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The False Alarm Solution: Verified Response

Salt Lake City Police Department

Abstract

Scanning

False alarm calls were draining patrol resources, comprising 12 percent of all dispatched calls. They contributed to a significant backlog of calls and the average police response time to alarm activations was up to 40 minutes, well beyond the time when police could reasonably hope to apprehend an intruder. Over 99% of all alarm calls proved false. Responding officers were getting increasingly complacent and they risked injury just driving to alarm calls.

Analysis

Past efforts to reduce the volume of false alarms through permits, warnings, fines, and suspensions had only modest effect. Other approaches tried elsewhere, from cost recovery to alarm industry regulation to outsourcing alarm administration, similarly proved only moderately effective. Police response to alarms was most effective and efficient if it could first be verified that an alarm activation was indicative of suspicious activity. Private security guards were ideally suited to make this initial verification.

Alarm owners were receptive to the possibility of having private guards verify alarms once they realized how this option could improve response times and lower their costs. A few other jurisdictions had positive experiences with verified response. A legal opinion established that police were under no legal obligation to respond to all alarm activations. A sufficient number of alarm companies and private guard companies were willing and able to provide initial verification service in a timely fashion.

Response

The police department proposed a verified alarm response ordinance to the city council. A campaign to inform the public, elected officials, and the alarm industry about the purposes and advantages of verified response was undertaken. The city council passed the ordinance and the police department conducted training for private guards to prepare them for their new responsibilities.

Assessment

The volume of alarm-related police calls for service dropped by 90 percent during the first nine months the verified response ordinance was in effect, compared to the same time frame one year prior. Average private guard response times to alarm activations has been much faster than the previous average police response times.

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Average police response time to other high priority calls for service dropped from five to three minutes. There has been no increase in the number of reported burglaries. The apprehension rate of burglars caught on site actually increased. Revenues for alarm companies and private guard companies have increased through collection of a modest additional monthly fee from alarm owners. Average costs to alarm owners have reduced due to reduced city alarm fines.

Commentary

The Salt Lake City Police Department's verified response to alarms project stands out for several reasons. Most obvious is the impact that verified response has had on reducing the amount of police resources consumed by highly unproductive responses to intrusion alarms. Verified response achieves reduction levels that no other response to the false alarm problem has even come close to achieving, while at the same time showing evidence that it improves the overall community response to the very problem that alarms are intended to address-burglary. Salt Lake City's experience with false alarms prior to adopting the verified response approach was typical of that faced by so many police agencies. Salt Lake City officials justified verified response by detailed documentation of the problem through hard data and professional expertise. They carefully explored and noted the limitations of alternative strategies for reducing the false alarm burden. They methodically built up internal, community, legal, and political support for making the dramatic shift in police policy. Perhaps most importantly, they continue to work closely with the private alarm and security industry to ensure that all aspects of verified response, from legislation to private security training to police operations, remain aligned to advance the community's ultimate interest, the protection of property from burglary.

Scanning

The Salt Lake City Police Department has struggled with the problem of false alarms for the past 20 years. False alarm calls were draining patrol resources and often created a significant backlog of calls. This problem had been apparent since 1980 when the department first began tracking false alarm statistics. Police administrators were concerned that officers responding to alarm calls were getting increasingly complacent, knowing that 99 percent of alarm calls proved false. Complacency put officers checking buildings at risk. Moreover, officers risked injury just driving to alarm calls. We were aware of at least four officers in the United States and Canada who had been killed in accidents responding to alarm calls in the past two years.

Interests in the problem

We identified as stakeholders in this problem taxpayers without alarm systems, alarm owners, alarm companies, city government and the police department. Stakeholders had different interests in the problem:

- Taxpayers without alarm systems were subsidizing the costs for police response to alarms, and those police resources were therefore not available to address other public needs.

- Alarm owners wanted a quick response to their alarm signal and wanted to minimize the costs they incurred from false alarm fines.

