Loneliness, impaired well-being and partner abuse victimisation of separated fathers in Wales

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Measures of mental well-being and social/emotional isolation were applied to a cohort of fathers seeking assistance from a Welsh charity. The fathers approached the charity predominantly with child arrangement problems after parental separation. Well-being was found to be strongly degraded – and loneliness severely increased – in this cohort compared to general populations. Associations of these dependent variables with nine predictor variables were explored, the latter being: a domestic abuse risk index, low income, allegations of abuse against the father, social services involvement with the family, refusal of the ex-partner to consider mediation, the father's concern about abuse of a child by the ex-partner or her new partner, the father's disability, the restriction of child contact, and an indicator of the father's recognition of his need for emotional support. The fathers' risk from domestic abuse was the variable most strongly associated with poorer well-being and elevated loneliness, as well as with a separate indication of depression/suicidality. The variable which was the second most strongly associated with those three dependent variables was low income, mostly due to unemployment. The findings of the study challenge the notion that serious partner abuse of men is either relatively uncommon compared with that of women, or that it is less impactful.

Keywords: domestic abuse; fathers; loneliness; parental separation; well-being

There is an extensive literature on the effects of parental separation on children. There is smaller literature on the impact of parental separation on the non-resident parent, usually the father, for example (Carlson & Turner, 2010; Köppen, et al., 2020; Nomaguchi, 2012). However, these studies do not discriminate between recent separations and those which occurred some years earlier. The participants of this study are fathers experiencing contemporaneous problems associated with parental separation. In this work, attention is focused on measures of loneliness and mental well-being obtained from this population of separated fathers, and the association of these measures with a range of independent variables, especially an indicator of domestic abuse. The association of these factors with depression/suicidality within this population is also discussed.

Private law children act cases in England and Wales: The background

Cases within the family courts of England and Wales which are brought by a parent to seek an order relating to childcare arrangements are known as 'private law Children Act cases'. There are now around 55,000 such cases per year (Ministry of Justice, 2020a). The parents in question may not be married or divorced. A roughly similar number of parental separations relate to parents who were never married to each other, though they will most often have been cohabiting. Only 38% of separating parents have recourse to the courts to make child arrangement orders (MacFarlane, 2019). The rest make their arrangements without court involvement. There are therefore nearly three times as many couples with children who separate per year in England and Wales than are seen by the courts, perhaps 145,000. With an average of 1.5 children per case, parental separation affects roughly 220,000 children per year in this jurisdiction alone.

The outcomes of these 'private law' child arrangement cases, either in terms of the court orders made or in terms of the actual child contact which transpires (the two things diverging substantially) are beyond the scope of this paper. However, what is relevant is that these outcomes are strongly associated with allegations of domestic abuse and the court's perception of the risks posed by the allegedly abusive parent (Collins, 2019). Hence, it is also pertinent to these outcomes that the incidence of domestic abuse allegations in these court cases is extremely high, while fewer than 10% of such allegations are subject to any 'finding of facts', discussed further below.

Domestic abuse in the UK: The background

For many years, the crime surveys for England and Wales have reported that 33% of adult domestic abuse or partner abuse is against male victims (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2019). Large, international meta-analyses have indicated that partner abuse is closer to gender parity, or even that men are the majority of victims (Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project [PASK], 2013). That men are a substantial proportion of the victims of partner abuse in England and Wales is evidenced by 25% of reports to the police of such abuse being by male victims (ONS, 2019), noting that male victims are less likely to report than female victims (ONS, 2018a). But this high level of male victimisation is diminished to very low levels of service provision, and hence minimal policy concern, in a succession of stages. In England and Wales, some 17% of victims in prosecutions for domestic abuse are male (ONS, 2017), already less than the 25% of police reports or the 33% of surveyed victims. Only 5% of cases considered by Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) involve male victims (ONS, 2018b). Similarly, only 4% of victims accessing Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) services are male (ONS, 2018c). Of those domestic abuse victims obtaining support in the community, such as from specialist charities, only 3.6% are men, and only 2.6% of refuge provision is provided to men (ONS, 2017).

