



The August riots in England

Understanding the
involvement of young people

SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Study aims

The overall aim of this study was to explore the triggers of youth involvement in the August riots from the perspective of those involved and affected. Young people were not solely responsible for these events – older people were also involved – but they are the focus of this study because the role played by young people is of particular concern and their perspectives are less likely to be heard in other ways.

The core question we sought to answer was therefore: 'Why did young people get involved in the riots?' To address this, the report describes:

- **what** occurred in five affected areas and two areas unaffected by rioting
- **who** was involved in the riots
- **why and how** young people got involved

What happened?

In early August 2011, there were outbreaks of significant crime and disorder in some of England's major cities. The riots and disturbances began in **Tottenham** in North London on Saturday 6 August following a peaceful protest in response to the police handling of the shooting of Mark Duggan. An apparent incident between a young girl and police sparked clashes which escalated to wide-scale rioting. Windows were smashed and offices, shops and homes set on fire. Looting broke out in the early hours of Sunday in neighbouring Wood Green and Tottenham Hale. Over the course of the next few days, similar disturbances occurred in other parts of London and in other cities.

Different areas of London experienced varying levels of violent protest, vandalism and looting. In some areas like **Peckham** (8 August), clashes between police and groups of largely local young people sparked violence that turned into looting. Events took a different course in other areas, such as around **Clapham Junction** station in Battersea (8 August). Here, looting by local people, and others from surrounding areas, was not preceded by any significant protest or clashes with police and continued for several hours before police could arrive in sufficient numbers to halt proceedings. Similar events took place outside London. In **Birmingham**, looting in the city centre followed by clashes between police and rival groups in suburban areas took place across two nights (8–9 August). In **Salford** (9 August), events followed a similar pattern to Peckham, with initial aggression towards the police developing quickly into looting.

Who was involved?

A behavioural typology characterising the different types of involvement in the riots emerged following analysis of the data collected from young people in the affected areas.

A typology of involvement	
Watchers: were observing but not involved	Bystanders: happened to be there The curious: deliberately chose to be there
Rioters: involved in violent disturbances	Protesters: had a specific set of grievances Retaliators: acted against police or the "system" Thrill-seekers: looking for excitement or a "buzz"
Looters: involved in breaking into and/or stealing from broken-into shops or handling stolen goods	Opportunists: took a rare chance to get free stuff Sellers: planned their involvement to maximise "profits"
Non-involved	Wannabes: would have liked to be involved Stay-aways: chose not to get involved

These are distinct behaviours but some young people moved through different types of behaviour during the riots. For example, the curious watcher could become a thrill-seeker or the thrill-seeker an opportunist.

Why did young people get involved (or not)?

The first key part of answering this question is what motivated young people. Young people were motivated to get involved in rioting or looting by what they thought they might gain, but whether they chose to get involved or not was affected by a range of situational, personal and contextual influences.

Motivations related to benefits

- **Something exciting to do:** the riots were seen as an exciting event – a day like no other – described in terms of a wild party or "*like a rave*". The party atmosphere, adrenaline and hype were seen as encouraging and explaining young people's involvement by young people themselves and community stakeholders.
- **The opportunity to get free stuff:** the excitement of the events was also tied up with the thrill of getting "free stuff" – things they wouldn't otherwise be able to have.
- **A chance to get back at police:** in Tottenham, the rioting was described as a direct response to the police handling of the shooting of Mark Duggan. Here and elsewhere in London, the Mark Duggan case was also described as the origin of the riots and the way it was handled was seen as an example of a lack of respect by the police that was common in the experience of young black people in some parts of London. Outside London, the rioting was not generally attributed to the Mark Duggan case. However, the attitude and behaviour of the police locally **was** consistently cited as a trigger outside as well as within London.

Factors that facilitated or inhibited involvement

It was clear, however, that more than motivation is required for action. Young people described factors which helped to “nudge” them into getting involved (facilitators) and others which they felt had helped to “tug” them away from involvement (inhibitors). These factors can be categorised as situational, personal, family/community and societal.

Situational factors were related to events and the actions of others:

- **Group processes:** young people who would normally think that such behaviours were wrong were encouraged to join in by seeing many others cause damage and steal – either witnessing this in person or through news and social media.
- **A rapid flow of information:** news and social media speeded up the exchange of information. Young people talked about watching events unfold in real time showing “*people getting away with it*”, and thinking that if all these people are doing it, then it must be OK.
- **Locality:** where the rioting was happening could encourage involvement or act as an inhibitor depending on the proximity to young people
- **What the young person was doing:** boredom, “nothing better to do”, was an important “nudge” factor. Conversely, being occupied through work, an apprenticeship or some other activity was an inhibitor to involvement.
- **What friends and peers were doing:** few young people got involved in the riots on their own. Most went along with friends and both influenced and were influenced by their peers in terms of how far they went in their involvement. However, peer influence was also seen as a “tug” factor by young people whose friends were not involved.
- **What authority figures were doing:** the presence of adults, particularly parents, at the time of the riots was described as playing an important role in preventing some young people from getting involved.

