

Running Free, Running Safe: The experiences of harassment and abuse of women, girls and the wider running community in Worcestershire?

REPORT

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Summary

The research study was a development of professional discussions with members of the Trauma and Violence Prevention (TVP) Research unit within the University of Worcester. This is a multi-disciplinary group of academic colleagues, PhD candidates and external organisations representing health services, public health, criminal justice agencies, education and the voluntary sector providing support for victim of trauma and abuse, among others. The study aimed to adopt the innovative *Jog On* Initiative introduced by West Yorkshire Police early in 2024. This resulted in the establishment of a local collaborative group to introduce *Jog On* in Worcestershire.

The study considered all runners regardless of their gender identity, expression or diversity. The research objectives were:

- 1 To develop an initial baseline of understanding on the perceptions and experiences of personal safety of individual runners and members of the running communities of Worcestershire.
- 2 To gain an insight on the experiences of harassment, threat and abuse of runners in Worcestershire.
- 3 To compare the experiences of female and male runners who have experienced abuse and harassment.
- 4 To compare the safety and risks of running spaces of city, urban and rural areas in Worcestershire.
- 5 Following the launch of the Jog On Initiative to examine the frequency, nature and geographic distribution of incidents of abuse experienced by runners that are reported to the police in Worcestershire during and after the Jog On initiative.
- 6 In consultation with research participants to make recommendations to the countywide community safety partnerships and local police to promote measures to ensure greater safety and freedom for all runners.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and context

The research study was instigated by the Trauma and Violence Prevention (TVP) Research Group at the University of Worcester. This is a multi-disciplinary group of academic colleagues, PhD candidates and a diverse range of external organisations representing health services, public health, criminal justice agencies, education and the voluntary sector providing support for victim of trauma and abuse, among others. The study was inspired by the innovative *Jog On Initiative* which was introduced by West Yorkshire Police early in 2024. Subsequently, this resulted in the establishment of a local collaborative group to introduce the *Jog On Initiative* in Worcestershire. The research team was encouraged by the early signals across local agencies suggesting interest and support for this project. It should be noted that this research was *not* funded, but a later application to the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia Police was successful, being granted in September 2025. This funding was then ringfenced for a separate follow up study to facilitate further awareness and bystander intervention work within and beyond the running community.

The aims of the *Running Safe, Running Free* research were as follows:

- To develop an initial baseline of understanding on the perceptions and experiences of personal safety of individual runners and members of the running communities of Worcestershire.
- To gain an insight on the experiences of harassment, threat and abuse of runners in Worcestershire.
- To compare the experiences of female and male runners who have experienced abuse and harassment.
- To compare the safety and risks of running spaces of city, urban and rural areas in Worcestershire.
- Following the launch of the Jog On Initiative to examine the frequency, nature and geographic distribution of incidents of abuse experienced by runners that are reported to the police in Worcestershire during and after the Jog On initiative.

- In consultation with research participants to make recommendations to the countywide community safety partnerships and local police to promote measures to ensure greater safety and freedom for all runners.

1.2 A focus on definitions of Gender-Based Violence

Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) *Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women* states how Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is manifested and experienced by women on a global scale: *‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life’* (UN, 1993: Article 1).

The Istanbul Convention 2011 further and succinctly defines GBV as: *‘violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.’*

The saliency of the above definition likely resonates with anyone who identifies as female and can relate to aspects of everyday lived experiences within private domestic spaces and those of public and working life, where fear of violence is a norm. The strengthening ambitions of previous and the most current Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy (2025) in England and Wales, gives countenance to the epidemic of violence of GBV. It is perhaps one of the most serious and most tolerated human rights violations which reinforces inequalities between men and women, boys and girls.

1.3 The extent of the problem of runners’ experience of abuse and harassment.

Both anecdotal evidence and primary research consistently highlight the gendered nature of runners’ experiences of abuse and harassment. A survey of over 2,000 women by *Runner’s World* in 2020 indicated the significance of women’s concerns, as 60% reported being followed, groped and physically or sexually assaulted. A previous study by Smith (1997) suggests the contrasting experiences of female and male runners, as men report more confidence and self-assurance while being far less likely to be concerned about running in the dark or in isolated spaces. Brockschmidt and Wadey (2022) conducted a small-scale study based in London of runners’ experiences

of abuse and harassment, of the 121 participants, it revealed that 84% of women and 50% of men experienced some form of harassment. In comparison, a larger gender inclusive study of 1,645 adult runners in the US by Davis et al. (2024) indicated that cisgender women (n=1,092) were more likely to attribute their gender as the cause of their harassment while less than 10% of cisgender men (n=343) suggested no contributing factor. This is an area of growing research and there is recognition of why this issue is of critical importance in the context of the prevention of violence for the benefit of all in our communities. This is also of relevance to the VAWG strategy 2025, which aims to halve the occurrence of GBV by 2035. Ultimately, when everyone can enjoy public spaces, rural or industrial spaces without fear of violence, then this is a positive measure of good health outcomes and equalities for all in our communities.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Project aims

