

What has happened to the prevalence and nature of domestic abuse during lockdown? Crime economists **Ria Ivandic** and **Tom Kirchmaier** collaborated with the Strategic Insights Unit of the Metropolitan Police to answer this question by analysing data on calls to the police and recorded crime in London.

Domestic abuse in times of quarantine



Home is not a safe place for everyone. As social distancing has become the dominant policy response to suppress Covid-19, there have been unintended consequences for domestic abuse victims. We find that although the total number of domestic abuse crimes did not rise, crimes between current partners did – but this increase is not visible in the total due to a corresponding decrease in crimes between ex-partners.

Datasets

We base our analysis on five years of crime records and two years of calls-for-service data from London’s Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). These individual-level data allow us to provide a reliable empirical assessment of the changes in volumes of domestic abuse during lockdown. Both data sets ran to 14 June 2020.

Each year, the MPS receives about 2.5 million calls for service, out of which 170,000 (~7%) are related to domestic abuse. In the 11 weeks from the beginning of lockdown, there were a total of around 45,000 calls to the MPS contact centres related to domestic abuse.

Out of these calls in 2019, there were about 900,000 crimes, with 9.7% of them being related to domestic abuse. Since lockdown started, there were 19,155 domestic abuse offences recorded.

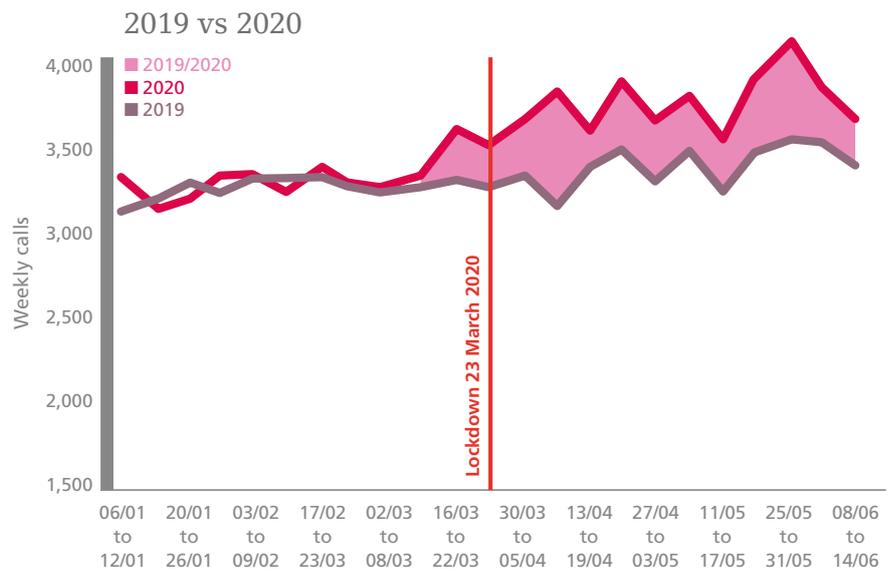
Calls-for-service findings

Since lockdown, domestic abuse calls to the police have increased by 11.4% on average compared with the same weeks in 2019 (see Figure 1). The increase is almost exclusively due to an increase in calls from third parties who are not directly witnessing the incident, and which include neighbours or family members (see Figure 2).

As a counterfactual for what trends in 2020 would have been without lockdown, we compare the calls in 2020 with those in the same week of 2019 (baseline). Figure 1 depicts the divergence in the trend between the two years, which starts about two weeks before the official lockdown, and then remains substantially higher. The difference equates to about 380 more calls per week on average as a result of lockdown, and more than 4,592 in total.

We disaggregate the data in Figure 2 to see the differential effects by types of caller. We observe that since the week of 16 March, almost all of the increase in

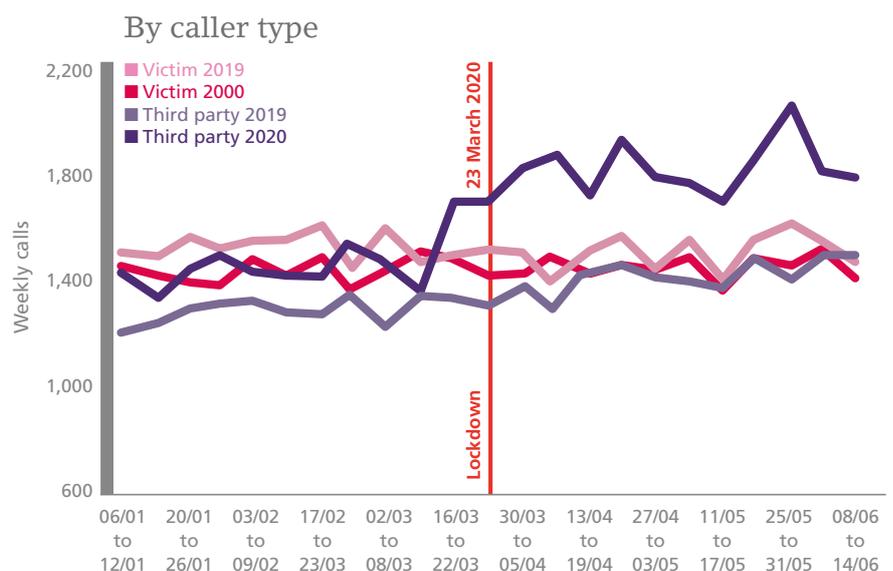
Figure 1: Weekly calls for domestic incidents/crimes



Note: The vertical red line signifies the start of lockdown. The official lockdown started on 23 March, but a significant number of workers were advised to work from home in the previous week, as concern about the scale of the pandemic and its economic implications spread.

