

Role-Play Exercise

Accidents & Injuries: Lessons from a Stampede

2017

Purpose

The purpose of this role-play exercise is to engage collaborative student group discussion about a stampede at a mass gathering in 2013, to facilitate understanding of the cross-disciplinary factors needed for effective prevention of unintentional accidents and injuries. The exercise is based on information described in the case study, “Stampede at the Kumbh Mela: Preventable Accident?”

Learner Level

Undergraduate, Graduate

Time

One 1-hour session

Required Pre-Reading

- Case: Stampede at the Kumbh Mela: Preventable Accident?
- Glossary of Terms: Learning from India’s Kumbh Mela

Assignment

Read the case study, “Stampede at the Kumbh Mela: Preventable Accident?” If necessary, refer to the supplementary “Learning from India’s Kumbh Mela: Glossary of Terms” to help you understand its details.

Divide the class into small groups of three students for each group. Each person in the group will play the part of one individual present at or affected by the Allahabad Railway Stampede: (1) Dr. Ahmed Shaikh, whose observations are summarized in the case with supplemental observations quoted below. (2) A pilgrim or tourist (you decide) who attended the Kumbh Mela and who was in the crowds at the Railway Station during the stampede; (3) A local official who is an employee of either the Railway or the local city government (you decide), who was on duty at work on the day of the stampede, and who now feels that the media from the disaster is placing blame on his or her office or job performance as being in some way at fault.

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The discussion will focus on one or more of the six specific areas that Dr. Shaikh identifies (below), where preventive measures could improve safety at a future event. The teacher may ask the students to focus on one or two of the six, or may assign each of the six to a different group.

In each small group, the student who takes the role of Dr. Shaikh will begin by reading aloud the suggested preventive measure under discussion, as it is worded below. “Dr. Shaikh” will then say again—this time in his (or her) own words based on reading of the case—why this point is an important one for keeping people safe in large crowds. The group will then spend approximately 30 minutes discussing (all or an assigned selection of) the following group discussion questions:

- a. How does this preventive measure affect what you experienced at the festival or the railway station? (begin by telling the group who you are in the role play: i.e., as a health worker; as a government employee; as an ordinary person attending an event that has special significance to you and your culture or religion)
- b. How does the point being discussed affect the health-related injury that hurt your family or friend?
- c. Does this suggested preventive measure increase your sense of anger or blame about what happened?
- d. Based on your reading of the case, what would make this possible solution or preventive measure hard to put into practice?
- e. What kinds of injuries or health effects would follow if this measure was *not* enacted?
- f. What do you think is the responsibility of the government to make this change possible? What other sectors would need to be part of this solution (e.g.: education, engineering, national security, local health workers, construction workers, business)?
- g. The Kumbh Mela is exemplary because many services are offered free. What kind of costs might be involved in this preventive measure? From your “role play” personality, do you think the cost is affordable and good for your community? Why or why not?
- h. How might this discussion relate to injury prevention in other countries or other accident or disaster settings that you can think of or perhaps know from personal experience?

Following the small group discussions, the class may reconvene, and one representative from each of the small groups reports key points based on their group’s discussion.

Students may find it helpful to refer to an [online map of the city of Allahabad](#) to identify locations of the railways stations and hospitals, or a [map of the ground plan of the 2013 Kumbh Mela](#).

Role Play in Small Groups: Discuss with Dr. Shaikh:

Dr. Shaikh: The stampede might have been easily averted. Just a few simple measures could have prevented the needless deaths and injuries. The following measures should be considered by officials as they plan for the future. For example:

1. Clear and coordinated communication for security personnel

The stampede would not have had such a tragic outcome if there had been clear and rapid communication in the minutes following the disaster. What if security personnel had been provided with equipment—such as walkie talkies—and prepared to act according to a deliberate communication plan that would help network response across all types of officials who were in or near the station at the time? Coordination and a clear hierarchy about who makes what calls would have helped trigger a rapid response.

2. Ambulance lanes

Ambulance lanes could easily have been made inside the Kumbh Mela as well as outside it in the city. After all, the roads of Allahabad had recently been paved—re-tarred—and a lot of other adjustments were made.

3. Sector-like clinics in the city of Allahabad

The sector clinics at the Kumbh Mela were all very well equipped. The clinics even had a large supply of pre-packaged first-aid kits specifically for use in case of a stampede. A similar system outside the festival jurisdiction, in the city of Allahabad, would have helped disperse care and ensure that facilities were adequate for rapid treatment.

4. Railway station control room with response capacity

The Allahabad railway station had a surveillance chamber where television monitors could view all activities that occurred within the station. Chamber entrance required government or official identification. During the brief moment when Dr. Shaikh was permitted to enter this room on the day after the stampede, he noted that staff in the room could observe what was happening, but they could not make announcements or do anything about what they saw. Basic tools for communication technology in such a chamber could aid rapid response and save lives.

5. Controlled access to the railway station

There were no controls on who could enter the station. The crowd density might have been alleviated if officials limited entry to those with a ticket or identification. This is commonly done in India at airports. However, this intervention to control station access would require a change in the national railway policy, since many passengers buy their tickets on the train.

6. Better use of nearby railway stations

The authorities had failed to see the value of developing two other, nearby railway stations that were very close to the Kumbh Mela site. Had the other stations been developed to cater to the bathing pilgrims, Dr. Shaikh reflected, the crowds on February 10 might have been divided into three separate locations. This use of nearby stations would have lessened the density at the main train station, and potentially prevented the stampede.

Note on Source: The six preventive measures identified in this Role-Play exercise were suggested and described by Dr. Ahmed Shaikh during a Skype interview on October 1, 2013, between Dr. Shaikh and Susan Holman, Senior Writer at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator, and are used here for discussion of the stampede case with Dr. Shaikh's permission. The interview was undertaken as part of the Harvard University collaborative research project, "Contemporary Urbanism: Mapping India's Kumbh Mela." More information about the Harvard Kumbh Mela project is available at <http://southasiainstitute.harvard.edu/kumbh-mela>.