

COVID-19 isolation linked to increased domestic violence, researchers suggest

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While COVID-19-related lockdowns may have decreased the spread of a deadly virus, they appear to have created an ideal environment for increased domestic violence.

Data collected in surveys of nearly 400 adults for 10 weeks beginning in April 2020 suggest that more services and communication are needed so that even front-line health and food bank workers, for example—rather than only social workers, doctors and therapists—can spot the signs and ask clients questions about potential intimate partner [violence](#). They could then help lead victims to resources, said Clare Cannon, assistant professor of social and [environmental justice](#) in the Department of Human Ecology and the lead author of the study.

The paper, "COVID-19, intimate partner violence, and communication ecologies," was published this month in *American Behavioral Scientist*. Study co-authors include Regardt Ferreira and Frederick Buttell, both of Tulane University, and Jennifer First, of University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

"The pandemic, like other kinds of disasters, exacerbates the social and livelihood stresses and circumstances that we know lead to intimate partner violence," said Cannon. She explained that increased [social isolation](#) during COVID-19 has created an environment where victims and aggressors, or potential aggressors in a relationship, cannot easily separate themselves from each other. The extra [stress](#) also can cause mental health issues, increasing individuals' perceived stress and reactions to stress through violence and other means.

"Compounding these stressors, those fleeing abuse may not have a place to get away from abusive partners," Cannon said.

Intimate partner violence is defined as physical, emotional, psychological or economic abuse and stalking or sexual harm by a current or former partner or spouse, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Crime statistics indicate that 16 percent of homicides are perpetrated by a partner. Further, the CDC says, 25 percent of women and 10 percent of men experience some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.

Research participants in the study completed an online survey asking about previous disaster experience, perceived stress, their current situation as it relates to COVID-19, if they experienced intimate partner violence, and what their personal and household demographics were. In all, 374 people completed the survey. Respondents, whose average age was 47, were asked about how COVID-19 had affected them financially and otherwise.

Of the respondents, 39 reported having experienced violence in their relationship, and 74 percent of those people were women.

Although only 10 percent of the sample reported

experiencing intimate partner violence, the people that had experienced that violence reported more stress than the segment of the sample that had not experienced it. Furthermore, the results show that as perceived stress increased, participants were more likely to end up as victims of violence.

"Importantly," Cannon said, "these data do not suggest causality and there is no way to determine if intimate partner violence was present in those relationships prior to the pandemic. What the data do suggest, however, is that experiencing such violence is related to reporting more exposure to stress."

Researchers found that as people find themselves in a more tenuous financial situation due to COVID-19, "there are more things to worry about and subsequently argue about. In many instances, that type of situation leads to an occasion for intimate partner violence," the researchers said.

"In our sample's case, as people lost their jobs and suffered financial losses, they also likely increased their worry about eviction," Cannon said. Notably, similar findings linking financial and job loss stresses with increased [intimate partner violence](#) were reported in the 2008 recession, Cannon said.

Researchers said their findings show a need for more communication resources for families—potentially coming from government and nongovernment sources of support and information. By increasing public awareness of resources available to the broader community, community members, trusted friends, neighbors, and family members may be better able to connect those affected by [domestic violence](#) with resources, such as shelters, treatment intervention programs and therapeutic professionals such as [social workers](#), therapists and others, researchers said.

More information: Clare E. B. Cannon et al, COVID-19, Intimate Partner Violence, and Communication Ecologies, *American Behavioral Scientist* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0002764221992826](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221992826)

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