The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

―――――――――

The Alarming Truth About False Alarms:
A Solution Called Verified Response

―――――――――

A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College

―――――――――

By
John P. Legg

Harris County Sheriff's Office
Houston, Texas
August 2014

ABSTRACT

There is a condition of epidemic proportion afflicting the budgets and operations of law enforcement agencies across the nation. The condition is the persistently high incident rates of false burglar alarms, whereby alarms activate and summon the police to locations for absolutely no legitimate law enforcement purpose. Statistics have consistently indicated that these false alarms regularly account for between 94% and 99% of all alarm calls-for-service in most U.S. jurisdictions (Blackstone, Hakim, & Spiegel, 2002; Blackstone, Buck & Hakim, 2005; Cunningham, Strauchs, & Van Meter, 1990). Nonetheless, most police agencies continue to respond in good faith to every alarm call, nationally wasting countless taxpayer dollars each year and delaying police responses to true calls for law enforcement services as a result. In a time when many police agencies report rising call-volumes and higher response times due to staffing constraints, most law enforcement officials and other stakeholders agree something must be done about the false alarm dilemma—and a relatively new protocol known as verified response is attracting considerable attention as a viable solution.

Today, studies on numerous jurisdictions across the U.S. that utilize verified response indicate unanimous reported outcomes of dramatically lower false alarm dispatches. As such, verified response certainly warrants closer examination and serious consideration for all police agencies experiencing persistent false alarms interfering with their ability to respond to legitimate calls-for-service. In this paper, research about the benefits and concerns relative to verified response are reviewed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract

INTRODUCTION

False alarms, also commonly and appropriately called nuisance alarms, have been occurring for ages. However, relative to the ever-increasing wide-spread usage of alarm systems in recent years, the problem is generally getting worse. The current high rate of false alarms emerged out of the rapid growth within the alarm industry between the 1970s and 1990s, resulting in the affordability, immediate availability, and increase in installation of alarm systems in both businesses and residences throughout society. The National Burglar & Fire Alarm Association estimated that some 32 million security alarm systems had been installed in the United States, with an estimated 3 million new systems anticipated to be installed each year going forward (Sampson, 2007).   Light (2001) estimated that at least one in seven U.S. businesses and one in five U.S. residences was equipped with an alarm system. As such, stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, alarm companies, alarm users, and local governments, are increasingly aware of and concerned with the waste of public resources associated with false alarms and are all involved to varying degrees in trying to stop or minimize their occurrence.

To give some perspective, research conducted by Blackstone, Buck, & Hakim (2005) found that police in the U.S. respond to approximately 36 million alarm activations per year, at an estimated cumulative cost of $1.8 billion annually. Given it is projected that false alarms make up some 94% to 98% of all alarm calls for service (Blackstone, Hakim, & Spiegel, 2002; Blackstone et al. 2005; Cunningham, Strauchs, & Van Meter, 1990), and these alarms constitute approximately 10% to 25% of all calls-for-service (Blackstone, Buck & Hakim, 2005), clearly there is considerable fiscal and

operational waste occurring. Theoretically, it is projected that if the false alarm problem could be solved, some 35,000 officers across the nation could be regularly freed-up to respond to legitimate police calls (Blackstone, Hakim, & Spiegel, 2000; Blackstone, Buck, and Hakim, 2005).   Even so, as evidenced by the continued persistence of high false alarm rates and police responses to them in the United States, reducing false alarms is a complex issue.

In practice, there are many combinations of false alarm solutions being tried with varying reported results. Perhaps it comes as no surprise, but outcomes of examinations seem to be curiously skewed dependent upon the vested interest of the stakeholders. For example, Lee (2006) reported in his study that the private security industry, which is almost entirely responsible for alarm system sales, installations, and monitoring, was estimated to accrue revenues of over $100 billion annually. As one can imagine, the alarm industry has a significant interest in characterizing alarm systems as ideal technology, and the industry wields its considerable influence to support that assertion in alarm system reliability and effectiveness arguments. This being the case, it would be an extensive undertaking to review and describe all the research validating and refuting the different perspectives concerning false alarms in one paper. Therefore, only the perspective of law enforcement and the viability of the relatively new solution called verified response for addressing high false alarm rates will be the focused on here.

