Race Equality Foundation

Understanding the Racist Riots of 2024 and what should be done

Summary Report of a series of webinars on 'Responding to the Racist Riots'

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

The racist riots of the summer of 2024 were shocking but were underpinned by years of public policy failures and the flourishing of toxic and Islamophobic discourses. While the response from the criminal justice system was relatively fast and effective in suppressing the violence, the root causes need to be addressed in order to prevent future violence and to promote more harmonious relationships between communities and people in the UK.

Conclusions we have drawn from our discussions with over 400 participants and 21 expert speakers, the national government has failed to understand or respond appropriately to the growth of the far-right and the broader challenge of male violence.

Indeed, at times, political leaders and legacy media have effectively legitimised and adopted the arguments, narratives and frames used by the far right, contributing to a toxic environment in which violence against minoritised ethnic people and communities is inevitable.

At the same time, social media provided a fertile ground for Islamophobic and racist discourse to seep into communities and for misinformation and disinformation to spread with devastating effectiveness.

There was a lack of coordination across sectors, institutions and in local areas, while the national response was piecemeal. In many areas this reflected breakdowns in communication and in trust between local government, the voluntary sector, communities, and the police.

Coordinated responses at a local level could have helped prevent or limit the violence and its impact on communities.

Clear factual information shared quickly with media sources could have cut through viral misinformation at the different stages of the riots, from the initial misidentification of the Southport attacker to the locations of planned violence.

Other institutions, such as the NHS, failed to provide a quick and effective support to help safeguard its staff who were affected by the riots. By contrast, voluntary sector organisations were forced to close frontline services due to fear and concerns from staff. Despite the scale of the crisis, many organisations in affected areas were also unable to access extra funding, or support.

There are effective policy responses to these challenges.

Government must:

1 Develop and monitor the implementation of a clear definition of Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hate.

2 Implement a public health approach (PHA) to violence prevention at local and national levels, with specific measures to address racialised and gendered violence.

3 Ensure anti-racism efforts to address the riots involve directly affected communities.

4 Develop national policies that enforce zero tolerance for racism in public institutions, particularly the NHS.

5 Develop national and local frameworks to coordinate the response of government, the public sector and national institutions to serious violent disorder.

6 Promote media literacy programmes and counter disinformation and misinformation.

Introduction

In August 2024, the UK witnessed some of the worst violent attacks against minoritised ethnic communities in recent history. Whilst in some areas communities came together to stand in solidarity with those attacked, it is clear that these events left individuals afraid and communities fractured, with the voluntary and community sector and local government struggling to respond. Worryingly, both the Government's immediate response and the agenda that followed fail to acknowledge the root causes of the racist riots and the true scale of the crisis.

The initial rioting was framed by perpetrators and their supporters as a reaction to the tragic murder of the three young girls in Southport. This was quickly debunked, with the racist, Islamophobic and often misogynistic underpinnings of the riots highlighted. But the relative success of the criminal justice response in stopping the violence, soon saw defenders of the riots speak of 'two tier policing', arguing the rioters had 'legitimate concerns' about what was happening to their communities.

Perhaps more concerning was the Government's uncritical response to the riots and the far-right agenda. National government labelled the riots as random acts of thuggery perpetrated by 'a few bad actors', while in areas where some of the worst rioting occurred, like Northern Ireland, the mainstream media and government were virtually silent. Little was also said about the far-right's weaponisation of the Southport tragedy to spread and justify a racist agenda.

Nor was there any serious reckoning with the conditions that enabled this violence to erupt. Political leaders have and continue to fail to confront the serious, deeper issues that the violence exposed: a climate of escalating racialised hate, rife Islamophobia spread by leaders and the media alike, anti-migrant rhetoric and economic marginalisation with the persistence of male violence.

Throughout the crisis, few from the anti-racism sector or Muslim-led sector were engaged at a national level to explore ideas on what needs to be done to prevent the spread of racist and Islamophobic violence. These very same organisations had warned of the increasing scale of racist and Islamophobic violence and often were providing support to affected areas where national government assistance was notably absent.

Exploring the issues through a series of expert informed webinars

Recognising that the government, media and criminal justice approaches alone would be insufficient to ensure the long-term prevention of racist violence, we launched *'Responding to the Racist Riots',* a broad initiative with a four-part in-depth webinar series including a range of speakers with deep expertise.

This initiative aimed to dissect the long-term causes of the riots and to ensure that the racist intent behind them was not overlooked.

