



SHINING LIGHT ON THE SHADOW

The impact of the COVID-19
Pandemic on Abuser Behaviour





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FOREWORD

The Backbone Collective would like to thank the Ministry for Women, for providing some funds towards enabling us to undertake the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Abuser Behaviour Survey via the Community Fund grants made in November 2021.

Backbone would also like to acknowledge and thank the 35 women who took part in our survey. We understand that reflecting on experiences of abuser behaviour and a sometimes failed system and agency response to that abuse, can be very distressing for you and your children. We value your courage and your generosity in sharing your experiences in the hope that other victim-survivors and children will not have to experience what you have. Our hope is that Government agencies, policy advisors and service providers will read this report and use your experiences and recommendations to urgently improve the way services and policy is designed and provided to enhance victim-survivor safety as the first and most important priority.

About the Backbone Collective

Backbone was launched in March 2017 to enable women to safely and anonymously tell the Government, others in authority, and the public about how the 'system' responded to them when they experienced violence and abuse, and how they need it to respond for them to be safe and rebuild their lives.

Backbone is an independent organisation and a registered charity with the New Zealand Charities Commission. Our purpose is to contribute to the continuous improvement of the response system in Aotearoa New Zealand so that it works well to support and protect women and their children when they experience violence and abuse. We run online surveys to collect anonymous feedback from women victim-survivors (service users) about different parts of the response system. We share reports about the findings of these surveys with recommendations for how the system can work more safely. Our ability to give victim-survivors the opportunity to share their experiences is reliant on donations, philanthropic grants and other contracts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aotearoa New Zealand lunged into an unprecedented environment when the COVID-19 pandemic hit our shores. Research emerged early in the pandemic that rates of domestic/intimate partner violence/family violence and sexual violence were increasing. The World Health Organisation labelled the growing rate of violence against women the 'shadow pandemic'. While government agencies and service providers in Aotearoa New Zealand focussed on the risk to women and children still in a relationship with an abuser, the risks and experiences of separated women and their children dealing with post separation abuse were largely overlooked.

Raising red flags

From the outset, Backbone began to receive communications from women victim-survivors who had separated from their abusive ex partners. These women explained that their abusers were using COVID-19 and public health measures in response to COVID-19, to further their post separation abuse. Many of these women shared care of children with abusive ex partners as ordered by the New Zealand Family Court. Backbone wrote to Government officials and the Principal Family Court Judge early on in the pandemic seeking clarity about rules for parents and children who were subject to parenting shared care orders. We warned officials of the potential for abusers to use the pandemic response to exacerbate their abuse and maintained that it was not sufficient nor safe to treat non-family violence cases and family violence cases in the same way and particularly at that time. However, our warnings were minimised and instead the response from officials and the Principal Family Court Judge was to simply reassure Backbone that children's safety was and would be prioritised.

Finding out more about victim-survivors' experiences during the pandemic

In March 2022, Backbone released an online survey to better understand victim-survivors' and their children's experiences of abuser behaviour and government agencies' and services' responses to that behaviour, during the COVID-19 pandemic. We received survey responses from 35

women victim-survivors who have 68 dependent children between them. All but one of the participants was separated from the abuser at the time of completing the survey, and more than half had been separated for over five years. These women experienced ongoing abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, their children experienced violence and abuse while they were in court ordered unsupervised care with the abuser during lockdowns.

Abusers use COVID-19 as a new tool of abuse

Participants described the ways that abusers used the COVID-19 pandemic as a new tool/weapon of abuse. While many New Zealanders were worried about the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, their health and well-being and that of their friends, family and whānau, victim-survivors also experienced genuine worries and fears regarding the behaviour of their abuser during the pandemic. Nearly two thirds of participants worried that if they got unwell their child/ren would still be forced into the care of the abuser and that if they tried to keep their children safe with them during the lockdowns they would be punished by the Family Court for doing so. Many worried about the safety of their children while being in lockdown at the abuser's home. They reported feeling more isolated and vulnerable to stalking and abuse and more vulnerable to getting unwell from COVID-19 due the abuser's disregard for public health measures. The women described how the abuser behaviour changed throughout the pandemic; for many it got worse towards both them and their children.

These abusers used the isolation, fear, risk of illness and lack of clarity and inconsistency of information, to control, isolate and abuse their ex/partners and children. The types of abuse described by participants included psychological, physical, litigation and financial. Abusers frequently forced contact with the adult victim-survivor and children using in most cases online platforms and/or court ordered contact with children to do so.

Children experienced violence and abuse

The survey participants' worries and experiences of abuse throughout the pandemic were deeply connected to the experiences of their children

and their efforts to keep their children safe, both from getting COVID-19 and from being in unsafe living situations with the abuser. Participants shared that abusers forced contact with children, even when those children were unwell. They also forced shared care orders to continue even when most other New Zealanders were isolating in individual bubbles, and in some cases, they held children in their care and refused to let them speak to or see their mother for significant periods of time. Abusers flouted public health regulations and exposed children to others, refused to share information with the victim-survivor regarding contact with COVID-19 and in some cases, used vaccination as a way to further abuse the victim-survivor or the child/ren either by refusing to vaccinate the child/ren or vaccinating the child/ren without their mother's consent or knowledge.

The children of this study who spent time in lockdown with the abuser, two thirds of whom were under 14 years of age, experienced a range of abusive behaviours. Most were prevented from contacting their mothers, over half were verbally abused and a quarter were physically abused. Some children were neglected and denied food and attention, some were kept from participating in online learning and denied medical attention. Abusers also used the pandemic context to psychologically abuse the children. Nearly half of participants said the abuser told their children that their mother was going to die of COVID-19 and they would never see her again. In some cases, children's communications on line with others (including their mother) were regulated, monitored and recorded by the abuser.

Victim-survivors tried to keep their children safe from COVID-19 and abuse

The survey participants tried to keep their children safe using a range of services and agencies to try and do so. However, the way that the system (government agencies, Family Court, Police and other services) was responding to COVID-19 helped to create an environment that further enabled the violence and abuse.

Shared bubble arrangements enabled further abuse

A significant issue for many participants was that the Family Court recommended shared care orders should continue throughout the lockdowns. While most New Zealanders were being told to stay in their household bubbles during Alert Level three and four phases of the COVID-19 response, the Family Court was telling parents with shared care of children to share bubbles or negotiate with the other parent to agree on care arrangements that were in the 'best interests of their children'. The survey participants were clear that this was an impossible expectation when abusers were fast to use the COVID-19 pandemic disruption, the ambiguous nature of the Family Court requirements and the isolation the pandemic brought, to coercively control and abuse them. The information released both early in the pandemic and throughout, was confusing for the participants and they actively tried to find information to help clarify what they were supposed to do to keep themselves and their children safe. The lack of information and ambiguity of the messages regarding shared care of children worked to the abuser's advantage.

Participants described abusers using the Family Court (litigation abuse) as a way to financially and psychologically abuse them. Two thirds of participants said their child/ren were subject to parenting orders. Abusers used Family Court proceedings during the pandemic to grant, enforce, remove, vary or appeal parenting orders. Some participants were taken to Family Court and accused of contravening parenting orders when they kept children in their care in lockdowns thinking they were obeying public health orders. The Family Court response was described as slow during the pandemic and the slowness impacted some participants' ability to have their children returned to their care after being held by the abuser.

Police were overwhelmed, short staffed and failed to take action

The participants tried to use other agencies and services, such as the Police, for support during the pandemic. Some participants described the Police response as slow, taking longer to attend incidents, and that the Police were unhelpful due to being short-staffed. Some women had

phone contact only with Police or had their case reassigned to other social services as Police were short staffed. Other reasons why participants were unsatisfied with the Police response were that Police failed to take appropriate action, refused to do welfare checks on their children, did not believe their experiences of violence and abuse, colluded with the abuser, lost paperwork or breached their privacy or refused to take action as there were Family Court parenting orders in place. The Police inaction put the victim-survivor and her children in more danger.

Support agencies were overwhelmed and unsure how to help

The women victim-survivors actively tried to get help and support from additional agencies and services, such as, mental health services, Work and Income (WINZ), social workers, Salvation Army, GP, Healthline, Oranga Tamariki, Women's Refuge, and several others. Support that was helpful was likely to be provided by specialist family violence agencies or counselling services. However, the participants' experiences of the support from some agencies and services was often not helpful. Participants described approaching multiple agencies for support but not finding any service that could help them or responses that failed to understand the risk and abuse they or their children were experiencing. Instead these victim-survivors overall describe a system response that overlooked their safety and welfare needs, failed to identify the risk that separated women and children faced during the pandemic, forced their children into lockdown care with abusers and failed to respond when they raised the alarm.

Victim-survivor insights can help shape a better response in the future

Victim-survivor insights, as in the Backbone survey, can be used to improve the system's response to violence and abuse. The survey participants' recommendations are outlined at the end of this report. In summary these victim-survivors want to see a specialist response to victim-survivors and their children that uses a family violence lens to inform policy and service provision which aims to protect women and their children from further abuse. Part of that specialist response requires

officials and service providers understanding that abuse does not end when a relationship ends. A specialist response would mean Family Court directions that enable protective parents to keep the child/ren in their bubble during lockdowns, clearer information about Family Court and public health rules, specialist support and services easily available for adult victim-survivors and children, Police able to undertake welfare checks on children and all services (including Government agencies) should prioritise the needs of victim-survivors and children.

The following report highlights the ways in which abusers used the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health and Family Court responses to it to further their abuse towards adult victim-survivors and children. Backbone hopes that this report provides insight for policy makers and officials to ensure that any future responses to crises, such as a pandemic, are informed by learning from past experience and use a family violence and child safety lens. Furthermore, it is essential to build in opportunity for victim-survivors and others to raise red flags when policy results in further risk to victim-survivors and their children. Most importantly, when those warnings are shared, officials must listen and take action to mitigate the opportunity for further abuse.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Backbone Collective raised issues with the Government, the family law system and the media about the increased rate of family violence and the impact of COVID-19 on abuser behaviour, and how the system was responding to that behaviour. However, while the Government agencies and family violence services' focus remained on women and children in a relationship with an abuser, or women needing to escape violence and abuse during the lockdowns, the experiences of women and children victim-survivors who had already separated from the abuser were largely overlooked.

In 2022 Backbone released an online survey for women and non-binary victim-survivors of intimate partner violence, aged 16+ who live in Aotearoa New Zealand to find out more about the impact of COVID-19 on abuser behaviour and how the system and agencies, including the family law system, had responded to them and their children during the pandemic. The responses we received highlight the ways in which abusive ex partners used the COVID-19 pandemic and the Government health measures put in place in response to it, as a new weapon of abuse against both their ex-partner and their children. For many participants the abuse towards both them and their children got worse during the pandemic. These abusers used the isolation, fear, risk of illness and lack of clarity and inconsistency of information, to control, isolate and abuse their ex/partners and children. The types of abuse described by participants included psychological, physical, litigation and financial. The experiences shared by the survey participants show multiple dangers women victim-survivors have had to navigate during the pandemic whilst attempting to keep themselves and their children safe. Participants described not being believed when they reported abuse, being expected to negotiate with abusers regarding care of children and ambiguity and contradiction between different rules and regulations. These women felt largely failed by the Government, agencies and the

family law system from whom they actively sought help and protection.

The following report provides a list of practical suggestions, as articulated by the participants, to improve how victim-survivors and their children are responded to in the context of the pandemic. Government policy and family law responses need to be informed by a family violence lens to ensure they are fit for purpose. Our hope is that these recommendations (based on lived experience) inform Government, family law and family violence agency reviews of their response during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide ways to improve the current and future response.

BACKGROUND

In 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa, Backbone began hearing from separated women victim-survivors about issues they were experiencing in response to Government lockdowns and alert level requirements and how abusers were responding in this environment. Women said there was a lack of information available on how shared parenting orders should operate in the new COVID-19 context and that there was a risk that some children who were subject to shared care orders might end up trapped in a lockdown bubble with an abusive parent who refused to return the child/ren to the other parent.¹ Backbone wrote to both the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice on 19 March 2020 requesting some clarification regarding the enforcement of parenting orders in light of the pandemic and lockdowns.

The Principal Family Court Judge issued a public statement on 24 March 2020 providing clarification and guidance regarding children subject to shared care arrangements in the evolving COVID-19 context. The guidance centred on protecting children and the wider New Zealand public from the risk of COVID-19; not protecting children from the risk of violence and abuse while in a lockdown care arrangement with an abusive parent. In a letter of reply to Backbone dated 26 March 2020², Minister of Health – Andrew Little stated,

*The Principal Family Court Judge has indicated the court's approach to the requirements of the COVID-19 Level 4 Alert response. Where possible, subject to Ministry of Health requirements to eliminate unnecessary travel, and to travel no further than within one's town or community, **reasonable efforts should be made to fulfil parenting order requirements.** There are exceptions set out in the Judge's guidelines. The Judge says she **expects parents to act in accordance with the***

¹See definitions section for more information about 'lockdowns' and 'bubbles'.

²The Minister's letter was in response to a number of questions Backbone had put to him regarding the COVID-19 Government public health measures – including stay at home orders in relation to mothers and children victim-survivors who had Family Court orders in place.

child's best interests and the wider community and national interest. It is my expectation that parents rise above their personal conflicts at this extraordinary time to do the best. In this respect the Judge says where a child is not able to share time with the other parent in accordance with the parenting order then the parent in whose care the child is for the time being should be generous in ensuring indirect contact by phone, Skype or other means with the other parent. **This is not a time for either parent to seek to re-write arrangements but rather to accept that these extraordinary circumstances call for forbearance and patience.**³

(emphasis in bold added by Backbone)

In effect, the statement released by the Principal Family Judge and reinforced by the Minister of Health, set out a different set of rules for people who were separated and shared care of children that were subject to Family Court orders, to the rules that applied to everyone else. All other New Zealanders were ordered to stay at home in their individual household units – 'bubbles' and not mix with anyone else from other bubbles in order to prevent or limit the spread of COVID-19. Children who were subject to parenting orders however, were expected /permitted to be in shared bubble arrangements and to continue with shared care arrangements if caregivers lived in the same communities and the child and family members were well. The Principal Family Court Judge's statement was ambiguous and leaned on the ability of parents to 'make decisions that are in the best interests of their children'.

Backbone wrote to the Principal Family Court Judge on 26 March 2020. In that letter we raised the issues victim-survivors and children were facing

³To read the public statement from the Principal Family Court Judge and the full response from Minister of Health to Backbone please see here <https://www.backbone.org.nz/s/200326-LITTLE-Hon-A-Backbone-re-Covid-19-wtgw.pdf>

and made suggestions for measures that might mitigate the risks these victim-survivors and their children might encounter.⁴ We also included some information regarding the context of parenting that women and children face when the other parent is abusive and why recommending existing shared care arrangements continue may be dangerous at this time from both a public health perspective and for the safety and best interests of the children involved. Backbone received a reply from the Principal Family Court Judge on 6 May 2020 thanking us for writing but assuring us the Family Court was prioritising the safety of victim-survivors and their children during the pandemic.

I can assure you that the protection of the vulnerable, those subject to family violence, and especially the safety of children, has been, and continues to be, afforded absolute priority during the Covid-19 restrictions.

However, while it is widely known that a crisis can exacerbate abuser behaviour⁵, and in spite of the efforts from Backbone and victim-survivors themselves to alert officials to the increasing risks they and their children faced, little was provided in the way of protective measures for them during this time. Women victim-survivors explained to Backbone early in the pandemic that messaging around COVID-19 stay at home orders and Family Court orders was confusing and dangerous for them and their children and abusers made use of the ambiguous messaging to further their abuse.

