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'They stand there looking really bored and pissed off': analysing efficient police resourcing at football matches in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

Football policing in England and Wales is a key area of activity for the police service, with a reported £48 m being spent each season on policing football. There is a reported increase in football-related disorder following the Covid-19 pandemic, and debates in the football policing community about the requirement for increased resource levels being deployed to football. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, this research captures voices from Dedicated Football Officers (DFOs); football club representatives; and other key stakeholders for policing football in England and Wales. The research shows multiple examples of ineffective and inefficient police resourcing at football matches. Despite calls for more liaison-based policing, there is an apparent emphasis on utilisation of public order units, which comes at great cost for the taxpayer, as well as football clubs. Here, it is argued that a focus on more specialised resources for policing football will lead to better outcomes in terms of preventing crime and improving relations with football supporter communities.

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Introduction

UK senior police officers have argued that football clubs should be paying more for the policing of football (Sky Sports News 2019), based on estimates suggesting that it costs £48 m per season to police football in England and Wales, with football clubs only contributing £5.5 m (South Yorkshire Police 2019). Hester and Hobson (2022) contest this, using Freedom of Information (FOI) data from police forces to evidence that a higher figure of approximately £10 m per season is being contributed by football clubs to police forces. Furthermore, they cast doubt over the accuracy of the original claim of £48 m per season, suggesting this to be an overestimate. Under s.25 of the Police Act 1996, police forces can recover costs for part of their football policing operations through a process known as Special Police Services (SPS). provides a mechanism for police forces to partly cover the cost of football policing operations from football clubs, however, Hester *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that SPS is problematic and creates tension between the two parties. Instead of examining the finances of the policing of football, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider how the policing of football is conducted, and how this can be improved to reduce the overall cost to the taxpayer. It is important to consider that football disorder in England and Wales has increased following the Covid-19 pandemic according to official statistics (see Home Office 2022), and any policy changes

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need to consider what the longer term trend may be. This paper uses empirical research through a series of semi structured interviews with Dedicated Football Officers (DFOs), football club safety officers and other key football policing stakeholders, to explore alternative ways that the police service in England and Wales can approach football policing. Furthermore, this is a topic of importance beyond England and Wales, as the policing of football engages significant amounts of police time across Europe (see Frosdick and Marsh 2005, Brechbühl *et al.* 2017, Stott *et al.* 2018a, Laursen 2019).

Football policing

Despite being a commonly used term in both the media and academic literature, 'football hooliganism' is not actually defined (Giulianotti *et al.* 1994, Dunning *et al.* 2002, Frosdick and Marsh 2005). It is used to refer to non-criminal through acts through to serious violence (Dunning *et al.* 1988, Giulianotti 1994, Armstrong 1998, Dunning *et al.* 2002, Frosdick and Marsh 2005, Pearson 2012). Frosdick and Marsh (2005) highlight that incidents occur at train stations, town centres and areas away from stadia as well as within the stadia. The widespread scale of the operation is particularly relevant for the police when considering threat, risk and allocation of resources. Despite being acknowledged as a long standing issue (Dunning *et al.* 2002, Frosdick and Marsh 2005), in the 1960s football hooliganism was recognised as a wider social issue and became the subject of academic research (Giulianotti 1994), which continues today but with a greater focus on how football is policed as opposed to why hooliganism occurs.

A number of high-profile incidents of stadium disasters, and stadium safety concerns have occurred in the context of football. Most notably in the UK was the 1989 Hillsborough disaster which resulted in 97 deaths. The Taylor *et al.* (1990) report which followed the Hillsborough disaster led to significant changes in football policing, with the implementation of improved safety standards and a gradual increased onus of responsibility for safety being moved from the police to football clubs (Frosdick 1995, Frosdick and Marsh 2005, O'Neill 2005). More recently the disorder which occurred at Wembley Stadium during the 2020 European Championship Final led to adverse media reporting, with a number of criticisms being levelled at the policing operation (Casey 2021). Ludvigsen (2018, 2022) highlights how policing operations for major football tournaments need to be more security focused, due to being considered as 'mega-events' which can attract issues beyond football hooliganism, such as terrorism or protest activity. The findings of the Casey (2021) report support this, and argue that high-profile football matches of such national significance are given a separate category, and may require maximum levels of policing. It is not disputed here that such matches will require higher levels of resourcing, however these are to be seen as the exception rather than the norm. Therefore, this research focuses on the volume of football matches throughout the regular football season, and considers that these can be viewed separately to the mega event policing as suggested above.

