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Narratives, policies and responses to rioting in a multi-level governance system: The case study of Wales (UK)

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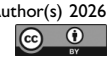
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Abstract

Wales (UK) has had two significant outbreaks of rioting in recent years. In 2021, there was public disorder in Mayhill (Swansea) during a vigil for a young person that had prematurely died. Then in 2023, there was rioting in Ely (Cardiff) after two young boys lost their lives during a police chase. State reactions to riots have become formulaic in terms of leaders condemning the disorder, and promising swift and punitive action. However, responses can be more fluid where states implement accommodating policies that aim to address riot related issues such as poverty and social exclusion. How states respond to rioting reveals important insights into their relationship with their citizens and in this paper, I provide an analysis of how the Welsh Government (WG) responded to the riots. Powers and responsibilities of the WG are devolved by the UK Government, and as I document within, criminal justice – a policy area that would typically be used to address rioting – is not a devolved policy and is reserved to the UK Government. However, this did not restrict the WG as riot issues were addressed through devolved policies. Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) was used as a conceptual framework to analyse the WGs response. MSF considers how narratives and policy solutions are articulated within discrete socio-political domains. A qualitative research strategy was used where I analysed nearly 80 different sources from various public domain platforms. My findings revealed that the WG addressed riot issues through community interventions focusing on tackling social exclusion in the respective communities. While this response to the riots represented the 'progressive' image that the WG has steadily

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cultivated, their approach was more nuanced and, on some occasions, explicitly punitive in how rioters should be treated.

Keywords
Criminal justice in Wales, multiple streams framework, riots, Wales, Welsh government

Introduction

Wales has had two outbreaks of rioting in recent years. First, in May 2021, there was disorder in Mayhill, Swansea following a community organised vigil for 19-year-old, Ethan Powell who had reportedly died from a drugs overdose (Dalling, 2022). Cars were set alight and rolled down Mayhill's steep hills, attending police vans and officers were attacked with missiles, and families on the Mayhill estate were targeted by rioters (Morris, 2021). Second, rioting broke out in Ely, Cardiff in May 2023, after Kyrees Sullivan, 16, and Harvey Evans, 15, died after being pursued by the police (Weaver et al., 2023). The boys appeared to be fleeing the police on an e-bike, when they were involved in what, South Wales Police (SWP) described as, a 'fatal road traffic incident' (SWP, 2023). Almost immediately after this happened up to 150 rioters set cars alight, and attacked police whom they believed had been responsible for their deaths (Morris, 2023a). While the causes of the riots were different in Mayhill and Ely, they shared the similarity of involving mostly young working-class people living in socially deprived public housing estates.

Riots are a common feature of any society and 'it is difficult to envision a future without' them (Bleich et al., 2010: 207). Understanding why riots happen in some locations compared to others has been the subject of extensive debate that is beyond the scope of this paper (see Drury et al., 2020 for an overview), but it is noteworthy that whilst many English cities experienced rioting in 2011, and then again (alongside Belfast) in 2024, there was no serious disorder in Wales. Riots happen in Wales though, and the dissent shown in Mayhill and Ely could, in many respects, be understood as means for 'oppressed citizens to secure a range of valuable political goals' which in the 'long-run further serves democracy' (Pasternak, 2019: 387, 396). How states respond to riots reveals significant insight about their 'tools to manage violent events, interactions with citizens who express anger and frustration, desire for social change, and concerns about law and order' (Bleich et al., 2010: 270).

Recent Western state responses to riots have been characterised by overt condemnation. In the immediate aftermath of the 'far-right' riots that happened across cities in England and Northern Ireland in 2024 the UK Prime Minister said

> Be in no doubt, those that participated in violence will face the full force of the law, the police will be making arrests, individuals will be held on remand, charges will follow, and convictions will follow … I guarantee that you [the rioters] will regret taking part in this disorder. (Starmer, 2024)

In France, President Macron faced accusations of 'authoritarianism' when he suggested a temporal suspension of teenagers using social media following riots in 2023

that were preceded by the police killing of teenager, Nahel M (Willsher, 2023). In response to rioting that happened in Paris after the Champions League football final in 2025, French Justice Minister, Gérald Darmanin proposed that rioters found guilty of attacking public officials should serve mandatory prison sentences (Stasiuk, 2025). While political condemnation is hardly surprising when it comes to riots, recently lawful protesters have been targeted by the state with often little if any distinction between the two. Amnesty International (2024) noted that pre-emptive state action across Europe, that has included severe restrictions on the right to protest as well as repressive policing, have led to rioting in Türkiye and Serbia rather than preventing it.

When Western states articulate a common criminality narrative post-rioting, they tend to implement punitive sanctions (Bleich et al., 2010). However, when there has been recognition of communal grievances prior to rioting, some states have responded more accommodatingly (Pasternak, 2019). McPhail and McCarthy (2005) have categorised state responses on a continuum that has different levels of accommodation and punishment but also where there can be an amalgamation of both, while Bleich et al. (2010) suggest that state responses are also influenced by the electorate, political national structures, or contextual factors attached to the rioters. While the responses of state leaders influence the type of action taken by a state, responding to riots typically involves multiple stakeholders. In addition to state government, they can include the criminal justice (CJ) system, local government, and community and third-party organisations.

