England's Urban Disorder: The 2011 Riots

The serious disorders in August 2011 caused shock and outrage, even though they were just the latest in a long history of public tumult. **John Benyon** examines the riots and the different reactions to them, and finds that the underlying causes were more complex and deep-seated than many seemed prepared to admit.

The 2011 riots began in the early evening of Thursday 4 August, when a 29-year-old man, Mark Duggan, was shot dead in Tottenham by police officers. This resulted in protests and a demonstration at the police station. Serious disorder developed on the evening of 6 August involving a few hundred youths. In the next few days rioting and looting took place in other parts of London, such as Enfield, Brixton, Hackney, Croydon and Ealing, and other English cities including Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, Salford and Wolverhampton. There were widespread physical and arson attacks on police and property.

Crime and Deprivation

The four days of rioting resulted in five deaths, countless injuries and enormous damage. Home Office data showed that more than 300 police were injured and it was claimed that the costs of the riots amounted to £300 million. Ten English police forces experienced the greatest disorder and together they recorded approximately 5100 offences. These were in 66 local authority areas that were generally localities with high levels of crime and deprivation. Just over two-thirds of all the offences were recorded in London.

The disturbances appeared to differ in some respects between different locations, with disorder, arson and attacks on the police predominating in some places, and looting and acquisitive crime in others and criminal damage in other areas. In total 2584 business premises and 231 residential properties were attacked.

The *Guardian*/LSE study *Reading the Riots* indicated that many rioters in places such as Manchester and Birmingham travelled from poorer suburbs to riot and loot in the city centre. The participants were

disproportionately poor. By early 2012 it was reported that the Metropolitan Police had made 3423 arrests and 2179 people had been charged or summonsed. Data revealed that three-quarters of those charged had previous criminal records. The ethnic background of those in court varied considerably from area to area but, overall, 42 per cent were white and 46 per cent black, with only 7 per cent described as Asian.

Home Office data, using indicators such as out-of-work benefits and free school meals, showed that those appearing in court were more deprived than the general population. Using indices of multiple deprivation, more than half of those in court came from the most deprived areas. Two-thirds of the young people had special educational needs and one-third had been excluded from school in the past year.

Perspectives on Collective Violence

The ways in which public disorder are interpreted vary according to the ideological stance that is taken. Three broad perspectives on collective violence can be identified:

- The **conservative** view sees riots as unusual, meaningless and irresponsible. It assumes that existing political, social and regulatory structures are adequate, and there can therefore be no necessity or justification for violent disorder. It is seen as an aberration perpetrated by irresponsible and criminal elements, motivated by greed or excitement, the dupes of political extremists, or imitating the behaviour of others.
- The **liberal** perspective views violent outbursts as inevitable under certain

Box 1 A long history of public disorder

Following the 2011 disorder, some politicians and journalists said that rioting is 'foreign' to the British way of life – but this reveals a lack of knowledge of Britain's history. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries riots were associated with a variety of grievances, including the price of food, working conditions, unemployment and lack of political representation. In the disturbance on 'Bloody Sunday', 13 November 1887, police clashed with unemployed people in Trafalgar Square, leaving three dead and 200 injured.

The periods before and after the First World War were characterised by extensive disorder over issues such as votes for women, home rule for Ireland and industrial disputes. In 1919, disorder occurred in various cities including Cardiff, Plymouth and Coventry, as well as London. The police went on strike in Liverpool, resulting in tanks on the streets. The 1930s was also a decade of considerable disorder, some of it related to attempts to suppress marches by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, with other disorder associated with the activities of the British Union of Fascists.

Disorder, labelled as 'race riots', occurred in September 1958 in Notting Hill and Nottingham. There was also violence on occasions in the 1960s and 1970s associated with various protests such as anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and rallies against the National Front. In 1980, disorder occurred in Bristol. Riots took place in Brixton on 10–12 April 1981 and were followed by other disturbances in cities such as Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. An official inquiry into the Brixton disorders was established under Lord Scarman.

