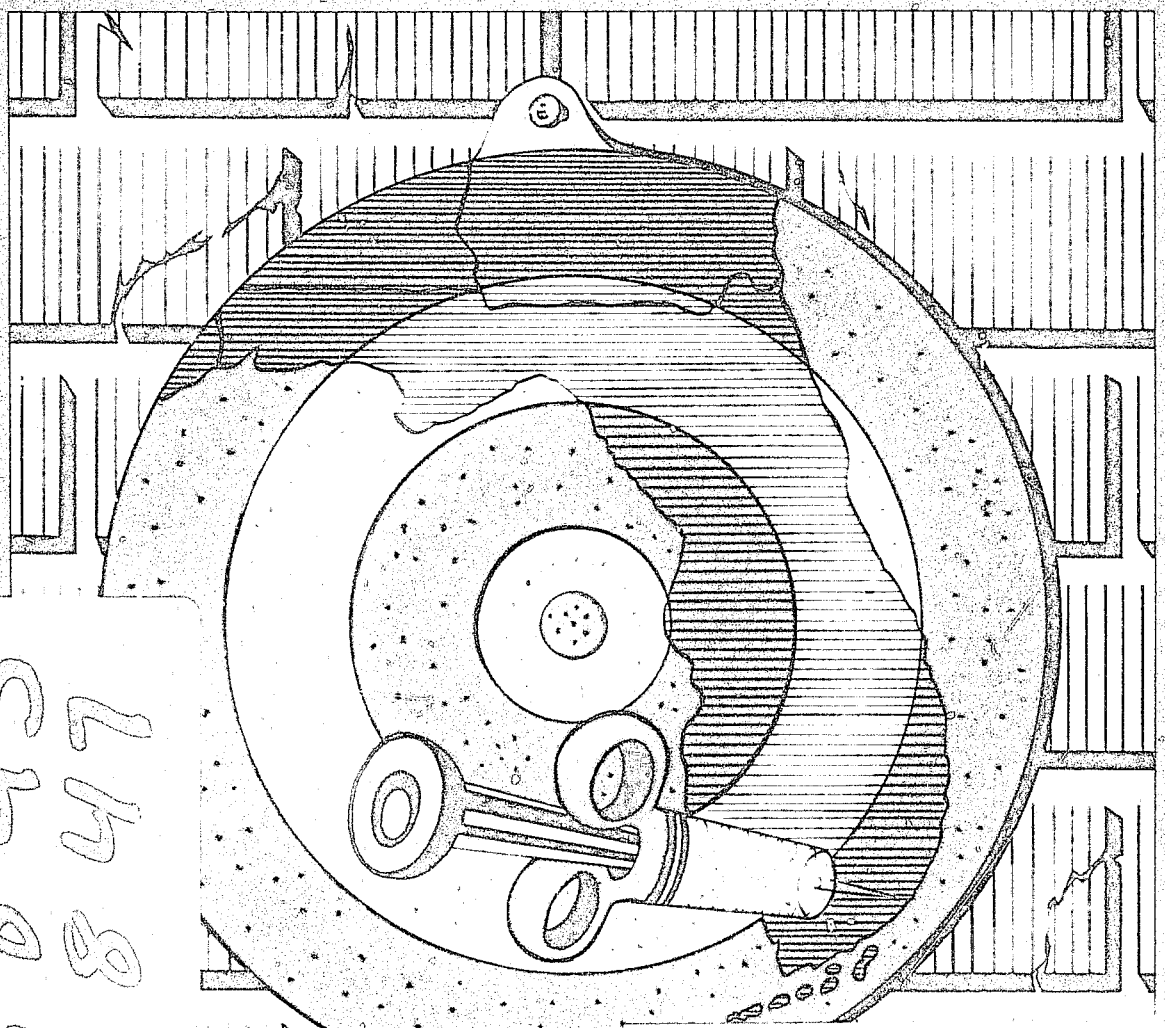
January 1988

FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin



ings in Miami

Contents

January 1988, Volume 57, Number 1

FBI
Law Enforcement Bulletin

United States Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, DC 20535

William S. Sessions, Director

The Attorney General has determined that the publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business required by law of the Department of Justice. Use of funds for printing this periodical has been approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget through June 6, 1988.

