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TRADITIONAL BURGLAR ALARM SYSTEMS ARE NO LONGER THE MOST EFFECTIVE SECURITY SOLUTION FOR RETAILERS

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ABSTRACT

Burglar alarm systems have, in some or fashion, existed since the 1850s.¹ In the 1970s, the emergence of motion detection gave rise to broader security applications which continue to be iterated upon to this day.² The 2000s ushered in an era of rapid adoption, both with respect to commercial and residential security customers.

For retailers, the burglar alarm has long been viewed as a viable means to safeguard merchandise and property. However, these systems have not evolved to address the realities of present day security challenges, most notably the propensity for false alarms, inefficiencies in response times, system operator fatigue and defense against modern burglary tactics. These shortcomings have very real effects on cities, their policing strategies and the businesses they aim to protect.

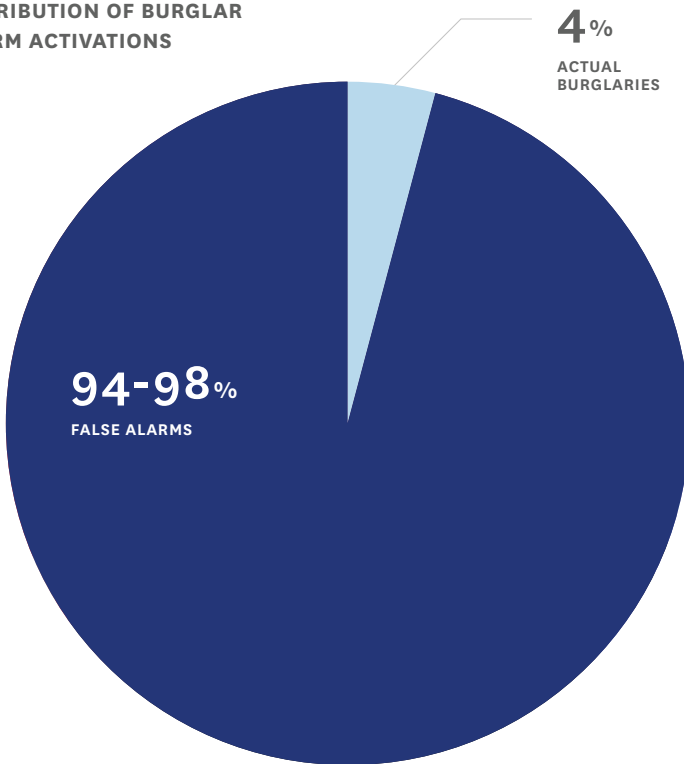
¹ Horowitz, H. (1891). Electric Alarm. U.S. Patent No. 9,802. Retrieved from <https://patents.google.com/patent/US9802>

² Lasko, J. (2023). Tech Trends: The Next Evolution of Motion Detection. SecurityInfoWatch. Retrieved from <https://www.securityinfowatch.com/alerts-monitoring/alarm-systems-intrusion-detection/article/21219314/tech-trends-the-next-evolution-of-motion-detection>

HIGH FALSE ALARM RATES

In the retail industry, false alarms are not only a source of frustration but also a significant financial drain. Retailers rely heavily on alarm systems to protect their inventory, but these systems are notorious for generating high rates of false alarms. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, between 94-98% of burglar alarm activations are false alarms, often triggered by non-threatening causes such as malfunctioning sensors, employee errors, or environmental conditions.³

DISTRIBUTION OF BURGLAR ALARM ACTIVATIONS



³ Clarke, R. V., & Bichler-Robertson, D. (1998). False Burglar Alarms (2nd ed.). Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series. Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, Arizona State University. Retrieved from <https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/false-burglar-alarms-2nd-ed>

Research presented in a paper titled “An Examination of Alarm System Deterrence and Rational Choice Theory: The Need to Increase Risk” supports this view, highlighting that false alarms are a pervasive issue that undermines the effectiveness of alarm systems as a deterrent. Repeated false alarms diminish the credibility of these systems, leading to a reduction in perceived risk among potential offenders. As a result, burglars may become more emboldened, knowing that a triggered alarm is unlikely to result in swift law enforcement action.⁴

The financial implications of false alarms for retailers can be substantial, as fines imposed by municipalities oftentimes even increase with frequency. The data below provides a glimpse into the real cost of false alarms:

