

Freedom under threat

New data reveals high levels of sexual exposure (including cyberflashing) and significant impacts on women's freedom

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Executive summary

Sexual exposure, including cyberflashing, is reshaping women's lives, with new data revealing high prevalence, particularly for younger women, and the harmful reality of women restricting their freedom and changing everyday behaviours to stay safe.

This Briefing presents findings from the **largest representative UK survey to date on sexual exposure** ('indecent exposure' and cyberflashing), with over 4,000 women and men, conducted by YouGov.

It finds that **women experience shockingly high levels of sexual exposure** (both 'flashing' and 'cyberflashing') across their lives.

- Our data indicate **far higher levels of victimisation than previously acknowledged**.
- Victimisation is **highly gendered** with women reporting substantially higher rates than men.
- **Women are over 3 times as likely to experience in-person sexual exposure as men** and **almost 3 times as likely to experience cyberflashing**.
- 30% of women have been victims of 'indecent exposure' in their lifetime and 23% have experienced cyberflashing, compared to 9% ('indecent exposure') 8% (cyberflashing) for men.
- **Cyberflashing is alarmingly common in the lives of younger women,** nearly half (45%) of women aged 18–24 report this experience compared to only 15% of men in the same age range. In fact, women aged 18-24 today are more likely to have

experienced cyberflashing than women aged 55+ are to have ever experienced in-person 'flashing'.

- **Sexual exposure is moving from the streets to screens**, with younger women experiencing higher levels of online exposure than older women, likely to increase over their lifetimes.

Restricting the freedom of women and girls

- Sexual exposure is causing extensive ***freedom-based harms***, **limiting women's ability to participate freely in both physical and digital spaces**, reducing their independence, movement, physical and mental wellbeing as well as opportunities for professional advancement, socialising, and public engagement and debate.
- The biggest adverse impact on all victims relates to **their loss of safety and trust in people**, with this being considerably more marked for women than men.
- **Women are more than twice as likely as men to feel less safe after such experiences.** Half of women who were victimised (52% in-person and 49% online) felt less safe compared to around one fifth (19%) of male victims of either form of sexual exposure).
- In response, most women are reshaping their daily routines and social lives – known as '**safety work**' - to manage risk.
- Around **two thirds (68%) of women change their behaviour** to reduce risk of victimisation, compared to around one third (34%) of men.
- **More than twice as many women as men avoid interacting with strangers online** (37% of women compared to just 14% of men).
- 26% of women restrict access to their online activity, while only 11% of men take this step.
- **When it comes to physical safety, the differences are striking**: over a quarter (27%) of women avoid certain routes when walking or exercising, and almost a quarter (23%) avoid going out alone. Just 3% of men restrict themselves in this way.

Background to the study

Sexual exposure (often known as 'indecent exposure' or 'cyberflashing' when online) has been historically overlooked and minimised as a form of violence against women and girls, despite its adverse impact on women and their freedom of movement. This trivialisation is being challenged, following the high-profile murders of three women – Libby Squire, Sarah Everard and Zara Aleena – by male strangers, all of whom had a history of non-contact sexual offending, including sexual exposure both online and in-person.

The Angiolini Inquiry was established after the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer whose previous non-contact sexual offending had been ignored and minimised. The Inquiry investigated police responses to non-contact offending, particularly in-person sexual exposure, recommending new training and guidance which the authors developed with the College of Policing.

Further, women and girls have challenged the growing prevalence and normalisation of online sexual exposure, namely cyberflashing (being sent penis images or videos without consent). This challenge has led to positive changes in legislation and public discourse. Experienced as violating, humiliating and threatening,

cyberflashing has now been criminalised in England and Wales, with the first conviction in 2024.

Given how common these forms of abuse appear to be, surprisingly little research has been undertaken on their prevalence, harms and links to other forms of sexual offending. Accordingly, this Research Briefing presents findings from the largest UK representative dataset of over 4,000 adults on their experiences of non-contact sexual offences, including in-person sexual exposure and cyberflashing.

What is the offence of exposure?

