

This paper was researched and authored by **M. Nichols Strategic Communications**

This paper is intended for the use of the greater Law Enforcement Community. Representatives of 23 cities in the United States and Canada with Verified Alarm Response policies in place for at least one year were contacted for the survey – a total of 20 cities responded.

Cities which took part in the survey were:
Arvada, CO; Aurora, CO; Bellingham, WA; Broomfield, CO; Burien, WA; Eugene, OR; Fremont, CA; Lakewood, CO; Lane County, OR; Las Vegas, NV; Milwaukee, WI; Murray, UT; Salem, OR; Salt Lake City, UT; Tucson, AZ; Victoria, BC; Westminster, CO; West Valley City, UT; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Yakima, WA

Every participant was interviewed either over the phone or in person. Subsequently, all participants reviewed the findings for comments and approval.

M. Nichols Strategic Communications and Sonitrol would like to thank the 20 cities who devoted their time and efforts to the research of this paper.

Research for this paper is ongoing, and updates will be made available as new statistics become available.

For more information, visit www.sonitrol.com/vr.

Verified Response: Lessons Learned

A Survey of 20 Police Departments across North America with Verified Response Policies

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Sonitrol, a leading provider of verified electronic security, commissioned research to learn directly from the police departments involved what their experiences with Verified Response have been and what advice they would offer to others considering Verified Response.

Executive Summary

94% to 99% of burglar alarms prove to be false

Police departments across North America are continually challenged by the need to respond to all burglar alarms, particularly when a staggering 94% to 99% of alarms prove to be false. Despite extensive efforts to combat the problem — including call verification, permits, and fines — the cost for responding to false alarms continues to mount while the false alarm rate remains essentially unchanged. In 2000, police responded to 36 million false alarms at a cost of \$1.8 billion.

Approximately 30 police departments in North America have introduced Verified Response policies...

Since 1991, approximately 30 police departments in North America, primarily in fast-growing Midwestern and Western communities, have introduced Verified Response policies, which require alarm companies to verify through an eyewitness, monitored audio and/or video that a burglary has occurred or is occurring before police are dispatched.

Sonitrol, the leader in verified electronic security, commissioned research to learn what the police departments' experience with Verified Response has been, and what advice they would give others considering it. Representatives of 23 cities in the United States and Canada with Verified Response policies in place for at least one year were contacted for the survey. A total of 20 responded, with the following noteworthy results:

- Significant time savings for police,
- The ability to re-deploy police officers to higher priority emergency calls,
- Concerns of skyrocketing burglary rates are proving unwarranted.

... Which require alarm companies to verify through an eyewitness, monitored audio and/or video...

Key Findings:

Problems Respondents were Seeking to Solve All respondents sought to reduce the amount of time police spent responding to false alarms so this time could be put to more productive use in pursuit of real crime and other matters, especially post 9/11. Some also were addressing critical manpower shortages, or were disillusioned by the cost of administering false alarm fines.

Strategies Used Prior to Introducing Verified Response Sixty-five percent of the surveyed communities tried such strategies as call verification, issuing alarm licenses or permits and imposing fines. A few experienced declines in police dispatches, but found these approaches not to have sufficient impact. Some said the cost of managing fees/fines outweighed the benefits.

... That a burglary has occurred or is occurring before police are dispatched

How Verified Response Works Increasingly, the definition of Verified Response is being expanded. The vast majority (85%) of respondents adapted it to fit their own criteria, relying on such indicators as eye-witness reports, multiple-trip alarms, including audio and video, or criminal activity in the area. Some also include broadcasting alarms, with varying levels of discretion for police in the field to respond.

Electronic Verification Electronic verification is becoming the norm with 75% of surveyed departments responding to dispatch requests from monitored audio and/or video.

Survey results found Verified Response led to significant time savings for police...

Impact on Alarm Dispatch Rates All jurisdictions reported that Verified Response dramatically reduced the percentage of times police were dispatched – ranging from 32% to 90%, with an average reduction of 72% for the 15 markets providing specific data.

Impact on Police Time Five jurisdictions cited average reductions in responding to dispatch requests, ranging from 8.56 minutes to 29 seconds. All cited the ability to redirect police officers to more productive efforts as the primary benefit of adopting Verified Response. Two reported savings in officer time and related support representing about 1% of their respective forces.

...The ability to re-deploy police officers to higher priority emergency calls...

Burglary and Apprehension Rates Contrary to fears that Verified Response would lead to skyrocketing burglary rates, 69% of the 16 jurisdictions providing data show the rate declined following adoption of Verified Response, while 31% experienced increases. Most, however, cautioned they couldn't draw a direct correlation between Verified Response implementation and the burglary rate. Further, four agencies provided data showing the incidents of arrests increased under Verified Response.

Meeting Objectives All jurisdictions reported that Verified Response met their goals; five reported it had exceeded their expectations. Two cited specific numerical gains they hoped to achieve, and all said they would be highly reluctant to go back to earlier methods for dealing with false alarms.

