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Domestic abuse and Covid-19: A year into the pandemic

Insight

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How has the pandemic affected domestic abuse and what has the Government's response been?

When the first 'lockdown' was announced in March 2020, charities such as Women's Aid highlighted the increased risk of harm and isolation for those affected by domestic abuse.

This Insight looks at emerging findings on the pandemic's impact on domestic abuse, and at how the Government, and support organisations have responded.

More referrals from third parties

The Crime Survey for England and Wales showed that 1.6 million women and 757,000 men had experienced domestic abuse between March 2019 and March 2020, with a 7% growth in police recorded domestic abuse crimes.

Although there is limited official data so far on the impact of lockdown on domestic abuse, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) report that in mid-May 2020, there was a 12% increase in the number of domestic abuse cases referred to victim support. Between April and June 2020, there was a 65% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, when compared to the first three months of that year.

Calls to London's Metropolitan Police also increased during this time but were mainly from third parties, rather than survivors themselves. The combined effect of survivors having fewer opportunities to report the abuse and neighbours having more, might explain this change but, improved recording by the police might also be a factor.

Emerging evidence shows a change in those who perpetrate abuse. Between April and June 2020, there was an 8.1% increase in abuse from current partners, a 17.1% increase

from family members and a decline of 11.4% in abuse experienced by former partners, according to a study by LSE and the Metropolitan Police.

More “complex and serious” cases

In April 2020, the Home Affairs Committee said there was “evidence that cases are escalating more quickly to become complex and serious, with higher levels of physical violence and coercive control.”

Karen Ingala-Smith, who runs the ‘Counting Dead Women’ project, estimated that during the first three weeks of the first lockdown, there had been sixteen domestic abuse killings of women and children in the UK, which was the highest for at least 11 years.

In evidence to the Justice Committee, Vera Baird QC, Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales, said the experience of other countries such as China and France meant it had been “obvious” that domestic abuse was going to be an “epidemic within the pandemic.”

The Commissioner urged the Government to ensure funding reached support services to resource more online chat services, and to introduce a system for people to seek support at supermarkets and pharmacies.

The Government’s response

On 11 April 2020, the Home Secretary announced £2 million to “immediately bolster” domestic abuse helplines and online support. By July 2020, £1.2m of this had been allocated to service providers.

A further funding announcement followed on 2 May 2020, when the Government pledged £76 million emergency funding to support vulnerable people. £25 million of this went to domestic abuse services, including £10 million to fund safe accommodation. The Government also launched a public awareness campaign, #YouAreNotAlone, aiming to reassure survivors of domestic abuse that police and specialist services remained open.

On 18 November 2020, midway through the second English lockdown, the Ministry of Justice provided £10.1 million to boost funding for rape and domestic abuse support, with a further £683,000 from the Home Office for domestic abuse organisations.

In January 2021, shortly after England entered its third lockdown, the Government announced it had partnered with UK pharmacies to launch the ‘Ask for ANI’ scheme (Action Needed Immediately) to help survivors. Pharmacies participating are supposed to display material to let survivors know that trained staff are available to offer a safe and private space, with the option to call the police or other support services if needed.

The Domestic Abuse Act

In February 2021, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, told the Home Affairs Committee that the “tail” of the pandemic’s impact on domestic abuse would extend “well beyond” the easing of lockdown, and that survivors depended on these services. The Commissioner welcomed the Government’s emergency funding throughout the pandemic but said this was nowhere near “the kind of sustainable foundation” needed.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which came into force on 29 April 2021, aims to make changes to better protect survivors of domestic abuse and strengthen measures to address the behaviour of perpetrators. Writing in The Sun, Nicole Jacobs warned that “legislation won’t change things overnight, but it paves the way for a new beginning.” Organisations such as Refuge and Women’s Aid have also welcomed the Act, but stress that effective implementation and funding will be key to its success.

Further reading

- [Coronavirus: Domestic abuse](#), House of Commons Library, April 2020.
- [Domestic violence in England and Wales](#), House of Commons Library, November 2018.
- [Domestic Abuse Bill 2019-21: Progress of the Bill](#), House of Commons Library, April 2021.
- [Domestic Abuse Bill 2019-20](#), House of Commons Library, April 2020.
- Ivandic, R., Kirchmaier, T., & Linton, B. (2020). [Changing Patterns of Domestic Abuse during COVID-19 Lockdown](#). *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 172. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3686873>

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- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-support-for-domestic-abuse-victims>
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- <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-08/150917>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-safe-accommodation-covid-19-emergency-support-fund>
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- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-boost-for-rape-and-domestic-abuse-support>
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- <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ask-for-ani-and-safe-spaces-schemes-pharmacy-materials>

- <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/04/29/domesticabuseactfactsheet/>
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