

Research Article

The Good Way to Work - The Benefits of Facilitation in Football Supporter Safety

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Abstract:

Policing large-scale sporting events presents a persistent challenge for agencies seeking to balance public safety with legitimacy. In Sweden, this challenge has been addressed through the Special Police Tactic, underpinned by the Conflict Reducing Principles of Knowledge, Facilitation, Communication, and Differentiation. These principles aim to foster lawful crowd behaviour by enhancing police legitimacy and enabling collective self-regulation. Drawing on a detailed case study of a high-risk football fixture between IFK Gothenburg and Malmö FF in 2017, this article examines how facilitation-focused policing operates in practice. Using combined observational and survey data collected during the ENABLE project, the study analyses interactions between Event Police and supporters. The findings show that facilitation does not simply reduce confrontation but generates conditions in which crowd members actively regulate themselves. This process is driven by perceptions of legitimacy and reinforced through reciprocal interactions, with early facilitative engagement shaping behavioural norms that persist even when the conditions for conflict arise. As a result, order is maintained with minimal reliance on coercive intervention. While the findings highlight practical challenges in implementation, they demonstrate that facilitation can be effective even under high-risk conditions.

Keywords: Football supporters; dialogue policing; crowd management; risk management; police tactics

Introduction

This article draws on data generated as part of the ENABLE project and developed in the first author's doctoral thesis; the present analysis offers a more detailed examination of facilitation as an operational practice.

Sweden has experienced increasingly severe issues with supporter disturbances during football matches in recent years. In December 2023, the government therefore decided to appoint an independent working group tasked with proposing stricter measures for Swedish legislation. The result of the investigation was the report *Safer Sports Events*, a 452-page document published in the spring of 2025.¹ The report has been criticised in several consultation responses for lacking proportionality in the proposed stricter measures and for risking the undermining of the dialogue-based relationship work that Swedish police are internationally recognised for.²

This article examines the Swedish police's efforts to strengthen dialogue and relationships with football supporters during the 2014–2017 period. These years contrast with the post-Covid context, where relationships between the police and supporters have become increasingly tense and antagonistic.³ While this study is grounded in the Swedish context, the challenges it addresses—how police can manage large crowds, reduce conflict, and maintain legitimacy—are common to public order policing internationally.

The police's handling of major sporting events and other mass gatherings is historically conditioned and should therefore be seen in light of the development of strategies in this area, particularly since the Gothenburg Riots during the 2001 EU Summit. Following these events, the Gothenburg Committee (*Göteborgskommittén*) was established to investigate the lessons learned. Their report identified serious flaws in the policing of crowd events, including inconsistencies in tactics across regions, which exacerbated mobilisation and coordination problems for the police.⁴

The committee also criticised the limited use of dialogue before, during, and after events, recommending the development of a national model of policing that embedded dialogue as a core working method. In response, the Swedish police launched the Special Police Tactic (SPT) project in 2004, with the aim of creating nationally standardised guidelines for managing large crowd events.⁵ Central to this model were the Conflict Reducing Principles (CRP), which are underpinned by the Elaborated Social Identity Model of crowd behaviour.⁶

The four Conflict Reducing Principles—Knowledge, Facilitation, Communication, and Differentiation—provide a framework through which police seek to understand crowd dynamics, support lawful behaviour, and minimise conflict. In particular, Facilitation involves enabling supporters to achieve their legitimate aims in ways that enhance perceptions of police legitimacy and encourage self-regulation within the crowd.

Despite the development of this framework, its application within football policing has been uneven. Dialogue-based approaches were initially more commonly deployed in the policing of political protests than in football, despite longstanding issues with disorder in that context.⁶ Over time, this gap led to calls for improved communication and greater understanding of supporter culture.⁷

It took a tragedy, the death of a football supporter in early 2014, to effect change.⁸ In 2015, the Swedish National Police launched the “MIKE” project, which resulted in the creation of Event Police units dedicated to engaging directly with supporters. These units played a visible role in facilitating supporter movements and interactions, applying the Conflict Reducing Principles in real time while feeding information back to commanders to support more differentiated responses when necessary.

The ENABLE project was also established in response to the 2014 tragedy. Between 2014–2017, a series of multi-stakeholder observations were conducted involving police, clubs, and supporters. Early findings suggested that while Facilitation and Communication were central to police strategy, they were not consistently realised in practice. Subsequent observations indicated that when these principles were applied effectively, they enhanced the police's ability to manage events in a manner consistent with human rights and reduced the potential for conflict escalation.⁹ Paradoxically, rather than continuing to develop this approach, there has since been a shift towards more control-oriented strategies. As the situation within Swedish football has become increasingly polarised, supporters have repeatedly pointed out:

*"The fact that the Police Authority invests tons of resources and energy in this petty crime, inflicts collective punishment on thousands of ordinary supporters, and destroys the opportunity for dialogue is a waste of resources. There was a good way to work — use it!"*¹⁰

The "good way to work" refers to the 2014–2017 model, which focused on managing crowds through the Conflict Reducing Principles rather than controlling them through restrictive measures. While existing research has drawn on the ENABLE observations at a macro level, there remains little detailed analysis of how Facilitation operates in practice and how it can be implemented in specific operational contexts.

This article draws on data generated as part of the ENABLE project and developed in the first author's doctoral thesis; the present analysis offers a more detailed examination of facilitation as an operational practice. The article addresses that gap by providing a detailed account of the policing of a single fixture between IFK Gothenburg and Malmö FF in 2017. However, rather than presenting this solely as a descriptive case study, the analysis focuses on how Facilitation was operationalised and how it contributed to conflict reduction. In doing so, the paper provides practical insights that can inform policing strategies in other settings where authorities face similar challenges in managing large crowds while maintaining legitimacy.