To simplify understanding of the two primary variables examined in this paper, false alarms are those specific types that cause law enforcement services to be deployed for no apparent legitimate law enforcement purpose. Verified response, on

the other hand, is the law enforcement protocol, irrespective of minor variations, whereby law enforcement agencies set policy consisting of the central prerequisite that no officers will be dispatched to an alarm call until the cause of the alarm activation can first be reasonably verified as a "true" criminal event by some witness other than the police.

POSITION

When looking at the false alarm problem from a law enforcement perspective, and why verified response simply makes sense, one can view the advantages from two general directions: fiscal policy and customer service or operational effectiveness. Generally speaking, both can be fundamentally addressed concurrently by saying that public law enforcement is like any other private service industry in that success is directly related to efficiency and effectiveness. Regardless of police agencies being non-profit public organizations, they operate on many of the same business principles as the private sector. Therefore, by either standard it is clearly an example of poor management if police agencies overspend on nonessentials while leaving primary responsibilities unfunded, or if they deploy too many patrol officers to low crime areas while leaving high crime areas to suffer. In the same way, it is as significant a remission of sound fiscal and operational judgment when law enforcement agencies consistently waste their time and effort maintaining zero-exception alarm response policies when research clearly shows they are almost always universally "false" (Blackstone et al., 2005; Cunningham et al. 1990).

It is also important to remind people of the sole purpose for which intrusion alarm systems exist, which is to prevent burglaries from occurring or summon the police

should an environment protected by an alarm system become unlawfully breeched for the commission of some other type of crime. The key ingredient of legitimate alarm activation is that there is some actual criminal event triggering the alarm activation. Unfortunately, police organizations across America are, and have been for years, experiencing the harsh reality that burglar alarms activate indiscriminately, regardless of the stimuli, which rarely are ever actual burglars. There are several implications to this reality, not the least of which is officer-safety. Repeated high false alarms erode officer caution due to complacency. If, on average, 98% of alarm calls over a long period of time are false, the mind-set in terms of officer preparedness is weakened when the officers respond to the rare 2% true incidents. Police are trained not to treat any call as routine, but, at some point the repetitiveness of responding to false alarms undoubtedly diminishes officer alertness to some extent.

The sad truth is that false alarms are very preventable when considering that most occur as a result of user error, improper installation, and family pets (Sampson, 2007). A number of early studies determined false alarms to be attributable to user error some 40% to 60% of the time, and a CSAA False Alarm Study (1992) determined the user error rate to be 75%. Advancements in technology that make systems more user-friendly and reliable, as well as better information being provided to clients on how to use their systems, have improved some user error rates today; however, overall false alarm rates continue to flourish.

To further put the problem into perspective, Sampson (2007) provided an overview of research relative to the false alarm dilemma affecting law enforcement agencies across the nation. The data reiterated the grim statistical estimation of false

alarms making up 94% to 99% of all alarm calls as indicated by Blackstone et al. (2005); however, it also reviewed earlier research indicating that similar false alarm rates had been occurring in the previous two decades as well (Cunningham & Taylor, 1985). Making matters worse, studies showed that when the police respond to the rare "true" alarms, the criminals are almost always long gone when they arrive (Blackstone et al., 2005). Supporting even further the position that indiscriminately responding to alarm calls significantly impacts police agencies, are findings by Blackstone et al. (2005) pointing out that the dollar amounts of federal funds traditionally allocated to supplement inadequate state and local law enforcement budgets are clearly on a progressive downward trend, compelling the police to increase efficiency and effectiveness like never before in order to continue providing their most important services. For the Harris County Sheriff's Office in Houston, Texas—the largest county law enforcement agency in the state, the total alarm calls-for-service dispatched each year since 2010 has exceeded 100,000, with over 95% of them being "false" (Harris County Sheriff's Office 2010; Harris County Sheriff's Office 2011; Harris County Sheriff's Office 2012; Harris County Sheriff's Office 2013).