There was a further outbreak of riots in September 1985 in Liverpool and Birmingham, and again in Brixton and Tottenham. In March 1990, a large demonstration against the proposed poll tax ended with a major disturbance in London. There were major outbreaks of disorder in 2001 in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley, and again in Birmingham in 2005.

circumstances, such as widespread social disadvantage and high unemployment. This view identifies various possible grievances, such as discrimination, police behaviour and lack of political representation. The liberal approach sees disorder as likely under such conditions, and it may be a social warning signal, but it tends to view riots as of limited utility in bringing about improvements.

- In contrast, the **radical** view interprets collective violence as purposeful and politically meaningful. It is seen as a legitimate and effective means of protest by disadvantaged people who have no other opportunities to express their views – riots are the ‘ballot boxes of the poor’. According to this perspective, riots may be seen as a strident demand for redistribution of power and resources, or even the stirrings of revolution.

The conservative perspective tends to focus on law and order issues. In the United States these were called the ‘riff-raff’ explanations of riots. They stress the perceived flaws in human nature, whereas the liberal and radical perspectives concentrate on the basic flaws in social and political arrangements. However, the liberal viewpoint considers that these can be rectified by reforms and redistribution, whereas the radical standpoint believes more fundamental restructuring is necessary.

These theories of disorder tend to focus on social injustice, inadequate institutions and the maldistribution of resources and political power. Riots are seen as a result of the failure of structures to accommodate demands and satisfy the expectations of certain groups. People’s perceptions of injustice are seen as a key factor in explaining riots. According to this view, when people believe that their treatment is unjust, they are likely to become increasingly resentful and angry. The tension builds until one further, sometimes seemingly small, incident of unjust behaviour results in a violent reaction.

Perceived injustice, rather than actual deprivation, is thus seen as a principal cause of disorder. As Thomas Carlyle wrote in his book *Chartism* (1840):

It is not what a man outwardly has or wants that constitutes the happiness or misery of him. Nakedness, hunger, distress of all kinds, death itself have been cheerfully suffered when the heart was right. It is the feeling of injustice that is insupportable to all men. ... No man can bear it or ought to bear it.

Discrimination is likely to cause feelings of injustice, as are certain types of improper police behaviour. Indeed, repressive measures and coercion have been shown to decrease the legitimacy of a political regime and to increase feelings of injustice and thereby cause some violent disorder (see Box 2 for a legal interpretation of public disorder).

Reactions and Explanations

All three major perspectives on collective violence were evident following the 2011 riots, but the most common was the conservative view. This was particularly evident in the comments of many politicians, police officers, pundits and much of the mass media. The liberal perspective was also heard, from some church and

community leaders, some commentators and newspapers, and various Labour MPs. The radical interpretation was occasionally evident, for example from some community organisations.

The reactions of many people were ones of shock, outrage and anger. The media were dominated by commentators saying how appalled they were and how the rioters should be dealt with severely. Many newspapers, columnists, pundits and politicians said the disorder was caused by a 'feckless criminal underclass'. There were frequent

references to 'mindless, feral youths', 'criminality and thuggery', 'mindless idiots', 'mayhem', and 'mob violence'. Parliament was recalled for a special debate on 11 August 2011 and the view that the riots were simply criminal behaviour predominated. Labour MP Hazel Blears, for instance, referred to 'deliberate, organised, violent criminality', while the Prime Minister said the disorder was 'criminality – pure and simple' and he blamed poor parenting and the lack of discipline in schools.

Home Secretary, Theresa May, called the rioters' actions 'inexcusable

and irrational' – the vast majority 'were not protesting, they were thieving'. These views were echoed by many other politicians from all parties, with references to moral decline, a culture that glorifies violence, lack of responsibility and the role of gangs in organising the disorder. Politicians and other commentators also alleged that social networking media, such as Twitter and Facebook, and smartphone messaging facilities such as Blackberry, using broadcasts and 'pings', were responsible for the rapid spread of rioting and looting.

