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How 911 callers and call-takers impact police encounters with the public: The case of the Henry Louis Gates Jr. arrest

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Research Summary: The Henry Louis Gates Jr. arrest provides an illuminating case study to show how the omission of dispatch in police reform conversations limits our understanding of police officer action. Using conversation analysis, this article analyzes the 911 call and radio transmission from the Gates incident to dissect the function of the 911 call-taker, and their impact on policing in the field. This analysis shines light on a previously overlooked call-taker function—risk appraisal—and concretely shows how the call-taker played a pivotal role in escalating the caller's uncertainty and, thus, primed the responding officer for a more aggressive encounter.

Policy Implications: Through unpacking precisely how the call-taker appraised risk—namely through extraction, interpretation, and classification of caller information—this article provides a framework to evaluate call-taker actions. The findings suggest the need for training that instructs call-takers to assess risk in more sophisticated ways. Preserving uncertainty may reduce the overestimation or underestimation of incidents and improve future police encounters with the public.

KEYWORDS
conversation analysis, dispatch, police contact, risk assessment

Contemporary policing in America is facing serious issues surrounding the level and distribution of encounters and arrests, infringements on civil liberties, and the use of force. Tensions between law enforcement and the public are at historically high levels (J. Jones, 2015). A series of officer-involved killings in places like Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, and Chicago have spurred an entire social movement against police brutality.

Much criminology scholarship attributes these various and sundry challenges to police officers' decisions about where to patrol, who to stop, and how to treat community members. Extensive research on proactive policing documents racial and socioeconomic disparities in how officers exercise discretion in stops and arrests. Thanks to scholars like Victor Rios (2011), Alice Goffman (2014), Jeffrey Fagan (Fagan, Braga, Brunson, & Pattavina, 2016; Gelman, Fagan, & Kiss, 2007), and Bernard Harcourt (2007), we now understand how individual officer-level decisions can produce and reproduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

By contrast, reactive or call-driven policing has not received comparable scholarly attention. The neglect of the features of reactive mobilization produces a limited understanding of policing because police often are acting in response to telephone calls from individuals requesting police services. In 2011, of an estimated 62.9 million U.S. residents who had one or more contacts with the police, more than half (32 million) requested police services (Langton & Durose, 2011). Requests come from callers who can be uncertain, biased, legally uninformed, or all of these in combination.

Calls to summon the police can result in arrest and the use of force because responding officers primarily are trained in law enforcement and force (Friedman, 2020). It is difficult to assess the most serious risks associated with police mobilization because of a lack of complete national statistics on use of force. Former police detective Nick Selby and co-authors help fill this knowledge gap by calculating the prevalence of the gravest policing outcome—police killings. They find that 83 of the 153 national police killings of unarmed civilians in 2015 began with a 911 call (Selby, Singleton, Flosi, & Bruce, 2016).

Reviewing local police department reports, albeit a piecemeal approach, further highlights how some of the most grievous forms of policing develop, not from officer-initiated encounters but from the public's calls to 911. In a review of 87 officer-involved shootings (OISs) between 2007 and 2011 in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police, analysts found that 65% of OISs originated from a call and only 25% from officer-initiated contact (Stewart, Fachner, King, & Rickman, 2012). A 2014 comprehensive review of 114 use-of-force incidents among officers in the Spokane Police Department found that 66% stemmed from a dispatch, whereas only 24% stemmed from officer-initiated contact (Spokane Police Department Office of Professional Accountability, 2014). Unlike in the case of proactive policing in which individual officer discretion primarily shapes the encounter, the statistics above hint that incident trajectory may be more contingent on the nature of caller requests and the ways in which 911 call-takers handle them than current criminology literature implies.

This article dissects the function of the 911 call-taker and illuminates their impact on policing in the field. By conducting a fine-grained analysis of the high-profile Henry Louis Gates Jr. case, the article uncovers a previously overlooked call-taker function—*risk appraisal*. Through unpacking precisely *how* call-takers appraise risk—namely through extraction, interpretation, and classification of caller information—a framework is provided to evaluate call-taker actions. The Gates case shines a particularly bright light on the challenges and dilemmas that can arise during the risk appraisal process. These findings are an important step in identifying ways in which police departments can pursue more intelligent policies inside dispatch.
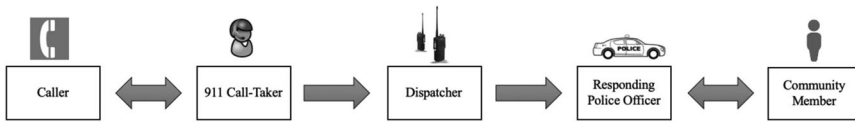
FIGURE 1 Information flow during call-driven policing encounters

Figure 1 illustrates the flow of information during interactions between 911 callers and call-takers, call-takers and dispatchers, dispatchers and responding officers, and responding officers and community members.