There are many contributing factors to why false alarms so frequently occur and a variety of proactive efforts other than verified response being tried to control them. For instance, many jurisdictions have implemented graduating false alarm fines, increased alarm permit fees to off-set costs, and false alarm education and training classes. Unfortunately, as the continuing high false alarm rates indicate, the benefits of these other initiatives are modest at best in lowering the occurrence of false alarm calls. On the other hand, verified response has been shown to unequivocally reduce false alarm

responses by the police, which from a law enforcement perspective is the ultimate objective. A review of literature indicated that since Nichols (2006) identified 30 U.S. and Canadian counties and cities that had officially adopted verified response with measurable success; there have since been a rapidly growing number of additional agencies to do so, or work toward doing so, throughout the nation.

It should be noted here before examining specific research supporting verified response, that while it involves the enactment of an official policy whereby alarm calls-for-service are met with the requirement that either alarm monitoring companies or their designees first verify alarm activations as "true" prior summoning law enforcement, exempted from all verified response policies are those calls manually activated by the user, such as panic, duress, or hold-up alarms. The reason for this is that alarms requiring manual, human initiated activation are far more likely to be deliberately triggered and true, which should therefore always be responded to accordingly by the police.

When police agencies adopt verified response, necessitating an alarm company's call center (i.e. alarm monitoring center) to first take steps to verify law enforcement is needed; alarm calls-for-service inevitably go down significantly. For example, an extensive independent study commissioned by the Sonitrol Corporation, a verified electronic security solutions provider, surveyed 20 police departments across the United States and Canada employing verified response policies and determined that such policies reduced police dispatch rates an average of 72% (as cited in Nichols, 2006). In another study by ADT, one of the largest American security system providers, it was found that verification diminished residential false dispatches by 35% and false

dispatches to businesses by 50% ("Industry leaders," 2003). Individual reports by jurisdictions adopting verification requirements report similar benefits. The Salt Lake City Police Department, for example, reported that their verified response policy resulted in a police response reduction to false alarms of over 90% after one year following implementation (Blackstone et al. 2005); and the Dallas Police Department reported a 45% reduction in false dispatches one year after its implementation of a verified response policy in 2006 (Dallas Police Department, 2007).

Thus far, research examining verified response practices corroborates what could be logically assumed, which is that by setting response prerequisites as opposed to simply responding every time alarms sound decreases unnecessary police responses and diminishes the associated waste of law enforcement resources (Eugene Police Department, 2004). Therefore, the tremendous monetary and operational costs of excessive false alarm calls plaguing law enforcement agencies across the U.S., and the residual effects with respect to the diversion false alarm calls cause police and support personnel by delaying their responses to true needs for law enforcement; can be remedied by implementing a verified response approach.

COUNTER POSITION

Nonetheless, there are perspectives that conflict with the aforementioned benefits confirmed by the data. Conceptually, alarms seem to be ideal target-hardening devices, and research from both the U.S. and U.K. lend some support to the assertion that burglar alarms are among the most effective burglary-deterrence measures (Palmer, Holmes, & Hollin, 2002). For this reason, the resounding chant from the proponents of alarm systems, and subsequent opposition of anything reducing their

effectiveness in terms of police responding to them to catch perpetrators, suggest that verified response is an affront on the expectation of police responsibility. However, it is important to note that insofar as people believing that alarms help police catch burglars, not only does burglary remain one of the most commonly reported crimes, but the clearance rate for burglaries in the U.S. has remained under 15% for many years (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004). This would suggest that whatever contribution burglar alarms make, it is virtually indiscernible when measured against both burglar alarm rates and burglar apprehension rates.

