



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

KANTAR PUBLIC

Freedom Restricting Harassment Research Report

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1 Research Background and Methodology

1.1 Background

As part of a wider review into social cohesion and resilience, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) have been examining the scale and impact of Freedom Restricting Harassment. This is a type of harassment which has the potential to lead to self-censorship both at an individual level, as well as at a wider institutional level. There are a number of reasons why people might be targeted for this form of harassment; often because of a view, belief or opinion they hold, sometimes because of the job they do or because they might have a protected characteristic.

While much of the public debate has focussed on public figures and parliamentarians experiencing such harassment, which potentially might result in them self-censoring, evidence also suggests this is a wider societal problem which might include members of the general public and private citizens.

DLUHC have commissioned this research to measure claimed experience of freedom restricting harassment amongst the general public.

1.2 Objectives

This research has been designed to understand and measure:

- Awareness of Freedom Restricting Harassment, and perceptions of whether there has been more or less of it than in the past;
- Awareness of other people witnessing such forms of harassment, either online or in person, and the resultant effects this might have had on the individual;
- Perceptions towards the effect Freedom Restricting Harassment may have on both individuals and on society more widely, and the effect it may have on their tendency to contribute to public life in the future; and
- An individual's direct experience of Freedom Restricting Harassment, and the potential effect it might have had on their day-to-day life.

1.3 Methodology and Sample

The data collection method used was an online survey hosted on one wave of Kantar Public's omnibus survey. This ensured we could quickly and efficiently recruit a nationally representative sample of n=1,279 respondents aged 16+ in the UK. A summary of sampling quotas and applied weighting is included in the appendix.

Fieldwork was conducted between Tuesday 17th and Thursday 19th October 2023¹.

¹ It is worth noting that this was the first full week after the start of the Israel-Hamas conflict (which began on 7th October). We acknowledge that the conflict is not directly related to the subject matter in the survey, although it might be the case that perceptions of harassment generally, and Freedom Restricting Harassment specifically, could have been more top-of-mind than would usually be the case as a result of the conflict and related media coverage.

2 Detailed Findings

2.1 Awareness of Freedom Restricting Harassment

A large majority (85%) of respondents thought that Freedom Restricting Harassment (FRH) currently occurs in the UK, with one quarter (25%) thinking that there is a considerable amount. Moreover, three in five (60%) believed that there is more FRH compared to five years ago, while only a minority (8%) thought that there is less. One in five (22%) believed that levels have remained the same. As seen in the table below, ABC1 socio-economic grade, white and disabled respondents were more likely than their respective counterparts to believe that there is more FRH than existed five years ago.

Over two in five (44%) respondents reported witnessing FRH online, with more witnessing this in their personal life (31%) compared to their work life (20%). The same proportion said they have witnessed FRH in person (44%), although the gap between those who have witnessed this in their personal life (29%) and in their work life (22%) is narrower.

When asked if they had ever witnessed others experiencing FRH which had then resulted in self-censorship, nearly half (47%) of respondents said they had, with more reporting that they have experienced this in their personal life (31%) than in their work life (24%). Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), disabled and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) respondents were more likely than their respective counterparts to have witnessed others experiencing FRH which has resulted in self-censorship.

2.1.1 Table of significant differences between demographics / protected characteristics

Q1. How much 'Freedom Restricting Harassment', as described previously, do you feel occurs in the UK nowadays? (NET: Any amount) n=1279					
NET: Any amount – 85%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
16-54	829	88%	55+	450	80%
ABC1	679	87%	C2DE	600	82%
Disabled	279	91%	Non-disabled	935	83%
Q2. Do you think there is more, less, or about the same amount of 'Freedom Restricting Harassment' now compared to five years ago? (NET: More) n=1279					
NET: More – 60%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
ABC1	679	63%	C2DE	600	56%
White	1025	63%	BAME	206	49%
Disabled	279	69%	Not disabled	935	58%
Q5. Have you ever witnessed others experiencing 'Freedom Restricting Harassment' online (NET: Yes) n=1279					
NET: Yes – 44%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
Male	624	49%	Female	648	38%
16-54	829	57%	55+	450	23%
ABC1	679	47%	C2DE	600	40%
Disabled	279	60%	Not disabled	935	39%
Straight	1070	41%	LGBTQ+	129	64%

Q5. Have you ever witnessed others experiencing 'Freedom Restricting Harassment' in person (NET: Yes) n=1279					
NET: Yes – 44%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
Male	624	49%	Female	648	38%
16-54	829	55%	55+	450	26%
White	1025	42%	BAME	206	53%
Disabled	279	62%	Not disabled	935	39%
Straight	1070	42%	LGBTQ+	129	63%

