READING RACISM AND THE RIGHT

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IN RACISM'S ECHO CHAMBER:

GOVERNMENT, CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND THE SUMMER 2024 RIOTS

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with a preface by Liz Fekete

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PREFACE

In summer 2024 we saw the most widespread anti-migrant and Islamophobic violence that England had ever seen. There should have been some government soul searching into the causes of this violence, unparalleled in its geographical reach and ferocity, and the consequences for racialised communities. But there wasn't. Politicians promoting divisive rhetoric against migrants and asylum seekers – responsible, it would seem, for every social ill – should have examined their consciences. But they didn't. The riots took place in some of the most deprived areas of England. Whether deprivation was a causal factor should have been considered. But it wasn't.

All these factors and their contribution to social fragmentation and the politics of scarcity that pits one disadvantaged group against another (most often on race and class grounds) were glaringly obvious to communities under siege. But not, seemingly, to the government. It chose to follow a myopic and, as later events would prove, ideological approach that located the causes of the riots[1] in extreme attitudes, individual rage and a nebulous culture of 'thuggery' residing within working-class communities where extremists and 'agitators from all parts of the ideological spectrum' have a penchant for provoking violent disorder.

In these ways, then, the government set out on a dangerous ideological project that decontextualised the riots, severing them from issues of structural discrimination and systemic racism. Its approach appears rooted in the doctrine of cumulative extremism, and the government is now amending the Crime and Policing Bill, to restrict or effectively ban demonstrations on the basis of their supposed 'cumulative impact'. This represents a decidedly repressive turn. For it not only starts a process that, if successful, could well lead to the end of the right to protest as we know it, but also justifies this onslaught on civil liberties in perversely Orwellian terms – the need to protect society from racism, antisemitism and hate.

In racism's echo chamber: government, criminal justice and the summer 2024 riots is the third IRR briefing paper in the series 'Reading Racism and the Right'.

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1 Though the degree to which the riots of summer 2024 were racist riots or far-right manipulated is contested by politicians and the right-wing media, the fact that they were riots is generally accepted. While we use terms like riots and racist riots throughout the report to capture the generic picture, we also warn that generalisations can distort what happened at a local level, since the targets of violence differed in various localities – from the targeting of asylum accommodation, mosques and community institutions, to the targeting of police, BME-owned businesses, generalised violence against shops, to demonstrations and fighting with counter- protesters.

Determined to respond to the government's delinking of the riots from racism, and to explore its impact on the legal process, the IRR commissioned criminologist Dr Jon Burnett (who had previously headed its 'Geographies of Racism' project) to conduct a study of prosecutions for riots-related offences as they came before the courts. We wanted to provide a snapshot of policing, prosecution and court responses following a period of sustained racist violence and to consider whether the 'riots' were a break with or a reflection of mainstream talking points around race, religion and immigration.

As the IRR's particular focus is on the racial dimension of policing, prosecuting, charging, convicting and sentencing, we elected to study in greater detail a sample of 126 cases which would allow us to observe how the cause of racial justice was furthered, particularly in the courtroom. Here, one of Jon Burnett's most interesting findings, which bucks existing frameworks for understanding the riots and also makes the government's claim to protect society from hateful mobilisations all the more Orwellian, is that 33 per cent of the charges we studied in our sample involved BME, mostly young Muslim male defendants, who did not initiate the riots, but responded to them. At the point of sentencing, some judges sought to minimise or dismiss defendants' lived experience of racism, seeing their (re) actions as equally culpable and 'incendiary'. And prosecutorial decision-making seemed driven by a sentencing policy directed at BME communities to deter them against responding to racist provocations. With no end in sight to racial violence, such a 'deterrent' approach could well have a powerful impact on communities which now find traditional avenues of protest closed to them.

The research findings, below, were reinforced by the events of summer 2025 (examined in an earlier briefing *Enforcing Britishness: from the 'numbers game' to far-right vigilantism*). Our strong belief is that unless society comes to terms with the deeper causes of anti-migrant, Islamophobic and racist violence we will be caught in a vicious cycle of events that repeatedly reinforce each other, with the prospect of ugly protests and riots forming an infinite loop. Jon Burnett's research unravels the many repetitions in this loop to reveal a binding narrative that connects the motivations of the racist rioters to policies of the government and the wider security state. The distorting confines of the echo chamber, of the government's own making, ultimately justifies the repressive direction of our criminal justice system as we enter a new era of authoritarianism.

Liz Fekete, Director Institute of Race Relations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our aims

To examine the criminal justice system's response to the 'rioters', including those who responded to the riots or were swept up in them.

To provide a snapshot of criminal justice processes following a period of sustained racist violence.

To see whether the 'riots' were a break from or a reflection of mainstream talking points around race, religion and immigration.

To consider a range of related factors arising from the data, such as
— the ways different kinds of cases were constructed,
— the nature of the cases themselves,
— the way that racism was understood in the courtroom and the relationship of these to charging and sentencing patterns.

To examine the motivations, mode of expression and rationales of those brought to court, in order to identify how such attitudes were reflected within the anti-immigration and Islamophobic violence of the riots.

Getting started

■ In line with IRR's particular focus on the racial dimension of policing, prosecuting, charging, convicting and sentencing, we sought to examine whether the 'riots' were a break with or a reflection of mainstream talking points around race, religion and immigration.

■ We established a database of 126 'cases' where individuals in England were charged with criminal offences in relation to the 2024 riots (between August 2024 and December 2025) with each case compiled via information gleaned from a variety of sources including national and local newspapers and, where publicly available, transcripts of judges sentencing remarks.

Within our 126 cases, we identified two separate cohorts:

■ Prosecutions that arose from participation in or in the context of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic mobilisations and their aftermath (67 per cent of all cases examined). This includes a subset involving prosecutions of vulnerable people, including the homeless and those with mental health problems and/or

addictions, who were in many cases not initiators of the violence, but caught up in it, and were often dehumanised in media and prosecutorial narratives.

- Prosecutions of those who responded to the riots, mainly but not exclusively young Muslim men (33 per cent of all cases examined), and including those who responded to attacks on community institutions, particularly mosques, as well as those who mobilised outside asylum accommodation or who participated in counter-mobilisations.

Findings (in relation to our sample)

The nature of the violence and how it was understood

What stood out from the findings:

- the sheer numbers of those involved (beyond those who instigated the violence), its sustained viciousness, and its geographical reach.

- the violence was cheered on both literally and metaphorically online, including by far-right or hard-right actors, including calls to turn out in greater numbers mixed with claims that this was 'war'.

- in some cases, media reporting, as cases went through the court, shifted the subject of discussion from violence motivated by racism to mob violence against police officers, or just 'mindless violence'. Yet, people, in their hundreds attended mobilisations outside asylum accommodation, with some ripping up paving slabs to throw through the windows, pouring flammable gases and liquids into corridors, and throwing petrol bombs inside – seemingly to burn the occupants alive.

- a 'two-tier justice' narrative emerged in the media and gathered pace following the riots. This suggested a) that the criminal justice system favours immigrants and b) some of those charged with riot-related offences were singled out due to their race and political views. It was pushed by a range of political figures, including news corporations, media personalities and online influencers. An alignment of far-right and hard-right actors sought to absolve some of those charged with riot-related offences (including online).

Why people participated in anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and racist violence

Among those prosecuted for offences arising from anti-immigration or anti-mosque protests were those clearly influenced by mainstream frameworks about

immigration and integration, as well as right-wing narratives around 'two-tier policing', 'two tier- justice', 'Islamisation' and 'uncontrolled immigration'. Some defendants claimed that the state prioritises the welfare of immigrants and minorities over that of white people.

In some cases, those accused of riots-related offences, went further to accuse the state of aiding and abetting an 'invasion', associating the state with disloyalty, treason and un-Britishness.

The government response to the riots

The government de-contextualised what happened, focusing overwhelmingly on issues of crime and punishment, and failing to consider its own role or to consider the urgent need to educate against racism.

The prime minister played a central role in delinking the riots from racism by establishing a narrative that linked the riots to violent disorder across the ideological spectrum.

The government failed to consider whether deprivation caused by state policies over time was a contributory factor in the riots and whether economic policies contributed to a situation whereby the far Right sought to gain a foothold in areas that perceived themselves as abandoned by government.

The role of the far Right in the violence

While the riots were not caused by the far Right, they were exploited and manipulated by them.

The far Right did make a concerted effort to organise, join in or exploit mobilisations in some of England's most disadvantaged towns and cities.

The scale of far-right misinformation and outright racist propaganda online sustained anti-immigrant and Islamophobic mobilisations that spread rapidly.

The far Right had already attempted to establish a foothold in certain areas with this then establishing a template for latching onto and exploiting local concerns in order to scapegoat migrants, refugees and Muslims.

The far-Right's exploitation of people's emotions has had a particularly detrimental impact on the vulnerable, including the homeless, those struggling with various addictions, those who had grown up in care, or who had experienced significant violence and loss.

In the courtroom

The impact of extreme racist violence on defendants from racialised communities was sometimes trivialised by judges or magistrates.

Defendants lived experience of racism was minimised or dismissed, thus equating actions linked to community defence as equally culpable or 'incendiary'.

In one third of cases in our sample the Crown Prosecution Service charged those who responded to the riots. In some of these cases, the CPS seems to have ignored the public interest test in bringing charges, while judges failed to consider, given the defendant's testimony, whether a guilty plea should have been considered 'equivocal' .

Our sample also shows that the post-riot crackdown swept up vulnerable people from all backgrounds in the violence, including the homeless, those struggling with various addictions, those who had grown up in care, or who had experienced significant violence and loss.

Did counter-extremism frameworks and 'two-tier justice' narratives influence judicial decision-making?

The narratives of 'cumulative extremism' or 'reciprocal radicalisation' have been embraced by criminal justice institutions, contributing to the punitive approach and harsh sentences imposed on those who mobilised in reaction to a far-right inspired presence in their neighbourhoods, as well as on vulnerable people from all backgrounds.

False claims of two-tier justice made by far-right and right-wing actors and amplified in media reporting may have influenced charging and sentencing of Muslim and other BME defendants.

There are indications that a deterrent sentencing policy directed at BME communities, who respond to racist provocations, may be developing.

INTRODUCTION

On 29 July 2024, 17-year-old Axel Rudakubana brutally murdered three girls, nine-year-old Alice da Silva Aguiar, six-year-old Bebe King and seven-year-old Elsie Dot Stancombe, and injured several others, at a dance class in Southport, a Merseyside town, on the northwest coast of England. One day later, a peaceful vigil organised and attended largely by locals took place; and several hours afterwards, a second – unrelated – gathering was organised. Later that evening, and following this second event, Southport's single mosque (the address of which had been publicised on social media channels organising the mobilisation) was attacked, with parts of the walls ripped down, people inside abused and threatened, and bricks (and other objects) thrown at the building. At the same time, shops were targeted, and a vehicle was set on fire.[2] Over the next few days, some twenty-nine protests took place in at least twenty-seven towns and cities in England and Northern Ireland. With the mobilisations, largely orchestrated on social media, serving in some contexts as a pretext for racially motivated attacks, what took place could well be described as a form of nationally dispersed racial violence, or even, some have argued, an attempted pogrom.

