

Changes in attitudes and prevalence: domestic abuse during COVID-19 isolation in the UK.

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Introduction

Historically, natural disasters appear to increase the rates of interpersonal violence, with a range of contributing factors towards this, such as, loss of resources, unsafe housing, lack of financial support and increase in mental health difficulties. Often during such crises and natural disasters, victim shelters are destroyed or become uninhabitable, therefore leaving victims with no escape from domestic abuse (DA). Additionally, in many cases, victims face inability to reach help lines, thus leading to underreporting of DA.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest ongoing global crisis; it originated in Wuhan, China and quickly spread globally, causing many fatalities, and putting pressure on communities and resources (Campbell, 2020). Various projects were focused on DA during 2019-2020, and many of them reported that DA rates increased, in many countries, including, Italy, Germany, China, UK, Brazil, and USA. Perhaps the imposed lockdown periods, loss of employment and working from home, led many people to spend more time with their families and partners.

Although, many enjoyed spending more time with their loved ones, DA victims were forced to spend more time with their abuser, which led to a record-breaking number of individuals utilising the mental health services in the UK (Holmes et al., 2020). Drawing upon research conducted specifically on the COVID-19, Evans et al (2020) found that 59% of participants who experienced DA before COVID-19, reported an increase in this experience during COVID-19. It was also noted that a decrease was observed with some areas reporting

more than 50% decrease in calls. However, in Canada, it was found (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020) that DA phone calls increased by 25% during the first week of isolation measures, with Kaukinen (2020) reporting a 300% increase in calls in Vancouver, and an 150% increase of online searches for online support for DA.

Aim

There seems to be a contradiction in the reported DA rates; some projects reported an increase in DA while other projects have indicated a decrease. Considering the opposing results and the severity of consequences for the victims of DA as well as the suggestion that crises and natural disasters increase the risk and rates, this project examines DA rates and experiences in the UK during the COVID-19 isolation.

Method

The current study used a within-groups repeated measures design, as all participants experienced both conditions that are being examined – before and during the COVID-19 isolation in the UK. Participants were recruited online in 2021 and completed the survey online. The survey consisted of the demographic questions, questions about participant's attitudes towards and beliefs about DA, experiences of DA, reporting of DA, types of experienced DA, as well as various factors such as the abuser's characteristics and financial issues because of COVID-19. Of the original sample (N = 211), 159 completed the demographic question relating to age (M = 24.9 years). From those that completed the demographic information (N=168), 64 had a partner with no common agreement, 47 were single, 53 married, seven divorced, four widowed and three separated. In relation to occupation, 75% were employed either full or part-time, 11.9% were studying, 8.3% were unemployed for reasons outside of COVID-19, 1.8% were retirees, and 3% were unemployed or furloughed due to the pandemic. Nearly all participants considered their ethnicity to be British, four mixed race and one Asian-British. Financially speaking, 49.4% of respondents

considered themselves to be of medium-high or medium income, and 50% low-medium income, and 53% of participants had children.

Results

Participants were first asked to report their perceptions on what constitutes DA, results are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Results of the Attitudes and beliefs of domestic abuse (N=211)

Attitude/belief	% Agree
Mental cruelty/Verbal Abuse	98.8% (N=208)
Threat of Violence	98.7% (N=208)
Deprivation of money/clothes	95.7% (N=202)
Both Physical and sexual harm	99.4% (N=210)
Withholding access to household finances	95.8% (N=202)
Restricting partners freedom to go out alone	96.3% (N=203)
Shouting at partner	51.2% (N= 108)
Pushing or pulling partner	97.5% (N=208)
Slapping partner	98.8% (N=208)
Breaking things in house	81.1% (N=171)

From the overall sample, 160 participants responded to the questions about DA experiences, out of which, 49.4% reported experiencing DA before COVID-19, and 13.1% reported experiencing DA during the lockdown period. Of those that reported experiencing abuse, both before and during the lockdown period (N=48), 52.1% reported that this abuse was from the same perpetrator. The mean age of perpetrators was 20.5 years (n=132, range 16-72 years, 64 male and 16 females), out of which, 27.4% of abusers were unemployed for reasons other than COVID-19, or unemployed or furloughed due to COVID-19.

