

# Final investigation into 97 deaths at Hillsborough stadium caps decades-long cover-up

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After 36 years the cover-up surrounding the killing of 97 Liverpool Football Club supporters at the Hillsborough football stadium is complete. It has been finalised with publication of a report—itsself taking 13 years to complete—by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).

The Liverpool supporters were crushed and suffocated to death after police gave the order to open an egress gate at 2:52 p.m., just before the kick-off of an FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest on April 15, 1989. Thousands of fans were directed into two already dangerously overcrowded pens.

Despite criticism at previous inquests, trials and hearings of the police, the Football Association and those responsible for safety at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield—followed by the inquests held as far back as 2016 which determined that the 96 who initially perished were “unlawfully killed”, no-one has ever or will be held responsible. The 97th victim, Andrew Devine, died in 2021—31 years after his initial “life-changing” injuries.

The IOPC investigation’s report on the Hillsborough disaster and its aftermath, while citing extensively police misconduct and criminality, concludes that only 12 retired police officers would have faced gross misconduct proceedings had they been prosecuted under legislation in operation today. Ten were from South Yorkshire Police (SYP) force and two from West Midlands Police (WMP).

This includes ex-South Yorkshire Police Chief Constable Peter Wright, who died aged 82 in 2011, 22 years after committing his crimes. Wright was chief constable of South Yorkshire Police from 1983 to 1990 and led the force as it brutally attacked miners during the 1984-85 national strike. He was responsible for overall policing at the Hillsborough football stadium on the day of the disaster. Afterwards, major efforts were made by the police and others to pervert the course of justice, including by doctoring statements. Complicit in the alterations were senior officers, including Wright and then South Yorkshire Chief Superintendent Donald Denton.

The IOPC concludes that former South Yorkshire police chief superintendent David Duckenfield—who instructed that the exit gate be opened—would have faced 10 alleged breaches for “failures in decision making and communication in relation to managing the build-up to the game”, as well as a “series of key failings of control as the crowd built”.

Following a retrial in 2019, Duckenfield, aged 81, was acquitted by a jury on the charge of gross negligence manslaughter.

The police officers have gotten away with everything because the 12 retired from the *force before the IOPC investigations began in 2012*. These investigations, including Operation Resolve into policing on the day, were mandated by the Hillsborough Independent Panel (HIP).

HIP found that the main reason for the disaster was a “failure of police control” by South Yorkshire Police (SYP), that fans were not to blame and that there were “concerted efforts” by SYP to deflect blame onto the fans. This included the systematic alteration of 116 police officers’ statements to remove or change unfavourable comments. The HIP findings led to the original “accidental death” inquest verdicts being quashed and the 2016 “unlawful killings” verdict.

The HIP only came about due to the decades-long fight of the families of the bereaved, and its findings should have led to those guilty going to prison. But having ensured that no one was brought to justice over the previous 23 years, the ruling class were not about to change course. Although the law was changed in 2017—by Theresa May’s Conservative government—so that ex-police officers are able to answer misconduct charges, it was not applied retrospectively.

The IOPC report brings forward even more evidence of criminality by the police. It notes that some 327 officers’ accounts were amended “before they were submitted to WMP [West Midlands’ Police, who were tasked with investigating South Yorkshire Police over the event] and the Taylor Inquiry. This figure was more than 100 higher than previous reviews of the evidence had found. While some of the amendments were relatively minor, such as correcting spelling or other typographical errors, many resulted in several paragraphs being removed or rewritten.”

This took place as “a group of senior officers within SYP, with the assistance of the legal team appointed by the force’s insurers, presented a case that the disaster was not caused by failings on the part of SYP corporately, or on the part of individual officers...”

“SYP sought to minimise potential criticisms of leadership on the day; downplay the significance of changes in the police operation for the 1989 Semi-Final compared with the 1988 game; deny that SYP had any responsibility for monitoring safety in the

pens; refute that there was any official police tactic to close the tunnel to the centre pens of the West Terrace, once they were full.

“In support of this, SYP and its legal team reviewed every officer’s account before it was submitted to WMP and the Taylor Inquiry and amended almost 1 in 4 of them. Through its comprehensive investigation with access to all accounts, the IOPC established that 327 SYP officers’ accounts were amended: 133 more than identified in the HIP Report.”

