

“Because They Know They Can Get Away With It”: Young People’s Experiences of Street Harassment in Edinburgh

2013, Hollaback! Edinburgh



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Street Harassment is one of the most pervasive forms of gender based violence, yet it is one of the least researched and challenged. Street Harassment is defined here as gender based violence and abuse experienced in public spaces. This is often demonstrated through actions such as wolf whistling, indecent exposure, public masturbation, comments and remarks, obscene gestures, indecent assault (such as touching or grabbing), the targeted beeping of car horns, and intimate stranger intrusion (getting too close, making you feel uncomfortable, blocking your way). Street Harassment is most commonly experienced by women and members of the LGBTQI community.

Hollaback! Edinburgh asked 100 young people from the ages of 12-25 in Edinburgh to tell us about their experiences of Street Harassment.

The survey opened in February 2013, and closed on the 8th March 2013, International Women's Day. The survey was shared on social media and through the YWCA Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Shakti Women's Aid, LGBT Youth, the Scottish Transgender Alliance, and NUS Scotland.

"I was followed through the Meadows in school uniform - in broad daylight - and only one person did anything to try and stop the man who was following me, shouting and screaming at me, and trying to grab me. This was in spite of there being large groups of students all around me."



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Key findings:

- The majority of the respondents were 18-25 (94%)
- The majority of respondents self-identified as female (85%)
- Almost all the respondents had experienced some form of Street Harassment, with the most common being an experience of someone whistling, shouting, or beeping their horn at respondents (86%)
- The most common reaction to Street Harassment was a feeling of anger, seconded by a feeling of vulnerability
- When asked who they told, the majority of respondents told friends
- One respondent reported that the “Police invalidated my experience”
- Many respondents highlighted that “banter” is often used as an excuse

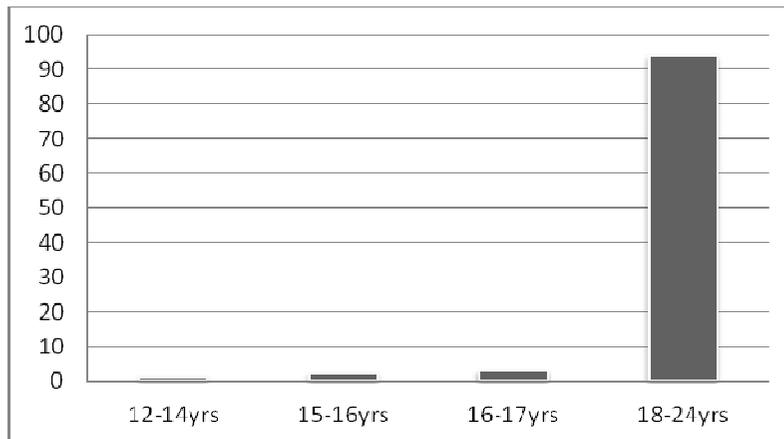
Some respondents reported that Street Harassment is seen as “normal”, and they worry that feelings of shame, anger, and vulnerability will be seen as “making a fuss over nothing”.

However, as the following results show, almost all of the respondents changed their behaviour and actions, and were keenly aware of the potential threat of violence from these incidents, highlighting the impact that Street Harassment has on young people in Edinburgh.



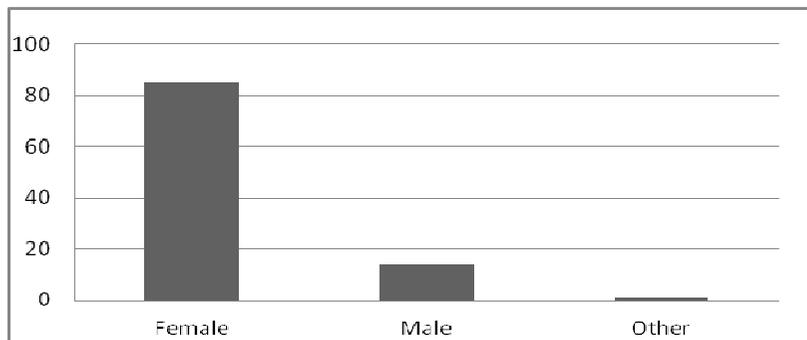
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Q1. How old are you?