In a football policing context, the role that the police perform has changed radically over time. Historically the police would carry out functions that would see them having overall control of the safety of particular stands, including ejecting people and holding them back after the game (Frosdick and Marsh 2005). The resource level that police forces deploy inside stadia has reduced from the 1990s onwards, with football clubs utilising stewards to 'police' inside the stadia (Frosdick and Marsh 2005, O'Neill 2005). The increased use of stewards instead of police officers came in part from the Taylor Report (1990). This recommended that stewards should be performing increased duties inside stadia, such as ejections and crowd control, and there should be suitable national training to ensure standards across all clubs. As a result, the stewards became considered as the private police force for the football ground and can be seen as preferable for football clubs as they cost considerably less than police officers (Frosdick 1995, O'Neill 2005). Operational Football Officers (OFOs – formerly known as police spotters) form a key part of match day policing and will routinely deploy inside stadia without additional police resources (UKFPU 2022). Despite the new guidance, the OFO

role appears largely unchanged from the previous police spotter role (see College of Policing 2023b) The UKFPU (2022) guidance suggests the OFO role should focus on both communication and engagement with supporters on match days, as well as evidence gathering for FBOs. These activities can counteract one another and cause tension in terms of interactions with supporters, as evidenced by Hope *et al.* (2023), with the evidence gathering element acting as a barrier to effective communication with supporters. Whilst OFOs are essential for football policing, the UKFPU (2022) advise that other policing resources can be utilised through different match categories (Police Free through to High Risk), but a category should not denote the resource level.

The UK government passed legislation in the Football (Disorder) Act 2000 to manage football hooliganism following the serious violence at Euro 2000 involving England fans. This resulted in the broadening of scope for football banning orders (FBOs), as well as the power that police forces could wield with them to restrict fans from not just stadia but locations such as town centres as well (Hopkins and Hamilton-Smith 2014). This led to FBOs being the subject of much academic research, due to them being regarded as 'panic law' (James and Pearson 2006) and research (see Stott and Pearson 2006, Stott *et al.* 2012) which suggests improvements of policing methods as opposed to banning fans as a preferable situation. Hopkins (2014) interviewed police officers involved in gathering evidence and applying for FBOs and found that they provide a narrative that is favourable towards FBOs and that they are an effective measure at cutting crime and football related violence. However, Hopkins (2014) also found that a target driven culture had developed where police forces are funded by the UK Football Policing Unit for achieving FBOs. A target driven culture could then impact on the policing of football, as the police may be looking to obtain evidence to support FBO applications as opposed to methods that seek to minimise disorder. Hester (2020) conducted similar research and offers some support of Hopkins (2014) findings, and suggests that the use of FBOs is still a problematic area. This is important as it can then direct police activity towards enforcement and evidence gathering towards FBOs, as opposed to communication and engagement to foster a liaison-based approach. Hester (2020) also found that police officers were starting to reject the concept of funding being primarily directed for FBOs, instead advocating for policing initiatives that seek to promote better liaison between the police and football supporters, to reduce the likelihood of disorder. Hester and Pamment (2020) supports this, and showed officers were exploring investing in youth initiatives, although the UKFPU funding was still only available for FBOs and post-match investigations. This apparent change in policing attitudes (albeit not necessarily across the board) is in line with academic research (see Stott *et al.* 2012, Stott *et al.* 2018b, Stott *et al.* 2019, Hope *et al.* 2023) which has been calling for a more liaison-based approach to football policing for a number of years.

It is important to consider that both Government data (see Home Office 2022) as well as academic research (see Kurland *et al.* 2014a, Kurland *et al.* 2014b), indicates that football in the UK generates crime. The necessity of policing football across Europe indicates that this is the case outside the UK context as well. To address this issue, a number of studies (see Stott *et al.* 2012, 2018b, 2019, Hope *et al.* 2023) have argued that a reduction in football violence can be obtained by a liaison-based approach to football policing, with improved dialogue between supporters and the police service. The body of work by Stott *et al.* (2012, 2018b, 2019) has involved direct working with, and observation of, football policing operations. These operations have adopted the use of Police Liaison Officers (PLOs), typically associated with the policing of protest, into football operations with the key aim of facilitating dialogue between the police and football fans, ensuring the policing of football follows the principles of procedural justice. Stott *et al.* (2012, 2018b, 2019) suggest that this improves the supporter experience, and can help to minimise disorder. Furthermore, they are particularly vocal in their opposition to the enforcement and intelligence gathering approach with an end goal of achieving FBOs, as this can be considered as being counterintuitive to models of policing by consent and lead to more disorder. Their ENABLE project (see Keele University 2019) is part of a longer term plan of working with academics, the English Football League, police forces and football clubs to improve the methods of policing football. Their pilot study (see Stott *et al.* 2019) showed