Thus, the prevalence of male victims is vanished away via a sequence of filters at different stages of the process. The low level of male victimisation apparent at the end of this process then gives rise to misleading claims that women are the 'overwhelming majority' of victims, and even wildly incorrect claims that men are the majority of perpetrators of domestic abuse against other men, claims which are reiterated in the UK Parliament (e.g. Atkins, 2019), which then become instrumental in judicial policy (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2020b). The result is a virtual monopoly focus on female victims, manifest in the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) policies (e.g., UK Government, 2017). The significance of male victimisation is minimised in such policies based on sex alone. Despite this, the requirements of the

Equality Act (UK Government, 2010) may be claimed to be met based on the differing 'needs' of the two sexes. However, this rationalisation can be sustained only once the underlying prevalence of male victimisation has been successfully hidden by the process of filtering described above, or by claiming that the victimisation identified in surveys is misleading because men are not impacted as seriously as women by the same level of abuse. Both of these attempts to minimise the significance of male victimisation, based on either prevalence or impact, are challenged by the data presented herein.

The association between partner abuse and separation has been quantified in the crime surveys for England and Wales for many years. In 2018/19, for married couples responding to the survey, 2.3% of women and 1.6% of men reported partner abuse in the last year (ONS, 2019). Among separated people, those figures were about eight times larger at 18.1% and 12.3%, respectively. However, the prevalence of allegations of partner abuse rises still further to about 50% for cases of disputed child contact within the family courts in England and Wales (Barnett, 2020). Fewer than 10% of these claims are subject to any meaningful examination (Barnett, 2020). This is the context within which the cases providing the data used in this study arise.

METHOD

The source of participants

This study draws upon data collected from service users of the Welsh charity FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru (henceforth 'the charity') between July 2019 and July 2020. The primary role of the charity is to assist non-resident parents after parental separation to retain or obtain, a mutually beneficial involvement in their children's lives. In the UK, 92% of non-resident parents are fathers (Hunt & MacLeod, 2008), and this is reflected in the sex of the charity's service users, only a few per cent of whom are mothers. Before the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK in March 2020, most service users made the first contact with the charity via monthly meetings in each of ten locations around Wales. During the lockdown there has been no diminution in service user registration, contact now being made through a helpline, or via the charity's web site, or by referrals from solicitors and many different agencies.

There is a very strong association between parental separation and the incidence of domestic abuse, and this applies to both male and female victims (ONS, 2019). For many years this association has been a matter of daily observation within the charity. As a result, in 2018, the charity started a separate service (Aegis) for male victims of domestic abuse, which involved (before COVID-19 lockdown) weekly drop-in centres in two locations in South Wales. In practice, the association between parental separation and domestic abuse is so strong that the charity maintains a single case register which pools the two sources of service users together.

The bulk of the charity's service users are non-resident fathers who are experiencing difficulties with child contact. However, there is also a smaller, but significant, several cases in which the father seeks assistance from the charity principally around concerns about the safety of his children due to a perceived risk from the mother, or perhaps her new partner. In these latter cases, the father may or may not be content with the extent of his contact, and in a few cases, he may be the resident parent.

Data collection and ethics

The charity has been in operation since 2009, but data collection and record-keeping have been subject to maturation. In July 2019 the charity introduced a standardised six-page 'service user pack' (SUP) which records basic data about the client and his/her particular problem concerning which they have sought the charity's assistance. Invariably this involves child arrangements in some form. (Purely financial disputes are notable by their absence). The last three pages of the SUP consist of a domestic abuse risk assessment tool and measures of well-being and loneliness discussed further below. The completed SUP is uploaded to our confidential Caseworker system which also houses all other documentation, correspondence, etc., relating to the case. Strict adherence to confidentiality rules in terms of access to these data is essential, both for GDPR reasons and also because the documents mostly relate to living family law cases, to which legal restrictions apply.

The SUP includes the service user's agreement to the charity's confidentiality and data protection policies, and the possible usage of data in fully anonymised form for research purposes, such as this paper.

Completion of the SUP is partly a supervised process and takes typically 45 to 60 minutes. Before COVID-19 lockdown, this was done as a face-to-face exercise, but it has necessarily been done by 'phone and internet during the lockdown. Usage of the full SUP and associated recording within the caseworker system came about gradually from July to October 2019 and was fully embedded by November 2019. However, for logistical reasons or service user preference, not all cases achieve a fully completed SUP.

Between 1st July 2019 and 19th July 2020, the charity registered 418 new cases, of which 271 (65%) had a SUP within Caseworker and the service user was a father. Due to the slow start in July to September 2019, the SUP data relates to an equivalent of about 10 full months operation of the charity.

