Understanding the 2024 summer riots in the UK: three case studies

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Understanding the 2024 Summer Riots in the UK: Three Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

The wave of riots in England in summer 2024 constituted the biggest wave of disorder in the country for more than a decade. These were followed by swift policy responses, based on assumptions about the events and the participants, before any detailed empirical investigation had been carried out. There is a need for detailed description of events as a solid basis for both social psychological theory and policy. This article therefore presents case studies of the disorders in Bristol, Hanley, and Tamworth, using interviews and multiple secondary sources, to understand what happened and who was involved. Our analysis suggests that it is inaccurate to see the events as 'protests', since they consisted of collective attacks (on asylum seekers' accommodation and on mosques). Protagonists were ethnically white but not homogeneous. At least four different parties were involved—anti-immigrant participants, police, counter-protesters, the targets of the actions (asylum seekers and Muslims), and on one occasion 'community defenders'. We compare these events to the 2011 English riots, and we specify remaining 'unknowns' that future research should address. Please refer to the Supporting Information section to find this article's community and social impact statement.

1 | Introduction

The riots that took place in England in summer 2024 formed the biggest wave of disorder[1] in the country for more than a decade. Approximately 29 disorderly events took place across 27 towns and cities over 7 days (House of Commons Library 2024). Hundreds of people participated in attacks on asylum-seekers' accommodation and on mosques; abuse and physical attacks on minoritized ethnic groups, counter-protesters, and police; and in some cases, damage to houses and cars and looting of shops. More than 300 police officers were injured (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services 2024). Effects included the distress caused to the direct targets and to wider minority populations, and a wider rise in hate crime (Dodd 2024; Gohill 2024). By the end of October 2024, there had been 1590 arrests (Gov.uk 2024b); by November that year, several hundred people were serving custodial sentences (North 2024).

Yet too often when waves of riots occur, politicians and media are quick to reach judgement about underlying causes without waiting for the evidence. Policy initiatives are rushed out in response, when the nature of the events still isn't properly understood. During the last major wave of riots in the UK, in August 2011, the government's initial claim—later abandoned (Ball and Drury 2012)—was that the riots were led by 'gangs'. Supposed solutions included the appointment of a US 'Gangs Tzar' (Wintour 2011) and a police algorithm on gangs which became discredited as discriminatory (Dodd 2018). Another

rushed response was the 'Troubled Families' programme, based on assumptions that poor family upbringing led young people to grow into the 'career criminals' supposedly behind the riots. This £1.37 billion programme was subsequently shown to be ineffective (O'Carroll 2016).

Underpinning these examples of hasty policy responses were assumptions about the composition and psychology of riots that echo the 'riff-raff' theory favoured by US policymakers in the 1960s (Fogelson 1971). In this theory, riots happen because of the convergence of criminal, marginal, and poorly socialised individuals. However, research in social psychology and other disciplines has found little evidence to support 'riff-raff' explanations of riots (Ball and Drury 2012; Fogelson 1971; Reicher 2001).

A version of this 'riff raff' perspective was evident in the 2024 summer riots in the UK, with claims that participants were all far-right or otherwise homogeneous. While the riots were still happening, the Prime Minister announced the 'immediate creation' of a new intelligence-gathering operation designed 'to stop criminals intent on causing violence and unrest on our streets' (Gov.uk 2024a). At the same time, the government responded to the anti-immigrant public opinion they saw in the riots by taking a tougher stance on immigration and asylum (Kenber 2025). But the claim that everyone who participated was far-right, or was the same, is so far unevidenced. Moreover, by referring to all the participants in the 2024 riots as 'far-right' there is a danger of inflating the perceived capacity of the far-right, which experimental evidence has shown is a central part of their appeal to potential supporters (Hoerst and Drury 2023a).

In contrast to the 'riff-raff' perspective, contemporary social psychology theorises behaviour in riots as a function of a social identity shared by participants (Reicher 1984, 1996, 2001; Stott et al. 2017). A common social identity enables participants to act as one in unstructured events such as riots, through providing shared definitions of appropriate conduct (group norms), as well as a basis for (and limitations on) social influence within the crowd. This social identity model helps explain the evidence that in even the most violent crowd events there are limits to behaviour: in the main, targets are not indiscriminate but rather reflect the worldview (and sense of legitimacy) embodied in the crowd's identity (Drury et al. 2019; Reicher 1984).

The elaborated social identity model of crowd behaviour (Reicher 1996; Stott et al. 2017) suggests that norms for collective violence can arise out of an interaction between a hitherto peaceful crowd and police, where police actions in relation to the crowd are perceived as both illegitimate and indiscriminate. Therefore, it would be important to establish the extent to which there was any evidence in the 2024 riot crowds of prior identity-based intentions to engage in collective violence against specific targets, or whether instead collective violence developed dynamically from changing relations between police and participants.

Moreover, news and initial research coverage of the 2024 riots suggests that, on many occasions there were not only the anti-immigrant participants, police, and the targets (asylum seekers and Muslims) present at the events but also crowds of counter-protesters (e.g., Khan and Hopkins 2025). Social identity models of crowd behaviour tend to focus on the crowd and the police. Yet close inspection of intergroup conflict sometimes reveals the presence of three or even more groups (Dixon et al. 2020). It is important therefore not only to understand the behaviour of these other groups at the events, but also the psychological consequences of their presence and behaviour. If these third parties challenge the rioters, what did this mean for the behaviour and perceptions of those who witnessed this? Did their actions serve to empower those who opposed the riots, or otherwise affect the beliefs of members of the public about local 'public opinion' on asylum seekers (cf. Selvanathan and Lickel 2019)? Examining these questions could add to existing models.

Frustratingly little is still known about the dynamics and nature of the 2024 riots (Bonnett and Hopkins 2025). There is an urgent need, therefore, for a detailed analysis of what actually happened before far-reaching policy decisions are made, and as a solid basis for theorising the nature of the phenomenon. To address this need, our approach is twofold. Through a detailed empirical investigation of three of the riots, we will establish what is known about behaviour in the events, including in terms of variability across the riots of 2024 which is glossed over in many existing accounts. We will also establish what is still *un*known and therefore the questions that need to be asked in a wider social-psychological investigation.

We have three research questions. First, *what did people do*? Some media sources (e.g., BBC 2024) described some of the events not as 'riots' but as 'protests'. To what extent was it accurate to describe the actions as protests? Relatedly, did collective violence evolve from initial protest after perceived illegitimate treatment by police (as seen in some riots previously, and as suggested by the elaborated social identity model; Stott et al. 2017)? Even if it is appropriate to describe the events as 'riots', there may be important differences between them, in terms of process, content, or both.

Second, having established what happened in the riots, we try to address the question of *who participated*? In contrast to claims that the participants in the riots were all the same kind of people—that is, far-right activists—we examine the evidence for the argument of some commentators (e.g., Trilling 2024) that various groups, including 'bystanders' or people who joined in spontaneously, were involved. For example, nationally 10% of those charged by 31 October 2024 were under 18 years of age (Children's Commissioner 2025). Based on interviews with 17 of the 147 children who were charged, the Children's Commissioner (2025) suggests that these young people joined in 'opportunistically' and/or because of hatred of police, not because of strong commitment to racist views.

While the question of who participated focuses on the anti-immigrant participants[2] themselves, a third and related question concerns *which other groups were present* at the events. Early approaches to the psychology of riots conveyed a misleading picture of crowd violence in isolation from its proximal relationship with another group—usually the army or police (Reicher 2001), but third parties are often involved in intergroup conflict (Dixon et al. 2020). It's important to understand local

community responses in these events, again to avoid unwarranted assumptions that the riots comprised simply hundreds of far-right people acting unchallenged.

Because the 2024 wave of riots was the biggest in the UK since 2011, some in the media and academia compared the two—in terms of participants, motivations, and targets (e.g., Newburn 2024). Government departments, as well as researchers of riots, would benefit from an accurate account of similarities and differences, for diagnosis and remedies. By analysing some of the 2024 events in detail, we will be able to systematically compare these two waves of riots on key dimensions, which we will do in the discussion section.

