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Nowhere to Run. Impact of Family Violence Incidents during COVID-19 Lockdown in Texas

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Introduction

2020 was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global lockdown caused life-altering changes across the world. In the United States, 959,533 COVID-19 deaths and 79,198,539 COVID-19 cases were recorded as of March 9, 2022 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Quarantines, social isolation, travel restrictions, and stay-at-home orders were implemented in the United States to curb the spread. Work from home became the order of the day for some workers, while approximately 40 million Americans lost their jobs (Usher et al., 2021).

Preliminary data from several Texas counties provide some early awareness into the effect COVID-19 has had on domestic violence (DV) in some regions. In Texas, the San Antonio Police Department subsequently noted they received an 18% increase in calls about family-related violence in March 2020 compared to March 2019 (Boserup et al., 2020).

Previous studies have shown that domestic violence and intimate partner violence tend to exacerbate during periods of natural disasters, public health crisis, civil unrest, and economic insecurity. Therefore, it is not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown significantly increased family violence (Lyons & Brewer, 2021). Several factors were responsible for this increase. The physical and mental stress, spike in unemployment, and financial hardship put more significant stress on relationships. At the same time, the lockdown reduced the opportunities for victims to leave and increased opportunities for perpetrators to monitor and control victims' behavior. (Lyons & Brewer, 2021).

For victims of domestic violence, it was therefore a case of double jeopardy, as they had to cope with the multi-various consequences of the lockdown like everyone else and the increased likelihood of victimization. According to Usher et al. (2021), high levels of fear and uncertainty related to pandemics make them enabling environments for family violence to emerge or worsen. Although evidence related to increased family violence during and post-pandemic is unclear, anecdotal evidence indicates that this violence was rife in previous pandemics. Kaukinen (2020) contended that convincing evidence suggests that women's physical and mental health and intimate partner violence (IPV) risk is connected to the consequences of natural disasters and pandemics, including social isolation, economic instability, and increasing relationship and family conflict. Buttell and Ferreira (2020) argued that in many instances of IPV, women are afraid to be alone with their abusive partners and experience a high degree of social loneliness because they are scared to tell their families and friends what is happening. This is commonly out of both shame and fear that their abusive

partner will hurt them, their children, or family members in retaliation for disclosure.

Domestic violence remains anathema in many societies, and IPV victims are often stigmatized (Ragavan et al., 2020). Several internal and external stressors might have increased the risk for more frequent and intense abuse in families already experiencing IPV before COVID-19. A problem unique to the violence caused by COVID-19 is that there is no place for IPV victims to go to escape the abuse. Most IPV victims may call a hotline number and receive psychological assistance over the phone, but the police were strongly encouraged only to arrest for felonies (Cannon et al., 2021). This stance by security agencies may have been an opportunity for IPV to thrive during the COVID-19 virus outbreak in Texas.

The purpose of this exploratory review is to show through a trend analysis the potential impact of the lockdown from COVID-19 on family violence incidents.

Literature Review

The definition of family violence differs from one jurisdiction to another. According to the Texas Family Code, Chapter 71.004, family violence is defined as follows:

An act by a member of a family or household against another member of the family or household that is intended to result in physical harm, bodily injury, assault, or sexual assault or that is a threat that reasonably places the member in fear of imminent physical harm, bodily injury, assault, or sexual assault, but does not include defensive measures to protect oneself.

The term intimate partner violence (IPV) is narrowly defined by the Texas Family Code. IPV is generally covered under family violence which extends to harmful physical acts against a family member (Texas Family Code, 1973). This study's literature focuses on IPV analysis because of its prevalence and high family violence rates.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown forced many couples worldwide to stay at home together in isolation for an extended period far beyond what was previously the case (Vowels et al., 2021). External stressors can have a significant impact on the quality and stability of intimate relationships. For example, research showed that the impact of the lockdown was inextricably tied to emotional and physical stress such as job loss, anxiety, economic hardship, mental health challenges, physical

health issues, etc., arising from the mobility restrictions (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). These external stressors can be damaging to relationships. For example, they might result in higher toxicity that is expressed in the form of unresponsiveness to one's partner, blaming, shaming, being overly critical, and creating a strain to maintain the relationship (Buck & Neff, 2012; Neff & Karney, 2017; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The unusually high stress level that arose from the lockdown had devastating consequences that threatened many romantic relationships, resulting in more cases of domestic violence, 911 calls, and a higher incidence of divorce (Deese, 2020). Likewise, the challenge of maintaining a functioning intimate relationship during COVID-19 was just as stressful for same-sex couples as it was for heterosexual relationships (Yachao & Samp, 2021).

