

Safety, support and recovery

Identifying the needs of victims of domestic abuse in the new 'normal'



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Foreword



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The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be truly understood but we can already start to identify those that are immediate and a direct consequence of the pandemic, and those that might be shaped by our experience of lockdown.

I have previously written about how crime might adapt to the circumstances of the pandemic and how the lockdowns would likely result in victims of family violence being placed at greater risk.

Governments across the region have been mindful of this and there are examples of police and other agencies being proactive in getting messages out to their populations about where they can access support during this period.

This is entirely consistent with the work being done across our region to improve its response to family violence. Countries have introduced legislation on this subject and continue to innovate in the development of services for victims. This paper is intended to help this by providing a perspective on the victim journey in cases of domestic violence. It sets out the key elements necessary to support the victim.

One impact of the pandemic will invariably be around utilising technology not just as a response to the restrictions introduced but as a way to enhance services to ensure the best possible experience. It will therefore be no surprise to see technology feature here but it should be seen in the context of what we can learn from the crisis, not simply a response to it.

For any arrangements to be effective there has to be strong cooperation across all of those agencies involved. Good governance underpinned by strong data and analysis, are essential to providing victims support, safety and ultimately recovery. Victimisation of any kind is traumatising but for those that are victimised within a family context there is a complexity and longer-term impact that requires specialist provision.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp rise in the number of phone calls to domestic service hotlines globally, as well as several cases of suspected homicide. In the first two weeks of quarantine, France reported a 32% rise in the number of police calls reporting conjugal violence, while in the UK at least 16 homicides that have taken place since COVID-19 restrictions were imposed are believed to be a result of domestic violence. This compares to of an average of 5 homicides in the same period over the last 10 years.

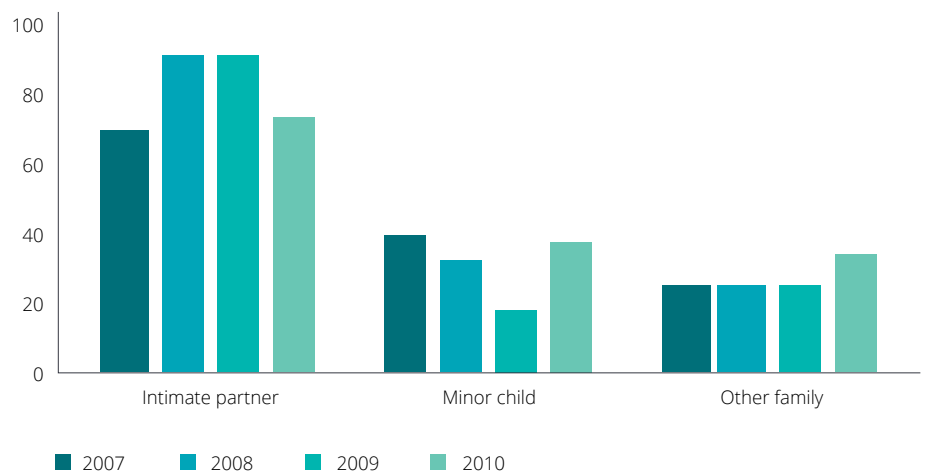
There is a well-founded concern that domestic abuse will continue to rise around the world even as life begins to return to “normal”. In some cases, perpetrators may use the COVID-19 situation as an excuse to further isolate victims from friends and family. In others, anticipatory anxiety over the economy or employment may be cascaded down to individual families in the form of abuse and violence, as has been the case in prior times of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the way victim support agencies will need to respond to domestic abuse. Increasing allegations, peaks and troughs in activity and limitations on face-to-face interactions will place new demands on police and other relevant services, and test their ability to respond and adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