1 | PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Under call-driven policing, a series of interactions takes place before police arrive at the scene, all of which produces information that can affect police responses. For much of the public, the first point of contact with law enforcement is through a 911 call. A member of the public calls 911, a *911 call-taker* answers and speaks with the caller, and a *dispatcher* manages the allocation of responding police units and transmits information that the call-taker gathered over the radio (Lum et al., 2020). At some dispatch centers, the same person answers calls and dispatches police, whereas at others the two positions are filled by different workers. Figure 1 illustrates how information flows between callers, call-takers, dispatchers, and responding officers.

Disaggregating the role of the 911 call-taker in policing is critical because call-taker actions set the trajectory of an entire incident. As a result of the work call-takers do to divert, filter out, or resolve via telephone inappropriate or misguided requests for police services, a few scholars primarily have conceptualized their role as *gatekeeper* (Neusteter, Mapolski, Khogali, & O'Toole, 2019; Percy & Scott, 1985; Sharrock & Turner, 1978; Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988). A recent study finds that call-takers at a dispatch center in Fairfax, Virginia, resolve, on average, nearly half of all calls without having to dispatch the police (Lum et al., 2020). Gatekeepers, like those in Fairfax, prevent many inappropriate requests from reappearing in the legal system (Black, 1973; Silbey & Bittner, 1982).

Gatekeeping certainly is an important aspect of call-taking, but it fails to account for the other key functions call-takers play, in particular, call classification. Sometimes referred to as "slotting" or "recoding," classification involves interpreting caller information and fitting it into meaningful organizational categories (Gilsinan, 1989; Manning, 1988; Prottas, 1978). Practically speaking, this means that a call-taker must choose an incident type that aligns with a caller's problem from a set of predetermined incident types in the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system, each with a different priority level (Lum et al., 2020). Decisions about the type of incident and priority level impact the number of police cars dispatched, the speed at which officers drive to the scene, and police perceptions about the call. Indeed, a 2007 study of the Baltimore Police Department's calls for service finds that police officers make assumptions about a call's legitimacy based on information from dispatch, such as the type and location of an incident (Moskos, 2007).

Despite the significant consequences call classification can have on policing, it is severely under-theorized. A thorough literature review of the 911 system as it relates to policing by Neusteter et al. (2019) describes numerous studies that measure call-taker stress and well-being, as well as analyze broad 911 metrics such as call volume, call type, and response time across neighborhoods; none of these studies address how call-takers carry out call classification or how they process risk.

This article attempts to fill this gap by reconceptualizing call-takers as not only *gatekeepers* but also *risk appraisers*. In *Policing the Risk Society*, Ericson and Haggerty (1997) wrote that, "The concept of risk … turns people, their organizations, and their environments into myriad categories and identities that will make them more manageable." Although Ericson and Haggerty applied their definition of risk mainly to the police, this article applies their definition to the work of call-takers who form and transform caller requests into more manageable categories using their own knowledge and expertise, rules, classification schemes, and technology to minimize harm.

This article identifies three key steps in the risk appraisal process—*extracting*, *interpreting*, and *classifying* caller information. Extracting information involves asking investigative questions to gather information from a caller about the nature of an incident. As information is extracted, the call-taker engages in interpretation to make sense of the caller's statements. These two steps are iterative; interpretation helps to guide the direction of questioning as the call moves forward. Ultimately, the call-taker classifies the information with an incident type based on the nature of the request and level of risk. The dispatcher communicates this information on to the responding police officers.

Because 911 call-taking lacks strong governance over the risk appraisal process, call-takers can deploy discretion and assessments can suffer from imprecision. Dispatch centers often register with the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) to access model call-taking and dispatching policies. NENA recommends for call-takers to gather the address or exact location of an incident, call-back number, type of emergency, time of occurrence, hazards, and identities of the parties involved (NENA, 2017). These protocol suggestions are silent about *how* call-takers should extract, interpret, and classify information, especially when a caller is ambiguous or uncertain. As a result, call-takers frequently overestimate incidents. Scholars find that at some call centers, between 20% and 40% of all crime calls that 911 call-takers enter are downgraded by officers once at the scene (Ericson, 1982, p. 96; Reiss, 1971, p. 73; Klinger et al., 1997).

Evidence from emergency medical dispatching suggests that more scripted and structured call-taking protocols may reduce the prevalence of incident misclassification. In emergency medical dispatching, call-takers often are provided flipcharts with checklists or sequential questioning protocols to help standardize patient risk assessments (Lum et al., 2020). At some medical dispatch centers, call-takers who use priority dispatch protocols—where questions are scripted and incident types automatically determined based on caller responses—correctly code calls about "obvious death" and "expected death" in 98.5% of all cases (Whitaker et al., 2015).

