

SAFETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS OF SHOPPING CENTER CUSTOMERS AND THE EFFECT OF THESE CONCERNS ON SHOPPING BEHAVIOR

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Overview

Security, now demanded by customers and tenants alike, has become a major operating expense of shopping centers and malls. Security has become the fastest growing expense incurred by owners of enclosed malls, and security concerns have also had an impact on customers' shopping behaviors. A recent survey by America's Research Group reported 37.1 percent of consumers polled had changed the way they shopped in the past year because of their fear of crime (Rickard, 1994).

In the study reported in this article, surveys were administered to 786 customers at 12 enclosed malls located in four southeastern states - South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia - and in Washington, DC. Participants were asked to respond to 45 questions dealing with changes in their shopping frequency, their level of concern about safety and security issues, the precautionary actions they take in response to their concerns, and the importance they place on safety and security activities undertaken by enclosed shopping center management.

Results show that shopping center customers are most concerned about their security outside the center, that concern level is associated with increased precautionary behaviors, and that greatest importance is put on activities dealing with parking lot

disrupt ordinary operations. In many localities, shopping centers have become the hub of teenage social activities - raising the potential for increased security problems. Violent crime has become an even more frequent occurrence at some shopping centers. Even though gunplay is not common, the potential exists as evidenced recently by a gun battle between rival gangs in a shopping mall outside Los Angeles. Shopping center managers will need to determine the impact of such activities on customers' feelings of safety and their shopping behavior.

Violent crime at shopping centers gets a lot of attention, but a study completed by *Chain Store Age Executive* (May, 1993), in conjunction with the Department of Sociology at the University of Florida and Loss Control Systems, shows that the types of crimes receiving the most attention - carjacking, kidnapping, arson, rape, and other serious crimes - are the least likely to happen. Results of the survey indicated that by far the greatest security problem for shopping centers was shoplifting. Incidents of disorderly conduct were the second most frequently reported problem, followed by a third category including trespassing, vagrancy, and panhandling. Vandalism was the fourth most reported crime, followed by automobile break-ins.

A study by the International Council of Shopping Centers (Wilson, 1992) also indicated that customers felt safe at most shopping centers. Eighty-six percent of respondents felt that shopping centers were safe places for their family to visit. Has this perception changed in recent years as crime and violence have escalated in this country? To answer this question, continuous monitoring of customer perceptions will likely be required.

A 1994 survey by America's Research Group reported that 37.1 percent of 1,003 consumers polled by phone have changed the way they shop in the past year because of their fear of crime. More significantly, eight in ten reported shopping less at night, and 60 percent said there were areas where they used to shop that they would not frequent today (Rickard, 1994).

What are some of the primary security problems that shopping centers face and how have owners/managers dealt with them? Every shopping center has developed its own approach to handling security problems, ranging from the passive to the preventive. Disruptive young people are a major problem for many malls and may even alter the demographics of mall patrons. However, these young people have money to spend and many stores within the mall are marketing directly to this group.

■ Security Programs

Security programs must be implemented without alienating potential customers and their families. Current security practices range from prohib-

iting loitering, to ticketing rowdy teens for disorderly conduct, to playing classical music to discourage loitering by teens. Some malls hire security officers well versed in adolescent psychology to handle troublemakers, while some bar certain groups from the premises. Security directors also must find effective and acceptable ways to control access by homeless people, panhandlers, and gangs.

Parking lot crime, including car theft, presents another major security concern. Most changes in this area have been in improved lighting, use of low-lying landscape shrubbery, and increased security patrols. In recent years, shopping center and mall developers and property managers have become more aware of the need to provide a safe environment for customers. Facility planning plays a big part in their efforts. In newer malls, wider aisles allow crowds to spread out, discouraging shoplifting and unruly behavior. At some malls, restrooms have been relocated to more visible areas such as food courts, and/or have been built smaller so customers have to wait outside if restrooms are already occupied. Closed-circuit TV cameras at enclosed malls are strategically placed to encourage proper behavior and crowd control, with security personnel in mall command centers maintaining surveillance of monitors and alarms.

