

QUESTIONS RELATED TO PUBLIC SAFETY ON PEDESTRIAN BRIDGES

William H. Sousa, Ph.D.

1. What is the focus of Dr. Sousa's research projects and how do they relate to the pedestrian overpasses?

The focus of my research is on crime, disorder, and public safety, particularly in urban settings. I am an author of a textbook on policing and numerous articles, monographs, and book chapters on the nature of disorder, its impact on community life, and the role of police and citizens in terms of dealing with disorder. The nature of the research often involves conducting observations of police as they manage complex problems in public places. Over my nearly 20-year career, I have conducted approximately 150 ride-along / walk-along observations with police, totaling well over 1,000 hours.

While I have explored issues related to public safety in numerous cities around the country, much of my research is focused in Clark County. As just a few examples, I have studied citizen perceptions of disorder along Las Vegas Boulevard and Fremont Street,¹ issues related to pedestrian safety on Las Vegas Boulevard,² efforts to manage major crowd events along Las Vegas Boulevard,³ concerns related to unhoused youth in Southern Nevada,⁴ and violence prevention efforts in Las Vegas neighborhoods.⁵

Whereas much of this work examines connections between disorder and public safety, the research relates directly to concerns that have developed along the pedestrian bridges over Las Vegas Boulevard.⁶ Analyses indicate that calls for service for disorder-related events on Las Vegas Boulevard increased 23% between 2018 and 2022. Moreover, while problems related to disorder have increased on the Strip in general, further analyses reveal that disorder tends to concentrate on the pedestrian overpasses. While the bridges comprise less than 6% of the sidewalk system along Las Vegas Boulevard, 11% of disorder-related calls occurred on the overpasses.

¹ Jonathan Birds and William Sousa (2015). *Perceptions of Disorder: Results from Two Las Vegas Tourist Locations*. Research in Brief Series, 2015-01. Las Vegas, NV: UNLV Center for Crime and Justice Policy.

² William Sousa (2023). *Safety on Las Vegas Boulevard, 2018-2022*. Stat Sheet Series, 2023-01. Las Vegas, NV: UNLV Center for Crime and Justice Policy.

³ William H. Sousa and Tamara D. Madensen (2011). "The police and major event planning: A case study in Las Vegas, Nevada." *Preventing Crowd Violence*. Crime Prevention Studies Series, 26, 139-158.

⁴ Patricia Cook-Craig, Jennifer Guthrie, William Sousa, Carlton Craig, Michael Bruner, Judy Tudor, Jessica Word, and Melissa Jacobowitz (2017). *The State of Youth Homelessness in Southern Nevada*. Research in Brief. Las Vegas, NV: Greenspun College of Urban Affairs.

⁵ Timothy Radtke, William Sousa, and Timothy Hart (2008). "Operation Ceasefire in Clark County, Nevada: Evaluating a Cross-Jurisdictional Approach to Reducing Gun Violence." Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

⁶ See, generally, Sousa (2023).

2. What does disorder mean with respect to Dr. Sousa's expertise and areas of research and study? What is the relationship between disorder and crime and other safety issues? Explain disorder and how it creates conditions of public safety and/or crime.

Within the criminological literature, "disorder" refers to a broad range conditions and behaviors that are not necessarily illegal (although they often are), but are nevertheless considered to be problematic in public places.⁷ The term "disorder" is sometimes used interchangeably with terms such as "incivilities" or "quality-of-life concerns." Research often distinguishes between two types of disorders: social and physical. Social disorders involve active behaviors, such as aggressive panhandlers who intimidate passersby, individuals engaging in street prostitution, people using drugs and alcohol in public, or unruly teenagers who harass pedestrians. Physical disorders involve persistent conditions, such as litter along sidewalks, locations with evidence of public urination and defecation, or graffiti on walls of public buildings.⁸

Disorder is a concern because of the potential harmful effect it can have on public life. Research indicates that disorder can lead to citizen fear, to more disorder, and to serious crime. Researchers have argued, for example, that citizens' perceptions of disorder are significantly related to fear of victimization,⁹ and that people will often alter their behavior to avoid confrontations with disorderly actors or conditions.¹⁰ Other studies demonstrate that relatively little disorder, if left unchecked, can generate more disorder.¹¹ Furthermore, although it is not inevitable, locations with permissive atmospheres toward disorder are more susceptible to serious criminal activity.¹² This is because serious offenders are generally more comfortable in places where acts of disorder are common and appear to be acceptable.

