



**Paladin
Risk Solutions**

ABSTRACT

In this piece, we analyze how the death of an African American man while in police custody in the U.S., resulted in wide condemnation and how COVID may have escalated the protests to such widespread violence in a very short time.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RIOT, LOOTING AND COVID

Featured Analysis

The connection between riot, looting and COVID.

The impact and predictions related to COVID were outlined in our series “The road to dysfunctional society” and “Business in a depressed economy”. In those papers, it was illustrated how COVID was magnifying and illustrating the divides in communities and society in general and in particular between those who have, and those who have not.

In the context of COVID on April 5th, 2020 we wrote “... So what are the likely scenarios that will escalate towards a dysfunctional society. Looting and acts of widespread violence have occurred many times in many major cities in the western world. It is interesting to note that those riots or coordinated acts of violence and antisocial behaviors were often initiated by a single spark. To create fire we require Oxygen, fuel and heat or ignition ...”

The tragic death of George Floyd was the spark that initiated the current round of rioting. It is difficult to separate genuine and legitimate protest and concern from rioting and looting; it may of course not be relevant that the two actions are specifically identified. The reality of protests, including violent protests, is that history shows it has been effective in attracting legislative, organizational, and political change.

The fact that this round of protest spread so fast to over 20 Cities in the U.S., Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, European cities, Brazil, New Zealand and even Iran and Syria, are linked to the social impact of COVID. In countries including Canada, U.S., and Germany those protests have resulted in rioting.

There is nothing in the commentary that takes away the underlying issue subject of this civil disorder. Minority communities, particularly in the U.S. and parts of Europe have suffered countless incidents of unfair, disproportionate, and sometimes illegal actions at the hands of authority. The fact that this particular incident, the tragic killing of George Floyd, has resulted in the reaction we have all seen and the copycat behavior in North America and beyond should not come as a surprise to anyone. However, in this case we also identify what, if any, impact the consequences of COVID have played on these events.

It has been reported that there has been a disproportionate number of COVID victims in poorer communities in North America. It is also well known that the black community in the U.S. are disproportionately represented in poorer communities. Reflection, when COVID is behind us, will no doubt identify minority and black communities as disproportionately represented in the ranks of those being laid off work as a result of COVID.

COVID effectively illustrated to those most likely to be negatively impacted by the consequent unemployment and financial impact, the divide between those that have and those that have not. Therefore, when the circumstance and environment allowed for a backlash against both wealth and authority many more people were dragged into the protests and then it is a small step from protest to rioting and looting.

There is no doubt that anger and frustration are the key emotions at the heart of rioting and looting and there is no doubt that genuine protest for action and change will be frustrated by the associated lawless violence. Majority of protestors are vigorously opposed to violence and damage to property. Protest is a legitimate instrument to initiate and manipulate change.

How did we really get from protest to international violence on the streets? It is highly likely that the circumstances of the death of George Floyd would have resulted in wide condemnation and protest prior to COVID, but we will briefly explore how COVID may have escalated the protest to such widespread violence in such a short time.

As we move into the next phase of dealing with COVID we saw in many parts of the world a total disregard for the required and sensible measures strongly advised from a medical perspective. In many regions, we have seen politicians and leaders delivering confusing and conflicting messages about how and when to move from lockdown to a fully functioning economy. There are many instances where the mixed political message is more likely about political agenda than public health. Many members of our communities were and still are confused about messaging.

The consequence of the mixed messaging in the context of so many people fearful about their future financial stability is resulting in anger and frustration. This has resulted in members of communities who have thought it is ok to reject the authority message that does not match their convenience. Crowded beaches, large gatherings and armed protest are some of the obvious signs of picking and choosing the narrative you want to believe. Once we have communities that pick and choose messaging from leadership about such important issues as a global pandemic, it creates an environment where defiance and rebellion against authority seem much more acceptable than it was six months ago.

Once angry communities are provided with mixed messaging, at a time when they are angry and stressed about their own future, all that was needed was a spark or a cause upon which to act out their frustration.