... Concerns of increased burglary rates are proving unwarranted

Initial Negative Public Reaction Sixty-five percent of the surveyed agencies experienced a strongly negative public and/or alarm industry reaction for proposing Verified Response. However, all were able to achieve citizen acceptance relatively quickly through public education or by forming city-led task forces. Public concern generally changed in support of Verified Response with accurate information. And alarm companies, which typically opposed the measure, appear to have since adapted to Verified Response policies.

Advice for Other Communities All 20 respondents view Verified Response as the right solution to the false alarm problem. Those who customized their policies to fit their communities' unique needs encouraged others to the same. Several stressed the importance of conducting wide-scale public education prior to introducing Verified Response or involving citizens and the alarm industry in the decision-making process. Many said to prepare for opposition, but predicted negative sentiment would dissipate quickly. Some suggested Verified Response might not be right for all jurisdictions.

Conclusions Verified Response is here to stay because it is proving to be an effective solution for police departments faced with 90%-plus false burglar alarms. Results to date indicate that in almost all cases, key metrics such as police response times and apprehension rates have improved. Though no direct correlation can be proven, burglary rates declined in 69% of the jurisdictions providing data, blunting fears that Verified Response would automatically lead to skyrocketing burglary rates. Most police departments have been able to free officers' time to pursue more productive, higher priority duties.

Introduction

In 2000, police responded to 36 million false alarms at a cost of \$1.8 billion

Among the many problems police departments throughout the U.S. struggle with, few are as challenging as the resource-draining requirement of responding to burglar alarms – especially since a staggering 94% to 99% of all physical police responses nationwide invariably prove to be false. In 2000, for example, police responded to 36 million false alarms at a cost of \$1.8 billion¹. Meanwhile, the number of installed alarm systems increased by 89% between 1998 and 2004².

High false alarm rates have long been a vexing issue. To combat the problem, many jurisdictions over the years have implemented mandatory alarm permits and fines, partially offsetting the costs in an effort to relieve ever-growing budget pressures. Most also required alarm companies to call the property owners before contacting police as another way to screen out false alarms. Additionally, user education became a fairly standard requirement.

Despite these efforts, false alarm rates remained intractable, and do to this day. This has led to new thinking, and the advent of Verified Response.

The number of installed alarm systems increased by 89% between 1998 and 2004

In 1991, the Las Vegas, NV Metro Police Department introduced Verified Response, for the first time requiring alarm companies to verify through an eye-witness — generally a private security guard — that a burglary has occurred or is occurring before police will respond. Of course, police continue to respond to all hold-up, panic and duress alarms.

In 2000, the Utah cities of Salt Lake City and West Valley City implemented similar measures. Since then, adoption of Verified Response has accelerated with an increasing number of larger markets joining – including Dallas, Milwaukee and Tucson.

A total of approximately 30 jurisdictions have introduced some form of Verified Response

Presently, a total of approximately 30 jurisdictions have introduced some form of Verified Response. Most have adapted Verified Response, often referred to as Informed or Managed Response, to suit the particular needs of their respective communities. Too, the meaning of Verified Response has broadened with adoption, with a majority of regions recognizing audio and/or video technology as an accepted method of verification.

Thus far, the returns on Verified Response are noteworthy:

- Significant savings in time for police
- The ability to re-deploy police officers to higher priority emergency calls
- Concerns of skyrocketing burglary rates proving unwarranted

Survey Methodology

By introducing Verified Response, all respondents were essentially trying to tackle the same problem...

Representatives of 23 cities in the United States and Canada with Verified Alarm Response policies in place for at least one year were contacted for the survey – a total of 20 cities responded. Cities which took part in the survey were: Arvada, CO; Aurora, CO; Bellingham, WA; Broomfield, CO; Burien, WA; Eugene, OR; Fremont, CA; Lakewood, CO; Lane County, OR; Las Vegas, NV; Milwaukee, WI; Murray, UT; Salem, OR; Salt Lake City, UT; Tucson, AZ; Victoria, BC; Westminster, CO; West Valley City, UT; Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Yakima, WA.

The communities surveyed are mostly located in the Midwestern and Western regions, a reflection of the growing movement towards Verified Response by municipalities west of the Mississippi, where police jurisdictions tend to be larger, fast growing and frequently with much lower ratios of police to population than in the Eastern U.S. and Canada.

... Most jurisdictions were experiencing a false alarm rate in the range of 98%-99%...

Law enforcement professionals of varied ranks were surveyed, including chiefs, assistant chiefs, commanders and division commanders, lieutenants, police administrators, officers and public information specialists.

Problems Respondents Were Seeking to Solve

By implementing Verified Response, all respondents were essentially trying to solve the same problem: Reduce the amount of time police spent responding to false alarms so this time could be put to more productive use in pursuit of real crime and other matters requiring police attention. Most jurisdictions were experiencing a false alarm rate in the range of 98%-99%, similar to the national average.

