

# THE VANCOUVER RIOT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

## Introduction

### Focus

Within minutes of the Vancouver Canucks' Game 7 loss to the Boston Bruins in the Stanley Cup final, thousands of people took part in a riot that left store windows shattered, hundreds of people hurt, and the city's reputation in tatters. This *News in Review* story looks at the riot and its aftermath.

Anticipation of a historic Game 7 showdown between the Vancouver Canucks and the visiting Boston Bruins quickly turned to disappointment for the hometown fans as the Bruins sent the Canucks packing with a dominating 4-0 victory. Even more disappointing was the riot that began sweeping through Vancouver's downtown streets as the final seconds ticked off the game clock.

No one really saw the riot coming. Vancouver managed to host the Winter Olympics without incident. Over 100 000 people watched the men's hockey final from venues located throughout the city's downtown core. In the run-up to the Stanley Cup final, similar crowds made their way into areas like the CBC's Fan Zone—a 35 000-spectator street viewing area, furnished with giant television screens where fans could watch their team try to win the Stanley Cup.

The police were optimistic that the “meet and greet” strategy that saw officers mingling and cheering with fans during the Olympics would work just as well in the Stanley Cup playoffs. They seemed to have reason to be optimistic since over the course of Vancouver's two-month quest to win the Cup crowds pushing 100 000 had made their way downtown and celebrated the Canucks on-ice performance in a law-abiding way.

Unfortunately, the events played out differently. It was reported that a great many fans were either drunk or on drugs when they arrived downtown

to watch the hockey game. It was later revealed that 150 000 fans descended on downtown Vancouver that day—arriving at a staggering rate of 500 people every 90 seconds—and, when the game was deemed out of reach, some fans took their frustration out on the city's downtown businesses and each other. All told, the riot resulted in millions of dollars in property damage, hundreds of injuries, and over 100 arrests.

The Vancouver riot made headline news around the world in the immediate aftermath of the melee. The stellar reputation of the former Olympic host city was suddenly sullied by images of marauding youth shattering windows, looting businesses, and fighting each other. *Sports Illustrated* wondered if Vancouver wouldn't come to be seen as “a city of chokers and jerks” (www.SI.com, June 16, 2011).

Meanwhile Vancouverites responded to the riot with a mixture of disgust and anger. Within hours of the riot, social media groups formed with the goal of identifying, and in some cases publicly shaming, rioters. Images from these websites were later used by police as part of their investigation into the riot. Other people were so repulsed by what happened that they made their way downtown and helped with the clean-up. In the aftermath of the riots, people questioned what they saw as the inadequate response by the police and the disappointing behaviour of Canadians.

## To Consider

1. How did you feel when you watched footage of the Vancouver riots?
2. Canada has a reputation as a peace-loving country, with a polite population. How did these events challenge this reputation?
3. Do you think this was an embarrassing event in Canada's history, or are you a hockey fan who thought the riots were somehow cool?

# THE VANCOUVER RIOT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

## Video Review

### Pre-viewing Questions

An anarchist is a person who seeks to challenge and/or destroy society's rules, customs, and institutions. In other words, an anarchist promotes the idea of anarchy, a belief that society should exist without any government or rule of law. Many of the rioters were called anarchists by the authorities after Vancouver's Stanley Cup riot in June 2011.

1. Do you think that people who take part in a riot—where violence, destruction of property, and looting rule the day—are anarchists or are they just “regular” people caught up in the heat of the moment?

---

2. Do you think that the actions of the rioters were planned, or were they the result of drinking and poor judgment? Provide reasons for your response.

---

3. Did you watch television footage of the Vancouver riot? If so, what did you feel when you watched the footage?

---

---

### Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions below in the spaces provided.

1. What happened in 1994 that put Vancouver authorities on edge going into the 2011 Stanley Cup finals?

---

2. Why did Bob Whitelaw think that a repeat of the 1994 incident was unlikely to occur in 2011? What evidence did he base his assessment on?

