

**Amusement Parks:  
Family Fun or Targets for Terror?**

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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## **Amusement Parks : Family Fun or Targets for Terror?**

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Joe Mendez was alerted by a security officer employed at Universal Studios in Hollywood, California that a vehicle cruising around the perimeter of the parking lot seemed suspicious. Deputy Mendez was contacted because, as a peace officer, he had the ability to conduct a traffic stop and identify the occupants. Mendez would need probable cause or a violation of traffic laws to legally make this stop. Once the vehicle was stopped, the investigation might be limited because of a lack of intelligence on the car and driver. Limited facts might limit Deputy Mendez ability to fully investigate the suspicious nature of the vehicle and occupants.

Fast Forward to September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Universal Studios is now equipped with an advanced video monitoring system that records every vehicle and pedestrian that enters the theme park, parking lot and surrounding properties. A suspicious vehicle similar to that stopped by Mendez in 2008 has been observed by a security officer. The car has been cruising near the parking lot closest to the theme park entrance. The vehicle's license plate is recorded and the registered owner's information is automatically delivered by cell phone or podcast to every Sheriff's Deputy in the area. The Deputies immediately begin monitoring the vehicle and its occupants. Eventually, a deputy conducts a traffic stop, using his handheld retinal scanning device to determine the identity of the driver. Another handheld device scans the exterior of the vehicle to determine if hazardous materials are present in the trunk of the car. The driver is identified via automated systems as a "person of interest" wanted for questioning by the

Federal Government's Joint Terrorism Task Force. He is taken into custody for questioning, and is later determined to have been "casing" the park for a way to enter and commit an act of terrorism. Due to advances in technology, the observations of a security guard and the work of a sheriff's deputy, a major act of terrorism has been averted.

In the pages that follow, we will look at how amusement parks such as Universal Studios may be targets for acts of terrorism. Safety has always been a priority at amusement parks. The issue has evolved into the use of technology along with private and public cooperation to keep the parks safe in the emerging future. The reader will learn that by utilizing technology and working as a team, amusement parks can continue to be places of enjoyment for people from all over the world.

### **Teamwork and Technology**

According to a 2005 poll from the Associated Press, most Americans believe a terrorist attack is inevitable in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Amusement Parks can be prime targets for these types of events. Responsibility for amusement park safety should be focused on how law enforcement, the private sector and emerging technology are utilized together to keep these locations safe.

Partnerships between law enforcement and the private security industry continue to grow larger. Dr. James F. Pastor in the text "Security and Law Methods" stated that since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the number of security employees in relation to police officers has grown significantly. Examples given by Pastor include the fact that as of 2003, the

private security industry employed over 2 million security guards in the United States compared to 700,000 thousand police officers. Representative of that trend, since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, *Securitas*, the security contractor for Universal Studios theme parks has added 10,000 security positions in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

To avoid future catastrophes, these partnerships should continue to be fostered. The utilization of new and evolving technologies will be a significant enhancement to future theme park safety. To optimize the outcomes of these partnerships, police and security personnel should also incorporate a vigorous program of appropriate technologies to aid them in their work. Examples of these technologies include: retinal scanning, advanced video systems and fingerprint identification upon entry into the park.

### **Introduction and Response**

Amusement Parks are attended by large crowds on a daily basis and many of the patrons are children. According to statistics, over 15 million people per year visit Disney properties located in California.<sup>3</sup> Disney properties in Florida have approximately 47 million visitors per year and employ over 61,000 thousand people.<sup>4</sup> Universal Studios in Orlando Florida attracts approximately 11 million visitors per year. Universal Studios Hollywood attracts about 4.5 million attendees per year.<sup>5</sup> An attack at an amusement park such as Universal Studios, Hollywood would be devastating to the Los Angeles economy and could also impact the national economy. Tourists from all over the world travel to Los Angeles and patronize amusement parks such as Universal Studios. In the

event of an incident of terrorism at an amusement park, many agencies would become involved in the response and investigation.

