

# REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY



## RPS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES: Burglar Alarms

*This brief is part of a series on different types of community issues and complaints to which police are asked to respond. In each brief we discuss the nature of the issue, review traditional policing strategies, and explore opportunities to adopt novel approaches.*

### Top Takeaways:

Burglar alarms are used frequently by residents and business owners to protect their property from robbery. And they are effective – their presence alone reduces the risk of robberies in the community. Traditionally when a burglar alarm is triggered, 911 receives a notification and dispatches officers to the location to investigate.

But because nearly 95 percent of burglar alarms turn out to be false, responding to each of the tens of millions of such calls made each year can impose enormous time, personnel, and financial burdens on cities.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Blackstone, E. A., Hakim, S., & Meehan, B. (2020). Burglary reduction and improved police performance through private alarm response. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 63, 105930.

To alleviate this system strain, many cities have:

- Established **false alarm registries**, which track their occurrence by addresses and issue fines after a certain number of false calls have been made;
- Implemented **new policies** requiring alarm companies to conduct a **verification process** – either via video, phone, or in-person – prior to dispatching officers to a location, which can improve the efficacy of false alarm registries; and
- Designed **new unarmed units** comprised of technicians that collect evidence and interview residents and witnesses when calls are made and a suspect is no longer on the scene.

## The Problem

Burglaries in the United States have dropped consistently since the 1990s, but clearance rates have remained largely constant at around 13 percent.<sup>2</sup> The proliferation of burglar alarms has had a large impact on this reduction.

Properties with burglar alarms are less likely to be burglarized and the presence of alarms hasn't increased the likelihood of burglaries at nearby local properties without alarms.<sup>3</sup>

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2 The Vera Institute of Justice. (n.d.). Clearance Rates | Arrest Trends. <https://arresttrends.vera.org/clearance-rates>; Statista. (2022). USA - reported burglary rate 1990-2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/191243/reported-burglary-rate-in-the-us-since-1990/>

3 Lee, S. (2008). The impact of home burglar alarm systems on residential burglaries. Rutgers The State University of New Jersey-Newark. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/67fb18dfa5168d45737a76da27a5ef54/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>

Simply put, they are a community-wide crime deterrent.<sup>4</sup>

But as the use of alarms increases, so too does the burden on police departments that dispatch automatically to them.

As early as 2003, LAPD Chief Bill Bratton recognized burglar alarms as the single largest call type that officers responded to, consuming fifteen percent of all calls for service – of which, only four percent were legitimate. Chief Bratton approached the city council, which established the Burglar Alarm Task Force comprised of alarm industry representatives, residents, and existing local advisory boards. In addition, the council gave LAPD their blessing to stop responding automatically to burglar alarms following two false calls made from a location in a year.<sup>5</sup> After this threshold was met, properties were required to verify a crime in progress before a car would be dispatched to the scene.

Los Angeles isn't alone in bearing an overwhelming burden of automatic alarm calls. One study estimates that 38 million alarm calls are made per year, 36 million of which are false, requiring the equivalent of 35,000 full-time officers to respond, at a cost of \$1.8 billion.<sup>6</sup> All told, false alarms account for between ten and twenty-five percent of all calls for service nationwide.<sup>7</sup>

This represents a massive waste for law enforcement, which must divert time and resources away from investigating and deterring violent crime – and for the public as a whole, which must spend money employing officers and dispatching them to calls where there is either nothing wrong, or where their sole function is to call an evidence technician.

This brief explores the traditional way municipalities

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4 Meehan, B., & Benson, B. L. (2017). Does private security affect crime?: A test using state regulations as instruments. *Applied Economics*, 49(48), 4911-4924.

5 LAPD Online. (2022). Alarm Section: History and Problems. <https://www.lapdonline.org/police-commission/alarms-section-history-and-problems/>

6 Blackstone, E. A., Buck, A. J., & Hakim, S. (2005). Evaluation of alternative policies to combat false emergency calls. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 28(2), 233-242.

7 Sampson, R. (2011). False burglar alarms. US Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

historically have responded to burglar alarms, as well as innovations that relieve the burdens associated with them. In many cities, the policy responses to false alarms are the creation of a false alarm registry.

Several municipalities also have begun experimenting with requiring companies to verify alarms – and some have removed alarm responsibility from police purview entirely.

