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At the Olympics, transport chiefs must trust the wisdom of crowds

Crowd control is often driven by a fear of panic and selfish behaviour, but this view is out of date – communication is key

Clifford Stott and **John Drury**
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'Coping with moving large aggregates of people through London's busy transport network is not just about the control and marshalling of crowds.' Photograph: Scott Barbour/Getty Images

As the Olympics draw nearer, commuters in the capital are increasingly preparing themselves for the worst. Over the last two weeks, test runs and "crowd control" exercises have resulted in long queues at London's busiest stations. It is almost certain that serious crowding will be a feature of the transport infrastructure during the games. Somewhat ominously, as early as February 2012, Sir David Higgins, chief executive of Network Rail, asserted that during the Olympics "bad things will happen", and that there would be disruptions and long delays. He argued it was almost inevitable that parts of the transport infrastructure such as the "Jubilee line will go down", and that "we shouldn't panic".

"Don't panic" is a common mantra when dealing with crowds. And the fear of "panic" is what appears to drive too many emergency management practices. The idea is that crowds are dangerous because they make people selfish, stupid and fickle – a view that is in part a legacy of discredited 19th-century "crowd science". Think of a crowd escaping from a burning building. The primary assumption we might make is that, on recognising the danger, people will simultaneously rush for the narrow exit door. As a consequence, the doorway gets overwhelmed so nobody escapes: killed not by the fire, but by the mass panic it causes.

It is sometimes assumed that people in crowds lack the capacity to properly consider the dangers or to act co-operatively, either with each other or the authorities. Crowds, it is thought, require the authorities to control them because they cannot control themselves. But this view of the crowd, and the management practices it serves to justify, is seriously flawed. While situations like these sometimes do end in tragedy, a growing body of research supports the view that in situations of adversity people have a greater potential

for resilience in crowds than when alone.

Adversity itself can sometimes create a sense of psychological togetherness from which flows the co-ordination, courtesy and co-operation people need to cope. Take, for example, orderly queueing, so beloved as a British stereotype. Our study of survivor behaviour in emergencies such as the London bombings of 7 July 2005 found that the more that people identified psychologically with others in the crowd, the more likely they were to adhere to social norms such as queueing. The real challenge for Network Rail then is how to facilitate such co-ordination and co-operation among the crowds that will develop in and around the rail network.

Modern psychology tells us that coping with moving large aggregates of people through London's busy transport network is not just about the control and marshalling of crowds. Communication is the key. Access to the appropriate information, delivered in the appropriate way at the appropriate time, facilitates both ordinary co-ordination and effective emergency evacuation. As we saw in last week's drill, the absence of information creates frustration and even anxiety. But information only becomes communication when there is a relationship of trust. Network Rail needs to ensure that it evaluates the extent to which its approach, which presumes trust on the part of the public, might actually serve to undermine it.