



911 operators in Thurston County, Washington's emergency dispatch center.

911 Analysis: Call Data Shows We Can Rely Less on Police

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When people feel ill-equipped to resolve health and safety issues on their own—such as mental health crises, neighbor disputes, and trespassing concerns—they deserve support. In many communities, calling 911 for police assistance is the only way to get a timely response. However, police are often tasked with addressing 911 calls that pose no imminent threat or danger to others. Using police as our primary first responders contributes to overpolicing and police violence.¹ It also compounds a racial justice issue, as Black communities and other communities of color have disproportionately shouldered these harms.²

911 data analysis can help us understand what people urgently need from public safety systems and reduce our overreliance on police to meet those needs. Vera's previous analysis of 911 data from five cities, published in 2020, found that the vast majority of 911 calls do not involve crimes or violence.³ Building on that evidence, this analysis of recent 911 data from nine cities—including the four cities in Vera's 2020 analysis that publicly share their 911 data on an ongoing basis—found that **in most of the cities, fewer than 3 percent of calls were for situations involving a violent crime**, revealing the need for a variety of timely responses that unarmed civilian responders may be better equipped to deliver than police.⁴ In fact, many "criminal" 911 calls involve underlying substance use or mental health issues, homelessness, poverty, or other well-being concerns that police are ill-equipped to handle.⁵ Instead, jurisdictions should dispatch civilian responders to a range of calls to better align responses with the unmet needs of callers and reduce reliance on police.⁶

Methodology

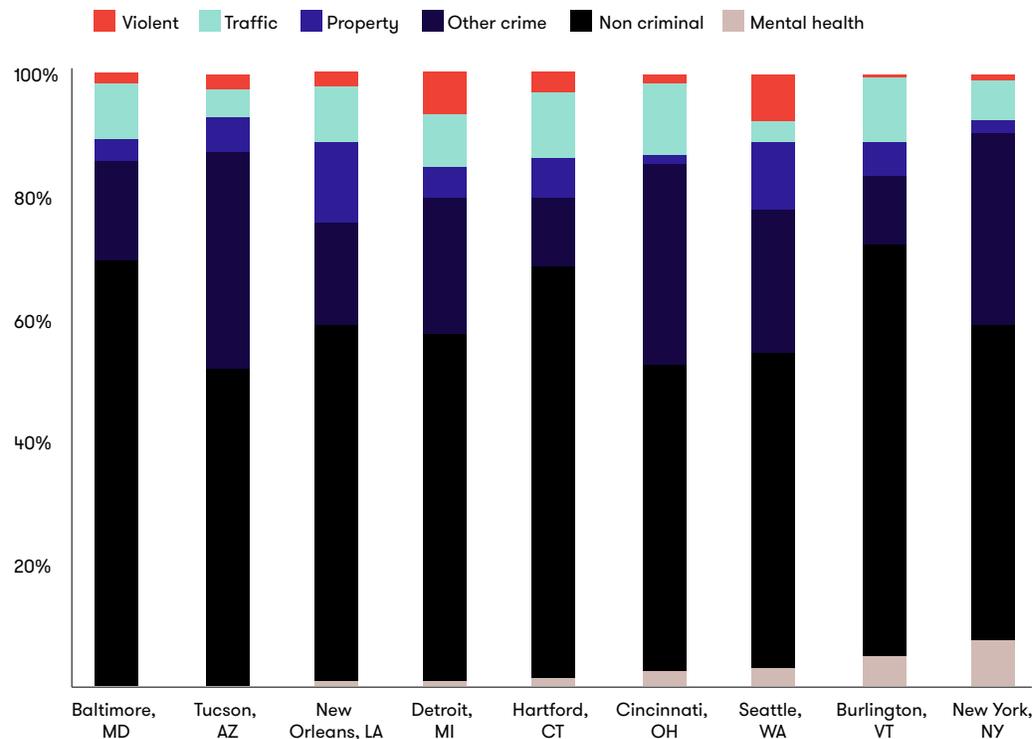
For this analysis, Vera researchers used publicly available 911 data from police departments in Baltimore, MD; Burlington, VT; Cincinnati, OH; Detroit, MI; Hartford, CT; New Orleans, LA; New York, NY; Seattle, WA; and Tucson, AZ.⁷ The data includes a total of 15.6 million community member-initiated calls to 911 between January 2019 and November 2021.⁸ For more information on the timeline of the data collected, see [911 Explainers: Methodology and Limitations](#).

