If you have issues viewing or accessing this file contact us at NCJRS.gov.

92598

92598

U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this ~~copyrighted~~ material has been granted by

Public Domain/NIJ
U.S. Department of Justice

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the ~~copyright~~ owner.

U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice

NIJ

92598

International Summaries

A Series of Selected Translations in Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

NCJRS
JAN 29 1988
ACQUISITIONS

National Institute of Justice/NCJRS
NCJ-92598

From Great Britain

The Police Response to Calls From the Public

Improving procedures for police radio controllers can lead to better allocation of police resources in the face of growing demand for service.

By Paul Ekblom and Kevin Heal

Introduction

Radio controllers are key figures in police organizations in Great Britain, as they are the initial point of contact between the public and the police. Most calls for service come to the police by telephone. The caller speaks to the radio controller, who is the police officer or civilian who determines the nature of the problem and makes the decision about the initial action to be taken. The way in which radio controllers respond to callers influences not only the attitudes of the public but also the allocation of police resources.

Despite their central role in police work, radio controllers have been neglected in British research. In contrast, North American studies have led to proposals for more explicit policies to govern police responses to calls for service. This study was designed to examine the work of the British radio controller and to determine whether it might be possible to change the current system to conserve police resources while maintaining good relations.

Study methods

The first step in the research was to make preliminary visits to several English police forces. These visits revealed two broad categories of radio control organizations. In one-tiered organizations, both emergency 999 calls and those made via the British Telecom (GPO)* system came to control rooms at the regional or divisional level. In two-tiered organizations, the emergency 999 calls went to a headquarters office, while GPO calls were received at local control rooms. The study focused on the two-tiered system, since it was the more typical pattern.

The main site for the study was a police subdivision that served about 135,000 residents of a northern city with a total population of about 300,000. The police force had crime and clearance rates approximating the national average. Study data came from interviews with controllers, their senior officers, and colleagues on patrol; observations of controllers on duty; analysis of incident record sheets completed by the controllers; and analysis of tape recordings of the 510 calls received during a 7-day period. These calls included all the GPO calls made directly or indirectly by the public and all the emergency 999 calls relayed from the central control room during the study period. From these sources the researchers learned the procedures and practices guiding the controllers' daily work as well as the pressures and constraints they experienced. In addition, interviews were conducted with 288 people who had called the police; most of the interviews took place less than a week after the call. The interviewers tried to discover why the callers contacted the police, how they went about it, their expectations of police action, and their satisfaction with the service received. The practical results of police service were also noted.

The nature of demand

The calls varied widely with respect to both their nature and their urgency. Only 18 percent of the calls required the preparation of a report of a new crime. Most of the calls concerned minor problems such as being locked out of a car or a home, administrative matters such as license renewals, commercial and domestic disputes, and neighborhood disturbances or nuisances. While 72 percent of the calls related to immediate incidents,

---

The Police Response to Calls From the Public (NCJ 87180),1982. (Research and Planning Unit Paper 9. London: Home Office)

*The 999 is a central emergency number (similar to 911 in the United States) that puts the caller in touch with various emergency services. Through the GPO, the caller dials a specific number for each service. (Ed. note)

22 percent were classified nonincidents (administrative matters or information requests) and 6 percent concerned long-term problems entailing repeated contacts with the police. About 17 percent of the calls involved a serious crime. About two-thirds appeared to demonstrate some kind of justification, if only a weak one, for sending a patrol officer. Just over a quarter (26 percent) of the calls appeared to involve potential outcomes for which police response time would be a critical factor. However, only 2 percent of the calls were judged to combine the factors of being credible, involving a serious matter, and requiring a fast response.

Virtually all requests for service came by telephone. The majority of the people called the police within 10 minutes of the event. Nevertheless, 32 percent of the callers waited 30 minutes or longer before calling. The calls reaching the police via the emergency 999 channel and the GPO channel did not form two distinct categories. Instead, they tended to overlap one another in both their nature and their urgency; the 999 channel received many trivial calls and the GPO system received many urgent calls. The GPO system received a substantial majority of the incident calls.

The callers varied widely in their reasons for contacting the police and in their expectations about what the police would do. Many called mainly for reassurance or for administrative purposes, and did not expect the police to achieve any practical solutions to their problems. Many callers also seemed to have contacted the police as an automatic, unthinking response to a problem.

Despite this diversity of demand, there were some common features. Most callers expected the police response to include a prompt visit by a uniformed patrol officer. The callers also expected police officers to handle situations calmly, with authority, and following set procedures.

How the controllers gathered information

The callers often described their problems in vague and rambling fashion. However, the radio controllers rarely tried systematically to clarify this information. They also made little effort to establish the degree of urgency of a call or the credibility of the caller. Moreover, they rarely asked for more specific information beyond what callers volunteered about the location of the incident.

