



Responding to domestic abuse during COVID-19

The Police response with DCC Louisa Rolfe

Podcast transcript

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US – Unknown Speaker

JS – Jo Silver

LR – Louisa Rolfe

Start of audio at 00.07

US

We know that the current situation with COVID-19, and the measures being taken to prevent the spread, will be particularly difficult for people currently living with abuse. In this podcast, Jo Silver speaks to Deputy Chief Constable Louisa Rolfe of West Midlands Police about how police are responding to domestic abuse during this crisis.

DCC Rolfe led the UK Police response to HMIC's report 'Everyone's Business', which focussed on improving support for domestic abuse victims and survivors. She is also the National Police Chiefs Council lead for domestic abuse.

Please note this podcast was recorded remotely, as we are following government advice and working from home. We apologise for any breaks in the recording, and reduced sound quality.

JS

Hi, Louisa. Thank you *very* much for spending some time with us today, and we're *really* grateful because we know that there are lots of victims around the country that are thinking about how it impacts on the Police and their ability to respond to those people that are, hopefully, accessing support from police. So, what I'd like to do is just talk about, firstly, your role within the Police, and then just tell us a little bit about what your challenges are, through this coronavirus period that we're staring in the face of, really.

LR

Ok. Thanks, Jo. So... so, my role is the National Police Lead for Domestic Abuse. So, my day job is to work as the Deputy Chief Constable in West Midlands Police. In terms of Covid-19, we're working really hard to ensure that every force is able to prioritise domestic abuse, that we're really clear when somebody calls us and needs the Police – for emergency calls – we'll be doing everything we can to

preserve our response to victims who are in danger and need us quickly. For non-urgent calls, at the moment we're still responding as we always have... some officers ... you know... if somebody calls and tells us they're in isolation because a family member is affected by the coronavirus then we will be sending officers with the appropriate kit and equipment, but we *will* be responding to domestic abuse as usual. Now, of course, if we become more stretched and we have a greater role in responding, then we might need to deal with some victims differently, but we'll always be assessing the risk when they call; so it's really important if people are frightened that they *tell* us they're frightened – they *tell* us what they're frightened of – and they describe the risk that they're facing to us really clearly, so that we can respond.

Now, if they find they're not in a position to make that call, I think they should look online – not only for the support that brilliant charities like yours can provide – but also, we have web-chat services, we have online reporting, and forces will be looking out for calls from victims of domestic abuse, but also looking for that online contact. And people can make silent 999 calls as well, but guidance is available online, and if you're unable to talk, that you can press three nines, stay quiet, cough, and then press 55, and police... BT will put the call through to the Police, and the Police will know what to do.

JS

That sounds really reassuring, and obviously it's... it's early days, and the Police have got a *huge* job to be contending with, but understanding that domestic abuse is a priority, and I think I just would like to urge people who are listening to this; sometimes, as a victim of abuse, you are used to minimising your situation; I would just say, really, a big 'please' that now is not the time to minimise your situation. If you need the Police, you need to be very clear about what's going on for you, so that they can risk assess on the facts that you are dealing with, rather than you trying to underplay it, just because that's how sometimes victims are responding – and used to responding – to keeping themselves safe. So, just a big 'please' that you share with the Police when you need them, all the information that you can, so they can assess the situation you're in. I suppose – early days – but I know that the... erm... coronavirus, or COVID-19, is starting to have an impact on ... you know... suspects or... abusive perpetrators' behaviour with the Police. We're having some information around where the family are divided, and... erm... one partner's got the children, and they're not... they're saying that the children can't go back home because of the COVID-19 and they're isolating; this is leaving victims in really difficult positions, where they can't access their children and ... you know... there is no magic wand to those situations, but it's just... to share with you the kind of information that's coming through our surveys that we've done with victims, and also our communications with domestic abuse services, that offenders – suspects – are using this as a way to control in their relationships; I just wondered if you'd seen any of that through the Police involvement?

