

Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic 2021

Contents

Foreword	1
Summary of findings	3
Methodology	8
Our findings	9
The scale of domestic abuse in England and Wales during the pandemic	9
Crime recording	10
Domestic homicide	13
Demand was high for specialist domestic abuse support organisations	13
The police responded proactively to protect victims of domestic abuse	15
The police worked proactively to keep people safe	17
Investigations	21
Maintaining contact and support	21
Domestic abuse perpetrators	22
Police and partners made good use of technology	24
The police and partners innovated to support victims	29
Delays and backlogs in the criminal justice system are a very significant concern	30
The exceptionally low volume of domestic abuse cases resulting in a charge remains unacceptable	34
Annex A: Academic research	38
Annex B: Domestic Abuse Act 2021	43
Annex C: Definitions and interpretation	44
Annex D: About the data	49
Annex E: Domestic abuse reference group members	52

Foreword

This is the fifth in a series of thematic domestic abuse publications since our first report in March 2014, [*Everyone's business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse*](#). This review looks at how the police responded to the unique challenges the COVID-19 pandemic placed on preventing and responding to domestic abuse.

The United Kingdom entered the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020. Most of us were instructed to stay at home. This meant many victims of domestic abuse couldn't distance themselves from their abuser, safely contact the police for help or get support from family and friends. Forces started to work differently, recognising that the absence of a call to the police doesn't imply absence of abuse and harm. Many forces adopted innovative new practices to check on the safety of victims of domestic abuse, finding new ways to 'reach in' to them rather than waiting for victims to 'reach out'.

We are pleased that policing recognised the risks to those who felt trapped in their own homes with their abusers and that it made sensible decisions on how to manage those risks. This review expands on the findings in our recent [*policing COVID-19 report*](#), highlighting good practice and innovation. We have also made three recommendations aimed at ensuring forces continue to respond to the challenges of policing domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

We are grateful for the collective focus by the police, domestic abuse organisations, charities, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for domestic abuse, the Victims' Commissioner and Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Home Office, the College of Policing, and academia on the issue of domestic abuse. Some of that activity is discussed in this review.

There can be little doubt that the restrictions imposed during the pandemic have put some victims of domestic abuse at greater risk. The police responded effectively in the most challenging of situations, adapting their practices, focusing on prevention and sharing ideas for new ways of working through well-established national arrangements. However, evidence suggests that this success was, at least in part, due to domestic abuse truly being prioritised during lockdown as the competing demands of other crimes, like burglary and night-time economy disorder, reduced with people staying at home.

It is intended that, in England, most remaining lockdown restrictions will ease during the height of the summer, a time when typically (along with other holiday periods) there is an increase in reporting of domestic abuse incidents. It is vitally important that police forces maintain their focus on protecting and supporting victims of domestic abuse as life returns to normal.

We have seen progress in important areas of the police response to domestic abuse, including the opening up of new channels enabling victims to contact and interact with the police online. We applaud these innovations, many of which have led to a more tailored and timely police response. But we seek reassurance that the new ways of working are properly monitored and supervised – they must not become a shortcut to a less effective response to victims.

We have significant concerns about the backlogs that have built up in the courts during the pandemic. Delays in cases coming to trial increase the likelihood of victims disengaging from the criminal justice process, often out of frustration and despair. Failure to bring offenders to justice in a timely way means they have further opportunities to offend, increasing the risk of harm to victims and their families. The police cannot solve the issue of court backlogs, but others in the criminal justice system must do so rapidly. In the meantime, we expect the police to continue to take measures to safeguard victims who are waiting for court hearings.

Not all victims of domestic abuse want or expect the police to pursue a criminal justice outcome, but all want the harm to stop. The police must use their powers appropriately and effectively. In earlier reports we have expressed concern about the number of reported domestic abuse crimes that the police decide to take no further action on. The situation has worsened considerably over the past five years, to the extent that on average the police now decide not to continue to investigate three in every four domestic crimes reported to them. Many forces are unable to explain why these figures are so high and there is significant variation among forces. We have asked all forces to take immediate action to review their own position.

The murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 was a catalyst for women concerned for their own safety and that of women and girls across this country. In the wake of the tragedy, the Home Secretary commissioned us to do a bespoke inspection; we will shortly be reporting on the effectiveness of the police response in keeping women and girls safe. We will revisit some of the areas in this review and those we have highlighted previously, assessing where the police need to redouble their efforts in supporting victims of domestic abuse and bringing offenders to justice.

Zoë Billingham

HM Inspector of Constabulary

Summary of findings

The police responded proactively to protect victims of domestic abuse

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened concerns for people living with fear and violence because of domestic abuse. Many forces told us that they quickly recognised domestic abuse victims and their families as a priority. Most forces made sure that they planned responses that would meet victims' needs.

At first, the police were worried that there would be a large rise in domestic abuse incidents. This view was based on statistics from European countries that had been tackling the pandemic for longer.

Anticipating increased reporting of domestic abuse, forces prepared as well as they could. Many moved staff into domestic abuse investigation units so they could continue to respond effectively.

Many forces had fewer than usual reports of domestic abuse at the start of lockdown. But as time went on, reports returned to normal levels. There was an overall increase in first-time reporting. Incident levels were up by 4 percent at 18 May 2020 and 7 percent at 11 June 2020, with normal trends beginning as of 8 June 2020. Most forces were back to expected levels of domestic abuse crime and arrests at that time.

By contrast, specialist domestic abuse services have seen very large increases in calls to their helplines and online platforms, such as webchats. Several helplines reported more requests for emotional support, worries about controlling behaviour and escalating experiences of violence and abuse. There were also calls from victims planning to leave their partner when restrictions eased and who needed support to do so. It is important that police forces understand that victims are still reporting domestic abuse through other services, why victims may choose to report in that way and how they can work with partner organisations and victims to break down any barriers to reporting to the police.

The police were proactive in keeping people safe

Forces told us that they acted proactively in supporting victims of domestic abuse, for example, addressing the threat posed by repeat domestic abuse perpetrators by creating plans to mitigate threats posed by them. Many forces greatly increased their applications for Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs). Many were also proactive in contacting people who had previously reported domestic abuse and who were assessed as being at greatest risk of harm from further abuse because of being repeat victims or as a result of the level of violence they had previously suffered.

While we saw an increase in arrests from a three-month snapshot during the first lockdown, overall, there is an annual downward trend. Forces should ensure that any changes in performance are recognised and understood through existing routine monitoring mechanisms. This will support forces to determine whether officers are using the most appropriate methods to protect victims of abuse.

Police and partner organisations also made some adaptations to the way in which they responded to domestic abuse. One such positive development was the move to virtual court hearings for DVPOs, which forces have reported as being more efficient than attending a physical court hearing. Under the DVPO scheme, police and magistrates have the power to ban a domestic abuse perpetrator from returning to their home or contacting the victim for up to 28 days after a domestic abuse incident. The process also provides a further window of opportunity for police and partner organisations to work together to protect victims from future harm.

Although forces historically haven't used a telephone-based initial response for domestic abuse cases, some chose to implement this process for 'grade 3' incidents (those not needing an immediate or priority response). This was in recognition of the need to continue to offer a response to all calls from victims, at a time of reduced officer capacity and based on a threat, risk and harm assessment.

Some forces informed us that they had expanded the ways in which a victim could report a crime or contact police for advice. This included online reporting processes, web chats, video links and virtual waiting rooms, which victims could log into and be connected to a specialist investigator.

While we welcome the increased options for victims to make and maintain contact with police, and applaud forces for the rapid, innovative steps they took in difficult circumstances, we are concerned that online contact in all forms is not scrutinised through performance management and oversight in the same way as traditional reporting routes. Although a risk-assessed approach to phone-based domestic abuse response may be appropriate, we would urge forces to ensure this approach is reviewed regularly. Furthermore, any future innovative practice that is developed should have all appropriate safeguards and monitoring frameworks in place.

Recommendation 1

- We recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should **immediately** introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework. The framework should assess the suitability of such contact methods, ensuring that victim needs are at the forefront of decisions around their use and appropriate onward action is taken in all cases.
- We recommend that forces **immediately** review their use of a telephone-based initial response to any domestic abuse incidents and crimes and ensure that it is in accordance with the strict parameters set out by the College of Policing.

Police and partner organisations made good use of technology and innovated to support victims

The police work with other public services and organisations to keep domestic abuse victims safe. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of those involved moved to working from home. This meant they needed to establish new ways of communicating with victims and each other. Some organisations had to overcome problems with the compatibility of their technology with that of others. Importantly, meetings focused on sharing information between organisations for the protection of victims, such as multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs), continued to take place. Feedback also suggested that virtual meetings were better attended and more easily arranged, which in turn supported the ability to keep victims safe.

Forces used technology to manage the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS), also known as Clare's Law. The DVDS has two functions:

- 'right to ask': this enables someone to ask the police about a partner's previous history of domestic violence or violent acts; and
- 'right to know': third parties can make a request via this process, or police can proactively disclose information to a potential victim about a partner's previous history of domestic abuse or violence.

The process helps the person receiving the disclosure to make informed choices about continuing a relationship and about their personal safety, even after the relationship ends.

Disclosing information could now be done securely online, where previously it had to take place at a police station. So the pandemic did not prevent this important tool from being used to prevent future offending.

The need to keep in contact with victims has never been more important as during the pandemic. Many forces told us that they worked with other domestic abuse organisations and businesses to create safe spaces. This meant that domestic abuse victims could report abuse online or go to designated locations without being put at greater risk from their abusers.

Some forces gave victims safety equipment such as doorbell cameras.

Delays and backlogs in the criminal justice system are a significant concern

Forces adapted rapidly to a changing pattern of criminal behaviour. They moved staff to work on areas of greater risk, like domestic abuse and managing virtual remand court hearings, which was viewed by criminal justice partners very positively. However, this was not without difficulties, such as financial constraints, resourcing issues, the lack of an efficient court scheduling tool, and detainees being held in police cells for an extra 16–24 hours rather than being transferred to court cells. The challenges described above mean that most forces have been unable to continue with virtual remand hearings.

Many forces told us that delays in getting Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) advice for some domestic abuse cases meant victims were potentially exposed to further risk of harm. In some cases, victims withdrew their support for prosecution. While withdrawal of support is not new, it was exacerbated due to the delays.

According to the report [Impact of the pandemic on the criminal justice system – A joint view of the criminal justice chief inspectors on the criminal justice system’s response to COVID-19](#), time from charge to trial greatly increased in 2020. This created more opportunities for re-offending and increased risk of harm to victims and families. Until we have the results of investigations and court hearings that arose in the pandemic, we won’t know the true impact of these delays.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that forces **immediately** review their capacity to provide ongoing support and safeguarding to victims of domestic abuse whose case is awaiting trial at court. This should:

- ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims to keep them up to date with the progress of their case; and
- enable the offer of access to specialist support services as well as opportunities to address concerns victims may have regarding continuing to support a prosecution through the delays.

Investigative outcomes: the number of occasions when victims do not support police investigations is increasing

In cases of domestic abuse, it is sadly not uncommon for victims to feel unable to support police action and this can be for a variety of reasons. It is also important to recognise that when victims make a call to the police, not all are seeking a criminal justice outcome. In many cases they simply want the abuse to stop.

In the 12-month rolling period up to March 2020, we found that on average 54.8 percent of domestic abuse cases were discontinued for this reason (outcome 16). There is huge variation between forces, with between 36 percent and 71 percent of cases having this outcome. There are different reasons why cases fail. For example, a victim may be reluctant to give evidence, due to fear of having to relive their experiences or of reprisals from the perpetrator and/or their family. They may simply not have faith that a positive outcome will occur. In these instances, there may be sufficient other evidence to enable police to proceed on an evidence-led basis. However, this will not always be the case.

We have reported previously that officers appear to have a working knowledge of what is needed to prosecute on an evidence-led basis, but that there were still cases that could have been progressed in this way that were discontinued.

There are times when there is insufficient evidence even with the support of the victim (outcome 15). In the same 12-month period, on average 20 percent of cases did not proceed due to evidential difficulties but where a victim did support the prosecution.

While we acknowledge that there will be crimes whereby there is no possible means by which to take a case forward to charge, we remain concerned at forces' unacceptably high use of outcome 16. It is even more disturbing that, when combining rates of the use of outcome 15 and outcome 16, on average 75 percent of cases are discontinued by police, leaving victims at potential risk of further harm.

It is imperative that forces collect and understand their data in this area to improve their understanding of why so many cases are finalised in these ways, and whether those outcomes are appropriate. Additionally, they should determine whether more can be done to connect victims who are particularly scared or vulnerable with specialist support services. This may increase the likelihood of victims continuing with the legal process and may also support the prevention of future harm.

We will continue to monitor these points closely within our PEEL inspection framework and our violence against women and girls thematic inspection this year.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that all forces **immediately** review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions. This is to ensure that:

- domestic abuse investigations guarantee all attempts to engage victims are explored, and that all possible lines of evidence are considered so that in all cases the best possible outcomes for victims are achieved;
- there is regular and effective supervision of investigations that supports the above point to be achieved; and
- the use of outcomes 15 and 16 is appropriate, and the reasons for using them, including auditable evidence of victim engagement, are clearly recorded.

