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ENHANCING PUBLIC SAFETY: EXPLORING THE BENEFITS OF ALTERNATIVE POLICE CRISIS RESPONSE

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KEY POINTS

- **Overburdened law enforcement** agencies are looking for solutions.
- **There has been a rise** in alternative police crisis response models across the nation.
- **There has been positive impact** with alternative police crisis response models, when implemented in collaboration with traditional police forces, not in place of traditional policing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While traditional policing methods are characterized as reactive, alternative police crisis response models offer a way for law enforcement to manage mental health crises, homelessness, and other non-violent emergencies better ([Turner, 2022](#)). Alternative police crisis response models are programs where behavioral health specialists, often social workers, respond alongside police officers to certain emergency calls, such as suicide threats, drug overdoses, and psychiatric episodes. These teams focus on de-escalating crises, addressing the root cause of the emergency, and avoiding unnecessary arrests, particularly in cases where a simple resolution is possible ([Lartey, 2024](#)). Traditional responses often leave law enforcement questioning how to handle these complex issues, which contributes to officer burnout, creates strained department resources, and tragic outcomes for citizens involved.

Solutions can be found in implementing alternative police crisis response models, like crisis intervention teams and co-responder programs, in tandem with traditional police methods. Alternative police crisis response models are not a replacement for traditional policing. However, taking simple steps like integrating mental health professionals, substance abuse counselors, and other individuals who are equipped to handle crisis situations benefit all involved ([CSG Justice Center, 2019](#)). Implementing tandem alternative response models can enhance public safety and allow officers to focus on violent crime by providing different options for non-violent 911 call response that don't require armed responses ([Stand Together, n.d.](#)). Examples include crisis intervention teams and co-responder programs, which integrate mental health professionals or social workers into police responses ([Ekins, 2016](#)). Alternative response models have already been implemented alongside traditional policing in North Carolina, with 53% of North Carolina police departments having some form of a co-response

program, and 78% of police departments utilizing a community partnership model ([UNC School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab, 2022](#)).

Implementing alternative police crisis response models comes with challenges, including funding, resistance from law enforcement and the community, and resource allocation ([Ors, 2023](#)). However, when alternative police crisis response models are supported by community partnerships and sustainable funding is secured, implementation can lead to safer communities and a more effective public safety system.

INTRODUCTION

9-1-1 receives approximately 240 million calls annually, with 50 million of those calls relating to mental health or substance abuse crises ([NENA, 2021](#)). Historically, overburdened and shrinking law enforcement agencies are the first responders to calls involving complex social issues like homelessness, mental health crises, and substance use disorders ([Turner, 2022](#)). In addition to policing, officers often respond to calls beyond the scope of their work and training, resulting in overburdened departments across the country ([Dholakia, 2022](#)). More police departments are exploring alternative approaches to handle more robust needs, manage budget cuts, and prevent officer burnout ([Lynk, 2021](#); [Wilson, 2022](#)).

While traditional policing methods have been standard, more departments are looking to prioritize de-escalation and turn their attention towards improving community engagement and officer well-being. Modern-day policing faces myriad challenges aside from the duties of the job itself ([Washington, 2021](#)). To focus on these new priorities, agencies have advocated for alternative police crisis responder units in North Carolina and nationwide. The goal of implementation is to enhance public safety while optimizing law enforcement resources. Responders can facilitate access to essential services through alternative approaches, and police officers can shift their focus back to traditional crime response. Alternative approaches can also shift the dependence away

from the justice system for addressing social challenges such as homelessness, mental health issues, and substance use ([Washington, 2021](#)). These alternative police crisis response models come in various forms, including police-based initiatives, co-responder setups, and community-driven models.

THE CURRENT ISSUE

On July 6, 2024, two Sangamon County sheriff's deputies were dispatched to a Springfield, Illinois, residence to investigate a possible intruder. The residence belonged to Sonya Massey, a paranoid schizophrenic who was shot and killed by a deputy when she failed to respond to the deputy's request to turn her stove off and instead picked up a pot of boiling water and turned toward the deputy. Reports show that Massey had an encounter with police over a mental health issue on July 5, 2024, the day before the shooting ([Spearie, 2024](#)).

