

From Mark Breen, Sage Events Global, A guide to Crowd Stampedes, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2025

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## Understanding Stampedes in Crowds and Events

Stampedes are chaotic and dangerous events that can occur when large crowds of people move suddenly and uncontrollably.

They can lead to serious injuries and even fatalities, making it crucial for event organisers, [Crowd Safety personnel](#), Crowd Management personnel, and the public to understand how and why stampedes happen.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of stampedes in crowds, explaining what they are, how they occur, and why they happen.

It also offers insights into preventing stampedes and ensuring [crowd safety](#).

Involving [Crowd Safety professionals](#) will help avoid stampedes, as we will discuss below.

### What is a Stampede in a Crowd?

A stampede occurs when a large group of people starts moving quickly and uncontrollably, often in response to a perceived threat or panic.

People fall, become trapped, leading to injuries and deaths, due to the sudden and forceful movement.

As per [Professor Dr. G. Keith Still](#)

*‘A stampede implies that people had space to run to.’*

‘We’ regularly mislabel incidents that are ‘crowd surges’ or ‘crowd crushes’ as stampedes when they are not.



## **Stampedes and the media**

**As important as it is to understand what a stampede, it is equally important to understand what a stampede is not.**

**Issues at events are often mislabelled as stampedes by the media. They incorrectly assign an irrational, almost animalistic psychological nature to those in the crowd.**

**This misuse can spread misinformation and prevent a proper understanding of the risks associated with crowds. By mischaracterising incidents in this way, organisers, authorities, and the public may focus on the wrong preventative measures.**

**In fact, many instances of mass, sudden movements of crowds at events are logical responses to a situation not involving any panic.**

**They are controlled, rational movements due to a real or perceived threat.**

**Stampedes are uncontrolled and generally accepted to involve panic.**

**In truth, a huge swathe of incidents labelled as ‘stampedes’ in the media are more accurately considered ‘crowd disasters’, of which there are varying types.**

**[Prof. John Drury and his team have researched and written about this.](#)**

## **How Do Stampedes Happen?**

**Stampedes typically occur in crowded spaces where there is limited room for safe movement.**

**Several factors can trigger a stampede:**

### **1. Panic and Fear**

**Triggering Events – Stampedes often start when people panic due to a real or perceived danger. This could be a loud noise, a fire, an act of violence, or even a false alarm.**

**When people believe they are in danger, they may instinctively try to flee the area as quickly as possible.**

**When they panic and do this in an uncontrolled manner, you have a stampede.**

**Chain Reaction – Once panic sets in, it can spread rapidly through the crowd.**

**As more people try to escape, others may follow, even if they are unaware of the actual threat.**

**This creates a chain reaction where the crowd's movement becomes increasingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable.**

### **2. Overcrowding**

**High Density – Stampedes are more likely to occur in situations where the crowd density is high, and people are packed closely together.**

**In such environments, even a small disturbance can lead to a loss of control.**

**Limited Exits – When there are few exits or escape routes, people may become trapped or bottlenecked, increasing the pressure on the crowd and contributing to the risk of a stampede.**

**A lot of our work as [Crowd Safety consultants](#) involves us determining how many exits and what exit routes are needed. We do this on everything from large, multi-storey, challenging structures through to greenfield sites.**

### **3. Poor Crowd Management**

**Lack of Management – Inadequate Crowd Management or security measures can lead to situations where the crowd becomes difficult to manage / control.**

**This may happen if there are too few staff members to manage the crowd, or if the event layout is poorly designed, for instance.**

**While [Crowd Management and Crowd Control](#) are different, failures in either can contribute to stampedes.**

**Inadequate Communication – If attendees are not informed about Emergency Procedures or evacuation routes, they may panic or make poor decisions in an emergency, increasing the likelihood of a stampede.**

**Several underlying factors contribute to the occurrence of stampedes.**

#### **4. Human Behaviour**

**Fear Response – When panicked, people tend to prioritise their safety, often without considering the consequences of their actions on others.**

**This fear-driven behaviour can lead to pushing, shoving, and rushing, which are common triggers for stampedes.**

**It is important to note that contemporary research and understanding has highlighted that ‘mass panic’ does not tend to explain people’s behaviour in emergencies.**

**Panic features far less than was previously believed.**

**Herd Mentality – People often follow the actions of others in a crowd, especially in stressful situations. This herd mentality can amplify the effects of panic, as individuals mimic the behaviours of those around them.**

#### **5. Environmental Factors**

**Confined Spaces – Enclosed or confined spaces, such as narrow corridors or small venues, can exacerbate the effects of a stampede.**

**In these environments, people have fewer options for movement, leading to higher risks of trampling and injury.**

**Unexpected Triggers – Sudden events like fireworks, loud noises, or unexpected announcements can startle a crowd and lead to a stampede, especially if the crowd is already on edge.**

#### **6 Inadequate Planning**

**Event Design – Poorly designed event layouts with limited exits, bottlenecks, or unclear signage can contribute to confusion and chaos during an emergency, increasing the risk of a stampede.**

**Lack of Preparedness – Events that do not have well-defined emergency plans, trained staff, or clear communication strategies are more vulnerable to stampedes, as attendees may not know how to respond in a crisis.**

**We always advise involving your safety consultants early on in the planning process. This can help avoid issues around inadequate planning.**



### **Preventing Stampedes – Best Practices for Crowd Safety**

**Preventing stampedes requires careful planning, effective crowd management, and a focus on safety.**

Here are some best practices to reduce the risk of stampedes at events:

### 1. Conduct Thorough Risk Assessments

Assess the venue, crowd size, and potential hazards before the event. Identify areas where overcrowding could occur and plan for contingencies.

### 2. Design Safe Event Layouts

Ensure that the venue has ample exits, clear signage, and well-defined pathways. Avoid creating bottlenecks or confined spaces where people might become trapped.

[Safety by Design](#) is a key element of what Crowd Safety Advisors like ourselves do.

### 3. Implement Effective [Crowd Management](#) Measures

Use barriers, fencing, and designated entry / exit points to manage the flow of people. Employ trained security personnel to monitor the crowd and respond to potential issues.

### 4. Communicate Clearly and Often

Provide attendees with information about emergency procedures, exits, and safety protocols before and during the event. Use public address systems, signage, and staff to keep everyone informed.

### 5. Prepare for Emergencies

Develop and rehearse emergency response plans with your team. Ensure that medical personnel and first responders are on-site and ready to act if needed.

### 6. Monitor Crowd Behaviour

Keep an eye on the crowd's behaviour throughout the event. If signs of distress or panic appear, intervene quickly to calm the situation and prevent it from escalating.

### 7. Deploy experienced, trained staff

Ensure you have [Crowd Safety personnel](#) who can effectively monitor the crowd and adapt plans. Planning is one thing, but having trusted team members on the ground to make timely decisions is critical also.



## Conclusion

**Stampedes are dangerous events that can lead to serious injuries and fatalities.**

**Understanding what causes stampedes and how to prevent them is essential for ensuring the safety of everyone at an event. Understanding what incidents are not stampedes is also important.**

**Panic isn't as much of a thing as 'we' traditionally think and, similarly, neither are stampedes.**

**By conducting thorough [risk assessments](#), designing safe event layouts, implementing effective [crowd management and control](#) measures, and communicating clearly, event organisers can reduce the risk of stampedes and create safer environments for attendees.**