



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

Update on Initial Findings¹

Research briefing by Dr Helen McCabe, Dr Rowland Seymour, and Hannah Coggins

Calls to the national helpline for forced marriage dropped throughout the first quarter of 2021. In March 2021, they were at the same level as during the first “lockdown”² (in spring 2020).



As restrictions on movement and household mixing tightened, calls declined. This suggests there was a decrease in cases of forced marriage in late 2020-early 2021 due to on-going impacts of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions

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.

Karma Nirvana (KN) are an NGO who run the national helpline for victims of forced marriage and honour based abuse. In 2017 they received (on average) 40 calls or emails regarding forced marriage each week; in 2018 they received 71; in 2019, 56; in 2020, 71. Although increasing in number, referrals relating to forced marriage are a gradually declining percentage of the total contacts they receive year-on-year, from 32.5% in 2017 to 18.4% in 2020.³

KN receive referrals from victims; children’s social care services; police; other third parties; adult social care services; schools; voluntary services; colleges; universities; the voluntary domestic abuse sector; health

services; family members; local councils; mental health services; refuges; housing

services; victim support; statutory domestic abuse services; Women’s Aid; GPs and doctors; survivors; perpetrators; and legal practitioners. People contact them from all over the UK, but most calls come from West Yorkshire, London, the West Midlands, Thames Valley, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire, Bedfordshire, South Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside.⁴

Although data on the prevalence of forced marriage in the UK is scarce, on average, 30% of cases dealt with by the UK Government Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) over the last nine years have involved 0-17 year olds, and 80% of cases involved females.⁵ 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 in the UK.

Changes to Calls to Karma Nirvana's Helpline

We have used changepoint analysis to understand when key changes to calls to KN's helpline happened, and map these against relevant decisions about Covid-related restrictions and policies. This gives us a window into how people at risk of, or already experiencing, forced marriage have been affected by Covid-related decision-making in 2020 and 2021.

As reported in [our first data update](#), we can see a direct correlation with some key

Covid-related decision-making by the UK Government in early 2020. Calls to KN's helpline relating to forced marriage significantly dropped the week commencing 23 March 2020 (when the first "lockdown" was declared), significantly increasing as restrictions eased in mid-May 2020.⁶

Analysis of further data from KN shows that call rates continued to fall from a high-point in October 2020 through to the end of March 2021, where calls were at a similar level to the first UK-wide lockdown (23 March – 10 May 2020⁷).

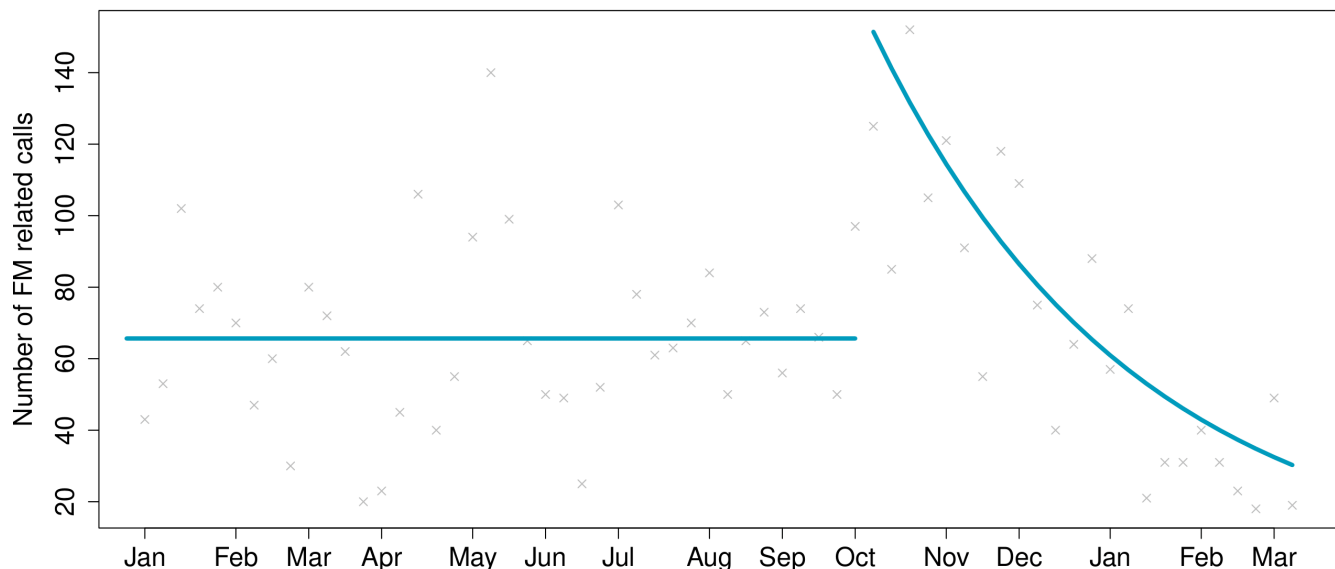


Figure 1: Changepoint analysis of weekly calls to Karma Nirvana's helpline January 2020 to March 2021