Exposure – often known as 'indecent exposure' or 'flashing' – is the physical display of genitals to strangers in public and is usually a form of exhibitionism or other sexual disorder. It has long been understood as a public nuisance, often prosecuted as a form of outraging public decency. Where the intention is to cause alarm or distress, it is an offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, with the law being strengthened in 2026 to include motives of sexual gratification. It is also a sexual offence in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

What's in a name? Why we use the term 'sexual exposure'

Men exposing their genitals physically in public has long been labelled 'flashing' or 'indecent exposure', and referred to as 'cyberflashing' when online, but these terms are flawed. 'Flashing' trivialises the conduct and suggests transient harm, while 'indecent' is rooted in notions of public morality and nuisance and has not, in fact, reflected the law for over two decades. What is needed is an umbrella term that encompasses both contexts for offending, enabling connections to be drawn both in terms of perpetration and impacts.

What is the offence of cyberflashing?

Cyberflashing is the digital distribution of penis images or videos to someone without their consent - also known as sending 'unsolicited dick pics'. It can be perpetrated anywhere, including public transport, professional contexts, and through online dating platforms.

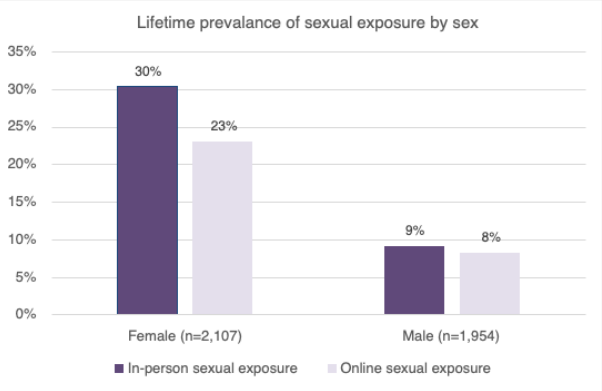
Cyberflashing was criminalised in England and Wales via the Online Safety Act in 2003 with the first conviction reported in 2024, and almost 4,000 offences recorded by the police in 2024-2025. Northern Ireland introduced a cyberflashing offence in 2022, with Scotland criminalising these behaviours since 2009.

We recommend using the term 'sexual exposure' to encompass both the offence of in-person exposure and cyberflashing. The concept of sexual exposure emphasises the violation of an individual's sexual autonomy and integrity, rather than a breach of societal 'decency' or moral norms or a transient harm. It also ensures the conduct is recognised as a sexual offence, noting that sexual offending is not only based on an offender's intent, but also in the nature of the conduct and victims' experiences.

Women report significant lifetime prevalence of sexual exposure including cyberflashing

- Sexual exposure victimisation is highly gendered and common in the lives of women (see Figure 1).
- Women are **over 3 times as likely as men to experience in person sexual exposure**, with 30% of women reporting an experience during their lifetime compared to just 9% of men.
- Women are also **nearly 3 times as likely as men to experience cyberflashing**, with 23% of women reporting this compared to just 8% of men.

Figure 1: Lifetime prevalence of sexual exposure by sex



Why this matters

- This pronounced gender gap underscores that **women are disproportionately targeted for both in-person and digital exposure**, reflecting a consistent pattern of gendered sexual violence across offline and online contexts.
- The prevalence of victimisation in women's lives also means that **sexual exposure offending is widespread rather than exceptional** and that women are more affected by sexual exposure than men.

From Streets to Screens: Women's Experiences of In-Person Sexual Exposure Increase with Age, Men's Declines

- There is a **pronounced gendered pattern in lifetime experiences** of in-person sexual exposure by age (see Figure 2).
- Among women, the experience of in-person sexual exposure increases steadily across age groups, with women aged 55 and over far more likely to report having ever been a victim (reflecting earlier research with smaller samples).
- In contrast, men report consistently lower lifetime prevalence than women at all ages, with a modest peak in early adulthood, followed by a marked decline.

