
Not all cops are bastards — Danish football supporters’ perception of dialogue policing

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Abstract

The Danish police have changed their tactics in relation to their policing of football supporters. The changes have involved the development of a dialogue-based approach to the policing of football supporters. The changes seem to have contributed to a reduction in the number of arrests and football supporters detained. This article presents the first e-survey that involves football supporters’ perception of the dialogue approach and thus adds an ‘end-user’ perspective on the police work delivered by the Danish police. The results underline that the changes in police tactics have increased a sense of legitimacy among the football supporters that is in sharp contrast to the notion ‘ACAB’ (All Cops Are Bastards) used by football supporters all over Europe. The results from the survey indicate that a change towards a dialogue-based approach can be beneficial in relation to the police fulfilling core strategic goals like conflict reduction and creating a more peaceful atmosphere at football matches.

Keywords:

dialogue police, football supporters, police legitimacy, survey

Introduction

The vast majority of football matches require a police presence. The approach of the police has a direct influence on the behaviour of football supporters. During the last few years Danish police have changed their tactics in relation to their policing of football supporters. The changes have involved the development of a dialogue-based approach to the policing of football supporters. The changes seem to have contributed to a reduction in the number of arrests and football supporters detained. This article presents the first e-survey that involves football supporters' perception of the dialogue approach and thus adds an 'end-user' perspective on the police work delivered by the Danish police.

Background

In 2008, the Danish national police distributed the 'National handbook on police work in association with football matches' (translated title). The handbook strongly emphasises flexibility and tolerance towards all football supporters. The handbook's intentions represent an innovation in the handling of Danish football fans compared with the less dialogue-based practices of the past, where high-risk matches were policed through the so-called 'mobile deployment concept'.

This involved the use of police vehicles and squads of police officers with protective equipment to achieve strategic objectives through rapid mobility and the use of force. However, the years following the handbook's publication revealed a number of obstacles in implementing a dialogue-based approach (Rasmussen and Havelund, 2010). As a consequence East Jutland Police (one of Denmark's 12 police districts), and researchers developed the so-called 'event police concept' with the primary focus on a dialogue that reflects the research in crowd dynamics (Havelund et al., 2011). The concept was evaluated by the Danish national police. One of the evaluators has elsewhere described the concept in these terms:

'By having specially trained police who can undertake dialogue or exertion of physical force respectively, one can both minimise the use of physical force and make it more effective because it is possible to target it at those individuals representing the core of the problem, rather than taking a scattergun approach and ending up in a confrontation with the whole crowd' (Diderichsen, 2011, p. 138, our translation).

The 'event police concept' was adopted nationally and implemented from 2012 as the 'dialogue deployment concept'. The concept has been developed within the framework of football matches but has since been used for protests and large crowd events. The primary role of the dialogue police officers is to facilitate legitimate behaviour of the visiting supporters. Prior to a match day the head of the operation or the commander of the

dialogue unit seeks to establish contact with key persons from the visiting supporters, both from official and unofficial supporter groups, including known violent supporter groups. This is done with the help of the police department's 'football contact person' and the police department where the supporters come from. Often the visiting football club and especially their supporter liaison officer (UEFA, 2011) facilitate the communication and give valuable input to the policing operation in the planning process. The police often help find a suitable pub for pre-match drinking and collaborate on the organisation of marches. The supporters often arrive by train or by bus several hours before kick-off. If they arrive in the town centre away from the stadium they are met by the dialogue police officers. The dialogue police officers will follow the supporters throughout the day except inside the stadium (Havelund et al., 2011). Their main focus will be on establishing contact with supporters and be open to engage in dialogue, thereby following a key strategic objective of the concept by delivering a precise dynamic risk assessment throughout match day in order to secure a quiet and peaceful event. One of the primary aims of the dialogue-based approach is thus to gain a better understanding of the different supporters' groupings and their intentions for the day. In case things start escalating, more precise and differentiated interventions will be possible on the basis of the dialogue-based approach thereby indirectly supporting legitimate behaviour. During this first contact of the day the main task is to gather information on the group and feed the information into the overall operation in order to update the risk assessment and maybe do some adjustments depending on the mood of the supporters and intelligence from other parts of the operation (see Havelund et al., 2013 for a detailed description of the concept). The concept seems to have contributed to a positive development regarding arrest figures in Danish football where the number of arrests or detained has gone from record high 714 in the season 2008/2009 to 99 in the season 2014/2015 for the 198 matches played in the Danish Superliga. The Danish police have emphasised the introduction of the dialogue concept as one of the primary reasons for the decline in the number of arrests and people detained. It is exemplified by the Danish national police's press release following the publication of the arrest figures from the 2011/2012 season:

