

Cover story

From the start, violence follows the beat



In Cincinnati: Shoes are the only evidence of the carnage-causing crush at a 1979 Who concert.

Mosh pits often lead to injuries

Continued from 1D

safety expert. Among the findings: ▶ Injuries are at their highest level in a decade, according to industry watchdog Paul Wertheimer. Wertheimer, a consultant who started focusing on concert safety after working for the city of Cincinnati at the time of The Who tragedy, counts 19,723 injuries and 70 deaths worldwide at concerts and festivals in 1999, up from 5,711 injuries and eight deaths in 1998.

Wertheimer says his data — compiled from news and police reports, industry sources, his own concert attendance and other research — are not all-inclusive and understate the problem.

“My database is the one-eyed giant in the land of the blind,” he says. “They make it as hard as possible to gain any kind of data.”

▶ Given the lack of complete data, the extent of the problem is one of the industry’s most closely guarded secrets. The federal government’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, which tracks mishaps ranging from falls to homicides, keeps no record of concert injuries, spokeswoman Sandy Bonzo says. “It would require a special investigation.”

Venues — which, because of industry consolidation, are increasingly under the umbrella of big corporations such as SFX Entertainment — refuse to release their data.

“I’m not sure it’s relevant to talk about the percentage or number of injuries at any of the events that the company produces, unless the company deems it to be a health ... concern,” says Mitch Slater, SFX executive vice president.

“There is no reason for the public to be concerned.”

▶ Festival seating — the practice of selling fans a ticket for an area with no seats — remains pervasive, despite its role in injuries. So do the dangerous expressions it spawns — mosh pits, crowd surfing and squeezed fans.

The nine deaths at a Pearl Jam concert in Denmark on June 30 were blamed, in part, on a crowd surge in a festival seating area in front of the stage. At The Gorge, an amphitheater in George, Wash., 16-year-old Harjeet Jagpal was found unconscious after a mosh pit collapsed during a Blink 182 concert June 16. He remains in a coma.

Festival seating has contributed to hundreds of other injuries this summer. The all-day HFStival drew 83,000 fans to FedEx Field in Landover, Md., outside Washington, on May 28. At the first-aid tent, 1,019 people were treated, including 61 with lacerations, sprains or other problems considered serious enough to warrant a hospital trip.

▶ Fans have become more volatile, fueled by drugs, alcohol and anger. On July 29, a fan was stabbed in a mosh pit during a show by NOFX in West Palm Beach, Fla. “It’s not a happy crowd, which it used to be,” says Nina Crowley, director of Mass Mic, a non-profit advocacy group that fights music censorship.

In mid-July, when the Ozzfest rolled into the Nissan Pavilion, an SFX-owned amphitheater in Bristol, Va., staggering, inebriated fans were not uncommon — perhaps inspired by show namesake Ozzy Osbourne, whose various addictions recently were chronicled in *Rolling Stone*. In a steady stream, police and security hustled dozens into vans for a trip to the detention center. Final tally: 134 arrests for drug possession and public intoxication, according to the Prince William County Police Department.

“The drunk people are the only ones who start fights,” said 18-year-old Tim Vertin, watching the scene from the security area.

Another problem: sexual assaults. Crowley says young men feel free to grope women. And organizers of shows frequently don’t help. At the WBCN River Rave, an all-day concert May 27 at Foxboro Stadium, outside Boston, the person operating the video screens encouraged women to bare their breasts by typing messages such as “You know you want to.”

“It’s a big problem,” Wertheimer says. “It’s one thing for a guy next

Injuries and deaths have always been a part of the rock concert experience. Some significant events:

March 21, 1952, Moondog Coronation Ball, Cleveland

Disc jockey Alan Freed’s rock ‘n’ roll party erupts into a riot. One patron is stabbed; dozens are injured.

Aug. 15-17, 1969, Woodstock, Bethel, N.Y.

Six thousand are treated for injuries at the seminal music festival. Three die: one run over by a tractor, one from a ruptured appendix and one from a drug overdose.

Dec. 6, 1969, the Rolling Stones, Altamont, Calif.

A Hells Angels member, part of the festival’s security, kills an 18-year-old fan. Three others die in accidents; 850 others are injured.

