

COVID-19

Hidden Victims:

A perspective on managing domestic violence and protecting vulnerable people during - and after - the COVID-19 pandemic



Hidden Vulnerabilities...

Living in lockdown conditions has radically altered the dynamics of people's lives. Those who were already in volatile and risky domestic environments are confined with their abusers for lengthy periods. These same conditions may cause previously difficult, but stable, relationships to escalate into violent or abusive situations.

Of key importance are the needs of vulnerable groups - women and girls, the elderly, the physically or mentally disabled and children. In addition to making their situation more risky, lockdown measures may also restrict their abilities to access important social networks, seek agency support and exert some control over their lives. The risks may manifest themselves in four different, but closely interrelated, ways.



Hidden vulnerabilities - arising from COVID-19 restrictions

Increased exposure to violence, including sexual violence, physical and emotional abuse

Resulting from family members becoming **increasingly frustrated** by prolonged confinement, particularly where there is already a history of violence or abuse.

Where one member of the household exerts a **controlling influence over others**, opportunities to seek help may be more limited.

Victims may become **isolated** from existing sources of support and become much more vulnerable. This may be exacerbated by the abuser's use of drugs or alcohol, Internet exposure and other negative social influences.

Mental health and psychosocial distress abuse

Psychological impact of **sustained close confinement** with a partner or family member who has a history of abusive behavior.

The **persistent threat** of violence or abuse is just as damaging as when it actually happens.

This will impact on other members of the household, and it is highly likely that their **mental wellbeing** will also suffer.

This is likely to be **intensified** where they have limited opportunities to leave the family home and seek less stressful environments.

Reduced access to sources of support and protection

Victims suffer a unique form of isolation, often there are **few alternatives** to remaining in the home.

Normally, this can be offset to a degree by interactions **outside the home** with friends, neighbours and – where available – with specialised police units or other support agencies.

During full or semi lockdown conditions, victims are **cut off** from these interactions. This can be worsened where the abuser seeks to **control** the victim's access to and use of mobile phones, tablets, laptops etc.

Neglect and lack of care

Vulnerable adults and children may also suffer where the environment inhibits those in the household from providing **necessary support and care**.

The factors which contribute towards the isolation of victims can impact on the **extent to which external care providers are able to gain access** and thereby identify any emerging problems or risks.

This situation can be worsened where the abuser **prevents or obstructs access to the home**, or **prevents the victim from leaving the home**.

Domestic abuse can take different forms - and victims typically require a range of specialist services to help them deal with their situation and deliver an appropriate response...

Abused members



Intimate Partner



Infants, Children and Adults (25-59 years)



Elderly



Care Receiver



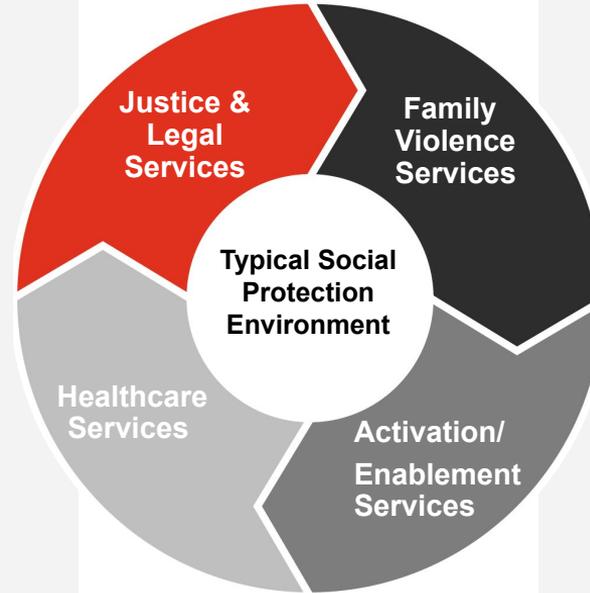
Domestic Labor



Disabled

Multiple entry points

Services provided to victims of abuse



Social Protection Services

Justice & Legal Services

- Legal professionals
- Court services
- Police and local authorities
- Child protection services

Healthcare Services

- Medical services
- Emergency services
- Mental health services
- Drug and alcohol services
- Disability services
- Rehabilitation services

