

Home Affairs Select Committee: Home Office Preparedness for COVID-19 (21 April 2020)

Introduction The Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA) has over 160 member organisations working across the criminal justice system including prevention, policing, prisons, probation and victim services. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important inquiry.

- **The effectiveness of Home Office communications to its partners, responders and the wider public about its preparations:**

Equitable access to information. People with limited proficiency in English are at risk of miscommunication and the lack of translated public health information relating to covid19 had led to confusion about what is and is not permitted. We understand from our members that, at least in some areas, the task of translating outreach materials has fallen on small charities who have had to work with translating agencies to ensure important announcements and guidance are reaching those with a limited English. The Home Office should work with PCCs, local grassroots and community-led organisations to ensure that covid19 related information, including guidance around 'reasonable excuses' for leaving home, is translated in a wide range of languages. Consideration should also be given to sharing information with radio stations that broadcast in other languages to share COVID-19 guidance.

Engagement with children and young adults. Hundreds of thousands of children and young adults are being asked to stay home with uncertainty as to when we may return to normalcy, which can be both overwhelming and worrying. In attempt to ensure children and young adults abide by lockdown measures, some forces have threatened to contact social services with a view that "parents allowing children to break lockdown rules could be deemed neglectful"ⁱ. Senior officers have also called for wider police powers including fining the parents of those who are not complying with lockdown measure.ⁱⁱ Many families will face severe financial strain due to the economic impact of the crisis and authorising such powers would add additional burden on those who are already experiencing poverty. Instead the focus should be on building partnerships with, and providing emergency funding to grassroots community-led organisations and youth services, to produce targeted information, activities and support for children and young adults. For example, the charity Peer Power have worked with NHS England to develop a short filmⁱⁱⁱ on COVID-19 by young people for young people impacted by the criminal justice system.

Police powers and community scrutiny. There is still considerable confusion following guidance published by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and the College of Policing, regarding what constitutes as a reasonable excuse to leave the place where you live. The document also states that the list is not exhaustive, and officers are required to use their own discretion and judgement in deciding what is and is not reasonable. While the document was produced to support officers in enforcing lockdown restrictions and social distancing, it is concerning that the guidance was disseminated before the Easter bank Holiday weekend, yet there have been reports of the powers being misapplied on both adults^{iv} and children^v after the guidance was issued indicating the need to communicate guidance more effectively.

The collection of data under the emergency police powers will be vital in monitoring and ensuring that they are not being disproportionately applied against some populations, in particular, people of colour, children and those living in areas of deprivation who may be living in high-density, overcrowded and possibly chaotic or unsafe homes. Despite the NPCC sharing provisional data^{vi} from police forces in England and Wales on the number of fines issued, there is still a lack of clarity as to how police powers granted under Schedule 21 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 are being recorded, collected and most importantly, analysed and shared with community scrutiny groups (inc. Independent Advisory Groups and stop and search monitoring groups) and with the public. We would like to see this data collected in a uniform way and collated centrally, so the Home Office can regularly analyse if the powers are being deployed with parity across communities and if not, follow the principle of 'explain or reform'.

- **What trade-offs will have to be made by police if a significant number of officers are unable to work at any given time, and the potential impact of those decisions:**

It has been reported that in some forces up to one in five staff are off sick or self-isolating due to the virus.^{vii} The proportion of officers unable to work requires redeployment of officers in specific roles including Victim Liaison Officers, who are vital in supporting victims of crime and providing them with up-to-date information regarding decisions about their case. This service is imperative to a victim healing process and understanding the journey of person who committed the offence through the period of imprisonment to their supervision in the community. Court cases may be delayed and cause further anxiety and concern. It is vital victims are informed about progress with their case and receive support whether from Victim Liaison Officers or charities offering victim support services.

