Working Paper 4

Innovating during the Pandemic: policing domestic abuse and multi-agency risk assessment conferencing (MARACs)

Background.

Multi-agency partnerships as one way of developing policy initiatives in response to crime have been around for some time. In an early evaluation of such partnership working, Sampson et al (1988), recognizing the contested purpose and impact of such partnerships, primarily in inner city areas in England and Wales during the 1980s, offered a nuanced understanding of their role, purpose, and operation. In so doing they suggested a: ‘more narrowly focused approach, with specific forms of inter-agency relationships, on specific themes and problems, provided that they seek to minimise the problematic consequences of the multi-agency approach’ (Sampson 1988: 491). In many ways the development of multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) is one such specific form of inter-agency working with one specific focus. However, as shall be seen, this is a policy and practice development that has not, to date, completely overcome some of the earlier problems of multi-agency working identified by Sampson et al (1988).

In this paper we offer:

1. An overview what is known about the problems and possibilities embedded in MARACs.
2. A summary of our key research findings relating to MARACs during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Recommendations for the future working of MARACs based on our research.

MARACs; What do we know?

As Blagg et al (1988: 217) commented in relation to the earlier development of multi-agency working in response to violent crime, domestic abuse had been relatively neglected in these early developments in stark contrast to the already existing web of liaisons in existence in
relation to child protection. Home Office Circular 60 (1990) was influential in reorientating multi-agency partnerships towards domestic abuse, which brought the UK much more into line with developments in North America. In the United States, the view was taken that positive policing policies worked most effectively alongside other community-based initiatives (see Jaffe et al 1986). At that time some areas in England and Wales (for example Merseyside) introduced Domestic Violence Forums in which both statutory and voluntary agencies met to co-ordinate policies. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act added further impetus to the development of this kind of multi-agency working. However it was not until the 2004 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act that this way of working was implemented on a larger scale (Cleaver et al 2019). This legislation established Specialist Domestic Violence Courts, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC’s), and Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs). Taken together Safe Lives (2016) has suggested that this suite of proposals provided the framework for close, cost effective inter-agency working in relation to particularly high-risk victims of domestic abuse. In this paper the focus is on MARACs.

SafeLives defines a MARAC as

‘a meeting where information is shared on the highest risk domestic abuse cases between representatives of local police, health, child protection, housing practitioners, Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), probation and other specialists from the statutory and voluntary sectors.’ (www.safelives.org.uk)

The key purpose of which is: information sharing, co-ordinated safety and action planning, and linking with other relevant agencies. SafeLives goes on to say

‘At the heart of a MARAC is the working assumption that no single agency or individual can see the complete picture of the life of a victim, but all may have insights that are crucial to their safety. The victim does not attend the meeting but is represented by an IDVA who speaks on their behalf. (www.safelives.org.uk)

In England and Wales, the MARAC model developed primarily from an initiative introduced in 2003 in Cardiff. This initiative brought together a wide range of agencies including police, probation, local authority, health, housing, refuge and what was then the Women’s Safety Unit. Its work was evaluated by Robinson (2006) and Robinson and Tregidga (2007). This process and outcome evaluation work pointed to the positive effect this kind of multi-agency working had for victims of domestic abuse, particularly high-risk victims, and led to this multi-agency model being adopted elsewhere in England and Wales.

SafeLives (October 2020) report there are approximately 290 MARAC’s across the UK and they collate data from MARACs on a quarterly basis. Their most recent figures are in the table below.
Latest UK MARAC data: Downloaded from SafeLives, October 19th, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Latest Quarter 12 months 01/07/2019 to 30/06/2020</th>
<th>Previous Quarter 12 months 01/04/2019 to 31/03/2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of Maracs who submitted data</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases seen at these Maracs</td>
<td>105,883</td>
<td>104,457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-on-year change in number of cases</td>
<td>+6%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>132,692</td>
<td>131,526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases per 10,000 adult females</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of repeat cases seen at these Maracs</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of partner agency referrals to these Maracs</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(A further detailed breakdown of these statistics can be obtained from https://safelives.org.uk/practice-support/resources-marac-meetings/latest-marac-data).

Statistics such at these afford a useful overview of the essential work done by MARACs and indeed there is a remarkable consistency over time in the quarterly figures presented above. However, figures such as these do not reveal very much about the actual working practices of these conferences and/or the challenges and successes embedded within them. There has been some limited work examining MARACs in practice. Some of that work has also focused on multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH) and, where appropriate, that work will also be drawn upon here. Overall, some of the findings associated with MARACs echo the earlier observations made by Bottoms (1990; 16). He asked three questions.

1. Do different agencies have different amounts of power in inter-agency working and does this matter?
2. How much autonomy does each agency need to lose in the interests of collective working and are they willing to do this?
3. To what extent is it possible to recognise that different agencies have different functions and do these different functions inhibit co-operation and if they do how?