---

3. How did the riot start and how fast did it get out of control?

---

4. How did the people featured in the video react to the rioting?

---

5. What words did Vancouver Police Chief Jim Chu use to describe the rioters?

---

6. How did some of the citizens of Vancouver react the day after the riot?

---

---

7. How did social networking sites help police investigate the riot?

---

---

8. What is "The Great Wall of Vancouver?"

---

9. What did Constable Erik Kerasiotis think of the sticky note tribute left by concerned citizens on a Vancouver squad car?

---

10. How did some angry Vancouverites go after rioters with a vengeance?

---

---

11. In your opinion, did some of the online protestors go too far in condemning the actions of the rioters?

---

---

12. How many people were jammed into downtown Vancouver that night?

---

---

13. How many police were on duty that night? Were there enough?

---

---

14. What logistical problems did the police face the night of the riots?

---

---

### Post-viewing Question

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, the Vancouver Police Department and the mayor claimed that "anarchists" were responsible for the bulk of the damage done in the riot. However, the video and photographic evidence suggests that those responsible were mostly drunken young men dressed in Canucks swag. Why do you think there seems to be a difference between what the police are thinking and what the video and photographic evidence is suggesting?

---

---

# THE VANCOUVER RIOT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

## *What happened?*

### Focus For Reading

It doesn't take many people to start a riot but, once a riot starts, people who might not otherwise take part in riotous behaviour suddenly become rioters. Why do you think this happens? Why do people who are not necessarily violent or destructive choose to take part in a riot?

### Prelude to a Riot

Hours before the Vancouver Canucks and Boston Bruins took to the ice at Rogers Arena for the deciding game of the Stanley Cup playoffs, fans began pouring into Vancouver's downtown core. Most were headed to the city's Fan Zone, a sizeable stretch of road along West Georgia Street that featured several large screens for people to watch the game. Even as officials began preparing the venue for the game, fans were already arriving en masse. In fact, by 2:00 p.m.—three hours before game time—transit authorities alerted city officials that much larger than expected crowds were boarding buses and trains and heading downtown. It was eventually determined that, at its peak, 500 people were arriving downtown every 90 seconds.

### Fan Zone

The Fan Zone had been a huge success over the course of Vancouver's playoff run. Thousands of fans had watched their Canucks lose some but win more en route to the Stanley Cup final. When Vancouver beat Boston in Game 5, over 100 000 fans celebrated the victory downtown without any major incidents. However, police did seize almost 3 000 bottles and cans of liquor. The level of alcohol consumption, and the corresponding number of intoxicated fans, prompted police to order the closure of all downtown Vancouver liquor stores an hour before game time for the remaining two playoff games.

But that didn't stop scores of fans from bringing their own liquor downtown for Game 7. It also didn't stop fans watching the big game in bars from drinking. This is not to say that Vancouver's downtown core was filled exclusively with drunken hockey fans. The Fan Zone in particular had established itself as a safe, family-friendly place to celebrate the game of hockey. However, as game time approached, the Fan Zone was getting more and more packed. In fact, prior to puck drop, police were forced to close the Fan Zone due to overcrowding. It was later established that 150 000 fans had descended on Vancouver for the game, with many of them taking in the Canucks' disappointing performance in the Fan Zone.

### From Disappointment to Riot

While things remained jovial and friendly over the course of the first period, the mood began turning sour by the end of the second. With the Canucks down 3-0, many of the families with younger children started to head home. The mood grew worse in the third period and, as the game clock wound down on Vancouver's mostly impressive run for the Cup, the more restless people in the crowd began hurling bottles at the big screens.

When the game ended, the majority of fans made their way out of the Fan Zone to take public transit back to their homes. But thousands of others stayed put. People who minutes earlier saw themselves as hockey fans suddenly

**Think About It**

Prior to the outbreak of the riot, some witnesses noted several young men holding signs reading "Riot 2011." Why might they have made those signs?

became hooligans and thugs. They started by burning Boston Bruins paraphernalia and then went after a car. They flipped the car, pounced on it, and smashed it with whatever blunt objects they could get their hands on. While some continued to attack the car, eventually setting it on fire, others began flipping nearby portable toilets. For some reason this was accompanied by a series of fist fights.