'The police's concept of dialogue police officers in connection with matches was implemented last season ... We believe that it helps ensure that matches can be played without a large number of arrests.' (our translation)⁽¹⁾

Football supporters have indirectly contributed to the evaluation of the event police training programme via interviews conducted by researchers (Havelund et al., 2011). But the results shown below represent the first survey done in Denmark with a focus on football supporters' perception of the dialogue approach.

⁽¹⁾ - 'Lavt antal anholdte ved superliga-kampe', politi.dk, <https://politi.dk/da/aktuelt/nyheder/Lavt+antal+anholdte+ved+superliga-kampe.htm?WBCMODE=PresentationUnpublis>

Methodology

An internet survey was developed for the purpose of data collection. Web-based research is increasingly being used to reach a wide variety of sports fans (Manfreda and Vehovar, 2008; Jansen, Corley and Jansen, 2007).

The questionnaire included questions with the purpose of gathering information about the supporters and their attitudes towards dialogue-based approaches such as stewards, train stewards and dialogue police officers. The questions were formulated based upon experience from a previous interview study and observations made during training events (Rasmussen and Havelund, 2010; Havelund et al., 2011). The questionnaire included sections with statements about the concepts, which were answered on a 5-point Likert-format scale. The Likert scale included two grades of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and a 'neither nor' category. The respondents were also given the opportunity to give the answer 'don't know'. The results of the survey were analysed through the use of cross-tabulations and frequencies. An opportunity for open-ended comments was also provided. The input from the open-ended questions was analysed as qualitative data, however the input did not reach a point where coding was made possible.

Invitation to participate in the survey was distributed to the members of Brøndby Support. The supporter club has a total of around 3 600 members. The questionnaire was online for a 7-day period with a reminder sent after the first 5 days. The respondents were given no incentives for their participation. Brøndby Support is one of Denmark's most active official supporter clubs, which supports Brøndby IF. The supporters can best be characterised as non-risk supporters and thus resemble the vast majority of supporters in Denmark. However, matches in Denmark with Brøndby as the away team are treated by the police as some of the matches with the highest level of risk. In that sense, and due to the number of respondents, findings cannot be extrapolated from all Danish supporters as many matches with a low level of risk are handled without the presence of police officers, which certainly will influence supporters' experiences of the police operation. These results therefore need to be interpreted with caution (Gerring, 2007, p. 65ff).

Results

The questionnaire was completed by 623 persons and the completed questionnaires form the basis of the results presented below (see Table 1). The average age of the respondents was 40.9 years old. 18 % of the respondents were women and 82 % were men. The respondents frequently visit the home matches, with one third of them attending at least 75 % of the club's home matches (national league and Europa league) in 2015.

Since the early 1990s, football crowd disorder has been perceived as a significant problem in domestic Danish football. Football matches often attract a large number of supporters and therefore inherent safety risks need to be recognised by organisers and the police.

The primary role of the police in relation to football matches is to ensure the balance between the highest degree of freedom for the supporters and the best possible safety standards. However, until the implementation of the dialogue-based approach the police were mainly associated with repression and restrictions, and the football supporters often resented the presence of the police forces (Havelund et al., 2006; Joern, 2006). From time to time supporters around Europe use the notion ACAB to show their dissatisfaction with the police (Armstrong and Young, 1999; Testa, 2009). ACAB is short for 'All Cops Are Bastards' and is also occasionally used in Denmark.

