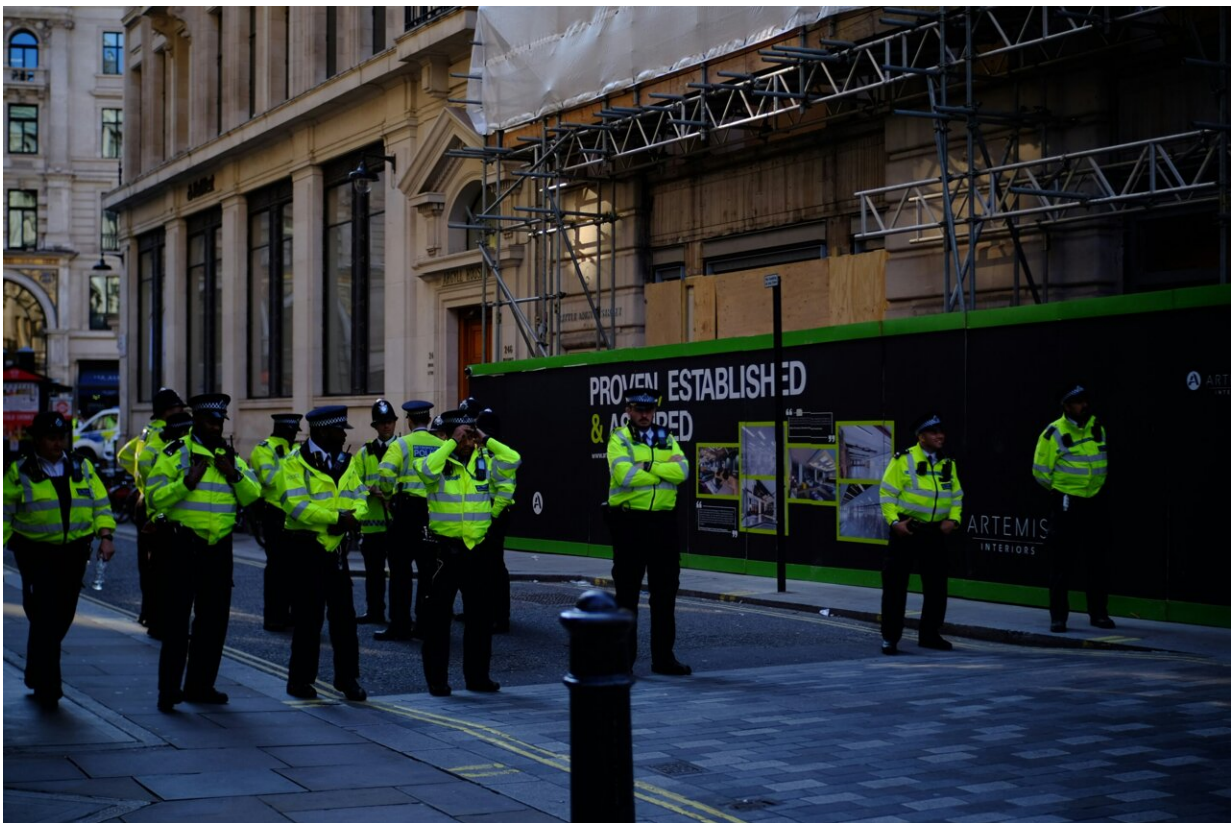


Viewpoint: Why the UK doesn't need more policing—even after the riots

August 14 2024, by Andrea Brock, Amber Huff and Patrick Huff



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In response to the violent far-right riots across the UK, we have seen pledges from Keir Starmer's Labor government to increase police resources, expand policing powers, and implement tougher and quicker

sentencing to keep our communities safe. Far-right violence is a danger to individuals and communities across the UK but putting more police on the streets with beefed-up powers will leave many UK communities and legitimate acts of protest less safe for everyone.

We should scrutinize the prime minister's promises of a "[standing army of specialist police](#)", "swift criminal sanctions" for far-right rioters and promises to bring down the "[the full force of the law](#)" as a deterrent. The eruption of far-right violence is a danger to all of Britain's communities and a manifestation of deep social crisis, but a crisis is the worst time to abandon critical faculties and hard-won rights for an illusion of safety.

Lack of policing is not the problem

The problem is not that the criminal justice system lacks the power to criminalize and police racist and fascist violence. To the contrary, successive Conservative governments have massively expanded police powers to collect intelligence on protesters and members of social movements and to dole out arbitrary and excessive prison sentences as a deterrent to popular dissent. While popular fears of far-right violence are often used to justify these expanded powers, as Starmer is doing now, in practice they have routinely been used to crackdown on very different forms of protest.

