In the UK and the USA alike policing has had to come to terms with the powerful influence of political ideology. This has interacted with academic and public commentaries in the creation of social policies. For example, thinking about poverty, such as the idea of an ‘underclass’, has been influential in determining the response of some police policymakers to increased social divisions and exclusion and specifically the problems of crime and disorder which flow out of these (Scarman, 1981: 2.11; Alderson, 1984: 171, 107; Newman, 1983). Since the early 1970s, under the influence of American thinking, the post-war consensus on welfarism in British society came under attack. This coincided with an increase in poverty as well as rising crime, but especially urban unrest. Throughout the 1980s there were outbreaks of public disorder in some of Britain’s inner cities which, for some scholars, were a consequence of these changes (Benyon and Solomos, 1987). Some observers regarded these conflagrations to be the British equivalent of the ‘race’ riots which occurred in the US during the 1960s, and in certain ways the response to the former was conditioned by reactions to the latter.

After the urban riots of 1981 and 1985, the spectre of lawless American ghettos appeared in the British press, and Lord Scarman among others drew heavily on American analyses of racial disorders and anti-discrimination policies because few indigenous sources were at hand (Silver, 1993: 343).

Since then, Scarman’s (1981) report has been a key document serving as a guide-line for policy-making in the modern British police service. This chapter investigates how these events are bound up with the racialisation of poverty in the UK. It also describes how they led to
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fundamental changes to styles of policing. Firstly, the background and key debates surrounding the 1980s riots are reviewed. Secondly, the cardinal themes in the police policy process at that time are identified. The main concern is with broad brush developments in policy rather than small scale innovations at a local level. Since 1979 neo-liberal governments have introduced the disciplines of the ‘new public management’ into the police service to make it more efficient, economic and effective and to reduce public expenditure (McLaughlin and Murji, 1995, 1997; Farnham and Horton, 1996; Butcher, 1998). At that time the idea of communitarian or community policing was important. Given that public funds are finite, the police were required to work more closely with various public, voluntary and private agencies to reduce crime and disorder (Alderson, 1981; Scarman, 1981). Thirdly, the particular points at which the ideas about poverty discussed in Chapter 5 may have entered the police policy process are delineated. Some senior officers stress the importance of the structural dimensions of poverty, whereas it would appear that the Home Office and the rank and file tend to favour a behavioural version. Indeed some of the the former have criticised government policy by referring to the complex structural processes which lead to poverty and also unrealistic demands being made of the police.

Poverty, the ‘underclass’ and racialised disorder

It only takes a cursory glance at the events in Britain’s inner cities throughout the 1980s to see that riots have been a significant feature. These were not a new phenomenon, and past incidents had set the tone for police relations with certain sections of the black community at national and local levels in the 1970s and 1980s (Fryer, 1984; Keith, 1992, 1993).

In the aftermath of the 1981 riots, and again following the disorders of 1985 and 1991 and 1992 respectively, the ‘underclass’ won a place on the agenda of politicians, media commentators and some policymakers. Waddington (1992), Campbell (1993), King and Brearley (1996) and Reiner (1998) provide comprehensive accounts of this unrest, although they do not refer to poverty and the notion of an ‘underclass’ as such. This chapter is less concerned with the events themselves but more with the public response to them and the various usages of the term ‘underclass’ at that time.

The key incidents were the inner city riots in Bristol in 1980, and Brixton, Moss Side (Manchester) and Toxteth (L8, Liverpool) in 1981. These events represented a watershed in terms of British policing, and