

When home does not offer shelter: partner violence in the time of pandemics

Alisa Velonis, MPH, PhD & Molly McGown, MPH
University of Illinois at Chicago, Center of Excellence in Maternal & Child Health

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“The safest place you can be right now is at home.” We’ve all heard that in recent days from our community leaders and public health officials as they scramble to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, and for most of us, this is true. Yet what if home is NOT a safe place under normal conditions?

Roughly one-third of U.S. women will experience physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Over the course of a typical year in [Illinois](#), between 6% - 13% of women are stalked or experience physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner (between 4% - 9% of men). For these individuals, home may provide little sense of shelter or security. Evidence suggests that reports of domestic and sexual violence to hotlines, shelters, and police increase following disasters (First, 2017; Enarson 1999), and that violence against women not only increases in prevalence, but also in severity (First 2017). While the current pandemic differs from hurricanes, floods, and fires in substantial ways, people (particularly women) living with physical violence and emotional abuse face greater threats to their health and well-being in ways related to the pandemic compared to non-abused individuals.

The most obvious has been pointed out in numerous places: *staying at home with a violent partner may be dangerous, if not lethal*. In addition to increased time with and proximity to one’s batterer, the disruptions to daily life and livelihood brought on by sheltering-in-place or self-isolation can exacerbate already volatile dynamics. Fears around contracting the virus combined with sudden and widespread changes to our social and financial world have many of us on-edge, and could easily result in the escalated

If you are questioning your safety:

The COVID-19 virus is frightening, and Illinois’ “Stay at Home” order means having little in-person contact with friends, family, or co-workers. Stress and isolation can make existing tensions in a relationship worse. If you are concerned about your safety because someone in your home scares or hurts you, you are not alone. There are actions you may be able to take to keep you and your children safer:

- A stay-at-home order does not mean you should remain in your house if your safety is threatened. If this is the case and you are able to, leave, and call 911 or one of the hotlines below.
- Are there people outside of your home who you can ask to check on you? You may ask them to keep calling back if you do not answer immediately.
- If leaving your partner (even temporarily) is something you want to do, a friend may be able to look for space for you at nearby shelters; they can also ask about COVID-19 precautions.
- If it is safe to do so, try to maintain as much of your daily routine as you can, including keeping social connections over the phone or internet.
- Consider making a [safety plan](#) that lists what you can do while the Stay at Home order is in effect. This includes finding a place to go in the house where there are no weapons if a fight happens.
- There are people you can call if you need help. [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) and the [Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline](#) are available 24/7 (you can even chat with someone by texting LOVEIS to 22522– but only if you know your phone or computer is not monitored).

use of physically and psychologically abusive tactics.

The isolation that many of us feel after just a week or two under stay-at-home orders leaves individuals living with abusive partners with little sense of help or support. Without external voices to contradict them, threats that they will lose their children, could be arrested if they leave home, or that they will be abandoned if they get sick, have tremendous power.

If you are worried about a friend or family member

Times of stress are trying on any relationship. If someone you know is in an abusive situation, you may wonder how you can help, knowing they are more unsafe than ever.

- Survivors and their children are likely to feel especially frightened and isolated now. Reach out – ask them how they are doing, how their kids are, and if they are okay. Help them to not feel alone.
- If they are staying in a place with the abuser, they may not be able to answer questions directly. Ask if it is okay to talk, or if there is a better time to connect.
- It's possible that their partner is using the fear of getting sick to keep them trapped or telling them that they will be arrested if they leave the house. Assure them that if they are in immediate danger, help is available.
- Staying connected with someone who is in an abusive relationship can be challenging under the best circumstances; it is likely to feel more difficult now. Know that there are resources for YOU, too. [Supporting Someone Experiencing Abuse](#)

Making decisions that might increase one's safety and the safety of one's children is not clear-cut under normal conditions; too often it involves choosing between bad options and worse ones (Velonis 2017). In a world where going to the grocery store has become high-risk, reaching out for advice, support, or shel-

ter is likely to be -- quite literally -- impossible.

