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# 911 Dispatchers: Their Role as Evidence Collectors

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911 Dispatchers: Their Role as Evidence Collectors

A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Masters in Forensic Psychology

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

City University of New York

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### Abstract

911 dispatchers are often the first point of contact after an individual is in an accident, needs emergency assistance, or witnesses a crime. In an emergency involving a crime, a dispatcher can play an important role in assisting the investigative process and collecting evidence, such as an eyewitness' description of the suspect. While trained in how to gather situational and locational information from a caller so that relevant first responders can be notified, dispatchers may not be trained on how the specific language they use with a caller can impact the caller's memory for the event. Thus, if dispatchers are not being trained on how to interview witnesses, it is possible that dispatchers may engage in the use of techniques and practices, such as asking leading questions, which may potentially result in the alteration or contamination of an eyewitness' memory. To date, published research has not examined dispatchers' training and knowledge of the potential influences they could have on an eyewitness' memory and recollections of an event. The current study aimed to fill in this knowledge gap through a survey methodology of 911 dispatchers in three jurisdictions in the United States. The results demonstrated that while a majority of the respondents had received over 26 hours of job training, and are required to complete additional training throughout their career, they had insufficient knowledge of the factors that influence eyewitness accuracy. A majority of the participants recognized their role as an evidence collector, however, they did not recognize the potential harm that "leading" language can have on memory, as well as the susceptibility of an eyewitness' memory to contamination. Future directions are discussed.

### 911 Dispatchers: Their Role as Evidence Collectors

There are approximately 240 million calls made annually to 911 in the United States (9-1-1 Statistics, 2015). With this volume of calls, it is crucial that 911 dispatchers<sup>1</sup> are trained to handle virtually any scenario and provide the appropriate services in a timely manner. Beyond this, dispatchers also need to understand that their communications and use of language are important when gathering information from callers. A call to 911 is often the first opportunity to gather information about a crime, resulting in dispatchers performing the role of *evidence collector*. Their role as evidence collectors shares some similarities with that of a detective at a scene of a crime; dispatchers are responsible for gathering information about the perpetrator(s) and about the event itself. However, depending on the state and agency where a dispatcher works, the job requirements and training will differ and this could result in significant variance in the type and amount of information the dispatcher is trained to ask a caller (911 Dispatcher, 2016).

In many criminal investigations, a witness' memory can be essential in helping identify a suspect and uncovering the facts of a crime. Therefore, it is crucial that dispatchers are trained to ask appropriate and specific questions of callers so that a witness' memory report can be as accurate as possible. Training would likely increase the probability that, the information being dispatched to (responding) officers is as accurate as possible and that the memory of the witness is preserved soon after the crime (via audio recording). These issues raise the question of how well dispatchers are trained to gather this information from eyewitnesses to a crime?

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 911 dispatcher and 911 operator are often used interchangeably. In some jurisdictions in the United States, however, callers do not call 911 but rather a 7-digit local phone number. For clarity, the term dispatcher will be used in this thesis to refer to the individual who answers an emergency call.

Information about dispatchers' job duties and job description is readily available (911 Dispatcher, 2016), but there is limited information regarding their training in regards to questioning and communication techniques with witnesses. This is important because research has shown that the wording (Harris, 1973; Loftus, 1975; Loftus & Palmer, 1974), structure, and style of questions (Leding, 2012; Lindsay, 1990; Sharman & Powell, 2012) can all potentially influence memory. In addition, memory becomes more susceptible to errors over time and thus it is essential to gather information about a witness' memory of a crime as quickly as possible. This puts dispatchers in a unique position in the criminal justice system in that they are the most likely person to speak with witnesses immediately after a crime. Thus, there is a need for dispatchers to understand the ways in which time can affect memory and recognize that the first callers relating to an incident may have the best memories for the event (e.g., they were closest the scene or the most closely involved). As time passes and more calls come in, the information provided by callers may be secondhand or influenced by discussions with other witnesses at the scene. The current study therefore examined dispatcher's training in their role as evidence collectors, their knowledge of factors that can influence eyewitness accuracy, and their understanding of how their choice of words can impact a person's memory.

### **Memory Conformity**

During a shift, a dispatcher may receive multiple calls pertaining to the same incident. After a few calls and the appropriate emergency responders are on their way to the scene, do dispatchers continue gathering (detailed) information about the incident from subsequent callers? Or do they simply inform callers that emergency personnel are en route? For example, on April 10, 2014 in Orlando, Florida, there was a fatal car crash between a tour bus and a FedEx truck (Transcript: 911 call, 2014). Calls to 911 came pouring in from both witnesses and individuals

involved in the crash. Below is a sample of some of the 911 calls that one dispatcher received immediately following the accident:

Caller 1: "Yes, there was just an accident on I-5. It just exploded. Whatever was on the freeway is on fire."

Caller 2: "I'd like to report an accident?"

Dispatcher: "Is this Southbound 5, just south of ... 7? Yeah ... we're on our way."

Dispatcher: "911 emergency what are you reporting?"

Caller 3: "It's right here by Date Street."

Dispatcher: "Where?"

Caller 3: "In town, by Date Street it was by I-5. There's like a lot of fire. There's gonna be an explosion."

Dispatcher: "I know there was an explosion, was it on the freeway? It was on the freeway."

Caller 4: "I was in a car accident. I was in a travel bus and we crashed into a FedEx truck..."

Dispatcher: "Is this on southbound I-5?"

Caller 5: "The bus hit the FedEx truck. But the FedEx truck hit into us."

Dispatcher: "Was it head on?"

Caller 5: "Yeah head on."

Dispatcher: "Are both the lanes blocked I assume?"

Caller 5: "No it's only one side of ... uh ... uh ... (crying) ... I don't ... uh ... I ... don't ... (crying) (Transcript: 911 call, 2014)."

It can be seen from these calls that at a certain point the dispatcher stopped gathering information about the accident and instead began to offer information to the callers. In one instance the dispatcher offered the location of the accident, in another he or she indicated that an explosion had already happened, and in another call the dispatcher made an assumption that both lanes of traffic were blocked (Transcript: 911 call, 2014). Is it possible that these incidents in which the dispatcher provided information to the callers could have contaminated the callers' memories and resulted in false memories of the incident? This is important because there could be future litigation relating to the case (e.g., insurance investigation, civil suits related to

negligence or liability) where the accuracy of the witness' reporting could have significant consequences. Unfortunately, the answer to this question will never be conclusively known and this is precisely why there is a need for standardized training that shows how language affects memory and that dispatchers must be careful in selecting their language and communications.

As a goal of this study is to examine dispatchers' perceptions of their role in evidence collection, it is important to consider potential influences a dispatcher may have on eyewitness memory. In particular, we might expect memory conformity effects to occur as a result of information exchange between dispatchers and eyewitnesses. Specifically, it is possible that a dispatcher, who receives information about an offender from one caller, could provide information to another caller about this person. According to research on co-witness conformity, this could result in callers disregarding the details they saw themselves and instead relying on the details provided by the dispatcher. For instance, if co-witnesses discuss information about a recent event, this can lead to one or both of the witnesses incorporating the information provided by the other into their memory of the event (Paterson, Kemp, & McIntyre, 2012; Thorley, 2013; Zajac & Henderson, 2009). In criminal (and civil) investigations, it can be damaging to the integrity of the evidence if memory conformity occurs before witnesses make a formal statement (Paterson & Kemp, 2005; Skagerberg & Wright, 2008). Research in this area has shown that individuals sometimes conform their report of an event to another person's view, even when contradictory evidence is present (Zajac & Henderson, 2009).