that the police overestimate the risk of violence, that there were too many officers on duty in relation to the actual threat, and that those officers did not effectively liaise with supporters. These findings are important, as it partly relates to the pre-match planning process that occurs between the police and the football club and leads to how a match is categorised. This is supported by Hester *et al.* (2024), who show that this pre-match planning process is subject to disagreements between football clubs and police forces, potentially caused by risk aversion in resource allocation. Leach (2021) supports this, and suggests that public order operations are generally over policed as commanders do not wish to be exposed to professional harm if there are issues and disorder at the event. The associated issues are often referred to for police commanders as 'on the job trouble' (Waddington 1994). It is important to note that risk aversion is not just confined to the policing of football or public order, and has been identified in a range of policing practices (see Heaton 2011, Black and Lumsden 2020). Against the backdrop of austerity measures impacting on the availability of police resources for football policing (see Hester 2020) as well as broader policing functions (see Millie and Bullock 2013, Greig-Midlane 2019, Black and Lumsden 2020), effective resourcing solutions are required. The implication is that the police could reduce their expenditure on football policing, by assessing threat and risk more effectively and having fewer officers policing on a match day overall, with those that are deployed being more specialised in their role. This concept will form part of the discussion point with interview participants in this study.

Methods

This research utilised an evidence-based policing approach, meaning the best available evidence is used to inform and challenge policing policies, practices and decisions (College of Policing 2023a). Lydon (2023, p. 265) argues how a problem of evidence-based policing research is that it does not neatly sit within a particular research paradigm, and suggests that a 'more inclusive paradigm' which 'embraces methodological pluralisation' is required. As evidence-based policing has developed, it has been argued that there should be a range of research methodologies that constitute evidence-based policing, including mixed methods and qualitative research (Punch 2015, Brown *et al.* 2018, Williams and Cockcroft 2019). This research attempts to add to the evidence base for policing football, through qualitative design with a specific population, which helps to inform practice in this area. Given the limited number of people working in this area in England and Wales, qualitative data through interviews allows for more specific and detailed data to be established from the research.

From November 2020 to December 2021, this research obtained qualitative data through 21 semi-structured interviews with 23 research participants over Microsoft Teams, each lasting from 30 to 60 minutes. This triangulated the views of a range of football club safety officers, police Dedicated Football Officers (DFOs) and key stakeholders in football policing from across professional football in England and Wales, ensuring a broad sample was used for the research purposes. The participants are summarised in Table 1.

The research received ethical approval, with anonymity for participants being the main area of concern. Therefore, the level of football which they operate at, is the only identifying element for the participants, with pseudonyms being used (e.g. Safety Officer 1 (SO1); Dedicated Football Officer 1 (DFO1); Organisation Representative). Individual names, locations, police forces or any other material which could lead to the identity of the participant has been redacted in the research. All participants completed written consent forms in order to participate in the study, which were returned to the researcher via email.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed, with themes following specific questions to the participants based around the study objectives of exploring the current issues with football policing and how this can be improved. The basis of the questions was designed with due consideration of the findings from previous research on the policing of football (Stott *et al.* 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022), which suggests that over resourcing by the police may be

Table 1. Interview participants.

Participant	Role/level of work
Football club participants	
SO1	Safety Officer experience in the Championship, League 1 and League 2
SO2	Safety Officer experience in League 2
SO3	Safety Officer experience in League 1
SO4	Safety Officer experience in the Championship
SO5	Safety Officer experience in the Premier League
SO6	Safety Officer experience in the Premier League
SO7	Safety Officer experience in the Championship
SLO8	Support Liaison Officer experience in the National League
Police participants	
DFO1	DFO experience in Championship and League 1, single club
DFO2	DFO experience in Premier League to National League, multiple clubs
DFO3	DFO experience in Premier League to National League, multiple clubs
DFO4	DFO experience in League 1 to National League, multiple clubs
DFO5	DFO experience in Premier League to National League, multiple clubs
DFO6	DFO experience in Championship to National League, multiple clubs
DFO7	DFO experience in Championship to National League, multiple clubs
DFO8	DFO experience in Premier League to National League, multiple clubs
DFO9	DFO experience in Championship to National League, multiple clubs
Stakeholder organisation participants	
NPCC Rep	National Police Chiefs' Council representative
SGSA Rep	Sports Ground Safety Authority representative, previous policing experience
FSA Rep	Football Supporters' Association representative
PCC's Office Reps	Chief Finance Officer and Head of Communications from a Police and Crime Commissioners' Office
SAG Rep	Safety Advisory Group chair from a local authority in England