At the core of this initiative was a cross-sector partnership. We reached out within, and beyond our network to local government, the voluntary and community sector; Muslim charities, organisations working to tackle violence against women and girls, as well as those working within health and care, the media and the police. Partners were either involved throughout the programme or contributed as speakers to individual webinars. While we reached out to far more organisations to ensure the webinars captured the far-reaching issues caused by the violence, such as several trade unions, none were able to provide a speaker.

By uniting these cross-sector UK-wide partners committed to addressing the root causes of racist violence, our approach prioritised collaborative work. We aimed to ensure that the insights and any recommendations from the webinars were shaped by those working within affected communities, groups, and sectors – voices that had been notably absent from the national agenda.

The initiative commenced with a webinar series, convening 21 expert speakers and engaging over 400 audience members:

1. *'Developing a United Response'* focused on the value of a coordinated anti-racist response across sectors.

2. *'Preventing Violence: Race, Gender and the Racist Riots'* examined how far-right racialised and gendered narratives fuelled the violence; and the preventative measures needed against this.

3. *'Confronting Racism in Healthcare'* tackled racialised violence against NHS staff.

4. *'The Role of the Media: Narratives and Rhetoric'* critiqued decades of normalised racism and Islamophobia within the media, as well as the role of misinformation and disinformation.

These discussions unpacked the intersection of factors behind the riots: systemic racism, increasing gendered violence, inadequate protections in health and care, and the spread of demonising racist and Islamophobic narratives.

This summary outlines the key points that arose from these webinars, highlighting four overarching key learnings and providing six actionable recommendations for future policy and practice. The insights shared give an assessment of how racist violence took root over the country, the failures to address it nationally and the urgent need for multi-level systemic change.

Several of the participants did not want to be identified and so we have chosen to anonymise contributions throughout this report.

The Insights

1. Islamophobia as the driver of racist violence

Throughout all four webinars, speakers identified that Islamophobia was both a cause and a consequence of the riots. Speakers explained the riots demonstrated the extent to which Islamophobia has become a new vehicle for racism, with anti-Muslim narratives weaponised to marginalise all minoritised ethnic communities.

Speakers condemned leaders who in the aftermath of these attacks were reluctant to even acknowledge or call out racism and Islamophobia despite evidence of the harm and dehumanisation inflicted upon Muslim and minoritised ethnic communities.

One of the presenters also pointed out that while the government in England took swift legal action against rioters, prosecutions in Northern Ireland have been significantly slower - despite the fact some of the worst rioting occurred there. Weaker legislation in Northern Ireland has also allowed many perpetrators to evade justice altogether.

> *"Looking at the riots more broadly across the UK this was not just a moment of acute violence, it came from a position of normalisation of hate, Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism"*

Even in areas where rioting did not occur, violence against minoritised ethnic communities increased. There was a spike in reported hate-crimes submitted to the Islamophobia Response Unit while a BIMA survey; 'Impact of Summer Racist Riots on Muslim Healthcare Professionals' found 82% of respondents were forced to make significant lifestyle changes to protect themselves.

Crucially, speakers explained that racist violence is not confined to the riots. The everyday racist hate crime that minoritised ethnic communities face in the UK is well documented. Speakers further described an atmosphere of amplified and intensified racialised hate, such as a 600% increase in Islamophobic incidents in 2024.

> *"If you research many of the areas where we saw rioting, you will see numerous stories of Black and Asian communities being targeted, in the Northeast of England, in Merseyside, in the Southwest, in the Coastal regions, where the far right are quite strong - it's important to remember that the atmosphere of hate preceded the riots"*

Furthermore, speakers argued there has been a failure of leaders to hold themselves accountable for the role of politicians in creating that atmosphere of hate which gave legitimacy to extremists.

> *"There has been a consistent, unchecked rhetoric demonising Muslims, whether it be the narrative around 'stop the boats' and Rwanda or the Islamists controlling London."*

The failure to call out this increasing Islamophobia and racism – or take substantive action to address their widespread impact – both before and after the riots has allowed these harmful ideologies to persist unchallenged. The silence contributes to a further normalisation and acceptance of extreme racism and violence, reinforcing, rather than challenging the damaging narratives spread during the riots. And, as speakers underscored, we are witnessing the consequences of this inaction, with racist violence and attacks still rising since the riots.