"I don't think that just because I'm a girl I should have to watch out for things that my male peers don't have to worry about"

Q2. How do you self-identify?

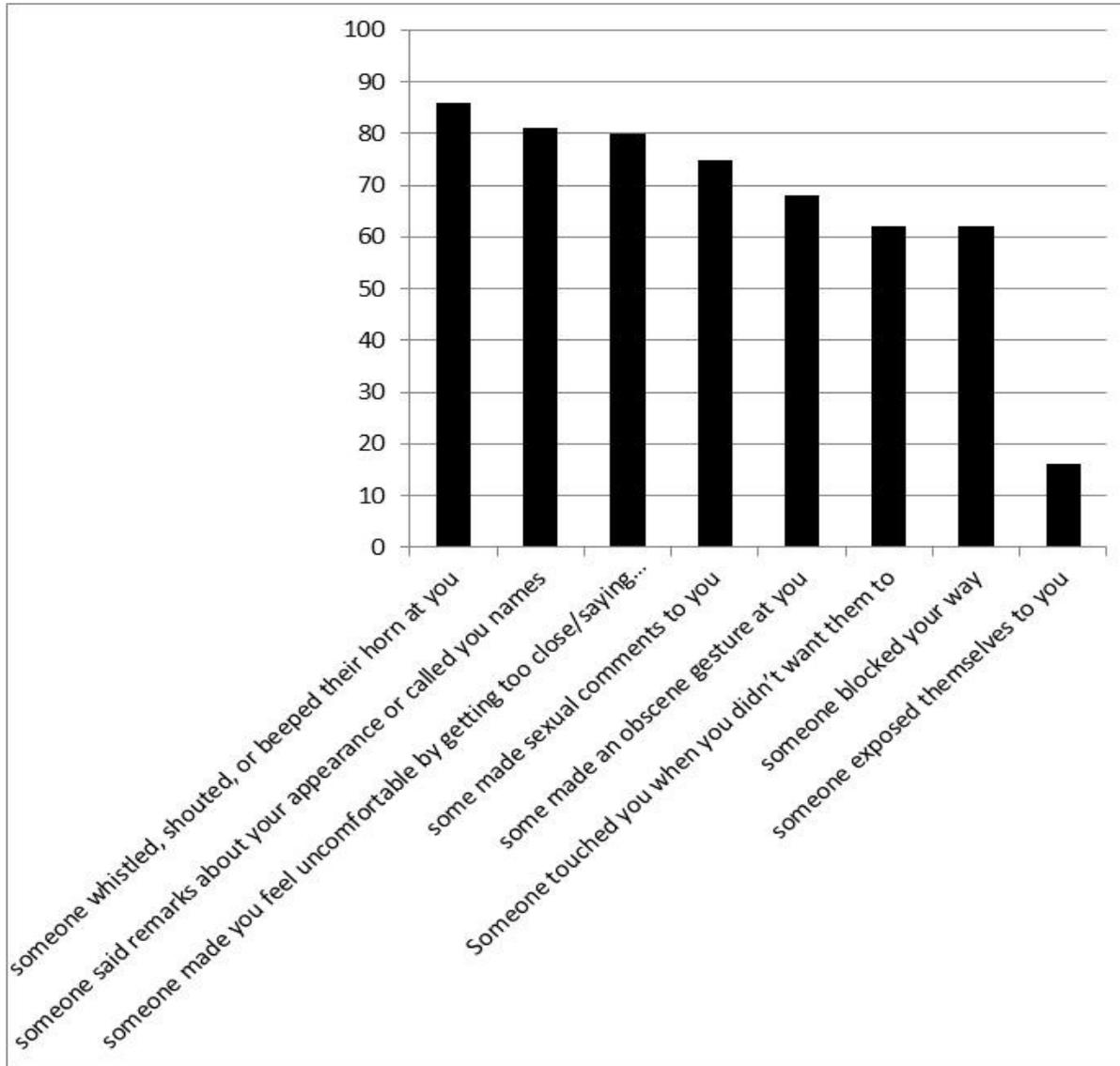


The youngest respondent was in the 12-14 age-bracket, the majority of respondents (94%) were aged 18-25.

The majority of respondents identified as female (85%) with one respondent identifying as a transwoman.



