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# Why do people riot? Examining rioter motivations and the role of the police

## Dominic Willmott [ID]
Department of Criminology, Sociology & Social Policy, School of Social Science and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

Faculty of Psychology, SWPS University, Wroclaw, Poland

## Matt Long
Department of Criminology, Sociology & Social Policy, School of Social Science and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

## Amuda Agneswaran and
## Danielle Labhardt
Department of Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

## Abstract
This article examines different theoretical explanations for rioting and crowd disorder drawing on psychological, sociological and political perspectives. The role of the law and in particular, police practice in tackling and exacerbating crowd violence are explored with a critical eye on the latest police science research. Both psychological motivations of rioters and systemic intersectional inequalities are considered together in this piece to comprehensively account for the reasons *why* people choose to riot. The adequacy of theoretical explanations and recommendations for how future riots might be avoided are considered in relation to the English riots of August 2011 and August 2024.

## Keywords
Rioting, policing, offender narratives, typology, elaborated social identity model

**Corresponding author:**
Dominic Willmott, Department of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, School of Socal Science and Humanities, Loughborough University, Brockington Building, Margaret Keay Road, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK.
Email: d.willmott@lboro.ac.uk

## Introduction

Throughout time, the world has experienced countless examples of large-scale rioting and civil unrest, with history books rich in accounts of mass revolts and widespread public disorder sweeping throughout cities, nations, and entire continents. Many riots throughout history are thought to have emerged as a consequence of increased state powers disproportionally applied against the poor, often within areas already experiencing high social deprivation. European nations including Britain and France have experienced many violent outbreaks over recent decades colloquially described as *race riots*. Here civil unrest is seemingly rooted in disputes between different ethnic groups, with anger at specific acts perpetrated by or against migrant populations, and with often fractious pre-existing relationships between these groups and the police. Such disputes are often underpinned by polarised views linked to local or government policies surrounding housing, welfare and immigration. One group is typically perceived to be receiving either enhanced or insufficient treatment compared to another. Set against such a turbulent backdrop, the trigger point that lights the touchpaper is commonly some form of police intervention - perceived to be heavy handed in nature by one disaffected group - or concerned onlookers. Indeed, as we write this article large scale gatherings of agitated and violent crowds are currently embroiled in civil disobedience and rioting across the UK. Following the murder of three young girls and attempted murder of several others at a children's Taylor Swift themed dance class in Southport, false rumours began circulating online that the offender was a Muslim migrant seeking asylum in Britian. This led to spontaneous, and later organised, gatherings of groups who attacked mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers. At the time of writing, protests and disorder had spread across the UK, with riots taking place in London, Rotherham, Middlesboro, Bolton, Belfast and many more British towns and cities. Media reports and early accounts from the police suggest far-right groups may be involved in the organisation of mass gatherings and riotous disorder taking place. Despite the offender now known to be a British-born 17-year-old male whose family settled in the UK from Rwanda, protests and riots have taken on an explicit Islamophobic and anti-immigration focus. Mosques have been the target of protests, with crowds shouting racial-slurs and clashing with police in attendance. Some may argue that the ethnic origin of the Southport offender are irrelevant to what is otherwise a clash between police and local disaffected groups. However, in recognising the stark similarity in circumstances between the current riots and those previously experienced in Britian, France and elsewhere, the role of race, immigration, social in-equity, and police tactics during the initial onset of disorder, clearly play a significant role in the emergence of disorder.

## *Recent riots – when, where and why?*

In 1980s Britain, and France in the 2000s, small- and large-scale violent clashes between minority ethnic groups and the police were relatively common (see Waddington and King, 2009). More recently, 2011 is remembered as the year of widespread civil unrest – with major riots occurring in Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa. Whilst the

sociopolitical context varies widely between these countries, riots seemingly emerged as a consequence of public dissatisfaction with local or national government policies. These included the introduction of new (or increases in existing) taxation, reduced social support and welfare, as well as policies which seemed to further infringe upon people's legal freedoms. On a more localised level, certain communities, typically those already marginalised, seem to bear the brunt of these policies. The poorest are routinely those most likely to live in areas of high social deprivation. It follows that they are also those most likely to experience cuts in government welfare and other social mechanisms of support. These communities are also those upon which policing tactics are most readily enforced due to the levels of crime that they experience. Studies of those involved in riots and looting in England, Northern Ireland, France, and the United States all find evidence that social deprivation, alongside policing tactics perceived to be excessive in the application of force, to be key determinants of mass public disorder (Briggs, 2012; Leonard, 2010; Nägel and Lutter, 2023; Williamson et al., 2018). More recently, criticism of state handling of the Covid pandemic and disruption to the economy caused by sharp rises in essential commodity prices have reportedly led to a 45% increase in protests and riots throughout North Africa and the Middle East (Chaucer, 2021). Significantly, these are all factors that remain omnipresent throughout the Western world today as nations continue to struggle to cope with the economic consequences of the covid pandemic and the ongoing conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. For many living in the UK, the cost-of-living crisis continues to cause concern (Padley and Stone, 2022) as uncertainty surrounds food prices and the increasing costs of energy needed to heat homes. Indeed, unanticipated spikes in interest rates are also having a significant effect on mortgage and rental repayments, meaning the rates of homelessness and property repossession are also likely to rise (Forrest, 2022). With food prices and other household essentials significantly rising in price, and workers striking across a wide range of sectors on a scale arguably not seen in Britain since the 1980s (see Boraman, 2023), the socio-economic factors found to underpin most civil unrest and rioting of the past, appear to be converging. The most recent riots in Britian are therefore somewhat unsurprising given the added tensions surrounding political responses towards increasing legal and illegal migration.