Multiple academic studies have already attempted to document, situate and analyse the violence which took place in the summer of 2024.[3] It is not our intention to repeat this work. Still, it has to be acknowledged that in the months that followed the riots, as cases proceeded throughout the courts, the focus of media reporting began to concentrate, for the most part, on violence against police officers thereby obscuring the racist violence against those living in asylum accommodation, attending mosques, or merely going about their everyday business. It's worth recapping that people were dragged from their cars and attacked in Hull. A Muslim man was reportedly stabbed in Liverpool. At a train station in Kent, National Front stickers with 'rights for whites' were placed with

2 Hope not Hate. 'The Far Right and the Southport Riot: What We Know So Far', *Hope not Hate*, (31 July 2024), https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/07/31/the-far-right-and-the-southport-riot-what-we-know-so-far/

3 See for example, Charlotte Chadderton and Anke Wischmann, 'Racialised political discourse as public pedagogy in the UK and Germany: The sanctioning of racial violence and reproduction of European whiteness'. *Equity in Education and Society*, (Online first, 1 September 2025): https://doi.org/10.1177/275264612513713; Dan Godshaw and Ann Singleton, 'Neither mindless nor legitimate: the racist politics of the 2024 riots and the limitations of the carceral response'. *Justice, Power and Resistance*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2025), pp. 237-248; Anthony Ince, 'Entanglements of resistance and repression in the UK's 'far-right riots' of 2024'. Kriminologisches Journal, Vol. 57, No. 1, (2025), pp. 52-60; Yamina Boukari and Delan Devakumar, 'Far-right riots in the UK: the culmination of years of rhetoric and policies'. *The Lancet*, Vol. 404, No. 10456, (2024), p. 931.

razor blades beneath to lacerate the fingers of anyone removing them.[4] While, in Sunderland, Filipino nurses travelling to work had rocks thrown at them, and in Manchester a lone black man was assaulted by multiple people, egged on by a crowd shouting 'stamp on his face' and 'kill him'. Across numerous towns and cities, buildings, including a food bank, community hub and library, and citizens advice bureaux were damaged, probably targeted because they provided services for migrants. But a specific level of ire was reserved for mosques, as well as hotels 'accommodating' those seeking asylum. For it was these, in particular, which were targeted by groups of people numbering anywhere between tens and hundreds, and who (among other things) ripped up paving slabs to throw through the windows, poured flammable gases and liquids into corridors, and threw petrol bombs, leaving those targeted fearing they would be burned alive. Meanwhile, the waves of violence were cheered on both literally and metaphorically online, including calls to turn out in greater numbers mixed with claims that this was 'war'.[5]

Such was the extent and the ferocity of these events that they were likened to a 'pogromist reaction' by the political analyst Richard Seymour.[6] For Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who immediately delivered a statement from Downing Street, the rioting was an example of 'far-right thuggery', describing those who took part as a 'violent mob [who] do not represent our country'. All of those engaged in the 'disorder' would 'regret it', he continued, before stating that 'Whatever the apparent cause or motivation we make no distinction. Crime is crime. And this government will tackle it.'[7]

This report examines the short- and longer-term meanings of the dominant government response and depictions of these events by drawing on analyses of 126 'cases' which entered and were processed through magistrates and crown courts. And in doing so, it argues that this response and these depictions are reductive: de-contextualising what happened, and disavowing any broader political culpability for creating the conditions within which they took place. There were and are multiple interpretations of what happened, of course. But that the Prime Minister's remarks – widely reproduced via media and backed by numerous

4 Charlotte Philips, 'Stickers with "razor blades stuck to them" reportedly discovered at Dunton Green railway station in Sevenoaks'. *Kent Online*. (5 August 2024), https://www.kentonline.co.uk/sevenoaks/news/police-respond-after-stickers-with-hidden-razor-blades-all-310838/

5 See Martin Lindsay and Calum Grewar, 'Social media misinformation "fanned riot flames"', *BBC News*, (9 August 2024), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70jz2r4lp0o

6 Richard Seymour, 'Dreaming of downfall', *New Left Review Sidecar*, (13 August 2024), https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/dreaming-of-downfall

7 Keir Starmer, 'PM statement: 4 August 2024', *Prime Minister's Office*, (4 August 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-4-august-2024

cross-party figures – initially foregrounded an expansive 'law and order' response to these events (followed by a commitment to community cohesion policies and frameworks through a cross party Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion launched in 2025) is well established.[8] The Prime Minister's remarks were echoed by the Home Secretary, who spoke of 'deliberate organised violence' and 'thuggery', and stated that those involved would face 'the full force of the law'.[9] What the analysis of cases and empirical data in this report provide is a way to explore, understand and critique this government's – and, indeed, the wider state's – response.

The need to do so takes on particular resonance when situating the events and understanding the longer-term context within which they played out. This report should be read alongside Mainstreaming Hate: how the Right exploits the crisis to divide us which the IRR researched, prior to the riots. Academic Nadine El-Enany, writing in the *New Left Review*, also pointed out the importance of acknowledging that the political establishment had ramped up hostility to migrants prior to the general election that preceded the events:

> *Rishi Sunak tirelessly reiterated his pledge to 'stop the boats' and 'control our borders' by imprisoning asylum seekers and banishing them to Rwanda. Keir Starmer tried to outdo him by demanding the accelerated deportation of Bangladeshis. One of Yvette Cooper's first moves as Home Secretary was to draw a direct link between immigration and rising crime, launching a new Border Security Command and ramping up 'illegal working raids'.*

Indeed, 'When the rioters took to the streets', she suggests, 'they were not merely repeating the slogans of these politicians. They were taking matters into their own hands, enacting the violent policies they had been promised.' However, while the government (and segments of the Conservative Party) depicted the riots as 'thuggery' or 'mindless violence', she argues, neither were 'willing to discuss the establishment racism that galvanized them'.[10]

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8 See for example Sky News, 'UK riots: Sir Keir Starmer makes "guarantee" for "thugs" and announces "emergency security" for mosques', *Sky News*, (5 August 2024), https://news.sky.com/story/uk-riots-sir-keir-starmer-condemns-far-right-thuggery-13190805; Jennifer Williams and Rafe Uddin, 'Keir Starmer vows "extremists" will feel full weight of law after riot arrests', *Financial Times*, (3 August, 2024), https://www.ft.com/content/4e004944-f80d-4690-a25d-76cdcfe06678; Jake Puddle, Jill Rutter and Heather Rolfe, *The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK* (London, British Future, 2025).

9 10 Downing Street, 'Prime Minister launches new clamp down on criminal and violent disorder', *10 Downing Street*, (1 August 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-launches-new-clamp-down-on-criminal-and-violent-disorder

10 Nadine El-Enany, 'Something Monstrous', *Sidecar, New Left Review*, (4 September 2024), https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/something-monstrous

In this way, the 'thuggery' narrative pursued by politicians neatly disappears and absolves mainstream political parties as well as government policy choices from any broader culpability regarding the core forces driving the violence – depoliticising and decontextualising them. As we shall see, decontextualisation was also integral to the way those responding to violence inflicted on their communities were dealt with in the courts. As is well established, both during and after the riots a narrative of 'two-tier policing' that treats white people more harshly because of their race or political views gathered pace relentlessly, pushed by Tommy Robinson and a range of political figures, news corporations, media personalities, online influencers and the commentariat from the Right. Not only is this claim an inversion of the historical legacy and current reality of structural racism within the criminal justice system (See IRR criminal justice statistics pages and Race & Class UK Criminal Justice resource, 'The Past in the Present'), but in the context of the riots, it mystifies the way a centrist narrative of 'two sides' being mirror images of each other – of 'cumulative extremism' – was incorporated within the work of criminal legal institutions. One of the primary themes of this report is how a decontextualised 'thuggery' narrative depoliticised the events of summer 2024 by delinking it from the violence we have already described, thereby contributing to the criminalisation of those who mobilised in reaction to what in some cases was a far-right- inspired presence in their neighbourhoods. This seems to have been forgotten. A secondary theme that our cases compelled us to explore is the impact of the post-riot 'crackdown' on vulnerable defendants, such as the homeless, those with addictions and those with mental health needs, who were not instigators of riots but who in some cases were swept up in events.

While this report attempts to provide a snapshot of criminal legal processes at a point of sustained violence, it also sets out to explore how the dominant state response – of which the work of criminal legal institutions is one part – has been to decontextualise the riots, absolving government policies and practices of any culpability, to explain away racist violence as the domain of 'thuggery', and to explain away responses in the same vein. There have been, of course, multiple – often competing – understandings and explanations of the riots, and these will be discussed in what follows. Worryingly, our data and analysis show that in too many respects the dominant response has been to solidify the material and ideological conditions which led to the riots taking place in the first place. At the same time, though, material anti-racist solutions and horizons, rooted in the forging of radical solidarities, are already being advanced at a community level.

METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

This report examines 126 cases where individuals in England were charged with criminal offences in relation to the riots in 2024 and subsequently appeared in court between August 2024 and December 2025.[11] In doing so, it covers cases from each of the localities in England directly experiencing the riots where information was available, with each case compiled via information gleaned from one or more of the following sources:

— National and local newspapers
— Broadcast media
— Publicly available transcripts of judges sentencing remarks (where available)
— Independent media
— Publicly available information drawn from the websites of criminal legal institutions

It is important to state that this sample of cases does not claim to be representative either of the range of charges brought following the riots or the way defendants (not all of whom have come to trial) were treated in court.[12] A study that examines all prosecutions as a result of the 'riots' is beyond our scope. And, in any event, IRR's particular focus is the racial dimension of policing, prosecuting, charging, convicting and sentencing. We wanted to consider whether the 'riots' were a break with or a reflection of mainstream talking points around race, religion and immigration, taking into account a range of related factors arising from the data, such as: the ways in which different types of cases were constructed; the nature of the cases themselves; the fact that some cases involved people reacting to the 'riots'; the way that racism was understood in the courtroom, and the relationship of all of these to charging and sentencing patterns.

Given the sources from which we draw in building up case studies, there will be limitations. For example, it is well established that media 'crime' reporting/ frameworks reproduce the intersections of a whole range of differing biases

11 While rioting also took place in Northern Ireland, this report focuses only on the criminal justice response in England. As responsibility for criminal justice has devolved from Westminster to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the criminal justice and policing response there, would have demanded separate consideration that was beyond our scope.

12 In October 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) released figures stating that there had been, up till then,1,590 arrests, and 1,015 charges. National Police Chiefs' Council, 'Update on violent disorder arrests and charges', (29 October 2024), https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/update-on-violent-disorder-arrests-and-charges-1

and power relations. These include (among other things, and in different ways), the deference to and reproduction of 'official' narratives, interpretations and forms of information, an over- or under-emphasis on particular criminal offences, 'offenders' and victims, and layers of filtering limiting the parameters of interpretation.[13]

Nor is it controversial to argue that criminal legal institutions themselves shape and reproduce a range of power relations.[14] In this context, it is important to bear in mind that these cases are an indication of particular patterns of incidents and charges, and, by definition, do not include incidents where people were not charged.

Nevertheless, by drawing on multiple forms of information (court dates, criminal justice system narratives, media reporting) we have sought to provide an analysis, not just of the nature of charging and sentencing following the riots, but crucially how these legal measures were interpreted and understood by media, political commentators and political parties and how all these factors contributed to the development of powerful frameworks around 'two-tier justice' or 'the Islamisation of the UK', or related themes.

In what follows, Section 1 (A Narrative That Binds) situates the dominant responses to the riots, examining how media and political narratives played out in local contexts. We provide an overview of cases that includes the rationales put forward by those charged and also draws attention to the severity of prosecutions brought against vulnerable people, including the homeless and those with addictions, who in some cases were not initiators of the violence, but caught up in it. In Section 2 ('No Defence Or Excuse') we shift our focus towards examining prosecutions of those who responded to the violence, in particular exploring cases where people mobilised against anti-immigrant demonstrations or responded to attacks on community institutions, particularly mosques, and found themselves charged. Section 3 (Bringing the Cases Together) explores the reproduction of cumulative extremism narratives through criminal legal institutions and processes. A concluding discussion brings together these analyses.

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13 See Jon Burnett, 'Racial violence and the Brexit state', *Race & Class*, 58/4 (2017): pp. 85-97; Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Robert Reiner, Crime: *The Mystery of the Common-sense Concept* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2016).

14 Steven Box, *Power, crime and mystification* (London: Tavistock, 1983); Joe Sim, *Punishment and prisons: power and the carceral state* (London: Sage 2009)

(1) A narrative that binds: anti-immigrant and Islamophobic mobilisations, charging and justifications

This section provides an overview of our first cohort of cases (67 per cent of the cases we examined). These relate to charges brought for specific actions, involvement in or otherwise broadly carried out in the context of the 'anti-immigrant' and/or Islamophobic mobilisations, including (though not always): targeting racialised groups, and those (assumed to be) acting in their support where defendants participated in mobilisations or in some cases got caught up in them. We first explore the immediate backdrop to the riots and how the violence played out in local contexts, relating this back to social media and mainstream narratives about immigration, Islam and integration. We go on to reflect on the ways in which rationales for violence echoed the ideological statements and policy positions of government and mainstream media narratives over time. We conclude with a discussion of the broader social and economic drivers of the riots and identify amongst other trends the criminal justice system's harsh treatment of certain vulnerable defendants, such as the homeless and those with mental health or addiction problems.

