

Tulane researchers studying rise in intimate partner violence amid COVID-19 pandemic

August 10, 2020 10:30 AM Barri Bronston

bbronst@tulane.edu

504-352-2534



Researchers from the Tulane School of Social Work say many of the strategies that are critical to ensuring public health, such as lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, social isolation and social distancing, are having a major impact on families experiencing intimate partner violence.

The hidden and often unspoken impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the prevalence of intimate partner violence, according to Tulane University researchers, who are conducting a survey to determine how serious the problem is in the New Orleans area.

In a paper published by [*Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*](#), a journal of the American Psychological Association, [Tulane School of Social Work](#) professors Reggie Ferreira and Fred Buttell, say many of the strategies that are critical to ensuring public health, such as lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, social isolation and social distancing, are having a profound impact on families experiencing intimate partner violence, also known as IPV.

“In many instances of IPV, women are afraid to be alone with their abusive partners and experience a high degree of social isolation because they are afraid to tell their families and friends what is happening, out of both shame and fear that their abusive partner will hurt them, their children, or family members in retaliation for disclosure,” the researchers write.

“In effect, the public health measures to protect people from COVID-19 are increasing the amount of time that women have to spend with their abusive partners at home, which raises their risk of injury exponentially,” they say.

Ferreira is an associate professor of social work and director the [Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy](#). His research focuses on the intersection of climate change, mental health and resilience. Buttell’s research focuses on improving family functioning by eliminating domestic violence and improving the effectiveness of batterer intervention programs.

The two are conducting a survey and will later lead focus groups to determine the seriousness of IPV locally. Ferreira said that while IPV has been a public health issue long before the pandemic, cases of reported IPV typically rise after disasters.

“This disaster, however, is different and is a slow onset crisis,” he said. “Due to associated stressors of COVID-19, such as financial strain and substance abuse, we can expect to see a significant increase in reported cases. The biggest concern is if the needed resources to mitigate and address this issue will be available.

Ferreira and Buttell want to better understand how a pandemic differs from other types of disasters in terms of disaster preparation and response, explore changes in IPV during this time period and study whether COVID-19 pushed families into experiencing IPV for the first time.

They cite local crime statistics from April showing aggravated domestic assaults rising 37 percent on the year, while other violent crimes were down 25 percent.

Their own preliminary data appears to support that trend. Of 275 women surveyed, 59 percent reported an escalation of IPV among those who experienced it prior to the pandemic. In addition, 88 percent felt nervous and stressed in the past month and 95 percent expressed worry about the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

“When completed, this research will provide critical information to policymakers about the impact of COVID-19 on relational stress and coping strategies for families experiencing IPV,” the paper says.

“It might suggest that shelter-in-place strategies have differential impacts on families experiencing IPV. Indeed, such data would reinforce the anecdotal evidence that prompted the recent call of the United Nations for urgent action to combat the worldwide surge in domestic violence.”

The researchers were referring to a statement in April in which the U.N. urged all government to make the prevention of domestic violence against women a key part of national response plans for COVID-19, from declaring shelters as essential services to ensuring that judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers.

Ferreira and Buttell will hold focus groups in the coming months to explore impact of IPV on women and investigate their resilience. “The end goal is to develop a response model to mitigate the impact of future events,” Ferreira said.

Anyone affected by abuse and needing support can call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) at 1-800-799-7233 or text LOVEIS to 22522.

“Due to associated stressors of COVID-19, such as financial strain and substance abuse, we can expect to see a significant increase in reported cases. The biggest concern is if the needed resources to mitigate and address this issue will be available.”

Reggie Ferreira, associate professor at the Tulane School of Social Work