



Executive Summary

Over recent weeks a range of voices: politicians, radio presenters, journalists, have all expressed their views about the causes of the riots. However, young people have not been heard despite being the group that have been blamed for the uprising.

The government's response to the riots has shown they are out of touch. Recent comments from Justice Secretary Ken Clarke, that the rioters were a feral underclass demonstrate the general view that rioters were subhuman. Iain Duncan Smith recently discussed the need to tackle gang violence but failed to acknowledge the role his government's cuts had in drastically removing alternatives – youth centres etc – for young people.

In addition to the negative impact of the cuts, young people also suffer from excessive use of stop and search. They are targeted for being in the 'wrong neighbourhood' or wearing the 'wrong clothes'. Meanwhile stop and search continues to have an unacceptably low hit rate. Only 10% of stop and searches lead to an arrest. Despite rising knife crime, incredibly half of all stop and searches are for drugs, mainly cannabis while the exceptional section 60 power aimed at violence only leads to arrest for knives in 0.5% of cases.

Now disproportionate policing is turning into disproportionate sentencing as 45% of those convicted of involvement in the riots have received custodial sentences compared to 12% of those convicted of the same offences in 2010.

Young people demand the same treatment from police as all other citizens. To be able to walk the streets un-harassed but protected.

1. Out of Touch - A Youth Perspective

What caused the riots? Over the past few weeks, politicians, radio presenters and journalists have all expressed their views, but what about young people? Clearly you would think that the very group blamed for the uprising would be consulted to avoid repeated rioting in the future.

2. The phrase 'out of touch' could not provide a better description of the governments' comments and battle plans to tackle the 'riot issue' at large. Recent comments from Ken Clarke, describing rioters as a 'feral underclass' go some way in capturing general perceptions of the rioters as subhuman, beyond society and beyond hope.

3. In a recent article, Iain Duncan Smith talks of the need to tackle gang problems, adding that 'a lot of these kids are desperate for a way out'. Mr. Smith rightly highlights the negative impact that gangs play in our communities, but fails to acknowledge the impact of the cuts which he and the government have implemented. In Haringey alone, 8 out of 13 youth clubs have closed down, closing with them, the opportunity of positive activity away from the streets and away from gang culture.

4. Various organisations have issued warnings that government cuts would impact heavily on the most disadvantaged groups in society. With the advent of the August riots, these alarmist voices turned out to be prophetic an experience foreshadowed by the Brixton riots of 1981 in the midst of a recession and in an environment oppressed by heavy handed policing.

5. Even the government will admit that it's not a good time for young people. In a time where youth unemployment has reached record levels, with cuts to youth services, EMA and an astronomical rise in university fees, many young people are wondering what the future has in store for them. This may go some way to explaining why the overwhelming majority of convicted rioters were under 25 and unemployed. When young people have nothing more to lose, is it surprising that the social norms restraining people from looting - fear of a criminal record, community exclusion and time in jail - become less of a deterrent than they otherwise would be?

6. While the cuts are taking their toll, so too is the steady increase in police use of stop and search to target young people. 'Youth' from the 'wrong neighbourhood' or wearing the 'wrong clothes' are regularly hounded, humiliated and harassed by police while getting on with their daily lives. The unacceptably low 'hit rate' or 'arrest rates' only add to the injustice felt by many young people today towards the police. Only 10% of stop and searches lead to an arrest . Despite rising knife crime, incredibly half of all stop and searches are for drugs, mainly cannabis while the exceptional section 60 power aimed at violence only leads to arrest for knives in 0.5% of cases. While the police spend their time targeting low lying fruit and ignoring real community priorities; young people will continue to be criminalised, increasing distrust, disengagement and disrespect for the authorities supposedly here to protect - not persecute.

7. Over-policed and now over-sentenced

Now disproportionate policing is transforming into disproportionate sentencing

with recent figures showing that 45% of those convicted after the August riots have been jailed against 12% for comparable offences such as affray, assault, burglary and violent disorder in 2010. David Cameron, when asked about the likeness between the rioters and members of the Bullingdon Club last week said; "we all do stupid things when we are young and we should learn the lessons." Well let's learn the lessons in productive way and not through a riot induced glut of expensive, disproportionate sentencing which is pushing our jail system to breaking point. In this time of austerity, community projects, such as the remaining youth clubs in Haringey, are in need of volunteers and act as beacons in what positive collective action can do. Community led 'pay-back' schemes proposed recently by Nick Clegg will benefit both rioter and community much more than a stagnant stint in jail.

8. So what do we want as youth from police? Like most people really; to walk the streets without undue suspicion, to be protected when in need and to be treated equally regardless of our age, post code or fashion choice. Like the rioters, we don't need a second or third chance, we need a first chance; to contribute to our communities and to society as a whole. Listen to us; or lose touch at your peril.



This article was written by youth members of Stop Watch, a group campaigning for better policing.

Further information on StopWatch can be found at: www.stop-watch.org