

Making Sense of Football Fan Behaviour Data: Trends post-Covid-19, Anti-social Behaviour Definition and Quality Assessment

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This report was written as part of the internship work undertaken by Jennifer Dang Guay during her Masters degree in Statistics and Data Science at KU Leuven, Belgium, which took place between July and October 2022.

This report should not be considered as SGSA policy.

Executive Summary

This report examines trends in data of football fan behaviour, in light of reported increases of anti-social behaviour (ASB) in football grounds post-Covid-19. Specifically, by looking at available data on fan behaviour, the aim was to answer the research question as to how football fan behaviour has changed since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. However, because available data on fan behaviour is limited, no firm conclusions about any changes in fan behaviour could be made.

This report also aims to address some of the challenges of analysing data on fan behaviour (i.e., poor definition of fan behaviour and lack of data accessibility), particularly in the context of ASB, which has become a concern amongst stakeholders as at the end of the 21/22 season.

Specifically, the report identifies existing fan behaviours in football that could be considered 'anti-social' through a taxonomy of ASB. An assessment of the quality of available ASB data was also conducted by examining its strength (e.g., consistency, validity, robustness) and accessibility (e.g., whether, how and with whom the data is shared).

Although, many stakeholders are reporting on football-related ASB, UK Football Policing Unit (UKFPU) has the most data on ASB. Additionally, most of ASB data lacked quality, except data on ticket touting and driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs, which was found to be consistent and its information accessible to the public.

This report has identified that data quality on ASB at future seasons can be improved to provide a more in-depth picture on levels of safety in football by:

- (1) reporting on other ASB provided in the proposed taxonomy, for which there is currently little to no information on;
- (2) breaking down vague categories of fan behaviours found in current datasets into specific forms of ASB based on the taxonomy; and
- (3) collecting and releasing ASB data more frequently.

Introduction

A 2019 report by Dr Aidan Collins¹, highlighted some of the challenges in understanding patterns of football fan behaviour. This included poor definitions of violence, disorder, and ASB, as well as a difficulty in obtaining data on fan behaviour, which might be due to lack of focus on safety issues being a priority and/or a lack of clarity about whose responsibility it is to deal with it.

The purpose of this report is to revisit some of the data and challenges from the 2019 report¹, considering reported deteriorations in football fan behaviour following the Covid-19 pandemic.

As of the 22/23 season, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority (SGSA), the Football Association (FA), Premier League, and English Football League (EFL) have been working together to introduce new measures and sanctions to tackle the recent increase of ASB in football grounds. There is also a DCMS Select Committee inquiry into safety at major sporting events.

There is an ongoing debate about the origins of a recent rise in ASB. Some attribute these problems to a bounce back from the Covid-19 pandemic, where the increase in ASB might be understood as the return of previously normative behaviours^{2,3} and/or as a counter to “boredom” felt during lockdown^{4,5,6}. Others believe instead that these problems precede the pandemic, which brings into question the effectiveness of current safety strategies in dealing with such problems.

This report aims to inform the debate by investigating how football fan behaviour has changed since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. It will explore:

- (1) whether fan behaviour in football deteriorated since the lifting of Covid-19 lockdown or returned to pre-pandemic levels (i.e., 18/19 season); and
- (2) what types of problems were reported pre- and post-Covid-19, where finding similar problems might suggest that the same types of problematic fan behaviour are being dealt with.

There were no predefined hypotheses for the research question given its exploratory nature.

Importantly, however, because fan behaviour post-Covid-19 could only be covered by data from the latest season (i.e., 21/22), it might be too early to draw firm conclusions about any return to previous levels pre-pandemic. However, it is hoped this report can encourage the need for better and faster monitoring.

There are potential limitations in the analysis due to the previously mentioned challenges¹ in analysing data on football fan behaviour. Consequently, in section two, these challenges will be addressed (especially on poor definitions of fan behaviour and lack of data accessibility) to improve

¹ Collins, A. (2019). *The changing nature of spectator behaviour*. Sports Grounds Safety Authority. <https://sgsa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/20/11/Changing-Nature-of-Spectator-Behaviour.pdf>

² Mao, G., Ellis, O., Dang Guay, J., Templeton, A., & Drury, J. (2021). *Factors associated with attendee adherence to COVID-19 guidance during the Sefton Park 21 DCMS Events Research Programme*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31935.64168>

³ Templeton, A., Smith, K., Dang Guay, J., Barker, N., Whitehouse, D., & Smith, A. (2020). *Returning to UK sporting events during COVID-19: Spectator experiences at pilot events*. Sports Grounds Safety Authority. <https://sgsa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/20/10/Returning-to-UK-sporting-eventsduring-COVID-19-Analysis-of-spectator-experiences-at-pilot-events.pdf>

⁴ Cleland, J., & Cashmore, E. (2016). Football fans' views of violence in British football: Evidence of a sanitized and gentrified culture. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 40(2), 124–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723515615177>

⁵ Spaaij, R., & Anderson, A. (2010). Soccer fan violence: A holistic approach: A reply to Braun and Vliegthart. *International Sociology*, 25(4), 561–579. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580909351328>

⁶ Spaaij, R. (2008). Men like us, boys like them: Violence, masculinity, and collective identity in football hooliganism. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 32(4), 369–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723508324082>

data quality. These will be studied in the context of football-related ASB, which became a concern at the end of 21/22, with new forms of ASB being increasingly recognised as safety issues, such as racism and misogyny, but are not adequately represented in data on fan behaviour. These challenges also seemed most relevant with new data on fan behaviour being gathered by the Premier League and EFL in 22/23.

Importantly, football-related ASB is highly subjective and contextual⁷, which has led to concerns among various stakeholders and academics about how these behaviours are recorded, if at all. Moreover, ASB covers a wide range of behaviour (e.g., from shouting to pyrotechnics)⁸, and while police reported incidents of ASB capture some of the more extreme behaviours, others are less well understood and often neglected, leading to highly selective and inconsistent ASB data collection⁴.

