Session No. 17

Course Title: Social Dimensions of Disaster, 2nd edition

Session 17: Understanding Looting Behavior 1 hr.

Objectives:

17.1 Describe the myth of looting behavior

17.2 Discuss three major differences between looting in consensus and conflict crisis events (e.g., natural disasters vs. civil disorders)

17.3 Identify three social factors that impact the probability of looting behavior during a crisis

17.4 Describe and illustrate emergent norm theory

17.5 Describe four principles of community policing relevant to crowd management

17.6 Explain the relevance of understanding looting behavior to emergency managers.

Scope:

Students are introduced to the empirically based research literature on looting behavior, the social conditions that may facilitate it, and a theoretical scheme for interpretation, i.e., emergent norm theory. The concept of community policing and principles of crowd management are related to the myth of looting behavior. Implications for emergency managers are highlighted.

Readings:

Student Reading:


Professor Readings:


**Background References:**


**General Requirements:**

Overheads (17-1 through 17-7 appended).

See individual requirements for each objective.

**Objective 17.1 Describe the myth of looting behavior.**

**Requirements:**

Start this session with the student exercise and proceed with lecture material specified below.

Use Overhead 17-1.

**Remarks:**
I. Introduction.

A. Exercise.

1. Remind students of exercise procedures.

2. Divide class into four groups and assign roles.
   a. Chair.
   b. Reporter.
   c. Timer.

3. Announce time limit: 5 minutes.

B. Display Overhead 17-1; “Workshop Tasks”.

1. Group 1 – Based on your reading throughout this course, explain and illustrate the myth of looting behavior.

2. Group 2 – According to Hooper (1995), what is the relationship between community policing and civil disorder?


4. Group 4 – Why is an understanding of looting behavior important to emergency managers?

C. Start discussion.

D. Stop discussion.

E. Explain that group reports will be given periodically throughout the session.

II. Group 1 report: 2 minutes.

III. Myth of looting behavior.

A. Supplement Group 1 report as required so that the following points are covered.

B. Remind students of materials covered in prior sessions, e.g., reading from Fischer (1998) in Session No. 7; “Disaster Mythology.”
C. 

  **Looting behavior.**

  1. **Definition:** the taking of goods by theft.

  2. **Examples:**

     a. Commonly reported throughout history during wars.

     b. Plunder: used interchangeably with looting.

  3. **Public myth:** many homes and stores will be plundered during disasters.

D. 

  **Sources of looting myth.**

  1. **Remind** students of materials covered in prior session, e.g., reading from Mitchell, et al. (2000) in Session No. 8; “Sources of Disaster Myths.”

  2. **Current** media coverage: professor may wish to introduce media coverage of recent disaster event wherein looting behavior was reported.

E. 

  **Example study:** Quarantelli and Dynes (1972).

  1. Data from National Opinion Research Center (NORC) field team reports.

  2. **Findings:** (p. 69).

     a. 58% reported hearing of stolen property.

     b. 9% indicated they observed seeing looting in progress or arrests being made.

     c. Team could verify actual theft of only two items: a cash register and a piano.

F. 

  **Consequence of myth.**

  1. **Public fears** looting because of belief in myth.

  2. **Public expectation** places pressure on local law enforcement to insure security.
3. **People delay** or avoid evacuation advisories because of looting fear.

4. **Example study**: Lindell and Perry (1992) documented that 57% of the people considering evacuation indicated a fear of looting (p. 266).

**Supplemental Considerations:**

Many students appear to have a hard time accepting the research conclusions which document the usual absence of looting during most disaster responses. This section sets the stage for important differentiations among disaster events. The key message is that looting behavior does occur during disaster responses, but the image of it is a gross exaggeration except in very specific cases which will be defined below. Depending on the quality of the group report, this section may be very brief. Some professors, however, may wish to expand it somewhat with additional research examples, e.g., see Drabek 1986, pp. 145-146 and 231-233.

**Objective 17.2** Discuss three major differences between looting in consensus and conflict crisis events (e.g., natural disasters vs. civil disturbances).

**Requirements:**

Use Overhead 17-2.

**Remarks:**

I. Introduction.

A. **Ask students**: “What is meant by the term ‘civil disorder’?”

1. **Definition**: refusal to obey orderly conduct codes, may involve physical violence, property destruction, and property theft.