Published by the Office of Public Affairs
Milt Ahlerich, *Assistant Director*

Editor—Thomas J. Deakin
Assistant Editor—Kathryn E. Sulewski
Art Director—John E. Ott
Production Manager/Reprints
—Mark A. Zettler

The Cover:
Miami's approach to the narcotics problem. (See article p. 1).
Cover design by John E. Ott.

The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (ISSN-0014-5688) is published monthly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 10th and Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20535. Second-Class postage paid at Washington, DC. Postmaster: Send address changes to Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Washington, DC 20535.

ISSN 0014-5688 USPS 383-310

False Alarms — A Drain on Police Resources

By
G. H. KLEINKNECHT
Superintendent
St. Louis County Police Department
and
DENNIS A. GEORGE
Director
Bureau of Central Police Records
St. Louis County, MO

Most police administrators realize that an increase in a demand for service must be met by a corresponding increase in efficiency in order to offset fiscal constraints plaguing most public agencies today. For example, in 1977, the St. Louis County, MO, Police Department handled approximately 600,000 calls-for-service, and 2.5 percent, or 16,000, were for "alarm sounding," of which 99 percent were false. The number of alarm soundings, better known as false alarms, escalated at a rapid pace for several years prior to 1977. The 1977 cost for handling the false alarm calls, in terms of manpower and equipment, was nearly $125,000.

The St. Louis County Police Department began exploring new ways to become more efficient in handling the "false alarm" problem by using modern technology and the legislative process. The false alarm problem was identified and analyzed by the department from several viewpoints:

—Potential for injury to citizens and responding police officers,

—Exorbitant cost ($125,000 annually in 1977),

—Unnecessary out-of-sevice time for officers investigating false alarm calls (insuring the building is secure, notifications to business/homeowners, etc.),

—Removal of officers from their primary duties of preventive patrol and law enforcement,

—Unnecessary police radio traffic,

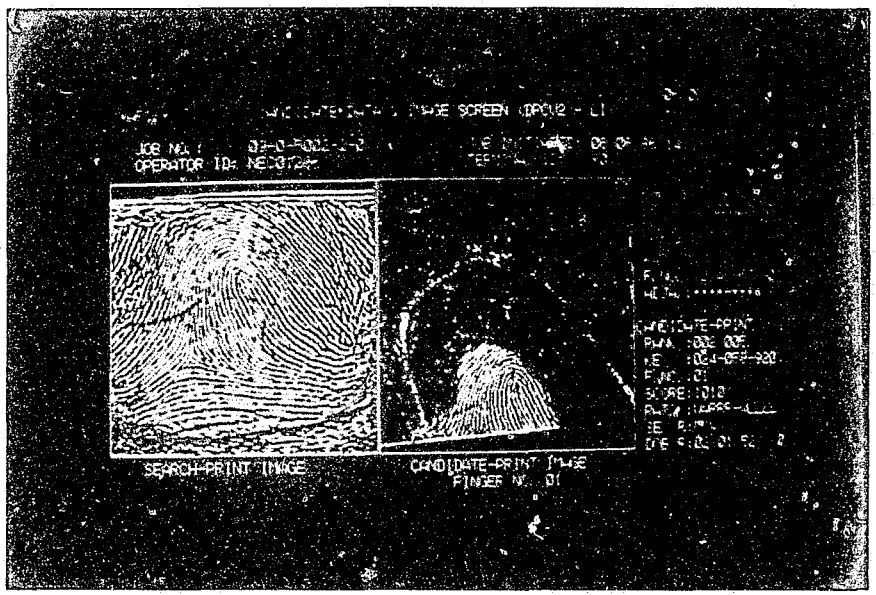
—Unnecessary workload by complaint operators answering repeated automatic dialer alarms and calls from alarm companies, and

—Complacency caused by repeated responses to alarm locations that continually reported a false signal.

With these problems in mind, the department proposed a strict county ordinance and procedure which would eliminate, or significantly reduce, the false alarm problem.

Alarm Companies

Prior to 1977, alarm companies, appealing to the crime concerns of the community, were doing a flourishing business. Without regulation, there was no accurate way to determine the number of companies in operation or the quality of their workmanship. Faulty installation and undependable equipment



Split-screen image displaying the candidate inked print and the latent search print.

inked print minutiae recorded on the fingerprint card.

