



THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COMMITTEE PRESENTS

# SAFER AT HOME? DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Reports of domestic violence have increased across the world since the outbreak of Covid-19 following the implementation of stay at home orders.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the practice most necessary to curb the spread of Covid-19—limiting social contacts outside of one’s immediate family—has bound victims to their homes and made them dramatically less safe by reducing their access to service providers, law enforcement, and the courts, which have implemented their own procedures to reduce spread of the disease. This article discusses victims’ experiences in seeking help during the pandemic through anecdotal case examples from a victim’s rights attorney and provides thoughts on what attorneys and courts can do to assist victims in reaching safety in the months ahead while virtual court hearings and remote legal services remain the norm.

## Dynamics of Domestic Violence During a Pandemic

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, epidemiological reports estimated that nearly one in three women has experienced domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> Data also has shown that nearly half of all female homicides in the United States are perpetrated by a current or past male intimate partner.<sup>3</sup> Several studies have reported that violence against women increases during natural disasters and pandemics.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies have also shown that domestic violence increases when families spend more time together, such as over holidays.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the realities of Covid-19 and its restrictions have undeniably caused a perfect storm for victims worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Immediately after stay-in-place orders were mandated, YWCA Kalamazoo, one of Michigan’s oldest victim services agencies, saw a perceptible drop in calls to their crisis line - due largely to the proximity of the perpetrator to the victim without the reprieve of school, work, or social commitments. Advocates assisted victims with crafting safety plans under the guise of a trip to the grocery store or from the safety of the victim’s bathroom with the shower running so as not to be overheard by their perpetrator. As the pandemic dragged on, victims began reaching out for assistance at greater numbers through text, social media, and the YWCA website. By mid-April, with advocates and attorneys working remotely, the number of requests for personal protection orders and other emergency orders rose dramatically. The Michigan Coalition

to End Domestic and Sexual Violence (MCEDSV), a statewide association for domestic violence shelters and services, reports that contacts to their member agencies jumped to 393 in March and the first half of April 2020, up from 189 the same time in April 2019.<sup>7</sup>

The Battered Women’s Justice Project, a national resource center on civil and criminal justice responses to intimate partner violence, notes that abusers are using new and pandemic-specific means of coercive control.<sup>8</sup> We gain a better understanding of victim experiences when we view these against the backdrop of the “Power and Control Wheel”<sup>9</sup> that experts have used for decades to describe perpetrator actions. Examples include:

- Emotional abuse – preying on fears of infection; lying about symptoms; rationing food and paper goods; relegating victim to a particular part of the house without reason.
- Isolation – preventing medical access and/or treatment; preventing care of sick relatives; prohibiting errands for essential goods; interfering with cell phone, internet, or other means of communication.
- Minimizing – blaming abuse on stress caused by the pandemic or economic scarcity.
- Using children – threatening to take the children or refusing to return them because of the pandemic; declining to take public health precautions at home or work.
- Economic abuse – forcing the victim to resign from employment; denying support when the victim is unemployed; refusing to share tax stimulus payments; interfering with application for unemployment or relief loans.

Predictably, what advocates are witnessing is that when a victim and a perpetrator are in the same space 24 hours a day opportunities for an abuser to control and monitor their victim increase and physical and psychological violence are more likely to occur.

## Systems Challenges for Victims of Domestic Violence

Court closings, cancellations, and restrictions created significant obstacles for victims of domestic violence seeking