The Worcestershire study considered all runners' experiences of abuse and harassment, regardless of their gender identity, expression or diversity. The research objectives were:

1. To develop an initial baseline of understanding on the perceptions and experiences of personal safety of individual runners and members of the running communities of Worcestershire.
2. To gain an insight on the experiences of harassment, threat and abuse of runners in Worcestershire.
3. To compare the experiences of female and male runners who have experienced abuse and harassment.
4. To compare the safety and risks of running spaces of city, urban and rural areas in Worcestershire.
5. Following the launch of the Jog On Initiative to examine the frequency, nature and geographic distribution of incidents of abuse experienced by runners that are reported to the police in Worcestershire during and after the Jog On initiative.
6. In consultation with research participants to make recommendations to the countywide community safety partnerships and local police to promote measures to ensure greater safety and freedom for all runners.

2.2 Ethics

The research was approved by the University of Worcester in accordance with the University's Ethics Policy and the rigorous ethics process ensured that the following principles were satisfied:

- The research must be justified
- Participation in the research must be justified
- Informed consent must be given by participants, (although contact with participants was via anonymous online surveys)
- Confidentiality must be assured
- Participants and researcher(s) should not come to any harm during the research process.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Data Collection

Due to the sensitivity of the topic under investigation and in consideration of the ethical issues and resource restrictions, the research proposed the following methods of data collection:

Phase One: Online Survey of runners in Worcestershire in 2024

A series of public awareness raising across Worcestershire via local media (radio/newspapers) and appropriate social media platforms to put a spotlight the issue of the safety of runners and to announce the forthcoming research study. The research team liaised with the University Communications Team to generate interest and support for the study's launch and to prepare a Press Statement considering the current research on runner harassment and what would be investigated as a research team. This outreach occurred during week beginning 11th November 2024, to attract the interest of the various runners and running groups within the county. The intention of this awareness campaign was to coincide with the International 16 Days of Action to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls from the 25th November to the 10th of December 2024.

The first of the online surveys launched on the 10th of December via social media platforms, including Facebook and those specific to organized running groups including parkruns across Worcestershire. The survey was adapted from a research

design by Miles and Broad (2024), whose work informed the Jog On initiative in Bradford and the Greater Manchester Police. Participants were invited to share their experiences of abuse and fears while out running in Worcestershire, the first confidential online survey was kept open for a 3-week period, the data was subsequently analysed which informed the subsequent phases of the research.

Phase Two: Online Survey with runners in Worcestershire in 2025

The second online survey was conducted in June 2025 via the same social media platforms, including Facebook and those specific to organised running groups, including parkruns across Worcestershire. This survey had some additional questions added with regards to personal safety anxiety, anxiety of violence when out running and, adaptations of appearance and behaviour. Participants were invited again to share their experiences of abuse and fears while out running in Worcestershire, the confidential online survey was kept open for a 3-week period, the data was subsequently analysed.

Phase Three: Follow Up Online Survey with runners in Phase 1 in 2024

Participants of Phase 3, were those who answered a question in survey 1 about being contacted for a follow up survey. The online survey was sent via email (provided by the participant) with a much smaller selection of questions to discover their experiences in the previous 6 months and the new additional questions as above in phase 2.

1.4 Analysis of the data

A total of 151 participants were included in the dataset. All responses were systematically organised by mapping each participant's answers to the corresponding questions across all phases of the data collection process. Following this, the questions were categorised into quantitative (numerical) response items and qualitative (open-ended) response items to facilitate subsequent analysis.

The quantitative (numerical) response items are presented using descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequency counts, and graphical representations to illustrate the findings clearly. The qualitative (open-ended) response items are conveyed

through illustrative participant quotations, ensuring that participants' perspectives are accurately and transparently represented. Building on these findings, an interpretative analytical approach has been employed to develop the data summary, with particular attention to the concept and practice of safety work.

3.0 Results

3.1 Demographics

The total sample from all 3 phases of 151. Of those 151 participants, 64% identified as female and 36% identified as male. The age range of participants was between 18 – 80 years of age.

