

# CHAOS THEORY

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

**M**ass 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 (PR, 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 this 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 corraling 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 reassured 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 infringe 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 so-

cial 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.



**ANGRY MOB?** (Above) A police officer and a protester clash outside the Bank of England during the G20 protests in London on 2 April, and (left) officers with shields contain and corral the crowds

Not least because it leads to policing practices that can unintentionally initiate widespread disorder.

For example, during the anti-poll tax demonstration in central London on 31 March 1990, a small sit-down protest combined with some minor confrontation outside Downing Street led very rapidly to forceful police intervention against large sections of demonstrators.

The evidence suggests that the police officers'

Such emergent hostility confirmed police officers' views that this was becoming a disorderly crowd so there was an increase in the scale and intensity of forceful intervention. This interaction then cycled back and forth until it culminated in one of the largest riots ever witnessed in central London.

What is clear from this and our other research is that widespread disorder can and does emerge

**'Disorder can and does emerge during a crowd event as an unintended consequence of the indiscriminate use of force by the police'**

decision to use force in this way was driven by the traditional view of crowd dynamics. But, we found in our research that people in the crowd could see no threat to public order, just legitimate civil disobedience against what was seen as an unjust system of taxation.

Consequently, large numbers of demonstrators came to perceive the forceful behaviour of police officers as an attack on democratic rights. In technical terms, people in the crowd began to perceive their relationship to the officers as illegitimate.

Given the relatively indiscriminate use of force, a psychological unity – a natural consequence of this type of police intervention – emerged that also left people in the crowd feeling powerful enough to strike back at the police. This change in the crowd's psychology also increased the ability of 'troublemakers' to influence and find support among ordinary demonstrators.

Therefore, the sense of illegitimate policing combined with perceived empowerment within the crowd was the psychological basis from which many who had previously rejected violence began to become violent and through which an increase in collective disorder occurred.

during a crowd event not because crowds are inherently dangerous but as an unintended consequence of the indiscriminate use of force by the police.

## Effective response

This argument is not an attempt to blame police officers. It is an evidence-based argument that exposes how such processes emerge due to systemic problems in public order policing.

Most acute of these is that the current strategic and tactical policing approach is based on outdated views of the inherent danger of crowds.

As the result of a jointly funded PhD study with the UK Football Policing Unit, between June and September 2007 our team conducted a series of studies of command-level training for public order in England and Wales. Through this research we have begun to demonstrate that current police public order training is problematic because it lacks any reference to modern crowd theory or research.

This is critically important. If the police want to manage crowds, the most effective way of doing so is to understand and harness the processes un-



**OK CORRAL** (Left) Anti-capitalism demonstrators are penned in by a line of police officers on 1 April, while mounted police officers push protesters back at the Bank of England on 2 April (centre). G20 policing tactics were based on the theory that containing a crowd is the best way to control it

**FURTHER READING**

Some of the research underpinning these arguments can be found in the following published material:

Stott, C. & Pearson, G. (2007) *Football 'Hooliganism', Policing and the War on the 'English Disease'*, London, Pennant Books.

Stott, C.J., Adang, O.M., Livingstone, A., & Schreiber, M. (2008) *Tackling Football Hooliganism: A Quantitative Study of Public Order, Policing and Crowd Psychology*, Psychology Public Policy and Law. Vol. 14, No. 2, 115-141

Stott, C., Livingstone, A. and Hoggett, J. (2008) *Policing football crowds in England and Wales: a model of 'good practice'?* Policing and Society, 18, 258-281

Drury, J., Cocking, C., & Reicher, S. (2009). *The nature of collective resilience: Survivor reactions to the 2005 London bombings*, International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters, 27, 66-95.

Reicher, S., Stott, C., Drury, J, Adang, O., Cronin, P., & Livingstone, A. (2007) *Knowledge-Based Public Order Policing: Principles and Practice*, Policing, 1, 403-415.

Drury, J. (2009). *Crowd dispersal*, CBRNe World, Spring, 40-42.

derlying their behaviour. What our research suggests is that a lack of accurate knowledge about crowd dynamics is also leading to missed opportunities during public order events for developing more effective tactics and command-level decision 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 possible 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 policing international football matches.

**Portuguese pilot**

In the period leading up to the 2004 European Championships in Portugal, the Home Office provided 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 Portugal'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 embedded within crowds (even during events categorised 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 maintained 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 initiate trouble or at the very least making it easier for the police to deal with them. But, most importantly of all, there was an almost total absence of disorder in match cities.

**Stockholm's success**

The success of this approach has now been recognised 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 police 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 international training for football match commanders 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 tactics for public order management following the widespread disorder and the death of a protester during an international summit in Gothenburg in 2001.

Rather than focusing on techniques of corralling 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 Israel's assault on Gaza in January. The tense demonstrations passed without major incident and the tactic bodes well for any forthcoming international summits in the city.

**Looking forward**

Our team has also begun to explore the implications of this theory for reacting to mass emergencies and disasters. The results are already leading

**'There may have to be a radical transformation in national minimum standards of public order policing'**

to important policy developments, such as in revisions to the Police National CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) Centre training and policy documentation and in the new NATO guidelines on psychosocial care for people affected 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 advance how our society responds to the challenge of controlling public order, while protecting fundamental democratic rights?

Our analysis would suggest that, while containment 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 environments 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 likelihood of the indiscriminate use of force.

Our research has demonstrated that there are alternative means available against which the proportionality 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 understanding of crowd dynamics and their relationship to police tactics. ■

**Dr Clifford Stott works at the University of Liverpool, Prof Stephen Reicher works at the University of St Andrews, and Dr John Drury works at the University of Sussex. For further information, write to Dr Clifford Stott, University of Liverpool, School of Psychology, Bedford Street South, Liverpool, L69 7ZA, or email him at c.stott@liverpool.ac.uk**