

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/changing-police-practices-means-changing-911>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As the nation focuses on the deep, systemic problems with policing that have hindered public trust and undercut safety in many communities of color for decades, the operation of emergency response specifically the 911 call-taking system has come under increasing scrutiny.

Each year, people across the country make approximately 240 million calls to 911. That's an average of 7.6 calls for service *every second*.

But only about [1 percent of 911 calls](#) in major cities are to report violent crimes in progress.

Instead, 911 has become the default option for many people seeking support for a broad array of problems such as disruptive neighbors, family members experiencing mental health crises, or people engaged in suspicious activity. When law enforcement officers are dispatched in response to many different call types, neighborhoods especially in communities of color can quickly become overpoliced, with sometimes tragic consequences.

911 call-takers, who are responsible for receiving and processing 911 calls, are responding to a wide range of issues. This requires a careful, nuanced approach and rigorous training. Yet there are no national standards governing 911 call-taking, data collection, or dispatch practices and very little information on how these systems are structured or the outcomes they produce.

Over the past three years, [researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice have been studying](#) these concerns, collecting and analyzing detailed data on 911 call-taking systems. But 911 data is not easily accessed or analyzed. Only with greater transparency can communities help co-create 911 systems that best meet their unique needs. Here are three questions community members can ask to learn more about how their local 911 system operates.

1. Why are 911 calls made? How many involve violent crimes?

911 departments routinely dispatch law enforcement officers when calls to emergency lines come in. But police may not be the best responders to calls made for reasons other than crimes. Understanding why people call 911 provides a more complete picture of the social supports needed within a community.

The vast majority of 911 calls for service are not for violent crimes in progress. Based on [Vera's analysis](#), most 911 calls relate to non-criminal issues. Calls are placed predominantly to make nuisance complaints, report low-level offenses, and request well-being checks. Having information about the reasons people call 911 provides a starting point for identifying alternative approaches to police responses better suited to addressing the unmet needs within a community including behavioral health treatment, homelessness intervention efforts, and youth support services.

2. Who calls 911?

911 call centers do not collect demographic information about callers, but some police departments provide access to data on the locations where calls originate. Although one might assume that the volume of 911 calls is an indicator of neighborhood crime rates, this connection is tenuous at best.

Because police have failed to protect them, treated them unfairly, or harmed them in the past, residents of Black and Latinx neighborhoods may not dial 911 when facing emergency situations. This can lead to lower call volumes from these areas. Conversely, rather than indicating high crime rates, excessive call volumes may indicate artificially high *perceptions* of crime or emergency response needs. Indeed, higher rates of false reports or harassing calls may be fueled by overt or underlying racism.

3. How do local 911 departments address racism in call practices?

The 911 system has been levied as a tool of oppression in many communities. [Videos of white people](#) placing 911 calls to intimidate people of color engaged in day-to-day activities have been highly publicized. Several jurisdictions have taken steps to address such racist calls. Some places have made it a civil infraction to place a racist 911 call, [imposing fines](#) on the caller when evidence shows the complaint was based on race. Other jurisdictions, like California, have gone further, [classifying false, racist 911 calls as hate crimes](#).

By drastically changing the ways 911 calls are processed and responded to, communities can reallocate funding and resources from policing to respond to their true needs, connecting callers to the services that help them thrive. With additional data and greater transparency, communities can more effectively hold public safety departments accountable. Answering these questions is critical to achieve a system that operates with equity, integrity, and in the best interests of *all* community members.

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