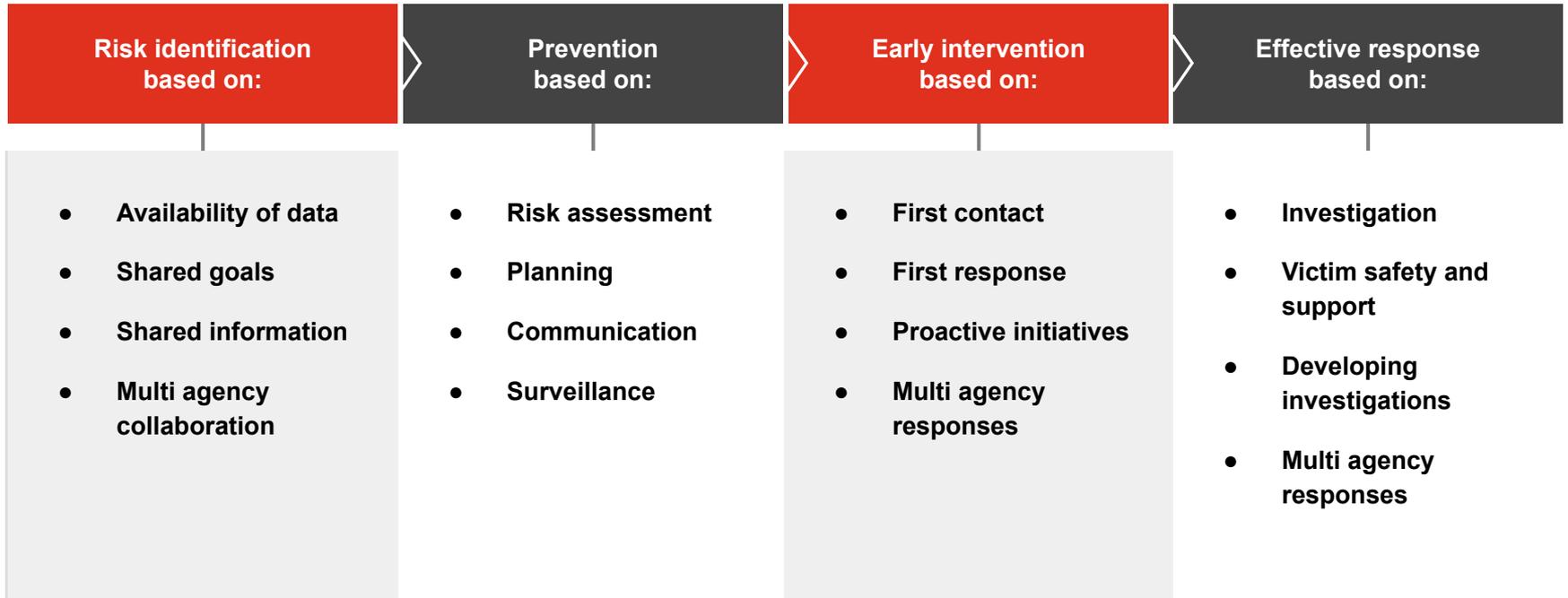
Family Violence Services

- Counseling & case management.
- Housing services
- Healing centers
- Rape Crisis

Activation/ Empowerment Services

- Specialised education services
- Social work services
- Women's Aid
- Financial Service

... which seeks to achieve four separate, but closely related objectives:



Good practice in risk identification - looking for the early signs

Availability of data

Risk can only be identified if agencies routinely **gather and share information** which is accurate, has **integrity** and is easily **available** to those who require it (some material may be highly sensitive and care must be taken in sharing it).

Reporting crimes to the police must be as easy as possible, with **sound governance around classifying and recording** them.

Similar processes must exist in other relevant agencies (social support, health, education and specialist agencies).

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Early risk identification may be challenging where access to agencies, and to potential victims, is limited.

Shared goals

Organisations in different professional areas have different priorities. But there are areas where their interests can overlap - notably in relation to keeping people safe.

Where **shared goals** can be agreed, then there is an opportunity to focus on how different entities can **work collaboratively** towards achieving these.

Different perspectives can help to highlight **different areas of risk**, and in many cases non-police entities can identify the first signs that all is not well.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Relevant entities must be particularly alert to potential warning signs.

Shared information

Effective sharing of information between agencies is best achieved through a **formal protocol**. This is a set of rules which explain (i) **why** information sharing is desired, (ii) the **responsibilities** of the entities involved, and (iii) **what** the information will be used for. It will also make reference to any laws relating to information management or security.