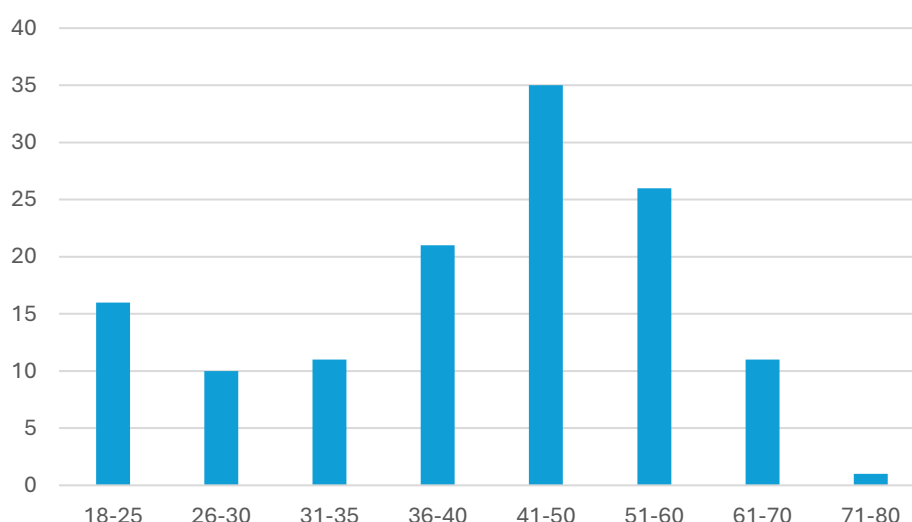


Figure 1: Age range of participants

3.2 Geographic locations

All the districts within the county of Worcestershire were represented.

Table 1: Districts of Worcestershire where participants reside

District	% of participants
Bromsgrove	11
Kidderminster	5
Malvern Hills	15
Redditch	8
Worcester City	46
Wychavon	11
Prefer Not to Say	4

3.3 Participants Running Information

The participants represent the full range of running experiences.

Table 2: Participants running experiences

Years	% of participants
0-1	6
1-5	22
5-10	27
10+	44
Prefer Not to Say	1

Participants activity is highest in the morning (n=99) and remains high in the evening (n=91), while early (n=47) and afternoon (n=48) levels are similar. The vast majority of participants run within urban areas in Worcestershire (n=102) with a smaller proportion running in rural areas (n=46) with two participants selecting prefer not to say. Running locations for participants ranged from residential (n=112), built up areas (n=94) to parks (n=92), off road (n=81), country lanes (n=44), tow paths (n=76) to running tracks (n=18) demonstrating a range of running options for the participants.

3.4 Runners Experiences of Abuse and Harassment

The following section presents participants' reported experiences of abuse, harassment, or antisocial behaviour encountered while running in Worcestershire. 64% of all the participants had noted that they had experienced abusive or intimidating behaviour whilst out running in Worcestershire. The findings are first examined in relation to total figures for each experience identified before exploring the gender identity split to illustrate patterns across different groups and are subsequently disaggregated by district to provide a more detailed breakdown of the dataset.

Table 3: Participants who have experienced abuse and harassment when running

Experiences (list provided via survey)	TOTAL figures	% of total participants
Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	61	41
Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	48	32
Verbal comments/abuse from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	66	44
Being followed	11	7
Being flashed at	6	4
Physical assault	0	0

Robbery/mugging	0	0
Sexual assault	2	1
Other *	15	10

*Other forms of reported abuse, harassment and anti-social behaviour were identified by participants as 'other' incidents: dog attacks or dogs jumping or lunging, items such as drinks or bottles or eggs being thrown, abuse from dog walkers, deliberate puddle splashing from vehicles, being driven at, being whistled at, blocking pavements so cannot get past, deliberate cycling or swerving in front of runners.

3.4.1 For those that stated 'yes' they had experienced harassment, abuse or anti-social behaviour when out running

Table 4: Gender Differences

Gender Identity	Total stating YES	% of total number of participants
Female	71	74%
Male	25	26%

Table 5: Age Differences

Age	Total stating YES
18-25	8
26-30	8
31-35	8
36-40	12
41-50	32
51-60	19
61-70	9
70+	0

Table 6: Where do participants most often run?

Age	Total stating YES
Rural	27
Urban	67
Prefer Not to Say	2

3.5 Worcestershire Districts

Details about where participants resided when they experienced harassment, abuse or anti-social behaviour when out running.

Wychavon

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?
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	or intimidating whilst out running?		
Male	1	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	1
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	1
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	1
		Other	1
Female	10	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	6
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	8
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	7
		Being followed	2
		Being flashed at	1
		Other	1
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
• St Peters (somewhere between tescos and power park) • Orchard Walk, Evesham. • Near Astwood Lane outside of Wychbold.			

Redditch

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive or intimidating whilst out running?	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?	
Male	2	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	2
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	2
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	2
Female	4	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	2
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	2
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	4
		Being followed	1
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
• Morton Stanley Park • Evesham Road near Mount pleasant, Redditch. • Main road in Studley			

Malvern Hills

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive or intimidating whilst out running?	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?	
Male	3	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	1
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	2

		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	2
		Other	1
Female	10	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	8
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	3
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	8
		Being followed	2
		Being flashed at	2
		Other	1
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
• Cinders Lane near Raddlebank, Tenbury Wells, WR15. • Malvern Hills			

Bromsgrove

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive or intimidating whilst out running?	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?	
Male	2	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	2
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	2
Female	8	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	7
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	6
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	8
		Being followed	2
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
• Fishhouse Lane, Bromsgrove. • Worcester Road, Bromsgrove. • Main road, Redditch. • Catshill (park).			

