# Responding to Domestic Abuse - Policing Innovations during the Covid-19 Pandemic:
## Lessons from England and Wales

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**Abstract**

This paper, based on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RCUK; Grant number ES/V00476X/1), offers a review and analysis of the different ways in which police officers (in role of domestic abuse leads) in 22 different police forces in England and Wales, endeavoured to provide optimum service delivery in relation to domestic abuse during 2020-21. The paper suggests that thinking about these DA leads as entrepreneurs offers a valuable lens through which to make sense of the range of innovative practices that were introduced and the future potential of these in responding to domestic abuse.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, policing domestic abuse, innovation, entrepreneurial policing.

## Introduction

In offering some thoughts on how the pandemic might impact upon policing, Mawby (2020) suggested three areas in which consequences might be anticipated: the enforcement of new legislation, the use of new strategies, and the deployment of new personnel. These suggestions were made at a time of wider debate concerning the impact of the pandemic on crime itself. Mawby suggested that there would be fewer burglaries (because fewer properties were left unattended), there would be fewer thefts of/from vehicles and there would be a decline in public violence but an increase in private violence. For an evidenced analysis of the

impact of social distancing on crime rates in general see Mohler et al (2020) and for a general assessment of the impact on violence see Eisner and Nivette, (2020). Other commentators went so far as to suggest that in the context of changing crime patterns the pandemic moment afforded the opportunity for criminology and criminal justice to engage in the experimental testing of theory and practices (see for example, Miller & Blumstein, 2020; Stickle & Felson, 2020) particularly in relation to routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Such debates aside, it is evidently the case that criminal justice professionals across the globe, like many others working in public sector support services, faced unprecedented challenges. This paper explores the nature of these challenges and the policing responses to

them as seen through the eyes of police practitioners working within the field of domestic abuse.

The first part of the paper situates the challenges posed for those working within the field of domestic abuse against the backcloth of the wider evidence of the impact of public health responses to the pandemic, specifically the impact of lockdowns on domestic abuse. The second offers a brief overview of the methodological approach adopted by the project reported on here. Thirdly, the paper offers some findings from this research focusing on the innovations adopted by police forces in England and Wales and posits the role of the domestic abuse lead as an entrepreneur. The concluding part of this paper offers some reflections on the wins and losses associated with these innovative practices, which might be of value for other jurisdictions.

## Covid, lockdowns, and domestic abuse

In relation to the work reported here, it is important to note that recorded incidents of domestic abuse have been increasing year on year in England and Wales. From 31st May 2013 to 30th June 2017 recorded incidents of domestic abuse increased by 88% (HMICFRS 2019) with the Office of National Statistics reporting another 24% increase by March 31st, 2019 (ONS 2019). In addition, it has been increasingly recognised internationally that crises of various kinds increase rates of violence against women and children (see for example, Rao, 2020, Nguyen & Rydstrom, 2018, Parkinson, 2019). Concerns that the coronavirus pandemic, and the public health directives to 'stay at home', would provoke such outcomes were expressed in early 2020 by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. She talked of 'a perfect storm for controlling, violent behaviour behind closed doors' and went on to name the consequences of Covid-19 isolation restrictions on domestic abuse as 'The Shadow Pandemic' (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). However, the extent to which these concerns were realised and carried consequences for policing remains subject to empirical scrutiny. It is undoubtedly the case that different jurisdictions saw a rise in calls to a range of organisations for support in relation to domestic abuse during the first lockdown in 2020 (see UN Women, April 2020: Usher et al. 2020; Pfitzer et al 2020). The pandemic was certainly taking its toll on violence(s) towards women and children (see inter alia Bourgault 2021, Fraser, 2020); however, debate on the impact of the

pandemic on the work of criminal justice agencies has been more muted. Most jurisdictions seem to have reported an initial decrease in calls to the police followed by spikes in the number of calls (see for example, Peterman et al. 2020, Leonhardmair & Herbinger, 2021). The purpose of the ESRC-funded Shadow Pandemic (June 2020 – December 2021) project is to analyse the impact of lock-downs in England and Wales on the police and courts response to domestic abuse.