## Defining riots – social and legal perspectives

Definitions of rioting traditionally depend on the content in which consideration is given, varying between political, legal and academic perspectives. One simple definition posits rioting to be, "*relatively spontaneous group violence contrary to traditional norms*" (Marx, 1972: 50). Another more specified definition suggests that rioting equates to "*...hostile collective action by a group of about 50 or more people who physically assault persons or property or coerce someone to perform an action*" (Bohstedt, 1994: 259). In law definitions predictably focus instead on the circumstances and behaviour deemed illegal, alongside the punishments enforceable for perpetrating such crimes. In England and Wales, the offence of rioting is encompassed in the Public Order Act, whereby an individual is considered guilty of rioting when; "*12 or more persons who are present together, use or threaten unlawful violence for a common purpose and the conduct of them*

*(taken together) is such as would cause a person of reasonable firmness present at the scene to fear for his personal safety…"* (Public Order Act, 1986, Part 1, Sec. 1, p. 2).

The legislation goes on to outline that groups need not threaten or use violence at the same time for the conduct to be considered a riot. The consequences of being convicted of rioting range from a fine to a maximum of up ten years imprisonment. Notably however, sentences are often swift and severe for a variety of offences perpetrated during a riot against a person or property – designed to discourage further disorder from occurring in the immediate aftermath of a riot. Despite differences between definitions, what remains consistent is the collective gathering of multiple individuals for the express purpose of perpetrating crime on a scale larger than that which society is usually encounters. With an apparent increase in group-based disorder across Britian, next we reexamine the events surrounding the 2011 English riots, considering the initial trigger incident and role of the authorities.

## English riots of august 2011

On the 4th August 2011, a 29-year-old black man named Mark Duggan was fatally shot by armed police officers in London during an intelligence-led traffic stop on the taxicab that he was travelling in. Police suspected that he was in possession of a firearm. Whilst a gun was found close to the scene where, no forensic evidence ever officially linked him to this firearm. After failing to get answers surrounding why he had been shot, members of his family and the local community began gathering outside the local police station. Here a group of protestors attempted to storm the local police station after which the situation deteriorated and criminal damage to police vehicles and buildings began. Police and young men in the crowd started to clash and over the next 2 days, rioting and looting spread throughout other parts of London. Day three saw disorder occur in other cities outside of the capital including, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, and Nottingham, and by day four disorder spread to Manchester, Salford, Bristol and beyond. Calm resumed by day five, Wednesday August 10th however by then, significant damage and criminality had occurred on a somewhat unprecedented scale.

An official body set up in the aftermath of the riots found that in total, 141 incidents of rioting and looting occurred in 66 different locations. The total monetary cost was found to exceed 250 million pounds. The human cost equated to five deaths, over two hundred police officers injured, and countless businesses and properties were looted and damaged (Riot Communities Victim Panel, 2011). During an inquest in 2014, a jury concluded that the firearm recovered from the scene was likely to have been thrown by Duggan during the police stop, though he was never forensically linked to it. They also concluded that police acted lawfully in killing him based upon what the jury interpreted to have been an honestly held (albeit inaccurate) belief that he was holding the weapon when he was shot. Mark Duggan's family challenged the jury verdict at the Court of Appeal and the High Court though were unsuccessful on both occasions (Taylor, 2017). In October 2019, Mark Duggan's family reached a civil damages settlement with the police for an undisclosed figure though the Metropolitan Police made no admission of liability. The press and politicians alike branded the riots that emerged from his death as being the worst bout of

civil unrest in a generation (Aufheben, 2011), though perhaps more importantly, these riots reignited public debate and professional interest into the causes and motivations that lead a person to riot.