Key tests which usually applied are that the information sharing is **necessary, proportionate, relevant, adequate, accurate, timely and secure**.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: In lockdown situations there may be very limited information available. Professional judgement will be crucial.

Collaboration and coordination

Multiple agency involvement in risk identification **widens the range of potential indicators** and the number of sources of information.

Multi agency risk assessment enables **free and open discussion** of the implications of the available information and helps to identify whether a particular risk exists and how severe it is. It also enables agreement on any **early interventions necessary**, how they are to be delivered, and by which agency (or agencies).

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Situations involving sustained lockdown may reduce opportunities for interventions and agencies may have to identify creative solutions.

Good practice in prevention - seeking to minimise the threat and risk to the victim(s)

Risk assessment

Accurate and continued assessment of the risk to the victim, including everything known about the **victim**, the **abuser** and the **environment**.

Multiple sources will include the police, support agencies, schools (if there are children involved), family members and doctors (where appropriate).

The victim may be unwilling to speak openly. **Professional judgement** will play an important role.

Key COVID-19 takeaway:
Existing risk assessments may have to be reviewed in light of any constraints imposed on victims.

Planning

A safety plan, devised in **collaboration** with the victim and relevant support agencies.

This may include **advice** to the victim, **technical support** and a **response plan** which is capable of being activated by the victim - possibly through a code word or other approach.

In extreme circumstances, **removal of the victim** to a place of refuge may be appropriate - if suitable facilities are available.

Key COVID-19 takeaway:
Existing safety plans may not be as practical and effective within the context of COVID-19 constraints.

Communication

A key factor in successfully **minimising risk** is continued communication with the victim by the police and / or support agencies.

This is also of significant importance in maintaining the **mental and physical wellbeing** of the victim.

There must be **clarity** around who is responsible for keeping the victim informed. 24/7 communications should be considered for particularly high risk cases.

Key COVID-19 takeaway:
Communications with victims during sustained lockdown may be more difficult.

Surveillance

Multiple agency involvement in addressing domestic abuse helps to **increase scope for gathering information** about risk, and the wellbeing of the victim.

Potential sources include medical staff, schools, support agencies - and even neighbours.

Key COVID-19 takeaway:
Situations involving sustained lockdown may reduce opportunities for this sort of natural surveillance.

Good practice in early intervention - tackling the threat and risk to the victim(s)

First contact

It is a **significant step** for a victim of domestic violence or abuse to seek help.

A call handler may therefore need to spend longer on a domestic abuse call than other calls - the victim may be taking advantage of a **rare opportunity** to call in the absence of the abuser.

Providing a **high-quality response** to the caller should take priority over any pressure to move on to other calls to meet performance targets.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Victims may have significantly fewer opportunities to contact the police or other agencies for help.

First response

Where the police are first to respond, they must:

- (i) ensure the **safety** of the victim and any others in the home;
- (ii) identify **opportunities** to prevent further abuse; and
- (iii) deal with any **crimes or offences** for which there is evidence.

It is also important to gather as much information as possible about the victim's history, so that a **comprehensive risk assessment** can be made.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Effective first responses may be more difficult to fully achieve in a lockdown situation.

Proactive initiatives

Domestic and family violence occurs in an environment influenced by **attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, structures and systems**.

Early interventions must focus on these. Also look beyond the victim and seek to **engage with the abuser** and address their behaviour.

Other initiatives might focus on financial / material assistance, or parenting and relationship skills.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Lockdown and social distancing requirements may place constraints on the scope for proactivity.

Multi agency responses

No single agency is able to deliver effective early interventions in situation involving domestic violence or abuse.

Any early intervention approaches must be based on the principles of **sharing information** and **decision making** across agencies, **identifying the best options** and **avoiding worsening the situation**.

Particularly in lockdown situations, the victim may be unwilling to talk openly if the abuser is still present. **Professional judgement** is important.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: This may be constrained by coronavirus lockdown.

Good practice in effective response - getting it right first time

Investigation

The first incident reported is unlikely to be the first. It is important that whoever receives the first report understands that, for the victim, this represents a **significant step**.

Where there is insufficient evidence to support criminal charges, there may be **other action** which can be taken to **reduce the risk** to the victim. This must begin early - it is likely that this is an ongoing situation which has escalated to the point where the **victim is concerned for their safety**.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Previously manageable family situations may escalate into violent or abusive situations.

