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Latest 911 data reveal thousands of calls lingering in Minneapolis' emergency response system

By [Jessica Lee](#) | 11/05/2019

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As the Minneapolis City Council prepares for its annual **budget fight** over police staffing, a group of city officials and community members are finalizing a proposal that would change the way the police department handles 911 calls, a policy aimed at curbing the times no police officers are immediately able to respond to emergency situations.

Last week, the leaders of the group — composed of Minneapolis Police Department, 911 dispatchers, emergency responders, public

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potentially dangerous scenarios — had the largest proportion of calls that fell outside of the department's guidelines for response times: almost 9 percent.

The data are the first detailed look at 911 responses following **news coverage** this summer reporting that no Minneapolis police officers were available to respond to almost 7,000 calls to 911 over a 12-month period.

How Minneapolis' 911 system works

In Minneapolis, once dispatchers get basic information from 911 callers, they label calls in a computerized queue based on the type of emergency — a system that patrol officers can also see via dashboard computers in their squad cars or listen to over the scanner. A significant chunk of 911 calls in Minneapolis receive a "Priority 1" categorization, while another large portion are "Priority 2" calls, which could be reports of property damage, a suspicious person or situations that don't pose an immediate threat to public safety.

Once officers see a new 911 call with its code in the queue, they weigh whether they should drop what they're currently doing to respond to the new emergency, or if other officers should help out. That period of time — from when a dispatcher codes a call and officers claim it — in the majority of cases averages about 3 minutes for Priority 1 calls, 25 minutes for Priority 2 calls and 28 minutes for Priority 3 calls, which include reports of illegal parking, thefts or cases where conditions are safe at the time of the call.

If dispatchers notice a call sitting in the queue longer than they should based on the severity and public-safety threat of the emergency, police sergeants on duty are notified. According to **Minneapolis' director of emergency services, Kathy Hughes**, who helped present the latest data to the council, that rule is in place to cut back on the time those calls sit in 'pending', and a notified sergeant can decide whether to pull an officer from one call to respond to the new call.

After officers claim a call in the queue, the system tracks the time it takes for them to reach the scene. For all calls immediately claimed by officers, police spend an average of 7 to 10 minutes traveling to 911 callers. Not surprisingly, for calls that aren't claimed immediately by officers and need to be brought to a sergeant's attention, police spend more time reaching callers: an average of about 17 minutes for Priority 2 calls and roughly 19 minutes for Priority 3 incidents.

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According to **MPD Chief Medaria Arradondo**, the response times are a result of two trends: an increasing volume of 911 calls and a widening resident-to-officer ratio. Of MPD's 880 currently sworn officers, roughly 600 respond to 911 calls — a force size that the chief says is stretched too thin. He has said he wants to grow the city's police force by 400 officers to meet the demand for emergency services, **though crime rates citywide** have been on the decline.

Police staffing was at the center of the council's **budget discussions last year**. Initially, Mayor Jacob Frey proposed a \$1 million spending plan that would have moved eight police officers currently in desk jobs to the streets and backfilled their office positions with civilians.

But citing a “cultural shift” in how the city addresses public safety, the City Council rejected Frey's proposal. Instead, the council created a new “Office of Violence Prevention” via the city's health department; expanded **a city program partnering mental-health professionals with police officers**; and made other investments that Council President Lisa Bender described at the time as “upstream strategies” and alternatives to “traditional policing.”

As part of those discussions, the council also decided to research police response times and explore the potential benefits of a revamped dispatch system, namely whether sworn officers would have more time for urgent matters if citizens handled less serious 911 calls. As an addition to the 2019 budget, the council directed the formation of the work group to determine whether government departments outside of MPD could handle 911 calls that don't pose an immediate threat to anyone's safety, such as mental-crisis situations, drug overdoses or noise complaints.

But while exploring if government agencies outside of MPD should handle 911 calls this year, the work group has faced one significant hurdle: Minnesota law. Police officers must handle emergency situations that involve any type of arrest or firearm, and they must be the ones to fill out reports of domestic violence. Yet those same statutes do not outline clear rules for who can respond to 911 calls initially, according to the city's attorney's office.

In its meetings this year, the group has also discussed possibly realigning the codes so that not all mental health calls — or those involving an emotionally disturbed person — are “Priority 1,” since some callers may simply need a referral to a mental health

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6.95 percent) that again incorporates a boost to MPD's budget. The mayor wants to add 14 new officers next year: eight outreach officers, three sex-crimes and domestic-assault investigators and **three traffic officers**.

Council members have said the new 911 data will help them make decisions on Frey's budget proposal and navigate the upcoming debate over police staffing, which may prove contentious. **Reclaim the Block**, an advocacy group that wants the city to divest in policing and that interrupted Frey's budget speech in August, has been asking supporters to gather at all budget hearings and protest the proposal for more police.

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COMMENTS (4)

SUBMITTED BY SCOTT MCKELL ON 11/05/2019 - 01:29 PM.

Kudos to Jessica Lee for pulling so many apparently-isolated threads together in one article.

Please just tell me the study in the second paragraph was not a “first-of-its-kind” look at this data. To paraphrase a favorite admonition from my boss, “the first step to improve anything is to pay attention to the metrics.”

LOG IN TO REPLY

SUBMITTED BY RORY KRAMER ON 11/06/2019 - 01:42 PM.

It was a first of its kind look at 911 data for the Minneapolis Police Department and the other groups mentioned. Other cities have done these studies but a study done in one city can't be applied to other cities in terms of what wasn't done and what needs to be done to improve matters.

LOG IN TO REPLY

SUBMITTED BY JIM MEYER ON 11/06/2019 - 04:29 AM.

I attended meeting 3 and I concur this is a very good summary of both complex working data and the larger implications on desires for some bold change in a crucial delicate area of public service. A whole lot is happening quite quickly. so thank you. Without wanting to sound like a sheltered curtain-twitcher, I do question if crime is down as stated. Super Bowl year 2018 was an outlier for many reasons, including tent city and the Navigation Center...now closed. Mpls. homicide is above 2018 with two months to go. We are trending back toward the historical average. (St. Paul? C'mon.) Agg. assault up YTD, garage burglaries rampant, “petty” till tapping and tip-jar toppling and store-swarming are growing problems for fragile small biz (not to mention, customers). If

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SUBMITTED BY PAUL UDSTRAND ON 11/07/2019 - 08:44 AM.

I think it's a problem if police can't get to all emergency calls quickly even if the over-all crime numbers are down. I understand that there's friction and hostility to police in some quarters, but I don't see how reducing the number of officers or pulling them off the streets is a "real" solution unless you have someone else around who can respond to emergencies and enforce the law.

Given the numbers, I don't see how 8 or 12 more officers is a serious response.

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