- Alarm companies were interested in maximizing their profit, which they believed they could do best by having police investigate alarm signals at public expense.
- City government tried to balance citizen welfare with consumption of municipal resources.
- The police department was interested in conserving resources by not responding to so many false alarms and in ensuring that alarmed properties were adequately protected from burglary.
- Alarm companies' interests were summarized in a recent report on false alarms:

Alarm dealers view police as a gift to their business. They sell a system, charge monthly fees for managing effective response that is provided and paid by the general taxpayers. Dealers consider false activation to be an issue merely between the police and the customers. There is also little (apparent) interest by individual dealers to spend resources in order to solve their own and the communal problem. [1](#)

The impact of false alarms on city resources

False alarms appeared to be a universal problem for police. We found studies indicating that 97 to 99 percent of all alarm activations police respond to nationwide are false and they consume about 12 to 30 percent of patrol resources. Salt Lake City's false alarm problem did not appear to be unique. A number of important findings emerged from our local analysis of the problem, including the following:

- In 1999, the Salt Lake City Police Department responded to 8,213 alarm activations. Only twenty-three cases, or three-tenths of one percent, of these calls justified a police report of any sort, only a few of which were for actual burglaries.
- False alarm calls comprised 12 percent of all dispatched calls.
- Nearly \$500,000 of the police department's budget was attributable to false alarms. The personnel time alone was the equivalent of five full-time officers. [2](#) This figure does not include the amount of time complaint takers and dispatchers spent handling incoming alarm activations and the 2,100 canceled false alarm calls for 1999.
- Processing of alarm permits and false alarm fines, and adjudicating appeals created a significant workload for the police department alarm unit, the city treasurer's office, and the small claims court of appeals, respectively.

- Only \$150,000 in alarm fines was collected in 1999, which only partially offset the costs of alarm response, creating a net deficit of about \$350,000. Alarm permits were required, but were free of charge. (We did not support charging for alarm permits because we felt it created an unwritten promise that police would respond on alarm activations.)

- All taxpayers, regardless of whether they had alarm systems or not, were subsidizing through that portion of their taxes that were spent responding to false alarms false alarm response for the 12 percent of the city's residences and businesses with alarms.

- The average response time to an alarm activation was 40 minutes and occasionally took as long as two-and-a-half hours. Some aggressive alarm sales representatives were making false and unrealistic promises to their customers about how quickly the police would respond to alarms, a matter over which the alarm companies had no control. In fact, due to the tremendous number of alarm activations and the number of false alarms, the priority for alarm activations was downgraded in 1992 to preserve resources for higher priority calls for service such as domestic violence.

- Locally we found that alarm owners became increasingly frustrated by false alarms and the consequent fines. They vented their frustration at both the police department and their alarm companies. Sixty percent of the phone calls received by the police department's alarm unit were from frustrated citizens.

- False alarms in Salt Lake City had three main causes: user errors due to insufficient training ³; inadequate verification by alarm company monitoring stations; and improper installation, inferior equipment and application for the alarm site.

Analysis: Part I

How effective was the current response and what alternatives were available?

As early as 1980, Salt Lake City officials realized that preventive measures were needed to reduce false alarms. The city adopted a false alarm ordinance in 1981 that required a permit, established fines for false alarms that exceeded specified limits, and required the alarm owner to disconnect the alarm after excessive alarms. There were no means to enforce the disconnection provision, however. In 1994, a more stringent alarm ordinance was adopted allowing four "free" false alarms and charging a \$100 fine on the fifth alarm. Alarm owners were charged even for false alarms caused by faulty equipment or faulty alarm installation. This 1994 ordinance resulted in a 16 percent decrease in false alarms in the first year after it was adopted, however the following year false alarms increased by 13 percent. These ordinances were only marginally effective, and considering the rising number of new alarm owners, the permit and fine approaches were like putting a finger in the dam to stop the flooding. These responses helped manage, but did not solve, the false alarm problem.

