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Phillip Banks, CPP  
The Banks Group  
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1439 South Indiana Ave.  
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**RE: Silent/Hold Up Alarms and “Best Practices”**

Dear Mr. Banks,

The following is a summary of my research pertaining to the usefulness and “best practices” pertaining for the application of hold-up/silent alarms.

### **Conclusion**

The application of a silent/hold-up alarm should truly be questioned for its overall contribution to the security strategy employed at a business or facility. It appears the primary strategy for most silent/hold-up alarms is to aid in the detection and apprehension of robbery suspects. However, some law enforcement agencies and security practitioners suggests to minimize the risk of injury or violence, activation of such devices should occur “after” the suspect(s) leave the premise. The Los Angeles Police Department suggests in their robbery prevention guide “If you have a silent alarm and can reach it without being noticed, use it. Otherwise, wait until the robber leaves.” The unsettling term used by the LAPD is “if.” It would appear that much of the research suggest that the silent/hold-up alarm poses a risk to the victims and provides a “delayed” response by the police.

Although the LAPD makes reference to silent alarms, many other security practitioners or law enforcement agencies do not. Lawrence Fennelly in his book The Handbook of Loss Prevention and Crime Prevention, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition makes no reference to the use of a silent/hold-up alarm for robbery prevention program. The City of Gainesville, FL financed a study of late night retail robberies following an escalation of such incidents. Following the analysis of the data, several prevention methods were recommended and later incorporated into a city ordinance. No where in the prevention strategies did the study recommend the installation of a silent/hold-up alarm. **The common recommendations by both security practitioners and law enforcement suggest: better lighting, cooperate with suspects, cash controls, clear site lines, and employees working in pairs or more.**

The most significant problem for the silent/hold-up alarm is the number of nuisance alarms generated. Interviews with many law enforcement officers indicated they anticipate such an alarm will yet be another false activation. Most law enforcement agencies respond to the

silent/hold-up alarm obeying all traffic laws, resulting in a delayed response. Yet, the possibility of law enforcement responding quickly may possibly generate a hostage situation. This was evident in Olathe, KS on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999. The Olathe Police Department in preparation of the turn of the century had significantly increased the number of officers on the street. Just as a bank was preparing to close for the holiday, two individuals entered the bank with the intent to commit a robbery. The alarm was activated and officers responded immediately. What ensued was a hostage standoff that lasted for nearly eight hours. The incident ended with the suspects surrendering, but the potential for violence and injuries was significant.

### **Problems with the Silent/Hold-Up Alarm**

In theory the silent/hold-up alarm should pose a significant risk to the perpetrators, but as Henri Berube points out *“Allowing the robbers to know of the existence of the silent alarm sort of defeats its purpose and allows the robbers to plan for controlling it.”* Given that, then does the silent/hold-up alarm pose a risk to the perpetrator or victim? Even the LAPD recognizes the potential hazard activating the alarm in the presence of the perpetrators, **“If** you have a silent alarm and can reach it without being noticed, use it. Otherwise, wait until the robber leaves.”

The biggest problem with the silent/hold-up is the false alarm. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) indicates that over 90% of all alarm activations are false. This has caused many law enforcement agencies to require the alarm activation to be routed through a central station before calling the police. This caused a delay to the notification to the law enforcement officer on the street as noted in Security Management Magazine (February 2001). Brian Abraham and Peter Baldassaro wrote in their article titled Leaving Robbers Barren about one company’s revision to their bank robbery prevention initiative, *“The company chose to remove all the panic alarms from the branches. In review of the branches that had not yet been converted to the new program, security found that staff would push the panic button, which went to a monitoring center, rather than phoning the police as they were instructed. That caused a problem because, under Canadian law, monitoring companies must call the bank and confirm the robbery before dispatching the police. This resulted in significant delays in some cases. By removing the alarms, staff are now forced to call 911. The new program has both improved police response times and reduced false alarms.”*

I teach the false alarm prevention class for my city which has adopted recommendations by the alarm industry to fine alarm users. Our fine schedule increases with each false alarm occurrence that an officer responds to. Some businesses have experienced so many false alarms that it is not uncommon for the fines in one year to exceed the average loss per robbery incident. The very device intended to save money and keep people safe appears it does neither. When examining the risk through crime analysis data, it is obvious for some clients the silent/hold up alarm could be a costly endeavor.

