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Final Report to the UKRI-ESRC

Responding to the Covid-19 domestic abuse crisis: developing a rapid police evidence base

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Introduction

The project aimed to provide timely empirical evidence on how Covid-19 and related lockdown measures has impacted domestic abuse recorded by police,¹ and associated policing responses. This research was conducted in partnership with seven police forces in England, the Home Office, the College of Policing, and the National Police Chief's Council. The project analysed all domestic abuse crimes reported to seven police services in England since the start of the pandemic (March 2020) until the end of April 2021. The difference in differences method and data from the two previous years (2018 and 2019) were used to test whether the introduction and lifting of lockdowns had a statistically significant impact on the volume and/or nature of domestic abuse coming to police attention during the pandemic. In addition, 73 officers from four police services were interviewed between June 2020 and June 2021 to triangulate the quantitative results with how officers experienced, made sense of, and responded to domestic abuse as the pandemic unfolded.

Methodology

Police administrative data and statistical analysis

We use statistical methods to examine all domestic abuse-flagged incidents and crimes reported to seven police forces since the onset of the pandemic and comparing these data to those of the previous two years to account for seasonal and long-term trends (i.e. data timeframe 1 March 2018 – 30 April 2021). The sample (or rather, census data) used in this study means that findings are representative for the seven forces in the study. The seven forces include small, medium and large forces, urban and rural areas, some of the poorest and most wealthy areas in the country, varying levels of crime, and a wide range of geographies within England. Additionally, three of the seven forces provided detailed domestic abuse risk assessment data (using the DASH or DARA questionnaire) officers in England and Wales must complete at every domestic incident. This allows a more in-depth analyses of how the pandemic impacts on relationship and abuse contexts, and any changes in the prevalence of known domestic abuse risk factors.

¹ It is important to stress that the police data used in this research do not allow us to make direct inferences to actual levels of domestic abuse; e.g. multiple barriers to reporting mean that only a fraction of domestic abuse is captured in recorded police data. However, studying police-recorded domestic abuse is important because it encompasses all cases coming into contact with the police, and where we expect some form of police response.

Police interviews

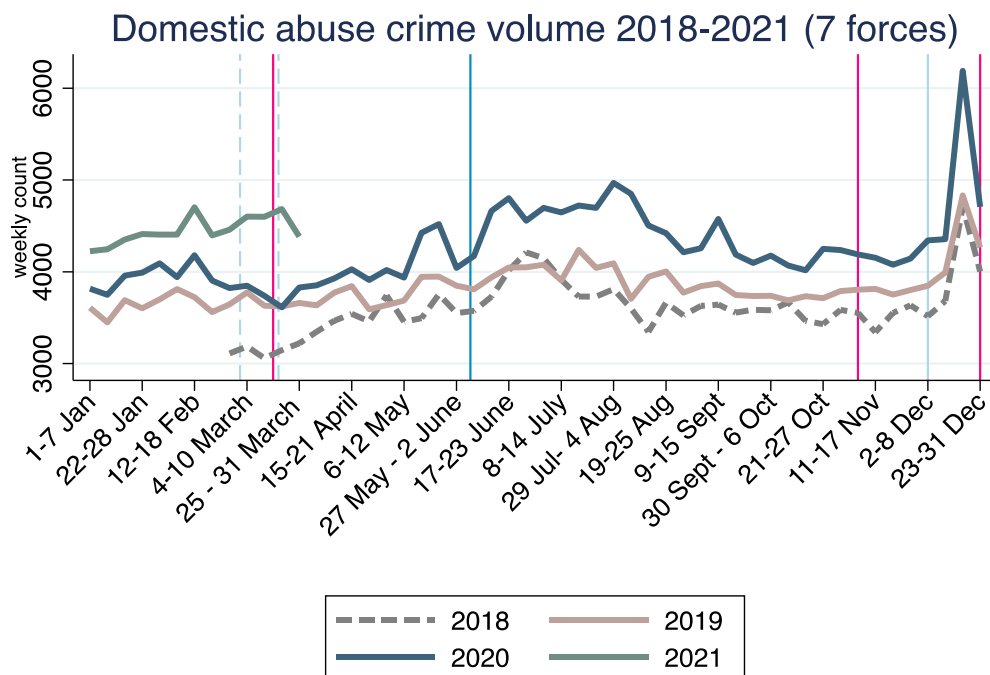
We conducted a total of 73 phone interviews with officers of various ranks and roles from four forces between June 2020 and June 2021 about how they perceive and are responding to domestic abuse to understand their experiences of policing domestic abuse across the changing context of the pandemic, and to identify emerging challenges and best practice in the frontline response. The findings are being triangulated with our statistical analyses.

