

Eagle-Eye of the Yard can spot rioters by their ears

A team of police officers with staggering memories for faces are naming and helping to catch rioters seen on even the blurriest CCTV footage

Jack Grimston Published: 20 November 2011

CCTV images have led to the arrest of suspects from the summer's riots (Dan Istitene)

If you were caught on camera in last summer's London riots, you had better hope you never meet Idris the Jailer.

Idris Bada, a detention officer at Charing Cross police station in central London, is one of an elite squad with exceptional memories for faces who are spearheading the police campaign to identify tens of thousands of rioters' faces caught by CCTV cameras.

About 20 of the officers, known as "super-recognisers", have so far been assembled by the Met. They are ranked in a league table, in which the current number one, based in Greenwich, southeast London, identified 17 rioters at a single sitting last week. He recognised the faces on his screen as people he had seen in the course of duty or on police databases. They are all now likely to face arrest.

The flood of CCTV images of the riots in English cities now being combed by officers is forcing police across the country to improve their methods for identifying faces quickly — and super-recognisers have so far proved the Met's most effective weapons.

Many were already noted for their skills before the riots but have now come into their own. The top 10 — out of a force of 34,000 constables and support officers — have been responsible for identifying about one in 16 of the 3,060 London rioters arrested so far.

Their uncanny ability allows them to recognise people arrested at their station years ago from a single blurred image. Even when the subject's face is partly obscured, the super-recognisers can identify them from their eyes.

Detective Chief Inspector Mick Neville, who runs the super-recognisers team, said: "We have over 4,000 images and these are increasing by 200 or so a week, so by Christmas we could have 5,000-plus and there is no intention to stop viewing the thousands of hours of CCTV still to be done. We will identify as many as we can."

Neville started to make use of the super-recognisers long before the riots and in 2009 a single officer was responsible for 3% of all CCTV identifications by the Met.

The constable, who declined to be named, patrols London's transport system. He has received an official commendation for his achievements.

Neville is now trying to find more super-recognisers by conducting tests in which officers will be given 500 images of suspects to look through in 45 minutes to see how many they recognise.

Those that do best will be asked to set aside an hour or two a week to go through new files of suspects in their area. Neville hopes that, by allowing them to concentrate, they will be able to perfect their innate skills.

When The Sunday Times was given access to the unit's headquarters at Marylebone police station last week, Bada, a top-five super-recogniser with 44 identifications this year, had just notched up another — although this one was relatively easy, as he was a prolific troublemaker who had passed through Charing Cross's cells only a few days before.

Although he was photographed from the front, Bada said: "I can see him just from the nose. Sometimes I'll go for the height of the ears, or the way the eyes are set and how the eyebrows are set in relation to the ears, then I'll compensate [for the angle of the camera relative to the face]."

He added that identifying had become a hobby in quiet moments at his station.

"When my babies [the detainees] are safely tucked up in bed at night, I'll start looking through pictures, although it gets quite hard to concentrate if there's lots of banging on the doors and stuff," said Bada. "It's personal for me. I'm kind of addicted."

Martin Lotriet, a robbery specialist based in Haringey, scene of some of the worst rioting, managed to identify one rioter whose face was obscured except for his eyes as someone who had been arrested several times previously and brought into his station. The man cannot be named because his case is still in progress.

Once CCTV footage has been analysed and stills of the faces taken, they are circulated in an online police bulletin called Caught on Camera, as well as being released on websites. Neville believes the riots are leading to CCTV being treated as a forensic science in the same way as fingerprints or DNA.

Because of the large number of images published in the media, identifications by members of the public have played a bigger part than in most inquiries. But the ability of officers to match up faces in CCTV images with people on police files or in their own memories is playing the key role.

The fact that identification is so heavily dependent on whether or not a suspect is known to the police is a big factor in the finding that 75% of those aged over 18 charged following the riots have had previous convictions. This figure was used by Ken Clarke, the justice secretary, to argue that the dominance of reoffenders in the disorders showed prisons were "dreadful" at rehabilitating criminals.

Neville said computerised face-recognition technology had so far proved of limited value, although he has had some luck with software, designed by the Surrey-based company Omniperception, that can follow individuals in moving footage by tracking the logos on their clothes.

The term super-recognisers was coined in a study two years ago by Richard Russell of Harvard University and Brad Duchaine, then at University College London. Russell plans to publish more research soon.

Many aspects are still unexplained, for example why all the officers so far identified with the skill are male.

Josh Davis, senior psychology lecturer at Greenwich University who is to publish a study of the Met's super-recognisers, said: "It seems it is more of a born rather than bred ability, although you may be able to enhance it by training.

"If the police start identifying and encouraging these officers, they can develop them for use in work such as surveillance or policing demos so they can spot troublemakers if the march gets out of control."

The part of the brain responsible for facial recognition — the fusiform face area, in the upper part of the temporal lobe on the brain's right-hand side — has long been known about, but some scientists believe the existence of special powers of super-recognition is unproven.

Colin Blakemore, professor of neuroscience at Oxford, said: "This is interesting, but my immediate response is to be a bit sceptical. Perceptual abilities do vary, but often not as much as anecdotal reports suggest.

"Photographic memory, for example, is often claimed and is extremely difficult to demonstrate. I was working on it a few years ago, trying to track down people with demonstrable photographic memory and finding literally nobody, nobody whose memory stood up to the test.

"But if these police officers really are much better than the average, it would be really interesting to find out why."