Many investigations must rely heavily on an eyewitness' memory and their description of an offender because in most crimes there is no physical evidence that can assist in creating a visual representation of the perpetrator (Zajac & Henderson, 2009). The heavy reliance on verbal descriptions provided by witnesses in active police investigations adds to the urgency for

the provided information to be accurate. Dispatchers, in the haste of processing calls, may share information about the perpetrator that they obtained from a previous caller. If a witness receives incorrect information from another individual (e.g., dispatcher) about the offender, they may incorporate this information into their description of the offender (e.g., Loftus & Greene, 1980; Paterson & Kemp, 2005; Paterson et al., 2012). Loftus and Greene (1980) found that when an individual is exposed to both verbal misinformation and accurate information following an event the witness often includes this information, whether accurate or not, into their report of the incident. This information also impacts their ability to recognize an offender in the future. Although Loftus and Greene (1980) used traditional co-witnesses in their study, a dispatcher is another source of potential information and misinformation.

### **Source-Monitoring & Leading Questions**

Another way that dispatchers could potentially contribute to eyewitness contamination is through source-monitoring errors. The source-monitoring framework theorizes how an individual determines the source of a memory (Leding, 2012; Luna & Martin-Luengo, 2013). According to this framework, when an individual is presented with information that needs to be remembered, the source of that information is not usually labeled in the memory (Leding, 2012; Luna & Martin-Luengo, 2013), potentially resulting in a false memory when there is an error in source retrieval.

In the context of criminal investigations, witnesses are often asked to provide information about what they experienced themselves and additional information that they may have learned from other individuals. During this process, witnesses must accurately be able to determine the source of the information they are providing. For example, we can imagine a scenario where, during trial testimony, an eyewitness reports that he/she saw a weapon in an offender's hand

during a robbery. The eyewitness may have actually seen this, imagined this, or it could have been suggested by a co-witness or a detective during questioning. Alternatively, a dispatcher could just have easily suggested this information. In other words, a witness may recall information provided by a dispatcher due to a source-monitoring error resulting in a contaminated memory of the event. Just as a detective would not want to contaminate a crime scene by introducing evidence into it, a dispatcher would not want to compromise an eyewitness' testimony of an event by offering details from another witness.

Another potential source of contamination on a witness' memory of an event is the type of question dispatchers ask callers when processing emergency calls. Specifically, researchers have found that question wording – and leading questions in particular – can impact an individual's response (e.g., Harris, 1973; Loftus, 1975; Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Sharman, Boyd, & Powell, 2015; Sharman & Burwood, 2012). The classic study demonstrating this effect was conducted by Loftus and Palmer (1974). These researchers found that when participants were shown a video clip and later asked “how fast the cars were going when they smashed (or hit) into each other?” (Loftus & Palmer, 1974, p. 588), participants' approximations of the cars' speed were influenced by the verb used in the question. When the verb smashed was replaced with hit the estimates were significantly lower. Loftus and Palmer's (1974) findings, and the many replications of the effect over the last four decades, support the idea that the wording used in a question can affect the answer a person will provide.

Question wording is not the only potential source of contamination that dispatchers should be concerned with. During an investigation, law enforcement (and all evidence collectors) should also avoid the use of leading questions (Sharman et al., 2015), which can prompt witnesses to answer in a certain way. These types of questions may introduce

information to an individual that was not previously available (Sharman et al., 2015). If an individual receives new information during questioning, whether it is correct or not, they may experience a source monitoring error and incorporate it into their original memory (Leding, 2012; Lindsay, 1990; Luna & Martin-Luengo, 2013; Sharman et al., 2015). This is known as the misinformation effect (e.g., Sharman et al., 2015).

The structure of a question can also lead to memory contamination. Sharman and Powell (2012) looked at four question types and their effects on an individual's memory. The results showed that individuals were more likely to be misled by the misinformation when asked either a closed-specific question (e.g., questions that require a yes or no response and encourage an individual to accept the interviewer's suggested knowledge) or open-presumptive question (e.g., questions that assumes knowledge and influences an individual to think about the suggested details). These question structures also impacted the individual's ability on a recognition test performed at a later time. These results confirm that the wording of questions affect a witness' original memory of an event (Loftus & Palmers, 1974; Sharman & Powell, 2012).

### **Delayed Recall**

Another way in which an individual's memory may be influenced is increasing the period of time between the event and recall. There are instances where a witness to a crime may not call 911 immediately (e.g., they were scared, confused about what they saw, had no telephone, etc.) but at a later point in time, these individuals do sometimes call 911 and report the original incident to a dispatcher. As time passes between witnessing an event and recalling the details of the event, memory will fade (Ebbesen & Rienick, 1998; Odinot & Wolters, 2006) and be more susceptible to post event information (Paterson & Kemp, 2006). Research has shown that when an eyewitness immediately recalls the details of an event it may help to preserve their initial

memory. In a recent study, McPhee, Paterson, and Kemp (2014) found that immediate recall for either spoken or written responses helped to protect the memory from misinformation provided in the dialogue that was played a week after the initial recall.

### **Memory Conformity and the Law**

When there are multiple chances for memory conformity to occur, it is imperative that there is some way to guard against the negative effects. In the legal system, the hearsay rule is used to protect against witnesses reporting information they may have heard from another person (Paterson & Kemp, 2005; “Search Legal Terms and Definitions,” 2016). Not all emergency calls are recorded and, even for those that are, there is no set guideline for how long to keep the recordings. So if a dispatcher provided information, it would not always be possible for prosecutors or defense attorneys to know because the recording may be unavailable.

Trial procedures are designed to limit the opportunity for witnesses to communicate with or hear information from other witnesses. For example, it is typical to prohibit a witness from hearing another witness’ testimony (until they have themselves testified) and judges will specifically tell witnesses to not discuss their testimony or the incident with other witnesses. Additionally, lawyers will question an eyewitness to discover if there is a chance that their testimony could be contaminated (Paterson & Kemp, 2005). In many cases, attorneys tend to focus on hearsay between witnesses; however, dispatchers may be another opportunity for hearsay to occur. The legal system currently lacks any safeguards to protect against the potential of dispatchers contaminating witnesses. We anticipate that this study and future studies on dispatchers could inform this discussion on best practices and procedures for this group of individuals.

With respect to investigations, recommended police guidelines for interviewing witnesses explicitly state that investigators should keep witnesses separated and inform them to not discuss any details with other witnesses (e.g., NIJ, 1999). Despite these guidelines, a study by Paterson and Kemp (2006) found that police officers frequently questioned multiple witnesses at the same time and in front of the other witnesses. This study also found that police officers encourage discussion between witnesses. These results suggested that officers were ignoring the guidelines provided to them when these were deemed “not practical” (Paterson & Kemp, 2006). In another study using police officers as participants, Paterson and Kemp (2005) revealed a controversy amongst police officers on whether co-witness discussion is beneficial or detrimental. On one side of the argument, officers found that discussion amongst witnesses was detrimental to the prosecution’s case because it could contaminate a witness’ memory and result in the witness being less confident in their recollection. The officers in support of co-witness discussion thought it helped a witness to recall facts about the event that they had not previously remembered and that this could strengthen a witness’ memory and provide a more accurate overall recollection. It appears from this research that police officers, who have clear guidelines and manuals, cannot agree on best practices for upholding the accuracy of witnesses’ memory. At this time, there is no published information about dispatchers’ opinions on these important issues.