To address our three questions, we conducted case studies of the 2024 riots at three locations. Our approach was to focus specially on behaviour—what people actually did. In social psychology, the current ease of online surveys, vignette experiments and so on only reinforces a point made 20 years ago that studies of 'behaviour' are rare compared to studies of self-report (Baumeister et al. 2007). As such, we follow the approaches of historians who have tried to reconstruct 'disorderly' events as well as social psychologists of riots who have adopted similar methods (e.g., Reicher 1984, 1996; Stott et al. 2017; see Drury et al. 2025). Therefore to construct our case studies, we sought evidence to describe in detail the sequence of events, as well as investigating the local background, who took part, and the actions of police and other groups present. Analytically, we triangulated multiple sources, including videos, news articles, police arrest data, photographs, social media posts, and interviews with police, counter-protesters, and witnesses.

1.1 | An Overview of the Events

The summer 2024 riots began the day after the fatal stabbing of three schoolgirls in Southport, Merseyside. Misinformation that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker was circulated by far-right social media accounts.[3] The first riot was in Southport on Tuesday 30th July. On July 31st, there were riots in London, Manchester, Hartlepool, and Aldershot. On 2nd August there were further riots in Sunderland and Liverpool. 3rd August was a Saturday and saw the wave of riots peak, with reports of disorder in Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, Liverpool, Stoke-on-Trent, Manchester, Blackpool, Bristol, Hull, and Belfast. Sunday 4th August saw riots in Rotherham, Bolton, Middlesbrough, Tamworth, Solihull, Hull, Weymouth, and Sheffield, and Monday 5th saw riots in Plymouth, Belfast, and Darlington. On Wednesday 7th August there were dozens of often large counter-demonstrations across the country. At this point, the wave ended.

2 | Methods

Our case study locations—Bristol, Tamworth, and Hanley (Stoke-on-Trent)—were chosen for two kinds of reasons. The first was practical. The project was conducted in the months following the riots as part of a rapid response, with funding for research on no more than three locations. We chose locations where team members had local contacts or a relationship with local police to enable data-gathering. Second, we sought to make comparisons across riot locations with historical differences. Tamworth has a relatively small non-white population, whereas Hanley and Bristol each have a much larger and longer established non-white population. Bristol is an urban centre with a history of protest and riot (e.g., Black Lives Matter in recent years). The Staffordshire towns of Hanley and Tamworth do not have such an anti-racist history or culture; rather, Stoke-on-Trent and, to a lesser extent, Tamworth have a recent history of far-right and anti-immigrant mobilisation.

2.1 | Data-Gathering Approach

We gathered three types of data: interviews; publicly available secondary data (news articles; videos; social media); and police arrest data. For the interviews, we recruited police officers (including the senior commanders during the riots), counter-protesters, and witnesses through existing contacts, approaching community organisations, and 'snowballing'. Our interviews took place from October 2024 to January 2025; 21 took place online and 10 were in person. They covered the sequence of events and participants' perceptions of the composition and actions of the crowd (see S1 for interview schedules). We also attended a police debrief.

In relation to secondary data, we sought to collect all relevant sources in the time available for the project. Key words (including location, name of the accused in Southport, 'riot', 'protest') as well as date restrictions relating to each riot were used to search online data, including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, TikTok, news websites, blogs, and YouTube. Snowballing was used to then identify further sources (e.g., other sources written by the same author or replies to or commentary on identified sources). We approached one of the two police forces (Staffordshire) for arrest data.

2.2 | Sources

The final dataset was as follows:(see Supporting Information 2–4 for locations of publicly-available sources).

2.2.1 | Bristol

Twenty three news websites and blogposts (10 containing contemporaneous videos, 11 containing photographic sources, 3 containing timelines), 1 YouTube video, 1 independently provided timeline and 52 X posts (46 posts containing contemporaneous videos and 6 containing photographic sources); 7 interviews with police, 13 with counter-protesters, and 1 with an eyewitness.

2.2.2 | Hanley

Forty three online news articles and blogposts (containing 10 videos, 23 photographic sources and 1 timeline), 2 YouTube videos, 41 social media posts (mostly on X) (including 33 videos); 7

interviews with police officers (including senior commanders), 4 with counter-protesters, and 2 neutral participants; and arrest data for 94 individuals.

2.2.3 | Tamworth

Twenty three news websites and blogposts and 9 X posts. Within these, there were approximately 17 contemporaneous videos, 3 photographic sources and 15 written articles; 5 interviews with the police officers interviewed for Hanley, 5 with counter-protesters, and 3 with eyewitnesses; arrest data for 72 individuals.

2.2.4 | Interview Demographics

For the non-police interviewees, 19 were male and 13 female. Twenty-one were white; others were British Chinese, Black, African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian/Iranian. Ages ranged between 20s and 70s, with the modal age range being 40s. The largest number of non-police interviews completed was in Bristol.

2.3 | Data-Triangulation and Narrative Construction

We triangulated different sources to substantiate the timing, location, and content of a particular incident within a riot in a way similar to that used in case studies of the August 2011 riots (e.g., Drury et al. 2020). Central to this process was the creation of a timeline of incidents within the overall riot event. We cross-referenced information such as times and locations in order to construct a robust evidential base for an assessment of the patterns in the physical movements of participants, police, and other groups. Timeline entries were triangulated to create the narrative account, with notes made where conflicts arose between different sources. Evidence entered into the timeline was broadly weighted depending on how closely it was time-stamped and geolocated; for example, sources containing time-stamped photographs or video evidence were weighted more heavily than loosely described recollections of the day. The aim was to create a consensual account of the timing, pattern, and order of behaviours. Where only one source was available, this is indicated. We analysed riot participants' beliefs, perceptions, and motives, based on recorded comments, shouts, chants or slogans, and flags displayed. In addition, based on qualitative content analysis, we employed a manual coding strategy to identify where interview quotations fitted with the sequence of events/phases of the riots; the coded excerpts were then used to describe the detailed event under each phase of the riots.

Motives and meanings could sometimes be inferred by what witnesses said about the crowd, including reported conversations and utterances. To make sense of some aspects of the events, we also investigated anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic activities in the locations before the events in question.

Finally, once case studies were drafted, we met with and presented the findings to relevant committees of local authorities as well as community cohesion officers from the affected locations, as a form of validation and sense-checking.

2.4 | Ethics

Recruitment for the interview part of the project began 3rd September 2024 and ended in March 2025. Interview participants (who were all over 18 years of age) provided written informed consent. They were first provided with an information sheet and then the consent form via email which they signed and returned (as a Word document) to the interviewer. Favourable ethical opinion for the project was given by [Keele University's Research Ethics Committee] (reference number 0929) in September 2024.

3 | Analysis

We present a summary for each case study below. We follow these by drawing out from the full narrative accounts direct answers to our three research questions. The full narrative accounts, including sources for all statements, are in the Supporting Information.

3.1 | Hanley, Saturday 3rd August

For the full triangulated narrative account, and sources for all statements, see Supporting Information 2.

3.1.1 | Background

There is a history of far-right political influence, violence, and counter-protest in Stoke-on-Trent.[4] By 2009, the British National Party had achieved nearly 15% of the vote in local elections and had nine councillors on Stoke City Council. There were clashes in July 2001, September 2008, January 2010, and October 2017 at British National Party and English Defence League (EDL) marches and national rallies. The 2010 event was the most serious, with EDL supporters breaking through a police containment and rampaging through the Hanley district of the city, assaulting those seen as Muslims and attacking 'Asian' businesses. Much of the violence over this period involved networks of far-right football fans associated with Stoke City and Port Vale FC. More recently, far-right activists and organisations have focused on two targets: 'contingency accommodation' for asylum seekers and the construction of mosques in the city.

