

# 911 ABUSE

## PREVENTING 911 ABUSE THROUGH CPTED

ST. PETERSBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT, FLORIDA, 1996

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**THE PROBLEM:** In the six-month period from April 1995 through September 1995, there were thirty calls for service at one location; fourteen (46%) of which were either “911 Hang-ups” or “Playing on 911.” An examination of data over a period of nearly five years revealed that 27% of the calls were of this nature. The deliberate misuse of the 911 emergency telephone system could prevent its legitimate use and unnecessarily commit zone units to calls.

**ANALYSIS:** A review of printout data indicated that the problem location was not a residence or business, but a bank of pay telephones installed at a convenience store. The use of the area by school-aged children seemed to be a factor influencing the problem. The telephone booths were hidden from the view of passing vehicular and pedestrian traffic by dense shrubbery. Moreover, the phones were purposefully installed out of the view of the employees and patrons of the convenience store at the edge of the property and away from the store to discourage loitering.

**RESPONSE:** Requests were made to City maintenance and the Florida Power Corporation to trim the shrubbery and repair the lighting. Both agencies responded, and the appearance of the area has been improved drastically.

**ASSESSMENT:** The calls for service at the bank of pay phones were monitored from November 20 (the date the improvements were made) to July 1, 1996, there have been no calls of “Playing on 911” and “911 hang-ups” have accounted for only 13% of total calls for service.

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### INTRODUCTION

This problem-oriented policing project is the result of a successful problem solving initiative that began on a much smaller scale. Having identified a specific bank of telephone booths as being responsible for an excessive number of repeat calls for service, subsequent analysis determined that the greater percentage of the calls amounted to abuse of the 911 emergency system.

As Sergeant Charles G. Burnette continued his research and analysis, it became evident that this problem was not limited to any area within the city but was, in fact, being experienced by every sizable law enforcement agency in the country.

Burnette’s efforts have shown that despite the pervasiveness of the problem, law enforcement professionals have proposed little in terms of practical solutions.

This project could not have been started at a more appropriate time. The “tyranny” of 911, has been the subject of much media attention as of late and the tentative solutions proposed by governmental representatives are temporary stopgap measures at best, and more likely will exacerbate existing difficulties in the long run. The prevalence of 911 abuses detracts greatly from the time available for officers to properly commit to community and problem-oriented policing strategies as well as their basic law enforcement responsibilities.

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## SCANNING

Since February of 1995, the St. Petersburg Police Department has practiced problem-oriented policing on the patrol level through geographic accountability—assigning supervisors to specific areas as opposed to shift responsibilities. As a result, the usual “squads” of officers were reassigned to teams that work together over all shifts in the same geographic area to better facilitate problem solving and address community concerns.

One of the methods utilized by team sergeants to gain a sense of potential problems is the tracking of repeat calls for service. Team sergeants review the CAD system on a monthly basis for locations that generate five or more calls. In November 1995, Burnette noted that one specific address in his geographic area had been appearing with regularity on the repeat calls list.

A cursory examination of the nature of those calls found that an inordinate number were either “911 Hang-ups” or “Playing on 911.” In the six-month period from April 1995 through September 1995, there were thirty calls for service at that location, with fourteen calls (46%) being one of the nature codes noted above. This prompted a more thorough review of the calls for service and Burnette ran statistics for the location that had been maintained since the inception of our current CAD system.

He discovered that from July 1990 through October 1995, this address was responsible for generating 259 calls for service, with a total of 71, or 27%, of the nature code in question. (Please refer to the table below.)

1995 Calls for Service 2234—4 Street South		
Month	Total CFS	Abuse of 911
April	10	3/30%
May	11	7/63%
June	2	1/50%
July	3	1/33%
August	2	1/50%
September	2	1/50%
Total	30	14/46%

Operating on the premise that deliberate misuse of the 911 emergency telephone system could prevent its legitimate use and/or unnecessarily commit zone units to calls, these statistics demonstrated that there was a problem at this location that affected both the “guardian” and “victim” aspects of the crime triangle.

The guardians were identified as the emergency service providers affected by the overworked and abused system, whereas the victims were described as citizens affected by the misdirection of services. After Burnette consulted with his immediate supervisor, Lieutenant Wes Kenly, it was decided that a “POP” project would be undertaken to address these concerns.

## ANALYSIS

The Analysis Phase began the week of October 23, 1995. Considerable difficulties were encountered in that the CAD system did not provide the depth of data anticipated, requiring a hand search of printouts.

