REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

RPS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES: Noise Complaints

This brief is part of a series on different types of community issues and complaints to which police are asked to respond. In each brief we discuss the nature of the issue, review traditional policing strategies, and explore opportunities to adopt novel approaches.

Top Takeaways:

Residents often call 911 to report noise complaints, on issues ranging from barking dogs to nearby domestic arguments, to unmuffled cars.

In most instances, sending armed officers to resolve a noise issue is a drain on civic resources and can lead to avoidable harm.

Sorting noise complaints into different categories can help inform a better response. Does the reported noise violate any city ordinances or laws? Does it indicate a potential danger or threat? Does it occur persistently, or is it only a one-off?

Several new and emerging approaches to noise complaints show promise as effective means of resolving conflicts and addressing neighborhood concerns without involving the police. These include:

• Deployment of trained mediators
• Use of community service officers
• Enhanced focus on code enforcement
• Better collaboration between government and businesses
• Creative utilization of technology

Why Care About Noise?

Noise is neither a trivial nor a trite problem.

At a minimum, noise affects quality of life, and, in many cases, it can have a serious impact on physical or mental health. This impact tends to fall disproportionally on communities of color, which typically are exposed to greater levels of noise pollution and are more likely to experience the harms that come with unnecessary enforcement of low-level offenses.¹

Noise also can signal the possibility of physical danger, which presents challenges distinct from and usually more serious than noise itself. This is the case, for example, of a loud domestic dispute that escalates into assault.

Finally, noise complaints are common, imposing a significant burden on police resources. City residents lodge thousands to hundreds of thousands of noise complaints each year. Noise complaints are a leading call type for over-taxed 911 and 311 systems.

The broad catchall categories of “noise” or “excessive noise” include a wide range of very different issues, such as:

- Loud parties or music
- Yelling or shouting, as if people are fighting
- Use of equipment, like mowers or leaf blowers
- Construction
- Unmuffled engines

Sample data from one of our research partner jurisdictions is instructive as to the necessity of a police (as opposed to alternative) response. The vast majority of noise complaints concerned music and parties. Although parties have the potential to turn ugly or dangerous, they usually don’t — and, in most cases, getting someone to turn down the volume does not require an armed officer.

Before looking more closely at alternatives, let’s examine why we typically send the police to address noise, and why that sometimes is a problem.

As with so many other issues, noise complaints typically are assigned to the police because they often are the only responders available. This especially is true if complaints come on evenings or weekends when much of the rest of government shuts down. Data from a sample jurisdiction confirms our intuition that noise complaints peak in the overnight and weekend hours.

Figure 1: Noise complaints over a four-year period in a mid-size U.S. city, 2018-2021
Figure 2: Noise complaints by hour over a four-year period in a mid-size U.S. city, 2018-2021

Figure 3: Noise complaints by day of week over a four-year period in a mid-size U.S. city, 2018-2021
To be clear, sometimes a police response is appropriate or even essential. This is the case when the underlying activity presents a physical danger (e.g., fighting or drag racing). And the mere presence of police might encourage compliance in some situations.

Yet police response is problematic, and in many situations the advantages of police presence will be outweighed by the potential harms and disadvantages:

- The presence of police can escalate an otherwise peaceful situation, or lead to enforcement that brings people into the criminal justice system unnecessarily.
- Enforcement actions inevitably affect low-income neighborhoods disproportionally, and frequently have a racially-disparate impact.2
- Police usually are not trained in mediation, code enforcement, or many of the other skills and duties that may be most relevant in a large percentage of noise complaints.
- With many competing demands on their attention, police do not always prioritize noise complaints, which can result in excessive response times. In one jurisdiction we examined, the average time to respond to noise complaints was well over two hours! That’s not much help to the caller.

**How can we improve our response to noise?**

Based on the input of experts and our experience on the ground, here are our suggestions for how to go about addressing noise complaints in a way that works for all concerned:


Sorting through these questions will inevitably fall upon the staff at 911 call centers, so it is essential for call takers and dispatchers to possess, understand, and utilize clear protocols for distinguishing types of complaint and for assigning resources accordingly.
FIND THE ALTERNATIVE THAT FITS YOUR RESOURCES, NEEDS, AND CALL PATTERNS

Communities across the country have enjoyed success with varied approaches, each of which offers advantages or disadvantages, depending on your needs, resources, and call patterns. Note that these strategies are not mutually exclusive.

