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The causes and consequences of the 2011 London riots



Social Forces

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During the London riots in August 2011, the police lost control of parts of the city for four days, and thousands of people took part in destruction and looting that resulted in property damage estimated at least \$50 million. [A recent article in *Social Forces* \(http://oxford.ly/1b28NLE\)](http://oxford.ly/1b28NLE) examines the residential address of 1,620 rioters — who were arrested and charged in the London riots, to investigate potential explanations for rioting. I spoke with one of the authors, Michael Biggs, to further understand his findings, and whether they confirm or alter previous understandings of rioter motivation.

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1. Can you briefly tell us what the London riot of 2011 was and why it occurred?

It began during a protest against the police shooting of a young man of mixed race, Mark Duggin. Rioting quickly spread across several London boroughs. For four nights, the police lost control of vast swathes of the capital city. Other English cities also experienced riots on a smaller scale. Why the riot occurred is disputed by scholars and politicians. According to some, the rioters were motivated by anger against brutal treatment by the police, along with grievances against rising inequality and cuts to public services. Other argue that the motivation was not protest but crime, as rioters exploited an unprecedented opportunity to steal consumer goods.

2. How do you know who rioted?

Fortunately for sociology, but unfortunately for the rioters, the police conducted a massive investigation in the months afterwards. In Britain, closed circuit television cameras are everywhere, and these were used to identify participants. The police kindly shared their data on 1,600 individuals who were arrested and subsequently charged with a criminal offense. Of course we didn't have access to names or other personal information, but all we needed was the postcode of the individual's residence. British postcodes are exceptionally detailed, and so we could match them with

information from the Census, which provides comprehensive information on 25,000 neighborhoods in London. Our analysis looks at geographical variation within the city. We compare (a) neighborhoods where at least one rioter lived with (b) neighborhoods without rioters.

3. How does your study confirm earlier studies of riots and in what ways does your study change our understanding of riots?

Our study is the first to provide rigorous evidence for the importance of police legitimacy. Many riots, like this one, are triggered by an incident involving perceived police brutality. But such a triggering incident could just be a pretext. Surveys conducted after riots in the United States have shown that rioters have worse experiences with the police than individuals who didn't participate. But attitudes expressed afterwards could be a consequence of taking part in the riot and rather than a cause. Our study, by contrast, measures police legitimacy from surveys conducted *before* the riot, which sampled the entire population. We show that rioters were more likely to come from areas where people didn't feel that the police treated them with respect. This finding holds even after taking into account many other social, economic, and political factors.



Carpetright store after Tottenham riots by Alan Stanton. CC BY-SA 2.0 via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carpetright_store_after_Tottenham_riots.jpg).

We challenge the accepted sociological wisdom that rioting is not associated with poverty. In London, rioters tended to come from the poorest neighborhoods, as measured by unemployment, adults lacking educational qualifications, workers in the lowest-paid occupations, overcrowded housing, and so on. How do we reconcile this finding with studies of American riots in the 1960s, which reject poverty as an explanation? Most of the analyses considered variation among cities, rather than variation *within* a city. In addition, in the United States at that period, black people were overwhelmingly poor, which makes poverty and ethnicity very hard to disentangle.

4. What did you conclude from your study as to why the London riot took place in some areas of London but not in others?

Overall, three major factors explain geographical variation. First, rioters came from areas where people felt less respected by the police. Second, they came from poor neighborhoods. Third, rioters came from neighborhoods which were ethnically diverse or “fractionalized.” Don’t make the mistake of thinking that diversity is just another word for nonwhite — we are measuring whether people in the neighborhood are drawn from many different ethnic groups rather than one. This last finding surprised us. We interpret it in terms of social cohesion: more diverse neighborhoods are less cohesive, and so adults are less able to prevent youth from rioting. This interpretation is supported by the fact that rioters were less likely to come from areas with many charitable (or nonprofit) organizations, which is another measure of social cohesion.

5. What, if anything, does your study say to those who claim that there are “no-go” zones in London, where the police cede their authority to residents?

London doesn’t have “no go” zones. American cities have ghettos, where most residents are black and poor. London doesn’t have similar spatial concentrations of class and ethnicity. Police in Britain don’t routinely carry firearms and only a few criminals are armed. This means that relations between police and civilians aren’t fraught with violence. So while we find that variations in police legitimacy across London help to explain rioting, these were variations around a relatively high level of legitimacy.

6. What, if any, are the similarities and differences between the London riot and the recent riots in Ferguson, Missouri in the United States?

The riots in Ferguson also began with protest against the shooting of a young man by the police. But these riots manifested a stark racial divide: the rioters were almost entirely African American. In this sense, the Ferguson riots resembled the riots of the 1960s, though on a smaller scale. By contrast, the London riot was exceptionally multiethnic. Some ethnic groups were overrepresented among the rioters, like people of Caribbean descent. But no single group was in the majority. This makes the London riot especially intriguing for sociologists.

Heading image: *Shop fire during London riots, 2011* by Andy Armstrong. CC BY-SA 2.0 via [Wikimedia Commons](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shop_fire_during_London_riots,_2011.jpg) (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shop_fire_during_London_riots,_2011.jpg).

Michael Biggs is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Fellow of St Cross College, University of Oxford. He is co-author of *"Anarchy in the UK: Economic Deprivation, Social Disorganization, and Political Grievances in the London Riot of 2011"* (oxford.ly/1b28NLE), published in *Social Forces*.

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