Most security programs depend upon well-trained security personnel who patrol in uniform or in plain clothes. Although some are armed, most are not. But the presence of a security force is felt to various degrees at different shopping centers/malls. Recently, some security guard companies have come under scrutiny for allegedly lax hiring practices. The best way to stave off mall security problems is through well-trained personnel. However, more and better training costs money. A 1991 *Peter Berlin Report on Shrinkage Control* (Wilson, 1992) stressed that when a mall's reputation for tight security increases, criminal activity decreases, and as shoppers feel safer in the malls, sales increase.

Mall managers are also faced with whether or not to raise the issue of safety concerns to customers. Customers need to be informed in order to change their shopping habits if necessary, but raising such issues could also cause a decline in customer traffic. In recent years there have been increased efforts by malls to inform customers about security precautions. One mall even distributes brochures containing safety tips, crime reporting procedures, and mall crime statistics to its patrons.

A review of the literature related to retail security reveals the types of security programs retailers are developing and implementing. Such information, however, provides little insight into how customers perceive these activities and how they rate the importance of these activities in relation to their feeling safe in a shopping environment. In addition, there is probably a relationship between customers' perception of shopping center security and their shopping behavior. Marketing strategies for se-

curity programs must be designed to produce favorable perceptions or modify existing perceptions in a favorable direction.

While customer safety and security is a priority with shopping center owners and managers as well as tenants, the issue is too complex, the costs too great, and the liabilities too risky to attempt to address the problem without a clear understanding of the causes and effects of customer concerns. While techniques and resources used in improving safety and security at shopping centers and malls have increased measurably over the past five years, research studies related to the attitudes and behaviors of customers have been noticeably sparse. Yet, it is this information which will provide shopping center operators the insights needed to best address customer concerns in the most cost-effective manner.

■ Research Questions

The research questions addressed by this study provide needed information as to the security concerns of shopping center customers and the effect of these concerns on their shopping behavior. These research questions are:

1. What are the safety and security concerns of shopping center customers, and how serious are they?
2. Is there evidence to suggest that safety and security concerns of shopping center customers have changed measurably during the past two years?
3. How have the safety and security concerns of shopping center customers affected their shopping behavior?
4. What activities conducted by shopping centers best address the safety and security concerns of customers?

Within these research questions, it is reasonable to predict that:

Hypothesis 1: Greater frequency of safety and security concerns will be positively associated with greater frequency of precautionary behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Female customers and older customers will report greater frequency of safety and security concerns.

■ Methodology

Questionnaire Design

Questions selected for the study were based upon a review of previous studies, industry literature, and input from shopping center managers

and executives. The survey consisted of 45 questions dealing with safety and security concerns, precautions taken by customers, the importance to customers of safety and security activities undertaken by shopping centers, and changes in customer shopping frequency over the past two years. Most of the questions required that customers respond according to a scale of 1 to 5, with each value anchored by a descriptive statement. Respondents chose the value and statement that best described their feelings concerning each particular question.

For example, in responding to questions regarding their concerns over particular safety and security issues, respondents were handed a card showing five levels of concern, ranging from 1 indicating "never concerned" to 5 "always concerned." Responses 2, 3, and 4 were each anchored with a descriptive statement, with 2 indicating "seldom concerned," 3 indicating "concerned about half the time," and 4 indicating "usually concerned." To answer questions dealing with how often they took precautionary actions as a result of their security concerns, respondents were asked to refer to a card showing a range of responses from 1 "never take this precaution" to 5 "always take this precaution."

The same approach was used in asking participants how important certain activities undertaken by the shopping center were in reducing their safety and security concerns. In these questions, participants responded on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating "not important" to 5 being "very important." Again, each numerical value was anchored by a descriptive statement. In addition to these questions, the survey included four open-ended questions dealing with respondents' shopping frequency, reasons for any decline in their shopping frequency, their suggestions on what shopping centers could do to improve their feelings about safety and security, and their overall assessment as to whether their shopping centers remain safe places for themselves and their family to shop. The survey was designed to be read to the respondent, with the responses recorded on the survey form by the interviewer.

