

KEEPING HOLIDAYS SECURE RETAIL LOCATIONS PUT PEOPLE ON LOOKOUT:[Final Edition]

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Full Text

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It's Friday afternoon, and Capt. Emile Augustin is on patrol.

The security guard paces around the rooftop of the Patrick Henry Mall in Newport News, scoping the parking lot with binoculars.

"We can see everything from up here," Augustin says, watching car after car pour into the lot near the new JCPenney. "Like, if I see a lady with a lot of packages walking by herself to her car, I'll call the mobile unit to go to that area to make sure she makes it to her car safely."

For the seventh consecutive holiday season, the Patrick Henry Mall security team has stationed a guard atop the mall from the early afternoon to the evening, with the guards working in two-hour shifts.

"It gets pretty chilly up here at times," says Augustin, who dons gloves but no hat. "But I think it helps the mall security. If people see you up here, they'll think twice about doing anything."

It's been a relatively crime-free Christmas, store management and security teams said this week. And the best way to avoid crime during the commotion of Christmas, they said, involves real human beings: placing more of them in strategic places - either on the rooftop or on the store floor.

At Camelot Music at Coliseum Mall, Manager Christy Bullock said the mall typically had about three "greeters" - employees who walked the floor, helping customers. During the holidays, however, the store has between five and eight people walking the floor at any one time, both to help customers and to watch for shoplifters.

There are plastic stickers on each CD that sound if someone walks out the door with it. If someone tries to peel those off, there's a loud peeling noise.

"But the biggest deterrent is still people," Bullock said. "The more people there are, the less they're likely to steal."

S.L. Nusbaum Realty Co. has beefed up security at two of its Peninsula shopping centers - Heritage Square Shopping Center on Route 17 in York County, and at Denbigh Village Shopping Centre at Denbigh and Warwick boulevards. Guards typically work a 5-10 p.m. shift. In recent weeks, they've been working from 2 to 11 p.m., said Frank Cowling, S.L. Nusbaum's senior vice president.

Stores were guarded in giving figures as to how much they've lost to shoplifting this Christmas season, but they said their losses were negligible. Shopping-plaza management companies have said holiday-related crime, such as car break-ins, had been nearly negligible, as well.

Getting to this relatively low-crime environment, of course, involves lots of crime-fighting methods - more than just human beings.

JCPenney places some ink-spouting device on dresses and clothes, which have to be removed by a cashier. If someone else tries to remove it, the clothes will be permanently stained. Radio Shack keeps all its small but valuable items - such as laptops, calculators, scanners, radios and cameras - behind a glass counter.

Computer-game and software stores leave the games behind the counter, putting only the boxes on the racks.

There are two theories on security cameras: Some stores make them clearly visible to deter crime, while others conceal them to catch the criminals later.

But for all the high-tech approaches, human beings are the best crime fighters, store managers say.

During the year, lots of stores use employees posing as other shoppers to keep an eye out for shoplifters. During the holiday season, however, there's so much commotion and so many shoppers that it works better just to have employees look like employees.

"Posing works well with one or two people in the store," said William Smith, the loss-prevention officer at JCPenney at Coliseum Mall. "When it's so crowded in here, you can't concentrate on everybody. During the holidays, it works better to be more open about who we are."

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[Illustration]

Staff photo (b&w) by KENNETH SILVER; Caption: Eye in the sky Capt. Emile Augustin of Top Guard Security Service observes customers from his perch atop Patrick Henry Mall in Newport News on Friday. Security has been heightened this holiday season at area malls to help reduce theft and to ensure patrons' safety.

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