Mothers were fearful for children in lockdown situations with the abuser. They were concerned about abusers breaching bubble rules⁶, not returning children to them, or children with medical conditions being

⁴ Please see Appendix 1 to read our letter in full.

⁵ Peterman, Potts, O'Donnell, Thompson, Shah, Oertelt-Prigione, and van Gelder, 2020. "Pandemics and Violence Against Women and Children." CGD Working Paper 528. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/pandemics-and-violence-against-women-and-children>

⁶ See 'definitions' for explanation of 'bubbles' and Covid terminology.

forced to have contact with abusers during the lockdown. Women said they were scared of access handovers that had previously been in public places to protect her and the child/ren and during lockdowns there was no one else around to be another set of eyes or ears and monitor for their safety. We heard about abusers using new ways to abuse in the context of the pandemic including:

- *Sending obsessive emails and/or texts demanding contact with children resulting in constant online surveillance of women and children.*
- *Forcing children to get COVID-19 tests.*
- *Withholding information about potential Covid contacts.*
- *Threatening children that they would not see their mother again or that she would die of Covid.*
- *Denying children access to food, medical attention or schooling while in their care.*
- *Refusing to return children from contact visits.*
- *Using the pandemic to get more contact in Family Court after lockdown (make up time).*

Victim-survivors were told in public messages via the media to reach out for support during the COVID-19 pandemic but some victim-survivors told Backbone that it was not safe for them to reach out for support because this could backfire for them and the children. These women said they were scared of the outcome of asking for help and protection. Their fear related to both the abuser's response and that of the Family Court. These women said they felt like they had nowhere to go, no one believed them and they were trapped. Women reported a poor response from Police who now expected them to 'negotiate' with abusers and told us that

Oranga Tamariki failed to take safety concerns seriously if there was a Family Court order in place.

Increasing the knowledge regarding tactics of abusers and how aspects of the current response can be used to further abuse women and children is important in addressing the unintended consequences of systems that aim to assist rather than harm. Our intention in releasing the current COVID-19 survey was to deepen the insight we have on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on abuser behaviour so that people and agencies can update their policies and services to ensure that women and children victim-survivors are both protected and supported as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact New Zealanders on multiple levels.

Our approach

Based on previous communications with victim-survivors regarding the impact of COVID-19 on abuser behaviour, Backbone set out to design and release an advanced web-based survey that could gather experiences (quantitative and qualitative) from some victim-survivors in an anonymous and safe way. The survey was built using reliable survey software provided through Alchemer (formerly Survey Gizmo). The survey was designed to find out from people who identify as female or gender non-binary, live in Aotearoa New Zealand, aged 16+ and who have experienced family violence in an intimate personal relationship

- *the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on abuser behaviour, and*
- *the safety of victim-survivors of violence and abuse.*

We designed the survey to gather victim-survivor experiences of violence or abuse during the pandemic, specifically their personal experiences during any contact they and/or their children had with the abuser, as well as any interactions they may have had with Police, Government agencies and the justice system regarding the violence and abuse.

Definitions

Victim-survivor – The person who experienced/es an act or series of acts of violence and/or abuse from someone they have been in an intimate personal relationship with.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) - includes physical, sexual, psychological abuse/coercive control and financial abuse. Psychological and emotional abuse is controlling behaviour, often involving humiliation, threats, and constant criticism, which can cause you to feel confused about the truth - as if you are going crazy – and result in fear, anxiety and depression.

Family Violence - includes coercive controlling behaviour, psychological abuse (including financial abuse), physical and/or sexual abuse and dowry related violence from a partner (ex), family member or caregiver. It occurs within a variety of close interpersonal relationships, such as between partner, parents and children, siblings, and in other relationships where significant others are not part of the physical household but are part of the family and/or fulfilling the function of family.

Abuser - the person who used/uses violence and/or abuse against the victim-survivors and/or their child/ren.

The pandemic – throughout the report we also refer to the COVID-19 pandemic as 'the pandemic'.

Lockdown - a public health measure classed as alert level 4 that ensures people stay home and leave only for necessities as part of New Zealand's elimination strategy, and determined by the Government (refer to Appendix 3 for a pandemic timeline).

Bubble/s - self-isolating household units of people.

Alert levels/Elimination Strategy - depending on the risk assessment by Government alert levels (1-4) are determined by risk assessment of transmission to society (refer to Appendix 2).

Traffic Light System/COVID-19 Protection Framework - introduced following the Elimination strategy and sets out a plan to manage life while reducing the impact of future outbreaks (refer to Appendix 2).

SURVEY DESIGN AND DISTRIBUTION

The survey was designed to focus primarily on capturing victim-survivor experiences of abuser behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic and how Government agencies and service providers responded to victim-survivor needs in relation to abuser behaviour.

The survey began with four eligibility questions and then asked some background questions to help us understand more about the participants including whether or not they were separated from the abuser, the gender of the abuser, if they had children and the ages of those children, their ethnicity, and which region of Aotearoa New Zealand they lived in. Following these background questions participants were asked some overview questions to gauge how much of an overall impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on abuser behaviour – was it the same, worse or better? Participants were then asked about specific behaviours the abuser had used during the COVID-19 pandemic and lock-downs during 2020,21, and 22. Questions related to their own worries and experiences and other questions related to their children's experiences (if relevant). The final section of the survey asked participants about their involvement with agencies and services including the Police, the Family Court and other non-Government services. We asked participants to reflect on what could be done to improve the response to victim-survivors and their children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A combination of open text questions and drop-down option questions were included in the survey. The drop-down options were based on experiences victim-survivors had shared with Backbone in the past and a review of international literature regarding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic for victim-survivors.

The survey was tested by one victim-survivor and her suggestions were included in the final design.

The survey went live on 17 March 2022 and was open for a period of three weeks. The survey link was shared with Backbone members in a Backbone newsletter and was shared with a small number of social services known to Backbone.

LITERATURE SCAN

The disruptions of COVID-19 have highlighted and exacerbated the level of IPV/family violence both in New Zealand and internationally. Although public health benefits of social distancing, isolation, quarantines are essential for reducing health risks of spreading the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), there is cause for concern regarding the increased risk of violence from a partner, family member, or other household members that can result from these public health measures (Humphreys et al., 2020). A report published by the Lancet reveals that isolation can cause increased anger, confusion, posttraumatic stress symptoms, as well as increase in substance abuse among people generally (Brooks et al., 2020). It is well understood that IPV/family violence can increase or change dynamics following many types of natural and human emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic, that can result in adverse conditions for individuals, particularly women and children (Mears & Misher, 2005). In 2020, the United Nations (UN) and the Platform of Independent Expert Mechanisms on Discrimination and Violence against Women (EDVAW Platform) issued a statement calling nations to act in addressing 'the pandemic of gender-based violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis.' This statement highlighted concerns around the impact of restrictive health measures that can have compounding effects against women and girls (United Nations Women, 2020).

Several studies have reported evidence that illustrate an increase in IPV/family violence impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Morgan et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2021). Further, abuser behaviour has been found to have increased and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Warren et al. (2021) explored the changes and intensification of coercion, control, and violence which also increased in complexity and severity of IPV/family violence. Concerns about this "shadow pandemic" were raised almost immediately (see for example, van Gelder et al., 2020). The effects of the pandemic on financial and economic security, limitations

on mobility, reduced access to support networks, and trauma from abuse have exacerbated the risk of IPV/family violence. While there is a significant body of evidence that suggests COVID-19 has impacted and intensified IPV/family violence, there is little evidence that focuses on the nuances of these impacts particularly for victim-survivors who were separated from their abuser but share children who move between one parent to the other.

Research on intimate partner violence tends to focus on those individuals within ongoing intimate relationships. However, there is little attention paid to the abuse that occurs for individuals who have ended abusive relationships (Fleury et al., 2000; Henze-Pedersen, 2022; Hardesty, 2002). These studies argue that the abuse does not end for many even after separation⁷. There is evidence that suggests that the risk of violence is heightened when a couple is going through a separation or divorce (Henze-Pederson, 2022). In a recent article discussing the experience of legal abuse for IPV survivors, (Gutowski et al., 2022) the authors explain that separation from an abuser opens the door to a range of ongoing coercive control tactics which may include using the court system to force interaction with the survivor, seek child custody or increased visitation time, distort information about the survivor and financially abuse them. The ongoing nature of IPV has implications for victim-survivors' children. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), it is said that the number of children affected by family violence and IPV is under-reported and is generally considered to be much higher (WHO, 2021). Further, research is scarce concerning the experiences of children in unsupervised living situations with abusers when their protective parent is not living with them. Women's Safety New South Wales (NSW) conducted a survey with frontline service workers and service providers (N-56) and highlighted the unprecedented complications for women experiencing violence through shared care arrangements since the outbreak of COVID-19. They refer to

⁷The experience of ongoing violence and abuse post separation was reported by nearly half of the survey participants in Backbone's survey 2019 of 528 victim-survivors.

the COVID-19 pandemic as a high-risk period for women and children navigating shared care parenting arrangements particularly when health regulations make pre-existing parenting arrangements infeasible (Foster & Fletcher, 2020).

Studies have explored the current pandemic situation particularly in efforts to prevent IPV/family violence in future emergency situations and pandemics alike to prepare suggestions for policy, practice and future research (Ali & Heward-Belle, 2021). Backbone hopes the current study can shed more light on the nuances of abuser behaviour in response to the pandemic and extend the effort to protect victim-survivors and their children during global disruptions such as COVID-19 when they are reportedly at higher risk of experiencing violence. Our current survey and this corresponding report provide a unique perspective from victim-survivors themselves who are separated from the abuser, and that perspective has not been gathered and reported elsewhere that we have been able to find.

LIMITATIONS

Online surveys provide an opportunity for victim-survivors to safely and anonymously share their lived experiences. However, in Backbone's experience online surveys are not appropriate or attractive for all victim-survivors. Some are less likely to participate in an online survey because they dislike the impersonal process and prefer face to face experiences, are not easily able to communicate in English, do not feel safe or able to use online platforms, or lack ready (or safe) access to devices or the internet. The participants of this study are self-selecting and are therefore potentially motivated to engage in a survey of this kind due to their experiences of abuser behaviour and a poor system response to that behaviour. Therefore, the findings from this Backbone survey should not be taken as representative of all victim-survivors, but rather represent the lived experience of a small subset of victim-survivors.

Our intention in releasing the survey was to gather some women and children's experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on abuser behaviour, and the system's response to that behaviour to inform future service and policy delivery. We used both qualitative and quantitative methods in the design of the survey questions and in doing so hoped to create a 'built for purpose'⁸ approach that could capture individual experiences and provide in depth analysis and isolate some trends in experience across the participants. It was therefore very useful to use the experiences shared with Backbone throughout the pandemic to shape questions that could capture the types of experiences women had been telling us about previously.

Sample size

Although the sample size of this study may be considered small (35 respondents with 68 dependent children) and cannot be generalised for the entire population, the information shared provided breadth and depth giving voice to vulnerable individuals in society.⁹ The survey participants

⁸Zyphur, M., & Pierides, D. (2017). Is quantitative research ethical? Tools for ethically practicing, evaluating, and using quantitative research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 143, 1-16.

⁹Patton (2002) argues that a sample size depends on "what you know, the purpose of inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources (p. 242).

provide a voice of experience from a unique group of individuals who are often isolated and silenced due to their experiences of IPV and systemic abuse. The sample size of this study allowed for an investigation that was rigorous and sufficient for the objectives of this study. However, we hope that the study findings will encourage others to look more deeply at the experiences of women and children who are separated from an abuser when decisions regarding policy development or research projects are undertaken in the future.

Location

Regional differences or similarities in responses could not be fully analysed as the survey did not get participants from all regions of Aotearoa. To illustrate, survey responses were not received from victim-survivors who live in Northland, Tasman, Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast and Otago. However, survey participants did come from other regions throughout both the North and South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. More survey responses were received from women victim-survivors living in city centres than in rural areas. The inclusion of survey participants from other regions could have shed more light on perspectives of victim-survivors living outside urban environments.

Diverse Communities

Although there is some diversity in the pool of participants for this study, there was limited representation of diverse communities, particularly for those who are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence. Due to the small size of the survey sample, we have not discussed findings or provided analysis particular to any individual cohort of survey participants but rather have presented findings from the full survey sample for each section of the report. It is hoped that this report provides signposts to support and implore further investigation.

SURVEY SAMPLE

Once the survey link was closed, the responses were checked for participant eligibility, completion status and consent to include partial responses. There were 35 valid survey responses that were eligible for inclusion in our final analysis. The following report is based on these survey responses only.¹⁰

Participants came from a range of backgrounds and shared significant detail about their experiences of abuser behaviour during the pandemic towards both themselves and their children. The participants spent significant time explaining their experiences in open text boxes as well as answering questions with drop down options. Many left recommendations for ways to improve the response to victim-survivors and children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gender

The survey was open to victim-survivors who identified as a woman or as gender minority/non-binary.¹¹ However, all survey participants identified as women.

Experiences of violence and abuse

All of the survey participants indicated that they had experienced violence and/or abuse from someone they had been in an intimate personal relationship with. A definition of intimate partner violence was included and clarification that participants did not have to have lived with the person who had abused them, or had children with them to take part in the survey.

¹⁰ At some points in the report reflection on victim-survivor experiences communicated to Backbone prior to this survey are commented on but are clearly marked as such.

¹¹ If participants selected they identified as gender minority/non-binary a message would appear to explain that if there was a small number of participants who identify as gender minority/non-binary then the ability to separate out those responses and write them up as a separate and specific section became more difficult due to the risk of those small number of responses making the themes discussed potentially more identifiable.

Region

All participants were asked to confirm that they currently live in Aotearoa New Zealand in order to be eligible to take part in the survey. Participants were also asked to select which region in the country they currently live in. Participants live throughout Aotearoa New Zealand however there were more participants who lived in cities than in other regions. Responses were not received from victim-survivors who live in Northland, Tasman, Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast or Otago. Please see the table below.

