

# Suspicious Person Calls Audit

2014-2019



prepared for

City of Clayton, Police Department

Candorum Consulting LLC

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Both the Clayton Police Department and the ECDC call center deserve thanks for giving the fullest possible cooperation with this audit. Data was well documented and easily retrievable. Survey participation levels were high, with staff members at all levels offering a wealth of candid and insightful responses.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This audit was undertaken to study patterns in the origin, receipt of, and response to Suspicious Person calls (hereafter “SP calls”) by the Clayton Police Department.

Such calls have risen sharply in the past decade, from .7% of total call volume in 2009 to 1.7% last year.

As the rate of calls has doubled, their fidelity to crime has halved. Five years ago, 37% yielded an incident report, now only 17% do. This means such calls offer a low probability of preventing or solving crimes, and a high risk of false positive encounters.

There is consistent racial disparity in the calls, with African Americans 50% more likely than benchmark to be the subject described. This disparity does not arise from police conduct but is present in the calls themselves. In fact, officers are more skeptical of SP calls when the subject is described as Black, and show awareness of the structural factors giving rise to false suspicion.

A substantial fraction of SP calls involve minimal information. 35% lack a clear claim of suspicious behavior, and 40% lack specific subject descriptions.

In most cases this appears to be because callers themselves lack or decline to provide details, but there may nevertheless be room for process improvement aimed at raising the specificity of information gathered.

Officers are unanimous in a desire to receive more specific up-front information about the basis for suspicion and the subjects in Suspicious Person calls.

Several policy implications follow. We recommend CPD:

- 1) Sub-categorize SP calls to further encourage discretion and minimize contact.
- 2) Set targets for improving the quality and specificity of SP Call descriptions.
- 3) Conduct joint training between officers and dispatchers on SP Call response.
- 4) Train managers in strategies to further encourage discretion and de-escalation.
- 5) Communicate with citizens and businesses about the issue of false suspicion.
- 6) Work with Nextdoor.com to help users improve specificity of information shared.

## **WHY THIS MATTERS**

Why are suspicious person calls important? What makes this activity worth studying?

The best answer is provided by police officers themselves. During the 21CP consulting process, it was officers who identified Suspicious Person calls as a potential problem, an area where cops are frequently sent out with limited information, a low chance of solving or preventing crimes, and a high risk of mistaken identity.

The technical term for that is “low specificity” or “high risk of false positives”, but we should not let such language obscure the personal nature of what’s at stake.

For citizens, a mistaken encounter with police can produce negative consequences ranging in the worst cases to civil rights violation, injury, and death. And even if the most severe incidents are rare, the vivid image of these in the public mind may cause people to suffer acute anxiety, with effects that far outlast the moment. This is especially true among members of historically marginalized groups, for whom the experience of police contact can be profoundly alienating.

For officers, mistaken or unnecessary contacts consume time that could be better spent elsewhere, and deliver a focal setback to the goal of improving police-public relations.

Simply put, false positives are a lose-lose proposition. Both police and citizens share a common interest in seeing them reduced. If we can gain an understanding about where false positives come from, and better yet if we can find a way to reduce their number and impact, everyone would benefit.

That is the ultimate goal of this project.

## **SCOPE & LIMITATIONS:**

The scope of this audit was very specific in being limited to Suspicious Person calls.

As you read this report, bear in mind that the data examined and the patterns observed came from this one fairly narrow area of activity in the work of an otherwise busy police department. It is possible, indeed likely, that these findings have some wider relevance for the agency, and may inform future discussions in related policy areas, but care should be taken not to automatically generalize the results.

