

# COVID-19 – Social and Economic Issue Analysis: Domestic Abuse

## What does the Government say about this issue?

In an address to the nation on 23 March 2020 the Prime Minister gave the British people what he described as “a very simple instruction”: to stay at home. This instruction has now been backed up by legal regulations.

But what if home is not a safe place?

The law (Regulation 6 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020) makes it an offence for a person to leave home without “reasonable excuse”. This offence is punishable by a fine. Regulation 6 states that “reasonable excuse” includes:

- Leaving the house to access “critical public services.” This includes social services and services provided to those at risk.
- Leaving the house to avoid injury or illness or to escape a risk of harm.

So, someone leaving the house to avoid injury, illness or a risk of harm caused by domestic abuse, or to access domestic abuse support services, should have a ‘reasonable excuse’ for doing so. Plainly speaking, whilst the advice is to stay at home, anyone who is at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse, is still able to leave and seek refuge.

However, despite this, campaigners and police are worried that lockdown will leave those affected by domestic abuse suffering in isolation at a time of stress and uncertainty for many households.

Domestic abuse charity Women’s Aid has warned that perpetrators may use self-isolation and social-distancing, as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour.

## What impact is coronavirus having on domestic abuse services?

Lockdown has shut down routes of safety for women, with most public places that victims of domestic abuse could normally escape to, now closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women’s Aid has noted that the requirement to self-isolate if someone is showing symptoms of COVID-19 is likely to shut down routes to support and safety. Self-isolation could impact access to domestic abuse services in a number of ways:

- Those affected by domestic abuse, who are self-isolating, will be restricted to online and telephone services. These may be difficult to access from home with the perpetrator present.
- Accommodation services may not be able to provide self-contained spaces where people can self-isolate, or ensure suitable space for social distancing, which may limit the service they can offer.
- Support services may not be able to run and emergency accommodation may have to close if too many staff members need to self-isolate or if suitable social distancing measures cannot be implemented.

Domestic abuse charities Refuge and Women's Aid have published safety tips and advice, with a particular focus on online and telephone support. It includes information on the 'Silent Solution' system for calling 999 when someone is unable to speak. A number of national domestic abuse services are still running. There is also a range of resources for those seeking support available on gov.uk.

It has been reported that 80% of women's frontline support is reporting a reduced service, because of less face-to-face contact, as well as staff sickness and technical issues, including a basic lack of laptops to enable working from home.

This will be a challenging time for refuge services, that continue to face a funding crisis and high levels of demand for their help. Refuge services should be supported to continue to operate safely and effectively as coronavirus spreads. Refuge services that must lockdown and stop taking referrals due to the virus may need additional financial support, as they will not receive the same level of rental income (funded through housing benefit). There is also a risk that staff absences due to the virus will impact on the safe provision of these life-saving services.

Media reports indicate an increased number of visits to domestic abuse websites and an increased number of calls to helplines during the COVID-19 pandemic. MPs on the Home Affairs Committee have warned that the COVID-19 lockdown will have "devastating consequences for a generation" unless swift action is taken to tackle rising rates of abuse inside homes. The charity Refuge reported a 49% increase in the number of people calling its national domestic abuse hotline in the week to April 15, and there are concerns that many victims trapped with their abusers are less able to seek help. Home Affairs Committee chair Yvette Cooper said there are "already alarming signs of the rise in domestic abuse. Our cross-party committee is calling for an urgent action plan from government setting out practical measures to tackle domestic abuse as an integrated part of the fight against COVID-19."

### **Are incidences of domestic abuse increasing?**

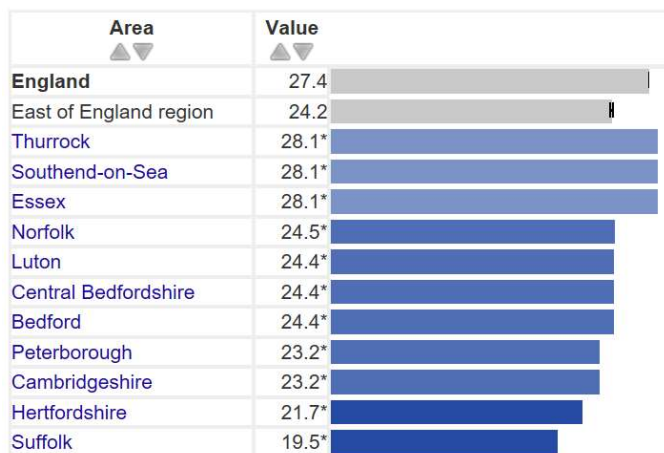
Evidence is emerging of increased incidences of domestic abuse linked to coronavirus, both in the UK and globally. For example, Beverley Hughes, Greater Manchester's deputy mayor for policing and crime, said there had been reports of abuse linked to the lockdown; and the Thames Valley chief constable, John Campbell, said his force expected to see a rise in the number of domestic abuse calls.