present. Within the themes, the most pertinent quotes were used as part of the final research report, and were based on: the current issues in policing; risk aversion; and potential reform to football policing.

Results and discussion

Based on the participant's perspectives, a range of sub themes were identified from the interviews, concerning policing of football matches in England and Wales. These are broken down into four different areas: poor police practice; police risk aversion; modified approaches to resourcing; and different methods of policing football.

Poor police practice

The DFO participants were acutely aware of issues with how police were performing when deployed at football events:

> I think it's the quality of what they're getting is a problem sometimes. You know, I go mad if I see cops, no hats on looking at the game not doing their job. (DFO2)

> I'll say to Silver: 'Boss, can you have a word with Bronze, because they're just stood there not doing anything, at least walk around the stadium.' You know, I want us to have that good relationship, I don't want to sit in the next planning meeting with them [the football club] going 'well, we're not paying for cops because all they do is stand around or sit in a van'. (DFO6)

These observations clearly cause issues for DFOs, who are then having difficult conversations with football clubs who may be raising concerns about the performance of the police, and questioning if they are getting value for money out of the SPS they are paying. This contention over the police not representing value for money could lead to a breakdown of the relationship between the club and the police force, as found by Hester *et al.* (2024). This finding also

supports existing research (see Stott *et al.* 2019) which suggests that there is minimal engagement between police officers and football supporters. The police performing poorly and not representing value for money was also recognised by the football club and stakeholder participants as being an issue:

> The police officers go around in groups of three or four, and just like scowling at the crowd, not say: 'hi, how are you', you know, 'enjoy the game'. It doesn't take much. (SO1)

> I've seen police officers perform at football and I wouldn't pay them washers some of them. Shocking and you as a DFO or FIO/FLO [Football Intelligence Officer/Football Liaison Officer] you'll have been shocked at games, won't you? You'll be there wading in dragging people out, and then you'll be looking and they'll be some officer who is only there for the overtime with his thumb up his bum and brain in neutral. (SO4)

> They're standing in a little group chatting amongst themselves … and I have to say to the police commander, 'could they spread out a little bit?' You know, why am I having to ask them to do that? Are you not looking at what your own resources are doing? (SO6)

> Are the cops on football duty briefed to talk to people? They don't, they just stand there in their little yellow jackets clustered or they stand there looking really bored and pissed off … It's invariably an opportunity missed for all sorts of reasons, so again, these are the conversations that perhaps are more important than the finances. (FSA Rep)

Whilst poor policing performance will not be happening in every case, and there will undoubtedly be examples of proactive police practice, it is of concern that these experiences appear somewhat widespread in football policing. The finding supports existing work which suggests police resources at football may be ineffective and over resourced (Stott *et al.* 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022). Moreover, it demonstrates that the policing of football is not always adopting the principles of procedural justice when dealing with football supporters, as advocated by Stott *et al.* (2012) and Pearson and Stott (2022). Furthermore, there were other issues in terms of threat assessment and poor police practice as identified by football clubs:

> There are occasions when you can see that some police forces are gilding the lily [within this context, this means enhancing and embellishing the police intelligence for a fixture] … and I'll go and speak to the safety officer of the club and say, well, look, the police are saying this, tell me about it. And they'll say 'well, it's partially true'. (SO2)

> [On an incident] So the police came, but then what I tried to explain what I wanted them to do. They didn't know what to do, and I'm not kidding, I was physically manhandling where I wanted them put. And I'm thinking, we're paying for this what's going on? (SO3)

> We had quite a serious disorder with <football club> in the ground. The police were the cause of that, and they actually admitted it in the end … what they did is, they rounded up all of the <football club> supporters in the town centre and corralled them all in the town centre and then brought them to the ground. (SO7)

The evidence of over resourcing by the police supports existing research (see Stott *et al.* 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022, Hester *et al.* 2024) which states that policing of football is not appropriately threat assessed in a consistent way, and is somewhat over-resourced. The remarks from SO7 support Stott *et al.* (2018b), who evidenced concerns in a case study of a similarly high-risk fixture that found the police escorting supporters as a group to the stadium can create more disorder. This is due to creating a potential target for opposing supporters, as well as negative reactions to coercive policing in maintaining the escort (Stott *et al.* 2018b).

