

**“911, Is This an Emergency?”:
How 911 Call-Takers Extract, Interpret, and Classify Caller Information**

by

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Abstract

Policing in America is in crisis. Much of the nation is outraged by the level and distribution of encounters and arrests, infringements on civil liberties, and excessive uses of force by the police. Prior scholarship typically has attributed these problems to features of officer-initiated policing—specifically police officers’ decisions in who to stop and when to arrest.

By contrast, reactive or call-driven policing has not received comparable scholarly attention. Yet, in many places roughly half of all police-work involves responding to the public’s calls-for-service. In these cases, a series of interactions take place between 911 callers, 911 call-takers, and dispatchers *before* the police arrive at the scene, all of which can produce information that shapes police responses.

This dissertation is squarely focused on the role of 911 in American policing. It aims to answer the question of how 911 call-takers mediate caller demands and impact policing in the field. To answer this central research question, the author worked for two years as a 911 call-taker in Southeast Michigan, which allowed her to analyze the kinds of problems callers report, the decisions that call-takers must make, the challenges and dilemmas that they face, and the ways in which training and organizational norms shape the call-taking process.

Using a mix of quantitative, qualitative, and conversation analytic methods, this dissertation reveals that the process through which private citizens’ requests become

police responses is complex and presents unique challenges to policing. The chapters aim to show how the contemporary 911 system has come to offer the public wide latitude over the scope of police work. By dissecting the day-to-day duties of 911 call-takers, the chapters shine a light on two critical call-taking functions. First, the author reveals an overlooked call-taker function—*risk appraisal*. Through unpacking precisely how call-takers appraise risk, namely through extraction, interpretation, and classification of caller information, this dissertation provides a framework to evaluate call-taker actions. Second, the author complicates the previously documented *gatekeeping* function by showing how organizational rules and norms can constrain the ability of 911 call-takers to limit the public's heavy reliance on the system. Taken together, the chapters find that call-takers exercise discretion when performing these critical functions and their actions impact police responses.

This dissertation puts forth recommendations aimed at encouraging police agencies to reconceptualize the call-taking function in an effort to enable call-takers to more intelligently deploy discretion. Recommendations include developing protocols and criteria that empower call-takers to prevent inappropriate requests from receiving police services, training call-takers to assess risk in more sophisticated ways, distributing call-taker best practices to peers, and using technology to assist call-takers in preserving caller uncertainty. The author hopes that these findings and recommendations will help improve police encounters with the public and spur readers to strongly consider 911's role in policing in the future.

Introduction

Policing in America is in crisis. Much of the nation is outraged by the level and distribution of encounters and arrests, infringements on civil liberties, and excessive uses of force by police. 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 Washington County, GA have spurred an entire social movement against police brutality (Berman 2014; Davey and Bosman 2014; Boone 2017; Fitzsimmons 2014).

Much sociological 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 such as Victor Rios (2011), Alice Goffman (2014), and Jeffrey Fagan (2007, 2016), we understand much about how individual officer-level decisions can produce and reproduce disparities in the criminal justice system.

By contrast, reactive or call-driven policing has not received comparable scholarly attention. This neglect has produced a limited understanding of policing precisely because police often act in response to telephone calls from the public. In 2011,

of an estimated 62.9 million US residents who had one or more contacts with the police, more than half (32 million) *requested* police services through calls for service (Langton and Durose 2011). Sociologist Chris Herring is one of the few scholars who has examined call-driven policing, specifically using ethnography to show how residents' complaints about homelessness in rapidly-gentrifying areas of San Francisco produce police responses (Herring 2019).

Calls to summon the police are not without consequence. They 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 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 et al. 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 percent of OISs originated from a call, whereas only 25 percent from officer-initiated contact (Stewart et al. 2012). A 2014 comprehensive review of 114 use of force incidents among officers in the Spokane Police Department found that 66 percent stemmed from a dispatch, whereas only 24 percent stemmed from officer-initiated contact (Spokane Police Department Office of Professional Accountability 2014).

Despite the potential problems associated with call-driven policing, scholars and public commentators implicitly assume that call-driven encounters are justified and unproblematic. A return to 1970s socio-legal scholarship helps explain scholars' relative lack of concern over reactive policing; a core claim in this literature is that because *citizens* initiate police contact, the process is more legitimate than when *police* initiate contact (Black 1973). This widely accepted claim was first made by sociologist Albert Reiss in his classic book, *The Police and the Public*:

Reactive strategies were seen as those that required simply that the police respond to a citizen request for service. Such activities of the police...enjoyed a measure of legitimacy because police were mobilized at the request of a citizen seeking police assistance (1971).

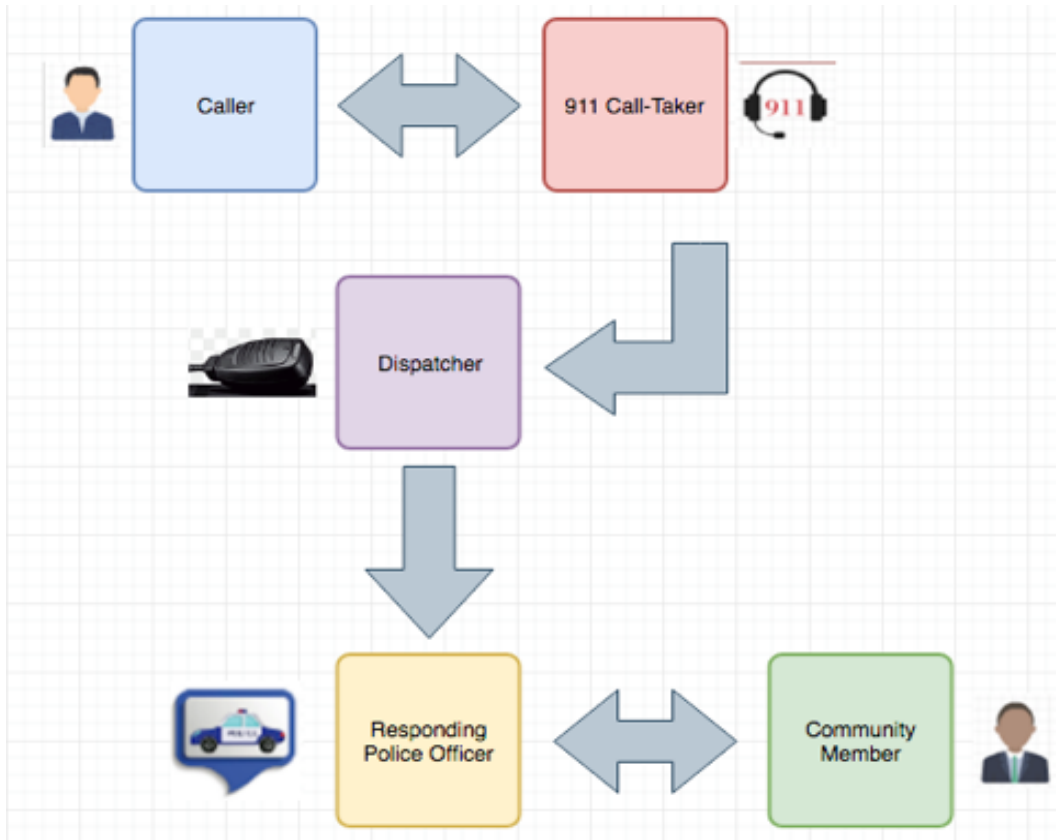
A 2017 National Academy of Sciences report on proactive policing reasserts Reiss' argument that the public is more willing to accept police power when it is in response to a citizen request. This sentiment is found not only in academic writing, but is also reflected in popular press about policing. Take, for example, Tom Mullen's 2016 Huffington Post op-ed in which he recommends, "Taking cops off the street, unless they are responding to a 911 call or serving a warrant issued by a judge," to reduce troubling police-citizen interactions. Underlying such recommendations is the assumption that call-driven policing is relatively unproblematic.

This assumption is undermined by the fact that call-for-service requests come from callers who can be uncertain, inaccurate, biased, legally uninformed, or all of these in combination. A spate of high-profile 911 calls in 2018 that either was racially-motivated or had huge racial impacts highlights some of the challenges associated with

call-driven policing. The public was treated to media stories from New York to Colorado to Oakland of white community members calling the police on people of color simply for going about their lives (Rosenberg 2018; Hudetz and Foody 2018; Mezzofiore 2018). In each of these cases, troubling police encounters stemmed not from officer-initiated stops, but from 911 calls. Incidents like these continue to happen; the most recent taking place in Central Park. Amy Cooper, a white female, called 911 claiming that “there’s an African American man threatening my life” after the man, who was birdwatching, politely asked her to leash her dog in accordance with park rules (Bellafante 2020).

Existing sociological literature overlooks the role that 911 callers, call-takers, and dispatchers play in shaping the expectations that responding officers bring to the scene. For much of the public, the very 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 0-1 illustrates how information flows between callers, call-takers, dispatchers, and responding officers. As information filters down through the call-driven policing process, callers’ demands are formed and transformed, and ultimately shape police expectations.

Figure 1 The Call-Driven Policing Process



An investigation into high-profile cases of police misconduct demonstrates just how interactions between callers, call-takers, and dispatchers can produce unconscionable police-community member interactions. Take the shooting of twelve-year old Tamir Rice in a Cleveland park by Officer Timothy Loehmann. A critical element in the incident was how the 911 call-taker handled the call. A bystander called to report a black male brandishing a gun in the park. Forty-nine seconds into the call, the caller backtracked on his initial report saying the gun was “probably fake.” At a minute thirty-eight seconds, the caller clarified that “it’s probably a juvenile.” The caller repeated his uncertainty about the gun at the close of the call: “I don’t know if it’s real or not” (Schuessler 2017; Lee 2015).

Despite the caller’s uncertain and cautious statements, the call-taker chose not to

pass along these key pieces of information to the dispatcher. Instead, the dispatcher relayed the following information to Officer Loehmann based on the call-taker's incident narrative: "In the park by the youth center is a black male sitting on the swings. He is wearing a camouflage hat, a gray jacket with black sleeves. He keeps pulling a gun out of his pants and pointing it at people." Cuyahoga County prosecutor Timothy J. McGinty cited the omission of key information from the caller by the 911 call-taker as a contributing factor to the shooting: "The shooting might have been avoided if the information from the 911 caller had been properly relayed to the officers" (The Associated Press 2017).

Whether in the police shooting of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, the fatal tasing of fifty-eight-year-old Euree Martin in Georgia, or the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. at his own front door—all of which started with a 911 call and some of which were mishandled by dispatch—scholars repeatedly overlook the ways in which the 911 system affects policing. Unlike in the case of officer-initiated policing in which individual officer discretion largely shapes the trajectory of an encounter, the incidents above suggest that incident trajectory is far more contingent on prior interactions between callers and call-takers than current sociological literature implies.

Few lines of inquiry exist into the broader organizational contexts in which police operate, especially the link between dispatch and police response. This dissertation shines a light on the "black box" of caller requests and police dispatch, and their impact on policing in the field. The central research question is a reformulation of a long-standing socio-legal question posed by Donald Black in 1973 about *how the law is mobilized by ordinary citizens*. Black tries to answer this question by focusing on how social

conditions, like legal intelligence and the availability of the law, shape the kinds and rates of cases that the people bring forward to the state, whether through the courts or the police. He touches on discretion only insofar as it rests with the citizen, rather than any legal official.

Reactive systems, however, are not as unilaterally citizen driven as the research perspective that Black developed implies. Requests are processed by state officials who make decisions and may exercise discretion of their own. In this dissertation, I shift Black's question to focus on *how state officials enact reactive systems of law*. Specifically, how do 911 call-takers mediate caller demands and impact policing in the field? Answering this central research question requires a close analysis of the call-taking function with an eye to the decisions call-takers must make, the formal and informal rules they follow, and the amount of variation they exhibit in key job duties. I find that the process through which private citizens' requests become police responses is complex because the 911 dispatch center is a *previously overlooked locus of discretion* in the criminal justice system.

Criminologists, socio-legal scholars, and policymakers have documented discretion at nearly every stage of the criminal justice system from the police to the courts to the jails and prisons; a notable exception is dispatch. The exercise of discretion, defined as "decision-making not strictly governed by legal rules, but rather with a significant element of personal judgment," has implications for the ways in which call-takers mediate and transform citizen requests for police services (LaFave and Remington

1965:63).¹ Up until now, scholars and law enforcement officials have been relatively blind to the forms that discretion take inside dispatch, the ways call-taker discretion may shape street-level policing, and opportunities for call-takers to use discretion more intelligently.

This dissertation endeavors to bring attention to these blind spots and runs parallel to 1950s research that sought to clarify the use of discretion among police. The 1950s-movement paved the way for a reconceptualization of the police function and the emergence of a rule-making movement to better structure how officers use their judgment. I advocate for a similar movement to occur inside dispatch through examining call-taking within the framework of discretion that is used in the criminal justice system more broadly. In the following section, I provide a brief historical overview of the study of police discretion to serve as a path forward for this dissertation's study of dispatch.

Replicating the Study of Discretion within Dispatch

Documentation of Discretion

Although discretion was long acknowledged among prosecutors, grand juries, judges, probation, prison and parole officers, it was not formally recognized among the police until 1956 when The American Bar Foundation (ABF) sent field researchers to observe officers in Kansas, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The project was a response to Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson's 1953 speech to the American Bar Association (ABA) about the "breakdown, delay and ineffectiveness of American law enforcement."

¹ Wayne LaFave and Frank Remington (1965) provide a useful definition of discretion that I rely on in this dissertation because the term discretion is not consistently used in the criminal justice literature.

Jackson specifically asked the ABA to gather more evidence on the “day-to-day administration of justice” (Walker 1992). The survey—which became the ABF’s first major project and, at one time, accounted for 57 percent of the Foundation’s budget—found that police engaged in a “pervasiveness of decision-making” that was guided, not only by rules, but also by judgement and conscience (LaFave and Remington 1965; Walker 1993; 1992; Ohlin and Remington 1993).

Today it may seem obvious that police officers exercise discretion in the performance of their job duties, but this was not the case at the time the ABF did its work—indeed, the ABF survey is what documented the extent of the discretion. Field researchers found that police haphazardly made decisions about whether to enforce the law because “full enforcement” (i.e., enforcing all criminal statutes and city ordinances at all times against all offenders) was simply not practical (Goldstein 1963). The survey revealed a prevalence of officer discretion when “determining how to invoke the criminal process and when to use a variety of investigative techniques...such decisions as whether to undertake a custodial arrest, whether to persist in that attempt by use of force, whether to stop a suspect for investigation, and whether to conduct a search” (LaFave 1990). Without explicit rules to guide these decisions, police were found to sometimes rely on a troubling mix of racism, unprofessionalism, and lawlessness (Walker 1992).

Reconceptualization of the Job Function

Once discretion was acknowledged formally, a reconceptualization of the policing function occurred. No longer were police conceived of as “ministerial actors” (i.e., persons who follow the law exactly), but rather as professional decision-makers who

exercise discretion. Scholars, such as Yale Law Professor Joseph Goldstein (1960), formally added police to the list of existing decision-makers in the criminal justice process. Superintendent O.W. Wilson of the Chicago Police Department, publicly embraced this new conceptualization of the police when he proclaimed in June 1962:

I do not consider police officers to be robots who are prohibited from exercising discretion. Each of you—every day—is called upon to decide whether or not to search, to arrest, or to hold an individual. This is as it should be. If we took discretion out of the job of a police officer, we would reduce the task to one which could be performed by people of far less capability and much less pay. (LaFave and Remington 1965)

This reconceptualization of the police was radical at the time because police departments were loath to admit the existence of discretion believing that it undermined the perception of the police as objective. Herman Goldstein (1963), former executive assistant to the superintendent of the Chicago Police Department, writes that police officials refused to acknowledge discretion because it ran counter to impartiality. The idea that personal judgment, rather than the law, guided police action threatened the “autonomous professionalism” that law enforcement embraced following the 1931 National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (commonly called the Wickersham Commission) that exposed rampant corruption between the police and government (Friedman and Ponomarenko 2015).

Police departments were also hesitant to recognize discretion because of the additional administrative burdens it would create. Goldstein (1963) explains how the admittance of discretion required additional police instruction, “It is easy, from an

administrative standpoint, to support a program of full enforcement. Instructions and training are simple. One need only teach the difference between black and white. If discretion is to be exercised, criteria become essential.” The development of criteria, instruction, and training would be time consuming, challenging, and limit the broad authority of the police.

Despite police officials’ concerns about admitting to discretion, the ABF’s findings made it so that law enforcement had to confront the widespread, haphazard decision-making by police. The Progressive Era paradigm of an objective administration of criminal justice was so undermined by the survey findings that a new paradigm was needed (Walker 1992). The new paradigm captured the complexity of the criminal process—haphazard decision-making, discretion, dependency between different parts of the criminal justice system—and brought with it an administrative rule-making movement.

Development of Administrative Rules

President Johnson’s 1967 Crime Commission encouraged police departments to develop rules and guidelines over officer action. Scholars, such as law professor Anthony Amsterdam, Kenneth Culp Davis, and Herman Goldstein, led the rule-making effort in hopes of increasing police accountability. Davis provided the first framework for administrative rule-making in his 1969 book, *Discretionary Justice*, to reduce injustice from police discretionary power. He argued that controlling discretionary power required a rule-making movement: “Agencies through rule-making can often move from vague or absent statutory standards to reasonably definite standards, and then, as experience and

understanding develop, to guiding principles, and finally, when the subject matter permits, to precise and detailed rules” (Davis 1969:219).

The guiding principles of Davis’ framework centered on “confining, structuring, and checking” discretion. *Confining discretion* involves the creation of written policies by police departments to define acceptable and unacceptable behavior. *Structuring discretion* requires instructing officers in specific factors beyond “good judgment” that should guide their decision-making. For example, perhaps an officer should consider the road conditions before initiating a vehicle pursuit, or take into account the time of day a panhandler is on the street corner to assess the level of threat he may pose to the public. *Checking discretion* occurs through supervisor reviews of officer self-reports following certain types of incidents.

Even with the help of Davis’ rule-making framework, the codification of discretion into rules is difficult because of the breadth of situations police encounter every day. Creating an exhaustive rules list for every situation is nearly impossible and police manuals tend to focus instead on internal matters. Samuel Walker (1992) finds that police department rules continue to “overestimate trivial matters of internal discipline, and ignore most of the crucial issues related to the exercise of police authority.” Law professors Barry Friedman and Maria Ponomarenko (2015) similarly show that police manuals are often filled with “detailed rules regarding uniforms, record keeping practices, and off-duty conduct,” but provide very little guidance on decision-making and the enforcement of law.

Despite the challenges that accompany a rule-making movement, some departments have observed benefits from rule-making, notably around use of force. Jim

Fyfe's 1978 dissertation research on the positive impact of NYPD's Temporary Order of Policy 237 on reducing police firearm discharges spurred departments across the country to develop formal policies around use of force. Fyfe found that the weekly average of firearm discharges among police declined 29.9 percent after the NYPD both *confined discretion*, by specifying in written policy when firearm discharges were prohibited, and *checked discretion*, by requiring officers to complete a report after each discharge that was reviewed by a supervisor (Fyfe 1978). Some forty years later, the legacy of Fyfe's findings can be found in the 2015 President's 21st Century Taskforce on Policing Report that recommends departments have "clear and comprehensive policies on the use of force." Some departments also engage in routine incident reviews following use of force events to both assess whether officers conformed to standards, and to shed light on new ways for the organization to handle complex problems (Thacher, n.d.).

Since the 1970s the rule-making movement has made uneven progress in policing, but a handful of contemporary scholars are attempting to revive and broaden the movement. Friedman and Ponomarenko (2015) are leading the way with their call for "front-end accountability." Compared to "back-end accountability" that only kicks-in *after* misconduct has happened through civilian review boards, inspector generals, and judicial review, "front-end accountability" establishes rules and policies up-front with the public's input to guide police action. Their ideas are echoed by Risa Goluboff (2016) in her book, *Vagrant Nation*, who also pushes for a rule-making revival in policing: "Those powers which are indispensable in a rational scheme of police activity should be explicitly recognized, so that standards for their exercise may be created, and limitations may be imposed on them to prevent their abuse."

In short, policing has undergone a movement to review the day-to-day administration of justice. It has included the documentation of police decision-making, the reconceptualization of the police from precise law followers to discretionary actors, and the development of an administrative rule-making framework to try to confine, structure, and check discretion. Up until now, a similar movement has not occurred inside dispatch. The ensuing dissertation chapters follow in the footsteps of the ABF by a) documenting the nature of call-taker discretion, b) reconceptualizing the role of call-takers from administrative support staff to front-line decision-makers who are active participants in the construction of incidents, and c) bringing attention to instances of intelligent uses of discretion among call-takers. It is my hope that this research will spur future administrative and scholarly endeavors to confine, structure, and check call-taker discretion.

Road Map

To better understand the nature of call-taker discretion, I became an active participant in the 911 system. In 2016, I was hired as a part-time 911 call-taker at a Sheriff's Office in Southeast Michigan. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to Central Dispatch—the dispatch center where I worked for two years while in graduate school. The chapter describes the field site, the kinds of data I collected, how I gained the trust of my co-workers, and the ways in which my experiences shaped the research questions and analyses in the subsequent chapters. This chapter highlights a salient experience with a police official following a spate of racially biased 911 calls in which he laments that such calls are an unfortunate, but largely inevitable outcome of the 911 system.

The police official's response, which was echoed by police leaders across other cities, motivates the central research question in Chapter 2—how did it become likely that when the public calls the police, regardless of the nature of the problem, they receive a police response? To answer this question, the chapter places contemporary call center practices in their historical context. Drawing on historical materials, the chapter argues that the earliest forms of call-driven policing in the late 19th century attempted to strike a balance between citizens' power to mobilize the police and potential abuses of that power, but that balance has eroded due to changing assumptions about who should play a role in mobilizing the police, how broad the scope of police work should be, and what function dispatch personnel can and should play in mediating caller demands.

Chapter 3 turns to dissecting the function of the 911 call-taker in policing. Using conversation analysis, this chapter analyzes the 911 call and radio transmission from the high-profile arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. to shine light on a previously overlooked call-taker function—risk appraisal. The analysis concretely shows how discretionary decisions about risk, such as escalating caller uncertainty, can impact police response. Through unpacking precisely *how* the call-taker in this case appraised risk—namely how he extracted, interpreted, and classified caller information—this chapter provides both a framework to evaluate call-taker actions and a reconceptualization of call-takers as risk appraisers.

Chapter 4 builds on the findings in the previous chapter by quantitatively measuring to what extent call-takers vary in how they carry out risk appraisal and the causal implications of this variation on street-level policing outcomes. The chapter leverages a natural experiment at my field site using the random assignment of call-takers

to calls. The analysis provides strong evidence that call-takers deploy discretion when making decisions about risk, and that these decisions, in turn, directly affect how police officers perceive of incidents and whether they make an arrest.

Chapter 5 considers how organizational policies, rules, and logics shape the practice of call-taking. A close analysis of the formal rulebook reveals a narrow view of call-taking with selectively instructive rules that ignore many of the complicated realities call-takers face. The rules primarily are focused on instructing call-takers to extract routine incident information. The rules fail to train call-takers to probe callers' claims or assess risk in sophisticated ways. Moreover, the rules defer authority to callers and overlook potential civil liberties issues that come from sending the police to check on innocent people. By applying the rules to a set of emergency and non-emergency calls, the chapter illuminates how and when call-takers deploy discretion, the moral dilemmas they face, and the resource allocation problems that can arise. The chapter brings attention to instances of intelligent uses of discretion among call-takers as models for future organizational reform.

Chapter 1: Entering a Dispatch Center

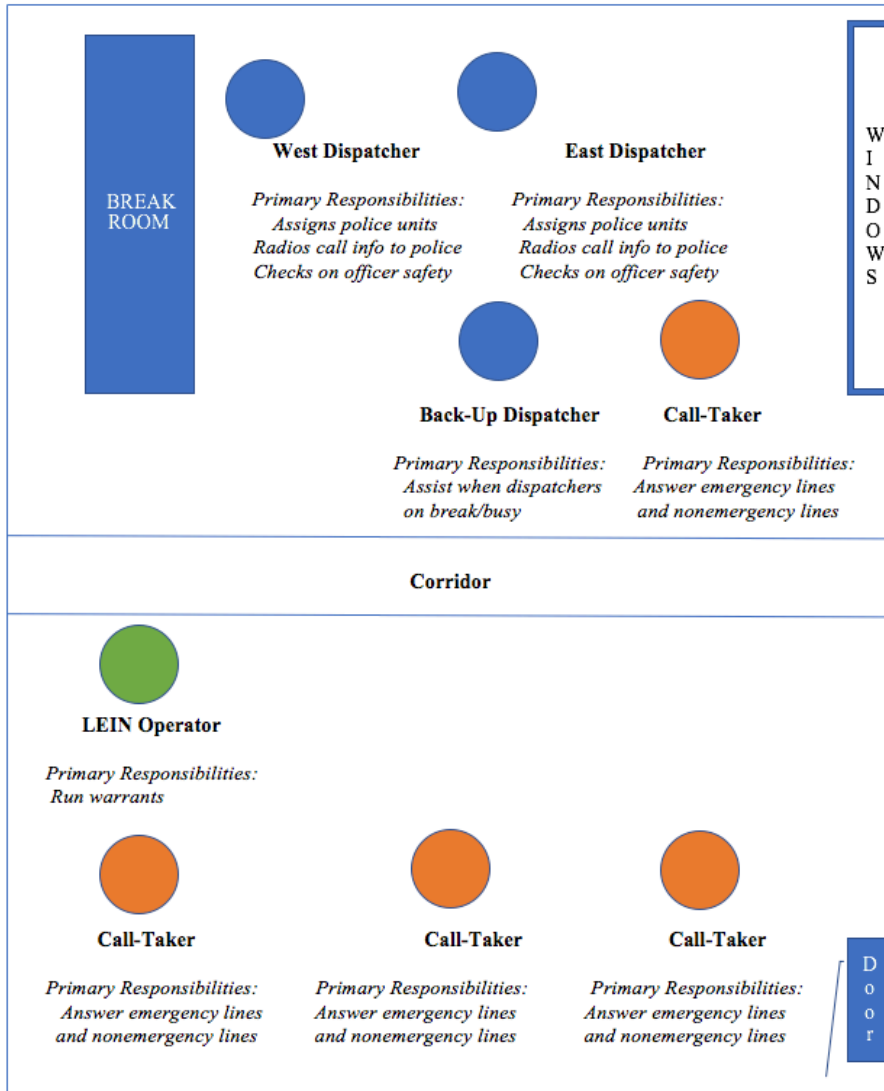
On a Wednesday afternoon in early spring, 911 call-takers and dispatchers at Central Dispatch answer emergency phone calls and dispatch police to myriad incidents across Southeast Michigan. Between the hours of 7 am and 3 pm, the three call-takers on duty answer roughly 400 phone calls and generate 204 calls-for-service that the two dispatchers relay over the radio to police—five fewer than on a typical Wednesday.

The call-takers and dispatchers sit or stand at their desk consoles—standing is often preferred among those working extended twelve- or sixteen-hour shifts. Their desk consoles are close enough together that co-workers can yell over to one another to share a laugh or a reprimand. This chatter adds to the noise in the room coming from multiple ringing phone lines, simultaneous telephone conversations, and police radio traffic. Each console station is equipped with three computers, five monitors, and three keyboards. The glare from the monitors illuminates the linoleum-floored room in an artificial, blueish glow. And, the smell of stale coffee, microwaved food, and cleaning disinfectant is heavy in the air.

Depending on the time of day, anywhere from four to eight call-takers and dispatchers work together at any one time. Typically, one to four call-takers answer phones, two dispatchers dispatch police (with a third working back-up), and one operator runs the Law Enforcement Information Network (LEIN). See Figure 1-6 for a floorplan of Central Dispatch; each circle represents a manned desk console. Full-time call-

takers/dispatchers rotate between all three job positions in the diagram: answering phones, operating the radio, and running LEIN. Part-time operators are only trained to answer phones.

Figure 1-1 Layout of Central Dispatch with Job Positions



Each worker wears an official Sheriff’s Office uniform. The uniforms are thick and uncomfortable. They consist of tucked-in khaki colored button-up shirts with embroidered Sheriff’s Office badges and name tags, black braided belts with large silver buckles, and black tactical cargo pants that come in only men’s sizes. Some employees

opt to wear police-grade black military boots issued by the department; others opt for all black sneakers bought out-of-pocket.

It is rare for an employee to wear their uniform on the street. Almost everyone changes up in the locker room before stepping onto the floor. On at least ten occasions, five different staff members said their uniforms made them feel vulnerable to attack from disgruntled residents looking to retaliate against law enforcement. Many employees carry concealed firearms for added protection on the street, but these are not departmentally issued and must be locked up in small lockers outside the interior main door before entering Central Dispatch.