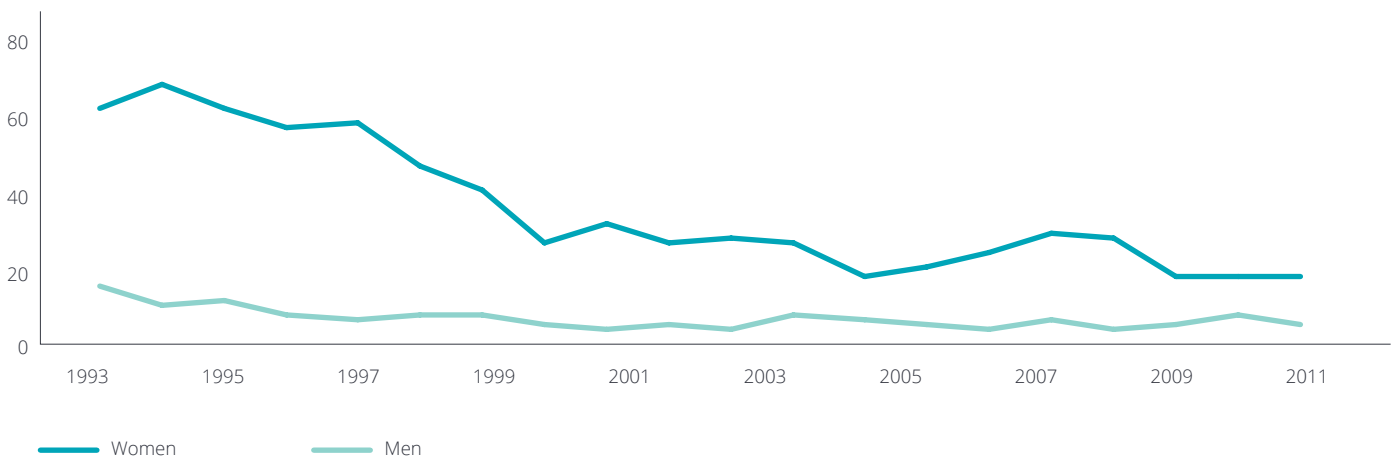
This paper explores how government agencies can adapt to the new normality created by COVID-19. It investigates the tools and capabilities that will be required to develop a robust and resilient response to domestic abuse, including those that have recently been deployed by necessity during the crisis (e.g., online response and support tools). In applying these tools, governments will be better prepared to both weather the storm of this existing pandemic, as well as prepare for any future crisis that arises.

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Domestic homicides in NY state by relationship to perpetrator



Intimate partner violence, by gender of victim, rate per 1,000 people aged 12+



Understanding domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is a major global public health and safety issue that is prevalent in every country of the world. As well as physical violence, domestic abuse can come in the form of psychological or emotional abuse (e.g., cursing, swearing, attacks on self-esteem), economic abuse (strictly controlling another person's income or access to income), or sexual abuse (non-consenting sexual acts or behavior).

Although men can also be victims, women are disproportionately affected by this crime. According to the World Health Organization, an estimated one in three women will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, compared to one in six men. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence. Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner.