While these developments are often discussed in policy and practice terms, they reflect a much deeper set of assumptions about the nature of crowds and how they should be policed. In other words, the shift from dialogue and facilitation towards more control-oriented approaches is not simply strategic, but theoretical. Understanding this shift therefore requires engagement with the body of research that has examined how police conceptualise crowds, and how these conceptualisations shape operational practice.

Literature Review

The policing of crowds has historically been shaped by what might be termed 'classical' theories of crowd behaviour. Most notably associated with Gustave Le Bon, these perspectives conceptualise crowds as inherently irrational and prone to emotional contagion, wherein individuals lose their sense of self and become subsumed by the collective.¹¹ While such ideas have long since been challenged within academia¹², they have nevertheless proven remarkably resilient within policing contexts.¹³ In many respects, they continue to form part of the 'common-sense' understanding of crowds that informs operational thinking.

Research into police perceptions has consistently demonstrated the persistence of these assumptions. Stott and Reicher, in their study of public order trained officers in the UK, identified a tendency to view crowds as composed of a small number of 'troublemakers' capable of mobilising an otherwise passive and suggestible majority.¹⁴ All crowds were therefore seen as potentially dangerous, and this in turn justified a reliance on control-oriented tactics and a readiness to use force at relatively low thresholds. Subsequent work has replicated these findings across different national contexts. For example, Drury et al.¹⁵ and Prati and Pietrantonio¹⁶ both highlight how such perspectives remain embedded within police culture, with the latter noting that more experienced officers were often more, rather than less, likely

to endorse them. This suggests that these assumptions are not simply individual misunderstandings but are reproduced through organisational practice.

The difficulty with such perspectives is not only that they are theoretically outdated, but that they can become self-fulfilling. When police approach crowds as inherently volatile and act in ways that are perceived as indiscriminate or excessive, they risk generating the very dynamics of conflict they seek to prevent. A substantial body of work has demonstrated how interactions between police and crowds can transform the social meaning of a situation, particularly where police action is experienced as illegitimate.¹⁷ Under such conditions, individuals who would not otherwise engage in conflict may come to see opposition to the police as justified, leading to an escalation that is produced through interaction rather than inherent crowd pathology.

In contrast to these classical accounts, the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) offers a fundamentally different way of understanding crowd behaviour.¹⁸ Rather than viewing crowds as irrational, ESIM conceptualises them as structured social groups whose behaviour is shaped by shared identities, norms, and values. Crucially, these identities are not fixed, but emerge and develop through interaction, particularly in relation to other groups such as the police. Central to this is the concept of legitimacy. Where police actions are perceived as fair, proportionate, and respectful, crowd members are more likely to regulate themselves and others. Where they are perceived as indiscriminate or unjust, this can lead to a shift in collective identity and an increased likelihood of conflict.¹⁹

There is now a substantial body of empirical research supporting this approach, particularly within the context of football policing. Comparative analyses of international tournaments have demonstrated how different policing strategies can produce markedly different outcomes. For example, research on Euro 2000 and Euro 2004 highlighted how 'high-profile' approaches, characterised by heavy deployments and limited communication, were associated with increased disorder, whereas approaches that emphasised dialogue, communication, and facilitation were associated with more peaceful outcomes.²⁰ These findings have been influential in shaping contemporary approaches to public order policing. It is within this context that the Conflict Reducing Principles (CRP) were developed.²¹ These principles—Knowledge, Facilitation, Communication, and Differentiation—represent an attempt to translate social psychological theory into operational practice. They emphasise the importance of understanding the crowd, enabling legitimate behaviour, maintaining open lines of communication, and ensuring that any interventions are targeted rather than indiscriminate. Subsequent work has demonstrated how these principles can contribute to enhanced perceptions of legitimacy and reduced levels of conflict.²²

Sweden is often presented as a key example of the application of these ideas in practice. Following the events of the 2001 EU Summit in Gothenburg, a national inquiry identified significant shortcomings in the policing of public order events, including a lack of communication and an over-reliance on force.²³ In response, Swedish police developed the Special Police Tactic (SPT), which was explicitly grounded in the principles outlined above.²⁴ The introduction of Dialogue Police units in particular has been widely cited as an example of good practice and has influenced developments in other national contexts, including the development of Police Liaison Teams in the UK.²⁵

However, while there is a growing body of work examining these developments at a strategic or comparative level, there remains relatively little detailed analysis of how such approaches are enacted in practice, particularly within the context of football. Existing research has tended to focus on outcomes or on broad comparisons between different approaches, rather than on the micro-level processes through which facilitation is achieved. In the Swedish case, this is especially evident. While studies drawing on the ENABLE project have provided valuable insights into the overall impact of these approaches, they offer relatively limited detail on how facilitation is operationalised in real time.²⁶

This matters, because one of the reasons why facilitation-focused approaches are not more widely or consistently implemented is precisely because they are difficult to achieve.²⁷ They require ongoing

interpretation, negotiation, and judgement on the part of officers, often under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure. Without detailed accounts of how these processes unfold in practice, the principles themselves risk remaining abstract. It is in this sense that there remains a gap within the literature.

The present article seeks to address that gap by providing a detailed, micro-level analysis of a single operation conducted within the Swedish football context. In doing so, it aims not simply to demonstrate that facilitation can be effective, but to show how it is done, and therefore how similar approaches might be adapted and applied in other contexts.