Further, the Paterson and Kemp (2005) survey revealed that even with guidelines in place, police officers were confused on best practices. Unlike police officers, dispatchers do not appear to have any uniform best practice guidelines in place (Hauer, Moenck, & Bombach, 1998; Virginia Information Technologies Agency, 2017). This leads to the possibility that dispatchers, like police, will disagree on whether or not it is helpful to offer information to a witness. If

dispatchers are not educated and trained on potential eyewitness contamination, it is likely that they engage in the act of providing new or differing information to the witness that was not in their initial recall of the event. This presents another reason it is necessary to gain an understanding of dispatchers, their knowledge, and training as evidence collectors.

### **Current Study**

In their role as evidence collectors, dispatchers can help provide investigators with accurate and (relatively) uncontaminated details of a crime. But this process requires training and education. Currently, the training requirements for dispatchers vary from state to state and even among different counties and organizations within the same state (Hauer et al., 1998; Virginia Information Technologies Agency, 2017). This lack of uniformity in training raises questions about whether dispatchers are being appropriately trained as evidence collectors. The current study is aimed at understanding how dispatchers view their role as an evidence collector, and what types of training dispatchers receive in regards to evidence collection concerns, particularly those related to eyewitnesses recall and the effects of language on memory. We expected that dispatchers would report receiving little or no training related to the susceptibility of witness memory to co-witness contamination and had no predictions regarding their view of themselves as evidence collectors. Finally, we predicted that dispatchers do not receive sufficient training to adequately collect detailed information from witnesses, especially in relation to the use of leading questions.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

A survey was sent via email to the supervisors of several 911 dispatcher groups in New York, Florida, and Arkansas. The dispatchers' email addresses were accessible through contact

with dispatcher supervisors or dispatcher district trainers of different Police Departments in the three states. After reviewing the survey, each supervisor agreed to distribute the survey to their dispatchers via their email addresses. Each dispatcher on their email lists was sent an email describing the study and providing a link to the survey (Appendix A). The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants needed to be currently working as a dispatcher, or as a supervisor that has dispatcher experience, or have dispatcher experience and are currently working in a different position, were 18 years of age or older, and have access to the Internet.

One hundred and eleven dispatchers responded to the survey. Of the 111 responses, 10 of the participants stopped responding to the after answering only a few questions; therefore, their responses were removed from the analyses and the results below are based on a final sample of 101 participants. The final sample included 93 paid employees, 1 volunteer, 2 supervisors, and 1 participant is a computer aided dispatch systems administrator (CADS) who formerly worked as a dispatcher. Participants worked an average of 43.23 hours per week ( $SD=12.34$ ), with 95 (94.10%) participants considered to be full-time employees and 6 (5.90%) were part-time employees. Of the respondents that provided their gender, 65 (64.40%) were females, and 29 (28.70%) were male. The age of the participants ranged between 21 and 63 years old ( $M=34.90$ ,  $SD=11.15$ ), and 74.30% self-identified as White, 5.90% as African-American, 5.90% as Latino, 2.00% as Asian or other Pacific Islander, 3.00% chose 'other' as their racial origin and identified as Biracial or Mixed-race, and 5.00% preferred not to say.

## **Materials**

A Dispatcher Questionnaire with 34 questions was developed to examine dispatchers' experiences, perceptions and training in their role as evidence collectors (Appendix B). The survey site Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com) was used to collect all responses allowing for

confidentiality. The results were downloaded and stored in a password-protected file on a password secure computer. The questionnaire was organized into a knowledge section, a training and practice section, and a policy section. Some of the knowledge questions were adapted from Kassin, Tubb, Hosch, and Memon's (2001) survey of eyewitness experts. This adaption was chosen because it allowed for a comparison between dispatcher answers and those of eyewitness experts (Kassin et al., 2001) as well as jurors, judges, and law enforcement personnel, as assessed in Benton, Ross, Bradshaw, Thomas, and Bradshaw's (2006) study. Consistent with how Kassin et al. (2001) and Benton et al. (2006) scored their responses, participants' answers to questions adapted from Kassin et al.'s (2001) study were scored as correct or incorrect.

The Dispatcher Questionnaire included multiple-choice and closed-opened-ended questions throughout. For example, in the knowledge section dispatchers were asked "In general, what role do dispatchers play in criminal investigations?" (open-ended), followed by "Do you believe a dispatcher plays a role as an evidence collector?" (yes, no, not sure). Another question asked "In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to obtain a detailed description of a perpetrator from a witness to a crime?" This question format asked the participant to check all that applied: police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and dispatchers. These questions and related questions gathered information regarding dispatchers' perceptions of job duties and responsibilities. Next, dispatchers were asked questions regarding their required training for the job. For example, dispatchers were asked: "Have you received specific training on how to gather information and ask questions of crime witnesses?" The next section asked dispatchers about behaviors they engaged in on the job. This section allowed insight into participants' practices and asked if there are any policies in place for such behaviors. For instance, dispatchers were

asked “When a witness calls to report a crime involving multiple perpetrators, do you ask the caller to separately describe what each perpetrator looks like?”, and “At your agency, how are emergency calls recorded?”

### **Procedure**

At the beginning of the study, dispatcher supervisors and dispatcher district trainers emailed their dispatchers a description of the study, the terms of compensation, and a link to the survey (Appendix B). If the dispatchers had any concerns or questions regarding the study they were given the opportunity to email the principal investigator concerning any information they did not understand. The consent statement was at the top of the survey and it indicated to participants that completing the survey constitutes consent (Appendix C).

Next, participants were asked to complete the survey made available on the Survey Monkey website. The dispatchers were informed that they were under no obligation to complete the survey and were encouraged to answer all of the items honestly and accurately as possible. Although the participants were required to provide their names and emails to be entered into the draw, they were informed that the responses they provided would be kept separate and confidential. At the end of the survey, a debriefing statement explained the aims of this study, provided the PI’s contact information for any questions or concerns regarding the survey, and explained how to receive more information about the influences of language on memory (See Appendix D). Finally, in exchange for their participation, participants were provided with a link to a website to enter in their name and email address to be entered into a drawing for a chance to win a \$100, \$75 or \$50 gift card.

## Results

All open-ended questions were coded using two research assistants. Where there were differences in coding decisions, the coders discussed and resolved all differences.

### Work Experience

The current study surveyed dispatchers with as little as less than one year of experience all the way to 42 years of experience. On average, participants in the current study had nearly a decade of experience as a dispatcher ( $M=9.53$ ,  $SD=10.14$ ) on the job. Over the course of their careers, the participants had received approximately 140,249 calls ( $SD=15,500$ ). Furthermore, a majority (45.50%) of the participants had received up to 5,000 “eyewitness” calls – where a witness is describing a crime and/or a perpetrator – over their career, with the remaining participants having received more than 5,000 calls.

### Role of a Dispatcher

In an open-ended question, we asked participants “what role dispatchers play in the investigative process.” This question was coded and thematic analysis was used to identify any underlying themes and patterns in the participants’ responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All but two participants responded to this open-ended question. A total of seven themes were identified in the dispatchers’ responses. Table 1 represents the themes and the percent of participants that listed each theme.

Overall, the average number of roles dispatchers reported was 1.66 ( $SD = 00.79$ ), with a range of one to four roles being listed. The top three reported roles were information gatherers (72.70%), first responder/first line of communication (31.30%), and to relay information (27.30%).

