Performance of Dual Photoelectric/Ionization Smoke Alarms in Full-Scale Fire Tests

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Abstract

Data from two full-scale residential smoke alarm fire test series were analyzed to estimate the performance of dual sensor photoelectric/ionization alarms as compared to co-located individual photoelectric and ionization alarms. Dual alarms and aggregated photoelectric and ionization alarm responses were used to estimate dual alarm performance. It was observed that dual alarms with equivalent or higher sensitivity settings performed better than individual photoelectric or ionization alarms over a range of flaming and smoldering fire scenarios. In one test series, dual alarms activated 539 s faster than ionization alarms and 79 s faster than photoelectric alarms on average. In another test series, individual alarm sensor outputs were calibrated against a reference smoke source in terms of light obscuration over a path length (percent smoke obscuration per unit length) so that alarm thresholds could be defined by the sensor outputs. In that test series, dual alarms, with individual sensor sensitivities equal to their counterpart alarm sensitivities, activated 261 s faster on average than ionization alarms (with sensitivity settings of 4.3 %/m smoke obscuration for the ionization sensors) and 35 s faster on average than the photoelectric alarms (with sensitivity settings of 6.6 %/m, for the photoelectric sensors.) In cases where an ionization sensor was the first to reach the alarm threshold, the dual alarm activated 67 s faster on average than the photoelectric alarm. While in cases were a photoelectric sensor was the first to reach the alarm threshold, the dual alarm activated 523 s faster on average than the ionization alarm. Over a range of ionization sensor settings examined, dual alarm response was insensitive to the ionization sensor setting for initially smoldering fires and fires with the bedroom door closed, while dual alarm response to the kitchen fires was very sensitive to the ionization sensor setting. Tests conducted in the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) fire emulator/detector evaluator showed that the ionization sensors in off-the-shelf ionization alarms and dual alarms span a range of sensitivity settings. While there appears to be no consensus on sensitivity setting for ionization sensors, it may be desirable to tailor sensor sensitivities in dual alarms for specific applications, such as near kitchens where reducing nuisance alarms may be a goal, or in bedrooms where higher smoke sensitivity may be a goal.

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Introduction

The performance of ionization and photoelectric smoke alarms in various fire scenarios has been the subject of several research studies over the past 30+ years. Studies that have investigated flaming and smoldering fire scenarios have observed that in general, ionization smoke alarms sense flaming fires sooner than photoelectric smoke alarms, while photoelectric smoke alarms sense smoldering fires typically much sooner than ionization alarms [1-5]. These observations suggest that in order to achieve a higher level of performance from either ionization or photoelectric alarms, a mix of these technologies is a solution. Several organizations have taken the position that such a mix provides a greater level of fire safety since the benefits of each technology is realized. Smoke alarms that possess both photoelectric and ionization-type sensors have been available to consumers for residential applications in the US for over 10 years. They are currently available as a battery powered stand-alone unit, and as a mains-powered interconnected alarm with battery backup power from multiple manufacturers. The convenience and aesthetics of a dual alarm as opposed to separate photoelectric and ionization alarms are motivations for consumer acceptance.

The UL Standard 217, "*Single and Multiple Station Smoke Alarms*" allows for dual sensor alarms so long as the each sensor is primarily a smoke sensor and the design meets the Standard [6]. The alarm logic is an {OR}-type such that the alarm is activated if either the photoelectric sensor or ionization sensor alarm threshold is met. The individual sensor sensitivities are not tested separately. Therefore, manufacturers have the freedom to set each sensor's sensitivity separately. Since an individual sensor can be set to meet all current sensitivity standards, it is not obvious what overall benefit is achieved from a dual alarm with an additional sensor technology that could be more or less sensitive than what would be found in a standalone unit employing such a sensor. Additionally, another potential benefit of a dual sensor alarm may be realized by adjusting each sensor's alarm threshold to reduce nuisance alarms. Thus, the sensitivity of each sensor factors into the overall performance of a dual alarm.

This paper examines data from two full-scale smoke alarm fire tests to provide some insight into the performance of dual photoelectric/ionization alarms as compared to individual photoelectric or ionization alarms. The two test series are the NIST home smoke alarm tests [4] and the National Research Council (NRC) Canada home smoke alarm tests [5]. Both test series had co-located photoelectric, ionization and dual sensor alarm technologies in various locations of the test homes. The NRC Canada study used off-the-shelf smoke alarms. The NIST study used smoke alarms that were modified to provide a continuous voltage signal. The signal from each of these alarms was calibrated at NIST to known smoke obscuration and reference measuring ionization chamber (MIC) levels. Thus, equivalent alarm thresholds can be specified by determining the required signal to reach a threshold. Therefore, the effect of sensor sensitivity levels on the dual sensor detection performance can be estimated with the NIST data. The analysis presented below focuses on a single aspect of alarm performance: the time to alarm during exposure to various fire smokes. It is a relative comparison applicable to four alarm strategies employed at a given location: an ionization alarm, a photoelectric alarm, ionization and photoelectric alarms, and a dual photoelectric/ ionization alarm. No consideration was made to account for tenability conditions anywhere in the homes, nor any egress scenarios. Furthermore, nuisance alarm susceptibilities that may factor into the overall alarm performance were not considered. A brief description of each test series and the data is given below, followed by analysis of the test data, results from sensitivity tests of ionization sensors, and conclusions.

Data Sources

The NRC Canada test series in Kemano, British Columbia consisted of 13 tests using small fire sources in a single-story and two-story home. Smoldering fires in living rooms and bedrooms were examined. Fuels including wood, paper, polyurethane foam, cotton flannel, and upholstered furniture sections were ignited with an electric heating element. One test was conducted in a kitchen using vegetable cooking oil as the fuel. Off-the-shelf residential ULC listed smoke-alarms, conforming to CAN/ULC-S531-M87, *"Standard for Smoke-Alarm*s" [7] were used; alarms activated at their preset sensitivity. Photoelectric, ionization, and dual alarms were located on the ceiling in a linear or triangular pattern with a separation distance measured from the center of alarms of approximately 30 cm. Sets of alarms were located in bedrooms, living rooms, corridors, foyers, and at the top and bottom of stairs. There were 13 tests conducted and 56 instances of co-located alarms. Recorded alarm times are provided in the report appendix [5].

The NIST home smoke alarm tests were conducted during 2001-2002, and consisted of 24 tests performed in a manufactured home placed inside the NIST large fire laboratory and 6 tests performed in a two-story house in Kinston, North Carolina that was slated for demolition [4]. The fire sources were initially smoldering and flaming upholstered chairs in living rooms, initially smoldering and flaming mattresses in bedrooms and a cooking oil fire in the kitchens. There were 30 tests conducted and a total of 92 instances of co-located alarms.

