

Does your emergency plan include a role for the crowd? This question might seem a little odd. One of the most readily available images of crowds in emergencies is that of mass panic. This is the idea that collective responses to an emergency will be mindless, irrational or selfish – or a combination of all three. In news reports, ‘mass panic’ is blamed for numerous tragedies, including deaths in night club fires and ‘stampedes’ at religious mass gatherings.

Yet over 50 years of social science research on crowd behaviour in emergencies and disasters has questioned the usefulness of ‘mass panic’ as a characterisation of crowd behaviour. For example, a review of over 144 studies of disasters found little evidence of panic, but plenty of evidence for co-operation¹; and ‘lack of panic’ has been noted at a range of disasters, from the atomic bombing of Japan during World War II² to the King’s Cross Underground fire in London of 1987³.

Contradictory views

Views of crowd behaviour in emergencies can be contradictory. We surveyed a range of professional groups involved in emergency planning and response (including police officers, civilian safety managers and resilience planners)⁴. Around 62% of those surveyed believed that in emergencies people in crowds exaggerate the threat they face and do not think rationally, and 80% said that ‘panic’ spreads easily through a crowd. On the other hand, respondents also agreed that crowds in emergencies are co-operative, exhibit heroism, and use knowledge (for example of building layout) when they evacuate. They also agreed with the views that the emergency services have to rely on survivors’ own initiative and that survivors have the resourcefulness to escape.

When we analysed UK civil contingencies guidance⁵ we found a similar pattern. There were some references to crowd ‘panic’ and many more to crowd

passivity, sometimes with the explicit claim that ‘resilience’ is exclusively a feature of formal organisations and the emergency services. Some of the guidance also indicated that, given this psychological vulnerability of crowds, care must be taken by those managing the emergency not to be too open with information. And yet there were other places where it seems that the crowd has a role in resilience.

The Civil Contingencies Secretariat’s Strategic National Framework on Community Resilience describes ‘communities of circumstance’ as follows:

“These communities are created when groups of people are affected by the same incident, such as a train crash. These groups of individuals are unlikely to have the same interests or come from the same geographical area but may form a community in the aftermath of an event. Although this sense of community may be temporary, some communities of circumstance grow and are sustained in the long-term following an emergency.”⁶

Pulling together

Our research has looked into the psychological processes behind such adaptive collective responses. When we spoke to survivors from the July 7 London bombings of 2005, we found widespread agreement that mutual helping among strangers was common, and that levels of courtesy and co-operation were higher than on a normal day on the London Underground⁷. And our studies of survivors of the sinking of the Jupiter in 1988 and the Hillsborough stadium crush of 1989 found numerous references to orderly queuing, self-sacrifice and strangers ‘pulling together’⁸.

In these studies we found evidence that the emergency itself transformed people’s relationships with each other. In many cases, people saw themselves just as individuals with no psychological connection with others in the crowd – until the emergency happened. At that point, a sense of common fate caused them to see themselves as part of a group with those around them. In our terminology, they shared a *social identity*. Shared social identity transforms definitions of interests, needs and goals from the personal to the collective level, motivating us to give social support, enhancing expectations of social support from others, and facilitating coordination.

To take another example, in the World Trade Center attack, which is the most well-researched disaster of all time, people had just one hour 42 minutes to



Getting the crowd behind you

John Drury addresses some of the misconceptions around how crowds respond in a crisis and explains their important resilience role

evacuate Tower 1. Yet all of those in the floors beneath where the plane struck managed to do so without the aid of the emergency services. The vast majority of people were able bodied and simply needed to coordinate their activity and move down the fire exit stairs at the same speed, which they did without external direction. If any individual threatened this process – for example by stopping to use their mobile phone – members of the crowd pulled them into line.

Such coordination is only possible where there is a shared understanding and a shared belief that acting on behalf of the group (for example, by intervening against ‘deviants’) would be supported by others. And shared understandings are a function of a shared identity – a sense of ‘we-ness’. Put differently, if everyone acted as an individual, the most likely result would be competition, blocked doors and hence fatalities.

A community response

It has been acknowledged in the UK for a while that some form of community resilience is necessary because, with the increased threat of natural disasters and terrorist attacks, professional responders simply will not be in place in time or in sufficient numbers to help the public in all cases.

Crowds clearly act like communities at times, and can be thought of as participants in that process of resilience. However, the research suggests that such informal collective responses are not only necessary but also inevitable. Taken together, these points suggest we can think about crowds as responders, or even as ‘the fourth emergency service’. For example, it was members of the crowd in the bombed out trains on July 7 who provided emotional support, shared bottles of water and even tied tourniquets. This in turn suggests that resilience planning needs to take account of the active role of the crowd rather than assume it to be either mindless or passive.

Playing a part

There are a number of specific ways that this can be achieved. First, information empowers, so ensure that the public have the information to act. Our work with Public Health England on crowd responses to chemical incidents⁹ has found that people in emergencies want information and feel anxious without that information. On top of this, if they believe that information is being withheld, they may distrust the authorities. This in turn may lead them to disbelieve any further information and to reject their instructions.

Second, this takes us to trust. ‘Information’ becomes ‘communication’ when it is trusted. In our research on chemical incidents, we found that the more that professional responders were seen as legitimate, the more the public identified with them. This trust and identification led members of the public to internalise and own the information that they were given, and become active participants rather than passive recipients of care. The result was a much more effective and efficient emergency response – which could in practice save lives in incidents when speed is of the essence.

Finally, there is accommodating the public urge to help. Survivors and witnesses try to help (whether or not they have expertise!). This is inevitable. To accommodate it has several functions: it builds unity and trust; it makes them feel better; and, as we have seen, it might actually be necessary!

A source of resilience

The notion that crowds can be sources of resilience is not an argument that people should simply be left to fend for themselves when disaster strikes. But it is saying that collectively people have certain capacities in such circumstances that the emergency services need to recognise in their policies and practices. The notion of crowd resilience is also not meant to minimise the real tragedies that occur in crowds or because of features of the crowd. However, the attribution of these disasters to the spread of irrationality in crowds is not supported by the research evidence – indeed there is increasing support for the view that crowds can be sources of safety, even in very dense crowd events¹⁰.

Among social scientists, disaster management agencies, resilience planners and public health organisations, there is increasing convergence on the views first that mass emergency behaviour is typically characterised by resilience, second that resilience is a good thing, and third that it can be facilitated by the right emergency management practices. I hope this review of some of the recent research can contribute to these practices.

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