, arrest, and all "domestic" calls. A call in any category can be "domestic." In this column, categories with a large number of "domestic" calls—"family disturbance," "larceny," "destruction of property," "common assault," and "other"—are inflated due to the inclusion of unfounded "domestic" calls.

Source: Baltimore City Police Department, 2001. Data recoded by author.

Four dispatched calls illustrate the concept of an "illegitimate" domestic call. All of these calls require a written report but lack a crime, victim, injury, or damage.

- A worried man calls police to report that his girlfriend has not yet returned home from work. Police receive a call for a domestic-related missing person.

By the time police arrive at the couple's house, the woman has returned home safely. She was delayed by public transportation.

- A woman calls police because she believes her baby's father stole her house keys. Police receive a call for domestic-related theft. When police arrive, the woman apologizes because she has found the misplaced keys.
- Police receive a call for domestic-related assault in progress: a woman being assaulted by her boyfriend. Upon arrival, police find no sign of struggle. A happily inebriated woman is sprawled on the couch. Her boyfriend is seated nearby. Both are dressed for bed. She laughs and says she called the police because her boyfriend put his feet in her hair. The boyfriend apologizes for her, saying he thought she was joking when she said she was calling the police to report an assault.
- A resident calls police and reports that a man and his girlfriend are yelling in the street. Police respond to find two people, casual friends, loudly planning when they will see each other next.

Illegitimate domestic calls are responsible for increasing the number of written reports and thus overestimate the number of "legitimate" calls as defined by a written report. Given the limitations of available data, I could not analyze domestic calls separately. Approximately one-third to one-half of all written reports are domestic-related, and a majority of domestic calls—in a ratio similar to nondomestic calls—are unfounded.

The bias of using written reports as a proxy measure for legitimate calls is not entirely one way. There is not a written report for every required call. Police officers do not like writing reports and will avoid doing so if at all possible. The number of required reports that are not filed, however, is not a large percentage of all reports. An officer cannot get in trouble for writing an unnecessary report, and officers who do not write a required report risk severe trouble. Reports are written for some unfounded calls in order to protect the officer from accusations of mishandling a call. Outside of the time required to write most reports—five minutes to half an hour depending on the report—there is little downside to writing a report.

Before the 911 system was introduced, citizens in need of police service found a police officer or called the local police station. *All* calls for service required a written report. After 911 was introduced, requests for police service skyrocketed, and police were overwhelmed by report writing. The system was changed so that today only arrests, crimes with victims, and domestic-related incidents require written reports. If no report is required, officers may "close" a call with one of six "oral codes": (1) call unfounded, (2) unable to locate complainant, (3) no such address, (4) no police services needed, (5) suspect gone on arrival, and (6) call abated.

Thirty-five percent of calls are coded "abated," a catch-all oral code that implies some need for or effect from police services, however minor. While there is not a great deal of significance as to which oral code a call receives, calls coded "abated" may, as in the case of drug dealing, involve a victimless crime but usually, as in an auto accident, do not involve a crime. Some minor crimes without personal

injury or property damage may be coded “abated.” The following are examples of “abated” calls, thus requiring no written report:

- A strong wind opens a store’s poorly secured rear door, setting off a burglar alarm. There is no sign of forced entry, and a search of the building shows no person present nor any sign of stolen or damaged property. The responding officer closes the door securely.
- Two cars collide with damage but no injuries. In Baltimore, only accidents with injury or involving city vehicles require written reports. The majority of “abated” car accidents are legitimate in that cars did crash, but there is little police can do other than direct traffic and facilitate the exchange of drivers’ information. To the frustration of insurance companies, no police report is written.
- An assault call reveals two friends engaged in a loud public discussion. The men apologize for their noise and go home.
- A man claims he was robbed. Investigation reveals the man to be a drug addict who freely gave ten dollars for drugs but received nothing in return. This call could be handled in many ways (including the arrest of the addict), but most likely the complainant would be dismissed and the call coded “abated.”
- A caller states that boys on a neighboring stoop are selling drugs. When a police officer approaches, three young men on the stoop disperse.
- A call for a family disturbance reveals a 17-year-old man sitting on the stoop. He says he called the police because his mom locked him out and he wants to go back inside. His mother, inside the home, says she kicked him out because he’s out of control and disrespectful and called her a “bitch.” The son is given a stern lecture, but the mother is told in private that she can’t kick her son out of the house until he turns 18.

