

5 FESTIVAL CAMPSITES: THE EFFECTS OF TENT THEFT

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May 2009

JCSSM
Vol.1, No.2

Page 45

Work based
projects

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the impact of the recent recorded increase in theft from tents at festival campsites on attendees and security staff at outdoor music festivals. A questionnaire survey was designed and the questionnaire administered to a purposive sample of 750 festival attendees and security staff. Secondary data was also sourced from police reports, published crime records and the media. The findings of this exploratory study do not corroborate the entrenched perceptions of many professionals, which appear to reject the opinion of festival promoters that the majority of theft occurs during the first night of the festival. They also show that the perceptions of festival goers, including those who have been victims of this crime, do not change. The study also offers some insight into how individuals deal with becoming victims of theft, and may have crowd security implications.

Introduction

During 2008, reports of theft from the tents of people attending many of the UK's outdoor music festivals increased greatly compared to figures for previous years (reference?). Not only has this increase caused concern among promoters and people attending these events; more alarming were the techniques used to gain unlawful entry to access festival attendee's belongings. In a recent article, Diver (2006:p?) asks the question: "Is such a crime just a symptom of the success of certain festivals?" He also notes that few thefts occur at a Truck Festival but that many do at larger events." This study looks at the surge in tent theft at outdoor music festivals and the effect it has on crowd and security management. It explores the perceptions of victims of this rising crime and their expectations of what needs to be done to help reduce its incidence.

Media reports suggest that there has been a marked increase in theft from tents at the majority of the UK outdoor music festivals (reference?). An article on Bristol (2008) website suggests that according to new police figures, crime at last year's Glastonbury Festival (2008) was the highest since 2003. As with Glastonbury Festival, the Download Festival event has also fallen victim to an increase in reported tent theft. Brown (2008) points out that during 2007, crime on the Download Festival site increased by 58%, from 203 offences in 2006 to 322. He also indicates that a total of 147 offences or 46% of all crime committed during the four-day festival involved theft from tents. To the disappointment of the Leicestershire police, this increase occurred despite numerous campaigns by the police and organisers to encourage visitors to keep their belongings safe (Leicestershire Police, 2008). Coombs (2008) of Avon and Somerset Police singles out theft in general as a key



Journal of Crowd
Safety and Security
Management
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factor in the significant increase in reported crime at the Glastonbury Festival. He also states that the increase in theft in general is as a consequence of theft from tents. These concerns were echoed by an article in the Western Daily Press (date?), which reported that theft at the festival was carried out predominantly in the campsites, and that tent theft made up the majority of thefts on-site. However, the article also reported that people became victims of pick-pocketing while in large crowds. However, despite recent crime figures, it is known that until recently, tent theft made up very little of the incidents reported to police during a three or four day music festival. Da Bank (2008) states that, "although tent theft at our festivals has always been very low, any theft at all is really upsetting for the promoter and the people involved. Not only is it upsetting for the victims of tent theft, as word spreads around a festival campsite, the whole atmosphere changes to one of unease". He explains how tent theft can soil the atmosphere of an event, noting that while tent theft only directly affects a small percentage of festival goers, it is extremely distressing for victims and a spoiler of the atmosphere for everyone.

Disturbingly, it is thought that an element of gang culture may also be starting to creep into the outdoor music festival industry, and may have made an impact on crime levels. At Glastonbury Festival 2008, gang related crime was reported by Avon and Somerset Police. Coombs (2008) notes an increase in the number of coordinated groups who were able to gain legitimate entry to the Glastonbury Festival site compared with previous festival events. Da Bank (2008), promoter of Bestival, concurs with Coombs; he holds the view that the majority of tent thefts are committed by organised groups, rather than by opportunist thieves. Da Bank is also of the opinion that these groups attend the festival on the first night, specifically to target the campsites. Due to uncertainty accessing cash during a festival, it is not uncommon for attendees to bring enough money with them to last the duration of the event. It is for this reason, Da Bank believes, thieves target the campsites on the first night.

Hicks (1998) believes the current enforcement activities aimed at detection, seizure, and confiscation of assets and the prosecution of offenders is not effectively undermining organized criminal enterprises or reducing the overall threat of organized crime. Data suggests that some of current efforts may be contributing to the problem (reference?).

Study Method

Due to limited information surrounding the increasing effect of theft from tents at UK music festivals and the lack of secondary data, it was decided to conduct a questionnaire survey administered to a purposive sample of victims of theft and security staff. However, as this study was conceived in the spring of 2009, attempting to conduct an onsite survey or interviews would prove very difficult. This is due to the fact that the main festival season runs from June to September.



