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Maximizing Security at Soft Target Crowded Places Events

By Steve Wilder, CEO, Sorensen, Wilder & Associates

Introduction

It's that time of year again...community celebrations, music festivals, carnivals, religious gatherings—all events where large groups congregate with minimal protective measures...known as Soft Target Crowded Places (STCP). The open and accessible nature of these events makes them appealing to the public, but also prime targets for malicious actors seeking to inflict harm or chaos.

In these soft target crowded places where threats continue to grow in scale and sophistication, organizers and public safety officials must shift from reactive approaches to proactive, coordinated security strategies. This article provides a comprehensive look at how to maximize safety and preparedness for STCP events while preserving the community spirit and openness that define them.

Understanding the Threat Landscape

The risks facing STCPs are diverse and dynamic. From active shooter incidents and vehicle ramming attacks to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and drone-based threats, malicious actors exploit these venues' limited defenses. Historical tragedies, such as the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, and the July 4, 2022 Highland Park, IL parade shootings underscore the devastating potential of such attacks.

To combat these threats, preparedness must start with a thorough risk assessment. This includes:

- Vulnerability mapping of the venue
- Threat identification, likelihood and impact analysis
- Evaluating past case studies to identify patterns and gaps in preparedness
- Security measures review
- Access and egress points

By understanding the likely or specific threats applicable to an event's location, type, and audience, organizers can tailor mitigation strategies effectively.

Planning and Coordination

Security begins long before the first guest arrives. Successful safety outcomes hinge on early and inclusive planning involving all stakeholders.

Develop a Security Team

A security team is a critical component in the successful planning and execution of any Soft Target Crowded Place (STCP) event. These public gatherings—such as festivals, religious services, or sporting events—are inherently vulnerable due to their open access and limited structural protections. A dedicated security team helps mitigate risks by proactively identifying threats before they materialize. Their work begins in the planning stages, where they conduct site-specific threat assessments to evaluate vulnerabilities such as unsecured perimeters, blind spots in surveillance coverage, and poorly managed entry points. This intelligence informs the creation of a comprehensive risk mitigation strategy that addresses

- Site characterization

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everything from active shooters to drone incursions and crowd control challenges.

Build a multi-disciplinary security committee comprising:

- Local law enforcement
- Security consultants
- Fire and EMS
- Private security integrators
- Venue management and event organizers

Emergency Action Planning

Developing an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) for a Soft Target Crowded Place event is a critical step in ensuring preparedness, coordination, and a swift response in the face of emergencies. An effective EAP should be tailored specifically to the event's layout, expected attendance, and threat profile, and must be created in collaboration with security personnel, event organizers, and local emergency services. The plan should clearly outline roles and responsibilities for staff and volunteers, communication protocols (including internal radios and external emergency services contacts), and response procedures for various scenarios such as active shooter incidents, severe weather, fire, medical emergencies, or hazardous material exposure. It must also incorporate detailed evacuation routes, shelter-in-place locations, staging areas for emergency responders, and accommodations for individuals with disabilities. To ensure effectiveness, the EAP should be distributed to staff in advance, rehearsed through tabletop and live drills, and reviewed regularly to integrate lessons learned and adapt to emerging threats. A well-crafted EAP not only enhances safety, it builds confidence among attendees, staff, and stakeholders that the event is being

conducted with the highest standards of preparedness.

An effective Emergency Action Plan (EAP) must delineate:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Emergency communications
- Response protocols for various scenarios (e.g., evacuation, shelter-in-place)

Pre-event tabletop exercises and simulation drills should validate these plans and ensure all teams understand their duties.

Physical and Technological Safeguards

Layered security, often referred to as defense-in-depth, is key to deterring, detecting, and disrupting threats. These layers include:

Perimeter and Access Control

- Establish Secure Perimeters
- Implement Credential Checks
- Use Screening Procedures at Entrances
- Employ Tiered Access Zones
- Leverage Technology for Access Control
- Staff Entrances with Trained Personnel

Surveillance and Monitoring

- Install CCTV cameras with AI-driven analytics to detect suspicious behaviors.
- Employ drones for aerial surveillance, while also planning for anti-drone countermeasures.
- Consider smart credentialing systems such as RFID badges or facial recognition, while remaining mindful of privacy implications.

Human Intelligence and Awareness

While technology plays a vital role in enhancing safety at Soft Target Crowded Place (STCP) events, it cannot

replace the critical judgement, intuition, and adaptability of trained human personnel. Technology can detect threats, but it takes a person to assess intent, de-escalate tense situations, and make dynamic decisions in real time. For example, an AI system might flag suspicious behavior, but only a trained staff member can interpret context, engage with the individual, and decide on appropriate action. Moreover, in high-stress situations such as evacuations or medical emergencies, attendees often rely on the calm presence and clear guidance of human staff—not software. True security comes from a hybrid approach where technology enhances, but does not replace, the human element at every layer of event planning and response.

Staff and Volunteer Training

Training staff and volunteers is essential for the success and safety of any STCP event. Well-trained personnel serve as the frontline defense against potential threats, ensuring quick identification of suspicious behavior, effective crowd management, and confident execution of emergency procedures. Their ability to communicate clearly, assist attendees, and respond calmly under pressure can significantly reduce risk and enhance the overall security posture. Simply put, a prepared team is a safer team—and comprehensive training turns ordinary event staff into vital partners in public safety.