Because staff are not authorized to have firearms at work, and because there is no armed law enforcement presence in the building, employees appear to rely on anonymity to feel safe. Central Dispatch is located on the second floor of a non-descript brick building. There are no signs on the door, no businesses listed in Google Maps for the address, nor any mention of the location on local police websites. If a member of the public were to look through the glass entry door on the first floor, all they would see is an empty brick-lined room with a few old mops and janitor buckets laying around. The lack of transparency about Central Dispatch's physical location is not merely an accident, rather it is a method of defense.

Around 11:45 am, Paul, a thirty-three-year-old full-time call-taker and dispatcher, hears the high-pitched ringtone of a 911 call play out over the speakers at his console and hits F1 to answer the line, "911, what is the location of your emergency?" He is following training protocol by first asking the caller for the location of their emergency. Location is the single most important piece of information according to Central Dispatch training

because it dictates which police agency will be dispatched to the call and allows for police to respond even if the caller hangs-up before providing any further information.

Carol, a guidance counselor at a local secondary school, is on the line and asks for help locating a seventh-grade student who is making suicidal threats over text. Carol provides the address of the school where she works, but quickly clarifies that the emergency is not occurring at the school. She explains that a student came into her office to show her text messages from his girlfriend. The girlfriend texted that she wanted to end her life. Paul starts typing the caller's name and phone number into the computer, and selects the incident type "SUICIDE" from a drop-down menu of over 100 incident types in the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. Carol does not know the girl's last name or address, just that she is a seventh-grade student at a neighboring school that is closed for the day. Paul asks Carol for the girl's phone number and inquires as to the nature of the relationship between the two students. Carol responds, "He's calling her his girlfriend but they've been dating for seven days... it's online...they haven't met." Paul tells Carol that he will try to use the phone number to locate the girl, but cautions that if the phone is pre-paid he likely cannot locate her. Paul then types up a summary of his interactions with Carol for the dispatcher, while calling Sprint's 24-7 law enforcement line to ascertain subscriber information (i.e., name and address) for the suicidal girl. Phone carriers have a dedicated law enforcement line that provides subscriber information and/or pings cell phones in life-or-death emergencies.

Across the room, Jasmine, a part-time call-taker, is on the phone with a man asking for a civil standby. Jasmine is in her late forties with long brown hair that she wears up in a ponytail to adhere to the dress standards at Central Dispatch. She worked

for the local court system before joining dispatch about five years ago. The caller, Joe, needs to pick up his belongings from his girlfriend but has a no contact order with the woman. He asks for the police to accompany him to get his things. Joe's belongings are at an apartment complex that is well-known to staff at Central Dispatch as a site of violent crime.

Jasmine interrupts Joe and puts him on hold to answer another non-emergency line that is ringing. The caller says, "Hey!" and Jasmine immediately recognizes the voice as belonging to a frequent caller, Bobby. Bobby is a local homeless man who routinely calls Central Dispatch just to say hi. Michelle, a veteran call-taker and dispatcher, met Bobby once when she was working as a dispatcher for a neighboring police department before the call center was consolidated with the Sheriff's Office and cautions that seeing Bobby in-person is not as entertaining as hearing from him. Jasmine follows the unspoken protocol at the center by asking Bobby, "What's the word?" to which he responds, "Call me back" and then disconnects. Another favorite phrase of Bobby's includes "zero zero." Bobby is a welcome distraction to many of the staff.

Jasmine returns to her line on hold and listens to Joe explain that, "I just got out of jail yesterday evening on some bullshit that me and her are going through. Some domestic kind of thing. I can't contact her...but she keeps texting me... I'm trying to cover my tracks...So what do I need to do to keep myself together, beyond what I've been doing?" Jasmine avoids answering his question, but tells him that she can send a deputy over when he's ready to pick up his belongings. He's ready now. Before disconnecting, Jasmine asks Joe for his race and date of birth, which he gives willingly and without question. With this information, a dispatcher can run his name through the

Law Enforcement Information Network (LEIN) to check the nature of the no-contact order, whether he has warrants out for his arrest, or if he has any registered firearms. As a part-timer, Jasmine is only trained to answer phones so she cannot access LEIN to run Joe herself.

Between answering other calls, Paul tracks down the phone number for the suicidal seventh-grader's mother. He calls the mother to inform her of the information he received through 911 and ask about the girl's location. The mother is at work and explains that her daughter should be at her grandmother's house. Now that Paul has a good address, he updates the CAD record in the computer for the dispatcher and dials the medical dispatch center to request an ambulance to head toward the grandmother's house for a possible psychiatric transport to the hospital. Depending on how quickly the medical dispatch center can get an ambulance to head to the address, the EMTs may have to wait in the area until the police show up and secure the scene. An hour after Paul received the initial call from the school counselor, the police radio in that the female is being transported to the hospital. The dispatcher and call-taker never learn the extent, if any, of the self-harm.

Meanwhile, Jasmine is busy struggling to piece together information from the victim of a felonious assault (i.e., an assault with a deadly weapon). The caller, Frank, says that someone shot at his vehicle in the parking lot of a Subway. Jasmine asks in a confused tone why he waited twenty minutes after getting shot at to call 911. Frank responds, "I was scared." Jasmine asks for a description of the suspect, Frank's current location, and his phone number. Frank pauses and starts yelling at a passerby to tell him what street he is on and then struggles to provide his phone number, saying, "I don't dial

my own phone so I really can't remember." Jasmine repeats the phone number that shows up on her caller-id to jog Frank's memory and then tells him to stay where he is and the police will meet him there.

In the span of ten minutes, Paul and Jasmine process calls from Carol, Joe, Bobby, and Frank. Over the next seven hours, the call-takers on-duty enter many more calls-for-service; everything from medical transfers (n=38) to suspicious persons (n=23) to suicidal persons (n=6) to dog complaints (n=4) to family troubles (n=4) to a felonious assault (n=1). These calls produce a demand on the state for finite, public resources. Paul and Jasmine stand at the initial boundary of the criminal justice system and are tasked with determining whether these demands will be met with a law enforcement response, and the level of risk they involve. Up until now, how call-takers perform these critical job functions, and the challenges and dilemmas they face in carrying them out, rarely has been the subject of scholarly attention.

This dissertation, as mentioned in the introduction, strives to answer the question of how 911 call-takers mediate caller demands and impact policing outcomes. Answering this question requires redirecting attention off the streets and into the places where 911 call-takers work. For this dissertation, I became an active participant in the 911 system and conducted research using a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and historical approaches.

In 2016, I was hired by a Sheriff's Office in Southeast Michigan as a part-time 911 call-taker. Joining the agency as an employee helped me overcome historic wariness of law enforcement toward outside researchers and granted me rare institutional access. Maurice Punch (1979) puts best the task before police researchers:

The researcher's task becomes, then, how to outwit the institutional obstacle-course to gain entry and...penetrate the mine-field of social defenses to reach the inner reality of police work. Prolonged participant observation seems to me to be the most appropriate, if not the sole, method for achieving these ends.

Indeed, since the American Bar Foundation survey, essential studies illuminating police officer discretion have all been observational in nature (Moskos 2008; Bittner 1990; LaFave and Remington 1965; M. K. Brown 1988; James Q. Wilson 1978). Participant observation pays attention to how individuals react and behave to make sense of uncertain situations. The method's emphasis on meaning-making and interaction is particularly well-suited for studying discretion (Becker and Geer 1957). This method helped me to identify and describe the decision-making processes that shape call-taker behavior, the situations in which formal rules break-down, and the logics that lead call-takers to make decisions differently from one another.

As my time in the field progressed, I came to ask more reflective questions based on my observations and expand my methodological toolkit to include a mix of historical, quantitative, and qualitative approaches to answer them. First, I sought to gain greater insight into why police leaders I spoke with were so hesitant to empower call-takers to be more effective gatekeepers. To do this, I reviewed historical materials on call-driven policing and dispatch to clarify the exact times and places when the public's expectations about receiving police responses became so ingrained.

Second, I sought to test whether, and to what extent, my observations concerning call-taker discretion impacted street-level policing. Quantitative analyses using administrative call-for-service and arrest records were conducive to examining direct

links between variation in *risk appraisal*, a concept I observed in my field notes, and policing outcomes, such as arrests.

Third, to precisely examine the strategies call-takers relied on when facing uncertainty or ambiguity, I expanded on my field notes to include audio recordings of emergency and non-emergency calls. Audio recordings permitted me a window into the exact exchanges between callers and call-takers. One particularly useful audio recording came from outside my field site and captured the 911 call that resulted in the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. This call concretely highlighted the difficulties that I had observed and experienced in appraising incident risk, and was accompanied by a robust scholarly response that helped inform the analysis.

The data in this dissertation were collected during my twenty-five-month employment tenure. They include participant observation field notes from June 2016 – July 2018 about interacting with citizens on the phone, meeting with management, and navigating complex social dynamics with co-workers; call-for-service administrative records (N=159,487) which archive the date, time, location, and nature of every police-citizen interaction over a two-year time-period; arrest records (N=6,743); training manuals; and audio recordings of 159 emergency and nonemergency calls. Taken together, this is the most comprehensive dataset on a dispatch center in the U.S.

This research was approved by University of Michigan IRB, and formally supported by the Sheriff and Undersheriff who signed a data use agreement. Supervisors at Central Dispatch were also aware of my research and condoned data collection. Immediate co-workers knew I was conducting research on 911, but were less aware of the types of data and methods I was using. To protect personal identities, all names of

dispatch personnel have been changed, in addition to the name of the dispatch center and the cities and county it covers. Because callers were not aware of my research objectives, I did not take notes on names, phone numbers, or exact addresses. The IRB did not require consent from callers because every 911 call is recorded and open to FOIA by the public.

Field Site

The field site for this dissertation is particularly fruitful site for three main reasons: it is a consolidated dispatch center meaning it dispatches for multiple police agencies, it covers a geographic area with considerable racial and socioeconomic variation, and it receives a high call volume. Central Dispatch handles requests from 95 percent of the residents in the county. It operates as an organizational unit under the control of the local Sheriff's Office, but dispatches for six distinct police agencies across several cities, townships, and villages. Dispatch operations have been consolidated across multiple cities and townships over the past eleven years. Because Central Dispatch handles calls from across the county, I can hold constant organizational features—such as training practices, call-taker characteristics, technology, and office environment—while maintaining substantial variation in types of calls and responses.

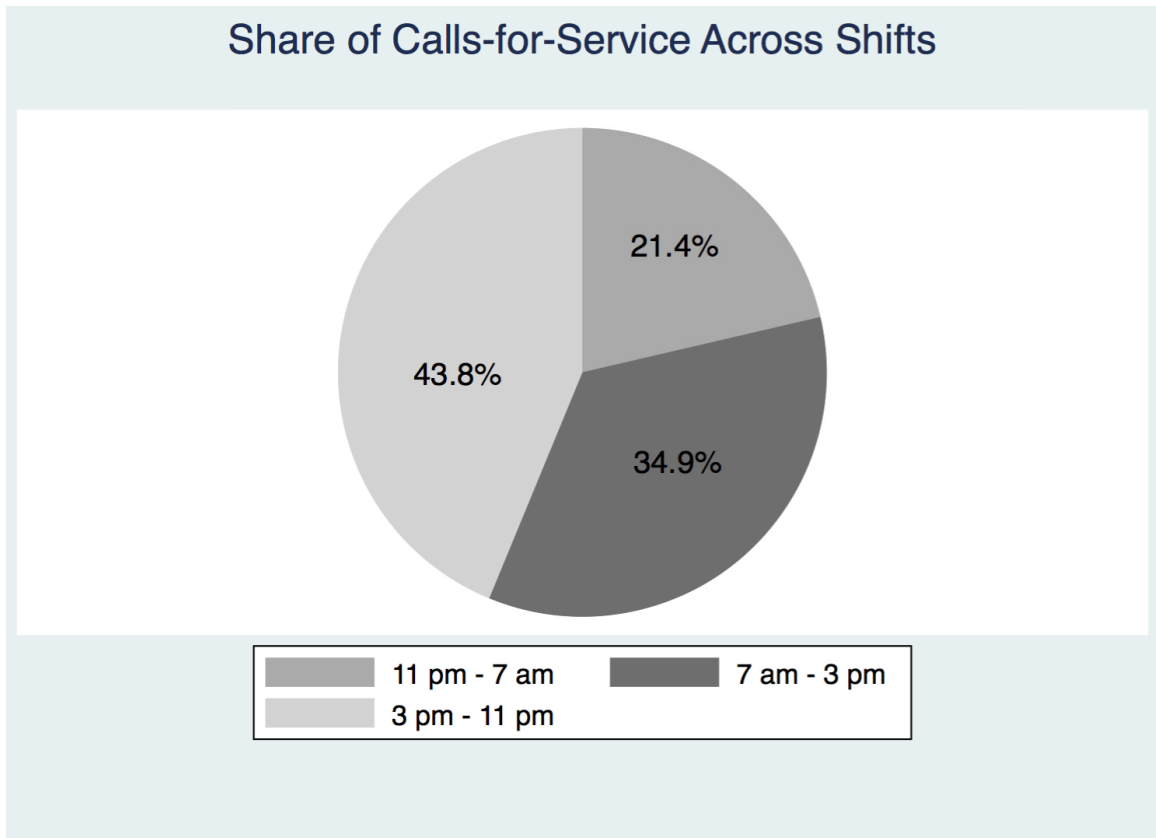
Central Dispatch provides a window into mid-sized law enforcement agencies where reactive policing is especially prevalent. Findings from a 2017 National Academy of Sciences report on proactive policing (i.e., officer-initiated stops) suggest that existing sites of police study such as Chicago, New York, and Oakland are less fruitful spaces for investigating call-driven policing because “the use of proactive strategies declines as the

size of police departments decline.” In other words, smaller departments, like the ones that Central Dispatch dispatches for, spend a greater share of their time responding to calls-for-service.

Geographically, much of the county where this research took place is rural, has low population density (fewer than 3,600 people per square mile), and is white (percent white is eighty-five or higher). The county also contains two mid-size cities. These two cities, and closely surrounding townships, are racially distinct from one another. African Americans make up 7 percent of the population in City A, compared to 32 percent of the population in City B and 27 percent in the township surrounding City B. In City B, the African American population is highly concentrated with some areas over 70 percent Black. The two areas also vary in unemployment, poverty, and median income. The average unemployment rate in City A is 3 percent, compared to 7 percent in City B and 5 percent in the surrounding township. The average poverty rate is considerably higher in City B (41%) and its township (17%) than in City A (14%). Similarly, average median household income is much lower in City B (\$26,097) and the surrounding township (\$55,335) than in City A (\$75,925).

Based on personnel, call volume, size of population covered, and number of agencies served, Central Dispatch is one of the busiest dispatch centers in Michigan. On average, the center receives approximately 1,300 calls per day and dispatches police to slightly over 500 of them. Calls that receive a police dispatch are referred to as *calls-for-service*. Staff at Central Dispatch entered 268,920 calls-for-service between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016, excluding officer-initiated traffic stops. The volume of calls-for-service are unevenly distributed across the three shifts at the center— “days” (7 am – 3 pm), “noons” (3 pm – 11 pm), and “mids” (11 pm – 7 am) — with the “noons” shift generating the most calls-for-service. See Figure 1-5 for the fraction of calls-for-service by shift.

Figure 1-2 Share of Calls-for-Service Across Shifts



Staffing

The Sheriff's Office 2017 annual report finds that compared to other divisions (e.g., community engagement, administration, corrections, and police services), Central Dispatch is the *least diverse*. Ninety-three percent of staff are white and seventy percent are female. When I asked some of my male co-workers why they chose to work in dispatch, several mentioned either not passing the necessary exams to become police officers or preferring the safety of working indoors. Paul, for example, shared with me that he had thought about being a cop, but opted not to because "the pay isn't that different from working in dispatch and being a cop is hard today with people shooting at you and stuff." More than half the full-time employees were hired either directly from college or from local dispatch agencies that were taken over in consolidations. Of the employees under age forty-five, most hold 4-year college degrees. Table 1-1 includes demographics of Central Dispatch employees based on my field notes.

Table 1-1 Demographic Characteristics of 911 Operators at Central Dispatch, 2015-2016

	Sample
<hr/>	
<i>Sex</i>	
Female	0.71
Male	0.29
<i>Job Position</i>	
Full-Time Call-Taker & Dispatcher	0.77
Part-Time Call-Taker	0.23
<i>Job Experience</i>	
10 Years or Less Job Experience	0.52
10 Years+ Job Experience	0.48
<i>Race</i>	
Black	0.07
White	0.93
Observations	31

By Spring 2018, Central Dispatch was operating with 21 trained full-time operators and six trained part-time operators; this is far below the recommended staffing level of 30 full-time operators. Low staffing levels was a consistent problem during my time at the center and made for challenging working conditions with some full-time operators being forced to work 16-hour shifts multiple days in a row. Many of the staff at Central Dispatch consider their co-workers as a second family given the number of hours they spend together. This closeness between staff is balanced by a level of fractiousness given the demands and stresses of their work.

Although my co-workers often blamed the lack of hiring on failures in recruiting by the supervisor, data from the agency indicate that the larger issue was attrition during the hiring process. In 2016, the agency received 292 applications for full-time communication operators and 219 applications for part-time call-takers. To apply for the job, you must be over the age of 18 and have a high school diploma or GED. Full-time operators earn between \$36,713 and \$58,631 annually, receive full benefits, are part of the police union, and can work overtime for additional 1.5-2.0 times pay. Part-time call-takers earn \$18/hour with no benefits or union status. Despite the number of applicants, none of the 292 full-time applicants, and only four of the 219 part-time applicants, were hired in 2016.

Applicant attrition was not surprising given the protracted hiring process. Making a job offer requires applicants successfully completing nine tasks: passing a data entry test, attending an informational job meeting, filling out a 31-page personal history statement application (9-page for part-timers), observing a 911 operator for an eight-hour

shift, passing the CritiCall computer test, participating in a human resources interview, background investigation, medical examination, drug test, and psychiatric examination. The largest drop-off in applicants comes early in the process. Of the 292 full-time applicants, only 78 signed up to take the initial data entry test. Of the 56 who passed, 43 attended the job description presentation, 18 completed the 31-page personal history statement, 10 passed CritiCall, and 2 passed the human resources interview and subsequent background investigation. Neither ended up in the job position.

Completing this process took me nearly four-months and was at times quite intense—like when I was interrogated for two hours by in-house detectives who sat with a 3” binder with the name “Gillooly” on the side and grilled me about whether I had engaged in drug activity as a student on “liberal” college campuses, if I had ever joined a group with the intent of overthrowing the US government, and why I had not told them that I was pulled over by the police for making a wake in my 10’ boat when I was 16 years old in my home state of Rhode Island.

The agency began streamlining the hiring process in January 2017 in response to mounting pressure from staff. Since then, the agency has eliminated the County’s pre-employment data entry test, and applicants who do not pass the more challenging CritiCall test on their first attempt can retake it 30 days later. Furthermore, the agency has bought additional software licenses to enable applicants to practice before taking the test. The hiring supervisor also has increased recruitment efforts online and at local college campuses. These efforts seem to be helping. I was informed in July 2019 by a former supervisor that the center is now operating at full-staffing levels.

Data

Participant Observation Field notes

Throughout my time working as a 911 call-taker, I took field notes and jottings of my experiences with callers, co-workers, and supervisors. Most of my field notes came from the “noon” shift that runs from 3 pm – 11 pm. I selected the noon shift because it exposed me to the most calls. Approximately forty percent of my field notes came from Friday and Saturday shifts because I was juggling work responsibilities with being a graduate student. Furthermore, a 2017 policy change required part-time staff to sign up for at least 32 hours per month during “critical shifts” (i.e., Fridays and/or Saturdays) because of staffing shortages.

One obstacle to taking field notes while working at 911 was the speed at which calls came into the center. During a typical shift, I handled a call every two-and-a-half minutes, which left little time to take notes between calls. To overcome this obstacle, I made quick jottings and referred back during breaks or lulls to add more detail. Sometimes, I failed to make jottings as I was unwilling to compromise caller safety in the name of research. Other times, I was simply too physically and emotionally exhausted to convert jotting into detailed field notes.

In three small notebooks, I kept quick-reference items that helped me efficiently perform the job. Items like the after-hour key code for the local animal shelter, the appropriate information to gather if a juvenile had run away, a reminder to update the medical dispatch center if a call was no longer emergent, and directions of travel to ensure appropriate agency response. See images 1-1 through 1-2 for examples of these notes.

Illustration 1-1 Directions of Road Travel

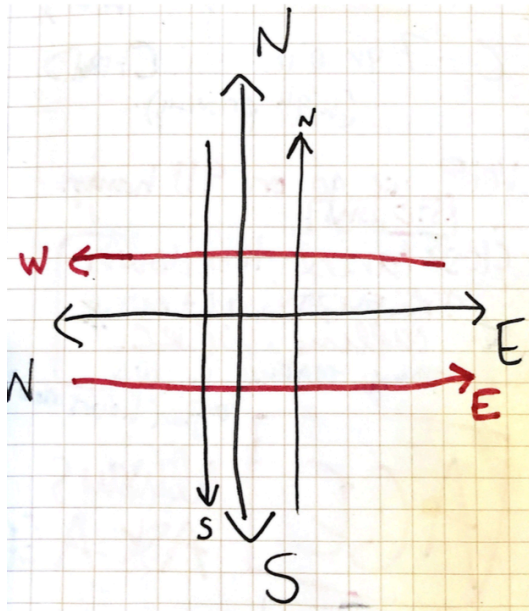
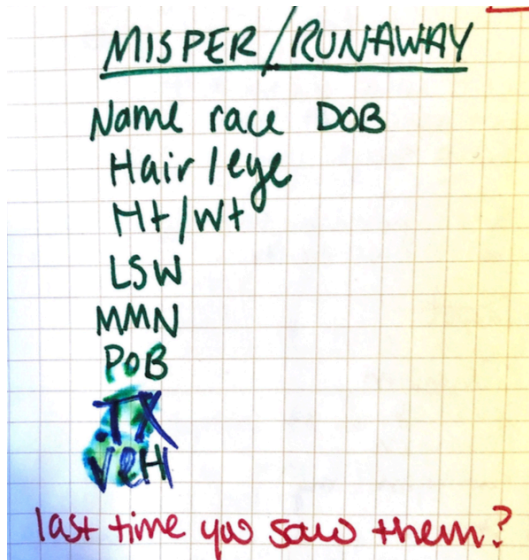


Illustration 1-2 Routine Question Prompts



I kept notes about calls and interactions with co-workers in other notebooks or on my laptop. Certain work stations offered enough privacy that I could type on my laptop without co-workers reading over my shoulder. Employees can use cell phones, iPads, and laptops during work, though there is a risk of the items being FOIA'ed in response to

mishandled calls.

Audio Recordings

For a researcher, a useful feature of the 911 system is that every call is recorded. It was difficult to capture callers' exact wording, or my co-workers' exchanges with callers; however, I could fill these data gaps with call audio recordings. Audio recordings reveal precisely how 911 calls are produced—how a caller presents their problem, what a call-taker says in reply, and the decision points a call-taker faces.

I redacted personally identifiable information (e.g., names, phone numbers, and exact addresses) and then extracted 225 audio recordings of emergency and non-emergency calls. I excluded calls that lasted less than one minute because they were mostly hang-up calls, burglary alarm calls, or private property impounds and did not offer much in the way of interaction. Because putting a caller on hold often generates a new audio recording file but is the continuation of the same call, my final sample consisted of 159 unique recordings.

The audio recording sampling strategy was intended to produce maximum variation across call-takers. To do this, I cross-referenced staffing schedules and sampled calls on a day in April 2018 when a mix of full-time, part-time, novice, and experienced call-takers were on-duty. Although there are advantages to sampling calls from different days—namely greater potential variety in the type of calls—my sampling strategy minimized having repeat call-takers across days.

Call-for-service and arrest records

Despite limitations of administrative data—they are not collected for the purposes of research, have no code book that defines variables or values, and are not well-positioned to answer research questions about process—call-for-service data ended up being critically important to this dissertation. Not only do they provide a complete archive of the type and frequency of police-citizen contact across the county, but they capture the ways in which call-takers and police classify incidents. Classification decisions capture interactional outcomes between callers and call-takers.

I extracted administrative records of every 911 and non-emergency call that a call-taker entered into the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016 (N=367,754). I reduced the sample size to 159,487 by dropping all officer-initiated traffic stops because they are not the result of a caller/call-taker interaction (N= 100,934), non-life-threatening medical calls because police rarely respond (N=32,418), Michigan State Police calls because troopers do not use the same dispatching software so there is no information about the verified incident (N=29,114), and calls that could not be geocoded for a host of reasons (N=45,801). Note that call-for-service data do not include records of calls that call-takers address without police assistance, such as helping a lost driver, redirecting a caller to another agency, or multiple calls about the same incident, such as a car fire on the highway.

These data, provided by the Sheriff's Office, include the date and address of each call that received a police dispatch, a reported offense code determined by the call-taker, a verified offense code as determined by the officer once on-scene, and the personal identity of the call-taker. The data set includes identifiers for each of the thirty-one 911 operators who worked during this period.

Call-for-service records were merged to arrest records. Arrest data are from 2015 (N=6,743). The arrest records include 4,210 officer-initiated arrests and 2,533 call-driven arrests. The most severe charge was kept for each arrest; lower-level charges were dropped.

Drawing on resources at the Clark geospatial library at the University of Michigan and the center for Consulting for Statistics, Computing, and Analytics Research (CSCAR), calls-for-service and arrest records were geocoded and merged to block-group census data. Census variables come from the 2011-2015 ACS 5-year estimates and include racial composition, education level, and poverty status at the block-group level.

Training Manuals

Because discretion often arises in the absence of clear rules, an examination into call-taker discretion requires a review of formal call-taking protocols. To document formal practices and procedures, I collected call-taking rulebooks from my field site. The over one-hundred-page formal rulebook was provided by the Sheriff's Office during training. It includes organizational-specific rules, as well as national-level rules provided to dispatch centers by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA). Dispatch centers can register with NENA to access model policies and practices. The guidelines are intended to create some consistency in how calls are handled across communities.

Gaining Trust

Gaining the trust of my co-workers was at times harder than the actual job of answering 911 emergency phone calls. Staff are largely unwelcoming to newcomers

because many quit during training, gossip mercilessly about workers who make mistakes for anything from not providing information quickly enough for in-progress calls to mixing up “their,” “there,” and “they’re” in their incident narratives, and are not fond of part-timers. Moreover, staff are almost entirely from Michigan and have strong preferences for the more rural parts of the county.

I was a part-time call-taker, who lived in an urban part of the county, was from the East Coast, and did not carry a gun. Early on in my training, I realized I needed to overcome these differences to build relationships with my research participants. Building rapport would be crucial to the quality of data I could collect. Sociologist Karen O’Reilly (2009) writes that a key concept in ethnography involves, “Establishing reciprocal relationships based on mutual trust and understanding, which in turn demands a certain rapport. The kinds of relationship built in the field can affect the quality and range of access achieved (and vice versa) and the data collected, or constructed.”

To build rapport with my co-workers, I spent the first four months of job training speaking only to my communications training operator (i.e., a full-timer who works certain shifts as a trainer) and my supervisor. One of the other new-hires was overly talkative early on, and I overheard veteran call-takers expressing irritation with her for “not knowing her place at the center.” To avoid this social pitfall, I spent my first six months answering as many calls as I could, not speaking to anyone unless they spoke to me, and quietly observing the unspoken social norms of the center.

Over time, I picked up on social cues about what irritated full-timers—such as staying on the phone too long with a caller, asking for co-worker help answering the same question multiple times, acting overly confident, or making spelling and grammar

mistakes in the computer screen. I also picked up on the less call-related cues—such as not moving someone’s food out of the microwave until they reclaimed it, wiping down your workstation with Lysol wipes after your shift, never saying the word “quiet” because it would surely bring a deluge of calls, and showing up twenty minutes before your shift to relieve your co-worker.

After about eight months of proving myself an efficient worker who was attuned to the social norms of the center, my co-workers began opening up to me and vice-versa. With rapport built, I could ask more questions about their thought-processes as they handled calls, what frustrated them about the job, and what kinds of calls they considered problematic.

Despite doing my best to navigate the rules of the center, I was paranoid that the full-time operators did not fully accept me and thus was missing out on valuable data. A major break-through happened when I invited by the full-timers to sit at the desk position next to the dispatch desks. This position is informally reserved for full-timers who are on phone duty; not for part-timers. Sitting in this position meant not only that I was gaining respect at work, but also that I could better overhear the struggles and frustrations experienced by dispatchers.

A further sign of approaching “insider” status was co-worker teasing. Jokes about my trips to the organic grocery store where the “barefoot hippies go,” my confusion about what a “chop shop” was (I later learned it is *not* somewhere to bring your car for service), or my East Coast palate that “probably only drank Fiji water” were some of the recurring jokes made at my expense. On three occasions, two of my co-workers and one of my supervisors joked about me “being a mole” because of my research. Other signs of

acceptance included receiving support from full-timers after challenging calls, being invited to switch into the “good” locker room, and occasional text or Facebook messaging outside of work.

