

Calling the Police: Citizen Reporting of Serious Crime

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October 1984

**U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rapid police response may be unnecessary for three out of every four serious crimes reported to police. The traditional practice of immediate response to all reports of serious crimes currently leads to on-scene arrests in only 29 of every 1,000 cases. By implementing innovative programs, police may be able to increase this response-related arrest rate to 50 or even 60 per 1,000, but there is little hope that further increases can be generated.

These are the major findings of the Forum's three-year study of citizen-reporting and police response. These outcomes unequivocally support conclusions reached by the Kansas City (MO) Police Department in its 1977 study of police response to serious crimes: that citizen-reporting time, and not police response time, most affects the possibility of on-scene arrest; and, that, when citizens delay in reporting crimes, efforts to reduce police response times have no substantial effect on arrest rates.

The Forum's study is based on interviews with over 4,000 victims, witnesses and bystanders in some 3,300 serious crimes of the following six types: aggravated assault, auto theft, burglary, larceny, rape and robbery. The study was conducted in four American cities: Jacksonville, Florida; Peoria,

Illinois; Rochester, New York; and San Diego, California. These cities were selected because of their differences; each represented a singular mix of populational, regional and police agency characteristics. Nonetheless, the outcomes from city to city were almost identical, which would tend to indicate that the findings apply to other cities across the nation.

The results of this study and the related implications for police department policy concerning rapid response to citizen calls for service must be kept in proper perspective. The findings of this study focus only on citizen delays in the reporting of serious crimes (Part I crimes except homicide and arson) and the effect these delays have on on-scene, response-related arrests by the police. The effect of rapid police response on less serious crimes was addressed in the aforementioned Kansas City study. Also, previous studies have examined the effects of rapid police response on citizen satisfaction, availability of witnesses and crime scene evidence, and the handling of medical emergencies. These related issues are considered in the literature review but are not the subject of empirical analysis in this study. The effects of rapid police response on other types of citizen calls for police service, including non-crime calls, calls to maintain order, and calls which can prevent crime, have not been studied here. All of these issues must be taken into consideration along with the

findings concerning response-related arrests when reviewing a police department's general policy on responding to citizens' calls for service. It would be consistent with the results of this study, for example, to have a policy requiring rapid response in a "suspicious person" call while providing for less than immediate response in a burglary discovered after the fact.

Some details of the major findings of the study are summarized in the next few pages, but a thorough understanding can only be gained by reading the full report. The page numbers listed in the margins indicate those sections of the report which relate to the findings described only briefly in this summary. (Analytic methods are described in the separate Technical Appendixes.)

Reporting Time, Response Time and Arrest

For at least half a century, police have considered it important to cut to a minimum their response times to crime calls. The faster the response, they have reasoned, the better the chances of catching a criminal at or near the scene of the crime. In the cities we studied, however, arrests that could be attributed to fast police response were made in only 2.9 percent of reported serious crimes.

pp.61, 66-68 Why is the response-related arrest rate so low? The major reason is that about 75 percent of all serious crimes reported are discovery crimes--crimes that are discovered after they have been completed, and in which offenders have had time to escape without police interference. The remaining 25 percent are involvement crimes--those in which the victim is directly confronted by the offender. In this study, citizen reporting time for discovery crimes averaged between ten minutes and ten-and-one-half minutes in the four cities, or between 40 to 60 percent of total response time, which includes citizen reporting time, police dispatch time and police travel time. Consequently, because "suspect get-away time" even before the crime is discovered is likely to be long, and citizen reporting time after discovery of the crime is also long, there is virtually no chance that discovery crimes will result in response-related arrests. This common sense conclusion is verified by previous research and is confirmed by the results of this study. Therefore, in only about 25 percent of all reported serious crimes, namely those that are not discovery crimes but, rather, are involvement crimes, can fast response make a difference.

But how fast does response to these involvement crimes have to be to make a difference? Since the late 1930's, police scientists have asserted that fast response can lead to arrest only if the police arrive while the crime is still happening or

within two to three minutes after it has been completed. In this study, average citizen reporting time for involvement crimes ranged between four minutes and five and-one-half minutes or between 28 and 47 percent of total response time. Thus, even for involvement crimes the likelihood of response-related arrest is relatively low. When citizens delay even a few minutes, the suspect has usually left the crime scene and no on-scene arrest is likely. This was found to be true in each of the four cities surveyed.

Of all involvement crimes reported to police, 54 percent were reported within five minutes of their occurrence.