On the local level, law enforcement, fire departments, the Red Cross, coroner's office and numerous others would be involved. Local officials could expect responses from FEMA, the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Homeland Security and other agencies to become involved in the response and investigation. So who would be affected by a terrorist attack? A review of statistics and the financial impact of these venues provide a brief description of the potential physical and financial impacts.

### **The financial impact of terrorism**

It is obvious from the attendance figures that these venues are well attended and large influences on their respective economies. Universal Studios Hollywood had full year revenues (tickets, food and retail) of \$267 million dollars for day operations.<sup>6</sup> Families from all over the world go to places like Universal Studios and Disneyland for family entertainment and to have a good time. The end of school and the summer months remain the main times these tourist locations are visited. According to the Los Angeles Convention and Visitors Bureau, in 2006, 25.4 million tourists visited Los Angeles, 4.7 million of who were international visitors.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of this travel includes locations such as Orlando, Florida, Hollywood California, and Anaheim California. People from all over the world spend thousands of

dollars) at these venues. In fact, at Universal Studios, Hollywood, the average attendee is figured to spend approximately \$200.00 dollars per person.<sup>8</sup> Universal Studios charge of \$20.00 dollars per vehicle to park at the location covers all employee expenses, the rest being profit.

It is obvious from the attendance figures that these venues are well attended and large influences on their respective economies. Universal Studios Hollywood had full year revenues (tickets, food and retail) of 267 million dollars for day operations.<sup>9</sup> The people who attend these venues are spending money in local hotels, restaurants, rental car agencies and other entertainment venues around Los Angeles. In 2006, the City of Los Angeles counted 20.7 million domestic overnight visitors staying in its 92,000 hotel rooms and tourist related spending was \$13.6 billion dollars.<sup>10</sup>

The sheer numbers of people who attend amusement parks make them prime targets for individuals or groups who wish to commit terrorist acts.<sup>11</sup> While Americans once thought of these locations as places of fantasy and escape from the real world, the reality is that these locations are viewed differently by potential terrorists. They are looked upon as places where masses of people can be killed if one automatic weapon is smuggled inside. They are places where germ warfare, botulism or proper placement of a dirty bomb could cause havoc and devastation. Terrorists know that these are locations where a terrorist strike could be devastating to the local economy by causing people stay away due to fear.

## **Historical Perspective**

Amusement parks throughout the United States have always considered the safety and security of their venues to be important. In 1976, Busch Gardens, located in Tampa, Florida hired William Avery as their first, full-time safety expert.<sup>12</sup> During this time, safety at these theme parks focused on the operation of thrill rides. Safety was incorporated into and as a larger part of the security division. The security at theme parks usually focused on rowdy patrons, misbehaving teenagers and dissuading people from sneaking into the locations. No real plans existed for dealing with terrorism and/or emergencies. Crowd issues were usually handled by private security companies and most amusement parks had Emergency Medical Technicians on staff to handle minor medical issues.<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, the focus of security at amusement parks evolved and began to include crisis management. At Universal Studios, amusement park security became outsourced about 1990 with the private security company “*Securitas*” handling most routine security procedures at the parks. This included bag checks, fixed post assignments and parking lot patrols. According to Safety and Security employees who work at Universal Studios, the focus on safety and security has changed.

