
Panic at “The Who Concert Stampede”: An Empirical Assessment

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In life-threatening situations, such as a fire in a movie theater, we might expect people to put their own safety first and behave in ways that might unintentionally harm others. Media accounts of the injuries and deaths that occurred at a 1979 rock concert were consistent with this common-sense explanation. However, as Norris Johnson’s research revealed, concert goers did not “stampede” as the media contended. Instead, they actually tried to help one another. This article explores some of the forces behind unexpected human behavior.

On December 3, 1979, eleven young people were killed in a crush entering Riverfront Coliseum in Cincinnati, Ohio, for a concert by the British rock group, The Who. The incident was immediately labeled as a “stampede” by the local media, and commentators were quick to condemn the “mob psychology” which precipitated the seemingly selfish, ruthless behavior of participants. Crowd members were thought to have stormed over others in their rush for good seats within the arena, leading a national columnist (Royko, 1979) to refer to the crowd of young people as barbarians who “stomped 11 persons to death [after] having numbed their brains on weeds, chemicals, and

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Southern Comfort. . . ,” and a local editor to write of the “uncaring tread of the surging crowd” (Burleigh, 1979). . . .

Those who interpreted the incidents in this way and labeled it as a “stampede” recognized that other factors contributed, such as the unreserved seating and the late opening of an inadequate number of doors. The unreserved or “festival” seating prompted many in the crowd to arrive several hours early to compete for the choicest locations within the building. During the hours before the doors were opened, the large crowd became so tightly packed outside the arena doors that some people who wanted to withdraw could not do so, and policemen patrolling the area could not see the problems that were developing near the doors. In addition, the densely packed crowd was swaying to and fro creating a “wave” effect—people at the edge of the crowd were observed shoving on its fringes just to see the effect begin (Stevens, 1979). This resulted in some people being pushed to the concrete floor of the concourse before the surge for entry began. Nevertheless, police described the crowd at this point as “normal” for a rock concert. Soon after the doors opened, as many as 25 people were pushed down into a pile. Eleven died lying on the concourse just a few feet from the entrances, eight others were hospitalized, and several were treated and released at the first aid station. Although the people were not trampled as more dramatic accounts reported, the event did appear to fit the image of panic held by the public and many scholars.

☉ *Previous Research and Theories of Panic*

Many social scientists would categorize the crowd behavior described above as a special form of panic—usually termed an “acquisitive panic” (Brown, 1965) or “craze” (Smelser, 1963). Smelser distinguishes it from the classic panics of escape, e.g., flight from a burning building, in that the latter is a “headlong rush away from something” while the craze is a rush “toward something [the participants] believe to be gratifying. . . .” (1963:170; also see Brown, 1965).

In this form, the competition that arises is not to escape possible entrapment, but to acquire some valued commodity. The special group investigating the event for the city preferred the term “craze” to the “stampede” label affixed by the media (City of Cincinnati, 1980). . . .

Although many collective behavior theorists discuss the phenomenon, systematic studies of panic are uncommon. Researchers conducting such studies generally conclude that panic is a rare form of crowd behavior. Quarantelli and Dynes (1972) report that they have found few instances of panic after years of disaster research. They indicate that even within the famous Cocomanut Grove fire most people did not panic. Smith (1976), a participant observer in a flight from the Tower of London after a 1976 bomb explosion, reported that panic responses were few, and that primary group bonds and roles were crucial in maintaining order in the situation. In fact, primary group ties were important in the minimal panic that did occur. . . .

The core of my analysis is an examination of the Cincinnati Police Division’s file on The Who Concert incident. First, I describe the data source and then present a description of the surge based on that evidence. I then use material from the taped transcriptions of interviews with people present at the concert to assess the extent of unregulated competition, breakdown of group ties, and other behaviors characteristic of panic. Finally, I discuss the theoretical implications of this case study.

☉ *Data and Methods*

My analysis is based on data contained in a file created and kept by the Cincinnati Police Division, supplemented by accounts in daily newspapers. The police file includes 46 statements taken by officers investigating the event—22 from patrons, 13 from police officers present, and 11 from Coliseum employees or private security guards. The file also includes 10 statements presented by patrons at hearings conducted by a committee of the Cincinnati City Council. My pri-

mary data source is transcribed patron interviews and statements that I coded for analysis. I also coded and analyzed six interviews or statements from patrons which appeared in news articles reporting the incident.

I analyzed these materials by developing a questionnaire with which to “interview” each transcript. The questionnaire called for information relevant to theories of panic, particularly evidence of unregulated competition. For example, one question asked whether the “respondent” observed crowd members showing a “lack of concern for others,” and another specifically asked, “Did the person report receiving help from others?” Coded responses to the latter question indicated whether, and from whom, help was received. A similar question concerned giving help to others. Other questions pertained to potential control variables such as age and sex of respondent, size and type of group with which the person arrived, time of arrival, and physical location relative to the doors.