**Out of Control**

One more vehicle was flipped and set ablaze before the rioters turned their attention to nearby businesses. Windows were shattered as the riot spread away from the Fan Zone and out into neighbouring blocks. More vehicles were set on fire. Businesses saw their windows smashed and goods stolen by looters. More fights broke out as the rioters seized control of the downtown core.

Meanwhile, police scrambled to respond to the growing level of violence. By the time they assembled in riot gear and headed back out to face the crowds, almost an hour had passed and mayhem reigned. Smoke billowed from

the downtown core as more cars were set on fire—including several police cruisers. Rioters eventually smashed through the doors of the Bay and London Drugs and stole thousands of dollars of merchandise. In a desperate attempt to contain the riot, Vancouver bridges were closed to prevent people from coming downtown, and transit authorities announced that people would only be allowed to take buses and trains travelling away from the downtown area.

**The Damage**

The results of the three-hour rampage were devastating:

- over 140 people were injured, including 14 police officers
- 60 businesses were damaged and looted
- 15 cars were destroyed
- there was over \$5-million in property damage

But perhaps the greatest damage came to the reputation of Vancouver. Just a year earlier, the city was the envy of the world courtesy of the Winter Olympics. But after the Stanley Cup riot of 2011, many saw the one-time Olympic darling as a city of thugs, punks, and sore losers.

**To Consider**

1. Based on your reading, what do you think were the main causes of the Vancouver riot?
2. At what point do you think the authorities lost control of the situation?
3. Do you think it is fair to characterize Vancouver as a city of 'thugs, punks and sore losers? Why or why not?
4. Do you think this incident affected Canada's reputation internationally? Explain.

# THE VANCOUVER RIOT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

## *Aftermath*

### Focus for Reading

When Toronto hosted the G20 conference in June 2010, hundreds of rioters ran loose in the downtown core despite the fact that 19 000 security personnel had been charged with the task of maintaining order in the city. In fact there were more police in Toronto than protestors that day. Is the approach that was taken for security during the G20 a good way to prepare? Should Vancouver have planned as diligently? Or are these two entirely different situations?

### A City in Shambles

The streets of Vancouver looked like a war zone the day after the Stanley Cup riot. The city core was in shambles. When the sun illuminated the city streets and revealed the damage, many asked the question, “What happened?” Soon it became all too clear—thousands of people had turned the downtown core into a pit of destruction.

Police initially claimed that a few hundred “anarchists” did the bulk of the damage in the riot. However, the television images and the enormous number of social media pictures and videos made it clear that thousands were involved either directly or as cheerleaders on the sidelines. Hockey fans shuddered at the site of rioters in Canucks jerseys tearing the city apart.

The overwhelming majority of Vancouverites responded to the riot with astonishment and anger. Why did hockey fans destroy parts of downtown? What did they think they were doing? What could possibly have motivated them to act in such a willfully destructive manner?

### The Cleanup and the “Wall”

While the battered and bruised city tried to cope with the aftermath, thousands of citizens made their way downtown to help with the clean-up. Some wrote their feelings about the riots on the plywood covering shattered storefronts. Before long the messages covered the plywood and there was no space left to write.

These “murals” became known as “The Great Wall of Vancouver.”

### The Shaming Sites

While many Vancouverites helped with the clean-up, others turned to social media to either show their disdain for the riot or to help identify rioters. Within 12 hours of the riot, 20 000 people joined a Facebook group looking to nab offenders. The “get the rioters” mentality took on a momentum of its own, with some people going so far as to publish not only the names of rioters but also their phone numbers and addresses.

