

Reading the Summer 2024 Riots: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Summary

On 15 May 2025, several months after the sentencing, a workshop titled “Reading the Summer 2024 Riots” was convened at the University of Leicester by colleagues from the School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy. Funded by the Leicester Institute of Advanced Studies (LIAS), the workshop drew inspiration from the “Reading the Riots” study into the 2011 UK riots led by Professor Tim Newburn at the London School of Economics in collaboration with The Guardian (Newburn, 2011).

Unlike the 2011 riots, however, there was a notable absence of academic voices in public debate following the 2024 unrest. Whether this reflected a lack of media engagement, institutional barriers, or academic reticence remains unclear.

Nevertheless, participants agreed that there was a pressing need to analyse and better understand both the attack and the subsequent unrest. The workshop created a space for interdisciplinary dialogue among 15 academics at different career stages and disciplines. Discussions centred on key questions: why people were motivated to protest; why some engaged in violence; who was involved; who instigated events; and whether the government’s response was appropriate. The workshop also addressed the relative absence of academic engagement and considered what lessons might be drawn for future research and public intervention.

Keywords: UK Riots 2024; criminology; public policy; interdisciplinary dialogue; academic engagement

Introduction: about the Workshop

Between 30 July and 5 August 2024, a series of protests and riots took place across towns and cities in England and Northern Ireland. These events were triggered by the killing of three children by 17-year-old Axel Rudakubana at a Taylor Swift-themed yoga and dance workshop in Southport, Merseyside, on 29 July 2024. At the time of the attack, 26 children were in attendance; in addition to those killed, ten children and two adults were injured.

In the immediate aftermath, false information circulated online claiming that the perpetrator—whose identity had not yet been publicly confirmed—was a Muslim who

had recently arrived in the UK by crossing the Channel in a small boat. During the unrest that followed, expressions of racist, Islamophobic, and anti-immigration sentiment were widely reported. The scale and spread of the disorder marked the most significant outbreak of social unrest in England in over a decade.

Responding to the violence, Prime Minister Keir Starmer characterised the events as criminality rather than legitimate protest and stated that those involved would “face the full force of the law” (Starmer, 2024). By January 2025, according to the National Police Chiefs’ Council (2025), 1,804 arrests had been made, with 1,072 individuals charged. Around 800 received custodial sentences, most commonly for violent disorder under section 2 of the Public Order Act 1986, which carries a maximum sentence of five years’ imprisonment. In some cases, charges of riot—carrying a maximum sentence of ten years—were pursued, alongside offences including attempted arson, burglary, racially aggravated criminal damage, and offences relating to online activity.

Rudakubana was charged with three counts of murder, ten counts of attempted murder, and possession of a bladed article. He was later charged under the Biological Weapons Act 1974 and the Terrorism Act 2000 for possession of ricin and an Al-Qaeda training manual. Although he initially pleaded not guilty, he admitted all 16 charges at the start of his trial in January 2025 and was sentenced to life imprisonment with a minimum term of 52 years. No clear motive for the attack has been established. In the first of two working papers included in this special issue, Chris Allen challenges this, arguing that while Rudakubana’s motivation was ‘mixed, unclear and unstable’ it was nonetheless ideological.

On 15 May 2025, several months after the sentencing, a workshop titled “Reading the Summer 2024 Riots” was convened at the University of Leicester by colleagues from the School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy. The School’s origins in the Scarman Centre — named after Lord Leslie Scarman, who led the inquiry into the 1981 Brixton riots — provided an important historical context for the discussions. Funded by the Leicester Institute of Advanced Studies (LIAS), the workshop drew inspiration from the “Reading the Riots” study into the 2011 UK riots led by Professor Tim Newburn at the London School of Economics in collaboration with The Guardian (Newburn, 2011).

Unlike the 2011 riots, however, there was a notable absence of academic voices in public debate following the 2024 unrest. Whether this reflected a lack of media engagement, institutional barriers, or academic reticence remains unclear.