Alternative responses to false alarms

We researched other police departments' efforts to manage their false alarm

problems. We found everything from smaller jurisdictions doing nothing to larger jurisdictions dedicating up to twelve employees to deal with false alarms. Police officers were being utilized in a variety of capacities such as inspecting alarm systems and hanging notices on citizens' doors to increase awareness of the problem. Alarm unit staff were billing and tracking false alarms, and sponsoring false alarm awareness courses. Despite intense efforts by many police departments, false alarm rates persisted at over 97 percent false and alarm calls constituted from 12 to 30 percent of total dispatched calls for police service. The following are some of the false alarm reduction efforts we discovered other police departments attempting:

Traditional Regulatory Ordinance

The most common was the regulatory ordinance consisting of processing permits, warning letters, a certain number of "free" false alarm responses, fines, and suspension of police response to alarm systems with excessive false alarms. Our department adopted this approach as early as 1981. This ordinance attempted to manage the problem, but had no significant long-term reduction. It was very labor intensive for our alarm unit, the treasury department and required an extensive software program. With four "free" alarms, alarm owners were often negligent about solving the problem until the fifth alarm was imminent. Alarm owners placed on suspension received no response to their alarm from the police department and usually had not selected an alternate provider to do so. Thus, when their alarm signaled, no response was forthcoming. Suspension provisions in this traditional ordinance dealt with the chronic false alarm abuser. However, new alarm owners who were poorly trained and unfamiliar with the use of their alarm system caused the bulk of the false alarms. The fines seemed punitive to citizens, complaints were vigorous, and most alarm owners blamed their alarm company for their false alarms.

Cost Recovery

This method requires a permit with an annual renewable fee. Once again this is very labor intensive for the alarm unit and may require additional personnel. There are usually no suspension features and police continue to respond to all alarm signals. Fees would have to be significantly increased in order to reclaim the full costs of patrol response and would be a financial burden to many alarm owners. The police department seldom retains the monies from the alarm response as it usually goes directly to the municipality's general fund.

Alarm Industry Regulatory

Only a small number of cities use the method of requiring the alarm company to collect false alarm fines from their customers and remit it to the city. One city charges \$73 for every alarm call coming into the communications center. Alarm companies typically resist this approach even to the point of threatening legal challenges. Some police departments were attempting to restrict the alarm monitoring stations' actions by requiring that the alarm monitoring operator place a telephone call to the alarm site to determine if the alarm signal was in error and if the person who answered the telephone knew the pass code. Another approach was to require the monitoring company to receive signals from two different alarm zones before requesting a police dispatch.

Alarm monitoring stations are not necessarily located in the same city as the customers they serve. They may be located hundreds of miles away, deal with thousands of police departments, and answer alarm signals for millions of alarm customers. Each police jurisdiction may require different specifications for alarm response, but that does not mean the monitoring company will comply. It is difficult for a police department in California, for example, to try to dictate to a monitoring company in Florida, which approach to use. At least one monitoring company we know of refuses to cancel a request for a police dispatch if the dispatch has aged more than 15 minutes, even if the alarm owner can verify the alarm is in error.

Outsourcing Collection Agency

In this approach the police department responds to alarm calls, but the

administrative tasks of issuing permits, sending out fine notices, and collecting fines is contracted to a private firm. Usually, the private firm returns a small percentage of the fines collected to the municipality. As with other methods, this method merely manages the problem, it does not solve it.

Conclusions from the first phase of analysis

The police department's attempt to manage false alarms with ordinances consisting of warnings, fines and permits had no significant long-term effect and only minimal short-term effect on the overall reduction of alarm activations or the percentage of false alarms. Nearly all alarm activations were false and the current system was yielding slow police response times that were of little value to either the police or alarm owners. The probability of catching burglars in the act after 40 minutes was slim. Even the alarm industry did not believe that police response added much value. The Utah Alarm Association conceded that 90 percent of the deterrent value of an alarm system was in the signs and stickers posted on the premise. The public costs of the current system far exceed what were being recovered in fines. Continuing to waste police resources was not in the best interest of public safety.

We concluded that police response to an alarm signal only made sense if some eyewitness could first verify the signal that the alarm may indeed be valid. Private security guards were a logical fit for this role. We concluded that the initial verification of an alarm activation was a private sector responsibility. Consequently, we began to explore the feasibility of shifting the primary responsibility for verifying alarms signals from the police to the private alarm and security companies. We refer to this practice as "verified response".