This analysis also divides 911 calls into “criminal” and “noncriminal” categories to shed light on how often community members seek help with situations identified by 911 operators as involving criminal activity or not. Categorizing calls this way illuminates immediate opportunities to divert responses from police to civilian teams.⁹ It is important to keep in mind that “crime” is not synonymous with “violence,” and many situations that are considered “criminal” do not necessarily pose a threat to the public.

For more information about the methodology behind this fact sheet, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by 911 data analyses more generally, please see the accompanying publication [911 Explainers: Methodology and Limitations](#).

Findings

Figure 1. Breakdown of 911 Call Type Across Nine Cities Analyzed



This stacked bar graph shows how across the nine cities analyzed, the majority of 911 calls involved noncriminal situations. Only a minor percentage of calls were for violent crimes.

Analysis of Noncriminal versus Violent Crime Calls

The majority of 911 calls in each city Vera analyzed—and an average of 62.6 percent of calls across all nine cities—involved noncriminal situations.¹⁰

Figure 2. Percentage of Noncriminal 911 Calls in Nine Cities Analyzed

Baltimore, MD	Burlington, VT	Cincinnati, OH	Detroit, MI	Hartford, CT	New Orleans, LA	New York, NY	Seattle, WA	Tucson, AZ
70.0%	75.0%	53.5%	57.6%	70.0%	61.3%	61.1%	59.1%	56.3%

In three cities, at least 70 percent of all calls were for noncriminal situations.

Calls involving violent crimes in progress warrant urgent responses from police, but 911 data reveals that these situations comprise relatively small percentages of overall call volume.¹¹

Figure 3. Percentage of Violent Crime 911 Calls in Nine Cities Analyzed

Baltimore, MD	Burlington, VT	Cincinnati, OH	Detroit, MI	Hartford, CT	New Orleans, LA	New York, NY	Seattle, WA	Tucson, AZ
1.1%	<1%	1.9%	7.1%	3.2%	2.1%	<1%	7.1%	2.3%

For six of the nine cities in the analysis, no more than 3 percent of 911 calls involved violent crime, and only two cities—Seattle and Detroit—saw these percentages rise above 5 percent. This data accounts for all violent crime-related calls, including both calls for crimes in progress and for reported crimes.

This information clearly indicates that people are typically calling 911 to solve problems that present no imminent public safety risk and have little, if anything, to do with crime—and thus do not warrant a default police response. Yet communities continue to rely on police for a wide range of nonviolent, noncriminal situations. In the nine-city sample, four cities provided publicly available data that allowed researchers to ascertain whether calls prompted an on-scene police response. Among these cities, police were dispatched to up to 88 percent of 911 calls received.¹²

Most Common 911 Calls

The most common 911 calls include the following call types: Business Checks, Disturbances, Suspicious Persons, and Complaints.

Figure 4. Most Common 911 Calls in the Nine Cities Analyzed

City, State	Call Description	Percent of the City's 911 Calls
Baltimore, MD	Business Check	28.5%
Cincinnati, OH	Advised Incident	18.9%
Detroit, MI	Disturbance	17.2%
New Orleans, LA	Complaint Other	11.9%
Cincinnati, OH	911 Call No Emergency	10.8%
Seattle, WA	Disturbance Miscellaneous	10.4%
Cincinnati, OH	Tow Vehicle	10.2%
Burlington, VT	Suspicious Events	9.7%
Detroit, MI	Hang-up ¹³	9.4%
Hartford, CT	Breach of Peace	9.0%
New Orleans, LA	Disturbance Other	8.8%
Detroit, MI	Unknown Problem	8.2%
Seattle, WA	Suspicious	8.0%
Tucson, AZ	Check Welfare	8.0%
Hartford, CT	Domestic	7.9%

“Business Check” calls typically involve businesses calling 911 to request that police pass by or check in to address behavior in the vicinity of a business, including loitering and similar concerns. “Disturbance” and “complaint” calls typically refer to a broad range of concerns involving noncriminal situations and situations that may be escalated by police presence rather than resolved by it. “Complaint” may pertain to specific businesses and residences and can include issues ranging from obstructing an entrance to a general request for police presence.

Additionally, 911 centers receive many calls involving a “suspicious person,” but no clear criminal activity.