## The ESRC Shadow Pandemic project

The project uses mixed-methods informed by the 'rapid research approach' (Vindrola-Padros, 2019). This project follows the recommendations of McNall and Foster-Fishman (2007) in engaging in data collection and analysis at the same time and sharing findings with stakeholders early in the research process (Johnson & Vindrola-Padros, 2017). An online questionnaire was distributed to all policing leads for domestic abuse in England and Wales through the office of the National Police Lead for Domestic Abuse in June 2020. This questionnaire asked respondents to reflect on the impact of the pandemic, whether policing as normal was possible, and if not what kinds of changes to practice had they introduced in order to maintain service delivery. The findings from this initial work are discussed in Walklate et.al. (2021a). Twenty-five police forces replied to this questionnaire (58% response rate) out of which 22 domestic abuse leads from different forces agreed to a further interview. At the time of writing, these respondents are being interviewed for the third time. These interviews have been conducted using Microsoft Teams (the online platform preferred by the police) during September- October 2020, January-February 2021, and May-June 2021. The methodological challenges of working in this way have been discussed in Richardson et al. (2021). This paper is primarily based on data gathered from the questionnaire and this series of interviews.

The interviewees were from a mixed group of police forces comprising urban, rural, and semi-rural forces with a mix of different demographic populations including several large metropolitan forces alongside other smaller forces. The respondents were all domestic abuse leads of different ranks (Chief Inspectors, Superintendents and Chief Superintendents). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted about an hour. They were transcribed and analysed using an adapted

form of Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) with a key focus on innovative practices.

## Innovation in Responding to Domestic Abuse

Weisburd and Braga (2019) remind us that understanding innovation in any organization is neither simple nor straightforward. Moreover, in the context of policing much of the academic focus on innovative policing has been seen through the lens of a crisis in policing (especially in the United States) and particularly a crisis as perceived by those exposed to policing practices. Innovation driven in this way has resulted in a wide range of initiatives from community-based policing to technology driven system-based practices, developments which are not only evidenced in policing in the United States. However, innovation can mean different things depending on whether it is viewed as systems-based or as more consumer-based. For example, Fox and Albertson (2020) in their analysis of the value of innovation for the probation service in England and Wales, identify three different models of innovation. They observe that in some respects, because criminal justice relies upon coherence, consistency, and adherence to well-defined processes in the delivery of its mission, innovation can be contra-indicated in relation to these principles. This is particularly the case in relation to policing where there is a fundamental reliance upon a 'command and control' model of policy implementation and decision-making. From this viewpoint, it might be concluded that innovation and criminal justice constitute a contradiction in terms. However, this is not necessarily the case when faced with the complex and intertwined problems of service delivery and consumer demand, as are policing domestic abuse leads. It should be noted that little of this discussion has focused attention on the context in which a crisis in society, albeit a public health crisis, both adds to that complexity and becomes the driver for doing things differently: innovation. Thus, this wider social context created a need for innovation in and of itself.

Thinking about innovation in this way, as driven by a public health emergency rather than a crime or policing emergency, the findings from our research illustrate the wide range of proactive practices police domestic abuse leads reported. Of central importance are the ways in which they advertised that they were still 'open for business' for victims of domestic abuse (see also Walklate et al 2021a). These practices ranged from using multimedia

platforms emphasizing 'business as usual'; implementing a single point of contact for all domestic abuse support; using Facebook/online forums to reach out to victim-survivors; working with community leaders to access hard-to-reach audiences; and having a police presence in supermarkets, pharmacies and local shops, as a way of offering safe spaces for victims to report domestic abuse. In addition, some police forces were also proactive in providing technological aids (like providing Ring doorbells to high-risk victims) and in using analytics to identify high-risk victims with whom contact had been lost and to identify high-risk offenders with a view to reminding those on bail of any conditions they have to abide by. In addition, with a focus on victim safety the majority of forces in our project held regular (daily or weekly) online multi-agency risk assessment conferences to ensure swift responses to, and the development of, safety plans for high-risk victims (this particular innovation has been discussed in detail in Walklate et al 2021b). All these practices were implemented in a context in which, as lockdown took hold, the pattern of other crime related behaviour changed (as implied by Mawby, 2020). These changing crime patterns were also reported to us by the domestic abuse leads interviewed. As one commented:

> *"…..because we've got that little bit of additional sort of space and capacity at the minute because we don't have things like the night time economy fully back yet….we've had a period of time where kind of some of our traditional levels of demand have dropped off a little bit, and it's enabled us to put even more focus on this [DA], which has been really good and it's giving us a more positive momentum, which we're trying to sort of keep as we're moving forward, I'm really keen that we kind of keep that focus"* (Female Inspector, DA lead, urban-rural force, mixed population).