However the statement does not reflect the general perception among the respondents since 49.4 % of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the police's way of handling football matches. 17.5 % displayed dissatisfaction and only 3.3 % were 'very unsatisfied' with policing operation. The remaining 33.1 % answered that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied or that they didn't know.

This result reflects the low level of disorder in the Danish context over the last few years, with a decline in the numbers of arrests and people detained. To some extent the results also mirror data from the European Social Survey where the Danish population, despite a minor decline from 2012 to 2014, is placed second when it comes to the population's trust in the police (Ministry of Justice, 2016).

Table 1

Respondents' attitudes towards statements

Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)
Dialogue police officers contribute to a more peaceful atmosphere at football matches	38	44	11	2	2	3
The behaviour of the dialogue police officers is conflict reducing.	31	46	12	3	3	4
The behaviour of the dialogue police officers has strengthened the dialogue between police and fans	36	38	15	1	2	7
Dialogue police officers contribute to a reduction in the number of arrests.	22	29	21	5	2	21
The behaviour of the dialogue police officers has given me a more positive perception of the police in general	27	30	30	4	5	4
Dialogue police officers have minimised my respect for the police	5	6	19	13	53	4
Dialogue police officers have given me a better understanding of the police's work in relation to football matches	16	27	39	6	5	6

The Danish 'dialogue deployment concept' is mainly used for away supporters. Of the 623 respondents 295 answered that they had had experiences with dialogue police officers.

The vast majority of the supporters (82 %) recognised that the behaviour of dialogue police officers contributed to a more peaceful atmosphere at football matches. This result contrasts with previous findings where police in riot gear had been seen as part of the reason for disorder (Havelund et al., 2006). The result thus supports the assumption by the Danish police that the change in police behaviour has contributed to a more peaceful atmosphere at football matches. This is supported by the perception shared by 77 % of the respondents that the behaviour of the dialogue police officers can be characterised as conflict reducing. As a reflection of that around half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that dialogue police officers contribute to the reduction in the number of arrests.

One of the main tasks for the dialogue police officers is to seek dialogue with supporters and to be approachable. This seems to have been achieved with 74 % agreeing or strongly agreeing that the officers have strengthened the dialogue between police and fans. Dialogue has for a part of the respondents (43 %) resulted in a better understanding of the police's work in relation to football matches.

At the same time the strengthened dialogue between supporters and police does not seem to have a negative impact on the supporters' respect for the police. On the contrary, the majority (57 %) of the supporters answered that dialogue police officers have improved their perception of the police in general and that they respect the police. One of the respondents gave the following input that reflects the results:

'The dialogue police officers are always very professional. ... They build relationships between supporters and police so that we can see that they are not all bastards (sorry for my language). They are 'down to earth', show us respect and actually want to listen to us. ... They solve 9 out of 10 situations without speaking loudly or using any repressive measures.'

Conclusion

The study is based upon responses from Brøndby supporters. Data has not been gathered from football supporters supporting different teams in Denmark and the results therefore need to be interpreted with caution.

Only very few of the respondents that have been policed by dialogue police officers expressed any negative attitudes toward the concept. Instead, the dialogue police officers were generally and to a very large extent positively evaluated by the supporters.

This supports the perception expressed by the Danish national police that the 'dialogue police concept' has contributed to fewer arrests and confrontations (see Note 1). The results underline that the changes in police tactics have increased a sense of legitimacy among the football supporters that is in sharp contrast to the ACAB notion (Armstrong and Young, 1999; Testa, 2009). On the contrary the results from the survey, based upon responses from Brøndby supporters, indicate that a change towards a dialogue-based approach can be beneficial in relation to the police fulfilling core strategic goals like conflict reduction and creating a more peaceful atmosphere at football matches and other crowd events. However, due to the limited number of respondents it is necessary to conduct large scale and nationwide surveys to extrapolate the results for the Danish context.

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