

The Abuse of Women Runners: Perceptions, Fears and Experiences

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GM Policy Hub Seminar

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Background to project:

The same message over three decades

- "Long-term commitment to improving women's quality of life, free from physical and sexual harassment, must necessarily become part of any campaign to reduce women's fear of crime" (Stanko, 1995: 56).
- "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, Gender-Based Violence Strategy, 2021)



Policy Context

- Police Violence Against Women and Girls Framework (2021)
 - To improve trust in policing and create safer spaces
 - To understand reasons preventing women from reporting abuse
- Safer Streets initiative – focus on VAWG in public spaces
- GMCA Gender-based violence strategy 2021
 - ‘Is this ok?’ campaign



[Video: GMCA gender based violence campaign #IsThisOK](#)

Existing research

- Academic literature on women runners and why women runners?
- Existing literature on wider issues of VAWG
 - Women and fear of crime – women’s fear of sexual assault (e.g. Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020)
 - ‘Street harassment’ research indicates high incidences of ‘low level’ experiences
 - Harassment of women in the night-time economy
 - Women and participation in sport
 - Women and running



NEW ADIDAS STUDY FINDS 92% OF WOMEN ARE CONCERNED FOR THEIR SAFETY WHEN THEY GO FOR A RUN

10-MAR-2023 / HERZOGENAURACH, GERMANY



Female student murdered while out for a run on university campus in the US

A suspect has been charged for the killing of 22-year-old of Laken Hope Riley

Project Aims

- The Abuse of Women Runners project was funded by the N8PRP
- 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.



Project Methods and Data Sources

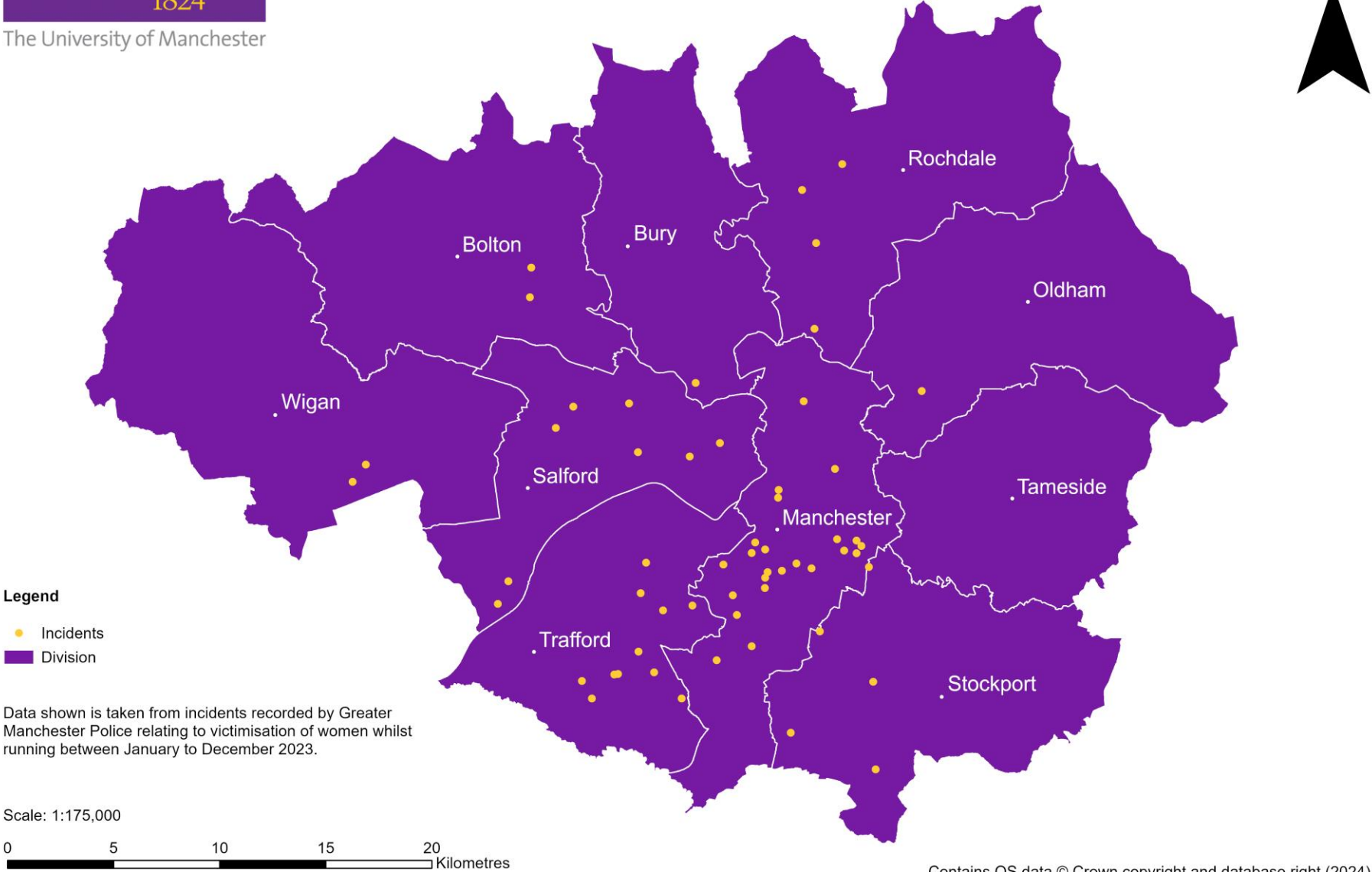
- Analysis of **police data (GMP and Merseyside)** covering a two-year period (01/01/21 – 31/12/22) focusing on recorded incidents of abuse experienced by women runners across two police force areas.
- **Online survey** about women's experiences of abuse whilst running, fear of being verbally, physically 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.