The riots of 2024 marked the latest iteration of a long, if sporadic, history of racist violence in England and Northern Ireland.[15] But what stood out from the past was, firstly, the sheer numbers of those involved (beyond those who instigated the violence) in a particular form of sustained viciousness, but, secondly, and crucially, their 'geographical reach'.[16] Within hours of the horrendous murders of nine-year-old Alice da Silva Aguiar, six-year-old Bebe King and seven-year-old Elsie Dot Stancombe on 29 July 2024, claims on X (formerly Twitter) that the attacker was a 'Muslim immigrant' had been seen by some 4 million users. By that evening social media posts, were becoming more elaborate and more extensively circulated, providing the perpetrator with a made-up name, claiming that he had arrived in the UK in a 'small boat', was Muslim, and was seeking asylum. By the following day, X posts speculating that the attacker was Muslim and/or subject to immigration control, had received at least 27 million impressions according to

15 See for example, Peter Fryer, *Staying power: the history of black people in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

16 Daniel Trilling. 'This time it's worse', *London Review of Books*. (6 August 2024), https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2024/august/this-time-it-s-worse

some suggestions; a small minority of these posts were attempts to denounce the spread of rumours.[17]

Among those circulating or otherwise speaking to such claims were influencers such as X Executive Chairman Elon Musk, who called on his roughly 9.5 million X followers to 'wake up' and, with reference to the riots themselves, warned that 'Civil war is inevitable'. Meanwhile, Reclaim Party leader Laurence Fox warned of the 'need to permanently remove Islam from Great Britain'. English Defence League (EDL) co-founder Tommy Robinson (Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) shared claims that there were attempts to manipulate the public with regard to the attacker's identity; and Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, in a video circulated on X, asked 'whether the truth was being held from us'.[18] One day after the mosque in Southport was attacked, mobilisations took place in five other towns and cities. Two days after this, mobilisations took place across two more places; in eleven towns and cities the following day; nine localities two days after that and then in three towns and cities the following day after. Resisted from the outset, by the following weekend while (rumoured or realised) mobilising was still taking place, these were significantly outnumbered by those organising against them.

Misinformation or far-right propaganda? The role of social media

That these mobilisations were able to sustain themselves for as long as they did has been attributed in part to the symbiotic relationship between the scale of misinformation and far-right propaganda spread on social media and the capacity of such disinformation to be used to organise mobilisations at rapid pace. Certainly, it was for this reason, that journalists spoke in terms of 'social media

17 Cited in Paul Reilly, 'Southport riots: why social media's role in unrest is overblown', *The Conversation*. (1 August), https://theconversation.com/southport-riots-why-social-medias-role-in-unrest-is-overblown-235979

18 See for example Jabed Ahmed, 'How misinformation about the Southport murders sparked violent race riots across the country', *The Independent*. (23 January), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/southport-riots-race-muslim-axel-rudakubana-murders-b2685264.html; Andrew McDonald and Esther Webber, 'Farage tries to have it both ways as Britain burns', *Politico*. (8 August), https://www.politico.eu/article/nigel-farage-uk-riots-keir-starmer-elections-2024-conspiracy-x-rally/; Al Jazeera, 'Agitators accused of Islamophobia for linking Southport attack to Muslims', *Al Jazeera*, (31 July, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/31/agitators-accused-of-islamophobia-for-linking-southport-attack-to-muslims

fuelled riots' that were 'fomented online'.[19] The Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, said that social media platforms put 'rocket boosters' under the events, linking this to the Prime Minister's depiction of far-right 'thuggery'. Meanwhile, the former Conservative Home Secretary, James Cleverley, suggested the events had 'all the hallmarks' of a 'pernicious' online culture 'perpetrated by the far right, amplified, both within the UK, and beyond our borders'. [20]

However, such partial explanations – that tend to homogenise or decontextualise hateful comment on social media – can conceal as much as they reveal. Certainly it is the case that messaging channels utilised during the riots were buzzing with individual users offering 'incitements to destroy mosques' and calling for the mass killing of Muslims, as documented by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. In fact, 45,000 messages were shared between some 55 Telegram channels linked to the far-right prior to and in the aftermath of the Southport Mosque attack alone, according to the Institute of Strategic Dialogue. This included sharing details of the mosque that was targeted, livestreaming the events, congratulating the participants and organising (or promoting) mobilisations in other localities over the next few days.[21] But it might equally be the case that the far Right's longer term influence on the course of events – and here it is important to note that the majority of those present at protests were local, and as such not 'bussed in' by any far-right party – was offline as well as online. For the far Right's historical legacy of organising meant that it had already established a template for latching onto and exploiting local concerns. For example, far-right groups and 'migrant hunters' protested outside or otherwise 'visited' forms of accommodation for asylum seekers (often hotel accommodation) over 250 times in 2022, according to Hope

19 See for example Cristina Criddle, Stephanie Stacey and Lucy Fisher. 'Social media fuelled Southport misinformation, UK home secretary says', *Financial Times*. (5 August 2024), https://www.ft.com/content/6b886570-1b55-4647-8b6a-c4ad4c5b6925; Nick Martin, 'Social media fuelled riots - and the government has tech giants in its sights', *Sky News*. (11 August 2024), https://news.sky.com/story/social-media-fuelled-riots-and-the-government-has-tech-giants-in-its-sights-13195688; Joseph Miller, 'UK riots: Social media's role in misinformation and violence', *Policing Insight*, (18 November 2024), https://policinginsight.com/feature/advertisement/uk-riots-social-medias-role-in-misinformation-and-violence/; Adam Satariano, 'The U.K. Riots Were Fomented Online. Will Social Media Companies Act?', *New York Times*, (2 August 2024), https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/02/business/uk-riots-social-media.html

20 Cited in Alix Culbertson, 'Home secretary says prison places "ready" for "thuggish minority" involved in riots', *Sky News*. (5 August 2024), https://news.sky.com/story/home-secretary-says-prison-places-ready-for-thuggish-minority-involved-in-riots-13191129

21 Institute of Strategic Dialogue & CASM Technology, 'Quantifying extremism: A data-driven analysis of UK riot-related far-right Telegram networks', *Institute of Strategic Dialogue & CASM Technology*. (13 September 2024), https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/quantifying-extremism-a-data-driven-analysis-of-riot-related-far-right-telegram-networks/

Not Hate, more than doubling the levels of such activity in the previous year.[22] The activities of people who compare themselves to 'citizen journalists', but whose actions are described in a recent Channel 4 expose as akin to 'digital vigilantism', have sometimes involved far-right activists posing as independent journalists, harassing or abusing those staying and working in asylum accommodation while 'filming their interactions [and] sharing relevant addresses in order to encourage further harassment'.[23] These activities have taken place alongside things like 'Christian patrols' and invasions of mosques organised by Britain First as far back as 2014 in areas with large Muslim populations, as well as 'beach patrols' (attempting to monitor/'catch' asylum seekers disembarking on British beaches), all of which have provided the far Right with an opportunity to attach themselves to local issues.[24] Indeed, it is against such backdrops that, as Richard Seymour has argued, the riots were not so much caused by the far-right but exploited by them.[25]

Nor does a focus on misinformation (as opposed to the orchestrated disinformation of far-right propaganda) adequately capture the extent to which the design and weakening of safeguards on X, amplifies incitement to violence directed at Muslim and other racialised groups, an extensive documentation of which has been provided by Amnesty International.[26] But, crucially, there are also 'mainstream' politicians that have to be held to account for the role they played not so much on social media, but in parliament. As journalist Daniel Trilling noted, while far-right activities and activists might have inflamed the situation, an ideological backdrop normalising hostility to Muslim and migrant communities

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22 HOPE not Hate, *State of hate 2023: rhetoric, racism and resentment*. (London: HOPE not Hate, 2023); Safya Khan-Ruf, 'Far-right harassment of migrant accommodation doubles in 2022', *HOPE not Hate*. (1 March 2023), https://hopenothate.org.uk/2023/03/01/far-right-harassment-of-migrant-accommodation-doubles-in-2022/

23 Tom Bennett, 'Inside the UK's anti-migrant protests', *Huck* (21 February 2023), https://www.huckmag.com/article/the-rise-of-anti-migrant-protests-uk-2023

24 See for example, Safya Khan-Ruf and David Lawrence, 'HOPE not Hate has recorded more than 50 anti-migrant demos since the beginning of 2023 – a huge uptick from the previous year, *HOPE not Hate*, (14 June 2023), https://hopenothate.org.uk/2023/06/14/refugees-not-welcome-here-six-months-of-far-right-anti-migrant-protests/; Jack Peat, '"Refugees Welcome" event held on beach targeted by far-right beach patrols', *London Economic* (23 September 2019), https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/refugees-welcome-event-held-on-beach-targeted-by-far-right-beach-patrols-161385/; Emma Wallis, 'Anti-migrant groups patrol Britain's beaches', *Infomigrants*. (23 September 2019), https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/19703/antimigrant-groups-patrol-britains-beaches

25 Richard Seymour, 'The horror in the heart of the farce', *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières* (6 August 2024), https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article71655

26 See Amnesty International 'UK: X created a "staggering amplification of hate" during the 2024 riots', *Amnesty International*, (6 August 2025), https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-x-created-staggering-amplification-hate-during-2024-riots; and for the full report Amnesty International, *UK: technical explainer on X's recommender system and the 2024 racist riots*. (London: Amnesty International, 2025).

has been established by 'ostensibly more respectable sources'.[27] For, it is political leaders who have, for example, driven depictions of migrants entering England as an 'invasion' and a 'swarm'.[28] It is members of political parties, vying for electoral advantage, who have publicly depicted Muslims as 'barbarians' and the enemy within. For example, while attacking the London mayor Sadiq Khan, certain politicians have promoted ideas of 'Islamists' being 'in charge' of the capital, also playing on a wider 'politics of scarcity', with its dog-whistle to race implicit in the argument that the 'high birth rates' of 'foreign-born mothers' exert unique pressures on state services (also a clear nod to the Great Replacement theory).[29] The mainstream right-wing media has also played an outsized role with its relentless barrage of news stories and comment pieces, centred around themes and frameworks that depict: Muslims as a cultural and demographic threat, receiving special treatment; and migrants as a specific economic and security risk 'exploiting' and harming the nation, and so on.[30]

It is certainly not the first time in post-war British history that such a conflagration of xenophobic interests has come together.[31] But with the advent of social media the dangers of escalation are more present. The reason why misinformation about the perpetrator of the brutal murders of three children at Southport was able to spread so rapidly, and partly drive the riots that followed, was not solely due to far-right organising (a claim which absolves the culpability of broader political forces). The point is that both far-right social media and mainstream media had already established frameworks that popularised racial tropes about Muslims and asylum seekers, and that these could then be easily exploited by the far Right precisely because they had already been normalised and were a regular feature of political and public discourse. As such, while it is important to emphasise that the

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27 Daniel Trilling. 'This time it's worse', *London Review of Books* (6 August 2024), https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2024/august/this-time-it-s-worse

28 Philip Hubbard. 'Suella Braverman's talk of a refugee "invasion" is a dangerous political gambit gone wrong', *King's College London*, (3 November 2022), https://www.kcl.ac.uk/suella-bravermans-talk-of-a-refugee-invasion-is-a-dangerous-political-gambit-gone-wrong

29 Liz Fekete, Liam Shrivastava and Sophia Siddiqui, 'Mainstreaming hate: how the Right exploits the crisis to divide us', *IRR Briefing Paper* (London, Institute of Race Relations, 2024); Middle East Eye, 'UK: Suella Braverman says "Islamists" now in control of Britain', *Middle East Eye*, (23 February 2024), https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-suella-braverman-says-islamists-now-control-britain

30 Centre for Media Monitoring, *British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam* (2018-2020), (London: Centre for Media Monitoring, 2021); Maka Julios-Costa and Camila Montiel-McCann, *A hostile environment: Language, race, politics and the media*. (London, Runnymede Trust, 2025); Des Freedman, 'Mainstream media's complicity in far-right riots isn't accidental – it's structural', *Media Reform Coalition*. (7 August 2024), https://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/far-right-violence-media-structural-racism#intro

31 See for example Arun Kundnani. *The end of tolerance? Racism in 21st century Britain*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007); and Liz Fekete. *A suitable enemy: racism, migration and Islamophobia in Europe*, (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

drivers and motivations for taking part in the riots were of course multifaceted, our findings show how such mainstream themes and frameworks, around things such as 'Islamisation' and 'uncontrolled immigration', played out in local contexts. We also show, via the cases examined, how these themes played out in the courtroom, paying particular attention to the narratives utilised in the violence, including anti-immigration/anti-Muslim and/or racist violence. In a nutshell, by examining the immediate motivations and rationales of some of those coming before the courts, we explore how such themes translated within the violence embedded in the riots.