In Wales, due to the constitutional arrangements of multi-level governance, where the Welsh Government (WG) has an asymmetrical governance partnership with the UK Government (UKG), collaboration between stakeholders can be convoluted (Birrell et al., 2023). The WG governs in several, but not all, policy areas of a sovereign state and policies that could be used to address rioting operate across WG and UKG jurisdictions. Policing and CJ policies are reserved to the UKG, but local government, welfare and health policies, that can be used to address riot related issues, are devolved WG powers. It is precisely because of this arrangement, that the organisation and delivery of CJ in Wales have begun to diverge from practice in England (see Jones et al. 2023), highlighting the need to examine Wales as a standalone entity.

While multi-level governance systems are viewed as a marker of good democratic practice, they are often wrought with issues due to their piecemeal development, intergovernmental tensions and uneven power dynamics (Birrell et al., 2023). Examples of these issues are evident across multi-level government systems in Europe. Most notable of these is in Catalonia (a self-governing region in north-east Spain), where the *Generalitat de Catalunya* have experienced a long-fractured relationship with the Spanish government. After a 2017 Catalan independence referendum that the government in Spain viewed as illegal, the Spanish government imposed direct rule over the area, where Spanish police raided Catalan government offices, and issued arrest warrants for multiple Catalan politicians (Wagner et al., 2019). These actions led to numerous demonstrations, and extensive rioting in Barcelona (Burgen and Jones, 2019). While these events in Catalonia could be considered rare in Western democracies in terms of their excessive violence compared with the relatively peaceful relations that exist across

numerous other multi-governmental states, it highlights how and why understanding these relationships are important within a political and criminological context.

My paper provides insight into how Wales, a non-sovereign state, responded to the riots in Mayhill and Ely. Using Kingdon's (1995) Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) as a heuristic tool to identify themes in relation to how the riots were problematised and to how they were addressed, I document the narratives generated from WG political actors and mainstream media, and the post-riot policy that followed. Before that, and to provide a useful context, I summarise how states have responded to rioting.

State responses to rioting

Havercroft (2021: 921) has suggested that rioting 'constitutes a form of politics'. Rioters 'use coercive measures' as a 'form of effective democratic participation when it helps to correct injustices' (Pasternak, 2019: 395). Yet, state actors commonly (and unsurprisingly) react with disdain in the aftermath of rioting often 'drawing the moral distinction between [rioters] and common criminals' (Pasternak, 2019: 418). While initial political reactions to rioting emphasise the violence and criminality, where states act swiftly and punitively (see Newburn, 2015), Bleich et al. (2010) argue that Western states can exercise both repressive and accommodating policies. They demonstrate, through an analysis of rioting in the UK and France, that state responses are characterised by their fluidity. Indeed, there has been a varied response to rioting in Western states with McPhail and McCarthy (2005) arguing that states can be placed on a continuum that ranges from punitive to accommodative responses. Bleich et al. (2010: 276) have categorised these as (a) primarily punitive, (b) primarily accommodative, (c) both punitive and accommodative, (d) influenced by electoral incentives, (e) demarcated by political-national structures of the state such as whether states are defined by their inclusivity or exclusivity or (f) 'fluctuate from case to case' depending on the contextual factors associated with 'each particular riot'. These perspectives are useful when it comes to analysing how Western states respond to public disorder, but Bleich et al. (2010) omit the intricacies of policy development in terms of how and in what circumstances policies are mooted and then implemented. Such decision making can reveal important insights in how states respond to riots.

Multiple streams framework

One of the most influential conceptual frameworks of analysing policy development has been the MSF. Its application is evident across various disciplines including criminology (see Brewster and Jones, 2019) and riots (see Newburn et al., 2018). Kingdon (1995) notes that MSF was shaped by another policy development framework, *the Garbage Can Model of Organisational Choice* which principally argues that the policy decision-making process in organisations resembles 'organised anarchies' which have numerous properties (Cohen et al., 1972: 1). One of these properties is 'stream independence' where ideas or solutions that pertain to an organisation emerge independently due to the typical structure of an organisation (Cohen et al., 1972). It is the 'streams' property that MSF is

noted for and where it has received 'most scholarly attention' (DeLeo et al., 2024: 3). MSF has three streams that operate 'according to [their] own dynamics and rules' (Newburn et al., 2018: 341). Kingdon (1995: 87) defines these as:

1. The *problem* stream where issues are defined and come to the attention of 'people in and around government',
2. The *political* stream where 'national mood, vagaries of public opinion', and ideological' matters affect the policy process, and
3. The *policy* stream which consists of debate from politicians, policy advisors and other external advisories on identifying and implementing policy solutions.

Each stream has multiple factors that affect policymaker attention and crucially the viability of *coupling* these streams to enable a *policy window* to open. Coupling is the process that unites the streams and where policies can be championed and agenda change can happen (Kingdon, 1995). Once two or more streams are considered coupled a policy window opens where 'advocates push their pet solutions to their special problems' (Kingdon, 2003: 165). Policies exist within what Kingdon (1995) terms a 'primeval soup' where a collection of solutions to problems are available and where policy communities ready themselves for the right opportunity to advocate. This advocation is often carried out by a *policy entrepreneur* during the policy window stage. Policy entrepreneurs 'invest considerable time, energy and resources to promote policy change' and are viewed as 'important catalysts for change' (DeLeo et al., 2024: 19). These entrepreneurs typically exist within policy communities, but state or local government officials can also be policy entrepreneurs due to their power of supporting or vetoing policies (Roberts and King, 1991).