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Therefore, conducting an on line survey questionnaire seemed a more practical approach. Responses were received from 570 victims of theft crime and 286 security staff. The response figures were good, considering the time of the year. Two questionnaires were designed and posted on a Facebook page; one to victims of tent theft and the other to security staff and stewards. Key questions solicited data on: the most common day for tent theft at a festival, methods used to gain entry to tents, most common stolen items, and peoples' perception of festivals. The questionnaires also offered questions which required multiple-choice answers, and others which were open-ended giving respondents the opportunity to elaborate their answers.

The decision to base the questionnaires on Facebook was to create a central focal point, and point of contact. This page was created at www.eFestivals.co.uk and www.downloadfestival.co.uk. Further promotion was sought from the following websites; Virtual Festivals, V Festival, T in the Park and Glastonbury Festival.

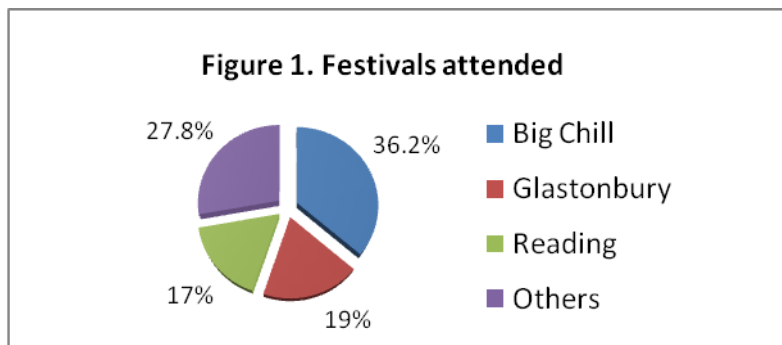
Access to the questionnaires became available from January 2009 for ninety days, and promotion to all mentioned websites immediately followed afterward. As the questionnaires were accessible via the Internet, there was no control as to who can respond. Without direct form of targeting or control as to who has access to the questionnaire, some doubt is cast over the accuracy of the responses.

Analysis and Findings

Analysis of the data obtained from the two groups is presented below:

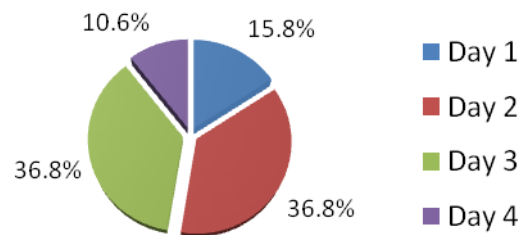
Victims

The findings show that the Big Chill festival has clearly been a target of tent theft more than any other festival (Figure 1). This is alarming considering the small crowd capacity of the Big Chill, only 30,000 people, compared to Glastonbury Festival that now has a capacity of 125,000 and Reading Festival which is around 60,000.



It is often thought that the majority of tent theft occurs during the first night of a festival. The responses do not support this claim, as Figure 2 shows.

Figure 2. Festival day tent broken into

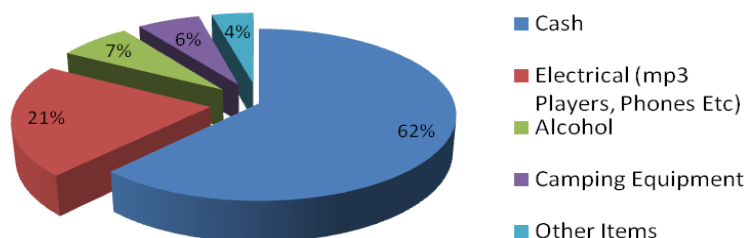


These figures are based on the knowledge that the majority of festivals run from Friday (day 1) to Monday (day 4), and the headline acts playing on Saturday (day 2) and Sunday (day 3). Although some festivals run from Wednesday to Monday (e.g. the Download Festival), headline acts would usually perform on a Friday (counted as day 1). This pattern indicates that the majority of tent thefts occur during the key days of a festival, the days the headline acts are performing. Another factor to be taken into account is the victim's knowledge of the theft; at what time they discovered they had in fact been a victim of theft. If a theft occurred before midnight on a Friday but the victim did not realise this until Saturday morning, this could impact the results.

