

# Germany: 20 dead and hundreds injured at techno music festival

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This year's Love Parade techno music festival, held in the city of Duisburg, ended on Saturday with 20 dead and approximately 350 injured, including many severely injured. This tragedy is directly attributable to the negligence of local city authorities and private sponsors.

With their eyes on maximizing profits, both the city of Duisburg and the main organizer of the festival, the fitness studio chain McFit, ignored a series of warnings from the police, fire brigade, local inhabitants and visitors to the festival.

The 20 mostly female victims, between the ages of 20 and 40, died when the only entrance and exit to the festival area was closed at around 5:00 p.m. as large numbers of people tried to join in. In addition to German victims, the dead included visitors from the Netherlands, Italy, China and Australia.

The site chosen for this year's festival was the former railway freight station south of Duisburg city center and close to its main station. The area had been hastily prepared. The Love Parade originated in West Berlin in 1989 and was held in Berlin until 2003. It also took place in Essen in 2007 and in Dortmund in 2008. In all of these cases the Parade was held in a large open area without fences or barriers.

The Love Parade in Duisburg was the first to take place in a limited arena. Last year the neighboring city of Bochum called off the festival, declaring it was unable to ensure the security of those taking part. In Duisburg this year, such fears were simply swept aside.

While hundreds of thousands were waiting to enter the festival, thousands were trying to leave. The police responded by closing the only access point, a tunnel 120 meters long, 16 meters wide and less than 4 meters high located between two other tunnels. Panic broke out as thousands crowded into the tunnel. Desperate visitors began climbing high surrounding walls, ladders and railings. The organizers maintain that some then fell back into the crowd, unleashing a mass panic.

This version is not confirmed by eyewitness accounts on the Internet. Because of the enormity and speed of events,

there were also few pictures or videos of what took place. A Swiss visitor, who wanted to remain anonymous, wrote: "People were pressed against a wall. A whole mass of people lay on top of each other a meter high across an area of perhaps 15x15 meters. It took a half hour, until this mass of people was relieved. It is simply not true to say that people fell from a wall."

In an initial statement on Saturday evening, those responsible for organizing the event, including the mayor of Duisburg Adolf Sauerland (Christian Democratic Union), spoke of the "individual weaknesses of individuals" that led to the panic. Prior to the event the city had prepared "a sound security concept with the organizers and all partners involved."

The security plan had been drawn up by the Duisburg researcher Michael Schreckenber, who defended his concept to the press. He told *Spiegel Online* that the tunnel in which the mass panic took place was large enough and that responsibility lay with individual participants at the event. What had taken place was an eventuality that could not have been predicted or planned for, he contended.

In fact, the statements made by the organizers were aimed at covering up their own responsibility for what took place. The area chosen for the event in Duisburg offered sufficient room for around 250,000 to 350,000 people, although previous festivals had involved gatherings of over a million. The city authorities also gave shops and businesses in the Duisburg city center permission to remain open—although the city center itself provided sufficient room for the Love Parade. Representatives of the Duisburg Marketing Society (DMG) explained that the closure of shops during the Love Parade in Essen in 2007 had set a very bad example.

Things were to be different in Duisburg, despite the fact that the police and fire brigade had criticized the security concept, which the Duisburg mayor now defends so vehemently. A fireman whose criticisms were ignored has since laid charges against the organizers, while the public prosecutor's office has raided the city hall to confiscate all documents relating to the festival.

The police trade union GDP holds the city council and the organizer responsible for the tragedy. GDP spokesman Rainer Wendt told the *Bild-Zeitung*, “I warned Duisburg one year ago that it is not the right place for the Love Parade. The city is too small and narrow for such gatherings.” The police had originally requested that the entrance to the festival be staggered to prevent any concentration of visitors in the access tunnel. Such a concept would have required additional personnel and was rejected by the city administration.

In a further attempt to deflect from the responsibility of local authorities, leading members of the city council sought to defend their planning concept by arguing that far fewer people had taken part in the event than anticipated. The security advisor to the Duisburg council, Wolfgang Rabe (CDU), told a press conference on Sunday that in his opinion only 150,000 had taken part in the festival. This figure is absurd. Various media outlets put the number of participants much closer to one and a half million.

The Duisburg chief of police Detlef Schmelting also sought to deny that a mass panic had taken place: “Mass panic is an evocative term. As far as I am aware there were no indications of a mass panic.” His explanation also sought to reduce the tragedy to “individual responsibility”, i.e., blaming the victims themselves.

Not only were eyewitnesses warned by police of the danger in the tunnel on the fateful day, there was also a prolonged discussion on the Internet over the potential risks. A number of persons exchanged their views on the web site of the region’s biggest newspaper [www.derwesten.de](http://www.derwesten.de).

Already on June 4 “a resident” wrote on the web site that the organization was “unbelievable: The administration is provoking incidents.” Another wrote that he was not prepared to be treated like cattle: “Then I will remain at home! I have no interest in being trampled to death!”

Three days later another contributor wrote disbelievingly: “Am I seeing right! They are planning to conduct a million people across a single-lane tunnel with two small paths to the meeting area? In my view this is a trap. It can never work. I can’t believe it! I predict deaths.”

Two days earlier, on July 22, a Duisburg resident wrote: “There will be huge chaos. The city would have been better advised to call off the Love Parade.... People will talk about this Love Parade for a long time—unfortunately only in the negative.”

Erich Rettinghaus, the North Rhine-Westphalia regional chairman of the German police trade union for civil servants (DPoIG), blamed economic interests for the disaster and declared: “In the long run security should not be subordinated to commercial interests.”

But this is exactly what happened.

For a long time the future of the Love Parade remained uncertain. The city of Duisburg, which has the highest level of unemployment in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and recently imposed a drastic budget-cutting program, was unable to finance the €840,000 estimated for the event. But finally a consortium consisting of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and private sponsors assured its funding. The festival was to be promoted as part of the Europe Ruhr.2010 project, with the city of Duisburg and the fitness studio chain McFit as main sponsors. The Sinalco firm was another main sponsor.

The plan was to raise €6 million from merchandizing. The Duisburg Marketing Society, for example, sold Love Parade insignia over the Internet.

Prior to the event, Mayor Sauerland declared: “A meeting, which mobilizes up to one million people, who peacefully hold a party together with the world’s best known DJs has to be a good thing. I regard the Love Parade as a good opportunity to show the world how tolerant and in particular how exciting our city is.”

According to Olive Scheytt, managing director of the Ruhr.2010, the Love Parade has “important, international charisma”, while Eva Maria Kießler, press speaker for the economic promotion company Metropol Ruhr GmbH, said the Ruhr district needs such meetings in order to demonstrate its “image as an open and tolerant habitat”.

Twenty people have now paid with their lives for this publicity campaign aimed at emphasizing the economic advantages and profits to be made in the city of Duisburg and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.



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