Several factors escalate problems related to disorder, including the amount of visible disorder at any given time, the level of aggressiveness of the disorderly actor(s), and the type of location where the disorder is occurring. Location is particularly important because disorderly behaviors are often most problematic when they are performed in specific locations where people are especially vulnerable to intimidation (i.e., in areas where the observer of the behavior is a "captive audience"). Examples of such locations are bus stops, train platforms, and subway cars.

⁷ Wes G. Skogan (1990). *Disorder and Decline: Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods*. New York: The Free Press.

⁸ William H. Sousa (2010). "Wesley Skogan's 'Disorder and Decline'" in *The Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory*, Frank Cullen & Pam Wilcox (eds.), SAGE publications.

⁹ Catherine E. Ross and Sung Joon Jang (2000). "Neighborhood disorder, fear, and mistrust: the buffering role of social ties with neighbors." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(4), 401-420.

¹⁰ William H. Sousa and George L. Kelling (2014). "Order Maintenance Policing" in *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, G. Bruinsma & D. Weisburd (eds.), Springer.

¹¹ Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Lionda Steg (2008). "The spreading of disorder." *Science*, 322, 1681-1685.

¹² Skogan (1990).

Those who are a captive audience often fear that they could be an easy victim of serious crime if they refuse the disorderly actor, or they fear harassment because it is physically difficult for them to “get away.”¹³ Even if people are physically able to avoid or remove themselves from a particular location where the disorder is occurring, doing so may prevent them from the legitimate use of that location. Notably, it is often the most vulnerable members of society – such as the elderly, children, and the disabled – who are the most susceptible to this type of intimidation.

3. When considering the pedestrian overpasses as part of Las Vegas Boulevard South / Resort District sidewalk system, are there disorder or safety issues that are unique or more significant to the bridges separate from the at-grade sidewalks? If so, what are the issues unique to the bridges that are not issues on the at-grade sidewalks?

A number of disorders are common on the Las Vegas Boulevard South / Resort District sidewalk system, including aggressive panhandlers, solicitation while intoxicated, aggressive street performers, illegal vendors, confidence games (i.e., three-card monte), and drug related activity. These are all disorders that, as discussed above, can potentially lead to more significant problems if they are not managed.

While many of these behaviors are not unique to the pedestrian bridges (they occur on the at-grade sidewalks as well), the nature of the bridges makes these disorders especially problematic for at least two reasons. First, disorderly acts and conditions contribute to obstructions and crowding on the overpasses as people stop to react to the disorder. While not all acts of disorder are necessarily intended to make people stop, many of the behaviors described above (three-card monte, for example) are done by individuals who are stopped on a bridge and who deliberately cause other pedestrians to stop and congregate.

Second, people trying to cross a pedestrian bridge are a “captive audience” similar to those described above in Question #2. If pedestrians want to safely cross Las Vegas Boulevard, they have little choice but to use the overpasses. Once they are on a bridge, they are essentially confined to a restricted space with no way to leave other than the point that they entered and the exit point on the opposite side. Such conditions make pedestrians on overpasses particularly vulnerable to intimidation from disorderly behaviors or conditions. Pedestrians on at-grade sidewalks have more flexibility in terms of avoiding disorder if they feel threatened by it – since they are not restricted by the walls of a pedestrian bridge, they can retreat, enter a property, or otherwise maneuver around the disorder. Given the relatively limited width of the bridges, however, pedestrians are often unable to negotiate around the disorders they encounter. Their only choice may be to return to the point where they entered, but doing so would deny them from the legitimate purpose of using the bridge in the first place, which is to safely cross Las Vegas Boulevard.

¹³ George L. Kelling and Catherine M. Coles (1996). *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities*. New York, NY: The Free Press, p.34.