MSF takes into consideration the dynamic factors that can affect policy making and has provided a more than useful way of understanding policies in several domains (DeLeo et al., 2024). This makes it a useful conceptual framework for understanding how governments discuss and respond to riots.

Methodology

A qualitative research strategy was used due to the emphasis it places on establishing meaning and interpretation of social phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In this study, I was interested in how Welsh political actors 'interpreted' the riots and what solutions they pursued. Desk-based research was employed due to its convenience. I wanted to explore how narratives of the riots were generated through public domains available online or in print. It is through these platforms that the public form an initial understanding of phenomenon, and where politicians can be persuaded to act (Kingdon, 1995). I acknowledged one of the main limitations of this approach would be that these secondary sources are contextual in terms being produced for an audience in a certain medium; however, I viewed this as advantageous as I was interested in how phenomena such as riots could be shaped by and within normative state structural institutions (Patton, 2014).

Data was sourced from broadcast, and social media; policy documents and statements from the WG and local government; and Welsh and UK parliamentary debates. These were deliberately selected due to their logicality as sources of data for discussion about the riots. This form of purposive sample is referred to as 'critical case sampling' due to the hegemonic influence these sources would have on generating narratives of the riots, and shaping government policies (Patton, 2014). I identified nearly 80 relevant sources from the various platforms sampled with most information coming from broadcast and social media. There were less than a handful of instances where the riots were discussed in Welsh and UK parliamentary debates, and not much more from WG and local government sources. This was not a surprise due to the proliferation of information that commonly emerges in the commodified broadcast and social media markets compared to the public sector which is subjected to a more regulated platform to discuss governmental issues.

I used Kingdon's (1995) MSF to help analyse data because of its conceptual focus on how narratives from politicians and other stakeholders influence policy decisions. Responses to riots can vary in term of states, accommodatingly addressing issues perceived to cause the problem, repressively punishing those that riot through the justice system or using a combination that can be influenced by an array of political factors (Bleich et al., 2010). An important part of understanding which direction a state (or substate in the case of Wales) takes is through an analysis of how policies are deliberated. Kingdon's MSF (1995) provides a fruitful conceptual framework in this respect as it takes into consideration the dynamic ways in which discreet 'streams' (problem, political and policy) of policy activity operate as well as the 'critical importance of policy entrepreneurs who facilitate coupling by highlighting linkages across' these streams during policy windows (DeLeo et al., 2024: 15).

My approach to analysing data included many of the techniques suggested by Bruan and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This included the initial coding process where I looked for repetitive descriptions in terms of how politicians described the riots. Furthermore, I looked for the similarities and differences in relation to how rioters were described as well as the cause of and prevention of further rioting. One of more useful applications of thematic analysis is its malleability of incorporating theory related material (Bruan and Clarke, 2006). In my case this concerned MSF, where I used the three streams to help organise the data first at its basic descriptive level before moving on to more substantive analytical categories. From this approach I identified three interrelated narratives of:

(1) Criminality,
(2) Policing in terms of response, organisation and relationship with communities, and
(3) Community in terms of how the community was described.

Prior to discussing these narratives, I provide necessary contextual information about governance and CJ in Wales.

Welsh government and criminal justice

Wales is a constituent nation of the UK that has a population of 3.1 million (ONS, 2021). The country has had its own government and parliament (the *Senedd*) since 1999 following a devolution referendum 2 years earlier (Welsh Parliament, 2025). Initially, the devolution settlement only provided Wales with limited secondary law-making powers, although, after another referendum on primary law-making powers in 2011 and changes to the law (see National Assembly for Wales, 2011; The Wales Act 2017), the WG now have powers to legislate in 20 different policy areas.[1]

CJ is reserved to the UKG. However, devolved policies such as local government, welfare and healthcare have a decisive influence on contemporary CJ policy including how riots are addressed (Kiely and Swirak, 2022). This has created a situation that Jones and Wyn Jones (2022) have labelled, the 'jagged edge' of the Welsh CJ system, as it operates within a UKG and WG policy framework. Jones and Wyn Jones (2022) have suggested that CJ practices in Wales are beginning to diverge from England due to the prevalent role that social policies have in preventing crime. Anti-social behaviour and community safety is now primarily overseen by WG 'Public Service Boards' rather than UKG 'Community Safety Partnerships' (Rabaiotti and Harrison, 2023). Also, policing in Wales is continuingly being influenced by the WG through different funding streams when compared with English police forces, and Welsh social policy legislation that requires police enforcement (see Jones et al., 2023). These differences in practice underscore the importance of Wales being studied as a distinct unit of analysis and not aggregated with the experiences of CJ in England.

Perspectives on justice from the WG and UKG have differed, historically. The UKG has traditionally been preoccupied with law and order, while the WG has supposedly been more progressive (Jones and Wyn Jones, 2022). It is in this backdrop that CJ operates in Wales, and it is within this context that public services and the WG respond to matters that are of national interest – such as rioting.