To address this challenge of poor definition of ASB, a taxonomy of ASB will be proposed, providing an overview of behaviours falling under this category. Additionally, an assessment of the quality of available ASB data will be conducted, specifically its strength and look at whether, how, and with whom it is being shared. In doing so, this report aims to ways of improving data collection on ASB for future seasons.

Problems of ASB exist globally. The author engaged in discussions about changes in fan behaviour and challenges in reporting such behaviours with the football unit of the Belgium Ministry of Interior (BFU) and the European Stadium and Safety Management Association (ESSMA). As both the UK and Belgium are experiencing many of the same recent problems (e.g., pyrotechnics), examining the Belgian system of data collection on fan behaviour may help determine how the UK can improve their data⁹.

Methodology

Methods in this report are primarily built on previous work¹, referencing data sourced from Kick It Out and UKFPU from the 18/19 to 21/22 seasons. The work also included a rapid review of relevant academic papers, news articles, technical reports, laws in relation to football, all available statistics (Kick It Out, UKFPU). In addition, there has been engagement with key stakeholders through meetings and conferences, thanks to the SGSA's strong stakeholder network in the UK and Europe¹⁰.

This report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 tests the research question “How has football fan behaviour changed since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions?” using publicly available data from Kick It Out and UKFPU from 18/19 (pre-covid) to 21/22 (post-covid);
- Section 2 addresses the two challenges of data on fan behaviour and proposes ways to improve data quality by building a taxonomy of ASB and assessing ASB data quality based on its strength (e.g., consistency, validity, robustness) and accessibility (e.g., whether, how and with whom is it shared) through a rapid review of the literature and data on fan behaviour.

⁷ Strang, L., Baker, G., Pollard, J., & Hofman, J. (2018). *Violent and antisocial behaviours at football events and factor associated with these behaviours: A rapid evidence assessment* (Document No. RR-2580-QAT). RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2580>

⁸ Redgrave, H. (2022). *Rebuilding communities: Why it's time to put anti-social behaviour back on the agenda*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. <https://institute.global/policy/rebuilding-communities-why-its-time-put-anti-social-behaviour-back-agenda>

⁹ BFU used to publish their statistics on the webpage of the Belgium Ministry of Interior at least once a year. However, since the Covid-19 pandemic, they have updated their webpage and no longer publish their data. Therefore, for the purposes of this report, the data was provided to the author for internal use.

¹⁰ The author attended the SGSA's conference in May 22 and a stakeholder conference on disorder at football matches post-pandemic in July 22.

Section 1. Trends in Football Fan Behaviour Post-Covid-19

This section will analyse how football fan behaviour has changed since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions in the UK, using publicly available information from Kick It Out and UKFPU.

Kick It Out is an organisation aimed at tackling discrimination in English football, by, among other things, allowing fans the ability to anonymously report on all forms of discrimination¹¹. Every season, an annual report with a summary statistic of incidents reported to Kick It Out is published on its website¹². The full statistics were also published for the 19/20 until 21/22 seasons¹³. However, because data of 18/19 was not made publicly available, information for this season was taken directly from its annual report¹⁴, leaving analysis to be conducted on the total number of reported incidences of discrimination, which was available for each season.

While Kick It Out also collects information about incidents of discrimination at non-professional games, the analysis will focus on incidents witnessed at men's and women's professional games (including clubs in Premier League and EFL), as well as those occurring on social media made in connection to football, which has been shown to be positively associated with violence of fans in stadiums¹⁵.

Every season, UKFPU releases information about football-related arrests, football banning orders, and reports of incidents of football-related ASB, violence and disorder from police forces in England and Wales, the British Transport Police (BTP) and police dedicated football officers (DFOs) across professional games (including those played by the Premier League, EFL and National League clubs), which may be supplemented by information from the FA or Kick It Out. The data is then supplied to the Home Office statisticians for quality assurance checks before the statistics can be officially released to the public¹⁶.

Notably, in light of the decision made to extend football banning orders to include online hate crime¹⁷, numbers of online hate crime have been added to UKFPU statistics for the first time during the 2022/23 season. However, because these numbers are considered experimental¹⁸, they will not be included in this analysis. Furthermore, because football banning orders of a particular season can be given to offences committed in the previous one, their information may be misleading. Hence, in

¹¹ Penfold, C. & Cleland, J. (2022). Kicking it out? Football fans' views of anti-racism initiatives in English football. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 46(2), 176–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723521106719>

¹² Kick It Out's 'Reporting Statistics' page contains their annual reports since 2008/2009: <https://www.kickitout.org/reporting-statistics>

¹³ The full statistics contains numbers of incidents of discrimination reported to Kick It Out, broken down by type, location, reporting methods and league, which can be downloaded from the 21/22 annual report on: <https://www.kickitout.org/reporting-statistics>

¹⁴ Kick It Out. (n.d.). *Annual Report 2018/19*. [https://www.kickitout.org/sites/default/files/22-06/18-19 Annual Report.pdf](https://www.kickitout.org/sites/default/files/22-06/18-19%20Annual%20Report.pdf)

¹⁵ Ben Shalom, U., Dvir, A., Levy, M., Zwilling, M., Orkibi, E., Gabay, N., & Pele, O. (2019). From internet swear words to stadium violence in football (soccer) games – An Israeli case study. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 54(3), 348–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690217715298>

¹⁶ Official statistics of football-related arrests and banning orders since 1984 is released by the Home Office every season and can be found on: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/football-banning-orders>

¹⁷ As of July 1st, 2022, a person committing online hate crime in relation to football can be charged with a criminal offence. For more information, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-21-to-22-season/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-21-to-22-season#online-hate-crime-connected-to-football>

¹⁸ Statistics on football-related online hate crime have been reported for the first time in the 21/22 publication by the Home Office, making them new, and thus further development may be needed to assure the quality of these statistics. For more information, see Section 6, 7.8, 7.9, and 7.10 of: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-21-to-22-season/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-21-to-22-season#online-hate-crime-connected-to-football>

regard to data from UKFPU, an analysis will be performed on the total number of football-related arrests (excluding online hate crime) and incidents per season.

