

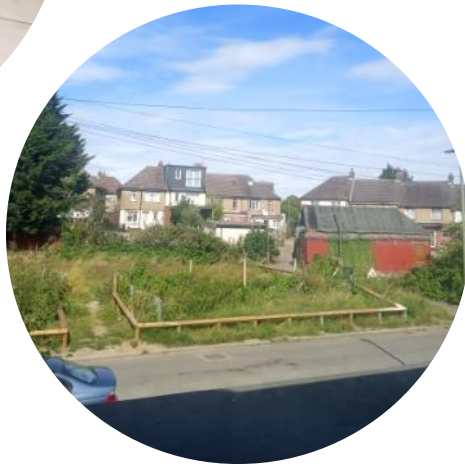
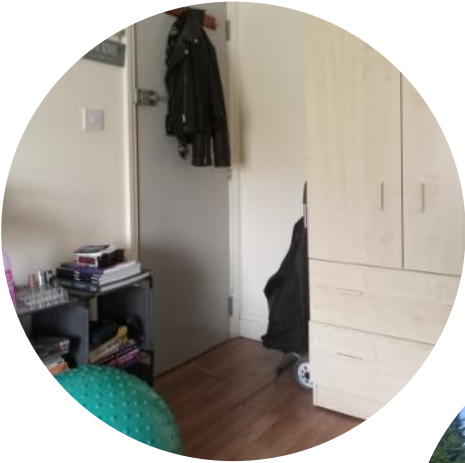


‘A strange empty place’

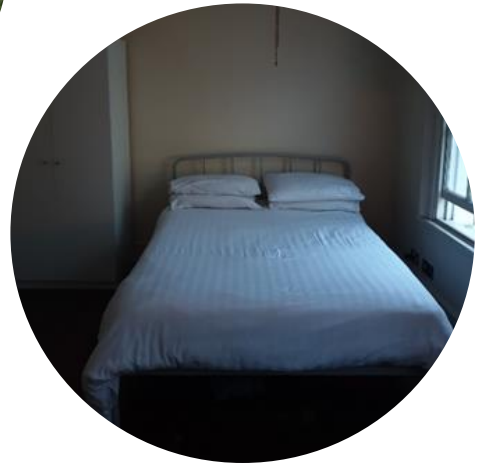
Women’s experience of the COVID-19 lockdown

Survey of women in contact with the Criminal Justice System and supported by Advance’s Minerva Services, sharing their experiences and impact of the pandemic and the lockdown in March to June 2020.

“Being stuck in the
same four walls”



“I have felt
overwhelmed at
times, due to the
living quarters
that I share with my
children, a ten, three
and two-year-old”



Photographs and quotes by women supported by Advance during lockdown

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The lockdown felt sudden and the change left me very unsettled. I had just moved to a new house and had to wait weeks for certain basic household items.

The isolation made me feel **extremely lonely and vulnerable**. I was uneasy when I went out for my one-hour daily exercise, some days I couldn't face going out at all. I felt **homesick** and wanted to be close to my family.

I felt completely broken at times, in a constant fight or flight mode. I cried every day for about 7 weeks. I am not typically a person who would cry every day or feel lonely. I still feel anxious, but I am glad the lockdown is starting to ease and things are feeling familiar again. ”

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Covid-19 lockdown experience

On March 23rd, the UK government announced a national lockdown to combat the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women in the criminal justice system face multiple disadvantages and vulnerabilities, which this situation has greatly exacerbated.

Women faced increased risk of exploitation, domestic and sexual abuse, isolation, homelessness, and mental health and problematic substance use issues were exacerbated, increasing the risk of suicide, self-harm and offending.

As agencies reduced or even withdrew access to services due to lockdown, women were at risk of falling through the cracks and Advance teams found themselves working harder and longer to ensure they supported the women and to achieve partnership solutions. Women were being released from prison out into an unchartered, strange environment without adequate community support, as referral pathways were changed and sometimes suspended, resulting in reduced access to support.

Approach and Method

Advance undertook this research to understand this further and provide insights into the challenges faced by women in contact with the criminal justice system during this time:

- 368 women were surveyed to ascertain their level of digital access through individual contact by Advance in April 2020.
- 48 women were surveyed via a questionnaire, during a 2-week period between 20th May to 3rd June 2020.
- 5 additional women were interviewed and provided qualitative insights into their experiences, including photographs of their living spaces and case studies, in July 2020.

