THE LITTLE KNOWN, RACIST HISTORY OF THE 911 NUMBER

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FIRST 911 CALL
Haleyville, Alabama
Feb 18, 1968
Alabama Telephone Co. President B.W. Gallagher, Alabama Public Service Commission Director Eugene “Bull” Connor & U.S. Representative Tom Bevill

University of Baltimore Archives
911 AS WE KNOW IT

- Saves countless lives
- Deploys police response inappropriately
- Calls made to enforce *racist* notions of “order”
- Fueling mass incarceration & violence of people of color, especially Black Americans

**TWO YEAR STUDY OF 911 CALLS IN FIVE MAJOR CITIES**

- MAJORITY OF CALLS FOR NON-EMERGENCY & NON-CRIMINAL ISSUES
- NOISE
- PARKING
- UNHOUSED PERSONS
THE HISTORY WE’VE BEEN TOLD

■ Until late 1960s, difficult to access emergency services
  – Overlapping jurisdictions
  – Different numbers
■ Reduce deaths & injuries, quicker response to fires & robberies
■ Recommended by National Association of Fire Chiefs & National Academy of Sciences
■ Recommended by 1967 Katzenbach Commission
911 FOR THE WRONG REASONS

- President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Administration
- Aimed at suppressing protests by Black communities against segregation & police brutality, or “civil disorder”
- Not the first effort, but first with political & commercial will
The Kerner Commission launched after 159 protests in summer of ‘67

Most remembered for
- Condemning white America’s racism as cause of protests
- Demanding investments in Black communities & action against discrimination

Suppressed early findings that riots are a logical, effective political response to white supremacy

Internal disagreement on best response to civil disorder
SUPPLEMENT ON CONTROL OF DISORDER

- Focused on expanding police capacity to suppress protests
  - Riot control training & equipment
  - Infiltrating Black communities & movement spaces
- Omitted from most report publications
- Led by Associate Director for Public Safety Arnold P. Sagalyn
- 1963 universal emergency services number used to aid U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Caracas, Venezuela

Arnold P. Sagalyn
LAUNCHING THE 911 SYSTEM

- **November 1967:** Sagalyn & FCC contact AT&T
  - To explore a “more effective means of making the telephone a help during emergency situations”
  - Increase the usefulness of phones during civil disorders

- **January 1968:** Public announcement and early rollout of 911 in select cities

- Implementation “got a boost as a result of last summer’s widespread civil disorders.”
**EARLY CONCERNS**

- **February 1968**: LBJ says 911 will decrease response times, increase arrests, and provide a “more immediate” solution to civil unrest.

- Increases police deployment for non-emergency calls:
  - FCC’s Lee Loevinger warns LBJ
  - NYC adopts 911 in July 1968 for police only
  - Half of new calls for non-emergencies
  - Deployment increased by 7.5%
PARALLELS: 1968 & 2020
■ 911 number not built to promote safety, but to mobilize law enforcement in wake of protests against racial violence

■ Failure to understand origins and center impacted communities + lack of funding means
  – Poorly designed systems
  – Under-resourced infrastructure

■ Alternatives insufficient when patterns of deployment harm communities

■ Must understand how distrust impacts use

LESSONS 988 CAN LEARN FROM 911
FOR MORE INFO:

In These Times, “The Little Known, Racist History of the 911 Emergency Call System” (Jan. 26, 2021).

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911 & RACISM ROUNDTABLE

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Discussion