



Young people and the 2011 'riots' in England – experiences, explanations and implications for youth work

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Introduction

Street disturbances such as those which broke out in a number of cities in August are a part of English history – as is the panic that followed. In a well-known book *Hooligan: A history of respectable fears*, Geoffrey Pearson charts how, over 400 years, there have been repeated panics about criminal behaviour and 'feral' or troublesome children and young people[2]. While the scale of events may have taken policymakers and the popular press by surprise, the fact they occurred should not shock us – and certainly didn't surprise many youth workers on the ground.

Initial responses to the disturbances were also predictable. On the one hand there were those who wanted to punish rioters severely, on the other those who saw rioters as victims. The language was of moral collapse and broken Britain or of poverty and inequality.

This paper explores some key aspects of what happened, explanations of what may have contributed to the disturbances, and the implications for youth work. As we will see, it is best to avoid notions such 'broken Britain' and simplistic linkages to reductions in government expenditure on young people and youth work if we are to find sensible solutions.

Protesting, rioting, looting, doing damage and spectating

The disturbances can be seen as one of the most serious instances of civil unrest in a generation. More than 3,000 people were arrested and five people died. To understand what happened it is necessary to separate out five different but overlapping behaviours in the events of August 6-10th, 2011.

First, there was **protest**. Born of specific concerns and anger around the shooting by the Metropolitan Police of Mark Duggan close to Tottenham Hale Station on August 4th, a group of around 120 people marched from Broadwater Farm to Tottenham police station – and remained there dissatisfied with the response they received. In particular, there were concerns about the manner of the shooting (and whether 'race' played a part); and what was perceived by his family and some local people as a failure by the local police force in keeping them informed of developments. At this early stage fears were expressed by local community leaders that rioting could occur[3]. Protest was present in what then followed, but had various dimensions. The police remained the most significant focus for protest - and this was reflected in some of the chanting etc. directed at them. In particular, experience of police practices such as 'stop and search' appears to have been an important motivation for activity[4].

Second, we find **rioting**. The first disturbances occurred after the initial protest. However, from the second night on we saw significant numbers of young people taking to the streets in some poorer neighbourhoods in London[5]. While there was some looting, a great deal of the activity was aimed at gaining control of certain areas (often for a short period of time) from the Police and, more generally, 'sticking

two fingers up' to authority. There was some debate in the midst of things as to whether this activity constituted 'riot' – a violent disturbance of the public peace by people assembled for a common purpose. The behaviour was certainly riot in its original sense – dispute and quarrel – and harks back to another possible root of the word, the Latin to roar (*rūgīre*). One of the new elements was the ability of the 'rioters' to organise activities via messaging particularly via BlackBerry Messenger (BBM).

Third, and attracting much media attention, was **looting**. It was a feature of the disturbances from the first night – but grew in intensity. Much of looting appears opportunistic and to have happened because people elsewhere had shown it could be done. In London, much looting took place in or close to the neighbourhoods where those involved lived (the main exception here being Ealing, although even here there was significant local participation). A contrasting picture emerged in Birmingham and Manchester where people appear to have travelled into the city centre from quite distant neighbourhoods to join in the looting and disturbances. A certain proportion of the looting was organised and targeted.

Fourth, significant **damage** was done to property and to businesses. Such damage was summed by two images - both of fire destroying buildings – Union Point Tottenham and Reeves Corner, Croydon. At least 100 families were made homeless[6]. A report in the Financial Times suggests that around 48,000 local businesses suffered financial losses as a result of the disturbances. It is thought that the cost of compensation in London alone could be around £300 million[7].

Last, there were significant numbers of younger people **spectating**. The unusual nature of what was happening, the spectacle and excitement, drew many to the areas where action was occurring (or about to occur). With rolling news coverage, they were joined by large numbers of people sitting at home. Spectating – looking on - was an important aspect of what happened. Knowledge that there was an audience for disturbance – and one that spread well beyond the immediate situation - may well encouraged further action. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there appears to have been an element of 'let's show them' in some of the events [7a].

Who was involved?