Analysis: Part II

Was verified response feasible?

To explore the feasibility of implementing verified response, the alarm unit began a campaign to increase alarm owners' awareness that they could contract with a private guard company as the first responder to their alarm signal. Most alarm owners were otherwise unaware of this option. The first step was to provide alarm permit holders with a listing of private guard services in the mailing with all new permits issued in 1998 and 1999. The number of false alarms decreased by 7 percent from 1998 to 1999 and we had reason to believe that this reduction was at least partially due to offering alarm owners this private response option. Indeed, many alarm owners told us they appreciated having an option of paying for the less expensive services of a private guard responder rather than paying false alarm fines to the city. Some alarm owners even told us that they didn't want "their" officers wasting time on a false alarm. Such comments reflected a feeling among citizens that they preferred that officers were available to respond to genuine emergency calls.

Our search for other police agencies' experiences with verified response led us to the Las Vegas Metro Police Department. The Las Vegas Metro Police Department implemented a verified response policy in 1991. Said Las Vegas police captain Mike Ault:

This policy has been effective for us for more than eight years. Terrorists didn't take to the streets when we implemented the policy. In fact, as it relates to the population, the burglary rate is actually going down. ⁴

A few other jurisdictions had adopted verified response policies or ordinances including: Henderson, Nev.; Lane County, Ore. Sheriff's Office; and West Valley City and Taylorsville, Utah.

We concluded that alarm ownership is a private, personal choice, not mandated by law, the city or the police department. Our research found no legal challenges to these verified response ordinances and policies. According to the Salt Lake City Attorney's Office, "Law enforcement did not have a legal liability to respond to alarms and the alarm contract is a civil contract between two private entities." ⁵ Concluded the author of the article describing Las Vegas's policy:

The police have no legal responsibility to respond to any given situation unless mandated by local law. Litigation aimed at forcing response compliance is unlikely to succeed because this law is so clearly stated and so well understood by judiciaries. ⁶

We explored the costs associated with verified response and concluded that private alarm companies could feasibly recover the costs of responding to alarms from their customers. When West Valley City (population of 100,000 located eight miles to the west of Salt Lake City) adopted their verified response policy in May 2000, alarm companies operating in that community began charging their customers an additional \$5 per month to pay for a private guard response.

To gauge availability of private guards responding to alarm activations, the police department sent a survey to all private guard firms listed in the Salt Lake City telephone directory asking if they would be interested in responding to burglar alarms and, if so, what they estimated their average response time would be. Nine companies responded positively with estimates of average response times ranging from three to fifteen minutes.

As noted by several researchers, "Already private security guards fulfill most security functions and they number more than three times the total number of federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel." ⁷

On the basis of our research we concluded that a verified response policy was indeed feasible and enough private security companies were willing and able to respond to alarm signal activations.

Response

We therefore proposed to the city council a new ordinance. The major elements of the proposed verified response alarm ordinance were:

- To require eyewitness verification of all alarm activations by alarm company personnel or a private guard. If they discover suspicious circumstances, they would call the police department.

- Police will continue to respond to human-activated alarms such as robbery, panic and duress alarm signals. The first false alarm of these types incurs a \$50 fine and is based on an escalating fine structure.

- Alarm owners can participate in a false alarm prevention course in lieu of one false alarm fine per year.

- False alarms that are caused by the alarm company technician are charged to the alarm company rather than the alarm owner.

We realized that educating citizens, business owners and the city council on false alarm issues would be crucial to passage of the verified response alarm ordinance. The average citizen had many misperceptions of the police resources and taxpayer monies involved in false alarm response. The city council members were astonished to learn of the high percentage of false alarm calls.

We contacted all local television stations and newspapers and briefed them on the proposed policy and the rationale behind it. All were willing to cover the story. The majority of the resulting stories were favorably inclined towards the proposed policy.

Upon hearing of the proposed policy, some citizens called the alarm unit to express concern. When we explained that they would receive faster response to their alarm activation from the private guard service than they could expect from the police, would pay a small fee (rather than the \$100 ordinance fines), and if the alarm was valid, the police would respond more quickly than they had in the past, a vast majority of the citizens we spoke to supported the ordinance. In the first month after the news stories broke, we received more than 100 phone calls, with only two callers remaining opposed to the proposed policy.

