Street Police Patrolling Effects To Reduce Crime Against Women in Public Spaces in India

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Sector(s): Crime, Violence, and Conflict, Gender

Fieldwork: Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR)

Sample: 350 hotspots

Initiative(s): Crime and Violence Initiative (CVI)

Target group: Women and girls

Outcome of interest: Arrests and convictions Violence

Intervention type: Policing

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Partner organization(s): Hyderabad City Police, United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Princeton University, Leibniz Association, Gladstein Family Human Rights Institute

Women frequently experience sexual harassment in urban public spaces, making it harder for them to move around freely, pursue education, and participate in the workforce. In partnership with the Hyderabad City Police (HCP), researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of a police patrolling program aimed at improving women's safety on the frequency of sexual harassment and women's freedom to move around in public spaces. The presence of uniformed officers in public spaces reduced instances of severe forms of sexual harassment and led to fewer women relocating from the patrolled areas.

Policy issue

Sexual harassment in public limits women's freedom of movement, education, and participation in the labor force. Around 82 percent of women report avoiding certain areas due to fear of street harassment. Meanwhile, efforts to address street harassment face several challenges. Street harassment is often tolerated by the public, including police officers, which can contribute to its frequency. Low reporting rates also lead to unreliable data about sexual harassment.

Prior research suggests that improving women's access to the police can increase reporting of gender-based violence (GBV) and reduce its incidence. The police also play a key role in addressing GBV in public spaces, since their presence may deter potential perpetrators. How do police patrols affect the frequency of street harassment? How does the visibility of patrols or the attitudes of officers impact their effectiveness at reducing harassment?

Context of the evaluation

Street harassment is prevalent in Hyderabad, India. A 2019 survey (conducted at the beginning of the program) of 8,264 women found that over 30 percent of participants experienced street harassment in public spaces within the past month. Additionally, 75 percent reported feeling unsafe when moving around the city after 4 PM, and 87 percent said they took precautionary measures when moving around, such as traveling with others, dressing conservatively, and avoiding certain areas.

To address concerns about women's safety, Hyderabad City Police (HCP) launched the Safety, Health, and Environment Police Unit (SHE Teams) in 2014. The program consists of 72 officers, divided into 24 teams with three members per team—with at least one female officer. Officers assigned to the task force receive formal training in identifying and responding to street harassment. SHE Teams publicly penalize perpetrators by arresting them, issuing warnings, and taking them to police stations. To identify areas to patrol, SHE Teams tracked police reports, social media, and police helpline calls. Before the evaluation, SHE Teams prioritized undercover patrols to identify and apprehend street harassment offenders, on the basis that keeping their identity hidden would enable them to arrest as many perpetrators as possible.



Hyderabad City Police

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Details of the intervention

In partnership with the HCP, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of the SHE Teams program on the frequency of sexual harassment and women's freedom of movement in public spaces. The HCP and researchers identified 350 harassment hotspots in the city—public spaces with high rates of crime—to be randomly assigned into one of three groups:

1. *Undercover officers group* (100 hotspots): These hotspots were patrolled by undercover SHE Team officers wearing civilian clothing.
2. *Uniformed officers group* (100 hotspots): These hotspots were patrolled by SHE Team officers in the official HCP uniform.
3. *Comparison group* (150 hotspots): These hotspots were not patrolled by SHE Team officers during the study period, however received the business as usual policing.

Officers received weekly assignments, allocating them to either uniform or undercover patrolling. Officers were randomly placed on teams each day and assigned hotspots to patrol. On average, each team spent 15–20 minutes at each hotspot, police patrolled each hotspot for 45 minutes per week.

Trained enumerators recorded incidents of sexual harassment discreetly and in real-time at designated hotspots. This approach to data collection helped address issues of underreporting and stigma, which often hinder the measurement of sexual harassment. Enumerators identified the severity of the harassment, distinguishing between mild forms (unwanted comments, catcalling, whistling, inappropriate gestures, and non-consensual photography) and severe forms (stalking, groping, physical intimidation, and abduction). Enumerators were unaware that the intervention was taking place, and SHE Team officers were also unaware of their presence. Additionally, researchers used administrative data to measure police performance and conducted surveys of officers to assess their attitudes and tolerance toward harassment. To understand how these factors influenced officers' responses to harassment, the researchers conducted lab experiments where officers viewed videos depicting instances of harassment and then answered questions about how they would respond.

In addition to receiving ethical review and approvals from an institutional review board, researchers made efforts to address and account for ethical questions by deliberating on potential risks to all stakeholders involved in the study, including enumerators, police officers, and women participants and proactively defining mitigation strategies, such as by providing training, informed consent, referral to support services, and withdrawal rights. For more on the researchers' discussion of ethical considerations, see section C of the appendix.

Results and policy lessons

The presence of uniformed officers in public spaces significantly reduced instances of severe sexual harassment and decreased the likelihood of women leaving hotspots due to such incidents, thereby enhancing their freedom of movement. In contrast, undercover patrol groups were not effective in reducing harassment.

Incidents of Sexual Harassment: While overall SHE Team patrols had no effect on the overall occurrence of street harassment, the presence of uniformed patrols reduced severe forms of harassment. In areas patrolled by uniformed officers, enumerators recorded a 27 percent decline in severe harassment incidents compared to areas with no SHE Team patrols. This impact was equivalent to 0.7 fewer women experiencing sexual harassment each week on average. This reduction emerged after the second month of the program and lasted for the duration of the study, suggesting that the visible presence of uniformed officers deterred potential offenders from engaging in harassment. Undercover patrols did not reduce the frequency of severe forms of harassment, and neither undercover nor uniformed patrols reduced the frequency of mild forms of harassment. Finally, patrol groups did not cause an increase in harassment in nearby areas.

Women's freedom of movement: In areas patrolled by uniformed officers, enumerators recorded a 30 percent reduction in women relocating from hotspots in response to severe forms of sexual harassment. Consistent with this finding, women were less likely to leave hotspots with lower occurrences of severe harassment.

Officer attitudes and tolerance: Surveys of police officers revealed a general reluctance to address mild forms of sexual harassment, which often led to inaction in such cases. Findings from the lab experiment showed that officers with harsher

attitudes toward sexual harassment, when patrolling in uniform as part of SHE Teams, achieved a twelve percent reduction in recorded harassment cases compared to areas not patrolled by these teams. Notably, these officers were particularly effective in addressing mild forms of harassment, with recorded cases of such offenses decreasing by sixteen percent in hotspots they patrolled, relative to the control group. In contrast, patrols led by officers with milder attitudes toward sexual harassment did not result in any reduction in mild harassment cases.

These findings underscore the critical role that officers' attitudes play in shaping their responses to harassment. They also highlight the potential of attitude-focused training to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts in addressing not just severe offenses but also the pervasive issue of mild forms of harassment, which often go unchecked.

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