- In **Los Angeles**, you will be charged \$267 for the first false alarm, scaling up to \$467 by the fifth false alarm within a year, potentially costing businesses nearly \$2,000 in unplanned expenses for just five false alarms.⁵

- In **Chicago**, fines start at \$100 for the first false alarm within a 12-month period, increasing to \$300 for subsequent activations.⁶

- **Minneapolis** imposes fines starting at \$30 for the first false alarm, \$100 for the second false alarm, \$200 for the third false alarm, increasing \$100 for each subsequent false alarm beyond three.⁷

- **Dallas** charges \$50 for the first false alarm, increasing up to \$100 per incident for multiple occurrences.⁸

⁴ Berube, H.A.. (2010). An Examination of Alarm System Deterrence and Rational Choice Theory: The Need to Increase Risk. *Security Journal*, 10(2), 57-72. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233211821_An_Examination_of_Alarm_System_Deterrence_and_Rational_Choice_Theory_The_Need_to_Increase_Risk

⁵ City of Los Angeles False Alarm Fees. (2023). Retrieved from Los Angeles Police Department website: <https://www.lapdonline.org>

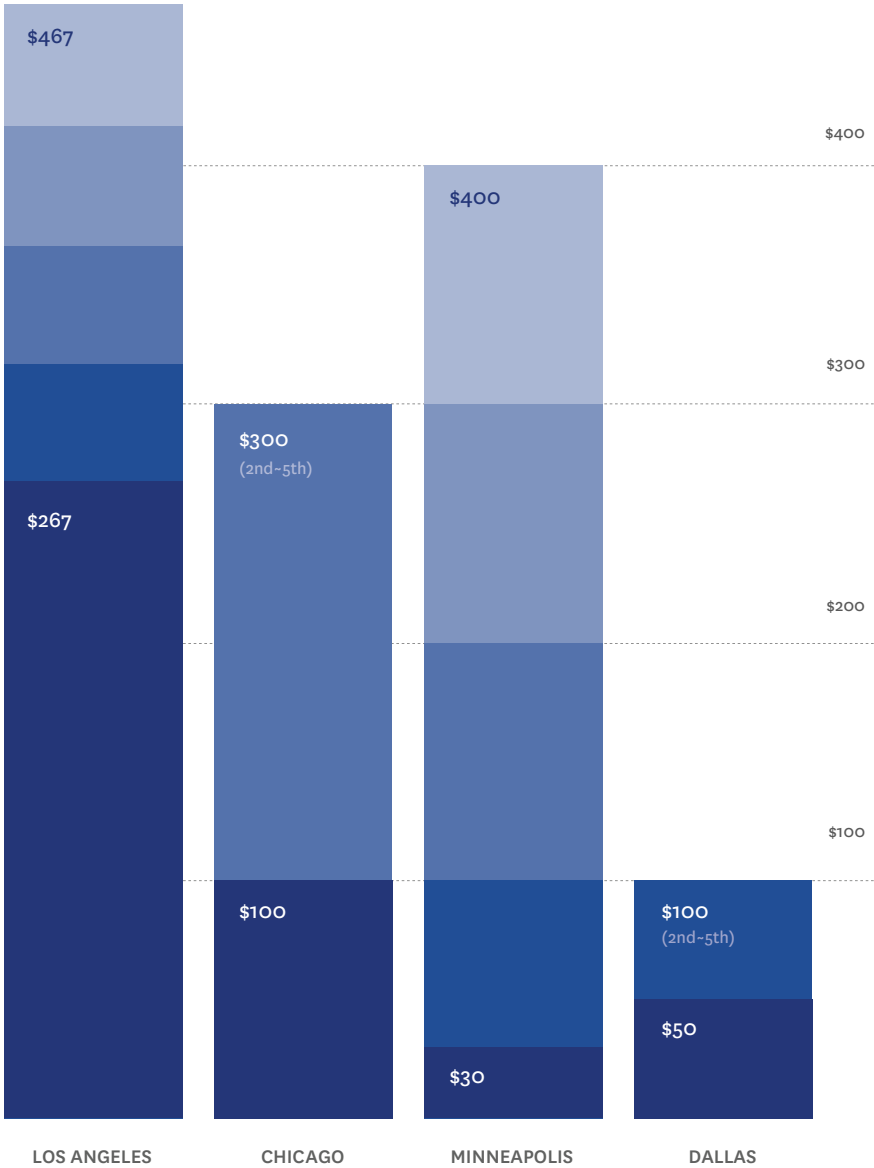
⁶ City of Chicago False Alarm Program. (2023). Retrieved from Chicago Police Department website: <https://home.chicagopolice.org>