To achieve this, the study draws on data collected during a high-risk football fixture in Sweden, using a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach that enabled close engagement with police, supporters, and club staff throughout the event.

Methods

Research Design and Context

This study draws on data collected as part of the ENABLE project, which adopted a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach involving collaboration between researchers, police, clubs, and supporters.²⁸ Drawing on traditions of Action Research²⁹ and Collaborative Inquiry³⁰, this methodological approach is particularly well suited to examining the practical enactment of facilitation, as it enables close engagement with both operational decision-making and the perspectives of those involved.

Case Selection

The fixture analysed in this article—IFK Gothenburg vs Malmö FF, played at Nya Ullevi Stadium on 1 April 2017—was selected as part of a series of four observations conducted during April 2017. This particular fixture was chosen for three reasons. First, it had been categorised by police as high-risk, with the away team's supporters expected to attend in significant numbers and with a recent history of disorder in Gothenburg. Second, it was located in Region West, an area where ENABLE had conducted less prior research, thus providing an opportunity to assess the implementation of nationally standardised approaches across different regional contexts. Third, the fixture represented a significant derby rivalry with an attendance of 32,129, making it a particularly demanding test of facilitation-oriented policing.

Data Collection

Data collection involved multiple methods designed to capture the operation from different perspectives and at different levels of analysis.

Observational Data

Prior to the match, background information was gathered on the historical relationship between the supporter groups, recent developments in police-supporter relations, local political and media context, and planned logistical arrangements including supporter march routes and temporary infrastructure.

On match day, a multidisciplinary team of approximately fifteen observers—comprising police officers, safety and security professionals, club staff, supporter representatives, and academics from Denmark, Sweden, and the UK—was deployed across the operational footprint. This composition enabled simultaneous observation from operational, organisational, and supporter perspectives. Observers were organised into smaller groups based on their expertise and positioned strategically to capture data across different temporal and spatial dimensions of the operation. This included pre-match gatherings, supporter movements and marches, interactions at transport hubs, stadium entry and exit procedures, and post-match dispersal.

Field notes were recorded using both traditional methods and digital devices, with digital communication technology enabling real-time sharing of observations, photographs, video footage, and

updates on crowd movements. Observers also conducted opportunistic field conversations with both officers and supporters when appropriate.

Survey Data

A Swedish-language online survey was released on match day and promoted via ENABLE social media accounts. The survey was designed in consultation with the Swedish Football Supporters Union to ensure appropriate language and framing. Rather than focusing narrowly on 'policing' or 'security', the survey asked respondents about the 'management' of the match, allowing supporters to highlight any issues they deemed relevant.³¹

The survey collected basic demographic information before asking open-ended questions about supporters' views on the management of the match, requesting specific examples of both good and bad management, and inviting additional comments. Of the 710 total survey responses received (representing 2.21% of match attendance), 375 contained qualitative data and were retained for analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed a structured process combining knowledge co-production with thematic analysis.³²

Workshop and Observational Data Analysis

On the morning following the match, a three-hour workshop was convened involving all observation team participants as well as police officers who had been on duty, club representatives, and supporter representatives. This workshop involved the collective reconstruction of events in chronological order, with participants encouraged to reflect critically on what happened and why, constructing a consensual and triangulated account of the operation.³³ This process constituted a preliminary stage of analysis, as practitioners and participants gave voice to their theoretical understandings of events, providing insight into the motivations behind and outcomes of the operation.

The workshop was audio-recorded and transcribed, with contemporaneous notes taken during the session. A visual timeline of interactions between the three main groups (home supporters, away supporters, and police) throughout the event was also created. These materials were synthesised into a detailed report of the operation, which was circulated to all participants for verification and validation.³⁴

The verified report, timeline diagrams, workshop transcripts, contemporaneous notes, and pre-match data were collated and subjected to thematic analysis. Initial coding was semantic and data-driven, with all extracts coded inclusively to maintain context. These initial codes were then collated into broader themes, at which point the analysis became more theory-driven, focusing specifically on the Conflict Reducing Principles. Themes were refined using Patton's principles of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity to ensure they were internally coherent and externally discrete.³⁵ Candidate themes and coded data were then presented to ENABLE team members for verification and discussion. The entire dataset was then reread and extensively recoded according to refined thematic maps.

Survey Data Analysis

Survey responses were analysed using the same thematic analysis approach. All responses were submitted in Swedish and analysed by the first author, with regular verification by native Swedish-speaking project members. Initial semantic coding focused on identifying what supporters were discussing and whether they described it positively or negatively. Codes were then organised thematically, with particular attention to different stages of the event (e.g., ingress, match, egress) and conceptual issues (e.g., policing approaches, communication, safety).

To enable quantitative analysis of overall supporter perceptions, all survey transcripts were coded into four categories: positive (expressing satisfaction, approval, or praise regarding management), negative

(expressing dissatisfaction, criticism, or concern), mixed (containing both positive and negative elements), and neutral (purely descriptive without evaluative content). To ensure coding reliability, 25% of survey responses ($n = 94$) were independently coded by two researchers fluent in Swedish. Cohen's Kappa was calculated to assess inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = 0.76$), indicating substantial agreement.³⁶ Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, with coding criteria refined accordingly. The remaining responses were coded by the primary researcher with ongoing verification by the second rater. Analysis was conducted concurrently with the observational data analysis, allowing for triangulation between observer accounts and supporter perspectives.