Seventy-nine out of the 211 participants who had experienced DA prior to COVID-19, 46 reported physical abuse, 24 stated financial abuse, 13 experienced sexual abuse, 55 highlighted verbal abuse and 57 experienced psychological abuse. Six participants reported experiencing some other form of abuse not listed above. Prior to COVID-19, most participants experienced abuse daily (29.6%), 42.3% experienced abuse 1-3 times per week,

and 28.1% experienced abuse once per month or less. Of the participants who experienced abuse prior to COVID-19 and went on to also experience abuse during the isolation period, 34.8% experienced daily abuse, 47.8% experienced abuse 1-3 times per week, and 17.3% were abused once per month or less often.

Of the 21 participants who reported experiences of DA during COVID-19, 11 reported physical abuse, nine financial, two sexual, 15 verbal, and 15 participants reported psychological abuse. Additionally, two participants reported abuse not listed above. Twenty of these participants had experienced domestic abuse prior to the isolation period, and of these, 25% experienced daily abuse, 50% reported experiencing abuse 1-3 times per week, and 25% experienced abuse once per month or less. During the isolation period, 36.8% of respondents experienced daily domestic abuse, 57.9% experienced the abuse 1-3 times per week and 5.3% experienced abuse once every six months or less often.

Finally, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test indicated that the large decrease in domestic violence occurrences reported during COVID-19 isolation compared to before COVID-19, was statistically significant, $T = 1711$, $z = -7.62$ $p < .001$.

Discussion

The current study investigated the DA rates during COVID-19 in the UK and compared the results to the period prior to the pandemic. Attitudes and beliefs were also explored, with a focus on participants' perceptions of DA.

Historically, physical aggression has been deemed DA by the majority, with non-physical abuse slowly being recognised as DA as time progresses. The current study found that, 98.8% of individuals agreed that mental cruelty and verbal abuse are DA, with other attributes such as the threat of violence and deprivation of money or clothing also being deemed as DA by over 90% of respondents.

The prevalence of DA is well documented; 35% of women have experienced physical

or sexual abuse from an intimate partner worldwide (WHO, 2017). The current study further highlights this prevalence; 49.4% reported experiencing domestic violence before COVID-19. Interestingly, only 79 participants highlighted the type of abuse they were exposed to before COVID-19, with around 25% experiencing financial abuse and 14 participants documenting sexual abuse. Almost half of the overall sample, experienced DA around 1-3 times a week and 29.6% reporting daily incidents.

Kanaisty and Norris (1995) noted that natural disasters increase the stress levels of individuals, which in turn can add pressure to existing relationships and social connections. The current study builds on these findings, as the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing and provided an ideal opportunity to investigate the impact of a long-lasting disaster.

Moreover, the findings showed that, 49.4% reported abuse before COVID-19 and 13.1% of those individuals reported experiencing DA during the COVID-19 isolation. This is a significant decrease, with half of the 13.1% stating that the abuse was from the same perpetrator. WHO (2020) provide some support for this finding, proposing that isolation periods have hindered individuals' privacy, which could impact engagement with such surveys and reporting in general.

In line with previous literature, perpetrators were found to be mostly male and 27.4% of abusers were unemployed, with a small percentage being unemployed due to COVID-19. With isolation guidelines being in place to try to contain the virus and prevent infection rates, individuals were forced to stay at home, which could have increased strains on relationships and the risk of DA occurring. The observed decrease in the findings could be explained through situational factors that impact self-report measures such as privacy, access to the internet or an assumption is that some relationships may have been restored during this period for reasons that may or may not be related to COVID-19 regulations. Still, this is a hypothesis that needs further exploration by future research with a larger sample.

Conclusion

Based on previous research, it was expected that an increase in DA rates would be observed; however, the findings indicated a significant decrease, which could be a result of underreporting, feeling unsafe to complete such surveys, lack of privacy and fear towards the abuser. Going forward, further research is needed to explore this in more detail, taking methodological limitations into consideration, so that a wider audience can be reached. The current study, while of a small sample, does indicate that individuals are potentially underreporting their domestic abuse experiences, which is a cause for concern, particularly during crises such as COVID-19.

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