

Research reveals 'huge' impact of pandemic on sexual violence support services

October 4 2021



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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual abuse survivors going through the criminal justice system has been 'huge' with support services reporting referral increases of up to 366 percent.

They also reported supporting clients for much longer periods of time because of the delays now being seen in the [criminal justice system](#).

A new evidence briefing out today, written by Lancaster University and published on the Justice in COVID-19 for Sexual Abuse and Violence (JiCSAV) project website, focuses on the experiences of Independent Sexual Violence Advisors and Third Sector Support Services during the pandemic.

The report also highlights a range of innovative ways in which support services have rallied to help their clients.

"The increase in referrals was an issue before the pandemic, but things are far worse now," says lead author Dr. Siobhan Weare.

"Support services have done an incredible job supporting clients since the first lockdown in March 2020 and we've seen some amazing innovation in how services have delivered support. This has had huge benefits for survivors being supported."

Some 20 participants from 19 support services across England and Wales were interviewed between May and July 2021 with interviewees working as Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) or children and young people's ISVAs (CYPISVAs), lead ISVAs/co-ordinators, therapists, support workers, and service managers.

Support services all reported the pandemic as the busiest time they had ever experienced.

The opportunity, created by lockdowns, for survivors to sit and reflect, lack of opportunity to engage other coping mechanisms, and broader impacts of the pandemic on mental wellbeing are cited as possible reasons for increased referrals to [support services](#), who moved to remote

working when face-to-face support was halted.

Services supporting young survivors of [sexual abuse](#) reported seeing some of the worst family relationship cases ever during the pandemic and an increase in the complexity of cases being dealt with.

"What we did have was some really horrific familial stuff, so horrific even in our general sanctum of horror that we see on a daily basis, like above and beyond that, the stuff that was coming through in the middle of the pandemic was really grim, really difficult stuff," said one CYPISVA.

Continuity of service for clients in one form or another was important to all interviewees. This was particularly so because, as many participants noted, other services were not available through lockdowns, or were struggling to meet increased demand.

"Doctors weren't seeing people, mental health teams weren't ... social workers were doing it all over the phone, the whole housing office and council provisions closed down ... for some people we were the only contact they were having," said one service manager .

Similarly, the impacts of the pandemic on the Criminal justice System (CJS) meant that survivors were receiving fewer updates about their cases. Continuity of ISVA support was therefore essential.

For many survivors, the move to online support was beneficial. Some groups of [service](#)-users, particularly male survivors and those with more complex mental health issues and vulnerabilities, appeared to find it easier to engage with online or telephone support than with face-to-face support.

However, not everyone was able to effectively engage with online

support. Some did not have the technology or skills to access support in this way, and others did not have a safe or confidential space at home.

Additionally, some [younger children](#) really struggled with online support, especially after spending so much time online for home schooling. Those with learning difficulties and autism also found the move to online support very challenging.

Participants explained that they were providing support to clients for longer periods of time due to increased delays in the progression of cases through the CJS. They noted that investigations and charging decisions were delayed and pre-existing delays in the court system were magnified.

Interviewees frequently reported their client's court cases were canceled or rearranged at the last minute, with some trials not yet being re-listed and others listed as far ahead as 2023.

Participants explained that survivors may now have to wait an average of 2-3 years from reporting to the police to the start of their trial.

"The CJS has slowed down so dramatically, where we may have worked with people in a worst-case scenario for three years, we're now looking at six years ... we are going to have the same person on our caseload for six years," said one advisor.

Innovations to support survivors included:

- Setting up lending libraries to distribute tablets and training to clients to improve accessing online support
- Introducing 'walk and talk' sessions and doorstep visits—initially seen as a "COVID-secure" way for clients to access support, this brought unexpected benefits and will be retained by some services. Several services reported men and young people

- particularly benefitted from walking therapy.
- Using the online game Minecraft to provide support to children who would traditionally have benefitted from play therapy but who struggled to engage remotely
 - As lockdown restrictions eased and in-person support was permitted, providing children with individual therapy boxes containing play materials for the duration of their therapy journey.

The report makes a number of recommendations based on the findings including a need to urgently address the increased delays within the CJS to improve survivors' experiences, and to maximize justice opportunities.

More information: The briefing is available online:
www.coventry.ac.uk/globalasset...search-briefing3.pdf

Provided by Lancaster University

Citation: Research reveals 'huge' impact of pandemic on sexual violence support services (2021, October 4) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-reveals-huge-impact-pandemic-sexual.html>

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