## **METHODS:**

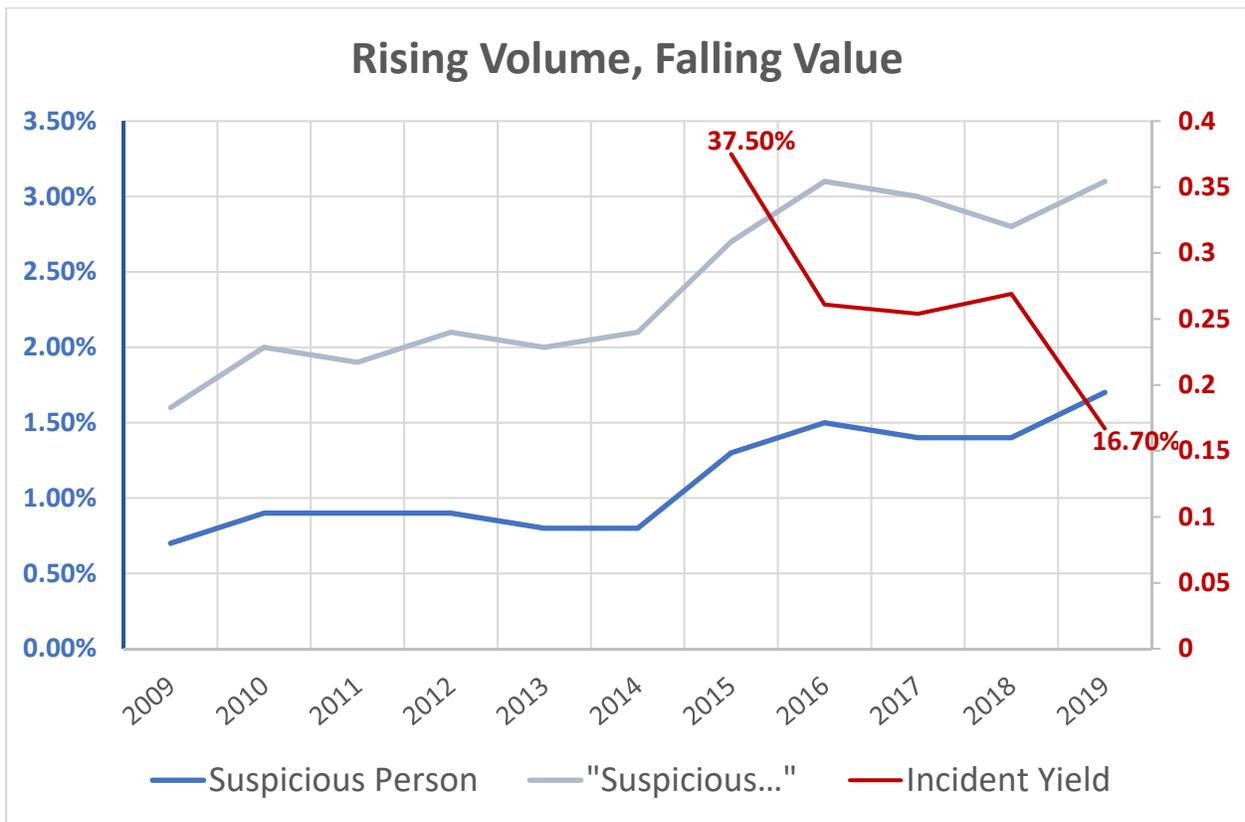
Data for this project was straightforward and amenable to simple analytic techniques. SP call volume was tracked going back 10 years, and benchmarked against all calls containing the keyword “suspicious”, against total calls for service, and against UCR crime stats. The index crimes used here were burglary and larceny, as these are the offenses most likely to present as a call for “Suspicion Person”. Call descriptions were coded as weak, intermediate, or strong on two dimensions: 1) activity cues (i.e. how clear was the basis for suspicion), 2) specificity of subject description (i.e. how clear was identification of the subject). Descriptions and incidents reports were spot checked. Call descriptions were also coded for race and gender of subject, as Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, or Unknown, and as Male, Female, or Unknown. Where possible descriptions were also coded for age and number of subjects. Response for different types of description were examined, using the “dispatch to arrival” time metric. Subject race descriptions were compared to a custom benchmark, based on the premise that Clayton police spend about 20% of their time interacting with Clayton residents (8% African-American), 60% interacting with residents of St. Louis City and County (29% African-American), and 20% interacting with justice-involved persons in Greater St. Louis (60% African-American), applying the nationwide multiple for the index crimes of burglary and larceny). By this assumption the expected rate for African Americans to appear in call descriptions would be  $31\% = (.08 \cdot .2) + (.29 \cdot .6) + (.6 \cdot .2)$ . Subjective impressions were also gathered from both officers and dispatchers, with a variety of questions and assessment tools (select responses can be found throughout this report in boxes marked “Featured Comments”). Finally, both officers and dispatchers were surveyed for feedback on the preliminary findings and policy recommendations in this report.

