Law Enforcement Responses to Burglar Alarms in Texas

Sean Blackwell
Texas Christian University

Ronald G. Burns
Texas Christian University

ABSTRACT

False burglar alarms are prominent among the challenges currently facing law enforcement agencies. Particularly, false burglar alarms cost police departments, and by extension taxpayers, millions of dollars annually. It is argued that false alarms consume extensive police resources which could be used to address more significant crime problems. Police officers and departments struggle with finding a balance between allocating resources to burglar alarm calls (the large majority of which are false alarms) and targeting resources to their many other law enforcement duties. The current research sheds light on officer perceptions regarding false alarms through analyses of survey responses from large local police and sheriff's departments in Texas. All large departments in Texas were questioned regarding department policy and perceptions of departmental approaches to burglar alarms. The findings confirm that police departments do indeed devote a great deal of resources to unsubstantiated burglar alarms. Suggestions for addressing the problematic situation are offered.

Key Words: burglar alarms, police operations, police practices, responses to burglar alarm

INTRODUCTION

Among the challenges facing police departments in the United States today is responding to a large number of false burglar alarms. Officer responses to false burglar alarms consume a substantial portion of police resources and generate other tangible effects, such as officer complacency during alarm response. Further, it is argued that false alarm responses detract from everyday police practices, which arguably results in a greater likelihood of crime.

Blackwell, Burns—Law Enforcement Responses to Burglar Alarms in Texas (2008)
Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice, Vol. 5(2). pp. 158-169.

There is much debate between law enforcement agencies, home alarm users, and the security industry regarding how limited police resources are to be used for false alarm burglar alarm response. Alarm users pay alarm companies to monitor their homes or businesses and contact law enforcement when necessary. Law enforcement is funded by tax-paying citizens, including those who don't receive the direct protection of a home alarm. Thus, it seems unjust and unfair for law enforcement to devote a notable portion of resources to mostly unsubstantiated burglar alarm calls. As a result, many law enforcement agencies are revisiting and revising their alarm response policies. In light of the current shortage of police officers in many departments and the increased concern for homeland security, the need to maximize officer efforts is imminent. The present work sheds light on recent law enforcement responses to burglar alarms in Texas and provides insight on how law enforcement officers perceive the false alarm situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the significant problems associated with police responses to false alarms, there is a notable dearth of research in the area. Available numbers suggest the significance of burglar alarms in terms of police resources, public use, and market interests. For instance, there were an estimated eighteen to 21 million alarm systems in the U.S. as of 2001, 15 million of which were monitored. Approximately 1.5 million new systems are added each year (Sampson, 2001). Nearly $25.9 billion was spent on professionally installed electronic security systems and services in 2006. Thirty-three percent of the security installations were for residential customers, 37% for commercial establishments, and 30% for large industrial facilities (Security Sales and Integration, 2006). The market for security alarms and related products is anticipated to increase 3.8% per year through 2010, to $4.6 billion (NBFAA). To be sure, the security industry is big business and security professionals are protective of their booming industry.

Law enforcement, however, has voiced concerns about how false burglar alarm responses drain resources. Blackstone, Hakim, & Spiegel (2002) suggested false alarms account for 10–20% of all calls for service, with 94–99% of all burglar alarms involving no crime. In 2000, law enforcement officials responded to 36 million false burglar alarms at an estimated cost of $1.8 billion. The alarm problem consumed an estimated 35,000 officers who could have been addressing more substantive law enforcement duties (Blackstone, Hakim, and Spiegel, 2002). In addition to the financial resources consumed, consistently responding to false alarms could result in greater danger to officers. Particularly, Moslow (1994) warns that repeated false alarm response breeds officer complacency and can negatively affect response to a truly dangerous situation.