2. The role of the media

A second consistent theme throughout the webinars was the role of social media and traditional media in fuelling the riots and reinforcing the political and social climate that enabled them.

Speakers explored the media influence in three distinct, yet interrelated aspects: traditional media's failure to counteract misinformation, the role of unregulated platforms in spreading disinformation, and the broader culpability of the media in perpetuating racist and Islamophobic narratives.

Misinformation

Firstly, speakers highlighted the wave of misinformation (incorrect information) after the Southport attack, and the failure for the media to combat these false claims. The specific piece of misinformation said to ignite attacks was the false name of the Southport attacker, shared on an online news website; some reports suggest the publication of this name was an unintentional error.

Due to legal regulations, the police and traditional media outlets shared only a few details about the Southport attacker's identity. However traditional media provided little clarity following the Southport attack. The media and police were also equally slow to counteract viral falsehoods such as the attacker's identity or the location of planned riots. This allowed fear to amplify, and for far-right groups to manipulate public opinion further.

For several speakers, the groundswell of misinformation during the riot, and the media's incapacity to use its tools to help the public distinguish fact from fiction, raised two urgent points.

Firstly, it revealed a breakdown in communication between media and other institutions supplying the press with factual information, in particular the police. Correct factual information shared quickly with media sources could have gone a long way to clarify where rioting was planned to take place and cut through viral misinformation.

> *"The Southport attacks demand for stakeholders across journalism, civil society and the voluntary sector to take shared responsibility for the narratives we perpetuate and challenge (…) we need to start by taking a look at very practical things in the relationship between the press and the police and sorting out the information flows."*

Secondly, with so many people turning to unregulated spaces for their news, speakers indicated a serious distrust in the traditional news to supply news and information that the public trusts.

Disinformation

The other key theme speakers highlighted was the growth of disinformation: deliberately crafted falsehoods used to manipulate public opinion, incite anger and mobilise potentially violent responses.

If the initial false-name of the attacker was accidentally shared, right-wing bad-faith actors weaponised platforms such as X, and Telegram to organise groups of violent attackers around intentional false claims, namely that the attack on the young girls in Southport was a result of refugee policies, and Islam. The rapid spread of these falsehoods translated into real-world violence, raising urgent questions for all speakers about how we regulate social media, the online environment, and the need for a global approach to tackling hate online.

However, speakers emphasised that it was important to establish that misinformation and disinformation thrived in an environment where these racist and Islamophobic narratives were already entrenched. As one participant put it:

> *"Even if there had been misinformation, this does not justify [or explain] the violent response"*

Beyond the role of obvious forms of 'mis' and 'dis' information, speakers examined more insidious forms of media influence: the way certain media frames shape audiences' opinions and behaviour. The media plays a crucial role in reinforcing and legitimising certain narratives: when a story becomes framed in a particular way, it helps to reinforce

a dominant narrative. Media commentary stabilises certain ideas, and these ideas often determine whose voices and opinions are amplified and whose realities are ignored.

For example, one participant quoted a figure from the Centre for Media Monitoring:

> *"Over two years between 2018 and 2020, research of 34 media outlets found that more than one in five online articles had a primary focus of Muslims on terrorism and extremism, and that almost 60% of all articles associated Muslims with negative aspects and behaviours (...) the media's propagation of negative and hateful views of Islam and Muslims fuels what we saw this summer"*

Derogatory and racist rhetoric is not just confined to extremist or fringe groups online. A number of speakers suggested that it was embedded in government policies and media rhetoric about migrants, faith communities, and some cultures.

> *"Deeper issues contributed to the unrest, heightened public frustration and anger. Migrants, and minoritised ethnic communities are often scapegoated for economic difficulties, despite their vital contributions to the workforce, and populist rhetoric exploited these sentiments intensifying anti-immigrant hostility."*

> *"Media's coverage and narratives aren't abstract. They have real, tangible consequences"*

Finally, speakers underscored the riots as a moment where media coverage had the power to either reinforce or challenge dangerous narratives. While some outlets exposed racism and Islamophobia as key drivers of the violence, others framed the riots as 'random acts of violence', or voiced ideas of 'two-tier policing'.

Particularly insidious, for speakers, was the claim that rioting stemmed from 'genuine grievances of being left behind'. Speakers outlined that this narrative not only ignored that Muslim and other minoritised ethnic communities have felt some of the worst impacts of austerity and deprivation, but it also misrepresented the root causes of the unrest: racism.

