

<http://www.slate.com/id/2304416/pagenum/all/#p2>

## Could Riots Happen Here?

# Violent unrest has swept Europe and the Middle East. Is America next?

By **Sudhir Venkatesh** Posted Thursday, Sept. 22, 2011, at 6:13 PM ET

It's been awhile since we've had a full-blown riot here in the United States. I don't mean the occasional minor conflagration—Cincinnati in 2001, Oakland in 2009, and a Chicago ghetto street corner practically every month, if YouTube is to be believed. And I don't mean a single night of drunken mayhem. I'm talking about unrest that spreads, from downtown to neighborhood, city to city, night after night. These social disturbances can sometimes look necessary after the fact—a catharsis for an ailing social body or the antidote to a dictatorial regime—but they can also carry significant costs, including fatalities, loss of property, and damage to the social contract.

Europeans and those living in the Middle East are witnessing the spectrum of protest firsthand, from sober public demonstrations to violent mass unrest. From Greece to Jerusalem, London to Egypt, the masses have taken to the streets, and only sometimes peacefully. At times, there appears to be an identifiable cause that mobilizes the angry mob, such as government cutbacks (Greece, Israel). Prolonged frustrations over political leadership have also ignited violence (Egypt). But riots can also take off from a single incident, like an allegation of police abuse (London), and then a wider range of motives can keep the flame burning.

Could we see similar outbursts in the United States? Given the potential injuries to participants, bystanders, and property, this isn't a purely academic question. Anticipating the conditions that give rise to riots can help us identify hotspots and prepare for the worst. And conditions are not so great at the moment. Joblessness continues to rise, particularly among the youth, who typically make up the majority in a riot. Overall, crime rates are at historic lows, but cities across the country are cutting basic services, like policing (New York, Camden), physical upkeep (Oakland), and public services (Madison, Milwaukee). We're likely to see frustrations increase among young people, at a moment when fewer social workers, school teachers, beat cops, and community leaders are at the ready to channel the energies into productive directions.

Before addressing the U.S. situation, it's worth pointing out a few common misperceptions about rioting:

**1. If you have enough angry individuals, you'll likely end up with a riot—or at least some form of mass violence.**

There are really only three questions that matter to a potential rioter: Do I go? Do I go crazy when I get there? When do I stop? Enough people must decide that it makes sense to travel, to break the law once they arrive, and to keep doing so, for a full-fledged riot to occur. A few unruly actions does not a riot make. An angry mob must *stay* engaged and angry.

Though it may seem that people who are angry and in search of mischief can walk out of their homes and proceed directly to a riot, in fact getting a riot off the ground can be quite a production. Texting and tweets address the mass-communication challenge, but you still have to get people to the riot. Police patrols, citizen associations, and even rival gangs can restrict the movement of an aspiring rioter, making even a few blocks' distance seem insurmountable. I've spent time with rioters, as part of my research into youth political action in the United States and Europe. I've found that rioters are surprisingly malleable; that is, they will change their mood and willingness to act based on little more than a shout or a text. But this doesn't mean they are easily moveable or that they can find the crowd and join the action.

In 1990s Chicago, I watched elderly, female homeowners instruct angry black youth to stay off their block; they were armed with little more than the threat of a butt-whopping, but they safeguarded stores and homes while their less-active neighbors suffered. As youth ran about looking for mobs, these homeowner blockades diffused their energy, transforming them into a distracted, motley crew. In 2005, Parisian youths told me matter-of-factly that they didn't think twice when crossing police barricades. But fearing the following day's scolding in front of their parents, they wouldn't dare enter the neighboring district of a powerful local religious leader. Months after *les emotes*, suburban streets in Paris were a checkerboard of unharmed and burned-out districts.

**2. To stop a riot, you need sufficient numbers of well-armed police willing to open up with tear gas, gunfire, and the like.**

The economist [Edward Glaeser](#) argues that the mob just needs to be larger than the police for crowds to tip from protest to riot. Once the crowd sees its relative advantage, then, *voila*, a thrown rock or Molotov cocktail, a general call to arms, and you're off!

Well, not always. Take London, for example. The media credits Prime Minister Cameron for finally stopping the riots by dispatching 10,000 law enforcement officials to overcome rioters. But in fact plenty of police were on hand while youths burned stores, damaged cop cars, and attacked the cops themselves. The ratio of police to rioters is important, but rioters usually have no idea how many cops are around, and they are often *energized* by a large law-enforcement presence.