Nevertheless, participants agreed that there was a pressing need to analyse and better understand both the attack and the subsequent unrest. In their co-authored working paper, Laurie Parsons and Charlotte Brook share some reflections and ideas based on their experience of attending the workshop. These include responding to questions that emerged during the workshop about what the role of academics should be and more importantly, who academics are.

The workshop created a space for interdisciplinary dialogue among 15 academics at different career stages, including postgraduate researchers, teaching fellows,

lecturers, associate professors, and professors. Participants came from a wide range of disciplines, including Business, Criminology, History, Law, Mathematics, Museum Studies, Politics, and Sociology. Discussions centred on key questions: why people were motivated to protest; why some engaged in violence; who was involved; who instigated events; and whether the government's response was appropriate. The workshop also addressed the relative absence of academic engagement and considered what lessons might be drawn for future research and public intervention.

Causes and Triggers

Initial discussions focused on the causes of the unrest, particularly the role of media narratives. While newer outlets such as GB News were mentioned, participants emphasised that negative framings of immigration long predate these platforms and are embedded within mainstream media discourse. Migrants have frequently been portrayed as problems or threats, contributing to a normalisation of hostility. This pattern was not seen as uniquely British; similar narratives were identified in countries such as the United States, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, where right-wing and populist movements have gained traction.

Such representations were understood to have real-world consequences, contributing to hostility in both urban and rural areas. In particular, migrant accommodation sites, often hotels, have increasingly become targets of protest and violence. Participants also highlighted structural and socio-economic factors, including the policy of housing migrants in hotels, frequently located in economically deprived areas with predominantly white working-class populations. In such contexts, perceptions that migrants were receiving preferential or “luxury” treatment were seen as fuelling resentment and a sense of injustice.

Alongside this, the normalisation of Islamophobia within political and public discourse was identified as a key driver, reflected in attacks on mosques during the unrest. While social media played an important role in spreading misinformation—particularly false claims about the perpetrator—it was generally viewed as a catalyst rather than a root cause. It amplified and accelerated existing grievances rather than creating them.

The discussion distinguished between short-term and long-term triggers. The Southport attack itself was the immediate catalyst, but the nature of the response—particularly the targeting of migrant accommodation and religious sites—reflected deeper, pre-existing attitudes. These actions were therefore interpreted as expressions of longer-standing tensions rather than isolated reactions. Michael Dhanoya's working paper reflects on some of these longer-standing tensions through the lens of ‘permission to hate’.

Longer-term factors included the perceived marginalisation of the white working class, although participants cautioned against treating this group as homogeneous. The term was seen as shorthand for a set of socio-economic conditions—unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion—often reinforced by negative cultural stereotypes. More

broadly, participants pointed to chronic underinvestment in certain communities, leading to feelings of neglect and disconnection. These dynamics were linked to shifting political allegiances and forms of protest, indicating deeper structural grievances underpinning the unrest.

The White Working Class and Narrative Framing

A key theme in the discussion was the conflation of the white working class with the “far-right,” a narrative reinforced by political rhetoric and media coverage. Early characterisations of the riots as “far-right” risked oversimplifying the diversity of motivations among participants. While some individuals may have held extremist views, others appeared to have been motivated by factors such as opportunism, boredom, or a desire for disorder.

Participants emphasised that framing the unrest solely in terms of far-right extremism risks obscuring the extent to which racist, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant sentiments may be more widely distributed across society. At the same time, there was recognition that such sentiments were clearly evident during the riots and should not be minimised. The events were widely seen as highlighting ongoing challenges for multiculturalism in Britain and the persistence of discriminatory attitudes.

The “far-right riots” label was nonetheless widely adopted and reinforced by media outlets and advocacy organisations, contributing to a lack of critical engagement with alternative explanations. Participants stressed the importance of distinguishing between different forms of political belief and behaviour, noting that anti-immigration views are not always synonymous with racism, even if they may overlap. However, there was also a strong consensus that racism and Islamophobia were central elements of the unrest and must remain central to any analysis.