Figure 5. Percentage of “Suspicious” Activity 911 Calls in Nine Cities Analyzed

Baltimore, MD	Burlington, VT	Cincinnati, OH	Detroit, MI	Hartford, CT	New Orleans, LA	New York, NY	Seattle, WA	Tucson, AZ
<1%	9.7%	2.3%	<1%	6.8%	5.3%	4.0%	8.0%	6.3%

When 911 callers report ambiguous situations like “suspicious” activities, call-takers are often trained or required to send a police response to avoid the potential perils of underestimating the public safety risk of an incident, including both harm to the public and professional consequences for themselves, such as disciplinary action.¹⁴ And, even when call-takers can identify that there is no clear threat to public safety based on callers’ reports, community members who demand a police response may get a police response as a matter of departmental policy and due to the lack of an alternative unarmed first response.¹⁵ Jurisdictions have various policies and protocols for when call-takers are empowered to resolve calls without dispatching a response and when

they are required to dispatch police.¹⁶ In fact, some 911 calls do not need any kind of in-person response and may benefit from phone-based or administrative alternatives, such as help lines or online crime reporting.¹⁷

Moreover, when 911 operators overestimate the seriousness of an incident, responding officers may have a disproportionate sense of danger and may escalate the situation upon arriving on scene.¹⁸ Additionally, an audit of 911 data in Clayton, Missouri, found that “suspicious person” calls disproportionately target Black people, with bias in the community driving unnecessary and potentially harmful encounters between police and the public.¹⁹ Multiple high-profile incidents involving 911 calls reveal stark examples of how white people have weaponized 911 to target Black people.²⁰

Conclusion

This analysis of 911 data suggests that police, who are uniquely empowered among first responders to use force and make arrests, are inappropriate responders for a substantial portion of the concerns that community members bring to the attention of emergency communications centers. Yet despite this reality, existing 911 systems are designed to primarily deliver police responses. Rather than relying on police, many calls that currently prompt a police response could instead be addressed by a range of civilian responders, such as crisis workers, peer support specialists, and credible messengers.²¹

Recommendations:

- › Police involvement in emergency response should be reserved for situations involving crimes in progress that pose an imminent threat to people’s lives or bodily safety. When there is ambiguity at the call-taker level, jurisdictions must account for the potential harms of sending police before dispatching them by default, including for calls involving a “suspicious person” with no clear criminal activity.
- › Local governments should make 911 data public and accessible and should partner with community-based organizations on analysis to identify opportunities for civilian responses that minimize the reliance on police as default first responders. These stakeholders can then work together to design and develop new emergency responses to address the unmet needs reflected in local 911 data, as well as community-based supports to proactively address the issues that prompt calls to 911.
- › Elected officials must ensure that alternatives to policing and the 911 centers that dispatch them are adequately resourced to meet community needs.

For more information, see Vera’s companion factsheet on the role of [911 analysis in developing civilian response programs for behavioral health crises](#); the [fact sheet series on alternatives to policing](#); and the [comprehensive 2020 analysis](#) of 911 data and the broader emergency communications landscape.