Framing the problem

Criminality

According to Kingdon (1995) 'problems' within the MSF problem stream can come to the attention of policy makers either through national *indicators* (e.g., trends identified in governmental statistics), evaluations of existing policy (which is termed *feedback*) or *focusing events*. Focusing events 'can come in various forms' but they typically include large-scale disasters of which riots could be considered an example (DeLeo et al., 2024: 17). The Mayhill and Ely riots were examples of focusing events that were initially and primarily understood as a crime problem. National UK media outlets characterised the rioters as 'thugs' and 'yobs' (Braddick and Duggan, 2021; Grealish and Johnson, 2023; Lewis, 2023). Reports suggested that young people deliberately 'provoke[d] police' (Bolton and Murphy, 2023) while others livestreamed the events on social media 'making fun of what was happening' (PA Media, 2023).

Reactions from politicians were comparable in tone to the media. In the aftermath of Mayhill, the then First Minister (FM) Mark Drakeford tweeted that the 'violent scenes in Swansea were completely unacceptable and [would] not be tolerated anywhere in Wales' (*Prif Weinidog*,[2] 2021). In a WG written statement, this exact message was repeated by the then Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt (Hutt, 2021). These initial reactions from the WG are reflective of liberal governmental responses to public disorder (Ignatieff, 1981). In a method to appease public concern rioting is simply condemned which can be understood as the WG asserting their (non-sovereign) state position as a societal moral purveyor (Reus-Smit, 2001).

Reaction to the disorder in Ely was conciliatory in tone due to the deaths of Kyrees Sullivan and Harvey Evans. In a social media post, Drakeford, who in addition to being FM was the local politician in Ely said 'a fuller understanding' of the rioting was needed and did not condemn the behaviour in the way he had after Mayhill (Drakeford, 2023). The WGs initial response after the Ely disturbances clearly differs from their 'no tolerance for disorder in Wales' message after Mayhill. Evidently, the deaths of the two teenage boys before the onset of the disorder in Ely influenced this *volte face* response with such incidents having a powerful impact on the public mood (Rosie and Gorringe, 2009).

Kingdon (2003) suggests that one key element of generating policy discussion within the politics stream is the *national mood*. This is described as 'a large number of people thinking along common lines' (Kingdon, 2003: 146). The actions of politicians and policy makers often dictate responses which is clear in the WGs initial response. However, an alternative reading into this response reflects an additional element of MSFs political stream which is *interest groups* where stakeholders must calculate a 'balance of support' in terms of the narrative or policy response not compromising the support of constituents (Kingdon, 2003: 150). The WGs response could therefore be understood as being calculative. The Ely riots happened in the FMs constituency which could have undermined Drakeford's competency as a local politician. Such factors are not unusual in influencing state positions and as della Porta (1995) and Bleich et al. (2010) identify, governments in Europe and North America have applied partisan rhetoric and policies in the aftermath of protests that are considerate of the electoral positions of rioters.

Policing

SWP came under immense scrutiny after the disorder. Several Mayhill residents claimed their lives were at risk because of the perceived lack of urgency in SWPs response (BBC News, 2021). On the morning after the Ely disorder, SWP issued a statement that said a 'serious traffic collision' had occurred and two teenage boys had died (SWP, 2023). SWP said they responded to the collision and 'remained on the scene to manage large scale disorder' (SWP, 2023). However, several posts on social media suggested that the boys died while being pursued by SWP (BBC News, 2023). SWP did not address this claim in their initial statement but during the disorder they did call for people to 'avoid speculation [of a police chase]' (PA Media, 2023). In an interview, Alun Michael, the then SWP Police and Crime Commissioner (SWPPCC), dismissed claims of a police

chase and said that 'there were rumours – and those rumours became rife – of a police chase which was not the case' (Matthews and Hale, 2023). However, CCTV footage soon circulated on social media that appeared to show a SWP response van chasing the teenagers shortly before their fatal crash (John and Gogarty, 2023). Despite the circulation of this, SWP continued to dismiss that it was connected to the boys' deaths (Deans, 2023).

The SWPCC did eventually concede that SWP most likely chased the teenagers (Morris, 2023b). Michael's supportive and uncritical stance toward SWP angered the then local UKG politician, Kevin Brennan. Brennan argued that Michael was neglecting one of the core responsibilities of a PCC which was to exercise scrutiny over policing (Deans, 2023). WG politician, Heledd Fychan claimed that Michael 'acted as a spokesperson for SWP rather than the community' and that before commenting any further he should have 'ensure[d] that the facts [were] independently established' (Deans, 2023). Drakeford defended Michael, commenting that he was 'entitled' to relay information that had been provided to him by SWP but remarked that he was 'not quite sure' that Michael was 'relaying the best information' (PA Reports, 2023).

Community

Politicians, SWP and the media were keen to highlight that the Mayhill and Ely disorder was not a reflection of the perceived togetherness of these communities. While it was highlighted that both had suffered from historic economic hardship, as well as stigmatisation, people that lived there had positive communal values. This narrative was reflected in media reports that stressed how these communities condemned the disorder, and how it brought more distress to the victims' families (Morris, 2021; Johnson, 2023).

Reports of community clean-ups and support from local businesses helped generate a community spirit narrative (Swansea Council, 2021a; John and Ahmed, 2023). This suggested that these communities were defined by their character, togetherness and inclination to support each other. They were the personification of traditional communities that had 'shared interests, identity, and networks' (Aull Davies, 2003: 3). Drakeford praised Ely's community spirit, suggesting that the community were 'an asset and not a problem to be solved' and this was largely due to the 'enormous sense of community identity' (Nation.Cymru, 2024).

