



## Catcalls, wolf whistles and groping: How 40% of young women in London have suffered sexual harassment in public places

- 21 per cent of women of all ages have experienced unwanted sexual attention, survey finds
- One in 25 has been subjected to unwanted sexual touching
- Campaigners call for greater awareness of how harassment threatens women
- Photographer reveals how she has been assaulted three times since moving to London

By [Rob Preece](#)

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Two in five young women in London have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces in the last year.

Forty-one per cent of women aged 18 to 34 said they had encountered unwanted contact or attention in the capital, such as wolf-whistling, sexual comments, staring or exposure, according to a YouGov poll.

Campaigners have called for more research into the problem, which they say leaves women across the country feeling threatened and uncomfortable.



Intimidating: Two in five young women said they had experienced attention such as wolf-whistling and sexual comments

The research compiled by the End Violence Against Women Coalition found that 21 per cent of women of all ages had experienced unwanted sexual attention and 4 per cent of all women had been subjected to unwanted sexual touching.

The survey also asked female Londoners about their experiences while on public transport, and found 31 per cent of women aged 18 to 24 received unwanted sexual attention.

Fourteen per cent of women of all ages said they encountered unwanted sexual attention, while one in 20 experienced unwanted sexual touching.

Some claimed they had been harassed while onlookers did nothing to help them.

One victim, music photographer Rosie Wadey, 20, said she had been sexually assaulted three times since moving to London.

She said each incident had begun with her being harassed in the street.

Describing the most recent assault, which happened in Liverpool Street station, she said that a man had approached her at about 11.30pm as she used a cash point.

'He followed me and would not stop talking to me,' she told the Independent. 'By that point, I had made it perfectly clear that I did not want to talk to him.'

'He put his arm around me. He asked me things like, "Do you have a boyfriend?", "Want to come back to my house?". I got more and more aggressive, and this person is not taking the message.'

'It got to the point where he put his hand on my head and pulled me by my hair, and I screamed at him.'

Sarah Green, 36, said being harassed was a 'common experience' for her, particularly while cycling in the capital.

'It can be quite seasonal,' she said. 'It's worse when the weather is better.'

**'It's a minority of people who behave in this way, but they probably do it again and again.'**





Victims: Rosie Wadey, left, and Vicky Simister, right, have both been subjected to sexual harassment in public  
'You'll have someone in the passenger seat, waiting at the lights, just calling out offensive stuff.'

Ms Green described an occasion when she was followed by two men in a white van while cycling in Bermondsey.

'They said something to me that was quite rude and that day I had had enough,' she said.

### **'I'VE BEEN FORCED TO LEAVE TRAIN EARLY OR CHANGE CARRIAGE TO STOP MEN HARASSING ME'**

Women told the YouGov survey that they felt threatened by men approaching them and giving them unwanted sexual attention.

Here are some of the comments from respondents:

**'I feel safer on public transport than I do walking around, but I have still experienced several nasty incidents of sexual harassment on the tube where I have been forced to change carriage or leave the train a stop early to avoid harassment from men.'**

'Feel unsafe at night if I am alone and travelling home. I often move carriages on the tube to feel safer or change buses.'

**'Have had some issues when travelling on the top deck of a bus, especially at night, so don't**

## feel safe up there. Safer to sit nearer the driver.'

'Some people will say it's trivial or even a bit flattering, but women will tell you it's not because, if you tell them to stop it, the situation can escalate quite quickly.'

'We were on a main road and, after I turned on to a minor road, they followed me for three streets at speed.'

'I had to pick up my speed and race away. They were shouting all sorts of offensive things at me - four-letter words - and it was really threatening.'

Ms Green said motorists would shout negative comments about her appearance, as well as positive, and that experience could also be intimidating.

'Sometimes it's men telling you that you're fat or that you're ugly and that you need to sort yourself out,' she said.

'Now I pity these men, but when I was younger I felt threatened and it determined how I felt about myself.'

The coalition commissioned the survey to highlight the everyday impact of sexual harassment and how it makes women feel unsafe.

It said 45,000 incidents of domestic violence and 3,000 rapes were reported to police in London last year.

Another victim of sexual harassment, Vicky Simister, 27, decided to found a campaign group, the UK Anti Street Harassment Campaign, after she was attacked by a group of men at Manor House underground station in north London in 2010.

She said: 'I was walking along the street when a group of men in a car pulled up alongside me.'

'It was dark and they started trying to talk to me and making comments about my appearance.'

'They slowed down and followed me as I walked to the Tube station, which took about 15 minutes.'

'I was really wound up and frustrated and I told them to leave me alone.'



Pursued: Cyclist Sarah Green was followed by two men who made lewd comments to her

'They followed me into the station and pinned me against the wall. I had to be helped by members of the public.'

Ms Simister said of the survey results: 'In order to address this, local councils and the police need to convey a strong message that this behaviour will not be tolerated by perpetrators.'

'It is important to note that this is not a London-only problem, and a national survey needs to happen to understand the extent of the problem.'

'We hope that London can lead the way in addressing this issue - particularly in light of the impending Olympics and international perceptions of our nations attitude to women's safety.'

Ms Simister decided to set up her campaign group after she was attacked by a group of men at Manor House underground station in north London.

Coalition co-chairman Professor Liz Kelly said: 'Our survey shows that sexual harassment in London is extremely common.'

'Some survey respondents also said that this behaviour makes them feel uncomfortable and unsafe and makes them change their behaviour and decisions about when and where to travel.'

**'Despite this high prevalence and impact however, public sexual harassment is a form of abuse which generally goes unchallenged, creating an unsafe and**

unequal environment for women.

'We need investment in public campaigns on transport and elsewhere saying this behaviour is unacceptable, and training for transport staff and police about how to respond to it.'

Women who responded to the survey described having to change carriage or leave a stop early after experiencing harassment on the train or tube, while others said they avoided sitting on the top decks of buses.



Raising awareness: Professor Liz Kelly called for more investment in campaigns on public transport

The coalition said research was lacking into the scale of the problem in the UK, but some international studies appear to show that as many as four in five women have experienced sexual harassment.

It has sent its findings to Transport for London and urged the body to begin a campaign making the public aware that sexual harassment can be a crime and is unacceptable.

It is also calling for more training for police and transport staff to deal with reports of sexual harassment.

Bryony Beynon, co-director of Hollaback London, a campaign aimed at ending street harassment, said: 'These statistics are just the tip of the iceberg.

'From unwanted sleazy comments to violent sexual assault, street harassment is an epidemic in London.

'Our website gets thousands of hits a month from women looking for support, reassurance and a chance to speak out about their often horrifying daily experiences.

'Whether 13 or 70 years old, time and time again they ask "What did I do to deserve this?"

'Wider social change through community education as well as more robust enforcement of the laws designed to protect women in public is desperately needed.

'Until then, men who harass need to wake up to the damage this behaviour is having on a daily basis.'



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