

Written evidence submitted by BR-UK (SDR0005)

Summary

We are a team of social and behavioural scientists investigating the summer 2024 disorders. We are carrying out detailed case studies of the protest/riot events (and counter-mobilisations) in three locations: Hanley (Stoke), Bristol and Tamworth. In each location, there was violent disorder. There was also some variation in what happened. Hanley largely involved attacks on the local Asian community and confrontation with members of the community (especially youth) who were defending mosques and other targets. Bristol largely involved attempted attacks on asylum seekers who were defended by a diverse group of counter-protestors and the police. Tamworth involved attacks on asylum seekers in which counter-protestors were outnumbered and the police countered the attackers. While each of the events had elements of protest from the participants (e.g., placards), it was notable that violence began almost as soon as the majority of 'protest' participants arrived, without provocation and with no gradual escalation. Overall, these were attacks rather than protests.

Introduction

We are a team of social and behavioural scientists – social and health psychologists, public health researchers, historians, criminologists – based in multiple UK universities who are engaged in a research project, funded by the [Behavioural Research UK](#) (BR-UK) Leadership Hub, investigating the summer 2024 disorders. BR-UK is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under grant (ES/Y001044/1). The project began on 31st August and is due to deliver a final report on 31st March 2025. The pre-registered research protocol can be found on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/umrpg/>).

The project addresses four research questions:

1. Who were the participants and different social groups involved in the riots, and to what extent did group memberships relate to the forms of behaviour they participated in?
2. What was the nature of policing behaviour, and how did different forms of policing behaviour affect the escalation/de-escalation of violence?
3. What was the nature of anti-riot collective behaviour, who participated and why, and what was the impact of the riots and these solidarity behaviours on the cohesion/inclusion/sense of belonging of ethnic minorities?

4. What were the effects of the different behaviours of rioters and those who protested against them on public meta-perceptions (i.e. beliefs about others' beliefs) about immigration and support for immigration policies?

We address these questions through detailed case studies of the protest/riot events (and counter-mobilisations) in three locations: Hanley (Stoke), Bristol and Tamworth. These were selected for two reasons - first because of the diversity of large and small town locations, second due to our contacts with the various parties involved. In each case, we have created detailed timelines and narrative accounts of the events by triangulating multiple data sources. We are also interviewing participants, witnesses, counter-protestors, local ethnic minorities to understand their beliefs, experiences, perceptions, and motivations.

The case study analysis of riots employed here is based upon a methodology which we have developed over four decades and which we employed for the study of the wave of disorders in August 2011 in England (see [here](#)). The process involves the collection of various forms of primary sources of data including video, photographs, news reports, blogposts, interviews with eyewitnesses, participants and police, social media, damage reports, disorder-related crime and arrestee data and other forms of police information. These primary sources are used to create detailed triangulated timelines, capturing when and where incidents within the disorder occurred. We then use interviews with the participants to understand the perceptions and motivations which produced these events, paying particular attention to the interactive dynamics whereby the perceptions of one party influenced their actions, thereby feeding into the perceptions and reactions of the other.

Before outlining our findings to date, we need to raise an important caveat. One of the problems of past reactions to riots is that the political demand for quick answers leads to conclusions and policy responses before we have a clear idea of what actually happened. In our own case, we are still at an early stage of data collection, especially when it comes to interviews with the various parties involved. Moreover, there are ethical issues of consent relating to our ability to use some of the data we have for this report. Accordingly, at this stage, our analysis must be seen as preliminary and our aim is as much to raise questions arising out of preliminary data rather than provide definitive answers.

This document is divided into two sections. In the first, we provide brief summaries of the timeline of events in our three locations. In the second, we draw on these summaries to address Q1 in the Home Affairs Committee call for evidence:

1) What was the nature and extent of disorder in July and August 2024, including:

What proportion of events following the Southport attack constituted peaceful protest compared to violent disorder?

To what extent did violent disorder in July and August 2024 arise from, or occur during, otherwise peaceful protests?

Section 1: An account of events

Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Saturday 3rd August 2024

On Saturday 3rd August 2024, violent disorder occurred during an anti-immigration protest in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent.

