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*Archival analyses reveal how privatization increases rather than decreases public spending.*

## The Effects of Privatization on Public Services: A Historical Evaluation Approach

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What is the evidence about the impact of privatization on public resources? Using home security systems as a case study and historical evaluation as a method, I reexamine the assumption that the growth of a private security industry has reduced demands of wealthier citizens on public police and the public purse. Evaluation evidence based on historical research casts serious doubt on whether the apparent creation of a parallel, private system is in fact resulting in reduced demand for public services.

The sections that follow illustrate how observers who view private security in opposition to public police do not account for areas like alarm response, where the private and public sectors have a cooperative, if ambivalent, relationship (Cunningham and Taylor, 1985). Security devices may symbolize privatization and withdrawal, yet alarm users' demand for service from public police in fact remains high. Thus, while privatization is described as a "retreat of the state" (Swann, 1988), evaluation evidence in this case reveals that the state does not retreat. The case of alarms offers a vivid account of the unexpected consequences of privatization.

This article has five sections. Section One presents the common wisdom on privatization from a prominent group of social observers. I call their perspectives "fortress narratives." Section Two cross-examines these fortress narratives. Evaluation questions from the history of technology help us to assess critically their claims about social change and begin the search for contrary evidence. Section Three uncovers several contradictions in the privatization of security. I juxtapose fortress narratives with new information from historical

sources to reveal a surprising mismatch between the consequences of privatization that these interpretations anticipate and the actual consequences documented by historical data. The argument that Americans are buying out of the common life in their choices for crime prevention can be turned on its head when reexamined in the light of this evidence. This close evaluation study of a single technology raises a set of broad questions for scholars and policymakers confronting policy challenges posed by privatization. In Section Four, I suggest how discrepancies between privatization in theory and in practice suggest the need for a different kind of conversation about privatization. This new conversation would place the growth of private security technologies and services, and their relation to the allocation of public policy resources, more prominently on a public policy agenda. Finally, the Conclusion calls for a serious national discussion grounded in empirical data to clarify relationships between public policy and the private security industry.

### **The Common Wisdom**

An entirely parallel, private system exists to provide schools, playgrounds, parks, and police protection for those who can pay, leaving the poor and less well-to-do dependent on the ever-reduced services of city and county governments. . . . In areas where citizens feel let down by local government, it is not surprising that those who can afford to turn to private service provision do [Blakely and Snyder, 1997a, p. 95].

A prominent group of American social observers has expressed urgent concern about the collective consequences of privatization. In articles and books with titles like “Secession of the Successful,” *The Revolt of the Elites*, *Democracy’s Discontent*, and *Fortress America*, social critics such as Robert Reich, Christopher Lasch, Michael Sandel, Edward Blakely, and Mary Gail Snyder cast critical eyes on privatization as a source of growing social inequality (Blakely and Snyder, 1997a, 1997b; Davis, 1990; Ellin, 1997; Flusty, 1994; Lasch, 1995; McKenzie, 1994; Reich, 1991; Sandel, 1996; Spitzer, 1987). Privatization has multiple meanings, and these observers emphasize three: privatization as the search for privacy—the loss of community; privatization as a constriction of public space—the privatization of the public sphere; and, most notably, privatization as a replacement of public services and community institutions with market alternatives—the creation of a parallel private system. In schooling, housing, health care, and policing, private options seem to present the affluent with a total retreat from the common life, with public and community institutions left to serve only the poor. As a result, both these institutions and American civil society are depleted.

Among the phenomena these commentaries treat is the growth of a private security industry. Private security officers patrolling U.S. residential neighborhoods and businesses have outnumbered public police since the early 1970s (Shearing, 1992; Kakalik and Wildhorn, 1972; Cunningham and Tay-

lor, 1985; Cunningham, 1990). Today a remarkable one-fifth of homes in the United States are equipped with electronic security systems (Pedersen-Pietersen, 1997). In these critical readings, private police and self-protective gadgetry represent a “fortressing” of America, transforming security from a social good produced through the informal surveillance of neighbors’ eyes on the street into a commodity that sets people apart. As affluent citizens choose private protection, Americans with fewer financial resources are left with bad service from poorly funded public police. Only a sustained national conversation about revitalizing community and renewing social obligation can begin to repair what these observers identify as the problems of privatization.