2. **Examples**:

   a. **Sports crowd celebrations** that result in property destruction and/or violence, e.g., numerous occurrences following Super Bowl (football) or Stanley Cup (hockey) victories.

   b. **Peaceful demonstrations** that result in violence, e.g., anti-war groups precipitate violations of property or access restrictions and police use tear gas to disperse crowd; riot ensues.

B. **Remind** students of the types of conflict disasters reviewed previously, i.e., Session No. 4; “Overview of Disasters and Hazards in the U.S.A. Today” (see Student Handout 4-4).
II. Pattern differences.

A. Display Overhead 17-2; “Differences in Looting Behavior: Natural Disasters vs. Civil Disturbances.”

B. Explain:

1. Quarantelli and Dynes (1970) reviewed numerous studies of civil disorder events.

2. Some of these events were investigated by field teams from the Disaster Research Center.

3. Recent literature review by Quarantelli (2002) provides additional documentation and support for these interpretations.

C. Example:

1. Location: Watts area of Los Angeles.

2. Date: 1965.

3. Looting rampage caused $40 million property destruction.

4. Reflected tensions between African-Americans and local officials, especially law enforcement.

5. Numerous additional disturbances occurred in U.S.A. cities reflecting civil rights, and later anti-war, demonstrations.

D. Review the contrasts listed on the Overhead and illustrate with comments like these. Based on Quarantelli and Dynes (1970).

1. Scope: “In civil disorders looting is very widespread whereas in natural disasters actual looting incidents are rare.” (p. 173).

2. Looters: In civil disturbances “... looters often work together in pairs, family units, or in small groups. This is a marked contrast to looting in natural disasters, where it is carried out by solitary individuals.” (p. 174).

3. Publicness: In civil disturbances “Goods are taken openly and in full view of others, bystanders as well as co-participants, and often even policemen. In natural disasters, such looting as occurs is covert and secret, with looters taking care not to be observed by others.” (p. 175).
E. Explain: This is one example of documented differences in types of disaster events.

1. Contrast validates the utility of a distinction among types of disasters, i.e., illustrates why the question is important—"What is a disaster?"

2. Contrast illustrates problem of external validity, i.e., to what universe of events can study findings by generalized?

3. These issues are not yet resolved.

Supplemental Considerations:

The key message of this section is to explicitly contrast the pattern differences documented between looting in civil disorders and natural disasters. Some professors will prefer to keep the section very brief and focused. Others may wish to expand the section by incorporating a variety of research studies on riot and crowd behavior, e.g., Lewis (1986); Marx (1970); Mann (1986); or others. It is essential that students relate this contrast to the broader questions of "What is a disaster?" and the general problem of external validity. In his most recent statement on these issues, Quarantelli (2002) has elaborated on pattern differences in other phases of disaster responses, especially during the recovery period. Insurance fraud and invalid small business loans are but two examples of white collar crimes that are made into unique opportunities by disasters. In some locations, relief funds may never reach victims because corrupt public officials redirect them for political or personal gain.

Objective 17.3 Identify three social factors that impact the probability of looting behavior during a crisis.

Requirements:

Use Overhead 17-3.

Remarks:

I. Ask students: “Aside from civil disturbances wherein looting sometimes occurs extensively, which natural disasters have you heard about where some looting occurred?” (Answer: Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew).

II. Documented looting behavior.

A. St. Croix after Hurricane Hugo (1989). Schneider (1992): “...local authorities were unable to alleviate conditions and to maintain social order within the disaster-stricken areas. This created a truly noninstitutionalized...
situation, because traditional norms and values simply did not apply. Widespread looting and violence were reported . . .” (p. 138).


1. “. . . twenty-two months later, the isolated trailer park full of hundreds of crowded, hot, and frustrated residents has become an increasing ugly place to live. Parks of FEMA trailers throughout South Dade were plagued by crime and violence. According to a FEMA spokesman, the combination of poverty, disaster stress, new neighbors, cramped quarters, and densely packed parks can be explosive . . .” (p. 129).

2. One Hurricane Andrew victim stated: “Since we are into the camp, every week there are shooting or stabbing, killing, robbing. They rob my trailer. They stole my [license] plate too.” (p. 130).