Key Findings

Women's needs were adversely impacted during COVID-19 lockdown

- **75%** of women said their support needs had changed due to COVID-19
- **60%** reported a negative effect on their health and wellbeing
- Women reported an increased risk of
 - **40%** financial difficulty,
 - **28%** self-harm, and
 - **27%** problematic substance use

Women lacked access to basic essentials and to ways of getting help, due to digital exclusion:-

- **53%** of 368 women surveyed did not have access to a smart phone or computer
- **11%** of 368 women had no phone or computer, increasing the risk of safeguarding
- **20% to 25%** of 48 women surveyed could not access food, essential household supplies and medicine
- **31%** of 48 women surveyed needed support with accommodation needs

Women's most common support needs were mental health & well-being (52%), financial support (35%), physical health (31%), and accommodation (31%).

A small proportion of women reported a reduced risk of offending, self-harm, and substance misuse.

Recommendations

Learning from this experience through our research, Advance recommends that

1. Women in the criminal justice system are provided with the fundamentals on their path to break the cycle of re-offending through all commissioned services, including on release from prison access to **food, clothing, hygiene packs and other essentials**
2. All women are provided with access to **mobile technology** to enable them to access and engage with support and services, and address digital inequalities.
3. All women in the criminal justice system are offered **emotional and mental health support**, including specialist one-to-one holistic services such as Advance's Minerva programme and counselling where appropriate, to enable improved engagement with other services to meet women's often multiple and complex needs.

Covid-19 has presented an opportunity to shift our perspectives about disadvantage and those most vulnerable in society. The national response of support, innovation and community should create a **long-lasting legacy** to come out of this difficult time.

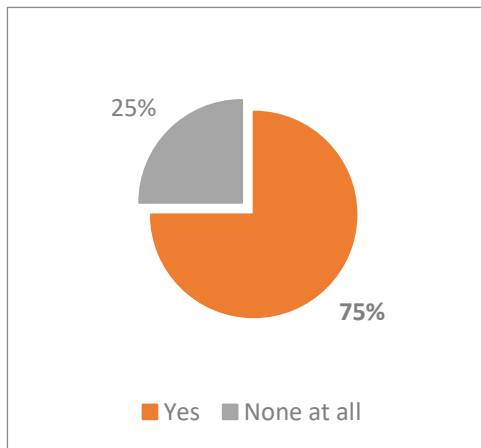
For some of the women themselves, this has been **a chance to reflect**, remove themselves from negative influences in the community, and take positive steps forward to change their lives.

We hope for the women, and society as a whole, the 'silver linings' and opportunities presented by this experience will be sustained during this crisis and beyond.

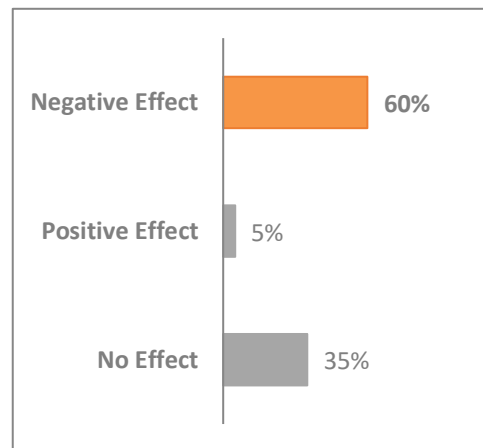
SURVEY FINDINGS

Risks & Needs

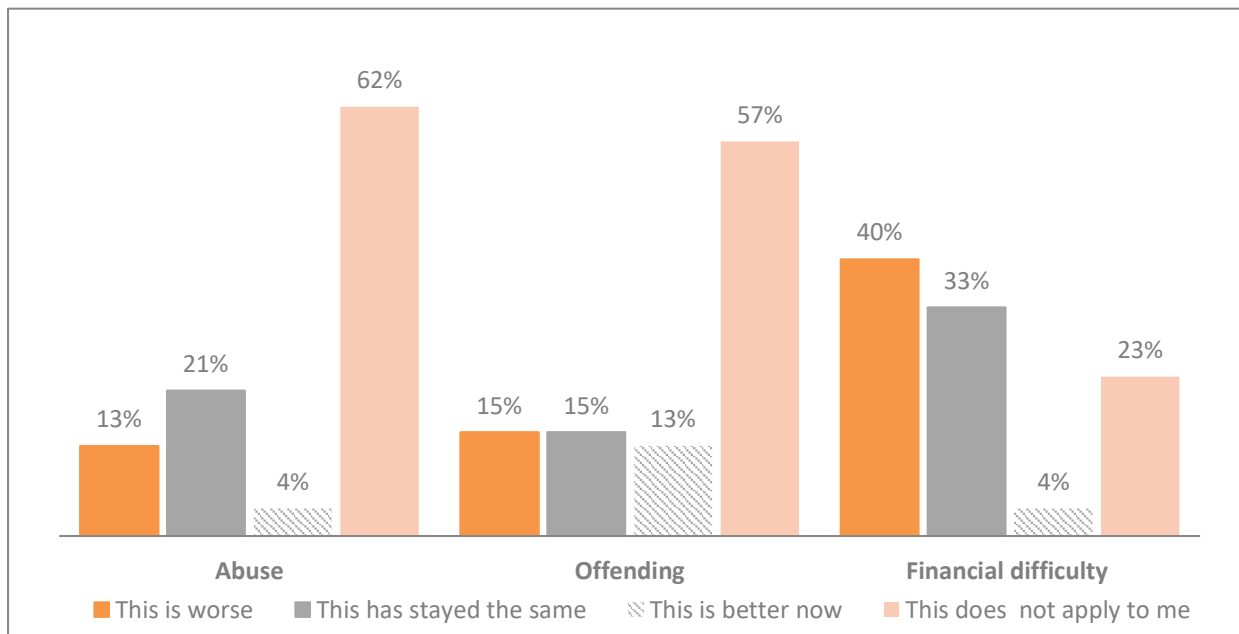
Do you feel your support needs have changed as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown?



