(Mis)representing the August 'riots': How statistics were used to sustain ideological explanations

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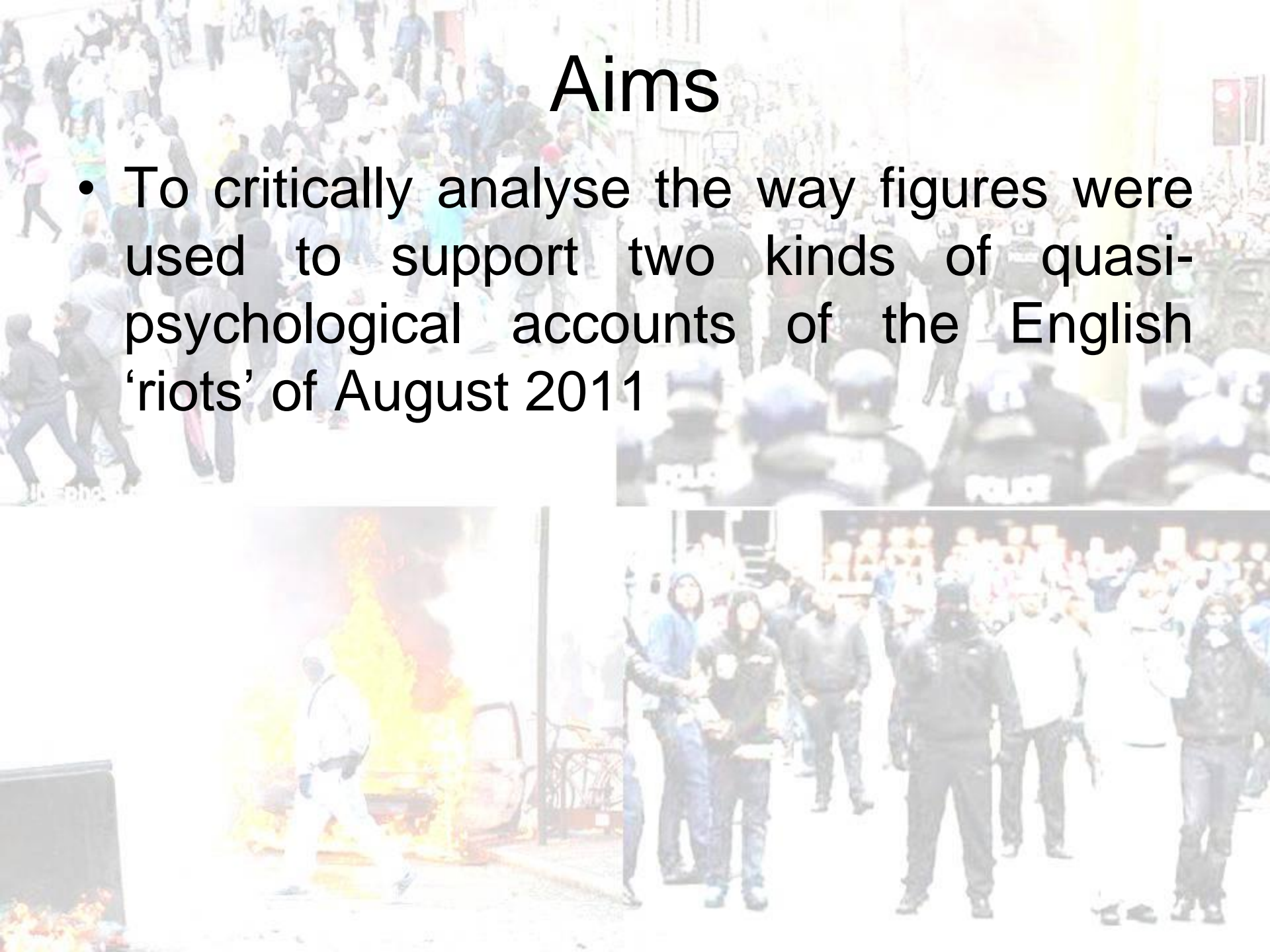John Drury
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Politics, Consumption or Nihilism:
Disorder and Protest, the UK and beyond
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Sheffield Hallam University

University of the West of England
BRISTOL

US University of Sussex

Aims

- To critically analyse the way figures were used to support two kinds of quasi-psychological accounts of the English 'riots' of August 2011

Two kinds of accounts of the 'riots':

