

# Safety and Survival in Protests and Civil Unrest: What Every Employee Should Know

**November 2011**

**Steve Crimando, MA, CTS, CHS-V**  
**Managing Director**  
**Extreme Behavioral Risk Management**  
**A Division of AllSector Technology Group, Inc.**  
**New York, NY**

Since the political protests, now known as the “Arab Spring”, XBRM has been increasingly called upon by businesses and public officials to provide insight into human behavior in group, crowd and mob situations. Such information can help leaders and decision-makers better develop strategies to reduce risks and address safety concerns for facilities and employees who may become caught up in protests and acts of civil unrest. As the “American Autumn” has become defined by the various “Occupy” movements in cities across the country, the largely peaceful protests have been punctuated by increasingly aggressive behavior, and in one instance in Oakland, a violent death.

## Understanding the Problem



There are several different types of groups, crowds and mobs, each with unique characteristics. Understanding and responding appropriately to each type of collective behavior can help security and law enforcement officials more effectively manage such events and prevent a potentially dangerous escalation. Regardless if your organization is specifically targeted by or simply caught up in the activities of a nearby protest, it is important for employees to have the proper awareness and guidance in safely dealing with crowds and mobs.

In “Expressive mobs”, typical in most “Occupy” gatherings, groups assemble simply to vent discontent with the current political and economic situation. “Aggressive mobs”, such as those seen in London last summer, are bent on terrorizing and traumatizing their community. Regardless of their intent, the sheer number of people packed into such gatherings can represent a real risk of injury or death.

An “escape mob” occurs when a “flashpoint”, such as shots fired or the perception of excessive force by police or security ignites a group. The ensuing panic can result in a potentially deadly

“crowd crush.” Crowding, stampeding, trampling and suffocating are the main causes of multiple injuries and death by human hands in group settings. A striking, but not isolated example of this phenomenon was the stampede in August 2005, when 953 people died on the Al-Aaimmah Bridge in Baghdad after someone yelled out that they saw wires hanging from a backpack and that there was a suicide bomber on the bridge. Although there was no bomber, nearly 1,000 people died in the panic to escape. The crowd’s reaction a *perceived threat* became the *actual threat*.

Crowd crush, not anger, rage or violence, is the most common killer in crowd and mob situations. Most people killed in crowds die from “compressional asphyxiation”, and in fact, die standing up, not from trampling. The compounded force of just five other people crushing a person can render them unconscious in 30 seconds and brain dead within 6 minutes. It is thought that people need at least one square yard of space around them to maintain their footing, control their movements and breathe freely. A crowd can quickly become dangerous without any intention of doing harm. In otherwise peaceful religious events, concerts and sporting events around the world, thousands have died over the past two decades when groups seemingly spontaneously flashed over into mobs.

## Understanding the Defense

While leaders and decision-makers benefit from a more complete understanding of the psychology and physics of groups, crowds and mobs, individual employees have a real need for advice and direction about how to keep themselves safe, and how to survive crowd or mob situations that become dangerous. History has proven that otherwise peaceful gatherings can turn deadly in an instant; therefore, you will want to share this information with your workforce before they find themselves in such a situation. During times in which your organization or the surrounding neighborhood may experience large gatherings, such as the current “Occupy” protests, it is helpful to know the basics of safety and survival in group, crowd and mob events.



## **Safety Tips**

If you anticipate that your organization or neighborhood may experience a group, crowd or mob action, remember to:

- Carry a cell phone, photo ID and a small flashlight in a pocket or purse;
- Wear comfortable shoes with little or no heel. Laces should be double tied to avoid tripping;
- Avoid wearing clothing and accessories that may prove dangerous, such as long jewelry or neck ties that can become tangled or pulled;
- Try to stay outside of a crowd when walking. Go around, rather than through the crowd;
- If the crowd taunts or insults you, just move on. Don't engage or take the bait;
- Don't stop or stand near temporary structures which could collapse under the weight of a crowd;
- Don't stand near or against immovable objects, such as walls, doors or barricades, which would limit your options for escape or represent a risk if pressed against by the crowd;
- If you anticipate going into a crowd or possibly getting caught up in a crowd, try to bring a "buddy" and not go alone.

## **Survival Techniques**

A dynamic crowd can produce the force of a moving train or powerful wave rolling across the sea. The energy produced by the weight and speed of the moving crowd can be deadly. It is important to understand the basics of crowd survival to avoid being trapped or crushed.

- If you are caught up in the middle of a crowd, **DON'T STAND STILL OR SIT DOWN!** Keep moving in the direction of the crowd and slowly try work your way diagonally across the crowd, toward the outside where the flow is weaker;
- If you have dropped an item, unless it is critical, don't try to pick it up. Bending or getting your fingers stepped on or trapped will increase your risk of being pushed to the ground. Whatever you've dropped, just let go, and keep moving;
- If you fall or are pushed down, try to get back to your feet as quickly as possible. If someone is willing and able, extend an arm and ask for help getting back on your feet;
- If you can't get up, keep moving! Crawl in the direction of the crowd until you can get back up;
- If you cannot get up at all, curl up in a ball to create an air pocket and cover your head. Keep your back facing up, protecting your head and face with your hands and arms.
- Crowds tend to surge or pulse. Wait until a lull in the pressure or flow to try to get back to your feet.

## Act in Time!



Groups, crowds and mobs make great theater; that's usually the point. Protestors in most instances are trying to attract attention and raise awareness to their cause. It is understandable that people may be curious and want to see the protests in action, but unless you have a real need or no other way of avoiding a group, crowd or mob, it is best to stay clear of the area involved. The dynamics of the crowd can change quickly and with no warning. Police attempting to manage the crowd or making arrests may not be able to distinguish protestors from observers and you

can end up simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

During times of unrest, when group, crowd and mob activity can disrupt business and present a potential threat to safety and health, it is important to understand the type of risks associated with large gatherings. Please consider sharing these safety and survival tips with anyone who may be in or around those areas experiencing the current unrest in our cities.

## Upcoming Events and More Information

XBRM's Managing Director, Steve Crimando, has provided training and consultation to organizations worldwide on human behavior in disasters and emergencies, including those behaviors associated with group, crowd and mob situations. He will be addressing safety in group, crowd and mob situations at the upcoming, U.S. Department of Justice-Office for Victims of Crime 2012 "*Mass Violence and Emergency National Training Conference*" from January 31-February 2, 2012. You can learn more about that program at: <https://www.thecjportal.org/CONF/Ovcconf/Pages/default.aspx>

XBRM offers a dynamic, live, instructor-led training program, as well as 90-minute webinar style training program for organizations concerned with safety, security and business continuity issues related to acts of civil unrest. To schedule training for your organization, please call us at 800-280-6606 or reach us by email at: [info@xbrm.com](mailto:info@xbrm.com).