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The 2022 Halloween Itaewon Crowd Crush: A Case Study

Introduction

Every year during Halloween weekend, Itaewon, Seoul, South Korea becomes a magnet for crowds, the streets fill with laughter, music, costumes, and nightlife, attracting thousands into its narrow streets. Yet, on Saturday, October 29, 2022, the district reached a critical breaking point, and an anticipated night of fun quickly turned into a mass casualty disaster.[1] Vast crowds packed into a tight, sloped alleyway (one that served as a passage to nearby bars and nightclubs), hundreds were trapped, and left unable to move or breathe. This event killed 159 people and injured 196, marking it one of the deadliest manmade disasters in South Korea history.[1] This event exposed major preparedness limitations in mass gathering crowd control, real-time risk monitoring, and coordinated emergency response.

Facts of the Case

On October 29, 2022, devastation struck over the weekend of Halloween in Itaewon, Seoul, South Korea, one of the city's largest nightlife scenes. This Halloween weekend was one of the first major Halloween weekends, following the easing of Covid-19 social restrictions. This electrifying weekend of costumes, music, and bar hopping abruptly transformed into a mass casualty disaster taking hundreds of lives.[1] As the night went on, tens of thousands of attendees congested Itaewon's streets, many of them funneling into a narrow, sloped alleyway that served a shortcut and easy access to the nightlife venues. In the absence of effective crowd control measures, ticketing systems, and entry limits, the crowd density grew uncontrollable. Movement became increasingly difficult, and then nearly impossible. The pressure inside the alleyway intensified as more people continued to pack in from both sides.[2] When the crowd density reached a certain point, individuals lost the ability to move independently and instead started moving as a single entity, almost like a fluid. Small pushes began to surge through the densely packed crowd like shockwaves, causing several individuals to stumble and lose their footing. These initial falls disrupted the counter-pressure from both directions that had been keeping the crowd stable, creating gaps in the crowd.[2] As this pressure was lost, surrounding individuals fell into these gaps, setting off a chain reaction of additional falls and bodies piling on top of one another. People suffocated in these gaps, others in the crowd were squished against each other, facing compressive asphyxia, where their lungs were unable to expand and breathe. Ultimately, this event led to 159 deaths, and 196 people injured.[2]

Early in the night, bystanders and attendees placed several emergency calls reporting dangerous crowding, only to be reassured that the responders would arrive quickly, which did not occur. The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency had deployed 137 police officers to manage the scene. This number proved to be a gross underestimation of the resources required to manage this event. In stark contrast, more than 7000 police officers were deployed elsewhere in Seoul that same night to manage rampant protests. Granted these protests had attracted tens of thousands of protesters, it still involved fewer people than those who flocked to Itaewon that night. In fact, the task force later established to investigate the incident consisted of 475 members, notably three times larger than the number of officers deployed that night.[3] Other logistical factors further complicated the scene including the volume of people, the narrow geographical area, and the absence of crowd management to control inflow. Emergency teams rushed to arrange transport and treatment, with victims admitted to hospitals throughout Seoul.[3] Following the tragedy, public scrutiny intensified. Discussions erupted regarding Seoul’s deficiencies in crowd monitoring, surge capacity planning, and interagency coordination (police, fire, medical). All of which did not seem up to par for a gathering of this size. This incident prompted formal investigations and legal actions related to these failures in planning and emergency response.

The Seoul government covered funeral expenses for the deceased, reportedly providing up to fifteen million won per person, along with an additional condolence payment of up to twenty million won.[6] They also covered medical expenses for the injured ranging from an estimated five to ten million won depending on the severity of the injury.[6] The Seoul government further engaged in a road repair project following the event which cost approximately 830 million won ($623,886).[6] They also equipped the affected area and seventy other locations throughout Seoul with CCTV cameras and AI technology to detect crowd density.[6]

Epidemiological aspects of the event

The Itaewon crowd crush resulted in 159 deaths and reported 196 injuries. Of the fatalities, 56 were men and 102 were women. 95 victims were in their 20s, 32 in their 30s, 9 in their 40s, 4 were teenagers, and the remaining 13 were not reported.[4] 26 of the fatalities were foreign nationals, reflecting Itaewon's position as a popular nightlife hotspot for both residents and foreigners. A simulation-based analysis used hydrodynamic modeling and estimated the crowd density likely averaged an estimated 7.57 persons per square meter, with peaks approaching nearly 10 persons per square meter.[7] These conditions are known to severely limit ventilation and movement. The most common mechanism of death was compressive asphyxia.[4] This was a result of the external pressure from the crowd restricting proper chest expansion and breathing. Other causes of death included: myocardial infarction (heart attack), which was as a result of decreased blood flow, and blunt force trauma to intrathoracic organs, as a result of injuries sustained by the heart, lungs, vessels, or airway caused by rapid impact or compression.[5] The scale and rapid onset of fatalities required an immediate emergency response, including on-site treatment and patient transfers to hospitals throughout Seoul.

From an epidemiological perspective, studies analyzing this event utilized descriptive study methods with data derived from government reports, hospital records, and public records.[7] Several limitations affected research conducted on this incident. First, demographic information including age and sex was incomplete for a subset of victims. This led to an incomplete picture of those affected. With this, there were a few clear sources of potential bias. Bias could have affected early casualty counts, misclassification of cause of death in chaotic emergency conditions, and survivor recall bias after the event. Also, other additional factors may have also influenced outcomes, such as underlying health conditions, alcohol/drug consumption, and a person’s particular location in the crowd. Many of these variables among others may not have been consistently accounted for. Despite all the limitations, the available research does provide a consistent profile of the incident and its fatal outcomes.