Q6. Have you ever witnessed others experiencing 'freedom restricting harassment' which has resulted in them self-censoring what they say or do or changing the way they live? (NET: Yes) n=1279					
NET: Yes – 47%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
Male	624	52%	Female	648	42%
16-54	829	60%	55+	450	28%
White	1025	46%	BAME	206	55%
Disabled	279	61%	Not disabled	935	43%
Straight	1070	45%	LGBTQ+	129	66%

The table shows significant differences (highlighted in green) at 95% confidence interval

2.2 Perceptions towards Freedom Restricting Harassment

Roughly seven in ten agreed with the following statements:

- 72% agreed (either strongly or slightly) that “FRH of individuals will undermine people’s ability to live and speak freely in our country”. This statement also saw the highest strength of agreement across all statements, with 36% strongly agreeing
- 70% agreed (strongly or slightly) that they “feel FRH has had a negative effect on people living well together in our society”
- 69% agreed (strongly or slightly) that they “feel people are having to censor the way they live their lives, either in their work or personal lives because of FRH”
- 69% agreed (strongly or slightly) that “FRH of individuals in public life is likely to put off other people from contributing to public life in the future”

Consistent with their higher awareness of occurrence of FRH, ABC1 respondents were generally more likely to hold views that FRH was negatively impacting on society than C2DE respondents. Respondents with children were also more likely to agree that people have to censor themselves because of FRH, as well as that FRH was likely to put off other people from contributing to public life in the future. Outside of these differences, there were few other differences of note among demographic sub-groups or UK regions.

2.3 Previous experience of Freedom Restricting Harassment

Three-quarters (76%) of respondents reported having ever restricted expressing their view publicly out of fear of receiving FRH abuse to themselves or their loved ones; although one quarter (27%) reported having done this rarely. One in ten (11%) said that they always self-censor while nearly two in five (38%) reported doing this regularly or often.

However, despite a majority of respondents reporting self-censoring out of a fear of receiving FRH, only one quarter (27%) said they have ever experienced FRH personally. BAME and LGBTQ+ respondents were also more likely to have reported experiencing self-censorship and FRH. Interestingly, although disabled respondents were consistently more likely to think that FRH occurs, more likely to feel that it had increased, and to have witnessed it, they were less likely to report experiencing self-censorship and FRM personally.

Among those who have reported experiencing FRH (n=356), three-quarters (77%) claimed to have experienced at least one change in their perception of themselves and/or others. The most commonly stated change was feeling like they are not able to fully express their opinion (36%), followed by experiencing a negative effect in their personal or social life (29%), followed by saying they have felt a decline in their personal freedoms (26%). Four in five said they have taken specific actions as a result of FRH, with the most commonly stated action being to come off social media (20% claimed they had done this) and abandon specific tasks at work or take additional security measures (17% claimed they had done this). Although a minority, one in eight claimed to have acted in a more life changing way as a result of FRH, losing or changing their job (15% claimed they had undergone this) or having to move house (13%).

2.3.1 Table of significant differences between subgroups

Q4. How often, if at all, do you restrict expressing a view publicly out of fear of receiving 'freedom restricting harassment' and abuse to yourself or loved ones? (NET: At all) N=1279					
NET: At all – 76%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
16-54	829	82%	55+	450	66%
White	1025	75%	BAME	206	84%
Straight	1070	75%	LGBTQ+	129	90%
Q7. Have you experienced 'freedom restricting harassment' that has left you fearful and caused you to alter the way you live whether in your personal life or in your work life? (Yes) N=1279					
Yes – 27%					
Subgroup	Base size	%	Subgroup	Base size	%
Male	624	32%	Female	648	22%
16-54	829	35%	55+	450	15%
England/Scotland/ Northern Ireland	1210	32%	Wales	69	14%
White	1025	25%	BAME	206	40%
Disabled	279	25%	Not disabled	935	40%
Straight	1070	24%	LGBTQ+	129	52%

The table shows significant differences (highlighted in green) at 95% confidence interval

3 Summary

In summary, a majority of respondents thought that Freedom Restricting Harassment occurs in the UK today and that levels have increased in the last 5 years. However, less than half reported witnessing this, either in person or online, and only a quarter said they have experienced this first hand. Among those who have experienced FRH, most reported changes to perceptions of themselves and others, and a smaller proportion, but still a majority, reported taking specific

actions such as coming off social media, abandoning tasks at work or taking additional security measures. Respondents under 55, as well as ABC1 and disabled respondents, were consistently more likely to think that FRH occurs in the UK today, has increased in the last 5 years and claim to have witnessed it either personally or online. Other protected characteristic groups, such as BAME and LGBTQ+ respondents, were more likely to have experienced self-censorship and freedom restricting harassment personally, while LGBTQ+ respondents were also more likely to report witnessing others experiencing FRH and having to self-censorship as a result.

