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Hooliganism

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ABSTRACT

Hooliganism is a violent, disruptive, and anti-social group behavior, most commonly associated with sports fans, street gangs, and political thugs. It originated from 19th century London; the term evolved to describe organized group violence driven by social identity, economic frustration, and weak institutional control. Worldwide, hooliganism has significant social, economic, and political consequences that include destruction of property, loss of lives, erosion of public trust, and increased security costs. Hooliganism occurs in sports leading to stadium disasters, club sanctions, and heavy policing. In developing countries like Nigeria, it manifests primarily as "area boy" gangs and political thuggery, which are linked to youth unemployment, urbanization, and electoral violence. The paper examines the causes, forms, effects of hooliganism, and as well as the preventive strategies.

KEYWORDS: *Hooliganism, youth violence, political thuggery, public disorder, social identity, Nigeria, anti-social behavior, vandalism, street gangs, Sustainable Development Goal 16, insecurity.*

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INTRODUCTION

Hooliganism is the violent, disruptive, and anti-social behavior carried out by groups, often in open spaces [1], as shown in Figures 1 and 2. This term is known to have originated in 19th century London and was associated with street gangs known for vandalism and public disorder. With time this became globally recognized, particularly in relation to football violence, but now has extended to political thuggery, street gangs, and online mobs [2, 3]. Hooliganism globally poses a threat to public safety, economic activities, and social cohesion. As noted by the United Nations, youth violence and gang-related disorder undermine peace, development, and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 of Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions [4]. In Europe, football hooliganism in 1970s-1980s led to major disasters such as Heysel 1985 and Hillsborough 1989, prompting new stadium security laws [5, 6].

With respect to Africa and Nigeria, hooliganism shows up differently but disruptive. It appears as "area boys" in urban centers, election thugs, and cult-related violence. In Nigeria, political hooliganism contributes to voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, and the loss of lives during elections [7]. In Lagos, area boy groups engage in extortion, touting, and vandalism, creating situations of insecurity in markets and transport hubs [8-11]. Despite government interventions such as policing, legislation, and youth programs, hooliganism still persists in Nigeria. The root causes of hooliganism include unemployment, poverty, weak institutions, and political sponsorship that remain largely unaddressed, leading to continuous disruption of public order, increased cost of security, and fear among citizens [8, 12-14].

THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM: "HOOLIGAN"

The word "hooligan" first appeared in London police and newspaper reports in the 1890s. it was believed to be named after the "Hooligan family" of Southwark, London, who were notorious for street fights and drunken disorder, as shown in Figure 3. The early use described any young, working-class male involved in rowdy, and anti-social behavior [2].

Early 20th Century: Pre-Football Hooliganism (1900-1945)

Before football became central, "hooliganism" described:

1. **Street gangs** in industrial cities of Britain and USA
2. **Drunken disorder** and vandalism during public holidays
3. **Racial and class riots** in ports like Liverpool and Glasgow

The period linked hooliganism to poverty, urbanization, and weak policing in industrial areas [12].

Post-War Era: Birth of Football Hooliganism (1950s-1970s)

After WWll, football became mass entertainment in Britain. Some of the developments were:

1. 1959s-60s: Youth subcultures like "Teddy Boys" and "Mods vs Rockers" used football matches as meeting points.
2. 1960s: Organized "firms" emerged – groups of fans who traveled to fight rival supporters.
   Clubs: West Ham "Inter-City firm", Chelsea "Headhunters".
3. Alcohol + Saturday matches + no CCTV = perfect conditions for violence [1, 15].

The Peak: 1970s-1980s Britain

This was referred to as the "golden age" of football hooliganism. Some of the major incidents include:

1. **Heysel Stadium disaster 1985**: It was reported that 39 people died after Liverpool fans charged Juventus fans, as shown in Figure 4. This led to a 5-year ban of England clubs from Europe.
2. **Hillsborough 1989**: In this case, 97 Liverpool fans died in a crush, as shown in Figure 5. Inquiry blamed poor policing, not hooliganism, but led to all-seater stadiums.
3. **UK Government Response**: Football Offences Act 1991, Football Banning Orders, CCTV, alcohol bans [5, 16].

However, in the late 1980s hooliganism declined in the UK due to policing and commercialization of football.