Management of the event

The management of the Itaewon Halloween crowd crush has been widely scrutinized by the public. There were severe gaps in preparedness, planning, and response. This Halloween celebration drew an estimated 100,000 to 130,000 people and was popular due to its proximity to various bars and events in the area.[2] There was no ticketing system, no crowd capacity limitations, no one-way pedestrian routes, and no authority managing crowd flow, despite knowledge of the anticipated mass gathering. This was especially concerning given the risks posed by Itaewon’s narrow alleys and steep lanes.[2] There was little police presence in the area compared to the number of attendees, and crowd density kept increasing as individuals continued to enter the district from various directions. Early into the night attendees made various emergency calls reporting unsafe congestion and people being pushed, however, these warning signs were dismissed. Shortly after 10:00 pm, poor crowd conditions kept accelerating. Attendees pushed their way into narrow, steep alleyways near the Itaewon station that connected the main road to multiple bars and clubs.[2] Crowds moved simultaneously in opposing

directions along the slope. As the crowd density exceeded safe levels, the crowd exerted pressure on each other and were held in place by this pressure. Subtle surge-like shockwaves then rippled through the crowd, causing individuals to fall. These falls created gaps in the crowd that disrupted the equilibrium of pressure from both sides, leading more individuals to fall into the space until the pressure temporarily eased. People stacked upon one another or squished against each other and walls. Some tried climbing buildings to escape.[2]

The physical logistics severely limited emergency response. The small, steep alleyway made it very difficult for emergency personnel to reach or remove victims from the crowded area. Lifesaving attempts at cardiac resuscitation were carried out by first responders and other attendees alike, often with very limited space.[2] The emergency response teams were overburdened as they rushed to transport and treat hundreds of attendees. Victims were sent to hospitals throughout Seoul, putting further strain on local emergency rooms and ambulance services. The lack of coordination between the police, fire, and emergency services further exacerbated these issues.[2]

Crowd management experts expressed that clear risk factors for a crowd crush had been present both prior to and during its occurrence. This included the anticipated large crowd density, the apparent extreme overcrowding, and the uncoordinated flow of pedestrians from wider streets to the narrow passageway.[2] The crowd density also exceeded the recommended five people-per-square meter guideline for mass gatherings. Anything above this guideline, especially if it reaches 6 or more people per square meter, would severely increase the risk of compressive asphyxia and loss of individual control.[2] The elements of disaster included: the insufficient police and support staffing, the delayed escalation (despite early warning calls), the lack of real-time crowd monitoring, the absence of a unified incident command structure, and the limited capacity to manage crowd movement in a congested area.

After the incident, South Korean officials took the time to review the incident and strengthen areas of improvement. They implemented the use of drones and other high-tech resources to manage and view crowds from monitoring hubs. This includes crowd detection cameras that will automatically measure the density per square meter and alert officials and citizens about heavily congested areas.[8] Designated police and safety personnel will be conducting on-site patrols and crowd monitoring during the weekend, as well as enforcing parking bans, installing safety fences, designating entry/exit areas if congestion levels reach a “warning” stage, among many other crowd control measures. The interior ministry is to manage and help local safety plans and mitigate congestion.[8] Local governments are meant to support this mission and communicate with local businesses to aid and assist in their safety plan. The national police agency is meant to supply an adequate number of officers in congested areas and the national fire agency is meant to proactively position firefighters around high density areas and review evacuation routes with local businesses.[8] Certain areas of Seoul have been predetermined to be areas of priority management. These include: Itaewon, Hongdae, Seongsu, Konkuk University, to name a few.[8] These efforts are promising.

Communications of the event

Poor communication was at the forefront of critique for the disaster’s management. The poor communication is evident before and during the incident. Before the incident occurred, attendees placed multiple emergency calls to inform authorities about severe crowding, people being shoved, and breathing issues.[2] This was before the incident escalated towards taking lives, however, these concerns were not effectively escalated into prompt crowd control measures. Attendees were reassured that authorities would promptly respond and address the concerns, but attendees report not seeing swift or adequate action following these calls. During

the event, communication challenges worsened. When emergency responders started showing up to the scene, the narrow-sloped alleyways limited physical access, visibility, and on sight communication. First responders had difficulty reaching the victims and escorting them out. One of the primary shortcomings South Korea officials pointed out in this event was the lack of coordination between police, fire, and medical departments. The officials explained that when previous events had a specific organizer (unlike this one), there were preemptive discussions and plans made between these municipalities.[3] Since this event did not, it was not planned for. Thus, there was the absence of preparation, real-time information sharing, and rapid decision-making. The fire, police and medical units were fragmented and not unified.

Also, during the event, when the severity of the problem became clear, emergency alerts were sent to every phone in the affected district. It alerted people to return/stay home, however, by this time, the crowd crush had already taken many lives.[1] This event underscored the importance of adequate and planned communication methods between emergency responders, localities, and attendees. Following the event, South Korean officials stressed the need for greater collaboration amongst emergency response agencies and acknowledged the communication shortcomings. For future large-scale events, efforts have been initiated to evaluate emergency alert systems, enhance interagency coordination, information sharing, and establish more transparent lines of command.[1]

Summarize

The Halloween weekend Itaewon crowd crush was a preventable disaster that was the result of a lack of coordination, risk evaluation, and preparedness for a mass gathering. This significant post Covid-19 celebration quickly turned into a mass casualty disaster when a narrow, sloped path for pedestrians was overwhelmed by hundreds of people trying to navigate to nearby bars and clubs. It led to 159 deaths and 196 injuries, primarily caused by compressive asphyxia.[1] This event highlighted the need for thorough mass-gathering readiness, including clear command authority, interagency communication, real-time monitoring, and proactive crowd control.

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