Demographics

The charity's client base is not an unbiased cross-section of the Welsh population. This is inevitable given the charity's main function in terms of assisting separated parents. Marriage has become markedly less popular over the last 50 years, but this is strongly demographic related (Benson & McKay, 2015). In the highest-earning demographics, marriage has become only marginally less popular. In contrast, in the lowest income demographics, the reduction in marriage has been dramatic, for example only 25% of new mothers in the lowest quintile of income are married (Benson & McKay, 2015). The decline of marriage in these demographics has led to an increased prevalence of cohabitation. But cohabiting couples separate at several times the rate of married couples (Benson, 2017). Consequently, services for separated people will inevitably be skewed to the lower socioeconomic classes. This is further exacerbated by the withdrawal of legal aid from civil court cases since April 2013 (UK Government, 2012), which leads to low earners, and those on benefits, seeking free assistance from charities such as FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru.

As a result, 56% of the charity's service users are unemployed, and 70% have an income of less than £12,000 pa. At least 6% are BAME and 18% report a disability. This report is confined to male service users. 8% of these fathers did not have formal parental responsibility (PR). It is noteworthy that 92% of fathers did have PR, despite being unmarried in many cases.

Loneliness and well-being measures

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 adopts a range of indicators of well-being for the Welsh public (Welsh Government, 2019). Two of these are, (1) the average mental well-being of the Welsh people, and (2) the percentage who are lonely. The measures adopted by the Welsh government were the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale, and the de Jong-Gierveld loneliness scale. The charity has adopted these same measures.

For mental well-being, the shorter Warwick-Edinburgh scale has been used (WEMWBS Resource, 2018). This asks seven questions, such as 'I have been feeling optimistic about the future,' and similar questions relating to feeling useful/relaxed/close to others, dealing with problems well, thinking clearly, or 'able to make up my mind.' The scale uses a five-point scoring system from 'never' (score 1) to 'always' (score 5). Hence the possible scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating better well-being. (Tennant, et al., 2007) have shown that the WEMWBS showed good validity/reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of close to 0.9.

For loneliness, the longer de Jong-Gierveld scale has been used (de Jong-Gierveld & Kamphuls, 1985). This combines both the social loneliness and the emotional loneliness sub-scales. Only the combined score will be used here. It consists of eleven questions, which variously may be positively phrased (e.g., 'There are enough people I feel close to') or negatively phrased (e.g., 'I often feel rejected'). Each question scores either 0 or 1, (see Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency [MVDA], 2020), so the total score lies in the range 0 to 11 with higher scores indicating greater loneliness. The de Jong-Gierveld loneliness measure was originally developed to meet the criteria of a Rasch scale (de Jong-Gierveld &

Kamphuls, 1985), and has been shown by (de Jong-Gierveld and Van Tilburg, 2006) and (Iecovich, 2013) to be valid/reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of around 0.86.

The last page of the SUP contains the Warwick-Edinburgh and de Jong-Gierveld questionnaires and is handed to the service user to complete independently (or the electronic equivalent). The resulting Warwick-Edinburgh and de Jong-Gierveld scores will be treated as dependent variables in regressions.

Depression and suicidality

A further dependent variable was defined according to the service users' self-reporting of depression and/or suicidality. The variable was defined as self-reported depression = 1, suicidal ideation = 2, suicide attempt = 3, none of these = 0.

Domestic abuse risk index (RIC score)

Pages 4 and 5 of the SUP consist of the Safelives Dash domestic abuse Risk Identification Checklist, or RIC (Safelives, 2020). This is the same tool which is virtually universal within the female domestic abuse sector in the UK. It consists of 24 questions with yes/no/don't know responses. Example questions are, 'has the current incident resulted in injury?,' 'Are you very frightened?', 'do you feel isolated from friends/family?', 'does the abuser try to control everything you do?'. Each 'yes' scores one point. The higher the score, the greater the assessed risk. A score of 14 or more is taken to indicate a high risk of abuse, a level which may suggest referral to a MARAC. Use of the RIC tool requires supervised completion by a trained person. The national manager of the charity is trained as an IDVA. The RIC score will be treated as an independent (predictor) variable in the regressions, together with a range of other independent variables (defined next).

Other independent variables

Ordinary linear regressions were carried out based on nine independent (predictor) variables, with nicknames and definitions:

- *RIC* is the domestic abuse Risk Identification Checklist score normalised by 14, so that RIC ≥ 1 indicates high risk.

