Representing the Riots: The (mis)use of statistics to sustain ideological explanation
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Introduction

In this article, we critically analyse the use of figures that were employed implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, to support two kinds of quasi-psychological accounts of the UK riots[2] of August 2011. The first kind of account suggested that that, overwhelmingly or typically, the rioters were a specific category of individual distinguished from others by their lack of civilization. For example, there were claims about the family upbringing of those involved, their alleged membership of a distinct cultural 'underclass', their gang membership, and their criminal characters. The second kind of account focused on the psychological effects of being in a (rioting) crowd. It suggested that the crowd leads people to lose their senses and lose control of their behaviour, and therefore to commit acts of mindless and indiscriminate violence.

These two kinds of accounts echo traditional convergence and submergence explanations for riots in academic psychology, which have been shown to be both inaccurate and ideological. In principle, it is possible, of course, that the riots of August 2011 were indeed characterized by the convergence of 'uncivilized' individuals and by indiscriminate attacks on property. But we shall show that the figures used to support these claims were deeply problematic. Commentators, including government ministers, misinterpreted some of the patterns they found (e.g., in the arrest and criminal records statistics); they also overlooked certain other patterns that could be discerned in the data (e.g., of discrimination in violence) because of imprecision in their coding categories.

Before demonstrating how figures were (mis)used, we will briefly indicate some of the history of the two types of ideological explanation.

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[2] Thompson (1971) cautions us against loose employment of the term 'riot'; we agree that the associations of this word may serve to obscure the significance of what for some might instead be called an 'uprising'. The term is also used sometimes to group together events which are quite different (Aufheben, 2011). We shall bracket off these discussions for the present analysis, however, which seeks to understand and criticize the way that facts are constructed in explanations for events that are widely described by almost all sources as 'riots'.

Convergence and submergence: Two ideological explanations for riots

The suggestion that violent crowd behaviour reflects the 'uncivilized' character of participants - the 'riff-raff' explanation (US riot commission, 1966) - has been around at least since the early 19th century (Rudé, 1995). It found scientific expression in the psychological theories of Lombroso, Sighele and Floyd Allport (Drury & Stott, 2011) who argued that if crowd behaviour in riots was violent, criminal and destructive, it was because the individuals involved had violent, criminal and destructive predispositions.

In contrast to this suggestion that in riots (criminal) individuals do what they normally do anyway[3] was the argument that the individual becomes 'submerged' in the crowd and their personality replaced by a collective 'racial unconscious'. In this account, the loss of self (and hence of self-control) and the primitive impulses of the 'group mind' lead typically to indiscriminate violence and irrational self-destruction. The notion of an underlying barbarity in all humanity is clearly Hobbesian in its provenance, but was developed into 'crowd science' by Taine and Tarde and popularized by Le Bon (Stott & Drury, in press).

Despite their continued popularity in some circles,[4] convergence and submergence explanations are not supported by the evidence. Thus, studies have consistently demonstrated that participants are more likely to be socially integrated in background than 'uncivilized' (Reicher, 2001). For example, qualitative and quantitative analyses of the 1960s US urban riots has shown that, far from being 'riff-raff', participants were representative of many others in society (Fogelson, 1971) and that the individual attributes of rioters (their attitudes or supposed 'disorder proneness') were poor predictors of participation (McPhail, 1971). Against 'submergence' explanations, it has been established that anonymity in psychological crowds leads not to loss of control but to adherence to identity-based norms (Postmes & Spears, 1998). Moreover, studies consistently find that, far from being indiscriminate, crowd violence is typically targeted, limited, and patterned (Fogelson, 1968; Reicher, 1984).

As well as being falsified by the research evidence, convergence and submergence accounts are also both profoundly ideological in their implications. Thus, as Fogelson (1971) argues in a stinging critique of 'riff raff' accounts, attributing riots to the characters of the individual

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[3] In a memorable dictum, Allport claimed that 'the individual in the crowd behaves just as he would behave alone, *only more so'* (Allport, 1924, p. 295).

[4] The Cabinet Office commissioned NatCen report on the August 2011 riots refers uncritically to de-individuation (see Morrell, Scott, McNeish, & Webster, 2011, p. 62).

rioters presents the events as unconnected to wider problems in society and thus allows the establishment to argue for law enforcement 'solutions' rather than accept the necessity of political change. Similarly, accounts depicting crowd action as mindless rather than meaningful place the crowd outside of 'politics' and rationalize coercion (Drury & Stott, 2011; Hoggett & Stott, 2010).