Based on the broad range in the “abated” category, it is not possible to dichotomize these calls as either legitimate or undeserving of police response. A majority of “abated” calls are minor but legitimate in that police perform some function or service, even if this service could come from agencies other than the police. “Abated” calls are grouped in their own middle-ground category of “some police service” required, however minor. One-third of dispatched calls fall in this category.

Along with all calls coded “abated,” the oral code “suspect gone on arrival” indicates “some police service” for drug calls, armed person calls, and disorderly calls (see the “Calls for Service” table). While including all these calls as legitimate overestimates the legitimacy of these categories, it acknowledges that many calls are irrelevant by the time police arrive but were legitimate when they were first made. Gunshot calls coded “no police services needed” are also included in this category. By custom, the oral code for gun discharge refers to the presence of a victim rather than the existence of gunshots. If a gunshot victim is found, the call is reclassified as an “assault by shooting,” and a report is written. Most calls for gunshots do, in fact, reflect actual gunshots. The remainder are prank calls or loud firecrackers.

Many people falsely assume that police dislike responding to “minor” calls. Police are often more concerned about the legitimacy of a call than its severity. Police officers tend to enjoy any call in which they can make a difference or help an appreciative person. Most officers take particular pride in some category of minor call for which they believe they give particularly thorough service. Police tend to take minor calls seriously as long as the situation can be resolved by some police action that is not available to the calling citizen. While officers frequently complain that some people call the police too much, police also believe that many people are too hesitant to call police about “minor” but very real issues. As one officer said, “If they don’t let us know about a problem, we can’t do anything to fix it.”

Thirty-nine percent of calls to which police respond require no police response (see the “Calls for Service” table). Calls coded “unfounded,” “unable to locate complainant,” “no such address,” “no police services needed” (except for gun discharges) and “suspect gone on arrival” (except for the aforementioned categories), are all indicative of a call with little or no legitimacy. Police call these unfounded calls “bogus” or “bullshit.” While the definition of a “bullshit” call is somewhat flexible, one officer defined a “bullshit call” as follows:

Something we shouldn’t be there for. “Bullshit” is people call police, but then get mad that you show up. Or when you show up, and they make shit up. Bullshit is any junkie who wastes my time because they got burnt [*ripped-off on a drug deal*] and say, “I was robbed.” Or some bitch who don’t get paid and says, “I was raped!” Everything out here is bullshit. Half the CDS [*drug*] calls are bullshit . . . What can we do about it? People want their rights. People here just want their drugs, their “hair-ron” [*heroin*], some malt liquor, and a “little some’m’ some’m” [*something something, i.e., sex*]. We just get in the way.

While all unfounded calls are considered “bullshit,” not all “bullshit” calls are unfounded. Legitimate but minor calls most often achieve their bovine descriptive because of an uncooperative victim or the inability of the officer to “do anything.” Many victims of even violent crime are uncooperative with police due to fear of or friendship with the suspect. Other victims simply—and sometimes wisely, if they are wanted—choose to avoid interaction with an ineffective criminal justice system. It is not unusual for crime victims to be uncooperative and, for example, not even reveal their name.

Illegitimate calls stem from a variety of sources. A large percentage of calls are simply fictitious: people use 911 to harass enemies, draw police away from an area, and make prank phone calls. Calls that require no police response include a complainant who cannot be located; a location that does not exist; a call reporting that an unarmed stranger at a bus stop is armed; a burglary at a location at which there is no building; a false report of a man shot; and a person, usually a child, who dials 911 and hangs up. As a category, 90% of these “911 hangups”—6% of all dispatched calls—are unfounded.

In general, officers can determine the validity of a call from the sparse information given by the dispatcher. One officer said, . . .