## The Traditional Response

When a burglar alarm is triggered, the following process typically is initiated:

1. Alarm is set off at a property.
2. Alarm company contacts the dispatch center to notify 911 that they have a triggered burglar alarm and provides the address for a formal response.
3. Police are dispatched to the location and check windows and doors for signs of burglary.
4. Police attempt to make contact with those associated with the address and listed by the alarm company.
  - a. If there are no signs of forced entry and/or they make contact with the address and confirm a false alarm, officers notify dispatch and become available for another call for service.
  - b. If officers find signs of forced entry, they verify whether or not the burglar is still inside the building and either attempt to make an arrest or collect evidence and file a report.

A significant drawback of the traditional response is that only one to five percent of burglar alarms are triggered by an actual burglary, meaning that

police respond to millions of calls that are initiated in error.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, burglaries typically last only between eight and ten minutes, so for the vast majority of *legitimate* alarms, the suspect likely already has left the scene by the time police arrive.<sup>9</sup> This places officers in the position of crime scene or evidence technicians, as opposed to deterrents of crime.

## Improved Response: False Alarm Registries and Fines

In response to the increasing burden of false alarms, several cities have begun tracking alarm use and issuing fines after a certain number of false calls. For example, Philadelphia charges a \$75 fee on the third false alarm;<sup>10</sup> the City of Chicago imposes a \$100 fine per false burglar alarm immediately; and Los Angeles fines \$50 after the first false alarm, which increases by an additional \$50 for each subsequent alarm.<sup>11</sup>

There is some evidence that increasing fines helps reduce false alarms. When Memphis, Tennessee realized that 99.2 percent of burglar alarm calls made to 911 were false, they instituted an increasing fine structure including: a warning for the first offense, a fine of \$140 for the second offense, and a fine of \$300 for each additional false alarm.<sup>12</sup> As a result, false alarms were reduced by 20 percent.

Similar results were observed in Duluth, Minnesota when the city implemented the following fine

structure: \$100 fine after the third false alarm, \$200 for the fourth offense, and a \$100 increase for each additional false alarm.<sup>13</sup> This resulted in a 31 percent decrease in false alarms.

Baltimore has a false alarm registry of high-frequency locations to which the police will no longer respond. In 2022, Baltimore tightened this policy by reducing the threshold of allowable false alarms from five to two. This decision was made in response to the finding that, even with the registry in place, false alarms still consumed an extraordinary amount of officer time at the expense of verified priority calls elsewhere.

Other cities, such as Salt Lake City and Boulder, use approaches similar to Baltimore's, aimed at deprioritizing immediate police responses to burglar alarms.<sup>14</sup> Below is a general false alarm registry process observed in cities across the country:

1. Properties that call repeatedly to report a false burglar alarm within a 365-day period are assessed for fines through a citation (police are still responding in-person).
2. After a predetermined number of citations, a property is added to the false alarm registry.
3. Police stop responding to automatic burglar alarms at the property.
4. The property owner is required to complete several steps to remove their property from the registry (e.g., proof of completed alarm maintenance by an authorized provider).

The drawback of a register-and-cite model is that it shifts the burden of system effectiveness onto the customer and community at large by placing blame on the user, and not the company for providing a product that doesn't work. It increases the cost of

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8 Blackstone, E. A., Buck, A. J., & Hakim, S. (2005). Evaluation of alternative policies to combat false emergency calls. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 28(2), 233-242.

9 Covington, T. (2023). Burglary Statistics. *The Zebra*. <https://www.thezebra.com/resources/research/burglary-statistics/#statistics-by-time>

10 Pay an excess false alarm fine | Services. (2019). City of Philadelphia. <https://www.phila.gov/services/permits-violations-licenses/pay-a-penalty-fine-or-ticket/pay-an-excess-false-alarm-fine/>

11 LAPD Online. (2021). Alarm Users. <https://www.lapdonline.org/police-commission/alarm-users/>

12 Staff, S. (2018). False Alarm Fine Increase Led to Reduction in Dispatches, Memphis Police Say. *Security Sales & Integration*. <https://www.securitysales.com/fire-intrusion/false-alarm-fine-dispatches-memphis/>

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13 Kuchera, S. (2017). Duluth police credit fines, cooperation with drop in false alarms - Duluth News Tribune | News, weather, and sports from Duluth, Minnesota. *Duluth News Tribune*. <https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/duluth-police-credit-fines-cooperation-with-drop-in-false-alarms>