Integrated Analysis

The integrated analysis focused on identifying and interrogating instances of facilitation within the operation, examining how the Conflict Reducing Principles were enacted in practice and how interactional dynamics between police and supporters unfolded over time. Particular attention was paid to moments of potential tension and how these were managed, as well as to the micro-level processes through which communication, differentiation, and facilitation were achieved. The combination of observational and survey data enabled analysis of both the operational processes employed by police and the lived experiences and perceptions of supporters. Survey responses were collected in Swedish. All quotations presented in this article have been translated to English and verified by native Swedish-speaking members of the research team.

Results

Observational Account

The match between IFK Gothenburg and Malmö FF opened the 2017 Allsvenskan season. This fixture between teams from Sweden's two largest cities outside Stockholm is known locally as the *mesta mästarmötet* (the clash of champions). The match followed a highly contentious previous fixture in April 2016 that had been abandoned after a pyrotechnic device was thrown from the stands, at a Malmö player. The incident, dubbed *skandalen matchen* (the scandal match), resulted in IFK being adjudicated to have forfeited the match 0-3. As such, the 2017 match was classified as high risk, with emotions expected to be elevated due to the recent history of disorder.

Planning Stage

The decision to host the match at Nya Ullevi rather than IFK's usual home ground introduced significant logistical challenges, particularly in relation to supporter segregation, ingress, and movement through the city. The proposal to move the fixture came from the football league organisation, Svensk Elitfotboll (SEF), as part of its strategy to enhance the profile and financial power of Swedish football. The move was initially met with resistance from supporters who perceived it as profit-driven. Managing these challenges required careful coordination between police, clubs, and supporter groups.

Planning was characterised by sustained dialogue between stakeholders, including both clubs, supporter representatives, and police from both Gothenburg and Malmö. While the Conflict Reducing Principles (CRP) form part of a national strategy, officers noted during the workshop that their implementation can vary across regions. This fixture therefore also provides an opportunity to examine how these principles were enacted in Region West, where ENABLE had conducted comparatively less prior work.

A key priority was maintaining supporter segregation while enabling movement through the city. The stadium's location offered some advantages: away supporters travelling by special train could disembark at Liseberg station (approximately 950m from the away entrance), enabling a supporter march along a route that would not intersect with home supporters. More broadly, the organisation of transport, routes, and holding areas formed part of a facilitative approach that structured supporter movement in ways designed to reduce unnecessary contact and minimise risk. Additionally, stadium infrastructure enabled organisers to create a fenced hosting area outside the away entrance.

As is normative for Scandinavian supporters, key groups among the home supporters publicly announced their intention to arrange a supporter march from Götaplatsen to the stadium. However, days prior to the match it became apparent that the usual route was now unavailable due to construction work. The police explained this to the supporters and negotiated another route.

The away section had an allocation of 3,000 tickets that had quickly sold out for the away supporters. Intelligence estimated that there could potentially be an additional 2,000 away supporters with tickets in other areas of the stadium. The official supporter club, MFF Support, secured a special train to bring supporters directly from Malmö to Gothenburg. The special train quickly sold out its 920 seats. A supporter march was organised from Liseberg with MFF Support inviting all those travelling by other means to congregate at the station and join the march. The route for the march had been discussed between supporters, police and MFF, and was communicated via social media.

The policing approach was explicitly grounded in public safety rather than public order, with a low-profile presence prioritised unless risk escalated. The operational plan stated that if no risk occurred, the only police presence at supporter gathering places should be Event Police and Supporter Police—not public order units. After the match the supporters were informed in advance that there would be a 15-minute hold-back followed by an escort to the station, and that there would not be an overt show of force.

The operational strategy aligned with the Conflict Reducing Principles (CRP), emphasising communication, facilitation, and the promotion of self-regulation among supporters. Police highlighted the importance of established relationships between supporter police, liaison officers, and supporter groups as central to the operation.

Match Day

Pre-match: Facilitation in Practice

Home supporters gathered at Götaplatsen on Kungssportsavenyen as planned. As the announced time for the march approached, the square filled with people. The atmosphere was calm and anticipatory. Event Police and Supporter Police were the only police present, walking among the supporters and engaging in dialogue in a friendly manner. At 11:00 the supporters seemed eager to start the march, however as one of the ultra-groups had not yet arrived the march was delayed. Shortly afterwards the missing ultra-group arrived in full voice, and supporters set off approximately 10 minutes later than planned. As the march started, bengal flares and smoke bombs were used.

The event had what observers described as a 'carnival atmosphere'.³⁷ Police officers walked amongst the crowd as the march progressed, often chatting with supporters. It should be noted that the officers tolerated a certain amount of minor indiscretions which was appreciated by the supporters. Shortly after the march had begun one of the observers stopped in order to take a photo. An officer next to him quickly offered to hold his coffee cup so that he might use two hands.

The march soon stopped as supporters reached a red light. Whilst the singing and pyrotechnics continued, the supporters waited for the lights to turn. The march continued in this mood until it had almost reached the stadium and then stopped again. This time however it was stopped to orchestrate a large coordinated entrance. The march had become somewhat spread out over the last two kilometres and the supporters at the head of the march wanted to recreate the energy experienced at the start. Supporters and club staff later described the march as one of the most organised in years.

A large number of away supporters who had travelled by other means congregated at Liseberg station prior to the arrival of the special train. Despite this growing number of away supporters, observers noted a clear absence of police until approximately thirty minutes before the train's expected arrival

time. When a police presence did materialise, it was mainly made up of Event Police and the Malmö Supporter Police.

