

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

An Analysis of McKinney Public Safety Communications: Is There a Need for Specialized Call
Takers?

A Policy Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Professional Designation
Graduate, Management Institute

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McKinney, Texas
September 1999

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ABSTRACT

The outcome of this policy research enables the McKinney Police Department to determine the workability in splitting current dispatcher tasks into these two more specific jobs of "call taker" and "dispatcher." And if not now, as calls for service increase, at what point in the future?

Historically, two methods have been utilized by law enforcement agencies in handling calls, especially when calls increase. One method is to have each position perform all of the many complex tasks of dispatching a call, and as calls increase, just add people. The other is to split the task of dispatching a call into two specialized positions; that of "call taking" and "call dispatching", and add positions in relation to the task demands.

An extensive survey of 50 Texas law enforcement agencies was conducted in this research. Several personal interviews of agency administrators that have in the past experienced growth similar McKinney's were conducted. Additional research in law enforcement communications journals was done.

Conclusions drawn from this research indicate that only the very large agencies of Texas benefit from having separate positions of call takers and dispatchers. The recommendation is that the McKinney Police Department's Communications Division continues with one job classification of dispatcher, rather than creating a new job classification of call taker. And as workload demands increase, add dispatchers.

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Introduction

The McKinney Police Department's Communications Division provides dispatch service for the City of McKinney Police Department, Fire Department, and Emergency Medical Service. The demands of each group require specialized training in their respective policies and procedures. Training as it relates to gathering of information from the caller, to policies and procedures in the dispatching of the proper response unit(s). In order to perform their job, each dispatcher must be trained in all of the different agencies policies and procedures. In the past five years the McKinney Police Department Communications Division has experienced a 65.8 percent increase in volume of calls for service from 1994-1998.

Historically, two methods have been utilized by law enforcement agencies in handling calls, especially when calls increase. One method is to have each position perform all of the many complex tasks of dispatching a call, and as calls increase, just add people. The other is to split the task of dispatching a call into two specialized positions; that of "call taking" and "call dispatching", and add positions in relation to the task demands.

The purpose of this policy research project is to do a job analysis of the McKinney Police Department's communications technician position, often referred to as dispatcher. This study will review the communications division; the operating procedure of handling calls for service, staffing of personnel, tasks performed in handling calls, and the need to increase personnel. The communications division's mission is to provide prompt dispatch service. This includes the answering of 9-1-1 calls, gathering needed information, processing this information, determining the appropriate service unit(s), and the dispatching of emergency unit(s), which are all important components of the dispatch service.

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The intended audience of the policy research project is the McKinney Police Department. However, other agencies considering splitting their dispatch operation into two specialized positions could benefit from it.

An extensive survey of agencies surrounding McKinney, in the Dallas-Forth Worth metropolitan area, was conducted for this research. Additional research in law enforcement communications journals was done.

The intended outcome of this policy research is to enable the McKinney Police Department to determine the workability in splitting current dispatcher tasks into these two more specific jobs of "call taker" and "dispatcher." And if not now, as calls for service increase, at what point in the future.

Historical, Legal or Theoretical Context

As early as the 1920's the benefit of effective law enforcement communications was realized as noted by then Police Commissioner Rutledge of Detroit, Michigan. While addressing the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) at its 1929 convention he stated: "Snaring criminals in a radio network woven by broadcasting to radio equipped cars has become a matter of seconds...With the use of radio communication between Headquarters and the patrol cars, we are catching criminals red-handed" (Hickes, 1990).

The communications function, whether integrated into one function in a small department or divided into two functions in larger departments is found as early as the late 1950's and 1960's. Conveyor belt type systems were very popular and widely used during this era by large agencies. Larger agencies such as St. Louis, Missouri and Dallas, Texas police departments are examples of agencies that used manual systems to move "call cards" from telephone operators to radio dispatchers (Weaver, 1993).

