

The “Researcher as a Hooligan”

Riots after sporting events is not a new phenomenon. In fact, at this writing, the most recent sporting event riot to result in injuries and arrests to occur in the United States just happened near the University of Kentucky campus after the University of Kentucky Wildcats lost to the University of Wisconsin in the NCAA basketball semifinals. Long-term trends in violent riots, however, are equally likely to occur after wins (Bialik, 2015). How do these riots happen and what kinds of people get involved? To find out, Geoff Pearson (2009) engaged in covert participation in the illegal behavior of English football (soccer) supporters, commonly referred to as *hooligans*. He was not just interested in individual and group behavior, but in police responses to this behavior as well. He first attempted to interview self-professed hooligans about their behavior, but he found that their reports were unreliable, with nonviolent fans often exaggerating their violent behavior and violent fans often downplaying theirs because they feared being reported. To obtain more valid information about the culture of hooliganism, Pearson began to study this social world as a covert participant. He stated, “The only way I could gain an understanding of the ‘lifeworld’ of the subjects was to fully immerse myself in the group’s activities through participant observation” (p. 246). He spent three years as part of a fan club for an English football club, who regularly engaged in a wide range of low-level criminal offenses including drinking and drug offenses, disorderly and threatening behavior, damage to property, and sometimes assaults. In his research, Pearson committed minor offenses, which “the majority of the research subjects were committing and that I considered necessary to carry out the research” (p. 247). He justified his covert participation because he believed soccer hooligans have been misunderstood and subject to “serious injustices and maltreatment by those in authority” (p. 249). Among other findings, this research concluded that when the police adopt a more targeted and less confrontational approach, the risk of rioting was decreased (Stott & Pearson, 2007).

Exhibit 8.2

Soccer Hooligans Assaulting a Rival Fan After a Match