4. With respect to the pedestrian overpasses, are there issues of egress in times of panic and increased risk of injury?

Pedestrians on an overpass are in a rigidly confined space with traffic flow in only two directions. This creates a heightened risk of injury should an incident occur that triggers rapid group movement in one direction (i.e., panicked pedestrians rushing toward one side of the bridge).¹⁴ A bottleneck can occur as a quickly moving crowd on an overpass is funneled to a narrower exit point (i.e., a doorway or an escalator on the overpass). As crowd density increases at the concentrated exit point, people can become so packed together that injuries result – a phenomenon known as “crowd crush.”

An escalator further complicates matters in the event of an emergency on a pedestrian overpass. While the down-escalator is a potential source of bottlenecking as people rush off the bridge, the up-escalator will continue delivering people to the same location as the bottleneck. This can result in a pileup at the outlet of the up-escalator, which further contributes to crowd density and increases the likelihood of injury.¹⁵

Additionally, crowd density caused by pedestrians who are rapidly exiting an overpass can impede the efforts of first responders who are trying to enter the bridge. This can prevent authorities from reaching the initial source of the panic, and it can delay emergency medical treatment to those injured on the overpass.

5. Are these issues that are unique or more significant to bridges exasperated by those who congregate or stop on bridges, regardless of whether the people who stop or congregate are engaging in wrongful conduct themselves?

As discussed above, the rigid boundaries of pedestrian bridges reduce the ability of people to distance themselves from each other, particularly if there are large numbers of people on a bridge at a given time. Individuals who are standing, sitting, laying, or otherwise stopped on an overpass may obstruct pedestrians and therefore present a physical risk both to themselves and to others, especially in an emergency.

Those who are stopped may also encourage others to stop or congregate (either intentionally or unintentionally). Regardless of whether people who stop or congregate are engaged in wrongful conduct, the relatively confined space along a pedestrian overpass generates a higher propensity for increased crowd density when people are stopped. Pedestrians may be forced to negotiate through the crowd since going around it may not be an option.

¹⁴ See, generally, John J. Fruin (1984). “Crowd dynamics and auditorium management.” *Auditorium News*, May ed.

¹⁵ John J. Fruin (1993). “The causes and prevention of crowd disasters.” Paper presented at the First International Conference on Engineering for Crowd Safety, London, England, March 1993.

In addition to the heightened risk of injury as crowd density increases (as discussed in Question #4), research on crowd dynamics suggests a number of other problems that can result as crowds gather, especially if the density of the crowd is such that people are close enough to physically touch.¹⁶ For example, pickpocketing, groping, and other forms of theft, assault, and violence are more common in crowded conditions, particularly if alcohol or drugs are involved.

6. What actions can be taken to reduce disorder and improve public safety on the pedestrian bridges and how and why would they do so?

When the nature of an environment is such that there are limited points of ingress and egress, efforts should be made to facilitate the orderly movement of people and make the flow of pedestrian traffic as efficient as possible.¹⁷ In practical terms, this means encouraging people to keep moving on the overpasses, discouraging people from stopping or congregating on the bridges, and managing any disorderly conditions that may cause people to stop.

In some environments, technological, architectural, or engineering modifications could be implemented that might reduce disorder or otherwise encourage pedestrians to keep moving / prevent pedestrians from stopping or congregating. Given the architectural design of the pedestrian overpasses, however, options for altering the physical environment are limited.

Enforcement efforts would be another method to reduce disorder and facilitate the flow of pedestrian traffic along the overpasses. Official ordinances give police the legal authority to issue warnings for non-compliance or, as a last resort, take formal action (i.e., citations). A local ordinance that prohibits stopping, for example, would provide a legal mechanism for police who seek to manage the orderly movement of people along the overpasses.

7. Assuming one such action is to prevent the stoppage or congregating of all persons, how does that action decrease risk to the public? To be effective does it need to include everyone, including those who stop or congregates and are not engaging in bad behavior?

