



PHENOMENON OF FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM –
AN EVIDENCE-BASED ANALYSIS

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***Abstract:** The paper analyzes the phenomenon of football hooliganism through the prism of evidence-based practice. It is a systemic approach focused on the application of the latest evidence on the problem of football hooliganism as well as the authors' experiences aimed at preventing and eliminating this problem. Football hooliganism as a socio-pathological part of sports fandom is becoming a global social phenomenon. The contribution sets two basic goals. The first goal is the interpretations of football hooliganism through current literary sources, political documents and conducted research, as well as the authors' experiences from scientific research and social prevention activities in this area. The second goal is the identification of football hooliganism prevention strategies and the possibilities of cooperation between helping professionals and public authorities in the prevention and elimination of this negative social phenomenon.*

Keywords: fandom, football hooliganism, hooligans, racism, intolerance, prevention, anti-social behaviour, social work intervention.

Introduction

Hooliganism connected to football matches and teams is a world phenomenon, though the amount and seriousness of hooliganism have great variations. In some countries, like the United Kingdom, football hooliganism have long traditions and is tied to regional and religious differences (Dunning 2000 and Dunning, Murphy and Williams 2014; Pearson 1984; Politics.co.uk 2023; Williams, Dunning and Murphy 1986). Illustrative football hooliganism has been labelled “The English Disease” pointing to the long traditions and importance of English football (Stott 2007). In other regions hooliganism is a rather new phenomenon and seem to be an imported phenomenon inspired by what is happening in other countries. Increasing travel and communication seem to fuel hooliganism. Hooliganism groups present

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a subculture which is a fragmentation of the social life of other fans as well as in communities (Gelder and Thornton 1997; Jenks 2005).

In some countries, like Italy, there are visible political use of political by right-wing political parties. One example is the fans of the Italian team Lazio their fans use slogans like “Duce, duce” the title of the fascist leader Benito Mussolini and have large obelisk outside their Stadion with his name (Graaas-Stavenes 2023 and Broder 2023).

Football hooliganism is a major concern for law and order as well as sport teams. For social workers it is about mechanisms which might be serious deviance of the individual and their identity fuelled by group processes, as well as those being the victims of abuse and violence. Football activities both as fan and as a player might be a way out of misery as well as a road to misery. Several studies have been made of football hooliganism from different perspectives and there are a large number of student thesis on the subject (see for example Badžgoň 2014). Participation in sport activities as well as active interest in sports is used in social work in rehabilitation and youth work. Nevertheless, deviant subcultures might develop, and football hooliganism is one of them.

Firstly, this article will describe football hooliganism as a phenomenon using literary sources, policy documents, published research as well as own experience from social work and as spectators at matches. Secondly the article discusses social work as a prevention strategy of football hooliganism and co-operation with police, correctional authorities, and other public bodies in rehabilitation of football hooligans.

Methodology

In the proposed article we discussed the phenomenon of football hooliganism through the prism of evidence-based practice. This is a systemic approach, focused on evidence available in the public sphere. We also took into account the narrative method based on the authors’ experience.

Results and Discussion

Hooligans

The 24th of November 2023 Ireland experienced serious riots and hooliganism. The Irish Prime minister (Taoiseach) said that “about 500 people were involved in the disorder, adding that they had “brought shame” on Ireland and promising new laws within weeks to bring those involved to justice”. Ireland’s police chief Drew Harris characterized rioting on a “lunatic, hooligan faction driven by a far-right ideology” (BBC 2023). What triggered off the hooliganism was the stabbing of five-year-old girl and her teacher who tried to protect her. The perpetrator was Algerian born and naturalized Irish citizen. In the riots 34 people were arrested and the police that many more arrests will follow. A spokesman for the police Drew Harris characterized the riots as “disgraceful” and suggested they were driven by misinformation about the knife attack that was being spread online for “malevolent purposes.” (The Irish Times 2023).

The statements from the Irish police as well as the Irish Prime-minster points to hooliganism as a phenomenon that was motivated by far-right ideology. According to the Guardian “Resentment towards asylum seekers has in recent years fused with a housing crisis and concern about crime, leading to protests outside refugee centres, marches and a raucous protest in September outside the Oireachtas, Ireland’s legislature, which trapped lawmakers” (The Guardian 2023). A BBC report points to “increasing numbers of localised protests about new residences for asylum seekers as some seek political advantage ahead of next year’s local and European elections”, anti-immigration attitudes and protests against what they call <woke culture>, including LGBTQ rights and the Covid-19 lockdowns” (BBC 2023). One commentator wrote that there were sign of this coming (McDermott 2023).

Thus, what triggered off the violence and hooliganism could be a football match as well as in this case a stabbing of a small child by a person suspected of having a non-Irish ethnic background and prior in other protests resentment against asylum seekers. The use of online misinformation for malevolent purposes escalated the riots. Such communication is well-know, in football hooliganism as well.

