Report concludes British riots provoked by police brutality and poverty

Julie Hyland
8 December 2011

The first comprehensive investigation into the riots that swept London and other parts of England in August has confirmed that police brutality, poverty and social inequality were the primary motivating factors in their eruption.

The "Reading the Riots" study was undertaken by the *Guardian* newspaper and the London School of Economics (LSE) following the government's refusal to establish an independent inquiry into the inner-city disturbances. It is the only report based on evidence gathered from those who were directly involved in the events.

The study involved a team of 60 academics, journalists and researchers. They conducted interviews with 270 people who took part in the riots in London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham and Manchester. A separate analysis of a database of more than 2 million riot-related "tweets" was undertaken by Manchester University.

Those interviewed were between 13 and 57 years of age, with most aged 16 to 24. They were drawn from all ethnic backgrounds and most had not been arrested for their involvement in the disturbances.

The accounts of those interviewed, who reside in some of the most socially deprived areas in England, refute the claims made by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, with the support of the Labour Party and the media, that the upheavals were the product of the "criminality" of a "feral underclass."

This libel was used to justify wholesale police and judicial repression against working class youth. Over 4,000 people were arrested. Specially convened kangaroo-style courts were set up in several areas, sitting for 24 hours in some instances, to dispense summary justice. Hundreds have been imprisoned, mostly for petty offences, and three young men have been jailed for four years for Facebook postings supportive of rioting.

Time and again, those interviewed identified police harassment, poverty and social injustice as the main causes of the riots.

Many described the disturbances as "anti-police" riots, citing the police killing of 29-year-old Mark Duggan in Tottenham on August 4 as the major factor that precipitated the eruptions.

At the time, it was claimed that Duggan had opened fire on the police and the officers shot him in self-defence. That account has been proven false, as Duggan was unarmed when he was killed. A whitewash inquiry by the Independent Police Complaints Commission is ongoing, while no police officer has been identified, let alone charged, in relation to Duggan's death.

The investigation found a "deep-seated and sometimes visceral antipathy towards police," with Duggan's killing meeting up with the interviewees' own experiences of police harassment and brutality. Of those interviewed, 73 percent said they had been stopped and searched in the last 12 months, a reflection of the common practice in which police arbitrarily harass working class youth.

Eighty-five percent said that poverty was an "important" or "very important" factor in causing the disturbances.

"Rioters identified a range of political grievances, but at the heart of their complaints was a pervasive sense of injustice," the report stated. "For some this was economic: the lack of money, jobs or opportunity. For others it was more broadly social: how they felt they were treated compared with others. Many mentioned the increase in student tuition fees and the scrapping of the education maintenance allowance [a benefit paid to poorer college students that was abolished by the coalition government]."

The study confirms that those involved in the riots were generally poorer and less-educated working class youth, but it notes, "While general levels of achievement for the group as a whole were relatively low, many were highly

© World Socialist Web Site

articulate and politicised, particularly when it came to describing the problems they faced, the frustrations in their lives, and the lack of opportunities available to them."

The findings flatly contradict the fraudulent "investigation" initiated by the government into the disturbances. The Riots Communities and Victims Panel was set up to deflect demands for an independent inquiry into the causes of August's events.

Prime Minister David Cameron has insisted that no comparison can be drawn between the summer disturbances and the inner-city riots of the early 1980s. The latter were the subject of the Scarman Inquiry, which found that police brutality, especially against young black people, was the primary cause. Cameron's assertion flies in the face of the facts, including the fact that the August 2011 disturbances were far more extensive, involving larger numbers of people in many different areas of the capital and the country, than those investigated by Scarman.

The Victims Panel took evidence only from those affected by the riots. Unsurprisingly, its report insisted that the disturbances were not "political" and could not be compared with those of 1981. Its main recommendations were for more robust policing, including a call for a review of police "emergency plans" to deal with similar "public disorder."

An interim report by London's Metropolitan Police claimed that it had been unable to respond with sufficient force to the riots because it feared criticism over "heavy-handed" tactics.

What unites the various reports is their conclusion that more riots can be anticipated. The Victims Panel said "riots will happen again if urgent action is not taken," while 81 percent of those interviewed in the *Guardian*/LSE study said the same.

Earlier this week, the former Metropolitan Police chief, Lord Stevens, warned that Britain faced "years of public disorder." Police would face a battle to keep control of the streets, Stevens said, as the economic crisis fuelled public disorder. "My gut feeling is it's going to be a very difficult 18 months to three years," he said.

The *Guardian*/LSE study was released at the same time as a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development that detailed the huge growth in social inequality across its 35 member countries over the last three decades. The sharpest increase has occurred in the UK.

The study underscores the principled stand taken by the Socialist Equality Party at the time of the riots. Entirely alone in the UK, the SEP condemned the state repression being meted out against working class youth. From the start, the SEP explained that the disturbances were an "elemental eruption of social anger" against the "entrenched poverty, discrimination and police brutality faced daily by many working class youth."

Well before the OECD reported, the SEP noted that the ruling elite and their political representatives had carried out a war against society for more than 35 years, during which every aspect of life had been subordinated to the interests of a parasitic elite. Now, their orgy of speculation and greed had produced an economic catastrophe that was destroying the living standards of billions.

The SEP warned that the repression employed against working class youth was symptomatic of the ruling elite's increasing resort to anti-democratic, class-war measures against all working people.

The so-called liberals and "lefts" were entirely complicit in this development, the SEP stressed, as Labour's Ken Livingstone and numerous "minority" and "community" spokespersons demanded the use of water cannon and worse.

"The political tragedy of the youth," the SEP wrote, was that "their entirely justified indignation has been unable to find any organised, progressive expression because of the utter rottenness and bankruptcy of the Labour Party" and the trade unions.

This essential political point has been further underscored by Labour's decision to select former Metropolitan Police chief Lord Stevens to head its own "independent commission into the future of policing."

This, Labour's sole initiative in the wake of the riots, doesn't even make a pretence of concern over poverty, rising unemployment or other conditions of social deprivation, much less police brutality. To these conditions Labour is utterly indifferent. Instead, the commission is to be used to demand greater funding for the police along with other measures to prepare for the public disorder warned of by Stevens.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site