## **Robbery Facts**

### **Segments from Violence on the Job: Identifying Risks and Developing Solutions**

Without a doubt robbery can be a violent and dangerous crime. *“Contrary to popular opinion, the predominant motive in workplace homicides was neither anger nor passion – as may appear from well publicized events – but robbery.”* (pg. 8)

Older workers (65 years and over) had the highest homicide victimization rate-more than twice that for workers in the 55-64 age group. (pg. 7)

Simple assaults, which comprised over two thirds of workplace violent crimes, resulted in injuries to one out of every seven victims; aggravated assaults resulted in injuries to one out of every five victims; ***and robberies resulted in injuries to one out of every four victims***. All in all, slightly fewer than 160,000 victims suffered injuries (aside from rape), and 10% of these required medical care. It appears that more than half of all victimizations were not reported to the police. Of those not reporting, 40% considered the incident minor or a private matter and 27% said they had reported the incident to another official, such as a company security guard. (pg. 12)

**The FBI’s Uniformed Crime Reports (2002)** indicates that the use of a firearm in a robbery is relatively low at 42% and injuries occurred in less than 39% of the incidents.

*“Firearms continued to be the weapon used most often in the commission of robberies. In 2002, offenders used firearms in 42.1 percent of the robberies reported to the UCR program. Another 39.9 percent of robberies involved strong-arm tactics-hands, fists, feet, etc. Offenders used knives or cutting instruments in 8.7 percent of the offenses and other weapons in 9.3 percent of robberies.*

#### ***Dollars Loss***

*“Nationwide, the average monetary value of property stolen during a robbery was \$1,281. Banks lost an average of \$4,763 for each robbery, and commercial houses (including supermarkets, department stores, restaurants, taverns, finance companies, hotels, motels, etc.) lost an average of \$1,676 per robbery offense...Additionally, losses from gas or service stations and convenience stores averaged \$679 and \$665, respectively, per robbery.*

#### ***Clearances***

*“In 2002, law enforcement agencies cleared by arrest or exceptional means 25.7% of robberies reported to the national programs...Law enforcement in suburban and rural counties cleared 29.5 percent and 41.4 percent, respectively, of reported robberies”*

*“A 5 year comparison of robbery arrests for the Nation showed an overall 8.3 percent decline.”*  
*“The majority of the arrestees, 89.7%, were males. By race, 54.1% of persons arrested for robbery were black, 44.1% percent were white, and 1.7% were of other races.”*

### **Summary of Gainesville Convenience Store Intervention Strategy (1985)**

(Most of the information was taken directly from the research paper)

In the spring of 1985, a barrage of convenience store robberies in Gainesville led to an exhaustive analysis of the problem by police personnel. The intent of the study was to discover whether any other locations throughout the country had successfully combated or prevented convenience store robbery and to isolate those factors which make the convenience store an attractive location for robbery. The data revealed the following:

- 92% of all the robberies occurred when only one clerk was present in the store. The statistic was not particularly significant since very few stores employed more than one clerk during the 1981-1986 period. Instead, the attention-getting factor here was the number of situations in which the robber had waited for the store to “clear out” – presenting a single victim upon which to prey.
- 85% of the robberies occurred when no customers were present at the inception of the crime and there was not a second clerk in the store. The scenario which developed repeatedly within the data analysis was that a perspective robber would enter the store and browse up and down the aisles until any present customers would leave before attempting the robbery.
- 91% of the incidents, the victim encountered a visible weapon or a threat of a weapon. In an additional 5% of the incidents, the victim was physically assaulted with fists by the perpetrator. In 3% of the situations, verbal threats were involved.
- Prior the research sponsored by Gainesville, researchers from the Southland Corporation argued that the presence of two clerks in late night retail was not a deterrent, but possibly escalated the chances of violence. The researchers (Crow and Erickson) sponsored by Gainesville interviewed 241 inmates in the states of Texas, California, Illinois, Louisiana, and New Jersey State prison systems. These inmates were all convicted of robbery offenses and information was obtained from the robbers as to their preferences for target characteristics. Only 22% of the sample population had committed convenience store robbery. The inmates were presented with eleven factors that supposedly influenced their thinking with regard to committing a robbery. These factors included:
  - The amount of money
  - The escape route
  - Anonymity
  - Likelihood of interference
  - Active police patrols
  - Armed clerk
  - The number of clerks in the store
  - The number of customers in the store
  - Camera system in the store and video recording equipment
  - Alarm system in the store

After the initial research had been conducted by Crow and Erickson, some in the police department felt the information was representative of what they knew about robberies. Following another in depth analysis, the following was developed. More interviews with robbery perpetrators were conducted and the desirable characteristics of stores are listed in progressive order with the most desirable characteristic being easy access/getaway.

