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Suggestions for messaging on disorder based on the behavioural science literature

Background

- There has been a wave of violent disorder across the UK after three young children were killed in a knife attack, which was followed by misinformation that the suspect was a Muslim asylum seeker
- Disorder has since spread to multiple locations across the UK and there is an urgent need to understand what communication strategies could be taken to mitigate the spread
- We define “spread” as disorder which:
 - Take place in new locations
 - Involve/recruit more perpetrators
 - Take place in the same location multiple times
- This paper was rapidly compiled in collaboration with members of the Social and Behavioural Science in Emergencies Working Group; it pulls together a set of recommendations for how to communicate with perpetrators, would-be perpetrators, bystanders and members of affected communities
- This paper draws findings from the literature on crowd psychology, social identity theory and other behavioural frameworks (including literature on past disorder) - however, **we acknowledge this is a novel situation and as events unfold, these recommendations may need to be updated**
- An important background point to note is that factors that initially triggered disorder, may not be the same factors that maintain or spread disorder - people who do not necessarily share the ideological views or political causes of the original perpetrators,

may also get involved in violence (as happened during the London riots in 2011^{1 2}). See Annex.

- The current crowds involved or adjacent to the violence should not be viewed as a single monolithic group; rather, members will be motivated to participate for different reasons and circumstances. Stephen Reicher, a leading crisis expert, has suggested that current crowds are likely to include the following four groups of people³:
 - Organised Far Right
 - Young people (young men in particular) who hold anti-police sentiments
 - Groups who hold anti-immigration sentiments (but who may not necessarily be violent)
 - Groups who want to watch / observe a newsworthy situation
- There are also counter protestors who may get caught up in violence (see point 7-8 in Annex)
- Other groups that can get involved in disorder are those who spot an opportunity to loot (as happened during the London riots in 2011).

Recommendations for communications

Recommendations are given according to the different potential objectives for communications.

Objective 1: Reduce spread of violence and disorder amongst perpetrators and potential perpetrators

1. **Amplify and repeat messages directed at potential perpetrators about the consequences of participation in disorder**, demonstrating the punishments already received by perpetrators in an expedited process.
 - To be effective, messages should (1) communicate which actions can lead to punishment (including conspiring, provoking, keeping watch, etc), (2) communicate the certainty⁴ and severity of potential punishment (amplifying custodial sentences in particular), (3) reduce perception that people can “get away” without being caught, and (4) set out explicitly what people should do instead (eg. stay at home).
2. People may assume that they are “safe in numbers” to engage in criminality - **communications should continue unequivocally setting an ambition that all perpetrators will be brought to justice**, using case studies and information about new policing and identification technology to reduce perceptions of “plausible deniability”

¹ [Drury et al 2019. A social identity model of riot diffusion: From injustice to empowerment in the 2011 London riots.](#)

² [Reading the riots: investigating England's summer of disorder.](#)

³ [Talk TV interview with Stephen Reicher, 6 August 2024.](#)

⁴ The certainty of punishment has been found to have more of a deterrence effect on criminality than severity (Nagin, 2013).

3. **Unequivocally condemn the actions and behaviours of those engaged in violent acts** including by signalling that this is not what the majority of people believe or want to see happening. Ensure that Government messengers and channels do not appear to be justifying or excusing disorder or criminality, and apply this standard consistently across disorder with different participants/underlying ideologies.
4. **Where people are engaged in racist or xenophobic actions, call this out, describing it in terms of public acceptability and societal disapproval** (e.g. “there is no place in our society for racism or xenophobia”)
 - This should also extend to condemning “smaller” acts of hate to avoid giving the perception that any xenophobic or racist behaviour or speech is tolerated. For example, take a strong stance on verbal harassment.
5. **Avoid making assumptions about the social, economic and educational status or beliefs (e.g. anti-vaccine or climate denial) of those engaging in violence as this could provoke defiant adoption of violent behaviours and undermine trust amongst the wider public.** Racism crosses the political and educational spectrum and although disorder may initially be sparked by specific concerns or issues, early analysis suggests that⁵, similar to past incidents of public disorder, those involved in or adjacent to violence have a range of different motivations for their involvement (see background to this paper). Until representative data is available on perpetrators (e.g. following police investigations) there is a risk of contributing to misinformation. If communication was issued suggesting other groups were involved (e.g. those who strongly identify with anti-vaxx or climate denial communities) then this could pose as an invitation /provocation for those groups to get involved too. Stereotyping of those involved in violence (e.g. as being uneducated or from a lower socio-economic group) may also lead to unintended consequences including alienation/reactance against future messaging (e.g. on the Government’s missions). Instead of using labels to describe the people, describe the behaviours they are undertaking and which ones will be subject to criminal prosecution (see points 1, 3 and 4). Labelling people risks confirming/feeding into narratives by actors intentionally seeking to sow social division.⁶
6. **Demonstrate that outbreaks of violence driven by different ideologies are treated in the same way**, amplifying information about arrests and punishment of perpetrators across all ideological groups to directly counter narratives about two-tier policing. Communicate about the operational independence of police forces.