There has been an increase in the number of people of Asian origin being subjected to racist abuse since the outbreak of COVID-19.^{viii} Police forces have received reports of physical and verbal abuse against members of the Asian community. The level of abuse on social media platforms is even more evident. With a reduction in the number of working officers and an increased need to ensure such crime is adequately addressed, with the Home Office will need to ensure hate crime is being monitored and responded to both on and offline. Consideration should be given to restorative justice being used as an out of court disposal to help address the harms caused by hate crime^{ix}.

- **Preparedness of responders and service providers to address the needs of victims during the pandemic; and the effectiveness of Government advice, co-ordination and support for responders and service providers:**

Support for victims of domestic abuse and child abuse. Families are under new pressures due to daily life being restricted and the measures will have a significant bearing on those living in high-stress home environments. In particular, lockdown restrictions disrupt support systems and school closures limit the number of people children come into contact with making signs of abuse more challenging to identify. Confinement is likely to exacerbate risks for people who experience domestic abuse. Police must be mindful that children and young adults, as well as adults, found outside of their homes during the emergency measures may themselves be escaping a dangerous and traumatic home environment. Despite exemptions applying to those fleeing domestic violence in seek of refuge, at least 16 suspected domestic abuse killings^x have been identified in the UK since the lockdown came into effect.

To prevent the further loss of life, an integrated approach is urgently needed between police, social services, youth work services and domestic violence charities to ensure that all those at risk are safeguarded and have safe accommodation. We welcome the Chancellor's announcement for domestic violence charities to receive emergency funding for national helplines, but more is needed in particular to support small, grassroots organisations working with specific cohorts of victims impacted by domestic violence, for example children, BAME and LGBT people. Police should also work with local restorative practitioners who have the expertise to deliver remote conflict resolution and mediation for families.

Specialist services for women in the criminal justice system. A disproportionate number of women and girls in prison have experienced violence and abuse. Women with multiple and complex disadvantages are at an increased risk as this time due to the lack of vital face to face services, being isolated at home or coerced into other unsafe environments where they are at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. Post-release support is vital to prevent further victimisation. However many specialist services are struggling to support women after release from prison during the crisis, due to lack of information about planned releases. For example one service was told about a woman being released with no fixed abode less than 24 hours before release.

Women's Centres and other specialist services have had to adapt to provide support via phone and online, as well as ensuring their clients have access to mobiles and technology in order to receive that remote support. These virtual services enable women to be connected with staff from local services, access emergency supplies and participate in virtual group/peer support. However, due to inadequate funding, charities are being forced to secure resources from a range of sources in order to survive the crisis and provide the support that women and their families. This is putting a great financial burden on these charities and Women's Centres, which needs to be resolved to ensure they cannot only provide services to women now, but in the future as the current situation is risking their financial sustainability.

-
- ⁱ Express & Star. (2020) Parents whose children break lockdown rules given social services warning.
- ⁱⁱ Townsend, M. (2020) [Checkpoints, fines and online shaming: police struggle to enforce new rules](#), *The Guardian*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Peer Power. (2020) [Peer power launch just health film and report](#).
- ^{iv} Bowcott, O. (2020) [Man wrongly convicted under coronavirus law, Met police admit](#), *The Guardian*.
- ^v Dearden, L. (2020) [Police wrongly fining children under coronavirus law](#), *The Independent*.
- ^{vi} National Police Chiefs Council. (2020) [Police chiefs: keep reporting crime to us during the coronavirus outbreak – we are still here for you](#).
- ^{vii} Hymas, C. (2020) [Police appeal for coronavirus tests for officers as disease absence rates rise](#), *The Telegraph*.
- ^{viii} Campbell, L. (2020) [Chinese in UK report 'shocking' levels of racism after coronavirus outbreak](#), *The Guardian*.
- ^{ix} <https://why-me.org/campaigns/hate-crime-restorative-justice/>
- ^x Grierson, J. (2020) [Domestic abuse killings 'more than double' amid covid-19 lockdown](#), *The Guardian*.