

N8 PRP Small Grant Policy Briefing

THE ABUSE OF WOMEN RUNNERS: PERCEPTIONS, FEARS AND EXPERIENCES

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SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the findings of an N8 PRP funded project conducted by Dr Caroline Miles (PI) and Professor Rose Broad (Co-I), University of Manchester, in partnership with Greater Manchester and Merseyside Police forces. The project aimed to increase knowledge and understanding of the abuse experienced by women who run, whether they report this to the police, the barriers to reporting, women's safety concerns around running, and the measures employed by women to increase their feelings of safety when running. Three sources of data were analysed: police data covering a two-year period across two forces; survey data from 498 women runners; and audio diaries from 10 women runners. The project links directly to an objective of the Police Violence Against Women and Girls National Framework 2021, *to improve trust in policing and create safer spaces and understand reasons preventing women from reporting abuse*. It also links with the Government-led Safer Streets initiative, which includes a focus on VAWG in public spaces.

KEY FINDINGS

- There were 81 offences recorded by Greater Manchester and Merseyside Police 01/01/2022 – 31/12/2022 involving the abuse of women runners. The majority involved sexual offences, followed by Public Order Section 4a offences, and physical assaults.
- 68% of the 498 women survey respondents said they had experiences of being abused whilst out running, but only 5% of these women had reported the abuse to the police. Reasons included the normalisation of abuse, not perceiving incidents as criminal offences, and low confidence in the willingness/ability of the police to take the report seriously.
- 82% women said they have safety concerns around running and take a multitude of measures to increase their feelings of safety, including risk assessing when and where they run, who they run with, what they wear, and carrying items such as phones, keys, personal alarms, and tracking devices to increase feelings of safety.

Project Background

In 1995, Stanko discussed the endemic, everyday, and mundane nature of violence against women, including the harassment of women in public spaces, highlighting the impact of gender-based abuse and violence on women's fear of crime and critiquing 'responses' that make women responsible for changing their behaviour to protect themselves. Over a quarter of a century later, a Runners' World survey in 2021 (n=2,000 women) indicated 60% of female runners had experienced harassment and 25% regularly experienced sexual abuse (date?). Research has illustrated how women change their behaviour based on their perceptions of crime and harassment and under-report incidents due to their everyday experiences of 'lower-level' harassment, which can normalise and trivialise these behaviours, increasing the risk of further victimisation¹ (Nicholls, 2017; Hollander, 2001).

Aims and Methodology

There is a lack of academic research surrounding women's use of everyday spaces for exercise and no criminological research on women runners' fear of abuse, the impact of their fear and experiences, and attitudes towards reporting abuse to the police. This project addressed the gap in knowledge about women runners' experiences, fears and perceptions of abuse, with the following aims:

- To examine the frequency and nature of abusive incidents experienced by women runners that are recorded as crimes by the police;
- To generate data and knowledge around the lived realities of women runners, focusing on their experiences of abuse, fear of abuse, decision-making processes around running, reporting of abuse, and help-seeking;
- To inform preventive strategies and police responses to reported incidents;
- To provide knowledge and understanding of this abuse that will inform a larger, inter-disciplinary project around women's use of public spaces and relatedly, the impact upon participation in sport and attitudes of boys and men towards the types of abuse experienced by women.

The research, conducted from January-December 2023, used three sources of data to address these aims:

- Analysis of **police data** covering a 2 year period (01/01/21 – 31/12/22) focusing on recorded incidents of abuse experienced by women runners across two police force areas.
- **Online survey** about women's experiences of abuse whilst running, fear of being abused whilst out running, factors shaping fear, impact of fear on running, and reporting decisions.
- **Audio-diaries** recorded by women runners across the two police force areas about their experiences and fear of abuse, and decisions around running routines and reporting.

Project Findings

1. Police data

In total, 81 offences were recorded by Greater Manchester and Merseyside Police between 1st January 2021 and 31st December 2022 involving the abuse of women runners. The majority of these involved sexual offences, followed by the Public Order Section 4a offence of causing intentional harassment, alarm or distress, and physical assaults.

The age of the women reporting these incidents ranged from 15-64 years. 32 women self-identified as 'British', 3 as having a mixed ethnic background, 2 as 'Pakistani', 1 self-identified as 'other' and there were

¹ See also research presented by Vera-Gray (2022) available <https://www.n8prp.org.uk/home/events/policing-innovation-forum/pif22vawg/>

missing data for the remaining 43 women. Offenders were only identified in 29 cases. In terms of disposal, in 14 cases the perpetrator was charged and in 15 cases, the case was discontinued due to evidential difficulties.

Offence	Frequency	Percent
Sexual offences	33	41
Causing intentional harassment, alarm or distress (Section 4a)	30	37
Physical assault	11	14
Harassment	5	6
Robbery/theft	2	2
Total	81	100

Table 1: Breakdown of offence recorded

2. Survey data

498 women completed the online survey, 99% of whom identified as Cis-Women. 91% respondents who provided a nationality identified as British and 92% of women respondents identified their ethnicity as White. 42% (n=210) were aged 41-50 years.

