



9-1-1 response time is typically

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measured in minutes, yet studies

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show the window to thwart violent

S A V

crime is measured in seconds.

Y O U

Now who you gonna call?

by

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A recent report by the National Academies of Science concluded that there is not enough empirical data to determine whether gun control enhances public safety, or whether gun ownership deters crime. The report called for further gathering of data on firearms injuries. We suggest that gathering a type of related data is equally critical: How often 9-1-1 calls result in the interruption of a crime, and the prevention of victim injury.

The issue is central to the gun debate. The anti-gun lobbies, while sometimes conceding that people can be allowed to have sporting guns, vehemently oppose gun ownership for personal protection. The lobbies insist that crime victims should rely on 9-1-1 instead.

For a disarmed victim, rapid police response to 9-1-1 can literally be a matter of life or death. If the data show that 9-1-1 won't save your life when you're attacked by a criminal, then it would be difficult for government to claim the moral authority to disarm victims.

Before making the life-or-death decision to count on the government to rescue us in a moment of mortal peril, we would like to know how often the police actually stop a violent crime in progress following a call to 9-1-1. And, when the police do arrive in time to rescue us, do they arrive before we are injured?

We searched for information on the percentage of times a crime in progress is interrupted following a call to 9-1-1. And we searched for information about how often citizens are protected from harm by police intervention.

There are all kinds of information available regarding 9-1-1 calls: numbers of 9-1-1 calls made, number of arrests made as a result of calling 9-1-1, and types of crimes called in. There are lots of data about 9-1-1 response times. For example, Priority One responses in Atlanta and nearby counties take an average of 9 to 15 minutes. In Washington, D.C., in 2003, the average police response time for highest-priority emergency calls was 8 minutes and 25 seconds. ("Ramsey defends 9-1-1 response," *Washington Times*, May 11, 2004.)

There are precise data on events such as the two-hour shutdown of 9-1-1 in three of New York City's five boroughs on the evening of March 26, 2004, because of phone company problems. There are even data on how many 9-1-1 callers are put on hold; *The New York Times* reported that in Nassau County in 2003, 11 percent of 9-1-1 callers got a pre-recorded message and soothing music, rather than a human operator. ("Nassau 9-1-1 Callers Are Being Put on Hold," Sept. 14, 2003.) In contrast, 9-1-1 callers in Quebec City were redirected to an answering machine only about 0.2 percent of the time during a five-month period in 2003. ("Thank you for calling 9-1-1, please leave a message," *The Record*, [Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario], Oct. 22, 2003.)

So why are there no data on crime interruptions?

WE LOOKED THROUGH the vast wealth of criminological information at the U.S. Department of Justice Web site, and we looked through print-based resources. Not finding any statistics anywhere on violent crime interruption by the police, we asked the statisticians at the Department of Justice (DOJ) directly.

One day later, we received the following answer from the DOJ's Bureau of Justice Statistics: "I'm sorry but the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) does not collect data on law enforcement intervening or preventing crimes that are in progress."

The Canadian government does not gather such statistics either, even though the Canadian government vehemently insists that citizens must not use firearms to protect themselves or others. The non-existence of the Canadian data was confirmed for us by M.P. Garry Breitkreuz, deputy house leader for the Official Opposition in the Canadian Parliament, based on his queries to the Library of Parliament and to Statistics Canada.

Although we were unable to find the statistics for interrupted crimes, we did find a study of how many criminals are caught after perpetration of the crime. However, the most recent research is more than two decades old.

In 1977, the Kansas City (Missouri) Police Department examined variables affecting police response time to 9-1-1 calls. The study concluded that the factor which most hampered the effectiveness of the 9-1-1 system was not police response time, but citizen delay in alerting the system.

William Spelman (a professor at the University of Texas' LBJ School of Public Affairs) and Dale K. Brown

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showed that the Kansas City results could be replicated in other cities. In their 1981 book, *Calling the Police: Citizen Reporting of Serious Crime*, Spelman and Brown selected four additional cities to study, each having significant regional, policing and population differences: Jacksonville, Fla., Peoria, Ill., Rochester, N.Y., and San Diego, Calif. Despite the differences, the outcome measures were almost identical among all four cities studied.

... victim injury “drops almost to zero, regardless of type of crime or resistance” when victims resist. Their analysis validated the fact that resistance, especially armed resistance, rarely resulted in victim injury.

Spelman and Brown confirmed the Kansas City results—the most important reason criminals escape, despite a call being made to 9-1-1, is that the call is made too late. In other words, the police were exonerated. The police were not, in general, failing to respond quickly to 9-1-1 calls; the calls simply came too late to do any good. Of course, there are horror stories of negligent and torpid police response, but these disasters represent the exception, not the rule.

The Spelman and Brown report had important implications for the allocation of police resources: Putting more money into speeding up police response times to 9-1-1 would be too expensive and would offer insufficient

benefit to justify the expense. As Spelman and Brown found, “arrests that could be attributed to fast police response were made in only 2.9 percent of reported serious crimes.”

According to Spelman and Brown, if the crime was reported while still in progress, the arrest rate was 35 percent. If the crime was not reported while in progress, and the victim took 60 seconds to get to a phone, the arrest rate dropped to 10 percent.