Massey's story is not an isolated incident but instead reflects a pattern where police intervention is the default response for an individual in a mental health crisis. Post-pandemic, there was a surge in alternative crisis calls, pushing communities to seek better solutions. Currently, 14 out of the 20 most populous cities in the United States operate some form of alternative police crisis response program ([Associated Press, 2023](#)).

Moreover, reports indicated a significant increase in 9-1-1 call volume throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in New York City alone, call volume rose from a usual daily high of 4,000 calls to over 7,000 in March 2020 ([Al Amiry & Maguire, 2021](#)). These dramatic increases in call volume have imposed increased pressure on police departments and first responders ([Al Amiry & Maguire, 2021](#)). It is further estimated that at least 20% of police calls for service involve a mental health or substance use crisis, and for many departments, that demand is growing ([Abramson, 2021](#)).

Research from the Research Triangle Institute reveals that the core issue is not the routine transfer of

individuals with mental health issues into the justice system, it is the need in the field to follow-up and provide needed services to individuals ([Strom et al., 2022](#)). Police are often dispatched to handle real or perceived mental health emergencies without the necessary resources to address immediate or underlying problems. This results in untreated conditions persisting and repeated 9-1-1 calls. Alternative police crisis response methods could help mitigate this problem by developing or enhancing police response to include trained clinicians or even third party responses that remove law enforcement from these non-violent 9-1-1 calls altogether ([Strom et al., 2022](#)).

TRADITIONAL POLICE CRISIS RESPONSE METHODS IN USE

Traditional police crisis response methods typically involve a swift and authoritative approach to managing calls ([Rawlings, 2023](#)). These methods have routinely been effective in many cases but have their own limitations and challenges. Issues like over-reliance on force, lack of adequate training in de-escalation techniques, and strained community relations have underscored the need for urgent reform in crisis response strategies ([Rawlings, 2023](#)).

Traditional policing methods are very reactive in procedure: an event occurs, and police officers respond accordingly, sometimes only having very little situational information as guidance (through no fault of their own). There is little forethought by law enforcement agencies regarding when or where resources are allocated other than designating police districts to solve the immediate need to restore safety. This method uses community partnerships via individuals and organizations to restore property damage and the perception of safety rather than prevent future crime or solve an underlying issue like substance abuse or mental health illness ([Rawlings, 2023](#)).

Law enforcement agencies recognize the importance of providing all officers with specialized training, knowledge, and skills to effectively respond to mental health calls. To address this need, many agencies

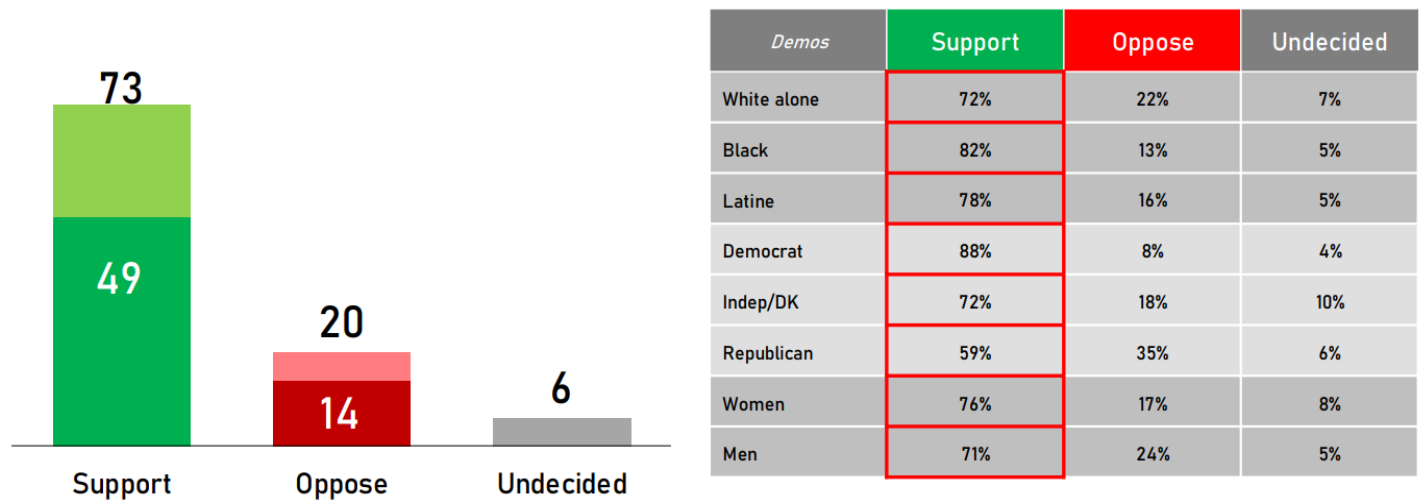
incorporate comprehensive Police-Mental Health Collaboration Programs (PMHC) curriculum into their recruit academy training to supplement traditional police response models. This curriculum may include the original 40-hour Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Training, a modified version, or a custom-developed PMHC curriculum tailored to the agency's training approach and the community's resources and needs ([Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.](#)).

