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Commentary

Researching the riots

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This commentary sets out an agenda for researching the riots that swept through English cities in 2011, and for exploring the broader issues raised by these events. Drawing inspiration from groundbreaking social and cultural geographies of the 1981 riots, and also from mappings and quantitative studies of the more recent disturbances, this paper sets out a framework for researching the riots, and underlines the importance of doing so. It concludes that while riots are traumatic experiences for many, they can also be opportunities, which effective research can help to realise, recasting these events as catalysts for change.

KEY WORDS: riots, cities, children

Introduction

There has been much speculation about the causes and meanings of the riots that swept through English cities in August 2011 but, as yet, little sustained research. In this commentary, we propose an agenda for researching these events, focusing upon geographical perspectives. We begin by drawing out some lessons from researching an earlier wave of riots, which took place almost exactly 30 years earlier, in many of the same cities including London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. These efforts include public enquires, appointed by national and local governments, and also smaller scale independent studies such as an archival and oral history of the riots in Liverpool: *Liverpool '81: remembering the riots*, by Diane Frost and Richard Phillips (2011). Though Frost and Phillips concentrated on qualitative data – newspaper cuttings, archives and interviews – geographical research on this subject can also be pursued through numerical data, as the other author of this paper – Alex Singleton – demonstrated in his spatial analysis of the 2011 riots, which he published online and in the national media. Developing and explaining Frost and Phillips' archival and qualitative research, and Singleton's spatial analysis, this commentary discusses and draws together historical and contemporary, qualitative and quantitative precedents, to propose an agenda for researching the riots of 2011.

We take as our point of departure the absence of any systematic approach to the problem of researching the 2011 riots. These disturbances began on 6 August following the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a black resident of Tottenham, North London. Over the following days, they spread within London and to other English cities. The riots took different forms in different places, but increasingly turned from anti-police demonstrations into violent unrest involving looting and vandalism. The UK government has refused to launch a public enquiry into these events, stating simply that it would conduct a policy review, while Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announced a survey of victims' accounts and views, which presented interim findings in November 2011, in advance of a final analysis promised by March 2012 (Curtis 2011). These surveys do not compare with the systematic bipartisan studies undertaken in the wake of some earlier riots, such as the Scarman and Gifford enquiries in the 1980s (Gifford *et al*. 1989; Scarman 1981). The first of these was launched in the aftermath of the Brixton riots of 10–12 April 1981, in which petrol bombs were thrown for the first time in mainland Britain, and its remit was widened to consider the disturbances in other English cities that took place in July of the same year (CARF 1981, 230–1). The Gifford Enquiry, headed by Lord Gifford, Wally Brown and Ruth Bundy, was commissioned by Liverpool City Council to investigate race relations in the city, in the

wake of the 1981 riots. In the absence of such detailed and public enquiries, it is particularly important for independent and academic researchers to investigate the riots of 2011. Inevitably, a number of projects have already been initiated. Among the highest profile of these is a survey launched by the London School of Economics and *The Guardian* newspaper with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Led by Tim Newburn, entitled 'Reading the riots', this included interviews with residents, police and the judiciary, in addition to an analysis of riot-related internet traffic (Lewis 2011). Findings of the project were printed in the *The Guardian* in a series of articles, printed in December 2011.

Imagined geographies

During and immediately after the 2011 riots, commentators – including government ministers, newspaper editors, journalists and bloggers – weighed in with descriptions and interpretations of what had taken place. Their interventions were typically speculative and in many cases geographical, explaining the riots with reference to the areas in which they had taken place: English cities. Prime Minister David Cameron diagnosed a 'broken' and 'sick' society, undermined by the breakdown of two-parent families and the rise of gang culture (Gilligan 2011). Former London Mayor Ken Livingstone pointed instead to public spending cuts and rising deprivation. Others focused on children and young people. Kit Malthouse, the Conservative Deputy Mayor of London with responsibility for policing, blamed the riots on 'feral youth' (Sparrow 2011). Former Prime Minister Tony Blair pointed to the minority of socially excluded children and young people whom he said were hostile to mainstream values. Freed from the constraints of public office, others employed more colourful language to explain the riots, blaming gangs, 'chavs' and – in a bizarre intervention by sixteenth century historian David Starkey – the influence of black 'gangster culture' on white youths (Barrett 2011). Speculative references were also made to 'casino capitalism', fat-cat bankers, greedy and corrupt politicians, and even the 'cult of celebrity'.

