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THE NUMBERS GUY

Detroit Police Response Times No Guide to Effectiveness

Figures are clouded by lack of standardization



By

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Among the many data points the city of Detroit offered in explaining its decision to declare bankruptcy last month, one was particularly eye-catching: Detroit police take an average of 58 minutes to respond to emergency calls, compared with a national average of 11 minutes.

But those figures, repeated by Michigan's governor on national television and in media reports around the country, say little about the effectiveness of the city's police, according to law-enforcement experts and former and current police chiefs, including Detroit's.

There is no standard way, they say, for cities to measure response times, which can vary according to many factors: how many calls are labeled high-priority and included in the average; whether unusually long waits for police response are tossed from the data set; whether the clock starts when a 911 call is answered by an operator or when the call is dispatched to the police; and whether officers check in promptly after arriving at a crime scene.

Even if response times were standardized, they wouldn't be the most important indicator of police performance, say law-enforcement scholars. The vast majority of calls—those when the crime has already been committed and the perpetrator has left the scene—don't require an immediate response. What matters more, according to several studies, is whether callers are given an accurate estimate of arrival time, and what officers accomplish when they do arrive.



Detroit's police chief, James Craig, said one reason the stats make his officers seem so slow to arrive is that his department puts far more calls than other departments into the high-priority category—about 50%. *REUTERS*

And even more important than responding to calls are measures to stop crime happening in the first place, says Kevin Belk, chief of the Grand Rapids, Mich., police department. "Calls for service tend to make you a reactive department," Chief Belk said. "Where you can provide significant value is proactive methods."

THE NUMBERS GUY BLOG

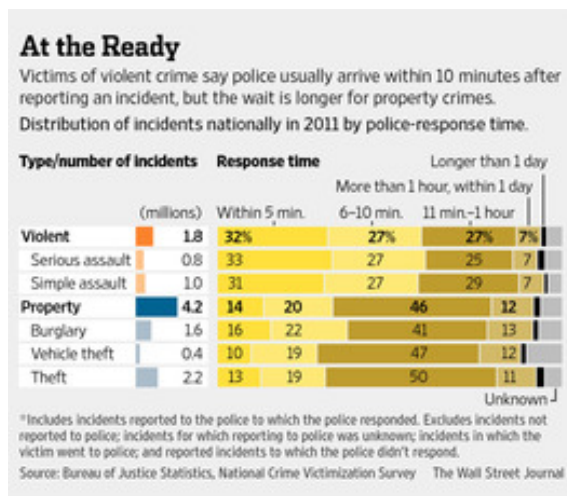
- Giving No Time to Misleading Police Stats

Chief Belk and others who downplay response time nonetheless agree it is important to respond to urgent calls as quickly as possible. But it's not clear how much less successful Detroit is at that than other big cities.

Detroit's police chief, James Craig, said one reason the stats make his officers seem so slow to arrive is that his department puts far more calls than other departments into the high-priority category—about 50%. He said his staff has examined the subset of calls that were true emergencies and found that response times last year averaged 15 minutes. He added that the time included the period between when the 911 call was answered and when it was assigned to a police unit, time that some departments don't count and that Detroit's won't count in the future.

"It's not that we want to play with the numbers," Chief Craig said. "It's just that we want to make sure we calculate it the same way everyone else does it."

Detroit's emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder have compared the city's response times with a nationwide average of 11 minutes, but it's not clear where that figure comes from. A Snyder spokeswoman cited Mr. Orr's report to creditors, and an Orr spokesman didn't respond to a request to provide sources for the estimate. Law-enforcement scholars said they doubted a national average is available, given the dearth of standardized data.



This week, The Wall Street Journal asked police departments in the 25 most-populous U.S. cities for a variety of response-time stats. Fewer than half responded, and none kept a stat that several experts said would be more revealing than a straight average: the amount of time by which 90% of urgent calls are responded to. Those that responded gave numbers that didn't jibe with the national picture painted by Detroit officials. Police are arriving at urgent calls much sooner than 11 minutes—but those calls make up less than 10% of 911 calls in many departments.

For instance, police in Philadelphia, San Diego and Austin, Texas, typically arrive on the scene after urgent calls in about six minutes, but in each city fewer than 5% of calls are categorized as urgent. Police take longer on priority calls in San Francisco, Boston, Nashville and Fort Worth, Texas, but then each of those cities categorizes a greater proportion of calls as urgent—as high as 14% in Boston. And lower-priority calls can take much longer—44 minutes in Austin, 77 minutes in San Diego.

Darrel Stephens, a former police chief in four cities who is now executive director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association, traces the focus on response times to a commission convened by President Lyndon B. Johnson, which reported on ways to professionalize policing, including measuring and minimizing response times. The commission studied nearly 2,000 crimes committed in January 1966 in Los Angeles, and found the average response time when arrests were made was 4.1 minutes, while the average when arrests weren't made was 6.3 minutes. Based on that finding, the commission recommended "that ways should be found of getting persons with investigative expertise to crime scenes with the greatest possible rapidity."

But Mr. Stephens said those data were flawed, because they included cases where officers weren't responding to calls but initiated contact when they saw a crime being committed. Those crimes both had zero response time and were the most likely to yield an arrest, but said little about the importance of responding quickly to a 911 call.

There are other data suggesting the Detroit police department is troubled. For instance, its clearance rate—the rate of laying a charge for a crime—is far below other Midwestern cities of similar size.

Clearance rate is one of many measures superior to response times, said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington, D.C., think tank. "We measure police on a whole set of criteria—reduction of crime, prevention of crime, quality of service—as opposed to racing from one call to another," he said.

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