



Young people and the August 2011 disturbances

**Observations from the Youth Justice
Board consultation with young people
and youth offending team staff**

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1. The story so far

Since the disturbances that took place across London and then England between 6 and 11 August 2011, there has been a large number of publications about the characteristics and needs of those involved (for example, Ministry of Justice, 2011, 2012; Home Office, 2011), and a growing body of literature looking at the possible drivers and causes (for example, Cabinet Office, 2011; Guardian-London School of Economics (LSE), 2011; Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011, 2012).¹

From the first arrests during the disturbances, the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) played an active role in helping to manage the consequences: liaising with and co-ordinating youth offending teams (YOTs); managing the demand for custodial places; overseeing the placement of individual young people into custody; and providing practical assistance to YOTs and the secure estate as they dealt with the unexpected and significant pressures on the system.

This report presents findings from a consultation with young people and YOT practitioners. In particular, it presents findings on the views and experiences of a small group of:

- young people under 18 sentenced to community and custodial sentences in the immediate aftermath of the disturbances
- YOT staff about their role and experiences during the disturbances.

The information available has come from a wide range of sources, but is by no means exhaustive. The chapters report on only a small sample of those involved in the disturbances and the YOT staff who now work with them. As a result, the findings from this consultation do not conclusively demonstrate the experiences of all young people and staff. However, these samples do compare with the findings from the publications cited above and serve to highlight areas that warrant further investigation.

For information about the impact on victims and communities, please refer to the Riots Communities and Victims Panel reports (2011, 2012).

For an overview of the demographics of those arrested and sentenced for their role in the disturbances, please use the figures outlined in the Ministry of Justice's publications (2011, 2012).

The key findings from the Ministry of Justice are that:

- as of midday on 1 February 2012, 2,710 people had appeared before the courts in relation to the disturbances, and, of these, 720 (27%) were aged 10–17. Of these 720 young people:

¹ Details of the reports published can be found in the Reference section at the end of the document.

- 484 had been sentenced, with 176 (36%) receiving immediate custody. During 2010 as a whole, 5% of juveniles appearing before the courts received an immediate custodial sentence
- 62% had a previous caution or conviction, meaning that 38% had no previous criminal history.

Through matching data with the Department for Education, details of the educational background of 386 young people involved in the disturbances were analysed in October 2011. Of these:

- 66% were classified as having some form of special educational need, compared to 21% of all pupils in maintained secondary schools
- over a third were identified as having at least one fixed-period exclusion from school during 2009/10 (compared to 6% of all Year 11 pupils)
- 42% were in receipt of free school meals, compared to 16% of all pupils in maintained secondary schools
- 64% lived in one of the 20% most deprived areas, while only 3% lived in one of the 20% least deprived areas.

Additionally, the Home Office (2011), in their overview of recorded crime and arrest figures, found that:

- adults were slightly more likely to be arrested for acquisitive crimes than juveniles (62% compared with 51%). By contrast, juveniles were slightly more likely than adults to be arrested for criminal damage (8% compared with 4%) and disorder offences (30% compared with 19%)
- 13% of those arrested were gang members, although gang membership was not necessarily a factor in their participation in the disturbances.

These sets of figures provide a full overview of those arrested for their role in the disturbances, and sentenced in the immediate aftermath, up to the end of September 2011. However, the figures in isolation do not tell the story of what happened. A range of qualitative pieces of work have drawn up a remarkably consistent picture of the motivations of those who took part (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2011; Guardian-LSE, 2011; Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011 and 2012). According to the National Centre for Social Research's report for the Cabinet Office (2011), these motivations can be summarised as:

- **something exciting to do**
The disturbances were seen as an exciting event – a day like no other – described in terms of a wild party or “like a rave”. The party atmosphere, adrenalin and hype were seen as encouraging and explaining young people’s involvement by young people themselves and community stakeholders
- **the opportunity to get free stuff**
The excitement of the events was also tied up with the thrill of getting “free stuff”, things they wouldn’t otherwise be able to have

- **a chance to get back at police**

In Tottenham, the disturbances were described as a direct response to the police handling of the shooting of Mark Duggan, i.e. the way it was handled as seen as an example of a lack of respect by the police – common in the experience of young Black people in some parts of London. Outside London, the disturbances were not generally attributed to the Mark Duggan case. However, the attitude and behaviour of the police locally was consistently cited as a trigger.

How and whether participants acted on these motivations depended on situational factors that related to “on the night” group processes and dynamics, peer pressure and what young people saw happening around them.

The views and experiences of a group of under-18s sentenced for their role in the disturbances have been sought and analysed because in other publications their experiences have not been separated from other, older participants.

2. User Voice consultation: the experiences and views of young people serving community and custodial sentences

User Voice, a charity run by ex-offenders, was commissioned by the YJB to conduct a consultation with young people aged 10–17 serving a community or custodial sentence in relation to the August 2011 disturbances. A number of interviews were conducted, which aimed to explore:

- their perceptions of how and why the disturbances started in their particular areas, as well as who was involved
- how they got involved in the disturbances and their feelings both at the time and subsequently, taking account of the reactions of others (please see Appendix A for the topic guide used in the interviews).

A total of 25 YOTs and six secure establishments, who at the time were working with young people sentenced for disturbance-related offences, were asked in October and November 2011 if they would approach relevant young people to be interviewed by User Voice about their experience in the disturbances. Some YOTs felt unable to take on this responsibility, partly due to workload demands, but also because they were experiencing additional pressures from a wide range of disturbance-related research inquiries, as well as considerable media interest.