## SUSPICIOUS PERSON CALLS: FREQUENCY & TRENDS

As noted above, the frequency of SP calls has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2009 they accounted for only .7% percent of all calls, but in 2015 that fraction began trending upward, and they now represent 1.7% of total call volume. Considering there are about 325 different nature codes, this means that SP calls are many times more common than random chance would predict, representing a large draw on the service capacity of the department.

The trend is not happening in a vacuum, but is linked to a more general increase in suspicion. A similar pattern can be seen in calls for "Suspicious Occupied Vehicle" as revealed by a keyword search for all calls containing the word "suspicious".

## SP CALL YIELD - PERCEPTION & REALITY



How do officers perceive SP calls? How accurate is that perception according to the data?

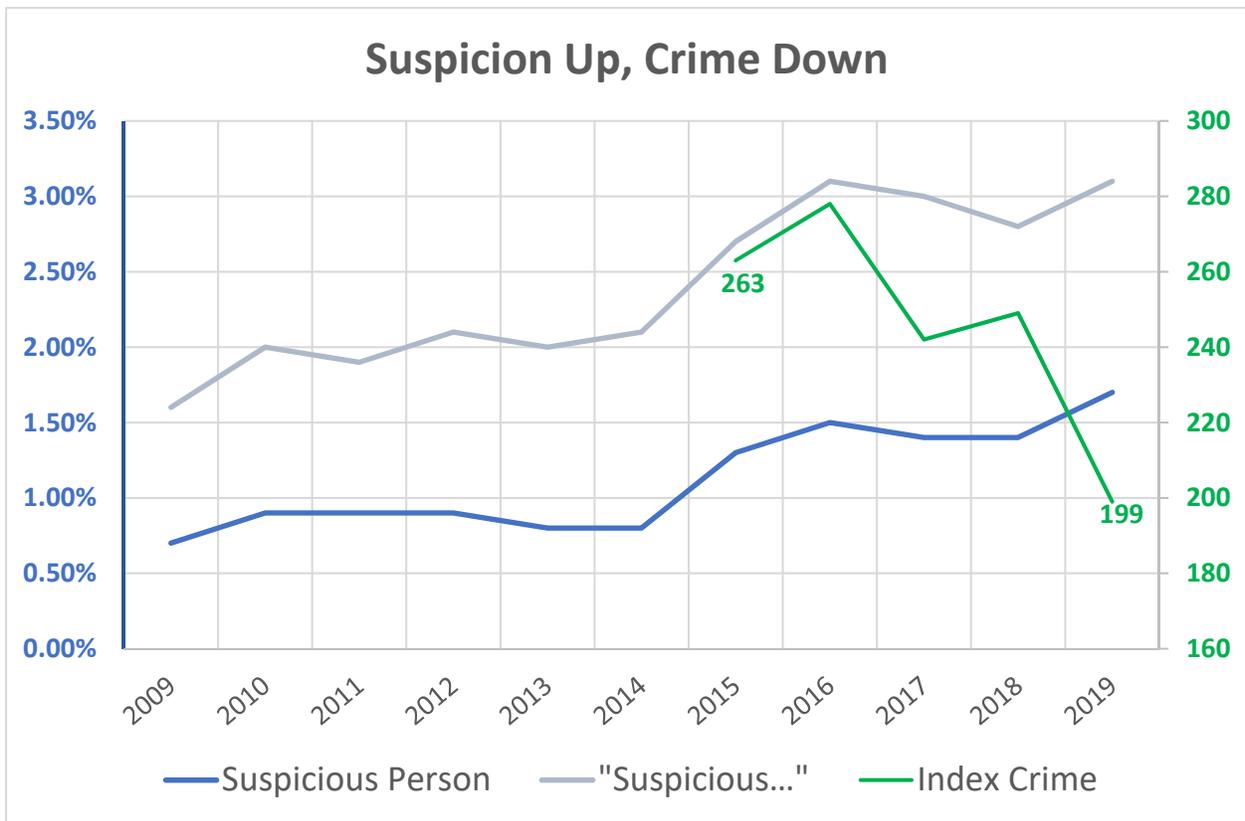
Clayton Police Officers were asked to estimate what percentage of SP calls correspond to any actual crime, and what percentage are misunderstandings or false alarms.