Objective 2: Reduce spread of looting for goods

⁵ [Talk TV interview with Stephen Reicher, 6 August 2024.](#)

⁶ Other examples include Hilary Clinton’s [speech](#) in the final months of her political campaign in 2016. She said that “half of Trump’s supporters” were “deplorables”. It was widely reported afterwards that her comments revealed what “she really thought” of the American public, and thereby fed into the narrative that the mainstream political elite had a low opinion of the public.

In the context of disorder, looting is a prevalent outcome⁷ which can occur due to complex and varied motivations including opportunism, social exclusion and a desire to voice grievances⁸. Taking part in looting is likely fueled by a looter's perceived lack of police presence or intervention, creating an environment where individuals feel capable of obtaining "free stuff" they could not ordinarily afford, such as luxury goods, without fear of consequences, due to the perceived suspension of normal societal rules⁹. Accordingly, social exclusion and consumer culture is considered crucial in providing a comprehensive understanding of looting in disorder contexts¹⁰. **To reduce the spread of looting, communications should:**

1. **Clearly communicate and amplify messages directed at potential perpetrators about the consequences of looting specifically**, highlighting the risks involved (i.e. the certainty of punishment if caught) and using case studies of successful prosecutions for looting¹¹.
2. **Avoid highlighting or publicising the location(s) of looting**, as insight from the 2011 London riots suggested that this may inadvertently encourage more looting by signalling to potential looters where law enforcement is overwhelmed¹²

Objective 3: Reduce sharing of unverified information online that aims to provoke further unrest

1. **Make it clear to people that sharing content could be considered a criminal offence that is punishable by law and amplify the arrests taking place** for incitement and social media participation (e.g. as of Tuesday 6 August, the first person has already been prosecuted for using threatening words or behaviour on Facebook linked to the violent disorder¹³)
2. **Government should quickly challenge disinfo/misinfo to avoid a vacuum**. For example, rapid rebuttal of misinformation online before it becomes entrenched¹⁴ and by avoiding labelling people (e.g. referring to all those participating in violence as xenophobes) as this could unintentionally contribute to misinformation (e.g. if later data analysis shows that perpetrators were a much more heterogeneous group).
3. **In the long term, actions could be taken to address the root causes of mis/disinformation** (e.g. regulating social media and reducing inequality).

Objective 4a: Reassure and protect affected communities

⁷ Analysis from the 2011 London riots found looting to be the most common type of unlawful activity. [Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder \(2011\)](#)

⁸ [Van Brown \(2019\) Conflict or consensus? Re-examining crime and disaster](#)

⁹ [Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder \(2011\)](#)

¹⁰ [Casey \(2013\) 'Urban Safaris': Looting, Consumption and Exclusion in London 2011](#)

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¹² [Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder \(2011\)](#)

¹³ [Man admits stirring up racial hatred online](#) - BBC News, 6 August 2024

¹⁴ GCS Wall of Beliefs. <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/the-wall-of-beliefs/#:~:text=The%20Wall%20of%20Beliefs%20is,and%20susceptibility%20to%20false%20stories>.

Countering reports of violence with positive news could help to correct misperceptions by Far Right groups that lots of people share their views, which research suggests is a motivator for these groups to come out and riot. Using communications to speak directly to affected communities can also be used to help reassure. Here are some options:

1. **Use communications to amplify and highlight positive behaviours to avoid contributing to the (incorrect) impression that there is wide public support for violent behaviours and/or discriminatory views/beliefs**¹⁵ e.g. report on and show images of volunteers who are helping to clear up the streets^{16 17}.
2. **Let people know what actions they can take to keep themselves safe and whether they need to adjust their daily routines in order to ensure the safety of themselves and their loved ones**
 - For example, should people stay at home, is it safe to go to work or attend appointments (e.g. should people take public transport rather than walk)¹⁸
 - Engage with religious leaders to convey messages as to whether or not to come to prayer or attend religious places of worship
 - Action should be practical and actionable (e.g. continue to call 999)
 - If looting becomes prevalent, reassure the public that instances of looting is likely to be directed at property not individuals
3. **If feasible, signal that there will be spaces and opportunities for victims and affected communities to share their stories and have their experiences heard and validated**
4. **When possible to do so, consider speaking directly to communities to understand their experiences and needs so that this can be used to inform ongoing communications (as well as communications after order is restored)**
5. **Generic statements of reassurance, without underpinning data or evidence that can be scrutinised by the public, offer less reassurance, especially if they are disproven** (ensure reassurance is backed up with actions e.g. see point 7 below)

Objective 4b: Enabling positive bystander behaviours and mitigating harm from counter protests/violence

People have a strong desire to help in crises¹⁹, for instance by attending counter protests to show solidarity or help fill perceived gaps in policing. If you do not want people to do this (e.g. by attempting to protect mosques, because you fear they will get injured or caught up in violence) then there are specific steps you can take to reduce the likelihood of this.

