

The causes of the English riots, August 2011

One important factor in the spread of the riots was the response by the police. Public order policing is an art as much as a science, involving inherently difficult judgments about the degree of aggression and force to be used in a particular situation - and the police often get criticised either way. But with the benefit of hindsight, it does seem clear that the response in the first 48 hours was inadequate, both in terms of visible police numbers and tactics. It failed to stop the riots and looting spreading, or to deter opportunists from joining in.

What about the deeper causes? Race does not appear to have been a major factor, immigration even less so. The initial spark for the first disturbance in Tottenham had a racial element; and Tottenham and Brixton, another affected area, were the scenes of famous race riots in the 1980s. But in other areas, including Manchester, the great majority of the rioters and looters were ethnically white British.

If race was not a factor, what about 'culture'? Right wing commentators reacted by [attacking 'black culture' and rap music](#), and the Conservative Prime Minister has lamented the "slow motion moral collapse" of society - reactions which seem to reflect prior prejudice more than close analysis. A more interesting line of thought has focused on the role of consumerist attitudes in the looting. These attitudes are certainly being felt younger, and most acutely on kids from poor backgrounds - but while this may have shaped the nature of the riots, it is less plausible to suggest it caused them in the first place.

Some on the left have blamed the controversial cuts in public spending, but the timing makes this unlikely, with the cuts only starting to take effect - though they may well hamper the process of recovery, or make future disturbances more likely.

The most obvious characteristic linking the affected areas is economic inactivity (and boredom) among young men - a factor which has been correlated with crime and disorder across different eras and different countries. Unemployment and lack of opportunity is not an excuse for looting, and to posit some crude causal link would be an insult to those who struggle to overcome the same disadvantages without resorting to crime. But there is no ignoring the fact that at around 20%, youth unemployment is at a historically high level, and initial [analysis](#) by IPPR suggests it is higher still in areas where the riots took place.

Finally, the riots also re-ignited a debate in Britain around families in which children grow up with little sense of right and wrong: a small minority, but one which may well have accounted for a disproportionate share of the most violent and unrepentant looters. Precisely because the numbers here are so small, it would be a mistake to expect reforms to mainstream services (like education or welfare reform) to have a major impact. The good news is that we have an increasingly good understanding of how to identify the most chaotic families, or those most at risk, and we also know more about what kinds of interventions succeed: typically small-scale, one-to-one support offered by programmes like [Family Nurse Partnerships](#) and [Family Intervention Projects](#). They are not cheap, and they need long-term support from across the political spectrum, but they are worth it.

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