Priority Codes (Code 1/2/3)

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What It Is

Priority codes are numeric or color-based designations assigned by dispatch – or by CAD algorithms – that specify how urgently an officer should respond to a call for service. The most common scheme uses three tiers:

- Code 1 – Routine response. Officer proceeds at normal speed, no lights or siren.
- Code 2 – Urgent response. Expedited travel, often without lights and siren (varies by agency).
- Code 3 – Emergency response. Lights and siren, may exceed posted speed limits under state vehicle codes.

Nomenclature varies. Some agencies use "Priority 1/2/3/4," "Alpha/Bravo/Charlie/Delta," or color codes. The operational logic is identical: higher priority authorizes faster travel and signals to the officer that the situation is time-sensitive.

How Codes Are Assigned

Code assignment happens in seconds, typically before units are dispatched. In most agencies, the process follows this sequence:

1. The 911 call-taker collects initial information and enters it into the CAD system.
2. The CAD system applies a priority protocol – often driven by call type – to suggest a code.
3. A dispatcher reviews and either accepts or overrides the code before broadcasting.

In agencies with high call volume, dispatchers may accept CAD-suggested codes without review. In smaller agencies, a single person handles both call-taking and dispatch. The result is that code assignment is often driven by call type label rather than a detailed assessment of the specific situation.

A call typed as "person with a knife" may automatically generate a Code 3 regardless of whether the person is threatening anyone, is in mental health crisis, is stationary in a private residence, or is in the middle of a crowd.

What the Evidence Shows

Response Time and Outcome

The core rationale for Code 3 response is that faster arrival improves outcomes. The evidence for this in calls involving edged-weapon subjects is weak:

- For cardiac arrest and active shooter events, response time has a demonstrated effect on survival. Those findings do not transfer to most calls involving a person with an edged weapon.
- Most edged-weapon critical incidents are not ongoing attacks at the time officers arrive. The person is present – often in crisis – but not actively assaulting anyone.
- Code 3 response does not prevent injury during the time between dispatch and arrival. It changes the response mode of the arriving officer, not the condition of the scene.

Collision Risk

Code 3 response significantly increases the risk of vehicle collisions:

- Emergency vehicle crashes kill approximately 150 people per year in the United States, including bystanders, other motorists, and officers.
- The majority of law-enforcement vehicle crashes occur during emergency response.
- Risk is highest in urban environments with high traffic density – precisely where mental health and behavioral crisis calls are most concentrated.

Tactical Effects

Arriving Code 3 affects what officers encounter:

- A subject in mental health crisis may become more agitated or frightened by the arrival of lights and sirens.
- Bystanders and family members at the scene respond to the signaling of emergency severity.
- Officers arriving under a Code 3 may approach with a higher threat-orientation set, affecting their initial assessment.

Some agencies have documented that downgrading certain behavioral crisis call types from Code 3 to Code 1 or Code 2 has not increased harm rates while reducing arrival-related collisions and improving subject cooperation.

Operational Considerations

When Code 3 is appropriate for edged-weapon calls:

- An active, ongoing attack is reported and is continuing.

- An officer or civilian is reported to be injured and requires immediate assistance.
- The person has already fled and is believed to present an ongoing public threat.

When Code 3 is likely not appropriate:

- The person is barricaded or contained and not currently attacking anyone.
- The call involves a person in mental health crisis who has not harmed anyone.
- Family or bystanders describe the person as frightened, confused, or suicidal – not aggressive toward others.

Staging considerations: Even when a Code 3 response is appropriate, officers who arrive first should consider staging one block away and approaching on foot or at reduced speed if the situation has stabilized. Arrival mode and response mode are separable decisions.

Policy Implications

Priority code protocols are set at the agency level, often embedded in CAD system defaults. Meaningful reform requires:

1. Disaggregating call types. "Person with a weapon" covers an enormous range of situations. Agencies that use subtype coding (e.g., active attack vs. person in crisis vs. weapon visible but no threat) can assign codes more accurately.
2. Building in dispatcher override authority. Dispatchers who can downgrade codes based on additional call information reduce over-coded responses.
3. Tracking code-versus-outcome data. Agencies that do not record the assigned priority code alongside incident outcomes cannot evaluate whether their coding protocols are calibrated to actual risk.
4. Separating response priority from officer mindset framing. Code 3 authorization is a travel instruction, not a threat assessment. Officer training should distinguish the two.

HOW TO CITE

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