The traditional CIT Training is the instructional program linked to the CIT approach for assisting individuals with mental illness. This comprehensive 40-hour course is delivered over five consecutive days and focuses on enhancing officers' understanding of mental illness. It includes developing communication skills, gaining practical experience, and participating in role-playing exercises ([Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.](#)).

The Department of Justice reiterates the need for continued mental health training. They recognize that "[r]ecruit academy training is not sufficient by itself to prepare a police force to respond appropriately to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. Recruit academy training must exist alongside a more comprehensive and robust program to be effective" ([Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.](#)).

According to the American Bar Association (ABA), the general criteria for police objectives and priorities are "to safeguard freedom, to preserve life and property, to protect the constitutional rights of citizens and maintain respect for the rule of law by proper enforcement thereof, and, thereby, to preserve democratic processes" ([American Bar Association, n.d.](#)). The ABA says, "In implementing their varied responsibilities, police must provide maximum opportunity for achieving desired social change by freely available, lawful, and orderly means," accounting for flexibility in procedure and that alternative police crisis response methods can be implemented as deemed necessary to bring about the best outcomes ([American Bar Association, n.d.](#)).

Figure 1
Poll: Support for Investing in Additional Approaches to Traditional Policing



Source: Lake Research Partners & The Tarrance Group, 2023 (<https://assets.joycefdn.org/content/uploads/LRP-Joyce-Foundation-Deckqw.pdf>).

IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE POLICE CRISIS RESPONSE MODELS

Alternative police crisis response models depart from the traditional models which prioritize investigating violent crime, protecting individuals from violent crime, and investigating drug and property crimes, as the alternatives emphasize collaboration, empathy, and tailored interventions. Examples include crisis intervention teams and co-responder programs, which integrate mental health professionals or social workers into police responses (Ekins, 2016). Studies have shown these alternative approaches to effectively reduce potential injuries and improve outcomes for individuals in certain crisis situations (CSG Justice Center, 2019). Alternative police crisis responder programs can take various forms. These include police department-based initiatives such as crisis intervention teams, homeless outreach programs, and case management programs, where specially trained staff handle crisis calls and follow up with individuals in crisis. Community-based programs feature mobile teams of mental health, disability, or social service professionals who respond to calls independently or alongside medical personnel. Additionally, co-responder programs involve mental health, substance use,

or social service staff responding to service calls in partnership with law enforcement (Bailey, 2022).

One of the benefits of alternative police crisis response models is the reduction in the use of force when responding to calls. Data analysis from the Center for American Progress demonstrates a link between adopting alternative police crisis response models and decreased instances involving the use of force (Irwin & Pearl, 2020). These alternative response models prioritize de-escalation techniques and communication skills and strive to create a holistic understanding of the underlying issues contributing to the crisis instead of only relying upon traditional response methods.