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During the 1960's and early 1970's police agencies throughout America began placing non-police officers (civilians) within various positions. The transferring out of police officers from police communications divisions and replacing them with civilians made up the majority of this trend of civilianization of police departments (Shernock, 1988). This was to increase the effectiveness of police departments by allowing police officers to perform duties that they were hired and trained (Weaver, 1985).

As a result police communications divisions became a specialized unit of the police agencies. Civilians in these positions performed both telephone intake and call dispatching functions (Shernock, 1988).

Another trend in order to provide more effective police communications is the use of computer aided dispatch systems. True automated computer aided dispatch, CAD, as we know them, started to appear in police communications centers in the early 1970's (Weaver, 1993). Although a good CAD system is primarily a data gathering tool and allows call handling to be more efficient (Pilant, 1996).

Police communications has come a long way from patrol wagons using telephone call boxes located throughout their law enforcement jurisdiction to get dispatch information, to highly sophisticated CAD systems and multi-channel radio systems. With technological advancements and ever increasing calls for police services the demand for well-trained and highly skilled communications personnel is greater today than yester-years (JT Seminars, 1995).

The McKinney Police Department began hiring civilian dispatchers and placing them in communications center in the late 1960's. Originally there were three. One per eight hour shift. Police patrol officers staffed days off, holidays, vacations, and other leaves of absence. These dispatchers performed a wide variety of other duties besides just call intake and call dispatching,

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including jail monitoring, clerical typing duties, and telephone receptionist for the department. In the early 1980's enough dispatchers positions were added to allow the communications center to be staffed 24 hours a day 7 days a week by "dispatchers." However, police patrol officers still made break and meal relief. This trend continued through the 1980's (See Appendices D).

As the McKinney Police Department grew in size and increase of calls for service demands, dispatchers were added. In fiscal year 1989-1990, to increase the staffing of the communications center and provide more efficient use of dispatching personnel the three McKinney Fire Department dispatchers were merged with the police communications center dispatch. This increased the staffing level and for the first time there were enough dispatchers to provide for more than just one during peak workload hours (See Appendices D).

Initially, the police dispatchers continued to do what they were hired and trained to do, police call dispatching. Likewise the fire dispatchers continued to do what they were trained to do, fire and medical service call dispatching. However, as the three fire dispatchers retired or resigned, their replacement were hired with the understanding that they would be trained in both police and fire service dispatching.

From 1990 through 1996 the McKinney Police Department communications division made several changes. Key changes was an upgrade in the CAD system that is capable of handling both police and fire calls. Each dispatcher was crossed trained in both police call handling and fire call handling. Currently there is a police dispatch workstation and a fire dispatch workstation and all communications personnel are able to inter-change.

Looking toward the future and anticipating growth, in the fall of 1996, three dispatcher positions were upgraded to that of Communications Shift Supervisors. Currently all communi-

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cations personnel, including the shift supervisors, are trained in all areas of public safety communications and perform these multi-task duties interchangeably.

Review of Literature or Practice

The dynamic growth of the City of McKinney in the past several years has greatly increased the workload of the McKinney Police Department communications division. In the past five years calls for service have increased 65.8 percent (1994-1998) (See Appendices E). This necessitates the need for a review of the operating procedure of handling calls for service, and adequate staffing of personnel, in order to continue providing a high level of public safety communications services.

An extensive review of research literature and an extensive review of other Texas law enforcement agencies communications divisions operations was conducted. The majority of the communications research literature found dealt with technology advancements, such as improvements to CAD and multi-channel radio systems, or various communications training literature. No material was discovered related to the decision of when an agency should split the two basic functions of police communications--of call intake and call dispatching.

A survey of 50 Texas law enforcement agencies was conducted to obtain data for this research. Each agency was sent a questionnaire asking the same questions; whether the agency's communications had two separate positions for call intake and call dispatching and if not has their agency considered doing this. Also, their input was solicited pertaining to advantages and disadvantages of splitting communications functions into two separate positions.