The most famous example of this emerged in the case of Nathan Kotalyk, an up-and-coming water polo player for the Canadian national team. He was photographed trying to light a rag stuffed into the gas tank of a police cruiser. While Kotalyk turned himself in to the police and publicly apologized for his part in the riot, angry Vancouverites hassled and threatened Kotalyk and his family to the point where they had to leave their home until the threats ceased. The shaming grew to such an extreme that many began to wonder if online shame sites were really tantamount to a cyber version of vigilante justice.

This is not to say that the public online response to the riot wasn’t helpful. By July, the police said that they had over 1 600 hours of video and thousands of photographs courtesy of concerned citizens.



**Did you know . . .**

Nathan Kotalyk was suspended from competition for two years by Water Polo Canada in September 2011 after he confessed to participating in the riots in Vancouver.

**Did you know . . .**

Vancouver Police Chief Jim Chu faced criticism when he refused to tell reporters how many police were on duty the night of the riot. This number only came out after the inquiry report was released.

**The Inquiry**

Politicians almost immediately called for a public inquiry into the riot. While the provincial government wasn't willing to pay for a costly inquiry, they were willing to foot the bill for a review of what happened that night. Over the course of the summer of 2011, the review panel headed by Douglas Keefe, the former deputy attorney general of Nova Scotia, and John Furlong, the former head of Vancouver's Olympic committee, conducted an investigation into the riot, focusing on policing, public intoxication, and crowd control.

In September, they released their report, laying blame for the riot squarely on those who incited the violence and destruction of that night. The report claimed that the 446 police assigned to the Fan Zone area didn't stand a chance against the enormous crowd once things deteriorated. However, they did note that the police might have been overly optimistic in their belief that a riot wouldn't take place. While there really were no definitive pre-Game 7 warning signs, the police needed to be better prepared to shift from "meet and greet" mode to riot mode if and when the need arose.

The report also noted that, once the riot was in full swing, a broken radio resulted in 100 police officers never getting the call to suit up in riot gear. They also reported that a lack of co-

ordination regarding riot equipment led to a 40-minute delay in the full deployment of the riot squad. In other words, by the time the police got in position, it was too late.

These were lessons that Keefe and Furlong believe the police could learn from and use to improve future responses to mass unrest.

**The Charges**

Initially the police were heralded as heroes for wading into the crowds and trying to stop the riot. However, the public began to grow restless in the weeks after the riot because no one was getting charged for rioting. Despite the fact that 41 people turned themselves in to the police, and a mountain of video and photographic evidence showed people breaking the law, no one faced charges as the summer of 2011 came to a close.

Vancouver Police Chief Jim Chu defended the lack of charges by claiming his force was trying to make sure no one was charged until all the evidence had been reviewed. This would ensure, Chu said, that those involved in very serious crimes would be charged appropriately. Eventually, in late September, the Vancouver Police Department announced that 40 people would be charged within the month, and more charges would follow by the end of the year.

**To Consider**

1. a) Why do you think so many people volunteered to help with the clean-up following the riots?
  - b) How might the actions of those volunteers have affected Canada's image internationally?
2. a) Is public shaming an effective way of delivering justice to rioters?
  - b) Does shaming interfere with the efforts of police?
3. According to the Keefe and Furlong's report, the police made some mistakes that night but ultimately they were not responsible for the riot. What do you think the police could have done differently the night of the riot?

# THE VANCOUVER RIOT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

## **Damaged Reputation**

### Focus for Reading

What does the word *reputation* mean to you? Why is it important to have a good reputation? What are the potential pitfalls of having a bad reputation?