Although approaching “insider” status had its perks, it also meant I was becoming more jaded and developing biases about people and places. Over farewell drinks at a local bar, two of my co-workers reminisced about my initial innocence and how they did not think I would make it through training because they had heard that on one occasion I was nervous to ride the elevator with a cop, and on another I was scared that a cop was going to shoot a Black man in response to a 911 call. I never approached their level of distrust and skepticism toward callers, but I did become hardened to the everyday plight of many callers. My patience for listening to drawn out stories about child custody battles or the reasons why a caller broke up with their girlfriend wore thin faster and often resulted in fist banging at my desk when the caller would not stop talking.

Despite my years of training in graduate school on implicit bias, racism, and social stratification, I caught myself stereotyping people and places based on what neighborhood they called from or the way they spoke on the phone. Many 911 operators rely on stereotypes when handling calls, such as trusting that callers from certain apartment complexes know the difference between gunshots and fireworks. Yet, mental shortcuts like these can backfire. I experienced this one afternoon when I entered a call-for-service to the wrong location. The address the caller gave me existed in both City A and City B and I mistakenly assumed the caller was in City B based on her name, the way she spoke on the phone, and previous calls to that location. I did not realize my error until she called back irritated that the police had not arrived. After correcting my mistake, I

was confronted with the truth that my own biases had affected the receipt of police services.

Being socialized into the job of a 911 operator made me complicit in a criminal justice system that I frequently struggled to consider just. Although I provided life-saving assistance in some incidences, in others I entered calls-for-service with the main goal being to harass low-income people and people of color, such as when a caller could not articulate why a person was suspicious beyond their mere presence on the street. Additionally, when asking a caller for a subject's name, race, and date of birth—whether that subject was a suspect in an assault or an elderly neighbor who needed to be checked on—I was gathering information used to run people for warrants often unbeknownst to the caller. At times, that information led to arrests. My own actions, influenced by training protocols, co-workers, and bias, speak to some of the ways in which the work going on in dispatch centers complicates the existing narrative that police officer discretion is the root of the problems facing the police and public today.

Testing Trust

In 2018, I wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* about how police departments could leverage 911 call-takers to reduce racially motivated call-driven police encounters. This piece came out a month after the Philadelphia Starbucks incident in which a white employee called 911 to report two Black men for not making a purchase. The men were waiting for an associate to join them before placing an order, a commonplace occurrence at Starbucks. Yet in this instance, the men were told by the manager to make a purchase or leave, and when they refused the employee called the police. Officers were dispatched

to a “disturbance” at the Starbucks and asked the men to leave. According to the police report, the men again refused and began being “verbally disrespectful to the police.” The officers then arrested the two men and charged them with a “defiant trespass” misdemeanor (Philadelphia Police Advisory Commission 2018). A bystander recorded the interaction and the video of the Philadelphia Police arresting two black men for sitting in a Starbucks went viral. The video raised questions about whether the Starbucks employee or the police would have behaved in the same way were the two men in question white. The Starbucks incident was the fifth story in a spring filled with stories about white people calling 911 on people of color simply for going about their lives.

The news about these incidents did not surprise me. As a call-taker, I had processed countless requests from citizens and rarely denied police services. I saw how callers’ biases and idiosyncratic preferences became police responses that affected people of color. I handled a call from a man who was bothered by his neighbor’s “Mexican music.” I handled a call from a man who felt uncomfortable at the bus station because a black teenager’s jeans were hanging too low. I handled a call from a man who was so irate with his neighbors for selling illegal cigarettes, chips, and drugs from their apartment that he yelled on a recorded line, “I’m sick of these f’ing N----s. I’m gonna kill them if nothing gets done.” My own frustration over callers who invoked “they don’t belong here” language or made racial slurs on the telephone, coupled with that of my mostly white, female, and more conservative co-workers, provoked me to write about the potential for call-takers to prevent the worst excesses of 911 from entering the legal system through empowered gatekeeping.

Although I had considered my policy suggestion for call-takers to reject racially

motivated requests practical and sensible, I did not fully grasp the stir that such a recommendation could create. For starters, I had forgotten (or perhaps conveniently overlooked) the agency rulebook section about the media that explicitly states, “No employee can lecture on ‘police’ or related matters to the public without the express consent of the undersheriff.” In response to re-reading this rule, I emailed my supervisor to ask permission to publish the opinion piece. Within hours, my request had made it far up the chain of command.

I nervously waited for a phone call from agency brass, fearing reprimand, or at worst firing, and the burning of bridges with those at my field site. Agency brass asked why I had written the piece and told me it was highly irregular for an employee to go to the media. I clarified that my decision stemmed from my dissertation research, which seemed to assuage some concerns about my underlying motivations. A top police official articulated that he agreed with a lot of what I had written, especially the idea that call-takers often are overlooked yet critically important to policing.

Nonetheless, he had serious concerns about some of my policy recommendations. He disagreed that the responsibility should lay with the call-taker to decide whether to dispatch the police. Because call-takers do not have a visual and only hear one side of any incident, he said it was “unfair to them and to the community” to burden them with that choice. His response somewhat surprised me given that I had frequently witnessed call-takers struggle to make that exact decision with suspicious person calls, sometimes opting to send the police and other times not. Moreover, his comments seemed to run counter to studies on dispatch that argued a key function of call-taking involved gatekeeping (Percy and Scott 1985; Lum et al. 2020). Ultimately, we agreed about

recommendations to encourage call-takers to press callers for more information and alert police to potentially inappropriate requests.

This interaction, along with subsequent conversations with police leadership from other agencies, revealed to me that the notion of empowering call-takers, or placing checks and balances over the 911 system, could be perceived as radical and dangerous. I was puzzled. If the role of the call-taker was not to decide whether to send the police, then what precisely was their role in the system? Were they simply conveyer belts passing along caller information? If so, that did not square with my experiences in the field where call-takers were making decisions and exercising discretion over caller requests. Moreover, I was left wondering how it became likely that when the public calls the police, regardless of the nature of the problem, they inevitably receive a police response. The historical account of call-driven policing and dispatch that I present in the next chapter helps to address these questions.



Chapter 2: The Evolution of Call-Driven Policing and Dispatch

Each day across America, many thousands of residents dial 911 seeking assistance. An estimated 240 million calls are made to 911 each year. The majority of which are for non-life threatening, non-emergencies—such as traffic complaints, noise disturbances, and animal complaints (Lum et al. 2020).

Calls to 911 are wide-ranging and can involve everything from mental health illness to substance abuse to homelessness to interpersonal conflicts (Cumming, Cumming, and Edell 1965; James Q. Wilson 1978; Herring 2019; Zezima 2017). With some frequency, 911 callers report people of color for simply going about their lives. The media has covered the social costs of inappropriate 911 usage in incidents from Philadelphia to Cleveland to Colorado (Takei 2018).

Chapter 2 aims to place today's call center practices in their historical context to shed light on how callers came to have such broad influence over what the police do and where they go. The earliest forms of call-driven policing in the late 19th century attempted to strike a balance between citizens' power to mobilize the police and potential abuses of that power, but that balance has eroded due to changing assumptions about who should play a role in mobilizing the police, how broad the scope of police work should be, and what function dispatch personnel can and should play in mediating caller demands. This chapter suggests that contemporary call center practices—particularly the conception of dispatch personnel—should be revisited.

In the wake of the Philadelphia Starbucks incident involving a white barista calling 911 to report two Black men for not making a purchase, the Philadelphia Police Advisory Commission published a report reviewing the case. Their report was one of the first by a police department to explicitly acknowledge the role of 911 caller bias in policing and demand policy change. The report reads, “The weaponization of police due to racial animus or other reasons must be addressed by the Police Department, citizens, and business owners.” They go on to recommend reforming 911 usage by developing “a clear and consistent communication strategy to educate the public regarding how and when 911 should be utilized” (Philadelphia Police Advisory Commission 2018).

Philadelphia remains one of the only major cities to include the public’s usage of 911 in conversations about police reform. Indeed, the 2015 President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing report and Campaign Zero—a prominent online police reform clearinghouse developed by activists, protestors, and researchers—are both silent about how the 911 system produces policing challenges.

Instead, policymakers and police officials often focus on reforms to improve police officer behavior because they consider community bias an intractable problem. Following the Starbucks incident, the same high-level police official in Michigan who expressed concerns with my proposed op-ed policy recommendation to empower call-takers to reject racially motivated calls (described in the previous chapter), explained his community bias perspective to me in a 2018 interview: “There’s a history in this country of police being used as a tool to further societal bias. So I don’t know if these types of things are ever totally eliminated because I don’t know if you ever eliminate societal bias.

So I think the way you mitigate these situations is when officers do arrive [*sic*] we mitigate the impact of that.” A former police commissioner from Massachusetts expressed a similar viewpoint to me in 2019—biased calls are part of the system and our best hope lays in training the police to be respectful. Neither leader advocated for placing limits or checks on the 911 system.

Embedded in the Starbucks case is a clash of ideals. On the one hand, the public’s use of 911 is an exemplar of a functioning democratic system of governance—the will of the people guiding the work of the government (e.g., the police)—and it produces tangible safety benefits. Any member of the public can pick up a phone, dial 911, and receive police services. In a December 2019 interview with NPR’s 1A, Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo highlights the highly democratic nature of 911: “When you call 911 we don’t ask whether you’re white, Black, brown, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, man, woman, straight, gay. We don’t ask whether you’re a supporter or not a supporter. We don’t ask where your zip code is. We don’t ask if you’re a critic, friend, or foe. We ask what is the problem, what is the threat, where are you located. And we roll.” Attempts to limit the public’s use of 911 could threaten the core democratic principles at the heart of the system.

On the other hand, an unchecked democratic system can lead to oppressive use of government authority and produce unanticipated inequalities. Under call-driven policing, the distribution of police intervention is not determined by explicit policy choices about where police intervention is most warranted. Rather, police allocation is the result of uncoordinated private choices (Thacher 2001). The system prioritizes the needs of the caller. Because callers are not trained in the legal subtleties of criminal law, have their

own biases about people and places, and/or maintain complicated relationships with family members, neighbors, and exes prioritizing caller demands can come at the expense of the subject of the call. Indeed, the Starbucks incident underscores how the very people already disproportionately negatively affected by policing often bear the burden of these calls.

From the perspective of the police officials in Michigan, Houston, and Massachusetts that I quoted earlier, calls like these are an inevitable byproduct of the system. The public has come to expect a police response when they call 911. The Michigan official directly expressed this to me when he said, “If you call in this community, we already know that your expectation is that we are going to send somebody. Maybe that never changes” (2018). But how did that expectation come to be? When did it become likely that when the public calls the police, regardless of the nature of the problem, they receive a police response? Has the system always offered the public such latitude over the scope of police work? And are there ways to change the public’s expectations about 911 while preserving a democratic system?

In this chapter, I address these questions by showing that the present state of affairs is historically contingent rather than preordained or unavoidable. Historian Quentin Skinner (1969) writes about the use of *contingency* in historical reasoning: “A knowledge of the history of such ideas can then serve to show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements which we may be disposed to accept as tradition or even ‘timeless’ truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure.” This approach attempts to locate the exact times and places where practices and beliefs became normalized in society.

By using a historical reasoning approach, I find that the account previously put forward by criminologists who study the history of the police—that technological innovations like the telephone, two-way radio, patrol car, and 911 system unavoidably led to a rise in call-driven policing—is incomplete (Moskos 2008; Sherman 1983). This is because institutional and ideological changes also played an important role in shaping citizen-driven policing over this period. Through reviewing historical materials, I find five discrete developments that affected the public’s access to policing and how police departments handled the public’s demands: 1) the introduction of the call box in the late 19th century, 2) the rise of the telephone, 3) the lessening of police autonomy, 4) the civilianization and feminization of dispatch, and 5) the rise of 911 and 311.

From the Telegraph to the Telephone

The rise of reactive policing—defined by legal theorists as the mobilization of the police through citizen-initiated complaints (Black 1973)—has its origins in the invention of the fire alarm box. With cities across the U.S. experiencing massive population growth and overcrowding in the late 19th century, fires were becoming more prevalent and an effective system was needed to preserve life and property. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which killed over 200 people and destroyed nearly four square miles of the city, was a stark reminder of the challenges urbanization brought (Poulin 2011). Because firefighters did not, and still do not, roam the streets looking for fires, an alarm box provided a solution to the limited information available from inside the station house. In 1845 in the *Boston Advertiser*, physician and inventor William F. Channing presented designs for an alarm box that would connect residents to fire departments by telegraph

(Easterbrook 1902). The box would have an alarm that when triggered would tap out a signal onto telegraph wire indicating the box number. Telegraph operators inside fire stations would then match the box number to numbered neighborhoods and send out the fire department. Between 1852 and 1881, over one-hundred fire alarm boxes were installed throughout the US (Leonard 1938).

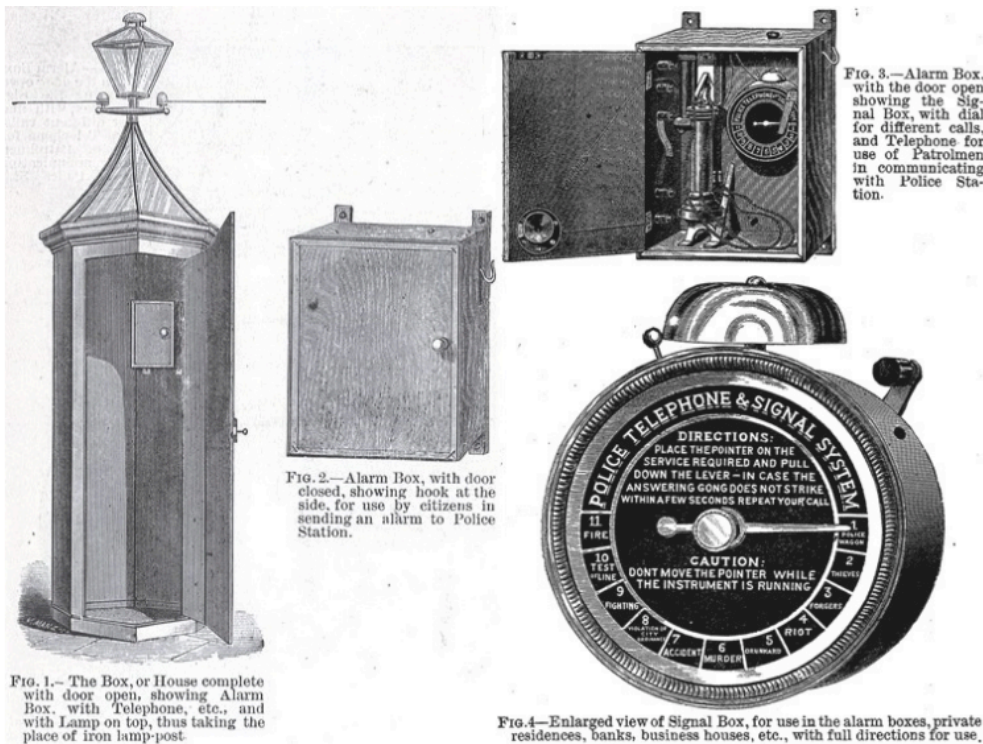
Prior to the 1880s, police were not included in the alarm box system; a partial reflection of the way society conceived of the police at that time. The function of uniformed police was to walk the streets deterring crime, much like the night watchman or constable of colonial times. With police out roaming the streets, a resident could simply run up to a beat patrolman and ask for assistance (Leonard 1938).

The informal watch and constable system was no match for urbanization and growing disorder. First, the watch system was largely unreliable because it was volunteer based and decentralized. Second, constables and night watchmen were not trained in maintaining law and order, and often found themselves busy performing myriad other duties, such as land surveying and proclaiming marriage announcements (Walker 1998; Whitehouse 1973). A variety of factors, including a rise in mob violence and vice in cities, a growing desire among economic elites to limit their workforce's drinking and disorderly behavior, and growing concerns about urban crime, led politicians and the public to desire more centralized police forces (R. M. Brown 1969; Fosdick 1920; J.Q. Wilson 1973; Spitzer and Scull 1977). In 1838, Boston established the first paid police force in America with the explicit goal of preventing crime, suppressing riots, and enforcing city ordinances (Lane 1967).

Centralized police forces, however, required more advanced communication

systems than were previously in place so that station headquarters could communicate with, and exercise some control over, patrol officers. Greater communication between police officers and station headquarters was expected to increase police oversight and reduce lazy or corrupt patrolman behavior (Walker 2016). Police were required to report to local call boxes hourly to receive updates and report their statuses to headquarters, both of which facilitated greater supervision (Reiss 1992). The police call box was more elaborate than the fire alarm. It consisted of a booth with a door and lamp on top, and contained an alarm box with a telephone for the police to communicate with the station and a signal box for the police or public to alert the station to the type of incident (Chicago Public Library Reference Blog 2014). See Illustration 2-1 for a visual of the Chicago police call box.

Illustration 2-1 Chicago Police Call Box, 1886



Improved Chicago police alarm box. Source: Chicago Police Dept. [Annual Report 1886](#)

The introduction of the police call box did more than just improve communications between police officers and headquarters; it also facilitated direct communication between the public and the police. Chicago led the way in the development of one of the first police call boxes accessible to citizens in 1880 under the direction of J.P. Barret, Superintendent of the Chicago Electrical Department. Under the Chicago system, residents registered and received keys at local police stations to activate the police alarms. Keys were reserved for “certain responsible citizens” (Chicago Public Library Reference Blog 2014). The system—referred to as “The Little Joker” in homage to the fire alarm “The Joker”—was initially installed in the most crime-laden parts of the city in an effort to improve public safety. After police lauded the system for helping them arrest the men responsible for a vicious East Chicago boarding house murder in 1889, the system grew to include over 1,000 street boxes and hundreds of residential boxes (Chicago Police Department 1888). Other cities followed suit with similar boxes installed in Milwaukee, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia.

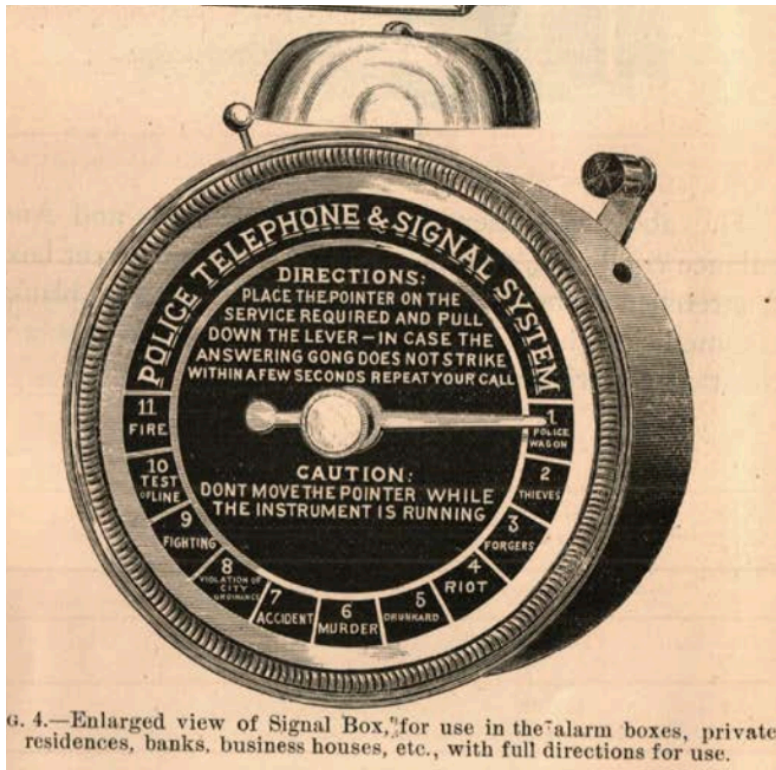
The introduction of the call box contributed to a rise in *reactive policing* and introduced a new set of policing challenges. Charles Rolfe, in an 1892 report to the International Police Association, writes that the call box, “Makes every key holder, to a considerable extent, a policeman, for he carries with him the power to summon the police to any point wherever he may see that their services are required.” This key-holder power could help inform police of crimes and violence that they otherwise would not have known about, but with such power also came the potential for key-holders, often untrained in the law, to misuse and abuse the system.

The alarm box included two safeguards to minimize inappropriate usage. First,

when activated, the alarm box would trap the key-holder's key inside the box until a police officer released and returned it to the key-holder. If an officer's investigation found that the key was used in a problematic way, it would be withheld from the key-holder. The mechanics of the alarm box made it so that individuals who proved to be unreliable or untrustworthy would lose the power to summon the police. According to the 1913 Report of the General Superintendent of Police of the City of Chicago, officers appreciated the locked alarm box design because it prevented false alarms and encouraged key-holders to wait in the area and provide police with more information.

Second, the alarm box included a signal box with a dial for key-holders to spin to select the reason for their police mobilization. The signal boxes implicitly limited the scope of police-work by clearly defining the types of problems that city officials believed were appropriate police matters. See Illustration 2-2 from the 1886 Annual Chicago Police Department report for an image of a signal box and the eleven possible mobilization categories, including, thieves, forgers, riot, drunkard, murder, accident, violation of city ordinance, fighting, test of line, fire, or request a police wagon.

Illustration 2-2 Enlarged view of Signal Box



With the proliferation of the telephone the call box became antiquated. Between 1876 and 1920, the total number of telephones in the U.S increased from approximately 3,000 to 13,000,000 (Gabel 1969). This was a period in which the telephone went from an obscure innovation to a commonplace household device. The spread of the telephone theoretically made summoning the police a more democratic process—no longer was it reserved for select key-holders, but anyone with access to a phone (Moskos 2008).

Technological advances also were being made in radio communications that affected how police departments passed along the public’s telephone demands and made police more dependent on dispatch. The advent of the two-way radio between police and headquarters—first debuted in Detroit in 1928—made it possible for police to give and receive real-time updates when responding to citizen requests for service (Poli 1942). Initially, some police commissioners opposed such “newfangled” advances because they

thought the radio was too complicated to use (Leonard 1938). Others ideologically disagreed with the notion of officers being controlled by dispatch. The latter group likened themselves to admirals and ship captains who believed that, “When a ship was out of sight of land she belonged in the hands of her master and that orders from the blue were an outrage and an affront to his dignity” (Leonard 1938). This group believed police should have freedom on the streets and resented the idea of being told where to go and what to do by dispatch. For them, responding to calls translated into a loss of police autonomy. Despite early debate over the new technology, two-way radios eventually became ubiquitous across police departments and further facilitated police responses to public demands.

The Feminization and Civilianization of Dispatch

Shortly after the development of the telephone and two-way radio, police departments began hiring women to work inside police communications centers as phone operators. Phone companies already were experiencing success with female operators, which they believed was because “women are quieter...they have natural aptitudes suitable to switchboard operation” (Leonard 1938). The phone companies’ successes, combined with news coverage of female phone operators winning heroism awards—such as Miss Emma Gatti, a supervisor of a telephone office in Hackensack, NJ who helped a hysterical mother construct a tourniquet over the phone to save her child—provided evidence to police departments that women could handle emergency calls (*The New York Times* 1935; *Chicago Sunday Tribune* 1940).

In response, New York City Police Commissioner Valentine proposed substituting women for patrol officers to switchboard duty. Female police phone

operators were perceived to “afford a higher and more uniform grade of service...as well as a more courteous service” and could be “employed at a rate of pay below that received by the police officer” (Leonard 1938). Valentine explained that such a change would enable officers to return to much needed patrol work (*The New York Times* 1935).

Despite the benefits of employing female phone operators, the feminization of the police communication profession faced pushback from some law enforcement actors. The earliest telegraph and telephone operators were male, recruited from within the police force, and experienced patrol officers. Certain officers were hesitant to staff the switchboards with female civilians, who had little formal training or background in policing, because they doubted female civilians could sense when police were needed: “The idea behind keeping the switchboard in masculine control was that only a policeman could sense the need for action when calls for help or reports of crimes were received” (*The New York Times* 1935). Moreover, the presence of women in the telephone room was troubling to officers who believed they were “not reliable in an emergency” because they lacked street experience, extensive knowledge of the law, and interviewing skills (Rubinstein 1973).

The rise in females inside police communications centers coincided with a decline in the status of phone operators. Initially, many police leaders looked favorably upon male operators and considered them to possess the qualities and capabilities necessary for career advancement in the broader police organization—such as speed, judgement, accuracy, and courtesy. Indeed, a prominent police executive on the Pacific Coast explained that he selected phone operators based on who was likely to experience career advancement (Leonard 1938). By the late 1970s, working as a phone operator was

viewed not as a sign of career advancement, but more as a punishment. Non-civilian phone operators consisted of, “Sworn officers considered unfit for other duty, being punished for internal rule violations, or who have been ‘taken off the street’ because of infirmity or incompetence” (Scott 1981).

Just as the demographics and status of operators shifted over time, so too did conceptions of the operator function within law enforcement. The fact that police departments initially had a strong preference for seasoned policemen with interviewing skills and street experience to work the phones implicitly suggests that call-takers were recognized, at one time, as playing an integral role in policing. With a loss of prestige to the job title and fewer trained policemen at the switchboard, police officials increasingly conceived of the phone operator function to be clerical. This was reflected in the job’s new nickname: “complaint clerk” (Mladenka and Hill 1978). Police officials largely saw phone operators as simply passing along raw information from callers to police, and the term “agents of information transfer” caught on—a term originally coined by V.A. Leonard (1938) in his description of the telephone communication system in large police departments.

Indeed, by the 1970s phone operators appeared to have little formal authority to decide whether caller requests warranted police attention. Police journalist Johnathan Rubinstein (1973) observed that phone operators were instructed to enter all citizen calls for dispatches. Departments feared phone operators would inappropriately reject calls to reduce workloads or to “satisfy some personal whim” if given such authority (Rubinstein 1973). If the operator had a concern about the legitimacy of the call, then he/she was instructed to either inform the dispatcher, who would “advise caution when he assigns the

job” to the police, or ask the lieutenant in charge of the radio room for assistance. The perception that phone operators did not, and should not, make decisions about whether to send the police continues to shape how police departments conceive of the call-taking function today.

The Introduction of 911 and 311

Following the 1967 President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, officials called for the implementation of a universal emergency telephone number across the US. Officials believed it would facilitate faster police responses to emergencies. The Commission concluded that the current system, which required the public to look up and dial an appropriate ten-digit police department phone number, was too burdensome. Los Angeles County, for example, had fifty different telephone numbers for fifty different local police departments (Prybil, Montgomery, and Gora 1974).

New York City was the first major city to implement 911 and establish a police communications center. Officials found that the new system cut police response times in half and they expected this would lead to more arrests. New York Times reporter David Burnham, who covered the inauguration of New York City’s police communications system, wrote that, “One important benefit the police hope the new center will deliver is a larger number of arrests” (Burnham 1968). In reality, the 911 system did not produce the envisioned number of arrests because of time delays in citizen reporting and relatively few calls involving crimes against persons (Bercal 1970; Cumming, Cumming, and Edell 1965; Reiss 1971; Webster 1970).

Instead, the establishment of a 911 system without mechanisms to control citizens' usage or filter out inappropriate requests led to an explosion in demand for police services; only a small share of which involved true emergencies. Shortly after the introduction of NYC's 911 system, the city experienced a 17 percent increase in the number of calls. Between 59 and 62 percent of all calls were non-emergency in nature—calls about lack of heat, park regulations, instructions on how to file for divorce, etc...(Burnham 1969). NYPD Inspector Anthony Bouza best summarized the challenges 911 posed to a NYT reporter in 1969: “The new number has done two things. It has destroyed the knowledge barrier—everyone knows 911—and it has destroyed what might be called an inhibition barrier. People call 911 on the slightest pretext.”

One potential problem with the increase in 911 calls was that it crowded out the ability of the police to perform other functions. Sociologist and former police officer Peter Moskos writes about this problem in his ethnography *Cop in the Hood* in which he quotes a fellow officer complaining that, “We can't get shit done because calls are always coming in. How many are really 'in progress'? Five percent? How many are innocent victims? None” (Moskos 2008). He goes on to explain that, “The emphasis on radio calls means that in busy districts, officers can do little other than answer dispatched calls for service.”

Police outside Baltimore faced similar challenges. A study by the Washington Metropolitan Area Council of Governments found that D.C. police were also “confronted with a staggering volume of nonemergency calls which overload the system” (Vesey 1984). Furthermore, a 1974 National Survey of Operational 911 Systems found that out of 188 systems, nearly half reported that less than a third of their system's calls were

“true emergencies.” In response to the problem of non-emergency calls jamming 911 systems, some cities adopted 311 lines dedicated for non-emergencies. However, because 311 calls typically still receive a police dispatch, this did little to reduce the overall demand for police services (Mazerolle et al. 2005).

In short, today’s 911 system is highly accessible to the public, can be used for a multitude of reasons, and lacks checks and balances. Unlike in the late 19th century, the modern 911 system lacks clear definitions and criteria about when it should be used. Moreover, personnel shifts inside dispatch centers from sworn officers to civilians and women in the early 20th century coincided with police officials increasingly conceiving of dispatch personnel as “agents of information transfer” who simply pass on caller information, rather than as discretionary decision-makers. This conception has produced call-takers with seemingly little authority to place limits over the public’s demands.