The UK riots of August 2011

The shooting by a police firearms unit of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, London, on the evening of August 4th 2011 precipitated four days of urban disturbances across the UK between Saturday 6th and Tuesday 9th August. Beginning with a major disorder in Tottenham on the Saturday night, the 'riots and looting' spread across London over the following two days, and on the Monday evening appeared in several other cities including Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Nottingham and Bristol. On the Tuesday afternoon and evening, whilst London remained fairly quiet, the disturbances developed across the west and east Midlands as well as appearing in Manchester, Salford, Leicester, Gloucester and again in Liverpool and Bristol. In all, it was estimated that 66 areas experienced 141 incidents of 'disorder' (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011).

The disturbances were not homogenous in either their form or content, with different repertoires of activity and patterns of targeting visible (Aufheben, 2011). The initial disorders in Tottenham and Hackney in London for example, can be described as *'community riots'* where there was mass local participation with the principal targets being the police and their property (Aufheben, 2011; Reicher & Stott, 2011). The majority of the incidents that followed were akin to *'commodity riots'* where the principal aim was to appropriate goods. In this case there was significant premeditation and communication, crowd mobility and selective targeting of commercial concentrations such as shopping centres and malls. There was also a sub-pattern involving the targeting of particular 'wealthy areas' in London (Ealing, Pimlico, Sloane Square, Notting Hill) which suffered widespread damage to property (and people).

During the events, five people were killed, over 200 police officers were injured and there were 1,860 incidents of criminal damage and arson. The final 'bill' for damages, loss of trade and policing was estimated at £250-500 million (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011).

Figures used to suggest the convergence of individuals with uncivilized predispositions

In this section, the content and use of statistical evidence concerning the August riots from government reports is reviewed and critiqued. The focus is on how the figures were interpreted to support ideas of predisposition, particularly in characterising participants as principally being 'existing criminals' or led by 'gangs'.

Statistics on 'criminals'

'Criminal' and 'criminality' were amongst the most frequently occurring words used to refer to the UK riots (Reicher & Stott, 2011). On the one hand, as a description of illegal activities the term 'criminal' was clearly technically correct. On the other hand, a different kind of claim was made, particularly by senior politicians, when it was stated that most of those who took part already had criminal records and convictions.

This kind of claim included statements about the 'hardcore' made by the Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke in September 2011:

> *'It's not yet been widely recognised, but the hardcore of the rioters were in fact known criminals. Close to three quarters of those aged 18 or over charged with riot offences already had a prior conviction…In my view, the riots can be seen in part as an outburst of outrageous behaviour by the criminal classes – individuals and families familiar with the justice system, who haven't been changed by their past punishments.'*[5]

About a week later he added that *'existing criminals were on the rampage'*[6]

Home Secretary Theresa May continued with this characterization of the 'majority' in a speech given in December 2011:

> *'…three-quarters of those who appeared in court in connection with the riots already had a previous caution or conviction. On average each rioter charged had committed 11 previous offences. In other words, they were career criminals'*[7]

Similarly:

> *'I think there are a number of issues here that we can only properly assess when we have a proper analysis of the people*

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[5] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/kenneth-clarke-riots-penal-system

[6] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/15/english-riots-hardcore-repeat-offenders?intcmp=239

[7]http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2075540/Theresa-May-lessons-SHE-learnt-weeks-LSE-report-summer-riots.html 18-12-2011

> *who were involved in the riots ... But I am absolutely clear that*
> *what underlay it was criminality'*[8]

Clarke's terms 'hardcore' and 'existing criminals' convey the notion that even if 'known criminals' did not make up the numerical majority, they were at the heart of the events, or were most instrumental in what happened. In contrast, May's statement about the 'majority' conflates those appearing before the courts with all those involved in the riots of August 2011.

So what did the government statistics concerning arrestees and convictions suggest? Figure 1 displays the total number of persons arrested and the fraction brought to court nationwide as a result of the August riots in the three months following the cessation of the disturbances. It also shows the fractions of adults (>17 years old) and juveniles (aged 10-17) of those brought to court.[9]

The first noticeable feature of Figure 1 is the fact that more than 50% of those arrested were not brought to court by the middle of October 2011. There are no statistics relating to how many of this majority fraction had previous convictions, so it is unclear if this group of arrestees were showing similar criminal histories to those who were brought to court.

