

## There is a pressing need for credible research into the causes and the consequences of the recent riots. A new joint study between the LSE and the Guardian aims to address this.

A month on from August's unprecedented riots in England, we can begin to ask the host of questions needed to uncover why they occurred and what they mean. [Tim Newburn](#) and the LSE's Department of Social Policy, together with the Guardian newspaper, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Open Society Foundation are beginning a three-month in-depth study into the causes and consequences of the recent riots.



In *The Observer* on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August, columnist Nick Cohen wrote a piece entitled "[No riots here, just quiet, ever-deeper misery](#)". Eager journalists, he said, ask think tanks, sociologists and anyone else who monitors Britain's unravelling social fabric, "When are the British going to imitate the Greeks and the Spanish and snap?" In fact, on the evening of Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> August, no doubt just as the newspaper carrying Cohen's piece was being printed, some sections of British society had seemingly just snapped. Rioting had broken out in Tottenham, and it was to be followed by numerous other disturbances in other parts of London and elsewhere.

In the month since the riots broke out, we have seen further disturbances in many English cities, thousands arrested, all night sittings in the magistrates' courts as they attempted to deal with the flood of prosecutions, and no end of speculation about what lay behind the worst civil disorder for over two decades.

What occurred in early August raises a host of questions. What led to the disturbances in different areas? Why did people riot, or loot? What was in their minds as they did so? Why were some cities affected and not others? How effective and appropriate was the law enforcement response? And, were these riots similar to, or qualitatively different from what we have seen before?

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. There is also emerging evidence that the disorder was not the same across the country, but subject to significant geographical differences. A major political debate about the causes of the riots and the appropriate policy response is underway, but it is fair to say this has been characterized more by rhetoric than evidence thus far.

Opinion about the causes of the riots has been 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. Most recently, the Justice Secretary, Ken Clarke, has pointed at 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.



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From a slightly different political position, fingers have been 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. Nick Cohen, quoted above, 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 has been missing among all the clamour is much of a desire to stand back and collect evidence. Unlike the Brixton riots in the early 1980s, there is to be no Lord Justice Scarman on this occasion. Yes, there is the 'victims panel' established by the deputy prime minister, and there will be other inter-departmental reviews or examinations of both the 'broken society' and 'gang culture'. But, as yet, there is little sense of commitment to attempting to undertake a full-scale review.

Such inquiries can serve a number of functions. Initially, they help dampen down some of the less helpful speculation about what went on and what the causes of the events concerned might have been. Then, in the process of collecting evidence they allow people to speak. Those caught up in the events, in whatever way, have some opportunity to have their views heard. Finally, in the longer term, if successful, they provide an account and an analysis of the events, and a basis on which future public policy might be built. It is the latter that has prompted the [LSE's Social Policy Department](#) to get involved in a [joint study with the Guardian newspaper](#).

In our view – one no doubt shared by academics and many others around the country – there is a pressing need for credible research into the causes and the consequences of the recent riots. Together with the Guardian, therefore, we're delighted to have secured some financial support from the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) and the [Open Society Foundation](#), to embark on '[Reading the Riots](#)'. Taking some inspiration from a study of the Detroit riots in 1967, conducted by a partnership of journalists and academics, our intention is that 'Reading the Riots' will report in three months. Our view is that if we are to have any hope of contributing to the current 'conversation' the research must be done quickly. Given that the core of the first phase of the study will involve large numbers of interviews with people caught up in the disturbances, this is no small challenge.

Adapting the [model](#) used by the University of Michigan and the Detroit Free Press, we will be recruiting and training interviewers, wherever possible with some connection themselves to the affected neighbourhoods, to do this work in London, Birmingham, Manchester and elsewhere. We will also be analysing the social media databases that the newspaper has collected from Twitter (roughly two and half million tweets we're told) and Blackberry Messenger. A second phase, which will look at the criminal justice response to the riots is also planned.

'Reading the Riots' will not be able to answer all the big questions. Moreover, it is not a substitute for a formal, government-sponsored inquiry – one which would have much greater resources, and no doubt a longer time-scale. But our hope is that it will begin the process of filling parts of the current information gap and that it will make a positive contribution, as much social science should seek to do, to public and political debate.