

FESTIVAL SECURITY

Simon Houlton investigates whether or not enough is being done to keep revellers safe

The music festival season is in full swing. People of all ages and backgrounds are losing themselves and dancing away to their favourite acts, part of an alcohol-fuelled crowd. As organisers juggle putting on a good show while ensuring the audience is safe, it raises much-needed questions about the state of festival security. Festival security has been lacking in recent years, with a number of deaths and reports of violence casting a shadow over the summertime events, but where does the blame lie?

When it comes to the security sector, there are some very clear standards about what is required for the job role. A quick search online for festival security jobs reveals plenty of potential employers, all offering a similar rate of pay and asking for little experience. As long as you have an SIA-approved door supervisor badge, that is often enough. As a result, festival security

ONE IN FIVE FESTIVAL GOERS HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO SEXUAL ASSAULT OR HARASSMENT

is mainly run by bouncers. Another quick search online and you will find that for as little as £150 and four days training you can be the proud owner of such a badge, as long as you are over the age of 18.

The main problem here is that this is promoting the idea that experience is not important – that the people keeping us safe could potentially be under qualified in terms of experience. Dealing with crowds on a festival-size scale should surely require some on-the-job experience and training? This problem can easily be solved, if the employers take the time to vet and reference check potential candidates for adequate experience. Telling a white lie in an interview to secure a job is not uncommon, but when the role is to protect people's safety and security the vetting process cannot be overlooked. IScreenYouScreen's software completes checks on potential employees to ensure the legitimacy of their applications and provide employers with peace of mind.

Understandably, the security personnel will need to acquire experience to be successfully vetted and it can be argued that you have to start somewhere. In these

cases, employers should offer an on-the-job training scheme, where less experienced security staff shadow and assist a more experienced security member. Regular assessments should be carried out by the employer to note where progress has been made or improvements necessary. This way they can gain relevant experience and knowledge, which in turn should generate a safer atmosphere at music festivals.

Festival security checks are often seen by the public as a chore, queuing for what seems like hours to be herded through metal barriers like cattle. Listening to the moans and groans of the impatient festival goers must take its toll on the security staff carrying out bag, body and ticket checks. These searches take time and to speed things up some festival security have been known to conduct random searches and bag checks, instead of checking every single member of the audience while video footage has also emerged online of security performing less than thorough checks. Although this may keep the public happier in the short term, it is not keeping them safe.

THOROUGH SEARCHES

One obvious way to tackle this is to ensure that each person is searched thoroughly for unauthorised contraband. This can take hours and to ensure that the job is done correctly security staff should circulate their roles in order to stay alert and keep a fresh pair of eyes on the job. This should go some way towards preventing prohibited items from slipping through the net. It is important that security services work alongside the local police force at festivals. By having the police present, you are much less likely to see a crowd disturbance, as they are able to diffuse potentially volatile situations with their presence. The police can also offer assistance in the form of sniffer dogs to help detect drugs, weapons and explosives. This could act as a deterrent for festival goers that consider smuggling in items that could cause harm to the public.

If you are attending a festival, you can be sure that you are never too far from illegal substances. Unfortunately, UK festivals have made a name for themselves as being one of the hot spots for taking drugs. With music lovers attempting to 'enhance' their festival experience by taking illegal substances, it seems that festival security has a hard time keeping up with the flow of drugs entering sites. With the recent drug-related deaths of Tommy Cowan and



Security personnel should rotate during lengthy searches to keep their senses sharp

Georgia Jones, who reportedly took a particularly high-strength type of ecstasy at Portsmouth's Mutiny Festival. It had been reported by festival goers that security was lax at the event. This is further proof that once again security services cannot afford to cut corners at events.

A lot of festivals are adopting drug-testing services, where potential drug users are given the opportunity to have their illicit substances tested by professionals to test their purity. They go on to outline exactly what the drug is made up of and the impact it has on the body. They will be advised against the use of it, but it is the choice of the individual to take it or dispose of it. This service is done confidentially, eliminating the fear of being judged or potentially arrested. Drug testing,

although controversial, has been very successful at the festivals that have embraced it. Since the deaths at Mutiny Festival, which did not have a drug testing facility, there has been a call from the public to make it festival policy that these facilities are readily available. These drug testing centres should be fully supported by the security services working at the event.

There is a stigma attached to festival security that you need to be muscular and imposing to carry out the job. Although having a certain build can come in handy when trying to physically control a crowd, it certainly shouldn't be the only quality when selecting security teams. A recent survey showed that one in five festival-goers had been subjected to unwanted sexual assault or harassment with the majority being women

– of this number only 2 percent went on to report the incident to the authorities. Although fear can be an element when it comes to not reporting crimes such as this, it could be the lack of approachability at these festivals. Security can become overly focused on breaking up the fights as opposed to offering a helping hand.

CHANGING PERCEPTION

You want to encourage attendees to look to them for help and, to a degree; a change of perception is needed here. When the public sees security not as an aggressive force to avoid, but individuals there for safety, their presence can be utilised more effectively. Alongside this, security personnel should be trained in basic counselling techniques in the event that they are approached by a victim. They can offer immediate support before putting them in touch with the appropriate authorities. It would be impossible for changes to happen overnight, but with methods like these in place security services will be seen as an approachable asset to the public.

The number of people that attend a festival will impact how many security staff are required for the event. The general rule appears to be that if an

event or venue is serving alcohol there should be one member of security for every 50 attendees. Violence is on the rise in the UK, with knife crime hitting the headlines more than ever and terrorist threats being a very real danger to the public, maybe it is time to reevaluate this ratio and increase the number of security staff at music festivals now that there is a

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different kind of risk associated with large amounts of people in an enclosed space?

Finally, when hiring your security team, it is vital that you run plenty of background checks, looking at their employment history and being sure to contact their listed references. You should ensure that the security team is qualified, professional, approachable and most importantly the adequate number of personnel to keep festival goers safe. It is not a case of quantity versus quality – both are just as important ●

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It is important that employers take the time to vet and reference check potential security candidates



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