A related point concerns the rate of arrests. This was extremely high over the ten days immediately after the cessation of the disturbances, with almost three quarters of all those arrested in the three months following the riots apprehended in that short period. The police claimed to have 250,000 hours of CCTV footage as evidence. According to detectives, by February 7th 2012 six months after the August disturbances, they had only 'studied' in detail about four fifths of this total.[10] Taking a conservative estimate, by the middle of September 2011, by which time the majority of arrests had been made, perhaps only one seventh of the footage had passed through this process. So how could so many arrests have been achieved so quickly? We will return to this important question later in this article.

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[8] (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2011 (a) para.18)

[9] The data for this graph was obtained from Ministry of Justice (2011a,b,c). http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/10/london-riots-spark-copycat-birmingham, http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/riots-police-expect-to-make-3000-147645 and http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/08/boy-riots-arrested-tv-cameras

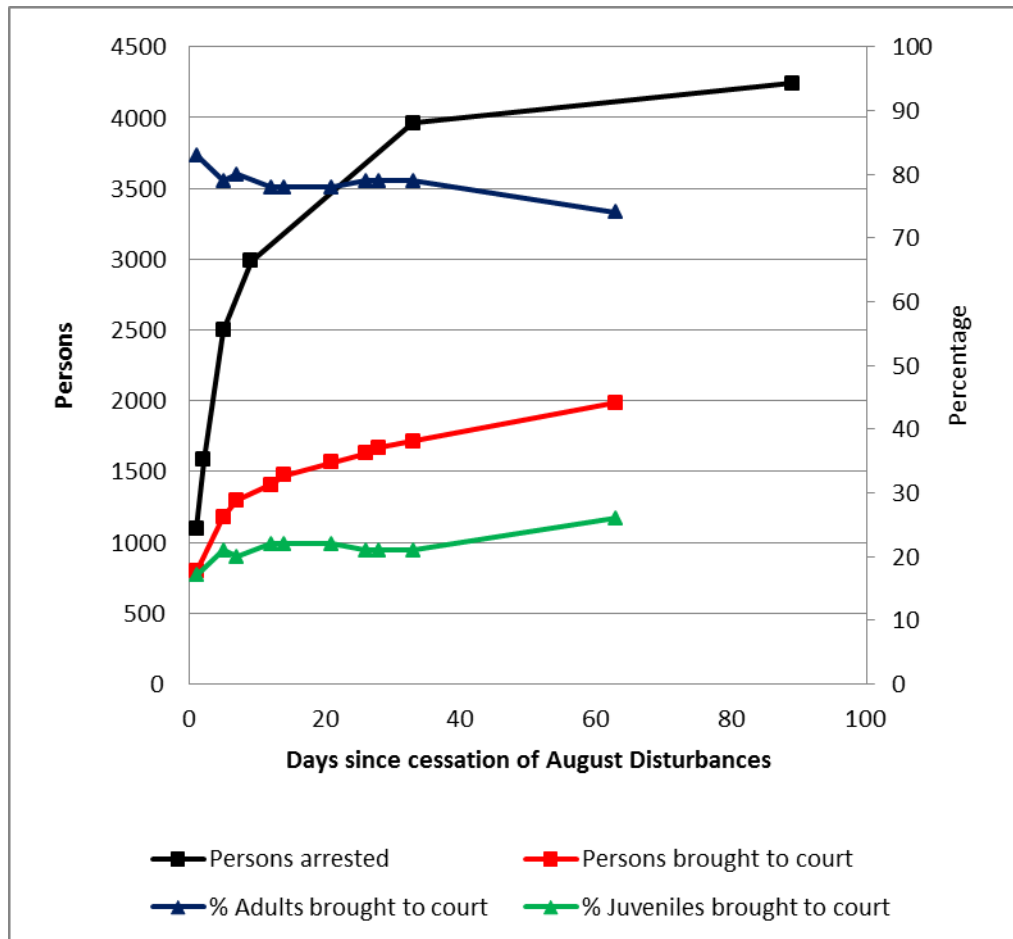[10] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-16875386

Figure 1: Persons arrested and/or brought to court (nationally) as a result of August riots since the cessation of the disturbances

The second feature of Figure 1 is that as time went on the percentage of those brought to court that were adults decreased and the fraction of juveniles began to increase. Typically, juveniles have significantly fewer previous offences than adults and are thus less likely to be known to the police.[11] This fact alone may explain why it took some time for the police to track down juvenile suspects. This suggests in turn that a major factor in apprehending participants subsequent to the August events was *previous criminal history*, rather than the content of the crimes committed.

