

RIOTS COMMUNITIES AND VICTIMS PANEL

**EVIDENCE FOR THE RIOTS
COMMUNITIES AND VICTIMS
PANEL LONDON ASSEMBLY
CONSERVATIVE MEMBERS**



GLA CONSERVATIVES
GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

CONTENTS

Motivation of rioters	I
Policing in london	2
Policing public order emergencies	4
Recommendations	7
Conclusion	10
Feedback	11

The riots in August were unprecedented and the situation was in a constant state of change, which made it very difficult to police or predict. However we believe that there are a number of lessons that can be taken from the events, related to London-based policing and criminal justice.

MOTIVATION OF RIOTERS

1. Career criminals

1.1. We believe that the London riots, which took place following the death of Mark Duggan on 4 August, were fuelled by criminal opportunism and greed. Claims, for example, that the riots were in response to “cuts” to youth-related services and benefits seem unlikely, since many rioters were over the age of 18.

1.2. More importantly, figures reveal that the majority of ‘rioters’ were simply criminals, with over three-quarters having a previous conviction. Following the imprisonment of many of the perpetrators, violent crime in London fell - for example in Croydon by 20 percent in the four weeks after the disturbances.

1.3 Recommendation: We recommend that the Panel focuses on critical issues that have been highlighted by the riots - such as “career criminality” and police tactics - and avoids politically motivated debates around “cuts”.

2. Criminal Justice System & Police – Fear of the law

2.1. We believe that a large factor behind the riots was the lack of fear of facing any consequences. Following the media images of the first night’s riots in Tottenham, an expectation developed that those who joined in would not be stopped.

2.2. However, we believe that many of these looters had developed a sense of “getting away with it” over many years. Twenty six percent of those arrested for the riots had already committed more than 10 offences. This not only highlights that the criminal justice system is seriously failing to adequately rehabilitate “career criminals”, but also that it is failing to deter them.

2.3 The failure to deter criminals is caused by an array of factors. Victoria Borwick AM recently uncovered figures that reveal that the MPS screens out 41.5% of all crimes, including 73% of thefts. It is also worth noting that the number of cautions given out for violent offences rose by 82% in just five years between 2003 and 2007.

2.4. Imprisonment and sentencing must act more determinedly as a deterrent; rehabilitation needs to be improved; and people who break the law – be they for ‘petty offences’ such as theft or for more serious offences - should always expect consequences.

2.5. Recommendation: We recommend that the Panel looks into the attitude of rioters towards the law, the police and the criminal justice system. We also recommend that the Panel considers what actions could be taken to ensure that criminals genuinely fear the consequences of breaking the law, so that they think twice about breaking it in the first place. We believe key areas of change must include the following: The criminal justice system must drastically

improve its handling of repeat offenders. Meanwhile, police must focus on fighting crime at all levels.

2.6. Recommendation: We welcome the criminal justice agencies' actions in ensuring swift and appropriate punishment and recommend that successful criminal justice practices used during the riots are embedded into its daily procedures. The rapid action by the courts does lead to questions being raised regarding why cases usually take so long and why prison sentences are not handed down earlier for continuous re-offenders.

3. Supporting the Police

3.1. Many residents and businesses in our constituencies felt that the police were unwilling to take firm action against looters. A Channel 4 YouGov Survey revealed that 84% believed police hadn't been "tough" enough.

3.2. We also feel that the police should have felt able to stand up more proactively to the looters. Comments from some residents and police officers reveal that there is a genuine concern that, in day-to-day policing, police officers are often forced to deal with criminals with kid-gloves.

3.3. The approach taken by the police during the riots was not fuelled by cowardice or weakness, but was influenced by past experiences - such as the controversy over the policing of the G20, as well as the constant reproaches for their kettling of protesters.