Some young people were less than enthusiastic about repeating their story yet again, with no obvious advantage to themselves.² Parental consent was required for anyone under 16 and all other participants signed informed consent forms prior to the interview. With the exception of one 15-year-old, all interviewees were 16 and 17 years old.

Focus groups were also arranged with a small number of young people (six) who had not participated in the disturbances – one in an urban area outside London and the other in a London borough. These focus groups, which were supervised by YOTs, specifically aimed to gather comparable young people's views on why disturbances did not spread to their area (for the non-London group) and why they did not participate in the disturbances that took place in their area (for the London group).

² Some YOT managers reported that many young people just wanted to get through their sentence and put the experience behind them. Young people involved in disturbance-related activities had also experienced an unprecedented level of interest from the media and other researchers; one YOT manager even reported that a measure of 'fatigue' was setting in.

All of the semi-structured interviews took place in October and November 2011 and were held in a private or semi-private space in the young person's respective YOT or at the secure establishment they were serving their sentence in. The interviews lasted 25–45 minutes, on average, and were digitally recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim.

The young people who were interviewed were guaranteed anonymity, so the following sections are written in such a way as to avoid any of them being readily identifiable. Where the young people are quoted, they are referred to by a randomly assigned initial and the area they came from, but no other personal detail.

The interviewees

A sample of 15 young people (seven in the community and eight in custody) agreed to participate in the interviews with User Voice. It is important to note that this is a small-scale study and the views of those interviewed are not representative of all young people convicted of disturbance-related offences. As such, the findings should be read as indicative only.

Of the 15 young people interviewed, three were female, 10 were aged 17 at the time of the disturbances, four were 16 years old and one was 15 years old. The interviewees were from a range of different ethnic groups, including White British, other White backgrounds, Black British, and British Asian.

Most came from London or Manchester; and while the six in London described separate incidents in three different areas of the capital, the accounts of the five young people interviewed in Manchester all related to events in the city centre. Two young people came from Birmingham, and one of these had been involved in an incident well away from the main area of disturbance. There was one interviewee from Liverpool and one from Leicester.

Eight of the 15 were first-time entrants to the youth justice system. The remaining seven varied considerably in the extent and seriousness of their offending histories (as self-reported to the interviewers). However, two of those recruited from custody had serious criminal records before they were involved in the disturbances.

The main offences for which the 15 said they had been convicted included violent disorder, burglary (non-dwelling), criminal damage, handling stolen goods and theft by finding – or a combination of these offences.

Most, when asked, said they had been involved on the first night of the main disturbances in their area, though one Birmingham case related to the second or third night.

Some of the young people were now at college or had been expecting to move from school to college in the autumn term following the disturbances, although one claimed not to have attended school since he was 12. Where information was available on their school careers, all but two had been excluded at some stage and five had been permanently excluded.

Most of the interviewees seemed to be living with their families of origin. Several young people said that they were living with their mothers, although six specifically mentioned their fathers as being part of the household.

As described below, many were involved in disturbances in town and city centres and had travelled there from their homes some way away. Many described the areas where they actually lived in very negative terms:

Scruffy, full of dole heads and cider heads, it's horrible ... You got to keep an eye out on your possessions haven't you because everyone's robbing you, you can't trust no-one about because they get the chance they'll stab you in the back as soon as you turn your back on them.

Young person K, Manchester

Too much gangs, too much fighting, too much everything innit. Too much drugs, too much everything innit?

Young person H, London

Several young people emphasised an attachment to their area, in large part because of family and the numbers of people they knew. They also drew a distinction between how it would be seen by outsiders and their own experience, referring in particular to the fact that they felt safe there because they belonged, whereas it would be dangerous for anyone from another area. By the same token, several recognised that they themselves would not be safe in certain other areas. For some young people, crime was not seen as area-specific, but a fact of London life.

Interviewees' general perceptions of the disturbances

The three main drivers for the disturbances that emerged from the consultation were succinctly described by one young person, who explained the events in Manchester as follows:

*A couple of people wanted to kick off with police because of what they do around here. Other people just wanted free s***. And some people just turned up, innit?*

The shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham was only specifically mentioned by respondents in London, but images of the disturbances in Tottenham appeared to be an important point of reference for what subsequently happened elsewhere. Some interviewees saw this as offering the possibility of action on a scale which would effectively render the police impotent, at least for a while. Seeing the police in this position appeared to be a source of particular satisfaction for some (who in a few cases actively took the opportunity to settle what they saw as 'old scores') but it also offered unprecedented opportunities for acquiring goods:

They [the police] stopped people going in the Bull Ring for the first bit, but there were so many people and the police weren't there, none of the police were there, so everyone could do what they want ... During the night no police would be seen, just the riot police but they weren't doing anything, they were just blocking it off [Interviewer: They weren't arresting people?] They couldn't because they were overpowered.

Young person A, Birmingham

They weren't like setting things alight, they weren't trying to make a point or something. It was just because they knew they had the opportunity because all the police were in [a neighbouring area] because they were setting fires and all that. They knew straight away that [it] was just an opportunity they could take and they took it.

Young person J, London

The respondents emphasised that those involved were of all ages:

We were the youngest people there ... There was one guy there who was about 50 ... The youngest there was 12 and the oldest was ... well the guy that was caught with me was like 45.

Young person M, Manchester

A few interviewees specifically complained about the way in which sections of the media seemed to have blamed the disturbances exclusively on young people:

They said it was only youths, [but] there were adults and people doing uni as well, not only youth.

