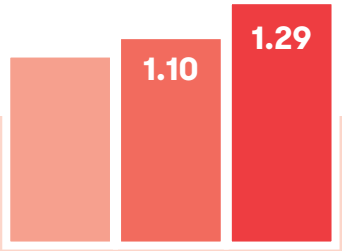
Investing in Evidence-Based Alternatives to Policing:

Civilian Crisis Response

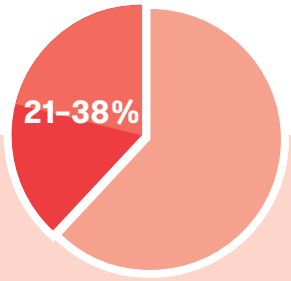
August 2021

When people experience a behavioral health crisis, they need special care and attention to reach a resolution. Yet police responses to these crises often worsen the situation. Civilian first responders are better equipped to effectively handle and de-escalate behavioral health situations.

With more than 240 million 911 calls made each year, police have become the default first responders to nearly every social issue people and their communities face—from mental illness to substance use to homelessness.[1] However, police are ill-equipped to safely and effectively respond when people are experiencing behavioral health crises. Although officers may possess de-escalation skills, the mere presence of armed, uniformed officers with police vehicles can exacerbate a person's feelings of distress and escalate mental health–related situations, particularly in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.[2] The dire shortcomings of this approach are reflected in the disproportionate number of people with mental health and substance use issues who are incarcerated in jails and prisons each year.[3] Furthermore, people with known mental health conditions are killed by police during law enforcement interactions at alarmingly high rates, including when they are at home and unarmed.[4]



Of the more than 6,000 people who have been fatally shot by the police since 2015, close to one quarter were experiencing a mental health crisis.[5] The rate of fatal shootings by police of people who were experiencing a mental health crisis was **1.29 times higher for Black people** compared to white people, and **1.10 times higher for Latinx people** compared to white people.[6]



A recent analysis of 911 calls in eight cities found that between **21 and 38 percent** of those calls were for mental health, substance use, homelessness, or other quality-of-life concerns that could be better addressed by civilian first responders instead of police.[7]

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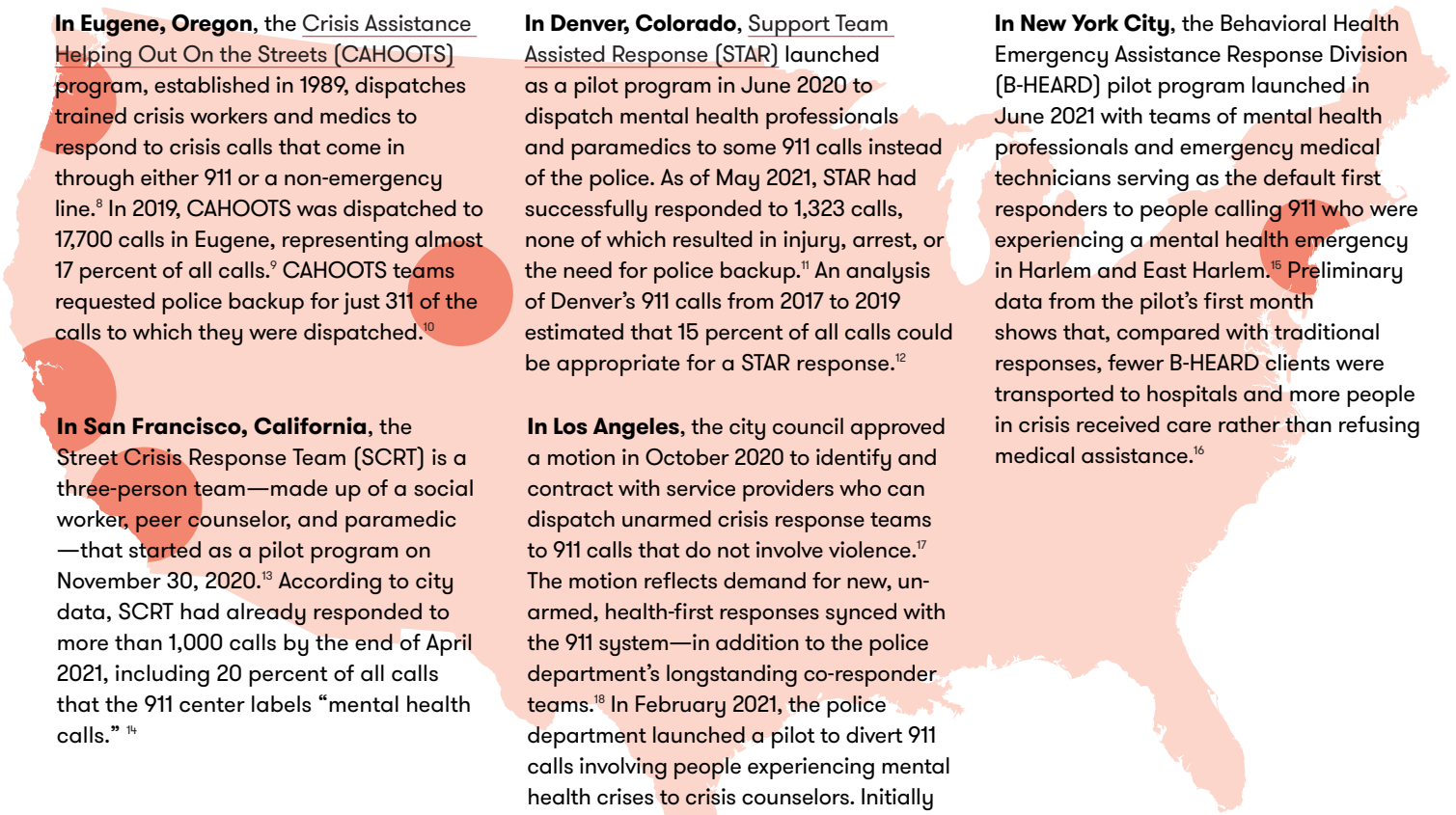
Civilian teams of behavioral health professionals and people with lived experience are effective responders to behavioral health crises.

Many existing and emerging community-based and health-centered response teams are doing this work successfully:



In Eugene, Oregon, the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On the Streets (CAHOOTS) program, established in 1989, dispatches trained crisis workers and medics to respond to crisis calls that come in through either 911 or a non-emergency line.[8] In 2019, CAHOOTS was dispatched to 17,700 calls in Eugene, representing almost 17 percent of all calls.[9] CAHOOTS teams requested police backup for just 311 of the calls to which they were dispatched.[10]

In San Francisco, California, the Street Crisis Response Team (SCRT) is a three-person team—made up of a social worker, peer counselor, and paramedic—that started as a pilot program on November 30, 2020.[13] According to city data, SCRT had already responded to more than 1,000 calls by the end of April 2021, including 20 percent of all calls that the 911 center labels "mental health calls."[14]

In Denver, Colorado, Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) launched as a pilot program in June 2020 to dispatch mental health professionals and paramedics to some 911 calls instead of the police. As of May 2021, STAR had successfully responded to 1,323 calls, none of which resulted in injury, arrest, or the need for police backup.[11] An analysis of Denver's 911 calls from 2017 to 2019 estimated that 15 percent of all calls could be appropriate for a STAR response.[12]

In Los Angeles, the city council approved a motion in October 2020 to identify and contract with service providers who can dispatch unarmed crisis response teams to 911 calls that do not involve violence.[17] The motion reflects demand for new, unarmed, health-first responses synced with the 911 system—in addition to the police department's longstanding co-responder teams.[18] In February 2021, the police department launched a pilot to divert 911 calls involving people experiencing mental health crises to crisis counselors. Initially operating eight hours a day, this summer the program expanded to 24/7 service.[19]

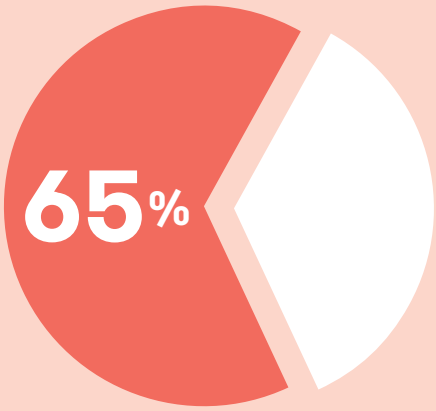
In New York City, the Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division (B-HEARD) pilot program launched in June 2021 with teams of mental health professionals and emergency medical technicians serving as the default first responders to people calling 911 who were experiencing a mental health emergency in Harlem and East Harlem.[15] Preliminary data from the pilot's first month shows that, compared with traditional responses, fewer B-HEARD clients were transported to hospitals and more people in crisis received care rather than refusing medical assistance.[16]

These programs cost a fraction of what communities spend on policing and have been funded by a variety of mechanisms:

People are demanding less money be spent on policing and more on civilian-led crisis response solutions.[20] The combined annual budget for policing in Eugene and Springfield, Oregon, is $90 million, while the annual budget for CAHOOTS to serve those two cities is $2.1 million—just 2.3 percent of what these jurisdictions spend on law enforcement.[21] By responding to calls to which police would otherwise be dispatched, CAHOOTS saves the city of Eugene an estimated $2.2 million in officer wages.[22] In May 2021, CAHOOTS requested an additional $1.8 million in annual funding from the city of Eugene to stabilize its current level of service and raise base wages for staff from $18 an hour to $25 an hour; it plans to expand in the future.[23]