Borrowing from research that illuminates how police officers make judgments in uncertain situations helps to explain why police call-takers tend to overestimate uncertain risk and favor over-response. Police sometimes engage in a minimax strategy—meaning they try to minimize the maximum risk—when deciding on a course of action. This strategy can result in police interpreting individuals' actions through the prism of worst-case scenario thinking (Muir, 1977). Muir explains that police understood that, "There was a qualitative difference (which all policemen appreciated) between being wrong and being disastrously wrong" (Muir, 1977, p. 166). Based on my experiences in the field working as a 911 call-taker at a dispatch center in the Midwest, call-takers also use minimax thinking. This strategy can be troublesome because training exercises (a) instill an outsized concern for officer safety relative to the safety of the subject of a call and (b) assume that over-responses are preferred to under-responses. In other words, call-takers are often trained that "being wrong" by sending an over-response is far better than "being disastrously wrong" by sending an under-response. Turning to scholarship on the effects of "priming" will reveal precisely why overvalued risk appraisals in the direction of over-response can, in fact, be profoundly problematic.

2 | SETTING POLICE EXPECTATIONS: THE PHENOMENON OF PRIMING

Priming is generally defined as a subliminal or overt stimulus that precedes an event and affects a behavioral response (Tulving, 1983). Police responses likely are linked to dispatch decisions because of a psychological phenomenon known as "anchoring bias." Psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1982) described anchoring bias as a phenomenon whereby people make estimates in the face of uncertainty by adjusting from an initial value or a starting point. Because "different starting points yield different estimates, which are biased toward the initial values," high initial values will result in high end values (Tversky & Kahneman 1982, p. 14). If police are primed for a high-priority encounter, then, based on anchoring bias, they will be more likely to perceive of the incident in those terms upon arrival.

Paul Taylor is one of the few researchers who has studied this phenomenon in dispatch. Using a firearms training simulator, he found that, "When dispatched to a distal call, an officer's initial understanding of the incident will be formed almost entirely by the information received from dispatch" (Taylor, 2019, p. 5). In his experiment, dispatchers told one group of officers that the suspect in a "possible trespassing in progress" might be holding a gun, they told the other group that the suspect was talking on a cell phone. The results showed that 6% of officers who had only been advised about a cell phone shot the suspect when he pulled the phone from his pocket in the video simulation. This shooting error rate is ten times less than for the officers primed to think the suspect had a gun (Taylor, 2019).

Taylor's findings echo earlier observations by police journalist Jonathan Rubinstein (1973) who found that police responses are shaped by information from the dispatcher. After a year of police ride-alongs, Rubinstein determined that, "What this unseen person relates to him establishes his initial expectations and the manner of his response to the assignment" (Rubinstein, 1973, p. 88). Any errors by the dispatcher can result in serious problems for the police and public. Rubinstein described a situation in which the dispatcher failed to mention to the patrol officer that the call was emergent, which is part of a dispatcher's duty. Because of this omission, the patrol officer arrived without lights or sirens to the incident causing the mother—whose child had cut his arm and was badly bleeding—to call him "lazy" and threaten to complain to his captain (Rubinstein, 1973, p. 122).

Given the serious consequences of priming, it is worth considering how decisions call-takers make influence the circumstances under which police arrive to a scene. What insights can be gleaned by including these initial interactions in an examination of policing?

3 | A CONVERSATION ANALYTIC APPROACH

This article presents a detailed case study of the interactions that preceded the Cambridge Police Department's arrival to Professor Henry Louis Gates's residence. Because single case studies are built for in-depth exploration into complex phenomena, this approach is well suited for unpacking the process through which the 911 call-taker carried out his duties. I selected the Gates case for two main reasons. First, this case, unlike most others, received a great deal of national and international media coverage, which made it possible to obtain audio recordings and review reports written in its wake. These materials helped inform the analysis. Second, from my experiences as a 911 call-taker, I recognize that the challenges the call-taker faced—namely

weighing caller uncertainty against potential incident risk—represent common struggles inside dispatch that transcend this specific case.