The need to relay information from one officer to another compounded the difficulties involved in gathering precise information. This factor was a particular problem for the 999 calls, which were received at headquarters and passed on verbally to the appropriate local control room. This relaying process often produced a loss or distortion of the information and a resulting increase in the chance of error in the police response.

How the controllers responded to calls

The controllers had several possible choices of responses:

- Send a patrol officer or a specialist to the scene.
- Promise attention to the problem by area or beat officers.
- Instruct patrol officers to be alert for missing property or persons.
- Ask the caller to come to the police station to make a report.
- Give general advice or information on how to handle the problem.

The controllers' responses varied according to the type of call involved. They generally handled information requests and administrative matters by giving advice or information or by passing on the information given by the caller to other officers who were already dealing with that type of problem. For immediate incidents and long-term problems, the main response was to dispatch uniformed patrols to the scene. Overall, the primary response was to dispatch a patrol--on some occasions, even when callers did not ask or expect the controllers to do so.

The controllers usually did not exercise discretion in their decisionmaking. They declined to send patrols only when explicit policies or alternative courses of action guided them, or when it was clear to them either that the police could do nothing to help, that the call did not concern police business, or that the caller had low credibility. When the controllers didn't dispatch a patrol officer, they generally gave the callers a varying degree of advice or information. While they sometimes recommended that the caller seek other sources of help, the controllers were vague and uninformative.

A controller who decided to send a patrol generally gave the caller indefinite information about when the patrol would arrive. In addition, callers were given the impression--not always fulfilled--that the patrol officers would be able to take conclusive action.

The controllers made formal records of 90 percent of the incident calls, 73 percent of the calls regarding prolonged problems, and about a third of the information and administrative calls. They also made informal notes about many calls. These notes were generally limited in scope and useful only to the working shift during which they were made.

How controllers communicated with patrol officers

The controllers gave the patrol officers very little information about each case. The brevity of their communications stemmed from several sources: the limited information they had obtained from callers, poor radio reception, the use of very simple coding systems, patrol officers' inability to record large quantities of information, a policy of conserving broadcast air time, and an assumption that patrols would gather more information when they met the callers directly. The limited communi-

cations between controllers and patrol officers led to difficulties in finding the locations of incidents rapidly and sometimes to embarrassment or even danger on arrival.

The controllers did not exert control over the activities of patrol officers once they had let them know that a visit to the scene was needed. They had the same rank as patrol officers and thus were not inclined to direct their activities further. When backlogs of calls occurred on particular beats, the controllers did not do any deliberate, planned redistribution of the patrols' workloads. Instead, they tried to keep their own desks cleared and to operate on a first-in/first-out basis. They used an informal and incomplete system of setting priorities, which had no consistent relationship with any dimensions of urgency. There was little deliberate effort to adjust the timing and priority of the dispatch of patrols.

Deliberately delayed response appeared to be arranged for the convenience of the caller rather than for improving police performance. In addition, controllers did not tend to determine the extent to which response time was critical to particular incidents. Similarly, unless the caller had very low credibility, they ignored the probability that a call might be false. Moreover, the controllers' decisions about whether or not to dispatch a patrol officer seemed to depend on their own workload rather than other factors; they tended to divert more calls away from patrol officers when their own workloads were the heaviest, possibly thus to save themselves the required administrative work and contact with the patrol.

Many factors seemed to cause the controllers' lack of assertiveness in managing or ranking calls for service. They received little guidance or training from supervisors. Instead, they relied on trial and error and on the examples and advice of their more experience colleagues. This led to traditions that were hard for supervisors to change. The controllers tended to use the principle of "just in case," whereby they dispatched patrols to most cases to avoid future criticism if the worst outcome occurred. To keep the telephone lines clear, they asked very few questions of callers and usually didn't discuss the appropriateness of sending a patrol. They lacked the procedures or facilities for delaying calls or setting priorities. Furthermore, there was a problem with fatigue and sickness not only in the local control rooms, with poor working environments, but also at the central control room, which had better physical facilities and a smaller workload.

The responses of patrol officers

The speed of responses to 999 calls and GPO calls seemed to be similar. According to the reports of the callers, the response times were less than 15 minutes in over half of the cases and more than an hour in only 17 percent of the cases. In 13 percent of the cases, the patrols arrived after the crisis had passed and all was again in order.

The patrol officers rather than the controllers tended to make the main decisions regarding what type of service to provide immediately and whether to pursue further action. Only one-third of the incidents resulted in conclusive outcomes that resolved or alleviated the initial problem. In 31 percent of the cases, the police appeared to achieve virtually nothing of tangible value. For some 35 percent of the incidents, the police role was that of an informed observer or administrator.

The patrol officers disliked callers' suggestions for particular courses of action. They also appeared to avoid prolonged or repeated contact with callers, probably because of their need to respond to other calls, and they rarely referred callers to other agencies.

