

# Ninth victim dies, boy remains in coma, as details emerge showing how Astroworld disaster was prepared

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A 22-year-old woman became the ninth person to die following a disastrous, hour-long crowd crush at Astroworld music festival, held a week ago at NRG park in Houston, Texas. Bharti Shahani died Wednesday night. She was in critical condition and had been on a ventilator.

Eight others, age 14 to 27, died during or soon after the performance of rappers Travis Scott and Drake on the night of November 5. Scott continued to perform for a total of 90 minutes, even as ambulances attempted to gain access to dying and wounded people trapped near the stage.

Nine-year-old Ezra Blount remains in a medically induced coma. His father Treston explains in an appeal on GoFundMe, “I had my son on my shoulders awaiting Drake’s stage appearance. I began to be crushed until I couldn’t breathe. I passed out.”

When Treston regained consciousness, Ezra had already been taken to Texas Children’s Hospital as a John Doe. With “brain damage and trauma to nearly all organs,” his father writes, “we are certain that he was trampled.”

Countless social media posts and videos document the nightmare of November 5. Thousands of fans were allowed to pack tightly between metal barriers in front of the festival’s only active stage. Hundreds became trapped and suffered “compression asphyxiation” from the crush of human bodies. Many lost consciousness and some went into cardiac arrest. Those who fell to the ground were either trampled or their limp bodies were passed over the barriers as the show continued.

More than 300 people were treated at a field hospital on the night of the disaster. Fifty-eight lawsuits have been filed by victims and their families. Attorney Ben

Crump, who represented the family of George Floyd, is being retained by the Blount family.

## How did this happen?

The responsibility for safety at a music festival is not up to the attendees. It is the responsibility of the organizers.

University of Suffolk professor Keith Still, who specializes in “the principles and applications of Crowd Safety and Crowd Risk Analysis,” explained in an interview on NPR that “once you’re in a high-density surge environment, there’s very little you can do as an individual. It is up to things like the building design or the operations manager or the safety design of any system to make sure they’ve got a safe environment.”

While Scott refused to stop the show—even as fans screamed for help and limp bodies were dragged from the crowd—the tragedy was prepared long in advance by festival organizer Live Nation Entertainment and its subcontractors, who engineered the deadly situation on the ground in Houston.

Live Nation is the world’s largest live music firm, with over 200 venues in 44 countries. It runs some of the largest music festivals in the United States, including Lollapalooza and Bonnaroo.

Eager to restart festivals amid the pandemic, it is cutting corners everywhere. Details continue to emerge that show the Astroworld festival was severely understaffed, security staff were badly paid and poorly trained, medical staff were poorly equipped and quickly

became overwhelmed, and staff were unable to communicate with the Houston Fire Department, which was playing a critical support role.

Event security was contracted out to a company called Contemporary Services Corporation (CSC). CSC's posting advertising Astroworld jobs indicated that security staff were paid between \$10.10 and \$13.00 per hour. The only requirement was to be 18 years old and a high school graduate.

Darius Williams, who had no security experience, was hired by CSC a few days before the festival. He explained in a video statement on TMZ that workers were not properly trained: "The training was extremely brief. It was an open book test. The teacher was giving us the answers. This was the night before Astroworld."

Williams told TMZ that when he arrived for his shift at 7 p.m. on the night of the disaster, "we were understaffed in every sense of the word. ... If two people decided to rush the gate, it was over with." When he raised concerns, his supervisor tried to reassign him to another role. Worried about his own safety, Williams told supervisors he would not be working his shift at all, and left the festival.

In fact, as is shown in multiple videos, fans did overpower staff at the festival gate. Hours before the crush disaster, hundreds of people rushed into the park without presenting tickets or undergoing a security check.

CSC's chief of security denied Houston firefighters access to festival grounds twice on the day of the festival, Houston Fire Chief Samuel Peña told CNN.

Firefighters also said that the festival's emergency medical staff, contracted through a company called Paradocs, did not even have radios, but were communicating via cell phone. Concertgoers report that there was poor cell phone service at the festival, where 50,000 or more people were present, all of them crowded around one stage.

A medic described on TikTok how, about half an hour into Scott's set, the small emergency staff was already overwhelmed with "no pulse no breathing" cases.

Paradocs Medical Services' website boasts, "Our staff and services provide peace of mind to your employees and visitors while remaining in compliance with local regulations and government recommendations."

Austin-based promoter ScoreMore was in charge of operations overall at the festival. Its 56-page Event Operations Plan was obtained by CNN. It shows that only two people had "Authority to stop the show," the Festival Director and the Executive Producer, but not the Director of Risk and Safety or the Director of Security. It also instructs staff to refer to dead bodies as "smurfs."

There is also the question of the highly unusual decision to schedule Scott (and surprise guest Drake) as the only performance happening at the time of the crush. Normally, large music festivals schedule multiple performances at different stages simultaneously, in order to more evenly distribute the crowd.

Festival attendees report on social media that the festival became increasingly unruly over the course of the day. Harris County Police Chief Troy Finner said on Twitter that he met with Scott briefly before the performance to discuss his "public safety concerns."

Scott has a history, including a criminal record, of encouraging fans to engage in dangerous behavior at his concerts. In 2015, he pleaded guilty to reckless conduct after telling a crowd at the Lollapalooza festival to jump over security barricades. In 2017, he was arrested for "inciting a riot" which left a fan paralyzed, and again pleaded guilty.

The rapper has also, in the past, bragged on social media about injured and unconscious fans at his concerts. One Instagram post shows a man unconscious on the ground at Scott's 2015 concert in New York City, with the caption "TO THE KID THAT DIDNT SURVIVE THE RODEO. UR A HERO IN MU BOOK."

A full police investigation into the Astroworld disaster is not expected to be completed for "weeks or months," according to Finner.



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