



## INDIAN POLICE FOUNDATION

### **Policing in the Pandemic**

*India's State & Central Police Forces must quickly prepare & enforce a Pandemic Preparedness Plan*

In the course of the past month, it has become clear that the world is confronting a public health crisis not seen since the great influenza epidemic of 1918-1919—a crisis which will have unprecedented impacts not just in terms of morbidity and mortality, but long-term economic hardship and social dislocation. Based on statistical models, scientists have estimated that India may join China, Italy and other countries as a pandemic hotspot. The simple truth is we do not know what the scale or scope of the crisis will be. This is a once-in-a-generation catastrophe; experience holds out no precedent.

For the Indian Police, the pandemic will hold out challenges for which no-one has a template. Yet, police forces must begin to prepare for the unimaginable now, or risk being overwhelmed. Prolonged lockdowns, large-scale mortality and economic dislocation are all known to accentuate social strains, often engendering large-scale violence. Inevitably, police forces across India will be called on to play a key role, both in protecting frontline health services and ensuring order.

Based on the experience of law enforcement elsewhere in other affected countries, this paper is an effort to flag the critical issues that will confront our police, should the pandemic accelerate. Police departments across the country, as well as the Central Armed Police Forces, must immediately begin work on a Pandemic Preparedness Plan in support of government policy. This plan would also, constitute the Business Continuity Plan of police department, to ensure uninterrupted police service delivery to citizens.

Local conditions are, of course, enormously diverse across India. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to facilitate discussion, rather than provide a well-defined road-map. The suggested Pandemic Preparedness Plan must be seen as a work in progress, constantly responsive to the evolving threats, technological developments, government policies and community responses.

**N Ramachandran,**

**President**

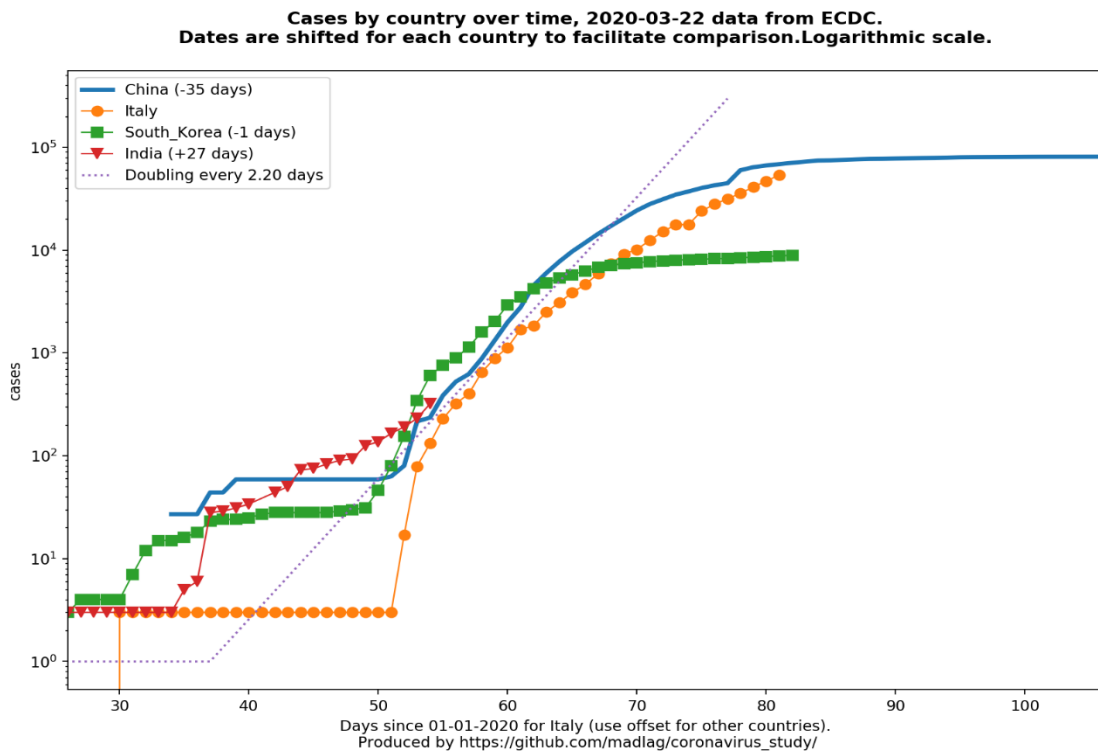
## § Government strategy

In essence, the Government's strategy is built around a robust body of scientific evidence which shows minimising human contact—whether through lockdowns of entire populations, or simple social distancing—is the most effective means to slow the exponential growth of the pandemic. Dan Klein et al. have [estimated](#) that if everyone decreased their daily contact with other individuals by 25%, there would be a 50% decrease in the cumulative number of cases over a 30 day period. A 75% reduction of social contact, though hard to achieve, is predicted to roll back the pandemic.