Although less common, some people favoured explanations from the liberal and radical perspectives. The Labour Party leader Ed Miliband asked why there were 'people who feel they have nothing to lose and everything to gain from wanton vandalism and looting.' Some drew attention to the levels of youth unemployment and deprivation and alienation. As a result, many communities had weakened social ties. The educational maintenance allowance was being ended, there were cuts in facilities for young people and there was a lack of hope and opportunity. David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham, said:

We cannot live in a society where the banks are 'too big to fail' but whole neighbourhoods are allowed to sink without a trace. The polarisation is not between black and white. It is between those who have a stake in society and those who do not.

This theme was highlighted by others who said there was great anger and frustration about the behaviour of bankers and other wealthy people and there was also a sense of alienation among young people without jobs or prospects.

Mr Miliband said there was a need to change the ethic of the 'take what you can society'. At Christmas 2011 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, spoke of the 'broken bonds and abused trust' within UK society and compared the behaviour of urban rioters and financial speculators and their acquisitive mentality. Conservative Cabinet minister Michael Gove asked: 'Why has a culture of greed

and instant gratification, rootless hedonism and amoral violence taken hold in parts of our society?’

Reactions about the policing issues were mixed. Many people praised the police and emergency services but others criticised them, especially the Metropolitan Police, for not acting more quickly and firmly to suppress the disorder. Others said that the disturbances were largely anti-police riots by young people who felt they had been unjustly treated and harassed by police officers.

Investigations into the Riots

The Prime Minister was in no doubt about the reasons for the 2011 riots: ‘This was not political protest, or a riot about politics. It was common or garden thieving, robbing and looting’. The government refused to establish an official investigation modelled on the 1981 Scarman inquiry. Many seemed to believe that trying to explain and understand the serious breakdown in public order was an attempt to excuse or justify it.

In the absence of an official independent inquiry, a host of investigations were set up by other bodies. Local organisations established the North London Citizens’ Inquiry into the Tottenham riots, due to report in 2012. The Cabinet Office commissioned a modest study involving 206 young people, 50 of whom had participated in

the rioting. The study found that among a variety of reasons for taking part excitement, opportunism and dissatisfaction with the police were significant.

The *Guardian*/LSE study, *Reading the Riots*, conducted interviews with 270 people who had participated in the disorder in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Salford, Nottingham and Liverpool. Nearly 30 per cent were aged 10–17 and a further 49 per cent were aged 18–24. One fifth of those interviewed were women. The most important causes of the riots were cited by 86 per cent as poverty and 85 per cent as policing. This contrasted with a survey of the general public in which 86 per cent said the two principal causes of the disorder were poor parenting and criminality. A number of the rioters said they became involved because it was an opportunity to acquire ‘free stuff’.

The *Guardian*/LSE study found many young people felt great anger about their treatment and a pervading sense of economic, social and political injustice. It reported that many of those involved in the disorder said they had previously been abused and assaulted by officers, and that they harboured great resentment (and in some cases hatred) of the police. The study found that gangs had played no significant part in organising the riots and this accorded with findings from the Home Office.

The Riots Communities and Victims Panel, established by the Deputy Prime Minister, published its

interim report in late November 2011. It estimated that up to 15,000 people were involved in the riots. It said there was no single cause, but 'stop and search' was a major factor affecting relationships between the police and young people. Many alleged that stop and search was consistently carried out without courtesy. The Panel said that the underlying challenges were strikingly similar to those identified in 1981 by Lord Scarman. It said it was

shocked at the 'collective pessimism' among young people.

An internal review by the Metropolitan Police identified a number of issues needing further inquiry, including intelligence, social media, the relationship with the Independent Police Complaints Commission and public order tactics. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary also undertook a review that recommended that the police should be given clearer rules on the

use of plastic bullets and water cannons. It said that legal advice indicated that firearms officers with live ammunition could also be deployed in riots in certain circumstances.

The Home Affairs Select Committee conducted an inquiry and found that there had been a failure of policing tactics. Improved communications were needed and the police needed to act more quickly to quell disorder. Much of it had involved opportunistic looting and copycat behaviour. In December 2011 an independent commission on the future of policing was launched under the chairmanship of Lord Stevens, former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

Sparks and Tinder

Many of the areas in which disorder occurred in 2011 shared certain common characteristics. As in previous outbreaks of disorder, the riots in Tottenham began after a trigger event involving the police and young people. The trigger events are the flashpoints that ignite the 'tinder' that has accumulated over a longer period of time. There are five characteristics that seem to give rise to an increased potential for public disorder.

