

Understanding Violence Against Women and Girls in Lancashire (2025)

Key findings report V1.0

Prepared by SMSR Research
on behalf of Lancashire OPCC

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1.0 Introduction

This report summarises findings from research commissioned by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Lancashire to understand local experiences and perceptions of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

VAWG includes a wide range of behaviours, from harassment, intimidation, and coercive control to serious sexual and physical violence. The study forms part of the OPCC's commitment to make Lancashire a safer place for women and girls by improving understanding of risks, concerns, and priorities for action.

The research was delivered by SMSR Ltd, an independent research organisation, between July and September 2025. It combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide both statistical insight and first-hand accounts of lived experience.

This shorter, public-facing summary presents the main survey findings and key messages from community discussions. A full technical report has been submitted to the OPCC to inform future partnership work and the September 2025 VAWG stakeholder event.

2.0 Research approach

Two complementary strands of research were undertaken:

Quantitative survey

An online survey, designed with the OPCC, was completed by over **4,800 people across Lancashire**. It captured perceptions of safety, experiences of harassment and abuse, confidence in policing, and views on how communities and institutions can help prevent violence against women and girls.

Qualitative engagement

Six focus groups and several one-to-one discussions were conducted by SMSR researchers to explore issues in greater depth. These included:

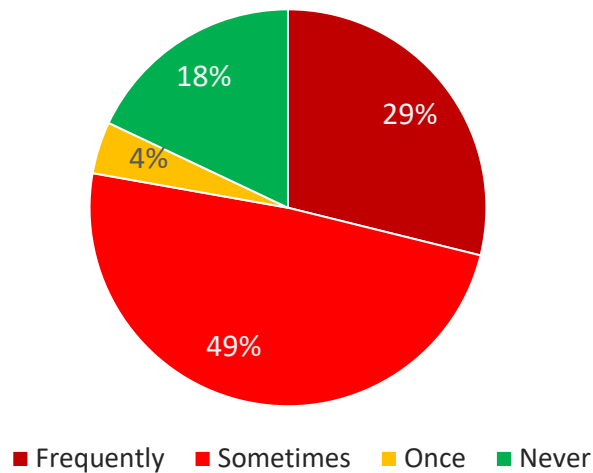
- Three focus groups with women across Lancashire's policing divisions.
- Two with men and boys to understand attitudes and responsibilities.
- One with vulnerable women in Preston, many of whom had experienced homelessness, exploitation or substance misuse.

All participation was voluntary and anonymous, and findings are reported without identifying individuals or locations.

3.0 Feelings of safety

Women and girls described safety as a daily consideration rather than an occasional worry.

As a woman or girl have you felt unsafe in any public place in Lancashire, over the last 12 months? (n=4,809)



Nearly four in five survey respondents said they felt unsafe at least some of the time, especially when walking alone after dark. Town centres, car parks, and public transport were the most frequently mentioned locations of concern.

Qualitative discussions reinforced these concerns, with women describing how they plan routes, walk with keys in hand, or call a friend for safety. One participant said:

"I never walk home the same way twice. I pretend to be on the phone, so people think someone knows where I am."

4.0 Everyday harassment and behaviour change

Harassment was widely reported and often seen as routine. Catcalling, unwanted touching, and comments from passing cars were common experiences. Around 90% said they adapt their behaviour to feel safer, avoiding certain areas, altering how they dress, or limiting social activities.

The following have been identified as coping strategies used by women and girls to reduce their fear and limit risk to themselves when travelling in public spaces. Please indicate whether you use any of these strategies: (n=4,782)



Focus group participants described frustration that such actions have become normalised:

"It's just expected that we'll avoid places instead of expecting men to behave."

5.0 Online harassment and abuse

The digital environment emerged as a growing source of harm.

Half of women surveyed (51%) said they had experienced unwanted or inappropriate messages or images online. Only 12% reported this to police or any official body.



Participants spoke about “*sliding into DMs*”, unsolicited explicit images, and harassment on mainstream platforms. Many used blocking tools but felt perpetrators simply re-appeared under new accounts.

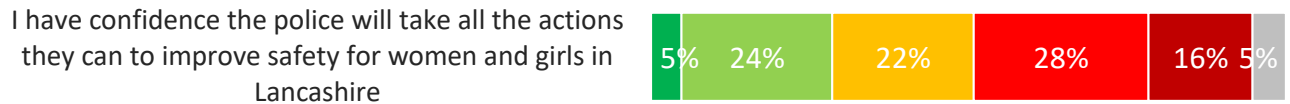
“It’s constant – you block one and two more turn up. It wears you down.”

6.0 Confidence in policing and reporting

Confidence in the police response to VAWG was relatively low.

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the below statements:

■ Strongly agree ■ Tend to agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Tend to disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Not sure



Only a third of respondents felt confident that police would act if they reported an incident, and just 8% trusted the wider criminal justice system to deliver justice.

Several women said they no longer report “*lower level*” harassment because they believe nothing will change. High-profile national cases involving police officers were cited as damaging public trust.