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[11] In the current population (2011), 28% of males aged 18-52 have a previous conviction, whilst the figure is only 2% for male juveniles (aged 10-17) (Ministry of Justice, 2011c. p. 7).
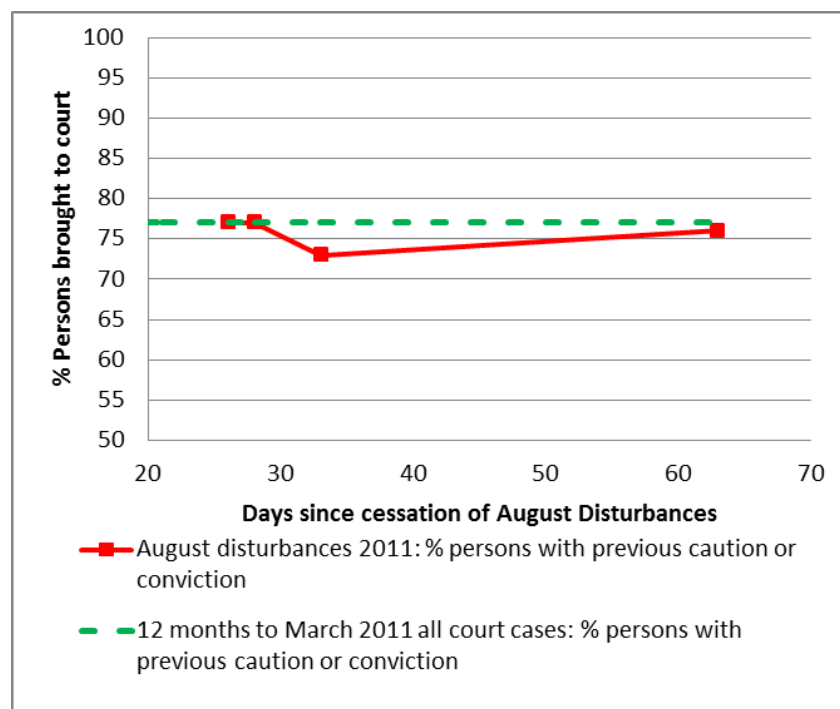
Figure 2: Previous criminal histories of those brought to court as a result of the August riots

Figure 2 shows the fraction of those brought to court for the August disturbances with previous cautions and convictions (against time). It also shows for comparative purposes the statistics for all offenders brought to court for the 12 months up to March 2011.[12] The government statisticians interpreted this as follows:

> *This suggests that while **those taking part in the disorder** were much more likely than the general population to have previous convictions, they are not quite as prolific as offenders sentenced for indictable offences in 2010/11[13]*

At face value, the results suggest that those brought before the courts in the aftermath were fairly characteristic of those who generally appear before the courts in a given year. Thus the inference is that the majority of participants in the August riots' were already 'criminals'. However, as is becoming clear, this interpretation of the data was seriously flawed.

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[12] The data for this graph was obtained from Ministry of Justice (2011a,b,c).

[13] Our emphasis in bold. The report contradicts this statement in its introduction by noting: *'the group of people brought before the courts is only a subset of all people who took part in the public disorder of 6th to 9th August 2011. It is therefore possible that there are differences between the people brought before the courts to date and all those who took part in the disorder'* (Ministry of Justice, 2011c, pp. 2, 7)

Several police sources indirectly drew attention to the problems in using these figures to characterise the composition of the 'rioting' crowds in August 2011. For example, the intense (government) pressure in the immediate aftermath of the disturbances to arrest 'suspects' was used to explain the large number of cases of supposed mistaken identity and the failure to press charges:

> *'An official from the Metropolitan police, who asked not to be named, said that there were "extenuating circumstances" during and immediately after the disturbances, when police were under great pressure to "go out and arrest people while the evidence is still fresh"; because of the "sheer numbers" police were dealing with, it was inevitable that they were "not going to get the required evidence to charge all of them", the official said'[14]*

Clearly, such pressure was leading to the path of least resistance in terms of sweeping up possible suspects. This involved concentrating on those who were already within police databases and/or under investigation and fitted the criminal profile of a potential 'rioter' or 'looter' in a particular area. As we shall see, the use of CCTV evidence in the context of a rapid response to events was to bias the arrest statistics even further.

