**COVID-19 and Domestic Abuse: What can universities do for students?**

Restrictive measures, such as lockdown, expose survivors living with domestic abuse to more risk. *‘Stay Home, Stay Safe’,* the now familiar guidance, is a contradiction for many, and it is a contradiction with potentially the most serious of consequences. Those most at risk of domestic abuse are aged 16 to 24, which is the age group most students fall into [(ONS, 2019](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusefindingsfromthecrimesurveyforenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2018#groups-of-people-most-likely-to-be-victims-of-domestic-abuse)). The National Union of Students have also reported in their research relatively high levels of domestic abuse amongst students ([NUS, 2014](https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/hidden-marks-a-study-of-women-students-experiences-of-harassment-stalking-violence-and-sexual-assault); [2019](https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/sexual-violence-in-further-education-report)). But this evidence references a time before C-19. What is the situation now for university students experiencing domestic abuse? What can universities do for these students?

Before turning to these questions, let’s consider the consequences for students when campus and city-based universities moved to ‘closure’ in response to Government advice in late March. Some students will have left their university halls or rented student accommodation and returned to their parental home, either in the UK, or further afield. Other students, those who continued to reside with their parents whilst studying, for example, and those students settled with their own families (partners and/or children), will have remained in situ. Some students, such as care leavers, or students estranged from their families, will have remained, or taken up residence, in university halls. What is clear is that students across the country will have experienced different levels of disruption to their living arrangements in the aftermath of C-19. There is at least one common denominator here. All students will have faced the difficulties that come with negotiating life in the midst of a global pandemic. Despite the easing of restrictions on movement, the summer break means many students are unlikely to return to ‘normal’ university life any time soon. Unfortunately, domestic abuse means that some may never return to their studies.

In early April, Dame Vera Baird QC, Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales, characterised domestic abuse *‘as an epidemic within the pandemic’* [(Baird, 2020)](https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/blog-domestic-abuse-an-epidemic-within-the-pandemic/). Here the reference is to the upsurge in calls and contacts with domestic abuse organisations reported at this time [(Refuge, 2020)](https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-reports-further-increase-in-demand-for-its-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-services-during-lockdown/). Evidence is yet to emerge (and it may never emerge) on student specific experiences of domestic abuse under C-19 lockdown. It would be easy to assume a students’ return to a parental home means an escape from an abusive intimate relationship formed as part of university life. The escape is a physical one only. Domestic abuse is more than physical [(Home Office, 2013)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf). Abuse perpetuated via technology can continue, and may even intensify under lockdown. Re-locating back to a parental home may for some students mean a return to an abusive household; one from which a university place had helped them to escape from. Those students who lived with their parents before C-19, and those students in their own homes with their own families, face the same increased risk as the rest of the population [(Home Affairs Committee, 2020)](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/321/321.pdf). Of most concern are those students experiencing multiple forms of discrimination, such as women from minority ethnic communities, students with disabilities, and LGBT+ students. Here the channels to support are even more challenging to access even at the best of times [(Universities UK, 2020)](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/covid19/Documents/uuk-briefing-domestic-abuse-covid.pdf).

So, what can universities do? London South Bank University (LSBU) took the initiative early on when Dr. Jaya Gajparia contacted Professor Pat Bailey, Vice Chancellor (VC) at LSBU, expressing concern about the serious impacts of C-19 on the lives of women and children for whom home is not a place of safety. This led to the formation of the LSBU Working Group on Domestic Abuse in Covid-19. At the heart of our Group sits a clear and strong commitment to supporting our students (and colleagues) living with domestic abuse. Initially the Group comprised of only four academics. It now has representation from across the University, and, most importantly, this includes the President of London South Bank Student Union, as well as professional services, such as Head of Wellbeing, including student safeguarding responsible for delivering frontline support for students. The Working Group formulated a message, which was included in a weekly briefing from the VC sent to all students across the university. The message was timely one as it reminded students early into lockdown that support was still available for those experiencing domestic abuse. It also signposted students to domestic abuse organisations, particularly those with on-line support facilities, such as chat rooms. This recognised that those living with abuse under lockdown may find their usual means of reaching out for support closed to them due to the constant, physical proximity of the perpetrator and the opportunities for persistent surveillance.

Universities UK are alert to the fact that some students will be experiencing domestic abuse, and the escalation of risk during Covid-19. Their recent briefing on [*Responding to Domestic Violence and Abuse in Higher Education Communities*](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/covid19/Documents/uuk-briefing-domestic-abuse-covid.pdf) is a welcome development. We encourage all universities to reflect closely on the needs of their students who may be exposed to increased risk to domestic abuse at this time, and ask is there more that needs to be done.

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