In 2004, Universal Hollywood employed 2 full-time “safety engineers.” In 2008, the number of full-time employees holding this same position is now five.<sup>14</sup> The responsibility of these employees differs from the traditional security function, but includes working closely with security to train and prepare for possible catastrophe. The

“safety engineers” at Universal Studios also work with the local fire department and law enforcement to focus on disaster preparation and crisis management. This is in addition to overseeing general ride safety and occupational safety measures. According to Laura Isbell, Senior Vice President of Environmental Health and Safety for NBC/Universal, General Electric, the parent company of Universal Studios, places a significant emphasis on corporate safety and security.<sup>15</sup>

General Electric has extensive corporate policies regarding safety procedures that have been enacted since 1994 and are now in place at Universal Theme Parks. These procedures include dangling photo identifications that must be worn by all times at all times. Another safety policy in place is that all access points must be secured at all times, either by personnel or other means such as locked gates. These policies along with many others fall under the category of “Crisis Management.” Other shifts in safety and security procedures at amusement parks can be directly attributed to the events in New York City on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

The tragic events of September 11th caused a new emphasis on security at the amusement parks. This incident caused security experts to focus on disaster management issues such as terrorism and bombs. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, amusement parks such as Universal Studios have formulated disaster and recovery plans, conducted training exercises and explored new technologies to assist security. William Avery, who is described by author Judith Rubin as “the father of amusement park safety” stated “if a facility has discussed, practiced and planned for a catastrophe, it has also prepared for

terrorism”.<sup>16</sup> Universal Studio amusement park safety and security personnel now work together to ensure proper communication, staffing and strategies exist to help avert disaster.<sup>17</sup> One of the methods Universal Studios is implementing is new technologies that will proactively assist law enforcement and security personnel in their efforts to avert a violent tragedy.

### **Technology and the amusement park**

Amusement parks such as Universal Studios, Florida and have implemented fingerprint technology to identify patrons entering the parks. Other locations such as Universal Studios, Hollywood are reviewing enhanced video systems and retinal scanning technology. According to Lieutenant Kenneth Talianko of the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department, (Commander of the Universal Studio sub-station) it is the hope of law enforcement that the private industry will continue to provide and supplement funding to law enforcement for future development and implementation technology.<sup>18</sup> Law enforcement currently utilizes federal grant money to obtain technology safety equipment such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), body scanning x-ray machines and hazardous material detection devices. The advancement of these technologies that focus on safety and protection will soon be used by private security to supplement law enforcement efforts.

Current technology practices in place at most amusement parks are usually limited to video cameras systems.<sup>19</sup> Disneyland utilizes an extensive network of video that includes surveillance. These systems are also in place on most attractions. Future video systems

such as the “Salient Stills” video capture system that utilize screen capture, analog capture and a conversion designed to allow law enforcement immediate use are being investigated by Universal Studios, Hollywood for possible implementation.<sup>20</sup>

Universal Studios, Florida has implemented a version of fingerprint technology. Upon entering the park, the person entering has an index finger electronically scanned. This information is stored in an internal data base. This system is currently being used for re-entry purposes. Similar fingerprint technology is currently being investigated by Universal security in Hollywood. This technology would scan those entering theme parks using a fingerprint. The fingerprint would be entered into a data base monitored by security and the Sheriff’s Department, allowing for identification of possible terrorists.<sup>21</sup>

### **Law Enforcement Responses**

As law enforcement professionals, we must be concerned and aware about how well we are prepared to handle a terrorist incident at an amusement park. Currently, Universal Studios Hollywood falls under the policing jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department, West Hollywood Station. The Universal Hollywood location has a sub-station for the Sheriffs Department located on the adjoining mall called Universal CityWalk. This sub-station is staffed by twelve deputies, two Sergeants and one Lieutenant who are assigned to CityWalk on a full-time basis. Two additional deputies are utilized on Fridays, Saturdays and Holidays. This is due to an average daily volume of 50,000 to 60,000 visitors per day that increases on weekends.<sup>22</sup> The deputies’ primary responsibility and jurisdiction is Universal Studios Theme Park, CityWalk and the

Universal Studios Lot. The Sheriffs Department staffing is supplemented by twelve plain clothes security officers. They are usually off-duty law enforcement officers and are aided by 100 private security officers from “*Securitas*” the contract private security company. This additional staffing is deployed on only on weekends or special events.<sup>23</sup>