Location of Referrals to Karma Nirvana's Helpline

KN receive calls from all over the UK, but predominantly from London, West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, Thames Valley and Staffordshire (see Figure 2). These were all among the areas of England which experienced the most-stringent Covid-related restrictions, and for the longest periods of time.

We focus here on restrictions in, or affecting, England, as this is where most of KN's calls come from. After the lifting of most restrictions from May 2020, several areas of England were subject to increasingly severe restrictions, beginning with the "local lockdown" in Leicester at the end of June.⁸ Restrictions continued to be more-severely imposed in parts of the UK (e.g. the North West of England, and parts of London), as they were lifted in other areas.

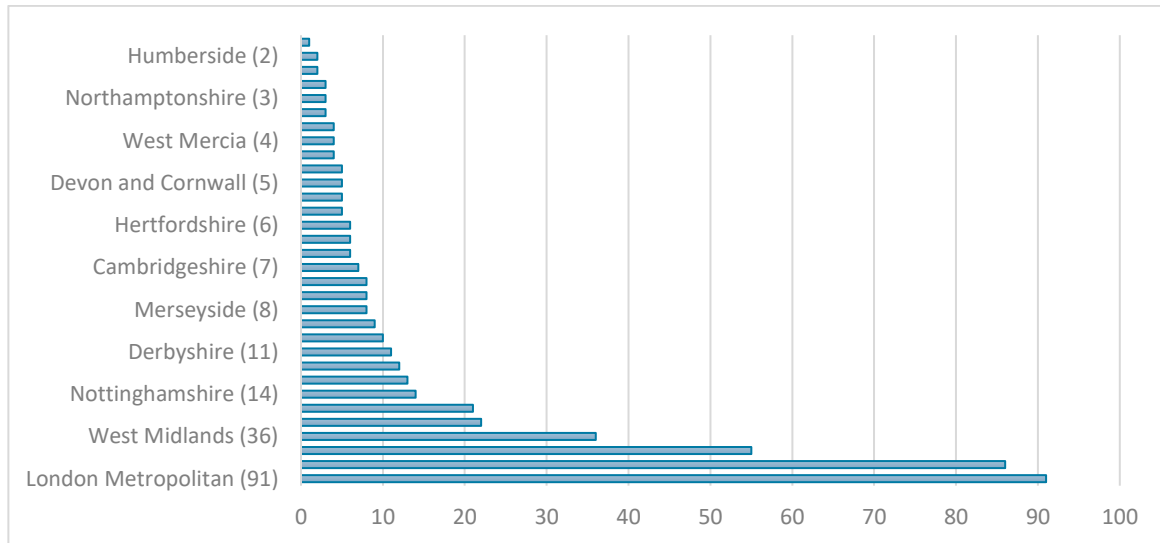


Figure 2: Region (in England) of referral for calls regarding forced marriage to KN in 2020 (where known)

Relevant Covid-Related Restrictions

Schools officially re-opened in England from September 2020, even in areas with greater local restrictions, though classes were sent home if cases of Covid-19 were detected in class or Year-group “bubbles”.⁹

Restrictions continued to tighten across the UK from September 2020 (e.g., with the re-introduction of the “rule of 6”¹⁰, and weddings limited to 15 guests), and the introduction of more-stringent restrictions in several local areas, particularly in the North-West.¹¹

On 14 October, England entered a “Tier” system of restrictions.¹² Originally, there were three Tiers: Medium Alert; High Alert; and Very High Alert.¹³ A fourth (Stay at Home) was introduced on 20 December.¹⁴ Medium alert meant the “rule of six” restrictions were still in place. Under High Alert, household mixing was prohibited indoors. Under Very High Alert, household mixing was banned indoors as well as outdoors.¹⁵