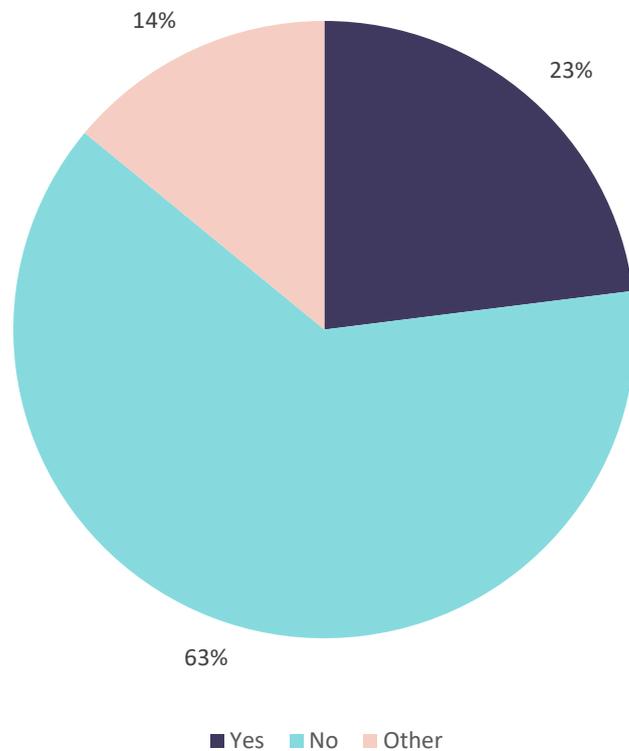
Table 1. Regions where participants currently live (N - 35)

REGION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
Auckland	15
Waikato	1
Bay of Plenty	3
Gisborne, Hawke's Bay	1
Taranaki, Manawatu, Whanganui	3
Wellington	6
Canterbury	4
Southland	2
Total	35

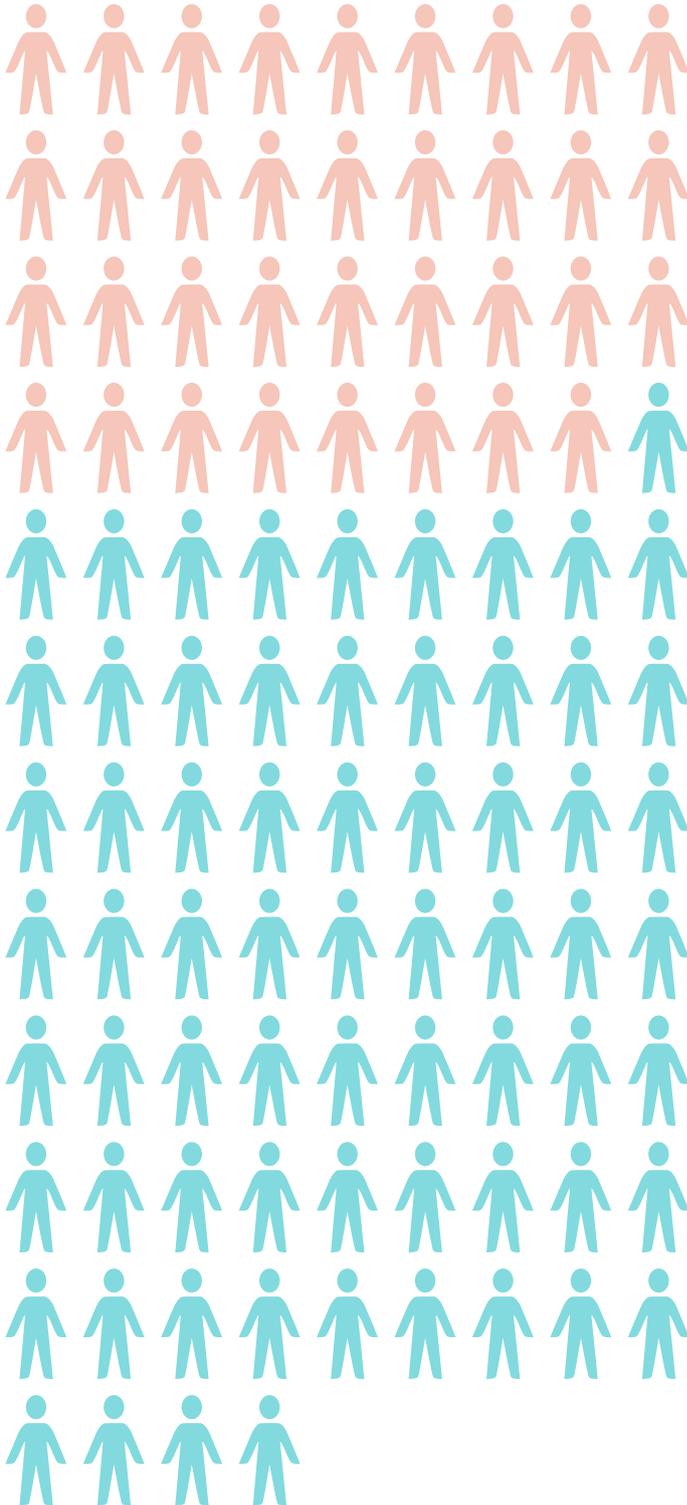
Disability

Participants were asked if they lived with a disability that creates problems for them, such as impairment, activity limitation or participation restrictions. The majority of participants said they did not live with a disability (63%) however, 23% said they did live with a disability and a further 14% selected the 'other' option and described experiencing issues relating to their mental health including PTSD and anxiety and one participant described a hearing impairment. Therefore, the combined percentage of survey participants who report living with a disability or illness is 37%.

Figure 1. Percentage of participants who report living with a disability (N - 35)



Sample size



WOMEN

This study is based on the responses of 35 women victim-survivors.

58% of participants said they were prevented from seeing or speaking to their children during lockdowns.

CHILDREN

The women in this study are mothers to a total of 68 children.

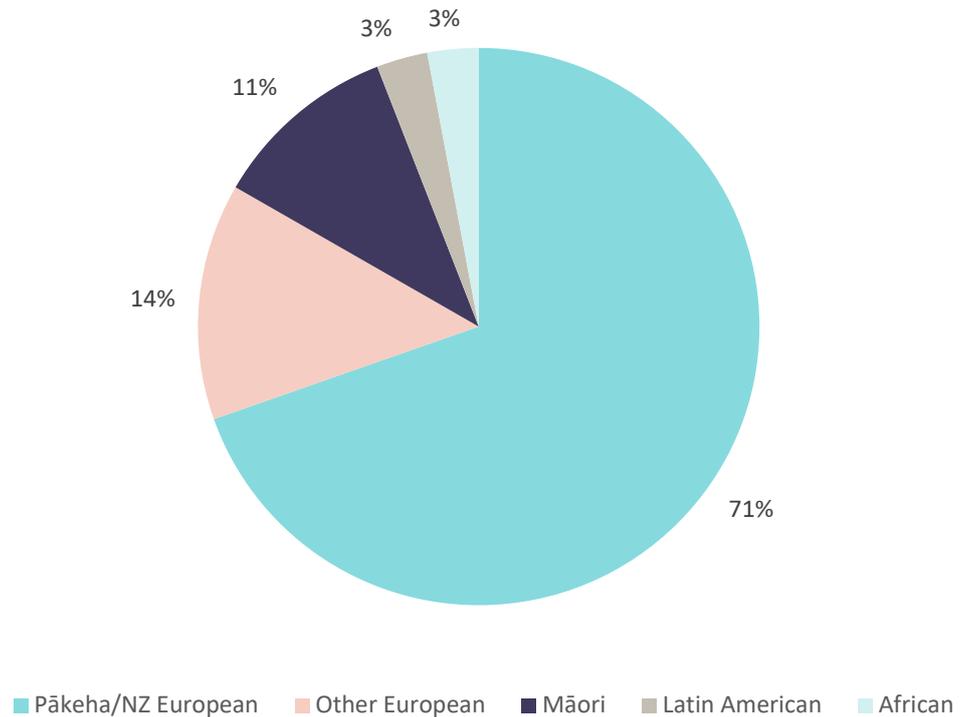
Half of the children are primary school aged or younger.

67% of children spent time alone with the abuser during lockdowns and one quarter experienced physical violence during that time.

Ethnicity

Participants were asked to select from a drop-down menu which ethnic or cultural group/s they or their family mostly identify with. Participants could select more than one ethnicity.¹² The following graph shows that the majority of participants identify as Pakeha/New Zealand European (71%), 11% identify as Māori and the remaining participants identify as Latin American, African, other European, South East Asian and South African.

Figure 2. Survey sample by ethnicity (N-35)

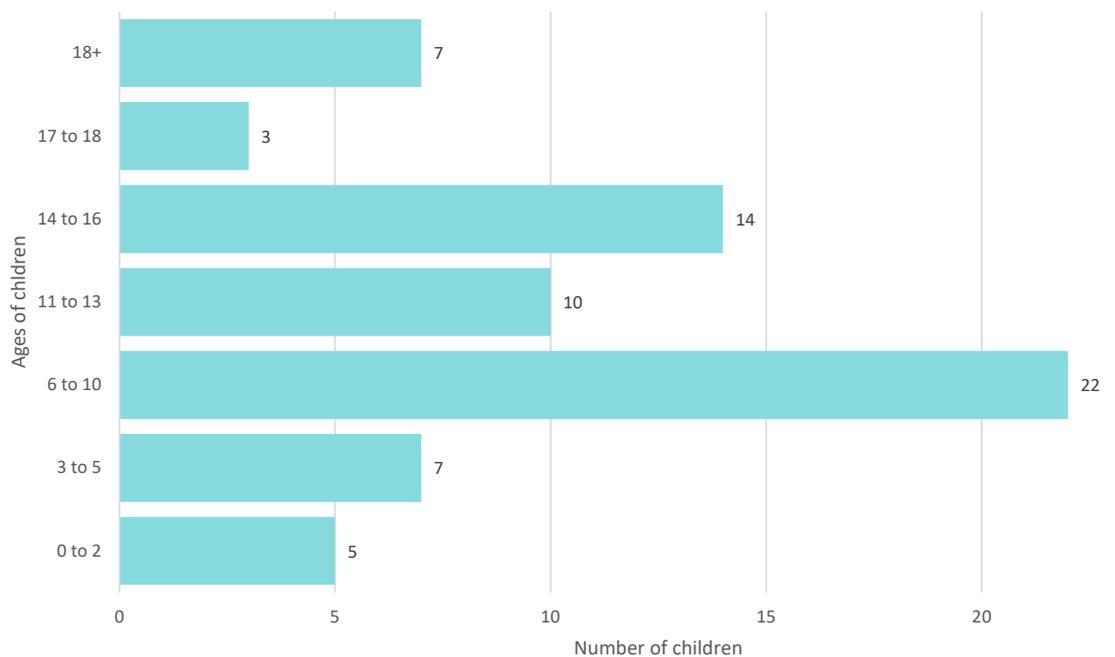


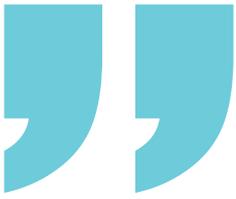
¹²Participants could select as many options as they wanted – therefore the total percentages exceed 100%.

Children

Participants were asked if they had dependent children. Most of the women (32) said they have dependent children, one does not and the remaining two participants have children but they are no longer in their care. Survey participants have 68 dependent children between them. The children included in this survey are aged from 0 to over 18. The figure below shows that half of the children are primary school aged or under (under 11 years of age).

Figure 3. Number of survey participant's children in each age band (N-34 participants, 68 children)





56% of participants have been separated for five years or more from their abusive ex partner and still experienced ongoing violence and abuse from their ex-partner during the COVID-19 pandemic.

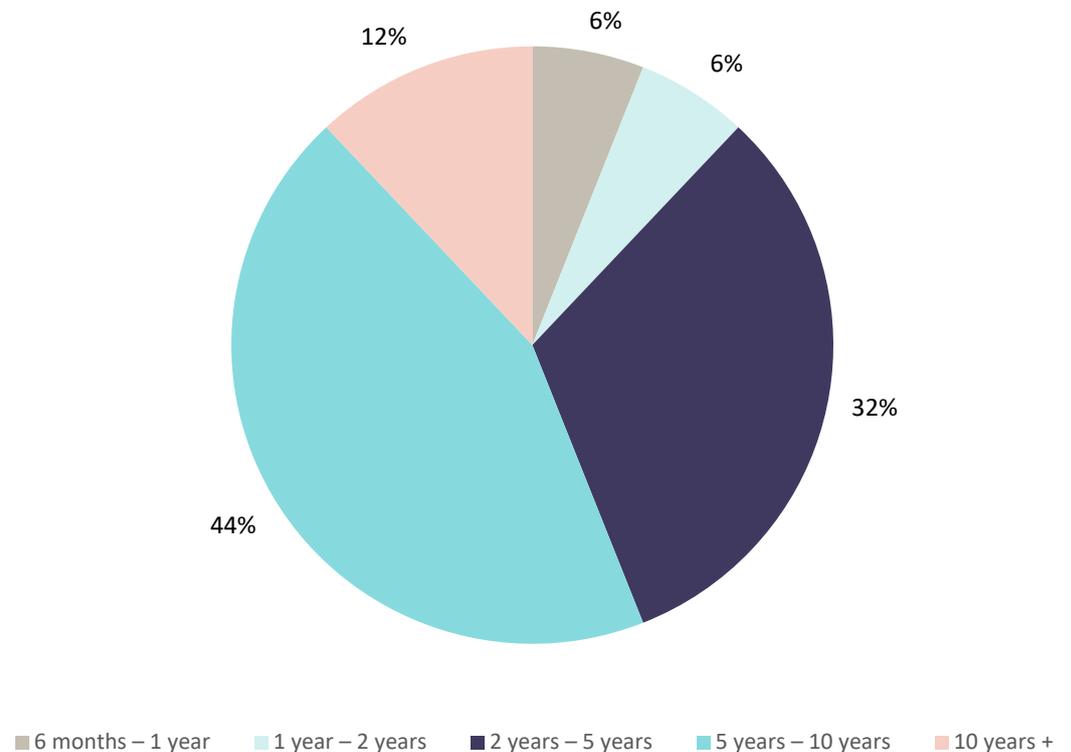
Separated

All but one of the survey participants has separated from their abusive ex-partner. There was a range in the period of time participants had been separated from between 6 months to a year up to over ten years. Participants who had been separated for between 5 – 10years made up the largest portion of overall participants (44%). It is of vital importance to note that women who had separated for long periods of time still reported experiencing ongoing violence and abuse from their ex-partner during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gender of abuser

Each of the 35 participants advised that the abuser is male.

Figure 4. Period of time participants had separated from the abuser (N- 34)





THE OVERALL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ABUSER BEHAVIOUR

As discussed earlier in this report, international studies and reports have shown that the pandemic has impacted on abuser behaviour towards partners they are in relationship with. However, for many victim-survivors who separate from their abusive partner, the abuse and violence does not stop and can continue for many years beyond the separation and impacts both women and their children.¹³ In understanding the ongoing abuse which women victim-survivors and their children are forced to navigate post separation, Backbone wanted to know how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on abuser behaviour; was abuser behaviour the same, worse or better.¹⁴

Changes to abuser behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic

A number of general questions were asked at the beginning of the survey to gain an overview of the experiences of the survey participants and their children of the abuser behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ The majority of survey participants indicated that the abuser behaviour was or may have been different during the pandemic (65%), although for 35% of participants it was not different.

Table 2. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on abuser behaviour (N- 34)

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ABUSER BEHAVIOUR (N - 34)	
Yes- it was different	50%
No- it was not different	35%
Maybe	15%

Participants who signalled that the abuser's behaviour had or may have changed were asked if that behaviour had got better, worse or different

¹³In Backbone's 2019 survey of victim-survivors' perspectives on longer term support we found that 47% of participants said the abuse had not stopped even though many of the women had been separated for five years or more. These women described ongoing abuse that was psychological, physical and/or included violence against their children. <https://www.backbone.org.nz/s/Victim-Survivor-Perspectives-on-Longer-Term-Support-Backbone-report-for-MSD-2020-FINAL.pdf>. Please see pg.41.

¹⁴One participant was still in a relationship with the abuser at the time she completed the survey.

¹⁵The one participant who has not separated from the abuser said the abuser's behaviour had got worse toward her during the COVID- 19 pandemic.



Abuser behaviour got worse towards children during the pandemic.

(neither better nor worse). Of the 22 participants who answered this question the majority (18) said the abuser's behaviour had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, a few (3) said the behaviour was different but not better or worse and one participant said the abuser's behaviour had got better.

Table 3. How has abuser behaviour changed during the pandemic (N - 22)

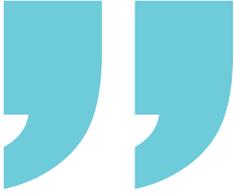
HOW HAS THE ABUSER BEHAVIOUR CHANGED DURING THE PANDEMIC (N - 22)	
Better	4%
Worse	82%
Different	14%

Participants were also asked if the abuser's behaviour had changed towards their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two thirds of the participants said the abuser's behaviour had changed towards the children, nearly one quarter said the abuser had not changed their behaviour towards the children¹⁶ and a small number (3) said the abuser may have changed their behaviour towards the children.

