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Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence law enforcement operations and training needs

EDUCATE, INNOVATE, MOTIVATE

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Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence law enforcement operations and training needs

CEPOL, the EU agency for Law Enforcement Training, completed an analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on crime patterns, operations and training needs in the area of domestic violence. Domestic violence is typically a local type of crime, rarely requiring international cooperation to tackle it, however its widespread nature and the gaps in knowledge skills and competencies of law enforcement in this topic call for EU-level intervention in terms of training. Outcomes of this analysis will feed to newly developed learning products that aim at enhancing the knowledge, skills and competencies of law enforcement officials across Europe as a response to the pandemic.

Summary

Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence varies across Member States. The general trend shows that number of criminal cases increased during the lockdown but number of reports about cases decreased. In those countries where criminal cases also declined, they got to the same level as in last year after the confinement, meaning high latency rate of domestic violence cases.

The lockdown altered investigations in 44% of responding institutions: officials had less capacities, it was more difficult to get into contact with perpetrators, victims and witnesses. Investigations got slower, leaving criminals unpunished for a longer time than normal.

Training needs related to COVID-19 include safety measures to be applied when contacting people, be it an entry to a house, an interrogation, or an interview; alternative ways of getting into contact with and help victims applying new technologies; conducting interviews, interrogations via digital tools; and psychological impact of quarantine.

It has to be noted that, when reporting about the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence, many respondents indicated general, not lockdown-related trends in investigations and training needs. This shows that there is high need for training of law enforcement officials independently of COVID-19. General training of law enforcement in this area falls under national competency; however, the survey demonstrates that EU-level intervention would be appreciated to bridge the gap between the required level of training and the level provided by national training institutions.

Background

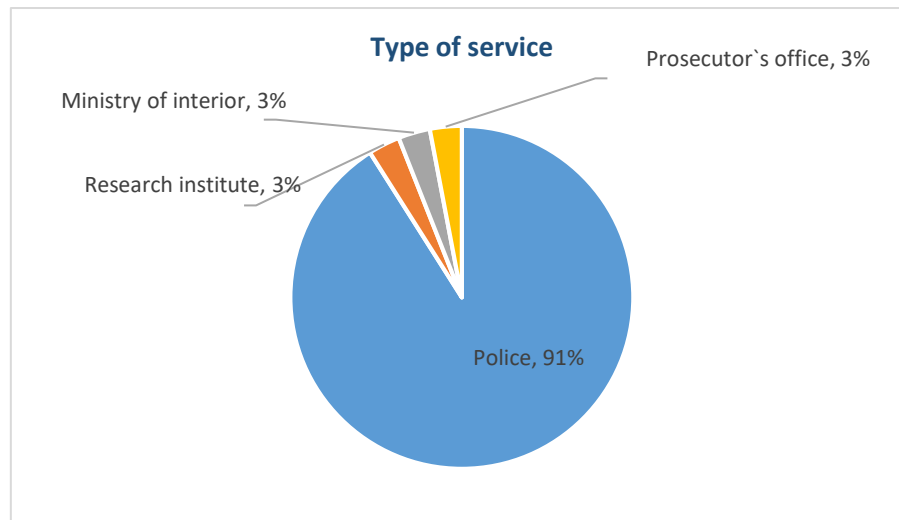
This analysis is a follow-up to a training needs analysis that addressed the impact of COVID-19 on crime patterns, operations and training needs of law enforcement in relation to serious and organised crime priorities¹. In the previous survey, published by CEPOL in July 2020, respondents indicated that cases of domestic violence have substantially increased as a consequence of the pandemic. To get better insight to the specifics of these cases and to how law enforcement officials should be prepared to addressing them, CEPOL launched a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence. Outcomes of this analysis will be used to develop training products on domestic violence for law enforcement officials across Europe.

The analysis gathered responses through CEPOL National Units (CNUs), members of the IMPRODOVA² project, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) between 29th June and 14th July 2020.

¹ CEPOL completed the analysis in cooperation with the European Council and the EMPACT structure. The analysis is available here: https://www.cepola.europa.eu/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20TNA_FINAL_with%20cover_EMPACT.pdf.

