

COVID-19 and Partner Violence

Stay-at-home orders are necessary to slow the spread of the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19). Recommended actions such as social-distancing, sheltering in-place, restricted travel, and closures of key community gathering places have dramatically increased the risk for family violence here and around the globe. Many countries are already reporting a dramatic increase in cases of domestic violence.

Increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic

With shelter-in-place measures and widespread organizational closures related to Covid-19 likely to continue for an unknown period of time, stress and associated risk factors for family violence such as unemployment, reduced income, limited resources, and limited social support are likely to be further compounded. Additionally, alcohol abuse, a commonly reported risk factor for family violence, has been linked to an accumulation of stressful events and a lack of social support (both likely occurring as a result of Covid-19).

An increased risk of domestic violence related homicide is also a growing concern – reports continue to surface of intimate partner homicides tied to stress and other factors related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Reports of increasing gun and ammunition sales in the U.S. during the crisis are particularly concerning given the link between firearm access and fatal domestic violence incidents. Communities considering the mass release of prisoners to reduce their risk of spreading Covid-19 in confinement must weigh the potentially significant risk for victims and households if domestic violence or other violent offenders are among those released.

In addition to adult victims of family violence, children and pets reside in 60 % or more of households where domestic violence is perpetrated and are also at risk of suffering significant physical and/or emotional harm. Given school and library closures and shelter in-place mandates, children are spending significantly more time than usual in the home. Domestic violence abusers target children or pets as a means of furthering control over the household. Researchers estimate children residing in a home where domestic violence occurs are at as much as 60 times the risk of child abuse or neglect compared to the general U.S. child population.

Increasing reports of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic

Reports of increasing rates of domestic violence are beginning to surface around the world. This growing global trend is likely to continue throughout the pandemic and may represent just the “tip of the iceberg” as victims find themselves trapped with the perpetrator and unable to report the abuse.

In the United States, police agencies from across the country are reporting an increase in domestic violence. In addition to risk of physical harm, victims are at greater risk of emotional harm and abuse. U.S. reports have surfaced of domestic violence perpetrators using Covid-19 as a weapon against their victims, forbidding handwashing in an attempt to increase the victim’s fear of contracting the virus and threatening to forbid medical treatment if the victim does contract the virus.

Decreasing reports of child abuse or neglect during the Covid-19 pandemic

In contrast to increasing police reports of domestic violence, child welfare organizations are noting a significant drop in reports of child abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, this decrease may be a result of fewer opportunities for detection as opposed to an actual decrease in incidence. The closures of schools and other critical community organizations has limited key community partners in their ability to observe and report suspected abuse. In the United States, 67 % of substantiated child abuse or neglect reports come from victim-serving professionals and 19 % of these reports come from education personnel.

There is growing concern that we may see an overwhelming number of reports of child abuse or neglect when children do return to schools. If children do not return to the classroom until after the summer, the concerns should be even greater given the extended period of time kids are out of school. When Covid-19 measures are lifted and society returns to a “new normal”, child abuse victim-serving professionals may find themselves completely buried in reports and unable to meet the needs of an overwhelming number of victims.

[Source: An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives; Andrew M. Campbell, Forensic Science International: Reports. 2020 Apr 12](#)