Table 1

*Primary perceived role of dispatchers listed by participants in an open-ended question*

*(frequency in parentheses)*

Role Listed (Theme)	% of Participants that listed each theme
Gather Information	72.7 (72)
First Line of Communication/Responder	31.3 (31)
Relay Information	27.3 (27)
Use their resources to assist law enforcement	11.1 (11)
To Dispatch Assistance	8.1 (8)
Interview	5.1 (5)
Record Calls	4.0 (4)

Several of the responses to this open-ended question highlight the different perceptions dispatchers' hold in regards to their role in the investigative processes. For instance, one respondent said about dispatchers:

They are the first point of contact for most citizens reporting crimes. I believe their role is to obtain all relevant information regarding the crime being reported and suspect/vehicle/weapon information while it is still fresh in the persons mind. They must be specific in their line of questioning (don't just ask what the person looked like, ask specifics like hair color/length, eye color, height, weight, shirt color, pants color, etc.).

Another example underscores the importance of collecting an eyewitness' report before the memory may become distorted:

Dispatchers take the initial phone call and ask various questions based on the situation to try and ascertain as much information as possible from the caller. The reason this is so

imperative is because most times the caller will call as soon as an incident occurs and the sooner you question them and try and ascertain details of the event the more likely they are to remember. Typically the more time that passes between the event occurring and the caller talking about it, the more distorted their memory becomes trying to recall all the details.

A third example exemplifies the wide range of perceptions dispatchers have in regards to their role:<sup>2</sup>

I feel that dispatchers don't have such a vital role in criminal investigations. They are only taken the information provided from a witness or the officer and documenting it in the call.

Next, participants' responses to the closed-ended question regarding whether they specifically "perceive their role in the investigative process to be evidence collectors" were examined. Consistent with the open-ended responses, 79.2% responded yes to this yes/no/not sure question. Interestingly, 16.8% of respondents said that it is *not* their job to collect evidence and another 4.0% were unsure.

### **Eyewitness Knowledge**

In order to determine dispatchers' overall knowledge of eyewitness research, dispatcher participants were given 12 statements and asked to rate them on their level of agreement (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, and not sure). Table 2 represents the percentage of dispatchers who agreed (selected strongly agree or agree) with each statement regarding eyewitness memory. Participants' responses were compared to the responses from eyewitness experts from Kassin et al.'s (2001) study. In addition, the responses to these questions from jurors, judges, and law enforcement personnel from Benton et

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<sup>2</sup> For additional dispatcher responses that illustrate the wide range of answers and roles listed, see Appendix E.

al.'s (2006) study are presented in Table 2. The 12 items are organized into system and estimator variables<sup>3</sup>, and represented by the percentage of individuals that agreed with the statements. All items in the table are 'true,' except the trained observer item, which is 'false,' and the correct response rates are provided. To compare the responses of dispatchers with those of jurors, judges, law enforcement, and experts on their overall knowledge of eyewitness information, chi-square goodness of fit tests were performed. It was predicted that dispatchers' responses would be similar to jurors and law enforcement personnel, indicating that they have little knowledge of the factors that influence eyewitness accuracy.

With respect to dispatchers' knowledge when compared to the specific groups discussed above, several significant differences are worthy of mention here. As predicted, there was a significant difference between dispatchers and experts in regard to their knowledge of the effects of the wording of a question  $X^2(1, N = 165) = 7.17, p < .05$ . Also, as predicted, there was no significant difference between dispatchers' knowledge of confidence malleability and judges' and law enforcements' responses  $X^2(2, N = 195) = .61, p > .05$ , indicating that dispatchers are comparable to judges and law enforcement personnel (laypersons) when it comes to understanding the effect of systematic variables on eyewitnesses. There was a significant difference between dispatchers and experts, judges, and law enforcement personnel on their knowledge of cross-race bias. There was no significant difference between the other three groups  $X^2(2, N = 158) = 3.44, p > .05$  in regards to cross-race bias; however the dispatchers answered significantly differently  $X^2(3, N = 259) = 59.39, p < .05$ , this difference indicates that

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<sup>3</sup> System variables affect eyewitness accuracy and are controlled by the legal system. Estimator variables affect eyewitness accuracy and the legal system has no control over them (Wells, 1978).

dispatchers lack an awareness of cross-race bias. Dispatchers are comparable to jurors in this respect  $X^2(1, N = 212) = 1.46, p > .05$ . As predicted, there was a significant difference between

Table 2

*Percentage of agreement rate of dispatchers, experts, jurors, judges, and law enforcement personnel on eyewitness knowledge questions adapted from Kassin et al. (2001).*

	Dispatchers ( <i>n</i> = 101)	Experts ( <i>n</i> = 64)	Jurors ( <i>n</i> = 111)	Judges ( <i>n</i> = 42)	Law Enforce. ( <i>n</i> = 52)
<b>System Variables</b>					
Wording of Questions	86.1*	98	85	88	83
Confidence Malleability	75.2*	95	50	81	75
<b>Estimator Variables</b>					
Post Event Information	71.3*	94	60	81	75
Unconscious Transference	43.6*	81	30	48	46
Cross-Race Bias	38.60*	90	47	81	79
Accuracy and Confidence	46.50*	87	38	64	50
Weapon Focus	50.50*	87	39	67	69
Forgetting Curve	41.60*	83	33	41	50
Exposure Time	44.60*	81	47	71	54
Stress	82.20*	60	68	81	73
Trained Observers	20.80*	39	28	29	50
Identification Speed	42.60	40	65	36	65

*Note.* \* Indicates a significant difference between dispatchers and experts at  $p < .05$ .

the dispatchers and experts in regard to the forgetting curve,  $X^2(1, N = 165) = 27.26, p < .05$ , post event information  $X^2(1, N = 165) = 12.36, p < .05$ , and unconscious transference  $X^2(1, N = 165) = 22.87, p < .05$ . Finally, dispatchers were not significantly different from judges and law enforcement in regard to their understanding of the effects of stress  $X^2(2, N = 195) = 1.81, p > .05$ , but were significantly different from jurors and experts in their understanding of this variable  $X^2(2, N = 276) = 9.70, p < .05$ .

### **Training, Practice, and Policy**

A majority (84.2%) of participants received 26 hours or more of training over the course of their career as a dispatcher. After completing their initial job training, most dispatchers are required to complete additional training: 6.9% receive ongoing or continuous training, 7.9% are trained once per month, 7.9% every six months, 12.9% once per year, and 39.6% responded that they have required training but there is no specific time frame. Only 6.9% of respondents are not required to complete additional training after they begin their job as a dispatcher.

When asked specifically about eyewitness training, 83.2% of participants had received training on how to gather information from eyewitnesses and a similar percentage of participants believed that dispatchers receive sufficient training on how to accurately gather information from witnesses. Despite these findings, only 75.3% of participants were trained to ask follow-up questions when an eyewitness provides a limited description of a perpetrator. But when follow-up questions are asked, 77.2% of participants believe that asking detailed questions of a witness will *not* taint their memory of the event.

Participants also were asked a series of questions regarding their everyday practices, whether they had received training on these practices, and whether there is a policy in their agency regarding each practice. Table 3 represents the dispatchers' responses.

