

Monitoring Brief

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Reporting of official statistics about the August 2011 public disorder

In January 2012, the Daily Mail published an article under the headline: *Rioting is 'airbrushed' from official crime statistics as most trouble-hit areas record a **drop** in violent crime*¹. The article highlighted official statistics from the Home Office report *Crime in England and Wales: Quarterly Update to September 2011*², published on 19 January, which included recorded crime statistics in respect of the public disorder in cities across England in August 2011.

The article highlighted the apparently small number of offences recorded following the disturbances, saying 'reading the crime figures yesterday, it is almost as if the five days of widespread looting and violence never took place'. It went on to quote disorder statistics for several of the main cities, for example:

'In Croydon, where a 144-year-old furniture shop was one of dozens of buildings burned to the ground and a photo of a woman jumping from a first-floor inferno became one of the defining images of the riots, police recorded just seven disorder offences.'

This Brief reviews the statistics available about the incidents of disorder and considers whether there are any lessons to be learned.

The disorder-related official statistics

Both the Home Office and Ministry of Justice (MoJ) have released statistics relating to the August disorder:

- MoJ released³ a twice weekly publication of initial court hearings from 12 August 2011. It then released summary statistics about the offences coming before the courts in *Statistical Bulletin on the Public Disorder of 6th to 9th August*⁴ on 15 September, followed by an update on 24 October giving detailed information on the characteristics of offenders.
- Also on 24 October, the Home Office released⁵ statistics from a special data collection of recorded crime from the police forces affected by the public disorder in August. These figures were also included in an annex to the quarterly statistical bulletin on crime in England and Wales released on 19 January 2012². The offences included violence, acquisitive crime, criminal damage and 'disorder' as defined by the *Public Order Act 1986*. Home Office Counting Rules specify that one crime should be recorded for each victim or

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2089300/Rioting-airbrushed-official-crime-statistics-trouble-hit-areas-record-DROP-violence.html>

² <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/hosb0112/>

³ *Estimates of initial court hearings*: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/criminal-justice/public-disorder-august-11-editions.htm>

⁴ *Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6th to 9th August 2011*: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/criminal-justice/public-disorder-august-11-editions.htm>

⁵ Official statistics release: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/overview-disorder-aug2011/>

intended victim. Where there is no specific intended victim, as is often the case with *Public Order Act* offences, an offence against the state is recorded.

The Daily Mail article quoted the correct number of specific offences of disorder⁶ recorded by the police, but did not give the numbers of the other offences that it used to illustrate the disorder in each area. These included serious violent offences (such as murder), criminal damage (e.g. to buildings, cars and arson offences), and acquisitive crimes (such as burglary, robbery, vehicle and other theft).

The table below gives the Daily Mail description for each area highlighted, together with the number of disorder-related offences occurring in August 2011 recorded by the police (as given in the 19 January 2012 release):

Place and Daily Mail description	Numbers of disorder-related recorded crime by type					Total
	Disorder offences ¹	Acquisitive crime ²	Criminal damage ³	Violent offences ⁴	Other ⁵	
Croydon: Seven disorder offences. Rioting by hundreds of mostly-masked youths in the south London borough saw dozens of shops burned, including a 144-year-old furniture store. During three nights of disturbances, a woman jumped from a first floor inferno into the arms of firemen.	7	322	74	14	13	430
Salford: Three disorder offences. Mass disorder by hooded youths who set fire to cars and threw bricks at firemen. Dump truck was taken for joyride.	3	77	54	48	6	188
Birmingham: Six disorder offences. Mass looting, thugs fire gun at a police helicopter, three men are killed when they are mown down by a stolen car.	6	209	132	14	2	363
Manchester: Eleven disorder offences. Marauding bands of hooded youths, some as young as ten, ran amok through the centre of the city ransacking shops. CCTV captures one man using a lighter to set one store on fire.	11	185	150	24	16	386
Total for the ten police forces with most extensive disorder	141	2,561	1,860	366	184	5,112

1. Includes violent disorder and public order offences

2. Includes burglary, theft, handling stolen goods and robbery

3. Includes criminal damage and arson

4. Includes murder, wounding, grievous bodily harm, assault and possession of weapons

5. Includes drug offences, driving offences and a range of other miscellaneous offences

The Daily Mail went on to correctly note, but question, the way in which the Home Office Counting Rules govern the recording of riot, public order offences and violent disorder by police forces. In some cases the Mail's reporting is likely to have left readers with the impression that far fewer crimes were recorded as a result of the events in August than was actually the case. For example, the article says that in Croydon the Metropolitan Police only recorded 7 disorder offences, while in fact a total of 430 offences were recorded. The total number of offences that were recorded by the ten police forces that experienced more extensive disorder (recording 20 or more disorder-related

⁶ Public order offences and violent disorder combined

offences) was 5,112. This total includes the 141 specific offences of disorder, as well as more than 2,500 acquisitive crimes, 1,800 offences of criminal damage and 360 violent offences.

The quarterly statistical bulletin released by the Home Office in January 2012 set out the basis for the crime recording used by police forces during the disorder in August 2011. It presented the numbers of offences by type recorded in the 15 local authority areas most affected by the disorder and provided a comparison with crime recording in these areas for each of the months July to September 2011 and in the previous two years. In terms of lessons for the future, the commentary and the layout of the tables could perhaps have highlighted more clearly the distinction between specific disorder offences under the *Public Order Act* and the full range of disorder-related crime.

The first Home Office report (in October 2011) included information about the arrests associated with the public disorder. The statistics indicated that by 12 September 2011 nearly 4,000 people had been arrested by the ten police forces. This report summarised the MoJ statistics published the same day that showed that just under 2,000 (1,984) people had appeared before the courts by midday on 12 October 2011. However, the overall number of offences cannot be directly compared with the number of arrests or with the number of offenders appearing in the courts, since one crime can involve many offenders and one offender can commit many crimes. The first Home Office report stated that 'For some crimes no-one will have been apprehended' but gave no information to indicate the proportion of offences that have been 'cleared up'^{7,8}. Consequently, it is not possible to draw conclusions from the statistics published to date about the success of the police in apprehending offenders.

We conclude that:

- a substantial amount of relevant statistical information was made available by MoJ and the Home Office; and
- the reporting of this information by the Daily Mail is likely to have left its readers with the impression that far fewer crimes were recorded as a result of the disorder in August than was actually the case.

⁷ Detected crimes are those that have been 'cleared up' by the police

⁸ The current Home Office collection of detections statistics does not allow linking of the detection to the specific crime so a second special collection of detections data from police forces would have been required