New research into policing high-risk protests suggests that understanding a crowd is key to controlling it. Clifford Stott, Stephen Reicher and John Drury look at how the theory could have helped officers police the G20 protests.

Mass containment of crowds during public order incidents may be legally justifiable, but how effective it is in managing crowd dynamics remains open to question.

In the High Court on 23 March 2005, the judge Mr Justice Tugendhat concluded that the police tactic of surrounding and holding large crowds was legal where it could be justified that there was a threat of violence or damage to property (96, 1 April 2005). The judgement was critical because it freed the way for the Met to use mass containment as a formal part of tactical planning for future incidents, including the month’s G20 protests.

G20 tactics

Once intelligence was received that there was a threat to public order at G20, it was therefore almost inevitable that some form of crowd containment would occur.

Despite widespread predictions of impending chaos, there were no major riots and relatively minor criminal damage. There was even the initial sense that the tactic of forceful containment had been very successful. But, within days, the police handling of the G20 protest was the subject of ongoing negative national news headlines.

As Police Review was going to press, police officers’ use of force has been implicated in the death of a member of the public, and two territorial support group officers have been suspended and may face criminal charges. The media has also begun to question the relationship between the police service and society. An independent Police Complaints Commission inquiry has begun and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary has been invited to conduct a review of public order tactics.

What is clear is that policing a major event in central London has turned into another critical incident for the service, and the more positive aspects of the operation will be widely ignored.

So, despite its legality, important issues remain about the proportionality and overall effectiveness of forceful mass containment.

Sir Paul Stephenson, Met commissioner, has been quoted as inviting the HMIC review precisely because he wants “to be measured that the use of this tactic remains appropriate and proportionate.”

But proportionality in public order policing is a complex issue; it has to be measured against the potential use of alternatives that can achieve similar outcomes but which influence civil liberties to a lesser degree.

Although mass containment came to prominence following the May Day protests in London in 2001, similar tactics are used almost weekly by officers in England and Wales for ‘bubbling’ large crowds of travelling football fans. And the revelations concerning the aggressive acts of individual officers will come as no surprise to those who travel regularly to watch teams whose fan base is deemed “high risk.” Indeed, Sir Paul’s invitation was announced on the same day British society looked back on the failings of the Hillsborough tragedy.

What these examples have in common is that they all reflect an approach based on a view of the crowd as inherently dangerous; one where, as a consequence, containment or dispersal is the favoured manner of managing the perceived threat they pose to public order.

Cycle of violence

Over the past 30 years the authors’ team of social psychologists has been amassing scientific evidence concerning the psychology of crowd violence and the implications of this theory for public order policing.

Central to our approach is a rejection of traditional, entrenched ideas about how and why crowds become disorderly. The now outdated view is that crowds are prone to random and unpredictable acts of violence because ordinary people within them lose rational control of their own behaviour.

This view has been endorsed by social scientists since the 19th century and appears in the pre-read material for the 2006 version of the National Policing Improvement Agency’s public order commanders’ course, which states that “a crowd is a device for indulging ourselves in a kind of temporary insanity by all going crazy together.”

Adding to this perceived danger, is the idea that “troublemakers” are then able to easily hijack crowds, whipping them up into frenzied and dangerous mobs whatever the circumstance.

Our research has shown that this traditional view of crowds is actually scientifically unsustainable, dangerous and extremely counter-productive.
deriving their behaviour. What our research sug-
gests is that a lack of accurate knowledge about
crowd dynamics is also leading to missed oppor-
tunities during public order events for developing
more effective tactics and command-level deci-
making.

We have also been exploring the implication of
our understanding of crowd dynamics for police command and control structures, approaches to
intelligence, accountability and multi-agency co-
operation.

This new theoretical approach means it is pos-
sible to start asking the right questions about how
to build more effective and proportionate policing
responses to high-risk crowd events. This has
been demonstrated most effectively when polic-
ing international football matches.

Portuguese pilot
In the period leading up to the 2004 European Championships in Portugal, the Home Office pro-
vided us with funding to conduct research on the
effective management of English fans travelling to
continental Europe.

On the basis of this research, we developed a
model of dynamic risk assessment and graded
tactical intervention. By collaborating with the
Portuguese Public Security Police, this model was
implemented for the tournament in all of Portu-
gal’s major cities.

A central feature of the Portuguese approach
was the strategic facilitation of lawful behaviour.
The graded tactical model that grew from this
strategy began with officers in normal uniform.
Riot police were on hand, but were deliberately
kept out of sight. Frontline officers were then
embodied within crowds (even during events cat-
egorised as high-risk), working in pairs, interacting
and encouraging legitimate behaviour.

