Alarm Management: Determining the Best Approach for Your Community

October 2013

Summary

Since 2002 the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the alarm industry have worked together to reduce alarm dispatches through the work of the IACP's Private Sector Liaison Committee (PSLC) and Division of State Associations of Chiefs of Police (SACOP). Much progress has been made, including the establishment of alarm management committees in 13 state associations. Improved technology and better educated consumers, coupled with local ordinances and enhanced verification procedures, have produced a significant decrease in the number of calls for service resulting from false alarms in many communities. However, the proportion of false alarm calls remains high, well over 90% of all calls. As a result, false burglar alarms continue to be a significant issue for many law enforcement agencies.

Today's fiscal environment leaves many law enforcement agencies struggling to provide critical services with fewer resources. In 2011, police responded to more than 38 million false burglary alarm calls. For many jurisdictions, alarm calls represent the most frequent call for service, placing a significant burden on agency budgets and personnel. A November 2012 Urban Institute report found that reduction of a single false alarm saves 40 minutes of officer time, and $50-$120 in associated costs.

A law enforcement executive has a range of alarm management options to consider. Regardless of the option(s) selected in a particular jurisdiction, addressing false alarms requires public-private cooperation between the law enforcement agency and the alarm industry. An agency's strategy will be driven by state laws and local ordinances, resources, and local political and community perspectives and customs, prerogatives, and demands. This document outlines the key issues, response options, research studies, and IACP's official position and resources on alarm management to aid in the development of an alarm management strategy.

Key Issues

Officer and Citizen Safety – The proportion of dispatched calls that are due to false alarms remains high, causing complacency among responding officers. Such complacency can leave officers less prepared, physically and mentally, to respond if the alarm is valid. Further, unnecessary dispatches increases the opportunity for officer injuries and accidents.

Community Expectations – Limiting response and/or charging fees and fines can be a public relations challenge. Community members may perceive alarm response as a basic function of their local law enforcement agency. There may also be political resistance to changing response practices even when determined to be cost-effective.

Resources – Responding to false alarms requires considerable resources, including personnel costs for dispatchers and responding officers and time lost in responding to other calls. Alarm management and education programs require administrative and personnel costs. Registration fees and fines can be used to offset some of the costs.

Key Questions[1]

In order to assess your jurisdiction's alarm problem, consider the following basic questions:

- What proportion of your department's call for service workload involves responding to alarms?
- What proportion of these alarm calls is false?
- What is the department's true cost of responding to alarms, including personnel hours, call load, equipment, administrative costs, and lost productivity?
- How many alarm systems are operable in your jurisdiction?
- Are there any identifiable patterns for alarm calls?
- Do some alarm companies have higher false alarm rates than others in your jurisdiction?
- Has your department met with alarm company personnel to discuss collaborative solutions?
- Has your department identified jurisdictions that have successfully reduced their total number of false alarms?

[1]From Sampson, Rana, *False Burglar Alarms*, 2nd Edition. Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice, 2011. See the guide for a comprehensive set of questions and factors to consider.

Response and Management Options

Local Ordinances – Many jurisdictions have a local ordinance that guides their response policy and outlines registration requirements and fines for false alarms. The alarm industry, through the work of the Security Industry Alarm Coalition, has worked with several state associations of chiefs of police to develop state model alarm ordinances.

Registration of Alarm Systems – Requiring alarm owners to register their alarm system may help to offset alarm management administrative costs and serve as a prerequisite to collect fines and fees but may be difficult to enforce. Law enforcement agencies should work with alarm companies to identify all customers within the jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions outsource the administration of permits and collecting fines and fees to another unit of government outside of the law enforcement agency or a private company.

Enhanced Call Verification – Endorsed by the IACP through a 2002 resolution, this approach requires alarm monitoring companies to attempt contacting the owner(s) using two or more phone numbers to determine the cause of the alarm and whether dispatching police is required. This is often referred to as two-call verification.

Verified Response – Verified response requires visual (in person or by video) confirmation by the alarm company that a break-in has occurred. Verified response has not been widely implemented but has resulted in a significant decrease in the number of alarm calls. Many jurisdictions implementing, or considering implementation of verified response have faced significant resistance from alarm companies and citizens.