From current trends, the spread of the disease in India appears broadly in

line with international trends. Even though there is some scientific speculation that India's geo-climatic conditions may [slow the spread](#) of the disease, there is as yet no consensus on this question, prudent planning must rest on the assumption that conditions in India will evolve on the lines seen elsewhere.

The significance of the social distancing strategy rests on the simple fact that even countries with public health infrastructure far better resourced than India have simply crumbled in the face of the disease burden. Indeed, Italian doctors have advocated that countries avoid treating infected individuals in hospitals, as far as possible.



## Pandemic policing - some of the challenges

1. Infection control within the force: Policing during pandemics brings an unprecedented challenge: keeping the force itself functioning. Because police personnel come in close contact with countless number of people, officers have to find means to maintain safe distances from potentially-infected individuals, without distancing themselves from the community.
2. Staffing: If there is large-scale spread of the virus amongst members of the force or in their families, there could be significant drops in the available fighting strength of the force, which is already well below desirable levels.
3. Potential for disruptions in law and order: Any inability of the health care systems to cope, when the system gets overwhelmed with large scale infections etc, may result in disruptions of law and order. Availability of food and essential items is another critical area that needs continuous watch.
4. Restricting public access to police stations / police offices or scanning body temperatures of visitors etc may become problematic. Aggressive policing measures like in China are not an option.
5. With the mounting number of deaths, a different kind of policing challenge has been reported in some countries. In the absence of adequate testing capacities, the hospitals are unable to directly attribute some of the deaths to Covid19. Thus, the police are required to investigate and certify that a sudden death is not suspicious. The capacity of police to be able to conduct any meaningful investigations in such times could get seriously impaired.
6. Our overcrowded prisons will pose another serious challenge. When the outbreak hits prisons, there will be no option but to release the prisoners, or perpetrate unimaginable judicial injustice, especially in the case of undertrials.
7. Increasing infections and mortality rates will inundate current capacity of the police to discharge its core responsibilities.
8. If the medical and policing services of the first world countries have been swamped in a matter of days, the situation in India, with its limited resources, is likely to be far worse. This is the reason why our planning should take into account worst case scenarios.

## § Lockdown Management

The wholesale closing down of an entire city or State over a prolonged period of time is fraught with risks that will need managing. Aggressive quarantine plans will engender resentment and resistance, especially given the limited understanding of social distancing and epidemic dynamics among sections of the population.

Prolonged inability to work and earn a livelihood, financial stress and consequent anxieties may spark unruly behaviour. The disease itself will generate fear, panic and terror. Disquiet among quarantined citizens can erupt into sporadic incidents of violence or even major riots.

However, action to restrict mobility over a prolonged period cannot be avoided. Law enforcement must, therefore, update or create plans to cordon off entire cities and neighbourhoods, and to maintain these lockdowns for periods of time in the face of resistance. This will, of course, involve outreach to influential community actors and local leadership, but worst-case scenarios must be anticipated.

The plans must incorporate measures to protect hospitals and medical workers, who may become targets of public anger in the event of large-scale mortality, or in

case services are stretched beyond the point help can be delivered. In addition, law enforcement may be called upon to facilitate movement of essential service workers, and even disposal of dead bodies.

A particular challenge will be ensuring the smooth delivery of essential services and food in the midst of a lockdown—at once, without allowing crowds to gather. This is a particularly complex challenge. Italian and French authorities have [experimented with curfew passes](#) that allow limited segments of the population to visit designated shops on designated days. Some variation on this practice may be worth considering.

While the Central and State governments have been assuring citizens of continued availability of food grains, medicines and essential items, even minor disruptions in the supply chain could trigger anxieties leading to panic buying, hoarding and shortages. Lessons from the infamous food riots witnessed in the extended lockdowns during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic are relevant today.

Beyond ‘core’ policing duties, sustained ability to trace contacts and monitor population movements will be critical to successful lockdown management.