4 Appendix

4.1 Quotas and Weighting

Quotas applied were as follows:

Age and Gender	%	Region	%
Male 16-24	7%	North east	4%
Male 25-34	8%	North west	11%
Male 35-44	8%	Yorkshire and the Humber	8%
Male 45-54	8%	Scotland	8%
Male 55-64	8%	East midlands	7%
Male 65+	11%	West midlands	9%
Female 16-24	6%	East	9%
Female 25-34	8%	Wales	5%
Female 35-44	8%	London	13%
Female 45-54	8%	South east	14%
Female 55-64	8%	South west	9%
Female 65+	13%	Northern Ireland	3%

SEG	%	TAE	%	Household size	%
AB	27%	<=16	35%	1	15%
C1	34%	17-19	25%	2	29%
C2	19%	20+	34%	3	25%
DE	20%	Still Studying	7%	4	17%
				5+	15%

4.2 Final Questionnaire

Introduction:

We would like your views on to what extent people in the UK have experienced harassment which has led them to be fearful and is causing them to censor themselves, or restrict their rights or freedoms as a result.

This is known as “**freedom restricting harassment**”, where individuals are targeted with threatening, intimidatory and or abusive behaviour which causes them to feel fearful for the safety or wellbeing of themselves or their family/loved ones. Such behaviour can be verbal or physical, can occur in person and online, and can be directed at someone because of their job or activism or in a personal capacity because of the beliefs and opinions they hold.

Such harassment can result in censorship and limit people’s freedom by changing how they live their lives, including what they choose to say or not say publicly.

1. How much “freedom restricting harassment”, as described previously, do you feel occurs in the UK nowadays?
 - a. A considerable amount
 - b. A reasonable amount
 - c. A small amount
 - d. None
 - e. Don’t know

2. Do you think there is more, less, or about the same amount of “freedom restricting harassment” now compared to five years ago?
 - a. A lot more
 - b. A little more
 - c. About the same
 - d. A little less
 - e. A lot less
 - f. Don’t know

3. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements (4 statements in total to be shown on separate screens):
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Slightly agree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Slightly disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
 - f. Don’t know
 - "I feel “freedom restricting harassment” has had a negative effect on people living well together in our society.”
 - "I feel people are having to censor the way they live their lives, either in their work or personal lives, because of “freedom restricting harassment”."
 - "Freedom restricting harassment of individuals in public life is likely to put off other people from contributing to public life in the future"

- “Freedom restricting harassment” of individuals will undermine people’s ability to live and speak freely in our country”
4. How often, if at all, do you restrict expressing a view publicly out of fear of receiving “freedom restricting harassment” and abuse to yourself or loved ones?
 - a. Always
 - b. Regularly
 - c. Often
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
 - f. Don’t know

 5. Have you ever witnessed others experiencing “freedom restricting harassment”...
 - a. Online
 - b. In person
 - Yes in my personal life
 - Yes in my work life
 - No
 - Prefer not to say

 6. Have you ever witnessed others experiencing “freedom restricting harassment” which has resulted in them self-censoring what they say or do or changing the way they live?
 - a. Yes in my personal life
 - b. Yes in my work life
 - c. No
 - d. Prefer not to say

INTRODUCTION ON NEW SCREEN: We understand the following questions might be seen as distressing by some. If you would prefer not to answer the following questions, please state below:

7. Have you experienced “freedom restricting harassment” that has left you fearful and caused you to alter the way you live whether in your personal life or in your work life?
 - c. Yes
 - d. No
 - e. Prefer not to say

IF ANSWERED YES TO Q7, ASK Q8. OTHERWISE SKIP TO NEXT QUESTION

8. How has your life been altered as a result of “freedom restricting harassment”? Please select all that apply.
 - i. I came off of social media
 - ii. I changed my route to work or elsewhere
 - iii. I lost or changed my job
 - iv. I feel I’m not able to fully express my opinions
 - v. I’ve abandoned specific tasks at work or projects
 - vi. I’ve had to move house
 - vii. I’ve had to take additional security measures

- viii. I've experienced a negative effect on my personal or social life
- ix. I've experienced a negative effect on my work life
- x. I've lost trust in public institutions
- xi. I've felt a decline in my personal freedoms
- xii. I've felt reputational damage
- xiii. I've been excluded from my community
- xiv. Other
- xv. I would prefer not to say