

PIERCE COUNTY HAZARD IDENTIFICATION & RISK ASSESSMENT

CIVIL DISTURBANCE HAZARD

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Identification Description

Definition

“Civil disturbance means acts of violence and disorder prejudicial to the public law and order.”¹

Civil unrest is the result of groups or individuals within the population feeling, rightly or wrongly, that their needs or rights are not being met, either by the society at large, a segment thereof, or the current overriding political system. When this results in community disruption to the extent that intervention is required to maintain public safety, it has become a civil disturbance. Civil disturbance may be a cascading consequence of the impacts from a natural disaster as demonstrated in Hurricane Katrina.

Types

Civil disturbance spans a wide variety of actions some of which may violate criminal law and includes, but is not limited to: riots, acts of violence, insurrections, unlawful obstructions, protests or assemblages, or other disorders prejudicial to public law and order.² Triggers could include: an economic depression leading to economic instability for a portion of the public; human-caused or natural disasters that disrupt infrastructure; racial tension; religious conflict; sectarianism; sector, or general unemployment; a decrease in normally accepted or available services or goods, such as extreme water, food, or gasoline rationing; or unpopular political actions such as the Vietnam War.

Communal riots are types of disorders that are classified by direct battles between groups. Their underlying cause may be racial, religious, economic, territorial, or any of a number of issues that pit one group against another.

Commodity riots are disorders that stress the economic and political distribution of power among groups. The focus of violence is the destruction of, or in some cases the taking of property.

Profile

Location and Extent

The potential for civil unrest or civil disturbance is highest in the larger cities of the County. This correlates with normal patterns across the country. There needs to be an adequate population density, or critical mass, to bring civil unrest to the point of impacting the community at large. This doesn't exclude a rural development; rather it means that large cities have a higher probability for civil unrest to spill over into civil disturbance. In Pierce County, this includes Lakewood, Puyallup and Tacoma. However, as other cities grow, their vulnerability also increases.

Occurrences

The United States has a long history of civil disturbance. After the American Revolution it did not take long for major incidents like Shay's Rebellion (1786-7) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1791-4) to break out. This has continued in other shapes and forms throughout the entire history of the country, touching every state in one form or another.

Pierce County has seen a number of civil disorders over the years. These have ranged from the mob violence leading to the lynching of J.M. Bates in Steilacoom in 1863³ and the anti-Chinese riots in 1885⁴ to the Vietnam War demonstrations of the late Sixties and early Seventies. Labor unrest has ranged from agitation by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) "Wobblies" to multiple strikes like the Longshoreman's strike of 1934.⁵ These civil disorders often escalated to violence due to tensions between labor unions, companies, and local law enforcement. In one case (May, 1905) a battle erupted between the Longshoreman's Union and the Sailor's Union which led to one death and numerous injuries.

Occasionally unrest at a national level may spill over into the local environment. This was seen in the panic of 1893 where the economic depression led to high unemployment and a series of bank failures. These circumstances influenced Ohio businessman and organizer Jacob Coxey, to organize a march of the unemployed on Washington D.C. in 1894.⁶ Local organizers in Seattle and Tacoma decided to follow a routine being developed by other groups across the country. The organizers converged in Puyallup with the intent to form a permanent labor organization and then hijack a train travelling to Washington D.C. On April 29, 1894, their "army" of 3500 unemployed workers assembled in Puyallup. In preparation to augment their own forces, the City had hired police officers from the surrounding jurisdictions. Unfortunately the mob was too large for local law enforcement to control. Outnumbering the citizens by two to one, the "army" demanded food and money, threatened local citizens, and demanded the Northern Pacific Railroad to supply them with a train. Four days later, on May 3rd, becoming frustrated with the behavior of the protesters the governor stepped in and threatened the use of troops to quell the disturbance. The threat worked and the group disbanded.⁷

One of the more significant incidents of civil unrest was the conflict between the State of Washington and the Puyallup Tribe of Indians throughout the latter half of the 1960s. This culminated in the September 9th 1970 arrest of 55 adults and 5 children from a fishing camp protest on the Puyallup River. One tribal member threw a fire bomb onto a railroad bridge over the river that damaged it. Tear gas and clubs were used to subdue the inhabitants of the camp. The escalating confrontation between the State Fisheries and Game Departments and the Puyallup Tribe of Indians over the previous six years had brought the Indian's cause to the forefront of local news and had gradually turned the local citizens against the state agencies. Four years later the Boldt Decision affirmed the right of the tribes to 50% of the harvested fish.^{8,9}

Today while black and white racial tensions are occasionally high, they have not escalated to the level as they did in 1969 when violence erupted in the Hilltop area of Tacoma and curfews were enacted. Even in 1991 with the Rodney King episode, there was more damage to business from lost customers, (because many stores closed early in fear of a riot) than there was from physical damages to the infrastructure. For many years racially inspired graffiti or incidents have decreased but the occasional incident still remains today. Since the presidential election in 2008

there has been a noticeable increase in white supremacy organizations¹⁰ and in racially motivated incidents. These have not coalesced into any sort of major anti-minority movement at this time.