Respondents were unanimous in answering that “25% or fewer” of such calls “solve, interrupt, prevent, or otherwise reflect an actual crime”.

An analysis of incident/call ratios showed that officer perceptions in this area are quite accurate. In fact, as SP calls have increased, their yield has fallen dramatically. It was 37.5% in 2015, but it dropped to ~25% in 2017 and 2018, then dropped again to 17% last year.

This suggests that as SP calls grow, they also grow less connected to the reality of crime. Since 2015 SP calls have become twice as common, and half as productive. The skepticism officers feel toward them is well grounded in the facts.

### SUSPICION INVERSE TO CRIME



Nor can the rise in suspicion be explained by an objective increase in the rate of relevant crimes. During the same period when SP calls have gone up, the index crimes of burglary and larceny- i.e. those most likely to present as and form the basis for a valid SP call - have gone down almost 25%, from 263 combined incidents in 2015 to just 199 last year.

## FEATURED COMMENTS

What factors might help explain the recent increase in SP calls?

*“More information on social media. The people in the community also share more information on their own social media pages, especially those with home surveillance systems. People are sharing videos of criminals breaking into cars or just suspicious behavior on the Ring camera's app and on Nextdoor.”*

*“There has been a significant increase in crime [elsewhere] in the St Louis area. More people are aware of the issues and call the police more.”*

*“Neighbors seem less connected and people are more fearful of crime.”*

*“Technology and transparency. More residents have exterior cameras and they report suspicious activity/persons that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.”*

*“They share the crime information that has occurred in the community. This has created fear among some residents. They believed that they lived in a bubble and that no criminal activity occurred in Clayton. They are now more likely to report and even encouraged to report suspicious persons.”*

*“Social media outlets have encouraged residents to make reports simply and anonymously where they used to have to make a phone call and “become more involved”.*

*“I believe the trend shows that more people are calling to report suspicious persons with less and less suspicion of any actual criminal activity. People are more fearful of the world and base their suspicions off of fear and not facts.”*

## **RACIAL DISPARITY**

Do SP call patterns reveal a racial disparity? Yes. About 48% of calls involve a subject described by the caller as Black, as against 23% for whites and 24% for race unknown.

This is higher than predicted by the weighted benchmark set for this project, which put the expected rate for African Americans at 31%. The disparity index for SP calls was therefore 1.54, meaning African-Americans are over-represented in descriptions for this type of call, even after accounting for regional population effects and known differences in local rates of criminal justice involvement.

It's important to note this disparity is not produced by the actions of dispatchers or police officers. It is present in the calls themselves.

One concept that may explain the disparity is systemic or structural bias – a kind of bias that arises not from individual actions, but from larger social circumstances or structures.

There are good reasons to think that concept applies here. Greater St. Louis is a massive conurbation of 3,000,000 people divided into numerous, often very small and very different, political units. By census Clayton is home to only 16,000 of those people, but in practice its daily visitor population is many times that, and almost everyone who lives in this region travels to or through Clayton sometimes.

The city is demographically and economically distinct. It is only 8% Black, but seated in a county which is 25% Black, and neighboring a city which is 50% Black. To give just one example of the economic contrast, median household income in Clayton is \$88,000, but in the nearby city of Wellston it is \$18,000, and there 70% of the population lives below the poverty line. Traffic between the two towns is likely to be stilted, as there are many more reasons why a resident of Wellston would visit Clayton, than there are reasons for a resident of Clayton to visit Wellston. In terms of crime Clayton itself has very low rates, but the wider region includes areas where crime is endemic with large racial disparities. In neighboring St. Louis for example, it is common for 95% of homicide victims to be Black, and crime there dominates the local news, with predictable effects on public perception.

