

News release

Campaign for Social Science

Friday 21 October 2011

Focus on the police response obscures need to deal with underlying causes of summer riots, says Campaign for Social Science

Recent proposals to strengthen police powers in the aftermath of the summer riots are failing to address the fundamental issues that sparked the riots, says the Campaign for Social Science. At a conference on 13 October organised by the Campaign, leading social scientists presented evidence providing different perspectives on the riots, views on the underlying causes and the role of the police.

The conference was held, coincidentally, on the same day that the government announced new powers for the police to impose curfews on specific areas during times of heightened tension and the establishment of an international forum to examine the growing problem of gangs, which David Cameron said (in the August emergency session of Parliament) were partly to blame for the riots.

But social scientists cautioned against snap judgements ascribing blame mostly to gangs. Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, warned against planting a pre-existing narrative on the events of the summer. "There is a need to listen to the rioters and to understand their motivations," he said. "We need to rely more on science and less on guesswork."

John Solomos (Professor of Sociology at City University) said that opportunist looting was a significant feature. A study of TV footage and media reports shows that the only common factor identifying rioters was that most were young men under 30, on foot in urban areas, unemployed and with no family commitments, said Paul Bagguley (Reader in Sociology at Leeds University). "Hence, the search for the typical or average rioter may obscure as much as it reveals about the causes of disorder. Urban disorders cannot be explained in a simple causal manner", he said.

David Canter (Director of the International Research Centre for Investigative Psychology at the University of Huddersfield) stressed the need to get a better understanding of the psychology of the looter or rioter. "Studies of crowd behaviour also show that, contrary to some opinions, groups don't come together easily or adopt a hierarchical structure," he said. "Riots are not part of a 'great movement going forward'. But crowd actions do rely on key central contact points bringing groups together."

The role of the police was mentioned by a number of speakers. Jon Silverman (Professor of Media and Criminal Justice at the University of Bedfordshire) focused on the role of the police and the failure of police intelligence to spot the danger signs before the riots erupted. The problem was that the police had been unable to integrate its information on media networks into its planning - an area that it needs to focus on more closely enabling it to distinguish between rumour and real information, he said. A better use of new technology, particularly social media, could have made the police much more effective in anticipating the riots and then dealing with them.

Other speakers highlighted the impact of the Government's austerity measures and rising unemployment. Richard Wilkinson (Professor Emeritus of Social Epidemiology at the University of

Nottingham) and Mike Hough (Co-Director of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at Birkbeck) presented evidence showing a clear relationship between inequality, relative poverty, high levels of crime and low levels of trust. What happened in August was linked to increasing feelings of injustice and a “fractured habit of compliance”, said Mike Hough.

“There is clearly a need for a forensic-style study of the riots and the rioters before any new far-reaching measures can be introduced,” says Cary Cooper, Chair of the Academy of Social Sciences, which sponsors the Campaign for Social Science. “There is a pressing need for more discussions about the underlying causes of the riots. We need to be sure that longer sentences and changes in police powers are accompanied by policies to tackle these issues. Any new policies must be backed by sound evidence. The Campaign for Social Science is keen to work with the Government review to look more closely at the causes of the riots.”

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More information from

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Notes to editors

The Academy of Social Sciences is a membership organisation of over 700 academicians and 41 learned societies. Its mission is to promote the value of social sciences in the UK for the public benefit. The Campaign for Social Science has been established to raise the profile of social science in the public, media and Parliament to address changes to funding teaching and research. A key objective is to create a popular vision of what social science can do and demonstrate its impact in government and the wider society.

The conference focused on three themes:

- What caused the riots? What is the state of Britain today?
- Is Britain “broken”?
- Were the rioters “just criminals”?

Speakers:

Professor Ben Bowling, AcSS, (King’s College, London)
Professor Emeritus Richard Wilkinson (University of Nottingham)
Professor Jon Silverman (University of Bedfordshire)
Professor Tracy Shildrick (Teesside University)
Dr Paul Bagguley (University of Leeds)
Professor John Solomos AcSS (City University)
Professor Ted Cantle, CBE (Institute of Community Cohesion)
Professor David Canter, AcSS (Huddersfield University)
Professor John Benyon, AcSS (University of Leicester)
Professor Mike Hough (Birkbeck, University of London)



ACADEMY
of **SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Chairs:

Dame Janet Finch, AcSS (University of Manchester)

Trevor Phillips (Equality and Human Rights Commission)

Professor Ted Cattle (Institute of Community Cohesion)

A full report of the conference plus a podcast can be found on the Campaign website.
www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk