

Domestic Abuse and the Lockdown

April 2020

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Domestic abuse has spiralled during the present Covid-19 lockdown crisis:

- Calls to the National Abuse Hotline in the UK soared by 65 per cent last month and by 25 per cent in a five day period last week
- Age UK reports 88 per cent increase in calls to its advice line
- Refuge helpline for victims has seen a 120 per cent increase in one day

Meanwhile, of 119 frontline services

- Three quarters (76 per cent) of respondents said they had to reduce service delivery due to Covid-19
- A third of services have reduced staff as a result of self-isolation of workers and the refusal by some schools to accept domestic abuse workers as 'key workers', which disproportionately affects the predominantly female work force in this sector
- 79 per cent said they were worried about increased risks for their clients

Our top recommendations:

1. Schools should classify all domestic abuse workers as key workers, so that their children may stay in school, releasing them to resume their work outside the home.
2. Refuges should be kept open in so far as this is possible and should have priority access to free tests/vaccinations.
3. Government should invest in a national campaign to ensure the public knows that despite Covid-19 victims of domestic abuse still have recourse to justice and the support network they are entitled to; and their perpetrators can still seek help to modify their behaviour.

Home can be the most dangerous place of all for victims of domestic abuse.

This is especially true during the national lockdown to contain coronavirus - an essential public health measure that risks trapping victim with perpetrator. For many, this is a time of intense stress, when fear of infection is compounded by financial worries, limited movement, and the attendant increase in alcohol abuse and addictions such as online gambling.

Simultaneously, the lockdown is compromising traditional safeguarding. Self-isolation and school closures have affected the number of service providers. Government has exempted women's refuges from closure, so that they may continue to offer a safe haven to victims, but social distancing measures affect multiple occupancy in these refuges, while many face closure because of Covid-19-induced staff shortages. Victim support - counselling, referral services, etc - is being limited to on-line, which can prove difficult to access for victims living with little privacy and in close proximity to their abuser¹. Counselling for perpetrators for behaviour modification is also limited to on-line². Traditional connection points - schools and GP surgeries, but also churches, hair dressers, mikvahs (baths used by Orthodox Jewish women) - where victims are identified, and where they can seek help, have become more difficult or impossible to access.

1. "Domestic abuse frontline service COVID-19 survey results" SafeLives March 2020
2. www.respect.uk.net/respect-releases-covid-19-guidance-for-practitioners

These extraordinary developments call for an innovative and multi-faceted safeguarding approach, engaging statutory and voluntary bodies as well as the public at large. The CSJ, through its alliance of grass-roots community-based charities and voluntary organisations in every part of the UK, has identified a number of creative responses to the crisis. We also have connected with front line services, national and local police forces, as well as the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office to find how offers have been, or could be, adapted to these unprecedented circumstances. The feedback we have collected has helped us draw together examples of best practice and key requests from statutory and voluntary bodies. It has also enabled us to compile a set of recommendations to inform government policy and support the safeguarding of the most vulnerable among us. These recommendations are especially timely given the Domestic Abuse Bill now going through Parliament.

Even before the present crisis, the number of women killed by their partner (or ex-partner) had risen dramatically - by one third in just one year³. Across England and Wales 1.6 million women experienced domestic abuse last year. Although most victims are women, a significant proportion of domestic abuse cases involve children and elderly relatives coming under attack. Domestic abuse represents a third of all violent crime recorded by the police. In 2019, the Home Office estimated the total cost of domestic abuse for victims who were identified in a single year at £66bn⁴.

The cost to society goes beyond economic losses, however. For victims of all ages, the physical and psychological impact of abuse continues well after the violence stops, affecting their long-term mental and physical health. A quarter of high-harm perpetrators are repeat offenders and some have at least six different victims⁵. Dame Vera Baird QC, Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, has found an overlap⁶ between children's experience of domestic abuse and their offending behaviour. Research shows that living with domestic abuse between parents is as psychologically harmful to children as when they are direct victims of physical abuse themselves.⁷

The Domestic Abuse Bill recognises that abuse takes many forms - including economic; emotional; manipulative and controlling behaviour: the online gambler starving his elderly grandparents in order to extract money for his habit and the husband who checks his wife's mobile phone several times a day both exhibit abusive behaviour⁸.