Q3. Have you experienced any of the following things on the street/on the bus/train/in public?



“I have had someone once try to lift up my dress while I was walking home”

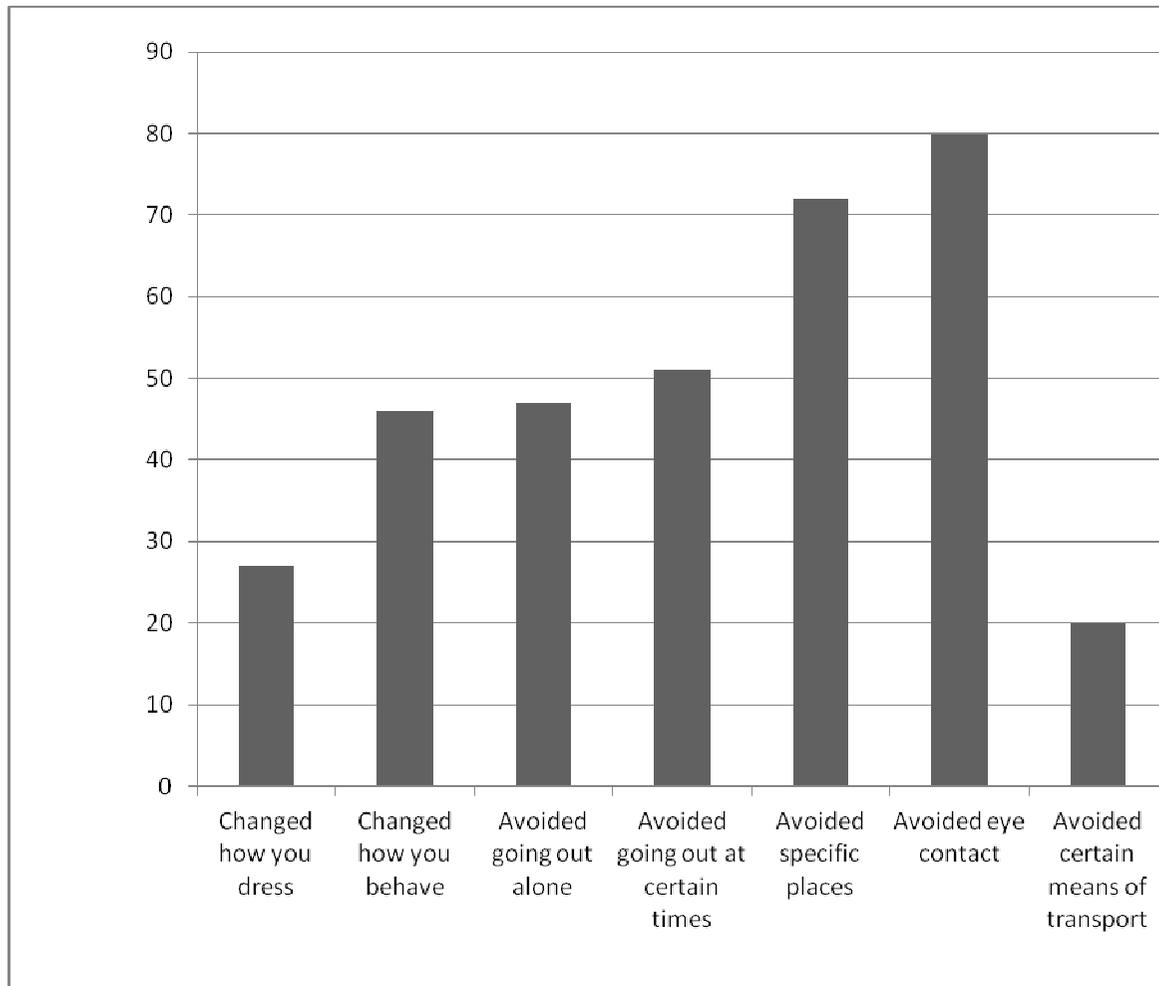
“Someone intentionally bumped into me with enough force to knock me to the ground”

Over 80% of people had been whistled, shouted or beeped at.

60% of respondents had experienced unwanted touching.



Q4. If you have experienced, witnessed or heard of any of the above, have you changed your behaviour in any of these ways?