Efforts designed to prevent stopping or congregating on pedestrian bridges would improve public safety in several ways. First, as discussed in Question #5, regardless of whether people who stop or congregate are engaged in wrongful behavior, they may contribute to crowd density that can increase risk of injury (i.e., “crowd crush”) or other problems that arise when people are close enough to physically touch (i.e., pickpocketing, theft, groping, fights). By keeping all pedestrians moving on the overpasses, risks associated with crowd density are minimized.

¹⁶ Miliakalea SJ. Heen and Joel D. Lieberman (2018). “Sexual harassment and violence at music concerts and festivals.” Stat Sheet Series, 2018-03. Las Vegas, NV: UNLV Center for Crime and Justice Policy.

¹⁷ Fruin (1993).

Additionally, as discussed in Question #3, much of the disorder that occurs along the pedestrian bridges is the result of people who are stopped or who encourage others to stop (either intentionally or unintentionally). Research demonstrates that efforts to manage disorderly behaviors directly reduce those behaviors and can also prevent more serious problems from forming.¹⁸ Preventing stopping or congregating on bridges – regardless of the actor’s motivation for stopping – is likely to reduce disorder and therefore improve public safety.

8. Why is a prohibition on obstruction insufficient to resolve the issues on the bridges?

As discussed above, obstructions can occur as the result of unsafe and disorderly conditions along the walkways. Once obstructions have occurred, however, it may be too late to prevent their more serious consequences, including the elevated risk of injury to pedestrians and the increased difficulty for first responders to quickly manage emergencies. A prohibition on obstruction is therefore insufficient because such a prohibition will not address the problematic conditions that create obstructions in the first place.

The main safety concern on the bridges stems from people who stop or congregate. Those who are stopped, even if they are not intentionally obstructing others, may encourage other pedestrians to stop. This can contribute to increased crowd density and its potential results, including risk of physical injury and criminal activity that can occur when people are in close proximity to each other. Relatedly, those who are stopped may add to the amount of disorder on the bridges even if their actions are not unlawful.

Whereas the purpose of the overpasses is to safely deliver people from one side of Las Vegas Boulevard to the other, the most reasonable solution to minimize problems related to crowd density, disorder, and criminal activity is to keep pedestrians moving along the bridges. A prohibition on obstruction alone will not resolve these concerns.

¹⁸ See George L. Kelling and William H. Sousa (2001). *Do Police Matter? An Analysis of the Impact of New York City’s Police Reforms*. Civic Report No. 22. New York, NY: The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research; see also Anthony A. Braga, Brandon C. Welsh, and Cory Schnell (2015). “Can policing disorder reduce crime? A systematic review and meta-analysis.” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 52(4), 567–588.

Stat Sheet

April 2023

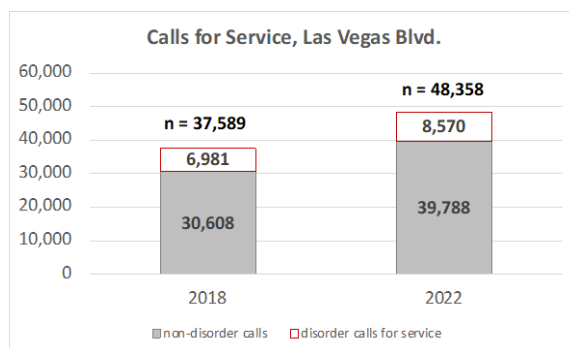
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Safety on Las Vegas Boulevard, 2018-2022

By: William Sousa

Safety concerns related to police calls for service, disorderly conditions, and unhoused individuals present numerous challenges for public officials. This Stat Sheet provides an overview of safety conditions on Las Vegas Boulevard from 2018-2022.

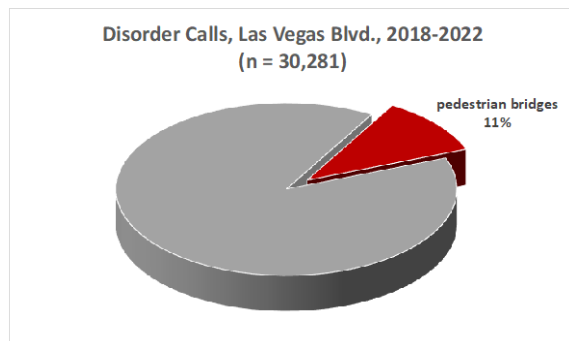
Key Stats



1. Calls for Service – Disorder

Overall calls for service on Las Vegas Boulevard increased 29% from 37,589 in 2018 to 48,358 in 2022.

