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How Citizens Stop Riots: Analyzing the Case of the 2021 Dutch Curfew Riots

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ABSTRACT

The causes of riots have been extensively researched. Comparatively, little is known about how they are prevented from occurring. We address this gap with a qualitative study of the role of formal and informal guardians in Amsterdam in January 2021, when public disorder was widespread across the Netherlands after the government had announced a curfew to curb the spread of the Covid–19 virus. We used CCTV footage of two gatherings that had elements of disorder and two that occurred without them. We also rely on interviews with 40 so-called “intimate handlers” who were present during these gatherings to understand how they managed them. We find that the presence and actions of intimate handlers collaborating with the police during the gatherings, effectuated through frequent affiliative contacts with the crowd, had direct de-escalatory effects, operative because of their well-developed social community bonds: participants in gatherings avoided jeopardizing these bonds of attachment, which also created a more positive image of the police through citizen-police collaborations. Our findings thus stress the importance of social bonds for the effectiveness of riot prevention and we consider practical implications for public disorder and large-scale crowd management.

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Introduction

On the 20th of January 2021, the Dutch government declared a nation-wide curfew in order to curb the ongoing COVID–19 pandemic. In the days that followed, people took to the streets across the country to express their anger and frustration about the governmental COVID–19 policies. An unprecedented number of protest gatherings turned into public disorder in the form of violence against the police and vandalism. For example, a group of youths set fire to a COVID–19 testing station in UK, rioters smashed hospital windows in Enschede, police were attacked in Eindhoven, and in various other towns, large and small, shops were vandalized and looted. Hundreds of participants were arrested and the damage caused exceeded into the millions of Euros. The police considered the public disorder “the worst riots in 40 years” (for an overview see: <https://nos.nl/collectie/13858-rellen-na-invoeren-avondklok>).

While public disorder was widespread, there were at least as many and probably more gatherings that did not develop disorderly. Our question is why participants behaved disorderly in some of them, but not in others. We seek the answer in the role of intimate handlers (such as street coaches, youth

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workers and volunteers from the community) and police officers in the actual interactions with the crowd, and in the way these informal and formal guardians collaborated. Based on observations of four video-recorded protest gatherings capturing details of the interactions of all parties involved in these gatherings, and 40 qualitative interviews with intimate handlers and police officers involved in the same gatherings, we study how and why these gatherings did not escalate to actual riots. In two of them, participants engaged in disorderly behavior (involving throwing firecrackers and other objects, setting fire to garbage cans and vandalizing police cars and other vehicles), in the others participants refrained from doing so. We contribute to the tradition of research into riots and public disorder in three ways.

Firstly, we take up Newburn's (2016, 2021) calls to consider the issue why riots and public disorder do not appear in some locations where one would have theoretically expected them to happen, and to focus on the roles of both community representatives and police to understand why gatherings turn into disorder. Secondly, methodologically, our use of real-life video observation provides a unique perspective on *how* intimate handlers and police, through their non-verbal actions and movements, managed the interactions with the crowd, including the sequential patterns of their actions and the way in which these matter for escalatory and de-escalatory outcomes. Thirdly, the combination of video observations of gatherings and interviews with involved guardians and police officers, allows us to place the analysis of actual observed actions, such as the number and nature of contacts between intimate handlers, police and crowds during the course of events, in relation to historical social relationships between participants, intimate handlers and the police before the event occurs.

In line with Newburn (2016) we find that intimate handlers' use of preexisting social bonds with community members when they interact with crowd members during events that could potentially escalate into riots and their connections to the police can help explain how and why two of our cases featured public disorderly behavior, whereas the two others did not.

Extant research into interactional and relational processes related to public disorder

One of the most influential theories explaining the emergence of public disorder is Waddington et al.'s (1989, 2021) flashpoint model. The flashpoint is an event that provides immediate moral and emotional meaning to the protest, it channels already existing feelings of dissent and triggers people to take to the streets. In our study, the announcement of the curfew forms the flashpoint. In the flashpoint, developments in six dimensions culminate. They comprise structural socio-economic inequalities, opportunities for political involvement, cultural processes that foster social identities clustering around grievances, contextual processes related to local relationships between authorities, police and community members and, finally, situational (presence of police, objects that offer opportunities for vandalism and arson) and interactional (how police and civilians respond to each other's actions) processes that affect the behavior of police and protesters as they gather in public space.

