

“COVID gave him an opportunity to tighten the reins around my throat”: Perceptions of COVID-19 movement restrictions among survivors of intimate partner violence

Background

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious public health issue that affects millions of people, globally and in the U.S. and was exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While movement restrictions (i.e., shelter-in-place orders) and other infection control methods are successful in reducing the spread of COVID-19, their impacts on IPV have not been investigated. This study addresses that gap by understanding the impacts of COVID-19, including the impacts of movement restrictions (i.e., shelter in place orders, quarantine, isolation orders) on experiences of IPV from the perspective of survivors.

Citation

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Methods

- A qualitative study design was utilized by conducting in-depth interviews to elicit IPV survivors' perceptions and experiences on the sensitive topic.
- Ten survivors who presented at a large, public hospital or sought community IPV resources (i.e., domestic violence shelter, therapy services) in Atlanta, Georgia were individually interviewed via Zoom between March and December 2020.
- Thematic analysis was carried out to describe the impact of COVID-19 movement restrictions on IPV and help-seeking behaviors among survivors, in addition to identifying resources to improve IPV response during pandemics.

Findings

Themes		IPV Survivors' Quotes
COVID-19 paved the way for relationship challenges catalyzing violence	COVID-19 movement restrictions and social distancing measures reinforced control and abuse tactics contributing to relationship challenges and IPV	“COVID gave him an opportunity to tighten the reins, if you will, around my throat.”
	COVID-19 restrictions and impacts pertaining to financial and life stressors worsened IPV	“...things just got worse, like he started really, putting his hands on me after that.”
COVID-19 movement restrictions catalyzed new relationships quickly and sparked new or intensified violence in existing relationships	COVID-19 movement restrictions catalyzed relationships and triggered new violence	“It was a couple of days afterwards, actually, when we got into a tussle, um, we tried to come back, recon-reconcile together, but that didn’t work and it ended very badly.
	COVID-19 movement restrictions sparked new or intensified violence in existing relationships	“...COVID didn’t produce the abuse, the abuse was already pre-existing. It just got worse during COVID.”

Discussion

All survivors in this study stated that relationship challenges were amplified by COVID-19 related movement restrictions, consistent with IPV research during natural disasters and other health emergencies. Future research may be carried out in other areas of Georgia or the broader U.S., and also explore integrative care to ensure survivor safety. Additionally, the findings suggest that safe housing and economic resources, among others, be provided in a timely manner to IPV survivors.