... The goal was to reduce the amount of time police spent responding to false alarms...

But there were other problems that communities wanted to address in adopting Verified Response. For example, Fremont, CA viewed Verified Response as a partial solution to recent layoffs that had created critical staffing issues, resulting in the department having the lowest ratio of police to population for a city of its size in the country.

Some communities, such as West Valley City, UT, and Yakima, WA, were concerned that taxpayers were being unfairly penalized. With its excessive drain on police resources, "all citizens were paying for the high percentage of false alarms," said Assistant Chief Craig Black of West Valley City, UT.

... So time could be put to better use in pursuit of real crime and other matters requiring police attention

Others were disillusioned by the cost and bureaucracy of administering fines to control false alarms and were looking for better, more efficient, and less expensive solutions to the problem. Another objective, cited by Milwaukee, was to reassure the public that police resources were being used prudently.

Generally speaking, most jurisdictions did not adopt Verified Response with spe-

“All citizens were paying for the high percentage of false alarms”

cific numeric goals in mind for reducing the number of staff hours spent responding to false alarms – they were simply looking for a more effective way of responding to staggeringly high false alarm rates, particularly when also faced with budget cutbacks, layoffs and other staffing issues. A few, however, cited quantitative goals – Westminster, CO and Aurora, CO, for example, wanted to achieve 40% and 90% reductions in the false alarm response rate, respectively.

The History of Verified Response among Markets Surveyed

Approximately 30 municipalities and counties in the U.S. and Canada have implemented some form of Verified Response. Las Vegas (city and county), NV was the first in the country, adopting it in 1991. It remained the sole market until 1999 when Lane County, OR adopted it. Salt Lake City and West Valley City in Utah followed in 2000.

Since 2000, adoption of Verified Response has rapidly accelerated...

Since 2000, adoption of Verified Response has rapidly accelerated, with an increasing number of larger markets joining, including Tucson, Milwaukee and Dallas. It is important to note that Dallas began implementing Verified Response in February of 2006, and was therefore unable to provide feedback. However, the importance of the Dallas policy is explored below. Interestingly, a 2005 *Security Sales & Integration Magazine* study showed that 55% of alarm installers it surveyed said Verified Response measures have been adopted or are being investigated in the cities they serve.

... With an increasing number of larger markets joining, including Tucson, Milwaukee and Dallas

Following are the U.S. and Canadian cities with Verified Response policies, which responded to our survey, listed in chronological order of enactment:

A recent study showed that 55% of alarm installers it surveyed said Verified Response measures have been adopted or are being investigated in the cities they serve

- Las Vegas (Metro and County), NV – 1991
- Lane County, OR - July 1999
- West Valley City, UT - May 2000
- Salt Lake City, UT – December 2000
- Arvada, CO - April 2001
- Eugene, OR – November 2002
- Victoria, BC – April 2003
- Murray, UT – April 2003
- Tucson, AZ – September 2003
- Winnipeg, MB – May 2004
- Broomfield, CO – May 2004
- Yakima, WA - June 2004
- Lakewood, CO – June 2004
- Westminster, CO – July 2004
- Milwaukee, WI – September 2004
- Salem, OR – October 2004
- Burien, WA – October 2004
- Aurora, CO – December 2004
- Bellingham, WA - January 2005
- Fremont, CA – March 2005

65% of the surveyed communities tried a variety of strategies for combating false alarms before adopting Verified Response...

Measures Employed to Decrease False Alarm Response Prior to Introducing Verified Response

Sixty-five percent of the surveyed communities tried a variety of strategies for combating false alarms before adopting Verified Response, including requiring 1-call or 2-call verification with property owners, issuing alarm licenses or permits, and imposing fines. In general, survey respondents said that they found these approaches had little or no impact on the false alarm rate or the number of police dispatches.

Several communities said the administrative costs for managing fees/fines far outweighed the benefits. Bellingham, WA, for example, tried fines with no effect on lowering the false alarm response rate, while Westminster, CO dropped fines in the 1980s because the fees weren't sufficient to cover administrative costs. Lakewood, CO also tried fines, but found them "bureaucratic, hard and expensive to administer." Burien, WA used the Model States Plan, which recommends a fee and fine structure, but concluded it was too costly in terms of the time to track and process information.

... Including call verification, alarm licenses and permits, and imposing fines...

"While the alarm industry will talk about revenue streams to be derived from such fees, they often omit the actual staff cost associated with implementing them," said Pam Olshanski, Public Information Officer for the Eugene, OR Police Department, adding that she "challenges any community that says it breaks even with it."

While Fremont, CA used permits, warnings, fines and suspensions to cut its alarm dispatch rate from 10,000 to 7,000, staffing cutbacks ultimately led them to select Verified Response. Milwaukee, WI reduced police dispatches by about 25% from 1990 to 2003 through the use of fines, but also turned to Verified Response as the volume of false alarms continued to grow.

