



Smartphone update behind increase in accidental 911 calls, Ottawa police say

Android update could explain increase in 'hang-up, pocket and misdialled calls'



'Sometimes it's life or death': Why 911 misdials are causing issues for Ottawa police



Avanthika Anand

Police communicator Alexa Rioux said many people aren't aware of settings on their phone that can be adjusted to lower the chance of dialing 911 by mistake.

Ottawa police say the number of accidental calls made to 911 in the first three months of the year is nearly double what it was during the same time last year, inundating already-swamped staff.

In a statement, the police force said it received about 50,000 "hang-up, pocket and misdialled [911] calls" during that time, 49 per cent more than in the start of the previous year.

Insp. Russell Lucas with the information directorate of the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) said the service's communications centre has received more calls for emergency services "post-pandemic," but misdials alone are causing a lot of issues.

Nearly half the 911 calls received in those first months of 2023 were misdials, he noted.

"There [have] been changes in technology to operating systems where there is sequences of buttons that you can press on different operating systems to to initiate a quicker 911 call," Lucas said.

In particular, he said, the recent uptick in accidental 911 calls is due to a software update on Android devices.

Android users can activate a feature called Emergency SOS — which will contact emergency services — by pressing their device's power button at least five times or pressing and holding it down, depending on the phone.

It's easy to do accidentally, causing misdials and false emergencies.



Insp. Russell Lucas says misdials are slowing down police communicators who are already seeing an increase in 911 call volumes post-pandemic. (Avanthika Anand/CBC)

Lucas added the problem is not unique to Ottawa.

Earlier this month, police services in other parts of Canada reported an uptick in accidental 911 calls, including in [London](#), [Windsor](#), Durham Region, Cornwall and [Waterloo](#).

'Life or death'

Part of the challenge of dealing with misdials is confirming whether or not the call is an emergency, Lucas said.

OPS communicator Alexa Rioux, who answers 911 calls, explained that accidental calls are often made by children who "are playing on the phone, that aren't aware who they're talking to, what they're doing."

Still, Rioux said, communicators like herself have to stay on the phone or call back to make sure there isn't an emergency.

"When we get 911 activations, a lot of times people notice and they'll hang up right away, which causes us to have to go through an ordeal to have to call them back, try to get an open line, see if there's an actual emergency," she said.

Rioux said it can take up to several minutes per call to go through that process — but time may be of the essence for some callers.

"Two minutes can be [a matter of] life or death," she said.



Police communicator Alexa Rioux says OPS's communications centre deals with hundreds of accidental 911 calls every day. (Avanthika Anand/CBC)

Between 9 a.m. and noon on Monday, Rioux said she answered over 70 accidental calls, which took "a few hours" to handle.

"Imagine a full day," she said. "It's ridiculous."

Rioux advised people who accidentally call 911 to stay on the phone to clarify they aren't experiencing an emergency.

Lucas added that people should turn off the SOS auto-dial feature on their phones and refrain from programming wireless devices to automatically call 911 to avoid making accidental calls.

He also said people should lock their phones and ensure the devices don't sit loose and open in a bag or pocket.

Android aware of the issue

OPS said various public safety agencies are working with the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and device manufacturers to reduce accidental 911 calls.

The Android operating system is owned by Google and is used by large smartphone manufacturers such as Samsung.

In an email, a Google spokesperson told CBC last month that the company is aware of an increase in accidental 911 calls related to its Emergency SOS feature.

"Android phone manufacturers who choose to offer Emergency SOS on their devices manage the implementation of the feature," the statement read.

"To help these manufacturers prevent unintentional emergency calls on their devices, Android is providing them with additional guidance and resources. We anticipate device manufacturers will roll out updates to their users that address this issue shortly. Users that continue to experience this issue should switch emergency SOS off for the next couple days."

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ottawa-police-911-calls-misdial-increase-1.6909169>