According to UKFPU, football-related arrests are those related to offences specified in Schedule 1 of the Football Spectators Act 1989¹⁹ (e.g., pyrotechnics, missile throwing, pitch invasion; hereinafter Schedule 1 arrests), as well other offences (or “other” arrests) that are not covered by Schedule 1, such as possession of drugs. Notably, football-related arrests determined by Schedule 1 can also be given by BTP officers who escort trains before and after matches, or guard stations with large number of fans arriving (hereinafter BTP arrests).

Football-related incidents, on the other hand, are defined as football-related ASB, violence, and disorder. Unlike football-related arrests, which are reported by police forces in England and Wales and the BTP, reports of incidents are collected by DFOs or supplemented by information from the FA or Kick It Out. Additionally, their numbers represent the number of matches where an incident occurred, and multiple incidents can take place at a given match.

Table 1 gives a summary of the number of reports of football-related discrimination, arrests, and incidents (in %) collected by Kick It Out and UKFPU in the seasons before, during and after Covid-19.

Table 1

Percentage of Total Number of Football-Related Reports Received by Kick It Out and UKFPU from 18/19 (pre-Covid-19) to 21/22 (post-Covid-19)

Season	Total Number of Reports Received (%)					
	Pro-game Discrimination	Online Discrimination	Schedule 1 Arrests	BTP Arrests	“Other” Arrests	Incidents
18/19	27%	34%	29%	36%	31%	27%
19/20	38%	26%	23%	6%	26%	26%
20/21	3%	23%	2%	26%	4%	2%
21/22	32%	16%	46%	32%	40%	44%
Total ^a	100% (n = 1173)	100% (n = 462)	100% (n = 4784)	100% (n = 433)	100% (n = 794)	100% (n = 3664)

Notes. n = total number of reports received, BTP = British Transport Police. Schedule 1 arrest are those determined by Schedule 1 of the Football Spectators Act 1989¹⁹, whereas “Other” arrests are those not covered by Schedule 1. The number of reported incidents represents the number matches where an incident occurred, and multiple incidents can take place at a given match.

^aThe sum of percentages across a column may not add up to 100% as values have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Section 1.1. Discrimination at Professional Games

Key findings: The data suggests that reports of discrimination at professional games rose at the start of the pandemic before decreasing in 21/22 and reaching comparable levels of pre-Covid-19, with racism remaining the most problematic form of discrimination. However, given that the data relies on self-reports from fans, which can fluctuate from season to season and was affected by Covid-19 restrictions, it is difficult to assess the influence of the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions on discrimination at professional games.

¹⁹ Football Spectators Act 1989. Schedule 1. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/37/schedule/1>

According to Table 1, the pattern of reported discriminations witnessed at professional games between 18/19 to 21/22 is inconsistent; reports increased at the start of the pandemic, then decreased before increasing again post-Covid-19, reaching almost comparable levels as pre-pandemic. Specifically, out of the total reports of professional games discrimination, there were 27% in 18/19, 38% in 19/20, 3% in 20/21 and 32% 21/22.

The substantial decrease reported in 20/21 is due to most games being played without fans, limiting the number of abuses that would have been witnessed, whereas 19/20 was only partly affected by Covid-19 restrictions²⁰. Conversely, with fans returning to stadiums in 21/22, the number of reported incidents on discrimination rose above those of pre-Covid-19 (i.e., from 27% to 32% respectively).

Table 2 shows the number of reports received by discrimination type (in %) between 19/20 to 21/22 at professional games and on social media. Notably, because the full statistics of 18/19 were not available, it was not possible to breakdown the total number of reports received per discrimination type for this season. Instead, reliance was placed on information in the annual report, which only indicated that racism was the most problematic form of discrimination at both professional games and on social media in 18/19.

Table 2

Percentage of the Total Number of Reports Received by Discrimination Type Between the 19/20 to 21/22 Seasons at Professional Games and on Social Media

Discrimination Type	Pro-Game Reports			Social Media Reports		
	19/20	20/21	21/22	19/20	20/21	21/22
Disability	1%	0%	2%	2%	2%	1%
Gender	0%	0%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Gender Reassignment	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%
Race	63%	91%	48%	74%	82%	50%
Religion/Faith	9%	0%	18%	16%	6%	32%
Sexual Orientation	26%	9%	28%	5%	9%	12%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%
Total ^a	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(n = 446)	(n = 34)	(n = 380)	(n = 121)	(n = 108)	(n = 74)

Notes. n = total number of reports received. Adapted from “Reporting Stats 19-20 to 21-22”, by Kick It Out, 2022 (<https://www.kickitout.org/reporting-statistics>).

a The sum of percentages across a column may not add up to 100% as values have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Based on the above information and on Table 2, it appears that racism continues to be the most reported across seasons, suggesting that forms of discrimination witnessed at football grounds in 21/22 might be similar to those pre-pandemic.

However, given that data from Kick It Out relies heavily on self-reports, which may fluctuate from season to season (e.g., due to poor awareness of reporting mechanism), trends in the data cannot be concluded with certainty. In future seasons it may be worth supplementing information from Kick It Out with data on discrimination from other stakeholders.