Instead, the perception of police behavior in a society is often the critical fact. Under Thatcher's rule, after prolonged allegations of police harassment and corruption, there was a national review of British law enforcement. But Brits still are fighting over whether their passive tradition of policing, so-called "policing by consent," is effective for modern crime, or whether they should encourage greater use of force and surveillance. Compared to the United States, the British still lag in convincing ethnic minorities to see cops as legitimate and fair. And both the right and the left have called for more consistent, effective law-enforcement services.

The lack of faith in law enforcement shaped the forms of mass unrest we saw last month in the U.K. In the first 48 hours, rioters displayed wanton disregard of police because there was no expectation of predictable response. By contrast, notice the near absence of looting in Japan after the earthquake—and historically. The Japanese may have a "culture of respect," but they also expect that law-breaking will bring about a predictable response and so they adjust their actions accordingly. Comparisons are hard to make across nations, but in general, when policing is believed to be arbitrary or capricious, those who wish to loot and riot are more likely to find like-minded souls to join them.

### **3. Riots are spontaneous, chaotic, and hard to influence, whereas peaceful protests are organized, planned in advance, and easily to manipulate.**

Riots tend to begin as nonviolent protests and demonstrations. It is less common to see an event like Vancouver's recent violence, in which it seems that the instigators arrived even before the final Stanley Cup game was over to begin committing arson, and more common to see an event like the London riots, in which protestors started as peaceful demonstrations.

Predicting whether a large group becomes riotous is difficult. The logic of crowds is different than the logic of many individual decisions made separately. The sociologist [Mark Granovetter](#) argued years ago that crowds are uncommitted masses that require particular sparks to grow rebellious. Different individuals make different cost-benefit analyses, and some are more prone to violence than others. But a group of individuals can be influenced much like a caucus. In some groups, individuals may be deaf to religious pleas, in others, they may respond to race-based calls to action, and in others they may be sensitive to anti-capitalist screeds. You need the right spark for the right crowd. (And views of the police are just one key factor affecting public opinion.)

The idea that individuals who spread information and rumor may effectively incite action in one crowd but not another is supported by recent research on artistic influence by Yahoo! Research's [Duncan Watts](#). By tracking the role that key "influencers" can play in mobilizing group opinion, Watts finds that "average individuals" are sometimes as powerful in shaping collective behavior as charismatic, well-known figures. (He thus concludes that companies who pay celebrities a high price to publicize their product or fashion trends may be throwing their money down the drain.) For riots, this means that the spark can come from unpredictable places, and not only from a powerful blogger, activist, or leader. Anyone could potentially be the instigator—if he or she wants to be.

The implications probably sound a bit depressing: If anyone in a crowd can start a riot, how do we make a strategic intervention? But the converse is also true: Anyone in a crowd can help stop a riot, too. A few discordant pleas from different voices, and no one will know whether to throw the rock or put it down. For this reason, to stop a riot, there are many options, big and small.

Sending in cadres of police certainly can work. But mobilizing hundreds of cops can take days and most countries aren't equipped to carry out coordinated enforcement. In this respect, the United States gets high marks; for over a century, local police forces have excelled in quelling mass unrest by strategically using force, closing off streets, and infiltrating the crowds. By contrast, European cops typically look like deer in the headlights when crowds gather. They are slow to act, they hesitate to use force, and they have poor leadership—Britain still uses volunteer forces to respond to unrest.

In practice, riots can dissipate without excessive police actions like tear-gas spraying and the use of heavily armed battalions. In the 2005 riots, sociologist Laurent Bonelli found what I saw in 1990s Chicago: Local religious leaders and outreach workers walked about the streets, sending youth various messages, from

warnings that police were arresting their friends at great rates to updates that everyone else had left the streets and gone home. Small doses of confusion can be effective because crowds are highly susceptible to one another's actions. If a few people curtail their violence, their counterparts may feel isolated, vulnerable, and exposed.

So, then, what should we look out for in the United States?