25 July 2020

- Local Lockdown
- 1m Plus Restrictions

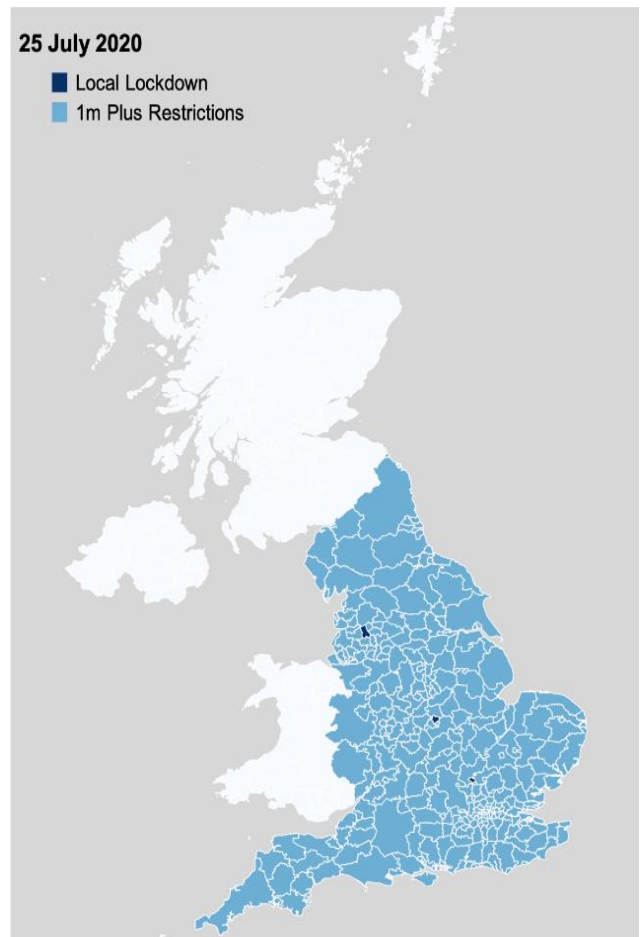


Figure 3: Covid-related restrictions in England, July 2020

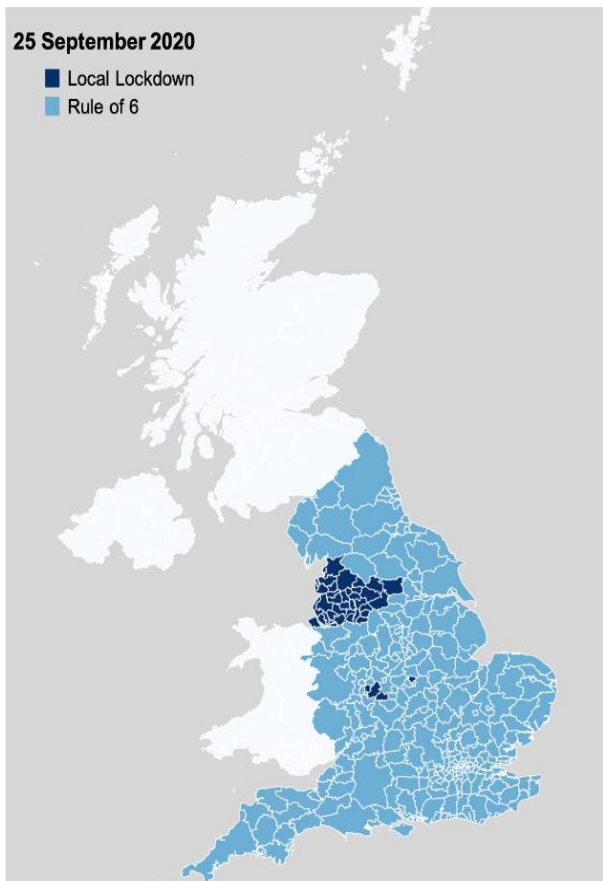


Figure 4: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 September 2020

In October, Liverpool City Region was immediately placed in Very High alert.¹⁶ Significant areas of Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Derbyshire, Lancashire, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Durham, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Tees Valley, West Midlands, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire were immediately put into High Alert.¹⁷ The rest of England was put on Medium Alert.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards (17 October), areas in Cumbria, Essex, London, North Yorkshire and Surrey were added to the High Alert level¹⁹, followed (on 24 October) by parts of Berkshire and Staffordshire, and at the end of October, Bedfordshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, Shropshire, Lincolnshire and Oxfordshire²⁰.

