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The madding crowd

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By [Justin Palk](#)

This is a bit dated, but, via [Schneier on Security](#) and [Pruned](#), we hear word of Paul Torrens' work on modeling crowd behavior, like panic, in urban environments.

Torrens intends for his [software](#) to help urban planners, public safety and health officials and others model behaviors that couldn't be realistically tested in a lab, such as evacuations.

Quoting Torrens from an Arizona State University press release:

"You couldn't stage a realistic rehearsal of an evacuation, because people are not going to panic appropriately. You could never bulldoze large sections of the city to see how it affects pedestrian flow."

Other questions the model might be able to answer:

- How a pathogen gets passed among a group of pedestrians;
- What are the signs a crowd might be about to turn into a mob;
- How to reduce pedestrian interactions (i.e., collisions) with cars.

Or, as Pruned put it: "... quadruple the population of Chicago. How about 200 million? And into its historic Emerald Necklace system of parks, you drop an al-Qaeda sleeper cell, a pedophile, an Ebola patient, an illegal migrant worker, a swarm of zombies, and Paris Hilton. Then grab a cold one, sit back and watch the landscape descend into chaos. It'll be better than any megablockbuster movie you'll see this summer."

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