The Community Policing Officer assigned to the zone, Michael Kepto, who edited and organized some of the printouts so that Burnette could better tabulate the data, assisted him in this review. This review indicated that the problem location was not a residence or business, but a bank of pay telephones installed at a convenience store. This revelation provided some direction for additional analysis and eventual response, at the least, the “location” side of the crime triangle.

Burnette conducted additional statistical analysis on the “false” 911 calls generated from the phone booths, from the period 7/1/90 through 10/6/95, in an attempt to identify factors influencing the problem.

The results of this analysis were not surprising in that the greater percentage of calls were made during periods when pedestrian traffic would be expected to be the heaviest. (Please refer to the tables below.)

Time of Day Analysis		
0000 - 0100	1	1%
0100 - 0200	1	1%

0200 - 0300	0	N/A
0300 - 0400	0	N/A
0400 - 0500	1	1%
0500 - 0600	0	N/A
0600 - 0700	1	1%
0700 - 0800	3	4%
0800 - 0900	3	4%
0900 - 1000	0	N/A
1000 - 1100	1	1%
1100 - 1200	7	10%
1200 - 1300	4	6%
1300 - 1400	2	3%
1400 - 1500	10	14%
1500 - 1600	0	N/A
1600 - 1700	3	4%
1700 - 1800	9	13%
1800 - 1900	9	13%
1900 - 2000	4	6%
2000 - 2100	6	8%
2100 - 2200	0	N/A
2200 - 2300	4	6%
2300 - 2400	2	3%

Day of Week Analysis		
Monday	15	21%
Tuesday	4	6%
Wednesday	7	10%
Thursday	7	10%
Friday	9	13%
Saturday	11	15%
Sunday	18	25%

Month of Year Analysis		
January	7	10%
February	4	6%
March	3	4%
April	7	10%
May	18	25%
June	9	13%
July	6	8%
August	5	7%
September	6	8%
October	2	3%
November	3	4%
December	1	2%

Upon reviewing the data revealed in these tables, what seemed to be a probable factor influencing the problem was the use of the area by school-aged children. In particular, Burnette noted that 9% of the calls were generated from the time period between 0600 and 0900, and that

14% were generated in the one hour between 1400 and 1500. These are time periods when students would be in the vicinity awaiting bus transportation. When coupled with the pronounced weekend use and the heavy use in the months of May and June, when school is traditionally dismissed for the year, a direction for further analysis and possible response was indicated.

Envisioning that a tactic could be developed and directed towards specific school populations, Burnette contacted the Transportation Department of the Pinellas County School Board to obtain a list of schools that used the general neighborhood for bus stops. He discovered that this approach was quickly thwarted when he was informed that upwards of twenty schools send over 100 busses through the intersection on any given day when schools are in session.

Burnette then set aside a day on which he could personally respond to the address for a physical site assessment, which would encompass the "location" portion of the "crime triangle." He also intended to use the visit to meet with convenience store personnel to determine their position and influence with regards to the problem.

When Burnette arrived at the store, it was instantly clear that environment had a role in aggravating the problem and that CPTED standards should be applied. The bank of three telephone booths was hidden from the possible view of passing vehicular and pedestrian traffic by dense shrubbery on all but one side, two of these in the direction of the main thoroughfares by the booths.

The booths were additionally hidden from view of the patrons and employees who might be at the restaurant directly east by overgrowth at the booth and on an intervening chain link fence. The only open area was directly in front of the booths, which faced the front of the convenience store. A subsequent night visit found the overhead light inoperative, rendering the area totally without artificial illumination. It was here also that Burnette discovered the pay telephones were not installed and maintained by the local telephone company, but by a private leasing company out of Miami.

Burnette met with the on-duty manager of the store, who is a brother of the owner, and informed him of the problems being experienced with the pay phones. He conceded that he had not paid much attention to them, but pledged cooperation in the future.

True to the tenets of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design, they had purposefully installed the phones at the edge of the property and away from the store to discourage loitering and other criminal behavior. Accordingly, he was not amenable to relocating the phones. This also placed the responsibility for the overgrowth in the City's hands, as the phones were situated at the end of the store's land.

**RESPONSE**

On leaving the store, Burnette asked Officer Kepto to contact the appropriate City maintenance department for trimming of the shrubbery and Florida Power Corporation to repair the lighting. Both agencies responded the week of November 20 and immediately there was a pronounced difference in the appearance of the site. Polaroid photographs taken "before" and "after" served to document the change.