Throughout October, in addition, other areas within local authorities which were partly under High Alert were also raised to that level. Significant parts of Lancashire, Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire,

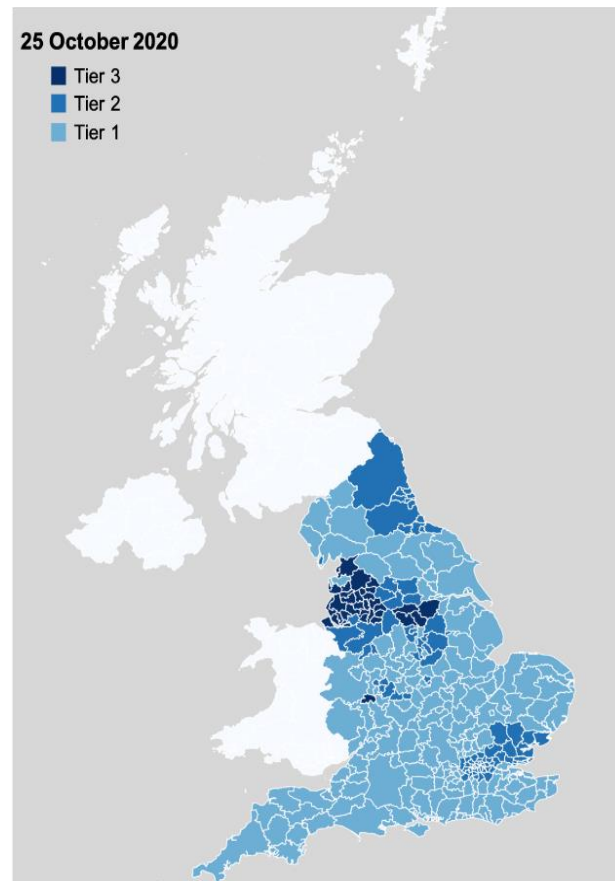


Figure 5: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 October 2020

Cheshire and Nottinghamshire were put into Very High Alert.²¹

In November 2020, all areas of England entered a month-long second “lockdown”, although schools remained open. These restrictions were lifted, with a return to Tier restrictions of differing levels in different areas of the country, on 2 December.²²

These restrictions were updated over the month²³ (including the introduction of “Christmas bubbles”, rules regarding which were tightened on 19 December²⁴), and by 31 December, only the Isles of Scilly were in Tier 1. No area was in Tier 2. Most of the country was in Tier 3, with all of London and significant parts of the East Midlands, East of England, the North East, the North West, the South East, the South West and West Midlands in the new Tier 4 (Stay at Home).^{25,26}

25 November 2020

■ National Lockdown (Schools Open)

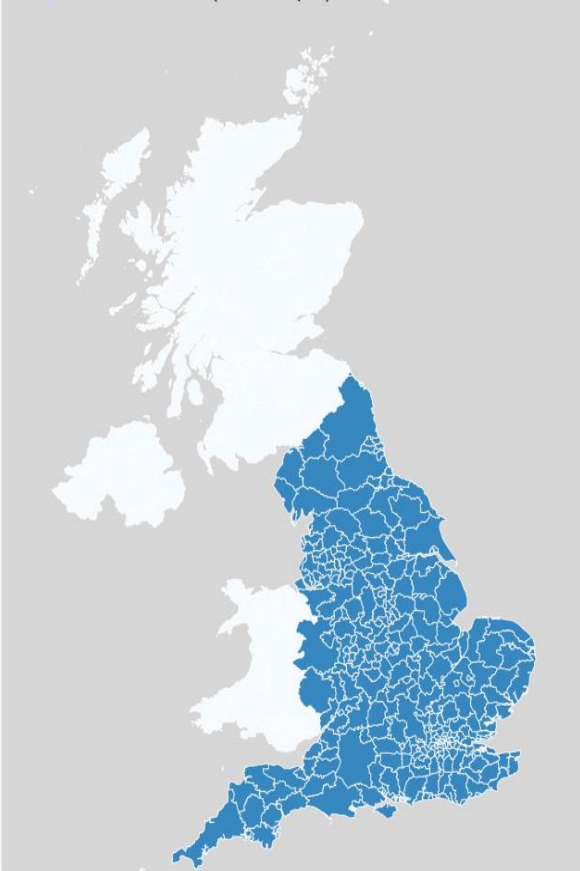


Figure 6: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 November 2020

This Tier was broadly similar to the restrictions put in place during the November “lockdown”.²⁷

A third “lockdown” was introduced across England from 6 January 2021 (announced 4 January). This involved schools and colleges having to “close their doors to all except vulnerable children and those of critical workers”.²⁸ They re-opened on 8 March 2021.