Data from Lake Research Partners and the Tarrance Group (2023) reflects a positive shift in community perceptions of law enforcement when presenting community members with the idea of implementing alternative approaches in crisis response. Lake Research Partners and the Tarrance Group surveyed 2,000 “Likely 2024 General Election” voters, as well as 500 voter oversamples each in Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois, and 200 voter oversamples each among Black and Latino voters. The survey was

conducted between January 30, 2023, and February 9, 2023. Respondents were drawn for the sample from an online panel and screened to be likely registered voters. The data were weighted slightly by gender, age, race, region, education level, and party identification to reflect the profile of the likely 2024 electorate shows that almost 75% of respondents support investing in additional approaches to traditional policing, including having specific 9-1-1 calls responded to by other professionals (like mental health professionals, trained social workers, or community-based violence intervention specialists) either along with police officers or, for some non-violent calls, in place of police officers ([Lake Research Partners & The Tarrance Group, 2023](#)).

High rates of burnout, turnover, and job dissatisfaction among law enforcement officers all highlight the urgent need for interventions that prioritize officer well-being. The Police Executive Research Foundation surveyed 194 departments and found that between 2020 and 2021, resignations increased by an average of 18%, retirements rose by 45%, and hiring activity decreased by about 5% ([Adams et al., 2023](#)). Alternative police crisis response models could help offset these numbers, as they would contribute to better officer retention by promoting a more sustainable approach to policing by freeing up officer time to focus on more traditional policing calls ([DeLaus, 2020](#)).

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE IMPLEMENTATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

One of the nation's first alternative police crisis response programs, Chapel Hill Police Department's Crisis Unit, launched in 1973 in North Carolina. This program pairs officers with a dedicated group of individuals in a 24-hour emergency response team. This unit helps local citizens in times of non-violent crisis while allowing law enforcement to focus on public safety. For example, this unit may respond to persons experiencing psychiatric emergencies or persistent mental health concerns, or they may engage in outreach to vulnerable community members. Chapel Hill's program sets an example of

how effective alternative police crisis response can be in addressing non-criminal emergencies ([Town of Chapel Hill, n.d.](#)).

In a 2022 survey by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab, 53% of North Carolina police departments had a co-response program, and 78% utilized a community partnership model ([UNC School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab, 2022](#)). For example:

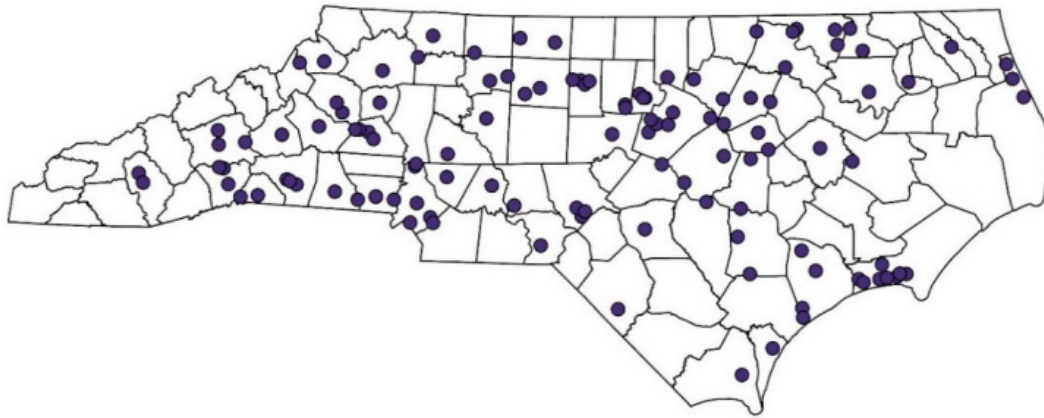
- **Chapel Hill, Durham, Buncombe County, and Greenville:** These areas provide on-site emergency assistance alongside responding officers in crises ([UNC School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab, 2022](#)).
- **Durham's Crisis Intervention Team:** This team collaborates with clinicians to connect individuals in crisis with appropriate social services ([City of Durham, n.d.](#)).
- **Burlington Police Department's Law Enforcement Crisis Counselor (LECC) Program:** In this model, a clinical mental health counselor responds to behavioral health-related calls with law enforcement to provide care at the scene and connect people to services ([Turner, 2024](#)).

Another example of an alternative response program is North Carolina's 9-8-8 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, whose counselors answered 73,465 contacts for help between July 2022 and June 2023 ([Knopf, 2023](#)). This service provides immediate assistance without involving law enforcement ([Knopf, 2023](#)).