Table 3

*Percentage (and number) of dispatchers who responded yes to the training, practice and policy questions regarding the collection of eyewitness statements.*

Topic	Trained and do in Practice	Trained Only	Do this in Practice Only	There is an agency policy
If a witness provides limited description of the perpetrator, ask follow-up Qs to gather more info	50.5 (51)	24.8 (25)	14.9 (15)	55.4 (56)
Ask witnesses if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs	28.7 (29)	11.9 (12)	15.8 (16)	35.6 (36)
Ask witnesses if they got a good look of the perpetrator	28.7 (29)	13.9 (14)	15.8 (16)	21.8 (22)
Ask witnesses if they notice anything unusual about the perpetrator	21.8 (22)	8.9 (9)	25.7 (26)	19.8 (20)
Ask witnesses how far away they were from the perpetrator	14.9 (15)	11.9 (12)	12.9 (13)	14.9 (15)
Ask witnesses if there are other witnesses to the event	7.9 (8)	8.9 (9)	19.8 (20)	9.9 (10)
Ask witnesses about the lighting at the scene of the incident	2.0 (2)	3.0 (3)	6.9 (7)	4.0 (4)
If a witness/perpetrator are strangers, ask the witness if the perpetrator looks like someone they know	2.0 (2)	3.0 (3)	8.9 (9)	5.9 (6)

The responses in Table 3 indicate that when there is no policy in place for certain practices and behaviors, there is a substantial decrease in the number of dispatchers that have been trained and

do each of these behaviors in practice. Of note here is that very few of these basic questions – that are extremely relevant for eyewitness reliability – are a matter of agency policy. Particularly surprising is that very few agencies have a policy on inquiring about other witnesses who may be present at the scene, and this may have had some influence on the paucity of dispatchers who routinely ask this question of eyewitnesses.

We also were interested in learning more about the length of 911 calls so that we could assess whether a prompt or checklist system would be feasible for emergency calls involving eyewitnesses. For example, if there are standard time limits for calls within an agency then a checklist might extend a call past that time limit. Therefore, participants were asked if there were policies in place at their agency to encourage them to get off the phone as quickly as possible (i.e., a standard time limit for calls). A majority of participants (78.2%) said there are no policies to encourage short phone calls. Participants were then asked, to the best of their ability, to “estimate the length (in minutes) of an average call where a witness is reporting a crime and describing a perpetrator.” Of the respondents that answered, 27.7% reported that eyewitness calls last three minutes or less, 37.60% reported a time between four and six minutes, 23.80% said seven to ten minutes, 3.00% said 11 to 19 minutes, and 3.00% said 20 minutes or longer. Finally, participants were asked how calls are recorded at their agency. All but one participant responded, with 96.0% indicating that calls are recorded automatically at their agency and 3.0% indicated that calls are recorded manually.

### **Obtaining a Perpetrator’s Description: Training and Practice**

Participants were asked whose responsibility it is to obtain a detailed description of a perpetrator from a witness. Nearly all (99.00%) participants felt it is both a police officer’s responsibility and a dispatcher’s responsibility (94.10%) to collect this information.

Interestingly, 5.90% said it was *not* a dispatcher's job to ask for a description of a perpetrator. Participants were then asked how often they ask a witness for a detailed description of the perpetrator. Despite near unanimity on the responsibility question, only 76.20% of participants said that dispatchers always ask for a perpetrator's description, 17.80% said dispatchers do so very often, 3.00% do sometimes, and 2.00% indicated that, in their experience, dispatchers almost never ask for this information.

In an open-ended question, participants were asked to list the questions they ask or types of information they try to gather when speaking with a caller who is a witness to a crime. Table 4 shows the items that emerged across participants' responses and number of participants that listed the question in their own response. Only one respondent did not answer this question.

Table 4

*Responses to an open-ended question regarding what types of questions dispatchers ask of eyewitnesses.*

Question Asked/ Information Gathered	Percentage (frequency)
"Fixed" Perpetrator Description Items	
Description of Perpetrator	64.64 (64)
Number of Perpetrators	44.44 (44)
Race	40.40 (40)
Height	25.25 (25)
Hair Color	22.22 (22)
Sex	21.21 (21)
Weight	20.2 (20)
Tattoos	18.18 (18)
Unique Features/ Marks	16.16 (16)
Age	13.13 (13)
Eye Color	12.12 (12)
Scars	12.12 (12)

Build/ Body Type	4.04 (4)
Complexion	2.02 (2)
Birthmarks	1.01 (1)
“Changeable” Perpetrator Description Items	
Clothing	49.49 (49)
Accessories/ Bags	8.08 (8)
Piercings	6.06 (6)
Hair Style	4.04 (4)
Hair Length	2.02 (2)
Facial Hair	2.02 (2)
Hat	2.02 (2)
Glasses	2.02 (2)
Shoes	2.02 (2)
Perpetrator Familiarity Items	
Perpetrator’s Name	8.08 (8)
Perpetrator Known	6.06 (6)
Seen Perpetrator Before	1.01 (1)
Objects	
Weapon Presence	74.74 (74)
Vehicle Description	36.36 (36)
Weapon Description	10.1 (10)
Weapon Implied v. Shown	5.05 (5)

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In instances where a caller initially provides no description of a perpetrator, participants were asked how often they ask the witness to provide the following specific physical characteristics and if they received training to ask about each of the following items: gender, height, weight, clothing, hair color, hair length, accent, distinct features, and if the individual reminds the witness of anyone they know (see Table 5). What can be seen from these results is that the majority of participants ask about gender and clothing in all calls involving perpetrators, despite the fact that just over half of the participants received training on these items. What is notable in these results is that other, quite general, physical characteristics are not routinely

queried about, such as, hair style or length, and facial hair. Another remarkable finding is that there appears to be a general lack of training with respect to obtaining detailed perpetrator descriptions with only two items receiving more than 50% responses.

Table 5

*Percentage (and frequency) of participants who ask specific questions relating to a perpetrator's appearance and have received training on these topics.*

Feature	Always Ask	Received Training
Gender	93.1 (94)	58.4 (59)
Clothing	93.1 (94)	58.4 (59)
Height	51.5 (52)	48.5 (49)
Weight	50.5 (51)	48.5 (49)
Hair color	50.5 (51)	44.6 (45)
Distinct features	34.7 (35)	47.5 (48)
Hair Length	24.8 (25)	39.6 (40)
Accent	5.9 (6)	15.8 (16)
Reminds me of...	2.0 (2)	9.9 (10)

It is interesting to note that although 93.1% answered yes to always asking eyewitnesses about the sex and clothing of a perpetrator, when asked to freely list the types of questions they ask less than half of the participants listed these factors. It can be seen that when participants are prompted with closed ended questions, they report higher frequencies in the questions asked, than when they are asked to freely provide the questions they ask.

Finally, in crimes involving multiple perpetrators, participants were asked how often they ask a caller to separately describe what each perpetrator looks like. Nearly two-thirds (63.40%) of participants indicated that they always ask for individual perpetrator descriptions but 17.80% said “it depends.” The reasons given for those who responded to the latter category included that it depended on the number of perpetrators present, on the presence of a weapon, the nature of the crime (crime is in progress versus delayed), and the witness’ emotional state (whether they were overly distraught).

We also were interested in knowing whether participants would find it helpful to have a “guide” when they are handling eyewitness/crime related calls, as is often used in emergency calls requiring CPR. In these circumstances, a set of prompts or a checklist can assist the dispatcher in accurately describing the steps for CPR, asking relevant questions, and ensuring no steps are missed. Participants in our survey were asked if, similar to the CPR prompts described above, it would be helpful to have prompts or checklist for calls in which a witness is describing a crime and/or perpetrator. Over three quarters of the participants (76.20%) said that prompts would be helpful, 15.80% said prompts would not be helpful, and 7.90% were not sure if the prompts would be helpful to them. Therefore, there seems to be general agreement that a “perpetrator description” checklist might be helpful to dispatchers in conducting their job.

