

# The riots:

## what are the lessons from JRF's work in communities?

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**Introduction: taking stock after the riots**, by Julia Unwin, Chief Executive, JRF

August saw riots and looting in cities across England. Images of people smashing shop windows, stealing, and setting fire to buildings were broadcast across the world and left a firm imprint on our collective conscience. People are left scratching their heads, wondering what has gone so wrong.

With such drastic and unexpected events, it is easy to get swept along with the inevitable tide of media commentary and politicking, and for decisions to be made without a thorough analysis of their consequences. At times like this, as we try to understand and review policy in light of such devastating events, it is essential that we turn to evidence. This paper reviews the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) back catalogue of research as we try to comprehend the summer's events.

We know that most damage was done in communities suffering most from poverty, disadvantage and a depressed environment. Those rioting and looting laid waste some of the poorest communities in Britain and the victims were among the poorest people.

Of course, there are areas of acute economic desperation where no riots happened. The overwhelming majority of people living in poverty had nothing to do with these events. So it is dangerous to connect poverty, bad housing, poor life chances or weak parenting with these shocking events, without researching the links thoroughly.

But it is clear something has, and is, going wrong in our communities. Through our research, we know that people in some places feel absolutely powerless. And we know that many feel little loyalty to or involvement in their communities. We know that they believe their aspirations are frustrated and that whatever their effort they will not be recognised. People are worried about living in a culture that has increasingly defined status through material possessions and the accumulation of possessions as worthy in its own right. We know about the devastating effects of recession on communities – with some never coming out of recession. None of this excuses or even explains rioting, and it certainly does not give us a clear direction for preventing riots in the future – but it does emphasise the urgent need to tackle these social problems head-on.

We are living through very challenging times. The global financial crisis continues to affect the circumstances of every single person in the UK, and a national programme of austerity affects us all. We need to rely on evidence about what happened and its effects, and we need to develop understanding and knowledge, not just anecdotes. Otherwise we will be doomed to repeat the mayhem and misery of August 2011, and yet again the poorest people and places will pay the biggest price.

## What do we know from JRF's work in neighbourhoods since 1990?

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, there was an understandable rush for instant explanations.

As the dust begins to settle, though, it is clear how complex and difficult to explain the events of 6–10 August actually were: from the speed at which the riots spread, the role of social media, the distance people travelled to the various disturbances, to the social and ethnic backgrounds of those involved.

JRF has significant experience of research on the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods, some of which were the victims of looting and rioting. In three major programmes since the early 1990s, with a total investment of some £5m, JRF has examined social and economic conditions, community engagement, regeneration and partnership in poor and excluded neighbourhoods. Our research has drawn on evidence from hundreds of estates and neighbourhoods across the UK.

This summary of evidence cannot explain exactly why these riots happened. However, as policy-makers develop responses to the riots, we believe that solid evidence on their social context is crucial. We are taking the opportunity to review this extensive body of research. This is a vital chance to present a picture of life in our poorer neighbourhoods: the problems that exist in these areas; the challenges of living and working there; the misconceptions and stereotypes that must be confronted; questions about representation and participation in society; and the need to give appropriate services to these communities.

## We need to understand life in the poorest areas

Much of JRF's work has focused on understanding what it is like to live in the poorest neighbourhoods. Our work has highlighted a range of challenges:

- Case studies in London, Nottingham, Liverpool and Teesside showed that:
  - decaying buildings and abandoned homes had a severe effect on resident morale;
  - these areas were not lacking social cohesion and interaction;
  - neighbourhoods mattered to residents; and
  - residents did not feel they were in control (Forrest and Kearns, 1999).
- In the Broad Street area of Swindon, tensions between many different ethnic groups – Somali, Turkish, Iranian, Asian and British – led at times to misunderstanding and conflict (Taylor, 2007).
- A project on two of Bradford's traditionally white estates – both relatively deprived – revealed that:
  - a sense of community, albeit compromised, still existed in these neighbourhoods;
  - fear and insecurity were serious problems for residents;
  - people living in these communities felt they were seen as the 'lowest of the low', and they resented how society seemed to moralise, blame them and attribute their problems to their own behaviour (Pearce, 2010).