3.1.2 | Mobilisation

Staffordshire Police first received information on Thursday 1 August about a potential protest in Stoke on the coming Saturday. Consequently, they prepared for resourcing public order trained police and undertook standard planning for protest events. This included activation with Stoke City Council of the 'partner engagement' plan, which involved preparing the streets, CCTV, and contacting local businesses and potential targets of the 'protest'. By Friday evening, it became clear that

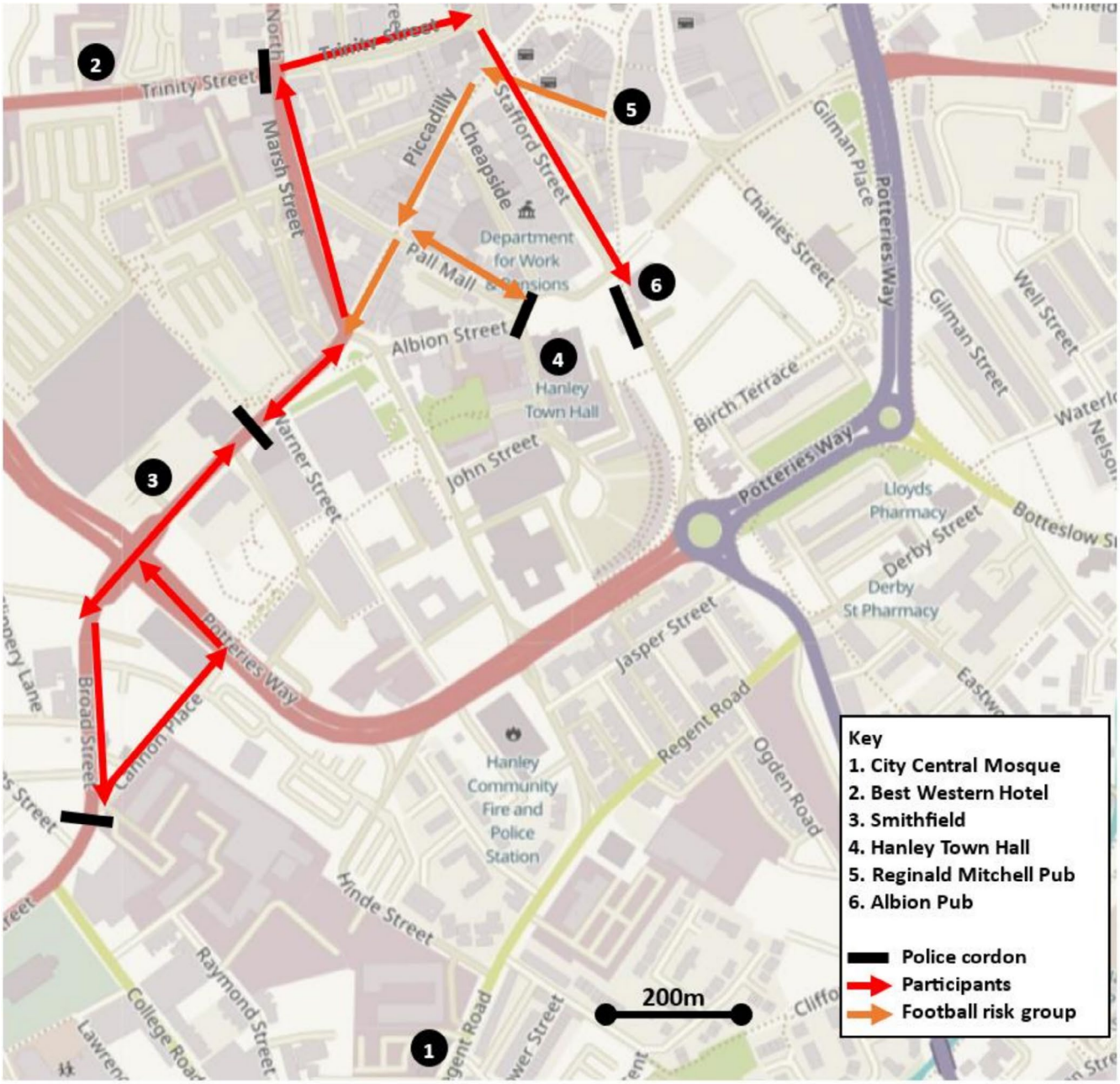

FIGURE 1 | Centre of Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, showing routes of marches (*Source:* OpenStreetMap).

the site for the start of the anti-immigrant 'protest' was going to be in the Smithfield quarter of Hanley (see Figure 1) at 11:30 am, and that a counter-protest organised by North Staffs Campaign Against Racism and Fascism would be at Hanley Town Hall.

3.1.3 | Assembly

On Saturday morning, Staffordshire Police received intelligence that 'football risk groups' attending the 'protest' would be meeting in a pub in Hanley town centre. The fierce rivalry between 'risk groups' of Stoke City and Port Vale fans appeared to have been suspended, and they were collaborating.

At around 10:30, counter-protesters began arriving outside Hanley Town Hall. The counter-protest was intended to distract the anti-immigrant crowd from ethnic minority areas, contingency accommodation hotels, or mosques. By 11:00 there were about 50–70 attendees, mostly white, a mixture of ages, and around half were women. Separately, more covert organising was going on to protect the local mosques. Online warnings from senior figures from local mosques that 'sisters' should stay away from Hanley and that young people should not engage in violence were allied with calls to protect 'your places of worship'.

At 11:00 around 100 'football risk' participants left the pub apparently to walk to the anti-immigrant 'protest' assembly point in Smithfield. However, having seen the counter-protest, they ran towards the town hall. Police vehicles intercepted them, and they proceeded to make Islamophobic chants towards the counter-protesters before they were persuaded to leave. With the arrival of this group at Smithfield at 11:30, the anti-immigrant

crowd numbered around 300–400. This white, largely male and predominantly middle-aged group had no placards or banners, but were carrying St George, Union Jack, and England football flags.

3.1.4 | Movement

The anti-immigrant participants then moved towards Shelton, a minority 'Asian' district. Anticipating this, police had placed a cordon across Broad Street. After around 10–15 minutes of verbal abuse, throwing missiles, and scuffling, the participants returned to Smithfield. After a stand-off for about 30 minutes, at around 12:15, they moved towards Hanley town centre. Attempts to access the Best Western hotel used by asylum-seekers on Trinity Street (see Figure 1) were prevented by a cordon of police officers. As businesses became aware of the anti-immigrant participants, some began to close.

The anti-immigrant participants, followed by a complement of police officers, then marched down Stafford Street back towards the town hall. At about 13:00, they arrived at the Albion public house (see Figure 1) about 50 m from the counter-protest. Police support unit[5] officers formed a cordon facing the participants, who began chanting at the counter-protesters outside the town hall.

3.1.5 | Attacks on Mosques

During this stand-off, a breakaway group left the anti-immigrant crowd and headed along Town Road towards the Darul Falah Centre (see Figure 2). Around the same time in Churchway Potteries shopping centre, around 70–100 of the local 'Asian community',[6] many of whom were masked and dressed in black clothes, were traversing the streets looking for the anti-immigrant crowd.

There was a violent clash outside the Darul Falah Centre between anti-immigrant participants and around 50 defenders of the centre. Missiles were thrown by both groups before police officers arrived and separated the two sides. Anti-immigrant participants on Town Road roundabout (see Figure 2) were then attacked by another group of masked men. One of the anti-immigrant participants was hit on the head by a hammer, whilst another was knocked down by a missile. Neither was seriously injured, but both were treated by police and paramedics. However, videos, which were later circulated on social media by leading figures on the far-right, claimed that the injured men had been 'stabbed', and that one was 'dead'. At 13:45, news of the apparent 'stabbings' reached anti-immigrant participants at the town hall, who then left en masse. This gave the impression to counter-protesters that the 'protest' was over, and consequently the counter-protesters all left the town hall by 14:30.

The false information about the severity, nature, and location of the attacks outside the Darul Falah Centre led to a convergence of anti-immigrant participants at another mosque, the Kurdish Masjid Salahuddin close to the entrance of Central Forest Park (see Figure 2). Between 14:00 and 14:30, the main anti-immigrant group joined the smaller breakaway group near the Town Road roundabout. Around 200–250 anti-immigrant participants crossed the Town Road overpass towards the Masjid Salahuddin. As they approached, stones and fireworks were thrown at them, driving them back along the overpass and Potteries Way.

The following 2 or 3 hours saw forays by both the anti-immigrant participants and around 200 young men defending the mosque. Even though it was effectively under siege, the mosque's elevated location made it relatively safe. Police units in full public order equipment with shields deployed around the mosque, on Potteries Way and at the Town Road overpass to keep the two sides apart. There was uneasy cooperation between the police units at the mosque, worshippers, and other residents.

3.1.6 | Dispersal

Around 16:30 to 17:00, the number of anti-immigrant participants began to dwindle. At 17:15, Staffordshire Police issued a public statement that no one had been stabbed, which helped stop the further convergence caused by the false rumours on social media. Officers were now deployed to 'contain' those at Masjid Salahuddin. Finally, between 18:00 and 19:00 police began scaling down their operation as the remaining anti-immigrant participants dispersed.

3.2 | Tamworth, Sunday 4th August

For the full triangulated narrative account, and sources for all statements, see Supporting Information 3.