During summer 2008, a lot of discussion was based on the techniques used by thieves to gain access to a person's tent. The most common form of entry according to comments made on-site is the apparent slashing of the tent material with a Stanley knife or other sharp implement. These comments appeared to have been based on hearsay and rumour, as only 4% of the 570 respondents reported theft by cutting the tent open. The vast majority of the responses (96%) reported theft by unzipping the tent. It was also reported by a third of the respondents that being present in own tent at the time of the theft did not act as a deterrent.

The item that was reported stolen by the majority of respondents (58%) was cash, while credit cards were often left behind. This suggests that the theft may not have been carried out by professional thieves. Other items were also stolen, see Figure 3.

Figure 3. Items stolen



The majority of the respondent (68%) who have experienced theft at the festival, nevertheless, did not change their perception of the festival, and 73 % will again consider attending the festival. This suggests that for the majority of respondents, theft did not play a role in their perception of the festival.

A great majority of the respondents (452) added further comments. These comments ranged from providing advice to fellow festival attendees, recommendations to the festival promoters and using the opportunity to vent their anger at being a victim of crime. Below are some of respondents' comments:

Although the items stolen from me were not of a high value, it was still an inconvenience and annoyance not to mention it awakened my vulnerability and safety at this particular festival. I shall not be returning to this festival for many reasons, but being unsafe is one of the main reasons. So many other festivals are well run and have better security with more to offer in entertainment and hospitality.

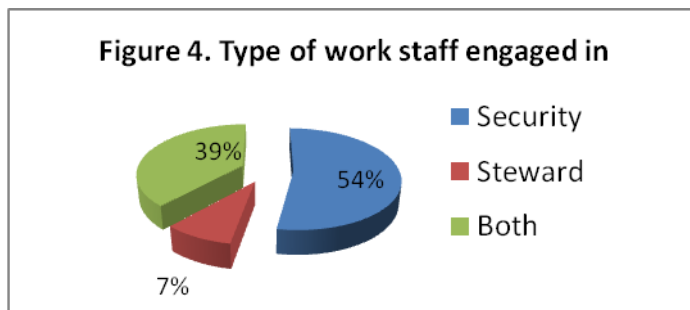
Many, many tents were stolen from during that night. Some people were awake. The offenders mumbled an apology, saying they thought that this was xyz's tent, or said they were looking for someone to buy some drugs from.

This was doubly surprising as my tent was inside the 'secure' staff camping area! (I was a steward) It was taken while we were at our ten-minute 'staff briefing' meeting before shift.

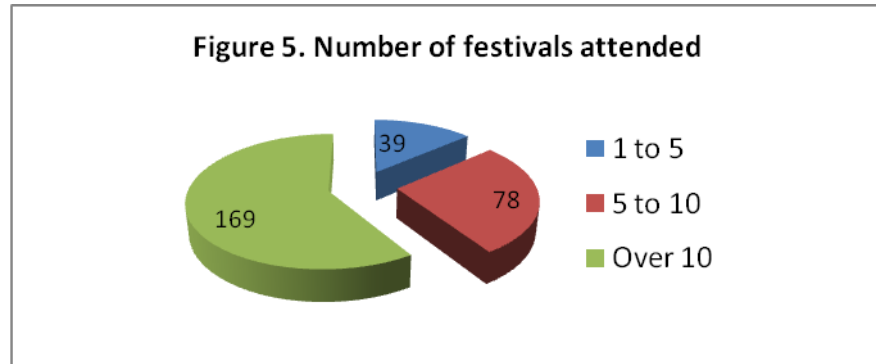
Thieves ... have an easy target, which is made easier by the fact that you don't know if the tent that person is entering is their own, and at night the sites become a maze with little lighting so again making tents easier to steal from.

Security Staff and Stewards

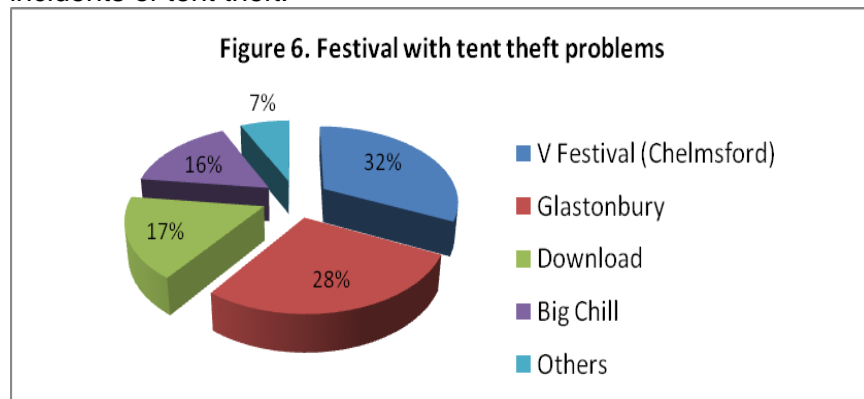
The findings show that of the 286 respondents, 54% worked in a security capacity and 39% as stewards, while the remaining 7% worked in both (Fig. 4).