- 1 *Unemployment is high and particularly affects young people:* In November 2011, it was announced that more than one million young people under 25 were unemployed, with 260,000 of them jobless for more than a year. This amounted to more than 22 per cent of all young people out of work and in some areas the level of youth unemployment was much higher: for example, in Lewisham it was nearly 40 per cent.
- 2 *Deprivation is widespread:* Poverty, poor housing, low educational attainment, environmental decay, crime and inadequate recreational and youth provision are evident.
- 3 *Racial disadvantage and discrimination are problems:* A significant proportion of the population is African Caribbean or Asian. They tend to experience social and economic disadvantage more acutely, and also suffer from discrimination.
- 4 *Political exclusion and powerlessness are evident:* There are few institutions, opportunities and resources for airing grievances and bringing pressure to bear on those with political power. Decisions tend to be imposed through a 'top-down' approach. There is a lack of political voice. The *Guardian*/LSE research reported that many rioters said 'the government don't care about us'.

FIGURE 1 The downward spiral of deprivation, policing and disorder

5 *Mistrust of, and hostility to, the police is widespread among certain sections of the population, particularly the young: There is disquiet about police tactics, such as stop and search, and allegations are made about bullying, rudeness, abuse and assault. In 1981 Lord Scarman reported that many young people had become 'indignant and resentful against the police, suspicious of everything they did'. The Guardian/LSE study in 2011 found similar problems, while the interim report of the Riots Communities and Victims Panel, and the Metropolitan Police's own internal review, both reported that stop and search needed to be conducted in a 'professional, objective and courteous way'.*

Repudiation of Political Authority

These factors interact to create a downward spiral of social disintegration and alienation that can culminate in an outbreak of disorder if a trigger event occurs. The resulting riot then has further adverse effects on conditions in the locality (see Figure 1).

The position in such areas is likely to result in frustrated expectations,

cumulative disappointment and increasing resentment at perceived injustices. These lead to disenchantment with the established political procedures. They undermine confidence in, and the legitimacy of, political institutions and rules, and erode social controls and consensus. The result may be the repudiation of political authority, which may be manifested as civic indifference, a refusal to comply with laws and directives, or as open conflict and violence. Perhaps the least threatening outcome of this sombre possibility are continuing 'quiet riots', which sometimes flare up into violent disorder.

It does not seem likely that sustained action will be taken to tackle the problems. After riots in the past there was a flurry of activity but the momentum soon slackened. The 1981 Scarman report did lead to reforms in policing practices and some further changes may be anticipated following the 2011 disorders. For example, on 14 December 2011 the Home Secretary announced a review into the police use of stop and search.

The most likely responses seem to be ones based on the conservative interpretations of the disorders. Police equipment, training and

tactics for suppressing riots will be strengthened. In December 2011 it was announced that the Metropolitan Police was increasing the number of officers trained to use plastic bullets and was considering buying water cannon, although the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Bernard Hogan-Howe, expressed scepticism about their practicality.

The Use of Force

The aftermath of the riots saw frequent police raids and arrests in various parts of the country, with many of those convicted subject to tough sentencing that was described as disproportionate and excessive by many. Even more stringent penalties were said to be under consideration, including curfews and the banning of facial coverings. Reports of policing following the riots indicated that a tough approach was being adopted in various areas.

There is, however, a danger that such a response will make matters worse by further diminishing the cooperation and consent of those affected. If this occurs, it will make the police's task even more difficult – and they may as a result adopt more 'vigorous' methods. There is a danger of the police and certain communities growing even further apart. Indeed, research in the United States has indicated that an increase in coercion by a regime often leads to an increase in violent disturbances. As Edmund Burke observed more than 200 years ago, 'the use of force alone is temporary. It may subdue for a moment, but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again.'