Research shows that partner violence is associated with [multiple adverse physical and mental health outcomes](#), including conditions that can increase vulnerability to severe COVID-19. Injuries, the use of risk-increasing coping behaviors (smoking, excessive drinking), and the effects of stress associated with daily life with an abusive partner are [plausible reasons](#) for these health effects. Coupled with fears around seeking medical attention or being directly prevented from obtaining care or medication, we can expect individuals living with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to be at greater risk of morbidity and mortality related to direct and indirect effects of the pandemic.

Finally, the long-term consequences of social and financial upheaval are likely to impact survivors of partner violence hard, particularly women with children. Research suggests that violence negatively impacts women's ability to maintain long-term employment, and in turn, precarious employment can create dependence on abusive partners. Fears linked to survival, including maintaining housing, health insurance, food, and childcare, are likely to be compounded for those living with abuse, increasing the difficulty of making decisions that could increase safety and well-being.

Certainly, our efforts to stem the lethal effects of this novel coronavirus must be community wide and inclusive of the best public health science to date, which includes widespread physical distancing and self-quarantining. But public health efforts also must focus on protecting those who are the most "vulnerable" among us, whether that vulnerability comes from weakened immune systems, age, or social and structural inequities, including partner violence. To do this ef-

fectively, community preparedness and response plans must include strategies to keep these segments of our population safe, while still implementing population-wide approaches to disaster mitigation. We understand that crowded shelters are places where COVID-19 can easily spread; alternative arrangements need to be identified long before the order to stay-at-home is announced. We recognize the importance of closing schools and day-cares to protect staff and students; alternative child-care facilities for parents who cannot leave children at home while seeking medical care or making a safety plan should be part of the response. We know that emergency departments and health clinics are likely to be flooded with sick patients and physicians overwhelmed; alternative medical care sites need to be established for the other casualties of the pandemic.

Only two weeks into Illinois' shelter-in-place order, a Chicago Police Department representative reported a 19%- 27% increase in calls classified as "domestic violence" (A. Robinson, Personal Communication, 4/2/20). This is almost certainly an incomplete picture, as only a fraction of incidents are reported to law enforcement, generally constituting the most severe episodes, where criminal laws were broken. This was also a mere 14 days into what is likely to be weeks or months of mandatory isolation, and based on what we know about violent relationships, time is not likely to ease the situation. We were pleased to hear Illinois Governor Pritzker draw attention to partner violence in his 3/27/2020 address; his office has done an amazing job of responding to this crisis, and by promoting the Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline number, he has reminded individuals in abusive homes that they can reach out for help. Yet we are calling for a response to this crisis that is more than just a soundbite

and a hotline number; as a community, we need to not only recognize that the problem exists but to know that there are options available for people living with abuse and what we can do when we suspect this to be affecting someone we know.

Resources

The **Illinois statewide interpersonal violence hotline** can be used by victims and concerned loved ones: call or text 1-877-863-6338.

National

- Domestic Violence Hotline is 24/7, confidential and free: 1-800-799-7233 and through chat (<https://www.thehotline.org>)
- The StrongHearts Native Helpline for domestic/sexual violence is available 7am-10pm CT, confidential, and specifically for Native communities: 1-844-762-8483.
- The National Sexual Assault Hotline is 24/7, confidential and free: 800.656.HOPE (4673) and through chat (<https://hotline.rainn.org>).
- The Trans LifeLine for peer support for trans folks 9am-3am CT: 1-877-565-8860 This hotline is staffed exclusively by trans operators.
- National Parent Helpline Monday -Friday 12pm-9am CT emotional support and advocacy for parents:1-855-2736

Local (Chicagoland Area)

- Apna Ghar hotline: 773-334-4663 OR 800-717-0757; Text hotline: 773-899-1041
- Between Friends Chicago- 24/7 hotline: 1-800-603-4357
- Center on Halsted (LGBTQ)- Hotline: 773-871-CARE (2273) or avp@centeronhalsted.org
- Connections for Women Abused and Their Children Hotline: 773-278-4566
- Family Rescue- South Side 24/7 hotline 773-375-8400 or 800-360-6619
- Mujeres Latinas en Acción 24/7 IPV hotline: 312-738-5358; 24/7 Rape hotline: 888-293-2080

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