

Interview (Skype) with Tunde Olayinka, Youth Services Co-ordinator for Kensington and Chelsea, August 30 2011.

1. Who are these young people who have been involved in the recent trouble?

They are a mixture of different young people. Firstly, not all them were that young as recent arrests were shown. People in their late 20s/30s and 40s were involved. But generally there are several different types of young people. Some who were clearly opportunist. This is where social networks and texts played a part such as '300 needed for Croydon where we are going to be hitting JD sports' or other retail establishment. These are young people who wouldn't commit crime normally but with the opportunity of getting hold of designer goods that they could not otherwise afford with what they thought was little chance of being caught the opportunity was too good to resist. Some of the other young people are gang members and so would have been career criminals who were upset at what they saw as the treatment they were getting from the police. This relates to the Mark Duggan shooting which they believed happened in cold blood and they believed that the police weren't playing fair. And so Blackberry texts went round to other youth gangs that were previously enemies and said its time for havoc. This is where a lot of the fury that was aimed at the police and buildings was involved. Other young people were generally people considered as mild mannered who come from the lower socio-economic scale who have seen their ability to improve themselves lessened by government cuts such as EMA [Educational Maintenance Award that was given to people to stay on in education after 16] grants and high tuition fees and are unemployed at the moment because in times of recession no one wants to take a chance on an unproven young person. There seemed to be genuine anger that they seemed to be hit hardest with the cuts and so social mobility is lessened. Therefore, it was mixture of the three groups plus the vast majority that, with regard to the looting, were opportunist. Many those that got caught did so because they didn't cover their faces when looting that shows that they were not really thinking about what they were doing but just saw an opportunity to get hold of a lot of equipment for free.

2. How would you describe the everyday realities of these young peoples lives?

In the work that I do it's about giving young people hope that they can have a better future through legal means. We talk about poverty of aspiration and the work that we and other youth services do is to tell young people that their potential can be turned into something productive. The reality at the moment in these times of economic recession with rising youth unemployment and government cuts and austerity measures is that many young people feel that they have no future.

3. Do you think that the people involved in the disturbances had any explicit demands?

This is question I am often asked. I don't think a lot of them would or could have been able to articulate what they are angry about. All the media called the rioting wanton criminality which I thought was quite naïve and I'm pretty sure most politicians who are intelligent anyway know it wasn't that. I think it was two things, two protests that were delivered on a sub-conscious level. The first being what I have

already discussed as the cuts and the lack of ability to better themselves. But the second was, interestingly enough, almost a protest against the materialism we keep feeding our young people. We have a bling culture, you are only successful if you have material wealth. MTV Cribs, the Beckhams, all of which heightens the pressure on young people especially if you haven't got the right mobile phone or the right trainers, or the right clothes is much harder than when I was a child even though it was pretty high then. Young people are constantly being bombarded that you are not complete unless you have these things yet they have no ability to get these things particularly in this current climate. It was interesting to watch the news about the riots around the world and I watched Al Jazeera who said it was a protest against capitalism. And although a lot of the looters couldn't articulate it for the looters they were saying 'you know what I'm taking this anyway. Your dangling this in front of us and we don't have the means for getting it'. I guess it's a symptom of our culture that as Iain Duncan Smith said, and I agree with him, that there was no difference between the looters and those MPs fiddling their expenses, the only difference was subtlety. Young people grabbed things but it was motivated by wanting material things for nothing.

4. How were these people involved viewed by the rest of their own community?

The rest of the community probably reflected the debate nationally. There were those who said I don't agree with what they are doing but I understand why they are doing it. There are those who said this is disgraceful you are destroying our own community. It was interesting that some of those people who had been involved in the riots twenty years earlier during the 1980s who said this is totally out of order we had a political reason then but these young people don't. And there are those who said: 'good, I'm glad they are doing this, this will show the government,' and, if they were gang members, then it will show the police that they can't mess with us.

5. In the current context of cuts to welfare what level of support is available for young people specifically?

Apart from statutory school education and social services, which is really crisis intervention, a lot of the youth support services such as careers service, integrated youth services such as teenage pregnancies, a lot of them are being cut. In Tottenham where the trouble started there has been a 75% cut. So the services and the support for young people is going down at a time when they need it most because there is a recession. For example we ran a Princess Trust Programme which took about 30 young people each year who had been long term unemployed, built up their confidence, gave them work experience, and then sent them out into the job market with apprenticeships and other means to support themselves. That has vanished with all the stringent cuts that came in. Personally, my opinion is that you have to raise a penny to save a pound. So raising a penny now will save a lot of social issues that cost pounds and millions in the future. I guess that with the advent of the Big Society we are in a transition period where local authorities and governments are not going to be directly responsible for providing this so it's going to be voluntary organisations and social enterprise companies. However, there probably will still be a shortfall and it just depends on how much society views young people and their ability to improve their lives.

6. Are young people guided into the world of work?

We can improve, we certainly can improve. From my experiences in my job the world of alternative education, as not every young person is academic, and schooling in England can make vast improvements in its ability to prepare young people for the workplace. We are still very geared to academic achievement leading onto A-Levels leading onto university. That route is clearly not practical for every young person so we need to improve on our apprenticeships, we need schools to make better links to business and we need to be offering young people vocational training within mainstream educational level at a far earlier age. Often the German system is held up as being a system that has the potential to be adapted into the UK.

7. Cameron spoke of fathers who have disappeared from the lives of young people. (Sometimes it can be good, criminals and drug-addicted fathers are perhaps not the best role models.) But what other adult role models are there?

If I was to give a personality to education, social services, and youth services I'd say it's pretty female. It's nurturing it's caring, it's based in the traditional female principles. What fathers give is boundaries, how to compete, how to contain emotion and so on. So we have a group of young people who don't... and Cameron is quite right, have been brought up more or less fatherless and have not had access to some of those qualities a good father will give. In terms of role models youth services often can be the only adults that they know outside of their parents who they can sit down and talk about anything to and get guidance. From a male and female perspective ... they particularly seek a male perspective on how to navigate through life. With all these cuts and the nature of our work it's hard to say we prevented this young person from becoming a criminal as someone can say 'well how do we know that they would become a criminal anyway?' But certainly we see a benefit in young people coming in and talking, discussing and being supported by ourselves, see how we live our lives. So, male youth workers, male mentors in schools, learning support workers, do act as role models for young people. And sadly our work is cut at the time it is needed most.