## Theoretical explanations of rioting

Over time social scientists have produced numerous theories for rioting. Psychologists have primarily focused on understanding the underlying motivations of rioters, examining individual pathways to offending and the role of personal and social identity. Alternatively, criminologists and sociologists have tended to examine broader societal structures and inequalities thought to underlie involvement in disorder, considering why a specific 'trigger incident' resonates with wider community groups. A small number of explanations have dominated the literature and here we will consider each in turn, examining evidence that supports or contradicts the key components of each theory.

*Convergence theories and apolitical explanations.* Convergence theorists argue that features implicit within the individual explain their involvement in violent disorder and looting. This is the idea that people are in some way 'predisposed' to offend, or in this case, riot - referred to as an 'apolitical explanation' as it does not recognise any sociopolitical motivations for rioting. Popularised by the early work of Floyd Allport (1924), any illegal, violent and generally destructive behaviour within rioting crowds was thought to be the result of those involved already being of such criminogenic character, in that "*the individual in the crowd behaves just as he would alone, only more so*" (p. 295). Alternatively put, people actively involved in crime, a so-called 'criminal element of society', are those thought to be responsible for riots when they occur. Interestingly, despite a lack of contemporary academic support for this idea (see Ball and Drury, 2012), its popularity remains surprisingly widespread.

After the 2011 English riots, senior politicians openly drew on this explanation, with the then Prime Minister (David Cameron) proclaiming rioting to be "*criminality, pure and simple*" and that "*gangs were at the heart of the protests and have been behind coordinated attacks*" (Heap and Smithson, 2012: 55). Similarly, the Justice Secretary (Kenneth Clark) attributed disorder to "*a feral underclass*" (Aufheben, 2011: 14), with then Home Secretary (Theresa May) stating "*...I am absolutely clear that what underlay it was criminality*", going on to suggest that gang members made up a large proportion of those involved (Heap and Smithson, 2012: 57). Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly then, the current British Prime Minister (Kier Starmer) described the August 2024 riots in much the same way, stating "*this is not protest, it is organised violent thuggery*" and describing rioters as "*marauding gangs intent on lawbreaking*" (BBC News, 2024).

Interestingly, of roughly 2000 offenders who appeared in court within 8 weeks following the 2011 riots, 76% had previously been convicted or cautioned for a criminal offence - with an average of 11 previous convictions per rioter (MoJ, 2011). At face value these figures appear to support the idea that rioters are indeed largely comprised of existing offending populations. However, closer scrutiny of the data suggests these early government figures seem to misrepresent those who were actually involved. For example,

it stands to reason those already known to police are those most likely to be identified, apprehended, and prosecuted during and immediately after riots occur given that their identities, addresses and fingerprints are already recorded within police databases. Local police asked to review CCTV are most likely to identify those rioters already known to be involved in crime in the area and less able identify rioters not regularly in contact with the police. Conclusions made based upon figures reported in the 2 months following riots are therefore unlikely to provide an accurate profile of *all* rioters that were involved. In fact, analysis of the impact that gangs had on the August 2011 riots from a variety of in-dependent and government sources have shown that their involvement was substantially overstated - equating to around 13% overall (Ball and Drury, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011). Whilst some evidence suggests rival gangs did implement a truce of sorts during the 2011 riots (see Kawalerowicz and Biggs, 2015), evidence from interviews with rioters who were part of a gang indicate that organised disorder and coordinated offending between gang members was rare (Newburn et al., 2018). With the August 2024 UK riots also being attributed to far-right organised gangs by politicians and the media alike, forthcoming careful analysis of *all* of those involved is warranted before the accuracy of such claim can be established. Therefore, in evaluating the efficacy of the convergence explanation as a unified theory of rioting, it is clear that limited empirical evidence (beyond political discourse) appears to support this theory. In fact, research findings over time and place indicate rioters are often socially integrated and representative of diverse members of society, from varied social backgrounds (McPhail, 1971; Reicher, 2001; Willmott and Ioannou, 2017). To be clear, available contemporary evidence does not provide strong support for the conclusion that those who take part in riots are largely representative of an uncivilised inherently impulsive (Farrington and Aguilar-Carceles, 2023), anti-social (Farrington and Liu, 2023), mentally disordered (Rode et al., 2024) or criminal (Jackson et al., 2023) 'underclass'.

*Deindividuation theory and submergence explanations.* Another theory frequently drawn upon to explain rioting is that broadly described as the submergence explanation, re-volving around the premise that the crowd itself has an important psychological impact on an individual's behaviour. According to this explanation, when present within a large group, our individual sense of self, personal responsibility, and rational thinking can become replaced by 'group think' or as Reicher and Stott (2011) put it, a 'mob mentality'. Following the early word of crowd scientists Taine and LeBon in the 19th century, contemporary social psychologists Festinger, and later Zimbardo, developed the concept of *deindividuation theory*. Here, the underlying premise is that the anonymity provided whilst 'submerged' within a large crowd, can serve to reduce our sense of the individual self, thereby increasing the tendency that people will behave in violation of *"established norms of appropriateness"* (Zimbardo, 1969: 251). This theory has long been used as an explanation for large scale rioting where indiscriminate violence and criminality occurs. Indeed, media commentators and television 'experts' often draw on this explanation when attempting to explain why seemingly 'normal' people get drawn into rioting and other crowd-based violence. The popularity of this idea is in part due to the widely known Zimbardo studies.