Alongside school closures, between 6 January and 8 March, people were not permitted to be outside their home apart from:

- to shop for basic necessities for themselves or a vulnerable person unable to do their own shopping;

25 December 2020

■ Tier 4
■ Tier 3
■ Tier 2
■ Tier 1

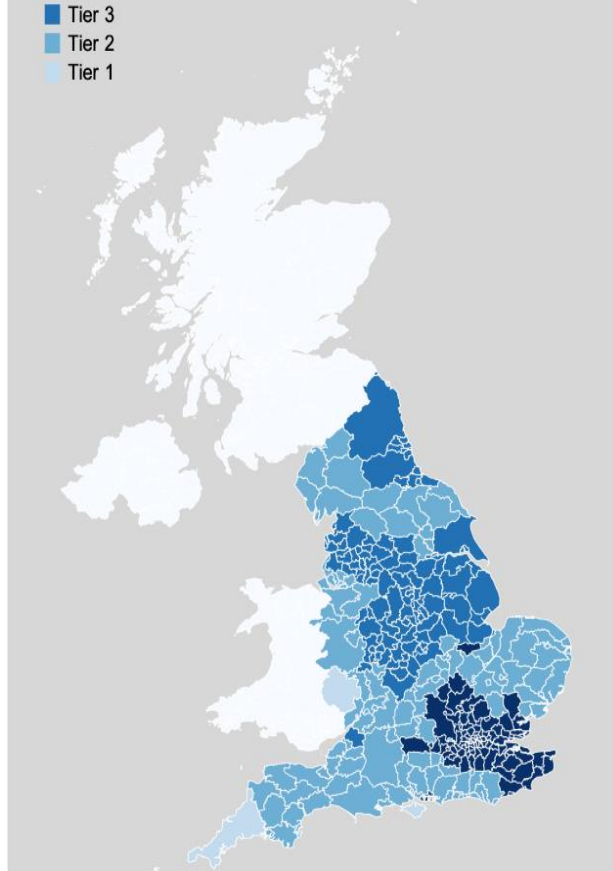


Figure 7: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 December 2020

- go to work or provide voluntary or charitable services, if they could not reasonably do so from home;
- exercise once per day in the local area; meet their support or childcare bubble (if relevant);
- seek medical assistance or avoid injury (including avoiding domestic abuse);
- attend education or childcare (for those eligible).

These restrictions were almost identical to the restrictions as in March 2020 (though with the introduction of support and childcare “bubbles”, and overt permission to leave home to escape domestic violence).

These restrictions have been slowly lifted across England since 8 March, when meeting one other person outside your household outdoors was permitted.²⁹ “Stay at home” was lifted on 29 March, and replaced by the rule of six.³⁰

Restrictions on International Travel

During the Covid-19 pandemic a variety of international travel restrictions were introduced in England. These are also relevant and important, given the number of forced marriages in the UK which involve either someone being taken abroad to marry, or being forced to marry a spouse coming from outside the UK.³¹ Similarly, 10 new referrals to KN’s helpline in 2020 and 4 so far in 2021 have been “international” in geographical location.³²

At the start of the pandemic, there was advice against travel to specific affected regions, followed from February 10, 2020, by the necessity to quarantine if it was suspect people might be infected.³³ People were warned against “non-essential” travel from 16 March 2020, and the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) advised against all non-essential overseas travel a day later.³⁴

After the first “lockdown”, the FCDO advice against international travel remained. People arriving into the UK were asked to self-isolate for fourteen days from June 8.³⁵ From 3 July this only applied to countries “where the virus ... is not yet under control”.³⁶ On 4 July the FCDO announced some exemptions to its advice against international travel.³⁷ “Travel corridors” were introduced on 10 July.³⁸ This meant people did not need to self-isolate on arrival in England from a number of countries, though none of these, apart from Italy, appeared on the list of “focus countries” for forced marriage listed in the FMU statistic for 2020.³⁹ Further changes were made to

