

Survey of those who use abusive behaviour in relationships

Findings Report

January 2021

About Respect and The Drive Partnership

The Drive Partnership has been funded to write this report through a government grant to Respect.

The Drive Partnership is made up of three organisations, Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance. Between them, these organisations have significant expertise in working with victims, perpetrators and developing sustainable responses to entrenched social problems.

Respect is the UK membership organisation for work with domestic violence perpetrators, male victims and young people. Respect accreditation is the benchmark for the provision of quality interventions with men who use violence against their female partners.

The authors wish to recognise the input of Respect accredited members and members of the Call to Action network in helping shape and disseminate the survey.

Thanks also for the input into the design of the questionnaire by a small number of volunteers who had used abuse and were accessing a service.

Introduction

Lockdown restrictions, the pressures of Covid-19 and its impact on mental health, child contact, and drug and alcohol misuse have been a concern of the domestic abuse sector in 2020. The Drive Partnership's survey of frontline professionals revealed that 95% of practitioners working with perpetrators felt Covid-19 increased the risk to child and adult victim/survivors of domestic abuse. Added to this, 87% reported seeing increased mental health concerns within the people they work with who use abusive behaviours. This came at a time when contacting mental health agencies was found to be difficult¹.

Victims' experience of lockdown has been well documented. Refuge reported a 50% increase in calls to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline². However even this huge rise may under-represent the true volume of need. SafeLives found almost two thirds of

¹ <http://driveproject.org.uk/news/survey-findings-services-working-with-perpetrators-of-domestic-abuse-during-covid-19-lockdown-continued-to-deliver-despite-significant-challenges/>

² <https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-reports-further-increase-in-demand-for-its-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-services-during-lockdown/>

victim/survivors surveyed had not asked for help during the Covid-19 restrictions due to the practical barriers in reaching out for support³. They most commonly cited fear of the perpetrator as the main concern for their safety during Covid-19.

Little research has been carried out directly with those using abusive behaviours to understand their experience of lockdown and help-seeking. The Drive Partnership hopes that understanding this will help agencies and the Government better prepare for ongoing lockdowns as well as restrictions lifting. To this end, The Drive Partnership of Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance, designed a survey to explore perpetrators' experience of lockdown, whether they perceive it as having altered their relationships or their behaviour in relationships, as well as any past help-seeking and what support was deemed most effective.

The survey was open between August and October 2020 and had 32 responses. Almost three quarters were from England (72%), with the rest in Wales (25%) or not answering the question. Two thirds of respondents were male (69%), a quarter were female (25%), with the other 6% not answering the question. All respondents were between 16 and 65 years old with the most common age range being 35-44 (31%).

Four fifths of respondents said they were White British/Irish (81%). Three respondents were Asian/Asian British (9%), two were White – Other (6%) and one Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British (3%). The vast majority stated they were heterosexual (88%) with this rising to all when considering male respondents only. Three people identified as being LGBT+ (9%) with two describing themselves as bisexual (6%) and one as a lesbian (3%).

The majority of respondents had children (66%), one quarter did not (28%) and a further two people declined to say (6%).

Respondents were mainly approached to complete the survey by the specialist services they were engaged with such as Respect accredited services. The majority of respondents, 20 people (63%), completed the survey by themselves and 12 (38%) completed it with their support worker.

The survey asked broadly about relationships in general and the majority of respondents answered in relation to their intimate partner relationships.

The authors acknowledge that the sample size in this survey is small and is likely to be biased towards those who are in touch with services or willing to reflect on their behaviour, and therefore not representative of all people who are using abuse. It is, however, an important chance to collect the experiences of those who have identified as having used harm in their relationships or having accessed behaviour change programmes in the past.

Summary of key findings and commentary

Before reading, it is important to note that this report only documents the perspective of those causing harm, and conclusions should be triangulated with victims' experiences during lockdown.

³ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%2020200615.pdf>

- Lockdown hasn't made life harder for everyone. From the point of view of people using abuse in their relationships, lockdown appears to have *reduced the impact of things that cause them problems in their relationships* such as finances, friends, and jealousy. 94% said they have not experienced more relationship problems during lockdown.
- Most also felt their abusive behaviours reduced, saying that arguing had halved and name calling, shouting and being aggressive reduced by more than half.
- The authors stress that this perceived reduction in aggression does not necessarily mean less fear for victim/survivors. They note that whilst it could reflect perpetrators' efforts to control their behaviour it could also reflect victims' efforts to protect themselves from harm.
- Responses to questions about how the epidemic had affected the needs of people using abuse showed wide variation – responses on many needs such as financial, physical health and mental health were almost evenly split between people whose needs had got greater, reduced, or stayed the same. For example, a third said lockdown made their mental health needs easier and a third said they made them harder.
- Most people who had sought support in the past had predominantly turned to specialist services, their GP, or their family for help. Two thirds found the support they had received was helpful to change their behaviour.
- Speaking to someone and being listened to was the kind of help that perpetrators wanted most and found most useful.
- Just under half of those who had ever received support from a specialist service found it difficult to obtain.
- Most found that learning greater self-control and understanding their own behaviour better were the most effective tools in changing their behaviour.

The findings are a reminder that domestic abuse can happen behind any front door and that perpetrators are from all walks of life. It is therefore to be expected that their experiences will differ, and that lockdown will have been much harder for people who already have acute needs⁴.

Perhaps the most striking finding is what respondents told us about how lockdown had affected their relationships and their behaviour. In contrast with what practitioners in our frontline survey reported about risk (which is of course different to current behaviour), perpetrators reported that their abusive behaviours and relationship problems *reduced* during lockdown⁵. Indeed, 94% said they have not experienced more relationship problems and they thought the things that usually caused problems, such as issues around finances, relationship with children or jealousy, were lessened.

Most reported that their abusive behaviours reduced, with arguing halving and name calling, shouting and being aggressive reducing by more than half. Responses to other questions suggest this could be in part because the stressors that induced those aggressive responses – such as issues with friends – were lessened due to Covid-19 restrictions rather than their behaviour improving when a problem occurred.

In particular, respondents reported that problems caused by jealousy, suspicions of cheating and monitoring social media all reduced during lockdown. This could reflect perpetrators efforts to modify their behaviour or it might reflect simply that the situation is

⁴ <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/will-covid-19-be-a-watershed-moment-for-health-inequalities>

⁵ <http://driveproject.org.uk/news/survey-findings-services-working-with-perpetrators-of-domestic-abuse-during-covid-19-lockdown-continued-to-deliver-despite-significant-challenges/>

easier to control, with perpetrators being able to keep a close eye on the victim inside the home.

It is important to note that their perceived reduction in aggressive behaviours does not necessarily equate to less fear for victim/survivors. As mentioned above, this report only documents the perpetrator's perspective, and conclusions should be triangulated with victims' experiences during lockdown, which may differ. Victims often report high levels of fear and tension when they are being coercively controlled, even when there is no physical abuse taking place at that time. SafeLives' survey of victim/survivors during the pandemic found the most common response to concerns around safety was fear of the perpetrator⁶.

Therefore, respondents' self-reported reduction in aggressive behaviour may reflect victims' efforts to protect themselves from harm, such as walking on eggshells around the perpetrator to avoid arguments when they fear the consequences may be more extreme than normal. In short, any reduction in aggressive behaviours could be because of real efforts by the perpetrator to manage their own behaviour but it may be because the circumstances mean it is easier for them to maintain more control over the victim/s, without, in their view, having to use aggression.

This paints a concerning picture about life in lockdown but also a possible escalation in harm as lockdown eases and the vaccine enables life to return to nearer normal. These concerns appear to be supported by data; Katrin Hohl and Kelly Johnson found a rise in first-time domestic incidents that were reported to the police as lockdown eased in summer 2020⁷ and ONS data found that the largest month-on-month increase of domestic abuse-related offences was between April and May 2020, coinciding with the easing of lockdown measures⁸.

Beyond the epidemic, and reflecting more generally, the survey also indicates what kinds of support perpetrators found most helpful. Here, respondents' thoughts were less varied, with many saying that talking to someone and being listened to were most beneficial, followed by accessing support for their additional needs – such as mental health.