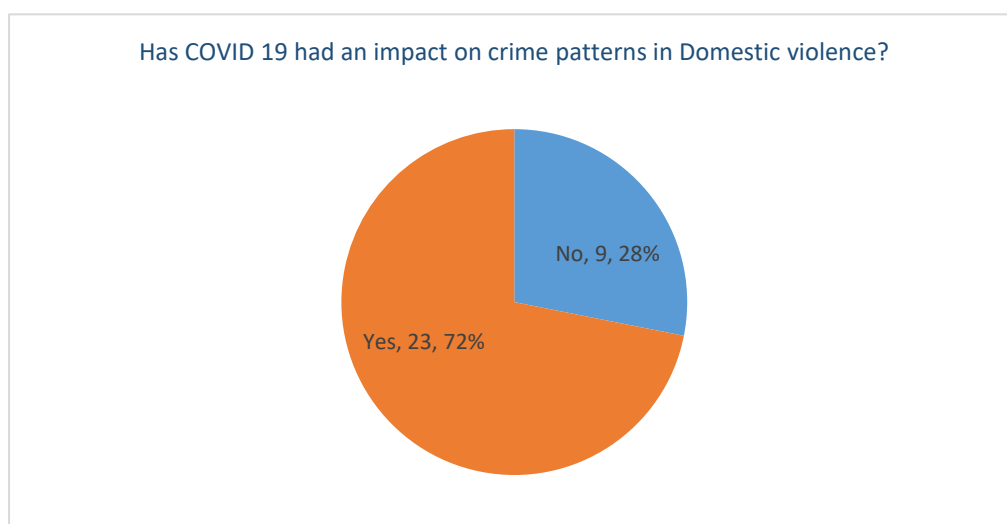
² IMPRODOVA, a research and innovation project funded by the European Union involves a group of experienced researchers and practitioners from eight countries, Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia, and UK (Scotland), is designed to provide solutions for an integrated response to High

This report summarises 32 responses submitted from 21 Member States, meaning that 81% of EU Member States provided input to the survey.³ 91% of respondents represent police, the remaining three responses were submitted by a ministry of interior, prosecution office and research institute.



Impact on crime patterns

The availability of reliable statistics varies from country to country, but the trend shows that COVID-19 had an impact on crime patterns in domestic violence in most (72%) of responding Member States. Outcomes of the survey demonstrate a complex, sometimes contradictory, picture: while in some countries number of domestic violence cases increased, in others there was a drop of criminal cases during the pandemic. In those countries where domestic violence cases, number of victims in hospitals and the level of risk assessed showed a decrease during lockdown, number of cases increased to the same level as in 2019 by the end of the confinement. This might indicate that even in those countries



Impact Domestic Violence, based on comprehensive empirical research of how police and other frontline responders (e.g. medical and social work professionals) respond to domestic violence in European countries. More information: <https://www.improdova.eu/>.

³ Responding Member States: AT, BG, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, IT, LV, LT, LU, PL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES, SE; Non-responding MS: BE, HU, IE, MT, NL.

where criminal statistics about domestic violence cases showed a favourable picture during the pandemic, the latency of this crime was higher than before.

Staying home, accompanied by the deterioration of the material situation, had a negative impact on mental and emotional state of people and boosted the use of drugs, alcohol and aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, victims had to stay at the same place where the perpetrator, which increased the risk of committing domestic violence and lowered the possibility of seeking for help and reporting cases.

COVID-19 did not have an impact on crime patterns in Croatia, Cyprus, Luxemburg, Poland and Romania. In the remaining 76% of responding Member States, we can detect contradictory trends even in the same country, depending on the responding institution. Those respondents who reported about increased number of domestic violence cases and interventions mainly referred to the rise of gender-based violence (Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Sweden), child abuse (Finland, Germany, Sweden) and misuse and intentional serious bodily harm and injuries (Latvia, Slovakia). Moreover, violence against both ancestors and descendants, rape, conjugal violence, cases of manslaughter, causing health damage, beating and threats increased during the pandemic (Estonia, France, Italy). Respondents reported about more cases of online violence (Portugal) and sexual exploitation of children online (Slovenia, Sweden) as well as cybercrime and cyber fraud (Czech Republic, Estonia, Portugal).