Mediation. As is true of many issues that receive a police response, what appears superficially to be a “noise” problem may reflect on a deeper level a disagreement over appropriate social behavior. A trained mediator can help people reach a compromise or resolution when they simply cannot work things out for themselves. Mediation can be valuable both for persistent and one-off noise situations, and may be especially helpful when the conduct at issue is lawful, yet still causes social tension.

Mediation Strategies

Responder Model: Dayton, Ohio recently launched its Mediation Response Unit (MRU), which addresses a variety of 911 complaints such as noise, neighbor disputes, barking dogs, loitering, and some juvenile issues. The team, which is dispatched in response to 911 calls, has training in areas such as crisis response, de-escalation, conflict resolution, community development, and relationship building.

Formal Mediation: In response to growing community complaints related to outdoor dining that proliferated during the pandemic, New York City created a mediation program tailored to resolve disputes between businesses and residents. Launched in summer 2020, the MEND (Mediating Establishment and Neighbor Disputes) program provides opportunities for mediation to encourage problem solving and avoid the need for enforcement. Both parties must agree to engage in mediation in order to participate in the program.

Community Service Officers (CSOs). CSOs usually operate out of the police department and provide support to police officers by handling low-level incidents and issues. These officers do not carry weapons, though some have limited enforcement powers. Their close ties to police provide some built-in advantages, such as the ability to be deployed seamlessly through existing dispatch systems. In cases where the appearance of an ‘official’ can help resolve a social disagreement, a CSO could fit the bill without unnecessarily risking the escalation that an armed officer could prompt. However, because CSOs are part of the police department, they still may favor an enforcement-focused approach, and community members may not view them differently than other police officers.

Code Enforcement. Code enforcement officials can be helpful with certain sorts of noise issues, particularly those involving persistent and unlawful noise. Even so, code enforcement is still enforcement, meaning that it draws people into the legal system and can result in the imposition of fines or cease and desist orders. If a situation can be resolved peaceably without enforcement, then sending a code officer is probably the wrong approach. But some situations simply are going to require code enforcement, which typically is civil, not criminal.

Collaborative Enterprises. Collaboration between government and businesses can achieve sustainable solutions to chronic sources of friction. For example, accreditation or certification for businesses that agree to certain policies and practices can help prevent noise problems — and other problems — from arising in the first place.

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Collaboration can be especially useful in neighborhoods that are gentrifying, and in which different cultural expectations, including those surrounding noise, come into conflict. A voluntary collaborative process can promote mutual understanding and forge closer ties among diverse residents and business owners.

Technology. The creative use of technology can improve our assessment of and response to certain types of noise issues. For example, sound meters can be deployed at strategic locations to monitor vehicle noise, with tickets automatically issued based on license plate detection, such as the Roadside Sound Meter pilot program started by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection. The initiative installs sound meters on already existing speeding cameras and, when excessive noise is detected, the camera captures a video of the offending vehicle. Tickets are issued by mail and persistent violations can be dealt with more severely.

Tread carefully, however. A seemingly neutral deployment of new monitoring devices may have racially or socio-economically disparate impacts. Privacy considerations may limit the collection and use of information. And overreliance on technology could come at the expense of the in-person interactions with potential for building trust.

Spotlight on Arlington, Virginia

Created by the Arlington Police Department, the Arlington Restaurant Initiative (ARI) is a collaborative community policing program that aims to increase safety and economic viability for restaurants and special events. ARI is a voluntary accreditation program that recognizes establishments that commit to responsible alcohol serving practices, which reduce the total number of noise complaints.

Participants in the program agree to maintain the policies and standards codified in the ARI Accreditation Standards and Guide for Writing Policy. Restaurants and bars follow the guidelines intended to improve safety and reduce undesirable behavior, which should, in turn, lower their risk of violations and liability. To become an accredited member, restaurants must draft and submit for review their policies on topics such as underage drinking, criteria for calling police, and how to approach suspected stalking.

Additional Resources
- Getting Started - Working with Data Models from the Field – Community Service Officers
- Providing Service 24/7
- Designing a Reimagined System — Decision Points