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Fair or Foul:

An Analysis of Police Response to Fan Aggression

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Abstract

Policing spectator sports comes with a unique set of challenges and can result in various consequences if handled improperly. Officers who work spectator sports events are often faced with unpredictable behaviors during high stress situations which could lead to difficulties maintaining safety and order. It is important to understand that officers experience heightened stress during these events and finding the right way to mediate it can be difficult. This study seeks to answer two research questions. First, what factors contribute to fan aggression in spectator sports crowds from a crowd members perspective? This applies to policing sporting crowds because understanding these factors helps law enforcement develop safer crowd management strategies. Second, does the standard model of procedural justice and police legitimacy apply to the context of spectator sport crowd management? This question relates to policing in a broader field, as the invariance thesis suggests that procedural justice and police legitimacy can be applied similarly across contexts (Bolger,2019). However, this has never been tested within the realm of crowd management during sports events. Understanding how police can manage crowds during spectator sports is important because officers must know what is required to manage crowd dynamics and prevent collective chaos.

Introduction

Policing spectator sports comes with a unique set of challenges and can result in various consequences if handled improperly. For instance, Mississippi State was fined \$500k after fans stormed on the field on September 08, 2025, following their victory against the 12th ranked Arizona State University. Other universities like Florida State were also fined for similar violations after their win against Alabama. Officers who work spectator sports events are often faced with unpredictable behaviors during high stress situations which could lead to difficulties maintaining safety and order. Oftentimes events must be shut down and the crowds lose thousands of dollars due to the collective emotions experienced when mishandling these events. It is important to understand that officers experience heightened stress during these events and finding the right way to mediate it can be difficult. This study seeks to answer two research questions. First, what factors contribute to fan aggression in spectator sports crowds from a crowd members perspective? This applies to policing sporting crowds because understanding these factors helps law enforcement develop safer crowd management strategies. Second, does the standard model of procedural justice and police legitimacy apply to the context of spectator sport crowd management? This question relates to policing in a broader field, as the invariance thesis suggests that procedural justice and police legitimacy can be applied similarly across contexts (Bolger,2019). However, this has never been tested within the realm of crowd

management during sports events. Understanding how police can manage crowds during spectator sports is important because officers must know what is required to manage crowd dynamics and prevent collective chaos.

Literature Review

Spectator sports can be high-intensity public gatherings for players, spectators, and the police managing those events. Due to the poignant nature of sporting crowds, the policing of spectator sports occupies a unique intersection of policing, crowd psychology, and community legitimacy. Unlike routine law enforcement contexts, spectator sports present dynamic environments where large, emotionally charged crowds gather in confined spaces, often under the influence of alcohol (Nassauer, 2015). These settings challenge traditional models of policing, requiring strategies that balance deterrence, de-escalation, the facilitation of fan engagement, and symbolic legitimacy. The large crowd sizes and rivalries can make this hard to manage and promote fan aggression or disorderly conduct. The nature of these interactions makes it important to examine crowd dynamics and policing strategies that are used to maintain order.

Hoggett & Stott (2010) examined catalysts for crowd aggression that led to police interventions and found that violence is less likely when police adopt strategies that are influenced by more modern crowd psychology perspectives. When examining crowds, public perceptions are based on the fairness and transparency of how an officer may have responded or reached the outcome they did. This is referred to as procedural justice and this perspective

contends that when police engage in more transparent and fair decision-making, officers are more likely to be perceived legitimately. Legitimacy primarily focuses on following the law and cooperating with officers throughout the course of an interaction. (Bolger & Walters, 2019)

Through this perspective, officers may approach a spectator sports event prioritizing alternatives from formal sanctions, like verbal warnings or arresting someone. This knowledge and practice can have important implications for policing crowds, specifically in sports management, by prioritizing strategies that promote legitimacy and foster favorable perceptions.