⁷ City of Minneapolis. (2024). False Alarm Fines. Retrieved from <https://www2.minneapolismn.gov/business-services/licenses-permits-inspections/business-licenses/information/fees-fines/false-alarm-fines/>

⁸ City of Dallas False Alarm Fees. (2023). Retrieved from City of Dallas website: <https://dallascityhall.com>

FALSE ALARM FINES PROGRESSION IN LOS ANGELES, CHICAGO, MINNEAPOLIS, AND DALLAS

- 1ST ALARM
- 2ND ALARM
- 3RD ALARM
- 4TH ALARM
- 5TH ALARM



Clearly, these costs can add up quickly, particularly for multi-location retail chains who may experience hundreds of false alarms, in aggregate, over the course of a year, significantly impacting their bottom line. In addition to eroding retailers' profits, false alarms create serious strains on law enforcement resources, leading to delayed responses in instances where a real emergency is taking place.

Cities are increasingly seeking to rein in the volume of false alarms their police departments have to process on a daily basis. In law enforcement, it is well known that false alarms place considerable strain on police departments. One study found that in the city of Chicago, responding to false alarms accounted for the time of 195 full time officers.⁹ Recently, the city of Seattle announced a new ordinance in which their police department “will only dispatch officers to calls from alarm companies with supporting evidence, such as audio, video, panic alarms or eyewitness evidence that a person is illegally entering or attempting to enter a residence or commercial property. SPD will no longer respond to calls from alarm companies based only on sensor or motion activations. With depleted resources SPD cannot prioritize a patrol response when there is a very low probability that criminal activity is taking place.”¹⁰ The enactment of this ordinance will require Seattle-based business to assess if their current system meets the new criteria imposed by the city.

With police departments across the country in crises due to an inability to recruit new officers to meet activity demand, it is likely that more cities will put into place restrictions similar to the ones just instituted in Seattle.¹¹

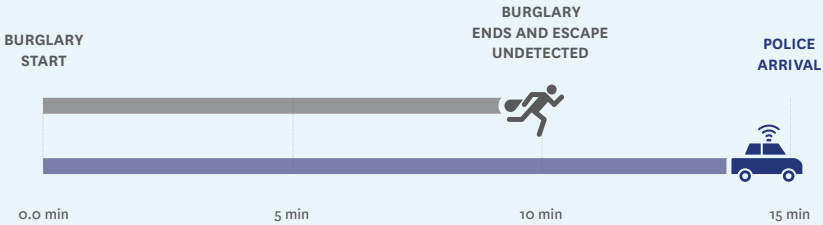
⁹ Tilley, N., Thompson, R., Farrell, G. et al. Do burglar alarms increase burglary risk? A counter-intuitive finding and possible explanations. *Crime Prev Community Saf* 17, 1–19 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1057/cpcs.2014.17>

¹⁰ City of Seattle. (2024). Alarm System Monitoring. Retrieved from <https://www.seattle.gov/business-regulations/alarm-system-monitoring>

¹¹ Burke, M. (2023). U.S. experiencing a police hiring crisis. NBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/us-experiencing-police-hiring-crisis-rcna103600>

DELAYED RESPONSE LIMITS ACTUAL CRIME PREVENTION

Traditional burglar alarm systems are inherently reactive. This means that in retail environment, store owners and authorities are notified only after a break-in has occurred. This reactive nature presents significant challenges in preventing the type of activity the systems were installed to defend against in the first place, as criminals are able to achieve their mission long before law enforcement arrives on the scene. The FBI reports that most burglaries only last 8 to 10 minutes.¹² Meanwhile, in large metropolitan areas, such as New York City, police response times to “serious” offences routinely exceed 15 minutes.¹³ This disconnect in timing gives criminals ample opportunity to escape undetected, rendering alarm systems effectively useless at actually protecting stores.