3.2.1 | Background and Mobilisation

The target of the 'protest' in Tamworth was the Holiday Inn Express (see Figure 3), a hotel designated in 2022 by the Home Office as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers. This decision had been subject to protest and petitioning by local people, businesses, councillors, and the MP. The hotel itself was a target for protests by the far-right party Britain First. About a month before the riot, misinformation about harassment by asylum seekers from the hotel had been disseminated on social media, leading to the creation of a Facebook group 'Tamworth pull together and make a stand' (TPTMS) with the aim to 'get illegal migrants out of our town' and focusing on the Holiday Inn Express.

On Saturday 3 August, an electronic flyer advertising a 'protest' at the Tamworth Holiday Inn Express for 19:00 the following day appeared on the TPTMS Facebook group stating:

> Peaceful protest against the influx of immigrants being put before the British public and our children.

Police were not aware that the protest was going to happen until the evening of the day before. They generated a deployment plan based on the presumption of a peaceful protest. Many of the police officers had been involved in the disturbances the previous day in Hanley.

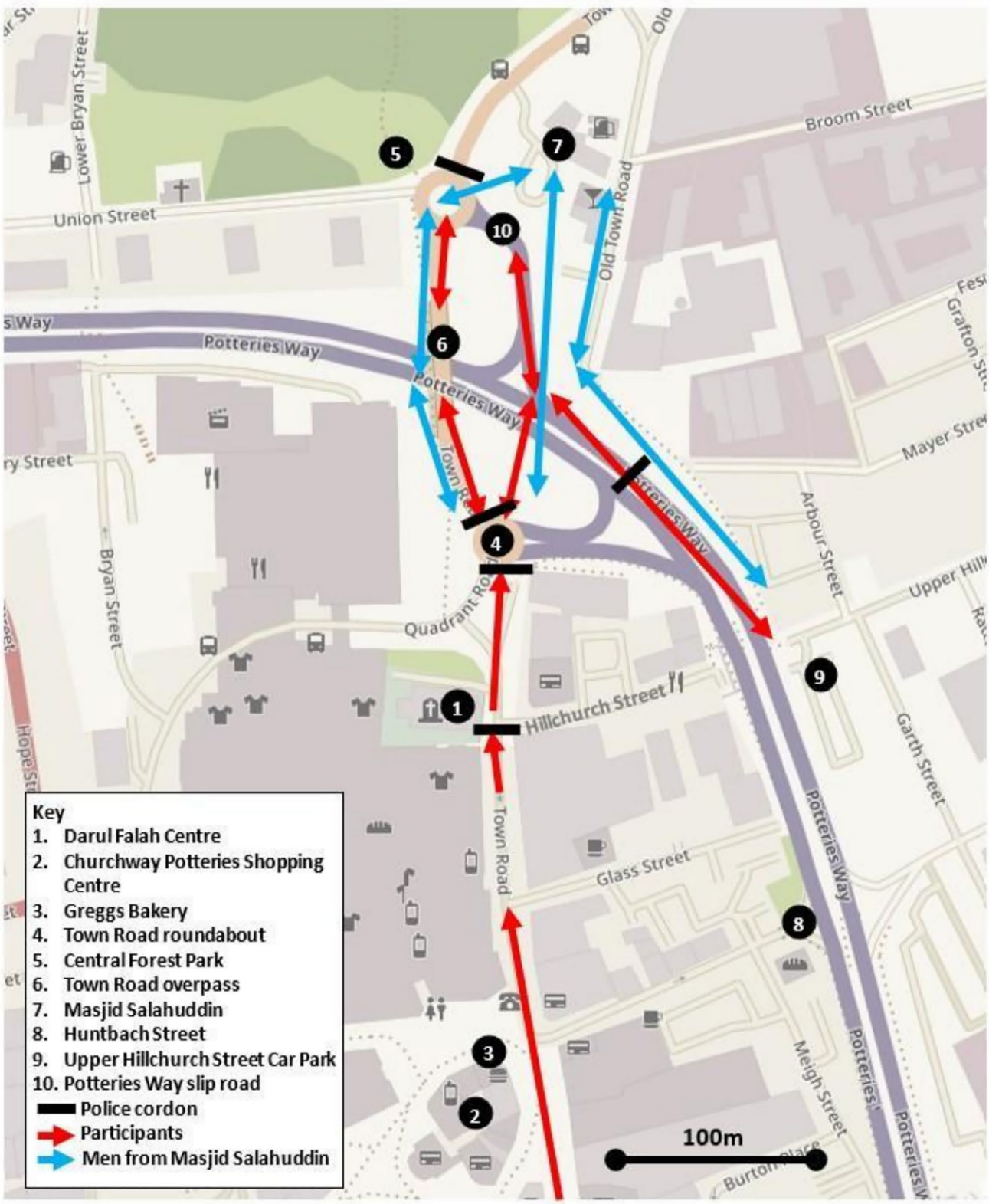

FIGURE 2 | Hanley town centre showing Darul Falah Centre and Salahuddin Mosque (*Source:* OpenStreetMap).

3.2.2 | Assembly

At around 18:00, the only police officers visibly deployed were two Police Liaison Officers who were trying to engage with the anti-immigrant participants and carry out minor traffic control duties. Over the next half hour, the number of participants grew, which confirmed to senior police that a significant event would take place.

At about 18:30, a group of 10–15 counter-protesters carrying placards walked to the front entrance. By this stage there were 50–100 anti-immigrant participants present, congregated on the

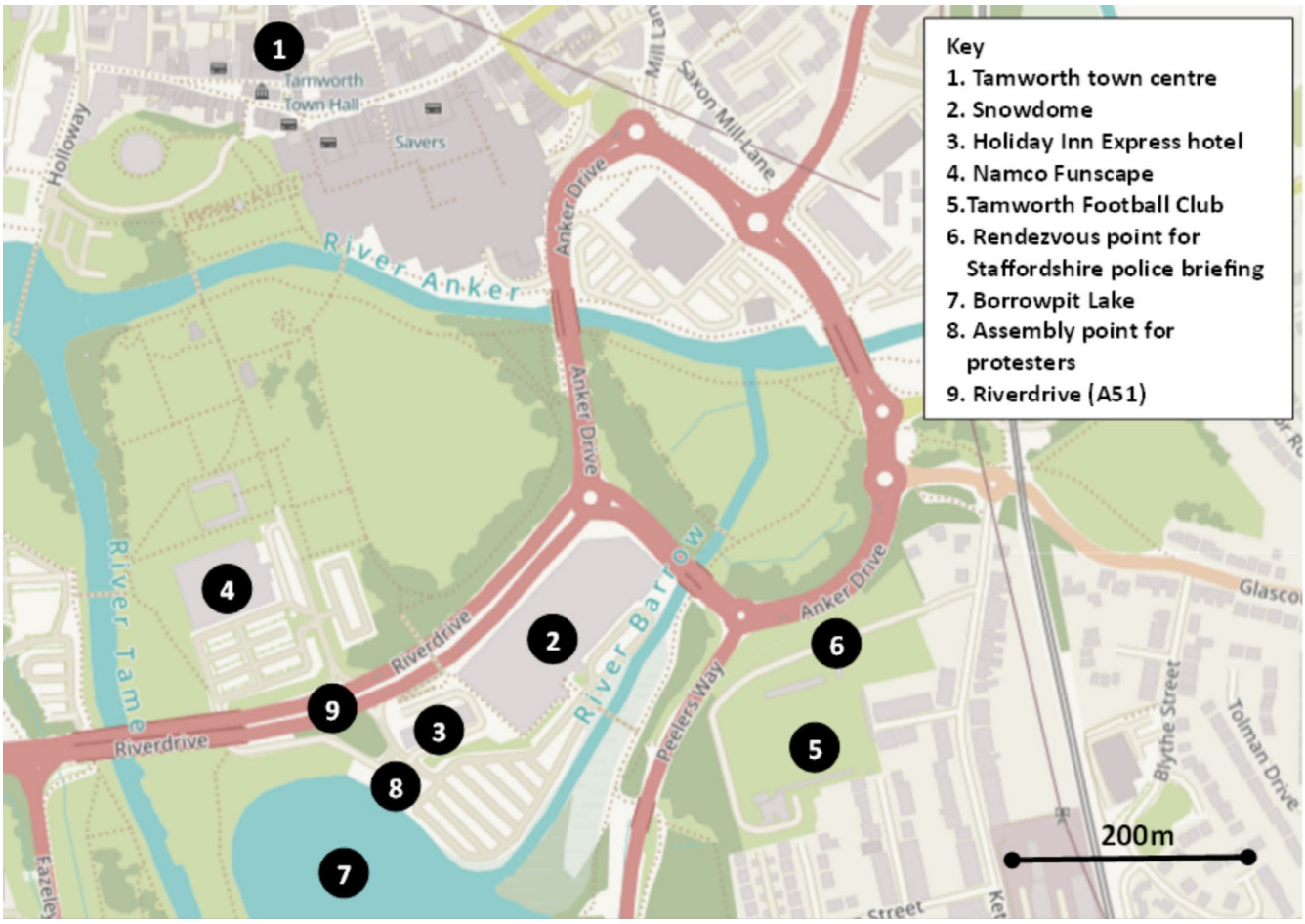

FIGURE 3 | South Tamworth showing location of Holiday Inn Express contingency accommodation (*Source:* OpenStreetMap).

southern side of the hotel in the car park next to Borrowpit Lake (see Figure 3). Around 10 family groups with children were present among the participants.

