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PlayStation spurs spree of violence

Unruly crowds, high demand and greed blamed for string of incidents.

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Gunshots in Connecticut and Kentucky. Stampeding crowds in Wisconsin. Arrests in Fresno and armed robbers in Elk Grove.

What's behind these random acts of violence? Shopping, it turns out. In cities across the country, the nationwide frenzy to be the first consumers to purchase Sony's PlayStation 3 video game consoles has taken a decidedly ugly turn.

In Fresno, two people were arrested after a melee Thursday night, triggered when Best Buy officials tried to get a large group to form a line.

In Elk Grove, masked gunmen raided a Best Buy store on the eve of Friday's rollout, fleeing with four of the new consoles.

What's driving the violence?

"It's an extension of the supply and demand issue as with any coveted good," said Christopher Null of Yahoo Tech, who closely follows the \$30 billion games business. "It seems frivolous, but there's no accounting for human nature. People are manic for this stuff."

And with only a limited supply of Sony's game consoles on the market, buyers are desperate. Beset by production problems, Sony rolled out only 400,000 systems for its nationwide Friday launch, prompting hard-core gamers, eBay profiteers and living-room Santas to camp out in department store parking lots for a crack at the coveted consoles.

But it's not just simple supply-and-demand that's inspiring the bad behavior. It's also about cold, hard cash.

Some customers were buying the \$500 and \$600 PS3 machines for themselves or as holiday gifts, but many said they plan to quickly resell them at a profit. Units were fetching as much as \$10,000 Friday morning on the eBay auction site.

Sony has promised to have about 1 million machines on store shelves by year's end.

Null of Yahoo Tech was critical of Sony's inventory issues.

"Sony is not smart for not getting their production set up months in advance," Null said. "They can be blamed for having bad business sense."

In Sacramento, most of those camped outside local electronics stores were civil, but a few negative incidents were reported.

About 12:30 a.m. Friday, five men between the ages of 18 and 20 began fighting in the parking lot of the Target store on Fairway Drive in Roseville, said police spokeswoman Dee Dee Gunther. Three had been in line and two had driven past in a vehicle, she said. The fight erupted after derogatory comments were exchanged, she said. There were no injuries, she said.

Also in Roseville Friday, outside the Best Buy store on Galleria Boulevard, police received reports of eggs being thrown by a drive-by motorist and a hammer being tossed by those standing in line at 2 a.m. No arrests were made.

More extreme examples were seen nationwide this week. In some stores, crowds got rowdy and stampeded in store aisles, injuring a man in Wisconsin and forcing authorities to shut down a Wal-Mart store in Palmdale on Wednesday.

In Connecticut, two armed men tried to rob a line of people waiting outside a Putnam Wal-Mart store at 3 a.m. Friday. One person was shot when he refused to give up his money, state police said.

In Lexington, Ky., four people waiting outside a Best Buy were hit by BB pellets, though none was seriously injured, reported TV station WKYT, whose own reporter was hit as she interviewed buyers.

One expert says the hours spent camping in line, the pressure to get the prized consoles and a largely young, male buyer is a volatile mix.

"They're fanatics. That creates tension and stress," said Chris McGoey, a Riverside County -based security consultant and host of the security Web site www.crimedoctor.com. " ... No one establishes any rules. It's sort of the rule of the street."

Is the mania indicative of something more troubling?

Scott Krugman of the Washington, D.C. -based National Retail Federation, the large retail trade association, says no.

"The reality of the situation is that there's not enough (game consoles) to go around. If there's anyone to blame, it's the people committing crimes," he said.

To prevent future incidents, McGoey suggests retailers eliminate queues altogether and institute a lottery system for high-demand, low-supply items and bar overnight camping in parking lots.

Retailers confront these issues every holiday season, said retail liability attorney Paul Caleo, a partner with Oakland-based law firm Burnham Brown.

"Retailers do have a responsibility to help control customers who are waiting in line," said Caleo. "They have a legal obligation not to expose customers to a reasonable risk of harm."

With liability concerns arising from this week's disturbances, retailers face uncertainty in dealing with heavy demand for their products, McGoey said.

"That urgency is good for business. They want that buzz," he said. But it's a gamble "there won't be any trouble."

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