3.4. Recommendation: We recommend that politicians, the media and the public give police support to use robust enforcement to preserve the peace and, in future, do not undermine them. The police have received mixed-messages over public-order policing and this has to stop. We have now seen what happens when criminals believe the police are not going to respond robustly and this must never be allowed to happen again. The police need to know that they have our full backing when they take action they deem necessary to keep public order.

POLICING IN LONDON

4. Policing of property & businesses during riots

4.1. Many shop owners, as well as residents, felt they were abandoned by police while their businesses were looted. For example, residents in Peckham claim to have seen rioters force their way into stores despite police being 20 metres away.

4.2. Witness statements suggest that there was very little attempt to prevent looting or protect property. Instead, police concentrated their efforts on non-confrontational actions such as sealing roads, to prevent, what some maintain, would have been an escalation of violence.

4.3 Recommendation: We feel that, in some cases, the police did not adequately protect businesses and property in London and recommend that the MPS' policy on how to handle looting and criminal damage should be reviewed. However we are also aware that, as mentioned in 'Point 3.4.', external pressures and past

criticisms of policing have contributed to the police's recent approach.

5. Strong messages

5.1. The lack of on-the-spot-arrests of looters seems to have been partially fuelled by a belief that police could later rely on CCTV. While CCTV has been invaluable in assisting police to identify criminals, we feel that this tactic was less effective than on-the-spot arrests would have been.

5.2. Primarily, this is because the lack of on-the-spot-arrests sent out the wrong message to potential criminals - that they could avoid arrest. Furthermore, CCTV will be unable to identify many of the looters, particularly those who used face masks and live in more desolate areas without CCTV.

5.3 The sight of stationary police made residents and shop-owners feel increasingly vulnerable and alarmed. It is important that the Panel appreciates the level of fear that was created in London by both the rioters and the police's lack of action. Indeed, people believed that police had lost control of the streets and that anarchy had taken over. This led to vigilantism being considered and, in some cases, carried out.

5.4. Recommendation: We believe on-the-spot arrests are preferable to a reliance on CCTV and that police use of CCTV should be reviewed in light of this.

5.5. Recommendation: We recommend that more care must be taken by politicians and police with regard to envisaging what messages are promoted by policing decisions. For example, avoiding arresting or confronting criminals on-the-spot can be interpreted by criminals as a signs of weakness, and it is these messages that promote casual attitudes towards, alongside a disregard for, the law.

5.6. Recommendation: Therefore, we recommend that the Panel supports Government proposals to change the law so police can always remove face masks. We think police should be given adequate powers to ensure they can deal with public order incidents, to send out a strong message to criminals, and to demonstrate to the police that we trust them.

5.7. In Havering on 8 August, Borough Commander Mike Smith responded to intelligence collected on social networking sites by asking businesses to close early and deployed his officers at Romford railway station. We believe that the considerable police presence at the station and around the town centre discouraged many people who had come to Havering to loot, as it ensured that a critical mass of troublemakers could not be realised in the first place.

5.8. Recommendation: We recommend that the Panel examines police tactics in the areas that avoided disturbances. For example, they should consider the tactic of deploying police on public transport to prevent rioters arriving at their destinations in the first place.

6. Trust in police – Businesses and property theft

6.1 Many businesses believe that the attitude shown by police during the riots reflected the

police's general behaviour towards crime against small businesses. After the riots, many shop owners said that they often felt that the police did not give a high enough priority to dealing with thefts of goods or shoplifting.

6.2. A Wandsworth business owner said that he was pleased with the police's active response since the riots; but that this contrasted with his experience in the past, for example, when a car drove into his shop window, but the police failed to respond, referring it on as an insurance matter.

6.3. There is a feeling amongst many businesses and residents, rightly or wrongly, that police only focus on certain types of crime. For example, police deal with simple cases of speeding by otherwise law-abiding citizens or, at the other end, tackle very serious cases such as murder. However, the areas in between, such as theft and burglary, can get overlooked.