C. Armenia, Columbia after earthquake (1999) Quarantelli (2002): “. . . there was massive looting of supermarkets . . .”

III. Social factors.

A. Display Overhead 17-3; “Social Factors That Constrain Looting Behavior.”

B. Explain: three factors identified by Quarantelli (1994) after study of St. Croix; reinforced in subsequent analysis (Quarantelli 2002).

C. Review and illustrate factors listed on Overhead (adapted from Quarantelli 1994).

1. Degree of societal stratification.

   a. Looting most likely in highly stratified society like St. Croix.

   b. Intense stratification encourages a collective sense of disenfranchisement.

   c. Poor people do not believe they can make a difference; they perceive little or no choice in the political or social decisions that impact their lives.

2. Normalcy of petty theft.

   a. Pre-disaster environment in St. Croix was characterized by high level of petty theft.

   b. Petty theft rate reflected normative acceptance; just expected.
c. **After hurricane**, petty theft rate escalated into a short-term looting episode.

d. Poor took from middle-class or wealthy.

3. **Continuity of social control by legitimate authority.**

   a. **For a few days** after hurricane, there was a temporary loss of control.

   b. **Military and law enforcement** were overwhelmed temporarily.

   c. **Lack of continuity** in social control provided an opening in the constraint on the normal pattern of petty theft which escalated rapidly.

   d. **Reflecting an acute sense of disenfranchisement** from the government and ruling class, the poor rush through this temporary crack in the control structure, much like water flowing through a hole in a dam.

**Supplemental Considerations:**

The **key message** of this section is to enhance student understanding that looting behavior represents a **continuum**. It does not occur much following most disaster responses. Under certain conditions, however, it **can be anticipated**. Some professors may wish to expand this section through more discussion of **urbanized settings** wherein pockets of poor may represent **levels of disenfranchisement** similar to that found in highly stratified societies like St. Croix. Others may wish to use the looting example as a way to describe **modal response patterns**. That is, all human response patterns, including those related to disaster, represent a continuum. There is marked variation among people and future research will better pin down the rates of variation and the social factors that constrain them.

**Objective 17.4 Describe and illustrate emergent norm theory.**

**Requirements:**

None.

**Remarks:**

I. Origins.
A. Early work of sociologists specializing in the study of “collective behavior”, e.g., Turner (1965); Turner and Killian (1972).

B. Applications to disaster by Quarantelli and Dynes (1970) to looting behavior and Lindell and Perry (1992) to warning responses.

II. Basic theme.

A. Quotation from Mann (1986) is typical.

B. “Emergent norm theory (Turner and Killian, 1972) maintains that changes which occur when a person belongs to a crowd are due to the development of norms, common understandings about appropriate conduct, to which the individual is led to conform. Group pressure encourages behavior consistent with the emergent norm, inhibits behavior contrary to it, and justifies restraining actions against dissenters.” (p. 172).

C. Aspects of disaster behavior are best explained by emergent norm theory, e.g., heightened frequency of altruistic behavior and under special circumstances, looting behavior.

III. Application (based on Quarantelli and Dynes 1970).

A. In natural disasters all property rights are suspended temporarily for the common good.

1. Emergent norm is the temporary suspension of property rights.

2. Example: “. . . warehouses can be broken into without the owner’s permission to obtain generators necessary to keep hospitals functioning . . .” (p. 176).

3. Interpretation: Emergent norm legitimates such actions “. . . if undertaken for this purpose even though the participants might agree that it was technically an act of burglary.” (p. 176).

B. Looting behavior reflects a specialized instance of the emergent norm process.

1. There is a redefinition of property rights.

2. “The looting behavior undertaken is likewise a temporary manifestation of a new group norm, in which the right to use available resources becomes problematical. If property is thought of as the shared understanding of who can do what with the valued resources
within a community, in civil disorders we see a breakdown in that understanding.” (p. 176).

C. **Looting behavior** reflects conformity to the new emergent norm.

   1. Plundering, at least temporarily, becomes the normatively acceptable thing to do.

   2. Those in the group who do not plunder may be sanctioned for rule violation.

   3. “As in natural disasters, the legal right does not change; but there is local group consensus on the massive use and appropriation of certain public and private goods, be these police cars or items on grocery store shelves. In many ways, a new property norm has emerged.” (p. 177).