1. The rioters characterized by certain **(uncivilized) predispositions**: distinctive family upbringing, 'underclass', gang membership, criminal characters:
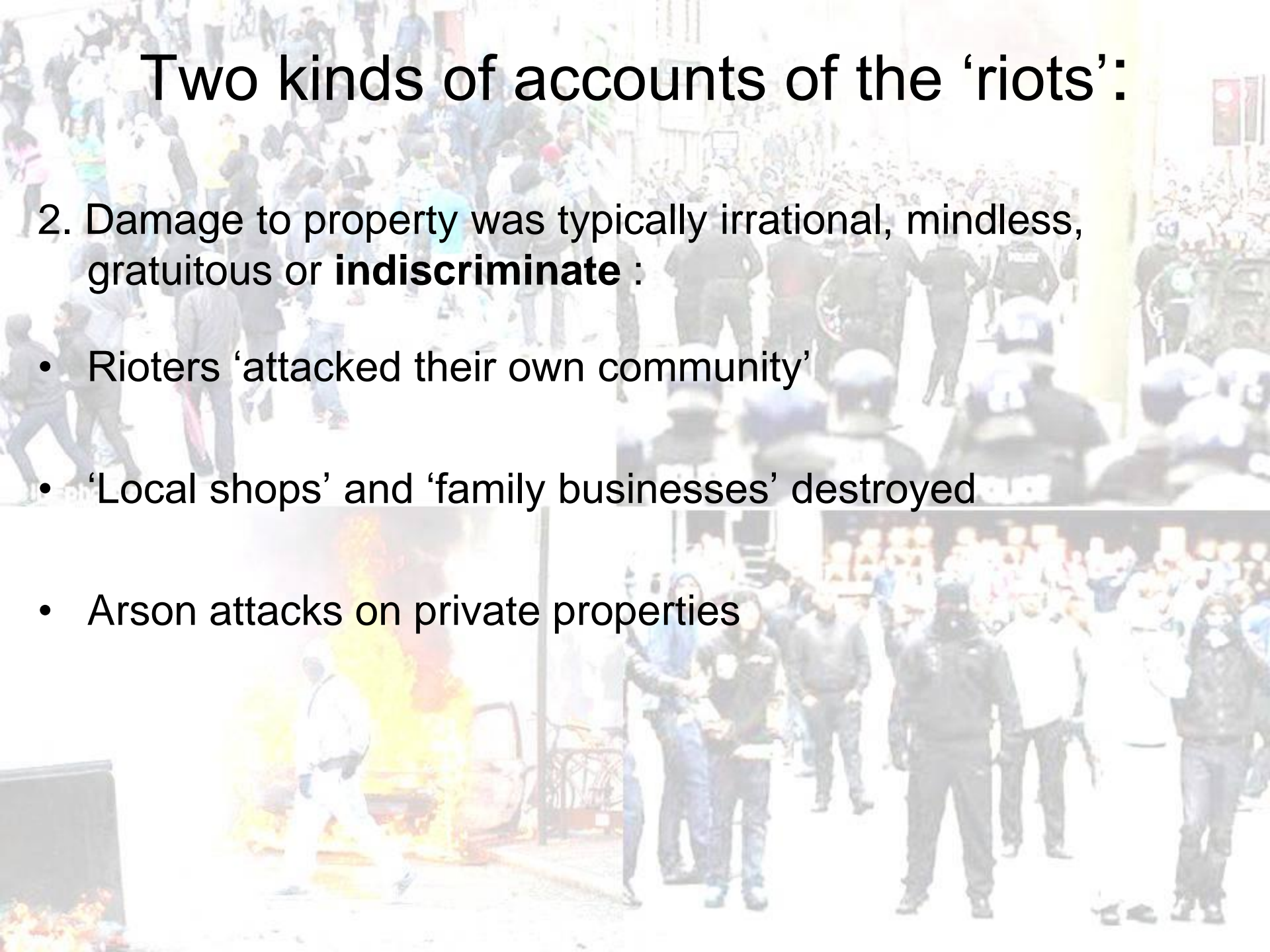
Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clark:

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

- *'existing criminals were on the rampage.'*

Two kinds of accounts of the 'riots':

2. Damage to property was typically irrational, mindless, gratuitous or **indiscriminate** :

- Rioters 'attacked their own community'

- 'Local shops' and 'family businesses' destroyed

- Arson attacks on private properties

Echoes of 'classic' **theories of crowd psychology**…

- The emphasis on 'criminal characters' echoes **'convergence'** explanations:
  - Allport: 'riots' occur because of individual predispositions
  - 'Riff raff' explanations for the US urban riots

- The emphasis on 'mindlessness' and indiscriminate destruction echoes **'submergence'** explanations:
  - Le Bon: generic susceptibility to loss of self, loss of control and tendencies to destruction in crowds