Young person G, London

Adults, in the view of many interviewees, had not only been equally involved in the disturbances (and the looting in particular), some had been seen directly encouraging young people to engage in these activities:

It was everyone there ... I did see a couple of really old people there and a few little kids... I saw an older lady walking out of the shop with a stack of stuff. You see parents driving waiting for their people to come so they could put it in the car and drive off... There were a lot of older people ... you wouldn't expect to be there with good jobs wearing suits, they were putting stuff in nice cars and it wasn't just poor people. I don't think it's to do with where you're from or what sort of money you've got, it's about them getting the opportunity.

Young person I, London

Lots of adults were there as well, they were cheering us on. They were: 'Come on, do this, do this'. And they were the ones breaking into shops and that first.

Young person G, London

Several respondents in Manchester referred to the fact that the word was going around the night before predicting the events of the next day:

The night before the word was getting about with all these Manchester lads, all sides, south, north, everywhere. Everyone was talking about it. We're like: [...] nothing'll happen'. Because last time we were going to go for a kick off nothing happened, but the next day something happened.

Young person N, Manchester

For the most part, these broadcasts (which are described in more detail, in relation to respondents' individual involvement, below) seem to have been made via Blackberry Messenger (BBM). However, another young person from Manchester who initially replicated the account above, went on to explain that there was a switch of media, to avoid police detection:

BBM starts rolling and checking Facebook and everything and they're saying Manchester's going to happen tomorrow at six. So you wonder is it really going to happen and you think they won't really do it, but they did it. [Asked by the interviewer whether BBM was the main vehicle of communication] It was before but people stopped using it because that wasn't really it, it was more like by text and that, because the day before someone said the police are tracking it, everyone knows about it.

Young person O, Manchester

However, even in the case of those who later came to be treated as ringleaders, there is no indication that they were the originators of these broadcasts. The critical factor appeared to be whether those who heard the rumour chose to act on it in sufficient numbers to ensure that it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hence, the reference above to the fact that in Manchester "last time we were going to go for a kick off nothing happened" was echoed elsewhere:

When I first heard about the riots I didn't think it was going to go off like the way it did. Same old gas you know: everyone just chats.

Young person A, Birmingham

One of the young people interviewed said that activities during the course of the disturbances appeared to be orchestrated:

There were different parts of the group: the smashers, the grabbers, the watchmen. The watchmen were on bikes and looking around and they'd shout 'Police' and everyone just stops what they're doing and runs to another shop or something, smashes every window, they got bats and stones and stuff and the grabbers obviously just run in and grab stuff.

Young person O, Manchester

While young person O detected clear evidence of planning, others were adamant that the events were spontaneous. Many of the young people explained, however, that gangs were not responsible for the disturbances, even in areas which they had described as having significant gang problems. A few of the young people explained that many gang members were involved, but gang rivalries were suspended for the duration of the disturbances:

More than one gang was there but that night they were all against the police. They weren't organising it, everyone was just there.

Young person G, London

All the gangs hate each other, [but] for that day they all came together... That never happens! They see each other now – bang. But it [i.e. the truce observed during the riots] was weird.

Young person O, Manchester

Similarly, no respondents saw drugs or alcohol as playing a significant part in causing the disturbances. Some individuals admitted to being drunk when they took part, but others said that they were sober and they did not see any abnormal levels of either form of intoxication among the crowds they observed.

Young people's personal involvement

Immediate triggers for involvement

Most of those interviewed were already well aware of events in Tottenham from the media and, in some cases, of the way in which this sort of action had started to spread to other areas. Many were alerted to the fact that disturbances had started to take place in their own areas, or (as in the case of Manchester cited above) that it was expected to take place. These alerts (or broadcasts) seemed, for the most part, to come via Facebook or BBM, but word of mouth also played an important part.

I got like a BBM the day after the London riots ... Just to say there's going to be riots in town ...

Young person M, Manchester

Like I'm sitting in the house on me BBM. Then what happened, yeah, someone's, um, been broadcasting like 'anyone game for riots?' ... Then I'd be in my car like just deleting the messages and like, I got about 50 messages like broadcasting 'Who's game for rioting? Meet up by like the kebab place' – you know what I mean?

Young person D, Liverpool

In several instances this meant those involved consciously decided to make their way to particular areas, invariably in the company of others. Some went via public transport, some walked and one travelled in a friend's car. They gave different accounts of whether they, in turn, had summoned others.

Other interviewees, though, appeared simply to have strayed into these events on their way home from other places.

First impressions and taking part

Reference has already been made to the size and diversity of the crowds, as described by these young people, and their perception of the powerlessness of the police. Most had already seen dramatic scenes of the disturbances on television and via other media over a period of 24 hours or more, and now they were happening – or about to happen – in some cases, on their own doorsteps.

I went because I just seen what was going on and I thought 'yeah, this is definitely going on' – and you could see pictures, people putting display pictures, police getting bullied and throwing things at them and fighting the police. And it was really funny and I thought 'I want to be there'.

Young person L, Manchester

Several of the young people described the excitement being enhanced by an unusual sense of solidarity (as also reflected in the perceived co-operation between gang members who would normally have been rivals) and by the sight of the police being unable to stop what was happening, if they were present at all.

*I got there and you just see hundreds and thousands of people running out with things in their hands, glass breaking, constant noise. I thought I was in Grand Theft Auto – like I was there, I thought that it should be like this all the time. Everyone was happy, I know it was a bad thing that happened but everyone was happy that they was getting things, breaking up the police when normally the police break us up. Taking s***, we was taking shields from them and taking s***. Everyone was happy, I was happy.*

Young person F, London

It was just full of adrenalin. The power you felt because you could do what you want, no police could stop you, it just felt good ... It was like when you go to a theme park and go on a rollercoaster – that kind of good scared. Instead of fearing for yourself – it didn't feel real. You always see that in other countries and when it comes to England it's like 'Nah...'. But everyone loved it!

