

# Out of touch – a youth perspective

Sam Waterton and Kanja Sesay look  
at the policing of youth that underpinned  
the rioting

**W**hat caused the riots? Over the past months, politicians, radio presenters and journalists have all expressed their views, but what about young people? Clearly you would think that the very group blamed for the uprising would be consulted to hear what they think might help avoid repeated rioting in the future.

## Out of touch

The phrase 'out of touch' could not provide a better description of the government's comments and battle plans to tackle the 'riot issue'. Ken Clarke's description of rioters as a 'feral underclass' go some way in capturing general perceptions of the rioters as subhuman, beyond society and beyond hope (Clarke, 2011). In an interview, Iain Duncan Smith talks of the need to tackle gang problems, adding that 'a lot of these kids are desperate for a way out' (Nelson, 2011). Mr Duncan Smith rightly highlights the negative impact that gangs play in our communities, but fails to acknowledge the impact of the cuts which he and the government have implemented. In Haringey alone, eight out of 13 youth clubs have closed down, closing with them the opportunity of positive activity away from the streets and away from gang culture (Topping and Robinson, 2011).

Various organisations and individuals including Derek Barnett, the president of the Police

Superintendents' Association, have issued warnings that government cuts would impact heavily on the most disadvantaged groups in society with potentially explosive effect (Whitehead, 2010). With the advent of the August 2011 riots, these seemingly alarmist voices turned out to be prophetic, leading many to draw parallels with the Brixton riots of 1981 which took place in the midst of a recession and in an environment oppressed by heavy handed policing.

Even the government will admit that it's not the best of times for young people. In a time where youth unemployment has reached record levels, with cuts to youth services, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), an astronomical rise in university fees, and the increases in the cost of housing,

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were under 25 and unemployed. When young people have nothing more to lose, is it surprising that the social norms restraining people from looting – fear of a criminal record,

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community exclusion and time in jail – become less of a deterrent than they otherwise would be?

While the cuts are taking their toll, so too is the steady increase in police use of stop and search to target young people. 'Youth' from the 'wrong neighbourhood' or wearing the 'wrong clothes' are regularly hounded, humiliated and harassed by police while getting on with their daily lives. The unacceptably low 'hit rate' or 'arrest rates' only adds to the injustice felt by many young people today towards the police when only 10 per cent of stop and searches lead to an arrest (Delsol and Shiner, 2011). Despite rising knife crime,

incredibly half of all stop and searches are for drugs, mainly cannabis, while the supposedly 'exceptional' Section 60 power, which allows 'suspicionless searches' aimed at violence, only leads to arrest for dangerous weapons in 0.3 per cent of

cases (Povey et al., 2011). While the police spend their time targeting 'low lying fruit' and ignoring real community priorities; young people will continue to be criminalised, increasing distrust, disengagement and disrespect for the authorities supposedly here to protect – not persecute.

## Over-policed and now over-sentenced

Now disproportionate policing is transforming into disproportionate sentencing. Recent figures show that 45 per cent of those sentenced after the August riots have been jailed, in comparison to a 12 per cent custody rate for people sentenced of comparable offences such as affray, assault, burglary and violent disorder in 2010 (Bowcott, 2011). David Cameron, by association, is no stranger to public disorder as a member of an Oxford University group 'The Bullingdon Club', notorious for its acts of mindless

vandalism. When asked about the likeness between the rioters and members of the club he conceded that; 'we all do stupid things when we are young and we should learn the lessons' (Cameron, 2011).

Well, let's learn the lessons in a productive way and not through a riot induced glut of expensive, disproportionate sentencing which is pushing our jail system to breaking point. In this time of austerity, community projects, such as the remaining youth clubs in Haringey, are in need of volunteers and act as beacons of what positive collective action can achieve. Constructive community led 'pay-back' schemes put forward by Nick Clegg might provide an alternative answer (Clegg, 2011). Giving offenders a chance to repair and contribute to their communities while receiving employment support

for their future is much more productive than a stagnant, longer than necessary, stint in jail.

So what do we, as young people, want from police? Like most people really, we want to walk the streets without undue suspicion, to be protected when in need and to be treated equally regardless of our age, postcode or fashion choice. Like the rioters, we don't need a second or third chance; we need a first chance – an opportunity to contribute to our communities and to society as a whole. Listen to us; or lose touch at your peril. ■

**Sam Waterton** and **Kanja Sesay** have written this article on behalf of the youth members of *Stop Watch*, a group campaigning for better policing. For more information visit: [www.stop-watch.org](http://www.stop-watch.org)

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