

Written evidence submitted by Professor Sandra Walklate, Professor Barry Godfrey, and Dr. Jane Richardson (all at Liverpool University) to the UK Parliament Home Affairs Committee Inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19, January 2021.

1. Who we are.

Professor Sandra Walklate is Eleanor Rathbone Chair of Sociology, **Barry Godfrey** is Chair of Social Justice and **Dr. Jane Richardson** is a post-doctoral researcher. We are all based at the University of Liverpool.

2. Why this submission.

This submission emanates from our ongoing ESRC-RCUK funded research project entitled '**Domestic Abuse: Responding to the Shadow Pandemic** (Grant Ref: ES/V00476X/1). This project commenced in June 2020 and end in December 2021. Whilst the project is concerned with the response of the criminal justice system to domestic abuse overall, our focus in this submission is on innovative policing practices in relation to domestic abuse. Further information from our project can be found here:

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/law-and-social-justice/research/coronavirus-research/the-shadow-pandemic/working-papers/>

3. Context

3.1. Global and local voices have been keen to point out the potential problems inherent in 'stay at home' directives, especially for women and children. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, named the consequences of Covid-19 isolation restrictions on domestic abuse as 'The Shadow Pandemic' (UN Women 2020). Stay at home directives have the capacity to put everyone under stress and they are not in themselves the cause of violence. However, the insecurities felt by everyone during 2020 and ongoing, about money, jobs, health, food supplies are the kinds of insecurities felt *routinely* by women and children living their lives with an abusive partner and these can be multiplied when the spaces afforded by work, school, meeting with friends and so on are taken away. As Williamson et al (2020) have pointed out, 'perpetrators can use the lockdown measures as a tool of control and coercion by, for example, either insisting on strict lockdown or failing to protect the health of family members.' Sometime this includes weaponizing children (Meyer and Fitz-Gibbon 2020).

3.2. Globally, however, the evidence pointing to changes in demand on policing consequent to such directives is to date inconclusive. In a review of 17 studies, Peterman et al (2020)

point out that looking at criminal justice data on a month-by-month basis reveals little about wider trends over time nor anything about the accuracy of the data itself. Moreover, this kind of evidence can produce contradictory findings. For example, in two studies based in the US, one suggested a 10% increase in calls to the police for domestic abuse, largely driven by households with prior calls of such abuse (Leslie and Wilson 2020), while the second reported a decrease in such calls in the two cities studied (Mohler et al 2020). In a study based in Dallas, Piquero et al (2020) reported a short-term spike in reports followed by a decrease in reporting behaviour. Work by Campedelli et al (2020) indicated no significant change in reported incidents, with Gerell et al (2020) reporting a decrease in reports of indoor assaults in Sweden. Freeman (2020) also reported no evidence of an increase in recorded incidents of domestic assault on the introduction of social distancing in New South Wales, including the figures for more serious assaults for which it is suggested police involvement might still be expected.

3.3. Making sense of the policing response to domestic abuse in England and Wales within these broader concerns and the concerns consistently highlighted by domestic abuse support services during 2020-21 is one of the foci of our ongoing project. Especially when set against the evidence of increased reporting rates of domestic abuse incidents over the last 5 years (HMICFRS 2019).

4. Methods

4.1. This project embraces the principles of rapid research methods ensuring that data collection and analysis happen simultaneously, interim reports are written early in the process, and aiming to ensure that data requests to respondents do not conflict with other requests for similar data (McNall and Foster-Fishman 2007). We are particularly committed to the early sharing of findings (Johnson and Vindrola-Padros 2017, Vindrola-Padros et al, 2020), and paying attention to 'reflexive interpretation of findings' (Vindrola-Padros and Johnson 2020) as this project unfolds over time.

4.2. During July and August 2020 an online questionnaire was distributed to all policing leads for domestic abuse in England and Wales (43 forces were approached; 25 responded). Of the forces that responded, four were Metropolitan, thirteen were rural, and four were what we considered to be mixed in profile. The Metropolitan forces received the largest funding and policed the largest populations, if not physical areas. Three forces had high BAME populations, five mid, and thirteen low (the rural forces). In terms of respondents to our questionnaire, we classified four as largely 'operational' (Detective Sergeants and Detective Inspectors) and sixteen as 'policy' focused (Detective Chief Inspectors, Superintendents, and Chief Superintendents).