Although the modern 911 system lacks oversight mechanisms present during the call box era, it is possible that different assumptions and norms could have been embraced over time to more strictly control citizen-driven policing. For instance, the modern system might have more tightly restricted the reasons for why citizens could summon the police, much like the signal box did, or police departments might have continued staffing dispatch centers with police officers rather than civilians, or agencies might have empowered civilian call-takers and dispatchers to be more effective gatekeepers. Rather than consider these alternate paths, police officials have largely accepted the growth of call-driven policing as inevitable leading them to neglect the potential role call-takers could play to rein in the system.

Discussion

This chapter argues that the broad scope of unchecked caller influence over the police is a contingent historical outcome; one that could have charted a different course. A series of technological, ideological, and institutional changes over time have produced a system where the public has come to expect that the police will swiftly respond to any and all 911 calls. Call-takers largely appear to lack the authority to limit their requests.

Yet, the problems of over- and misplaced reliance on 911 to summon the police has the growing attention of many in government and there is reason to believe that shifting the public's expectations may be possible. Some police agencies already are experimenting with prioritizing 911 calls and trying alternative responses to certain calls to reduce burden on the system. For example, Houston Police Department now trains 911 call-takers to divert mental health-related calls to a crisis phone-counselor if a police response is not deemed necessary (Houston Police Department 2015). And, call-takers at my field site can redirect calls about broken down vehicles on the highways to the Michigan Department of Transportation courtesy patrol.

Two recent events hold promise for the implementation of more wide-sweeping changes to dispatch policy.

First, public outcry over the kinds of racially biased 911 calls that motivated this chapter is propelling some police leaders to rethink dispatch policy. At my field site, the police official who initially had spoken to me about the intractable problems inherent in a democratic call-driven policing system came to embrace the potential for limiting dispatches to racially biased calls following conversations with myself, other academics, and the public. Other cities are moving in a similar direction. In Alexandria, Virginia, a

2019 resolution was proposed by the Alexandria Democratic Committee following an incident in which a resident called the police on one of the drafters for canvassing a neighborhood with a Black female. The resolution, which was passed, urges, “911 centers to continue to train dispatchers to attempt to determine if there is a reasonable concern for a caller’s safety or the safety of others, or if a person is calling only because of explicit or implicit bias toward minority group members” (Alexandria Democratic Committee 2018). In Seattle, call-takers are now provided criteria for entering suspicious person calls. Call-takers differentiate between *suspicious behavior* and *suspicious persons*, and have the authority to reject calls about persons (Vera Institute of Justice 2019). The city of Grand Rapids, Michigan is considering a more extreme and controversial measure to fine callers up to \$500 if they make racially biased 911 calls (Hicks 2019).

Second, the onset of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic has prompted some police officials to implement more restrictive dispatch policies; a change that could last well-beyond the duration of this pandemic. The Cincinnati Police Department has announced a “differential response plan” to reduce in-person contact from 911 calls (Knight 2020). In upstate New York, the Schuyler Sheriff’s Office asks callers to provide a call-back number for deputies to follow-up via telephone and assess whether an in-person response is necessary (Day 2020). The Metropolitan Nashville Police Department has started suspending in-person responses for lower-level calls, and taking select crime reports over the phone or online. Wauconda, Illinois police are only responding to high priority or emergency calls (Police Executive Research Forum 2020). Wauconda’s policy change reads as follows:

Wauconda Police officers will only be responding to high priority/emergency calls. The definition of a high priority/emergency call will include, but are not limited to; motor vehicle crashes, forcible felonies, batteries or domestic disputes (either in progress or where the offender is still on scene), burglaries where evidentiary items need to be collected or the scene needs to be processed, any other violent crime or crime against persons, or where the shift supervisor deems it necessary.

By presenting the public and call-takers with criteria about the kinds of calls that demand in-person responses and the kinds that do not, police leaders are implicitly empowering call-takers to be more aggressive gatekeepers.

These policies, and call-taking policies more generally as I will show in Chapter 5, are not explicit about *how* call-takers should make sophisticated assessments about the nature of a call or level of risk it may entail. For example, some police agencies are concerned that coronavirus stay-at-home orders will cause an uptick in intimate partner violence (IPV), and are instructing call-takers to continue sending in-person police responses to domestic calls (David Kennedy et al. 2020). But, determining whether a call involves IPV, or will escalate to involve IPV, is not a simple process. It will depend on how a call-taker extracts, interprets, and classifies caller information, and is likely shaped by some level of call-taker discretion. As the following chapters will demonstrate, similar issues arise across a host of call contexts. In order to understand the potential for more sophisticated call-taking, we first need to have a fuller understanding of the precise call-taking functions and how they are carried out on-the-ground.

Chapter 3: How 911 Call-Taker and Dispatcher Decisions Impact Police-Civilian Encounters

Chapter 3 comes at the question of how call-takers mediate caller demands and impact policing in the field by conducting a fine-grained analysis of the high-profile Henry Louis Gates Jr. arrest. This chapter dissects the function of the 911 call-taker and 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—this chapter provides a framework to evaluate future call-taker actions. The Gates case shines a particularly bright light on the challenges and dilemmas that can arise during the risk appraisal process. In this case, the call-taker played a pivotal role in escalating the caller’s uncertainty and, thus, primed the responding officer for a more aggressive encounter. These findings are an important step in identifying ways in which police departments can pursue more intelligent policies inside dispatch.

Practical and Theoretical Background

Disaggregating the function of the 911 call-taker in policing is critical because call-taker actions set the trajectory of an entire incident. Evidence from Chapter 2 suggests that throughout history police leaders have largely conceived of the call-taking function as involving the *transfer of information*. This conception likens call-takers to

conduits who pass along raw information from callers to the police. Scholars who have spent time observing call-taker behavior present a somewhat different picture of the call-taking function.

Because of the work call-takers do to divert, filter out, or resolve via telephone inappropriate or misguided requests for police services, a handful of scholars primarily have conceptualized their role as *gatekeeper* (Neusteter et al., 2019; Percy & Scott, 1985; Sharrock & Turner, 1978; Whalen et al., 1988). A recent study finds that call-takers at a dispatch center in Fairfax, VA resolve, on average, nearly half of all calls without having to dispatch the police (Lum et al. 2020). Gatekeepers, like those in Fairfax, prevent some inappropriate requests from reappearing in the legal system (Black 1973; Silbey and Bittner 1982).

Gatekeeping certainly is an important aspect of call-taking, but it fails to account for the other key tasks call-takers carry out, 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 of 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, and 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 chapter attempts to fill this gap by reconceptualizing call-takers as not only *gatekeepers*, but also as *risk appraisers*. In *Policing the Risk Society*, Ericson and Haggerty (1997) write that, “The concept of risk...turns people, their organizations, and their environments into myriad categories and identities that will make them more manageable.” Though Ericson and Haggerty apply their definition of risk mainly to the police, it also aptly describes 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 in order to minimize harm.

This chapter 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 to the responding police officers.

Because police 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 thirty and fifty percent of all crime calls that 911 call-takers enter are downgraded by officers to minor incidents or no crime once at the scene (Ericson 1982; Manning 1988).

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 high priority responses in 98.5 percent 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 risk. Police sometimes engage in a minimax strategy—meaning they try to minimize the

maximum risk. This strategy can result in police interpreting individuals' actions through the prism of worst-case scenario thinking (Muir 1977). Based on my fieldwork, call-takers also use minimax thinking. This strategy can be particularly 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, both of which I will elaborate on in Chapter 5. Turning to scholarship on the effects of "priming" will reveal precisely why overvalued risk appraisals can be so problematic.

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) describe anchoring bias as a phenomenon whereby people make estimates in the face of uncertainty by adjusting from an initial value or 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 and Kahneman 1982:15). 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 finds that, "When dispatched to a call, an officer's initial understanding of the incident will be formed almost entirely by the information received from dispatch" (Remsberg, 2019). In his experiment, dispatchers

told one group of officers that the suspect in a “possible trespassing in progress” might be holding a gun, while the dispatchers told the other group that the suspect was talking on a cell phone. Taylor finds that six percent 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: 88). Any errors by the dispatcher can result in serious problems for the police and public. Rubinstein describes 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: 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?

A Conversation Analytic Approach

This chapter presents a detailed case study of the interactions that preceded the Cambridge Police Department's arrival to Professor Henry Louis Gates' home. 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 own experiences as a 911 call-taker, 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 following the incident. The first audio recording is of the interaction between the 911 caller and call-taker. The second audio recording is of the interaction between the dispatcher and responding officers. 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.²

Conversation analysis is a micro-level approach that first emerged in the 1960s and insists social interaction provides a window into understanding how institutions and

² For readers who are interested in learning more about conversation analysis methods see Steven E. Clayman, Virginia Teas Gill, (2012), "Conversation analysis", In *Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (James Paul Gee, Michael Hanford, eds.), New York, Routledge, pp. 120–134. Also, see Jack Sidnell, (2012), "Basic Conversation Analytic Methods," In *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (Jack Sidnell, Tanya Stivers, eds.), Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 77-99.

organizations come to life (Heritage and Clayman 2010). Through analyzing interactional patterns, researchers can learn how co-participants accomplish, or fail to accomplish, institutional goals and tasks. Detailed transcriptions are meant to shed light precisely on how interactants react to one another's utterances to co-construct "mutually intelligible courses of action." (Clayman and Gill 2012). Conversation analysis is most powerful when done in conjunction with participant observation because observation provides opportunities for researchers to "acquire the skills and competencies of participants in the field" (Garfinkel & Wieder, 1992). Indeed, my time working in the field helped me to better understand the conversational interactions in this chapter's recordings.

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 actually occurs, including emphasis, overlapping speech, pitch, intonation, silence, and inhalations.³ Refer to Table 1 in the Appendix for a complete list of commonly used conversation analytic transcription symbols and descriptions. CA is becoming increasingly prominent in studies of 911 emergencies and police-civilian contact (Cromdal, Osvaldsson, and Persson-Thunqvist, 2008; N. Jones and Raymond, 2012; Meehan, 1989; Raymond and Zimmerman, 2007; Whalen, Zimmerman, and Whalen, 1988; Zimmerman, 1984, 1992b, 1992a).

³ 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 parenthesis 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 Alexa Hepburn and Galina B. Bolden, (2012), "The Conversation Analytic Approach to Transcription," In *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (Jack Sidnell, Tanya Stivers, eds.), Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 57-76.

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, following a heated verbal encounter between the two men, Sgt. Crowley arrested one of the leading African American scholars in the U.S. for “exhibiting loud and tumultuous behavior in a public place” (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010:55). The struggle between Gates and Crowley reignited a national conversation about race and law enforcement in the U.S.

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 twenty percent of all African American-related media coverage in 2009 mentioned the Gates incident (Guskin, Khan, and Mitchell, 2010). Public discussion and expert analysis following the arrest tended to emphasize Sgt. Crowley and Gates’ 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.

Explaining Problematic Police-Civilian 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 and Fagan, 2008; Tyler and Huo, 2002). Fairness and procedural justice are pillars of “rightful policing,” and these features of police work establish community trust in the police (Meares and Neyroud, 2015). From Gates’ perspective, Crowley treated him disrespectfully, especially since it should have been obvious he was not a burglar given his age, need for a cane—Gates’ 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' 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 2009). 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, 2010:6).

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 non-emergencies 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, write, “It is important to emphasize that Sergeant Crowley arrived at Gates’ home in response to a 911 call as opposed to an exercise of his own discretion.” Because Sgt. Crowley was responding to a call, they admit that Gates’ “experience fit somewhat uneasily into the typical legal framework of racial profiling” (Meares & Neyroud, 2015:2). Yet, despite these concessions, the authors nonetheless use 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) defend 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 suffer 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—identifies six areas to improve police-public relations: build trust and legitimacy through procedural justice, develop comprehensive use of force policies, appropriately use technology, cultivate community policing, train and educate officers, and support officer wellness and safety. Nowhere in the report is 911 or 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 their ten recommendations to “limit police interventions, improve community interactions, and ensure accountability” (Campaign Zero 2019). 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 make no mention of call-takers (Walker and Macdonald 2008). In sum, the leading police reform reports all remain silent on dispatch.

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 happened.
18 CLR: .hh Um w- I- don't know what's happening, I just had an
19 ah 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 barge
22 in and they broke (.) the screen door and they finally
23 got in and when I had looked I went (.) further closer
24 to the house a little bit after the gentlemens were
25 already in the house, .h I noticed t-two suitcases so
26 I'm not sure if these are two individuals who actually
27 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 appears 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 18-27, 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, etc... 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
29 don't 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 possibility might have been there, or ah how- what do

32 you mean by barged 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 pushing the door in: like uh:: .hh
 34 uhm::: l- 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
 39 bit away from the door 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-
 44 I hh. 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 appear 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 show 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 apahrtment they ah: broke
 46 into.
 47 (0.4)
 48 CLR: No. They just the first floor (.) I don’t even think
 49 that it’s an apartment. It’s seventeen Ware Street. It’s

50 a house. It's a yellow house. (0.7) Number seventeen.
51 (0.9) I don't know if they live there and they just had
52 a hard time with their key but I did notice that they
53 (.) kinda used their: a shoulder to try to barge in and
54 they got in. I don't know if they had a key or not cuz I
55 couldn't see from my angle. But: ya know when I looked
56 a little closely that's when [I saw (...)]

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 51-55 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 classification when callers are uncertain and incidents straddle priority levels. The call-taker must decide whether to classify the call as a high-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 3-1 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 appears that the call-taker has decided to classify the call as a breaking and entering.

Figure 3-1 Example of Information Classification Options



The call-taker faces competing pressures when making classification decisions. On the one hand, *over-estimating* 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, *under-estimating* the incident can open the call-taker up to liability and potential disciplinary action. Although we do not know for certain, it is likely that the concern about *over-estimating* explains why the call-taker repeatedly attempted to garner the caller's agreement about his hypothesis, but ultimately the concern about *under-estimating* the incident leads the call-taker to escalate the caller's uncertainty.

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

04 in progress. Two SPs barged their way into the home. Ah
 05 they have suitcases. RP (five) to SPs. Uh. Stand-by.
 06 (0.2)
 07 Trying to get further.
 08 (0.7)

Lines 01-07 show the abridged version of the lengthy and complicated caller/call-taker interaction detailed above.⁴ 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: (...)
 18 (Inaudible) Can you have the caller come to the front
 19 door.
 20 (0.5)
 21 CO1: I’m sorry repeat?
 22 (0.7)
 23 OF1: <Can you have the caller come to the front door.>
 24 (1.5)
 25 CO1: It’s not her house. She doesn’t live there. She’s uh a
 26 witness in this.
 27 (1.7)
 28 OF2: C-13 to control I’m on Broadway. I’m going to respond.
 29 (0.5)
 30 CO1: Received.
 31 (0.7)
 32 OF3: 52 to control.
 33 CO2: Answering 52.
 34 (1.0)
 35 OF3: I’m out with a uh gentleman says he resides here.
 36 (inaudible)
 37 Uncooperative. But uh: keep the cars coming.
 38 (0.5)
 39 CO2: Copy. (...)

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,

⁴ Note that in the radio transcript “CO” (i.e., control) stands for dispatchers and “OF” for officers.

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 operator and dispatcher (The Cambridge Review Committee, 2010:26). They played pivotal roles in taking an ambiguous and cautious call and generating a high priority dispatch.

Discussion

This chapter offers three main contributions to our understanding of call-taking and its impact on police-civilian encounters. First, by reviewing the key reports that came out following 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. 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 paper 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 policymakers to evaluate future call-taker behavior. Specifically, this chapter calls for greater evaluation of the information extraction, interpretation, and classification steps of the call-taking process when reviewing police-civilian 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 public. Sociologists Geoff Raymond and Nikki Jones already are applying CA to body cam 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 there may be legitimate liability concerns that 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 over-response is preferable may help call-takers to be more thoughtful about their actions. 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 may improve outcomes. Computer Aided Dispatch technology could be designed to include fields which prompt call-takers to capture this information. For example, call-takers could indicate if 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 of the problems of over-response. 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 police dispatchers in Tucson, Arizona (Vera Institute of Justice 2019).

The Gates incident raises important questions. It is worth considering what might have happened if instead of first asking the caller if the men were breaking in, the call-taker had asked if 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 how call-takers carry out the risk appraisal function could improve outcomes in future police-civilian encounters.

Chapter 4: Variation in Risk Appraisal and Its Effects on Police Officer Action

Chapter 4 builds on the findings in the previous chapter, which establish risk appraisal as a critical call-taking function, by quantitatively measuring to what extent call-takers vary in how they carry out risk appraisal and the causal implications of that variation on street-level policing outcomes. The analysis provides strong evidence that call-takers deploy discretion when making decisions about risk, and that these decisions, in turn, directly affect how police officers perceive of incidents and whether they make an arrest. Documenting this phenomenon is an important step in pinpointing a locus of discretion inside the dispatch center.

Around 7:30 pm on a Tuesday in February, I answered a 911 call from a male reporting an in-progress breaking and entering at his own address. The caller had just returned home and saw a six-foot tall black male wearing a Carhartt jacket on his front porch. He told me, "I believe there's a burglary in progress in my apartment. And I'm just fucking scared." Within seconds, I classified the incident as a "breaking and entering" and entered it into the system for dispatch.

Paul, a thirty-three-year-old dispatcher with 11 years of job experience, proceeded to dispatch the incident over the radio. Rather than dispatch it as a breaking and entering, Paul downgraded the incident to a suspicious. He stated, "For units, a suspicious...A Street. Between B Street and the alley way. Caller just returned home to

find a black male, tan Carhartt jacket in his porch area that he says should be secure.”

After dispatching the call, Paul yelled a series of follow-up questions at me from across the room. Was I sure that the caller did not know the man? Could it be a friend of the caller? Was it a maintenance worker? Because I had not asked these questions, and I still had the caller on the line, I repeated the questions back to him. He replied that he did not recognize the man. I relayed that information back to Paul, who then asked me for a second time if I was sure the caller did not know the man. Again, I repeated the question to the caller and the caller stated that he did not.

Six minutes later, the police piped up on the radio to report that the suspect on the front porch was not a burglar. The officer stated, “We’re secure...It’s gonna be an employee of the house. A cleaner.” Paul repeated the officer’s information for units in the area and opened the radio waves back up to all officers on the east side of the county: “Clear. A member of the cleaning crew. Normal [radio] traffic on East.” Because I still had the caller on the, I explained that the man on the porch was a cleaning person to which the caller embarrassedly laughed and said, “Oh my god!”

Though grateful the police left the scene without incident, I could not help but question why I had not challenged or probed the caller’s claim until prompted by Paul, and whether my initial risk assessment had been overly aggressive given Paul’s downgrading of it. I sat back in my chair and considered how easily the call could have gone sideways and how my own actions might have contributed to a negative outcome.

The nature of this incident is similar in some respects to the Henry Louis Gates’ case described in Chapter 3—a caller reporting a man on a porch who appears suspicious

but is ultimately not—however the caller’s demeanor and the way the call was handled inside dispatch markedly differ. Unlike the cautious caller in the Gates’ incident, this caller was unequivocal about what he was observing and made inferences based on his observations. The Gates’ caller shifted responsibility onto the call-taker to interpret and classify her information. The caller in this incident made classification and prioritization decisions for the call-taker. Without any pressing on my part, the caller clearly stated the man was committing an in-progress serious crime.

Despite a breaking and entering classification being more than warranted, the dispatcher in this case reacted much differently than in the Gates incident and attempted to *de-escalate* the situation. First, Paul took my seemingly clear-cut breaking and entering incident and downgraded it to a lower-priority suspicious circumstance before dispatching the police. Second, he prompted me to consider and propose alternative hypotheses about what the caller was observing before hanging up (e.g., perhaps it was a friend or maintenance worker). Third, he interpreted certain information, such as the Carhartt jacket description, as potential evidence that the subject on the porch was a workman of some sort—an interpretation that ultimately was correct. Whereas I had failed to interpret the caller’s information in any way other than as a breaking and entering, Paul had remained open to alternative explanations.

Paul’s actions partially reflect a lack of trust in neophyte call-takers, such as myself, and his concern about the over-estimation of incident risk. In workplace chats, he had spoken to me about the costs that come from tying up police units on high-priority incidents and priming officers for overly aggressive encounters. Although we cannot know for sure whether Paul’s actions changed the outcome of the police encounter with

the Black man on the porch, unlike in the Gates' incident, this encounter did not result in conflict or arrest.

Comparing and contrasting the Henry Louis Gates Jr. incident to this call, suggests that the risk appraisal process can vary between workers in meaningful ways. Paul's decisions to de-escalate the incident type, probe the caller, and consider alternative hypotheses offer a window into how he would have handled the call if he had been on call-taker duty that day instead of me. Moreover, both of our decisions to refrain from escalating the incident beyond the caller's statements suggest that the Gates' incident could have played out differently. These kinds of variation between workers motivate two novel research questions that I address in Chapter 4. I ask 1) To what extent do 911 call-takers vary in how they classify the same types of calls? 2) Does call-taker variation affect subsequent police officer action?

To systematically answer these questions, I analyze call-for-service administrative data and arrest records from my field site. I leverage a natural experiment using the quasi-random assignment of call-takers to calls. I find that call-takers have different propensities for classifying incidents as high-priority and this variation has causal effects on police officer action. Using a two stage least squares model (2SLS), I find a seven-percentage point difference between call-takers in their propensity to classify a call as high priority based *solely on who happened to pick-up the phone*. This discrepancy translates into a thirteen percent change in the average propensity of a police officer to verify the incident as high priority, and a thirty-four percent change in the average propensity of a police officer to make an arrest.

These findings fill gaps in the criminal justice literature about the role of dispatch

in policing by 1) systematically showing discretion among call-takers, 2) documenting variability in how discretion is exercised, and 3) reporting the effects of this variability on police officer behavior. This is the first study to causally link call-taker actions to policing outcomes.

The Inclusion of Dispatch as a Factor Shaping Police Officer Behavior

Scholars have long sought to understand police officer behavior and the factors that shape it. Albert Reiss and Donald Black led one of the first systematic social observation (SSO) studies in Chicago where researchers rode along with the police and observed that a suspect's demeanor toward the police influenced the likelihood of juvenile arrest (Black and Reiss 1970). In the 1980s, policing scholar Lawrence Sherman expanded beyond "suspect demeanor" to develop a typology of factors that shape police action, including, 1) individual factors (e.g., officers' characteristics, including gender, race, experience, training, attitudes, and demeanor); 2) situational factors (e.g., suspect, victim, and encounter characteristics); 3) organizational factors (e.g., agency size, supervision, and managerial styles); 4) community factors (e.g., neighborhood characteristics, and political contexts), and 5) legal factors (e.g., seriousness of the offense, strength of evidence). A 2018 report on arrests by the International Association of Chiefs of Police still uses Sherman's framework to explain police behavior regarding arrests.

In addition, sociological scholarship highlights the importance of *place* in understanding police behavior. Ethnographic findings from the Los Angeles Police Department show that police officers construct narratives about places for their own personal safety. The LAPD differentiates between "pro-police" and "anti-police" areas,

and these spatial constructs lead to different styles of interaction. Indeed, police are “more suspicious of actors in anti-police areas than in pro-police ones, and are more likely to respond aggressively to challenges to their authority in anti-police areas” (Herbert 1997:21). Making broad generalizations about people in certain kinds of places can lead to what Frederick Schauer terms actuarial decision-making– “making decisions about large categories that have the effect of attributing to the entire category certain characteristics that are probabilistically indicated by membership in the category, but that still may not be possessed by a particular member of the category” (Schauer 2009:4). This type of place-based actuarial decision-making further shapes police behavior.

Missing from this typology are factors associated with dispatch, specifically the effects of risk appraisal on police officer action. Yet, much of police work is responding to calls-for-service and reacting to information from dispatchers. This information can have important consequences on police perceptions. The work on “priming” by Paul Taylor that I describe in Chapter 2, and my own analysis of the Henry Louis Gates Jr. incident, indicate that dispatch plays a critical role in setting initial police expectations. Dispatch is similar to other organizational settings where front-line workers dealing with crises “do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis” (Weick 1995:309). Indeed, 911 call-takers’ initial actions, specifically around risk appraisal, influence incident trajectory by shaping the number of police cars dispatched, the speed at which officers drive to the scene, and the level of incident risk the police perceive.

Variation in the Risk Appraisal Process

Few scholars have examined the information production process undertaken by 911 call-takers. Because of the legacy of police phone operators being conceived of as *agents of transfer*—or conduits passing along raw information from callers to the police—some scholars have assumed that incident classification is an objective process, based solely on a caller’s report. Under this assumption, information classification would not depend on which call-taker answered the phone because the content of the call would drive any variation. A literature review of the 911 system by Neusteter et al., (2019) highlights a body of research implicitly equating call-for-service administrative records with caller requests. These studies do not consider how the actions of call-takers—particularly actions around risk appraisal—may shape and transform caller requests.

However, the Henry Louis Gates Jr. incident described in Chapter 3 concretely showed that incident classification was not an objective reflection of the caller’s report. Rather, the incident was co-constructed by the call-taker and caller. The call-taker interpreted and reframed the caller’s request to minimize what he saw was the maximum risk—loss of property and potential life from a home invasion.

Other scholars have found that call-takers engage in interpretive work when processing information—though not specifically around risk appraisal as I have shown. Gilsinan (1989) analyzes nearly three hundred 911 call and finds that call-takers transform callers’ complicated and sometimes hysterical requests into organizationally meaningful categories. Peter Manning’s 1988 study of an American and a British police dispatch center similarly finds that call-takers do more than pass on raw information; they “make sense” of a caller’s request. He describes a key function of call-taking as

involving, “Sensing, that is, deciding if a call is credible, deciding if the address or location is valid, and ascertaining what the nature of the problem is, selecting and sorting from the message” (Manning 1988:70). Whalen, Zimmerman, and Whalen (1988) analyze a single 911 call to highlight how misinterpretation between caller and call-taker can produce disastrous police outcomes. These studies highlight the innately human aspects of processing 911 calls.

Although prominent studies speak to the co-construction of incidents between callers and call-takers, they do not systematically show whether, or to what extent, call-takers differ in how they assess the same types of calls. Comparing and contrasting the Gates incident to the field note at the beginning of this chapter suggests that call-takers vary in how they make sense of caller requests and assess risk. The extent to which call-taker behavior varies may depend on how influenced call-takers are by their own experiences and how transparent they are about sharing those experiences with co-workers (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003:23). For instance, if a call-taker faced disciplinary action for under-estimating a caller’s request in the past, then that same call-taker may be more risk-averse and initiate a heightened response when processing calls in the future, compared to others without such experiences. If that worker then shared his story with a co-worker, she then may learn to become more risk-averse too. On the other hand, perhaps more job experience makes call-takers become jaded and thus less likely to take a caller’s complaint seriously, regardless of disciplinary action.

Variation in the information production process may be dampened by surveillance practices inside dispatch. Call-takers operate under high-levels of surveillance in which every phone interaction is recorded, saved, and subject to review. Agency rules may be

more closely followed than would be typical among other types of front-line workers (e.g., police, teachers, welfare case managers) where lack of supervision makes workplace discretion possible (Lipsky 1980).

Organizational Context and Data

This analysis relies on records of 911 and non-emergency calls entered into the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system by call-takers at my field site in Southeast Michigan between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016. These data include the date and address of each call that received a police dispatch, a reported offense code determined by the call-taker, a verified offense code determined by the primary responding police officer, and the personal identity of the call-taker. Table 4-1 indicates that twenty-eight percent of all calls-for-service entered by Central Dispatch call-takers were in response to 911 calls, and seventy-two percent were in response to non-emergency calls.

Between one and four call-takers typically answer calls during each of the three shifts at Central Dispatch. Table 4-1 shows that in my analysis sample the 3 pm – 11 pm shift receives the largest share of calls (44%), followed by the 7 am – 3 pm shift (35%), and then the 11 pm – 7 am shift (21%). Weekends are typically the busiest part of the week with nearly forty-five percent of all calls-for-service being entered on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Summer months are also slightly busier with thirty percent of calls-for-service coming during June, July, August; however, accidents related to inclement winter weather in Michigan keeps calls-for-service fairly constant year-round.

The call-takers in this dataset handle calls from racially and socioeconomically

diverse cities and townships. I merged American Community Survey (ACS) 2015 block-group estimates to the call-for-service data based on the latitude and longitude of each call-for-service. There are 244 block groups—geographical units that are larger than census blocks but smaller than census tracts—represented in the call-for-service data. Table 4-1 indicates that the average block group is seventeen percent Black, has twenty-three percent of households living below the federal poverty line, and has an unemployment rate of 5.4 percent.

In 2016, Central Dispatch employed thirty-one call-takers. Table 4-1 shows that approximately fifty-three percent of call-takers have over 10 years of 911 job experience either from time at Central Dispatch or from another dispatch center. Central Dispatch employs both part-time call-takers and full-time call-takers/dispatchers. Part-time call-takers only are trained to answer 911 and non-emergency calls, whereas full-time call-takers/dispatchers rotate between call-taking and radio dispatching. Table 4-1 also indicates that about one-third of employees in the sample are part-time call-takers and two-thirds are full-time call-takers/dispatchers. On average, each of the thirty-one 911 operators in the final analysis sample entered approximately 3,000 calls-for-service a year (6,262 over two years).