²⁰ A range of Covid-19 restrictions was introduced from March 20 onwards. See Section 1.1 of: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-19-to-20-season/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-19-to-20-season#user-guide>

Section 1.2. Online Discrimination

Key findings: Although the data points to a steady decrease in incidents of discrimination on social media since pre-Covid-19, with racism remaining the most problematic form of discrimination online, these results might be hindered by unclear and potentially underreported data. Therefore, no firm conclusions could be drawn about changes of online discrimination since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions.

Table 1 shows that percentage of reports of discrimination on social media seems to have dropped consistently from pre-Covid-19. Out of all reported incidents of discrimination online, there were 34% reported in 18/19, 26% in 19/20, 23% in 20/21 and 16% in 21/22, with racism remaining the most problematic form of discrimination online (see Section 1.1 and Table 2).

Because there may be more incidents of discrimination online than those reported to Kick It Out, the data might not be representative. Additionally, since there is no information about the persons being targeted, this raises concern about what kind of information the data conveys. For instance, do these reports represent incidents of discrimination online against professional footballers, grassroots players or both? Do they cover men's and/or women's games across Premier League and EFL clubs? Therefore, interpretations of discrimination on social media from Kick It Out might be restricted by unclear and potentially underrepresented data.

Section 1.3. Football-related Arrests

Key findings: Schedule 1 arrests and "other" arrests have been the highest in 21/22, rising above those of pre-Covid-19 levels, while arrests by the BTP in 21/22 seems to have decreased relative to pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, similar arrests appear to have been made during the 18/19 and 21/22 seasons, with the addition of more Schedule 1 arrest on possession of pyrotechnics post-Covid-19. Importantly, higher number of arrests made in 21/22 might be related to a greater willingness of police to prosecute risky fan behaviour, making it difficult to assess the actual influence of the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions on levels of football-related arrests.

In Table 1, Schedule 1 arrests have been the highest in the latest season since pre-Covid-19. Out of all Schedule 1 arrests, there were 46% arrests in 21/22, compared to 2% in 20/21, 23% in 19/20 and 29% in 18/19.

Table 3 shows the number Schedule 1 arrests by offence type (in %) made before, during and after Covid-19. Across all seasons, most arrest were made in relation to violent disorder, public disorder and alcohol offences/driving under influence of a drink or drugs. However, in 21/22, possession of pyrotechnics moved to the list of top five most arrest for the first time within the last four seasons, matching anecdotal evidence on growing concerns over pyrotechnics being brought into stadiums in 21/22²¹. Therefore, while offences committed in 21/22 were similar to those pre-Covid-19, new problems surrounding pyrotechnics might have emerged following the pandemic.

²¹ The FA. (2022, May 10). *The dangers of pyrotechnics at football matches*. <https://www.thefa.com/news/2022/may/10/fa-statement-on-pyrotechnics>

Table 3

Percentages of Total Number of Schedule 1 Arrests by Offence Type Made Before (i.e., 18/19), During and After Covid-19 (i.e., 21/22)

Schedule 1 Arrests by Offence Type	Season			
	18/20	19/20	20/21	21/22
Public Disorder	38%	34%	34%	36%
Violent Disorder	19%	26%	36%	20%
Pitch Incursion	11%	8%	3%	14%
Alcohol Offences/ Driving under influence of a drink or drugs	11%	11%	11%	10%
Possession of pyrotechnics	6%	6%	2%	8%
Throwing missiles	8%	7%	1%	8%
Criminal damage/Offences against property	2%	1%	8%	2%
Racist and Indecent Chanting	1%	3%	0%	1%
Breach of banning order	1%	1%	4%	1%
Ticket Touting	1%	3%	0%	1%
Possession of an offensive weapon	1%	0%	1%	0%
Total ^a	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(n = 1381)	(n = 1089)	(n = 116)	(n = 2198)

Notes. n = total number of reports received.

^a The sum of percentages across a column may not add up to 100% as values have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

According to Table 1, BTP arrests in 21/22 have also risen from 19/20 and 20/21 but decreased from pre-Covid-19 levels. Specifically, out of all BTP arrests, there were 32% arrests made in 21/22, compared to 26% in 20/21, 6% in 19/20 and 36% in 18/19.

Table 4 shows the number of BTP arrests by offence type (in %) made before, during and after Covid-19. Again, violent disorder, public disorder and alcohol offences/driving under influence of a drink or drugs were among offences with the most BTP arrests across seasons, suggesting that offences leading to BTP arrests in 21/22 might be similar to those pre-Covid-19.

Table 4

Percentages of Total Number of BTP Arrests by Offence Type Made Before (i.e., 18/19), During and After Covid-19 (i.e., 21/22)

BTP Arrests by Offence Type	Season			
	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22
Public Disorder	50%	38%	38%	45%
Violent Disorder	26%	32%	58%	34%
Pitch Incursion	0%	0%	0%	0%
Alcohol Offences/ Driving under influence of a drink or drugs	21%	27%	4%	16%
Possession of pyrotechnics	1%	1%	0%	1%
Throwing missiles	0%	0%	0%	0%
Criminal damage/Offences against property	1%	3%	0%	4%
Racist and Indecent Chanting	0%	0%	0%	1%
Breach of banning order	1%	0%	0%	0%
Ticket Touting	1%	0%	0%	0%
Possession of an offensive weapon	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total ^a	100% (n = 155)	100% (n = 114)	100% (n = 24)	100% (n = 140)

Notes. n = total number of reports received.

^a The sum of percentages across a column may not add up to 100% as values have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Similar to arrests determined by Schedule 1, amount of “other” arrests have been the highest in 21/22 since pre-Covid-19. Out of all “other” arrests, there were 40% arrests made in 21/22, compared to 4% in 20/21, 26% in 19/20 and 31% in 18/19 (see Table 1).

However, because “other” arrests cannot be broken down by offence type, their details (pertaining, for instance, to the behaviour that led to an arrest) were not made publicly available. Therefore, there could not be a comparison of the type of offences leading to “other” arrests pre- and post-Covid-19.