Karen Ingala Smith, the founder of Counting Dead Women, a pioneering project that records the killing of women by men in the UK, has identified at least 16 domestic abuse killings between 23 March and 12 April (three-week period), including those of children. Based on previous years' data, we might expect to see seven women killed in 21 days.

## Are things any different in Norfolk?

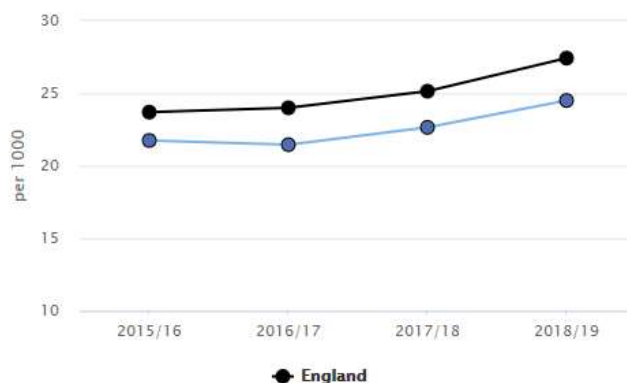
Comparative data relating to domestic abuse and domestic violence is generally published annually. Data around this topic is collected by a number of different organisations (such as police, hospitals, schools, GPs, domestic abuse helplines and refuges, and community safety teams), is collected for specific recording purposes, and is not brought together into a holistic picture.

The chart below shows domestic abuse-related incidents and crimes recorded by the police (crude rate per 1,000 population aged 16+) for the latest year available 2018/19. This data is from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and sourced from Public Health England. Norfolk has a lower rate of domestic abuse-related crimes than seen nationally (24.5 compared with 27.4 nationally). Compared with the other local authority areas in the East of England, Norfolk sits amongst the highest third.



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS)

The graph below shows that Norfolk's rate of domestic abuse-related incidents and crimes has remained below England's average over recent years, and has followed a similar upward trend compared with England's average.



It is likely that the situation for people at risk of domestic abuse in Norfolk during the COVID-19 pandemic, will be little different to many other places around the UK, amid concerns that more victims will be at risk due to social isolation and reduced services and reduced refuge capacity.

Similar to other Police and Crime Commissioners, Norfolk's Police and Crime Commissioner, Lorne Green, said the coronavirus can disproportionately impact on those who already face many challenges in the home, which can be even more frightening during self-isolation with an abuser.

Locally in Norfolk, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Norfolk (OPCCN) and the Norfolk Constabulary websites aim to reassure victims and survivors of domestic abuse that they will maintain the highest level of service possible during this challenging time. This includes an assurance that the police will always respond to emergency calls if someone is in immediate danger.

Leeway is an independent charity providing support to adults, young people and children who are experiencing domestic abuse in Norfolk and Suffolk, and operates seven safe houses. Mandy Proctor, chief executive of Leeway, said the charity has put plans in place to deal with a number of potential eventualities, ensuring their services are still able to provide the necessary support whilst reducing the spread of the illness. Any residents that have coronavirus or display symptoms of it will follow public health guidelines and will self-isolate. Communal areas will be deep cleaned, and the refuge will be temporarily unable to accept new referrals. Leeway would look at alternative accommodation options for any new referrals.

Norfolk domestic abuse crimes and incidents data covering the period of COVID-19 and lockdown is not yet available for analysis.

The reality is that whilst living in lockdown with a perpetrator, there may be lack of opportunity for a victim to report a domestic abuse crime or incident to the police. Or that victims consider the consequences of police action under lockdown conditions could cause further problems at home. This means that there is likely to be a backlog of domestic abuse crime and incident reporting after lockdown is lifted, which may mean an increase in demand of resources for the police and other support services, and this should be planned for.

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