At around 19:00, police began receiving reports that football 'risk fans' attending a nearby match of the Tamworth FC (see Figure 3) youth team were making their way to the event. At this stage, there were 100–150 anti-immigrant participants congregated in the car park. There was a sudden influx of younger participants who an eyewitness described as similar to a football youth 'risk' group. Over the next 20 minutes, the crowd swelled to about 250. The majority were white males, though there were small groups of white women clustered among them. There were one or two flags of St George visible, though no other signs of allegiance. A participant with a microphone and amplifier led nationalist and anti-immigrant chants. Meanwhile, the small group of counter-protesters at the hotel entrance chanted, 'Refugees are welcome here'.

3.2.3 | Disorder Commences

At 19:26, about half of the anti-immigrant participants, around 100–130 strong, some now wearing balaclavas and masks, surged towards the ~30 police officers, who hurriedly formed a line across the entrance to the hotel concourse. Hurling insults, missiles, and coloured smoke bombs, the crowd confronted the police line, which retreated towards the hotel. During this, the remainder of the crowd stood spectating from the edge of the lake. Some participants filmed the clashes on their phones, live streaming them on TikTok. Within an hour, far-right influencers were posting videos of the clashes with police on social media.

The outbreak of violence led the police Silver commander to request reinforcements, which had to be mustered from other duties and from some distance. By 19:46, the police were using drawn batons and pepper spray on participants who attacked their line; and the Bronze commander on the scene had deployed one carrier of police in full public order equipment, including shields, along with some dog handlers. Some officers were also deployed to the back of the hotel, and two police vans were used to barricade the rear access road. The anti-immigrant participants continued to pelt the police line with missiles and fireworks, some of which were also aimed at the counter-protesters near the hotel entrance. After two were hit with fireworks, the group retreated away from the entrance and, after advice from the police, left the site.

Participants broke car-park equipment such as barriers and ticket machines to throw at the police line. They dug up paving slabs and, using hammers, stripped the tops off brick retaining walls to use as missiles against the police and to break the windows of the hotel. Unable to penetrate the police cordon

and access the hotel entrance, the participants began to fan out around the building.

3.2.4 | Attacks on the Holiday Inn Express Hotel

From around 20:30, the hotel itself came under concerted attack as the anti-immigrant participants attempted to gain entrance via a ground floor fire-door on the west-facing side of the building. After breaking the door open, they threw fireworks into the corridor, which set off the fire alarms in the hotel. As the threat level increased, the hotel security team evacuated residents upwards along with the staff, floor by floor.

Using their shields to block the broken doorway, a small unit of police officers resisted the sustained attacks, including participants using a tree as a battering ram. At around 20:50, the police officers withdrew from the doorway after one of their number was doused in petrol and set alight. Over the next few minutes, to cheers from the crowd gathered near the fire door, flammable liquids and gases were sprayed into the corridor and a petrol bomb was thrown, which created a blaze inside the hotel. This fire continued for more than an hour before being finally extinguished. Graffiti was sprayed on the walls either side of the breached fire door stating 'England...get out' and 'England... fuck P***s'. Some participants were still attacking the line of police protecting the sides of the hotel with fireworks, using the car park barriers as battering rams, and one sprayed a fire extinguisher at them. The participant using the microphone and amplifier led chants of, 'England... England' to the cheers of the crowd.

Whilst the fire was started in the hotel, some of the anti-immigrant participants moved onto the junction with Riverdrive, the A51 (see Figure 3). In response, 12 police officers were moved up to the corner of the building to protect the north-facing side of the hotel. The participants threw stones and other missiles at these officers whilst others spectated and filmed from the pedestrian footbridge over the A51. As dusk fell, three dog handlers made repeated forays to drive a crowd of around 100 protesters off the traffic island next to the slip road. Each time the crowd returned after initially running away. Some participants on the slip road continued to break up parking machines and road signs to throw at police and set fire to a commercial banner. The crowd then moved en masse into Riverdrive, shutting both carriageways down. The police responded by advancing with the dog units to try to disperse the crowd.

3.2.5 | Dispersal and Aftermath

For over 2 h a contingent of just ~50 police officers held out against what was perhaps the most extreme violence observed during the 2024 disorders. By 22:00, police reinforcements arrived and drove the now dwindling numbers of participants out of the hotel car park and then away from the slip road and the A51, dispersing them in small groups into Tamworth town centre.

The following day Staffordshire police made a statement that no asylum seekers or staff in the hotel had been injured (the asylum seekers were evacuated during the night to another location), and that one police officer had a suspected broken arm. In the afternoon, the hotel and environs were cleaned up by council workers, contractors, and volunteers from the local community.

3.3 | Bristol, Saturday 3 August

For the full triangulated narrative account and sources for all statements, see Supporting Information 4.

3.3.1 | Planning and Mobilisation

On Wednesday (31 July) evening, an e-flyer stating 'Bristol Your country needs you, Enough is Enough, Save our Kids!!! #stoptheboats' advertising a gathering in Castle Park in central Bristol at 19:00 on Saturday 3 August was being distributed on social media. The following morning, Avon and Somerset police reported that a 'brand new ... youth right-wing group had been created' and were planning the 'protest'. On the Friday morning (2 August), a second e-flyer of similar style expanded the event from a gathering in Castle Park to a 'twenty minute' march to Redcliffe Hill and a demonstration. The Mercure Hotel, located on Redcliffe Hill, provided contingency accommodation for over 300 asylum seekers, of which more than half were children. This was the indicated locus for the demonstration.

3.3.2 | Assembly

At around 17:45, police carriers began to arrive in the vicinity of Castle Park, and over the next half an hour or so more than 500 counter-protesters gathered at St Peter's church (see Figure 4). The crowd was mixed by gender and relatively ethnically diverse. As the crowd grew, police deployments increased, with mounted officers and most of the police support units arriving by 18:30. The first anti-immigrant participants began to arrive in groups from their rallying point, heading across the park towards St Peter's church and the counter-protesters. They were mostly white men, though a few white women were present, and of varying ages. A few were carrying flags of St George or Union Jacks, but otherwise there were no placards or banners carrying slogans. There were immediately some altercations as they confronted the counter-protesters. Just before 19:00, police began to form two lines across St Peter's Square, one facing the counter-protesters and the other the anti-immigrant crowd, creating a buffer zone.

3.3.3 | Disorder Commences

At around 19:20, the anti-immigrant participants began to increasingly advance on, goad, and verbally abuse the line of police officers, throwing missiles at them and the counter-protesters behind. This squeezed the gap between them, the police, and counter-protesters. An attempt to use mounted officers to push them back had limited success after missiles were thrown at the horses and their riders.

