

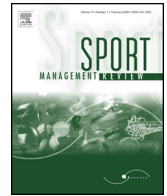


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A mixed methods analysis of disciplinary incidents in men's soccer

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were to (a) document the frequency and types of disciplinary incidents directed toward men's soccer referees and (b) examine stakeholders' perceptions of factors that contributed to such incidents. A two phase sequential mixed methods approach was used. In phase one, a provincial soccer organization's disciplinary files from 2010 to 2015 were subjected to a document analysis. Descriptive statistics for frequency and type of incident over time were calculated. In phase two, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 players, 9 referees, and 3 disciplinary committee members. Results from the document analysis showed that 98 incidents were reported over the five-year period, with the most incidents occurring in 2015. Incidents occurred more frequently in indoor versus outdoor soccer, and the highest number of incidents was reported at the lowest competitive tiers of play. Qualitative data showed that factors at different levels of social ecology contributed to the occurrence of incidents. Microsystem level factors, which appeared to directly contribute to the occurrence of incidents, were players' and coaches' lack of knowledge, coaches' attitudes, physical environment (indoor versus outdoor soccer), inconsistent refereeing, referees' communication, number of officials, and importance of game (score, stage of season). At a broader exosystem level, the training and mentoring of referees, rule changes, and the disciplinary procedure were associated with incidents. At the macrosystem level, cultural background and discrimination were distally associated with incidents. These findings provide information that may be used by sport organizations to inform educational efforts to reduce disciplinary incidents.

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1. Introduction

Sport policies and programs in many countries, including Australia ([Australian Sports Commission, 2015](#)), Canada ([Canadian Heritage, 2012](#)), and the United Kingdom ([Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2015](#)), have goals to increase levels of participation. Sport officials play a central role in the achievement of such goals ([Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013](#)). However,

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sport organizations face challenges in attracting and retaining officials, and declining numbers of sport officials have been reported (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; Sabaini, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2013). One reason officials drop-out of sport is because they experience criticism, abuse, and/or aggressive behavior from athletes, coaches, and spectators (Dell, Gervis, & Rhind, 2014; Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer, & Norlander, 2002; Friman, Nyberg, & Norlander, 2004; VanYperen, 1998; Warner, Tingle, & Kellet, 2013). In the current study, we sought to shed light on some of these issues by examining disciplinary incidents in men's amateur soccer games played in a Canadian province from 2010 to 2015.

More specifically, the purposes of this study were to (a) document the frequency and types of disciplinary incidents directed toward men's soccer referees and (b) examine stakeholders' perceptions of factors that contributed to such incidents. Disciplinary incidents were defined as incidents involving players that were reported by referees to the sport governing body disciplinary committee.² These incidents were classified (by the sport governing body) in categories of persistent criticism, foul and abusive remarks, unsportsmanlike conduct, threatening an official, incidental physical contact toward an official, deliberate physical contact toward an official, and deliberate violent contact toward an official.

1.1. Frequency and effects of disciplinary incidents

Whereas previous research has documented infractions (i.e., yellow and red cards) in professional levels of soccer (e.g., Buraimo, Forrest, & Simmons, 2010; Dohmen, 2008), we were unable to locate any previous research documenting the frequency of disciplinary incidents toward officials in amateur soccer leagues across extended time periods. This may be because studies at lower levels of soccer have sampled officials themselves, documenting the incidents they have personally experienced. For example, Folkesson et al. (2002) examined aggression and threat among 107 Swedish provincial soccer referees. The authors differentiated between verbal aggression (i.e., utterances expressed toward the referee that are experienced as unpleasant, such as swearing, words of abuse, and verbal defamation) and physical aggression (i.e., actions through which soccer players or coaches intentionally attack a referee, such as pushes, kicks, or punches). Threat pertained to "verbal threat of impending physical aggression" (p. 319). They found that 63.3% of referees had been exposed to verbal aggression, 15% had experienced direct physical aggression, and 35.1% had been threatened with physical aggression. However, these percentages may be misleading. Whereas 63.3% of referees may have been exposed to verbal aggression at some point in the careers, this percentage does not reveal how frequently such incidents occur. The lack of data on the frequency by which incidents occur may be because it is difficult to access records from amateur sport organizations.

Disciplinary incidents toward officials are an important topic to investigate. For instance, reported sources of stress among sport officials include verbal abuse from players/coaches, fear of physical harm, and interpersonal conflict/confrontation, along with other factors such as fear of failure, fear of making a wrong call, previous mistakes, time pressures, and the presence of a referee assessor (Neil, Bayston, Hanton, & Wilson, 2013; Rainey, 1994, 1995; Voight, 2009). In a study with 421 Canadian ice hockey officials with various levels of certification, threats of physical abuse were perceived to be among the most stressful events (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007). In another study, Swedish referees reported that aggressive behaviors from players and coaches were more difficult to cope with than aggressive behaviors from spectators (Folkesson et al., 2002). However, the literature is far from clear. For instance, Mascarenhas, Collins, and Mortimer (2005) suggested existing research shows that officials "experience no more than a moderate amount of stress" (p. 364). Indeed, a study of 22 professional and semi-professional Australian football referees showed that, while they experienced abuse, they routinely reframed it and considered it to be a normal part of their role that was not particularly aversive (Kellet & Shilbury, 2007). These somewhat contradictory findings may reflect the fact that little is known about the frequency of such disciplinary incidents. They may be infrequent, but very challenging events when they do occur.

1.2. Factors contributing to disciplinary incidents

A small number of researchers have examined factors associated with disciplinary incidents. In one study, Folkesson et al. (2002) showed that younger referees were exposed to more aggression and threat than older referees. In another study, Friman et al. (2004) interviewed seven Swedish provincial soccer referees about their experiences of threats and aggression. Sources of threat included criticisms from players, coaches, and spectators. Referees' reactions to aggression and threats included decreased concentration, performance, and motivation. Strategies for managing situations included communicating to parties concerned, not taking things personally, and filing complaints to appropriate authorities. Interestingly, participants perceived that aggression and threats stemmed from players' and coaches' lack of knowledge of the laws of the game.

Referees themselves may have an influence on the occurrence of disciplinary incidents. In an experimental study with male soccer players, Simmons (2010) found that ratings of fairness and correctness of a decision were significantly higher when players received an explanation for a decision compared to when they did not. Furthermore, ratings of referee fairness were significantly higher when the decision was communicated calmly rather than angrily. Certain social forces also influence the decisions of soccer referees. For example, a study of professional soccer in Germany showed that referees tended to favor the home team in terms of allowing more goals, penalty kicks, and stoppage time at the end of games when

² The referees in this study received payments for officiating games (regardless of competitive level) so were not, strictly speaking, volunteers. Disciplinary committee members were volunteers. Players were amateurs and did not receive financial compensation to play.

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