I obtained two audio recordings that were publicly released by the Cambridge Police after the incident. The first audio recording is of the interaction between the 911 caller and call-taker (Cambridge Emergency Communications Center, 2009a). The second audio recording is of the interaction between the dispatcher and responding officers (Cambridge Emergency Communications Center, 2009b). Because conversation analysis (CA) has been the predominant method for analyzing recorded interactional data and unpacking the dynamics of interaction, I employ this method to transcribe and analyze the transcripts.[1]

Conversation analysis is a micro-level approach that first emerged in the 1960s and insists social interaction provides a way to understand how institutions and organizations come to life (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Through analyzing interactional patterns, researchers can learn how co-participants accomplish, or fail to accomplish, institutional goals and tasks. The method requires close, repeated listening to audio recordings followed by detailed transcription. Both recordings in this analysis were transcribed using conversation analytic transcription conventions, which capture the details of talk and interaction as it occurs, including emphasis, overlapping speech, pitch, intonation, silence, and inhalations.[2] This level of detail is meant to shed light precisely on how interactants react to one another's utterances to co-construct "mutually intelligible courses of action." (Clayman & Gill, 2012). CA is becoming increasingly prominent in studies of 911 emergencies and police–public contact (Cromdal, Osvaldsson, & Persson-Thunqvist, 2008; N. Jones & Raymond, 2012; Kevoe-Feldman, 2015; Meehan, 1989; Raymond & Zimmerman, 2007; Whalen et al., 1988; Zimmerman, 1984, 1992a, 1992b).

4 | THE INCIDENT

On July 16, 2009, Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. returned home to Cambridge from a trip abroad. Finding his front door jammed shut, he attempted to push the door open with the help of his driver. Shortly thereafter, Sgt. James Crowley, an 11-year veteran of the Cambridge police, was dispatched to the address in response to a 911 call about a possible in-progress breaking and entering. Six minutes later, after a heated verbal encounter between the two men, Sgt. Crowley arrested one of the leading African American scholars in the United States for "exhibiting loud and tumultuous behavior in a public place" (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010, p. 55). The struggle between Gates and Crowley reignited a national conversation about race and law enforcement in the United States.

The Gates case is one of the more prominent controversies of the past decade and exemplifies the prevailing assumptions informing current debates about police reform. Both news media and academic outlets widely covered the incident. According to the Pew Research Center, nearly 20% of all African-American–related media coverage in 2009 mentioned the Gates incident (Guskin, Khan, & Mitchell, 2010). Public discussion and expert analysis after the arrest tended to emphasize Sgt. Crowley's and Gates's behavior at the scene, focusing in particular on Crowley's racial profiling and lack of procedural justice as primary explanations for what transpired. These explanatory factors are significant but incomplete because they fail to address decisions that were made inside the Cambridge Emergency Communications Center before Sgt. Crowley arrived on scene.

5 | EXPLAINING PROBLEMATIC POLICE–PUBLIC ENCOUNTERS: THE GATES CASE IN SCHOLARLY CONTEXT

The final report by the Cambridge Review Committee—a group of academics, law enforcement leaders, and lawyers tasked with analyzing the incident—advocated for police reforms to improve the style of interaction between the police and public without giving serious consideration to the decisions that established Sgt. Crowley's initial expectations. Indeed, many of the report's recommendations involved improving aspects of officer on-scene behavior by treating individuals with respect, de-escalating tense situations, and appropriately exercising discretion (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010).

Both the committee's report, and a second report about the Gates arrest from the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) Executive Session on Policing and Public Safety, concluded that the incident would not have escalated to the point it did if Sgt. Crowley had applied more "procedural justice." Procedural justice is based on the idea that when police treat individuals respectfully and with dignity it will lead to greater cooperation between the police and public (Tyler, 2004; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Fairness and procedural justice are pillars of "rightful policing," and these features of police work establish community trust in the police (Meares & Neyroud, 2015). From Gates's perspective, Crowley treated him disrespectfully, especially because it should have been obvious he was not a burglar given his age, need for a cane—Gates's right leg is two inches shorter than his left—and identification documents.

Although recommendations to improve on-scene decisions made by the police have potential to advance policing, they are focused solely on the moment of interaction between police and subject and thus miss other potential areas for reform. Such a narrow focus ignores the reasons why Crowley was on scene in the first place and how the decisions made before Crowley arrived directly influenced the interaction.

On that day, dispatch sent Sgt. Crowley to an in-progress, high-priority incident in response to a 911 call at Gates's address that turned out to be inaccurate, and yet there was no inquiry into the call or the actions of the 911 call-taker. The dispatcher said over the radio, "Respond to seventeen Ware Street for a possible B and E in progress. Two SPs (suspects) barged their way into the home. They have suitcases" (Cambridge Emergency Communications Center, 2009b). These three short statements primed Crowley to perceive of the incident as a serious crime with multiple suspects. So serious, in fact, that he drove the wrong way down a one-way street to reach the address as quickly as possible. Crowley told the Cambridge Review Committee that in the first few minutes of the encounter, he had "legitimate concerns about safety and security" and the report concluded that these concerns contributed to his abrupt demeanor (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010, p. 6).