It is tempting simply to dismiss all this speculation about contemporary British society and to call for research that can debunk the stereotypes and myths that spring from this imaginative and undisciplined set of interventions. Indeed, we go on in the next sections to do precisely this. First, though, it is also insightful to interrogate these assertions and the cultural logic they mobilise. It is possible to take cues, here, from pioneering geographical research on the 1981 riots. Jacqueline Burgess examined the ways in which media commentators had addressed the particularly severe disturbances that took place in Liverpool. She showed that, while preliminary attempts to describe and explain riots are often inaccurate, they are also revealing, as mythical or imagined geographies. Burgess examined the tropes and conventions in factual reporting, features, editorials, photographs and cartoons. She found a lot of colourful but highly conventional rhetoric, which screamed out, often in block capitals and through metaphors of war: 'RIOT TORN, RIOT RAVAGED, THE BATTLE OF BRIXTON, BLOODY SATURDAY, WAR ON THE STREETS' (Burgess 1985, 204). Much of what she found anticipated coverage that would follow the 2011 riots, with its emphasis on children and young people in anarchic cities:

> The inner cities were being BLITZED by 'mobs' of young people. Extracting maximum drama from what were already dramatic events, headlines and texts carried extreme emotional tones. Some were blatant, others evoked drama more subtly. Reporters and sub-editors wrote of 'the Toxteth terror, the horror of it all, fear stalking the streets, violence and hate, orgies of looting and violence'. A common description was of the 'anarchic ferocity' of many encounters between police and people. The rioters themselves were supposed 'insane'.
>
> Burgess (1985, 203)

Journalists echoed and embroidered this rhetoric, describing the 'Bloody battle' of Toxteth in which rioters were heard 'howling' and 'masked men handed out petrol bombs to their frenzied army of teenagers' (Burgess 1985, 204).

Coverage of the riots was riddled with mistakes and misconceptions, exaggeration and embellishment. Most tangibly, the part of Liverpool in which the disturbances took place is known locally as Liverpool 8 rather than Toxteth, the term favoured by journalists; the difference is significant in Liverpool, where the two geographical terms have different associations. But, rather than dismissing media coverage, Burgess found meaning within it. She interrogated and interpreted media coverage as a myth system, which constructed the inner city as a place apart, a dystopian but mercifully contained and localised vision of Britain. This imaginative geography enabled mainstream readers to distance themselves from inner cities and riots that took place there: in a kind of 'grey, shabby, derelict, poverty-ridden fairytale-land which can be conveniently ignored because it has no reality' (Burgess 1985, 206).

Many other interpretations are possible. The media's inner city was also, for example, a fertile space for cultural politics of race and class, where it was possible to articulate and contest terms such as black and working class (Bunyan 1981). It was also a space in which to present a series of urban visions and scenarios, speaking to policy and practice. Some newspapers concluded that inner cities had been neglected and needed rescuing. The *Daily Mirror* ran a front-page editorial entitled 'Save our cities', in which it argued for urban renewal, arguing that 'the riots, the

racial attacks, the tensions and the intolerance have social causes and political solutions' (quoted by Burgess 1985, 205).