Police risk aversion

Another prominent issue that emerged, and linked to threat assessments, was the evident risk aversion that was taking place when the police were planning resources for football policing operations. Police participants and stakeholders observed this:

> We seem to be afraid of disorder happening. We become too good at our jobs at preventing disorder. So, we have a lot of cops to prevent things that aren't likely to happen. We're very risk averse, where something goes wrong, we can learn from it. Rather than yeah, we had a hell of a lot of cops, and we prevented one small fight type thing. (DFO6)

> We've had more head in hands going: 'we are stood here and there's far too many cops and we had an opportunity not to have as many and we haven't done the proper process here'. (DFO8)

> I think the problem is the police are generally too risk averse. And they're not really looking at the threat that actually exists because the threat that exists, as you know as an ex kind of DFO is you're probably talking about 20–40 lads, if that. There are far, far too many officers on. (SGSA Rep)

> You could rightly and correctly say there's nothing more important than the safety. But then when people are being risk averse and overcautious, what's that got to do with safety? Because I think we both know that there are a lot of, I think the police generally, when it comes to football, are risk averse. (FSA Rep)

The costing of police resources and associated negotiations with the football club also had potential impacts on police risk aversion:

> I think the club's get a great deal, I mean, we are left with a dilemma of you know where there's gonna be some flashpoints. Do you not deploy because it's not chargeable? Well, we can't do that because we've got obligations. The clubs are very well aware of it and some of them are quite cynical, in just leaving it for the police to pick up the tab. (NPCC Representative)

It was also apparent that the costing aspect through Special Police Services (SPS) impacted on police decision making, in terms of the police feeling that they had to ensure sufficient resources are in place to cover the broader event and not just inside the stadium. The issue of costing resonates with the findings of Hester *et al.* (2024) where it was shown that cost implications through SPS, along with difficult relationships with football clubs can impact on police resourcing decisions.

DFO9 was acutely aware of potential police risk aversion, although offered some explanation as to why that may be occurring. Risk aversion could be due to having limited pressure to reform from stakeholders such as the Police and Crime Commissioner, which results in potential risk averse practices continuing:

> Did nothing happen because the police were there? Possibly, could be, or was it never gonna happen? Did we get it wrong? You know, it's a really difficult one to quantify sometimes … I think there's a danger isn't there depending if you get a commander … who doesn't do that many football matches, and you suddenly present them with a package and you think, oh my god, I need I need the whole force on this. (DFO9)

> We probably not proposing anything 'cos there's always a risk of unintended consequences of a, of a Pandora's box. I think our fear would be if there were any changes on that front, that we might see it as a threat rather than as an opportunity. (Head of Communications – PCC's Office)

The findings resonate with existing research (see Kurland *et al.* 2014a, Kurland *et al.* 2014b) which suggests that the impact of policing and the various causal factors to offending in the context of football, is highly complex and therefore it is difficult to assess the preventative impact of police resources deployed at football events. The resourcing decisions will often be based on professional judgement, and not necessarily be based on specific intelligence relating to that fixture (Pearson and Stott 2022). Overall, the findings from this research support the assertion by Hester *et al.* (2024) that football policing is inherently risk averse, as well as public order policing (Leach 2021) and policing more broadly being risk averse (see Heaton 2011, Black and Lumsden 2020). It is evident here that the PCC's Office does not consider reviewing football policing resourcing as a high-priority area, despite their clear mandate for holding police forces accountable (Caless and Owens 2016). One may consider that across the country, PCC's need to do more to reduce risk averse approaches to policing football. The established issue of football hooliganism and adverse media consequences for policing (Dunning *et al.* 2002, Frosdick and Marsh 2005) may understandably lead to police commanders seeking to avoid 'on the job trouble' (Waddington 1994), through disorder occurring or worse serious safety incidents inside

stadia. It should not be surprising that policing currently seeks to over rather than under resource football matches, although changes to the approach may result in a reduction in risk averse approaches and improvements in efficiency for policing.

