

Security Solutions for Strip Shopping Centers

by

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Strip shopping centers face unique threats not common to other properties. Often considered a safe haven by customers, strip centers contain various types of businesses and stores that create high traffic levels of both vehicles and pedestrians. Shopping centers often contain an anchor store which draws the bulk of the traffic, such as grocery stores and department stores. Grocery stores, in particular, face numerous crime challenges as they meet many customer needs beyond groceries.

The two biggest threats to shopping centers are victimization of employees and customers and the liability associated with such events. The inherent nature of the facility lends itself to high traffic, because diverse businesses are located within the center. This high traffic creates an abundance of targets for criminals. Other factors that can contribute to higher traffic and higher risks are external payphones, banks and automated teller machines (ATM), and the location of the center at major cross streets or near highways. These factors along with other considerations are typically what the real estate department is looking for when selecting and planning new shopping centers as the factors also contribute to marketability. Thus, a fine line exists between marketability and security.

Determining True Risk

Having outlined some of the concerns at strip centers, it should be noted that the focal point of this article is how to determine the true risk at these facilities, rather than the reasons for the risk. As such, we turn to the way in which risk can be determined.

Shopping center managers face a formidable challenge in determining the true risk at their properties because their addresses are often used by crime victims, witnesses, and even the police to report criminal incidences. Adding to this problem is the fact that many people without phones in their residences use the payphones at shopping centers to report crimes that happened elsewhere. Even crimes that occur on the public street can get reported using the center's address. These issues necessitate the need to thoroughly investigate each crime of violence to determine the true location.

The most accurate method for determining crime risk at a site is police crime data, which, not surprisingly, is the most commonly accepted method in court. This crime analysis methodology far surpasses the reliability of other methods, such as demographic data and security reports. Crime Analysis, as defined in Applied Crime Analysis, is the logical examination of crimes which have penetrated preventive measures, including the frequency of specific crimes, each incident's temporal details (time and day), and the risk posed to a property's inhabitants.

As an industry best practice, the objectives of crime analysis are:

1. To reduce crime on the property.
2. To evaluate and aid in the selection of security measures.
3. To justify security expenditures.
4. To provide a system of monitoring the effectiveness of security measures.
5. To provide a continual evaluation system of the site's crime situation.
6. To reduce liability.

Having outlined the objectives of crime analysis, we should take a look what crime analysis is and is not. Crime analysis is not demographic data that determines risk for an area using unknown data points and some far reaching social disorder theory, nor is it data from other unrecognized sources. To the contrary, crime analysis is based on actual crime data pulled from law enforcement databases. The difficult part here is accessing those databases from each and every police department where a store is located. Despite the difficulty in some jurisdictions, it can be done.

Using Police Data

Given that we now know that crime analysis uses actual crime data, we should define, step by step, the methodology that is proven, considered a best practice, and most important, accepted in court. The first step is to obtain the police department data for each store. This data usually comes in the form of Calls for Service (CFS), which provide a fairly accurate portrayal of criminal and other activity and consist of each call to the police to report crimes or other activity from the location. With this initial data, we can begin to build our database of crime at each store.

To get to 100% accuracy, we have to go one step further by obtaining the offense report for each incident that concern us. Offense reports are the written narrative of a call for service that resulted in an actual crime. Offense reports are especially important at shopping centers for a number of reasons. First, it is common for people to use the pay phones at shopping centers to report crimes that may not have occurred at the store. Offense reports give us the critical information to weed out those crimes that happened elsewhere. Second, shopping centers often have inflated crime levels because police dispatchers and officers use the main address of the shopping center. The police report will disclose the business where the crime actually occurred. Third, crimes are sometimes misreported by victims and witnesses. Offense reports disclose the actual

crime, not the reported crime. For example, offense reports may tell us that a reported robbery from the shopping center was actually a burglary at an apartment complex across the street.

Analyzing the Information

Once we have our database of actual crimes, we can analyze the specific risk at each site. There are a number of queries that will assist in creating an effective security program. The first is a property-specific analysis which helps us differentiate between crime risks when comparing sites. For resource allocation, it is imperative that the analysis is focused at the property level. Given a security budget of \$1,000,000 per year, this analysis allows us to compare risks at each site and allocate accordingly.

The next query is a crime-specific analysis which focuses on the type of crimes committed on the property. Knowing what crimes have occurred on the property will aid loss prevention managers in selecting specific prevention measures to prevent future occurrences as it tells us what particular asset is being targeted.

Temporal analysis is the third query. This analysis tells us when the risks are high and helps us efficiently allocate our security resources when threats are more likely. Various methods for learning a property's crime patterns can be considered including time of day, days of week, week of month, seasonal trends, and, on the extreme, crime trends during full moons. Temporal analysis is where security managers will gain the highest return on investment.

You will find that crime analysis does not stop with these analyses and applications of security measures, but takes further steps to monitor the crime situation. Crime analysis continually monitors the crime picture, typically on an annual basis so we can test the program's effectiveness and revise if necessary. Crime analysis makes a static security program dynamic, providing for change.

Conclusion

A crime analysis case study was recently completed by the author's firm and is pending publication in the American Society for Industrial Security's (A.S.I.S.) Security Business Practices Reference, Volume 6. The results of the case study indicated that a sizable return on investment was realized within a year of implementing a crime analysis program. The first year's savings, or cost avoidance, was \$9.2 million, or 41% of the security budget. This savings reflected a number of changes to the security program, but primarily constitutes the deployment of security personnel during higher risk times.

There is another category of cost avoidance that cannot yet be measured. That category is generated by reducing crime and avoiding security litigation.

The necessity to develop and maintain a well-balanced security program is elementary and essential to the protection of customers and other assets. Crucial to such a program are the balanced applications of crime analysis, security selection & implementation, and monitoring. In addition, potential liability can be avoided if management responds appropriately to the property's crime experience. Premise security cases are much less supportable if management conducts crime analysis, anticipates certain activity, and implements reasonable crime countermeasures.

Like most other tasks that security managers must do, there are two solutions. The first is to hire, train and supervise a person or team of people to pull the data from each police department where we have a store. The other option is to out-source this task. Outsourcing appears to be the most common alternative as it reduces costs substantially and brings third-party objectivity to the project. Also, the expertise to conduct crime analysis is somewhat limited given the high demand for it today.

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