Some respondents reported having sought support from their GP or their family, and when asked whether anyone else has been worried about their behaviour, family members were mentioned most often. This therefore has policy implications for awareness raising and signposting within the health sector and the public.

Two thirds of people who had received support with their behaviour in a relationship found it effective in changing their behaviour and/or improving their relationship, and they were more likely to say this if they had received this support from a specialist service, as opposed to other forms of support, such as friends, family, the GP and online. However, just under half of those who had received this kind of support from a specialist service found it difficult to access. We know missed opportunities to seek support can add years to the abuse⁹, therefore, work needs to be done to lower these barriers to access specialist domestic abuse services and quality assured perpetrator services.

⁶ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%2020200615.pdf>

⁷ <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/news/a-crisis-exposed-how-covid-19-is-impacting-domestic-abuse-reported-to-the-police/>

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseduringthecoronaviruscovid19pandemicenglandandwales/november2020>

⁹ <https://safelives.org.uk/policy-evidence/getting-it-right-first-time>

As referenced in the introduction, the authors acknowledge that the sample size in this survey is small and may be biased towards those who are already receiving services, or who are motivated to reflect on their behaviour. This is an initial step into collecting feedback from those who use harm, and the small sample size reflects the difficulty of engaging them. However, taken together, the results of the first section which suggests escalating risk in 2021, and the second section which paints a picture of valuable specialist services being hard to access, the results support a case for increased investment in perpetrator work in 2021.

Findings in detail

High proportion of ACEs

Of the respondents in the present survey, two-thirds (64%) reported having experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), compared to an average of 50% in the population in England. Just under half (48%) of the respondents to this survey reported that they experienced four or more ACEs, as compared to an average of 8% of the population in England.

For those who selected at least one ACE, more than half of them had experienced parental separation (67%), verbal abuse (57%), alcohol abuse within the household (57%) and direct physical abuse (52%), with two-fifths seeing/hearing domestic abuse (42%).

There is evidence that an increased number of ACEs and negative experiences as a child can feed into poor outcomes in adulthood; someone with 4 or more ACEs is 16 times more likely to perpetrate violence and 20 times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime¹⁰. This is not the rule for all cases and protective factors can mitigate this, but it demonstrates that childhood experiences can influence later behaviour.

Support and Needs

Respondents were asked about their previous access to support and asked to reflect on the first lockdown in spring, and whether their needs had changed.

Only 2 respondents (6%) had not accessed support in any area. 72% had previously received support for their mental health needs, with 67% having received support with their relationship with their partner. This is to be expected as we reached out to respondents predominantly through perpetrator services. Other common forms of support previously accessed were around housing (34%) and relationships with children (31% rising to 48% of those who said they had children).

Over half (57%) of respondents expressed a current interest in receiving support with their current relationship; they were either receiving it just before the restrictions came into play, or they would like to receive it now. Similarly, just under half expressed a current need for mental health support (41%).

¹⁰ https://safelives.org.uk/practice_blog/living-domestic-abuse-ace-adverse-childhood-experience

Respondents were asked if their needs had stayed the same, decreased or increased during the first lockdown. A third said that during lockdown their mental health needs reduced, and a third said they increased. Similar results were seen in relation to finances (40% reported increased need and 30% reported decreased need) and physical health (30% reported increased need and 30% reported a decrease). This shows that like everyone, perpetrators are met with changing needs and a range of experiences.

A reduction in financial pressures may reflect a lockdown-induced change in spending habits. However, 33% had increased needs which may reflect redundancies and furlough.

Relationship support – help-seeking

Of the 32 respondents, 17 stated that they had received support for issues or problems in their relationships. Again, this is to be expected as we reached out to respondents predominantly through perpetrator services.



Most common forms of support sought:

-  Someone to talk to/advice
-  Help for both the respondent and their partner to improve their relationship
-  Coping strategies
-  Help to change their behaviour
-  Help to manage their anger

Most said they had sought advice or someone to talk to (12 people) or help for both them and their partner to improve their relationship (12 people). They also sought support with coping strategies (10 people), changing their behaviour (10 people), and managing their anger (9 people).

The most common place they initially sought support was from specialist relationship services (9 people), their GP (7 people) and their family (7 people). Less common responses included their partner, a friend and online.