Fandom as a general phenomenon

In a recently published book, the professor of law Paul Campos discuss fandom, as a general phenomenon, including followers of political parties as well as fans of sport teams and entertainers (Campos 2023). Himself a fan of the Michigan football team the Wolverines he describes the thin mania of fandom as an affliction as well as something he was himself ensnared in (Davis 2023). He describes fandom like love. People love different things and due to that they can end up hating each other. “To be a fan is to renounce fairness or balance, and to open oneself up to joy, despair, triumphalism, indignation and absurdity” (Campos 2023; Davis 2023).

Today's fandom he describes as industrialised fandom with huge economic interest and as part of the entertainment industry. In his opinion fandom is boosted by the internet, which is a marketplace for passions but not for ideas. The obsessive fandom of the internet is increasingly also the force behind political interest groups. Monsters are unleashed in the process and a place where “tribes build up distorted and hateful pictures of their enemies” (Davies 2023: 12).

A match between the two Swedish teams AIK and Malmö is illustrative. There were, limited hooliganism, but use of Bengal lights, smoke and sound resulted in the match having to be stopped for 45 minutes (Palmqvist 2023; Käck, Ashara and Wahlberg 2023). The audience were in a great mood and intoxicated and smoke, sound and Bengal lights made the match into something like a disco scene.

The political use of football

All mass gatherings in sport have a possible political dimension. Sometimes on a national or regional level and sometimes on a religious or political level. Political ideologies like communism, fascism and Nazism actively have used sport to favour their ideology. The continued use of football to promote fascism is one, but not the only example (Granaas-Stavenes 2023: 5-4; Broder 2023 and Dunning, Murphy and Williams 2000).

Claus (2017) describes how a Russian Neo-Nazi became a role model for German Neo-Nazis. The case is illustrating of how values and ideologies are communicated across borders and into new contexts. In a digital world with easy communication and travel we are increasingly faced with ideals and ideologies being adopted in new regions and nations.

The players as role models

In a report from Copenhagen in Denmark the culture among young players were characterized as aggressive both towards other players and football referees (Jørgensen 2023). It was great worry for a football culture that was changing into hooliganism not only off-stage among fans, but also among players. In a Swedish article it was emphasized that most of the population was critical to the supporter culture (Aftonbladet Sportsbladet 2023).

The Hooligan as a Macho ideal

Books like “Harry the Dog: The Story of Football Hooligan” describe the hero like macho status of a football hooligan (Drawie 2020). Being violent, inflicting pain and injury on fans of other football teams certainly gives status among other football hooligans (Armstrong 2003; Pennant 2022 and Lumber 2017). Even if police and the public react it still means that the hooligan is someone to take into consideration.

Being part of football-hooliganism means that status is achieved through violence and part-taking in other illegal activities of the hooligans like destructive behaviour and sale of drugs (Blaney 2013; Little and Cleur 2019).

Substance misuse as part of hooliganism

Blaney (2013) describes from the 1990's a massive involvement in sale of drugs among English football hooligans. His rather literary and self-biographical interpretation was that half the football hooligans he was part of sold drugs and were heavily involved in the rave culture of the 1990s. A substantial substance use is certainly part of football-hooliganism and drug sales seem frequently to part of

hooliganism. It might also be said that drug use fuels violence and is used as doping to create a mood of hooliganism and violence (Weihe 2019). Hooliganism might also be part of a pattern of risk-taking and gambling (Overå and Weihe 2016).

Racism and sectarian hatred

There are many examples of outright racism among football hooligans. In some areas sectarian hatred, like between Ulster protestants and Irish Catholics, is part of football hooliganism. Thus, tying hooliganism into historical conflicts, social-injustice, and religious differences.

Sexual abuse and intolerance of homosexuals

Fans expressing blatant aggression against homosexual players and homosexuals as well as sexist attitudes is a frequent part of hooliganism. The outright abuse and violence against females and homosexuals are both a group phenomenon as well as a individual phenomena (William, Dunning and Murphy 1986; Hype; 2000; Grinnel College 2023 and Dunning 2000).

The digital

Many football hooligans communicate and co-ordinate their activities through digital communication. Thus, able to concentrate and focus their hooliganism that are difficult to monitor with traditional police methods. Digital communication enables hooligans to travel individually or in small groups and avoid spots with police monitoring and control. Digital communication and media development also mean that subcultures of today are far more international and borderless than in prior times (Gelder 2007).

Policing Football Hooligans

Policing football hooligans is a priority for many police forces and particularly so in countries with a tradition for hooliganism like in Britain (Stott and Pearson 2007). Several methods have been used. Undercover operations have been used since the 1960's in the UK and have resulted in several convictions. The spotter system involves a liaison officer being attached to a particular club to identify and monitor hooligans. During Euro 96 the system resulted in co-operation between police forces in several European countries. Modern technology, like the use of CCTV have made it easier to monitor stadiums. Several of the large stadiums in the UK have police monitoring rooms and all fighting and disturbances is monitored (University of Exeter 2023).

