

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

Reducing Police Response to False Alarms Through Permitted Response

A Policy Research Project
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ABSTRACT

The high rate of false alarms has traditionally been defined according to the impact on patrol operation's workload and communication's dispatch activities. As law enforcement administrators become increasingly frustrated with the continued escalation of false alarm calls in their community, they must develop new approaches to reduce the demands on their limited resources. Law enforcement has unintentionally contributed to the problem by emphasizing security systems in their crime prevention programs. Most experts agree that, although alarm systems provide a benefit to law enforcement and the community in deterring crime and in the apprehension of criminals, their effectiveness will be reduced if strategies are not developed to control the problem.

A review of some recent studies conducted by the alarm industry, in association with law enforcement representatives, indicated that there is a move toward implementing and enforcing strict alarm ordinances in some communities. Although there are some administrators who are reluctant to restrict police response, it appears that the concept is becoming more popular as traditional methods continue to fail. An analysis of limited response policies enacted by some larger cities indicates promising results in reducing false alarms, by providing some sort of consequence or incentive to alarm users.

The research concludes that a permitted response policy can be a very effective tool in reducing the demand on police resources, as long as it is developed in conjunction with the local alarm industry, and includes both a public awareness campaign and continued customer training.

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to evaluate a justification for the development of a policy which would enable administrators to better manage the growing concern of police response to false alarms.

False alarms have traditionally been a problem for police administrators and citizens due to various reasons. The concern for rising crime rates and dwindling law enforcement resources have compounded this problem in the 90's. In addition, technological advances in electronic security monitoring devices have contributed to more alarm systems in operation today which has severely strained police resources and in some communities has reached a saturation point, i.e., police response is discontinued altogether or is suspended until corrective measures are taken (Cunningham, Strauchs, and Van Meter 277). In addition to draining resources, the false alarm problem erodes the credibility of alarm deterrence of property crime (Cunningham and Taylor 64). This has forced many communities to enact ordinances and policies to regulate the alarm industry.

One particular method currently employed by some agencies to address this issue, is to adopt policies and ordinances utilizing the "No-Permit, No-Response" concept (Dallas). This concept basically states that the agency will not respond to an alarm call unless the server has obtained a permit as required by the local ordinance or law. Since the term "No-Permit, No Response" has such a negative connotation, the phrase "Permitted Response" will be used for the purposes of this research paper.

The information in this project was obtained by reviewing numerous articles, books,

abstracts, and journals to gather data from a variety of sources throughout the nation. In addition, local ordinances and policies of other agencies were also studied in an attempt to gather insight into current trends and ideas regarding the false alarm problem.

The project is intended to provide city and police administrators with objective information which would enable them to effectively evaluate a "Permitted Response" policy. The review of the literature will indicate that "Permitted Response" can be a valuable alternative for reducing police response to false alarms which would also have a direct impact on reducing demands for police resources.

Historical, Legal or Theoretical Context

False alarms have historically been frustrating for police administrators and community leaders. They also present a problem for the community, in that false alarms continue to cost citizens, in the form of higher taxes for the increased demand on police resources ("False Alarms: A Growing Problem" 1). A recent poll has shown that a majority of the police departments nationwide, are experiencing false alarm rates which exceed 90%, with most averaging 95% or greater (Sharp 69). According to a study on the false alarm problem, conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the national average is somewhere between 95% and 98%, which accounts for 10% to 30% of all police calls for service (Sec. 1: 2). Although the false alarm rate has been historically high in most cities, the increased popularity of alarm systems has compounded the problem even more. Some alarm industry executives even agree that false alarm response by police is a massive waste of public funds (Zalud 48).

Communities have attempted to address the growing false alarm situation through a combination of mechanisms, such as, local ordinances, permits, fees, and reduced service (McLaurin 8-10). Some administrators still view any form of reduced response as a last resort, feeling that it is law enforcement's duty to respond when summoned. Reduced service or refusal to respond may be controversial, but it has proven to be effective (Sweeney 47). The alarm industry, itself, has urged community officials to implement policies to suspend response in certain cases, with the provision of resumed response after corrective actions are met (AIREF False Alarm 2). According to the "Model False Alarm Ordinance," developed by the National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association, it is recommended that response refusal be allowed for sites where permits have been revoked, with revocation criteria being determined on a local basis (16).

