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The effect of the 2011 London disorder on public opinion of police and attitudes towards crime, disorder and sentencing

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Abstract

How did the 2011 London disorder affect Londoners? This article presents the findings from a study on the impact of the disorder on Londoners' attitudes towards the police, sentencing, crime and disorder, using Metropolitan Police Public Attitude Survey (METPAS) data from the weeks before and after the disorder. The findings suggest that while public confidence remained largely steady, confidence is lower (and already was lower prior to the disorder) in those areas of London what were hit hardest by the disorder. We also observe a substantial shift towards greater punitiveness and authoritarian viewpoints following the disorder.

Key words: policing and public opinion, London disorders, punitiveness

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Introduction

During three long days in August 2011, London experienced what was described as the most serious disorder in a generation (HMIC 2011). Following a shooting in North London, it took three days of simmering resentment to explode into pitched battles between some members of the public and the police. During just a few days, widespread television coverage brought the looting and burning into the homes of Londoners and others around the world. Details of the hows and whys of the disorders have been debated by many forums (see for example, Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012). The purpose of this paper is to explore how the policing of the disorder impacted on the views of resident Londoners.

Government and other research on the disorder have thus far focused on those immediately caught up in the disorder: the participants and the victims. The disorder – through widespread on the third night in particular – was very locally based. MPS' own postcode analysis of the reported crime on the nights shows that just under 1% of the London postcodes were immediately affected by disorder or looting (according to police-recorded incidents) and less than .05% of Londoners reported being victimised.ⁱ Yet, the impact of the disorder was much wider, as it was the focus of 24 hour news, on site news coverage and continuous commentary during these days in August 2011.

In this article, we examine how the disorder affected the citizens of London with regards to their trust in the police and their attitudes towards crime, disorder and sentencing. We draw on data from the Public Attitude Survey of the Metropolitan Police London, a large-scale, continuous, population-representative survey of Londonersⁱⁱ. The survey was in the field during the disorder, and in the weeks following and leading up to it.

Background

The 2011 disorders were unprecedented in scale and media coverage in the UK. Traditional, new and social media intensively reported and commented on the disorder and its aftermath. Previous studies of police-related high profile events on public opinions of the police are few and provide mixed evidence as to their impact on the public. Weitzer (2002) studied the impact of the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in 1991 on public perceptions of the police, a case of racist police misconduct known to 85%-95% of the population according to survey data. Weitzer also studied the impact of three similarly mediatised and widely known cases of racist police misconduct in New York in the late 1990s. Weitzer found a fairly large initial impact, in particular amongst ethnic minorities. However, the observed opinion change was temporary and public confidence returned to its prior level a few years later. Miller et al. (2004) combined a media analysis with data from a police user satisfaction survey and a general public opinion survey over a nine-month time span. Over this relatively short time period, which was free of high profile incidents, the authors did not find evidence of a media impact on attitudes. Whilst media coverage fluctuated, public opinions of the police remained stable. The authors conclude that there seems to be a 'buffering' zone of public confidence, a certain range in which media reporting can oscillate without translating into changes in public opinion. Beyond media exposure, many Londoners will have had vicarious experience – hearing from family members, neighbours and friends – with how the disorders were policed, and one might suspect that this may have had an effect on their opinion of the police: Rosenbaum et al. (2005) found that vicarious experience has a similarly strong effect on trust in the police as direct encounters with police.

How has the London 2011 disorder affected public opinion in London? In this study, we examine how public confidence in the police, perception of crime and disorder, and attitudes towards sentencing compare in the weeks before and after the disorder. Confidence in the police can be defined as a belief about the competence and capabilities of the police to fulfil and act according to their specific roles. It can be decomposed into three dimensions: (a) perceptions of police engagement with the needs and concerns of the community and perceiving that the police represent and defend society's shared values and norms (b) perceptions of the police treating people equally, with fairness and respect in direct encounters (c) perceptions of police competence (effectiveness) in dealing with crime. Empirical studies show that these three dimensions are distinct yet related, and closely tied to confidence (Stanko and Bradford 2009, Bradford and Jackson 2010, Bradford et al., 2009, Jackson and Bradford 2010).