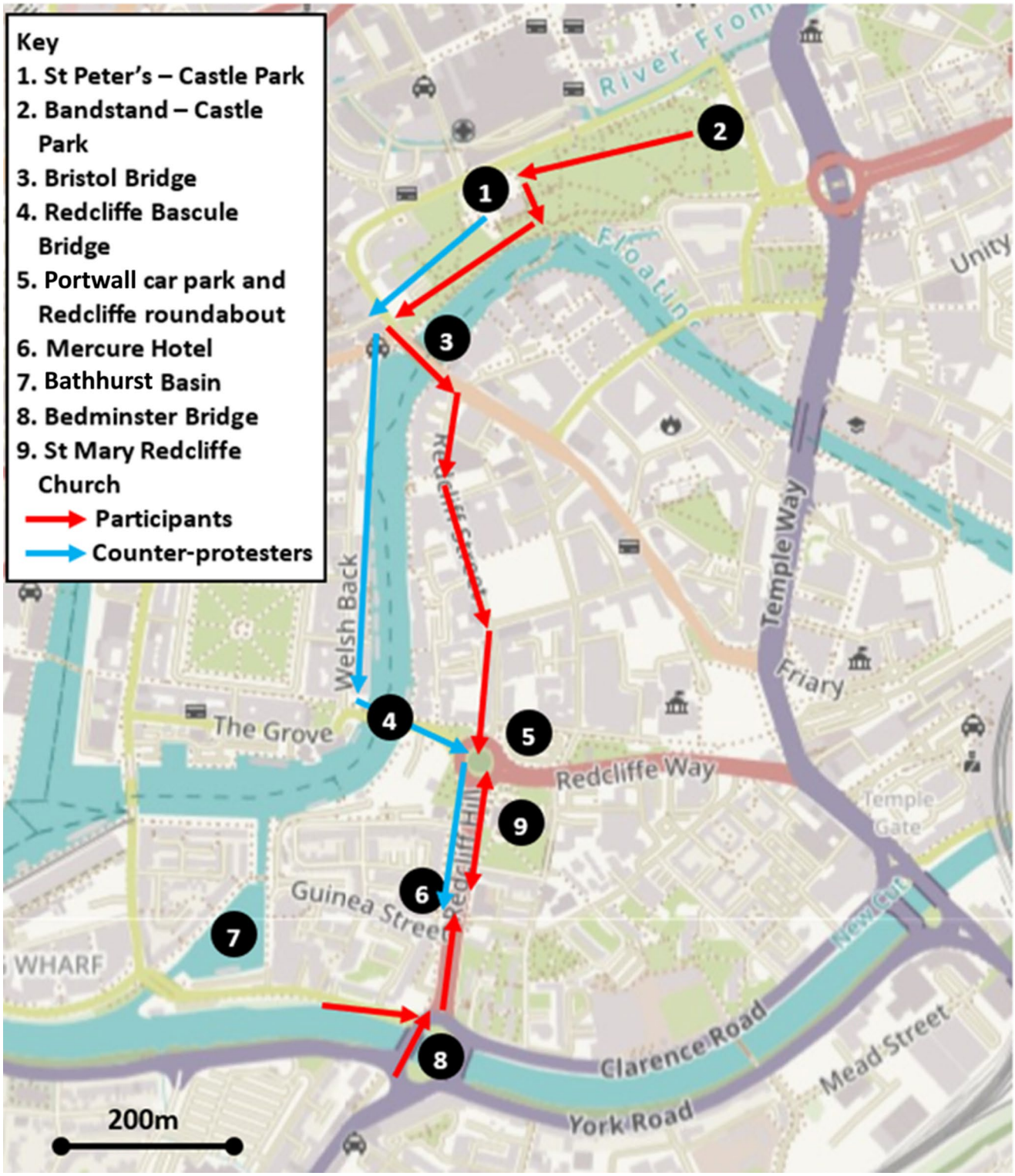

FIGURE 4 | Bristol city centre showing location of assembly and Mercure Hotel (*Source:* OpenStreetMap).

At 19:30, the number of anti-immigrant participants was estimated at 200 and the counter-protesters 600–700. Police in public-order equipment and dog teams were deployed replacing police in standard equipment. They formed up facing the anti-immigrant participants (who were the source of attacks) and with their backs to the counter-protesters (who constituted minimal if no threat).

Most of the anti-immigrant participants by the river in Castle Park began to move towards Bristol Bridge, engaging in verbal and physical attacks on police and counter protesters. The police kept the two crowds separated, pushing most of the anti-immigrant participants onto Bristol Bridge, whilst the counter-protesters were held by police cordons north of the river. After confrontations with police on Bristol Bridge, the

participants left, unescorted by police, in several large groups towards Redcliffe and the Mercure Hotel.

3.3.4 | The Mercure Hotel

Although there had been a police presence at the Mercure Hotel an hour previously at 19:00, the police support unit was withdrawn to aid the policing situation in Castle Park. Police were then redeployed to organise the protection of the asylum seekers (mainly women and children) and staff at the hotel but were given incorrect information and sent to a Holiday Inn hotel instead of the Mercure.

At around 19:55, 60 anti-immigrant participants arrived at the hotel when it was unguarded, but did not attack it immediately. About 5 minutes later, a group of 50–100 counter-protesters arrived who had circumvented the police cordons on Bristol Bridge by running down Welsh Back and crossing the Redcliffe bascule bridge (Figure 4) to get to the hotel. They were being followed by seven officers on bicycles. By 20:10, some of the counter-protesters had linked arms to form a cordon protecting the entrance to the hotel, whilst others gathered in front of them to protect the cordon from attack. The hotel management put the building into 'lockdown' whilst asylum seekers and their families looked on from windows on the upper floors.

A few minutes later, the bulk of the anti-immigrant participants arrived, expanding their numbers to around 100–150. They arrived from two directions, from Redcliffe to the north and from Bedminster to the south. They crossed the dual carriageway, throwing missiles at the counter-protesters and launching forays into them. Four police officers drew their batons and tried to intervene at the front of the hotel entrance but were overwhelmed and largely ignored by the anti-immigrant participants. The police cycle unit formed a loose cordon with their backs to the counter-protesters on the northern side of the front of the hotel. They were heavily outnumbered and sent a message to their Bronze commander requesting immediate assistance as groups of anti-immigrant participants began to physically assault them to get at the counter-protesters and the hotel entrance.

For around 10 minutes, the main body of the counter-protesters came under concerted attack including missiles being thrown, kicks and punches, and racist and homophobic abuse. A police eyewitness stated it was in the 'top five most violent incidents' they had witnessed in their 25-year career. At about 20.30, eight mounted police officers arrived and separated the two crowds at the front of the hotel. A few minutes later several police support units arrived. The police reinforcements formed a line in front of the counter-protesters on the dual carriageway, and at 20:52 Redcliffe Hill was closed to traffic. A tense stand-off ensued, with the anti-immigrant participants grouped behind the dual carriageway barrier hurling abuse and the counter-protesters in the cordon protecting the entrance to the hotel. At 21:15, most of the anti-immigrant participants began to leave and head back towards Redcliffe roundabout. They were jeered by the 250 counter-protesters at the hotel, who remained in the protective cordon.

3.3.5 | Final Confrontations

At around 21:15, the anti-immigrant participants began to regroup in the vicinity of Redcliffe roundabout, though their abuse and violence were now largely directed at police units sent to disperse them. At dusk, the anti-immigrant participants were split into two groups, one on Redcliffe Way in front of the bascule bridge and the other in and around the Portwall car park.

At around 21:30, more police reinforcements arrived carrying shields and pushed the anti-immigrant participants on Redcliffe Way back towards the bridge. By around 22:00, the police had secured the area around the Mercure Hotel and most of the anti-immigrant participants had dispersed. Throughout this period counter-protesters had maintained the protective cordon at the hotel. By 22:30, the remaining counter-protesters had left.

Having summarised what people did at the three locations, here we draw from the datasets direct answers to our three research questions: Were these events protests? Who participated in the rioting? And which other groups were present?

3.4 | Were These Events Protests?

Our evidence suggests that although the three events were each advertised as a 'protest', they largely involved attempted physical attacks on asylum seekers' accommodation (as well as on police and counter-protesters standing in their way). In the case of Hanley, after confrontations with members of the community, there were attempts to attack mosques. Collective violence in Tamworth and Bristol was unprovoked and was severe at times. In Bristol, the disorder lasted 5–6 hours, Hanley 7 hours, and Tamworth 6 hours. These periods are long compared to typical formal 'protest' demonstrations. They are more comparable with the durations of riots, and suggest significant commitment by the participants. This presented difficulties for police forces in resourcing the front-line police officers involved, particularly in Tamworth.

In Bristol the anti-immigrant crowd numbered around 200 at its largest, in Hanley up to 400, and in Tamworth about 250. In each of the three locations, approximately half of the participants present engaged in disorder in some manner, whether threatening behaviour, throwing missiles, assaulting police and counter-protesters (and in a few cases passers-by), criminal damage or arson. Violence and disorder appeared to be normative for these crowds. Not everybody joined in with conflictual and violent acts, but we found no evidence of such acts being overtly challenged; and overt support through cheering by spectating participants was common. For example, in Tamworth where there were a significant number of family groups present, about half the crowd did not directly engage in violence but remained to spectate. This cheering and lack of challenge possibly allowed those involved to infer a sense of support from the majority, and hence to gain confidence in what they were doing.