Young person K, Manchester

Based on the accounts from many of the young people, it appeared to be a situation in which a lot of other people (including adults) were already engaged in the same activities openly and on an unprecedented scale. Some of the young people interviewed seemed surprised at themselves, having gone simply to see what was happening but then having got swept up in the action, and they seemed amazed at the ready availability of goods.

Young person A, with no previous offences, described being very defensive when friends later expressed shock at their involvement:

It wasn't even like that! I didn't go there to loot, I went there to have fun, to be honest. Like I said, I don't have nothing better to do so why not, if there's something going on in town I might as well enjoy it ... I made them realise that I didn't go there ... to steal nothing. If I did, I'd have went in the afternoon.

Young person A, Birmingham

Among other things, young person A said that they would have dressed differently if the intention had been to get involved:

Town [Birmingham] was just like mad, there were people [wearing balaclavas] running around, smashing shops and there was riot police but they weren't doing nothing ... Because I wasn't planning on doing the riots in the first place, I didn't even have a hood. That was the joke about it – I had sandals ... But when there's an opportunity like that to get free clothes and everything that you wanted like, you can get it, why not? A few extra things on the side, why wouldn't you? There's shops getting broken in everywhere ...

Young person A, Birmingham

Some of those with more serious criminal histories, and who showed no remorse for their involvement, said they had been caught up in the moment rather than actively intending to get involved. Young person G admitted seizing the opportunity to get back at the police:

I was walking [home] and I saw my friends there and got carried away ... I wasn't expecting to see them [my friends] there. I thought the whole world was going crazy. I said: 'You all, what you doing?' And they said: 'It's riots – we're doing what Tottenham did.' ... Everyone just kept shouting my name, I turned around and someone said my name and I was just lost, like – I ended up getting caught in the moment ... [But] I would go back and do it again ... It was one of the best experiences I've ever had [because] I've been nicked 13 times and all that anger was just brought up that night. It let all my anger out ... And it was the fact that the police couldn't do nothing. It felt so good. I felt free. ... It's just a mad buzz.

Young person G, London

As he went home 'G' felt:

Tired. And I felt like I achieved something.

Young person G, London

Nonetheless, young person G cited their later arrest and charge as clear evidence that involvement was not premeditated:

Because I wasn't planning to, that's the reason I got caught. See, I wasn't dressed properly ... I wasn't all blacked up.

Young person G, London

Young person C had consciously agreed with friends that they would go into town to take part. This young person was almost the only person to admit arriving at the scene with conscious, though vague, criminal intent. When pressed on this by the interviewer, the young person said:

[I hoped to] just get money basically, that's how everyone was thinking, money, money ... Money and clothes.

Young person C, Leicester

In many accounts young people talked of simply following the movement of the crowd, with shops targeted randomly (because these had already been broken into) or simply in sequence.

When young person A was asked by the interviewer why they had burgled that particular shop, they responded:

Because it was getting broke into at the time [Pressed on the fact that it was not one of the shops closest to the point where they arrived on the scene]. It was where the crowd was going really. You followed the crowd. You can see everyone outside the shop and you can see it's getting broken ... [So it's] get in, get out, get some stuff, that's all it was.

Young person A, Birmingham

There was some consistency in the expressions of animosity towards the police, particularly among the young men interviewed. Some with previous criminal records recounted 'war stories' of police brutality both on previous occasions and during the disturbances – not only in relation to their subsequent arrest. Young person N (subsequently charged with violent disorder) claimed that the only reason they got involved was in reaction to the following events:

*A police officer was dragging a girl by her hair because she wouldn't move or something. And now I was at the front of the crowd and there's some black guy walking along and an officer turns around and licks him on the back of the head and his phone drops. And he drops on the floor. And he didn't do nothing, just walked past the police officer. So everyone's getting p***** off and I was right at the front, everyone's behind me throwing bricks and I was the last one to move back. And I wasn't moving. A police officer came behind me, punched me from behind.*

Young person N, Manchester

In London, young person H observed that "many people rob the shops" but that was of no interest:

No, no, no! I just wanted to fight with police.

Young person H, London

When young person H was pressed on this, they expressed dislike of the police and, like many in London, referred to being stopped and searched repeatedly. By contrast, one interviewee in Manchester was asked why the police were so disliked and said:

They are doing a good job, that's why everyone hates them though! They're always saying this is the law and they've got to enforce it and everyone hates it because no-one wants to do the law. The police say they have to and that's why they get hated a lot.

Young person O, Manchester

Getting caught and its aftermath

Whether young people were caught or not appeared arbitrary to most of the interviewees; it was a different experience for different individuals.

Several young people referred to the fact that friends who had also been involved in the disturbances had escaped arrest. One young person who had initially escaped arrest remarked on the irony of being found later on their way home with some stolen goods which had simply been discarded by others. So, rather than the more serious offences the young person might have faced had they been caught in the middle of the disturbances, they had now been convicted of theft by finding which, in their view, was "a rubbish charge".

While some young people said they were picked up by the police in the course of the disturbances, others were arrested from CCTV evidence, including having their pictures published in the local paper. In one of the latter cases, one interviewee believed it was someone they knew that "grassed them up" and strongly hinted that they suspected their own mother.