In other countries, such as Portugal, France and Slovakia, criminal cases decreased during the confinement, showing an increase to the usual number of cases by June. Interestingly, the pattern of decreased criminal activities is very similar to the one of increased. Estonia, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain reported about lower number of domestic violence cases while gender-based violence dropped in Italy, Portugal and Spain. Fewer cases were reported on rape and sexual abuse in France. Number of intentional serious injuries with fatal consequences decreased in Slovenia, so did violence between couples and ex-couples in Portugal and feminicide in France. Mistreatment against family members and cohabitants, persecutory acts and sexual violence decreased in Italy and so did face-to-face sexual crimes against children and adolescents in Portugal. Battering a close person and a person entrusted into one's care decreased in Slovakia. Not related to domestic violence, but some respondents reported about less drug-related crimes, spectator violence, theft, domestic and industry burglary, robbery as well as pub fights.

Respondents indicated new crime patterns related to domestic violence. In Portugal and Spain there was an increase in criminal behaviours associated with gender-based violence through new technologies and social media. Domestic violence against men emerged as a new crime pattern in France. Among new crime patterns, respondents mentioned some areas outside the scope of domestic violence such as Internet fraud, cybercrime, sexual, psychological and economic cyber aggression, different types of cyber scams and zoom bombing.

Homicides attempts by women against their partners, using knives increased in Portugal. In France, a study of investigations carried out during confinement observed less frequent but more serious forms of violence⁴; harassment, rape and attempted rape being the most common forms of sexual violence. Intentional beatings and injuries (slaps, kicks, punches and bites) were mainly committed on partners or ex-partners. In most cases the children witnessed first-hand the violence against their mother (beatings, broken objects, shouts, threats and insults), and in many cases, the minor child was the source of the complaint in France.

In addition to its impact on the number of criminal cases, COVID-19 influenced the requests for help by victims. Due to disabled social contacts with family members, neighbours and friends, violence was

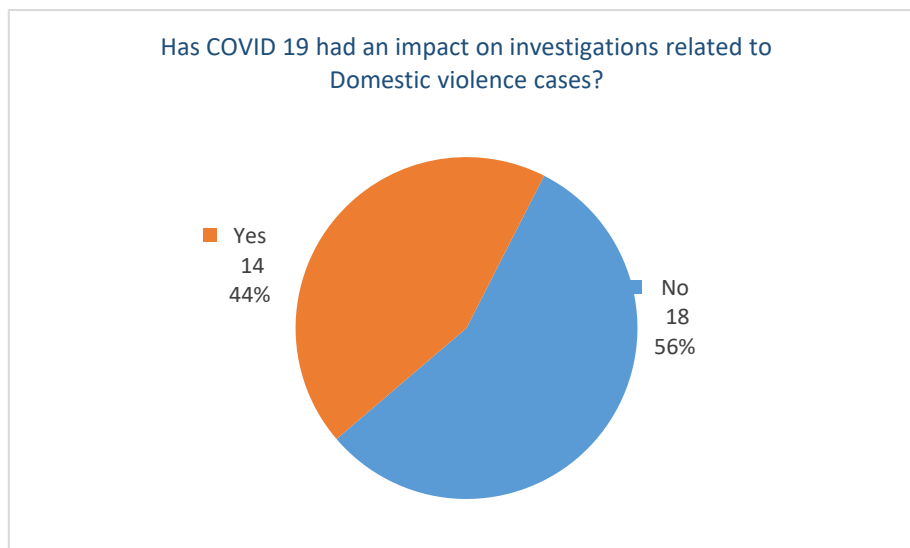
⁴ attempted strangulation, burning, use of weapon

more difficult to be recognized by the environment and to report. It was also more difficult to influence the willingness of citizens to go to the police for their complaint. In case of children, lack of contact with peers and the lack of possibility of psychological care, as well as support from schools and institutions providing assistance to children in an emergency.