Why this matters

- **There are interesting generational differences.** While younger women and men (aged 18-24) show similar rates of victimisation, older women (aged 45+) are more than twice as likely as men in the same age group to have experienced lifetime victimisation.
- Further, women over 45 are 5 times as likely as men of the same generation to have been victimised.
- These differences may reflect generational patterns in how such experiences are recognised and reported. Given the rapid change in technology use between the generations, it is important to also look at the rates of online sexual exposure (cyberflashing) by age and sex (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Lifetime prevalence of in-person exposure by sex and age

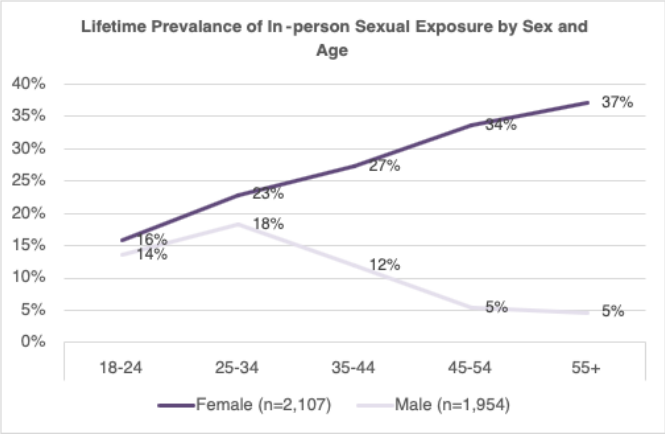
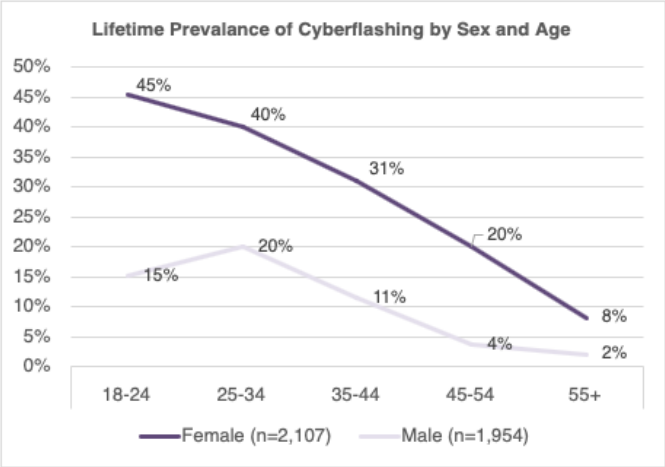


Figure 3: Lifetime prevalence of cyberflashing by sex and age



Cyberflashing is alarmingly common in the lives of younger women

- **Nearly half (45%) of women aged 18–24 report lifetime experiences of cyberflashing**, and 40% of women aged 25-34 compared to 20% of men.
- Men, by contrast, report far lower rates overall, peaking at about 20% from 25–44, before falling sharply to near zero in later life.

Why this matters

- There are strong generational patterns: **as our lives increasingly move online, victimisation for women follows. From the streets to screens, it is the same experience in a different space.**
- **Our findings on cyberflashing show higher prevalence** than previous studies. In 2018, YouGov found 41% of Millennial women had experienced cyberflashing, with their 2024 survey, finding that 36% of women under the age of 40 had received unsolicited sexual photos from someone who was not a dating, sexual or romantic partner.* While a 2021 Bumble survey with a smaller, non-representative sample (n=1,800) found that 48% of women aged 18-24 had been cyberflashed.

Women experience a profound loss of trust and safety after sexual exposure

- Most victims of sexual exposure report negative impacts on their mental health, body image, and freedom of movement and expression. Again, though, female victims are far more likely to be negatively affected.
- The **biggest impact for all victims of sexual exposure is on their sense of safety and trust in people**.
- **Women's loss of safety is profoundly more marked than men's**, with 1 in 2 reporting they feel less safe, compared to only 1 in 5 male victims (Figures 4 and 5).
- **Cyberflashing has a far more pronounced impact on trust for both female and male victims than in-person sexual exposure,** and it has a

much more significant impact on safety for women than for men (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Trust and safety impacts for victims of sexual exposure in-person