Recognizing the need for innovation, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services announced in May 2024 a \$1.35 million investment to begin piloting trauma-informed mobile crisis and crisis co-responder services ([NCDHHS, 2024](#)). These services would deploy trained and experienced teams to respond to people experiencing a behavioral health emergency, in addition to deploying

Figure 2

Map of Current Alternative Responder Programs



Source: Smith et al., 2023 (https://live-cjil.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ARP-Final-Report_2023.7.31.pdf).

mental health professionals and peer support specialists who can de-escalate crises and provide appropriate support (NCDHHS, 2024).

In North Carolina, serious mental illness affects 15% of men and 31% of women in jails, and 85% of the prison population has a substance use disorder or was incarcerated for a crime related to substance use (NCDHHS, 2024). Kelly Crosbie, the Director of the NCDHHS Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services, explained,

Handcuffs and emergency departments can be disorienting and traumatizing for people experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis...By investing in trained responders with mental health expertise, we are building a more compassionate system that prioritizes de-escalation and connects people to the support they need when they need it, setting them on a path to recovery. This is one of the ways we're shifting our entire system from a state of crisis to a state of care. (NCDHHS, 2024)

CHALLENGES

Despite the evidence-backed benefits, adopting alternative police crisis response models presents several challenges. Barriers include skepticism and resistance within law enforcement agencies, resource restrictions, and the need for continued comprehensive crisis response training. These barriers can be overcome with department and community support, dedicated funding, and ongoing education and collaboration efforts (Ors, 2023). Sustaining these programs is crucial but expensive. Utilizing private foundation grants, partnering with non-profits, and leveraging local, state, and federal funding opportunities can help fund and ensure the sustainability of these models.

Around the country, there are countless examples of ways communities have found funding or justified budget allocations to incorporate alternative police crisis response models into their communities.

In 2023, Providence, Rhode Island, budgeted over \$700,000 in general funds for its alternative police crisis response program and identified \$1.75 million in ARPA funding to expand it (Policing Project, n.d.).

In Denver, Colorado, the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment's Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) program costs four times less to respond to incidents than if the police were to respond, as the average cost of the STAR program is \$151 per incident, compared to \$646 per incident for police ([Martín et al., 2024](#)).

Many North Carolina police departments partner with local universities to offset the costs of housing full-time alternative response staff, and 23 western counties—including Buncombe ([n.d.](#)), Cherokee, and Jackson—have partnered with Western North Carolina University's Smoky Mountain LME/MCO ([2014](#)) for mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse services.

RESPONSE RECOMMENDATIONS

Alternative police crisis responses must be implemented in collaboration with traditional police forces, not in place of traditional policing methods. In a publication by *Psychiatry Services*, researchers recognize, "Successful approaches to connect people to behavioral health care in lieu of emergency departments and jails require collaboration between law enforcement and a crisis system that can easily accept individuals in crisis and provide care in the safest and least restrictive setting possible" ([Balfour et al., 2022](#)). Certain situations may present significant safety risks to situationally involved or uninvolved citizens, and some behavioral health emergencies may not be evident until

law enforcement has responded. Addressing these complex challenges requires collaboration between law enforcement, alternative responders, and the greater healthcare system to tailor the appropriate response for each scenario, whether that involves law enforcement, clinicians, or a joint response with shared responsibilities ([Balfour et al., 2022](#)).

CONCLUSION

Alternative police crisis response models offer a promising path forward in enhancing public safety and improving outcomes for communities and law enforcement officers ([Beck et al., 2020](#)). By prioritizing de-escalation, community engagement, and officer well-being, these models have demonstrated significant benefits, including reduced use of force, improved community trust, and better officer retention ([Irwin & Pearl, 2020](#)). Policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and communities must support adopting alternative approaches to crisis response.

North Carolina is building on the realized benefits of alternative police crisis response programs as a complement to the work of law enforcement. Trained crisis-response professionals can de-escalate crises and provide continual resources to distressed individuals when public safety is not an issue. Investing in alternative response programs enhances public safety by providing a more efficient way to address the growing number of non-traditional police emergencies, which allows law enforcement officers to focus on maintaining safety. ■

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