



PRESS RELEASE

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**Study on Two U.S. Cities' Alternative Non-Police Response to 911 Programs
Finds Dispatch Protocols Poorly Suited to Handle Many Street Crisis Calls**

One of the fastest growing and most popular innovations in public safety in the United States is the use of alternative non-police responders to 911 calls. Spurred by the killing by police of George Floyd and ensuing protests in 2020, this approach aims to reduce the scope of policing and offer a more suitable response to a range of social problems. There are more than 100 alternative response teams across the country, and a key challenge is ensuring that the most appropriate responder is dispatched to handle each situation.

In a new study, researchers examined how dispatch organizations in San Francisco and Denver have structured decisions about whom to send on calls. They found that the protocols currently in use are poorly suited to handle the uncertainty, subjectivity, and ambiguity that characterize many street crisis calls.

The study, by researchers at Suffolk University and New York University (NYU) School of Law, appears in *Criminology & Public Policy*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

“Among policymakers and community leaders, the emerging consensus is that sending a combination of behavioral health professionals, social workers, medics, and peers to certain 911 calls can avoid unnecessary, ineffective, and sometimes harmful police encounters,” explains Jessica W. Gillooly, professor of sociology and criminal justice at Suffolk University and a former 911 call taker and 911 subject matter expert, who led the study.

“But as approaches like these grow, the alternative response movement cannot succeed to its fullest potential without addressing the specific challenges it raises within dispatch centers.”

As alternatives to police responses to 911 calls have emerged as a leading public safety reform strategy, a key challenge lies in determining whether alternative responders, police, or both are most appropriate for a given situation. These decisions fall largely to 911 call takers and dispatchers, who must identify on a case-by-case basis which incidents are best suited for unarmed responders and which are not.

Recent investigations have found that all too often, 911 dispatch staff err on the side of sending the police to behavioral health-related calls, even when alternatives are available, which raises significant concerns. Based on these concerns, in this study, between 2021 and 2023, researchers interviewed city officials; police officers; alternative responders; and 911 call takers, dispatchers, and supervisors in San Francisco and Denver, both of which have adopted alternative response programs. They also observed dispatch staff from both cities.

In both cities, the implementation of alternative response suffered because dispatch leaders relied too heavily on coded instructions and rule-based protocols to guide call diversion decisions, without paying sufficient attention to the design of these tools, the study found. Rigid and formulaic protocols proved ill-equipped to handle the uncertainty, subjectivity, and ambiguity dispatch workers routinely face, and these were not meaningfully revised in response to frontline feedback or supplemented with additional forms of guidance and support.



In the absence of more thoughtfully designed guidance, call takers and dispatchers sometimes developed workarounds to justify sending an alternative to police response when their protocols advised doing otherwise. At other times, they retreated into old habits and sent the police to calls when armed police presence was unnecessary and may have led to harm.

“Our findings underscore that the success of any policy reform aimed at reducing the public’s reliance on police depends on how such dispatch-level decisions are made,” notes Barry Friedman, professor of law at NYU School of Law, who coauthored the study. “The variability in call handling that we found can have serious consequences for the nature of the response a caller receives, and underscores the need for dispatch organizations to pay greater attention to the forms of guidance they provide their staff.

“The researchers called on dispatch agencies to refine existing protocols by grounding them in the experiential knowledge of frontline staff. Protocols need to be designed with care, tested against real-world practice, and supported with additional forms of guidance—such as clear value statements that articulate organizational priorities, including that if a situation can be handled safely without police, that is the preferred outcome—elements that have until now been missing from alternative response program implementation. These suggestions, the authors say, can be used to improve call diversion in any jurisdiction that seeks to reduce its reliance on police.

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Summarized from *Criminology & Public Policy*, *Rethinking the Rules for 911: Dispatching Alternative Responders in Denver and San Francisco*, by Gillooly, JW (Suffolk University), and Friedman, B (New York University School of Law). Copyright 2025 The American Society of Criminology. All rights reserved.