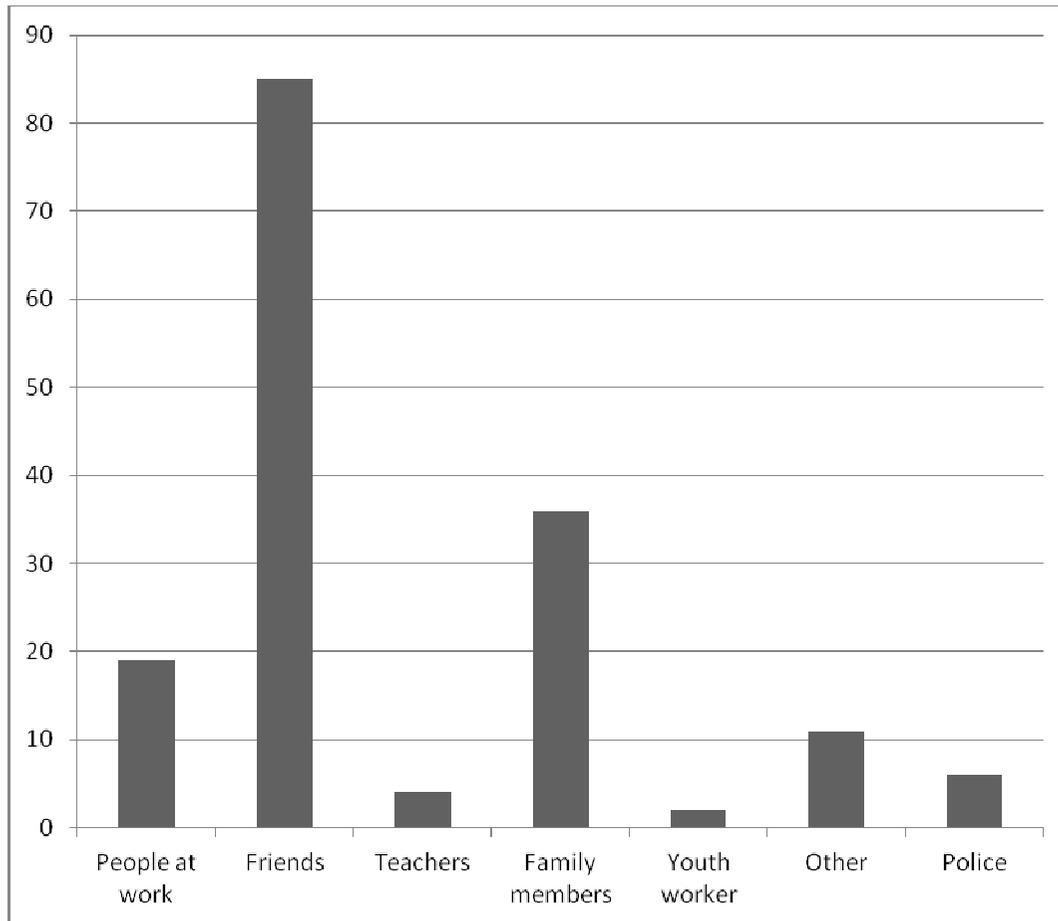
“I feel so powerless that doing those things [in Q4] makes me feel like I’m at least doing something, as demeaning and unfruitful as doing them may be”

Over 70% had avoided specific places

Over 50% avoided going out at certain times



Q5. Did you tell anyone?



“Cat-calls especially are something I have always considered normal, although not something I enjoy, and [I] feel pressured to accept them and either ignore or smile at the people (as it generally is a group of people and not one individual) to avoid them jeering at me”

“Telling anyone about it always makes it sound like you're making a fuss over nothing”

82% of people told friends

22% told family members



Q6. How did it make you feel?

We asked respondents to tell us in their own words how it made them feel. 77/100 responded. Throughout this document we have outlined some of the things they told us. Common responses focused on anger, embarrassment and vulnerability.