While many states and municipalities are revisiting their alarm response policies, Texas recently took steps to address the wasted resources inherent in law enforcement responses to false burglar alarms. In 2005, Texas Governor Rick Perry signed legislation that provides a framework for managing security alarms in Texas, with the goal of reducing unnecessary police dispatches. The bill, SB 568, provides guidance for municipalities to follow when developing alarm ordinances or policies. Three key aspects of the legislation are: (1) an industry standard equipment, CP-01, which has received support from the International Association of Chiefs of Police and maintains several enhanced features designed to minimize user error; (2) enhanced call verification, which involves the alarm monitoring center placing two calls to a customer in an attempt to increase the probability of a valid alarm prior to dispatching law enforcement

officers; and (3) an alarm permit system combined with an escalating fine structure which is designed as incentive for alarm users to detect and correct errors.

The research literature regarding law enforcement responses to burglar alarms extends beyond the criminal justice arena. Economics professors Erwin Blackstone, Simon Hakim, Uriel Spiegel, and Yochanan Shachmurove published several works in this area, with particular emphases on cost/benefit analyses. Hakim, Rengert, and Shachmurove (1995) identified reduced burglary, assault, rape, and fire incidents as social benefits of alarm ownership. However, they noted that 94–98% of all alarm activations are false and 20–30% of officer time is devoted to false alarm response. Based on their calculations, alarm ownership yields greater benefits than costs for many reasons, including the removal of burglars from the community, the facilitation of officers monitoring unguarded property, and the encouragement of commercial development in response to lower crime rates. The authors proposed a model for efficient false alarm fee collection based upon fines that match department costs and a requirement that all monies collected are allocated directly to police alarm unit resources.

The same researchers found similar results in their 1996 study, commenting on the social justice associated with using public funds to serve those with private alarms. They argue that to adequately meet the requirements of social justice, the net benefits to the public must outweigh the costs they bear to support a private service. They restate their contention that alarm owners must be properly charged for police response, and all fines collected from false alarms should be allocated to the police.

Some jurisdictions have shifted alarm responsibility to private security companies in an attempt to alleviate the burdens posed by requiring law enforcement to respond to most false alarms. In the verified response approach, law enforcement agents respond only if an alarm is dispatched by security guards physically at the location. The alarm company sends its own employees to confirm a burglary and call the police if they find any signs of a crime. The security officers must watch the entrances until police arrive and may not enter the premises unless someone's life is in danger. Adoption of a verified response approach may result in higher costs of owning a burglar alarm, for example, as the shift in resources is passed from the police to the security industry and then to the public. For instance, consumers pay as little as $5 to as much as a couple of hundred dollars per month in places where alarm companies contract with private security firms to alleviate the burden on police (Jackson, 2004).

Las Vegas, Nevada, instituted the verified response system in 1991. Prior to the change, officer response time to the scene averaged 45 minutes at a cost of $75 per response. Only 1–2% of alarms were valid. Annual budget savings exceeded $600,000 after the measure was introduced, and police response time dropped significantly. Salt Lake City, Utah, adopted the same ordinance in 2000 with similar results (Sampson, 2001). Several options in addition to verified response are also available to law enforcement agencies (see Appendix A).

In 2001, Rana Sampson published a U.S. Department of Justice-sponsored report titled *False Burglar Alarms* as a part of the Problem-Oriented Policing Guides for Police series. Sampson provided an overview of the false alarm problem and an analysis of alarm distribution. She noted no relationship between the burglary rate decline from 1982 to the late 1990s and the simultaneous increase in alarm ownership. Sampson offered questions departments can answer to help them best assess and respond to the false burglar alarm problem, including a list of criteria by which police can assess their response practices, such as the number of alarm

calls, the cost of handling false alarms, the personnel hours devoted to false alarm response, etc. Sampson categorized the varied responses to false burglar alarms into three categories: best responses, responses with limited effectiveness, and responses not recommended. Verified response and charging a fee for service for all false holdup, duress, and panic alarms were among the most effective practices, and responding "priority one" to all calls was deemed the least effective approach (Sampson, 2001).

The extensive amount of resources used in response to false alarms encourages the need for study in this area. Accordingly, the present research contributes to this need through analyzing both the varied approaches to addressing the false burglar alarm problem and Texas law enforcement perceptions of the problem.

