Public Disorder and Public Health: Contemporary Threats and Risks
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Executive summary

- The threats currently facing the UK are diverse, inter-connected and dynamic.
- Public health will be particularly adversely affected by spontaneous public assemblies, particularly if these develop into violent confrontation.
- Local lockdown carries with it a series of threats to social cohesion and public order.
- Some media narratives are reinforcing claims that Asian and Black people in areas of local lockdown are potentially responsible for disproportionately spreading the virus.
- There has been a step-change in threat levels since the last sustained period of serious rioting in the UK in 2011.
- The police are in a far weaker position in terms of capacity to deal with these threats than in 2011 and police weaknesses, when recognised, were a factor in the spread of urban disorder during those riots.
- If upstream intervention is not taken, amplification of the conditions for serious public disorder in multiple locations is likely to develop.
- If serious disorder does develop, it will have a detrimental impact on public health, facilitating the spread of disease, making the re-imposition of measures to control the spread of COVID-19 next to impossible and would be likely to require military support.
- Policing has a vital role to play in preventing disorder but coordinated action is needed across Whitehall and with local authorities. **This is not simply a policing issue.**

Introduction

In the next few weeks and months the UK will face grave challenges to public order. The situation is volatile and highly complex. Tensions resulting from the pandemic and lockdown have become inextricably bound with structural inequalities and international events. While widespread urban disorder is not inevitable, currently, the situation in the UK is precariously balanced and the smallest error in policing (whether perceived or real, inside or outside the UK) or policy could unleash a dynamic which will make the management of COVID-19 all but impossible. Put simply, a serious deterioration of public order could overwhelm all attempts to control contagion, overwhelm hospitals, the criminal justice system and hinder revival of the economy.

The challenges posed to public order are multiple and overlapping. As lockdown eases, the numbers of spontaneous large-scale public assemblies such as protests, celebrations and unlicensed music events (e.g. raves, block and house parties) are increasing. The removal of restrictions on pubs from 4 July will complicate all these

problems and introduce entirely new ones. At the same time, the legitimacy of the Police - and of the laws and regulations they are charged with enforcing - is being challenged from many sides.

This rapidly evolving situation makes it urgently necessary to update our previous paper 'Home Office Commission-10/06/2020: Public health, protest, policing'. The use of localised lockdown to control resurgent or persistent sites of infection also makes it necessary to update our previous paper on the subject of 'Neighbourhood-level release'. Our reflections in this briefing paper offer a preliminary assessment of risks currently facing the UK and the means by which they can be potentially mitigated.

Core challenges

Emerging conditions and an array of historical events have resulted in a high risk of civil disorder across multiple sites, with serious implications for public health. This potential disorder could be comparable or bigger in scale to the rioting of August 2011 but police capacities and capability has diminished since 2011 with the loss of very high numbers of [staff](#).

The latter includes not just 'frontline' response officers but neighbourhood and intelligence staff. The structural and losses police have suffered are relevant – closing down of custody suites and specialist prisoner-processing units, and the restriction of access to resources such as police helicopters. As a result, situational awareness (i.e. the ability to detect rising tensions), as well as operational response capacity in the police is significantly diminished.

The national public order mobilisation plan remains resourced at 2011 levels. However, in the event of a large-scale national mobilisation, officers will inevitably be redeployed from other roles. Given the overall reduction in staff, this will significantly impact on police capability to deliver 'business as usual'. If such a situation were to develop a security crisis would ensue, undermining public trust in Government and catastrophically undermining its COVID-19 recovery plans.

The present situation

- Data has emerged showing the disproportionate impact of the epidemic and lockdown upon black and some other ethnic minority communities, exposing and widening existing [level](#)s of inequality.
- Data on Policing of people from black and minority ethnic communities in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic shows a significant increase in the use of stop and search against young black men: according to NPCC data from 15 May, such people received at least 22% of the coronavirus lockdown fines. The data shows that BME people were fined at a rate of 26 per 100,000, while the rate for white people was 16.8 per 100,000. The Crown Prosecution Service

has found that many people were wrongly charged and convicted under emergency coronavirus laws.

- In the last two weeks, the UK has experienced a series of protests framed by political issues relating to ethnic inequality and national identity. In late May and early June, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that emerged in the USA found resonance in the UK, resulting in significant protests in cities such as London and Bristol. Criminal damage during these protests and police operational decisions provoked condemnation of police and resulted in counter-protests by the extreme right-wing (XRW), the Democratic Football Lads Alliance, and veterans (the latter ought not to be considered 'right-wing').