The study

We use survey data from the Public Attitude Survey of the Metropolitan Police London (METPAS). Face-to-face interviews are held continuously throughout the year, with roughly 1,000 interviews held per month and a total annual sample size of 12,000 respondents. The survey uses a random sampling procedure and is representative of Londoners aged 16 and over. The METPAS includes a wide range of questions on experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards the police and crime, and also collects socio-demographic data. In addition to the survey, we use Metropolitan police crime records of the number of incidents in each postcode and borough during the summer disorder in the analysis. The following survey measures are included in the analysis:

Public confidence in the police is measured using the standard single item question 'How good a job are the police doing in this local area?' Respondents are asked to answer this question on rating scale from 1='very poor' to 5= 'excellent'.

Self-reported changes in public opinion: Respondents are asked whether the policing of the disorder have changed their opinion of the police, with five response options indicating whether their opinion has improved, worsened, remained unchanged positive or unchanged negative. A 'don't know' response is provided.

The survey measures three components of trust and confidence in the police, trust in police community engagement, procedural fairness and police effectiveness with several items. Based on the set of items for each component we estimate a separate one-factor model for each of the three components using maximum likelihood estimation and, based on the factor loadings, calculate factor scores via the Bartlett method of regression.

Police community engagement: The score is based on four items. Respondents rate on a five-point scale to what extent they feel the police listen to the concerns of the local people, understand the issues that affect the community, are dealing with things that matter to the community and, finally, can be relied upon to be there when you need them.

Police fairness: Using the same five-point agreement scale, respondents rate the extent to which they feel that the police treat everyone fairly regardless of who they are, would treat the respondent with respect if they had contact with them for any reason, are friendly and approachable and are helpful.

Police effectiveness: Respondents rate on a seven-point scale how well the police are doing in tackling gun crime, supporting victims and witnesses, policing major events in London, tackling dangerous driving and responding to emergencies promptly.

Perceptions of crime and disorder: Respondents rate to what extent they perceive general crime, general violence, knife crime, drug dealing and using, vandalism and graffiti and teenagers hanging around are a problem in their local area. Responses have been dichotomised into ‘a problem’ and ‘no problem/don’t know’.

Punitiveness and authoritarianism: Respondents rate on a five-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ (with a don’t know option) to what extent they agree with the statements that ‘people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’ and ‘young people today don’t have enough respect for traditional values’.

In the analysis we use the following *socio-demographic variables*: gender, age, ethnicity, work status, police contact within the past 12 months (coded as ‘no contact’, ‘negative contact experience’ and ‘positive /neutral contact experience’) and victimisation of crime or anti-social behaviour within the past 12 months.

Results

Public confidence in the police, measured here with the standard ‘good job’ question, plays a central role in public support for the police and willingness to cooperate with the police. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents feeling the police are doing a ‘good’ or excellent’ job in their local area before and after the disorder, alongside the respondents’ (post-disorder) self-evaluation of how the policing of the disorder has affected their opinion of the police.

- TABLE 1 NEAR HERE -

Based on respondents’ self-reports, the way the disorder was policed has changed public opinion of police in 25% of the population. This pattern holds across age, gender, ethnic and socio-economic groups, including the group with the most strained relationship with police, young Black and Ethnic minority men under the age of 24.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, according to the ‘good-job’ measure, the disorder had no statistically significant effect on Londoner’s overall confidence in the police. This may be explained by the observed near 50-50 split between those who say the policing of the disorder has improved their opinion of the police (14%), and those say it has worsened their opinion of the police (11%). This finding suggests that the policing of the disorder has divided the public – a roughly even split between a more positive and a more negative view of the police as a result of the policing of the disorder, and most respondents (75%) feeling confirmed in their prior - positive or negative - view of the police.

