

Emergency contacts

When we encounter a crisis, it's helpful to have more phone numbers at the ready than just 911.

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When Talisa Coombs called the police on November 7, she was hoping they could defuse a tense domestic situation.

She had gone to visit her son, Mitchell Holder, his partner, Maria Pike, and their 11-week-old daughter, Destinii, at their apartment in Independence, Missouri. Coombs was worried about Pike, who had a history of mental illness and was being treated

for postpartum depression. According to Coombs, Pike attacked her when she arrived, so Coombs did what many other people might do: she called 911.

But about 20 minutes later, both Pike and her baby were dead, shot by one of the officers who arrived at the scene.

“Maria needed some help, that’s all,” Coombs later told local media. “I never asked them . . . to go upstairs into that apartment and shoot that baby and Maria.”

Most of us were taught from a young age that when we feel unsafe, we should call the police. And yet for many vulnerable populations, interactions with the police can be fatal. And if you’re Black or Brown or experiencing a mental health crisis, even calling for help in your own home could result in your death.

After a Minneapolis police officer responding to a call about a possibly counterfeit \$20 bill ended up murdering George Floyd in 2020, many municipalities started exploring policing alternatives. More than 20 cities across the US reduced their police budgets, opting to spend that money instead on social services. Some cities like Eugene, Oregon (see “Who shows up when you call 911?” January 27, 2021) and Durham, North Carolina (see “Nonviolent crisis response in my city,” August 2023) set up first-response teams, staffed by medical, mental health, and social work professionals.

But what if you don’t live in one of those cities? Or you’re facing an emergency, your fight-or-flight response has been triggered, and you’ve been conditioned since childhood to call the police—even if your thinking on policing has since changed?

According to organizers who work on policing alternatives, what you need is to have a plan in place—before there’s an emergency.

In some situations, having friends and neighbors who can arrive quickly and mediate a conflict may be enough. UK-based Abolitionist Futures suggests creating a phone tree of people who can be contacted in a crisis. Learning bystander intervention and de-escalation responses through a group like Right to Be may also be helpful.

But sometimes, more professional assistance is required. In those instances, organizers recommend having on hand the phone numbers of local and national organizations that provide nonviolent crisis services. Learning what’s available in your local area takes research, although dontcallthepolice.com could be a good

place to start. Groups exist to assist both people in crisis and those who are survivors of violent crimes.

Of course, there may still be times when calling 911 is the best available option. But we should do so aware of the gravity of that decision, of the risks it might pose to others—and with a commitment to working to bring about a world in which public safety is truly worthy of the name.