Previous research on urban riots has pointed out that arrest or conviction figures neither necessarily reflects crowd composition nor 'riot' severity (Cooper, 1985, p. 63; Keith, 1987, p. 97; Peach, 1986, pp. 397-398). In the August 2011 riots, the problem with assuming the characteristics of those arrested to represent the characteristics of those who took part was exacerbated by the police use of CCTV evidence. In order to demonstrate this point, the participants in the August 2011 riots (or in fact any recent urban disturbance) can be simply divided into four categories, based on two sets of criteria: (1) faces covered or uncovered; (2) previously known to the police or not known to the police.

It is fairly obvious that the most likely group to be arrested in the immediate aftermath of a disturbance using CCTV footage as evidence are those whose *faces were not covered and were previously known to the police.* This is simply because having a CCTV image of a suspect is not much use if you don't have an existing named photograph to compare it to. The second most likely group to be arrested were those who were not masked up but were unknown to the police. In this case the police were relied on members of the public who recognized them to provide the identification. The least likely category of participant to be identified were those whose faces were covered and were not

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[14] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/08/boy-riots-arrested-tv-cameras

previously known to the police. These categories are organised into a matrix illustrated in Table 1.

	Known to police	**Not known to police**
Face uncovered	Most likely to be identified	Requires public identification
Face covered	Less likely to be identified	Least likely to be identified

Table 1: Likelihood of identification of riot participants by police analysis of CCTV footage

Thus it is very likely that those who were arrested and/or charged, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the August riots, were primarily those with (extensive) criminal records whose faces were uncovered and secondly those who had no previous record but were unmasked. Consequently the effect of using CCTV evidence was to inherently bias the arrest and charging statistics towards the former group,[15] rather than the other three categories shown in Table 1. One government-sponsored report, ignoring this obvious circularity, blandly stated that *'Nine out of ten* [suspected rioters] *were already known to the police'* (Riots communities and victims panel, 2011, p. 11).

The police authorities were aware of this phenomenon, and it was clearly stated during exchanges between the Acting Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Tim Godwin, and the Home Affairs Committee in early September 2011:

> Dr Huppert: *'Whereas the Mayor was saying that most of the people involved were known to police and that we should be dealing with that group of people, you are saying that, in fact, that is just an artefact of the fact they are the first people you rounded up; is that correct?'*

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[15] Thirty years previously, during and after the urban disturbances in England in July and August 1981, nearly 4,000 people were arrested (Home Office, 1982 Table 1). Approximately 61% of these had a previous criminal record, significantly lower than the figures for those brought to court as a result of the August 2011 riots. This may point to the effect of CCTV and on-going investigations into 'gang members' in directing police towards those suspects who are already known to them.

> Tim Godwin: *'That may well turn out to be the case, because we still have lots of images to go through and obviously the ones that you know are going to be arrested first.'*[16]

Public statements that most rioters were already 'criminals' treated as unproblematic the circular way that the data was produced, with those already known to the police most likely to be identified and arrested. This simple statistical flaw did not restrain politicians from knowingly (or unknowingly) using the data to both characterize the August riots and define policy responses.[17]

Statistics on 'gangs'

The supposed mass involvement and organizational centrality of 'gangs' in the disturbances was a major topic of debate both in government and the media in August 2011. It initially dominated supposed 'explanations' for the riots and appeared for a time to be directing policy.[18] The gang 'folk devil' even began to take ethereal form as 'gang culture', an alien contagion which was driving 'innocent' youth to 'riot'.[19]

There were early signs that statistical data was being sought by politicians to back up this account. For example, the Metropolitan police provided evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in August 2011 that 28% of those arrested in London were 'gang members'[20]. This is a significant figure and seemed to support the earlier statements by the Prime Minister and other cabinet members that

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[16] House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2011b, Q93)

[17] For example, the Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke proposed in September 2011, on the basis that the rioters were 'hardcore criminals', *'radical changes to focus our penal system relentlessly on proper, robust punishment and the reduction of reoffending.'* http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/05/punishment-rioters-help.

[18] *'David Cameron has announced he will extend US-style gang injunctions as he claimed there was clear evidence that gangs had been at the heart of some of the violence in Britain's cities in recent days. He said he believed they had co-ordinated some of the attacks on police'.* http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/11/uk-riots-gang-crackdown. He also called on help from the US: *'America's most fearsome policeman* [Bill Bratton] *has been appointed David Cameron's top adviser on gang warfare'* http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2024946/UK-riots-Bill-Bratton-advise-David-Cameron-gang-warfare.html.

