

RESPONDING TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

Using non-carceral responses to prepare for the future

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THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19

Across the globe, political leaders have had to make the difficult decisions to institute mandatory lockdowns and social distancing measures in order to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. This pandemic has not only led to immense tolls on health care systems with extensive rates of illness and casualties, but also the collateral consequences of forcing entire cities, state, and countries to remain home and isolated.

Global increases in violence

Regions across the world have already seen notable increases in domestic violence [1-5]. In the UK, calls to the country's largest domestic violence helpline had a 700% increase in daily calls [3]. Locally, calls to police departments for domestic disputes have increased by 17% in St. Louis County, 43% in Jefferson County, and by 64% in St. Charles County [6]. These numbers may increase, as stay-at-home orders have been extended until May [6].

The complexity of a public health crisis and mandatory lockdowns increases opportunities for an abusive partner to exert control over a victim as well as prevent victims from being able to seek emotional or medical help [5]. A victim

cannot easily call help while they are under increased surveillance by a partner and may be afraid to access medical services out of fear of contracting COVID-19 [2, 5]. Emergency shelters are becoming limited in space as sharing rooms are no longer an option due to social distancing [6]. Even small social interactions outside a violent home that used to provide respite are near impossible with stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines [6].

Extensive economic toll

Rates of unemployment have skyrocketed in the United States – up to 22 million new unemployment claims in the last month – as the result of non-essential businesses closing [7]. In Missouri, over 350,000 residents filed for unemployment since March 15 as the result of the pandemic [8].

Applications for food stamps in Missouri have increased by 64% in March compared to February [9]. Some researchers have estimated an increase in national poverty from 12.4% up to 18.9% if unemployment reaches 30%, as some models have suggested [10]. If that proves to be true, poverty in the United States will be near the levels seen during the Great Recession [10].

THE ECONOMY & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

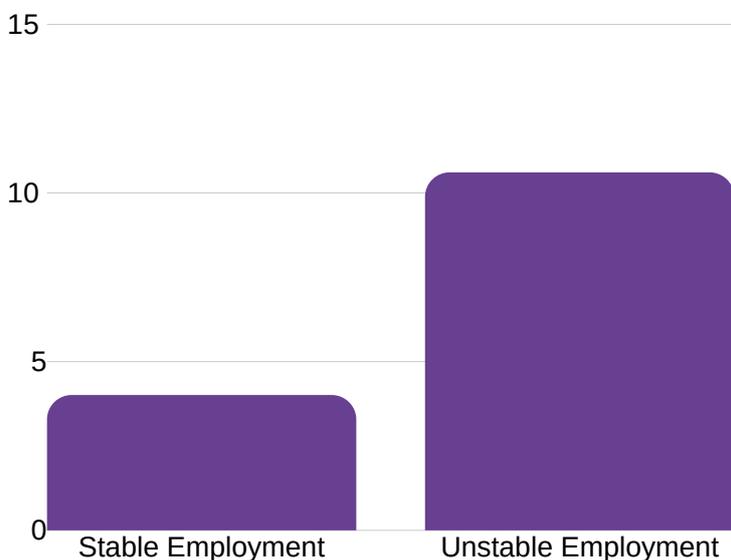
Financial strain increases violence, decreases victims' ability to leave

Environmental stressors have historically borne increases in interpersonal violence, such as climate disasters, epidemics, and recessions [2, 5, 11]. Aside from the complexity of trauma from natural disasters and public health crises, there is substantial evidence linking domestic violence to economic strain [11-13]. After the 2008 economic crises that left millions jobless, there was a marked increase in domestic violence nationally due to financial strains [11]. Regional trends in economic downturns and unemployment, such as de-industrialization and factory closures, have also resulted in notable increase in domestic violence [12].