### Three Evaluation Questions

The carefully manicured lawns of the Westside [of Los Angeles] spread ominous little signs threatening “ARMED RESPONSE!” Wealthier neighborhoods in the canyons in Hillside scour behind walls guarded by gun-toting private police and state-of-the-art electronic surveillance systems. . . . This militarization of city life is increasingly visible everywhere in the built environment of the 1990s [Davis, 1992, p. 154].

Critics who investigate the collective social consequences of privatization make many compelling observations about contemporary life:

- Economic divisions are increasing.
- Rich and poor citizens have unequal access to security.
- Fear of crime is often out of proportion to actual victimization risk.
- Private security systems and services ironically may create fear in order to reduce it.
- Privatized public spaces and services have important implications for civic life.

So what could be wrong with these conventional interpretations?

Evaluation using historical research is well suited to question common wisdom. Both the skepticism historians bring to accounts of social change over time and the open-ended nature of historical and archival research lend themselves to allow for unexpected findings. I begin the search for contrary evidence by cross-examining existing research, using three basic questions that historians of technology often ask. It is important to understand that when historians of technology use the word *technology*, we refer not only to individual devices but also to techniques (such as urban planning) and systems (such as the electrical grid).

- *Does the argument make claims about the role of a technology in social progress or its role in cultural decline?* One of the most frequently repeated stories about technology tells how a given device or technological system

has served as an engine of positive or negative social change (Douglas, 1986; Fischer, 1992; Marvin, 1987; Rheingold, 1993). A common variant is that technology connects us, or separates us, linking observations about technology to an issue that has captured American interest since de Tocqueville: the tension between individualism and isolation versus community and civic engagement (Adorno, 1934, quoted in Levin, 1990; Hayden, 1984; Lynd and Lynd, 1956; Oldenburg, 1989; Postman, 1992; Putnam, 1996; Slater, 1970; Sorkin, 1992). These themes reappear and intersect in fortress narratives, which characterize home security systems as technological extensions of wealthy citizens' desire for isolation and exclusion.

Historians who study the social dimensions of technological change learn quickly to become skeptical about accounts of a technology's role in such unidirectional social change. Technologies are complex artifacts and are not independent of the society in which they are created (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch, 1987; MacKenzie and Wacjman, 1985;). A device's array of interactions with different individuals and groups makes it difficult for any particular technology to have monolithic or predictable effects (Fischer, 1992; Wajcman, 1991). The reappearance of such stock stories here, explaining home security technology as exemplifying the decline of community and civil society, presents a first clue that the situation may be more complicated. Any claims of technology's universal social effects—positive or negative—deserve scrutiny, suggesting the need to look for evidence that may cut in another direction.

Contemporary critics recognize that the desire for security, and unequal protection, is not new. Wealthy citizens have long fenced their property and hired doormen or guards. Private policing predates state responsibility for police service, as the title of Les Johnston's *The Rebirth of Private Policing* (1991) reminds us. What these critics suggest is new, and sinister, about privatizing security is privatization itself. We might then look for evidence showing that much of what is considered fortressing in fact results from a more democratic society, where a wider variety of citizens now believe that they have a right to walk down the streets of more affluent neighborhoods. Such free movement was not an option in earlier periods. According to this view, it is not because of an increasing segregation of society but precisely because it is much more integrated that alarm systems have become so common. What electronic alarms allow is a more open, public face to the world.

- *Does the argument's characterization of a technology look at how that technology is used?* In their focus on isolation and the decline of civil society, narratives about "fortress America" fall into the interpretive category that Raymond Williams (1975) calls "symptomatic approaches." These approaches read technologies as expressing a prevailing view of society; here we find that observers see home security systems alongside privatization's catchall list of developments with important social and political effects. Yet as an interpretive genre, symptomatic approaches often reveal less about a technology and more about the staying power of "characteristic modes of explanation" (Schudson, 1984, p. 135) as scholars invest objects with mean-

ings independent of any actual use. Designers' and even users' intentions for technology, while a vivid record of individual hopes, do not accurately predict or portray the actual effects of a device's use over time.

Home security systems encompass an array of options. For example, security monitoring may originate from a local police switchboard or a national center several states away. Private security services may or may not have branch offices with alarm runners near a subscriber's home. That people may act as central components in making technological systems function (Hughes, 1983) is an important detail here, for home security systems depend on a network including technology, the private security industry, neighbors, and public police. To what extent do these different permutations have the same effects?

