

# Extremism, racism and riots: exploring the political, social and cultural determinants of poor mental health

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The UK has seen an outbreak of riots after the death of three children in a knife attack. Misinformation about the suspect's heritage and religion was spread by social media, which was then used to incite violence and racism resulting in damage to property, terror and injuries. We put forward arguments that this was an extremist act and draw on the literature on terrorism, extremism and identity to put forward a deeper analysis of how this happened and what can be done to prevent future riots. We bring an interdisciplinary perspective drawing on research from social, cultural, psychological and political perspectives.

## Keywords

Extremism; racism; mental health; political determinants; socio-cultural determinants.

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On 29 July 2024, three girls aged six, seven and nine died following a knife attack at a Taylor Swift dance and yoga event in Southport, Liverpool, in the north of England. Eight children and two adults were also injured. A tragedy of this nature and the intensity of grief reactions are difficult to imagine. The local community struggled to make sense of events whilst coping with a collective sense of shock, loss and injustice. Police later arrested a 17-year-old boy, whose picture and name were unexpectedly revealed to the public through official sources. The courts confirmed the suspect to be a young Black boy of Rwandan heritage, and that he had a neurodevelopmental disorder. The suspect's actions seemed inconsistent with his previous character; for example, he had participated in charitable televised events to raise funds for children. In taking the case forward, the standard criminal justice process should not speculate but rather it should gather reliable expert opinion and all sources of evidence upon which the courts can deliberate.

Soon after the attack, social media postings began to speculate on additional identity characteristics of the alleged perpetrator, proposing the suspect was an asylum seeker and Muslim. Malicious speculation in this instance promoted misinformation and racist and xenophobic ideologies, escalating to hostility and violence targeting immigrants, Black people, Pakistanis, asylum seekers and Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The attacked were first-generation immigrants and their descendants, irrespective of how long they had lived in the UK or even if they were born in the UK. Their significant contributions and service to British life and public services, such as the National Health Service (NHS), were ignored, silenced, denied and obscured.

The riots quickly spread around the UK, including Stockport, Hull, Belfast, Nottingham, Leicester, Leeds, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, Bristol and Plymouth. There was looting and racist chanting; a local library, a mosque, a hotel and cars were targeted and set alight; and there were even Nazi salutes.<sup>2</sup> Community cohesion and race relations seemed to crash to levels not seen for many years in Britain. What was even more troubling was that rioting parents took their children to witness the violence, harmful to them in so many ways.<sup>3</sup> In some instances, the children were coached to participate and throw missiles at the police, which has led to two 12 year olds being charged for violent disorder. There were over

700 arrests and 300 people were charged in the early weeks.<sup>4</sup> Based on the UK Government's definition of terrorism<sup>5</sup> (see [Box 1](#)) and analysis from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the USA showing that domestic violent extremism is racially and ethnically motivated and includes White supremacists,<sup>6</sup> the police and criminal justice system, rightly in our view, considered these acts to be closer to terrorism and criminal damage than any reasonable or justifiable protest. Furthermore, the FBI report that White supremacists and other like-minded extremists conducted 67 per cent of terrorist plots and attacks in the USA in 2020.<sup>7</sup> Terrorist agendas attack state institutions and practices and, in this instance, policies affecting immigration, poverty, unemployment and public services, under the mistaken guise that immigrants and the immigration policies are to blame. The definition offered by the Terrorism Act of 2000 leaves little doubt that the use of violence by rioters to challenge political decisions and positions constitutes an act of terrorism. Although this may seem uncomfortable for clinicians, political decisions do affect people's lives and health systems, and may provoke protest. An alternative formulation is to consider violence as a public health issue,<sup>8</sup> an epidemic that in this instance was a response to misinformation,<sup>9</sup> although underlying prejudice and grievances may still be drivers of violence.

## Box 1 The 2000 Terrorism Act (Chapter 11, Part I, Section 1)

This defines 'terrorism' as the use or threat of action.

- (1) Terrorism: interpretation:
- (2) the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public; and
- (3) the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause. And
- (4) Action falls within this subsection if it—
- (5) involves serious violence against a person;
- (6) involves serious damage to property;
- (7) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action;
- (8) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public.