Though not directly tested in the context of rioting groups, in the 1970s and 1980s American psychologist Philip Zimbardo reportedly on the power of group affiliation on an individual's behaviour. In his now (in)famous prison experiments, participants were said to have been 'deindividuated' after being assigned either the role of a prison guard or prisoner. Zimbardo reported extremely harsh treatment by those assigned to be 'guards' upon those assigned as 'prisoners', said to be so bad that the study had to be abandoned early. Zimbardo and colleagues said this was despite 'prisoners' and 'prison guards' being designated such roles from an initially equal status group of participants recruited for the study (Haney et al., 1973; Zimbardo and White, 1972). Other studies around the same time also reported finding evidence that once participants were 'deindividuated' within the presence of a large crowd, they were more inclined to attack people (Mullen, 1986) and encourage suicidal people to jump to their deaths (Mann, 1981). Despite the popularity and intrigue that emerged from studies such as these that at face value seem to support the deindividuation explanation, most contemporary scholars now consider the theory to be both ideological and largely debunked based upon a lack of robust empirical support (Ball and Drury, 2012; Newburn, 2021; Stott et al., 2018). In one extensive (albeit now dated) meta-analytical review of sixty independent studies, Postmes and Spears (1998) found evidence which discredited important conceptual elements of the deindividuation explanation. Specifically, closer scrutiny of the studies previously considered to support deindividuation showed instead that the anonymity afforded by presence in crowds leads not to a loss of control, but rather conformity to situation-specific social (identity) norms. In fact, limited evidence emerged across the studies reviewed (that had previously boasted support for the theory) that a deindividuated state was ever actually invoked. Furthermore, findings from other studies have since displayed that contrary to being indiscriminate, rioting and crowd violence is often both targeted and patterned (Reicher and Stott, 2011; Stott et al., 2020) bringing core principles of the submergence explanation for rioting into question. Therefore, whilst it is important to acknowledge the importance of submergence explanations in helping to develop current thinking, contemporary social psychologists (see Haslam et al., 2007; Stott et al., 2018), widely disregard deindividuation theory as a valid explanation of crowd-based violence.

*The elaborated social identity model (ESIM).* The application of social identity models to rioting and crowd behaviour is relatively recent in comparison to the earlier approaches discussed and emerged primarily out of the work of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) *Social Identity Theory (SIT)*. Tajfel and Turner theorised the power that group membership and intergroup relations can have on individual behaviour, recognising the importance that self-categorisation to such groups can have upon facilitating collective behaviour (Turner et al., 1987). While forensic psychologists have applied SIT principles in the development of Criminal Social Identity theory to explain an offenders' sense of criminogenic identity derived in part from in-group ties with offending peers (see Boduszek al., 2012, 2016, 2021; Sherretts and Willmott, 2016), crowd psychologists Reicher and colleagues drew upon SIT components to account for offending behaviour that emerges in the presence of a crowd. Their model, known as the *Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM),* posits that alongside a unique personal identity, individuals within a crowd also express social

identities. When such a social identity is shared amongst crowd members, collective norms and thus action (e.g. rioting and looting) become possible (Drury and Stott, 2011; Stott and Drury, 2000). Moreover, whereas deindividuation explanations suggest a loss of identity and thus control whilst in the presence of a group, the ESIM argues that the individual in fact gains an additional identity that is both context specific and operates concurrently alongside existing personal identities (Drury and Stott, 2011). Reicher and Stott (2011) argue *"crowds are a place in which normally subordinated identities can change through empowerment to allow for the expression of underlying antagonisms in ways that other more mundane circumstances do not allow"* (p. 1), thereby suggesting riotous behaviour to be the product of newly adopted social identities, alongside personal identities.