## Managing the Police

Effective and sensitive internal communication within the force is the need of the hour. Clear and repeated instructions regarding safety procedures should be integral to this strategy. Efforts must also be on to assure the subordinate ranks that the top leadership is truly concerned about their safety and well-being.

Police Leaders need to be sensitive and supportive of their subordinates' concerns, avoiding authoritarian approaches. Watch out for occupational stress and psychological trauma within the force. Listen. Be conscious of the need to manage grief, anxiety and anger within the force. Remember, the resilience of the force is directly dependent on its morale.

Effective steps must be taken to reduce opportunities for transmission of the virus within the force: It is critical that supervisory officers do everything possible to reduce internal transmissions. Operational and training drills involving assembling of large numbers of personnel will need to be re-worked carefully.

Ensuring thorough precautions at police stations and police lines is important, including disinfection of common facilities as well as training and practising of hand-washing and education in the principles of social distancing. This will lessen anxiety among police personnel about the safety of loved ones. Disinfection of vehicles and articles that are issued for use and return like firearms and wireless sets etc must be made routine practice.

Just as important is credible public communication. Ensure there is a single spokesperson for the police to serve as a source of authoritative information for the public. Evasion or economy with information often facilitates the spread of disinformation, especially through social media. Thus, the police's role as a provider of credible information is critical to maintain public order.

Frontline police personnel also need to be engaged with to ensure they are mentally prepared to play new or special roles. In some countries, police have even been called on to help conduct cremations and burials of pandemic victims, whose families are in isolation or lockdown. Personnel must be mentally prepared for such exigencies.

Police should be sensitised to develop a deep understanding of how people are being affected by the lock-down. Further, it is to be kept in mind that the pandemic has a disastrous impact on the poor and it is important that the police devise sensitive approaches to the hardships and frustrations of the people. For this, coordination with NGOs and civilian agencies such as RWAs may be helpful.

## § Some Suggested To-Dos

### Create a working group of senior officers

The Working Group's role should be to constantly monitor the situation within the state or district, and promote situational awareness among all stakeholders. The Working Group must ensure seamless communication, coordination and liaison with emergency services, hospitals, the Ministry or Department of Health and other relevant wings of the administration. It must also continuously monitor the health of police personnel and keep a watch on infections within the force. Finally, the Working Group must support the police leadership in resources planning, in terms of HR, food, medicines, PPEs and essential consumables, equipment and mobility. Explore possibility of enlisting volunteers and Special Police Officers, forge partnerships with other organisations and the private industry.

### Prepare a detailed local-area lockdown management plan

This should include careful planning for worst-case scenarios, including civic disturbances and threats to medical and other essential services; systems to allow locked-down communities to access supplies and essential services in a disciplined manner; and measures to mitigate hardship of vulnerable sections of the community. It would be prudent to design it to cater for lockdowns that could run to several weeks. An important part of the plan will be measures to respond and quash rumours and to dispel fears.

### Prepare a Police Business Continuity Plan

Each police department must have a worst-case scenario business continuity plan—ensuring the continuity of the core functions of police services, while supporting the public health services and general governance of the State. Ensuring adequate numbers of personnel fit to participate in law-enforcement duties may prove to be among the most difficult challenges in the weeks to come. The Business Continuity Plan must anticipate various levels of illness among the force, and lay out clear plans for managing these different scenarios. It must also lay out a clear protocol for ensuring the well-being of personnel and their families during the course of the pandemic

The Central Armed Police Forces will need to evolve their own Business Continuity Plans based upon their specific operational contexts.

## § A Few Useful Resources

The role of law enforcement in public health emergencies

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/214333.pdf>

Comprehensive professional guidance, based on research carried out by police practitioners for the United States Department of Justice

Pandemic flu guidance for police services

[https://www.college.police.uk/What-we-do/Support/Health-safety/Documents/PD023B0709\\_PandemicV2.pdf](https://www.college.police.uk/What-we-do/Support/Health-safety/Documents/PD023B0709_PandemicV2.pdf)

Guidance from the United Kingdom's National Police Improvement Agency on how to protect officers and the public.

Police planning for an influenza pandemic

<https://icma.org/sites/default/files/5700.pdf>

Field case studies and experience, documented by the Police Executive Research Forum

BBC4 Contagion:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwvUvqSilA0>

A useful general guide to how transmission in the community takes place, based on modelling conducted using a special cellphone app.