Findings

Part I: The impact of the pandemic on police recorded domestic abuse

1. The impact of the pandemic on domestic abuse: a crisis which pre-dates the pandemic

- 1.1 Our study used difference in difference regression and data from the two years preceding the onset of the pandemic to test whether the observed levels of police recorded domestic abuse in 2020 has been statistically significantly altered by the onset of the first lockdown in March 2020. The results suggest long-term trends largely account for the steady rise and high levels of police-recorded domestic abuse in six of the seven forces included in the study (*Graph 1*). As others have noted, this means that Covid-19 is shining a light on a pre-existing domestic abuse crisis – a ‘shadow pandemic’ (UN Women [2020](#)) – which pre-dates the global spread of the virus (see also Women’s Aid 2020, Imkaan [2020](#)). Our findings demonstrate that perpetrators do not need the Covid-19 context to entrap victim-survivors; they were already doing so before lockdown.



Graph 1: Domestic abuse crime volume 2018-2021

1.2 Unlike the domestic abuse charities, which have experienced a sharp rise in calls from victim-survivors and saw early evidence of domestic abuse cases escalating (Home Affairs Select Committee [2020](#)), participating police forces saw a small and short-lived reduction in domestic abuse reports shortly before and during the first two weeks of the first national lockdown on 23rd March 2020. However, we found that the easing of lockdown measures over the summer months had a pronounced impact on domestic abuse coming to police attention – with every force participating in our study experiencing a statistically significant, substantial rise in first-time reports of domestic abuse.

1.3 The increase in domestic abuse coming to police attention following the easing of lockdown restrictions is also supported by our analysis of DASH risk assessment data, where there was a statistically significant increase in July and August 2020 (when Covid rates and social distancing restrictions were at their lowest since the start of the pandemic), with victim-survivors disclosing to police: that the abuse was getting worse and more frequent; that they were experiencing an increase in harassing and stalking behaviours; and that there was an increase in abuser substance misuse and mental health problems. Collectively, these findings point to a delayed Covid-context impact on domestic abuse, where increased reports and escalating domestic abuse only comes to police attention following the easing of social distancing measures.

2. Covid-19 context is being used by abusers to extend and conceal their abuse

2.1 As stated above (1.3) our data demonstrates that in the Covid-19 context, victims are disclosing the domestic abuse is getting worse and that perpetrator mental health is declining. This is supported by similar findings in other research conducted by key domestic abuse stakeholders (see e.g. Drive 2020, Women's Aid 2020, Imkaan [2020](#), Scottish Women's Aid 2020); similarly, our research shows that some domestic abusers have used the coronavirus and lockdown context as a device to further their abuse - to intensify and conceal their violence, coercion and control. Officers were able to identify such behaviours as manifesting in the cases they attended, and have reported examples which include abusers using the coronavirus and associated legislation/the threat of infection: as a ruse to isolate victims from friends and family, to prevent them from leaving the house, to coerce them into sharing accommodation, to extend their abuse through Covid-related child care and child contact measures, and minimising or blaming their abusive behaviours on the stresses associated with the pandemic.