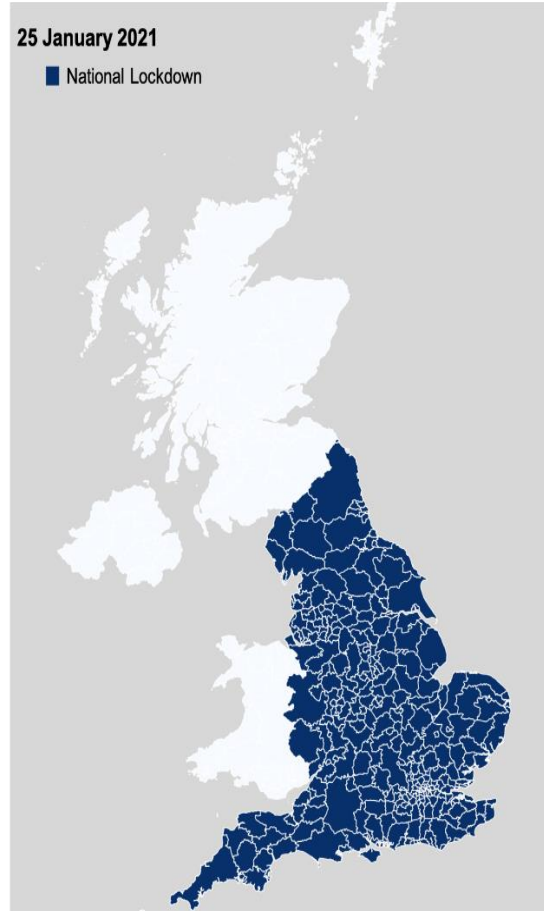


Figure 8: Covid-related restrictions in England, 25 January 2021

the “travel corridor” list throughout the rest of 2020, until they were all suspended in mid-January 2021.⁴⁰ Most other “focus countries” were not included in travel corridors, though the United Arab Emirates was added in November 2020.⁴¹

On 15 January 2021 all travel corridors were suspended, and pre-departure testing required for all inbound passengers to the UK.⁴² Travel was no longer permitted outside of the UK unless for a “valid reason” from January 27 2021.⁴³ Valid reasons included work, to receive medical care, and to make “compassionate visits”, which included attending weddings.⁴⁴ Thus, these restrictions would not necessarily have prevented people travelling for a forced marriage. However, holidaying was overtly stated *not* to be a valid reason⁴⁵, and some forced marriages occur abroad through deceiving the victim into thinking they are being taken “on holiday”.

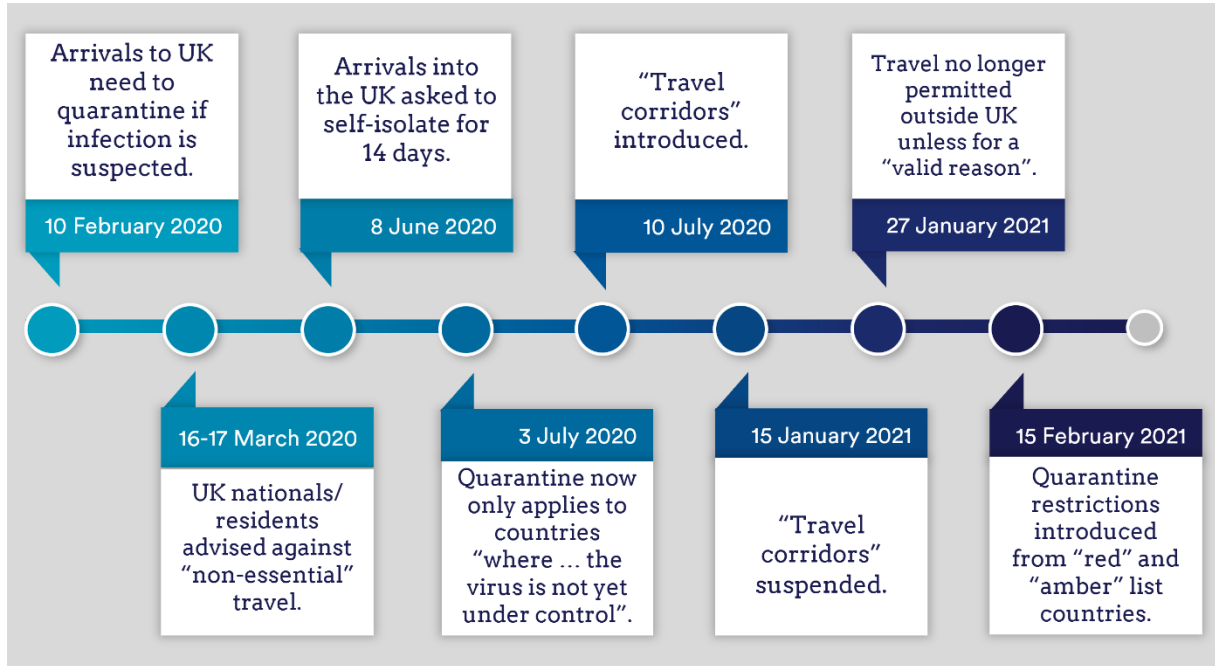


Figure 9: Timeline of Covid-related international travel restrictions imposed by UK government