The stories we tell about technology are only as good as the evidence we gather, and research in the history of technology suggests that evaluators must look at the use of a technology within a broad context and over time to understand its effects. Short-term modes of thinking risk overlooking the long-term contradictions that some technologies generate (Fischer, 1992; Forrester, 1969; Slater, 1970; Tenner, 1996). A technology's effects may differ by user group or place of use. Other technologies of the same era may exert opposing effects (Fischer, 1992). And people may welcome one aspect of a technology while resisting another. These possibilities suggest that further research about use is needed to assess whether and to what extent different kinds of private security systems share common effects.

- *What are they really talking about?* This question flows directly from the most basic evaluation question that historians bring to any set of sources: Who are the authors? How authors explain change over time, and whether they construct this change as problematic, often reveals more about how they see society than about any specific empirical social reality (Gusfield, 1981; Schudson, 1984). According to this view, evaluators must pay careful attention to whether observations about phenomena such as the privatization of security are in fact political arguments about something else.

Looking at fortress narratives' observations about technology in the light of the first two evaluation questions, it becomes increasingly clear that security technology itself is not so central to the argument about the collective consequences of privatization. In fact, private security is rarely the singular focus in these jeremiads, but rather is presented as merely one example of a broader phenomenon that includes the privatization of schools, public space, media, health care, and housing. Both of these observations offer clues suggesting that criticisms of privatized security are less commentaries on the security industry and more commentaries on what these observers believe has gone wrong with American society.

At the heart of most fortress narratives is a negative interpretation of the impact of reduced social services and worries about consequences that accompany an increased role for the market. These trends are said to have effects on security, citizenship, and, ultimately, democracy. According to this view, civic life has been corrupted by the market as a preoccupation with

individual “rights,” including individuals’ right to spend, has superseded social obligation, and the only practice of citizenship is through the market (Lasch, 1995; Glendon, 1991). Such observations are extensions of the critique of American individualism leveled by de Tocqueville (1956), who wrote that individualism, expressed through isolation, might lead to the downfall of public life. Understanding how private security serves as a placeholder for a broader argument about the commodification of American life, important questions emerge. Do the consequences of privatization in institutions from schooling to media to policing follow the same predictable path? Where is it possible to find concrete data that really tell us about how privatization works?

Each of the three questions suggests new directions for evaluation based on gathering additional evidence. A rich stock of data on home security systems across the past three decades is contained in the written record. Mainstream newspapers and magazines, specialist publications such as *Police Chief*, think tank reports on the alarm industry from the RAND and Hallcrest Corporation, local municipal codes from Illinois to Hawaii, police data on alarm response, and archival records of home security equipment testing at Consumers’ Research Incorporated provide the foundation for my alternative evaluation here of the effects of home security systems.

Contradictions emerge between widely accepted narratives about home security technology and the ways its actual implementation and use affect peoples’ lives. By focusing on alarms’ technical details, the demands that alarms place on public police, and how existing public policies treat the devices, none of which figures prominently in fortress narratives, I consider how, in constructing fortress America as a problem of privatization, these accounts ignore other important consequences.

## The Findings That Surprise

Too often, alarm users and the alarm industry expect the police to be merely an extension of an electronic security system functioning as a piece of equipment [Holcomb, 1977, p. 68].

There are important reasons to be concerned about the effects of the home security systems used in an estimated 20 percent of American households. Yet these are not the same reasons suggested by accounts of privatization and the fortressing of America. My research on the use of home security technology since the late 1960s has uncovered some contradictions in the privatization of security. The argument that affluent citizens are buying out of the common life can be turned on its head to reveal some surprising consequences when we remember three details about alarm use.

First, home security systems, which encompass a range of devices, are not merely the province of wealthy Americans. Archival records of pricing

from Consumers' Research Incorporated Archives and more recent issues of publications such as *Consumer Reports* reveal devices priced for a broad middle class of consumers, as well as a large group of alarm hobbyists (Consumers' Research Incorporated Archives; "Alert," 1990; "Burglar Alarms," 1994; "Home Security Test," 1998; Gorman, 1979). Second, on account of their origins in military sensor technology, systems of all types are highly prone to malfunction: an astonishing 95 percent of alarm activations are false alarms, unchanged over the past three decades. Third, while the private purchase of home security technology may suggest an intention to "fortress," in practice it is public police who must ultimately respond to these apparently privatized forms of security. This police time is paid for by all taxpayers, rich and poor (Daughtry, 1993; Kleinknecht and George, 1988; Sweeney, 1983).