Despite this range of serious problems, JRF's work has consistently stressed the dangers of oversimplification and stereotyping.

A recent study on the links between poverty and place examined six low-income neighbourhoods in England, Scotland and Wales. It found that residents supported the virtues of hard work, self-reliance, responsibility and independence. The six areas all had their problems with antisocial behaviour and gangs, but many people cared deeply about their neighbourhoods, and liked living there. So, despite

references in current policy debate to ‘broken’ communities, there was no evidence that these were places somehow dislocated from the normal world and rife with lawlessness (Cole, 2011).

These findings are set in the wider context of the UK’s persistent inequality. A 2009 review of poverty and inequality showed that the gap between most deprived and other areas had narrowed in education, employment, crime and local perceptions; and that intensive local initiatives had been successful. But despite these findings, the gap between richer and poorer communities remains wide (Hills, 2009). Indeed, a ‘geography of misery’ can plot patterns of inequality, showing that neighbourhood quality indicators overlap closely with measures of low income and social housing (Burrows, 1998, via Maclennan, 2000). By spring 2006, more than half those of working age living in social housing were without paid work, twice the national rate (Hanley, 2007).

The multi-racial dimension to the riots was much commented on – in contrast to riots in previous decades, where race was a much more immediate issue. Still, the proportion of minority ethnic people living in deprived neighbourhoods across England is about twice as high as those living elsewhere. Some research also suggests that the effect of living in a deprived area has a more negative impact on minority ethnic groups than on white British people (Barnard, 2011).

In 2008, JRF ran a public consultation asking about today’s ‘social evils’ ([www.sociale evils.org.uk](http://www.sociale evils.org.uk)). Respondents expressed fear about the growth of individualism, greed, inequality, and apathy. People said they wanted to live in a society with stronger communities and a shared set of values. Despite this common desire, we’ve since seen the banking crisis, and the MP expenses and phone-hacking scandals. Set against this, JRF research demonstrates that the problems of deprived and excluded neighbourhoods remain considerable, despite the advances of the last two decades, and that workable and affordable solutions for these areas remain a key priority for policy and practice.

## **Community organisations are vital for transforming neighbourhoods**

JRF’s programmes have shown how active residents – working within energetic neighbourhood groups, often called ‘community anchors’ – can play a substantial role in regenerating their own areas:

- During the early 1990s, for example, residents in Plymouth’s Pembroke Street estate, angered by the area’s steady and unchecked decline, bid for government ‘Estate Action’ funding. When the bid was successful, they led the complete physical redesign and refurbishment of the estate. The work included a £60,000 community arts project. Then residents not only took over the running of their estate but also played a key role in the regeneration of the surrounding dockland area (Watson, 1994). The Pembroke Street Estate Management Board is still going strong today.
- On Merthyr Tydfil’s Gellideg estate, a mothers’ group created a playgroup for their small children. Later they worked with Oxfam Wales to understand how poverty affected women, and then formed the Gellideg Foundation Group (GFG) to manage projects tackling the needs they had uncovered. The work included youth work, activities for elder people, job training and managing community buildings. GFG attracted funding from multiple sources, including the National Lottery Fund, and eventually became the local fund holder for the Welsh Government’s Communities First programme, thus playing a very significant role in the regeneration of the entire ward (Taylor, 2007). GFG have also worked with parents and schools to help keep disruptive children in school and to assist children with homework. They have made an important contribution to breaking the cycle of poverty.

These examples highlight the importance of persistence over time in establishing and running community bodies that can speak up for their area and tackle local priorities.

More recent work by JRF on 'community assets' provides other impressive examples of community groups. One example is Cordale Housing Association near Glasgow, where a resident-led body in a former mining village has developed housing and a medical centre, and also runs many social and cultural activities for all age groups. JRF's work on community ownership and management of their assets suggests that this approach can create lasting, positive changes in deprived communities, and the Government focus on this agenda is welcome. However, it is also clear that some deprived neighbourhoods, lacking the necessary skills and experience, risk not being able to grasp the opportunities available (Aiken, 2011).