Kidderminster

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive or intimidating whilst out running?	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?	
Female	4	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	2
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	2
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	4
		Being followed	1
		Being flashed at	1
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
• Stourport Road • Franche Road			

Worcester City

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive or intimidating whilst out running?	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?	
Male	15	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	11
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	5
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	6
		Other	3
Female	26	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	19
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	14
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	15
		Being followed	1
		Being flashed at	1
		Sexual assault	2
		Other	5
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
- Bewdley Hill (A456) between Kidderminster and Bewdley - B/w Diglis fish pass & Diglis bridge. - Droitwich Road b/w Worcester & Fernhill Heath. - Canal towpath in Worcester. - Astley (Dunley Road) - Dilmore Lane, Fernhill Heath - Tolladine Road, WR4 - Next to racecourse, Worcester. - Spetchley Road - Worcester Woods Country Park - London Road. - Gheluvelt Park, Worcester - Wylds Lane, Worcester. - Tolladine Road - Meco bridge, Laugherne Brook - Henwick Road - Footpath next to Ink Road St Peter's. - Northwick, Worcester. - Pitchcroft. - Rainbow Hill. - Worcester bypass, near Rushwick, - Northwick playing field. - Path on the Cathedral side of Severn near Brown's restaurant Carrington Bridge, Worcester. - St Peters.			

Prefer Not to say which district they reside within

Gender Identity	How many (total) have ever experienced anything abusive or intimidating whilst out running?	Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months while running?	
Male	1	Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	1
Female	4	Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (individual)	3
		Verbal comments/abuse from passerby (group)	3
		Verbal abuse/comments from a vehicle (including bicycles, scooters, cars etc.)	3
		Being followed	1
Specific locations of incidents from participants:			
• High Street • Local village			

3.6 Reporting Incidents

Only 5 participants stated that they had reported the abuse to police. Those that did report, stated the following in relation to the response received. These are the exact quotations from the participants to provide context.

- *“A man officer rang me and mansplained to me how important woman’s safety was to West Mercia Police, but there was nothing they could do despite me giving the car reg and a description of the driver. He stated they couldn’t be sure the driver was the registered owner of the car.”*
- *“They recorded the incident and gave me crime reference number”*
- *“They investigated and caught the perpetrator.”*
- *“No action taken in one case, visit to the high school and talk to all pupils in the other”*
- *“They made a record of the complaint.”*

For those participants (n=145) who did not report the abuse, stated a variety of reasons as to why they did not. The following is a summary of their points:

- Incidents were perceived as too minor or not serious enough to report
- Behaviour was seen as just comments, jokes, or not illegal
- Belief that nothing would be done even if reported (eg. “what would they do?”)
- Perception that the police would not take it seriously or do not care
- Concern about wasting police time or police being overstretched
- Lack of evidence, such as no video, witnesses, clear descriptions, or vehicle registration numbers
- Incidents happened too quickly to identify offenders
- Offenders were often in moving vehicles, making identification impossible
- Belief the incident was not a police matter
- Assumption that reporting would not change anything
- Experiences were normalised due to frequency (eg. “it happens all the time”)
- Fear that reporting could make things worse
- Preference to ignore, forget, and move on
- Feeling the behaviour was annoying but not threatening

- Not considering reporting at the time or it never crossed their mind
- Belief that police have more serious priorities
- Feeling the incident was petty or insignificant
- Unable to report at the time (e.g. no phone)
- Was not directly targeted or felt less serious due to being in a group.

3.7 Consequences of experiences of abuse and harassment

Participants described a wide range of emotional, behavioural, and practical impacts on their running because of harassment or intimidating incidents. While some reported little or no lasting impact, many described heightened fear, anxiety, anger, and self-consciousness, alongside significant changes to when, where, and how they run. Common responses included avoiding certain locations or times of day, running only with others, increased vigilance, and adopting personal safety strategies. For some, these experiences led to reduced running frequency, reliance on treadmills, or stopping outdoor running altogether, highlighting the cumulative effect of repeated or severe incidents on participation, confidence, and wellbeing. A summary of the key consequences noted are:

- Increased feelings of **unease, nervousness, fear, and vulnerability**, particularly when running alone, in the dark, or in quiet areas
- **Heightened alertness and vigilance**, including constant awareness of surroundings, routes, and who is nearby
- **Avoidance of specific locations**, such as canals, commons, rural lanes, busy roads, junctions, or areas associated with previous incidents
- **Avoidance of certain times of day**, especially evenings, early mornings, winter months, and rush hour
- **Preference for well-lit, populated, residential areas** and staying close to main roads or visible routes
- **Changes to running behaviour**, such as altering routes, running at less convenient times, or changing direction to avoid men or vans
- Increased **reliance on running in groups**, with partners, friends, spouses, or clubs to feel safer.

