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Colorado shooting: Security alarms sound beyond theater industry

Theaters are reviewing security procedures after the Colorado shooting at a midnight movie premier, but security experts warn Americans must learn to be vigilant at all large public venues.



Police block the road in front of an apartment where the suspect in a theater shooting, identified as 24-year-old James Holmes, lived in Aurora, Colo., on Friday.

(Ed Andrieski/AP)

By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer
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Los Angeles

The Colorado shooting at a midnight screening of the new Batman film is sending a chill throughout the entertainment industry.

Parents are holding their children out of midnight screenings, while theater chains are reviewing security procedures and assuring theatergoers they will be safe. And Warner Brothers, the studio behind the film, canceled the Friday night Paris premier of the movie and all interviews with the director and cast.

But security experts say this event is also a wakeup call about the need for more security at all types of large gatherings.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a football game, Disneyland, Six Flags Over America, or a rock concert,” says Jeffrey Slotnick, chair of the Physical Security Council of ASIS, a national trade organization devoted to industrial security needs. “We need to be more vigilant. Americans simply don’t have the luxury of walking around any more without paying attention to what might be going on.”

Mr. Slotnick points to the year-old Department of Homeland Security program dubbed “If You See Something, Say Something,” which encourages all citizens to develop better antennae for detecting suspicious behavior and reporting it.

Take this Colorado shooting, which left 12 dead and 59 wounded, he says. “Somebody saw this man in the parking lot, maybe even going into the theater wherever he got access,” he says, “you can’t hide the four guns he was carrying, as well as ammunition and some kind of incendiary device.”

Beyond that, says Ernest DelBuono, senior vice president at Levick Strategic communications, a Washington-based crisis management firm, there are always signs and indications leading up to this extreme behavior.

“Nobody just wakes up and decides to pick up four military grade weapons and go off to a movie theater and shoot more than 50 people,” he says.

Nonetheless, The National Association of Theater Owners has announced it is working with the Department of Homeland Security to review security procedures and policies for all its member exhibitors nationwide.

The nation’s three largest theater chains, Cinemark, Regal Entertainment, and AMC Entertainment, have condemned the violence and are reassuring consumers they will be safe in the theaters over the weekend.

Cinemark said in a statement that it was “deeply saddened” by the tragedy. In its statement, AMC echoed the feeling, stating, “We are terribly saddened by the random act of violence in Aurora and our thoughts are with the victims and their families.

“For the safety and security of our guests and associates,” it added, “we are actively working with local law enforcement in communities throughout the nation, and under the circumstances we are reaching out to all of our theaters to review our safety and security procedures.”

The statement continues, “being a safe place in the community for all our guests is a top priority at AMC, and we take that responsibility very seriously.”

At the same time, local theater managers are loath to discuss actual security enhancements.

Management at the Pacific Theaters Five in Sherman Oaks referred questions to the corporate office, which did not answer calls. However, the staff at this popular

neighborhood cineplex were unaware of any adjustments being made to security. “Nobody has said anything to us,” pointed out Miguel, selling popcorn behind the counter.

Parents, on the other hand, are making their own adjustments. Fourteen year-old Andy Newman says his mother nixed his plan to go to a midnight screening Friday because of the shootings. “She took me to a matinee instead and told me to call as soon as the movie was over,” he says.

“Americans have yet to understand the threats to their safety, and regard security as an intrusion into their privacy,” says Rachel Ehrenfeld, director of the American Center for Democracy, a New York-based research group.

“In Israel,” she says via e-mail, “well-trained security personnel monitor the entrance to every public building, even supermarkets, and public awareness has stopped many terror attacks and saved many lives.”

Younger Americans are already adjusting to the new normal, says April Masini, an online advice expert who specializes in youthful inquiries. She points to many high schools that have metal detectors to prevent weapons from being transported in backpacks onto campus. “With each act of violence, like the shooting in a Colorado movie theatre, the obvious need for more security becomes clearer,” she writes in an e-mail.

The cost of the security will get added to the ticket price at theatres or whatever venue requires additional security, she notes.

We all will foot the bill because of lone gunmen such as the one in Colorado, she points out, adding, “just like our kids can’t remember rotary dial telephones or children’s sneakers without Velcro, their kids won’t be able to remember a time when they didn’t have to check their backpacks and teenage purses at the door of the mall while they walk through a metal detector.”

Staff writer Daniel B. Wood contributed to this report from Los Angeles

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