Texas is one of five states nationwide which have statutes regulating local alarm control procedures (IACP sec.2: 1). Although the Texas statute may appear restrictive, it does allow for the revocation or suspension of a user permit, as well as the refusal to respond to sites which have a history of unreliability. In addition, the statute does not prohibit an agency from refusing to respond to a location which is un-permitted, but is restrictive, in that response cannot be withheld for excessive alarms if a permit holder has paid all false alarm fees incurred (Texas Local Government Code 338).

An agency must also consider the liability issues associated with failing to respond to a request for police service. Currently there are no definitive liability decisions by the courts concerning refusal to respond, but then again, the agency could be liable if they don't respond to a true emergency while they are tied up on a false alarm, or if injuries or damages are caused as a

result of responding to a false alarm. What the courts have said, is that ordinances must have a provision for a hearing when a fine is imposed, and that the community must have legal authority to enact these regulatory ordinances (IACP sec 4: 1).

Police administrators are continually being asked to manage their resources more efficiently as demands for police service continue to rise. It would not be efficient for administrators to hire someone who missed work 95% of the time, nor would it be efficient to retain an employee who made mistakes 95% of the time, so why should they be content to respond to alarms which are false 95% of the time (Daughtry 14). A "Permitted Response" policy would enable an agency to address the increase in demand for services, with an increase in efficiency (Kleinknecht 12). There must be an incentive for the alarm industry and the alarm user to cooperate with law enforcement, in reducing the waste of its valuable resources. Alarm response should be to reward the permit holder who manages or controls his system properly, and denial of response should be the consequence for those who are chronic abusers, fail to obtain a permit, or fail to pay the fines imposed (Cunningham and Taylor 64). Alarm systems, which are regulated and controlled properly, are beneficial to the police and community as a deterrence to crime and in criminal apprehension, but improperly operated systems are just a waste of the communities' resources (Sweeney 50).

Review of Literature or Practice

The majority of false alarms are caused because the alarm itself is either poorly manufactured, improperly installed, or carelessly used. Reliability of equipment is not as

problematic as it used to be, due to innovations in the electronics industry which have improved the quality of systems on the market today, while at the same time, making them more cost effective (Sweeney 48-49). According to the Central Station Alarm Association, 76% of false alarms are due to user error (NBFAA False Alarms 1). User error can be attributed to various causes, but the most common are; indifference, carelessness, or poor training (Sweeney 51).

Agencies have tried several methods and policies to address the issue of reducing response to false alarms. A recent poll indicated that 59% have some sort of punitive program where fines are assessed for excessive false alarms, and only 7% of the agencies polled have ceased responding to most alarms (Sharp 69). Most of the recent data indicates that the successful programs are those which include proper education of the user, proper installations of systems, and adequate service and maintenance of those systems (Cunningham and Taylor 209).

Through a joint effort, the International Association of Chiefs of Police and various alarm industry associations have produced a model for creating effective programs to reduce false alarms. This guideline is known as "The Model Cities Program." The program emphasizes the importance of cooperation between law enforcement and the alarm industry, as well as having a good alarm ordinance, which must be enforced. The study indicated that ordinances should have provisions to cancel police response as well as some form of attempted verification by the alarm companies. In addition, a successful program should have a system which will identify abusers and restrict response when necessary. The program also states that agencies should have the ability to measure alarm activity and manage corrective action (NBFAA Model 1-2). National alarm associations continue to study the problems associated with false alarms, and are further

developing more successful programs for law enforcement, which will be dubbed the "Model States Program," with a target date of December 1998 (AIREF Model States 3).

