

Reading the 2024 riots

*The riots that erupted in late July and early August are the most significant instance of civil violence in Britain since 2011. **Tim Newburn** who led the 2011 *Reading the Riots* study in partnership with the Guardian, identifies the key differences between 2024 and 2011 and argues that the Government should call an official inquiry to understand the nature and causes of the riots, rather than leave the analysis to academics and journalists.*

Riots are unpredictable things. They happen rarely and, consequently, almost inevitably take the authorities by surprise. July and August 2024 have seen the latest examples of large-scale disorder in England, representing the most significant civil violence since 2011. Beyond their unpredictability and many of the challenges they present the authorities, there are however relatively few similarities between the most recent riots and the violence witnessed in 2011, whose nature and causes were examined in an award-winning study by The Guardian and LSE entitled [Reading the Riots](#), which I helped to run.

In addition to their unpredictability, riots by definition involve significant levels of criminality. As a consequence they invite us to ask difficult questions, not least about the motivations of those involved in the violence and destruction. While we have already learned enough to offer an initial analysis of the 2024 events and how they match or differ from riots in the recent past, their nature requires something more official than academic and journalistic analysis.

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So what do we think we know about the 2024 events? First, the immediate background – or “spark” to use the often favoured metaphor in such events – was the horrific murders of three young girls at a dance class in Southport, and the stabbing of ten others, two of whom were adults, at the same event on the 29th July. Second, it appears then that rumours spread on [social media](#) about the alleged identity of the perpetrator of the attacks, a young man who had quite quickly been arrested by the police. Though a

[British national](#), born in Cardiff, who subsequently had moved to live in Southport, the internet-based rumour mill contained a variety of false claims, including that he was an asylum seeker/illegal migrant. Third, this led to a number of “protesters” taking to the streets in Southport, focusing their attention initially on a local mosque, with significant violence eventually breaking out as police who sought to keep order were attacked. Fourth, in the week and a half since, similarly focused violence has taken place regularly in a large number of towns in England, as well as on a couple of occasions in Belfast, though not in Scotland or Wales.

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Though much of the violence has currently ceased, it's not yet clear whether the riots are over. So far, though, although only lasting four days, what occurred in 2011 was far larger in scale, certainly as indicated by the number of people involved, than the 2024 disorder. Second, the scale of the violence in 2011 was also much greater. The response in 2011, as in 2024 to date, focused primarily on policing and punishment. Once again, however, the scale of that [penal reaction](#) was far, far larger in 2011.

The apparent target of the riots also differs markedly. Whereas in 2011 much of the focus of the anger on the streets was directed at the alleged misuse of police power against ethnic minorities, in 2024 much appears to be directed at minorities themselves, at asylum seekers in particular, and at the police for so-called “two tier policing”. This is the assertion that the police deliberately favour minorities and are harsher in their treatment of protesters on the political right: an assertion for which there is no evidence and that is very much the reverse of the claims made in 2011.

Riots raise important questions many that are difficult to answer, and which require careful and sustained inquiry. In the absence of such inquiry the danger is that we rely on speculation, that we form opinion about the events based on limited information, or perhaps simply our own biases and prejudices.

Finally, though assertions about the important role played by social media can be found

in both 2011 and 2024, the nature is different in the two cases. In 2011, the claim, not always supported by evidence, was that social media were vital in organising violence, in aiding people to meet at particular locations or even to avoid particular locations. Though there was some evidence that Blackberry Messenger had been important as a source of communication, there was little evidence that it formed an important cause of the disorder in 2011. In 2024, the claim is that social media-based commentators, including some very high-profile individuals, have played a significant role in inflaming tensions and in organising “protest” – and thus fomenting violence. This has been very much a focus of official [concern](#).

As I said at the start, riots raise important questions, many that are difficult to answer, and which require careful and sustained inquiry. In the absence of such inquiry the danger is that we rely on speculation, that we form opinion about the events based on limited information, or perhaps simply our own biases and prejudices. In 2011, politicians flatly refused to establish any form of serious inquiry into the events – the Prime Minister at the time simply asserting that the riots were “[criminality](#), pure and simple” and that in his view was all we needed to know. Crucially, although we heard from senior politicians, police leaders and other opinion formers and community members, little to nothing was heard from the rioters themselves. Many claims were made about them, but most of this was sheer conjecture. It was in the context of this refusal to ask difficult questions about the nature of the riots that the *Guardian* and the LSE established its *Reading the Riots* study.

Much as I am proud of *Reading the Riots*, however good the research I don’t think this should be left to journalists and academics.

We find ourselves again in a similar position. Commentators – politicians, police officers, journalists and, yes, academics – have been offering their views about the actions of the rioters. Claims are made about the focus of the “protests”, about the motivations of those involved, about the source of their anger and what they are seeking to achieve. But in the absence of proper inquiry this will continue to be little more than speculation with the risk that we settle on simplistic assumptions and answers. The reaction of the Starmer government to the events in Southport and elsewhere subsequently has, like the Cameron coalition government in 2011, focused most of its attention on policing and punishment. While the violence has been ongoing this is perhaps understandable. But once order has been fully restored and things are quieter, this will be insufficient.

One can only hope that Keir Starmer is more open to the idea of an official inquiry than his Conservative predecessor was in 2011.

More will be necessary and this ought to involve asking those difficult questions about the rioters and the riots. Much as I am proud of *Reading the Riots*, however good the research, I don't think this should be left to journalists and academics. Some form of high-level official inquiry is required. In 1981, and somewhat against her instincts, Margaret Thatcher appointed Lord Justice Scarman to inquire into the events around the Brixton riots of April that year. It proved to be a landmark inquiry, one that was highly influential and one that in many respects has stood the test of time.

The events in England in the summer of 2024 are too complex and too serious to be left without something similar. One can only hope that Keir Starmer is more open to the idea of an official inquiry than his Conservative predecessor was in 2011. The Prime Minister's willingness to consider an independent inquiry is one of the first major tests of the new Labour administration.

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