## **We can learn from work with young people**

Much of the discussion about the riots has focused on young people, and our research highlights local residents' concerns about the behaviour of young people in their communities, suggesting that community groups can play an important role in resolving these tensions:

- A project in Wythenshawe, on an estate with increasing possession of guns and knives, looked at the transformational work being done by community leaders in half a dozen communities (both white and ethnically diverse, from all over the North of England) to divert young people from street crime. The study highlighted the tensions that exist within such communities, the high levels of skill, commitment and persistence needed in such work, and the dangers associated with the 'poaching' of young people from drug dealers and street gangs. It also showed that community leaders – the only people with the skills to engage with hard-to-reach young people – can be marginalised, cold-shouldered and treated with suspicion by statutory agencies. One partner in this project was CARISMA from Moss Side in Manchester. They established the Street Pastors organisation, a group of trained volunteers who patrol the streets at night and offer befriending and advice to people in need of help (Lynn, 2008).
- Another JRF study looked at territorial behaviour by young people in six cities. It found that territoriality was part of everyday life for young people in these six areas, and often had deep historical roots. While there was evidence that such behaviour could lead to criminal gang behaviour sometimes, including drugs and gun-related crime, there were also more positive reasons for territorial groupings, such as: friendship and a sense of security; a way of earning recognition and respect; and a readiness to protect one's neighbourhood (Kintrea, 2008).
- Work in JRF's 2002–2006 Neighbourhoods programme illustrated that community-based projects could cater for a broad range of young people's needs. The Bradford Trident partnership, for example, involved young people being 'ambassadors' for their neighbourhood, giving them influence over partnership policy as well as a wider role representing their neighbourhood in Bradford and elsewhere in the country. And Wrexham's Caia Park Partnership, a strong resident-led body, ran successful projects training young people for work, helping them find jobs, and employing them on schemes on the Caia Park estate (Taylor, 2007).
- Research from JRF has shown the importance of raising young people's aspirations, from a very young age. Education gaps emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and widen throughout childhood. By age three there is a considerable gap in cognitive tests between children in the poorest fifth of the population and those from better-off backgrounds. The study suggested policy could help narrow educational inequalities by reducing children's behavioural problems and 'risky behaviours' like anti-social behaviour and truancy, and by raising children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education, from primary school onwards (Goodman and Gregg, 2010).

## There are barriers to good community leadership

It is clear then that people in deprived areas can play a significant role in tackling local priorities, including working with young people. Yet developing community leadership can be difficult:

- Our work on the Bradford estates cited above showed that community leaders could be regarded by neighbours as ‘cliquey’, or as having become the stooges of public agencies. On one estate, leadership was made more difficult by the recent arrival of residents from Asia and Eastern Europe (this was also an issue in Swindon). At a more general level, the study uncovered a worrying ‘disconnection’ between residents of these estates and both local agencies and local politicians (Pearce, 2010).
- Other more systematic studies of community leadership within neighbourhood regeneration partnerships confirm these problems. One study (including a survey of 110 partnerships) revealed the persistence of a traditional mindset of doing things *for* people, as opposed to *with* people. In Birmingham and London, issues of race and contemporary racism were strong challenges to representative participation (Anastacio, 2000).
- Another study of nine regeneration partnerships revealed the huge amount of time community leaders were expected to contribute, and the difficulties they had working with formal local authority bodies and local people. This was combined with another common problem, where community leaders were allocated responsibilities without the power to act (Purdue, 2000).

## Deprived neighbourhoods can't go it alone

Much of JRF's work has illustrated the impressive results that can be achieved through strong local leadership. But it has also consistently shown that these efforts cannot survive in isolation. There are many community groups that do not aspire to lead, preferring instead to work in partnership with statutory or voluntary bodies:

- Residents in Foxwood and Bell Farm (two council estates in York) with social and economic problems chose to work in partnership with City of York Council to develop agreements that let them negotiate the provision of public services so they could respond to their own priorities, working with a range of local groups (Cole, 1995 and 2000).
- Another form of outside help to neighbourhood organisations was the ‘light touch’ support developed during JRF's 2002–2006 Neighbourhoods programme. Experienced facilitators offered mentoring, organisational advice and networking opportunities to local groups (Taylor, 2005). Similar approaches are now surfacing in other programmes such as the Lottery Fund's Big Local Trust.