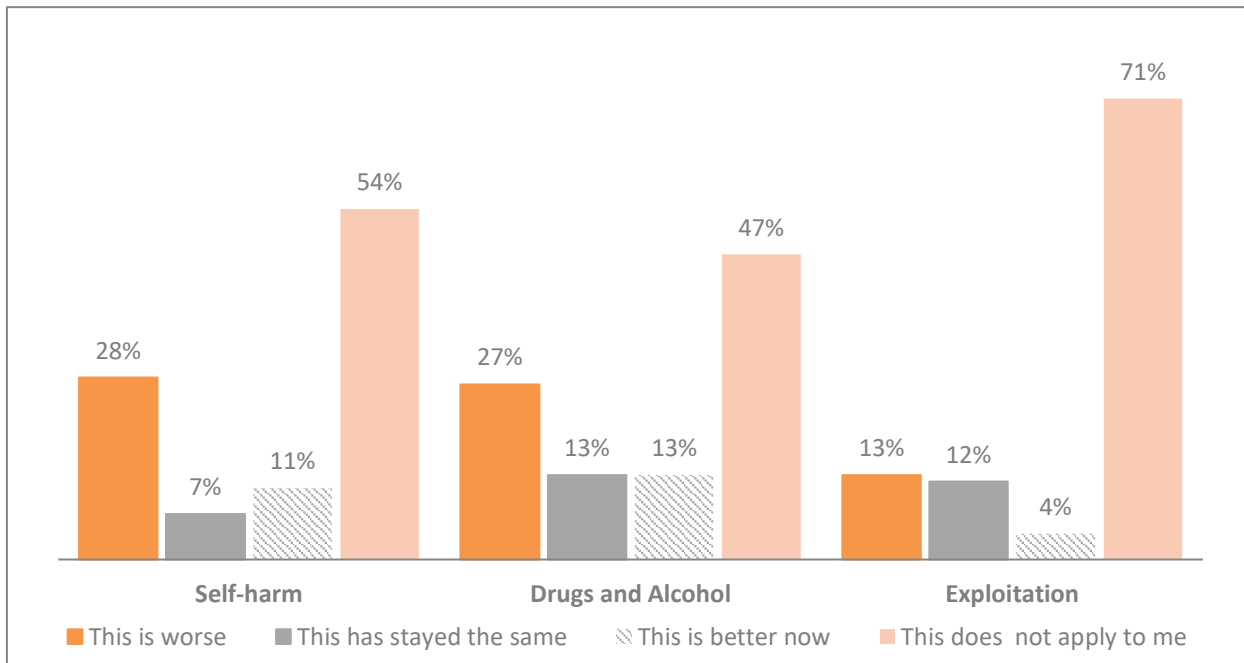
What impact has the COVID-19 lockdown had on your overall health and well-being?