METHODS

The present work contributes to the limited body of research in this area through analyzing survey responses from Texas law enforcement agencies. In fall 2006, a survey was sent to the 54 sheriff's and police departments in Texas with at least 100 active duty officers as of 2003. Our goal was to better understand how large departments respond to the false alarm problem, as well as how department personnel perceive the problem.

A survey was faxed to each department with an introductory letter stating the nature of the research. Subjects were asked to complete the one-page survey and either mail or fax it back to the authors at their earliest convenience. The survey questions addressed three primary areas: the nature of each department's response to burglar alarms, fees associated with responding to false alarms, and participant perceptions of false alarm response.

Efforts to increase the response rate included making the survey brief, faxing follow-up requests for participation at roughly three-week intervals, and making telephone calls to non-responding agencies. Subjects were offered the opportunity to receive the results upon completion of the study. Accordingly, copies of the results were sent to all participating agencies who requested them. Representatives from 33 of the 54 departments returned completed surveys, resulting in a 61.1% response rate. Nineteen of the 33 responding agencies were municipal departments (57.6%); 14 were sheriff's departments (42.4%).

FINDINGS

The survey questions were categorized into three areas: "Response," "Fees," and "Perceptions." The first set of questions involved department responses to burglar alarms. All subjects noted that their department responds to all alarm calls. Forty-five percent of the respondents (n=9) noted that their department treats alarm calls as a high priority, 40% (n=8) identified alarm calls as a medium-level priority, while only 15% (n=3) designated alarm calls a low-priority. The notable percentage of departments that reported treating alarms as a high priority seems controversial in light of Sampson's (2001) suggestion that alarm calls should not receive high priority.

Subjects were also asked to comment on the nature of alarm calls. Particularly, they estimated that an average of 8.2% of all calls for service involve alarm calls. Of those calls, only an estimated 2.2% actually involved a crime. Roughly the same percentage of alarm calls to residential locations (2.0%) and calls to commercial establishments actually involved a crime

(2.1%). The low percentage of alarm calls that actually involved a crime is consistent with findings in the research literatures. Table 1 depicts these findings.

Table 1. Perceived Validity of Alarm Calls

	Mean	Median	n
Estimated percentage of all calls for service that involve burglar alarms	8.2	6.3	27
Estimated percentage of all burglar alarms that actually involve a crime	2.2	1.2	31
Estimated percentage of all residential burglar alarms that actually involve a crime	2.0	1.0	24
Estimated percentage of all commercial burglar alarms that actually involve a crime	2.1	1.0	24

Subjects responded to a series of questions concerning their department's policy regarding false alarms. One-third of the respondents noted that it was their department's policy to alert alarm companies about false alarm abusers, and roughly 15% noted that it was their agency's practice to publish alarm company false alarm rates on their Website. Most respondents (62.5%) reported that it was their department's practice to educate businesses and citizens regarding police response to alarm calls, while over 90% of respondents noted that it was their agency's practice to permit alarm companies to cancel dispatch to false alarm calls. Table 2 displays these findings.

Table 2. Department Policy Regarding Burglar Alarms

	Number of Agencies (%)	
	Yes	No
Is it your department's practice to alert alarm companies about false alarm abusers?	11 (33.3)	22 (66.7)
Is it your department's practice to public alarm company false alarm rates on your Website?	5 (15.2)	28 (84.8)
It is your department's practice to educate businesses and citizens regarding police response to alarm calls?	20 (62.5)	12 (37.5)
Is it your department's practice to permit alarm companies to cancel dispatch to false alarm calls?	30 (90.9)	3 (9.1)

Subjects were also asked about fees associated with responses to alarm calls. Over three-quarters of respondents (75.8%) noted that their department required alarm users to register their alarms, with an average cost of $21.63 for doing so. Table 3 notes that only one department (3%) charged for all false alarm calls, while eight (24.2%) charged nothing to respond to alarm calls. Most departments required no charge for a certain number of responses, although alarm owners were responsible for a charge after a certain number of false alarm calls. Of the

19 respondents who noted their department charges a fee after a certain number of calls, most (14; 73.7%) provided alarm owners five free responses with a charge beginning with the sixth call. Just over 20% (21.1%) charged after the third false alarm call. Only one agency (5.3%) charged after the ninth call.