- Some participants **stopped running alone** altogether or only ran if accompanied
- **Reduced running frequency**, disrupted routines, or temporary cessation of running following incidents
- Use of **personal safety measures**, including carrying a phone, live location tracking, alarms, avoiding headphones, or using bone-conduction headphones
- **Increased self-consciousness**, including concern about appearance, clothing choices, and being visible or observed while running
- **Emotional responses** including anger, sadness, frustration, humiliation, and loss of confidence
- For some, **experiences triggered ongoing anxiety**, physical stress responses (e.g. elevated heart rate), and negative impacts on mental health
- Shift to **indoor alternatives**, such as treadmills, particularly during winter or after dark
- Some participants reported **resilience or defiance**, continuing to run despite incidents and refusing to let harassment stop them
- A minority stated that incidents did not affect their participation, often **normalising the behaviour** or viewing it as expected
- Recognition that while some individuals continued unaffected, **participants believed such experiences could deter others**, particularly women and less confident runners
- Broader reflections on **gendered expectations**, societal norms, and perceived lack of safety infrastructure or policing contributing to the issue.

3.7.1 Consequences: Being Safer while running

Table 7: Do you wear or carry anything that makes you feel safer?

Items identified	Total Figures
High-Vis/Reflective clothing	38
Light/Torch	22
Clothing with lights attached	4
House Key (to be used as a weapon)	4
Phone	54
Whistle	4
Clothing that carries torch, key, phone etc	4
Location Tracker (eg. Strava)	10
Watch	4
Panic Alarm	1
Dog	2

Telling someone route	2
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3.7.2 Key Concerns of running outdoors

Table 8: Personal Safety Awareness (additional question for 6 month follow up and new participants in June 2025) These are percentage of respondents.

Personal Safety Awareness	1= completely unlike me	2= unlike me	3= slightly unlike me	4= neither like me nor unlike me	5= slightly like me;	6= like me	7= completely like me.
I feel nervous about my safety when I am alone	24	14	14	2	29	10	6
I have thoughts about my safety when I notice someone checking out my body/body parts.	26	5	9	12	16	20	13
I never worry about my personal safety.	28	24	16	12	9	6	5
I would feel uncomfortable running alone on the street at night.	20	16	10	5	14	12	22
I check behind me when I am running alone to see if someone is there.	17	14	6	7	22	17	16
When alone, past experiences where I have felt personally threatened enter my mind.	34	16	7	10	16	8	8
I share my concerns about my personal safety with others.	22	14	9	10	17	17	9
In general, I do not worry about my safety in my day-to-day environment.	13	7	14	12	17	20	17

Table 9: Anxiety about experiencing violence when out running (additional question for 6 month follow up and new participants in June 2025) These are percentage of respondents.

Anxiety of violence when out running.	1= never;	2= sometimes	3= often	4= all of the time	5= don't know	6= not applicable
Have you ever avoided leaving your home on your own to go running?	63	22	6	2	2	3
Have you ever avoided taking certain streets or going to certain areas when running?	14	41	21	9	7	7
Have you ever avoided going to places where there are no other people around?	34	34	14	8	3	6

Follow up question for those who answered 3=often or 4= all of the time to provide an explanation as to why. In summary, the participants are:

- Avoiding running alone due to fears for personal safety and vulnerability.
- Running only in daylight, particularly in the mornings, and avoiding evenings or darkness.
- Avoiding secluded, quiet, unfamiliar, or poorly lit areas where help would be unavailable.
- Altering or limiting routes to avoid places associated with verbal abuse, antisocial behaviour, or perceived risk.
- Avoiding canals, parks, trails, and off-road areas when alone, especially without lighting.
- Preferring built-up areas, well-lit roads, main roads, or familiar neighbourhoods.
- Running only with others (eg. running groups, friends, a dog) in certain environments such as forests or remote trails.
- Constantly risk-assessing surroundings as a lone runner to feel safe enough to run.
- Wanting to avoid negativity, hassle, abuse, or attention from others while running.
- Taking practical precautions (fixed routes, avoiding valuables, live tracking such as Strava) but still prioritising avoidance of risk over convenience or preference.

Table 10: Behaviour Changes to running habits (additional question for 6 months follow up and new participants in June 2025) These are percentage of respondents.

	Yes %	No %
Do you adapt your appearance prior to going out for a run alone?	28	72
Do you adapt your appearance prior to going out for a run with a group?	7	93
Do you adapt your running routine if you are running alone	37	63

Follow up questions for those participants who answered yes to adapting appearance when running alone? In summary the participants are:

- Wearing baggy, loose, or longer clothing to draw less attention
- Avoiding tight, cropped, or revealing running clothing
- Covering up more skin (e.g. long sleeves, leggings, no shorts)
- Wearing hats, caps, or hoods to hide face or hair
- Tying hair back or hiding hair to reduce attention
- Trying to appear more gender-neutral or male through clothing choices

- Avoiding clothing that may attract comments or attention (e.g. slogans or specific tops)
- Choosing clothing carefully to manage how they are perceived
- Wearing high-visibility or reflective clothing in low light or on country roads
- Using bright colours, reflective gear, or lights to increase visibility to traffic

Follow up questions for those participants who answered yes to adapting appearance when running with a group?