- 'Classic' theories of crowd psychology are flawed
  - US urban 'riot' participants found to be relatively educated and representative of others in the ghetto
  - Violence in 'riots' is typically targeted and patterned; anonymity does not lead to a loss of control
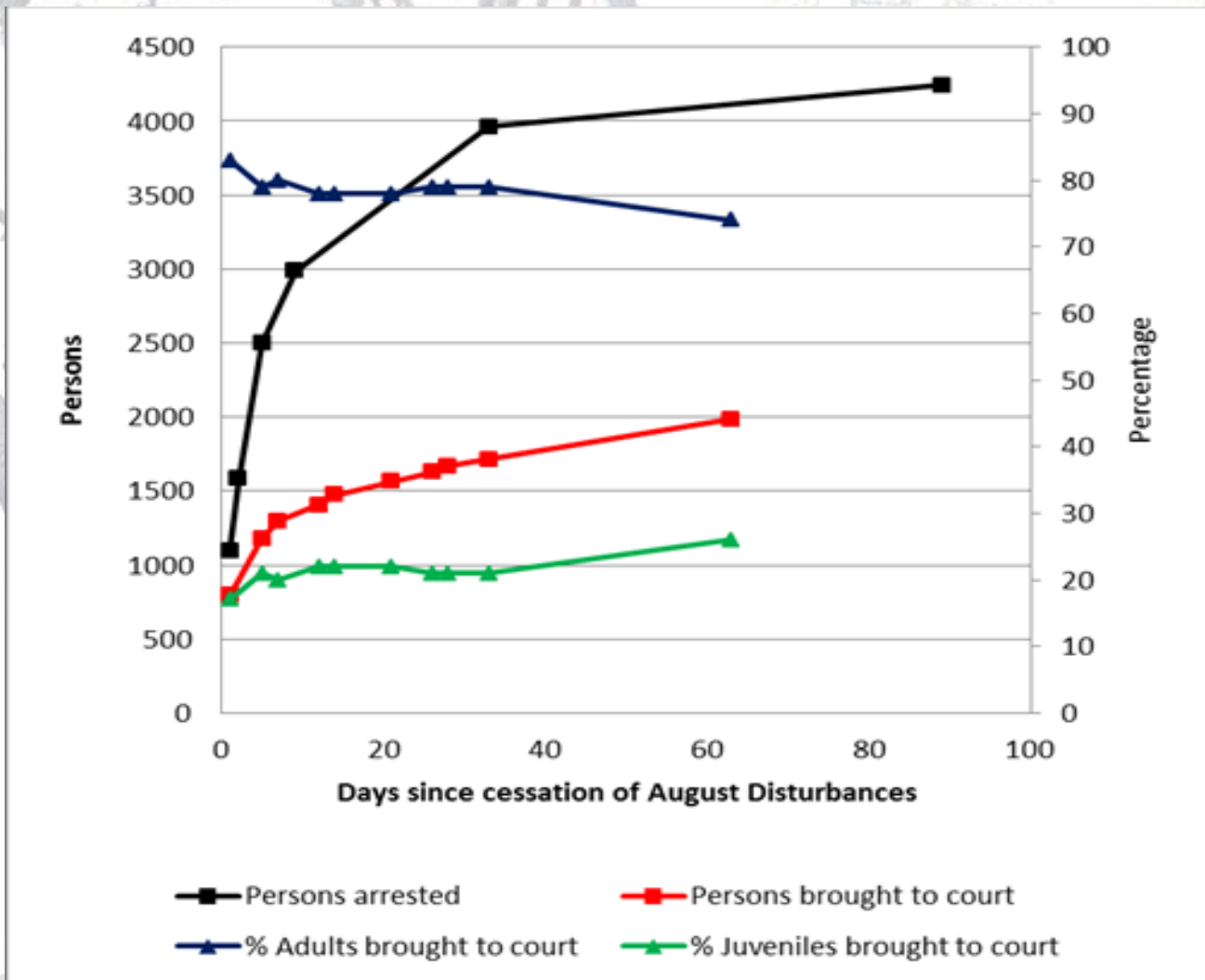
- 'Classic' theories of crowd psychology are ideological
  - Explaining 'riots' in terms of simply rioters' characteristics detracts from problems in wider society
  - Characterizing riots as 'mindless' is used to justify coercion

Statistics used to explain the 'riots' as a convergence of individuals with uncivilized predispositions

- 'Criminals' and 'criminality' as recurrent theme
- Not simply descriptive of the events (as 'crimes')
- Justice Secretary Kenneth Clark and Home Secretary Theresa May:
  - *'the hardcore of the rioters were in fact known criminals. Close to three quarters of those aged 18 or over charged with riot offences already had a prior conviction…*
  - *'they were career criminals'*
  - *'existing criminals were on the rampage'*
  - *'what underlay it was criminality'*

Figure 1. Persons arrested and/or brought to court as a result of the disturbances (MoJ)

1. Most of those arrested hadn't been brought to court.

Clark's stats on criminal records only refer to those brought to court.