Test Site Documentation

In order to measure the test results accumulated at each test site, various test documents should be obtained. The test documents deemed critical were printouts of all test search results and respondent lists, copies of all inked print impressions registered on the optic disc that were missed during the latent print searches, a representative number of 10-print minutiae skeletons, photographs of any images that could not be copied from the image screen, and copies of any vendor research and evaluation of missed identifications. All test site documents become the property of the agency and will be used to evaluate the system being tested. Another important reason to compile and obtain this enormous amount of documentation is to provide the agency and those persons responsible for evaluating the test the means for justifying all test conclusions and to defend those conclusions in litigation proceedings should the need arise.

Flexibility

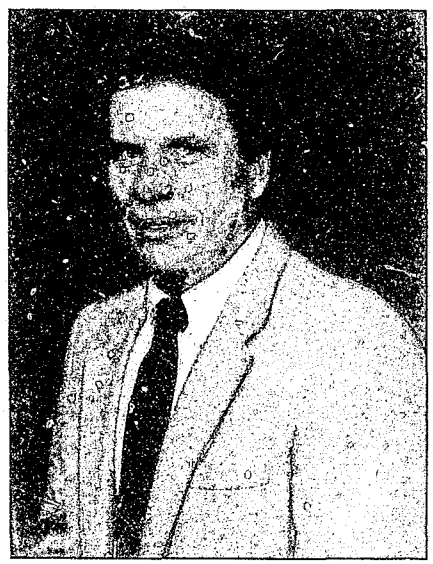
The test should be flexible so that any problem encountered at the test site which would preclude a specific test and the collection of certain desired information can be modified to accomplish the desired objective without compromising the test. Test site difficulties can occur as a result of equipment problems, the inability of the system to perform the tasks, the nonavailability of the equipment to conduct specific tests, the lack of in-depth knowledge of the system by the agency, and misunderstanding of what the agency wanted to test versus the vendor's interpretation of a specific test.

Conclusion

A comprehensive benchmark test, coupled with in-depth documentation and scientific evaluation, will provide administrators with an objective basis to select an AFIS system for their agency. The test results will also provide the groundwork for designing the agency's system, training of personnel, and developing the operational procedures for the system. Law enforcement agencies desiring more information can obtain a detailed latent print benchmark test report by writing to Jeremy D. Margolis, Director, Illinois Department of State Police, attention Joseph Ginter, Deputy Superintendent, Illinois Department of State Police, Division of Forensic Services and Identification, 100 Armory Building, Springfield, IL 62706.

FBI

Superintendent Kleinknecht



Mr. George

were responsible for a large number of the false alarms. Some systems were so poorly designed or installed that a slight wind gust would activate the alarm. Likewise, the growing number of alarm users contributed to the problem by accidentally triggering their alarm systems. The false alarm problem was escalating at a rapid pace, primarily because alarm companies were able to operate without any form of control or penalty for improper alarm installations, alarm equipment, or maintenance.

After several months of researching ordinances and codes of other local governments around the United States, the department developed a regulatory package that was adaptable for St. Louis County. This package, although primarily targeting the alarm industry, was also designed to require the alarm user to share in the responsibility for the reliability of the alarm system. With public and alarm industry input, the St. Louis County Council adopted an ordinance.

The St. Louis County Alarm System Code was enacted into law on July 17, 1978, with three major requirements:

1) No person could engage in the business of selling, leasing, maintaining, servicing, repairing, altering, replacing, moving, or installing alarm systems without a license issued by St. Louis County.
2) A service charge ranging from $5 to $25 was levied against the alarm owner when police responded to a false alarm, and
3) Automatic dialing systems were banned and audible alarms required a 30-minute automatic cut-off timer.

The ordinance specified that alarm company licenses be issued by St. Louis County for a period of 1 year for an annual fee. To be eligible, neither the applicant nor any employee or business associate may have been convicted of crimes involving moral turpitude or have had repeated violations of the alarm ordinance. The license application must include specifications of the alarm system(s) to be sold or installed by the company. In addition, a copy of detailed instructions must be provided to the alarm owner, a statement of repair and maintenance service must be made available, and the name and address of the person designated to receive the violations notice must be provided. The primary goal of the licensing ordinance was to eliminate the so-called "fly-by-night" or unqualified installer, and thereby, upgrade the reliability of alarm industry service and protection of the consumer.

