

Abuse of women runners – perceptions, fear and experiences

Generating the first criminological dataset on female runners' experiences, fears and perceptions of abuse.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Manchester
Principal researcher(s)	Principle researcher, Dr Caroline Miles; Co-investigator, Professor Rose Broad caroline.miles@manchester.ac.uk
Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N8 Policing Research Partnership • Greater Manchester Police • Merseyside Police
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	January 2023
Date due for completion	December 2023

Research context

This project focuses on women runners' experiences of abuse – including 'low-level' verbal abuse, catcalling, indecent exposure, serious violent or sexual assaults – and the barriers to systematic reporting of abuse, which can empower women to engage in making public spaces safer.

There are well-established bodies of research on the abuse of women in private spaces and victimisation connected to the night-time economy. There is a small body of research within sports science highlighting the issue of harassment experienced by runners (for example, Brockschmidt and Wadey, 2022). However, there is little academic research around women's use of everyday public spaces and no criminological research focusing on women's experiences of abuse while running. Similarly, there is no research on women runners' fear of abuse, response to fears and perceptions of abuse, or the decision to report to the police.

In 2021, UK magazine Runners' World reported findings from a survey of 2,000 female runners, revealing that 60% had experienced 'harassment' and 25% regularly experienced sexual abuse. This led to thousands of female runners recounting their experiences of harassment on social media. Although much of the abuse is considered to be low-level, the murder of Ashling Murphy in 2022 illustrated the potentially fatal implications of this abuse.

People experience fear of crime based on their own experiences, media reports or friends' stories (Brockschmidt and Wadey, 2022; Jackson and Gray, 2010). Women change their behaviour based on their fear of crime and can under-report incidents as a result of their everyday experiences of 'lower-level' abuse, which can normalise these behaviours (Nicholls, 2017; Hollander, 2001).

Aims

There is little administrative data on the abuse of women in public spaces, and no criminological research on the experiences of female runners, or police responses. Through generating the first criminological dataset on female runners' experiences, fears and perceptions of abuse, this research aims to address an important gap in the literature on gender-based abuse and women's use of public spaces.

The aims of the research are to:

1. examine the frequency, nature, and geographic distribution of incidents of abuse experienced by female runners that are reported to the police
2. generate data and knowledge around the lived realities of female runners, focusing on their experiences of abuse, fear of abuse, decision-making processes around running, reporting of abuse and help-seeking
3. inform preventive strategies and police responses to reported incidents

4. 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.

Research methodology

Research questions

1. What are female runners' experiences of being abused?
2. How is this form of abuse geo-spatially distributed across police force areas?
3. How do women perceive the risk of being abused while out running?
4. How do women respond to fear of being abused while out running?
5. What changes and adaptations to participating in running do women make in response to their fears and/or experiences?
6. What are women's experiences of support-seeking or reporting abuse to the police?
7. What barriers prevent reporting to police and what measures can be taken to increase reporting?
8. What measures are necessary to counter the problem (in terms of prevention and response strategies)?

Methodology

In order to address these research questions, the project will incorporate a mixed-methods approach, using the following four research methods.

1. Analysis of police data for reported incidents across two police forces covering a two-year period.
2. Online survey (n=300) administered to women about their experiences and fear of being verbally, physically and/or sexually abused while out running, across the two police force areas. The survey will capture women's demographic characteristics, lifetime and recent experiences of abuse when running, factors shaping women's perceptions and fear of abuse, the impact of fear, perceptions, and experiences on running routines and decision-making processes, and decisions and experiences of reporting to the police.
3. Audio diaries recorded by women runners across the two police force areas (n=30) about their experiences and fear of abuse, and decisions around running routines and reporting.

4. A mapping exercise to illustrate the geo-spatial distribution of abuse experienced by women while out running. The online survey will generate data on locations where women run and locations where previous incidents have taken place (where relevant). This will be mapped to provide geospatial information that can be used to identify areas where incidents are clustered.

Tags

- [Violence against women and girls](#)