Greater Manchester Police Data

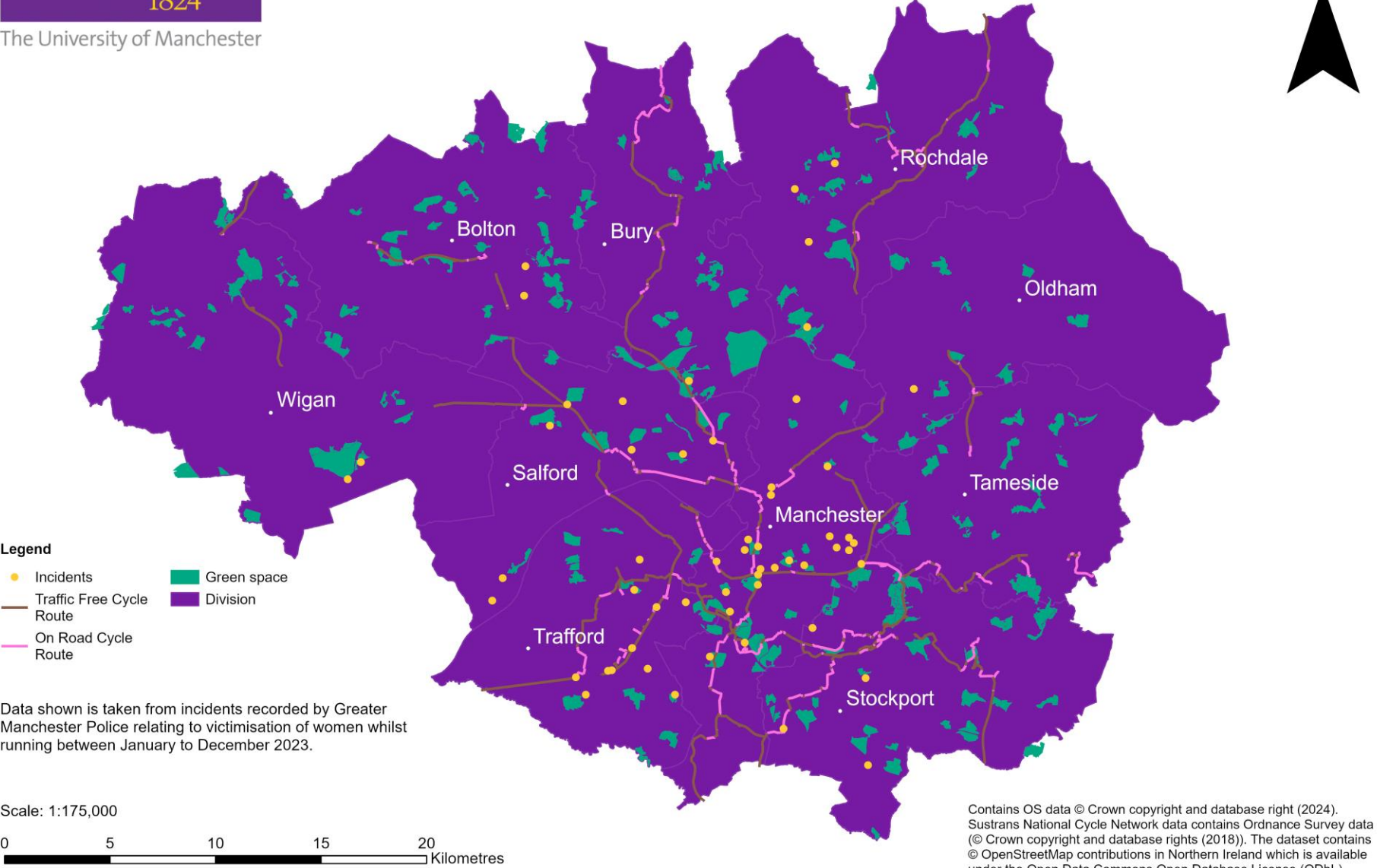
Offence	Frequency	Percent
Sexual offence (other)	25	41
Public order (section 4)	20	33
Violence with and without injury	10	16
Harassment	3	5
Robbery/Theft	2	3
Rape	1	1
Total	61	100

