It is much food for thought in Kevin Morrell and Graeme Currie's article “Impossible Jobs or Impossible Tasks? Client Volatility and Frontline Policing Practice in Urban Riots.” In the space available, I will reflect on two points on the spectrum in this commentary—the events of August 2011 and the policing of football (soccer)—and conclude with more general thoughts on impossibility.

In August 2011, I witnessed the “riots” from Hampshire Constabulary’s Force Control Room as critical incident commander—the most senior person on duty. Watching the events unfold, colleagues and I waited for “copycatting” in our communities. We were fortunate to be able to improvise and implement a comparatively sophisticated media response strategy, overseen by one very capable colleague who took control of our Twitter and Facebook feeds and monitored social media. This enhanced our response, although the major difficulty was indeed a volatile, ballooning “client base.”

Many responsible were not previously known to us and instead seemed swept up in events. They were cloaked in anonymity, empowered by contemporary technology, and emboldened by an unprecedented opportunity to loot stores (seen as a victimless crime) apparently without consequence.
Our jobs at all command levels felt impossible in part because of “client volatility” and also because the effects of various media had never been seen in British policing, or anywhere in the world, on this scale.

Accordingly, I would agree with Morrell and Currie’s analysis. Interestingly, though, although the agency myth did vanish for those who thought they could loot without consequences, that is not the whole story. Faith in policing actually came through for us many times when we needed it. Relatives and friends of those planning copycat offenses such as disorder and looting told us—because they did not want their neighborhoods to fall the way of some of the neighborhoods in London. One could see this using the “impossible jobs” lens in terms of conflict among different sets of stakeholders, but I am not sure this is the simplest or truest way to represent this phenomenon. My own view is many people saw themselves as part of a real community, rather than a virtual network, and trusted the police to help them preserve that community. The public—and I am the public, too—know that it is at the heart of what the police do, or try to do. Perhaps, to flirt with a technical term, a missing moderator in the impossible jobs framework is community spirit.

As to the world of soccer, as Morrell and Currie identify, there is interdependency in terms of leaders’ authority, stakeholder conflict, client base, and agency myth. I can see clearly how these criteria could be used to help understand the policing of Premier League Football—a setting that is at times very divisive, where authority and the agency myth can be called into question, and the client base is volatile. The match commander’s job is impossible on some match days, partly because he or she remains wholly responsible for the outcomes but does not own most of the “security resources.” Most resources in the stadium (such as club stewards) are owned by the football club. Relations between police and stakeholders can massively enable or inhibit the ability to command.

There is an aspect of realpolitik in this setting because these events recur. Notwithstanding legislation enabling the match commander to “take control” of the ground, including its resources, such a move is rarely taken. Unlike the once-in-a-generation or once-in-a-lifetime “riots,” soccer is policed week in, week out. Perhaps other dimensions of impossibility are the severity of the crisis or the extent to which such things are repeated and predictable.

Recurrent features of policing and realpolitik apply not just in public order but also in day-to-day policing with partner agencies such as local government. In the United Kingdom, local government also has a policing function and responsibility. The outcomes of local government policy have an impact on the same client base as that of the police, and services between agencies are being pushed ever closer in the drive to achieve spending targets.

Morrell and Currie’s research provides important insight into public order policing, and it is the most academically rigorous account of the riots I have seen. Inevitably, there is a historical dimension to their analysis because it is steeped in data. My concern, based on experience as a senior officer, is about future lessons for policing. In the United Kingdom, as in many other developed economies, across the public sector we have experienced budgetary pressures in the wake of the global financial crisis. This shift to austerity has meant our government has sought to reduce public spending. Policing, which has been comparatively well funded over the course of my 22 years in service, is feeling these pressures more than other services.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and I would acknowledge that austerity has encouraged new ways to maximize resources, a change toward more negotiated management styles of policing at senior levels, the use of partner agencies, and other innovations. These could all be seen as positives. At the same time, since 2011, forces have reduced recruitment and officers have left because of erosion of pay and changes to their pensions. It strikes me that there is another, basic operational aspect to impossibility when confronting riots. Impossibility is the result of interlocking criteria, but it could also boil down to a numbers game—in 2011, the U.K. police were criticized for their perceived inability to “surge” enough officers onto the streets. Reducing officer numbers can only make this more challenging. “Impossibility” in the United Kingdom and the United States always has a policy context (as Hargrove and Glidewell’s contributors all acknowledged). An inescapable truth is that political administrations and budgets ultimately set the bar to “impossibility.”

References