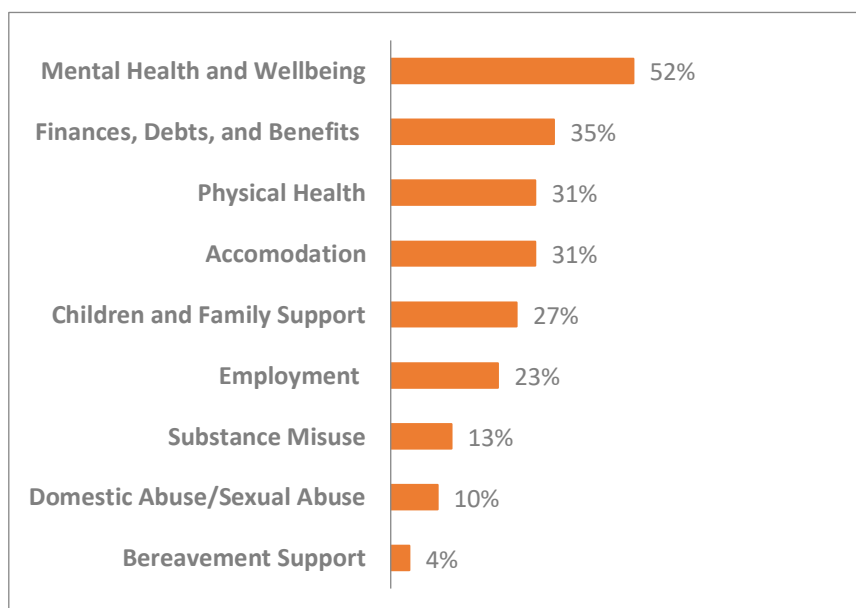
To what extent has the COVID-19 lockdown impacted on any of the following risks towards you?



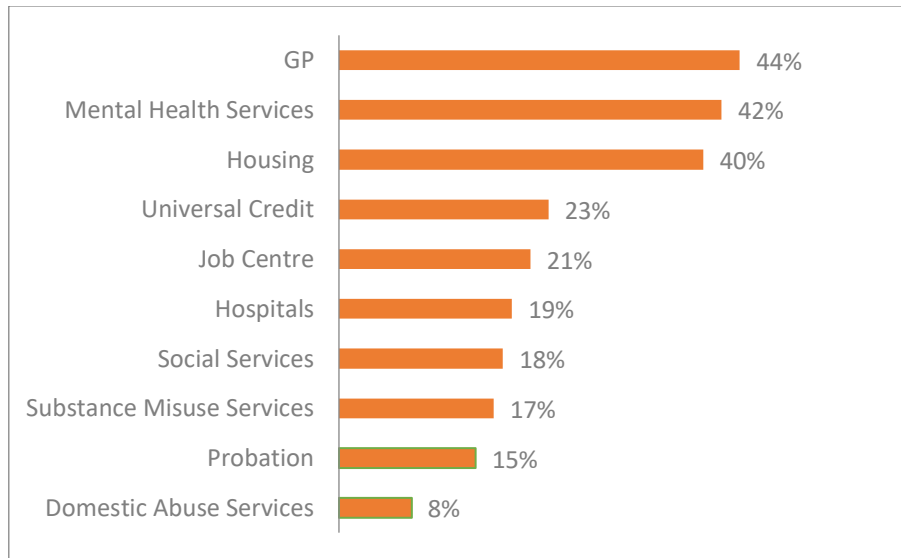
To what extent has the COVID-19 lockdown impacted on any of the following risks towards you?



During this period, what do you feel you have needed the most support with?



Has it been difficult for you to access any of the following services during this time?

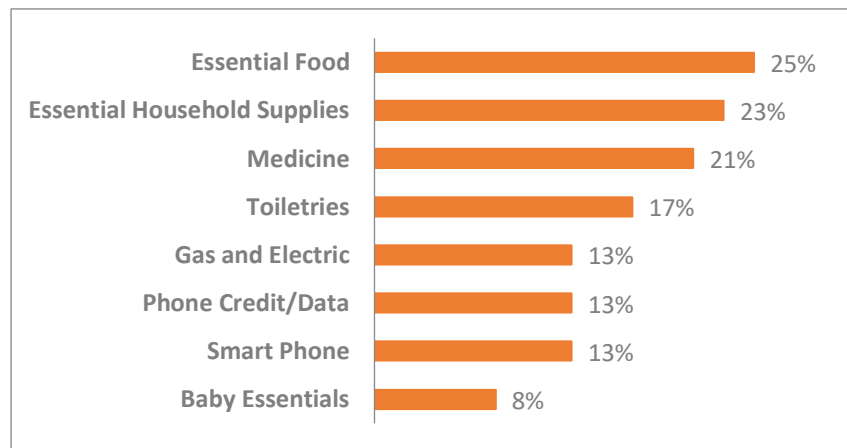


“ I lost all structure and now have a whole week to fill. I felt frustration due to chasing services. No data, so I am using WIFI from mother’s home to contact services. Trying hard to build and maintain a structure and motivation. Managing to get a response from housing and the GP but everything is taking so long ”

SURVEY FINDINGS

Hardship

Have there been any items that you have been unable to access due to the COVID-19 lockdown?