... And in general, found these approaches had little or no impact on the false alarm rate or the number of police dispatches

A few markets such as Arvada, CO and Yakima, WA initially considered permits, fees and fines, but rejected them in favor of adopting Verified Response directly. Yakima conducted a three-year study and concluded that Verified Response was the best alternative. The study "revealed that Model Alarm Ordinances and cost-recovery models didn't achieve desirable reductions in false alarm dispatches and still shifted the alarm industry's burden of managing the false alarm problem to the police," reported Lt. Mike Merryman.

Tucson, AZ and Murray, UT created task forces including businesses, citizens, alarm companies, police and government representatives to recommend new policies for dealing with false alarms which ultimately led to adoption of Verified Response.

Eyewitness and Electronic Verification

The interpretation of Verified Response has evolved and differs from city to city. Verified Response is often interpreted to mean that an eye-witness verification of

The interpretation of Verified Response differs from city to city

an alarm activation — generally through the use of private security guards — is required as evidence that a break-in may be occurring before police will be dispatched. Indeed, some markets surveyed follow this definition, including Salt Lake City, UT, Eugene, OR, and Yakima, WA.

Increasingly however, the term Verified Response has been expanded to include monitored audio and/or video, which removes the need for on-scene eyewitness verification. This means that police will respond to an alarm if the alarm company can verify activity through its audio or video technology. In fact, 75% of the 20 police departments surveyed respond to monitored audio and/or video alarms.

75% of the 20 police departments surveyed respond to monitored audio and/or video alarms

The vast majority of communities surveyed (85%) have adapted Verified Response requirements to fit their own specific criteria. For example, the suburban Denver area communities of Arvada, Broomfield, Westminster and Lakewood will dispatch based on indicators such as an independent eye-witness report, multiple-trip alarms – including monitored audio and video – or knowledge of criminal activity in the area. Termed “informed response,” the approach is “uniquely crafted to fit the needs of our community, police organization and municipal government,” said Westminster Public Information Officer Tim Read, enabling the police to gauge their response to burglary alarms “on good information instead of the absolute personal verification information that is limited by Verified Response policies.” In addition, Westminster implemented the alarm industry recommendation also to include “Enhanced Call Verification,” which requires alarm companies to make two different attempts to reach a property owner before requesting a dispatch.

Tucson, AZ will respond to verification by an eye-witness as well as multiple-trip alarms – including monitored audio and video – that demonstrate a progression of movement within a building. Knowing the progression of movement “increases the likelihood of finding a valid break-in,” according to Tucson Officer Jennifer Howell.

85% of respondents have adapted Verified Response requirements to fit their own specific criteria

Murray, UT, in addition to security guard/eye-witness verification, relies on broadcasting alarms for police in the field to respond to, based on availability of units, credibility, location of alarm and type of premises such as pharmacies or other high-target properties. The decision to respond is made by the shift supervisor. Other markets that broadcast alarms with varying levels of discretion for officers in the field to respond include Westminster, Arvada, Broomfield and Lakewood, CO as well as Fremont, CA.

Impact on Alarm Dispatch Rates

Implementation of Verified Response and its numerous variations has had the greatest impact on reducing the amount of times that police officers responded to dispatch requests, according to respondents. All jurisdictions reported that the measures dramatically reduced the percentage of times police were dispatched – with an average reduction of 72% for the 15 markets that provided specific data.

Having introduced Verified Response 15 years ago, pioneer Las Vegas said it would be impossible to gauge the savings in time for its police officers. However,

Las Vegas police cite Verified Response as a contributing factor in keeping pace with the city's dramatic growth. "It really helped us. We're fortunate now because there is no way we could have kept up with the growth in alarm installations and resulting false alarms," Senior Analyst Sandy McLaughlin said.

All jurisdictions reported that Verified Response dramatically reduced the percentage of times police were dispatched...

Topping the list in terms of percentage reductions were Salt Lake City and Milwaukee, posting reductions of 90%. Salt Lake City, for example, saw an immediate 90% reduction in alarm responses. And the number of responses continued to decline – going from 9,439 in 2000 to 577 in 2005. Verified Response began Dec. 1, 2000.

Aurora, CO responded to 18% of alarms during its December 2004 through December 2005 trial period – coming very close to its goal to reduce dispatches by 90%. Prior to implementing Verified Response, Aurora police required a patrol response to all alarm calls. Westminster, CO, which targeted achieving a 40% reduction in dispatches, saw a 68% decline in a five-month, year-over-year comparison.

... With an average reduction of 72% for the 15 markets that provided specific data

Three additional jurisdictions reported declines in excess of 80%: 88.6% for Burien, WA from 2003 to 2005; 82% for Yakima, WA; and 81.5% for Winnipeg, MB. Markets posting reduction in dispatches of 70% or greater were: Bellingham, WA with 75% decline; Eugene, OR with 74.9%; Salem, OR with 74%; and Arvada, CO with 70%.

