



Impact of Covid-19 on Calls to the Forced Marriage Unit:

Analysis of 2020 Data.¹

The Forced Marriage Unit released its data for 2020 on 1 July 2021. They gave advice and support to 753 cases of forced marriage in 2020.² This is half the number of cases from 2018, and 56% of the number of cases handled in 2019.



Further analysis shows that cases reduced evenly across the board. That is, Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions do not seem to have unequally impacted any particular type of case handled by the Forced Marriage Unit.

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 and those working to support them.

Covid-19 was first identified as a novel coronavirus in December 2019, with the first patients officially-identified as having contracted Covid-19 admitted to hospital on 30 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.

We hypothesise that Covid-19 itself, and the related restrictions on, for instance, movement (including international travel), schools, and household mixing will have had an impact on rates of forced marriage in the UK. In this report we present initial analysis of data from the [Forced Marriage Unit](#) (FMU) in 2020.



The Forced Marriage Unit³

The FMU is a joint Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office unit, and leads the government's forced marriage policy, outreach and casework. It was founded in 2005, and operates both within the UK and overseas. Support is provided to any individual in the UK, and to any British national, including dual nationals, overseas. It publishes statistics about the cases it has handled annually. The 2020 statistics were released on 1 July 2020.

Given the events of 2020, and a significant portion of 2021, we are positing that any significant changes in the cases handled by the FMU are due to Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions. The FMU themselves say the reduction in cases "is largely attributable to reasons derived from the coronavirus pandemic, such as restrictions on weddings and overseas travel".⁴ We are interested in what the data can tell us about what these impacts might have been.

The FMU reports that it "remained fully operational throughout the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic and took steps to ensure that this was publicised extensively. FMU caseworkers have been more regularly invited to attend multi-agency strategy meetings following the switch to virtual working".⁵

Overview of 2020 Data

There is almost no hard data available on forced marriage in the UK, and prevalence is basically unknown. Data from the FMU, then, tells us about cases they handled, but there is no way of knowing what proportion of cases occurring in the UK come to their attention, or whether that is a similar proportion year-on-year. Thus, from their data we can see the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on cases handled by the FMU, but it is difficult to extrapolate from this to say anything about forced marriage more broadly in the UK.

On the other hand, FMU data is one of the few "windows" we have into prevalence of forced marriage in the UK.⁶ It is, therefore, worth studying in some detail to understand the unequal impacts of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on people vulnerable to, or already experiencing, forced marriage in the UK, and those working to help and support them.

Total Cases

On average, pre-pandemic, the FMU handled 1,350 cases a year.⁷ 2020's figure of 753 cases represents just under 56% of this average. It is a 45% decrease in cases from 2019, and is only half the number of cases reported in 2018.

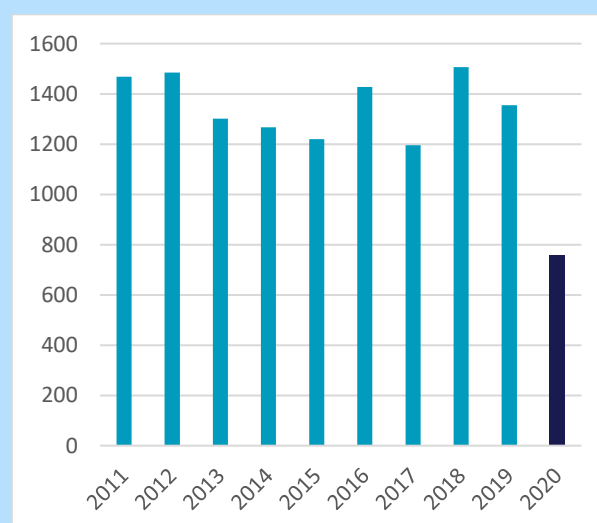


Figure 1: Annual Cases handled by the FMU 2011-2020.



