

The initial Metropolitan Police handling of the Tottenham riots shows a depressing failure to learn lessons from recent history

The deputy Mayor in charge of London's police authority and Scotland Yard's high command have both repeatedly claimed that nobody could have foreseen that an initial protest over the shooting dead of a black suspect in Tottenham would mushroom into a riot situation. However, [Chris Gilson](#) finds that recent history should have provided plenty of pointers to how deaths at police hands or in police custody can often act as triggers for wider outbreaks of lawlessness.



The philosopher George Friedrich Hegel once despairingly remarked: 'What experience and history teach us is this – that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it'. This quote certainly seems applicable to events in Tottenham on Saturday evening (6 August) when the London police faced an initially small protest over the shooting of a 29 year old man (Mark Duggan) by armed police two days earlier.

Credit: Lenin's Tomb

From the start, [doubts were quickly raised](#) over the circumstances in which Duggan was killed. Yet there were no senior officers available at the time of the initial protest to answer the many queries and issues of the crowd of family, friends and supporters, who were unhappy at the lack of communication about how Mr Duggan died. Subsequently confrontations developed between elements of the crowd and local police, which then quickly morphed into rioting. The long delays in Scotland Yard subsequently responding to this situation suggested vulnerabilities in their capacity to act, which then helped ignite 'copycat' rioting in other areas that same night, and in many other areas of London on subsequent nights.



Scotland Yard senior officers [defended](#) their response and along with the London deputy-Mayor Kit Malthouse, have repeatedly argued that no one could have foreseen that an initially peaceful protest over a single death at police hands would turn into a riot. Yet there is a long history of the suspicious deaths of ethnic minority people in police custody or at police hands, and sometimes other kinds of 'heavy-handed' policing, functioning as triggers for disturbances that morph into large-scale riots. This history stretches all the way back to the urban riots of the mid 1960s in the USA. My first Table here shows commonalities with two well-known more recent incidents.

Table 1: Major riot waves sparked by triggers

Riot	Year	Place	Trigger	Aftermath
Initial Tottenham riot, followed by copycat looting	2011	Tottenham, London, later spreading to many areas	Fatal shooting of 29-year-old black man Mark Duggan by police	Riot in Tottenham and later looting in other parts of London. Millions of £ worth of damage. 100 arrests, 26 police officers injured in the initial riot.
Civil unrest	2005	Paris suburbs and other towns in France	Three young boys escaping police, climbed into an electricity substation and were electrocuted.	2 deaths, 274 towns affected, 2,888 arrests. €200million damage.
Los Angeles	1992	Los Angeles,	Acquittal of police	Several days of rioting, 53

riots		USA	officers of the severe beating of Rodney King	deaths, 2,000 injured. \$800million – \$1billion damage
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Most of the tactics used by rioters in Tottenham that the London police found so hard to combat were also strongly foreshadowed in the 2005 French disturbances – especially the arson of cars and odd buildings, and the rapid movements of ‘feral’ youths from one area to another.

Paris 2005

London 2011

Credit: Beacon Radio (Creative Commons NC)

Looking further back in British history, the Metropolitan Police should also have been aware of an apparent ‘electoral-riot’ cycle pattern in the UK that occurred under the last Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Here severe disturbances broke out in ‘stressed’ urban areas after periods when Tory governments severely squeezed public spending at times of high unemployment, almost invariably during the mid-years between general elections. Again Table 2 shows that the triggers were always incidents that imperil the legitimacy of policing with some sections of local communities.