Have you got access to a smart phone, a computer or a simple phone during to the COVID-19 lockdown?

53% of women did not have access to a smart phone or laptop/ computer

42% had access to a basic phone

11% had no access to their own phone at all .¹

“ I’ve been very stressed due to my health conditions and not being able to afford to pay my council tax. I can't afford to pay for medication. I don't have the money to eat what I want to eat ”

“ I have been unable to work during the lockdown. My financial situation has got worse which has led to offending ”

¹ Based on a survey of 368 women
advancecharity.org.uk

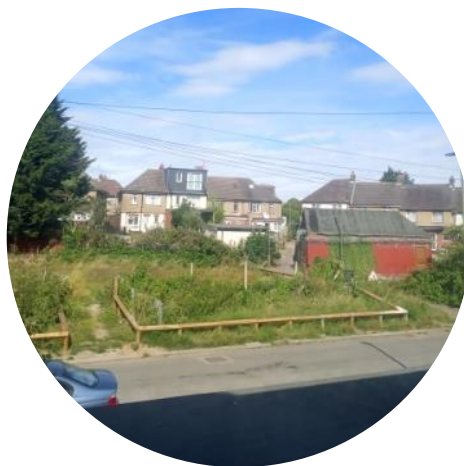
SURVEY FINDING

Silver linings

There were some positive experiences amongst the women surveyed, as the time in lockdown **allowed them to reflect and become more self-aware**, while the situation further highlighted their needs and **encouraged them to seek support**.

“ The lockdown has made me realise how alone I really am and that I have nobody. But on the flip side, it made me realise that I needed to look into my drug use which I am now getting help with ”

“ I feel the lockdown has forced me to deal with my mental health and to talk more openly about it which I never did before, I used to brush it off and pretend I was fine when I wasn't ”



WOMEN'S STORIES

Two women tell their stories and journeys through the lockdown since March 2020 ; their names have been changed to protect them. They share feedback about the support they received by Advance's Minerva service.

Lauren's journey

"I moved into my new bedroom 2 days before lockdown after having ended my lease in my old place ahead of expecting a prison sentence. **I found myself in a strange, empty place, isolated as London went into lockdown.**

I've always turned to my faith to help me through hard times (rosary beads above my bed) but it was at this point I knew I had to reach out for help from Minerva. The fear of the unknown crept in and I found myself really struggling being thrown out of routine, nothing felt familiar.

Minerva (Advance service) helped me to find comfort in my passion for playing music and reading, studying Opera and Art History. Minerva encouraged me to embrace the time doing things for myself and be more kind to myself. I found solace in these pastimes and no longer felt alone with the help of Minerva. I felt included and supported.

I had been dreaming about visiting the bluebell wood below my parent's house when lockdown was over, and I finally got there with my family recently. I felt that things had gone full circle.

That week my keyworker had done a review with me of the initial goals we set which helped me to reflect back on how far I had come; **how much more positive and optimistic my mindset was from (Advance) Minerva helping me out of such a dark place.** I wouldn't have got through it without this support and will always be grateful."

WOMEN'S STORIES

Sudha's journey

"I feel anxious about the unknown, I do not fully understand what is happening. Wrapped up in too many thoughts. The house is messy. I make my own face masks. No support groups. The high street is empty. I am worried about my daughter in foster care. **I am tempted to numb my mood with alcohol and other substances, but I do not want to disappoint myself by relapsing.**

I have been feeling very low and isolated from peers and professionals. My sleep is better, but I do not eat well. Irregular mood, some days are spent creating art, mending clothes and cooking which lifts my spirits. I watch Netflix on my phone.

I go out in the community for essentials, but the bus journey causes anxiety. I have regular phone calls with my daughter. Heading into the community more often and it is good to see people. I do art on my walls! I have an appetite again and I eat well.

I made it, I did not give into temptation and I am proud.

Still no (Advance) groups , I miss the support. I miss my daughter. I would like routine and purpose back in my life. The uncertain feelings remain, but I try to stay positive."



Acknowledgements

Thank you to our Advance team, including Summer, Krishna, Emma and Amy, for spearheading this research and to all the women who engaged in our surveys and those who provided additional insights into their journeys, sharing their experience of lockdown.

Advance

Founded in 1998, Advance's vision is a world where women and children lead safe, violence-free and equal lives so that they can flourish and actively contribute to society. We do this through our mission of saving and changing lives, by working with women who experience domestic abuse to be safe and take control of their lives, and women who have committed crime or are at risk of offending to break the cycle.

Advance

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