Monthly Contacts

The FMU saw a dramatic decline in contact during April and May 2020 which coincides with the first “lockdown”. Numbers of cases picked up in June and July, but also fell in August. Even before Covid-19 related restrictions were put in place in the UK, however, monthly calls were already lower than in previous years. For instance, in January 2020 there were only 85 calls to the FMU, compared with 102 in 2018 and 135 in 2019.

This may show the impact of Covid-19 even before restrictions were brought in in the UK (though the start of the decline pre-dates Covid-19 by a couple of months). The novel coronavirus now known as Covid-19 was first identified in December 2019 (hence its name), and the World Health Organisation published its first comprehensive package of guidance documents for countries between 10 and 12 January 2020. The number of cases worldwide had overtaken those of the 2003 SARS epidemic by 31 January. This may well have had an impact on travel plans, even without specific limitations on travel to or from the UK, and therefore an impact on forced marriages which either take place outside the UK (but involve UK nationals) or which involve a spouse travelling from outside the UK.

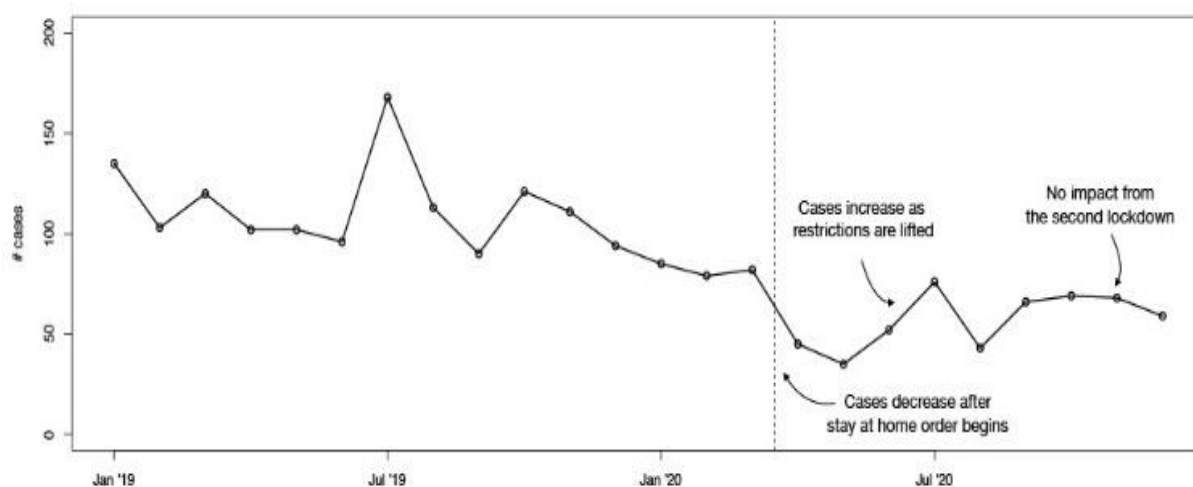


Figure 2: Trends of calls to FMU 2019-2020.

Cases, then, were already falling before December 2019, and continued to fall until the end of March 2020. There was a significant decline in April and May 2020, with an increase after restrictions began to be lifted in May 2020. The lockdown in England beginning in November 2020 had no discernible effect on cases. We

have posited [elsewhere](#) that this may be because schools remained open, and teachers were able to spot, and report, cases – but it is worth recalling that around 70% of cases handled year-on-year by the FMU concern people not of school age.⁸



Although there is almost no hard data on forced marriage in the UK, anecdotally we tend to expect cases for under-18s to increase around the summer holidays given the link between forced marriages and people being taken out of the UK. (Though it must be noted that around 10% of forced marriages take place entirely within the UK.) These marriages might be more likely to come to the attention of the FMU than others, given the help and assistance it offers to British nationals abroad (and with 10% of contacts to the FMU in 2020 coming from the Home Office, mainly via UK Borders and Immigration⁹). (Though we should note that we simply do not know how many forced marriages involving a UK national take place abroad without coming to the attention of the FMU.)