These are powerful structural factors outside the control of callers, dispatchers, and officers alike, and fully capable of causing the kind of disparity index seen here.

## **OFFICER BIAS**

As noted above, the patterns and disparities observed here cannot be attributed to officer bias because they occur upstream of police involvement.

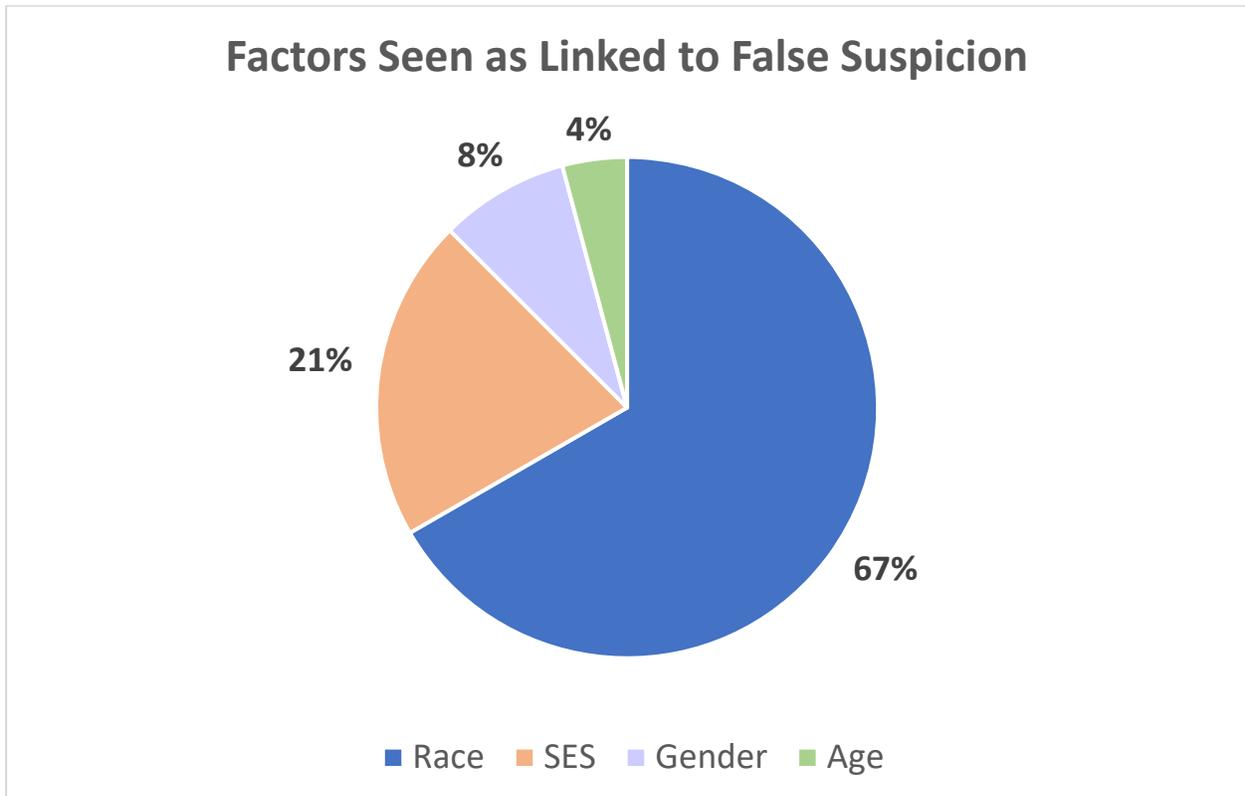
The data examined for this audit found no evidence of either explicit or implicit racial bias by CPD officers in response to calls of this type. Despite handling more than 3,500 SP calls in the past five years, there have been no complaints or allegations in this area - including bias-based profiling, excessive force, and uncivil treatment. Everything in the visible record suggests CPD officers make use of discretion, and apply sound tactics with effective de-escalation in this area.