The topic of immigration has generated a significant amount of passion from both sides of the issue. This passion has resulted in some large protest events that have resulted in significant disruptions within the cities they have been staged. Some have become violent while others disrupted due to the sheer number of participants. Most, but not all, protests were peaceful.¹¹ These types of events can easily occur in Pierce County.

The World Trade Organization riots in Seattle in November of 1999 serves to remind all of us in the Northwest that organized groups could still cause a major disturbance if they had that desire. Shortly thereafter, there was fear that the Kaiser Aluminum strike could turn violent in March of 2000 when outside agitators came to Tacoma in support of the striking workers. A strong police presence and good planning prevented a repeat of the Seattle experience.

Recurrence Rate

In relation to the movement of military supplies through the Port of Tacoma and protests at the gates to Pierce County's military bases, many of these direct actions are either supported or actively instigated by outside groups. While there has been a decline in activity with the wind down of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, if there is an escalation in the various conflicts in the Middle East, a resurgence in activity at the Port is possible.

Many of the same groups are a minor irritation, organizing small protests over the incarceration of illegal immigrants in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility on the Tacoma tide flats. Minor occurrences of civil unrest may occur at any time for various reasons. Most of these are too small to warrant any concern. The occasional situation where police operations are more than cursory are the exception rather than the rule. Looking at the historical record, major civil unrest leading to social disruption is a rare occurrence in Pierce County.

Impacts

Health and Safety of Persons in the Affected Area at the Time of the Incident

Civil Disturbances can lead to injury and death for both the citizens involved and innocent bystanders. This can be from conflict between groups or between protesting groups and the legal authorities as well as the direct result of property destruction actions.

Health and Safety of Personnel Responding to the Incident

If violent civil disturbances can lead to injury and death for responding personnel.

Continuity of Operations and Delivery of Services

Minor protests should not limit the continuity of government operations or the delivery of services to the general public. However, as the size of the protest grows the potential impact on

County operations and delivery of services could be considerable. This would largely be dependent on the focus and the location of the disturbance.

The blocking of roads, taking over of Pierce County government buildings, threats against County personnel, and destruction of County property all could impact operations and the normal day-to-day delivery of services. Actions like these could impact County operations, potentially well beyond the actual time of the civil disturbance. Furthermore, damage to property and equipment may limit the physical ability of the County to respond over a significant period of time. Injury, death or threats to staff, causing some to either resign their position or change their work habits or schedule could have the same impact, limiting the delivery of services to the public.

Property, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Property may be damaged or destroyed by those fomenting the unrest. Depending on the scale of the protests this could range from broken windows, burnt refuse bins and spray painted graffiti to destruction of major pieces of infrastructure. An extreme example of this was the Los Angeles riots of 1992. During the riots, fifty-three people died, over 2,000 were injured, and 5,383 fires were set destroying 1,100 buildings.¹²

On a much smaller scale, but local example, is the firebombing of the railroad bridge over the Puyallup River during the confrontation between members of the Puyallup Tribe and law enforcement in 1970. While this incident did not destroy the bridge, the time and cost to evaluate the damage and make repairs impacted the movement of rail cars for a short period. Essentially any major facility could be damaged by a large enough contingent bent on harming or destroying the infrastructure.

Environment

Environmental damage is highly dependent on the size and focus of the civil disturbance. Generally speaking there is little or no damage to the environment. Litter, broken windows and spray painted graffiti create little environmental damage. On the other hand, a civil disturbance that turns destructive and attacks infrastructure that includes hazardous chemicals or starts fires could cause extensive environmental damage.

Economic and Financial Condition

Damage to stores from vandalism associated with civil disturbance could be relatively minor or extensive as seen during the Los Angeles riots of 1992 which totaled over \$1 billion in damages.¹³ This is only part of the problem. There are the long term social impacts, such as the potential to foster the growth of centrifugal tendencies¹⁴, from any civil disturbance. The loss in confidence by local residents and/or businesses could lead to depopulation in the impacted area and/or an exodus of business and capital from not just the directly impacted area, but also surrounding areas that might have been tainted by the actions nearby.