One of the problems when trying to make sense of all this is that much of the focus in coverage has been on looting. To some extent it was 'news'. The scale of the looting compared to the previous rounds of disturbances was worthy of attention – but it does mean that much of the data we have derives from arrests made around this element.

From this data we can say that most of those arrested were young adults, male and from poor neighbourhoods.

- In an initial analysis of those who came to court in the first week, Alex Singleton (2011) found that 41% of suspects living in one of the top 10% of most deprived places in the country. The data also shows that 66% of neighbourhoods where the accused live got poorer between 2007 and 2010. Very few of those appearing in court had jobs or were students (around 9% in total of the first 1000 cases). The Institute of Public Policy Research (2011) found that in an overwhelming majority of the worst-affected areas, youth unemployment and

child poverty were significantly higher than the national average while education attainment was significantly lower[8].

- When the first thousand cases are examined we find 66% of those who have appeared in court are aged under 25. 17% aged between 11 and 17. A very small number were aged over 30. More than 90% are male.
- Ethnicity and 'race' form a further feature that must be addressed. Unlike some of the disturbances in the early 1980s the August events did not, on the whole, pit one ethnic community against another, although there were some exceptions, for example in some aspects of events in Birmingham and Ealing, and implicitly, Eltham. However, many of the poorer neighbourhoods affected have large 'black' populations. Ministry of Justice and Home Office analysis showed that 46% of defendants were 'black', 42% 'white' and 7% 'Asian'. At one level this could be expected given the nature of the initial incident and protest – and the extent to which 'stop and search' has been directed against 'black' young people[9].

If we look at those involved in the rioting and immediate spectating there is some anecdotal evidence (from workers etc.) that a different demographic applies. A larger number appear to have been aged between 11 and 17 (although this needs some careful checking).

The role of gangs

A great deal of media attention and political comment has focused on the role of gangs. Here it is probably worth defining what is meant here. Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young have defined a gang as follows:

A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity.[10]

Most young people join such gangs between the age of twelve and fourteen – but not all those involved with gangs are members. Many of the gangs active today began in the 1980s[11].

In London it was said initially that around 25 per cent of those arrested were connected with gangs. This figure has subsequently dropped to 19 per cent (337 suspects from 169 different gangs). Outside London less than 10 per cent were identified as being gang members. Most forces report that gangs did not play a 'pivotal role'. One of the knock-on effects of this has been an increase in gang activity in prisons. The Chief Inspector of Prisons has reported a significant rise in young people on suicide watch, and that prison service staff 'were seeing changes in gang activity with some young people joining up despite having no previous involvement. The key motivation appeared to be self-protection as the established prison population turned on newly-arriving inmates'[12].

The Metropolitan Police have identified just under 200 gangs operating in London – and these are said to be responsible for a fifth of all youth crime. They were found to have around 20 to 30 members[13]. The total youth membership of London gangs is probably no more 2000 according to one report[14]. Around 40 per cent of members are reluctant or occasional affiliates[15].

Local evidence suggests that gangs were involved in organising some of the targeted robberies of specialist stores e.g. concerned with electronics and sportswear. These

robberies have some of the hallmarks of ram-raiding in the 1980s. There is also some anecdotal evidence of members orchestrating disturbances in other locations in order to distract police attention.

One of the significant aspects of the rioting that took place is the way in which groups and gang members from different postcodes and neighbourhoods who are normally antagonistic to each other joined to combat a common foe (the police)[16].

Care needs to be taken around over-emphasising the role of gangs. They are an aspect of the situation – but we need to look well beyond them to appreciate what happened in the August disturbances.

Some explanations

Five main strands have appeared in explanations of why the disturbances happened. It is, however, necessary to issue an initial warning:

- Several things were happening at once – each with different elements – there is no satisfactory single explanation for what occurred.
- Deep-seated economic, social and cultural change combined with flawed policies and approaches concerning young people and marginalised neighbourhoods, and with some initially counter-productive responses, to create an explosive mix.

Inappropriate policing

There are two important aspects to explanations involving policing – one long-term; the other to do with reaction to the events of August 6th-10th.