For a list of law enforcement agencies a questionnaire was sent to see Appendices A. Of the 50 agencies surveyed 28 responded (See Appendices B).

A key question asked, does your agency have communications call taker positions, 7 of the responding agencies said yes and 21 responded no. Or 25 percent do have call takers and 75 percent do not. In response to the question if they do not have call taker positions, has your agency considered creating a separate call taker position. Of the 21 agencies not having call taker positions, 3 said they had or were considering splitting the dispatch function into two separate positions. This results in 14.3 percent considering and 85.7 percent not considering (See Appendices C).

Three agencies of the 21 agencies responding that they currently do not have call taker positions stated that they had tried having separate call taker positions and it did not work. All three of these agencies, Abilene, Lubbock, and Richardson are larger than McKinney and handle a larger volume of calls for service (See Appendices B).

Two of the 7 agencies responding that they currently have separate positions for call takers and call dispatching, Irving and Plano police departments, are considering returning to one position of dispatcher to handle their call taking and call dispatching needs.

Irving Police Department stated that they are in the process of phasing out call takers and replacing them with dispatchers. (Notations made on returned survey/questionnaire.)

Donna Naylor, Director, Plano Texas Public Safety Communications, mentioned in a personnel interview (September 1999), that they are strongly considering returning to a single position of dispatcher. They have already moved their call takers from a separate room back to the same room housing their dispatchers.

A closer review of the seven agencies responding that they have two separate specialized positions to handle communications service needs revealed they are all very large police agencies. They all have a substantial more number of calls for service as well. In parallel they have a

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greater number of personnel assigned to their communications divisions. The contrast shown is very large agencies do split the communications into two separate positions, and smaller agencies do not (See Appendices B and C).

Discussion of Relevant Issues

Lieutenant Mel Synder of the Irving Police Department made some interesting comments in his questionnaire. Lieutenant Synder acknowledges that training a call taker is relatively quicker than training a dispatcher. And even more so than training a person to do both call intake and call dispatching. However, he cited several key reasons why Irving Police Department is returning to having only one position--dispatcher. Three key reasons given: 1) lack of mobility, 2) manpower/staffing, and 3) mentality/attitude. (Notations made on Survey/Questionnaire, Chilton, 1999).

Explaining his reasons in more detail: First, lack of mobility--they (call taker) can not relieve or fill-in for dispatchers and vice versa. Second, manpower (staffing)--takes more people to fill two separate positions. And third, mentality (attitude)--call takers vs. dispatchers. The us and them attitude, especially if they are housed in the same area. (Notation made on questionnaire).

Dr. Sam Souryal, Criminal Justice Professor at Sam Houston State University, echoes the last key reason, us versus them, mentioned by Lieutenant Synder. In his book Police Organization and Administration, Dr. Souryal reviews specialization task within a law enforcement agency, of which the splitting of communications functions into two jobs, is. Dr. Souryal states a key disadvantage of specialization is: "specialists may develop a status consciousness--that is, they may become aloof or snobbish" (Souryal, 1995).

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Hoping to gain valuable information from area agencies which have already experienced growth similar to that of what McKinney is currently experiencing, both Plano Police Department and Garland Police Department were contacted for on-site visits. Both of these agencies have grown from small agencies to large agencies of the Dallas Fort Worth Metro-Plex.

Both Donna Naylor, Director, and Tammy Knight, Manager, of Plano Public Safety Communications echoed Lt. Mel Synders' advantages and disadvantages of having separate positions for call takers and call dispatchers. Ms. Naylor pointed out that they had tried several things to become a more efficient dispatch operation. At one time they had physically separated their call takers from their dispatchers--in separate rooms. But recently they had placed the call takers within the same work area of the dispatchers. One primary reason for doing this is for the two groups to better interact; sharing call information directly, and to assist one another when the other needed help. She reiterated that they are strongly considering returning to one position of dispatcher (Naylor, 1999 and Kennedy, 1999).