I based most of my interpretations on vivid descriptions of the event by those present, particularly those most directly involved, and on the interviews with policemen, security guards, and Coliseum employees. In addition, I present quantitative results from the 38 questionnaires I coded. Of course, these data represent only those persons selected by others for interview (often because they were injured or had accompanied an injured person) or who came forward to write to newspapers or appear before a public hearing.

☉ *Analysis*

I will focus mainly on the issue of whether the observed behavior involved unregulated competition. I assume that competition in crowds awaiting entry into a concert is regulated by appropriate situational norms. I also assume that such crowds are characterized by a rudimentary social structure, reflecting at least the ties of crowd members to others with whom they arrived. Aveni (1977) has shown that crowd members typically arrive in small, primary groups. Accordingly, all of the persons whose transcripts contain relevant

information reported that they arrived at the Coliseum with at least one other person, most often primary group members such as their spouse or other family member. An important research question, then, is whether these elements of social organization constrained behavior. A second question, which emerged during the research, is whether the conventional distinction between panics of escape and of acquisition (i.e., crazes) is a useful one.

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Helping Behavior

Since most theoretical explanations of panic focus on unregulated competition, the first research question is whether such competition existed in this case. That many people were killed and injured in a crowd of pushing people is not in dispute; the key issue is whether this was the result of callous competition for a seat at the concert at the expense of the lives of others.

However, evidence from the transcripts does not provide support for the theoretical models of panic and is in clear conflict with interpretations reported in the newspapers. One witness before the City Council committee specifically objected to newspaper accounts of the people as animals or barbarians and asserted:

[T]he people in our area were the most helpful people that I've ever known. . . . Everybody I saw was helping everybody else. At some point in the crowd people could not help them. It's not that they didn't want to. They were physically unable to (Police Division, I, YZ).

The coded interview data support this claim. Approximately 40 percent of those interviewed reported helping behavior in each of three coded categories—giving, receiving, and observing help. Of the 38 people interviewed, 17 reported that they had received some help from others, 16 reported that they had given help to others, and 16 reported observing helping behavior by others. Some reported more than one of the categories of helping activities, and when indicators

are combined, more than three-fourths of those interviewed (29) reported at least one form of pro-social activity.

Helping behavior possibly was even more common than indicated by those results. It is likely that additional respondents observed, but did not report, helping activity since interviewers did not ask a direct question concerning helping. In fact, only seven respondents reported action by others that was coded as showing a lack of concern for others, and six of these also reported helping behavior. Thus, just one of the 38 respondents reported *only* self-interested, competitive behavior. Although we cannot infer from this selective sample that a comparably large proportion of the entire crowd continued to behave in a cooperative manner, this evidence does suggest that many of those centrally located within the crowd, at just the location where persons were in most danger, demonstrated concern for others.

Helping behavior began during the early crush, long before the surge, and continued throughout the episode. People simply tried to get people to step back and relieve the pressure, but others around them either could not hear or could not move. One young man noticed that the girl next to him could not breathe and “turned to ask people to back up, but soon realized that the only people who could hear me shouting couldn’t move either.” (Police Division, III, M). A small 17-year-old girl near the doors away from the worst crush . . . reported having problems nearly an hour before the “stampede.” She pleaded with people to let her out, but neither she nor they could move. She told the police detective interviewing her:

I lost my footing an’ slowly but surely began going down. People behind me could do nothing to stop the pushing. I was saying “No. No. Please help me . . .” Some of the people around didn’t even hear me. . . . So then I grabbed someone’s leg an’ whoever that was told three other guys about me. They all pushed me up, pulled me up, but it was hard. . . . At about 7 o’clock I passed out. The four guys who pulled me off the ground helped me to stay up until we got through the door (Police Division, II, V).

Another person reported a similar observation from the view of the person trying to give help:

Smaller people began passing out. I attempted to lift one girl up and above to be passed back. . . . After several tries I was unsuccessful and near exhaustion (Police Division, III, M).

A few were successful in extricating themselves and helping others out of the crush. One man reported that he and friends picked up and carried from the crowd two nearly unconscious girls who had fallen (Police Division, III, M). These particular young men knew the girls they helped, but many helped others with whom they had no social ties. Thirteen of the 17 mentioned above as having received help were aided by others they did not know, and 12 of those 16 giving help gave it to strangers. As one person reported in a letter to a newspaper, “Total strangers probably saved my life” (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, 1979).

Helping became increasingly difficult after the first persons fell near the doors at the entrance and the pile of people . . . , which was described as being 10 to 12 feet in diameter, began to form. Persons not in the immediate area were unaware that others had fallen, and those nearest the fallen who might have helped were themselves in danger of being pushed onto the pile. For instance, one person who, with his wife, was pushed atop the fallen described the situation in this way:

At that point everyone around the perimeter of the circle, of course, was trying to back off and trying to help the people get up onto their feet, but the people in the back of the crowd, of course, could not see this and continued to push forward (Police Division, II, L).