Long-term policing practices. One of the central elements in what young people involved in the disturbances have said (see below) concerns their long-term experience of policing in the neighbourhoods where they live. Two particular dimensions stand out – what is perceived as the overuse of 'stop and search' and 'stop and account' (especially with young 'black' men), and degree to which young people are criminalised for being together on the street. As an Equality and Human Rights Commission review found, a number of police forces have been using 'stop and search' tactics in ways that are disproportionate and possibly discriminatory[17].

The figures are stark: if you are black, you are at least six times as likely to be stopped and searched by the police in England and Wales as a white person. If you are Asian, you are around twice as likely to be stopped and searched as a white person[18].

The Commission concluded that the evidence suggests racial stereotyping and discrimination remain significant factors behind the higher rates of stops and searches for black and Asian people than white people.

Alongside 'stop and search' there are number of practices and policies that have caused considerable resentment among key groups of young people. For example, dispersal orders (under the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003) have been disproportionately used against groups of young people. As one investigation found, dispersal orders can 'antagonise and alienate young people who frequently feel unfairly stigmatised for being in public places'[19].

The events of August 6th – 10th provided an opportunity for payback. The failure or inability to mobilize sufficient numbers of

police trained to handle street disturbances created the chance to 'get one over on the police' or to 'payback' (see below). More than anything 'payback' appears to have been a, probably the, key motivating factor in terms of the rioting element of the disturbances. Different local experiences of policing may help to explain why a number of areas with similar levels of deprivation did not witness significant disturbances.

Reaction to events. A certain amount of criticism has been directed at the way that local police handled the situation surrounding the shooting of Mark Duggan. This included what was seen as a failure to keep the family informed of what was happening, and issuing incorrect information concerning the shooting. Taken together, these may well have inflamed the immediate local situation.

A further area of criticism concerns the failure to scale up and strengthen the police response on the second night of disturbances. In the wake of criticism of the policing of the student demonstrations earlier in the year (especially of kettling [corralling] and the handling of demonstrators and onlookers) care was being taken not to inflame situations. When this was combined with not having enough police on the streets on the second night, the rolling news channel coverage included a lot of material focusing on police retreating or having to stand by while looting and rioting took place. This could have been a factor in generating copy-cat activities the next night. It certainly enraged government ministers who then took the opportunity to present themselves as pushing police services into stronger action and to set out an agenda for reform. Senior police officers and representatives of rank and file police officers reacted angrily - and quite understandably - to this. They argued that operational

independence should not be compromised, and that it takes time to scale up and alter the response.

Two things are worth noting here. First, there had been a major and largely unpredicted shift in the direction of the disturbances towards looting – and this required a different tactical response. Second, while messaging was a feature of the earlier student riots and demonstrations, it provided a major tactical headache during the August riots. Messaging facilitated the orchestration of disturbances and criminal activity and the stretching of police responses.

An earlier, stronger police intervention may have reduced the scale of looting – but there has to be some doubt about this. There are lessons to be learnt about the handling of potentially inflammatory incidents; intelligence and the monitoring of messaging etc.; and the range of tactical responses open to officers. Along with this there remains important worries about the use of 'stop and search, and dispersal orders and similar instruments and practices. This said, there were strong social forces at work which were going to surface as an 'explosion' – and will continue to find violent expression unless they are properly addressed.

Inequality and materialism

One of the striking features of recent research is that feelings of happiness (and more concrete indicators of well-being) weaken the wider the differences in rich and poor in a country. In other words, the higher the level of inequality in a society, the more likely its members will be unhappy. This is of special significance for the United Kingdom where the gap between rich and poor is now very similar to Victorian times and is one of the widest in the 'developed' world – second only to the

US[20]. Children and young people appear to have suffered significantly as a result. Researchers involved in a major UNICEF initiative made a comprehensive assessment of the lives of children and young people in 21 nations of the industrialized world. They issued a 'Report Card' to encourage monitoring, to permit comparison, and to stimulate the discussion and development of policies to improve children's lives[21]. The United Kingdom and the United States find themselves in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions reviewed.