4.3. The purpose of this open-ended questionnaire was to focus on innovative practices. Respondents were asked to reflect on the initial lock-down period (March 23rd to June 15th, 2020) and to address their responses to domestic abuse with three questions in mind.

- i) Were they able to continue with normal practices?
- ii) What, if any, were the changes introduced in relation to responding to domestic abuse under social isolation and what was the impact of these changes?
- iii) In review, would they do anything differently, and, of the changes they made in response to the lockdown, which would they keep, and why?

This questionnaire was supplemented with 22 online, face-to-face interviews with Domestic Abuse leads during September and October 2020. Our engagement with these respondents is ongoing. The findings and recommendations reported below emanate from this initial combined data set.

5. Findings

5.1. Set against the evidenced year on year rise of domestic abuse incidents dealt with by the police, 19/25 respondents to our questionnaire noted that domestic abuse calls declined initially in March 2020 and then returned to normal by May 2020. These changing levels in demand were the context in which domestic abuse was being responded to. Overall, our findings to date have indicated the extent to which the police forces who responded to our survey responded nimbly, and swiftly keeping both the victim and offender in view. Our data points to four identifiable themes.

5.2.1 Business as usual.

All respondents made it clear that, with health and safety in mind, the police were open for business. Indeed, three respondents commented that the overall reduction in demand and the consequent increased availability of some policing resources, facilitated focused efforts to deal with already existing levels of domestic abuse. As a result, one respondent reported an 8% increase in domestic abuse referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service and a 15.8% increase in perpetrators charged during lock-down as a result of their perpetrator focused activities during this time.

5.2.2. Use of information and communications technology.

The increasing use and presence of the digital world, and other means of communication, to ensure access to policing services for victims of domestic abuse has taken a wide range of forms. To list a few: updating of webpages to include online reporting tools, Facebook Q and A sessions, use of data analytics to focus on high-risk victims and/or high-risk offenders with whom they had not had recent contact, supermarket surgeries, use of online multi-agency risk assessment conferencing to speed up decision-making, use of community radio and post campaigns.

5.2.3. *Focussing on the perpetrator*

Three respondents reported concerted and focused efforts to use the resources available consequent to the down-turn in crime rates generally under lockdown, to focus efforts on attending to repeat perpetrators. Given the long-standing evidence that all a perpetrator had to do before the police arrive to a call is to leave (Edwards 1986), the evidence on repeat victimisation in cases of domestic abuse (Farrell and Pease 1993, Hope 2007, Pease et al 2018), and the importance of flagging repeat incidents on call systems (HMICFRS 2019), practices such as these, though localised, clearly met with some success.

5.2.4. Justice by geography.

In the context of responses to domestic abuse ONS statistics regularly point to the variations between police forces in arrest rates alongside the differential use of both different offence categories as do HMIC reports over the last decade. This variation is evident in the responses to our data and is implied in the presentation of the themes discussed above. Not all police forces respond to domestic abuse in the same way either as a priority in terms of their mission statements or as a demand-led priority in relation to service delivery. This is not new and serves as a reminder that criticisms of service delivery in relation to the policing of domestic abuse can be context specific. One example of the kind of the variation in prioritisation can be discerned in the priority statements set by local Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) at the beginning of the lock-down period when compared with the responses to our questionnaire provided by police force domestic abuse leads. The Association of Police and Crime Commissioners Report published in April 2020 contains the statements of 34 PCCs' priorities for protecting the vulnerable during lock-down. Twenty of these statements tally with 20 police areas covered by our data. Of these twenty, only 11 PCCs mention domestic abuse support in the broadest sense in their list of priorities in relation to such protection. Given the crucial role afforded to such commissioners in commissioning local victim support services including the provision of refuge spaces, this observation is telling.

5.3. These findings remind us of the complex and kaleidoscopic world in which local service responses to domestic abuse are constructed, prioritised and not always in the gift of the police alone. Our findings indicate that the police in England and Wales have been remarkably proactive and innovative in ensuring the appropriate delivery of service in response to domestic abuse.

6. Recommendations to the Committee

In line with Winsor (2020) we suggest that.

- i) All police forces in England and Wales, where possible and practicable, move towards the use of MS Teams (or the equivalent secure platform) for MARAC business.
- ii) Appropriate infrastructural IT support is provided to enable this where it does not already exist.
- iii) Where partner agencies are inhibited through lack of infrastructural IT systems, that Police and Crime Commissioners are encouraged as a matter of urgency to fund the developments of such systems as appropriate.
- iv) That further strategic thought be given to the questions raised by the ongoing presence evidenced in this research and elsewhere to the access to justice and support consequences of geographical variations in service delivery levels of demand notwithstanding.