The data collected included analog voltage signals from a number of smoke alarms. Co-located alarms were confined to a 0.50 m by 0.25 m area of the ceiling. Computed alarm times were provided for all alarms in Appendix A of the NIST report [4]. The individual smoke sensors were calibrated to smoke obscuration levels (reported as a percentage of light obscured per unit length) in the NIST fire emulator/detector evaluator using smoldering cotton wick. The NIST tabulated results include alarm times for high, middle and low sensitivity settings of 2.6 %/m, 4.3 %/m, and 5.9 %/m for ionization sensors, and 3.3 %/m, 6.6 %/m, and 9.8 %/m for photoelectric sensors. The alarm analysis conducted in the report only considered the middle sensor sensitivity settings for photoelectric, ionization, and dual alarms.

In the analysis of the NIST data, alarm times from co-located sensors were averaged for both photoelectric and ionization sensors at specified sensitivities. It was possible to have two photoelectric sensors and three ionization sensors co-located from one photoelectric alarm, two ionization alarms, and one dual alarm. Thus at each location, representative photoelectric, ionization, and dual alarm times were computed. The photoelectric sensor sensitivity was fixed at 6.6 %/m for both the photoelectric and dual alarms. This sensitivity setting was found to be consistent with measured sensitivities of off-the-shelf photoelectric alarms used in the NIST study [4]. All three ionization alarm sensitivities were considered for the ionization and dual alarms to provide results for a range of ionization sensor sensitivity settings. The rationale for examining ionization sensor sensitivities related to dual alarm performance is based on the expectation of the desire to optimize dual alarm sensitivity with respect to smoke detection and nuisance alarm reduction. Optimization of the photoelectric sensor sensitivity in a dual alarm should also be considered in an optimum design. However, in this analysis, a comparison of the middle sensitivity setting results for photoelectric, ionization, and dual alarms is consistent with the sensitivity settings used in the NIST report analysis.

Alarm Time Analysis

The NRC Canada test series used fire sources that all started out as smoldering fires, with most transitioning to flaming at some time during each test. Alarm sensitivities were not measured prior to testing, thus there is no information on relative sensitivity between ionization, photoelectric or dual alarms. There were 54 instances where a set of alarms were co-located during the 13 individual tests. The average alarm time and standard deviation (SD) for each type of alarm are given in Table 1. The dual alarm responded 616 s faster on average than the ionization alarm, and 72 s faster on average than the photoelectric alarm.

Alarm Type	Average Alarm Time (s)	Standard Deviation (SD) (s)
Ionization Alarm	1205	1102
Photoelectric Alarm	666	537
Dual Alarm	587	450

Table 1. Average alarm times for NRC Canada test series [5]. All were initially smoldering fires.

Figures 1-3 show the distributions of ionization, photoelectric, and dual alarm times in histograms with the median and mean alarm times indicated. These particular distributions arise in part from the variation of the fire sources and locations of the alarms.

Since individual sensor sensitivities were not known, an estimate of which ionization and photoelectric sensor was more sensitive was made (either the ionization alarm or the ionization sensor in the dual alarm, and either the photoelectric alarm or the photoelectric sensor in the dual alarm.) To make this judgment, the following logic was considered. Between the ionization and photoelectric alarm, the ionization alarm was the first to respond in 18 of the 54 instances, responding 83 s faster on average than the photoelectric alarms. Considering those 18 instances, the dual alarm responded first in 17 of those instances, and responded 81 s faster on average than the ionization alarm (SD = 158 s), with a median response 19 s faster. Figure 4 is a scatter plot of the difference for each

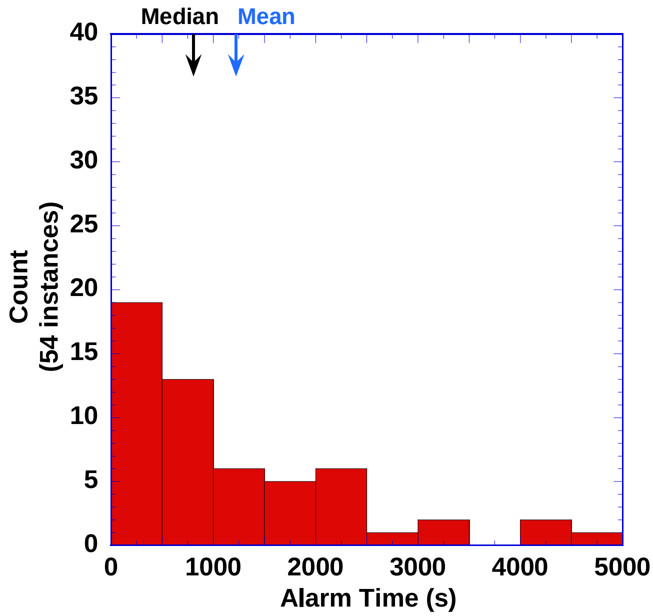

Figure 1. Histogram of NRC Canada co-located ionization alarm times.

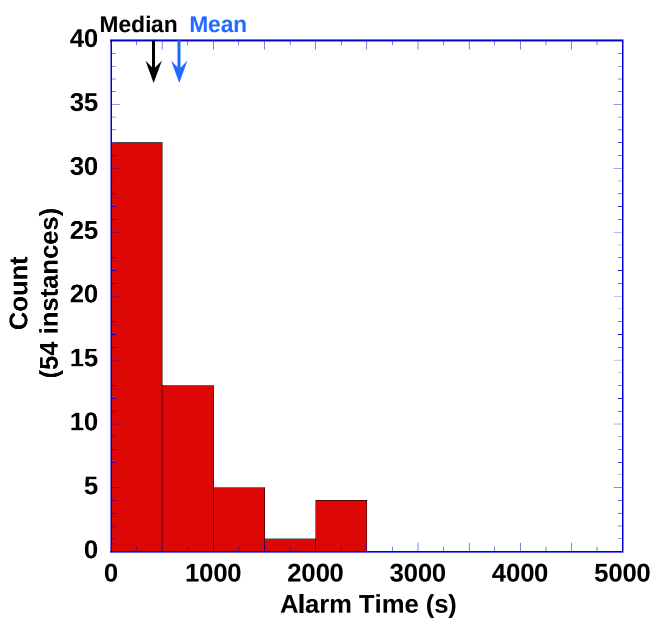

Figure 2. Histogram of NRC Canada co-located photoelectric alarm times.

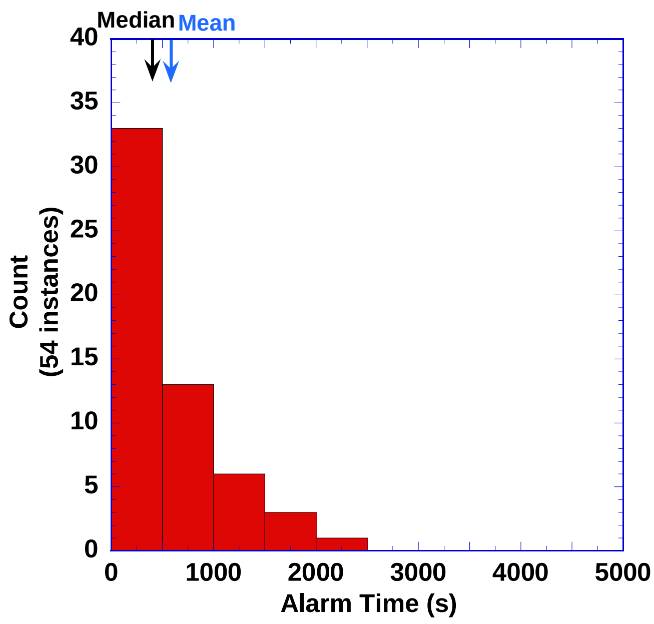

Figure 3. Histogram of NRC Canada co-located dual alarm times.