These fundamental questions, and how they are managed are as pertinent today as they were when Bottoms (1990) first asked them.

Warmington et al (2004) have pointed to the ‘feel good factors’ associated with multi-agency working and this rhetoric can belie a range of conflicts, tensions, and challenges. Cleaver et al (2019) summarize these challenges in terms of funding (particularly for non-state agencies), resources (availability of staff to participate), competing organisational priorities (including the problems of working in professional ‘siloes’), and the challenge of hierarchical relationships in which the police frequently feature as the lead agency. In a detailed study of MARACs, Steele et al (2011) concluded from the available evidence that the jury was still out as to cost effectiveness of this way of working. However, there were some perceived positives around
information sharing (though see McCulloch et al 2020 on information sharing and Pitt et al 2020 on the challenges of information sharing for General Practitioners), having the relevant agencies in the room, and ensuring IDVAs were also present. All of which could be enhanced and supported by strong partnerships and leadership. Steele et al’s (2011) empirical research suggested that there remained some variation in practice from the recommended practice principles as endorsed contemporarily by SafeLives but that such variation enabled flexibility. Nevertheless, four issues seemed to present some ongoing challenges. These were; the appropriate identification (of high-risk) cases, representation of appropriate agencies, managing the volume of work, and action planning. Managing workload is also a challenge for the future (a commented on by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services HMICFRS, 2019). Robbins et al (2014) add to these challenges that of the potentially different ways in which agencies construct the victim, the practice implications of this as well as the capacity of MARACs to recognise the complex lives of these service users. This is a finding echoed by Shorrock et al (2020) in their work on the role of MASH and repeat victimisation. The HMICFRS (2019) report found additional areas of concern within a small number of forces. For example, a backlog of referrals awaiting a further risk assessment in a MASH; lack of triaging of high-risk cases for MARAC discussion, and different approaches to MARACs being adopted both within and between police forces. All of which have the potential of different outcomes for victims.

In the section which follows we present findings from our ESRC funded research project, concerned to examine policing and court responses to domestic abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on MARACs.

MARACs and the 2020 Pandemic.

The findings presented below are taken from questionnaire responses and interviews conducted with policing Domestic Abuse leads in England and Wales from June to October 2020. We received 26 responses to our questionnaire from 25 different police forces1. This was distributed in June 2020. Following up those who had expressed a willingness to engage in our research further we interviewed 22 Domestic Abuse leads from 22 different police forces during September and October 2020.2

All 26 questionnaire respondents commented on the significance and value of being able to maintain inter-agency working relationships virtually using online platforms (MS Teams for the police). With one exception, all of the respondents also thought that virtual meetings/video conferencing would remain the way they would conduct this aspect of their domestic abuse work in the future. One exception felt that there was still more to be learned in a ‘real’ face-to-face meeting as opposed to a virtual one. The overwhelming enthusiasm for maintaining virtual meetings ranged from the practical (it was much easier to get everyone in the same room at the same time with no travelling issues to negotiate), to perceived improvements in the quality and efficiency of the meetings. The ongoing use of digital platforms for MARACs was a theme

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1 These participants comprised a substantial mix of rural, semi-rural, and urban forces.
2 A full discussion of our methods can be found at Godfrey, B., Richardson, J. and Walklate, S (2020) Working Paper 3
explored in more detail in the interviews which followed. This data enabled a more nuanced appreciation of this aspect of their work set against their pre-Covid practices.

In the last five years the number of cases MARACs to be held had been growing. In 2017-18, 88,461 cases were reviewed in England and Wales, this increased to 93,893 in 2018-19, and to 105,883 in 2019-20 (Data from Office of National Statistics). Therefore, prior to the changes demanded by the pandemic, some police forces had already made the move to virtual working in order to manage a rising workload. As interviewees stated:

"we'd had to introduce anyway more frequent MARACs anyway just to simply deal with those coming through, [...] In reality, we can't wait to move to put in a safeguarding plan to make sure the victim and the wider family are properly protected. So really, if we do our job properly by the time we come to MARAC, certainly from police perspective if we haven’t wrapped around the right safety measures round the victim, come that time, then I think we're not doing very good."

“some of the MARACs were already virtual due to size of county. Each area of the county had a different arrangement for MARAC [in terms of frequency and structure], so they were looking at how to improve this e.g. through single daily Marac for XXX and north of county.”

“[We already did] daily MARACs, as many agencies are co-located, and for others dial-in was available. Evaluation of this was underway.”

It was clear from our respondents that the frequency of meetings varied considerably from quarterly, monthly, fortnightly to daily, with one respondent indicating that such meetings varied across the force area itself. Whilst this echoes the comments of HMICFRS (2019), it should also be noted that some of this difference in frequency of meetings will be the result of variations in levels of demand as well as the availability of partner agencies to engage with this process.

