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SXSW Crash Raises Concerns About Barricade Safety

By KATE MCGEE • MAR 13, 2014

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(www.kut.org/sites/kut/files/styles/x_large/public/201403/Screen_Shot_2014-03-13_at_6.55.04_PM.png)

A car plowed through barricades like these early Thursday morning, killing two and injuring 23. Now, some are questioning whether the city of Austin should use stronger barriers to increase pedestrian safety.

FILIPA RODRIGUES, KUT NEWS

Every year during South by Southwest, police use barricades to create pedestrian-only streets. They're meant to protect the large crowds that descend on the city.

But early Thursday morning, a driver plowed through one of those barricades (<http://kut.org/post/two-dead-after-driver-plows-sxsw-crowd-suspect-custody>), killing two people and injuring 23 others.

Now, some people, like pedestrian safety expert Rob Reiter, are questioning if the city should put more protective barriers in place. He says crashes like the one last night are preventable if the right types of barricades are used.



"You can't make a site completely secure, you have to get ambulances in and out, that kind of thing. But it's very simple to do removable bollards (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bollard>)," Reiter says. "They weigh about 40 to 50 pounds a piece and it wouldn't be hard to station emergency personnel nearby to quickly lift out bollards so ambulances can get in or get out."

In 2003, a car drove through a farmers' market in Santa Monica, California. Ten people were killed and more than 60 were injured. After the crash, the National Transportation Safety Board said bollards could possibly have prevented the car from driving through.

But Kara Kockelman, a transportation researcher at UT Austin, says barricades don't necessarily make sense.

"For temporary installations I don't think that's economically wise, generally," Kockelman says. "That barricade line may change from year to year, or it might only be up for SXSW."

Plus, she says, police officers have to make sure emergency vehicles can access areas quickly. "It could be a worse outcome if we can't get personnel and equipment in there quickly," she argues.

During a press conference Thursday, Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo voiced similar concerns.

"When somebody acts intentionally, it's very difficult to stop," Acevedo says. "If you have a car here, you go around the car. You had a police officer in uniform that was forced to jump out of the way. There's a method to why we do things the way we do. It's worked for many, many years and I don't foresee any huge changes in the way we set up our closures," Acevedo.