

Pandemic response creates perfect storm for self-harm and domestic violence

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Lockdowns and social distancing may be key to stopping the spread of COVID-19, but they are having other, deadly, effects too, a University of Otago study highlights.

Dr. Katerina Standish, of Otago's National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, says the public health reaction to the [pandemic](#) negatively increases rates of domestic [violence](#) and suicidality.

"The focus on tackling the pandemic means, globally, the first objective is to control its ability to replicate and mutate. We know this is necessary, but the lockdowns and [social distancing](#) have other effects that are only beginning to reveal themselves and they are deadly too," she says.

For the research, published in the *Journal of General Psychology*, Dr. Standish analyzed billions of US-based Google searches for the months of March to August in 2019 and 2020, looking for signs of psychological stress.

Search terms were categorized into precarity, insecurity, despondency, helplessness, indicative male violence, and intentional male violence. They included searches such as "lost my job," "I don't have anywhere to go," "I want to die," "no one will help us," "how to hit a woman so no one knows," and "he will kill me."

Results showed an "overwhelming upsurge" from all six categories from 31% to 106%.

While the study focused on US-based searches, Dr. Standish says the results are generalisable to other countries.

"I originally did multi-country data collection for the UK, US, Aotearoa-New Zealand and Canada and the effects were quite similar, in fact in places doing 'better' in the pandemic there were even higher indicators of suicidal and femicidal violence. COVID-19 is being called a 'perfect storm' for suicidal violence and UNWOMEN is calling femicide during COVID-19 the 'shadow pandemic.'"

Dr. Standish is calling for policy makers to put self-harm and domestic violence at the front of their minds.

"As Dr. Michael Ryan from the World Health Organisation emergency program said 'be the first mover' - incorporate the risk of suicide and femicide into pandemic responses. You can't get data on how often suicide spikes and domestic violence abuses happen without looking for them. We know these are underreported forms of harm."

Adding buttons to contact tracers that signal impending or experienced violence make it possible for people to communicate threat and need. Making these discreet and traceless will mean social stigma and controlling agents cannot "mine" the tracer for help-seeking behavior, she says.

Her main message for the public is to be aware of those around you, keep connections in real life, and reach out to people who may need help.

"Lots of people are losing their income and sense of safety and the virus has exacerbated precarity and insecurity that existed before the pandemic. Suicides happen when people are alone, feel alone or like they don't matter.

"We may lose some to the virus, but we must try to help one another survive the pandemic response too. Check on each other and keep checking on each other."

In terms of femicidal violence, she hopes people take domestic violence and violence against women and children as seriously as COVID-19.

"Most women who are killed have a history of experiencing coercive control by partners or ex-partners. The idea that we are asking women to

'lockdown' with abusive agents means we take their safety less seriously than 'public' safety.

"Hopefully, while our world continues to turn its attention to one plague, we can be mindful of whether or not our responses to the pandemic sow the seeds of more suffering."

More information: Katerina Standish. COVID-19, suicide, and femicide: Rapid Research using Google search phrases, *The Journal of General Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/00221309.2021.1874863](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.2021.1874863)

Provided by University of Otago

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