

# The London riots, a psychiatrist's perspective

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In August 2011, riots that started in London spread across England with widespread rioting, arson and looting, along with injuries to the public and police and the death of five people. In a new paper published in *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, Professor Carmine Pariante and Dr. Guiliano Aeillo from the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London examine the events from a psychosocial point of view.

The paper suggests that the rioters were experiencing a lack of mentalization: the lack of ability to identify one's own states of mind, to give them a name, and to assign them significance. Feelings and emotions were perceived therefore only as physical sensations, leading an unbearable sense of physical restlessness, and thus to the expression as violence.

The paper also suggests that the behaviour was the result of a lack of social identity, leading to frustration and anger. Similarly to patients with

personality disorders, who alienate the community that they long for, the 'socially excluded' destroyed shops and stole goods in order to belong. Instead, confirming they are not part of society, and increasing their social exclusion.

Psychotherapy for people with personality disorder requires therapists to show themselves as 'present, involved and invulnerable'. The authors suggest that a healthy community should show the same characteristics: 'present', meaning knowledgeable of the community members in difficulty; 'involved', meaning interested in helping the pursuit of the individual and social goals of the community; and 'invulnerable', meaning trustworthy, and morally coherent, in how we deliver on our promises of equal opportunities, personal development, social mobility, and respect of the law.

Professor Pariante says: “Showing concern is a start, but it is not enough. Society can, and must deliver practical steps to improve social inclusion. Recent research in the USA has shown that social and psychological interventions can improve social belonging in ethnic minorities. These interventions were focused on students, and maybe that is where we should start: in schools. Social belonging is a primary requirement to allow people to live a meaningful life in the community. It is also the major deterrent that a civilized and emancipated society can offer to prevent violence and [riots](#) from happening again.”

**More information:** For full paper: Guiliano Aiello and Carmine Pariante, ‘Citizen, Interrupted: the 2011 English Riots from a psychosocial perspective’, *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* (August 2012), [doi: 10.1017/S2045796012000364](https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796012000364)

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