3. Restrictions are keeping victims in abusive relationships for longer

3.1 During the initial lockdown, there was a sharp, statistically significant decline in victim-survivors telling police they had recently separated or had tried to separate (via DASH responses), indicating that Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and the associated socioeconomic strains are making it more difficult for victims to escape abusive relationships.

3.2 Our data indicates that these separations are delayed rather than cancelled, only taking place once significant social distancing restrictions are lifted; over the summer

months, as lockdown measures were eased, there was a statistically significant spike in abusive relationship separations. Across the census data, the average number of weekly DASH responses indicating separation is 340. However, in June and July 2020 the weekly count of separations peaked, at 420 and 409 respectively. For comparison, only Christmas 2019 has had a similar number of reported separations, 419, meaning the level of separations recorded in the summer of 2020 is otherwise unprecedented. This finding is crucially important, given that it is widely established in domestic abuse research that separations can be a trigger point for the escalation of domestic abuse-related harm and risk. The recent UK Femicide Census, for example, found that 43% of domestic homicides occurred after victims had separated or attempted to separate from their abusive partner (Femicide Census 2020, see also Mockton-Smith 2018).

- 3.3 Accordingly, we recommend police forces and other domestic abuse related policy-makers and services prepare for a surge in separations and attempts to separate, and an associated escalation high-risk and high-harm domestic abuse reports following the significant easing of lockdown restrictions in spring, and as vaccines are rolled out. Our data indicates that 2021 might pose a bigger challenge than 2020 to police forces responding to domestic abuse, because of the potential for significant escalation in domestic abuse as the pandemic starts to recede, which will need to be managed alongside the expected surge in other forms of criminality and police demand (see [Farrell and Birks, 2020](#))

4. Covid-19 is having a differential impact on victims of domestic abuse, making reporting harder for those most at risk.

- 4.1 Our research findings demonstrate the impact of Covid-19 and associated lockdown measures on police-recorded domestic abuse is complex, and has differential effects on different subgroups. These differential impacts are often masked at the aggregate level, emphasising the importance of detailed statistical analysis. In one force, for example, a decrease in ex-partner abuse masked an increase in reports of abuse taking place in ongoing intimate partner relationships. In five forces, there is also evidence of a delayed lockdown impact on first-time reports of domestic abuse, as first-time reports started to increase once lockdown measures eased over the summer.
- 4.2 There was no statistically significant change in victim or perpetrator recorded demographics (e.g. recorded ethnicity, age or gender) in the domestic abuse coming to police attention. This means there has been no recorded change in reporting from minoritised individuals or communities, despite interlocking inequalities compounding their risk of domestic abuse during the pandemic and adding additional barriers to reporting (Imkaan [2020](#), Anitha and Gill [2021](#)). Additionally, in some forces there were fewer reports from victims with a previous and/or repeat history of reported domestic abuse. These findings combined indicate that the pandemic and lockdown measures are making reporting domestic abuse harder for those most at risk. Accordingly, we recommend that additional, targeted victim outreach and safeguarding measures might be beneficial for further mitigating this concerning gap in reporting, indicated in our data.

Part II: The Impact of Covid-19 on Police Responses to Domestic Abuse

5. Domestic abuse has been a priority to police forces, with significant innovations and additional policy measures introduced