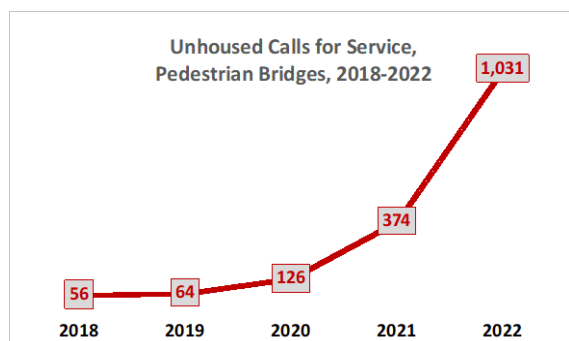
Calls specifically for disorderly offenses jumped from 6,981 in 2018 to 8,570 in 2022 – an increase of 23%.



2. Disorder on Pedestrian Bridges

Calls for disorderly offenses on Las Vegas Boulevard are disproportionately concentrated on pedestrian bridges.

Although the pedestrian bridges account for less than 6% of the total length of the sidewalk system along Las Vegas Boulevard, 11% of disorder calls occurred on the walkways.



3. Calls Related to Unhoused Individuals

Calls for service related to unhoused individuals increased dramatically on Las Vegas Boulevard from 2018-2022.

For example, calls related to the unhoused increased on the pedestrian bridges from 56 in 2018 to 1,031 in 2022 – an increase of over 1,700%.

Center for Crime and Justice Policy

Introduction

Public safety along Las Vegas Boulevard – the heart of the entertainment industry in Clark County – is an important consideration for public officials. As a major tourist destination, issues related to police calls for service, disorderly conditions, and unhoused individuals present a number of challenges. An analysis of data from 2018-2023 provides information on measures of public safety along Las Vegas Boulevard.¹

Calls for Service

Calls for service are a gauge for the amount of police resources required to manage problems at locations. While many calls are not necessarily crime-related, they often reflect citizen concerns about problematic conditions related to personal health and safety. Analyses reveal that calls for service along the stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard between Russell Road and Sahara Avenue increased substantially, from 37,589 in 2018 to 48,358 in 2022 – an increase of 29%.

Disorder

Research demonstrates that problematic quality-of-life conditions (aggressive panhandling, public drug and alcohol use, excessive trash and litter, etc.) can lead to more quality-of-life issues in public spaces, increased sanitation problems, heightened fear among citizens, and serious criminal activity. Calls for service specifically for disorder increased from 6,981 in 2018 to 8,570 in 2022 – an increase of 23%. Disorder also appears to concentrate at specific locations along Las Vegas Boulevard. For example, although pedestrian bridges make up less than 6% of the total length of the sidewalk system, 11% of disorder calls on Las Vegas Boulevard occurred on the walkways.²

Unhoused Individuals

Safety concerns related to unhoused individuals present a number of challenges. The unhoused are disproportionately impacted by struggles with physical health, mental health, and substance abuse problems – and they are at heightened risk of victimization by serious crime. Many calls for service to police concern unhoused individuals. Calls related to the unhoused increased at an alarming rate along Las Vegas Boulevard, from 346 in 2018 to 7,066 in 2022 – an increase of over 1,900%. On the pedestrian bridges alone, calls increased from just 56 in 2018 to 1,031 in 2022 – an increase of over 1,700%.

¹ Data were provided by the LVMPD Research & Analysis Unit and the Clark County Public Works Department.

² The total length of the sidewalks between Russell Road and Sahara Avenue (east and west sides), including the pedestrian bridges, is 39,600 linear feet. The length of the bridges alone is 2,300 linear feet. These measures do not include the privately owned pedestrian bridges in front of Treasure Island, the Venetian, and the Wynn.