**ASSESSMENT**

Burnette monitored the calls for service at 2234 4 Street South regularly after CPTED principles were applied the week of November 20. As of July 1, 1996, there have been no calls of "Playing on 911" and "911 hang-ups" have accounted for only 13% of total calls for service. (Please refer to the table below.)

To this point, it appears the problem has been resolved with the primary factor responsible being the application of CPTED to the site.

Post Response Calls for Service		
Month	Total CFS	911 Hang-up
December	4	N/A
January	4	N/A
February	5	1/20%
March	7	1/14%
April	4	N/A

May	4	1/25%
June	9	2/22%
Total	38	5/13%

As this particular project progressed, Burnette had the opportunity to discuss it with fellow officers and supervisors. It became increasingly evident that the problems Burnette was experiencing with the payphones in the area were not unique. Supervisors in all Districts and on all shifts expressed similar concerns, and he began to see the need to reevaluate his approach and perhaps consider a more global analysis and response. The need for this tactic was confirmed when he pulled City-wide statistics for "911 hang-ups" and "Playing on 911."

Burnette discovered that of 141,851 calls for service handled by patrol officers in 1995, 7,222 (or nearly 5%) were either 911 hang-ups or playing on 911. Assuming that a patrol officer responding to a false 911 call spent an average of ten minutes on his/her investigation, this would reflect a salary expense alone of \$20,185 (based on an average cost of \$16.77 per officer as supplied by City Employee Relations).

Review of false 911 calls for each patrol district demonstrated that the problems were widespread yet evenly distributed between the districts and over time periods. Statistics delineating calls from residences versus businesses or payphones were not retrievable from the CAD system, but the practical experience of and observations made by zone officers and their supervisors confirmed payphones at businesses constituted a large percentage of the problem.

Although further detailed analysis did not point as conclusively towards the involvement of juveniles as in the initial project, Burnette believed that the application of a dual framework of education and enforcement would nonetheless be appropriate. Educational programs would focus on all age levels of the public to inform them of the proper use of the 911 system as well as consequences and penalties for its misuse, targeting the offender portion of the crime triangle. Enforcement strategies would target locations, identifying addresses from which repeated false 911 calls were generated, and be supported by response policy changes within the police department.

## **SECONDARY ANALYSIS**

To this point, Burnette had been laboring, as do all other emergency service providers, under the assumption that false 911 calls encumber the system and interfere with the processing of or response to “legitimate” emergencies. He felt it necessary to challenge this assumption, and sought to gain a complete understanding of the operation and regulation of both public pay telephone and 911 emergency telephone systems.

Contact with supervisors from both the police agency’s and the county’s 911 communications centers informed Burnette that between equipment and staffing, rarely are all lines tied up except in the event of a natural disaster.

In most cases, a 911 call received at the county facility is confirmed and routed to the appropriate agency, by phone and terminal lines, in 45 seconds or less. Intending to illustrate that there were enough private residence phone lines in existence that the removal of specific problem payphones would have no effect,

Burnette contacted the local phone company for statistics. When he was advised that these figures were not available, he surveyed a five-block radius surrounding the phones at 2234—4 Street South (the original target location). He discovered that there were 26 other public phones in existence, representing five different private leasing companies.

In one instance, the same company had installed two phones directly across the street from each other. Several others conducted by community policing officers in surrounding areas confirmed the findings of this survey. This was the turning point in Burnette’s analysis as it became apparent that the sole motivation for the installation of this number of phones is not public need, but monetary gain by local businesses.

Upon receiving this information, Burnette began to consider the possibility of drafting an ordinance that dealt with public phones and began researching their regulation.

The Special Agent for the local branch of our regional phone company, GTE, told me that they had little to do with the oversight of privately owned, lease pay telephones. They were concerned with providing an access line and little else as long as bills were paid and there were no glaring violations. He referred Burnette to the Florida Public Service Commission (FPSC).

An analyst with the FPSC stated that his agency regulated service issues only, such as free 911 access, booth illumination, handicap provisions, and posting of repair numbers. A company wishing to install pay telephones in the state must undergo a certification process that, once satisfied, is good for the installation of an unlimited number of instruments state wide.