There are lessons, in this pioneering work, for geographical research on the 2011 riots. This might begin by interrogating rather than simply contradicting the ways in which many commentators described and explained these disturbances: the speculations, assertions and polemics. This means locating the recent interventions within discursive conventions and systems and asking how they functioned, what purposes they served or were intended to serve. It also means locating the 2011 riots within imaginative geographies, and exploring continuity and change with geographical representations of earlier riots. Whereas the 1981 riots were mapped onto inner cities, the 2011 riots have been placed within a new set of imaginative geographies, associated with children and young people, and with an eclectic set of streets and cities. Ultimately, though, it is also necessary to interrogate these representations and challenge these claims, as the following sections discuss, with reference to qualitative and then quantitative geographical research.

Listening

One reason for all the speculation that followed the 2011 riots was that few commentators wanted to listen to those most directly involved in those events. The survey announced by Deputy Prime Minister Clegg was pointedly directed at victims, not rioters, suggesting an official view that rioters did not deserve to be heard. Radio and television reporters, interviewing children and young people who had been caught up in the disturbances, provided another excuse for not speaking or listening to rioters: they did not seem to be able to explain themselves or articulate any real grievances. But, if there is any truth in Martin Luther King's famous assertion that 'riots are the voices of the unheard', then there can be no substitute for listening, however inappropriate or difficult this may seem. But listening is difficult, particularly when it involves children and young people, when emotions are running high and when grievances and reasons may exist, but not yet be named. So it is necessary to confront challenging questions about how to listen, and to whom. Working through these questions today, it helps to understand how others have framed research on previous riots. Once again, the experiences of 1981, and efforts that were made to understand and investigate them, are instructive. These include the Scarman and Gifford enquires, mentioned above, and also a study of inner cities conducted for the Church of England by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, and an enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, led by Lord Swann (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas 1985; Sheppard 2002; Swann 1985). In the absence of political and institutional will, it is not possible to replicate these studies today, but it is possible to learn from them, and also from the examples and experiences of other, independent and smaller scale projects such as our own investigation into the memory of the riots that took place in Liverpool in 1981.

First, many excuses are given for not listening to those involved in, and most directly affected by, riots. In 2011, many mainstream commentators dismissed rioters as rebels without a cause, contrasting them with earlier counterparts, whose grievances about issues such as policing have since been acknowledged. Similar claims were made in 1981. Then, as now, there was a lot of attention to children and young people. The *Daily Mail* devoted its editorial on 9 July 1981 to 'teenage violence,' which it said was 'uglier and more destructively anarchic than anything before' (Burgess 1985, 204). The police also took a hard line, rounding up many young suspects and holding them without charge. Unable to represent themselves, these children and young people were represented by others, who were quick to pass judgement. But when they were finally listened to, it turned out they had important things to say. We interviewed Michael Simon, a member of the Liverpool-born black community, who was 13 at the time of the 1981 riots when he was arrested and – in his own words – 'battered' by the police. He served two and a half months in a youth offenders' institution before being released without charge (Frost and Phillips 2011, 33–4). These emergency measures only compounded grievances against the police. Simon told us that, through his childhood, the police would 'arrest you whenever they want' and 'beat you up' at will (Frost and Phillips 2011, 33–4). The enquiries conducted by Scarman and Gifford reinforced Simon's recollections. As Scarman put it, 'relations between the police and the black community in [Liverpool 8]' were in 'a state of crisis' in which young people were 'alienated and bitterly hostile' (Scarman 1981, 13). His report initiated and propelled a process of police reform, which most observers agree has been productive, if slow (Morris 1999, 2). This experience – beginning with a tendency to caricature rioters, continuing with attempts to silence them, and proceeding through formal processes of listening – illustrates the importance of hearing the 'voices of the unheard' and underlines the dangers and missed opportunities in not doing so.