Early findings emerging from Stephen Reicher's (1984) observational research into the St Pauls Riot in Bristol in 1980 and student-police disorder in Westminster in 1988 (Reicher, 1996), provides support for such an explanation. Here, he suggested that use of oppressive or 'heavy handed' tactics by police on a day-to-day basis, as well as during the policing of crowd events (e.g. large-scale football matches and public demonstrations), negatively impacted upon the dynamics of the crowd. He found that individuals were seemingly drawn into violent behaviour despite appearing to have had no prior intention to do so, with a collective sense of identity appearing to form as a direct consequence of the crowds perceived shared experience of adverse treatment by the police. Interestingly, similar examinations in the aftermath of riots and crowd violence by other researchers appear to support such a collective social identity premise. Lord Scarman's (1981) report on the Brixton riots and Cooper's (1985) analysis of the Merseyside riots in 1981, both cite coercive policing strategies (instead of efforts to police crowds with consent) in areas where disorder sprung up as being significant determinants of the subsequent outbreak of rioting. Angel (2012) commenting on the 2011 English riots outlines how tactics including, frequent stop and search of young black men (which often does not lead to an arrest), as well as the death of members of the black community during an arrest, are so reminiscent of features present within past riots, that they are "impossible to ignore" (p. 25). Given that such events draw into question the legitimacy of the police, and certain policing methods, proponents of the ESIM suggest rioting crowds and prior police conduct are so intrinsically linked, that the societal context in which they occur cannot be ignored. Testing this premise across time and place, Reicher, Drury, Stott and colleagues find recurring evidence of riotous disorder emerging as a consequence of collectively held negative experiences of perceived heavy-handed policing tactics, whereby collective social identities, supportive of violent action, emerge in a way that individual identities are unlikely to (Novelli et al., 2010; Reicher, 2011; Stott et al., 2018). Importantly, whilst the ESIM can be criticised for not directly taking account of the broader structural sociological inequalities often found to underpin rioting including poverty, unemployment, and cuts in social support (see Newburn, 2021), the explanation does allow for practical considerations of how police may best manage collectively aggrieved crowds to avoid or reduce subsequent disorder. Before we consider police responses and tactics when managing crowds, first we will briefly discuss possible evolutionary and sociological explanations for rioting.

*Evolutionary psychology and violence.* Applying evolutionary psychology to political violence, scholars such as, Max Taylor, Jason Roach and Ken Pease (2016) have sought to answer the question of what leads people to engage in such violence. Over recent decades there has been a reluctance to recognise evolutionary theory as a valid explanation for crime and criminality, arguably due to biological determinism (i.e. that genetics are the primarily influence on human behaviour) being critically attributed to Darwin (see Roach and Pease, 2013). This criticism has traditionally been that evolutionary perspectives oversimplify criminal behaviour, undermining the importance of sociocultural influence, free-will and individual experience. Indeed, notable applications of evolutionary theory to specific crime types have not helped. For example, Thornhill and Palmers' assertion that rape is an inherent evolutionary adaptive strategy men use for reproductive success led to predictable (and justified) critical responses (see Ward and Siegert, 2002). However, *epigenetics* is fast becoming a prominent area in the scientific study of crime, with research examining the potential biological underpinnings of criminal behaviour now evidencing the role that environmental factors such as first-hand and intergenerational experiences of trauma appear to have on modifying brain and DNA composition. Indeed, this is the position taken by Roach, Pease and others in seeking to understand male violence. Contemporary evolutionary perspectives such as these assert that violence and rule-breaking associated with riots and other political crimes grounded in predominately male violence can be explained by integrating biological, behavioural and social influences on the individual (Roach and Pease, 2011; Taylor et al., 2016). For Liddle and colleagues (2012) violent behaviour is both a biologically and psychologically evolved mechanism inherently driving aggressive feelings about space and territory. Whilst such a perspective is difficult to prove, Roach and Pease (2013) instead anchor their assertions in more concrete realities of crime. That is, that young men are almost exclusively the main proponents of these behaviours around the world, prone to aggression, violence and risk-taking behaviour, often seemingly rooted in *distal factors* such as, sexual competition, that seem to interact with *proximal factors* such as, crowded male-dominated environments (Roach and Pease, 2011). It is true that most riots are almost exclusively initiated and thereafter perpetuated by young males engaging in a range of aggressive risk-taking acts. Orienting integrated evolutionary theorising into crime prevention strategies, Roach and colleagues offer a range of solutions for offences including child homicide, political and gendered violence (Roach and Pease, 2011; Taylor et al., 2016). Whilst these 'Darwinian' ideas may once have been dismissed by mainstream criminologists, the growing evidence of a link between epigenetics and male-violence (see Duclot and Kabbaj, 2021) means that evolutionary perspectives are perhaps more scientifically grounded today than ever before.