- Only one clerk on duty
- No other business nearby
- Accessible safe

- Only one car in front
- One counter
- Remote area and poor visibility
- Female clerk dimly lighted outside
- Obstructed windows
- Gas station

When ranking the undesirable characteristics, the robbers identified the following:

1. robber knows clerk
2. store is near robber's residence
3. lots of customers near
4. cameras in the store
5. Time release safe
6. In the middle of other businesses
7. Heavy traffic
8. Two male clerks
9. Raised counter
10. Two or more cars in front
11. Deep register counter

The analysis concluded that a robber does not want to the possibility of interference – therefore, looks for only one clerk, no other businesses nearby, one car in front, and remote area stores – and wishes to remain anonymous, which is the reason for noting the undesirable characteristics of not wanting to know clerk and not having store near the robber's residence. In the final analysis the following was noted:

1. If the store had any shift with only one clerk on duty, it had a higher propensity for being robbed.
2. If a store limited its time of operation, it had a lower propensity for being robbed.
3. If a store exhibited visible cameras, it had a lower propensity for being robbed.
4. If there were 24-hour stores nearby, there were less occurrences of robbery
5. If the store exhibited a time-release safe, there were less occurrences of robbery.

**Based on the findings, the following prevention methods were recommended and later passed into law:**

- **Two employees working and on site**
- **Removal of signs posted in windows to provide a clear and unobstructed view of the cash register and sales area**
- **Locate sales area so that the clerk and customer are fully visible from the street**
- **Post a conspicuous sign in the window which states:**
  - **The cash register has \$50 or less,**
  - **Employee has access to 50% or less available to the employee at all times, and**
  - **A drop safe time-release safe is maintained in the store and it is (either) bolted to the floor, installed in the floor, or weighs a minimum of 500 pounds;**
- **Parking lots are to be lit at an intensity of 2-foot candles per square foot, with a uniformity ratio of no more than 5 to 1;**
- **Install security camera of a type and number approved by the City Manager; and**
- **Provide mandatory robbery prevention training to all employees who work between the hours of 8 PM and 4 AM.**

**Schmallegger, Frank (2004) Criminology Today: An Integrative Introduction. Pearson Prentice Hall. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey**

“Robberies that occur in commercial settings, such as convenience stores, gas stations, and banks, are termed institutional robbery. Several research studies have found that institutional robberies may be prevented through environmental and policy changes. As Scott A Hendricks and his colleagues found in a study of convenience store robberies, “The robber chooses a target based on various situational crime prevention factors.” These factors include staffing, hours of operation, cash-handling policy, and characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood. For example, the researchers found that “the odds of convenience store robbery were twice as high for older neighborhoods than newer neighborhoods.” Many of the precautions that lower the risk of robbery are costly, however, and not all businesses can afford them. A Richard T. Wright and Scott H. Decker note, “this puts businesses located in high-crime neighborhoods in a no-win situation because their clientele frequently are too poor to bear increased prices to support crime prevention measures.” Additionally, if the business fails as a result of robberies, the community loses again because the exodus of businesses that are forced to relocate makes the community less viable. Most of the robbers interviewed by Wright and Decker in their ethnographic study of robbers who selected commercial targets generally selected liquor stores, taverns and pawnshops because of the large amount of cash available. They also targeted businesses with low levels of customer activity because they viewed customers as an unpredictable risk factor. The robbers interviewed as part of the Floyd Feeney’s research in California during the 1970’s reported very little planning overall, but those who engaged in commercial robbery were much more likely to report planning than those who engaged in personal robberies (60% compared with 30%).” (pg 309-310)

1. -----Original Message-----

From: Henri Berube [mailto:[h.berube@sympatico.ca](mailto:h.berube@sympatico.ca)]  
Sent: Tuesday, October 12, 2004 10:50 PM  
To: William A. Alford, CFE  
Cc: Phillip Banks; Betten, Mike  
Subject: Armed Robbery Silent Alarms

Personally I don't like the alarm to be activated until after the robbery to avoid the police arriving while the robbers are still in the premise and provoke a hostage taking!

This is what we preached when I worked for Peel Police and I am not aware of any other police services that preach the contrary.

I wrote my Master's Thesis on the alarm industry and did not deal with nor do I recall seeing anything on robbery related silent alarms.

Arguably, from a prevention standpoint the alarm could pose a deterrent effect if it increased the risk of apprehension however for that to happen the robbers would need to be aware the silent alarm exists in the first place and believe that it increased the risk of apprehension beyond that of other suitable targets. Allowing the robbers to know of the existence of the silent alarm sort of defeats its purpose and allows the robbers to plan for controlling it.

I have a book on robbery studies in England that may deal with this issue. It is at my University office and I will check it out later in the week.

Henri

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**Referenced Material**

(My referencing skills are very rusty)

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Convenience Store Robberies: An Intervention Strategy by the City of Gainesville (1985)

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