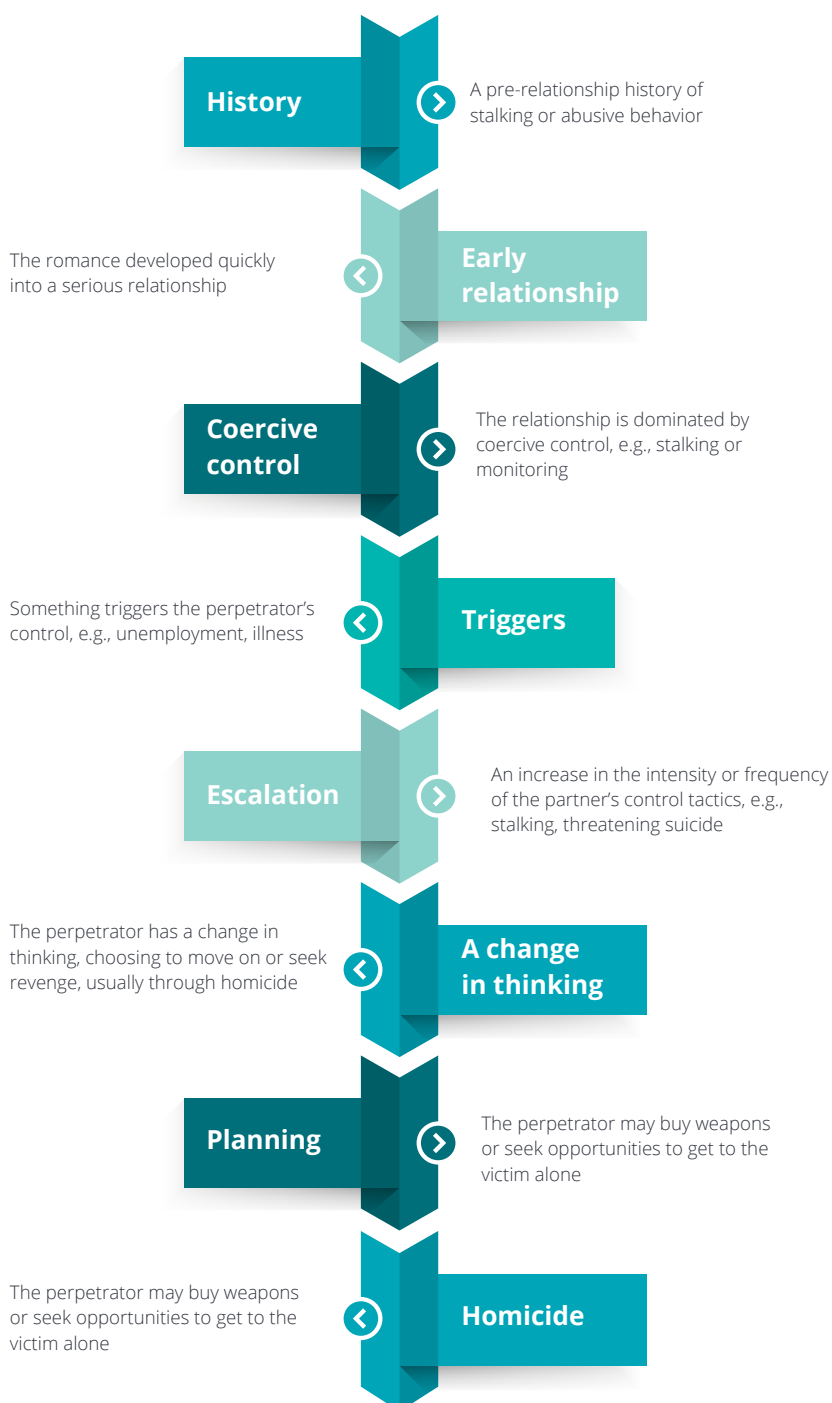
Domestic abuse can leave a scarring impact on those involved. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that in homes where violence between partners occurs, there is a 45% to 60% chance of a child also experiencing abuse, a rate 15 times higher than the average.

Children who see or hear abuse often exhibit a range of long-term psychological responses, such as persistent fear of harm or abandonment, depression, guilt, inability to experience empathy, low tolerance, poor judgment and anxiety over the future.

Domestic abuse timeline

By Dr Jane Monckton Smith

While there is no 'typical' victim journey, there are often similarities in the behavior of the perpetrator and increasing risk of more serious violence as time progresses. We also need to be mindful of cultural context in a region where some marriages happen soon after introduction and agreement to the match.



Although the police respond to many domestic abuse cases, the reality is that it is not the responsibility of any one sector or agency.

Any strategy intended to combat domestic abuse has to be supported by strong multi-agency arrangements. These need to operate at a strategic and practical level. The identification and mitigation of risk; development and delivery of support requires agencies to work together and in a way that makes the experience seamless for the victim.