By failing to challenge these deep-rooted narratives, and in some cases reinforcing them, the media risks fuelling a tinderbox of resentment which could ignite with events in the future. If left unchecked, this cycle of misinformation, and misleading narratives will only contribute to racist violence breaking out again.

3. Recognition of the long-term causes of violent behaviour

The riots were both an expression of racist violence and a symptom of a wider failure to address the root causes of violent behaviour. As speakers highlighted, there is a link between the killing of the three girls in Southport and the riots: male violence. The second webinar, organised with a number of organisations working to end violence against women and girls (VAWG), examined this issue.

Gendered violence

In the initial days of rioting, far-right perpetrators claimed their actions were driven by a concern for the 'safety of women and girls'. Speakers explained how the far-right co-opted the tragedy in Southport as a flashpoint to justify racist violence, spreading falsehoods that their actions protected 'white womanhood'.

One presenter highlighted that many of these individuals and groups are often known misogynists, who support patriarchal notions of the family and have never campaigned to end violence against women and girls. Another person also explained that these far-right individuals are also often responsible for hate crimes and violence against minoritised ethnic women.

The weaponisation of violence against girls and women to advance the far-right agenda is not new. The presenter highlighted that in recent years,

> *"... cases of child sexual exploitation and so called 'grooming gangs' are often shorthand for the vilification of Muslim men."*

This co-option serves the far-right agenda and shifts attention from the foundational issue: addressing the abuse of power and pervasive violence which women face daily. The violence faced by women and girls remains a crisis in the UK; every three days a woman in the UK is killed by a man, and minoritised ethnic women are disproportionately affected.

Preventing violence

The second webinar also saw speakers assess the drivers of racialised and gendered violence. One presenter emphasised that the proliferation of such violence during the riots requires us to examine the environment in which this behaviour flourishes:

> *"If they thought that there was a need to protest. Why didn't they protest peacefully? They felt justified in the behaviour, in the extreme violence that we saw perpetrated against others. But why did they feel justified? How can that be changed? How can the core values that say it's okay to harm somebody else be challenged"*

Other speakers reinforced violent behaviour is,

> *"... enabled and facilitated by our society including the structural inequalities, our social norms, our ideas, and our institutions."*

For example, speakers raised the role of national policies and legislation in influencing racist violence. One participant explained,

> *"... decades of anti-migrant discourse, policies and the legislation – the introduction, and the fostering of a hostile immigration environment … [has] problematised migrants and racialised people, and regarded them as a threat, a burden, a danger, and that has culminated in individual acts of violence."*

What is clear from this assessment is that the criminal justice response will not address the roots of this violence: a point echoed by one of the presenters. The riots were an extreme display of violence, but the normalisation of everyday aggressions and hate crimes directly feed this escalation. Violence has profound consequences for communities, leaving scars for decades and contributing to long-term heightened levels of fear and trauma. If these structural causes are left unchecked, they pose an existential threat, especially for minoritised ethnic communities and women.

4. Lack of a coordinated response locally and nationally

Another recurring theme was the lack of coordination and safeguards across sectors, institutions and in local areas. Speakers questioned why communities, and sectors were not better prepared to prevent the outbreak of violence, and the reasons behind the piecemeal national response.

Support for the voluntary sector

Speakers commended the voluntary and community sector support to communities, displaying solidarity with the affected and offering vital post-riot services. However, many organisations faced challenges in accessing support from the statutory sector.

Speakers from voluntary organisations throughout the webinars highlighted having to close frontline services due to fear and concerns from staff. Despite the scale of the crisis, many organisations in affected areas were also unable to access extra funding or support. One speaker noted that no political leaders visited the Southport Mosque, where the initial violence was sparked. This lack of support hindered community recovery and highlighted a government oversight in not recognising the magnitude of the challenges caused by the riots to services, communities and individual organisations.

This response from the statutory sector contributes to an erosion of trust between the sectors. One speaker emphasised it is crucial that leaders are clear and explicit about the actual issues that the voluntary sector, especially those working with affected communities, face. Moreover, going forward, voluntary organisations should be listened to and consulted on future action both to prevent and to respond to the riots.

Long-term community resilience through investment and addressing inequality

One participant presented an example of how proactive measures taken in Bradford by the Local Authority prevented violence. Bradford served as a litmus test throughout the first webinar to reveal how other local areas could have been better supported and prepared.

