



# A Security Manager's Guide to Youth Engagement at Commercial Properties

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# Overview



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Commercial and retail spaces are attractive locations for the general public to visit, shop, and meet with friends or family. Often enticing large crowds, these locations can be thought of as scaled-down representations of the communities they serve, and are popular destinations for young people.

Youth will visit these sites to shop and purchase food, but often they use these environments for socializing with their peers.

Factors that determine a property's appeal to youth include:

- Proximity to schools
- A mix of retailers
- Accessibility to transit

The majority of young people respect the property and generally follow the rules of enjoyment, and typically only a small percentage are known to openly disregard the rules. However, these numbers can be exacerbated when groups of youth engage in altercations or if schoolyard rivalries are acted upon in commercial spaces. Some of these rivalries end in violence.

To add to the challenge, many young people will travel in large groups for protection and/or intimidation and have resorted to carrying weapons to protect themselves. These include items like pepper spray, batons, knives, and in rare cases, handguns.

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Escalating youth activities have led to increased challenges for the employees and security at a property. This can include:

- Increases in security-related incidents
- Requiring increased security presence after school hours or during school holidays
- Deterring other patrons from visiting a property

As the person responsible for security at your property, your job is to counter these issues and make your property a safe and enjoyable space for everyone. Below are five tips for approaching youth issues:

- 1.** Build mutual trust and respect
- 2.** Knowing when incidents occur
- 3.** Recognizing the signs of escalated behaviour,
- 4.** Community support & resources
- 5.** Knowing when to draw the line

# Mutual Trust and Respect Through Engagement

The conventional approach to youth has historically been heavy-handed. Many commercial properties and shopping centres have tasked security departments with an aggressive approach in which youth are immediately threatened with eviction or banning or security guards attempt to physically intimidate young people into leaving. Some properties have gone as far as effectively prohibiting all young people during certain days/hours.

While this aggressive approach may be tempting and appear to be effective, it seldom works as intended. Youths react negatively or even aggressively in response. They lose any respect they might have had for the property or those in authority on the property. In some cases, preventing access based on age is deemed discriminatory, which tarnishes a property's brand and reputation.

The modern approach to youth is more low-key, casual, and relaxed. The focus has shifted to promoting mutual respect and building relationships between the security department and young people. Proactively approaching youth and welcoming them to the centre reminds them security is present, while at the same time offering them the respect that so many young people seek. Treating youth with the same respect as more mature visitors encourage more mature behaviour from youth.

This modern approach is not all "soft". There will be situations in which security will need to be firmer and remind youth that their invitation to enjoy the property will be rescinded if they misbehave. This message should still be delivered respectfully and fairly, ideally at a time when the youth have the opportunity to correct their behaviour. Security's first efforts should be to address the behaviour. If the unwanted behaviour is stopped, the youth can continue to enjoy the property.

# Knowing When Incidents Occur: Recognize a Familiar Situation

A scary, but familiar situation in shopping centres across Canada often happens between 3 PM and 6 PM. The usual activity in the food court and other common meeting places is disrupted when pepper spray is deployed. When the air has cleared and surveillance footage is reviewed, it is discovered that two groups of youth got into some sort of dispute and one (or both) pulled out and deployed pepper spray before fleeing the area. The result is a chaotic scene in which the perpetrators, intended victims, and bystanders are all negatively impacted, and in some cases, require first aid. The effects can be worse for children and people with pre-existing medical conditions – making an already serious incident into a potentially life-threatening one.

Security departments can learn this frequency and type of behaviour and develop a strategy that is proactive in dealing with incidents like this in common spaces. Industry standards are:



Install Guard Tour points to establish a frequent presence



Incorporate regular patrols and proactive Video Surveillance System monitoring



Encourage food court attendants to report unwanted behaviour



Initiate friendly, respectful early contact (welcome upon entry)



Document any incident and review repeat offenders

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Create standard operating procedures and risk mitigation strategies for common weapons that are encountered on your site. Below are the recommended mitigation steps for pepper spray:

## Pepper Spray Mitigation



Engage HVAC systems and open nearby doors to optimize natural ventilation to clear the areas



Avoid going directly into the affected area without protective equipment (PPE) until the air is clear



Stock Pepper Spray Response Kits that includes baby shampoo to clean particles from the victim's eyes and provide instant relief



Ensure property janitorial teams properly clean the area to remove any lingering spray on surfaces



Have caution tape or stanchions available to block access to affected areas until clear

# Recognizing the Signs

Before the majority of incidents (like the one described above), there are signs and behaviours, also known as pre-incident indicators, that suggest confrontations are going to escalate. Groups converging, raised voices, profanities, threats, posturing, clenched fists, and excessive animated movement are all indicators of escalating behaviour.