In France, calls to the national victim support helpline doubled during the COVID-19 lockdown, but the reasons for calling were more connected to mental health and suicide topics than domestic violence. Other countries, like Portugal reported about less requests for help seeking in victim support institutions and decrease in the number of complaints of gender-based violence offences. At the same time Spain indicated an increase in complaints via telematics and telephones. In Greece, number of emergency calls concerning incidents of domestic violence increased during the period of the imposed curfew in comparison to the same time period last year. Due to the pandemic, many of the emergency calls were about requesting information and guidelines on domestic violence and related issues.

Impact on operations

COVID-19 did not have impact on investigating domestic violence cases in 56% of responding institutions. Still, the remaining 44% of respondents enlisted quite a few issues that altered or challenged investigations as a consequence to the pandemic.



Safety measures introduced during the investigations resulted in more challenging procedures. Law enforcement needed more preparation to intervene in a confined environment and social services were not keen to do home visits during lockdown which left victims of home and child abuse. The search for the perpetrator or the search for evidence (testimony of witnesses, etc.) were hampered by ban measures. Domestic isolation affected the amount of evidence available to the law enforcement authorities in investigating this crime (e.g. absence of medical certificates, witnesses, etc.). It was a challenge to find a safe place for infected suspects and victims.

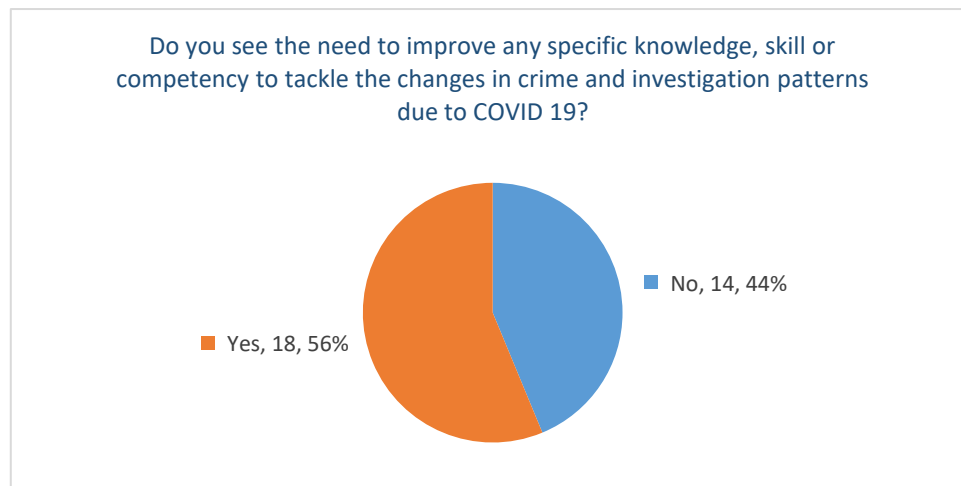
During the lockdown, police received less denunciation by victims in person but more use of numeric tools, online alter platforms and phone.

Investigation process did not always go by the standards, it was more difficult to get reports, most courts and prosecutor's offices carried out remote work and some proceedings were suspended or extended. Furthermore, non-critical court hearings were postponed which resulted in leaving criminals being unpunished for longer. At the same time, many witnesses refused to cooperate, did not visit the police because they were afraid to leave their homes.

On the organisational level, some police officers, especially those who care for underage children, had to go to work remotely or take leave. Others were delegated to perform virus control tasks. In other countries number of police staff remained the same but had to cope with increased number of domestic violence cases.

Impact on training needs

Need for training of law enforcement officials was indicated by more than half of responding institutions (56%). Some training needs are of general nature related to investigation of domestic violence cases while others relate directly to the impact of COVID-19.



