

Nicole Jacobs

## Viewpoint of Nicole Jacobs, domestic abuse commissioner for England and Wales Introduction

In 2019, I was appointed the first Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales. This role enables me, as an independent voice speaking on behalf of victims and survivors, to use my statutory powers set out in the Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 to hold agencies and government to account in tackling domestic abuse. I use my unique powers to fight for change and campaign to ensure that domestic abuse services are available for everyone including minoritised ethnic heritage, LGBTQ+ and disabled survivors across England and Wales.

Another key part of my role is to raise public awareness of domestic abuse, so it is my pleasure to write this viewpoint and contribute to this academic conversation on the impact of COVID-19 and I thank Dr Roxanne Khan, Editor for this Special Issue, for inviting me to do so.

## COVID-19 lockdown

With nearly 30 years' of experience as a frontline worker in domestic abuse policy and intervention, I have dedicated my career to supporting victims and survivors, and like all my colleagues working in this sector, I am acutely aware of the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on victims, and those working to safeguard them.

In the 12 months prior to COVID-19 lockdown, it was estimated that 2.3 million adults experienced domestic abuse ([Office for National Statistics, 2021](#)). Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK in March 2020, there was a significant increase in the number of people reaching out to domestic abuse services for support and in the severity and complexity of the abuse suffered. While COVID-19 did not in itself cause domestic abuse, what the very necessary public health measures did was to create a conducive context for it to happen. For many, this period led to an escalation of violence and abuse, closed routes for people to escape safely and made it more challenging to bring perpetrators to justice. Ninety per cent of specialist services reported increased demand since the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, a survey conducted with frontline domestic abuse services by a national charity, [SafeLives \(2020\)](#), found that almost a quarter (24%) were concerned about the possible increase to referrals once lockdown starts to ease and over one-third (38%) had seen an increase to caseloads. The majority of those (83%) said this was due to an increase in numbers of clients being referred, an increase from 73%. Likewise, a report by *Women's Aid*, another national charity found that over three-quarters of survivors (78.3%, 36 out of 46) of those living with an abuser said they felt they could not leave or get away because of the pandemic ([Women's Aid, 2020](#)). Just over 90% of respondents currently experiencing domestic abuse said the COVID pandemic had negatively impacted in at least one way. Of those women living with their abuser during lockdown, 61% said the abuse had worsened. More than two-thirds (68%) said they felt they had no one to turn to during lockdown.

Frontline domestic abuse services were overwhelmingly reporting that survivors were experiencing higher and more complex support needs. This is in part because people faced difficulties accessing statutory support such as housing, social care or mental health

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services. From the first week of the lockdown in March 2020, I convened regular meetings to bring together frontline domestic abuse services, officials from central government departments, the police and local government to ensure that information from the frontline was being fed back to government as quickly as possible to help shape the emergency policy response. During these meetings, we consistently heard reports from domestic abuse services that other agencies, owing to the significant demands for their support, were unable to provide some of these vital support services for victims of abuse, particularly mental health and drug and alcohol services. This left specialist domestic abuse services to “pick up the pieces”, and consequently people’s support needs became more complex, with lengths increasing as a result. This is supported by reports from domestic abuse helplines who have reported longer call times owing to the complexity of cases.

The already precarious funding situation for specialist domestic abuse services caused greater uncertainty for organisations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Research from [SafeLives \(2020\)](#) with frontline practitioners found that many services were already experiencing financial difficulties. Over half said that this was due to funding opportunities having dried up, and almost one in six (16%) due to local commissioning changing due to COVID-19. Comments from practitioners highlighted that the funding pots they would usually apply to fund core services had become COVID-19 specific, leaving their service ineligible.

### “By and for” services

The increase in demand for support from victims was sharpest in “by and for” services for the most marginalised survivors, where specialist services have experienced up to a 49% rise in demand. Emergency funding was made available by government, but the surge in demand for services further exposed the vulnerability of the sector with regards to funding, with many services struggling to cope with the increased number of survivors requiring support. [Imkaan \(2020\)](#), a Black feminist membership organisation working to combat violence against Black and minoritised women and girls in the UK, conducted research on the impact of COVID-19 and found that 75% of their members entered the pandemic with less than three months reserves. The situation was so perilous that an Open Letter led by HARM network, with over 70+ influential signatories, urged the government to take urgent steps to address the impact of domestic abuse within Black, African, Asian and other Minority Ethnic heritage communities during the lockdown. This was handed to the then Home Secretary, Priti Patel MP, at the Hidden Harm Summit for Domestic Abuse in 2020, Chaired by Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson at Downing Street ([Khan et al., 2020](#)).

### Helplines

While the additional COVID-related funding from the government has now ceased, demand remains far higher than pre-pandemic levels. The increase in demand for domestic abuse support is starkly reflected in helpline data, and levels remain very high ([Refuge, 2021](#)). For example, for the period 1 April to 31 December 2020, the average number of weekly calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline in England run by Refuge increased by 34% compared to the same period in 2019 (2,191 in 2019 to 2,938 in 2020). Demand further increased to an average of 3,315 calls per week between week commencing 4 January 2021 and 12 July 2021. In the 10 weeks following the easing of most COVID-19 restrictions in England (19 July 21 to 26 September 2021), an average of 3,206 calls were made per week – 46% above the April to December 2019 pre-pandemic baseline. Similar patterns follow for the Men’s Advice Line, which saw a 50% increase in average weekly calls across the same period. We know that helplines are often just the first step to accessing support, and the pressure on community-based services will be felt for years to come ([Respect, 2021](#)).

The pandemic will have a significant long-term impact on the nature and rates of domestic abuse over the course of the Spending Review period. The sharpest surges in demands for domestic abuse services have followed the periods of the tightest national lockdown

restrictions. Research from the Home Office found that the average length of abuse for a victim is three years before they are able to access support (Office for National Statistics, 2020, based on the SafeLives national data set). We also know that the length of time taken for a survivor of domestic abuse to be able to access support will vary across different groups. For example, for disabled survivors, many of whom have been shielding throughout this period and face some of the highest levels of exclusion from mainstream services, we expect that this period could have been longer.

## Government response

Strengthening the vital infrastructure of specialist domestic abuse services must therefore be considered an essential element of the government's plans to tackle domestic abuse. The Home Office estimates that domestic abuse costs the economy about £74bn every year, so further investment would not only save money but, far more significantly, would help countless domestic abuse victims and their children (Oliver *et al.*, 2019). For victims and survivors of domestic abuse accessing support, 70% of them will do so via community-based services, with the vast majority never spending time in refuge accommodation. In their annual survey, Women's Aid (2021) reported that in a single year, 187,403 children and 156,169 women were supported by community-based services. Community-based services play a significant role in preventing domestic abuse, as well as managing the far higher costs that would be incurred by government if a survivor moves into refuge accommodation. Despite their clear value, community-based services have faced a fragile funding landscape. Community-based services consistently report caseloads that are unsafe, and 23% of these services operate without any local authority funding at all.

## Post-COVID lockdown

Evidence from my Office's mapping research ([Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, 2021](#)) highlights the precarious funding position of community-based services and the need for the Victims' Bill to address these gaps. While further work is needed to assure responses and to improve response rates to funding questions, initial analysis suggests accommodation-based services were 14% more likely to receive their main source of funding from a statutory source compared to community-based services.

The importance of properly secured funding for community-based services cannot be underestimated for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. They quite literally provide a lifeline for many thousands of victims and their children. The Victims Bill provides the perfect opportunity to give those people the help they need and deserve.

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