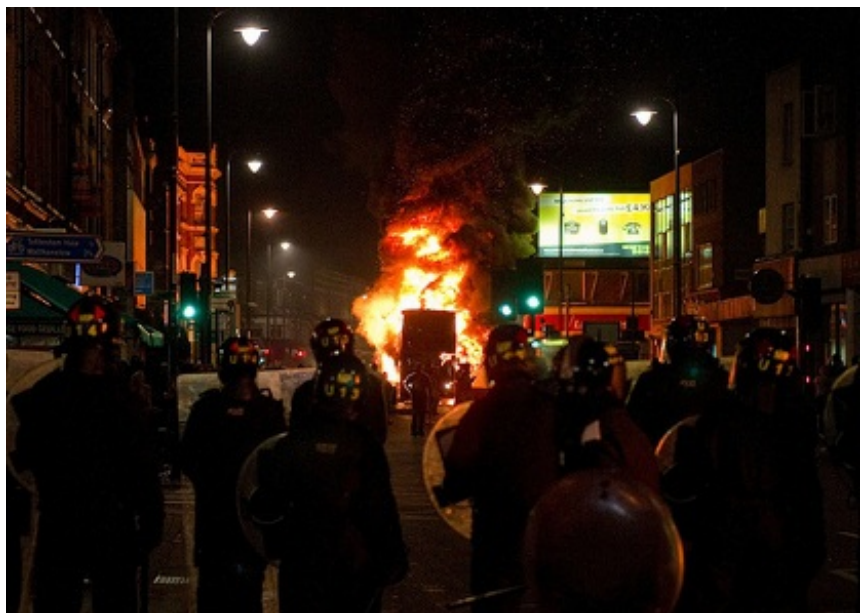


Table 2: Key events in the electoral/riot cycles during the 1979-97 period

Riot	Year	Place	Trigger	Aftermath
Brixton riots	1995	Brixton, London	Death of black 26 year old, Wayne Douglas, in police custody	Standoff between 100 demonstrators and police. Police attacked, shops, cars damaged.
Broadwater Farm riot	1985	Tottenham, London	Brixton riot; Death of Cynthia Jarrett during police search of her home.	Day of rioting, murder of PC Keith Blakelock by rioters. 3 convicted of murder, but later cleared due to lack of evidence.
Brixton riot	1985	Brixton,	Shooting of Jamaican	48 hours of riots, 1 building

		London	Dorothy Groce by police while seeking her son on firearms offences	destroyed. The police officer who shot Groce was acquitted of malicious wounding.
Brixton riots	1981	Brixton, London	Police thought by crowd to have not been getting medical help for a stabbed black youth.	364 injuries (299 police), 82 arrests, 28 buildings destroyed. The Scarman report later found indiscriminate use of 'stop and search' powers by police.
Toxteth riots	1981	Toxteth, Liverpool	Heavy handed arrest of young black men under 'SuS law'	9 days of riots, 1 death, 468 police injured, 500 arrests, 70 buildings destroyed
St Paul's riot	1980	St Paul's, Bristol	Tension over stop and search of young black men ('SuS law')	90 charged. 19 police injured. All those prosecuted were acquitted.

Of course, under the last Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown there were strong efforts to improve policy-community relations and to improve social cohesion. All of the riots listed in Table 2 were triggered by the heavy handed policing of young black men, and strenuous efforts at police-community liaison were subsequently made to stop such problems recurring, which for more than a decade seemed to have succeeded. So perhaps the Metropolitan Police felt that this was an era that lay behind them. Yet different warning signs of deteriorating relations with youths in many communities [were also evident](#). And policies such as the [abolition of the Educational Maintenance Allowance](#) for 16 to 18 year olds directly affected the urban youth cohort.

However, Table 3 below shows that there have been some deaths at police hands which did not spark unrest or riots, and for which no policemen have yet been convicted in UK courts.

Table 3: Deaths at police hands

Event	Year	Place	Trigger	Aftermath
Death of Iain Tomlinson during G20 protests	2009	City of London	Tomlinson struck by police officer and fell. Died of injuries soon after.	Inquest jury found 'unlawful killing'. PC Simon Harwood to stand trial for manslaughter.
Shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes	2005	Stockwell, London	de Menezes shot by plain clothes police who suspected he was a terrorist.	Jury returned an open verdict. Legal settlement with family reached.
James Ashley	1998	St Leonards, East Sussex	Shot dead by police while unarmed	Enquiry found evidence by chief officers to conceal information. Five officers later found not guilty of the killing.
Death of Blair Peach, allegedly by police	1979	Southall, London	Anti Nazi League Demo against National Front	Report concluded he was killed by police, but killer impossible to identify.

However, even in cases where there was apparently there was no little or no damage to police-community relations, the reputational effects may linger for years. An example was the 2005 'execution' style shooting of the unarmed [Jean Charles de Menezes](#) at close range in Stockwell tube station by Met officers, who mistakenly formed the view that he was a terrorist. A key element in sparking the initial disturbances over Mark Duggan's death were completely unfounded viral rumours that he too was the subject of an 'execution style' shooting – rumours which the Independent Police Complaints Commission only denied after the first riot had occurred.

Finally, it seems beyond coincidence that the past weekend's riots have come at a bad time for the top command of the Metropolitan Police, some of whose officers were heavily implicated in the recent News of the World [phone hacking scandal](#), clearly raising issues for [police governance](#). Last month saw the resignations of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police, Sir Paul Stephenson over an expenses issue,

and Assistant Commissioner John Yates because of failure to investigate the News of the World scandal. (In October 2008, less than three years before the loss of Stephenson, London mayor Boris Johnson forced out his predecessor as Commissioner, Sir Ian Blair). The Home Secretary Theresa May also announced a [review](#) by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary into police corruption and the relationship between police and the media, focusing on the Met.

Add in the absence of all the senior ministers in the government on holiday at the same time, and the extraordinarily reluctant stance of London Mayor Boris Johnson, the PM David Cameron and the Home Secretary Theresa May to end their vacations early, and it seems that the police were not the only decision-makers who seem to have learnt little from past history.