

The Abuse of Women Runners: Perceptions, Fears and Experiences

Briefing Report

Authors

Dr Caroline Miles, Professor Rose Broad and Meg Oldham (University of Manchester)

UoM

Crim

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the findings from an N8 Policing Research Partnership funded project, conducted from January to December 2023 which aimed to increase knowledge and understanding of the abuse experienced by women who run, whether they report this abuse to the police, the barriers to reporting and the measures employed by women to increase their feelings of safety when running.

In 2021, a Runners' World survey (n=2,000 women) revealed that 60% of female runners had experienced harassment and 25% regularly experienced sexual abuse. The survey prompted thousands of female runners to recount their experiences of harassment on social media. In October 2022, The Guardian reported:

'One in every five women is concerned about sexual harassment when exercising – and three in 10 have experienced it first-hand, while doing physical activity, mostly in streets and parks. And we know that people will not do something – whether that's walking or cycling to school, or jogging before work – if they do not feel safe doing so'.

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 upon participation in running and experiences of/attitudes towards reporting experiences of abuse to the police. Similarly, there is a lack of administrative data on prevalence, trends, hotspots, and links to other types of violence and abuse.

The project directly links 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 and builds on the increased public awareness of these issues raised nationally and locally by the 'Is this ok?' campaign in Greater Manchester.

'No woman or girl should have to live in fear of going out, think about changing their normal route or whether to wear headphones or not. Women shouldn't have to change what they do because of unacceptable behaviour by men'. (Andy Burnham, GM Gender-based Abuse Strategy (2021)).

Project Aims and Methods

The project aimed to:

- Examine the frequency and nature of abusive incidents experienced by women runners that are recorded as crimes by the police;
- 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;
- Inform preventive strategies and police responses to reported incidents;
- 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 findings are drawn from three sources of data gathered during the project:

- **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 verbally, physically and/or sexually 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, there were 81 offences recorded by Greater Manchester and Merseyside Police between 1st January 2021 and 31st December 2022 involving the harassment and/or abuse of women runners. As shown in Table 1, 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.

Table 1: Breakdown of offence recorded:

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

Victim demographics:

The age of the women reporting these incidents ranged from 15-64 years. 32 of the women self-identified as 'British', 3 as having a mixed ethnic background, 2 as 'Pakistani', 1 self-identified as 'other' and there were missing data for the remaining 43 women.

Offender Data:

Offenders were only identified in 29 of the 81 cases. In terms of disposal, in 14 of these cases the perpetrator was charged and in 15 cases, the case was discontinued due to evidential difficulties.

Incident Details:

From the incident logs, we extracted details of the incidents, and below we provide some examples to illustrate the context and nature of abuse experienced by women who report incidents to the police.

Victim is running...when she saw the suspect with his genitals out grunting at victim. Victim was out for a morning run when she has seen a male with his trousers unzipped and genitals on display. Victim states the male appeared to be talking on his mobile phone and that she shouted at him to cover up as she ran past. The male has turned around and started walking in the same direction the victim was running but has disappeared from view.

IP has gone for a run...and leant down to tie her laces and the suspect has pulled his coat over the IP'S head and pushed her to the ground. The suspect has then put his hands down the IP'S pants and rubbed her genitals. Suspect has then left the IP lay on the floor and made off in unknown direction of travel and the victim could hear the sound of youths laughing. IP has got back up and ran home to alert family of the incident.

Unknown male follows [woman] as she is on a run around her estate...making her feel intimidated and then approaches her to speak to her...[she] felt fear, alarm and distress because of the situation.

2. Survey Data

In total 498 women completed our online survey asking women about their experiences, fears, and perceptions of abuse whilst out running, and also about their responses (including whether they had reported incidents to the police).

The demographic characteristics of the women respondents are as follows:

- 99% of these women identified as Cis-Women (1 participant identified as a trans-woman and 2 preferred not to say).
- Of the respondents who provided a nationality, 91% identified as British and 92% of women respondents identified their ethnicity as White.
- The largest proportion of women respondents (n=210, 42%) fell into the age 41-50 years old category, comprising 36% of the women.

49% women reported that they run on their own, and the majority of women said they usually run between 5pm and 8pm, or before 8am.

In terms of location, the women reported running in a variety of environments, although the most common responses were built up areas, residential areas, parks, and off-road trails.

