Responding to Football Disorder:
Policing the British Football Fan

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Abstract

Football hooliganism has been prevalent in British and European football throughout its existence as a professional sport (White, 1982; Rookwood and Buckley, 2007). The phenomenon has resulted in numerous consequences to varying degrees of severity. The 1985 Heysel stadium disaster, in which thirty-nine fans were killed, serves as one of the most significant tragedies in this regard involving English hooligans (Young, 1986). One issue that has helped shape the characteristics of football disorder is the approach adopted by police in attempting to combat the phenomenon. This paper focuses on fan and police perspectives regarding how the problem has been responded to in this context. Interviews were conducted with three experienced supporters from three different Premiership clubs, as well as the football intelligence officer (FIO) at each of these clubs. In response to questions, fans argued that policing in the UK is different to that experienced in European football, with the largely covert and intelligence-led approach in the former considered more appropriate than the more aggressive overt style of the latter. Supporters also claimed that although the police are often disliked, they are perceived to be an important part of the match experience, and can prove useful agents of social control, protection and information. The FIO respondents contended that the developments in legislation have been vital in helping the police control football hooliganism. These participants also perceive British police forces to have succeeded in developing a consistent, standardised and effective model of managing hooliganism. The paper concludes by highlighting the requirement for further work on the prevention of hooliganism in Britain, relating particularly to the issue of self-policing.

NB Acronyms used in this article:
FIO Football Intelligence Officer
FBO Football Banning Order
IVF Interview with fan (1,2,3)
IVP Interview with Police (1,2,3)

Introduction

The disorderly behaviour of football spectators, commonly referred to as ‘football
hooliganism; has been a worldwide phenomenon since football was introduced. For decades football supporters have caused disorder both inside and outside football grounds in almost all countries where football is played (Dunning et al., 1988; Pratt and Salter, 1984). Acts of hooliganism have produced consequences of varying degrees of severity (Guttmann, 1986; Kerr, 1994), including injuries and fatalities, as well as damage to property both inside and outside of stadiums. The Heysel disaster in May 1985, in which thirty-nine spectators died, is the worst hooligan-related tragedy Europe has seen in terms of the number of fatalities (Chisari, 2004; Scraton, 1999). Developments in this subculture have also seen violence occur further away from grounds, partly to evade intensive policing (Guilianotti, 1995). In April 2000 for example, two Leeds United fans were stabbed to death in Istanbul prior to the club’s Champions League encounter with Galatasaray (Sugden, 2002a; Evans and Rowe, 2002). More recently, a policeman was killed in Catania in a riot before the Sicilian derby against Palermo in February 2007, which saw the Italian league subjected to a temporary suspension. In England, a Fulham fan was killed following a match at Gillingham in March 1998, after suffering head wounds in a skirmish outside the ground (Hatherall, 1998). As a result of such occurrences, the phenomenon has received widespread attention from a variety of circles, notably the media. The publicising of football disorder has arguably proved unhelpful in that it has exacerbated the issue, glamorising and reinforcing hooligan behaviour (Redhead, 2007). However, Sharr (2003) argues that the influence of the media in this regard has not been entirely unconstructive, as it has also succeeded in pressuring the government and footballing authorities to tackle the problem. Whilst Stott (2003) justifiably claims that such ‘pressure’ has often proven counter-productive, partly as a consequence of media’s misrepresentation of fans, governmental response to the issue has seen policing methods revamped and fresh legislation developed. This has enabled stiffer penalties to be introduced to help deter and penalize unruly behaviour from football supporters (Pearson, 1998; 2002).

