

## Reporting Domestic Abuse During Lockdown: The Use of Silent Online Reporting

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### SUMMARY

An increased incidence of domestic abuse (DA) during the Covid-19 lockdown period (Taub, 2020) has required creative interventions from police forces to address additional risks (Williamson et al., 2020).

The project aimed to understand the patterns of DA reporting during the Covid-19 lockdowns when victims were confined to their homes and may have been at greater risk of experiencing DA but less likely to have the freedom to report it safely.

This study, carried out by Sheffield Hallam University, in collaboration with the University of Liverpool, South Yorkshire Police (SYP) and West Yorkshire Police (WYP) explored the use of online reporting tools (ORT) to support victims in reporting DA safely and silently during the Covid-19 lockdown period. This ORT research compared reporting characteristics of victims and incidents pre-, during and post-lockdown logged with SYP and WYP.

### KEY FINDINGS

1. There was a reduction in historic reporting during the Covid-19 lockdown period, and less in person reporting, but then reporting spiked in December 2020.
2. There was a steady increase in ORT use over the lockdown periods, with more use by vulnerable victims and those with children, likely owing to greater accessibility and convenience of this reporting method.
3. SYP received more ORT reports, which may reflect that it had been in use for longer and victims were more of how to use it.
4. ORT is being used to report criminal incidents, although more of these reflect a lower level of seriousness and have lower rates of prosecutions.

### INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic brought into focus domestic abuse (DA) experienced within the home. Restrictions ensured DA victims were easily located and potentially imprisoned at home with their abuser (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). A 25% rise in calls to DA helplines during Covid-19 lockdowns confirmed these fears (Morgan, 2020), prompting the Government to increase funding for DA services (Grierson, 2020). However, increased use of DA services did not materialise, suggesting victims were less able, or less free, to engage with services (Donagh, 2020). With perpetrators perpetually present, victims faced greater difficulties in reporting DA prompting greater third-party reporting (Ivandic et al., 2020), particularly from children (Moore et al, 2022).

To support DA reporting, some police forces developed Online Reporting Tools (ORT), a means of 'silent' reporting, where victims can text instead of using speech, enabling reporting without perpetrator knowledge. Further, ORT is convenient and accessible, and can be used any time of day. South Yorkshire Police (SYP) developed their ORT prior to the Covid-19 lockdowns and was followed by West Yorkshire Police (WYP) during the lockdown periods. This research analyses report data to explore the patterns of reporting to these forces over the Covid-19 period to determine the characteristics of reporting and incidents, and the differences in ORT use.

## METHOD

SYP and WYP retrieved DA records from pre-, during, and post-Covid-19 lockdown periods, dating from May 9<sup>th</sup> to Dec 14<sup>th</sup> (see Fig 1). A code-book was developed to consistently code most fields in the data-sets. Some fields could not be reconciled, and where appropriate these are reported separately.

### Limitations

This dataset was large enough to allow reliable comparisons, however some yes/no fields had missing data for example, 'was a child present', may be left empty by officers rather than stating 'no', therefore caution should be used when interpreting these findings.