- *A first surprise: The number of police hours spent responding to alarms is high.* As more Americans have purchased home security systems, the number of police hours spent responding to false alarms has increased. The consequences for police of this high false alarm rate have been astounding, and an array of findings in the historical evaluation literature quantify these consequences. Six examples illustrate:

In Beverly Hills, California, a survey of the last three months of 1970 revealed that 99.4 percent of the over 1,000 alarm calls to which police responded were false alarms (Kakalik and Wildhorn, 1977).

In 1981, the New York City Police Department responded to 400,000 alarm calls, of which 98 percent were false. This took up 15 percent of radio car runs in that city (Cunningham and Taylor, 1985).

In 1982, the Houston Police Department responded to 78,562 false alarms, billing 15 percent of police time at a cost of \$7 million (Cunningham and Taylor, 1985).

In 1992, Dallas police estimated their annual cost of servicing false alarms at \$6.3 million: "Answering those 147,010 calls [one-fifth of all calls to police] occupied the equivalent of 80 full-time police officers working the whole year" (Jacobson, 1993, p. 1A). Dallas's police department organized an entire alarm unit to deal with this task.

According to 1996 data, low crime and high alarm use created conditions whereby "in some neighborhoods, almost half of all police calls were to check burglar alarms," including 117 responses to calls from a single address (Bartels, 1996, p. 4A).

In the 1990s, police across the United States responded to more than 13.7 million alarms per year, at a 98 percent false alarm rate (Blackstone and Hakim, 1996).

Accounts of fortress America emphasize the irony that security devices increase fear among some users. (Trade publications from the 1970s at the Consumers' Research Incorporated Archive are filled with industry discussions

of how to create fear in order to sell consumers on security technology.) Perhaps more ironic is that excessive false positives subverted a central motivation for purchasing an alarm in the first place. As early as 1971, police reported great frustration:

In responding to these alarms, police expend valuable resources which could be better utilized elsewhere. Police officer alertness and interest may become dulled after investigating repeated false alarms. Officers and citizens are subjected to the threat of traffic accidents during fast vehicular response to false alarms. Or, as is done in some cities, police may reduce the priority of alarm responses and in busy periods may arrive too late to apprehend the burglar [Kakalik and Wildhorn, 1977, p. 417].

An early requirement that “an alarm means at least two police units responding at emergency speeds” did not characterize the situation for long (Holcomb, 1977, p. 68). Police cars speeding to an apparent crime scene posed potential public hazards. In the case of false alarms, ten to twenty minutes spent checking a house for intruders took time away from responding to actual crimes in progress.

- *A second surprise: The trend toward remote monitoring has not resulted in a “revolt of the elites against the constraints of time and place” (Lasch, 1995); rather, it has resulted in increased calls for service from public police.* In the 1970s, when alarm ownership was at only 2 percent (Greer, 1991) and many systems connected directly to police switchboards, growth in ownership alongside persistent false alarms catalyzed debates about privatizing alarm response. Historical sources document a vigorous debate about the advantages and disadvantages of hiring private companies that lack police powers. Police relished pointing out why they were better and more effective than the private companies, although in many cases they were unwilling providers of residential security services. (Compare, for example, Boughton, 1976; Cunningham and Taylor, 1985; Gordon, 1988; Gribbin, 1972; Holcomb, 1977; Metias, n.d.; “Electronic Alarms,” 1973; Usher, 1992; Zethraus, 1998).

Replacing direct connections to police with central station services, a trend in the 1970s and 1980s, did not resolve the problem. The theoretical model of privatization as increasing efficiency, or at the very least reducing the drain on police resources through intervention, did not work well in practice. Crime is a local phenomenon, so as one guide observed, a national service might not provide the best protection: “Hooking a silent alarm into a security service is not cheap, and unless the security service has an office nearby it may be an exercise in futility. Being connected to a service where the agents have to drive twenty miles to answer an alarm isn’t going to catch many burglars” (Keogh and Koster, 1977, p. 99).

Police saved some time because such arrangements provided some “false-alarm screening, especially during storms. Besides, they eliminate the



often frustrating police hunt for someone to reset the sounding alarm” (Gribben, 1972, p. 9). Yet central stations located in other states demanded local police response if a household could not confirm a signal was false. Even companies that sent local alarm runners or private security officers to reset alarms would often simultaneously call in police backup.

Historical evidence reveals how cooperation between local police and private security organizations has played a critical role in the home security system. The public-private partnership undergirding this system assumed greater importance as technological developments made remote monitoring increasingly common (Greer, 1991). With reductions in the cost of long-distance lines and the development of two-way communications, regional and even national private monitoring centers emerged in the 1980s. The first such super-central station, the National Alarm Computer Center (NACC), in Irvine, California, opened in 1978. The NACC contracts with multiple alarm companies and is the largest monitoring facility in the United States. It is not unusual now for an emergency call to be routed through another state, and Kornheiser (1998) describes the frustrations of a Maryland homeowner whose alarm signal is routed through Kansas City.