Victim safety and support

Ensuring the victim's safety is a **first priority**. This will be very challenging - it may be difficult for the victim to leave the abusive environment.

It is important that **contact is maintained** with the victim and that they know of strategies they can use to **improve their safety** within the home (e.g. keeping mobile fully charged, covert communication, safety code-words to use on the phone and use of secure space, such as toilet / wc area).

Key COVID-19 takeaway: These measures may be complicated by the continued presence and behaviour of the abuser.

Developing investigations

Where there is clear evidence of a crime having taken place, the police should act accordingly.

A professional approach should **involve other support agencies at an early stage** and allow them access to information which will help them to support the victim.

Domestic abuse **may not involve obvious criminality**. The police should still gather as much information as possible and with a view, to involving other support agencies at an early stage.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Lockdown and social distancing requirements may place constraints on the scope for proactivity.

Multi agency responses

As with early intervention, no single agency is able to deliver an effective response to a situation involving domestic violence or abuse.

Again, the principles of:

- **sharing information** across agencies;
- **joint decision making**;
- identifying the **best options**; and
- **avoiding worsening the situation** for the victim

are of primary importance.

Key COVID-19 takeaway: Delivering against these principles may be constrained by coronavirus lockdown.

Opportunities for governments, police and specialist agencies to be creative in supporting victims

which have relevance to and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (1/2)



Opportunity

Ensure sufficient capacity to support victims in difficult times.



How?

Funding of specialist support agencies must be sufficient to ensure that they are able to provide services for victims and that their operations are sustainable beyond the immediate demand spike.



Example

Italian, Canadian, Scottish and French governments have allocated a total of \$57 million in additional support for support agencies and women's refuges. The UK Ministry of Justice has also committed additional funding to enable victim support charities to expand videoconferencing and Voice Over Internet Protocols to facilitate communication with victims of crime - including victims of domestic violence.



Opportunity

Explore innovative ways of enabling victims to access support agencies.



How?

Creative use of communications technologies, and by providing opportunities which tap into victims' normal routines.



Example

The Italian government has introduced an app, called 'Youpol', which allows victims to alert the authorities without making a phone call. The UK national 999 network can be used to seek emergency help without requiring the victim to speak.



Example

The French government has provided funding for temporary 'pop-up' support centres to be located in supermarkets, where victims can access support and counselling while they are shopping. Victims in Spain are able to access police or agency support through pharmacies by using a simple code word and asking for 'Mask 19'.



Opportunities for governments, police and specialist agencies to be creative in supporting victims

which have relevance to and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (2/2)



Opportunity

Ensure information about available support is easily accessed by victims.



How?

Recognising the difficulties some victims may have in using the Internet confidentially, consider clustering data for quick access.



Example

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Morocco has assembled a range of support resources on one website - essentially a one-stop-shop - which victims can access.



Example

A Lebanese women's support entity, working with the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF), has set up a special phone line in the ISF's control room, and a website for victims to report domestic violence.



Opportunity

Ensure that known victims continue to receive support and contact.



How?

Proactive outreach to victims, thereby reassuring them of agencies' continued availability and support.



Example

The Irish police are proactively communicating with known victims by phone / SMS communications, inviting them to highlight any concerns associated with living restrictions resulting from the coronavirus.



Example

Specialist agencies in Ontario, Canada, have launched a text and chat line to give victims a new channel to seek support should they feel anxious about being overheard on a call. This provides access to advice, referrals and emotional support.



The COVID-19 pandemic has presented great challenges for government, emergency responders and other agencies around the world. We recognise the purposes underpinning the restrictions which governments have imposed on the movement of citizens in different countries, and share their hopes that these will bring coronavirus under control. But there are unanticipated consequences of these restrictions, and the reported increase in domestic violence and abuse is one of them. Key considerations, in summary, are:

Victim support

- Close confinement of the victim with their abuser may impact on any risk assessment which have been made.
- This may also impact on any safety plans which have been arranged with support agencies.
- Close confinement may also impact on established channels of communication with victims.
- Previously fragile relationships may escalate into abusive or violent situations during lockdown, creating new victims.



Investigation

- Lockdown conditions may limit opportunities to speak to the victim in the absence of the abuser.
- This may impede investigations, meaning that police and support agencies must use any contact time to obtain as much information as possible, so as to protect the victim.
- Any investigation must take into account the safety of any others in the household.



