ESSAY-040 | BOUNDARY CONDITIONS SERIES

The Wrong Argument

Why the policing debate keeps failing to reach the actual problem

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Signal and Consequence Series

The call comes in as a disturbance.

A voice, unsteady. Someone is shouting. Maybe throwing things. No clear words at first, then fragments: he's not making sense, he hasn't slept, he's scaring me.

The dispatcher asks the questions they're trained to ask.

Is anyone hurt.

No.

Are there weapons.

I don't think so.

Is he threatening anyone.

I don't know.

The address is familiar. Prior calls. Nothing violent.

Thirty seconds have passed.

There are only two systems that can be sent. One can use force. One cannot. Only one is always available. Only one is guaranteed to take control if the situation turns.

The dispatcher chooses before the call ends.

Everything that follows depends on that choice.

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Two things are true about what happens next.

If police arrive and the situation is exactly what it sounds like — a man in crisis, exhausted, frightened — the call will likely end without incident. It will also be logged as a police response to a disturbance. The system will have worked, by its own measure.

If police are not sent and the situation is something else — if the exhaustion is concealing something, if the fear in the caller's voice was tracking something real — the window closes before anyone with authority arrives.

The dispatcher cannot know which of these is true. The decision still has to be made.

This is not a failure of training. It is not a failure of funding. It is not a failure of the people inside the system.

It is a structural problem. And the argument about policing in America, on every side, has been happening almost entirely downstream of it.

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For the last several years, two positions have dominated that argument.

The first holds that police are overused, that the system applies force where none is needed, that the harms produced by that misapplication fall unevenly and predictably on specific communities, and that money currently flowing to police should be redirected toward systems better suited to the actual problems being presented.

The second holds that policing is essential, that removing capacity creates danger, that crime is real and response time matters, and that the people most harmed by under-policing are often the same communities invoked in the argument for reduction.

Both positions contain true observations. Neither one identifies the actual problem.

The argument has been about volume and about values. It has not been about structure. That is why it has not resolved.

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To see the structural problem, you have to look at what policing is actually being asked to do.

On any given shift, officers respond to calls that fall into roughly three categories.

The first is what the system was designed for: violence, credible threat, situations where someone has or is about to cause serious harm. These calls require the capacity to apply coercive force. They are the core function of policing.

The second is administrative and investigative: reports taken after the fact, custody transfers, documentation for court. These require legal authority but not immediate force capability.

The third is something else entirely: mental health crises, welfare checks, domestic disputes that have not turned violent, people in addiction, people sleeping in places they are not supposed to sleep. These calls present human distress. They do not, in most cases, present violence. They require someone capable of de-escalation, assessment, connection to services, presence. They do not require the capacity to apply force.

The system routes all three categories through the same structure.

That is the problem.

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When a single system handles incompatible types of load, it optimizes for its most extreme requirement.

A force-capable system is trained, equipped, and legally authorized around the possibility of violence. That is appropriate for the first category of calls. It becomes a mismatch for the third. The officer who arrives at the apartment where a man has not slept in four days is arriving inside a system built for something else. They have the authority to arrest. They may not have the time, the training, or the structural support to do what the situation actually requires.

When force-optimized systems absorb non-force load, two things happen.

Outcomes degrade. The tools available do not match the problem. The system produces results — the call gets handled, the log gets filed — but the underlying condition is untouched. The same address generates another call. And another.

The system's error rate rises in ways that are hard to see from inside it. The officer is making real-time decisions under uncertainty with incomplete signal. The public evaluates those decisions afterward, with full information, in slow time. That mismatch, between the conditions of the decision and the conditions of the evaluation, generates most of the conflict that follows. The conflict is a symptom. The structural mismatch is the cause.

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The serious version of "Defund the Police," the argument underneath the slogan, was pointing at exactly this.

It identified that a force-optimized system was absorbing load it was not designed to handle. It proposed redirecting some of that load to systems better matched to it. Social workers for mental health calls. Mediation for disputes. Medical response for addiction. The logic was sound.

The implementation often was not.

In the versions that failed, capacity was reduced before alternative systems were built. The load did not go away. It went somewhere worse: delayed response, diffuse harm, calls that fell through gaps between systems that did not yet exist. The diagnosis was correct. The sequencing was wrong.

You cannot remove a boundary before you have built a replacement.

The critics of reform were pointing at something real too. Policing provides a guarantee. When everything else fails, when the situation is ambiguous and the stakes are asymmetric, one system will respond, will arrive, will have the authority to take control. That guarantee has value. Undermining it before building a replacement is removal, not reform.

Both sides were right about something. Neither was operating at the level where the problem actually lives.

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There is a second layer underneath the structural one, and it explains why the system has not changed even when the diagnosis is understood.

Non-coercive response is slow to show results. A mental health intervention that works produces nothing you can point to: the call that did not happen, the arrest that was not made, the crisis that de-escalated before it required documentation. Prevention does not generate a log entry. Success leaves no record.

Police response is fast and attributable. The car arrives. The situation is contained. Something happened and someone can claim it.

Political systems reward what can be seen and attributed within an election cycle. Long-horizon interventions that produce diffuse benefits are structurally harder to fund and harder to defend. Decision-makers who understand the structural problem still face a system that punishes them for solving it. Incentives govern what gets built, regardless of what anyone knows.

So the loop continues. Resources flow toward containment. Non-coercive infrastructure remains underdeveloped. The load that should route elsewhere keeps entering the same system. The same addresses generate the same calls.

The system is failing to change because the solution is structurally disincentivized.

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Which brings us back to the dispatcher.

Police are the default response because they are the only system trusted when classification is uncertain.

Any alternative system, any redesign that routes non-coercive load to non-coercive responders, has to clear a specific threshold to be trusted at dispatch. The dispatcher's question is not about outcomes in ideal conditions. It is about what happens when the classification turns out to be wrong.

That is a much harder bar. And most reform proposals have never addressed it directly.

A non-coercive system becomes viable at dispatch when it can demonstrate four things.

Containment capacity.

The system is able to stabilize a scene without applying or threatening physical force, including in scenarios where the subject is uncooperative, agitated, or unpredictable. If it cannot create separation and sustain it without coercion, it cannot be the primary responder.

Rapid escalation pathway.

When containment fails, coercive authority must be able to enter the situation fast enough to preserve the window for intervention. This pathway has to be pre-built and time-guaranteed. Without it, the dispatcher cannot accept the risk of routing a call away from a force-capable unit.

Signal integrity under stress.

The system must be able to report accurate state information back to dispatch in real time. Is the situation stable, degrading, or escalating? If dispatch loses the thread, the routing decision cannot be corrected in time.

Bounded error.

The system will misread situations. The question is whether its errors remain recoverable, whether a misclassification creates a window for correction before the situation becomes irreversible. A system that fails catastrophically when wrong will never be trusted at dispatch, regardless of how well it performs when right.

These are structural requirements. A non-coercive system that cannot meet them is not ready to replace the default, regardless of how its outcomes look in controlled conditions.

The argument about policing has been fought at the level of values, outcomes, and resources. Those are real. They matter. They are also downstream.

The dispatcher is still on the line. Thirty seconds. Two systems. Incomplete signal. Irreversible consequences either way.

Until the design changes at that level, everything else is argument about symptoms.

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A companion instrument, the Dispatch Substitution Test (DST-001), provides a decision framework for evaluating non-coercive response systems at dispatch.

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