Trends in this data are hard to discern, because data on monthly case rates has only been shared since 2018. However, we can see spikes in total cases in July and August in 2018 and 2019 (corresponding with school summer holidays in the UK) – see Figure 3. Spikes in December (2018) and January (2019) may also reflect cases increasing over the Christmas holiday. This could be connected to travel abroad: it could also be connected to longer time spent in the home and less ability to escape pressure (at least for a few hours) through going to school or college.

There was also a spike in July 2020, decreasing in August and then rising again in September, October and November, which is in contrast to the previous two years. Despite international travel restrictions, therefore, the summer holidays may have caused a spike in

cases of forced marriage contacting the FMU.

As Figure 3 also shows, 2020 was somewhat similar to 2019 (though with fewer cases, and not so significant an increase in cases in October), and more dissimilar to 2018 (as was 2019).

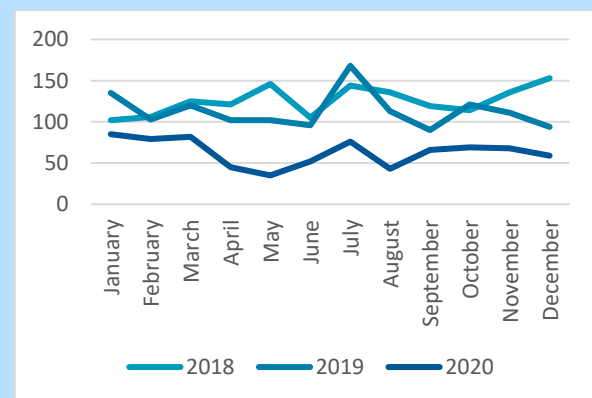


Figure 3: Monthly calls to the FMU 2018-2020.

Age of Victims

The age of potential victims in the cases handled in 2020 are much the same as in other years. A slightly smaller percentage of cases (11%) involved 16-17 year olds than in an average year between 2011 and 2019, though in 2019 this was 12%, and it was between 11 and 13% in 2014, 2015 and 2016, so 2020 is not an outlier.

Age of Victims	2020	Mean, 2012-2019
% below 15	15	14.6
% 16-17	11	15.5
% 18-21	22	22.4
% 22-25	15	14.7
% 26-30	11	8.9
% 31-40	11	6.4
% 41+	5	3.2
% Unknown	11	20.3

Table 1: Age of victims in FMU cases.



Similarly, a slightly higher than average percentage of cases involved 26-30 year olds. This number has been growing pretty much year-on-year from 8% in 2012 to 11% in 2020, with a previous high-point of 10.4% in 2017. 2020, then, again fits with existing trends in the data.

Far fewer cases than on average were of “unknown” age, and slightly more were of people aged 41 over above. The latter figure again matches the existing trend, however: in 2017 4.1%, in 2018 3% and in 2019 4% of cases involved victims who were aged 41 or above.

The fact that the statistics on the age of victims from 2020 looks very similar to the same data from 2012-2019 shows that the drop in cases this year handled by the FMU was across the board. That is, Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions (which we are positing as the most significant factors likely to have caused this drop in cases) have affected *all* cases. This might reflect a drop in the numbers of forced marriage across the board: it might also, or instead, show that people of all ages have struggled to contact the FMU for help because of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions.

Gender of Victims

The proportion of female and male cases in 2020 was the same as in past years. 79% of cases were female – it has been between 75 and 82% each year between 2012 and 2019. 21% in 2020 were male. Similarly, between 2012 and 2019, 18-21.4% of cases involved males.

As in other years, male victims are a higher percentage of cases involving victims with

mental capacity issues than female. 55% of such cases involved males in 2020: between 2015¹⁰ and 2019 this figure was between 38 (in 2018) and 62 (in 2015).