While this sense of community was used to conjure a positive image, the shared identity or commonality of people living in Ely and Mayhill was that they had suffered from prolonged economic hardship. Hill et al. (2021) have argued that informal community support networks that solidify a 'community identity' are commonplace in areas that experience poverty and deprivation, however such networks are unstable because they are also suffering. According to the *Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation* (WIMD), areas of Mayhill and Ely suffer from some of the highest levels of deprivation in the respective cities of Swansea and Cardiff and have some the highest levels of deprivation in Wales (Welsh Government, 2025) (see Table 1).

Drakeford recognised that poverty and social exclusion had been wearisome in Ely and that the WG could have done more to alleviate these issues (Carrell and Morris,

Table 1. The WIMD overall deprivation rank for Ely and Mayhill (Welsh Government, 2025).

Lower super output area[a]	Overall deprivation rank within city[b]	Overall deprivation rank within Wales[c]
Ely 5	1	3
Ely 2	3	8
Ely 4	4	17
Mayhill 2[d]	3	19
Mayhill 3	4	20
Ely 3	6	24
Mayhill 1	5	26
Ely 1	7	40
Mayhill 6	8	43
Mayhill 5	9	51

[a]Lower Super Output Area (LSOAs) are small geographical wards within Wales.
[b]In Cardiff there are 214 LSOAs, and in Swansea there are 150 LSOAs.
[c]In Wales there are 1,917 LSOAs.
[d]Mayhill does not have any LSOA categorisations despite it being recognised as a ward within Swansea. Instead the WIMD lists areas in Mayhill as 'Townhill'. Townhill is the adjoining community situated to the west of Mayhill. I have altered the names of the Townhill LSOAs to Mayhill as these areas are situated in Mayhill.

2023). However, Drakeford said that the accent of blame should be on the UKG due to austerity policies which had affected social security benefits (a reserved UKG policy), and generated a below inflation UKG budget for Wales (referred to as the Barnett Formula[3]) (Carrell and Morris, 2023). Opposition members in the Senedd believed the WG should have been held accountable. After Mayhill, WG politician Sioned Williams argued that the disorder was unsurprising given the legacy of child poverty in Wales which has consistently been ranked amongst the worst of the UK nations (Welsh Parliament, 2021; Keir and Wrathall, 2023). Williams argued that the WGs failure to address this was a 'national scandal' and that previous attempts to 'address the issue [had] failed' (Welsh Parliament, 2021).

Knaggård and Hildingsson (2023) document how multilevel governments and the dynamics that exist between governments can influence the rigidity of policy windows. From the WGs perspective, the UKG were culpable in the riots due to the WGs perceptions of unfair funding, and that social security is a UKG policy. Goyal (2022) notes that policy change in multilevel governance systems tends to be orchestrated from the sovereign state and rarely from the relatively powerless devolved region or nation. Despite the riots being a *focusing event* in Wales, this was not the case in the UK. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the opening of a policy window in Wales due to the sustained pressure that the riots were connected to social deprivation and poverty which the WG has governmental responsibility.

Policy developments

Using the same headings that characterised the initial understanding the riots, I now discuss how this was addressed through policy, and CJS outcomes.

Criminality

The Mayhill CJ proceedings concluded in December 2022. Thirteen of 31 people charged in connection with the riots were under the age of 18, and 27 of these were charged with the offence of riot (BBC News, 2022). Three of the 13 young offenders received youth justice custodial sentences (SWP, 2022a). Four of the young offenders were sentenced to custody in a Young Offender Institution, while 14 adults over the age of 21 were sentenced to prison for a combined total of over 80 years (Morris, 2022). These custodial terms appeared to be motivated by the principle of deterrence. In court, the sentencing judge said there was 'a public duty to send out a clear message … that such behaviour [would] not be tolerated and [would] be appropriately punished' and that the 'sentences [were] intended to deter others from acting in a similar way in the future' (Evans, 2022). Comments from the judge closely resembled those made from Welsh politicians, in terms of disorder in Wales not being tolerated with an implication that retributive punishment must follow (Hutt, 2021; Prif Weindog, 2021). Far from suggesting that the WGs initial reaction to the disorder influenced sentencing in this case, it is noteworthy that this message of 'no tolerance' and retribution was shared by the courts even after extensive legal examination.

After the Ely disorder, SWP arrested 42 people (CPS, 2024; 2025a). Thirty eight of the 42 were charged with the offence of riot which carries a 10-year maximum sentence, while the remaining four were charged with criminal damage. Nine of the 42 charged were children aged between 15 and 17, eight of these were charged with rioting, while the other child was charged with criminal damage (Lewis, 2024). In February 2025, the eight teenagers charged with rioting pleaded guilty and were all sentenced to a 12-month community sentence (Griffith, 2025). Eight of the adults charged with rioting pleaded guilty and in September 2025 their court cases started in Newport Crown Court with the outcome expected by the end of 2025 (Bird, 2025).

Initial reactions to the riots from politicians as well as the media in Mayhill predominantly focused on how communities were harmed and that the rioters should be retributively punished. It is from this perspective that 'policy makers' (or the CJS in this case) respond to the 'perceptions of what [most] people think' should be done and therefore policymakers are responding to the *national mood* element of MSFs 'politics' stream (DeLeo et al., 2024: 53). The tone of the WGs initial response to the riots in Mayhill and punitive response from the CJS provides an illustration of the shared punitive values that exist across British nations (Moore, 2014). It suggests a degree of convergence between the WG and UKG in relation to views of retributive punishment.

