Sport Venues and Crime: Applying Criminology and Criminal Justice Theory to Stadium Policing and Security

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Facilities/Events - Operations (Other)  
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Spectator sports venues are a potential target for crime. These arenas and stadiums often provide opportunities to commit crime in parked cars while attention is focused on the stadium, spectators sometimes engage in crime due to game-related aggression, violence can be stoked due to the presence of alcohol, and other times the venue provides a target for offending on dark days when the area is deserted. While there has been a call for sport management scholars to develop sport management-focused theories (Cunningham, 2013; Fink, 2013; Chalip, 2006), the application of criminology can be very useful for venue managers, especially those concerned with security, crowd management, and potentially unruly crowds. This presentation provides a conceptual review of how criminology theories and law enforcement interaction models can be applied to crime prevention and crowd management in the sport facility event and management environment. The theories and models discussed and applied to the sport event management setting are as follows: routine activities theory, social disorganization theory, situational crime prevention, and the RDFC Interaction model.

The question of whether the sport venue as a whole is a target for crime can be considered through routine activities theory. According to Cohen and Felson (1979), the way people move about in their daily lives influences the chances of a crime occurring. They posited three elements that must converge for a crime to happen: a motivated offender, an attractive target, and the lack of capable guardians. If any of these elements are missing there is little likelihood of a criminal event. To put this in the context of a sporting event, a motivated offender would be someone either attending the event or outside the venue who has the desire and ability to commit a crime, e.g., someone angry at the opposing team’s fans who encounters one of them at the venue or an individual looking to prey on people unfamiliar with the area (e.g., tourists) as they leave the venue. The attractive target is one that has something of value that the motivated offender desires. Add to this, that tourists may be utilizing portable electronic devices that fit the CRAVED model outlined by Felson and Clarke (1998). Finally, there is the issue of the lack of capable guardians, someone that has the capacity to restrain the motivated offender via an intimate relationship with them, such as parents, or a person with a relationship to the place, e.g., a manager or security guard (Felson, 1986; Eck and Wiesburg, 1995). Decker, Varano and Greene (2007) assert that there has been little consideration of “‘normal’ or ‘routine’ social interactions” in the study of planned and unplanned events and crime. In their examination of the relationship between crime during the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics and routine activities theory, Decker, et al. (2007) found that citizen complaints regarding crime spiked during the Olympics despite increased presence of police in the “Olympic envelope.” It was found, that police resources had been diverted to the area surrounding the Olympics and away from other parts of the city. This perhaps indicates that citizens outside the area surrounding the Olympic venue felt an absence of capable guardians. Interestingly, “incidents and arrests” decreased during the 2002 Olympics, but returned to “normal” once the games were over (Decker, et al. 2007, p. 99). Breetzke and Cohn (2013) used routine activities theory to outline how large sporting events can impact crime by examining crime patterns using GIS during rugby union and soccer games in Tshwane, South Africa. They found a “localized effect” for crime in and around Loftus Versfeld stadium during rugby union and soccer games, but this effect did not extend city-wide.

Sporting events can provide a potential supply of social disorganization. The work of Weisburd, Groff and Yang (2012) offers a more recent test of social disorganization theory by examining street segments and elements of social disorganization. Their findings indicated “property values and housing assistance measures were associated with persistently high levels of crime on street segments” (as cited in Braga and Clarke, 2014, p. 484). Further, “physical disorder,” the number of delinquent juveniles living on the street segment as well as “collective efficacy” (or lack thereof) as measured by the number of voters on the street segment were also associated with high levels of crime.
In a study to determine whether a soccer stadium in London attracted or generated much of the crime in the surrounding area, Kurland, Johnson, and Tilley (2014) found that crime increased in the surrounding area of a stadium when the stadium was in use relative to when it was not.

Situational crime prevention focuses on deincentivizing criminal opportunity. In particular, it suggests that opportunities for crime can be less attractive for offenders by (1) making criminal activity more difficult to commit, (2) increasing the risk of arrest, (3) minimizing or eliminating the benefits of committing the crime, (4) reducing or eliminating the provocations encouraging people to commit crimes, and (5) removing excuses to commit crimes (Cornish & Clarke, 2003; Wortley, 2001). The following applications of situational crime prevention have been proposed to focus on the venue (e.g., creating access barriers, redesigning venue designs that facilitate violence), events (e.g., restricting alcohol sales, removing disruptive spectators), and staff (e.g., using different security levels, incorporating technology) (Madensen & Eck, 2008).

The RDFC Interaction model can be used in the stadium security and crowd management process, as well. Madensen et al. (2012) proposed four dimensions that determine the success of police interactions. Patrons and potential offenders are most likely to cooperate with law enforcement when police behave in a way that is 1) reasonable, 2) disarming, 3) focused, and 4) consistent. Reasonableness focused on protecting citizen rights and preventing harm rather than strict enforcement. Disarming behavior can be used to reduce stress in highly charged situation through creativity and clever responses. Being focused requires law enforcement to ask whether a person is directly causing harm or can cause another person to cease from causing harm. Being consistent enhances the credibility of authorities by acting predictability. Erratic policing inspires hostility and defiance, especially in a sporting event crowd setting. Behavioral benefits of RDFC include the reasonable approach leading to voluntary compliance, disarming approaches evoking calm and positive reactions, focused policing leading to interventions that are permitted and supported, and a consistent approach inducing routine and instinctive compliance (Sousa & Madensen, 2016). Since all police and offender interactions can be explained through this model, it is clear that application to the sport venue situation, field invasions, fights, riots, and other potential issues in stadiums is useful to stadium managers and security personnel. The presentation will conclude with a discussion of strategies to implement the RDFC Interaction model in the sport venue setting and potential future applications to test the model.