

Criminology professor studies COVID's impact on gender-based violence

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UTSA criminology and criminal justice professor Kellie Lynch is investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dynamics of gender-based violence. Credit: University of Texas at San Antonio

The pandemic has exacerbated risk factors for gender-based violence, such as unemployment and financial strain, substance use, isolation, depression anxiety, and general stress, according to the American Psychological Association. That's inspired The University of Texas at San Antonio criminology and criminal justice professor Kellie Lynch, along with professor TK Logan from the University of Kentucky, to work with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence on a national survey to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dynamics of gender-based violence and the experiences of those serving victims of gender-based violence.

"The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are far-reaching and we still have much to learn about how this pandemic has impacted and will continue to impact gender-based [violence](#)," said Lynch. "Gender-based violence, such as [intimate partner violence](#), child abuse, sexual assault and human trafficking, are crimes that thrive on [survivor](#) isolation. The isolation resulting from this pandemic, coupled with financial strain and a myriad of mental health issues experienced by many, creates a perfect storm to enhance the occurrence of gender-based violence."

Many victim and criminal justice services have been operating in a limited capacity, if at all, during the pandemic. "The pandemic has forced agencies to quickly adapt their policies and/or manage with limited resources in these unprecedented times. One critical step in helping victim service agencies become better equipped to serve survivors is to document the challenges that agencies face so they can prioritize their needs for future service" said Lynch.

Professionals who serve survivors of gender-based violence across the United States were recruited to complete the online survey between September and December 2020. It consisted of questions across a variety of areas, including the impact of the pandemic on forms of gender-based violence, risks and challenges for survivors, challenges for agencies,

interactions with law enforcement, innovations for agencies in going forward and survey respondent information.

In the open-ended responses section of the survey, respondents highlighted a numerous list of barriers to serving survivors, such as maintaining staff and victim health/safety, statewide mandates restricting access to services, limited resources, shelter capacity and reduced criminal justice system operations.

The survey findings indicated that most respondents believed Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), [child abuse](#) and sexual assault have increased during the pandemic.

"The results revealed strong concerns about financial insecurity for survivors and their families. In particular, the ability to access safe housing is a major concern as many shelters are operating at limited capacity and homelessness continues to rise in the U.S. The impact of continued isolation on mental health and child wellness are also key issues that we must grapple with as we continue to move toward some version of normal," Lynch added.

The study also found that survivors face immense barriers to seeking help during the pandemic, such as concerns for their health and safety, being closely monitored at home by an abuser, and a lack of knowledge of if and how agencies are providing services during these times.

Additionally, nearly 40% of respondents reported that gun sales have increased in their community since the start of the pandemic and about 50% of respondents reported that abusers threatening to shoot survivors has become a bigger problem since the start of the pandemic.

"The potential risk posed by increased access to firearms in volatile situations cannot be overlooked as an abusive partner's access to a

firearm dramatically increases the risk of domestic fatality. Further, there are broader implications for public safety as a recent analysis by Bloomberg found that 60% of U.S. mass shootings in the last six years were committed by men with a history of [domestic violence](#) or began as domestic-related attacks."

Findings are coupled with the fact that about two-thirds of respondents reported that abusers have interfered with survivors' work/employment as a control tactic during the pandemic.

The survey also demonstrates that survivor populations are at greater risk during the pandemic. For example, in the case of children, respondents assessed, "They are at an [increased risk](#) during the pandemic as many of them live with their abusers or are continuously exposed due to having to function in all aspects from home. There is also a decrease in the access to needs/resources that were being provided from schools."

Among the responses, 25% reported that law enforcement's response to meeting the needs of survivors worsened during the pandemic.

The researcher's concluded the efforts to gather this information is to highlight areas of high concern and innovations to improve services going forward and identify the challenges that victim service agencies face during a global pandemic and perceptions of the impact the pandemic has had on the dynamics of gender-based violence.

"This study was an initial step in documenting the resiliency of victim service agencies and highlights the creativity, determination, and passion of agency staff to navigate this pandemic" Lynch concluded. "These results can be used to inform strategies and allow coordinated plans for providing services to survivors as this [pandemic](#) continues and in future emergencies, such as natural disasters and also highlight important areas of need for agencies so that they may seek funding to support their

services during these difficult times."

Provided by University of Texas at San Antonio

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