When seeking support for issues / problems in their relationships



respondents turned to **specialist relationship services, their GP or family** for help

The most common types of support received:



One to one counselling



Behaviour change group work programme

The small majority (9 people) found it very easy or easy to get this support, while others (8 people) found it difficult or very difficult. This has implications for improving ease of access to support so that vital opportunities to support perpetrators to stop using abuse are not missed.

Nearly all of those who received support in their relationships had done so through specialist services (16 out of 17 people). Most people had accessed one to one counselling (8 people) or a behaviour change group work programme (8 people).



Specialist relationship support services were difficult to obtain for just under half of those who had ever received it.

Relationship support – what worked?

Survey respondents were asked whether the support they have received has helped change their behaviour or improve their relationships. Of those who responded, 75% (21 people) thought that it had.

Respondents who had accessed support with their behaviour in relationships from a specialist service were more likely than those who had received other forms of support (such as from their GP, a helpline, family, or colleagues) to say that the support they had received helped to change their behaviour or improve their relationships.

When asked to expand on what aspect of support had been most beneficial, many referred to talking to someone and being listened to.

“Someone listening and helping”

Accessing support for their additional needs was the second more common theme. This may be because achieving more stability in their lives means they are in a position to engage in behaviour change work. This is one reason why the Drive Intervention is successful in reducing abuse¹¹.

“Received support booking a GP appointment and got medication for depression and also support with a PIP claim which reduced financial pressure”.

When asked in what way the support has helped change their behaviour and improve their relationship the majority of responses discussed learning greater self-control as well as having an understanding their own behaviour.

¹¹ http://driveproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DriveYear3_UoBEvaluationReport_Final.pdf

“More onus is on yourself to control situations rather than try to focus on other people’s faults.”

“I understand more why I get angry - I understand the impact of my temper on children.”

Relationship support - communication preferences

Before the pandemic, most people (75%) reported face to face sessions to be the best way to receive support. Less commonly selected were phone calls (4 people), face to face group work (4 people) and text/instant messages (4 people).

During lockdown, support via phone was considered the best way to receive support (11 people), followed by text/instant messages (8 people), video call group sessions (3 people) and face-to-face 1-2-1 (3 people). This change is unsurprising as service users will likely have been bound by lockdown restrictions, and preferred virtual support given the circumstances. Email was not selected by anyone as a preference either before or since lockdown, so services should consider avoiding provision of support by email in the future.

Over 60% reported phone contact to be easier/as easy as face-to-face support. However, six people did report phone, video, and email support as more difficult, with two respondents in the open-ended questions specifically stating that they struggled with phone contact and it could not be a replacement for face-to-face support.

These findings show that to achieve the best results for victim/survivors, thought should be given to the delivery of services during and after lockdown. Services should look to move back to face-to-face support when restrictions allow as this was deemed most effective outside of lockdown. While restrictions are still in place, most respondents were happy with telephone support. However, as this was not always the case, care should be taken to ensure the support being offered is accessible and effective for the individual.

Problems in relationships

A series of questions was asked to all respondents about their behaviour in their personal relationship: what causes problems, how these are dealt with and any changes during lockdown.

Only two-fifths (38%) reported that those around them had ever been worried about their behaviour, with family members mentioned most often (7 people), alongside an ex-partner (4 people) and current partner (3 people).

In their view, respondents felt their abusive behaviours had reduced during lockdown, with 94% saying they have not experienced more relationship problems. The majority said their needs to do with their relationship with their partner had stayed the same before and during lockdown. It is possible this may reflect the circumstances of having to remain in the property together or practical barriers to resolving issues.

Aside from pressures arising from coronavirus and tension around adhering to lockdown restrictions, respondents deemed that other factors that they perceived to usually cause problem within the relationship were less of a problem during lockdown.

The most common issues before lockdown were finances (38%), children (34%), alcohol/drug use (34%), household chores (28%), concerns around cheating/ being unfaithful (28%) and jealousy (28%).

During lockdown, the most common problems were other pressures arising from coronavirus (25%), children (22%), finances (22%), adhering to lockdown restrictions (19%), family (16%) and alcohol/drug use (16%).