Such variations in the patterning of crime are also evidenced in the data available from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) published in May 2021 for the year ending December 2020. The practices highlighted above lend weight to the views expressed in the HMIC-FRS Report on 'The Police Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic 2020' published in April 2021, which states: Through innovation, flexibility and adaptability, forces generally successfully maximised the protection of staff while minimising the effect on public service (ibid: 2). Reflecting this observation and the data from our interviews with police domestic abuse leads, it is possible to visualise the challenges and opportunities facing them during 2020-21 in the following way.

**Figure 1:** Centring Domestic Abuse Leads as Entrepreneurs



This figure places the domestic abuse lead at the centre of a context in which the nature of crime in England and Wales changed during 2020. It was also a context in which widespread and significantly vocal anxieties emanating from support services on the potential impact of lockdowns, specifically on those living with violence, were also being expressed. In May 2020, the government put £76 million extra funding in place to assist support services. Hence practices were put in place (digitally and through other means of communication) to convince the public that the police remained 'open for business'. At the same time, those at the centre of the policing domestic abuse business utilised the resources available to them (including the use of front-line officers whose time was less occupied with crime related to the night-time economy for example) to respond to the needs of repeat victims and target repeat offenders, all with public protection and safety in mind.

The closure of the courts produced a backlog of cases. In March 2021, there was a backlog of 476,932 cases in the Magistrate's Courts and 56,875 in the Crown Court (HMCTS, 2021), which required renewed efforts on the part of police in terms of resources and resource allocation to try and reduce levels of victim attrition. Our interview data indicated that this changing set of demands required domestic abuse leads to be open to, and encourage, innovative practices. In particular, it demanded that they be passionate, agile, resilient, and tenacious in delivering their task: all individual characteristics associated with the drivers for change. They also had to be entrepreneurial in securing resources to enable them to deliver change and secure an appropriate level of service for domestic abuse victims.

## Domestic Abuse Leads as Entrepreneurs

Smith (2020) charts the (limited) growth and development of what he terms 'entrepreneurial policing' and in doing so suggests, "…traditionally, the term 'entrepreneur' itself lies out with the pragmatic lexicon of policing" (p 2). Moreover, whilst there has been an increasing, if marginal, interest in entrepreneurial policing since the publication of the Flanagan Report (2008), in England and Wales the police interest in this concept increased after the 2008 financial crisis and the measures of austerity that followed (Smith, 2020). Police forces in England and Wales were hit by the pandemic just as some of the worst effects of austerity measures were impacting on budgets. In 2019, there was a targeted personnel uplift of 20,000 new police recruits, colloquially referred to as Boris' Bobbies, after the Prime Minister who introduced them, the effects of which have yet to translate into fully trained policing personnel. However, the concept of entrepreneurial

policing has a presence pre-dating these issues. The work of Hobbs (1988), 'Doing the Business', in which detectives are seen to 'trade' information to secure results, stands as testimony to the intellectual heritage associated with this concept. Of course, some of this work blurs the boundaries between police entrepreneurialism as involving both legitimate and illegitimate practices. Indeed there is a rather richer vein of work excavating the illegitimate than the legitimate (see inter alia Sherman, 1974; Punch, 1996). Indeed, Smith (2020: 9) offers a very detailed and useful conceptual map of what he calls the 'policing entrepreneurial nexus' and in so doing makes the case for its value in making sense of a wide range of work associated with the policing task.

Put simply, and for the purposes of the focus of this paper, entrepreneurial policing constitutes more than the introduction of business practices into a public service. This vision of policing is, using terms borrowed from Klein et al. (2010), about understanding how police officers, occupying particular roles deploy their leverage and capabilities to deliver the task of policing. As Smith (2020) suggests, and which coheres with the understanding adopted in this paper, this kind of vision centres domestic abuse leads as agents of change who also have the *agency* to deliver on that change. Sometimes this agency is about the kinds of innovative practices listed above (delivering the same task differently) but sometimes this agency also involves securing the funding needed to do the task (a more traditional sense of entrepreneurship). In addition, this requires securing the engagement of other service providers working alongside and with the police in the delivery of services. For example, one Domestic Abuse Lead informed us:

*"We're also fortunate enough to tap into a funding stream that allowed us to bring in two additional victim care officers for our xxxx, which is our commissioned Victim Support service in xxxx. Pleasingly, after a sort of succession of papers that had put together and sort of evidencing the worth and the impact, it was agreed a couple of months ago that we could recruit in one Detective Sergeant and five police staff members to basically make up that big Safeguarding Hub. But we've completed recruitment so we're certainly not up and running with our full complement yet, but we're getting there and I hope that, come late July, we should have five and then hot off the press, last week I was invited some more money in the pot from the Ministry of Justice which will allow us to recruit an*

*additional 3 into that hub, so one individual. It'll be on a short-term contract for now, because it's essentially two years' worth of funding and the hope will be we'll find the money to sort of funding permanently going forward"* (Male, Superintendent, urban-rural force).