In addition to the information from dispatch, Sgt. Crowley's heightened response likely was also shaped by the community and organizational context in which the incident occurred. Cambridge is an affluent East Coast city where residents pride themselves in having a diverse and inclusive community (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010). In 2009, the population was 68% White, 12% Black, 12% Asian, and 7% Hispanic, which made it more diverse than the average Massachusetts city or town. Relative to similarly sized cities across the nation, Cambridge ranks well below the nationwide average for all index crimes, except larcenies (Cambridge Police Crime Analysis Unit, 2009). The majority of calls-for-service are for quality-of-life issues and nonemergencies like noise and traffic complaints (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010). In this type of low-crime context, an in-progress breaking-and-entering call would elicit a magnified response.

When public commentators inquired as to why Crowley was on the scene they were quick to call it an instance of racial profiling, which in and of itself fails to pay sufficient attention to the role the 911 caller and call-taker played. President Obama, on nationally televised news, spoke about the incident in racial profiling terms: "There's a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped disproportionately by the police" (Cooper, 2009, para. 4). Racial profiling certainly may have led Crowley to engage with and arrest Gates, but it is not the reason he was on scene and primed to view the situation in the way he did.

Even reviewers of the incident who were well aware of its 911-driven nature nonetheless returned to racial profiling as the core problem. The authors of the NIJ report wrote, "It is important to emphasize that Sergeant Crowley arrived at Gates's home in response to a 911 call as opposed to an exercise of his own discretion" (Meares & Neyroud, 2015, p. 2). Because Sgt. Crowley was responding to a call, they admitted that Gates's "experience fit somewhat uneasily into the typical legal framework of racial profiling" (p. 2). Yet, despite these concessions, the authors nonetheless used a racial profiling framework—a framework that evaluates whether an officer's actions are lawful, effective, and fair—to explain the interaction.

Meares and Neyroud (2015) defended using this framework because Professor Gates described his experience as one of racial profiling. By making this choice, the authors effectively shut down any lines of inquiry into the call-driven aspects of the incident, as a racial profiling framework does not take into account events leading up to a police officer's arrival. In fact, both the NIJ and Cambridge Review Committee reports suffered from a complete disinterest in examining the complexities associated with call-driven policing—such as why Crowley was responding to an in-progress breaking-and-entering call and the expectations set in motion by that process.

The Gates case is by no means unique; it is emblematic of a serious blind spot in contemporary conversations about police reform. The 2015 President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing Report—the most prominent recent police reform agenda—identified six areas to improve police–public relations: (1) Build trust and legitimacy through procedural justice, (2) develop comprehensive use of force policies, (3) appropriately use technology, (4) cultivate community policing, (5) train and educate officers, and (6) support officer wellness and safety. Nowhere in the report is dispatch mentioned (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Similarly, Campaign Zero—an online clearinghouse of police reforms developed by activists connected to Black Lives Matter—does not mention dispatch among its ten recommendations to "limit police interventions, improve community interactions, and ensure accountability" (Campaign Zero, 2019, para. X). Moreover, a review of Department of Justice consent decrees that call for improved use of force, citizen oversight, officer training, and early intervention systems to monitor officer behavior made no mention of dispatch (Walker & Macdonald, 2008). The leading police reform reports all remained silent on the role of call-takers and dispatchers in policing.

6 | EXTRACTING, INTERPRETING, AND CLASSIFYING INFORMATION FROM THE 911 CALLER

The Cambridge Emergency Communications Center (ECC) received a 911 call at 12:43 PM on July 16th, 2009. Three key figures played a role in the early stages of the incident: the caller who reported two men with suitcases trying to get into the house, the call-taker who processed the call, and the dispatcher who relayed information to the responding officers. As the transcripts of the incident will reveal, the caller cautiously presented an ambiguous problem, but the 911

call-taker made escalating decisions while extracting, interpreting, and classifying that information—decisions that shaped Sgt. Crowley's expectations.

Extracts from the audio recording reveal that the caller was markedly uncertain about the nature of the problem.

```
                    (...)
17      911:    Alright whatsa problem tell me exactly what hap pened.
18      CLR:    .hh Um w- I- don't know what's hap pening, I just had an ah
19              older woman uh standing here and she had noticed two
20              gentlemen .h trying to get in a house at that number
21              seventeen ware street .hh and uh they kinda had to barg e in
22              and they broke (.) the screen door and they finally got in
23              and when I had looked I went (.) further closer to the house
24              a little bit after the gentlemens were already in the house,
25              .h I noticed t-two suitcases so I'm not sure if these are two
26              individuals who actually work there I mean who live there?.hh
```

In line 17, the call-taker follows protocol by asking about the problem. His language choice in the problem query—"tell me exactly what happened"—sets a high-standard of information extraction that the caller seems to resist from the outset of the call. This resistance is evidenced by her initial in-breath (".hh") and series of false starts ("um – w – I") before saying, "I don't know what's happening."