*Sociological explanations and subcultural theory.* For alternative distinctively sociological explanations of rioting, subcultural theories must be examined. Subcultural theories focus on the 'normative' in that they are underpinned by a view that some social groups (at least temporarily) break away from the type of collective values embodied in what is frequently referred to as mainstream society. In many ways the allure of the group, inherent in the collective nature of riots, builds on conventional wisdom and populist convictions that

'peer group pressure' may bear some responsibility. What was referred to as 'delinquency' (Cicerali and Cicerali, 2018) rather than 'criminality' or 'anti-social behaviour' (Filkin et al., 2022) back in the 1950s was presented by subcultural theorists as providing disempowered groups with an accommodation to their marginalisation 'on the edges' of society. Two of the first to talk about the role of subculture in understanding crime were Thrasher (1947) and Albert Cohen (1955), the latter of whom explained the attraction of group bonding by reference to the notion of 'status frustration'. For Cohen, deviancy was presented as a reaction to (and subversion of) the so-called dominant norms and values prevalent in society at the time. Other subcultural explanations, for example by Merton (1957), focus on the notion of 'strain', with the Durkheimian idea of normlessness also being a pivotal concept. Merton proposed that within competitive capitalist society, social strain occurs because the demand for material goods and services outweighs the available supply resulting in scarcity in market terms. Under conditions of social strain, young working-class boys cannot attain material success through legitimate socially acceptable means (e.g. employment) and therefore their natural alternative may become a 'mode of adaptation' that involved embracing some kind of so-called 'deviant' subculture – in this case crime and riotous disorder. Throughout the 1960s, David Matza's (1964) work on delinquency and 'drift' made a significant contribution towards understanding drivers of group-based criminality outlining how people gravitated towards (and then away from) subcultural attachments whilst in part leading apparently 'normal', 'law abiding' lives, adopting what he famously described as 'techniques of neutralisation' (see Sykes and Matza, 1957). So, the contribution of the subcultural tradition and sociological explanations more broadly, in explaining the August 2024 (and other) UK riots is to examine the societal context and circumstances to understand why some people form temporary group-based affiliations to riot in the first place (for a comprehensive review see Newburn, 2021). One way of doing this, is by examining what the rioters themselves say about why they decided to riot.

*Rioter narratives.* What seems clear from public commentary and political discourse is a lack of agreement on what ultimately motivates people to riot. As discussed above, academic theorising provides a series of differing explanations, though what is often lacking is the systematic examination of rioter's own explanations (or narratives) for their offending behaviour. The utility of this approach was recognised by researchers at the London School of Economics (LSE) following the 2011 English disorder. Led by Tim Newburn and colleagues, researchers conducted more than 270 interviews with rioters seeking to understand what the rioters themselves said about their decision to participate in disorder. Their research report, *Reading the Riots* (Lewis et al., 2011), provided insight into the rioter's attitudes, experiences, and motivations. Rioters often reported feeling aggrieved by government and police policies, alongside feelings of injustice resulting from specific policies felt to be targeted at already marginalised groups. Examples include increased university tuition fees and cuts in youth services which young people reported led to feelings of hopelessness. Significantly, rioters cited experiences of what they perceived to be unfair and excessive police tactics such as, frequently being stopped and searched based on what they felt to be racial profiling. Interestingly, the mention of feeling

angered by the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan, widely considered to be the 'trigger' incident for riots that took place throughout London, was frequently mentioned by rioters from *outside* of the capital. This seems to evidence the sort of collective sense of injustice needed to bind rioting groups together, as proposed by Reicher and colleagues in their ESIM. Overall, the Reading the Riots report found that 85% of rioters interviewed considered policing to be either an "important" or "very important" factor in why the riots occurred (Guardian, 2011: p. 5). Importantly, the research did however identify several factors seemingly outside the realms of the rioters purported sense of injustice and more in line apolitical explanations favoured by politicians. Lewis and colleagues (2011) reported that for some rioters, events were described as representing a unique opportunity to offend, given the lack of perceived law and order. Indeed, this was frequently cited by those whose participation in the riots was largely centered upon looting material goods.

*Typology of rioters.* Adopting a similar approach to that used in the *Reading the Riots* project, Willmott and Ioannou (2017) analysed rioter narrative accounts aiming to systematically differentiate rioter motivations. Here, the researchers scruitnised a smaller number of rioter narratives though instead of retrospective interviews, chose to analyse rioter accounts provided whilst they were actively engaged in criminality during the course of the 2011 disorder. Given the severe custodial sentences that many rioters received for participating in the 2011 disorder, the researchers deemed these 'live' first-hand interview accounts a better representation of the reasons why people may have decided to riot. Willmott's analysis revealed that motivations linked to looting were those most frequently mentioned in their dataset of rioter narratives, with the decision to riot purportedly motivated primarily by monetary gain. However, also prominent were motivations linked to a 'desire for revenge' on both the police and government for perceived unfair and excessively harsh experiences rioters reported encountering. Less prominent motivations cited were the opportunity that the riots presented to have fun and because those involved felt that they had no other option but to steal to survive, given cuts to mechanisms of state support and fewer job opportunities. In total, Willmott and Ioannou (2017) recorded 47 distinct rioter motivations which they modelled into four distinct rioter types (Figure 1).