Table 4. Has abuser behaviour changed toward children during Covid pandemic (N - 33)

HAS ABUSER BEHAVIOUR CHANGED TOWARD CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 (N - 33)	
Yes	67%
No	24%
Maybe	9%

¹⁶The participant who has not separated from the abuser said his behaviour had not changed towards the children during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The majority of participants said abuser behaviour towards them and their children had changed and worsened during the pandemic.

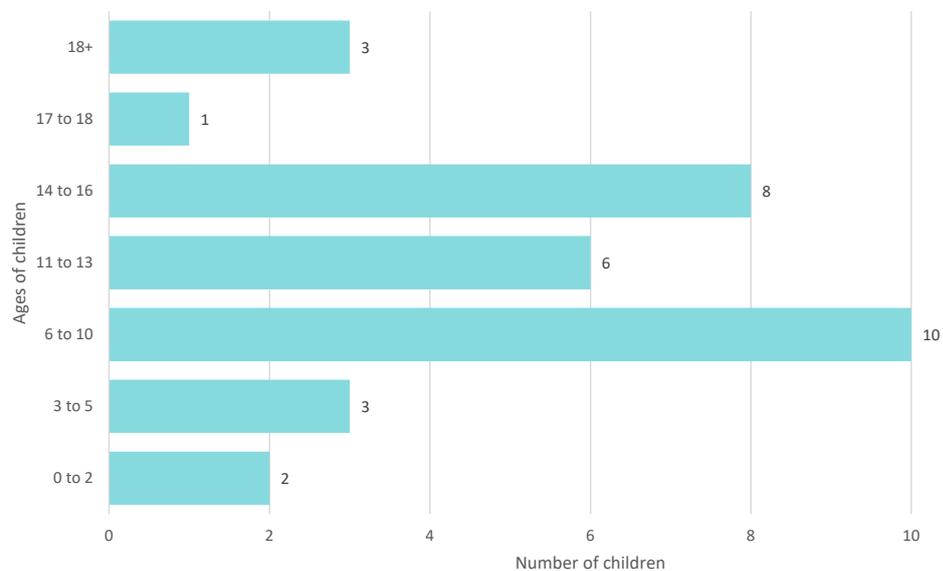
Participants who signalled that the abuser's behaviour had or who may have changed towards the children were asked if that behaviour had got better, worse or different (neither better nor worse). Of the 25 participants who answered this question, 72% said the behaviour had got worse during the pandemic and the remaining 28% said it was different but was not better or worse. None of the participants said the abuser behaviour towards the children had got better.

Table 5. How has abuser behaviour changed towards children during the pandemic (N- 25)

HOW HAS ABUSER BEHAVIOUR CHANGED TOWARDS CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 (N - 25)	
Worse	72%
It's different but not better or worse	28%

The participants who said the abuser's behaviour had got worse towards their children during the pandemic have 33 children between them. These children range in age, but 45% are aged ten and under.

Figure 5. Ages of children where participants said abuser behaviour got worse towards the children during the pandemic (N-18 participants of 33 children)



VICTIM-SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES OF ABUSER BEHAVIOURS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The victim-survivors who participated in Backbone's survey experienced ongoing abuse from the abuser during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the majority of cases they were separated from the abuser and had been for a significant period of time. However, the ways these victim-survivors were experiencing violence and abuse show that the abuser was using the COVID-19 pandemic as a new tool of abuse. Furthermore, Government responses to the pandemic provided the abuser with new opportunities to abuse, including directions regarding how shared care orders should function during lockdowns.¹⁷

Survey participants were asked to select from a drop down list any behaviours that the abuser had used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in 2020, 2021 and 2022. Participants could select as many or few as were appropriate.



Abusers used court ordered contact with children and technology including text messaging, phone calls, emails, social media platforms and parenting apps to force contact on victim-survivors during the pandemic.

Nearly three quarters of participants said that the abuser used the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns to psychologically abuse them. Many participants (63%) said that the abuser used the Government's public health measures such as vaccines, QR codes, vaccine passes, masks, physical distancing or other responses to COVID-19 to control her or the children. Some abusers used the fear of COVID-19 to psychologically abuse by threatening to expose participants to the virus, lying about COVID-19 test results or faking COVID-19 symptoms. Abusers threatened these victim-survivors and over a third of participants said the abuser had forced contact with her and many said he had used court ordered contact with children during the lockdowns to abuse her. There were some participants who left comments in an 'other' open text box

¹⁷ Refer to the 'Background' section of this report for information about shared care orders and lockdowns.

to describe kinds of abuser behaviour. Responses are discussed below under corresponding themes that emerged from all open text responses.

Table 6. Abuser behaviour in response to COVID-19 pandemic towards adult victims (N- 32)

ABUSER BEHAVIOUR IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 TOWARDS ADULT VICTIM-SURVIVOR (N - 32)	
Used the lock-downs or the COVID-19 pandemic to psychologically abuse you.	72%
Used the Government's public health measures such as vaccines, QR codes, vaccine passes, masks, physical distancing or other responses to COVID-19 to control you or the children.	63%
Used court ordered contact with the children during lock-downs to abuse you in any way.	44%
Threatened you.	41%
Forced contact with you.	34%
Other.	28%
Used put downs on social media etc. about you or your response to COVID-19.	9%
Threatened to expose you, or people you care about to the COVID-19 virus.	6%
Lied about Covid test results to you or others.	6%
Faked Covid symptoms to cause you worry about yourself or your child/ren.	3%

Participants used an open text box to share more explanations about the types of abuse they had experienced. Their responses covered several types of abuse including the following:

- Financial/Economic
- Psychological
- Physical
- Control
- Contact - forced and inconsistent

Financial/economic, psychological, physical abuse

A central theme that emerged from the survey responses was the wide range of abuse victim-survivors experienced in response to the pandemic. Abuse was felt by the victim-survivor via means of financial/economic abuse, psychological abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and abandonment. For several victim-survivors, the abuser either decreased or discontinued financial support during the pandemic. For others, it was revealed that the abuser was not declaring his self-employed income which is well above the income of the victim-survivor, thereby impacting child support calculations. Despite shared care arrangements, participants felt that the economic and financial burden for caring for the children during the pandemic fell on the victim-survivor as opposed to the ex-partner/abuser. The women of this study spoke of the psychological abuse perpetrated by the abuser through intimidation, extreme and frightening behaviour, withholding phone calls from children, isolation of mother from her children, and attempts to control their support network. In some cases, children were taunted and physically restrained to coerce the children to get vaccinated without consultation with the mother. Some participants spoke of their ex-partner neglecting court ordered responsibilities (discontinuing contact with children altogether), and feelings of abandonment.



44% of participants said the abuser used court ordered contact with children to abuse them during lockdowns. Nearly three quarters of these participants were threatened or intimidated during that contact.

Control

A common theme among participant responses was the use of controlling techniques by the abuser. Elements of control were found in experiences of abusers withholding children from their mother, and making false accusations to Police, Oranga Tamariki and the Family Court. Participants felt that their abuser attempted to control support services either indirectly, or directly. For example, a number of participants spoke of the abuser making false accusations of lockdown breaches to the Police. Participants also spoke of the abuser making threats that he would make a false claim to services or Police as a way to force her to maintain a shared child care arrangement as court ordered even when she felt the child would be safest from illness staying in her care.

Abuser contact - forced and inconsistent

Several participants discussed that there had been a lack of communication, and inconsistent contact made by the abuser regarding the children. Not only was this evident as abusers would withhold their child from seeing and contacting their mother, but some abusers would have periods of no contact, and other periods where they would demand contact with their child. The participants who indicated that the abuser forced contact on them in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were then asked to describe the ways in which the abuser had achieved this. These women described a range of techniques and platforms used to force contact and most relied on technology including the use of text messaging, phone calls, emails, social media platforms and parenting apps. However, nearly two thirds of participants who answered this question said that the abuser had used other people to contact her on their behalf. Those other people were sometimes other family members,

including the children or other agencies such as the Police. Participants who used the open text 'other' option to share more detail did not raise different issues to those already listed in the drop-down options. However, it was explained in comments that abusers would directly manipulate, entice and coerce children to come to their homes during the lockdowns.

Table 7. What ways abusers used to force contact with adult victim-survivors (N- 11)

WAYS ABUSERS USED TO FORCE CONTACT WITH ADULT VICTIM-SURVIVORS (N - 11)	
Texts	73%
Phone calls	73%
Getting other people to contact me	64%
Emails	55%
Social media accounts	27%

Abusers use court ordered contact with children to abuse the adult victim-survivor

If participants selected that the abuser had used Family Court ordered contact with children to abuse her in any way, then an additional question was asked to ascertain in what ways the abuser had used these opportunities to abuse her. There were fourteen participants who provided more information about how court ordered contact was used to force access changeovers and further abuse during lockdowns. Many participants (71%) were threatened or intimidated on these occasions, some were verbally abused, some had the abuser force his way into their home, car or somewhere else. Some participants described how the abuser had put people off from supporting her or put others around her at risk by deliberately forcing some kind of in person contact or refusing

to wear a mask even when the abuser was ill with COVID-19. Others described how the abuser had forced them into making applications to Family Court to get the children returned from him. This became legal abuse as proceedings dragged out and participants were forced to pay for legal assistance.

Table 8. How the abuser has used court ordered contact with the children during lock-downs to abuse the adult victim-survivor (N - 14).

HOW THE ABUSER HAS USED COURT ORDERED CONTACT WITH THE CHILDREN DURING LOCK-DOWNS TO ABUSE THE ADULT VICTIM-SURVIVOR (N - 14)	
Threatened or intimidated you	71%
Verbally abused you	29%
Come into your home, your car or somewhere else without your permission	21%



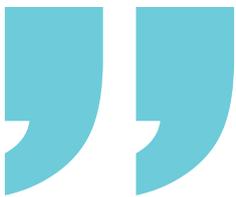
The worries participants expressed were grounded in the very real experiences they had of abusers forcing contact on them, stalking them, deliberately flouting Government public health measures, and using the Family Court and other agencies to further their abuse.

Victim-survivors' worries about abuser behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic

The impact of ongoing abuse for victim-survivors and their children can be significant and serious. While many New Zealanders were worried about the impact of COVID-19, lockdowns, health of themselves, their friends, family and whānau, victim-survivors also experienced genuine worries and fears regarding abuser behaviour in the context of the pandemic. These worries and fears are grounded in their experiences of abuser behaviour prior to the pandemic towards both them and their children. The worries become part of the safety planning that victim-survivors must undertake to help keep themselves and their children safe (using experiences and information they already have to assess and plan for risk and impact on abuser future behaviour).

Survey participants were asked to select from a range of drop-down options what they had been worried about during the COVID-19 pandemic (including the lock-downs) during 2020, 21 or 2022. Participants could select as many or as few options as applicable.

For the majority of participants, these worries were related to the safety and ongoing care of their children in the context of the pandemic. In particular, that children would be forced into isolation at the abuser's home during lockdowns and therefore at increased risk of violence and abuse as well as from COVID-19, that if the children got sick while they were in the care of the abuser he would not care for them appropriately and that if the victim-survivor got unwell with COVID-19, the children would be forced into unsafe care arrangements with the abuser. Participants also worried about the risk they faced from the abuser due to the impact of lockdowns which meant he was easily able to know or track where she and the children were and her subsequent isolation meant there were fewer protective people and factors available to her and the children.



Some children were kept by the abuser in his care during lockdowns and were denied contact either directly or indirectly with their mother.

Women worried that their attempts to keep the children safe from COVID-19 and from isolated contact with the abuser would result in punishment from either the abuser himself or from the Family Court such as being accused of breaching parenting orders or being in contempt of court.

The worries that these participants expressed were grounded in the very real experiences they had of abusers forcing contact on them, stalking them, deliberately flouting Government public health measures, and using the Family Court and other agencies such as Police or Oranga Tamariki to further abuse them as discussed throughout this report.

Table 9. Worries of victim-survivors' during the COVID-19 pandemic (N-31)

VICTIM-SURVIVORS' WORRIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (N - 31)	
That if I get seriously unwell the children will be forced into the care of the abuser.	65%
That if I tried to keep the child/ren with me during lock-down I would be punished by the Family Court for doing so (breaching parenting orders, contempt of court etc).	65%
The child/ren being isolated at the abuser's home during contact and therefore less safe- at more risk of violence and abuse.	61%
That if I try to keep the child/ren with me during the lockdowns I would be punished by the abuser for doing so (physical/verbal/financial/further litigation).	61%
Being more socially isolated has made it easier for the abuser to hurt/abuse me/us.	48%
That if the children get sick with Covid the abuser will not give them the appropriate care.	48%
The children would be exposed to more people at his house than I thought was safe from a health perspective (extended family/whānau, friends, step children and other partners).	45%
The abuser using the lock-down as an opportunity to force contact (emails, phone calls, turning up at our house) etc.	42%
The abuser is more able to track and monitor where I am due to the lock-downs.	29%
I or someone in our household have a health condition, which means we are more at risk if we contract the virus. The abuser's behaviour could put me/us at greater risk of getting sick.	29%
The abuser would deliberately try to get the children exposed to Covid to punish me.	16%

This section has focussed on adult victim-survivors' experiences of abuser behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously explained, the experiences of the adult participants were closely tied to those of their children. The participants worried about the safety of their children and tried to protect them from the abuser. However, many of the participants were forced to share care of their children with the abuser throughout the pandemic. When children spent time with the abuser, they too experienced violence and abuse in a range of ways. The following section of this report discusses the experiences of the children included in this study.

ABUSER BEHAVIOURS TOWARDS CHILDREN IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC



Children spent time with the abuser during lockdowns. Over two thirds of these children were aged under 14.

For most of the women who took part in the survey, the ongoing abuse they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic was deeply interconnected with their mothering and their own children's experiences of abuse. The following section focuses primarily on the children's experiences with the abuser during the pandemic. These experiences have been shared with Backbone via their mothers and we have not heard directly from these children.

The children's experience was a dominant theme that emerged throughout the survey responses. Although the parents were separated, the children were a means for the abuser to continue abuse toward both the victim-survivor and her child/ren during the COVID-19 pandemic and in response to it. Children whose mother had separated from an abuser were made more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Nearly half the participants said that the abuser told their children frightening things about COVID-19 including that they would not see their mother again or that she would die of COVID-19.

Survey participants were asked to tell us about experiences their children had of abuser behaviour in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic more generally. Similarly, to adult victim-survivors' experiences of abusers using COVID-19 pandemic as a new tool of abuse, children also experienced new avenues of abuse that used COVID-19 and Government public health measures as further opportunities to control, intimidate, threaten and harm them. Many participants (62%) said the abuser pressured, harassed or forced contact with the children during the pandemic, in some cases when the children were unwell, and some used the Family Court to enforce parenting orders to ensure contact happened. Nearly half the participants said that the abuser psychologically abused the children by telling them frightening things about COVID-19 including that they would not see their mother again or that she would die of COVID-19. Some children were kept by the abuser in his care during lockdowns and were denied contact either directly or indirectly with their mother - see later in this report for a detailed discussion about this. Many of the children

were forced by the abuser into situations that breached Government public health measures, including taking children into public places when that was not permitted, refusing to share information about contacts the children had with potential COVID-19 cases, and refusing to give children access to soap, masks, vaccinations or adequate health care when they were unwell with COVID-19. Children were also the victims of abuse relating to vaccination disputes between parents. Some abusers forced children to be vaccinated without their mother's knowledge or consent, others made it very difficult for mothers to get their children vaccinated. Some abusers refused to pay child support during the pandemic which impacted heavily on how mothers could provide for their children during that time.