14 False Alarm Reduction Program. (n.d.). The City of Baltimore. <https://dhcd.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/FALSE%20Alarm%20Reduction%20Program%20Brochure.pdf>

owning an alarm system through the introduction of registration fees and fines in addition to subscription costs, reducing the number of new customers who can even install a system, and may eventually price out customers who previously owned them. As a result, the number of alarm-protected properties decreases and community security suffers.<sup>15</sup>

## Alternatives to Automatically Dispatched Burglar Alarms: Verified Response and Civilian Reporting

### VERIFIED RESPONSE POLICIES

Private alarm system provider ADT states that there are currently 24 cities in the United States that have implemented a verified response policy through their municipal code, and that number grows every year.<sup>16</sup> A verified response policy requires private alarm companies to verify that there is an actual crime in progress before contacting the police, putting the onus – and cost – back on alarm companies for ensuring that their equipment is functioning as intended.

Verified response falls into three categories:

- 1. Telephone verification.** Alarm companies reach out to contacts listed at the property to verify that the alarm is legitimate.
- 2. In-person verification.** Alarm companies contract with private response companies to dispatch a private security officer who verifies that an alarm is legitimate before securing the scene and forwarding the call to the police department.
- 3. Video verification.** Alarms trigger a video recording that alarm companies use to verify

there is a crime in progress, as well as for video evidence. (Due to privacy concerns, this type of verification may be more appropriate for a place of business as opposed to inside a residence.)

Data shows that these programs largely have been successful. The city of Milwaukee's verified response policy reduced police responses to burglar alarms from 30,000 a year to around 800.<sup>17</sup> Salt Lake City reduced their police response to burglar alarms by 95 percent after implementing their policy, from 10,500 per year to 500.<sup>18</sup>

Simply put, requiring alarm companies to provide a better product reduces the burden on first responders.

### CIVILIAN REPORTING

Some jurisdictions have established teams of non-sworn officers to respond to the scene of burglaries when the suspect is no longer present. These models opt to involve the police only when there is a safety concern – namely, that there is confirmation that the suspect remains on or in the property. Because confirmation that a suspect is on scene can be provided through the use of in-person and/or video technology, important evidence may be obtained that can support departments in making future arrests.

For example, in addition to requiring telephone verification for burglar alarms, Denver, Colorado deploys non-commissioned Civilian Report Technicians to properties where the suspect is no longer on the scene to investigate, collect evidence, and interview residents and witnesses.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Burglar Alarm Policy. (2021). City of Milwaukee. <https://city.milwaukee.gov/police/Information-Services/Burglar-Alarm-Policy>

18 Denver Office of Human Resources. (n.d.). Civilian Report Technician (No. CN3151). The City of Denver. [https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/job-center/documents/jobspecifications/civilian\\_report\\_technician\\_cn3151.pdf](https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/job-center/documents/jobspecifications/civilian_report_technician_cn3151.pdf)

19 Denver Office of Human Resources. (n.d.). Civilian Report Technician (No. CN3151). The City of Denver. [https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/job-center/documents/jobspecifications/civilian\\_report\\_technician\\_cn3151.pdf](https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/job-center/documents/jobspecifications/civilian_report_technician_cn3151.pdf)

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15 Blackstone, E. A., Hakim, S., & Meehan, B. (2020). Burglary reduction and improved police performance through private alarm response. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 63, 105930.

16 Cities that require Verified Response. (2018). Zions Security Alarms. <https://zionssecurity.com/cities-require-verified-response/>

## Additional Considerations

While most verified response municipalities administer the program at a local level, this might create administrative burdens for smaller jurisdictions that have to register, verify, and monitor the status of alarm and response companies. This could be addressed by state legislation mandating verified response.

At present, we are unaware of any state-level policies requiring verified response, leaving the responsibility entirely in municipal hands. The risks of this division of labor were illustrated in Dallas when the City Council repealed their verified response policy in 2007 against the wishes of the Chief of the Dallas Police Department. This was done due to the belief that requiring verification at a municipal level incentivized businesses to move out of city limits (there was no evidence demonstrating that this was the case).

In smaller municipalities, the cost of administering such a program may itself be a barrier to rolling it out.