Initially, questions were designed to refer to respondents' feelings about the mall in which they were currently shopping. For example, questions were phrased to ask respondents their concern about "being assaulted in *this* mall." For legal reasons, these questions were re-worded to "being assaulted while in *the* mall" and then finally to "being assaulted while in *a* mall." While these changes addressed the legal concerns of shopping centers participating in the study, the value of the information provided to each mall was somewhat diluted.

Sample Selection

Shopping centers participating in this study were selected based upon their geographical location, size, and their managements' willingness to partic-

ipate. The object was to survey malls within a reasonable distance from project headquarters and to include centers in large, mid-size, and smaller cities. Second, the study was designed to include malls of varying sizes within the various cities. The centers selected were all enclosed shopping centers and ranged in size from 400,000 to 1,900,000 square feet.

Letters inviting participation in this study were sent to managers of approximately thirty malls meeting the selection criteria. These letters outlined the intent of the study and suggested data collection procedures. In most cases, mall managers forwarded the letter to their corporate headquarters for approval and, in many cases, requested a copy of the questionnaire. Two companies declined participation because of their policy of not participating in any study which they did not commission, and two declined because of legal concerns. The objective was to have ten to fifteen centers participating in the study.

The *respondents* selected for participation in the survey were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate. A concerted effort was made to select individuals of different age, gender, and ethnic groups. While efforts were made to obtain responses from a cross-section of customers, no attempt was made to collect a sample which was reflective of the customer mix of a participating mall. For example, at a particular mall 17.9 percent of the respondents may have been from the 25–34 age group. This result should not be interpreted as meaning 17.9 percent of customers shopping that mall were in the 25–34 age group.

Data Collection

At each shopping center, tables were arranged at locations approved by the center manager. Customers walking by the tables were intercepted and asked if they would be willing to participate. The interview required eight to ten minutes to complete and no incentives were used to gain participation. Interviewers were trained in sampling, interviewing, and coding in order to minimize selection bias, verbal and non-verbal cueing, coding errors, and other systematic errors.

■ Findings

Characteristics of the Sample

A description of the respondents and shopping centers involved in the study can be found in Table 1. As noted, all age groups were well represented in the sample. The largest percentage represented were those aged 24 and under. Approximately two-thirds of the sample were Caucasian, and 56 percent of the sample were female. Most (76%) of the

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

| Characteristics | Percentage | Characteristics | Percentage |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|------------|
| Survey Participants | | | |
| Sample Size (786) | | | |
| <i>Age</i> | | | |
| 15–17 | 8.4 | <i>Time of Day</i> | |
| 18–24 | 21.5 | 10 AM–12 Noon | 1.4 |
| 25–34 | 17.9 | 12 Noon–3 PM | 15.4 |
| 35–44 | 19.0 | 3 PM–5 PM | 39.1 |
| 45–54 | 14.0 | 5 PM–7 PM | 37.0 |
| 55–64 | 8.7 | 7 PM–10 PM | 7.1 |
| 65 or above | 10.6 | | |
| <i>Ethnic Origin</i> | | Participating Malls (12) | |
| African-American | 27.7 | L.T. 1,000,000 sf. | 5 |
| Asian-American | 2.7 | G.T. 1,000,000 sf. | 7 |
| Latino | 1.5 | <i>Average size</i> | |
| Caucasian | 66.6 | 1,027,000 sf. | |
| Other | 1.5 | | |
| <i>Gender</i> | | | |
| Female | 56.0 | | |
| Male | 44.0 | | |

surveys were administered between 3:00 and 7:00 PM. Seven out of twelve of the malls participating were larger than 1,000,000 square feet, with the average size of the malls participating measuring 1,027,000 square feet.

Research Question 1 - Security Concerns

In responding to questions asking how often they were concerned about a variety of safety and security issues, respondents indicated that their most serious concerns deal with their safety outside, rather than inside, the mall. As indicated in Table 2, the top four areas of concern for all survey respondents, as measured by the percentage responding “usually” or “always” concerned, are “having items stolen from their car” (42.3%), “being robbed while in the parking lot” (41.2%), “being assaulted while in the parking lot” (36.5%), and “having their car vandalized while shopping” (34.6%). Of those responding, 37.5 percent said they were “usually” or “always” concerned about driving or traveling after dark, reflecting society’s overall concern about crime. For survey respondents reporting taking small children shopping, the most serious concerns shift to “having a small child get lost at a mall” (55.9%) and “having a small child abducted at a mall” (53.6%).