Instances are continually being reported, and in some cases to a degree of severity. Indeed, the problem is still prevalent in national and international football, with an apparent, dramatic rise in violent incidents of well-organised hooliganism (Tilley, 2003). This illustrates the relevance of the problem and the importance of continuing to conduct research in the area. Although some academics are of the opinion that British football disorder “attracts a disproportionate amount of research activity” (Carnibella et al., 1996: 6), much of this research “has not always been valued” (Armstrong, 1991: 427). This investigation did not aim to replicate previous work, but to produce fresh and meaningful insights. As Stott et al. state, the objective is to “advance on previous studies” (2001: 359). The aim here, therefore, was to add to the knowledge-base by exploring fan opinions as well as the attitudes of the police. Both perspectives have largely been overlooked in previous work, and yet both clearly rep-
resent a potential source of experienced and informed opinion. This approach focused on preventative measures and their perceived effects, relating to policing in the UK and abroad. Football intelligence, the legal responses to the problem, and club intervention are also examined here. These aspects provided the structural component of this exploration into football hooliganism, from the perspectives both of those who watch football regularly, and those who are responsible for policing supporters. Interviews were conducted with a supporter from three different Premiership clubs, as well as the football intelligence officer (FIO) at each of these clubs. The criterion for selection required participating supporters to have been to a minimum of eighty per cent of their team’s matches in both European and domestic competition during each of the last three seasons. Also, each FIO had to have held their role for a minimum of three seasons. The sample was purposive therefore, and helped ensure a degree of understanding of the contemporary characteristics of the phenomenon from respondents.

**Policing football fans**

Brick (2000) claims that the authorities have recently become less tolerant of anti-social behaviour in football stadia. Also, as a result of the severity of football hooliganism, in the last decade clubs have started employing more stewards and police in an attempt to reduce the problem. Penn suggests that the safety of supporters “is secured by means of a dual strategy of stewarding and co-operative policing” (2005: 31). However, from the perspective of the fans, this ‘dual strategy’ is considered in practice at least to be somewhat ambiguous. One respondent for example argued: “You don’t really know what the stewards are there for. You don’t always listen to them anyway. You know what the police are for, but stewards, they can’t arrest you can they?” (IVF3). Frodsick suggests that “fans have to be separated inside the stadium and, sometimes, they have to be separated outside the stadium as well. This is all to prevent injuries, damage and public disorder” (Frodsick, 2005: 152). This intervention however, whilst considered ‘necessary’, is also thought to have created more problems, as the following statement emphasises: “By separating fans you divide them. In sports like rugby, they sit together without a problem. The segregation creates the ‘us versus them’ mentality that has caused so many problems. But it’s necessary. If you didn’t split fans there would be more trouble so they can’t win” (IVF1).

In addition, structural and technological advancements have dramatically reduced football hooliganism inside grounds, with the problem spreading to external locations as a consequence. The actions of supporters are closely monitored by closed-circuit television (CCTV), safety officers, stewards and police in “key spots” (IVP2). This has made it substantially easier for the police to identify those who participate in violent behaviour inside football grounds: “We have the technologies available to
make life very hard for a would-be hooligan” (IVP1). In addition, various legislative acts have been passed in an attempt to minimise the effects of hooliganism, and as one FIO interviewee stated: “The new laws have been vital in helping us combat the problem” (IVP2). Powers to limit the movement of hooligans were introduced by section 30 of the 1986 Public Order Act through which “exclusion orders could be served on those who were convicted of ‘football related’ offences” (Stott and Pearson, 2006: 3). Following further serious disturbances involving English fans at the 1998 World Cup Finals, the Football (Disorder) Act 2000 was produced, which saw the introduction of combined domestic and international Football Banning Orders (FBOs) (Stott and Pearson, 2006). According to the FIOs, such laws are considered “largely responsible for the control and even break up of many hooligan groups. It’s helped us change the way we police fans” (IVP1).

Each interviewee, both policeman and fan, agreed that whilst the police have been largely successful in managing football disorder, it is considered “nearly impossible” (IVF3) for the police to stop spontaneous acts of football violence. However, each FIO claimed that the biggest deterrent to the threat of hooligan behaviour is covert approaches to policing, and more specifically, the FBOs: “The introduction of the Football Banning Order has done a hell of a lot to stop football hooliganism. Some of the people who have been on bans and come off, say when you talk to them now that the biggest thing they missed was going to football matches” (IVP3). Stott and Pearson (2006: 2) also acknowledge the role FBOs have played in the prevention of disorder: “With the increasing use of the FBOs and the decline in levels of ‘disorder’ it would be reasonable to assume that FBOs have begun to play a critical determining role”. Each fan offered a similar viewpoint, drawing on their own personal experiences of people who they knew. Each agreed that the threat of a five-year ban that is often “handed out to convicted hooligans” (IVF2), served as a considerable deterrent for many potential hooligans to resist engaging in acts of football related disorder.