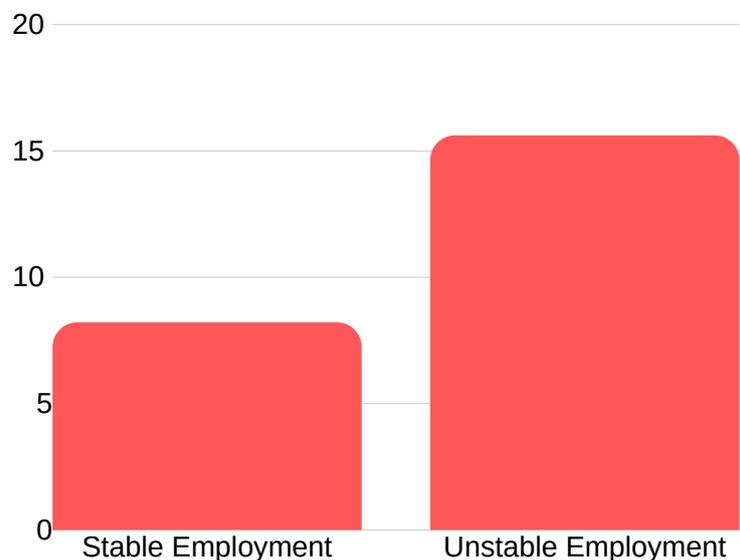
In heterosexual relationships, men who have experienced multiple periods of unemployment are increasingly violent to their partners [13]. Communities that have historically been economically marginalized have an increased risk of violence, particularly for couples experiencing financial stress [13].

Low-income women are most vulnerable to domestic violence, including economic abuse [13]. Victims may have restricted finances, destroyed credit, and limited employment options due to an abusive partner [13-15]. This can increase their reliance on a partner because of their lack of economic independence, making it all the more difficult to leave [13-15].

Rate of Domestic Violence in Heterosexual Relationships Based on Men's Employment Status in Economically Advantaged Neighborhoods



Rate of Domestic Violence in Heterosexual Relationships Based on Men's Employment Status in Economically Disadvantaged Neighborhoods



WE CAN'T CRIMINALIZE OUR WAY OUT OF THIS

Incarceration perpetuates violence and economic marginalization

Extensive policing and criminalization policies not only criminalized entire communities but has perpetuated domestic violence. First, prison is a highly violent and misogynistic environment that has no demonstrative rehabilitative effect on reducing abusive behaviors and by most accounts, increases them [12, 16]. Second, incarceration of individuals and targeted communities has devastating economic effects. Incarceration takes away familial and community sources of income and drastically diminishes future employment opportunities and advancements [12, 16, 17]. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of economic marginalization, incarceration, and violence.

Alternatives to incarceration are especially crucial during the time of COVID-19. As predicted by public health officials and prisoner advocates, the spread of the virus has been rapid and deadly in U.S. jails and prisons [18]. The high rate of infections among incarcerated individuals is expected to put strain on the health care system [18]. Sending individuals convicted of domestic violence to jail or prison during the prolonged pandemic will exacerbate infections and add to the already mounting economic crisis [18].

MITIGATING COVID-19'S EFFECTS WITH ECONOMIC POLICIES

Housing First

Housing is the most important material need for survivors of domestic violence. The Housing First approach emphasizes that intensive needs, such as mental illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence, cannot be treated effectively until a person has stable housing [19, 20]. A Housing First program for domestic violence victims addresses the barriers they often face, such as limited financial resources, damaged credit, or unemployment [12]. The Housing First program started by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence is overwhelmingly successful, with 96% of survivors still in their housing after 18 months [19]. In addition to subsidized housing, the program also provides financial assistance for child care, utilities, and transportation [19].

The extent of the pandemic is currently unclear, though public health officials believe prolonged periods of lockdowns might be necessary until a vaccine is created. This means that shelter capacity will be extremely limited to account for social distancing for an indefinite future, elevating the fundamental need for housing for victims.

Financial Assistance

Redevelopment Opportunities for Women's Economic Action Program (REAP) is a promising financial empowerment program for victims of domestic violence [15]. REAP addresses the economic needs of survivors through financial literacy programs and Individual Development Accounts [15]. The program provides low-income women strategies to regain control of their debt and credit, save for the future, and be aware of predatory lenders [15]. REAP provides women IDAs to assist them in saving by matching their funds by one to one or two to one, depending on their financial status [15]. These programs can also be supplemented with education and job readiness courses to provide survivors with skills to gain employment and income that can then be matched in their IDAs [21].

Other policies that provide direct cash assistance, similar to that of the Domestic Violence Housing First Program, are also necessary to improving financial independence. Programs such as TANF are restrictive in meeting eligibility, especially work requirements that can be near impossible to meet if an abuser has limited a victim's movements or interfered with her employment [21]. And because of the effects abuse can have on employment, additional policies should work to protect survivors from termination without requiring direct disclosure of abuse to employers [12, 21].

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