The push given by the pandemic to embrace virtual working seems to have generated some benefits. Echoing questionnaire responses, eight interviewees stated that MARACs were more efficient, from both police and partnership organisation perspective. Police and partner agency time was being used more efficiently (no time spent travelling, sometimes long distances, to attend meetings). There was also greater participation from, and better inter-agency working with, partner organisations. Respondents told us:

“We've reduced the bureaucracy, so that's increased capacity within police resources and we've also found that the third sector organisations are much more much more supportive of this 'cause it's less impactive on their resources, very, very tight resource.”

“other agencies saw MARAC as police led and too resource intensive but since virtual MARACs they are much more engaged.”

“staff really like it as it frees up more time for them to do other work. Partners appreciate the flexibility.”

Almost inevitably these improvements in the way in which MARACs were increasingly being conducted led several respondents to comment on what they saw to be the ultimate advantages in these developments for victims. As they said:
“the advantages are massive especially to victims and families, so they're getting a much quicker service. They're getting support quicker 'cause there's a requirement that actions will be completed on a weekly basis rather than, you know. There's almost on the monthly side. It was almost seven weeks before somebody might get some service, and by that point within their own life, the cycle would have moved on and they might not be interested in receiving that support.”

“actions can be more responsive just a simple benefit is that if you're sitting in a in a meeting like this that you have your files available to you and you can just go and look something up, or you know or send that action, do that that email then and then there's no there's no waiting for that because we have so much more participation and better participation, people have more time, we get more information.”

“24 hours, max of 72 hours rather than 14 days, to deal with a case.”

“flexibility meant they could include e.g. a prisoner due to be released into the daily MARAC meeting and do safety planning.”

“daily MARACs already meant that cases could be heard in 48-72 hours.”

Given that the focus of the MARACs are high risk victims, the importance of the advantages outlined above cannot not be under-estimated. Speedier, better informed, more responsive decision-making with all the relevant agencies in the room is something that has been consistently referred to as problematic particularly for Domestic Homicide Reviews (see *inter alia* Dawson 2017).

**Going forward: MARACs post-Covid.**

Whilst two of our respondents expressed reservations about the loss of face to face meetings, and what they saw as the associated inability to build person relationships, by far the majority of our interviewees expressed the view that the future in relation to MARAC operations was virtual. Respondent stated:

"We just we were muddling our way through in some aspects of it and getting used to having meetings like this, but this is the future now. This is the way that it will stay." "there really aren't any benefits in going back to that relationship or going back to what we had before, so I think very much that we will stay exactly as we are, and we're getting used to it, you know it's very different to engage like this."

“I just think we're never ever going to go back to the way we were in terms of like this. This face to face to face side of things, there is no there's no reason.”

Obviously these positive views need to be set against the context in which MARACs were occurring pre-Covid, the regularity of meetings, the geography of the particular force under consideration, the demands of high-risk domestic abuse in local areas, the range and availability of other agencies (one respondent commented for example that the introduction of virtual meetings had brought one agency to the table who had never attended a meeting previously) and the capacity of all partner agencies to be equipped with the appropriate digital infrastructure (more of a problem in rural areas than urban ones). However, given the amount
of work conducted by MARACs (see Safe Lives statistics presented above), the embrace of the virtual and its effectiveness did lead one respondent to observe: ‘Why didn’t we do this before?’

Policy Recommendations

Winsor (2020) makes a sound case for the development of information and communication infra-structure in relation to the modernisation of policing. The way in which the move to digital platforms has both assisted police forces in relation to domestic abuse to travel some way down this route resulting in benefits to them, their partners, and importantly, in their view, for the women whose lives they are engaged with, is significant in this regard. However, it is also important to be mindful that in the practice arena a one size fits all approach does not often yield anticipated benefits (Parmar and Sampson 2007). Nonetheless the findings reported here point to the potential for generalised working practices that may be of benefit for all MARACs participants, but victim-survivors especially. Based on these findings we recommend that:

1. All police forces in England and Wales, where possible and practicable, move towards the use of MS Teams (or the equivalent secure platform) for MARAC business.
2. That appropriate infrastructural IT support is provided to enable this where it does not already exist.
3. Where partner agencies are inhibited through lack of infrastructural IT systems, that Police and Crime Commissioners are encouraged as a matter of urgency to fund the developments of such systems as appropriate.
4. That, depending on local force demands, MARACs meet at least weekly to ensure a timely, informed, and targeted response to high risk victims.
5. That as far as possible, unless particular local situations prevent it, the same MARAC practices should be adopted within each police force, and across all police forces.
6. That ongoing efforts to ensure the attendance of all relevant agencies are sustained.

These recommendations, of course, leave untouched some of the deeper questions raised by Bottoms (1990) about the role and sometimes conflicting function of MARACs and their membership. The engagement of health professionals and continuing issues in relation to data sharing remain a contentious issue. However, for the foreseeable future 1-6 above will ensure the delivery of MARAC business in responding to both the needs and demands of domestic abuse.

References.