Having experienced serious rioting in the 2000s, Bradford Council forged a strong foundation of trust and collaboration between sectors. Rumours did spread of potential violence in Bradford; however, community leaders and local authorities pre-emptively activated a 'reassurance and resilience group' to manage tensions and prevent violence, which enabled quick communication and effective decision-making when the rumours of potential rioting spread.

Another speaker reinforced the point that while policing appeared to respond to the disorder, engagement by police afterwards and before the disorder could have been better. During the riots,

> *"... policing was forced to reach out to communities to provide reassurance, and those police services who had invested time in longer term community engagement fared better."*

The key takeaway was clear: trust-based relationships were essential for serving communities before and after the riots, and these require sustained energy and investment.

Moreover, areas suffering without investment in social infrastructure were not only unable to deescalate the violence, but speakers also outlined the relationship between underfunded communities and the rise in racialised violence. Seven of the 10 most deprived areas of the country saw rioting. As speakers underscored, the reality is that across the country minoritised ethnic communities are experiencing the sharpest end of this deprivation. However, the impact of underfunding communities for years has been exploited by those on the far-right, fuelling a perception that minoritised ethnic communities are taking services and jobs away. So, widening economic inequality was not only a cause of a breakdown in trust of weakening underfunded public institutions, but it fostered and enabled the rise of racist, anti-migrant and Islamophobic sentiments.

> *"Both sides of the political spectrum have raised the impacts of cutting services, lack of investment, and increasing disparities in health, housing and education on rising extremism"*

> *"Local communities and councils have been turned into more like service deliveries. We are supposed to build, protect and serve communities, not just numbers of residents."*

The riots were evidence of the consequence of unchecked systemic racism, enabled by deep wealth inequalities. We saw a significant breakdown of communication and deep mistrust between institutions. This failure to build this trust before the riots weakened the overall response and left many communities abandoned during the crisis. Investing in communities across the country, and long-standing partnerships between public services and voluntary organisations is essential to mitigate tensions and prevent escalation during crises. And, more significantly, better funded and resourced communities are an essential step for addressing the root causes of racism.

Case study: The health and care sector

During the violent attacks experienced by minoritised ethnic groups, incidents of racialised terror were directed at NHS workers – 26% of whom are from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic heritage. Rioters destroyed the car of Middlesbrough carer, Brendan Nwabichie, and in Sunderland, Filipino NHS nurses were pelted with rocks. In Northern Ireland, several families of healthcare workers had their car windows smashed.

It was also NHS workers who were frontline, directly treating the perpetrators of the attacks. One speaker highlighted the deep psychological impact and mental toll of the threat of racialised violence staff faced. Another speaker echoed this, offering findings from a BiMA survey of Muslim healthcare staff during the riots: 70% of Muslim women in healthcare had experienced Islamophobia before the riots but the events amplified this sense of vulnerability to such an extent, with nearly 44% of the respondents considering leaving the NHS.

A key theme for speakers in the third webinar was the absence of safeguards and support for NHS workers within the healthcare sector, worsening this atmosphere of vulnerability, and fear.

Several speakers pointed to this failing, for example, one participant explained:

> *"The initial response from Amanda Pritchard, the NHS CEO, was widely met with disbelief – it contained not a single robust step for NHS employers to take (…) A second letter was much better, stating NHS services could refuse to treat abusive patients"*

While the revised NHS England guidance eventually issued was an improvement, many speakers argued it seriously overlooked the complexities of refusing treatment. Not least the ethical obligation many healthcare professionals feel to deliver frontline emergency services; it also meant that racism during a time of crisis was treated on a case-by-case basis, with the burden placed on the healthcare professional to refuse treatment.

> *"Some NHS employers adopted this guidance robustly, and a number of NHS staff were sacked for racist actions or social media activity. Some trusts put in place free taxis, shared travel arrangements, working from home, and expected managers to check with every BME member staff on their welfare, however, many others did next to nothing. I've repeatedly asked staff networks and union reps if they've even seen this [guidance] circulate – frequently, they have not. So, what we have, I think, is an NHS response to overt racism that's helpful but patchily applied, but the response to covert everyday racism is simply not good enough"*

This lack of leadership at the national level translated across the NHS. One speaker pointed out that bodies like integrated care boards, fundamental in coordinating delivering services and coordinating staff, also remained similarly silent.