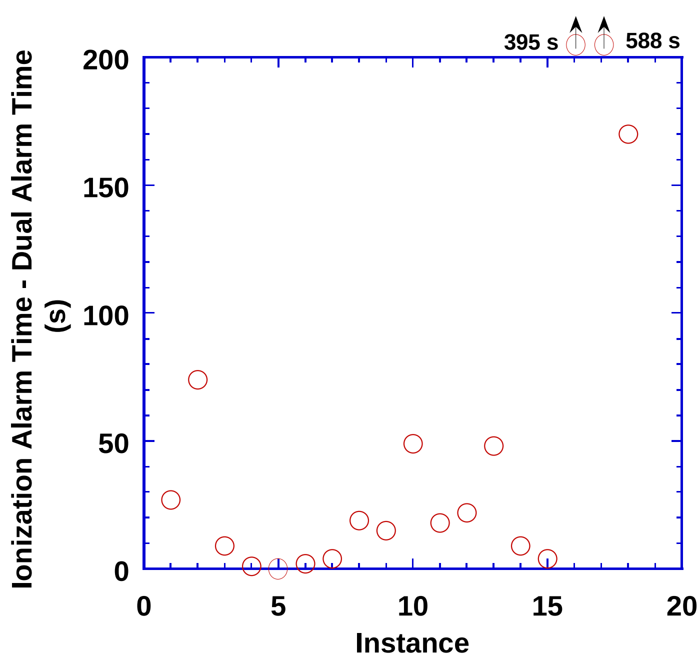

Figure 4. The difference between the ionization alarm time and the dual alarm time for co-located alarms when the ionization alarm was the first to respond in the NRC

Canada tests. Two instances at 395 s and 588 s that lie outside the y-axis range are indicated by arrows.

instance. Thus, if the photoelectric alarm and dual alarm photoelectric sensor had equivalent sensitivities, then one can conclude that the ionization sensor in the dual alarm was more sensitive than the sensor in the ionization alarm.

In the remaining 36 instances, the photoelectric alarm responded 874 s faster on average than the ionization alarm. The dual alarm responded first in 21 of the 36 instances, responding 26 s faster on average than the photoelectric alarm (SD = 161 s) with a median response 6 s faster. Figure 5 is a scatter plot of the difference for each instance. If the extreme instance is removed (where the dual alarm responded 740 s faster), the average drops to 6 s (SD = 106 s) with a median of 5 s. These statistics lead to the conclusion that the dual photoelectric sensor and the photoelectric alarm had nominally the same alarm sensitivity settings, and conversely, the ionization sensor in the dual alarm was more sensitive than the ionization alarm sensor. Also, one can conclude that some of the benefit of the dual alarm used in this study can be attributed to a more sensitive ionization sensor, compared to the stand-alone ionization alarm.

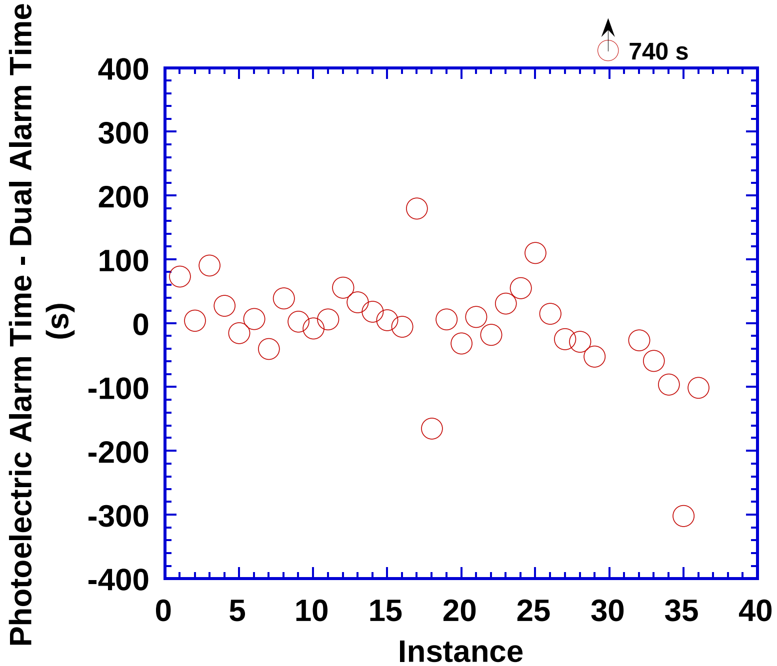

Figure 5. The difference between the photoelectric alarm time and the dual alarm time when the photoelectric alarm was the first to respond in the NRC Canada tests. One instance at 740 s that lies outside the y-axis range is indicated by an arrow.

The NIST test series allowed for more detailed analysis due to the adjustable alarm sensitivities. In addition, the NIST test series also included initially flaming and initially smoldering fire sources, so the performance in different fire scenarios could be assessed.

The sensor sensitivity combinations examined were as follows. The middle sensitivity setting for photoelectric alarms specified in the NIST report (6.6 %/m) was used for the individual photoelectric alarms and for the photoelectric sensor in the dual alarm configurations. While all three ionization sensitivity settings specified in the NIST report (2.6%/m, 4.3 %/m, and 5.9 %/m) were used for both ionization alarms and dual alarm configurations. Therefore, a comparison was made between the photoelectric alarm, and three ionization alarms and dual alarm configurations with differing ionization sensor sensitivities.

There were 92 instances where a set of alarms were co-located during the 30 fire tests. The average alarm times and standard deviations for the ionization, photoelectric, and dual alarm configurations are shown in Table 2. On average, all three dual alarm configurations provide faster average alarm times compared to the photoelectric, or ionization alarms at any one of the three ionization sensor sensitivities

Alarm Type	Average Time to Alarm (s)	Standard Deviation (s)
Ionization (2.6 %/m)	1929	2104
Ionization (4.3 %/m)	1981	2132
Ionization (5.9 %/m)	2006	2138
Photoelectric	1755	1915
Dual 1 (2.6 %/m)	1702	1945
Dual 2 (4.3 %/m)	1720	1936
Dual 3 (5.9 %/m)	1730	1929

Table 2. Average alarm times for the NIST test series. Shaded entries highlight sensitivity settings used in the NIST report analysis.