Figure 1. Persons arrested and/or brought to court as a result of the disturbances (MoJ)
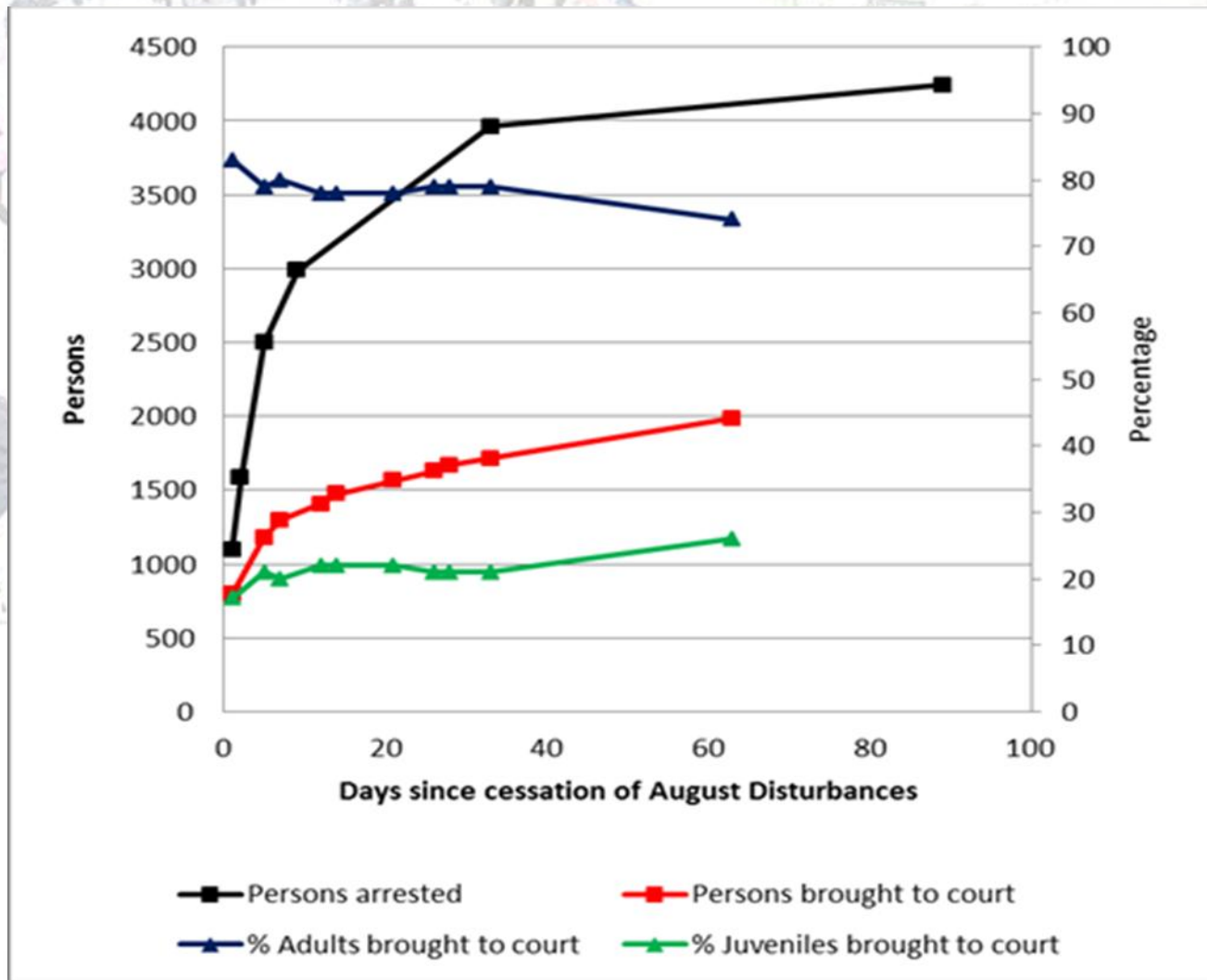
2. Rate of arrests was very high in the 10 days following the riots.