The present Covid-19 lockdown risks magnifying the scale of what was already an alarming scenario. The Home Secretary recognised this in her statement on 29th March 2020, when she pledged continued support for victims of domestic abuse, and assured them that their recourse to justice and protection would not be affected by the pandemic.

Front line services and charities have expressed their concern lest there be a reduction in the number of incidents reported, due to the heightened risk for whistle-blowers isolated by lockdown. SafeLives fear that⁹ this will mean domestic abuse will slide down the police agenda, at a time when victims are at their most vulnerable: a recent report from DFID¹⁰ reveals that police in China and Italy, where quarantine measures have been in place for longer than in the UK, have reported a dramatic increase in domestic abuse cases - such incidents have tripled in some areas of China, while Italian police say they have registered a 30 per cent spike.

3. "Domestic violence affects us all", Robert Jendirch, 16th February, 2020

4. www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-economic-and-social-costs-of-domestic-abuse

5. www.driveproject.org.uk

6. www.victimskommissioner.org.uk/published-reviews/sowing-the-seeds-childrens-experience-of-domestic-abuse-and-criminality

7. www.victimskommissioner.org.uk/published-reviews/sowing-the-seeds-childrens-experience-of-domestic-abuse-and-criminality

8. www.driveproject.org.uk

9. www.safelives.org.uk/covid-19

10. "Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on violence against women and girls", DfID, 16th March, 2020

One of the country's top police officers, Louisa Rolfe OBE, however, confirmed this week that domestic abuse remains a priority for all police forces. Data from the 43 police forces across England and Wales shows a diverse picture in terms of victims' reports: police in Avon and Somerset are reporting a 20.9 per cent increase in recorded incidents since lockdown began; others have seen a reduction in numbers - in Derbyshire, for instance police reported DASH daily average on 1st February = 63, on 1st April = 57.89. Recorded domestic abuse crime on 1st February = 57, on 1st April = 47.57. Police should recognise that a dip in reported incidents may be an inevitable consequence of fearful whistle-blowers unable to find space or time away from their tormentors.

While the trend in reports to police remains unclear, helplines and support websites have registered a huge increase in calls and web traffic. Calls to the National Abuse Hotline in the UK soared by 65 per cent last month¹¹, while helplines focused on family courts and male victims of violence have also reported increased calls. Age UK reports an 88 per cent increase in calls to its adviceline. The calls to the Respect Adviceline (for people worried about their own abusive behaviour) are showing an increase in people with mental health challenges presenting¹². Refuge service for victims has seen a huge increase in web traffic and calls¹³.

Lockdown also has affected two key components of the justice system - courts and prisons. Criminal and civil courts are reducing their hearings to accommodate only the most urgent cases. Although a proposal to move court hearings online, as took place in China¹⁴ is under review, applications for Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs), Domestic Violence Protection Notices (DVPNs) and Non-Molestation Orders (NMO)s are bound to be affected, as the work of court and tribunals is being consolidated in fewer buildings. The Ministry of Justice plans also to reduce the potential for Covid-19 contagion in prisons by allowing prisoners sentenced for low level abuse (which disproportionately includes domestic abuse) to be released on Home Detention Curfew (HDC). This move concerns charities and front-line services, who fear perpetrators will return home to continue their abuse.

Domestic abuse victims in rural areas are particularly vulnerable in this crisis. A recent report by the National Rural Crime Network¹⁵ highlights the similarities between rural victims of domestic violence and those in lockdown: isolation accentuates the victims' feeling of despair and dents their resolve to report their abuser. In addition, isolation in a rural context, where both the transport and internet networks are patchy, can be even more devastating.