All the remaining variables are binary, taking values 0 or 1, as follows:

- *Income*: If the service user's income is less than £12,000 pa then Income = 1
- *Allegations*: If allegations of domestic abuse were made against the father then Allegations = 1
- *Buddy*: If the service user requested to join the charity's 'Buddy' scheme then Buddy = 1. (The charity's Buddy scheme provides emotional support, so this variable is an indication of the service user's recognition that he needs emotional support).
- *Services*: If social services were already involved with the family when the service user registered with the charity then Services = 1
- *Mediation*: If the partner/ex-partner has refused formal mediation then this variable is set to 1
- *Child DV*: If the partner/ex-partner or her family or new partner were reported by the service user as having been abusive to a child then Child DV = 1
- *Disability*: If the service user self-reports a disability then Disability = 1
- *Contact*: If the service user's contact with his child(ren) was being prohibited or unduly restricted than Contact = 1

Statistics

Analysis of the data was carried out in Python and cross-checked in Excel data analysis. This included calculating Pearson correlations between pairs of variables and ordinary, multivariate, linear regressions between the dependent variables and the full set of independent variables (unstandardised). Linear regressions were also carried out based on a subset of independent variables chosen as those with the larger correlations. The full dataset had N = 271 but many SUPs were incomplete, so for the well-being

and loneliness data N = 220, for the RIC data N = 173, and regressions which required both well-being and RIC had N = 156. The significance of relationships between variables may be judged from the p values quoted below and derived from the regressions.

RESULTS

Loneliness data

Figure 1 displays in histogram form the distribution of de Jong-Gierveld loneliness scores from the charity's male service users. Table 1 compares these scores with a large scale survey of the general adult male population of England (ONS, 2018d), in ranges which correspond with the verbal descriptions used in that source. Figure 1 is starkly distinct from the general population, the mode of the distribution being at the maximum possible loneliness, compared with the general population for which the mode lies in the 'hardly ever lonely' range. 40% of the charity's service users are severely lonely ('often/always') compared with only 5% in the general adult population. 67.7% of the charity's service users are lonely more often than 'occasionally', compared with 19% of the general adult male English population (ONS, 2018d), or 16% of the general adult male Welsh population (Welsh Government, 2018). A Mann–Whitney U test confirms that the distribution of measured loneliness is significantly different from the general population (p < 0.00001). The extreme degree of social/emotional isolation evident in this cohort of separated fathers is one of the main observations of this study.

Figure 1
*De Jong-Gierveld Loneliness Score (Percentage of Service Users Who Completed the Assessment, N = 220)*
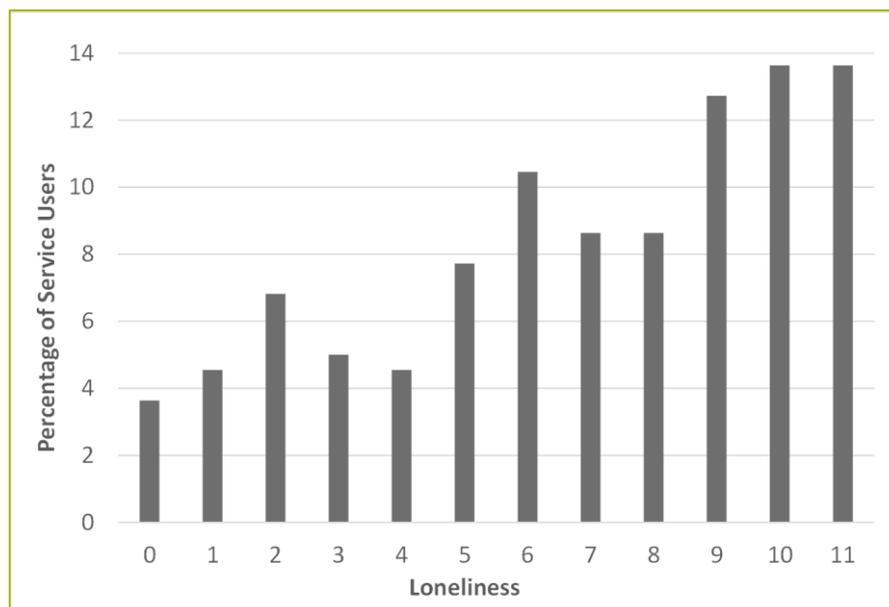
Table 1
Loneliness of the Charity's Male Service Users Cf. General (English) Adult Male Population

Loneliness score	Decription	General population	Present study
0	Never lonely	27%	3.6%
1–2	Hardly ever lonely	32%	11.4%
3–5	Occasionally lonely	22%	17.3%
6–8	Lonely some of the time	14%	27.7%
9–11	Often/always lonely	5%	40.0%

Well-being data

Results of the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being assessments are plotted in Figure 2 in comparison with the general adult population of England (WEMWBS Resource, 2011), where the latter is represented by a normal distribution with a mean (or median) of 23.6 and a standard deviation of 3.9. To aid visualisation the best lognormal fit to the service user data is also plotted in Figure 2. The median is 18.9 and the mode is 17.4. It is clear from Figure 2 that the separated fathers have mental well-being skewed to abnormally poor levels, the median being shifted down by 4.7 points. 78% of these separated fathers have poorer well-being than the mean of the general population. 28% of the separated fathers have a well-being score of 15 or lower, which has a prevalence of less than 2% in the general population. A Mann–Whitney U test confirms that the distribution of measured well-being is significantly different from the general population ($p < 0.00001$).