The greater number of arrests made this season might be due to more matches being policed in 21/22, compared to previous seasons²². With more police in the grounds then more arrests may be made, in turn facilitating the belief that problems of football fan behaviour have increased⁴. Thus, it is difficult to conclude on the extent to which increases in numbers of arrests may be associated with the lift of Covid-19 restrictions.

²² BBC. (2022, January 27). *Police chief wants to meet FA, Premier League and EFL about disorder at matches.* <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/60127492>

Section 1.4. Football-Related Incidents

Key findings: Reports of football-related incidents has been the highest in 21/22 since pre-Covid-19, with more matches reporting incidents of pyrotechnics, pitch invasion, missile throwing and hate crime in 21/22, compared to 18/19. However, because increases in reported incidents might be related to greater number of matches with DFOs present, an examination of the real influence of the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions on levels of football-related incidents could not take place.

According to Table 1, levels of football-related incidents have been the highest since pre-Covid-19, similar to Schedule 1 and “other” arrests. Out of all reported matches with incidents, 44% occurred in 21/22, 2% in 20/21, 26% in 19/20 and 27% in 18/19.

Most incidents have increased from pre-Covid-19 levels, with notably more matches reporting incidents of pyrotechnics (+12%), pitch invasion (+8%), missile throwing (+5%) and hate crime (+5%) in 21/22, compared to 18/19²³.

Similar to football-related arrest, the greater number of matches with reported incidents in 21/22 might be due to an increased presence of DFOs at matches, making it difficult to examine the influence of the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions on football-related incidents.

Section 2. Quality Assessment of Data on Football-related Anti-Social Behaviour

This section considers ways of improving data on ASB. Two key issues highlighted in the 2019 report¹ will be considered:

- (1) poor definition of fan behaviour, and
- (2) lack of data accessibility on fan behaviour.

Specifically, a taxonomy of ASB will be proposed, alongside an examination of the quality of available data on ASB.

Section 2.1. ASB taxonomy

To date, there has been no attempt in categorising football behaviours as ‘anti-social’, and football violence and disorder remains ill-defined. Because ASB has become a major public concern in 21/22, it was of interest to establish a taxonomy of ASB to use for data collection on fan behaviour.

In defining ASB, the aim is to provide a fuller view of behaviours already existing in football to identify new and emerging trends, as well as gaps in the data. Particularly, if there is an understanding of what behaviours lack data, ways can be identified to measure them and prevent selective reporting, whereby some behaviours are being reported but others ignored⁴. This can also help in determining where the focus of data collection should be in the future so that stakeholders can collect the right data that would help improve safety within football grounds.

²³ For more information about number of matches with reported incident by type, see Table 11 of the football-related arrests and banning order statistics, England and Wales, Season 2021/22 on: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022-season>

Through a rapid review of the literature and data, various behaviours occurring at football matches were identified and considered whether they were 'anti-social'. The definition of ASB from the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014²⁴ was used and adopted it to the context of football, leading to ASB being defined as one causing, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm, or distress to any person, or capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to a person's enjoyment of the event.

Based on this definition, a list of ASB occurring at football matches was identified, for instance: horseplay (i.e., pushing and hitting others in a rowdy manner²⁵), aggro (i.e., letting others know that they have lost from the outset by bluffing or "eyeing each other up"²⁶), parading (i.e., walking in unison pass a stationary crowd while displaying symbols of membership in a threatening manner²⁷), jibbing (i.e., entering football grounds without paying²⁸), tailgating (i.e., sneaking into football grounds by following someone else²⁸).

Considering the wide range of behaviours identified, ASB was grouped into four types of behavioural categories (i.e., misuse of public space, disregard for community/ personal well-being, acts directed at people, environmental damage) and nine subcategories (e.g., drugs/substance misuse and dealing, ticket issues, rowdy behaviour). This was based on the table of ASB published in 2004²⁹ before ASB orders (ASBOs) were replaced by civil injunctions according to the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act in 2014³⁰. Although, it might be considered outdated, the table served as a good basis to build the taxonomy. Importantly, given that certain ASB (e.g., pyrotechnics) are well known to be criminal offences, it was further highlighted those that could lead to an arrest. Table 5 presents the list of football-related ASB grouped into their categories and subcategories.

There is debate as to whether certain behaviours should be considered 'anti-social'. For instance, ticket touting might be considered a form of ASB, if it involves instances of actively approaching people to sell tickets for an event illegally (e.g., at a public transport hub³¹). Additionally, some behaviours may exist on a spectrum. For example, verbal abuse can range from swear words¹⁵ to incidents motivated by hostility and prejudice, whereby a person's identity has been targeted based on their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or because a person is transgender, which would be regarded as criminal¹⁹⁻³². Likewise, chants can range from songs about past victories³³ to racist and indecent ones (e.g., monkey chants targeting a Monaco midfielder³⁴) considered as criminal³⁵.

²⁴ Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, s 2. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/contents>

²⁵ Lowerson, A., & Jacks, A. (n.d.). *Club ban procedure guidance document*. EFL.

²⁶ Marsh, P. (1978). *Aggro: The illusion of violence*. Dent.

²⁷ Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. Basic Books.