Curiously, five states (Arizona, Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon) witnessed a decline in marriage and divorce rates in 2019 before COVID-19 began (Manning & Payne, 2021). Similarly, in Denmark, the COVID-19 pandemic did not have any significant impact on the divorce rate, as the country experienced less divorce filings during lockdown periods (Fallesen, 2021). It is unclear whether the unavailability of the court system and other bureaucratic agencies was responsible for the decline. It is also not clear whether the pandemic and ensuing lockdown slowed down human activities due to the exigencies of the era.

Intimate partner violence is a significant public health and global phenomenon. In addition to the immediate impact, IPV has lifelong effects (Breiding & Black, 2014). IPV victimization is also associated with poor short- and long-term physical and mental health outcomes (Peterson et al., 2018). IPV is an under-recognized problem that can enormously impact women, men, and children's physical and mental health and well-being. It also has links to risky health behaviors, such as alcohol and other substance abuse (Stewart et al., 2013).

Previous studies demonstrate that approximately 6.9 million women and 5.3 million men experience IPV annually in the United States. Nearly 36% of American women and 29% of American men are victims of IPV at some point in their lifetimes (Black et al., 2011). It is estimated that the annual financial cost of IPV is in excess of \$5.8 billion, including \$4.1 billion in medical costs and mental health services for the victims (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). The U.S. has also recorded a high financial burden of IPV cases among different adults (Peterson et al., 2018).

To curb the rates of IPV, it is not only criminalized, but there is a standard mandatory arrest policy in cases reported to the police in the United States (Mallicoat & Gardner, 2014). Mandatory arrest laws compel police officers to initiate an arrest if an act of alleged IPV occurred or if there

is the likelihood of a threat of physical or sexual harm. The police can also engage in pro-arrest (discretionary arrest based on the situation) if such action is the "preferred" outcome (Mallicoat & Gardner, 2014). The mandatory arrest policy, however, is not without critics, who argue that the policy can escalate intimate partner violence, damage intimate relationships, and disallow victims the right to make a choice (Schneider, 2000).

The criminalization of IPV in the United States came into being in the late 19th century. Previously, the concept of coverture, which was borrowed from English common law, encouraged intimate partner violence and protected men from being sanctioned for abusive behavior towards their partners. During this period, the law allowed a man to be physically abusive to his wife if it was meant to correct her behavior and not result in permanent physical injury (Siegel, 1996; Goldfarb, 2011). The women's rights and temperance movements of the 19th century took up the fight against the legal right, arguing that it was cruel law that was symptomatic of gender inequality. In the United States, the turning point came in 1871 when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in *Commonwealth vs. McAfee* that marriage or any other type of relationship does not confer on any man the right to physically harm his wife (Siegel, 1996). A test case involved a drunk defendant who was indicted for manslaughter, which resulted from violently striking his wife (Siegel, 1996). By 1906, at least 12 states had passed laws forbidding wife beating with sanctions, including punishment by public whipping. However, the legislation was rendered relatively ineffective because only the poor and people of color were punished for the act (Mallicoat & Gardner, 2014).

By the early 1900s, IPV and violence against women were still pervasive. The courts generally refused to intervene as IPV was considered a private marital issue, which the court believed should be kept separate from public spaces. People were encouraged to engage in informal conflict resolution, use specialized domestic relations courts, or seek counseling. The police were encouraged to mediate rather than make an arrest even where physical violence had occurred, while intimate partners were advised to embrace informal conflict resolution, counseling, and the use of specialized domestic relations (Schneider, 2000).

However, there was an uptick in efforts to curb IPV in the 1970s as tougher legislation was introduced criminalizing partner abuse and empowering the police to arrest abusive partners (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2017). In the 1980s, more than half of U.S. states had passed laws requiring mandatory arrest for physical violence against intimate partners (Mills, 2003). According to some studies, however, the laws produced mixed

results. On one hand, the arrest had a significant deterrent effect among employed abusers. On the other hand, arrests led to an increase in cases of assault among unemployed aggressors (Pate & Hamilton 1992; Sherman, 2018; Sherman & Smith 1992), and in some cases, it had no deterrent effect at all (Berk et al., 1992). Some studies even suggested that mandatory arrest and no-drop prosecution do not reduce the future occurrence of IPV (Mills, 1998).