Since jealousy, concerns around cheating and monitoring social media all reduced during lockdown, we might infer that this is likely due to the perpetrator being able to closely monitor the victim inside the home. This has implications for when lockdown restrictions are lifted and this sense of control is threatened.

Abusive behaviours

As well as reporting fewer problems within their relationships, respondents reported an improvement in their behaviour during lockdown. Shouting and name calling reduced by two thirds and aggression halved. It is possible this could be due to the feeling that problems were less frequent, rather than their behaviour improving when there was a problem. Respondents stated that the occurrence of these negative mechanisms all at least halved during lockdown.

As discussed in the commentary, it is important to note that this does not mean a reduction in coercive controlling behaviour or any less fear felt by victims. Instead, it may reflect victim/survivors' efforts to comply and placate to avoid arguments which may have even more extreme consequences than usual.

Most survey respondents felt their **abusive behaviours reduced** from before lockdown, to during lockdown:



Conclusion and recommendations

This report should be read alongside The Drive Partnership's frontline survey report¹² as well as research documenting victims' experience of lockdown.

It shows the unique perspective of people using abuse in their relationships and suggests lockdown restrictions make it easier for those who use abuse to maintain control of their victims, even without, in their view, being abusive.

This report documents an initial step into collecting feedback from those who use harm. The small sample size reflects the difficulty of engaging this cohort and there has been important learning about methods of engagement. Going forward we recommend that perpetrator voice work should be undertaken hand in hand with Respect accredited members, benefitting from co-creation both with perpetrators and professionals working in the perpetrator sector, to explore different means of gathering data.

¹² <http://driveproject.org.uk/news/survey-findings-services-working-with-perpetrators-of-domestic-abuse-during-covid-19-lockdown-continued-to-deliver-despite-significant-challenges/>

Finding in this report, taken together with The Drive Partnership's frontline survey report¹³, shows the need for services to prepare for ongoing demand and continued risk to victims. This includes looking again at funding, technology and multi-agency working.

There is also a need for professional awareness. Practitioners need to be mindful that even if demand for specialist services appears to be stabilising, and service users report problems to be decreasing, this does not necessarily mean decreasing risk for victims.

The report also shows that specialist services are valued and are deemed, by respondents, to be effective in changing behaviour and reducing problems in their relationships. Thus, services need to be accessible for victims, perpetrators, and other agencies. Our frontline survey report found specialist perpetrator programmes to be hard to contact. Similarly, in the present report, half of those surveyed who had received support from a specialist service found it difficult to access. Thus, accessibility of services is an area that needs work when preparing for risk levels to increase in 2021.

To achieve the best results for victim/survivors, thought should also be given to the delivery of services during and after lockdown. Services should look to move back to face-to-face support when restrictions allow as this was deemed most effective outside of lockdown.

The findings of this report have further implications for the easing of lockdown restrictions. Victims will have more opportunities to access specialist services or the police, including to report current or non-recent abusive incidents or coercive control that occurred during lockdown.

Since perpetrators may have experienced an increased sense of control during lockdown, the easing of restrictions may threaten this which could lead to desperate or abusive behaviours. Taken together, specialist services and the police will need to be prepared for increased demand.

This is supported by preliminary findings from research by Hohl & Johnson where reporting of first-time domestic abuse incidents rose across six police forces following the easing of the first lockdown restrictions in June 2020¹⁴. This research also identifies lockdown as contributing to pent up separations, which are known triggers for escalations in domestic violence. These things together highlight a need for the police to prepare for a post-lockdown surge in domestic abuse, a surge which is likely to take place at the same time as other forms of crime - like street crime and theft - return to more standard levels.

In short, 2021 will be critical for the response to domestic abuse and agencies need to be prepared for a surge in demand for their services. Secure resources, both financially and practically, will be essential to meet the need.

¹³ <http://driveproject.org.uk/news/survey-findings-services-working-with-perpetrators-of-domestic-abuse-during-covid-19-lockdown-continued-to-deliver-despite-significant-challenges/>

¹⁴ <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/news/a-crisis-exposed-how-covid-19-is-impacting-domestic-abuse-reported-to-the-police/>