TABLE 2. SAFETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS: PERCENTAGE RESPONDING “USUALLY” OR “ALWAYS” CONCERNED

| Concerns | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| Having items stolen from your car while you shop at a mall | 42.3 |
| Being robbed while in the parking lot at a mall | 41.2 |
| Being assaulted while in the parking lot at a mall | 36.5 |
| Being robbed while in a mall | 14.0 |
| Being assaulted while in a mall | 10.2 |
| Being harassed by teenagers loitering in a mall | 26.1 |
| Having your car stolen while you shop at a mall | 26.1 |
| Having your car vandalized while you shop at a mall | 34.6 |
| Driving/traveling through high-crime areas to get to a mall | 32.2 |
| Being in the section of town where the mall is located | 18.2 |
| Driving/traveling after dark | 37.5 |
| Having a small child get lost at a mall* | 55.9 |
| Having a small child abducted at a mall* | 53.6 |

*Responses from those who reported taking small children shopping.

When asking respondents the basis for their concerns, 57.7 percent attributed their concerns to what they see and hear reported by newspapers, TV, and radio; with 23.8 percent mentioning personal experience and 17.1 percent mentioning the experiences of friends and family. In response to an open-ended question as to whether or not respondents felt malls were safe places to shop, 2.6 percent responded “no,” 77.2 percent responded “yes,” and 19.4 percent responded “yes, with some stipulations.”

Research Question 2 - Changes in Concern

In responding to the question, “When shopping in malls, is your concern over safety more, less, or about the same as compared to two years ago?” 43.1 percent reported more, 4.8 percent less, and 52.2 percent about the same. When survey respondents were asked, “Over the past two years, has the amount of time you have spent shopping in malls increased, remained about the same, or declined?” 35.4 percent responded that their shopping time had increased, 47.6 percent that it had remained about the same, and 16.9 percent reported a decline. As reported in Table 3, of the 16.9 percent of respondents reporting a decline in time spent shopping, only 5.7 percent attributed this decline to crime/security concerns; 26.8 percent to issues specific to the mall they shopped; 41.5 percent to personal issues; and 20.3 percent to lack of money. In terms of the entire sample, 7 out of 785, or .8 percent, responded that their time at shopping centers had declined due to crime/security concerns.

TABLE 3. REASONS FOR REPORTED DECLINE IN TIME SPENT SHOPPING AT MALLS OF THOSE REPORTING DECLINE*

| Reasons for Decline | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| Crime/Security Concern | 5.7 |
| Mall Specific Issues (<i>Customer Service, Mall Proximity, Shop Profiles</i>) | 26.8 |
| Personal Issues (<i>Health, Busy Schedules, Job Demands</i>) | 41.5 |
| Lack of Money | 20.3 |
| Other | 5.7 |

*16.9% of total sample reported a decline in time spent shopping at malls over the past two years.

Research Question 3 - Changes in Shopping Behavior

Survey respondents were asked, "As a result of any security concerns you might have, how often do you take any of the following precautions?" Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents reporting taking a precaution either "most of the time" or "always." The most prevalent precaution reported was "avoiding parking far out in a parking lot" (60.6%). The next highest percentages were for "avoiding shopping after dark" (32.6%) and "using only the main entrance" (32.3%). These precautions parallel the concerns reported in Table 2. Of special interest is the small percent-

TABLE 4. SAFETY AND SECURITY PRECAUTIONS: PERCENTAGE RESPONDING TAKING THIS PRECAUTION "MOST OF THE TIME" OR "ALWAYS"

| Precautions | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| Avoid shopping after dark | 32.6 |
| Avoid parking far out in a parking lot | 60.6 |
| Avoid shopping alone | 25.3 |
| Avoid shopping at malls | 5.0 |
| Avoid shopping in stores by using catalogs to make purchases | 5.0 |
| Avoid shopping in stores by using TV shopping channels to make purchases | 2.5 |
| Complete your business at the mall as quickly as possible | 21.8 |
| Use only the main entrance at malls | 32.3 |
| Avoid using restrooms while in a mall | 22.3 |
| Avoid using public phones while in a mall | 10.3 |
| Avoid carrying cash for your purchases | 27.2 |
| Carry some form of protection, such as mace | 15.7 |
| Avoid taking small children shopping at a mall | 8.0* |
| Avoid low-traffic, side corridors | 28.3 |

*Responses from those who reported taking small children shopping.