Table 4-1 Summary Statistics

	Analysis Sample
<i>Call Characteristics</i>	
911	0.279
Non-Emergency Calls	0.728
Classified High Priority by Call-Taker	0.203
Received on Midnight Shift 11p-7a	0.212
Received on Day Shift 7a-3p	0.348
Received on Noon Shift 3p-11p	0.440
Received on a Weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday)	0.443
Received in Summer (June, July, August)	0.284
<i>Incident Characteristics</i>	
Classified High Priority by Police Officer	0.114
Arrest	0.026
Share of Arrests from 911 Calls	0.358
Share of Arrests from Non-Emergency Calls	0.642
<i>Call-Taker Characteristics</i>	
Part-Time Phone Operator	0.285
Female	0.751
10 Years+ Job Experience	0.539
Mean Number of Calls Processed	6,262
<i>Census Block Group Characteristics</i>	
Percent of Block Group Black	0.174
Percent of Block Group Living Below FPL	0.231
Percent of Block Group Unemployed	0.054
Observations	158,918

Call-takers can select from 144 different offense codes when classifying calls-for-service in CAD; however, only fifty-two offense codes appear in the analysis sample. Each offense code comes with a pre-determined priority level set by the Sheriff's Office. All police agencies that contract with Central Dispatch use the same priority level coding

system. When a call-taker selects an incident code, the priority level is automatically assigned to the incident by the CAD software. For purposes of this analysis, priority levels run from zero to seven, with seven being the highest and zero being the lowest. See Table 4-2 for a list of incident types and corresponding priority levels.

Table 4-2 Call-for-Service Incident Types by Priority Level

Priority Level	Incident Type
Seven (high)	Assault with a dangerous weapon, homicide, person seen with a gun, drug overdose, robbery, fleeing police, injury vehicle crash, ambulance requesting police assistance.
Six (high)	Alarms, physical assault, domestic violence, 911 hang-up call, indecent exposure, intoxicated person, sexual assault, shots heard, suicidal subject, found child.
Five	Sudden death, disorderly behavior, family trouble, missing person, welfare check.
Four	Breaking and entering, drugs, emotionally disturbed person, stolen vehicle, court violation, vehicle crash with no injury, harassment.
Three	Child abuse/neglect, larceny, neighbor trouble, noise, suspicious person, trespassing, found property, panhandling.
Two	Citizen assist, reckless driver, fraud, juvenile trouble, malicious destruction of property, disturbing the peace.
One	Abandoned vehicles, fireworks, parking complaints.
Zero	Animal complaints, civil standbys, code violations, information report, follow-up with person.

Although the call-for-service data do not include a direct measure of risk appraisal, I operationalize this concept by measuring the prevalence of high priority incident classification. Coding an incident with a “high priority” incident type approximates the level of risk a call-taker perceives an incident will entail. I coded an incident “high priority” if the incident type received a six or seven on the priority scale, as these kinds of incidents are dispatched faster and involve more police units. Twenty percent of all calls-for-service in this sample are high priority.

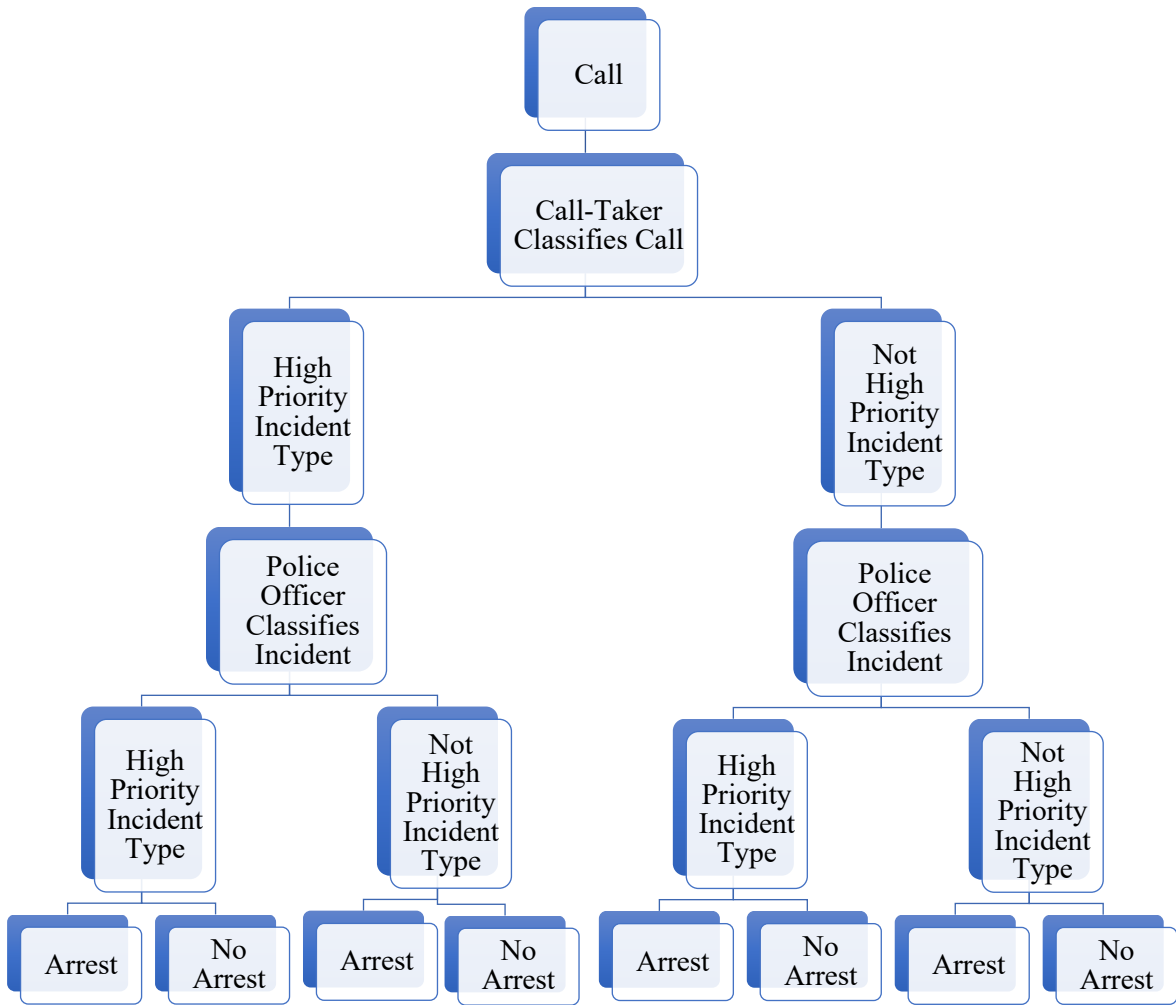
I focus on high priority incidents because it is in these situations that police

responses are most heightened. More police cars are dispatched, which results in heavier police presence in communities. Officers are speeding with lights and sirens to arrive at the incident scene, which puts other drivers and pedestrians at risk. And, police are being psychologically primed by dispatch for potentially high-risk, dangerous encounters. Precisely for these reasons, we would hope that any variation we find across call-takers in high priority incident classification is due to the nature of the call, not individual call-taker characteristics.

To measure how call-taker risk appraisal impacts policing in the field, I use two policing outcomes. First, whether the police officer verified the incident he/she was dispatched to as high priority. Second, whether he/she made an arrest. I merged arrest records to call-for-service data using unique incident identification numbers. Arrest records only are from one year (2015), rather than both 2015 and 2016, due to data gathering time constraints. Table 4-1 shows that about three percent of calls-for-service in the sample led to an arrest. Of those arrests, thirty-five percent stemmed from 911 calls and sixty-four percent from non-emergency calls.

Refer to Figure 4-1 for a simplified call-taker and police officer decision-tree highlighting the outcomes of interest in this analysis.

Figure 4-1 Call-Taker and Police Officer Decision-Tree



Empirical Strategy

To examine 1) variation across call-takers in how they appraise risk—specifically in their propensity to classify incidents as high-priority and 2) the casual effect of that variation on subsequent police officer incident classification and arrest, I use an examiner assignment research design. Although this design has been used in studies of incarceration (Harding et al. 2017; Mueller-Smith 2015), foster care (Gross 2020; Doyle 2008; 2007), and auction markets (Lacetera et al. 2016), it is novel to dispatch and policing. I instrument for high-priority call classification using underlying tendencies of each call-taker’s level of alarm when processing calls, which I name *call-taker alarmism*. My strategy isolates only the variation in call classification that is related to the quasi-randomly assigned call-taker.

Like in other examiner assignment studies, I calculate the instrument as the fraction of all calls-for-service assigned to the same call-taker that resulted in a high-priority classification. To predict a call-taker’s propensity to classify a given call as high priority, I use information from all prior and future calls a given call-taker handles. For call j assigned to call-taker k :

$$Z_{jk}^R = \left(\frac{1}{n_k - 1} \right) \sum_{i \neq j}^{n_k - 1} HP_i \quad (1)$$

where n_k equals the total number of calls entered by call-taker k and HP_i is a binary indicator equal to one if the call was classified with a high priority incident type. This method is equivalent to call-taker fixed effects from a leave-out regression in which high-priority call classification is the outcome variable. The instrument has a mean of 0.203 and a standard deviation of 0.023.

Using an Instrumental Variable (IV) design allows me to estimate the causal

effects of interest using only the variation in the “treatment” (i.e., call-taker propensity to classify a call with a high priority incident type). I use the following equations to measure the causal effects of high priority call classification on police officer incident classification and arrest:

$$HP_{jk} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 Z_{jk}^R + \gamma_2 X'_{jk} + \varepsilon_{jk} \quad (2)$$

$$Y_{jk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \widehat{HP}_{jk} + \beta_2 X'_{jk} + \mu_{jk} \quad (3)$$

where Y_{jk} is a policing outcome, either the likelihood of an officer classifying an incident as high priority once at the scene or the likelihood of arrest, and X'_{jk} includes a set of fixed effects to control for two features of call-taking that threaten the random assignment of call-takers to calls—the shift the call-taker works and the source of call (whether a 911 line or non-emergency line). Standard errors are clustered at the call-taker level because the treatment is assigned at the *call-taker level* and not the individual call level (McKenzie 2017).

Identifying Assumptions

Two stage least squares regression requires that three assumptions be met to produce unbiased estimates. The first assumption is referred to as *relevance*. Relevance requires that the instrument predict high priority call classification. Refer to Table 4-3 for first stage regression estimates of high priority call classification on the call-taker alarmism instrument. The correlation between the instrument and high priority call classification is 0.908 (column 1). After including controls in the model, the model indicates that a one standard deviation increase in call-taker urgency (2.3 percentage point) significantly increased the likelihood of high priority call classification by 1.2

percentage points (column 7). An F-statistic on the model of 64.34 finds no weak instruments problem.

Table 4-3 First Stage Effect of Call-Taker Urgency on Call Classification (“CC”)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	High Priority CC	High Priority CC	High Priority CC	High Priority CC	High Priority CC	High Priority CC	High Priority CC
Call-Taker Alarmism	0.908*** (0.030)	0.871*** (0.034)	0.572*** (0.065)	0.572** (0.062)	0.508*** (0.064)	0.514*** (0.063)	0.520*** (0.065)
Observations	158,918	158,918	158,828	158,828	158,828	158,828	158,828
F-Statistic	974.93	649.23	78.62	84.03	63.63	66.11	64.34
Call Source FE		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shift FE			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Block Group FE				✓	✓	✓	✓
Day of Week FE					✓	✓	✓
Month FE						✓	✓
Year FE							✓

Notes: This table reports the results from regressions of call classification on the leave- out measure of call-taker urgency. Each column includes a different set of covariates. Standard errors are clustered by call-taker. *p<0.01, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.

The second identifying assumption is referred to as *exclusion*. Exclusion requires that the instrument’s effect on the treatment must be the only pathway through which the instrument affects the outcome. This means no other unobserved variables are causing an association between the instrument and the outcome. This assumption would be violated if, for example, a police officer learns to trust or distrust information from specific call-takers overtime. Although statistically untestable, the organizational structure of Central Dispatch supports the validity of the exclusion restriction. At Central Dispatch, police receive radio transmissions from dispatchers who are separate and distinct from call-takers. It is highly unlikely police are aware of call-taker identity while driving to an incident since the call-takers are not on the radio with the police. Moreover, because

Central Dispatch is a consolidated dispatch center—they dispatch for six different police agencies—many police officers have never met dispatch staff and are not on a name-to-name basis.

The exclusion restriction also requires that the instrument is “as good as randomly assigned.” To test this assumption, I include a rich set of covariates —source of call, census block group characteristics, shift, month, day of week, and year—to see whether these variables predict the instrument. If call-takers are randomly assigned to calls, then these covariates should not predict the instrument. However, if the covariates do predict the instrument, then this would suggest that call-takers receive different compositions of calls which would threaten the study design (e.g., a threat would exist if some call-takers receive more calls during summer months than others and summer months are when more serious crimes occur). Table 4-4 indicates that call-takers are randomly assigned calls across census block group characteristics, month, day of week, and year (column 2). Random assignment across block groups is further supported by my first-hand knowledge that call-takers are unaware of a caller’s location prior to answering a call.

Two covariates, however, threaten the random assignment of call-takers to calls—shift and call source. Because call-takers bid for shifts based on seniority, some call-takers are more likely to work during certain shifts and types of calls vary across shifts. Table 4-4 (column 2) shows that the coefficient on shift is significant, but small in magnitude (-0.006). Call source—whether the call comes in on a 911 or non-emergency line—also threatens the random assignment. Because 911 lines ring out in the dispatch center with different ring-tones than non-emergency calls, call-takers know the source of call before answering. Although in theory all call-takers should answer 911 calls first, it

is possible that some call-takers may break this rule and opt to answer more non-emergency calls to avoid high stress situations. By doing this, they may alter the composition of calls each call-taker receives. Table 4-4 (column 2) shows that the coefficient on source is significant, but small in magnitude (0.009). To address these two violations, I include fixed effects for shift and call source. This means the allocation of call-takers to calls is *conditionally random* after controlling for shift and call source.

Table 4-4 Balance Tests for the Conditional Random Assignment of Call-Takers

	(1)	(2)
	High Priority Call Classification	Call-Taker Alarmism
<i>Call Characteristics</i>		
Call Source 911	0.017* (0.010)	0.009*** (0.003)
<i>Census Block Group Characteristics</i>		
Percent of Block Group Black	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Percent of Block Group Living Below FPL	-0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Percent of Block Group Unemployed	0.068*** (0.022)	0.002 (0.001)
<i>Temporal Features of Calls</i>		
Shift	-0.026*** (0.003)	-0.006*** (0.003)
Month	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Day of Week	-0.000 (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)
Year	-0.009*** (0.003)	0.001 (0.001)
F-Statistic from Joint Test	37.09	3.21
P-Value from Joint Test	0.000	0.009
Observations	158,918	158,918

The third identifying assumption is *monotonicity*. Monotonicity requires that harsher examiners are harsher across different sub-groups. For example, in the judge literature, harsher judges should be harsher for both black and white defendants to lend credence to the monotonicity assumption (Harding et al. 2017). In the case of call-taking, call-takers that are more alarmist for certain sub-groups should also be weakly more alarmist for other sub-groups. I probe this assumption in Table 4-5 where I run regressions of high priority call classification on the call-taker alarmism instrument by geographic area. The first stage estimates in Table 4-5 remain positive and statistically significant when I run regressions by geographic area. This suggests that the monotonicity assumption is met.

Table 4-5 Testable Implications of Monotonicity for the Alarmism Instrument

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	City A	City B	County (excluding City A & City B)
Call-Taker Alarmism	0.309*** (0.116)	0.586*** (0.147)	0.763*** (0.114)
F Statistic	7.14	15.95	44.96
Observations	52,605	20,743	85,570

Results

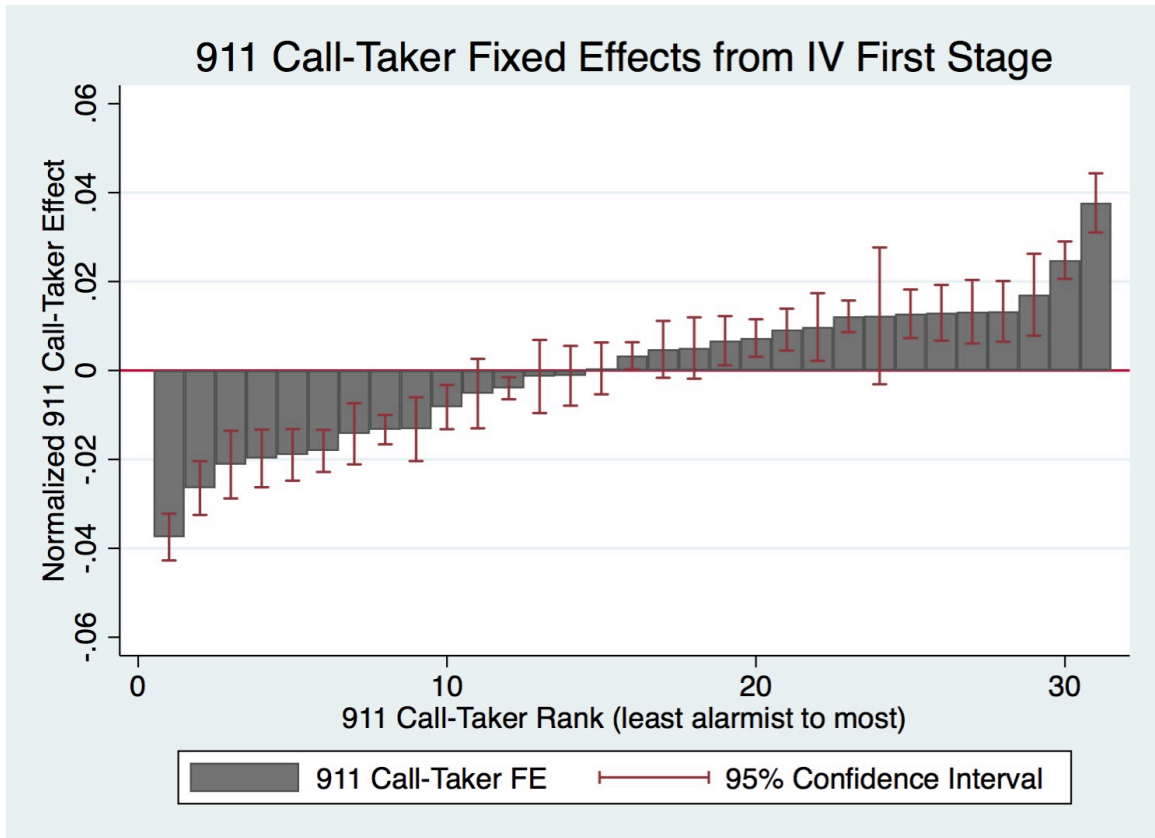
Call-Taker Variation in Call Classification

Because discretion among call-takers has not previously been systemically documented in the literature, I report first stage results from the 2SLS model. Figure 4-2 reveals that significant variation exists across call-takers in their average propensity to classify *the same type of call*, after controlling for shift and call source, as high priority.

Each vertical bar in Figure 4-2 represents a unique call-taker at Central Dispatch. The height of each bar records the deviation of that call-taker's average propensity to classify a call as high priority from the average call-taker's propensity to classify the same type of call as high priority. The vertical bars include 95 percent confidence intervals around each of the call-taker effect estimates. For 26 of the 31 call-takers, the confidence intervals on the effects exclude zero, meaning the effects are statistically significant. An F-test of the joint hypothesis that all the estimated call-taker effects are zero is rejected with a $p\text{-value} < .001$, meaning that call-taker variation is unlikely to be random.

Figure 4-2 indicates that a 911 call-taker at the top of the distribution is nearly seven percentage points more likely to rank the same type of call as high priority than a 911 operator at the bottom of the distribution. Relative to the average call-taker, the most alarmist call-taker is nearly four percentage points more likely to classify the same type of call high priority, and the least alarmist call-taker is nearly 4 percentage points less likely to classify the same type of call high priority. A one standard deviation increase in call-taker alarmism (2.3 percentage points) increases the likelihood of high priority call classification by 1.2 percentage points. This variation is based *solely* on which call-taker happens to pick up the phone. These findings suggest that call classification is neither an automated or uniform process.

Figure 4-2 Call-Taker Fixed Effects from IV First Stage

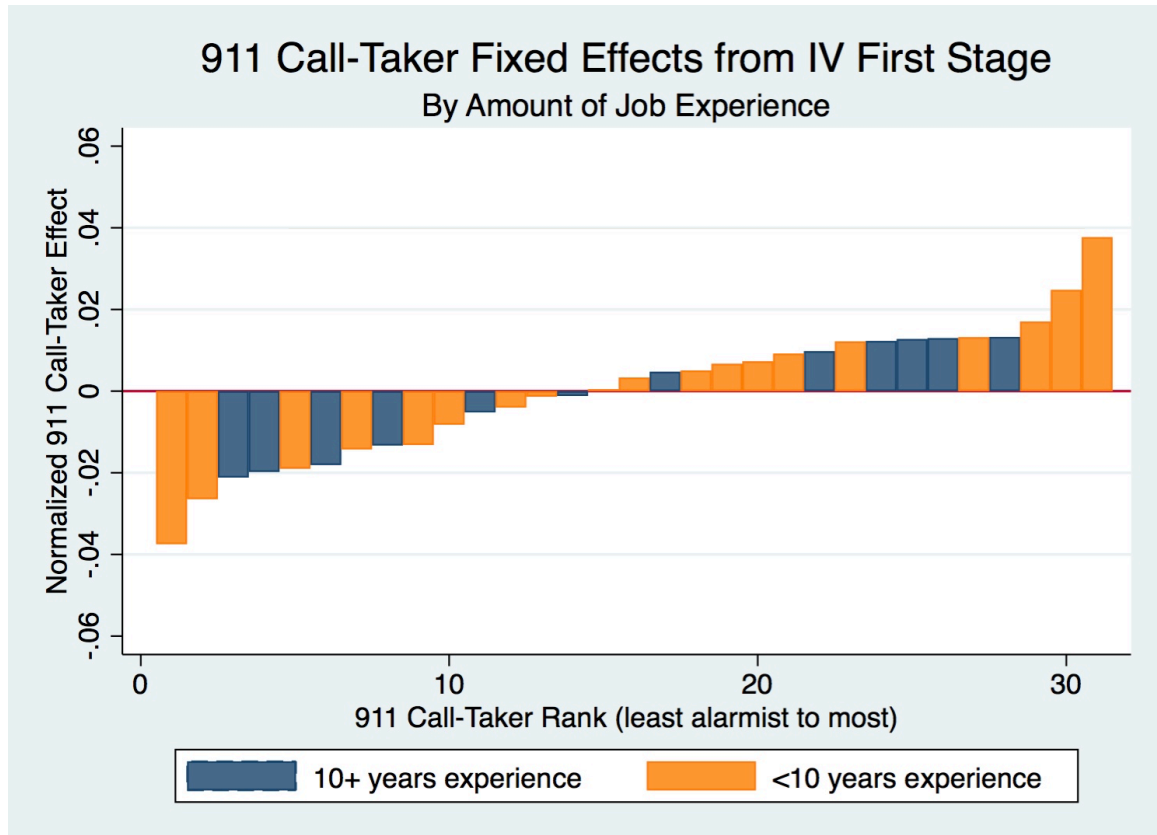


Notes: Figure 4-2 plots the normalized fixed effects for each of the 31 operators along with 95 percent confidence intervals. The fixed effects are obtained by running a regression model with operator fixed effects, shift, and call source fixed effects (see equation (2)).

To examine whether certain characteristics of call-takers predict placement on the alarmism scale, I present call-taker effect estimates by amount of job experience. In Figure 4-3, I differentiate between call-takers with ten or more years of experience working for 911—whether at Central Dispatch or another dispatch center—and those with less than ten years of experience. Although we might expect that call-takers with less job experience are more likely to enter calls as high priority because of the anxiety and apprehension that comes with inexperience—much like how my own excitability during the call in the opening field note led me to classify the incident as a breaking and entering and fail to probe the caller—Figure 4-3 does not show a clear pattern between

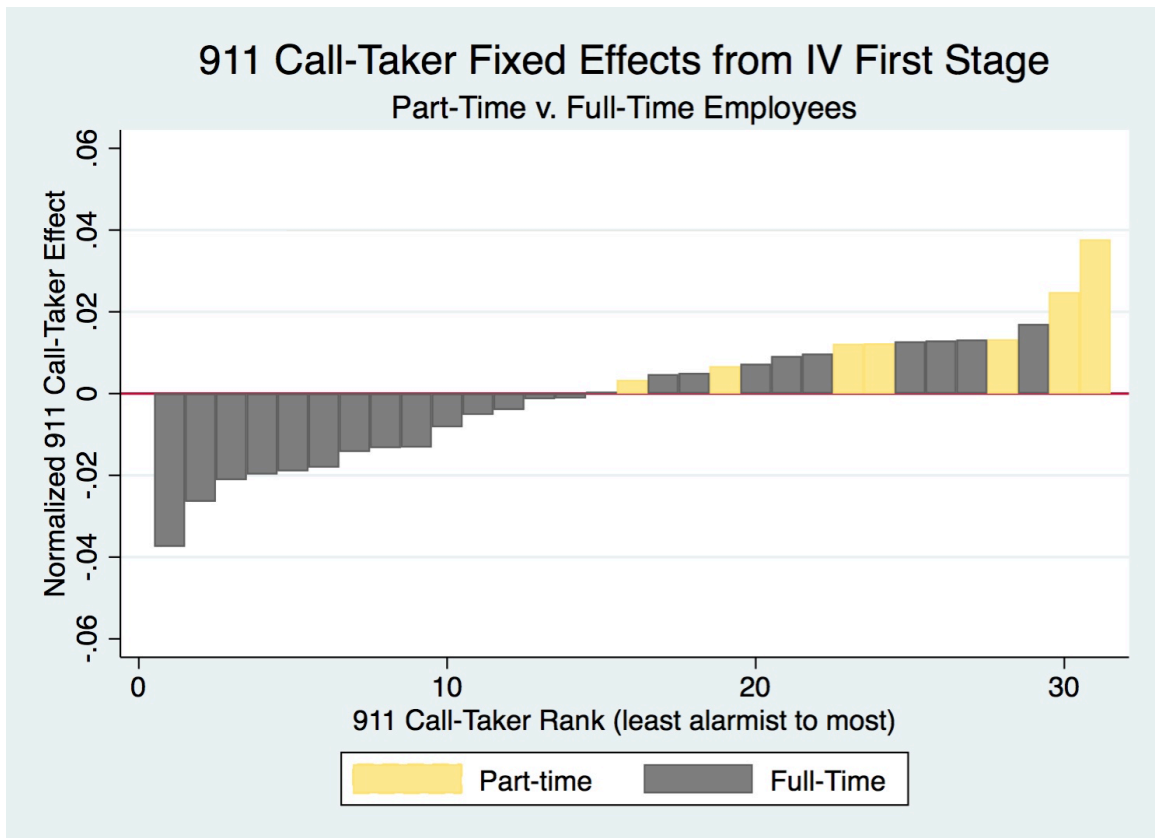
job experience and a call-taker's propensity to classify a call high priority. It is simply not the case that employees with less experience treat calls differently than their co-workers.

Figure 4-3 Call-Taker Fixed Effects from IV First Stage by Amount of Job Experience



I also present call-taker estimates by job position to see whether being a part-time call-taker versus a full-time call-taker/dispatcher is associated with alarmism. In Figure 4-4, I differentiate the seven part-timers who only answer phones from the twenty-four full-timers who rotate between answering phones and dispatching the police. Figure 4-4 suggests that relative to the average call-taker, part-time call-takers exhibit higher levels of alarmism when classifying calls. Given the differences in training between part-time and full-time call-takers, these findings strongly suggest that organizational practices play a role in shaping how call-takers appraise risk and classify calls.

Figure 4-4 Call-Taker Fixed Effects from IV First Stage by Job Position



In addition to undergoing a shorter training period, part-timers also may be more alarmist because they do not deal with the consequences of entering high priority calls in the same way as dispatchers. Dispatchers understand that high priority calls pull police resources away from other incidents and elevate officer safety risks. Moreover, dispatchers bear the brunt of embarrassment over the radio when sending police to high priority calls that could have been avoided with more probing.

It is difficult to ascertain from the model whether the part-time call-takers are actually more accurate in classifying calls than full-timers; however, experiences from Central Dispatch suggest this likely is not the case. Indeed, during my time at the dispatch center full-timers frequently voiced discontent about part-timers' quality of

work. John, a full-timer with over ten years of job experience, expressed this frustration to me saying that part-timers lack knowledge about the laws and this causes them to “drop stupid shit in when our boards are full.” Lisa, another full-timer with over ten years of job experience, told me that part-timers put in wrong call types and are basically incompetent. These observations suggest that call-takers who escalate risk are recognized as less competent when carrying out key job functions.