In 1977, Oregon enacted the first mandatory arrest law in the United States, which empowered police officers to arrest if they believed that a case of physical assault had taken place or if a victim under a protective order believed that a grievous physical attack was imminent (Zorza, 1992). The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment, conducted between early 1981 to mid 1982, was the first major study to examine police responses to domestic violence under a grant from the National Institute of Justice (Sherman & Cohn, 1989). The study demonstrated the significant deterrent impact of the mandatory arrest policy, as only 19% of IPV perpetrators that were arrested committed another act of intimate partner violence within six months (Sherman & Berk, 1984). Subsequent studies meant to replicate the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment produced mixed results. Nevertheless, the Minneapolis study had an overwhelming influence on police departments across the country and helped to popularize mandatory arrest policy among police officers (Maxwell et al., 2001).

Mandatory arrest policy has, however, not been without unintended collateral consequences. For one, high death rates among victims of IPV following the arrests of their abusers have been reported, and up to 64% of victims died when their abusers were arrested or jailed rather than warned (Sherman & Harris, 2015). Among African American victims, the arrest of abusers increased the likelihood of premature death by 98%, while among White victims, arrest increased the likelihood of victim mortality by just 9% (Sherman & Harris, 2015). Among the African American victims who died, 11% died after the arrest of their partners, but none died after warnings. Murder was the cause of death in three of all 91 deaths, while heart-related ailments and other illnesses caused the deaths of most of the victims (Sherman & Harris, 2015).

Family Violence Trends in Texas' 15 Largest Counties

The Texas State Directory keeps a comprehensive demographic record for state, city, and counties in Texas. According to the Texas State Directory (2021), the top 15 counties based on population size are; Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, Bexar, Travis, Collin, Denton, Hidalgo, Fort Bend, El Paso, Montgomery, Williamson, Cameron, Brazoria, and Bell. This work analyzed family violence incidents from these 15 counties. The counties were selected because of their population sizes.

The lockdown in the United States from the pandemic went into effect in March 2020 when different states issued stay-at-home orders. Texas imposed stay-at-home order on April 2, 2020, exempting only essential workers (Texas Executive Order, 2020), and this lasted till May 2020 when a phased lifting of the fairly effective restrictions began in 2020.

Data were obtained from the Texas Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Reporting [UCR] Program (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2021). The collection of family violence data in Texas began in 1991 (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2021).

This section analyzed family violence trends from the 15 Texas counties for a two-year period. The first period was the year of the pandemic 2020 (classified as the COVID era). The second period was for the year 2019 (classified as pre-COVID).

Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

Table 1

Pre-COVID vs. COVID Era Family Violence Data in Texas' Counties

County	2019 (Pre-COVID Era) Family Violence Incidents	2020 (COVID Era) Family Violence Incidents
Harris	37,676	47,836
Dallas	22,594	25,023
Tarrant	13,328	13,681
Bexar	16,139	14,683
Travis	10,418	8,395
Collin	3,103	3,162
Denton	2,663	3,074
Hidalgo	5,393	5,876
Fort Bend	3,780	4,415
El Paso	4,991	5,187
Montgomery	2,892	3,121
Williamson	2,267	2,563
Cameron	2,857	2,859
Brazoria	2,093	2,221

Bell	2,416	2,838
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Table 2

Pre-COVID Family Violence Data in Texas' Counties

County	Year	Number of Incidents
Harris	2019	37,676
Dallas		22,594
Tarrant		13,328
Bexar		16,139
Travis		10,418
Collin		3,103
Denton		2,663
Hidalgo		5,393
Fort Bend		3,780
El Paso		4,991
Montgomery		2,892
Williamson		2,267
Cameron		2,857
Brazoria		2,093
Bell		2,416

Table 3

COVID Era Family Violence Data in Texas' Counties

County	Year	Number of Incidents
Harris	2020	47,836
Dallas		25,023
Tarrant		13,681
Bexar		14,683
Travis		8,395
Collin		3,162
Denton		3,074
Hidalgo		5,876
Fort Bend		4,415
El Paso		5,187
Montgomery		3,121
Williamson		2,563
Cameron		2,859
Brazoria		2,221
Bell		2,838

Findings/Results

We compared family violence incidents in 15 Texas counties for a two-year period. The total number of cases was 15 (n=15). This paper conducted a trend analysis to compare family violence incidents during the pre-COVID and COVID periods. The periods are classified as 2019 (pre-COVID) and 2020 (COVID) periods.

