

# Domestic violence and gun sales in the time of COVID-19

April 16 2020

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The stay-at-home orders across the United States and in many places worldwide are intended to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. But as the days stretch into weeks and the weeks into months, a different

hazard has emerged, one that concerns researchers like Penn's Susan B. Sorenson.

"When the governors and mayors and others were issuing the stay-at-home guidance, my antenna went up right away," says Sorenson, director of the Ortner Center on Violence & Abuse and a professor in the School of Social Policy & Practice. "COVID-19 is a threat to health, but the danger isn't always just in crowds. Sometimes it's in the most intimate of spaces."

Sorenson is referring to intimate partner violence, a subject she has studied for decades. Though we likely won't know the pandemic's full effect on this for years, data are already showing spikes as people who might previously have been able to limit exposure to an abusive partner are now required to shelter in place with that person.

Around the world, reports of domestic violence have increased, according to [statistics released by the United Nations](#). France, Argentina, Cyprus, and Singapore, for example, have experienced at least 25% more calls of this kind in the past month, and U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres issued a plea for the world to pay attention, one echoed on Monday by Pope Francis.

Penn Today spoke with Sorenson about new challenges surrounding intimate partner violence in the era of COVID-19 and about the uptick in gun purchases since this crisis began.

**Being told you should never or barely ever leave your house is daunting to anyone. But what about for those who live with someone abusive?**

It's a terrifying prospect for them. Under normal circumstance, many

women—because it's mostly women who are abused—figure out how to manage being with someone who is abusive upon occasion. They manage it so that the children are not around when the abuse occurs or that the abuse is minimized. They have all sorts of coping techniques.

But when people must stay home, such as in this current situation, their kids will be there. Maybe one partner is working from home. Maybe both are furloughed or laid off. The kids are loud, clamoring for access to computers and TV. It's a trying circumstance for healthy people with good stress-management skills. But these circumstances can exacerbate tensions and increase the risk of violence, particularly if there's been prior abuse. And if there hasn't been prior abuse, this is a recipe for stress and distress in a family.

**Social distancing is crucial, already flattening the curve in some places. How can we continue doing what's needed to stop spreading the virus but also protect those who are most vulnerable?**

It's important for the people issuing stay-at-home orders to recognize that home is not a safe place for a lot of people. Instead, they could issue the orders with a caveat, saying, 'If your home is a safe place, we want you to stay there, to shelter in place there. If your home is not a safe place, we urge you to find one, to stay with friends, relatives, or elsewhere, a place where you are comfortable and where you are safe.'

It also would be great if, during this emergency, time-bound hotel vouchers were issued for people who might not have alternatives. This would keep them safe and provide some income for the hotels, which are laying off workers. This, in turn, would help with the local economy. Hotel vouchers are given sometimes when shelters for battered women are full, so this is not a wild, untested idea. It's an application of an

existing practice.

**The term 'intimate terrorism' has been used to describe this type of abuse. Can you explain what that means?**

When they hear the word 'terrorism,' most people alive today think of bombings, Al Qaeda, and the like, which could make some reject the term out of hand. I don't want people to reject the concept, so I tend to talk about 'coercive control' instead. Coercive control underscores the psychological and emotional tactics an abuser uses to gain control over someone, to say whether she can have contact with family members, whether she can go out. It's used to create and sustain a climate of fear and eats away at one's identity and self-confidence. It facilitates physical and other forms of abuse.

**Shifting gears for a moment, there have been reports of increased gun sales in the past month. Have gun sales gone up?**

Oh, yes. Oh my gosh, they've really gone up. Guns sales have been remarkable. It used to be the highest days and highest weeks were associated with the mass shootings around Sandy Hook and San Bernardino. Now the highest days and highest weeks are COVID-related. The FBI reports that the highest single day for background checks was Friday, March 20, when more than 210,000 checks were done. And it's not just a single-day blip. Three of the five highest weeks for [background checks](#) are related to COVID-19.

**Why?**

It's fear. People are simply afraid.

**That's understandable, but it's still hard to connect the dots between an infectious disease and the perceived need for a gun.**

I'm speculating, but it could be fear that food-distribution networks are going to fall apart, which would lead to people thinking they'll need to confront each other. We've seen that Feeding America, which supplies most of the food banks across the country, has had a substantial drop in donations. The foodbank supply chain is being disrupted. Who uses the food banks? People who are laid off, who are already stressed and were already having a hard time prior to COVID-19. And people who were in good circumstances suddenly aren't so secure.

When people get desperate, they sometimes take desperate measures. That could be one thing motivating gun purchases, people who fear others and fear that their own circumstances will deteriorate. That's the sort of scenario we're seeing play out in terms of an apparent spike in first-time gun buyers: 'I have to protect myself because this is getting really bad.'

In addition, there's a lot of confusion and mistrust about where all this is going. You have one person in government saying one thing and another saying something else, one saying there could be 100,000 deaths in the U.S. and another saying we should focus on getting back to work quickly. When people don't know what to believe, their anxiety increases and sometimes they take extreme measures.

**Is there anything else you wanted to add?**

This is a very difficult time for lots of reasons. For people dealing with

[intimate partner violence](#), the question of why she stays always gets raised. There are myriad reasons: She loves or at one time loved this person and hopes things will change, just like people do with someone who has a drug or alcohol problem. They might be wonderful people except when they're drinking. If you could get the drinking to stop, it would be great. Often, that's what abused women want. They don't want the relationship to end; they want the violence to stop.

In this situation, in the midst of the intense fear, being told they have to stay at home, these women may be walking on tip toes, feeling even more like they're on thin ice. If they don't have alternatives, they can feel even more isolated. That's why it was so important when the U.N. Secretary General spoke out. COVID-19 is about safety and health, and it's important not to make things worse for some people.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: Domestic violence and gun sales in the time of COVID-19 (2020, April 16) retrieved 4 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-domestic-violence-gun-sales-covid-.html>

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