Several protest participants gathered at 11.00 in the Smithfield Centre. They were a diverse group, both local and from outside Stoke, consisting of members of far right groups, unaffiliated opponents of immigration, and others. They were later joined by members of football 'risk' groups who had met beforehand at a nearby pub.

This group were not conventional protestors in the sense of seeking to advance a particular cause. They did not have banners or placards or leaflets or give speeches. Rather their aim was to target groups amongst the asylum seeker, immigrant and ethnic minority communities. Henceforth, we refer to them as 'participants'. At first, they tried to head to Shelton, an area with a large Asian community. This was prevented by public order trained police. Instead, at around 11.30am, they set off, some 200 strong, on a march around the town centre, carrying flags of St George, of the Knights Templar, Union Jacks, and England football flags.

Throughout the day, there were two, largely separate groups of counter-protestors. The smaller group (some 70 strong) was organised by the anti-racist groups Stand Up to Racism and North Staffordshire Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (NORSCARF). They gathered near the Town Hall around 13:00. The other group consisted of predominantly male members of ethnic minorities, some clothed all in black and wearing masks. They were labelled in the media and in many accounts as 'Asian youth'. They were primarily concerned with defending mosques and other potential targets and, in doing so, clashed violently with the attackers.

As the participants passed through Trinity Street, they made multiple attempts to attack the Best Western Stoke City Hotel, which housed asylum seekers and had been the focus of longstanding

[controversy](#). The police intervened to stop these attacks leading to clashes between themselves and the participants.

The march ended near the Albion public house, opposite the Town Hall. Here, the participants had verbal confrontations with the anti-racist counter-protestors. Around 100 police intervened to stop these confrontations from escalating. Somewhat later, around 14.30, a rumour began to circulate on social media that a participant had been stabbed by 'Asian youths'. Many participants headed off to attack the Masjid Salahuddin mosque, which was defended by a group of Asian youths and (according to some reports) a broad section of the local community. On the way there, at approximately 15.00, participants threw missiles at the Darul Fallah Centre on Town Road about 500m from the Town Hall. The mosque was protected by Asian youths, who were also armed with bricks, missiles, and blunt objects.

There were also clashes between the participants and Asian youths at the Central Forest Park, where a number of the protestors were gathered, and Masjid Salahuddin mosque, which was protected by Asian youths. There followed a cycle of both groups clashing, dispersing, regrouping and clashing again (both verbally and physically). This lasted for three to four hours with the police between the groups and trying to mitigate the violence.

Finally, between 18:00 and 19:00 police began scaling down their operation as the remaining participants and counter-protestors (i.e., mainly Asian youths) dispersed.

Bristol, Saturday 3rd August 2024 and Wednesday 7th August 2024

In Bristol on Saturday 3rd August 2024, violent disorder occurred during an event in response to the Southport murders.

The event began with more than 500 counter-protestors gathering peacefully in Castle Park in central Bristol at 18:00, approximately an hour before participants had planned to assemble in the same location. These ranged from some masked anti-fascists to local councillors, members of the Labour, Green and Liberal-Democrat parties, and anti-racists who were members of no party.

At around 19.00, some 200 participants arrived and were separated from counter-protestors by police officers. Tensions rose around 19.25 as participants began to verbally harangue police officers and throw missiles both at them and at the counter-protestors. Police in public-order equipment were then deployed facing the participants (who were the source of attacks) and with their backs to

the counter-protestors (who constituted no threat). The police also deployed mounted officers and a dog team.

The police then drove the participants (who, as in Hanley, had no placards or banners, made no speeches nor distributed leaflets) towards and over the nearby Bristol Bridge and prevented the counter-protestors from following them. This took them towards the Mercure Hotel on Redcliff Hill, known to house asylum seekers and (according to social media posts) seen to be the target of the participants. Accordingly, while unable to follow the participants, a number of counter-protestors ran a longer way around to arrive at the Mercure before the participants.

