



Impact of Covid-19 on Calls to National Forced Marriage Helplines: Initial Findings¹

The first UK lockdown had a significant impact on calls to Karma Nirvana's national helpline for forced marriage and honour based abuse. As restrictions decreased, calls increased.

Background

Our research team are studying the impact of COVID-19 and COVID-related decision making on people at risk of, or already experiencing, forced marriage in the UK. COVID-19 was first identified as a novel coronavirus in December 2019, with the first official identification of patients in the UK on 29 January, the day before the World Health Organisation declared a global health emergency. A month later, the UK recorded its first official case of in-country transmission. Schools were closed in the UK from 20 March 2020, and the country entered "lockdown" on 23 March 2020.

These restrictions were gradually lifted from 10 May 2020, with different parts of the UK entering different "Tiers" of restriction, and devolved administrations bringing in their own restrictions. A further "lockdown" was announced (with some differences to the first) on 31 October 2020 (from 3 November), and after the lifting of some restrictions over Christmas, a further lockdown was announced from 4 January 2021.

Karma Nirvana run the national helpline for victims of forced marriage and honour based abuse. People can also contact them by email. They receive calls and emails from all over the UK, though mainly England and Wales and particularly the North-West and London. In 2019, they received an average of 700 calls per month.²

Although data on prevalence of forced marriage in the UK is scarce, on average, 30% of cases dealt with by the UK Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) over the last nine years have involved 0-17 year olds, and 80% of cases involved females.³ Forced marriage affects people in all faith communities (and

none) and from all ethnicities. However, data suggests it predominantly affects women from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. COVID-19 has been shown to also have disproportionately affected BAME communities in terms of infection and death rates.⁴

Data

We have analysed data from the helpline from January 2020 to January 2021 to understand the impact of COVID-19 and COVID-related decision-making on the helpline (and, through that, on people at risk of, or already experiencing, forced marriage). We used changepoint analysis to understand when key changes happened. We can see a direct correlation with some key COVID-related decision-making by the UK Government.

Karma Nirvana's helpline saw a 200% increase in overall contacts over a 6-week period from 16 March 2020 to 24 April 2020.⁵ Looking solely at contact related to forced marriage, however, we see a significant drop in calls immediately following the Prime Minister ordering people to "stay at home" on 23 March 2020. The highest number of contacts all year occurred in the week commencing 10 May 2020, which was when the "stay at home" was officially changed to "stay alert" and some lockdown restrictions were lifted (with the UK moving to the Tier system instead).

We also see a significant increase in contacts in all weeks from 22 September, corresponding with when schools fully re-opened (subject to COVID-19 safety restrictions)⁶. We also see a drop in calls through the November lockdown, though still a much higher average of calls than earlier in the year. One important difference between that lockdown and the earlier one is that schools remained open.

Future Research

Our project continues to explore the impact of COVID-19 and COVID-related decision-making on those at risk of, or already experiencing, a forced marriage in the UK. We are also interested in the impact of COVID-related restrictions on people who have left forced marriages, because preliminary discussion suggests there has been a high incidence of re-traumatisation.

We will analyse the 2020 data from the FMU as soon as this becomes available, and are currently running a survey with third-sector stakeholders regarding the impact of COVID-19 and related decision-making on their working practices, staff, and those who use their services.

We will continue to publish regular updates. Look out for them at forcedmarriageresearch.ac.uk and/or by following our team members on Twitter.