A rich tradition of social psychological research has provided insights in the interactional processes that are crucial to understand the emergence of disorder and riots (see Newburn 2021 for an overview). Reicher et al. (2004) argue that crowd policing strategies have an important impact on the escalation or de-escalation of such events. When there is little informal contact between police and crowd members, and "the crowd" is treated as a homogeneous potentially dangerous group, members are more likely to identify themselves in opposition to the controllers. People define themselves as a group member, therefore the goal, reputation and well-being of the group is the same for them (Reicher et al. 2007). When police action is viewed as illegitimate, it can make members who did not intend to create conflict more willing to join or accept violence by other group members (Reicher et al. 2004). In contrast, friendly interactions between police and crowd members can lead to less hostility.

Police interactions with crowds can also rely on the self-policing capacity of crowds and instead of generating or reinforcing us-them boundaries, the police can attempt to align identities by collaborating with community members or crowd participants (Stott et al. 2007). Stott et al. (2020)

showed how in-group policing can be an effective way to prevent football supporter violence, through engagement with “supporter liaison officers” who serve as a link between police and would-be unruly supporters. However, if the self-regulatory capacity is disrupted by unnecessary (forceful) police intervention, crowd members tend to consider police actions as unjust, illegitimate and hostile, which furthers an antagonistic identity among them (Reicher et al. 2004). Similarly, Drury et al. (2022) showed that when police act forcefully on “small incidents,” such as a smashed window, this tends to be interpreted as “illegitimate” and “over the top” (p. 663). In their case study of the Salford riots, the community and the police already had a relationship characterized by distrust. Drury et al. (2022) highlight that police interventions in an already troubled community-police relation may cause a situation in which both parties escalate the conflict in tandem (see also Drury et al. 2020). These insights point to the importance of cooperation (or rather, lack thereof) between community members, guardians, and the police in explaining the occurrence and nonoccurrence of riots, resembling the contextual level of the flashpoint model (Waddington et al. 1989, 2021). However, this line of research discusses the role of citizen involvement as part of a policing strategy, which emphasizes a dominant role for the police in the organization of these initiatives. Additionally, the discussed literature on in-group policing focuses on the role of social identity, rather than the importance of relational ties.

Local relationships between authorities, police and community members also played a decisive role in Newburn’s (2016) analysis of the (non-)emergence of disorder in neighborhoods of Bristol, Leeds and London during the nation-wide disorder in the UK in 2011. All three neighborhoods had high poverty, deprivation, crime levels and a bad reputation, and in all three, residents experienced feelings of neglect, frustrations and being unheard. The main difference between the neighborhoods was at Waddington et al.’s (1989, 2021), contextual level. Whereas in London the trust between police and residents was at a low level, in Bristol community policing and youth work resulted in more connections between residents and police, and in Leeds, community representatives and youth workers mediated between youth and the police (Newburn 2016: 134–135). These contextual relationships turned out to be consequential at the interactional level during the wave of riots. In London, the police “stood back and let it happen” (p. 139), while in Leeds and Bristol, the connections between community members and police dampened antagonistic social identities. Due to collaboration and information sharing between community representatives and youth workers, this facilitated both low-key policing and display of forceful capacity at strategic positions (Newburn 2016: 138). The maintenance of social order in Bristol and Leeds “relied on the credibility held by such people – by virtue of their standing in the communities concerned and the relationships they had built up over extended periods of time. The work itself primarily involved persuasion – convincing people that what they were contemplating was fraught with danger and had very considerable implications for their futures” (Newburn 2016: 139). Newburn’s analysis emphasizes the importance of key community figures who worked together with the police. However, the actual actions of these figures were not examined in the study that relied only on self-reported perceptions.

Interestingly, criminological routine activity theory arrives at similar insights. The theory states that criminal events involve three aspects: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians (Cohen and Felson 1979). In later versions of the theory (Felson 1986), a specific type of guardianship termed “intimate handler” indicates that strong social bonds allow for more effective social control. An intimate handler is described as someone who has the ability to exert control over the potential offender and “grasps the handle,” and therefore implies a hierarchical relationship. Strong social bonds are characterized by people’s attachment and commitments to relationships with friends, family, neighbors or fellow residents as well as involvement in their conventional activities, and beliefs in the value of these activities (Hirschi 1969). So far however, empirical research on how intimate handlers prevent crime is scarce (Tillyer and Eck 2011).

Van Bavel and Elffers (2013) make a distinction between preventive and repressive guardianship. The preventive phase takes place before a situation escalates, when guardians might prevent a crime by monitoring or talking to a potential offender. The repressive phase starts after criminal offense has

taken place, a guardian might react to the occurrence of the crime by intervening directly or indirectly, for instance by warning the police.