LR

So, we are monitoring with forces across the UK, the volume of calls coming in about domestic abuse and the nature of those calls, and we have already noticed that... whilst, actually, calls have not gone up significantly yet – although I think they might, as self-isolation and the lockdown continues – but whilst they haven't gone up so far, we have noticed some trends of... more calls about difficult challenges around child access, and particularly where there is shared custody, and also calls about financial pressures. So, we're doing what we can to give victims the right support.

I think the government guidance is now really clear, that children under 18 – where they live across 2 households – can see both sets of parents. Nothing in the guidance ... you know... unless people are following the rules because somebody in the household *has* coronavirus, and needs to self-isolate, and I think that guidance from Public Health England is really clear as well, that there is no reason why children under 18 shouldn't either return to a parent or visit a parent.

Now, if in those circumstances victims believe that their partner – abusive partner – is controlling or ... you know... demonstrating coercive behaviour and exploiting the situation, then they need to let us know. Report that kind of behaviour to police – we don't want perpetrators to exploit the circumstances. We have had one or two cases in my own force – I spoke to investigators the other day – we've had one or two offenders say 'You can't arrest me because I've got Covid-19' – we *can*. We have the right equipment, we have custody units dedicated to deal with offenders who may be infected, and we've got the right healthcare support.

JS

Thank you. That is also reassuring, because it is just really good to get the facts out there, because I'm sure, in these relationships, these myths are being... erm... shared quite widely that ... you know...

'there's no point phoning the Police' – well, there *absolutely is* a point phoning the Police, and they are still coming when you call them on 999, and they *have* got the equipment to deal with – and arrest, if needed – perpetrators of domestic abuse. I think that's really important to keep saying out loud.

I'm also thinking about the silent 999 calls, and... thinking about... the... *not* urgent, so where there's no crisis that you'd dial 999 for, but you know that you're living in a very abusive household, and you might not see it as an emergency, and might have an hour while your partner has gone shopping, or for a run, or to the chemist for whatever reason; I wonder how we can manage that with a conversation with your non-critical kind of call handlers, so there's safe time to ring and stuff... is there any opportunity for victims to have that conversation?

LR

There is. I mean, we need to be aware that, realistically, those teams might find the pressure has increased, but at the moment we're still dealing with 101 calls. There's been lots of advice on our website; there are links to things like the National Domestic Abuse Helpline...

JS

Yeah.

LR

...and I think if victims don't feel that they're in immediate danger, but they might want help and advice, I'd say 'Have a look at the helpline numbers, the charity websites – but also, if you need to call the Police because you think you're a victim of crime and we can help you, then please, *please* get in touch'. If you don't have an opportunity to call, look on police websites – most forces have an ability to get in touch via webchat or... or reporting things online, as well.

JS

Oh, excellent. And that webchat would be another route, wouldn't it, to manage that communication in a safer way than... than phoning the Police, obviously – that's really good advice.

So, what happens with the... kind of... infrastructure around those calls? So, we know that the Police are leading the way, really, with multi-agency work, responding to those at most high harm and risk of domestic abuse; are those infrastructures going to be... and processes, going to be impacted whilst ... you know... we are all aware that the Police have got a lot to manage at this time; I was just wondering about multi-agency conferences, for instance, and how *they're* being impacted?

LR

So, I know that we're already working with partners, so things like multi-agency risk assessment conferences – the MARAC meetings – that are regularly held by forces, we are already seeing an impact ... you know... in our *own* workforce – a number of police officers are self-isolating – and because they're following the guidance...

JS

Yeah.

LR

... because of family member with symptoms, or symptoms themselves, and that's affecting our ability to deal with the day-to-day demand. But, at the moment, the demand that's coming into the Police is down a little bit, as well, so actually, at the moment, we're managing those things. We're working with partners in other agencies like Social Care teams, Children's Services, to ensure that we can maintain a way of managing those multi-agency risk assessment conferences, and also keeping in touch with charities, now we'll do everything we can to remain that service. I know this is something that partners are thinking about as well. So, the Department for International Development looked at the impact of violence against women and girls in both China and Italy, and... it sort of gathered some really useful advice about the impact...

JS

Yeah.