At the same time, there was strong support for education and prevention, with almost nine in ten respondents agreeing that more should be done to engage boys and men in understanding consent, respect and gender equality.

7.0 Key themes from the qualitative engagement

Although the survey formed the main evidence base, the focus groups provided powerful context behind the statistics.

Women's focus groups

Women described a pattern of *everyday fear* and *hyper-vigilance*, from adolescence onwards. Harassment was said to start young, some recalled being catcalled while still in school uniform. Pornography and online content were believed to shape unrealistic sexual expectations in boys and normalise objectification.

Trust in services was low, particularly towards police. Several participants shared experiences of being dismissed or not believed, while others noted progress through local safety campaigns and training in bars and clubs.

Vulnerable women in Preston

Among women with lived experience of sex work, addiction and homelessness, the accounts were more extreme. Violence, coercion and exploitation were described as routine. Hostels and support staff were viewed as lifelines, though these services are under heavy strain.

Staff spoke of working "*elastically*" to meet growing need, despite limited resources. They raised concern that when dedicated staff leave for less demanding jobs, their skills and relationships are lost to the sector.

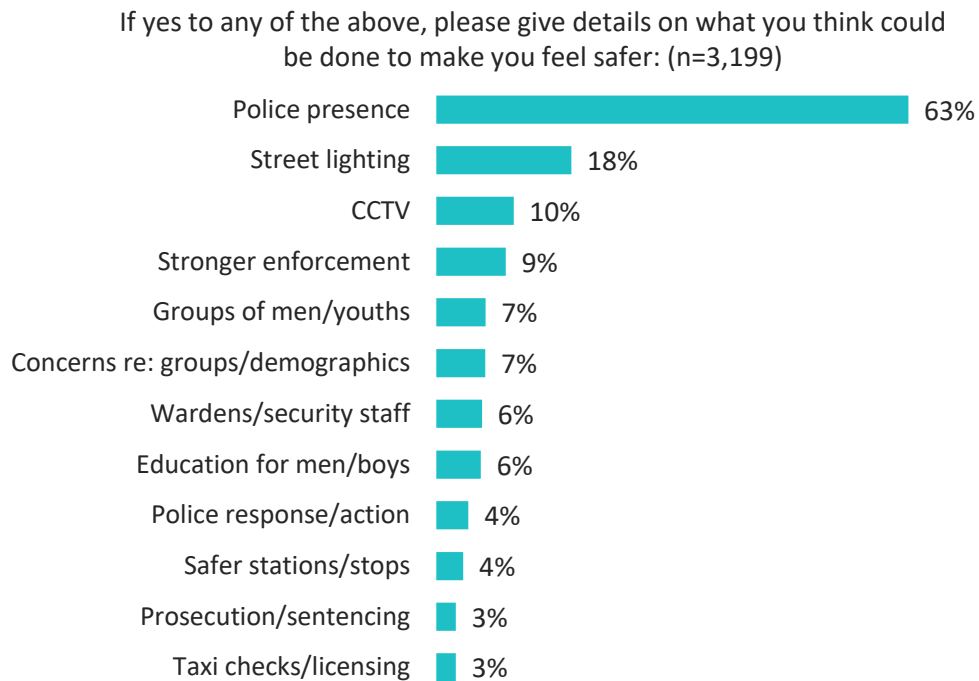
Men and boys

Young men acknowledged women's vulnerability but some expressed frustration at being collectively blamed. Peer pressure and bravado were seen as major factors behind inappropriate behaviour, while online influencers such as Andrew Tate were cited as reinforcing harmful ideas about masculinity.

Several participants highlighted positive alternatives: sports clubs and college environments offering structure and belonging without aggression.

8.0 What the public want to see change

When asked what would make Lancashire safer for women and girls, responses clustered around a mix of practical and cultural solutions:



Others highlighted education, stronger penalties for offenders, and better reporting channels. Participants stressed that safety requires both *visible reassurance* and *long-term cultural change*.

9.0 Summary of key messages

The research paints a clear picture of how VAWG affects daily life in Lancashire:

- Harassment and intimidation are widespread and often normalised.
- Women routinely adapt their behaviour to stay safe.
- Online abuse is a growing concern, particularly among younger women.
- Confidence in reporting remains low, though there is appetite for improvement.
- Visible policing, lighting and education are the most popular solutions.
- Men and boys recognise risks but need support to challenge harmful norms.
- For vulnerable women, safety depends on consistent, well-resourced local services.

10.0 Next steps

These findings will inform Lancashire OPCC and partner organisations as they strengthen joint action to prevent violence, improve support for victims and build public confidence.

A detailed technical report has been shared with statutory and voluntary partners, and this summary provides an accessible overview for members of the public.

Together, the voices and data in this consultation offer a shared evidence base for continued partnership work to make Lancashire a safer place for women and girls.

If you have been affected by issues in this report

Police and Crime Commissioner Clive Grunshaw has commissioned a range of services to support victims of crime across Lancashire. This includes specialist services for domestic abuse, sexual violence and stalking. You can find further information at victimcarelancashire.org/support-directory

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