Looking more closely at sub-groups of the population we find a pattern that is well established in the literature (Bradford 2011, Bradford et al. 2009, Flatley et al. 2010, Roberts and Hough 2005, Skogan 1990). Those who are young, of lower socio-economic status, of Black or mixed ethnicity, recent victims of crime or who have had a negative experience with police tend to have lower confidence in the police. Following the disorder, we observe a statistically significant 11% drop in confidence amongst those aged 35-44 (and a similar increase in the age bracket above) and an 8% drop in the confidence of the most well-off

socio-economic group (SEG a+b). However, these changes are still within a range that preserves the pattern in confidence described above.

In sum, our broad-brush indicators suggest that the disorder did change public opinion of the police for a quarter of the respondents. The sub-group analysis suggests that these changes were of similar magnitude across population sub-groups. On the aggregate level, these opinion changes largely cancelled each other out. Only the confidence of the middle-aged and high socio-economic status groups took a statistically significant knock. However, these changes are within a range that preserves the existing pattern of confidence being lowest amongst the young, less well-off, Blacks, victims and those with negative police contact experiences.

- TABLE 2 NEAR HERE -

Moving from a socio-demographic to a geographical perspective, Table 2 shows pre- and post-disorder differences in public opinion according to the number of police-recorded disorder-related incidents in a respondent's borough. Boroughs have been grouped into three categories: less than 50 disorder-related incidents (e.g. Hammersmith and Fulham, Kingston, and Richmond, the only borough with less than five disorder-related incidents), 50-100 incidents (e.g. Barnet, Brent, Camden, Islington, Redbridge) and those with over 100 incidents (e.g. Croydon, Lewisham, Lambeth, Haringey, Waltham Forest).

We observe a statistically significant drop in trust in police effectiveness in the boroughs with the highest number of disorder-related incidents, and a statistically significant decline in trust in police procedural fairness in the boroughs with low or medium numbers of disorder-related incidents. These changes are small in magnitude. Striking, however, are the differences in public trust and confidence in the police that already existed *prior* to the disorder: *respondents living in boroughs hit hardest by the disorder had substantially lower confidence in the police locally and London-wide prior to the disorder (and still do after). They also had substantially lower trust in police procedural fairness (treatment) and police community engagement prior to the disorder (and still after) – the two factors the confidence model identifies as the main drivers of overall confidence in the police* (Stanko and Bradford 2009, Stanko et al. 2012).

- TABLE 3 NEAR HERE -

Turning to the effect of the disorder on public attitudes of crime and disorder, Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents that perceive a range of crime and disorder issues as a problem in their local area, again sub-divided according to the number of disorder-related incidents in the respondent's borough. There are no statistically significant changes observed in public perceptions of graffiti, vandalism, teenagers hanging around, drug dealing and selling or knife crime being a problem in the local area. The percentage of respondents that perceive general crime and general violence as a problem in their area increased by a statistically significant 12% in the boroughs only mildly affected by the disorder. No statistically significant changes are observed in the boroughs that had a medium or high number of disorder-related incidents. Overall, there is no evidence that the disorder changed respondents' perception of crime and disorder problems. Rather, the disorder stirred punitive sentiments.

- TABLE 4 NEAR HERE -

Table 4 shows how the disorder has affected punitive and authoritarian sentiments. The percentage of respondents who strongly agree with the position that law-breakers should be given harsher sentences increased by between 9% and 16%, to a new average of 44%. We also find substantially greater agreement with the authoritarian statement that young people don't show enough respect for traditional values. These changes are observed across boroughs with low, medium and high numbers of disorder-related incidents. These changes in punitive and authoritarian sentiments are of remarkable magnitude; disorder and looting were experienced as an assault on social order, and the public reacts by demanding harsher punishment and by seeking affirmation of shared values.