¹⁵ [Drury, John. 2024 blog.](#)

¹⁶ ['Overwhelming response and Middlesborough clean up'](#) - BBC News, 5 August 2024.

¹⁷ [Volunteers help clean up effort after far right mob cause chaos](#) - Bristol News 5 August 2024.

¹⁸ See [this example](#) from Stella Creasy giving people guidance on how to get home to Walthamstow in London on the day of a planned riot.

¹⁹ [A behavioural approach to crisis communication, 2022.](#)

1. **Issue clear directions asking people not to attend counter protests with a clear explanation as to why.** People may genuinely believe that attending potential riot locations will be necessary and important for protecting communities and showing solidarity. Explain that attempting to help could result in personal injury, could divert police and emergency response resources and could even exacerbate the violence (e.g. if perpetrators attempt to attack counter protestors). Instead of highlighting instances where the public are actively defending against perpetrators, highlight positive stories of volunteering after violence has been brought under control and other volunteering opportunities (see point 3).

2. **Let the public know what steps the government and other authorities are taking to protect communities so that they don't feel motivated to fill a perceived gap** (e.g. if the government is committing to sending protection for asylum hotels or other places that are being targeted).
 - **In particular, use messaging to reassure targeted communities that the police and other frontline services will be there for them** (for example, confidence in the police is lower amongst some ethnic groups, including Pakistani, Black, and especially Black Caribbean ethnic groups²⁰)
 - **Send a message directly out to those who are considering attending scheduled "protests" to film events and people (e.g. so they can report this to police) asking them not to do this,** and let them know what footage the police are able to take themselves (e.g. body-worn video)

3. **Give people clear instructions about how they can help instead, so as to channel people's righteous anger at events and desire to help into positive action and coping behaviours.** If these positive outlets are not provided, people are likely to take matters into their own hands which may lead to more people getting harmed and/or further outbreaks of violence:
 - **Consider issuing clear guidance about the ways in which communities can help to bring the violence to an end,** such as by identifying and reporting people they know in footage
 - **Signpost to volunteering opportunities** in the local area impacted by the rioting (e.g. cleaning up sites where disorder has taken place)
 - **Suggest that people check-in on the wellbeing and safety of friends, family and colleagues for whom they may be concerned or worried**

Objective 5: Increase national resilience to hate speech and racially targeted violence

1. **Start to build a positive anti-racist counter narrative by celebrating multicultural Britain and using communications to unequivocally and emphatically express that ethnic minority groups belong here, are wanted here, and are essential to the success of British life.** At a national level, consider

²⁰ [ONS Confidence in the police May 2021.](#)

highlighting the diversity of the NHS and at a local level, highlight and champion the contributions of local ethnic minority people (and amplify local voices who are already doing this).

2. More work will be needed to develop this further after public order is restored in order to regain trust and reduce the perceived acceptability of racism and promote community cohesion

Finally, and more generally:

- The public disorder literature²¹ suggests that crowd events can become “disorderly” through a) procedural injustice in the way a crowd or group is treated by the authorities/police and/or b) the influence of recent, relevant examples of crowd “disorder” elsewhere (e.g., in a nearby location or in one with a historical or social connection). In addition to avoiding instances of procedural injustice, **communications can be used to uphold public trust in the legitimacy of the law by showcasing best practice by responders.**
- Ensure that communications is consistent and frequent; set expectations that information may change; convey what is known and not known; cover what actions the government and other authorities are taking and why; and flag when to expect further information.

²¹ Drury et al., 2019; Van Zomeren et al., 2008.

Annex: Why does public disorder spread?

The factors that initially triggered disorder, may not be the same factors that maintain or spread it. Only post event analysis will reveal the underlying causes and motivations.