IV. Application (based on Anderson and Dynes, 1976).

   A. Civil disturbances should be viewed as **expressions of political discontent**.

   B. **Mitigation**, as with natural disasters, should be long-term goal.

   C. **Curacao “May Movement”**.

      1. Rampages resulted in two deaths, 79 injuries and damages of $35-40 million.

      2. Date: Spring, 1969.

      3. Dutch marines mobilized to assist local authorities.

   D. **Post-event mitigations**.

      1. Two reform parties created (Liberation Front and MAN).

      2. Both parties championed rights of poor.

      3. Both won legislative seats.

      4. “Labor acquired more political influence in Curacao as a result of the May protest.” (p. 46).

      5. Blacks were appointed to high office.

   E. **Conclusion**: “It does not seem that the recent disturbances in the United States had this type of immediate political impact.” (p. 47).
F. **Ask students:** “Since the time of this case study, i.e., 1969, has all racial discrimination ended in the U.S.A.? Do we have a just society with regards to racially based inequities?” (Answer: No).

G. **Explain:** Disasters are a type of social problem.

1. **All social problems are interdependent.**

2. **Examples:** failures in educational systems perpetuate poverty; lack of employment opportunities, facilitate dysfunctional families.

3. **Emergency managers** must recognize the interdependencies between disaster and other types of social problems.

**Supplemental Considerations:**

The **key message** of this section is to **enhance student understanding** of looting behavior through an introduction to emergent norm theory. Some professors may prefer to keep this section very short using only the suggested notes. The section could be **expanded substantially** through introduction of additional examples of collective behavior episodes such as studies of crowds, riots, or other instances of looting during various civil disorders. For example, the case illustration in the upcoming section (Objective 17.5) could be developed further (i.e., the four day rampage in South Los Angeles that was ignited by the acquittal of police officers who were tried for the beating of Rodney King in April, 1992). Use of a **recent example case event** also could be used, e.g., sports celebration or anti-war demonstration that evoked violence or property destruction.

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**Objective 17.5** Describe three principles of community policing relevant to crowd management.

**Requirements:**

Use Overheads 17-4 through 17-6.

**Remarks:**

I. **Introduction.**

   A. Group 2 report: 2 minutes.

   B. **Supplement** as required with points like these.
1. **Definition**: community policing is “... a proactive problem-solving model of policing in partnership with the communities of the city.” (Hooper 1995, p. 33).

2. **Display** Overhead 17-4; “Community Policing and Civil Disorder”.

3. **Review** and illustrate points listed on Overhead (based on Hooper 1995).
   
   a. Encourage a **presumption of good will**.
      
      1) Allows misunderstandings and misperceptions to be addressed.
      2) Reduces the chance events will spin out of control.
   
   b. Provide **mutual accountability**.
      
      1) Anonymity is reduced on both sides.
      2) Accountability is increased.
   
   c. Obtain a “pulse” on the level of community **tension**.
      
      1) Use community communication networks.
      2) Defuse threatening situations.

II. **Riot similarities**.

A. Group 3 report.

B. **Supplement** as required with points like these.

C. **Display** Overhead 17-5; “Riot Similarities”.

D. **Review** points listed on Overhead 17-5 and integrate with student responses (based on Hooper 1995, p. 34).

1. **Reservoir of grievances**.
   
   a. Poor living conditions and high unemployment.
   
   b. Select groups doing better, e.g., Cubans in Miami and Koreans in L.A.
c. Feeling of oppression.

2. Precipitating incident, e.g., acquittals of police officers charged with beating a Black.

3. Death toll.
   a. 18 killed in Miami.
   b. 42 killed in Los Angeles.

4. Property damage.
   a. $80 million in Miami.
   b. $775 million in Los Angeles.

5. Duration.
   a. 11 days in Miami.
   b. 12 days in Los Angeles.

6. Timeline.
   a. Verdict announced mid-afternoon (both locations),
   b. Rock and bottle throwing escalates to high level of disorder within one hour (both locations).

E. Conclusion: Based on follow-up survey: “The vast majority of respondents agreed that community policing reduced the potential for unrest, facilitated the exchange of information during periods of tension, and encouraged good will.” (Hooper 1995, p. 36).