Discussion

Our study finds that the policing of the disorder changed the public opinion of the police for 25% of Londoners. The disorder seems to have divided the public to a degree; among those who changed their opinion of the police, about half say they now have a more positive opinion of the police, whilst the other half says they now have a more negative view of the police. This split in public opinion reflects the complexity of the London 2011 disorder, its causes and the relationship between the public and the police. On the one side, the disorder exposed the rift between some groups of the population and the police and brought into media focus their deep-seated dissatisfaction with the way the police are treating them - not listening and responding to their concerns, the alleged racial bias of the shooting of Mark Duggan, and experienced racial bias in stop and search practices. On the other side, the disorder and looting constituted a real threat to persons, life, property and social order from which stems a forceful reminder of the need for a police service.

Yet, the majority of respondents reported that they did not change their opinion of the police as a result of how the disorder was policed, but felt their opinions of police were confirmed. Furthermore, the change in public opinion reported by 25% of the respondents is not reflected in the before and after (the disorder) measurements of confidence in the police. There are various reasons why this might be the case. First, it is possible that, because of the fifty-fifty split, positive and negative changes have cancelled each other out on the aggregate level. Our cross-sectional dataset does not allow us to empirically test this possibility. Panel data are required to establish whether individual respondents changed their individual opinions. Furthermore, it remains to be seen in future research whether the observed opinion change is lasting, or short-lived with a quick return to previously held opinions. Second, the opinion change might have been small – too small to result in moving a full response option up or down on the confidence measure. Third, self-reported opinion change might not have translated into a change in *confidence* in police. Trust and confidence in institutions are thought to be attitudes relatively stable in nature (Bradford and Jackson 2010, Barber 1983, Tilly 2005).

An important finding of our study is that preceding the disorder, overall confidence in police and trust in procedural fairness and community engagement were markedly lower in the boroughs that were hit hardest by the disorder. The MPS confidence model suggests that trust in police procedural fairness and police community engagement are key drivers of overall confidence in the police (Stanko and Bradford 2009, Stanko et al. 2012). This finding supports the hypothesis that low levels of confidence in the police erodes public support for police, and nurture the hate against police expressed in the anti-police riot elements of the London disorder (Jackson and Bradford 2011, Reicher and Stott 2011 – but see Waddington,

2012). Trust and confidence are an important pillar of police legitimacy and linked to people's willingness to cooperate with the police and willingness to obey the law (Tyler and Huo 2002, Tyler 2006, Tyler and Fagan 2008, Jackson et al. 2012). A lack of trust and confidence undermines the perceived legitimacy of police. Anti-police riots, disorder and looting are extreme forms of lack of willingness to cooperate with the police, and readiness to break the law.

Although the relationship between the public and police is likely to have been a factor in enabling the disorder and looting, the disorder will also have had deeper roots in feelings of social exclusion, perceived social injustice and the lack of prospects (Natcen 2011, LSE/Guardian 2011). This shows in the public response. Disorders are a threat to social order, and signal damage to the social fabric (Bradford and Jackson 2011). Rioters and looters did not show respect for the property of fellow Londoners, and arson threatened the lives of some. A significant proportion of the participants in the disorder were teenagers and young adults (Natcen 2011, LSE/Guardian 2011), and it is thus not surprising that our study finds an increase in the proportion of Londoners who feel young people don't have enough respect for traditional values. We also found a substantial increase in the demand for harsher punishment of law breakers.

Conclusions

Pictures of London burning flashed around the world. The Commissioner, in his preface to the MPS' reflection of the events those 'four days in August 2011' stated, 'I cannot conceive that there is a single person in this country who was not affected in some way by the events...' This article brings new insight into people's opinions of the police immediately before and after the events. Most Londoners experienced the disorder indirectly through the media. This does not diminish the impact of the events. But what is more striking is that Londoners largely affirm their commitment to policing. The data on those who have less confidence in the police are consistent and persistent. The areas where Londoners reported less confidence in police are the areas most affected by the disorder.