Mental Capacity Concerns

66 cases in 2020 involved victims with mental capacity concerns. (That is, people who are considered not competent under the relevant legislation in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to consent to marriage.) As in other years, a higher proportion of such cases involved male victims (55%) than female.

Numbers in these cases fluctuate quite widely year-on-year, from lows of 93 (2018) and 97 (2013) to highs of 137 (2019) and 125 (2016). Similarly, in all years for which this data has been shared, male victims outnumbered female, apart from in 2018, when 38% of cases involved males and 58% involve females (with 4% unknown).

Again, Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions appear to have affected victims across the board. They have not made it significantly more likely that a case handled by the FMU would have, or would not have, mental capacity concerns.

Region

80% of victims were in the UK when the case was referred to the FMU, which they say is in line with previous years.¹¹

The percentage of cases from London, the West Midlands, the North West, the South East, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East in 2020 were slightly higher than the average of 2012-2019. Cases from the South West, Scotland, Wales, the North East, and



Northern Ireland were slightly lower than, or the same, as the previous average. Slightly more regions were unknown.

Region	% of cases in 2020	Average % of cases 2012-2019
London	24	17
West Midlands	13	10
North West	11	8
South East	9	7
Yorkshire and Humber	9	6
East ¹²	7	3.5
East Midlands	3	3
South West	2	1.5
Scotland	2	1.5
Wales	2	1
North East	2	1
Northern Ireland	0 ¹³	0 ¹⁴
Unknown	17	15

Table 2: UK Region from which FMA cases come.

As many of the regions with higher-than-average contacts to the FMU were subject to more-stringent “Tier” restrictions and more frequent local lockdowns or other restrictions than other parts of the UK, and have experienced higher case-rates of Covid-19 than other areas, this slight increase may be a result of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions.

However, this increase could also be due to better knowledge about the FMU and how to contact it in these areas, perhaps aligned with the FMU’s own increased provision of education and training in 2020. Moreover, the percentage increase is very slight (and the overall total number of cases much lower than in pre-

pandemic years), and so it may simply be the case that regions which accounted for a high percentage of cases of forced marriage handled by the FMU pre-pandemic accounted for a similarly high percentage during it.

Focus Countries

In 2020, the FMU dealt with cases involving 54 “focus countries”.¹⁵ A “focus country” means that the (planned) forced marriage involved a UK national (or dual national) being taken to this country to marry (or an attempt being made to take them there), or that their intended spouse resides in, or is a national of, that country.¹⁶

The ten countries (in addition to the UK) with the most cases in 2020 were: Pakistan; Bangladesh; India; Afghanistan; Somalia; Iraq; United Arab Emirates; Romania; Turkey; and Italy.

Country	Number of Cases in 2020 (% of total)
Pakistan	286 (38%)
Bangladesh	69 (9%)
United Kingdom	53 (7%)
India	44 (6%)
Afghanistan	30 (4%)
Somalia	15 (2%)
Iraq	7 (1%)
United Arab Emirates	7 (1%)
Romania	7 (1%)
Italy	5 (1%)
Turkey	5 (1%)
“Other”	83 (11%)
Unknown	147 (19%)

Table 3: Ten Focus Countries with highest cases, plus UK, “Other” and “Unknown”.



Since 2015¹⁷, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the UK, Afghanistan, Somalia, India, Romania, Turkey and Iraq have all featured as focus countries in a large-enough number of cases year-on-year to be included by name in published FMU statistics. On average, around 570 cases involve Pakistan; 120 solely the UK, and also Bangladesh; 60 India; 50 Somalia; 35 Afghanistan; 20 Iraq; 16 Romania; and 8 Turkey.