Notice how the caller is subsequently cautious and refrains from making any inferences about what she has witnessed. Instead, in lines 19–26, she provides a series of ostensibly factual observations to the call-taker—an older woman was standing outside, that woman (not herself) noticed two gentlemen trying to get in a house, the men broke the screen door, they had suitcases, and so on. In lines 25–26, she invokes the suitcases to suggest that the men might live at the house. She concludes her account by speculating that the incident may be entirely innocuous.

Despite the caller's portrayal of the incident as possibly benign—like the men being locked out of the house—the call-taker presses the caller to categorize the incident in *criminal terms*.

```
27      911:    You think they might have been break[ing
28      CLR:                                         [(m'side) .hh I don't
29              know :: cuz I have no: idea I just[
```

Rather than initially phrasing his question in line 27 from a milder position (e.g., "you think they might have been locked out?")—which would be more than warranted given the caller's ambiguous account of what she saw—the call-taker asks an escalating question. This decision is shaped by his interpretation of the caller's uncertainty through the lens of worst-case scenario thinking. He proposes that the men may be breaking-in in an attempt to classify the incident. When pressed to make this criminal classification, the caller declines to affirm the call-taker's categorization. She responds in lines 28–29 that she does not know whether the men were breaking in. The caller thus maintains her more cautious stance and, by implication, shifts the responsibility of classifying the incident wholly back on the call-taker.

The call-taker hesitates to move forward with his "breaking-and-entering" classification without the caller's agreement and instead backtracks and tries again.

```
30        911:                                      [well do you think the
31                           pos sibility might have been there, or ah how- what do you mean
32                           by bahged in, did they kick the door in? hh.
```

In lines 30–32, the call-taker seems to be exploring the hypothesis that there is an in-progress burglary in several different ways. In line 31, he emphasizes the word "possibility" to see whether accentuating the hypothetical nature of the incident will garner the caller's agreement. But before waiting for a response, he revises his question and re-invokes the caller's previous characterization ("barged in") to invite clarification.

The call-taker's efforts to have the caller support his "breaking-and-entering" classification once again fail.

```
33        CLR:       Um: no they were push ing the door in: like uh:: .hh uh m ::: l-
34                   like the screen part of the b-front door was=
35        911:       =How [did they
36        CLR:            [had like cut
37        911:       Open the door itself with the lock off.
38        CLR:       They:: I didn't see a key or anything cuz I was a little bit
39                   away from the do or but I did notice that they, (.)
40        911:       And what did the [suitcases
41        CLR:                        [pushed their
42        911:       have to do with anything
43        CLR:       I don't know =  I'm just saying that's what I saw. Uh- ah- I hh.
44                   jus[t
```

The caller resists the call-taker's "kick the door" characterization in lines 33–34. Instead, she says that the men were pushing the door. Her observation does not seem to satisfy the call-taker, so he interrupts the caller and presses her further about the incident. In line 40, the call-taker returns to the matter of the suitcases and probes the caller as to why she brought them up. His puzzlement over the suitcases shows that he failed to grasp the exculpatory import of the suitcases as initially presented by the caller.

Despite never gaining the caller's agreement about the nature of the incident, the call-taker chooses to move forward on the presumption that a break-in has occurred.

```
45        911:       [Do you know what apahtment they ah: broke into.
46                   (0.4)
47        CLR:       No. They just the first floor (.) I don't even think that it's
48                   an apartment. It's seventeen Ware Street. It's a house. It's a
49                   yellow house. (0.7) Number seventeen . (0.9) I don't know if
50                   they live there and they just had a hard time with their key
51                   but I did notice that they (.) kinda used their: a shoulder to
52                   try to barge in and they got in. I don't know if they had a
53                   key or not cuz I couldn't see from my ang:le. But: ya know
54                   when I looked a little closely that's when [I saw (...)
```

FIGURE 2   Information classification options

Figure 2 depicts information classification options, and associated priority levels, that would be potentially relevant to this call.

Notice in line 45 how he asks the caller for the apartment number that the men "broke into." After clarifying the address, the caller in lines 49–51 immediately attempts to dial-down the call-taker's characterization by suggesting, for a second time, that the men might merely be locked out of the house. The call-taker does not up-take her proposition and instead moves on to conclude the call.

