Major sporting events can lead to an increase in racially motivated hate crime. This is particularly the case when athletes who belong to an ethnic or religious minority are blamed for a country's poor performance.
This is the result of a sociological study conducted by Dr. Christof Nägel at the University of Cologne (Germany) and Dr. Mathijs Kros at the University of Utrecht (Netherlands) in cooperation with Dr. Ryan Davenport at University College London (U.K.) in the wake of England's defeat at the men's UEFA Euro 2020 final. They report a rise in racially motivated hate crime in London by 30% in the weeks after the event.

The study, "Three Lions or three scapegoats: racial hate crime in the wake of the Euro 2020 final in London," is available as a preprint and will be published in the journal *Sociological Science*.

The England team had not reached the final of an international tournament since winning the 1966 World Cup. In the 2020 Euro final at Wembley Stadium in London, England and Italy faced each other. With the score at 1-1 after normal time and extra time, the game went to penalties. While the two white players Harry Kane and Harry Maguire scored for England, the three black players Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka missed. The Italy team, which had scored three goals, won the title.

**A vent for frustration**

Sociological theory assumes that hate crime often does not arise spontaneously, but requires so-called trigger events. For example, the numbers rose in the U.S. as a result of 9/11 2001 and after Donald Trump's presidential election in 2016. The United Kingdom recorded an increase as a result of the Brexit referendum.

As a theoretical explanation for the rise in hate crime after the football final in London, the authors draw on the "frustration-aggression theory," in which people identify a (supposedly) responsible party after a frustration or defeat who "thwarted their plans" and thus becomes the object of anger and aggression.
In addition, they rely on the "scapegoating theory," in which responsibility for the misfortune of one group is shifted to another, socially marginalized group in order to maintain a positive image of one's own group.

In the wake of the defeat, the three England players who missed were subjected to a wave of abuse on social media that explicitly referred to the color of their skin. Twitter UK recorded 1,622 racist tweets during the final and in the 24 hours that followed. The hate was not only directed at the individual players, but targeted all people with black skin in the U.K.

How important are prior assumptions?

The researchers wanted to find out how the rise in racially motivated hate crime was distributed in the physical world. To investigate the wave that ensued after the 2020 Euro, they drew on statistical data from the London Metropolitan Police to identify trends for individual boroughs.

"We were interested in whether there would now be more violence in neighborhoods with a history of racist violence, or whether the event would 'mobilize' people in neighborhoods that have no such history," said Christof Nägel from the University of Cologne's Institute of Sociology and Social Psychology.

Earlier sociological research had found, for example, that as a result of the events of New Year's Eve 2015/16, when young men of predominantly North African origin sexually assaulted women in the vicinity of Cologne's Cathedral and elsewhere in Germany, hate crime against people perceived as Muslim rose in regions of the country where it had previously been low. Collectively felt anger—so the assumption—had led to people rethinking their generally positive attitude towards a certain group.
"Racism was already widespread among some English football fans before the 2020 Euro," said Ryan Davenport of University College London. It could therefore be assumed that racially motivated hate crime would not rise sharply after this trigger event, as existing negative preconceptions were "confirmed" and did not need to be reconsidered.

"On the other hand, violence can be intensified after an event in groups with negative preconceptions: Here is an opportunity to express existing prejudices even more vehemently and violently," said Mathijs Kros at the University of Utrecht. Hence, the sociologists would expect a pronounced rise in those parts of town where previous behavior has normalized these kinds of crimes.

The results show that in the weeks following the defeat in the European Championship final, racially motivated hate crime in London increased by 30% overall. There were more incidents in boroughs with a history of such violence.

"This supports the assumption that trigger events do not have a homogenous effect on societies, but rather reinforce existing attitudes," Kros concluded. The results therefore appear to invalidate the research findings on the New Year's Eve events in Cologne to some extent.

Nägel and his co-authors see this difference in the nature of the trigger event. "While the European Championship defeat was a singularly frustrating experience, people in Cologne perceived the events of New Year's Eve as threatening. This led to a profound rethinking of their convictions."

However, the authors also see examples in sport of how diversity can contribute to positive social developments. "Previous research shows that extremely successful footballers such as Mohamed Salah from Liverpool FC can have a clearly measurable mitigating effect on racist hate crime,"
said Nägel. The Egyptian-born, Muslim striker "Mo" Salah joined Liverpool FC in 2017, which, according to a different study, led to a significant decrease in Islamophobic violence and attitudes in the city.

**More information:** Three Lions or Three Scapegoats: Racial Hate Crime in the Wake of the Euro 2020 Final in London

Provided by University of Cologne


This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.