Further information about this project can be obtained from Professor Sandra Walklate email; S.L.Walklate@liverpool.ac.uk

References

Association of Police Crime Commissioners, 2020. PCCs in Focus: protecting the vulnerable during the Covid-19 crisis. Available from: <https://www.apccs.police.uk/media/5210/covid-19-in-focus-v4e-pdf-final.pdf> [Accessed 3rd January 2021]

Campedelli, G M., Aziani, A., and Favarin, S., 2020. Exploring the Effect of 2019-nCoV Containment Policies on Crime: The Case of Los Angeles. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

Edwards, S., 1986. *The Police Response to Domestic Violence in London*. London: Polytechnic of Central London.

Farrell, G. and Pease, K., 1993. Once bitten, twice bitten: repeat victimisation and its implications for crime prevention. Police Research Group Crime Prevention Unit series paper no. 46. London: Home Office

Freeman, K., 2020. Monitoring changes in domestic violence in the wake of COVID-19 social isolation measures (Bureau Brief No. 145). Sydney, New South Wales: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. Available from: <https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/BB/2020-Report-Domestic-Violence-in-the-wake-of-COVID-19-BB145.pdf> [Accessed 3rd January 2021]

Gerell, M., Kardell, J, and Kindgren, J., 2020. Minor covid-19 association with crime in Sweden, a ten week follow up. *Crime Science*, 9 (19).

HMICFRS, 2019. *The police response to domestic abuse: an update report*. London: HMICFRS.

Hope, T., 2007. Theory and method: the social epidemiology of crime victims. In S. Walklate ed. *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing, 62-90.

- Johnson, G.A. and Vindrola-Padros, C., 2017 Rapid qualitative research methods during complex health emergencies: A systematic review of the literature. *Social Science and Medicine*, 189, 63-75.
- McNall, M. and Foster-Fishman, P. G., 2007. Methods of Rapid Evaluation, Assessment, and Appraisal. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 28(2), 151-168.
- Meyer, S. and Fitz-Gibbon, K., 2020. COVID-19: *The bystander role has never been more critical in calling out family violence*. Monash Lens, 9 April. Available from: <https://www.monash.edu/arts/gender-and-family-violence/community-and-media-engagement> [Accessed 3rd January 2021].
- Mlambo-Ngcuke, P., 2020. Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic. UN Women. Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic> [Accessed 3rd January 2021]
- Mohler, G. Bertozzi, A.L. Carter, J., Short, M.B., Sledge, D., Tita, G.E., Uchida, C.D. and Brantingham, P.J., 2020. Impact of social distancing during COVID-19 pandemic on crime in Los Angeles and Indianapolis. *Journal of Criminal Justice [online]*, 68, 101692. Available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0047235220301860?via%3Dihub> [Accessed 3rd January 2021].
- Pease, K., Ignatans, D. and Batty, L., 2018. Whatever happened to repeat victimisation? *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 20, 256–267.
- Peterman, A., O'Donnell, M., and Palermo, T., 2020. *COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Children What Have We Learned So Far?* Center for Global Development Note, June. Available from: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/covid-and-violence-against-women-and-children-what-we-have-learned.pdf>. [Accessed 3rd January 2021].
- Piquero, A.R., Riddell, J.R., Bishopp, S.A. *et al.*, 2020. Staying Home, Staying Safe? A Short-Term Analysis of COVID-19 on Dallas Domestic Violence. (2020) *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45, 601–635.
- Vindrola-Padros, C. and Johnson, G. A., 2020. Rapid Techniques in Qualitative Research: A Critical Review of the Literature. *Qualitative Health Research*, 30 (10), 1596–1604.
- Vindrola-Padros, C, et al, 2020. Carrying Out Rapid Qualitative Research During a Pandemic: Emerging Lessons From COVID-19. *Qualitative Health Research*, 30 (14), 2192-2204.
- Winsor, T., 2020. *The State of Policing 2019*. London: HMICFRS
- Williamson, E., Brooks-Hay, O., and Lombard, N., 2020. *Domestic violence and abuse in lockdown needs more accurate media reporting*. Available from: <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2020/06/15/domestic-violence-and-abuse-in-lockdown-needs-more-accurate-media-reporting/> [Accessed 3rd January 2021].