In a 2005 Associated Press poll of Americans, an incident of terrorism involving mass casualties is believed to be inevitable in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Captain Todd Chamberlain, former commander of the Los Angeles Police Department’s, Anti-Terrorist Division, believes that amusement parks such as Universal Studios could be prime targets for these types of incidents.<sup>25</sup> Responsibility for theme park safety should be focused on how the private sector and emerging technology are utilized in partnership with law enforcement to keep these locations safe. Examples of current and proposed technologies include the use of RFID, fingerprint, and advanced video systems as ways to identify potential terrorists and provide safety. Of course, as all of the involved agencies work on information sharing and mutual cooperation, proper training on the use of technology and identification of potential threats will become the essential component for success. According to Bob Parker of the National Association of Tactical Officers the best way to prepare for a disaster is for agencies to communicate and be well trained.<sup>26</sup>

### **Looking to the future**

Considering the events of the past decade, and the increasing use of technologies available today and emerging on the horizon, what will “security” look like in the near future? In the year 2011, visitors to amusement parks can expect to have their vehicle

license plate recorded by a digital video system when they enter the parking area. As the people approach the front entrance, they will see a visible security presence of well trained professionals. Upon entering the park, a small, handheld device will record the guest's fingerprints.

If the person is someone on a national or local terrorist watch list, that information will be information will be automatically sent with a high alert to local and federal law enforcement. Other devices such as those that conduct retinal scanning may be placed at the entrance to provide the same safety warning system in a less obtrusive manner. The relationship between public and private policing will be blurred, with both cooperating openly to enhance the outcome they both desire: a safe and enjoyable experience for anyone seeking to enter the park for its intended purposes. For those intending otherwise, the target will have been hardened, and each passing day will see new developments in technology and safety to aid in that fight.

## **Conclusion**

Law enforcement executives, amusement park executives and private security owners must look toward both the past and future. This will allow them to forecast issues that may create danger to their locations. Future forecasting, which is the ability to scan the world around us is essential to improve systems. The identification of worldwide trends and events is essential for law enforcement leaders to identify future problems. They must be able to evaluate available and future technologies that are specific to their needs.

The days of law enforcement working as a single entity without outside help or assistance no longer exists. Law enforcement leaders should embrace the stakeholders who are involved in the amusement park industry. We will find that additional funding, resources and intelligence will assist our efforts to combat terrorism and the negative impact an incident at an amusement park may have on our communities. To do less is to miss an opportunity to enhance public safety, and also to add “one more thing” to worry about. The astute leader will recognize, and respond to, that difference.

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- <sup>5</sup> Kovacs, Judy, Vice President, Environmental Programs, NBC/Universal Corporation, September 5, 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid
- <sup>7</sup> Los Angeles Convention and Visitors Bureau, May 2008, [www.discoverlosangeles.com](http://www.discoverlosangeles.com)
- <sup>8</sup> Kovacs, Judy, 2007
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid
- <sup>10</sup> Los Angeles Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2008
- <sup>11</sup> Chamberlain, Todd. Captain, Los Angeles Police Department, interview with author May 2007
- <sup>12</sup> See [www.expertsafety.com](http://www.expertsafety.com)
- <sup>13</sup> Nominal Group Technique (NGT) panel facilitated by author, Universal Studios, May 2007
- <sup>14</sup> Isbell, Laura, Senior Vice President, Environmental Health and Safety, NBC/Universal Corporation, interview with author May 2007
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- <sup>16</sup> Rubin, Judith, Editor, Funworld Magazine, “*Security Procedures Change with the Times*”, (2002)
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- <sup>19</sup> NGT Panel
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- <sup>21</sup> NGT Panel
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- <sup>23</sup> NGT Panel, 2007
- <sup>24</sup> Associated Press, “Americans believe transit attack inevitable” July 15, 2005. [www.MSNBC.com](http://www.MSNBC.com)
- <sup>25</sup> NGT Panel
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