Analysis of cases

Of the 126 cases drawn on, 85 (67 per cent) relate to people charged for specific actions or forms of involvement in, or otherwise carried out broadly in the context of 'anti-immigrant' or Islamophobic mobilisations, including (although not always) targeting racialised groups and those (assumed to be) acting in their support, principally the police. In 51 of these cases (66 per cent of this sub-total), these actions involved physical attacks against individuals/groups (principally police, but also counter protesters) such as punching, kicking, stamping, spitting, throwing items, beating or otherwise assaulting them.

In 22 cases (26 per cent of this sub-total) actions related to attacks on, or attempts to attack places and buildings, such as mosques or hotel accommodation for asylum seekers, but also one building potentially going to be converted to a mosque, community services (such as a library, community hub or citizens advice bureaux), homes, restaurants and other buildings and vehicles.[32]

In very rare cases, people were carrying weapons (not used), such as knives. But more frequently, when 'weapons' were used in attacks (47 cases, 55 per cent of this sub-total), these were items ripped up, torn up, or otherwise taken ad hoc from the scene in question: i.e. bricks, bottles, rocks, paving slabs, stones, concrete, wood, metal fencing or iron bars, furniture and fire extinguishers. At the same time, as noted above, while in some cases those charged were on their own, in multiple cases, those accused were part of groups (in some cases, court descriptions refer to hundreds of people) abusing people and/or attacking people or places. The fluidity of the crowd means that in some cases it is difficult to pinpoint individual actors and their actions. Where items were used as weapons in group/crowd contexts, the items used by such broader groups also included bottles, bins, street furniture, stones, bricks, debris, rocks, missiles, tins of

32 There is not always a clear distinction between the categories of physical attacks against individuals and attacks on buildings, as those charged may have carried out multiple attacks and appear in a multiple of categories.

paint, fireworks, road signs, beer kegs and, even, petrol bombs. In 63 cases (74 per cent of this subtotal) people individually and/or were part of groups, abusing, threatening or racially abusing those targeted, with such attacks described in some cases in court with words like 'relentless', and phrases such as hours of 'hate-filled' violence. This included, for instance, taunting and shouting abuse at asylum seekers cowering in a hotel while others smashed windows and threw petrol bombs. Nine cases (11 per cent of this sub-total) involved actions online, including actions seen as inciting violence.

Key themes from analysis of cases

As we sift through the cases, regarding 'race' and immigration a number of intersecting themes stand out, that, when taken together, comprise a binding narrative that:

- **Echoed the dominant aims of government immigration policy:** In many of the cases we have studied, those accused of riots-related offences either utilised or were among/adjacent to mobilisations where others utilised variations of slogans used by successive governments' immigration enforcement policies. Simultaneously, those accused expressed frustration that immigration policies are not enacted to the level that politicians claim. For example, former Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's 'Stop the Boats' slogan and the policy framework that developed around it (continuing when the Labour government came to power in 2024), was repeatedly echoed (either by defendants or by broader mobilisations they were among) .[33] One person, part of a group that had confronted counter-protesters, and thrown bins, glass bottles and furniture from the street at police, shouted 'sink the boats'. While another said he had attended mobilisations (which, among other things, ended up with windows and vehicles smashed, and, in at least one case, set on fire) because he was unhappy that people were arriving 'in small boats'. Clearly, it is narratives of an 'invasion' that have for years been put forward in the pronouncements of political figures and by sections of the media that were being reproduced here, with one defendant using the term 'boat invaders'.

- **Accused the state of aiding and abetting the 'invasion':** If the cases above *echoed* dominant 'invasion' narratives, in other cases it was inferred that this 'invasion' was aided and abetted by the state, along with other forces. People spoke in terms of resources/money going to 'immigrants … who get priority',

33 See for example Rishi Sunak, 'Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's statement on the plan to stop the boats: 22 April 2024', *Prime Minister's Office* (22 April 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-rishi-sunaks-statement-on-the-plan-to-stop-the-boats-22-april-2024

or 'illegal immigrants ... living off us', or people who are put 'f***ing first'. This echoes dominant claims, made by politicians and in segments of the media, of white communities being disadvantaged by policies that privilege BME communities, migrants and refugees. Simultaneously, reference was made to particular racialised groups portending specific threats, for example as 'murderers' or 'terrorist sympathisers'. Put together, this amounted to a set of ideas coalescing around the viewpoint that certain groups represented specific dangers, that these same groups were privileged in terms of access to state services, and ultimately that governments and other forces were complicit in these assumed processes. What was clearly being articulated within this viewpoint, was the perception that something akin to a denial of patriotism, or a form of treason, was taking place, particularly with regard to political classes, public officials and the police. For example, one defendant who called police 'Muslim lovers' also called them 'traitors'. In other cases, people shouted to police things like 'you're not English anymore' or 'you are not fucking British at all; you c**** aren't fucking British'.

- **Spoke in terms of 'reclaiming' or 'defending' the country:** Against this backdrop, several defendants linked their actions to defending or 'standing up for' the country, or reclaiming it from those 'trying to take over' or those who through a lack of patriotism were complicit in the so-called 'takeover'. One person, attempting to push burning items on people, for example, was part of a group shouting to 'take our country back'. While another person who threw stones and concrete at a mosque, shouted 'who the fuck is Allah' and 'this is our fucking country'. Here we can see why the targeting of mosques and hotels accommodating asylum seekers was so important. For these buildings were articulated as the frontline of the 'invasion'. It is notable in such contexts that in Stoke a mobilisation took place around a building where planning permission had been sought to turn it into a mosque, for example. In another city, a defendant said that if there was 'one more fucking mosque in the area, I will burn the fucking thing down'. Another person stated 'we are going to burn down every fucking mosque' in Newcastle. In some cases, people publicised the address or location of a place to potentially attack. For example, one defendant, referring to a location where migrants were housed in one city, stated on social media that if people were going to mobilise, they should 'do it properly'. Another named a hotel and suggested people should be 'smashing fuck out [of it]'.

- **Targeted racialised communities:** Racialised groups, principally Muslims and asylum seekers, were repeatedly abused or attacked, with their targeting made explicit in multiple cases. For example, as mentioned above, several people, part of groups threatening or attacking people, shouted or chanted 'who

the fuck is Allah', with one person doing so before entering into an altercation with an Asian man and punching him in the face. Meanwhile, another person armed with weapons spoke of confronting 'Muslim hordes'. At the same time, however, while Muslims and asylum seekers were the groups most likely to be targeted where abuse or attacks were racially motivated, racist violence was not confined to them. For instance, one defendant in Sunderland called someone a 'black c**t' while helping rip up paving stones to throw at people. Another perpetrator – part of a group in Manchester which attacked a lone black man and was urged on by others to 'kill him' – asked the victim if he had a 'problem with us English'? Roma men were dragged from their car in Hull, forcing them to flee the vicinity. While in Middlesborough, somebody ran to the house of an international student and smashed a window with a household appliance.

- **Demanded the 'enaction' of immigration enforcement or 'enacts' the role themselves:** At the same time as seemingly agreeing with the thrust of (certain) immigration policies, but under the belief that they were not being enforced/ enacted sufficiently enough, some defendants appeared to see the events as an opportunity to enact their own versions of immigration control. Several actors, for example, were part of a mobilisation in Blackpool which not only threw glass bottles and furniture at people, but also stopped taxi drivers, demanding they prove their nationality.[34] One man in Middlesborough attempted to stop cars to check whether the drivers were 'white' and/or 'English'. Another defendant, who called out 'deflate the boats', was part of a group which included a man who called for asylum accommodation to be burnt down, also vocalising a demand for an increase in deportations. Immigration policy, in such cases, was not going far enough; and the violence of the riots was seemingly an opportunity to facilitate a more violent form of immigration enforcement.

- **Attacked symbolic sites, and those in solidarity with or 'protecting', migrants, Muslims, 'paedophiles' and 'nonces':** In certain cases, defendants went further, expressing anger at those perceived as complicit in the supposed failure to enact a draconian enough immigration policy. It is this part of the binding narrative that in some cases possibly explains why Citizens Advice or community resources providing social support to migrants (among others) were targeted. At the same time, communities mobilising to protect or show solidarity with targeted groups in a framework of anti-racism were in some cases targeted. For example, in one case a man attempted to punch at a female

34 For discussion of risks and racism experienced by taxi drivers, including that within the night-time economy, see Jon Burnett, 'UK: Racial violence and the night-time economy', *Race & Class*, 53/1 (2011), pp. 100-106.

'counter-protester' outside a hotel accommodating asylum seekers. In another, a man called counter-protesters 'f*****g scum' while threatening to harm them. In Bristol, a man part of a mobilisation targeting a hotel accommodating asylum seekers told police I 'hope it's your f****** kids next'. In Rotherham, a man who called the police 'fucking nonce protectors' was part of a group of people who smashed the window of a hotel accommodating asylum seekers. (He also helped sustain a fire that was lit outside the building, as people cowered inside.)

A distorted echo chamber

It goes without saying that the words and explanations of those facing criminal charges, were public rationalisations of the acts which led to the charges in the first places, and therefore not full explanations of the motivations for involvement in the events (although some defendants did touch on this). At the same time, it is important to emphasise that cases examined here focus, by definition, on examples when people were charged and what these charges related to, and not incidents where people were not charged. What is striking, though, is how with regard to 'race' and immigration the words of those accused so frequently related back to mainstream political debates and policies. Here we return to Daniel Trilling's observation cited above that while far-right activities and activists might have inflamed the situation, an ideological backdrop normalising hostility to Muslim and migrant communities had been established by 'ostensibly more respectable sources'. In fact, what emerges from the binding narrative we describe above could be compared to the distorted confines of an echo chamber. The ideological positions embedded in people's justifications for violence frequently echoed the ideological statements and policy positions of government policies over time, as well as the views of politicians and media commentators more generally.

The key difference, however, is that some of those involved in the summer 2024 violence further echoed dominant narratives asserting that the state had not gone far enough; they had betrayed the people (i.e. white people) by supposedly privileging immigrants, Muslims and BME communities more generally, and it was up to the 'native' population to take matters in to their own hands, violently, if necessary.

The background to this lies in the way successive governments, for instance, through their 'Stop the Boats' and 'Smash the Gangs' narratives, created a political culture and policy framework that could be seized on as an ideological justification for those instigating rioting. Yet we would go further. Mainstream political parties have also played an outsize role in creating material conditions which far-right groups could capitalise on and exploit, fomenting violence and justifying this

on racist grounds. Those involved in the riots, it is essential to emphasise, came from a range of class backgrounds. But it bears repeating that the events of 2024 took place in some of the most deprived areas of the country,[35] with seven of the ten most deprived areas in England experiencing concentrated violence.[36] In certain cases, such areas (or parts of them) constitute what US theorist Ruth Gilmore describes as urban areas of state-led dispossession and organised abandonment.[37] In the UK, this correlates to areas that have disproportionately suffered from the consequences of decades of austerity under Conservative, Conservative-Lib Dem coalition and Labour governments, leading to a much diminished welfare state, the closure of vital spaces of social reproduction, such as youth centres, the degradation of previous universal and free services into means-tested forms of assistance, the decay of community buildings and infrastructure and, as recently identified by the Social Mobility Commission, a near total lack of any social mobility, particularly amongst young adults. Today, the risk of not being in education, employment and training is more than double for those from a disadvantaged background with low qualifications. This group is proportionally highest in the north-east and north-west of England, followed by the East Midlands and West Midlands.

This imposition by the state of punishing austerity politics (and indeed longer-term policy frameworks of upward wealth distribution) has been accompanied by a relentless media and political focus on immigration as a major (if not the sole) cause of a scarcity of resources in communities. Media headlines and 'exposes' have linked racialised and migrant communities with economic hardship, social loss and community fragmentation and breakdown. At the same time, the government's approach to accommodating asylum seekers has frequently involved 'dispersing' them, most recently to hotel accommodation, to areas that have suffered from the negative cumulative impact of austerity. In combination, these issues would have consequences in terms of community cohesion and community relations that should have been clear to any clear-sighted politician or policy-maker.

35 Grace Blakely, 'The economics of despair', *Tribune*. (14 November 2024), https://tribunemag.co.uk/2024/11/the-economics-of-despair/

36 Amy Borrett, 'Far-right riots centred on England's deprivation hotspots', *Financial Times*, (8 August 2024), https://www.ft.com/content/c8317b53-ce27-42fc-bd67-59f9ac9267c9

37 For discussion of this concept see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. (California, University of California Press, 2007).

