

How do the police spend their time?

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing October 15, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

“The share devoted to handling violent crime is very small, about 4 percent.”

So Gadfly is hoping that Bethlehem will take this cultural moment — the death of George Floyd + the installation of a new Police Chief — to do an in-depth review of policing in Bethlehem.

Which is not to suggest that there is something wrong in the department.

But the Floyd murder changed things.

At least for some people.

It was interesting to see at the **October 6 City Council meeting** that, as reported here earlier, two Councilors viewed a routine matter through a different lens, though one didn't.

For some of us, the culture moved May 25.

We see the world through a different lens.

It's time to take stock of what we are doing, public-safety-wise.

Gadfly hopes and would assume that a review of public safety would be an issue in the not-too-far away Mayoral and Council elections.

But before we begin discussing abolition, defunding, re-imagining, it makes sense to ask what the police do.

It might be good to stop and reflect for a minute on examples of situations when you called the police. And to ask if the police were necessary in those cases.

Gadfly remembers recently:

- calling because Mrs. Gadfly had fallen, and he needed help

- calling because College students 3 houses away were partying outside and playing loud music
- calling because a neighbor had a derelict truck parked for weeks on the street
- calling because a rabid cat had gotten into the cellar

Could that business have been better, more efficiently, less expensively handled in another way?

Ha! Maybe your life is more exciting than mine.

But it makes sense to ask the questions, what do police do, and is it necessary for them to do it.

So here's a story from the *New York Times*.

It may be controversial because of the source, or the data, or a narrow vision.

Gadfly invites your response to the article.

But, also, mainly, think of your interactions with the police.

Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz, "How Do the Police Actually Spend Their Time?" New York Times, June 19, 2020

A review of publicly available data in three areas reveals that much of an officer's job revolves around handling routine calls rather than violent crime.

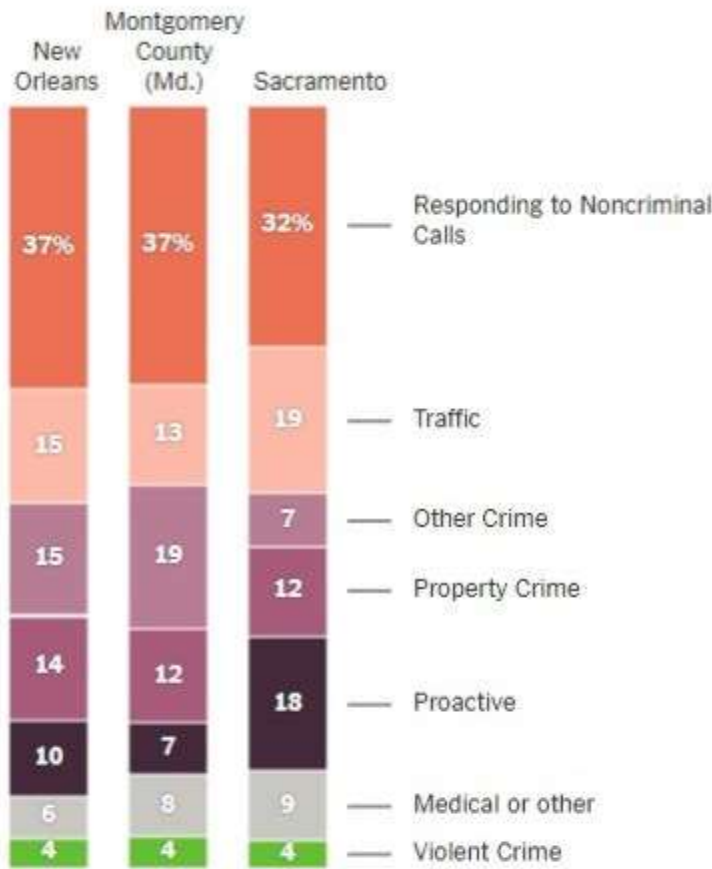
What share of policing is devoted to handling violent crime? Perhaps not as much as you might think. A handful of cities post data online showing how their police departments spend their time. The share devoted to handling violent crime is very small, about 4 percent.