- The sense of injustice in BME communities is reflected across many other communities which also perceive injustice who are coalescing under the BLM movement.

- At the same time, XRW groups are coalescing and mobilising at a scale not witnessed since the early EDL protests around 2010. There is a substantial overlap between some of the issues foregrounded by these groups (e.g. protection of heritage, memorials) and much larger sections of the population, e.g. among veterans.

- There are several examples of effective engagement where 'organisers' with lawful intentions have engaged and assisted in the achievement of safe and peaceful events but there are also examples where 'harder' elements have refused engagement and where unlawful agendas exist.

- Large-scale confrontations provoked by the XRW in London and then subsequently in Glasgow, Newcastle and other cities were partly responses to the previous actions of hardcore elements of BLM and the Anti-fascist movment and perceptions of weakness among the police. However, there are other drivers for these protests, including Loyalism in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and a more general feeling that the white working-class has been ignored and 'left behind'. The sectarian nature of the unrest in Glasgow, for example, is becoming increasingly evident.

- Increased polarisation of political discourse makes conflict and protest more likely and this may mutate into new and more violent forms. There are clear and evident racist undertones to the emerging tensions.

- There has been a series of public assemblies in the form of 'unlicensed music events' in the form of 'Raves' and 'Block Parties'. These have taken place in multiple locations; some have led to conflict and have resulted in deaths. There is also some evidence of intersection with BLM protests and ideologies as well as organisation and funding by Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) to create a market for drug supply.

- There have been fatal stabbing incidents in Reading, London and Glasgow, two of which were perpetrated by asylum-seekers, which is being exploited by far-right groups.

- A major incident was declared with regard to a large gathering of people on a beach in Bournemouth. The crowds here were predominantly white.

- Premiership and Championship football has resumed. The securing of the titles or promotion have led to large-scale gatherings and associated conflicts in Coventry and Liverpool.
- On July 4th the Government is further lifting restrictions, including the reopening of licensed premises. This has been framed by some as 'Independence Day,' implying celebration and implied entitlement to excess.
- Simultaneously, localised forms of 'lockdown' have begun, specifically in the city of Leicester, with a large South Asian population which inhabit areas having the highest density of cases. This is already a source of political tension between the local South Asian community and government. There is extensive racist commentary on social media. Videos have also been circulated on social media showing the South Asian community flouting social distancing in an attempt to stir conflict.

Managing the legitimacy of policing

It is clear from the context outlined above that the risks to public health and public order are multiple, complex and inter-related dynamics, but most include increasing inequalities and perceptions of police legitimacy. There is also the more general context of, quite simply, lack of clear, consistent, message for all to adhere to re who can go where, when, with whom and with what precautions (e.g. 2 or 1m, masks or not). These issues cannot be ignored as they represent key threats to public health and the delivery of a coherent recovery strategy. They are also known to be associated with the development of riots (Reicher and Stott, 2020).

In response to protests, unlicensed music events and football celebrations, there has been high-profile criticism of the lack of police assertiveness. This arose primarily in relation to the decision not to intervene to prevent the pulling down of the statue of Colston in Bristol; officers undertaking tactical withdrawal when under attack; or 'taking the knee' during BLM protests in London (and elsewhere), and allowing public gathering of football fans on Liverpool's Pier Head. There was also high-profile criticism of Greater Manchester Police for not intervening to prevent large unlicensed music events.

There have been several incidents in which people have attacked police during the above-mentioned assemblies. The Government has been forthright in its communication that attacks against police officers or damage to public property are unacceptable.

Both the Government and the Police Federation are also increasingly insistent that a more forceful and robust approach to public order management is both justified and required in the interests of officer safety. This relates to concerns over officer protection (physical and mental health) and also to police identity and officers' perceptions of 'self-legitimacy'.

If the police are continually facing criticism, there is a danger that an 'us and them' mentality will develop. This may adversely affect the policing of sensitive situations. At the same time, backlogs within the criminal justice situation may result in a reluctance to seek prosecutions. This could, in turn, further impact on the perceived legitimacy of police action.

The police response to fatal stabbings in Reading and Glasgow, and the serious wounding of a police officer in Glasgow, was widely applauded and represented as capturing the bravery and commitment to public safety of the police service. In contrast, the police response to the murder of two Black sisters in north-west London has been widely criticised. This is due in part to the slow response to the initial missing person call from the family, compounded by officers taking and distributing 'selfies' taken at the murder scene.