340/498 (68%) women said that they had experienced abusive behaviour whilst out running, highlighting the level of under-reporting to the police. The most common type of abuse is verbal abuse (58%), although a substantial number of women also reported being followed (19%), flashed at (7%), and experiencing 'other' forms of abuse, the most common being abuse from men in vehicles (13%). 13 women said they had been physically assaulted and seven women had been sexually assaulted whilst out running. No women reported acquisitive crimes, which indicates that the motivation was related to gender rather than economic reasons.

Despite the high prevalence of women experiencing abuse whilst out running, 95% of these women had not reported the abuse to the police. A variety of reasons were given for non-reporting, centring around the key themes of a) the abuse of women in public being normalised; b) not perceiving incidents to be criminal offences; and c) low confidence in the police. Substantial numbers of women reported that in addition to their own experiences, they heard of other women's experiences of abuse via a multitude of sources including friends and family, social media, the news and via running groups.

82% of respondents said that they worried about their personal safety whilst out running. What was particularly noteworthy was the magnitude of measures taken by women runners to enhance their feeling of personal safety. Many women reported taking other items for safety alongside their phones such as their keys (held between their fingers as a weapon), watches (Apple watches, Garmin or Strava), personal alarms (including rape alarms), dogs and lights/reflective clothing.

3. Audio Diary Data

Audio diaries were obtained from women runners (n=10), providing reflections about their running experiences over a one-month period. A common theme in the audio diaries emerged around women's perceptions of and decisions on when and where it is safe to run, which changes according to the seasons:

'When it's quite early I don't really like to go into the park, even though it's light there's just not a lot of people around so I go on the main road, I only run to a spot in which the houses stop'

As well as risk assessing when and where to run, the audio diaries also provided illuminating insights into how fear of abuse feed into women's decisions on what to wear for a run:

I put a t-shirt on as well as there were a lot of people around and I don't want to get any undue looks, it was absolutely fine I didn't have any people staring, or catcalling as far as I can recall'

Like the survey data, women talked about taking practical precautions whilst out running, including not listening to music or only having one earphone in, so they were more aware of noises around them:

'I do only ever have my music in one ear and I have it quite quiet so that I can still hear what's going on'

Audio diaries also provided an invaluable insight into the many situations in which women running feel uncomfortable and fearful, as well as what they considered to be 'low-level' incidents that cause concern:

I did get shouted to by a group of men but they were standing in the pub and I was running past so it didn't go on for very long as I was out of the way then, I guess because they had a drink and it was semi-late at night about 9 o'clock, they obviously felt comfortable to do that'.

Conclusion

In 2020, a Runners' World survey of women runners revealed that 60% of women runners had experienced harassment whilst out running. This high prevalence of the abuse of women runners has been supported by our research, which found that over two-thirds of women runners across Merseyside and Greater Manchester have experienced abuse, in the form of verbal abuse, physical and sexual assaults, being followed, flashed at, and having items thrown at them. This research, which is the first criminological research examining this issue and the first to analyse police data, has also highlighted the very low numbers of women reporting experiences of abuse to the police. Indeed, only 5% of the survey respondents who had experienced abuse said they reported it to the police, for a number of reasons including the normalisation of abuse, not perceiving it to be a criminal offence or serious enough, or not thinking it would be taken seriously or result in any positive outcome. As a result of their experiences, and of hearing stories of abuse from other women runners, the women who responded to our survey disclosed very high levels of fear of abuse, with 82% women saying they feared for their safety whilst running. To mitigate their fears, women undertake a series of risk assessments before heading out for a run, avoid running in certain places at certain times of the day/years, carefully choose what to wear for a run, and carry various items to make themselves feel less at risk.

There are a number of implications and recommendations arising from this research, including measures that can be taken by the police. These include analysing patterns and trends in recorded incidents, in order to identify where and when perpetrators are most likely to abuse women runners so that prevention strategies can be appropriately targeted; increasing women's confidence in reporting experiences of abuse to the police, so that they know they will be taken seriously; communicating clearly with victims about outcomes of their investigations, even if this involves no further action; and engaging with alternative platforms through which women can share their experiences (that do not involve directly contacting the police).

Beyond the police, there is important work to be done to change perceptions that being abused whilst running is 'normal' or 'part of life' for women and girls. This work could build upon campaigns such as Greater Manchester's 'Is this OK?' campaign and evaluate their effectiveness, and also focus on bystander intervention. Crucially though, the endemic nature of the abuse of women runners reflects misogynist attitudes and norms, which can only be challenged and changed through educational and campaign work targeted at boys and men.

Implications for Future Research

We need to learn more about the experiences of women across every sector of society. The low proportion of non-white women who completed our survey may reflect the ethnic breakdown of women who run, or the survey engagement from non-white women. The findings of this project have been disseminated to the project partners, steering group and key stakeholders. From this project, we are now developing a large, inter-disciplinary research proposal examining how experiences of abuse impact more widely upon women's use of public spaces for exercise, how technology can be used to facilitate reporting of abuse, and what work can be done with boys and men to challenge the attitudes that underpin the abuse of women in public spaces. This project will draw and build upon Barker's (2023) research and work with urban geographers to identify potential measures which increase women and girl's use of public space for exercise (see Barker, 2023), the Transport for Northumbria work in developing Apps through which people can report incidents, and GMCA's campaign work such as Is this Ok?