

Reading the Riots

Tim Newburn

Professor of Criminology and Social Policy, London School of Economics

The “England Riots” began in Tottenham, London, on August 6, and quickly spread to towns and cities across the country. After four nights of civil unrest, five people had been killed and more than 2,000 arrested. Although the initial disturbances in Tottenham were recognisable in their origins and development when compared with previous riots on the mainland, the following days saw evidence of a type of systematic looting that did not appear to fit previous experience in the UK. A major political debate about the causes of the riots and the appropriate policy response quickly ensued, though rhetoric and assertion tended to dominate.

Opinion about the causes of the riots was extraordinarily varied. The Prime Minister rejected the idea that they could be considered to be protests. On the contrary, in his view it was “people showing indifference to right and wrong, people with a twisted moral code, people with a complete absence of self-restraint.” Beyond this ‘sheer criminality’ as he called it, an array of other ideas have been floated. The Justice Secretary, Ken Clarke, pointed to a ‘feral underclass’ who have been insufficiently held to account by the penal system and who have never learnt the traditional values associated with being a productive member of society.

From a slightly different political position, fingers were pointed at increasing social inequalities, growing alienation among the young, and the poor example set by the greed of bankers and of MPs’ fraudulent expenses. The Observer columnist, Nick Cohen, drew a link with the deteriorating economic circumstances in Greece and Spain. Other commentators have weighed in, with absent fathers and family breakdown, poor discipline in schools, the influence of gangs, and rap music, all held up as possible causes of the riots and looting in August.

Then there are the new social media. Twitter, Facebook and Blackberry Messenger have come in for particular attention, with critics arguing that they played a crucial role in the orchestration of the riots. Indeed, immediately after the worst of the rioting, it was widely rumoured that a number of senior government figures were actively considering the possibility of attempting to limit the use of social media sites during any future civil disorder.

Speculation is easy however. What was missing among all the clamour was much of a desire to stand back and collect evidence. On this occasion there was to be no Lord Justice Scarman, though some smaller scale inquiries were to be set up. A “victims’ panel” was established by the Deputy Prime Minister to hear from those affected by the riots, and the Home Affairs Committee also announced that it would also hold hearings into the disturbances. HMIC also began an inquiry into the policing of the disturbances, and the Home Secretary was to lead an inquiry into gang culture. However, government resisted calls for a public inquiry and it quickly became clear that there was unlikely to be any full-scale empirical assessment of the riots and their aftermath. It was in this context that the Guardian and the LSE established the *Reading the Riots* research study, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Open Society Foundations.

The study has two phases, the first of which has just been completed. We took the view that the biggest gap in all the talk in the immediate aftermath of the riots, was the voices of the ‘rioters’ themselves. The first phase, therefore, sought to interview as many people as was possible in a short period of time (less than a month) with a view to reporting as quickly as possible in order to maximise the chances of having some chance of affecting political and policy debates. We therefore set about recruiting interviewers – who we hoped would not only have interviewing skills, but also the personal skills and contacts to enable successful contact to be made with people involved in the riots. We had an ambitious target for this phase: approximately 200 interviews with people involved in the riots in

London, Birmingham, Manchester, Salford, Liverpool and Nottingham. In the event, through some extraordinarily hard work by the research team by the end of October 2011, a total of 270 interviews had been successfully completed. The vast majority of these were undertaken out in local communities – though a small number were also done within prisons. In addition, colleagues from Manchester University also undertook some analysis of a database of 2.57m tweets that the Guardian had managed to secure from Twitter, in order to explore how this particular strand of the new social media had been used during the riots.

Following the unusual template that the study has been working to, the initial results of the first phase of Reading the Riots were published in six days of extensive newspaper coverage in the Guardian. All the reports can be found on the project website: www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots. The initial findings, in short, were:

- A widespread anger and frustration at people's everyday treatment at the hands of police was a significant factor in every major city where disorder took place. At the heart of problematic relations with the police was a sense of a lack of respect, and anger at what was felt to be discriminatory treatment. The focus of much resentment was often police use of stop and search - which was felt to be unfairly targeted and often undertaken in an aggressive and discourteous manner.
- Gangs behaved in an entirely atypical manner for the duration of the riots, temporarily suspending hostilities with their postcode rivals. The effective four-day truce applied to towns and cities across England. In the main, the study found the role of gangs in the riots to have been significantly overstated.
- Contrary to widespread speculation at the time, social media sites Facebook and Twitter were not used in any significant way by rioters. In contrast, the free messaging service available on BlackBerry phones - known as "BBM" - was used to extensively communicate, share information and plan in advance of riots.
- Although mainly young and male, those involved in the riots came from a cross-section of local communities. Just under half of those interviewed in the study were students. Of those who were not in education, 29 percent were unemployed. Although half of those interviewed were black, those involved did not consider these "race riots".
- Many rioters conceded their involvement in looting was simply down to opportunism, saying that a perceived suspension of normal rules presented them with an opportunity to acquire goods and luxury items they could not ordinarily afford. They often described the riots as a chance to obtain "free stuff".
- The evidence suggests rioters were generally poorer than the country at large. Analysis of more than 1,000 court records suggests 58% of England rioters come from the most deprived 20% of areas in the UK. Other analysis carried out by the Department for Education and Ministry of Justice on young riot defendants found 64% came from the poorest fifth of areas – and only 3% came from the richest fifth.
- Rioters identified a number of other motivating grievances, from the increase in tuition fees, to the closure of youth services and the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance. Many complained about perceived social and economic injustices. Anger over the police shooting of Mark Duggan, which triggered initial disturbances in Tottenham, was repeatedly mentioned - even outside London.

- Almost four-fifths (79%) of those interviewed said that they thought that riots would happen again, and slightly under one third (30%) said that they would get involved if there were riots. Of those that expressed a view, 63% said that they thought more riots would occur within 3 years.

Although analysis is continuing on the first phase material, and will do so for some time yet, we are already in the early planning stages of the second phase of the study. A significant next step for Reading the Riots will be to take the findings from phase one back to local communities as the basis for a series of community debates and discussions. The intention is that these should be public debates in the areas affected by the riots and led by the people most affected by them.

We will also be looking at a series of criminal justice issues raised by the riots. First, we will be examining both the policing of the riots as they unfolded, as well as the work undertaken by the police service to identify offenders in the aftermath. Our intention is to interview officers – both at a command level and those involved in front-line policing – to hear their experiences of the riots as they started, evolved and came to an end.

The second element of the criminal justice study will focus on the work of the courts. The courts were required to work under unusual circumstances, with all night court sittings, high levels of custodial remand, and the use of substantial prison sentences for many of those convicted of riot-related offences. In this part of the study we will be interviewing court staff and sentencers, exploring their experiences of working during and after the worst civil disturbances for a generation. As previously, the findings from this second phase of the study will also begin to appear on the project website as they emerge.