Multi agency responses

- Although the police have responsibility for any criminal investigation, the support of other specialist agencies must be considered at an early stage.
- This will be particularly important where the victim is unwilling to testify in any subsequent court case - this does not mean that their situation has improved or that risk has reduced.



Tackling abusive behaviour

- Criminal justice solutions - arrest, sentencing, court orders constraining behaviour and contact with victim.
- Social solutions - encouraging the abuser to seek help, and to confront and explore the reasons for their behaviour (can be a part of any criminal disposal or sentence, or a voluntary undertaking by the abuser).
- Overall objective is to minimise the continuing risk to the victim.



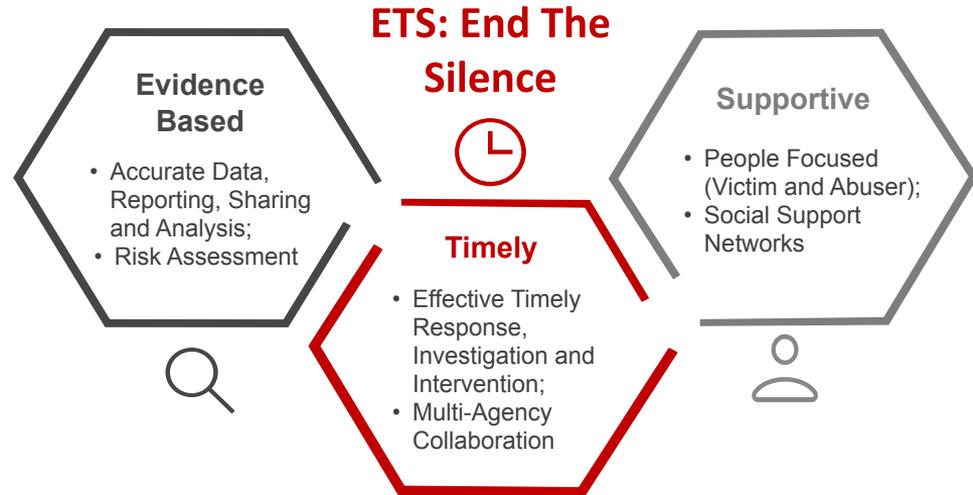
Continuous cycle of intervention

Policing entities and support agencies must also be prepared for a possible surge in reported cases as lockdown conditions are eased and victims have the opportunity to move more freely. This will have to be managed alongside a likely increase in normal policing demands as public life begins to return to normal.

As we have discussed....

Domestic violence is very challenging for policing and specialist entities to address, even without the circumstances of lockdown.

Governments, policing entities and support agencies must develop and build integrated responses which address the four key elements we have identified: risk identification, prevention, effective intervention and effective response. Our **ETS** framework provides a possible model.



Our Government and Public Safety Team is here to support and advise you....



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Supported by key Subject Matter Experts



Matt Torrigan: Matt has served as Ontario's Deputy Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services and also as the Chief of large urban police service (Waterloo Regional Police, Ontario). He has delivered community safety reform in the areas of technology, domestic violence, community policing, monitoring and inspection of police services and police governance bodies, and provincial / national security. He is a Distinguished Fellow at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto. He is currently leading development of governance and violence reduction strategies through a cooperative initiative which includes Caribbean, European, and North American countries.



Kay Wosniak: Kay has supported domestic abuse victims and their families - originally as a first-response UK police officer, and later leading strategic programmes which improved domestic violence and abuse services. With a keen interest in supporting vulnerable victims of crime, she has managed police public protection units and led multi-agency teams focused on safeguarding domestic abuse victims and their families. As a senior police officer, and UK national lead for this challenging subject area, she was the driving force in developing the first integrated victim and witness care service in the country for victims of domestic abuse.



Derek Benson QPM: Derek is a retired UK senior police officer with a detailed understanding of how to tackle social issues with multiple partner organisations. He was responsible for his force's public protection command, managing the threat, harm and risk presented by domestic violence, child sexual exploitation and abuse, and managing dangerous offenders. Since 2015 he has been the Independent Chair of a regional partnership, leading multi-agency oversight of safeguarding activity in relation to vulnerable adults and children; domestic abuse; exploitation; mental health and wellbeing; residential and domiciliary care and organisational review.

To find out how we at PwC are responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, please visit:
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Thank you

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