## FINDINGS

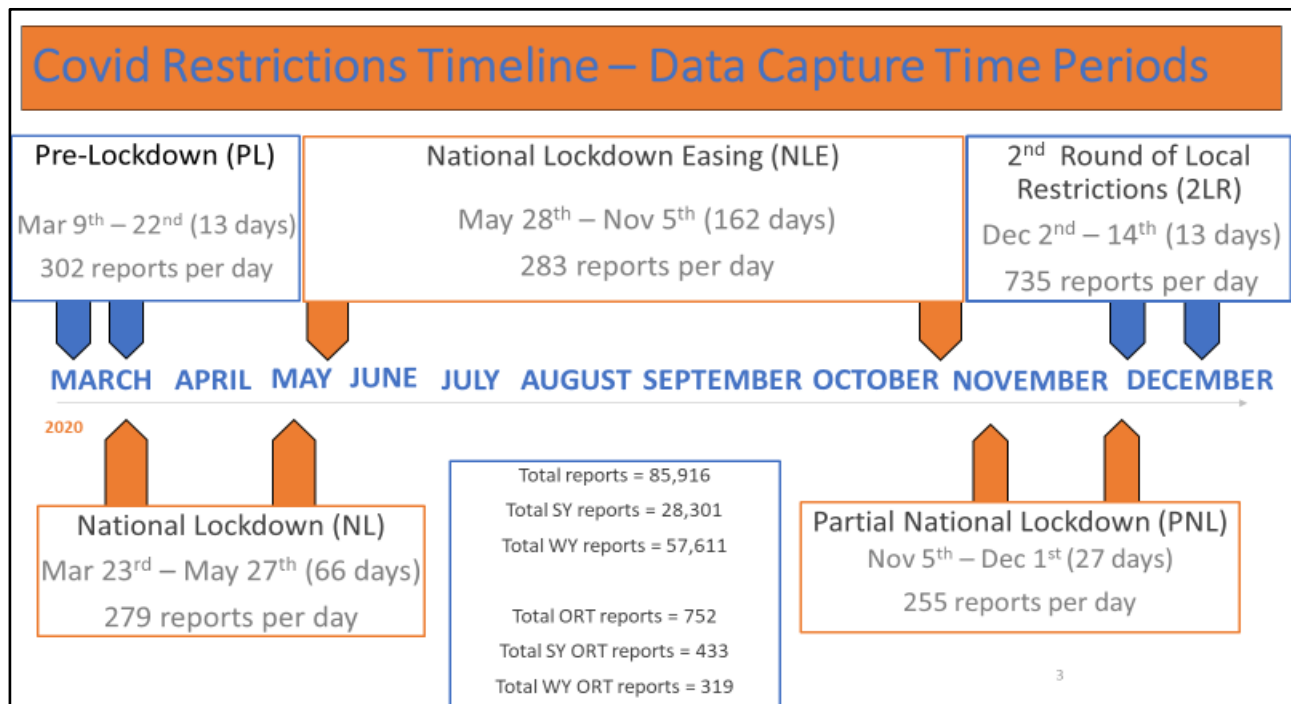


Fig 1 Covid 19 lockdown period dates, and rates per day of DA reporting

## Overall DA reporting patterns

### Timing of reporting

The pattern of reporting DA incidents across lockdown periods and time of day were similar for both forces, with most reporting in December 2020, during the second set of local Covid restrictions (2LR), with most reports being between 3pm and midnight, and within 2 days of the incident. Most reports were from emergency calls (47%) and non-emergency calls (26%) and most were recorded as 'crimes' (70%) with a standard DARA rating (44% - Medium 35%, High 9%).

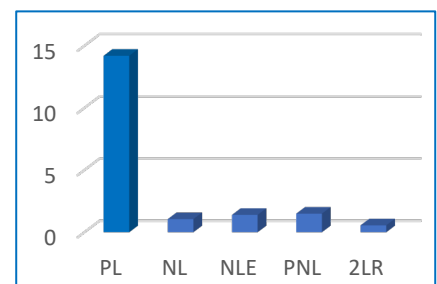


Fig 2 Days between incident & report by Lockdown

### Differences by reporting type

The number of days between the incident and it being reported was least when reported by phone (1.4 days), and longest when reported in person (5.4 days), as might be expected during lockdown. However, this difference may not solely be related to restrictions to in person during lockdown, as longer delays were observed pre-lockdown (14.2 days; See Fig 2). It is likely the greater delays relate to historic cases, less urgent cases, not being reported during the lockdown periods.

### DA reporting differences between Forces

WYP received over 7 times more reports than SYP during the 2LR period. SYP received a greater proportion of reports via online/digital means (5%) than WYP (3%), with 58% of SYP's and 42% of WYP's online reporting being via the ORT. ORT reports were made on average within 4 days, whereas for WYP it was within 1.5 days. Victims and alleged perpetrators mean age in SY was greater (Victims 38yrs; alleged perpetrators 39yrs) than in WY (Victim 34yrs; alleged perpetrators 35yrs).