Figure 2
Shorter Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Cf. the General Population of England (Fraction of Service Users Who Completed the Assessment, N = 220)
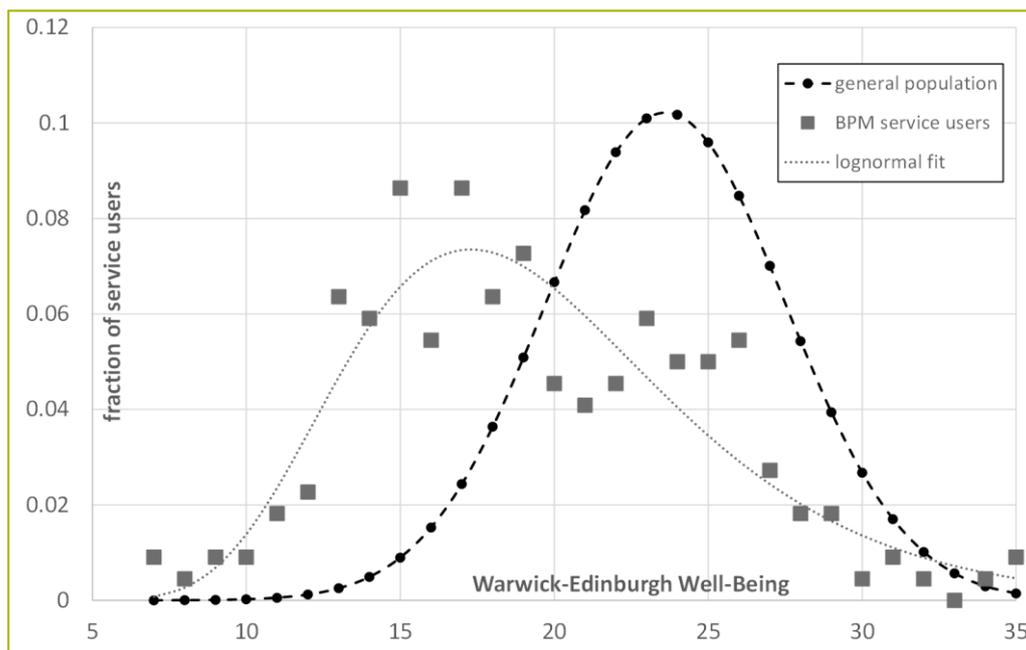

Domestic abuse and RIC scores

From the dataset of 271 male service users, 196 (72%) either self-reported being the victim of domestic abuse, or this was apparent from the domestic abuse risk index. 173 (64%) completed a supervised RIC assessment. 138 service users with a completed SUP (51%) reported that allegations of domestic abuse had been made against them by their partner/ex-partner. 33 cases (12%) involved child protection issues other than any risk posed by the father, almost all associated with the father claiming that the mother had abused the child(ren). In 63 cases (23%) social services were already engaged with the family at the time the service user registered with the charity.

The results of the RIC assessments are displayed in histogram form in Figure 3. The median RIC score was 12. 41% of service users with a RIC assessment were assessed in the 'high risk' category, having a RIC score of 14 or greater. In 23 cases (13% of assessed cases) the charity's IDVA judged the risk sufficient to motivate a MARAC referral. The average RIC score for these 23 cases was 16. However, few of these were referred to MARAC. It is no longer the charity's policy to do so. The reason is several experiences with breaches of security within the MARAC process which led to the abuser discovering the victim's

address and thereby furthering the abuse. The charity no longer regards the MARAC process as a safe recourse for men.