I don't predict a wave of rioting to take over towns and cities, even if the country sinks back into recession. However, there has been a steady growth in large-crowd actions recently. This year, several dozen large "movement"-based protests were organized by unions and advocacy organizations over cutbacks in services, treatment of immigrants, and [bargaining rights](#). Nearly all have been peaceful. But there have been spontaneous gatherings that have precipitated violence. A few weeks ago, "flash mobs" of youth in [Philadelphia](#) ransacked stores and harassed pedestrians; in January, [Milwaukee](#) suffered a similar outbreak at a shopping mall.

Well-behaved crowds don't indicate an absence of threat on the horizon. In fact, let me go out on a limb by pointing out a few places to watch:

1. *Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas.* From Mobile, to Charlotte and Sumter, to Atlanta and Dalton, a flailing economy is hitting communities hard, with steady double-digit joblessness. This region doesn't receive a lot of media attention, but it merits a second look. More households are leaving the Northeast and the Rust Belt for the American urban south. Young people in particular are leading the exodus, and they are not finding what they came for. In addition, these states cannot keep warehousing their disenfranchised in jails and prisons forever. Budgetary constraints alone will force the region to find alternative and cheaper solutions. A [report](#) by the Institute for Economics and Peace cited this region as not only the "least peaceful," but the place to watch as violence and unrest outpaces government response.

2. *Chicago.* Even when the crime rates fall overall, Chicago manages to keep up its reputation as a hotbed for organized youth violence. Across the city's poorest, ethnic-minority tracts, youth homicides, gang wars, and [gun-related violence](#) have risen to levels that have not been seen since the late 1980s. There is particular cause for alarm because the areas experiencing high violence have low levels of social services, government support, and philanthropic attention. In these "edge" communities, on the far South and West sides of the city, locals have little experience combating entrenched poverty and warring gangs. And just across the

city border, suburban poverty tracts are equally plagued. If ever there was an urban cauldron waiting to ignite, Chicago is it.

The bright spot is newly elected Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who has shown a willingness to tackle a problem that has been largely ignored by his predecessor, Richard M. Daley. His administration will have to bring citizens, activists who distrust the police, and police who rarely work with the activists all together. The harsh realities of the city's budget alone will necessitate cooperation. A [report](#) by the Chicago Crime Lab estimates that the social costs of the city's gun violence to be \$2.5 billion per year, or \$2,500 per Chicago household.

3. *Oakland*. The Bay Area has a love for protests. In this year alone, demonstrations have been held against [public transport policies](#), restrictive immigration laws, [radio station closure](#), [educational cuts](#), and [foreign wars](#). As the proud birthplace of the Black Panther Party, Oakland appears to specialize in the youth unrest variant. The shooting of an unarmed man, Oscar Grant, by an Oakland police officer prompted immediate rioting in 2009, and then looters hit the streets again after the two-year minimum sentence was imposed in 2010. The city always seems on high alert, which is not surprising given that the overall unemployment is [16.3](#) percent, and 25 percent of black youth under 24 years of age are [unemployed](#). (This figure would be even higher if it included those who have given up looking for work altogether.) Alameda County has the second highest rate of [youth violence](#) in the state, most of it concentrated within Oakland.

The rash of killings has brought out local organizations, like the Center for Third World Organizing and the [Ella Baker Center](#), who are hitting the streets to calm tensions, but everyone worries about youth with free time on their hands.

4. *Immigrant California*. We tend not to link together immigrant disenfranchisement, foreclosures, and organized youth violence. But we should. Across the state of California, immigrant communities are facing severe hardships that stem from the recessionary economic conditions. Government services are harder to come by, the job market is depressed, there are vast pockets of blighted neighborhoods, and youth are joining gangs that have deep ties to Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. A populist, anti-immigrant sentiment seems to support measures to restrict immigrant rights, which is only turning up the heat inside the ethnic enclaves.

Different forms of organized, collective action have surfaced. Beginning in [2006](#), public demonstrations by pro-immigrant groups became [commonplace](#). But youth

can always move in other directions; it's not a great leap to assess the rise in gang membership and youth violence as a partial response to these conditions. Cities like San Jose, Bakersfield, and Fresno, where immigrant gangs are prevalent, have neither the manpower or expertise to handle youth unrest, and so they are calling in the [feds](#).

Rioting is a highly specific and relatively rare form of collective unrest. It would be hard to convince most Americans that the country is anywhere near mass mayhem. And I share this view. But I also would have laughed a few weeks ago if you said that the Brits were about to unleash a prolonged period of looting, arson, and racial conflict.