The ordinance also addressed the alarm user by assessing a false alarm service charge aimed directly at false alarm abusers. It provided for a warning for the first alarm in any calendar year, a $5 charge for the second false alarm, a $15 charge for the third false alarm, and a $25 charge for the fourth or any subsequent false alarm in the same year. The initial impact of the alarm ordinance with the staggered service charge was favorable. From 16,000 in 1977, false alarms dropped to 10,100 in 1978, and 9,020 in 1979; however, the trend began to reverse in 1980, when false alarms increased to 10,434. The figure rose to 12,093 in 1981 and reached 12,534 before the ordinance was amended at the end of 1982. The increase in false alarms was believed

"[The program] significantly reduced the false alarm problem and recovered a major portion of the cost for responding to false alarm calls."

to be due, in large part, to the increasing number of citizens and businesses obtaining alarm systems.

It became evident to those administering the program that the service charge system, with its initial warning letter and extensive bookkeeping requirements, was becoming too cumbersome, confusing to alarm users, and an inadequate deterrent to repeat false alarm offenders. An ordinance change was adopted which streamlined the program and reduced administrative processing time. This change was the replacement of the "sliding" service charge schedule with a flat rate fine of $16. The amount of the fine was determined by the actual cost of having a police officer respond to a false alarm. The impact of the change was immediate and favorable. The number of false alarms leveled off and the revenue collected increased dramatically in each subsequent year.

Program Administration

The administration of the alarm program is the responsibility of two staff members — an alarm coordinator and an administrative clerk. Alarm activation reports, prepared by patrol officers who have responded to the alarm sounding, are forwarded to the alarm coordinator on a daily basis. Such reports are reviewed by the patrol officer's supervisor who recommends if a fine should be assessed. These decisions are based on whether the false alarm falls within the exceptions stated in the ordinance. Exceptions include:

1) Damaging, testing, or repairing of telephone lines,
2) When there is visible evidence that an attempted unauthorized or illegal entry had been made, or
3) When an alarm is intentionally activated by a resident acting under reasonable belief that a need exists to call the police department.

When the alarm is false, that is activated intentionally, by inadvertence, or as a result of a system malfunction, procedures are initiated to collect the fine. The administrative clerk enters data from the alarm report into the computer. This causes the in-house computer program to generate a notification letter which is mailed to the alarm user. This notification letter includes the name of the business/homeowner, location, date, time, and file number of the false alarm report.

The notification letter was designed to include a tear-off portion which is mailed back to the department along with the fine to insure proper credit. The remaining portion of the notification letter is retained for the user's personal records.

If payment is not received within 30 days, as specified by the ordinance, the computer system generates a "final notice" letter, giving the user an additional 15 days to pay the fine. Statistically, more than 95 percent pay their fines within 45 days, leaving only a small percentage requiring any additional attention. Less than 1 percent require court action.

Although not designed to increase revenue, the amended ordinance has resulted in the collection of more than $904,000 in service charges or fines since 1979.

Program Results/Benefits

Using management reports generated by the false alarm computer program, the alarm coordinator identifies frequent violators and any alarm companies which may be operating without a license. This information is provided to the Division of Uniform Patrol for follow-up investigation. Patrol officers will assist the alarm user in correcting false alarm problems/procedures.

Studies indicate equipment failure is the cause 60 percent of the time, and employee or citizen error is responsible for another 15 percent. These efforts have had a positive impact on false alarms, as demonstrated by a 13-percent decrease in the number of repeat violators.

The accomplishments of the St. Louis County Alarm System Code may be measured in many ways. The major goal of reducing the number of false alarms to make police officers more readily available for legitimate emergency calls was achieved immediately.

Since modifying the ordinance and enacting a set fine for each violation, the number of false alarms between 1981 and 1986 has stabilized at approximately 12,300 false alarms annually. During the same period, the number of alarm installations on homes and businesses has more than doubled. Therefore, while the number of false alarms remained relatively the same, the ratio of false alarms to the number of alarm systems in use decreased considerably.

The quality of alarm systems and their installation improved dramatically, either because alarm companies needed a better product to stay competitive or because they did not want to