- Thirteen percent were reported while still in-progress. Under these circumstances, the chances of response-related arrest were very good: about 35 percent.
- An additional 14 percent were reported within the first minute after the crimes had been committed. When reported within a few seconds, the chances of response-related arrest were about 18 percent; if reported 60 seconds after the crime, the chances were only about 10 percent.
- For the remaining 27 percent reported between one and five minutes after the crimes had been committed, the chances of response-related arrest were about seven percent.

Regarding the remaining reports of involvement crimes, when citizens delayed for a full five minutes, they might as

well have delayed for an hour: the chances of arrest were no better for five-minute delays than for 60-minute delays.

So it is not surprising that only three percent of all reports of serious crimes led to response-related arrests: only about 25 percent of these reports were likely to be reports of involvement crimes in which fast response could make a difference; and, what is more, only 54 percent of these reports of involvement crimes were likely to be made in time enough, that is within five minutes, to afford police a reasonable opportunity to make on-scene arrests.

The findings are clear. Most serious crimes reported to the police are discovery crimes for which there is virtually no chance for response-related arrests. For the remaining crimes, those in which there is citizen involvement, the citizen must call the police within one minute, or the likelihood of response-related arrest drops dramatically.

What can police do to cut reporting times and increase the opportunities for arrest? They must focus their efforts on addressing the reasons for delay.

Why Citizens Delay

When citizens do not report crimes immediately, it is either because they decide to call the police only after they

have taken some other action in response to the crime, or because they have trouble in communicating their reports to police after they have decided to call--or both.

There are three basic reasons for not deciding immediately to report crimes:

- Citizens sometimes want first to verify that a situation does indeed involve a crime, that is, they try to resolve ambiguity in the situation. To do this they take actions, some of which include:

- Observing the situation and/or investigating the crime scene. Such actions delayed reporting in just over 25 percent of the crimes studied, resulting in an average delay of two minutes.
- Telephoning someone not at the scene to acquire additional information, or seeking such information by talking to another person at the scene. One or the other of these actions was taken in about 6.6 percent of crimes studied, resulting in an average delay of three minutes for a telephone call or 90 seconds for a face-to-face conversation.

- Sometimes citizens take actions to help themselves cope with problems the crime has created for them. Such actions include:

- Leaving the scene of the crime. This occurred in over 19 percent of the cases studied, resulting in an average delay of about 90 seconds.
- Speaking with or telephoning someone to obtain assistance or support. One or the other of these occurred in 16.5 percent of our crime sample, resulting in average delays of about 90 seconds and three minutes, respectively.

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- Chasing or restraining a suspect. Such actions occurred in about 6.4 percent of crimes studied and delayed reporting, on average, by 30 seconds.
- Caring for physical injury. This occurred so infrequently in our sample (just over one percent of all cases) that no reliable estimate of delay is possible.

- Many citizens experience conflict as to whether or not to call the police, and they try to avoid making immediate decisions. In such cases citizens may:

- Procrastinate, hopeful that the decision will become easier. This occurred in 9.5 percent of the sample of serious crimes and caused delays that averaged 11 minutes.
- Talk to someone at the scene or telephone someone to get advice that may help in resolving the conflict. Face-to-face conversations occurred two percent of the time for an average delay of 90 seconds; telephoning occurred in only slightly above one percent of our sample, resulting in an average delay of about three minutes.

Most citizens who delay in making decisions do so for reasons they believe are very good: they may want to avoid the consequences of their calling the police about suspicious events that turn out not to involve crime; for some, coping with emotional trauma or with personal conflict may seem more urgent

pp.130-131 than reporting crime. To prevent these decisionmaking delays, police must offer to citizens good reasons to report immediately, reasons that will override citizens' inclinations to delay.

In undertaking to meet this objective, it is important to distinguish the three basic causes of decisionmaking delays; because of the distinctions, the methods police use in attacking the causes will necessarily differ.

When citizens do decide to report crimes, problems in communicating their reports to police sometimes arise. In our study, three such communications problems led to reporting delays.

- A phone was not readily available. This problem presented itself in only seven percent of our crime sample, resulting in an average delay of about 45 seconds.
- The caller did not know the police telephone number and had to look it up or call directory assistance. This problem touched 23 percent of our respondents, resulting in delays that averaged about one minute and forty-five seconds if the telephone directory was used but only a few seconds if the call was placed through the telephone company operator. Regarding the most urgent cases, the majority of people who did not know the police number dialed "0" rather than searching the directory.
- The caller has trouble communicating with the police complaint taker. This problem gave rise to reporting delays in 10 to 12 percent of the cases in our sample, resulting in an average delay of about 35 seconds.

People occasionally encountered other problems: a pay phone may have been out of order; the caller may have had no change for a pay phone; the caller may have dialed the wrong

pp.149-150 agency by mistake; but these problems arose so infrequently
163-164 that, if somehow they all were eliminated, still, few, if any
additional arrests would ensue.