We again presented the proposed verified response policy to local alarm companies. Salt Lake City and several other local police agencies had been meeting with some of the alarm companies and members of the Utah Alarm Association for the past five years so this was not the first time the alarm industry had heard about verified response. One of the Utah Alarm Association's early objections to verified response was the cost to alarm companies to respond to and investigate false alarms. This concern was addressed when alarm companies realized they could pay for this added service by charging alarm owners an additional modest \$5 monthly fee. One alarm company even allowed their customers three "free" responses before charging a fee.

The Salt Lake City Police Department offered a three-hour training course to all state licensed guard companies. Improving cooperation between police and the private guard sector was one of the goals of this training. The training stressed that the private guards' role was only to observe and report at the alarm activation scene and not to enter or search the building or try to apprehend offenders. They were instructed that if they discovered an open door, they were to contact the police department and not enter the premise. A call from a guard discovering an open door, broken window or any criminal activity would result in a "possible burglary in progress" call, a top priority call. Our police department attorney reviewed and approved the lesson materials. Other subjects covered in the training included safety tactics, initial approach, cover and concealment, crime scene containment, and suspect identification. One of the most popular subjects was the Utah state statutes and codes governing the elements of the crimes of burglary and criminal trespass, and laws governing private guards' authority to use force to arrest and defend themselves and others.

The Salt Lake City Council set a briefing date for the police administration to present the ordinance to them. In the staff report to the council it was noted that:

The policy in this proposal may be consistent with guidelines to mitigate City expense in situations where individuals, through personal choices that may not be available to all City residents, are creating additional consumption of municipal resources.

In order for the alarm industry to have sufficient time to participate in the discussions involving the proposed ordinance changes, a public hearing was scheduled one month after the initial briefing. Police administrators briefed the city council on false alarm issues. The police union president wrote a strong letter of support for the verified response ordinance to the city council.

The ordinance was passed by the city council on a 4-2 vote on September 12, 2000. One council member who had a family member in the alarm industry voted against the ordinance. Some of the comments from city council members were:

The better argument supports taking the resources now being used to address situations which were not of the highest priority and use them to address needs of a higher priority.

No matter what side a person was on, it was an undisputed fact that there is a 99 percent false factor involved in alarm system calls. There is not a program in the City which, if only 1 percent effective, would survive scrutiny for even a moment. If properly implemented, an appropriate method of having security companies show up made a lot of sense. This would free up officers to do what they were supposed to do. The police department was not asking to change the ordinance because they did not want to serve the citizens; they were asking to change it because it was not effective and did not work. It makes sense to create a competitive alarm business, where good alarm companies thrived and poor companies went out of business, because taxpayers of Salt Lake were no longer subsidizing them.

The city council further decreed that the ordinance would take effect three months after it was enacted to allow the alarm companies time to mobilize their private guards and educate the public on the upcoming changes. The ordinance took effect December 1, 2000.

Certified letters were sent to all alarm and monitoring companies to inform them of the changes. In order to reach all citizens of Salt Lake City, an article explaining the drain on police resources caused by false alarms and the new requirements for private guard response was included in two issues of the water bill. This was an efficient way to reach all affected citizens.

Assessment

Benefits to the Police Department

The Salt Lake City Police Department experienced a 90 percent decrease in alarm-related calls for service during the first nine months the verified response ordinance was in effect, from December 1, 2000 to August 1, 2001, compared to the same time frame one year prior. This represents 6,338 fewer calls for service or the equivalent of five full-time police officers (valued at about \$400,000). This time and money is now available for higher priority police services. There are fewer backlogs of calls for service. Responses to high priority calls for service have dropped from five to three minutes. Today, the probability that a crime has in fact occurred when police are called to an alarm activation is much higher. There has been a corresponding decrease in the workload of police call takers and dispatchers, the alarm unit, the city treasury department, and the court of appeals.