Broomfield, CO posted a 64% decline in dispatches; Lakewood, CO saw dispatches drop by 63.1%; Tucson, AZ reduced dispatches by 40.9%; and Fremont, CA dispatches declined by 32% in the first 11 months.

"We are very short staffed and each day have to make decisions about the best way to deploy resources..."

Meanwhile, as Officer Jeff Maglish of Murray, UT stated, "The false alarm rate doesn't really change from one year to the next, but it no longer affects us" because police only respond when there is substantial verification to indicate a burglary is taking place.

Impact on Police Time

While several jurisdictions reported declines in police time to respond to burglary dispatch requests, all cited the ability to redirect police officers to more productive efforts as the primary benefit of adopting Verified Response. Typical is the following comment: "We are very short staffed and each day have to make decisions about the best way to deploy resources. Verified response is freeing up our resources for higher priority calls," said Lieutenant Randy Smith of the Lane County, OR Sheriff's Office.

"... Verified Response is freeing up our resources for higher priority calls"

Tucson, AZ reported the average response time to dispatch requests had been 32.59 minutes and was reduced by 8.76 minutes just by changing the policy to Verified Response. Verified dispatch requests have been increased in priority while non-verified requests are now at the lowest response level.

Lakewood, CO reported a five-minute reduction in the average response time, again citing a higher priority being assigned to verified dispatch requests. Eugene, OR saw its average response time drop by nearly two minutes. Salem, OR police

Most jurisdictions caution that they couldn't draw a direct correlation between implementation of Verified Response and the burglary rate...

shaved an average of 29 seconds off of high priority calls, while overall reducing the percentage of the department's total calls for service from 8% to 1.5% for alarms. Meanwhile, Salem police were able to redirect officers' time, resulting in a 47% increase in traffic citations.

Verified Response in Salt Lake City, UT helped police reduce response time to high-priority emergency calls overall by two minutes. In the first year, 8,482 officer hours were freed for other priorities. The city also saved \$508,920 in associated personnel costs. And, in 2005, officers who formerly responded to false alarms were freed up to pursue apprehending persons with outstanding warrant citations. "We attribute this warrant arrest program to a decrease in burglaries last year (2005)," reported Alarm Administrator Shanna Werner.

... Nonetheless, 69% of the 16 jurisdictions providing data show the rate declined following adoption of Verified Response...

Milwaukee, WI said that prior to adopting Verified Response, responding to false alarms consumed up to 150 officers' time at a cost of more than \$1.1 million annually. With Verified Response in place, officers are freed to pursue higher priority issues.

"We respond more quickly – with better information," said Assistant Chief Craig Black of West Valley City, UT, which adopted Verified Response in May 2000. Remaining jurisdictions said response times to dispatch requests stayed relatively constant.

Bellingham, WA reported a savings in time of one full-time officer and related support in the first year, while Westminster, CO estimated 3.5 officers' and two back-office personnel savings – in both cases representing about 1% of their respective forces.

Burglary and Apprehension Rates

Initial fears that Verified Response would lead to skyrocketing burglary rates have largely proved unwarranted. Sixty-nine percent of the 16 jurisdictions providing data show the rate declined following adoption of Verified Response, while 31% experienced increases.

... Blunting fears that Verified Response would automatically lead to skyrocketing burglary rates

Most jurisdictions, however, cautioned that they couldn't draw a direct correlation between implementation of Verified Response and the burglary rate, citing factors such as rapid growth in population, the health of the local or regional economy or unique circumstances.

For example, Salt Lake City's burglary rate has been on a relatively steady decline for nearly a decade. Following adoption of Verified Response in December 2000, the burglary rate increased by 13% in 2002, the year the city hosted the Winter Olympics, but has since resumed its downward trend – dropping 6.3% by 2004.

Meanwhile, in Fremont, CA the burglary rate increased by 14.4% in the first 11 months following adoption of Verified Response in March 2005, while total arrests rose by 300. However, neighboring communities in the Silicon Valley area also experienced sharp increases in the burglary rates with Santa Clara's rising by almost 17% and in Sunnyvale by almost 25%.

Several departments registered double-digit declines in their burglary rates follow-

Tucson, AZ reported that police there were 5.5-times more likely to make an arrest with Verified Response

ing implementation of Verified Response. Salem, OR, which introduced Verified Response in October 2004, reported a 23% drop in its first year. Westminster, CO reported a 14.6% drop in the 12 months following adoption of Verified Response, and Murray, UT saw its rate decline by 16% from 2003 to 2004. Broomfield, CO saw its rate decline by 12% from 2004 to 2005, representing the lowest number of burglaries since the department began maintaining statistics in the 1980s.

The Washington departments of Burien and Bellingham reported declines of 8% and 6%, respectively, in the first year following adoption of Verified Response. Yakima, WA, which introduced Verified Response in June 2004, registered a 4% year-over-year drop in its burglary rate.