## Racism and riots

Most people living in the UK, including migrants, asylum seekers, religious minorities and majorities, were astonished and horrified when such events unfolded in modern Britain. There is strong evidence based on terrorism research that those who take to violence are either already committed to the ideologies they pursue and seize every opportunity (like sleeper cells or clandestine movements) when an opportunity arises; or others influence people who are disenfranchised to become engaged in powerful group processes for which justifications are sought later.<sup>10</sup> For example, in a previous study of extremism in ordinary residents in England, sympathies for violent extremism were more common amongst White British individuals compared with Pakistani residents.<sup>11</sup> Social isolation, previous offending and negative affectivity were relevant risk factors, including pessimism; however, poverty and personal experiences of discrimination and religious beliefs seemed less relevant, and it was not the uneducated or poorest who held more extremist views. At this stage, it is reasonable to conclude we have paid insufficient attention to homegrown right-wing extremism promoting racism and xenophobia, as well as the extent of support such movements attract from right-wing politicians or wider communities.

## Mental health impacts

Violence, terrorism and hatred have direct and indirect impacts on short- and long-term mental and physical health.<sup>12–14</sup> Children aware of the wider discussions and news reporting have been found to be worried, and more of them go on to develop mental disorders. Indirectly, living in fear – a key strategy of terrorism – and restrictions to everyday freedoms are troubling and can be frustrating. Terrorism also works by creating divisions in society. During the post 9/11 period, Muslims and minorities were under attack with documented evidence of growing intolerance and hostility.<sup>15</sup> A similar trend was seen in the UK after Brexit, with spikes of hate crimes reported to the police.<sup>16</sup> This is race thinking at its worst: if a small group of any one race or nation or religion commits a crime, all who are perceived to be from that ‘race’ are vilified, and their very rights and existence questioned. These views are promoted on a flawed premise that all White people are individuals who share a single cause and identity, and Whiteness as a process and category is left uncontested.

Racism affects mental health. There is evidence of aetiological influence on mental illnesses, including anxiety, depression, psychoses and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>17–20</sup> Racism affects mental health through felt and enacted stigma leading to internalised states of poor esteem, helplessness and hopelessness and discrimination, for example, when applying for employment. Racism also leads to poor physical health, for example, hypertension, diabetes, multimorbidity and even premature mortality. Inflammatory markers are raised in those exposed to racism, and these are indicators of future poor physical health; these can remain elevated over generations, adding evidence that poor health and trauma are intergenerationally transmitted through social and physiological processes.<sup>21,22</sup> Racism, like many traumatic events, also influences brain development. Racism can lead to post-traumatic symptoms and greater levels of impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, fear responses and inflammation, as found in young people exposed to adverse childhood experiences.<sup>23,24</sup> The social determinants of poor health are not randomly distributed and are more common in some ethnic minority groups, as well as specific national groups, and those living in precarity. Personal identity according to nationality, country of origin, heritage, religious belonging and even age, gender and sexuality influence the

types of adversities people encounter in their lives and vulnerabilities to poor health, and less equitable access to safe and effective health-care. Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are exposed to multiple adversities and losses, including living in unstable and often precarious legal and social situations.

## Political and social determinants of racism and extremism

It is hard to overlook how elections in the UK, and even in the USA, focus on domestic troubles such as poverty and a lack of public services, laying blame on ‘others’, immigrants and asylum seekers. There is even analysis in the USA suggesting right-wing extremism may escalate if a democratic candidate wins the presidency.<sup>6</sup> Thus, some of the narratives used by extremists warrant reflection and challenge. In the recent UK election, minorities, migrants and marginalised groups were blamed for creating an ‘unprecedented population explosion’. Another argument is of limited resources and strain on public services. Contradicting such propositions are well-established facts that the birth rate in UK is dropping and most of our public services will need and already rely upon a significant number of people who are migrants or descendants of migrants. Immigration and social policies over decades have drawn on migrants to fill employment and skills gaps. We are again (in the UK) headed for a shortage of skilled workers, not least since the departure of many European Union migrants following Brexit. The need to address contradictions in immigration and domestic policy is legitimate; however, the difficulty arises when political rhetoric and public sentiments are conflated with underlying racism alleging immigrants are to blame.