Those arrested at the height of the disturbances appear to have been remanded in custody or at least held in police cells for one or more nights. In two cases, though – one in Liverpool and one in London – the young people had first been taken to hospital and then into police custody. The volume of arrests seemed, to the young people, to have made the process difficult:

*And then we got to the police station and we were just waiting and we didn't get out the car for an hour. I was like 'We're here now, why can't we get off?' and they're like 'We've got 15 other vans in front of us full of people'. So that's when I clocked on (yeah?), they're gonna think this s***'s serious ... We was in custody for like three nights and they can't do that s*** – but it was that [...] packed, it was madness.*

Young person L, Manchester

Young person L, who was arrested on a very minor charge during the disturbances, had no previous convictions, but claimed to have been held in a police cell for four days. This contrasted with the case of young person C, who was arrested three or four weeks later after a picture appeared on the news. This young person was a year older than young person L, had a long record of previous offences and claimed to have already served more than one custodial sentence. By offending during the disturbances they had breached their current Intensive Supervision and Surveillance conditions. In this case:

I got police bail for a week to go to court I don't know why. [They] just said that all the prisons were full and the courts was all full.

Young person C, Leicester

There was no clear pattern to the way these 15 young people reacted to their convictions, their subsequent reflections on what they had done, and their perception of any implications for their future. Some gave contradictory accounts at different points in the interview. Some expressed regret and were concerned for their future, whereas others said they would do the same again, given the opportunity; and both of these reactions were found among those with previous offending histories as well as first-time entrants.

Of those with previous convictions, one young person (young person K) had little hope for the future, in part, because of a chequered school career and learning difficulties. The conviction had upset both their mother and grandparents:

It's been bad for her [K's mother] because I've been put away but she knew it was going to happen sooner or later anyway – but she didn't expect it so soon.

Young person K, Manchester

Young person K said that they would probably do the same thing again, and they were already getting into trouble in secure accommodation because of an inability to sit still and concentrate on anything. Yet at the same time, they recognised that there was no future without personal change:

But hopefully I'm going to try to get my head sorted out when I get out, because I need to get a job and get paid properly and that – because I don't want to be sitting on the dole all my life. It's not good is it?

Young person K, Manchester

Young person G, one of the interviewees with the most hardened attitudes towards the police, said that their mother had now given up telling them off “because I've been arrested so many times before” and claimed that all of their friends had themselves been involved in the disturbances. They had now lost their place at college for this year and were uncertain about being taken on again next year. They said, without hesitation, that they would do the same again because of what they had heard about police behaviour towards some friends during the course of the disturbances.

Another of the young people in custody expressed regret for their part in the disturbances:

I think it was a spur of the moment thing. I don't think I should have gone but there's nothing I can do now. I regret what happened to the people who owned the shops, they were affected and they're just normal people ... [Asked about future plans] Go to college. I've got a good qualification and I should be able to go to college. I want to do business studies and I'd like to set up my own business ... in the West End.

Young person I, London

Young person I had not only been severely reprimanded by their mother, but had been housebound (“gated”) for two weeks. Friends had also “said I shouldn't have done it” and, although a younger sister knew what had happened “I don't think she tells people I'm in prison”.

Among those with no previous convictions, young person F denied discussing what had happened much with friends, for fear of incriminating them. Young person F's attitude towards involvement in the disturbances was regret at getting caught. They appeared not to believe that involvement in the disturbances would in any way undermine an ability to realise their aspirations, which were to “have a job, [partner], kids”.

Similarly, young person L said that getting caught was their main regret:

I felt quite gutted because I should have gone in the afternoon – because there was enough people in the afternoon and I wouldn't have got caught. But I just decided to go in the night, when there was less people ... and all the feds were there.

Young person L, Manchester

Young person L's mother had been, they said, "disappointed" but:

*Do you know, my mum's a bit s***, she said nothing at all. She did seem quite surprised when I was getting my tag fitted in because my brother was on tag there and she didn't want [me] to be on tag there too – the whole family on tags, you know what I mean?*

Young person L, Manchester

As for the future, young person L was sure that they would do the same thing again, although not while under supervision from the YOT.

Young people's views on preventing future disturbances

Despite some strong views on why the disturbances happened, young people often had to be pressed hard for ideas about what could be done to prevent them recurring. Initially, some of the young people interviewed expressed cynicism about politics and politicians, implying that they did not expect anything to change; and three young people offered no suggestions at all, in two cases on the grounds that they thought the disturbances were a one-off occurrence.

The two issues most commonly mentioned were the need for better employment opportunities for young people (including apprenticeships) and positive recreational activities. The thinking on both scores was summed up by one young person, who said:

Obviously I know it's hard now – but give teenagers the opportunity to shine. Give them something to do.

Young person A, Birmingham

In relation to the second of these issues, one young person noted that the recreational facilities that were available often had very limited opening hours. Meanwhile, young person G, who had a history of offending, was, by their own admission, regularly the subject of complaints while out with friends with nowhere to go:

Wherever me and my friends go, we get a 24-hour ban from that area for no reason, just because we're there. We get neighbours saying we're causing havoc when we're not.

Young person G, London

Young person G specifically wanted not only better facilities for young people to keep them off the streets but appeared to attach considerable importance to how these were staffed:

If there's a youth club at least you'd have someone to talk to, I mean staff. Because where there's no youth club you've only got your parents and you argue with your parents. The staff should be people who know the area themselves.

Young person G, London

The next two issues (which were each mentioned by four of the young people) concerned income and the Criminal Justice System. In one sense, the question of income was related to employment, in that low wage employment was unattractive. As young person N put it:

I want a proper job and proper money, not [...] £2.50 an hour.