Krista Roberts, Manager of Police Communications, Garland Police Department was also interviewed. She stated that Garland PD like Plano PD has returned their call takers to the same area as dispatchers by removal of a dividing wall. Ms. Roberts reports for reasons similar to those mentioned by Irving PD and Plano PD, that all of her communications personnel are cross-trained. They receive equal salaries. Her reasoning is you have more flexibility in scheduling. She further elaborated that when someone is sick or away on leave, you are not limited to just a special group to replace the missing person. Another key advantage she mentioned by having all personnel cross-trained in the total communications operation is it helps eliminate burnout. People have less of a chance to become stagnant and bored in their position (Roberts, 1999).

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All three agencies: Irving, Garland, and Plano mentioned lack of mobility of personnel as one of the key disadvantages of having two separate positions. All agreed that this should be carefully considered and with greater caution for smaller agencies. For example, one dispatcher short, either temporary when one calls in sick or long term when there is a vacancy, has far greater impact on a smaller agency than a larger agency. Compare Garland PD being one short is 2.3 percent decrease in staffing as to McKinney being one short is 7.7 percent. Another example, currently McKinney is 4 people short or 30.8 percent as compared to Plano being 7 people short or 13.5 percent below budget staffing allotment.

Advantages and disadvantages of splitting communications tasks into two separate positions were solicited from surveyed agencies. Several key issues were repeated. The following is a review of the most common ones mentioned.

Advantages:

- ✓ Reduced training time. Call taker's training can focus on call taking and dispatcher's training can focus on call dispatching.
- ✓ Salary. Call takers' salaries historically and in general practice are lower than those of dispatchers.
- ✓ Effective for high volume of calls. Call takers can focus on incoming calls. While dispatchers can focus on radio transmissions and field units' safety needs.

Disadvantages:

- ✓ Staffing limitations. Lack of mobility. Can not use call taker as dispatcher or use dispatcher (radio operator) as a call taker.
- ✓ Additional Staffing. More people are needed to fill both positions.

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- ✓ Mentality/Competition. Call takers versus Dispatcher. Especially if housed in the same area.
- ✓ Disparity in workload. Incoming calls are slow and radio activity is high or vice. This results in an, "I'm working harder than you!" morale issue.
- ✓ Lack of continuum of call information. Creates more chance of critical information getting lost or misinterpreted. (Notations made on Survey/Questionnaire, Chilton, 1999).

One of the key reasons for agency administrators to choose to create call taker positions within their communications divisions is economics; cheaper salaries for call takers.

An argument can be made that using call takers, who generally are paid less than dispatcher, is a more economical. Others could argue that this is not true should an agency not have a sufficient level of incoming calls to keep the call taker busy. Reviews of agencies having separate positions of call takers and dispatchers indicate that call takers salaries are less than dispatchers. Some of the surveyed agencies that have separate positions of call takers and dispatchers provided salary information. Those supplying this information gave either the same salary for both positions, or indicated call takers salaries were less. Agencies paying less for call takers averaged 14 percent less than dispatchers. (Notations made on Survey/Questionnaire, Chilton, 1999).

McKinney Police Department's current base salary for entry level dispatchers is \$24,406 annually. Using the average of call takers being paid 14 percent less than dispatchers this would equal an annual salary of \$20,989. Considering our growth trends of call for service, at a minimum 2 dispatchers will be needed in the next two years to maintain current call workload ratio per position. By city planning standards the growth trend appears to continue far into the next

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several years. Should McKinney PD hire 2 call takers in lieu of 2 dispatchers base salary savings would be at least \$6,834 (City of McKinney Salary Schedule FY98-99).

These 2 call takers could be added to free-up dispatchers to handle call dispatching and attentiveness to radio traffic. They could be scheduled to be on duty during peak workload periods. An example of scheduling could be to staff them 4 days a week on 10-hour shifts, Wednesday through Sunday for the hours of 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM and 5:00 PM to 3:00 AM.

Initially this appears to be a savings. However, one must take into consideration the totality of the issue and also consider all other advantages and disadvantages. In particular those pointed out by agencies already having experienced this issue.

In order to implement call takers around the clock, that is for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, a minimum of 5 positions is needed. (Consider hours in a year and hours a person is available subtracting days off and all other leaves of absence.) In order to hire 5 people at \$20,989 equals \$104,945 or \$56,133 more than the salaries of 2 additional dispatchers.

However, it appears that it is the very large agencies that truly have separate call takers and dispatchers truly can be benefited by separate positions due to their very high incoming call and radio volumes. These agencies responding to this research survey are San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth and Austin. All four of these law enforcement agencies have population of 500,000 or greater (See Appendices B and C).

David Wyman of Wyman and Associates, a management consulting group, was contacted for insights into this research. As a professional management consultant since 1985 he stated that "This works well (separation of police and fire dispatch service and specialization of call takers and dispatchers), I believe, in cities over 300,000 but it isn't efficient in smaller cities." He also pointed out many of the same advantages and disadvantages for splitting the communica-

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tions functions into two separate job positions of call taker and dispatcher as gathered from surveyed law enforcement agencies. He allured to focusing on specialty training for each of these two major task (Wyman, 1999).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The purpose of this policy research project was to do an extensive survey of Texas law enforcement agencies, in particular those of the Dallas Fort Worth metropolitan area, and a review of available law enforcement communications literature, to determine the workability in splitting current dispatcher task into two more specialized positions of "call taker" and "dispatcher" of the McKinney Police Department.

Historically, two methods have been utilized by law enforcement agencies in handling calls, especially when calls increase. One method is to have each position perform all of the many complex tasks of dispatching a call, and as calls increase, just add people. The other is to split the task of dispatching a call into two specialized positions; that of "call taking" and "call dispatching", and add positions in relation to the increase in task demands.

In the past five years the McKinney Police Department Communications Division has experienced a 65.8 percent increase in volume of calls for service (1994-1998). As calls for service increase, at what point should the McKinney Police Department consider splitting the dispatcher's task into call taker position and dispatcher position? If not now, at what point in the future?

Careful consideration should be given to the experience gained by other law enforcement agencies that have grown from small agencies relevant to McKinney's current size into much larger agencies. Some four to five times larger.

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With the findings of this policy research project in mind, it is recommended that the McKinney Police Department's Communications Division continue with one job classification of dispatcher, rather than creating a new job classification of call taker. And as workload demands increase add dispatchers.

In addition it is recommended that the dispatcher's training program is reviewed and changes made to align the training into units related to the various workstation roles. A continuum from unit to unit should be developed to progressively increase the dispatchers knowledge and develop broader skills from the initial call taking to the call dispatching; including the differences in police service dispatch and fire/EMS service dispatch.

These workstation-focused units of training would provide for the training program to be broken down into learnable units, and at the same time provide for complete cross training of the dispatch function. Scheduled rotations for veteran dispatchers throughout the various workstations should be done to provide more flexible staffing, improved mobility of personnel, and reduce burnout and turnover.

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APPENDICES A

Texas Law Enforcement Agencies Surveyed

Abilene PD	Lufkin PD
Allen PD	McKinney PD
Arlington PD	Mesquite PD
Austin PD	Midland PD
Beaumont PD	Nacogdoches PD
Carrollton PD	North Richland Hills PD
Dallas PD	Odessa PD
Denison PD	Pflugerville PD
Denton PD	Richardson PD
Everman PD	Rockwall PD
Farmers Branch PD	Round Rock PD
Fort Worth PD	Rowlett PD
Frisco PD	San Angelo PD
Gainesville PD	San Antonio PD
Garland PD	San Marcos PD
Grand Prairie PD	Sherman PD
Grapevine PD	Stephenville PD
Greenville PD	Sugarland PD
Haltom City PD	Temple PD
Huntsville PD	Texarkana PD
Hurst PD	Tyler PD
Irving PD	Waco PD
Lewisville PD	Waxahachie PD
Longview PD	Weatherford PD
Lubbock PD	Wichita Falls PD

