

Young women in large cities are the main victims of violence in public space

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Violence against women in the street and in public transport is a major social issue. The VIRAGE survey conducted by the French Institute for Demographic Studies in 2015 gives a clearer picture of men's and women's experiences in public space and of the violence – verbal, physical and sexual – to which they are exposed. What are the characteristics of the most frequent victims?

Measuring violence in public space

Fifteen years after the 2000 national ENVEFF survey on violence against women, the first survey in France to measure gender violence experienced in different life spaces [1], the VIRAGE survey on violence and gender relations,** collected information on respondents' exposure to violence over the previous 12 months. This article focuses on violence in public spaces, which differs from violence in other contexts of everyday life in that its perpetrators are not family members, friends or partners of the victim, and not linked to him or her through their school or workplace. The majority of perpetrators are strangers (78% of reported incidents for men, and 88% for women), neighbours that the victim barely knows (10% of reported incidents for men, and 6% for women) or other people not well known to the respondent (such as someone they have just met, a workman, etc.).

Most investigated incidents are the same verbal, physical or sexual assaults (Table 1), as those studied in the 2000 ENVEFF survey. The two surveys differ in several respects, however. First, the ENVEFF survey interviewed women only. Second, to better assess the level of physical violence in public spaces and to determine the respondents' attitudes to physical confrontation, a question on participation in street fights was added in the VIRAGE survey. To take account

of changes in the law on sexual harassment¹ which covers sexual blackmail and degrading or humiliating situations, a question on wolf-whistling and catcalling under the pretext of chatting up, and another one on persistent sexual advances despite refusal were also added. Last, respondents were invited to attribute a perceived level of severity to each of the incidents they mentioned.

Women are the main victims in public space

Men and women are unequal in public space, and not exposed to the same forms of violence. A quarter of the women interviewed in the VIRAGE survey reported experience of at least one of the listed forms of violence over the previous year (see Table 1), and 7% more than one. Out of 100 women, 20 reported receiving wolf-whistles at least once in the year, and three of these women mentioned more than one incident. This is followed in order of frequency by insults (8%), being followed (3%), groping sometimes associated with forced kissing (2%), persistent sexual advances (1%), and

¹ In law, sexual harassment is defined as repeatedly subjecting a person to language and behaviour of a sexual nature which either compromise his or her dignity through their degrading or humiliating nature, or which create a situation that is intimidating, hostile or offensive to the victim. The use of any form of severe pressure, even if not repeated, with the real or apparent aim of obtaining a sexual act, be it for the perpetrator or for a third person, is also considered as sexual harassment.

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** See Box

Table 1. Percentage of women and men reporting at least one act of violence in a public space over the previous 12 months

Over the last 12 months,	Women	Men
... have you been whistled at, called or approached under the pretext of chatting up?	20	3
... have you been insulted in the street, in public transport or at a public place near your home, for example?	8	8
... have you been persistently followed by someone on foot or in a vehicle?	3	1
... have you been subject to persistent sexual advances despite your refusal?	1	1
... have you fought, or exchanged punches with one or more persons during a street fight?	0	3
... have you been slapped, shaken, punched or physically assaulted in another way in a public space?	1	2
... have you been threatened with a weapon, has someone tried to strangle you, to endanger your life or kill you?	0	1
... have you been approached by an exhibitionist or a voyeur in a public space?	1	1
... has anyone, against your will, touched your breasts or your buttocks, cornered you in order to kiss you, rubbed or pressed against you? ^{2a}	2	0
... has someone forced you to perform or submit to sexual touching, has someone attempted to have sexual intercourse with you against your will, or succeeded in doing so?	<0.1	0
... has someone ever forced you to engage in other sexual acts or practices?	<0.1	0
At least one act	25	14
At least one considered to be serious	8	5

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey 2015
 Coverage: Men and women aged 20-69 living in metropolitan France, N = 27268
 (a) for men, the question was limited to "rubbed or pressed against you".

exhibitionism or voyeurism (1%). Physical violence was reported by 1.3% of women. When a woman reported several incidents, the perpetrators were generally different: cases of repeated acts by the same person are exceptional in public spaces. Women attributed different levels of severity to reported incidents, largely in line with collective representations. In a large majority of cases (86%) wolf-whistles and catcalls were described as not serious. These acts appear to be generally tolerated. Likewise, half of the women who were insulted (55%) did not consider this as serious. Incidents deemed serious were most often acts of physical and sexual violence. In all, 8% of women reported experience of at least one serious incident in a public space in the previous 12 months, and 17% a non-serious incident. In the 2000 ENVEFF survey, 19% of women reported experience of violence in public space. The addition of questions on sexual harassment may explain the higher reporting frequency in the VIRAGE survey, although the ENVEFF respondents may have reported such acts as insults. We may also assume that in response to the awareness campaigns conducted since the 2000s and the social condemnation of such acts, women today denounce them as intolerable, whether they consider them as serious or not.

