



Reducing barriers to reporting sexual harassment through enhanced police procedural justice for racially minoritised young women



Key points

- Positive and procedurally just encounters with the police can potentially override prior negative perceptions of the police. This can reduce barriers to reporting sexual harassment.
- The quality of treatment that racially minoritised young women and girls receive when reporting sexual harassment to the police is as important as police officers' quality of decision making.
- In terms of procedural justice, what seems to matter most for sexual harassment cases is **trust**, which hinges on giving **voice** to victims, police **neutrality** and **accountability** for report outcomes.

Summary

The Sexual Harassment and Reporting Equity for Inclusion and Trust project (SHaRE IT) aimed to examine the link between racially minoritised young women and girls' perceptions of a lack of procedural justice and barriers to reporting public sexual harassment (PSH) to the police.

The evidence presented in this report draws on a systematised review of 51 research articles, as well as focus groups and interviews with 20 racially

minoritised young women aged 18–22. The project team identified the key barriers to reporting, as well as solutions for how these barriers can be reduced through enhanced procedural justice (i.e. fairer processes). The team then used this co-produced evidence to inform the design of police workshops.

This project was funded by the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's **Early Career Researcher Development Fund**.

Background

A recent Ofsted (2021) report suggested that an estimated 90% of young women and girls aged 13–21 years old experienced sexual harassment.

What's more, research suggests that racially minoritised young women and girls, specifically, are at greater risk of public sexual harassment and are more likely to be blamed for harassment committed by others towards them. This is due to assumptions that they are more sexually active and less innocent when compared to their white peers.

The Protection from Sex-Based Harassment in Public Bill was recently passed in the UK, which raises the prospect that young women and girls might need to report such offences to the police. However, this is concerning given racially minoritised young women and girls are more likely to be blamed for harassment committed by others towards them. Indeed, public trust in the police is at an all-time low and current public perception of the police might more readily align with images of perpetrators of sexual violence (e.g. Wayne Couzens and David Carrick) rather than protectors.

Lack of trust in the police as an institution, creates a major barrier to reporting public sexual harassment to the police. The project team examined whether these barriers could be reduced through enhancing police procedural justice. Enhancing procedural justice involves the police listening and explaining with fairness and dignity to build trust when they interact with members of the public.

In the study, the team worked together with racially minoritised young women and girls, empowering them to share their concerns around reporting public sexual harassment to the police, and offer their opinions on solutions to improve police interactions with vulnerable groups based on their experiences and the evidence gathered. For this project, sexual harassment was understood as spanning multiple behaviours, including cat-calling, rape jokes, groping, flashing, assault and rape. The team also built on its **recent research** linking intersectional gender and racial bias with barriers to reporting public sexual harassment.



What we did

To better understand the evidence on what works in reducing barriers to reporting public sexual harassment for vulnerable populations, the team conducted a rapid evidence review.

They systematically searched and analysed, and evaluated information in academic literature related to:

1. Young women and girls' reporting/disclosure-related attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours;
2. Young women and girls' perceptions of fairness, trust, inclusivity, equity in interactions with police;
3. Changes in police knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, behaviours resulting from procedural justice interventions.

Next, the team engaged 20 racially minoritised young women in co-production activities through focus groups and interviews to better understand how they view the police and what they perceived as the barriers to reporting public sexual harassment. Additionally, the team asked the young women what changes they wanted to see in the way that police officers handle reports of public sexual harassment to encourage reporting.

After synthesising the evidence and analysing the data, the team designed a half-day workshop that aimed to help the police better understand how to apply the principles of procedural justice to interactions with racially minoritised young women who report incidents of public sexual harassment.

Key findings

The racially minoritised young women and girls who participated in the interviews echoed the findings from the rapid evidence review: the general negative perception of the police within society acted as a major barrier to reporting public sexual harassment.

Rapid evidence review

- Women felt that police officers lacked sensitivity training and would likely blame, judge, mistreat and dismiss women reporting sexual harassment, sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence. Such trivialisation of gender-based issues and fear of further victimisation by the police made reporting to the police seem futile.
- Specifically, women of colour felt that the police regarded them with apathy and viewed them as less worthy of protection than white women. Sometimes these perceptions were informed by prior negative interactions and experiences with the police that left women with the impression that police lacked due concern.
- The nature of the assault left questions in victims' minds about its seriousness and whether a crime was committed, so many victims chose to prioritise their own safety having come to the conclusion that the risks associated with reporting outweighed both the harm caused and any potential benefits.
- Procedural justice training can result in more impartial decision making for officers, better treatment for victims, and yield real results e.g. actual arrests.

Interviews

- Racially minoritised young women in the study did not view the police as natural protectors, due to their likelihood to not take reports of public sexual harassment seriously, to not see young women of colour as 'true' victims, and even so, to tend to victim blame.
- Participants' distrust of the police extended to their distrust of male security personnel in the nighttime entertainment industry. Busy nightclubs or concert venues presented challenges to reporting public sexual harassment, such as identifying the perpetrator, having actual evidence, being believed, and the frequency of such occurrences. Altogether these challenges could make victims feel helpless.
- Racially minoritised young women instead seemed to imply that they valued accountability more highly than respect, not wanting the emotional risks they exposed themselves to by reporting to be rendered futile through police inaction.

Next steps

The study's evidence review and interviews closely align with some recent large-scale reports.

Reports by the **North Yorkshire Youth Commission** with over 1,500 young participants and by the charitable organisation **FORWARD** looking at women's experiences of public sexual harassment on public transport in London with over 1,000 participants, have come to similar conclusions about the barriers to reporting public sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence to the police.

While policy change is needed to develop legal definitions and new legal frameworks for public sexual harassment, the research evidence supports that enhanced procedural justice (e.g. overall positive perception of police fairness) was associated with a greater likelihood of reporting. Other key suggestions for reducing barriers to reporting overall involved prioritising the protection of victims rather than institutional procedures and reputation, showing that perpetrators are held accountable.

Meanwhile, some of the practical solutions participants in the study suggested for reducing barriers to reporting public sexual harassment to the police included:

- Increased sensitivity training for the police.
- More readily available information on how to report public sexual harassment and the procedural steps involved.

- Replication of "Ask Angela" and Transport for London (TfL) campaigns in local communities to show police dedication to addressing the issue.
- Increased use of people-centred community policing approaches.
- The options of reporting to sexual violence liaisons and/or officers who were also women of colour.

The team are currently looking for volunteer officers and supervisors to help pilot test the police workshops to assess the efficacy of its ideas and improve its design. So please do get in touch at share-it-project@york.ac.uk if this interests you.

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For further information

Scan the QR code to read more about the project.

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