The present lockdown puts the onus on police to take a pro-active, intelligence-led approach rather than rely on report. Yet this new demand on police forces comes at a time when they face depleted resources, caused by central government cuts of 16 per cent since 2008/9 as well as Covid-19 isolation. Despite this, many forces are stepping up to the challenge. Hampshire police, for example, have distributed posters with local helpline and local refuge numbers through supermarket chains and pharmacies. This is being copied by other police forces in their areas. The Met has produced a poster for national use with the numbers of national front-line services. Emerging global evidence¹⁶ in dealing with domestic abuse in China, Singapore and Italy points to the importance of awareness-raising poster and social media campaigns.

In North Yorkshire, police are adapting empty hotels to serve as refuges and working with the local authority volunteer scheme, engaging volunteers to be on the look-out for signs of vulnerability when visiting homes.

Other constabularies are also encouraging alternative 'extra eyes and ears' to help them spot victims and perpetrators: supermarket staff, GPs and surgery staff, pharmacists and school staff - in those schools still open to deliver FSM and food parcels - are being tasked with being on the look-out for signs of abuse. In Cumbria, police have asked postal workers and delivery drivers to do the same.

11. www.thehotline.org/resources/statistics

12. www.respectphoneline.org.uk

13. DA Commissioner's Office

14. "Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on violence against women and girls", DfID, 16th March, 2020

15. www.ruralabuse.co.uk

16. "Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on violence against women and girls", DfID, 16th March 2020

The highly successful Operation Encompass, pioneered by police and schools in Devon and Cornwall, allows police who have been called in to inspect an incident of domestic abuse where children are victims or witnesses to pass on confidential information to the children's teachers. During Covid-19, police collaborate with Heads and key adults within school to offer these children a place in school under the vulnerable groups allocation.

The Criminal Records Office has asked that local authorities¹⁷ agree to keep open refuges and put in place protocols to keep victims safe from contagion. Police, women's groups and charities have also petitioned the Ministry of Justice to prioritise domestic abuse court hearings.

National front-line providers are finding considerable differences in local authorities' response to the Covid-19 crisis, which they have reported¹⁸ at the weekly conference chaired by Nicole Jacobs, the DA Commissioner. While some local authorities, such as Hampshire, are distributing details of local help lines and local refuges, as well as national services; others are failing to communicate on this issue. Many local authorities have shown¹⁹ significant support to their local service providers, for example releasing funds to allow for remote working; but others continue to demand that competitive tendering be completed by April, at a time when services are prioritising front-line support rather than applying for funding.

The recent Victims' Commissioner Report, "Sowing the Seeds",²⁰ found that different local authorities had different thresholds for interventions in domestic abuse cases. Recognising that those local authorities under greatest financial pressure may opt to address only cases that constitute 'greatest risk', police are using their on-going Multi-Agency Risk Assessment conferences, which include probation and education services, to drive for consistency²¹ in addressing this crime.

Covid-19 has undoubtedly affected charities that deliver frontline services in terms of increased risk to clients and reduced service delivery. Last week, SafeLives, the national charity, surveyed²² 119 frontline services to find that three quarters (76 per cent) of respondents said they had to reduce service delivery due to Covid-19; a third of services have reduced staff as a result of self-isolation of workers and the refusal by some schools to accept domestic abuse workers as 'key workers', which disproportionately affects the predominantly female work force in this sector. 79 per cent of front-line workers said they were worried of increased risks to their clients during this crisis. Multiple accommodation refuges carry a risk of contagion for victims; as do alternatives such as hostels and budget hotels. Safe accommodation for perpetrators, away from their victims, is also challenging when lockdown prevents their staying with relatives. Unsuitable accommodation puts the victim at risk by encouraging the perpetrator to return to her home.