The standard model of procedural justice is important because it emphasizes fairness and transparency among the criminal justice system (Kingshott, 2014). This model is influential in public perceptions of legitimacy, and serves as the antecedent to more legitimate interactions. Evidence that has been drawn shows that community policing and crowd management can help build trust among the community (Kingshott, 2014). Within the criminal justice system, there is a correlation between communities trusting officers due to consistency while enforcing laws among different groups and being aware of the different communities they may encounter so they could be prepared (Kingshott, 2014).

During spectator sports, the implementation of procedural justice principles has some challenges compared to other forms of crowd management. Police-fan interactions can be affected by alcohol use or strong collective identities (Nassauer, 2015). These factors can escalate tension and cause officers to have a harder time maintaining peace at a spectator sports event. Nassauer (2015) suggested that both protest and spectator sports atmospheres have similar dynamics of legitimacy and compliance. For instance, emotional dynamics and interactions are factors that trigger violence among both types of crowds. Interactions between an officer and an

individual won't affect these dynamics but a group interaction with an officer possesses the capability strong collective identities to clash. Although both atmospheres may have similar crowd dynamics, targeted research may be needed to adapt policing strategies that can effectively control and maintain spectator sport environments.

Kanaujiya (2022) examines spiritual mass gatherings and finding a comprehensive approach for risk analysis, management and preparedness. Accommodating larger crowds such as mass gatherings or spectator sports can be difficult when trying to maintain peace. Creating a system that can be adapted during these events can be beneficial. Situational and environmental factors play a huge role in crowd behavior at sporting events as well. Designs of stadiums, entry and exit points, and crowd numbers can impact how fans may interact and react to stressful situations (Kanaujiya, 2022). Rivalry matches and overcrowding can intensify emotions leading to aggressive behaviors. The style of policing and the system used for crowd management can also increase or decrease tensions. Thus, officers acting in approachable manners are more likely to be perceived favorably and can diminish the potential for aggression. Environmental factors as well as an individual's behavior such as compliance or emotional outbursts are important in the management of spectator sports.

Police interactions can impact a variety of outcomes during collective events, including whether spectators form a singular social identity against officers in attendance (Kennedy, 2019). An event where officers approach procedural fairness, where officers respect fans, and communicate clearly tend to lead to compliance and reduce conflict. Coercive control can provoke resistance and escalate aggression. De-escalation strategies have different outcomes than

those that involve use of force or other formal sanctions. Aggressive policing fuels fans to aggression rather than containing it as many case studies have shown.

Integrating the two research questions highlights the potential of procedural justice and legitimacy to reduce fan aggression in spectator sports. The evidence presented from policing research shows that when officers engage with spectators in respectful and fair ways, allowing them to voice their opinions can reduce the risk of noncompliance (Mazerolle et al., 2013).

According to Mazerolle and colleagues (2013), individual, interpersonal, and situational interactions are important because they can impact the outcome of fan violence. Procedural justice not only encourages obeying rules, but it also strengthens the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement. This can help create a cooperative atmosphere that can prevent minor tension from escalating to aggressive behavior. Procedural fairness within crowd management can not only serve as an ethical guideline but also as a strategy to reduce conflict and maintain public safety.

In the same sense, research can point to potential feedback in which poor procedural justice reduces legitimacy. In return, this can cause fan aggression and provoke coercive policing responses which could include use of force or intimidation (Pryce & Whitaker, 2022). While studies in general policing and protest can support this model, there remains a question on whether empirical research directly connects procedural justice interventions to fan aggression outcomes, which can provide clearer guidance for law enforcement to find strategies for crowd management that balance authority and are evidence-based.

In brief, the literature highlights the potential and limitations of applying models of procedural justice and police legitimacy to spectator sports. Although some research may suggest that showing fairness, neutrality, and respect can result in compliance and trust, other factors can

alter the outcomes of these events. The factors include collective identity, alcohol use, and emotional rivalries (Nassauer, 2015). Integrating the different perspectives and factors suggests that procedural justice may be necessary for controlling and reducing aggression. Overall, this review points to the need for future research that will examine how legitimacy-based crowd management strategies can be adjusted to address pressures during sporting events. It offers practical implications for policing, sporting crowds management, and public safety.