Cycles of distortion

However, the cycle of distortion, that centres immigration and integration (of Muslims) as the major problems facing working-class communities, does not end there. Distortion continued after the riots as seen in the ways in which particular politicians and media commentators attempted to influence the debate. For, though quick to distance themselves from the violence – mobilisations had gone too far – they simultaneously described them as a signal of 'legitimate grievances' about immigration, Islam and integration. Former Labour minister Ed Balls, for example, said the riots were down to a failure to 'control and manage immigration'.[38] Tory Police and Crime Commissioner Donna Jones said the factors uniting the 'protests' included 'the desire to protect Britain's sovereignty, the need to uphold British values and, in order to do this, stop illegal immigration'.

Yet, leaving aside the question of why such figures chose to ignore the backdrop of manufactured hostility outlined above, one must also ask why in some cases they also chose to either downplay, abstract or ignore, the material conditions faced by communities where the riots took place and the broader realities of the riots themselves. This also involves ignoring the social suffering engendered by economic conditions. When further examining our cohort of cases, we discovered that 40 people arrested (47 per cent of this specific cohort) were vulnerable people such as those experiencing homelessness and those with mental health or addiction problems. In 14 of the cases, where defendants' vulnerabilities were emphasised within the information available to us, those charged were involved in serious violence against racialised communities, including in relation to attacks on mosques and asylum accommodation, but also other incidents of serious assault. A further 11 arrests were related to online offences and/or cases where people appear to have played an active role in the mobilisations, though the racial motivation was not necessarily reflected in the charges that often related to other offences.

However, when taken in the round, our analysis of this sub-category of cases in the cohort suggests that many defendants did not have a background in racist or far-right networks, and also in some other cases that their vulnerability, as well as a history of interactions with the police, could have been exploited by those who mobilised protests. In court, some people described themselves as 'ashamed' of, 'distraught' and 'remorseful' about their actions. People convicted in the riots included people with PTSD, anxiety, struggles with various addictions, those who

38 Dan Godshaw and Anne Singleton, 'Neither mindless nor legitimate: the racist politics of the 2024 UK riots and the limitations of the carceral response', *Justice, Power and Resistance*, Vol. 8. No. 2 (2025) p. 238.

had grown up in care, people with complex mental health needs, with learning difficulties, people who had experienced significant violence and loss, people with no fixed address and people who were homeless. Three cases included people who were sentenced for offences which took place at the same time as the violence but were not part of it per se. In multiple cases, defendants did not attack or victimise members of racialised communities; abuse and violence was directed at the police. Academic research based on case studies in Bristol, Hanley and Tamworth (Staffordshire), identified anti-police sentiment as a factor in the riots. Likewise, the Children's Commissioner, whose officers interviewed 14 children charged following the 'unrest' [sic], identified 'a deep distrust of the police and the opportunity to retaliate against a previous interaction'. Substantial prison sentences were administered in many of the cases in our sample where violence was directed at police.

For example, in one case, a woman who was homeless and had previously experienced domestic violence threw bricks and shouted abuse at police (she was arrested sometime after the event, for this and other unrelated offences). Carrying her possessions in several carrier bags at the time this took place, as well as a bottle of alcohol (which she explained, along with other addiction issues, was to 'ease the pain'), she admitted her involvement and later said (through a lawyer) she was 'deeply, deeply embarrassed and ashamed'. She received a 20-month prison sentence. In another case, a homeless man received a 22-month prison sentence after stealing items from a supermarket and attempting to steal items from a different shop. Meanwhile, in another case, a defendant with learning difficulties described in court as 'to some extent a very vulnerable young man' who was 'easily led and clearly exploited by others' was sentenced for throwing a plastic water bottle at police, in the context of broader violence by others. Due to his 'reduced level of functioning' his sentence was reduced but nonetheless amounted to 12 months in a Young Offenders Institution.

If, on the one hand, such cases (and others) indicate something about the complexities and nuances in the violence in 2024 and what ensued within it, on the other they demonstrate something about the direction of the post-riot crackdown as it unfolded. For, while – as emphasised earlier – those culpable of 'rioting' came from a whole range of class positions, the cases show that in some instances those who were vulnerable and may have been swept up in the events bore the brunt of the criminal justice aftermath. This should not be a surprise. There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating how homeless people, those with mental health needs and those suffering from significant deprivation are among the

populations considered 'police property':[39] disproportionately surveilled, targeted and focused upon by criminal justice agencies. There is a wealth of evidence that these practices can be the realisation of forms of stigma.[40] And there is a wealth of research demonstrating how criminal justice processes reproduce social inequalities and inequities.[41] What the cases here indicate is how these processes operated in the context of substantial disorder and the crackdown against it. For, while culpability for the violence resided in multiple forces, it was sometimes the most vulnerable individuals punished for it.

Culpability and contextualisation

To conclude this section, we assert that what has been so far overlooked in analysis of the riots, is the culpability of powerful forces at the centre of British politics not just for underpinning the conditions of the riots themselves, but for creating an environment where some of the most vulnerable people in society could become cannon-fodder for the far Right.

In a nutshell, the riots occurred in poverty-stricken areas not because such communities are inherently racist (a condescending and offensive claim which ignores the nuances of the riots and who was involved), but in part because these were the areas the extreme Right chose to exploit by claiming to speak out on local concerns. In fact, in August 2025, retiring Merseyside police chief Serena Kennedy (who led the response to the Southport murders) made similar points about the dangers of lazy generalisations about white working-class communities, and their perceived attitudes. She pointed out that the claim that the violence against asylum seekers and mosques typified the anger of white working-class communities does not add up, as it was also white working-class people who turned out in great numbers to repair and clear up the Southport mosque after it was attacked. As the next section shows, white working-class people are part of the multicultural working-class communities which, in actively confronting threats and physical attacks against racialised communities, found themselves subject to arrest and prosecution.

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39 See for example Vickie Cooper, 'No Fixed Abode: The Continuum of Policing and Incarcerating the Homeless', *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, Vol. 11. No. 1. (2017), pp. 29–38; Clive Elmsley, *The English Police: a political and social history* (Second Edition), (London: Routledge, 2014); William Robinson, *The Global Police State*, (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

40 Liz Fekete, 'Racism, radicalisation and Europe's "Thin Blue Line"', *Race & Class*, 64/1, (2022), pp. 3-45.

41 See for example Alana Barton, Karen Corteen, David Scott, David Whyte (eds) 'Introduction: developing a criminological imagination', in *Expanding the Criminological Imagination: Critical Readings in Criminology,* (Uffculme, Willan Publishing, 2007).

(2) ‘No defence or excuse’: BME and anti-racist defendants

Many mainstream narratives have foregrounded the riots as an expression of ‘legitimate grievances’ of ‘left behind’ white working-class communities in deprived areas. But these are also areas where Black, Brown and migrant working-class communities live, where the far-Right, when they gain a foothold, seek to turn neighbour against neighbour. In this section we shift the focus from those prosecuted for participating in the riots to those reacting to them, in particular those charged and/or prosecuted for mobilising against demonstrations, responding to attacks on community institutions, especially mosques but also, in some cases, contributing to the violence by going out to seek retribution. This overall cohort represents 33 per cent of the total number of cases examined.

As we have seen, the broader social, economic and political forces driving the riots are obscured in mainstream debate. Not only that, but a myopic focus on the ‘legitimate grievances’ of ‘left behind’ communities, which condescendingly homogenises the attitudes of white working-class communities (who are presented as inherently anti-immigrant), also fails to acknowledge the multicultural make up of working-class communities.[42] Although rarely acknowledged in mainstream debate, working-class people from BME backgrounds, living in areas that rioted, have shared the same experiences of state abandonment and economic neglect. This is, of course, something that the far Right, in attempting to gain a foothold in such communities, and turning neighbour against neighbour, attempt to obscure. Yet it is multicultural working-class communities that mobilised in numbers against the protests and violence, including that which targeted Muslim sites of worship and community institutions, as well as accommodation for asylum seekers. So, too, did regional and local anti-racist and anti-fascist organisations.

Analysis of cases

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) always has a ‘public interest’ test as well as a ‘likelihood of conviction’ test in deciding whether to prosecute. 41 (33 per cent) of the 126 cases we examined involved prosecutions of people who responded to the riots and mobilisations; sometimes, in the case of Islamophobic protests, young people may well have been responding to community-led calls to rally to

42 For further discussion on the mobilisation of such discourses see James Morrison, *The Left Behind: Reimagining Britain’s Socially Excluded* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

the defence of local mosques. However, our case studies in this category are quite varied and, in some cases, defendants, who pleaded guilty, did not frame their actions as necessarily in self-defence or defence of the community. In 19 cases (46 per cent of this cohort) arrests were in the context of pitched confrontations, sometimes violent, with demonstrators, and in such cases the specific details differed. For example, in some of these cases, people said they reacted to experiencing racist abuse; in others, defendants – along with some of those they were confronting – had weapons (including ad-hoc weapons appropriated from or taken to the scene). However, in seven cases (17 per cent of this cohort), young BME people did directly seek out those believed to be responsible for the riots, occasionally going out masked and/or armed. Video posted online, erroneously claiming a far-right mobilisation was going to take place in one locality when it wasn't, for example, may also have encouraged young people to mobilise. Out of such chaos, came more violence and ultimately more arrests.[43] In 13 (32 per cent) of the cases in this cohort, people were charged for acts which they said took place in the context of them intending to defend mosques or hotels, or against people who it was believed were intent on attacking them.

In that regard, as we have argued throughout this report, context is vital. For instance, with regard to the factors underlying the previous cohort of cases we drew attention (among other things) to mis-and dis-information about the Southport murderer as well as broader attempts to manufacture hostility and fear. This cohort of cases reveals the reactions to the widespread fear that the mobilisations and rioting had generated in racialised communities up and down the country. It should be recalled that the police have a long history of prioritising the freedom of assembly of the far Right above the freedom of minority communities to live their lives free from attack. (We discuss the recent history of this, particularly in certain Northern towns, at greater length in Section 3.)

While it is beyond the scope of this report to systematically analyse the police operational response to the riots, it is clear that in the initial stages of certain anti-immigrant and Islamophobic mobilisations, even though racially motivated offences were being committed, the police saw the protests as legitimate. When the protests quickly spilled over into violent disorder, and particularly as they, came under attack, the police changed tack. It is also clear that in some localities they were overwhelmed and unprepared. Yet, from the outside it certainly appears that public order measures which could have allowed police to impose restrictions

43 It should be noted that in seven of the 41 cases, it was not possible to find the outcomes of the charges. In two cases, people were sentenced for online offences.

on the size, route and venue of mobilisations to protect institutions being targeted were not always considered. There are exceptions of course. We have been told, for instance, that in Hartlepool, police blocked off roads to prevent protestors from targeting the local mosque. But this kind of policing was not the norm. In some cases, police operational failures were even more apparent, not only potentially putting lives at risk but making it essential that counter-protestors took defensive actions. One graphic example came from Bristol, where on 3 August 2024 Avon and Somerset police officers were mistakenly deployed at the wrong hotel, leaving asylum seekers at a besieged hotel gravely under-protected.[44] A small number of police officers were present but they were overwhelmed by 'anti-immigrant' protesters who attacked them, also seeking to inflict violence on the counter-protesters, who had linked arms to protect the entrance of the hotel, and were subjected to a 10-minute assault. One police officer described it as in the 'top five most violent incidents' that they had witnessed in their 25-year career.

Indeed, while the full breadth of the disparate reactions and responses to the riots are not covered here in this limited sample, this was the context that also shaped the arguments put forward by the defence in court in some cases. Certain defendants, it was said, felt compelled to respond directly to racist abuse or threats, especially if those threats (whether rumoured or actual) were directed at community institutions, including mosques. Our data also shows that while the counter-mobilisations to the racist violence and rioting were multicultural in make-up, in the majority of the cases in this cohort, those charged were Muslim, mainly young men in their 20s and 30s. We dug deeper into the charges brought against them, examining the framing and interpretation of such cases by criminal legal institutions, including (in some cases) the reasons given by judges in sentencing, and found that:

- **Defending communities or acting in self-defence – not treated as a defence:** In multiple cases, people in this cohort faced charges brought by the CPS related to directly defending themselves or others from concentrated violence. In court, for a variety of reasons, it appears the case for self-defence seldom was put forward, with defence lawyers, for the most part, seemingly advising their clients to plead guilty. In some cases, this could be related to the fact that lawyers may have represented both defendants who rioted and defendants

44 The course of events is described more fully in the research paper, 'Understanding the 2024 Summer riots in the UK. Three case studies' Corresponding Author, John Drury. Available by open access at: https://www.qeios.com/read/17ASAP. The authors also make the point that the disorders should not be characterised as resulting from protest as they consisted of racially motivated targeted attacks and collective violence aimed at targeted groups.