Dec. 3, 1979, The Who, Cincinnati

Eleven are crushed to death and dozens are injured as the crowd tries to enter Riverfront Coliseum for a festival-seating show. The city later bans shows with general admission or festival seating.

June 13-15, 1986, Ozzy Osbourne/Metallica, Long Beach, Calif.

Three die: one from an overdose, one from a stabbing and one after a fall.

Dec. 19, 1987, Public Enemy, Nashville

Two girls are crushed to death when fans rush out of the auditorium after reports of gunfire.

Jan. 18, 1991, AC/DC, Salt Lake City

Three teenage fans die from the crush in the festival-seating area.

May 11, 1996, Smashing Pumpkins, Dublin, Ireland

A 17-year-old girl dies and scores are injured after there’s a crowd crush in a mosh pit.

July 23-25, 1999, Woodstock 99, Rome, N.Y.

An estimated 10,000 people receive first aid at the concert, which ends in rioting and rapes. Three die: one from heatstroke, another who was hit by a car and the third from a heart attack.

June 30, 2000, Pearl Jam, Roskilde, Denmark

Nine are crushed to death in a festival-seating area in front of the stage.

Sources: Crowd Management Strategies, USA TODAY research

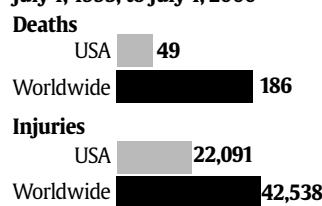


By Grarup Jan, AP

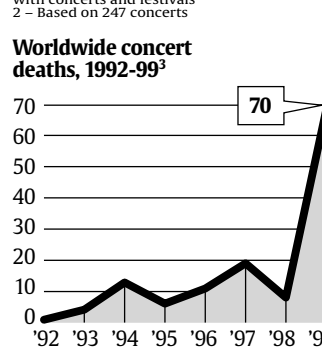
In Roskilde: Nine trampling deaths at a Pearl Jam concert June 30 leave young fans in tears.

Concert casualties continue to rise

July 1, 1995, to July 1, 2000¹

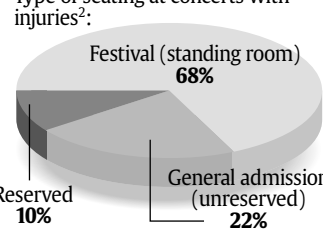


Worldwide concert deaths, 1992-99²

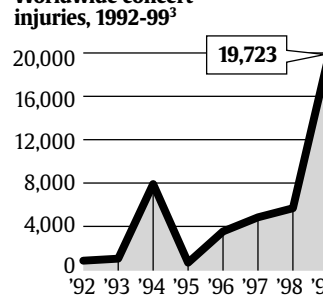


Seating plays a role

Type of seating at concerts with injuries²:



Worldwide concert injuries, 1992-99²



¹ - All injuries and deaths associated with concerts and festivals

² - Based on 247 concerts

³ - Injuries and deaths attributed to crowd safety problems; based on an annual survey of about 215 concerts.

Source: Crowd Management Strategies' "Rock Concert Safety Survey"

By Julie Snider, USA TODAY

to a girl to be yelling. 'Show us your (breasts)'. It's another thing for it to be coming from the stage."

Along with the injuries, there's no shortage of blame. Bands complain about venues. Security points to bands, saying they incite crowds. And lawyers, filing lawsuits for the injured, offer a litany of alleged negligence.

When reports surfaced that police in Denmark were holding Pearl Jam "morally responsible" for the crowd crush that killed nine people there, band manager Kelly Curtis posted a message on the band's Web site calling the charge "ludicrous." Later, in a statement given to USA TODAY, Curtis defended the band's safety record and shifted the focus to organizers — specifically to security and to medical personnel. He also cited low visibility from the stage and alcohol as problems.

"At least 15 minutes passed between the time a member of the Festival security team identified a potential problem and the time we were informed," he wrote. "If we had been informed ... we could have stopped the show earlier." Danish police, who have backed off their criticism of the band, are still investigating.

