



Victim Advocates' Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Florida during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Samia Taoulost Malik, Meghan McCallister, Anisha Kesarwani, Alyssa Allem, Jessica De Leon, PhD, and Suzanne Harrison, MD

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Background

- Domestic violence (DV) is an important public health issue with far-reaching implications and significant burden for individuals, communities, institutions and society.
- Approximately 1 in 4 women have experienced DV by an intimate partner during their lifetime.
- Global rise in DV during COVID-19 implies the pandemic is serving as a “multiplier” that worsens the impact and access to services to this already vulnerable population.
- Stay-at-home orders exacerbated domestic violence in homes where it already existed, and incited new violence in others.
- Understanding the magnitude and the impacts of this crisis is critical to designing more effective public health interventions

Objectives

- This qualitative study elicited responses from domestic violence advocates to explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on DV in Florida. Objectives are to:
 - Analyze domestic violence trends during COVID-19 pandemic through exploratory research
 - Identify existing & new resources available to domestic violence victims and advocates in Florida

Methods

Recruitment: Potential subjects were recruited via a flyer stating the purpose and objective of the research project. The flyer was sent to a victim advocate network, state agencies, and law enforcement. Snowball sampling was additionally used. Upon receiving queries, all potential subjects received emails from the team inviting them to participate and schedule an interview.

Study Design: Mixed methods

- Qualitative semi-structured one-hour Zoom interviews
- Quantitative demographic/professional survey

Interview Domains:

- Barriers encountered by victims of domestic violence during the pandemic
- Barriers encountered by victim advocates in providing services
- Strategies employed by victim advocates to overcome these barriers
- Perceptions of “lessons learned” to be prepared for the next crisis

Data Analysis: Descriptive analysis of survey results and exploration of categories and themes of qualitative responses. The qualitative data was categorized into large domains of barriers and potential interventions.



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Results		
	N	Percent
GENDER		
Female	2	66.7
Non-binary	1	33.3
AGE		
18-24 years	1	33.3
25-34 years	1	33.3
45-54 years	1	33.3
RACE		
White	3	100.0
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL		
Bachelors	1	33.3
Masters	2	66.7
EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Full Time	3	100.0
PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION		
Law Enforcement	1	33.3
DV Shelter	1	33.3
University/College	1	33.3
YEARS AS A DV ADVOCATE		
Range	1-19 years	
Mean	7.33	
Std. Deviation	10.116	

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Advocate Barriers	Health and Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fear of exposure for themselves and their familiesFrustration from not being able to meet victims’ needsIncreased worry for victims
	Professional Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Insufficient funding, budget cuts and hiring freezesUnstructured and extended work hoursIncreased workload without adequate compensation
	Public Health Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Social distancing and PPE creates an impersonal context for very personal and sensitive situationsMasks make it difficult to communicate, portray or read emotions and impedes relationship buildingMust have negative COVID test for Sexual Assault Nursing ExamHesitancy to perform home visits for own and client’s safety
	Legal & Law Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Delay in filing and implementing injunction for protection orders and subpoenasUnable to attend court hearings with victimsNeed for physical evidence for arrest of abuser
Victim Barriers	Underreporting Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Victims isolated at home with abusersLack of “excuses” to leave home and escape perpetratorsFear of being reprimanded for breaking social isolation rulesFear of being judged by society
	Lack of Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Limited housing and shelters and lack of transportation to shelterEconomic instability due to loss of incomeLack of childcare resourcesLack of transportation options, especially in rural areas
	Heath and Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fear of safety for personal healthLack of mental health resourcesAvoidance of healthcare system<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fear of exposure to COVID-19Adherence to messages about not overwhelming the system
	Legal & Law Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Need for physical evidence for arrest of abuserFear to engage with police in the climate of police brutalityProcedural change of filing injunction reports
	Intersectionality increases Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Low incomeRural areas with resource deficitsAlcohol and/or substance abuseOlder adultsHomelessness, housing insecurity



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Discussion

Suggested Solutions	Housing and Shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Increased funding for alternative housing and sheltersDedicate safe rooms for DV victims across college campuses
	Leverage Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">For filing of legal documents, preventing delaysCommunicating safely with victims
	Education and Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Educate the public, law enforcement and policy makers on the cycle of violence and difficulty for victims to leave their circumstancesEducate victims about DV and COVID-19 and encourage victims to seek the services, care, law enforcement needed<ul style="list-style-type: none">Services are available and openPersonnel, agencies, shelters etc. are taking public health measures against COVID
	Facilitating Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Dealing with PPE: Communicate differently without relying on facial expressions<ul style="list-style-type: none">Audible laughterSpeak rather than use facial expressions or gestures

Next Steps

- To conduct focus groups and more interviews.
- To increase recruitment efforts and reach advocates serving other counties in Florida
- To inform interventions and policy recommendations to better prepare and protect human rights during future pandemics and natural disasters.

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