Experience also shows that listening is complex and challenging, particularly in the immediate aftermath of riots, since rioters may not be able to answer direct questions about why they acted as they did. But this does not mean that there were no reasons, or that their actions were meaningless. The struggle to articulate the 2011 riots seemed to contrast with the stock of descriptions of and explanations for the events of 1981, which have been represented in a number

of forms: from oral histories and written stories to songs, poems and pictures. For example, in a poem called 'Mekkin Histri', Linton Kwesi Johnson remembers the riots in pointedly lyrical terms (www.lintonkwesijohnson.com/):

well dere woz Toxteth

an dere woz Moss Side

an a lat a addah places

whe di police ad to hide

well dere woz Brixtan

an dere woz Chapeltoun

an a lat a adah place dat woz burnt to di groun

burnt to di groun

burnt to di groun

But it has taken time for some of these representations to be distilled and communicated. Nearer the time, Scarman observed that rioters had acted emotionally and spontaneously, and had 'found a ferocious delight in arson, criminal damage to property, and in violent attacks upon the police, the fire brigade, and the ambulance service' (Scarman 1981, 45). In other words, they 'spoke' primarily through their actions, and the ensuing carnival of violence. Scarman did not take this to mean that the riots were meaningless or that the rioters were, as the newspapers put it, 'insane'. But it did show that listening was and is necessarily more complex than simply asking rioters – particularly those in their early teens – why they acted as they did. This resonates with the findings of our oral history. David, who was 16 at the time of the 1981 riots and is now in his forties, remembers the strength of feeling he experienced on the streets of Liverpool: 'I'm trying to restrain the euphoria, even after all this time I can feel a rush.' Strong feelings like this can take time to put into words.

The question of *who* to listen to is equally complex: should it include rioters and non-rioters, victims and their communities; which rioters and which victims? Distinctions are often drawn between legitimate rioters with genuine concerns, and copycats or opportunists. In 2011, this distinction was drawn between those who reacted to the death of Mark Duggan in a police shooting in Tottenham, North London, and others who got involved in later disturbances, locally and further afield. Similarly, in 1981, Scarman observed that after the initial unrest in Brixton, 'outsiders' participated, 'attracted into the action by the publicity' and 'intensifying the disorder' (Scarman 1981, 45). We found similar distinctions in our oral history of the Liverpool riots. We were often told about two types of rioters: those who were seen as more legitimate or authentic, and others who had come into the area from outside. The former, including members of the Liverpool-born black community and other residents of Liverpool 8, were said to have been angered and wronged by the police, and alienated by years of deprivation and discrimination. The latter are said to have had separate agendas and interests.

The question of who to listen to broaches geographical questions about rioting and rioters, which can illuminate and help to explain these events. Part of the attraction of a place-specific approach to the riots, which we adopted with respect to 1981, was that this defined a framework for research in which it was meaningful to ask questions not only of rioters themselves, but of others too. We interviewed community leaders and activists; church leaders and parishioners; organisers and members of youth groups; and police officers who had patrolled the area. We concentrated our own research on what we regarded as 'authentic' rioters and members of their communities, and effectively left out others who travelled to the riots. Others located the events of 1981 in a different set of spaces, and opened up another set of questions about how to frame riots. Michael Heseltine, then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Secretary of State for the Environment, focused upon urban and regional problems and solutions. In the wake of the riots he beefed up the Merseyside Development Authority (MDA) and set up a temporary office in Liverpool, where he earned the nickname of 'Minister for Merseyside' (Heseltine 2000). Heseltine was distinctive in focusing not on the inner city, but on the wider urban and regional context (Murden 2006). He was criticised for this (LeRoy 1983), inevitably perhaps, since questions about who to listen to in the wake of riots depend upon intrinsically controversial *a priori* judgements about who may be worth listening to and who may not. In 1981, it seemed important to listen to residents of inner cities; this time the focus may need to be upon residents of Tottenham, North London, and children and young people in cities across the UK, as the next section explains.

An understanding of the broader geographies of the riots and the experiences of non-local rioters could have helped provide a bigger picture of the disturbances, and it could also have helped to explain how and why they spread: from some parts of some cities to other parts of others, and leapfrogging still others without touching them directly. These questions are discussed in the next section.

