Call-for-Service Classification

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What It Is

Call-for-service (CFS) classification is the process by which a 911 call-taker assigns a standardized incident type to an incoming call. This label – entered into the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system – drives nearly every downstream decision: which units are sent, how many, how urgently, and what, if any, non-law-enforcement resources are co-dispatched.

Classification happens fast. Most agencies train call-takers to classify a call within 60–90 seconds of answering. The call-taker is simultaneously trying to understand the situation, enter data into CAD, and keep the caller engaged. Under those conditions, classification defaults to the call-type that most closely matches the first available information.

The Classification Menu

CAD systems present call-takers with a fixed list of call types – typically several hundred options organized by category. Common categories include:

- Criminal complaints (assault, robbery, weapons offense, disturbance)
- Traffic (crash, hazard, pursuit)
- Medical (medical emergency, overdose, psychiatric emergency)
- Welfare checks (person in crisis, unknown problem)
- Civil (neighbor dispute, trespass)
- Suspicious (suspicious person, suspicious vehicle)

The granularity varies by agency. Larger agencies often have dozens of subtypes within each category. Smaller agencies may have a single “disturbance” type that encompasses everything from a loud party to a physical fight.

Classification Errors and Their Consequences

Undercoding Mental Health Calls

A caller reporting a family member in psychiatric crisis may describe behavior that triggers a criminal call type – particularly if weapons are mentioned. “My brother is in crisis and there’s a knife in the house” may be entered as a weapons offense rather than a psychiatric emergency, even though the two descriptions call for different responses.

Undercoding mental health calls into criminal categories results in: - Dispatch of patrol officers without mental health co-responders. - A higher priority code than the situation warrants. - No notification to community crisis teams that might have handled the call without law enforcement.

Overcoding Ambiguous Calls

Call-takers are trained to err toward officer safety when uncertain. In practice, this means ambiguous calls – particularly those involving any mention of a weapon – tend to be coded at higher severity than the actual situation requires. An ambiguous call classified as "armed and dangerous" rather than "welfare check – agitated" produces a different officer response even if the underlying situation is the same.

Reclassification Gaps

Conditions change between intake and arrival. A call entered as an active fight may have ended by the time officers arrive. A welfare check may have escalated. Most CAD systems do not have a structured reclassification protocol – the call type at intake travels through the incident unless a dispatcher actively updates it.

Officers arriving on scene are therefore responding to a label that may be minutes old and based on 90 seconds of caller information.

What Shapes Classification Quality

Caller communication. Call-takers can only classify what they hear. Callers under stress frequently emphasize the most alarming detail – which may not be the most operationally relevant. Training call-takers to ask structured follow-up questions (Is anyone injured? Is the person threatening anyone right now? Where is the person now?) improves classification accuracy.

CAD design. Systems with behaviorally-specific subtypes allow more precise classification than systems with broad generic types. "Mental health crisis – no weapon reported" is a different dispatch instruction than "mental health crisis – weapon present" – but only if the CAD system supports the distinction.

Call-taker workload. High call volume compresses the time available for thorough intake. Understaffed dispatch centers process more calls per call-taker, increasing misclassification rates.

Agency policy. Some agencies have developed specific intake protocols for calls involving persons in mental health crisis, houseless individuals, or subjects with known disability. These protocols prompt call-takers to gather specific information before locking a classification.

Relationship to Alternate Dispatch

Classification is the gating mechanism for alternate dispatch programs. A call must be correctly identified as a behavioral health crisis – not a criminal event – for a mobile crisis team or co-responder unit to be dispatched.

Agencies that have implemented alternate response programs and then observed low utilization often find the problem is at the classification stage, not in the capacity of the alternate response unit.

Operational Considerations

For officers, call classification is the first layer of available information – and also the least reliable. Officers should treat the initial call type as a starting hypothesis rather than an established fact, particularly for:

- Welfare checks
- Disturbance calls
- Any call with a mental health or substance component in the caller narrative
- Calls coded as weapons offenses based solely on caller mention of a weapon in a residence

Dispatchers should relay updated caller information to en route units when call conditions change, even if the formal call type is not updated in CAD.

Policy Implications

Agencies seeking to improve classification accuracy and reduce law enforcement dispatch to behavioral health calls should:

1. Audit misclassification rates. Compare initial call type to final incident disposition. Calls entered as criminal complaints that resolve as welfare checks or mental health contacts represent classification error.
2. Develop behavioral health call-type subtypes. Distinguish weapon present versus no weapon reported, current threat versus historical concern, and voluntary crisis versus involuntary or aggressive behavior.
3. Implement structured intake protocols for mental health calls. Scripted question sequences – adapted from IACP or CAHOOTS models – improve consistency.
4. Enable and track dispatcher reclassification. Officers relaying updated scene information should have a clear path to prompt a CAD update.
5. Integrate alternate dispatch eligibility into the classification workflow. If a co-responder or mobile crisis unit is available, the classification screen should flag eligibility at the point of intake.

HOW TO CITE

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