Because the dual photoelectric sensor and photoelectric alarm have the same prescribed sensitivity setting, and thus, equivalent estimated alarm times when triggered by the photoelectric sensor (about 50% of the 92 instances), the average time to alarm statistics above do not clearly convey the benefits of the dual alarm over the photoelectric alarm when the photoelectric alarm responded slower than the ionization alarm.

Considering the instances when the ionization alarm (at a sensitivity setting of 4.3 %/m) responded first, the dual alarm configurations (from high to low sensitivities) activated 89 s, 67 s, and 47 s faster on average than the photoelectric alarms. Conversely, considering the instances when the photoelectric alarms responded first, the dual alarm configurations (from high to low sensitivities) activated 535 s, 523 s, and 518 s faster on average than the ionization alarms.

There were 36 instances of co-located alarms during initially flaming fires, 35 instances during initially smoldering fires, and 12 instances during kitchen fires. The last category considered was bedroom mattress fires with the bedroom door closed. These tests were grouped together because they experienced delayed smoke alarm times due to the fact that the door acted as a barrier to smoke flow. There were two initially flaming and one initially smoldering fire test conducted with the bedroom door closed with 9 instances of co-located alarms, and no instance of calibrated alarms in the fire origin bedroom.

Table 3 gives the mean, median and standard deviation of the alarm times for initially flaming fires with the bedroom door opened. Figures 6-9 show histograms of the alarm times of the middle sensitivity ionization alarm, photoelectric alarm, dual 1 alarm configuration, and dual 3 alarm configuration for this set of tests. The dual alarm configurations yielded faster average alarm times than the photoelectric alarm and average alarm times nearly equivalent to the ionization alarms.

Alarm Type	Average Alarm Time (s)	Median Alarm Time (s)	Standard Deviation (s)
Ionization (2.6 %/m)	107	107	35
Ionization (4.3 %/m)	113	113	36
Ionization (5.9 %/m)	118	118	36
Photoelectric	143	149	33
Dual 1 (2.6 %/m)	105	107	29
Dual 2 (4.3 %/m)	109	112	30
Dual 3 (5.9 %/m)	114	115	29

Table 3. Alarm time statistics for the NIST test series of initially flaming fires (36 instances). Shaded entries highlight sensitivity settings used in the NIST report analysis.

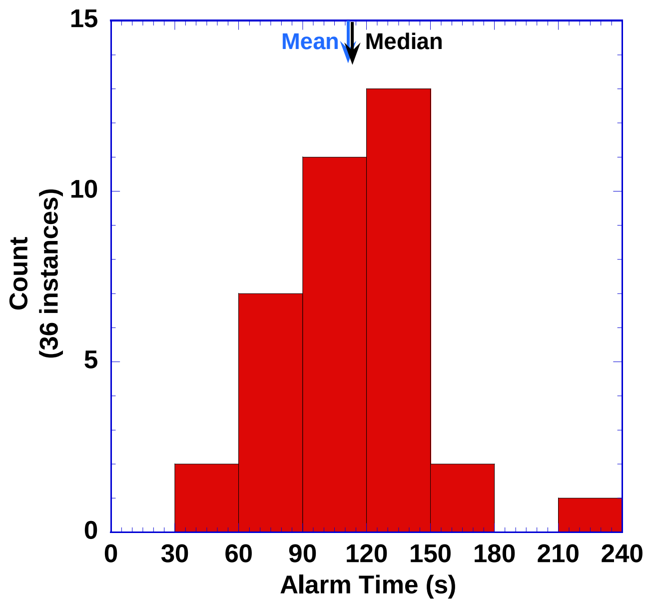

Figure 6. Histogram of NIST ionization alarms for flaming fires.

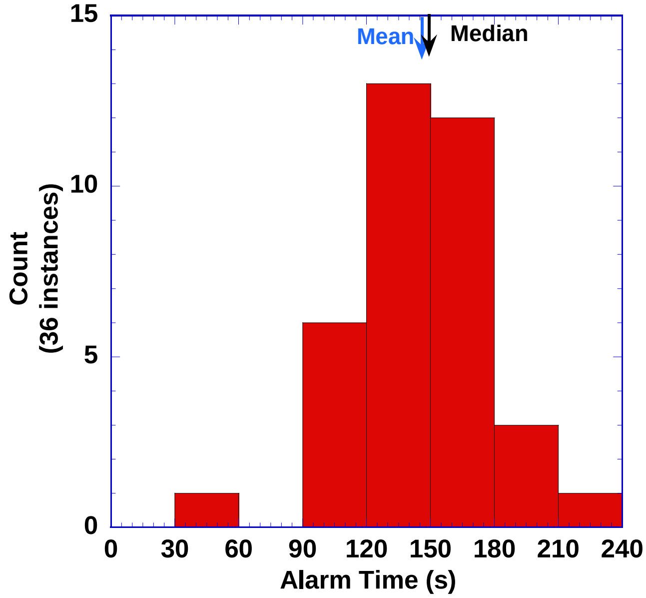

Figure 7. Histogram of NIST photoelectric alarm times for flaming fires.

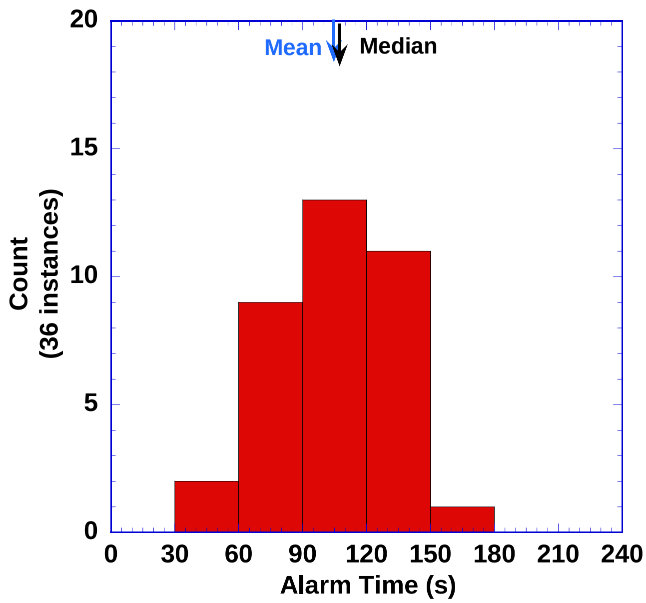

Figure 8. Histogram of NIST high sensitivity dual 1 alarm times for flaming fires.