> who reacted. One is left with a sense of people on a conveyor belt to fast-track justice, advised to accept the 'least-worst' option. In fact, when all the 126 cases are taken together, the rapid processing of people through the courts and the application of fast-track justice within the criminal justice system links so many of the cases we have studied in the timeframe of our study. (August-December 2025)

Self-defence, whether of oneself or one's property, is a complete defence to charges involving violence, provided the force used is reasonable and proportionate to the threat. When someone pleads guilty to violence but says it was in self-defence or to defend a community building such as a mosque, the judge should treat the guilty plea as 'equivocal', or ambiguous, and should tell the defendant that self-defence is a legal defence and ask them if they want to change the plea to not guilty. If the defendant is still unclear, the judge should treat it as a not guilty plea. The issue of whether the violence used was reasonable and proportionate to the threat faced by the defendant would then be tried. But in numerous cases we studied within the sample it appears judges failed to question guilty pleas, and proved reluctant to accept the argument that defendants were there to protect mosques, or responding to events that were damaging to community relations, racially motivated and even, in some cases, potentially life-threatening.

For example, one Muslim man in his 30s who was arrested in Stoke went to a mosque after hearing reports that it was going to be attacked by an organised faction who were going to burn it down. According to his lawyer, his motivation was not one of violence but of protection. When, as predicted, protesters, did 'descend' on the mosque, they were said to be 'intent on violence', and began throwing objects. At this point, the defendant, who had not taken any weapons to the scene, responded by picking up several rocks, throwing one back, putting the others down after being ordered to do so by police. He was later handed a 24-month prison sentence for violent disorder.

In another case, a Muslim man in his 20s who joined a counter-demonstration in Bristol became 'pumped up and aggressive', according to media reports, after receiving 'racist and Islamophobic abuse'. He was then 'drawn into' a fight with two men (of whom one would later go on to attack a hotel holding asylum seekers), at which point he was pinned to the ground by police in riot-gear and taken into custody. Although the defendant (who pleaded guilty) suggested he had acted in self-defence, the judge did not treat his plea as equivocal and handed him a 20-month prison sentence for violent disorder. Acknowledging that he had been 'triggered' by the racist abuse, the judge concluded that he was 'aggressive

and spoiling for a fight', and that he 'ignored police requests to move'. However provoked, there was 'no defence or excuse' for his actions the judge concluded.

- **'Racial abuse is unpleasant, but you should have risen above it':** In other cases, judges went further, telling defendants that while experiencing racist abuse was unpleasant, they should have risen above it. Their failure to do so, choosing instead to engage in and/or react to violent disorder, made imprisonment (according to judges) inevitable. For example, one Muslim man in his 20s said he attended a counter protest in Plymouth in solidarity with those under attack. Subsequently, someone in the opposing crowd who was throwing missiles at them, began to shout 'deeply offensive' abuse, also throwing a can of alcohol at him. As a result, the defendant threw several objects back. He was charged with violent disorder. Sentencing him to 20-months imprisonment, the judge said he was' more than satisfied' that what he did was because of provocation, and in consequence the sentence was slightly reduced. But what the defendant should have done, the judge said, was 'simply rise above their obnoxious racism'. Similarly, in another case in Plymouth, a man also received a 14-month prison sentence for violent disorder. He had thrown a drink and a bottle in the general direction of people who had racially abused him (as well as police officers) at a protest. Sentencing him, the judge said he had 'every justification to be mad and angry' at the racist abuse, but that was 'no justification' for his actions and taking part in 'widespread lawless behaviour'.

- **Further minimising or decontextualising racism in the courtroom:** As the above cases show, the racial abuse defendants could have been responding to was often acknowledged by judges as obnoxious and hateful. However, in certain cases judges made explicit their view that the provocation was irrelevant, as a 'good citizen' would simply rise above it. In this way the racial abuse was individualised and delinked from the riots as a whole, which in some cases were, by any objective measure, racially-motivated riots explicitly targeting asylum seekers and Muslims. But in court, this kind of objective assessment of the riots, the threat they posed to community relations, and potentially in some cases to life itself, was missing. The courts seemed to follow an individualised hate crime framework for judging each case, with the riots and the counter response equally reflecting a general breakdown in public order, in which those who responded with violence (such as the throwing back of a can) were seen to have played an equal part to those who initiated the public disorder. And in other cases we have analysed we can see how at the point of sentencing judges sought to minimise or dismiss defendants' lived experience of racism, once again seeing their actions as equally culpable and 'incendiary'.

- In one case noted above in Bristol, a Third-Sector project supporting the defendant tried to advocate for him in court by imploring the judge to consider the 'wider context' of racism underpinning his actions, and more broadly surrounding the case. According to the submissions, the defendant had experienced 'protests' in his hometown where he had been on the receiving end of racist abuse and violence. The impact of such violent experiences ought not to be minimised, they said. However, the sentencing judge stated that 'Appropriate punishment can only be achieved by immediate custody'.

- A Muslim man in his 20s was given an 18-month prison sentence for violent disorder after linking arms with others to create a protective barrier around a hotel accommodating asylum seekers under attack and throwing two 'missiles' in the direction of the attackers. None of the items hit anyone. In a pre-sentence hearing, statements were submitted emphasising the 'fear and terror' experienced by racialised communities, how Muslims had felt 'unprecedented' threats to their communities during and prior to the events, and of people 'being careful about not being "openly" Muslim in public to avoid being targeted' in their aftermath. However, while acknowledging that the defendant was reacting to 'racist slurs that were thrown at you provocatively', the 'irony', the sentencing judge said, was that 'in reacting the way you did, particularly in throwing a missile at the opposing faction… your actions were incendiary'. Throwing these objects, he continued, 'added fuel to the already caused fire'.

- In another case, a Muslim man who gathered with others to protect a mosque would later be part of a group that chased two men who they believed had made 'racist threats', also attempting to punch them. The sentencing judge accepted that 'racial slurs' had been made, also acknowledging that the defendant was 'deeply ashamed' of his actions, but he concluded that neither of these factors mitigated culpability, that the public was 'rightly outraged' by the broader disorder of which this was a part, and that imprisonment (in this case of 14 months for violent disorder) was justifiable.

- Another case involved the sentencing of several Muslim men who were in the vicinity of protests and counter protests and got into a brawl with men who they said racially abused them. In this case, the judge appeared to downplay the backdrop of ongoing and orchestrated racist violence and depicted the events as emanating from 'civil unrest and disorder in many parts of the country'.

'Deterrent sentencing' and pre-emptive policing

As indicated above, the nature of responses to the riots was diverse. There was no singular response. Not all cases were framed as defensive actions or reactions

and, those that were, had differing dynamics. But, taken together, the prosecutions and the 'deterrent sentencing' approach reflected in the cohort of the cases outlined above could also indicate a particular CPS and judicial approach to racialised and religious communities mobilising against Islamophobic, far-right and/or anti-immigrant protests. Such mobilisations – even if stemming from a desire to protect – are seen as inherently violent and contributing to violent disorder, with the purpose of sentencing being to send a strong deterrent message to all. This approach justifies equivalent sentencing between (in some cases) far-right/anti-immigration and Muslim defendants as necessary even in contexts where Muslim defendants were clearly provoked. 'Fighting back' against racism had to be criminalised in order to maintain public order. Their mobilisations – even if protecting communities or institutions from attack – are seen as inherently violent and contributing to violent disorder, with the purpose of sentencing being to send a strong deterrent message to all. This begs the question as to what communities are meant to do if the state fails to protect them from such public disorder in the first place. In the final analysis, as we have maintained throughout the report, it is the decontextualising of riots from racism and extreme racist violence that can lead to the refusal to question whether self-defence/a desire to protect might be a legitimate defence. The duty to protect public order or the institutions of the state trumps all.

More recently, as more cases (outside our sample) have come before the courts, we have observed something of a shift in sentencing patterns, with some judges imposing suspended sentences for both Muslim and white defendants involved in the riots and, in some cases, for the same kind of actions in the vicinity of mosques that we have described above. Whether this is a definite trend towards a less punitive approach we cannot say as it lies outside the timescale and scope of this research.[45] Nevertheless, the sentencing and judges' remarks (implicit in which is the refusal to acknowledge the potential case for self-defence) will have already served a purpose, sending a strong message to the defendants, the families, friends and the wider community about the treatment they will receive if they continue to respond to such provocation in the future. In that sense, we can talk about the evolution, as witnessed in the courtroom, since summer 2024 of a 'deterrent' sentencing policy aimed also at BME communities.

It is not known how much this deterrent sentencing influenced the CPS's decisions to prosecute those defending their communities or whether it represented official CPS policy. In the absence of access to policy discussions within the judiciary and

45 In some cases, this may be linked to people already having served part of a sentence on remand.

the CPS, this is difficult to pinpoint. It is hoped that our findings will encourage more research into the CPS, the courts and the policing of racial violence, and the place that deterrent prosecutions and sentencing plays in communicating broader messages to racialised communities.

We conclude with significant judges' remarks in the courtroom, in relation to the riots in general:

> *'In the context of widespread and significant public disorder, it is not only the precise individual acts of an offender that matter. It is the fact that the offender is taking part in violent disorder, threatening violence against other people and/or property, and is part and parcel of widespread threatening and alarming activity.'*

> *'Defendants who choose to involve themselves in activity which threatens the safety and well-being of communities across the nation must therefore expect severe sentences designed not only to punish them but also to deter others.'*

(3) Bringing the cases together: from 'two tier-justice' to 'two types of thuggery'

In this section, we consider the treatment of Muslim and BME defendants in the courtroom in relation to a political and media narrative developing outside. An intense media debate, fuelled by the far Right as well as certain politicians, was taking place, revolving around claims of 'two-tier policing' and 'two-tier justice'. Within this, the criminal justice system was seen as biased and privileging BME defendants over white defendants. We consider whether this narrative, once linked to the far Right but now mainstreamed, could have impacted on judicial decision-making in relation to Muslim and BME defendants. The impact of counter-extremism narratives of longer duration on criminal legal institutions and processes is also considered. We also describe the ways in which courtroom approaches that abstracted the riots from social, economic and political forces sat alongside a punitive crackdown against all those who participated or responded to the riots, irrespective of motives or vulnerability.

Even as the 'riots' were ongoing, a range of figures sought to spread the notion that white defendants were victims of a 'two-tier' policing system that treated them more harshly 'because of their race and political views'.[46] Claims like this had certainly been made prior to the riots, notably in relation to policing failures in the child sexual exploitation cases in Rochdale in the 2000s. Subsequently, in summer 2020, claims of two-tier policing were made in relation to Black Lives Matter demonstrations ('soft policing', according to Nigel Farage).[47] But, with the 'riots', such claims took on a new life, fuelled and sustained through a cacophony of voices ranging from Tommy Robinson, to Nigel Farage, to Conservative Party politicians, notably Robert Jenrick, and to whole swathes of the right-wing press.[48] Our analysis of particular cases involving defendants from Muslim and other BME backgrounds in Section 2 has indicated a judicial failure to treat the pleas of those

46 Archie Bland and Vikram Dodd, 'England riots: how has "two-tier policing" myth become widespread?' *The Guardian*, (6 August, 2024), https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/06/england-riots-two-tier-policing-myth-widespread

47 Millie Cooke, 'Farage joins calls for Parliament to be recalled and claims "soft policing" at BLM protests to blame for riots', *The Independent* (5 August 2024), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-riots-nigel-farage-recall-parliament-b2591246.html; Hannah Davenport, 'What is the 'two-tier policing' conspiracy theory?' *Left Foot Forward*, (6 August 2024), https://leftfootforward.org/2024/08/what-is-the-two-tier-policing-conspiracy-theory/

48 For discussion, see for example Lilie Chouliaraki and Kathryn Claire Higgins, 'The truth about "two-tier policing"', *London School of Economics* (15 August 2024), https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-truth-about-two-tier-policing/; and Kojo Koram, 'Robert Jenrick and the myth of "two-tier justice"', *New Statesman*, (13 March 2025), https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/society/2025/03/robert-jenricks-false-two-tier-justice-narrative

admitting guilt to violence, while asserting self-defence, as 'equivocal'. This could suggest that judges were unduly influenced by this media campaign around 'two-tier justice'. Did a debate outside the court play an outsize role on the way judges perceived and responded to particular BME defendants? In relation to our cohort, it is certainly a legitimate question, given numerous cases where the judiciary seemingly failed to consider legal arguments around defending communities, considering a reactive violence as equal: two sides of the same coin, equally contributing to disorder.[49]

Has the theory of cumulative extremism influenced judicial decision-making?