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APPENDICES B

Agencies Responding To Survey Calls for Service and Population 1998

Agency	Service	Population	Calls
Abilene PD	PD/FD	113,300	149,400
Allen PD	PD/FD/EMS	41,150	47,421
Austin PD	PD	500,000	526,800
Dallas PD	PD	1,030,500	999,700
Everman PD	PD/FD/EMS	8,400	6,261
Farmers Branch PD	PD/FD/EMS	24,500	16,273
Fort Worth PD	PD	500,000	365,862
Frisco PD	PD/FD/EMS	28,000	30,855
Gainesville PD	PD	14,500	17,409
Garland PD	PD/FD/EMS	202,000	133,084
Grapevine PD	PD/FD/EMS	37,000	26,976
Greenville PD	PD/FD	23,708	5,407
Huntsville PD	PD/FD/EMS/CO	34,774	25,171
Hurst PD	PD/FD/EMS	37,000	50,600
Irving PD	PD	180,060	132,646
Lubbock PD	PD/FD	198,000	227,022
Lufkin PD	PD/FD/EMS	38,000	30,397
McKinney PD	PD/FD/EMS	47,500	33,091
Mesquite PD	PD/FD/EMS	116,350	92,915
Midland PD	PD/FD/EMS/CO	57,704	93,449
North Richland Hills PD	PD/FD/EMS	53,150	117,671
Odessa PD	PD/FD/EMS/CO	89,000	11,315
Plano PD	PD/FD/EMS	204,000	118,239
Richardson PD	PD/FD/EMS	86,700	62,189
San Angelo PD	PD/FD/EMS	94,000	34,700
San Antonio PD	PD	1,200,000	1,500,000
Sugarland PD	PD/FD	59,700	46,436
Waxahachie PD	PD	25,000	33,899

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APPENDICES C

Agencies Responding To Survey Call Taker Position 1998

Agency	Yes	No
Abilene PD		✓
Allen PD		✓
Austin PD	✓	
Dallas PD	✓	
Farmers Branch PD		✓
Everman PD		✓
Fort Worth PD	✓	
Frisco PD		✓
Gainesville PD		✓
Garland PD	✓	
Grapevine PD		✓
Greenville PD		✓
Huntsville PD		✓
Hurst PD		✓
Irving PD	✓	
Lubbock PD		✓
Lufkin PD		✓
McKinney PD		✓
Mesquite PD		✓
Midland PD (County)		✓
North Richland Hills PD		✓
Odessa PD (Emergency Comm)		✓
Plano PD	✓	
Richardson PD		✓
San Angelo PD		✓
San Antonio PD	✓	
Sugarland PD		✓
Waxahachie PD		✓

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APPENDICES D

Growth of McKinney PD Communications 1977 - 1999

Year	Dispatchers	Calls For Service
1977	3	12,000
1978	3	12,640
1979	3	13,000
1980	4	13,432
1981	4	12,650
1982	5	12,877
1983	5	13,139
1984	5	13,056
1985	5	13,494
1986	5	13,736
1987	5	14,031
1988	5	11,783
1989	5	12,656
1990	7	14,680
1991	9	NA
1992	9	NA
1993	9	19,295
1994	10	21,769
1995	10	23,930
1996	10	27,950
1997	11	32,083
1998	11	33,091
1999	13	37,005