After extracting and interpreting information from the caller, the call-taker must *classify* the incident. The technology inside dispatch does not allow for simply passing along a caller's raw information; it must be classified with an incident type. Unlike cut-and-dry calls about barking dogs or illegally parked cars, the Gates call underscores the complexities that can arise in appraising risk when callers are uncertain and incidents straddle priority levels. The call-taker must decide whether to classify the call as a higher priority breaking and entering, despite the caller's uncertainty, or opt for a lower priority classification like a "suspicious circumstance," or even a "citizen assist." See Figure 2 for a visual depiction of the choices that a call-taker typically faces when classifying an incident such as this one. By line 45, it seems that the call-taker has decided to classify the call as a breaking and entering.

The call-taker faces competing pressures when appraising risk. On the one hand, overestimating the incident will prime the police for a serious encounter, tie up police units, and put pedestrians and other drivers at risk. On the other hand, underestimating the incident can open the call-taker up to liability and potential disciplinary action. Although we do not know for certain, based on my experiences and observations as a 911 call-taker, it is likely that the concern about overestimating explains why the call-taker repeatedly attempted to garner the caller's agreement about his hypothesis, but ultimately the concern about *underestimating* the incident leads the call-taker to escalate the caller's uncertainty.

7 | RELAYING INFORMATION TO THE RESPONDING OFFICER

The next interaction occurs over the radio between the dispatcher and responding police officers. The dispatcher's information comes directly from the call-taker. In this exchange, the dispatcher further escalates the situation by recontextualizing the caller's observations.

```
             (...)
01    CO1:   Control to car one. Eighteen four ah.
02    OF1:   O-R.
03    CO1:   Respond to seventeen Ware street for a possible B and E in
04           progress. Two SPs bahged their way into the hom:e. Ah they
05           have suitcases. RP (five) to SPs. Uh. Stand-by. (0.2)
06           Trying to get furtha.
07           (0.7)
```

Lines 01–07 show the abridged version of the lengthy and complicated caller/call-taker interaction detailed above.[3] The dispatcher sends police to a possible breaking and entering and refers to the two men as "suspects" who "barged" into the house with suitcases, despite the caller never affirming the call-taker's proposal that the men were breaking in and mentioning the suitcases as evidence that they *might actually live at the address.*

The dispatcher fails to communicate the stance of the caller in relationship to the incident in the first transmission creating subsequent interactional troubles.

```
             (...)
17    OF1:   (Inaudible) Can you have the caller come to the front door.
18           (0.5)
19    CO1:   I'm sorry repeat?
20           (0.7)
21    OF1:   Can you have the caller come to the front door. (said slowly)
22           (1.5)
23    CO1:   It's not her house. She doesn't live there. She's uh a witness
24           in this.
25           (1.7)
26    OF2:   C-13 to control I'm on Broadway. I'm going to respond.
27           (0.5)
28    CO1:   Received.
29           (0.7)
30    OF3:   52 to control.
31    CO2:   Answering 52.
32           (1.0)
33    OF3:   I'm out with a uh gentleman says he resides here. (inaudible)
34           Uncooperative. But uh: keep the cars coming.
             (...)
```

Confusion over the stance of the caller is evident in lines 17–25 when a responding officer asks the dispatcher to have the caller come to the front door and the dispatcher, after asking the officer to

repeat his question, replies with emphasis that the caller does not live at the house and is "uh a witness in all this." The decision by dispatch to not initially relay information about the caller's relationship to the incident may have further escalated the situation by causing the officer to initially incorrectly assume that the caller was inside the house during a serious crime.

Because radio traffic must be concise, as police and dispatchers are competing for broadcast space over air waves, many of the particularities of calls are stripped away by call-takers and dispatchers. In some cases, particularities are superfluous, but in others, they can be critical to understanding the nature of the call. In this case, the dispatcher failed to relay the caller's evident uncertainty as well as her willingness to entertain the possibility that the incident, although suspicious, may be entirely innocuous.

In short, although the Cambridge Review Committee Report concluded that, "Sergeant Crowley and Professor Gates each missed opportunities to 'ratchet down' the situation and end it peacefully", the above analysis indicates that so too did the 911 call-taker and dispatcher (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010, p. 26). They played pivotal roles in taking an ambiguous and cautious call and generating a high-priority dispatch.

8 | DISCUSSION AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

This article offers three main contributions to our understanding of call-taking and its impact on police encounters with the public. First, by reviewing the key reports that came out after the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., as well as broader national police reform agendas, I bring attention to the unfortunate absence of dispatch in public policy debates about policing. Whether in the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by Officer Timothy Loehman or the fatal tasing of 58-year-old Euree Martin in Georgia by deputies—both of which started with a 911 call and were arguably mishandled by dispatch—scholars repeatedly overlook the ways in which 911 callers, call-takers, and dispatchers affect police responses. The approach used here stresses the need for scholars to apply a wider frame when examining police behavior, one that includes the interactions that take place before the police arrive at a scene.