Some participants discussed the increased risk they faced from COVID-19 due to existing medical conditions they or their children had.¹⁸ These women explained that the behaviours of the abuser increased the health risks even more and it felt like the behaviour was intentional – he knew that his behaviour could put her or the child/ren in more danger, or would cause her psychological distress. Abusers disregarded the heightened risk for these women and children and undermined participants' attempts to keep their bubbles tightly closed. Abusers forced children to move between homes thereby breaching women's bubbles, exposed children to multiple other people while in their care thereby increasing the chances of exposure to COVID -19 and refused to wear a face masks.

We heard about a small number of children who had been unwell with COVID-19. Their mothers described responses from the abuser towards those children during their illnesses as insensitive and inattentive. They described behaviour that put these children and other people around them at risk by refusing to keep children home and away from contact with others and refusing to provide a nurturing and adequate response to children's health while they had COVID-19.

¹⁸ Please note that 37% of survey participants reported living with a disability or illness.

Table 10. Abuser behaviour towards children in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in NZ during 2020, 21 and 2022 (N-29 participants of 57 children)

ABUSER BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS CHILDREN IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND LOCK-DOWNS IN NZ DURING 2020, 21 AND 2022 (N - 29 PARTICIPANTS OF 57 CHILDREN).	
Pressured, harassed, forced contact with my child/ren.	62%
Psychologically abused the child/ren e.g told them frightening things about Covid, told they will never see you again, told them that you will get sick or die etc.	48%
Taken the children into public places, situations and breached lock-down and/or alert level rules.	45%
Refused to share details about potential contact the children may have had with the virus or lied about exposure events the children may have been present at.	38%
Kept the child/ren in their care during the lock-downs and refused to return them to me.	21%
Forced the child/ren into contact with them even though the children were unwell.	21%
Had my child/ren vaccinated against my wishes, and/or without my knowledge.	17%
Applied to the Family Court to enforce parenting orders to force contact during the lock-downs.	14%
Refused to give child/ren access to soap, hand sanitiser or masks.	10%
Made it difficult for me to get my child/ren vaccinated.	10%
Refused to pay child support blaming the impact of Covid on their refusal.	10%
Refused to give my child/ren the care they required while they were sick with Covid.	10%
Forced the child/ren to be tested for COVID-19 even though the child/ren were not unwell.	7%
Forced the children to wash their hands excessively or take unprescribed medications.	3%



Abusers were insensitive and inattentive to children who were infected with COVID-19 and refused to keep children isolated while they were unwell.

Children in unsupervised care with the abuser during lockdowns

Three quarters of survey participants said that their children spent time without them during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 while with the abuser.¹⁹ These children were isolated from help and support as they were forced into care arrangements with the abusive parent for periods of time without their protective parent present, and without contact with friends, other family members or their schools. During these times children were often prevented from having contact with their mother (seeing or speaking with her) for significant periods.



Participants' conversations with their children were recorded and monitored by the abuser.

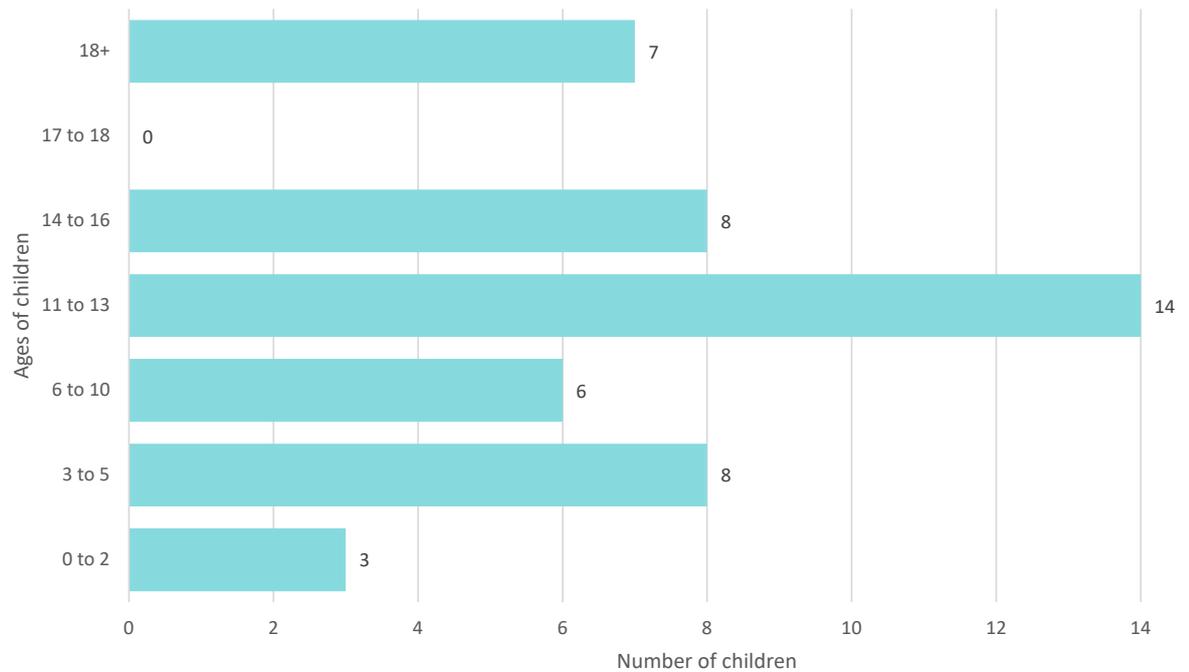
Mothers who said their children spent time with the abuser during the lockdowns have 46 children between them and they range in age from infants to teenagers. The figure below shows that over two thirds of these children were under 14 and therefore highly vulnerable and reliant on the abuser for care and attention and due to their age may have been less likely to have access to contact with others via online channels. While we did not ask participants if their children had access to devices during the lockdown, we did hear from some participants that abusers prevented or monitored and surveyed the children's use of devices while in their care. The restrictions abusers placed on children's use of devices focussed in particular on contact with their mother, making these children very isolated.

A common experience shared by participants was the control that the abuser took when keeping children during lockdown and not returning them to their mother. This exertion of control also extended to the level of communication the children could have with their mother. Participants

¹⁹ There were 32 participants who answered this question asking if their children had spent time with the abuser during lockdowns.

shared their experiences of having conversations with children either via phone call or video call recorded and monitored in an attempt to control what the child might discuss with their mother. Several participants spoke of their abuser neglecting court ordered arrangements and stopping contact between children and their mother altogether.

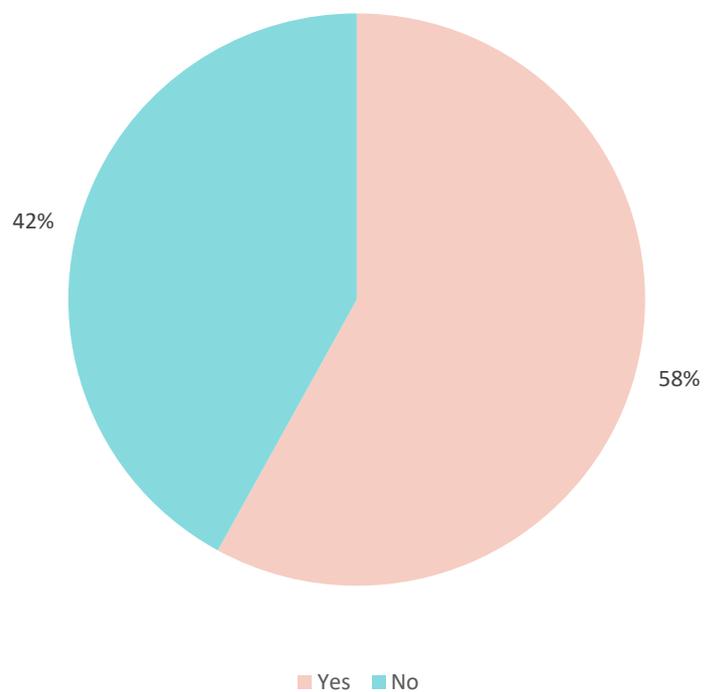
Figure 6. Number of children by age group who spent time in the abuser's care during lockdowns (N-46)



Mothers prevented from having contact with their children

Over half of the survey participants said they had been prevented from seeing or speaking with their children during lockdowns.

Figure 7. Mothers prevented from seeing or speaking with their children during lockdowns 2020 and 2021 (N - 31)



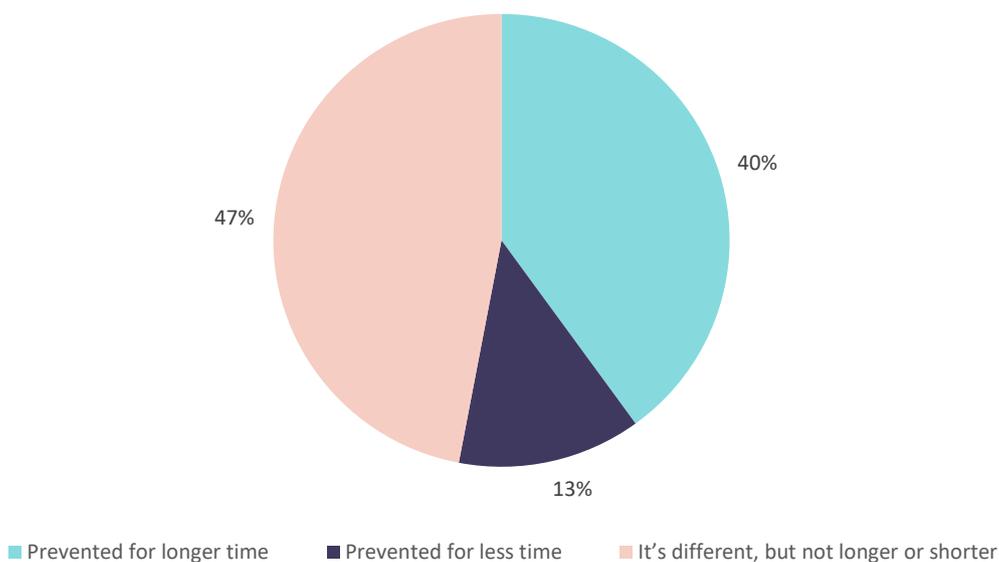
Participants who said they were prevented from having contact with their children during the lockdowns were asked in what ways they were prevented from having contact. The majority said the abuser was responsible for severing their contact with their children by preventing them from seeing or speaking with the children. Some participants also said their children were in lockdown in a different region to where they lived and that prevented the children from travel between regions or that their own health condition meant it was safer for them not to have contact with their child/ren during the lockdowns.

Table 11. Ways mothers were prevented from seeing or speaking with their children during 2020 and 2021 lockdowns (N-14)²⁰

WAYS MOTHERS WERE PREVENTED FROM SEEING OR SPEAKING WITH THEIR CHILDREN DURING 2020 AND 2021 LOCKDOWNS (N -14)	
The abuser prevented me from speaking with my child/ren.	95%
My child/ren were in another region/district and could not return to my care due to the lock-down travel restrictions.	14%
I have a health condition that meant it was safer for me not to have contact with my child/ren to limit my exposure to COVID-19.	7%

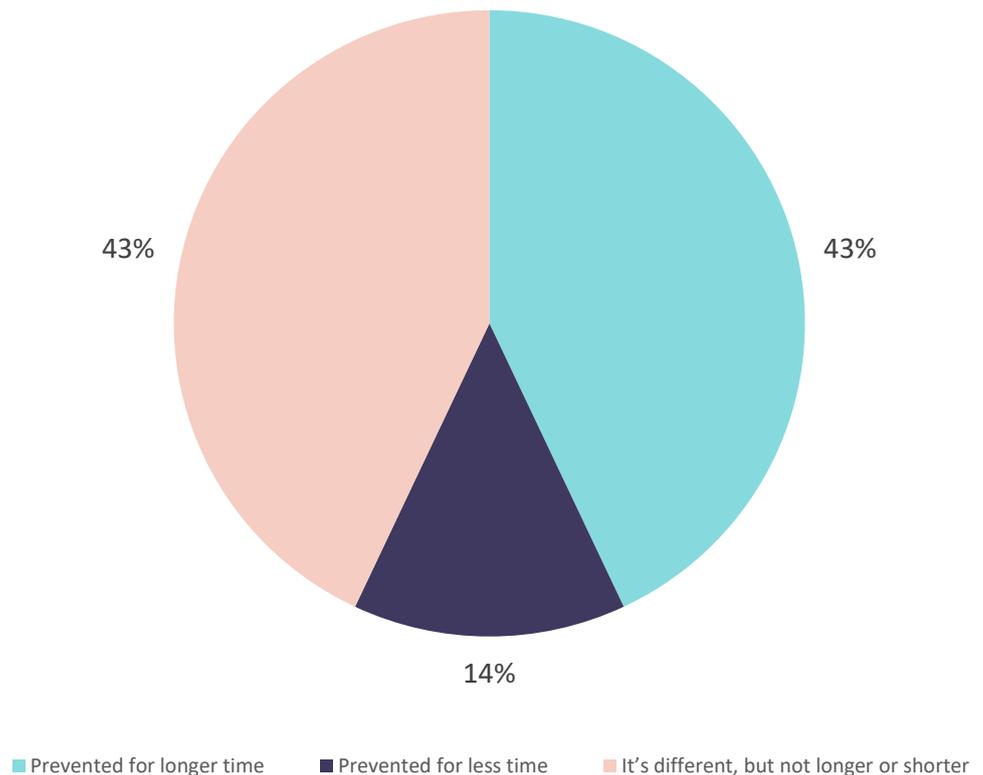
The victim-survivors of this study spoke of being isolated from their children while the child was in the care of the abuser during lockdowns. Children were kept from speaking to their mother (victim-survivor) by the abuser for a length of period ranging from two days to four months. The pandemic changed the ways abusers prevented mothers from speaking with their children. For 47% of participants the amount of time did not change but the way it happened was different. However, 40% of participants said that they were prevented for longer periods of time from speaking with their children than prior to the pandemic.

Figure 8. Comparison in periods of time mothers prevented from speaking with their child prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic (N-15)



²⁰ Participants could select all options that applied to their experience.

Figure 9. Comparison in periods of time mothers prevented from seeing their child prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic (N-14)



Some children were prevented from seeing their mothers during the lockdowns. Participants described being prevented from seeing their child for periods of time ranging from two days to longer than a year and a half. Participants were asked if the period of time they were prevented from seeing their children during the pandemic was different to prior. For 43% of participants, the period of time they were prevented from seeing their children was longer.



Abusers breached public health regulations by taking children to social events, sometimes when children had COVID-19 symptoms.

Children's experiences of abuser behaviour while in his care during lockdowns

If survey participants indicated that their child/ren had spent time in the abuser's care during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 they were then asked to use a drop-down list of options to indicate if their children had experienced any of the behaviours listed. An option was provided for participants to use an open text box to provide more detail. Some children were subjected to abuse and violence while in the abuser's care. Over three quarters (79%) of participants said the children were isolated from their mother as the abuser prevented children contacting them. Over half (54%) of mothers said the children were verbally abused and one quarter said their children were physically assaulted while in his care. Some participants said their children were neglected and denied food and attention. Participants also said the abuser prevented their children's opportunities to participate in online learning, and denied medical attention. Over a third of mothers said their child/ren were forced into contact with other people against their wishes. Many of these children (63%) experienced two or more of the following behaviours in Table 12.