Initially, alarm company spokespersons said they believed that burglaries in the city would increase when police ceased to become the first responders to the alarm signal. We have not found this to be the case. The number of burglaries have remained consistent over the past two years and even decreased by 24 percent from burglaries in 1998. Passage of the ordinance on December 1, 2000 made no significant impact on the number of burglaries.

Six burglars were arrested by police as a result of private security guards' response to alarms on 720 police responses during the first nine months of the ordinance enactment. By comparison, in 1999, prior to adoption of verified response, only five

burglars were arrested on 10,200 police responses to alarm signals.

Said Salt Lake City Watch Commander Zane Smith:

In the first three months of enforcement, this alarm ordinance has returned more patrol hours to our department and helped to decrease the backlog of calls better than anything attempted in the past 15 years.

Benefits to Alarm Owners

The benefits of verified response to alarm owners include a six to fifteen minute alarm activation response time from private guard companies, far lower than what the police were able to provide; lower average costs from the modest monthly fee than most alarm owners were paying in fines for false alarms; and continued police response to human-activated alarms such as robbery, panic or duress signals.

Benefits to the alarm industry

The alarm industry benefits from verified response in that they are now providing their customers with a valued quick response to alarm activations; they can redirect time and effort into serving their customers rather than trying to appease police; and they have increased their revenue from the additional monthly fees charged to customers.

The following quote from the president of the Utah Alarm Association reveals how verified response has affected the alarm industry:

Most of the members of the Utah Alarm Association believe it is a win-win situation for everybody. It is cheaper and easier for the alarm companies. It has been burdensome dealing with the police in the past. All I do is call a guard, and the guard is more than happy to have my business. 8

Prior to passage of the verified response alarm ordinance, one alarm company had a guard division in place and merely needed to hire some additional guards. The police department provided a list of nine state-licensed and bonded guard companies to those alarm companies that needed to subcontract with guard companies in order to respond to alarm activations. Alarm company representatives we spoke with have indicated that their sales have not been impacted by the shift to private guard response. Citizens are continuing to purchase alarm systems.

Verified response has shifted the management of the false alarm problem from the police to alarm owners and the alarm companies they choose to do business with. Economic supply and demand will now govern the delivery and cost of private security responses to alarm activations. If a guard company's performance proves unsatisfactory, the competition will provide another company to take its place.

Salt Lake City's verified response alarm ordinance is a long-term solution to the false alarm problem, a problem that our department had been struggling with for twenty years. By no longer attempting to manage a private sector problem, we believe we have solved the false alarm problem for the police department.

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1 Erwin Blackstone, Simon Hakim and Uriel Spiegel. "Government Competes and Retreats, Public Gains: Shedding Police Response to Burglar Alarms." January 23, 2001. Center for Competitive Government at Temple University: Philadelphia, Pa.

2 Each alarm call requires two officers for an average half hour on each alarm call at an average wage of \$60 per hour. This figure includes salary, benefits, and the amortized costs of the police car, computer and equipment.

3 Commercial intrusion alarms accounted for two-and-a-half times the number of residential alarms, mostly due to employees who did not have or remember the alarm code, and to cleaning crews inadvertently setting off the alarm while working. Residential alarms tend to be activated by children and relatives who do not know how to use the alarm system, and by the motion of pets, insects, ceiling fans, and even floating balloons. The National and Burglar Alarm Association calculate that 76 percent of alarm activations are caused by user error.

4 "Las Vegas PD Gambles on No Response Policy and Wins." Donna Englander, Security Sales magazine, December 1998.

5 Salt Lake City Attorney's Office. Roger F. Cutler, City Attorney. Salt Lake City and County Building, Room 505, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111, Tel. (801) 535-7788.

6 "Las Vegas PD Gambles on No Response Policy and Wins." Donna Englander, Security Sales magazine, December 1998.

7 Erwin A. Blackstone, Simon Hakim and Uriel Spiegel. "Response to Alarms: A New Type of Club Good." March 2000. Drs. Blackstone and Hakim are professors of economics and members of the Center for Competitive Government at Temple University in Philadelphia.

8 "No police when alarm goes off? No problem." Laura Hancock, Desert News, December 28, 2000.