From 15 February 2021 people returning to the UK from abroad from "red-list" countries had to quarantine in government-approved hotels at their own cost, and at home (or wherever they were staying, if they did not usually reside in the UK) on arrival from "amber-list" countries.⁴⁶ Both sets of restrictions may have deterred people going abroad for the purposes of a forced marriage. Of particular note, given the number of cases involving these countries handled year-on-year by the FMU, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Somalia, Turkey, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Kenya, the United Arab Emirates, and Sudan were all on the red list.⁴⁷

In addition, some countries which are frequent "focus countries" for forced marriage according to the FMU imposed restrictions on travels from the UK. For instance, on 1 January 2021 Bangladesh introduced quarantine requirements for travellers arriving from the UK – travellers had to quarantine in a government facility or government approved/supervised hotels at their own cost.⁴⁸ These restrictions lasted until 3 April 2021, when the Bangladeshi government moved to saying that UK arrivals would be assessed on arrival to see if they ought to quarantine, or if they could self-isolate somewhere other than a government-approved facility.⁴⁹ (On 14 April,

Bangladesh suspended all international flights for two weeks).

Pakistan	286
Bangladesh	69
India	44
Afghanistan	30
Somalia	15
Iraq	7
Romania	7
United Arab Emirates	7
Turkey	6
Italy	5

Table 1: "Focus countries" and number of cases in 2020

On 1 March 2021, Pakistan added the UK to its "Category C" list, allowing only Pakistani passport holders holding a valid visa, Pakistani NICOP holders, Pakistani Origin Card holders, or Diplomatic passport holders (and their families) to enter the country from the UK.⁵⁰ These restrictions may have deterred travel for the purpose of forced marriage to these countries.



Analysis

We see a significant increase in calls relating to forced marriage to KN's helpline around the time schools fully re-opened, and the two are plausibly connected, though in 2020 schools, colleges and universities only account for 31 referrals to KN's helpline.⁵¹ (In 2019, this was 44 cases.⁵²) The highest number of calls come from victims themselves (230 from single victims in 2020⁵³). School re-opening may have made it easier for victims to contact the national helpline, including by providing an opportunity to safely leave the home and make phone calls in private, even if that was not via teachers or pastoral staff in school. Similarly, the number is advertised in several schools, which may be how victims accessed the helpline. In addition, KN re-started advocacy work in schools when they re-opened (though this only applies to West Yorkshire).

As restrictions tightened across the UK, calls relating to forced marriage dropped at KN's helpline. We see a peak in calls as the Tier system was introduced, and more and more areas were moved into Tier 3 ("Very High Alert"). The highest number of calls relating to forced marriage in one week of the whole pandemic (152) was received in the week parts of London, Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire joined Liverpool in Tier 3. As Figure 2 shows, these are areas which account for a high percentage of calls regarding forced marriage to KN's helpline.

This is an interesting contrast to earlier 2020: the previous highest number of calls that year (140) came in the week beginning 18 May, when the first lockdown began to lift (with "stay at home" moving to "stay alert").

Calls to the helpline fell throughout the second "lockdown" (where schools remained open but household mixing and much other outdoor activity was banned), and also through the third "lockdown", back to the levels seen in the first, 12 months earlier.

There was a slight peak in cases in the week beginning 4 January. Schools opened on 5 January, but then closed on 6 January.⁵⁴ We did

not see a significant increase in cases when schools re-opened from 8 March 2021, though there were significantly more calls to the helpline relating to forced marriage in the week beginning 15 March than the one either before or after, which may be associated with schools re-opening.

Overall, data from KN shows that increasing restrictions lead to falls in calls to the national helpline related to forced marriage. This may be because restrictions prevent forced marriages from being planned or attempted, or from happening if they had already been planned. (We should, though, note some accounts of forced marriages happening via Skype during restrictions.)

It may, however, be that victims are simply less able to contact the helpline as they have much less privacy. Moreover, concerned third parties (including teachers, friends, colleagues, social workers and police officers) are less able to spot signs that potential victims are at risk.

This said, it is worth noting that calls, in total, to KN increased by 36% during 2020 (compared to 2019), with calls mainly concerning honour based abuse and domestic abuse.⁵⁵ "Lockdowns" and other restrictions did not make it impossible for people to contact the helpline, therefore. This suggests a decline in cases of forced marriage, rather than that people specifically at risk of forced marriage were unable (or unwilling) to contact the helpline.

There is a real concern, however, that forced marriages were still being *planned* during Covid-related restrictions, and that there will be a surge in cases once restrictions ease (as they are doing at present).

Further Research

Our project continues to study the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions on people at risk of, or already experiencing, forced marriage in the UK. Please check our project website (forcedmarriageresearch.ac.uk) for further updates.

