

Peer Review

Review of: "Understanding the 2024 Summer Riots in the UK: Three Case Studies"

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This interesting paper examines riots in England (and Belfast in Northern Ireland) in the summer of 2024 that took place across 27 towns and cities over seven days. It utilises three case studies in Bristol, Tamworth, and Hanley (Stoke-on-Trent). While Tamworth has a relatively small non-white population, Bristol and Hanley have larger, established non-white populations.

The paper has two aims: to understand what happened and who was involved, using interview data and an array of secondary sources, including social media. A brief comparison of the 2011 riots in England is provided. It also establishes what is unknown as a pointer to future research. The findings reject the view that all participants held far-right views and were homogenous. The criticism of the rushed policy responses is justified on the grounds that it is better to first garner a better understanding of the causes of the riots and the participants. That said, under such circumstances, the authorities come under intense pressure to act speedily – to show that ‘something is being done’ to diffuse the problem.

The riots began in Southport on 30th July 2024, a day after the fatal stabbing of three girls in Southport – the perpetrator was mistakenly thought by far-right activists to be a Muslim asylum seeker. They quickly spread to many towns and cities – these can be considered as ‘copycat’ or ‘contagious’ riots that are common in the age of mass, rapid communication. The lack of formal organisation is typical of riots – they are invariably spontaneous. As is typical, counter-protests followed suit.

The methodology is appropriate, based on interviews and secondary data. The aim is to provide an accurate picture of the timing, location, and content of a particular incident, which is legitimate. The split between non-police interviewees of 21 whites and 11 non-whites gives a third to the latter, which is a

much higher proportion than the population at large. An explanation for this needs to be given. Clarification is also needed on whether these were counter-protestors, bystanders, or a mixture of both.

The paper points out that in Hanley, the far right has focused on contingency accommodation for asylum seekers and opposition to the construction of mosques. This begs the question: are only those designated as far right who focus on these two issues, or are there also those who support mainstream parties but share the same concerns? And what are the reasons for these concerns? Furthermore, do 'football risk groups' also share these concerns? If not, is it realistic to think that their sole purpose of partaking in the protests/riots is because of the likelihood of violence? That is, they are largely devoid of views on these issues?

Clarification is needed as to the meaning of 'anti-immigrant'. Are anti-immigrant activists opposed to all immigration – or mainly to Muslim immigration and to asylum seekers? Reference is made to participants moving towards Shelton – this being an 'Asian' district. This suggests a high degree of segregation, which can engender an 'us and them' dynamic, especially if communities lead what Ted Cattle (2001) described as 'parallel lives'. It would be interesting to know if there is evidence of such a dynamic and whether this may have fuelled tensions.

Stress is made of the targeting of mosques. Does this indicate that buildings of other minority faiths (if they exist) were not targeted? If so, what might explain this? It is important to note that some Muslims are white (for example, from Albania and Bosnia), so an anti-Muslim stance does not necessarily imply that it is racist. There is research and polling data that show that concerns about Muslims are widespread in Europe, and these are not based on race or ethnicity but on Muslim beliefs and practices (especially pertaining to women, children, sexual minorities, and free speech). Hence, care is needed about conflating an anti-immigrant stance with racism. Relatedly, evidence suggests that many non-white British citizens are also concerned about high levels of immigration.

There is a seeming contradiction: if the protests/riots were not formally organised, then how come there was a significant element of premeditation of collective violence – which suggests planning, hence some form of organisation.

The differences between the 2024 and 2011 riots are made clear, and the reasons cited are valid. Note, however, that the Conservative government's 'hostile environment' was geared towards illegal immigrants. Furthermore, the promise was to reduce net (legal) migration to tens of thousands, yet despite Brexit, it went into reverse, reaching record levels. Many thought this an act of betrayal and contributed to the Conservative's worst ever performance in the 2024 general election.

Furthermore, polls show that as far back as 2001, following the 1997 Blair government's more open-door policy and attendant increase in population, immigration became one of the two most important areas of concern to voters, alongside the economy, and has remained so since. Thus, mainly because of immigration, the population of the UK increased from 59m in 2001 to 67m in 2021, a 13.5 percentage increase with attendant impact on multitudinous aspects of society. A common refrain over the past quarter of a century is that 'we did not vote for this'.

There is even greater opposition to illegal immigration – indeed, the majority holds a zero-tolerance approach – for example, regarding small boats from France illegally crossing the English Channel in recent years. Indeed, the use of hotels to house such persons has aroused much controversy, even anger – so much so that in the latest Spending Review, the Chancellor Rachel Reeves pledged to stop using taxpayer-funded hotels by 2029, thereby saving £1bn.

But this opposition to illegal immigration is mirrored in European countries and is perhaps the most important issue in the US, helping propel Trump to victory in the last presidential elections.

So, concerns regarding immigration – legal and illegal – are widespread and legitimate, and it is reasonable to assume that those protesting about this issue will therefore think they have considerable support among the wider public. But they are likely to lose much of this support for lawbreaking, including racist chants, violence – especially against the police, and rioting. Ipso facto, it could be argued that resorting to riots is counterproductive. In his influential 1903 work, *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind*, Gustav Le Bon made this striking argument:

Moreover, by the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings, whom he further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images—which would be entirely without action on each of the isolated individuals composing the crowd—and to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits (Le Bon, 1903, p. 36) (emphasis added).

From Le Bon's perspective, those partaking in a crowd and resorting to violence and rioting in the summer of 2024 were acting against their 'obvious interests', that is, making the case for curbing immigration.

This is where the absence of interviews from the ‘anti-immigrant’ participants in the riots is a significant lacuna. Were substantiated reasons given as to their refusal to speak with academic researchers? To offset this, were questionnaires considered a viable alternative with the assurance of anonymity and strict confidentiality?

Suggestions for clarification

It would be helpful to define ‘riot’ and explain how it differs from ‘protest’ or ‘demonstration’.

The meaning of Bronze Commander and Silver Commander should be provided.

Once at least some of the comments and suggestions are taken on board, it can be published.

References

Le Bon G (1903) *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind*, London: T. Fisher Unwin

Cantle T (Chair) (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*, Home Office, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/independentreviewteam.pdf>

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.