

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE IN ACTION: **Early Learnings from the Field**

Many jurisdictions across the country have begun to redesign their public safety systems with new methods for responding to issues previously handled solely by the police. Some of these methods involve co-response strategies that pair police with other professionals (such as clinicians, trained mediators, or social workers). Some involve alternative responders acting independently of police. And others involve the use of video, telephone, or online resources rather than the dispatch of a person to the scene.



As part of our Reimagining Public Safety (RPS) initiative, we are conducting research in multiple U.S. cities that are making innovative changes, learning from them through direct engagement and data collection. In each city, we examine what does and doesn't work, and why. Our goal is to surface common issues recurring across multiple jurisdictions and to highlight lessons that are relevant to communities throughout the United States.

Once this research concludes, we will release a full report about each city, as well as a set of overall lessons. In the meantime, we are sharing some initial observations.

Our Research Methodology

Our research incorporates qualitative and quantitative methods, and involves working with both community members and local governments. This work includes in-person and virtual interviews, site visits, and ride-alongs. Four separate research teams focus on:

- Intensive group conversations with residents, primarily from neighborhoods most impacted by policing and most reliant on 911.
- Long-form individual interviews with community members.
- Group and individual interviews with municipal government officials and employees, from elected leaders and dispatchers to alternative responders and police officers.
- An examination of the calls for service in each jurisdiction, as well as other available data.

The research topics range from high-level understandings of what constitutes public safety, to very specific questions about the implementation of programs.

By bringing together these different methods and areas of research, we seek to form a holistic picture of existing public safety systems, needs, and future possibilities.

Interview Question Themes

CITY OFFICIALS AND SAFETY PRACTITIONERS

- Definition of public safety
- Motivations for change
- Role of the police
- Goals of alternative response
- Barriers to implementation

COMMUNITY

- Definition of public safety
- Who should be responsible for public safety
- Perceptions of public safety changes
- Readiness for change
- Vision for a reimagined system

Preliminary Findings

ACHIEVING PUBLIC SAFETY: DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES

“The role of governmental agencies and systems should be to support and amplify community stakeholders to solve their own problems. The community knows what a community needs.”

Local Resident

“Government cannot overlook the responsibility to keep its people safe.”

Police Official

In our interviews with both community members and city government stakeholders, we have found different views about what public safety means, and how it is best achieved.

Community members tend to define public safety rather broadly, envisioning a community in which both they and their neighbors have the resources they need to lead secure, healthy lives — the feeling of safety that comes with, for example, the ability to secure stable employment and feed, house, and care for one’s family, or the ability to walk in the neighborhood without fear of harm.

On the other hand, those who work for and represent the city generally view public safety more narrowly, equating it with physical safety from harm and victimization.

Perhaps because of these differing perspectives, the two groups also differ on who should be primarily responsible for providing public safety. Community members see themselves as being the lead in this area and want government to play a secondary supportive role. As an example, community members suggest that government could mobilize residents to do mediation work in their own neighborhoods. Conversely, city employees describe public safety as the unique responsibility of government and do not consider community members as having a meaningful role.

TIME FOR CHANGE, BUT DIVERGENT VIEWS OF RESPONDERS

“We have been doing the same thing over and over again, and it hasn’t worked. This cookie-cutter approach to safety – who feels safe and who doesn’t, who is protected and who isn’t, and which agency responds – this shit ain’t working.”

Local Resident

“I don’t know that I would call somebody having a health crisis a policing issue. Although, by default, in this country, it tends to be a policing issue, unfortunately.”

Police Official

Community members and public officials largely agree that it is time for change. Their reasons for this diverge in some ways, but there is also common ground. Both agreement and divergence are important here.

Community members’ desire to change first response stems largely from negative perceptions of police response to 911 calls. Chief among these concerns is the perceived risk of legal or physical harm that the police might direct toward them or others on the scene. Community members also often say their city’s police are biased and discriminatory, and that they do not treat all people fairly.

Not surprisingly, city interviewees have a more positive overall view of police and first responders.