1979 - Added 4th dispatcher mid-year

1988 - Stopped counting traffic stops as calls for service

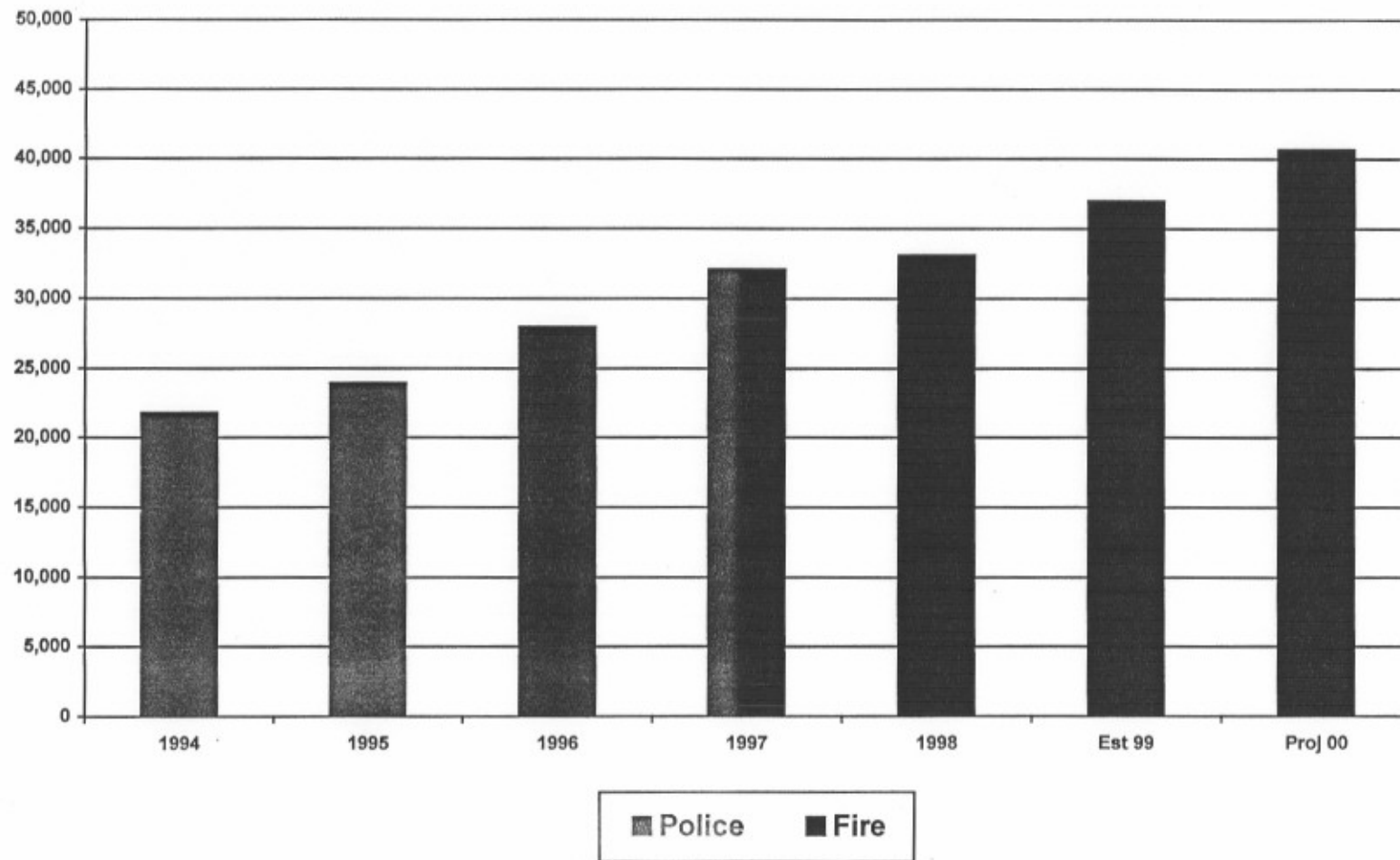
1991 & 1992 - Calls for Service unavailable

1999 - Estimate - Calls for Service

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APPENDICES E

Calls for Service (Police/Fire)
McKinney Public Safety Dispatch
1994-98



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