Private monitoring operating from such a distant station has had to contact alarm subscribers’ local police if an alarm was triggered. Without police following up such calls, the technological sophistication of a private service has not guaranteed protection beyond a deterrent effect. The most expensive services might dispatch armed alarm runners or private security officers to hold suspects, but these agents need police to make the final arrest. Indeed, the suggestion that private companies operate a parallel private system overlooks an important fact: private security officers’ power of arrest. With only a few exceptions, a private security officer employed by Guardsmark or Westec has the same power of arrest as any other private citizen or neighborhood patrol. Hiring private officers does not eliminate the ultimate need for police backup as the final step in the public-private system. Thus, the use of private security was in essence a contract with public police for increased service. Privatization in theory is turned on its head in actual practice.

- *A third surprise: Local ordinances regulate private devices to support continuing police response, yet they do so without compelling evidence that such ordinances achieve their goals.* Depictions of a parallel private system ignore the places where private actions and public policies intersect. As partial privatization of alarm services did not significantly reduce burdens on public police, local officials turned to alarm ordinances as a way to recoup some of the public costs. Across the United States, an array of local ordinances increasingly undertook to regulate the use of private devices—both the minority still directly connected to police and the majority monitored by private companies. These include permits for alarm use, fees for false alarms that summon police, and a variety of licensing standards and rules for alarm businesses and private security officers. Geographical variation among both

technologies and ordinances complicates any simple story of alarms' effects. Yet one constant is the role that local government plays in controlling the use of these devices and related services.

Individual municipalities have taken different positions as to whether alarm monitoring should be a public or private responsibility. Most categorize police responses to alarms actually triggered by intruders as a public service. Yet they classify response to false alarms as a private service, since it detracted from other police duties (Longmont, Colorado, 1993). Ordinances passed across the country articulated this distinction as they wrote costs into law. In some areas, with the authority of municipal code behind them, police have met overactive systems and unpaid fines with the penalty of low-priority response, nonresponse, or permit revocation.

For example, in the 1970s, an ordinance in Englewood, New Jersey (where police still offered direct services), allowed owners three false positives per year. This was followed by a fifteen-dollar fine, then a twenty-five-dollar fine, and finally, at the sixth fine, the alarm would be disconnected from the police board (Phalon, 1973). Los Angeles City Council's 1973 alarm ordinance revoked permits after four false alarms within any four-week period (Shepard, 1977). In South Polk County, Florida, an ordinance from 1997 grants permit holders two "free" false alarms. The third false alarm nets a fifty-dollar fine, increasing each time by twenty-five dollars, to a maximum of five hundred dollars (Samoliski, 1998). In Rochester, Minnesota, an ordinance specifically discussing "Failure to Pay Assessments" explains how "police may reduce the priority of the police response to Alarm Dispatch Requests at their Alarm Site until such payment has been made" (Rochester, Minnesota, 1997).

These fines and threats achieved the desired results in some places, yet overall results were mixed. In Multnomah County, Oregon, a false alarm ordinance from 1975 reduced false alarms by 47.3 percent by 1977 (Watts, 1977). In contrast, Dallas's permit system, in effect since 1982, seemed ineffective given that in 1995, "Police studies show that half of all false alarms originate from unregistered systems. In other words, police spend a lot of time responding to alarms that are in violation of a city ordinance" ("False Alarms," 1995, p. 22A).

Idiosyncratic differences across municipalities illustrate how local politicians iteratively retooled local regulations to accommodate them rather than ban malfunctioning alarms. For example, in Missouri, the Blue Springs Police grandfathered subscribers already connected to the police department but, beginning in 1992, forced new customers to find private alternatives (Blue Springs, Missouri, 1992). Such was the cooperative, if ambivalent, relationship between public and private sectors.

In some sense, many calls for service to public police—to rescue a cat, to send an ambulance—are private uses of public resources. What is distinct about alarms is that a majority of alarm calls are false positives. Police have found themselves in a catch-22: servicing false alarms wastes police time,

yet the opposite response—inaction—can have dire consequences. In 1992 in Riverside, California, a woman was raped and beaten in her home. The intruder set off her alarm, but police did not respond because she had not paid the permit fee (“Cops Ignore Alarm,” 1992). Riverside rescinded its nonresponse policy, although similar laws remain in city codes and municipal ordinances in many communities across the United States. This extreme incident highlights the challenge that private alarm use poses to public police. Although 95 to 98 percent of activations might be false, what about the 3 to 5 percent of alarms actually triggered by intruders?