Second, by using a conversation analytic approach, this article unpacks the functions of call-taking and reconceptualizes the role of the 911 call-taker as that of *risk appraiser*. This reconceptualization transcends the Gates case and provides a framework for policy makers to evaluate future call-taker behavior. Specifically, this article calls for greater evaluation of the information extraction, interpretation, and classification steps of the call-taking process when reviewing police–public encounters. Analyzing these often-overlooked aspects of call-taking could help to clarify why call-driven policing encounters unfold the way they do. Although it is counterfactual, it is altogether possible the interaction would not have unfolded as it did had Sgt. Crowley not been primed to believe he was encountering a breaking and entering.

Third, by bringing to bear a methodology not traditionally used in the field of criminology, I expand the methodological toolkit available to researchers in this arena. Such a method has growing relevance given the proliferation of new surveillance technologies that record two-way interactions between the police and the public. Sociologists Geoffrey Raymond and Nikki Jones already are applying conversational analysis to body camera footage to examine how verbalizations from police have the potential to reduce use of force incidence. CA can help shed light on how and when interactions go well or go badly and document best practices for 911 call-takers, dispatchers, and police.

The inclusion of dispatch in the Gates incident introduces the possibility for a distinct set of policy reforms that go beyond improving officer behavior at the scene. Reforms targeted at training call-takers and dispatchers to appraise risk in more sophisticated ways is one such example. Although legitimate liability concerns may lead 911 call-takers to escalate callers' requests, the account here indicates there are risks on the other side as well. Current training practices often disregard the costs that can come from escalation and, instead, encourage call-takers to upgrade incidents in the face of uncertainty. Training modules that present concrete examples challenging the assumption that overresponse is preferable may help call-takers de-escalate situations. Such a training change would require police leadership to formally recognize the risk appraisal function of call-taking.

Another locus for policy intervention exists at the intersection of training and technology. The Gates case highlights the costs that can arise from flattening caller uncertainty. Reforms targeted at preserving callers' uncertainties and cautions might improve outcomes. CAD technology could be designed to include fields that prompt call-takers to capture this information. For example, call-takers could indicate whether a caller presents high levels of uncertainty when reporting high-priority incidents by checking a box in CAD. This feature would allow call-takers to signal quickly to the dispatcher and police that their information classification choice may be overestimated. Not only might preserving caller uncertainty have improved the outcome of the Gates encounter, but it also might have prevented the shooting of Tamir Rice. In that case, the dispatcher failed to convey to the responding officer that the 911 caller cautioned that the male in the park with a gun was "probably a juvenile" and the gun was "probably fake" (Schuessler, 2017).

Evidence from emergency medical dispatching suggests that policy interventions aimed at the information extraction phase of call-taking also might help address some problems of overresponse. Unlike in fire and medical dispatching in which departments use protocols and scripts for call-taking, police dispatching lacks standardized protocols. This can produce variation across 911 operators in how they ask questions. In the Gates case, we see the call-taker repeatedly press the caller to identify the incident in criminal terms. Another call-taker may not have proceeded in the same way. Standardizing questions could help to guide which line of questioning call-takers should pursue in high-pressure situations. This type of "criteria-based dispatch" approach currently is being piloted among call-takers in Tucson, Arizona (Vera Institute of Justice, 2019).

The Gates incident raises important questions for criminologists. It is worth considering what might have happened if instead of first asking the caller whether the men were breaking in, the call-taker had asked whether they were locked out. Imagine, too, if the call-taker had downgraded the call to a suspicious circumstance. Or, if the dispatcher had simply passed on the caller's persistent uncertainties to Sgt. Crowley. We likely will never know the answers to these questions, but a greater focus on dispatch could improve outcomes in future police encounters with the public.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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ENDNOTES
[1] For readers who are interested in learning more about conversation analysis methods, see Clayman and Gill, (2012) and Sidnell (2012).

2 Underscored utterances capture stress or emphasis. Brackets mark overlapping or simultaneous talk. Up and down arrows indicate an upward or downward shift in pitch. A period at the end of a phrase marks downward intonation to signify a statement. A question mark at the end of a phrase marks upward intonation and signifies a question. Numbers in parentheses mark lengths of silence, represented in tenths of a second. A period followed by the letter "h" marks an in-breath, and the length of the in-breath is reflected in the number of "h's." For more information about a conversation analytic approach to transcriptions, see Hepburn and Bolden (2012).

3 Note that in the radio transcript "CO" (i.e., control) stands for dispatchers and "OF" for officers.

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