

Strict security not realistic at shopping centers, consultants say

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The random, sudden violence that befell Omaha, Neb., on Wednesday is almost impossible to prevent without turning shopping centers into armed camps, security consultants say.

It would require the kind of security employed at airports with metal detectors at every entrance and trained, armed personnel running them.

"It's more than cost prohibitive -- it's cost impossible," said James Dallas, a Philadelphia area security consultant.

That said, such attacks are rare, and those responsible for shopping center security say they work to be as prepared as possible.

"This was not an attack against an individual mall or an attack against an industry," said Malachy Kavanaugh, spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers in New York. "It was obviously an emotionally disturbed individual who wanted to make a very public display."

The owners of many area malls and larger retailers do not comment on specific security measures, but they say they constantly refine and look for ways to improve.

Shopping centers have emergency plans to determine whether to evacuate. In a shooting's aftermath, they might increase security and even shut some entrances.

Still, Americans might not be ready to pass through metal detectors to shop at their favorite mall.

"By and large we live in a free society, and consumers tell us they want to be able to travel about society and shop and not be impeded by security," Kavanaugh said.

Malls here and across the country typically employ several layers of security, including video surveillance and unarmed and armed security personnel.

According to reports out of Omaha on Thursday, security officers noticed the gunman acting strangely but saw no indication he was armed before the shooting started.

As is typical in most American shopping centers, those officers were not armed.

The unarmed security jobs usually are low-paying and require little training or education, security experts say.

"You kind of get what you pay for," said Chris McGoey, a Los Angeles-based consultant.

Arming guards without proper training is not an attractive option.

"They're not policemen. They're basically civilians in uniform," said Dallas. "You'd better have very well-trained and experienced people if you're going to put a gun on their hip."

In the Kansas City area, off-duty police officers routinely are employed as security by malls and individual stores. But because of the sprawling layout of many malls, they cannot always be in position to act.

That was the situation in April when a gunman opened fire at Kansas City's Ward Parkway

Center. Two Kansas City officers were working off-duty, but neither could intervene before the gunman killed two and wounded others. Another officer responding to 911 calls fatally shot the gunman.

Overland Park and Independence both maintain permanently staffed substations in their largest malls. Manpower always is beefed up during the holidays.

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