In each case, there appeared to be a significant element of premeditation. There was no evidence that collective violence towards the target groups arose as a result of an initially peaceful crowd only becoming violent after experiencing police actions

they perceived as illegitimate and indiscriminate (cf. Stott et al. 2017).

However, the timing of the occurrence of collective violence varied between locations and was a function of specific intergroup interactions on the day. In Bristol and Hanley, but not in Tamworth, the crowd of anti-immigrant participants moved between different areas of the city, and in Hanley this movement was partly driven by real-time misinformation. In all three locations, anti-immigrant participants violently confronted police when the latter blocked them from reaching their targets; but in Hanley, in addition, the anti-immigrant participants directed their anger at the police after a perception that the latter failed to protect them from attacks by locals, echoing a pattern observed in some previous riot dynamics (e.g., Stott et al. 2001). Also in Hanley, in contrast to the other two locations, collective violence escalated in a confrontation with people defending their mosques.

3.5 | Who Were the Anti-Immigrant Participants?

Our evidence suggests that participants in the three riots comprised a 'racial' majority (i.e., white people) seeking to attack minoritized ethnic groups. As such, these riots were unlike the waves of urban riots in the UK in the 1980s and 2011 (which involved an ethnic minority against authority). Arguably the summer riots of 2024 had more in common with the 'race' riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham in 1958 and those in Liverpool and Cardiff in 1919 in which Black minorities were attacked by groups of white people.

However, as well as the observed ethnic homogeneity, there was evidence of some heterogeneity within the anti-immigrant crowds at the three riots we examined. Some sources (e.g., Trilling 2024) have characterised the crowds across the riots in the 2024 wave as comprising not just far-right activists or individuals affiliated with football 'risk' groups, but also non-affiliated individuals who were anti-immigration, people who were anti-police, and also 'bystanders' who were there to see or record exciting events or who joined in spontaneously. Our own data on the three riots concurs with this, though proportions are hard to estimate.

First, we were able to confirm that far-right activists were present at the Hanley riot (see also Right Response Team 2024a, 2024b, 2024c) and played a role in planning and promoting the 'protests' in Hanley and Bristol. Well-known far-right figureheads also shared content and misinformation as the riots were happening, particularly in Hanley and Tamworth. While numbers are hard to estimate, it seems that far-right activists were a minority within each event. 'Risk' football supporters, sometimes overlapping with the far-right activists, were a significant minority presence in all three riots, but exact numbers are again hard to estimate.

Second, the affiliation (if any) of most of the other anti-immigrant participants is unknown. However, we can make inferences about their identity from consistent patterns in the dataset. Thus, the pattern of targets across the three events—refugee contingency accommodation and (in Hanley) mosques—are connected within a racist worldview that can be said to characterise the common identity in the crowd at each location. Based on observed material culture (flags, t-shirts, graffiti), utterances (chants, shouts), and interviewees' conversations with anti-immigrant participants, the features of this common identity were very similar across the three locations. They can be characterised as anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, anti-refugee (with 'Muslims', 'refugees' and 'migrants' conflated in this racist worldview), English nationalist, angry at seeing their (white) ingroup as 'victims', and therefore protecting vulnerable categories—children, women—from those they perceive to be 'non-English' 'predators'/ threats. If collective chants are included, this pattern of evidence comprises data from between 180 and 350 unique individuals, therefore including up to half of those present at each riot.

Third, we found evidence from witness statements to suggest that some people were part of the anti-immigrant crowd because they were anti-police. However, it's difficult to determine whether this was their primary motive or to estimate their numbers.

Fourth, with regard to people that joined in spontaneously, one form of evidence for this is the presence of unaccompanied children (cf. Children's Commissioner 2025). Thus, around a fifth of arrestees in Tamworth and Hanley were under 18 years of age. Another way to estimate the extent to which people joined the three events spontaneously is by considering their locations. The location of the Tamworth riot was not one where there would be many passers-by—all those present had gone there specifically for the event—whereas this was less true of Hanley and Bristol.

3.6 | Who Were the Different Parties Involved?

Each of the events we examined involved not just two parties (rioters, authorities), but several: the anti-immigrant participants, police, counter-protesters, the targets of the riots (asylum seekers and Muslims), and in the case of Hanley what might be termed local 'community defenders'.

There was significant variation across the three events in the balance of anti-immigrant participants vs. oppositional groups present. At the Bristol event, the crowd of counter-protesters significantly outnumbered the anti-immigrant participants. At Tamworth, the reverse was the case. At Hanley, there was the (predominantly white) counter-protest organised by anti-racist campaigns but also a larger group of community defenders which consisted of predominantly male members of local minoritized ethnic groups (labelled in the media and in many accounts as 'Asian youth'). The community defenders' violent actions against the anti-immigrant participants seem linked to the recent history of far-right attacks on ethnic/religious minorities in the area. Together the counter-protesters and community defenders outnumbered the relatively large crowd of anti-immigrant participants.

4 | Discussion

Our analysis of three riots in the wave of disorder in England in summer 2024 suggests the following in response to our

three research questions. First, based on the pattern of behaviour—the length of the collective actions, the relative absence of protest event paraphernalia, and the largely unprovoked nature of the violence in which at least half of those in each anti-immigrant participants engaged—the events largely comprised collective attacks rather than protests. Second, activists affiliated with far-right ideology were present and promoted the events, but there appeared to be other participants present, and there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the anti-immigrant crowds were homogeneous or that all present were equally committed to racism. Finally, at least four different parties were involved—the anti-immigrant participants, police, counter-protesters, the targets of the actions (asylum seekers and Muslims), and (in Hanley) local 'community defenders', with the size and activity of these groups varying significantly between the three riots.

In terms of contribution to social psychology theory, the behaviour of the crowd in each case appears consistent with what the social identity model (Reicher 1984) would suggest, in the sense that there was a clear pattern of targets that reflected the anti-immigrant identity evidenced in the material culture and other evidence analysed. We found no evidence that police action served to escalate conflict as the elaborated social identity model (ESIM; Stott et al. 2017) describes in some events. However, asymmetries of power between the different groups varied over time, sometimes constraining and sometimes enabling the anti-immigrant participants to act, similarly to what has been observed in numerous studies of intergroup dynamics (e.g., Drury et al. 2020; Stott et al. 2001). Violent intentions appeared to be part of the normative repertoire of the common identity among anti-immigrant participants, rather than constituting emergent forms of 'self-defence'. We also found that third parties played an active role in the two of the events (cf. Dixon et al. 2020). We discuss below, under 'Remaining questions', the possible theoretical implications of these examples.

We next compare what is known about these riots with the last major wave of disorder in the UK, which was in 2011. After discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the present analysis, we specify the remaining unknowns that a future programme of research should address.

4.1 | Comparison With the 2011 English Riots

There are now a large number of studies of the 2011 riots, including the Guardian/LSE 'Reading the riots' project (Lewis et al. 2011) and the ESRC-funded 'Beyond contagion' programme (Drury et al. 2019). This large body of research enables us to make some comparisons with what is known about the 2024 wave.

Both the 2011 and 2024 waves of riots were relatively spontaneous events, in which riots appeared to influence the likelihood of further riots in new locations. The riots in 2011 were associated with areas of high deprivation, and this was true for the Hanley and Tamworth riots in 2024 as well as the majority of other 2024 riot locations (see Mohdin 2024). However, in both waves there were also many areas of high deprivation that did not riot, which points to the role of additional factors.

In other important respects, the 2011 and 2024 waves were very different. The distal context in summer 2024 was profoundly different from that in 2011. By 2024, there had been 12 years of the Government-initiated 'hostile environment' that promoted resentment to migrants; the anti-immigration political party Reform UK had grown in popularity; and the two major political parties both actively highlighted the 'problem' of asylum-seekers. For example, the day after the murders in Southport on 30 July 2024, Labour MP for Tamworth, Sarah Edwards, stated in parliament that 'residents want their hotel back' (Haynes 2024). Edwards had repeatedly used similar language during her successful election campaign in June and had made a mistaken claim in parliament earlier in the year that the 'Holiday Inn, in Tamworth [was] costing Taxpayers £8 million per day' (Debunk Admin 2024).[7]

The 2011 riots, which comprised a much bigger wave than that in 2024, were overwhelmingly born out of long-standing antagonisms between local communities and police (Newburn et al. 2018). In London, where they began, they were a reaction against police racism, both in terms of the police killing of a local mixed heritage man and in terms of a chronic pattern of day-to-day experiences such as stop-and-search (Drury et al. 2019, 2020). Rioters in 2011 did not target particular ethnic groups or minorities as the 2024 rioters did. Rather, in 2011, rioting was in part a response to racism.