Rioters were organised and incited by misinformation that was disseminated by social media, an approach also used by terrorists to grow their ranks and ultimately kill innocent citizens as a way of attacking the country they consider their enemy.<sup>25,26</sup> In the name of defending freedom of speech and seeking to resolve domestic policies about poverty, austerity and public services, rioters seized the opportunity to blame the deaths of the young girls at Stockport on Muslims, migrants and People of Colour. Violence was directed towards people who had nothing to do with the homicides, people who were good citizens of Britain.

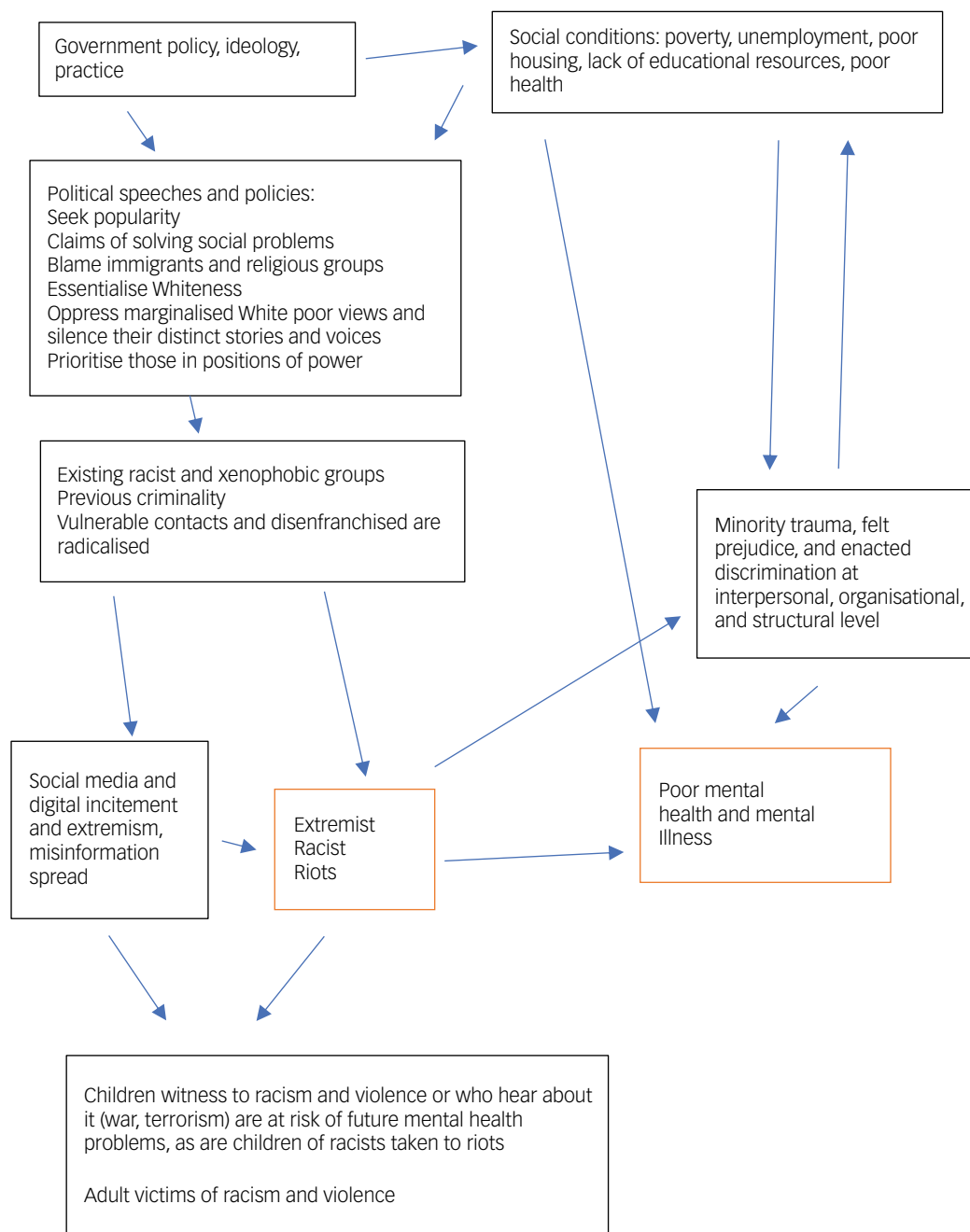
Disentangling motivations behind racism are not easy, and the task is even more difficult when extremism is grounded in racism or prejudice.<sup>6,27</sup> Young-Bruehl<sup>28</sup> applies psychoanalytic experiences and theories to distinguish ethnocentric prejudice (the universal tendency to form and preserve cultural groups based on economic, political and social ties, and to set themselves in opposition to other groups) from what she calls ‘ideologies of desire’. Ideologies of desire are prejudices rooted in deeply held worldviews and structured by shared desires that target victims across cultural groups based on ‘marks of difference’ in human form and identity. Skin colour, for example, or Muslim or asylum seeker: these sentiments do not distinguish between the multiple identities and affiliations that exist in each of these groups. Ideologies of desire do not recognise distinct cultural and religious identities, histories and meaningful contributions towards a shared social fabric of a nation. The notion of ‘ideologies of desire’ includes narratives of an idealised and lost past (of Britain in this instance) that rioters wish to restore.<sup>28</sup> This is a common political trope designed to promote notions of racial purity and preservation. These ideologies are troubling not least because in the past they have served as precursors of historical atrocities and antisemitic rhetoric. The ideologies of desire concept offers a way of understanding the narratives and rhetoric of extremists and its relationship with terrorism.

