

Excessive violence on and around football fields

Practice research on the extent, severity and tackling of 'football violence'

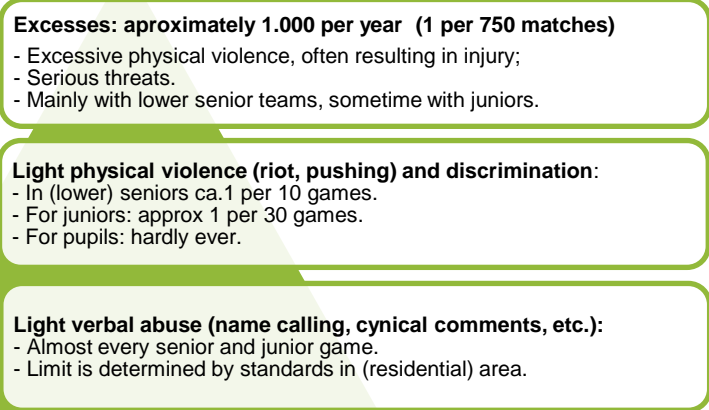
In December 2012 linesman Richard Nieuwenhuizen was attacked and fatally injured after serving as a volunteer linesman at a youth football match in which his son was playing for the home team. For a while football violence was big news in the Netherlands and abroad.

News about excessive violence on and around football fields surfaces with some regularity. That raises questions, such as: How big is this problem? What are we doing about it? And what else is needed? We started to look for answers, with the aim of gaining insight into the extent and severity of violence on and around football fields (the officially registered incidents and the 'invisible' ones), the factors and actors that play a role, and we looked at possible solutions. Commissioned by the Dutch Program 'Police and Science' research organisation DSP-groep asked stakeholders from 25 football clubs and organizations in the neighborhood, such as the police and the local authorities, about their experience with football violence.

We also observed numerous football matches. This does not provide us with a representative picture, but it does give a good impression of the problem. The results were compared with the results of an exploratory research, consisting of an analysis of available registration (number of incidents), relevant literature and expert interviews with key figures from sport associations, police, law enforcement agencies and local authorities.

The extent and severity of football violence: an indication

Based on the data and results from the practical research the number of cases of extreme football violence is estimated at approximately a 1000 cases per year. Set against a total of 752 395 events per year we can conclude that excesses are rare. Unlike light physical and verbal violence: these cases are (much) more common and are a breeding ground for excessive violence.



Striking are the major differences between clubs. Roughly speaking, there is a split with on one side the standard clubs, who are faced with excessive violence once every few years, and on the other side the risk clubs, who face extreme violence annually or even monthly. Risk clubs generally have a lot of members with a low socio-economic status and a 'short fuse', and relatively often have

financial, organizational and / or administrative problems. Frustrations about arbitration 'errors', hard play of the opponent, verbal abuse and / or additional stress due to the importance of the game are common 'reasons' for excessive violence. Often it is the 'logical offender' who resorts to violence, the 'short fuses' in the club of whom it was more or less expected.

Approach: how do football clubs tackle violence?

Football clubs are generally used to fend for themselves. They tend to have an ad hoc approach: the people present (trainers, leaders, referees, board members) act as they seem fit according to the circumstances. Because it involves incidents, there are often no clear agreements which causes the wheel to be reinvented time and again. The KNVB¹ and the police become involved only when extreme physical violence (the top of the pyramid violence) occurs, which the club cannot contain on its own. Red tape and fear of penalties discourage clubs to report smaller incidents to the KNVB. Excesses are reported in two of the three cases. The police is called once every three excesses - estimated at over 300 times a year – to restore order. Clubs generally leave the reporting of a crime to the victims themselves. It is estimated that the police deal with approximately 350 sport related reports of crime every year.

Solutions and recommendations

Support and encourage football clubs in their basic attitude to fend for themselves. Give them tools in hand to help them solve their own problems. Risk clubs that deal with numerous internal problems and relatively large problem groups need more support. For these clubs, especially in the big cities, a chain approach might be a solution: a joint deployment of club, KNVB, police, local authorities and other partners in the district. Violence on and around the football fields cannot be ruled out completely, but with a shared commitment, the problem can be limited.

Challenges and recommendations for the most important 'players in the field' are:

KNVB (the Dutch Football Association)

- Create awareness of the importance of a good security policy, with a focus on prevention of and dealing with violence on and around the football field.
- Provide practical tools for this. A practical incidents protocol and a simple applicable security monitor are tools that can be used to reduce the number of violent incidents and improve safety within the club. Preventive measures include drafting, maintaining and promoting of rules of conduct, training of coaches, managers and referees, a hospitable and well-organized reception of away teams, ensure sufficient self-correcting ability within teams and the exchange of information with other clubs about risk teams and players.
- Give explicit attention to the theme ' football violence ' and the possibilities for prevention and tackling of football violence in training courses for coaches and referees.
- Guide and support risk clubs: help them in dealing with administrative, organizational and/or financial problems (vitality as a basic condition) and with the implementation of preventative and repressive measures.
- Deploy KNVB referees or observers at risk matches, also in the B category.
- Experiment with the rotation of referees, and club games without linesmen.
- Give clear feedback to clubs on disciplinary statements.

¹ Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbal Bond: the Dutch Football Association with more than 1 million active players.

Police and Justice

- Continue the current role and approach: follow-up on incidents reported by football clubs and where necessary, restore public order.
- Promote contact between the district police-officer and the club in order to lower the threshold for the club to contact the police in case of problems.
- Disciplinary law (short term, sport specific penalties) and criminal law (longer term, social punishment) can both be applied, the one does not rule out the other.
- Exchange information with the KNVB about previous violent offences, in order to take these into account in determining the penalty.
- Prevention of and learning to deal with aggression and violence is important for employees in the Public Service Sector. The Dutch Government has drawn up a program for employees in this sector to learn how to deal with conflicts constructively and how to prevent escalation. Football clubs can enter this program in order to provide a safer environment for their referees, trainers and volunteers.

Local Authority

- Strengthen the civil society, i.e. the social and educational climate in the district by encouraging and supporting clubs to improve their social and educational climate. For instance by creating links with other social organizations in the area.
- Use of social-educational experts in risk clubs in order to support and promote the implementation of matters such as rules of conduct, parent involvement and youth participation.
- Initiating and directing collaboration between risk clubs and other parties in and around the area, such as police, youth services, welfare, education and the KNVB: the football club as reference and positive setting to confront problem groups with their behavior.
- Make good safety policy a grant requirement for football clubs, with the addition that clubs can receive support in setting that up.

The full research report (in Dutch):



Duijvestijn, P, B. van Dijk, P. van Egmond, M. de Groot, D. van Sommeren & A. Verwest (2013). *Excessief geweld op en om de voetbalvelden. Praktijkonderzoek naar omvang, ernst en aanpak van 'voetbalgeweld'*. Apeldoorn / Amsterdam: Politie & Wetenschap / DSP-groep.
ISBN 978-90-3524-723-9.

More information:

Paul Duijvestijn, email: pduijvestijn@dsp-groep.nl