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Government Reports and Football Legislation

This chapter will consider what the government has published on the topic of football policing and supporters through their reports and legislation. It is important to know what the government has written about football supporters, the legal powers the police have at their disposal and the corresponding rights of the supporters before analysing my own research on interaction in football policing. When considering the interaction that actually takes place, it is interesting to note whether or not these statutes are employed, or if more informal rules come into play. As such, I will discuss the Green Guide (1997), the handbook published to guide the analysis of stadium safety, and the current football legislation for England and Wales and the legislation for Scotland. While much of the legislation for these areas is similar, there are important differences to keep in mind. Primarily, laws for the English game do not usually apply north of the border.

Government reports

This first section will discuss inquiries and other reports by the UK government on the policing, control and safety of football supporters. Many of these reports lead to the introduction of new legislation, some of which is still in place today. The focus here is what the government has published over the years about the causes of and solutions to football disorder and its recommendations for ensuring supporters' safety at football events. Current legislation will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

The earliest government investigation into football safety and control happened after the first Wembley Cup final in 1923. The disorder that occurred at that game resulted in the Shortt Report of 1924.
Its primary focus was crowd control and it recommended that the police should only concern themselves with preserving law and order. The football ground authority should hire and properly train stewards to assist the public and ensure their safety. It did not feel that legislation was necessary to ensure that these things happened. However, it seems as though little changed after the report (McArdle 2000).

Overcrowding in Burnden Park, which resulted in 33 deaths in 1946, was the subject of the Hughes Inquiry. During a FA Cup tie at the home ground of Bolton Wanderers a man who wanted to leave the park picked a lock on an exit gate. Once that was opened, supporters outside gained entry and overfilled the terraces 30 minutes before kick-off. More supporters were allowed in at the turnstiles and the barrier behind the goal collapsed from the weight. Like most other football grounds at the time, this stadium's capacity had never been properly assessed. The report recommended that capacities be scientifically calculated in all grounds and that a mechanised counting system be installed to monitor the turnstiles. It went a step further however, and urged that legislation be introduced to allow the Home Secretary to establish regulations for stadium safety that would be enforced by a license from the local authority. As with the previous report, these recommendations were ignored (McArdle 2000).

A series of reports were then conducted in the late 1960s. Sir Norman Chester chaired the first, which was commissioned in 1966. The main focus of his report was status and conduct of players, organisation and government of the game and the financing of football. He noted that crowd behaviour had been deteriorating in recent years and that representatives from police forces and the football authorities had met to discuss it. However, Chester's committee did not have the time nor the resources to fully investigate football crowd safety and control. They did suggest that improved stadium facilities, better refereeing and more action from club management would help the situation (The Department of Education and Science: Report of the Committee on Football 1968). In that same year, Denis Howell, the minister of sport, commissioned a private research group lead by Dr. J. A. Harrington to investigate football hooliganism. As with the Chester report, this was not prompted by a disaster at a football ground. Regardless, they seemed to expect the worst from fans and were surprised that the situation was not more dire. They made many generalisations about how hooligans feel, the effects of alcohol and the effects of being in a crowd. They urged more police control of fans and increased use of technology to monitor them. However, ultimate responsibility for order at games was