Many would say they cannot see the link between protest about the tragic killing of a black man in Minneapolis and rioting in other cities and on other continents. That rioting and looting is counterproductive to the intent of the protest. It is right that the death has again brought to the surface the feeling of injustice and inequality felt by many communities but it was also predictable that the spark this incident caused uncapped the emotions and anger and frustration that the response to COVID attracted.

Nothing in this paper is intended to suggest that the protest and anger resulting from the killing of George Floyd occurred because of COVID, it is highly likely, and many would say appropriate, that such an incident unleashes demands for change, accountability and justice. But in this instance, it is equally likely that the bottled up stress, frustration and restrictions of COVID, combined with mixed messaging from authorities and leaders, has contributed to the speed and intensity of the spread of the events since the first images were circulated in the media.

It is interesting to note that individuals caught up in protests that turn violent are often swept along into actions that they would not otherwise consider. They are caught up in the excitement, violence, and looting that characterize riots. One of the fears of ordinary law-abiding citizens finding themselves in such circumstances is the fear of carrying out violent acts during protests that turn to violence, which is why most riots occur during the hours of darkness.

The details and complexity of crowd dynamics and violent acts are not included in this paper. However, one aspect of ordinary people being caught up and participating in crowd violence is anonymity. COVID legitimizes people attending a protest already with a face mask. The face mask that is a symbol of rioting if

often produced early in the violence for those that come prepared to anonymously participate and escalate violence.

In the current environment not only are people arriving at a protest with a mask, but the authorities positively encourage it because of the fear of the spread of COVID. When people arrive at a protest legitimately wearing a face covering that conceals their identity, they already feel anonymous and it is easier for them to be drawn into the escalating violence.

It is a reality of our time that high quality images and videos are shared worldwide within minutes of an incident. This is very positive from the perspective of righting wrongs and accountability but does not prepare communities for spontaneous and destructive consequence. It also does not allow time to see circumstances in context and very often the only information known is the raw footage. In this particular case it is difficult to see circumstances that justify what is seen on video. It is likely that over the next few weeks we will see other videos, probably riot related, that may easily be a distorted representation of what occurred that will fuel the violence.

The likelihood of the current events being resolved by a strong show of force is slim. History shows us that communities healing from such outbursts of violence is a slow process of regaining trust and demonstrations of decisive action by community representatives, business, leaders engaging in constructive discussion and working towards a better society that addresses the protesters issues and the events that caused the problem, this includes underlying causes not only the event itself. Therefore, we should expect that even if the current round of violence is suppressed by a strong show of force the underlying anger will not so easily be dissipated or be addressed.

We should therefore be prepared for circumstances that will result in another incident(s) where authorities, most likely police, as they are often forced into frontline confrontation, where there is actual or perceived injustice or excessive force. Such events will likely release any residual anger or frustration that was suppressed by a resolution using overwhelming force to regain order.

So how does this impact business in general? The epicenter of a violent protest cannot be predicted. It is more likely to be in areas of social disadvantage and involve minority communities. Social media posting, without considering consequence, is a common issue that is also a characteristic of our time and shares the immediate and impactful messaging. Your business, therefore, could be close to location of disorder or impacted by supply chain problems associated with connected businesses.

Have you considered the contingency for being close to or seriously impacted by further violence? How prepared are you to continue business remotely, at short notice, when it is unsafe or not advisable for staff to travel? Are your staff or goods being transported to or through potential problem areas? Could a geographic shift in violence impact your business?

In conclusion, we have seen the speed with which communities can suddenly spiral out of control. The recent round of rioting, however resolved, will unlikely be the last, particularly as this has occurred at the start of the summer and warm weather. Incidents in other corners of the country or even other countries can, through the power of social media, cause issues thousands of miles from the incident. There will be other incidents similar to the death of George Floyd, this view is supported by a pattern of history not by a negative prediction of the future. Business owners are part of damaged communities and should reach out

and assist in the healing process. There are flashpoints in the future of the George Floyd process associated with various milestones in the judicial and any inquiry process that should be closely monitored.

Finally, we should all be mindful of the pain and suffering of George Floyd's family and friends and all those that have suffered as a consequence of the subsequent violence and have been impacted directly and indirectly, including law enforcement officers and community leaders that are expected to operate under very difficult circumstances.