In fact, CPD officers appear to behave in an actively anti- or counter-biased fashion when it comes to SP calls. An analysis of dispatch-to-arrival times shows that officers are actually slightly *slower* to respond to such calls when the subject is described as Black.

The most probable reason for this is that officers are aware of structural factors which put Black citizens at heightened risk for false positives suspicion, and as a result they

discount the credibility of incoming reports to correct for that risk. Simply put, officers seem to understand that a report of suspicious activity is slightly more likely to be credible if the subject is described as white, and more likely to be mistaken if the subject is Black.

Survey data confirms as much, with 67% of officers expressing the belief that race is the factor most often implicated in undue suspicion (21% identified socio-economic status, a factor with significant potential overlap).



This means a large majority of officers are aware of the disparity, and of the risk that African-American citizens and visitors face from false positive racial profiling.

#### FEATURED COMMENTS

How do officers perceive the problem of false positive suspicion?

*“95% of the time it's just a regular person walking around in the middle of the day just trying to get some steps logged on their step-counter and mind their own business.”*

*“Walkers should feel safe walking around the city and the neighborhoods without worrying someone thinks they look "out of place" and that they might have a negative interaction with the police.”*

*“Many suspicious person calls are for landscapers, utility workers, students, etc.”*

*“We might be sent to check on individuals who may be doing a contracting job on a house, or providing landscaping service. Then whichever officer responds looks like a jerk for harassing someone who is just trying to do their job.”*

*“I have seen 10x more false suspicious person calls...it's a little absurd. Police called on Black males in jogging suits running near WashU at 6am”*

*“Some people are hyper-sensitive to crime, based on the media and social media, and misunderstand what suspicious behavior really entails.”*

## **QUALITY OF DESCRIPTIONS**

How good were the descriptions provided for Suspicious Person calls?

This portion of the audit considered two dimensions: descriptions of the alleged suspicious activity, and descriptions of the subjects themselves.

About 65% of calls in the sample included a clear idea of suspicious activity - e.g. “subject trying door handles”, “subject peering into multiple parked cars”, etc.

And about 60% contained reasonably specific identifiers - e.g. height, clothing, location, number of subjects, etc.

Only 51% of Suspicious Person calls contained BOTH a clear activity cue and a clear means of identifying the subject.

The latter statistic shows significant overlap in the two kinds of quality. If a caller was good as describing their reason for suspicion, they tended also to be good at physically describing the subject. If a caller was vague on one dimension, they tended to be vague on the other as well.

This suggests call-takers and dispatchers are often working with the odds stacked against them. They can only extract such information as the caller has, and data suggests the limiting factor is often to be found there.

At the same time, it also presents a clear target for sub-categorizing and then de-prioritizing certain calls as deficient in both kinds of relevant information, and a metric to use for measuring success if indeed there is room for improvement in gaining more and better information from callers.

## FEATURED COMMENTS

### Why is specificity and description quality important?

“Often the information provided is inaccurate and other than being in the area the reporting party can not tell us what 'suspicious activity' is going on.”

“It is hard to have a complete understanding on the whole situation relative to SP calls because as officers we generally have no contact with the caller (most refuse contact)”

“Many of the people aren't actually doing anything wrong, but specifically even when people actually call 911. They actually don't provide any relevant information to give the perception as to why it might be suspicious.”

“Police and dispatchers can only work with the information provided.”

“It is really hard with poor descriptions that fail to state why the person is actually suspicious.”

## **INFORMATION PRIORITIES**

What do cops most want to know when receiving an SP call?

Officers' strongest preference by far was for a clear cue to the nature of suspicious activity. What is the subject actually *doing* to prompt the caller? What criminal or dangerous *behavior* rises to the level of warranting police contact?

Next after that was a preference for specific descriptors. How can the subject be distinguished from others, so as to minimize the risk of mistaken identity?

In terms of inherent characteristics like age, sex, race, etc. officers expressed less interest in race as a variable except as needed to complete an individual description. Indeed, given a choice of factors to inform their level of vigilance, officers most preferred to know the number of subjects, then their age, and after that their sex or gender. Considering that age and gender are indeed more significant correlates for justice involvement, this reflects a rational set of priorities on the officers' part.