- 5.1 Since the initial onset of the pandemic, domestic abuse has been an area of key concern and a priority policy response area for forces participating in this study. Interviews with force Domestic Abuse Leads make it clear that partner forces have adopted significant policy innovations and safeguarding measures to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic while still effectively responding to domestic abuse. Many officers across various roles were also able to identify a range of additional challenges the pandemic context posed to domestic abuse victim-survivors, including being locked down with abusers, abuse escalation, having avenues to support and safety restricted, increased barriers to reporting, especially for black and minoritised individuals, and contextual risk accelerants such as a decline in victim and/or perpetrator mental health.
- 5.2 Through our research we identified a range of operational adaptations made by our partner police forces to respond to domestic abuse in the changing Coronavirus context, which have been significant in both scale and scope. Policing innovations and additional policy measures introduced include: strategic coordination of force responses to domestic abuse during the pandemic at a senior management level; new and enhanced strategies for victim-outreach and awareness-raising campaigns; enhanced safeguarding activities, such as repeat-victim and repeat perpetrator contact and new risk management strategies; additional input for officers and in-force communications regarding domestic abuse prioritisation and practice; technological and practice innovations in responding to and investigating domestic abuse; fine-grain police domestic abuse and performance data monitoring, and attuning police responses and directives accordingly; communication and information sharing with other forces and statutory agencies; engaging in evidence-based policing, working closely with academics, consulting academic research and international data on domestic abuse in other jurisdictions; and finally, adopting additional health and safety measures to protect police officers, staff and service users, and to maintain the feasibility of police responses to domestic abuse (see also [Walklate *et al* 2021](#)).
- 5.3 Officers identified the relative drop in police demand experienced during the initial phases of the pandemic increased their capacity for responding to domestic abuse. Specifically, officers reported they felt the reduced demands on their resources meant they had more time to support and engage with victims, explore avenues of investigation and safeguarding, and resolve any open or backlogged investigations in specialist units. Many forces reflected that, due to this increased capacity, they expected an overall improvement in domestic abuse outcomes and victim satisfaction during the earlier stages of the pandemic. Additionally, interviews with officers highlighted that the pandemic context has limited some areas of domestic abuse outreach and engagement (e.g. through normal neighbourhood policing opportunities) but has increased engagement in other ways (e.g. through increased use of online technologies).
- 5.4 As the pandemic has progressed, however, police officers are reporting their perception that demand has increased again and returned to almost pre-lockdown levels, with their workload being further compounded by the additional demands of enforcing social distancing legislation, and what many officers perceive to be an increase in domestic

abuse volume (see 1.2, 1.3). More recent interviews with officers have emphasised the pressures of increased demand on policing over the past year, compounded by police funding cuts which pre-date the pandemic, and its negative impact on staff capacity and well-being. Officers working in several different police departments reported facing significant staff shortages due to Covid-19 related staff sickness and/or staff members self-isolating. Officers also conveyed the cumulative demands and challenges they are experiencing as they have continued to work as key police workers across the pandemic period, disclosing: a decline in their mental health and well-being, an increased sense of stress, isolation and threat related to their work, regularly being threatened with being infected by the virus by hostile members of the public, and being concerned about catching the coronavirus and passing it on to loved ones.

5.5 Despite the cumulative challenges and demands the pandemic has placed on police officers, interview participants broadly felt well supported by their force, and had found communication from their senior management, the NPCC, and the College of Policing helpful for informing their practice. Some officers noted they would find further, additional and advanced communication from central government helpful before significant announcements are made to members of the public (for example relating to significant changes to lockdown restrictions) to facilitate advanced planning and resource allocation – both generally and specifically in the context of responding to domestic abuse.

6. Existing problems relating to police responses to domestic abuse amplified in pandemic context: identification, risk management and positive action

6.1 Although officers were generally conscious of the lockdown and pandemic context generating additional risks and barriers to reporting for victim-survivors of domestic abuse, when interviewed some officers perceived they were attending an increased number of what they identified to be ‘lower-level’ domestic incidents (i.e. rather than encountering increased cases of ongoing patterns of domestic abuse). Echoing broader public discourses about domestic abuse during the pandemic (see e.g. Williamson et al 2020), officers often posited these incidents as ‘situational’ domestic ‘arguments’ between members of the public who would not normally have contact with the police, which had ‘got out of hand’ and been precipitated by the stresses and demands of the pandemic. Certainly, this perception of lower-level, situational incidents is not supported by our analysis of the DASH data (see 1.3), where ongoing and escalating domestic abuse has been identified. This finding parallels existing research which suggests that some frontline officers can miss ongoing patterns of domestic abuse and coercive control, which is crucial for responding appropriately to the experiences of victim-survivors, and effective victim safeguarding (Myhill and Johnson [2016](#), Barlow et al [2020](#)).