All personnel should be trained in:

- Situational Awareness and Threat Recognition
- Emergency Procedures and Response Protocols
- Communication and Reporting
- Crowd Management and Customer Service
- Access Control and Credential Verification

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- First Aid and Basic Medical Response

Public Engagement

Communicating security measures to the public at a STCP event should strike a careful balance between informing and reassuring. The key is to emphasize that visible safety protocols—like bag checks, security personnel, and emergency exits—are in place to protect everyone and ensure a smooth, enjoyable experience. Use friendly signage, trained staff with a welcoming tone, and clear but calm announcements to explain procedures without creating apprehension. Framing safety as a shared responsibility can empower the public without instilling fear. The goal is to foster a secure environment that feels safe, not scary.

Encourage attendees to participate in safety through:

- “See Something, Say Something” campaigns
- Visible signage outlining how to report suspicious activity
- Easy-to-access information booths or mobile apps with safety info

Partnerships with First Responders

Strong ties with local emergency services enhance response effectiveness.

- Conduct joint scenario-based exercises to build familiarity and test interoperability.
- Establish mobile command centers and ensure shared radio communication channels.
- Pre-state medical triage areas and responder access routes within the venue layout.

This coordination ensures a unified response during crises.

After-Action Review and Improvement

No plan is complete without a comprehensive post-event evaluation. A STCP After-Action Review (AAR) is vital for continuously improving event safety and security. It brings together key stakeholders—such as security teams, event organizers, and emergency responders—to evaluate the effectiveness of planning, communication, and response strategies used during the event. By analyzing both successes and shortcomings, the AAR helps identify specific areas for improvement, validate what procedures worked well, and ensure that lessons learned are integrated into future planning. This process transforms real-world experience into better preparedness, ultimately making each subsequent event safer and more resilient.

- Conduct After-Action Reviews (AARs) with all stakeholders.
- Document lessons learned, gaps in response, and feedback from attendees.
- Use this information to update policies and training for future events.

This cycle of continuous improvement is vital to long-term security resilience.

Balancing Safety and Guest Experience

Balancing safety with guest experience is essential at STCP events to ensure that security measures do not overshadow the enjoyment of attendees. While strong security is critical, overly aggressive or visible tactics can create anxiety or discomfort, potentially deterring participation. By integrating discreet yet effective safety protocols, like friendly security personnel, clear signage, and seamless screening processes, organizers can create an environment that feels both safe and welcoming. Striking this

balance builds public trust, encourages cooperation, and helps ensure the event is both secure and enjoyable for everyone. Overt security can be intimidating if not handled with care. Striking a balance is essential.

- Train staff to provide security with hospitality, being approachable, professional, and calm.
- Utilize uniformed and plainclothes police officers and low-visibility technology to reduce the sense of over-surveillance.
- Clearly communicate privacy policies related to surveillance or data collection to maintain public trust.

Security measures should feel like a seamless part of the event, not a barrier to enjoyment.

Conclusion

As threats continue to evolve and incidents become more frequent, the security of Soft Target Crowded Places must be ready to meet the challenge head-on. With solid planning, sharp use of technology, strong communication with law enforcement, and capable, well-trained personnel, we can protect the public spaces where people come together. Every event is a chance to stand watch, protecting lives while keeping the spirit of the gathering intact. When safety is built into the foundation through disciplined preparation and decisive execution, success isn't left to chance, it's ensured.

About the Author

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Lung Health in the Office

By Work Right, NW

When you think of workplace lung hazards, bustling construction sites or manufacturing floors probably come to mind. However, even in the calm environment of an office, invisible risks can threaten your lung health. Poor ventilation, hidden mold, and exposure to chemicals in everyday office products are just a few of the hazards that can impact your respiratory system over time.

Office Environment Risks

- **Indoor Air Pollution:** Modern office buildings are often tightly sealed for energy efficiency, which can trap pollutants like dust, mold spores, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from carpets, furniture, and paints.
- **Poor Ventilation:** Inadequate ventilation systems fail to circulate fresh air, leading to the buildup of carbon dioxide and other contaminants.
- **Mold and Mildew:** Leaky pipes, poorly maintained HVAC systems, or damp areas can foster mold growth, triggering allergies and asthma.
- **Cleaning Chemicals:** Regular use of disinfectants and air fresheners can release harmful fumes, especially in closed spaces.
- **Printer and Copier Emissions:** High-volume printing releases fine particles and ozone into the air, contributing to respiratory irritation.

Keeping the Air Clean

- **Improve Ventilation:** Ensure HVAC systems are regularly maintained and that air filters are replaced routinely. Open windows when possible to increase airflow.



- **Use Air Purifiers:** HEPA-filtered air purifiers can help capture fine particles and reduce indoor pollution.
- **Monitor Air Quality:** Request regular indoor air quality assessments to identify hidden risks.
- **Control Humidity Levels:** Keep humidity between 30% and 50% to prevent mold growth.
- **Limit Chemical Use:** Opt for green-certified cleaning products and minimize the use of harsh air fresheners.
- **Reduce Printer Use:** Encourage digital documentation to cut down on high-volume printing and ensure printers are placed in well-ventilated areas.

Unlike acute injuries, lung damage from poor air quality accumulates over time, often going unnoticed until it's too late. Conditions like asthma, chronic bronchitis, and even long-term lung damage can result from continuous exposure to indoor pollutants. By staying proactive and ensuring your workspace is properly ventilated and maintained, you protect not only your lung health but also your overall well-being.

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