The counties served as our independent variables and family violence incidents were the dependent variables.

The results are given below:

Figure 1.1: Pre-COVID vs. COVID Era Family Violence Trend in Texas' Counties

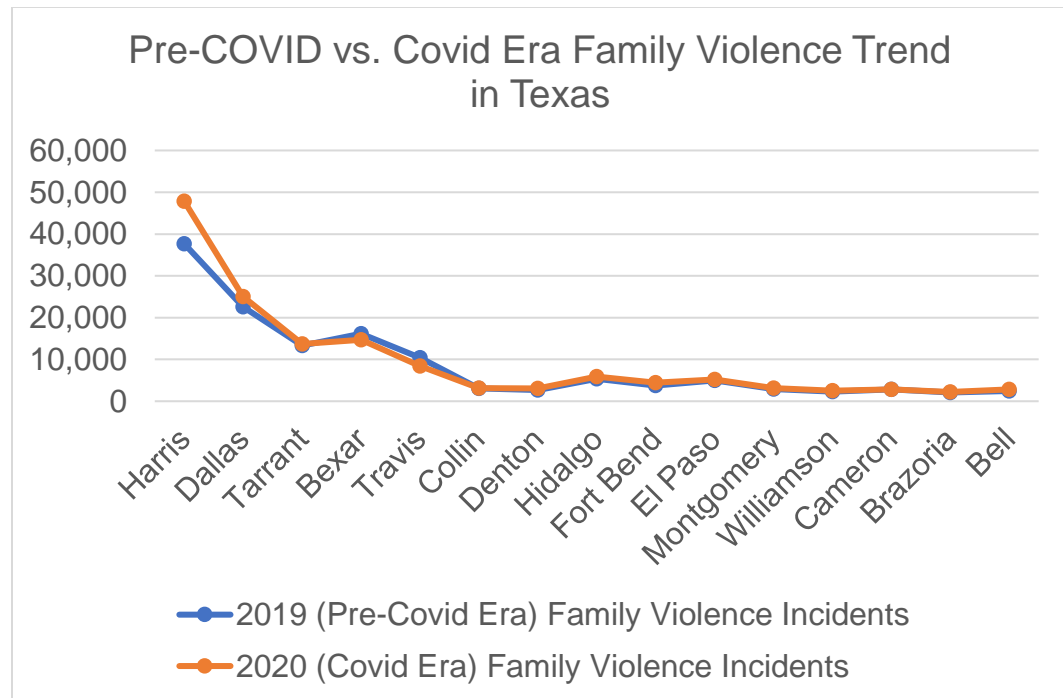


Figure 1.2- Percentage Change of Family Violence Cases in Texas' Counties

County	2019 (Pre-COVID Era)	2020 (COVID Era) Family	Percentage Change
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	Family Violence Incidents	Violence Incidents	
Harris	37,676	47,836	27%
Dallas	22,594	25,023	11%
Tarrant	13,328	13,681	3%
Bexar	16,139	14,683	-9%
Travis	10,418	8,395	-19%
Collin	3,103	3,162	2%
Denton	2,663	3,074	15%
Hidalgo	5,393	5,876	9%
Fort Bend	3,780	4,415	17%
El Paso	4,991	5,187	4%
Montgomery	2,892	3,121	8%
Williamson	2,267	2,563	13%
Cameron	2,857	2,859	0%
Brazoria	2,093	2,221	6%
Bell	2,416	2,838	17%

Our findings show an increase in family violence incidents between pre-COVID and COVID eras in 12 counties. The counties are Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, Collin, Denton, Hidalgo, Fort Bend, El Paso, Montgomery, Williamson, Brazoria, and Bell.

Cameron County showed no change in family violence incidents between pre-COVID and COVID eras.

Bexar and Travis Counties showed a decrease in family violence incidents between pre-COVID and covid eras.

Discussion

Using trend analysis, more counties (12 out of the 15 studied counties) indicated an increase of family violence incidents during the lockdown. Harris county especially showed a major increase in the family violence incident trends.

The increase in family violence incidents from this paper is in line with results from earlier studies that reported family violence calls increased during the COVID pandemic (Boserup et al., 2020).