Our work thus follows up on social psychological studies of public disorder and connects it to criminology, as we aim to show how intimate handlers act with the intention to prevent riots, and how peacekeeping behavior arises from preexisting relational ties between police, intimate handlers and other community members. Our study reveals the interactional dynamics of public disorder prevention based on video observations, and shows how intimate handlers and police officers who were present during the gatherings portray their actions and relationships with one another and with community members (notably youth) who took to the streets.

Methods

Data

One methodological challenge of the current study is that we were interested in both riots and interactional situations and the community processes that happen prior to the situations, and these different social phenomena cannot be easily grasped with the same and single social scientific method. On the one hand, valid information on interactional situations needs to be acquired through direct observation, given evidence showing that self-reported accounts offer course-grained and biased data on how people actually interacted in situ (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Specifically, in the case of riots and violent situations, it is recommended to use video-assisted observations (Collins 2008, Nassauer 2019), given that this allows the researcher to observe these often hectic and hard-to-decipher cases multiple times in slow motion (Nassauer and Legewie 2018, Philpot et al. 2019). In line with these considerations, we decided to sample video recordings of the riots. On the other hand, direct observations and video data offer no detailed information on the social processes that lead up to the interactional situations, or the meaning-making and motivational dynamics (Philpot et al. 2019). Here, interview data is better suited to grasp these pre-situational and subjective aspects (Lamont and Swidler 2014), and therefore we also conducted interviews with intimate handlers who were co-present during the riots.

Video data

We collected video clips of the riots, recorded by municipal security cameras operated by the Amsterdam police. The cameras are spread across the public settings, with recordings of all cameras saved for one month before automatic deletion. To identify riots that had been video recorded, we searched out locations that news media and social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram) had associated with the riots. We found that calls to riot on social media and media reports on public disturbances were related to five locations in Amsterdam. Other public disturbances could have occurred that the media did not write about, yet we expect significant events would have been reported. Of these locations, four conformed to the following inclusion criteria: intimate handlers and/or police were present, and interactions between these parties and crowd members were visible in the footage. The exclusion of the fifth case could be due to the angle or scope of the camera at that location, or that the planned riots on social media were not executed. Two cases started at 6:30 PM, and the other two videos started at 7:00 PM. The duration of the videos ranged from two to four hours.

The coding of the video data was conducted by two trained coders, using a code scheme that was inductively developed through systematic observations of the video cases (Jones et al. 2018). First, we coded whether the following types of disorderly behavior took place in the event: property damage, throwing firecrackers, throwing bricks, setting things on fire. Note that this – and all other video measures – used the event as the unit of measurement, reflecting that we are interested in *situational* (rather than individual) properties and dynamics of the riots (Collins 1983). Next, we distinguished four types of actors based on their visual appearance: crowd members, intimate handlers (e.g., wearing yellow), community police (e.g., wearing standard police uniforms), and riot police (e.g., carrying

helmets and shields). We then recorded the number of persons in the rioting crowd (at the point when most people were present), and counted the number of contact and interaction behaviors, performed by the different actors across the videos. Specifically, *contact* was coded when the actors were looking at or walking/driving toward the crowd members on camera; and *interaction* was coded when one or more actors were talking or gesturing to one or more crowd members. The coders independently coded the videos and cross-checked agreement and disagreements of each code in all videos. Upon disagreement, they asked two of the other authors for their interpretation, and as such reached agreement together.

Interview data

Interviews were conducted with 40 respondents, comprising two Imams, three chairmen of mosques, ten neighborhood mothers, seven neighborhood fathers, three young men, ten youth workers, two community police officers, and three employees of the municipality. Initially, the respondents were found through online research on who were present as intimate handlers during the riots. This involved browsing news messages and social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) in finding contact information. These people were then approached by e-mail or telephone. The interviewees were volunteers, including members and Imams of the mosque, neighborhood mothers and fathers, and professionals, such as youth workers, community police officers, and municipal employees. Next, we established contact with additional informants through snowball sampling. All respondents provided written informed consent. The interviews took place online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, or at an in advance agreed semipublic place (e.g., a youth center). The duration of the interviews ranged from 10 to 80 minutes. All interview quotations have been subjected to anonymization, translated to English, and edited for clarity.

The interviews were semi-structured. Following an interview guide, the respondents were asked to describe their actions from the moment they first heard about the planned riots to the end of the night that the riots were planned. Other themes concerned their motivation to take part, their earlier experiences with similar initiatives, and their connection to their neighborhood. The interviews were coded in ATLAS.ti 8. Through open coding of the first ten interviews, a coding scheme was developed. The reliability of the scheme was tested by an additional coder, who independently coded two interviews. After comparing the results of the two coders and adjusting the codes, the remaining interviews were coded.

