Policing the Coronavirus Outbreak: Processes and Prospects for Collective Disorder

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This briefing is divided into three parts. First, we outline the factors which lead to incidents of collective disorder (or riots). Second, we consider how the overall response to the coronavirus outbreak, and the role of the police within this response, will impact the probability of such disorder. Third, we apply these understandings to three specific scenarios of potential disorder.

How riots start

Contrary to common opinion, riots rarely start simply because people are frustrated or because they do not get what they want or need. Rather, contemporary research[1] suggests that three factors are necessary to create the potential for major rioting:

- *First*, it is necessary for people to develop a sense of illegitimacy and grievance: that is, something they experience as being done or denied to them by another group unjustifiably.
- *Second*, this grievance relates to an 'ingroup' which people belong to psychologically (e.g. neighbourhood, community, class, ethnic grouping). Rioting stems from what is happening to 'us'.
- *Third,* it is necessary to be able to identify an agent – or outgroup - who is seen as the source of grievance (e.g. government, army, police). Rioting requires a 'them' to target.

It is important to stress that these conditions do not necessarily 'pre-exist' riots. They can develop during collective events especially where the intervention of authority is seen as indiscriminate and excessive, particularly if it involves the use of force by police[2].

It is equally important to recognise that, even when these three conditions are in place, it is not that any confrontational incident will generate widespread conflict (as implied by the familiar metaphor of 'tinder' and 'spark'). Rather the incident is precipitating because it encapsulates a more generalised sense of 'our' grievances against 'them'[3].

It follows from this, that avoiding the possibility of riots during the coronavirus outbreak requires an understanding of both (a) the general way in which people represent and understand what groups are involved and the relations between these groups, and (b) the ways in which specific situations involving these groups are handled by the authorities.

'Us' and 'them' in the coronavirus outbreak

A risk factor governing the emergence of widespread social tension or conflict during the outbreak of Covid-19 will be the extent to which there is a credible sense that some sections of the community are being treated unfairly as a consequence. This may be because different measures taken by the authorities apply to different groups or because the same measure impacts differently on different groups. For instance, if quarantining measures (e.g. self isolation) are seen as disproportionately penalising poorer groups in society (who are less able to afford time off work), then there is a real potential for social division between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The risk may be amplified when agencies who then enforce such measures (i.e. police, army, etc.) are then seen as agents of privileged groups rather than neutral guardians of law and order. In such circumstances there is a danger of these enforcement agencies becoming seen as the illegitimate agent of the 'other' and for a loss of trust and conflict to emerge. In such contexts, minor confrontations in one location can then be seen by others in different locations as indicative of wider illegitimacies in their relationship to authority and disorder can begin to escalate and spread[4].

In order to mitigate against these possibilities and risks, two general approaches are critical. The first concerns the overall framing of the outbreak by Government and media. As far as possible, the virus needs to be seen as affecting the entire community, with policies oriented to seeking to

secure the overall good of the community with prioritisation of resources towards the most socially vulnerable (e.g. those less able to secure access to health care, those less able to self-isolate). Under such conditions, both evidence and theory suggest that people will be more willing to accept the actions of the authorities as 'procedurally fair,' even if the outcome of these actions involves negative outcomes and personal sacrifices[5]. As a result, people and communities will be more likely to self-regulate (for instance, complying with the instructions of authority figures, spontaneously challenging those who act against the communal interest) and to be more positive towards external regulation by the police and other agencies. From this perspective the public are potentially the most powerful resource the authorities have to deal with emergencies. The role of the police and other authorities, then, is to work with citizens to *scaffold,* rather than *substitute* for (or, at worst, suppress) community 'self-regulation'. Moreover, insofar as they are able to act in this way, the police come to be seen as 'of us' and 'for us'[6].

The science and theory underpinning these recommendations are already incorporated into national police guidance in the UK for policing public order. This depends upon applying the four principles of facilitative policing[7].

- The police (and also other agencies such as the army) need to *educate* themselves concerning the nature, beliefs, values and norms of the different communities they are dealing with.
- The police/army need to focus on *facilitating* legitimate goals and priorities of these different communities
- The police/army need to *communicate* clearly and consistently with those communities explaining how their actions are designed to facilitate community goals and negotiating with community representatives how they can be achieved.
- Where some people act in unlawful or disruptive ways, police interventions must be proportional, targeted and must thereby *differentiate* between such individuals and the rest of the community.

