



Enquirer photo BY DAVID KOHL

FRED OSWALD of the Cincinnati police Communications Control Center is one of several officers who monitor bank, store and home alarms at the center on Ezzard Charles Drive. Police officers respond to 50-60 alarms a day.

Police May Act Against Alarms That 'Cry Wolf'

BY PAUL FURIGA
Enquirer Reporter

When District 2 Officer Jim Murray turned his police cruiser around hard, flipped on the lights and headed for the Madisonville branch of Eagle Savings Association Wednesday, he didn't know what he'd find.

The Cincinnati police communications center had just told him—and any other District 2 car in the area—that a holdup alarm had gone off at the savings branch on Madison Road.

Since it was a bank alarm, Murray says he had "a good feeling" that the alarm was legitimate, which it turned out to be. But more often than not, he admits, there are too many false alarms, some of them set off by "cousins (of the owners) who don't know how they work."

Police officers across the city respond to similar alarms about 50 to 60 times a day, police statistics show. The alarms range from holdup circuits in bank teller cages to safe alarms in stores to alarms that guard the family jewels in homes scattered throughout the city.

THE PRICE for the more than 16,000 false alarms Cincinnati police handle every year is expensive, say crime prevention officers and burglary investigators. Expensive in terms of lost time, wear and tear on cars and wear and tear on the officers continually pumping their adrenalin for a potentially deadly confrontation, only to find that 97% of the alarms they respond to are false—"drops."

"It's certainly irritating to say the least,"

says Sgt. Dan Steers, head of the department's burglary investigation section. "The inherent danger is that if you're responding to a place where they've had a lot of false alarms in the past, you might have a slightly slower response."

"It becomes a kind of 'cry wolf' situation with police officers on the street," says Sgt. Charles Horstman of the department's community assistance office.

Horstman says officers develop "a kind of gut reaction" that may slacken their response to chronic false alarms.

Unfortunately, he says, if a business or home with a chronic "drop" problem actually does have a break-in or holdup, "one minute off the response time can make the difference between catching the crook or not."

THE CONTINUAL problem with false alarms in the city has led the police division to examine in detail the causes of false alarms and look for some solutions.

In the next few months, Horstman expects to hear from police and safety officials on two new methods of controlling the problem during the coming year: charging for false alarm runs, or refusing to respond to alarms at locations with chronic drop problems.

Though many burglar and some holdup alarms may be sensitive to mechanical drops—caused by the weather or electrical outages, for instance, Horstman says most of the alarm problems come from alarm owners—not the devices themselves.

He estimates that two-thirds of all false alarms in 1980 could be traced to "people

problems. People who are improperly using the system, or who don't train their employees properly."

Then, too, Horstman says, "there are those people who believe they are entitled to false alarms," to see if the alarms really work, or if the police really show up.

SO FAR, the department has been treating those with alarm problems to a "very nice letter" that Horstman sends to all businesses and homeowners who've had five false alarms in one month.

Of those, he says, 74% take heed and correct their problems after one letter, while 21% need yet another letter. Just about 6%, Horstman says, "need more encouragement than just a nice letter."

Horstman says the department is considering just that kind of action in dealing with chronic drop problems in 1982 in two programs that have seen some use in other cities.

One program under consideration—making those who have too many false alarms pay for them, like traffic tickets—has been in use in other cities, including Montgomery.

Though Horstman says the program is under serious consideration, there is a drawback which may make it unfeasible.

"WE WOULD need an entire accounting apparatus to handle the bills and the paperwork," Horstman says. "What with economics the way it is, that may be too expensive."

The second alternative may cost the department less outright. It's a program de-

veloped in a New York City study, wherein police response was denied to alarm owners in several precincts if the owners failed to correct false alarm problems.

"It was successful enough," Horstman says, "that they expanded the program city-wide four months. . . . It's an intriguing kind of thing."

If used in Cincinnati, Horstman says the denial program wouldn't be applied, black-and-white, to all false alarm problems.

"Any alarm is going to drop a false alarm from time to time," Horstman says. "We're willing to give our subscribers a number of freebies." But not too many.

CURRENTLY, ONLY those alarm owners who have false alarms five times a month or more receive letters from the police. Horstman says sending letters to those who have three or four false alarms a month may mean more savings for the department—with or without the denial program.

In October, he says, 44 alarm owners received letters from his office. If those who had three or four alarm drops were included, Horstman would have had to send out another 74 letter last month, a considerable increase.

Even so, "it could be very successful if we would have the same success rate (the 74%) that we've had with the five or more program," Horstman says.

The success that Horstman is looking for comes from knowledge of alarms and how they work, something which has so far been elusive. "Look, I'm not saying alarms are bad," he says. "We appreciate them. But you have to use them properly."