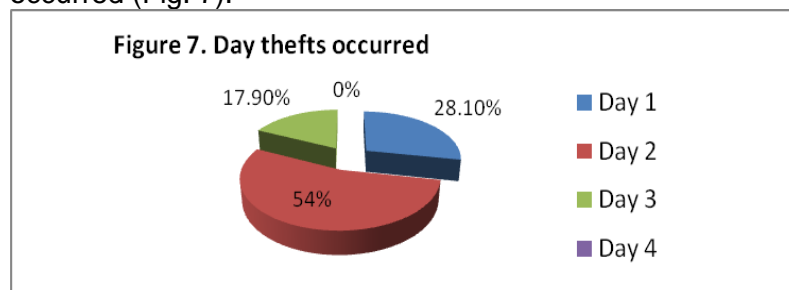
169 respondents attended more than 10 festivals, 78 attended between 5 and 10, and 39 attended less than 5 festivals (Fig. 5). This suggests that the majority of the responding security staff had a good experience of the festival security industry



In relation to the festival with biggest tent theft problem, 32% pointed to V Festival (Chelmsford), 28% Glastonbury, and both Download and Big Chill attracted around 16% (Fig. 6). These results show a difference of opinion compared to the results of victims of tent theft, where Big Chill received the most alleged incidents of tent theft.



Unlike the responses from victims, security staff respondents consider day 2 instead of day 3 where the highest figure of theft occurred (Fig. 7).



Security staff respondents in their majority (95%) reported that almost all the theft occurred in the midday to midnight period, and over 80% of the respondents stated they were in fact at the theft incident scene. Furthermore, 92% of the respondents did not know whether the victims were subjected to acts of violence.

169 respondents offered views which they felt could help reduce thefts from tents, some examples are shown below:

Increased security to prevent people breaking in the site, and more security patrols to stop or put off planned thefts from people who have purchased tickets to get in and steal. An idea may be to use mobile CCTV, and their operators to keep watch on large areas of tents.

I think that it's too hard to control tent thefts due to the size of the fields and the amount of tents in them. It's too difficult to monitor all tents. More CCTV is unlikely to prevent it, just might give more of a chance of catching people; more security presence may reduce it.

There is a whole raft of countermeasures...It depends on the location/Event as there normally is a number of issues, such as the locals coming over the fence and this needs to be better controlled using a combination of good fencing (not heras) and security patrols, as even with steel shields they will try to come over. In addition there needs to be HV patrols within the campsite to discourage and a zero tolerance of where there is good suspicion that they have indeed tried to steal (there is frequently not enough for prosecution, but it is well obvious. In such cases the decision to evict needs to be made by the senior manager (and clear guidelines etc) or there will be abuse of the eviction policy by some security staff (unfortunately).

Raise awareness of the fact that tent thefts occur, from speaking to festival customers I have found that many people are unaware that there is such a significant level of theft. Offering tips and warnings around the campsite... From experience it is always helpful when people have to have a specific wristband ..., which can help with crime prevention and detection. I have heard of people having their wallets stolen from their back pockets whilst they sleep, with people gaining access to their tents by silently slashing the sides with a razor blade. With this level of audacity by the criminals it is difficult to suggest anything that the potential victim can do to minimise their chances of falling prey, it therefore must be down to the control of people in and around the campsites, and providing some sort of identification as to who should be where.

Conclusion

The findings highlighted key concerns from festival attendees and provided some insight into their thoughts and concerns. The findings suggest that the overall



perception of theft at outdoor music festivals may not be as bad as originally thought. For the majority of the victims, the theft appeared to have been no more than an inconvenience. This study also highlights a determined intention to steal on the part of the perpetrators, and provides some evidence of an increasing threat of gang related incidents. Contrary to the general opinion that the majority of tent theft occurs during the first night at a festival, the findings indicate that a more common time for tent theft to occur was when the headline acts are on-stage.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, further research should be undertaken at the end of the festival season. Police reports and statistics presented during September may provide key information as to an increase, or decrease in crime related figures. Although many festivals provide chargeable lockers for their attendees, these are often positioned around the arena areas and not the campsites. Providing free to use, manned lockers positioned within the campsites may help reduce theft from tents; this is an area which requires further research.

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