III. Principles of crowd management.

   1. Field observations.
   2. Events:
      a. Ku Klux Klan rally (December, 1993).
      b. Rock concert.
c. Super Bowl Parade (Dallas Cowboys, 1994).

B. Display Overhead 17-6; “Principles of Crowd Management.”

1. Dispel myths.
   a. Some city officials had incorrect perceptions of crowd behavior (p. 13).
   b. Remind students of surveys on the belief in disaster myths, e.g., panic, which still guides many officials.

2. Crowds are not anonymous.
   a. Some crowd participants assume they are anonymous.
   b. Inhibitions, usually constrained by normative expectations, may be dropped.
   c. “. . . research shows most crowds are not anonymous.” (p. 14).

3. Crowds can be good.
   a. Common assumption is that all crowd behavior is antisocial.
   b. Example: “. . . during the 1994 Dallas Super Bowl parade, a street vendor’s cart fell over from strong winds, which blew away his pennants, shirts and other souvenirs. Bystanders in the crowd saw the incident, helped the merchant upright his cart, and chased down the scattered merchandise.” (p. 14).

4. Adopt community policing.
   a. Riot gear worn by police may incite a riot.
   b. A community policing approach requires that local officers work with crowd leaders in advance. This is Hooper’s (1995) key message.
   c. Example:
      1) KKK rally.
2) African-American crowd members agitated by words from speakers.

3) “Instead of arresting the protester, the officer put his arm around him and calmly talked with him while walking away from the site.” (p. 14).

Supplemental Considerations:

The key message of this section is to reinforce the linkage between the theory of emergent norms and the basics of community policing and crowd management. For most students these linkages will be new ideas. Additional discussion time and examples could be used to reinforce these messages if required. Some professors may elect to expand this section through the introduction of parallel issues related to terrorism and homeland security. For example, what linkages are required between law enforcement agencies, emergency management, and intelligence units?

Objective 17.6 Explain the relevance of understanding looting behavior to emergency managers.

Requirements:

Use Overhead 17-7.

Remarks:

I. Introduction.

A. Group 4 Report: 2 minutes.

B. Ask students: “What additional insights would you offer that reflects the material covered during this session?”

C. Record responses on chalkboard.

II. Relevance to emergency managers.


B. Review and integrate with Group 4 and student generated examples listed on chalkboard.

1. Debunk mythology.
a. Image of mass looting is a false exaggeration.

b. During most disasters minimal, if any, looting occurs.

c. Rumors of looting and media reports fuel the false image.

2. **Policy guidance.**

   a. Research evidence should guide policy.

   b. Training workshops for local agency personnel should include above content.

   c. Organizational policies and procedures may require review.

3. **Recognize event differences.**

   a. Civil disorder is a type of conflict event.

   b. Pattern differences with natural disasters.

      1) **Widespread vs. rare.**

      2) **Groups vs. individuals.**

      3) **Public act vs. secretive actions.**

4. **Probability of looting is highest when:**

   a. Societal stratification is high.

   b. High rate of petty theft.

   c. Temporary loss of social control.

5. **Use emergent norm theory.**

   a. Provides link to **basic social theory.**

   b. Provide interpretative scheme.

   c. Looting behavior reflects temporary conformity to an emergent norm.

   d. Looting behavior, like the emergent norm, is **transitory.**
6. **Community policing and civil disorder.**
   a. Definition.
   b. Principles, e.g., encourage a presumption of good will.
   c. Riot similarities.

7. **Crowd management.**
   a. Dispell myths.
   b. Crowds are not anonymous.
   c. Crowds can be good.
   d. Adopt community policing.

8. **Linkages to social problems.**
   a. Civil disturbances can be mitigated.
   b. Disaster is a non-routine social problem.
   c. Community resources must be divided.
   d. All social problems are interdependent.

**Supplemental Considerations:**

By reviewing the relevance of knowledge about looting behavior for emergency managers, this section can provide an integrative summary of the entire session. The two key messages are: 1) the image of mass looting during disaster is exaggerated and false and 2) emergent norm theory explains when looting is most probable and why. Some instructors may wish to expand this section through elaboration of the social problems theme. Others may select alternative points that reflect personal interest, e.g., crowd management, community policing, or additional applications of emergent norm theory.

**Course Developer References:**


