

PROTECTING CROWDED PLACES: **A CASE STUDY IN CROWD SAFETY RISKS**



Beale Street Saint Patricks Day Parade, March 17, 2018 © Peter Ashwin 2018

It's an unfortunate reality that in today's uncertain world, festivals, events and other crowded places where we bring large numbers of people gather on a predictable basis will continue to be attractive targets for acts of violence from issue motivated or fixated individuals, home grown violent extremists or transnational terrorist organizations.

While the risk of terrorism and other violent acts will remain enduring threats for the foreseeable future, one unforeseen consequence of this dynamic threat environment is that we have seen an increase in the occurrence of crowd safety related risks at festivals and other special events.

The recent "stampede" during the Global Citizen Festival (Central Park, NYC) on Saturday 29th September, highlights a crowd safety risk that event organizers and police responsible for special event security must consider, particularly given that many

attendees possess a heightened (perception) fear of terrorist attacks or other acts of violence in crowded places. Places, where our family, friends and communities come together to experience the magic moments associated with festivals and events.

In this edition of 'Yesterday's Incident is Tomorrow's Risk' column, I would like to share some insights on crowd safety risks and findings from a recent study that investigated the relationship between stampedes, anti-social behavior and public safety incidents.

First, in relation to what specifically happened at the Global Citizen festival, while the media portrayed the incident as "a stampede driven by panic and chaos", it is misleading to describe such this incident as a 'stampede' because it implies that people are behaving irrationally or in other words, demonstrating a "herd mentality".

Dr. Chris Cocking, a UK social psychologist who specializes in the study of crowd behavior during mass emergencies, notes

that crowd related incidents commonly referred as stampedes in the media, are often miscategorized and these incidents are more accurately described as an “instinctive crowd flight” or “crowd surge” – crowd movement driven by anxiety and uncertainty, an instinctive behavioral response to preserve one’s own safety to run (flight response).

This instinctive crowd flight response otherwise described as “mass panic” during the Global Citizen festival, shouldn’t be considered as irrational but rather a normative behavioral response by individuals who are caught up in a fast-moving situation without access to accurate information and possess a heightened sense of the potential for acts of violence (active shooters) in crowded places. In the US, this response behavior is also influenced by the “run, hide, fight” training for active shooter scenarios initiated through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Crowd flights or crowd surges (stampedes) are certainly not a new phenomenon for our industry - on the 29th May 2016, Memphis’ iconic Beale Street recorded one of its largest recorded stampedes, after a crowd bike barrier fell over in the vicinity of Club 152 and was mistaken for a gunshot, triggering a large scale, uncontrolled crowd surge with visitors running in all directions on Beale Street.

Cedric Woods, caught up in the Beale Street stampede on the 29th of May 2016, summed this up: “If you think your life is in jeopardy, you’re going to do whatever you have to do (...) (WMC, 2016). <http://www.wmccactionnews5.com/story/32091351/hundreds-Stampede-down-beale-street-in-fear>

In February 2018, Event Risk Management Solutions (ERMS) was commissioned by the City of Memphis (Beale Street Task Force) to “...conduct a crowd control study for Beale Street to focus on objective ‘measurable’ benchmarks for managing public safety generally as well as to investigate the relationship between anti-social behavior and crowd safety within the Beale Street Historic District.”

For this study, ERMS applied an evidence-based approach to identify and understand the nature of crowding and public safety incidents on Beale Street through analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected through on-street observations, stakeholder interviews and surveys, CCTV video data analysis and review of Memphis Police Department and Beale Street Management incident report.

Based on the study of 19 stampedes that had occurred over four (4) years from 2013 - 2017, the key findings from the study provide insights into the root causes that trigger crowd surges, be it on Beale Street or at other festivals like Global Citizen.

The distal (underlying) cause is thought to be an individual’s general fear and anxiety as an innocent bystander being caught up in a violent crime, particularly gun related on Beale Street. This underlying anxiety triggers an instinctive individual behavioral response to run (flight response) when other individuals are seen running or “gunshots” are heard on Beale Street.

The proximate cause (trigger) for the crowd surges and flight response (running from the incident scene) appears to have been triggered by incidents occurring from within the crowd including accidental events of “gunshot like noises” (crowd barrier falling over), public disturbances (fights) and gunshots / shootings within vicinity of Beale Street or other intentional acts of anti-social behavior – youths deliberately setting off fire crackers to replicate gunshots.

Beale Street crowd surges occurred almost immediately after a “trigger” event; were typically very short in duration (5 – 10 seconds) and there appeared to be no direct correlation between crowd size or crowd density in regards to the probability of a crowd surge occurring.

The ERMS report identified 24 risk-based recommendations to enhance existing public safety arrangements and to reduce the probability of crowd related crime and other anti-social behavioral events that were known to trigger stampedes on Beale Street.

A number of these recommendations are applicable not only to Beale Street but for all festival and event organizers:

Ensure that emergency egress routes are free from obstacles and “choke points” that restrict crowd movement - thereby increasing the risk of injuries through slips, trips and falls or in the worst case, trampling or crowd collapse.

Signage and wayfinding indicating emergency exits and routes should be visible from all directions.

Universal communication systems that provide clear instructions and accurate information about nature of the emergency - crowds are known to evacuate more effectively when they have been “trusted with information”.

Conduct crowd management and emergency response procedures training for all event staff (including security and police) who are responsible for directing and controlling attendees during an emergency.

Conduct multi-agency pre-event drills to validate emergency response procedures (including evacuation, shelter-in-place or security lockdown), joint communication protocols and operational integration.

While there is no one solution to mitigating crowd surges or other crowd related risks in today’s uncertain world, adopting a risk-based approach to reducing the likelihood (prevention) and the potential consequences of credible, worst case scenarios (risks), provides organizers and their safety and security partners the opportunity to provide safer environments for our families, friends and communities to experience those magic moments that festivals and events bring to our cities and municipalities.

Peter Ashwin is the Principal at Event Risk Management Solutions in Boise, Idaho / Gold Coast, Australia. Peter Ashwin is an accomplished security and risk management consultant within the international major events environment. He is an innovative leader and project manager who successfully navigates complex, multi-agency environments to deliver effective integration strategies to align and integrate Event Organizing Committees with Government Security Authorities, Police and the private security sector. Peter’s diverse range of skills have been developed through 15 plus years of security planning & operational management for mega events, including the Baku 2015 European Games, ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 (Australia/NZ), six Olympic Games from 2000 - 2012, the 2010 G8 & G20 Summit (Toronto), supplemented by his experience as an Australian Army Special Forces officer. Peter is a regular lecturer and author on Major Event Security and Event Risk Management. In 2015, Peter was invited to join the International Festivals and Events Association (IFEA) World Board of Directors. Peter is based in Boise, Idaho but still calls Australia “home”.