6.4. Recommendation: We welcome Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe's recent statement that police must stop "screening out" crimes that are difficult to solve and instead should allow victims to decide whether an offence is investigated. In light of this, we recommend that senior officers continue to work more closely with shop owners and businesses, and discuss plans for policing businesses and property in the future.

POLICING PUBLIC ORDER EMERGENCIES

7. Police Numbers

7.1. Until 9 August 2011 - when approximately 16,000 officers were deployed across London, including 3,750 public order trained officers - the MPS did not have enough officers to quell the level of violence that escalated from events on 6 August.

7.2. The overall number of police officers in the Metropolitan Police Service (approximately 32,000) may have been high enough, but, specifically, we believe that the deployment of officers was inadequate in dealing with the disorder.

7.3. For example, in Wandsworth a decision was made to deploy 52 officers to other areas of London. Consequently, there were insufficient numbers of officers stationed in the borough to maintain order. This led to wide-scale criminality occurring over an extended period on the 8 August 2011 in the Clapham Junction area.

7.5. Recommendation: We recommend that the deployment of police officers across London during public order emergencies is reviewed, in addition to the way the police operate when deployed and how they are supported by the public, as stated above.

8. Public order training & equipment

8.1. While police numbers are important, there are many other factors that have been shown to be critical. The first factor is the number of officers trained to cope with widespread public disorder.

8.2. The MPS has approximately 770 Level 1 trained officers and 3,500 Level 2 trained officers. By the 9 August we had received 1,705 public order trained officers from mutual aid. It is generally agreed that there were not enough public order trained officers available to the MPS to deal with disorder on the scale seen in August. Greater use of police armoured vans would also have helped contain the riots.

8.3. Recommendation: We recommend that more police officers receive training in dealing with riots and street disorder, to ensure the events in August are not repeated. We are aware that any increase in riot trained officers will need to be balanced against increased costs and the potential levels of abstraction from boroughs and other units. However, we believe that this needs to be urgently reviewed in time for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

8.4. We are concerned by the limited amount of options that were available to police during the riots. The fact that police felt that going in with batons would escalate the violence, meant that one of their only options seemed to be to stand by and seal off the roads.

8.5. However many of the residents and shop owners said that they wished the police had been more “aggressive”. Nonetheless, we are aware that police were outnumbered and had limited options available to them.

8.6. Recommendation: We recommend that the option of using water cannon is considered by the MPS. The use of water canon could have acted as a deterrent during the riots and critically could have helped make up for the lack of riot-trained police officers during the first few nights of disorder.

9 Mobilisation

9.1. The riots also drew attention to weaknesses within the MPS’ mobilisation procedures relating to police officers and, in particular, riot trained police officers. During the riots, additional officers were not sent in quickly enough. In Wandsworth, on 8 August, public order trained reinforcements only arrived at 10.38pm - 3 hours after disorder started - and armoured vehicles took until 12.13am to arrive.

9.2. The delay in sending in more police resources, in many boroughs, escalated the disorder, as it confirmed, for opportunistic looters, the belief that they could get away with criminality.

9.3. The MPS has admitted that there were not enough officers on 8 August, despite the service mobilisation plan being fully implemented. We understand that the MPS has subsequently changed the way it co-ordinates public order trained resources to increase the numbers of officers available for deployment. We support this action. This has been achieved by bringing Level 2 public order trained officers to designated areas where Police Support Units (PSUs) can be assembled more quickly rather than requiring Boroughs to provide minimum numbers of PSUs.

9.4. Recommendation: We recommend that the MPS changes the way officers are mobilised to enable more Level 2 public order trained officers and armoured vehicles can be mobilised more quickly.

10. Intelligence – Social network sites

10.1. A key reason for the failure in deploying officers effectively across London during the riots was the lack of accurate intelligence. However, in some areas, local police deduced in advance that looters were coming into the area and managed to dissipate them as they arrived.