[19] The Prime Minister emphasised this view in a speech to the House of Commons on 11th August*: 'This is not about poverty, it's about culture. A culture that glorifies violence, shows disrespect to authority, and says everything about rights but nothing about responsibilities.... At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs. Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent, they are mostly composed of young boys, mainly from dysfunctional homes.'* http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14492789

[20] House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2011b; reply to Q84). The definition of a 'gang member' or 'affiliate' is unclear; the Home Affairs Committee even stated categorically: *'The Home Secretary should clarify what the Home Office means by the term in the context of the August disorder and the methodology used to establish whether a particular individual was "affiliated to a gang"'*

'gangs' had orchestrated the events in London at least. However, by early September, the Home Secretary was wavering:

> *'Mrs May told the Home Affairs Committee on Thursday that the Metropolitan Police and other forces were looking at the number of people arrested with known gang affiliations - the percentage of which had fallen over time, as total arrests had risen'*[21]

The publication of comprehensive statistics by the Home Office in October 2011 demonstrated the extent of the statistical variation over time:

> *'Overall 13 per cent of arrestees (417) were reported to be affiliated to a gang. Outside London, the majority of forces identified fewer than ten per cent of all arrestees as gang members…In London, 19 per cent of arrestees were identified as gang members – the joint highest of any force – and the number of gang members arrested in London (337) is far greater than those arrested in all other forces combined'*[22]

The report went on to state that:

> *'In terms of the role gangs played in the disorder, most* [Police] *forces perceived that where gang members were involved, they generally did not play a pivotal role'*

The key points to note here are that the sample studied was arrestees, that the percentage of 'gang members' fell as more arrests were made and that the London area had the highest fractions of supposed 'gang' membership.

The inherent circularity demonstrated earlier in this paper in the data concerning 'criminals' also biased these statistics. The reactions of government ministers in the immediate aftermath of August directed the police (chiefly in London) to focus on 'gangs' as the perpetrators of the violence. As a result, they arrested large numbers of gang members and 'affiliates' who were known to them, particularly in the first few weeks after the disturbances. Consequently, the percentages of 'known gang members' dominated the early arrest figures and thus provided the supposed empirical evidence for the statements issued by the politicians.

This circularity was understood to an extent by the Acting Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police who stated in giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in September:

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[21] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14834827

[22] Home Office (2011, p. 5).

> *'Most of the gang members we do in fact know. Most of the gang members we have active investigations against, so they were the ones that we scooped up first off, which is why the percentage was higher at the beginning'*[23]

An even more fundamental statistical anomaly was not even addressed by these commentators, that of 'arrestees' as opposed to those 'convicted'. It is unclear how many arrested 'gang members' were actually charged (or convicted). If the government had argued, for example, that *traffic wardens* were orchestrating the riots, it might be expected that a number of them would be arrested under suspicion and questioned. However, it certainly would be foolish to use these distorted *arrest* statistics to back up arguments that traffic wardens planned or led the riots.

Figures used to suggest rioters' behaviour was affected by submergence

The claim that when people are in crowds they lose control of their senses and their behaviour, and therefore commit acts of irrational and indiscriminate violence, was implicit in the suggestion made by commentators that rioters were 'destroying their own community.' Politicians and journalists, during and after the unrest, emphasised the damage and loss to 'local shops' and to 'family businesses', as well as the effects of arson on private properties. Most of the initial interviews that were conducted in the media concentrated on non-chain local retailers and on those who had lost their homes. The impression of indiscriminate or gratuitous destruction was prevalent in these (mostly anecdotal) reports.

The most comprehensive data to be produced concerning the commercial properties that were targeted was published at the end of October 2011 by the Home Office.[24] Figure 3 displays this tabular data graphically.

Among the most detailed media coverage of the events of August 2011 was that by The *Guardian*. In line with a 'social deprivation' explanation, it suggested in its early reporting that the damage to property was largely the targeting of large stores. By the time it published *Reading the riots*, however, the *Guardian* interpreted these Home Office figures as evidence of a bloody-minded attack by rioters 'on their own community'. Thus, while acknowledging that 'many rioters repeated the claim local businesses were deliberately spared',

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[23] House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2011b; reply to Q87).