Other frequent “focus countries” are Saudi Arabia (average of 11); Egypt (average of 9); Sri Lanka (average of 7); and Nigeria (average of 5). It is interesting that these countries are not on this year’s list, particularly as – in the case of Egypt and Sri Lanka – other “red-list” countries (such as Pakistan) were mentioned as frequently-occurring “focus countries”, and Nigeria and Saudi Arabia are on the “amber list”, meaning travel to and from them has been less-restricted than to some other countries which did feature (e.g. Bangladesh).

Similarly, it is interesting to see Italy on the list. Further research is needed to understand the circumstances of these cases, and whether they have any connection to Italy’s own tragic experience of Covid-19.

The FMU say that the 7% of forced marriages with no overseas element is roughly in line with previous years. It is true that this figure was 5% in 2019 and 7% in 2018, though it is worth noting that the figure was 10% in 2017, 11% in 2016 and 14% in 2015.¹⁸ In raw numbers, this represents a drop from 175 cases in 2015 to 72 in 2019, and 53 in 2020. This might reflect a fall in the number of forced marriages being perpetrated in the UK (and only involving people residing in the UK) which Covid-19 and Covid-19 related restrictions did not halt. Alternatively, it may only show that fewer people at risk of forced marriage with no overseas element are coming to the attention of the FMU.

Of further interest is the fact that 82% of cases where India was the focus country involved victims who were in the UK at the point when they contacted the FMU. The FMU report that this is “a small decrease compared with 2019” when the figure was 89%. This means *more* people contacting the FMU for help were in India than in 2019, despite restrictions on travel put in place by both the Indian and UK governments.



Sources of Referral

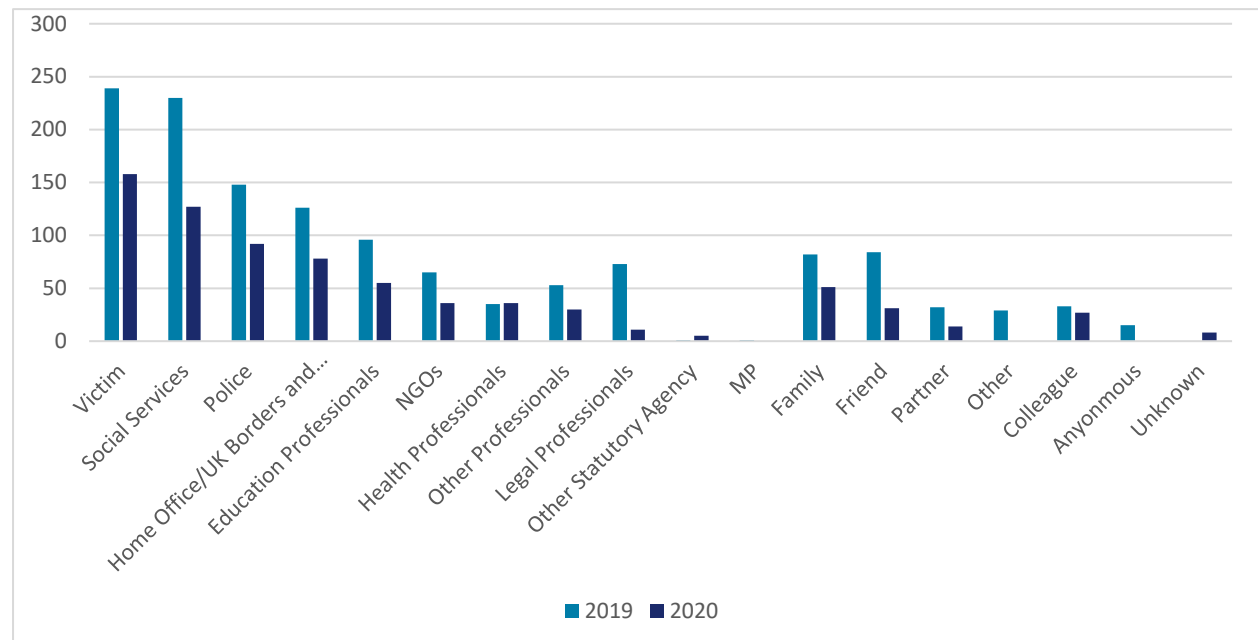


Figure 4: Sources of Referrals to the FMU in 2020¹⁹

The FMU has only released data on the source of referral for 2019 and 2020. Still, this allows for some comparison between before the Covid-19 pandemic, and during it.