Fewer men than women reported experience of violence in the previous 12 months: 14% reported at least one incident, 4% several (generally with different perpetrators), and 5% reported at least one serious act. The most frequently reported act was insults (8%), and 3% of men aged 20-69 view them as serious. Physical

violence is also frequent: 2.3% of men reported experience of a violent act over the previous 12 months, and the proportion rises to 4.1% if fighting is included. The scale of this type of violence is revelatory of the gender roles attributed to men, who are viewed as more likely to engage in violent confrontation, or are expected to behave in this way. They generally consider such violence to be serious. On the other hand, the 3% of men who reported being the target of wolf-whistling and catcalling did not judge these acts to be serious. Sexual assaults are most frequent in public spaces

– generally groping and touching of the sexual organs – with 7.9% of women and 2.2% of men being affected at some time in their lives. Rape and attempted rape in public spaces were reported by 0.9% of women and 0.3% of men aged 20-69, a smaller proportion than in the family (1.6% of women and 0.3% of men) or in intimate relationships (1.4% of women and less than 0.3% of men [2, 3].

The sexist and sexual nature of violence towards women

The differences in reported frequency and severity reflect a diversity of forms of violence. In order to analyse them in detail, five different profiles were defined, taking account of men's and women's reported experience of each form of violence and its associated level of severity. They do not correspond precisely to existing legal categories (insults, exhibitionism, sexual harassment and sexual assault) since they take account of the accumulation of incidents and their perceived level of severity.

The first profile includes people who were insulted, but with no experience of other violent acts. The second, called "unwanted sexual advances",² includes people who have experienced catcalling under the pretext of chatting up (once or more) without viewing it as serious and without experience of other acts. The third group comprises people who have experienced physical violence

² The question was formulated to exclude situations where the respondents were consenting parties. Here, only unwanted catcalls were included.

or street fights, often in association with insults and being followed. The fourth group is made up of people who reported a range of sexual incidents (excluding touching of the sexual organs, rape or attempted rape). It includes women who have been catcalled, who have encountered an exhibitionist or voyeur, have been followed, groped, or forcibly kissed, etc. Men mainly reported encounters with an exhibitionist or persistent sexual advances. We define these situations as sexual harassment and abuse even though the expression includes exhibitionism and certain forms of sexual assault which are legally classified in a different category. Finally, the last group, labelled sexual violence, includes victims of unwanted touching/ groping, rape and/or attempted rape. These acts were always reported in association with other forms of sexual harassment. So acts considered as inconsequential by some, such as wolf whistling, catcalling or persistent sexual advances, are strongly interlinked with more serious criminal offences such as groping, forced kissing, touching of the sexual organs, rape or attempted rape.

Women are the main targets of unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment and abuse and sexual violence, and more than one in five women in the general population are concerned by such acts (Table 2). An estimated 3 million women in France aged 20-69 are subjected to unwanted sexual advances in public spaces each year, and more than one million women experience sexual harassment and abuse. The vast majority of perpetrators are men.

Men, for their part, are much less frequently exposed to unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment and abuse or sexual violence (around 850,000 men per year). However, 6% of men aged 20-69 reported insults, but no other form of violence, and 4% reported experience of physical violence, sometimes associated with other acts. These two situations concern respectively, 1 million and 750,000 men each year. In all situations, with the exception of unwanted sexual advances, violence against men is perpetrated mainly by other men.

Table 2. Percentage and numbers of men and women by type of violence experienced in public spaces in the previous 12 months

Type of violence	Women		Men	
	%	Number	%	Number
Insults only	4	805,000	6	1,071,000
Unwanted sexual advances only	15	2,969,000	2	442,000
Physical violence	1	206,000	4	745,000
Sexual harassment and abuse	5	1,082,000	2	409,000
Sexual violence	0.1	15,500	<0.1	4,000
Total	25	5,077,500	14	2,671,000

Source: INED, VIRAGE survey 2015.

Coverage: Men and women aged 20-69 living in ordinary household in metropolitan France.

Women and men attribute different levels of severity to the most serious types of violence. Less than one-third of men who reported sexual harassment and abuse considered it to be serious, versus 70% of women. Likewise, barely half of men who reported physical violence judged it to be serious, versus 78% of women. These differences reflect the power relations between women and men, but also gendered attitudes to violence [4].

Amongst 20-24 year-olds, over half of women and almost one-third of men report experience of violence in public space

Violence in public spaces does not affect the entire population of France in the same way. Young people are the most frequently at risk, with 58% of women and 30% of men aged 20-24 reporting at least one incident, and 21% and 10%, respectively, at least one serious act of violence. These proportions decrease regularly with age, but still concern 8% of women and 7% of men aged 65-69 (Figure).

At ages 20-24, 40% of women reported unwanted sexual advances and 14% mentioned sexual harassment and abuse (Figure). These are the two most common types of violence encountered within this age group. While decreasing with age, risk of such violence remains frequent throughout women's lifetimes and accounts for the majority of acts of violence experienced by women up to ages 60-64. However, insults become proportionally more frequent with age.