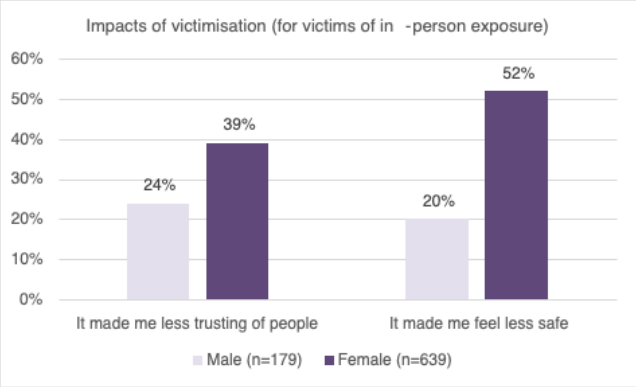
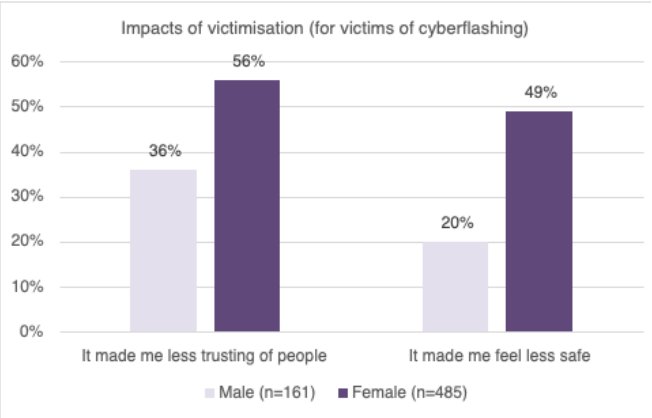


Figure 5: Trust and safety impacts for victims of cyberflashing



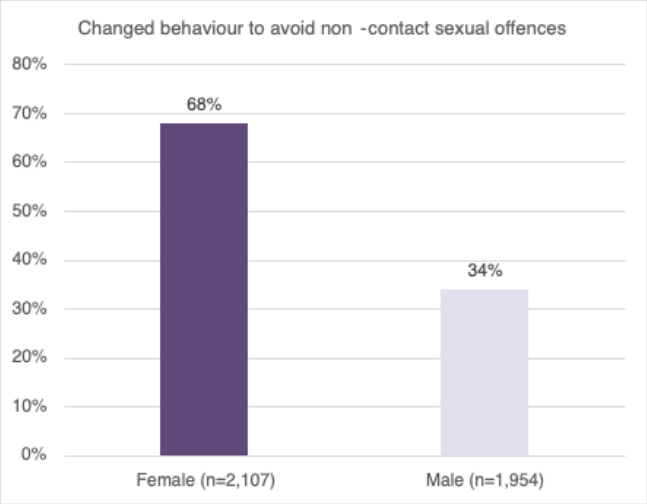
Why this matters

- Sexual exposure and cyberflashing are seriously harmful forms of abuse in and of themselves.
- Too often, these crimes are only considered harmful as the offender might escalate his behaviour to contact sexual offending.
- Our previous evidence review found that while some sexual exposure offenders do escalate their offending to contact offences, there is equally evidence of maintenance (maintaining a similar pattern of offending over time) and de-escalation, meaning it is better to understand offenders engaging in '**patterns of offending' rather than escalation.**
- The loss of safety experienced by most women following victimisation is a profound harm and for many results in a restriction of their freedom.

Women's freedom is restricted by sexual exposure (including cyberflashing)

- **Women are considerably more likely than men to alter their online and offline behaviours to avoid the risk of non-contact sexual offending such as sexual exposure**. These changes in behaviour have been termed 'safety work' and are a particularly gendered form of invisible labour.
- Over two thirds (68%) of women have changed their behaviour to avoid non-contact sexual offences, compared to just over one third (34%) of men (see Figure 6).
- In physical spaces **women are 9 times as likely as men to be restricting their freedom of movement**. 27% of women avoid certain routes when walking or exercising, 23% avoid going out alone, and 19% avoid public transport at certain times. Only 3% of men change their behaviour in these ways (Figure 7).
- In digital spaces, while many people change their online behaviour to stay safe, women do so at much higher rates than men: **37% of women avoid interacting with strangers online, compared to just 14% of men.** Similarly, 26% of women restrict access to their online activity, while only 11% of men take this step (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Changed behaviour (safety work) of all respondents



How do women change their behaviour?