Referrals from a wide range of people and agencies, and data from FMU shows the wide range of stakeholders who serve important roles in alerting relevant authorities to forced marriages, and therefore the wide range of Covid-related restrictions which may have impacted the likelihood of cases being spotted, and victims supported, in a timely fashion.

There were two-thirds the number of cases referred by victims in 2020 than in 2019, and victims themselves remain the most-common source of referral to the FMU. This shows that

Covid-19 related restrictions did not prevent victims from contacting the FMU and – as the decrease in the number of calls from victims (34%) is less than the decrease in the total number of cases handled by the FMU (44%) – it seems that Covid-related restrictions made it harder for third parties to contact the FMU than for victims. That is, Covid-related restrictions appear to have made it harder for third parties to become aware of forced marriage cases. This confirms one of our initial hypotheses, but does not confirm our initial fear that victims would find it harder to contact the FMU (though, as noted elsewhere, a drop in cases handled by the FMU does not necessarily mean a decrease in forced marriages, and this data may show that some victims did find it harder to contact the FMU than in 2019).



It is notable that referrals from health professionals increased in 2020 – from 35 in 2019 to 36 in 2020, despite a general decrease of almost 50% in total cases handled. This confirms what we have heard from stakeholders involved in our project, that the Covid-related restriction on more than one person seeing a health professional at any time may have helped people seek help free from pressure or coercion from whoever might have accompanied them to their medical appointment. (However, as these figures show, these accounted for a relatively small proportion of contacts to the FMU.)

Referrals from Social Services decreased by almost exactly the same percentage as total cases (45% versus 44%). The same is true for Education Professionals (57% of cases in 2020 compared to 2019). This is somewhat reassuring, and suggests that both social services and educational professionals were able to continue safeguarding young people during the pandemic, despite Covid-related restrictions (including school closures). (This said, as with victims, of course, it could be that teachers and social workers – and others – missed cases, and that the FMU data does not actually represent a decline in actual cases of forced marriage.)

Referrals from “other professionals” and from NGOs also decreased by much the same amount as total cases (43% and 45%). The latter is interesting, as our research shows that calls to at least the NGO Karma Nirvana increased during 2020 (71 new referrals in 2020, compared to 56 in 2019).²⁰ Further research is needed to understand the nature of the calls being handled by NGOs, and when they referred cases to the FMU in, and before, the pandemic.

The decrease in referrals from UK Borders and Immigration is less than to total cases (62% of 2019 cases, compared to 56%). This suggests that significant travel restrictions were not as significant a deterrent to forced marriage as other Covid-related restrictions (including, for instance, on household mixing).

There was a very dramatic decrease in the number of cases referred by legal professionals – only 15% of the number of referrals in 2019. The reasons for this are unclear, but may be connected to court closures, and other Covid-related restrictions. Our previous research shows there was a decline in requests for Forced Marriage Protection Orders in 2020 (there were 356 applications made in 2019, and 239 in 2020, a decrease of 33%).²¹ Legal professionals were evidently still active in forced marriage cases, then, so further research is needed to understand this decline in referrals to the FMU.

Given the requirement to “work from home” where possible, even before lockdowns, and the number of people furloughed because they could not do their work from home, it is interesting that referrals from colleagues were not greatly impacted: there were 82% of the number of referrals from colleagues in 2020 as in 2019. There were much *more* significant impacts on referrals from family (62%) and friends (37%). Indeed, referrals from family-members decreased significantly more than the decrease seen in to all cases (whereas referrals from family did not decrease as much as total referrals).