Global Spread (1980s – Present)

Hooliganism was exported via **media** and **migration:** British football hooliganism was made a "global template" via 2 major channels i. e:

1. Media Export
   A. Films & TV: Movies like *The Firm, Green Street Hooligans*, and news coverage of Heysel 1958, Hillsborough 1989 glamorized "firms" and fighting.
   B. News spectacle: This is where global news turned UK hooliganism into a symbol of working-class male identity. This gave the idea to fans in other countries.
   C. Video tapes: In the 1980s-90s, VHS tapes of fights circulated among fan groups in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

Media did not just report hooliganism but **packaged and exported** it as a style to copy [6].

2. Migration and Travel

A. British fans abroad: English fans that travel for Euro tournaments and World Cups brought "firm" culture to Germany, Italy, and Netherlands.
B. Labor migration: British workers, coaches, and players took fan culture with them to other leagues.
C. Reverse migration: Fans from Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe who watched English football on TV then adopted the dress code, chants, and fighting style when they returned home.

This was what Giulianotti said that migration created "cultural diffusion" – as local fans adapted British hooligan rituals to their own political/social context [6, 17].

Hooliganism in Nigeria: Historical Context

Nigeria's history of hooliganism is tied to urbanization and politics:

A. 1970s-80s: This period was the rise of "area boys" in Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt. It was linked to oil boom rural-urban migration [9].
B. 1990s-2000s: Hiring of youth as thugs by political parties for elections. Ballot box snatching became common [18].
C. 2015-Present: Cultism, cyber hooliganism, and election violence has increased. HRW reported over 100 deaths in 2019 elections linked to political hooliganism [7].

Hooliganism in the Nigerian case is known to have shifted from sports to political and economic survival.

The Digital Age: Cyber Hooliganism (2010-Present)

With the social media, hooliganism has now moved online.

Features: Mob attacks, doxxing (which is sharing info with the intent to harm), hate campaigns, and disinformation during elections [4].

This is now recognized as a new form of group violence by the UN [19].

Hooliganism vs. Thuggery:
Hooliganism and thuggery are related but not the same. However, they overlap via:

A. Violence: Both make use of physical aggression, vandalism, and intimidation.

B. Group identity: Both operate in groups and use group loyalty to justify violence.

C. Social roots: They are both linked to unemployment, poverty, and weak institutions [13].

D. In Nigeria: "Area boys" can act as both. They may be hooligans fighting rival groups, and also hired as political thugs during elections [3, 6-9].

CHALLENGES TO HOOLIGANISM

The challenges to hooliganism refer to the problems, barriers, and obstacles that make it difficult or hard to prevent, control, or eliminate it. These challenges are grouped into 5 major areas by scholars and UN as:

1. Social & Economic Challenges, under which are:

A. Youth unemployment and poverty: Many hooligan groups recruit from the pool of unemployed youth. It is the lack of jobs that makes political thugs and "area boys" attractive [4, 8].

B. Breakdown of Traditional Social Control: Colonialism is said to have weakened both community and family authority. This has weakened parental supervision.

C. Alcohol & Drug Use: The increase in aggression in stadiums and streets is as a result of substance abuse [1, 8].

2. Political Challenges

A. Politicization of thuggery: Politicians hire hooligans for elections, rallies, and intimidation. This gives them protection [4].

B. Corruption & Poor Governance: The banning of orders and arrests cannot work where police and officials are bribed [20].

C. Weak Role of Law: Delayed justice and plea bargains reduce deterrence [4, 7, 21, 22].

3. Security & Policing Challenges

A. Inadequate Policing & intelligence: This is due to police lack of training, CCTV, and databases to identify "known hooligans", as shown in Figures 6 and 7.

B. Displacement Effect: This occurs when heavy security in stadiums pushes violence to pubs, buses, and streets.

C. Human Rights Concerns: The use of excessive force causes public distrust and lack of cooperation [4, 6, 23, 24].

4. Cultural & Media Challenges

A. Media Glamorization: Films, news, and social media export hooliganism as "masculine" and "brave".

B. Copycat Culture: This is where local fans imitate UK/EPL "firm" culture via satellite TV and internet, as shown in Figures 8 and 9.