The IOPC states that “further analysis of the 327 amended accounts showed that there were 63 accounts from which criticisms of senior officers and/or police command and control were removed or reworded... Comments about aspects of police planning and tactics, including pre-match briefings, an apparent shortage of officers and a lack of coordination in the rescue effort were amended in 31 accounts, but left unchanged in 13”.

Significantly, “Every reference to monitoring the pens or tunnel closure was removed from the accounts. That was despite senior officers demonstrating their knowledge of such tactics in meetings after the disaster, and SYP having successfully argued in a court case a few years previously that its officers’ role involved maintaining safety on the terraces.”

Although its 366 page report assembles extensive evidence of a police cover-up, including involvement by the investigating West Midlands Police, the IOPC denies any such cover-up occurred. The report states, “The first suggestion that there was some form of police ‘cover-up’ was reported in the media in the days after the disaster. Over the years, similar comments have been made by a wide range of people: not only by the families of those who died and Liverpool supporters, but also by some journalists, public figures and campaigners as well as other football supporters. In short, many believe that there was a cover-up, and the IOPC received several complaints to that effect.”

This forced the IOPC to investigate whether there was a police cover-up. But a body that supposedly exists to investigate police conduct simply accepts as good coin statements from those proven *years ago* to have lied—including Duckenfield—that there was no organised cover-up or involvement “from the wider ‘establishment’”.

In the section “The response of SYP officers to allegations of a cover-up”, the IOPC states, “The allegation that there was a deliberate attempt to blame supporters for the disaster was repeatedly raised during the [2014-2016] Goldring Inquests [into the deaths]. Several former senior SYP officers were asked by barristers representing some of the families whether their actions in the aftermath of the disaster had been part of a cover-up. While some accepted that, in hindsight, certain actions were hard to justify, and in some cases even acknowledged that SYP had been on the defensive, all denied that they were involved in a deliberate cover-up of any form”.

The IOPC notes, “Ch Supt Duckenfield was asked if his lie was the start of a cover-up; he said no.” Having instructed that the exit gate should be opened, allowing approximately 2,000 fans to enter already overcrowded pens, Duckenfield lied telling—within minutes—the Football Association head Graham Kelly that Liverpool fans forced the gate open. This became the media and Conservative government’s narrative from then on, with endless

lies claiming that “drunken Liverpool fans” caused the deaths.

Speaking on behalf of several bereaved families, Nicola Brook, a solicitor at Broudie Jackson Canter, noted that there was no need for the IOPC to take 13 years to deliver its report as “The evidence that has allowed the IOPC to draw its conclusions has been there all that time.” It took so long that two of her clients had died while waiting for fresh inquests and never got to hear the verdict of unlawful killing in 2016. More had died in the years since then and never saw the IOPC report.

She added, “This outcome may vindicate the bereaved families and survivors who have fought for decades to expose the truth—but it delivers no justice.

“Instead, it exposes a system that has allowed officers to simply walk away, retiring without scrutiny, sanction or consequence for failing to meet the standards the public has every right to expect.

“Yes, the law has now changed so this loophole cannot be used in future. But for those affected by this case, that is no consolation.”

IOPC Deputy Director General Kathie Cashell put forward the position, agreed by Labour Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, that had there been “a legal duty of candour” for all public officials at the time of Hillsborough, everyone responsible would have just owned up and justice would have been served. This duty is currently being legislated by the Starmer government, having initially been proposed in relation to the Hillsborough events in 2017 when Labour were in opposition.

But what has been delivered by the ruling class over Hillsborough is class justice, and whenever the crimes of political and corporate interests of the ruling elite have led to the mass loss of life, they have used every means possible to evade punishment.

During the Grenfell Tower Fire inquiry—which took seven years to complete—nothing stopped the political and corporate criminals responsible from placing the blame on everyone but themselves. As with Hillsborough, over eight years after the deaths of 72 people in the inferno, not a single person has been brought to justice.

**A timeline of the state cover-up over the Hillsborough 97 deaths, carried out under successive Conservative and Labour governments can be viewed [here](#).**



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