Figure 3
Domestic Abuse Risk Index (RIC Score) for the Separated Fathers (Percentage of Service Users with an RIC, N = 173)
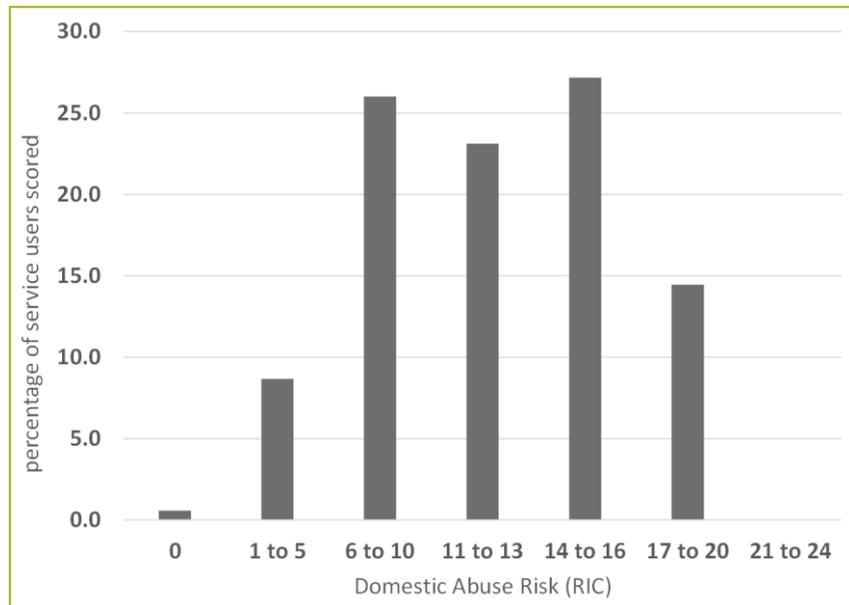
Correlations

Pearson correlations between the loneliness scores and the independent variables, where significant ($p \leq$ 0.05), are given in Table 2 together with their p values. Correlations with the mental well-being scores are also given. Note that the correlations align with expectation in terms of the sign, i.e., those for loneliness are positive while those for well-being are negative. Note that the correlations with domestic abuse victimisation of the father are most significant, while low income (mostly unemployment) is the second most significant.

Table 2
Pearson Correlation Between Loneliness or Well-being and the Independent Variables, Where Significant (No Correlations Significant for Variables Child DV, Disability, or Contact)

Variable	Loneliness (deJong-Gierveld)		Well-being (Warwick-Edinburgh)	
	Correlation	*p*	Correlation	*p*
RIC	0.23	0.004	−0.26	0.001
Income	0.23	0.001	−0.19	0.007
Allegations	0.14	0.045	n/s	> 0.05
Buddy	0.14	0.044	−0.18	0.013
Services	n/s	> 0.05	n/s	> 0.05
Mediation	n/s	> 0.05	−0.18	0.01

Regression

Ordinary linear regressions for the dependent variables, loneliness and well-being, were carried out in terms of the nine independent variables. The resulting unstandardised (or 'b') coefficients are given in

Table 3. The linear fits accounted for 40% of the variation in the well-being measure and 44% of the variation in the loneliness measure. Also included in Table 3 are the coefficients obtained when variables which do not have a significant correlation with the dependent variable are excluded from the regression. The salient feature of all fits is that the dominant predictor variable is the domestic abuse index (RIC score) in each case, and this is significant at the 97% confidence level or better. The only other variable which is significant at the 95% confidence level is the refusal of the ex-partner to agree to mediation (in respect of degrading well-being, see Table 3).

Table 3

Regression 'b' Coefficients and Their P-Values for Loneliness and Well-being (for Cases Where All Variables Were Known, N = 156)

DV	Loneliness				Well-being			
	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p
Intercept	4.88	<0.001	4.79	<0.001	22.95	<0.001	22.97	<0.001
RIC	2.09	0.02	1.88	0.03	−4.86	<0.001	−3.95	0.003
Income	0.7	0.2	0.65	0.25	−0.54	0.5	−0.15	0.8
Allegations	0.15	0.8	0.14	0.8	0.52	0.5	0	−
Buddy	0.15	0.8	0.23	0.6	−0.48	0.5	−0.34	0.7
Services	0.64	0.27	0	−	0.61	0.5	0	−
Mediation	0.75	0.17	0	−	−1.69	0.05	−1.74	0.03
Child DV	0.43	0.5	0	−	1.55	0.16	0	−
Disability	0.89	0.15	0	−	1.73	0.07	0	−
Contact	−0.68	0.25	0	−	−0.11	0.9	0	−

Depression and suicidality

The Pearson correlation of the variable representing self-reported depression/suicidality with the nine independent variables was calculated and found to be significant ($p < 0.05$) only for three variables: *RIC*, *income*, and *disability*. These correlations are given in Table 4. The strongest correlation was with domestic abuse victimisation of the father, and the second strongest was with low income, as was found for loneliness and well-being (Table 2). However, the significant correlation between disability and depression/suicidality is new and specific to this dependent variable.

Also shown in Table 4 are the correlations between depression/suicidality and loneliness or well-being. Not surprisingly there are significant correlations with both, and with the anticipated sign. The negative correlation between the shorter Warwick-Edinburgh well-being measure and client reported depression/suicidality is the largest correlation identified in this study.

