

When Did Mass Casualty Event Become a Term?

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From the headlines: “Police declared Astroworld ‘mass casualty event’ half-hour before Scott left stage” – *New York Post*

“5 fatalities, at least 40 injured after Waukesha mass casualty event” – *gmtoday.com*

“Did quick-thinking taxi driver prevent mass casualty event in Liverpool blast?” – *The Daily Beast*

Very recently, the term “mass casualty event” has tragically become part of society’s lexicon. Words and terms have significance and specific meaning, especially for emergency managers. A case in point is how the term terrorism is applied, or misapplied, depends on who is asking or telling. Does your organization have a different set of plans for the adverse impacts of foreign terrorist organizations versus domestic violent extremists? Does it really matter to the people who were hurt, or worse? Or does it matter that how emergency-appointed fiscal agents, like those in Flint, Michigan during their water crisis from 2014, are called ‘emergency managers’? An event should be defined as something planned and scheduled.

The 2021 events in Houston, Texas, and Waukesha, Wisconsin, quoted above were a scheduled concert and parade, respectively. The Liverpool, England, incident involved a quick-thinking taxi driver who locked a suicide-bomb-wearing suspected-terrorist in his vehicle, keeping the explosion within, rather than going off at the hospital where they were most likely going to detonate it. There was not even a scheduled event at the hospital that day. The incidents are what happened at those events or situations. It is doubtful either of the concert or parade event

organizers were planning on having mass casualties on their itineraries, unlike, for example, the annual Running of the Bulls at Pamplona, Spain. That may be the only event to come to mind which really is a mass casualty event. Any mass casualty incidents should have been part of the consequence management planning as it is already established for most acute care hospitals, especially those designated as trauma centers. In my opinion, no ethical emergency manager should be scheduling mass casualties, however, they should be planning for mass casualties as part of their consequence management planning for any event. This includes both how to protect and prevent them, as well as respond to, and recover from them.

Emergency management is all about consistent understanding and usage of policies and procedures, including systems and acronyms. Plain language is a key tenet to the National Incident Management System (NIMS). They can be designated as different levels for events and types for incidents. We need to define these terms as standards.

- Events are planned, with notice. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security already has a leveling scale, called the [Special Event Assessment Rating](#) which can be used to identify needs for federal and other resources.

- Incidents can occur anywhere, including at events. Incidents occur as a change to what is normal. They can have notice like a winter storm or a hurricane, or no notice like a cybersecurity breach or a tornado. The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency has a set of typing for incidents as well, through the [NIMS](#)

[Incident Complexity Guide](#). Multiple operational periods and greater levels of staffing are both hallmarks of higher incident types.

- Emergencies engage more resources than the original plan anticipated. These can be thought of as incidents where the current plans are insufficient for what is actually happening, or the incident has escalated beyond the capacity of the current resources available.

- Disasters should be designated for those incidents when those additional resource needs cross major jurisdictions (such as across multiple states, territories, and/or tribal entities), or have national impacts. This is a Type 1 Incident.

- Catastrophes should be reserved as a term for when all the possible available systems fail to cover the unmet needs, up and down the chain of command, and our nation has not enough capacity to properly respond. In my opinion, 9/11 was a catastrophe, and so was our response to New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina.

- Finally, if you are a true consequence management planner, you will always consider the “what if it was worse?” scenarios. And yes, it can get worse than a catastrophe. When the whole world is figuratively going down the drain and there is a real possibility of mass extinction of humans everywhere, there’s a term for that type of incident. Unfortunately, many scientists have already described this as an event – an Extinction Level Event (ELE). Think along the lines of a meteor striking the earth, a nuclear war, or maybe an unchecked worldwide pandemic. This has also been called a Type 0 incident by some. There’s not much emergen-

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Mass Casualty Event

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cy management planning for an ELE, it is really the stuff of science fiction and the movies.

There is real value to society in keeping the term incident as part of the horrific aspects of a mass casualty incident. They stray from the norm and interrupt the plans in place.

As Merriam-Webster’s dictionary describes the word, it is a separate unit of experience. Something else beyond the original event has happened. And the incident is our signal to get to work. ♦



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ing of information and resources so that teams have accurate context and up-to-date information. This ecosystem approach to public safety has the potential to address disaster response more holistically as long as the teams are working together effectively.

Disaster Response Requires Creativity and Communication

Disaster response requires innovative approaches and expanded resources to address growing challenges. As hazards and vulnerabilities are changing over time, the methods to deal with them are improving as well. Creative problem solving, such as leveraging new partnerships and improving communication between stakeholders, will be critical in 2022. As threats evolve, the teams that are tasked with responding will need to do the same. Emergency managers are familiar with quickly adapting to new information and working as a team to mitigate harm. These skills will be sharpened in the next year as teams innovate their best practices for collaboration to be prepared for the next crisis event. ♦

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