Of the six important causes of citizen-reporting delay reviewed above (three involving decisionmaking problems and three involving communications problems), on which should police focus to trim the most minutes from reporting time and to make the most arrests? To find out, we estimated the number of additional on-scene, response-related arrests police would make if each cause of delay were eliminated. To actually eliminate any of these causes of reporting delays is probably impossible; in general, they are susceptible to alleviation, not to elimination. Our purpose in using this method is to identify those causes of delay that have the greatest potential for increasing arrests.

The results, shown in Figure A, indicate that causes of decisionmaking delays hold significantly greater potential for increasing arrests than do causes of communications delays. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that the chief cause of reporting delay--the cause which, if removed, would have the greatest potential for increasing response-related arrest rates--is conflict as to whether or not to call the police. A program completely successful in relieving such conflict would increase the number of response-related arrests from 2.9 to 4.8 percent, an

Figure A

Potential Increases in Response-Related Arrests As a Result
of Removing Each of Several Important Causes of Delay

At Present:



Police make about 29
response-related arrests
per thousand serious
crimes reported.

**DECISIONMAKING
DELAYS**

If AMBIGUITY delays
were eliminated:



+2 -- The police would
make 31 arrests per
thousand crimes.

If COPING ACTIVITIES
were never taken:



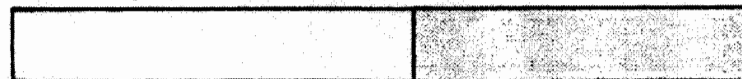
+2 -- 31 arrests per
thousand crimes.

If there were never a
need to RESOLVE CONFLICT:



+19 -- 48 arrests
per thousand
crimes.

If ALL DECISIONMAKING
DELAYS were eliminated:



+25* --
54 arrests
per thousand
crimes.

**COMMUNICATIONS
ACCESS PROBLEMS**

If a PHONE were always
AVAILABLE:



+1 -- 30 arrests per
thousand crimes.

If the NUMBER were
always KNOWN:



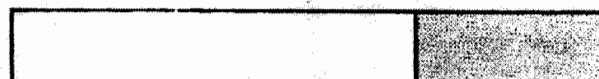
+3 -- 32 arrests per
thousand crimes.

If the COMPLAINT TAKER
were always COOPERATIVE:



+2 -- 31 arrests per
thousand crimes

If ALL COMMUNICATIONS
PROBLEMS were eliminated:



+8* -- 37 arrests
per thousand crimes.

Even if all REPORTING DELAYS could be eliminated, no more than 70 crimes
per thousand could result in response-related arrest.

*The total is more than the sum of the individual savings because
the non-linear nature of the relationship between reporting time and arrest.

· increase of 19 arrests per thousand serious crimes. Much smaller but still significant increases would be made if other causes of delay were eliminated.

What can police and local governments do to alleviate these decisionmaking and communications problems?

Programs That Probably Will Reduce Citizen Reporting Time

Cut the Cost of Reporting a Crime. Citizens experience conflict because they believe, whatever they do, there will be pp.118-129, high costs, either emotional or financial. On the one hand, 180-184 reporting crimes may be inconvenient; victims may fear that police will hold them responsible for precipitating the crimes; victims may fear that offenders will take reprisals against them. On the other hand, not reporting crimes greatly reduces the chances that citizens will ever recover their property or see offenders brought to justice. Citizens in conflict feel they cannot win, so they avoid making decisions about reporting crimes: they procrastinate or ask others to make decisions for them.

In any efforts to root out this cause of delayed reporting and non-reporting, police must examine their procedures to ensure that costs of reporting are kept to a bare minimum.

The inconvenience of reporting might be mitigated by offering to victims and witnesses assistance in getting to police stations and, when necessary, to court houses. Patrol officers could be trained to educate victims and witnesses in crime prevention techniques and to emphasize to these citizens the benefits that can accrue to them as a result of their implementing these practices. Then, too, citizens who fear reprisals deserve protection and reassurance; some police departments have instituted victim-witness protection units to prevent reprisals.

Because delays caused by conflict turn less on the actual costs, of reporting than on potential, often unknown, costs, it is possible that some gains can be made simply by advertising how infrequently offenders take reprisals against victims and witnesses and how convenient police procedures already are.