   *Professional rioters.* This rioter type is characterised their involvement in rioting as a means by which broader criminological objectives could be achieved. They were aware that civil unrest presented a unique opportunity perpetrate crime during what were repeatedly described as a period during which they were less likely to get caught. These rioters were largely focused on the acquisition of goods for personal and monetary gain. Theories that suggest rioting to be the product of the already criminal element of society opportunistically taking advantage of a tense situation to carry out their usual offending behaviour appear relevant to this rioter type, despite limited empirical evidence otherwise supporting this explanation of rioting. For a more detailed account of this rioter type see Willmott and Ioannou (2017).
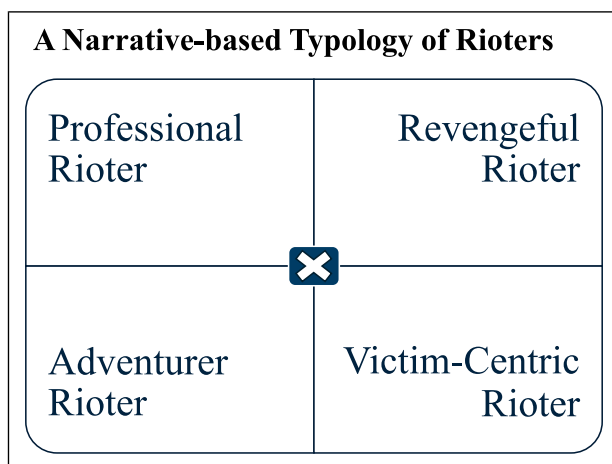
A Narrative-based Typology of Rioters

| Professional Rioter | Revengeful Rioter |
| Adventurer Rioter | Victim-Centric Rioter |

**Figure 1.** Typology of rioters (Willmott & Ioannou, 2017).

*Revengeful rioters.* This type of rioter frequently cited adverse experiences as their primary motivator for rioting including repeated experiences of police brutality, regularly being stopped and searched and government cuts to funding that impacted upon them and their communities. Rather than financial gain, these rioters described how disorder presented them with a rare opportunity to get their own back on the police and government and the pleasure they derived from showing the authorities that they had lost control (Willmott and Ioannou, 2017). Interestingly, revengeful rioters often rejected opportunities to steal and reported feeling deeply compelled to get retribution for what they perceived as being repeated unfair treatment and experiences, feeling empowered to do so in the presence of other like-minded individuals who also encountered the same ill treatments. Here motivations seem to closely align with the ESIM explanation for rioting.

*Adventurer rioters.* This group of rioters were found to be primarily motivated by their desire for enjoyment, with participation in disorder described as presenting an opportunity for unrestricted sensation-seeking (Willmott and Ioannou, 2017). These rioters described getting caught up in the moment and characterised their offending during riots as impulsive rather than based upon any planned effort to obtain goods or seek revenge. Blumer (1969) explained disorderly group behaviour as a consequence of routine unfulfilling activities being disrupted by a novel arousing event, with some empirical evidence also concluding that rioters were motivated by 'the buzz', 'for something to do' (Morrell et al., 2011: 27) alongside broader recreational entertainment in an otherwise unfulfilling environment (Jarman & O'Halloran 2001; Leonard 2010).

*Victim-centric rioters.* The final and least common group of rioters were those who reported being motivated by deep-rooted feelings of victimhood. Here, rioters attributed blame for their involvement in the riots as characteristic of factors outside of their control,

expressing a worldview where they were powerless victims within an unfair system. This rioter type reported being motivated to offend largely because they felt impoverished and unnoticed by employers, lacking opportunities that others had benefited from and explain that their offending as a practical necessity in order provide basic material goods for their families (Willmott and Ioannou, 2017).

## Police tactics and crowd management

Decisions to breach social contract and engage in riotous disorder is often underpinned by protestors shared belief that their perceived ill treatment is part of a broader problem of systemic abuse - directly at the hands of the police or by state actors for whom the police appear to represent when policing protesting crowds. In fact, evidence displays that an overt and confrontational police presence during a protest or gathering of a volatile crowd can itself serve to ignite violent disorder, especially in the aftermath of an event where the police had a role in the focal issue being protested (see Williamson et al., 2018). As such, despite the appeal of an increased police presence to dissuade violent disorder and the risk of rioting, in some instances a visible police presence may exacerbate violence. However, the situational context is important as in other instances, such as the 2011 English riots, the lack of a police response seemingly led to subsequent disorder.