Methodology

This review is based on several sources of information, as detailed below.

In July 2020, we announced our intention to inspect the police response to the COVID-19 pandemic. That inspection looked at what happened from March to November 2020, focusing on preparedness and the wider response to policing during the pandemic.

After that inspection, we published a thematic report, [*Policing in the pandemic – the police response to the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020*](#).

To understand the response to domestic abuse during this period, we reviewed the information that all 43 forces gave us through a self-assessment questionnaire as part of the COVID-19 inspection (put simply, what they told us was happening). We also carried out more detailed inspection in 19 forces, most of which we did remotely.

We wanted to ascertain how lockdown restrictions affected:

- the way in which victims contacted the police or other organisations for help and support;
- forces' ability to respond effectively to risk;
- the data reflecting the prevalence of domestic abuse;
- whether criminal justice processes were affected (in terms of closures of buildings and courts);
- how organisations worked effectively together to safeguard victims and their families; and
- the innovations that developed to make sure systems and processes could continue effectively.

We also reviewed the Home Office police-recorded crime and outcomes data tables for the 12 months to 31 March 2020. And we used information from specialist domestic abuse services highlighting 'the victim's voice'. This is referenced in the 2020 Women's Aid report, [*A perfect storm*](#).

A domestic abuse expert reference group advises on, and informs, our work relating to domestic abuse. The group includes representatives from the police service, police and crime commissioners, the College of Policing, the Home Office and the voluntary sector. We have tested out the early findings of the review with the group. We list the members of the group in Annex E.

Our findings

The scale of domestic abuse in England and Wales during the pandemic

The United Kingdom entered the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020, until 10 May 2020. At that time, in a televised address we were instructed to stay at home. This presented an acute set of new circumstances for policing to work within. For domestic abuse, this meant people were trapped at home, and usual support mechanisms were unavailable or could not be provided in the same way.

Unlike in some European countries, the large increase in reports to police of domestic abuse incidents didn't happen in England and Wales. But domestic abuse organisations reported very significant increases in contact for help at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has continued. People made contact for various reasons. Many used helplines for the first time to get support, either for themselves or on behalf of a relative or friend.

At the time data was collated for this review, except for controlling or coercive behaviour, domestic abuse wasn't a specific criminal offence. This changed on 29 April 2021, when the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was enacted. Before this, forces recorded offences that related to domestic abuse under the respective offence that had been committed (for example, assault with injury). The true prevalence of domestic abuse is challenging to understand, and estimates vary depending on the source of the information.

In the 12 months to March 2020, the police service in England and Wales received approximately 1,150,000 domestic abuse calls – an average of 130 calls an hour.

In an average 24-hour period there around 3,100 domestic abuse calls. Control room staff recorded approx. 3,000 incidents and 2,200 crimes.

Domestic abuse-related crime constitutes 1 in 6 (15 percent) of all crime recorded by the police in England and Wales and over a third (35 percent) of all recorded violence against the person crimes.

The Office for National Statistics recorded that only 1 in 5 incidents of domestic abuse were reported to the police in 2017. This figure was taken from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). The data held by the police can therefore only provide a partial picture of the actual level of domestic abuse experienced in England and Wales. Similarly, CSEW data should not be viewed in isolation. The estimates from the survey show a higher level of domestic abuse, in terms of the number of victims, than other data sources. Therefore, while the CSEW provides the best available

estimate of trends in the prevalence of domestic abuse, this may not match trends in administrative data sources and therefore an accurate picture of demands on the police, the criminal justice system or service provision cannot be produced.

What we do know is that many cases won't enter the criminal justice process and that it is too soon to say whether the pandemic has affected reporting levels.

Crime recording

Since the publication of [Everyone's business](#) in 2014, there has been a 181 percent increase in the number of domestic abuse-related crimes recorded by police forces in England and Wales. In the 12 months to 31 March 2020 (compared with the 12 months to 31 August 2013), the volume of recorded crime increased from 269,700 to 758,941.

The tables below highlight the changes in domestic abuse recording since the last [thematic inspection report in 2017](#).

Table 1: Changes in domestic abuse recording in England and Wales from March 2016 to March 2020

Volume police activity	12 months to 31 March 2017	12 months to 31 March 2018	12 months to 31 March 2019	12 months to 31 March 2020	Change since 2017
Domestic abuse-related crimes	488,049	599,549 (+23%)	746,219 (+24%)	758,941 (+2%)	Up 56% (+270,893)
Domestic abuse-related sexual offences	15,480	18,545 (+20%)	21,007 (+13%)	24,407 (+16%)	Up 58% (+8,927)
Domestic abuse-related violence against person crimes	375,629	458,711 (+22%)	579,633 (+26%)	595,859 (+3%)	Up 59% (+220,266)
Domestic abuse-related harassment crimes	74,894 *Please note this data is for 12 months to June 2017	106,905 (+43%)	166,472 (+56%)	176,837 (+6%)	Up 136% (+101,943)

Table 2: Changes in domestic abuse-related crime as a proportion of total crime and of other crime types in England and Wales from March 2016 to March 2020

Domestic abuse-related crime is:	12 months to 31 March 2017	12 months to 31 March 2018	12 months to 31 March 2019	12 months to 31 March 2020	Change since 2017
of total recorded crime (excluding fraud)	11%	12%	14%	15%	Up 4 percentage points
of all recorded sexual offences	13%	14%	14%	16%	Up 3 percentage points
of all violence against person crimes	32%	33%	35%	35%	Up 3 percentage points
of all recorded harassment crimes	36%	36%	37%	40%	Up 4 percentage points

Source: HMICFRS data collection

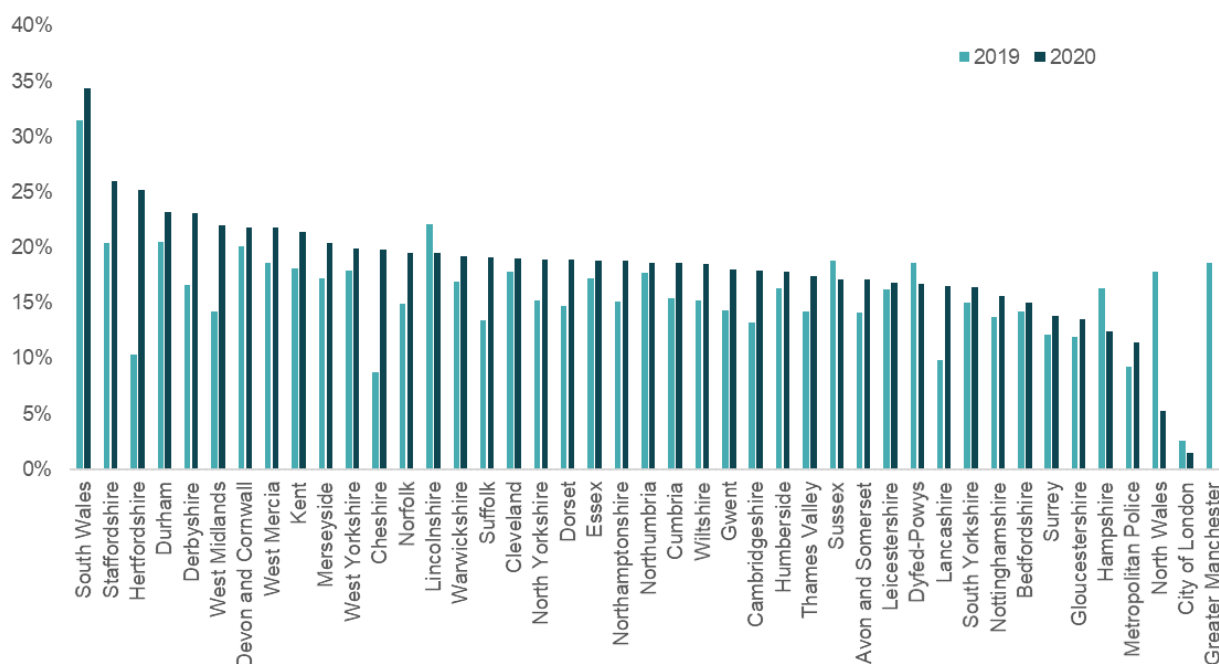
Please note that the ‘Change since 2017’ column in the tables above calculates changes in the number of crimes using percent, and changes in the proportion of crimes using percentage points

The gap between what is reported in the CSEW and the police-recorded crime data has decreased, indicating that the changes could be due to increased reporting rather than an increase in offending. An increase in reporting as opposed to offending is positive.

While police-recorded crime data showed an increase in offences that were flagged as being domestic abuse-related during the pandemic, and we anticipated a rise in domestic abuse calls, we cannot attribute the rise solely to the pandemic. It also highlights that the work undertaken by forces in developing their approaches to tackling domestic abuse and engaging with victims has been beneficial in increasing confidence to report.

However, as this review highlights, there are areas that still require further focus and improvement.

Figure 1: Domestic abuse as a percentage of recorded crime by force, 12 months to 30 September 2020



Source: HMICFRS data collection

Police-recorded crime data showed an increase of 7 percent in offences that were flagged as being domestic abuse-related compared with the same period last year. Greater Manchester Police was unable to provide data for 2020.

Some forces bucked the trend and reported higher levels of domestic abuse; for very few there was a decrease. West Midlands Police reported an increase of more than a third. This may be due to several factors, and the force has told us that it believes some of those may be:

- clear communication from police and partner organisations about support;
- increased accessibility through online reporting; and
- a reduction in the availability of support services.

London’s Metropolitan Police Service received a total of 41,158 calls for service for domestic incidents between 25 March and 10 June 2020. This is a 12 percent increase compared with 36,727 calls over the same period in the previous year. The weekly number of calls from victims remained at similar, sometimes lower, levels to the previous year. However, there were large increases in calls from third parties.

In several forces there was a reported increase in stalking or harassment cases. For example, North Wales Police told us that it experienced an increase of almost a third.

Some forces reported increased cases of adolescent to parent violence and abuse. Although the numbers were low, the cases are still troubling, and forces need to be alert to this in developing approaches to domestic abuse.

Domestic homicide

Since the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions, some forces and domestic abuse organisations rightly expressed concern that COVID-19 restrictions might increase the prevalence of domestic homicide.

Existing arrangements to examine and report on domestic homicides can take many months or even years. It was important for forces to quickly establish emerging patterns and where possible take preventive action. To address this, the National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme developed a project in collaboration with the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), the College of Policing and the Home Office.

The project, established in August 2020, counted deaths from the start of the first lockdown restrictions in England and Wales. Its aim was to design and implement a national pilot to better understand domestic homicides in England and Wales during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project sought to understand:

- the true scale and nature of domestic homicide deaths during the pandemic compared with previous years, and whether any increase was related to lockdown;
- rapid learning for police as to how they might predict, intervene or manage risks to prevent homicide (by examining domestic homicide deaths); and
- typology of perpetrators and to what extent they were already known to police, to inform interventions to prevent homicide.

Early findings from November 2020 show that most domestic homicides are still carried out by a current or former partner (50 percent). Victim suicide following domestic abuse was the second most common type (20 percent). Adult family homicide and child deaths accounted for 13 percent and 12 percent respectively.

However, there was no apparent rise in the overall number of domestic homicides based on data from previous years.

Further information about the methodology of this important project can be found in Annex A.

The final report is due in early summer 2021. For more information on this work, [contact the DH project team](#).

Demand was high for specialist domestic abuse support organisations

Specialist domestic abuse services have had very large increases in calls to their helplines and visits to their online contact points (such as webchats). This was particularly the case as lockdown measures eased. Several helplines reported increased requests for emotional support, escalation in violence and abuse, and worries about controlling behaviour.

Refuge, which manages the National Domestic Abuse Helpline (NDAH) in England, reported that there was a 61 percent increase in calls up to February 2021 compared with the 2019/20 baseline. Increase in calls for support doesn't necessarily indicate an increase in the number of victims. It could be an increase in the severity of abuse being experienced and a lack of available ways of coping (such as the ability to leave home to escape the abuse or attend counselling).

Refuge's helpline calls from January to December 2020 showed that 24 percent of women had been stalked, 40 percent had been subject to economic abuse, 58 percent subjected to physical violence and 81 percent reported being controlled by their partner. There were also calls from victims who were planning to leave their partner when restrictions eased, and who needed support to do this.

Between March and November 2020, there was an overall increase of 49 percent in new referrals to the helpline. Calls levelled out at approximately 50 percent higher than pre-COVID-19 averages (Office for National Statistics data, November 2020).

For the period 1 April to 31 December 2020, the number of calls and contacts that staff logged on the helpline's database (both incoming and outgoing) increased by 34 percent against the same period the previous year. The team increased the number of responses/support offered to women by 22 percent compared with the same period last year. This data was taken from the 2020 Women's Aid report, [A perfect storm](#).