Other recommendations include aggressive public awareness campaigns, installer training and standards, non-response for habitual violators, and time-of-day differentiation (IACP sec. 1 : 7 8). The city of Calgary adopted a strict ordinance which stressed revocation of permits and attempted verification of alarms during certain hours of the day before the police were called. The theory being that a majority of user error false alarms occur during the hours of 6am to 10pm when employees were present, but risk of criminal activity was low. Calgary has seen a significant reduction in false alarms at the same time they are seeing a significant increase in alarm systems (IACP sec.3: 3-4). The city of Portland enacted a strict ordinance combined with an aggressive public awareness campaign which has reduced their false alarm rate by 36%, while permits were increasing 26%, since 1988 (IACP sec.3: 2).

A survey of major cities in Texas indicates that most agencies are still reluctant to restrict response. Although the policies and ordinances of these departments vary, the survey placed each agency in one of three categories depending upon their current practices. Most agencies fell in the category of full-response, meaning they continue to respond to most alarm calls. The cities of Houston and Amarillo fell into the category of restricted-response, indicating a tough stance against alarm abusers. Dallas was the only city which appeared to have adopted a middle-ground approach, which was categorized as limited-response (See Appendix 1).

Although Dallas has adopted a policy of no-permit, no-response, they still respond to most alarm calls. They have seen some decrease in the number of alarm calls, but their false alarm rate

remains high. Houston, on the other hand, has adopted a policy of not responding to any unpermitted sites, or habitual violators, and has seen a significant reduction in their call load. They continue to respond to alarms reported by individuals, as well as, all panic and duress alarms (Houston 1). Houston has also been able to insure more sites are properly permitted by selling blocks of permits directly to alarm installers, who then issue the permits directly to the user upon installation of the system.

Austin's alarm ordinance, enacted in 1985, established a requirement for permits and implemented financial penalties for excessive alarms. Although the ordinance has generated revenue for the city, it has not reduced the number of false alarms (Austin 1). The number of alarms, as well as, the false alarm rate has continued to climb (see Appendix 2). Another growing concern in Austin is demonstrated by examining the outstanding or unpaid fines which remain uncollected. An analysis of accounts receivable for Austin's alarm unit shows that more than 50% of the unpaid fines result from no-permit violations (see Appendix 3). Since Austin does not have a policy to refuse response to habitual violators or un-permitted locations, these abusers continue to operate their systems with the benefit of free service by the police. The problems in Austin are not unique, and in fact, are common nationwide.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

Administrators will have to change the traditional approaches to controlling the false alarms in the future, if they are to succeed. Even a stronger approach, such as permitted response, will have limited success if implemented without some form of input from the alarm

industry. The most effective ordinance programs are initially developed in conjunction with the alarm companies and continue to involve follow-up customer training (Cunningham, Strauchs, and Van Meter 282). Administrators must be proactive in establishing a coalition of local alarm companies in their cities who will work with the police and customers in combating unnecessary alarm calls. In some communities the alarm industry is not a cohesive, easily identifiable group (Cunningham, Strauchs and Van Meter 277). An alarm association will have to be encouraged and recognized by community leaders if they are to be successful. This could be accomplished by providing incentives for the companies to work together on setting and following standards, like providing block permits to companies in good standing at a reduced rate. This will not only increase their competitiveness, but it will also facilitate the permitting of alarm sites. Strong licensing requirements of alarm companies have forced disreputable operators out of communities, thereby upgrading the business opportunities for the legitimate, qualified companies (Kleinknecht 15). This will serve to provide some protection for consumers while upgrading the reliability of alarm systems.

According to the President of the Capital Area Burglar and Fire Alarm Association, "It's the old 80/20 rule." "Unfortunately 20% of the alarm companies are responsible for 80% of the problems" (Sobczak). There are those companies who are not concerned with quality, but merely are trying to make as much profit as they can through quantity. They provide low quality systems at budget prices and invest no time or effort into educating the customer on the proper use of the system, nor do they provide follow-up service for the system.

Not only does a permit system insure that standards are met, it is a necessary tool for law

enforcement in regulating the false alarm problem. Permits provide baseline data to track programs and conduct comparative studies for effectiveness. They also track causes of problems and provide valuable information for officers while responding to alarm calls (Cunningham and Taylor 213). The permitting process can also serve the purpose of educating the public on the proper use of their systems.