The counter-protestors arrived just before 8pm. They found only a very limited police presence since units which had earlier been defending the hotel had been redeployed. They joined with staff to form a cordon that prevented the participants gaining access to the premises. For around 10-15 minutes they came under concerted attack (including missiles being thrown, blows struck, and racist/homophobic abuse) before, around 20.30, public order police arrived in vans along with mounted officers.

The police formed a line in front of the participants and then drove them away. At approximately 21.15, the participants moved off towards Redcliff roundabout. Incidents of violence continued with missiles being thrown at police and a police car damaged. They then dispersed. Once the threat from the participants had receded, most of the counter protestors who were in front of the hotel then dispersed. By 22.30 the events were over.

The following Wednesday (7th August), in response to reports that anti-immigration protest participants planned to attack the offices of lawyers dealing with asylum cases, counter-protestors gathered in West Street and Old Market Street in central Bristol. The crowd was in the region of 1-2,000 strong and was highly diverse, including a broad range of ages, ethnicities and political affiliations. Indeed crowd members described themselves as representing the community ('We are Bristol') rather than a specific section of the community. At first the atmosphere was tense, with some reports of far-right individuals being present. However, these never came together as a group, and what had been organised as a defensive counter-protest turned into a celebration of victory over racists. The mood was friendly and positive. There was no violence and the visible police presence was minimal.

Tamworth, Sunday 4th August 2024

On Sunday 4th August 2024, violent disorder occurred during an anti-immigration protest in Tamworth, Staffordshire.

A protest at the Tamworth Holiday Inn Express, which houses asylum seekers, was advertised on social media for 19:00 on Sunday 4th August. The hotel had previously been the focus of controversy, with the local Labour MP stating in Parliament a week or so previously (30th July) that local people [‘want their hotel back’](#).

A small group of participants, including men and women, young and old, started assembling in the car park from about 15.45. They were more traditional protestors, holding placards and acting peacefully. However, the bulk of the participants arrived from 18.00. There were about 200 of them. There was also a small group of counter-protestors, some 15-20 strong who stood outside the hotel entrance.

Once the participants were fully assembled, disorder and violence began very quickly. From 19.00 individuals started vandalising surrounding fixtures, including road signs and barriers, and used them alongside other materials as missiles. These were thrown towards police on the A51 main road outside of the hotel grounds. The counter-protestors outside the hotel left at this point as fireworks were launched at them. Police officers, now in public order equipment, formed a single line in front of the hotel entrance.

From 20.30 the hotel itself came under attack. Racist graffiti was scrawled on the building. Windows were smashed and fire doors broken to gain access. Fireworks were thrown and fired into the hotel. At around 20.50, a fire was started in one of the vandalised doorways. Inside, security officers moved residents and staff to the upper floors. They barricaded external doors and extinguished the blazes. Additional police officers including a Police Support Unit arrived from 22:00 and drove the crowd away from the building. By midnight, the event was over.

Section 2: On the nature and violence of the August 2024 protests

1. The first, and most obvious point is that we must be wary of a simplistic ‘one size fits all’ explanation of the protest/ riot events of August 2024. Even amongst the three locations we deal with here, there is considerable variation in what happened. Most obviously, Hanley largely involved attacks on the local Asian community and confrontation with members of the community (especially youth) who were defending mosques and other targets. Bristol largely involved attacks on asylum seekers who were successfully defended by a diverse group of counter-protestors and the police.

Tamworth again involved attacks on asylum seekers in which counter-protestors were largely irrelevant and the police alone countered the attackers.

2. Nonetheless, there are a number of general points that can be made. To start with, it is misleading to talk of 'protest participants' and 'counter-protestors' in the singular. Each group was highly diverse even though they are often labelled homogeneously as 'far right' and 'anti-fascists'. The 'protestors' (a term which, as we shall argue, is in itself misleading) were certainly mobilised and motivated by far right organisations. However the composition of the 'protest' crowds included, besides members of these organisations, unaffiliated individuals who were anti-immigration, people who were anti-police, members of football 'risk' groups and 'tourists' who were there to see and record exciting events. Equally, the 'counter-protestors' included organised anti-fascist groups, members of broader anti-racist organisations as well as anti-racists who belonged to no organisations, members of various political parties (Labour, Green, Lib Dem) and organisations (Trades Unions), members of ethnic minority communities and community representatives (councillors etc.). It follows from this that it would be misleading to read the strength of the far right in Britain from the size of the 'protest' crowds/ riot events. It also follows that it would be wrong to treat all the participants as if they were already radicalised - and to beware of official responses that might radicalise those who were not already members of the far right.

