Training park staff and volunteers to increase women's safety in UK parks and green spaces

In partnership with Suzy Lamplugh Trust and Keep Britain Tidy, this initiative trains park staff and volunteers to address harassment, evaluated through pre- and post-surveys.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Leeds
Principal researcher(s)	Anna Barker and Rebecca Brunk a.c.h.barker@leeds.ac.uk
Collaboration and partnership	• Suzy Lamplugh Trust • Keep Britain Tidy – Green Flag Award
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	October 2024
Date due for completion	October 2025

Research context

Harassment is a significant issue for women and girls in public spaces, including parks. Research by Dr Anna Barker and Professor George Holmes at the University of Leeds found that women do not feel comfortable relying on others to intervene in harassment or threatening behaviour in parks. Many feel it is safer to ignore harassment rather than challenge it.

The UK has 27,000 parks that offer vital green spaces for exercise, relaxation, and socialising. However, 1 in 6 women feel unsafe in parks during daylight, a rate three times higher than men (ONS, 2022). Women who have experienced harassment are more likely to feel fearful, which can limit park visits, restrict certain times or cause them to avoid going alone.

In collaboration with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and Keep Britain Tidy, this initiative trains park staff and volunteers across Britain to safely intervene in harassment situations, drawing from scenarios identified by women in prior research. The training helps participants recognise risks and respond effectively.

The project will also enhance park managers' understanding of gender-sensitive park design and management through the 'Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls' guidance, part of the Green Flag Award quality standard. This includes recommending active bystander training under the 'Eyes on the Park' theme, encouraging staff and volunteers to intervene safely without directly challenging harassment.

The initiative will hold workshops with approximately 500 park managers across Scotland, Wales, the North-East, North-West, Midlands and London.

Research methodology

Intervention surveys will be administered before and after to evaluate change. The evaluation of the impact of the bystander training will be assessed at three time points: pre-training to create a baseline, immediately post-training and three months post-training. This will measure changes in attitudes, confidence, skills and actual bystander behaviour.

Adapted versions of the validated Bystander Barriers Scale and Bystander Behaviour Scale for the park-specific harassment will be used to assess changes in psychological barriers and behaviour. In addition, participants will be asked to commit to at least one action resulting from the training, with follow-up on these commitments after three months to evaluate challenges and successes.

Research participation

The project will host workshops with approximately 500 park managers in Scotland, Wales, the North-East, the North-West, the Midlands and London. These are being organised by Keep Britain Tidy.

Participants of the workshops will be invited to take part in the evaluation.

References

Barker A and Cape-Davenhill L. 2024. '"I don't like walking in empty parks, so when I go to a park, I need timing": Exploring women and girls' safety work in urban parks'. Past Present and Future of Public Space International Academic Conference, 25–27 June 2024, Conference Proceedings. Accessed November 2024.

Barker A and others. 2022. 'What Makes a Park Feel Safe or Unsafe?' Leeds: University of Leeds. Accessed November 2024.

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Safer Parks Consortium. 2023. 'Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls'. Accessed November 2024.

Further information

Project website