The CSJ has consulted its alliance of local grassroots charities dealing with domestic abuse to find that they are pivoting their services to hotlines, phone consultations and virtual sessions. Many are adopting a chatroom approach, so that victims do not need to speak, and promoting the use of APPS such as Bright Sky, from the Vodafone Foundation and Hestia, which enables abuse victims to find local support. In Cheshire for instance, MyCWA support staff is taking on 1-2-1 case loads of adults and children by video or phone. They are promoting Chayn, the global online volunteer network and its 'Soul Medicine', online courses providing bite-sized support, delivered in disguised emails. Chayn is also launching a secure Telegram channel to provide support during this time.

Respect, the national charity which offers counselling to perpetrators, have developed communications materials aimed at driving perpetrators towards their phoneline, as well as to friends and families of higher risk perpetrators who would not engage.

17. Interview with ACRO, 3rd April, 2020

18. DA Commissioner's Office conference notes, 30th March 2020

19. DA Commissioner's Office conference notes, 23rd March 2020

20. www.victimskommissioner.org.uk/published-reviews/sowing-the-seeds-childrens-experience-of-domestic-abuse-and-criminality

21. Interview with ACRO, 3rd April, 2020

22. "Domestic abuse frontline service COVID-19 survey results" SafeLives March 2020

Despite embracing the move to digital, many charities (as well as front line services) report struggling with IT and tech challenges in delivering services remotely under the current circumstances. The sector has suffered from chronic under-investment, which has left many with poor-quality IT infrastructure.

Covid-19 is having an unprecedented impact on every area of national life. The Home Secretary has vowed that the pandemic and its attendant lockdown will not diminish the government's resolve to combat domestic abuse. The police have pledged their support. There are many encouraging signs that statutory and voluntary services are successfully adapting their offer to eradicate domestic abuse in these new circumstances. This message needs to be communicated to the wider community - and especially to vulnerable victims and perpetrators of this crime. Legitimate anxiety has fuelled doubts and suspicions about the offer to those struggling behind locked doors. A myth-busting national campaign is needed to reassure the public that the police and support agencies are continuing to respond to the needs of victims; all agencies remain open to provide advice and guidance to victims; perpetrator can still receive help and interventions if they are struggling with their behaviour and emotions; and the police, CPS and courts remain operational to pursue necessary prosecutions.

Our findings, drawn from interviews with police and front line services in this area, suggest that initiatives already exist, at a national and local level, that merit replication; and that a few additional schemes could further serve the sector. Our recommendations:

1. Schools should classify all domestic abuse workers as key workers, so that their children may stay in school, releasing them to resume their work outside the home.
2. Refuges should be kept open in so far as this is possible. They should have priority and free access to tests/vaccinations.
3. The pro-active, intelligence-led approach adopted by police in Hampshire, Cumbria, and North Yorkshire, which engages members of the public to serve as their 'extra eyes and ears' during lockdown, should be replicated across the forces.
4. Police-led Multi-Agency Risk Assessment conferences, including probation and education services, should continue to drive for consistency across Local Authorities in terms of their approach to domestic abuse cases.
5. A flexible and easily accessible fund, as proposed by SafeLives, which front line services according to turnover, can apply for and spend during this six month lockdown period.
6. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should advise Local Authorities to put a stop to competitive procurement for specialist services.
7. "Encompass Operation", which has been successful in schools across Devon and Cornwall, should be replicated nationally, allowing police to identify vulnerable pupils to Heads and key staff.
8. Online schooling can be used to share general, and possibly more focused messages to children and parents that give advice and what to do if they are feeling threatened.

During the Covid-19 global public health crisis we have an added responsibility to reach out to those who are especially vulnerable - the women, the elderly, children, and men who suffer from domestic abuse. Many statutory and voluntary bodies have shown that they can adapt to meet the challenge. Their efforts should be recognised - and copied more widely. We hope that our summary of best practice and our recommendations for improving operations can be of use to this sector, and to Government.

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