Causal Effects of Call Classification on Police Outcomes

Table 4-6 reports the effects of call-taker alarmism on policing in the field. Column 1 shows the effects of call classification on the likelihood of a police officer verifying the incident as high priority once at the scene. The 2SLS estimates indicate that classifying a call as high priority increases the likelihood of police verifying the incident as high priority by 21.9 percentage points. This effect is significant and large in magnitude. In standard deviation terms, a one standard deviation increase in call-taker alarmism (2.3 percentage points) increases the likelihood the police classify the incident as high priority by 0.5 percentage points.

Column 2 reports the effects of call classification on the likelihood of arrest. The 2SLS estimates indicate that classifying a call as high priority significantly increases the likelihood of arrest by 12.8 percentage points. A one standard deviation increase in call-taker alarmism (2.3 percentage points) increases the likelihood of arrest by 0.3 percentage points. Given how rare arrests are in the data—2.6 percent of calls-for-service result in arrest—these percentage point changes are substantial in magnitude.

Table 4-6 Effects of Call-Taker Alarmism on Police Outcomes from 2SLS

	(1)	(2)
	Police Officer High Priority Incident Classification	Call-Driven Arrest
High Priority Call Classification	0.219** (0.109)	0.128* (0.073)
Kleibergen-Paap Wald F Statistic	78.623	43.687
Observations	158,918	74,653

Table 4-7 calculates the maximal difference in police response depending on whether the officer is responding to a call processed by the least alarmist or most alarmist call-taker.⁵ I find that there is a thirteen percent change in the average propensity for a police officer to verify an incident as high priority, depending on whether the least alarmist or most alarmist call-taker processed the call. Moreover, there is a thirty-four percent change in the average propensity for a police officer to make an arrest depending on which type of call-taker processed the call. These are large and significant differences.

⁵ Column 1 reports the unconditional probability of 1) the police verifying an incident as high priority (0.114) and 2) the police making an arrest (0.026). Column 2 reports the maximal range of call-taker fixed effects (0.070). Column 3 reports the coefficients from the second stage of the 2SLS model. Column 4 calculates the outcome change by multiplying the 2SLS coefficients by the range of call-taker fixed effects. Column 5 generates percent changes in police behavior by dividing the outcome change by the unconditional probabilities in Column 1.

Table 4-7 Interpreting 2SLS Results- Percent Change in Police Behaviors if Responding to Most Alarmist v. Least Alarmist Call-Taker

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Unconditional Probability	Call-Taker Fixed Effects Range	Coefficient	Outcome Change= (2)*(3)	Percent Change =(4)/(1)
High Priority Incident Classification by Police	0.114	0.070	0.219***	0.015	13%
Call-Driven Arrest	0.026	0.070	0.129**	0.009	34%

Discussion

This chapter offers three main contributions to our understanding of call-driven policing. First, I bring attention to the fact that 911 call-takers systematically differ in risk appraisal when handling the same types of calls. This variation supports the idea that call-takers are more than “information-takers” passing along raw, unmediated information from caller to police, but rather are “information-makers” actively participating in the construction of events. Moreover, this variation is strong evidence that call-takers deploy discretion during the risk appraisal process, which has yet to be systematically documented in the literature. Future analyses would benefit from disaggregating high priority calls to determine which types are most likely to generate disagreement among call-takers.

Second, documenting call-taker variability offers an important methodological contribution to scholars who use call-for-service data to address pressing research questions. Studies that use call-for-service data to predict policing hot-spots or community needs frequently assume that the data reflect the true nature of the caller’s

problem. My findings indicate that because call classification is a complex interactional process that reflects both a caller's request and a call-taker's discretion, scholars should consider including call-taker fixed effects in future analyses.

Third, the results presented in this paper strongly suggest that call-takers' underlying level of alarmism when processing calls inside dispatch can impact police officer perceptions and behaviors in the field. By using an examiner assignment research design, I reveal a previously undocumented mechanism to further help explain police behavior. I find evidence that call classification variability impacts how police perceive of an incident, through incident verification, and how police behave, through arrest. Because the human interpretation of a phone call leads to some amount of imprecision, even if police receive information that is accurate on average, my findings imply that there is a substantial probability that police receive imprecise information. In the world of policing, this heterogeneity can have huge effects in terms of whether an officer draws a weapon, makes an arrest, or uses force.

This chapter raises important normative questions about call-taking. Because the analysis uses an internal benchmark, in which call-taker effects are presented in relative terms, there is no absolute truth to dictate where call-takers' average propensities should lie. It is possible that the average call-taker is not the desired call-taker. In fact, it is highly plausible that call-takers who are less alarmist are desired because they exercise restraint in the deployment of police, which is considered beneficial on the grounds of parsimony. Of course, the agency would not want to deprive people who need help from receiving police services, or underestimate the severity of an incident. But, the fact that the agency has rewarded more restrained call-takers suggests that their behavior is

desirable. Indeed, awards for “dispatch employee of the year” were presented two years in a row to two call-takers who are significantly less alarmist than the average call-taker. Moreover, the fact that more alarmist call-takers are overwhelmingly part-timers who receive less training and often frustrate their full-time co-workers further suggests that the ideal place for a call-taker to lie on the distribution is closer to the bottom.

Documenting variability in call classification introduces the possibility for policy reforms inside dispatch. Because call-takers rarely learn the outcomes of calls, it is nearly impossible for call-takers who imprecisely classify calls to learn from their mistakes. One policy recommendation would be to *check discretion* by presenting call-takers with performance feedback, specifically by showing them their propensity to classify the same types of calls as high priority relative to their co-workers. It is possible that call-takers would change their behavior simply from seeing that they differ from the average. Another recommendation to check discretion would be to distribute knowledge from the less alarmist call-takers to others at the center. Enhanced training exercises in which call-takers share their knowledge and expertise around call classification with co-workers could facilitate organizational learning and improve outcomes. Moreover, when mistakes are made, holding debriefing sessions with call-takers, dispatchers, and police could help bring call-takers more into line with one another.

In the next chapter, I will look more closely at what makes the practice of more restrained call-takers distinctive and why some call-takers are less so. I will explore the logic and justification for their call-taking practice. This analysis will make it possible to explore further possibilities for organizational reform.

Chapter 5: The Organizational Construction of Discretion

Chapter 5 approaches this dissertation's overarching research question—how call-takers mediate caller demands and impact policing in the field—by focusing on the dispatch center's role in shaping call-taker behavior. This chapter expands upon chapters 3 and 4, which conceptualize the functions of call-taking as gatekeeping and risk appraisal, by examining the ways in which organizational rules and logics guide (or fail to guide) these critical call-taking functions. Analyzing the organization's mandates reveals that they prioritize *organizational goals*, such as internal administrative control, the provision of customer service, and the protection of officer safety, over *community goals*, such as the appropriate use of police resources and the preservation of the civil liberties of the subject of a call. By applying the rules to a set of calls, I bring attention to the areas in which they are irrational and produce ethical dilemmas, classification struggles, and resource allocation concerns for call-takers. I also describe various forms of discretion that call-takers deploy in these complex situations.

Complaints from passengers wishing to use the Bagnall to Greenfields bus service that "the drivers were speeding past queues of up to 30 people with a smile and a wave of a hand" have been met by a statement pointing out that "it is impossible for the drivers to keep their timetable if they have to stop for passengers." – Herman Goldstein, 1979

Criminologist and law professor, Herman Goldstein, describes a newspaper report from the Midlands of England of a bus refusing to pick up passengers in order to stay on

schedule. He uses this anecdote to make the point that bureaucratic organizations can become so myopically focused on meeting their own internal goals that they lose sight of their broader mission. Police organizations, he argues, particularly are at-risk of engaging in this kind of narrow thinking.

Just as the bus drivers became obsessed with their timetable, so too can police become obsessed with operational goals, such as response times. Goldstein writes about the fact that police organizations invest heavily in technologies and personnel to reduce the amount of time it takes for police to respond to calls for service. He goes on to critique their efforts because they overlook the substance of police-work: “Much less attention was given in this same period to what the officer does in handling the variety of problems he confronts on arriving, albeit fast, where he is summoned” (Goldstein 1979). In other words, bureaucracies that value “means over ends” thinking discount substantive goals, such as whether an officer’s intervention resolves a caller’s problem or what the downstream consequences of an officer’s actions are on the public, in favor of accomplishing internal organizational goals.

Goldstein’s logic resonates not only with street-level policing, but also inside dispatch. As I will show through a detailed analysis of the rulebook in the next section of this chapter, dispatch also prioritizes internal goals, such as providing quality customer service and preserving officer safety. These certainly are commendable goals. Indeed, prior scholars have written about the importance of providing polite customer service to 911 callers to encourage civic engagement and corporation with the police (Sharp 1985; Waste 1989).

Although both goals are admirable pursuits aimed at providing callers with respectful interactions and preserving officer life, they can crowd out other call-taking functions. This is because calling 911 is not the same as calling a private business, where the adage “the customer is always right” holds supreme. Steven Clayman and John Heritage put it best when they write, “Calling 911 is not like ordering a pizza” (2002). What they mean is that call-taking requires careful assessment of citizen demands to properly allocate scarce resources. An outsized focus on customer service can constrain the gatekeeping function that is intended to prevent the worst excesses of the 911 system from entering the system, and undermine the accuracy of the risk appraisal function, by limiting the extent to which caller-takers probe and challenge callers’ requests. Moreover, a customer service focus speaks not at all to the ways in which 911 calls can threaten the civil liberties of innocent people who are the subject of misguided or malicious calls, or the ways call-takers could limit those misuses and abuses.

Much like in the case of the bus referenced at the start of this chapter, a 911 system that is firmly focused on sending the police without serious consideration of the relative costs and benefits of doing so yields an unsophisticated public safety system; one that prioritizes the needs of the callers and the police over the wider public.

The question remains as to how the organization instills these internal goals in their workers and whether workers adhere to accomplishing them. Literature from organizational studies speaks to these questions. First, written rules are a defining feature of formal bureaucracies (Weber 1968). Rules guard against personalistic and ad-hoc decision-making by routinizing tasks (Mattson 1989; B. D. Jones 1980; Percy and Scott 1985). Bryan Jones (1980) describes that organizational decision rules are intended “to

codify the repetitive decisions it must make in dealing with recurring situations requiring service efforts.” Such rules help to routinize tasks in a “fair” or “just” manner.

Rules, however, do not always live up to their promises. First, they seldom cover all the complexities and uncertainties of human interactions (Zimmerman and Douglas 1970). As a result, front-line workers frequently exercise discretion in the performance of their duties. Indeed, Michael Lipsky finds that front-line government workers exercise considerable discretion when carrying out the day-to-day implementation of public programs (1980). He writes that discretion arises under two conditions: 1) when the work is too complex to “reduce to programmatic formats,” and 2) when the work requires humanistic judgment to respond to unique circumstances. In these situations, rules and policies are abstract and fail to provide concrete instruction (Garfinkel 1967). As a result, workers may draw on personal attitudes, experiences, and membership in certain identity groups to guide their actions (Watkins-Hayes 2009).

Second, rules are not always adopted by organizations because they enhance performance, but rather because they are institutionalized practices. The key insight of the “new institutionalist” perspective in organizational studies is that organizations react to uncertainty by adopting organizational features (rules, practices, structure) that they see in their environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Some rules are widespread not because they are rational, but because they have become “taken for granted” ways of doing things (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Rules often become an end in themselves, shaping work at the expense of attaining an organization’s overarching purpose (Merton 1940). It is likely that workers may also exercise discretion when they perceive that a rule is irrational or that it falls short. For instance, when internal administrative goals do not

align with broader community goals, workers may push back. A study of front-line community mental health workers find that they must negotiate competing institutional logics—or those packages of “taken for granted” practices and their corresponding norms—during service provision (Spitzmueller 2016). In the case of dispatch, call-takers who approach call-taking from a gatekeeping orientation might develop a specific set of tactics to negotiate accomplishing internal organizational goals, while also limiting the public’s latitude over what the police do and where they go. The remainder of this chapter investigates these hypotheses.

Methodology

The analysis in this chapter relies upon the organization’s formal rulebook, a sample of 911 and non-emergency audio recordings, and participant observation field notes from my field site. To analyze the rulebook, I employ Strauss and Corbin’s “open coding” qualitative data system. Using this method, I generate descriptive codes for each rule in the rulebook and then combine similar descriptive codes into broader categories. Because I was interested in understanding the exact circumstances in which the rules provide sufficient guidance and those in which they do not, I next apply the categories of rules to a sample of 159 telephone recordings. This allows me to establish features of the contexts in which the rules provide sufficient (or insufficient) governance over call-taking.

Audio recordings also offer insights into the discretionary strategies and tactics that call-takers deploy over the telephone. Recordings were transcribed using conversation analytic transcription conventions, which capture the details of talk and

interaction as it actually occurs, including emphasis, silence, and overlapping speech. Drawing from cultural sociology, I use the concept of repertoires, or strategies of action, to further analyze call-taker tactics (Swidler 1986). To supplement this analysis, I draw on participant observation field notes, which capture call-taker reactions to the kinds of challenges and dilemmas that can arise from selectively instructive rules.

The Scope and Limits of Call-Taking Rules

Formal call-taking rules vary across dispatch centers because the 911 system does not have national standardized operating procedures. Dispatch centers can, however, register with the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) to access model policies and practices. NENA's website includes over fifty links with such materials for local dispatch centers to adopt. The guidelines established by NENA are intended to create some consistency in how calls are handled across communities. My field site adopted many of NENA's model call-taking policies, in addition to crafting supplemental organization-specific policies, all of which were provided to me in a rulebook that I was expected to study during training, and which served as the basis for discipline. The rulebook contained hundreds of pages of directives about uniforms, telephone technology, information gathering, and incident classification.

A close analysis of the rulebook reveals four primary categories of rules: those pertaining to *physical appearance*, *administrative tasks*, *information extraction*, and *information classification*. Appearance and administrative rules comprise a large portion of the rulebook and explicitly guide procedural aspects of call-taking. They provide the organization ample control over internal matters. In contrast, information extraction and

classification rules are only selectively instructive, despite involving the most substantive parts of call-taking.

This chapter argues that rules aimed at guiding the more substantive call-taking tasks fail to appreciate the critical gatekeeping and risk appraisal functions that call-takers play. This results in selectively instructive rules that do not encompass many of the complicated realities call-takers face. More specifically, the rules fail to instruct call-takers to probe or challenge callers' claims—a skill that prior scholars have shown call-takers to use when determining whether a call requires police attention. Furthermore, the rules are silent about how call-takers can and should appraise risk in sophisticated ways. Instead, the rules encourage call-takers to send the police to nearly all requests and, at times, upgrade ambiguous responses. Moreover, the rules largely are focused on preserving officer safety relative to preserving the civil liberties of the subject of a call.

Appearance Rules

Despite 911 call-takers invisibly operating with the public, rules about proper physical appearance are among the first taught to new hires. Rules about physical appearance are explicit, detailed, strict, and come with clear consequences if broken. Nearly every aspect of a call-taker's appearance is governed by the formal rulebook.

During my first week of training, I sat in a small white-walled room inside Central Dispatch with my training supervisor Louis—a wiry 6'0" white male in his early thirties with buzzed blonde hair. With my long hair running down my back, I read aloud: "Long hair will be pinned or held back so as to not cover the eyes or eyebrow, or the collar in the back...long hair must be tied back so it doesn't hang over the shoulder in

front or touch the uniform collar. Ribbons are not permitted.” I went on to read about hairstyles for male employees: “Hair will be maintained in a tapered and styled manner. When combed, hair may not fall over the eyes in the front, or over the ears on the side, or over the collar in the back. Afros two inches long or less are permitted.” Much to my surprise, I was also schooled in facial hair: “A neatly trimmed mustache is permitted. It may extend outward by ½ inch from the line separating the skin and the vermilion part of the lip. The mustache may fall to a line parallel with the bottom of the lower lip. Beards and goatees are not permitted.” The rulebook stated that compliance is mandatory and failure to comply may result in corrective discipline “up to and including discharge.”

The rulebook also provided specific dress standard guidelines. I read how all staff must wear department issued tactical shirts with agency shoulder patches, badges, and nametags, cargo pocket trousers, and black leather belts. Department issued uniforms must be purchased from a local uniform supply store. Uniform maintenance is the responsibility of the call-taker. For example, the black leather belts “must be maintained in good repair and kept polished.” In response to a slew of uniform infractions, management distributed the following list of appearance concerns to employees:

Areas of concern include: missing buttons need to be replaced, black shoes/boots need to be in good order (polished/clean) and tied, shirts must be tucked in regardless of hem length, belts need to be worn with pants, uniform should be in clean, neat and serviceable condition (free from stains, tears or signs of wear), and patches should be completely sewn tightly to clothing.

Management reiterated the enforceability of appearance rules in the same correspondence. They wrote, “Supervisors will conduct regular and at times, random, uniform inspections. Staff will have an opportunity to correct the issue; however, continued non-compliance will result in disciplinary action.” I draw attention to this correspondence because it highlights the level of attention that the organization spends on having call-takers accomplish certain internal goals.

Administrative Rules

Administrative rules instruct call-takers in the performance of tasks related to basic, mechanical 911 operations. Specifically, they include rules about the proper use of technology, phone etiquette, and law enforcement lingo. Directives are clear and thorough, and the tasks themselves relatively unambiguous.

A significant chunk of the rulebook includes detailed instructions and exercises aimed at instructing call-takers about how to operate the equipment and technology inside dispatch. The training manual contains 153 task modules that instruct call-takers on everything from turning on the wireless phone transmitter to logging into the computer to rebidding a phone number for more accurate location information. Each task module is straightforward with specific instructions on the more mechanical aspects of call-taking. For example, a typical directive might read as follows, “Attach the wireless headset to the matching remote unit. Check that the on-off indicator located at the top of the remote unit is flashing green. If the on-off indicator is not flashing green, press the on-off indicator and wait up to 45 seconds for the unit to connect.” A call-taker would then practice this skill multiple times to learn how to properly operate their wireless phone transmitter.

Administrative rules also instruct call-takers in proper phone etiquette. The rulebook provides directions with specific language call-takers must use when answering calls. For example, the rules read that a call-taker “shall answer 911 calls with ‘911, where is your emergency?’ and non-emergency calls with, ‘Central Dispatch, last name or badge number.’” Proper phone etiquette also involves speaking politely and courteously. Specifically, the rules read, “Employees shall be courteous, informative, and attentive when answering and responding to telephone calls and inquiries. Employees are required to be as helpful and attentive as necessary to properly process requests, referrals, questions and information.” The key adjectives in this directive—such as “courteous,” “informative,” “attentive,” and “helpful”—signal to call-takers that the organization values the provision of customer service.

The rules also teach call-takers to use police lingo. One of the first things call-takers must memorize is the Los Angeles Police Department phonetic alphabet. The phonetic alphabet is used to make communications uniform and reduce misunderstandings. A call-taker may confirm a caller’s last name “Hall” by repeating Henry-Adam-Lincoln-Lincoln, rather than H-A-L-L. This style of speaking differentiates call-takers from the regular public and increases their identification with the police. Call-takers are also instructed to use appropriate abbreviations when recording information in the CAD system. For example, phrases like OTW (i.e. on the way), TOT (i.e. transferred caller), CONS/ALERT/BREATHING (i.e. it is not a life or death medical emergency), OCC X1 (i.e., a vehicle has one occupant) are frequently used by call-takers to efficiently transfer information. Improper use of abbreviations creates confusion and frustration inside dispatch.

Thus far, I have shown that the rulebook provides call-takers with strict and specific guidance concerning a wide-range of administrative tasks—such as how to dress as members of law enforcement, successfully transfer a caller, and properly abbreviate important phrases. However, as evidenced by the analysis of the Gates’ 911 call in Chapter 3, often the most challenging aspects of call-taking arise not over procedural tasks, but over tasks related to the substance of a call. One such task involves extracting information from callers.

Extraction Rules

The rulebook recognizes information extraction as a critical call-taking duty and includes several directives instructing call-takers to extract *routine incident information*. Routine incident information includes the location of the emergency, the caller’s name and phone number, the time of the emergency, suspect descriptions (if there are any suspects), the type of incident, and whether the caller wants contact with the police. These are critical pieces of information for responding police officers; so critical that even when a caller is hysterical, angry, confused, or unable to speak freely, call-takers are taught that they still should endeavor to extract such information.

Although the rulebook provides some important guidance about the extraction of routine incident information, it remains silent on *investigatory questioning*. As mentioned in Chapter 3, scholars primarily have conceived of the call-taking function as involving *gatekeeping*. Gatekeeping involves preventing inappropriate or misguided requests from receiving police attention. In order to carry out the gatekeeping function, prior research finds that call-takers engage in investigatory questioning when on the telephone.

Investigatory questions are aimed at determining *why* police assistance is required and “enable the call-taker to determine whether the problem is actionable, and hence whether the request should be granted in the first place” (Heritage and Clayman 2010; Whalen, Zimmerman, and Whalen 1988). Because callers can make malicious, irrational, and mistaken reports to 911, scholars find that call-takers “probe reports that are excessively vague” (Heritage and Clayman 2010). Despite the important role investigatory questioning can play in call-taking, the rulebook at my field site does not provide formal guidance about how or when to engage in this work.

The rulebook’s only mention of extracting information beyond that gathered during routine questioning involves questions related to protecting the safety of the responding officer. This information is referred to as *officer safety information* and is used to prepare officers for potential risks at the scene. The rulebook instructs call-takers to ask questions about whether anyone has been drinking or taking drugs, if anyone has a weapon, whether anyone will be combative with the police, and if there is any other information that could help keep the responding officers safe. Moreover, call-takers are instructed to document any pertinent information regarding previous calls from a caller’s location—such as whether the caller owns a gun or was combative with police in the past—to further promote officer safety.

Officer safety information is undoubtedly important for protecting the lives of first-responders, but the rulebook’s preoccupation with officer safety does not carry over to subject safety. During training, I was presented with sobering statistics on the number of officers killed in the line of duty and frequently reminded of the risks officers face in the field. Notably missing from training was any discussion about the frequency with

which police are summoned by callers to check on innocent individuals or how such calls might contribute to racial and socioeconomic disparities in who receives police attention. Also missing was any mention of tactics call-takers might deploy to protect people from unnecessary police contact. Although my field site offered training around issues of race and civil liberties to deputies, during my time in the field such training did not extend to the call center (since my departure from the field in 2018 the organization has implemented implicit bias training for call-takers and dispatchers).

The lack of rulebook guidance on investigatory questioning and subject safety reflects an organizational logic centered not on gatekeeping, but on customer service. A customer service orientation to call-taking presumes a high level of caller entitlement to police services and does not encourage probing or challenging of callers' claims. This orientation is captured in the rulebook language, which states that call-takers, "Shall make every reasonable attempt to satisfy the caller's request." This customer service focus is reinforced during training both by an absence of discussion about the gatekeeping function, and by explicit talk from supervisors about the importance of providing quality service to callers.

A customer service culture does not mean that no call-takers engage in investigatory questioning, but if they do it is the result of on-the-job experience instead of formal rules or policies. Indeed, I find that a subset of call-takers approach callers with a high level of skepticism and expect callers to provide justification before sending police services. These call-takers reject the notion that police can solve every problem. Laurie, a veteran call-taker, captured this sentiment when explaining, "Some things you just have to solve by yourself and the police can't help you." Paul, another veteran dispatcher

explained, “A lot of time we are just passing the buck by saying ‘oh yeah the police will respond’ and the police get there and say ‘look we can’t help you.’” He cautioned me against embracing the “pass the buck” mentality as it wastes resources and can lead to negative experiences for callers who wait for the police only to be told that the police cannot help them. According to Paul, the organization used to embrace more of a gatekeeping orientation toward call-taking: “Four or five years ago training was really different. People were trained to put in the least possible calls. Now we are trained to drop all the calls in, and that creates tension between call-takers and dispatchers because they have to dispatch calls they don’t want to dispatch.” I will describe some of these tensions later in the chapter when I apply the rules to calls from the field.

In the case of a call-taker being skeptical or concerned about a caller’s request for police services, formal policies do not encourage call-takers to do anything beyond simply sending the police. Aside from civil calls (i.e., a call involving a private dispute between individuals and businesses), misdials, and prank calls, the rulebook does not explicate other scenarios in which police services can or should be denied or challenged. Rather, the rulebook encourages call-takers to use their discretion to send the police “in any situation where the call-taker believes an emergency situation may exist.” The organization stresses that liability can arise from not sending the police and advances the motto, “When in doubt, send them out” (them being the police). Call-takers who embrace a gatekeeping orientation, like Paul and Laurie, informally push back against management’s motto with their own motto, “When in doubt, close it out” (it being the incident).

Classification Rules

Another critical call-taking task involves distilling extracted information into a single incident type. As explained in Chapters 3 and 4, an incident type captures both the *nature and severity* of a caller's problem and shapes police responses. The formal rulebook defines each incident type. Full definitions can be found in Table 2 in the Appendix.

The rulebook includes definitions for over one hundred incident types to guide call-taker incident classification, but only a small fraction provides call-takers with specific criteria to assist in this process. Rulebook definitions are clear and concrete for a select number of incident types, often those involving serious crime or quality of life issues. For example, the rulebook states that for a call-taker to classify an incident as a "felonious assault" the caller must express that a deadly weapon is present. If a deadly weapon—such as a gun or knife—is not present, then the call would not meet the criteria for a felonious assault classification. Similarly, for a call to be classified as a "domestic" it requires a physical assault *and* an established relationship between the two parties (e.g., spouse, ex-spouse, child in common, dating, resident or former resident of the same household). If a physical assault occurred, but no domestic relationship exists between the two parties, then the rulebook indicates that the call should be classified as an "assault and battery." Quality of life incidents such as blocked driveways, barking dogs, or loud music are also well-defined in the rulebook and leave little space for interpretation. In these kinds of situations, the rulebook provides sufficient guidance by introducing a degree of objectivity into the classification process.

Many incident types, however, do not include clear-cut criteria and this can result in caller biases entering the call-taking process. This issue is particularly acute when considering suspicious person calls. By defining a “suspicious” as “any incident/situation/person/vehicle that is determined to be suspicious in nature *by the caller*,” the rulebook explicitly delegates classification authority away from the call-taker and towards the caller. In some situations, deferring to the caller, who is at the scene and can observe firsthand what is happening, is perfectly logical. But, the rules provide little recourse for call-takers who may become wary of a caller’s motivation. The “suspicious” definition leaves call-takers with no method of preventing calls involving children mowing lawns, students napping in common rooms, or politicians canvassing neighborhoods from receiving police dispatches—all which callers found suspicious and police responded to in recent years.

Incident types such as family troubles, disorderly behavior, emotionally disturbed persons, welfare checks, and neighbor troubles also can introduce high levels of caller subjectivity to the classification process. For example, the rulebook defines a “disorderly” as “any situation that threatens to disturb the public peace or a subject(s) behaving in a disruptive manner to themselves or others.” Because this definition is relatively vague and lacks criteria around “disturbing the public peace” or “being disruptive,” a disorderly can include a wide variety of activities. The controversial Philadelphia Starbucks incident described in Chapter 1 highlights how something as benign as waiting in a coffee shop can be considered disorderly. Moreover, welfare checks—defined as “requests to check the well-being of a citizen based on a possibility of endangerment not directly involved in a crime”—also introduce a degree of

subjectivity into classification. The *possibility* of endangerment can be widely interpreted by callers and call-takers. Indeed, the wide scope of this definition led me to classify a report of a male walking on the side of the road in pajamas as a welfare check, despite my concerns over whether the call warranted police attention.

Training about classification rules encourages call-takers to apply the highest priority incident type when there is a possibility of escalation. Potential for incident escalation is shaped by caller statements, prior call history, and caller location. Though not part of the formal rulebook, training materials at my field site encouraged using caller location to guide incident classification. My training supervisor spoke about how majority black and low-income areas of the county have the highest volume of calls and have “a higher chance of escalation because people have guns and stuff.” Despite comprising a relatively modest share of the county’s geography, these majority black and low-income neighborhoods dominated my training. Six of the nine neighborhood maps that I was instructed to memorize were of these areas. Furthermore, at least half of a mandatory eight-hour geography tour of the county was spent driving through these neighborhoods with supervisors pointing out specific addresses where police had trouble with violent crime, gang activity, and drug use. I observed how their notions of place, which were not unfounded given prior events, could lead call-takers to make broad generalizations about the people and incidents in these neighborhoods.

In the next section, I apply the extraction and classification rules to a set of calls from the field to illuminate the moral dilemmas, resource allocation problems, and uses of discretion that can arise.

Applying the Rulebook to Calls from the Field

Contexts in which Call-Taking Dilemmas are Rare

Extraction and assessment rules are particularly instructive under three conditions: 1) when the nature of a caller's problem is presented as an organizationally relevant category, 2) when the categories themselves have criteria driven definitions that limit caller subjectivity, and 3) when the caller is asking for direct assistance for themselves. These conditions are not specific to any one incident type, rather they can exist under a wide range of incident types and across priority levels—from felonious assaults to parking complaints. In these situations, rules that guide call-takers to extract routine information are more than sufficient to help them process and classify incidents. The examples below showcase a set of calls that meet the conditions listed above. Analysis of these calls will reveal that the rules are effective because the calls are processed efficiently and interactional troubles between the caller and call-taker do not arise.

