

## Research and the Realities of Police Dispatch

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**Citation:** Knight C. Ann Emerg Disp Resp 2013; 1(2):5

The reality of police dispatching is that there is nothing routine. Police calls change frequently simply due to the type of business. A perceived cold call of “breaking and entering” into a property can quickly turn into an in-progress “robbery” when it is discovered that a suspect is on the scene and has a weapon. A report of an “assault” can quickly turn into an “active assailant (shooter)” situation, one of the most dangerous and complex types of incidents. The constantly-changing police world is just never routine.

Because of the constantly-changing nature of policing and police dispatch, research is particularly important in this field to make sure we get things right, based on what’s happening in real police dispatch and law enforcement agencies. For example, one of the most pressing questions in police dispatch research right now is: How much time elapses from initial call receipt in the Communication Center to dispatch of responders? There is an expectation from the public that law enforcement agencies respond to their calls for service in a timely manner. I know of no Police Chief, Sheriff, or agency head who is not concerned with response times.

The amount of time that a call remains in the Communication Center prior to being dispatched is also of significant concern to agency administrators. At the same time, there is a concern that protocol use would increase these response times. That’s not what we see in agencies, but a scientific study of police protocol user agencies regarding the average time for initial dispatch versus the same data for non-protocol user agencies would be beneficial in identifying the reality on the ground and showing agencies and agency administrators the benefits of protocol use. Many factors influence how long it takes a call to be processed, i.e., call volume, structured call-taking versus un-structured call-taking, personnel available to answer 9-1-1 calls, etc. Although multiple factors influence call processing times, in-depth analysis and review of pre and post-implementation of the Police Priority Dispatch System would assist user agencies in determining one of the benefits of the Police Priority Dispatch System (PPDS). Of course, while call-

processing times are highly important to agencies, accuracy and completeness of information gathered is also critically important.

For agencies that do not use some form of structured call-taking (scripted process), call processing times may be longer or shorter, as what information is gathered and forwarded to responding officers is based on the experience (or inexperience) of the call-taker. While an experienced call-taker may gather critical and relevant information, an inexperienced call-taker may not. I’m sure we all agree, this is not a good situation. Structured call-taking benefits agencies, and most importantly responding officers, by ensuring that all call-takers ask the necessary and critical questions all the time. There is no “guessing” on what to ask, as the key questions that have to be asked are provided to all call-takers via the PPDS. While there is a possibility that call-processing times may go up, it can be justified by the benefits provided through accuracy of information provided to responders. A study into pre- and post-PPDS implementation would be interesting and beneficial to agencies as they determine the value of the PPDS to their organization.

Dispatchers and dispatch administrators know their jobs and are, for the most part, excellent at what they do. The law enforcement mindset is hard to change because the perception is that “we have always done it this way and it works.” However, if administrators can be shown the benefits of change, change will be implemented. Dispatch researchers should know that, as younger agency administrators are moving into decision making roles, there will be more openness to doing things differently in the future. These new administrators grew up in the technology era and are more technologically savvy. They recognize that there may be better ways to do things—and they know that they often involve technology. Younger generation Emergency Dispatchers not only want the newest technologies, but literally can’t work without them. Research showing the benefits of change is vital if necessary changes are to be instituted and ultimately accepted.