Spatial analysis: where, who, why?

Questions about the spatial dynamics of riots – about who is involved, where they live and where they travelled to riot – also call for numerical analysis. *The*

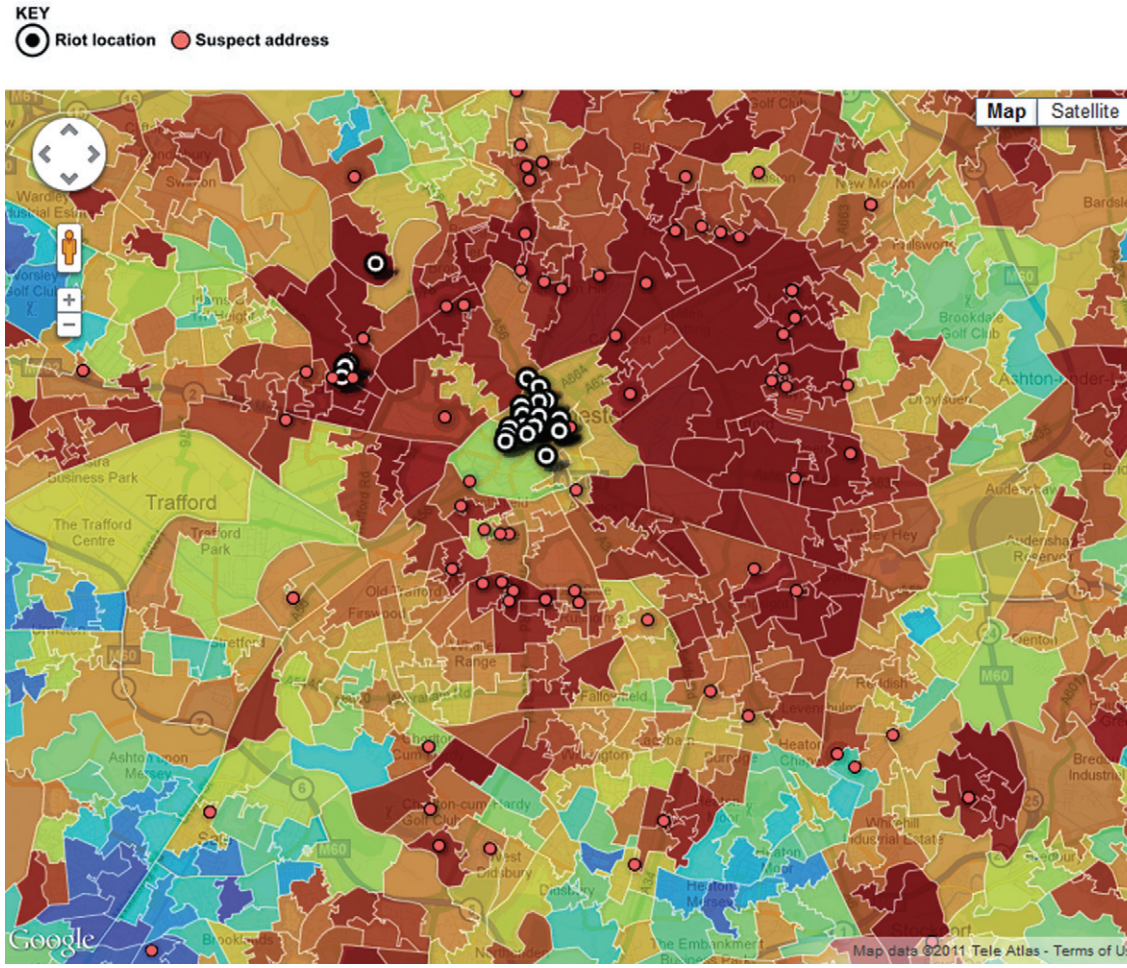


Figure 1 A screen shot from an interactive map featured in *The Guardian* showing the Index of Multiple Deprivation for the Greater Manchester area with an overlay of riot locations and domiciles of those appearing on riot related charges (red – high deprivation; blue – low deprivation)
Source: www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/interactive/2011/aug/16/riots-poverty-map

