

New research shares safety strategies for women experiencing domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

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As a veteran researcher who has studied intimate partner violence for 25 years, Dr. Patricia O'Campo knows that women experience higher rates of increased violence during epidemics—a troubling and well documented pattern. However, Dr. O'Campo discovered a puzzling gap in academic literature when the COVID-19 pandemic hit: there are no verified strategies women can utilize to promote safety and protect themselves during public health emergencies.

"There's a lot of opinions about what women might do, but nobody has verified those strategies," said Dr. O'Campo, Interim Executive Director of the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute and Scientist at MAP Center for Urban Health Solutions.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, Dr. O'Campo and her co-principal investigator, Dr. Nicholas Metheny, a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at St. Michael's, began exploring how to redesign the Pathways app—an earlier project which provides women in abusive partnerships with a personalized [safety](#) plan.

In a pandemic, women and children living with violence may be forced to shelter with violent partners, unable to access resources outside of the home, while dealing with a reduction in services available to them. Due to public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Service agencies aren't always able to support women face-to-face, so women experiencing violence may need to consider additional safety strategies.

To fill this gap in research, Dr. O'Campo and her team put together a list of around 35 suggested strategies and asked over 100 service providers and women with lived experience of domestic violence to rate whether the suggestions are "recommended" or "not recommended." Some of the suggestions were rated by survey responders as having the potential to make violence worse.

"For example, we know that alcohol and substances can make an episode of violence more likely, and one of the recommendations was to hide alcohol or other substances that may make abuse worse," she continued. "That one was rated by many women with lived experience as being something that would make violence worse."

Other strategies that were rated as "not recommended" include trying to "keep the peace" and switching to texting or emailing instead of phone calls.

Based on the results of the rapid survey, Dr. O'Campo and her team created factsheets listing verified recommendations for women living in situations of [intimate partner violence](#). The factsheets include tips for online and physical safety planning during public health emergencies. They are being disseminated to women and service providers to help them navigate issues that COVID-19 has exacerbated.

"There are [risk factors](#) for violence that are increasing as a result of the pandemic, and the economic pandemic that's accompanying the infectious [pandemic](#)," Dr. O' Campo said. "For example, an episode of unemployment highly increases household stress and therefore the risk of [violence](#)."

The takeaway from this work, she says, is that there are strategies women can implement—that are recommended by [women](#) with lived experience and experienced service providers—to promote safety when they're sheltering at home. These strategies, however, are not a "one-size fits all."

"Everything should be tailored to the context in which you're residing, but you can continue to promote safety even in this very difficult time."

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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