[24] Home Office (2011, Table 6, p.14)

the paper concluded: 'the truth was that *many local businesses* – some of which were deeply rooted in their community – were targeted.'[25]
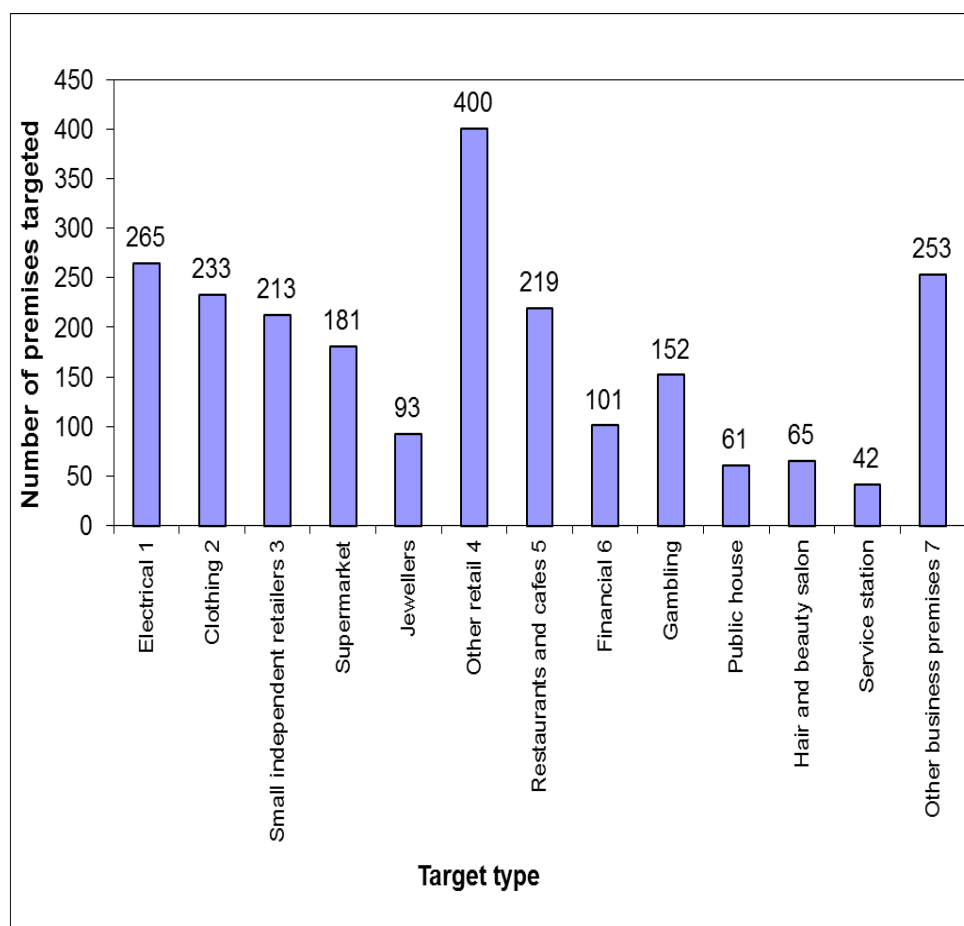

Figure 3: Types of commercial premises targeted nationwide in the August disorders[26]

However, the 'small independent retailers' category, so beloved of the media and politicians in the aftermath of August 2011, and which is taken uncritically by the *Guardian* to be synonymous with 'local businesses', actually makes up a small minority - 9% - of the 2,278 commercial properties that were attacked in total. It is also apparent that the vast majority of properties were targeted in order to obtain

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[25] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/05/morality-of-rioters-summer-riots Our emphasis.

[26] Notes on target types in Figure 3: 1. Includes electrical hardware, mobile phone, and digital media retailers (computer games, music CDs, DVDs). 2. Includes general/fashion clothing and sportswear retailers. 3. Includes convenience shops, newsagents and off licences. 4. Includes charity shops, pawn shops, pharmacies and car salerooms. 5. Includes restaurants, fast food outlets and cafés. 6. Includes banks, building societies, exchanges and cheque cashiers. 7. Includes miscellaneous services such as estate agents and post offices.

goods and cash, with electrical and clothing shops alone making up 22% of the total. Clearly, there was significant selectivity of targets rather than indiscriminate destruction.

Perhaps more importantly, these comprehensive national figures, and in particular the way the data is categorized, may hide some specific superordinate discrimination defined by locality, which isn't obvious simply by counting the types of property damaged without reference to its geographical context. In particular, there were targeted attacks on 'wealthy areas' in Ealing, Pimlico, Sloane Square and Notting Hill (Aufheben, 2011). What marked these particular events was the widespread destruction of commercial properties and cars which, within those districts, was far less selective and clearly not based purely on appropriation of commodities. One journalist described the scene in Ealing in comparison to other incidents of London he had observed that night: *'There were parts of Ealing where every single shop had been attacked, and every car set on fire'*[27]

This *discriminating*-indiscrimination deserves further investigation and may have significantly biased the numbers of 'small independent retailers' that were attacked. In line with this analysis that it was an attack on wealth, it is clear from cursory analysis of photographs[28] that the boutiques, wine bars and specialist shops of these wealthy havens were in general wrecked rather than looted by the participants, who travelled to these particular localities.