With the world banking crisis of 2008, the associated rise in unemployment, and the large-scale cutbacks in public education and welfare from 2010 onwards, economic inequality appears to be growing. Moreover, it is children and young people who have disproportionately borne the burden of this. For example, in 2009 around 2.2 million children lived in absolute poverty. A situation that was further exacerbated by the fact that parenting in the sorts of neighbourhoods we are focusing in here 'requires more money than it does in less urban areas and low-income parents struggle to meet even basic costs for their children'[22]. Projections produced by the Institute of Fiscal Studies indicate that by 2015 the number of children living in absolute poverty will rise to 3 million[23].

There are some profound costs to this. As Offer has commented, 'being low down the scale of absolute income is associated with misery – with shorter lives, bad health, discrimination, poor education, incarceration and other detriments'[24].

Wrapped up with this is the impact of materialism. As another recent UNICEF research report put it, 'materialism is thought

to be a cause, as well as an effect of negative well-being, and countries that have higher levels of inequality are known to score lower on subjective wellbeing indicators'[25]. Looking at the experience of children in the UK, Sweden and Spain, they concluded:

It seems that children are more likely to thrive where the social context makes it possible for them to have time with family and friends, to get out and about without having to spend money, to feel secure about who they are rather than what they own, and to be empowered to develop resilience to pressures to consume.

At the same time, the possession of 'status technology' like particular phones, and the wearing of certain clothing brands play an important part in 'creating or reinforcing social divisions between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots''. Parents in the UK report feeling under tremendous pressure to buy goods for their children (often against their better judgement). Not unexpectedly, this pressure was most strongly felt in low-income homes. It appears that many families in the UK tend to use 'the purchase of new material objects (particularly new technology) in an attempt to compensate for relationship problems and social insecurity'.

What the events of early August provided was a short-lived opportunity for some young people both to gain status items ('get free stuff') and to 'get out and about without having to spend money'! However, we should not push the focus on status items too far. A number of those looting were looking for more basic items like food.

Moral collapse

A third aspect of discussion of the August disturbances concerns moral collapse - signs of a decline in the ability to tell right from

wrong, and to act appropriately. This discourse is not confined to describing the activities of rioters. The widespread abuse of the expenses system by MPs; the endemic invasion of privacy by the UK press, most significantly the News of the World; and the failure of bankers and fund managers within certain parts of the financial system to work to proper standards – and the role this had in creating recession – have all been the focus of public debate and comment. In each case there has been an emphasis upon private gain at the expense of the whole and the use of practices that were either illegal or lacked moral responsibility. The result, it can be argued, has been a significant decline in confidence in the abilities of those in these important sectors – and in their readiness to act for the good of society.

The example of MPs, newspapers, and elements of the financial system set a tone it could be argued. Their actions were cited by some of those involved in the August disturbances as a justification for their activities. However, there has also been comment in the media about shifts in value systems and behaviours amongst those living in poorer and more marginalized neighbourhoods. Part of this has centred around the extent to which people expect, and have become dependent upon, state financial support – and to place responsibility for their situation on others. This is often contrasted with the ways in which those that do work or are prudent with their money are penalized.

Whether this represents a moral collapse is doubtful. There have always been those ready to exploit people and situations with little or no care for the harm it does to others or the morality of their actions. However, with secularization, the growth of competitive individualism, and the decline of key mass membership organizations like unions and

political parties, many people have less access to social environments where moral questions and collective responsibility are directly addressed.

Social breakdown

There have been changes in the experience and nature of households in poorer areas over the last decade or so – but whether this constitutes social breakdown is also a matter for some debate.

First, there has been a significant reduction in household size and a change in the nature of local populations. This has a number of causes as Rogers and Power comment:

... more elderly people are surviving, but they are living separately from their children; later marriage and childbearing; fewer children per family; more broken marriages and more lone parents; more economic independence for women.

They continue:

The effects are starker in cities because childless households and lone-parent families are concentrated there. Cities attract young people and new immigrants, but tend to lose established working families. They also retain an elderly, 'left-behind' population.[26]

Second, the proportion of dependent children in Great Britain living with a lone parent has almost doubled over the last twenty years (from 14 per cent in 1986 to 24 per cent in 2006[27]). This has a number of important implications for the experiences of children and young people. First, the households they are living in are poorer. Second, there tend to be more problems in parent-child relationships – 'linked probably to the experience of stress, low morale and

depressive mood in both mothers and fathers'[28]. As one overview reported, 'Children brought up in one-parent families are more likely to take drugs, drop out of school and end up in prison'[29]. Other commentators have drawn attention to the impact of absent fathers and lack of appropriate male role models[30].

This set of arguments needs handling with care. Over the last 15 years or so there has been a growing amount of evidence that once as children grow older their peer group becomes a far more significant influence than their parent or parents. Parents can have some influence over choice of peer group – but this also becomes limited[31]. Certainly, peer pressure has been reported as an important aspect of young people's involvement in the 'riots' of August 2011. A number have talked about the impact of messaging – of being told about what was happening or about to happen - and being 'expected to be there' (see below).

The debate over the impact of all this and the extent to which it fuelled the disturbances has tended to focus on the experiences of 'black' young people – partly because '65% of black Caribbean children in Britain grow up in a single-parent family'[32]. There has also been a focus on educational underachievement by 'black' Caribbean young men. However, a high proportion of white working class children and young people in the sort of neighbourhoods in which the disturbances took place also grow up in one-parent households and underachieve to the same degree at school.

We need to be careful about social breakdown arguments. There may well be particular problems in specific neighbourhoods – and these may well have been exacerbated by growing social polarization and inequality.

However, when we take a historical view we have to be cautious about whether there has been a step change. As a recent Young Foundation report on civility put it:

...our research shows that generalisations about declining standards of civility are inaccurate and problematic. While there are flashpoints of incivility, these tend to be contained to certain places or certain times. But in general Britain remains a well-mannered and courteous country. We still compare favourably to other developed nations. Most people still feel like they can trust others and that their neighbourhoods are free from anti-social behaviour.[33]

Policy

From the above discussion it is apparent that flawed or debatable government policies (some of which are longstanding may have contributed to the situation. Here I want to highlight four:

First, there has been a failure by governments over the last thirty years to properly address social housing. It has been a low priority area in terms of policy. This has aggravated the problems experienced in many poorer neighbourhoods. While there has been investment in existing stock and general improvements in the condition of houses and flats, very little has been done to increase the number of homes available. With the sort of demographic shifts already outlined, and the inability of many people to get on the home-owning ladder, this has had a major impact – both in terms of the cost of housing (forcing people into the private rented sector) and working to undermine the stability of local neighbourhoods.

Second, there has been a growing and long-run issue around young people's access to

public space. The use of dispersal orders and the like combined with the extent to which young people are discouraged from congregating in commercial areas like shopping malls^[34] has been problematic.

[For] many young people, meeting peers in local public spaces constitutes a fundamental aspect of developing their own sense of identity, and provides space in which to forge their independent capacity to manage risk and danger. In the absence of suitable alternative venues, public spaces constitute key resources for young people.^[35]

Third, there is the whole area of policy following the banking crisis of 2008 and the extent to which the austerity programme is undermining social cohesion. There is a perception that those at the bottom and middle of the household income scales are paying disproportionately for the failures that occurred. Unfortunately, this isn't just a question of perception. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies (*op. cit.*) states,

...the impact of changes to personal tax and benefit policy announced by this coalition government is to increase relative child poverty by 200,000 in both 2015-16 and 2020-21, and to increase relative poverty for working-age adults by 200,000 in 2015-16 and 400,000 in 2020-21. The reforms are forecast to increase absolute child poverty by 200,000 in 2015-16 and 300,000 in 2020-21, and to increase absolute working-age poverty by 300,000 in 2015-16 and 700,000 in 2020-21.

Fourth, the speed and the way in which decisions were made with regard to cutbacks in government support for young people has resulted in some poor decisions which may well have contributed to the situation. The most obvious areas concern the message sent by abolition of Educational Maintenance

Allowances (which was cited by a number of young people as a motivating factor for involvement – see below), and major cuts to summer programmes and to extended schooling (which often provided holiday schemes). This conclusion has been disputed by government ministers, but there is some evidence that summer programmes have provided 'diversionary' activity for young people.