**TABLE 5. SAFETY AND SECURITY PRECAUTIONS:
PERCENTAGE RESPONDING TAKING THIS PRECAUTION AT
LEAST "SOME OF THE TIME"**

| Precautions | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| Avoid shopping after dark | 61.2 |
| Avoid parking far out in a parking lot | 82.3 |
| Avoid shopping alone | 51.1 |
| Avoid shopping at malls | 23.1 |
| Avoid shopping in stores by using catalogs to make purchases | 21.1 |
| Avoid shopping in stores by using TV shopping channels to make purchases | 8.1 |
| Complete your business at the mall as quickly as possible | 48.1 |
| Use only the main entrance at malls | 53.1 |
| Avoid using restrooms while in a mall | 46.7 |
| Avoid using public phones while in a mall | 31.1 |
| Avoid carrying cash for your purchases | 54.9 |
| Carry some form of protection, such as mace | 27.1 |
| Avoid taking small children shopping at a mall | 38.3* |
| Avoid low-traffic, side corridors | 54.4 |

*Responses from those who reported taking small children shopping.

age of respondents "avoiding taking small children shopping at a mall," given the reported high level of concern over this issue. While percentages of respondents answering "most of the time" or "always" on other dimensions were in the mid-twenty percent range or less, they represent a significant frequency of precautionary behavior on the part of customers. If the percentage of customers who report taking these precautions, at least "some of the time" or more often is examined, those precautionary behaviors which are most pervasive can be determined (See Table 5).

Research Question 4 - Importance of Security Activities

Respondents were asked a series of questions to determine how important certain activities conducted by malls were in reducing their safety and security concerns. They were asked to rate each statement from 1 to 5, with 1 being "not important" to 5 being "very important." The percentage of respondents indicating each activity as either "important" or "very important" is reported in Table 6. An upward bias in these percentages is expected, as many respondents may report a fairly high level of importance for all security activities. Therefore, in interpreting these results,

TABLE 6. SAFETY AND SECURITY ACTIVITIES: PERCENTAGE RESPONDING ACTIVITIES AS “IMPORTANT” OR “VERY IMPORTANT”

| Activities | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| Well-lighted parking lots | 93.4 |
| Frequent security patrols in the parking lot | 88.7 |
| Low-lying shrubbery around the mall, especially near entrances and exits | 64.3 |
| Frequent security patrols inside the mall | 76.6 |
| Active enforcement of mall policies and procedures, such as dress codes, no loitering, prosecution of criminals, etc | 70.2 |
| Restrooms located in high traffic areas | 67.5 |
| Rules prohibiting loitering in the mall | 66.4 |
| The use of closed-circuit TVs for security purposes | 70.4 |
| Seminars being offered by the mall about safety procedures customers should take when shopping | 39.1 |
| Distribution of shopping safety tips and crime reporting procedures by the mall | 51.7 |

differences between the percentages should be assessed as well as the absolute level of the percentage.

As expected, based on previous responses, activities which clearly address security concerns outside the mall are given the highest level of importance. These include well-lighted parking lots (93.4%) and frequent security patrols in the parking lot (88.7%). Lagging in importance as reported by these respondents are distributing safety brochures (51.7%) and holding safety seminars (39.1%). When asked an open-ended question as to what one thing malls could do to improve the respondents' feelings of safety and security while shopping, over 64 percent responded with “more security personnel” both inside and outside the mall, with a somewhat higher percentage mentioning outside rather than inside increases in security (See Table 7). While these comments come as no surprise, they do show the strength of customers' desire to have more security, and represent the dilemma facing shopping centers of having enough visible security to address customer concerns, but not so much as to create unfounded concerns.