Those who helped others to their feet were not alarmed at first, but then they began to fall. The press forward was impossible to stall, and those on the ground could not be protected. . . .

Although most of the evidence leads to a conclusion that acts of ruthless competition were rare, there *were* such reports. For instance,

one patron, who from a position just inside the arena doors was pulling people inside to safety, reported being angry with the mob:

People were climbin' over people ta get in . . . an' at one point I almost started hittin' 'em, because I could not believe the animal, animalistic ways the people, you know, nobody cared (Police Division, II, A)

But both the analysis of the coded transcripts and the impressionistic accounts indicate that, even in the face of the throng, most persons tried to help others as long as possible. If a total disregard for others developed—and there is hardly any evidence that it did—it was only after cooperation was no longer possible.

Sex Differences in Helping Behavior

Normative expectations dictate generally that the stronger should help the weaker; specifically, men are expected to help women. The evidence indicates that such sex-role expectations continued to be an important influence on behavior during the event. Nine of the 13 females received help while only one reported giving help. On the other hand, almost twice as many men gave as received help. A few (three) reported helping their wives or members of their group, but, as noted above, most gave help to those around them, either friends or strangers. Thus, the sex-role norms of men helping women did not collapse when confronted with a threat.

Altruistic behavior, either generally or specifically toward women, was not universal; there *was* selfish competition. For instance, a young woman, interviewed in her hospital room late on the evening of the concert with the horror still fresh in her memory, complained that no one would move back:

They just kept pushin' forward and they would just walk right on top of you, just trample over ya like you were a piece of the ground. They wouldn't even help ya; people were just screamin' “help me” and nobody cared (Police Division, II, Mc).

And referring to another person who fell alongside her, she said,

I knew she was unconscious or something. And then everybody just trampled her like she wasn't even there; they just standin' on her (Police Division, II, Mc).

Another hospitalized woman reported a similar experience:

And there was a big group of people in front of me that had fallen down and people just went mad. They kept, you know, shoving' over me; they wouldn't help them get up; they wanted inside. . . . I fell down with them and no one helped me up and I—there was no way I could get up—and they just kept—there was people fallin' on me and then people walkin' over my legs tryin' ta get through the door (Police Division, II, P).

Similar reports are included in the interviews with arena employees. But both women quoted above as having been trampled also reported receiving help. That they recognized the difficulty of helping is evident in the second woman's remark that “there was really no way they could help me because there were so many people tryin' to shove over the top of me that they would have to clear all them out just even to see me” (Police Division, II, P).

Overall, these data seem to confirm the continuing importance of normative expectations. Even with the possibility of self-serving statements and the possibility that men are likely to say they gave help to women, the evidence is compelling.

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☉ Conclusion

We cannot conclude from one study that there are *no* situations in which competition for some valued commodity occurs without regard for social obligations. Perhaps there are situations such as a fire in a crowded theater in which people totally ignore others as they try

to escape from danger. However, documented cases of either form of panic are surprisingly scarce in the literature.

One possible reason for the lack of evidence or unregulated competition in The Who concert incident is that the appropriate conditions did not exist. Perhaps the people in this situation did not place such a high value on a preferred location for the concert that they would do harm to others in order to get inside; perhaps those trying to escape the crush did not actually perceive a serious threat to their lives. Kelley et al. (1965) have noted that panic-like responses are less likely when there is variation in perception of the danger; those who define the situation as less urgent are more willing to wait their returns. In this case, those who placed less value on their concert location would be less likely to compete with others. Many did try to leave the crush, giving up their valued locations nearer the entrance. Mann et al. (1976) reached a similar conclusion in their study of the bank run.

But the repeated failure of researchers to find examples of ruthless competition suggests another conclusion. Most crowds are comprised not of unattached individuals but of small, often primary, groups (Aveni, 1977; Smith, 1976). Group bonds constrain totally selfish behavior, even when the situation seems life threatening; thus, the type of unregulated competition generally labeled as panic occurs very infrequently. More case studies of such infrequent and irregularly occurring social forms must accumulate before general conclusions can be drawn with confidence. However, the evidence from this study is more than sufficient to discount popular interpretations of “The Who Concert Stampede” which focus on the hedonistic attributes of young people and the hypnotic effects of rock music.

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Questions

1. What is a panic of acquisition (i.e., a craze)? How does it differ from a panic of escape?
2. What research methods did Johnson use to study the panic that occurred at the concert? What are some other ways by which a sociologist might study this phenomenon?

3. How did social expectations for the behavior of men and women affect the events that occurred at the concert?
4. What conditions at the concert may have kept ruthless competition from occurring? Do these conditions forestall competition in other social settings? Explain.