

# Domestic violence and COVID-19: When it's dangerous to be stuck at home

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October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, but the pandemic has overshadowed the national conversation about intimate partner violence. This is unfortunate, particularly because COVID-19 has increased the severity of domestic abuse. Barbara Paradiso, director of the Center on Domestic Violence in CU Denver's School of Public Affairs, spoke to us about the connection between coronavirus and domestic violence (DV).

## **Petri Dish for Violence at Home**

The first issue connecting the pandemic to [violence](#) in the home is stay-at-home orders. "One of the things we have come to understand is that domestic violence has a tendency to rise whenever families spend time together—holidays, vacations, and certainly this is happening with COVID," Paradiso said. Whether it's due to quarantine or working from home, families are essentially stuck together in a relatively small area. "This creates a petri dish for violence," Paradiso added. "It's much more difficult to escape when violence erupts when you're forced to be in the same home with your abuser."

Another link between the "new normal" caused by the health crisis and DV is the underlying issue of power and control that's at the root of domestic violence. "Nobody has much control over their lives right now," Paradiso said. There is uncertainty in virtually all aspects of daily living—financial, geographical, political, existential—which is causing major stress. "Stress certainly doesn't cause domestic violence, but it has the potential to increase violence in the home," she explained.

## **Alarming Trends in Domestic Violence**

Although it's too soon for all the data about the correlation between COVID-19 and DV to be available, certain studies and statistics show a definitive link between the two events. A recent article in the *American Journal of Emergency Medicine* titled "Alarming Trends in U.S. Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic," shows a troubling rise in domestic violence as reported by U.S. police departments.

In four cities across the country, the percent increase in domestic violence in 2020 is dramatic: 27% in Jefferson, AL; 22% in Portland, OR; 18% in San Antonio, TX; and 10% in New York, NY. "Stay-at-

home orders may cause a catastrophic milieu for individuals whose lives are plagued by domestic violence," the article states. How much has COVID-19 increased DV worldwide? "The jury is still out," Paradiso explains. "This is something we will be studying for years and years."

But research is beginning to indicate that violence during the pandemic is intensifying. "Instead of bruises and cuts, there are more knife wounds, strangulations, and gunshot wounds," Paradiso said. "Because of lockdown orders, victims are waiting longer to ask for help, and violence continues to escalate until they have to seek [medical help](#)." A study published in August in *Radiology* analyzed the injury patterns of DV victims at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. The study concludes, "There was a higher incidence and severity of physical [intimate partner violence](#) (IPV) during the COVID-19 pandemic compared with the prior three years."

Paradiso stresses that national and local DV hotlines and shelters remain open during the pandemic (see resources below). If you are a victim of [domestic violence](#) and have limited time to ask for help, Paradiso recommends calling the national DV hotline: "They can connect you to your local shelter, and the crisis line is not only a phone—you can also email and text, which sometimes makes it easier, especially for [younger people](#)."

## **How Can People Help Survivors of Domestic Violence?**

"The most important thing is to continue to be a friend, not to judge, to be willing to be there and provide support and listen," Paradiso advises. It's also helpful for people who know DV victims to encourage survivors to reach out for help. "One of the tactics that's used pretty frequently is for friends or neighbors to come up with a code word, so if things start

to escalate, then the DV victim can call their friend or neighbor and say, 'We're having CUCUMBERS in our salad,' and that would clue someone in and get them to call emergency services," she explains.

Friends and neighbors can also hide a DV victim's emergency bag, which might contain things like ID, birth certificates, passports, or simply clothing and money. Bystanders can also help people experiencing DV by calling the police if they hear or see something suspicious in their neighborhood. "Reach out for safe help," Paradiso says, "typically the police, because DV can bleed over to surrounding people."

**More information:** Brad Boserup et al. Alarming trends in US domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, *The American Journal of Emergency Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ajem.2020.04.077](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajem.2020.04.077)

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