- Wearing bright coloured tops or reflective items to ensure visibility for cars
- Wearing baggy tops, tying hair back, and sometimes removing make-up
- Wearing baggy clothing regardless of running solo or in a group
- Feeling comfortable wearing a [anonymised club] runners top when running with the [anonymised club] running group or at events
- Making an effort not to look untidy or dishevelled

Follow up questions for those participants who answered yes to adapting running routine?

- **Timing of runs:** Running early, during daylight, avoiding darkness, choosing specific times of day, and avoiding predictable routines.
- **Route choice and location:** Preference for well-lit, busy, built-up or populated areas; avoiding quiet paths, canals, alleys, rural roads, lonely places, and locations with dogs
- **Safety and tracking measures:** Taking a phone when alone, using trackers or beacon texts, sharing routes and expected return times, and ensuring someone knows where they are
- **Behavioural adjustments when alone:** Changing routes, running closer to home, choosing shorter runs, giving people a wider berth, and running differently when alone than in a group
- **Planning and flexibility:** Careful route planning, changing locations, avoiding routine, selecting familiar roads, and adjusting routes to suit distance or safety needs.

4.0 Discussion

The research identified several important findings and issues to be considered regarding the safety and enjoyment of the running community in Worcestershire, more specifically as the data presents, the safety of women. It is also important to be mindful of the original key objectives for the purposes of the research:

1. To develop an initial baseline of understanding on the perceptions and experiences of personal safety of individual runners and members of the running communities of Worcestershire.
2. To gain an insight on the experiences of harassment, threat and abuse of runners in Worcestershire.
3. To compare the experiences of female and male runners who have experienced abuse and harassment.
4. To compare the safety and risks of running spaces of city, urban and rural areas in Worcestershire.
5. Following the launch of the Jog On Initiative to examine the frequency, nature and geographic distribution of incidents of abuse experienced by runners that are reported to the police in Worcestershire during and after the Jog On initiative.
6. In consultation with research participants to make recommendations to the countywide community safety partnerships and local police to promote measures to ensure greater safety and freedom for all runners.

4.1 General discussion of online surveys

The three online surveys had 151 responses, comprising 64% identifying as female and 36% identifying as male, the participants ranged in age from 18 to 80 years of age. There was a representation of runners from all six districts of Worcestershire, with Worcester City having the biggest response with 46 runners. The most common location for running was urban areas such as parks, built up and residential areas. It is important to note that this small survey sample is not generalisable, but the identified themes are in keeping with other themes and trends in similar national and international studies. The following themes are considered in view of the data - Experiences of abuse and anti-social behaviours (ASBs); the lack of reporting to police; the fear of violence and impacts on running habits and behaviours.

4.2 Experiences of abuse and Anti-Social Behaviours (ASBs)

As mentioned previously, due to the small data sets, the research findings are not generalisable but are significant in resonance with other similar national and international studies. The 3 phases of the study involved 151 runners, 64% identified as female and 36% identified as male. The age range of participants was between 18 – 80 years of age, with 74% of female runners describing experiences of abuse and harassment and 24% of male runners reporting the same. However, what is most notable from the data is that male runners tended to relate experiences of anti-social behaviours such as, abuse from dog walkers, dog attacks or dogs jumping or lunging, items such as drinks or bottles or eggs being thrown from passing cars, deliberate puddle splashing from vehicles and deliberate cycling or swerving in front of runners. The data of men's experiences in Surveys 1 and 2 indicate the examples of ASB as follows, which are nonetheless abusive such as from survey 1, one male commented that they *"had empty drinks thrown at me from a passing car...It saddens me that people can't go about their lives without someone trying to spoil your day",* and another from the same survey stating that *'a group of youths threw stones at me. I kept running to get away from them.'* (Survey 1). A further male participant from Survey 2 stated that *"fortunately, I'm quite a tall man, so other men (and it is men 99% of the time who are antisocial) think twice before threatening me. But I'm therefore constantly aware and overthinking how I come across to other users of the footpaths and parks, especially women and people who seem less confident runners".*

These quotes from male runners, link to Brockschmidt and Wadey's (2022) research in London. The authors note men's experiences of harassment in their study, which men described in gender-neutral terms such as "a person" or "a cyclist". Men also tended to see the comments as "humorous" or "flattering" rather than degrading and humiliating' (p.352). This point is noted in Survey 1 by a man who dismisses his experience, *"Because it was not really abuse. It wasn't very funny but not particularly unpleasant."*

The majority of responses in this *Running Safe, Running Free* study was from women who gave extensive detail of their experiences of abuse and harassment when running in Worcestershire. Women described instances of abuse when they were running solo

and where they ran with a friend or in a group. Most of the verbal harassment was sexual, by men who were passing by, walking or cycling or in cars/vans. Some examples of these behaviours are as follows:

- *“Wylds Lane, Worcester. White transit van drove past, rolled down window and started hollering and shouting inappropriate things verbally which were sexual” (Survey 1).*
- *“...group of young lads, hanging out of the windows in their car, toot their horn at me, then start cat calling, when I continued to ignore them, they began shouting names at me. They only stopped ...when I got my phone out and began to film them” (Survey 1).*
- *“I was sexually assaulted while running at Pitchcroft. The man was with friends and was riding a bike. He groped me in intimate body areas and then made his escape. I managed to get a photo which was published by the Worcester News. He was caught and admitted the crime” (Survey 1).*
- *“Individual stopped his car, asked intrusive questions, laughed at us, stared at our chests and would not leave us alone despite 3 requests to do so” (Survey 1).*
- *“Franche Road, Kidderminster close to the esso garage when a man in a white Mercedes slowed down and shouted out of the window to me. He said “you’re really fat, but I still would” (Survey 1).*
- *“was beeped at along a rural road and gestured to. The van slowed right down along side me. The road was quiet and rural and I was by myself so I felt instantly threatened and vulnerable and was scared they'd stop or what they'd do” (Survey 2).*

4.3 Not reporting abuse or ASB to the Police

The research highlights a general apathy and lack of confidence in reporting the incidents of abuse and harassment to the police, this view was apparent in the data from male and female runners. The study indicates that only 5 runners participating in the study had taken steps to report their concerns with varying police responses (see page 18).

A strong theme was the belief that reporting would be ineffective, with respondents expressing little confidence that the police would take such incidents seriously or be able to take meaningful action. Practical barriers to reporting were also prominent. These included the absence of evidence, such as video recordings, witnesses, clear descriptions, or vehicle registration numbers, with many incidents occurring too quickly to enable offender identification—often involving individuals shouting from moving vehicles. As a result, respondents believed cases would not be progressed evidentially. The repeated exposure to similar behaviour contributed to a normalisation of these experiences, leading individuals to view reporting as futile or disproportionate, especially given the frequency with which such incidents occurred. Reporting was simply not considered at the time, or the incident was not viewed as a police matter, reinforcing a broader perception that such behaviour, while unwelcome, falls below the threshold for formal intervention. There was also a concern about repercussions in reporting to the police *“afraid that reporting could make things worse”* (Survey 1). Broad and Miles (2026) suggest that there is a lack of information about why women as runners do not report their experiences of abuse, and how the police respond when they do. They argue that there is much developmental work to be done within policing and wider society to increase women’s confidence to report their experiences of abuse.

4.4 Runners’ Fear of Violence

For many people, running is seen as an excellent form of exercise, a display of stamina and strength, a form of freedom that many runners enjoy. However, the research data indicates that many women do not enjoy such freedom as ‘it comes with a mental load that men rarely carry’ (Thompson, 2026, p.40). One male participant commented that *“It is generally group of young lads and whilst I find it annoying I do not find it too intimidating”* (Survey 1). Other male participants suggested that their gender and athletic physique could be a protective factor stating that *“I’m a bloke...when running alone, I’m not someone who might be considered to look vulnerable. I can look pretty scary myself if need be.”* (Survey 1). Others noted that they had *“male privilege and the fact I’m a big guy”* (Survey 2).

Notably, the UK Runners’ World survey in 2022, captured the fears and experiences of 2,000 women, whereby 60% shared stories of harassment with a further 25%

describing sexual harassment in the forms of unwanted touching and comments. Much of this data is consistent with the narratives of female runners in Worcestershire such as a participant from Survey 1 who said that they *“run at lunch time and ...past a house that had builders outside on their lunch break. They were blocking the path, saw me coming and start whispering, pointing and whistling, then they cleared a space through them for me to run, but I decided to run in the road to avoid them. I dreaded seeing them on my run back”*. Other female participants commented their fears were *‘that someone is going to take advantage of me being alone and either harass, rape or physically injuring me’* (Survey 1) or that they are *‘concerned that I will be attacked or assaulted by a man when I am running’* (Survey 1).

Allen-Collinson (2023) remarks on feminist perspectives of public outdoor exercise spaces used by women which bring tensions for women, as women’s enjoyment and freedoms are restricted due to the fear and risk of violence against them. She describes women’s outdoor running environments as ‘spaces of pleasure and danger’ (p.382). Importantly, the paper notes that the access to and pleasure of public spaces are presumed to be enjoyed by all. Yet there are stark inequalities which underline gendered differences of power and privilege as to who can access these spaces, and these inequalities of access can also be demarcated by identities of race and ethnicity.

