

Purpose and context.

This is a rapid response paper by the currently constituting Security and Policing sub-Group of SPI-B. Our paper is designed to help facilitate understanding of how an exit strategy might affect crime and policing and is structured in response to five questions raised by the Home Office. The paper is commissioned to support a planning meeting for policing in this context likely to involve the Home Secretary, Cressida Dick (MPS) and Martin Hewitt (NPCC) among others. The paper is a rapid response undertaken over two days. The issue of disorder relating to Covid-19 has been addressed in prior SPI-B reports, which we also submit. A future more considered review could supply further information and solicit opinion more widely, particularly when the Security and Policing sub-Group has been formally assembled.

Points of attention:

- Situational factors are more important than dispositional in governing crime rates and patterns.
- The risk of serious and widespread public disorder is not inherent to any new conditions but will be driven primarily by structural, micro-sociological and social psychological factors.
- Addressing issues of legitimacy, equity and inequality must be central criteria in assessing the impact of any changing restrictions, otherwise sections of the public may lose trust in authorities, lose adherence and the potential for collective resistance may emerge.
- Research on the social psychology of riots indicates that such major urban disorder is underpinned by three primary dynamics: a) shared psychological group membership among those involved; b) perceived illegitimacy of intergroup interactions both prior to and also during public gatherings; c) changes in the power relationships, particularly between police and those motivated toward confrontation
- To mitigate and avoid the conditions for riot and increased criminality, theory and research suggest there is a need for a facilitatory approach where government and police are oriented less on coercion and more toward recognising underlying barriers to adherence and in doing so seeking to scaffold support for people in overcoming the difficulties they are encountering.
- Effective policing must be graded, neighbourhood led, and its effectiveness depends upon developing structures, practices of and capacities for dialogue-based community policing.

Questions raised by the Home Office.

1. How we should expect people with different criminal proclivities to behave?

- The question raises interesting issues with regard to an assumption of the drivers of criminality as merely dispositional, whereas contemporary research and theory recognises that situational factors are equally if not more important for general crime patterns (e.g. routine activity theory). The question also veneers the complexity of crime (i.e. what kind of crimes are of concern).
- In the current 'lockdown' phase the radically altered social context has seen a clear change to prior patterns of criminality in police force areas across the UK. For example, in most – but not all force areas – there was an almost immediate and enduring decline in overall calls for service, of up to 75% in some cases.
- This suggests the 'lockdown' led directly to major reductions in crime and criminality across society, presumably in part driven by lack of opportunity. However, in parallel,

there have been significant increases in specific types of police calls to service (e.g. domestic violence, suspected violations of control measures).

- Thus, it is likely that a relaxation of control measures will create a new situation and another shift in patterns of crime. It is likely these changing patterns will relate directly to the nature of the new Government measures, e.g. theft of masks if designated as compulsory for public transport, forgery of immunity certificates.
- Nonetheless, available data does suggest that during the 'lockdown' phase, the activity of Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) remains an enduring and salient issue for police, particularly regarding deliberate violations of existing and the new emergency legislation (e.g. continued supply of illegal drugs, deliberate public gatherings and 'anti-social' behaviour, particularly those involving young males).
- The activities of these OCGs may also change depending on the different circumstances provided by any relaxation of control measures. For example, there may be high demand for specific commodities (e.g. face masks) leading to opportunistic crime to obtain those commodities or forged certification of immunity passports and a further increase in online fraud.
- There may also be inadvertent criminality (i.e. violation of remaining control measures) driven by public confusion and lack of clarity in Government messaging about the exact parameters of partial lifting.

2. Different moments of risk with the general public - when is the biggest moment of risk and what would trigger public order problems?

- Our response to this question is framed by a fuller paper on disorder already produced for SPI-B ([Reicher & Stott, 2020](#)).
- Broadly speaking the risk to public order is driven by structural (the broader social context) and micro-sociological factors (in particular interactions between police and public) and is underpinned by three primary social psychological dynamics: a) shared psychological group membership among those involved in disorder; b) perceived illegitimacy of intergroup interactions both prior to and during public gatherings; c) changes in the power relationships, particularly between police and those motivated toward confrontation (changes that occur within but also extend beyond crowd events).
- Key drivers in terms of structural issues arising in the context of changing policy around lockdown will relate to their capacity to generate perceptions of the illegitimacy of the new measures, particularly among those materially disadvantaged by them. This risk is particularly acute if the impact of new measures is disproportionate (e.g. effects areas or relative deprivation more so relative to areas of wealth).
- There are also risks likely to emerge if new Government measures are perceived to reflect failures of the prior approach or that subsequently lead to future perceived failures. Such views of Governmental illegitimacy are likely to be highly influenced by public perceptions of UK measures relative to those in other countries (e.g. if 'relaxed' measures are seen to work in countries like Sweden people may question the continuation of harsh 'lockdown' in the UK).
- There are also risks that inter-ethnic conflict elsewhere (e.g. in India and Pakistan) could translate to diaspora in the U.K. context. Moreover, cultural issues such public gatherings and vulnerabilities (increased death rates) arising from – for example, Ramadan and Eid - could amplify pre-existing / racialised confrontations. [The Government of Pakistan was forced to back down on its intention close mosques over this period].
- Key drivers in terms of micro-sociological factors relate primarily to the ongoing local implementation of the civil contingency response and the extent to which it is perceived

as meeting local needs and adequately addressing or confronting local sensitivities (e.g. see SPI-B funerals paper LSE Anthropology).