Training needs related to COVID-19

- How to protect victims when there are limited possibilities to contact them, how to reach families within their homes, alternative methods of supporting families at risk of violence, how to deal with victims who cannot contact the authorities.
- Alternative ways of reporting incidents.
- How to develop strategies for contact with victims using *new technologies* and develop communication tools appropriate to this type of context, welcome *digitally* (online reporting, SMS alert, etc.), discrete reporting procedures tele-contact or tele-investigations.
- How to carry out a domestic violence investigation during lockdown if the perpetrator is living together with their victim(s).
- How to improve interviewing and questioning techniques via (video) call.
- Psychological effects of quarantine, closure, emergency situations in children, adolescents and adults; behaviour analysis.
- How to work with infected persons with COVID-19.
- Preparation of an adequate risk assessment.
- Sharing best practices.

Training needs on general level:

- Improve the knowledge of domestic violence overall, systemic changes in society's negative approach to committing violence in general, preventive campaigns.
- Effective police response to domestic violence.
- Professionalization of police officers on the issue of domestic violence to be important, improving law enforcement in investigation domestic violence cases as well as taking measures to combat domestic violence.
- The domestic violence could be explained more by personal factors (individual, inter-relational and psychological) much more than by circumstantial factors (contextual, collective and social). A training in those areas would be an improvement in the understanding of the phenomenon.
- Ability to detect a risk situation even in the case of a simple intervention without violence.
- Better understand the tools and consumption habits of young people in terms of digital technology in order to be able to anticipate their risky behaviours;
- Identifying/recognizing the varied forms and early signs of domestic violence.
- Improve the way to interact with the perpetrator: motivational, unbiased and conducive approach to an emotional stabilization process, with medical and social support. This would be a decisive step in victim's safety.
- The skills and practical experience of law enforcement authorities in conducting the interrogation of victims of domestic violence, including child victims, as particularly vulnerable victims in criminal proceeding.
- Education of police authorities in the field of empathic skills, care of police authorities from the point of view of psychogenic.
- Cooperation with psychosocial-legal support agencies and accommodation structures.
- Raise awareness among potential witnesses.
- Preventions strategies.

Conclusions

CEPOL conducted a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence because respondents to a previous analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on serious and organised crime indicated increased criminal activities in this area. Having analysed the responses of 21 Member States, the clear trend of increasing criminal activities of domestic violence in Europe could not be confirmed. However, the analysis indicates that crime patterns changed in different ways across Member States as a consequence of the pandemic.

The survey shows that there is high need for training of law enforcement on how to address domestic violence cases independently of COVID-19. This is an area where training provided at national level seems not to be sufficient to prepare law enforcement for the investigation of these cases where appropriate psychological and emotional approach shall be applied. As a consequence of the lockdown, problems related to investigations of domestic violence cases became even more tangible. Reaching out to victims, perpetrators and witnesses was hampered; investigators had to cope with gathering data and evidence through on-line tools, interrogations and interviews.

Training of law enforcement officials in the crime area of domestic violence as a consequence of pandemic would be much appreciated. On a related note, there is also high need for EU-level training on general aspects of investigating domestic violence cases across Member States.

Annex

Most common problems related to investigation of domestic violence cases, regardless of the COVID-19, as enlisted by France:

- high latency of crime and limited possibilities for its detection;
- fear of victims⁵ to file a criminal complaint and to cooperate with law enforcement authorities;
- failure to file a criminal complaint immediately after the attack of the perpetrator;
- change of statements during criminal proceedings;⁶
- absence of evidence, especially in the case of latent domestic violence;⁷
- absence of evidence of psychological violence;⁸
- difficult legal qualification of crimes committed within the framework of domestic violence as domestic violence can be classified under various crimes in a special part of the Criminal Code;
- lax attitude of people towards domestic violence, lack of interest of witnesses to testify in cases of domestic violence and
- high demands on the skills and practical experience of law enforcement authorities in conducting the interrogation of victims of domestic violence, including child victims, as particularly vulnerable victims in criminal proceeding.

⁵ fear of revenge on the perpetrator, feelings of shame, economic dependence on the perpetrator, etc.

⁶ trivialization of violence, denial of violence.

⁷ the victim did not seek medical help, did not report the violence to the police, etc.

⁸ humiliation, inducing fear and stress, threatening, etc.