Young person N, Manchester

Those involved in education also said they needed money. As one student put it, “with college coming up” in the autumn they would need new clothes as well as books and other items. They said that young people needed things to keep them occupied during the summer holidays, and being able to earn at the same time was an important consideration.

It was only young person J, sentenced for taking a stolen piece of clothing that was left outside their house, who highlighted the issue of the relative poverty which faced many of these young people. A shop which had been targeted in their area stocked expensive designer clothes:

After it had all happened everyone was laughing about it on Facebook because they ripped off ... it's like £380 for a pair of jeans ... We're in the middle of [area] and this ain't the wealthiest part of London and who's gonna buy that!

Young person J, London

There were four references to the Criminal Justice System in terms of preventing future disturbances. Two young people specifically referred to the police, one saying that the government could do nothing to prevent future disturbances, as the young person's only interest in the disturbances was to fight the police. The other reference to the police came from young person K, who had enjoyed the disturbances not least because it had provided an opportunity to “take the p*** out of the police” and the pleasure of being able to do whatever they wanted. Their main suggestion for preventing future disturbances was:

Make the police a better workforce [and] make the jails more strict, because they ain't a deterrent no more, because they're just too slack – it's just too easy. They should have harsher sentences and harsher police force. I reckon it would change [things] but until then nothing's gonna change.

Young person K, Manchester

By contrast, another young person argued that the severity of the sentences imposed on many of those involved was likely to prove counter-productive:

I think they handled it stupid – throwing everyone in prison ...

- 1) *the prisons will fill up*
- 2) *they [those sentenced to custody] will be waiting in there and as soon as they get out they'll do it again because they'll think 'I've gone to prison, [I've got] no life, might as well do it again'.*

Prison was a stupid punishment [in most cases, but] – in some cases maybe not.

Young person O, Manchester

Why did some areas avoid the disturbances?

This section concludes by looking at the ideas from the two small focus groups who had not participated in the disturbances (comprising three young people in each group) about what might prevent the disturbances happening again. This is combined with responses from the interviewees who had participated in the disturbances about why the disturbances happened in some places but not others.

The limited discussions within the focus groups of young people who had not participated could not be expected to provide any definitive answers to the question of why disturbances happened in some areas but not others. However, taken together with some of the accounts given above from young people who were involved in the disturbances, they offer some interesting insights.

It is important to note that, at the time of interview, all the young people involved in these discussions were under supervision by their local YOTs. In addition, they had all received BBM broadcasts predicting disturbances in their own areas. The fact that the young people interviewed were under YOT supervision, and that at least one was tagged, was itself an important personal consideration. Even those not inhibited by a tag saw no point in risking breach. This seems to echo the view of young person L, who said they might get involved in future disturbances, but not as long as they were under YOT supervision. More generally, though, the young people in the focus groups questioned why any other young person would risk imprisonment by taking part in the disturbances.

Those in the focus group outside London had particularly strong views about the damaging effects of the disturbances on communities and condemned acts of violence against people and property.

Both the groups of non-participants appeared to see the option of getting involved as taking risks simply to fight someone else's fight. Thus, one young person in the London focus group said they did not agree with "the way the rioting had spiralled from Tottenham", while the non-London group (from a predominantly White area) appeared to see the issues at stake as ones which affected the Black community.

Lack of interest was one relatively straightforward explanation for their decision not to respond to the BBM broadcasts. One person in the London focus group said "[I] couldn't be bothered to get out of bed" to join in the action in a neighbouring area.

Another key deterrent appeared to be the reaction of the police. The young people in the discussion group outside London spontaneously identified this as the main reason that, other than minor acts of vandalism, there had been no serious disturbances in their area:

The police were on it down here because they realised it was happening over there and I'm not being funny but as soon as that riot kicked off I've never seen so many policemen.

A few people did try and kick off but the police was on it straight away.

There was police at the bottom of the car park in riot vans, shields and that. All this other side of the field there was police with dogs, there was a helicopter patrolling. It all kicked off within an instant but the police just broke it up straight away.

Such was the impact of this that the group provided an example of the way in which the social messaging network (which others had used to incite a disturbance) was used to inhibit further disturbances. One young man recounted:

I sent a broadcast saying what's the point being on it [involved in rioting] when you're just gonna get locked up for it.

3. Feedback from youth offending team staff

To supplement the interviews that took place with young people, interviewers spoke to a small group of managers from a small number of YOTs (two from outside London and three from London) known to be working with young people serving disturbance-related sentences. These conversations aimed to explore:

- the extent to which the young people were typical or atypical of their usual caseload
- the picture staff had built up from working with these young people of:
 - a. how they had come to be involved in these events and
 - b. their reaction to the consequences of getting caught
- any other policy-related issues staff wished to raise, based on their own professional experience in relation to the disturbances.

In order to answer these questions, YOT managers consulted with their staff and asked them for feedback (including a profile of some of the young people they were working with). Some managers reported variable rates of response from staff, but all provided rich information by phone and, in four cases, by supplementary written material. In several instances, the interviewers had more than one phone conversation and additional email exchanges with these five managers, all of which contributed further to the range of material available. Two London YOTs provided supplementary written information, but no phone interview was conducted. The telephone interviews to provide feedback from YOTs or YOT staff lasted 30–90 minutes and were not recorded or transcribed verbatim.

The information provided by YOT staff showed considerable variation in the size of disturbance-related caseloads and also in the proportion of young people charged who were previously 'known' to the YOTs. However, because only a relatively small number of YOTs provided information, the experiences reported below should not be generalised to all YOT staff.

All of the YOTs who contributed material were promised anonymity. In order to illustrate patterns that were common to more than one YOT and to identify any factors that appeared to be locally specific, each YOT is identified separately by a letter.