The impact on referrals from friends raises concerns that perpetrators took advantage of Covid-related restrictions and isolated potential victims from their friends. It may have been harder to isolate them from family-members, or from



colleagues, and evidently some people at risk either have colleagues they trust enough to confide in, or colleagues well-trained and motivated enough to spot signs of concern, and reach out to the FMU.

There were 44% of the number of referrals from partners in 2020 than in 2019. Assuming that the FMU gets calls from people's chosen partners, concerned that their partner is going to be forced to marry someone else, this could be a sign that people with (perhaps living with) existing partners were less at risk of being forced to marry in 2020 compared to 2019 because of Covid-related restrictions (e.g. the lockdowns, and subsequent bans on household mixing). On the other hand, it may also show that people were being isolated from their partners, who did not know what danger they were in from a forced marriage.

Conclusion

Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions appear to have had a significant impact on cases handled by the FMU in 2020, almost halving the number of contacts.

This might mean that Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions have caused fewer forced marriages to be attempted in the UK.

However, the data does not necessarily mean that. Instead it may flag how Covid-19 and particularly Covid-related restrictions have made it harder for people to seek help from the FMU either for themselves or for someone else about whom they are concerned.

The one group who seem to have found it easier to contact the FMU during the pandemic are health-professionals, and we would urge the government and

relevant decision-makers to try to ensure that this benefit can continue in future (while acknowledging that there have been negative consequences of the rule that people must see medical professionals alone, and that these must be balanced against the needs and interests of those at risk of forced marriage).

Future Research

The FMU statistics point to a real need for more data on this issue in post-pandemic times, so that we can more-clearly understand the impact of policies, interventions and exogenous shocks like the global Covid pandemic in future. We will continue to dig into this data, particularly country-specific data, and compare it with other data sources.

Our research team continues to analyse stakeholder interviews conducted in spring 2021, collect data through further survey work with stakeholders, and analyse relevant quantitative data from Karma Nirvana, Family Courts and Ministry of Justice.

All findings will be shared on the [project website](#). Readers are encouraged to check this, and the [Rights Lab website](#), for further updates. You can also learn about future research findings by following our research team members on Twitter.

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References

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.

² The FMU handled 753 cases of forced marriage, 3 additional cases of FGM associated with forced marriage and 6 cases of FGM. See

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>.

³ The FMU's contact number is +44 (0) 20 7008 0151 and it is open 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday. 24/7 assistance is available by contacting the nearest overseas Embassy, High Commission or Consulate, or by calling 020 7008 5000.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>

⁶ Another is data from relevant helplines. For more information on which, see our [report](#) on the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on calls to the national helpline for forced marriage. Another is the number of Forced Marriage Protection Orders granted each year, on which we will publish initial findings soon.

⁷ Based on analysis of 2020 statistics, which include data for previous years. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁸ Based on analysis of FMU statistics available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>.

⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>.

¹⁰ The first year this data was shared.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>.

¹² Described, in different years, as East Anglia, East of England, and East, but treated here as the same region.

¹³ Northern Ireland accounts for fewer than 5 cases in total in 2020, and similarly small numbers in other years. The percentage is so small as to be negligible, but is not exactly 0. It is also worth noting that this does not necessarily mean there are hardly any forced marriages, only that they do not come to the attention of the Forced Marriage Unit.

¹⁴ See note 13.

¹⁵ The information in the FMU statistics on "focus country" does not disaggregate between forced marriage and FGM, so these countries include the 6 FGM-only cases.

¹⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>.

¹⁷ Data has not been shared for earlier years.

¹⁸ There is no data provided for 2011, 2012, 2013 or 2014.

¹⁹ See data available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>. "MP" in 2019 was <5 – for ease of visual representation we have put this in the figure as "1".

²⁰ See <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/september/briefing-impact-of-covid-19-on-forced-marriage.pdf>

²¹ See <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/july/forced-marriage-and-covid-19.pdf>.