During this period, the helpline's advisers made 3,785 referrals to emergency refuge accommodation; 72 percent of calls were from survivors, 10 percent were from professionals and 11 percent were from third parties. The proportion of calls from third parties was at its highest level during the first national lockdown. Analysis of the calls shows an increase in complexity, severity and diversity, which has increased the average call duration. Safeguarding referrals from the helpline also increased significantly.

The trend of an increase in the number of young people (16–24 years old) contacting the service also continues, with more than a 50 percent increase on figures for this demographic from 2019/20.

The highest call volume was in May 2020. The lowest was in December 2020. There were higher call volumes during the summer months and the second national lockdown in England.

The NDAH's new digital platform offers information and support for survivors and those who support them. It received 712,426 visits during the period 1 April to 31 December 2020. There were about 10,500 visits per month in the first three months of 2020, but an average of 73,595 per month between April 2020 and February 2021 – a seven-fold increase.

In Wales, the national Live Fear Free Helpline is run by Welsh Women's Aid (commissioned by the Welsh Government). Since it launched its new 'live chat' service on 5 May 2020, 3,397 live chats have taken place.

A June 2020 survey by Women's Aid found that 93.5 percent of victims living with an abuser said COVID-19 had affected their experience of abuse in more than one way. The ways included an increase in abuse or the level of violence, or the abuser flouting

government guidance and putting the victim at risk. Women's Aid included the results of its survey in its 2020 report, [A perfect storm](#).

On 3 February 2021, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner gave evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee, giving some detail and context to the rise in demand. The Commissioner stated that before the pandemic the NDAH helpline's staff experienced that callers were mostly looking for understanding, validation and emotional support. Now, the helpline staff are taking on complex cases where experiences of domestic abuse are compounded (and exacerbated) by stress and distress due to several factors: continuous lockdowns, increased isolation and worries about housing, income issues, escalating mental health issues, and the lack of – or limited access to – other crucial support services (such as health services).

This increase in demand also affected refuge provision. Data from Women's Aid shows that in May and June 2020 it saw around a 50 percent reduction in the number of refuge vacancies available in England in comparison with same period in 2019, showing that easing of lockdown had a clear impact on demand for refuge spaces.

The police responded proactively to protect victims of domestic abuse

Making and encouraging contact

It was important that forces considered proactive contact with victims who were isolated in their own homes, often with their perpetrator, to encourage them to seek support from police and partner services.

Many victims felt scared or unable to safely contact the police. This was particularly difficult for victims while lockdown restrictions were in place. This section covers the ways in which many forces tried to contact those victims.

Police-led campaigns

The domestic abuse sector lobbied to secure changes to the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 to specifically enable victims to leave their home and seek support, which was accompanied by a Home Office national awareness raising campaign #YouAreNotAlone.

Most forces developed media campaigns alongside this. They included poster, radio and billboard campaigns, all offering reassurance to victims and promoting the national Silent Solution 55 system for emergency contact. Under the system, a 999 caller who is too scared to speak or make a noise can press 55 on their mobile phone when prompted. This informs the police that the call is a genuine emergency. The system is potentially lifesaving and is well established in the UK. But it is only effective if the public know and understand how it works.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, the chief constable of Kent Police has had a regular slot on BBC Radio Kent to talk about issues affecting the public, including domestic abuse. The following excerpt is taken from a letter received by the radio station about the effect of that input and how valuable the police response is.

Dear Anna

Listening to you talking to the Chief Constable regarding domestic abuse call outs I felt I had to respond on behalf of my daughter. She unfortunately had to use this service and I would like you to pass on my thanks to the Chief Constable for the amazing help throughout the whole procedure.

His officers were a credit to the force and are still providing help and guidance, not easy in Covid restrictions.

Thank you for your coverage of this distressing subject which affects the whole extended family.

Many forces told us that some victims at high risk of domestic abuse who were classified as such before the lockdowns didn't appear to report abuse to the police during those periods.

Conversely, in the standard and medium categories of risk, the police received an increase in calls from victims who were reporting abuse for the first time.

It was recognised by many forces that a different method of engaging victims was needed, including consideration of joint initiatives with businesses that victims might have greater opportunity to engage with. After the initial lockdown, several forces worked with hairdressers and barbershops to promote an understanding of the signs of abuse. It was recognised that these were services that might be accessed by victims and where trusted relationships may exist that could enable a victim to feel confident disclosing abuse and discussing how to access support. The approach was based on the #CutItOut campaign first developed in Norfolk in 2017 after the death of Kerri McAuley.

Cleveland Police did a mass text messaging activity. This involved the force contacting some of its existing victims at high risk of domestic abuse (after analysing telephone numbers to make sure they were secure). The text messages gave details of how to contact the police and how to use the Silent Solution 55 system.

Suffolk Constabulary contacted more than 600 previous domestic abuse victims by telephone to offer reassurance, provide information about support services and encourage them to report further incidents. In recognition that due to lockdown restrictions it may be more likely that the perpetrator would be at home with the victim, a call script was used to help reduce risk. This enabled the victim to explain without arousing suspicion that they were unable to speak, but it also provided a rationale for the call if it was answered by the perpetrator.

As part of Operation Fortify, Northumbria Police telephoned medium-risk victims who had been in regular contact with the police before lockdown, and who hadn't come to police attention since lockdown began. The police disguised the calls as follow-up welfare calls and offered support and help. Victims gave feedback to the force, saying the calls had made them feel reassured and safer, knowing they hadn't been forgotten and that the police were easily accessible.

Kent Police worked with important organisations such as education, social services, Refuge, a MARAC and an independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA).

They identified three different groups based on criteria such as frequent callers who hadn't contacted the police in lockdown, repeat victims and families with children. Specialist domestic abuse officers then carried out proactive visits to those groups. The force reported that 330 visits were favourably received by families. The force is continuing this activity.

Many forces have worked to create safe spaces in a variety of community locations where victims can report incidents or speak with specialist support staff.

National campaigns

Hestia's 'UK says no more' is a national campaign focused on raising awareness of, and preventing, domestic abuse and sexual violence. It partnered with Boots UK, Superdrug, Morrison's and independent pharmacies across the country to provide Safe Spaces in their consultation rooms for people experiencing domestic abuse. These Safe Spaces increased the opportunity for victims of domestic abuse to access specialist support, providing a space for them to phone a helpline, contact a support service or talk to a friend or family member.

Hestia also runs the Bright Sky app in collaboration with the Vodafone Foundation. The app is free to download and can support people to assess the safety of a relationship and provides a directory of specialist domestic abuse support services. Evaluation of the app is being conducted by London Southbank University. A six-month evaluation report has already been published, which shows a 52 percent increase in the download of the Bright Sky app for the six months following 23 March 2020 compared with the same period the previous year.

In 2020, the government hosted the Hidden Harms Summit. It focused on tackling crimes such as domestic abuse, sexual abuse, child sexual abuse and modern slavery, all of which may have worsened during the lockdowns. At the summit, the government announced a codeword scheme for victims of domestic abuse. Launched on 14 January 2021, the scheme is run by the Home Office and supported by the independent Victims' Commissioner and Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and specialist domestic abuse services. Under the scheme, victims can signal to staff in participating outlets (such as supermarkets and pharmacies) that they need immediate support by using the codeword 'Ask for ANI'. 'ANI' stands for 'assistance needed immediately'. This will alert staff to the fact that the victim needs an emergency police response or help to contact a domestic abuse specialist support service. Through the weekly NPCC, College of Policing and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner conference call, this innovative practice was shared and promoted in all force areas. The scheme is currently being evaluated through Ipsos MORI.

The police worked proactively to keep people safe

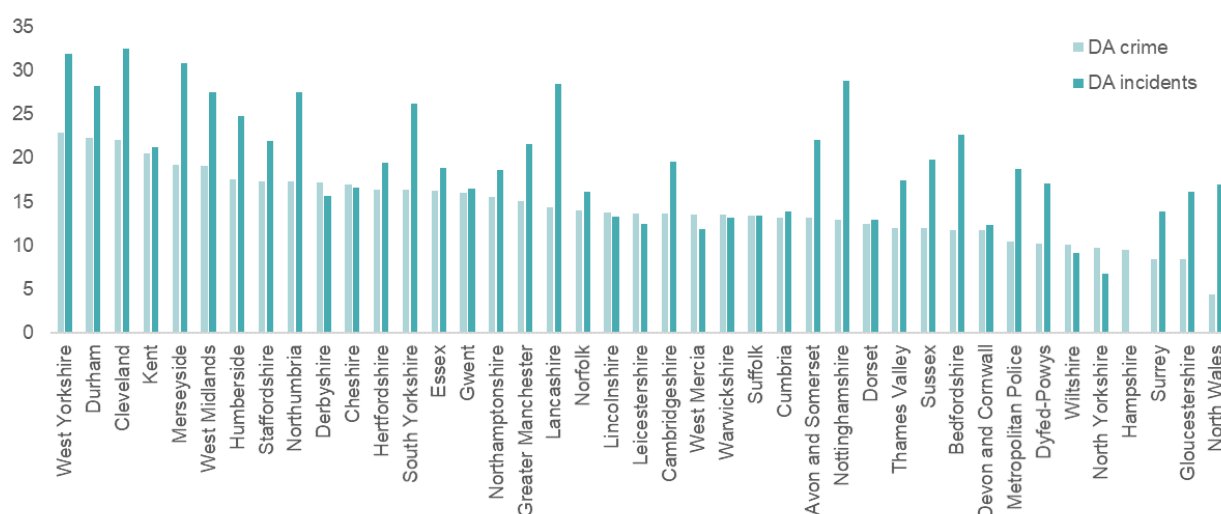
Calls for service

Most forces use the THRIVE system in their control rooms. This is a structured way for call handlers to assess the threat, harm and risk to a caller. It also helps call handlers to determine the vulnerability of the victim, the type of response needed and any action officers should take at the scene to help the investigation.

The THRIVE model allows forces to tailor their service to the individual needs of each victim. It also helps staff decide how best to deal with a call. We support this approach.

Many forces described how their approach to calls for service hadn't changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. They continued to use the THRIVE system for all calls. Some forces gave briefings and extra training to officers and staff. This training emphasised the risk from hidden harm and the need to be professionally curious when attending incidents, especially during the period of pandemic restrictions.

Figure 2: Domestic abuse crimes per 1,000 population per police force, 12 months to 30 September 2020



Source: HMICFRS data collection. See Annex D regarding the collection of data

Some forces added extra questions to assess the risk posed in responding to calls for service. These allowed them to determine personal protective equipment requirements or the suitability of remote deployment. (Remote deployment, remote resolution or remote investigation is where a force has deemed that the risk to a victim can allow the investigation to be conducted remotely, without the need for attendance to speak to the victim in person.)

Gloucestershire Constabulary introduced a vulnerability car, staffed by experienced and specially trained staff. They responded to (and supported) local policing teams who attended to vulnerable victims, with a focus on domestic abuse victims.

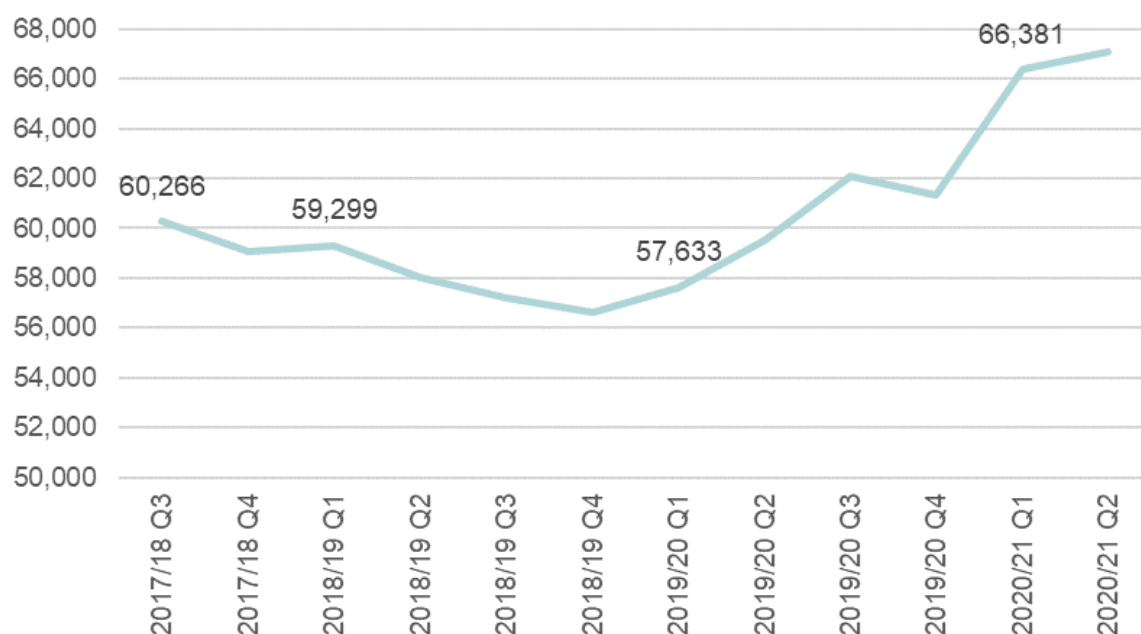
In some areas of Devon and Cornwall, police provided an unmarked car. A trained specialist domestic abuse officer and an independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA) used the car at times of highest demand for domestic abuse incidents. The IDVA supported victims, allowing officers to gather evidence and do a thorough risk assessment.