As a result, police officers were able to gather
information and constantly monitor for and then
react quickly to emergent risk. By using modern
crowd theory and principles in this way, the police
were able to avoid indiscriminate interventions
against large crowds, although they still main-
tained this as a tactical option.

What was also evident was that in this context of
perceived police legitimacy, fans began to ‘self-
police’ by actively undermining those trying to ini-
tiate trouble or at the very least making it easier
for the police to deal with them. But, most impor-
tantly of all, there was an almost total absence of
disorder in match cities.

Stockholm’s success
The success of this approach has now been recog-
nised internationally. The research-led model has
been adopted by the European Council Working
Group on International Police Co-operation and
continues to be used across Europe.

Similar approaches are being developed by po-
lace service football match commanders in England
from Stoke to Plymouth. The same model is also
currently informing police training and responses
to football in Sweden, Denmark and Scotland and
is set to form the theoretical basis of a proposed
European Commission-funded programme of in-
ternational training for football match command-
ers co-ordinated by the UK Football Policing Unit.

But the approach has implications far wider than
football. The Stockholm Police Department
has been using this theory to develop their tac-
tics for public order management following the
widespread disorder and the death of a protester
during an international summit in Gothenburg in

Rather than focusing on techniques of corral-
ing crowds, their tactical approach uses a ‘dialogue
police’ unit, whose officers work before, during
and after high-risk events to communicate with
radical groups. What they have found is that this
tactical option helps to alleviate the need to use
force and promotes a self-policing culture within
high-risk crowds.

The unit is already achieving great success. For
example, it was used during the recent anti-war
demonstrations in Stockholm following Iraq’s as-
sault on Gaza in January. The tense demonstra-
tions passed without major incident and the tac-
tical bodes well for any forthcoming international
summits in the city.

Looking forward
Our team has also begun to explore the implica-
tions of this theory for reacting to mass emergen-
cies and disasters. The results are already leading
to important policy developments, such as in revi-
sions to the Police National CBRN (chemical, bi-
ological, radiological and nuclear) Centre training
and policy documentation and in the new NATO
guidelines on psychosocial care for people affect-
et by disasters, and there are opportunities for
advancing police public order responses to CBRN
attacks.

Given that this research, theory, education and
existing practice is in place, our question is this:
what can be done to use this knowledge to ad-
sure how our society responds to the challenge
of controlling public order, while protecting fun-
damental democratic rights?

Our analysis would suggest that, while contain-
ment can hold a violent minority, it does so at the
expense of initiating intergroup dynamics that
draw ordinary demonstrators and police officers
into confrontations. If this approach were to be
used again it would be necessary to develop more
effective ways of filtering and communicating
with different groups and people in the crowd.

But to achieve this there may have to be a radical
transformation in national minimum standards of
public order policing.

What the G20 demonstrations expose is the
need to move away from the idea that the way to
control crowds is to repress them. Crowds can
and do contain people who seek to be violent and
break the law. But our research suggests that
the best way to manage these people is to create en-
vironments where they are isolated because the
majority of the crowd identifies with police goals.

To achieve this it will be necessary for public
order policing to move away from a view of the
crowd as inherently dangerous and to develop in
ways that decrease rather than increase the likeli-
hood of the indiscriminate use of force.

Our research has demonstrated that there are
alternative means available against which the
proporationality of mass containment must be
measured. It is important to see this latest critical
incident not just as a problem for police officers,
but as a catalyst for much needed development
in this area. Any developments must go hand
in hand with a more accurate, evidence-based un-
derstanding of crowd dynamics and their relation-
ship to police tactics.

FEATURE

FURTHER READING

Some of the research underpinning these
arguments can be found in the following
published material:
‘Hooliganism’, Policing and the War on
the ‘English Disease’, London, Pennant
Books.
Stott, C.J., Adang, O.M., Livingstone, A.,
& Schreiber, M. (2009) Racking Football,
Hooliganism: A Quantitative Study of Pub-
lic Order, Policing and Crowd Psychology,
Psychology Public Policy and Law. Vol. 14,
No. 2, 115-141
Stott, C., Livingstone, A. and Hoggett, J.
and Wales: a model of ‘good practice’?
Policing and Society, 18, 258-281
The nature of collective resilience: Survivor
reactions to the 2005 London bombings,
International Journal of Mass Emergencies
and Disasters. The results are already leading
into confrontations. If this approach were to be
used again it would be necessary to develop more
important means available against which the
proporationality of mass containment must be
measured. It is important to see this latest critical
incident not just as a problem for police officers,
but as a catalyst for much needed development
in this area. Any developments must go hand
in hand with a more accurate, evidence-based un-
derstanding of crowd dynamics and their relation-
ship to police tactics.

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