The police engaged with supporters in a proactive and purposeful manner. Shortly before the arrival of the special train there were also some unexpected guests. A small group of home supporters affiliated with 'The Wisemen' arrived at the same location.³⁸ The police approached them in a welcoming manner and engaged them directly. The group explained that they had arrived as part of their usual routine rather than to provoke a confrontation, and soon left in a taxi without incident. Police responded accordingly, dealing with the situation based on what was actually happening rather than what might have been assumed.

Police discretion was also evident in smaller interactions. One supporter recounted asking an officer if he could urinate in a bush during a long queue, to which the officer replied "not really, but no one is watching" (MFF31F).

Like the home supporter march, the away supporters used flares, flags and coordinated chanting to mark their presence. The march arrived at the fenced fan hosting area without any issues. Both marches progressed without incident.

Ingress: A Critical Test

Infrastructural constraints during stadium ingress created conditions typically associated with increased risk, including overcrowding, delay, and frustration. The entrance to the away section was far too small for such a large crowd and the atmosphere amongst supporters turned to quiet dismay. Despite large crowds still being outside at kick-off time the match started as scheduled. Segregation measures meant some entrances were not in operation, leading to significant bottlenecks. On the north-west side of the stadium, approximately 13,000 people needed to pass through a narrow entrance.

These issues were largely attributable to stadium design and organisational limitations rather than police action. In one instance, a locked gate on the concourse meant that an area of the stadium remained unused, contributing to last-minute movement of supporters shortly before kick-off.

Despite these conditions, there was no escalation into disorder. Supporters remained broadly compliant, and observational data indicate that many actively encouraged one another to remain calm.

Rather than intervening coercively, police maintained a low-profile posture, allowing these dynamics to unfold. Despite conditions typically associated with escalation, supporters remained calm and actively encouraged one another—a pattern also noted in the survey data.

Post-match: Adaptation and Responsiveness

Planned post-match arrangements were not fully implemented. Despite the proposed 15-minute hold-back of away supporters, the gate was opened immediately after full time. Instead of a large march with a police escort, supporters made their own way to the station. Despite this, they largely followed the pre-agreed route.

Upon recognising that no hold-back had taken place, the Event Police reacted quickly to facilitate the new situation. Although thinly spread they positioned themselves at key points along the route to direct the supporters. There was a potential flashpoint when Malmö supporters exited a park close to a bar populated by IFK supporters. The IFK supporters started shouting and moving towards them, but the Event Police dealt with the situation calmly.

A second flashpoint occurred between some of the ultra-groups. Whilst the majority of MFF ultras left by bus, one group almost came into conflict with members of an IFK ultra-group. As they moved

towards each other, two mounted officers coordinated with security staff and blocked the groups without incident.

The post-match phase concluded without significant incident. At the train station, Event Police were observed thanking supporters for coming and wishing them a pleasant journey. Interactions between police and known risk supporters were relaxed, with some later seen in friendly conversation.

Survey Data

This section examines supporter perceptions, guided by the observational account. The abundant qualitative responses submitted by supporters have been quantified to allow perceptions to be understood not just in relation to different elements or stages of the event, but also to see how widely these perceptions were held. Survey responses were coded to assess overall perceptions of the event and specific elements within it.

Overall Perceptions

47.3% of respondents (179 supporters) described the event in wholly positive terms—the largest category. A further 32.8% (113 supporters) reported mixed experiences, most of which were predominantly positive. Only 19.47% (73 supporters) described the event negatively, whilst 10 respondents submitted neutral answers.

Positive responses frequently highlighted the organisation of supporter movement and the conduct of police and staff:

"Exemplary arrangement for us away supporters. Everything from the march from Liseberg, the away supporter zone at the Ullevi and the treatment from the personnel and the security was completely faultless." (MFF35M)

Mixed responses typically praised certain elements whilst criticising others, most commonly ingress:

"Mostly good but the ingress and egress was run really badly. Strong criticism there." (MFF22M)

Negative responses were overwhelmingly concentrated on issues of ingress, particularly delays and overcrowding:

"Woeful ingress!! That it should be the same every time is incredible. Long queues where they were eventually forced to open the gates and let everyone in without a ticket check and visitation." (IFK36M)

Event Phases and Perceptions

In total, 285 respondents chronicled 773 examples of negative experiences during the event, whilst 265 respondents gave 610 examples of positive experiences. These could be subdivided into comments referring to different stages of the event (such as marches or ingress), general themes discussed in relation to the event as a whole (such as policing and security), or a combination of both.

Supporter marches were consistently viewed in positive terms (35 comments, of which 33 were positive and 2 negative), with comments frequently linking these experiences to calm and facilitative policing:

"The march to the match! Quiet and calm, no unnecessary efforts from neither police nor supporters." (IFK24M)

"Well organised between Liseberg-Ullevi, everything was calm and nice." (MFF27F)

Interestingly, there were also 4 positive comments about the MFF supporter march from IFK supporters, suggesting that home supporters valued arrangements that maintained spatial separation:

"That the fans of MFF went from the station in Liseberg. Really great!" (IFK26M)

Perceptions of policing and security were overwhelmingly positive across both supporter groups (137 positive comments versus 9 negative), particularly during the pre-match phase. These responses emphasised communication, discretion, and a restrained approach:

"As part of the supporter march to the arena (from Götaplatsen to Ullevi), the police acted exemplarily. Clear presence but did not seek any confrontation. Although the general order could be considered to be disturbed (Bengals, bangers, smoke, masked persons), the police remained calm." IFK31M