Security officers should be trained to recognize these actions early and intervene before a situation goes bad. This may include security inserting themselves in the situation to settle things down, breaking up the groups, or in some cases, simply providing a visible presence at the right time to deter escalation.

Great examples of low key, constructive verbal intervention include:

- Hey, how's it going? (Often this low-key engagement is enough to de-escalate)
- Hello, I'm so glad that you are enjoying this space, but I want to make sure that others are also enjoying this property. Please make sure your behaviour is respectful of everyone, including young families.
- Hello, if you want to continue to enjoy the property, please respect our rules of enjoyment.

The key to success is ensuring officers recognize the signs and understand concepts like behavioural baselining (e.g., recognizing normal behaviour) so they can identify abnormal behaviours and situations.



# Community Support and Resources

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A key aspect of a successful youth engagement program is community engagement. Specifically, engaging with the right community resources to support efforts in forging relationships with youth in your area.

- **Parents:** When dealing with underage persons, we cannot lose sight of the fact that they are minors and, whenever possible, we should engage with their parents or guardians. The success of parental participation will vary from parent to parent.
- **Local Police:** Police agencies are statistic driven. As many challenges with youth do not warrant a police report, it is important to create a relationship with police and meet regularly to discuss property-related challenges and include updates on challenges with youth. Determine times and days when youth are in the building and see if police can schedule walkthroughs or visits during those times. Police presence is a strong deterrent to unwanted behaviour.
- **Schools:** Many properties have had great success engaging with local schools and developing partnerships. This can be dependent on the initiative of school leadership; however, engagement has resulted in communication between property, school, and police in identifying problem youth, bolstering school support in promoting appropriate behaviours while on the commonly frequented properties, and even encouraging school's Principals to attend these properties and engaging with youth directly.
- **Community Organizations:** In some cases youth can be encouraged to join boys / girls clubs, community centre activities, or organizations like the Cadets where their youthful energy can be redirected in a more positive way.

# Knowing When to Draw the Line: Strike 3, You're Out!

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Sometimes, regardless of our best efforts, the only recourse with challenging youth is revoking their invitation to the property. This is sometimes called a “ban” or a “bar”, but legally it is a prohibition of entry and can range from 24 hours to one year to a lifetime depending on the severity of the behaviour. Bans should only come into effect when the young person has demonstrated an inability to disassociate themselves from the unwanted activity. In general, lifetime bans should be reserved for only the most heinous offences.

A few comments on bans:

- 1. Bans should be fair and consistent:** Issuing a lifetime or 100-year ban on a 14-year-old is absurd. Issuing a 100-year ban undermines the credibility of the process. When considering duration, apply consistent rules. Youths talk to each other and being fair and consistent is important for a consistent message about what is acceptable and what is not. A reasonable duration is also more likely to be supported by other stakeholders (parents, schools, police).
- 2. Bans should be achievable:** The ideal ban duration should be an amount of time that the young person can actually achieve. We are removing their access to something they enjoy. By setting an achievable duration, we are allowing them to earn back their welcome to the property. If a ban's duration is unrealistically long, the youth is more likely to breach the ban.
- 3. Bans should be enforceable:** Security is an industry with high turnover and shiftwork. Add that to the fact that youth grow up fast and undergo a lot of change in those formative years. A ban over six months would be challenging to enforce. A ban over a year, nearly impossible. The individual may not be recognized and as soon as the ban is unenforceable, it loses its effect.

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**Bans should have an appeal process:** The purpose of a ban is to remove a person's access to the property in hopes they learn from their mistake and improve their behaviour. As such, there should be an appeal process whereby a banned individual can submit a request in writing to have their ban shortened or lifted.

***NOTE: Youth are by definition minors. As such, they cannot legally sign a banning notice. Any notice signed only by the youth would be unenforceable and could undermine the credibility of the security team. It is critical in these cases to engage with the parents/guardians.***

Lastly, keep in mind that while a ban is a prohibition of entry, it is only legally enforceable as trespassing. If any person continually engages in criminal behaviour on a property, the next step will involve working with police to seek a court-ordered "no-go". A breach of which would be arrestable by a Peace Officer per the Criminal Code.

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# Conclusion

The goal of a security manager is to keep your property safe, secure, and enjoyable for all patrons. Youth can present unique challenges to this objective. Some act out, some engage in unwanted behaviour, and some may be armed to defend themselves or attack others. The recommended approach for security departments is to be proactive, low-key, and root interactions and actions with respect, firmness, fairness, and partnership with community resources.

Common youth issues will shift and evolve with trends, social events/movements, and technology. Staying up to date within security networks and neighbouring properties can help you stay alert to emerging challenges. Working with established security leaders like Paladin Security can ensure that your property always follows best practices.