

## Homeland Security Trade Show Deserted Even As Industry Grows

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WASHINGTON -- More than a decade after 9/11, it isn't easy to stage a "first-of-its-kind" event centered on homeland security and counterterrorism.

Yet that's what the organizers of a two-day [Counter Terror Expo](#) called their show at the Washington Convention Center this week. While the expo does mark the U.S. debut for the British [trade show company](#), it is among a proliferation of homeland-security-industrial complex gatherings that have mushroomed since the attacks and [far](#) from the largest.

"Counter-terrorism has become a fetish in the U.S.," Robert Grenier, a former director of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, wrote in an email to The Huffington Post. Noting that in 2010 there were "two American deaths from terrorism worldwide, outside of Afghanistan," compared with more than 32,000 Americans dying in traffic accidents at home in 2011, he said, "terrorism may in fact be a significant global problem, but it is not particularly an American problem."

"The reason we focus so obsessively on terrorism is because it is sexy and splashy, and plays to deep-seated fears," Grenier wrote. "And the reason we have a huge counter-terror infrastructure with hundreds of service vendors is precisely because the American people and the U.S. media seem to demand it."

Indeed, there are so many homeland-security trade shows and conferences that [one established outfit](#), POLICE-TREXPO, recently canceled its two annual events "due to tough economic times and competition." Said Leslie Pfeiffer, POLICE-TREXPO's chair: "It's an extremely crowded market."

Gone are the heady days right after 9/11 when [billions of dollars](#) in homeland-security grants flowed out of Washington to local first responders to pay for new equipment and training. Since then, [spending cuts](#) have left local governments with dwindling resources to buy new gadgets or maintain or replace equipment that's now reaching the end of its useful life.

"The exhibits are fine," said John Morrissey, police chief of Kenosha, Wis., "if you have the funding." But his midsize city does not, and with [federal officials focused on more high-risk areas](#), he doubts that will change anytime soon.

Morrissey was one of 1,000 people registered for Counter Terror Expo, which ended Thursday. Visits to the expo on Wednesday and Thursday, however, indicated far fewer individuals wandering among the nearly 100 exhibitor booths on the 50,000-square-foot showroom floor. The eerie quiet was punctuated only by occasional blasts from demonstration target pistols and the whir of remote-controlled bomb-disposal robots.

"This is probably one of the worst I've been to in years," said Jason Henry of Field Forensics, a Florida manufacturer of explosives and hazardous-material-detection devices that was incorporated in September 2001. "Nobody's walking the show."

"It was not as well attended as we expected," said Mark Anderson, a representative of FLIR, which manufactures sophisticated thermal imaging equipment for police and the military and was an event cosponsor. Anderson has observed dwindling attendance at other trade shows over the past two years, he said, adding that fewer government agencies can afford to send employees to industry events.

Still, according to [one private estimate](#), homeland security is still a growth industry, with federal, state and local governments and businesses expected to spend \$205 billion by 2014. At the same time, the [Pentagon is planning sharp cuts](#) in defense spending as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down.

"Unless a war pops up somewhere else, the homeland security mission will become much more important," said John Gritschke, a manager for Laser Shot, a Texas-based maker of training videos. Last year the company did \$20 million in business with the federal government. Most of it was with the military, which included the training of more than 10,000 soldiers at Fort Hood how to respond if their convoys were hit by a roadside bomb.

At the expo, though, attendees at the Laser Shot booth took turns firing a thermal pistol at virtual hostage takers who were enacting a real-life scenario on a large video screen. "You missed her," a representative told a man just before the onscreen female terrorist blew herself up. Told by a visitor that the \$25,000 setup resembled a video game, Gritschke bristled. "This is for training, not for playing," he said. Among his newest customers: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

[Military contractors](#), mindful of coming defense cuts, said they hoped to pick up homeland security customers, continuing a recent [militarization trend among law enforcement](#) agencies. There were companies selling military-grade thermal and night-vision gun sights adaptable for police use and booths featuring bomb-squad robots and other explosive-disposal equipment straight out of "The Hurt Locker."

At one booth, men in combat gear held what looked like military weapons but were actually airsoft rifles. Strikeforce Sports, a pro shop and target range on New York's Long Island, came to the expo in the hopes of rebranding itself as a training center for police and other first responders. That might be tough, given that [some police departments have tried to ban the fake firearms](#), which shoot plastic pellets and are used in simulated military games. Still, Strikeforce Sports' Greg Heddell sees an opportunity. "We would love to have a contract with Homeland Security," he said. More traditional exhibitors hawked small X-ray scanners designed for government buildings, biological and chemical detectors, data-mapping systems for situational awareness and interoperable radios. There were companies that made huge anti-ram barriers and firms that sold tiny explosive detector swipes. Also present were representatives from schools offering degrees in homeland security, including the University of St. Andrews, where Britain's [Prince William romanced his future queen](#). The school offers a certificate in terrorism studies.

Several exhibitors were from the booming cybersecurity business. One was Hacking Team, an Italian firm that provides an "offensive net hacking suite" for launching cyberattacks. The company's slick brochure touts a "remote control system" that can "defeat encryption and acquire relevant data," such as email and "relationships."

"You've heard of wiretapping? This is wiretapping of the future," said Hacking Team account manager Alex Velasco, who declined to name his government customers.

Despite the low attendance at the expo, most exhibitors said business was good. And that concerned Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

"Our panicked response to 9/11 has made a kind of self-licking ice cream that tries to keep us worrying about terrorism and sells us defenses against it," Friedman stated via email. "This conference is a small part of that."

"The good news is that austerity has meant that there is less money for homeland security, shrinking the homeland security industrial complex and bringing it into increased competition with its far bigger cousin, the military industrial complex," Friedman added.

Whether it's war fighters or cops, Patricia Schmaltz of Virginia-based A-T Solutions sees a vibrant market for her company's antiterrorism training classes. "I don't see peace on Earth coming anytime soon," she said.

"We would definitely support it but we don't see it," Schmaltz said. "So long as there are bad guys and nutcakes out there, we'll be in business."