TABLE 3. FEES ASSOCIATED WITH FALSE ALARMS

Department policy regarding responses to burglar alarms	Number of Agencies	Percentage
Charge a standard, flat fee for all responses to false alarm calls	1	3.0
Charge an escalating fee for multiple responses to false alarm calls	5	15.2
No charge for response to false alarm calls	8	24.2
No charge for a certain number of responses; charges for additional responses	19	57.6
Total	33	100.0

The final set of questions pertained to subjects' perceptions of burglar alarms in general. Almost two-thirds of respondents (62.5%) believed that private alarm companies should shoulder more of the financial burden of law enforcement responses to false alarms. As noted in Table 4, most respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with their department's current response policy to burglar alarms. Only 21.9% reported being very or somewhat unsatisfied with their department's policy.

TABLE 4. RESPONDENT SATISFACTION WITH DEPARTMENT'S POLICY TO BURGLAR ALARMS

"How satisfied are you with your department's current response policy to burglar alarms?"

	n	**Percentage**
Very Satisfied	12	37.5
Somewhat Satisfied	9	28.1
Neutral	4	12.5
Somewhat Unsatisfied	4	12.5
Very Unsatisfied	3	9.4
Total	32	100

Subjects were also asked about their perceptions of the utility of burglar alarms. Most respondents (56.3%) believed burglar alarms are a somewhat effective crime prevention method. Just under 20% believed alarms provide a very effective method for preventing crime. Only six respondents (18.8%) noted that burglar alarms are a very or somewhat ineffective method of crime prevention. Table 5 depicts these results.

TABLE 5. BURGLAR ALARMS AS CRIME PREVENTION

"How Strongly do you Believe Burglar Alarms are an Effective Crime Prevention Method?"

	n	Percentage
Very Effective	6	18.8
Somewhat Effective	18	56.3
Neutral	2	6.3
Somewhat Ineffective	4	12.5
Very Ineffective	2	6.3
Total	32	100.2*

* Percentage does not equal 100 due to rounding.

DISCUSSION

Several limitations to the current study warrant mention. The use of survey research to assess department policies is limited due to the inherent reliance on respondents to provide accurate data. While the desired unit of analysis is the agency, an individual within the agency had to provide the desired information. Along these lines, assessing the perception of one individual from each law enforcement agency is limited in that one person's opinion may not be reflective of the department as a whole. Surveying large law enforcement agencies could also be considered a limitation as many smaller departments face the same issues, yet their input is absent from the current results. Larger departments were selected due to their heavier involvement with responding to burglar alarms. Further, results from the present study are limited to the State of Texas. These limitations are certainly worthy of mention and are issues of consideration in future research, yet none significantly alters the contributions of the present work.

The present findings shed light on current law enforcement practices and perceptions of false alarm response while offering direction for further study. For instance, respondents were most likely to note that their department treats burglar alarms with high priority. Treating alarms as "priority one," however, is not recommended by some, including Sampson (2001) who notes that doing so is unnecessary in light of the high number of false alarms and does nothing to address the underlying causes of false alarms. Further, it appears that large law enforcement agencies in Texas face many of the same challenges as departments across the U.S. with regard to wasted resources spent on responding to false alarms. Specifically, respondents estimated that burglar alarm calls comprise roughly eight % of all calls received for service, with only an estimated 2% of the burglar alarm calls actually involving a crime.

The central question surrounding police response to false burglar alarms concerns what departments should do to address the false alarm problem. Law enforcement officials have numerous options at their disposal that would help to prevent or discourage false alarm calls. For instance, departments can: 1) make their false alarm rates available to the public, 2) educate alarm users regarding burglar alarms and the resources needed to respond to false alarms, and 3) notify alarm companies of any false alarm abusers to pressure them into more responsible

alarm use. While only a third of respondents reported that it was their practice to alert alarm companies about false alarm abusers and only 15% post alarm company false alarm rates on their website, most departments stress the utility of alarm user education. Some departments host seminars and/or visit repeat offenders in search of ways to reduce the number of false alarms; sometimes a fine will be waived for seminar attendance. However, research suggests education programs have few positive effects on the recurrence of false alarms (Blackstone, Hakim, and Spiegel, 2002).