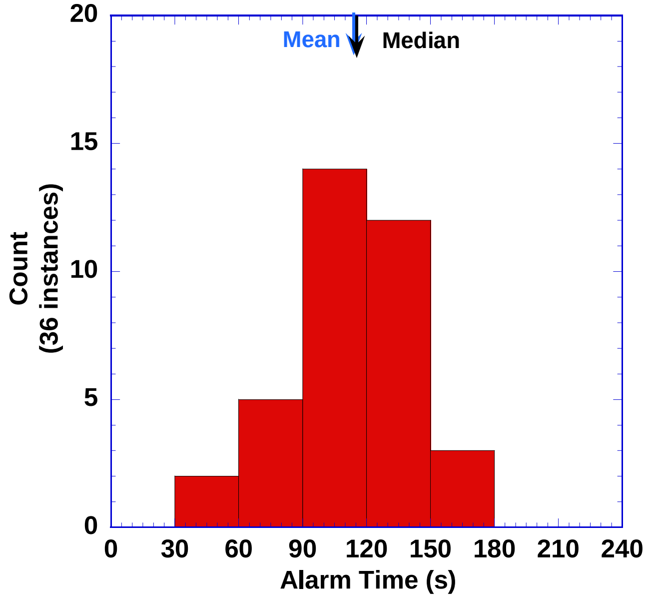

Figure 9. Histogram of NIST low sensitivity dual 3 alarm times for flaming fires.

Table 4 gives the mean, median and standard deviation of the alarm times for initially smoldering fires with the bedroom door opened. Figures 10-13 show histograms of the alarm times of the middle sensitivity ionization alarm, photoelectric alarm, dual 1 alarm configuration, and dual 3 alarm configuration for this set of tests. The dual alarm configurations yielded much faster average alarm times than the ionization alarms and average alarm times nearly equivalent to the photoelectric alarm.

Alarm Type	Average Alarm Time (s)	Median Alarm Time (s)	Standard Deviation (s)
Ionization (2.6 %/m)	4228	4213	1282
Ionization (4.3 %/m)	4281	4242	1343
Ionization (5.9 %/m)	4296	4244	1350
Photoelectric	3656	3753	1558
Dual 1 (2.6 %/m)	3652	3749	1554
Dual 2 (4.3 %/m)	3653	3751	1555
Dual 3 (5.9 %/m)	3653	3751	1555

Table 4. Alarm time statistics for the NIST test series of initially smoldering fires (35 instances). Shaded entries highlight sensitivity settings used in the NIST report analysis.

Table 5 gives the mean, median and standard deviation of the alarm times for the cooking fires. Figures 14-17 show histograms of the alarm times for the middle sensitivity ionization alarm, photoelectric alarm, dual 1 alarm configuration, and dual 3 alarm configuration for this set of tests. The dual alarm configurations yielded faster average alarm times than the photoelectric alarm.

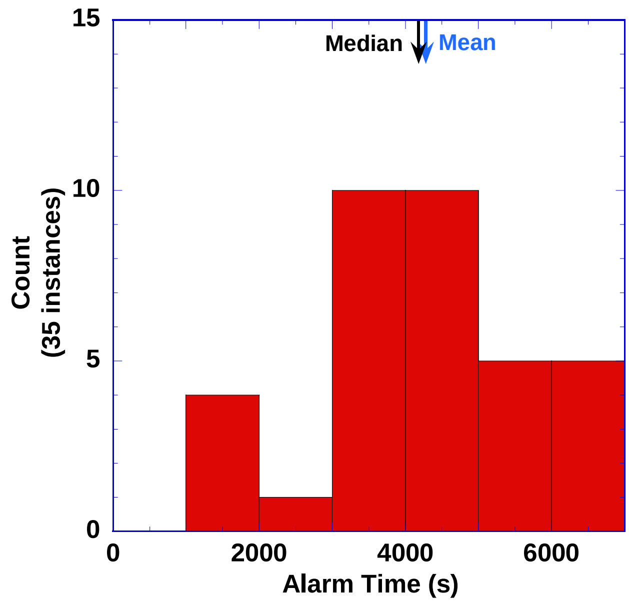

Figure 10. Histogram of NIST ionization alarm times for smoldering fires.

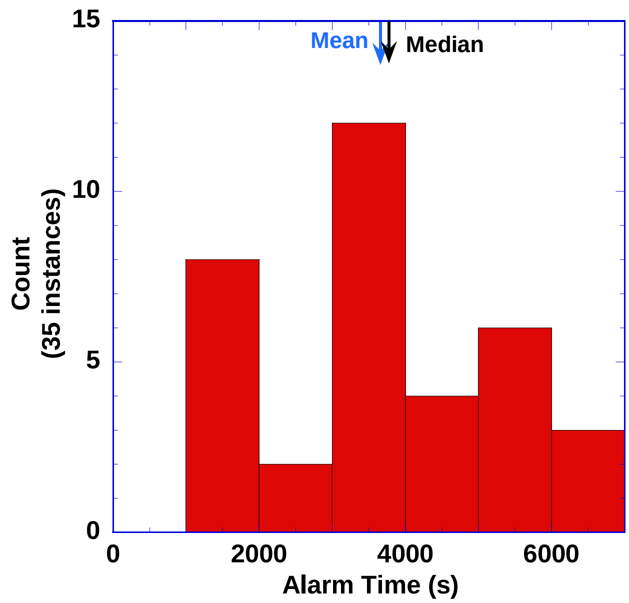

Figure 11. Histogram of NIST photoelectric alarm times for smoldering fires.

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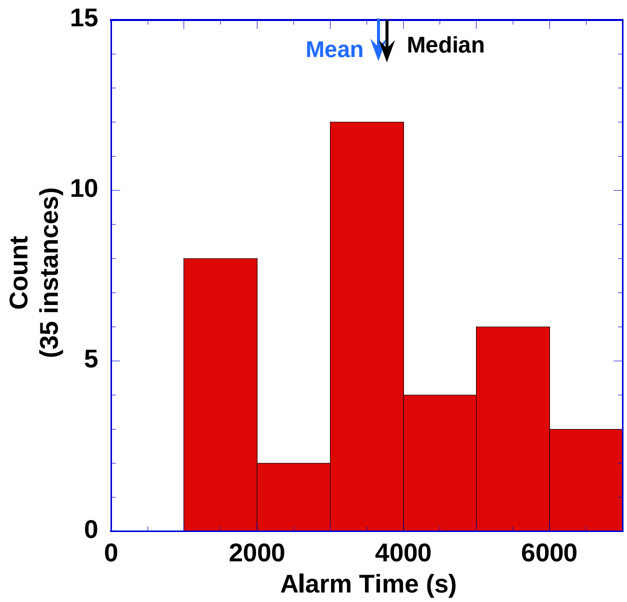

Figure 12. Histogram of NIST high sensitivity dual 1 alarm times for smoldering fires.

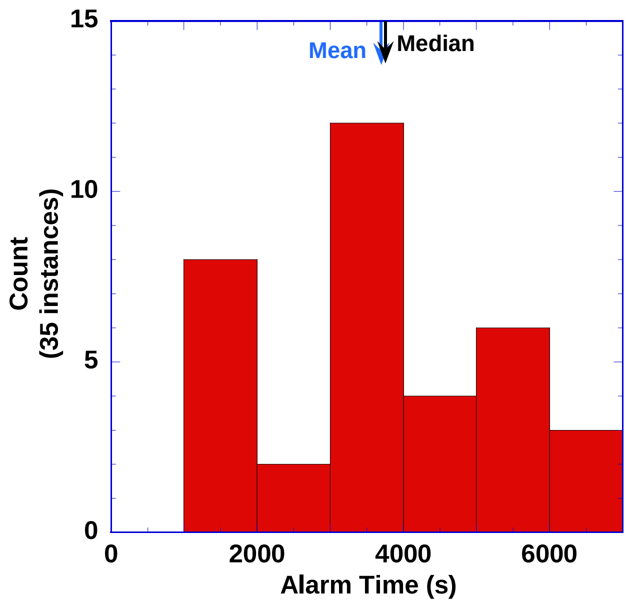

Figure 13. Histogram of NIST low sensitivity dual 3 alarm times for smoldering fires.