Using these principles, the police and army should prioritise gaining the consent and support of the local population surrounding them; it is essential that they are seen to be helping the community reach their own goals rather than imposing their own goals on the community. What is more, the ability to enact these principles depends in turn on the extent to which they understand the diverse array of community perspectives.

Specific scenarios

That is why, during a crisis such as the present one, the maintenance and indeed the extension of community dialogue and neighbourhood policing become more urgent than ever[8]. In this regard it is important to consider what police resources will be available (e.g. PSUs via Mutual Aid) and how they will be mobilised from one location (e.g. Mutual Aid resources directed via a regional Gold Command) into a local BCU level operation in ways that ensure they are seen to support rather than undermine or overwrite local neighbourhood policing operations, community relations and goals. Following the guidelines given to Behavioural Science group, we use three examples to translate the general principles outlined above into specific scenarios. The potential for violence in such cases will be directly related to the issues of framing addressed in the previous section.

a) *Family members are turned away from hospital due to demand from high-risk coronavirus patients*: If there is already a clear understanding that healthcare rationing is a matter of protecting the most vulnerable in the community, when those who are less vulnerable act against the communal interest by demanding resources, then any anger from individuals and their families who are turned away is unlikely to generalise. Moreover, other members of the community are more likely to support police action. In operational terms, such a scenario means that the police should set up local command structures that involve input from community members and that they should work with community mediators to try to prevent people presenting at hospital unnecessarily. In particular,

communication about the need to ration resources comes best from within the community itself and may increase the potential for community self-regulation decreasing the likelihood of people presenting unnecessarily.

b) *Anger arises at those who refuse to self-isolate and are seen to act in ways that spread disease*: This is the potential 'dark side' of creating strong norms of acting for the communal good and of collective self-regulation that targets norm violators. This can easily spill over into vigilantism unless care is taken to communicate clearly how disapproval should be expressed in strictly limited ways, how it is important to report serious norm violations, and that violence against violators will itself require policing resources that could better be used elsewhere and hence undermines collective interests. Such vigilantism becomes particularly serious under conditions where individuals are treated as proxies for groups and hostility extends to all members of the group – the notion, for instance, that ethnic minority members have behaved in ways that endanger the health of the majority has been at the root of pogroms throughout history. Hence it is particularly important to monitor the activities of 'hate groups' and the incidence of hate crime and to make a challenge to racist rumours and reacting to incidents a key priority of neighbourhood and response policing efforts. Once again, the success of these interventions depends upon the active involvement of a diverse array of community representatives with the police at a local level both in the framing and the delivery of policy.

c) *Most religious groups suspend their gatherings, but others do not*. This would be a particularly egregious example of the previous scenario, especially if the groups still meeting were from an ethnic minority where prior community tensions have been high. In such cases the probability of violence would be high and the police themselves may come under attack for intervening to prevent these attacks. Hence, it would be very important to avoid such situations through prior dialogue, through assessing religious needs and priorities at a local level, and, where necessary, by facilitating alternative means of satisfying these without gathering. Here more than ever, a focus on understanding and facilitating the legitimate goals and values of a community (e.g. to worship) combined with the early implementation of structures for police dialogue with all sectors of the diverse communities within a specific area is critical to avoiding circumstances where conflict might develop.

Conclusions

Even though the coronavirus outbreak may lead to some very difficult decisions that involve denying resources to those in considerable need, social tension and conflict are far from inevitable. Characteristically people respond to emergencies by developing a very strong sense of community and displaying remarkable altruism. With careful management both at a general policy level and in terms of sensitive community-based and dialogue led policing, it will be possible to maintain a sense of common endeavour and hence to draw on the community as a key resource in dealing with the crisis. The two keys are to build a sense of 'us-ness' — of shared identity and shared fate - at every decision point and to be especially sensitive to any fault lines in the community which could lead particular groups (including the authorities) to be seen as 'them' rather than 'us'.

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