Finally, the differences in public trust and confidence in the police that already existed *prior* to the disorder exist following the disorder: *respondents living in boroughs hit hardest by the disorder had substantially lower confidence in the police locally and London wide prior to the disorder (and still do after). They also had substantially lower trust in police procedural fairness (treatment) and police community engagement prior to the disorder (and still after) – the two factors the confidence model identifies as the main drivers of overall confidence in the police* (Stanko and Bradford 2009, Stanko et al. 2012). As England and Wales prepares itself for elected Police Commissioners, public attitudes to policing will be watched closely by those wanting to oversee better policing service to local people. We must take seriously the opinions of those who report less trust, and we can – and must - design better ways of improving that trust (see Jackson, Bradford, Stanko and Hohl 2013).

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Table 1. Pre- and post-riot differences in public opinion of and confidence in policing.

<i>Percentages</i>	Police doing a 'good' or 'excellent' job locally		Has the policing of the violent disorder changed your opinion of the police?				
	Pre-riots 1 July - 6 Aug	Post-riots 9 Aug-30 Sep	Yes - for better	Yes - for worse	No - still positive	No - still negative	Don't know
Overall	63	63	14	11	60	6	9
Sex							
Men	63	62	13	14	58	9	7
Women	63	64	15	9	61	4	11
Age							
15-17	57	58	23	12	46	12	8
18-21	56	68	5	17	59	10	10
22-24	66	63	15	15	53	7	10
24-34	61	59	12	12	59	4	13
35-44	69	58	13	13	58	6	10
45-54	54	65	16	9	64	5	6
55-64	66	57	16	10	65	3	5
65-74	62	71	15	11	59	7	8
74-85	75	74	15	9	63	6	7
85+	74	76	21	0	63	16	0
Ethnic group							
White	66	64	15	11	60	6	8
Mixed	35	53	11	5	53	26	5
Asian	62	62	13	13	57	7	11
Black	56	58	12	11	58	5	14
Other	59	66	5	5	76	3	11
Refused	76	76	28	0	50	6	17
Black, male, aged <24	60	63	15	11	48	15	11
SEG							
a+b	72	64	11	15	67	3	4
c1+c2	62	64	14	10	61	6	9
d+e	61	60	14	10	58	8	8
Refused	62	66	19	10	46	7	19
Employment status							
Employed	63	62	14	13	59	5	8
Student	56	61	16	13	53	8	9
Housekeeper/retired	67	67	14	8	64	6	8
Unemployed/other	58	58	12	9	55	10	14
Victim of crime							
No	65	64	15	10	61	6	9
Yes	54	51	12	17	52	12	8
Contact with police							
No	66	64	13	11	63	4	9
Yes, negative experience	28	30	17	19	39	20	5
Yes, positive/neutral experience	64	67	18	10	51	12	8
<i>Legend</i>	Bold: Pre-/post riot difference stat. significant at 95% confidence level.		Grey shading: Small row sample size, n<50 cases. Interviews between 02/09/2011-30/09/2011 only.				
<i>Sample size</i>	3,077		1,039				

Source: Metropolitan Police Public Attitudes Survey, 2011. Weighted data.

Table 2. Pre- and post-riot differences in public perceptions of policing, by number of riot-related incidents in the borough.

	Pre-riots 1 July - 6 Aug	Post-riots 9 Aug - 30 Sep
Confidence locally*		
<50 incidents	65%	64%
50-99 incidents	68%	69%
>100 incidents	59%	59%
Confidence London-wide*		
<50 incidents	61%	61%
50-99 incidents	65%	64%
>100 incidents	56%	57%
Effectiveness		
<50 incidents	0.06	0.13
50-99 incidents	0.02	0.11
>100 incidents	0.06	-0.12
Treatment		
<50 incidents	0.09	0.25
50-99 incidents	0.19	0.48
>100 incidents	-0.01	0.00
Engagement		
<50 incidents	-0.01	0.07
50-99 incidents	0.01	0.19
>100 incidents	-0.21	-0.14

Legend: Difference stat. significant at 95% confidence level marked in **bold**.