There's lots of clues, even when they [*dispatchers*] barely tell us anything. First, there's the location. Small-time robberies or rapes at drug corners are bullshit. People getting burnt [*ripped-off by drug dealers*] and what not. A real shooting will get lots of calls. If you're harassing drug dealers and one call comes in for a shooting a few blocks away, you know it's bullshit. Other calls you know are legit. There aren't too many fake cuttings. If you get a call for a cutting, good chance you're going to see some blood. Assaults are usually bullshit. [*Calls for*] burglaries, destruction of properties, stolen autos—well, not always stolen cars—but in general, they're legit. You just have to remember that nobody out here tells the complete truth. Everybody is out to get theirs . . . Other times you get information from the dispatcher and know there's nothing you can do. Or should do. Somebody can't raise their kid? What the hell am I supposed to do? I ain't baby's father.

The same officer expressed frustration with the 911 system:

I don't know why they have us responding to calls we can't do anything about. "He said, she said" [*type of calls*]. All we do is tell them to go to a court commissioner. We can't do shit if we didn't see it, but they still send an officer. That way it's on us [*the patrol officer*] and not on them [*the department*].

Drug Calls

Drug calls, usually anonymous, don't help police officers. Police already know the hot drug corners:

What's the point of telling us there's CDS [*drugs*] on 700 Port, or Madeira and Chase, or Wolfe and Eager? No shit. Either you let us jack everybody up [*stop and search people on the street*], lock everybody up just for being there, or you live with it.

We're not going to stop drug dealing. Look at all the junkies around. They're gonna buy! But people call 911 and we drive by. Ninety percent of this job is clearing corners, harassing junkies, and paperwork. What's left? I got to eat lunch and take a dump, too. How much worse would the city be if I just turned off the radio and did my job? I guarantee you I could do a better job if it weren't for [*the dispatcher*] always shouting in my ear.

We can't get shit done because call are always coming in. How many are really "in progress"? Five percent? How many are innocent victims? None.

As police must appear at each call request, the quality of these responses plummets as the quantity increases. Temporary dispersal of drug suspects is usually the best that can be achieved.

In part because of police officers' inability to solve the drug problem, however, officers generally welcome drug calls as "easy calls." Drug calls are less likely to require a written report than other calls, and as most drug calls are anonymous, there is no victim or complainant to placate. There is a modus operandi to police response to an active drug corner. When a police car approaches, drug activity stops and people—dealers, friends, addicts, lookouts, and any "innocents" who

happen to be walking by—will slowly walk away. Most often, the suspects will go for a brief walk around the block and then, after police leave, reconvene on the same or a nearby stoop. Dispersing without being asked is considered a sign of criminal activity, or perhaps an outstanding warrant, but police also view quick and unprompted departure—walking, not running—as a sign of respect and a satisfactory resolution to most problems. This interaction is so ritualized that it resembles a dance.

When a police officer approaches a group of suspected or known dealers, the officer will slow his or her car down in front of the individuals. This tells the suspects that the officer is there for them and not just passing through on the way to other business. If a group of suspects does not disperse when an officer “rolls up,” the officer will stop the car and look at the group. The mutual stare, known to police as “eye fucking,” serves a dual purpose: the police officer scans for contraband and weapons but also declares his or her dominance over the turf. Police officers assert their right to control public space. Every drug call to which police respond—indeed all police dealings with criminal or social misbehavior—will result in a suspect’s arrest, departure, or deference, but usually there is little long-term impact.

A drug call can be resolved in a few seconds or, with surveillance and investigation, can take upwards of an hour. Such a range gives patrol officers the ability to “sit on the call,” remain “out of service,” and not receive other dispatched calls. With this block of time, officers may finish paperwork, go to the bathroom, eat an uninterrupted lunch, or avoiding answering “bad” calls for another officer who is also trying to avoid taking calls. “Bad” calls, such as suspected child abuse or DOA (dead body), involve more time commitment, paperwork, or unforgettably horrible smells. When “sitting on a call,” conscientious officers will come back “in service” for any call on their post, an ideal, believed to be disappearing, known as “post integrity.” If no officer is “in service” (available to answer calls), the dispatcher may assign the call to their sergeant. This is a sure way to get officers back “in service” because sergeants are not supposed to answer calls for service.