The experiences of YOT staff

The disturbances and their immediate aftermath were a stressful time for the YOT staff interviewed. They had particular concerns about the young people already under their supervision, and several instances were reported of staff proactively trying to warn young people against getting involved – through the use of texts, Facebook, and other media – pointing out the particular risks if they were to reoffend or to be found in breach of any of the conditions of their

current order. At least one YOT worker also phoned parents and carers to urge them to keep young people at home during this time. YOT A (non-London), for one, is known to have already begun discussing how to improve this process if similar events occur in future.

The night and weekend courts set up to deal with the immediate disturbance cases were the subject of many concerns. YOT staff reported that they were taken off normal duties to cover these courts where young people from other areas were also being tried alongside adults and where the pace and volume of the work became very challenging. One YOT manager described such a court in London which suffered from pre-existing staff shortages. Given the strain of staffing Saturday and Sunday hearings, “a sense of exhaustion” started to creep in which affected communications and the process started to “break down”. This meant YOT staff were not necessarily called when they should have been and “kids were being remanded without us being involved”.

Once they were involved, the number of reports which YOT staff were required to write posed additional challenges, not least in the case of young people remanded in custodial establishments. Staff reported that the custodial establishments did not have enough space for interviews to be conducted in a timely fashion, and, in at least one case, the delays resulted in the young person being sentenced without a report. By mid-November, at least half of the disturbance-related cases in YOT B (London) appeared to involve young people who had been questioned and bailed twice to return, but whose cases had not yet been heard.

Not only were staff concerned about occasions when they felt excluded from decision-making, some also felt that their views were ignored at critical decision-making points in the process. At more than one court, staff had seen cases of young people remanded in custody despite the fact that, in some instances, these were first-time offenders and were not charged with serious offences. As one respondent put it, it was not as if “these were public protection cases” (i.e. cases where a custodial remand is essential because the young person is a danger to others and/or might interfere with witnesses). Some staff were particularly concerned when young people who were perceived to be vulnerable found themselves detained with other young people who were “in a very different league”.

At the sentencing stage, some decisions were seen by YOT staff as “incomprehensibly harsh” and imposed regardless of the input of the YOTs or by bypassing the normal levels of YOT engagement. Thus, there were examples of young people with very low risk assessment scores being given Intensive Supervision and Surveillance orders – which are normally reserved for persistent and/or serious offenders who are at risk of custody. One case was cited of a sentencer who wanted to impose an eight-month Detention and Training Order³ on a young man who was only involved on the periphery of events, without waiting for any reports. Elsewhere, in a court where sentencing was perceived by some YOT staff as harsh even in the context of the

³ Detention and Training Orders (DTOs) are sentences in which the young person spends the first half of the order in custody and the second half released on licence.

disturbances, three young people had already won appeals against their custodial sentences.

A further source of strain for staff was dealing with the reaction of parents and carers, many of whom were confused and distressed in these circumstances. Specific reference was made to their bewilderment when staff called in the middle of the night to ask them to get to court in time to see their child tried, especially when they had no obvious means of getting there. Staff reported feeling upset seeing young people they perceived to be vulnerable remanded in custody, which was compounded by having to cope with their parents' and carers' distress. This was especially the case where the parents or carers had no previous experience of the system and found it hard to believe that it was possible that their child could be sent to custody before even being tried.

Youth offending team feedback on the young people involved

How did young people get involved?

There was a broad consensus among YOT staff that young people's involvement in the disturbances was generally not premeditated, regardless of whether or not young people had a previous history of offending. The influence of older people may, in some instances, have influenced young people's involvement and this is discussed further below.

YOT staff said that, in many cases, the young people may have been initially drawn on to the streets out of curiosity and were then caught up in the moment. YOT staff made various references to young people finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time and to young people picking up on the excitement or 'buzz' when they found the events they had just been watching on television taking place on their own doorstep. For example, two cases were cited where young people had been on their way back home when they saw something happening and simply followed the crowd. Other young people were contacted by friends and initially just joined them to see what was happening.

In two YOTs, young people reported the mood they found on the streets as "exciting but scary". YOT staff said that the main type of offending the young people they supervised were caught up in was different types of property crime (from non-domestic burglary to receiving stolen goods), and that their actions were usually opportunistic.

In the aftermath of the disturbances, young people who might not have been anywhere near the disturbances themselves also got involved. Staff said some were convicted because they had bought looted items while others were found with stolen goods which they claimed they had simply been asked to look after for other people.

The most common influence discussed by YOT staff was the peer group, with young people describing how they had gone with friends to see what was happening or in several cases had been alerted to what was happening (and where) via text messages or BBM. In YOT D (London), however, there was evidence of adults and young people within the same family being involved. YOT staff reported that two young people in this area had been arrested at the same time as their parents on disturbance-related charges.

YOT staff did, however, make several references to parents and other older family members actively trying to ensure young people did not get involved.

Some had ordered their children to stay at home but the children had simply defied them. YOT staff also spoke about cases of parents handing their children in to the police. A young man with no previous convictions in YOT B (London) was described as living in a family “which seeks to instil pro-social values”. The young man claimed that he was asked by a friend’s brother to hide two television sets, and his stepfather, without hesitation, phoned police when he found them in his room.

Young people’s reactions to what they had done

There was almost no mention by YOT staff of young people denying responsibility for the offences they had been charged with, and there were no references to trying to excuse their behaviour. Several young people were described by YOT staff as remorseful, not simply for what they had done, but for the problems it had caused others, particularly their families, with some worried that their actions could result in the family being evicted from social housing.

