FEATURE

The Little Known, Racist History of the 911 Emergency Call System

The 911 system we have today was created in response to the 1967 civil rights protests.

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ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN OLBRYSH

This nation's system of police deployment is fundamentally dangerous to Black lives; just consider the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Walter Wallace Jr., Elijah McClain and so many others to tell that story. Less considered has been the emergency hotline system that deploys police officers in the first place, often taken for granted as the de facto response to any and all social problems: 911.

When someone dials 911, call-takers gather information and relay it to dispatchers, who allocate police, fire and other emergency resources. The system has surely saved countless lives; it also continues to deploy a police response to countless situations police are ill-equipped to handle. One study published in 2020 by the Vera Institute of Justice (Eds. note: S. Rebecca Neusteter is the study's lead author), which spans two years and five major cities, finds that most of the 240 million annual calls to 911 relate to non-emergency or non-criminal issues, such as noise complaints, parking issues and complaints about unhoused persons. Defaulting to the police to respond to all of society's ills places officers and communities alike in an untenable situation.

And some of these calls—beyond just the calls that make national headlines—originate from the caller's effort to enforce racist notions of "order." In 1990, for example, 15-year-old Phillip Pannell was shot in the back and killed by police officers responding to a 911 call about a disturbance in a local schoolyard. In 2012, police killed 16-year-old Darnisha Harris in response to a 911 call about a fight outdoors. In 2016, Terence Crutcher Sr. was killed by police after several passersby called 911 to report Crutcher standing in the street with his broken-down vehicle. In 2017, police killed 15-year-old Jordan Edwards after a 911 caller complained about underage drinking at a nearby house party. In each of these calls and so many others, police wielded the power of the state to kill Black Americans.

Since the inception of the 911 system, police officers have become the weaponized embodiment of social and racial bias, dispatched at the behest of semi-anonymous callers who (knowingly or not) may release devastating police violence. The end results have been the criminalization of people of color and mass incarceration.

But these results should come as no surprise: The crucible of the 911 system itself was the racist white response against Black Americans' demands for equality during the Johnson administration, inflamed by President Richard Nixon's successful 1968 law-and-order election campaign.

Emergence of 911

Telephoning an emergency service was a thorny process until the late 1960s. Local jurisdictions (which often overlapped) all had their own local telephone numbers. When a person called the police, for example, first they had to figure out the relevant jurisdiction they were in, then dial the department directly and hope someone was there to answer.

President Lyndon Johnson's administration is credited with "solving" these problems of responsiveness and efficiency with the creation of the centralized 911 system we know today. But the Johnson administration's motives were less than benevolent, aimed at quickly suppressing what it saw as

harmful civil disorder—namely, protests by Black communities against segregation and police brutality.

In the summer of 1967, following several years of civil rights protests (159 across the country that summer alone), Johnson appointed a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, better known as the Kerner Commission. The Kerner Commission was tasked with studying 24 so-called disorders that had occurred in 23 cities that summer. The commission's 11 members (almost entirely white, male, moderate politicians) and 118 staffers and assistants issued recommendations for preventing future "riots" in the Kerner Report, released Feb. 29, 1968.

Kerner Commission Chair Otto Kerner holds a copy of the 1968 Kerner Report report as he delivers testimony warning that continued high unemployment among Black Americans may lead to future civil unrest.

(BETTMANN / CONTRIBUTOR / GETTY)

The report is most remembered for condemning white America's racism as the primary cause of civil unrest in Black communities. It demanded investment in housing and social services for Black

communities, recommended federal action to challenge discrimination in employment and education, and cited numerous instances in which police, not protesters, escalated riots. The commission, however, was not a bastion of progressivism.

Between November and December 1967, the commission's executive director, David Ginsburg, fired 120 commission staffers who had issued preliminary findings that riots were a logical, often effective political response to white supremacy. Internal correspondence among staff that remained or were newly hired after these preliminary findings shows that the Commission was divided on how best to address "civil disorder": While some staffers insisted police could prevent protests by confronting racism within their own ranks and employing de-escalation strategies, other staffers recommended mobilizing state force to suppress Black protests.

Tellingly, in the report's "Supplement on Control of Disorder"—a section left out of nearly all published copies of the report but eventually converted into a training program administered by the Department of Justice—the Commission recommends expanding police capacity to suppress protests. The section advises state and federal law enforcement to intervene in civil disorders, recommends local police departments adopt militaristic riot control training and equipment (including tear gas) and encourages police departments to infiltrate Black communities.

Arnold Sagalyn, the commission's associate director for public safety, endorsed strategies to prevent the underlying causes of protests while also encouraging the militarization of local law enforcement. Sagalyn's contributions were informed by his long career in law enforcement and his study of international law enforcement techniques—one of which was a universal emergency services telephone number implemented by the United States in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1963, to aid urban counterinsurgency efforts.

This new, universal number was one tool in a wave of communications technology developments in Central America, and later the United States, that aided counterinsurgency by linking police forces and enabling more effective surveillance of militant groups. John P. Longan, chief of the U.S. Public Safety Division in Venezuela, briefed Sagalyn on the idea during the Kerner Commission's early research. Sagalyn then contacted Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Rosel H. Hyde in October 1967 to express the commission's interest in a system that became known in the United States as 911.

AT&T held a virtual monopoly over U.S. phone service at the time, so FCC Commissioner Lee Loevinger spoke with AT&T to explore "more effective means of making the telephone a help in emergency situations," in November and December 1967. In comments on a House resolution to create the 911 system, the FCC describes ongoing discussions between Loevinger, the Kerner Commission, Johnson and AT&T Vice President Ed Crosland. The Kerner Commission advised a national system would "increase the usefulness of the telephone" during civil disorders. The

"Supplement on Control of Disorder" ultimately suggested such a system would enable police to respond "promptly and with a sufficient display of force."

Sagalyn and Loevinger's advocacy yielded swift action: In January 1968, just three months after Sagalyn's initial recommendation (and one month before the publication of the Kerner Report), Hyde and Loevinger spoke with the *Wall Street Journal* to introduce the new system. While the 911 number had been recommended by other agencies in the past, Hyde and Loevinger shared that its implementation ultimately "got a boost as a result of last summer's widespread civil disorders in major cities." Shortly after, AT&T began launching 911 in select municipalities and rolled the system out across the country the following years.

Indeed, there were several previous efforts to adopt a universal emergency services number. In 1957, the International Association of Fire Chiefs lobbied for a singular number to report fires. In 1966, the National Academy of Sciences reported a uniform emergency number could reduce accidental deaths and injuries. Congressional resolutions in 1967 advised such a number would mitigate fires and robberies. And Johnson's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (also known as the Katzenbach Commission) recommended the creation of such a number in 1967—just prior to the Kerner Commission—as a tool to mobilize police departments.

None of these efforts yielded much progress. While the Katzenbach Commission often receives credit (arguably undeservedly) for recommending the 911 system, it was only when the Kerner Commission proposed the number as a means of suppressing civil rights protests that the federal government took swift action.

In February 1968, Johnson argued to Congress that the 911 number would decrease emergency response times, increase arrests and provide a "more immediate" solution to crime. Though Loevinger warned Johnson it would likely attract calls that did not involve crime nor emergent harm, Johnson moved the project forward. In the 52 years following Loevinger's warning, countless 911 calls, dialed because of racial biases, have resulted in police violence and the murder of civilians, and funneled millions of Black, poor and oppressed individuals into the criminal justice system.

The racist origins of the 911 system were on full display in its first-ever (ceremonial) use. On Feb. 16, 1968, in the small town of Haleyville, Ala., state Rep. Rankin Fite dialed 911, answered by U.S. Rep. Tom Bevill (D-Ala.) on the Haleyville police station's signature red phone. In a photograph from that historic day, Eugene "Bull" Connor, then director of the Alabama Public Service Commission, sits next to Bevill, looking bemused; Connor, who approved Haleyville's 911 system, had spent his career defending white supremacy and violently suppressing civil rights demonstrations. Five years prior and 65 miles southeast during a protest by the Birmingham Children's Crusade against segregation, Connor conducted mass arrests of Black children and unleashed police dogs, fire hoses and officers with clubs.

When New York City Mayor John Lindsay, vice chairman of the Kerner Commission, implemented the city's 911 number July 1, 1968, calls for police increased 40% within the first year. More than half of those calls were for non-emergency situations, yet police deployment went up 7.5%.

By 1970, 67 cities had adopted 911. By the close of the 20th century, the United States had virtually achieved universal adoption and Congress officially codified 911 as the nation's universal emergency number through the Wireless Communications and Public Safety Act of 1999.

