

How Do the Police Actually Spend Their Time?

A review of publicly available data in three areas reveals that much of an officer's job revolves around handling routine calls rather than violent crime.

By Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz

- June 19, 2020

- What share of policing is devoted to handling violent crime? Perhaps not as much as you might think. A handful of cities post data online showing how their police departments spend their time. The share devoted to handling violent crime is very small, about 4 percent.

That could be relevant to the new conversations about the role of law enforcement that have arisen since the death of George Floyd in police custody and the nationwide protests that followed. For instance, there has been talk of “unbundling” the police — [redirecting](#) some of their duties, as well as some of their funding, by hiring more of other kinds of workers to help with the homeless or the mentally ill, drug overdoses, minor traffic problems and similar disturbances.

Consider “[calls for service](#).” These can be defined as calls to emergency operators, 911, alarms, police radio and nonemergency calls. They mostly begin from calls by citizens, but also include incidents police officers initiate themselves.

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Calls for service do not include time spent investigating after an incident; training sessions; administrative duties; and off-duty employment. As such, they are not a perfect encapsulation of how police officers spend all their time, but they do provide a good representation of how police departments interact with the public.

Determining what constitutes a violent crime can be tricky because some agencies don't differentiate between aggravated assaults (generally considered a violent crime) and simple assaults (an assault without an injury that is generally not considered a violent crime) in their publicly available calls for service data.

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The F.B.I. Uniform Crime Report [definition](#) of violent crime is more narrow than frequently [broader state definitions](#). For this analysis, we used the Uniform Crime Report definition — homicide, robbery, rape and aggravated assault — to highlight responses to only the most serious of violent crimes. We found 10 agencies with publicly available calls for service data as shown in the chart below. Serious violent crimes have made up around 1 percent of all calls-for-service episodes in those agencies so far this year.

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Relatively minor incidents such as traffic responses and noncriminal miscellaneous complaints account for a much larger share of calls for service in most of these cities. In Seattle, for example, responses to traffic accidents and enforcement make up over 15 percent of all calls for service in 2020, while 15 percent of incidents in New Orleans fall in the “complaint other” category.

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Of course, responding to a murder scene takes far longer than handling a burglar alarm, so the number of episodes does not, by itself, indicate how much time an agency spends responding to violent crime. Fortunately, a handful of agencies include information on how long officers spend on any given incident.

While data is not available on how much time a specific officer spends on scene, a generalized result can be deduced by subtracting the time an incident is deemed “closed” from either when an officer was first dispatched or when the incident was first reported. Incidents without a known start and closure time were discounted, as were calls for service for routine patrol activities like area and business checks.

In New Orleans, officers have spent 4 percent of their time this year responding to calls for serious violent crimes. Gun violence has taken up an even smaller share, with 0.7 percent of time spent responding to homicides and nonfatal shooting incidents. Domestic violence calls that are not violent crimes have taken 7.3 percent of officer time, while roughly a third of time has been spent responding to calls regarding complaints, traffic accidents and noncriminal disturbances.

Similar patterns hold in Montgomery County in Maryland and Sacramento. In Montgomery County this year, officers spent 4.1 percent of their time responding to calls for violent crime, including 0.1 percent on homicides. Officers in Sacramento spent 3.7 percent of their time responding to serious violent crime and 0.1 percent handling homicides and firearm assaults.

Law enforcement has often become a backstop for much of society’s ills, sometimes being stretched thin while dealing with domestic disputes or providing safety for schools. Both the police and their critics have at times questioned whether social workers or other workers would be better equipped for those duties.

As [experts continue to debate](#) how best to improve the performance of law enforcement, it’s helpful to first have a clear understanding of how the police spend their time interacting with the public, including how little of it revolves around responding to violent crime.

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