In august 2023 one person was stabbed with a knife and killed and six wounded the day before a footballmatch between AEK- Athen and Dinamo Zagreb. According to Greek police 83 persons were involved in the fighting (Thomsen 2023). Later it was reported that 102 Croats and 3 Greek football fans were detained in Greece after the match. 11 of them were charged and four of them on felony charges including premediate murder and membership pf a criminal organisation (Euronews 2023). The next month nine persons were arrested by Croatian police for participating in the fighting (Hansen 2023). The case illustrates that investigating and pursuing such crime involve policework across borders in this case between Greek and Croatian police. The Greek police regarded some of the football-hooligans as part of a criminal organisation, which would have importance for sentencing as violence would be regarded as planned and organised.

Football hooligans in the correctional system

Some football hooligans are sentenced for hooliganism, arson, violence, murder, and rape. Some of the cases have received considerable media attention.

A local as well as a national and international phenomena

Football hooliganism is a worldwide challenge and not only in matches between national teams and top series in national football. In the last national Danish match in the season for the second division the 17th of June 2023 the two Danish teams Kolding IF and Esbjerg fB there were a large police presence

due to prior hooliganism. There were disturbances during the match with pyrotechnics and some fighting after the match. One person was arrested and will be prosecuted for violence against the police, another for violence against another fan and two for use of pyrotechnics during the match (Messer 2023). Similarly, a local match in Oslo the first of October had to be handled by large police presence detecting iron rods that could be used as dangerous weapons (Dagsavisen 2023). The two local examples, one Danish and one Norwegian, illustrate that hooliganism can represent a problem even in local matches among fans of local teams. Traditional local rivalries as well as imported conflicts between ethnic groups might fuel such conflicts. In both cases it is likely that gangs of anti-social juveniles and young men who used the matches as an excuse for fighting conflicts not related to the match itself.

Social work action and intervention

Social workers are frequently involved in both rehabilitation of individual offenders as well as preventive work in communities and targeted towards groups like children and juveniles. Rehabilitation of offenders will often be part of parole requirements as well as rehabilitation after treatment for drug, alcohol, or psychiatric disorders. At the same time participating in sports and being part of a community of fans might be part of rehabilitation. Social workers will also be involved in social work in the families and the communities of the hooligans. Thus, they will be faced multiple and often highly complex situations involving the whole spectre of social and welfare work. As some of the hooligans live in families with children child protection work might be another dimension.

It is an important focus of social work to prevent recruitment to negative subcultures (Gelder and Thornton 1997; Jenks 2005). In local community development as well as across of communities social workers need to meet new challenges such as hooliganism and often borderless negative subcultures (Forde, Lynch and Lathouras 2021). The answer to what is community work will be changing depending upon new challenges and local condition (Twelvetrees 1991). There are differences in community work and practice even within local regions like the Nordic countries (Hutchinson 2009).

However, there are difficulties in formalistic welfare states, like European countries, to allocate resources to community work (Svenson and Nielsen 2020; Hawkins 2006). Politically it is important to allocate funding to such work to battle hooliganism. Further, like all intervention we need a scientific foundation for such work (Hawkins 2006).

Preventive work

Influencing negative anti-social behaviour as well as creating positive values and integration is main target of preventive social work (Tasker 1988; Weihe 2004). Football hooliganism represent such anti-social behaviour that threaten to destroy the positive aspects of being part of supporters.

Conclusion

Serious tensions in societies might erupt in hooliganism due to many causes. The hooliganism in Ireland in November has not likely started due to resentment against asylum seekers and job-less foreigners. Football hooliganism might have similar causes, however there are also those that participate in hooliganism because they like the action, are attracted to violence and like to be part of a group of hooligans. It is simplifying and dangerous only to only look for causes like poverty and social injustices.

Modern hooliganism is fuelled by social media interaction and often of distorted or even false information. In many cases hooligans, co-ordinate their activity and communicate digitally. Thus, those who try to prevent and fight hooliganism need to be active in social media.

Social workers have important role in influencing negative attitudes in subcultures, rehabilitation of individuals involved football hooliganism as well as preventive work. Football is a positive activity and football players are at best ideals for many of us. However, football hooliganism is making what should be positive into a negative experience (Aftonbladet Sportsbladet 2023). Community work is a long-established part of social work (Gelder 2007; Tasker 1988). However, like other disciplines social workers need to relate to new challenges, such as hooliganism.

In education of social workers, educators as well as police and others involved in community work preventing hooliganism is important (Børstad 2020; Folkvord 2020; Grinnel College 2023; NDLA 2023; University of Exeter 2023). On the political level it is important to acknowledge that it is important to allocate funding not only to police work, but also to preventive work by social workers (Hawkins 2006).

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