Another counter position is that "true" burglar alarms that would have received a certain and timely law enforcement response if verified response policies were not in place, will end up being neglected. Following this logic, verified response policies "may ultimately result in a higher rate of intrusion-related crimes due to undermining the deterrent effect of certain and timely detection and response" (Buck, 2004, p. 2). In essence, two concerns commonly stressed by opponents of verified response focuses on the small percentage of true alarms for which no burglar is apprehended in the commission of his or her crime due to the delayed response and the potential effect of higher rates of burglary due to more burglars committing the crime because of an instituted verified response in their area of operation. On its surface, it is reasonable to put forth such arguments; however, in the jurisdictions studied by Nichols (2006), 69% reported lower rates of burglary after implementation of verified response. With regard to apprehensions resulting from delayed responses, as already stated, the arrest of burglars in the commission of their crimes at sites with and without alarm activations have traditionally been extremely low (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004).

Additionally, in one study reviewed, LeBeau and Vincent (1998) found that burglars were more likely to be caught by the police on premises without alarm systems than on those equipped with them. Similarly, in his survey of 20 police departments across North America employing verified response, Nichols (2006) indicated there were no reported side-affects relative to the rate of burglar apprehensions, and the respondents reported that verified response was actually meeting or surpassing their overall expectations.

For the most part, as confirmed by Nichol's survey (2006) and most editorials, when verified response is introduced for the first time in jurisdictions, there is usually what can be described as an initial "knee jerk" opposition due to a misperceived reduction of police services. However, in almost every case examined over time, communities are relatively quick to accept, and even become advocates for the verified response methodology once they are educated on the pros and cons of verified response's purpose and effectiveness.

It would be remiss not to place special emphasis on what is logically the source of most aggressive counter positions to verified response: the alarm system industry. Much of the literature critical of verified response is developed and disseminated by the alarm industry. If alarm calls must be verified by them or their designee before calling the police, it is the alarm companies that will have to shoulder the associated costs. In 1990, there were an estimated 13,000 alarm companies operating in the United States, with a projected doubling of that number by the turn of the new millennium (Cunningham et al. 1990). Today, that projection has been well exceeded. Understandably, the alarm industry is likely to always downplay the burden alarm

systems impose and champion the benefits they provide. After all, security systems account for about 58% of the industry's revenue ("Industry leaders," 2003). Therefore, irrespective of the problems alarm systems present for law enforcement, other emergency services, and third parties, the alarm industry is likely to divert concerns using supportive examples such as the study by Rutgers University (2009), suggesting alarm systems reduce burglary incident rates.

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement agencies have been experimenting for years with various ways to address the excessive and widespread false alarm rates without inconveniencing others. They have made appeals to alarm companies and to the public to assist in addressing the problems, and they have tested an array of relatively non-invasive approaches aimed at off-setting or recovering, at least to some extent, the considerable monetary and other associated costs imposed by false alarms. Unfortunately, none of these efforts have proven to be sufficient solutions for most jurisdictions, as false alarm occurrences still run rampant. Ideally, the alarm companies and alarm users would have long since self-corrected the problems so police could concentrate their efforts only on legitimate law enforcement functions; however, the police continue responding to false alarms nearly a hundred times more frequently than to those that are true. It really does come down to one simple premise: if false alarm rates cannot be significantly reduced by those who install and use alarm systems, then the police must take it upon themselves to reduce their responses to them.

Research showed that verified response is an effective remedy for the high incident rates of false alarm responses. The aforementioned independent study by the

Sonitrol Corporation, which objectively examined verified response in use throughout North America, confirmed its effectiveness without exception (as cited in Nichols, 2006). Verified response has been shown to relieve law enforcement of the unaffordable financial burden and relentless distraction false alarms impose on their ability to perform core police functions. Additionally, verified response also alleviates the incredulous burden false alarms have on police dispatchers, who, in many jurisdictions, are operating at less than ideal staffing levels much like the police. Adopting a verified response policy appears to be the most viable and effective approach law enforcement agencies can undertake to simply stop the hemorrhaging of wasted resources on false alarm calls—for which there is no redeeming value whatsoever.

