

RIOTS ON THE HIGH STREET: SECURING YOUR PREMISES

It is a sad reality that civil disorder or rioting, whatever the reason, invariably ends in the looting of commercial premises and on many occasions arson as well. This was as true on the streets of the UK in 2011 as it was more recently in the cities of Baltimore and Ferguson in the US last year. Whether it is an anarchist march or disorder triggered by some sort of social issue, looting and criminal damage can spread faster than the authorities can mobilise and deploy resources to keep up.

The reason why rioters should damage and loot the very businesses that serve their communities has many explanations. One is that local businesses, particularly chain stores, are seen as part of the establishment exploiting the community, and are therefore legitimate targets of anti-authority riots. This seems plausible in relation to big brands like Starbucks and Curry's etc. but there is not much evidence to support the theory as just as many, if not more of the businesses looted are locally owned and operated.

Another puts it down to a basic human instinct, which is a sort of herd or mob mentality which makes otherwise perfectly decent law-abiding citizens, outraged by some perceived wrong doing, follow the crowd into rioting and looting.

And my personal favourite that the 'consumer society' has created an expectation that we should all have a flat screen TV, a laptop computer or the latest must-have phone or gadget and that those that loot are rebelling against the system that denies them its bounty.

Whether you subscribe to any of these theories or to one of the many others, what is true is that the majority of rioters are usually young men and some women, usually from the poorer parts of town. And among these young men and women will be criminal elements that will use the disorder as a perfect cover to orchestrate the sort of orgy of criminal activity that they can only dream of on a normal day.

This is, of course, nothing new. What is new is the highly connected world in which we now live. What appears on TV can be seen on social media and what appears on social media can appear on TV and this information can be shared almost instantaneously.

Social media acts as a sort of impromptu command and control system making crowds much more mobile and making it much more difficult for the police to respond effectively. While social media was widely used during the Arab Spring and elsewhere to mobilise resistance to authorities, the London riots saw the first widespread use of social media to enable rioters to co-ordinate their criminal activities. Instead of confronting police as rioters do,



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they used their communications to disperse quickly from one location and re-converge at another where there was no police presence to carry on looting activities and damaging property.

In a 2011 report into the riots across cities and towns in the UK, the Riots Communities and Victims Panel said social networking and TV footage of police officers watching people “loot at will” helped fuel the disorder in London and other UK cities. And it went on to say: “From the evidence around the August riots and from what people have subsequently

A damaged electrical retail store in Brixton following a second night of disturbances in 2011



told us, it seems clear to us that the spread of rioting was made worse both by televised images of police apparently watching people cause damage and loot at will, and by the ability of social media to bring together determined people to act collectively”.

During the London riots we saw another first, a sort of ‘designer looting’ where rioters were moving around London popping up at major retail outlets with the sole purpose of avoiding confrontation with the police and getting on with the business of looting their chosen stores and brands. Comet electrical stores as well as Currys, Argos and PC World shops were all cleaned out. Designer sports stores and jewellers were also targeted. Looters used shopping trolleys and even brought their cars (or maybe someone else’s) to ensure that they could carry away as much swag as possible.

The understandable inability of the authorities to keep up meant that buildings were looted and burning out of control long before the emergency services could properly respond. And even when they were in the right place, the danger posed by rioters to first responders often meant that they could only look on as businesses and homes burned to the ground.

One of the most disturbing images of the riots and the worst nightmare for any business owner or anyone else that lives above a high street business, was the picture of Monika Konczyk leaping into the arms of riot police from the first floor of a burning building. If the police had not been close by on this occasion the results could have been tragic. Overall between 6 and 11 August 2011, thousands of people rioted in several London boroughs and in cities and towns across England.

Looting took place in Tottenham Hale retail park and nearby Wood Green. The following days saw similar scenes in other parts of London, with the most rioting taking place in Hackney, Brixton, Walthamstow, Peckham, Enfield, Battersea, Croydon, Ealing, Barking, Woolwich, Lewisham and East Ham.

From 8 to 10 August, other towns and cities in England saw copycat rioting and looting including Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester, Derby, Wolverhampton, Nottingham, West Bromwich, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester and Salford. There were five deaths in total, at least 16 others were injured and the cost of the damage has been estimated at around £200 million.

But it is not just the looting that is a problem for retailers and other high street businesses. As previously mentioned, arson is a regular consequence of rioting and looting and with many business owners living on the premises or with flats and apartments above businesses, securing your premises can be a matter of life and death.

One obvious conclusion of the London riots is that business owners must assume that during rioting and looting, they are on their own when it comes to making their businesses safe and secure. They cannot

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expect the normal response from police, emergency services or even private security companies that they may have employed.

Standard security systems such as burglar alarms and CCTV are unlikely to get a response from hard-pressed police. CCTV has proved useful in catching perpetrators after the event, but many looters have easily overcome this by wearing face masks and hoodies. It is therefore imperative that retail and business owners and operators choose the right systems to secure their premises.

Physical barriers are the only real defence and a high-quality fire suppression system such as sprinklers are also a must. Sprinklers might not save the stock, but they could save the building. Where appropriate outside the building bunds, bollards and planters can be used to prevent vehicles gaining access to shopping malls or directly outside the premises themselves without making the place look like a fortress.

Companies like J & S Franklin supply PAS68-tested barriers such as the DefenCell, which can be incorporated into security measures for public place protection and is used in shopping centres, airports, sports stadiums and other populous locations. It also supplies Securiscape bollards and planters, which are also PAS68 tested.

On the actual premises, shutters are the first and last line of defence and in a riot situation probably the only effective one. One observable failure of shutters in the 2011 riots was that they were not

properly locked down and so were easily forced up by looters allowing access to the premises. To counter this weakness Charter Global produces the Obexion range of LPS 1175 shutters which have a unique lockdown system that means that the shutters cannot be forced up regardless of what position they are left in, fully closed or not. They are opened from the outside which means that they can be the first or single point of entry.

They range from the LPS 1175, Issue 7, SR2 ideally suited to medium-risk commercial buildings, public facilities, schools, universities, community centres and retail outlets where ventilation or vision is required, to the first ever SR5-rated shutter the LPS 1175, Issue 7, SR5 designed for highest level of security such as national infrastructure sites, and other high-value premises such as banks, jewellers, galleries and museums.

Mark Deayton, Business Development Director at Charter Global notes: "We are very aware that in certain circumstances our products are often all that stands between our client's businesses and possible ruin. As a company we are deeply committed to innovation, we were the first company to produce a SR5-rated shutter and we are constantly striving to improve our products right across the range. We have a number of product development projects currently in the pipeline, all of which will further enhance our high security offering. We will be introducing these to the market over the next few months".

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