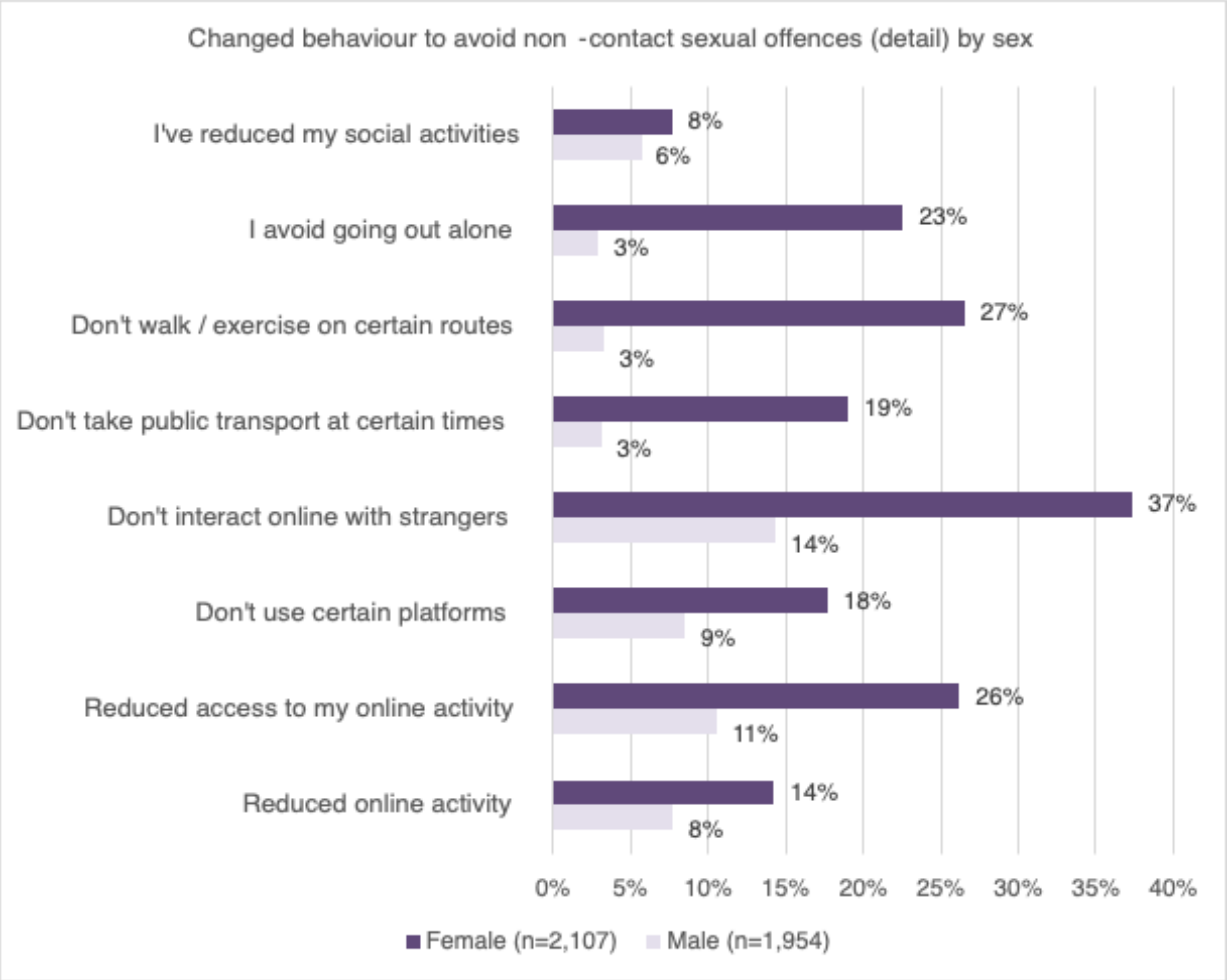
The quotes below are taken from free-text responses to the survey. They show the nature of the daily restrictions women are undertaking, as well as the extent of the freedom-based harms of this kind of offending.