- Cried in the shower.
- A mixture of scared, violated, and harassed. Disgusted, too. Particularly in situations where it is overly sexualised, [sic] the threat of sexual violence is keenly felt - my heart starts beating ten to the dozen and it can really shake you up.
- Basically unsafe.
- Horrible.
- Makes you feel guilty, ashamed and embarrassed at yourself, as if you've done something wrong.
- Objectified. Insulted at the person's assumption that their comments are complimentary and so shouldn't 'cause offence - and that said comments or behaviors [sic] should validate my existence as a young "attractive" (such a subjective term) female. Anxious about my appearance, embarrassed at the attention it draws.
- Vulnerable.[sic] It caused depression and anxiety. It's caused me to be very wary of men in general.
- Frustrated
- It makes me angry that people believe that it's still acceptable to objectify and victimize women (and men) at this day and age. We should be able to walk the streets in peace without fear of being verbally or physically assaulted.
- Disrespected, objectified, uncomfortable, worried about my personal safety.
- Horrible. I feel like bait.
- Bad



- Vulnerable, very uncomfortable and pissed off
- Worthless. Really uncomfortable. Like I shouldn't be walking around the street...
- I felt unsafe and embarrassed.
- Bad. But unfair at the same time. There is no reason to treat women this way !
- Like an object, less than human. And when I didn't get to tell the guy who smacked [sic] me on the ass to well..."go away and stop it" I regret it everyday [sic]. I don't stand for it now. It makes me sick.
- Uncomfortable and unsafe.
- Usually very angry -- but often also scared/panicked (asking myself, how do I get out of this situation without getting hurt/making it worse).
- It made me feel bad about my appearance and also uncomfortable being in certain situations such as out at night alone or going back to certain events [where] it took place.



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Q7. Why do you think people do it?

100% of the respondents replied to this question. Common responses focused on ideas around “banter”, and the sense that Street Harassment goes unnoticed and unpunished. That for some people, it is normal. Some respondents also spoke of how homophobic and sexist Street Harassment are often intertwined.

- Because "it's a compliment" or "banter" to impress their mates. It doesn't really matter that the joke is on someone they don't know, because "it's just a laugh".
- I think a lot of men don't realise how horrible it is, this is partly due to the culture of 'banter' and it being seen as a funny thing to harrass [sic] a woman.
- Peer pressure, cultural norms, workplace norms, boredom, because they can and because there are no serious repercussions.
- Because they know they can get away with it.
- They think it's funny, they are uncontested, they have no good relationships with females and see us as objects not people, they are bored and unfulfilled.
- Think it's funny, because they don't think anyone will stop them/do anything about it, because they're drunk, encouragement from friends.
- Assertion of (male) power and dominance. A result of being brought up in a society that allows and encourages it.
- I think some of it comes down to a lack of respect.
- Because they don't think they're being threatening/ Think it's just banter



- I think men have been conditioned into thinking it is OK -- it's 'banter' etc. Also when I rebuff this behaviour I hear, 'take it as a compliment!', so I think sometimes they actually think what they are doing is NICE.
- There's a culture around this sort of behaviour being acceptable. People don't always realise the effect it has on people and don't fully think through their actions.
- It's seen as an acceptable way to treat women. The media depicts people engaging in this kind of behaviour and so we're shown that is [sic] expected. Alcohol is often a fuel.
- I have been faced not only with sexist violence - I am a small effeminate woman - but also homophobic violence and harassment when out on the street with a girlfriend. No streets feel safe to me as a gay woman, I am always on my guard.

31% knew someone who street harassed.



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Summary.

Throughout this survey, we hoped to gain a sense of Street Harassment experienced by young people in Edinburgh.

We found that most people had experienced some form of Street Harassment, that many young people have changed their behaviour in some way in response to Street Harassment, and that it is seen as normal.

The Street Harassment detailed here ranged from sexual assault and indecent exposure to every day “stranger intrusions”, creating fear and unease for most respondents. Whilst many would argue that Street Harassment is “harmless fun”. We have to ask: “fun for who?”

The streets of Edinburgh, our public transport, our bars, clubs and bus stops should be safe for everyone who uses them.

It is not banter, it is sexual harassment, and it is not okay.

“They think it's 'a joke' as it's not an issue taken seriously, they feel they can get away with it with no serious consequence”

Acknowledgements

Many thanks for all those who completed the survey, to the YWCA Scotland, LGBT Youth, Shakti Women's Aid, Scottish Youth Parliament, NUS Scotland and the Scottish Transgender Alliance for dispersing the survey.