Ordinary linear regression for depression/suicidality against the nine independent variables yields the "b" coefficients given in Table 5. The dominant regression term is again that for domestic abuse victimisation of the father (RIC), but Disability is also significant. This fit accounts for 49% of the variation in the dependent variable. Also given in Table 5 are the regression coefficients when only the variables with significant correlations are included (*RIC*, *income*, and *disability*).

Table 4

Pearson Correlations Between Depression/Suicidality and the Independent Variables, Where Significant, and Also with Loneliness and Well-being

| Variable	Depression/Suicidality	
	Correlation	*p*
RIC	0.32	0.0001
Income	0.22	0.005
Disability	0.20	0.012
Loneliness	0.26	0.0002
Well-being	−0.35	10^{-6}

Table 5

Regression 'b' Coefficients and their P-Values for Depression/Suicidality (for Cases Where All Variables Were Known, N = 156)

Independent Variable	Depression/Suicidality			
	Coeff.	*p*	Coeff.	*p*
Intercept	0.19	0.34	0.28	0.11
RIC	0.71	0.001	0.66	<0.001
Income	0.23	0.10	0.22	0.11
Allegations	−0.15	0.27	0	–
Buddy	0.09	0.48	0	–
Services	−0.04	0.77	0	–
Mediation	0.01	0.94	0	–
Child DV	−0.01	0.97	0	–
Disability	0.3	0.04	0.26	0.07
Contact	0.12	0.40	0	–

Of the 173 service users who addressed the question during the period of this study, 39 (23%) had recently experienced suicidal ideation, of which 8 (5%) had attempted suicide. These prevalence are substantially elevated compared with the general population. However, the statistics are too sparse to identify any trends over time (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Number of Service Users Reporting Suicidal Ideation or Past Suicide Attempts by Month (November 2019–September 2020
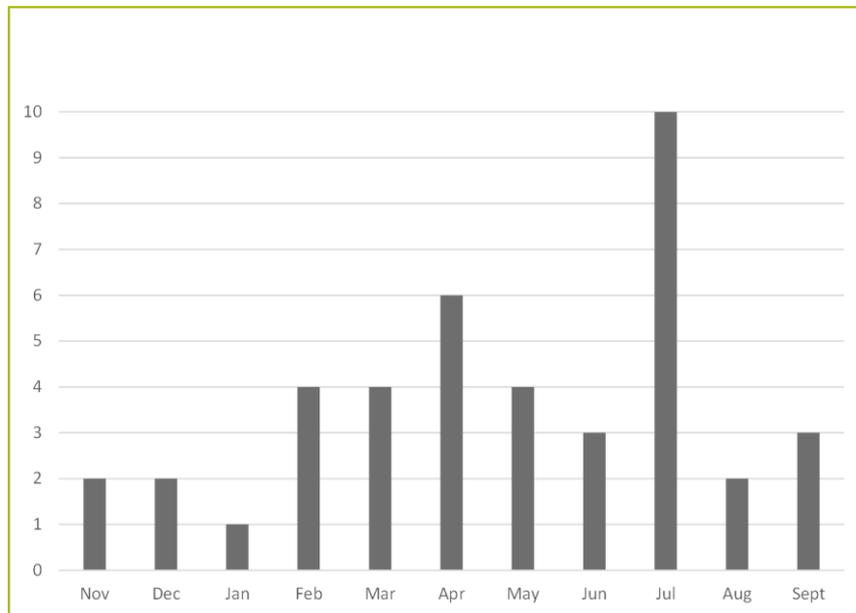
DISCUSSION

The experience of the staff and volunteers working with the charity is that most service users are in a state of considerable distress. Consequently, it is no surprise that the measured mental well-being of these separated fathers is skewed to substantially lower levels than the general population. However, it is of concern that such extremely poor well-being scores are so common in this population, 28% having a well-being score of 15 or lower, which has a prevalence of less than 2% in the general population.

It is also no surprise that the charity's service users have elevated loneliness scores. The charity knows that social isolation is frequently a service user's principal difficulty. This comes about because men's social circle tends to focus on just two centres: work and family connections. As most of the charity's service users are unemployed, after separation both centres of social contact have failed, leaving the man without social support at a time when it is most needed. Despite being readily explicable, it is still rather alarming to find that the degree of loneliness is so marked that the mode of the distribution lies at the maximum measurable loneliness. 40% of the charity's service users are severely lonely compared with only 5% in the general adult population.