But what of the claims concerning the destruction of private dwellings? The iconic images of burning buildings in London that mesmerised the nation in August were used by some sections of the media to spin a story of random attacks by 'looters' and 'rioters' on peoples' homes.[29] These 'human interest' stories, which portrayed 'innocent victims' preyed on by 'feral arsonists' were central to the narrative of psychopathic behaviours amongst the participants. However, extensive analysis of the targets of the arsonists and 'rioters' in August has demonstrated that there were very few (if any) deliberate attacks on private homes.

Take for example the figure of *'at least 100 families are thought to have been made homeless by arson and looting'*[30] which was quoted in

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[27] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/12/uk-riots-paul-lewis-five-day-journey?INTCMP=SRCH

[28] The variety of targets is obvious in this collection of photos:

https://picasaweb.google.com/106393364195414121585/20110808WestEalingAndEalingRiots

[29] Example: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2023964/London-riots-2011-Tottenham-residents-flee-burning-homes.html

[30] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/11/families-homeless-riots-compensated

several sources immediately after the August events. On closer examination this figure relates only two 'riot' locations in London; 55 private homes in Croydon and 45 in Tottenham.[31] Of these 100 properties, 26 lay above the Carpetright shop in Tottenham and the majority (if not all) in Croydon were damaged by a single fire set in the Reeves Furniture Store to which they were adjacent.

It appears from the evidence that peoples' homes were not the primary or even secondary targets for arson by 'looters and rioters' across the capital and the country; instead these incidents were more likely to be cases of collateral damage.

Discussion

Government ministers and others used problematic arrest and court statistics, biased by circularity inherent in the rapid apprehension of suspects already known to police, to claim that typically the rioters were 'career criminals' and 'gang' members. Thus figures were used to suggest that rioters were distinguished from others in society by their lack of civilization, an argument which clearly echoes discredited 'convergence' explanations for violent crowd behaviour. Echoing academic 'submergence' accounts, according to which people in crowds lose their senses and their self-control, commentators also suggested that rioters were indiscriminate, 'damaged their own community', and made bloody-minded attacks on ordinary people's homes. But the methods of counting the data used to support these claims failed to differentiate cases where properties were damaged in targeted attacks on rich areas; and most of the data on damage to homes was from a relatively small number of incidents.

Attempts by government ministers and others to claim that the rioters were criminals by predisposition, or that their actions were mindless, were not just neutral descriptions. They were intended as explanations with practical implications. Indeed, in offering such explanations the ministers were explicitly attacking competing explanations for the events. Specifically, when the prime minister and home secretary argued that the figures showed that the problem was 'culture' and that the rioters were a small group of 'career criminals', they were clearly rejecting explanations in terms of either government austerity measures (Taylor-Gooby, 2012) or police practices of stop and search (Guardian, 2011). If the rioters are an unrepresentative and tiny

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In fact only 61 families required long-term alternative housing in London where the bulk of the arson occurred (Riots communities and victims panel, 2011, p. 26).

[31] Only two other locations of private homes damaged by fire were mentioned in the sources, these were Southwark (London) and Birmingham where one household was affected in each case. http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/11/families-homeless-riots-compensated

minority who are prone to behave that way anyway, and if what happened during the events was just a meaningless outburst, there is no need to change government policy or policing practices; rather, the 'solution' is to arrest those who are 'riot-prone' and to limit mass gatherings, perhaps through curfews.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline an alternative theoretical account of the August 2011 riots to the discredited and ideological 'convergence' and 'submergence' explanations. However, we note that the only existing psychological study of the events in Tottenham and Hackney (Reicher & Stott, 2011) concurs with contemporary theoretical analyses not only in social psychology (Reicher, 2001) but also in historiography, sociology, and political science (e.g., Adams, 1992; Feagin & Hahn, 1973; Waddington, 1992; Walton & Seddon, 1994). Across these literatures, there is agreement on the following points. First, events such as riots are best understood as intergroup relationships, typically between a crowd and the police. Second, this relationship is characterized by changing perceptions of power and legitimacy. Third, the contours of collective violence (or non-violence) in crowd events reflect the contours of collective identity.

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