In the USA, criticism from artists centers on decisions made at concert sites. "Plenty of venues do a great job, but sometimes venues aren't rated (for capacity) high enough," says Peter Katsis, whose company, The Firm, manages Korn, Limp Bizkit and the Backstreet Boys, among others. "They'll rate the floor to hold 3,000 people, but they'll play it safe and only (allow) 1,500."

That practice, he says, creates more open space with festival seating, giving mosh-minded fans more room to run around. Venue officials "don't realize that kids could get hurt if they have more room to wind up," Katsis says.

Other times, public officials make questionable calls. At this year's HFStival, fire authorities decided to allow festival seating even though Maryland law bans it in any building holding more than 1,000 people. After consulting with the state fire marshal's office, the fire department decided that FedEx Field, where football's Washington Redskins play, was outside the restriction because the law did not apply to an open-air stadium.

The National Fire Protection Association, which created the code on which Maryland's law is based, disagrees. Its ban on festival seating "is intended to apply to a situation where you have any kind of confinement," NFPA engineer Robert Solomon says.

During the show, aisles leading from the field up to the seats were so jammed that fans climbed over 8-foot walls to get up, says Wertheimer, who was there with his camera. "They knew there was no capacity limitation for the field. It was way overcrowded."

Meanwhile, bands draw their own criticism. One of Katsis' acts, Limp Bizkit, was roundly criticized for helping whip up the volatile crowd at Woodstock 99, which later disintegrated into rioting, with thousands of injuries. The band's frontman, Fred Durst, "is a total idiot," says Cory Meredith, owner of Staff Pro, which provides security and other staff for events in Southern California. "He continually calls people down front, saying, 'Screw security — I want everybody to

come down front.' People are going to get injured, and he doesn't care."

Katsis blames promoters who book rock shows into venues, such as amphitheaters, that are designed for sit-down concerts. "They're not designed to let the crowd participate," which builds frustration, he says.

And then there are the injured plaintiffs and their attorneys.

Wertheimer has been able to identify 178 lawsuits filed between July 1995 and July 2000, though he says the actual number is probably far higher.

One case working its way through the courts involves Randy L. Adams, now 27, who suffered a crushing chest injury in a mosh pit at a Metallica concert at Deer Creek Music Center in Noblesville, Ind., in July 1994.

"They said that when they found him, they had to use a defibrillator ... to get his heart going again," says his father, Randy R. Adams. His son was in a coma for three months. Today, he's in a persistent vegetative state.

"I look at him, and sometimes I can't help but cry a lot," the father says. Adams sued the venue, Metallica, the promoter and others connected to the event, charging that all failed to prevent or properly supervise moshing.

"Parents send kids to concerts expecting them to have a good time," says Stanley Kahn, the family's attorney. "But who knows about the violence that occurs in that environment? Why isn't there a warning placed on the ticket by the venue owner? Why isn't there a video made to show the dangers? Why doesn't the band come on and say, 'Don't do it?'"

The venue and band declined to comment, although Metallica attorney Howard King says: "The band does not control what goes on at the venue. It's impossible."

Industry officials dispute that claim. "The artist controls the concert, and anyone who tells you he doesn't isn't telling the truth," says Florida entertainment insurer Walter Howell. "The artist can stop anything he wants."

But the ultimate finger-pointing, heard from many in the industry, is back at the fans.

"To me, moshing is done by people who have a desire to mosh," says Gus Kontopoulis, who operates Elite Show Services, a security and event staffing company in San Diego. "If I go into a mosh pit wanting to mosh and I catch an elbow to my mouth and get a couple of teeth knocked out, I have nobody to blame but myself."

But in Seattle, where Scott Stone, now 18, endures the changes to his life, questions remain about how an event meant to entertain can turn so dangerous.

Some of those questions are being aired in court. The family is suing Rage Against the Machine, Seattle, the security company and the promoter. Webb, the family's attorney, has amassed hours of depositions that he says point to a breakdown in responsibility. The defendants, in response, question whether the boy was even injured at the show. Marcia Nelson, a city attorney, says that because no one has reported seeing Stone get hurt, the lawsuit should be dismissed.

"It's appalling to me," Catherine Stone says. "Parents should know that the people in charge are not protecting their children."

