

# Policy Brief

## COVID-19 and the Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence Survivors and Service Providers

### Executive Summary

Emerging research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying containment measures inadvertently created ideal conditions for the proliferation of intimate partner violence (IPV). Researchers at RESOLVE Manitoba and the Family Violence Prevention Program (Government of Manitoba) conducted a research project to understand how pandemics, such as COVID-19, impact survivors of IPV and the organizations that serve them in Manitoba. Research findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the frequency and severity of IPV and enabled perpetrators to utilize new tactics of abuse and control. The influx of IPV during the pandemic also put increased strain on organizations serving survivors and made trauma-informed service provision difficult. Implementing gender-sensitive response measures, investing in IPV services and supports, increasing public awareness, and increasing data collection on IPV during emergent or crisis events is needed to address the issue.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first global pandemic to occur in nearly 100 years. Governments around the world implemented drastic measures to curb the spread of the virus, including lockdowns or “stay at home” orders, social distancing, and the closure of public spaces. While these drastic measures were necessary to prevent the spread of the highly infectious virus, they inadvertently exacerbated yet another public health epidemic that many have been battling at home for years—intimate partner violence (IPV). Emerging research suggests that the circumstances of the pandemic have greatly impacted experiences of IPV and strained resources under increasing demands for service.

To understand the impacts of the pandemic on IPV in Manitoba, researchers at RESOLVE Manitoba and the Family Violence Prevention Program (Government of Manitoba) developed a research study titled: *COVID-19 and the Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence Survivors and Service Providers*. This brief shares findings from the research with the aim of informing policy responses to IPV during pandemics and other emergent or crisis events.

### Research Overview

The specific objectives of this research were to:

1. Establish a foundational understanding of the nature and scope of the impact of pandemics on the social issue of IPV
2. Explore the impact of pandemics on IPV survivors
3. Identify how pandemics can put IPV survivors at additional risk
4. Explore the impacts of pandemics on IPV service providers
5. Explore how IPV-serving organizations in Manitoba responded to COVID-19, including what barriers they encountered
6. Develop policy and practice recommendations for policymakers and service providers

To address these objectives, the project utilized a mixed methods approach. Three sources of data were gathered in total, including an online survey for service providers, follow-up interviews with service providers, and in-depth interviews with survivors of IPV in Manitoba. Data from the online survey was analyzed using quantitative analysis software (SPSS) and data from the in-depth interviews was analyzed using qualitative analysis software (Dedoose).

### Results

#### Increases in the Frequency and Severity of IPV

Increases in the frequency and severity of IPV were reported after the implementation of lockdown or “stay at home” orders. Increases in frequency were characterized by experiencing violence more often or beginning to experience violence during the pandemic, while increases in severity were characterized by a rise in severe physical injuries and the escalation from non-physical to physical forms of IPV.

#### New Tactics of Abuse

Perpetrators utilized the unique circumstances of the pandemic to enact new tactics of abuse such as lying about available services, forcing survivors to collect the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and destroying materials needed to work from home (i.e., computers and phones).

For study details,  
access the final  
report here

## **Increases in Mental Health Challenges and Substance Use**

An increase in co-occurring issues, including mental health challenges and substance use amongst survivors and perpetrators of IPV during the pandemic were noted by survivor and service provider participants. Addressing IPV, mental health, and substance use amongst survivors was challenging, as few integrated services for these issues are available.

## **Barriers to Help-Seeking**

The pandemic presented new barriers to seeking help for survivors including the reduction or closure of services, a lack of privacy due to lockdown or “stay at home” orders, confusion or a lack of information surrounding services, and vaccination status.

## **Changes and Challenges to Service Provision**

Organizations adapted service provision during the pandemic in several ways including increasing or decreasing services, implementing online services, accommodating longer shelter stays, and utilizing hotels to accommodate increased demand at shelters. However, organizations found it challenging to stay up-to-date with changing public health orders, meet the overwhelming demand for service, and maintain social distancing and sanitary procedures during this time. Service providers also stated that it was difficult to provide trauma-informed care under pandemic public health requirements.

## **Detrimental Impacts on Service Providers**

The challenges of service provision during the pandemic had negative impacts on service providers including mental and physical health issues (anxiety, depression, stress, and exhaustion), a lack of work-life balance, and isolation from supports such as friends and family.

## **Recommendations**

### **● Implement Gender-Sensitive Emergency Response Measures**

- Developing a gender-sensitive emergency response plan to mitigate IPV (and other gendered impacts) during pandemics is essential for future preparedness. Women (survivor and service providers) should be represented throughout the emergency planning, response, and recovery process and emergency measures should be designed with an intersectional lens, so that diverse social and economic realities are considered.

### **● Increase Public Awareness of IPV and Pandemic Supports**

- Increased public awareness and knowledge of IPV and available supports is needed to foster change and connect survivors with needed resources. Distributing this information is particularly important during pandemics and other emergent or crisis events, as it can increase service access when survivors may be confused or told misleading information by perpetrators of IPV.

### **● Invest in IPV Services, Supports, and Resources**

- Current IPV services did not have the capacity to meet increased demand during the COVID-19 pandemic after years of underfunding. Investing in and strengthening these services during the post-pandemic period can build resilience for future emergencies. The need for investment in shelters/housing, mental health and addictions support, parental supports, community resources, and financial supports were specifically noted.

### **● Support Service Providers**

- Service providers described significant impacts to their personal lives and professional roles during the pandemic. Increased support for service providers, and the organizations they work in, can combat these impacts—including increased funding that enables organizations to hire more staff, update software/technology, build skills, and increase collaboration and knowledge sharing with other organizations.

### **● Increase Data on IPV in the Context of Emergent or Crisis Events**

- Policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were largely gender-blind and failed to consider the unique impacts of the pandemic on women’s safety. At the beginning of the pandemic, only 25 countries worldwide introduced policies to reduce gendered impacts including violence against women, unpaid care work, and women’s economic security (UN News, 2020). Policy and decision-makers need to invest in further research to fully understand the scope and gendered impacts of pandemics in their respective areas and create evidence-based responses to mitigate these effects.

## **Lessons and Insights for Policymakers**

Emergent or crisis events are known to provide an impetus for gender-based violence. However, responses to the issue are rarely prioritized. It is important for policy and decision-makers to acknowledge the unique impacts of these events on IPV and implement necessary measures to combat them, including providing adequate financial resources to do so. Investment in the gender-based violence sector in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is also needed to ensure that agencies and organizations are well prepared to respond to future emergencies.