Discussion

This study quantifies the level and misuse of police resources in the majority of dispatched calls for service. More than half of all dispatched calls for police service are fictitious, involve no crime, or peacefully resolve themselves before police arrive. In Baltimore’s Eastern District, the majority of 911 calls are for drug dealing, prank calls, and noncrime-related calls. The fact that drug dealing persists is perhaps the best example of the failure of police patrol based on rapid response. The high call volume of dispatched calls virtually precludes any form of patrol focused on crime prevention.

The impact of rapid response goes beyond the single quantifiable misuse of police resources. During slow periods, the possibility of receiving a dispatched call prevents officers from doing foot patrol, in-depth investigations, or any activity that may cause an officer to stray too far from the patrol car and the false promise of rapid response. Formally, police officers have no discretion over the calls to which they must respond. Informally, officers go through great effort to control their time and labor. In a throwback to old days when the dispatcher placed index cards in a police officer’s box, officers ask for backed-up calls on their post to be

put in their “box.” In the precomputer days, the calls could wait until the officer was free to deal with them. Computers and “improved 911,” however, have taken discretion away from the dispatcher and police officer. The perverse internal logic of rapid response demands that even nonemergency calls be quickly assigned to any available officer, even if that officer lacks knowledge and experience with the address or people involved.

Police isolated in squad cars will not know the community. An officer with over 30 years of experience talked about the greater knowledge he had before patrol was car-based and dispatch-controlled:

Back in the old days [*the late 1960s and 1970s*], there was such a thing as post integrity. You were out there walking around and people knew you. Things were different. You [*police*] could get away with anything . . . But that’s just the way things were. We had a lot of fun. But we also knew what was going on. People talked to us and trusted us. Well, some of them.

There is an inherent conflict between rapid response and knowing the community. There are not enough patrol resources to emphasize both rapid response and an alternative to a reactive, car-based patrol. The public that most needs police protection is already aware of the failure of 911 and police response; the rest of the public—the more influential and prominent citizens that generally defend the status quo and do not call for the police—need to be “unsold” on the necessity and inevitability of the reactive patrol.

Even with fewer cars and a de-emphasis of rapid response, police officers would better respond to all citizens’ needs. Free from the tyranny of dispatch, officers could focus on quality rather than quantity of response. A better system would require police dispatchers or police officers to exercise professional judgment and separate legitimate from illegitimate calls for police service. Such a system would need to affirm current legal protection for good-faith police errors. Freeing these police resources would make rapid response more consistent and reliable for the very rare serious crime in progress. By not promising (and usually failing to deliver) rapid response to all calls, patrol officers could be free to focus on crime-enabling problems and community concerns on their post.

Such a system would not be perfect, but it could be demonstrably better than the status quo. It could be tested in an area as small as one sector covered by the dozen or so police officers under the command of one sergeant. Experienced patrol officers would respond to all calls on their post. These officers would be free to walk their beat and use their discretion to solve local criminal problems. Nonemergency calls could be kept on an appointment basis. These officers, perhaps ironically, would still need access to rapid police response for backup. Inexperienced and lazy officers could be placed in patrol cars to learn the ropes, respond to legitimate emergency calls in progress, and provide officer back-up.

No police officer is ever promoted to beat cop. Foot patrol is most often a form of punishment. While the public generally favors increased foot patrol, the opposition to foot patrol in the police organization is strong. A car is comfortable; your feet don’t get tired; you can listen to the radio; you can talk to your partner in private; you stay warm and dry; and it’s easier to avoid problem people until after they

commit a serious crime. Then, you simply arrest them. Yet dealing with problem people *before* they commit a crime, though perhaps undesirable, is a police officer's job. Recognizing the failures and limitations of the status quo is the first step to better patrol: 911 calls dominate police far more than rapid response impacts crime.

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