### **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the ways in which dispatchers perceive their role as evidence collectors. Another goal of the study was to better understand the training dispatchers receive; chiefly their training on the susceptibility of an eyewitness’ memory, and the effects of language on memory. Furthermore, we attempted to gain insight into the everyday practices of dispatchers during emergency calls, as this group of individuals – often

the first to interact with victims and witnesses of crime – have been ignored in the scientific eyewitness literature.

The results suggest that a majority of dispatchers do understand their role to be that of an evidence collector. Furthermore, when asked what role dispatchers play in an investigation, participants reported “information gathering” (i.e., evidence collectors) as the top role they perform. The number of roles reported varied between one and four, which could be due to dispatchers following different guidelines, being located in different regions of the country, or resulting from variance in their training.

A majority of the participants received 26 hours or more of training as dispatchers, with all but 6.90% being required to complete additional training at varying time frames throughout their career subsequent to their initial training. The fact that there are dispatchers that do not receive training beyond what was required when they were hired could explain the variance in how these individuals perceive their roles and job duties, as well as the types of questions they ask of eyewitnesses. Our results also show that although 85.1% of participants feel they have received sufficient training on how to gather information from eyewitnesses, they are comparable to jurors, judges and law enforcement personnel in regards to their knowledge of factors that affect eyewitness reliability. Dispatchers specifically did not recognize the potential harm that could arise from the use of leading questions. In fact, when asked if follow up questions could potentially taint the memory of a witness, 77.2% of participants reported follow up questions will not taint a witness’ memory.

Although 94.1% of respondents felt it was the responsibility of a dispatcher to obtain a description of a perpetrator, only 76.2% said they always ask for one. It was also found that dispatchers, similar to judges, jurors, and law enforcement personnel, had little knowledge

concerning the concept of post-event information interfering with an eyewitness' memory of an event or crime. This discrepancy between training and knowledge indicates dispatchers do not receive adequate eyewitness training or may not be following the training they are given. These deficiencies could result in a reduction of the quality of eyewitness evidence.

As discussed in the literature review, another potential threat to the integrity of eyewitness testimony is co-witness contamination, where witnesses are permitted to speak with one another about the events and people they have seen. However, when our participants were asked to list the types of questions they typically ask of an eyewitness, only seven reported that they specifically ask the witness what they saw firsthand. Even more surprising, only one participant said they ask an eyewitness if there are any other witnesses present. Therefore, this appears to be another area in which additional training could be extremely useful so that the most accurate – and uncontaminated – information can be gathered from callers in these early moments after a crime has been witnessed.

Due to the fact that dispatchers play a vital role in the investigative process, it is crucial that dispatchers are trained properly. Dispatchers should be knowledgeable in different types of interview techniques when talking with eyewitnesses and be wary of any questioning style that may influence the witness' responses. For instance, dispatchers should understand the potential harm of leading questions as well as their ability to influence an individual's answer and their memory of an event in the long term. The results of the current study show that dispatchers are continuously undergoing additional training through the use of computer aided systems. Thus, it would not be difficult to implement additional training specifically aimed at further educating dispatchers on techniques for gathering information from witnesses, and on eyewitness research, into their (already) required training.

According to the survey responses, a majority of emergency calls are completed in less than three minutes, with eyewitness calls lasting approximately six minutes or less. Dispatchers processing these calls are responsible for not only obtaining relevant information from a witness but also process the call and determine the proper services to dispatch, and then relaying accurate information in a timely manner. Dispatchers are faced with stress in their jobs each day, and the emergent manner in which these calls need to be handled can lead to an individual forgetting valuable steps and questions to ask. In fact, our participants expressed an opinion that prompts for questioning an eyewitness and obtaining a perpetrator's description, similar to current CPR prompts, would be useful during eyewitness calls. With the standard eyewitness call lasting approximately six minutes, it seems feasible to implement prompts for dispatchers during eyewitness calls. Future training and state mandated guidelines could include the use of prompts and question lists in eyewitness calls.

This study was the first survey pertaining to the collection of evidence from eyewitnesses using 911 dispatchers as participants. Because this was the first survey using this population, there were some limits in its scope and purpose. In future studies, we believe it would be beneficial to examine a more diverse sample of dispatchers so that the results can be compared, for example, between full-time versus part-time, rural versus urban, and paid versus volunteer dispatchers. In terms of geographical diversity, this study focused exclusively on dispatchers in the states of New York, Florida, and Arkansas and thus a potential limitation is a lack of generalizability for dispatcher practices and training in other states and jurisdictions.

Another limitation of the current study is that it relied heavily on self-report measures. This may have resulted in response biases due to dispatchers providing answers that they believed were correct or desirable, rather than answers that most accurately represent their

training and practices in the field. In the current study, we did allow for confidentiality and encouraged honesty in hopes of minimizing the potential for this bias. It should also be noted that due to the fact that there is no published research on dispatchers' opinions about their role in the investigative process, self-report measures allowed for the dispatchers to provide information in an unrestricted way since they did not have access to information about what their colleagues think about these topics. To alleviate any potential shortcomings related to a reliance solely on self-report measures, it is suggested that future studies utilize both observational and self-report measures to obtain a more complete picture of dispatchers' roles. In terms of observational measures, we recommend listening to actual calls between dispatchers and eyewitness callers. It may be insightful to listen to the calls to identify variances in language when the caller is calm versus panicked and in an emotional state. Additionally, future studies could obtain actual training materials from the participating agencies to compare against the reported information the participants remember being trained on.

A third possible limitation of this study is that the surveys were administered via the Internet. This allowed for participants to complete the survey in a location of their choosing; therefore, external factors such as background noise or interruptions may have impacted the respondents. Alternatively, participants were not required to go out of their way to a specified location and were allowed to complete the survey in any environment of their choosing. This may have allowed participants to feel comfortable and may have alleviated some stress during the completion of the questionnaire.

Another limitation relates to the wording of a few questions used in the current survey. For instance, instead of using the language "standard time limit for calls," we should have asked what the "standard time length for calls" is. Additionally, stricter controls are needed for

acceptable survey answers. The above-mentioned question, first asked if there was standard time limit, then asked what that time limit was. For the individuals who answered “no” to there being a standard time limit, they should not have been allowed to provide and answer for how long the time limit is. Finally, it would be beneficial for future studies to ask the different agencies that participate in the study to provide a list of mandated questions per general situation that a 911 call taker may encounter.

Individuals reach out to 911 in times of emergency and extreme crisis. Recently, during the devastating Hurricanes (Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria) during the late summer of 2017, a leading news headline was the fact that 911 services would not be available in mandatory evacuation zones after set evacuation dates. This announcement underscored the fact that role of a dispatcher is critically important to society, as these individuals can be our lifelines and help to provide a feeling of safety and assistance. Their importance in the investigative process highlights the need to better understand their roles and training.

In conclusion, our 911 dispatcher participants provided some much needed insight into their job that should be valuable to the eyewitness and criminal justice literatures. It is clear that our participants see themselves as evidence collectors, however, there is a lack of proper training for these individuals in regard to questioning and collecting information from eyewitnesses. Although the generalizability of the study is limited, our participants had significant amounts of experience on the job and extensive training throughout their careers, that we are confident their responses can be used as a foundation for future studies in this emergent area of research.

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## Appendix A

Subject: You are invited to a research survey- 911 Dispatchers

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/H7XW6FW>

Dear dispatchers,

You are invited to participate in a research study examining 911 dispatchers and their job. This study is being conducted by Brittany Kassis and her research committee from the Department of Forensic Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

In this study, you will be asked to complete an electronic survey. The survey should take only 30 minutes to complete. All participants must be 18 years old or older. Please disregard this email if you do not meet this criteria.

