

Pandemic increased domestic abuse trauma

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The pandemic has significantly increased trauma suffered by victims of domestic abuse, with some abusers even using lockdown measures as a weapon of control, new research by UWS has found. Organizations supporting victims of domestic abuse saw a substantial spike in calls for support during the COVID-19 lockdown—with some abusers using

pandemic restrictions as a weapon of control.

A major study by University of the West of Scotland (UWS) into the impact of the COVID-19 [lockdown](#) on those living with [domestic abuse](#) has found that victims were confined in isolation with their abusers, deprived of safe spaces and opportunities to contact others for help or support, and that more children were subjected to witnessing abuse due to school closures.

The research is part of a growing body of work by the University exploring the impact of lockdown on both domestic and animal abuse.

Dr. Zara Brodie, Lecturer in the School of Education and Social Sciences at UWS, said: "Through in-depth interviews with staff from several UK-based support organizations, we've gained a detailed insight into calls received during the COVID-19 lockdown periods across 2020 and 2021. These findings will act as a crucial guide for policy decision-making regarding support needs of domestic abuse victims and survivors emerging from the pandemic and beyond."

Key findings from the research include:

- Victims lost most or all access to the support they relied upon prior to the pandemic.
- Victims no longer had respite from their abuser when they went to work or social engagements due to the lockdown.
- Abusers used [government guidelines](#) as a tool for abuse, such as refusing to wash their hands or by meeting up with friends socially with the intent to cause fear and distress for the victim.
- Perpetrators used the lockdown as an excuse to cease or minimize child contact where the children remained housed with the abuser.
- Due to lockdown school closures, children were at a higher risk

of witnessing or being a victim or tool for abuse.

- Furlough and other financial implications left victims concerned about their financial security, should they decide to flee the situation.
- In some cases, the lockdown meant that online support was seen to be positive, particularly for victims in remote areas who had difficulty engaging with face-to-face support services.
- However, several call-takers indicated that forcing victims to engage with new services or modes of delivery increased the risk of re-traumatisation; where callers had spent months or years sharing their experiences with a support provider who was no longer available, and now had to relive that trauma to bring the new service up-to-speed.

Dr. Zara Brodie added: "We found that not only did government restrictions make it harder for people to access formal support like GPs and community mental health services, but more crucially, their contact with friends and family was severely limited, making it impossible for those close to victims to monitor risk of harm and need for intervention as they had often done before. Pre-pandemic, this form of "third-party abuse monitoring" was often a critical route to accessing more formal support services."

"Worryingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, there was consensus across all helpline staff that abusers were weaponizing government restrictions and diffusing responsibility for their controlling behaviors. Many would tell the victim that they didn't have to stay at home and cease contact with family because they (the abuser) wanted them to, but because the government insisted. Many abusers were also purposefully disobeying government guidelines, with the aim of inciting distress, leaving victims fearful that they or their children might be at increased risk of contracting COVID-19."

As well as having a significant impact on the experiences of those living with domestic abuse, the COVID-19 lockdown had a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of abuse helpline staff.

These findings included:

- Call handlers' daily exposure to traumatic experiences of callers increased, leaving some staff emotionally exhausted.
- Many of the domestic abuse helpline staff's usual coping mechanisms for dealing with the trauma of their work—such as having informal conversations with colleagues, visiting their friends, or walking home from work—were unavailable during lockdowns.
- When working from home, staff had no physical separation from their working space and living space, leading to thoughts about working lingering into their personal time.
- Staff had great anxiety about their family members—particularly children—overhearing the traumatic nature of their work whilst they worked from home.

Dr. Chloe Maclean, also a Lecturer in the School of Education and Social Sciences at UWS, said: "Domestic abuse helpline staff have been performing a critical service during the pandemic. Their wellbeing, too, has been impacted by increases in calls and changes to their working conditions. They worry about their callers, they worry about the changing landscape of [support](#) for victims/survivors of domestic [abuse](#), and they worry about their own family potentially overhearing traumatic aspects of their work whilst they work from home."

Provided by University of the West of Scotland

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