Perhaps the most effective solution to the problem relates to financial manipulation. Specifically, one could argue that the best way to reduce false alarms is to bill alarm users for police response time and resources. However, one could also argue that since the police function is to protect and serve *everyone*, including alarm owners who make mistakes, it would be unjust to punish *all* alarm owners for the mishaps of a few. In response, departments have balanced these conflicting interests by allowing alarm users a set number of free responses. Sampson (2001) believes that approach is only marginally effective, and that departments should either institute a verified response policy or bill every false alarm individually. Conversely, some law enforcement officials claim that fines are an ineffective deterrent (Sostek, 1998).

Several respondents in the present study noted that their department was moving toward a verified response approach, and others noted a preference for their department to do so. Although verified response seems fiscally pragmatic, some of its facets have drawn criticism. First, resources needed to verify intruder presence would be shifted from law enforcement agencies to private security companies. Second, response time would increase for calls that involve a crime in progress. Third, alarm companies would incur increased response duties. However, some alarm industry officials view a verified response system as an opportunity to market higher end, more sophisticated alarm systems (Sostek, 1998).

It may be the case that resources spent on police department responses to alarms, both legitimate and false, are simply the costs of fighting crime. For instance, false alarm rates remain in the 94–99% range, and the cost of police response remains high, yet most department officials seem content with their agency's policy. Further, they strongly believe burglar alarms are an effective means of crime prevention. Such attitudes may imply that the high false alarm rate is simply the unavoidable price citizens must pay for the real alarms.

Perhaps the most fruitful approach to addressing the false alarm problem is to better understand why false alarms occur and who is responsible. The three main causes for false alarms are faulty equipment, poor installation, and user error (Sampson, 2001), with user error responsible for an estimated 76% of all false alarm calls (Blackstone, Hakim, and Spiegel, 2002). Further, estimates suggested that 20% of alarm systems were responsible for 80% of false alarms (Blackstone, Hakim, and Spiegel, 2002), meaning that a small group of offenders are responsible for a large consumption of wasted police resources. Is a monetary penalty for false alarms practical? Should the alarm industry be accountable for their role in false alarms, for instance, in cases involving faulty equipment? Should the small group of offenders receive notably enhanced penalties? These are among the many questions open to debate and worthy of future research efforts.

The dearth of scholarly literature in this area leaves room for study. Qualitative assessments of both law enforcement agencies and private security companies would also contribute to the body of literature in this area. For instance, one might examine the level of profes-

sionalism shown by officers responding to alarm calls, or perhaps examine the marketing and manufacturing efforts of the private security industry. Other research efforts might: 1) examine the precise financial impacts that result from false alarm reduction, 2) further investigate whether or not alarms prevent crime, 3) assess whether or not Texas SB 568 impacts alarm calls and police responses, and/or 4) observe how false alarms specifically alter officer response time or decrease safety.

In the end, cooperation and collaboration by the primary groups associated with false alarms is essential to effectively address the problem. Law enforcement, the security industry, and alarm owners must agree upon the best way to let burglar alarms prevent crime without wasting resources. Further, it is important to consider the input of residents and companies who choose not to use alarms. Much of the difficulty in getting these groups to work harmoniously concerns their individual interests. For instance, homeowners with alarms want security, and many view the police as public servants who should respond to all burglar alarm calls. Security professionals are protective of their industry and largely seek to continue providing security services without undue burden, such as having to verify the presence of a crime in order to generate a visit from police. Law enforcement agencies feel pressure to confront a wide array of issues within the community, yet they often must do so in the absence of sufficient resources. Law enforcement argues that responses to false alarms consume many resources that could be used to promote a greater sense of safety in the community. Those without alarms may feel that alarm owners are receiving preferential treatment. Finding agreement among these large and powerful groups will go far toward effectively addressing the problem. Doing so, however, is no easy task.