By this time, the police had studied very little of the 250K hours of CCTV.
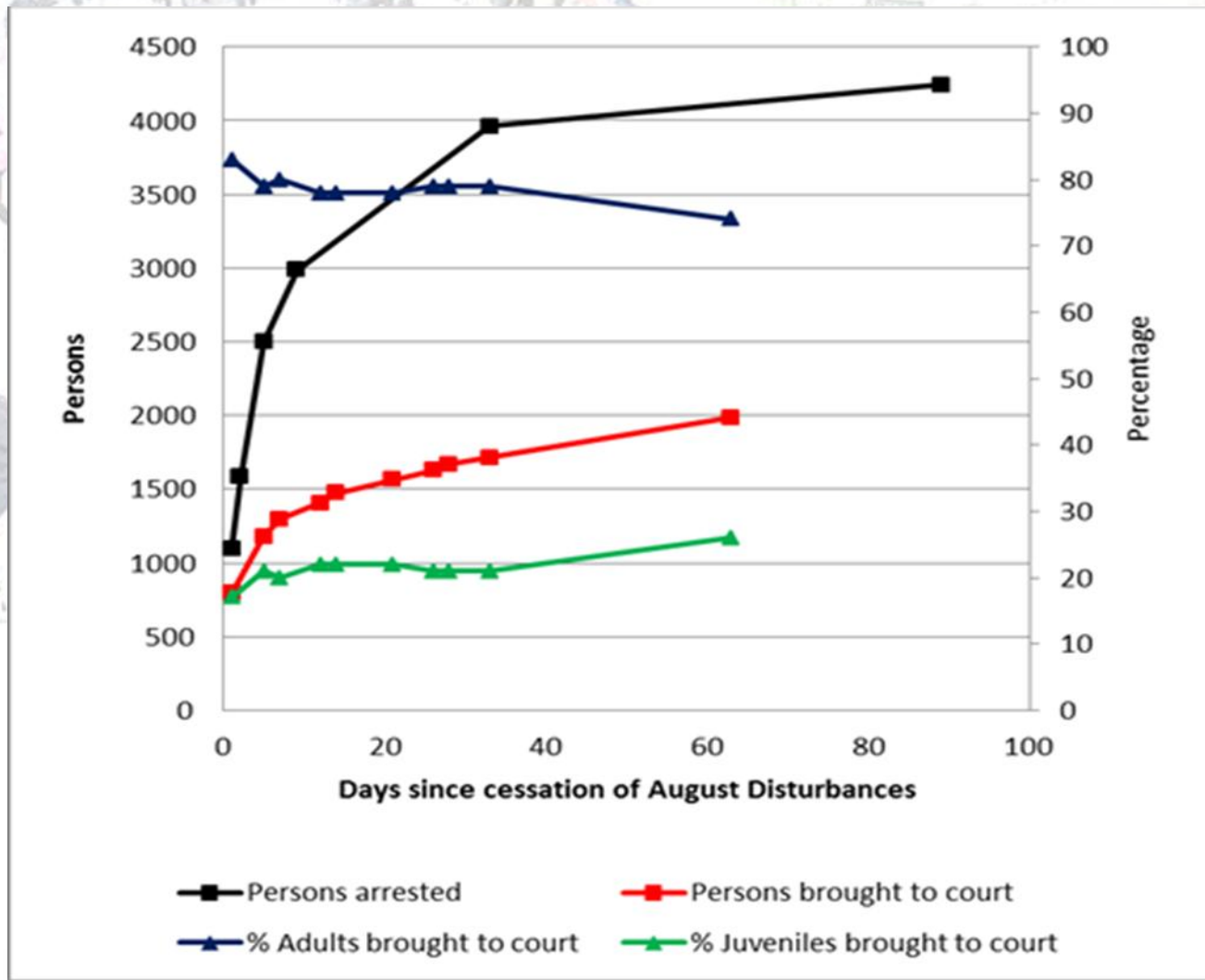
What was the basis of the arrests?

Figure 1. Persons arrested and/or brought to court as a result of the disturbances (MoJ)

3. Over time, the fraction of juveniles brought to court increased, while the fraction of adults decreased.

Juveniles typically have fewer offences.