Modified approaches to resourcing

A solution to risk averse policing would be to ensure a more robust and specialised system of resourcing, which was suggested by some of the participants, firstly in terms of the risk categorisation for the fixture and removal of rigid resourcing structures:

> We've come away totally from categories … we might say to them, look, we've got this many officers on today, we've come away from talking about a category inside the ground, and we just talk about numbers of police officers. (DFO5)

The flexible approach to categories was less evident at other police forces, even though the UKFPU (2022) guidance suggests a flexible approach to resourcing within match categories, which is more in line with the practice as suggested by DFO5. Other police forces were clearly still operating in more rigid ways with match categories denoting a specific resource level, as observed by both police and football club participants. This demonstrates more risk averse practices, even though a more flexible approach was desired:

> Let's talk cops for policing an event, if they're not level two [advanced training to deal with public order (see College of Policing 2023c)], they don't need to come as, you know, Sergeant and seven. If they don't need to come as a sergeant and seven, then how many? A Sergeant on patrol might have 25 cops that they're in charge of, and that's across an area of 50 square miles. So why are we looking at a footprint of around a football ground, that everyone feels that they need to have line of sight with six other cops? It could be there's two sergeants and 30 cops are working, and right, go out and deal with stuff … But it's changing that mindset of things. Which I don't think that, for a lot of other reasons, I don't think the bosses are yet there. (DFO8)

> Do you need 21 cops there, or can you make do with 14? Or can you make do with 16? Or 11? … why do you need to operate in serials and PSUs[1]? Why can't we just have one Inspector? And you know, so I don't like rigidity of police deployments. (SO4)

> 'You must have a PSU. We can't work with anything less than a PSU.' Well, we know they can work with anything less than a PSU because there's times when you can just have two spotters. But they were insisting in a public order situation. (SO7)

The flexibility that was demonstrated by the police force represented by DFO5 needs to be replicated throughout the country, however it is promising that there is evidence of more flexible practice occurring that is more proportionate to threat and risk. Other police forces had taken more radical approaches of completely withdrawing resources from inside stadia:

> We actually went to a default position of no cops inside the ground. So, the thought process behind that was actually we didn't want cops standing around inside the ground, watching the game of football and then going home. At the end of the day, what we wanted is no cops inside the ground, no cops on that particular operation, and actually cops on the neighbourhoods, doing the policing work that they should have been doing. (DFO3)

Football clubs are seeking to have a self-sufficient plural approach utilising stewarding as its main form of policing. Whilst withdrawal from football grounds may be considered a risk, it can be argued as evidence that police forces are seizing opportunities that have been created through pressure on police resources due to austerity (see Millie and Bullock 2013, Lumsden and Black 2018, Greig-Midlane 2019, Hester 2020). This more pragmatic approach, combined with alternative ways of policing football may prove beneficial in the future.

Different methods of policing football

As opposed to complete withdrawal from football grounds, multiple DFOs were advocating for use of fewer resources that are more specialised in football policing:

> If you've got an important search for a murder, you send you search trained officers. If you've got a traffic incident, you send your traffic officers, if you've got a football incident, why don't you send your football officers? … Why would you not choose the trained officers? My view would be, use them for every single game, because they're trained, we train them twice a year in football policing. So, they're the best officers to have on the ground … use less police officers who are better trained. (DFO5)

> Let's have a cadre of cops who always do football … and because we can deal with stuff and less cops means they're more effective, and they'll deal with more things, which ultimately would mean less cops overall. (DFO8)

The value of police spotters (now known as OFOs) as opposed to PSU resources in effective approaches and de-escalation was recognised by both police and football club participants:

> Spotters will see something bubbling, will just stand there. You know, pat someone on the back: 'hello fella you alright?' And it will calm that. Whereas a PSU you know, a serial steaming in pushing and shoving could escalate it. (DFO6)

> I actually think the spotters, who we don't pay for, are the ones that actually we should be paying for. Because they're the ones that actually have got the knowledge, they've got the experience … I would rather be paying for eight spotters every game, than an additional section of police that, you know, the uniforms there, it looks good, strength in numbers. But, actually what they give me I get more from my stewards. (SO6)

> When you bring police officers into a ground almost in full code one minus their helmets, which is strapped to their belt … they're only there for one reason and they're there for major disorder. They can actually nip that in the bud right at the start by speaking to people and talking to people on the way in and having a good rapport with them. (SO7)

