

# Is Football ‘Hooliganism’ a Hate Crime?

Jon Garland and Mike Rowe argue that football related violence can take many different forms and while some incidents involving the far right may be close to ‘hate crime’, other incidents of ‘hooliganism’ are not.

In the aftermath of the three nail-bombing incidents in London in 1999 the debate surrounding the issue of ‘hate crimes’ became more prominent in the United Kingdom. Two of these bombings occurred in areas containing significant minority ethnic populations (Brick Lane and Brixton) whilst the third took place in a bar in Soho popular with the capital’s gay communities. The fact that these incidents were carried out by a single individual, David Copeland, who was motivated by extreme racism, sparked a debate in Britain regarding the nature of such ‘hate crimes’ and how they should be punished. This debate has followed in the wake of a more long-standing controversy regarding hate crimes in the United States, where legislation combating such crimes already exists.

the National Front attempted to recruit fans on matchdays and was implicated in a series of disorderly events at fixtures over the course of the next two decades, while the extremist faction Combat 18 was amongst those orchestrating violence at the Holland versus England game in 1993. The disorder surrounding the Ireland versus England match in Dublin in 1995, which saw the game abandoned as English ‘supporters’ rioted within the stadium, was especially newsworthy. However, it is argued here that these incidents were not illustrative of hate crimes as such.

Whilst there is some evidence that organized and openly racist political groups were behind the disorder, the main aim of the violence was to deal a blow to the ongoing political dialogue regarding the

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In the UK the closest there is to such provision is the 1998 *Crime and Disorder Act* that contains a provision regarding racially aggravated offences. In 2000 the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) produced a new definition of hate crime: “Hate crime is taken to mean any crime where the perpetrator’s prejudice against an identifiable group of people is a factor in determining who is victimised. This is a broad and inclusive definition. A victim of hate crime does not have to be a member of a minority or someone who is generally considered to be a ‘vulnerable’ person. In fact, anyone could be a victim of a hate crime.” (ACPO, 2000). This definition will be used in this article to examine whether football-related disorder displays any of the characteristics normally considered a feature of a hate crime. This debate has become especially pertinent following serious disturbances that took place before, during and after the match between Oldham Athletic and Stoke City at the end of the 2000/01 football season, allegedly orchestrated by far-right groups, providing the catalyst for the riots that subsequently occurred in the Glodwick area of Oldham.

## **The far-right and English football**

The involvement of far-right groups with English football fans dates back to at least the 1950s, when the White Defence League sold its newspaper *Black and White News* in and around football grounds (Garland and Rowe, 2001). During the late 1970s

future of Northern Ireland. Although Irish supporters found themselves the target of missiles produced as England ‘fans’ broke up the stadium’s seating, and were therefore victims of ‘prejudice against an identifiable group of people’ as the ACPO definition states, the main purpose of this disturbance was not to hurt these fans, but instead to cause such disruption that the game itself would have to be abandoned, which would in turn highlight the opposition of these extremist parties to the ongoing peace process. The involvement of the far-right in the disorder that surrounded the Oldham Athletic versus Stoke City fixture at the tail end of the 2000/01 season is worthy of discussion.

The BBC programme *Hooligans* (2002) alleged that far-right supporters of a number of different clubs joined together to travel to Oldham on the day of the match with the specific intention of instigating a confrontation with local Asian youths, something which occurred after the match and contributed to the outbreak of serious rioting in the town. This incident fits within ACPO’s hate crime definition, although the nature of this disorder is important, as it had explicitly racist overtones and involved violence that took place many hours after the match. The fact that it appears to have involved a broad coalition of far-right sympathisers from a number of different clubs shows an element of organisation and premeditation, although whether the violence was ‘football-related’ is therefore open to debate. It could

be argued that the perpetrators were guilty of hate crimes but not of football 'hooliganism'.

Violent incidents among fans have been a characteristic of English league matches since the nineteenth century. A number of theories have been posited as to what motivates 'football hooligans', and there is unfortunately neither time nor space to discuss them all here.

However, probably the most persuasive of these is that advanced by the 'Leicester School' of sociologists who suggest that 'football hooligans' have predominantly come from the lower working-class that has an intense sense of local identity and loyalty combined with a propensity to violently defend its territory (Murphy, Williams, and Dunning, 1990). The serious disorder that occurred after the Millwall versus Birmingham City play-off fixture at the end of the 2000-01 season may give some credence to these theories. Described by some observers as the most violent football disturbance seen in Britain for years, 47 police officers were injured during several hours of rioting involving over 900 Millwall 'supporters'.

This violence was mainly directed at police officers, although arguably the only reason the Birmingham City supporters were not attacked was because they were kept inside the stadium, and thus away from Millwall fans, for a substantial period after the game. Nevertheless, it is difficult to fit this incident into a 'hate crime framework' as the disorder did not appear to involve 'prejudice against an identifiable group of people' as the ACPO hate crime definition states, and was instead described as 'recreational violence' by the police themselves. Generally this type of 'hooliganism' appears to have a more random nature and is directed against either the police or opposition fans depending upon situation and circumstance. It does not appear to be motivated by racism, but instead by fierce territorial loyalty and a propensity amongst some young men to become involved in violence.

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Football hooliganism is a complex phenomenon that is spatially and temporally contingent. As Armstrong (1994) argues, it "is ephemeral, renegotiated weekly, and constructs nomadic spaces for individuals and social groups to enter, perform and exit". That it is often unorganised and spontaneous is frequently unacknowledged by a media that appears keen to promote the idea that 'hooligan gangs' are 'highly organised' and are often influenced by far-right politics. That there has been some influence by far-right parties within fan groups is acknowledged here, and indeed some hooligan 'crews' have, on occasion, liaised and worked with extremist parties in order to orchestrate violence. However, these alliances are often forged for limited periods when the interests of both parties appear to

coincide, and fall apart once this mutual self-interest fades. Nevertheless, it is during these periods when football 'hooliganism' most closely resembles hate crime, as it may feature actions that are inspired by prejudicial views and are directed against a certain section of society. However, as Back, Crabbe and Solomos (2001) argue, too often the focus of the 'hooligan debate' has revolved around what they term the 'racist-hooligan' couplet, whereby 'hooligans' are equated with far-right activism; something which, it has been suggested above, is in fact relatively rare.

As this article has shown, football 'hooliganism' takes many forms. In some instances, for example when 'hooligans' combine with far-right groups or when 'fans' from one club clash with long-standing local rivals, the violence would fall within the framework outlined in the ACPO definition. At many other times though, 'hooliganism' is relatively unfocused and unorganised. To label these instances as hate crimes would involve stretching the definition so far that it becomes meaningless, as then virtually anything could be included as a hate crime.

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