Callers' satisfaction with police service

The psychological benefits of the physical presence of the police and their direct concern with callers' problems seemed to outweigh the frequently modest practical results of the patrol officers' responses. The overwhelming majority of the callers--84 percent--said that they were satisfied with the police response, while 12 percent were dissatisfied and 4 percent were undecided or neutral. Almost all were satisfied with the police performance on the telephone. No differences were found between those using the 999 channel and those using the GPO system. Of the callers who had received a visit from a patrol officer, 88 percent were satisfied with the response time; satisfaction dropped as the response time increased.

Some 90 percent were satisfied with how the patrol officers dealt with the problems upon arrival. Satisfaction was much higher for cases involving property than for those involving order. Ninety-six percent of the callers were satisfied with the way in which patrol officers had dealt with them as persons.

When callers were dissatisfied, it was generally because of the patrol officer's refusal to take responsibility regarding the incident or failure to appear to take it seriously. The dissatisfaction often arose from unrealistic expectations and lack of knowledge of police powers. However, lack of feedback from the police following the initial contact was a major source of dissatisfaction. Poor communication among callers, controllers, patrols, and detectives also caused dissatisfaction in some cases.

Overall, the satisfaction with police service appeared to result more from the emotional benefits gained from personal contact than from any perception of practical results. Reassurance and sympathy were central features of the direct contacts with patrol officers. The officers were also able to give practical information, which allayed callers' fears. The callers valued the informal, personal concern that patrol officers commonly conveyed.

Proposals for change

Although the study's results point to a need for changes in the current system, any changes must be undertaken cautiously to preserve the benefits of the current system. Many types of changes have been proposed as ways

of releasing police manpower for other duties such as fighting organized crime or developing the preventive side of police work. All these proposals focus on the need for a more systematic and deliberate way of responding to public demands for services. The proposals also place the radio controller in a central role.

One proposal calls for classifying incoming calls according to certain specific characteristics. The controller would ask certain callers to forego an immediate visit from a patrol and instead to accept a later visit or to submit a written report, deal with the matter on the telephone, or take the request to another agency. Another proposal is for the establishment of split-force patrolling. This system limits the number of patrol officers available to deal with calls from the public so that the other officers can pursue planned activities.

Although these proposals seem to be practical and sensible, the results of this study suggest that they may have some serious flaws. For example, controllers probably cannot classify calls accurately enough to choose the appropriate response. In addition, callers may not be willing or able to supply the necessary information even if they are questioned more closely. Furthermore, it is doubtful that comprehensive policy guidelines can be formed that will overcome the controllers' understandable reluctance to take responsibility for making substantial decisions regarding risk.

Even if these practical problems could be overcome, more fundamental problems would remain. Police management would have to identify which types of calls should receive a delayed response or no response. They would also have to determine the costs involved in reduced responding and whether reallocation of police resources would improve police service to the public. In addition, sending patrol officers to callers less often might make the public less likely to contact the police, might reduce public confidence in and support for the police, and might lead to greater fear of crime.

Recommendations for change

If no changes occur, the continued growth in demand for police service could lead to a deterioration in the quality of responses, due to large backlogs of calls and more peremptory handling of callers. Thus, the current system needs changes that will not jeopardize its current positive achievements. The following changes are therefore recommended:

- Public education is needed to help people learn what types of cases to report to the police, what information to provide, how long it might take the police to arrive, and the general nature of police powers and duties.

- Radio controllers should ask callers for more details regarding the location, nature, and timing of the incidents being reported. They should also give callers clearer expectations regarding how long it will take a patrol officer to arrive.

- Instead of the current two-tier system, all calls should involve direct contact between the caller and the radio controller.

- A computer could provide easy storage and retrieval of information as well as continuity of information between shifts. The computer could also provide "reminder" facilities for calls assigned a delayed patrol response or for instructions to check on recurrent sources of trouble.

- Radio controllers should give patrol officers better information and support. They should also try to match the skills of officers with callers' needs.

- Controllers and police should have more information about other community resources so that they can provide information and referrals to callers whose problems lie outside the scope of police responsibilities.

- The physical facilities and working conditions of controllers need improvement.

- Controllers need better selection and training and better guidance from supervisors during their decisionmaking.

Conclusions

The radio controllers have largely succeeded in balancing the supply of police resources against public demand. They have largely fulfilled public expectations and produced a high level of reassurance and satisfaction. However, the controllers have made very limited achievements in providing conclusive resolutions of callers' problems.

Maintaining or improving the quality of performance in the face of growing demand for service will require careful and gradual changes in the radio control system. Any changes should be considered carefully. Close attention is needed to the issues of priorities and the limits of acceptable risk. Attention must also focus on the balance between tangible and psychological assistance and the correct division between the role of the police and that of other helping agencies. Such questions should not be left to the police alone. Nevertheless, better public education, improved training of controllers, and modification of communications arrangements should contribute to better allocation of police resources without jeopardizing current positive achievements.