Northumbria Police introduced domestic abuse specialist support advisers. Their role is to telephone victims and give immediate advice and support. They also gather further information to inform risk assessments, establish any immediate or short-term needs, and ensure appropriate referrals.

Initial response

The below chart highlights that the number of arrests for domestic abuse has risen consistently since January–March ('Q4') 2018/19 and rose significantly during the first phases of the pandemic in England and Wales.

Figure 3: Number of arrests for domestic abuse in England and Wales



Source: HMICFRS data collection

Most forces made sure that when victims called for help, the response provided was appropriate to the risks identified in the THRIVE assessment. If that meant attending a victim's house quickly and apprehending a perpetrator, they did so. This is supported by data showing that there was a 15 percent increase (+8,748) in arrests from April to June 2020 (66,381 arrests) compared with the same period the previous year (57,633 arrests).

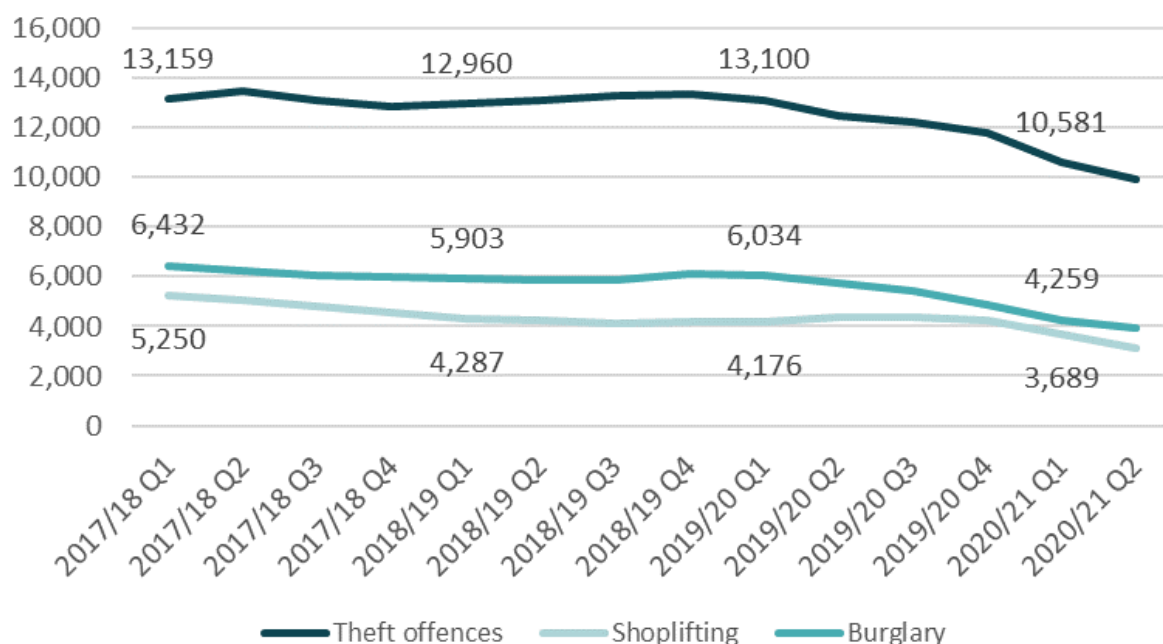
Domestic abuse arrest and prosecution rates increased between 2013 and 2016, when they reached an all-time high. They then plateaued and fell when acquisitive crime like burglary, robbery and car crime experienced a resurgence after more than 10 years of reductions. The increase in other crimes presented forces with a greater challenge in terms of prioritising their resources, but it is unacceptable if the fall in domestic abuse arrests and prosecutions was because of these crimes being treated as less important.

In general, forces recognised that domestic abuse may increase during lockdown and that therefore they needed to be proactive in responding to calls for support. In addition, most forces reported a reduction in some crimes, such as burglary and theft. This meant police were able to focus staff on investigations involving vulnerability, like domestic abuse.

Theft crimes decreased by 20 percent (-2,578) from April to June 2020 compared with the same period in 2018. Shoplifting crimes decreased by 30 percent (-1,561) and

burglary crimes decreased by 32 percent (-2,173 offences). The below chart highlights the changes in these crimes over time from 2017 to Q2 2021.

Figure 4: Number of theft, shoplifting and burglary crimes in England and Wales



Source: HMICFRS data collection

In some cases where a fast response wasn't necessary, forces developed ways to contact victims and conduct enquiries remotely.

We are aware that there is not a consistent approach to domestic abuse across all forces. And there are inconsistencies in investigations and officers' understanding of domestic abuse and coercive control.

Of those women currently experiencing domestic abuse and who took part in the Women's Aid study, 17.6 percent (13 out of 74) reported one or more incidents to the police during lockdown. Some of the comments describing their experiences referred to lack of follow-up from police or delays in arresting and charging (see [A perfect storm](#)).

"The police investigation is ongoing, but there have been delays because of the virus. My ex was due to be questioned, but this hasn't happened yet."

Others were critical of the level of understanding of domestic abuse shown in police responses:

"They made me feel like the criminal, asking why I haven't left, like it was my fault. No matter what he does to me now, I'll never ring them again."

Investigations

During the pandemic, the police changed the way in which they investigated crime. Officers had to consider social distancing, holding interviews with suspects in enclosed rooms, the wearing of personal protective equipment and methods of communicating with victims remotely rather than in person. These considerations added to the existing difficulties in managing investigations, such as gaining the confidence of the victim, supporting them through the investigation and collecting evidence to support a prosecution.

In recognition of this, the NPCC lead for criminal justice worked with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). They advised forces about the viability of officers obtaining initial accounts through online communication where attendance at scenes wasn't possible.

Most forces reviewed their caseloads of domestic abuse crime during the pandemic. This review helped them to update victims about the progress of investigations and inform them of local support services.

Kent Police told us that it wanted to reassure itself that it maintained the quality of domestic abuse investigation during the pandemic. In May 2020, the force carried out a domestic abuse internal inspection. It examined ten domestic abuse calls and crime reports from each policing area following the March lockdown. It looked for any notable changes in working practices, other organisations' involvement, safeguarding or service provision. Most investigations it reviewed were approached in the same way as cases before the pandemic.

Sussex Police created a local resolution team of specialist officers and staff to deal with standard-risk domestic abuse cases. The team conducts virtual interviews with victims by using discreet video conferencing technology. This helps officers to speak with victims face-to-face while listening to their reports. The team gives safeguarding advice during the initial stages of an investigation. This approach hasn't yet been evaluated.

Maintaining contact and support

Forces told us that online contact from the public increased during the pandemic. The public's ability to choose its preferred contact method is now better (and more widely) publicised than before the pandemic. It is important that, from their very first contact, victims feel supported and safe while an investigation is underway.

Forces have reported contact methods such as Facebook and other social media platforms, surgeries, online chats and webinars as being hugely successful. Forces that are adopting these alternative contact methods include Cumbria Constabulary, Cambridgeshire Constabulary, Greater Manchester Police, Cheshire Constabulary and Derbyshire Constabulary.

Several forces also tried to target their social media campaigns to specific groups of people who may be at higher risk of domestic abuse. They include those who live with their perpetrator, are repeat victims or can't make contact to get support.

Forces adopted other digital solutions for contacting victims. For example, Bedfordshire Police introduced secure links to facilitate face-to-face video calls.

Nottinghamshire Police moved the follow-up visits for victims at medium risk of domestic abuse from its neighbourhood policing teams to its research and insight team. That team could telephone victims and guide them to support services. Some early evaluation showed that between May and October 2020, the team contacted 676 domestic abuse victims by telephone or letter. This ensured the victims had details of any support services that might be able to help them following the report to the police.

Several forces contacted previous victims by telephone, text, email and newsletter to offer reassurance and advice.

We welcome the increased choices for victims to maintain contact. And forces should be applauded for the rapid, innovative steps they took in difficult circumstances. But we are concerned that online contact is not scrutinised through performance management and oversight in the same way as traditional reporting routes.

Forces have adapted through necessity. But online approaches need to be evaluated, with support from the College of Policing, before they are adopted long term as normal procedure for domestic abuse. It is important that victims' experiences are considered. Some victims who are unable to access digital communication will not have this option, so face-to-face contact must always be an option. The consequences of these approaches also need to be fully understood; for example, where an investigation has been less than thorough, or where it wasn't possible to adequately assess the risk posed to the victim.

Recommendation 1

- We recommend that if forces continue to adopt online contact methods in respect of victims of domestic abuse, they should **immediately** introduce an effective supervision and monitoring framework. The framework should assess the suitability of such contact methods, ensuring that victim needs are at the forefront of decisions around their use and appropriate onward action is taken in all cases.
- We recommend that forces **immediately** review their use of a telephone-based initial response to any domestic abuse incidents and crimes and ensure that it is in accordance with the strict parameters set out by the College of Policing.

Domestic abuse perpetrators

In response to the pandemic, most forces told us they had identified perpetrators who posed the greatest risk of harm. They did this by looking at factors such as the recency, frequency and gravity of the domestic abuse incidents. They then intervened with these offenders to prevent further harm. Examples are given below.

Perpetrator programmes

Some forces made visits to known perpetrators, which were conducted as safely as possible bearing in mind the COVID-19 guidance about social distancing. South Wales Police and the perpetrator-focused Drive programme worked with probation services, targeting those who had previously been convicted and released for domestic abuse offences and who were on licence. Being on licence means that a person is still serving a prison sentence, but they can live in the community rather than in prison. They must follow certain rules, the duration of which depends on the length of the sentence. If the rules are broken, the person may be returned ('be recalled') to prison.

In Cambridgeshire Constabulary, the CARA (Cautions and Relationship Abuse) programme aims to rehabilitate domestic abuse offenders. The programme changed from a group session to one-to-one sessions, held virtually or by telephone. The constabulary told us that feedback from victims and practitioners suggests this change has been positive. Perpetrators have become more involved, due to working alone with practitioners.

Derbyshire Constabulary created the MARAC+. This involves a team of officers reviewing all serial and repeat domestic abuse data. They determine which victims and perpetrators need enhanced intervention. A multi-agency response then makes the intervention.

Dyfed-Powys Police piloted a domestic abuse perpetrator scheme that was developed with academia. It is intended to educate and divert non-convicted perpetrators away from domestic abuse. The force carried out the scheme remotely and online. On completion of the pilot, the force will publish its results and an evaluation.

Integrated offender management

Integrated offender management is a multi-agency approach to tackling persistent offenders who commit a lot of crime, causing damage and harm to individuals and communities.

South Wales Police told us that it linked activity between domestic abuse investigation, safeguarding units and integrated offender management. It did this by introducing referral methods. The force referred more domestic abuse perpetrators with complex needs (over and above the existing integrated offender management domestic abuse group) for early intervention and online diversionary work.

For the South Wales programme, prevention is the priority. This is followed by early intervention, reducing repeat victimisation and then escalation through the criminal justice system if no other method is successful. In December 2020, the force created an online intervention programme for low-risk domestic abuse perpetrators. As it has been commissioned as a two-year pilot, there isn't yet an evaluation.

Greater Manchester Police and local probation services gave the offender management teams a list of domestic abuse perpetrators who they considered to be of concern. The list, which was outside of the usual group, triggered home visits. The police conducted visits to assess likely re-offending throughout the lockdown

period. The visits also served as a safeguarding check on vulnerable victims and children.

Nottinghamshire Police's neighbourhood teams focused on perpetrators and the use of perpetrator-centred orders. These are court orders, such as the DVPO, or a domestic abuse perpetrator programme. They can be issued as part of a court sentence. There has been some limited evaluation of Nottinghamshire Police's scheme, through measuring the number of victims applying to support services. The number has increased. The full impact of this scheme on victim involvement and enforcement against perpetrators hasn't yet been assessed.

In Manchester city centre, Operation Mantle involves plain-clothed officers proactively identifying and talking to perpetrators and potential vulnerable victims of domestic abuse. This is a multi-agency operation. It includes volunteer organisations such as the Village Angels, Student Angels and Street Pastors.

Reducing risk by managing perpetrators

The number of domestic violence remedy orders showed a mixed picture. From mid-April to the end of June 2020, both the weekly number of non-molestation applications and the number of orders granted were above the pre-lockdown starting point.

A non-molestation order prohibits a person (the respondent) from molesting the person who is applying for an order (the applicant) or a related child. The order is to protect the person who is applying for it from the respondent's behaviour. Most non-molestation orders are issued outside of criminal proceedings by the family court, so the police would not be involved at this stage.

The weekly number of occupation orders granted between March and the end of June 2020 was generally below the pre-lockdown starting point. An occupation order is a court order that specifies who can and can't live in a property as a way to protect victims of domestic abuse (not only physical abuse but also other forms such as emotional or financial abuse).

Due to the protracted period courts were closed during lockdown, the number of protective order applications will have reduced.