Perhaps the best way law enforcement can promote their adoption of verified response to the citizenry is to make it clear that the necessity of its implementation is only as enduring as the problem it is intended to address. In other words, adopting verified response may serve as the impetus to alarm companies and the public coming up with otherwise equally effective, yet perhaps less seemingly aggressive, solutions to reducing false alarms and/or police responses to them. Until then, verified response appears to be the only proven, substantially effective remedy employable entirely at the discretion of law enforcement.

REFERENCES

Blackstone, E. A., Buck, A. J., & Hakim, S. (2005). Evaluation of alternative policies to combat false emergency calls. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *28*(2), 233-244.

Blackstone, E. A., Hakim, S., & Spiegel, U. (2002, Spring). Not calling the police (First). *Regulation,* 16–19.

Blackstone, Hakim, & Spiegel (2000). The Problem of False Burglar Alarms. Retrieved from http://www.popcenter.org/problems/false_alarms/1/#endref3

Buck, K.R. (2004, November). *Assessing available research on the effects of verified response policies.* Paper presented to SIAC: Security Industry Alarm Coalition. Retrieved from http://www.siacinc.com/docs/DEALER%20SUPPORT%20DOCUMENTS/Assessing%20Available%20Research%20on%20the%20Effects%20of%20Verified%20Response.pdf

CSAA False Alarm Study. (1992). Bethesda, Md.: Central Station Alarm Association.

Cunningham, W. C., Strauchs, J. J., & Van Meter, C. W. (1990). *The Hallcrest report II: Private security trends, 1970-2000.* Hallcrest Systems. Retrieved from https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/126681NCJRS.pdf

Cunningham, W.C., & Taylor, T.H. (1985). Private security and police in America. *The Hallcrest Report.* Portland, OR: Chancellor.

Dallas Police Department. (2007, September 5). Verified alarm response review. Presentation presented at a Dallas City Council meeting, Dallas, TX.

Eugene Police Department. (April 8, 2004): A *12-month review of verified response alarm policy.* Eugene, OR: Author.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (2004). *Crime in the United States, 2003.* Washington, DC: Author.

Harris County Sheriff's Office (2010*). Emergency Dispatch Center Report: Internal crime & calls for service analyses reports.* Houston, TX.

Harris County Sheriff's Office (2011). *Emergency Dispatch Center Report: Internal crime & calls for service analyses reports.* Houston, TX.

Harris County Sheriff's Office (2012). *Emergency Dispatch Center Report: Internal crime & calls for service analyses reports.* Houston, TX.

Industry leaders aid alarm verification effort. (2003, September 1). *Security Distributing & Marketing.* Retrieved from http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-109024316.html

LeBeau, J. L., & Vincent, K. L. (1998). Mapping it out: Repeat-address burglar alarms and burglaries. Retrieved from http://www.popcenter.org/problems/false_alarms/PDFs/LeBeau_and_Vincent_1998.pdf

Lee, S. (2006, November 1). *Home burglar alarm impact study.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), Los Angeles, CA.

Light, J. (2001). The effects of privatization on public services: A historical evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 90, 25-40.

Nichols, M. (2006). Verified response: Lessons learned- a survey of 20 police

    departments across North America with verified response policies. Retrieved

    from http://www.mnicholscomm.com/sites/default/files/VR-WhitePaper-FINAL.pdf

Palmer, E., Holmes, A. & Hollin, C. (2002). Investigating burglars' decisions: Factors

    influencing target choice, method of entry, reasons for offending, repeat

    victimization of a property, and victim awareness. *Security Journal 15(1),* 7–18.

Rutgers University. (2009, February 5). Rutgers study finds alarm systems are valuable

    crime fighting tool [Press release].

    http://www.airef.org/research/airef_rutgerspr.pdf

Sampson, R. (2007). *False burglar alarms, Guide No. 5 (2nd ed.).* Washington, DC: US

    Department of Justice. Retrieved from

    http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/e05021556.pdf