#### Pre-riot Vancouver

Following the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010, the media could not find many bad things to say about the city. In fact, the reviews for the people and city of Vancouver were glowing. The BC Tourism website (“What the world has to say about us,” <http://tourismbc-web.ktx002.com/0410/news-6.html>) included these comments from the global media:

“You may have heard that Vancouver is a great city, but it’s better than that. On a good weather day—and we had a spectacular five-day run in the middle of the Games—it is stunningly beautiful, and it is an excellent eating, drinking and shopping city.” — *The Boston Globe*

“Vancouver looked gorgeous on TV . . . NBC’s shots of Vancouver’s downtown and waterfront, and aerial views of Whistler ski areas, provided a media boost no marketing campaign could have delivered.” — *The Seattle Times*

“In winter, the heart of downtown [Vancouver] is 30 minutes from the ski slopes. In summer, sun seekers crowd its beaches and seaside promenades. And despite a rain-prone climate, it displays a perpetually sunny disposition. Consider it the supermodel of North American cities.” — *USA Today*

#### Follow-up

Use a selection of quotes about Vancouver before and after the riot to write an article about how the world saw the city differently after the riot. You may choose to do your own research to include quotes other than the ones above.

Length of article: 250-400 words

#### Post-riot Vancouver

After the Stanley Cup riot in June 2011, the media saw Vancouver in a whole new light. Here’s a sample of what the global media had to say about Vancouver after the riot:

“No, it is not another G20 protest—somebody won an ice hockey match”— headline in *The British Daily Mail* newspaper (“Headlines and quotes: Canada and world media react to Vancouver riots,” *The National Post*, June 16, 2011)

“I feel bad for the 99 per cent of Vancouver residents who didn’t riot. What a miserable day they must be having. They poured every available emotion and thought into their hockey team, per city ordinance, and their team made it all the way to the last game of the Stanley Cup final only to get shut out at home, and then a group of highly motivated doofuses trashed the city, which means that all of North America now sees Vancouver as a city of chokers and jerks.” — Michael Rosenberg of *Sports Illustrated* (“Headlines and quotes: Canada and world media react to Vancouver riots,” *The National Post*, June 16, 2011)



# THE VANCOUVER RIOT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

## **Activity: Social Media Strike Again**

Did social media contribute to the start and growth of the Vancouver Stanley Cup riot of 2011?

According to Christopher Schneider, a professor at the University of British Columbia, smartphone photography and Twitter feeds helped drive the riot to new heights. Schneider described the mentality of rioters to a *Globe and Mail* reporter the day after the riot: “The law-abiding citizens who normally would get out of Dodge are sticking around because I want to be part of the action, and I’m going to prove it, so I’m going to take a picture of myself beside this burning cop car” (June 16, 2011).

While we’ll never be sure why people posed for photos and videos that showed they were breaking the law, there is no doubt that those same photos were soon used to incriminate those responsible for the riot. Vancouver’s Stanley Cup riot was perhaps the most well-documented mass demonstration in Canadian history—as you are about to find out.

### **Task 1**

Pretend you are working for the police. Research the riot by reviewing photos and videos of what went on that night. Find 10 photos or videos that show people committing crimes. Make sure the photos and videos clearly show the faces of the people committing crimes. Use those photos to create a picture/video essay of the riot. Provide a caption for each item that describes what is taking place and identifies the crime the perpetrator is committing.

### **Research Sources**

- This *News in Review* video and Resource Guide
- YouTube (search: “Vancouver riot 2011”)
- Photo galleries of the riot from the following sites: CBC – [www.cbc.ca/news/](http://www.cbc.ca/news/) (search: “Vancouver riot image gallery”), *Sports Illustrated* – [www.sportsillustrated.cnn.com](http://www.sportsillustrated.cnn.com) (search: “Vancouver Canucks fan riot”)
- Use a search engine like Google to see images from a variety of different sources across the Internet.

OR

### **Task 2**

Find a photo or video of someone doing something illegal, embarrassing or regrettable in the riot. Pretend you are the person in the photo or video. Write an explanation of your behaviour. Either describe what prompted you to participate in that particular activity or provide an apology for what you were doing.

Length: 250-500 words

### **Follow-up**

Initially, the Vancouver Police Department, along with Mayor Gregor Robertson, claimed that a few hundred anarchists were responsible for the riot. Does your video and photo research confirm this claim? Discuss this question in a group of four. Be prepared to share your conclusions in a larger class discussion.