During a year-long evaluation period beginning in December 2004, Aurora, CO reported a 3% drop in burglaries. West Valley City, UT posted a decline of 2.4% within the first year of implementing Verified Response. Winnipeg, MB, which had experienced a 13% burglary rate increase in 2002, saw its rate decline by 2% in its first year of Verified Response. Tucson's burglary rate declined by 1.5% in 2004 after introducing Verified Response in September 2003.

Eugene, OR reported its police efforts were 13-times more productive with Verified Response

Posting a rise in its burglary rate was Eugene, OR, which saw its rate increase by 11.3% in the first year following adoption of Verified Response. Lakewood, CO reported the rate rose 4.9% and Arvada's rose 10.2%.

Apprehensions

Burglary apprehension rates have historically been extraordinarily low – generally a fraction of one percent of the times police are dispatched. Several jurisdictions provided information demonstrating the benefits of Verified Response in increasing apprehensions and improving efficient use of police time.

Tucson, AZ reported a significant improvement. Police there were 5.5-times more likely to make an arrest with Verified Response, going from eight arrests resulting from 5,963 alarm responses in 2003 to 24 arrests from 3,300 alarm responses in 2004.

“It boiled down to an excessive drain on manpower with such high numbers of false alarms and the need to reduce or eliminate costs that all citizens pay for”

Eugene, OR reported its police efforts were 13-times more productive with Verified Response. In its first year, police made nine arrests from 396 dispatches compared with nine arrests from 5,287 dispatches during the previous year.

In 1999, Salt Lake City, UT police responded to 8,236 alarms, resulting in five arrests, two of which weren't related to alarms. In the first quarter following adoption of Verified Response in December 2000, seven arrests were made – all as a result of private guard notifications.

Meanwhile, Lakewood, CO saw apprehensions rise from 2 in 2004 to 7 in 2005. That translates to 0.348% of alarms responded to in 2005, or 0.128% of the total number of alarms.

Meeting Police Objectives

65% of the jurisdictions surveyed reported encountering a strongly negative reaction from the public and many in the alarm industry...

While only two jurisdictions cited specific numerical gains they hoped to achieve by adopting Verified Response, all reported that Verified Response met or even exceeded their goals. All said they would be highly reluctant to go back to earlier methods for dealing with false alarms.

“It boiled down to an excessive drain on manpower with such high numbers of false alarms and the need to reduce or eliminate costs that all citizens pay for,” said Assistant Police Chief Craig Black of West Valley City, the second-largest city in Utah. Commenting that Verified Response has helped the city keep pace with its rapid growth, he said, “We would be hard pressed to go back.”

Five jurisdictions reported Verified Response as having exceeded their expectations. Burien, WA said its alarm dispatch load was reduced from 1,041 in 2003 to 119 in 2005. In the more than four years of using the Model States Plan, Burien reported it had only been able to achieve a fraction of that result.

Lakewood, CO believes that Verified Response has “far exceeded” its objectives in that officers are now more widely available to make good quality arrests. Lakewood reported it achieved significant dollar savings as well. Westminster and Broomfield, CO also reported that Verified Response exceeded objectives.

... Though all were able to achieve citizen acceptance relatively quickly through public education

Calling Verified Response “a win-win for our citizens and our police department,” Salt Lake City, UT reported that private guard response time is much quicker than police response was when burglary alarms were a low priority, so police have been able to reduce response time to high-priority emergency calls. And citizens can save money by not having to pay \$100 fines for false alarms.

For Fremont, CA, adopting Verified Response was essential in helping the department cope with significantly reduced staffing levels. Covering a 92-square mile area in the rapidly growing Silicon Valley corridor, the department may have as few as eight patrol officers available at any given time.

Initial public concern often stemmed from not understanding that alarms such as panic, duress, robbery, and holdup would not be affected

Both Aurora and Westminster, which set actual numeric goals for reducing the percentage of times for police dispatches, said Verified Response met and exceeded their objectives, respectively.

Initial Negative Public Reaction

Sixty-five percent of the surveyed jurisdictions reported encountering a strongly negative reaction from the alarm industry, the public or both as a result of proposing Verified Response – or directly introducing where it was implemented as a matter of police policy. However, through public education, all were able to achieve citizen acceptance relatively quickly and today only receive occasional calls, mostly from new residents who need clarification about the policy.

When the alarm industry was adamantly opposed to the measure, it often attempted to stir up a negative public response by sending letters in opposition to Verified

Response to customers and frequently calling for public hearings in an effort to defeat it.

Today, respondents report Verified Response is a non-issue with the public

Initial public confusion and concern often stemmed from not understanding that alarms such as panic, duress, robbery and holdup would not be affected by Verified Response policy. In at least one case, a local alarm company erroneously suggested that customers would require an additional sensor such as a sound or video system to be in compliance.

As questions were answered and misinformation corrected, public concern typically changed in support of Verified Response. "The public didn't realize that our average response time was about 20 minutes prior to implementing Verified Response," said Sergeant Steve Bellshaw of Salem, OR.

