

# SAFEGUARDING *the* future of retail

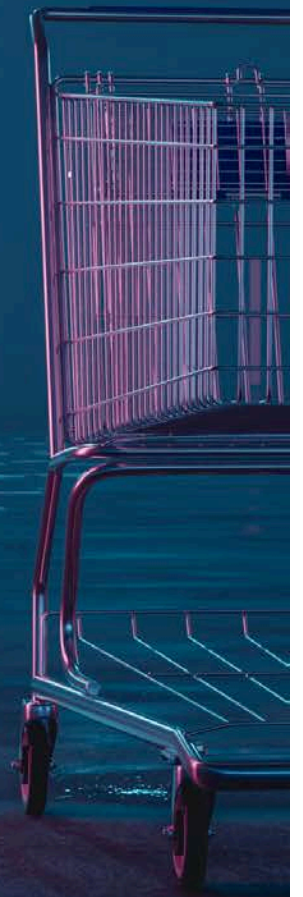
The security landscape in retail centres is undergoing a transformation due to escalating threats that have increased in recent years, writes Ben Olalde, Vice President, Retail Operations and Compliance, Allied Universal

**F**rom violent and petty crimes to economic and social unrest, retail shopping locations are facing unprecedented security challenges. As crime rates rise, particularly in the US, businesses are turning to innovative solutions, such as CCTV cameras, central monitoring, robotics, AI facial recognition, metal detectors at entrances, licence plate readers, firearm and explosives detection canine teams and more to protect employees, customers and assets.

## A year of uncertainty and escalating risks

According to the 2023 World Security Report, security professionals expect security incidents to continue to increase, with violent criminals presenting the greatest concern.

In North America, 49% of corporate chief security officer respondents highlight this as a major issue, surpassing the global average of 33%. The US leads globally with 61% of security professionals citing violent crime





as their primary concern. Petty crime is another issue, with 46% of respondents in North America expecting a rise in incidents, compared to the global average of 35%.

Real-world incidents support these concerns. In San Francisco, for example, major retailers have closed multiple locations due to rising theft and violent crime. Similarly, Chicago has seen an increase in organised retail crime, with large-scale looting incidents targeting high-end stores along the Magnificent Mile. These cases highlight the need for improved security measures in retail spaces.

### Why retail theft is on the rise

The increase in retail theft can be attributed to several factors, many of which have been amplified by the pandemic and subsequent economic instability. A shift to online shopping has created opportunities for organised crime groups to exploit weaknesses in physical security, leading to a rise in theft. Additionally, supply chain disruptions have made it easier for criminals to steal high-demand goods, including electronics and luxury items, and then re-sell online or in underground markets.

Economic factors also play a significant role in the rise of theft. With many individuals facing financial hardship, theft has become a more prevalent option. Others view retail theft as a low-risk crime, given the relative ease of stealing small, high-value items or engaging in smash-and-grab robberies without facing immediate consequences.

Another contributing factor is the rise in organised theft rings that target multiple locations across large regions. Often using sophisticated methods such as stolen credit card information, stolen/rental vehicles to not set off licence plate readers or employing individuals to steal goods, this type of organised crime has escalated due to the relative profitability and ability to operate with anonymity.

### A new layer of protection

With crime escalating, retail security professionals are adopting inventive strategies to mitigate risks. Among the most effective solutions are canine teams, which serve as both deterrents and active security measures in high-traffic retail environments.

According to the National Retail Federation, nearly 60% of retail security ▶

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executives have expressed concerns over the rise in mass violence and active assailants over the past five years (2023 National Retail Security Survey). In response, many retailers have deployed canine security teams to both detect firearms and explosives as well as to act as a deterrent for potential criminal activity.

Retail centres, which often remain open for 15 hours a day without mandatory security screenings, are particularly vulnerable to threats. Firearm detection canines provide a visible and proactive means of crime prevention. These highly trained dogs and their handlers patrol shopping centres, identifying and tracking firearm-related scents such as ammunition, cleaning solvents and more. Even if a gun has never been loaded or fired in six months, a trained canine can still detect its odour.

Unlike when deploying many traditional security screening processes, these canines operate without invasive physical searches, making them an efficient and discreet option for retail environments whilst providing an extra layer of customer service.

One such canine security team from the Allied Universal Enhanced Protection Services business responded to a "shots fired" alert at a shopping mall. When arriving on the scene, they discovered a man suffering from a gunshot wound and, while administering first aid, the man unexpectedly brandished a firearm. The canine handler

quickly disarmed the individual and continued providing medical assistance until law enforcement arrived.

In another case, a trained canine security team in Dallas successfully intercepted a suspect attempting to enter a shopping mall with a concealed weapon. The canine team's swift detection allowed law enforcement to apprehend the individual before any harm was done.

### Comprehensive security for the future

Retailers recognise that effective security strategies require a holistic security approach; combining trained personnel, smart surveillance and recognition technologies as well as firearm detection canines is key to mitigating threats. The National Retail Federation reports that 53% of retailers are investing in additional security technology and another 50% are increasing capital allocation for loss prevention equipment and staffing (National Retail Security Survey 2023).

**"From violent and petty crimes to economic and social unrest, retail shopping locations are facing unprecedented security challenges."**

As organised retail crime networks become more aggressive and the risk of violent incidents rises, retailers must continually reassess their security strategies. By integrating innovative measures such as firearm detection canine teams with advances in security technology and trained security personnel, businesses can create safer environments for employees and customers alike.

### A resilient future for retail security

As the retail security landscape continues to evolve, the strategies used to protect shoppers and employees need to as well. With continued threats of retail crime and rising incidents of violence, retail locations and shopping malls must take a proactive approach to security. Innovative solutions, such as firearm detection canine teams and advanced surveillance technologies, play a crucial role in mitigating risks and maintaining a safe environment.

A comprehensive security strategy, including well-trained personnel, effective communication and ongoing threat assessments, is essential. As security challenges become more complex, management of shopping locations must remain vigilant, adapt to emerging risks and invest in solutions that prioritise safety and wellbeing.

By integrating human expertise, advanced technology and forward-thinking security practices, businesses can foster safer retail spaces. In an era of increasingly sophisticated threats, proactive and adaptive security measures are more critical than ever in safeguarding the future of retail. ■

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