A second young person in YOT B (London) who had been reported to the police by a parent/carer had, by his own account, been on his way home when the looting started and said that he had stood and watched others smash and loot two high street shops. After watching for a time, he decided to enter a grocery store. When his mother later found chocolate bars under his bed she questioned him and he admitted to looting. According to their YOT worker:

Z continues to feel ashamed, disappointed and fed up with his actions. It is my assessment that Z feels labelled because of the offence as he often says – ‘I’m a thief there is no point in trying anymore’. Z often hides his face when discussing the offence.

However, YOT staff in several areas referred to young people still failing to appreciate the seriousness of what they had done. While this is not uncommon with the young people they usually work with, it seemed that young people may not see their actions during the disturbances as comparable to committing the same offences in different circumstances.

One factor that may have contributed to this reasoning is the young people’s perception that a lot of other people were engaged in the same activity, including adults. Reference has already been made to the YOT staff reporting that most young people did not plan to commit offences. In many of the accounts, young people were initially described as standing and watching for some time before joining in.

Another factor could be the perception that committing offences against shops was not the same as committing offences against individuals. One worker in YOT A (non-London) observed that even young people she supervised whose victim awareness was normally good seemed to have far less appreciation of the impact of their behaviour in these circumstances. In addition to seeing these offences as almost ‘victimless’, some of the young people seemed to be using the scale of the disorder as an excuse – as in “everyone was doing it” (so, by inference, “why shouldn’t I?”).

On the whole, YOT staff reported that while some young people recounted their involvement with remorse, others simply sought to explain away their behaviour by reference to external influences.

4. Observations

The information published so far consistently points to the fact that the young people who participated in the disturbances were largely disadvantaged young people from some of the poorest communities in the country. Levels of special educational needs were high, and accordingly, levels of educational attainment were low (for example, Ministry of Justice, 2011).

It is important to note that this was a small-scale consultation and findings should be interpreted with caution.

The interviews that were conducted with young people sentenced for their role in the disturbances suggest that their motivations align with the categories used elsewhere (for example, Cabinet Office, 2011; Guardian-London School of Economics (LSE), 2011; Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011, 2012):

- to enjoy the 'buzz' and excitement
- to get free 'stuff'
- to get back at the police.

The interviews also point to the role of adults in encouraging and legitimising the actions and offences during the disturbances, and this is something that needs to be explored further.

Finally, the small number of interviews with a sample of YOT staff highlighted that, as well as managing the strain of the throughput in the aftermath of the disturbances, YOT staff took a proactive role with young people under YOT supervision, through using texts, Facebook and other media to warn them not to get involved. YOT staff said they were also on the streets looking out for young people under YOT supervision, reminding them that they would almost certainly receive a custodial sentence should they breach their current order.

It is hoped that the findings from this report will add to the wider discussion about the motivations and drivers for the disturbances, and about who participated and who has been sentenced as a result.

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Appendix A

Interview Topic Guide for use with Young People involved in the disturbances

Introduction

[To be provided by User Voice:

- Confidentiality/Consent Form
- Permission to record
- Biographical Questionnaire (to be completed at beginning of interview)]

Before we start, please note that I'm *not* asking you to tell me about any offences you may have committed other than the one you have been convicted for. And also that I don't want to know the names of other people you may have seen committing offences.

General

1. You said that you live in ... [??]. What's it like there?

Prompts:

Is it a good place to live? (If not, why not? If so, why so?)

Do you feel safe there? (If not, why not? If so, why so?)

[Only if they mention gangs: Are there many gangs in your area? Obviously not mentioning any names, can you tell me a little bit about them? How many? How organised? What size? Etc.]

2. As you know, a lot has been said and written about the riots, but you were there and have a unique perspective. I would what like to ask *you* about what *you* think about it? Why do you think it happened in your area?

Prompts:

What sort of people were involved young people, older people?

Do you think that drink or drugs played a part?

[Only if they mentioned gangs in question 1]

Were the gangs involved? (If so, in what way?)

Personal involvement

Turning now to your own involvement in what happened

3. Which disturbances were you involved in? Were these in your neighbourhood?
4. Can you tell me when you first found out what was happening?

Probe:

(If they heard from others) how they heard – i.e. directly in person/ call on mobile/ text/other social network.

5. Why did you get involved?
6. Do you remember how you felt at the time?

Probe:

What was your first thought?

Did you tell other people? (If so, through what medium and what was the gist of the message)

How soon and in what way did you first get involved?

7. Did you know most of the people who were with you?

Probe:

How well did you know them?

Would you normally spend time with them in the evening/ your spare time?

I'm *not* asking you to tell me about any offences you may have committed. And I don't want to know the names of other people you may have seen committing offences. But can you just tell me:

8. From the time you first got involved to the time you got arrested, where were you and what sort of things were happening around you?

Probe:

How did you feel while it was happening?

If they mention particular premises being targeted, why do they think those were chosen?

[Only if they have not previously mentioned gangs]

Do you think gangs were involved? (If so, are there many gangs in your area? Obviously not mentioning any names, can you tell me a little bit about them? How many? How organised? What size? Etc.)

Aftermath

9. When did you get arrested and what were you charged with?
10. Once it was over, how did *you* feel about having been involved?
11. What sort of reaction have you had from:
 - a. Your friends who were also involved?
 - b. Your friends who were not involved?
 - c. Your family?

12. Thinking ahead, what would you *like* to be doing ten years from now? How do you think that being convicted over the riots will affect those plans?

Finally

13. If the government wanted your ideas on how they could stop things like this happening in the future, what would you tell them?

14. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Thank you for your help.

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