This suggests police were relying on past criminal records rather than content of crime committed.
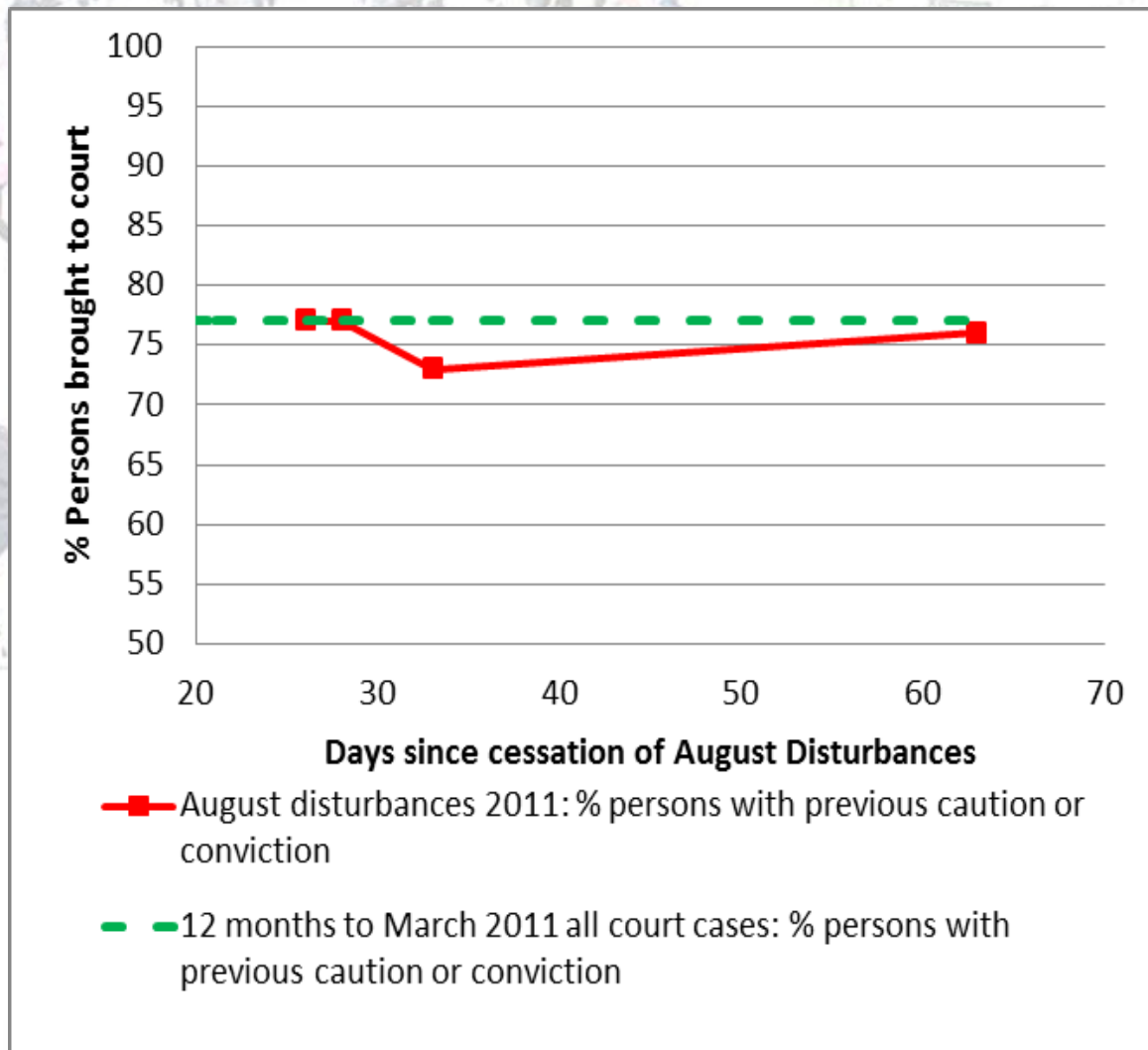
Figure 2. Previous criminal histories of those brought before the courts after the riots (MoJ data)

75% of those brought to court after the riots had a previous criminal conviction. Since 77% of those brought before the court for all offences in 2010-11 also had previous convictions, this was used to claim that the rioters were typically 'already criminals'.

BUT this assumes that the *process* of identifying and making arrests was unproblematic

The process problem

- Police sources admitted they were under pressure to make a lot of arrests
- They did so even when they were not confident they'd have the evidence to press charges
- Under pressure, the easiest way to do so was to concentrate on those people they already knew about or had information on
- Use of CCTV only exacerbated the bias

The process problem

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

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

- The problem is one of *circularity*.
- The high percentage of 'criminals' in the arrest figures represents selective fishing by the police
- Previous research: Arrest/conviction figures not necessarily representative of crowd composition.