User Education Classes – Ensuring that alarm owners know how to successfully activate and deactivate their system is key in reducing false alarms. User education classes, provided by the alarm company and/or police, may help to reduce false alarms but require significant resources to implement and maintain. Some jurisdictions may require a user education class for repeat offenders and/or waive a fine. Many agencies do not believe it is the responsibility of the police to train community members on the use of a product purchased from a private vendor.

Fines for Owners – A jurisdiction may consider implementing an escalating system of fines for false alarms after a pre-determined number of free responses. The IACP advises a maximum of two free responses before instituting fines. The fines may serve as a deterrent and a way to recoup the costs of service delivery.

Fines for Alarm Companies – Depending on applicable court rulings, state laws, and local ordinances and the cause of the false alarm (such as a violation of the local ordinance requiring enhanced verification), a jurisdiction may consider fining the alarm company.

Ceasing Response – After proper notice, a law enforcement agency may temporarily cease responding to alarm calls from chronic false alarm offenders after an established response cut-off point. The law enforcement agency should provide a right to appeal and/or take corrective action to allow for reinstatement.

Survey Results

In 2013, the IACP conducted a membership survey of law enforcement executives to identify key issues and the popularity of various alarm management and response options. Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported that false alarms are a significant issue for their department with the percentage of overall calls for service attributable to false alarms ranging from 1 to 30, with an average of 9.5%. Additional results are presented below:

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IACP Resources

IACP Resolution: Support for Alarm Licensing (2013) – This resolution supports and calls for state licensing of alarm and monitoring companies to include background checks for personnel selling, installing, and monitoring security systems.

IACP Position Paper on Alarm Management (2011) – This white paper outlines best practices that should be considered when developing an alarm management strategy.

IACP Resolution: Alarm Call Panel Standards (2006) – This resolution urges municipalities and counties, when developing false alarm ordinances, to consider the American National Standards Institute's SIA CP-01 standard for alarm control panels.

IACP Resolution: Measure to Enhance Police Resources (2002) – This resolution supports enhanced call verification by calling on alarm companies to implement multiple call verification procedures to be used by the central station monitoring center prior to law enforcement dispatch on all alarm signals from customer alarms, and support local jurisdiction efforts to adopt procedures or ordinances mandating multiple call verification procedures.

IACP Resolution: Mobile Security Devices (1998) – This resolution calls on the PSLC and SACOP to expand their false alarm reduction efforts to include mobile security devices.

Reading List

***Understanding Decisions to Burglarize from the Offenders Perspective*, University of North Carolina at Charlotte Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology (2012)** – This research study examines the decision-making processes of incarcerated burglars from three states and assesses the deterrent effect of burglar alarms.

***False Burglar Alarms*, 2nd Edition, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice (2011)** – This guide, produced by the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, reviews factors that increase the risks of false burglar alarms and outlines research and practice information about various law enforcement response models.

***Opportunities for Police Cost Savings Without Sacrificing Service Quality: Reducing False Alarms*, Urban Institute (2012)** – This research report highlights ways to reduce false alarm calls and highlights the experience of three jurisdictions.

***An Assessment of the Calculation Process and Validity of False Alarm Estimates*, University of North Carolina at Charlotte Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology (2010)** – This study examines how to measure and calculate false alarm rates in terms of dispatches per system per year as a valid method to evaluate the effectiveness of an alarm program/ordinance over a given length of time.

***The Impact of Home Burglar Alarm Systems on Residential Burglaries*, Rutgers University (2008)** - This study examines the impact of home burglar alarms on residential burglaries in Newark, New Jersey, during 2001 to 2005.

***Model Burglar Alarm Ordinance*, National Burglar & Fire Alarm Association and the False Alarm Reduction Association (2006)** – This ordinance is based on a registration system to facilitate false alarm reduction and outlines responsibilities for law enforcement, alarm installation companies, monitoring companies, and alarm owners.

***Model States Report*, Alarm Industry Research & Educational Foundation (1999)** – This report outlines the Model States False Dispatch Reduction Program and the results of the program.