C. Normalization of Violence: Some communities see violence as normal way to settle disputes [6, 10, 25].

5. Institutional & Sport Management Challenges

A. Poor Stadium Infrastructure: Risk is increased due to poor exits, lack of segregation, and no CCTV [26].

B. Weak Club Liability: In many of the leagues, the clubs are not held responsible for fan behavior [20].

C. Lack of Data: In most African countries, records of sports violence are not kept, making policies guesswork [27-29].

The main challenge is that hooliganism is not just a law-and-order problem. It is tied to poverty, politics, media, and weak institutions [4], and for which reason the UN has recommended "prevention + security + development" instead of arrests alone [6, 20].

THE UN 5-PILLAR MODEL

The framework recommended by UNODC for all member states are as stated below:

1. Prevent – this is through jobs, education, and inclusion
2. Protect – safe stadiums (stadia), security
3. Purse – investigate and prosecute
4. Respond – victim support, and medical aid
5. Partner – police + clubs + fans + community [20].

SOLUTIONS TO HOOLIGANISM

In finding solutions to hooliganism, scholars and the UN agreed on the need for the following 5 approaches: Prevention, Policing, Punishment, Partnership, and Policy. Arrests alone cannot solve the challenges. Some of the strategies to adopt include:

1. Social & Economic Solutions: Address Root Causes
   Challenge: Due to unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunity.
   Solutions: The solutions here would include"

A. Youth Employment & Skills Programs – Vocational training, sports, mentoring, youth clubs, and creative industry jobs to reduce recruitment into thug groups. Such programs would help reduce idleness and provide positive forms of group identity.

B. Community development – the building of recreation centers, libraries, and football academies to engage youth.

C. Civic education – To teach conflict resolution and citizenship in schools to ensure sportsmanship, tolerance, respect, peaceful conflict resolution, and consequences of violence.

2. Political & Legal Solutions: Cut the Use of Political Thugs
Challenge: Politicians hire hooligans, weak rule of law.
Solutions: These will entail:

A. Enforce electoral laws – Politicians who make use of thugs should be prosecuted. INEC + Police joint taskforce during elections.

B. Independent judiciary – Need for fast-track courts for violence cases to ensure deterrence.

C. Transparency – Campaign finance monitoring to cut funding for thugs.

3. Strengthening security and crowd management: Authorities should improve crowd-control systems at stadiums and other venues of large gatherings. The provision of adequate numbers of trained security personnel, controlled entry and exit points, surveillance cameras, barriers, emergency communication systems, and as well as clearly marked evacuation routes can help reduce opportunities for violence.

4. Effective policing: Police and other security personnel/professionals need to use intelligence-led and proportionate approaches to deal with hooliganism. Before major events, officers should identify potential troublemakers, monitor high-risk groups, and intervene early when violence is about to erupt. Furthermore, excessive or indiscriminate use of force must be avoided since this can intensify tensions.

5. Strict enforcement of laws: Governments and authorities must ensure that assault, vandalism, destruction of public property, possession of dangerous objects, and other violent offences are promptly investigated and prosecuted. Sanctions should be certain, proportionate and consistently applied, and not to rely on severe punishments.

6. Stadium bans and exclusion orders: In the case of sports-related hooliganism, individuals known to be repeatedly engaged in violence should be prohibited from entering stadiums or attending particular matches. This is to prevent known offenders from participating in future disturbances thereby allowing supporters to enjoy sporting events safely.

7. Tackling alcohol and substance-related disorder: Intoxicated individuals should be prevented from entering venues and the need to address the use of illegal drugs – as this is a driver for aggressive behavior cum disorder around sporting events.

8. Improving relationship between supporters and clubs: Establishing regular communication of sports clubs with supporters' groups. This will enhance supporters to participate in discussions about stadium behavior, security arrangements, and acceptable codes of conduct. This can encourage supporters to take responsibility for maintaining a safe atmosphere.

9. Use of technology: Modern surveillance technologies, as well as CCTV, controlled-access ticketing, digital identification systems, and incident-monitoring systems, can help security agencies identify offenders and reconstruct incidents. This must be used in accordance with privacy and data-protection requirements.

10. Community policing and early intervention: This will entail the sharing of information about emerging risks by the police, schools, families, local authorities, sports clubs and community organizations. Early intervention is preferable to waiting until violence escalates. Community-based approaches can also assist to address social problems that contribute to youth violence.