²⁸ The Baroness Casey of Blackstock. (2021). *The Baroness Casey review: An independent review of events surrounding the UEFA Euro 2020 final 'Euro Sunday' at Wembley*. <https://www.thefa.com/news/2021/dec/03/baroness-casey-review-uefa-euro-2020-final-20210312>

²⁹ UK Home Office. (2004). *Defining and measuring anti-social behaviour*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116655/dpr26.pdf

³⁰ Two key differences between ASBO and civil injunction were: (1) breaching a civil injunction was no longer seen as a criminal offence; (2) a civil injunction can require the perpetrator to take part in educational programmes (e.g., alcohol awareness course). For more information, see: Redgrave, H. (2022). *Rebuilding communities: Why it's time to put anti-social behaviour back on the agenda*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. <https://institute.global/policy/rebuilding-communities-why-its-time-put-anti-social-behaviour-back-agenda>

³¹ Metropolitan Police. (n.d.). *What is antisocial behaviour?* <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/asb/asb/antisocial-behaviour/what-is-antisocial-behaviour/>

³² For more information, see: Anti-Bullying Alliance. (n.d.). *Hate crime and bullying*. <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/bullying-and-law/hate-crime-and-bullying>

³³ Dunning, E., Murphy, P., & Williams, J. (1986). Spectator violence at football matches: Towards a sociological explanation. *British Journal of Sociology*, 37(2) 221-244. <https://doi.org/10.2307/590355>

³⁴ Prague Morning. (2021, August 2021). *Sparta to host Europa game at empty venue after fan racism*. <https://www.praguemorning.cz/sparta-to-host-europa-game-at-empty-venue-after-fan-racism/>

³⁵ Football Offences Act 1991, s. 3. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1991/19/contents>

Furthermore, while certain behaviours are not illegal per se, they may be considered criminal under specific circumstances, for example: urinating in public with the intent of exposing oneself³⁶ or outraging public decency³⁷; drinking in public spaces (e.g., on coaches) while on a journey to or from a football match¹⁹; smoking in publicly enclosed spaces (e.g., stadium concourses)³⁸. Therefore, while Table 5 identifies some ASB as criminal, they may not always be regarded as so, and the context in which they occur may help assess whether a person is found guilty of an offence.

Among ASBs considered criminal, a few of them are covered by Schedule 1 of the Football Spectators Act 1989¹⁹. This includes ticket touting, various alcohol-related offences (i.e., drinking in public, drunken behaviour), driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, pyrotechnics, missile throwing, pitch invasion, verbal abuse, online abuse, and chanting. Others not covered by Schedule 1 (i.e., those leading to “other” arrest) include: drugs-related offences (i.e., taking drugs³⁹, dealing/supplying them⁴⁰), urinating in public³⁶⁻³⁷, smoking³⁸, unauthorised sales of alcohol⁴¹, interfering with fire system⁴², theft^{43,44}, littering⁴⁵, criminal damage (i.e., graffiti, damage to stadium property, coaches/train/motor vehicles and toilet trailers)⁴⁶.

Because Table 5 was created based upon a limited number of literature and data on fan behaviour, it might not contain all possible forms of football-related ASB. Therefore, this taxonomy can be explored further in the future, as some ASB might have been missed. Finally, the next section will identify which types of ASB have been reported so far and by whom in order to assess their quality.

³⁶ Sexual Offences Act 2003, s. 66(1). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/contents>

³⁷ Criminal Justice Act 2003, s. 320. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/44/contents>

³⁸ Health Act 2006, s 7(1)(2). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/28/section/7>

³⁹ Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, s 5(1). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/38/contents>

⁴⁰ Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, s 5(3), s.4(3). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/38/contents>

⁴¹ Licensing Act 2003, s 1. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/17/contents>

⁴² Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, s 8. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1974/37/section/8>

⁴³ Theft Act 1968, s 1(1), s 7. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/60/section/1>

⁴⁴ Criminal Justice Act, Part I. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/36/contents>

⁴⁵ Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, s. 18(1)(2). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/16/contents>

⁴⁶ Criminal Damage Act 1971, s. 1(1)(2). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/48/contents>

Table 5

Football-related Behaviours Considered ‘Anti-social’

Football-related Anti-Social Behaviour			
Misuse of public space	Disregard for community/personal well being	Acts directed at people	Environmental damage
<u>Drugs/ substance misuse & dealing</u>	<u>Rowdy behaviour</u>	<u>Intimidation/harassment</u>	<u>Criminal damage/vandalism/theft</u>
Use of drugs (c)	Shouting & Swearing	Threat/incitement	Graffiti (c)
Smoking (c)	Spitting	Chanting (c)	Theft (c)
Vaping	Spontaneous or organised fighting	Verbal abuse (c)	Damage to stadium property (c)
Dealing/supplying drugs (c)	Drunken behaviour (c)	Online abuse (c)	Damage to street furniture
<u>Alcohol misuse & sales</u>	Horseplay	Following people	Damage to trees/plants/hedges
Unauthorised sales of alcohol (c)	Aggro	Pestering people	Damage to coaches/train/motor vehicles (c)
Drinking in public places (c)	Parading	Menacing gestures	Damage to toilet trailers (c)
<u>Ticket touting (c)</u>	<u>Nuisance behaviour</u>		<u>Litter/rubbish</u>
<u>Vehicle related nuisance</u>	Urinating in public spaces (c)		Littering (c)
Forcing vehicles to stop	Pyrotechnics (c)		
Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs (c)	Persistent standing on seats/barriers/rails		
	Missile throwing (c)		
	Pitch invasion (c)		
	Crowding		
	Crushing		
	Climbing		
	Blocking entrances		
	Interfering with fire safety system (c)		
	Non-cooperation with police/safety officers/stewards/medics		
	<u>Ticket issues</u>		
	Tailgating		
	Jibbing		
	Counterfeit (fake) tickets		
	Ticket recycle (pass back)		

Notes. (c) = criminal ASB. Adapted from “Defining and measuring anti-social behaviour”, by Home Office, 2004 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116655/dpr26.pdf). Crown Copyright 2004

Section 2.2 Quality Assessment of ASB Data

Football bodies collecting information about ASB include Kick It Out and UKFPU (both of which were presented in Section 1), Level Playing Field with data on disability abuse, and EFL and Premier League as of 22/23.