The best way to reduce improper usage of alarm systems or user error, is by educating the alarm user about the impact of false alarms on police services and their responsibilities for reducing or working with the alarm companies to eliminate the problems. The incentive to work with the agency in reducing false alarms comes from the possibility of permit revocation and thus, no further police response to the site (McLaurin 7). Setting off a false alarm is like calling 911 and making a false report (National Alarm Computer Center 1). Law enforcement agencies do not tolerate this, so why should they sit back and tolerate the growing problem of false alarms? Cessation of response may not bring the user into compliance, but it will definitely reduce the number of times an agency must respond to that location. In addition, it will reduce the costs associated with a police response and the administrative collection efforts associated with each false alarm.

Toronto has a policy of suspending police response for one year, after four false alarms, which has resulted in a significant reduction of alarm calls and saved the city approximately \$8 million annually (Daughtry 14). In 1994, the Dallas Police Department estimated that \$4.1 million was spent responding to and recording false alarm calls (1). Dallas has made a point of including this type of information in their public awareness campaign on false alarms. Administrators must

develop a strategy to sell the solution to the public. "People must be informed as to what you are trying to do, and why you are trying to do it" (McLaurin 11).

Not only is this problem costing local governments money, but it also costs in the form of employee performance, morale, and safety. False alarms erode officer caution and place them at risk of being involved in an accident while responding to a, "cry of wolf" (McLaurin 1).

Frequently agencies have enormous costs associated with controlling and tracking alarms, and these are often magnified in larger communities due to the sheer volume of alarm calls. The city of Houston addressed this problem by contracting with a private company to collect their delinquent accounts. The company is allowed to take a 25% cut of the fines which it collects and then, at the end of five years, the department will be allowed to keep the computer equipment so that they can continue to run the program themselves (Root A: 11).

Regardless of the approach taken, it must be one which is aggressive and broad-based. It has been shown, that cities with aggressive reduction programs have experienced lower rates of false alarms (IACP sec. 1: 2).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The purpose of this research is to provide administrators with a justification for the development of a broad-based policy to address the ever-increasing problem of false alarms. Alarms do have a benefit to the police and community, in that they are a proven method for reducing crime and apprehending criminals (IACP sec. 1: 5). False alarms not only waste police resources and cost tax payers millions of dollars each year, but they also erode the credibility of alarms and have a negative impact on the deterrence ability of these systems.

One of the reasons departments are concentrating on implementing and rigidly enforcing strict alarm ordinances is, that the public suffers if something really happens which delays police response and they're tied up on a false alarm (Sharp 75). Another argument is that alarm companies should not be allowed to continue to generate profits at the expense of a public service (Cunningham and Taylor 64). In actuality, a small number of systems are responsible for a large proportion of the false alarm calls, and the alarm industry has shown a willingness to cooperate, in most cases. There is a need to get past fault finding and finger-pointing and move toward cooperative work and better communication among all parties involved (Daughtry 14).

Frustration by administrators has forced them to impose excessive penalties and restrictions, but the problems can only be solved by involving everyone in a solution (IACP sec. 1 : 10). Law enforcement has been threatening to withhold response if the problems continue to escalate, and now the alarm industry is beginning to agree that a no-response is justified in certain cases. The two must work together, along with the users, to address the specific issues on a local basis. Agencies must have an option for dealing with those who refuse to cooperate in working toward a solution. A permitted response policy would allow departments to withhold response to the few who continue to cause the majority of the problems. Such a policy should not be used to generate revenue, but it would allow administrators to gain control of the alarm problems in their community and enable them to use their limited resources more efficiently. The main deterrent value of an alarm is that it will bring a police response, so the public must understand that they will receive a response as long as they obtain the proper permits, make timely payments of any penalties assessed, and maintain their systems in proper working condition.

