

Managing to avoid disaster: A thematic analysis of crowd safety professionals' accounts of crowd behaviour at the Big Beach Boutique



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Introduction

On July 13th 2002, the DJ Fatboy Slim hosted a free party on Brighton Beach. Organisers planned for 60,000 revellers. However 250,000 turned up, overwhelming those responsible for crowd safety. Although media reports characterised the event as a chaotic near-disaster, the event passed by relatively smoothly.

Objectives

To explore how the crowd safety professionals involved described crowd behaviour at the event and defined the psychological issues associated with managing the crowd.



Method

Thematic analysis was conducted on semi-structured interviews with eight crowd safety professionals (from the local council, emergency services and stewarding services) and on contemporaneous reports of the event

Results 1: The crowd

The crowd safety professionals felt that the crowd were volatile and prone to panic:

"...if people started to rush for the exit and we gave them cause to rush panic as you know in the crowd dynamic would be a disaster..." (Station Officer, Sussex Ambulance Service)

It was felt that the crowd were obstructive (preventing managers from doing their jobs):

"One Sergeant had no hat, baton or handcuffs. They had been stolen as he was punched whilst he carried an unconscious woman from the crowd, whilst defending himself with the other hand..." (Inspector, Sussex Police)

However, the crowd were also described as resilient and key to the smooth running of the event:

"...the key to the event the key to the the fact that it didn't go wrong is only really because the crowd allowed it not to go wrong they were happy they were content they were informed and the mood was great..." (Station Officer, Sussex Ambulance Service)

Results 2: Crowd management

Crowd safety professionals were described as acting professionally:

"...there was a great degree of professionalism really..." (Senior Police Officer)

However, there was acknowledgement that they experienced anxiety and distress:

"...probably the last time I cried at work..." (Brighton and Hove City Council Events Manager)

Crowd safety professionals felt that they had no control over the crowd:

"...we'd already lost control of it and that you know that my worst fears had sort of come true..." (Inspector, Sussex Police)

However, they also felt that their actions helped to maintain control over the crowd and avert disaster:

"...we've managed to avert that [disaster] by good communication with the crowd..." (Station Officer, Sussex Ambulance Service)

Discussion

• Crowd safety professionals drew on the disaster myth of mass panic (see Quarantelli, 2001) when describing the crowd – endorsement of mass panic can be associated with endorsement of coercive and paternalistic crowd management strategies (Drury, Novelli, & Stott, in press)

• Despite having no physical control over the crowd, it was acknowledged that in general, the crowd displayed resilience (see Drury, 2011), which was key to averting disaster.

• Although they felt that they lost control of the crowd, positive crowd behaviours were attributed to good management practices.



- References**
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