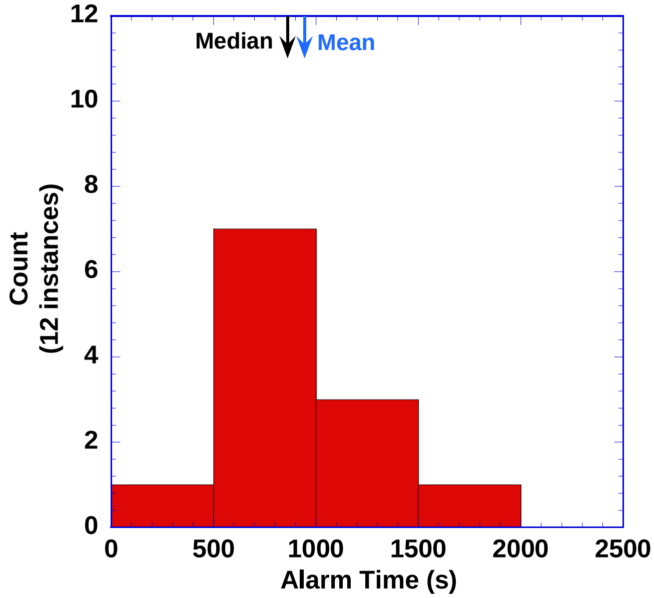

Figure 14. Histogram of NIST ionization alarm times for kitchen fires.

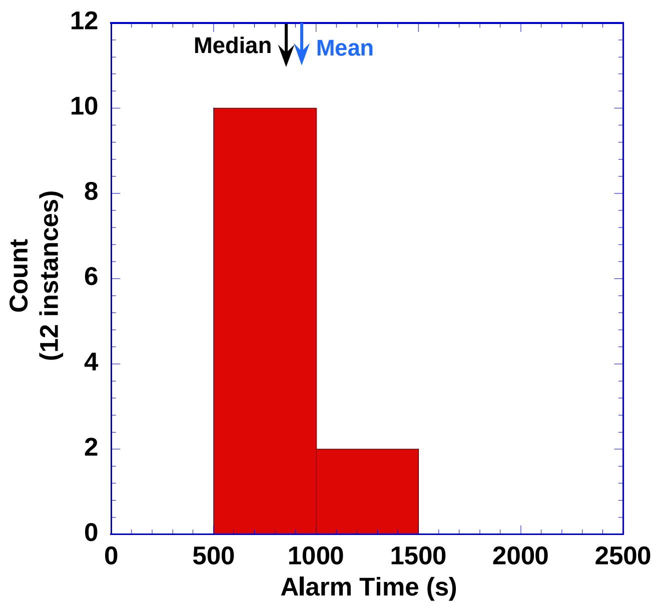

Figure 15. Histogram of NIST photoelectric alarm times for kitchen fires.

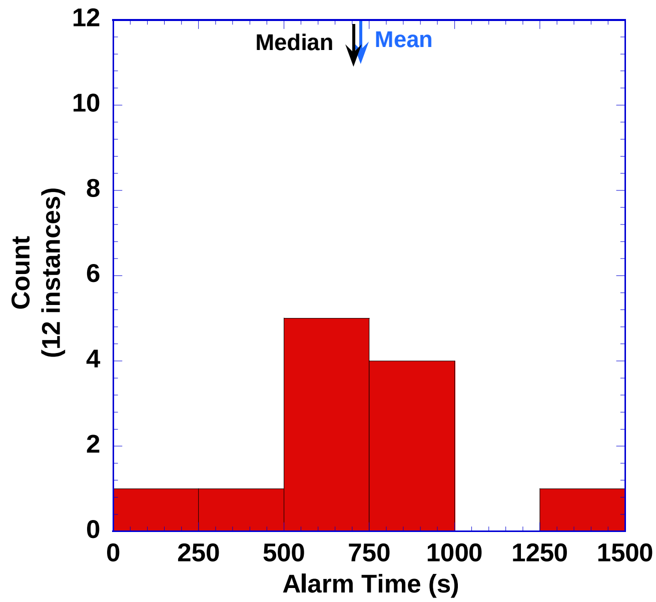

Figure 16. Histogram of NIST high sensitivity dual 1 alarm times for kitchen fires.

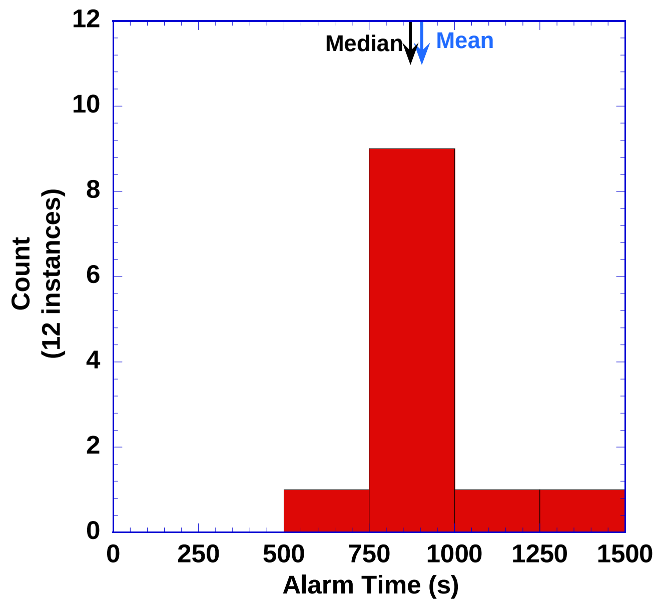

Figure 17. Histogram of NIST low sensitivity dual 3 alarm times for kitchen fires.

Alarm Type	Average Alarm Time (s)	Median Alarm Time (s)	Standard Deviation (s)
Ionization (2.6 %/m)	774	704	406
Ionization (4.3 %/m)	954	849	402
Ionization (5.9 %/m)	1080	992	342
Photoelectric	922	867	166
Dual 1 (2.6 %/m)	725	704	309
Dual 2 (4.3 %/m)	845	830	269
Dual 3 (5.9 %/m)	904	866	189

Table 5. Alarm time statistics for the NIST test series of kitchen fires (12 instances). Shaded entries highlight sensitivity settings used in the NIST report analysis.

Table 6 gives the mean, median and standard deviation of the alarm times for the three fires with the bedroom door closed. The dual alarm configurations perform about the same or better than the ionization and photoelectric alarms.