Guardian newspaper produced and published some preliminary analysis of the geographies of the 2011 riots, which aimed to explain why they had taken place where they did, through overlay maps that visualised deprivation alongside rioting. But, as Singleton explained at the time, these maps were problematic, raising as many questions as they answered. These maps can therefore be a productive point of departure for more rigorous numerical analysis of the 2011 riots (www.alex-singleton.com/).

Soon after the 2011 riots subsided, magistrate court data were made public, and *The Guardian* led in the assembly, analysis and presentation of these data. The tools for this are increasingly simple to use (Haklay *et al*. 2008), accessible to journalists and students alike. 'Did deprivation and poverty cause the riots?' *The Guardian* asked, responding with a series of visuals and maps (Rogers 2011). One such map presented residential addresses of suspects appearing on riot-related charges and known locations of where riot activities were recorded against a backdrop of deprivation (Figure 1).

However, on closer inspection, this map is problematic because it does not provide evidence of causality between deprivation and the propensity to riot. It shows that those who had been arrested for an offence, and who provided an address, which was correctly geocoded, tended to live in areas of deprivation. Care should specifically be taken not to conflate the characteristics of areas with those of individuals. Without an explanatory model, or even a sufficiently inclusive set of data, the visual association

between deprivation and rioting may simply be incidental. The distinction between correlation and causality – and the need to investigate the latter more directly – were all acknowledged in the official statistical analysis of the 2011 riots, presented by the Ministry of Justice. A preface to this report clarified:

> It is important to note that none of the factors explored imply causality with the public disorder events, but provide a deeper background understanding of the characteristics of those brought before the courts. It is also the case that those brought before the courts may have different characteristics from those who took part and have yet to appear before the courts.
>
> Bell *et al.* (2011)

Answering the challenge posed by this report and the question posed by *The Guardian* article would require explanatory methods such as those based on regression models.

Quantitative analysis could also broach questions of where riots did *not* take place. There were no riots in English cities such as Sheffield and Newcastle, and the streets of Welsh and Scottish cities remained equally calm. Notwithstanding speculation on this subject – including by commentators who suggested that their home countries, towns or constituencies had stronger communities and were more resilient than their neighbours and rivals (Evans 2011) – the question of why riots did not happen in some areas remains open and an important subject for research.