Political statements by state leaders can radicalise and kill if these statements express ideologies of desire and, at the same time, can go under the guise of promoting ethnocentric prejudices

to draw in a wider group of disenfranchised and troubled communities. This may be done to win votes and elections but can promote hatred and violence. Political speeches can also kill by attracting violent hostility towards democratic debate, for example, in the murders of members of parliament such as Jo Cox (16 June 2016) and Sir David Amess (15 October 2021). Political leaders therefore must manage their political rhetoric, which they think helps them to win elections and power, but which also awakens latent ideologies and attracts extremists and racists. Similarly, they must protect those fighting for equalities.

One of the key claims of the rioters' supporters is that there is a White poor English underclass that is ignored by mainstream politicians. As a result, their needs often get overlooked, or (1) subsumed under the needs of all White people, rather than addressing their specific lives and experiences and (2) are presented as if in opposition to

those of ethnic minorities, migrants and People of Colour for whom anti-racist legislation and laws are formulated and enacted.<sup>1</sup> Government measures have not prevented racism, poor health outcomes, poorer school performance and greater levels of poverty and unemployment, for the entire population, nor for specific minority groups. Historians of psychiatry and racism the world over show that elements of the White working class were and still are a racialised group that faces many difficulties that are not tackled and are sustained by the structures of public services and politics in modern Britain.<sup>29</sup> It is well established that more equal societies do better in many ways, economically, in terms of social cohesion and better mental and physical health.<sup>30</sup> The needs of the poor working class are not served by terrorists and rioters; rather, they are obscured and further marginalised, and criminalised if they riot. The poor irrespective of race remain the most heavily taxed and the least healthy.<sup>31</sup>



**Fig. 1** Pathways to extremism and riots.

Therefore, in part, the current situation is perpetuated by classism and the use of racism to sustain structures of hierarchy and power. Eradicating poverty and hatred are the real ambition towards which we should strive. A recent analysis of poverty indices of the areas where local rioters lived suggested there is a correlation, although in Manchester many came from the suburbs rather than central Manchester.<sup>32</sup> We need more research on how to partition rioters with long-standing criminal, racist and extremist views (terrorists harbouring ideologies of desire) from those who were drawn to participate in riots because of their disaffection with their lives, including levels of poverty and social exclusion.