The best way to build more resilient and responsive mechanisms is to start by developing an end-to-end view of the victim journey, taking into account the various touch points of the user and their interaction with different agencies.

In developing this it is important to recognise that not every victim will follow the same path and arrangements need be sensitive enough to pick up on changing dynamics that might, for example, increase risk.

It is also critical that services pay proper attention to what the victim wants. They need be structured to facilitate choice and not simply impose ready made solutions.

By better understanding this journey, governments can develop the diverse ecosystem necessary to ensure that victims get the support they need, when they need it and in a way most likely to deliver safety and recovery.

Our HEART principle contains five principles that governments should consider when building their response to domestic abuse.

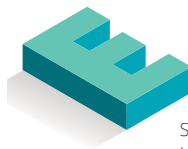
Have a HEART

Our five-pronged approach to domestic abuse puts coordination, evidence and timely access to support at the HEART of the victim journey.



OLISTIC

Domestic abuse is not just a criminal offence, it is something that impacts the health, wellbeing and financial welfare of the victim and their family. Any response needs to be embedded in a multi-agency network which facilitates information-sharing and coordinated care planning across government agencies.



VIDENCE-BASED

Strategic and operational decisions need to be based on evidence. Leveraging data can help practitioners to identify more vulnerable segments of the population and provide tailored solutions to victims. It can also help to remove practitioner bias and ensure a consistent standard of service to all individuals involved.



CESSIBLE

No domestic abuse strategy will be effective without ensuring that it is accessible and responsive to those who require it. Technology can help to facilitate the accessibility of information and support but given the sensitivity of domestic abuse, human support should always be accessible when required.



ISK-INFORMED

Any actions or support needs to be focused on identifying and managing the risks to the victims safety and that of any children or others involved, and services need to be tailored to minimize risk and support recovery.



RUSTWORTHY

To effectively support victims, it is essential to build a sense of trust amongst all parties. Trust between the victim and respondent will encourage openness and accessibility, while trust between participating agencies will facilitate information-sharing and the achievement of common goals.

A domestic violence victim's journey to safety

While acknowledging that there is no typical journey for a victim of abuse, the below maps out the potential milestones a victim may experience from realizing they are being abused to getting to safety and recovery.

Within this we identify how and where a victim might seek support and the tools and technologies that may be used by friends, family and victim support agencies to return the individual to safety.

These are examined in more detail on the following pages.



Key elements in victim response

1. Realizing it's abuse

As suggested by the domestic abuse timeline on page 6, domestic abuse can escalate over time with patterns of behavior developing in the build up towards more harmful incidents. Providing access to expert resources that can help victims understand what is happening to them and provide access to help is essential.

**Online community**

Online communities provide a source of refuge for victims seeking support and advice on how to deal with their situation. For example, domestic abuse forums provide a safe, anonymous space for victims to share their experiences and an opportunity to ask critical questions such as 'is it abuse?', 'how do I get out', and 'where can I find refuges and emergency accommodation?'.

★ Many organizations are exploring how data analytics and AI can be leveraged to deliver more tailored and immediate support to their customers. One example of this is the increasing use of chat bots to deliver instant information and support. This could be extended to victims of domestic abuse. Often victims have very short windows of opportunity when their partners are not around to find support online. A bot can drastically reduce a victim's search time from around 15 to 5 clicks, making all the difference in times of crisis and providing a route to support. This could include the opportunity for real-time connection to police or paramedic services in the case of imminent danger.

Standardizing data collection tools can also help to provide a consistent terminology across government agencies, as well as provide a practical tool for practitioners (police officers, social workers, health professionals) working with victims of domestic abuse.

★ Innovation in victim response

2. Seeking help

Incidents of domestic abuse will come to light through a variety of channels. Some victims will follow the end-to-end journey and seek help themselves after taking advice from friends, family or support services. Others will come to the notice of the police or health services when they respond to an emergency call. Whatever the channel, governments need to have systemized arrangements for assessing risk and need. These need to be supported by pathways most likely to deliver safety, support and recovery.