Figures used to explain the riots as a convergence of individuals with uncivilized predispositions:
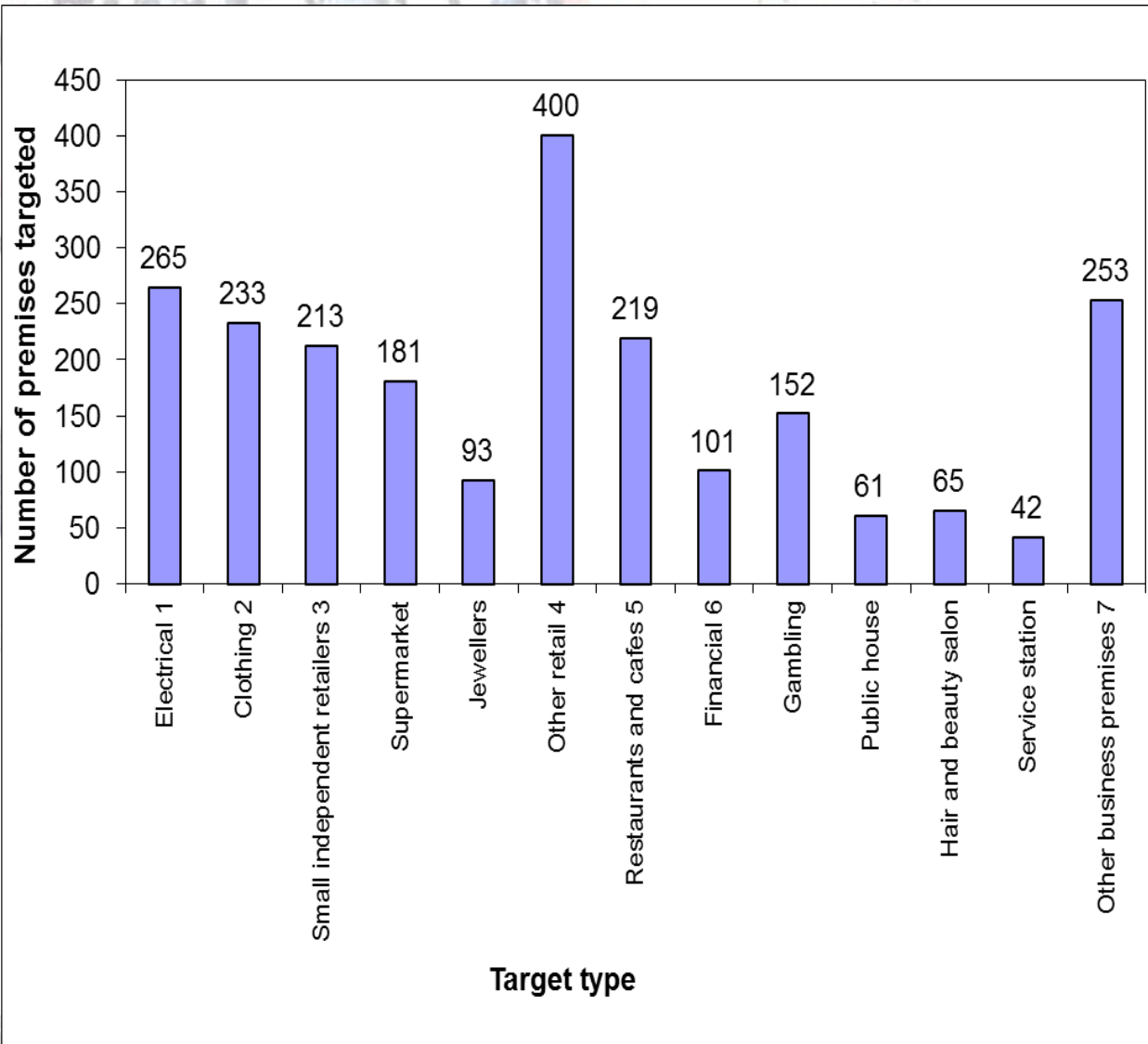Final comments

- Latest MoJ statistics report (8th June 2012) states that 3,051 people appeared before the courts for offences committed during the August 'riots'.

- No info now on their past criminal records!

- The other contentious category was **'gang members'**

- In August 2011, the Met said that 28% of those arrested were *'gang members'*; the PM said that gangs *'orchestrated'* the events

- By September, the Home Secretary admitted that the percentage of gang members to overall arrestees had dropped

- By October, a Home Office report stated that gangs *'did **not** play a pivotal role'*

- The original data was *arrest rates* (no data on percentage of those *convicted* who were gang members):

- **Circularity:** government had decided that *'gang members'* were the problem and so *'gang members'* were arrested!

Figures used to suggest rioters' behaviour was affected by submergence

- Rioters *'destroying their own community'*
  - 'local shops' 'family businesses', as well as the effects of arson on private properties.

The issues:

1. The anecdotes and 'exemplars' versus the actual data

2. The issue of coding and counting

Figure 3: Types of commercial premises targeted nationwide in the August 2011 disorders (source: Home Office)

1. 'Small independent retailers' = 213 (9%) of 2,278 targets

2. 'Electrical' and 'clothing' are the biggest single categories (22%), suggesting selectivity (high value goods) rather than mindlessness.