"The police had a restrained and calm attitude towards us home supporters." (IFK33M)

"Very good treatment from stewards and police." (MFF29M)

"The police went with the train and were very nice and social towards all supporters." (MFF46F)

"My friend needed to pee while we waited (around 1 hour) in the queue to the away section. There were no toilets nearby and there was a lot of cops. Then he asked one of the police if he could pee in a bush to which the police replied "not really, but no one is watching". We thought that was well played." (MFF31F)

In contrast, ingress was the most negatively perceived phase (239 comments, of which 187 were negative and 52 positive), with concerns focused on safety risks associated with overcrowding. However, even within these accounts, supporters described collectively maintaining order:

"It took way too long, but it was good mood with us supporters and we urged each other to take it easy and wait!" (MFF38F)

Another supporter explicitly linked this restraint to the broader atmosphere:

"The ingress was a disaster, saved only by the good mood of the MFF supporters. Crowded, too few people in the entrance, could become dangerous!" (MFF55F)

Numerous supporters directly associated ingress issues as risks to public safety, with some explicitly stating that such situations are likely to lead to violent incidents:

"Slow entry, risk of being crushed. Had probably been good with 'enclosures' a bit away from the entrance, then the risk of trampled children will not be as great." (MFF46M)

Despite these risks, as the observational account illustrated, the crowd remained compliant and there was no violence. The survey responses give an indication as to why: the positive atmosphere created by the facilitation approach enabled supporters to manage a potentially volatile situation through self-regulation.

Policing and Self-Regulation

Across both datasets, positive perceptions of policing were closely associated with behaviours consistent with the Conflict Reducing Principles, particularly facilitation, communication, and discretion. IFK supporters made 67 positive comments and 9 negative about policing and security. MFF supporters made 66 positive comments and 7 negative. Importantly, these perceptions were linked to observable patterns of supporter behaviour, including instances of self-regulation.

The data suggest that when conditions for conflict arose during ingress, it was avoided due to self-regulation within the group by certain individuals who were empowered by the context created through a police focus on facilitation. In other words, supporters themselves describe how the positive atmosphere established through facilitative policing earlier in the day carried forward and enabled them to maintain order even when organisational failures created risk conditions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that facilitation does not simply reduce conflict but contributes to the creation of conditions in which crowds actively maintain order themselves—even in situations where structural or organisational failures introduce risk.

Discussion

This study examined the implementation of the Conflict Reducing Principles (CRP) during a high-risk football match in Sweden, combining observational data with supporter perceptions to understand how facilitative policing operates in practice. The findings demonstrate that CRP-based policing can maintain order under challenging conditions and, critically, that supporter perceptions of police legitimacy are closely linked to observable patterns of self-regulation. More than this, the analysis shows that facilitation works not simply because it reduces confrontation, but because it builds the conditions under which crowds regulate themselves—something long theorised within crowd psychology but rarely demonstrated empirically in live operational settings.

This discussion proceeds in five parts. First, we examine how CRP principles operate as an integrated system in practice. Second, we explore the mechanisms through which self-regulation emerges as both outcome and process. Third, we analyse how these findings challenge classical theories and extend the Elaborated Social Identity Model. Fourth, we assess consistency and divergence from previous research. Finally, we consider practical implications for policing and the transferability of these findings to other contexts.

CRP in Practice: Integration Rather Than Isolation

The observational data reveal that CRP effectiveness derives not from isolated application of individual principles, but from their integration into a coherent operational approach. The encounter with 'The Wisemen' at Liseberg station illustrates this clearly. Officers drew upon prior knowledge of supporter routines, engaged directly through communication, and differentiated between routine and potentially risky behaviour. This demonstrates how differentiation depends upon knowledge and is enacted through communication. In practice, CRP operates as an interconnected system rather than a checklist of discrete tactics, extending previous research on dialogue-based policing by illustrating how multiple principles operate simultaneously.³⁹

Facilitation operated at both structural and interactional levels. Structurally, it was embedded in planning decisions: route negotiation, transport coordination, and the design of supporter movement through the city. These measures reduced unnecessary contact between rival groups and created a framework for safe supporter activity. Interactionally, facilitation was evident in micro-practices of policing—tolerance of minor indiscretions, embedding officers within marches, and small gestures such as offering advice. This dual operation, both strategic and relational, reinforces arguments that effective crowd management must address both physical and psychological dimensions of collective events.⁴⁰

The temporal dimension of facilitation represents a particularly important contribution. Supporters explicitly linked their restraint during high-pressure moments to earlier positive interactions, noting that the "good mood" from earlier carried forward into later phases. This suggests facilitation shapes the evolving normative context of the crowd over time. While procedural justice research demonstrates that fairness perceptions influence compliance, these findings extend that work by showing how such effects persist across event phases and remain robust when conditions deteriorate.⁴¹ Facilitation creates durable behavioural expectations that enable self-regulation under stress.

Self-Regulation as Outcome and Mechanism

A central finding is the emergence of active supporter self-regulation. In situations where escalation might typically be expected, supporters adhered to traffic controls without enforcement, coordinated their own movements, and actively encouraged one another to remain calm during overcrowded

conditions. This was not merely the absence of disorder but a collective process in which crowd members took responsibility for maintaining order.