Multiagency data sharing

The sharing of data between agencies can be critical in providing practitioners with up-to-date risk information and a timely assessment of victim's needs. They do so by gathering data from across the government network using statutory and voluntary inter-agency agreements. With this new information, practitioners can build victim-focused, coordinated action plans to increase victim safety. If collected digitally, this information can also be used to plan for provision by aggregating up the data to get a good understanding of what services are required and how effective they are.



Risk assessment

Standardizing data collection tools can also help to provide a consistent terminology across government agencies, as well as provide a practical tool for practitioners (police officers, social workers, health professionals) working with victims of domestic abuse.

In the UK, the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence (DASH) risk identification form is used to help respondents identify the level of risk an individual may be facing and the appropriate response given their situation.

- ★ More recently some jurisdictions have been looking to extend these to family risk assessments, which look at the family as a whole to provide a more holistic approach to action planning. This helps inform any intervention with the perpetrator to help them address their behaviour, and better protect children that witness domestic violence.

Research has shown that children can experience both short and long term cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects as a result of witnessing domestic abuse, and that children living with domestic violence are also at greater risk of experiencing neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse.



Multiagency victim service centers

Since the 1980s, victim-centered, multiagency response hubs have been established to reduce the trauma experienced by victims of sexual adult, domestic violence and child sexual abuse. These have taken many forms with the most well-known being the Children's Houses (Barnahus) for child victims of abuse or Family Justice Centers for adult victims of abuse.

These hubs are unique in their design and provide a number of essential benefits to users including professional support, an embedded

criminal justice process and the ability to deliver all services under one roof (e.g., forensic interview, medical exam and child/ family therapy).

Central to the concept is the need to stop victims having to re-tell their story to different agencies and in different locations, reduce the number of places victims must go for help, and look to increase access to services and support for victims and their children.

3. Receiving support

The journey of a victim of abuse does not necessarily end when the police intervenes. Government has a responsibility to support victims so that they are protected from any future emotional or physical harm caused as a result of the abuse. In many cases, but not all, this will involve a criminal justice process.



Place of safety

One of the first priorities is getting victims and, in many cases, their children to a place of safety. Depending on their circumstances, some victims may feel the need to move out of their home. Whilst this might address their safety it can be disruptive on a practical level causing additional distress and trauma and providing a challenge

to their recovery. As a result, some governments are trialing programs that provide accommodation and support services to perpetrators of domestic abuse. There is developing evidence that programmes aimed at perpetrators can have some impact on reducing reoffending.



Wearable technology

- ★ Quite often the court might issue an order requiring the perpetrator to stay away from the victim. These can be supported by wearable technology solutions, such as GPS tracking devices. Such technology can protect victims by notifying them of the location of their abusers and enabling them to discreetly signal for help if they are confronted. This solution has been successful in strengthening the protection of restraining orders and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. As the technology becomes increasingly sophisticated, devices could be extended to monitoring for evidence of stress and prompting the victim to seek help.



Remote counselling

- ★ Domestic abuse can have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of victims and their family. Typically support is provided face-to-face and in many cases this will continue to be the most appropriate way to provide this. However, there are also opportunities to extend that support though using therapy chat bots. There is developing evidence to suggest the benefits

of conversational agents or chat bots in reducing symptoms of depression. Any therapy chat bots would need to be developed with the particular needs of victims of domestic violence and would need to address issues of data privacy but could be a helpful addition to the options available to support victims as they move through to recovery.



Specialist courts

Giving evidence against an abuser can in itself be traumatic, and only serve to add to the pain and suffering of the abuse. In the UK, Australia and Nordic countries, Specialist Domestic Violence Courts have been established to provide more tailored support and advice to individuals. Models vary but in broad terms they include dedicated court sessions with specially trained judges and staff, an individual allocated to support the victim and in the United States, powers to monitor perpetrators to ensure that they comply with court orders.

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