Analysis strategy

The study has an explanatory purpose in that we are interested in the factors that lead to riot escalation or de-escalation. In this examination, we follow the two main analytical strategies suggested by qualitative researchers within the realist perspective for explaining social phenomena; through either a “variance” or a “process” type of analysis (Maxwell 2004). First, our variance analysis involved that we examined how a number of explanatory conditions (e.g., crowd size) and the de-escalation outcome co-varied between the included cases. Practically, this overview of the co-variation patterns in data is provided by tabulating (Ragin 2000) and visualizing data with simple matrices (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014). Second, the process analysis involved that we identified the social mechanisms through which riot de-escalation may be produced – that is, *how* rather than *whether* this occurred. By combining variance and process reasoning, the current study may be considered mixed-methods research (Maxwell 2004), and it is on this ground we embrace quantitative elements into our qualitative epistemology (Becker 1970).

Ethics and data security

The Ethics Advisory Board of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research positively evaluated the research design and contents of the interview protocol (ref. no. 13355). The video data were obtained from Amsterdam police with permission from The Netherlands Public Prosecution. Note that it was not practically feasible to obtain informed consent from those video-recorded. However,

according to the Ethics Code of the American Psychological Association (2010, section 8.03), research analyzing images are exempt from obtaining informed consent if it – as in the current case – “consists solely of naturalistic observations in public places, and it is not anticipated that the recording will be used in a manner that could cause personal identification or harm.” The latter point was ensured by storing all data on password-encrypted drives and by conducting the data analysis in the Secure Analytics Lab of the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR).

Results

Introducing the cases: four illegal gatherings in Amsterdam during curfew

The gatherings we study took place at four locations in Amsterdam during the first nights of the curfew, 23rd – 26rd January 2021. We analyzed gatherings in four locations. Three of the four neighborhoods have a higher percentage of low-income households than the city average (Statistics Amsterdam, Research, 2021). In the same three neighborhoods the safety perception is lower than the city average (Safety Monitor Central Bureau for Statistics 2022). In all four neighborhoods the percentage of residents with a non-western migration background is higher than the city average (Statistics Amsterdam Research 2023). In line with Waddington’s theory, three of the neighborhoods have characteristics of socio-economic deprivation. One of the neighborhoods is more gentrified, which could explain why there is no sign of deprivation at the neighborhood level. Interestingly, the situation escalated in this neighborhood. Corresponding to the statistics, respondents described the neighborhoods as “vulnerable” or minority groups as “stigmatized.” Especially the youth within these communities were described as deprived, as they had few facilities to enjoy their free time and few job opportunities.

After the government had announced the curfew, announcements on social media noted these locations as gathering spots. We therefore assume that these locations attracted would-be rioters during these three nights. What follows is a short description of what happened in each location, based on our observations of CCTV footage of these gatherings (see for more methodological detail below).

In case 1, groups gathered around 7:00 PM. Intimate handlers from the Mosque, youth workers and police were present, and the police stayed in their cars for most of the evening. The actions of the intimate handlers consisted of walking by repeatedly, standing close to the group, and interacting with different individuals, they gave fist bumps and laughed with each other. Some groups formed, but they never exceeded 20 people in size. The streets were close-to empty by 9:00 PM.

In case 2, we observed intimate handlers and police walking around the square from 7:00 PM. Intimate handlers were men connected to the mosque, neighborhood mothers and youth workers. Both the intimate handlers and police were standing close to the crowd members. Some groups formed during the night, but they never exceed 27 people. Intimate handlers interacted closely with a group of protesters, whereas the police checked the IDs of another group. By 9:00 PM the streets were empty, and all guardians left shortly after.

In case 3, we saw similar disorderly behavior. At 7:15 PM crowds had already started assembling. Officers were present in all corners of the intersection covered by our camera. Some officers were interacting with citizens, but again to a much lesser extent than described in case 1 and 2. Throughout the next hour, the group(s) increase in size, and we observed riot police and ordinary police vans driving by regularly. The officers mostly remained inside their vehicles. At 9:20 PM a firecracker was thrown close to a police car. At least two citizens in the crowd recorded it, and others are gesturing toward the police car as it drives off, followed by two smoke bombs being thrown into the road. Shortly after, the riot police positioned themselves in a line with batons and shields, before they walked down the road to clear the street. This caused the crowd to scatter around and people fled in various directions. Officers were hitting the citizens with their batons and pushing them. At 9:50 PM, we observed around ten people pushing a police car. One person smashed a window of the car with a rock

before running off. At 9:00 PM most of the citizens and police had left, however, we did observe a man in handcuffs at 9:50 PM.