This pattern is consistent with the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM), which posits that crowd behaviour is shaped by social identities formed through interaction with authorities.⁴² When police act in ways perceived as legitimate, they position crowd members as cooperative participants rather than antagonists. However, the present findings extend ESIM by demonstrating that self-regulation functions both as an outcome of facilitation and as a mechanism through which order is sustained. Once established, norms of cooperation are actively reproduced by crowd members themselves, reducing the need for direct police intervention.⁴³

The underlying mechanism appears rooted in reciprocity and legitimacy. When police demonstrate respect and willingness to facilitate supporter goals, supporters reciprocate by adhering to agreed arrangements and managing their own behaviour. This illustrates a shift from "power over" to "power through" the crowd: police authority emerges from legitimacy granted by supporters rather than imposed coercively.⁴⁴ This finding addresses a persistent gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence of how legitimacy translates into collective behavioural outcomes in real-world settings.⁴⁵

Police Adaptation and Professional Judgment

The post-match phase highlights that effective CRP implementation requires adaptability rather than rigid adherence to pre-planned tactics. When the planned hold-back strategy did not materialise, officers adjusted their approach, facilitating movement and managing emerging risks through positioning and communication rather than force. This reflects adaptive expertise, in which principles guide action but are flexibly applied in response to changing conditions.⁴⁶

This finding challenges critiques that facilitative approaches are unsuitable for high-risk contexts.⁴⁷ Rather, the data suggest that facilitation requires more sophisticated policing than confrontational approaches, demanding strong situational awareness, relational skills, and confidence to allow self-regulatory dynamics to operate under pressure. The low-profile police posture during ingress—allowing supporters to manage their own behaviour despite overcrowding—exemplifies this confidence. Officers did not interpret the absence of overt control as loss of authority but as evidence that earlier facilitation had established conditions for self-regulation.

Challenging Classical Theories and Extending ESIM

The findings strongly challenge 'classical' theories conceptualising crowds as composed of peaceful majorities and dangerous minorities susceptible to contagion.⁴⁸ Across the observation, isolated incidents of tension did not escalate into wider disorder, and were often managed through dialogue with or by supporters themselves. This undermines the assumption that proximity to disorder inevitably leads to its spread.

The findings also contribute to the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) by illustrating how legitimacy is produced and sustained through interaction during a live event.⁴⁹ Rather than focusing on large-scale shifts in crowd identity, the analysis highlights how moment-to-moment facilitative practices shape supporter behaviour in situ. In particular, the data show how early interactions between police and supporters establish expectations that persist across the event, influencing how crowds respond to emerging challenges. This suggests that ESIM can be usefully extended by paying closer attention to the temporal dynamics of police–crowd interaction, and to the ways in which legitimacy is reinforced through consistent, facilitation-oriented engagement. While these findings are necessarily limited to a single case, they provide empirical insight into the mechanisms through which self-regulation is achieved in practice.

One particularly notable finding concerns spatial segregation. While often associated with coercive control, segregation in this case was positively evaluated by supporters when achieved through dialogue and mutual agreement. This challenges assumptions that all forms of differentiation are inherently illegitimate, suggesting that the meaning of such measures depends on how they are

implemented and perceived.⁵⁰ The key distinction is between segregation imposed as a control measure (signalling distrust) versus segregation co-created through dialogue to enable safe participation (signalling respect for supporter agency).

Consistency and Divergence from Previous Research

These findings are broadly consistent with research on dialogue-based policing at protests and football matches across Europe. Studies in England⁵¹, Denmark⁵², and Sweden⁵³ have documented similar patterns: facilitative policing correlates with reduced disorder and improved supporter perceptions. The present study reinforces these findings while contributing new insights into the mechanisms through which facilitation operates.

However, the ingress phase represents a unique test case. Unlike previous studies where facilitation operated in relatively controlled environments, here supporters faced significant organisational failures creating objectively dangerous conditions. That self-regulation persisted despite these failures suggests facilitation's effects may be more robust than previously demonstrated—the normative context established through early facilitation appears capable of withstanding subsequent stressors that would typically trigger escalation.

The integration of observational and survey data provides triangulation rarely achieved in crowd policing research, strengthening confidence in causal claims linking police behaviour to supporter responses. The convergence between observed patterns of self-regulation and supporters' own accounts of how the "good mood" (MFF38F) from earlier carried over provides compelling evidence for the temporal mechanism identified above.

A surprising finding was the extent of supporter appreciation for arrangements that maintained segregation. Home supporters praised the away march route, and both groups valued clear spatial boundaries. This nuances ESIM literature emphasising the risks of categorical differentiation, suggesting that when segregation is achieved through facilitation rather than coercion—enabling each group to express their identity without threatening the other—it may enhance rather than undermine positive dynamics.⁵⁴

Implications for Police Practice

From a policing perspective, these findings suggest that facilitation should be understood as an active strategy requiring communication, coordination, and restraint, not a passive or permissive approach. The role of specialist units—such as supporter police—appears particularly important, providing a bridge between police and crowd that enables dialogue and shared understandings. The importance of differentiation is evident throughout: police responses were shaped by ability to distinguish between routine supporter behaviour and genuine risk, allowing proportionate intervention without undermining broader relationships.

More broadly, the findings indicate that effective crowd management may depend less on the capacity to impose control, and more on the ability to cultivate legitimacy within the crowd. Where legitimacy is established, compliance appears less dependent on coercion and more embedded within the group itself, representing a shift from "power over" to "power through" crowds. This has implications not only for immediate event management, but also for longer-term police-supporter relationships.