11. Responsible media coverage: Sensationalizing hooliganism or portraying violent supporters as heroes by media organizations must be avoided. Responsible reporting must emphasize the consequences of violence and help promote peaceful sporting culture. Social-media platforms and sports organizations should also respond to online threats that could contribute to real-world violence.

12. Rehabilitation of offenders: Punishment alone may not prevent repeated hooliganism. However, repeated offenders can benefit from anger-management programmes, counselling, restorative-justice programmes and behavioral interventions. Rehabilitation should be combined with appropriate legal sanctions.

13. Better stadium infrastructure: Since poorly designed facilities can be a contributory factor to crowd disorder or violence, stadiums should have adequate seating, lighting, toilets, emergency exits, crowd-control barriers, separate routes where necessary, with sufficient space for safe

movement. Therefore, good facility design can reduce overcrowding and conflict.

14. International cooperation: Hooliganism can also involve supporters travelling across national borders for major sporting events. The police and sporting authorities should therefore exchange intelligence about known offenders and coordinate security arrangements for international competitions.
15. Stronger institutional responsibility: Sports governing bodies, football clubs, stadium managers, government agencies, police authorities, and local communities should clearly define their responsibilities for preventing and responding to violent behavior [4, 7, 8, 20 25, 32-41].

THE "HIDDEN BENEFITS" OF HOOLIGANISM

Academics do not say "hooliganism is good", but some sociologists argue there are **unintended social functions** that explain why it persists. This is known as "latent functions" or "group identity benefits" – not justification for violence. Some of these include:

1. Group identity & social belonging – This is where hooligan firms give unemployed/marginalized young men a sense of identity, status, and brotherhood they do not get elsewhere [6].
2. Political mobilization/"voice" for the powerless – This argues that youth gangs/thugs become tools for political expression when formal channels fail. Politicians use them, and while the youth also use them to demand/get attention [21, 32].
3. Economic opportunity in informal economies – Match-day hooliganism creates informal jobs such as: ticket touting, merchandise, security "protection", and media coverage. Some communities even depend on it [25].
4. Pressure for better governance in sport – Due to high-profile violence FIFA, NFF, and governments have been forced to invest in stadium safety, CCTV, and fan engagement – known as "policy spillover" by UNODC [20].

All the authors above stress these are **not benefits** but "explanations of persistence". The costs are – injury, death, trauma, property damage, and rights violations that far outweigh them [28, 29, 32], and has prompted UN agencies to recommend the channeling of these benefits into lawful youth programs and sports development instead.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of hooliganism in Nigeria and globally is rooted in exclusion, impunity, and weak institutions rather than in sport itself. It is both a public and development problem in Nigeria. Violence in and around sports is fueled by youth unemployment, political sponsorship, and institutional weaknesses, and while the use of force to control it has raised human rights concerns and often displaced rather solved the problem. Furthermore, the absence of reliable sports violence data limits evidence-based policymaking. In as much as security measures are necessary, evidence from the UN (1966), UNDP (2022), and Giulianotti & Klauser (2022) shows that repressive approaches risk violating human rights and displacing violence. Therefore, addressing hooliganism will require a holistic approach such as: tackling youth unemployment, prosecuting sponsors of violence, building rights-based policing, and the use of sport as a tool for inclusion. It is only by addressing both the symptoms and the root causes can states move from crisis response to sustainable prevention of hooliganism. More information on hooliganism can be found in the books in [42-46] and the following *related journals:*

Journal of Sport Issues
International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics
International Review for the Sociology of Sport
Soccer & Society
European Journal of Criminology
Policing and Society
Journal of Criminal Justice
Development in Practice
Journal of Human Rights
African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies
Human Rights Watch
UNODC
UNESCO
UNDP

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Figure 1. Football hooliganism
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hooliganism



Figure 2. Football hooliganism
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Football_hooliganism



Figure 3. History of football hooliganism in the United Kingdom



Figure 4: Heysel stadium disaster
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heysel_Stadium_disaster



Figure 5: Hillsborough disaster
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillsborough_disaster



Figure 6: Talking CCTV
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talking_CCTV



Figure 8. List of hooligan firms
Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_hooligan_firms



Figure 7. Name the football hooligan



Figure 9. Football hooligans: Firms, films and violence culture