

Lockdown could have lasting effect on survivors of sexual violence and the services that support them

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The lack of public acknowledgement of sexual violence against women and children during the first month of UK lockdown could have long-term implications not only for individuals but for the services put in place to support them, a group of UK experts have argued in a new article published by the Journal of Gender-Based Violence.

The researchers from The University of Birmingham and Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust highlight that while the [mainstream media](#) and [policy makers](#) were quick to acknowledge the increased risk of violence against women in the early stages of lockdown, these conversations hinged almost exclusively on the heightened risk of domestic abuse and crucially, missed the opportunity to highlight other forms of gender based violence like sexual violence. Experts argue that this made these types of violence invisible at a time when offenses were likely increasing, making it harder for individuals to identify the most appropriate forms of support service.

Lead-author Dr. Clare Gunby from the University of Birmingham's Institute of Applied Health Research said "As well as an increased risk of violence within domestic relationships, we know that non-intimate partners will have continued to meet during lockdown and that rape and [sexual assault](#) was happening. This increased risk, combined with the lack of conversation around different forms of gendered violence, as well as the feelings of shame that are intertwined with survivors experiences of rape, will have almost certainly led to a reduction in reporting. Sexual violence thrives in a context of impunity and so, we should not be surprised if the number of women affected during the UK lockdown is vast. Specialist services will need to be resourced to execute strategies that can draw these groups of survivors into support."

As well as survivors of sexual violence, experts argue that lockdown could also have an impact on specialist voluntary sector workers from sexual violence services. Being required to move organizations and

support online meant that lockdown also brought service provision into the living spaces of often unpaid or underpaid, predominantly women workers. While this swift transition to remote working demonstrated organization's capacity for responsiveness, the blurring of the boundaries between work and home in roles which are emotionally burdensome, undermines workers ability to relax, switch off and distance themselves from their work.

The article concludes that research into the impacts of COVID-10 on sexual [violence](#), and the strategies voluntary sector practitioners used to manage (or otherwise) reformulated service delivery, should be considered both in the immediate and the longer-term. Decisions about the allocation of funding in response to the wider COVID-19 pandemic must not forget about the needs of frontline voluntary sector workers.

Co-author Professor Caroline Bradbury-Jones from the University of Birmingham's School of Nursing said: "The ability to create a boundary between home and work when dealing with the stigma of [sexual violence](#) is vital in enabling frontline voluntary sector workers to protect their mental wellbeing. Without this there is considerable risk that this group of workers will feel the unprecedented weight that COVID has created. It's important going forward to acknowledge that some practitioners may wish to maintain a certain level of remote working, however, a better understanding of the routines used by these frontline workers to mark out the boundaries between work and home is critical in supporting this group longer term."

You can find out more about the NIHR funded PROSPER study that this article forms part of, here:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/applied-health/research/PROSPER-study.aspx>

More information: Clare Gunby et al. Sexual violence and

COVID-19: all silent on the home front, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* (2020). [DOI: 10.1332/239868020X15984631696329](https://doi.org/10.1332/239868020X15984631696329)

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