Policing

After it became established that two SWP officers were involved in pursuing Sullivan and Evans in Ely, SWP referred themselves to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) (Palumbo and Pigott, 2023). The IOPC, which is an England and Wales policing accountability body, served the two officers with gross misconduct orders and pursued a criminal charge of dangerous driving for the driver (IOPC, 2024), although this did not

lead to SWP suspending the officers (Matthews, 2023). In spring of 2025, the IOPC stated that they were still investigating complaints made by the families of the deceased boys (IOPC, 2025), and as of December 2025 there has not been an update. The CPS announced in April 2025 that there was insufficient evidence to bring criminal charges against the officer that drove the police vehicle (CPS, 2025b). Alun Michael who denied that there was a police chase in Ely defended this position in a UKG led Welsh Affairs Select Committee in November 2023 and said that he was 'satisfied [that he] responded to the best of [his] knowledge because [he] thought it was very important for the public to know what the current status of knowledge and information was' (Parliamentlive.tv, 2023).

Welsh public funds were used to finance independent scrutiny of the Mayhill riots. A panel of three lay experts assessed what happened and their findings were published in a report titled the *Independent Learning Review* (ILR) (Evans et al., 2021). The ILRs remit was to 'assess internal debriefs written by [SWP] and [Swansea] Council' (Evans et al., 2021: 1) and is not regarded as an official inquiry. Much of the ILR focused on police failings and it is this that I draw upon. The ILRs objective was to generate 'future joint learning and consideration of future practice' in relation to how SWP … responded (Evans et al., 2021: 1).

The ILR concluded that SWP were ill-equipped to police the riots. Considered within the MSF political stream, the ILR addressed *national mood* concerns as it seemingly provided a more authoritative explanation of the riot, with SWP being held to account. While police forces can be reticent when it comes to formal scrutiny of their operations, such opportunities are conversely welcomed by police chiefs due to the influence they can have on repairing public faith in the police (Cronin and Reicher, 2009). According to Evans et al. (2021), SWP had a decisive influence in the commissioning the ILR and in this regard they can be viewed as a 'policy entrepreneur' 'investing considerable resource to promote … change' that MSF suggests is characteristic within the policy stream (DeLeo et al., 2024: 19). Furthermore, the WGs backing of the ILR (and fellow policy entrepreneur) ensured the report was commissioned.

The ILR identified:

- Police information and intelligence used to rationalise decision making was contradictory.
- There was an 'apparent lack of understanding of the situation well into the incident's escalation' (Evans et al., 2021: 9).
- There was no clear public order command structure.
- A 'critical incident' should have been called sooner.
- There was not an audit trial of why some police units were deployed and where they were deployed.
- A request to call resources from across the SWP force area was twice declined.

After the ILR was published, SWP acknowledged their faults and issued a public apology (SWP, 2022b). They said that despite their 'excellent reputation' in policing public order events, they recognised that they 'got [their] response wrong' (SWP, 2022b). When

reflecting on their mistakes, SWP indicated that they would 'use the recommendations from the ILR with oversight from the College of Policing' (SWP, 2022b).

While SWPs willingness to be independently investigated would have been welcomed by the public, the report's remit needs to be considered in terms of its impact to change policing. It was not a state inquiry, nor was it conducted by a policing accountability body. SWPs reference to the College of Policing (an organisation that oversees professionalism of policing in England and Wales) in their apology statement subtly positions their allegiance to the existing England and Wales policing structure. This demonstrates the lack of authority that the ILR holds in terms of its recommendations being implemented. Furthermore, it sharpens focus on the utility of independent reports that are organised in a devolved polity highlighting limitations when it comes to reserved policy matters such as policing. However, this reflection needs to be treated with caution. All police in Wales and England are afforded operational independence and while recommendations from accountability bodies are typically heeded, there is a degree of autonomy in terms of how and in what way they are incorporated in practice Lister and Rowe (2016).

Community

In Ely and Mayhill, there was a commitment by the local government, and WG to invest in communal amenities (Carrell and Morris, 2023). In August 2021, the regional community safety partnership organised a community event day in Mayhill. This event was organised with the objective of 'bringing the community together' through 'free activities, entertainment, and information stalls' (Swansea Council, 2021b). It coincided with an announcement that Swansea Council would be 'investing heavily in sports, leisure, environmental, and businesses improvements' (Swansea Council, 2021b), and in 2022 there was evidence of this investment with the opening of a children's park as well as investment into the local community hub (Swansea Council, 2022a; 2022b).

One of most notable images of the Mayhill riots was the car being pushed down the area's steep hill. Cars had been pushed down this hill before and despite complaints from residents, it was not until after the riot that Swansea Council addressed it by erecting a concrete barrier that would physically prevent it from happening again (BBC Wales Investigates: Mayhill Riot, 2021). Arguably extensive media coverage of the car incident fuelled the *national mood* which prompted policymakers to act in 'favour of a project' which would be supported by the public (DeLeo et al., 2024: 20). Additionally, Swansea Council provided financial aid to parents from low-income families, under the *Flying Start* scheme (Welsh Government, 2024).[4] Local authorities in Wales deliver this service and make decisions on how it operates. Swansea Council's decision to reinforce this policy provision reflected growing consensus that the disorder was, at least in part, due to economic and social deprivation of some communities (Evans et al., 2021). Kingdon (1995) suggests that solutions to issues within the problem stream are more likely to be supported if there are *indicators* that clearly show what the problem is. Indicators are 'objective or numerical measures or metrics of a problem' (DeLeo et al., 2024: 16). As evidenced in the 2025 WIMD deprivation statistics, Mayhill is one of

the most impoverished areas in Wales (see Table 1) which provided the rationale for *Flying Start*'s implementation as a policy to address the problem.