Methods

Research Questions

This study examines emotions during spectator sports events and the challenges police face throughout. This is conducted by collecting data from potential participants in spectator sports. The study addresses two questions, one focusing on collective emotions, and the other focusing on the approaches officers may adopt from a spectators' perspective. The study was conducted using a factorial vignette design and consists of both quantitative and qualitative questions. Specifically, this study aims to answer the perceived factors that contribute to fan

aggression in spectator sporting crowds and whether the standard model of procedural justice and police legitimacy applies in the context of spectator sport crowd management. The goal is to understand how situational emotions or triggers can influence crowd behaviors and how dynamics can shape the perceptions of policing strategies that are used.

Cross-sectional Survey Collection and Availability Sampling

The data was collected through a cross-sectional survey which included questions that measured procedural justice, such as; “Did the police officers in the short story treat everyone with respect?” and “Did the police officers in the short story treat people fairly?” We've used cross-sectional surveys to assess attitudes and beliefs pertaining to how police manage crowds during special events. 42 individuals agreed to take part in the survey. The participants were mostly ECU students and Greenville, NC residents that were sampled through email and social media platforms. As such, this sample is limited to one geographic area and is not generalizable to the larger population. Each participant was randomly assigned one of four potential vignettes with hypothetical scenarios pertaining to the condition of the event (i.e., violent/peaceful) and the legitimacy of the officer's behavior (legitimate/illegitimate). Most ECU students and residents within the sample have attended spectator sports or have watched a livestreamed sporting event. Additionally, all participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to data collection. All surveys are confidential as only gender and age will be used to identify the individuals.

Results

1. **What factors contribute to fan aggression in spectator sports crowds from a crowd members perspective?**

Across the sample collected, different variables related to fan aggression showed trends. Rivalry showed a strong mode of Yes (31 participants), indicating that a proportion of spectators viewed the event through the lens of group competition which is known to increase emotional intensity and the likelihood of aggressive responses. Fight involvement also showed a strong mode of Yes (24 participants), suggesting that a portion of the sample witnessed physical altercations at the events they've attended. In terms of emotional expression, celebratory behavior had a mode of Somewhat Likely (19 participants), indicating that most spectators engaged in a celebration following the conclusion of an event.

2. Does the standard model of procedural justice and police legitimacy apply to the context of spectator sport crowd management?

The statistics suggested that respondents reported moderate levels of procedural justice, with a mean score of 12.1 and a median of 13, and a range from 5-20, indicating variability in perceptions of how fairly they were treated by police. Measures tied directly to legitimacy were a bit higher: The normative obligation to obey score had a mean of 15.2 (median 15, range 8-20) and the non-normative obligation to obey score averaged 15.125 (median 15, range 5-20), suggesting that on average spectators were more likely to obey the police because of a fear of repercussions if they didn't. Cooperative intentions were somewhat lower, with a mean of 8.675 and a median of 9 (range 3-12), implying that most spectators were at least moderately willing to cooperate with police.

The results show that some parts of the procedural justice model do apply to spectator-sports crowds, but not perfectly. Spectators who thought the police were more legitimate also tended to think they were fair and were less likely to obey out of fear. However, other findings show that

political views and race also play an important role in how people perceive the police. For example, Democrats and people with more liberal political views felt less obligated to obey police while White spectators felt more obligated and Black spectators felt less obligated. Similar patterns appeared in cooperation: White respondents were more willing to cooperate, while Black respondents were significantly less willing. Overall, this means that while procedural justice still matters in spectator sports crowds, people's backgrounds and experiences, especially political beliefs and race, strongly affect how they view police and whether they are willing to cooperate.