### Use of the ORT

ORT was used in just 1% of reports (752 reports; SYP 1.5% & WYP 0.7%) (see Fig 3). ORT daily averages were lowest in the PL period (1.3), and highest in the 2LR period (6.6). This shows a steady increase from Mar - Dec which may reflect greater awareness of ORTs rather than greater need, as it would be expected that need would be greater during the early lockdown periods. Slightly more ORT reports were classified as 'crimes' than 'non-crimes' (ORT 75%, Non-ORT 71%), showing that the ORT is used to report criminal incidents, but they are more likely reported between 6am and 3pm (in contrast to reporting times using other means), suggesting that ORT users may have difficulty reporting at other times. Further, more ORT reports were from victims who did not live with the perpetrator (ORT 10.2%, Non-ORT 25%), or who were heterosexual ex-partners (ex-partner ORT 69%, Non-ORT 41%: Current partner ORT 11%, Non-ORT 29%), suggesting that victims wait for a more appropriate time and means to report.

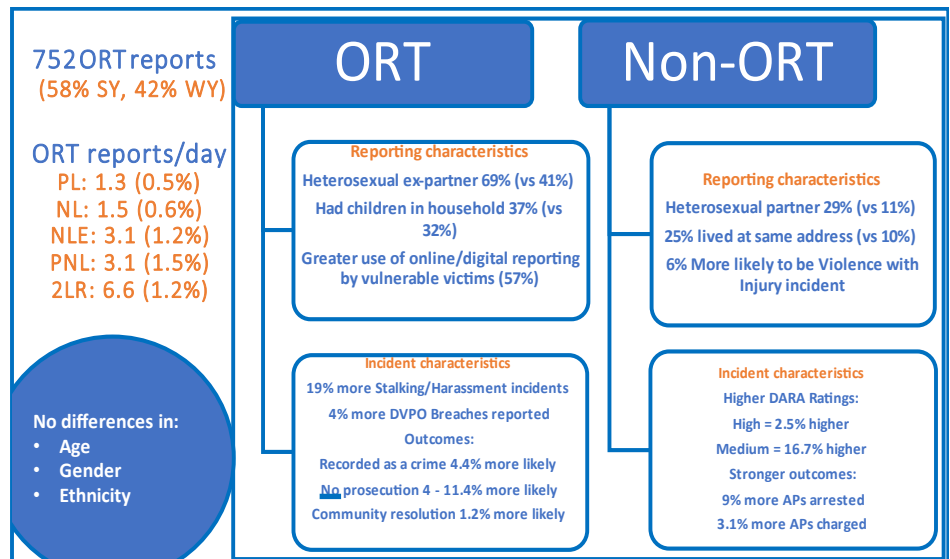


Fig 3 Key findings from ORT/Non-ORT analysis

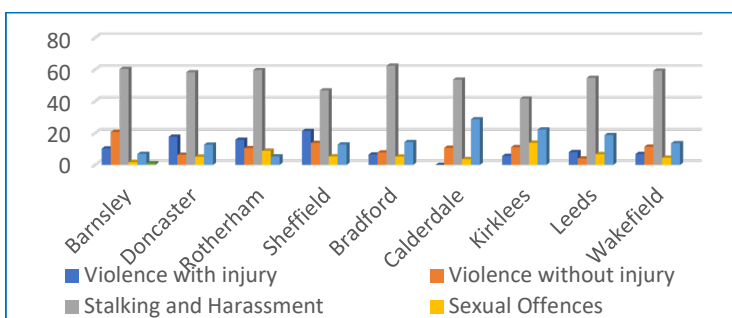


Fig 4 ORT reports by Area and Incident Type

### Area differences

ORT use in SY was greater in Sheffield (30%) and Doncaster (28%). In WY Leeds recorded greater use (25%). Regional areas differed in ORT reporting, with SY areas using the ORT more for Violence with Injury incidents, and the ORT in WY used more for Theft or Damage incidents (see Fig 4). This may reflect ORT longevity or how they are advertised in each force area.

### Incident type

Fewer ORT reports were rated as High or Medium than Non-ORT (see Fig 3), possibly because more ORT incidents were Stalking and Harassment (42%; Non-ORT 22%) and Breach of DVPO (19%; Non-ORT 15%), and only 9% of ORT reports were for Violence with Injury, compared with 15% for Non-ORT reports. Proportionally, fewer ORT reports led to arrests (ORT 21.5%, Non-ORT 30.5%) or charges (ORT 2.1%, Non-ORT 5.2%), with fewer prosecutions (regardless of whether supported by the victim -Prosecution supported: ORT 34%, Non-ORT 22%; Prosecution not supported: ORT 42%, Non-ORT 38%), or community resolutions (ORT 5.2%, Non-ORT 4%; See Fig 3).