### **Consequences of the Evaluation Findings**

With more than 3 million burglaries around the country every year resulting in losses exceeding \$2 billion, you’d expect the police to be falling all over themselves to praise burglar-alarm systems. But ask patrol officers about their value as a crime prevention tool and the clamor or abuse is likely to be deafening [Sharpe, 1981, p. 1].

The archival evaluation offered here reveals how questions and methods from the history of technology can usefully inform contemporary policy debates. Fortress narratives’ claims about community and democracy in decline, or the “secession of the successful,” may perhaps characterize America today. Yet in the case of security, we see from historical evaluations that such claims, linked to privatization, oversimplify complex institutional relationships between private and public sector groups, highly influenced by the limitations of alarm technologies. While fortress accounts favor a national conversation about privatization that emphasizes renewing civic obligation, the findings presented here suggest instead that we begin a conversation that reevaluates current policies guiding the provision of public police services to alarm owners.

The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, a now-defunct federal agency, briefly launched the private security industry and the topic of alarm use into the public eye in the 1970s, a time when public police were just beginning to comprehend the scope of the burgeoning industry and its potential impact. At that time, only 2 percent of residences had outfitted themselves with security systems (Greer, 1991). Central monitoring services were far more likely to be located near subscribers’ homes. Consequences for law enforcement of a high false-alarm rate were real, but far less significant than with the current 20 percent usage rate and a standard of remote monitoring.

The consequences of private individuals’ choices to continue using devices that malfunction so often demand further study. Ultimately the technological imperfections shift costs to the public sector. There is no reason to think that individual households and consumers will change their behavior if current public policies persist. Alarm permits and occasional

fines for overexcitable alarms are small prices to pay for access to essentially private services from public police. In the case of private schools, there may be redistributive financial benefits to public bodies when families pay taxes for public services they are not using. But policing differs from schooling because reliance on its private counterpart does not negate reliance on the public version. If the cost to society of an individual household's choice to maintain a security system does not reflect a more accurate accounting of police response to false alarms, as well as the lost access to police services for others, then individuals who choose private systems will continue their substantial call on public resources.

## **Conclusion**

Problems posed by alarm technologies, alongside the enormous growth of a private security industry, offer public police another opportunity to reevaluate the services they now provide. A serious national discussion grounded in empirical data would do much to clarify relationships between public police and the private security industry. The most extreme consequence of such a reevaluation would be a call for total privatization of some services like alarm response. Yet realistically, policy decisions are unlikely to be homogeneous or national, since individual neighborhoods continue to have different law enforcement needs.

For example, in cities, where the majority of crimes take place, inequalities resulting from the use of alarms are most readily apparent. Police response to false alarms in middle-class and affluent urban neighborhoods reduces police presence in areas experiencing more violent crime. By contrast, in affluent suburbs, where public law enforcement serves a more homogeneous population, police may encourage the use of alarms in the absence of other pressing service needs. In these areas, a call for service that is a false alarm is less likely to draw resources away from other populations.

How, given local differences, do we evaluate core public services that police must offer, and which should be privatized? If contracting out implies that only those who can afford to pay for certain kinds of protection get that service, then at what level should society fund police so that they offer similar services to those who cannot afford it? These questions have been part of vigorous policy debates about privatization in schooling and health care. Yet they are hard to find on the agenda in public policy discussions of policing.

The language of fortress America, and its reference to broad issues of social justice, remains a powerful rhetorical strategy to describe emerging forms of social inequality. Yet fortress accounts ignore empirical evaluation data attesting to how the inefficiencies of privatization exert their effects. In the case of home security systems, these inefficiencies have created an unexpected form of inequality: home security devices have become a significant constituent of how police spend their time, and local public policies sup-

port a significant allocation of resources by police to service these imperfect technological devices.

The case of home security offers a compelling example of the value of historical evaluation research for contemporary public policy. Historical methods make it possible to process a massive amount of data from a broad set of sources, picking up examples that run counter to accepted interpretations. The unexpected gap between privatization in theory and in implementation identified here raises practical issues for policymakers confronting privatization beyond security. As we seek to balance public needs and fairness with the collective consequences of privatization, further historical evaluations will deepen our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

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