Table 7 shows the average alarm time difference between the dual alarm configurations and the photoelectric alarm for the scenarios considered. Over the sensitivity range of ionization sensors examined, dual alarms exhibited almost no average decrease in alarm time compared to photoelectric alarms during initially smoldering fire scenarios (4 s to 3 s), a pronounced average decrease for initially flaming fire scenarios (38 s to 29 s), an average decrease that was a strong function of sensitivity for kitchen fires (197 s to 18 s), and a sustained decrease for fires with the bedroom door closed (103 s to 94 s).

Alarm Type	Average Alarm Time (s)	Median Alarm Time (s)	Standard Deviation (s)
Ionization (2.6 %/m)	1813	1108	1751
Ionization (4.3 %/m)	1876	1109	1823
Ionization (5.9 %/m)	1883	1112	1820
Photoelectric	1913	1107	1667
Dual 1 (2.6 %/m)	1810	1107	1751
Dual 2 (4.3 %/m)	1811	1107	1750
Dual 3 (5.9 %/m)	1816	1107	1746

Table 6. Alarm time statistics for the NIST test series of bedroom fires with the door closed (9 instances). Shaded entries highlight sensitivity settings used in the NIST report analysis.

Scenario	Alarm Time Difference (photoelectric – dual) (s)		
	High Sensitivity	Middle Sensitivity	Low Sensitivity
Initially Flaming	38	34	29
Initially Smoldering	4	3	3
Kitchen Fire	197	77	18
Bedroom Door Closed	103	102	94

Table 7. Average alarm time difference between photoelectric and dual alarms in the NIST test series (dual alarms responded faster on average in all cases).

Ionization Sensor Sensitivity Measurements

In general, the sensitivity range recorded on the back of residential smoke alarms (photoelectric, ionization, or dual alarms) is not predictive of relative alarm performance when comparing any two alarms due to the width of the allowable sensitivity range, and the variation in sensor response to different types of smoke. The sensitivity range (the allowable range for production of a listed alarm) typically spans one third or more of the obscuration range in the UL standard (1.6 %/m to 13 %/m). Furthermore, sensitivities are provided in terms of a smoke obscuration value, which for ionization alarms is generally not predictive of alarm sensitivity. The UL standard addresses this issue by specifying a cotton wick smoldering smoke for sensitivity test limits, expressed both in terms of light extinction and the response from a reference chamber, the measuring ionization chamber, (MIC) [6]. The MIC operates on the same physical principles of the ionization chamber in smoke alarms. Thus, it is predictive of ionization alarm performance. The chamber current limits of the MIC are 93 pA to 37.5 pA, with an initial clean air current of 100 pA. Figure 18 is a plot of the sensitivity test limits for cotton wick smoke in the UL smoke box [6].

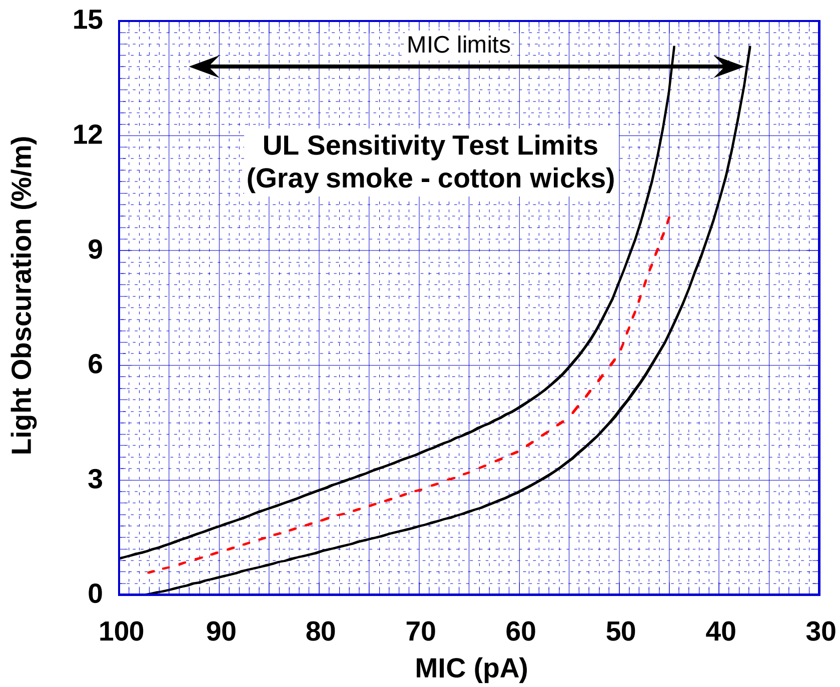

Figure 18. UL 217 standard sensitivity test limits for smoldering cotton wick smoke produced in the UL smoke box [6]. Smoke produced must fall between the two solid curves. Dashed curve is the mean value of the allowed range. Ionization alarms must respond within the MIC limits indicated.

The corresponding MIC sensitivity values for the three ionization alarm settings specified in the NIST report were approximately 73 pA, 61 pA. and 52 pA with an estimated uncertainty of 2 pA for high, middle and low sensitivity settings (2.6 %/m, 4.3%/m, and 5.9%/m), respectively.

Tests were conducted in the NIST Fire Emulator / Detector Evaluator (FE/DE) [8] to estimate the sensitivity of ionization chambers in three residential dual photoelectric/ ionization alarms and four residential ionization alarms purchased from retail establishments. A measuring ionization chamber was used to monitor the smoke concentration, and specify ionization sensor sensitivities. Thus, the ionization sensor sensitivity settings for the specified dual alarm configurations (dual 1, dual 2, and dual 3) above were compared to off-the-shelf products.

The testing protocol used in the FE/DE was to install two alarms side-by-side in the test section and expose the alarms to increasing levels of cotton smolder smoke. Tests were conducted in a similar fashion to the smoldering smoke calibration tests reported in the NIST Home Smoke Alarm report [4]. By bracketing steady smoke MIC levels where a particular alarm was not sounding and where it was sounding, an estimate of the alarm sensitivity was made. In the case of dual alarms, the photoelectric sensors were sealed so that a dual alarm only activated at the ionization sensor limit. Table 8 shows the results for all tests. The MIC current was monitored by a picoammeter and the uncertainty was estimated to be 0.1 pA. An estimated average sensitivity was computed from the mean of the four highest no alarm bounds and the four lowest alarm bounds. An uncertainty in the alarm sensitivity was estimated as the value that covers half the range of the difference between the two average bounds. The average sensitivity and uncertainty estimates are presented in Table 9. Figure 19 shows the average measured sensitivities and the NIST prescribed ionization sensor sensitivities for the three dual alarm configurations.