While situational “nudge” and “tug” factors give some insight into why some young people got involved and others did not, the extent to which young people were susceptible to these factors depended on a range of other underlying factors that they brought with them to riots. These were related to personal, family, community and societal circumstances.

Personal factors related to young people’s values, experiences and prospects:

- **A criminal history:** previous criminal behaviour was a facilitating factor in involvement in rioting and looting, though prior experience of being in trouble also acted as a deterrent.
- **Experience of the police:** young people cited previous negative experiences of the police as a significant “nudge” factor to get involved in the riots.
- **Attitudes towards those with power and authority:** there were expressions of anger and resentment about authority figures, particularly politicians. Engagement in formal politics was seen as irrelevant to young people. However, there was awareness of political issues among young people and particular anger about the MPs’ expenses scandal and the perceived greed of bankers.
- **Jobs, prospects and aspirations:** young people and community stakeholders made a distinction between young people who had a personal stake in

society and a sense of something to lose from any involvement in the riots and those who did not. Hope of a better future through current education and employment or an aspiration to work was seen as the main constituent of having something to lose. Alternatively, some young people felt that their prospects were so bleak that they had little to lose by their involvement.

Family and community factors' influence on relationships and identity:

- **Family attitudes and behaviour:** how young people are brought up was viewed as very important both in preventing and encouraging bad behaviour: *"My mum said: 'Don't you dare go outside the house.' I was joking: 'I could go and get myself some new trainers, I could get you some new trainers.' And she just looked at me and I just put my head down in shame. She took it very serious. I was raised up properly."* (Young person, Peckham)
- **Attachment to a community:** young people and community stakeholders described some neighbourhoods as having a prevailing culture of low-level criminality with negative attitudes towards the police and authority. Even young people who did not get involved themselves, talked about criminal behaviour being normalised: *"Half of their mams and dads don't work, half of them are bent, even I get to think it's normal, just how it is and ... I wasn't brought up like that."* (Male, 18 and over, Salford)

In contrast, young people also talked about the importance of belonging to a community (or a group or family within it) that opposed criminal behaviour. In particular, religion was mentioned as protecting them from getting involved: *"If I did this, my God wouldn't be happy, my parents wouldn't be happy. I have a bright future, my record is good. Imagine I did something that stupid, spoil my good reputation."* (Young person, Peckham)

Societal factors related to broader social issues:

- **Having a stake in the local area:** young people who were involved in voluntary and community work alongside older people were clear that this meant they had not wanted *"to trash their own backyard"*. Other young people and community stakeholders identified a feeling that they were written off in their communities, a lost cause: *"[They feel] excluded – no expectations/aspirations and lack of support ... called scum – told it enough they believe it."* (Female, 18 and over, Salford)
- **Youth Provision:** the immediate trigger of boredom and the desire for excitement was linked to a lack of legitimate things to do and places to go. Young people felt that they were a particular target for cuts in government spending with youth services cuts and the ending of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMA).
- **Poverty and materialism:** life for some people was described as a constant struggle. Young people talked about the difficulty of managing on the money they received when out of work or in training. At the same time, a materialistic culture was cited as having contributed to looting by both young people and community stakeholders. Participants from the unaffected area in Sheffield suggested that the starker contrast between rich and poor in London might mean that the disparity between young people's material desires and what they could afford might be more pronounced.

Making choices

Young people both involved and not involved in the riots were exposed to the factors we have outlined, yet made different decisions about whether to get involved. These decisions were influenced by a combination of the factors above. Although some young people barely made a conscious choice at all, others appeared to have asked themselves one, or both, of two key questions when making their decisions:

What do I think is right and wrong?

What do I risk if I get involved?

- **Beliefs about right and wrong:** beliefs on right and wrong ranged from a very explicit moral code which said that all criminal behaviour is wrong, through to a much more nuanced set of values where certain criminal behaviours were “more wrong” or “less wrong” than others. Young people attributed their beliefs both to personal characteristics (e.g. being “*strong-minded*”) and upbringing. However, they also observed that situational factors could “nudge” people into behaviour they would not normally consider. Taking “free stuff” was not always considered entirely wrong, even where young people didn’t and wouldn’t do it themselves.
There was also a view that some targets of the riots were more “legitimate” than others: “*When they hit the local shops, they went too far.*” Some behaviours were seen as much more wrong than others, with strong disapproval of behaviour which hurt people, put vulnerable people at risk or destroyed small family businesses.
- **Assessing the risks:** the risks of being caught, what that might mean for your future and whether it was “worth” it were themes that featured heavily in interviews. A fear of getting caught – through CCTV and DNA evidence, or serial numbers of stolen goods – was a key protective factor for young people. There were young people who made this calculation and decided they would be “smart” – e.g. cover their faces. Others said seeing the media coverage, the sheer numbers involved and the police not doing anything made them confident their chances of getting caught were low enough to reduce the risk sufficiently to get involved. A different calculation was made by young people who saw themselves as having too much to lose, even if the attractions were great and the risks low.