



SUNDAY SPECIAL

Nervous neighbours alarming their homes against invaders

Police believe alarms would have made difference in latest rash of home invasions

By Stuart Hunter
Staff Reporter

A home security system is a solid starting point to protect you from violent and potentially deadly home invasions.

The recent spate of vicious attacks has served as a jump-start for local alarm companies which are scrambling to add security for nervous neighbours.

Steve Millen, of Canada's largest home security provider, ADT, said his company has seen an increase in interest since the recent rash of home invasions. He added the interest is largely centred around the Whalley area, where the attacks have occurred.

"We are certainly getting inquiries from [older homeowners]," Millen said.

"A lot of people, now, when they are taking their system are taking convenience items like key fobs that can double as panic alarms."

A combination of a monitored alarm, physical deterrents such as bars on windows and eliminating items that make it easier for crooks to target your house, all add up to making your home feel like a secure castle.

And a canine counterpart isn't a bad idea, either.

"There are a very few good security companies and a lot of very bad security companies who do not understand security for residences and commercial properties," said security expert/company owner Joe Wilson.

"The good security companies educate clients to their true risks. The majority of bad companies simply go door to door and fear-monger clients into getting a free alarm so that they get a monthly monitoring fee."

While some security companies offer free systems, most like ADT, which has 80,000 customers in B.C., charge between \$200 and \$1,000 for a system, which can be a prohibitive amount for people on fixed incomes, like seniors. Some systems can cost up to \$5,000.

Then consumers are faced with an annual permit fee (about \$25) and a monthly monitoring fee usually between \$20 and \$30 for a 24-36 month contract.

The good news is homeowners who install alarms usually receive a 10- to 20-per-cent discount on home insurance.

Most systems, be it hard-wired or wireless, are monitored by the company and,



Nick Procylo — The Province

Joe Wilson's security company, Sonitrol, monitors alarms with video and audio.

if the alarm is activated, police are dispatched while the security company calls the home owner or contact persons to verify the alarm. Some alarms are also monitored via video or audio such as Wilson's firm Sonitrol.

With alarms coming up false in up to 90 per cent of instances, officers and neighbours often treat the alarm's siren or horn as nothing more than a glorified car alarm.

And homeowners in places like Surrey — where nine per cent of the 142,000 calls the RCMP detachment handled in 2001 were false alarms — face a \$75 fine for each bogus alarm.

"It is a very significant draw on our

resources," said Surrey RCMP Const. Tim Shields. "We would consider looking at a differential response."

Shields said he believes a home security system would have made a difference in the latest rash of home invasions. In four of the last five incidents, the suspect gained entry via a smashed window that wasn't alarmed, and the other home invasion involved a broken window in a door.

"Yes, we believe if there was an alarm that was activated, that would have been a very serious deterrent," Shields said. "Especially with a loud alarm, it's usually something that a suspect doesn't want to stay around for."

'A suspect doesn't want to stay around for a loud alarm'

— RCMP Const. Tim Shields

Before buying security

Looking for a home security system? Consider these tips:

- Get three written estimates and compare systems.
- Ask for proof that the company has applicable provincial and municipal licences. Check out the company's history.
- Find out how the system is monitored and who will do it. How are alarms verified (by phone, in person, video or audio)?
- Ask for a contract, detailed equipment list and instruction manual once the system is purchased.
- Insist on a written warranty on the equipment and labour.
- Check to see if the company carries errors and omissions insurance (\$1 million is the accepted minimum).
- Ask the company for references.
- Check that a professional installer is putting in your system and try to be home while it is being done.

Police in Victoria and Esquimalt are implementing a verified-alarm policy in April, which means officers will only attend an alarm call when it is verified as legitimate by the homeowner or a security company offering audio or video monitoring. Otherwise officers won't attend. Private guards are expected to pick up the slack.

And other forces, such as the RCMP, whose detachments set their own policy on the issue, and the Vancouver Police Department are watching intently how the program frees up manpower wasted on false alarms.

"We value alarms because they provide a huge sense of security for the public," said VPD Insp. Gord Coburn, adding that the Vancouver false alarm reduction plan has reduced the number of false alarms from 40,000 annually a few years ago to 17,000 last year.

But homeowners can also be proactive. Steel bars, laminated glass and door stops help shut criminals out. Upgrading locks on both doors and windows is another good idea that won't break the bank.

Your yard is another place you can make it harder for criminals to do their dirty work: Fence the yard, install motion-activated lights and take away items such as large rocks used to smash windows and gain entry. And never ever let a stranger into your home. Even if they claim they want to make an emergency call tell them you'll make it for them.

If you are ever in doubt, call 911.
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