Policing operational challenges.

The public assemblies and public criticisms of police decision-making are creating operational challenges and legitimacy dilemmas for the police. They are already under pressure from political leaders, mainstream and social media and the public concerning the actually highly effective graded tactical approach and facilitative tone adopted during 'lockdown' (e.g the four 4 Es and avoidance of enforcement tactics). During the lifting of control measures, a perception has emerged among some that 'the police have gone soft and are scared of certain groups and communities'.

This poses a further problem of legitimacy. On the one hand, some members of the community call for a robust approach to the policing of public assembly (e.g. to prevent 'block parties' or 'defend statues'). In contrast, those gathering for such purposes may see their legitimate rights to freedom of association and assembly being infringed if dispersed forcefully by police. In other words, approaches and tactics which enhance perceptions of legitimacy with some communities can ironically undermine them with others, so the balance is difficult to achieve.

There are also 'self-legitimacy' issues at work among the police. On the one hand, criticisms of police 'weaknesses' may lead commanders to judge they have a responsibility to take a more assertive strategic approach. On the other hand, pressures from officers critical of a soft approach, because it is seen as a sign of weakness, increases the potential for a 'heavy handed' tactical response. As a result, there will be a political 'push' upon Chief Officers to ensure their force is seen to be robust. The Police Federation is also providing a strong 'pull' by making a case around officer safety and the need to protect officers as a priority.

The reduction in the capacity for processing prisoners in custody suites in many areas is important. If 'robust' action is going to be taken the lack of custody facilities, and

officer concerns about infection (particularly in overcrowded holding cells) may reduce the motivation to arrest. As a result, when disorder occurs, police may try to disperse crowds rather than arrest culprits, thereby merely pushing the problem (and potentially the virus) to other locations.

However, in contrast, there is an explicit understanding in police operations that actions are being filmed by the public and becoming viral on social media. Police operational misconduct may then be captured and amplify sensitivities. One can add to this the media's penchant for scenes of mass gatherings, at least one of which was declared as a 'major incident', and the suggested inability of local services to cope. Hostile foreign media - most obviously RT - are apt to provide live coverage of sensitive events (e.g protests) and to amplify grievances of any disaffected group.

There is already a view among London's black community that large gatherings on beaches, or outside Anfield, involving predominantly white and older communities, largely see no police intervention of scale. In contrast, large gatherings in streets or parks with music and dancing with predominantly BAME communities or young people result in police intervention. A sense of racial injustice, inequality and discrimination is increasingly strengthened at a time of already tense relations.

A host of issues arise from the opening of pubs on 4th July, particularly as licensing provisions are complicated and difficult for police to interpret/enforce. Opening onto the street and wider spaces surrounding pubs (to achieve physical distancing) increases the prospect of fights/anti-social behaviour and there are potential flashpoints around football fixtures. This will produce an unprecedented situation which disrupts established policies and practices for scheduling football matches and managing supporters. Rather than being confined to sterile and largely alcohol-free environments, many fans will instead gather in pubs to watch the match on TV. For example, the first day the pubs open sees ten Premier League clubs and 16 Championship teams playing (including the Forest v Derby derby). Where fans can watch matches in pubs near stadia, there is the potential for fans to spill out and gather near the stadium.

Alcohol consumption will also have an impact on other public gatherings, including protests and celebrations, but particularly outside pubs in town and city centres. For example, large gatherings in Leeds are also likely if they are promoted. Depending on results other large football gatherings are foreseeable in Nottingham, Manchester, Wolverhampton and London. With the Play Offs, FA Cup, and European matches, these risks go well into August.

As with the assemblies so far, while some people will listen to advice not to attend, many will not. Public health messaging has become less clear and there is evident disregard in some sections of the population with social distancing. The police will need to plan the management of these gatherings carefully.

Mitigation

The risks identified above could be mitigated in the following ways:

Policing

1. A relationship of trust between the police and the communities they serve needs to be re-emphasised.
2. Strategies need to be developed for dealing effectively and sensitively with different types of protest/assembly, whether in Bournemouth or Brixton.
3. Improve data-sharing between police and local authorities (through LRFs) to enable better targeting of emerging and intersectional problems. For example, raves often take place in county border areas involving organisers and attendees form multiple force areas.
4. Enhance the level of cultural competence in policing.
5. Ensure that policing is seen to be impartial (explain why police are intervening or not) and wherever possible proactive. For example, some force areas have been using social media to identify rave organisers, negotiate or make pre-emptive arrests. Their experience is that this has been easier to manage than trying to disperse large crowds after raves have already begun.
6. The IOPC should be agile in dealing with problems as they arise. A key factor in the development of the 2011 riots was the slow and ineffectual response of the police.
7. If and where police misconduct is detected ensure the IOPC is adequately responsive with their communications.
8. Improve police PR capability (vital for the above and to prevent problems from escalating).
9. Ensure an effective communication strategy is in place and is properly resourced to enable rapid responses to emerging incidents.
10. With regards to the opening of licenced premises ensure effective engagement of licensees, doormen and stewards through neighbourhood policing. Build a response plan based on an understanding of the opening plans of licensed premises.
11. Plan management of space in the vicinity of pubs to mitigate disorder and public health risks. Consider design issues in terms of managing town centre public space (e.g. areas set aside for allowing crowds to spread out to enable distancing, consider crowd flow across town centres, consider possibilities for road closures, consider good signage)
12. NPCC and College of Policing should be encouraged to examine licensing inspection and management in conjunction with mayors and government ministers.
13. Maintain / increase neighbourhood officers for public order duties or ensure the skills, knowledge and networks of the NPT officers within a POPS

response are properly utilised to empower de-escalation. When policing large gatherings, police experienced in de-escalation should be placed in the front-line; riot gear should *normally* be kept out of sight unless there is a clear and obvious requirement. Also consider the use of PLTs.

14. Commanders should reflect continually on their plans and approaches (using independent, community-based advisory groups where possible).
15. Clear guidance to police forces needed on enforcement of local lockdowns, together with democratic support for legitimate targeting/protection of communities.
16. There should be early upstream intervention to explain how policing of localised lockdowns will be managed.
17. NPoCC should have a role in maintaining oversight and consistency in the policing of major public order events.

Public health

1. Government and local authorities should issue strong, clear and positive messages about responsible drinking and behaviour in and around pubs and bars. This should be reinforced on national and local media.
2. The public should know what kind of restrictions to expect when they enter pubs, bars and restaurants so that expectations can be managed (thereby reducing the risk of congestion and conflict).
3. The government needs to reconstruct a shared sense of responsibility for public health which accentuates its positive virtues, rather than taking a punitive approach.
4. Issues of local, generational, racial, ethnic and class inequality need to be acknowledged and addressed.
5. Government should take account of intelligence on community tensions and other factors that may be inflamed by the extension or imposition of local lockdowns. Public health measures are never simply scientific decisions and the consequences in terms of public order (and ultimately for public health) could be serious if lockdown imposition is ill-judged.
6. Where good intelligence on community relations is not currently available, this should be sought urgently for areas in which epidemiological and other trends suggest that intervention may be required.
7. Intelligence should be gathered from as many community sources as possible, as well as police. Other persons skilled in intelligence collection could assist. Relationships with local communities should be identified and developed.

Downstream problems

The above analysis and recommendations have focused chiefly on the problems likely to be faced in the short-term as a result of the next round of easing. However,

the main drivers of social unrest are likely to persist and grow stronger in some cases. Over the next 2-3 months the risks identified above may be complicated by:

1. The escalation of programmes of protest paused during the lockdown (e.g. Extinction Rebellion, anti-HS2).
2. The beginning of protests planned during the lockdown, (e.g anarchist / anti-capitalist groups seeking to frustrate a 'return to normality'; some are planned for July).
3. Possible resumption of terrorist activity beyond lone-actors, which may complicate the policing and volatility of large assemblies.
4. Resumption of right-wing protests planned on issues such as child sexual exploitation or 'blaming' BAME communities for local lockdown measures.
5. Possible attempts to stage unofficial Orange Order events in public (e.g. Belfast, Glasgow) despite official cancellation of marches on 12th July.
6. Eid al Adha (31st July) potentially problematic if occurring in the context of a localised lockdown or in a situation where a lockdown might be expected.
7. The cancellation of the Notting Hill Carnival in London on the August Bank Holiday.
8. Rising unemployment and/or anxiety about employment as furlough is wound down.
9. An increasing sense of grievance/inequality as a result of localised lockdowns.
10. Increasing ethnic conflict (already apparent in several cities) as a result of the imposition of more localised lockdowns, as well as increasing scapegoating of various communities (including East Asians).

All the above require further consideration and analysis. There is a particular need for on-going risk assessments of public disorder and mechanisms of mitigation; of hate crimes and extremism; and the suite of problems arising from localised lockdown.