> *"There was a lack of leadership and clear guidance when the riots were happening. Workforce colleagues did not know what the stance of those leaders within the integrated care boards, as well as at various acute trust levels, you know, they have absolutely no idea of what their stance was, and it would take colleagues from those communities that are being targeted to speak out before things were taken into consideration"*

Furthermore, without the institutional guidance, national leadership and support, trade unions also faced an uphill battle to both call out leaders for their unclear stance, and to support members during the crisis.

Significantly, for speakers the piecemeal and reactive support provided to health and care staff during the riots revealed a larger failure to prioritise anti-racist measures. Speakers explained racism and Islamophobia must be addressed as a systemic issue embedded in policies, processes, and culture.

> *"What really came out from the riots was this was a confirmation of leadership failings and a persisting toxic culture. There was a lack of recognition by managers and those in leadership roles to understand how the riots had impacted Muslim staff and to be proactive"*

> *"It has not gone far enough in addressing the systemic racism, the structural discrimination the ethnic minority workforce faces, and unfortunately we keep failing year on year"*

Several speakers referenced equality, diversity and inclusion roles cut from NHS Trusts as part of cost-effective measures; discriminatory disciplinary practices; the disproportionate negative treatment of internationally recruited staff; and the NHS executive decision to stop collecting workforce rates equality standard data as it was allegedly not a priority (although later reversed). For instance, one person referenced evidence collected for the 2021 Muslim Doctors' Association 12-point plan:

> *"Eight in 10 experienced negative assumptions about their religion, seven in 10 negative stereotypes, six in 10 unconscious bias. Half experienced discrimination. Two thirds felt a lack of senior representation and Muslim role models. Two thirds reported a lack of access to mentors. Nine in 10 do not know many Muslim colleagues in leadership and management positions"*

Ultimately, speakers argued that preventing the crises that staff, unions and trusts faced during the riots requires stronger measures than a reactive response alone. Real progress depends on a system-wide approach. This means proper funding, protected time, and institutional support. Above all, leaders should have had a uniform commitment to zero tolerance on racism and Islamophobia, not just during overt crises, but as a foundational part of the health system's culture and practice.

Future Action

The reality of the riots is that unless more is done to prevent the underlying and long term

drivers of racism and violence, we are unlikely to heal from the deep fractures exposed during the riots, nor will we prevent future eruptions of racist and Islamophobic violence.

The information outlined in this report illustrate the widespread impact of the riots, with the causes endemic across sectors. It shows us that if we are to prevent this violence and build a society in which communities thrive, structural and systemic solutions are needed. Accountability for the causes must also occur from national leadership down, recognising the role that demonising narratives, policies around minoritised ethnic communities, and migrants, as well as widening inequalities and inaction on racism and Islamophobia, have played in the riots.

In the time since the violence, the response continues to ignore and evade measures to address racism, gendered violence, and Islamophobia. With the rise of right-wing racist rhetoric, a pattern across social media and within our political institutions, it is likely that the violence of August 2024 will be repeated. That is why sustained anti-racist measures that push beyond surface-level solutions are needed.

In assessing the causes of the riots, speakers at our webinars offered a number of specific actions required institutionally, locally and nationally.

From the webinars, one point worth highlighting is the issue with the 'cohesion' narrative. Historically this approach has centred around minoritised communities' conforming to a set of British values, pointing the finger at the very communities worst affected by the violence, as the 'problem'. Worryingly, this agenda has been pursued locally and nationally in various forms since 2002, but there is little evidence that it has had a positive impact.

Our webinars indicated that cohesion should be reframed around the idea of 'belonging'.

> *"Belonging is something that is fundamental to everyone's way of life. A sense of belonging allows you to feel, this community is part of all my life. This is part of who I am."*

If leaders are able to shift the conversation to talk about what promotes belonging, and address what undermines belonging such as Islamophobia, racism, violent behaviour and inequality, more proactive steps might be taken.

Recommendations

Develop and monitor the implementation of a clear definition of Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hate.

Evidently the defining factor of the riots was violence targeted at Muslims and minoritised ethnic communities, yet since the riots, there has been marked reluctance to clearly state this issue. The issue extends beyond the riots to normalisation of demonising rhetoric across media institutions and within our political institutions as well as a significant rise in hate-crimes. In 2017 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, produced a definition of Islamophobia, but since then leading political parties have not accepted the definition.