In spectator sports settings, people are more likely to cooperate with police when they see them as fair and legitimate. Procedural justice encourages people to follow the rules because they think it's the right thing to do, not out of fear. Legitimacy is important in situations with potential conflict or violence. Demographics also matter: older spectators and men are more likely to see police as fair, while Black spectators are less likely to cooperate overall. Political beliefs and race influence moral obligation to obey, with Democrats or liberal individuals feeling obligated to follow police instructions.

Discussion

This research set out to understand what factors contribute to fan aggression in spectator sports crowds and whether the standard model of procedural justice and police legitimacy applies to spectator sports crowds. Throughout the literature review, different important findings emerged. The first finding was that different factors can contribute to perceptions of fan aggression. These factors include alcohol use, group identities, and environmental conditions

(Nassauer, 2015). The second finding shows that when officers act fairly, fans are more likely to view them as legitimate and respond cooperatively. (Bolger and Walters, 2019).

The first research question that examines different factors that contribute to fan aggression which included alcohol use, group identities, and environmental factors suggests that alcohol usage and perceived rivalries were associated with perceptions of fan aggression within our sample. This means that law enforcement cannot solely rely on specific tactics such as use of force, they must understand how alcohol and collective identities can push towards emotional responses. This suggests that policing strategies can influence the potential for aggression at sporting events (Nassauer, 2015). These findings suggest that policing at sporting events should create a preventive and situational model stemming from those factors. Officers may need to incorporate risk assessment tools to better prepare for situations that are likely to provoke aggression.

The second major finding has a stronger theoretical importance. Hoggett and Scott (2010) argue that aggression emerges when individuals feel threatened, restricted, or treated unfairly by officers. When officers communicate clearly and treat everyone fairly, crowds are less likely to become hostile. This outcome supports procedural justice, a theory which states that fair and transparent police actions are more important for individuals to comply than the severity of the punishment. Kingshott (2014) also supports this idea which shows that transparency and consistency builds trust within communities and officers. This also aligns with Kennedy's (2019) analysis of protest policing, where communication and de-escalation should be prioritized within police behaviors. For criminal justice systems, this means departments should emphasize the importance of communication training, de-escalation tactics, and consistent enforcement to

reinforce legitimacy. This could involve policy shifts towards guidelines restricting the use of fan-engagement units.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when reviewing this study. The first limitation is a lot of the crowd behavior research that exists relies on smaller samples, and this study is no exception. These samples often derive from a single event or a specific police department which limits jurisdictions. Crowd dynamics vary by sport, regions, and sometimes even religion. The smaller samples limit the generalizability of the results and the importance of this cannot be understated, as what works in one arena or city may not work for another.

The second limitation is this study adopts a cross-sectional approach. It only examines perceptions at a single point in time. This design limits the ability to analyze how procedural justice influences crowd behavior over time. Without longitudinal data, it is difficult to determine whether legitimacy practices lead to long-lasting effects.

Future research should examine how police can use fairness and respect to manage fans at sporting events, such as by using clear communication, talking to fans, or using de-escalation methods to reduce aggression. Studies should also explore how factors like alcohol use and strong fan group identities affect how well these fairness strategies work, especially during rivalry games. Research could examine crowded areas and influence how fans respond to police. The findings lead to questions such as: do procedurally just and legitimate approaches work the same way in different sports, how does alcohol affect interactions with police, and can staff or venue security that aren't officers use these strategies in a similar manner? Answering these questions could help improve ways to keep crowds safe and calm during sporting events.

In conclusion, managing crowds at sporting events is challenging because of the strong emotions, alcohol, and larger groups of fans. Research shows that when police act fairly and communicate clearly it can reduce aggression and increase cooperation (Kingshott, 2014). Future studies should focus and analyze how alcohol, fan group identities, and the stadium's design affect these strategies, and whether staff can help. Understanding these factors can help police and event organizers keep fans safe while creating a positive experience at games.

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