Following the Ely disorder, the WG, Cardiff Council and the SWPCC announced funding for a community-led action group that would be coordinated by Action for Caerau and Ely (ACE) (Hutt, 2023). ACE was launched in 2011 as a community-based charity that helps residents of Ely (and the neighbouring community of Caerau) with crisis support, health and wellbeing, and arts and culture projects (ACE, 2024a). Its emergence coincided with the cessation of the WGs *Communities First* policy which ACE credited as a successful initiative (ACE, 2024a). Communities First was a WG policy that operated from 2001 until 2017. Its purpose was to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life in Wales' most deprived areas through regeneration projects (National Assembly for Wales, 2007). Despite its success in Ely, Communities First closed due to the design of the programme where the WG set unfeasible targets with limited resources (National Assembly for Wales, 2017). These technical feasibility and financial viability issues closed the policy window for Communities First to be reintroduced nationally, but the 'focusing event' in Ely reopened a 'problem' stream where funding was allocated to ACE. As a 'policy entrepreneur', ACE who had fulfilled the role and gap left from the termination of Communities First had already 'invested considerable time, energy and resources' into the community of Ely, and were naturally positioned to advocate on the community's behalf (DeLeo et al., 2024: 19).

In 2024, ACE held consultations with people living in Ely to address what concerned them. The outcome of this resulted in over 40 actions being implemented. These were grouped into six themes of:

1. Children and young people
2. Community safety
3. Spaces and the environment
4. Health and wellbeing
5. Employment, living standards and cost of living
6. Communication and community building (ACE, 2024b)

ACEs action plan predominately focused on providing support for young people. In addition to delivering these schemes, ACE are assisted by a range of public bodies and charities including Cardiff Council, the Community Safety Partnership, Health, and Education services and SWP (ACE, 2024b). Its approach is reflective of longstanding policy initiatives that are rooted in social crime prevention where an emphasis is placed on identifying and mitigating risk in numerous social settings such as family life and in education (Crawford, 1998; Farrington, 2010). For example, ACE has planned risk monitoring and intervention in relation to school attendance, where it plans to focus on families and 'children growing up in relative poverty' with parenting courses being offered as well as acutely assessing when and what type of support is needed for children (ACE, 2024b: 16).

The funded ACE project, and the investment in Mayhill predominately aim to ameliorate issues of social deprivation and poverty. In the context of how states address riots,

these appear to be accommodating measures (Bleich et al., 2010). However, ACEs enhanced responsibilities around community safety present a different dimension to that of a response that is purely accommodative. Community fears around anti-social behaviour and crime often consume community partnerships like ACE and there is a real risk that ACE, despite its longstanding tradition of providing support for the community of Ely, could soon act an organisation that mostly responds to concerns of crime (Crawford and Evans, 2017).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have documented the narratives and policy responses of recent riots in Wales. There has been a long tradition of multi-disciplinary studies that have explored rioting, and my paper contributes to this area in terms of its focus on how state (or sub-state) officials understand rioting and what policies they believe will remedy these issues. Using the MSF conceptual framework my research has documented the intricacies of how the riots were framed and what solutions were implemented by the WG and other devolved public bodies. Below, I summarise my findings using the three streams as sub-headings before providing a conclusion on Wales' approach of responding to the riots.

Problem stream

The riots drew attention to problems of both lawlessness, as well as deprivation and poverty in what MSF refers to as a *focusing event* (Kingdon, 1995). A focusing event has a persuasive influence to initiate policy changes because of its magnitude in raising public awareness. Due to their rarity, riots attract public interest where there is an expectancy of the state to respond, and this was no different in Wales. While initial attention was focused on the act of rioting and addressing issues through the CJS, stakeholders looked at other explanations for the problem to be suitably addressed. The MSF suggests that policymakers sometimes refer to objective measurements or *indicators* to help provide a rationale for tackling the problem (Kingdon, 2003). In both cases, the WG pointed towards indicators of social deprivation and poverty that could have contributed to a sense of frustration felt by rioters, and the respective communities in general.

Politics stream

The initial responses to the riots reflected the *national mood* in terms of the abhorrence of the violence in Mayhill and the sadness about the two young people that died in Ely. In the former, the media narratives of chaotic collective violence drew condemnation from the WG that such behaviour was not acceptable in any circumstances. This finding is comparable to most Western states and is unsurprising given the role of a government acting as a societal moral purveyor (Reus-Smit, 2001). Contrastingly, the WGs tone changed when responding to the Ely riots because of the deaths of Sullivan and Evans. Once again this was a comparable finding in terms of conditional factors affecting government responses, where the WG were politically compelled to respond in a compassionate manner (Rosie and Gorringe, 2009).