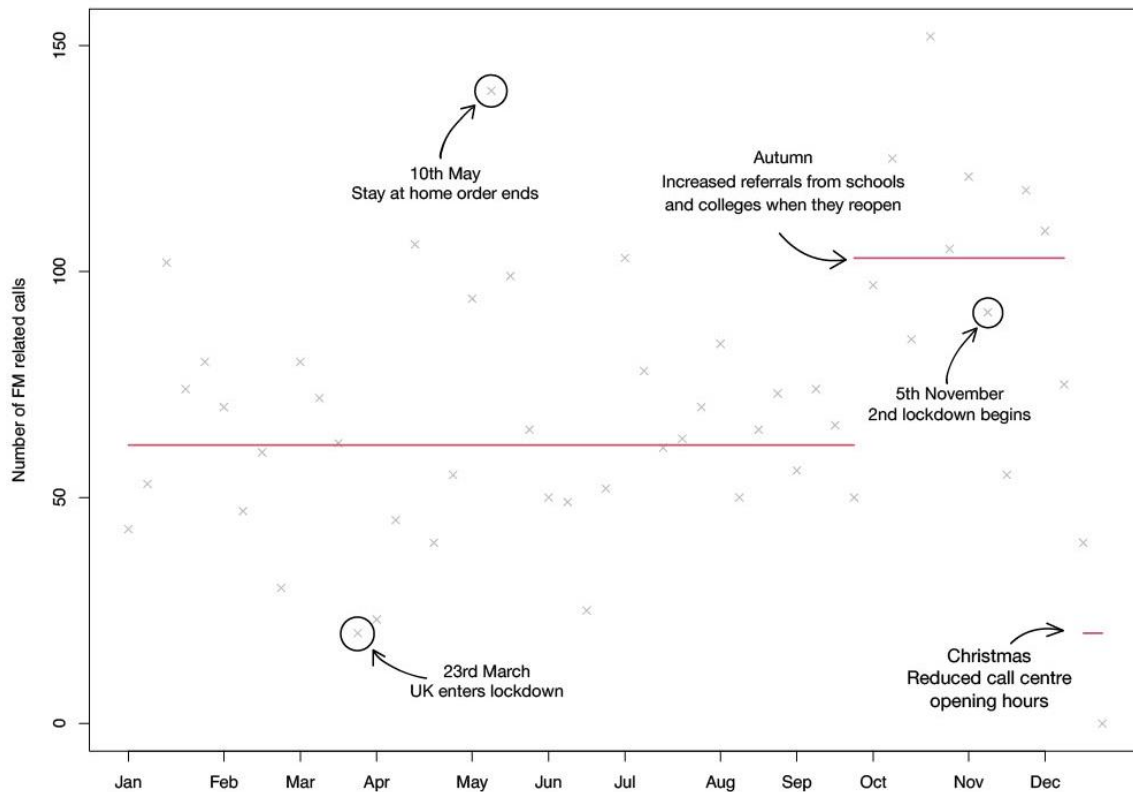


Figure 1: Changepoint analysis of weekly calls to Karma Nirvana's helpline

Findings

This quantitative data needs some further exploration through qualitative methods to understand the exact relationship between the changes we have observed. However, we can say the following:

- The first lockdown had a significant impact on calls regarding forced marriage to KN's helpline. This may have been caused by school closures, and a drop in resultant calls from teachers. It may also have been caused by similar lack of access to people at risk by third-parties such as the police and social workers. Lastly, it may be due to the fact that those at risk were unable to seek help, in particular because they were less able to contact support services due to a lack of privacy and/or a safe space from which to seek help.
- Easing of lockdown restrictions saw an increase in calls: this supports our hypothesis that people were less able to contact support services during "lockdown".⁷
- The fact that the average of calls increased from September highlights the importance of schools –

particularly as calls remained high even during the second lockdown (where schools remained open). This might be due to teachers calling the helpline to express concern and seek help for children they have identified as being at risk. It may also be due to school providing a safe space, away from surveillance by parents, guardians, family-members or other perpetrators, for young people to contact support services.

- Although there was a rise in calls in July (the traditional start of the long school holidays in the UK), which often corresponds with increased in cases of forced marriage dealt with by the FMU, we cannot yet say what impact the combination of school holidays/closures and travel restrictions may have had on the risk of forced marriage faced in the UK in 2020.

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¹ This is an update from the ESRC-funded project (ES/V015270/1) investigating the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on forced marriage in the UK.

² Based on analysis of data available here: <https://karmanirvana.org.uk/helpline-reports/>.

³ Based on analysis of data available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf.

⁵ <https://karmanirvana.org.uk/the-lockdown-impact/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-and-colleges-to-reopen-in-full-in-september>.

⁷ See also <https://karmanirvana.org.uk/the-lockdown-impact/>.