

Are Taylor Swift concerts still safe after terrorist threat? Experts explain why stadiums can be 'soft targets'

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Carey Rappaport, Northeastern distinguished professor of electrical and computer engineering, spoke about advances in venue security in the wake of a terrorist plot targeting several Taylor Swift concerts in Austria. Credit: Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

Authorities in Austria say they've subverted a planned terrorist attack targeting several of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour concerts in Vienna, shows that would have drawn [as many as 200,000](#) concertgoers to three stadiums.

Despite advances in stadium security in recent years, concert venues are considered "soft targets" for [terrorist attacks](#) because thousands of people gather in close quarters before passing through security checkpoints or [metal detectors](#), says Carey Rappaport, a Northeastern distinguished professor who helps lead three government-funded security research centers at the university.

"The soft targets are those regions that haven't been through security, but are still prone to a lot of density," Rappaport says. "Think of it as 'high yield' for the bad guys."

The primary suspect in Vienna is a 19-year-old man who officials say was "radicalized" online, swearing an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State, the New York Times reports. Authorities searched the man's home, where they discovered "explosives, timers, machetes and knives." The man reportedly confessed to a plot in which he was planning to kill himself and a large number of other people.

Authorities say another suspect is a 17-year-old who recently started a job at Ernst Happel Stadium as an events service provider. Authorities also questioned a 15-year-old boy who helped corroborate some of the details in the main suspect's confession, according to the *New York Times*.

Both suspects were known to police.

The line between soft and hard targets is, Rappaport notes, a little blurred.

When it comes to concert halls, stadiums and airports, once you pass through metal detectors and are admitted into the venue, you enter an area typically considered a hard target, Rappaport says. But throngs of people in a line waiting to enter a stadium or go through the security—that site can be vulnerable to attacks.

And it's those "thousands of people" outside the Swift concert who the suspect is said to have been targeting.

"Those people waiting in line are packed in tightly, it's very dense, and you could do a lot of damage with people gathered so closely together," he says. "It's a fantastically challenging problem."

"You can have perfect security if you're willing to be intrusive, but, of course, that's unreasonable," Rappaport adds. "You can use [video surveillance](#) for forensic after-the-fact analysis, but video doesn't usually help us prevent certain traumatic activities from occurring. And the problem is, it's hard to know what's innocent and what's malicious."

Advanced metal detectors and so-called millimeter-wave radar scanners have become a mainstay at most large concert venues, Rappaport says. But oftentimes there is a lack of security personnel to thoroughly check an attendee every time the metal detector alarm goes off.

The more "low-tech" surveillance methods—human intel, intercepted communications—are "still the gold standard" when it comes to keeping people safe, Rappaport says.

But the nature of the threats evolve, and another threat facing stadiums today is the possibility of drone attacks.

"One of the issues with stadiums is they tend to be open air, or exposed to the sky," Rappaport says. "The track and field stadium at the Paris

Olympics, for example, is open to the sky."

All in all, improvements in concert security—and Swift's is considered the best in the world—have made attending shows an overall safe experience.

"It's taken much more seriously, usually, than many of these indoor concert halls, like Symphony Hall in Boston, or an opera house," Rappaport says. "It seems to me that Foxborough Stadium is much more secure than those venues, but it is outdoor. So one needs to have consideration for drone attacks."

This is not the first time a music venue has been the target of a terrorist attack. In 2015, terrorists set off bombs across Paris in a coordinated terror attack, targeting many locations including a concert hall and soccer [stadium](#).

Two years later in 2017, a suicide bomber killed 22 people at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England. Later that year, a gunman killed 58 people and wounded more than 500 at a concert in Las Vegas in one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history.

An attack at a [concert](#) hall in Moscow in March resulted in the deaths of more than 133 people, and injuries to over 100 others. Islamic State in Khorasan Province, a regional branch of the Islamic State—ISIS-K—claimed responsibility for the attack.

This history makes officials prone to taking threats like the one in Vienna seriously, says Andrew Mall, associate professor of music at Northeastern.

"Every time there's a major gathering, law enforcement is on high alert," Mall says. "There's been so much made about the impact of the Eras

Tour [and] the size of the crowds. I can see that being an attractive target to people who are willing to put others' lives at risk.

"Organizers and promoters are aware that especially with very large events with people who attract attention from a huge variety of different constituencies, that this is always a standing possibility."

The Eras Tour not only brings in hundreds of thousands of attendees to a show, but to the city where it's happening. Fans from the United States have been traveling overseas to attend the European shows, taking advantage of lower ticket costs.

While police were able to uncover the alleged plot before it happened, Mall says the shows were likely canceled out of "an abundance of caution" as officials work on the investigation and ensure there's not an ongoing or continuing threat. Many events like these have insurance policies that allow them to cancel under situations like this with minimal financial risk.

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