CONCLUSION

Some researchers commented on the use of technology as a means of alleviating police resources in response to false alarms. For instance, Anya Sostek (1998) argues that video monitoring may be the best verification, as the physical presence of an individual responding to the call would not be required. Randy Southerland (1999) discusses an interactive video monitoring system developed from Gulf War technology that is able to visually distinguish between a human and a stray animal, changes in lighting, etc. The use of such technology would arguably reduce the cost of fines and a large security staff for commercial establishments. Further, it would free up much of the police resources currently devoted to responding to false alarms. Unfortunately for home owners and businesses, it would also raise the cost of having an alarm.

It is imperative that all interested parties cooperate to find a solution if successful change is to occur. The interested and involved parties must work together with the goal of finding the most efficient and effective way to serve the public. An example of the effectiveness of cooperation among the groups is found in the Model Cities and States Program, which was initiated by the alarm industry and the International Association of Chiefs of Police to assist alarm coordinators in their efforts to identify chronic false activators and work with them to reduce repeat false activations. Alarm owners and the security industry must balance their desire for protection and fiscal frugality with law enforcement's need to more effectively utilize resources. It is hoped that such a balance will be struck and a feasible solution discovered.

Law enforcement effectiveness depends largely on how departments react to changes in a protean society. Increased use of burglar alarms, and the need to respond to them are among

those changes. We've seen law enforcement agencies successfully shift their focus in response to societal changes on many occasions, for instance, toward a more community-oriented approach at a time when police-community relations were poor, and by demonstrating concern for homeland security in response to terrorist threats and attacks. With regard to the increased use of burglar alarms and limited police resources, how then, do law enforcement agencies work effectively within the confines of a budget, yet remain responsive to burglar alarm users? While the present research is not designed to directly answer this question, several suggestions are offered in light of the present findings and the research literature.

APPENDIX A

Law enforcement agencies have instituted a wide variety of responses since alarm use became widespread in the late 1980s. The following identifies the primary response policies adopted by law enforcement (Sampson, 2001). See Rana Sampson's *False Burglar Alarms* (2001) for elaboration.

- Requiring alarm companies to visually verify alarm legitimacy prior to calling the police.
- Charging a fee for service for all false holdup, duress, and panic alarms.
- Establishing a fee for service for all false alarm calls.
- Establishing an ordinance with escalating fines for false alarms.
- Accepting dispatch cancellations from alarm companies.
- Alerting alarm companies about false alarm abusers.
- Publishing alarm companies false alarm rates on Websites or elsewhere.
- Holding false alarm classes.
- Lowering the call priority of alarms.
- Responding "priority one" to alarm calls.

REFERENCES

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

Hakim, S., Rengert, G., & Shachmurove, Y. (1995). Burglar and fire alarms: Costs and benefits to the locality. *American Journal of Economics & Sociology, 54*(2), 145-161.

Hakim, S., Rengert, G., & Shachmurove, Y. (1996). Estimation of net benefits of residential electronic security. *Justice Quarterly, 13*(1), 153-170.

Jackson, L. A. (2004). False alarm. *Black Enterprise, 35*(2), 186.

Moslow, J. (1994). False alarms: Cause for alarm. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 63*(11), 1-5.

National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association. Industry Statistics. Accessed 11 May 2007 at www.alarm.org/info_ctr/stats/industry_stats.htm

Security Sales and Integration. (2007). Annual installation business report—Market statistics. Accessed 15 May 2007 at www.securitysales.com/pdf/SSFB07BuyersGuide/MarketStats.pdf.

Sampson, R. (2001). False burglar alarms. Officer of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice.

Sostek, A. (1998). Alarm aggravation. *Governing, 12*(1), 34-36.

Southerland, R. (1999). Putting a stop to false alarms. *Access Control & Security Systems Integration, 42*(10), 61-64.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Sean Blackwell has a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice degree from Texas Christian University. His research interests include social control of the homeless, socioeconomic factors and crime, and genocide.

Ronald G. Burns is an associate professor and director of the criminal justice program at Texas Christian University. He is the author or editor of six books and over 35 journal articles and book chapters. His research interests include policing issues, corporate deviance, and environmental crimes. Recent publications include articles in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Crime and Delinquency*.