During the last decade many local authorities have developed affordable ways of focusing on the needs of deprived neighbourhoods. Although communities may feel these approaches are ‘top-down’, they are still a way of partnering with neighbourhoods, and have the extra advantage of reaching many people in any one authority. A JRF project has been looking at how Bradford Metropolitan District Council relates to neighbourhoods across the district, through forums, action plans and ward-level teams. Bradford is keen to promote a concept of ‘active citizens’ – a way for people to take greater responsibility and avoid unnecessary dependency on local services. The project has also examined similarly innovative structures in Birmingham and Newcastle (Richardson, 2011).

## **We need to keep up the momentum during Government savings programmes**

A key issue for JRF is how scarce resources can be targeted at areas that need them most, and how work in deprived areas can be sustained over time.

This is reinforced by a recent JRF study exploring how 25 local authorities are implementing spending cuts. It shows that only half the authorities in the sample had adopted 'protecting the needs of the most vulnerable clients or communities' as a principle to guide decision-making (Hastings, forthcoming). Another current project reveals reductions in staff working in neighbourhoods in Birmingham, Bradford and Newcastle. Work in Bradford illustrates how difficult it can be to hold transparent debates or to develop clear policies about how to target services towards poorer communities (Richardson, 2011).

Our work on communities in recession also raised the issue of targeting. The study – which highlighted that some areas of the UK missed out on the growth of the past decade – recommends that public and voluntary bodies should try to protect the hardest-hit communities. The most effective approach recommended by this study involved shifting to low-cost but high-impact neighbourhood renewal and maintaining services for young people, job creation and training (Tunstall, 2009).

Finally, a long-term study of intensive management and regeneration on 20 English council estates demonstrated progress, but also an ongoing fragility, plus the need for continuing resources to support the estates' development (Tunstall, 2006).

Clearly, managing funding cuts without increasing social problems in deprived and excluded communities will remain a significant challenge.

## Conclusion

This paper, published after the recent riots, has focused attention on conditions in some of the UK's poorest communities. It draws attention to deep, widespread problems of poverty and social exclusion, and suggests how, with the active involvement of communities, these can be improved. The key messages are:

- Our most excluded neighbourhoods may be characterised by acute tensions and problems, but they are not 'broken' or 'dislocated'. Most residents living there share values and aspirations similar to the rest of us: fairness, hard work and responsibility.
- There is potential in all low-income neighbourhoods for active citizenship, organising and achieving remarkable results.
- However, these communities often experience great difficulty in developing leadership, winning effective political representation and influence with the outside world.
- Consequently there need to be affordable, consistent support and advice services for community organisations in deprived communities. This support needs funding that does not fluctuate in relation to changes in policy.
- Plans and projects need to work with the great complexity and diversity in deprived neighbourhoods. Failure to do this risks rejection by sections of the population and so could see such projects becoming unworkable from the start.
- A high priority for residents is to develop effective activities for, and engage with, young people. The efforts of community groups working with very challenging young people need greater recognition and support. Every effort must be made to support youth services.
- Flexible and innovative schemes are needed to provide training and jobs within neighbourhoods with concentrated worklessness.
- Plans to strengthen social enterprise and the transfer of assets to community organisations are welcome. Deprived neighbourhoods need extra help to access these opportunities.
- At the same time, not all deprived communities want or are able to own assets or generate income. For them, affordable partnership arrangements are essential, including low-cost, high-impact approaches to regeneration and neighbourhood management.
- In relationship to partnership working, Government could be more even-handed in recognising the work of *all* sectors, including local authorities. The challenges of stabilising and regenerating our most excluded communities remain immense: the contribution of all sectors must be recognised and supported.

JRF's work in community development and neighbourhood regeneration stretches back over the last two decades and covers the work of the current and the previous two Governments. Interestingly, government initiatives we studied in the early 1990s had their roots in the urban disturbances of the 1980s. What JRF's research shows is that this country has a long and honourable tradition of supporting effective initiatives in our poorest communities. Government at all levels, as well as the voluntary and private sectors, have made very significant contributions to this. All hands are needed on deck to maintain this momentum.

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