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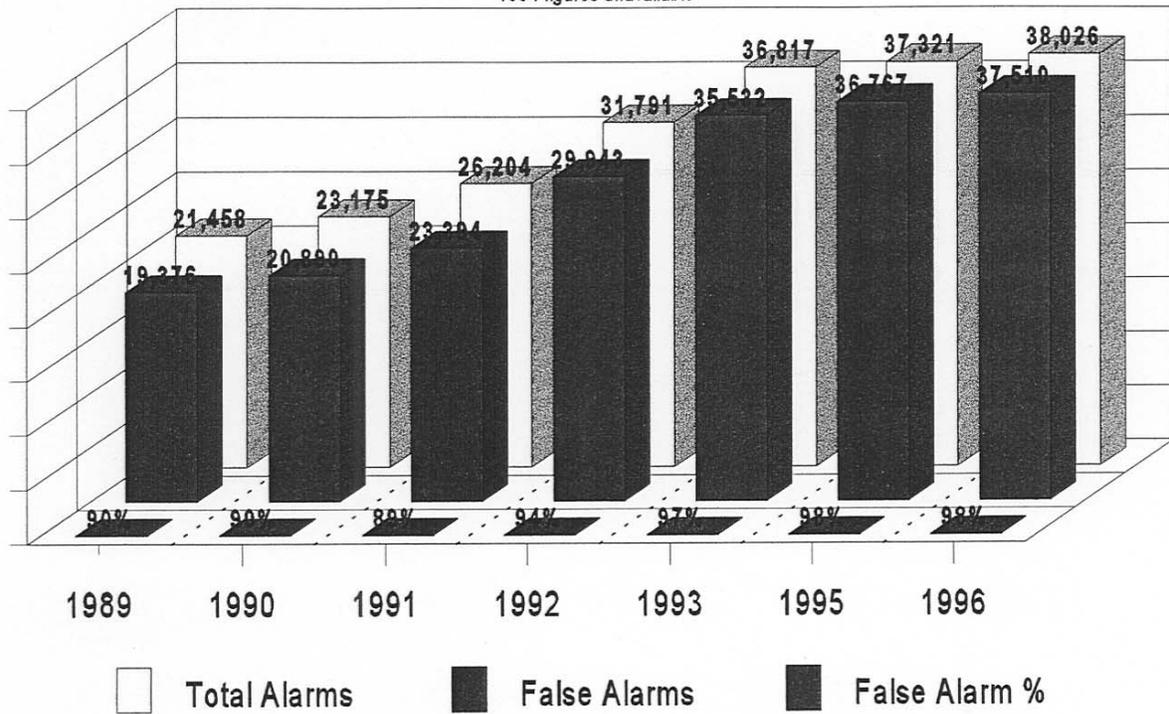
Appendix 1

<u>City</u>	<u>Full Response</u>	<u>Limited Response</u>	<u>Restricted Response</u>
Amarillo			X
Austin	X		
Corpus Christi	X		
Dallas		X	
El Paso	X		
Ft. Worth	X		
Houston			X
San Antonio	X		

Appendix 2

False Alarm Rate - Austin, Tx.

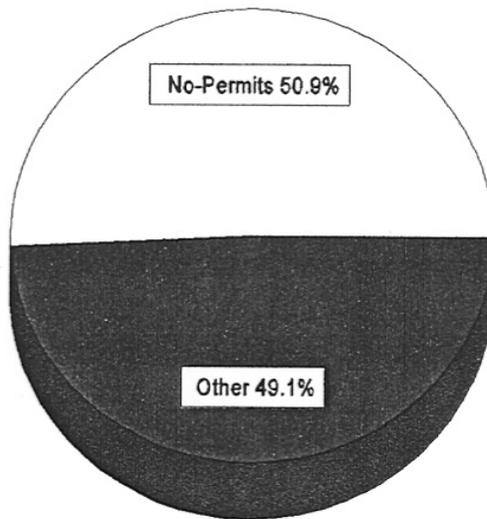
*1994 figures unavailable



Appendix 3

Austin P.D. False Alarm Unit

Total Accounts Receivable as of 3/31/97 - \$883,801



Unpaid No-Permit Violations

Other Unpaid Alarm Violations