In the following extract, a woman calls 911 to report that her car was broken into while she was out shopping.

Extract 01: The Larceny from Auto

01 911: Nine one one where is your emergency,
02 CLR: Hi. I'm uh on (beep) my car was just broken into
03 while I was in a store,
04 911: Mmkay. Where (.) did this happen=what address
05 CLR: I'm at Sally Beauty Supply ((redaction beeping))
06 911: <Sally Beauty Supply> ((typing)) What kind of car is
07 it,
08 CLR: It's a green Toyota Camry,
09 911: °Green° (.) ((typing))
10 (...)
28 911: Ohkay, well we will have the police drive over there
29 and they can meet you:: um near the vehicle.
30 CLR: Okay.
(...)

In line 02, the caller states the nature of her problem in language that is congruent with the rulebook definition of a “larceny from auto.” The rulebook defines a larceny from auto as the “taking and carrying away of the tangible personal property from the automobile of another with the intent to deprive him or her of its possession permanently.” Because a larceny from auto is a criminal act and within the purview of the police, the call-taker immediately affirms the nature of the caller’s problem with an “mmkay” in line 03. The call-taker then launches into a series of routine questions about the location of the incident and vehicle description for the responding officers to contact the caller. She ends the call with a promise of police assistance.

The call-taker does not need to exert any effort to interpret or transform the caller’s problem into an organizationally relevant category because the caller has done so for her. Moreover, because the caller is directly involved in the problem the call-taker has little reason to question the caller’s legitimacy. She is not a bystander who happened to notice a car in the parking lot with its door open, rather it is her vehicle and she knows that it was broken into. For these reasons, following the extraction and classification rules is sufficient to smoothly process this caller’s request.

In the next extract, a male calls the non-emergency line to report a car blocking a driveway.

Extract 02: The Blocked Driveway

```
01   CLR:      Yah we have a car blocking the driveway.
02   911:      Whatsa address hhh.
03   CLR:      ((Redaction beep::))
04   911:      Yer name.
05   CLR:      ((Redaction beep:::))
06   911:      D’you want the vehicle towed or ticketed.
07   CLR:      Well let’s start with a ticket=if it’s still here later
08           in the day we’l-I’ll call ya back for a tow job:.
09   911:      K:: What kinda car is it hhhh
10   CLR:      Its ah:: sil:ver Saa:b S:U:V:.
11   911:      A’right. >We’ll get ^some:body out there<
```

12 CLR: Th'you.
13 911: Thanks=bye.

Much like the vehicle break-in above, the caller in this extract also presents his problem using language that aligns with a pre-existing incident type. Because of the congruence between the caller's problem and the rulebook definition of a "parking complaint," the call-taker moves the call forward and initiates routine information extraction. Even though the caller does not specify whether the blocked driveway is his own or another's—he says "we have a car blocking *the* driveway"—the call-taker does not stop to clarify the point as the rules do not require the caller's own driveway be blocked for a police dispatch. Instead, she moves forward and asks for the address, the caller's name, and then provides the caller with an option for the police to ticket or tow the car. It is interesting to note that the call-taker defers to the caller about how the police should handle the illegally parked car. The call-taker does not need to exercise judgment in this call.

The following non-emergency call is from a woman who returned home and found her apartment broken into and her items moved and missing.

Extract 03: The Break-In

01 911: Central Dispatch ((redaction))
02 CLR: .hh Hi ((redaction beep)) home in my apartment complex
03 and someone has broken in, they're no longer here: but
04 I jus kinda want to make a report about it an shits all
05 over the place.
06 911: What is your address.
07 CLR: ((redaction beep)) (.3) Nothings like dam:aged but
08 shits
09 definitely moved and mis:sing,
10 911: Ohkay: yup we can definitely send out the p'lice=you're
11 in (beep) township?
(...)

In lines 02-04, the caller both defines the nature of her problem and severity of her problem in organizationally relevant terms. She explains that her apartment was

broken into, which helps the call-taker to classify the incident as a “breaking and entering,” and she makes clear that the intruders are no longer in the house, which lowers the priority level. In line 06, the call-taker moves forward with routine questions and asks for the caller’s address. The caller elaborates on the condition of her apartment to further justify her problem description, but because the call has already met the threshold for a breaking and entering the call-taker assures her that the police will “definitely” be sent out. This is another situation in which we see little need for call-taker judgment or discretion as the rules are highly effective.

Although the examples above highlight low difficulty situations that come from callers immediately presenting their problems in organizationally relevant ways, the next extract shows how even when callers do not do this call-takers can use criteria to quickly align with callers. In extract 04, a man calls 911 to report that the mother of his child just attacked him.

Extract 04: The Attack

(...)
01 911: Sir what’s going on?
02 CLR: Uh:: (.) I jus got into it with my my baby motha.
03 911: You jus did what?
04 CLR: I I I got into an argument with baby motha.
05 911: Oh:kay what what happened?
06 CLR: She she attacked me.
07 911: Whadya mean attacked you?
08 CLR: She attacked me uh physically attacked me and my my
09 mother.
10 911: Okay. What’s your [name?
11 CLR: [Mah nephew] and mah sister
12 911: What’s your name.
(...)

This caller does not initially present his problem in way that aligns with pre-existing incident types. In line 01, the call-taker asks about the nature of the problem and the caller responds that he “just got into it” with the mother of his child. The call-taker invites clarification by asking about the nature of the problem again. This time the caller

responds that he got into an “argument,” but again “argument” is not congruent with an existing incident type. The caller then says he was attacked and uses the word “physically.” At this point, the caller’s problem aligns with a pre-existing category because it involves a physical assault and the two parties have a child in common. Despite the call-taker having to ask clarifying questions in this call, ultimately the criteria in the rulebook around domestic violence incidents provide her the guidance she needs to appropriately classify the caller’s problem.

Occasionally, a caller’s request is so beyond the pale that even though the rulebook does not offer specific guidance, and the call does not meet the three criteria established at the start of this section, it is still clear to the call-taker that a dispatch is not appropriate. For example, I denied a request from a caller to have the police review video footage from a local grocery store to prove his wife’s innocence after she was accused by a store clerk of opening a rotisserie chicken container and taking a bite out of the bird while shopping; from a caller claiming her house was inhabited by ghosts; and from a caller scared of a possum outside his front door. In each of these situations, I felt comfortable rejecting requests for assistance because the nature of the request was far outside the purview of the police.

Contexts in which Call-Taking Dilemmas Arise

Not all calls progress as smoothly and efficiently as the ones outlined above. Indeed, many calls raise issues for call-takers, such as classification conundrums, moral dilemmas, and resource allocation problems. In the following section, I present a series of field notes and call extracts that highlight how the rules can contribute to such issues and

the ways in which call-takers use their discretion to manage them. I find that some call-takers engage in a series of discretionary tactics, including, asking investigatory questions, proposing alternate hypotheses about an incident, writing an incident narrative that conveys a call-taker's uncertainty or concern to a dispatcher, downgrading an incident, or simply not promising police assistance. Deploying these tactics takes additional work on the part of the call-taker; work that the organization does not formally govern or explicitly embrace.

I open this section by describing an incident in which my own failure to probe a caller's claim about two stolen bicycles contributed to an unnecessary encounter between an innocent Black man and the police. This incident occurred towards the end of my first year working as a call-taker; a period when I still fastidiously followed the rules and prioritized customer service.

A call came in Friday afternoon from a white male (based on verbal cues) in a predominately white neighborhood who said he just saw a guy steal two bikes and then hop on a city bus headed downtown. I followed call-taker protocol asking routine questions such as the suspect's race, age, clothing description, and direction of travel. The caller said the man looked to be a Black male in his twenties. I dropped the call in the screen as a larceny in progress.

The dispatcher immediately assigned officers to the call and then yelled over to verify that I had spoken with the victim of the crime. I realized that I had not spoken to the victim, but rather a neighbor who happened to be looking out his window and saw this happen. The dispatcher asked me, "How does he know the bikes were being stolen?" I got flustered because I knew I didn't have a good

response other than that the caller said, “It looks like he’s stealing them.” The dispatcher asked if the caller had seen any tools like bolt cutters. I again had no response. Laurie yelled out that it was a call about someone being of a “darker persuasion.” In other words, in her mind it was a racist, bullshit call. Minutes later the officers stopped the man at the bus station and then radioed in that the bikes belonged to the “suspect.” (Field notes 6/2/2017)

Although it was not irrational for the police to check on this situation given the caller’s statements, my handling of the call may have been. By extracting only routine information and failing to pause and investigate the caller’s assertions, I initiated an unnecessary, emergent “lights and sirens” response with multiple police units following a bus through City A. My veteran co-workers were frustrated because in their eyes I could have handled the call differently. I had the power to clarify the caller’s relation to the problem, to ask what made him think the bicycles were being stolen, and to enter the incident as a lower priority incident like a suspicious circumstance. As a novice call-taker, my reactions to this call were informed by the rulebook and training, neither of which empowered me to act in the ways my senior colleagues desired and instead taught me to defer to the caller. Only after the incident ended did I realize how the rules and training exacerbated the caller’s report.

As I gained job experience, I started to become more skeptical of caller demands, especially those that involved complaints about suspicious persons. This skepticism prompted me to work harder to investigate callers’ claim and classify incidents differently. The next field note captures aspects of my growth.

I was working the 3 pm to 3 am shift one night in late February when a guy called from downtown to report a black man acting “suspiciously.” The caller sounded like he was a young, white male. I asked him what was going on and he replied that a 300-pound black man was holding a plastic bag and ducking in and out of alleyways. He found this behavior odd. I briefly wondered to myself if the reason he found this behavior odd had to do with the race of the man, but before I could question the caller’s motives he stated that the man “possibly had a gun.”

Entering a suspicious person call is one thing, but entering a man gun call, the highest priority of calls, is a big deal. I knew by now that it wasn’t part of my job to consider the safety or civil liberties of the subject of the call—we really were only accountable to the caller—but I was still cautious before entering a man gun call. It would set in motion a “lights and sirens” response with five to seven police cars and officers who were primed for a more intense encounter. Before making a classification decision, I tried to extract more information from the caller. I asked, “Did you see a gun?” to which the caller replied, “No, but he could have one.” I thought to myself he COULD have one. Anyone COULD have a gun. The caller did not provide any further evidence to support his assertion.

I hung up and faced a classification dilemma. The caller had said, on a recorded line, that the man might have a gun. I would be remiss to overlook his statement. But, at the same time, sending the police to a man gun call without the caller being able to describe the gun or having actually seen it ran the risk of priming the police for an overly aggressive encounter with a Black man. I decided to opt for a lower-priority “suspicious” classification because no gun was visible. Though, I was careful to type

into the narrative report for the dispatcher and responding officers that the, “Caller stated the subject possibly had a gun, but did not see any gun.” I also yelled over to the dispatcher to double-check that she saw my message about the gun, and reiterated that it was unlikely the subject had one.

Unlike in the bicycle call described above, in this incident I paused to consider the potential consequences of my actions on the safety of the subject of the call. Although the lessons from formal training, and my own inexperience as a part-time call-taker, would likely have led me to enter the call as a high-priority “man gun”—especially because the incident was in an area of the county prone to violent crime—I instead deployed several tactics to de-escalate the incident. First, I questioned the caller about whether he had seen the purported gun. With hindsight, I also should have asked why the caller believed that the man had a gun. Second, I chose to downgrade the incident to a suspicious incident. Third, I used the narrative screen to clarify that the caller mentioned a gun but did not see one. The strategies I used came not from formal training or rulebooks, but from observing senior colleagues and learning from my own mistakes. This incident illuminates several ways in which call-takers can limit the extent of authority the 911 system delegates to callers and shape police responses.

Calls about suspicious persons, like the one described above, are not aberrations. In 2015, suspicious person calls were the fourth most common call at my field site, following reckless drivers, car crashes, and disorderly behavior. The next call describes another purported suspicious circumstance involving possible drug activity at a local park. Because the caller provides scant evidence to support her assertion that a Black woman is using the park grill to cook drugs, the call raises moral dilemmas and resource

allocation issues for the call-taker about whether the police should be sent at all. Despite the call-taker's fears that sending the police will generate a racially biased police encounter, and that it will waste police resources, the call-taker ultimately decides to send the police.

Extract 05: The Woman Grilling

01 911: Nine one one: where is your emergency,
02 CLR: Uhm: (beep) Park: =actually I don't know if it's an
03 emergency .hh
04 911: Oh::kay::: (beep) Park in (beep)?
05 CLR: Yes hh.
06 911: What's going on there.
07 CLR: Um there's a woman ah using the park grill to cook (.)
08 something that might be drugs.
09 (...)
10 CLR: Um I've seen her here before and I thought it was weird
11 and ah its cold out and um so it looks it looks
12 suspicious l-last time I saw her but now it looks (.)
13 more suspicious ((sniff))
14 911: ((typing)) What makes you think its drugs.
15 (...)
16 911: Like do you see::: needles::: [or: any I mean it's
17 definitely not foo:d,
18 CLR: [No.] I don't I can't see
19 it that close.
20 911: Ohkay.
21 (...)

Although the caller dialed 911, she immediately clarifies in line 02 that her request likely is not an emergency. The call-taker responds with a drawn out “okay” and moves the call forward by asking about the nature of her problem. In lines 07-08, the caller explains that a woman is using the park grill and proposes it is to “cook something that might be drugs.” The caller justifies this assertion by drawing on prior experiences in which she saw the same woman in the park and thought “it was weird.” She further advances her claim by saying that the woman looks “more suspicious” than in her previous encounter.

In response to this caller's unconvincing claims, the call-taker attempts to engage in investigative questioning. In lines 14-17, the call-taker asks a series of questions geared at determining how the caller has come to believe the woman is cooking drugs. She first asks the caller, "What makes you think its drugs?" Before waiting for a response (which she likely should have done), she launches into a problematizing question—defined as a question that moves the call in the direction of a bona fide problem for the police—and asks whether the caller had observed any drug paraphernalia. She then pivots and asks a normalizing question—defined as a question that moves the call in the direction of a routine activity that does not require police attention—by asking whether the woman simply might be cooking food. The call-taker's attempt to move the call either towards or away from suspicious drug activity fails because the caller responds that she is too far away from the grill to observe the items on it.

The call-taker must decide whether to mobilize the police because a caller finds a Black woman using a grill in a public park in broad daylight to be suspicious, or risk disciplinary action for closing out the call without passing it through for a dispatch. Despite the caller's weak justification, especially after admitting that she was not close enough to see the grill's contents, the call-taker follows the formal rules and customer service norms and enters the call for a dispatch. She recognizes the potential social costs of the call, but ignores them in an effort to avoid disciplinary action and liability.

Minutes after she enters the call into the system, the dispatcher reads the screen and is visibly displeased. He yells out, "Are you f'ing kidding me?" From the dispatcher's perspective, the call is "bullshit" and a waste of police resources. He is astounded that the call-taker failed so miserably to act as a gatekeeper, especially given

the caller's admission that she could not see what was on the grill. Moreover, he is frustrated because now that that call-taker let the request through and generated a call-for-service record in the computer system, the dispatcher will risk disciplinary action if he refuses to send police. The digital records trail will hold him accountable.

Despite suspecting that the grill call was going to upset the dispatcher, the call-taker nevertheless allowed the call through. Fresh in her mind was her co-worker's experience of being disciplined after closing out a call without sending the police. In that case, a caller had reported a Black man walking down the street and claimed it was suspicious, but did not provide any evidence of suspicious behavior. Management did not condone the call-taker's actions to close the call without a dispatch and communicated as such to him. This call-taker did not want to go through a similar experience and, thus, erred on the side of caution and sent the police, regardless of the social implications of her decision.

The next extract also involves a caller summoning the police about suspicious behavior. This caller dials 911 to report a "couple of sketchy guys" hanging around his neighborhood. The call-taker pushes back before promising assistance, but eventually enters the call for a dispatch.

Extract 07: The Sketchy Guys⁶

01 911: Nine one one what's the location of your emergency?
02 CLR: Yeah. It's (beep) apartments. I'm calling because
03 there's uh a couple of sketchy guys. I called earlier
04 about this and there are still a couple of sketchy guys
05 walking around the neighborhood. I don't know why. They
06 don't live here. And no one knows them. And I would
07 like for you guys to do something cause
08 911: Okay, what do they look like?
09 CLR: Uh they're African American. And one has a black hoodie
10 on and one has a uh gray and black hoodie on,

⁶ Note that extract 07 is not transcribed in conversation analytic style. This is because I left the field with only a conventional transcript of the call, and not with the audio recording.

(...)
11 911: Okay. And they're just in the area?
12 CLR: Ya. I don't know why they're here. No one knows them
13 and they've been like I think they're trying to steal
14 or do something because they aren't leaving. They lived
15 behind where I live. Uh. They live in the neighborhood.
16 The set of apartments next to me. Pretty much the same
17 neighborhood, but ya know.
18 911: Okay. Are they doing anything though besides just
19 walking or milling around in the area?
20 CLR: No. They're just looking around and I don't know why.
21 They're looking around the neighborhood. I think
22 they're waiting for someone to leave or something ya
23 know. It's kinda sketchy.
24 That's why I'm calling.
25 911: Alright. Alright. We'll have someone head out to that
26 area.

In line 02, the caller explains that he is calling 911 back because a group of “sketchy guys” still is in his neighborhood. He claims that no one knows the men and that they do not live in his apartment complex, and then tells the call-taker that he would like the police to take care of the matter. The call-taker interrupts the caller in line 08 and asks for a physical description of the men. The caller responds that the men are African American and wearing hoodies.

In response to the caller providing no evidence of actual suspicious behavior, the call-taker launches into a series of investigative questions. In line 12, the call-taker recycles back the caller's information in the form of a normalizing question by asking, “And they're just in the area?” His question both prevents the call from moving forward and implies that the information the caller has provided thus far does not rise to the level of a suspicious incident. The caller then tries to amplify the problem by raising the possibility that the men are lingering in the area to steal something. The call-taker does not take-up the caller's mention of a future crime, and instead offers the caller an opportunity to clarify whether the men *currently* are behaving in a suspicious manner: “Are they doing anything though besides just walking or milling around in the area?” The

call-taker's use of "though" and "just" suggest that walking and milling around are not sufficiently suspicious. The caller responds that the men are "looking around" and reiterates that he finds them sketchy. Despite the call-taker's hesitancy, he relents and ends the call by saying that the police will be sent out.

Although the caller provides little rationale for why the men are suspicious, other than the fact that they exist in his space, the call-taker follows the rules and enters the call for service. He faces a difficult choice between promising the police, which can generate social costs from unnecessary police contact, and not promising the police, which can undermine a potentially legitimate call about a future crime. After disconnecting with the caller, both the call-taker, who was in training, and his training supervisor expressed frustration. I overheard the training supervisor say, "I hate those calls...So they aren't doing anything but they want us to go out there anyway." Her comment exemplifies how delegating authority to callers to decide what is suspicious can create tension within the call center.

Even though the call-taker promises the police in this situation, he exercises a different form of discretion to make clear that the call likely is inappropriate. He types into the narrative screen, "2 BMs (black males) wearing hoodies are loitering in the area. Caller thinks they live in a nearby apartment complex but thinks it's suspicious because they keep 'looking around'. Caller doesn't want contact." The call-taker's wording, especially the use of direct quotes from the caller, makes clear to the dispatcher and responding officer that the call-taker believes this call lacks legitimacy.

The next caller also reports something that she finds odd, but this time the call-taker finds her request so improbable that he makes no promise of police assistance.

Extract 08: The Sleeping Girl

01 911: 911 whatsa the location of the emergency?
02 CLR: Hi um I didn't know who to call=this isn't like an
03 urgent emergency? Um (.) I just saw something funny so
04 I wanted to like call.
05 911: Okay what happened?
06 CLR: .hh um, it could be nothing=I was in Kroger parking lot
07 and there were these two guys that got in a car: and it
08 looked there was um a girl with her head against the
09 seat passed out:? So I took the it just looked
10 funny so I took their license plate number.
(...)
11 911: And what did you see?
12 CLR: Um there was there was two guys getting in the car
13 and in the back seat there was um it looked like a
14 girl she had a hood on. It was a pink coat. And
15 like she was fully leaned against the back seat and
16 like I thought--it looked like she looked passed out.
(...)
17 911: And did the guys look like they were being suspicious
18 in any way, or they just went into the store and left
19 their friend in the car that was sleeping?
20 CLR: .hh Uhm: I just saw them like getting in the car
21 leaving.
22 (.4)
23 911: So they weren't doing anything suspicious.=They weren't
24 like looking around or doing anything they were just
25 getting in the car?
26 CLR: Yeh yeah (short laugh) just getting in the car.
(...)
27 911: Ohkay. Thanks for the call.
28 CLR: Yep, you're welcome.
29 911: Alright.

In extract 08, the caller reports a woman asleep in the backseat of a car at a local grocery store. Before stating the problem, the caller provides several disclaimers—"I didn't know who to call," "this isn't like an urgent emergency," and "I just saw something funny"—all of which suggests that she realizes her problem likely falls short of what is required to mobilize the police. Despite these disclaimers, the call-taker pushes the call forward under the presumption that it may still demand police attention. By line 16, the caller finally expresses her underlying concern, which is that the woman in the car is unconscious and the men may be responsible.

The call-taker reacts to the caller's claim that the woman is unconscious by explicitly asking if the men who exited the car were "being suspicious in any way." The call-taker invites the caller to offer any additional evidence to support her hypothesis. He then proposes his own alternate hypothesis that the men simply left their sleeping friend in the car while they went grocery shopping. The caller avoids answering his questions and instead responds that the men are about to leave. Her attempt to intensify the urgency of the call by pointing out that time is running out for the police to arrive does not work. The call-taker refuses to move the call forward. Instead, he continues to probe the legitimacy of the caller's problem.

In line 23, the call-taker reframes the caller's problem as entirely innocuous and strongly suggests that the men are not behaving suspiciously. He says, "So, they weren't doing anything suspicious." His downward intonation means that he is making a statement, not posing a question. He then offers the caller another opportunity to make her case by asking if the men are doing anything strange such as "looking around." In the same turn of talk, he rephrases her observation about the men getting into the car as a normalizing question: "They were just getting into the car?" The caller affirms his question and then lets out a short chuckle, which suggests she likely is embarrassed by the nature of her request after hearing how the call-taker has transformed it into a benign occurrence. The call-taker ends the call by thanking her for the information, but making no promise of police assistance.

Even though the rulebook's "suspicious" definition encompasses this caller's problem, the call-taker deems it not worthy of police attention. Not only has the caller offered no evidence of suspicious behavior, but the fact that the vehicle is leaving the

area makes it improbable that the police will arrive in time to check the situation. To limit potential fallout from denying the request, the call-taker uses two tactics. First, he recycles the caller's own statements back to her on a recorded line to have her verbally agree that the men, in fact, are not acting suspiciously. Second, he avoids explicitly saying that the police will not be dispatched, but rather thanks the caller and omits the conventional 911 closing that guarantees police response. Again, these tactics are not part of any formal instruction, but tools he has developed in service of achieving gatekeeping goals.

Unlike the call-taker above who refuses a promise of assistance, the next call-taker sends the police despite being entirely confused as to the nature of the caller's problem. The next extract illustrates an ambiguous situation in which the call-taker has difficulty grasping the nature of the caller's problem. In this rather lengthy exchange, the caller dials the non-emergency line to report a man walking near an Applebee's with a box shaped like a gun. The caller presents a problem that could be interpreted as entirely innocuous or as extremely serious.

Extract 09: The Man with the Gun Box

01 911: >((redaction beep)) Dispa:tch< ((redaction beep))
02 CLR: Hi ((redaction beep)) .hh uh: there's a guy uh walkin
03 right here by Applebee's=it looks like he just (.)
04 bought a- (.)bought a gun or sumthing there's a gun-
05 gun box. .hh (.) [I just see a
06 911: [It's a gun] bo::x?
07 CLR: A gu- a- a box,
08 911: A wh:at?
09 CLR: Uh um a- a- bo it's in the bo:x in the shape of a gun
10 but he's walk:in. Eh ah I can't I can't tell if it's a
11 gun, but it looks like it's ah .h a bo:x with a gun (.)
12 (heh) a gun safe in it.
13 911: With a gu:n: wha:t? In it?
14 CLR: I don't know if there's a gun. It's just a bo:x but it
15 looks the shape of a gun bo:x (.) It jus seems like if
16 you just bought a gun you wouldn't be walkin (.) home
17 with it. (.5) He's in ah blue hooded sweatshirt (.)
18 co:at
(...) Locational and physical description questions

19 911: And what uh eh uh and uh what I don't understand the
20 what do you mean a gun like a rifle:: type: gun: box::?
21 Or what size?

22 CLR: I've I've bought guns [and heh heh
23 911: [Okay]
24 CLR: It's a box it looks like what you would buy a gun in
25 hh.
26 (...)
26 911: Yeah. But he wasn't in Applebee's or anything right?
27 [He was just walking by
28 CLR: [No. He's walking] right where the the beggar always
29 begs for mon:ey.
30 911: Ohkay. .hh alright. We can go check em out.((redaction
31 beep))
32 Alright. And what makes you think he's suspicious other
33 than that=anything else he was doing that seemed [odd
34 or unusual?
35 CLR: [No.]
36 I:: just if you're gonna go buy a gun somewhere I
37 wouldn't think that you'd walk to do it.
38 (...)

In lines 02-04, the caller reports that he sees a man walking near Applebee's and posits that the man just bought a gun because he is walking with a gun-shaped box. The call-taker immediately is confused by the term "gun box" and asks for further clarification. Interactional troubles ensue in lines 06-18 because the call-taker does not grasp whether the subject has a gun or simply a box. Nor, does she understand how the man can know what is inside the box.

After extracting routine location information and a physical description of the man (not shown in the extract), the call-taker returns to the matter of the gun box in lines 19-20. She explicitly states that she does not understand how the caller can know that the box contains a gun. She invites clarification by asking whether it is a "rifle type gun box," as a distinct rifle shape might lend support to the caller's assertion. The caller responds by drawing on his personal experience of gun buying as reason for why the call-taker should trust his assessment.

The caller's problem creates further confusion for the call-taker because Michigan is an open carry state, meaning residents can open carry a gun without a concealed carry

permit. This means that it is not necessarily criminal for the man to be walking with a gun, especially if it is in a secured box, and thus the entire call is potentially irrelevant to the police. However, because there is a possibility that the man is on his way to shoot someone, or shoot several people inside the Applebee's, the call-taker is wary and engages in a series of investigatory questions. In line 26, she tests out her active shooter hypothesis by clarifying that, "He wasn't in Applebee's or anything right?" This question, while seeming to be a routine location question, likely is geared at assessing the potential safety risk the man poses. The caller responds that the man is not inside the business.

Line 30 appears to be the close of the call because the call-taker makes a promise of assistance; however, evidently, the call-taker still is unsure of the risk the man poses because she returns to clarifying the nature of the problem one last time. In lines 32-34, the call-taker asks another investigative question: "What makes you think he's suspicious?" She invites the caller to offer any additional behavior (other than walking) that might be "odd or unusual." The caller does not provide any further reason for the call-taker to believe the man is suspicious.

By asking these additional questions, the call-taker can de-escalate the situation in two ways. First, she can write in the narrative screen that the man is not engaging in high risk behavior, such as brandishing a gun. Second, she can exercise restraint and classify the incident as a lower priority suspicious—even though it is unclear whether his behavior even rises to the level of suspicious—rather than as a higher priority incident type. Both strategies prevent an inflated response to an ambiguous situation.

The final example brings up a different kind of dilemma for the call-taker—

a resource allocation problem due to the problem being in a remote area of the county. In

Extract 10, a male reports a truck in a precarious location, but his distant stance to the incident makes the call-taker question whether his observations are accurate.

Extract 10: The Truck on the Tracks

01 911: Nine one=one what is your emergency,
02 911: I was (.) drivin I'm drivin down (beep) by mile
03 marker (beep) and there's a railroad track
04 trestle that goes over the highway? And there's a white
05 Suburban or Yukon sitting on the tracks. And ↑ I don't
06 think that's a good spot for a truck ↑ to be sittin.
(...)
07 911: Is there any markings on it?=Like maybe they're workin
08 on .hh the railroad tracks or something?
09 CLR: Uh:: I did not see any markings?
10 911: Are you sure those are railroad tracks over the highway
11 there?
12 CLR: Uhm:: I'm like [ninety nine point nine percent. Uh just
13 south of (beep) road exit is like mile marker (beep)
14 (.) Usually the railroad track is I mean the train
15 er or workers their stuff is marked pretty well and I
16 did not see any markings on it, I know their vehicles
17 are usually white but they're usually tru:cks and eh
18 it's a Suburban. (.2) It it doesn't look like a work
19 truck. I mean
20 (...)
21 911: .hhhhh hhhh. Uhm okay. We'll have someone check it out
22 hhh.

