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Commentary/Letter to Editor

An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives

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ABSTRACT

Though necessary to slow the spread of the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19), actions such as social-distancing, sheltering in-place, restricted travel, and closures of key community foundations are likely to dramatically increase the risk for family violence around the globe. In fact many countries are already indicating a dramatic increase in reported cases of domestic violence. While no clear precedent for the current crisis exists in academic literature, exploring the impact of natural disasters on family violence reports may provide important insight for family violence victim-serving professionals. Improving collaborations between human welfare and animal welfare agencies, expanding community partnerships, and informing the public of the great importance of reporting any concerns of abuse are all critical at this time.

Introduction

As the Coronavirus (Covid-19) global pandemic continues, more and more countries, cities, and communities are adopting dedicated measures to slow the spread of the virus. While actions such as encouraging individuals to adopt “social distancing”, mandating school and business closures, and imposing travel restrictions may reduce the transmission of the infectious disease, unfortunately not all are finding safety in the resulting seclusion. Many family violence (domestic violence, child abuse, and pet abuse) victims may currently be facing a “worst case” scenario – finding themselves trapped in the home with a violent perpetrator during a time of severely limited contact with the outside world.

It’s not uncommon for domestic violence abusers to isolate their victims as an act of control or to reduce opportunity for disclosure of abuse, and the current societal conditions are likely furthering the impact of these actions. Perpetrator-imposed restrictions and continued surveillance of social media, internet, and cell phones may also limit the ability of victims to reach out for help electronically. Further, schools, libraries, and churches are all critical staples in family routines around the globe. Families who are victimized by violence or abuse in the home indicate these institutions often offer critical emotional support and provide opportunity for a “reprieve” from their abusive home environment – a reprieve they are no longer getting at this time.

Increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic

With shelter in-place measures and widespread organizational closures related to Covid-19 likely to continue for an extended period of time, stress and associated risk factors for family violence such as unemployment, reduced income, limited resources, and limited social support are likely to be further compounded. Additionally, alcohol abuse, a commonly reported risk factor for family violence, has been linked to an accumulation of stressful events and a lack of social support (both likely occurring as a result of Covid-19) [1]. With bars and restaurants being limited to take-out service only in many communities, family violence perpetrators who abuse alcohol may be even more likely to do so *in the home*, likely increasing risk for the entire household.

An increasing risk of domestic violence-related homicide is also a growing concern – reports continue to surface around the globe of intimate partner homicides with ties to stress or other factors related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Reports of increasing gun and ammunition sales in the U.S. during the crisis are particularly concerning given the clear link between firearm access and fatal domestic violence incidents [2]. Communities considering the mass release of prisoners to reduce their risk of spreading Covid-19 in confinement must weigh the potentially significant risk for victims and households if domestic violence or other violent offenders are among those released. This risk is likely to extend outside of the home as well, as 20% of victims in domestic violence-

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related homicides are not the intimate partner but rather a neighbor, family member, friend, bystander, or first responder [3].

In addition to adult victims of family violence, children and pets reside in 60 % or more of households where domestic violence is perpetrated and are also at risk of suffering significant physical and/or emotional harm [4]. Given current school and library closures and shelter in-place mandates, children are likely to be spending significantly more time than usual in the home. Domestic violence abusers may often target children or pets in the home as a means of furthering control over the household. Researchers estimate children residing in a home where domestic violence occurs are at as much as 60 times the risk of child abuse or neglect compared to the general U.S. child population [5]. Additionally, when domestic violence abusers also harm animals in the home, it is often an indicator of increased risk for both human and animal members of the household. Nearly 80 % of victims residing in a home where domestic violence and pet abuse co-occur report daily fear they will be killed by the perpetrator [6].