Safety crusader at forefront

By Anthony DeBarros
USA TODAY

CHICAGO — Paul Wertheimer's crusade for safer concerts takes him from chaotic mosh pits to courtroom witness chairs. His reward: the nearly universal derision of the concert industry.

"He's kind of a self-made guy," scoffs Cory Meredith, owner of a Southern California concert staffing and security firm. "A self-proclaimed expert."

Wertheimer, 51, runs his Crowd Management Strategies consulting firm from his apartment in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. And he has indeed made a name for himself by pushing a mantra the industry loathes: stricter crowd-control standards. He's at the forefront of what have otherwise been off-and-on efforts to rein in the industry — efforts ranging from proposed legislation in California to a call-to-action resolution by the National PTA.

"Any show can be made safer with the proper planning and management," says Wertheimer, who was a public information officer for the city of Cincinnati when 11 fans were crushed to death there in 1979 while trying to get in to see The Who. In the ensuing investigation, he found himself chief of staff for the task force that investigated how to prevent similar accidents. It turned into a career.

"Nobody in the industry likes me," he says. "But you know what? They created me."



By Brent Jones for USA TODAY

Paul Wertheimer: The concert industry "created me."

He's not against moshing, or even festival seating, as long as venues follow the National Fire Protection Association's Life Safety Code, which outlines requirements ranging from the width of aisles to the number of square feet needed per person. But he complains that promoters and venues don't adequately protect fans and bands.

Among his recommendations, published on his Web site, www.crowdsafe.com: separate areas for moshers, a ban on crowd surfing and stage diving, and better training for security in mosh pits.

One of his longest-running feuds is with the International Association of Assembly Managers (IAAM).

Wertheimer "wants to have national standards for crowd management — here are the do's and

don'ts that you must follow every time without fail. And if you don't, you're negligent," says Jack Zimmer, the trade group's executive director. "He always points at IAAM. But as soon as you write a standard, it's like writing a book. It's out of date."

Wertheimer counters by pointing to the British government's Event Safety Guide as a starting point for what needs to be done here. The guidelines range from how to erect barriers to controlling sound. They're not law, but any organizer adhering to them will be in compliance with regulations.

"We involved massive amounts of people from the music events industry," says Mark Thomas of the British government's Health & Safety Executive's office.

In the USA, efforts have achieved mixed results. California Sen. Nell Soto, D-Ontario, recently introduced a bill that would require venues to have an emergency services plan and submit lists of injuries. But the legislation has since been watered down to simply require that the governor's office issue safety guidelines.

In 1992, the National PTA called for a ban on festival seating, but it rescinded the resolution in 1998.

"We really didn't get very far," says Pat Keegan of Northvale, N.J., who campaigned for the resolution. "Every time there's a tragedy, it's in the news — but then it dies."

Jeannie Williams' column appears on 7D today.


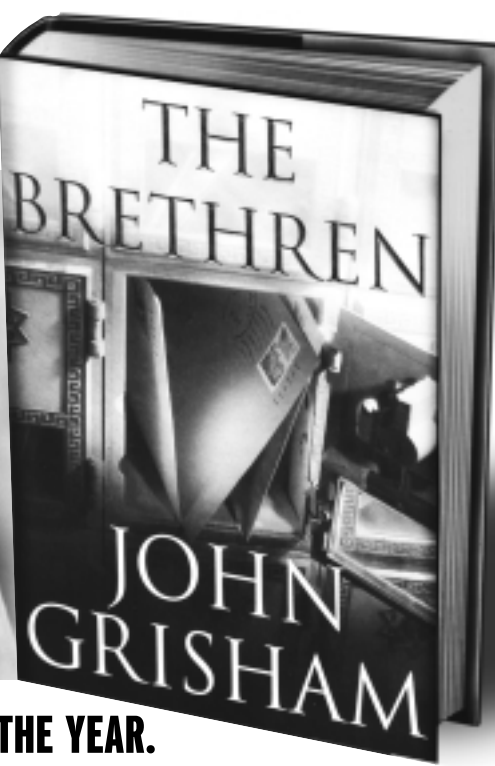
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