In case 4, we observed more antagonism and disorderly behavior. At 7:00 PM we observed officers being present next to a corner shop. At first, officers were interacting with the citizens in a peaceful manner – such as sharing a smoke – but in a much lesser degree than in the previously described cases. At 7:47 PM we made the first observation of the riot police, as they drove by in an armored van. Citizens were gathering and forming groups – at 7:50 PM we observed 25 people at the corner shop, and at 7:55 PM this number had increased to over 40. Then, a police car is observed driving into the group to split it up. At 8:00 PM a firecracker is going off in the middle of the road, shortly followed by a second. Two more go off at 8:20 PM close to cars driving in the street. At this point, the group size had increased substantially, making it hard to accurately count, but there are close to 100 people walking down the street together. Here, they meet a riot police van, which makes the crowd run off. At around 9:25 PM a trash can is lit on fire. At 9:30 PM the riot police march down the road and form a road block, and at least four officers are positioned by the side of the road with dogs. At 8:34 PM three riot police vans are visible on the video footage, and 20+ officers are standing in the road. At 8:40 PM officers with shields and batons run directly toward a group of people, who run off without any direct confrontation. Throughout the rest of the situation, more firecrackers are thrown, groups of people reform and confronted the riot police again who then chased them away. Riot police and protesters repeated this pattern, a cat and mouse game, several times. At 9:00 PM (the time of the curfew) the street was nearly empty, and citizens who were still out were stopped and asked about their activity by the police.

Variance analysis

We started to examine the differences in outcomes between the four riot cases, as these variation patterns appear on the video data. As summarized in [Table 1](#), case 1 and 2 showed no signs of escalation, while case 3 and 4 included several escalated behaviors. In case 3, people started throwing firecrackers and smoke bombs around 8:30 PM. At 8:50 PM, participants ran toward a parked police van, pushed against the van, and threw stones into the windows. Afterward, the group ran away. In case 4, around 7:30 PM, people started throwing fireworks, which continued until 8:30 PM. Around 8:20 PM, a big garbage bin was set on fire, and as it began to burn, the group quickly grew, and later people from across the street joined the crowd. The crowd of around 100 people walked together toward the other end of the street, where some guys threw bricks toward the community police. Suddenly they all ran back, away from the riot police that arrived in vans.

It is noteworthy that the number of crowd members in the two escalated cases (2 and 3) is substantially larger than in the two de-escalated cases (1 and 2). This finding resonates with the suggestion that group size is an escalating factor, given that the crowd may act to amplify the collective emotions of tension and the subsequent release of actions (Collins 2008). It should be stressed, however, that these figures cannot verify the direction of this explanatory claim; in fact, we observed that the size and the density of the crowd had peak points in the escalated case, indicating that the ongoing disorder shaped the attraction to be where the action is (Goffman 1969).

Next, we examined how and when the different actors (intimate handlers, community police, and riot police) had exchanges with crowd members across the escalated and de-escalated cases. Let us first consider

Table 1. Escalation criteria per case.

Case	Property damage	Throwing firecrackers	Throwing bricks	Setting things on fire	Number of crowd members
1	×	×	×	×	20
2	×	×	×	×	27
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	78
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	100

✓ and × depicts presence and absence in the video data, respectively. We note that two respondents mentioned that one firecracker was thrown in case 1 which we did not observe in the video data. Overall however this case appeared de-escalated.

Table 2. Counts of contact and interaction behaviors with crowd members.

Case	Preventive phase				Repressive phase			
	Guardians		Community police		Community police		Riot police	
	Contact	Interaction	Contact	Interaction	Contact	Interaction	Contact	Interaction
1	11	16	0	0	-	-	-	-
2	7	29	2	18	-	-	-	-
3	-	-	3	19	1	0	5	1
4	-	-	1	1	0	0	3	1

the “preventative phase,” that is, the timespan during which the intimate handlers and community police could be involved in preventing an escalation of the events (Van Bavel and Elffers 2013).

As we see in Table 2, a characteristic of the de-escalation cases 1 and 2 was that both intimate handlers and community police were present, while the intimate handlers were absent in two other escalated cases. This difference indicates that the mere presence of intimate handlers may serve as de-escalating factor, as suggested by routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson 1979). Further, we see that the intimate handlers engaged in performing contact and interaction actions, indicating that their behavior, in addition to the mere presence, played a role in defusing the escalation.

