

Pandemic restrictions limit women's ability to cope with abusive partners

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Lockdowns due to COVID-19 has had a significant impact on coping strategies of women experiencing intimate partner violence, according to a new study.
Credit: Rodnae Productions/Pexels

The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected how women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) coped with their abusive situation, according to a new study led by health sciences professor Tara Mantler and Kim Jackson, professor in the Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing.

Published in the *Global Social Welfare*, the study shares insights on the impact of pandemic-related lockdowns and restrictions on [women](#) experiencing IPV. While strict public health measures, including physical distancing and stay-at-home orders, helped mitigate the harm of the pandemic, they unintentionally exacerbated the risks for women who experience IPV by limiting their access to services and severely impacting their usual coping strategies.

IPV may include physical, sexual or emotional abuse along with intimidation, threats, isolation and manipulation.

"Stay-at-home orders kept women in the presence of their abusers, which in turn restricted their privacy and enabled surveillance, isolating them from social supports and services," explained Mantler. "Stress from unemployment, financial anxieties and increases in alcohol use, all known risk factors for IPV, also became more prevalent during these orders."

For women experiencing IPV, accessing a supportive social network during lockdown became more difficult, as [support services](#) were shuttered or only offered virtually. Venues to meet with social networks were likewise closed or inaccessible. A lack of privacy and extended partner surveillance complicated women's ability to speak freely on online calling platforms and to find a safe venue to express their emotions.

The pandemic's impact on their [financial situation](#) also meant the loss of their most important coping strategy. Financial resources provide women with some level of autonomy and can be the difference between them being able to leave an abusive situation or not.

The women did manage to find new coping strategies to adapt to the new pandemic paradigm, the researchers found. Physical coping strategies

that were achievable during stay-at-home orders, such as going outside for a walk or participating in artistic hobbies, allowed the women to be distracted from their circumstances for a time. Part of their social coping strategies was in knowing that there was a network of support out there and finding comfort in that knowledge even if they were unable to access it.

Valuing the lived experience and resilience of the participants, the study asked which resources they felt would be most beneficial for assisting women experiencing IPV, allowing them to suggest strategies that would help keep them safe.

"It's important to ask her what she needs to do to stay safe," said Mantler. "Women know best what helps them cope."

Study participants identified community centers, education for women to help them identify signs of IPV, and in-person services, such as counseling, as high-priority resources that are needed, along with activities that provide a temporary respite from abusive partners.

Most importantly, the women stressed [financial resources](#) are needed while acknowledging that financial coping strategies may not be available to women due to resource constraints and abuser control.

"When vying for protections and resources, it is important to acknowledge the nuance between saying there is a pandemic crisis versus an IPV crisis, and saying that even in the face of a pandemic crisis, the IPV crisis needs to be considered so that harm can be more effectively reduced," Mantler said.

Publication of the data from the study will hopefully assist in raising awareness of the need for resources and support for coping strategies for women who experience IPV during a public health crisis, the authors

said. They also hope it will create a foundation for inclusivity-informed public health policy and social services, protecting at-risk populations from both the [pandemic](#) and dangers of IPV.

More information: Tara Mantler et al, Impacts of COVID-19 on the Coping Behaviours of Canadian Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence, *Global Social Welfare* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s40609-022-00224-z](#)

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