Summing up

Just how strong any of these elements was in the events of early August is a matter for debate and research. A study undertaken by the London School of Economics and the Guardian (funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Open Society Foundations)^[36] confirmed much of the initial reading of the 'riots' by youth workers and others 'on the ground'. As one presenter (Richard [Beef] Frankland) to a seminar on the August 'riots' reported in October 2011, four themes were repeated in the conversations of those involved in the weeks after the disturbances:

1. *Getting one over on the police.* The relative powerlessness of the police in the early stages encouraged a number of people to 'take back the streets'. It was an opportunity to 'payback' for the poor treatment many felt they had had from the police.
2. *Peer pressure.* Many felt they had to be seen to take part – some quite reluctantly. Interestingly a few young people who were electronically tagged (as a result of early release from detention) and subject to a home detention curfew expressed relief at not being able to be involved.
3. *A bit of history.* The riots and disturbances offered young people a chance to be part of

something significant. They were making history.

4. *Getting free stuff*. The chance to get goods without having to pay for it had a certain attraction – as did the excitement of the process^[37].

This analysis has also been subsequently confirmed in its essentials by a study by Gareth Morrell and colleagues for the Cabinet Office. They mentioned three main motivations:

- Something exciting to do: the riots 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, adrenaline 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 rioting was described as a direct response to the police handling of the shooting of Mark Duggan. Here and elsewhere in London, the Mark Duggan case was also described as the origin of the riots and the way it was handled was seen as an example of a lack of respect by the police that was common in the experience of young black people in some parts of London. Outside London, the rioting was not generally attributed to the Mark Duggan case. However, the attitude and behaviour of the police locally was consistently cited as a trigger outside as well as within London. ^[37a]

The researchers talk about peer pressure - but demote it's significance to a 'situational factor' (probably wrongly when one talks to those working at the time with people involved in the 'riots').

Some implications for youth work and youth workers

We have yet to see what response the government will make. The main reaction thus far has been ‘steady as you go’. There has been no significant pulling back from the planned reductions on expenditure on policing and youth services, for example. There are some indications that central government policy with regard to the latter will continue to move towards a more targeted, welfare/social work model with the focus on combatting ‘dangerous behaviours around teenagers’^[38]. They will leave other forms of provision to voluntary organisations and the private sector.

There are major issues with this approach – most significantly that it fails to pay attention to the social context and relationships in which these behaviours occur. We know, for example, that looking to wider social networks, neighbourhood life and general family life pays considerable dividends in terms of raising educational achievement, reducing crime and stimulating economic activity^[39]. One of the things that agencies and organisations will need to do is to continue to make this case to government and to funders.

One of the key points to bear in mind however, is the extent to which reaction to the ‘riots’ will skew, or be used as an excuse to keep, policy away from some of the fundamentals. In other words, the focus will be on, for example, changes to curfew arrangements and tougher sentences for gang

members[40]. In the two months following the 'riots' and disturbances there have been a series of research reports highlighting the long-running and fundamental issues discussed here including growing inequality and poverty; and the lack of employment opportunities for young people and the significant rise in the cost of education post-16. This is where major action is needed – but is unlikely to be forthcoming.

In respect of what is likely to be a more limited policy response there are some obvious lines of development. The general shape of these was sketched out by *The Economist*:

The things that might work include both nice and nasty measures, as Mr Cameron should have the common sense to see. Broadly speaking, the cuddly ones should be focused on vulnerable children and the tough ones on miscreant adults. Schools should provide more pre- and after-school care to make up for parental absences. The coalition should press on with its plans to revive vocational education for unacademic pupils: that might help more of them feel they have the prospect of a decent and legal income. More resources should be found for youth work in rough neighbourhoods: teenagers spend a small fraction of their time at school, yet teachers are expected to socialise and discipline as well as educate them.[41]

Just whether the last of these is likely to happen on any scale is a matter of debate. Following the 'riots' there were a number of influential voices questioning the impact of youth work. For example, Kit Malthouse, the deputy mayor for policing in London, has argued that tens of millions of pounds have been 'squandered on youth services' that have done little to curb juvenile offending. Too many London projects had focused on "entertainment" and "diversion"[42].

