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## Southport Social Media Case Sparks Outcry as Taxi Driver Jailed for 7.5 Years

August 1, 2025

– Categories: *Breaking News*



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A British taxi driver has been sentenced to seven and a half years in prison for running a Telegram channel that spread false claims about a deadly knife attack in Southport last year. The decision has reignited concerns over the balance between public safety and free speech, particularly in light of comparatively lenient sentences for violent offenders across the country.

Andrew McIntyre, a 42-year-old from Merseyside, was convicted of inciting disorder through digital communication after posting misleading information in the aftermath of a 2024 knife attack that left three children dead. The incident, carried out by a 17-year-old, triggered unrest in the seaside town after unverified rumours about the attacker's background spread online. McIntyre's posts were said to have played a central role in stoking tensions, contributing to riots that resulted in several injuries and damaged property.

The sentence has prompted sharp criticism due to its severity relative to punishments handed down for violent crimes. In a recent case, a Rochdale gang leader found guilty of child rape received a nine-year sentence, just 18 months longer than McIntyre's term for non-violent online offences. Some critics have questioned whether penalties for online offences are proportional.

According to a 2023 report by the UK Home Office, prosecutions related to social media content have surged by over 300% since 2019. This trend reflects a broader tightening of online speech laws in recent years. Some advocacy groups have been cited as influential in shaping prosecutorial strategies, particularly in hate speech and misinformation cases.

However, the approach remains controversial. A 2021 study published in the *Journal of Law and Society* found that while reported hate incidents rose by 15% after similar legal reforms were implemented, there was no measurable reduction in actual violence. This has raised questions about the effectiveness of punitive measures targeting online expression.

McIntyre's sentencing marks one of the harshest penalties ever issued in the UK for social media-related offences. His legal team is expected to appeal the decision, arguing that the punishment is "grossly disproportionate" and undermines the principle of free expression in a democratic society.

The case continues to stir debate nationwide, with civil liberties groups having raised concerns about the potential impact on public discourse. Meanwhile, the government maintains that firm action against online incitement is necessary to prevent further disorder and protect public order.