Police and partners made good use of technology

Domestic Violence Protection Orders and the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme

During the first lockdown, most courts closed. However, Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) agreed that applications for DVPOs could continue virtually through the remand courts. The CPS and courts prioritised applications for DVPOs. Many forces reported that making DVPO applications remotely was more efficient, and that they would continue to do this beyond the pandemic.

The police service recognised that DVPO powers to eject a potentially violent perpetrator from the home conflicted with the government's advice on self-isolation and the message "You must stay at home".

The Home Office addressed this issue in conjunction with local authorities and housing providers. It issued specific advice:

If a suspect is ordered to leave premises (DVPN/O or bail conditions) they may claim to be homeless and contravening COVID-related legislation.

Forces will wish to consider options to ensure the suspect does not suffer disproportionate consequences, e.g. assisting the suspect to find a place to stay with friends or relatives or referring them to the local authority.

Forces will want to consider similar support for victims who feel unable to remain at home.

Northumbria Police established agreements with all local authority housing providers to ensure 24/7 housing provision for domestic abuse perpetrators who were displaced after being served with a Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) or Order (DVPO). This was to reduce the risk of them returning to their victim's home.

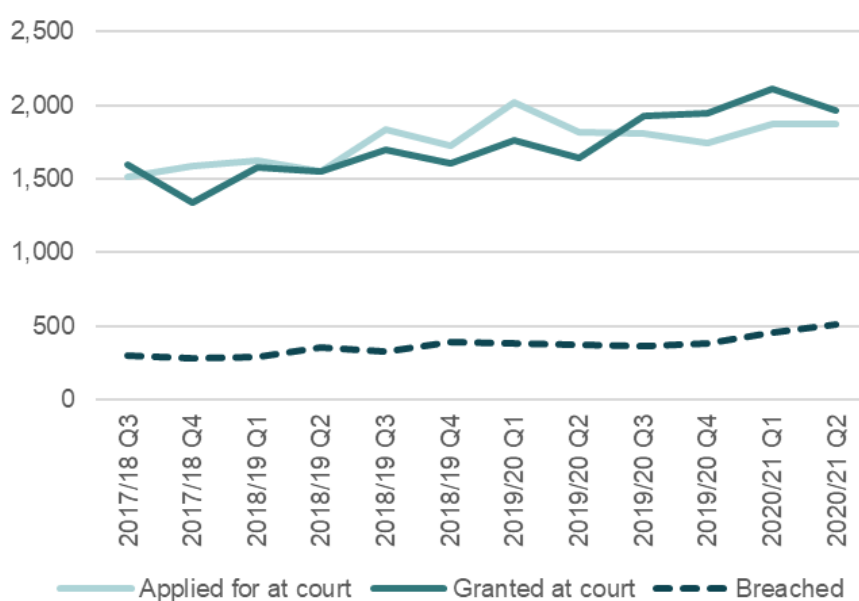
Forces used technology to manage the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS) effectively. They made disclosures securely online. Previously, this could only be done at police stations.

As a result, most forces substantially increased the numbers of DVPO and DVDS applications.

Essex Police was proactive in its approach. Between March and October 2020, it granted 181 DVPOs and dealt with 51 breaches.

Within Nottinghamshire Police, every domestic abuse occurrence is now subject to consideration for right to know, as part of the risk assessment process. Subsequently, the force is on track to have more DVDS applications than last year but it is too early to provide a final figure.

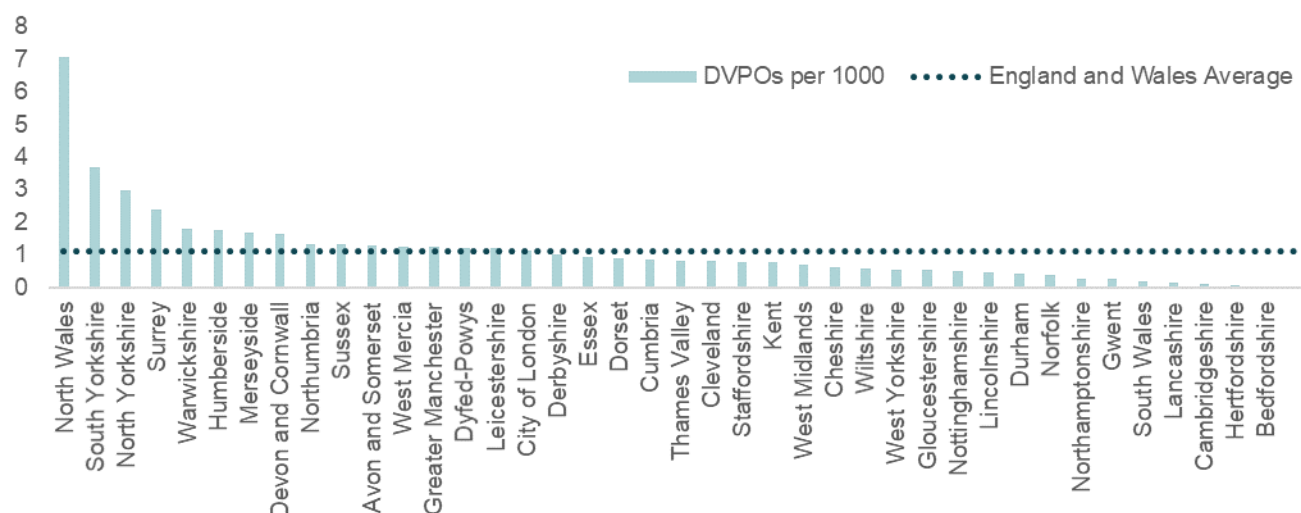
Figure 5: Number of DVPOs, England and Wales



Source: HMICFRS data collection

Despite DVPO applications remaining nearly level, DVPOs granted at court continued to increase to Q2 2020–21, and breaches have also increased but remain in the same proportion as the historic trend.

Figure 6: Number of DVPOs granted per 1,000 domestic abuse-related offences, by force, in the 12 months to 30 September 2020



Source: HMICFRS data collection, Home Office domestic abuse data

Suffolk Constabulary, the Metropolitan Police Service and Hampshire Constabulary could not provide data on DVPO applications. The England and Wales average number of DVPOs granted is just over 1 per 1,000. Most forces grant numbers of DVPOs around this average, but numbers range from 7 per 1,000 to nearly zero. On average, 88 percent of DVPOs applications are granted. This figure is reduced by relatively few forces with lower than average grant rates. However, the bottom four forces also received well below average numbers of applications (the England and Wales average being 44, and the total for Lincolnshire Police being 12), meaning that even slight changes will result in large differences.

Through the initial stages of the pandemic, some forces continued to contribute to the work they do with other organisations. This included the safeguarding children partnerships and the safeguarding adults boards.

Home working became common for many officers and staff, who held meetings with other organisations via virtual platforms. Forces adapted well. Initially, there were concerns about the ability of probation staff and children’s social care to access technology from their homes. This was due to a lack of technical compatibility. There were times when police officers took on the roles of other bodies, such as visiting perpetrators to check their compliance with sentence and order conditions, supporting victims awaiting court processes and carrying out safety checks on children at home.

The effectiveness of joint visits by police and probation staff with offenders was curbed until most partners could access technology and particularly Microsoft Teams, the system that is used by most other organisations.

Hertfordshire Constabulary worked with the Domestic Abuse Alliance on a national launch of We Protect, a victim referral app. Frontline officers use the app to refer victims to free legal advice (with their consent). A panel of solicitors then offers help in securing non-molestation orders.

Hampshire Constabulary works with other organisations to maintain a COVID-19 domestic abuse gold group. Attendees at this group include local specialist domestic abuse services, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, IDVAs and housing associations. The focus is on reviewing domestic abuse demand and risk, and ways to support vulnerable people.

At the start of the pandemic, some forces' investigations were initially delayed. This was because investigators couldn't access evidential material from other organisations, such as information from GPs and children's social care records.

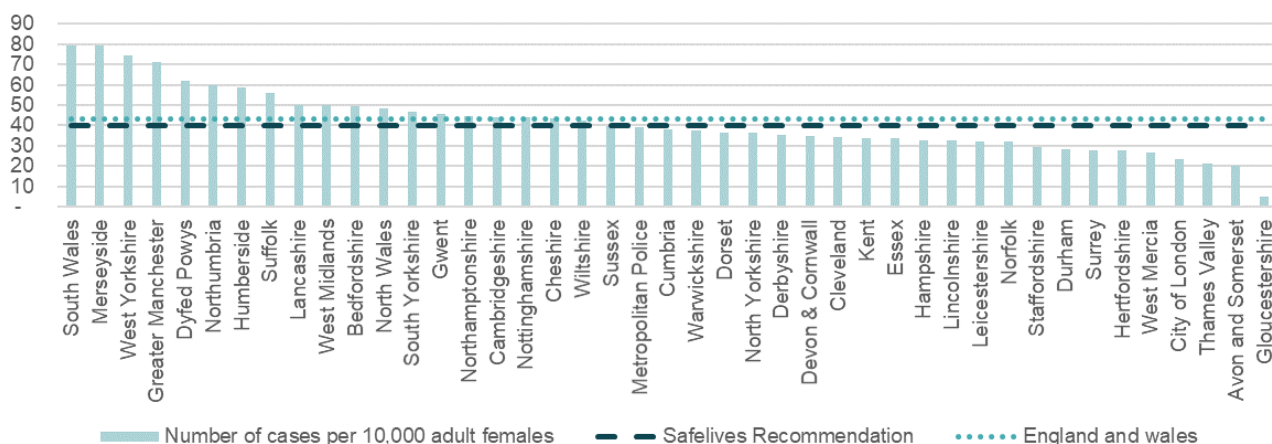
Multi-agency risk assessment conference

A MARAC is a meeting where information on the highest risk domestic abuse cases is shared between representatives of local police, health, child protection, housing practitioners, independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs), probation and other specialists from the statutory and voluntary sectors. After sharing all relevant information about a victim, the representatives discuss options for increasing the safety of the victim and create a co-ordinated action plan. The primary focus of the MARAC is to safeguard the adult victim. The MARAC will also make links with others to safeguard children and manage the behaviour of the perpetrator. At the heart of a MARAC is the working assumption that no single agency or individual can see the complete picture of the life of a victim, but all may have insights that are crucial to their safety. The victim does not attend the meeting but is represented by an IDVA who speaks on their behalf.

MARACs take place after domestic abuse is reported to the police. The case is either established as high risk, or a support organisation assesses it as needing discussion at a MARAC.

The use of MARACs is broadly proportionate to that suggested by SafeLives for the local population. SafeLives is a national charity dedicated to improving the response to domestic abuse in conjunction with other organisations. It recommends 40 MARACs per 10,000 women in the population, based on its analysis of the prevalence of domestic violence. The suggested level was exceeded by West Midlands, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Lancashire, Northumbria, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, South Wales, Nottinghamshire, Cheshire, Humberside, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, North Wales, Northamptonshire, Wiltshire, Bedfordshire, and Gwent police forces. We were unable to source data for Dyfed-Powys for 2020, but it exceeded the SafeLives recommended number in 2019.

Figure 7: Number of cases discussed at MARACs per 10,000 adult females, per force, in the 12 months to 31 March 2020



Source: SafeLives

The most recent data from SafeLives indicates that the total number of cases discussed at MARACs decreased in April to June 2020 compared with the previous quarter (see the Women’s Aid report, [A perfect storm](#)). This was the first time in five years that one quarter’s data had reduced compared with that of the previous quarter. This may reflect the difficulties that victims at high risk of domestic abuse faced reporting abuse or attempting to safely contact the police during the first lockdown. (Victims at high risk of domestic abuse are the main source of referral to MARACs.)

Soon after the initial lockdown, MARAC processes moved online. Most forces reported better attendance and contributions to the process. However, 30 percent of MARAC attendees interviewed in the SafeLives survey said they were not meeting virtually, with some opting for a reduced attendance. Some MARACs reported improvement in multi-agency working, but well over half reported IT issues. Those MARACs sitting virtually should strive for full attendance for all nine core agencies, as detailed in the [SafeLives guidance for multi-agency forums](#) released at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Durham Constabulary reviewed the cases of all victims who have been discussed at a MARAC and contacted those victims. The constabulary also reviewed repeat domestic abuse incidents. It defined ‘repeats’ as two incidents in five days. It then reviewed the incidents or further lines of enquiry.

Prior to the pandemic, Humberside Police referred approximately 200 people a week to a MARAC. At the start of the lockdown, referrals from other agencies to a MARAC reduced significantly. This raised concerns about victims at risk who would ordinarily have been protected through a referral.

Together with other organisations, the force agreed a process for maintaining contact with victims at high risk of domestic abuse. IDVAs arranged contact calls with victims. If the IDVA couldn't speak with a victim after two calls, the case was referred to the police. An officer then visited and conducted a safe and well check. The force extended this service to the top 15 medium-risk victims. As a result, it identified and dealt with more than 20 breaches of DVPNs and DVPOs.