During the interviews conducted with the FIOs, the significance of the Taylor Report was also noted in this regard. This report was produced after the 1989 Hillsborough disaster in which ninety-six supporters were killed in a non-violent crush, blamed mostly on the condition of the stadium and the naivety and incompetence of the police (Taylor, 1989; Richardson, 1993). One of the seventy-six recommendations made related to the increased application of intelligence-informed policing. One respondent commented on the need for: “Identifiable police officers who can identify individuals, travel around and get to know them, which was really where the FIO was born” (IVP 2). Similarly, Carnibella et al. detail a system whereby police officers are able to identify hooligans, namely: “The spotter system… where a police liaison officer is attached to a particular club and has the responsibility of identifying and monitoring hooligans, usually travelling to away games and assisting the local force.
with the detection of hooligans” (1996: 123). These authors also note that: “Another technological feature of police tactics at football grounds is the use of hand-held video cameras, with police filming supporters, primarily in a bid to deter violence, gather intelligence and monitor the efficiency of crowd control” (Carnibella et al., 1996: 117). These developments have “made a real difference for the police” (IVP2), one FIO argued. Also, the use of intelligence based policing was understood if not appreciated by the supporter sample. For example, “We get it, but no fan likes it. It’s an invasion of privacy for the ordinary fan as well as the hooligan” (IVF1). Similarly, another fan discussed the experience of being filmed and photographed in this context, recalling an incident at the 2006 FA Cup semi-final in Manchester, where the police: “Stuck us in that alley, searched us all and put us on camera and made us say our name. It’s like being back in school, go here, go there, don’t go there, don’t do that” (IVF2).

Each respondent claimed that the amendment of police procedures and the development of football stadia are in part a consequence of attempts to avoid further occurrences of football disorder. It was also stated that these alterations have vastly transformed the contemporary match day experience for violent supporters, which in turn has impacted the characteristics of the phenomenon: “The policing of hooligans affects all fans, and their approach can get to you if they’re too over the top” (IVF3). In relation to police presence, Frodsick states that “what happens away from and outside the ground does affect what happens inside” (2005: 157). He also argues that the way in which the fans are policed outside has a “direct impact on the management of their entry to the ground and their mood on entry” (Frosdick, 2005: 157). The sample of fans acknowledged that the police are a necessity at football matches in Britain as they fulfil various duties ranging from “providing directions, dictating crowd and traffic movement to the prevention of potential crowd disorder” (IVF1). There was however, a sense of disparity amongst the sample as to the ‘ideal’ number of police at home games, although it was unanimously agreed that the police are a necessity when attending games away in Europe, “for protection as much as anything else” (IVF2). The majority of respondents stated that an appropriate focus of police presence is necessary, agreeing that the eradication of football hooliganism would be “practically impossible” (IVF2). However, one fan argued that the presence of the police is “just as likely to aggravate a situation as relieve it” (IVF3). Policing was viewed by another respondent as a “necessary evil” (IVF1), who argued that a police presence is the biggest deterrent a football hooligan faces. The sample of supporters agreed that police presence at home games was not something they are acutely aware of. At away games however, particularly those in European competition, the presence of police has often “worsened situations” (IVF2), through a “high profile presence” (IVF2). Similarly, Stott and Pearson claim that the “greatest levels of ‘disorder’… actually occurred in ‘low risk’ situations when ‘high profile’ policing had been utilised (2006: 10). Thus it
can be stated that a high level police presence in a low risk environment can worsen a situation and lead to potential disorderly behaviour.