Police responses to crowd and riot control often involve the use of resources such as batons, specialist riot squads (Drury et al., 2022) and teargas (Gorringe and Rosie, 2008). Whilst some argue these tactics are necessary during a riot, given that crowds are known to perceive such tactics as excessive or unlawful, when and how these tactics are implemented is crucial (Waddington and King, 2009). Perceived indiscriminate use of force by police personnel is now understood to unite crowds against law enforcement (Stott et al., 2018), with police intervention becoming the source and target of disorder (Stott and Drury, 2000). Indeed, this dynamic between crowds and police has been evidenced in the United States (Heyer, 2022; Maguire et al., 2020); Hong Kong (Stott et al., 2020), Australia (Baker, 2020) and France (Heyer, 2022). After the August 2011 English riots, hoping to prevent further disorder, stop and search tactics were employed against local young Black youths in effected communities which ultimately escalated into the rioting that police were trying to prevent (Drury et al., 2022). The role of police use of force riot control efforts remains controversial (see Jeffery and Tufail, 2015). Currently, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 gives police in England and Wales the power to tackle disruptive crowds and protect the public by undertaking a range of tactical measures such as, use of barriers and designated crowd exit points, deployment of liaison officers and shields, batons, alongside broader application of physical force where justifiable (College of Policing, 2023). A proponent of a more strategic, proactive and dynamic approach for effectively policing crowds, in place of historically reactive responses, is social psychologist Clifford Stott. Stott and Radburn (2020) highlight the importance of considering Procedural Justice Theory alongside the ESIM whilst policing crowds, recognising the need for dialogue between 'powerholders' (the police) and 'subordinates' (the public), as well as careful management of perceptions of police legitimacy through application of appropriate use of force. Indeed, Nägel and Lutter's

(2023) analysis of rioter motivations for involvement in the French riots of 2017 concluded that decreased trust in the police following high-profile cases of police misconduct were a major determinant of rioting. In order to reduce violence escalation, and encourage public compliance, police conduct must be viewed as legitimate, fair and equitable (Stott and Radburn, 2020). That said, recent evidence highlights the difficulty of this task and confounding role that shared attitudes and experiences among members of a crowd can have upon such legitimacy judgements (Radburn et al., 2018). As such, the direct consequences of police weaponry such as, water cannons and rubber bullets must be tactically considered. The UK Home Affairs Committee (2011) argued that use of such techniques during the 2011 riots likely served to make the rioting worse. In clear practical terms, based upon the work of Reicher, Stott and colleagues, to avoid escalation of crown disorder into riots, police should avoid classifying all members of a protesting or gathering crowd as ready to engage in violence. Doing so is dangerous in so far as it may activate the sort of shared social group identity needed for normally subordinated individuals to be mobilised towards collective violence and riotous disorder. This is especially true if policing strategies that response to violence among *some* crowd members, result in robust and excessive police tactics being used against *all* crowd members. Here, available evidence and analysis (Reicher, et al., 2004; Stott et al., 2020) suggests the likely result will be a reduction in crowd and public perceptions of police legitimacy, leading to an escalation in the number of people engaging in disorder and the degree of criminality they enact.

## Conclusion

This article examines a range explanations for rioting, from both psychological and sociopolitical stance points. Whilst some theories remain popular, empirical evidence appears strongest for more contemporary theorising such as the ESIM. However, efforts to examine rioter narratives which account for motivations for offending highlight that no one explanation seems explain all offending. In fact, work by Willmott and colleagues to develop a typology of rioters seems to suggest that integrated psychosocial explanations may best explain the actions of distinct rioter 'types'. Whilst psychological motivations are important, the sociopolitical backdrop to rioting is omnipresent, with intersectional inequalities present in the lives of many people who riot. With the continuous development of riot management strategies, in place of excessive use of force designed to manage protesting crowds, application of careful situation management techniques may serve to prevent peaceful protest from escalating into a riot. For example, in the 2011 English riots, police failure to communicate with the family and community representatives, sparked disorder that may have otherwise been avoided. The solution to riots is therefore arguably a simple one. It involves focused and sustained efforts from policing organisations to strengthen community relations, and robustly self-police excessive, unlawful, biased, and ineffective police conduct – not always evident in recent years (see Gekoski et al., 2023). In turn, public confidence and perceived legitimacy of the police will likely increase, helping deescalate tensions that underpin prospective future riots. In clear practical terms, according with recommendation made by Reicher, Stott and

colleagues, we conclude that police must avoid classifying all members of a gathering crowd as irrational, suggestible, and potentially violent. Doing so is likely to activate shared social group identities needed for normally subordinated individuals to be mobilised towards collective riotous disorder. Where possible, police should seek to understand the dynamics of a protesting crowd, their intentions, and prioritise the level of control exerted against unlawful members of a crowd, whilst facilitating those crowd members who wish to engage in lawful protest. Increasing over coming years digital technologies will likely be available to support police in these efforts.

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## ORCID iD

Dominic Willmott https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7449-6462

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