The police and partners innovated to support victims

During the initial phase of the pandemic, forces used creative ways to interact with callers

Lincolnshire Police produced a short video made in collaboration with EDAN Lincs Domestic Abuse Service. The service offers emergency accommodation and support to people who are experiencing domestic abuse. Police show victims the video at the scene of an enquiry. The video educates them about domestic abuse and its effects and advises about support.

Sussex Police bought a new IT system so it could have virtual appointments with victims of domestic abuse.

This simple and intuitive program sends a one-time link to the victim, at a time of their choosing, to any internet-enabled smart device. The victim clicks on the link and arrives at a virtual consultation room, where an officer is waiting.

At the end of the consultation, the victim is asked to delete the link and all evidence of the appointment is gone. This helps to protect victims if their abusers check their devices.

Local feedback indicates high levels of satisfaction with the program. But it hasn't yet been fully evaluated.

West Mercia Police worked with TSB Bank to offer Safe Spaces in some of the bank's branches as part of the 'UK says no more' campaign.

The force trained bank staff and agreed how they should respond to calls from Safe Space branches. Worcestershire became the first region in the UK where TSB Bank offers support through the Safe Spaces initiative. Four of the bank's branches have dedicated space to help local people who are suffering domestic abuse. The intention is that victims will have someone to talk to who is trained to understand domestic abuse, in a safe environment. Victims can then tell the police what is happening to them.

Norfolk and Suffolk constabularies worked with a victim advocacy agency to trial Ring doorbells for victims of domestic abuse. These are usually used for burglary victims. They help victims to identify callers via an app on their mobile phone, which accesses a camera at their front door. This helps to deter perpetrators from attending the address. The constabularies told us that the trial was reported to be successful.

Staffordshire Police trialled a scheme that gave domestic abuse and stalking victims links to the Hollie Guard and Bright Sky apps. Hollie Guard gives real-time alert notifications if a victim feels in danger. It has 24/7 monitoring by trained security personnel. If a victim can't call the police directly, they can use the app to enable a third party to contact the police on their behalf.

Bright Sky is a mobile app that is free to download. It was launched in partnership between Hestia and the Vodafone Foundation. Thames Valley Police, as part of the Thames Valley Partnership, promoted the app locally. It offers support and information to anyone who may be experiencing domestic abuse or is concerned about someone they know. The app offers information about domestic abuse, covering matters such as online safety, stalking and harassment, and sexual offences. The app is available in Polish, Punjabi and Urdu. It features a UK-wide directory of specialist domestic abuse support services, so victims can contact their nearest service from the app.

Hampshire Constabulary told us about its work with a local charity, Aurora New Dawn. The charity has a 24-hour helpline and allows victims and police to speak to a domestic abuse advocate at any point.

Delays and backlogs in the criminal justice system are a very significant concern

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant difficulties for the criminal justice system in England and Wales. It has meant that criminal justice procedures, including court processes, couldn't operate as they normally do. This has created delays and backlogs in timescales for cases to be heard at court and caused trial dates to be repeatedly rescheduled.

The impact on victims of domestic abuse should not be underestimated. We know that ordinarily a high proportion of victims of domestic abuse are reluctant to support a prosecution for a variety of reasons. Delays in investigations, lack of contact and lengthy court processes more generally result in high levels of disengagement. Extended waiting times between a charge being made and a case being heard at court increase the risk of victims disengaging.

In the report [*CPS response to COVID-19: dealing with backlogs*](#), it was highlighted that victims were left in a state of limbo while waiting for new hearing dates to be set when previous ones had been adjourned. Witness Care Units (run by the police who contact, update, and warn victims and witnesses for court) made huge efforts to work through lists of postponed cases to update victims and provide reassurance and access to support. However, in nearly all cases, a clear indication of a future hearing date could not be given.

The report highlights that some magistrates' courts fixed single future dates for all trials – locally called 'bucket lists' trial dates. The rationale for this was that there needed to be a court date for all parties to plan for. While this may seem better than having no clear indication of when a hearing might happen, in reality it meant that the vast majority of victims and witnesses would end up with entirely different dates for hearings when magistrate courts reopened. The impact of this on victims is at best unsettling.

Sometimes, courts listed multiple cases for the same time to maximise court time, which often led to repeated trial date rescheduling. This only serves to support victims' views that their experiences and the harm they are enduring is not taken seriously. This in turn can have longer term implications regarding their willingness to report future offences and engage in future prosecutions. Individually and collectively, these issues place victims at greater risk of harm from perpetrators and enable a cycle of abuse to continue.

More detail regarding the backlogs and measures to reduce their impact is contained in the report by the four criminal justice inspectorates entitled [Impact of the pandemic on the criminal justice system – A joint view of the criminal justice chief inspectors on the criminal justice system's response to COVID-19](#). (The four inspectorates are Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation.)

According to this joint statement, the length of time to trial increased greatly during 2020. On 14 December 2020, HMCTS released data showing that the volume of live magistrates' court cases at that time was 83 percent higher than usual, with Crown Court cases 44 percent higher. The Lord Chancellor told the Justice Select Committee at that time that cases were being listed in 2022, but that it was hoped additional funding would allow listing officers to bring trials forward. A report published by HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate in March 2021 stated that in some areas trial dates are now having to be set into 2023 ([CPS response to COVID-19: dealing with backlogs](#)).

As previously mentioned in this report, at the time of reviewing data, other than coercive control, there was no specific criminal offence for domestic abuse. Cases are dealt with in line with the offence recorded (such as assault or harassment). These are summary only offences and have a time limit: court proceedings should begin no later than six months after the date of the offence. A summary only offence is assessed as lower severity. It includes most driving offences and common assault. These can only be tried in magistrates' courts.

The Coronavirus Crisis Protocol was agreed between the CPS, HMCTS and the senior presiding judge. As part of the protocol, time restrictions were extended on prosecuting summary only offences in domestic abuse cases.

CPS advice

CPS Direct gives charging decisions on priority cases throughout England and Wales. Much of its work is out of hours; it offers an emergency response 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Many forces said that CPS Direct's approach of dealing only with in-custody remand charging decisions has been detrimental, as it resulted in delays obtaining advice and charging decisions for some domestic abuse crimes. This left suspects on bail for longer, which could result in victims being exposed to further risk of harm, particularly those who were still living with their abuser. In some cases, victims withdrew their support for a prosecution to due delays in charging decisions.

Pre-charge bail and released under investigation

An aim of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 was to end the police practice of keeping people on pre-charge bail for long periods without independent judicial scrutiny. Where bail is still used, the circumstances of the investigation must fully justify it. When bail can't be justified, accused persons are released under investigation. In these cases, the police can't place restrictions on the person's release, for example to prevent them from contacting the victim, witnesses or otherwise interfering with an investigation.

Often conditions are needed for suspects who are released on bail while being investigated for domestic abuse offences. The conditions are to help safeguard victims from further abuse. Domestic abuse crimes can result in tragic outcomes if victims aren't protected.

Our joint thematic inspection in 2019 with Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate found cases of released under investigation without bail conditions in place to protect domestic abuse victims. When those cases were finalised in court, the court imposed restraining orders to prevent the suspects from contacting their victims. However, in many cases the victim had been left for several months prior to that without the protection that bail can offer. More details can be found in the report [*Pre-charge bail and released under investigation: striking a balance*](#).

Since the joint thematic inspection, every force increased the use of bail in domestic abuse cases and significantly reduced the use of released under investigation, which was a very positive move.

However, during the pandemic, some investigations couldn't be finalised due to delays in getting necessary information from other parties within initial bail periods. While offenders can be bailed on more than one occasion if enquiries are taking longer than expected, some suspects were released under investigation. This is worrying in domestic abuse cases, as perpetrators will have no conditions to deter them from re-offending against the victim.

Some forces told us they were concerned about an increased use of pre-charge bail during the pandemic in case it negatively affected victims and witnesses.

Court closures and delays

Some forces continued to staff the running of the virtual court systems. All court buildings were closed, and remand hearings for prisoners who were in custody at police stations still needed to continue. The hearings ran from police stations, linking remotely with the judiciary.

This arrangement came with additional responsibilities for managing risks, as well as caring for victims and witnesses, and detainees during their stay in police custody. More detail can be found in [Impact of the pandemic on the criminal justice system – A joint view of the criminal justice chief inspectors on the criminal justice system’s response to COVID-19](#).

The length of time to trial increased significantly during 2020, with magistrate cases charge to finalisation timeframes almost doubling from 8 to 14 weeks. The true impact will only be clear when all outcome data is available for cases that are currently in the criminal justice system and awaiting decisions and trials.

As all four criminal justice inspectorates highlighted in the report, delays in courts represent a fundamental risk to the effective running of the criminal justice system. These problems were present before COVID-19 and have been exacerbated by the pandemic. All inspectorates are committed to monitoring progress in this area.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that forces **immediately** review their capacity to provide ongoing support and safeguarding to victims of domestic abuse whose case is awaiting trial at court. This should:

- ensure there are sufficient resources available to maintain contact with victims to keep them up to date with the progress of their case; and
- enable the offer of access to specialist support services as well as opportunities to address concerns victims may have regarding continuing to support a prosecution through the delays.

Witness care and continued victim involvement

Three factors have put additional pressure on forces during the pandemic: the need to manage domestic abuse reports and support to victims; on occasions managing staff who were absent due to sickness, who needed support or to self-isolate; and court closures.

These factors meant that cases progressed (and continue to progress) very slowly through the criminal justice system. While the police were able to progress cases more quickly, these have been held up initially by court closures, but latterly due to courts being unable to implement COVID-secure measures, referenced in the 2020 study by Women’s Aid, [A perfect storm](#).

Some forces told us that the slow progress did affect victims’ willingness to remain involved with the prosecutions. Officers involved in the cases (or witness care officers)

had to manage victims' expectations carefully. They had to do this alongside the long-term considerations for managing risk posed by the perpetrator.

On 12 June 2020, a memorandum of understanding was agreed across the criminal justice system. It concerned existing commitments under the Victim's Code, and set out how witness care units, HMCTS, the CPS and the police would ensure effective court hearings. The [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime](#) is a statutory government document. It sets out the information, support and services that victims of crime are entitled to receive from criminal justice agencies in England and Wales. These agencies include the police and the CPS. The memorandum seeks to maximise the effectiveness of court hearings by identifying issues and having a clear understanding of the needs of victims and witnesses in domestic abuse cases. It also reinforces the principle that victims should be told about local specialist support services, including IDVAs, and should be referred to them when it is appropriate to do so.

In Devon and Cornwall, the force and the CPS developed a retraction statement. A victim gives this statement to indicate their unwillingness to attend court and give evidence. Usually, but not always, a domestic abuse expert takes such statements. The aim of creating a proforma statement is to help improve the quality of information to support evidence-led prosecutions to continue when a victim declines to continue to support a prosecution. (An evidence-led case is one where the victim doesn't wish to support the prosecution, but the police and CPS pursue the complaint using other evidence. This includes body-worn video evidence, statements from GPs or other organisations, and the call to the operator.)

The exceptionally low volume of domestic abuse cases resulting in a charge remains unacceptable

Charge rates remain low

The charge rate for domestic abuse crimes in England and Wales continues to fall. This is despite forces increasing their focus on victims. Data highlights that in 2016 the average charge rate for domestic abuse cases was 23.2 percent. In 2020 this had dropped to 9 percent, a reduction of 14.2 percent.

The below chart lists the outcomes that can be used when finalising an investigation for domestic abuse. The chart highlights the decrease over the previous five years, in the percentage of domestic abuse cases in which a charge was applied.

For 2018/19, data is not available for Cumbria, Humberside, Kent, South Yorkshire, West Midlands or Wiltshire. For 2019/20, data is not available for Dyfed-Powys, Greater Manchester, Humberside, Kent, Nottinghamshire, South Yorkshire, Warwickshire or Wiltshire.