The trend numbers indicated in this paper support the finding that family violence increases during periods of pandemics, natural disasters, public health crisis, civil unrest, and economic insecurity (Kaukinen, 2020; Peterman et al, 2020). Reasons cited from these studies are isolation and psychological challenges.

The uncertainty that COVID-19 brought coupled with the stress families had to undergo necessitated this current review of the literature. Being an exploratory work, this paper shows an increased trend of family violence in a majority of the counties studied.

Gaps in Research

Extant literature had demonstrated that domestic violence tends to spike during periods of natural disasters and epidemics that compel prolonged stay-together situations among family members and intimate partners (Kaukinen, 2020). Nonetheless, it was unclear to what extent the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions could lead to a spike in cases of domestic violence. The last time there was an epidemic of this proportion was in 1918 (Beach et al., 2020).

The differences in family violence incidents did not account for other confounding variables such as stress, depression, change in lifestyle brought upon by the stay-at-home orders during the COVID -19 pandemic. Future studies should draw a comparison between COVID -19 cases and family violence incidents to understand the rationale for such differences.

Furthermore, there were no direct participants studied as this research adopted a secondary data collection approach. It is also a retrospective observational review of literature from a limited list of counties.

Suggestions for Future Research

This paper calls for additional research from future studies on specific factors that may have played a role in an increase in family violence incidents in Texas counties. Our initial trend analysis disclosed that Harris County, Texas had the most significant increase of all the counties studied. Since Harris has a larger population compared to other counties, future studies should examine the distribution of income level, age demographics, sociodemographic status, and other structural factors to understand if these variables play any role in family violence incidents.

Family violence is a growing area of research. There is, however, a paucity of studies on the context and dynamics of the mental health characteristics of partners involved in family violence (Dim & Elabor-

Idemudia, 2018). Lack of a narrative of female-to-male violence creates a lacuna in the literature, and this also calls for further research because a full grasp of the concept of IPV cannot be fully realized if the complex interplay of victimization and perpetration is not properly accounted for. (Dim & Elabor-Idemudia, 2018). This may become imperative because IPV, as opposed to the general notion, is not only perpetrated by males. There have been several reported instances of female perpetrators and male victims. Many are even unreported or underreported because of fear of societal stigmatization. However, these cases do not rule out the obvious fact that the majority of the IPV cases are still male perpetrated. This only suggests the imperativeness of gender-inclusive quantitative and qualitative studies to examine the context of male involvement in IPV victimization and perpetration (Dim & Elabor-Idemudia, 2018; Dim & Ogunye, 2017).

Furthermore, because not much is known about the psycho-social adjustment conditions that encourage family violence, it is important to research further the prevalence, distribution, and patterns of victimization and perpetration of family violence beyond the stereotypes associated with it.

Conclusion

The relationship between COVID-19 lockdowns and family violence is indeed a new dimension to the study of family violence. COVID-19 is a novel case that took the entire world and human race by storm. The discussion about the impact of the lockdown on family violence is a continuous one that will require further study.

It suffices to say that certain factors may or may not have contributed to family violence during the COVID-19 lockdown. Predictors such as where family members were before the lockdown play a significant role in family violence. If family members were in a good place in terms of their relationships and communicated better before the COVID-19 lockdown, there may have been a closer relationship and better bonding during the lockdown. Likewise, the opposite will follow. That is, toxic family relationships will be exacerbated by the restriction imposed by the lockdown leading to family violence.

Family violence remains a major societal challenge. Due to the give-and-take nature of intimate relationships in which compromise is essential, there is a higher risk of marital conflict among intimate partners with poor communication and negotiation (Nwaorgu, 1999).

This review of the literature shows a higher incidence and severity of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic compared with the prior

year. These results also suggest that cases of family violence are on the rise.

COVID-19 or not, family violence has been with the human race from time immemorial and will not go away anytime soon, though societies continue to find better ways of dealing with it. Unlike most societies back in the days when it was a norm, many societies now frown at family violence, and more societies continue to take measures to deal with its prevalence. This exploratory review did not look at family violence as a whole because of its large scope. This paper but looked at the effect of family violence incidents before and during the COVID-19 lockdown using data obtained from 15 counties in Texas.

An analysis of the data shows that, out of the 15 counties under observation, 12 counties, with Harris County at the lead, showed an increase in family violence between the pre- COVID and COVID era. An explanation may be given as to why cases in Harris County are so high. Harris County has a large population, and it is expected that there will be more cases of family violence reported.

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