Sample size n=2467. Weighted data.

* Percentage of respondents saying the policing are doing a 'good' or 'excellent' job

Effectiveness: factor score, min=4.91 max=2.02 mean=0.15 SD=1.19

Treatment: factor score, min=-8.6 max=2.51 mean=0.03 SD=1.02

Engagement: factor score, min=-4.46 max=2.15 mean=-0.02 SD=1.23

Source: Metropolitan Police Public Attitude Survey, 2011.

Table 3. Pre- and post-riot differences in public perceptions of crime, by number of riot-related incidents in the borough.

<i>Percentages</i>	Pre-riots 1 July - 6 Aug	Post-riots 9 Aug - 30 Sep
General crime		
<50 incidents	44	57
50-99 incidents	44	40
>100 incidents	49	46
General violence		
<50 incidents	34	46
50-99 incidents	32	27
>100 incidents	34	38
Vandalism and graffiti		
<50 incidents	41	50
50-99 incidents	38	33
>100 incidents	41	40
Teenagers hanging around		
<50 incidents	50	58
50-99 incidents	44	43
>100 incidents	48	49
Knife crime		
<50 incidents	14	15
50-99 incidents	15	14
>100 incidents	19	16
Drugs dealing and using		
<50 incidents	19	21
50-99 incidents	19	20
>100 incidents	20	21

Legend: Difference stat. significant at 95% confidence level marked in **bold**.

Sample size n=1420. Weighted data.

Source: Metropolitan Police Public Attitude Survey, 2011.

Table 4. Pre- and post-riot differences in authoritarian and punitive sentiments.

<i>Percentages</i>	strongly agree	agree	neither agree/nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree	don't know
"People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences"						
<i>Boroughs with <50 riot-related incidents</i>						
Pre-riots (1 July - 6 Aug)	29	38	18	8	1	6
Post-riots (9 Aug- 30 Sep)	45	36	13	2	1	3
<i>Boroughs with 50-100 riot-related incidents</i>						
Pre-riots (1 July - 6 Aug)	26	37	23	7	1	6
Post-riots (9 Aug- 30 Sep)	44	31	14	6	0	5
<i>Boroughs with >100 riot-related incidents</i>						
Pre-riots (1 July - 6 Aug)	36	36	17	6	1	4
Post-riots (9 Aug- 30 Sep)	43	37	14	4	<1	2
"Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional values"						
<i>Boroughs with <50 riot-related incidents</i>						
Pre-riots (1 July - 6 Aug)	26	46	14	8	1	5
Post-riots (9 Aug- 30 Sep)	40	41	11	5	1	2
<i>Boroughs with 50-100 riot-related incidents</i>						
Pre-riots (1 July - 6 Aug)	23	43	17	10	1	7
Post-riots (9 Aug- 30 Sep)	42	36	12	6	1	4
<i>Boroughs with >100 riot-related incidents</i>						
Pre-riots (1 July - 6 Aug)	30	37	16	10	3	4
Post-riots (9 Aug- 30 Sep)	41	38	13	6	1	1

Legend: Difference stat. significant at 95% confidence level marked in **bold**. Sample size n=3077.

Source: Metropolitan Police Public Attitudes Survey, 2011. Weighted data.

ⁱ This data is calculated using crimes flagged as related to the disorder. This is an underestimate, but it clearly demonstrates how localised the disorder was.

ⁱⁱ Five years of survey data is now housed in the University of Essex Data Archives, and will be deposited there on a yearly basis. The survey is continuous, reported quarterly, and has long term trends on confidence in policing in London.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that for some of the groups we must be cautious in drawing conclusions (e.g. the youngest and oldest age groups, ethnicity minorities), since the sample sizes for these groups result in uncertain estimates.