Table 3: Outcome comparisons in England and Wales from March 2016 to March 2020

Outcome	12 months to Mar 2016	12 months to Jun 2017	12 months to Sep 2018	12 months to Mar 2019	12 months to Mar 2020
Charged/summonsed	23.2%	18.6%	12.6%	11.4%	9.0%
Caution – adults	5.6%	3.8%	2.0%	1.9%	1.5%
Caution – youths	0.3%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Community resolution	1.4%	1.1%	0.8%	0.8%	0.6%
Outcome 15 – Evidential difficulty prevents further action; victim supports police action	24.1%	23.7%	23.8%	23.1%	23.0%
Outcome 16 – Evidential difficulty prevents further action; victim does not support police action	35.4%	43.0%	51.9%	53.1%	54.0%

Source: HMICFRS data collection

Use of outcomes 15 and 16

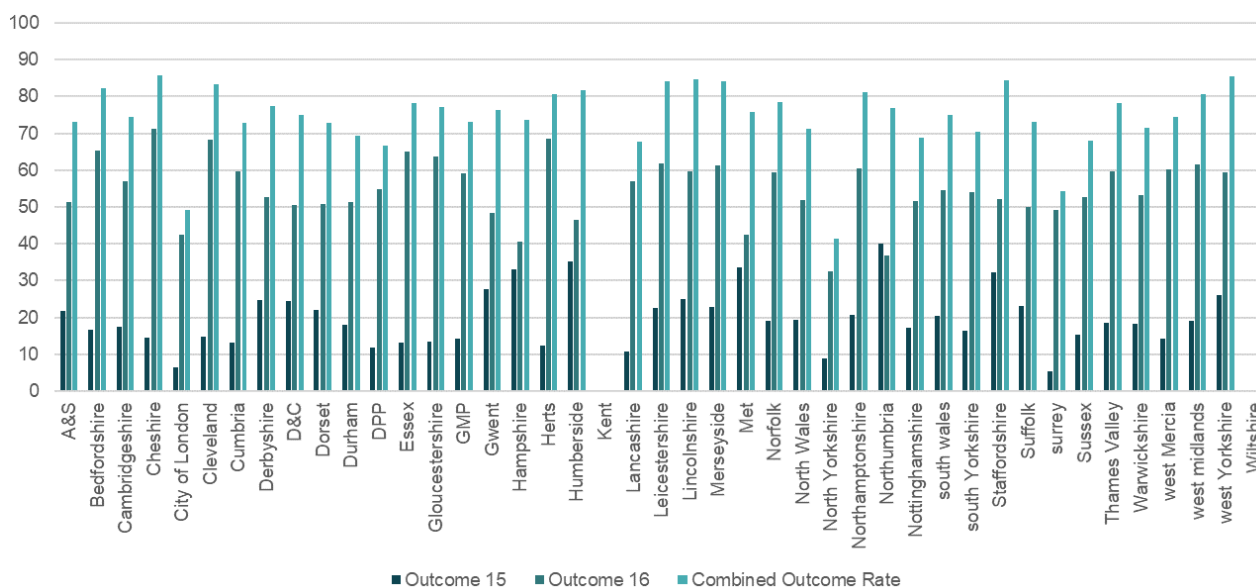
An outcome code allows every crime recorded by the police to be given an outcome, showing how the police deal with all crimes (including crimes that are still under investigation).

Outcome 15 is where a victim supports the prosecution but there are evidential difficulties, which could be a lack of evidence collected, and the case is not continued. Outcome 16 is where a suspect has been identified but the victim no longer supports the prosecution.

The below chart provides a force by force comparator of the use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and the total combined use of both outcomes. The data considers outcomes applied for during a 12-month rolling period up to March 2020.

Data for the full 12-month period was not available for Kent or Wiltshire, so the chart shows 0 outcomes for all categories for those forces.

Figure 8: Rate of use of outcomes 15 and 16 for domestic abuse-related crime, by force, in the 12 months to 31 March 2020



Source: HMICFRS data collection

The use of outcomes 15 and 16 by forces continues to increase, which is particularly concerning. It means that victims are not receiving a criminal justice outcome and as a result may be unprotected from their abuser.

Our most recent data shows that on average over 50 percent of cases are finalised using outcome 16. This represents an 18.6 percent increase from 2016 to 2020. Most concerning, on average 75 percent of victims' cases (combining outcome 15 and outcome 16) are being discontinued by police, which represents a 17.5 percent increase from 2016 to 2020.

As a result, on average across England and Wales, there is only a 25 percent chance that a perpetrator of domestic abuse will be charged or cautioned.

We recognise victims' right to decide what a positive outcome means for them. Furthermore, we understand that victims may not want their case to go to court and purely wish for the abuse to stop. But in many cases, there is a lack of auditable evidence to show that there has been enough engagement with victims about discontinuation. And it often isn't clear that forces have taken all opportunities to support victims to engage in proceedings nor that officers understand the benefits both from a future crime prevention and successful criminal outcome perspective of enabling victims to engage with support services.

We will continue to place close emphasis on this worrying statistic throughout our PEEL inspection processes and our violence against women and girls thematic inspection this year.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that all forces **immediately** review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions. This is to ensure that:

- domestic abuse investigations guarantee all attempts to engage victims are explored, and that all possible lines of evidence are considered so that in all cases the best possible outcomes for victims are achieved;
- there is regular and effective supervision of investigations that supports the above point to be achieved; and
- the use of outcomes 15 and 16 is appropriate, and the reasons for using them, including auditable evidence of victim engagement, are clearly recorded.

More positively, the rate at which the police issue cautions to domestic abuse perpetrators also continues to fall. Usually, the police use a caution for low-level offending where a person admits their guilt. The offenders receive a warning, but don't attend court or receive a conviction.

We don't believe that a caution is appropriate in most domestic abuse cases, given the serious nature of domestic abuse. We remain confident that the police don't consider the use of cautions to be appropriate for the completion of most domestic abuse cases.

Annex A: Academic research

We were pleased to learn that academic research focusing on domestic abuse has continued during the pandemic. Three examples are outlined below.

Domestic Homicides – The National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme working with the National Police Chiefs’ Council, the College of Policing and the Home Office

The project, established in August 2020, counted deaths from the start of the first lockdown restrictions in England and Wales on 23 March 2020. Its aim was to design and implement a national pilot to better understand domestic homicides in England and Wales during the COVID-19 pandemic and all lockdowns.

The project has adopted wider terms of reference for this work than the standard definition of domestic homicide. The wider definition includes people under 16 years of age; intimate partner homicide, and homicide from a family or household member; victim suicide following domestic abuse; child death; and unexplained deaths that follow domestic abuse incidents.

This wider definition allows identification of emerging issues that affect people who are living together during the COVID-19 restrictions (for example, adolescent to parent violence). Currently, there is no legal definition of adolescent to parent violence and abuse.

The project requires forces to complete an initial assessment form within 48 hours of a domestic homicide being reported. The form asks for details of deaths that meet the wide project definition outlined above. It also asks for details about the circumstances and characteristics of those involved. And it asks for any immediate learning, to support wider practice and policy development.

The process of completing the form and reviewing the details isn’t designed to replace a domestic homicide review or the necessity for gathering wider learning from those working together. (A domestic homicide review is carried out after the murder. Safeguarding organisations such as health, police, social care and others establish what lessons should be learned from a domestic homicide regarding the way in which local professionals and organisations worked individually and together to safeguard the victim.)

The process is designed to inform the development of a national repository of the features and immediate police learning from domestic homicides. It will also support practice and policy development and improved national reporting.

We support the project's approach, its use by forces and the achievements to date. It has established:

- a unique live-time repository of all domestic homicides, including victim suicides and unexplained deaths following domestic abuse; this doesn't exist elsewhere and makes this work more relevant to understanding the dynamic of domestic homicide in all its forms;
- a new central unit to collate domestic homicide deaths nationally, with contacts in each English and Welsh force;
- the evidence base on domestic homicide deaths, including what is known and what is contested on definitions of 'domestic homicide', as well as risk and predictive factors, and typologies of perpetrators and victims;
- a process whereby police forces routinely establish and report all deaths related to domestic abuse to a central unit (the domestic homicide project team), achieving a high quality of data return and completion;
- governance and expert advisory panels consisting of police leaders, government, and an extensive network of third sector interested parties, commissioners and academics in the field of domestic abuse, homicide and child deaths; and
- quick-time data and briefings to assist current debates.

Domestic homicide continued during lockdown, including at least two cases of mothers and their children being murdered by their husband/father, but not all victims were female. There were cases where women killed their sons and/or husbands. There were large differences in the profiles of victim–suspect relationships between male and female victims.

In the year ending March 2020, female victims were more commonly killed by a partner or ex-partner or a family member, while for males the suspected killer was more commonly a friend or acquaintance, stranger or another known person. Almost half (46 percent) of adult female homicide victims were killed in a domestic homicide (81). This type of homicide decreased by 24 compared with the previous year. The 81 in the latest year was the lowest figure since relationship data first started to be collected on the Homicide Index in 1977, and there has been a general downward trend in the number of domestic homicides over the last ten years.

Males were much less likely to be the victim of a domestic homicide, with only 7 percent (33) of male homicides being domestic abuse related. This was an increase of four homicides compared with the previous year (Office for National Statistics, [Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)).

Early findings from the interim report in November 2020 show that most domestic homicides are still carried out by a current or former partner (50 percent). Victim suicide following domestic abuse was the second most common type (20 percent). Adult family homicide and child deaths accounted for 13 percent and 12 percent respectively.

According to the interim report, there was no apparent rise in the overall number of domestic homicides based on previous years' data. There is no comparative dataset for previous years for domestic suicides or unexplained deaths, so these numbers

cannot be contextualised. The project aims to build a comparative dataset on suicides in future.

With intimate partner and adult family homicide, it is easier to draw comparisons with previous years' data. The average number of weekly deaths since the start of the first lockdown appears to be consistent with previous years.

Domestic abuse during COVID-19 – developing a rapid police evidence base (June 2020–December 2021)

This is a national project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It is led by Dr Katrin Hohl (City, University of London) and Dr Kelly Johnson is a co-investigator (Durham University). The project brings together several organisations, including the Home Office, the College of Policing, the National Police Chiefs' Council, seven police forces across England and Wales, and domestic abuse third-sector interested parties.

The project provides an evidence base to inform the police approach to domestic violence and abuse during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK. Police case file data from seven diverse police forces is being pooled to track the impact of the pandemic on domestic abuse, analysing changes in the risk factors, frequency, nature and profile of domestic abuse reported to police. These changes are being mapped onto changes in the restrictions imposed during lockdowns, transitional phases and post lockdowns, when domestic abuse calls to police are expected to spike. The study is the largest and most rigorous analysis of police domestic abuse case file data conducted anywhere in the world to date. The statistical analysis is complemented by regular focused semi-structured phone interviews with police officers, to identify emerging challenges and best practice in the frontline approach to domestic abuse. The mixed-methods study addresses urgent questions on the impact of COVID-19 on domestic abuse, which may have significant implications for the complex task of accurate police risk assessment, victim safeguarding and criminal prosecution as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves.

Initial findings suggest that the pandemic has exposed, rather than created, the domestic abuse crisis, with long-term trends largely accounting for the observed increase in domestic abuse reporting during 2020. The research suggests that lockdown effects are complex, impacting differently on different types of abusive relationships, and that the pandemic context is keeping victims in abusive relationships for longer, delaying separations until after lockdown. Victim-survivor attempts to separate from the abuser are a known trigger of an escalation in domestic violence. Consequently, the researchers are recommending that police forces and domestic abuse charities prepare for a post-lockdown surge in reports from victims at high risk of domestic abuse and prepare to support victim-survivors wishing to safely exit abusive relationships. More preliminary findings can be found on the [Campaign for Social Science website](#) and in [written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Home Office preparedness for COVID-19](#).

The research directly addresses current knowledge gaps in how lockdown and social distancing measures affect domestic abuse. It provides robust evidence for domestic abuse plans in the event of another pandemic (or similar circumstances). The findings

also have the potential to help the UK Government weigh up the benefits of lockdown restrictions versus their impact on vulnerable people. The research will give guidance to police forces on handling domestic abuse incidents. It will also inform the planning and allocation of resources.

For further information, [contact Dr Katrin Hohl](#), Senior Lecturer, City, University of London.

Responding to the shadow pandemic

The University of Liverpool, funded by the Economic Social Research Council (Research and Innovation), is carrying out research on domestic abuse. This 18-month project runs until December 2021 and is based on an analysis of 26 questionnaire responses from 25 police forces (sent to 43 eligible forces in England and Wales), supplemented by 21 interviews with domestic abuse leads and senior police officers. It focuses on:

- the police and court response to domestic abuse under lockdown, while transitioning out of lockdown, the time following the easing of all restrictions and during the post-lockdown period in England and Wales;
- the innovative practices developed and their longevity; and
- making recommendations on responding to domestic abuse, using examples of good practice.

Findings have shown a mixed picture about the clarity and availability of information on domestic abuse on force websites. During the periods of national lockdown, online video platforms (such as MS Teams) appear to have been vital for a wide range of organisations, including the police. All respondents commented on the significance and value of being able to maintain virtual working relationships with other organisations. Some focused on the absence of face-to-face men's behavioural programmes, and the lack of emergency accommodation. A few forces highlighted the impact of court closures during the lockdown but were largely unaware of the longer term implications of the court backlog for victims of domestic abuse.

Highlighted good practice includes:

- using multimedia platforms to emphasise a 'business as usual' message;
- implementing a single point of contact for all domestic abuse support;
- using Facebook/online forums, and working with community leaders to access hard-to-reach audiences;
- having a police presence in supermarkets, pharmacies and local shops, offering safe spaces for victims to report domestic abuse, and giving doorbell cameras to victims at high risk of domestic abuse;
- using analytics to identify victims at high risk of domestic abuse with whom contact had been lost and to identify high-risk offenders, and reminding people on bail or released under investigation of any conditions they have to abide by; and
- holding regular (daily or weekly) online MARACs to ensure swift responses and the development of safety plans for victims at high risk of domestic abuse.

[Other findings are available on the University of Liverpool School of Law and Social Justice website.](#)

For further information, [contact S L Walklate](#), University of Liverpool.

