

Understanding geographical patterns of forced migration from domestic violence



Summary

Research by geographer Dr Janet Bowstead brought new insight to the journeys of women escaping domestic violence, with innovative use of underused administrative data from multiple sources.

Challenge

Each year in England over 18,000 women are forced to flee domestic violence and relocate to access support services. The geography of these journeys – a complex form of internal forced migration – is not well understood but has implications for service provision and responses to domestic violence.

Service organisers and providers such as local councils and refuges only interact with survivors at a single stage of their experiences, which can present challenges in working with survivors. Women and children may have to move many times over an extended period.

As an additional problem, insights into trends – including in domestic violence – [may be locked](#)

[within administrative data sets which may not be actively shared](#), either for safety reasons or simply because data are collected and retained within a particular project. Not connecting these data could limit insight into wider trends in domestic violence within and across geographies.

Solution

Dr Janet Bowstead applied methods and theories from migration research to better understand these journeys, producing [“the first geographical mapping of domestic violence journeys across England”](#). She retheorised flight from domestic violence as forced migration and used [service monitoring data](#) to analyse patterns in the journeys of women fleeing domestic violence.

Using Special Licence access from the UK Data Archive, Dr Bowstead was able to access eight years’ administrative data from the Supporting People programme, a funding programme for accommodation or support services run by the Department of Communities and Local Government from 2003 to 2011. The data covered 18,000 annual relocations and over 140,000 journeys which had not previously been analysed by researchers, despite offering unique insights into service provision and responses to domestic violence.

Dr Bowstead found that journeys away from domestic violence [were complex, often with multiple journeys](#) between different areas of the country over a period of years, and [the types of transport used varied](#). The research also characterised geographical “strategies” of movement women used to access services while retaining safe access to, for example, their job or their children’s school. The balance of these strategies – staying put and seeking support from services, relocating within a Local Authority area,

or [moving into another Local Authority area](#) – differed between geographies, including urban and rural areas.

Benefits

Managing risk

The research offered insight for service providers and funders across central government, local authorities, third sector and private housing providers. Patterns that had implications for policy and service provision, identified in journeys, included:

–Most local authorities have similar numbers of women arriving and leaving to access services each year, and all have women leaving due to domestic violence. [This “churn”](#) and lack of net result in one area can obscure journeys in the available data, leaving local authorities unaware of how many women leave their area to seek support.

–Spatial strategies varied for different services. For example, women accessing refuge services were much more likely to have crossed local authority boundaries and travelled longer distances. This finding highlighted the need for understanding, coordinating, and providing services, particularly refuges, nationally rather than as local services.

–Relocation strategies were gendered – women who fled from domestic violence were [more likely to have relocated](#) than men, and to have relocated a longer distance, to access services. This highlighted the gendered nature of relocation and the need for services to facilitate relocation and support for women specifically.

–There were geographical differences in migration patterns - around 15% of women leave their region to access services. Major cities have a net loss, with more women leaving to access services than arriving. This variation highlights the need for greater understanding of intra-regional journeys.

The research established [the concept of the “journeyscape”](#), a framework for understanding

journeys at a ‘functional scale’ where women and children travel only as far as is necessary.

Better governance and decision-making

The research was [used in reporting by the APPG on Domestic and Sexual Violence](#), where it underpinned criticism of the practice of capping the number of women served from outside a given local authority. The major domestic violence charity Women’s Aid used the findings to support campaigning for refuge provision and to brief the Department for Communities and Local Government. Dr Bowstead’s [briefing papers](#) help service providers and funders to better understand escape strategies, needs and provision.

Combining systems / Sharing data

The research method addressed the problem of accessing administrative data from services, and highlighted the possibility of using large-scale, de-identified data from underutilised sources in research. The [data are available for further research](#).

Analysis allowed gaps and issues in the data to be identified. For example, where recorded journeys start with a service such as a refuge, it suggests the woman was already moving, and thus the overall journey was not understood.

Raising awareness

[Photography from groupwork](#) with service users is hosted on the project website to share the experiences and feelings of women journeying to escape domestic violence.

Further reading

–[Dr Bowstead’s blog](#) for the UK Data Service on using forgotten administrative data

–The research project website [includes blog posts](#) addressing findings and issues

–[Video showcasing a visualisation of women’s journeys to escape domestic violence in the UK](#)