Despite these divergent opinions, there is consensus on the need for change for one fundamental reason: all sides recognize that the police simply are not equipped to address the social issues that generate many 911 calls, and that dispatching officers to such calls can create a frustrating dynamic both for police and the public.

OVER-USE OF 911

“Honestly, if it’s not life or limb, is it really an emergency that needs 911 versus our non-emergency line?”

911 Call Taker

Both community members and those working in 911 call centers agree that 911 should be used only for serious emergencies, perhaps matters of life-and-limb, and that other issues should be resolved instead within the community or by alternative responders. 911 personnel are frustrated by official police department messaging that encourages the community to use 911 as a catchall.

At the same time, community members report engaging with the system for a broad range of issues, and call takers disagree amongst themselves about which situations do or do not constitute an emergency.

MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN GOALS AND METRICS

Why have alternative response? What are alternatives’ intended goals and how is success measured? On this issue, municipal officials often differ.

Interviewees characterize the goals of alternative response in two very different ways. One group sees it aimed primarily at providing better care (e.g., stabilization, harm reduction, diversion, crisis management, and care connection). Others, however, see alternative response as primarily a

means of improving the efficiency of resource allocation (e.g., reducing 911 calls and freeing up police time with related cost-savings). These two goals are not necessarily in conflict, but they do convey very different notions of what alternative response aims to achieve.

Not surprisingly, given this difference in views, there can be a mismatch between program goals and metrics for progress and success. For example, although crisis management, stabilization, and reduction in 911 calls were stated as goals of one the programs we examined, none of these measures are tracked. Relatedly, despite practitioners emphasizing the ability of alternative responders to connect individuals to care, an initial evaluation report did not detail the frequency with which the program was able to do so.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

“You really need to go with your gut for what’s risky, that you never want someone to get hurt.”

911 Call Taker

Despite clear step-by-step guidance and protocols for deploying alternative responders, we find that call takers sometimes fail to dispatch an alternative response team to appropriately qualified calls. There generally were two reasons for this.

First, perhaps due to the novelty of, or unfamiliarity with, an alternative response program, dispatchers simply forget to utilize it. Similarly, dispatchers may forget that alternative responders already have been assigned and proceed to dispatch police or paramedics, who sometimes arrive first and determine a course of action without alternative responders present.

Second, dispatchers sometimes assess the risk of utilizing alternative response contrary to the procedures and protocols that had been settled upon. Some call center staff choose to send police “just in case,” because they may be unfamiliar with the capacities and skillsets of alternative responders

such as mental health clinicians. They also may make inexpert judgments about liability or overestimate risks to the physical safety of responders.

The resulting under-utilization of alternative response hinders program goals and impedes an accurate assessment of efficacy.

Alternative responders and call center staff alike are frustrated by this dynamic. Both believe that better communication and familiarity among dispatchers and alternative responders would benefit everyone.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

“We would need a more transparent way to understand the origins of how budgets are funded, where does that come from and what does that mean. We never get all of the information to truly address things. We’re spoon fed a bunch of stuff to react to, then – boom! We do that. That will never translate to completely redesign...”

Local Resident

When community members play an integral role in the development of an alternative response program, they acquire a sense of ownership and agency. This establishes a foundation of positive feeling about and trust in the program.

But it also is clear that community involvement needs to continue as alternative response programs expand and change. Rather than just soliciting additional community input through town halls and surveys, community members suggest integrating residents and organizations from the most affected neighborhoods directly into the public safety system as staff members, decision-makers, and/or contracted providers.

Closing Thoughts

Change is challenging. It requires adapting novel policies and procedures, questioning deeply-rooted beliefs about risk and safety, and operating in a fraught environment in which there are divergent perspectives as to why and how systems should evolve.

Despite these hurdles, community members and public safety practitioners find much common ground. There is consensus that police and 911 system simply are tapped to do too much. This point of consensus – that it is time we handle some subset of community problems with more holistic, specialized, and compassionate care – is an important asset for change-makers.

Full reports regarding jurisdictions' approach to reimagining first response are forthcoming and will be made available when research is concluded. **Stay connected** with RPS to be alerted of new materials!



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