Annex B: Domestic Abuse Act 2021

This year we saw the domestic abuse bill making its way through the legislative process and receiving Royal Assent on 29 April 2021. This new legislation:

- gives a statutory definition of domestic abuse, which recognises children as victims in their own right;
- establishes the office of Domestic Abuse Commissioner and set out the Commissioner's functions and powers;
- provides for a new Domestic Abuse Protection Notice and Domestic Abuse Protection Order;
- identifies non-fatal strangulation as an offence;
- extends coercive and controlling behaviour to post-separation abuse;
- extends the offence of disclosing a private sexual photograph or film with intent to cause distress to an individual who appears in the photograph or film (the so-called 'revenge porn' offence) to include threats to disclose private sexual photographs and films;
- prohibits perpetrators of domestic and other forms of abuse from cross-examining their victims in person in the family courts (and prevents victims from having to cross-examine their abusers);
- gives the courts discretion to prevent cross-examination in person, where it would diminish the quality of the witness's evidence or cause the witness significant distress;
- creates a statutory presumption that complainants of an offence involving behaviour that amounts to domestic abuse are eligible for special measures in the criminal courts, family and civil courts;
- enables domestic abuse offenders to be subject to polygraph testing as a condition of their licence following their release from custody;
- places the guidance supporting the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme on a statutory footing;
- ensures a secure lifetime tenancy where a local authority grants a new secure tenancy to a social tenant who has (or had) a secure lifetime or assured tenancy (other than an assured shorthold tenancy); and
- extends the extra-territorial jurisdiction of the criminal courts in England and Wales to further violent and sexual offences.

We welcome the Domestic Abuse Act, which will equip the police with new tools to provide victims with better support and immediate protection from abusers.

Annex C: Definitions and interpretation

In this review, the following words, phrases and expressions in the left-hand column have the meanings assigned to them in the right-hand column.

Sometimes, the definition will be followed by a fuller explanation of the matter in question, with references to sources and other material which may be of help to the reader.

Term	Definition
bail conditions	terms on which a defendant is granted bail, pending a court hearing. Their purpose is to make sure that the defendant attends the next court hearing, commits no new offences in the meantime, and doesn't interfere with any witnesses or obstruct the course of justice. They are usually set by the court, which can grant bail without any such conditions, or can detain the defendant in custody, before the first court hearing. The police can also detain a defendant in custody or grant bail, with or without conditions attached. The police's powers to do so are more limited than those of the courts. Breach of these conditions may amount to a separate offence under Section 7(3) of the Bail Act 1976.
Code of Practice for Victims of Crime	statutory code of practice issued by the Secretary of State for Justice under Section 32 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004. The code establishes minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime. The stated objective is to make sure the criminal justice system puts victims first, making the system more responsive to them and easier for them to navigate. It also aims to ensure that victims of crime are treated well and receive appropriate support to help them cope and recover, and to protect them from becoming victims again. The code specifies the services that must be given to victims of crime in England and Wales and sets a minimum for the standard of those services. Higher entitlements are set for victims of the most serious crime, persistently targeted victims and vulnerable or intimidated victims. The code specifies those public sector bodies that are obliged to give services to victims of crime. They include police forces and police and crime commissioners. The Victims' Commissioner has a statutory duty to keep the code under regular review.

Term	Definition
coercion and control	coercive, controlling behaviour and actions of a perpetrator that are intended to control the victim through isolation, intimidation, degradation and micro-regulation of everyday life. The term and concept were developed by Evan Stark, seeking to explain the range of tactics used by perpetrators, and their effects on victims. The concept highlights the continuing nature of the behaviour, and the extent to which the actions of the perpetrator control the victim. Crucially, the concept sets out that such abuse can be psychological as well as physical. The term is explicitly covered within the definition of domestic abuse. The offence of controlling or coercive behaviour within an intimate or familial relationship is set out in Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, and carries a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment, a fine, or both, for offenders.
control room	facility in each police force in which call operators answer telephone calls from the public, determine the circumstances of the call and decide the initial response.
cuckooing	means by which a drug dealer (or network) takes over the home address of a vulnerable person to use it to prepare, store or deal drugs. Commonly associated with exploitation and violence.
domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence (DASH) assessment	risk identification, assessment and management model adopted by UK police forces and other organisations in 2009.
domestic homicide review	multi-agency review within the local police area following a domestic homicide. Aims to establish the lessons that can be learned from homicides where a person is killed because of domestic violence, with a view to preventing future homicides and violence.

Term	Definition
Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN)	made against a suspected perpetrator of domestic violence. Its purpose is to give emergency protection to a person who is believed to be the victim of domestic violence. This notice, which must be authorised by a police superintendent, contains prohibitions that effectively bar the suspected perpetrator from returning to the victim's home or otherwise contacting the victim with immediate effect. It may be issued to a person aged 18 years and over if the police superintendent has reasonable grounds for believing that the recipient has been violent, or has threatened violence, towards an associated person, and the DVPN is necessary to protect that person from violence or a threat of violence by the recipient. It was introduced by Sections 24–33 of the Crime and Security Act 2010. It was piloted in three police areas in 2011–12 and was introduced nationally in 2014.
Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO)	power that helps the police and magistrates' courts to put in place protection in the immediate aftermath of a domestic abuse incident. Where there is insufficient evidence to charge a perpetrator and give protection to a victim via bail conditions, a DVPO can prevent the perpetrator from returning to a residence and from having contact with the victim for up to 28 days. This gives the victim an opportunity to consider their options and get the support and guidance they need from a dedicated domestic abuse service.
harassment	causing alarm or distress and/or putting people in fear of violence. It includes the offence of stalking, either in person or through other means of communication. It is defined under Sections 2 and 4 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 as amended. High-risk harassment means it is likely that a victim will be subject to an incident that is life-threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible.
independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA)	trained specialist who gives a service to victims who are at high risk of harm from intimate partners, ex-partners or family members, with the aim of securing their safety and the safety of their children. Also known as independent domestic violence advocates. They serve as a victim's primary point of contact and normally work with their clients from the point of crisis, to assess the level of risk, discuss the range of suitable options and develop safety plans. They also represent the victim's voice in MARAC meetings. They can be accessed through voluntary organisations against domestic abuse or local authority services, and usually work within a multi-agency framework.

Term	Definition
multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)	meeting in which information about domestic abuse victims at high risk is shared between local statutory and voluntary agencies, including nine core agencies (police, IDVAs, probation, children's services, mental health, primary health, substance misuse, housing and adult safeguarding). They work to produce a risk-focused, co-ordinated safety plan to support the victim.
multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)	location in which staff from the police, local authority and other safeguarding agencies share data, research and decision-making in relation to local children and adults who are vulnerable. Representatives from agencies are likely to include police public protection unit, children's social care, health and education providers, child and adolescent mental health services, adult services, substance misuse, the early intervention services, and probation and housing, among others. The purpose is to ensure a timely and joined-up response for children and vulnerable adults who need protection.
partnership	established collaborative working between the police and other public, private or voluntary organisations.
positive action	activity conducted at all stages of the police approach to ensure effective protection of victims and children, while allowing the criminal justice system to hold the offender to account. It is often used in the context of arrest policy (that is, that an arrest will normally be 'necessary' under the terms of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to protect a child or vulnerable person, to prevent the suspect causing injury and/or to allow for the prompt and effective investigation of the offence).
risk assessment	structured professional judgment using a guide/checklist method by which the likelihood of risk is determined. Completion is intended to help police officers in the decision-making process on appropriate levels of intervention for victims of domestic abuse.
safeguarding	process of protecting vulnerable people from abuse or neglect.

Term	Definition
SafeLives	UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good. SafeLives works with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. SafeLives looks at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. Last year alone, nearly 13,500 professionals received SafeLives training. Over 70,000 adults at risk of serious harm or murder and more than 85,000 children received support through dedicated multi-agency support designed by SafeLives and delivered with partners.
vulnerable person	person in need of special care, support or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect.

Annex D: About the data

The information presented in this review comes from a range of sources, including data published by the Home Office, the Office for National Statistics, inspection fieldwork from 19 forces, and self-assessment returns from all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

Where we collected data directly from police forces, we took reasonable steps to agree the design of the data collection with forces and with other interested parties (such as the Home Office).

We gave forces several opportunities to quality assure and validate the data they gave us, to make sure the evidence presented was accurate. For instance:

- we checked and queried data with forces where they had submitted data that was notably different from other forces' data or was internally inconsistent; and
- we asked all forces to check the final data used in the report and to correct any errors found.

Methodology

Forces not included or where the data return isn't comparable to others are listed alongside their respective graphs. Our data is sourced from a combination of published sources and HMICFRS data. British Transport Police was outside the scope of inspection. Any aggregated totals for England and Wales exclude British Transport Police data, so will differ from those published by the Home Office.

Population

For all uses of population as a denominator in our calculations, we use the Office for National Statistics mid-2016 population estimates (unless otherwise noted). This was the most recent data available at the time.

For the specific case of City of London Police, we include both resident and transient populations within our calculations. This is to account for the unique nature and demographics of this force's responsibility.

In the chart 'Domestic abuse crimes per 1,000 population', we were not able to source directly comparable incident data for South Wales Police. Using comparable data, 26.5 domestic abuse marked crimes per 100 were detected; the force told us that that approximately 28 domestic abuse incidents were detected per 1,000 people in South Wales Police. Both figures are significantly above the average for England and Wales. We were not able to source incidents data for Hampshire. City of London had very low incidents and crimes due to its small resident population.

Recorded crime and crime outcomes

We obtained this data from Home Office police-recorded crime and outcomes data tables for the 12 months to 31 March 2020.

Total police-recorded crime includes all crime, except fraud offences, recorded by all police forces in England and Wales. Home Office publications on the overall volumes and rates of recorded crime and outcomes include the British Transport Police, which is outside the scope of this inspection. Therefore, England and Wales rates in this report will differ from those published by the Home Office.

Any data referring to police-recorded crime should be treated with care. Recent increases may be attributed to the renewed focus on the quality and compliance of crime recording since our national inspection of crime data in 2014, and continuing crime data integrity inspection programme.

Other notable points to consider when interpreting outcomes data are as follows:

- Crime outcome proportions show the percentage of crimes recorded in the 12 months to 30 June 2020 that have been assigned each outcome. This means that each crime is tracked or linked to its outcome. Therefore, this data is subject to change, as more crimes are assigned outcomes over time.
- Under the new framework, 37 police forces in England and Wales give outcomes data through the Home Office data hub every month. All other forces give this data via a manual return. They also do this monthly.
- Direct comparisons shouldn't be made between general crime outcomes and domestic abuse-related outcomes. Domestic abuse-related outcomes are based on the number of outcomes for domestic-abuse related offences recorded in the 12 months to 30 June 2020, irrespective of when the crime was recorded. Therefore, the domestic abuse-related crimes and outcomes recorded in the reporting year aren't tracked, whereas the general outcomes are.

Domestic abuse-related offences

Data relating to domestic abuse-related offences is obtained through the Home Office for the 12 months to 31 March 2020. The Home Office collects this data regularly and requires all forces to record accurately, and flag, domestic abuse crimes. Domestic abuse flags should be applied in accordance with the Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime to ensure consistency across forces, and within published datasets.

The Office for National Statistics collected data relating to domestic abuse arrests and outcomes directly from all 43 geographic police forces in England and Wales.

Further information about the domestic abuse statistics and recent releases is available from the Office for National Statistics.

Domestic abuse arrest rate (per 100 domestic abuse-related offences) in England and Wales in the 12 months to 31 March 2020

The arrest rate is calculated using a common time period for arrests and offences. It is important to note that each arrest isn't necessarily directly linked to its specific domestic abuse offence recorded in the 12 months to 31 March 2020 in this calculation. It is also possible to have more than one arrest per offence.

In addition, the reader should note the increase in police-recorded crime which affected most forces over the last year. This may mean arrest rates are higher than the figures suggest. Despite this, the calculation still indicates whether the force prioritises arrests for domestic abuse offenders over other potential forms of action.

During our inspection process, we evaluated the arrest rate alongside other measures (such as use of voluntary attendance or body-worn video cameras), to understand how each force deals with domestic abuse overall.

Annex E: Domestic abuse reference group members

The reference group supports the development and delivery of the domestic abuse elements of the HMICFRS inspection programme. The group also provides expertise and challenge when developing recommendations on police practice. Their input over the years has been invaluable.

- Karen Morgan-Read, Crown Prosecution Service
- Sophie Linden, Deputy Mayor, The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime
- Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner
- Veronica Oakeshott, Drive Partnership
- Helen Davies, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
- Priya Patel, Home Office
- Karen Reader, Home Office
- AC Louisa Rolfe, Metropolitan Police and the National Policing Lead on Domestic Abuse
- Julia Mulligan, North Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner
- Julia Dwyer, Refuge
- Jane Keeper, Refuge
- Kelly Maguire, Respect
- Jo Todd, Respect
- Jessica Asato, SafeLives
- ACC David Thorne, South Wales Police
- David Tucker, The College of Policing
- Vera Baird QC, Victims' Commissioner
- Rachel Nicholas, Victim Support
- Angie Whitaker, West Midlands Police and Staff Officer to AC Louisa Rolfe
- Lucy Hadley, Women's Aid

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