Just in the past two years, the focus of major legislative reforms, including 2022 and 2023 revisions to the Public Order Act of 1986, have explicitly targeted protest by groups such as [Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain](#). This has built on earlier efforts at setting precedents for long prison sentences that have targeted (ironically) "[Kill the Bill](#)" protests, environmental protests against the high-speed rail project HS2 and [fracking projects](#).

Individual targets have included members of leftist groups or political

orientations, including antifascist networks, anarchists, and other social and environmental activists who are portrayed as [threatening "public order" and "national security"](#) regardless of whether they are involved in criminalized activity. Identification as an anarchist, for instance, automatically makes one a ["high-level aggravated activist"](#), which has come to replace the police's categorization as "domestic extremists."

Out of the over 130 spy cops [that were used to infiltrate political groups](#) over more than 40 years, only a handful were spying on far-right activities. This has meant that there was little understanding or political will to deal with the well-organized and well-funded far-right threat bubbling away under the surface.

That pattern that is visible today in the [racist and Islamophobic policing](#), surveillance and criminalization of Palestinian solidarity activism, for instance.

Two-tier policing?

Recently, far-right ideologues including Tommy Robinson, Laurence Fox and Nigel Farage have propagated a [myth of victimhood](#), that, "white far-right 'protesters' are the victims of a 'two-tier policing' system that treats them more harshly because of their race and political views," [and allege](#) that they are receiving harsher treatment than people of color or "the left."

These claims collapse in the face of the well-documented historical, systematic and disproportionate use of police force [against people of color](#) and members of other marginalized social groups in the UK. We only have to look at the numbers: 46% of all stop and searches in the year ending March 2023 were conducted on black people (4% of the population), and 39% were conducted on Asian people (9% of the population).

Independent research on state-related deaths and abuses in the UK shows that [black people](#) are [seven times more likely](#) to die than [white people](#) following the use of restraint by [police officers](#), and that officers are often quick to escalate the use of force against people of color and particularly those in mental health crisis.

The Network for Police Monitoring (Netpol) has documented an escalation of aggressive policing of pro-Palestine protests, with "young black and brown people at the sharpest end of police violence and harassment," and particular incidents of police violence documented against vulnerable people, including children and the elderly. A 2021 Netpol report on the [policing of Black Lives Matter protests](#) showed excessive use of force against protesters, including baton charges, horse charges, pepper spray and violent arrest.

In contrast, the recent wave of far-right violence has seen rioters being charged with offenses like violent disorder rather than heftier riot charges that carry longer prison sentences and were used against [Kill the Bill protesters in 2021](#). While a far-right rioter involved in racially motivated violence was given a 2.5-year sentence for trying to set a Merseyside police van on fire, Ryan Roberts, involved in the Kill the Bill protests in Bristol in 2021 [was convicted to 14 years for a similar offense](#).

Policing doesn't protect communities

Enhanced police powers will not make communities safer. Historical disparities have been institutionalized, and modern policing has been built to maintain the status quo in regard to racial, gendered and class hierarchies.

Many in our communities—exploited workers, [people of color](#) and ethnic/religious minorities, people who are vulnerable due to mental

illness or substance dependency, [queer and trans people](#), and [victims of ecological plunder](#)—have always suffered from these instituted dynamics. Police may have been called on to step in in recent days to stop rioters and defend mosques, but that does not negate the fact that policing does not protect many in our communities when it comes to a whole host of crimes, including rape, racial assault and Islamophobic abuse. If some groups in our communities aren't safe, then our communities aren't safe.

Official denials of institutionalized racism and performative claims of protecting communities from far-right mobs only serve to render invisible people's ongoing struggles for justice.

True safety requires confronting some hard truths: increasing police powers will only serve existing power structures that have historically been shaped by inequalities and forms of exploitation, further entrenching biases and deepening social divides. And this makes it far easier for the state to crackdown on legitimate dissent rising from these same communities.

Increased surveillance, including physically following protesters, facial recognition technology, CCTV tracking, the use of unmarked cars for stops, and the overuse of conspiracy charges (to commit public nuisance or disrupt infrastructures) are all already being leveraged against legitimate dissent.

Ecological protests have been repeatedly treated to the strong arm of the law. Now, in the wake of the riots, amped up "law and order" rhetoric is again being used. On August 8, for example, while proclaiming themselves "not against protest but against crime" [police arrested 22 protesters](#) in North Yorkshire who were preparing to transport infrastructure, sanitation and accessibility equipment to the upcoming climate camp at Drax power station.

We protect our communities

We have seen a groundswell of mass anti-fascist and anti-racist solidarity across the country as local communities have come together to protect migration centers, immigration lawyers, mosques and community centers. These motivating values have sustained the UK in this crisis moment.

Keeping our communities safe in the long-term requires that we not only confront hard truths, but that we work to build and sustain everyday systems of care and accountability in our communities. To do this, we must look and act beyond the current emergency to plot pathways for transformative justice from the ground up.

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