Published just 13 days after the nation's first 911 call, the Kerner Report's more progressive recommendations ignited a fierce backlash. Johnson, kowtowing to criticisms that the recommendations were politically unpopular, refused to publicly acknowledge the report. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated a month later, setting off a new wave of protests. In their midst, 53% of white Americans condemned the Kerner Commission's findings that racism fueled the riots of the 1960s.

This backlash ushered in a new era of law-and-order leadership. Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act in 1968, a major bipartisan crime bill that increased federal funding for law enforcement, complete with grants to help police suppress riots. Then-presidential candidate Richard Nixon disparaged the Kerner Report's findings, too, and soon found himself in the White House.

In short, white America rejected the recommendations of the Kerner Report and decades-old demands from countless community leaders to confront the racism and poverty at the roots of American society. Instead, they chose to expand law enforcement's capacity to suppress Black communities' demands for dignity and equality. Our 911 system is a direct result of that choice.

Community Calling

Understanding how 911 became a police-first and police-only dispatch exposes 911's critical role in a system that deploys police as proxies for racial bias, animus, overcriminalization and violence. Transforming 911 is a critical first step toward reducing these harms.

Grassroots organizations and community leaders around the country have long advocated for alternative, community-based harm response systems. One example comes from Creative Intervention's StoryTelling & Organizing Project, which has hosted community conversations in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, Toronto, and Melbourne, Australia, about everyday people who avoid 911 calls by employing community-based interventions to violence. In 2012, the group released a toolkit that models this type of response.

The group's model suggests naming the particular harm that's occurring and identifying the goals of a response, then mapping out resources and taking action to support the people involved, and (later) following up.

One real-life example the toolkit offers is from a domestic violence incident. Instead of calling the police (potentially criminalizing and retraumatizing the people involved, none of whom would end up in a better situation), the community-based intervention prioritized finding the participant a place to stay with friends. Once safe, the group established the participant's goals, made a plan and organized resources, such as a list of people and phone numbers they could call for support at any given time.

The participant recalls: "I had people checking on me, people staying during the daytime hours, sometimes overnight for the week. ... That was how we got home to be a safe space for me again."

Not wanting to involve the police, the participant had their mother speak to their husband, who committed the harm, about next steps. In the end, the participant said, "I did get all three things that I wanted: ... that my kids went through that time feeling safe; that [my husband] did leave the house; that I was able to return home. [And] all that happened in a fairly short time," with the support of their community.

The Oakland Power Projects has conducted similar work to build community power through "new practices that do not rely on policing solutions." Beginning in 2014, the group spoke with allies and community members about safety, policing and building stable neighborhoods that don't rely on police. While several people had called the police, "nearly all the people we interviewed had ideas or had actively used resources that created safety without using the cops," according to the group.

It also identified a common thread: "[Support for physical and mental] health emerged as a broad theme in terms of resources that people needed but didn't feel they had access to in Oakland without police involvement." The group identified a variety of resources to address this concern, including traditional healing practices, trained mental health responders, community medics, maps of health resources and services, and community training on emergency medicine. Building on this work, the Oakland Power Projects launched its Anti-policing Community Health Workers Cohort in 2015. The cohort united residents and healthcare workers to train community members in providing healthcare and de-escalation support, with the goal of reducing police reliance.

In a similar effort to separate health crises from police response, the Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) program was developed in 1989 as a mobile crisis intervention collective that can respond to poverty-related issues, mental health crises and certain substance-use crises. CAHOOTS originated in Eugene, Ore., and may soon be rolled out in cities across the country.

Since its very first implementation, the 911 system has exacerbated racial disparities in communities across the country with devastating and costly results. Based on our research and lived experiences, we recommend constructing emergency response systems that follow three principles: First, they must prioritize community-based responses that center health, wellness and transformative approaches to harm. Second, they must limit police response to the most necessary of circumstances. This can be achieved by investing in community supports, improving training and conditions for call-takers, and implementing quality assurance measures. Third, they must reject haphazard fixes like deployment of alternate state actors who perpetuate criminalization of oppressed communities.

Ultimately, this transformation rests on exposing our nation's impulse to wield law-and-order tactics against "disorder" and protests for what it is: a punitive, expensive and oppressive system that is unjustifiably costly, both in terms of taxpayer dollars and, most importantly, human life.

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