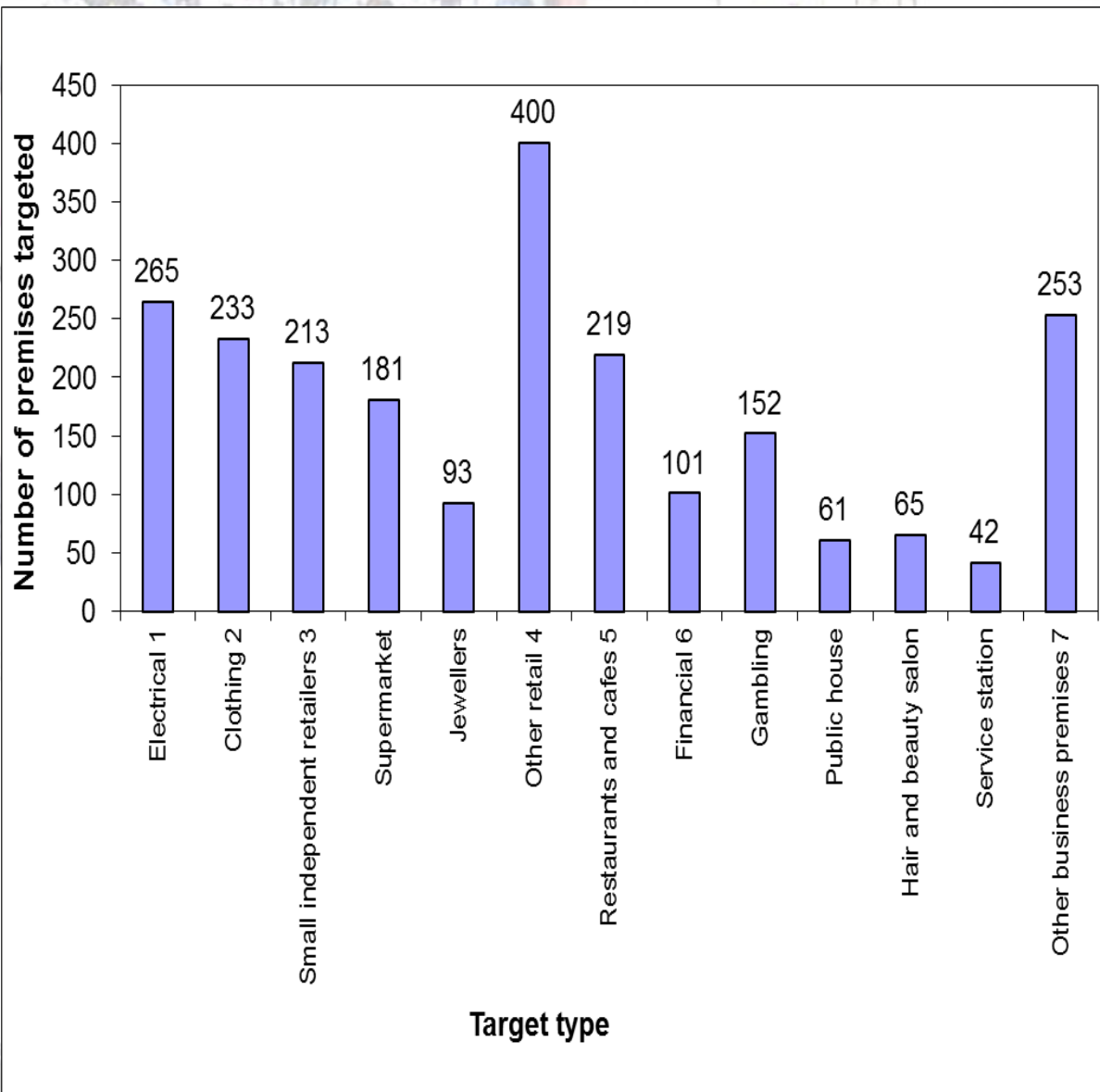**Figure 3**: Types of commercial premises targeted nationwide in the August 2011 disorders (source: Home Office)

3. The questionable equation of 'local' retailers and businesses with psychological community

4. This organization of data loses the differences within districts. In areas like Tottenham there was clear selectivity. In some wealthy districts of London, people travelled there and targeted everything and everyone: *'discriminating-indiscrimination'*

Figures used to suggest rioters' behaviour was affected by submergence
Final comments

- The figure of 'at least 100 families made homeless by arson' was widely quoted after the events.

  Actually, just two locations:
  - 55 homes in Croydon (most damaged by a single fire)
  - 45 in Tottenham (26 of which were above Carpetright)

- No evidence that private homes were directly targeted

Conclusions

- In principle, it is possible that the people who took part in the riots were criminals or people who acted indiscriminately or gratuitously

- BUT the figures used by politicians and others to make these kinds of claims were flawed
  - Misinterpretation of patterns in the data
  - Overlooking other patterns in the data

Conclusions

- When the prime minister and home secretary argued that the figures showed that the problem was 'culture' and 'career criminals', they were rejecting other explanations, such as:
  - government austerity measures (Taylor-Gooby, 2012)
  - police practices of stop and search (Guardian, 2011)

- Like their academic counterparts (convergence and submergence), the two types of accounts of the riots of August 2011 are profoundly ideological

- They serve to render the riots marginal and meaningless rather than indicative of wider problems in society.

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

Ball, R., & Drury, J. (2012).
Representing the riots: The (mis)use of
figures to sustain ideological explanation.
Radical Statistics, 106, 4-21.