6.2 Interviews with frontline officers also reflected some confusion, certainly in the initial months, about what constituted police taking ‘positive action’ in responding to domestic abuse in the new and evolving pandemic context. One such example was officer concern about separating parties as a safeguarding measure, in cases where there were no recorded complaints and/or an arrestable offence identified; here officers noted their concern about the potential risk of leaving parties in the same household after a domestic incident, but simultaneously their concern of requesting that one party leave to stay with another household, and potentially put other

members of the public at risk of contracting the coronavirus. Officers could identify alternative positive action strategies in such circumstances, including finding suitable alternative accommodation without clinically-vulnerable inhabitants, hotel accommodation, and other measures where appropriate, such as arrest, use of breach of the peace legislation, domestic violence protection orders, and evidence-led prosecutions.

- 6.3 Uncertainty about the use of positive action was identified, at least in part, as being underpinned by officer concerns about the potential risk posed to victims, and simultaneously concerns about proportionality – mirroring broader tensions relating to police legitimacy that have emerged during the pandemic (see e.g. Tuffin 2020). This concern about proportionality is particularly significant, given some officers’ perception they were attending a number of situational domestic arguments precipitated by the stresses of the pandemic, rather than cases of escalating domestic abuse and ongoing coercive control.
- 6.4 As per the evidence-based policing approach adopted by the force partners in this project (see 5.2) we are continuing to engage with police forces about these issues relating to appropriate domestic abuse identification, risk management and positive action. However, during the interviews, officers also reflected how policing in the pandemic context has increased the scope for officer discretion and individual decision making, which indicates that further input in this regard across all police forces might be beneficial - particularly providing further guidance about domestic abuse identification, use of risk assessment (e.g. DASH, THRVE) and the National Police Decision Making model, which is specifically tailored to the current pandemic context.

Summary of findings

- A. **The domestic abuse crisis pre-dates the pandemic:** our results suggest that in most police forces long-term trends largely account for the rise and high levels of police-recorded domestic abuse, although there are signs of increased reporting of domestic abuse and domestic abuse escalation when lockdown measures ease.
- B. **Covid-19 context is being used by abusers:** domestic abusers are using the lockdown to intensify or conceal their violence, coercion and control.
- C. **Restrictions are keeping victims in abusive relationships for longer:** there was a sharp decline in victims disclosing to police they have recently separated during the first national lockdown in March 2020, indicating lockdown restrictions are making it more difficult to exit abusive relationships.
- D. **Prepare for anticipated surge in high-risk cases when lockdown measures ease:** when social distancing restrictions ease there is an increase in domestic abuse separation, with spikes in separations previously only observed at Christmas. Separations are a known trigger for domestic abuse escalation, including homicide. We conclude that police forces, policy-makers and domestic abuse services must prepare for a surge in high-risk and high-harm reports when the current lockdown eases and as vaccines are rolled out.
- E. **Covid-19 is having a differential impact on victims of domestic abuse:** the impact of lockdown on police-recorded domestic abuse is complex, with differential effects on different subgroups, which are often masked at the aggregate level.
- F. **Lockdown is making reporting harder for high-risk and/or black and minoritised victims:** some forces experienced a drop in reports from repeat victims

of domestic abuse, and there has been no statistically significant increase in black and minoritised victim reports, despite interlocking inequalities compounding their risk of domestic abuse – both indicating Covid-19 is making reporting domestic abuse to the police harder for those most at risk.