This section will examine the strength (e.g., consistency, validity, robustness) and accessibility (e.g., whether data is being shared, how and with whom) of available ASB data from the relevant bodies (i.e., Kick It Out, Level Playing Field, EFL, Premier League, UKFPU) in order to evaluate their quality. In doing so, the aim is to improve current data collection and identify gaps to be filled with new data based on our taxonomy of ASB (see Table 5), as well as encourage more data transparency.

Table 6 presents the quality assessment of ASB data collected by the relevant bodies. The colour indicates the strength of the data (green = strong; red = weak), and its accessibility (green = accessible; red = inaccessible). Among reported behaviours, all bodies are collecting information on verbal abuse. EFL, Premier League and UKFPU report on other similar behaviours, with the addition of Premier League collecting on crowding, crushing, and climbing.

From Table 6, it can quickly be seen that data with the greatest quality (in terms of strength and accessibility) is ticket touting and driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs. On the other hand, the body with the greatest number of quality data is UKFPU (based on the number of green boxes), which is unsurprising given the number of years they have been reporting on fan behaviour¹⁶ and the fact that their data is sent to the Home Office for quality assurance checks before publication⁴⁷.

Section 2.2.1. Data Strength

In terms of strength, data from Kick It Out and Level Playing Field was weaker. As Kick It Out and Level Playing Field rely on fans to report incidents on discriminatory abuse, the reporting may be inconsistent as fans may choose not to report an abuse to a relevant body when they see it. For instance, if they do not believe that anything will be done to punish the perpetrator¹¹. Additionally, because Level Playing Field's definition on disability abuse can include both verbal and physical abuse⁴⁸, it is unclear how verbal abuse can be distinguished from those considered physical, which raises concerns over the validity of this behaviour. In the future, it might be worth breaking down disability abuse into different types of behaviours according to Table 5.

In a similar vein, UKFPU's data on incidents of football-related ASB is taken from DFOs who are not always present at a football match, leading to potential inconsistencies in the data. Furthermore, given that some ASB (e.g., verbal abuse, chanting) can exist on a spectrum (see Section 2.1), this might lead to certain instances of these behaviour to be ignored as DFOs may be more concerned about reporting the more extreme cases leading to an arrest⁴⁹. Conversely, ticket touting and

⁴⁷ UK Government. (2022, September 22). *Official statistics: Football-related arrests and banning orders, England and Wales: 2021 to 2022 season*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022-season/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022-season#user-guide>

⁴⁸ For examples of disability abuse reported by Level Playing Field, see: <https://www.levelplayingfield.org.uk/support-information/report-abuse/>

⁴⁹ Pearson, G., & Stott, C. (2016). Farewell to the hooligan? Modern developments in football crowd management. In N. Schulenkorf & S. Frawley (Eds.), *Critical Issues in Global Sport Management* (pp. 164–175). Routledge.

driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs always leads to a criminal offence, and thus arrest data on these types of behaviours can be considered consistent. In contrast, while the use of drugs is always considered criminal, this behaviour is recorded under “other” arrest, making it impossible to differentiate from other behaviours in this category⁴⁷, leading to poor validity of this behaviour. Taken together, the strength of most of UKFPU’s data was taken to be weak, except for ticket touting and driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs.

Because data collected from EFL and Premier League was inaccessible, this made it difficult to assess its strength. There was a reliance on the fact that safety officers/delegates present at every match are trained to collect information about fan behaviour. Accordingly, the data from these bodies might be more consistent, compared to data from Kick It Out, Level Playing Field and UKFPU. Secondly, there was a reliance on information from the template report provided to the SGSA, where the form under which the data would be gathered (e.g., quantitative: number of incident at a given match, qualitative: yes/no or through open text field) was specified.

Given that qualitative data alone does not provide sufficient information to assess trends in fan behaviour, these were considered not rigorous enough. On the other hand, behaviours collected in a quantitative, or quantitative and qualitative manner were deemed more robust as they can be useful in analysing trends in fan behaviour. That said, the combination of a description by open-text and quantitative data can provide a deeper, more meaningful picture into fan behaviour. For instance, if it had been found that a specific ASB is on the rise based on its quantitative information, it might be useful to know what it is about that behaviour that is problematic by looking at the qualitative aspect. Therefore, in the future, qualitative information can be supplemented by quantitative data, drawing on the strength of the latter to analyse patterns in the data, to provide more insights into fan behaviour.

While data of EFL and Premier League may be considered consistent, behaviours only collected in a qualitative manner do not provide sufficient information to assess the trends in the data on fan behaviour. Thus, only the strength of those reported as quantitative, or quantitative and qualitative were considered as strong. This includes pyrotechnics, missile throwing, pitch invasion and criminal damage, with the addition of the use of drugs from EFL.

It important to note, however, that both EFL and Premier League collect information on assault on stadium staff, players, or match officials, yet it is unclear what constitutes an assault. For example, spitting and punching can be both thought of as an assault⁵⁰. However, according to Table 5, they would fall under different types of ASB (i.e., spitting under spitting and punching under horseplay or fighting). Similarly, UKFPU has information about “other” arrest and “other” incidents⁵¹ that are not broken down by behaviour type, thus making it difficult to assess the quality of ASB data reported under these categories (e.g., use of drugs). Finally, subcategories of ASB, such as ticket issues and criminal damage, may be broken down further into behaviours according to Table 5. For instance,

⁵⁰ CPS. (2022, 27 June 2022). *Offences against the Person, incorporating the Charging Standard*.

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/offences-against-person-incorporating-charging-standard#:~:text=An%20assault%20is%20any%20act,unlawful%20force%20to%20another%20person.>

⁵¹ For a list of types of football-related incidents, see Table 11 of the football-related arrests and banning order statistics, England and Wales, Season 2021/22 on: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/football-related-arrests-and-banning-orders-england-and-wales-2021-to-2022-season>

ticket issues can be separated into tailgating, jibbing, counterfeit tickets and tickets recycle, thereby reducing any ambiguity and confusion during data collection.