Public Confidence in the Jurisdiction's Governance

The public's confidence in the jurisdiction's governance will depend on a number of factors:

- Is this a minor disruption or does this involve a major segment of the public,
- Is the civil unrest a result of local conditions or is there something of national significance that is driving the incident;
- Is the handling of the situation deemed appropriate to the scale or threat caused or implied by the unrest;
- Did the jurisdiction appear to be cowed or confused by the unrest;
- Is the unrest caused initially by a lack of confidence in the jurisdiction for some reason;
- How quickly do things return to normal;
- If laws are broken, are the perpetrators brought to justice; and
- If the incident accomplished its ends was this to the satisfaction of the general public?

Any incident handled to the satisfaction of the local population will enhance the public's confidence in the jurisdiction's abilities. However, this is a difficult position for the government to be in. Authorities can be seen as walking a social tightrope. If they are seen either as too harsh on the protesters or too lenient in giving in to demands or coercion then confidence wanes, leading to more difficulties in the future. Finding the middle ground that is acceptable to the majority of the public can be almost impossible. There have been a number of examples of this in Pierce County. In the 1893 takeover of Puyallup, it was not until the governor threatened to use military force that the disruption ended allowing the citizens to go about their normal business. In the conflict between the Puyallup Tribe and the State Fisheries, the heavy handed tactics used by the State had the effect of increasing sympathy for the Tribe. Just to the north, in Seattle during the 1999 World Trade Organization riots the lack of a coordinated response and delays in arresting the most violent demonstrators led to a decline in respect for the local authorities.

Resource Directory

Regional

- **Pierce County Department of Emergency Management**
<http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/Index.aspx?NID=104>
- **Pierce County Sheriff's Department**
<http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/index.aspx?NID=121>
- **Seattle Office of Emergency Management**
<http://www.seattle.gov/emergency-management>

National

- **Rand Corporation**
<http://www.rand.org/>
- **U.S. Fire Administration**
<http://www.usfa.fema.gov/>
- Hunton & Williams Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia
<https://www.policefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Charlottesville-Critical-Incident-Review-2017.pdf>

Endnotes

¹ <http://definitions.uslegal.com/c/civil-disturbance/>

² Ibid

³ Leland Athow, "[A brief history of the Adam Byrd branch of the Byrd family.](#)" As recorded on <http://www.usgennet.org/usa/wa/state/andrewbyrd.html>

⁴ [Puget's Sound: A Narrative of Early Tacoma and the Southern Sound](#), Murray Morgan, University of Washington Press, Seattle & London, 1979, pps. 212-244.

⁵ Multiple references at <http://www.ilwu19.com/history/1934.htm>

⁶ [Coxey Marches on Washington](#), Historycentral.com, History's Home on the WEB, <http://www.historycentral.com/Industrialage/CoxeyMarchWash.html>

⁷ City of Puyallup Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, March 7th, 2005, p. 2-7

⁸ Puyallup Tribe of Indians: Fishing, <http://www.puyallup-tribe.com/history/fishing/>

⁹ [The Fish-in Protests at Franks Landing](#), Gabriel Chrisman, Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/fish-ins.htm>

¹⁰ Statement of Daryl Johnson CEO, DT Analytics. (Sept. 19, 2012). *Hate Crimes & The Threat of Domestic Extremism*. Retrieved March 30, 2015 from <http://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/9-19-12JohnsonTestimony.pdf>

Jerome P. Bjelopera. (Jan. 17, 2013). *The Domestic Terrorist Threat: Background and Issues for Congress*. Retrieved March 27, 2015 from <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/203741.pdf>

¹¹ Seattle Office of Emergency Management. (April 2014). Seattle Hazard Identification and Vulnerability Analysis: Social Unrest. Retrieved March 13, 2015 from

http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Emergency/PlansOEM/SHIVA/2014-04-23_SocialUnrest.pdf

¹² MG James Delk. (Nov. 15, 1995). *A Domestic Case Study-The 1992 Los Angeles Riots*. Retrieved March 14, 2015 from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF148/CF148.appd.pdf

¹³ U.S. Fire Administration. (February 1994). *FA-142 Report, Report of the Joint Fire/Police Task Force on Civil Unrest*. Retrieved March 15, 2015 from <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/txt/publications/fa-142.txt>

¹⁴ Centrifugal tendencies are the movement away from a center, from others, or to separate from a mean or to separate from other groups.