When taken together, the cases we have analysed also point to the extent to which counter-extremism frameworks, most notably the doctrine of cumulative extremism, have become embedded within legal thinking. The framework of cumulative extremism, which was first developed by the academic Roger Eatwell,[50] regards different forms of 'extremism' (or extremists, to use the Prime Minister's words, when speaking of those charged or convicted in 2024), when opposed to one another, in certain respects mirror one another. They exist in a symbiotic relationship and create a spiral or cycle of violence and harm for which both sides are equally culpable. If applied to the courtroom, the doctrine of cumulative extremism (or 'reciprocal radicalisation', where one group brings out the worst in another extremist group in an enduring cycle of violence and terrorism), could potentially have the effect of prioritising a deterrent sentence needed to establish respect for public order (and the state), over and above justice for individuals (whether victims, perpetrators or indeed, in some contexts, whole communities subjected to racial violence). It would also mitigate against a forensic analysis of specific situations: including those where vulnerable people were swept up in the violence. In our case studies we have shown how some judges minimised racism. The doctrine of cumulative extremism would, by following a myopic approach, divorce prosecution and sentencing from the reality and environment that gave rise to the specific types of crimes, as well as the breadth of violence, experienced

49 In certain respects, this is not new. There is, of course, a long history of state strategies supressing, sabotaging and undermining community-led responses to racist violence. For discussion and analysis see for example Lee Bridges and Liz Fekete, 'Victims, the "urban jungle" and the new racism'. *Race & Class* (Vol 27, no 1, 1985), pp. 45–62; Jon Burnett, 'Community, cohesion and the state'. *Race & Class*, (Vol 45, no 3, 2004), pp. 1–18; Adam Elliott-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); Jas Nijjar, 'Baptised by fire: an interview with Suresh Grover', *Race & Class* (Vol 62, no 3, 2021), pp. 88–101; A. Sivanandan, 'Race, class and the state: the Black experience in Britain', *Race & Class* (Vol 17, no 4, 1976), pp. 347–368.

50 See Roger Eatwell, 'Community Cohesion and Collective Extremism in Contemporary Britain', *Political Quarterly* (Vol. 77, 2006), pp. 204–216.

during the riots. We are not privy to discussions within judicial circles and cannot therefore prove that judges have imbibed the doctrine of cumulative extremism and allowed it to colour their decision-making. But the examples we have provided in Sections 1 and 2 of this report, certainly back the assumption that this doctrine, despite not being codified into law, may have influenced judges.

The history of cumulative extremism frameworks in policing

In terms of policing and far-right violence specifically, the cumulative extremism approach is not new, although in terms of the courtroom, as we saw in the case of the Rotherham 12, juries have, on occasion, taken a different approach in circumstances involving self-defence. After the English Defence League was formed in Luton in 2009, far-right provocative marches through Muslim neighbourhoods became more commonplace. This was no more so the case than in the Northern towns where, following the exposure of a child sexual exploitation scandal in Rochdale, the far Right was regularly marching through Muslim neighbourhoods, with permission granted by police on grounds of free speech and the right to protest. Muslim communities were expected to stay at home and endure these far-right parades right through the centre of the neighbourhoods where they lived. In August 2015, 81-year-old Mushin Ahmed was killed while walking to a mosque in Rotherham in a racially-motivated attack (two people were convicted, one of whom kicked him to death, stamping on him repeatedly after accusing him of being a 'groomer'). According to Vakas Hussain, co-chair of the Rotherham 12 defence campaign, writing in the Justice Gap, prior to Ahmed's murder, Rotherham had endured fourteen far-right marches through the town, with people subjected to abuse on the street, bomb threats sent to mosques, the vandalising of Muslim-owned businesses, and Asian taxi drivers attacked and hospitalised.[51] Those Muslims expressing outrage, or joining counter protests, were viewed by the police and CPS through the cumulative extremism lens with this, in turn, seen by some parts of the community as underpinning the CPS' decision to prosecute the Rotherham 12. These were twelve Asian men who defended counter-protesters from attacks following a Britain First demonstration in Rotherham on 5 September 2015, a month after the murder of Ahmed. By the time the case came to court in November 2016, two of the defendants had accepted legal advice and pleaded guilty. But lawyers for the remaining ten men argued in court that they were not guilty of violent disorder (as the CPS maintained) but had acted in self-defence, with a jury at Sheffield Crown Court subsequently acquitting all ten men. Supporters, while welcoming the verdict, argued that the charges were

51 Vakas Hussain, 'The Rotherham 12: A tale of 12 Pakistani Men fighting institutional racism', *The Justice Gap* (23 February 2018), https://www.thejusticegap.com/rotherham-12-tale-12-pakistani-men-fighting-institutional-racism/

racially and politically motivated and, in this instance, should never have been brought.[52]

But the cumulative extremism framework also was applied by police and security services long before the case of the Rotherham 12. In fact, it was a doctrine, concept and framework that was mainstreamed in the context of the war on terror and the aftermath of 11 September 2001. It takes its cue, not from the Right per se, but from liberal academia, counter-extremism think-tanks and state policies, that came to regard terrorist attacks associated with political Islam, far-right anti-Islam movements, and counter-protests by anti-racists and Muslims as part of the same continuum. This simplistic and flattening process once again takes out of the frame state policies over time, as well as other drivers of extremism, like Islamophobic and anti-immigrant political rhetoric. Also denied within the framework is the multi-faceted nature of fascism in Britain today, as well as the legitimate concerns of BME and religious communities over the police failure to protect communities from far-right provocations, which leave them vulnerable to extreme acts of racism.

Indeed, all those caught up within violence (except it would seem the electoral drivers and the drafters of state policies) are seen within the cumulative extremism framework as part of the same continuum. Beyond the fray, is a seemingly benevolent state, that must (re)assert its authority. This is essentially, as Liz Fekete has previously argued, a 'reworking' of frameworks used before in Northern Ireland where the conflict was presented as 'an everlasting cycle of Catholic and Protestant religious fanaticism', in the process denying the role of British colonial policies and politics in conjunction with 'entrenched discrimination against Catholics as engines of the Conflict.'[53]

We would argue that it is this fusion – of colonial counter-insurgency, cumulative extremism and public order frameworks superimposed on England from the Northern Ireland context – which we now see embodied in the criminal justice response to the riots of 2024.

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52 Vakas Hussain, 'The Rotherham 12: A tale of 12 Pakistani Men fighting institutional racism', *The Justice Gap* (23 February 2018), https://www.thejusticegap.com/rotherham-12-tale-12-pakistani-men-fighting-institutional-racism/

53 Liz Fekete, 'Anti-extremism or anti-fascism?', *IRR News*. (21 November 2013), https://irr.org.uk/article/anti-extremism-or-anti-fascism/

Key processes and frameworks

Against this backdrop, we examine the recurring themes in the processes, frameworks and vocabulary in the 126 cases reviewed.

'Mindless violence': The 'mindless violence' explanatory framework for the riots is one that obscures rather than clarifies, preventing reflection on the nuances and breadth of violence and the multiplicity of factors underpinning this.

As we argued in Section 1, the violence associated with the riots did not emerge in a vacuum. It is a convenient obfuscation of the root causes of the riots, as well as the racism inherent in much of the violence, to describe the riots as 'mindless', and yet this phrase, and linked vocabulary, emerged as an oft-repeated refrain. In fact, some of those who carried out the violence may have been minded to attack asylum seekers and Muslims precisely because mainstream debates had identified these constituencies as a problem at the heart of society.

This is a continuation of the 'far right thuggery' narrative pursued by politicians. It neatly disappears and absolves mainstream political parties as well as government policy choices from any broader culpability regarding core forces driving the violence – depoliticising and decontextualising them. This, we would argue, was followed through by the judiciary which, in some cases and contexts, could not see a modus operandi for the violence, beyond that it was 'mindless'. To say there is a modus operandi for racial violence (where racial violence was indeed part of the violence) is not to condone it, but to argue for an analysis that examines cause and effect, and underpinning forces. To do so, of course, is not flattering to the forces at the centre of society which play fast and loose with anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives. It is very handy, for a depiction of the events of 2024 as the product of 'thuggery' to persist. 'Mindless', serves to depoliticise and decontextualise, to abstract the violence in all of its forms from any political backdrop.

A violence that comes from 'two sides': In addition, the characterisation of the violence as coming from 'two sides', not only ignores where people were deliberately minded to defend their communities but reasserts the necessity of the punitive criminal justice crackdown to restore public order. For example, one judge, speaking to people on 'both sides' (see below) clearly stated 'the word goes out from this court - we don't want you here behaving in this way'. This was 'violent thuggery and will not be tolerated in our society'. Others spoke of 'mindless and disgraceful thuggery' and an 'orgy of mindless destruction'. Celebrating the conviction and imprisonment of people involved, police press releases spoke of things like 'senseless violence' and 'another vile thug jailed'. Police depictions of

the events included descriptions of 'mindless thuggery'. While in turn, in other cases, the CPS spoke of 'thuggish behaviour' and 'violence and thuggery'.

Indeed, such depictions were not just confined to the framing of cases through and in relation to criminal legal court processes, they were frequently buttressed in such ways by media framings of the events. Of the 126 cases, 58 (or 46 per cent) were depicted in media sources examined as 'mobs', 'yobs', or 'thugs'. Media reporting and discussions of the events were, of course, not monolithic, and in many cases significantly different. But media sources were frequently describing or discussing things like a 'baying mob', an 'ignorant mob', 'thugs' who were 'blasted' in court, 'riot yobs', 'yobs caught on CCTV', and so on.

Pathologising the working class

While the violence included racist violence carried out by white people within working-class communities against their neighbours and asylum seekers dispersed to their areas, it does not serve the anti-racist cause to pathologise those carrying out these acts within a language that is almost Victorian in its hatred of working-class people per se and fears of the 'mob'. Indeed, it is cruelly ironic that, in some contexts, white people arrested for a range of actions during the riots were described in court reporting and by the same media voices that rail against two-tier justice, as though they were, in effect, some kind of social virus. For when it was the poor and vulnerable punished, media reporting was framed in ways that were tantamount to a sneering and taunting stance, also joining in the celebration of their punishment. A 'malignancy' in society, for example, was terminology used in court proceedings in one case. In other cases, media reporting on charging and sentencing were framed through similar condescending portrayals, in some cases tantamount to mocking defendants' poverty and/or vulnerability. Media depictions described for example, a 'vile drug addict' and 'vile thug' or 'idiot'. Press reporting described people with addictions and backgrounds of abuse as 'hapless', also celebrating the sentencing and imprisonment of certain people, including the vulnerable, by circulating the 'faces of thugs' and lauding people being 'caged'. Not only did centrist cumulative extremism narratives contribute to the flattening of understandings of the violence as essentially the product of 'two-sides' antagonistic to each other, but they also further co-existed with the visceral and communicative punishment of vulnerable people caught up in the violence. Moreover, when it came to these defendants, those railing against two tier justice were frequently either indifferent or complicit.[54]

54 It is notable that while particular prosecutions were utilised as examples of two-tier justice, for example with regard to the prosecution of people for online offence, those invoking this terminology often had less to say when the poor and vulnerable were prosecuted for offences related to the riots.

Two-types of 'thugs': Against this backdrop, the portrayal of the riots emanating from 'two sides' operating in some senses as mirrors of one another was manifested on multiple different levels. In part, this was through descriptions in court of the need for the police to act as a neutral force separating protest from counter-protest and the need for the state to intervene to prevent violent disorder (see below). In turn, this was buttressed in some cases by media depictions of how a small number of police struggled to hold back the rival groups and keep order. This was a narrative that was put forward by the police themselves, with one Assistant Chief Constable (of Devon and Cornwall Police) celebrating sentencing in one city in the following terms: 'We welcome the sentences today, as you can see, swift justice has been served. I think what's really important is people have received custodial sentences from the protest and counter protest side – both sides so to speak.'