Bounding MIC current for no alarm {NA} and alarm {A} smoke concentrations (pA)													
Dual Alarm A		Dual Alarm B		Dual Alarm C		Ionization Alarm A		Ionization Alarm B		Ionization Alarm C		Ionization Alarm D	
NA	A	NA	A	NA	A	NA	A	NA	A	NA	A	NA	A
60.0	64.8	63.8	76.2	86.6	100	85.3	90.8	69.0	73.0	86.3	88.2	66.2	75.4
64.6	75.5	61.0	66.1	86.3	92.0	84.9	91.2	67.2	75.1	87.6	93.7	65.6	74.3
62.0	70.0	68.5	76.2	81.7	87.9	78.7	85.2	69.3	75.6	79.4	87.4	66.2	75.4
63.1	83.2	66.1	75.3	83.4	92.8	84.9	91.2	68.0	79.9	85.2	87.8	65.6	74.3
67.7	67.9			77.8	88.8					81.7	90.7		
63.9	71.9			83.4	92.8					79.9	88.5		
64.7	73.7			77.0	88.8								

Table 8. Ionization sensor sensitivity bounds.

Ionization Sensor	Sensitivity (pA)	Uncertainty (pA)
Dual Alarm A	66.9	1.7
Dual Alarm B	69.2	4.3
Dual Alarm C	87.2	2.3
Ionization Alarm A	86.6	3.1
Ionization Alarm B	72.2	3.8
Ionization Alarm C	86.6	1.4
Ionization Alarm D	70.4	4.5

Table 9. Estimated ionization sensor sensitivity levels from data reported in Table 8.

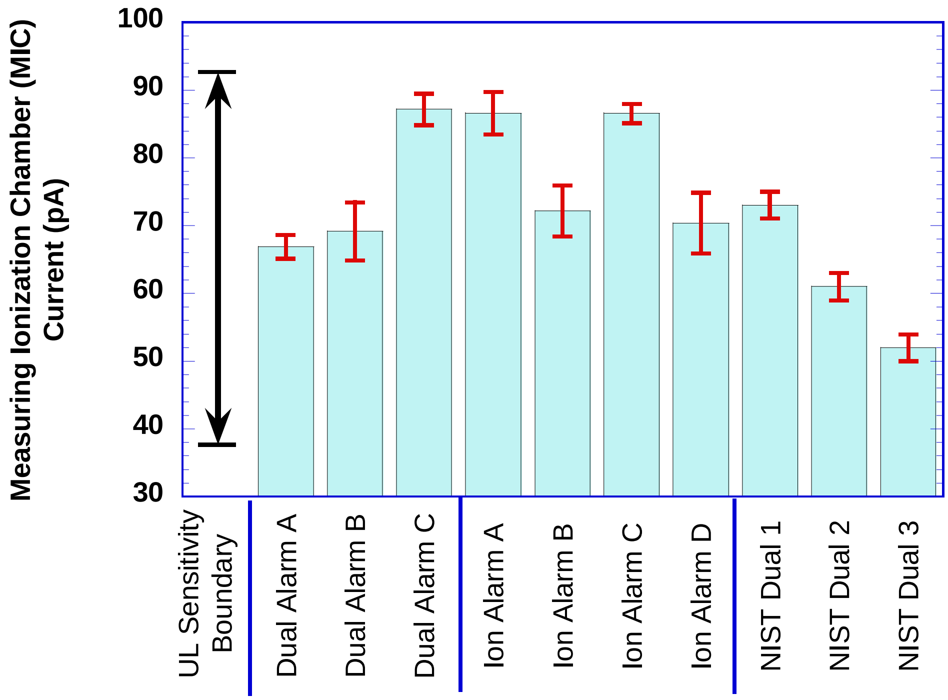

Figure 19. The Sensitivity of ionization sensors in select ionization alarms, dual alarms, and the specified NIST dual alarm configurations in the alarm time analysis.

The ionization sensor sensitivities of two of the ionization alarms were similar to two of the dual alarm ionization sensor sensitivities, falling within a current range of 66.9 pA to 72.2 pA. While the two other ionization alarms tested had sensitivities close to the third dual alarm's ionization sensor, falling within a current range of 86.6 pA to 87.2 pA. The high sensitivity dual alarm configuration specified in the NIST study [4] was 73 pA, closer to the lower ionization sensor sensitivities measured here, while the middle and lower sensitivity dual alarm configurations had prescribed ionization sensor sensitivities of 61 pA and 52 pA respectively which are below all the measured sensitivity values.

It is not clear if there is an optimum threshold value to set the ionization sensor sensitivity in a dual alarm. If one wanted to reduce cooking nuisance alarms, but maintain good overall sensitivity, then a lower ionization sensitivity setting (i.e., higher smoke obscuration value) could be specified. If one wanted the highest practical sensitivity for a wide range of fire types then a higher ionization sensor sensitivity (i.e., lower smoke obscuration value) could be specified.

Conclusions

Data collected on the performance of ionization, photoelectric, and dual photoelectric / ionization alarms in two full-scales smoke alarm studies were analyzed to assess the performance of dual alarms as compared to ionization and photoelectric alarms. Estimates of ionization sensor sensitivities in off-the-shelf ionization and dual alarms were made from measurements conducted at NIST. From the results, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. For both studies, dual alarms with equivalent or more sensitive settings performed better than individual photoelectric or ionization alarms over a range of flaming and smoldering fire scenarios.

2. From the NIST study, when the ionization alarm was the first to respond, the dual alarm configurations (from high to low sensor sensitivities) alarmed 89 s, 67 s, and 47 s, faster on average than the photoelectric alarm. When the photoelectric alarm was the first to respond, the dual alarm configurations (from high to low sensor sensitivities) responded 535 s, 523 s, and 518 s faster on average than the ionization alarm at the middle sensitivity setting.

3. Over the sensitivity range examined in the NIST study, dual alarms exhibited almost no average decrease in alarm time compared to photoelectric alarms during initially smoldering fire scenarios, irrespective of the ionization sensor sensitivity (4 s to 3 s from high to low sensitivity settings). Dual alarms exhibited a pronounced average decrease in alarm times compared to photoelectric alarms for initially flaming fire scenarios (38 s to 29 s from high to low sensitivity settings). For the kitchen fires, the average decrease in alarm time was a strong function of ionization sensor sensitivity (197 s to 18 s from high to low sensitivity settings). For the fires with the bedroom door closed, dual alarms exhibited a sustained average decrease in alarm time compared to photoelectric alarms (103 s to 94 s from high to low sensitivity settings).

4. Tests conducted in the NIST fire emulator/detector evaluator showed that the ionization sensors in off-the-shelf ionization alarms and dual alarms span a range of sensitivity settings as compared to a reference measuring ionization chamber. The prescribed ionization sensor sensitivities in the NIST study [4] were near or

lower than the measured ionization sensor sensitivities of three off-the-shelf dual sensor alarms and four ionization alarms.

5. It may be beneficial to tailor sensor sensitivities in dual alarms for specific applications. If one wanted to reduce cooking nuisance alarms, but maintain good overall sensitivity, then a less sensitive ionization sensitivity setting could be specified. If one wanted the highest practical sensitivity to a wide range of fire types, then a more sensitive ionization sensor sensitivity could be specified.

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