Security Cameras

Resources

American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS) is the international organization for professionals responsible for security and is dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and productivity of security practices by developing educational programs and materials that address broad security concerns. http://www.asisonline.org/

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Most schools in the United States are safe institutions. However, due to the recent string of school shootings, schools and school programs are working harder to develop programs to address violence, drugs, gangs, and vandalism. One type of deterrent that has become popular is the use of security cameras as a strategy to address these problems.

What Are Security Cameras for Schools?

Security or surveillance cameras are installed in locations throughout a building and its' grounds and are intended to be able to photograph any inappropriate activity which occurs (Green, 1999). These cameras may take still or motion pictures, but typically record via videotape, and can be part of a larger closed circuit television system. These kinds of systems have already become common in public buildings such as banks, government offices, and parking facilities. These systems can be set up with or without audio recording in addition to visual images.

Video camera systems have been most typically used in the following school locations: Parking lots and driveways; cafeterias; building entry areas; hallways; gymnasiums; main administrative offices; computer rooms; science laboratories; and supply closets.

Two approaches exist for using these systems. In one approach, the systems are set up to have a person monitoring the video cameras in "real time" as they are producing images. In this situation, someone who notices inappropriate or suspicious behavior would notify authorities for immediate intervention. Images from all cameras in the system are usually directed to a control center, where they are monitored simultaneously. Sometimes, if equipped, the cameras can be controlled to be panned or zoomed by the person monitoring them, resulting in even more ability to focus on activity of concern. Continuous monitoring requires personnel and training costs to be included in the overall cost of installation and operation.

One of the major problems with monitoring is that there is only a limited amount of time that any individual can pay attention to the monitors over an extended amount of time without missing important events. For example, efforts to try to use camera scenes to stop a student fight as it starts, or to prevent someone from bringing weapons into the facility may be missed if the person monitoring is momentarily inattentive or distracted. When systems are continuously monitored, they usually are also recorded for this reason. As a result, it is still possible that significant events may be missed. Because of both the costs and difficulty of manning a monitoring station, most schools do not attempt full-time monitoring of their systems.

The other approach relies on recording the camera images, so that if an incident occurs, the tapes could be later used as "evidence" to determine what had happened and who had been involved. This approach does not permit real time recognition and intervention in problem situations, but creates a record which is examined later.

Most of video surveillance systems have devices set up to record for a minimum of 24 hours, but some may maintain recorded images much longer. While one-camera systems are possible, it is more likely that multiple cameras would be used and recorded on different tracks of a common videotape or recording medium. In all of these systems someone needs to load tapes or other medium in the recording system on a regular basis- typically daily- in order for the system to record. Videotapes can be re-used only a limited number of times without losing significant recording quality, so the ongoing cost of recording media should also be included in budgeting for these systems.

The greatest asset that a security camera system offers to a school's security personnel is the deterrence factor it introduces to outsiders that do not belong on campus and to students and employees who do. It is assumed that information regarding safety measures, such as security cameras, will spread through a community. This type of reputation can make outsiders reconsider approaching the school, and also cause most

students to reconsider committing offenses in areas monitored by cameras. Nevertheless, some of the most serious incidents of school violence have occurred in spite of security camera systems being in place.

Another benefit of the use of security cameras is the strong evidence they can preserve on tape when incidents do occur. The recorded tape can prove to be very useful to school administration for showing students and parents the student's behavior resulting in disciplinary action, or to law enforcement agencies if crimes occur. Secondary effects that may result from the installation of security cameras may include the "peace of mind" of both students and staff created by the installation of video cameras in areas where crime or violence is occurring. This change of attitude itself may also have far-reaching effects on campus climate, although it has also been suggested that the "big brother" notion of being monitored may also be a negative element in a school's climate.

Many are concerned with the loss of privacy that these surveillance cameras create. This can be an issue particularly where the rate of crime and inappropriate behavior is low. Concerns have been raised that these systems can be used to snoop on staff or students inappropriately, particularly teachers, and may be used for other purposes such as performance review of staff. These issues may be stronger in schools than other commercial or public buildings, since students are required to be present. These systems may also be more controversial where there have been labor contract issues between teacher unions and administration. Few legal issues have arisen where a clear need for these systems has been demonstrated and where policies related to their use have been established and followed, but careful evaluation of legal ramifications is recommended before these systems are employed.

What Do We Know about Security Cameras?

There is no empirical research that could be identified to date that has examined the effectiveness of security cameras in relation to decreased violence and crime in school settings. Certainly, the use of security cameras in conjunction with other safety measures and procedures can provide a safer environment but the extent to which security cameras aid this goal is unclear compared to other measures that could be taken. One problem in understanding the value of cameras specifically is that they often are installed in schools as part of a package of other security measures (such as metal detectors, I.D. badges, etc.) and other measures (such as violence prevention curricula, etc.) making it difficult to determine the relative impact of the camera systems (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). But even the benefit of these larger packages of security technology is not clear-evaluation research has not been adequately conducted.

Making Security Cameras Work

It is essential to identify the purpose and budget for a security camera system, before obtaining equipment (Green, 1999). What are the current concerns and desired outcomes? A cost-benefit analysis should also be conducted to compare the investment in a camera security system with other school needs. It is important to keep in mind when the use of

surveillance technologies in schools is warranted. Surveillance technologies are appropriate when a) offenders need to be identified and their actions documented; b) certain difficult-to-monitor locations are attracting problem behaviors that have not been deterred through other means; and c) the offenders may be students or staff members with legal access to the school (Schneider, 2001). If these are not pertinent in a particular school, this type of system may not be needed.

Locations where cameras will be needed should be identified and prioritized. A decision should be made about whether or how the system will be monitored. A clear idea of how the system will be used, as well as the budget available for maintaining and operating the system in addition to the initial costs will be important. Be certain that a camera system provides the kind of information quality needed in the intended location and for the intended purpose. For example, some systems may produce tapes on which individuals are unidentifiable or their actions are indiscernible because of poor image quality due to location, lighting, or equipment.

Equipment, installation, and system maintenance contract costs will vary tremendously, with the less expensive cameras needing more light to accurately capture a scene, while more expensive cameras tend to be more sensitive, using more sophisticated electronics, and may also permit remote control of the camera. The technology for these cameras is constantly improving and costs have historically been declining; capacity for future upgrades should also be considered. Be sure that once installed, the system meets specifications based on the intended use. Finally, it is imperative that the use of the cameras be periodically evaluated and maintained to ensure proper use and functioning.

Conclusion

Security cameras are not the answer to all school security problems. However, many security products can be useful tools if applied appropriately (School Security Equipment and Technology, 2003). They can provide school administrators or security officials with information that would not otherwise be available, or free up manpower for more appropriate work. The danger, though, is that these technologies may not be applied appropriately. Their intended purposes may not match the equipment system and its capabilities, or they are not well-maintained or staffed after initial installation.

Courtney Miller, Reece L. Peterson & Thad Q. Strom, June 2003

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