The STAR program in Denver, Colorado, received $200,000 from a ballot initiative and a sales tax called Caring 4 Denver for its six-month pilot. STAR is set to expand with $2.4 million from Denver's general fund, and the city's public health department has applied for an additional $1.4 million from the Caring 4 Denver fund.[24]

In June 2020, Portland, Oregon's city council voted to reallocate $4.8 million in funds from its $229 million police department budget to the new Portland Street Response program, which launched in February 2021.[25] However, in May, Portland's city council voted against the budget proposal to allocate $3.6 million in ongoing funds to fully fund the program city-wide. As a result, the program will continue to operate in a more limited capacity.[26]



There is broad public support for civilian emergency first responder programs.[27] Communities are calling for investment in unarmed, civilian crisis response teams:

A national poll conducted in March 2021 found that **65 percent of likely voters support the creation of civilian emergency first responder programs** to respond to substance use and mental health issues instead of the police, including calls to help a family member who is having a mental health crisis or experiencing a drug overdose.

Recommendations

- **Cities and counties, as well as state and federal actors, should invest in unarmed, civilian first responder programs to help people experiencing behavioral health crises.** These first responders should have a passion for supporting people with behavioral health conditions and should receive training to support people's needs in moments of crisis, connect them to longer-term supports, and effectively work with other emergency responders. Programs should also compensate civilian first responders commensurately with the responsibilities of the role to promote staff retention and ensure program sustainability.[28]
- **Cities, counties, and law enforcement should redesign 911 systems so that nonviolent behavioral health calls receive a civilian response.** 911 system stakeholders should establish policies and implement dispatching systems that support 911 call-takers in diverting calls from police to civilian crisis response teams; provide ongoing training and support to call-takers and integrate behavioral health specialists into 911 call centers; and reclassify call-takers and dispatchers as first responders to enhance benefits, mitigate turnover, and minimize liability concerns among 911 staff tasked with diverting calls.[29]

Endnotes

1 For 911 call volume, see National Emergency Number Association (NENA), "9-1-1 Statistics," updated February 2021, https://perma.cc/FAJ8-QV6S.

2 See, for example, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), *National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care—A Best Practice Toolkit* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, SAMHSA, 2020), 68-69, https://perma.cc/XSJ2-RQJ6; Drew DeSilver, Michael Lipka, and Dalia Fahmy, "10 Things We Know about Race and Policing in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, June 3, 2020, https://perma.cc/FU9Q-3QYF; and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, *Future of Public Safety* (New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2020), 5-8, https://perma.cc/9ZSB-3FGU.

3 Jennifer Bronson and Marcus Berzofsky, *Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2011-12* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 2017), https://perma.cc/JJT7-V2NA; Jennifer Bronson, Jessica Stroop, Stephanie Zimmer, and Marcus Berzofsky, *Drug Use, Dependence, and Abuse Among State Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2007-2009* (Washington, DC: BJS, 2017), https://perma.cc/R3W7-6V92.

4 Amam Z. Saleh, Paul S. Appelbaum, Xiaoyu Liu, et al., "Deaths of People with Mental Illness During Interactions with Law Enforcement," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 58 (2018), 110-116, https://perma.cc/826F-AKG8.

5 The *Washington Post* has tracked fatal shootings by on-duty police officers since January 1, 2015. As of March 28, 2021, 23 percent (1,422 of 6,163) of people shot and killed by police were experiencing a mental health crisis. "Fatal Force: Police Shootings Database," database (Washington, DC: *Washington Post*, accessed March 28, 2021), https://perma.cc/KSR5-KEGE.

6 It is worth noting that Latinx, Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander people are not counted in a uniform way in the national database projects tracking fatal shootings and other incidents of violence by police. For more information, see: UnidosUS, *Special Advance Fact Sheet: Deaths of People of Color By Law Enforcement Are Severely Under-Counted* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, 2021), https://perma.cc/R64S-BKRX. See also, Silvia Foster-Frau, "Latinos Are Disproportionately Killed by Police but Often Left Out of the Debate About Brutality, Some Advocates Say," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2021, https://perma.cc/JF6P-94J6.

7 Amos Irwin and Betsy Pearl, *The Community Responder Model: How Cities Can Send the Right Responder to Every 911 Call* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress and the Law Enforcement Action Partnership, 2020), Table 3, https://perma.cc/6ZA4-YADJ.

