

New 2021 Chicago data shows 400,000 high-priority incidents where dispatchers had no police available to send – Wirepoints

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As crime continues to roil economic and social life in post-George Floyd, post-Covid Chicago, getting policing and criminal justice right are crucial. City officials are failing at that task.

We're already seen anemic rates of arrest and prosecutions in Chicago, accompanied by finger-pointing between politicians over crime and the court system. And years of no support from city leadership, anti-policing legislation and the damaging rhetoric of the "defund" movement have taken a toll on Chicago police morale and manpower.

All that has spread the police force so thin that, in 2021, one of law enforcement's most basic functions, responding to high-priority emergency service calls in a timely manner, was regularly beyond their capacity.

New data uncovered by Wirepoints through public records requests to the Chicago Police Department (CPD) reveal that in 2021 there were 406,829 incidents of high-priority emergency service calls for which there were no police available to respond.

That was 52 percent of the 788,000 high-priority 911 service calls dispatched in 2021.

High priority calls include Priority Level 1 incidents, which represent "an imminent threat to life, bodily injury, or major property damage/loss," and Priority Level 2 incidents when "timely police action...has the potential to affect the outcome of an incident."

In pre-George Floyd, pre-COVID 2019, there were only 156,016 such instances for which dispatchers had no police available to send – 19 percent of the total number of high priority 911 service calls made that year. We have requested parallel data for 2020.

There were no Chicago police available when 400,000 high priority calls for service went out in 2021

City of Chicago: Service calls occurring during "Radio Assignments Pending" (RAPs)*

	2019	2021
Total Priority 1 and 2 911 service calls	801,249	788,389
Number of times no Chicago Police available when service calls issued – Priorities 1 and 2	156,016	406,829
Percent of high priority service calls dispatched during RAPs	19%	52%

Priority 1 defined as "an imminent threat to life, bodily injury, or major property damage/loss."
Priority 2 defined as when "timely police action...has the potential to affect the outcome of an incident."

Source: CPD FOIA responses, Chicago 911 call OIG dashboard

*CPD defines a RAP as a period when there are "no dispatchable resources available."



The 2021 high priority numbers include, among many other calls:

- 14,955 – assaults in progress.
- 17,828 – batteries in progress.
- 16,350 – person with a gun.
- 5,210 – person with a knife.
- 12,787 – shots fired (reports from people, not the city's automated "Shotspotter")
- 1,352 – person shot.
- 887 – person stabbed.
- 14,265 – domestic battery.

Nor were there police available for 49,686 domestic disturbances or 9,458 mental health disturbances. Or 3,386 dispatches for a robbery that had just occurred. Or the 2,427 dispatches about someone threatening suicide and the 2,951 dispatches stemming from reported violations of a court protection order. (For the full list of service calls, see the CPD's FOIA response below).

Emergency police dispatches and call backlogs

Chicago police handled about 1.3 million dispatched 911 calls for service each year between 2019 and 2021. The data comes from a dashboard kept by the city's Office of the Inspector General (OIG). OIG numbers come straight from the Office of Emergency Operations and Communications, which runs the city's 911 center.


About 800,000 of the calls for service each year are high priority (priorities 1 and 2), about 60 percent of the total.

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City of Chicago: Dispatched 911 calls for CPD service

Calls for service	2019	2020	2021
Priority 1	542,656	569,210	564,198
Priority 2	258,593	224,469	224,191
Priority 3	530,585	501,638	486,697
Priority 4 & 0	732	687	710
Total	1,332,566	1,296,004	1,275,796

Source: Chicago OIG 911 call dashboard

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While the number of emergency calls for service has remained consistent, there has been a considerable jump in the number of periods in which 911 dispatchers could find no takers for urgent calls of help needed.

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Those periods of backlogged dispatches are known by the somewhat misleading name of *radio assignments pending* or "RAP".

RAPs occur and are tracked on a police district-by-district basis (there are 22 separate police districts in Chicago). It's important to note that a RAP is not one delayed response to one dispatch.

Instead, police representatives informed Wirepoints it is “a range of time in which no dispatchable resources are available in the District/dispatch group.”

A RAP is declared over only after all delayed responses to high-priority 911 dispatches have been cleared by police arriving on scene.

The numbers of annual reported RAPs grew from 5,077 in 2019 to 11,721 in 2021, up more than 130 percent.