10.2. Police have stated that there was sometimes too little intelligence available to adequately forewarn them of disorder – for example in Clapham. The MPS has also said that there was too much information available online, resulting in serious riots being predicated in parts of London, such as in Lambeth, where they subsequently did not occur.

10.3. We recognise that it is difficult to decide how much reliance to place on social networks. However, where serious disorder did take place, many residents have said that they knew many hours beforehand what was going to take place. This is supported by the fact that several shops closed early in these areas, in expectation of events that the police were apparently not expecting. We believe that police intelligence was inadequate in many boroughs.

10.4. Recommendation: We recommend that the MPS reviews the intelligence systems that they have in place. In particular, they should focus greater attention on monitoring and interpreting content on social networking sites.

11. Intelligence – Community engagement

11.1. Another area within intelligence that appeared to be inadequate in the riots was community engagement.

11.2. The first question raised is: should police have had better intelligence from their Safer Neighbourhood teams. If so, the next question should be: is local policing actually effective? Some people see some Safer Neighbourhood teams in their wards as ‘courtesy cops’ and believe that the really difficult areas and issues in their boroughs are not effectively targeted, if at all.

11.3. Furthermore, there are clearly several concerns around the relations between BME communities and the police. Some residents have cited the uncouth manner in which police sometimes address BME communities - particularly young, black men when using stop and search - as an area that seriously needs to be addressed.

11.4. Another concern is that the people that police and local authorities may treat as community representatives through formal settings may not actually be representative of their wider communities. It would seem that several community representatives, who the authorities were relying on for intelligence on the riots, did not come forward in time. While much police resource has gone into engagement, the events in August should make us question their effectiveness.

11.5. Recommendation: We recommend that the MPS reviews how SNTs and local police forces engage with their communities. The Panel should consider where strengths and weaknesses lie within police work around liaising with communities, in light of the points above. A lot of the community engagement work that Safer Neighbourhood teams carry out is invaluable, and it should be expanded.

Safer Neighbourhood teams should be the frontline in local intelligence gathering; they should not only be engaging with communities via formal local structures, such as the Safer Neighbourhood Panels and local authorities, but the onus should also be on them to go beyond the easily reachable groups and representatives.

11.6. Recommendation: We recommend that a review takes place into whether the resources that the MPS and local authorities are putting into community engagement are being effectively targeted. We think it is time to start evaluating the results of various community engagement initiatives and see what is and has been achieved.

11.7. The riots should also provide the opportunity to consider weaknesses and strengths in the partnership working and sharing of intelligence between the police and other agencies. For example, in future, closer work with probation trusts could enable police to ban probationers from town centres at times when serious levels of disorder are a possibility.

11.8 Recommendation: We recommend that the Panel looks into options for improving intelligence between the police and other agencies. The Panel should review where partnership work was successful during the riots and where it was absent but could have helped the police prevent disorder.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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CONCLUSION

The London Assembly Conservative Members' view is that the August riots were the result of criminal elements taking advantage of a soft-touch approach to the policing of public order disturbances. As a result they grew into a very serious civil disturbance.

It believes that the reasons for the riots are multi-faceted, but lack of the fear of the consequence of looting and vandalism played a significant part. In large part it believes the police have been stymied in their ability to take action to deal with situations by constant criticism from those more concerned with the civil liberties of rioters than the need to enforce the law.

It suggests that there are lessons to be learned from August in several areas including the delivery of justice in the days following the riots that saw criminals apprehended and dealt with swiftly; that the police make it completely clear from the outset that the law will be enforced and that they are able to call on the full resources of the state to ensure that law abiding citizen are safe, secure and can go about their business free of the fear of crime.

The London Assembly Conservative Members believe that maintenance of order is a pre-requisite in a civilised society, and that it should be maintained at all times.

Date: 28 October 2011



FEEDBACK

Connect with us online and tell us what you thought about this paper.

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