Finally, we evaluate the repressive phase (see Table 1) during which the riots had escalated violently and the community and riot police attempted quelling the events – note that there were no records for cases 1 and 2 because they did not enter this phase. Here, we see that the community police were virtually passive compared to their non-negligible interaction level in the preventive phase, and likewise, the riot police displayed an overall low level of contact and interaction behaviors. These patterns indicated that the community and riot police’s forceful engagement during the repressive phase substituted the possibility to perform contact and interaction actions.

Process analysis

Next, we examine and detail the social processes that underpin the identified co-variation patterns. In doing so, we complement our video observations with the interview data, and this allows insights into aspects that are not video-captured: the subjective experience of being co-present in the riots and a “preparation phase” where the actors are engaged in community bonding – i.e., in the months and years prior to the preventive and repressive phases taking place during the riots.

Intimate handler presence and social bonds

In the de-escalated cases, the intimate handlers were present in the preventive phase, as identified by their fluorescent safety vests. Either they walked around to monitor different parts of the streets, or they stood in places where crowd members were present, or places that were attractive “hanging” spots. The mere presence of intimate handlers with high levels of social bonding – typically neighborhood parents, religious key figures, and neighborhood sports coaches – worked as informal control and appeared to de-escalate the tension. The respondents attributed the preventive effect of their presence to the social bonds they had with the crowd members: that they knew the rioters directly or indirectly, and were known faces or authority figures in the neighborhood. A respondent said:

And I know all these youngsters, and the parents all know me too. I am not saying that children are scared of me or anything, they looked different at me. They looked at me as a father of them.

Specifying how this unfolds, another parent told how their presence changed the atmosphere of the crowd: “When we arrived, they suddenly became calm.” This shows the effectiveness is not described in terms of a shared social identity, but rather in terms of a relationship that is hierarchical (Felson 1986). The bonds of attachment that have a conforming effect are built over a long time in the

preparation phase; for example, through youth workers regularly organizing fun activities for youngsters or other intimate handlers having helped crowd members in the past. A youth worker told:

So it is actually not only that one day, but it is an investment if you look at for example Imran who has been here for 17 years already, he actually knows everyone from brother to parents to child, we were finally able to embrace this in a positive way.

This youth worker's consistent work in building bonds with "everyone" allows him actively to draw upon these bonds, and the youngsters clearly view him in a positive way. In line with social control theory (Hirschi 1969), this demonstrates that he has built up something that the youngsters do not want to risk jeopardizing by rioting. As such, by his mere presence, he is able to deter escalation that could threaten the pre-established bond. The fact that crowd members became calm when a "father" figure showed up shows how effective such bonds can be, when intimate handlers are present at the right time and place.

The effect of intimate handler presence is highlighted by comparing with the escalation case 4, where no intimate handlers were visible on the video footage – the intimate handlers were, as one respondent told, active in the area close by. As such, in addition to investments in community bonding in the preparation phase, effective guardianship is contingent on the physical presence at the right place and time in the preparation phase. This resonates with the idea that the absence of guardians creates a situational opportunity for crime (Cohen and Felson 1979). By comparison, in case 2, the group of intimate handlers was very visible on the street, and a youth worker experienced that their presence even prevented additional crowd members from joining – as plausibly mirrored in the fact that the crowd size in the de-escalated cases was smaller than in their escalated counterparts (see Table 1):

But everyone was in yellow, so it was just very visible, so visible that at a certain moment, we got signals that in the messages to each other, it was communicated that it was "too hot" in the district. And by "too hot" they mean that the chance of riots is really small. Because the chance that you get caught is bigger, understand, so that is what they actually mean with "too hot." And also that there were too many yellow vests.

Guardianship in action

Besides having preventive effects through their mere presence, the intimate handlers' behavioral engagement was also critical, similar to what is highlighted in more recent guardianship literature (Ejbye-Ernst, Lindegaard, and Bernasco 2021, Reynald 2009). In cases 1 and 2, we thus observed that intimate handlers interacted with crowd members in affiliative and informal ways, for example, by doing fist bumps or pats on the shoulder—i.e., social touching behaviors that confirm their social ties and may be soothing (Lindegaard et al. 2017). Multiple guardians also described that they approached crowd members in a "positive" way, with expressions of empathy and care and by showing respect and staying calm. According to Reicher et al. (2004), these friendly interactions with crowd members are important for preventing escalation. Furthermore, when interacting with crowd members, the intimate handlers actively appealed to their shared community; for instance, by discussing their responsibilities for the neighborhood, or as a chairman of a mosque explained, by referring to their parents and how rioting could influence their future:

We also told them: "But look, your fathers and mothers are at home. They don't know you are here, and maybe you are going to riot later. And yes, you will end up in prison, the police station. Then your father and mother will be called, because you are a minor. Then you will get a criminal record."