A definition that clearly refers to the anti-Muslim narratives weaponised to marginalise, and attack Muslims is needed. Without acceptance of a definition, the extent of hate directed at Muslim communities is often downplayed or misrepresented, allowing discriminatory narratives to persist. The lack of legal definition also hinders efforts to implement clear policies and responses to the discrimination faced by Muslim communities, or combat Islamophobia at institutional and governmental levels.

Implement a public health approach (PHA) to violence prevention at local and national levels, with specific measures to address racialized and gendered violence.

The evidence of the value of a public health approach to violence prevention is strong, but when it comes to the UK, the rhetoric is strong, but not the implementation. Our failure to see a significant shift in preventing the violence experienced by women and girls or the involvement of young people in serious violence would suggest that implementation has failed to date. We now need to add the racist riots as another example that our current approach is not working.

When done well, a public health approach to violence prevention looks to address the system of factors that leads to violent behaviour. The approach's efficacy is well-documented. However, few programmes nationally and even globally address both racist and gendered violence together.

The riots demonstrated the interaction between a set of racist, misogynistic values, and a range of societal factors that contribute to accepting and glorifying these values, allowing violent behaviour to persist. Advancing a public health approach to violence prevention, which addresses these two factors, is crucial if we are to understand and confront the full scope of violence.

Ensuring anti-racism efforts to address the riots involve directly affected communities.

The riots had far-reaching effects on communities, towns and cities across the country, with many of the views which caused the riots still circulating. Taking forward interactive engagement measures to address racism is needed. A part of this response must consider who is involved in anti-racist work. Amplifying the voices and concerns of affected communities is essential, as well as, engaging with mainstream communities, to challenge embedded racist and harmful views.

A key aspect of this work will be uplifting and supporting grassroots, voluntary sector organisations, and local authorities to lay the foundation for improved infrastructure and networks of trust. As well as consulting with race equality and migrant organisations through long-term consistent funding to ensure this change is delivered.

Develop national policies that enforce zero tolerance for racism in public institutions, particularly the NHS.

Anti-racist measures must be embedded into structures, leaders and daily operations. These changes should be prioritised and well-funded, to ensure that racism is tackled at the institutional level.

In the case of changes within health and care, anti-racist measures must be implemented and monitored ensuring consequences for non-compliance. This includes swift disciplinary measures against NHS staff found guilty of racism, and changing institutional culture, so that staff who raise instances of racism are supported. These frameworks must be implemented at all scales to prevent individual practices responding to racism in a piecemeal manner. Alongside this must be monitoring of implementation and adoption such as regulatory oversight, standardised reporting system for racist incidents within the NHS, and review bodies to investigate complaints.

Develop national and local frameworks to coordinate the response of government, the public sector and national institutions to serious violent disorder.

The shocking lack of coordinated response in localities and at a national level should be immediately addressed, drawing on good and best practice. In the event of a future serious outbreak of violent racist disorder, key national and local institutions must have a clear understanding of their role, and there must be a process to coordinate their response.

Promote media literacy programmes

The riots clearly demonstrated distrust in traditional sources of information in both the media and institutions. Individuals should be provided with the skills to critically evaluate and engage with media content, equipping individuals to assess media narratives and verify sources of information. These programmes can be implemented at the local level, and crucially within educational institutions. Part of this approach should be efforts to help individuals deconstruct media tropes and promote alternative, community-driven storytelling.

Importantly, literacy programmes must be complemented by larger-scale changes: accountability for the spread of derogatory and racist narratives in both traditional and digital media as well as work with media regulators to counter misinformation and develop guidelines on reporting to prevent spread of racist, Islamophobic, or anti-migrant rhetoric.

Conclusion

The discussions involving over 400 people, with contributions from over 20 expert speakers, suggest that the riots we saw in the summer of 2024 were not just the result of individual decisions and thuggery, but the result of a set of policy and practice failures across government, the public sector, and media. Whilst the criminal justice response clearly stopped the violence from spreading, it is nevertheless true that the disorder targeted against Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities, particularly Muslims, was preventable. For many involved in the discussion, the violence has had long-lasting impacts on individuals, families and communities.

Trust in the UK government, public and private institutions has collapsed, opening space for disinformation and manipulation of the public by the far right, which in turn underpinned that violence. Without intervention, we may see similar riots again as these underlying factors remain unchanged and unchallenged.

However, there are interventions and approaches that can address these challenges, including public health approaches to violence, holding social media platforms accountable for the material they host, clear leadership against racist violence by key institutions such as the NHS, and better partnership working across localities and at a national level.