There is a one-time application fee, accompanied by a small annual fee. Companies can lose their certification, mostly for bureaucratic reasons, and currently 97 of the 800 companies operating in Florida are under review. Neither the FPSC nor GTE foresaw any difficulties in the establishment of local, more restrictive policies.

## **SECONDARY RESPONSE**

Over the space of the next several months, Burnette conducted research into the responses of other agencies to similar problems. He spent hours at the local college library reading professional publications and periodicals, published requests in professional bulletins and on the “Internet” for information from any agency currently dealing with similar issues, contacted numerous departments, and made a presentation to the annual conference of the Florida Association of Chiefs of Police. Aside from discovering San Diego’s CPTED oriented nuisance ordinance, which includes payphone regulation as part of a larger effort to impact problem locations, Burnette found nothing substantive that indicated any agency had any procedures in effect to confront a common problem. To compound matters, recent proposals in reaction to media attention on the breakdown of the 911 systems in major cities merely involve the establishment of other emergency phone numbers.

With respect to the educational aspect of Burnette's proposed response, Burnette consulted the Youth Resources Section to determine what programs were already in place in area schools. He was surprised to find that instruction in the use of 911 was not included in the standard curriculum of the county. If covered in the classroom, it would be due to the personal preference of an individual instructor.

Learning that certification of a lesson plan to be presented by school liaison officers required only the approval of the school board; Burnette began working on proposals that were appropriate for each grade level. He is being assisted in this by the Public Education Coordinator for Pinellas County's Emergency Communications, who is searching for programs currently in use around the nation.

For adult education Burnette is exploring several avenues, again covering not only misuse of the 911 system, but also the mechanics of using the system properly. A media campaign would be the foremost vehicle to facilitate adult education, utilizing the public access television channels, one of which is almost exclusively used by city government, and billboard advertisement.

The St. Petersburg Police Department has already established liaison with area advertising companies in using billboards for public appeals for clues in unsolved homicides. They are also working towards the development of circulars, which could be distributed, with phone bills and in government offices and community resource centers. These circulars would provide tips, reminders, and instructions, as well as alternative numbers to call in the likely event the caller is not faced with a situation involving a police emergency. The latter would necessarily have to accompany revised and expanded inserts in area telephone books and resource guides.

By far the greatest challenge that remains is the construction and ratification of a city ordinance that will embody the greater portion of Burnette's enforcement strategy: a permitting process supervised by the police department to impose greater regulations on the installation, operation, and maintenance of pay telephones. The ordinance would additionally target, through a fine structure, locations at which

playing on 911 continually generated calls for service.

Under the proposed ordinance, an individual or business wishing to install a payphone would first petition the police department for permission. The team sergeant who is responsible for the area in which the phone would be installed would review the application. The sergeant would assess the need for the phone, based on factors such as the existence of other phones in the vicinity, and the impact the phone would have once installed if installation were allowed, the lesser would have to fulfill several responsibilities or risk revocation and removal.

These requirements would involve, but not be limited to, the maintenance of the phones by CPTED standards, provision of contact information to the department, and the posting of signs at the booths notifying the user of penalties for misuse of the 911 system. An annual review process, conducted by the team sergeant or community-policing officer, would ensure these standards are met. Fees that would help defer administrative costs and discourage frivolous installations would accompany the application and review process. Provisions would also have to be considered to "grandfather" in existing locations and then arrange for site visits to insure booths met standards.

For locations, which prove to continuously generate playing on 911 calls, graduated fines would be levied, after notice, to those responsible for the address. This has been a successful strategy in similar local ordinances dealing with false alarms and skateboarding.

To gain an understanding of the development and submission processes, Burnette met with the department's legal advisor and several officers who have drafted other ordinances, as well as reviewed current ordinances from our and other cities. This helped him to understand the need for such mechanics as the inclusion of grievances procedures and definitions to help the ordinance conform to standards and withstand challenge.

## **SECONDARY ASSESSMENT**

Assessment would involve comparison of before and after statistics, both city-wide and location-specific, after responses are enacted. A decrease in 911 abuses should be accompanied by an increase of calls to other service providers as a result of a successful public education program. The number of fines imposed as a measure of success.

## **CONCLUSION**

At this point, Burnette has been writing of the ordinance proposal. He is being assisted by the Public Education Coordinator for the Pinellas County 911 system, who is attempting to obtain grant monies for the project as she foresees the expansion of my ideas to the county level. Burnette has also been invited to serve on the upcoming county task force to address recent 911 concerns. This position would be of great help in the development and implementation of this project.