Policy stream, entrepreneurs and coupling

Kingdon (1995) suggests that policy windows are more likely to open when there is an established connection between two or more streams (known as *coupling*). While Kingdon (1995) stresses that there is no linear process to coupling in terms of these connections being made in a particular order, my research shows that factors in the problem and politics streams need to be present first before the policy stream is initiated. The WGs response to the riots in Mayhill and Ely attempted to address social deprivation and poverty issues. In Mayhill, there was an independent review of the policing and local government response, community regeneration projects, and targeted welfare assistance for young low-income families under the *Flying Start* policy. In Ely, a well-established community organisation, ACE, was provided WG funding to help facilitate their existing role of supporting the community with educational and employment opportunities but also monitor anti-social behaviour in partnership with the CSP, local government and SWP.

Policy entrepreneurs played an integral role in these developments. In Mayhill, these consisted of SWP in terms of initiating the ILR. Despite the limited impact of the report, the symbolic action of the review presented the impression that SWP (and the local government) were being held to account which goes some way of addressing the *focusing event* of the riot and *national mood* that the policing response was inadequate. In Mayhill and Ely, there were already suitable policies to address social deprivation and poverty, both of which were championed by public bodies. In Mayhill, the local government acted as the policy entrepreneur implementing Flying Start, while ACE, with the financial assistance from the WG, was the key policy entrepreneur.

Responding to riots in multi-level governance Wales

There is an intrinsic link between the actions of government and CJ outcomes, yet most scholarship tends to focus on sovereign and not multi-level government systems. My research provides a contribution to the rarely explored space of the Welsh criminal justice, that due to its convoluted structure and relationship with the UK state, has shown signs of divergence from practices in England (Jones and Wyn-Jones, 2022; Jones et al., 2023). My findings show the autonomy that the WG and other devolved bodies have in relation to responding to criminological issues (predominately through devolved social policies). This is evident in the WGs decision to fund community partnerships in Ely and the local government choices in Mayhill to extend a WG social care policy. The WG response to the riots could mostly be understood as an accommodating one (see Bleich et al., 2010) due to their predominant focus of addressing issues of poverty and social deprivation. This approach aligns with the WGs acclaimed progressive governance approach (Evans et al., 2021). However, as I have demonstrated in this paper there is more nuance to the WGs approach.

First, the more passive position adopted by the WG in relation to the disorder at Ely could have been motivated by electoral incentives (as opposed to progressive intentions) which has been a characteristic of other European states regardless of political ideology

(della Porta, 1995). Second, the initial responses by the WG to the Mayhill riots have an air of familiarity when compared with recent Western state responses. It was condemning in tone, and interestingly it corresponded with the retributively motivated punishment handed out by the courts (Evans, 2022). Whether the WG is indeed, like other state-governments in their attitude towards rioting and criminality needs further examination, but my findings hint that Wales' response is reflective of liberal governments that aim to appease public concern in the aftermath of rioting, and where punitive responses are sought in most contexts (Ignatieff, 1981). Furthermore, this reflexive deference to administer punishment indicates a shared perspective on CJ with the UK state (Moore, 2014) which contrasts to the WGs 'progressive' image (Moore, 2014; Jones and Wyn Jones, 2022). Therefore, findings in my research suggest a degree of convergence certainly in relation to attitudes around crime and punishment.

Third, despite the accommodative endeavours attached to ACE, its remit has a dual purpose of helping people but also preventing anti-social behaviour and low-level criminality. In community partnerships, it is these latter issues that take precedence and consume the concerns of residents (Crawford and Evans, 2017). It would be slightly misleading to categorise the response to the Ely riots as firmly 'accommodative' when ACE and its partners have powers to 'police' the community and potentially continue the ostracisation of predominately young working-class boys in the same way that SWP have been accused of (see Booth, 2021).

The core intention of my paper was to analyse Wales' response to rioting through an intensive analysis of policy making decisions (Kingdon, 1995). Unlike the work of others that have had the benefit of time to fully review the impact of policies post-riots, my paper is clearly limited in that respect. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it acts as a springboard in terms of (1) analysing policy decisions through MSF conceptual framework and (2) further researching devolved nations, territories or municipalities that have the power to shape riots (and CJ) policy responses.

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The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Notes

1. Devolved policies include agriculture, forestry, animals, plants and rural development; ancient monuments and historic buildings; culture; economic development; education; environment; fire and rescue; food; health; highways and transport; housing; local government; public administration; social welfare; sport; some forms of taxation; town and country planning; water and flood defenses; Welsh language and Welsh Parliament.
2. '*Prif Weinidog'* is the head of government in Wales in the Welsh language. Its direct translation into English is 'Prime Minister', although this translation is not used when communicating in English. Instead, 'First Minister' is used to describe the head of government in Wales.
3. The Barnett formula is the method used by the UKG to fund devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The devolved budget is calculated 'each year by using the previous year's budget as a starting point and then adjusting it based on increases or decreases in comparable spending per person in England' (Cheung, 2020). In comparison with Northern Ireland and Scotland, there has been 'pronounced political dissatisfaction' with the Barnett formula in Wales due to its failure 'to take real account of needs' of funding public services (Birrell et al., 2023: 57).
4. Flying Start supports families with children under the age of 4 in the most deprived areas of Wales. Support includes part-time childcare for 2–3-year-olds, increased monitoring and access to healthcare, as well as parenting support with the main aim to ensure children are healthy and reaching their potential (Welsh Government, 2024).

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