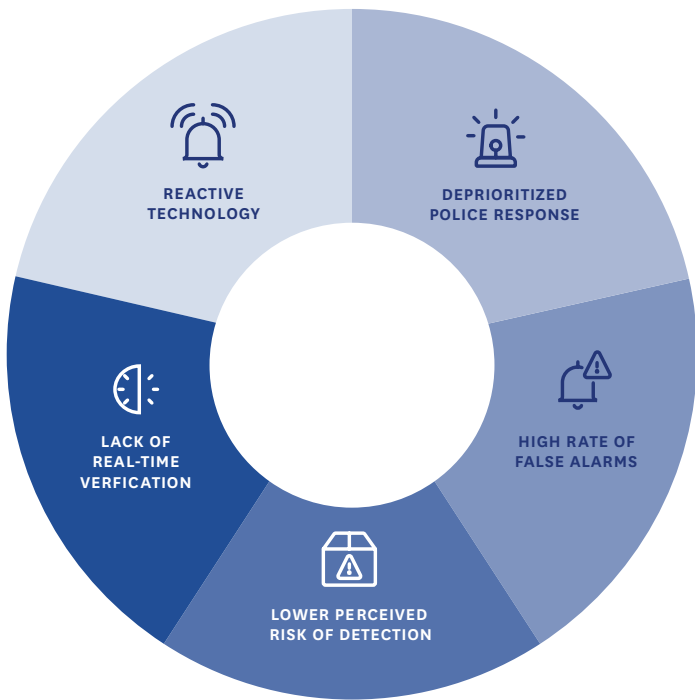


Criminologists often refer to the Rational Choice Theory when describing the dynamic between burglar alarms and the burglars themselves. The theory suggests that criminals make calculated decisions based on the perceived risks and rewards of committing a crime. When alarm systems are characterized by frequent false alarms and slow police response, the perceived risk for offenders diminishes as they’ve become well aware of deficiencies in the current burglar alarm response model.¹⁴ It is no surprise, then, that a study conducted by the University of North Carolina-Charlotte of 422 incarcerated burglars found that 40% of them would still burglarize a property even with the awareness that an

¹² The Zebra. (2023). 2023 Burglary Statistics: Data and Trends. Retrieved from <https://www.thezebra.com/resources/research/burglary-statistics/>

¹³ City of New York. (2024). Response Time Trends. Retrieved from <https://www.nyc.gov/site/g911reporting/reports/response-time-trends.page>

¹⁴ Berube, H.A.. (2010). An Examination of Alarm System Deterrence and Rational Choice Theory: The Need to Increase Risk. *Security Journal*, 10(2), 57-72. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233211821_An_Examination_of_Alarm_System_Deterrence_and_Rational_Choice_Theory_The_Need_to_Increase_Risk



**LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL
BURGLAR ALARM SYSTEMS**



alarm system was in place.¹⁵ This reinforces the point that some burglars may not view alarm systems as a significant deterrent, particularly in cities where response times are known to be unpredictable or delayed due to well publicized resource constraints.

TECHNOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF BURGLAR ALARM SYSTEMS IN RETAIL

Given retail stores often contain a volume of valuable assets, the industry faces more security challenges than most other sectors, from shoplifting and internal theft to organized retail crime and property damage. Yet, the traditional burglar alarm systems used by many retailers in an effort to curb these challenges are based on decades-old processes and technology. These systems typically rely on sensors that detect motion or the opening of doors and windows, triggering an audible alarm. However, this reactive technology does little to prevent crime or provide detailed information in real-time.

Research emphasizes that a significant shortcoming of traditional alarm systems is their inability to adapt to the evolving methods used by criminals and suggests that the deterrent effect of an alarm system is contingent on the perceived risk of detection and apprehension.¹⁶ When alarm systems lack real-time verification capabilities or integration with more advanced security technologies, such as video monitoring or AI-based threat detection, they are less likely to deter criminal activity effectively.

¹⁵ University of North Carolina at Charlotte. (2013, May 15). Through the eyes of a burglar: Study provides insights into habits and motivations. <https://inside.charlotte.edu/news-features/2013-05-15/through-eyes-burglar-study-provides-insights-habits-and-motivations/>