As highlighted by the UKFPU (2022), the skills and experience demonstrate the importance of OFOs to a football policing operation. A large body of research (see Stott *et al.* 2012, 2018b, 2019, Hope *et al.* 2023) advocates for a more liaison-based approach to policing football, as well as specialised resources for the policing of football. It should be argued that OFOs and DFOs have a vital role to play in fostering this approach. Proposals to increase the use of specialist football police resources, which reduce the overall police deployment of resources, is a sensible policing approach which is difficult to argue against. Safety Officer comments would also lend support to this, even though a note of caution is made about this approach:

> If you think you can always just use liaison, then you're probably gonna get some officers hurt. So, it's about having that mix, deploying the right things at the right time not being too precipitous about deploying public order assets. (NPCC Rep)

This comment emphasises the importance of striking the correct balance between avoiding risk averse practices, and ensuring that appropriate resource levels are in place, which is understandably not straightforward for the police service to achieve.

Discussion and conclusion

This research has demonstrated that areas of current police practice for the policing of football has a number of shortcomings, plus a range of areas for improvement. Of most concern is the apparent inactivity and wastage of police resources deployed at football events. This was evidenced through repeated concerns from football clubs, police forces and stakeholders. The issues in police practice and over resourcing is potentially occurring due to risk averse practices within policing, which was evidenced in this research and supports existing research suggesting that policing is risk averse in its approach to football (Hester *et al.* 2024), public order (Leach 2021) as well as policing more broadly (Heaton 2011). A limitation here is that specific views of match commanders have not been obtained in this research, further research through interviews with police match commanders could help to establish the potential reasons for this risk aversion in more detail.

A potential cause of police over-resourcing for football matches could be because there is an over-reliance on public order policing assets to manage the threat and risk of a particular fixture (as also suggested by Stott *et al.* 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022, Hester *et al.* 2024). This can then

result in some of the issues identified here, where there are numerous policing assets that are present for a worst-case scenario and are underutilised during the operation. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that the public order resources do not sufficiently engage with football supporters to develop a liaison-based approach which is grounded in the principles of procedural justice as recommended by previous research (Stott *et al.* 2012, 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022). The evidence base presented here indicates that a shift to a more flexible resourcing approach to policing football is required, that utilises a range of policing assets and does not overly rely on public order resources. The findings of the Casey (2021) report are significant and should not be overlooked, so it is important to bear in mind here that the findings should be applied to the volume of regularly occurring football matches, not one-off mega events. Some police forces were displaying good practice and pragmatism with regards to the more pluralised resourcing of football, and showed some potential future directions which offer a lot of merit in terms of improving football policing whilst reducing the burden on police resources. This occurred where police forces were aware of the body of work advocating for a more liaison-based approach to policing football (Stott *et al.*, 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022, Hope *et al.* 2023) and had made attempts to embed this into their practice. However, this was the exception rather than the rule, and other police forces need to move towards approaches such as focusing on specific resourcing, as opposed to set resourcing for match categories.

There is a clear call from the participants for the utilisation of specialist police resources that are deployed to football, with a mandate to engage with supporter communities in attempts to reduce disorder. By having more specialist resources which offer more productivity when policing football, it would allow other police resources to deal with the range of competing priorities for police time. Further evidence-based research is required to establish how these more specialist resources can be best utilised in practice to build a more liaison-based approach with supporters that embeds procedural justice, building on previous work in this area (Stott *et al.* 2012, 2018b, 2019, Pearson and Stott 2022). Furthermore, the UKFPU guidance could be updated to recognise the tension in the OFO role between the engagement and evidence gathering roles that they are expected to do (see Hope *et al.* 2023). Recognising the need for a more nuanced approach of who is responsible for implementing the engagement and liaison-based approach, could help policing practice. Football events are the most commonly occurring mass gathering of communities across England and Wales (and potentially across Europe), and by regarding football events as an opportunity to engage with the public, then improved outcomes may occur. Whilst senior police officers have called for football clubs to pay more towards the cost of policing football, this research has demonstrated that the direction of travel needs to be towards more efficient use of police resources when policing football. This would reduce the overall number of officers, and ultimately the cost to police forces and the taxpayer.

Note

1. According to the National Police Chiefs' Council (2022), a serial is one sergeant and seven constables, and a PSU is three serials plus a PSU inspector (see NPCC 2022).

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