- Victim age range 16-64
- Majority self-identified as White British
- Offender identified in 27/61 cases
 - 12 charged (Operation Carbon)
 - 15 cases discontinued due to evidential difficulties
- Geographical distribution of offences (Greater Manchester only)
 - Variation in reporting across different districts – requires exploring
 - Clear clusters around green areas, cycle routes and rivers

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Examples of incidents in GMP

[Woman] whilst jogging is passed by three scramble bikes due to how close they are to her she starts to film them on her phone, one of the riders sees this and approaches her in a confrontational manner. He becomes aggressive towards her and starts swearing which the [woman] found stressful and felt threatened.

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.

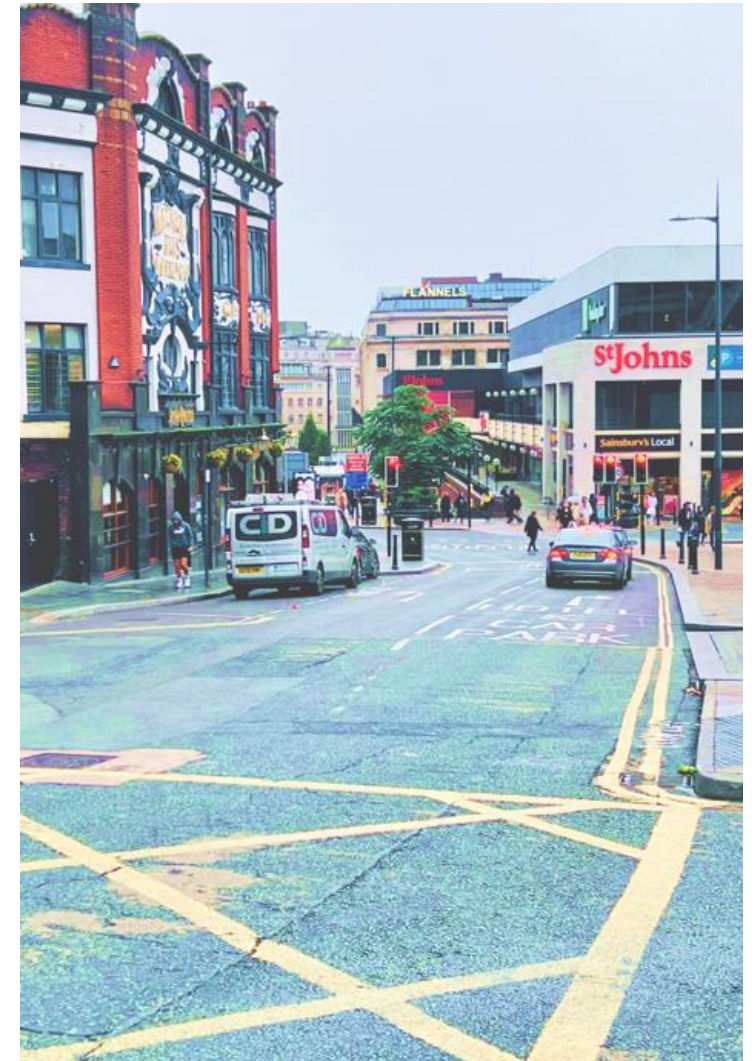
Victim running on path alongside [location]. Male offender who is hiding in bushes made orgasm noises which attracted victim's attention. Male was then seen to be exposing his penis. Victim ran away and was approached a second time by the same male who asked what she was staring at.

Offender rides up behind [woman] on pedal cycle and hit her on the bum, then cycles away.

While out running...the victim has been grabbed from behind by the hood on her jumper and pulled to the floor by an unknown offender. The offender has then stood over her before she kicked him out of the way and ran off to safety.