Complexity and Analytical Approaches

As discussions developed, participants increasingly emphasised the complexity of the riots and the need for analytical frameworks capable of capturing this. Two approaches were proposed. The first, “ecosystems of crime,” focuses on the interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors that shape criminal behaviour (Felson, 2006). The second, “conditions of possibility,” considers the broader structural and contextual conditions that make particular events possible (Castillo-Sepúlveda, 2025).

Although not explored in detail, both approaches were seen as useful for understanding the riots as the product of multiple interacting forces rather than a single cause. Participants also highlighted the importance of narrative and storytelling, suggesting that individual accounts can provide valuable insight into motivations and experiences that may be obscured in broader structural analyses.

Historical comparisons were also discussed, with reference to previous episodes of unrest in 1981, 2001, 2005, and 2011. Similarities included patterns of collective anger, tensions with policing, and the rapid spread of unrest across locations, sometimes in “copycat” forms. However, important differences were also noted, including the

absence of a major public inquiry and limited academic engagement in the aftermath of the 2024 riots. Participants cautioned that differing social and political contexts limit the usefulness of direct comparisons. In this regard, Stuart Hall's concept of conjunctural analysis was highlighted as a way of understanding how specific configurations of factors produce particular historical moments.

The Legacy of Brexit and Broader Contexts

The riots were also situated within the broader political context of Brexit and its aftermath. Brexit was seen as contributing to the normalisation of anti-immigration rhetoric and as potentially shaping the attitudes underpinning the unrest. Participants noted possible geographical overlaps between areas that supported Brexit and those affected by the riots, although this relationship was not straightforward.

Political rhetoric surrounding immigration - from figures such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson - was widely criticised for contributing to a climate in which migrants were dehumanised and hostility normalised. At the same time, many communities that supported Brexit were also seen as having experienced its negative consequences, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation and being "left behind."

Beyond the UK, participants pointed to the influence of global figures such as Donald Trump and Elon Musk, whose use of social media reflects shifting dynamics of power and influence. These developments were linked to concerns about the spread of harmful narratives and the limited capacity of governments to regulate them effectively.

Emotional dimensions were also considered important. Feelings of fear, loss, and perceived cultural threat were seen as potential drivers of hostility, sometimes manifesting as hate. However, participants stressed that socio-economic explanations should not obscure the role of racism and Islamophobia, which were seen as central to understanding the riots. The targeting of migrant accommodation and religious sites was viewed as clear evidence of processes of dehumanisation.

The Far-Right and Information

Discussion of the "far-right" highlighted both its prominence in public narratives and the ambiguity surrounding the term. Following its use by political leaders, the label became central to interpretations of the riots, reinforced by media and advocacy organisations. While some participants accepted that far-right individuals were involved, there was broad agreement that the label could not account for all participants. Evidence suggested that many involved had no formal links to organised groups and were locally based (Allen, 2024). In the second of his working papers, Chris Allen provocatively argues that the far-right narrative was – and indeed continues to be – weaponised.

Participants also questioned the usefulness of the term itself, suggesting it is often applied too broadly and inconsistently, sometimes functioning as a catch-all label or

even a slur. This lack of clarity was seen as limiting its analytical value and obscuring important distinctions between different actors and ideologies.

This discussion fed into a broader consideration of misinformation and disinformation. Participants distinguished between misinformation as unintentional inaccuracy and disinformation as deliberate falsehood. Questions were raised about who should be responsible for addressing these issues and how individuals can navigate an increasingly complex information environment. The prevalence of “fake news,” combined with the tendency for individuals to seek information that confirms their existing beliefs, was seen as complicating efforts to establish shared understandings of truth.

Conclusion

The working papers included in the special issue do not address all of the issues discussed. Instead, and as noted at different points throughout, they seek to reflect or challenge current thinking and understanding on certain specific themes. Individually, they develop key insights; collectively, they aim to stimulate further debate about the causes, meanings, and implications of the 2024 riots. As such, they contribute to ongoing efforts to understand one of the most significant episodes of unrest in contemporary British history and to consider its longer-term social and political consequences.

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