Another key finding from the research related to “the use of riot gear” or “protective clothing” (IVP2). Each police officer claimed that such an appearance was likely to “prevent trouble” (IVF2). The views of the fans, however, were quite different. As one respondent argued: “That look, with all the riot gear on, that’s much more likely to see a potentially peaceful situation turn into an aggressive atmosphere” (IVF3). It was generally accepted that the use of ‘protective clothing’ is seen in the UK only when it is considered necessary, such as for local ‘derby games’ or other grudge matches. The FIOs and fans both agreed however, that ‘protective clothing’ is much more prominent when English fans follow their club in Europe, where it is seen “whatever the circumstances of the game are for English teams” (IVF2). Frodsick states that the physical appearance of the police: “Wearing riot clothing for their own protection… gave them an aggressive rather than reassuring appearance” (2005: 156). Finally, in terms of perceived regional variances in football policing, there were substantial differences among the supporter sample. It was accepted that the attitudes of police differ relative to regional variations, however the degree of discrepancy in police approaches was noted differently by each fan. One participant said that “all police deal with any trouble” (IVF2), whereas another claimed to have witnessed acts of violence in the police presence which “weren’t dealt with” (IVF1). Similarly, Frodsick notes that in one instance of aggression he witnessed: “the police… just stood there and did nothing… one police officer pushed a Southampton fan backwards, sending him and a number of other fans sprawling. This was an inappropriate response by a frightened young police officer” (2005: 151). Another fan claimed that the existing ‘reputation’ of a fan-base is directly correlated to policing tactics. “Who you are affects how you’re policed. Things like what your fans have done in the past” (IVF1). Each FIO however, argued that this is not the case: “We have standards and in this country at least, policing is fairly standardised at football games” (IVP3). This disparity though was clearly a function of the different capacities in which fans and police officers attended matches: “The fans and the police are bound to have different views sometimes, because we’re on different sides of the fence. They don’t really know what it’s like to be a fan, and to be honest, we don’t understand everything about their job either” (IVF3).

Conclusion

This study produced a variety of commonality and divergence of opinion among the FIO and supporter sample regarding modes of response to football disorder. FIOs claimed that the UK have developed several successful covert and overt methods, notably the intelligence-led FBOs. Fans also noted the success of this intervention.
However, FIOs agreed that the policing of British fans in European competition was “less effective and more provocative” in comparison (IVP2), which echoes the work of Pearson and Stott (2006) and Carnibella et al. (1996). Each supporter claimed that European policing is unreliable and that they would not attend matches in countries where the style of policing is perceived to be “aggressive” (IVF3). Stott and Pearson (2006) contend that utilising a low profile police presence is more likely to prevent disorderly behaviour rather than deploying a highly visible police presence. Also, Frodsick (2005) argues that the approach of police outside the ground has a direct influence on the behaviour of fans inside the ground.

Although this work has highlighted some key findings on a phenomenon which has already been subjected to extensive sociological and ethnographic research, further work is undoubtedly required. Indeed, Frodsick and Newton claim that academics should be encouraged to join in with “new and alternative” avenues of work on the subject (2006: 420). One of these ‘avenues’ should relate to the issue of ‘self-policing’. In order to increase revenues and to alienate or invoke a change amongst disorderly supporters, elite clubs have made a concerted effort to attract a new ‘breed’ of more affluent spectators, thus: “creating an atmosphere where hooligans feel they have to give up” (Perryman, 2002: 236). This infiltration of a “new breed of supporter” effectively serves as a “colonisation of supporter culture” (Sugden, 2002b: 42). Similarly, Barclay discusses the use of law-abiding fans to have a “positive, knock-on effect” in terms of the mentality and actions of supporters (2002: 204). However, although this notion has been discussed in practitioner and media-based contexts, the impact of ‘self-policing’ certainly requires further academic scrutiny, in order to further the understanding of how to police football supporters. This could help provide a more sustainable model for how football hooliganism can not simply be managed and controlled, but how it can be prevented.

References


Routledge.


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**JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote**

1. Authors Reflective Comment: Joel Rookwood’s objective viewpoint and advice as a mentor has made this article enjoyable to write and a manageable task. As a direct result of his teaching I have been able to develop my academic writing and research skills.

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