

In Vegas, eye in the sky guards money, not guests

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LAS VEGAS (AP) — Hotel maid Brandi Patrick was chased down the hallway at the Flamingo casino last year by a nearly naked man. She said she had to lock herself in a cleaning closet and, as the man rattled the handle, fumble around in her pockets to find her cellphone so she could call security.

She said she's haunted by the thought of what might have happened if she hadn't had her phone. "Something could happen and no one would know it 'till the end of the shift," she said.

Las Vegas casinos— some of the most closely-watched spaces in the world— don't have video cameras in guest room hallways, an absence that hotel workers like Patrick, patrons and prosecutors say can act as a green light for crime.

Casino bosses say there is no need for extra security: America's playground boasts more cameras per square foot than any airport or sports arena in the country, with thousands of high-tech lenses watching the gambling floors, lobbies and elevators.

All four major Strip casino operators, however, declined further comment.

Closed circuit cameras hidden behind plastic ceiling domes are omnipresent in pop culture portrayals of Sin City. They play a pivotal role during the heist in 2001's "Ocean's Eleven" and in the reconstruction of a crazy night in the 2009 buddy comedy "The Hangover."

Yet the Associated Press found that 23 of the 27 major Strip casinos have no surveillance in hotel hallways or elevator landings. All but four of the 27 hotels are owned by MGM Resorts International, Caesars Entertainment Corp., Las Vegas Sands Corp. or Wynn Resorts Ltd.

The AP arrived at the tally by interviewing casino officials and visiting the hotels that wouldn't comment. Only Caesars Palace, Planet Hollywood, the MGM Grand and Tropicana Las Vegas monitor the halls above the gambling floor.

"People have a false sense of safety when they go to a casino," security consultant Fred Del Marva said. "You think, 'I'm going to Bellagio, they have 2,000 surveillance cameras, so I'm going to be safe.' And you're wrong. The level of security at the hotel level is zero."

Tourist Allyson Rainey said she wishes she'd known no one was monitoring the hallways of Harrah's hotel-casino before her computer was stolen from her room last year. A police detective caught the thief after spotting him clutching her distinctive laptop bag in hotel lobby footage.

But Rainey said more cameras at the Caesars-owned hotel could have prevented the crime.

"The detective told us that the guy had a keycard made, and he was going from hotel to hotel," she said. "He had been doing this for the last eight years, so he obviously knew they didn't have cameras there."

Gary Selesner, president of Harrah's and Caesars Palace, said cameras cannot stand in for vigilance when it comes to preventing "door-push" crimes, or crimes in which a burglar finds a room to target by pushing on doors until one swings open.

"As a hotel operator, I think what you really need is cameras in foyer and in the elevator. That said, we are putting cameras in as we complete renovations because of door-push concerns," he said. The company has installed cameras in at least one tower of Caesars Palace.

Hotel room burglaries account for the great majority of casino crimes, and they've been on the rise in recent years, while burglaries have declined in the rest of the city, according to an analysis of police statistics.

Las Vegas Chief Deputy District Attorney James Sweetin said the absence of cameras not only encourages petty crimes such as burglary but makes more serious crimes harder to prosecute.

He wondered whether stepped up surveillance might have prevented the rape of a 13-year-old boy in a hotel room at MGM's Circus Circus last New Year's Eve, or the assault of an unconscious woman at the Cosmopolitan. He said the woman's assailant avoided cameras by taking the stairs.

Housekeepers have their own scare stories. Patrick said she never reported her brush with the man in the hallway to police or her managers. Hotel officials said they would have conducted an investigation had the incident been reported.

Other hotel maids can recall similar scares, though they too say they don't report them.

In 2011, a 65-year-old maid was punched in the face, pushed into an empty guest room and raped at Bally's casino. Again, the assailant used the stairs. A man has been charged in the case, which is ongoing.

The main obstacle to increased hallway security is cost, experts say.

A midsized hotel might pay \$2 million to install the system and \$100,000 a year to monitor it, according to Art Steele, who directed security at the Stratosphere Las Vegas from 1996 to 2009. The casino, located between the Strip and downtown, is one of the few to place cameras in its hallways. Steele said they helped every day.

The other concern is lawsuits. If casinos set up hallway cameras but ignored the footage, guests might sue for negligence, according to Les Gold, who litigates liability issues for Mitchell Silberberg & Knupp in New York City.

"When they put these cameras in, it deters crime," he said. "But to have a camera that is not monitored is a huge mistake."