3. Despite the diversity of the 'protest participant' and 'counter-protestor' groups, the dominant position in the two was completely different. Thus, amongst the protest participants, violence and disorder were normative and, even if not everybody necessarily joined in with conflictual and violent acts, there is no evidence of such acts being overtly challenged. This likely allowed those involved to have a sense of support from others and hence to gain confidence in what they were doing. By contrast, amongst the counter-protestors (certainly in Bristol) violence and disorder were counter-normative. Even though there may have been some present who might otherwise have been open to violent action, they were not able to express it in a crowd where most people saw themselves as defending the community and allies of the police in so doing. If anything, this majority were critical of the police for seeing too much danger in the counter-protestor crowd and not taking up the potential for allyship.

4. To take the argument a step further, the term 'protestor' may be misleading in referring to those involved in the violence of August 2024. One of the striking things about all three locations is how little many of these people conformed to the normal characteristics of protestors. With the sole exception of a small number of people in Tamworth, who arrived early on and were marginalised when much larger numbers arrived at the time advertised on social media, there was no sign of

placards or banners or speeches or leaflets. This suggests that they were not present to argue a cause or change anyone's mind. It suggests that their motivation was to physically attack asylum seekers, immigrants, and ethnic/religious minorities (especially Muslims). This was something very different from traditional demonstrations in form and content. We need more evidence (especially from the participants themselves) before making firm conclusions about their motivations. Nonetheless, there is enough to suggest that 'protestors' is an unhelpful label and 'attackers' may be more accurate.

5. An added advantage of this reconceptualisation is that it helps explain some of the most striking characteristics of these events - namely the immediacy and the intensity of the violence. In [many of the crowd events that we have previously analysed](#), behaviour escalates through a process of interaction between crowd members (many of whom get unexpectedly involved in violence having not initially come with violent intent) and police. This takes place over a period of time, and so violence tends to be at the culmination rather than the initiation of events. In 2024, though, violence began almost as soon as the 'attackers' arrived. This was true in Tamworth. As we have described, as soon as the mass of participants arrived they set about trying to set fire to the hotel. It was also true in Bristol. And if things took a bit longer in Hanley, it was only because the attackers took a while to find their targets. Equally, the violence started at peak intensity rather than increasing over time, because the intent of causing harm was predetermined.

6. In the same way that we should reconceptualise the 'protestors' as 'attackers', it may be helpful to think of the 'counter-protestors' as 'defenders'. As we have already noted, the nature of the 'counter-protestors' is very different in different locations. In Hanley, for instance, some members of the local Asian community were prepared to defend their mosques and other buildings with force (perhaps lacking confidence that anyone else would do so). In Bristol, the counter-protestors that we interviewed were almost unanimous in defining themselves as being of the community and motivated to defend the community (both in terms of defending community members from being attacked and in terms of defending the reputation of the city). They were eager to work with the police in this enterprise and disappointed in the lack of reciprocity that they experienced.

7. This raises an important set of questions about the policing of the events in Bristol and possibly more widely - and we pose this as a genuine question requiring further investigation rather than as a disguised conclusion. To what extent was the policing of the 2024 events premised on the assumption that officers were facing two equal and opposed dangers from the 'far right' and the 'far left'? To what extent did that perception frame operational decisions and the deployment of resources (e.g., putting emphasis on the need to contain the different groups equally and the need

to keep them apart)? To what extent did this draw resources away from defending the targets of the attackers (e.g., the Mercure hotel in Bristol)? Finally, to what extent did that lead at least some of those under attack to conclude that they had only themselves to rely on and hence needed to meet violence with violence?

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