As indicated earlier, this ideological framing was in many respects reproduced through the law itself, with the majority of charges for violent disorder, and the events perceived (and presented) merely as violent disorder. Against this backdrop, orchestrated forms of anti-immigrant and/or Islamophobic violence, other forms of violence that people got swept up in (including against police), and the response of racialised communities, were all decontextualised as 'thuggery'. And once decontextualised they were then reinterpreted through criminal legal processes as violent disorder (and charged as such) for which 'two types' of 'thugs' were culpable, and within which, the police, and indeed the state, emerge as the real victims of the disorder. Through such processes, concepts of cumulative extremism entered the court room.

Conclusion: Breaking the vicious cycle

The riots took place in some of the most deprived areas of England which have suffered decades of disinvestment that could be described as state abandonment. This does not mean that all those in deprived communities where rioting took place are more inherently 'prone' to racist violence or should be associated with it. Such class-ridden assumptions ignore the breadth of violence and also the involvement of people from comfortable economic backgrounds and well-paid professions in the riots.[55] As we have been at pains to point out throughout this report, there was no single factor, but many that contributed to the riots of summer 2024: the cumulative impact of austerity; structural neglect and state abandonment; the electoral Dutch auction around immigration that inflames intolerance; the role of far-right actors who were active on social media and sought to establish footholds in many neighbourhoods.

We need to take seriously the fact that the far Right has made a concerted effort to organise, join in or exploit mobilisations in some of England's most disadvantaged towns and cities. And we also need to take seriously the wider forces that underpinned the violence that took place in 2024. Unless we do so, we will be trapped in a vicious cycle of violence.

Addressing racism at root

While the report focuses on the criminal justice system's response to the riots, we have also sought to provide a snapshot of the horrific racist violence unleashed against communities which had no connection whatsoever with the individual who brutally murdered three little girls in Southport. This included smashing the windows of people's homes, attacking mosques, vicious beatings, and the throwing of petrol bombs outside asylum accommodation while people cheered, livestreamed events and uploaded content on social media as though this was some kind of live sadistic theatre.

The response to this racism by the state has been pitiful. Combining the government pronouncements on the riots with the response of the criminal justice system shows that the state is incapable of addressing the role of racism in riots. That is because it is locked inside a racist echo chamber of its own making, and itself, part of the problem. As the state has no solutions beyond showing often classist

55 For discussion see Will Bolton 'Middle class people "drawn into" riots have lost everything, says policing chief', *Daily Telegraph*. (20 November 2024), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/11/20/middle-class-people-riots-lost-everything-police-chief/?msockid=2f261dab4c2e6e952a2608104dce6fc4; Aaron Winter, 'Riots, racism and the left', *Jewish Socialists' Group*. (30 October 2024), https://www.jewishsocialist.org.uk/features/item/riots-racism-and-the-left

contempt for the racist violence of individuals and locking them up – without even a nod to the need to address their offending behaviour in prison – it falls upon civil society to take necessary steps to educate against racism, to protect communities from its multiple harms, to develop strategies of resilience and resistance and bring communities together. And as the IRR director outlined in the Preface, unless we educate and mobilise against racism, we will be caught within a vicious cycle of events that repeatedly reinforce each other, with the prospect of ugly protests and riots forming an infinite loop with no exit in sight. Already in summer 2025, we were given a graphic example of this loop with another wave of protests, mostly targeting hotels accommodating asylum seekers, and spreading across the United Kingdom, with an attempted pogrom in Northern Ireland narrowly averted.

Breaking the vicious cycle of violence is an urgent task. Those sucked into the riots – among whom were those who did not engage in racist violence – were children, those with mental health needs, carers and homeless people. And the question that needs to be asked in such cases is not so much about the inscape of people's individual racism, or 'hate' (or not), but more about the external material and ideological and forces that led them to believe that the only viable space they had to vent frustration or rage was through mobilisations against asylum seekers, in some cases holed up in hotels terrified they were about to be burned alive or beaten, and mosques.

There is little doubt that the response to the riots has not been one of reflection and concerted action to address their root causes. Rather, what we have witnessed is a massive mobilisation of the criminal justice system to uphold the power of the state. The Ministry of Justice (re)launched Operation Early Dawn in 2024 in Northern England to create extra prison spaces for those convicted.[56] Pledges to 'ramp up criminal justice' included the development of a National Violent Disorder Programme, geared towards things like police intelligence sharing and greater spatial controls.[57] Shared intelligence and wider deployment of facial recognition technology were among the solutions put forward by the Prime Minister as the riots were ongoing.[58] Forces such as Cleveland and Durham talked of using facial recognition software to review more than 10,000 hours of CCTV footage.

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56 Ministry of Justice, 'Process activated to manage prisoner movements', *Ministry of Justice*, (19 August 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/news/process-activated-to-manage-prisoner-movements

57 Prime Minister's Office, 'Our immediate action after Southport attacks', *Prime Minister's Office*, (6 August 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/news/our-immediate-action-after-southport-attacks

58 Prime Minister's Office, 'Prime Minister Keir Starmer's statement in Downing Street: 1 August'. *Prime Minister's Office*. (1 August 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-keir-starmers-statement-in-downing-street-1-august

However, such powers do nothing to break the cycle of violence, because they do not confront the political and media narratives which create financial and political capital by peddling such narratives on a relentless, day-today basis. And nor are they designed to do so. The criminal legal and policy response concentrates on some of those individuals who act on these narratives, and in some cases, those doing the enacting are themselves vulnerable people swept up in the ferocity of events. The powers of the state concentrate, also, on those who resisted the violence.

Inequality and community cohesion are incompatible

To be clear, we are not calling for the expansion of criminal legal powers or provisions, to pull even more people into this policy vortex that rotates around processes of criminalisation and incarceration. What we seek to address is what US abolitionist Victoria Law has identified as the internal logic of criminal legal systems, that too often not only fails to address society's problems but conceals them.[59]

It is a concealment that those on the Right, peddling the idea of two-tier justice favouring racialised communities, and those liberal voices defending a supposedly benevolent and 'equal' set of criminal legal systems, are indifferent to and obfuscate. There is, of course, a two-tier justice system in England – a system weighted against the poor, the marginalised and those from racialised communities that today upholds a vastly unequal social order. Some 15 per cent of those in prison were homeless prior to their incarceration, for example. Almost two-thirds of those in prison have been unemployed immediately prior to their incarceration. Almost half of those in prison were expelled from school as children. Around 90 per cent have mental health needs, and over half of all women prisoners have previously experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse.[60] Criminologist Joe Sim contrasts this with the 'non-criminalisation and non-policing of the powerful, and their systematic criminality': criminality which is frequently 'regulated' through languid administrative controls and tokenistic condemnation.[61] The 'state and media-driven focus on policing the behaviour, morals, families and communities of the poor and the powerless', frequently shows

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59 Victoria Law, *'Prisons make us safer' and 20 other myths about mass incarceration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021) p.150.

60 See Luke Birmingham, 'The mental health of prisoners', *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 9(3), 2003, pp. 191–199; Prison Reform Trust *Bromley Briefing*, (2016), London: Prison Reform Trust; Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing. (2021), London: Prison Reform Trust; Kim Williams et.al., *Accommodation, homelessness and reoffending of prisoners: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) survey, Research Summary 3/12*, (2012), London: Ministry of Justice; Grace Wyld, et.al. *Understanding Women's Pathways through the Criminal Justice System*, (2018) London: NPC.

61 Joe Sim, 'Criminalisation and injustice: double standards which target the poor', *Centre for the Study of Crime, Criminalisation and Social Exclusion*. (16 October 2017), https://ccseljmu.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/criminalisation-and-injustice-double-standards-which-target-the-poor/

indifference, deference or selective faux outrage at the powerful, Sim suggests.[62] Prisons are largely mechanisms for 'punishing the poor' and 'along with the wider criminal justice system, they [are] corrosive sites for the 'churning' of vast, increasingly racialised, numbers of the dispossessed, pauperised and destitute'.[63] Indeed, this embodies a form of two-tier justice which is 'intimately connected with the reproduction of an unequal and unjust social order devised by the social lacerations of class, gender, 'race', age and sexuality'.[64] But neither liberal, centrist voices nor the Right have much to say about these dynamics and the searing inequalities they embody. Rather, the former tries to sanitise them; and the latter to harness them and mould them in their own vision.

The need for community-based, community-forged solidarities could therefore not be more apparent. At the same time as championing a substantial criminal justice response to the riots, the government established multiple funding streams to areas most closely affected. For example, a Community Cohesion and Resilience Programme established after the riots provided some £3.6 million in 44 localities 'to build stronger, more integrated communities and reduce harmful division', before being discontinued in 2025.[65] In September 2024, a £15 million Community Recovery Fund was launched and provided to local authorities, to disperse within these localities to initiatives seeking to 'begin work to repair fractured communities and bring people back together'.[66] Meanwhile, an Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion was established to begin work in Summer 2025, seeking (among other things) to find ways to 'collectively build a more united country where local lives and places are built on people working together'.[67] However, as the Runnymede Trust and others including IRR have argued , top-down community cohesion frameworks have in the past depoliticised and decontexualised tensions or conflicts between 'communities', ultimately rearticulating the root causes of

62 Joe Sim, *Punishment and prisons: power and the carceral state* (London: Sage Publications, 2009) p. 20; for further discussion see for example, Steve Tombs, *Social Protection after the Crisis* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2016); Steve Tombs and David Whyte, 'Unmasking the Crimes of the Powerful', *Critical Criminology*, (Vol. 11, 2003), pp: 217–236.

63 Joe Sim, 'The Modern Prison in a "Fear-Haunted World"', *Prison Service Journal*, (No. 250, 2020), pp. 20–27.

64 Joe Sim, *Punishment and Prisons* p. 8.

65 Miatta Fahnbulleh, 'Question for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: UIN 73797, tabled on 1 September 2025', *UK Parliament*, (12 September 2025), https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-09-01/73797

66 Ministry of Housing, communities and Local Government, 'Communities affected by public disorder in July and August 2024', *Ministry of Housing, communities and Local Government*, (18 September 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-recovery-fund-guidance/community-recovery-fund-guidance

67 Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion, 'The Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion', (accessed 4 August 2025), https://www.livingwelltogether.org.uk/

conflict as emanating from 'communities of colour for failing to 'integrate'. In a nutshell, 'victims of ... violence [are presented] as the cause of it'.[68]

At the same time, such funding – no matter how it is repurposed and utilised at local levels – cannot come close to mitigating the cumulative impact of a decade of punishing austerity measures, and the longer term (and intensifying) upwards transfer of wealth giving rise to unprecedented inequality and its punishing consequences. By the early 2020s, for example, 'the richest 50 families in the UK held more wealth than half of the UK population, comprising 34.1 million people'.[69] As the Equality Trust has made clear, if this trend continues to grow at this rate, 'by 2035, the wealth of the richest 200 families will be larger than the whole UK GDP'.[70] Rampant inequality and community cohesion are incompatible.

'We must unite here and now'

Likewise, the funding of community cohesion projects will come to naught if nothing is done to end the parliamentary race to the bottom on issues of race, immigration, welfare and poverty, which, both prior to and following the 2024 riots, has largely involved blaming societal problems on immigration, lack of integration and rising welfare budgets. [71]

Enduring solutions to the violence of 2024 reside not in carcerality, but in community solidarities forged through efforts to confront injustice for all and ensure long-term material and structural transformation. These are the communities of resistance that A. Sivanandan emphasised several decades ago, and as he recognised: 'We are here and now and the struggle is here and now, and we must unite here and now'.[72]

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68 Runnymede Trust, 'Community cohesion will not solve the racism underpinning this summer's riots', *Runnymede Trust*, (12 September 2024), https://www.runnymedetrust.org/news/community-cohesion-will-not-solve-the-racism-underpinning-this-summers-riots; see also, 'Jon Burnett, 'Community, cohesion and the state', *Race & Class*, Vol 45, no 3, pp. 1–18, and Arun Kundnani, *The end of tolerance? Racism in 21st Century Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

69 Equality Trust, 'The scale of economic inequality in the UK', *Equality Trust* (10 October 2025), https://equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk/

70 Equality Trust, 'The scale of economic inequality in the UK', p.3.

71 For discussion, see Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%* (Third Edition, London: Verso, 2019); Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile environment: how immigrants became scapegoats* (London: Verso, 2020); John Pring, *The Department: How a Violent Government Bureaucracy Killed Hundreds and Hid the Evidence* (London: Pluto Press, 2024).

72 A. Sivanandan, 'Communities of resistance', *Speech to Communities of Resistance Conference, Hackney Town Hall*, (11 November 1989), https://asivanandan.com/communities-of-resistance/