While this case study examines Swedish policing, its implications extend to other jurisdictions confronting similar challenges. Three lessons appear particularly transferable, though with important contextual caveats:

First, facilitation as strategic design. Facilitation is not simply a "soft" interpersonal style but a strategic approach requiring careful planning. Route negotiation, transport coordination, and infrastructure decisions all shaped the event's trajectory. Police agencies seeking to adopt facilitative approaches must invest in planning processes involving dialogue with event organisers and participant groups, enabling co-creation of arrangements meeting both safety and participatory goals.⁵⁵ However, such

dialogue-based planning requires time, trust, and institutional support—preconditions that may require preliminary relationship-building work.

Second, the importance of relationships and knowledge. Officers highlighted that established relationships between supporter police, liaison officers, and supporter groups were central to the operation's success. This underscores the value of specialist roles—such as Police Liaison Teams in the UK or Dialogue Police in Scandinavia—that prioritise relationship-building over tactical intervention. Such roles enable police to accumulate knowledge about supporter cultures, distinguish routine from risky behaviour, and build trust that facilitates communication during events.⁵⁶

Third, enabling self-regulation. Police can enhance public safety not only through direct intervention but by creating conditions that enable crowds to regulate themselves. This requires confidence to maintain low-profile postures even when situations appear tense, and organisational cultures supporting officers' professional judgment in applying principles flexibly. Training and debriefing processes emphasising situational awareness, communication skills, and adaptive decision-making may be as important as tactical training for public order policing. This approach challenges traditional effectiveness metrics (e.g., arrests, visible force) in favour of outcomes like voluntary compliance and absence of escalation.

Context and Transferability

However, the extent to which these findings can be generalised requires careful consideration. The case is situated within a Swedish context characterised by relatively high levels of trust in public institutions and a policing model emphasising dialogue and proportionality. What might be termed an "ultra-democratic" context shapes both how police define their role and how supporters understand legitimacy. The effectiveness of facilitation in this setting may therefore be contingent on broader social and political conditions.

In contexts where police legitimacy is lower, where policing is more explicitly oriented towards control, or where democratic norms differ, similar approaches may not produce the same outcomes. Several preliminary steps may be necessary: assessing what constitutes police legitimacy locally; addressing existing legacies of illegitimacy through sustained demonstration of procedural justice; building organisational cultures that support facilitation through leadership commitment and training; and adapting approaches to align with local understandings of police roles.

Research from diverse contexts including The Netherlands⁵⁷, Portugal⁵⁸, and England⁵⁹ suggests that dialogue-based approaches can be adapted to varied policing environments. However, transferability lies not in replicating specific tactics, but in understanding underlying principles—communication, facilitation, differentiation, and knowledge—and how they might be adapted to different environments. The fundamental question for any jurisdiction remains: what constitutes police legitimacy in the eyes of the crowds being policed?

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a single case, which limits the extent to which findings can be generalised. While the analysis contributes to theoretical understanding through analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2009), it cannot claim that similar outcomes would occur in different contexts.⁶⁰ The case's analytical value is enhanced by its "critical" nature⁶¹: a high-risk fixture with recent disorder history, contested venue change, and organisational failures. That Facilitation succeeded under these challenging conditions strengthens confidence that the approach can work in demanding circumstances. However, further studies across varied contexts are required to test applicability and identify boundary conditions.

Second, the reliance on qualitative and open-ended survey data, while providing rich insight into supporter perspectives, presents challenges in terms of reliability and consistency. Unlike closed-ended quantitative measures, such data limit the ability to produce precise or replicable counts. While inter-

coder reliability processes were employed, and observational data provides triangulation, future research might benefit from mixed-method surveys combining open-ended questions with standardised scales for reliability and comparability across studies.

Third, the data were collected in 2017, and the broader policing landscape has evolved since. Changes in technology, social media, and policing strategies may influence contemporary crowd dynamics in ways not captured here. While the theoretical mechanisms identified are not time-bound phenomena but enduring aspects of crowd dynamics, contemporary research is needed to examine how CRP implementation adapts to these changes. The case offers a benchmark against which contemporary practice can be compared.

Fourth, as with any observational research, the presence of observers may have influenced participant behaviour, although the collaborative PAR approach and ENABLE's ongoing engagement likely mitigated this effect.

Fifth, the survey response rate was low (2.21%), raising the possibility of non-response bias; however, triangulation with extensive observational data and workshop validation reduces—but does not eliminate—this risk.

Finally, the study does not fully explore conditions under which facilitation may be less effective. While the findings strongly support CRP, they do not rule out the possibility that coercive approaches may be necessary in certain high-risk scenarios. Future research should adopt a more explicitly comparative approach to examine the relative effectiveness of different policing strategies across varying contexts, including cases where facilitation is less successful, to identify boundary conditions and refine theoretical understanding.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide actionable insights for policing practice and theoretical development, while highlighting important avenues for further research in diverse contexts.

Why This Matters

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to ongoing debates about how police can manage crowds effectively while maintaining legitimacy. In many contexts, traditional control-based approaches have struggled to prevent escalation and have, in some cases, exacerbated tensions between police and the public. This research provides empirical evidence that an alternative approach—grounded in facilitation, communication, and differentiation—can produce stable and cooperative outcomes even under challenging conditions.

More broadly, the findings suggest a shift in how police power is conceptualised. Rather than relying on deterrence and coercion, effective crowd management may depend on the ability to shape social contexts in ways that enable cooperation. This has implications not only for football policing, but for public order policing more generally, including protests and large-scale public events. At a time when questions of police legitimacy are increasingly prominent, understanding how authority can be exercised through, rather than against, the public is of critical importance.

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Endnotes

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