

Hitting back at the curveball

Depending on what position a security or crisis management professional occupies, crime against persons and property can indeed be as sporadic as the change in weather and, at times, even more difficult to predict, says **Matthew Porcelli**

Just because crime is unpredictable doesn't mean that it always has to be. Both frontline and internal security teams worldwide are responsible for safeguarding fixed and mobile assets while simultaneously assessing their susceptibility to both internal and external threats. Criminologists, security researchers, and practitioners continue to study and analyse why windows of opportunity exist for aggressors to commit criminal acts and how to minimise them. Furthermore, the deployment of both security and law enforcement tactics during warmer months, depending on geography, leads to an increase in delinquent and criminal activity. Given the inevitable occurrence of natural crises and the prevalence of human-made crises resulting from nefarious human behaviour and motives, it is crucial to implement each layer of the security and crisis management framework to reduce the window of opportunity for criminals and aggressors to strike.

Just as a child might be tempted to take a cookie or candy left in the open, criminals are often driven by opportunity. Some individuals may not always have theft as their primary motivation; they may inflict damage on property owing to factors such as carelessness or appearance.

In 1982, social scientists James Wilson and George Kelling defined what became known as the Broken Windows theory, which holds that visible signs of disrepair, such as broken windows, can encourage further forms of criminal activity and delinquency. Over the years, this theory has aided both security and law enforcement deployment tactics. Combining this theory with the fields of contract security and fixed asset or property management, frontline response focuses on swiftly observing, reporting, and discouraging damage. This approach enables the fixed asset owner or property management to repair the damage promptly, thereby reducing the attraction and potential for criminal activity around the asset(s).

For instance, contract security teams often encounter graffiti and property damage. Once the security officer observes and reports this criminal act to their supervisor or manager, the client is notified to clean or repair. The repair's promptness is critical in reducing the window of opportunity for criminals and delinquents to carry out repeat or more serious attacks.

Site assignments expose frontline security teams to a variety of conditions. Some are more dangerous than others, depending on geography, location, crime rate, and

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other geopolitical factors. In my current position in the US New Jersey/New York Metropolitan Area, I have observed an increase in criminal activity during the warmer months. This is not a study strictly limited to the Garden and Empire States. For instance, inclement weather such as rain, snow, and thunderstorms do not normally bring people out. Warmer, more pleasant weather during the spring and summer months, for example, encourages more outdoor and commercial activity and opportunities. Ranson (2012) asserts that when discussing weather change and loss prevention: "Mild weather that encourages people to go shopping would also have the effect of increasing the frequency of property crimes such as theft."

Just as risk can never be fully mitigated, human interactions cannot be completely restricted. Businesses, stakeholders, and real estate owners cannot institutionalise their properties because this creates an unwelcome appearance and a low flow of potential revenue. This illustrates the importance of recurrent vulnerability assessments, communications, and training throughout the security team. Just as threats and crime trends evolve each

year, so may, at times, the security officers. Recurrent, topical training keeps security officers proactive in their duties while concurrently ensuring open communication with the clientele.

Crime after chaos

Natural crises are, unfortunately, inevitable. Criminal acts that exploit others during crises are even more unfortunate. Unlike internal security teams and organisations that have a security presence in the C-suite (such as the chief security officer or chief risk officer), contract security organisations are required to staff those fixed assets under contract with security officers prior, during, and after natural and human-caused crises.

On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy affected New Jersey, USA, causing death, injuries, and billions of dollars in property damage. During that period in my security career, I served as a shift supervisor for a contract security provider, tasked with safeguarding a corporate building alongside my fellow security team. The damage was substantial to the surrounding area,



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leaving it without power for days. As a security manager now, 12 years later, and considering a similar situation with Tropical Storm Ida in 2021, I find the window of opportunity for crime in areas vulnerable to natural disasters to be staggering.

Furthermore, many crimes committed after a crisis event are not always fuelled by wicked intentions; some may stem from necessity. This is substantiated when hundreds of thousands of New Orleans citizens were stranded during and after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. As one New Orleans resident recalled: “During a major disaster, natural or human-made, the people who do not have will want the supplies that they need from the people they do have; they will use any and all means to get it.” Frontline security officers are not tasked with understanding or dissecting the motives of those who commit such acts. When it comes to criminal acts, the bedrock principle for security officers, especially those who are unarmed, remains restricted to just two words: observe and report.

