

Policing the lockdown: domestic abuse and vulnerability

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The problem

Domestic abuse (DA) is common, and includes patterns of intimidation and control, with or without the use of physical and sexual violence. It is a mainstay of response policing, where it constitutes daily calls for help from the public.

What we know about domestic abuse and how we know it

Using crime surveys to estimate prevalence, the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) offers a long term time series view of DA as common in women's lives. According to the CSEW, nearly one in three women aged 16 to 59 years report having experienced some form of DA since aged 16. DA is especially common among repeat victims of crime, particularly for women. Men too experience DA and the data show that the impact and incidence is lower than women.

According to the CSEW ending March 2018 only 18% of women who had experienced partner abuse in the past 12 months reported the abuse to the police. On average the police in England and Wales receive over 100 calls relating to domestic abuse every hour (HMIC, 2015). Prior to the lockdown, two women a week are killed in domestic abuse circumstances, and lethality has been slowly increasing over time.

Domestic abuse can be experienced from those who live in the same household, and those where separation has occurred because domestic abuse has contributed to a breakdown in the relationship. Domestic abuse may persist after separation, and the sharing of childcare arrangements following separation is known to be a flash point for further abuse.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

Isolating the victim from family and friends is a common element in domestic abuse. Enforced isolation through the COVID-19 lockdown provides an ideal context for perpetrators, and will pose special difficulties for those in relationships where abuse behaviours exist. Financial worries, job loss or furlough, and other stressors will exacerbate tensions and may lead to the onset of violence or trap victims in situations where there is little contact with others who may help serve as a buffer or avenue to escaping abuse. Moreover, there has been a drop in the use of A&E, GPs and other health officials who are another route to safer strategies. Schools have been closed, and these too have been links to safeguarding children who may be experiencing abuse.

DA charities report a dramatic rise in calls for help and presented early evidence that cases escalate more quickly to become more complex and serious, with high levels of physical violence and coercive control. Calls to police are expected to spike after lockdown, when victims have more opportunity to involve police safely.

It is important during this time for the police to consider lessons learned from responding to domestic abuse during exceptional circumstances. While responding to need, use this opportunity to reflect on how to improve and flex police resources to work most closely with third sector organisations offering respite and escape. Since the lockdown domestic homicides have doubled, and there is little knowledge of the impact of the lockdown on children caught in homes where tensions and abuse are escalating.

In her first COVID-19 press briefing on 11th April, the Home Secretary stressed the urgency and importance of a national response to the emerging DA crisis, including what was promised as a robust police response. What this response is, and how well matched to the need for help in DA matters, has been the subject of debate and research for over three decades. The nuance of how police respond to a call for

help, the research suggests, should be informed by an understanding of the history of the abuse, the feeling of threat and danger the victim feels, who the offender is and what the offender's history of mental health, use of violence and controlling behaviours is. While the documentation of concern about the use of the risk assessment for DA challenges its consistent use here and abroad, the safety of victims and children during lockdown can be tracked and traced as a careful follow up to this increased need for help.

On 2nd May the government announced a further £76m support for survivors of domestic abuse and their children who are now "trapped in a nightmare". This includes funding front line charities who have experience a surge of requests for advice, support and accommodation as a consequence of being locked up during COVID-19.

The Home Affairs Select Committee on 24th April outlined the vast and devastating consequences of a domestic abuse crisis, which may last a generation if left unaddressed. It called for the urgent development of a domestic abuse strategy, including a police strategy for and immediately after lockdown, when calls to police are expected to spike. It is expected that the rise in DA is not temporary; rather, the on-going economic and psychological stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic are predicted to keep domestic abuse at elevated rates.

Some ideas in response

While demand for police help has been persistent over time, police themselves report the increase need DA victims have for police help during the pandemic lockdown so far. This is a good time to consider ways of working differently, or improving the way of working with victims of DA, by considering what is different during COVID-19 and what is the same.

COVID-19 scientific observers have admitted that they are all learning about the virus while studying its impact on the population. Policing can do the same. It is likely that more police officers across the force have had to respond to DA incidents, as reports of other crime has dropped as much as 21% (Home Affairs Select Committee 2020). It would be useful to highlight these incidents for further quick time, more detailed analysis. Are the victims repeat victims? Are the victims first time callers for police help? How can the police response link victims with front line charities supporting DA victims? In addition to the issues of health and safety, are there situations where the tensions and violence are escalating? Can you harness neighbours to act as bystander eyes and ears to alert police to disrupting violence? There is evidence that alcohol use has increased under the lockdown. Are response officers using domestic abuse risk assessments systematically? In what circumstances are offenders arrested? Do risk assessments contribute to the safety of victims in your force's responses to DA? What kind of systematic information might help you reflect on the kinds of service – and possible prevention actions – your force might take in anticipation that there will be more calls for help during lockdown?

Schools are still open for vulnerable children. It might be possible to consider whether vulnerable children in situations of DA are attending school. Schools could be the welfare hub for children living in conditions of DA.

Relevant resources

www.womensaid.org.uk

www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk 0808 2000 247

www.safelives.org.uk

www.whatworks.college.police.uk for resources on domestic abuse

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>