Furthermore, analysis by race alone fails to expose the intersectional forms of precarity by age, gender, race, social class and LGBTQ+ status, not to mention regional variations in public services and wealth and assets. Eco-social and cultural frameworks expose harmful political and social structures that drive inequality; this includes understanding the role of place in the generation of misery and poor health.<sup>33</sup> Poverty, homelessness, unemployment and class are still as relevant today as in 1980 when *Inequalities in Health: The Black Report* was published; this and many later reports on poverty and inequality were silenced and not actioned.<sup>34</sup> There are political determinants of these social conditions, which lead to shorter life expectancy and child poverty, poorer life chances and now civil unrest. The political determinants of poverty, or the neglect of policies to combat poverty in the most marginalised communities irrespective of race and ethnicity, we argue, are also the determinants of unrest and violence and can be exploited by extremists as well as contribute to the persistence of extremist ideologies in communities. More work is needed to understand the social dynamic of poverty, class, racism and extremism.

A novel approach is to consider extremist and racist ideas as infectious agents and draw on epidemiological models of their spread and containment. In such models, the spread of extremist ideas (considered to be viruses) requires hosts and vectors, and varying dynamics lead to the spread of infection. We need better knowledge of these dynamics and how to prevent contamination and reduce the pool of hosts. Attacking the infectious agent, hateful misinformation in this instance, using counter-narratives and pro-social environments (including addressing poverty), can reduce the spread of infectious ideas.<sup>35,36</sup> Community cohesion, narratives of hope and countering extremist ideology through community actions are known to combat and reduce the spread of extremism,<sup>37</sup> perhaps explaining why the marches against extremism quickly caught on and helped heal and restore local communities' power to defend against extremism and not be divided. Furthermore, police and security agencies must respond to the challenges of social media and media bias, and trust more in the public responses and engagement, paradoxically applying counter-intelligence responses openly (rather than secretly) and engaging communities as partners.<sup>26</sup>



## Conclusions

The recent riots are better understood as acts of terrorism, especially those directed at specific religious and minority groups and the buildings that represent their identities (Fig. 1). Furthermore, they caused wider damage to public buildings, which can be seen as an attack on the state and its institutions. Criminal justice processing will, of course, assess each case in detail and take a balanced view of the harms and mitigating factors in determining the appropriate sentences. We need better public skills in critical responses to social media messaging and opportunities for counter-messaging so that the public can navigate a path to an informed and balanced position. Rioting and inciting to riot to hurt and harm others are offences and should be treated as such. Offences should hold consequences for

those responsible and the media outlets that permit such communications. The data on racism leading to poor health should be sufficient to legislate and prosecute political speech that seeks to promote hatred. Although those supporting or seeking to join Islamic State were convicted in large numbers using increasingly comprehensive anti-terror legislation, the rise of right-wing extremism over the last decade has yet to result in similar levels of attention and prosecutions.

## Recommendations derived from the literature and proposed mechanisms

- We need better quality standards for research and public conversation about immigration policy, nuanced with an understanding of race and ethnicity – and historical accuracy – on the needs for and value of immigration.
- Public literacy on race, ethnicity, culture, religion, racism and social cohesion together with risks of violence and civil disorder also require more community-driven approaches, including working with young people and schools – although in the instance of the recent riots there were many older people involved.
- We must combat group processes and misinformation about tragedies exploited by racist and xenophobic ideologies that thrive in subgroups of society and are expressed in the most extreme ways. This extends to terrorism disguised behind political rhetoric purporting to serve the interests of poor White people and the wider public facing social distress.
- We need more action research and empirical evidence exposing and exploring right-wing extremist cells and crime, akin to the efforts to tackle terrorism.
- Programmes to tackle poverty, homelessness, unemployment and adversity in childhood, as well as parenting that promotes extremism and racism need to be prioritised. These are the policy and practice omissions that are exploited by criminals and extremists in our midst.
- Interventions to protect young people from being influenced to participate in extremist activity are already established, often delivered through public agencies including schools. The science behind such policies warrants further evaluation.

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## Data availability

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Author contributions

K.B. conceived the paper and wrote the first draft. K.B., D.R., M.L., E.J. and K.R.K. reviewed and proposed amendments based on their disciplinary expertise. All authors responded to peer review comments and agreed the final version.

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