This quote shows that the social position of the intimate handlers is important in the interactions with crowd members, rather than the shared identity. When a crowd member knows who the intimate handler is or when an intimate handler knows their parents, these statements are much more powerful. Other intimate handlers mentioned that especially religious figures received much respect from

crowd members. In one case, an Imam used shared religious beliefs to stop crowd members from rioting, as recollected by one respondent:

A lot of Muslims actually believe in the afterlife and in hell and what the Imam said. If you do something bad to someone or you burn someone's car or you break in someone's house, or you break someone's property. Then you are doing wrong and then you belong to the people of hell and that startled them. And he also says it does not matter if you do it to Muslims or non-Muslims.

Community police and intimate handler collaboration

So far, we have only considered the informal guardians, but as we saw in Table 2, the community police also played an active role through their contacts and interactions with the crowd. But of course, their background for this engagement is different: while the intimate handlers tend to have a self-evident bond with the community in which they live and are socially integrated, and as such take the role as intimate handlers, the community police officers have to invest more actively in developing community bounds. One officer describes what the role requires:

What I mostly did was visiting people, companies, foundations, mosques. That you just have a talk, that you just ask how it is going, that you are available for people, that you give your telephone number, so that people can reach you if there is something, that you are accessible, that you think with them even though it is something you cannot directly influence or that I have the solution. That is the investment you make.

In the current context, these bonding actions are, for example, aimed at mobilizing the intimate handlers. Specifically, the officers, municipality employees, youth workers, and some neighborhood representatives have a partnership called "Youth and safety," and according to several respondents, this network played a role in coordinating the guardianship involvement.

The collaboration between the community police and the intimate handlers not only took place in the preparation phase but also during the events in the preventive phase. In case 1, this appeared as a division of labor, with the intimate handlers present and active, while the police kept their distance from the crowd. We did not observe officers walking around where the group was gathering, only intimate handlers. In case 2, we observed how the intimate handlers and community police officers cooperated on the street and were co-present before the arrival of any crowd members. An officer explained that the community police needs the intimate handlers because without them and their ability to intimately handle the situation, they might have an escalating rather than a preventive effect:

Look there were riots, of course, for a big part because they wanted to riot against the police. But the moment that neighborhood moms, dads and youngsters from the neighborhood stand there with the message "no, we don't want this," then there is a power in that. They have shown that they work together with us, that they are also "pro-us," and I think that that is a very important instrument in this kind of, during this type of moments. Because you stand for that together, it is not just the police who stands there for the government, but it is really the whole neighborhood. The police is a part of that, we are a part of the neighborhood. But also all the moms, dads, youngsters who hang there regularly, they stood there shoulder to shoulder with the same message and apparently that works.

This officer indicates that the crowd is more reluctant to fight the police when they are acting in concert with intimate handlers because this resembles fighting people in the community that you have a social bond with, highlighting the importance of avoiding us-them boundaries for the prevention of conflict and violence (Stott et al. 2007). This contrasts the escalatory events, where the police were the only actor present during the prevention phase, and were engaged in surveillance of the crowd at a distance. This involved numerous vans driving by or being parked near the crowd, with few officers visible on the streets, more in line with a policing strategy where the crowd is viewed as dangerous (Reicher et al. 2004); behavior perceived as creating agitation and nervousness as one neighborhood parent said:

Look, the youth, I do not know why, but in one way or another they find the police very provoking. The police does not have to do anything, just the police uniform is already—it works like a sort of red flag for the youngsters.

So if you then see another group coming, then you think alright wait a minute these are no cops. These are people that I know. And then you have a different way in and they loosen up a little and they listen quicker as well.

The intergroup relationship between the police and the crowd is marked by sharp us-versus-them categorization and outgroup aggression (Stott et al. 2007). In the de-escalated cases, however, guardians in the role of intimate handlers associate themselves with the community police, which helps creating a more positive image of the police as belonging to the same in-group as the crowd members. The emergence of a sense of shared group membership – as a consequence of the established social bonds prior to the riot that become effectuated in the police-handler collaborations – offers a pathway to mitigate intergroup conflicts (Stott et al. 2018). As such it is not just a shared identification with a certain social identity (e.g. as related to the neighborhood, religion, ethnicity, etc.) but rather the investment in social bonds over time (e.g. knowing family members, friends, etc.) that when brought into the interactions in the riot has a de-escalating effect on the tensions. This situational resource sharply contrasts the escalatory cases, where the entry of the riot police in the repressive phase intensifies the outgroup aggression. The riot police wears helmets, shields, and bats, have their faces covered, and stand in a large group, and their presence involves very limited crowd interaction but rather an intimidating impression. As a neighborhood parent described, this ignites the events: “As soon as they saw the riot police, they huddled all together and they got ready for a fight, like it was war.”