There was a significant 'campaign' element in 2024: far-right activists, local groups, and football 'risk' groups attempted to mobilise others around a common anti-immigration cause and promoted local events. In 2011, there was no campaign activity to mobilise others and there was a greater level of spontaneity. The 2011 events involved some local community defence and clean up, but not extensive counter-protest, as was seen in 2024.

Finally, looting was a significant feature of the 2011 riots, particularly in those phases where the police had been driven away. While there was some looting in 2024 (e.g., in Hull), there was none identified in our three case study locations.

4.2 | Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the analysis presented here is the large amount and variety of data collected in a short period. Through the combination of materials, we have developed exceptionally detailed accounts of the events and actions of participants and have shed light on some of the processes involved. The depth of the present work is also a weakness, in the sense that three riots from a total of ~27 may have particular features and cannot necessarily tell us about the wave as a whole.

We interviewed police officers, counter-protesters, and witnesses who were involved in or present at the events. But we were unable to secure interviews with anti-immigrant participants. Our enquiries suggested that potential interviewees were hostile and suspicious towards academic researchers. We were still able to comment on features of the anti-immigrant participants' common identity by analysing the patterns of meaning in their recorded comments, shouts, chants, slogans and other material. In doing so, we drew on techniques employed in historical

research on crowd events where participants are long dead and so can't be interviewed (see Drury et al. 2025; Thompson 1971). Moreover, it should be noted that, although social identity researchers usually rely on questionnaire measures (and, to a lesser degree, interview questions), there has been increased interest in naturally-occurring data, such as social media posts, as an alternative (e.g., Smith et al. 2015) way of studying social identity processes. This has included research on far-right rioters (Hoerst and Drury 2023b).

4.3 | Remaining Questions

As well as addressing our three research questions, this analysis has enabled us to identify a further three key questions—or 'known unknowns'—that future research should focus on.

4.3.1 | Who Did the Rioters Believe They Represented?

We don't know the extent to which riot participants believed they represented a wider community. In some riots, participants take part in collective violence because they believe they are expressing the wider views of their community (e.g., Thompson 1971). The belief that their actions are widely supported confers a sense of self-legitimacy, justifying their violence and explaining their risky behaviours; participants believe they will not be punished for their actions because the local community, or the wider society, agrees with them. On the Saturday before the 2024 riots, 'thousands of people' marched in London on the 'Tommy Robinson' 'patriots' demonstration (Symonds 2024). A big protest demonstration is a way of building a sense that 'you are not alone', that 'many others think like you', and so of building confidence in enacting group norms (Hornsey et al. 2006). In the present cases, the fact that so many participants in each of our three locations engaged in illegal acts without masks or otherwise hiding their identity might suggest that they were simply reckless, or perhaps that they felt they had popular support. The limited evidence on the riot participants' beliefs and motives means that future research should gather self-report data from participants about their beliefs about relevant others' beliefs regarding the legitimacy of their actions.

4.3.2 | What Was the Role of the Counter-Protests?

We don't know the relationship between the anti-immigrant riots and the large counter-mobilizations that took place on Wednesday 7th August, at the end of the wave. What happened at the riots could either have inspired people to attend the subsequent counter-mobilisation or made them feel obliged to attend because the anti-immigrant participants had too much freedom to attack their targets. Given that the wave of riots ended after the day of large counter-protests, a second question is the extent to which these counter events affected the meta-perceptions of (potential) anti-immigrant participants, convincing them that the wider public did not support their views. Future work should therefore address the question of how a wave of riots comes to an end, something which previous research on riots has said very little about (Myers and Oliver 2008, and van Bruchem et al. 2023, are two exceptions).

4.3.3 | What Was the Impact of the Riots on the Perceptions of Local Communities Regarding Anti-Immigrant Sentiment?

There is some evidence that the riots led to a feeling of fear and intimidation among ethnic minorities, including those not present (Khan and Hopkins 2025; Sisters not Strangers 2025). We don't know the effect of the riots on the wider public, who might draw significant inferences about public opinion, locally and nationally. Perceiving racially-motivated collective violence as widespread and unchallenged might feed into public beliefs about anti-immigrant views in their society and even neighbourhood. By the same token, perceiving the counter-protest as reflecting 'true public opinion' could have the opposite effect. These perceptions could shape decisions regarding bystander interventions to challenge racist incidents; individuals will feel more confident to do so if they feel that the racist individual, and not they, are the exception. Addressing the impact of such counter-mobilizations on non-participants' meta-perceptions and subsequent actions (e.g., their willingness to speak out against racism) would bring together a practical problem with the tools of social psychology in a way which has been done in other domains (Paluck 2009), but not this.

4.4 | Policy Implications

The failure of anyone in the crowd at each of the events we analysed to challenge the predominant violent racism might suggest that each crowd was made up of (just) people who support violent racist attacks. However, recent research on the 'spiral of silence' and the rise of a right-wing movement (Portelinha and Elcheroth 2016) suggests an alternative explanation, in which behaviour is shaped by misperceived group norms. Thus, it might be that some people in the crowd were opposed to the racist violence they saw but did not challenge it because they believed that the rest of the crowd thought that this behaviour was appropriate. The evidence of the variety of motives (e.g., fun, anti-police sentiments; Children's Commissioner 2025), is consistent with this latter notion.

This suggestion that there were different degrees of commitment to racism among participants—rather than all participants necessarily being 'the same' kind of racist people—has significant implications for policy and practice. By assuming that everyone in the riot was equally committed to anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and other racist beliefs, one could inadvertently create the impression that this represents a growing part of public opinion. In fact, while recent polls often suggest that immigration is an increasingly significant public concern (e.g., Skinner et al. 2024), the British Social Attitudes survey found that views about 'belonging' in Britain are becoming less ethnocentric in the long term: whereas in in 1995, nearly half (48%) of those surveyed said that it was very important that someone had been born in Britain to be considered British, in 2013 40% held that view, but by 2022 it was just 17% (Butt et al. 2022).

The rushed policy responses we described in the introduction to this article were based precisely on assumptions that the 2024 riot crowds were predominantly comprised of committed racists or habitual criminals. But if those assumptions are unevidenced, as we suggest, then those policy responses will fail.

A final policy implication has to do with practical matters informing these possible policy responses. In the UK research funding landscape, there is currently no mechanism to support rapid response research in relation to sudden crisis events like those investigated in the present study. This must change if policymakers are to be able to make the evidence-based decisions required.

4.5 | Conclusions

The three riots analysed here were part of a wave in summer 2024 which was the biggest outbreak of disorder in the UK since 2011. The events were riots rather than 'protests', and more people were involved than the far-right activists. Moreover, as our studies of Hanley and Bristol show, these were also events with significant community defence actions. The study also shows that events in Bristol, Hanley, and Tamworth varied significantly in terms of their form and content, their complexity belying the simplicity implied by the label 'riot' (cf. Thompson 1971).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The present study was part of a pre-registered rapid research programme. All interviews with members of the public for which consent was given are available on the project OSF site: https://osf.io/x3qzv/overview. All publicly available secondary data sources (news articles, social media, videos etc.) are listed in full in Supporting Information 2–4.

Endnotes

[1] The UK government Home Affairs Committee (2025) report on the events refers to the events as both 'riots' and 'disorder', using the terms interchangeably.

[2] We use the term 'anti-immigrant participants', but the question of whether there were different degrees of anti-immigrant sentiment, and indeed different groups of people participating in what might otherwise be seen as a homogeneous crowd, is one of the questions we address empirically.

[3] Many commentators attributed the riots to this misinformation. However, even when these claims were shown to be false, the violence continued.

[4] 'Stoke' hereafter.

[5] A police support unit is a mobile group of police officers who have undergone public order tactical training.

[6] The delineation and labelling of groups of people by ethnicity or religion in the narrative is based on the sources' rather than the authors' definition, hence the quotation marks.

[7] What Edwards meant to say was *all the contingency accommodation in the country* was costing £8 million per day. Edwards did not retract this comment, though it was corrected in Hansard.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting Information. **Data S2:** Supporting Information. **Data S3:** Supporting Information. **Data S4:** Supporting Information. **Data S5:** Supporting Information.