As Kick It Out and UKFPU release their information publicly every season (Kick It Out on its webpage¹² and UKFPU on the Home Office's webpage¹⁶), their data was highly accessible. Although this could be further improved with data being collected and released more frequently. Similar to the BFU, for example, number of incidents of ASB can be reported monthly, in addition to the total number of incidents per season. With faster data being released, trends in fan behaviour can be analysed not just across but also within seasons.

Furthermore, it might be useful for UKFPU to release number of matches with police/DFOs vs. without (i.e., "police free" or "DFOs free" matches) to ascertain whether any trends in the data might be related to increases in willingness to report or police to arrest rather than to any changes in fan behaviour (see Section 1.3 and 1.4).

With regards to Level Playing Field, its information is not publicly released or shared with other football bodies, only to relevant clubs to help resolve issues. Therefore, its data was taken to be inaccessible.

Likewise, data from matchday reports of EFL and Premier League are only shared with their respective clubs but not with any other bodies or made publicly available.

Table 6*Quality Assessment of Data on Football-related ASB*

Behaviour	Characteristics	Football Bodies				
		Kick It Out	Level Playing Field	EFL	Premier League	UKFPU
Ticket Issues	Strength			Orange	Orange	Orange
	Accessibility					Green
Ticket Touting	Strength				Orange	Green
	Accessibility					Green
Use of Drugs	Strength			Green		Orange
	Accessibility			Orange		Green
Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs	Strength					Green
	Accessibility					Green
Pyrotechnics	Strength			Green	Green	Orange
	Accessibility			Orange	Orange	Green
Missile throwing	Strength			Green	Green	Orange
	Accessibility			Orange	Orange	Green
Pitch Invasion	Strength			Green	Green	Orange
	Accessibility			Orange	Orange	Green
Crowding	Strength				Orange	
	Accessibility					
Crushing	Strength				Orange	
	Accessibility					
Climbing	Strength				Orange	
	Accessibility					
Verbal abuse	Strength	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
	Accessibility	Green				Green
Chanting	Strength			Orange	Orange	Orange
	Accessibility					Green
Criminal damage	Strength			Green	Green	Orange
	Accessibility			Orange	Orange	Green

Notes. EFL = English Football League, UKFPU = UK Football Policing Unit;

Grey = no data collected; Strength: Green = Strong vs. Orange = Weak; Accessibility: Green = Accessible vs. Orange = Inaccessible.

In sum, only a few select ASB from Table 5 are being recorded, namely those leading to criminal Schedule 1 offences¹⁹. Among behaviours being recorded, data on ticket touting and driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs was determined to have the greatest quality based on their strength and accessibility, and UKFPU was the body with the most quality data on ASB. In the future, relevant football bodies may decide to record other types of ASB based upon the proposed taxonomy (see Table 5) to provide a clearer, more in-depth picture of the current state of fan behaviour in football.

Finally, by examining data accessibility, it is hoped this will encourage more data transparency to improve issues on fan behaviour.

Conclusion

In light of recent reports of deterioration of fan behaviour in football, the aim of this report was:

- (1) answer the research question as to how football fan behaviour has changed since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions by looking at available data on fan behaviour from pre- to post-Covid-19 (i.e., 18/19 to 21/22 seasons) from Kick It Out and UKFPU, and
- (2) address some of the challenges of fan behaviour data reported in the 2019 report¹ (i.e., poor definitions of behaviours and lack of data accessibility) in the context of ASB, which has become topical amongst the football bodies.

However, because data from Kick It Out and UKFPU provided a limited view of the overall picture of fan behaviour in football, they cannot be used to draw firm conclusions about how fan behaviour has changed since the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. Therefore, the author unable to provide an answer to the abovementioned research question.

To address the challenge of poor definition of ASB, a taxonomy of ASB was proposed and assessed the quality (i.e., the strength and accessibility) of available data on ASB. It was found that information on ticket touting and driving under the influence of alcohol/drugs had the greatest quality data, while UKFPU was the body with the most quality data on ASB. Crucially, by looking at the accessibility of the data, it was hoped to encourage more data transparency. UKFPU and Kick It Out are already sharing their data with the public every season, whereas it is unclear whether Level Playing Field are sharing it other bodies than clubs. Because EFL and Premier League are only beginning to collect data on fan behaviour, their data is currently used for internal purposes. However, they welcome the idea of establishing an agreement with the SGSA to share their data in the future.

Finally, approaches were proposed on how to improve the quality of data on ASB at future seasons to provide a more in-depth picture on levels of safety in football. First, because behaviours leading to Schedule 1 offences¹⁹ make up most of those reported by stakeholders, it might be worth exploring whether and how data on other types of ASB listed in the taxonomy could be collected at future matches. This may provide further insight into fan behaviour, including revealing new and emerging trends. Second, vague categories of behaviours (i.e., assault, disability abuse, offences under “other” arrest, behaviours under “other” incidents, ticket issues and criminal damage) can be broken down further into specific forms of ASB according to the taxonomy and their data quality explored. Lastly, more frequent data collection on ASB would be welcomed to provide a more complex picture on differences in fan behaviour across and within seasons.

Remark

Although, the focus of this report is on football-related behaviours, similar problems of fan behaviour (especially ASB) exist also in society⁸ and across the sports and events industry⁵², and

⁵² e.g., The Independent. (2022, February 02). *Wales to close bars at half-time and serve weaker beer during Six Nations in bid to curb fan disorder*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/rugby/rugby-union/wales-six-nations-fans-stadium-alcohol-b2006069.htmltra>

comparison with other sports might be worth exploring in the future, which brings forth the need for better and more data transparency.

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