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Security measures boost travelers' feeling of safety

Mark Kaminsky traveled through Grand Central Terminal on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, on his way from his home in Briarcliff Manor to work in SoHo.

Like every other morning, he thought nothing about security as he passed through the busy hub. A short while later Kaminsky watched from the windows of his office as the twin towers burned and collapsed.

Nine years later, Kaminsky, 54, still follows that same route to his job in advertising: the Metro–North train to the busy hub that is Grand Central, then on to work in lower Manhattan.

Sept. 11 tribute to Hudson Valley victims

He still doesn't think about security every day. But he does notice the armed National Guard troops patrolling the historic concourse. He sees MTA police with dogs scour the terminal for anything suspicious.

And it does make him feel safer.

"Obviously, Grand Central Terminal is a likely target," he said on a recent morning as he and business associates were about to catch a train. "Honestly, I don't think about it all the time. But when I look up and see them, I'm appreciative. It's reassuring to see them here."

But despite the increased feeling of safety, Kaminsky said he's not sure how significant a deterrent high–visibility security enhancements are against potential acts of terrorism.

"There's no way to completely prevent the kinds of things that can happen," he said.

Security experts agree.

What they disagree on is how much the additional security tilts the scale toward making travelers safer or making them merely feel safer.

Camouflage-clad soldiers at rail stations and exhaustive pre-flight passenger screening at airports were unheard of before the Sept. 11 attacks. Now, people accept them as part of their everyday routine, right down to the rote removal of shoes by passengers as they line up to go through the Transportation Security Administration's screening at Westchester County Airport.

David Ropeik, a Harvard instructor and risk perception consultant, says feeling more secure enhances actual security.

"To the extent that faux security, if people want to call it that, does somewhat contribute to reduced fear, it does help people keep their fears in perspective," he said. "They then can make healthier choices, and that contributes to public safety."

He pointed to the spike in road deaths in the six months after the Sept. 11 attacks as travelers shied away from airplanes and opted for the supposed safety of their cars.

A 2005 Cornell University study found "the 9/11 effect" was responsible for 1,200 road fatalities in the six months after the terrorist attacks, nearly half as many people as died in the twin towers.

"The more emotion clouds our thinking about the risk, the more susceptible we are to making choices that might feel right and actually raise the danger," he said.

As the attacks become more of a memory, he said, people are more likely to question the efficacy of the additional security they encounter. As she waited at Westchester County Airport for a flight home to Bal Harbour, Fla., Helen O'Connor, 68, said she thought little of the additional security she encountered flying to New York for a friend's funeral in Tuckahoe.

"I don't think it's a deterrent," she said as passengers in the room behind her removed shoes and belts before going through a TSA metal detector. "There's sort of a Big Brother feeling about it. We've become very passive. Maybe we want to be taken care of."

Don Collier decided to take care of himself after the Sept. 11 attacks. The 65-year-old lighting engineer from Wellington, Fla., got his pilot's license and bought his own plane, a six-passenger turboprop Piper Saratoga. He rarely flies commercially now.

As he waited at Westchester County Airport for a flight home, he said security is better than it was, although still not foolproof. That, he said, is because it's security that responds to threats rather than anticipates them.

He pointed to the shoe removal at airport screenings. That was put in place in response to London-born terrorist Richard Reid's attempt to detonate explosives hidden in his shoes Dec. 22, 2001, while on board American Airlines flight 63 from Paris to Miami.

Talk of full body scans at airport check-ins increased after last year's Christmas Day bombing attempt in which Nigerian-born Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab allegedly tried to detonate plastic explosives hidden in his underwear while on a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit.

"The more sophisticated terrorists are thinking of what the system doesn't currently account for," he said. He compared security measures to locking your car doors when you park on the street.

"It only keeps the semi-honest people honest," he said. "The professional's going to get in."

That's why security expert Bruce Schneier says virtually none of the security measures put in place since Sept. 11 have done anything to make people safer.

"It doesn't make us more secure at all," he said. "We take away guns and bombs, the terrorists use box cutters. We take away box cutters they throw explosives in their shoes. We screen shoes they use liquids. We limit liquids, they put a bomb in their underwear."

Full-body scanners won't work for the same reason, he said.

"They're going to do something else," said Schneier, who has authored several books on security. "It's a stupid game. Why are we playing it?"

The only security changes that have been beneficial after the Sept. 11 attacks, he said, have been reinforced airline cockpit doors and the realization by passengers that they have to fight back if a threat materializes.

Real, effective security comes from efforts that might not be seen by people in their everyday lives, he said.

"Intelligence, investigation, and emergency response," he said, "stuff that doesn't require us to guess the targets or the tactics."

And even with all that, plotters have shown they can get dangerously close to completing attacks that kill large numbers of people.

Pakistani-born Faisal Shahzad drove a Nissan Pathfinder loaded with explosives into Times Square on May 1 and tried to detonate it. As smoke came from the vehicle, two street vendors alerted police. The device failed to ignite.

Still, anything that makes terrorists work harder to figure out a line of attack has value, said James Carafano, a security expert with the Heritage Foundation, a Washington D.C. think tank.

"These are deterrents," he said. "Are they going to stop a determined terrorist? No. What you're hoping to do is force them to adopt some other technique and when they employ that, you catch them."