References

- 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 We have put “lockdown” in quotation marks, because there is no official definition from UK government about a “lockdown”.
- ³ Based on analysis of data shared by project partners Karma Nirvana (KN).
- ⁴ Based on analysis of data shared by KN.
- ⁵ Based on analysis of data available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.
- ⁶ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/april/impact-of-covid-19-on-calls-to-national-forced-marriage-helpline.pdf>.
- ⁷ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf>.
- ⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-06-29/debates/OF09COAB-4A72-4E67-832A-1F8FC07F2D2E/Covid-19Update>
- ⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/all-possible-measures-to-be-taken-before-schools-and-colleges-close>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-visits-to-schools-and-colleges-to-begin-this-month>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-to-visit-nurseries-and-childminders-this-autumn>.
- ¹⁰ That is, where no more than 6 people could gather, either indoors or outdoors. Exemptions existed for single households or support bubbles of more than 6 people. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/rule-of-six-comes-into-effect-to-tackle-coronavirus>.
- ¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-press-conference-statement-9-september-2020>; House of Commons Library, (2021) Coronavirus: A History of English Lockdown Laws (9068); <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-22-september-2020>; The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (England) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2020.
- ¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/update-on-new-social-distancing-rules>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-press-conference-statement-9-september-2020>.
- ¹³ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9068/CBP-9068.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-tier-4-stay-at-home-alert-level-in-response-to-new-covid-variant>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1611/made>.
- ¹⁵ <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-local-alert-levels-three-tier-system-for-england/>.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1105/made>.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1104/made>.
- ¹⁸ <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-local-alert-levels-three-tier-system-for-england/>.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1128/made>.
- ²⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1154/introduction/made>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1189/introduction/made>.
- ²¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1105/made>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1183/introduction/made>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1176/introduction/made>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1154/introduction/made>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/1131/made>.
- ²² <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9068/CBP-9068.pdf>.
- ²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/review-of-local-restriction-tiers-17-december-2020>.
- ²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-19-december-2020>.
- ²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-tier-4-stay-at-home-alert-level-in-response-to-new-covid-variant>.
- ²⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/full-list-of-local-restriction-tiers-by-area#tier-4-stay-at-home>.
- ²⁷ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9068/CBP-9068.pdf>.
- ²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-to-the-house-of-commons-on-covid-19-regulations-6-january-2021>.
- ²⁹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9068/CBP-9068.pdf>.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*.
- ³¹ For instance, see year-on-year data from the Forced Marriage Unit (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>). A significant number of cases to KN’s helpline each year are also flagged as “international” rather than coming from any specific UK region.
- ³² From data shared by KN.
- ³³ https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/129/pdfs/ukxi_20200129_en.pdf.
- ³⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51917562> Last accessed 7.5.21; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-16-march-2020>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/travel-advice-foreign-secretary-statement-17-march-2020>.
- ³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-new-public-health-measures-for-all-uk-arrivals>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-the-coronavirus-press-conference-3-june-2020>.
- ³⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-3-july-2020>.
- ³⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/self-isolation-lifted-for-lower-risk-countries-in-time-for-holidays-this-summer>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53217342>.
- ³⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/travel-corridors>.
- ³⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-55682825>.
- ⁴¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/jul/06/which-countries-can-uk-holidaymakers-visit-without-restrictions-on-arrival>.
- ⁴² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/all-uk-travel-corridors-temporarily-suspended-to-protect-against-new-international-variants>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/international-travel-update-11-january-2021>.
- ⁴³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tougher-border-controls-to-protect-public-health>.
- ⁴⁴ See “Declaration Form for International Travel from Endland during stay at home restrictions”.
- ⁴⁵ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-01-27/debates/3227B823-BAD0-4AC5-8160-4F7ECC9F9A6D/HealthMeasuresAtUKBorders>
- ⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-confirms-mandatory-hotel-quarantine-to-be-introduced-from-15-february>; The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (England) (Amendment) (No. 7) Regulations 2021
- ⁴⁷ For more information and discussion, see our [briefing](#) on the impact of travel restrictions and quarantine on people at risk of, or vulnerable to, forced marriage in the UK.
- ⁴⁸ <https://travelbans.org/asia/bangladesh/>.
- ⁴⁹ <https://travelbans.org/asia/bangladesh/>
- ⁵⁰ <https://www.caapakistan.com.pk/upload/MISC/CAT-c-Travel-Restrictions-Mar-01-2021.pdf>
- ⁵¹ Based on data shared by KN.
- ⁵² From data shared by KN.
- ⁵³ From data shared by KN.
- ⁵⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/55538338>.
- ⁵⁵ Based on data shared by KN.