When dealing with crime and disorder from the perspective of a security officer, it is important to understand that although frontline security officers play a critical role in protecting people and property, self-preservation must be the primary objective. Security officers have evolved from night watchmen to security professionals, and they have many different tactics available to assist and even defuse a potentially dangerous situation; however, putting themselves in serious physical harm is not one of them.

Just as different countries have different protocols for private security, so too do arm and unarmed security officers. The role of frontline security involves notifying law enforcement and providing appropriate details for responding units. From this, security officers can provide information and updates as well to their clients and management in real time. This is where the importance of training comes in. Security officers come from a variety of backgrounds; some have prior law enforcement experience, others have decades of security

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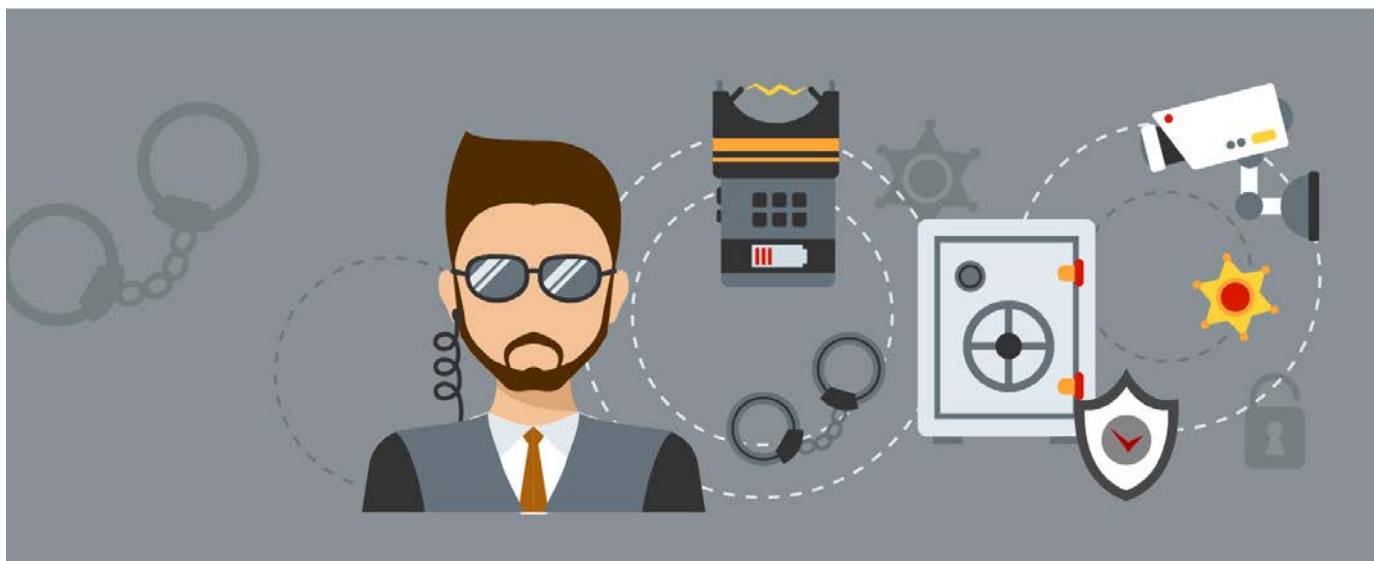
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experience, and some are just starting out right out of school. Regardless of where the officer sits in their career journey, there must be a shared understanding of how security personnel respond to criminal behaviour or attacks against the asset(s) they are protecting.

As long as there is opportunity, crime will exist. Criminals and delinquents will continue to evaluate the limits of security countermeasures either for profit or on a whim. As stated, it is not the objective of frontline security officers to ascertain the motive, but to deter the criminal act. For the longest time, many have believed that security officers apprehend those who commit criminal acts or attempt to breach an entry point; this is incorrect. The goal of physical security countermeasures is to delay the threat until the proper response arrives, which in this case would be law enforcement.

Security officers serve as the intermediaries, ensuring that law enforcement receives clear and concise information to deploy units and/or apprehend the suspect(s). According to the congregation, the probability

of criminal occurrence is indeed higher in the warmer months; however, the method of protection remains the same year-round.

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