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# Preparing for the Worst

## *Planning for Civil Unrest*

One of the less pleasant tasks of being an emergency manager is that we are forced to consider all risks, even those that are unpopular or may have a political dimension. This often leads to charges that we are being negative and obstructionist or that we are crying, "wolf". Our warnings are frequently ignored or disregarded. Nevertheless, risk assessment and preparing for credible risks is at the core of emergency management.

This country is more polarized and divided than at any time since the turbulent 60's. However, no matter which side of the political spectrum you fall on, there is an overriding concern that the elections in November will not result in the peaceful transition of power that we have come to expect.

This is not a popular position to take. Yet, because it is a credible risk, we need to be prepared. Here, then, are some ideas for consideration.

### **Advocate for Restraint**

As I discussed in [last month's article](#), much of the violence we are seeing in the current disturbances is the work of a minority with the aim of forcing an over-reaction on the part of the authorities. The use of chemical

agents and impact projectiles and, most particularly, the misuse of batons produce images that are used for further incitement.

While emergency managers are not generally involved in formulating riot control strategy, we should use our position as trusted advisors to educate our colleagues on the tactics of social demolition and to advocate for restraint. This will not be a popular position in many cases, but we need to remember that protesters are also the citizens we are sworn to protect.

### **Prepare for Interagency Coordination**

One of the key issues we find in disaster literature is that jurisdictions frequently do not have the capacity to deal with the influx of resources provided in a disaster. In a civil disturbance, we can expect to deal with multiple agencies: law enforcement mutual aid, National Guard troops, and federal law enforcement agencies. Since many of these agencies consider themselves autonomous, coordination becomes a nightmare.

In preparing for this task, you need to consider several factors. The first is the role of your Emergency Operations Center. In [last month's newsletter](#), my

Colleague, Tim Riecker discussed how an EOC could serve the traditional role resource support and information coordination or could plan and direct field operations. Deciding how your EOC will operate will have a bearing on what type of liaison you will expect from outside agencies.

A second factor that is often overlooked is that your EOC in all likelihood will be too small to house an expanded operation. Your plans should include the ability to switch to an alternate site that provides more capacity. This should be part of your planning in any case and not just limited to civil disturbance planning.

A third factor that should be included in your planning is the ability to conduct sustained operations. Like any major disaster, civil unrest can lead to extended operations and the need to transition from immediate response to short-term recovery. This was the case in the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992 when 6 days of rioting led to the damage of almost 4,000 buildings at an estimated cost of \$1 billion.

### Combat Disinformation

In any disaster but in civil disturbance in particular, rumor and disinformation spread faster than the truth. This is compounded by multiple agencies providing information directly to the media without a coordinated message. You need a way to get accurate information to the public and to be a trusted source that the media can rely on for verifying or correcting rumors.

The principal tool to provide this capability is the Joint Information Center. When properly implemented and supported by participating agencies, the JIC can create a unified message for use by all agencies and serve as a clearing house for all information related to the crisis.

Contrary to rumor, a JIC does not restrict the ability of agencies to provide information related to their activities to the media. It provides a unified message and consolidates common information relieving pressure on agency public information officers.

### Plan for Recovery

Civil disturbances can create unique social problems. Following the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, almost half of the destroyed stores in Central and South Central Los Angeles were not rebuilt. Myths sprang up about the riot areas resulting in business owners having trouble getting loans and investment being discouraged. Despite initial promises, few of the rebuilding plans were implemented.

A further lesson from the 1992 riots is that the impact from civil disturbances can fall disproportionately on a segment of the population. Approximately 45% of the damages caused by the riot were to Korean-owned businesses. Local counseling centers reported some 730 Koreans treated for post-traumatic stress.

On the surface, the rebuilding of a community damaged by arson and looting does not appear all that different from rebuilding after any disaster. However, it is the emotional and economic tolls that we need to consider. Damage to a community's reputation can, as we saw in 1992, affect investment in that community. This same fear was active in San Francisco in 1906 where the deaths from earthquake were minimized so as not to jeopardize Eastern investment. It can produce significant demographic shifts, as we saw after Hurricane Katrina and the Northridge earthquake. Planning for recovery is a critical part of preparing for civil disturbances. 