Table 12. Abuser behaviours children experienced while in their care during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 (N-24 participants of 46 children)

ABUSER BEHAVIOURS CHILDREN EXPERIENCED WHILE IN THEIR CARE DURING THE LOCKDOWNS OF 2020 AND 2021 (N - 24 PARTICIPANTS OF 46 CHILDREN)	
Been prevented from making contact with you via phone, zoom, Facebook, email etc.	79%
Verbally abused	54%
Been forced into contact with other people against their wishes.	38%
Neglected- denied food, comforts, activities, attention etc.	38%
Kept from participating in online learning opportunities available.	29%
Physically assaulted.	25%
Denied medical attention.	25%
None of the above.	8%

This section has shown how the children included in this study were exposed to and directly experienced violence and abuse from the abuser during the pandemic. While many children in Aotearoa New Zealand were kept safe in household bubbles, some children lived in bubbles that were not safe and others, whose mothers had separated from an abusive partner, were forced to move between households and into situations that made them more vulnerable to COVID-19 and abuse. The participants in Backbone's survey actively tried to access help to protect their children. In the following section we discuss the agencies and types of support the participants tried to use and how the system's response failed them and their children.



HOW RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IMPACTED ON ADULT AND CHILD VICTIM-SURVIVORS

In the previous sections of this report we have shown that some abusers used the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to further their abusive behaviour towards both adult victim-survivors and their children. These abusers used the isolation, fear, risk of illness and lack of clarity and inconsistency of information, to control, isolate and abuse both physically and psychologically, their ex/partners and children. However, the way that the system (Government agencies, Family Court, Police, other services) was responding to COVID-19 helped to create an environment that further enabled the violence and abuse. The following section discusses survey participants' experiences of the responses they received from services and Government agencies when they sought help in response to the abuse and to keep their children safe from both COVID-19 and the abuser. Overall these victim-survivors describe a system response that overlooked their safety and welfare needs, failed to identify the risk that separated women and children faced during the pandemic, forced their children into lockdown care with abusers and failed to respond when they raised the alarm.

GOVERNMENT-LED HEALTH MEASURES

As described at the beginning of this report, the New Zealand Government introduced a range of public health measures, including lockdowns, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these health measures provided new opportunities for abusers to exert control and further their abuse towards adult victim-survivors and their children. Participants' open text responses throughout the survey identified aspects of Government-led public health measures that were used by abusers including:

- *Lockdown regulations*
- *Care of symptomatic children*
- *COVID-19 tests*
- *Vaccination*
- *Shared bubble arrangements via family law policy*

The victim-survivors of this study spoke of the intentional breaches to lockdown regulations by their abuser through extending their bubble beyond that which was legally allowed and exposing their children to these environments. In some cases, children were believed to have contracted COVID-19 through these breaches. Some abusers used the vaccine pass requirements to try and get information about where the victim-survivor lived, or used the stay at home orders to target stalking behaviour as they knew where she and the children were.

Several participants shared how the father of their children would continue to take children to social events, church, and school even with COVID-19 symptoms. It was discussed that abusers faked positive COVID-19 tests to prevent children from seeing and contacting their mother.

For several participants, disputes over vaccination of their children became a source of abuse. Abusers used coercion, and scaremongering of the children (including keeping the children in their care) to ensure children were vaccinated without consultation with the mother.

A significant issue for many participants was the way the Family Court recommended shared care orders should be continued in the COVID-19 context. As discussed in the 'background' section of the report while most New Zealanders were being told to stay in their household bubbles



The 'shared bubble' direction from the Family Court and endorsed by the Minister of Health, gave the abuser increased power particularly during level three and four lockdowns.

during the alert level 3 and 4 phases of the COVID-19 response, the Family Court was telling victim-survivors with shared care of children with abusers to continue that contact arrangement. Victim-survivors explained that this response seemed incongruous with the public health response that all other New Zealanders were told to adopt. They felt it placed their children in greater danger of getting sick with COVID-19 and of being more vulnerable to violence and abuse in a lockdown environment with an abuser. The 'shared bubble' direction from the Family Court and endorsed by the Minister of Health, gave the abuser increased power particularly during level three and four lockdowns. Participants felt that the guidance on shared care during the Elimination Strategy (Alert level system) was ambiguous and was used in some cases to replace previous court ordered shared care arrangements. The ambiguity meant that some abusers used the lockdowns to hold children in their care and not return them to their mothers as was stipulated in the existing shared care parenting orders.²¹ Participants explained that court ordered shared care arrangements were better enforced during the Protection Framework or Traffic Light system. However, some participants still reported being kept from their children even under the Traffic Light System.²²

Participants tried to raise their concerns for their children and many were involved in Family Court proceedings throughout the pandemic. The following section details their experiences of the Family Court during the pandemic.

²¹ Please see discussion later in the report about Police responses when abusers refused to return children to their mother's care.

²² See Timeline section for more information about when New Zealand moved through the different alert levels and systems.

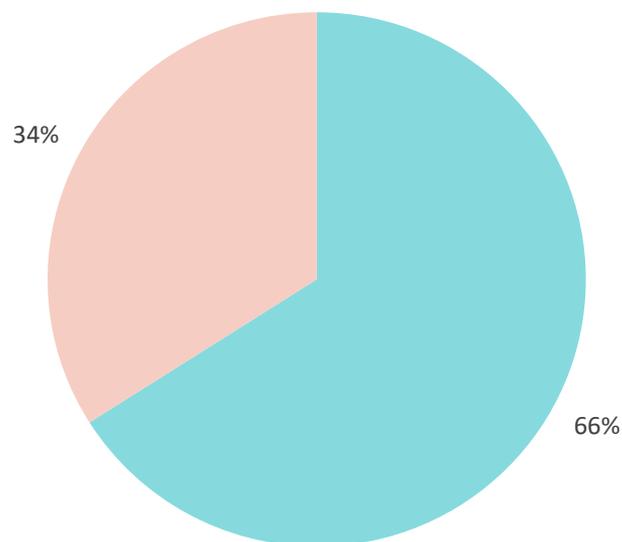
FAMILY COURT

Many of the participants (71%) were involved in Family Court proceedings during the pandemic regarding their abuser. The involvement with Family Court could include a range of activities such as applications made by the victim-survivor or the abuser, hearings, communications from lawyers or other Family Court professionals etc. Two thirds of the survey respondents had children who were subject to Parenting Orders made by the Family Court.

Figure 10. Percentage of participants with children subject to Parenting Orders during the COVID-19 pandemic 2020, 21, 22 (N-32)



Many of the participants (71%) were involved in Family Court proceedings during the pandemic regarding their abuser.

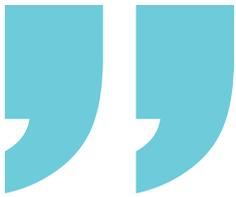


■ Children subject to Parenting Orders ■ Children NOT subject to Parenting Orders

Participants were asked to describe what kinds of applications the abuser made to the Family Court during the pandemic and what the outcome of

those applications were. Participants described a range of applications but the majority related to the enforcement, removal, variation, appeal or granting of Parenting Orders. In some cases, the abuser applied to have sole care of the child/ren, in others they applied to prevent shared care arrangements continuing throughout the lockdowns. Some participants were taken to Family Court and accused of contravening parenting orders when they were obeying public health orders. The impact of these proceedings was distressing and costly for these participants.

Participants spoke of their experiences with the Family Court system, and court ordered arrangements. Some of the issues that emerged included, the abuse of court ordered arrangements by the abuser, breaches, lack of intervention, and lengthy court processes. Several participants spoke of the court system being overwhelmed resulting in lengthy processes particularly for those who had their children withheld by their abuser. Several participants described a slow response from the Family Court and for some, that meant a significant delay in attaining contact with their children. The slow response from the court, also had flow on effects where in some cases, enforcement of orders was not carried out. Some participants spoke on the short notice given for change in judicial conferences (moving from in person to online). While acknowledging that lawyers were helpful, it was also pointed out that lawyers were unaware of the psychological damage, coercion, and manipulation inflicted on victim-survivors and children by the abuser.



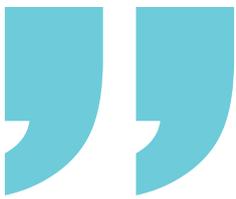
Several participants described a slow response from the Family Court and for some, that meant a significant delay in attaining contact with their children.

Parenting orders and lockdowns

Participants were asked about ways in which the Government and Family Court had responded to parenting orders in response to COVID-19

lockdowns (2020-2021). Common themes include the ambiguity of regulations and rules for parents in shared care arrangements, implications for those living with a disability or otherwise medically vulnerable, feeling threatened, poor communication, implications for supervised visits, and lack of enforcement of orders.

Survey participants provided detailed responses and experiences of abuser behaviour in connection to court ordered contact with children. The way that abusers used the Family Court during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in financial and litigation abuse as victim-survivors were forced into proceedings to clarify the shared care orders in light of lockdowns and alert levels. A poignant issue for several participants was the rights of victim-survivors during level three and level four lockdowns. The conflicting health and family law messages in effect supported the positions of both the victim-survivor to keep the children safe from COVID-19 in a bubble and the abuser to keep shared care going throughout the lockdowns and/or keep the child in their bubble and stop shared care.



The way that abusers used the Family Court during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in financial and litigation abuse as victim-survivors were forced into proceedings to clarify the shared care orders in light of lockdowns and alert levels.

The “shared bubble arrangement” advice provided by the Principal Family Court Judge and the Minister of Health during lockdown levels three and four was cause for considerable anguish for mothers and their children.²³ There was a difference in bubble rules for separated parents with children who shared care of those children with an ex-partner, compared with all other New Zealanders. As one participant explained shared care of children was treated like an essential service during lockdowns – it should continue while everything else shut down. The ambiguous nature of this “shared bubble arrangement” meant that court ordered care arrangements that may have previously been in place which determined

²³ See ‘Background’ section for explanation from the Minister of Health regarding shared bubble arrangements.

the amount of contact each parent must have (when and for how long), were in some cases not upheld by the abuser. The ambiguity was used to the ex-partner/abuser's advantage who withheld both in person contact, and phone contact between mother and children.²⁴ In some instances, particularly during the Alert Levels or Elimination Strategy phases, participants were denied their right to scheduled supervised visits with their children by the abuser.

The shift between the lockdown system (in particular, level three and four) to the traffic light system meant that existing court ordered shared care arrangements could then take precedence over the "shared bubble arrangement" advice from previously. However, in some instances, children were still kept from their mother for long periods of time (over a year and a half). Participants sought support from many avenues to see their children including legal aid, Family Court, Police, and Ministers within the New Zealand Government. Unfortunately, participants reported that these services and individuals failed to provide assistance in a timely manner and their children faced ongoing risk while in lockdown care with the abuser as a result. A detailed account of the support services participants used can be found on Figure 11.

Information about Parenting Orders and Government health measures was scarce and confusing

Backbone received many messages prior to the lockdown in 2020 and throughout the period since then from victim-survivors who were trying to make sense of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns on their shared care arrangements for their children. As explained in the introduction to this report, Backbone wrote to a range of Government officials requesting information and raising the issues for women victim-survivors and their children. These activities were in response to the gaps in information available for victim-survivors. Participants in the survey were

²⁴ See earlier section 'mothers prevented from contact with their children'.

asked what information sources they used to find out about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on Family Court parenting orders throughout the pandemic. Table 13 shows that these victim-survivors used a range of sources including official sites and their lawyer and half relied on the media for information. Some participants explained that they were forced to be extremely active in trying to access information about how to manage adhering to public health measures and complying with Family Court orders as their abuser placed extensive pressure on them to force contact with children during the lockdowns. Some participants used internet web searches (e.g. Google) to try and gather as much information as possible

Table 13. Sources of information used by victim-survivors about impact of COVID-19 on parenting orders (N-18)

SOURCES OF INFORMATION USED BY VICTIM-SURVIVORS ABOUT IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PARENTING ORDERS (N - 18)	
Media articles	50%
Ministry of Justice website	56%
My Lawyer	44%
The BackboneCollective updates	17%
Family/whānau/friends	17%
Lawyer for Child	11%

Comparison of Family Court response prior to and during the pandemic

Participants were asked if the response from the Family Court was different during the pandemic compared with prior to it. Of the 23 participants who answered this question, nearly half said the Family Court response was not different, a smaller number (22%) said the response was different and the remaining participants (30%) could not make a comparison as they did not have matters before the Family Court prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

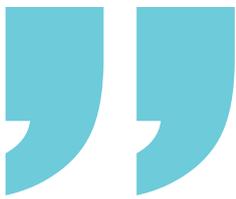
Backbone wanted to establish if the Family Court response during the pandemic had changed over time. We asked participants if they thought the Family Court response to the lockdowns in 2020 had differed from lockdowns in 2021. There were 18 participants who shared their experiences regarding a changed response from Family Court. Of those, half said the response was the same between the different lockdowns, 17% said the response differed and the remaining 33% said they were not sure if the response was the same or different between the different lockdowns.



Women said they felt demeaned by workers and were sent on a roundabout of referrals as places were unsure of the rules and no one could help them with information or support regarding parenting orders.

Participants were able to provide an explanation regarding the ways the Family Court and Government response to parenting orders was different between the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. Participants explained that the response from the Family Court itself, agencies and services was slow throughout both lockdowns and there was a real lack in clarity and advice that workers could provide victim-survivors. They complained that information was generic in nature and had no specificity for situations where one parent had underlying health issues. Women said they felt

demeaned by workers and were sent on a roundabout of referrals as places were unsure of the rules and no one could help them with information or support regarding parenting orders. Women used phone lines (either law line or the Family Court 0800 number) to try and access correct information. They reported getting incorrect advice and in particular during the 2020 lockdown, feeling threatened by the services they spoke with that the court would punish them if they did not hand over their children to the abuser in the lockdowns. They reported a slow response to their requests for information or support, orders not being enforced and lawyers lacking any awareness of the way abusers were using the lockdowns to further psychologically abuse them and their children. One participant thought that information and advice got a little clearer by the 2021 lockdown. Participants did not only use the Family Court to try protect their children. They also tried to get help from Police when they felt they or their children were in danger during the pandemic.



42% of participants called police during lockdown.

POLICE

Participants were asked if they called Police for help during the lockdowns in 2020 or 2021. There were a significant number of participants (42%) who had called for help from the Police and one participant who said someone else called on their behalf.

Table 14. Number of participants who called Police for help during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 (N - 33)

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CALLED POLICE FOR HELP DURING THE LOCKDOWNS OF 2020 AND 2021 (N - 33)	
Yes	42%
No	55%
Someone else did	3%

If participants indicated Police had been called during the lockdowns they were asked if the Police response was different from usual during the lockdowns. One third of the 12 participants who answered this question said the Police response was no different. However, the remaining participants said it was different (42%) or it may have been different (25%). The participants who said the Police response was different shared their insights as to how the response differed from prior to lockdowns. There was a range of explanations provided as illustrated in Table 15 below.

Although one participant said she received a swift response from the Police, several participants spoke of the delayed response rate from Police. Many said Police were inundated during COVID-19 lockdowns. It was suggested that Police could do nothing in level 4, and for those who had COVID-19 symptoms, contact was made via phone call. Many participants spoke of their experiences of being falsely reported to the Police for breaching Government led health measures by their abusive ex-partner.

Table 15. Police response different during the lockdowns

IN WHAT WAYS WAS THE POLICE RESPONSE DIFFERENT DURING THE LOCKDOWNS COMPARED TO BEFORE THE LOCKDOWNS?