Hypothesis 1 - Security Concerns and Precautionary Behavior

In testing the hypothesis that the frequency of safety and security concerns would be positively associated with the frequency of precautionary behavior, the overall level of concern for each participant (Total Concern)

TABLE 7. RESPONSES AS TO “WHAT ONE THING COULD MALLS DO TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND SECURITY?”

| Comments | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| More security (general) | 18.4 |
| Visible security guards | 17.1 |
| More security inside the mall | 10.0 |
| More security outside | 18.7 |
| Well-lighted parking lots | 11.8 |
| No loitering | 3.8 |
| Other recommendations | 18.7 |
| Keep doing the same thing | 15.9 |

was determined by totaling their responses (values 1 to 5) for each of the twelve questions dealing with security issues. This produced a Total Concern score of 12 to 60 for each respondent. The mean Total Concern for the total sample was calculated and used to categorize each respondent's Total Concern score into either the Low Concern or High Concern group, depending on whether the individual Total Concern score was above or below the mean. Statistical tests were then conducted for differences in frequency of precautions taken by the two groups. As indicated in Table 8, in every case, the frequency of precautions taken by the High Concern group was significantly higher than the Low Concern group.

Hypothesis 2 - Security Concerns and Precautionary Behavior by Age Group and Gender

Survey responses were also partitioned according to age group (Table 9). In examining measures of Total Concern for each age group, no significant differences were found. In testing differences in concern on each of the twelve security issues, results were significant on “having your car vandalized while you shop.” Here, older participants reported less concern. Significant differences between groups were also found in “driving/traveling after dark,” with the over-65 group reporting a much higher mean concern; and in “having a small child get lost at a mall,” with the 25–34 and 35–44 age groups reporting the highest mean level of concern.

In analyzing the differences in precautions taken by each age group, differences in “avoiding shopping after dark,” “avoiding parking far out

TABLE 8. DIFFERENCES IN PRECAUTIONS TAKEN BY LOW CONCERN AND HIGH CONCERN GROUPS

| Precautions | Mean Response | |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|
| | Low Concern Group | High Concern Group |
| Avoid shopping after dark | 2.11 | 3.07*** |
| Avoid parking far out in a parking lot | 3.08 | 4.21*** |
| Avoid shopping alone | 1.86 | 2.80*** |
| Avoid shopping at malls | 1.23 | 1.67*** |
| Avoid shopping in stores by using catalogs to make purchases | 1.27 | 1.55*** |
| Avoid shopping in stores by using TV shopping channels to make purchases | 1.09 | 1.28*** |
| Complete your business at the mall as quickly as possible | 1.84 | 2.61*** |
| Use only the main entrance at malls | 2.07 | 3.04*** |
| Avoid using restrooms while in a mall | 1.73 | 2.58*** |
| Avoid using public phones while in a mall | 1.42 | 1.95*** |
| Avoid carrying cash for your purchases | 1.95 | 2.87*** |
| Carry some form of protection, such as mace | 1.52 | 2.01*** |
| Avoid taking small children shopping at a mall | 1.50 | 2.05*** |
| Avoid low-traffic, side corridors | 1.91 | 3.02*** |

Response scale: 1. Never take this precaution; to 5. Always take this precaution.

*** $p < .001$

in a parking lot,” “using only the main entrance,” and “avoiding low-traffic side corridors” were significant. Here, the mean scores for the over-35 groups were generally higher (See Table 10).

In assessing differences in importance attributed to security activities undertaken by shopping centers (Table 11), results indicate signifi-

TABLE 9. SAFETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN RESPONSES BY AGE GROUP

| Concerns | 15–17 | 18–24 | 25–34 | 35–44 | 45–54 | 55–64 | 65+ | p value |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|---------|
| Having your car vandalized while you shop at a mall | 3.01 | 3.01 | 2.97 | 2.88 | 2.73 | 2.49 | 2.45 | * |
| Driving/traveling after dark | 2.53 | 2.47 | 2.72 | 3.03 | 2.78 | 3.10 | 3.45 | *** |
| Having a small child get lost at a mall | 3.71 | 3.22 | 3.80 | 6.70 | 3.98 | 3.00 | 3.31 | * |