A few jurisdictions conducted wide-scale public outreach before implementation, which often served to blunt this public fear factor. Eugene, OR provided "a tremendous amount of information" and tried to be extremely responsive to the many questions received from the public. In West Valley City, UT, there was little negative reaction from the community when they explained the reason for the move to Verified Response and how, by bumping up police response to verified calls to a higher priority, citizens would be the beneficiaries of the new policy, according to Assistant Police Chief Craig Black. Fremont, CA Police Chief Craig Steckler sent a letter to property owners outlining the need for the change prior to notifying the alarm companies so the police position would be in citizens' hands first.

After enactment, most citizens are accepting of the policy...

Two respondents, Murray, UT and Tucson, AZ, formed citizen or city-led task forces to help "mold" the program for their cities, resulting in considerable public buy-in.

Several jurisdictions reported no real issues in implementing Verified Response. Yakima, WA said public response was positive from the onset – opposition only came from the alarm industry because of increased operational costs. Commander Gary Creager of Arvada, CO said Verified Response "never was a big issue for us. A few in the community raised questions, but most everybody thought it made sense." Westminster, CO reported that it consulted with the state alarm association and incorporated the association's suggestion for two-call verification as part of the program.

... Because they don't see increases in crime, or in the number of valid burglar alarms that are not responded to

Today, respondents report Verified Response as being a non-issue with the public. After enactment, most citizens are accepting of the policy because they don't see increases in crime, or in the number of valid burglar alarms that are not responded to. Administrative Technician Cheryl Keller of Broomfield, CO said citizens realized Verified Response improved policing because officers could spend their time more productively. Milwaukee, WI reported residents today applaud Verified Response as being fiscally responsible on the part of police.

Respondents also reported that most alarm companies appear to have adapted to Verified Response policies.

Advice for Other Communities

All 20 respondents view Verified Response as the right solution

Despite initial negative sentiment from the public and many in the alarm industry, all 20 respondents view Verified Response as the right solution to the problem of having to respond to the high numbers of false alarms.

Respondents from Winnipeg, MB and Burien, WA both said Verified Response “works” from a police perspective. “It’s a viable option to reducing police calls for service and potentially freeing officers to perform more active and proactive patrols,” said Officer Roy Galusha of Burien, recommending it to any city wishing “to get a grip on its alarm problem.” Broomfield, CO Administrative Technician Cheryl Keller termed Verified Response as “particularly effective if you have manpower shortages.” Communities also should experience faster response times than with previous systems, added Pam Olshanski, Public Information Officer for Eugene, OR “because alarms are dispatched with a higher priority.”

“It’s a viable option to reducing police calls for service and potentially freeing officers to perform more active and proactive patrols”

Several respondents encouraged communities to prepare themselves for many in the traditional alarm industry to launch a vigorous, fear-based campaign opposing Verified Response, but not to be afraid of industry and public opposition. “Go do it and weather the storm” was the advice of Milwaukee, WI Assistant Chief Joseph Whiten. “Within six weeks of adopting Verified Response and fully informing residents what to expect, it will be all over with,” added Fremont Police Chief Craig Steckler. Broomfield, CO’s Keller encouraged communities not to be “afraid to try something different - implementing this policy wasn’t that big a deal” especially because it was presented as a “win-win” for the community. Aurora, CO Division Chief Ken Murphy said police departments “have to do the right thing and make hard decisions like Verified Response because they answer to elected officials and citizens.”

Because most respondents have customized Verified Response to fit their communities’ unique needs, they encouraged departments considering Verified Response to do the same. Bellingham, WA, Westminster, Arvada and Broomfield, CO, and Salem, OR advised communities to look at their own unique service requirements and tailor Verified Response policies accordingly. “My model may not work for you,” said Commander Gary Creager of Arvada, CO. “You can do Verified Response in a way that fits your community policing needs.” Salem, OR did its research, solicited community input, and now feels good about what they created: “We got our emergency response rate down, freed up our officers’ time and our burglary rate is down,” said Sergeant Steve Bellshaw.

“You can do Verified Response in a way that fits your community policing needs”

Nonetheless, Verified Response may not be for every community, some cautioned. While Lakewood, CO likes its version – which leaves officers free to make their own decision to respond – Division Chief John Camper said it may not be right for many small, rural communities. “It makes sense for medium to large-size communities,” he said.

Some respondents also suggested that agencies and alarm industry professionals work together to send a message to property owners that burglar alarms still have value: that in the event of an actual burglary, trained help is on the way and

“Alarm company representatives should move now to prepare for Verified Response policies”

losses will be reduced. Lieutenant Mike Merryman of Yakima, WA believes that alarm account holders are willing to pay a reasonable monthly fee for the “whole package,” when considering alarm monitoring. “Alarm company representatives should move now to prepare for Verified Response policies,” said Merryman, adding that “one such company in Yakima did so from the start and has added another revenue stream to its operations as a result.”