¹⁶ *ibid*

CONCLUSION

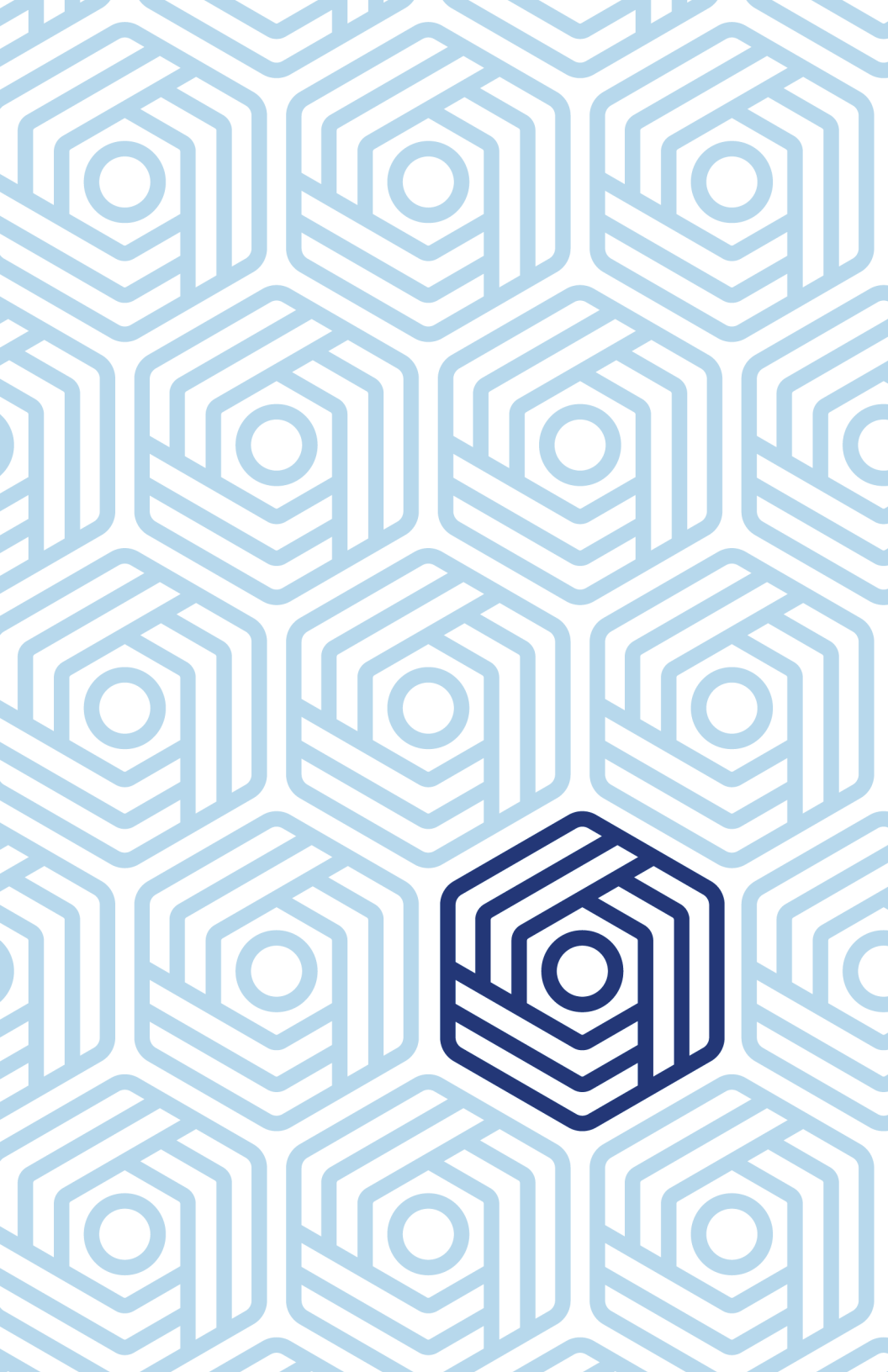
The traditional burglar alarm system, once the gold standard for retail security, has failed to evolve alongside the rapidly changing demands of the modern retail environment. Its high false alarm rates, delayed response times and inability to deter modern burglary strategies raise serious concerns about its effectiveness in safeguarding stores from theft and vandalism. As technology continues to advance and alternative solutions emerge, retail businesses must reconsider their reliance on burglar alarms and adopt more effective solutions to protect their inventory, staff, and customers.

ABOUT BLUE EYE

From urban storage facilities and big box retailers to remote oil fields and vast solar farms, Blue Eye serves a diverse range of industries with detect & deter capabilities using remote video monitoring (RVM), AI-augmented lookouts, swift communications with law enforcement, and powerful analytics & reporting.



15 W South Temple, Suite 800
Salt Lake City, UT 84101
Phone 855.258.3662





blue eye

15 W South Temple, Suite 800
Salt Lake City, UT 84101
Phone 855.258.3662
goblueeye.com