At the completion of the survey, you will be given an opportunity to provide your contact information that will be stored separately from your survey responses, to enter into a drawing for a chance to win a visa gift card. A total of six participants will be selected to win, there will be one winner at the amount of \$100, two participants will receive \$75, and three will win \$50.

If you have any questions regarding the survey or this research project in general, please contact Brittany Kassis or her advisor Dr. Jennifer Dysart at email [brittany.kassis@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:brittany.kassis@jjay.cuny.edu) or [jdysart@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:jdysart@jjay.cuny.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, please contact the CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at 646-664-8918. Your participation is appreciated. Please click on the above link to continue to the survey.

Brittany Kassis B.A., John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
Dr. Jennifer Dysart Ph. D.

Appendix B  
Dispatcher Questionnaire

**Knowledge**

1. Please select your level of agreement for each of the following statements.

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
Very high levels of stress impair the accuracy of witness memory					
A witness' confidence in their identification is not a good predictor of their identification accuracy					
The presence of a weapon impairs a witness' ability to accurately describe the perpetrator					
The less time a witness has to observe an event, the less well he or she will remember it					
The rate of memory loss for an event is greatest right after the event and then levels off over time					
Witness testimony about an event often reflects not only what they actually saw but also information they obtained later on					
A witness' memory about an event can be affected by how the questions asked of the witness are worded					
Witnesses sometimes identify as the culprit someone they have seen in another situation or context					
Police officers are more accurate as witnesses than is the average person					
Witnesses are more accurate when identifying members of their own race/ethnicity than members of other races/ethnicities.					
A witness' confidence can be influenced by factors that are unrelated to identification accuracy					

The more quickly a witness makes an identification, the more accurate he or she is likely to be					
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**Please answer the following questions based on your knowledge and experience as a dispatcher.**

2. In general, what role do dispatchers play in criminal investigations? Please use the space below to provide your answer.

3. Do you believe a dispatcher plays a role as an evidence collector?

Yes No Not Sure

4. In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to obtain a detailed description of a perpetrator from a witness to a crime? Select **all** that apply.

Police Officers\_\_\_\_ Dispatchers\_\_\_\_ Prosecutors\_\_\_\_ Defense Attorneys\_\_\_\_

5. From your experience, how often are witnesses asked for a detailed description of a perpetrator by members of the following groups?

	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never	Not Sure
Police Officers						
Dispatchers						
Prosecutors						
Defense Attorneys						

6. In your opinion, do the following groups receive sufficient training in how to accurately gather information from crime witnesses?

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Police Officers			
Dispatchers			
Prosecutors			
Defense Attorneys			

**Personal Questions**

7. In your career as a dispatcher, have you ever been called to testify in court?

Yes, but I didn't end up testifying      Yes, and I testified      No

8. If yes, when you were testifying, were you asked any questions about the training you have received as a dispatcher?

Yes      No

9. You answered yes to have being called to testify in court as a dispatcher. Please describe under what circumstances you were called to testify. In other words, why do you believe you were called and who called you as a witness (prosecution or defense)?

**Practice**

*Please answer the following questions based on practices you engage in during a typical work shift.*

10. When a caller describes an emergency situation requiring CPR, a set of prompts, including a checklist, often assists a dispatcher in processing the call. The prompt helps a dispatcher to accurately describe the steps for CPR, to ask relevant questions, and to ensure nothing is missed on the checklist. Similar to the CPR prompts described above, would it be helpful to have prompts and checklists for calls in which a witness is describing a crime and/or perpetrator?

Yes      No      Not Sure

11. In calls related to reporting crime, are there standard questions or prompts that your agency currently asks you to use?

Yes, there are required questions      Yes, but we are not required to use them      No  
Not Sure

12. To the best of your ability, please list the questions you ask or types of information you try to gather when you are speaking with a caller who is a witness to a crime.

13. Do you feel that if you ask detailed questions of a witness that you may potentially taint their memory? By detailed questions we mean asking questions that direct a witness' attention to specific or unique characteristics of a perpetrator, such as "did the perpetrator have any distinguishing tattoos or piercings?"

Yes      No      Not Sure

14. Where you work, are there practices in place that encourage you to get off the phone as quickly as possible (e.g., a standard time limit for calls)?

Yes      No

15. What is the approximate standard time limit for calls?

16. To the best of your ability, please indicate how often each of the following situations occur in your job as a dispatcher?

	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never	Not Sure
A witness reports that they know a crime perpetrator by name/nickname						
A witness reports that they are somewhat familiar with the perpetrator						
A witness reports that the perpetrator is a stranger (unknown to them)						
A witness reports there were multiple perpetrators of the crime.						
A witness reports that they see a perpetrator from a crime that they witnessed in the past.						

17. When a witness calls to report a crime involving multiple perpetrators, do you ask the caller to separately describe what each perpetrator looks like?

Always    Very Often    Sometimes    Almost Never    Never    It Depends (Please explain)\_\_\_\_\_

18. At your agency, how are emergency calls recorded?

Automatically    Manually    They are not recoded    Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

19. To the best of your ability, please estimate the length (in minutes) of an average call where a witness is reporting a crime and describing seeing a perpetrator.

**Training**

*Please answer the following questions based on the training you have received as a dispatcher.*

20. Have you received specific training on how to gather information and ask questions of crime witnesses?

Yes    No

21. When multiple witnesses call in separately about the same incident, do you ask the same questions for each of the callers? Select all that apply

Yes, this is how I was trained            Yes, this is how I always do it            Yes, this is

how I usually do it    Yes, this is how I sometimes do it    No, I do not    Other (please

specify)\_\_\_\_\_

22. If a caller initially provides no description of a perpetrator, how often do you ask the witness to provide the specific physical characteristics below? In the last column indicate if you have received training to ask each item.

	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Almost Never	Received Training (check if yes)
Gender					
Height					
Weight					
Clothing					
Hair Color					
Hair Length					
Noticeable Accent					
Distinct Features (tattoos, scars, etc.)					
Reminds the witness of someone					

23. Have you received training that advises you to allow an eyewitness to freely recall the details of an event? The free recall would occur before any follow up questions would be asked of the witness.

Yes No

### Procedures

*The below questions are regarding a witness calling about a crime.*

24. For each statement below, indicate if you have received training, do this in practice, or both. Finally, please indicate if there is a policy for this action within your organization.

Select **all** options that apply.

	I was trained	I do this in practice	There is a policy for this
If a witness provides a limited description of the perpetrator, I ask follow-up questions to gather more details.			
I ask witnesses if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.			
I ask witnesses if there are other witnesses to the event.			
I ask witnesses how far away they were from the perpetrator.			
I ask witnesses if they got a good look of the perpetrator.			
I ask witnesses if they notice anything unusual about the perpetrator.			
If applicable, I ask witnesses not to discuss the incident with other witnesses.			

Do you ask witnesses about the lighting at the scene of the incident (if it is dark outside at the time of the call)?			
If a witness and the perpetrator are strangers, I ask the witness if the perpetrator looks like someone they know.			

*Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.*

25. Please indicate the gender you identify with.

Female Male Prefer Not to Say Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

26. What is your age?

27. What is your ethnicity?

White or Caucasian Black or African American Hispanic or Latino American Indian or Alaskan Native Asian or Other Pacific Islander Prefer Not to Say Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

28. Please choose the option that best describes your current job as a dispatcher.

Paid Employee Volunteer Intern Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

29. On average, how many hours per week do you work as a dispatcher?

30. How long have you been a dispatcher? (indicate 0 if less than 1 year)

31. How many hours of training have you have received as a dispatcher? (Total over your career)

32. After your initial job training, are you required to complete additional training?

Yes, once every six months Yes, once per year Yes, but no time frame specified

No Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

33. Over your lifetime as a dispatcher, how many calls would you estimate you have received?

34. Over your lifetime as a dispatcher, how many eyewitness calls - where a witness is describing a crime and/or perpetrator - would you estimate you have received?

## Appendix C

The City University of New York  
John Jay College  
Forensic Psychology  
Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that is focused on 911 dispatchers' knowledge and training. The purpose of this research is to help us better understand and develop insight into a dispatcher's job and knowledge of eyewitness research.

If you decide to volunteer to participate in this research study, we will ask you to complete an online survey. All participants must be 18 years old or older. This survey has been approved by the City University of New York (CUNY) Institutional Review Board. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey will consist of both multiple choice questions and a variation of open-ended and fill in the blank questions. No identifying information of any respondent will be collected by the survey. All of the responses in the survey will be recorded confidentially.

The foreseeable risk of participation in this study is that participants may feel uncomfortable answering particular questions regarding their job and daily duties. Your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet, and confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. In order to minimize these risks you may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Additionally, you may discontinue the study at any time if you feel any discomfort during the study. The benefit of this study is that we will better understand dispatchers' and their knowledge. This study will expand our information on the different training and responsibilities a dispatcher attends to. The potential benefit to society is the insight into the successfulness and possible improvement on dispatcher training.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate without consequences. You can decide to withdraw your consent and stop participating in the research at any time without penalty. If you decide to participate and complete the survey you will have the opportunity to be entered into a random drawing for a visa gift card. The drawing is for a chance to win a gift card in the amount of \$100, \$75, or \$50. A total of six participants will be selected to win, there will be one winner at the amount of \$100, two participants will receive \$75, and three will win \$50. We anticipate 200 participants, and your chance of being selected is about 3%. The drawing will take place at the conclusion of the study, which is anticipated to be March 22, 2017.

Information gathered from you in this study will remain confidential. You will not be individually identified in anyway due to your participation. Your contact information for the gift card contest will be kept separately from your responses on a locked computer in Dr. Jennifer Dysart's office, while your responses will be kept in a secured survey account with a password that only the Principle Investigator and Dr. Jennifer Dysart will have access to.

By clicking the next button below to continue to the survey, you are agreeing to have read this consent form and that you fully understand the nature and consequences of participation in this study. If you have any further questions, comments, or concerns about this research please feel free to contact the Principle Investigator, Brittany Kassis at (727) 424-9336 or [brittany.kassis@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:brittany.kassis@jjay.cuny.edu).

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant please feel free to contact the CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at (646) 664-8918.

## Appendix D

This study is concerned with dispatchers' perception of their role as evidence collectors, their training, and their knowledge of eyewitness research and the effects of language on memory. Past research has focused on law enforcement personnel, experts, jurors, judges, and attorneys; however, dispatchers are at the start of an investigation and thus their training and roles need to be understood.

### How was this tested?

In this study, you were asked to complete an electronic survey to the best of your ability. The survey consisted of knowledge questions, and questions aimed at identifying your training, practices, and policies. The survey was made up of both closed-ended multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions.

### Aims:

The current study is aimed at understanding how dispatchers understand their role as an evidence collector. Additionally, I would like to understand the type of training dispatchers receive in regards to evidence collection concerns, particularly those related to eyewitnesses recall and the effects of language on memory.

### Why is this important to study?

Persons employed as 911 dispatchers are often the first person of contact after an individual is in an accident, needs emergency assistance, or witnesses a crime. Language has a powerful impact on memory; therefore, dispatcher training should be standardized to include the ability to gather accurate and unbiased information. In an emergency involving a crime, a dispatcher can play an important role in assisting the investigative process and collecting evidence, such as an eyewitness' description of a suspect. The fact that dispatchers play a vital role in the investigative process especially when a crime has been committed, is unquestionable in current research. Published research does not examine how dispatchers are trained to ask questions so the witness presenting information is not lead into revealing "facts" or drawing conclusions based on questions asked by the dispatcher. The current study aims to better understand dispatchers' roles as evidence collectors by considering the influence of language on accuracy of memory and how training should include methods for questioning 911 callers to report accidents or crimes.

### What if I want to know more?

If you are interested in learning more about the different ways language may influence memory, you may want to review:

Loftus, E. F., & Palmer, J. C. (1974). Reconstruction of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 13, 585-589. [http://dx.doi.org.ez.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/10.1016/S0022-5371\(74\)80011-3](http://dx.doi.org.ez.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/10.1016/S0022-5371(74)80011-3)

If you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this survey, please contact the CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at (646) 664-8918.

If you have questions or concerns about the current study please contact Brittany Kassis or Dr. Jennifer Dysart at [brittany.kassis@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:brittany.kassis@jjay.cuny.edu) or [jdysart@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:jdysart@jjay.cuny.edu). Thank you again for your participation.

## Appendix E

Interesting Responses to the question “In general, what role do dispatchers play in criminal investigations?”

**Response 1:** They are the first line of communication between the caller/witness and the incident, it is critical to get complete and accurate information to assist with locating the victim and or suspect.

**Response 2:** There are times when we have to pay attention to the area around where a crime may be occurring or where one just occurred in order to see if the crimes or calls for service may be related. Such as, if there is a robbery with suspect information, and then there is a suspicious people nearby that match the description, we have to relay that to the officers arriving/working the area, so that they are aware. We as dispatchers see it first sometimes.

**Response 3:** We gather the initial information for officers provided to go on scene. We usually don't really play a role in the actual investigation.

**Response 4:** Information gathered by dispatchers in the first moments of an incident are critical to the investigation. The dispatcher can set the tone for the entire call from the types of questions asked, how well they listen to the answers and what information they choose to relay and not relay to the responding units.

**Response 5:** Dispatchers are able to provide preliminary information either obtained by callers or by research prior contacts with subjects, providing addresses, phone numbers, alias and the such to assist officers in criminal investigations to help locate suspects and make an arrest.

**Response 6:** Dispatchers have learned to tell when a caller may not be giving the entire truth or if there is more to the situation than what is being given. Also, the callers will often give

dispatchers different information than what is given to the officers, and that could play an important role in criminal investigations.

**Response 7:** Very little. They can sometimes be subpoenaed for trial, but they do very little actual investigation.

**Response 8:** although call takers and dispatchers are not exactly involved in an investigation the call taker is the first person to talk to the victim over the phone and get all of the information (address, suspect info, weapons, direction of travel vehicle descriptions, etc.) from the victim; while that information is being added to the narrative of the call the dispatchers are using the radio to get the information out to the officers. This lets the officers know where to go, what's going on, and for what type of vehicle or suspect the officers are looking for.

**Response 9:** Dispatchers are the FIRST first responders. Without a dispatcher, the police/fire department would not know where to go, who they are looking for, etc. A lot of times for an in progress call, the dispatcher can get a full accurate description of what's happening and the subjects description as they are looking at them while they are calling.

**Response 10:** VITAL. They get the initial description and relay info to deputies/officers while they are responding to the scene. They often see the suspect before actually arriving on scene.

**Response 11:** Dispatchers are able to utilize multiple computer databases and phone resources to aid in investigations.