Endnotes

- 1 Vera Institute of Justice, *Arrest Trends* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://arresttrends.vera.org/arrests>; and Staff, “Fatal Force,” database, *Washington Post*, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 S. Rebecca Neusteter, Megan O’Toole, Mawia Khogali, et al., *Understanding Police Enforcement: A Multicity 911 Analysis* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2020), <https://perma.cc/L6CN-FDEL>.
- 4 This analysis used the FBI’s definition of violent crimes, which includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. FBI Uniform Crime Report, “Crime in the United States 2018: Violent Crime,” 2018, <https://perma.cc/WQ47-Y9DM>.
- 5 Jared Knowles and Andrea J. Ritchie, *Cops Don’t Stop Violence: Combating Narratives Used to Defend Police Instead of Defunding Them* (Washington, DC: Community Resource Hub and Interrupting Criminalization, 2021), <https://perma.cc/7V2Z-UWBN>.
- 6 Katherine Beckett, Forrest Stuart, and Monica Bell, “From Crisis to Care,” *Inquest*, September 2, 2021, <https://perma.cc/WMS2-QGT3>.
- 7 Due to data availability, this analysis focuses on police departments. However, many public safety answering points (PSAPs) dispatch sheriff’s deputies and other law enforcement personnel rather than police. There is no reason to believe that the trends in 911 calls described in this analysis apply exclusively to emergency communications centers that dispatch police.
- 8 Timelines vary based on the most recent data shared by each department.
- 9 Emergency communications center call-takers coded the 911 calls in this analysis. It is important to recognize that discrepancies occasionally exist between 911 operators’ understanding and coding of incoming calls and what police find when they arrive on scene. Call reclassification practices vary across jurisdictions, which means that publicly reported call types are not a flawless characterization of callers’ situations. Although research suggests that call-takers are able to accurately identify the general nature of a 911 call most of the time, they may misclassify ambiguous situations. See Rylan Simpson and Carlena Orosco, “Re-assessing Measurement Error in Police Calls for Service: Classifications of Events by Dispatchers and Officers,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 12 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260365>. Where studied, researchers found that 8 to 15 percent of calls had to be recategorized once police arrived on scene. Ibid. See also Jerry H. Ratcliffe, “Policing and Public Health Calls for Service in Philadelphia,” *Crime Science* 10, no. 5 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40163-021-00141-0>.
- 10 Mean was calculated as mean of the city’s values rather than as a pooled sample mean.
- 11 Although police have an important role to play in responding to violent situations in progress and in solving violent crimes, more policing is not the solution to violence. Community Violence Intervention programs (CVIs) have effectively reduced gun violence and saved communities millions. For more information about CVIs, see Vera Institute of Justice, *Investing in Evidence-Based Alternatives to Policing: Community Violence Intervention* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/KW56-P5GW> and Vera Institute of Justice, *Community Violence Interventions, Explained* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/QN5C-7PGM>.
- 12 Only four of the nine cities included a dispatch variable or timestamp in their uploaded dataset. The presence of these variables allows for researchers to determine whether an officer was dispatched because of a specific 911 call.
- 13 When calls to 911 result in hang-ups, the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) recommends a mandatory call back policy. If 911 operators are unable to obtain a “plausible explanation” for the hang-up or still suspect that emergency services could be needed, “a field unit should be dispatched.” Most police agencies dispatch police to investigate these abandoned calls. See NENA, *NENA Silent or Hang-Up 9-1-1 Calls for Service: An Operations-Focused Study*

- (Alexandria, VA: NENA, 2002), 10, 16-17, <https://perma.cc/25CC-DUFG>.
- 14 Jessica W. Gillooly, “How 911 Callers and Call-takers Impact Police Encounters with the Public: The Case of the Henry Louis Gates Jr. Arrest,” *Criminology and Public Policy* 19, no. 3 (2020); Cynthia Lum, Christopher S. Koper, Megan Stoltz, et al., “Constrained Gatekeepers of the Criminal Justice Footprint: A Systematic Social Observation Study of 9-1-1 Calltakers and Dispatchers,” *Justice Quarterly* 37, no. 7 (2020), 1176-1198, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07418825.2020.1834604>.
 - 15 Lum et al., “Constrained Gatekeepers of the Criminal Justice Footprint,” 2020.
 - 16 Ibid.
 - 17 Amos Irwin and Betsy Pearl, *The Community Responder Model: How Cities Can Send the Right Responder to Every 911 Call* (Washington DC: Center for American Progress and the Law Enforcement Action Partnership, 2020), <https://perma.cc/6ZA4-YADJ>.
 - 18 Gillooly, “How 911 Callers and Call-takers Impact Police Encounters with the Public,” 2020.
 - 19 Candorum Consulting LLC, *Suspicious Person Calls Audit, 2014-2019* (St. Louis, MO: Candorum Consulting LLC, 2020), <https://perma.cc/A5UB-TFCU>.
 - 20 Jessica Guynn, “BBQ Becky, Permit Patty and Why the Internet is Shaming White People Who Police People ‘Simply for Being Black,’” *USA Today*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2018/07/18/bbq-becky-permit-patty-and-why-internet-shaming-white-people-who-police-black-people/793574002/>; Troy Closson, “Amy Cooper Falsely Accused Black Bird-Watcher in 2nd 911 Conversation,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2020, updated May 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/nyregion/amy-cooper-false-report-charge.html>.
 - 21 Credible messengers are people who have life experiences similar to people who are criminal legal system-involved. They apply their leadership, lived experience, and mediation skills in violence prevention initiatives across the country. See Irwin and Pearl, *The Community Responder Model: How Cities Can Send the Right Responder to Every 911 Call*, 2020.

For more information

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