It also helps suggest a guide for improvement. To the extent that both time and caller cooperation are scarce resources for dispatchers, they can try to prioritize questions to match the information officers need most.

**FEATURED COMMENTS**  
**What information do officers need most?**

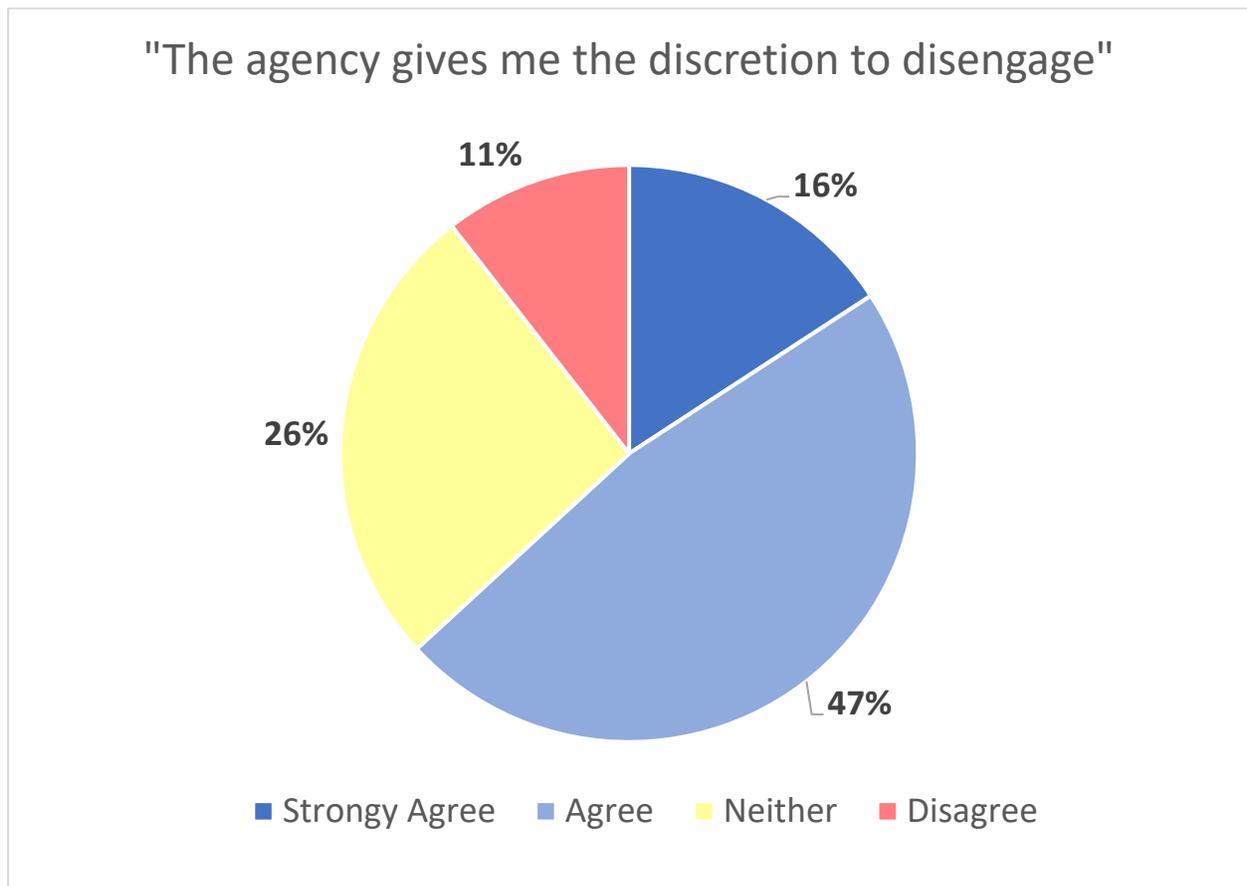
“Ask specifically what is ‘suspicious’ about the individual”

“Tell me what's suspicious about this person so I can decide what's the best approach to this call (I may not engage the person if suspicious behavior isn't articulated)..give me a solid description so I don't stop the wrong person.