More than 10% of men aged 20-24, as well as in the next age group, reported experience of physical violence (Figure). Other reported incidents (around 20%) were insults, unwanted sexual advances more or less equally and, to a lesser extent, sexual harassment and abuse. As age increases, insults increase proportionally with respect to other forms of violence, representing more than half of all incidents from age 40.

Sexist and violent cities?

Place of residence plays an important role in reports of violence. The environment of large cities is particularly favourable to violence of all kinds in public spaces. Experience of violence is most frequent in the Paris region, where 37% of women and 18% of men aged 20-69 reported at least one incident in the previous 12 months, and 15% and 7%, respectively, at least one serious incident. These proportions were as high as 68% and 34%, respectively, among 20-24 year-olds living in the Paris region. Conversely, rural inhabitants, of all ages, are least exposed to violence (17% and 9%).

The acts recorded in the survey also differ by place of residence. The larger the town or city, the higher the proportion of men who report insults and of women

who report unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment and abuse. In the Paris region, one woman in five (20%) reported unwanted sexual advances in the previous 12 months, and one in ten (10%) reported sexual harassments and abuse.

Urban women, the youngest women especially, are frequently exposed to violence in public spaces. This violence is most often of a sexual nature and acts that may appear to be inconsequential, such as catcalling under the pretext of chatting up, are strongly correlated with the more serious acts of sexual harassment or violence. Public campaigns have raised collective awareness of the unacceptable nature of these acts, encouraging women to report and denounce them more often.

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Box - The Violence and Gender Relations survey (VIRAGE)

The VIRAGE survey³ focused on experience of interpersonal violence in the 12 previous months and in the respondents' lifetimes in different life spaces (family, school, workplace, current or former union, public space). It was conducted in 2015 on a representative sample of 27,268 people (15,556 women 11,712 men) aged 20-69, living in ordinary households in metropolitan France.

³ The list of bodies who contributed to survey funding is available at <http://virage.site.ined.fr/fr/partenaires/les-financiers/> and the list of VIRAGE team members can be found at http://virage.site.ined.fr/fr/qui_sommes_nous/

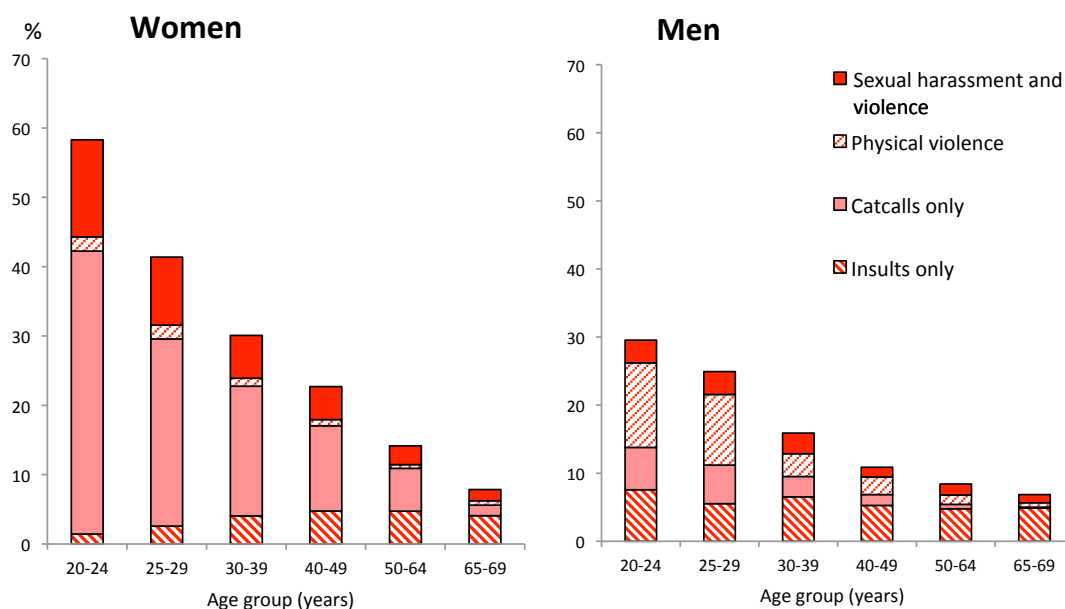
Abstract

A quarter of the women interviewed in the VIRAGE survey reported experience of at least one act of violence in public space over the last 12 months. Out of 100 women, 20 mentioned receiving wolf whistles at least once. This is followed in order of frequency by insults (8%), being followed (3%), groping sometimes associated with forced kissing (2%), persistent sexual advances (1%), and exhibitionism or voyeurism (1%). Sexual assaults are most frequent in public space – generally groping and touching of the sexual organs – with 7.9% of women and 2.2% of men being affected at some time in their lives. Rape and attempted rape in public space concerns 0.9% of women and 0.3% of men aged 20-69.

Keywords

Violence, sexual harassment, women, VIRAGE survey, France

Figure. Percentage of persons reporting violence by sex, age and type of violence



Sources : INED, VIRAGE survey 2015.
Coverage: Men and women aged 20-69 living in ordinary households in metropolitan France.



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