The nature of domestic abuse has changed, with ex-partner abuse down but current partner abuse up

Figure 2: Weekly calls for domestic incidents/crimes



Note: The vertical red line signifies the start of lockdown. The official lockdown started on 23 March, but a significant number of workers were advised to work from home in the previous week, as concern about the scale of the pandemic and its economic implications spread.

domestic abuse calls comes from third party calls.

This increase in calls from third parties might point to an increased awareness of noise as neighbours are now at home; an increased awareness of domestic abuse since public narratives in the media voiced concern for victims during lockdown; potential under-reporting by domestic abuse victims; or a combination.

In an effort to alleviate the issue of domestic abuse victims not being able to contact the police, the Strategic Insights Unit (SIU) and LSE launched a targeted social

media campaign to promote the Silent Solution, which allows victims to contact the police with minimal verbal communication.

Crime findings

While the overall level of domestic abuse crimes (not calls) have remained stable when compared with the long-term trend, we observe a considerable shift in the type of abuse. While abuse by ex-partners fell by 9.4%, abuse by current partners and family members increased significantly – by 8.5% and 16.4% – respectively since lockdown began.

We examine whether the nature of domestic abuse has changed. We estimate this using an event study methodology using five years of weekly time series data. While the overall level of domestic crimes is roughly stable at 1,500 per week for the Greater London area, this average masks important diverging trends between current partner and ex-partner crimes, and intra-family abuse.

As discussed, current partner crimes during lockdown increased by 8.5% on average, with considerable variation over the weeks (see Figure 3a). For example, in the worst week, crime was up by 18.9% compared with the baseline. Similarly, family domestic abuse was up by 16.4% on average, to about 380 cases per week during lockdown. Over the same period, ex-partner crimes decreased by 9.4% compared with baseline (see Figure 3b).

This is an important finding, as it shows that there are groups of victims that are suffering considerably more during lockdown, groups that should be targeted by focused policies. It also highlights the opportunity to maintain the reductions in ex-partner abuse after lockdown ends.

Policy implications

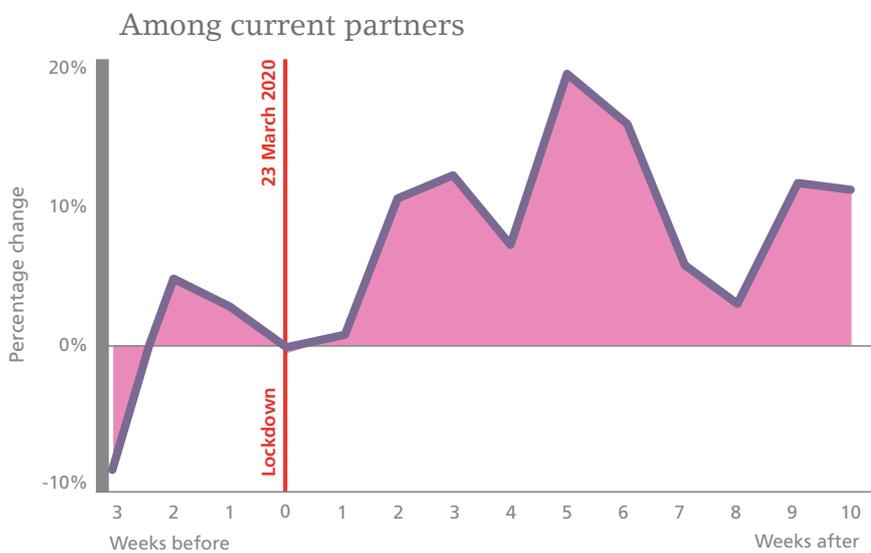
The social media campaign launched by LSE and the MPS to promote alternative means of reporting is showing positive engagement in terms of clicks. We propose continuing this research to investigate how best to communicate with victims.

The observed shift in the type of abuse to current and intra-family abuse invites rethinking how best to identify and target households where domestic abuse might occur for the first time.

Finally, given that we have identified a reduction in some aspects of domestic abuse, there is an opportunity to consider how that reduction might be maintained.

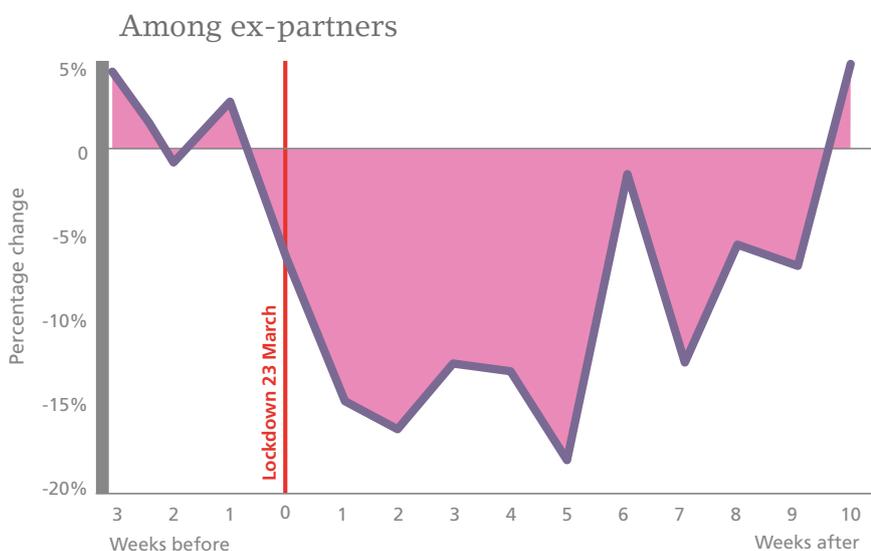
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Figure 3A: Weekly trends in domestic abuse among current partners



Note: The official lockdown started on 23 March.

Figure 3B: Weekly trends in domestic abuse among ex-partners



Note: The official lockdown started on 23 March.