In the light of the above there appear to be four main implications for youth work[43].

Being clearer about what youth work is and offers; to shape their work appropriately; and to tell people about it.

Youth work was born, and remains fundamentally a part, of civil society[44]. It is, at heart, about relationship and association – connecting and being with others – and the good that can flow from this[45]. Youth work involves:

- Facilitating relationships that allow young people to grow and flourish.
- Creating spaces with the chance to reflect, learn and grow.
- Enabling opportunities for people to freely to join together to organize and take part in groups and activities[46].

A range of evidence shows that local work with young people continues to offer sanctuary (a space away from the pressures of the school, family and neighbourhood); accessible and enjoyable activity; personal and social development; settings where friendships and relationships grow; and access to local knowledge and to credible role models[47].

Working for extended schooling

Given that 94 per cent of young people regularly attend school (with most of those not attending in any one year being absent due to illness or 'family holidays') it becomes obvious that youth work needs to be an element of schooling[48]. Indeed, many local projects are involved in schools work – and offer a bridge out to local civil society.

In a number of schools the contribution of youth workers and informal educators is recognised – but in many others it is not. One of the unremarked, but fundamental, aspects of schooling in deprived areas is the role that specialist educators like youth workers and learning mentors play in providing a daily reference point and support for young people who have trouble with the schooling system or that are experiencing problems in their home life or social situation. This intervention and support is not generally available over holiday periods – and it is likely that its absence contributed to some of the young people getting involved in the disturbances.

Unfortunately, extended schooling is under significant threat and yet it offers an important lifeline for many children and young people. There were major reductions in budgets during the last financial year and this has impacted on the ability to offer out of school activity – including holiday provision. There currently appears to be a major problem around breakfast clubs. A recent survey of teaching staff by Kelloggs (which runs more than 500 breakfast clubs in partnership with charity ContinYou) found that up to half of them could close because of threats to school budgets[49].

Local youth work agencies need to look at what they offer and to consider what it offers to schooling. They need to make a stronger case for the benefits to schools of the sort of associational and relational activity that youth work offers. In addition, they need to add their voices to those opposing the current cuts to extended schooling.

Developing, and making the case for streetwork

It is important to make contact with those not in schooling and education – and for those

who are unemployed. One of the classic means is streetwork. Unfortunately, it is rarely understood or properly appreciated by policymakers and local managers. It is a long-term, community-based activity that involves building relationships with people who are often very distrustful of professionals.

Some of the most interesting work in the areas affected by the August 'riots' was streetwork. There were a number of reports (and some later anecdotal evidence) of the impact of those working around the fringes of gangs, with gang members and with young people on the street. For example, youth workers in a number of areas sought out those they were working with and encouraged them away from involvement. Another feature was the number of workers involved in mediating between young people and the police during the disturbances. There does appear to be a need for additional investment in this area – but it does need approaching carefully.

First, there is the need to distinguish between those agencies who are undertaking significant work and those who have the ability to 'sell' their activities but whose work has little real substance.

Second, some of the work is successful precisely because it is not government sponsored or funded, nor subject to the sort of outcome criteria many funders require. Perhaps the most interesting example here is the example of street pastors. Their concern with both the behaviour and soul of those involved with gangs etc. and the approach they take would usually fall foul of the requirements of state funders and commissioners. Yet in a number of respects it is this very orientation that contributes to their success.

Building civil society

Beyond the immediate role of youth workers in relation to disturbances, there is a lot to be done when looking at some of the things that young people are saying about their experiences – and policies that still fail to support the generation of social capital (which is by its nature a 'universal' form of intervention). There is 'extraordinary potential' in supporting and generating small groups and associations – and growing evidence (in contradiction of talk of Broken Britain) of people rediscovering the power of face-to-face group life^[50]. Such activity has, historically, lain at the heart of youth work – and it is necessary for us to explore with young people new forms of group and associational life.

References and notes

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