Discussion

Based on a video-observational case study, involving two riots that escalated into confrontations with the police (e.g. throwing firecrackers, stones and vandalism) and two that did not escalate, we concluded that “intimate handlers” who collaborated with the police played a key role in preventing escalations. The studied riots took place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, during a Covid-19-installed curfew in 2021. We preferred the term “intimate handlers” over that of “guardians” because we found that an important aspect of their success with de-escalating the riots was the social bonds they had invested in and built up over time with community members prior to the riots.

Through the social network in the neighborhood, and the relationships with family and friends of the crowd members, intimate handlers were able to make contacts that mattered in the heat of the moment. From the video recordings, we distinguished intimate handlers from crowd members and citizens unengaged in the riot, through their clothing. The videos also allowed us to observe in detail the way intimate handlers made contact with the crowd, the frequency in which they did so, and the exact timing of their contacts. This also allowed for a similar analysis of the behavior of the different kinds of police officers present.

We found that the riots that were de-escalated involved active intimate handlers, who had an established social relationship with crowd members, and frequently made contact with the crowd, whereas cases that escalated did not involve intimate handlers. The riot police as at no point present in the de-escalated cases, whereas the escalated cases involved their presence already early in the event. These findings are in line with Newburn’s (2016) study, comparing one case of public disorder that escalated with one that de-escalated in England, proposing that community members played a key role in de-escalating tension.

Through the details about actions captured on the videos, we added insights into how the interactional level unfolds in real time, which was the level that Newburn (2016) emphasized as explanatory for processes of escalation and de-escalation in riots. Our findings suggest that intimate handlers made a different *kind* of contact with crowd members than both community and riot police officers. Intimate handlers also had longer, more frequent, and more intimate contact with the crowd than the police. Adding to these video observed patterns, we explained the patterns by analyzing perspectives of the intimate handlers engaging in the contacts on the videos

provided during interviews. The interviews revealed what they were saying to crowd members, and what their relationship was with crowd members prior to the riot, as none of that was captured by the videos.

Adding to patterns of actions we observed in the video material, the interviews with intimate handlers revealed the mechanisms explaining the efficiency of the observed intimate handler contacts. Respondents explained how they emphasized and actively used preexisting knowledge about crowd members, and preexisting bonds carefully built up with them and their family and friends over time, in order to convince them to de-escalate tensions and eventually leave the scene. As such it was not a shared social identity, defined by markers of shared group identification such as ethnicity and residency, which may occur among strangers, that mattered for processes of de-escalation, as proposed by social identity theory (Stott et al. 2018). Rather, it was the relational ties between individuals who knew each other, that mattered for peacekeeping behavior in the riots (Cohen and Felson 1986, Hirschi 1969).

Our mixed-method approach involving video observations and interviews resamples ethnographic studies concerning what people *actually* do, typically observed through participant observations, with what people *say* they do as elaborated through interviews. As such, video observations add another methodology to the ethnographic toolbox, providing detailed insights into the sequential order of the actions observed, with a relatively unobtrusive measurement (Lindegaard 2022). We propose such mixed-method approaches for future studies of violence, as the combination of insights allows for the establishment of not only patterns of actions and interactions but also the experienced and perceived mechanisms potentially explaining such actions.

Further video-based studies are needed in order to establish if the patterns we hypothesized here are generalizable to larger samples of riots. More detailed attention to the variation of acts of people involved in such events, including the acts of individual crowd members, could shed light on the social mechanisms we propose exist between the actions of the intimate handlers and that of crowd members. A limitation of our analysis is that we only studied the effect of the presence and actions of intimate handlers on an aggregated situational level, without taking into consideration the sequential order of the acts of everyone involved. In order to make stronger claims about the role of the presence and actions of intimate handlers, and their effect of the role of the police, future studies should establish effects of individual levels too.

Our findings are important for discussions about prevention and intervention in riot and policing debates, as they indicate the importance of police officers collaborating closely with intimate handlers in order to de-escalate tensions. Our findings propose that group dynamics during riots are influenced by what police are doing (Reicher et al. 2004, Stott & Drury 2017) but also by what citizens are doing. From previous studies of street fights in public, we know that citizens play a key role in preventing escalation and violence (Philpot et al. 2020, Weenink et al. 2022), and in particular citizens who have a social relationship with the conflict parties (Tillyer and Eck 2011). We need to know more about their role in riots, and politically motivated violence in general.

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