

To:

1. No 10

From: Rebecca Kirby,
Director, Tackling Exploitation
and Abuse, Home Office; and
Melissa Case, Family and
Criminal Justice Policy, MOJ

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COVID-19: Opportunities to increase interventions on hidden crimes agenda

Issue

1. You requested details of options to increase our interventions and level of ambition across the hidden crimes agenda, with a view to exploring potential for further action including options for a virtual summit. A great deal of work is already underway on the immediate response to the anticipated increase in risk to vulnerable cohorts from exploitation and abuse during the COVID19 crisis, including but not limited to the DfE-led delivery plan on vulnerable children, actions agreed by the General Public Sector Ministerial Implementation Group on hidden crimes on 14 April, the MoJ-led Victim and Witness Silver Command Group and the non-shielded vulnerable cohorts work.
2. The proposals set out below seek to build on progress we've already made and start work on the next phase of delivery, taking account of changing risks, reporting and pressures on delivery organisations as restrictions ease. It will be important to ensure alignment with longer term legislation and policy development, namely the Domestic Abuse Bill, Victims Bill, Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy, the online harms agenda and the Modern Slavery Strategy.

Scope

3. **'Hidden crimes' will be defined as those which relate to emotional and / or physical harm or abuse both in and outside of the home.** This includes: domestic abuse (DA) and sexual violence (SV); child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSA); and modern slavery. Wider hidden harms such as fraud, cyber-crime and radicalisation will not be considered within this work.

Threat Picture

4. **Under social distancing measures, we know vulnerable individuals may find themselves trapped in homes with abusive family members.** We also know children are also spending more time online and are therefore more exposed to online threats. This is compounded by social distancing, which is reducing the number of opportunities to spot the signs of abuse and safeguard those at risk.
5. **DA and 'honour'-based violence:** Around 2 million adults are affected by domestic abuse each year. Some service providers are reporting an increase in access to online support and helpline calls following the lockdown, **with national domestic abuse helpline calls increasing by 52% and website hits increasing by 161% since the week before lockdown.** Police, however, are not yet reporting any

increase in calls to domestic incidents, reinforcing the concern that whilst incidents are increasing, these crimes are more hidden behind closed doors. Charities also fear a worsening of 'honour'-based abuse as victims are isolated with perpetrators. The national 'honour'-based abuse helpline has witnessed more calls and increased COVID19-related risks to a number of callers.

6. **SV:** There is increased demand for SV victim services, with **the aggregated phonenumber and web chat usage for SV providers increased by 34% between w/c 16/03/20 and w/c 13/04/20**. In addition, victims are seeking different and more complex support, using Independent Sexual Violence Advisers to help them navigate housing and financial support during this time. **Galop, an LGBT+ domestic abuse and sexual violence helpline, reported that calls are now lasting an average of three times longer than pre-lockdown** due to the complexity of the calls. Victims are likely to develop increasingly complex needs the longer they are unable to access face-to-face support.
7. **CSA:** It is estimated that 7.5% of adults in England and Wales have experienced abuse before the age of 16 years.¹ Child sex offenders have globally welcomed isolation and reduced supervision of children due to COVID19 restrictions, but this is not yet manifesting in reports or an increase in observed activity by law enforcement in the UK. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation have reported increased calls to its StopitNow! Helpline pointing to more potential offenders seeking support to prevent themselves offending.
8. **Modern slavery:** Although more victims are being identified than ever before modern slavery remains a largely hidden crime.² There are greater vulnerabilities for potential victims during COVID19 as social distancing means there is a real risk that they are not identified by first responders and may miss opportunities to access support. For example, the closure of businesses has led to a decrease in street level intelligence reaching the police. There is also a risk that COVID19 restrictions are leading to increased labour exploitation as workers are transferred into sectors to meet increasing demand (agriculture, food production, warehousing and delivery services) which we know can be high risk in terms of exploitation.
9. **We are closely monitoring trends to understand the changing threat picture, so we can act swiftly to prevent and tackle offending and safeguard victims.** We anticipate a surge in recorded cases and referrals for support for both DA, SV and CSA victims following the end of lockdown due to increased opportunities for disclosure and an increase in those exploited as modern slaves for their labour.

Stakeholder focus

10. Stakeholders, such as the Victims Commissioner, Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and national charities such as the End Violence Against Women Coalition have been pressing for greater action from Government on these issues and have been critical of a perceived fragmented government approach.

¹ 7.5% of those aged between 18 to 74 years reported experiencing sexual abuse in childhood.

² In 2019 there were 10,627 referrals of potential victims made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) - the UK's mechanism for identifying and supporting potential victims - an increase of 52% on 2018.

already allocated from HO budgets or engage with DfE to utilise (unagreed) funding from their Shared Outcomes Fund bid to bolster and disseminate this good practice.

20. There are further areas we could encourage joint working to improve victim support, including:

- **Reviewing the approach to high risk perpetrators of domestic abuse**, considering whether within existing arrangements there are opportunities for selected agencies to proactively contact at risk households in a safe way.
- Further work with MHCLG to ensure there are **no significant accommodation barriers to removing perpetrators** issued with a Domestic Violence Protection Order from the home to protect victims.
- Exploring opportunities to **enhance Op Encompass especially around children who are identified in DA households** as well as any not currently attending school under vulnerability criteria at present.

Strengthening communications and awareness raising

21. Enhancing protection in communities: local areas are already doing innovative work to mobilise communities (e.g. supermarket workers, pharmacies, local volunteers) to identify and report the signs of exploitation and abuse. We should disseminate this good practice and consider whether further national campaigns are required. We could also work with the GLAA and sector stakeholders to develop an awareness raising campaign to help employers in high risk sectors to identify and safeguard victims of modern slavery. This would draw on the learnings of the recently concluded 'Hidden in Plain Sight' campaign by CO. And we can further promote the NSPCC helpline and communications in development to promote awareness of that resource (and in doing so promote wider community awareness of the signs of child abuse)

22. There has already been a range of activity to increase awareness of online harms which we can further promote. We can also work with OGDs to ensure the roll-out of laptops to vulnerable children is accompanied by rigorous online safety advice, and with DfE to explore opportunities to deliver lessons on online safety to children and young people through the prospective summer online curriculum.

23. Additionally, the Home Secretary's announcement of an additional £2m to support domestic abuse helplines and digital support raised awareness with victims that support is available, and saw a further increase in victims making contact, as did Victoria Derbyshire writing the national DA helpline on her hand whilst hosting the BBC news. Making announcements of commitments to support victims of hidden crimes, or publicising the available support, on programmes with high viewership by the public could disseminate the message significantly. Consideration should be given to targeting specific victim groups, such as sexual violence, as victims of different crimes have different experiences, with victims of hidden crimes not necessarily identifying as victims of crime and needing to be specifically targeted.

24. We could follow up on industry appetite to disseminate communications to parents, carers and children with pressure to serve deterrence messages to UK users suspected of online offending. Messaging has already been incorporated by search providers and is being piloted with a gaming platform,