However the literature on crowd psychology and social identity theory suggests multiple reasons for disorder spreading - although we acknowledge this is a novel situation and as events unfold, these may need to be updated:

- 1. Meta-perception and social norms:** Meta-perception refers to our beliefs about what others believe. Seeing large groups of people expressing similar views to the ones you hold (e.g. xenophobic views) sends the signal that other people (and potentially a lot of people) also think like you. This can be fuelled by what people say on social media (e.g. xenophobic comments and social media calls from activists²²) but also by footage of large demonstrations (for example, three days prior to the disorder in Southport, thousands of people marched on London as part of a Tommy Robinson 'patriots' demo²³) and violent behaviours. In short, people with xenophobic views suddenly (but mistakenly) believe that everyone else thinks like they do. This can create the expectation that others will also come out onto the street to engage in similar actions. When there is a critical mass of such people, crowd psychologists say that a riot can occur.²⁴
- 2. Legitimisation and collective empowerment:** people who hold these views may then get the impression that "other people" see their views and behaviour as acceptable - they feel they have permission (or support) to act in these ways. This can be heightened and reinforced if perpetrators (or potential perpetrators) perceive the police as being unable to cope (see point 4).
- 3. Perception that violence will be effective at influencing others/creating a "movement":** seeing crowds of people engaging in violent disorder could create the perception that the actions will effectively influence other members of the public or help to build oppositional movements e.g. in favour of certain beliefs.²⁵
- 4. Perception that other local police forces can't/won't cope (increasing likelihood of geographical spread):** If police appear unable to control or prevent disorder in one location, then people in other locations may start to

²² The online environment is not a true representation of the offline world and research shows that social media can be a bit like "a fun house mirror" giving people a distorted sense of how common certain views and beliefs are. See Robertson et al (2024). "[Inside The Funhouse Mirror Factory: How Social Media Distorts Perceptions of Norms](#)".

²³ [BBC news, 27th July 2024.](#)

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²⁵ [Hornsey et al 2006. Why Do People Engage in Collective Action? Revisiting the Role of Perceived Effectiveness](#)

believe that police in their area won't cope (and therefore feel empowered to engage in violence in their own area). Similarly, those who are involved in disorder in one location, but who were not or could not be apprehended by police, will gain confidence that they can do the same again, either in the same location or elsewhere.²⁶ This experience (enacting xenophobic views in a way that they usually feel they cannot through attacks on hotels housing asylum seekers) can itself feel empowering as it provides a sense of agency which feels personally rewarding. This can fuel another type of spread (see point 6).

5. Identification with a common “enemy” (increasing likelihood of spread across different groups of people): Although some perpetrators may have xenophobic motivations for getting involved in disorder, research and theory suggests that other groups (e.g. who may not identify strongly with xenophobic ideologies) could also get involved if they perceive themselves to share a common “enemy” (for example, the police or government). This explains why, in some cases, people who do not necessarily share the ideological views or political causes of the original perpetrators, will also get involved in violence (as happened during the London riots in 2011²⁷). In fact, people may have a whole range of motivations for getting involved in disorder that may have nothing to do with personal ideology or the original trigger for it (see point 6).

6. Perception that getting involved will be rewarding in other ways: Although disorder may initially be sparked by specific concerns or issues (e.g. xenophobia or concern about policing as research suggested occurred in the London 2011 riots²⁸), these issues may not be what maintains or spreads violence to more locations and people. Self-perception theory²⁹ suggests that, rather than make decisions about behaviours based on our views, we often carry out behaviours instinctively, led by what feels natural or enjoyable in the moment, and then justify these behaviours afterwards by developing internal narratives and identities that “explain” that behaviour. A small minority of people may find it intrinsically rewarding to engage in violence under the influence of intoxicating substances, to intimidate or abuse others (particularly perceived “out groups”), and to gather with other individuals who they believe feel the same way.³⁰ Some of those who articulate a political motivation for their behaviour may have been behaving instinctively, while using a political pretext to justify and explain their actions to others.

7. Fear for the safety of communities and desire to protect people and property. Communities that are being targeted by violent groups will have a

²⁶ [Ball et al 2019. Who controls the city? A micro-historical case study of the spread of rioting across North London in August 2011](#)

²⁷ [Drury et al 2019. A social identity model of riot diffusion: From injustice to empowerment in the 2011 London riots.](#)

²⁸ [ibid.](#)

²⁹ [Bem, 1972.](#)

³⁰ [Reading the riots: investigating England's summer of disorder.](#)

very strong desire to protect themselves, their loved ones and their communities as well as their properties (and especially places of worship) - especially if they don't have confidence that the police will or can. This could result in additional violence if these groups end up using violence in self-defence (e.g. if they are physically assaulted by other groups) or if people with more nefarious intentions decide to get involved.

- 8. Anger and outrage at events and racialised targeting.** Racially targeted abuse and destruction of property is likely to lead to a very understandable and strong emotional reaction from those communities (e.g. ethnic minority groups) as well as amongst anti-racist allies. There is a risk of this spilling over into retaliatory violence if people perceive that the police cannot prevent damage/harm, if justice won't be served or if people engage in violence as self-defence (see point 7).