Of the 498 women respondents, 340 (68%) said that they had experienced some form of abusive behaviour whilst out running. This gives some indication of the level of under-reporting to the police. The most common type of abuse is verbal abuse (58% women respondents said they had experienced verbal abuse/comments), although a substantial number of women also reported being followed whilst out running (19%), flashed at (7%), and experiencing 'other' forms of abuse (13%). 13 women said they had been physically assaulted and seven women had been sexually assaulted whilst out running. Notably, no women reported acquisitive crimes, which indicates that the motivation for the offences was related to gender rather than economic reasons. A range of abusive behaviours were described in the 'other' category, the most common being abuse from men in vehicles, for example:

'Incessant tooting by van drivers. Intimidating when you are alone on country roads'

'Things shouted from cars. Often unintelligible so can't say it was abusive speech, but certainly intimidating. Also had things thrown from cars'

Despite the high prevalence of women experiencing abuse whilst out running, 95% of women respondents who said they have experienced abuse said that they did not report the abuse to the police. Of the women that did report their abuse to the police, most women indicated there was some follow up and support, but no substantial outcome; often because the perpetrator could not be identified.

For the women who said they did not report experiences of abuse to the police, the reasons provided were frequently that they did not think anyone else would perceive the incidents to be serious enough, or due to the frequency with which they experienced abuse:

'Felt too insignificant and happens quite often when running. People shout things at you or make unsolicited comments'

'It's normal, I'm a woman. Wouldn't expect anything to be done about it'

'I considered it just part of 'being a woman' and a consequence of running outside'

'It seemed too minor to report. Guess you get used to abusive odd behaviour'

'The police do not care. They don't follow up crime like theft of phones...so why on earth would they follow up harassment against women?'

'Pretty pointless when even rape cases go unsolved and have a low conviction rate'

In addition to women's actual experiences of abuse whilst out running, we asked women whether they ever heard stories about the abuse of women runners. Substantial numbers of women reported that they heard of other women's experiences via a multitude of sources including friends and family, social media, the news and via running groups.

Perhaps not surprisingly given their experiences and perceptions of the safety of women whilst out running from hearing others' experiences, 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

The final stage of our data collection involved obtaining audio diaries from women runners (n=10), who provided short, recorded 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 and there's a bit of a dip it's a wooded area, it's still the main road but there's not a lot of cars on the road at that point, so I tend to stop and turn round and come back go back and then go the other way'

As well as risk assessing when and where to run, the women who recorded audio diaries also provided illuminating insights into how fear of abuse fed into their decisions on what to wear for a run, especially in hot weather:

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 around me'

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

Summary

The purpose of this research project was to learn about women's fears, perceptions and experiences of abuse whilst out running, how they respond to their fears and experiences of abuse, and also to inform prevention strategies and police responses to reported incidents. Our analysis of police data reveals that very few women report incidents of abuse to the police, however, the incidents they do report are serious. It is clear that police action in these cases is constrained by the difficulty in identifying perpetrators, who are almost always unknown to the victims, and also compromised by a lack of evidence.

What is very clear from the survey data is that the low number of police-recorded incidents does not reflect the absence of a problem. 68% of the 498 survey respondents had direct experience of being abused in some way. The most common type of abuse experienced by women runners is verbal abuse, but a significant proportion of respondents also disclosed being followed, being flashed, physically and/or sexually assaulted, and a range of other intimidating behaviours including being beeped at, having objects thrown at them from vehicles, having their path blocked, and being intimidated by men on motorbikes/scrambler bikes.

In addition to experiences of abuse, 82% of survey respondents said they had concerns about their personal safety whilst out running. In response to these fears, women undertake a series of measures to make themselves feel more safe, including decisions over when, where and with whom to run – or when and where not to run alone; carrying items such as keys, personal alarms and sprays with which to defend themselves; carrying mobile phones and/or other tracking devices; and making sure someone knew when and where they were running and were due home.

A striking finding was that just 5% of the women who had directly experienced abuse reported it 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 so normalised that experiences are perceived as trivial, to be expected, and part of everyday life; b) not perceiving incidents to be criminal offences and not wanting to waste police time; and c) low confidence in the police, expressed as doubt over whether police would be interested or take the report seriously.

Recommendations

The findings from the project prompt a number of recommendations for strategies to address and prevent the abuse of women runners:

- Police prevention strategies which could be informed by identifying when and where men are most likely to carry out this abuse.
- Increasing confidence in women to report, for which women need to know that these reports will be taken seriously. This could also include considering alternative ways for women to share information about incidents, such as recording their experiences on an app.
- Police responses to reported incidents need to be communicated back to victims, including why no further action has been taken.
- Changing perceptions that this is 'normal' or 'part of life' for women, girls but importantly also men and boys. This must include educational work with children as well as campaigns aimed at boys and men which target attitudes and bystander intervention.
- Working with urban geographers to identify potential measures which increase women and girl's use of public space for exercise.

Finally, we need to learn more about the experiences of women across every sector of society – majority of women who responded to survey identified themselves as White, despite our efforts to circulate the survey widely. The low proportion of non-white women may reflect the ethnic breakdown of women who run, or the survey engagement from non-white women (92% respondents identified as White).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the N8 PRP for funding this project, Merseyside and Greater Manchester Police for providing data, our steering group for providing guidance and feedback throughout the project, and all of the women who completed our survey and recorded audio diaries.