Chicago's 911 backlog periods more than doubled between 2019 and 2021

Number of reported 911 backlog periods (RAPs) in Chicago's 22 police districts last year

Year	Radio Assignments Pending (RAPs)*
2016	4,988
2017	4,802
2018	5,277
2019	5,077
2020	7,330
2021	11,721

Source: Wirepoints FOIA to Chicago Police Department
*CPD defines a RAP as a period when there are “no dispatchable resources available.”



RAPs are to be avoided if at all possible, according to CPD's own directive to staff on using its radio communications system. It says field supervisors should repeatedly check all available patrol and special unit personnel on duty to see if they can redeploy to new and high-priority dispatch requests, and that supervisors can deny lunches, personal breaks, and station assignments until the backlog ends.

As the number of RAP periods have grown, so, too, have the volume of high-priority, incident-specific 911 dispatches that weren't answered in a timely manner. As mentioned above, there were 156,000 high-priority incidents in 2019, but more than 400,000 in 2021.

Waiting for help

High priority dispatches can wait as long as an hour, even two hours, for a response during RAPs.

Last summer, a Chicago 911 dispatcher working the violent 11th Police District on the West Side was captured by Chicago Scanner's Twitter account in revealing audio of backlogged dispatch call-outs.



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03:02



911 Dispatch Audio
August 22, 2021

Dispatch
ress,

Also backlogged with no timely response were a theft, a robbery, a stabbing, a domestic battery, a violation of a protection order, a suspicious person, a mental health disturbance, a large crowd disturbance, drag racing, another disturbance, an EMS vehicle needed, and “a citizen waiting for an assist for 102 minutes at Roosevelt and Central Park.”

Of the response lag times of the 36 audible incidents reported, 13 were close to or in excess of two hours; 12 were close to or in excess of an hour; and most of the rest were clustered at 20 to 40 minutes each.

Unfortunately, Wirepoints can’t determine just how long RAPs typically last. In a recent FOIA for 911 backlog details, Wirepoints asked for the average length of backlog periods in recent years. CPD said no such data existed.

Although field supervisors are instructed under a CPD directive to “note in the supervisor’s management log (CPD-11.455) the time the RAP started, efforts made to end the RAP, and the time the RAP ended,” those records are paper only, not electronic, and they are reportedly not retained.

To many observers in Chicago, the increase in RAPs is one more indication of the need to restore police manpower to previous levels. The count of active sworn officers has fallen to 11,638 in June of this year, down from 13,251 in July of 2019, according to an OIG dashboard.

But Chicago politicians, Cook County judges, prosecutors and state lawmakers will have to make policing a far more attractive proposition than it is today to repair the damaged morale that’s helping drive the ongoing exodus of sworn officers.

Appendix

CPD 1st FOIA response: Count of Service Calls Occurring During Radio Assignments Pending, 2021

CPD 2nd FOIA response: Count of Service Calls Occurring During Radio Assignments Pending, 2019

There were no Chicago police available for thousands of high priority dispatches in 2021

Selected high priority dispatches not responded to by Chicago Police during call backlog periods (RAPs),* 1/1/21 - 12/31/21

Selected call type	"High priority" dispatches							
	1A	1B	1C	2A	2B	2C	2D	Total
Assaults in progress	14,891	11	3	11	6	31	2	14,955
Batteries in progress	17,767	4	1	52	0	4	0	17,828
Robbery recently occurred	3,366	2	0	5	13	0	0	3,386
Person with a gun	16,338	1	0	2	3	6	0	16,350
Person with a knife	5,208	1	0	0	0	1	0	5,210
Shots fired**	12,782	0	1	1	3	0	0	12,787
Person shot	1,348	0	0	4	0	0	0	1,352
Person stabbed	884	0	0	1	2	0	0	887
Domestic battery	14,251	0	0	13	1	0	0	14,265
Domestic disturbances	49,663	8	1	8	4	2	0	49,686
Mental health disturbances	9,543	0	3	2	0	0	0	9,548
Person threatening suicide	2,420	1	0	6	0	0	0	2,427
Violations of a court protection order	2,949	1	0	0	1	0	0	2,951

Source: Wirepoints FOIA to Chicago Police Department

*CPD defines a RAP as a period when there are "no dispatchable resources available."

**Reports from people, not city's automated "Shotspotter"

Note: Priority 1 defined as "an imminent threat to life, bodily injury, or major property damage/loss."

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