- G. **Domestic abuse has been a priority to police forces and officers, with significant innovations and measures introduced:** all partner forces have clearly identified domestic abuse as a key priority, and have adopted significant policy innovations and safeguarding measures to adapt to the challenges of the changing pandemic context and deliver an effective police response to domestic abuse.
- H. **Existing problems relating to policing domestic abuse, such as identification and risk management, are amplified in the pandemic context:** our data suggests some officers are missing ongoing patterns of domestic abuse and coercive control, by misinterpreting domestic incidents as being ‘situational’ and caused by the stresses of the pandemic. We additionally identify officers’ concerns about positive action, proportionality and diminished resources in the pandemic context, which has impacted their practice.
- I. **Additional strategic planning, resources and guidance is required to facilitate effective police responses to domestic abuse:** given our findings, we recommend domestic abuse must continue to be prioritised as Covid-19’s impact continues to unfold. Particularly, we recommend a strategic plan be put in place to prepare for a potential surge in reports following lockdown easing, supported by additional resources and guidance for officers (see Sections 7-12 for recommendations).

Recommendations

7. Recommendation: Plan and prepare for a surge in high-risk and high-harm cases of domestic abuse as restrictions start to ease.

- 7.1 We recommend the Home Office, UK police forces, other agencies and organisations involved in responding to domestic abuse plan and prepare for a surge in high-risk reports as lockdown restrictions ease in 2021. Police forces have expressed that advanced communication from the Home Office about any anticipated changes in pandemic or lockdown conditions would facilitate their strategic planning and resource allocation for responding to domestic abuse in this regard.

8. Recommendation: Adopt further outreach measures to engage with victims of domestic abuse

- 8.1 Given the ongoing disparity between the increased demand for service experienced by domestic abuse support organisations and the less significant changes in domestic abuse reported to the police, we recommend further outreach measures are adopted to engage with victim-survivors of domestic abuse, and to encourage reporting to the police. Particularly, as a result of our findings, we suggest (further) targeted attempts be made to engage with high-risk and repeat victims of domestic abuse, and/or black and minoritised women.

9. Recommendation: Issue further guidance for police officers about responding to domestic abuse in the pandemic context.

- 9.1 We recommend that officers be provided with further guidance and input tailored specifically to the current pandemic context, addressing domestic abuse responses, domestic abuse identification, positive action, and effective risk assessment and management. This input should include opportunities for officer dialogue, and use of concrete best practice examples of professional judgement and positive action under social distancing restrictions to facilitate officer learning.

10. Recommendation: Introduce systematic recording and reporting on police positive action

- 10.1 As part of the data scoping and analysis of police administrative data for the quantitative branch of our study, we have gained an in-depth insight into police recording practices. We found that police forces do not routinely and systematically record positive action activities, often including arrest on the incident and crime recording information management systems. This means that at present, there is no systematic recording, monitoring or evaluation of positive action and its impact on case outcomes, re-offending, repeat victimisation and reporting. Given criminal justice outcomes are only afforded to a small minority of domestic-abuse flagged crimes (see e.g. ONS 2019, 2020) and positive action forms a major part of police activity and the service/intervention victim-survivors receive from police forces, we recommend recording and reporting requirements to be updated to include positive action.

11. Recommendation: Ensure the focus on domestic abuse continues beyond the pandemic, and police forces are sufficiently equipped to respond

- 11.1 Our findings stress the importance of retaining a firm focus on addressing domestic abuse going forwards, including beyond the pandemic. To do so, police forces must have adequate resourcing, including access to ongoing, meaningful officer domestic abuse training.

12. Recommendation: Ensure the increased, secure and sustained funding of domestic abuse prevention and support services, including specialist services

- 12.1 The focus of this submission has been on domestic abuse and policing. However, it is vital that sufficient and sustainable resourcing is granted to domestic abuse prevention and education initiatives, and domestic abuse support services and refuges - including for specialist services such as those supporting black and minoritised women, LGBTQ+ victims, and/or disabled victims.

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