8 USA Today has reported that, in addition to existing civilian crisis responder programs in Eugene, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; and Olympia, Washington, as of April 2021, pilot programs have been launched in Austin, Texas; San Francisco, California; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Portland, Oregon; and Rochester, New York. Chicago, Illinois; Los Angeles, California; Baltimore, Maryland; Oakland, California; Dayton, Ohio; and Charlotte, North Carolina, are exploring models and/or planning to launch pilots; Ryan W. Miller and Grace Hauck, "Did George Floyd, Daniel Prude Change 911 Mental Health Call Response?" *USA Today*, April 5, 2021, https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2021/04/05/george-floyd-daniel-prude-911-mental-health-response/6819744002/.

9 CAHOOTS responds to crisis calls through the 911 public safety communications center, as well as a 10-digit non-emergency number in Eugene and its neighboring city, Springfield. For a detailed breakdown of calls and estimated diversion rate in 2019, see Eugene Police Department Crime Analysis Unit, *CAHOOTS Program Analysis* (Eugene, OR: Eugene Police Crime Analysis Unit, 2020), https://perma.cc/MN3F-DD2R. Out of 105,403 total calls for service in 2019, CAHOOTS was dispatched to 17,700 calls. According to the Crime Analysis Unit analysis, this represents 17 percent of all calls, and an estimated 5 to 8 percent of all calls that Eugene police would otherwise have been dispatched to. Ibid., Figures 2 and 8. See also: Eugene Police Department, "Frequently Asked Questions: CAHOOTS," Eugene Police Department, https://perma.cc/D52Y-USHW.

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11 Chris Richardson, "Mental Health Emergencies: Building a Robust Crisis Response System" (testimony at the House Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing; Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, 117th Congress, May 13, 2021), https://perma.cc/TPU2-U5X9. See also: Brian Blick, Vinnie Cervantes, Blake Christianson, et al., *STAR Program Evaluation* (Denver, CO: Denver Police Department, 2021), https://perma.cc/C9KA-5289.

12 Emily Lapel, *911 Call Data Analysis: Possible Deferment to Non-Law Enforcement Agencies*, (Denver, CO: Denver City Council Legislative Services, 2020), 8, https://perma.cc/ZGR5-YM57.

13 Chris James, "There's a New Approach to Police Response to Mental Health Emergencies. Taking the Police out of It." CNN, April 2, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/02/us/mental-health-police-response-go-there/index.html.

14 Trisha Thadani and Megan Cassidy, "S.F. Finally Has a New Mental Health Team to Respond to Homeless People in Distress. Is It Helping?" *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 17, 2021, https://perma.cc/PC29-ZLZS. As a partner in SCRT planning, the Department of Emergency Management identified various call codes concerning mental or behavioral health incidents that prompt police involvement, and selected the "800" code for inclusion in the pilot. SCRT had responded to 20 percent of calls labeled with this code through the end of April 2021. For more information on call codes, see: Mental Health San Francisco Implementation Working Group, *Street Crisis Response Team Issue Brief* (San Francisco: San Francisco Department of Public Health, 2021), 2, https://perma.cc/3ZK3-A63M.

15 Melissa Russo and Kristina Pavlovic, "NYC Readies to Send Social Workers into Uncharted Territory—911 Mental Health Calls," NBC New York, May 27, 2021, https://perma.cc/MU4F-HBXT.

16 Fola Akinnibi, "NYC's Mental Health Emergency Response Pilot Shows Promise in Early Data," Bloomberg, July 22, 2021, https://perma.cc/SES5-42HL; and B-HEARD, *Transforming NYC's Response to Mental Health Crises: First Month of Operations* (New York: B-HEARD, 2021), https://perma.cc/TXH8-B5XH.

17 Alexandra Meeks, "Los Angeles Will Create Unarmed Crisis Response Teams for Nonviolent 911 Calls," CNN, October 14, 2020, https://perma.cc/CB5J-X7H2; and Los Angeles City Council Item No. 20-0769, Unarmed Model of Crisis Response/Non-Violent Calls for Service/Non-Law Enforcement Agencies (2021), https://perma.cc/K65U-WFU4.

18 In 1993, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was among the first law enforcement agencies in the country to implement a co-responder program known as the Systemwide Mental Assessment Response Team, or SMART, that paired officers and clinicians together to respond

to calls involving people with mental illness. For more information about SMART and the evolution of police-based response strategies in Los Angeles, see: Los Angeles Police Department, *Mental Evaluation Unit* (Los Angeles: LAPD, 2021), https://perma.cc/ED3J-ZUGK.

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26 Rebecca Ellis, "$5.7 Billion City Budget Does Not Fully Fund Portland Street Response," *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, May 14, 2021, https://www.opb.org/article/2021/05/13/portland-street-response-city-budget-funding/.

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