



Video Surveillance Report Card

BY ROSIE LOMBARDI

"In many places where video surveillance is used, the environment is not well-designed for it," says Ratcliffe. "But one of the places where we see the best results is in the prevention of crime in parking lots."

Video surveillance is getting beefed up in parking lots and beyond, and vendors continue to add dazzling new features to entice buyers.

But the jury is still out on its effectiveness in preventing and prosecuting crime, and increasing public perception of safety, according to one academic.

Studies conducted by various universities show that the evidence is mixed and highly dependent on many environmental factors, says Jerry Ratcliffe, professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at Temple University in Philadelphia.

"In many places where video surveillance is used, the environment is not well-designed for it," says Ratcliffe. "But one of the places where we see the best results is in the prevention of crime in parking lots."

They typically have clearly defined areas and boundaries, so parking lot access points can be controlled. And really serious crimes rarely occur there.

"The majority of crime committed in parking lots is property crime," he says. "Video surveillance works in this context because a potential offender has time to think about the risk of getting caught. But it's not so good at preventing violent crime, and crime related to impulsive actions and drunkenness."

Results are also mixed on whether video surveillance increases public perception of safety. People become desensitized to cameras after awhile and stop noticing they're there, he says. "Studies show the perception of safety is not necessarily improved."

Video evidence is infrequently used to prosecute crime. "Most of the time, cameras are rarely enough to identify an offender," he says. "So in the end, video surveillance is less about investigating crime once it happens, and more about preventing it happening in the first place."

To maximize its deterrent value, the main issue is advertising the fact that the parking lot is monitored loud and clear. "Many places don't succeed on this

score – often, offenders say, 'Oh, I didn't know there were cameras.'"

High-end cameras that can identify offenders are very expensive, so parking lot operators need to evaluate their particular environmental and criminal elements carefully. "In the early stages of CCTV, people installed them to cover large areas, but you get less definition in the image of a specific area," he says.

"Even so, these cameras still tell you what's going on, and they also have deterrent value – but if car theft is a concern, then it's worth having better cameras at access points, down at eye level so you can see into cars, which also reinforces their visibility to potential offenders."

● Hospital adopts comprehensive system

The Hotel Dieu Grace Hospital (HDGH) in Windsor, Ont. recently installed a top-of-the-line video surveillance and security system. Located in the tough inner city area, the hospital offers 1000 parking spots in its five-storey parking structure and surface lot.

Like many hospitals, the HDGH must deal with a wide range of crime, but a particularly shocking incident occurred in a hospital recovery room in 2005. A doctor murdered the nurse who'd terminated her relationship with him, and he later committed suicide. "It was all over the media, and the inquest dragged on," says security manager Wally Dowhayko. "We had security and workplace violence issues to deal with."

The incident drove the hospital to release scarce funds to boost its security substantially and restore public confidence, he says. "I'd already been looking into an upgrade to the video surveillance system the year before the murder, but the new system was expensive. It cost about \$250 million, and I probably wouldn't have it now if that crime hadn't happened."

Dowhayko revamped the old CCTV system, which still used black-and-white cameras and VCR tapes for storage, and replaced it with high-definition digital CCTV in the parking lots and hospital's buildings. "We





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didn't go with IP (Internet protocol) cameras due to privacy concerns," he says, pointing to issues raised within the healthcare industry by a surveillance video hacking incident that occurred at a methadone clinic in Sudbury.

Almost all the parking areas have video coverage at access points, he says. "We have two pan-tilt-zoom (PTZ) cameras and 14 fixed cameras that cover entry points, stairwells and pay stations on each floor. But we don't have video coverage within the parking structure itself, as we would need 50 to 60 cameras to cover all areas of the deck, and the cost is prohibitive. Just one PTZ camera cost about \$7,000."

In addition, Dowhayko implemented a personal help call system from Bosch Security Systems with the help of systems integrator G4S Technology. The wireless system allows staff to send an emergency signal to a central console via a small pendant they wear. If they activate the distress signal, the system can track the person's movements on a map and direct security personnel to the scene.

Dowhayko says the number of thefts at the HDGH have decreased about 60 percent since the new system was installed last year. Like many inner city hospitals, theft is a significant problem. "Some people are brazen and walk into offices in the middle of the day and help themselves." Video evidence was used in two incidents last year to identify suspects, he adds.

The surveillance system has also helped cut down on nuisance crime, he says. "Panhandlers used to come into the parking lots to beg, because they know when our staff come and go. But now, as soon as they come on board, we can observe it at our monitoring station and send over patrols within 30 seconds."

But these improvements aren't just due to video surveillance, he warns. "Cameras are great but they're only one component of our security system. If you take that, then add preventative security patrols and personal alarms for staff, and then you've got a very decent security package in place."

Vendors agree with Dowhayko's view. Implementing video surveillance is often a knee-jerk reaction to a serious incident, says John Day, president of Toronto-based Contact North Representatives, the Canadian trouble-shooting agent for Bosch's systems. "It gives people the sense that something's being done, but without a comprehensive security approach to control the perimeter, it's actually not doing anything."

● University relies on sound security

The University of Guelph (U of G) is a major research-intensive institution located in southern Ontario with 18,000 students on campus every year.

The university recently extended and upgraded its video surveillance system, opting for a new system provided by Genetec Inc.

Although a networked IP video surveillance system was already in place in its parking lots, the university needed to expand the system to monitor and control access to entryways located on campus, which covers an area of 4.1 km.

"We were getting a new system for our buildings, which haven't been monitored in the past, so it was a perfect time to upgrade the old video surveillance system in our parking lots," says Robin Begin, director of campus police, fire prevention and parking services.

There are about 40 cameras in place throughout the university, says Begin. Five residential parking lots have PTZ cameras; a larger one has four cameras, while the other smaller ones have only one or two. Students haven't raised any privacy or other concerns about the monitoring, she says.

"Students typically leave their cars from Monday to Friday, so they like the idea that someone is keeping an eye on their vehicles, as they may not go to the parking lot during the week."

A novel feature of the university's system is its use of sound as an alarm. Security staff don't passively monitor video screens continuously for incidents, she explains. "Research shows there are limits to how long a human being can watch screens effectively. So a video surveillance system may give people false hope."

Although the U of G's dispatchers have their video screens on, they don't watch them live – but they do hear sounds. "If they hear screams or shattering glass, then the sound-activated PTZ cameras zoom in to see what's going on," she says. "We've successfully used the sound of smashed windows and loud students returning from parties to control potential incidents by quickly dispatching guards to the scene."

Incidents of car theft and smash-and-grab thefts of stereos and other valuables inside vehicles occur with some frequency at the U of G, she says. "Last year, we had six cars stolen across campus."

But video evidence wasn't used to prosecute the offenders. "All the suspects pleaded guilty, so we didn't need to use evidence, although we pulled the images from our cameras. You only need to present it if the charges are contested in court."

Begin believes video surveillance is a useful tool for deterring crime – but only to a point. "I think cameras can play that role with some people – they'll see the camera and not act. But they don't stop everybody from committing a crime."

And she's cautious about making pronouncements about its value in increasing the perception of safety. "We have to be careful, as the perception of safety and actual safety are two different things. Perceptions are personal things, but I think our video surveillance system enhances the actual safety of our parking lots. For what I'm asking my cameras to do, I'm getting value." ■