

## SPI-B return on risk of public disorder

25/02/2020

### Task

- SAGE and the Home Office, working with MoJ and NPCC, were asked to provide advice to COBR on the risk of public disorder in the Covid-19 RWCS.
- SPI-B, the SAGE behavioural science sub-group, and attendees from the Home Office and NPCC considered the risk of public disorder, with a focus on scenarios where there are significant workplace absences, e.g. in the police, and pressures on healthcare facilities.
- SPI-B did not consider prisoner unrest as they did not have sufficient expertise to do so at this stage. Additionally, the prison population differs significantly to the general population and therefore the likely behaviours may be different.

### Conclusions

- SPI-B defined public disorder to include actions from opportunistic crime, community tension and rioting.
- SPI-B agreed that large scale rioting is unlikely. It is rarely seen in these circumstances. Acts of altruism will predominate, and HMG could readily promote and guide these.
- Where public disorder occurs, it is usually triggered by perceptions about the Government's response, rather than the nature of the epidemic per se. For example, a perception that the Government response strategies are not effective in looking after the public may lead to an increase in tensions.
- SPI-B considered the risk of public disorder in scenarios where there are:
  - staff absences in police forces,
  - pressures on healthcare facilities,
  - perceptions that there is limited resource, e.g. limited face masks or hand sanitiser,
  - perceptions of inadequate government response to contain the outbreak.
- There was agreement that the key factors that are likely to increase public disorder are similar across the scenarios.
- The group agreed that the police face specific issues with regards to this outbreak:
  - If there are low numbers of police due to workplace absences, there could be a perception that the police have become disempowered. This has the potential to exacerbate what might otherwise have been a minor issue, e.g. lead to a rise in opportunistic crime by those who are already antagonistic towards the police.
  - Specific scenarios where police actions are experienced as excessive and which prevent the public from accessing services they believe they have a right to access (e.g. food, healthcare) may lead to increased tensions. To avoid this, police actions should as far as possible be focused on dialogue and facilitation of legitimate public needs (support rather than control).

SPI-B recommends that, in order to limit the risk of public disorder, Government should:

- **Provide clear and transparent reasons for different strategies:** The public need to understand the purpose of the Government's policy, why the UK approach differs to other countries and how resources are being allocated. SPI-B agreed that government should prioritise messaging that explains clearly why certain actions are being taken, ahead of messaging designed solely for reassuring the public.

This should also set **clear expectations on how the response will develop**, e.g. ensuring the public understands what they can expect as the outbreak evolves and what will happen when large numbers of people present at hospitals. The use of early messaging will help, as a) individuals are likely to be more receptive to messages before an issue becomes controversial and b) it will promote a sense the Government is following a plan.

- **Promote a sense of collectivism:** All messaging should reinforce a sense of community, that "we are all in this together." This will avoid increasing tensions between different groups (including between responding agencies and the public); promote social norms around behaviours; and lead to self-policing within communities around important behaviours.