“Keep the callers on the line to collect further information...so that we may get further details that they have failed to obtain”

**EFFECTIVE DISCRETION**

The good news is that the department has already made a start at limiting the impact of false suspicion in SP calls, by encouraging the use of officer discretion. The single most effective form of de-escalation is to forego contact altogether. Discretion allows individual officers to do just that, in cases where they deem the basis for suspicion is too scant or the subject description is too vague for contact to be well founded.



The survey results presented above show officers are aware of the false suspicion problem, and are disposed to use their discretion in a way that minimizes the risks of mistaken contact. In many cases it is only the officer on the scene who will have sufficient information to see when the best action to take is no action.

Like any other type of professional, police officers respond to incentives. If discretion is encouraged, they will tend to use it. If it is punished, they will tend not to in fear of being cited for failure to act. CPD has already built a solid foundation in this area, and can improve simply by continuing on the course already set.

## **CONCLUSION**

The growth of suspicious person calls and their apparent lack of connection to crime poses a problem for the city. If present trends continue, this year the department will field calls for suspicion person about 10 times per week, and about 5 of those calls will lack crucial information concerning both the basis for suspicion and the subjects involved.

If nothing else this represents an opportunity cost to public safety, by drawing police time and attention away from more productive activities. More serious though is the moral and political risk that comes from potential false positive encounters. Although in absolute terms the odds of a serious incident are very low, the impact can be so great as to justify even strenuous efforts at minimizing their occurrence. Especially when those efforts may set an example that helps illuminate similar initiatives in other areas.

In principle there are three strategies that might be used to approach the problem.

1. Reduce the number of SP calls.
2. Increase the specificity of SP call descriptions.
3. Reduce the odds of serious false positive incidents arising from SP calls.

In practice the best course of action is probably to pursue all three strategies at once. Each attacks a different part of the problem, but all combine to further the same goal: reducing the risk of false positive incidents.

Fortunately there are several ways to do this, none of which involve any radical change in policy nor departure from established practices, and all which are easily within the capacity of the Police Department and/or the Call Center.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1) Sub-categorize SP calls to label or flag those which lack both a clear claim of suspicious activity and a clear subject description. The purpose here would be to create an express path for officers and supervisors to use discretion, by communicating quickly which calls are least likely to require attention and/or yield results.
- 2) Stage a joint training session between CPD officers and ECDC personnel. The aim here is for cops and dispatchers to better understand each other, by understanding the practical problems their counterparts face. Dispatchers could learn more about what information officers need and why it's important, while officers could learn about the obstacles dispatchers face when trying to gather information from callers with varying degrees of acuity, awareness, and willingness to cooperate.
- 3) Set modest but significant improvement targets. If the current number of "rich" descriptions - those with both a clear cue to suspicious activity and a reasonably specific subject description - is 51%, a plausible near term goal might be to raise that to 60 or 65%. To rule out the possibility of operator error, ECDC should check to ensure individual call takers and dispatchers fall within statistical margin of error of that 51% baseline. Likely most of the variance in description quality originates with the callers, but it is worth the effort to make sure.
- 4) Include a block on discretion and incentive management during in-service for CPD supervisors. The agency already does well in fostering a culture of discretion, with a clear majority of officers surveyed expressing the belief that the agency allows for and supports their discretion. But this is such an important asset for CPD, it is worth the trouble to emphasize and formally reinforce through training.
- 5) Prepare public-facing communication and/or training materials to help citizens better understand what information is needed when calling the police for "Suspicious Person", and to help them understand the risks of false positive encounters, and to help them more clearly see which behaviors are likely to be correlated with an actual crime, and which are more likely innocuous. This might take the form of a webinar, a short video, or even live presentations at community meetings.
- 6) If possible, work with nextdoor.com on a pilot program to provide feedback and guidance to local users of the app. It's probable that Nextdoor's introduction has played some role – possibly even a key role – in driving the dramatic increase in SP calls. The company has a long term interest in mitigating side effects like this, especially those which might give rise to bias incidents or racially disparate impact, and its management has elsewhere shown a willingness to apply resources to such problems. They may agree to partner with Clayton for a focused effort here.