

## A letter from our President

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*Few of us can have failed to notice* the Coalition Government's quick recourse to USA policing expertise following the UK riots of August 2011. We might have had some sympathy with UK police chiefs who were reported to have felt insulted by Prime Minister David Cameron for turning to a USA law enforcement expert to help tackle what was perceived to be a major problem of gang violence. For a while it looked as if we were going to see new policies based on *perceptions* of what was happening rather than on sound evidence. In the immediate aftermath of the riots the BSC played a small part in suggesting to the Ministry of Justice that it needed to look well beyond gang violence - and made clear that there were academic policing experts within. Significantly, the Guardian/LSE research (with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Open Society Foundations) - extensively reported in the Guardian Newspaper this past week (5<sup>th</sup> December - 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2011) suggests that there was no one reason, but a multitude of reasons for the riots: mistrust of the police and dissatisfaction with the way in which they appear to police communities, opportunistic thieving, boredom, easy access to the BBM network (courtesy of Blackberry smartphones), and social and economic marginalization included. It remains a moot point as to how far 'race' played a role in events; certainly far right wing groups got involved in some of the skirmishes, but it is not at all clear that the riots were 'race riots' (as reported in overseas media) or solely attributable to a gang culture. Moreover, a number of participants experienced their involvement as a 'protest' rather than as a riot. The Guardian/LSE *Reading the Riots* project has been hugely important in revealing the complexity of issues and reminding us of the continuing need to engage with government to avoid the worst excesses of analyses and policy made 'on the run'. These are general lessons for us all.

It is also worth highlighting the bold methodology in *Reading the Riots* - an open-ended search for patterns and meaning through interviews with 270 people directly involved in the August riots. The data here complements the Ministry of Justice's own statistical analyses (Ministry of Justice data from 'Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6th-9th August 2011' and the Home Office 'An overview of recorded crimes and arrests resulting from disorder events in August 2011') and advances our understanding of what was happening and why. Of course, there are many questions to follow up. The second phase of the Guardian/LSE research will look in greater detail at the experiences of the communities affected by the riots, at police officers who tried to keep control of the streets, and at the criminal justice system which faced huge demand in the aftermath of the disorder.

For my own part, the spate of tough penalties following the riots raise concerns over the consistency of sentencing between offenders convicted of theft and handling within and outside the context of the riots, and between offenders sentenced for similar offences in different courts around the country. The effect of the disparate responses may well be to negate the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. Moreover, in the context of huge efforts to rationalize sentencing within a context of desert (proportionate punishment but allowing scope for public protection, the reform and rehabilitation of offenders, and reparation), the tough sentencing may be short sighted and counter-productive. If the rationale in pushing for tough custodial penalties has been to satisfy public opinion this is a worrying route to take. It is also not clear whether 'the public' would have preferred to have seen repair of the damage done, compensation and restitution. There are many opportunities for research here.

All of this leads us back to recent debates about the idea of a 'public criminology' which have focused on the growing disjunction between criminological knowledge and criminal justice policies -

where it is recognized that criminologists might conceivably do a better job of disseminating knowledge in ways that can contribute substantively to the policy-making process. If anything, the events of the past few months should renew our energies to consider how best we can contribute, both as individuals, and, importantly, as a collective via the BSC.

In June 2011 the BSC made a contribution to a push to highlight the role of the social sciences in the making of social policy. In a collaboration between the Academy of Social Sciences, the British Society of Criminology and the British Psychological Society, the BSC has published a report *Making the case for social science: crime* which presses the need for any crime control strategy to be based on a proper understanding of the underlying social, cultural and economic causes of crime. In March 2012 the BSC (with support from the British Academy) is planning a seminar with Ministry of Justice and Home Office researchers and policy-makers. But we should reflect hard. Why did the Prime Minister immediately turn to a senior police officer in the USA and not to criminological knowledge in the UK? And what can we do about it?

**Loraine Gelsthorpe, December 2011**

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