- Using masks.
- Very quick to respond and believed victim-survivor.
- Did not attend in person.
- A lot longer to respond.
- Police could do nothing during level 4 lockdown.
- False allegations from the abuser resulted in Police action against the victim-survivor in lockdowns.
- Police reassigned victim-survivor to social worker due staffing shortages.
- Police checked in via phone call due to victim-survivor being symptomatic.
- Very lengthy wait time for police to issue trespass notice.

Participants were asked if they were satisfied by the response from Police to them and were able to select from a range of drop-down options to describe their level of satisfaction. One quarter of participants who responded said they were satisfied with the Police response and were made safer as a result of Police action. The majority of respondents however, indicated that they were not satisfied with the Police response as Police did not take appropriate action, refused to do welfare checks on children or refused to respond as there were Family Court orders in place and this resulted in the victim-survivor and/or their children being less safe.

Table 16. Participants’ levels of satisfaction of Police response to abuse during the pandemic (N-12)



The majority of respondents however, indicated that they were not satisfied with the Police response.

PARTICIPANTS’ LEVEL OF SATISFACTION OF POLICE RESPONSE TO ABUSE DURING THE PANDEMIC (N - 12)	
No- they said they could not respond because it was a Family Court matter.	50%
No. they responded but did not take appropriate action and I/we were made less safe as a result.	42%
Yes- they attended and responded appropriately and made me/us safer as a result.	25%
No- they refused to do a welfare check on my child/ren.	17%

Participants who indicated that the Police response, or lack of response, made them and/or their children less safe were asked to explain what the Police did or didn’t do that made them or their children less safe. Participants raised a number of issues regarding the unsafe Police response including Police responding to false accusations or reports about the victim-survivor by the abuser, attempts by the abuser to have Police arrest the victim-survivor, threats by the abuser that he would call the Police,

lack of support from the Police, and Police services being overwhelmed. Some participants explained that they were threatened by the abuser with reports to Police that could jeopardise custody arrangements of children. For those participants who discussed their experiences with the Police, there was a general feeling that the Police were overwhelmed. Themes derived from participant experiences of Police included the response rate, failure to investigate, lengthy process for enforcement, administrative errors, lack of discretion, and lack of action.

Lack of action and discretion

Lack of action and discretion was an emerging theme from the survey responses. Participants spoke of experiences of the Police failing to press charges as a result of losing paperwork and failing to issue trespass notices in a timely manner. Some participants explained that losing paperwork and not issuing orders in a timely manner lead to an inability to prosecute for subsequent breaches of the orders. Participants shared experiences of Police breaching their privacy and putting their safety at risk by sharing information with the abuser. Participants said Police gave abusers opportunities to provide their version of events and when abuse was denied, Police chose to take no further action.

Police failing to act had the effect of emboldening the abuser and was described by participants as being worse than no Police response at all, making victim-survivors feel powerless against the abuser's continued use of violence. Some participants said they were not believed by Police. Others explained that Police failed to use their discretion to take actions that would increase the safety of their children during COVID-19 lockdowns. For example, participants shared examples of asking for Police

to prevent their sick child/ren moving between households (theirs and the abuser's), or going to public places. However, Police would not intervene to prevent that movement (override the 'shared bubble arrangement' explained previously). Therefore, some sick children were moved around often regardless of their health condition. We heard that in some cases Police had provided information that was in line with the Government's public health measures (stay in household bubbles) and participants relied on this information to decide what arrangements to make for their children. However, abusers then used Family Court proceedings to challenge her actions. Therefore, although the Police response may have been perceived as adequate by the victim-survivor, no further protection was provided from Police in response to how the abuser continued to abuse her and the children in light of their advice (by making applications in Family Court).



Participants described approaching multiple agencies for support but not finding any service that could help them.

While responses from the Police were varied, and the Family Court in large offered little protection for these women and children, the participants actively tried to get help and support from a range of other agencies and services. The following section details the kinds of support they tried to access and the response they received from these agencies.

OTHER AGENCIES AND SERVICES

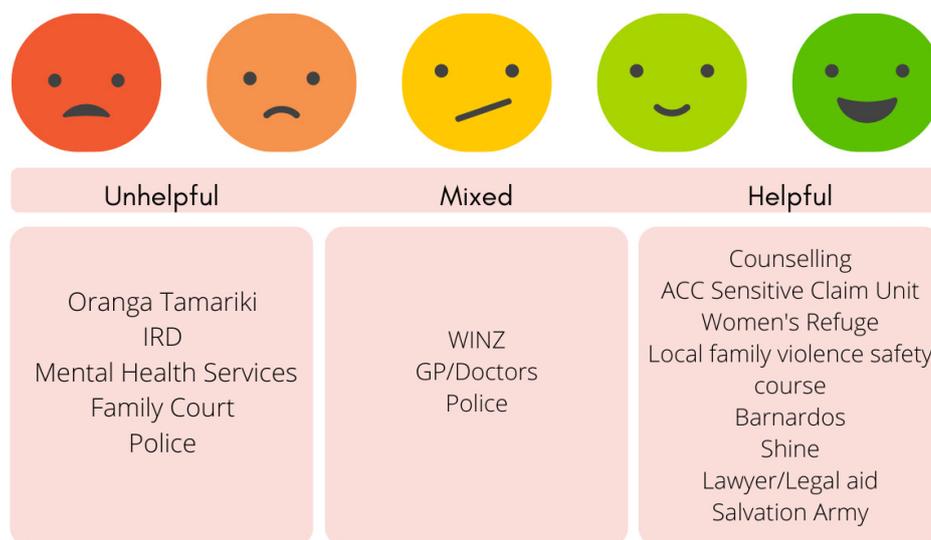
Survey participants were asked to describe the agencies and services they used during the pandemic. Participants listed a range of services and agencies. Support that was helpful was likely to be provided by specialist family violence agencies or counselling services.

However, the participants' experiences of the support these agencies and services provided was often not helpful. Participants described approaching multiple agencies for support but not finding any service that could help them or responses that failed to identify the risk and abuse, and agencies that were overwhelmed.

Participants shared several services and agencies in which they accessed or made attempts to access during the government led health measures (elimination strategy in 2020 and 2021). Participants were asked to describe how helpful these services were. Services as shared by participants include the following:

- Inland Revenue – IRD Child Support Review
- Salvation Army Food Bank
- Work and Income (WINZ)
- Counsellor
- ACC funded counselling
- Police
- Child and Adult Mental Health Services
- Shine
- Barnardos
- General Practitioner/Doctor
- Legal aid/Lawyer
- Healthline
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Health
- Community Law Centres
- Mediation Services
- Oranga Tamariki
- Women's Refuge
- Local family violence safety course

Figure 11. Survey Question: Please tell us if those services were helpful or not



Counselling for child/ren

When asked what support might make the mother and child/ren feel safe, participants explained the need for children to have access to specialist counselling without having to get the abuser's consent first. The need for counselling was intended to support children who suffer trauma responses due to the behaviour of their abusive parent. Participants also expressed the need for checks to be made on children while they are in the care of the abusive ex-partner.

Exhausted different avenues of support

An underlying theme that was shared by several participants, was found in the desperate attempts of victim-survivors to seek help from various support services such as the Family Court, family lawyers, Police, WINZ, and in one case, the Prime Minister. Some participants spoke of the lack of intervention provided to uphold court ordered conditions regarding the children when the abuser breached these conditions.

Response from agencies was variable

Participants expressed their concern over the response from agencies to the abuser's behaviour. Sometimes that behaviour led to Police, Oranga Tamariki and Family Court investigations, but other times their complaints did not result in a satisfactory response and participants described being stuck in an unsafe situation and not getting help to get safe. Further, several participants spoke of being falsely reported to Police by the abuser. Some participants explained that agencies and services focussed only on physical abuse and would not respond to or understand the negative impact of psychological abuse perpetrated by the abuser.

Agencies were overwhelmed

There was a general sense of feeling like public services were overwhelmed. This had several implications including the following:

- Children were withheld from their mother by the abuser
- Delayed court processes
- Being isolated and in danger in rural locations and unable to get urgent help as services were overwhelmed and had difficulty getting to remote locations
- As a result of financial/economic abuse and abandonment, those in need of financial assistance (from WINZ) had lengthy wait times for respite, including victim-survivors who live with a disability.

What participants want agencies and services to know

In their open text comments throughout the survey, participants shared information that they want the Government, the Family Court and agencies and services to know.

- Just because a relationship ends, that does not mean the violence and abuse ends too.
- It is not safe to recommend that an abusive ex partner drop children to the victim-survivor's house in lockdown.
- Children who spent time without their protective parent in the abuser's care in lockdown were stressed and traumatised by that experience. The impact of that experience is ongoing for these children.
- Mothers of children who were separated from their children during the lockdowns were traumatised by that experience. The impact on these mothers continues.
- Abusers increased their control of victim-survivors and children during the pandemic. That control impacted on victim-survivors' relationships with other family members, working life, financial situation and mental health and is ongoing.
- Court proceedings brought about by abuser behaviour in response to the pandemic have been drawn out and continue for victim-survivors in this study.

The victim-survivors Backbone heard from shared their suggestions for how the response to victim-survivors and their children during the pandemic could be improved. The following section of the report discusses those suggestions. We hope they can provide a useful checklist for officials and policy makers to ensure urgent changes are made to interrupt the ability of abusers to use 'the system' and the public health measures to further their abuse of women and children.

VOICES OF VICTIM-SURVIVORS

Survey Question: Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the Covid-19 pandemic with regards to its impact on the abuser's behaviour towards you or your children, or the Family Court or government's response to the abuser's behaviour during this time?

No support

There was no extra support for those who suddenly became full-time parents. Many also faced further financial hardship.

Enabling System

An enabling system further exacerbated the challenges already faced by mothers who were victim-survivors of abuse. The system did not keep victim-survivors and their children safe.

More abuse

There were more opportunities for abuse and the abuser got away with it.

Victim-survivor disadvantaged in court.

Victim-survivors were not believed in court about violence and abuse experienced.

Trauma

Women and children are still dealing with stress and trauma that resulted from abuser behaviour during COVID-19.

Family Court Taskforce

A family court taskforce is needed to provide immediate support for emergencies.

Lengthy Process

Victim-survivors were inundated with lengthy processing times in family court, and with police.

Learn about PTSD

Police and Family court need to work within a lens that understands the effects of Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for victim-survivors.

Children were treated like possessions

Victim-survivor is financially worse off

Courts misused by abuser

Abuser used the courts to take children from their mother.

Parents with protection orders were lumped in with other parents with co-parenting arrangements.

IMPROVING THE SYSTEM RESPONSE

The survey participants were able to share their ideas for how the response to victim-survivors and children in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic could be improved. We asked participants what responses from the Government, the Family Court and other organisations would have made or would make them/and/or their child/ren feel safe from the abuser during the lock-downs and subsequent alert levels. Participants selected a range of responses from a series of drop-down options and some left further comments about improvements in an open text box. Five of the participants indicated that the response from the Government was appropriate and kept them and their children safe but they also made selections from the drop-down list for further improvements.



The majority of participants (87%) want to see a specialist response from the Family Court to violence and abuse cases.

The majority of participants (87%) want to see a specialist response from the Family Court to violence and abuse cases during the pandemic that requires children to stay with the protective parent during lockdowns. Far better and clearer information is needed by victim-survivors to help them navigate the rules and how those rules speak to each other (e.g. stay at home order's relationship to parenting orders). Participants want to see far more specialised support available for themselves and their children and in particular support that recognises the unique and vulnerable situation they face as separated women whose children are forced to have contact with abusers without their protective parent present. And because these children of separated parents are far more vulnerable to ongoing abuse without a protective parent present, these participants see the need for Police to provide welfare checks on their children when they are in the care of the abuser and more specialised services to assist children if they need help while in the care of the abusive parent.

Table 17. Responses from Government, Family Court and other organisations that would increase safety of victim-survivors and their children during lockdowns (N-31)

RESPONSES FROM GOVERNMENT, FAMILY COURT AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS THAT WOULD INCREASE SAFETY OF VICTIM-SURVIVORS AND THEIR CHILDREN DURING LOCKDOWNS (N - 31)	
If there has been violence and abuse (alleged or confirmed) then children should stay with the protective parent during the lockdown and not be forced into care and contact with the other parent.	87%
Clear information that explained which legislation took precedence between Care of Children Act, Family Violence Act and the State of Emergency legislation (parenting orders, Protection Orders vrs lockdown requirements).	84%
Specialist support and advocacy services for victim-survivors who have separated from the abuser.	74%
Police available to undertake welfare checks on children while in the abuser's care if protective parents are concerned.	71%
Specific services should be made available for children about what to do if they need help during lock-downs e.g. phone lines, social messaging in media etc.	68%
The response from the Government was appropriate and kept me/us safe.	16%

Improving communication regarding the impact of lockdowns and alert levels on parenting orders

Survey participants were asked how information should have been made available to victim-survivors about the impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns on parenting orders. We heard from 17 participants who shared their ideas. As discussed previously in this report participants explained that the ambiguous nature of the information regarding parenting orders was used by the abuser as an opportunity to further abuse both the adult victim-survivor and the children. The ambiguity meant that participants tried to access clear information to help them understand what was required of them with regard to the parenting orders and how best to keep themselves and their children safe from illness. Getting clear information was extremely difficult for them. The participants suggested that in future

information or guidance about parenting orders in the pandemic context needs to be:

- *Clear and consistent and leave no room for ambiguity or mixed messages that can be used by the abuser or the Family Court against the victim-survivor and children.*
- *Concise (a one pager)*
- *Appropriate for cases where violence and abuse are present - understand that it is impossible and unsafe for victim-survivors to negotiate directly with an abusive ex-partner about the care of children.*
- *Responsive to children of separated parents so they can have their health protected like all other children.*
- *Communicated directly and proactively to all parents who are subject to parenting orders – lawyers should email their clients directly with this information, the Lawyer for Child should undertake responsibility for contacting parents in the interests of the safety of the child.*
- *Available on as many platforms as possible so it is easy to find – on the Ministry of Justice website, on the Ministry of Health COVID-19 website, on family violence service provider websites, social media platforms and the mainstream media.*

One participant explained that even if clearer information was available that would not have stopped her abuser from manipulating the COVID-19 situation to abuse her.

When asked about the kinds of supports that should be made available in general, participants responded with the following (see Table 18):

Table 18. Services and support needed

SERVICES AND SUPPORT NEEDED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child support payments should be enforced • Mental health services • Support to help parents understand obligations around parenting orders and COVID-19 government led health measures • Clarity on information for disabled or vulnerable health of parents, care of children, and exposure to COVID-19 and expectations of contact (in-person and over telecommunication) between parents and children during lockdown. • Specific counselling and support services that are familiar with family law. • Advice and check in service on keeping children safe • Trained family court advisors • Children’s lawyers trained in family dynamics and family violence • Support for parents who have a protection order • Clear guidelines on expectations for contact between parent/s and children during a pandemic situation. • Support navigating legal systems

When asked about the kinds of services that should be made available to children, the participants responded as follows (see table 19):

Table 19. Services and support needed for children

SERVICES AND SUPPORT NEEDED FOR CHILDREN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support (e.g., school fees and costs) when father fails to pay child support. • Drop-off/pick up service if children feel unsafe • Mental health services • Practical support for children to have contact with their protective parent. • Counselling without having to get consent of the abuser • Ability to check in with children when in the care of the abuser • “Reach out” app to allow children to discretely call for help if they are feeling unsafe • Counselling for children • Welfare checks • Child abuse counselling • Education around differences between protective parent and abuser.