LR

...and what they might be, and I've shared that with every police force Lead, but I've also shared it through the *national* police structure for managing COVID-19, to ensure that ... you know... police can

be working with other agencies, like Local Authorities, in managing the response to COVID-19. So, I've ensured it's also gone out through those channels. So, for example, Local Authority Leads can think about how they sustain and manage refuge services and victim support services.

JS

Thank you, Louisa. And I suppose that links quite nicely to 'What can we do?' So, 'we' being the people that come to work to support victims of domestic abuse, and challenge perpetrators' behaviour, and support them and their whole family, and their... eight children... I mean, from a police perspective, what can the sector do to... erm... support the Police, at this... kind of unprecedented time?

LR

So, I think... if things get more challenging for us, we might be leaning on you a little bit more, with that advice and guidance for victims. For those if they can't get through on 101, or they're finding they're having to wait for police, what you *can* do is if you... if you come across cases where you think people are in significant danger, then please chase us up, and tell us we've missed something, because I think we'd really value your support with that. But for victims who are not in immediate danger, or not facing ... you know... abuse and it... and if you can give people advice and support, and... and ... you know... make sure that it's not only police but other agencies are well aware of those cases, where they can support people, where victims or... where perpetrators need to be arrested, and ... you know... we're working with other people like the CPS and the Court Services to look at how we manage things like – and sustain things like – processing and prosecution of perpetrators – how we manage things like bail – because obviously if people are isolating, you restrict your opportunities for them to move to other addresses, but that... but we will be using bail, and we're just thinking about how we give guidance to forces to do it effectively and safely, at the moment.

JS

Thank you, very much. And that kind of links to our... erm... role, anyway, and all of the Chief Execs from the specialist services that we are talking to thinking about how we can manage the situation and, if you like, try and avoid using the Police for those non-critical cases, and also thinking about the roles of friends and family. So, where we are... thinking about a scenario where a family live together through this, we've been urging victims to be brave and disclose that there might be trouble in their house, and giving neighbours permission to phone the Police on their behalf. And also thinking about the links with their family, so agreeing some codewords with their nearest and dearest that they can contact, that can also do that on their behalf, so trying to really prioritise ... you know... when a crisis, when you need the Police to come to the house, and when you can just ... you know... look for support and advice elsewhere, and that's why we've put the safety plan together for the victims in those situations – and their children. So, hopefully, that will be really useful.

And I was just... wanted to... erm... go back to ... you know... police forces and... how *you're* managing, because, as an ex-police officer myself, I can't imagine how you would do that normal day job which is ... you know... a test at the best... really challenging work – how that might feel now. I'm just wondering how your police officers in your force are... kind of feeling about the task at hand?

LR

So, I think it's tough, but I'm really proud of them because I think... most people join the Police Service because they want to help people when they're in need – they want to be there when things are tough – and this, I think, is the real test for policing – but I'm really, really proud of how people are responding to it, and how ... you know... how many officers who might be self-isolating at the moment, but are calling us and saying 'How soon can I get back, to help?' So, we're seeing a really sort of positive approach from our officers and staff. And thankfully, at the moment, I think the public are really helping because we're getting less calls about (*inaudible – dog barking – 16.21*) so we really can focus on important things like supporting the vulnerable, people with domestic abuse challenges, so it ... you know... it's tough, but actually I'm proud of what we're doing, and I'm really proud of the officers and staff out there working, and a big part of what they want to do is support the NHS as well.

JS

Thank you, Louisa. And, I mean, whoever's listening to this, what I will... kind of what I'm going to say is just a big... a big thanks to you and your colleagues for... yeah, this is hard, and brave stuff that we're asking of people, and if we didn't have police officers that were all of those things and more, we'd be in a really bad place. But just a big thank you, really, from victims who will rely on you throughout the coronavirus and after, and so... yeah, I'd just like to end there, really. Thank you very much.

LR

Thank you. And I'm so impressed by how much the sector has stepped up; the business continuity approaches you've got are really impressive. So, really, really, glad for all the work you do – I'm really grateful. Thank you.

End of audio at 17.36