In lines 02-06, the caller explains that he is driving on the highway and claims to see a large white vehicle parked on a railroad trestle. His upward intonation in line 04 implies that he is uncertain whether there actually is a railroad trestle at that location. He then proceeds to justify his call by saying that the truck is not in a “good spot.”

In response to the caller's problem presentation, the call-taker launches into a series of investigative questions. He first asks whether the truck has any markings on it. He then invites the caller to consider an alternate hypothesis that perhaps the vehicle is a work truck and involved in railroad maintenance. Neither tactic works at normalizing the truck because the caller responds that he does not see any markings. The call-taker then pivots to test out whether the caller's location description is accurate. He asks if the caller

is *sure* that railroad tracks run over that part of the roadway, again indicating his skepticism of the caller's problem. The caller maintains that the circumstance is suspicious and explains that he knows the difference between work trucks and this vehicle. The call-taker ends the interaction by expelling a lengthy sigh, saying "um okay," and then entering the call for service.

This caller's request creates two issues for the call-taker. First, the call raises legitimacy concerns, not because of potential racial bias like some of the calls described above, but because the caller is not physically proximate enough to the problem to know whether the truck is on railroad tracks or what the truck is doing. Second, the location the caller provides is in a rural western part of the county that does not contract with the local police. This means that a state trooper is required to respond. Because the number of state troopers per shift are limited, there is more pressure to avoid unnecessary dispatches that pull their time away from responding to other calls or patrolling for reckless drivers on the highways. Because of these features of the call, the call-taker expends additional effort to try and act as a gatekeeper.

The myriad examples described above are intended to illuminate the practice of call-taking at a granular level to document forms of intelligent use of call-taker discretion. Refer to Table 5-1 for a summary of the analyses in this chapter, which highlight the key organizational norms that guide call-taking, the major situations in which dilemmas arise, and the tactics call-takers deploy to manage these dilemmas. The extracts above show that many call-takers engage in investigatory questioning—despite not receiving formal training in this practice—but few use the information they acquire to

act as traditional gatekeepers and reject calls-for-service. Instead, call-takers extract additional information to shift incident classification, and frame and communicate calls that they enter reluctantly in such a way as to convey their skepticism to dispatchers and police. These behaviors may not change *whether* an incident receives police attention, but they may change the *nature* of that attention.

Table 5-1 Organizational Norms, Dilemmas, and Tactics

Organizational Norms Guiding Call-taking	Situations in which Dilemmas Arise	Call-Taker Tactics
Customer Service	Nature of Caller’s Problem Highly Subjective	Investigatory Questioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problematizing Questions • Normalizing Questions
Officer Safety	Incident Definitions Lack Clear Criteria	Propose Alternate Hypotheses
Upgrading Uncertainty	Resource Allocation Problems	Use Narrative Screen to Pass on Call-Taker Concerns Downgrade Incident No promise of assistance

Discussion

This chapter aims to show how an organization’s rules and logics shape call-taker behavior. A detailed analysis of the formal rulebook reveals selectively instructive rules. The rules closely guide call-takers in accomplishing administrative, customer service, and officer safety goals. They do *not* closely guide call-takers in accomplishing community goals, such as efficiently and appropriately allocating police resources or preserving the civil liberties of the subject of a call. By directing call-takers to extract only routine incident information, prioritize customer service, and, in many cases, delegate classification authority to callers, this chapter argues that the organization’s rules and

logics undermine critical gatekeeping and risk appraisal call-taking functions. In response, I find that several call-takers deploy a range of discretionary tactics to try and push back against official mandates.

By applying the rules to a set of calls, the chapter reveals specific conditions under which the rulebook offers adequate substantive guidance. The conditions include a) when a caller presents their problem in an organizationally relevant way, b) when the rulebook includes well-defined incident criteria to limit caller subjectivity, and c) when a caller asks for direct assistance for themselves. Under these conditions, I find that moral concerns, resource allocation issues, and classification dilemmas rarely arise among call-takers.

However, the analysis of Henry Louis Gates' arrest in Chapter 3 and several emergency and non-emergency calls in this chapter shine a light on how much more complicated call-taking is than the rules imply. In most cases, call-takers are not simply agents of information transfer passing raw information from caller to police. They are co-constructing incidents with callers and troubles can arise when the nature of caller's problem is ambiguous, misappropriate, or overly subjective. Chapter 5 highlights precisely how callers' demands to harass racial minorities, put law-abiding gun owners under scrutiny, and expend limited police resources checking routine maintenance vehicles can create dilemmas for call-takers.

Certainly, some of the calls I highlight in Chapter 5 may turn out to be legitimate, but sending the police to them, or to similar kinds of calls, is not without cost. First, police are a scarce resource and sending them to one incident means there are fewer officers available to respond to another. Second, officer stops of innocent individuals can

erode an individual's trust in the police, increase their level of psychological stress, and reinforce the state's authority to interfere in daily life (Landers et al. 2011; Harcourt 2007). Third, police primarily are trained in force and law meaning that even the most benign requests can result in arrest or use of force (Friedman 2020). The rulebook is silent on these, and other, potential costs—aside from officer injury or death—from giving the public broad latitude over what the police do and where they go.

Despite the organization's silence about the risks associated with an expansive call-driven policing system, this chapter describes various ways in which call-takers recognize and tacitly object to rules they find irrational. In many of the examples in this chapter, call-takers deploy discretionary tactics to push themselves, and each other, from entering troubling police dispatches. By asking normalizing and problematizing questions, proposing alternate hypotheses, using the narrative screen to clarify and frame calls that they enter reluctantly, downgrading incidents, or in extreme cases denying service, call-takers attempt to act as effective gatekeeping and risk appraisers. Although their efforts do not often change whether a call receives a dispatch, they do shape the quality of information the police receive and level of response. Moreover, failure to perform these additional tasks can lead to disturbing police-public encounters, as evidenced by my own outsized response to the call about the man supposedly stealing bicycles.

This chapter help generates new insights into the dilemmas and challenges that arise in call-taking and the processes that underlie them. It is my hope that they are one phase in a larger scholarly line of research around dispatch-and-response, and that other researchers might do large N studies, or multiple case studies, to test the generalizability

of these findings. In particular, future studies would benefit from linking audio recordings to CAD and call-for-service records to a) demonstrate more ways in which call-takers use narrative screens to frame callers' problems, b) document the call rejection process, and c) examine how the location of a caller shapes the nature of call-taker discretion.

The analyses in Chapter 5 point to two areas for policy reform. One set of reforms involve expanding the rulebook and creating more specific definitions and criteria for subjective incident types. Suspicious person calls are one type of incident especially ripe for reform. Other agencies could learn from Seattle 911 where the organization introduced a policy to differentiate suspicious behavior from suspicious persons (Vera Institute of Justice 2019). A caller reporting a person trying car doors or looking in windows would qualify for a dispatch, whereas a caller reporting a person who simply looks suspicious would not. Adding criteria to subjective incident types empowers call-takers to deny requests that raise serious concerns about caller legitimacy. Indeed, such a policy would have given the call-taker handling the call about "sketchy guys" permission to deny the request.

No matter how detailed rules become, however, because of the variety of situations call-takers face they simply cannot cover every situation. Therefore, a second, complementary policy recommendation involves distributing call-taker best practices throughout the dispatch center. The various tactics described in this chapter currently are not written down or formalized by the organization. Codifying these intelligent uses of discretion, and the rationale behind them, could help to unify call-taker approaches.

A related third recommendation involves shaping call-taker discretion through the creation of an operational philosophy. Organizations use operational philosophies to lay

out core values and guide worker behavior in situations where rules may be incomplete or too general. The police at my field site have an operational philosophy to bracket their discretion; however, call-takers and dispatchers do not. This chapter recommends that discussions take place among police leadership and dispatch personnel to clarify the core values of 911 and dispatch. These discussions ought to take into account the risks that an overly inclusive dispatch-and-response system can pose to public safety. Moreover, this chapter calls for police leadership to recognize the dilemmas call-takers face when operating within an organization with competing and disparate goals, and advocates for an operational philosophy that considers both internal organizational goals and community goals.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) occupational handbook classifies 911 call-taking as an "Office and Administrative Support Occupation." California Congresswoman Norma Torres has been leading a movement to reclassify call-taking under OMB's "Protective Service Occupation," but such a reclassification has yet to happen (Torres 2016). This dissertation has sought to directly challenge long-held conceptions of 911 call-takers as "agents of information transfer" or "complaint clerks" by dissecting their function in policing.

Through unpacking the functions of call-taking, this dissertation sheds light on the complex process by which call-takers enact call-driven policing. First, this dissertation reveals an overlooked call-taker function—*risk appraisal*. Second, this dissertation complicates the previously documented *gatekeeping* function by describing how organizational rules and norms can constrain the ability of 911 call-takers to limit the public's heavy reliance on the system. The vivid descriptions of the kinds of troubling demands that 911 callers can make on the police substantiate the need for call-takers to be effective at preventing misuse and abuse of the system and appropriately setting the initial expectations of the police. How they carry out these functions has important implications for whether the work they do ameliorates or exacerbates police overreach in society.

This dissertation makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it complicates

the notion that call-driven policing is relatively unproblematic by documenting a host of complex challenges that can arise and are distinct from those present in proactive policing. Under call-driven policing, officers are responsive to community demands, which scholars and policymakers assume produce less pernicious police encounters. Yet, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 highlight various contexts in which call-takers face serious challenges and dilemmas when processing ambiguous, uncertain, misguided, and malicious demands. Chapter 2 helps to explain how these complex challenges have come to be by describing the public's growing reliance on 911 and police leadership's reluctance to formally empower call-takers to offer checks and balances over the system. These features of call-driven policing undermine assumptions that it is relatively legitimate and unproblematic.

Second, this dissertation documents that decisions by 911 call-takers *directly shape police expectations*. This is the first study to causally link the effects of call-taker behavior on downstream criminal justice outcomes. The Gates arrest described in Chapter 3 provides a conceptual framework to better understand the practice of call-taking by highlighting the risk appraisal function. Chapter 4 then uses this concept of risk appraisal to show that call classification decisions by call-takers directly influence the likelihood an officer makes an arrest.

Third, this dissertation reveals that not all 911 call-takers are created equal; their behavior significantly varies. Using an examiner assignment research design in Chapter 4, I find that call-takers vary in how they appraise risk and classify the same types of calls, which provides systematic evidence of discretion. Furthermore, analyzing audio recordings of emergency and non-emergency calls in Chapter 5 reveals that call-takers

deploy various discretionary tactics when faced with uncertain, biased, or misinformed callers. However, unlike the American Bar Foundation survey that found police engaging in haphazard, idiosyncratic decision-making, this dissertation finds that call-taker discretion is deployed along some predictable dimensions. Indeed, Chapter 5 suggests that behavior is largely shaped by whether call-takers work to accomplish internal organizational goals or community goals. Call-takers who endeavor to achieve community goals are more attentive to the downstream social costs and implications of their actions.

Policy Recommendations

This dissertation puts forth three sets of recommendations aimed to help guide policymakers. At an institutional level, it recommends that police leaders should formally acknowledge the functions call-takers play in policing. It is my hope that the findings presented here aid in this process by reconceptualizing call-takers as risk appraisers and guardians of a scarce public resource. Rules and training should explicitly recognize these functions and provide call-takers with more specific and reflective guidance about how they can and should mediate citizens' requests. For instance, the organization should take into account the social costs that come from an expansive 911 system and include trainings about how to protect the civil liberties of subjects being called on, establish more specific criteria for ambiguous incident types, and provide call-takers with greater guidance about when *not* to dispatch the police. Less experienced call-takers would benefit from formal training in investigatory questioning to make them more effective at assessing risk from the outset. Institutional changes such as these would help to

crystallize the role of call-takers as decision-makers in the criminal justice system.

Because Chapter 5 highlights some of the ways in which call-takers already wisely exercise discretion, this dissertation also recommends codifying their tactics and distributing them widely. The administrative rulemaking movement that came out of the American Bar Foundation survey on police officer discretion spoke of the importance of confining it—creating written policies to define acceptable and unacceptable behavior. By describing the tactics of effective call-takers in Chapter 5, this dissertation takes a step towards confining call-taker discretion. The organization, however, must embrace these tactics as acceptable before this step can be accomplished.

In addition to institutional reforms, the findings in this dissertation suggest that technological reforms could assist call-takers in performing their key functions. In the case of Henry Louis Gate Jr. and Tamir Rice, capturing caller uncertainty would have more appropriately primed the responding officers and may have altered the entire incident trajectory. Perhaps Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) systems could be designed to allow call-takers to check a box if a caller presents high levels of uncertainty when reporting high-priority incidents. This feature would allow call-takers to quickly signal to the dispatcher and police that their information classification choice may be over-estimated. With such technology, the call-taker in the Gates case could have still classified the incident as a breaking and entering, but made clear that the caller was entirely unsure of whether the men were breaking into the house.

Future Research Directions

This dissertation takes an important step towards opening the “black box” of

dispatch. Future scholarship would benefit from more scholars widening the scope of study beyond the police, courts, and jails to include call-takers and dispatchers. Research ought to continue to challenge the 1970s assumption that call-driven policing is relatively unproblematic and legitimate, and open lines of inquiry into 1) whether an unchecked call-driven policing system maximizes public safety, 2) how it might contribute to the overreach of police in society, and 3) what alternatives could be implemented to address callers' problems.

Given that much of the data in this dissertation come from one field site, future research projects should test whether the findings presented here can be generalized to different kinds of dispatch centers across varying geographic areas. Despite 911 being a national number, the system is enacted on a local level. There are over 6,000 Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) across the U.S. and each have their own policies and practices. Some agencies train their call-takers for thirty days; others for six months (Vera Institute of Justice 2019). These differences mean that the challenges call-takers face, and especially how they are trained to handle them, likely vary. Collecting and analyzing observational data, administrative records, and audio recordings from a variety of sites would help to bolster the findings in this dissertation.

Additionally, studies should continue to link dispatch records to arrest records and, ultimately, sentencing outcomes to further examine how call-driven policing contributes to an oversized criminal justice system. Scholars have long documented how haphazard judgments by police contribute to arrests. Although relatively speaking 911 does not produce many arrests, it can produce *arbitrary* arrests. Citizens can summon the police for nearly any reason, regardless of whether a crime was committed, and police,

who are primarily trained in force and law, will respond. This means that seemingly benign requests can result in arrest. Moreover, because of the prevalence of warrants among community members, these benign requests can result in warrant arrests that are entirely unrelated to the original nature of the call. More work is needed about the types and frequency of arrests, and sentencing outcomes, that stem from 911 calls.

For criminal justice reformers to seriously consider alternatives to police response, researchers must provide nuanced accounts of not only the nature of citizen requests, but also the tools and skills it takes to *resolve* them. Existing survey data from early systematic social observation (SSO) studies capture how police resolved situations, be it through use of force, arrest, mediation, or referrals to other service providers (Mastrofski et al. 2000; Liederbach 2005; Liederbach and Frank 2003). Law professor Barry Friedman is reviving these data to reimagine current public safety responses and consider potential alternatives. Future observational studies should pay close attention to the tools and skills police have at their disposal to address caller requests, and document instances in which those tools are mismatched to the nature of the problem. With such observations, reformers could pinpoint situations in which police are not the most effective service providers and further empower call-takers to redirect certain types of calls away from the police.

Future work ought also to consider how police will spend their time if more calls are diverted away from them. If police simply use uncommitted time to engage in greater levels of proactive enforcement, then this would undermine the goal of reducing police overreach in society. If instead, police use this time to solve callers' underlying problems and prevent future calls-for-service then diversion and triage efforts could truly work to

diminish this overreach (Lum et al. 2020). Or, if some amount of funding for police was redirected into other public services, such as schools, public housing, and mental health provision, then there likely would be fewer police on the streets engaging in proactive enforcement (Vitale 2017).

Reducing the mark of the criminal justice system on society requires holistic reforms that consider *every* step of the process—beginning with dispatch.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1 Conversation Analytic Transcription Symbols and Descriptions

Symbol	Description
[Left square brackets capture overlapping or simultaneous talk. Left brackets above one another capture the start of the overlapping talk.
]	Right square brackets above one another capture the end of the overlapping talk.
=	Equal signs indicate no gap or pause between lines of talk.
(0.5)	Numbers in parentheses mark lengths of silence, represented in tenths of a second. A (0.5) silence would last 5/10 of a second.
(.)	A period in a parenthesis marks a length of silence less than 2/10 of a second.
-	A hyphen indicates a self-interruption or glottal stop.
:	A colon is used to capture elongated vowels or consonants. The number of colons used indicate how stretched the talk sounds.
↑ ↓	Up and down arrows indicate an upward or downward shift in pitch.
.	A period at the end of a phrase marks downward intonation. This is used to signify a statement.
,	A comma at the end of a phrase marks slight upward intonation.
?	A question mark at the end of a phrase marks upward intonation. This is used to signify a question.
YES	Uppercase letters are used for parts of speech that are louder than the rest of the talk.
<>	The combination of less than and greater than symbols are used to indicate rushed talk. In the reverse order, they indicate drawn out or unusually slow talk.
	Underscored utterances are said with some stress or emphasis.
.hhh	A period followed by the letter “h” marks an in-breath. The length of the in-breath is reflected in the number of h’s.
hhh	The letter “h” with no period marks an out-breath. Again, the length of the out-breath is reflected in the number of h’s.
(())	Double parenthesis are used by the transcriber to capture descriptions of circumstances, such as ((cough)) ((typing)) etc...
()	Single parenthesis are used when an utterance is indecipherable to the transcriptionist.

Source: Adapted from Jefferson, Gail. 2004. “Glossary of Transcript Symbols with an Introduction.” In *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation*, by Gene H. Lerner, 13–41. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Appendix Table 2 Incident Types and Definitions

Incident Type	Incident Definition
Violent Crimes	
Assault and battery	An attempt or offer to do bodily injury.
Felonious assault	Act of assaulting another person with a dangerous weapon; the intent to inflict great bodily harm less than murder.
Domestic violence	An assault where a certain relationship exists between the victim and assailant. Relationship include: spouse or ex-spouse, child in common, dating relationship, resident or former resident of the same household.
Child abuse/neglect	Any non-accidental injury to the child. Or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child. Failure of a parent or responsible party to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care. Issues with supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety and well being are threatened with harm.
Criminal sexual conduct	An assault of a sexual nature on another person. Or any sexual act committed without consent.
Robbery	Taking or attempting to take something of value by force or threat of force and/or putting the victim in fear. Armed – weapon is used or implied. Strong arm – no weapon is used or implied.
Car jacking	Stealing a car with the use of force or violence or the threat of force or violence, or putting in fear any operator, passenger, or person in lawful possession of the motor vehicle, or any person lawfully attempting to recover the motor vehicle.
Homicide	Causing death by intending to kill or do great bodily harm or knowingly creating a very high risk of death or great bodily harm knowing that death or such harm would be the likely result.
Fight	Multiple people physically fighting.
Kidnapping	The taking away or transportation of a person against that person's will, usually to hold the person in false imprisonment, a confinement without legal authority.
Shots fired	Reports of gunshots being heard.
Suicidal subject	The act or threat of intentionally causing one's own death regardless of means.

Property
Crimes

Larceny	Taking a carrying away tangible personal property or another WITH the intent to deprive him or her of its possession permanently.
Retail fraud	Act of stealing merchandise while the store is open and/or price switching and/or trying to obtain a fraudulent refund.
Burglary	To illicit entry into a building/private and or occupied dwelling for the purpose of committing a crime.
Larceny from auto	Taking and carrying away of the tangible personal property from the automobile of another with the intent to deprive him or her of its possession permanently.
Malicious destruction of property	An act where a person willfully and maliciously destroys or injures the personal property of another person.
Unlawful driving away automobile	Engage in car theft by willing and without authority taking possession of and driving away; taking away, assisting in or being party to such taking possession, driving or taking away of any motor vehicle belonging to another.
UDAA recovery	Report of a located stolen vehicle by a private party, deputy, or company.
Fraud	Acquisition or attempted acquisition, or aiding and abetting acquisition or attempted, of property, income, rights or legal privilege by means of willful false statement, false representative or impersonation, or by any scheme contrived to misrepresent true circumstances.
Arson	The crime of maliciously, voluntarily, and willfully setting fire to the building, buildings, or other property of another or of burning one's own property for an improper purpose.
Embezzlement	Theft that occurs through deception or fraud, or abuse or a position or relationship of trust. Most commonly refers to employees stealing from employers.
Fail to return borrowed vehicle	Refusal to return a vehicle which was originally taken with the consent of the vehicle owner.
Forgery/counte rfeit	Making of a false document with the intent to defraud.

Receive and conceal stolen property	Knowingly to receive, possess, conceal, or dispose of stolen property knowing that it has been stolen and to withhold or appropriate the same to the use of any person other than the true owner or person entitled thereto.
<hr/>	
Most Common	
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Family trouble	Not to be confused with domestic violence, family trouble is used in situations where related subjects are engaged in a verbal confrontation where no assaults are reported. Typically, no crime has occurred at initial time of call however the potential for violence requires a Law Enforcement response.
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Disorderly	Any situation that threatens to disturb the public peace or a subject(s) behaving in a disruptive manner to themselves or others.
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Property Damage Crash	Reported traffic crash that occurred on a public roadway where all involved parties are on scene and without injury.
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Personal Injury Accident	Crash where injuries are present and medical response is required.
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Unknown Crash	Crash where injuries cannot be directly confirmed by a subject on scene (medical response is required).
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Hit and Run	The crime of a driver of a vehicle who is involved in a collision with another vehicle, property, or human being, who knowingly fails to stop to give his/her name, license number, and other information as required by statute to the involved party, a witness, or law enforcement officers.
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Private Property Crash	Reported traffic crash that occurred on private property where all involved parties are on scene and without injury. Response is dictated by individual agency response protocol.
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Suspicious Incident	Any incident/situation/person/vehicle that is determined to be suspicious in nature by the caller.
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Emotionally Disturbed Person	Any situation where a subject diagnosed or suspected of a social, mental, or emotional problem is the direct result of a situation that requires a law enforcement response to ensure life and property are protected. Not to be confused with a suicidal person where direct and/or indirect threats are made to harm oneself.
<hr/>	
Noise Complaint	All loud or unusual noises or sounds which offend the peace and quiet of persons of ordinary sensibilities.
<hr/>	
Be on the Lookout	A radio broadcast given to area police jurisdictions containing information for a subject or vehicle involved in a crime or posing a threat the public safety. This incident type is generally used for traffic offenses where there is no complaining witness. However it may be

used for any situation where information must be relayed to law enforcement without a call for service that requires direct response.

Burglary Alarm	Motion or location activated alarm.
Panic Alarm	Alarm that is activated directly by an employee of a business to indicate a possible robbery of the business.
Audible Alarm	Alarms reported by a third party who hears an audible alarm but has no means to determine the cause.
Car assist	Situation directly resulting from a mechanical failure which has left a motorist's vehicle disabled and in need of aid. May also cause a hazard to other motorists.
Traffic hazard	Any object in or near the roadway that causes a hazard for motorists. Michigan Department of Transportation Courtesy Patrol will respond to highway debris.
911 Hang Up	Refers to situations where 911 is dialed but the caller disconnects prior to speaking with a 911 operator.
General/Citizen Assist	Any situation that requires law enforcement personnel to assist a citizen where no crime is being reported. Often refers to situations where citizens are advised of their options and no incident report is requested/required.
Civil standby	Citizen request for law enforcement to "standby" during a civil situation to assure that all parties involved do not engage in physical confrontation. Response is dictated by individual agency response protocol.
Dog complaints	Loose or uncontrolled dogs; nuisance or barking dogs.
Bite complaints	Person bit by dog.
Animal complaints	Non-canine animals which requires police response to assure the safety and well-being of person and property
Lost property	Report of missing property when there is no indication that a crime occurred.
Found property	Property of value recovered with the intent to return it to the original owner.
Abandoned vehicles	A vehicle on public property for at least 48 hours, on a state road or highway for at least 18 hours, or on a state road or highway for any period of time if valid plate is not on the vehicle. If the vehicle is on

private property without the owner's consent, the owner can call and have the vehicle towed.

Assist fire department	Any situation where the Fire Department request law enforcement assistance. Includes traffic routing, building entry, and disorderly subjects on fire scene.
Ambulance request	Any situation where the ambulance requests law enforcement assistance
Assist other agency	Any situation where another law enforcement agency requests law enforcement assistance from our agency
Off Road vehicles	Used improperly, unsafe manner, or illegally.
Boating accident	Any reported accident involving a watercraft.
Bomb threat	A threat, usually verbal or written, to detonate an explosive or incendiary device to cause property damage, death, injuries whether or not such a device actually exists.
Carry concealed weapon	Violation of Michigan's CCW laws which include carrying a concealed pistol, without a permit, on property not belonging to the subject carrying the pistol.
Check well being	Request to check the well-being of a citizen based on a possibility of endangerment not directly involved in a crime
Hunting/consevation	Illegal hunting or hunting related safety concerns.
Drug crime	Manufacturing, possessing or trafficking controlled substances deemed illegal by federal and state law.
Fireworks	Legal on day of, day before, and day after a holiday ONLY.
Hazardous material	Released substances that are either flammable or combustible, explosive, toxic, noxious, corrosive, oxidizable, an irritant or radioactive and pose a risk to life, health, and property.
Indecent exposure	Deliberate exposure in public or in view of the general public by a person of a portion or portions of his or her body, in circumstances where the exposure is contrary to local moral or other standards of appropriate behavior.
Juvenile curfew	Time is set by each local jurisdiction.

K9 tracking	Incident requires a K9 track unit.
Parental kidnapping	Taking, retention, or concealment of a child or children by a parent, other family member, or their agency, in derogation of the custody rights, including visitation rights, of another parent or family member.
Littering/dumping	Knowingly depositing trash in any manner, on any public or private property or in any way public or private waters, without permission to do so.
Vehicle lockout	Utilizing tools to gain entry into a locked vehicle at the request of the vehicle's owner. Availability of the service differs across agencies.
Child luring	Consists of an adult knowingly and intentionally inducing a child, by any means, with the intent of committing a crime or endanger the welfare of the child.
Marine complaints	Any non-accident boating related complaint or specific request for a marine deputy's service.
Minor in possession	A minor purchasing or attempting to purchase alcoholic liquor/tobacco, consume or attempt to consume alcoholic liquor/tobacco, possess or attempt to possess alcoholic liquor/tobacco, or have any bodily alcohol content.
Missing child	Any situation where a child's whereabouts become unknown to the primary caregiver/guardian.
Missing person	Any adult missing person between the age of 18-21 years of age. Or any adult missing person considered endangered as the result of previous medical concerns, mental capacity, or any situation which puts the missing persons life and health at risk.
Neighbor trouble	Any dispute reported between neighbors that does not involve a specific crime but requires law enforcement intervention to assure that the involved parties remain civil.
Overdose	Refer to an accidental overdose of medications, narcotics or any other substance that poses a threat to the subject's health and wellbeing.
Panhandling	Attempt to obtain a monetary or tangible gain by approaching and begging from a stranger.
Drug paraphernalia	Any equipment, product, or material that is modified for making, using, or concealing drugs, typically for recreational purposes.
Parking complaint	Any parking related violation including handicapped parking issues, fire lane violations, etc.

Property check	Requests from businesses or individuals to check the security of property during a specific time frame.
Private property impound	Used to track private property impounds reported by private tow companies.
Court order violation	Reported violation of a court order such as a conditional bond release or personal protection order.
Prostitution	The act or practice of engaging in promiscuous sexual relations in exchange for money or services.
Vehicle repossession	Used to track vehicle repossessions by private companies.
Resist and obstruct/fleeing	Assault, batter, wound, obstruct, or endanger a deputy attempting to serve or execute any process, rule, or order made or issued by lawful authority or otherwise acting in the performance of his or her duties.
Runaway juvenile	A person under age 18 who is away from home or place of legal residence without the permission of parents, guardians, or custodial authorities.
Recovered runaway juvenile	Report by a private citizen of a recovered runaway which requires a deputy to respond for the official recovery
Threats/stalking	A 'willful course of conduct' involving repeated or continuing harassment of another individual that would cause a reasonable person to feel terrorized, frightened, intimidated, threatened, harassed, or molested, and that actually causes the victim to feel terrorized, frightened, intimidated, threatened, harassed, or molested.
Traffic control	Reports of malfunctioning traffic signals and details requiring a deputy to assist with the flow of vehicle and pedestrian traffic.
Traffic offense	Any act that violates a state or municipalities traffic laws.
Trespassing	Act of entering a person's property without consent.
Traffic stops	Used to track deputy's traffic stop activity by dispatchers.
Telephone harassment	Someone intends to annoy, harass or threaten you by making a telephone continually ring, making lewd incident or obscene comments, making a call where the caller does not identify himself, making repeated telephone calls where conversation consists only of harassment, making a call and using heavy breathing or silence with an intent to intimidate.

Urinate in public Urinating in public.

Vagrancy One who has no established residence and wanders idly from place to place without lawful or visible means of support

VIN inspection Certifies that the vehicle is not stolen and eligible for title- requires paperwork from Sec of State.

Warrant arrest Used to track arrests based on warrants issued by the courts.