RECOMMENDATIONS OF THIS STUDY

1. Apply an IPV/family/sexual violence lens

▶ All government led and family law policies should include a specialist IPV/family/sexual violence lens to ensure that they are fit for purpose and will result in safe practice and processes for victim-survivors and their children.

▶ Provide opportunities for victim-survivors or their advocates to alert officials to policies or processes that are resulting in harm to victim-survivors and their children. Ensure that when red flags are raised they are shared with all relevant government agencies and with the family law system and corrections to policy and practice occurs across all relevant agencies.

▶ Ensure government agencies work in collaboration when designing policies or processes in response to family and sexual violence so that information is shared and policies don't work against each other e.g. health policies and family law policies.

▶ Build victim-survivor voices into the design and development of policy and programmes.

2. Provide a specialist response to parenting orders for cases involving violence and abuse

▶ Government health measures and associated regulations that respond to major disruptions and events such as COVID-19 should provide detailed instruction and policy for parents who share children but are no longer in a relationship. Information must be clear and not provide opportunities for abusers to use ambiguity to further abuse victim-survivors and their children.

- ▶ Provision should be made in health measures and regulations for circumstances where it is safer for a child to stay with their protective parent particularly if they are symptomatic regardless of court ordered custody arrangements.
- ▶ Provisions need to be made in Family Court and Police to allow and enforce the returning of children to their protective parent regardless of lockdown and associated public health measures.
- ▶ Information about the impact of lockdowns should be shared directly with people with parenting orders. Lawyers, including Lawyer for Child or the Ministry of Justice should take responsibility for sharing information. Information should also be made available in multiple sites including family violence services' websites.

3. Provide specialist urgent intervention for victim-survivors and their children when required

- ▶ Support services, while undoubtedly overworked during the pandemic, need to prioritise women and children who are in immediate risk of violence, including women and their children who have separated from an abuser.
- ▶ Timeframes need to be shorter for those seeking immediate and emergency financial assistance from agencies such as WINZ.
- ▶ Police should provide a priority service with regard to call outs for assistance, the enforcement of protection orders and trespass notices.

► Police should undertake welfare checks of children (regardless of parenting orders being in place) if a protective parent has safety concerns for her child/ren while they are in the care with the other parent.

4. Specialist support is easily accessible

Women (and their children) who disclose any form of violence or abuse by a former partner should be offered immediate support from a specialist well trained workforce.

Support and services should include:

- Specialist support for children's mental health.
- Support and advocacy for navigating through legal services.

Services should ensure that they:

- conduct any consultation in private, and details should not be disclosed to the former partner.
- uphold client confidentiality, while informing women of the limits of this confidentiality particularly when mandatory reporting is necessary.
- are non-judgemental and supportive.
- provide practical care and support that does not intrude and are directed by what the victim-survivor wants.
- assist her in increasing safety for herself and her children and do not result in unintended harm.

5. Train the workforce

- ▶ Provide regular, mandated and specialist training to people who work with victim-survivors and their children. Training should aim to raise workers' understanding of family violence, sexual violence, abuser dynamics/behaviours and impacts on victim-survivors including children.
- ▶ Training must include the nuances involved in IPV for victim-survivors who are no longer in a relationship with their partners and that violence and abuse continues post separation. Attention must be given to the ways abusers use children to continue their abuse post separation.

6. Future research

- ▶ The sample size of this study is small and therefore limited. Further investigation should be resourced so that specialist researchers and advocates can gather and report the experiences of diverse groups of victim-survivors including wāhine Māori, disabled people, Pasifika women, refugee and migrant women, rainbow folk and children. Specific recommendations for improving the system response in the context of COVID-19 made by these researchers and advocates should be incorporated in future policy and practice.
- ▶ Future research should focus on and give further voice to victim-survivors who are no longer with their partners but share care of children with them and are still experiencing violence and abuse.

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APPENDIX 1

Backbone's letter to the Principal Family Court Judge



26 March 2020

Principal Family Court Judge
Judge Jacquelyn Moran
Judges' Chambers
Wellington
Dear Judge Moran

Re: COVID-19 lockdown- impact on children where family violence is present

I am writing to you to respectfully ask that you prepare and release a specific statement or directive from The New Zealand Family Court to guide how Family Court judges respond to people (victim-survivors and their children) who are forced to co-parent with an alleged or confirmed abuser in light of the COVID-19 lockdown. The purpose of this statement would be threefold;

1. To enable victim-survivors who have existing shared care parenting orders in place to act in ways to keep their children healthy and safe.
2. To guide how Family Court judges respond to new applications placed before them where family violence is alleged.
3. To ensure protective parents are not penalised for reasonable measures they take to keep their children safe and healthy during this lockdown period.

I am one of the Co-Founders of The Backbone Collective. We are a registered charity with over 1600 members. We launched Backbone in March 2017 to give women who have experienced violence and abuse a safe way to say how the system responded to them when they reached out for help. Our sole objective is to improve the way the system responds to domestic and sexual violence in New Zealand. As part of that objective we have surveyed New Zealand women and written reports outlining the issues they have shared with us regarding the legal system. In addition, we hear from many victim-survivors via email and our Facebook page about their experiences in the Family Court.

As you may be aware many commentators and family violence experts have warned of an increasing incidence of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been media reports of increased rates of family violence in Italy, Australia and Spain and the NZ Police have discussed the potential for increased rates in New Zealand in their recent media updates. There has been a focus

in these Police discussions on the experiences and risk for victim-survivors who might be living with their abuser and who are then forced into a lockdown household/bubble with that person. However, there has been no discussion about the risks to children who are still having to spend time with abusive parents under shared care parenting orders.

We have read the statement that was released by you on 24 March 2020 outlining the ways the New Zealand Family Court expects New Zealand parents to 'live out' their shared parenting orders within the unusual and unprecedented context of the COVID-19 lockdown. We understand from that statement that the directive is that parents continue with shared care arrangements if they live in the same city or town as their children's other parent and that parents 'put aside their conflict at this time', in order to uphold their children's best interests and to maintain the status quo in terms of their care arrangements where applicable.

Backbone wrote last week to the Minister of Justice, Minister of Health, Under Secretary Logie, and the Chief Victim advisor and to the Director General of Health this week requesting urgent advice regarding guidelines for children who are included in existing shared care parenting orders with an abusive parent during the COVID-19 lockdown. Backbone is asking that the New Zealand Family Court create a specific statement or directive for existing and new cases that feature family violence within this context. We maintain that it is not sufficient nor safe to treat non-family violence cases and family violence cases in the same way in this regard.

I would like to take this opportunity to respectfully provide you with some information which may help you understand the context of parenting that women and children face when the other parent is abusive and why recommending existing shared care arrangements continue may be dangerous at this time from both a public health perspective and for the safety and best interests of the children involved.

1. It is impossible for women who are victim-survivors of family violence to put conflict aside; - they are in fact the least equipped to have any influence on the other parent's behaviour. Unfortunately, men who use violence and abuse often use the Family Law system as a tool of abuse following separation. Backbone has written a number of reports about this over the last 3 years. Therefore, appealing to abusive men to behave in ways that uphold the community and public health messages, or to focus on the best interest of their children is in most instances unrealistic and insufficient to ensure the safety of children who are already vulnerable. These men may choose to flout the self-isolation rules as a way to get at their ex-partner.
2. We have been contacted by some mothers who have advised that their abusive ex-partner is refusing to return their children from recent contact visits using the lockdown as an excuse. In this situation, the child may be forced into an unusual, isolated and dangerous home situation without their protective parent being available to them. Many mothers have told Backbone that their child/ren have been physically assaulted during contact visits. For example, in our 2017 survey, 37% of children suffered physical injuries while in the care of the abuser post separation.¹
3. We have heard from mothers whose children are symptomatic and have been advised via the MOH Healthline to stay isolated at home but who are being forced into contact with the other

1

This finding related to the experiences of 389 children. Please see the report in full here <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57d898ef8419c2ef50f63405/t/5a3171c59140b743f5abbe36/1513189837189/Seen+and+not+Heard+Children+in+the+Family+Court+%281%29.pdf>

(abusive) parent thereby potentially spreading the virus. This is occurring with the support of Lawyer for Child.

4. We have been contacted by mothers who are very fearful that their abusive ex-partner has already exposed their child to public situations or will do so during the contact visits. Often abusers have little regard for the rules and use their ability to expose children to danger as a way to get back at their ex-partner and further exert continued power and control.

5. Parenting Orders in many cases stipulate a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between caregiver homes - 50/50 care is common in NZ. While these arrangements may occur every 3 days or 5 days, or week about, these different arrangements all involve REGULAR changeovers - not just fortnightly. Obviously, the more to-ing and fro-ing that takes place, the more likely there is to be community transmission of COVID-19, especially if there are others living in the home that are also moving between houses.

6. Some women are themselves vulnerable health wise and/or have other vulnerable adults living with them (sick family members, immune-compromised or grandparents etc). These women do not want their children going to other households where strict self-isolation rules are not upheld as this creates a far greater risk to these vulnerable people when children return from contact visits.

7. Some women have expressed concern that if they keep their children isolated at home with them, they will face contempt of court actions or criminal proceedings. They worry that they and their children may have their future safety compromised if their actions are misconstrued as attempts at not complying with existing Family Court orders.

8. Some victim-survivors do not have primary care of their children and only see their children for short periods of contact or at supervised contact centres. These women have described that their ex-partner is violent and abusive however, the professionals working in the Family Court did not believe them or their children when they disclosed the violence and abuse at the time parenting orders were made. These mothers are concerned that if they are prevented by the other parent from having contact with their children during the lockdown, an important safety valve for these children is closed.

9. Some women are very concerned that they are not financially able to take applications to the Family Court to vary existing Parenting Orders in light of the risk they believe is evident if their children continue to have contact with the other parent (abuser) in the lockdown period with the associated risks of isolation, lack of opportunity for help seeking by the children or observation of any danger by others e.g. school teachers, wider family etc.

Backbone appreciates that the judiciary are independent from Government as per our Westminster system. However, we urge you in your capacity as The Principal Family Court Judge to provide a specific statement or directive to outline how protective parents can better keep their children safe during the lockdown period and to assist individual Family Court judges to respond in cases where family violence is an issue.

Backbone is in contact with academics and legal professionals globally and has access to Judicial directives from other countries and states. In other places the Courts have made blanket directives that the child stays in isolation with the primary care giver or with the parent who has the most care time (Blair County, Pennsylvania). An organisation called Child USA has released a document today (endorsed by the Centre of Judicial Excellence) which I have attached, recommending a number of

actions Family Law Courts, Lawyers and Family Violence advocates can take to ensure children's safety at this time. One of those recommendations is for Courts to provide a specific directive aimed at people (victim-survivors and their children) who are forced to co-parent with an alleged or confirmed abuser in light of the COVID-19 lockdown to enable them to keep their children healthy and safe and to ensure protective parents are not penalised for reasonable measures they take to keep their children safe and healthy during this lockdown period. Another recommendation is that Family Court judges include particular wording into all new parenting orders requiring parents to maintain social/physical distancing, self-isolation, hand washing and regular cleaning in the home.

We appreciate that we are in an unprecedented time in New Zealand's history. It is difficult to predict the countless ways that the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown will impact on New Zealanders. However, we can be sure, based on previous research regarding the behaviour and attitudes of men who use violence and abuse against their partners and/or children that risk to victim-survivors, adults and children, will escalate in these circumstances. The risk will increase for victim-survivors and their children if they are still in a relationship with the abuser or if they have separated from him.

Thank you very much for considering this letter. We would appreciate receiving a response from you when you are able.

Yours sincerely

Deborah Mackenzie

Co-founder

The Backbone Collective

www.backbone.org.nz

APPENDIX 2

NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT-LED HEALTH MEASURES

Elimination Strategy

ALERT LEVEL SYSTEM

1

PREPARE

*No restrictions on personal movements.
Business, schools, workplaces can open.*

2

REDUCE

*Domestic travel allowed.
Work from home encouraged.
Gatherings up to 100 people allowed.
Over 12 years old must wear face masks in some settings.*

3

RESTRICT

*Stay home, can reconnect with close family or support isolated person.
Travel only for work, school, or pick up necessities.
Contactless business only.
Over 12 years old must wear face mask in some settings.*

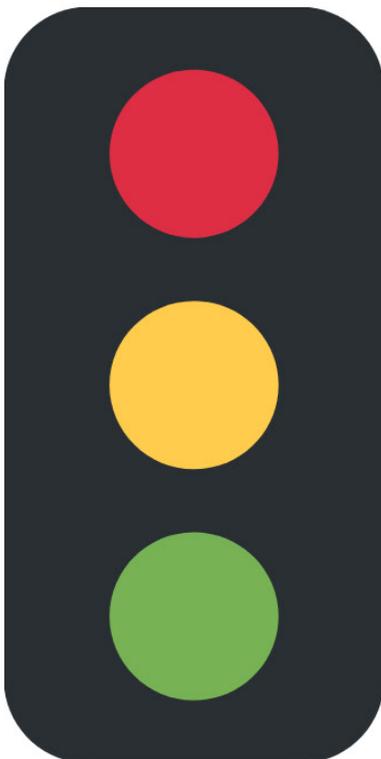
4

LOCKDOWN

*Must stay home in your bubble, can leave only for necessities.
No gatherings allowed.
All public and education facilities closed. Businesses closed except for essential services.
Over 12 years old must wear a face mask in some settings.*

Protection Framework

TRAFFIC LIGHT SYSTEM



Must wear a mask in most indoor settings.
Domestic travel allowed.
Workplaces and schools open.
Keep physical distance where possible, capacity limits at some venues.

Must wear a mask in several indoor settings.
Workplaces and schools open.
You can visit cafes, bars, gym, and events.
No capacity limits or distancing requirements.

Must wear a mask in most indoor settings.
Domestic travel allowed.
Workplaces and schools open.
Keep physical distance where possible.

28 FEB 2020

First case of COVID-19 reported in NZ

21 MAR 2020

NZ govt. introduces Elimination Strategy
NZ at Alert Level 2

23 MAR 2020

NZ at Alert Level 3 to move to Alert Level 4 in 48 hours

25 MAR 2020

State of Emergency Declared, **entire nation goes into self-isolation**

27 APRIL 2020

NZ moves to Alert Level 3

13 MAY 2020

NZ moves to Alert Level 2

8 JUNE 2020

NZ moves to Alert Level 1

12 AUG 2020

Auckland moves to Alert Level 3, Rest of NZ at Alert Level 2

30 AUG 2020

All of NZ at Alert Level 2

21 SEPT 2020

NZ moves to Alert Level 1

28 FEB 2021

Auckland moves to Alert Level 3
Rest of NZ at Alert Level 2

12 MAR 2021

All of NZ moves to Alert Level 1

17 AUG 2021

All of NZ at Alert Level 4

31 AUG 2021

Rest of NZ at Alert Level 3
Auckland and Northland at Alert Level 4

7 SEPT 2021

Auckland remains at Alert Level 4,
Rest of NZ at Alert Level 2

21 SEPT 2021

Auckland and Upper Hauraki move to Alert Level 3

25 SEPT 2021

Rest of NZ at Alert Level 2
Auckland at Alert Level 3

3 OCT 2021

Several areas in Waikato, and Auckland at Alert Level 3

8 OCT 2021

Parts of Waikato, Northland, and Auckland at Alert Level 3

16 NOV 2021

Auckland remains in Alert Level 3
Rest of NZ at Alert Level 2

2 DEC 2021

Elimination Strategy/Alert Level System moves to the COVID-19 Protection Framework or Traffic Light System.



2 DEC 2021

NZ moves to Traffic Light System