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

TABLE 10. SAFETY AND SECURITY PRECAUTIONS: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN RESPONSES BY AGE GROUP

| Precautions Taken | 15–17 | 18–24 | 25–34 | 35–44 | 45–54 | 55–64 | 65+ | p value |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|---------|
| Avoid shopping after dark | 1.83 | 2.07 | 2.39 | 2.72 | 2.91 | 2.90 | 3.40 | *** |
| Avoid parking far out in a parking lot | 3.38 | 3.49 | 3.37 | 3.74 | 3.53 | 3.94 | 4.06 | * |
| Use only the main entrance at malls | 2.20 | 2.18 | 2.62 | 2.77 | 2.66 | 2.65 | 2.60 | * |
| Avoid carrying cash for your purchases | 2.35 | 2.18 | 2.61 | 2.39 | 2.44 | 2.09 | 2.78 | * |

*p < .05; ***p < .001

TABLE 11. SAFETY AND SECURITY ACTIVITIES: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN RESPONSES BY AGE GROUP

| Activity Importance | 15–17 | 18–24 | 25–34 | 35–44 | 45–54 | 55–64 | 65+ | p value |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|---------|
| Well-lighted parking lots | 4.32 | 4.56 | 4.67 | 4.80 | 4.72 | 4.76 | 4.88 | *** |
| Frequent security patrols in the parking lot | 4.24 | 4.40 | 4.42 | 4.64 | 4.53 | 4.50 | 4.70 | ** |
| Low-lying shrubbery around the mall, especially near entrances and exits | 3.24 | 3.57 | 3.77 | 3.95 | 3.85 | 3.82 | 3.96 | ** |
| Frequent security patrols inside the mall | 3.74 | 4.00 | 4.15 | 4.29 | 4.07 | 4.37 | 4.24 | ** |
| Active enforcement of mall policies and procedures | 3.55 | 3.54 | 4.01 | 4.07 | 4.23 | 4.26 | 4.22 | *** |
| Restrooms located in high traffic areas | 3.35 | 3.40 | 3.91 | 4.03 | 3.90 | 4.01 | 3.86 | *** |
| Rules prohibiting loitering in the mall | 3.06 | 3.31 | 4.03 | 3.93 | 4.12 | 4.26 | 4.13 | *** |
| The use of closed-circuit TVs for security purposes | 3.65 | 3.68 | 3.96 | 4.05 | 3.90 | 4.21 | 4.31 | *** |
| Seminars being offered by the mall about safety procedures customers should take when shopping | 2.67 | 2.73 | 2.72 | 3.18 | 2.93 | 3.10 | 3.12 | *** |
| Distribution of shopping safety tips and crime reporting procedures by the mall | 2.94 | 3.12 | 3.32 | 3.43 | 3.32 | 3.62 | 3.40 | *** |

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

TABLE 12. DIFFERENCES IN MEAN RESPONSES BY GENDER

| Concerns | Female | Male | p value |
|---|--------|------|---------|
| Having items stolen from your car while you shop at a mall | 2.98 | 3.15 | |
| Being robbed while in the parking lot at a mall | 3.35 | 2.57 | *** |
| Being assaulted while in the parking lot at a mall | 3.27 | 2.37 | *** |
| Being robbed while in a mall | 2.15 | 1.63 | *** |
| Being assaulted while in a mall | 1.94 | 1.57 | *** |
| Being harassed by teenagers loitering in a mall | 2.21 | 1.98 | * |
| Having your car stolen while you shop at a mall | 2.45 | 2.57 | |
| Having your car vandalized while you shop at a mall | 2.85 | 2.84 | |
| Driving/traveling through high-crime areas to get to a mall | 2.73 | 2.40 | |
| Being in the section of town where the mall is located | 2.13 | 1.96 | ** |
| Driving/traveling after dark | 3.25 | 2.27 | *** |
| Having a small child get lost at a mall | 3.61 | 3.22 | * |
| Having a small child abducted at a mall | 3.66 | 3.06 | *** |

*p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001

cant differences by age group for each of the activities. In most cases, the younger age groups attributed the least importance to security activities.

In terms of security concerns of females versus males, results were as expected, with female respondents reporting significantly higher mean scores on several concern issues (See Table 12). Similar differences were found in frequency of precautionary behaviors taken by male and female respondents, with females taking most precautionary behaviors more frequently.