Several respondents stressed the important role of public education in introducing Verified Response. “Make sure not to set false expectations with the public - thoroughly educate them ahead of time in terms of what police will and will not respond to and steps they can take to protect themselves, such as having a security guard verify alarms,” said Randy Smith of Lane County, OR. Division Chief Ken Murphy of Aurora, CO urges departments to open up and “tell people what you are doing, including the alarm industry.”

Added Sergeant Steve Ing of Victoria, BC, “If we had it to do all over again, we would have paid more attention to public education – people don’t understand what the police do even under the best of circumstances. Make sure that they fully understand that you’re not talking about a ‘no’ response policy – that you will continue to respond to robbery, hold-up alarms, and panic/distress calls.” Eugene, OR’s Olshanski advised, “Know your statistics inside out – you must be able to back up what you are saying to the public” when discussing the problem of false alarms.

Make sure not to set false expectations with the public — thoroughly educate them ahead of time”

Enhanced Call Verification

Enhanced Call Verification (ECV) is a procedure whereby the alarm company calls the site of the alarm when the signal is received. If someone answers and indicates an error and verifies his or her identity, no dispatch is sent. If no one answers the phone, a second call is placed to another designated party at a different phone number. If no one is reached on the second call, the alarm company automatically dispatches the police.

Enhanced Call Verification, or Multiple Call Verification, was not a focal point of this research, but it is important to note because the state of Florida recently passed ECV legislation. The departments interviewed during this research had implemented some form of call verification prior to or as part of their Verified Response policy. For example, Westminster, CO included ECV as a piece of its overall Verified Response strategy.

Dallas Verified Response

The Dallas ordinance bears watching because it is sure to catch the attention of other large cities across North America

It is important to note the significance of the recently adopted Dallas Verified Response ordinance. To date, Dallas, which according to 2004 census data was the ninth largest city in America, is the largest city to implement a Verified Response ordinance. The Dallas ordinance took effect February 1, 2006 and is being phased in over 12 months.

Verified Response is here to stay

Unlike other cities, Dallas' ordinance applies only to commercial properties. Police will continue to respond to all residential alarm calls. This decision was a compromise to appease a skittish public — skittish in part due to a blistering anti-Verified Response campaign mounted by many in the alarm industry.

The Dallas ordinance bears watching because if proven successful, it is sure to catch the attention of other large cities across North America looking to cut waste in the face of increased law enforcement responsibilities, particularly in the wake of 9/11.

Conclusions

Many respondents indicated that they have been able to free officers' time to pursue higher priority duties and respond more quickly to verified burglaries

Based upon the feedback from the 20 cities and municipalities that participated in the survey, it is evident that Verified Response is here to stay. It has proven to be a viable solution for police departments faced with the persistent problem of 90%-plus false burglar alarms, and overall, has led to more efficient law enforcement. By placing more stringent requirements on the burglary alarm companies to verify the likelihood that a burglary has or is taking place, Verified Response policies strike a new, more even balance between the alarm companies and the police departments' responsibility to serve the public good for all residents. It is a balancing act that is likely only to intensify as police departments, facing constant pressures to manage budgets, look for ways to improve efficiencies without sacrificing public welfare.

"Do what's right for your community..."

Results to date overall have been positive, with the most dramatic improvement experienced in an average 72% reduction in the number of times police responded to dispatch requests. Significantly, several communities reported improvements in such key metrics as police response times and apprehension rates. Police departments indicated that they have been able to free officers' time to pursue more productive, higher priority duties and respond more quickly to verified burglaries. A majority of respondents (69%) who provided data reported declining burglary rates, though there is not sufficient data to support a direct correlation between Verified Response and a decrease or increase in burglary rates. Other factors, such as population increase and economic trends are more commonly cited. And while initial public reaction to Verified Response from burglary alarm users was almost universally negative, acceptance typically follows in a relatively short period of time.

"... Look at what's going on in your community and tailor your policy accordingly"

All respondents touched upon the fact that with Verified Response, one size does not fit all. While some rely solely on eye-witness verification, a growing number — 75% of respondents — accept electronic audio or video verification. Those adopting Verified Response range from small municipalities to large cities, such as Dallas, Milwaukee and Las Vegas, and each policy has been adapted to suit particular needs.

When asked what advice they would give to other communities, many police departments indicated that a concerted effort to fully educate the public in advance — or include residents and business owners in the decision-making process via

task forces such as Murray, UT and Tucson, AZ did – would help smooth the path. And adapting Verified Response to fit the needs of the individual community, prevalent among the departments that participated in the survey, also eases concerns. As Bellingham, WA Chief Randy Carroll advised, “Do what’s right for your community. Look at what’s going on in your community and tailor your (alarm) policy accordingly.”

1. Blackstone, E.A., A.J. Buck and S. Hakim (2005). Evaluation of alternative policies to combat false emergency calls. *Evaluation and Program Planning* 28(2):233-242.
2. Security Industry Alarm Coalition