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SECURITY

Not Just Mall Cops: How Shopping Centers Prevent Attacks

Large American malls don't just rely on rent-a-cops, but employ sophisticated security apparatuses in an effort to prevent violence

By Nate Rawlings @naterawlings | Sept. 24, 2013 | [Add a Comment](#)

In the security community, few labels are as derisive as “mall cop.” The term evokes a bumbling, poorly trained guard more likely to stop teenagers from loitering than a terrorist from attacking. But while your average American strip mall probably isn't closely guarded, major shopping centers in the U.S. employ more advanced security measures than you might think. And after [the attack](#) that left 62 dead at the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, U.S. malls are more vigilant than ever. A spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers, a U.S.-based trade group of mall and shopping center owners, [told Reuters](#) that he expects large American malls to ramp up security in the wake of the Nairobi attacks. But what exactly does that entail?



Craig Mitchelldyer / Getty Images

A mall security officer stands at the entrance to the Clackamas Town Center mall on Dec. 13, 2012 in Clackamas, Oregon, after a shooting left two shoppers dead.

“Often we think of security only as a responsive mechanism,” says Mike Rozin, a former member of the Israeli Security Agency who has consulted on security matters for large malls in the U.S. “It's important to understand that incidents, even like we saw in Kenya, don't just happen. Perpetrators have scouted the place, prepared, trained, rehearsed, prepared again and then executed. It's during those stages that efforts, big or small, could be the most effective in preventing acts of terrorism.”

Malls are what security experts call “soft targets.” They are large open spaces, have multiple entrances and exits and are often packed with people. “In the United States, there is no appetite for making malls closed environments, where there's one entry point with a metal detector and X-ray,” Rozin says. “We're far from that here, and that's not necessarily bad. But [the more] effort we can put on the pre-incident stages — before you have a guy with a gun or explosives — the more effective it will be.”

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In many large malls, security measures begin well before shoppers enter the stores. Parking lots are designed with choke points that funnel cars through areas that cause them to slow down. Some use automatic license plate readers plugged into local police databases. If a car is stolen or has otherwise been flagged, the system can issue an alert.

(MORE: [The Security Lapses That Led to the Nairobi Mall Terrorist Attack](#))

Walk into any shopping center in America and you'll see uniformed guards — an overt security presence used for deterring crimes as much as stopping them once they're already happening. But major malls have less obvious systems in place. Cameras record shoppers' behavior, and bomb sniffing dogs seek out explosives like they do in mass transit hubs. There are also plain-clothes security teams. If they notice someone acting suspiciously, they may approach the person and ask politely, "Can I help you?" The technique, called "soft contact," is often used in shopping centers in Israel, which have been the target of terror attacks in the past.

One of the most complex mall security challenges in the U.S. is presented by the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. With 520 stores, 4.3 miles of storefronts, an indoor amusement park and more than 40 million annual visitors, Mall of America personnel train year round for security issues from shoplifting to an active shooter situation. In an [interview](#) with trade publication *Security Info Watch*, Mall of America's security director Doug Reynolds described lockdown drills, which the mall conducts twice a month. When security sounds an alarm, the stores bring customers inside, locking the gates and turning off the lights. "We make it simple," Reynolds said. The mall also relies on behavioral recognition techniques to try and identify anything out of the ordinary. (Mall of America declined to comment for this story.)

No system is perfect and, although they remain rare, mall shootings have happened in the U.S. In 2007, a 19-year-old man killed nine people, including himself, and injured four others at the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Nebraska; in 2012, a 22-year-old man with a stolen semiautomatic rifle killed two people and committed suicide at the Clackamas Town Center in Oregon. Authorities have also thwarted at least two planned attacks since 2002. But none of those incidents compares to the carnage in Nairobi. For that, you might want to thank the often maligned "mall cop."

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