Distribute Phone Stickers Displaying the Police Department's Emergency Number. In the four cities we studied,

pp.150-161, most people distinguished emergency and non-emergency situations

191 relatively well, but many people called phone company operators or dialed police administrative numbers because they did not know police emergency numbers. If stickers for telephones were distributed (perhaps along with monthly phone or electric bills), and people were encouraged to post the stickers on or near their personal and work phones, more people would use

correct numbers. Regarding citizens who do not post numbers on their phones or who use phones beyond the reach of sticker distribution systems, they should be encouraged to dial phone company operators in emergencies and to refrain from searching directories. Though most people who do not know emergency numbers follow this procedure already, it should be encouraged for the benefit of the few who do not.

Implement Community-Based Neighborhood Anti-Crime

Programs. Additional, but less considerable, increases in

pp.88-102, numbers of quickly reported crimes and response-related arrests 187-189 can be realized by alleviating delays caused by ambiguity. If citizens are to recognize crimes while the crimes are being committed, citizens need to know what a crime looks like and where it is likely to occur: to provide such knowledge is the goal of programs like Neighborhood Watch. When Neighborhood Watch works, it is because citizens share information about each other's habits and activities. A man who sees a woman rummaging in a neighbor's house may think little of it; but, if he knows that his neighbor is on vacation he may recognize that a burglary is in progress and call the police. Neighborhood Watch programs in several jurisdictions have been shown to be effective in reducing delays due to ambiguity and in increasing the number of in-progress calls and response-related arrests.

Train Police Operators to Screen Calls for Service.

One possible consequence of training police operators to screen pp.193-200 calls would be a reduction in the occurrence of communications problems between complaint takers and reporting citizens; this reduction represents a potential gain of two arrests per thousand crimes. . Nevertheless, other potential consequences have more significance.

If all the programs reviewed thus far were implemented, and they were to work perfectly, the maximum possible gain in response-related arrests would be no more than about 30 arrests per thousand. Though this would amount to a doubling of the response-related arrest rate, it is important to maintain perspective: the vast majority of crimes will continue to be discovered after they have been committed and will not require immediate police response.

No matter what else the police departments do, they can realize immense efficiency gains by screening calls for service: prioritizing them according to seriousness and how urgently police response is needed. Some kinds of calls will demand simply that reports be taken by phone; civilians can be sent to cold burglaries. In turn, this will free patrol resources to conduct more comprehensive on-scene investigations; it will make way for increased use of surveillance, decoy and other directed patrol activities; it will permit utilization of

suspect "escape route blocking" tactics in cases of quickly reported crimes; it will allow officers to perform duties they are now unable to discharge because at present they must go back in-service to handle non-urgent calls.

The programs surveyed to this point are all likely to result in reductions in citizen reporting times and increases in arrest rates. In contrast, our analysis shows that certain other programs, though frequently proposed, will probably not work.

Programs That Probably Will Not Reduce Citizen Reporting Time

911. In the cities we studied, one of which had an pp.161-162, operational 911 system, there was nothing to show that installing 911 results in significant cuts in citizen reporting times. Where 911 is available, people who use it do so in situations in which they would otherwise dial police departments' seven-digit emergency numbers or call phone company operators. When people call operators instead of 911, delays increase by only about 10 seconds: not a significant figure within the general context of typical reporting times of five minutes or more. A 911 system would cut reporting times if people would not look up numbers in phone books when they should be using 911, but ironically, 911 seems to encourage people to look up numbers in phone

books. This is because departments, in their attempts to keep the number of 911 calls under control, encourage people to use 911 only for emergencies; in our sample, a few people in every city mistook in-progress crimes and crimes in which a victim had been injured--very urgent situations--to be non-emergencies and, so, looked up numbers in phone books. This happened most frequently in Peoria, the only city in our study which had installed 911. Extensive publicity accompanying 911 there may have backfired, causing slower reporting times.

More Pay Phones and "Dime-Free" Pay Phones. Some delays in reporting occur because phones are not available. Small pp.149-150, increases in numbers of arrests could be expected if phones were 191-192 always available to people who want to call police. Installing more pay phones, however, or allowing citizens to use police call boxes will not significantly alleviate this cause of delay. Moreover, to cut by one-half the number of delays that derive from this cause would require between two and four times the number of pay phones currently in place--clearly a very expensive proposition. Only nine of over 3,300 crimes studied involved delays owing to callers' having no change for pay phones, and such callers were rarely delayed for more than a few seconds. Permitting citizens to call police numbers or phone company operators for free may be useful with respect to public relations and may contribute to arrests in a few extraordinary

cases but will not cause perceptible changes in arrest rates.

Mass Media Advertising. Finally, there is no evidence

whatever that television and radio advertising, urging people to

pp.177-180 call the police immediately because "it's the right thing to

do," will have any effect on reporting delays or arrest rates.

When people delay, they do so for what they see as being good

reasons. If the police hope to encourage faster reporting, they

will have to give the public good reasons not to delay.