In view of the service users' markedly reduced well-being and commonly severe social isolation, it is to be expected that suicidality would have an elevated prevalence. This was borne out by 39 of those asked the question (23%) having recently experienced suicidal ideation, of which 8 (5%) had attempted suicide. The link between separation and men's suicide is well known, though perhaps not as well established by UK data as it might be. (Collins, 2019) analysed data referenced in (Samaritans, 2012) and (Evans et al., 2016), none of it from Great Britain, and concluded that separation increases the suicide rate for both sexes, but more so for men than for women. The suicide rate for men after separation was estimated to be 8 to 12 times higher than for women in the general population. To the effect of separation must be added the effect of domestic abuse in elevating suicide rates further, and again this is more marked in men than in women. In 2017/18, in England and Wales, 11% of male victims of partner abuse tried to take their own lives compared to 7.2% of female victims (ONS, 2018b).

As regards associations with the independent variables, the elevated loneliness, the reduced well-being, and the elevated prevalence of depression/suicidality were all most strongly correlated with the men's domestic abuse victimisation (RIC score). This variable was also clearly dominant in the regressions. The

greater significance of the fathers' victimisation by domestic abuse than any of the other eight independent variables is one of the main findings of this study.

The second most significant independent variable was low income, less than £12,000 pa (generally due to being unemployed), and this was again the case for all three dependent variables: loneliness, well-being and depression/suicidality. Other independent variables were significant for some dependent variables but not all, namely allegations against the father, the man's recognition of his need for emotional support, refusal of the ex-partner to consider mediation, and, in the case of depression/suicidality, the man's disability.

An initially surprising finding was that the variable representing frustrating contact with children was not significant, because the anecdotal experience is that child contact issues are a major source of fathers' distress. On reflection this is less surprising because our dataset does not contain contrasting data: essentially all service users were having some form of child arrangement problem. Whilst 65% were experiencing prohibited or restricted contact, the rest had other concerns which invariably focussed on their children, typically anxiety about potential abuse by the ex-partner or her family or new partner. Consequently, the lack of statistical significance of variable 'contact' most likely indicates that both types of case are equally distressing. The effect of prohibited contact could only be isolated by comparison with a control group experiencing no child arrangement problems, but the charity has no such control group.

There continues to be a political and judicial adherence to the notion that domestic violence is overwhelmingly about female victims and male perpetrators. This is exemplified by the outcome of a recent family justice review (Ministry of Justice, 2020b). The final report, literature review and implementation plan resulting from this judicial review, amounting to some 406 pages, presents a perspective which is not so much biased as a monoculture of concern. That partner abuse of men, and fathers, in particular, is relatively uncommon is not supported by the fact that 72% of the charity's service users have been identified as experiencing such abuse. Nor can any claim that the impact of such abuse on men is minor be sustained in the light of the present findings. 41% of service users subject to risk assessment were assessed in the 'high-risk' range, with a RIC score of 14 or higher (26% of the whole population in the study). But perhaps most revealing is that it is the domestic abuse risk index (RIC) which, out of the nine independent variables examined, is most strongly associated with loneliness, well-being and depression/suicidality. Add to these findings from this study the national crime survey findings that male domestic abuse victims are more likely to attempt suicide than female victims (ONS, 2018b), and it ceases to be credible to argue that partner abuse is a less serious issue for men than women, either in terms of prevalence or impact.

Much has been written this year about increases in domestic abuse resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown. There has also been an immediate effect on non-resident parents' contact with their children. A survey conducted by the charity in April/May 2020 indicated that 61.5% of fathers responding to the survey had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children during the lockdown, a huge increase from 14% which prevailed before lockdown. In comparison, 27% of women responding to the survey had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children after lockdown, an increase from 9% before lockdown. The long-term effects of the lockdown remain to be seen, but it is already apparent that the severe economic downturn is likely. The potential for a simultaneous marked increase in both domestic abuse and unemployment, the two most significant variables, presents a worrying prognosis for increasing levels of isolation and suicidality among the demographic of separated fathers.

CONCLUSION

Separated fathers accessing the services of charity FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru were found to have: (1) substantially degraded mental well-being, 28% having a well-being score of 15 or lower, which has a prevalence of less than 2% in the general population; (2) highly elevated social and emotional isolation, 40% being severely lonely compared with 5% in the general adult population; (3) markedly elevated prevalence of suicidality.

Of nine independent variables investigated, the variable which had the dominant association with degraded well-being, elevated loneliness, and the increased prevalence of depression/suicidality was the

fathers' victimisation by partner abuse. In each case, the second most significant variable was an income less than £12,000 p.a. (generally due to being unemployed).

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