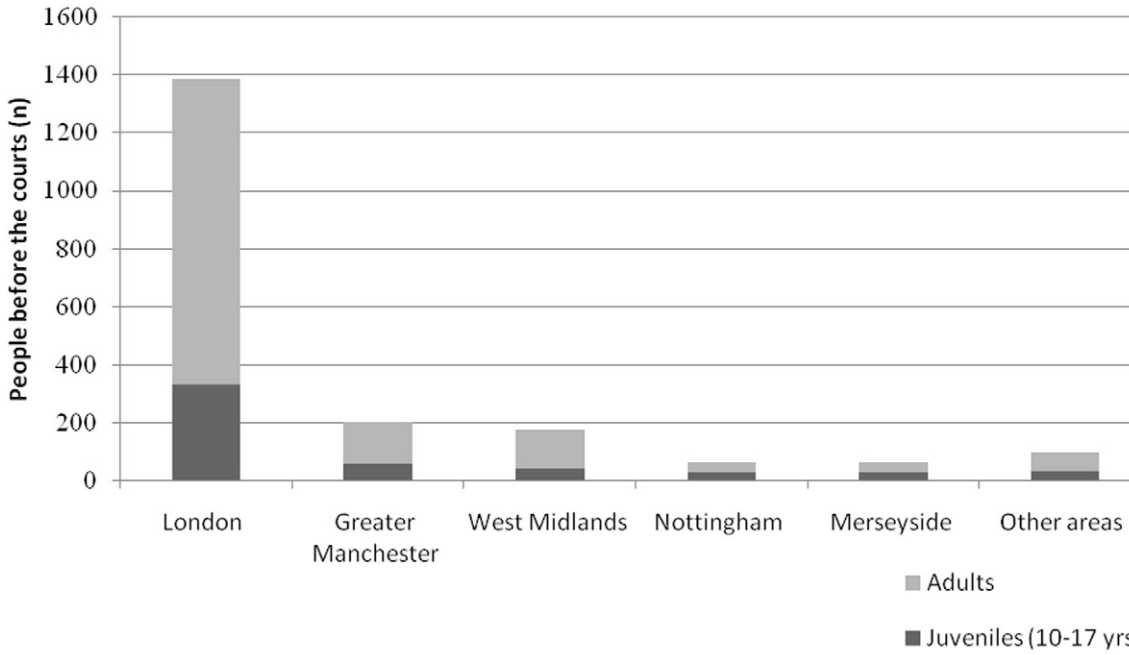
The Guardian map also raises ethical concerns and questions, which need to be addressed before further work of this type is considered. The map in Figure 1 is scaled to the highest resolution, which does go some way to prevent disclosure, given that it is not possible to zoom the map down to street level. But in the underlying code, which can easily be accessed, the precise spatial locations can easily be extracted and visualised in more troublesome ways at higher resolutions. In other online representations of crime data that focus on victims (e.g. http://police.uk), these data are aggregated into clusters of streets, thus masking individual locations of where events occurred. The fact that data may be available at a given scale – from magistrate's courts at address level, for instance – does not make it appropriate to represent the data at this high resolution. This raises further issues with regard to differences between representing data in offline and online maps, with the latter potentially more open to abuse through data extraction and reuse. These ethical concerns necessarily frame questions about how data on the riots, including those presented by the Ministry of Justice, can and should be analysed.

The Ministry of Justice data offer new scope for asking broader questions about who rioted: for describing their residential geographies and social profiles, and for framing questions about why they rioted, even though these questions are complex, demanding a wider variety of data, including those discussed in the previous section. To illustrate the ways in which numerical data can be used in this context, in a manner that variously substantiates, qualifies and contradicts speculative assessments that were ventured during and immediately after the riots, it is helpful to point to an initial analysis of the Ministry of Justice data. Ministry analysts were able to match the records of those accused of criminal offences to Department for Work and Pensions (for adults), Department for Education (for juveniles) and Police National Computer data at an individual level. This data fusion enables a rich picture of those appearing on riot-related charges to be built at the individual level. The dataset concerned 1984 people who by midday on 12 October 2011 had appeared before the courts on charges related to the riots. These adults and juveniles (10–17 years), 90% of whom were male, were distributed geographically as shown in Figure 2. This official report also contained valuable data and preliminary analysis on the ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational standards and deprivation of those charged with riot-related offences, and also of the areas where those individuals were concentrated. Those appearing before the courts were more likely to be in households receiving out-of-work benefits and free school meals – two indicators of deprivation – though the extent to which this was the case varied regionally. The courts also dealt with a disproportionately high number of young people with special educational needs, many of whom had been excluded from school.

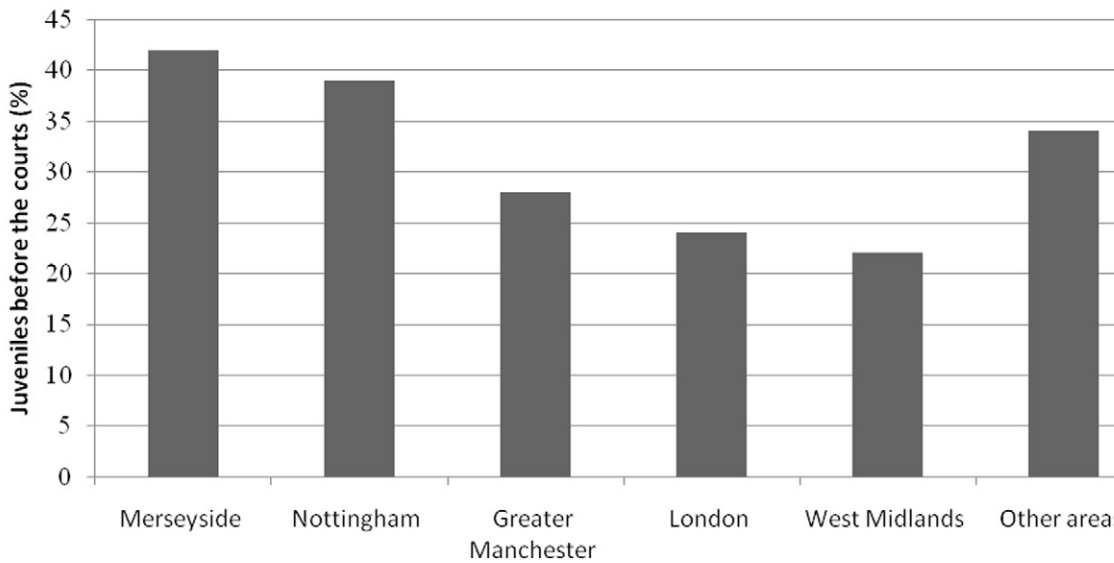
Preliminary analysis of the Ministry of Justice data, illustrated here, raises more questions than it answers. Outline findings on issues such as age, ethnicity and education suggest that rioters exhibit a complex composite of attributes, raising further questions about their social and geographical profiles. These findings also demand more sophisticated spatial analysis, since they raise but do not address questions about relationships between where individuals live and where they rioted. The official reporting by the Ministry of Justice made reference to geographical areas but did not present maps of the data which contrasted to the more immediate press analyses. In some sense this is a lost opportunity given the power of maps to communicate spatial information, which is clearly recognised by data journalists who prevalently support their stories through maps.

Conclusions: research agenda

Riots – and also the stories that are told about them, and perhaps the maps that are made about them – are traumatic experiences for many, but they can also be opportunities: recast as catalysts for change. It is therefore crucial that experiences, memories and causes of riots are thoroughly and sensitively investigated, with all the imaginative and methodological resources that



a) Absolute values for all offenders



b) Relative values for juveniles

Figure 2 Those appearing on riot related charges by midday on 12 October 2011 by area. (a) Absolute values for all offenders; (b) relative values for juveniles
Source: adapted from Bell *et al*. (2011)

can be marshalled: qualitative and quantitative, orthodox and creative, historical and contemporary. In this commentary, we have reflected upon the experiences of researching earlier events, and the more recent histories of investigating the 2011 riots, and identified a series of questions that can form the basis for geographical and social researchers investigating riots, including the events of 2011. Questions identified in this paper include:

1 How are riots represented by opinion leaders in the media and politics? How do these representations function?
2 How is it possible to cut through mainstream representations of rioters and riots by listening to those most directly affected by these events? How can these individuals and groups be identified? How can they be heard?
3 What scope is there to complement qualitative studies of riots with numerical and statistical analysis of riots, which might present a broader picture of those involved or affected, and trace their grievances and experiences?

These are complex and challenging questions, but together they contribute to an agenda for research that has potential not only for understanding the past, but for shaping the present and future. We found that remembering and telling stories about riots has been empowering and productive for many of those involved: a vehicle for change and reform. For Michael Simon, the riots in Liverpool in 1981 were 'a legitimate protest' and a catalyst for change. By listening to rioters, it has been possible to understand their real grievances – primarily about policing – and to initiate change, locally and nationally. As Scarman (1984, 159–61) put it, in an epilogue to his report, 'The story of the disorders themselves has proved to be itself a therapy.'

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