That could be relevant to the new conversations about the role of law enforcement that have arisen since the death of George Floyd in police custody and the nationwide protests that followed. For instance, there

has been talk of “unbundling” the police — redirecting some of their duties, as well as some of their funding, by hiring more of other kinds of workers to help with the homeless or the mentally ill, drug overdoses, minor traffic problems and similar disturbances.

Typical Shift by Officer: Time Spent

In three police departments so far this year, officers have spent roughly 4 percent of their time on serious violent crimes.



These may not be directly comparable because of measurement differences among cities.

Source: Police departments' open data portals.

Consider “calls for service.” These can be defined as calls to emergency operators, 911, alarms, police radio and nonemergency calls. They mostly begin from calls by citizens, but also include incidents police officers initiate themselves.

Calls for service do not include time spent investigating after an incident; training sessions; administrative duties; and off-duty employment. As such, they are not a perfect encapsulation of how police officers spend all their time, but they do provide a good representation of how police departments interact with the public.

Determining what constitutes a violent crime can be tricky because some agencies don’t differentiate between aggravated assaults (generally considered a violent crime) and simple assaults (an assault without an injury that is generally not considered a violent crime) in their publicly available calls for service data.

The F.B.I. Uniform Crime Report definition of violent crime is more narrow than frequently broader state definitions. For this analysis, we used the Uniform Crime Report definition — homicide, robbery, rape and aggravated assault — to highlight responses to only the most serious of violent crimes. We found 10 agencies with publicly available calls for service data as shown in the chart below. Serious violent crimes have made up around 1 percent of all calls-for-service episodes in those agencies so far this year.

Percentage of Calls for Violent Crime

Serious violent crimes have made up around 1 percent of all calls for service in these police departments so far this year.

Baltimore	0.9%
Chandler, Ariz.	1.0%
Cincinnati	1.2%
Montgomery County, Md.	0.5%
New Orleans	1.0%
Phoenix	1.8%
Sacramento	1.4%
San Diego	1.0%
Seattle	1.3%
Tucson	0.7%

Calls for service for murders unavailable for Baltimore and Cincinnati; calls for service for rape unavailable for San Diego; Phoenix does not differentiate rapes from other sexual assaults that might not meet the U.C.R. definition of rape.

Source: Police departments' open data portals • By The New York Times

Relatively minor incidents such as traffic responses and noncriminal miscellaneous complaints account for a much larger share of calls for service in most of these cities. In Seattle, for example, responses to traffic accidents and enforcement make up over 15 percent of all calls for service in 2020, while 15 percent of incidents in New Orleans fall in the “complaint other” category.

Of course, responding to a murder scene takes far longer than handling a burglar alarm, so the number of episodes does not, by itself, indicate how much time an agency spends responding to violent crime. Fortunately, a handful of agencies include information on how long officers spend on any given incident.

While data is not available on how much time a specific officer spends on scene, a generalized result can be deduced by subtracting the time an incident is deemed “closed” from either when an officer was first dispatched or when the incident was first reported. Incidents without a known start and closure time were discounted, as were calls for service for routine patrol activities like area and business checks.

In New Orleans, officers have spent 4 percent of their time this year responding to calls for serious violent crimes. Gun violence has taken up

an even smaller share, with 0.7 percent of time spent responding to homicides and nonfatal shooting incidents. Domestic violence calls that are not violent crimes have taken 7.3 percent of officer time, while roughly a third of time has been spent responding to calls regarding complaints, traffic accidents and noncriminal disturbances.

Similar patterns hold in Montgomery County in Maryland and Sacramento. In Montgomery County this year, officers spent 4.1 percent of their time responding to calls for violent crime, including 0.1 percent on homicides. Officers in Sacramento spent 3.7 percent of their time responding to serious violent crime and 0.1 percent handling homicides and firearm assaults.

Law enforcement has often become a backstop for much of society's ills, sometimes being stretched thin while dealing with domestic disputes or providing safety for schools. Both the police and their critics have at times questioned whether social workers or other workers would be better equipped for those duties.

As experts continue to debate how best to improve the performance of law enforcement, it's helpful to first have a clear understanding of how the police spend their time interacting with the public, including how little of it revolves around responding to violent crime.