■ Discussion

In addressing the first research question (What are the safety and security concerns of shopping center customers and how serious are they?), study results are consistent with other reports that continue to show that customers' security concerns rest mostly with their exposure outside rather than inside the mall. It is the walk from the car to the mall which alarms most customers, with a much smaller percentage of customers voicing concerns about being robbed or assaulted while in a mall. The data also show that while frequency of child abduction is rare, the seriousness of

the occurrences and the notoriety given them by the news media cause over 50 percent of parents or grandparents to be “usually” or “always” concerned about this issue. The overall seriousness of respondents’ security concerns is reflected in the 25 percent of the respondents reporting being “usually” or “always” concerned on ten of thirteen security issues. However, only 2.6 percent of respondents felt that malls were not safe places to shop.

As to changes in safety and security concerns over the past two years (*Research Question 2*), results show a significant percentage of respondents reporting an increase in safety concern while shopping at malls, though there is little evidence to connect these concerns to reported declines in shopping frequency. Results also show that while over half of the respondents attribute their concerns to articles and stories reported in the media, 41 percent report personal experience and experience of someone they know as the basis for their concern. This is a surprisingly high percentage and suggests that incidents which get reported and documented may reflect only the tip of the iceberg in relation to the frequency of security incidents actually occurring. If this is true, then shopping centers must not only deal with those increases in safety concerns caused by news stories, but also with the possibility that incidents are occurring more frequently than thought.

Statistical tests strongly confirm that higher frequencies of security concerns are associated with increased precautionary behavior (*Research Question 3*). It is reasonable to assume that any further increases in security concerns by mall shoppers will be associated with continued increases in precautionary actions. While some of these precautionary behaviors (e.g., only using the main entrance, avoiding carrying cash, carrying some form of protection, etc.) will not be detrimental to shopping center performance, other behaviors, such as avoiding shopping in malls or avoiding shopping after dark, will be. For example, while avoiding shopping at malls is one of the precautions least often taken by customers, over 23 percent took this precaution at least “some of the time.” If security concerns continue to rise, it is likely that in the future more customers will sometimes avoid malls as a precautionary behavior.

While study results did not strongly support the hypothesis that security concerns would be greater among older shoppers, middle age and older shoppers were more likely to avoid shopping after dark and consistently placed more importance on security activities undertaken by mall operators. Study results did support the hypothesis that security concerns would be higher for female shoppers when compared to male shoppers.

Study results also show that shoppers put greatest value on mall activities which address their safety outside the shopping center and

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strongly suggest additional security as the best way to improve shoppers' feelings of safety and security while shopping.

Study Limitations

While every effort was made to minimize the level of potential error and bias in the study, some limitations should be noted when interpreting the results presented. First, while over 80 percent of the customers intercepted agreed to be interviewed, thereby decreasing the possibility of respondents having either disproportionately high or disproportionately low levels of safety and security concerns, some self-selection bias is possible. Similarly, while there was no evidence to suggest that shopping centers involved in the study were as a group either especially safe or especially unsafe such a bias is possible.

Additionally, while results support the hypothesis that increased frequency of concern will be associated with increased frequency of precautionary behavior, direct causation was not tested and should not be inferred. Finally, since data were collected only on customers' attitudes concerning shopping at enclosed shopping centers, no conclusions can be drawn as to how these concerns compare to the level of security concern when respondents shop at other locations (e.g., strip centers, central business districts, etc.).

■ Conclusions

Overall, this study suggests that while the security concerns of customers and their effect on customers' shopping behavior are not as severe or damaging as reported in some articles, security remains a serious and possibly growing concern for shopping center owners, and one with potentially serious implications if not addressed appropriately. While shopping center owners should be pleased with the 92 percent of respondents who feel malls are safe places to shop, they should be concerned with the large percentage who report "at times" taking precautionary actions which may hurt mall performance.

Shopping center operators must address not only the increases in safety concerns fueled by news stories, but also the possibility that security incidents occur much more frequently than previously thought. Finally, it is obvious from results of this and other studies that owners and operators must continue to focus their efforts on ensuring customer safety outside the center and on achieving the appropriate level of visible security.

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