- Historical interactions between police and community prior to and during the 'lockdown' phase will be of particular importance. Where sections of the community experience or regard police actions as disproportionate, it is likely to engender antagonisms that may ignite localised confrontations. This is likely if police use of force is required to impose further and even harsher control measures in some locations relative to others following the issuing of new localised lifting / continued closures (see Security and Policing Sub-Group paper on localised lifting).

3. Why no looting (and should we expect some)?

- There is only one small-scale UK example of 'looting' during the present epidemic (South London, 18/03/2020) but it is arguable whether this was actually looting or straightforward theft (an attack on a supermarket to steal alcoholic drinks).
- Looting in the context of major disasters and mass emergencies is a complex issue that requires nuancing. First, historical evidence in the context of 'natural' disasters such as hurricane Katrina demonstrates that 'looting' was largely a subsistence strategy by those unable to access food supplies.
- However, historical evidence from food riots in 18th century and 19th century France demonstrates that such disturbances are often more about legitimacy than appropriation.
- Research on looting in the 2011 English riots shows that it was closely related to structural inequality and perceived police illegitimacy and disempowerment. Research suggests that looting was an emergent behaviour made possible through earlier stages of disorder focused initially on anti-police confrontations. It was also evident that more systematic looting was enacted by OCGs exploiting vulnerabilities in police capacities exposed through their involvement in multiple sites of disorder (see [Drury et al, 2019](#)).
- Instances of looting in other countries (e.g. USA, Mexico, South Africa, Philippines, Italy) during the present crisis suggest that such acts are similarly related to perceptions of police/governmental illegitimacy, while also being to some extent subsistence strategies (accessing food and PPE). [See <https://acleddata.com/analysis/covid-19-disorder-tracker/>]
- Severe shortages of PPE and/or severe hardship as a result of prolonged lockdown, job losses, etc., could trigger similar responses in disadvantaged / marginal communities in the UK across the longer term, particularly if triggered by arrests or police inflicted injuries to community members for violations of emergency legislation (e.g. currently [in France](#)).

4. Impact of relaxing social restrictions and then tightening them again?

- During lockdown and curfews people have limited opportunities to express grievances, although in other countries people are beginning to organise different forms of protest (e.g. in cars, South Korea; mass protest, real-time streaming on-line, Taiwan).
- Once restrictions are lifted, opportunities for public protest and gatherings (impromptu free festivals) will increase. There will also be pressures from the football Leagues to allow the resumption of the current football season to allow its conclusion. These events pose their own challenges (e.g. mass gatherings of Liverpool or Leeds fans should either side successfully win or gain promotion to the Premiership).
- Given tensions depend on the extent to which new measures are perceived as illegitimate and / or a reflection of Government failures, another lockdown in this new

context then increases the danger that measures are also perceived as restrictions on rights of expression and assembly.

- The public is likely to ask: 'How often does this have to happen?' They are also likely to be far less tolerant than during the current lockdown as the situation will be structurally different. The economic downturn will have begun to bite, many having lost jobs or feeling in a precarious situation.

5. How are these things likely to differ geographically across the UK?

- There are likely to be tensions between rural and urban areas, especially as the former will be seen as a refuge by the latter. Populations in rural areas may be more likely to resist easing of mobility restrictions than urban areas to prevent incursions from urban populations.
- Acts of violence against 'tourists' are likely to occur because for the above reasons and a growing culture of local mobilisation (sometimes verging on vigilantism) to enforce social distancing.
- Regional or neighbourhood level releases carries particular risks which we have already outlined in a prior paper (See Neighbourhood-level release below)
- Different regulations in different parts of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) may give rise to grievances. Some regions may feel aggrieved or there may be tensions that one UK nation has been allowed to trial restrictions while they persist elsewhere.

Ways forward

The above analysis has been framed around the questions set but it is equally important to think about ways to mitigate potential social disruption. This will require:

- Clear and effective communication, locally focused.
- Promoting adherence in groups less receptive to messages of collectivism (e.g. youth), through engagement with local community influencers
- Focus on messages likely to be more important to such groups, e.g. appeals by front-line health-workers.
- Focus on co-production of adherence and messages attempting to manage interaction between the public and police.

Lastly, the sub-group should focus on the generation of scenarios based on specific policy interventions or structural changes that may influence levels of adherence and generate social disorder. This would enable us to provide detailed advice on risk mitigation in future.