Of course, making an arrest is not

the same as stopping a crime in progress. If the police are called while a murder is taking place, they may arrive in time to arrest the murderer, but not necessarily in time to save the victim’s life.

Yet, even if we made the artificial assumption that every arrest meant that the crime in progress was thwarted before the victim was harmed, we see that two-thirds of the time the police will not arrive in time to protect you.

Nevertheless, the gun prohibition lobby, the District of Columbia government and many government officials insist that victims should not protect themselves with firearms. They must instead rely on 9-1-1.

That command ignores the fact that

any criminal in control of a crime scene will not permit his victim to call the police, and that the neighbors may be unaware of the crime in progress.

Moreover, even if the police are alerted immediately, they still have to spend time traveling to the scene of the crime, although the victim may need help within seconds.

On Jan. 8, 2004, Nicole Halpin was attacked in her apartment. When the attack began, Halpin was talking on the phone with a friend; the friend immediately called 9-1-1. As the *St. Petersburg Times* noted, “Deputies were on the scene in minutes, but the intruder was gone.” Beaten to a pulp, Halpin died two days later. She was 32 years old.

On June 5, 2002, 89-year-old Lois Joyner Cannady called the Durham County, N.C., 9-1-1 to ask for immediate police aid. She was killed before the police arrived on the scene. Police deputies came within minutes, but the killer was long gone.

Might the outcome have been different if Cannady or Halpin had a gun readily available?

THE CRIMINOLOGICAL EVIDENCE is clear: most murderers are sociopaths with long histories of violent behavior. Lois Joyner Cannady and Niccole Halpin were likely neither their attackers’ first victims, nor would they be their attackers’ last.

In Elbert County, Ga., two 80-year old women homeowners did what Cannady and Halpin did not: They used firearms to protect themselves. A News Channel 32 report stated that, according to Sheriff Barry Haston, “having the guns kept those women alive.” Haston explained, “In these two cases I’m actually glad they did [have guns] because it could have been a different story if they didn’t.” There are many other reported cases of persons in their 80s or older using firearms successfully for protection.

In fact, the 2004 National Academies of Science study agreed with Sheriff Haston. The authors admitted that, "Defense with a firearm is associated with fewer completed robberies and less injury." However, the authors called for more studies, more information, and refused to explicitly acknowledge the efficacy of citizen self-defense.

Florida State University Professors Jongyeon Tark and Gary Kleck recently confirmed, "A variety of mostly forceful tactics, including resistance with a gun, appeared to have the strongest effects in reducing the risk of injury [to the victims] ..."

The study was published in the Nov. 2004 issue of *Criminology*, the official publication of the American Society of Criminology. Tark and Kleck gathered a large amount of data in order to reduce the kind of confounding variables that might have, in older, smaller research efforts, led to spurious findings. They used U.S. Department of Justice information from the National Crime Victimization Surveys during the years 1992-2001, because those questionnaires asked about the order of events that took place between the attacker and the victim.

Tark and Kleck noted that, in the past, there was a lack of information about when victim injury occurred—before the act of self-defense or afterwards. That lack of information led to confusion about whether or not victim action precipitated their injury. As a result of this updated information, they concluded, victim injury "drops almost to zero, regardless of type of crime or resistance" when victims resist. Their analysis validated the fact that resistance, especially armed

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resistance, rarely resulted in victim injury.

Frustrated by the bad advice given to the public by bureaucrats who tell victims not to fight back, Tark and Kleck continued, "Some prospective victims who continue believing that nonresistance is the safest course will be hurt because no one did anything to correct their misapprehensions."

When potential crime victims—all of us—consider whether to adopt particular defensive measures (locks, guns, window bars, alarms, etc.), we must make trade-offs of costs and benefits. For example, window bars might prevent a criminal from coming in, but they can also block the exit in case of a fire. For us to make well-informed decisions about self-defense, we ought to know how likely it is that the government will rescue us in a dire emergency.

We cannot expect perfection from the police; after all, they travel by

automobile or by foot, not by teleportation. Although we need aid in seconds, even the fastest police arrival time is measured in minutes. The 9-1-1 system can never meet the needs of ordinary citizens faced with the immediacy of violent crime.

Politicians may promise us perfect safety if we adhere to their recommendations, and the law enforcement culture may fully expect to deliver on that promise. But evidence that supports such recommendations is nowhere to be found.

We can expect that government or university researchers (many of whom are heavily subsidized by the federal government) would gather statistics directly relevant to life-or-death decisions. And we should expect that such research will translate into recommendations that will be uncolored by the agenda of firearm-prohibitionists—recommendations that will save innocent lives.

In 2004, a large bipartisan majority

of the U.S. House of Representatives voted to repeal the most extreme elements of Washington, D.C.'s gun laws—such as the prohibition on having an unlocked and fully-assembled rifle or shotgun available in one's home for self-defense. The 198 Republicans and 52 Democrats who voted to restore Second Amendment rights to citizens of the District were, in effect, announcing that they no longer believed the D.C. municipal government's fiction that police protection could completely replace personal protection.

When the new Congress takes up the issue of restoring Second Amendment rights to the citizens of the District of Columbia, perhaps Congress should also provide funding for a study on how often crimes in the District are interrupted thanks to a 9-1-1 call. The results will very likely confirm the need for citizens of the District to have the means to save their own lives in an emergency. 