Survey respondents GM

- 97% participants identified as cis-women
- Of those who responded, 90% identified as British and 83% as White
- Largest proportion of women (43%) were aged 41-50 years
- 49% reported that they usually run on their own
- The majority of women respondents said they run between 5pm and 8pm, or before 8am
- The majority of women reported running in built up and residential areas



Key findings from survey data

- 112 of 149 (75%) of women runners across Greater Manchester had experienced abuse whilst running
- Most commonly verbal abuse, being followed and being flashed at – all by men
- 81% said that they worried about their personal safety whilst out running
- Women report carrying items to increase safety, being tracked by friends/family and most importantly, planning when and where they run, who with and what they wear.
- Only 4% reported their experiences to the police
- Most common reasons for not reporting were because they perceived it was not serious enough, low level of confidence in the police response and the frequency with which women experience this type of abuse – it was 'normal' to many respondents

Audio-diaries

Risk assessing runs – when and where

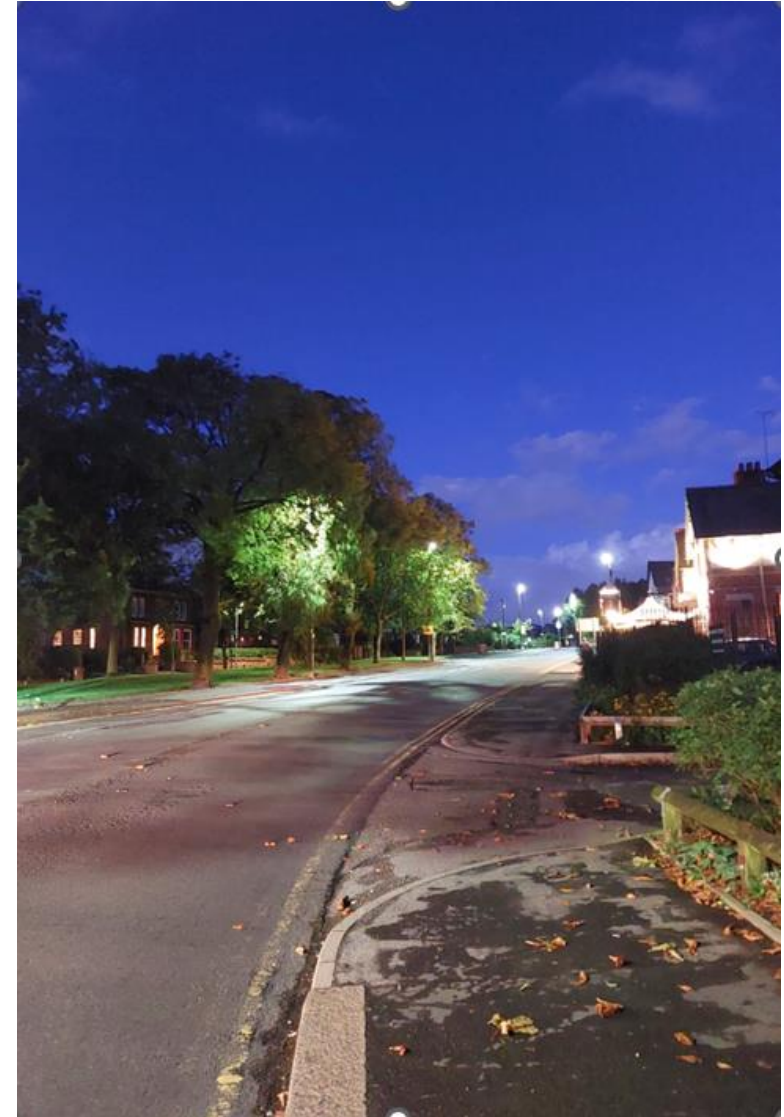
- *I went for a run yesterday evening, lucky because it's lighter now I can go at half eight at night, which is something I avoid in the winter-time if it's dark, as it's light, it feels a bit safer.*

Dressing for runs

- *I put a t-shirt on as well as there were a lot of people around and don't want to get any undue looks.*

Practical precautions

- *I use one earphone...that's a safety precaution and that makes me feel more comfortable.*



Audio-diaries

Safety in numbers

- *I don't always like running as part of a group. I mostly run by myself but there is definitely a feeling of safety and confidence in numbers at a running group.*

Normalisation of abuse

- *These things happen quite frequently, I don't tend to say it to other people and they have probably experienced these things too as it's just a way of life.*



Key takeaways/recommendations

The abuse of women in public spaces is endemic and enduring, and needs to feed into the VAWG agenda

Women runners require understanding as a distinct group because they are often alone, wearing running attire, at quieter times of day and in less populated locations

Women runners normalise their experiences and don't report them – police need to do more to encourage women to disclose abuse

The vast majority of women who run fear for their safety and take multiple measures to make themselves feel safer – there is a need to shift the onus away from women

Our future work will include learning more about the attitudes of boys and men, which are key to prevention

There are challenges in accessing under-represented groups – this needs addressing in research and practice/policy