

False alarms numerous, costly

By CAROL HASKIN

Everyone knows the story of the boy who cried wolf. He ended up with a credibility gap and a lot of lost sheep.

The tale has a modern parallel in the misuse of burglar alarm systems. An increasingly security conscious American public is equipping its homes with various systems and then unconsciously setting them off with, excuse the expression, alarming frequency.

The problem is one being faced by police departments across the country, but most particularly in affluent suburbs such as Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills and Bloomfield Township. In these areas, innumerable police manhours are lost monthly on wild goose chases that endanger traffic, leave areas unprotected, and decrease the officers' enthusiasm in answering subsequent alarms — ones that might not be false.

"They're not really false alarms," explained Lt. Millard Squire of the Birmingham Police Department. "The alarm systems in 95 per cent of the cases are doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing — recording an interruption in service. It's just that people aren't using them correctly. For simplicity's sake we call them false alarms."

IN 1972, Birmingham police answered a total of 885 false alarms. That adds up to 450 manhours. Squire said, "or 11 manweeks that go in a totally unproductive manner. Eleven manweeks when we have 52 in a year means one fifth of a patrolman a year we're losing, and we don't want to lose him."

Michigan mirror

Politics just vicious circle?

By ELMER E. WHITE

Criticism and questions about the political process—and the electorate—come from outgoing Lt. Gov. James H. Brickley.

In a speech he said might be his last as Michigan's lieutenant governor, Brickley told a group of new people in Lansing that there's "a deep and underlying shortcoming that permeates the whole process, superficially."

"I have come to the conclusion that the political process is not idea oriented; the media is not oriented to transmit ideas and the public is not in the mood for them," Brickley said. "It is certainly not the fault of any one segment of the public process," he added, "but it is a vicious circle that feeds on itself."

BRICKLEY SAID the United States proved "a disgrace in the free world" when less than 40 per cent of eligible voters came out for the last election.

And, he suggested, it's time for voters to base their balloting on what's good for the common interest instead of what's good for their own special interests.

The special interest problem is at work in the halls of government, too, Brickley said. "Much of the governmental scene, national, state and local, is a battleground where various factions of the government itself seek their own aggrandizement."

STUDENTS MAY soon be sitting on the governing boards of their colleges and universities.

Atty. Gen. Frank Kelley had ruled that a student would be in conflict of interest if he served as a member of his school's board. But a bill recently signed into law by Gov. William Milliken changes all that.

Birmingham was so concerned about the problem that for five years it has been analyzing the situation and developing a positive action program. The study began in 1969 when the city had five bank hold-ups, the first in many decades, that police felt were prompted by the number of false alarms the banks set off.

The study revealed there were three major causes for false alarms. The first, and most prevalent, is human error. Since most of Birmingham's false alarms come from businesses, police hypothesize that personnel in the business are not trained properly in the use of the alarm system, managers forget to train new employees or the alarm system is not properly suited to the business.

The other two causes of false alarms are the malfunction of the alarm itself or what the police term "unknown" — the cause of the alarm could not be ascertained.

MANY COMMUNITIES deal with the problem negatively, through ordinances, priority systems and fines. Lt. Squire said that Birmingham might be forced into that someday, but for the present they are trying to handle the situation in a positive manner through cooperation.

The department deals with the problem through a series of form letters. At the business's first false alarm, the head of the company receives a letter explaining the problem. After subsequent alarms he receives a report designating the cause of the alarm, how many his business has had so far that month and that year.

The money does not concern police as much as the danger involved in answering these calls. "A lot of people think that if you get to use your lights and siren it's a privilege," said Officer Mike Aperauch, head of the township's crime prevention unit. "But speaking from experience, that's the most dangerous part of our job. Speed limits are set up for safety and whether it's a policeman or not, speeding endangers the life of everyone else on the road."

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MILLIKEN SUGGESTS that implementation of the new law—allowing students to run for and serve on their schools' boards—"may serve as a productive step in improving relationships between university administrators and students."

Bullard says simply that "now at least we will not discriminate against students serving."

The next step, Bullard says, is to actually add students to the board memberships.

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THE AGRICULTURE Department says exacting work like this by counters for the Michigan Crop Reporting Service brings a pretty accurate projection of production for the year.

The department dispatches two cars to each alarm and makes it a policy to call up the head of the business, no matter what time, to inform him of the alarm.

Squire said that the problem of false alarms in Birmingham homes is much smaller than that in businesses because the former does not have the personnel turn-over of the latter and thus alarm system training tends to stick. However, Bloomfield Hills and Bloomfield Township, both primarily residential communities, have a considerable problem with home alarms.

JAMES WILLIARD, deputy director for public safety in Bloomfield Hills, said that Bloomfield Hills has more alarms per capita than any community in the area. The more alarms installed, the more false alarms can be expected.

"We don't like them but we answer them," Williard said, "and we don't treat the people too harshly because we don't want them to shut them off and leave them off. They are a great deterrent. If not for alarm systems I'm sure we'd have a lot more trouble."

To keep track of alarm systems and who is installing them, Bloomfield Hills has a licensing system which requires the alarm business to register the alarm it is installing with the police department.

Because its population is greater than that of the other communities, Bloomfield Township's false alarm problem is also greater. Township police have answered about 1,500 so far this year. In the first three weeks of December, false alarms cost the township \$210 in salary alone.

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mal speed limits on the way. Owners of alarm systems should be more familiar with their operation, he said, and this education should be taken care of by the businesses that sell the alarms. However, Aperauch said his own services are available to any resident having a problem with his alarm system.

All three police departments stress the point that, despite the inconvenience of false alarms, alarm systems are worthwhile. They encourage the installation of systems in both homes and businesses because they are a deterrent to burglars. All emphasize the importance of shopping around for the proper system for each place's needs and lifestyle.

The more experience people have with their systems, they hope, the fewer cries of wolf will they have to answer.

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