- *"Don't go out alone after dark"*
- *"Always let someone know where I'm going, how I'm travelling and when I'll return. My friends all message each other when they get home."*
- *"No longer use public toilets unless an emergency"*
- *"I don't go out alone or use public transport"*
- *"I stopped doing things I enjoy as I no longer feel safe"*
- *"I don't dress the way I'd like to when going out/socialising"*

Why this matters

- **Women are having to undertake considerable 'safety work'**. This is the everyday effort women and girls are forced to carry out to protect themselves from sexual offending, such as constantly adjusting behaviour, managing technology, hyper-vigilance and limiting participation in offline and online life.
- These data reveal how **safety concerns limit women's ability to participate freely in digital spaces,** which reduces their opportunities for professional advancement, socialising, and public engagement and debate.
- The **gender gap is clear,** and it is even more pronounced offline, where women are significantly restricting their daily movements and making everyday decisions to try to avoid victimisation.
- The scale of these adjustments highlights the **disproportionate burden women face compared to men** and illustrate the gendered nature of these freedom-based harms.

Figure 7: Detail of changed behaviour (safety work) by sex



About this research

Following the recommendations of the Angiolini Inquiry into the murder of Sarah Everard, the College of Policing commissioned Fiona Vera-Gray and Clare McGlynn to undertake a research review of the evidence on sexual exposure, to better understand its prevalence, links to contact sexual offending and policing responses. The full report is available here.

Subsequently, the College commissioned the authors to undertake further research on non-contact sexual offending more generally to inform new training and guidance issued to all police forces.

We reviewed the evidence base on non-contact sexual offending, including exposure, voyeurism and image based sexual abuse offences, as well as conducting focus groups with police officers and criminal justice personnel to better understand policing responses.

To inform the training, we needed up-to-date evidence on prevalence and the impacts of offending on the lives of women and men across the UK. Accordingly, we designed an online survey and commissioned YouGov in September 2024 to conduct it across the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 2-5th

September 2024. The total sample size was 4,257 adults, with 4,061 completing the survey, producing the sample of 2,107 women and 1,954 men. The figures are weighted and representative of all UK adults (aged 18+). Ethical approval was granted by London Metropolitan University.

About the authors

Professor Fiona Vera-Gray is Co-Director of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University. She is an international expert on public sexual harassment and sexual offending, including acting as a specialist advisor to the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into public sexual harassment in 2017/18. She is the author of *Men's intrusion, women's embodiment: A critical analysis of street harassment* (2017), *The right amount of panic: How women trade freedom for safety* (2018), and *Women on Porn* (2024). She was part of Pillar Five on the Home Office-funded Operation Soteria, which seeks to transform rape and serious sexual offence investigations.

Professor Clare McGlynn KC (Hon) is a Professor of Law at Durham University with expertise on sexual offences, online abuse and pornography regulation. She is co-author of *Cyberflashing: Recognising Harms, Reforming Laws* (2021) and worked closely with victims, campaigners and politicians to introduce the new cyberflashing criminal offence. She gave oral and written evidence to the UK Parliament's Home Affairs Committee 2024 inquiry into non-contact sexual offences and was part of the UK Home Office-funded project Operation Soteria strengthening rape investigations. She is co-author of *Image-based sexual abuse: A study on the causes and consequences of non-consensual sexual imagery* (2020) and co-editor of *Rethinking rape law: International and comparative perspectives* (2010). Instagram: @claremcglynn_ LinkedIn: @clare-mcglynn

Jo Lovett is a Senior Research Fellow at the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University. Jo has led the research field on rape and the criminal justice system for two decades, from working on an influential rape attrition study in England and Wales, to a 2009 study looking at rape attrition across 11 European countries, and most recently leading the data pillar (Pillar Five) for Operation Soteria.

Dr Vicky Butterby is a Research Associate at Durham University and a member of Durham University's Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (Criva). She is currently working with the Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding to better understand young people's experiences of safety and harm within the school environment including how schools respond to extra familial harm, such as peer-on-peer violence, sexual violence and the sexual exploitation of young people.

*__YouGov 2018__: sample 2353 GB women aged 18-36; fieldwork: 12.7-8.9.2017.**YouGov 2024:** sample 4040 GB Adults; fieldwork: 22-27.3. 2024

Further reading

- Fiona Vera-Gray and Clare McGlynn, An evidence review of the connections between sexual exposure and contact sexual offending (College of Policing, 2024).
- Fiona Vera-Gray The Right Amount of Panic (Bristol University Press, 2018).
- Clare McGlynn and Kelly Johnson Cyberflashing: Recognising Harms, Reforming Laws (Bristol University Press, 2021)

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