### *Vulnerability*

Data on vulnerability was available from SYP (all vulnerable victims results relate only to SYP). 42% of SYP victims were vulnerable, with 25% classed as vulnerable because of their DA history. Children were at home in 38% of reports, however, it is unknown if children witnessed the incident. Vulnerable victims used an online/digital reporting method (57%) more than non-vulnerable victims (43%), with 73% of these reports being generated by email, and 25% by ORT. Of those reporting Violence with Injury by email and ORT, 67% and 57% respectively were vulnerable, compared with only 48% of those reporting by emergency call. This suggests that ORT and other digital methods provide a valid means of reporting for those in greatest need and who may lack access to other means.

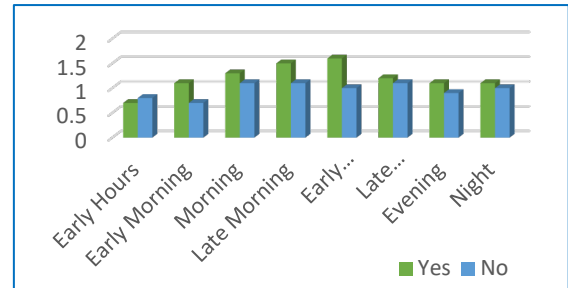


Fig 5 ORT reports by Time of Day & Child in Home

Having a child at home related to the reporting method with greater phone call (33%) and online/digital use (31%) than in person (21%). With children at home victims used ORTs slightly more (ORT 37%, Non-ORT 32%), particularly female victims (41%; males 24%). Further, with children, ORT report times differed, with greater ORT use earlier in the day (see Fig 5) showing that having children present may be a barrier to reporting using other methods.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

As in person reports reduced during lockdowns, ORT was used more often to report criminal, prosecutable incidents, particularly in SY who had been using an ORT for longer. Research would be useful to explore how victims become aware they can report using ORT, and their user experience.

Police and court action for ORT reported incidents was lower than those reported by other means, perhaps because ORT incidents were slightly less serious in nature. Further research should be undertaken to determine any differences in outcomes as a result of reporting method.

ORT reports happened more often when victims and perpetrators did not co-habit, suggesting victims may not need to use immediate reporting means (e.g., phone calls) to make the perpetrator leave. Ivandic et al., (2020) report declines in ex-partner DA reporting in London during lockdown, therefore ORTs may have supported their reporting in SY and WY during this period.

It is clear ORTs provide an accessible means for victims with vulnerabilities and children to report, and therefore has likely provided more accessible options these victims, or possibly for their children to report third party. As reporting is silent, this may be of benefit as children, or others in the home are unable to overhear reports, and thus ORT reports may provide reporting privacy for those in shared domestic situations. Research is needed to understand the barriers to reporting experienced by vulnerable victims. Further, police forces should consider how they are promoting ORTs so that those less able to report in person are aware of how to use it.

The lockdown period influenced the number of historic incidents reported, which should be noted by police forces post-lockdown to encourage victims to re-consider reporting these incidents. It is unclear what factors are behind the later spike in reporting in December 2020. It is possible this is due to a combination of the festive season and a long time of moving through lockdown restrictions where tensions would have been high, but it was not because of a return to reporting historic incidents.

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## APPENDIX

### Additional Findings

#### *Incident types*

The most common incidents were Breach of Peace (17%), Assault without Injury (15%), and Assault with Injury (12%), with arrests recorded in 30% of incidents.

Most victims (mean age 37yrs) were female (74%) and white (86%), with the majority of alleged perpetrators (mean age 35yrs) being male (78%) and white (77%).

Most alleged perpetrators were ex-partners (42%) or current partners (29%) not living with the victim.

#### *ORT Demographic differences*

ORT perpetrators were older (37.5yrs) than Non-ORT perpetrators (35.4 yrs).