With another domestic abuse lead saying:

*"…through the Home Office issued last year in some perpetrator cash funding for perpetrators. We applied for that funding to implement MATAC. If you've heard of that in South Yorkshire, so we used, we used some of that. We used some of that funding for and it wasn't much funding and it didn't last very long, so it was really intense, actually, but we recruited a small project team to implement MATAC in xxxxx"* (Female, Superintendent, urban force).

Further, another respondent pointed to success resulting from additional funding:

*"I think something we did in xxxxxx which was really beneficial was that funding came down for programs from central government that we set up a pilot for perpetrators, which we're doing in xxxx. So that's our biggest city. It's got the most we've got the most traffic in terms of domestic abuse victims and perpetrators. And what we, we put some funding into there. And so what think? The latest stats that I heard about a couple of weeks ago with that last year we managed to engage three people voluntarily with perpetrator services - in the first three months of 2021 alone, we've put 119 people into it, so we've managed to go and find the funding to do proactively target high harm perpetrators because we're a high harm force. That's what we focus on. So we've got high harm teams"* (Female Superintendent, rural force).

While in each of these examples, the extra funds came from different government sources, on other occasions the importance of excavating more local opportunities came to the fore. One respondent noted:

*"But yes, we've had quite a bit of precept growth and actually what happened is our Chief sniffed an opportunity to endear himself to the PCC [Police and Crime Commissioner; locally elected], I think. I put in a suggestion to the Chief about this particular growth that we've just described, and he said not only can you have it, I want you to take last year's growth and so you can actually have it straight away so you can have it now we couldn't keep up … It was kind of going*

*from concept to actually people starting in the space of eight weeks, you know, couldn't keep up. We're now kind of doing a hasty review now just to make sure it's still on track, but yeah, I'd say it's the speed of it was around PCC uplift"* (Male, Chief Superintendent, urban-rural force).

In addition, three force areas in our study succeeded in engaging the delivery of support and legal services from an independent service provider in which at the first point of contact with a domestic abuse complainant a frontline officer could, with the permission of the complainant, pass their details on to this service provider using an app on their mobile phone.

In sum, the majority of the domestic abuse leads interviewed for this project not only approached the role and the changing demands facing them during the pandemic with a personal passion for their role and the ability to be agile and resilient in their decision-making, they were also engaging in bidding for funds and negotiation processes with other service providers (both nationally and locally) to enable optimum service delivery. This combination of having leverage and capability might well fit with a notion of social entrepreneurship as characterised by Smith (2020) and further work is needed to determine its conceptual feasibility. However, what is the case is that domestic abuse leads certainly used the space in which they found themselves to good effect and in different ways to more conventional brokerage between policing and local businesses (Brewer, 2017).

## Concluding Thoughts: relevance for other jurisdictions?

Conceptualizing policing through the lens of innovation and entrepreneurship is not new. However, viewing policing in this way has been on the periphery rather than at the centre of policy concerns. In the context of policing in England and Wales, it is evident that the presence of austerity measures has been one im-

petus for reviewing policing, and indeed the delivery of the whole of the criminal justice system. The public health response to the global pandemic added a further impetus for reviewing how best to deliver policing and ensure the protection of victim-survivors. Thinking about policing service delivery in this way may have some resonance for other jurisdictions which imposed social distancing and 'stay at home' restrictions. The international evidence discussing the consequences of stay at home directives for those living with violence, especially women and children, suggests this is the case. Our research points to the pivotal role of police domestic abuse leads in charting a path through both the challenges, and opportunities of service delivery, in meeting the complex demands posed by domestic abuse during the pandemic. That role, in imagining ways to ensure safety for victims of domestic abuse (from online multi-agency risk assessment conferences to virtual messaging, to making sure that repeat offenders were warned of their behaviour), to negotiating for funding to deliver services, has not only required agile thinking and resilience but has also required the kinds of capabilities and leverage not normally associated with policing. It may be of value for other police jurisdictions facing the same challenges of increasing calls to respond to domestic abuse, to reflect upon not only the innovative practices reported here, but the vision of policing that those practices articulate. It is of course the case that different jurisdictions respond to and prioritise domestic abuse and the policing role in that process in different ways. The research reported in this paper is a platform from which further comparative learning may well be of benefit. In this respect, there is certainly more work to be done.

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