



Forced Marriage and Covid-19

Initial Analysis of Data on Forced Marriage Protection Orders¹

Research briefing by Hannah Coggins, with thanks to Rowland Seymour for Figure 3

It is widely feared that Covid-19 restrictions such as “lockdowns” and travel restrictions have had an adverse impact on the levels of forced marriages in the United Kingdom (Affoum and Recavarren 2020). This report examines this suggested link by analysing data on Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs) from the UK.



We find that FMPOs did decrease in 2020, but the link between this decrease and Covid-related restrictions cannot be fully validated as a similar decline was also seen in 2017. Of the changes to applications for FMPOs, the most significantly affected group was that of children aged 17 and under.

Background

We are a team of researchers at the Rights Lab, a University of Nottingham Beacon of Research Excellence working to understand the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision making on those at risk of, or already experiencing, a 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 2020, 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. These restrictions have slowly been lifted in all nations of the UK, with the government announcing a plan to lift all restrictions in England from 19 July 2021.

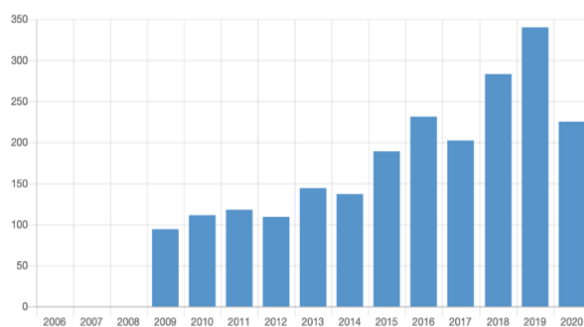
Forced Marriage Protection Orders

FMPOs were introduced in the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 in England and Walesⁱⁱ (and the associated Commencement Order in Northern Ireland in 2008ⁱⁱⁱ), and in the Forced Marriage etc. (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Act, 2011^{iv}. They are injunctions aimed at protecting people at risk by, for instance, preventing anyone from taking them out of the country and preventing people from making marriage arrangements for them, or even from contacting them. Breaching one was made a criminal offence in the UK in 2014. They are awarded, in England and Wales, by Family Courts and can be applied for by police officers, social workers, NGOs and other interested third parties.

In general, a hearing on an FMPO application will be heard on the same day.

Forced Marriage Protection Orders: General Patterns

Figure 1: Graph of Aggregate Forced Marriage Protection Orders



Source: GOV UK

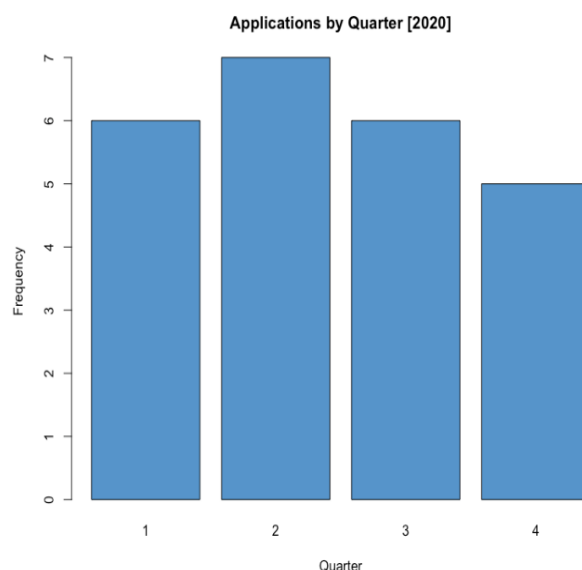
The figure above demonstrates that there was a decrease in FMPO orders granted in 2020. This validates the expectation that lockdowns and other Covid-19 related travel restrictions caused a decrease in the number of FMPO cases. Many in the field fear the easing of restrictions will cause a spike in cases. This is not visible from the

above figure but research should continue to see whether 2021 statistics present the predicted rise.

The link between Covid-19 restrictions and a decline in FMPO applications cannot be fully validated because there is a similar dip in 2017 which cannot easily be explained. A possible reason for the variation in reported figures is the differing recording methods used between years. Although yearly extracts are each taken at a fixed time point for consistency when reporting, the data source itself admits that figures cannot be taken as absolute because counting rules and data collection methods vary between years (GOV UK 2021).

In order to further investigate the decrease in cases, Figure 2 examines the applications made by quarter. In 2020 the distribution shows that there was a decrease in the number of FMPO applications made in the second half of 2020 (i.e. April to June 2020); suggesting that travel restrictions may have had an effect on the number of applications made as most restrictions were brought in, both in the UK and in countries globally, during these months. However, the peak of cases during the second quarter questions the effect of national lockdown on the frequency of FMPO applications as it would be expected that these measures would have decreased case rates.

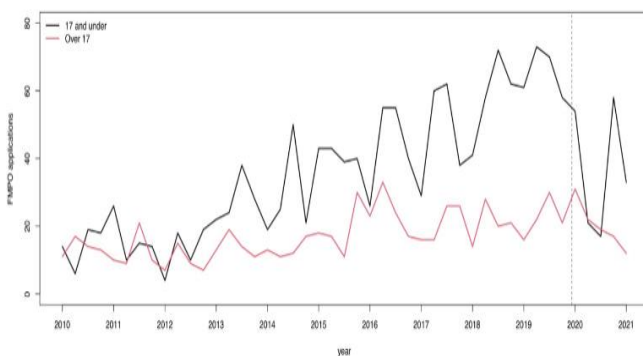
Figure 2: Applications by Quarter [2020]



In order to ensure that this research accurately represents all four nations of the UK, attempts were made to collect data from each country. However, the figures above only contain observations from England and Wales. Similar data to the Family Courts used above was found for Scotland but contained minimal data points, therefore not making it viable for inclusion. In addition, several attempts were made to contact government organisations in Northern Ireland to gain access to data but so far nothing has been returned. Research findings will be updated if and when further data is forthcoming.

Impact of Covid-19 by age group

Figure 3: FMPO's by age



In Figure 3 the most significantly impacted age group appears to be the '17 and under' category. There is noteworthy movement in the rates across 2020 for this category whereas there is a steady decline shown in the other category. The dramatic spike

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

exhibited in the '17 and under' category largely correlates with schools reopening and the easing of restrictions.

However, the sudden decline in cases again is less easy to explain. One possible reason may be stricter travel restrictions coming into force both in the UK and abroad making marital arrangements more complex. (Though there is anecdotal data about forced marriages happening via Skype.) This explanation is purely speculative, and data should be triangulated to determine whether this is a probable reason. This is a topic of further research for the team.

Conclusions

All the figures above show that Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions had an impact on forced marriage in the UK but it remains unclear as to what exactly happened. National lockdowns and travel restrictions appear to have decreased FMPO applications but it is unclear from the above figures how much of an impact they had.

Data source

GOV UK (2021) Courts Data [07 July 2021], Gov.UK Justice Data. Available at: <https://data.justice.gov.uk/courts/family-courts/> (Accessed 12 July 2021)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/20/section/1?view=extent>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nistr/2008/446/contents/made>

^{iv} <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2011/15/contents/enacted>.