4.5 The Impact of Fear on Running Habits and Behaviours

There remains a dearth in the research focusing on female runners’ experiences of abuse and harassment while running in outdoor spaces. Although this concern is a growing area of interest in terms of public health and policing responses. The recognition of the problem of a rape culture in the UK gives way to the inevitability of rape, and the tolerance of rape and sexual violence against women and girls. Rape culture enables victim blaming responses of men’s violence to women and provokes questions on what a woman should have done to prevent the abuse in the first place, much of which creates internal dialogues within many victims of self-blame and guilt (Brockschmidt & Wadey, 2022; Davis et al. 2024; Miles et al. 2026). One of the consistent themes in the research is the precautions that female runners take in preparing for their runs, such as changing their running gear, to be more baggy, or wearing a peaked hat to hide their face, avoiding wearing their hair in a ponytail so

that it could not be grabbed (Allen-Collinson, 2023; Brockschmidt & Wadey 2022). The authors' research also describes how women may take their partner with them or their dog. They may not wear headphones to be more alert to sounds around them, alternatively some women prefer to wear headphones to switch off their internal fears. Women will tell someone where they are running and what time they are due back and they keep their keys close as a potential weapon.

There were many issues and consequences on runners' behaviours raised within this research study, more specifically in terms of the fear of violence for women as runners in our local communities. Safety, time and space were key themes. Participants describe extensive "safety work" associated with running, particularly when alone, reflecting heightened vigilance and self-protection strategies. Time is also a major constraint on participation, especially during evenings, winter months, and darker periods and this links strongly to careful spatial decision-making, with clear distinctions being made by participants between acceptable and unacceptable running environments. The main themes and direct quotes to describe these realities for women are as follows:

Consistent avoidance of running alone, especially after dark

"I would never run in the dark on my own"

"Not running on my own in the dark"

Routine sharing of routes, locations, and return times

"My partner knows my route and can track my phone"

"Always let someone know where I'm going and how long I'll be"

Carrying safety devices and using tracking technologies

"I always take my phone"

"Set a personal tracker on GPS for my husband to see"

Heightened vigilance towards others encountered while running

"I keep looking back to check they aren't following me"

"Cross the road to avoid suspicious looking people"

Altering appearance or behaviour to reduce vulnerability

"I will wear baggier t-shirts to cover my bum"

"Try not to tie my hair up so people can't grab a ponytail"

Strong preference for daylight running

“Only run in daylight” “Running only in daylight, in heavily populated areas”

“I struggle to tun on my own in the dark”.

Widespread avoidance of evening and night-time running

“I do not run in evenings because of this reason”

“Hardly ever run at night”

Seasonal restrictions, particularly in winter

“I do not run at night alone, so therefore restricted during the winter months”

“In the winter this is harder so I run less”

Adjusting running times to feel safer

“Changed the time of day I run”

“Run in the morning when there are less cars on the road”

Preference for populated, visible environments

“Stick to well-lit busy areas”

“Run in lighter places which are overlooked by houses”

Avoidance of secluded, quiet, or off-road spaces

“Avoid alleyways and quiet places”

“Never footpaths, trails, canals etc”

Avoiding specific environments associated with risk

“Avoid the canal at night”

“Not going deep into Worcester woods”

Reliance on familiarity and proximity to home

“Stick to routes I know”

“Avoid lonely places, make sure I’m not too far from my house”

5.0 Summary with recommendations

5.1 Summary

The study aimed to adopt the innovative *Jog On Initiative* which was introduced by West Yorkshire Police early in 2024. Subsequently, this resulted in the establishment of a local collaborative group to introduce the *Jog On Initiative* in Worcestershire, early signals across local agencies suggested interest and support for this study. The positive response from the Worcestershire running community to participate in the research was encouraging and did capture several critical themes of runners' experiences of abuse and harassment. Most respondents were women, while men's experiences more typically highlighted features of anti-social behaviours which were considered as abusive with this research study. The data highlighted concerns which marred the enjoyment of running for female runners based on the continued and at times escalating fear of abuse, harassment and lethal violence. The data also indicated the psychological and emotional burden that women do carry when preparing to run and during a run in the context of personal safety, in contrast this was not an issue men considered in any detail.

5.2 Recommendations

The following is a listing of recommendations from the research study for consideration by Worcestershire County Council within public health and community safety initiatives, in collaboration with West Mercia Police.

County Council/Local Authority

1. Improve lighting, visibility, and maintenance on commonly used running routes (parks, canals etc), particularly those avoided after dark
2. Co-develop safer running routes
3. Address seasonal safety issues, such as tree cover over paths and poor winter lighting
4. Ensure consistent street lighting and rapid repair regimes in residential and semi-rural areas
5. Incorporate women's safety audits into transport, leisure and sport, and planning decisions

West Mercia Police

1. Have a visible presence in most used running routes but also in parks, canal pathways, urban and rural areas, during early evenings and winter months.
2. Change perceptions of runners that reports of harassment related to sport and running are taken seriously.
3. Provide clear guidance on what can be reported, how it can be reported and how patterns are monitored, and what the outcomes are.
4. Work with the University of Worcester supporting further research and bystander initiatives with running clubs and communities, to identify hotspots and repeat problem areas.
5. Focus on the development of allyship with male runners and the within the wider public as a means of challenging perpetrators and towards instilling greater confidence in the personal safety of female runners.

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