

What really caused the London lootings? [1]

Written by [Anton Howes](#) [2] | Friday 12 August 2011



As is inevitable, partisan politics has tried to impose simplistic narratives on the phenomenon of nation-wide looting and arson, to the detriment of finding a solution to the real, root causes of the malaise eating at British society. Those on the statist 'left' appear to blame a variety of socio-economic factors, such as unemployment, inequality, and relative poverty. Those on the statist 'right' instead view the problem as nothing but the breakdown of public order, with opportunists clambering into the holes left by the perceived lack of authority and discipline on the streets, in the schools, and in the home. Both views of course hold a grain of truth, but there are other underlying factors that have largely been conveniently ignored.

Unemployment could well be a significant factor. The areas initially hit seem to bear a strong correlation to areas of high youth unemployment. However, this explanation, along with cries of inequality and poverty, is both insulting to the hard-working and law-abiding poor, and offers little answer as to why the kids are having fun rather than expressing anger and frustration at the system. Gleeful malice rather than anger at the system is not the sign of the young person with limited opportunities. It also fails to explain why the looters are attacking their own localities, sometimes without aiming to steal anything, merely to destroy: to loosely [paraphrase Brendan O'Neill](#) [3], they are more than happy to "s? on their neighbours' doorsteps".

The 'break-down of authority' narrative seeks to answer these questions. It sees marriage-less families, communities without cohesion, and a general lack of discipline or punishment within the system. This may well be true, but it seems to focus on these symptoms to the neglect of their underlying causes. After all, why do some immigrant and religious groups maintain their cohesion in the face of public disorder, like the Sikhs and Turks did, and others do not? It also fails to account for the constant complaint of the young looters that they do not receive 'respect', and are too oppressed by authority.

So what is the true explanation? The underlying causes all seem to point to a dangerous mixture of a centralised and impersonal welfare state, along with a surveillance state that seeks to control in small yet demeaning ways. The latter would account for the perceived discrimination and oppression, a major complaint having been the police's use of stop-and-search powers. The former would account for high unemployment by promoting welfare dependency; but most crucially the sense of entitlement and 'rights' that accompanies it. It would account for the breakdown of marriage through distorted incentives, the atomised communities and the resultant lack of social feedback loops that the statist 'right' like to call 'discipline'.

By receiving their benefit from some faceless entity, there is no obligation to justify it to those who pay for it, no punishment when they waste it, and no obligation to stay an integral part of the family or community that cares. Self-reliance and the interdependent relationship with local, family and social communities has been gradually yet drastically replaced with individualised reliance on a single, faceless entity. The

misplaced sense of entitlement then seems the natural result of a youth spent only as an unconditional receiver. It is like getting water from a tap in a lone room rather than from a shared lake: the tap-user is then more than happy to defile that lake for whatever reason, having been brought up free of the immediate and damning social consequences. It then falls to the law to punish instead. Once that law is challenged, there is then no social element left to prevent wanton vandalism and theft - this appears to be what has just happened, with the hollowness of social constraints laid bare for all to see.

Identifying the role of the impersonal welfare-surveillance state offers the most comprehensive explanation of the looting. It takes into account the socio-economic concerns of unemployment and welfare dependency, but points out that the cultural element caused by the erosion of basic respect for others, for communities and society must be taken into account too, along with the pervasiveness of the state's presence in everyday life. If we want to solve this problem in the long term, we need to concentrate on the cause, not on the symptoms. Perhaps welfare needs to be more local and personal, rooted in the communities that pay for it; perhaps welfare needs to stop trapping people in dependency. Perhaps we should move to take the state out of welfare altogether and allow the personal, caring and communal element to thrive. Whatever the policy, solutions must be found to the right problems, not those that are simply politically convenient.

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