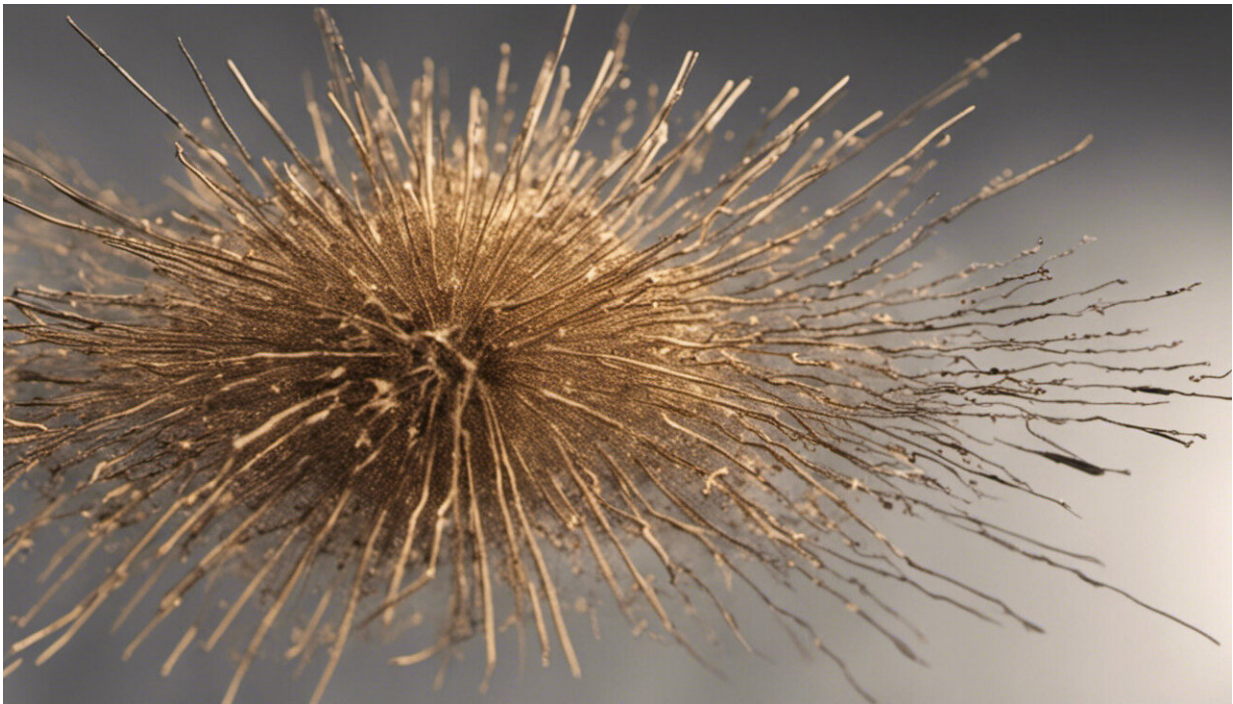


'Coronavirus murders': Media narrative about domestic abuse during lockdown misses the point

May 15 2020, by Emma Williamson, Nancy Lombard and Oona Brooks-Hay



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In more "normal" times, two women a week are murdered by their partners in the UK, but these crimes [rarely make the news](#). Now, following lockdown around the world, there has been a flurry of [reports](#)

of a surge in domestic violence and abuse (DVA) cases. Domestic abuse has been deemed newsworthy. Has it taken a global health crisis to shine a light on violence against women in the home?

Many believe spikes in the number of cases point to a rise in one-off incidents, but [our research](#) into perceived links between football and [domestic abuse](#) demonstrates that it's more likely that existing patterns of abuse are increasing in terms of frequency and type because people are permanently at close quarters. So it is critical to put this in context: more men are not becoming abusive or violent—women who are already suffering abuse are being attacked by their partners more often. As experts in this area we urge the media to make this important distinction.

From the outset, specialist DVA services (already dealing with precarious funding following austerity cuts) were preparing for a potential increase in both the occurrence and reporting of abuse, calling on the respective UK governments to issue clear guidance to potential victims and perpetrators during this time. [UK](#) and [Scottish](#) government guidance states that the police will come to assist in cases of [domestic violence](#) and that fleeing an abusive home is classified as essential travel.

[Data from countries in lockdown earlier](#) has suggested that during this period reports of DVA have increased. As many in the sector feared, there has also been an increase in the number of domestic violence murders. In the three weeks following lockdown there were [16 domestic abuse murders](#) in England and Wales—a figure that continues to rise alarmingly. This number is higher than the [usual rates reported](#).

A harmful interpretation

Unfortunately there has been a lack of understanding in the media reporting of these murders, often referred to as "coronavirus murders." This is unhelpful and points to a much bigger problem in the way society

understands domestic violence and the reasons why it happens. And it serves to construct a narrative that the virus is to blame and that under normal circumstances murders such as these—by ordinary men—would not be happening.

While we are undoubtedly in unprecedented times, this type of blurring of causes and excuses is not new. The current situation calls to mind our [earlier research project](#) examining the apparent links between football and domestic abuse. We were keen to study them because of the narrative adopted by local and national media around the issue, which was based on data showing a correlation between football matches and domestic abuse, and led to suggestions that football was the cause of it.

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Metro reported the death of a pensioner in England as ‘Britain’s first Coronavirus murder case’. CC BY

The conditions of lockdown magnify existing abusive behaviours: isolation from friends, family and employment; the opportunity for constant surveillance of a partner; restrictions on access to the outside world; and limitations on food. There is no escape or respite for victims

and their children outside of the home.

Our key conclusion was that focusing on football as the cause—or any other specific factors or events, in this case COVID-19—risks oversimplifying domestic violence. The media's approach was to look at cases as one incident or set of separate incidents, rather than attempt a more nuanced understanding of domestic violence and abuse as a form of coercive control embedded within a regular pattern of behaviour.

The findings of this original study can be applied to the current coronavirus pandemic and the daily updates that tell us domestic violence rates around the world are increasing. It is important to note that media reports are not the same as prevalence. While other crimes are falling during this pandemic, domestic abuse is not, and the lack of other news generally and the increase in murders make it a more newsworthy issue.

CORONAVIRUS 'MURDER' Husband 'strangled wife of 44 years to death after late-night argument in coronavirus lockdown'

How the Sun saw the story shown above. CC BY

Man accused of Britain's first self-isolation murder, as grandmother found dead at home

The tragedy comes after campaigners warned that enforced isolation could lead to a domestic violence epidemic

How the Telegraph framed the same story., CC BY

This creates a media loop in which the misreporting of these crimes perpetuates the perception of such abuse as "incidents," fuelling further misreporting which, in turn, leads to misinformed service responses. This is a problem because often the police, the courts and hospitals also perceive this type of abuse in the same way—when actually it is evidence of an underlying, ongoing and fluctuating pattern of abuse.

Describing domestic abuse killings as "COVID-19 murders" is dangerous as, like linking it to football, it masks the reality that perpetrators are ordinary people. These men are not monsters; they have the veneer of respectability as your mate down the pub, the devoted dad or the family man next door.

A further problem with this unhelpful narrative is that it implies that we are in a situation that will dissipate after lockdown when, in reality, domestic violence and abuse existed before COVID-19 and will be there after it.

In the middle of such a crisis, it is crucial that we continue to see the dynamics of domestic [violence](#) as both a pattern of abusive behaviours

and a product of the unequal world we live in, rather than viewing it as a reaction to a specific event. All that does is make it harder for victims to be seen and to get the proper help and support they need. Worse, it shifts the blame from those who should be held accountable for the violent [abuse](#) of their partners.

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