The heavy police presence at football matches in England has reduced hooliganism in the stadium – but at what cost in terms of both policing budgets and under-protected places elsewhere in the neighbourhood? Olivier Marie examines the multiple effects of football matches on crime.
In the 1980s, football in England became infamous for the aggressive behaviour of some of its fans, when hooliganism tainted the ‘beautiful game’. To combat this affliction, security at stadiums was greatly enhanced and the policing of matches drastically increased. As a result, crowd violence had significantly subsided by the 1990s and the hooligan stigma has all but disappeared from English football today.

Still, the occasional scuffle is inevitable. While the police are now mostly able to prevent these from degenerating, the physical proximity of opposing fans has the potential to result in violent crimes during home games. This possibility – which I call the ‘concentration effect’ – is the first channel through which football matches can have an effect on crime.

In recent years, a different public safety debate has emerged, which is concerned with the very high costs of policing matches. These costs are only partially covered by the football clubs themselves. In 2009, during a discussion of the costs of policing football by the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, David Winnick MP noted additional potential costs: ‘If I were involved in criminality of a more sophisticated kind… would I not work on the assumption that the police will be fully occupied in a particular city – it will not be difficult to find out when these premiership games are being played – and I could go about my unlawful business?’

This question suggests the second channel through which matches can affect crime – the ‘displacement effect’. There may be increases in violent crime and property crime away from stadiums because of the displacement of police personnel assigned to match security during a home game.

A third possible effect of football on crime may stem from the ‘self-incapacitation’ of some potential offenders. This supposes that among the thousands of fans attending or following a game, a not insignificant number of them would have been criminally active if they had not been at the match. Self-incapacitation could therefore lead to decreases in violent crime and property crimes during both home and away games, especially in neighbourhoods where a high proportion of the population supports the local team.

Football matches may thus affect local crime rates through concentration, displacement and self-incapacitation – the directions of the three potential effects are described in Figure 1. For researchers, the difficulty is to disentangle the impact of each of these effects as they occur simultaneously. One solution is to consider how they influence property crime and violent crime separately during home and away games.

For example, to identify the self-incapacitation effect, we simply need to consider changes in local crime rates in a football team’s neighbourhood during away games. The displacement effect can then be measured as the difference in crime rates during home and away games for property offences. The concentration effect only affects violent crime during home games but will be hard to measure precisely. We would still be able to attribute increases in violent offences during home games as stemming from a mix of the displacement and concentration effects.

To obtain measures of these effects, we use the Metropolitan Crime Statistics System, high frequency local area crime data available for London for 1994-97. The system contains information on the time, location and type of offence for all crimes recorded by the police in the capital during this period. The data are aggregated at the level of the 32 boroughs in London into four six-hour windows for property and violent crimes. This is matched to detailed game information for nine major football teams with grounds in seven different London boroughs (in parenthesis): Arsenal (Islington), Charlton Athletic (Greenwich),

During home matches, opportunistic offenders in under-protected local areas commit more property crimes

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Note: Upward and downward pointing arrows represent positive and negative effects through each of the three channels – concentration, displacement and self-incapacitation – through which home or away sporting events may affect local property crime and violent crime. Flat arrows suggest no expected effect.
This article summarises ‘Police and Thieves in the Stadium: Measuring the (Multiple) Effects of Football Matches on Crime’ by Olivier Marie, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1012 (http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1012.pdf).

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Further reading


Violent crime in the local community does not increase on match days except during a local derby