



Shopping Malls and the Underground Gang Empire

For decades enclosed shopping centers and malls have been social gathering places for people of all ages. Malls provide an inclusive shopping experience for everyone, a shelter from the elements, and an escape from daily living through the fantasy of window-shopping. Whether bargain-hunting for back to school clothes, beating the last minute holiday rush, or just looking for a few odds and ends, there is not much you cannot get at a mall. With the construction of ever-larger retail centers, malls have become places to enjoy a nice time with friends, grab lunch in the food court, or maybe even find a new love interest. You can even have your significant other's initials embroidered on a plush new robe while you catch a movie at the attached theater! Yet in many cases, there is another side to all the happy shopping and carefree social gathering that most people never notice. There is a dark and dangerous element that stays to the periphery, lurking by a concessions stand, playing video games in the arcade, even sitting in the parking lot. That element is local street gangs.

Gangs creep and slime their way into communities undetected until it they are far too big to eradicate. And these street gangs use local malls as breeding grounds. It is here in your mall that gangs are recruiting, marking their territory, selling narcotics and controlling the community's black market. Gang members like to go to the mall for almost all of the same reasons as good law abiding citizens do. Gang members like to gather in social places, eat food, play video games, watch movies and pursue members of the opposite sex. Yet there is one considerable difference; gang members are seldom at the mall to shop... Gang members could care less about the huge Presidents Day sales throughout the mall, or the buy one get one half off at Sleepys. No, in the end gang members are there for one thing and one thing only: to expand their criminal enterprise.

Street gangs sneak into the mall, undetectable to the untrained eye, by using the power of numbers. They strategically place gang members and graffiti in and around the mall so that other gangs and youth know who is in control of that area, slowly driving away competition as they solidify their hold on a given community. Gang members know that for them to thrive and exist they need to rule by fear and intimidation; they also know that they need to have a constant supply of youth to recruit from to stem the attrition caused by arrest and violence. The reality of gang life is that it's not very long. The majority of gang members spend a great deal of time in jail or prison, or end up dead. They need the malls and their seemingly endless inflow of youth to fill their ranks. Gang members easily use the excitement of a fast paced life style, drugs, alcohol, fast money, and sex as recruiting tools. And don't think a facility can be too upscale for recruitment. Many gangs do, of course, solicit members from impoverished locations. Yet middle class kids are no less susceptible to the manipulation and glamour depicted

by gangs in any region. If this behavior goes untreated in any mall for long enough, the likelihood of gang-related violence become critical.

Looking back in history we can see a number of incidents where gang conflicts at malls have cost many people their lives, and not only those of rival gang members. In many cases these types of incidents may have been prevented if mall security had known what to look for, and taken a proactive approach to securing their facility before things got out of control.

- On March 5th, 2012 at the Market Place Mall in Champaign, Milwaukee a gang related drug deal nearly turned fatal when shots were fired. Police responded and engaged in a shoot out with the suspect.
- On September 8th, 2012 at the Towson Town Center in Towson, Maryland a prospective gang member for the Black Guerrilla Family fired six shots at two innocent civilians as they were exiting the mall, leaving one dead. This was his initiation into the gang.
- On January 27th, 2012 at the Central Valley Shopping Mall in Bakersfield, California rival Norte 14 and SUR 13 gang members were involved in a shooting leaving two men wounded.

These are just three examples of gang related shootings that occurred in malls in 2012. This is not even to say of the countless incidents of non-lethal fights, assaults, thefts and other crimes that happen in and near malls on weekly bases. With the proper training, many of these incidents may have been prevented, and many more may yet still.

One of the first steps mall owners and security personnel can take to mitigating the risks of gang-related violence is to get trained on common gang related identifiers. Mall security should have a database or file system to track and monitor gang members and gang related activity in their mall. This kind of information can be useful to law enforcement out on the streets, and will aid in both preventing and investigating violence, even that which does not take place in a shopping center. Many incidents that occur on the streets are linked to a fight or conflict that was initiated at a local mall. One such example was the 2006 murder of Saul Herrera in Bradenton, Florida that was traced back to a disagreement between rival gang members at the Desoto Mall just hours before his murder.

It is very important for mall security to have a good working relationship with local law enforcement agencies. Gang members spend countless hours hanging out at local retail spaces. This gives mall security great opportunities to document what gangs are hanging out together and how they are adapting their style of dress and communication to hide from law enforcement. Enhancing a facility's relationship with law enforcement,

besides being a gratifying addition to local safety, is an essential component of securing malls from violent external threats.

After this relationship has been organized, the next step for mall security is to implement a “no tolerance” policy across all affiliated property. For example, have signs posted on all the entrance points and throughout the mall that gang related activity and clothing will not be tolerated. The proper training will also assist shopping center security in interacting with gang members. Gangs want and need to have full access to the mall; that is why you do not frequently see them walk in twenty or thirty deep, all wearing the gang’s colors. The police would be there immediately and they would have to leave the premises. Yet even when gang members are not all wearing distinguishing colors from head to toe, they still need to be removed from the mall. Gang members live a very violent life style and often times carry weapons with them or have them stowed nearby. Keeping gang members out of the mall and off the property is the best policy to have. To do so, you have to be able to spot them.

Malls in America are a social symbol, a safe haven for teenagers, a place for first dates and evening strolls. Don’t let your facility be tarnished by a tragedy or become a gathering place for gangs preying on your community’s youth. Train your security, learn how to build a better relationship with law enforcement, and get SMART about retail safety.

For more information about preventing gang violence in your shopping center, please contact Security Management International about the "Shopping Mall Assessment and Response Training" (SMART) course at training@smiconsultancy.com.