How family violence reporting in the aftermath of natural disasters relates to the current crisis

Though limited precedent exists for the current crisis, we do find scenarios of rapidly increasing stress, sudden shifts in daily routines, the closing of schools and community resources, and a rapid decrease in available resources after natural disasters. Additionally, controlling behaviors (often a means of coping with trauma), unemployment, and limited access to social support systems have all been identified as family violence risk factors that also commonly occur after natural disasters [7]. Studies that explore the impact of natural disasters on crime and violence report that while property crimes and other forms of violent crime may or may not be impacted, domestic violence reports often substantially increase after the catastrophic event [7,8].

In fact, domestic violence reports increased by 46 % in Othello, Washington after the eruption of Mount St. Helens, along with increases in reported alcohol abuse, family stress, and aggression [9]. After Hurricane Katrina, reports of psychological abuse among women by their partner increased 35 % while reports of partner physical abuse nearly doubled in the southernmost Mississippi counties [10]. Similar significant increases in domestic violence have been reported following earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and many other catastrophic events around the world, including the 2009 “Black Saturday” bushfires in Australia and 2010 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti [8,11].

While similarities exist, the current Coronavirus crisis may result in closures of key organizations for longer durations than often occur in the aftermath of natural disasters. While community togetherness may be often encouraged after natural disasters, physical separation from fellow community members is the course of action promoted in the current crisis. As a result, the increase in family violence reports during and after the Covid-19 pandemic may be *even greater* than the substantial increase observed in reports following natural disasters and other catastrophic events.

Additionally, studies indicate the increased rates of domestic violence reported after a natural disaster often extend for several months after the catastrophic event occurs. In fact, a study looking at the aftermath of natural disasters in the United States and Canada found domestic violence victim service requests increased for an entire year following the event [12]. Family violence victim-serving professionals must be aware of the high likelihood of increases in victimization rates and reports both during and long after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Increasing reports of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic

Reports of increasing rates of domestic violence are beginning to surface around the world. In China, domestic violence is reported to have tripled during their shelter in-place mandate. Additionally, France has

indicated a 30 % increase in domestic violence reports, Brazil estimates domestic violence reports have jumped 40–50 %, and Italy has also indicated reports of domestic violence are on the rise. In Spain, reports have surfaced of a horrific domestic violence-related homicide – a trend that is unfortunately likely to continue around the globe as stress continues to build and shelter in-place measures extend into the future. The growing global trend of increasing reports of domestic violence cases is likely to continue throughout the pandemic and may only represent a “tip of the iceberg” as many victims still find themselves trapped with the perpetrator and unable to report the abuse.

In the United States, agencies from across the country are also reporting an increase in domestic violence. In addition to risk of physical harm, victims are also at great risk of emotional harm and abuse. U.S. reports have surfaced of domestic violence perpetrators using Covid-19 as a weapon against their victims, forbidding handwashing in an attempt to increase the victim’s fear of contracting the virus and threatening to forbid medical treatment if the victim *does* contract the virus.

Decreasing reports of child abuse or neglect during the Covid-19 pandemic

In contrast to increasing reports of domestic violence, many child welfare organizations are noting a significant drop in reports of child abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, this decrease may be a result of fewer opportunities for detection as opposed to an actual decrease in incidence. The closures of schools and other critical community organizations has limited key community partners in their ability to detect and report abuse. In the United States, 67 % of substantiated child abuse or neglect reports come from victim-serving professionals and 19 % of these reports come from education personnel [13].

There is growing concern that we may see an overwhelming number of reports of child abuse or neglect when children do return to schools. If children do not return to the classroom until after the summer, the concerns should be even greater given an even further extended period of time out of the school system. When Covid-19 related measures are lifted and society returns to “normal”, child abuse victim-serving professionals may find themselves completely buried in reports and unable to meet the needs of an overwhelming number of victims. Agencies must work to develop community partnerships *now* with faith-based organizations, summer camps, youth clubs, libraries, public swimming facilities, and youth sports leagues to create potential opportunities to detect and report child abuse or neglect during spring or summer as opposed to waiting until children return to school in the fall.

Uniting human welfare and animal welfare efforts in response to Covid-19

My recent study published in the Journal of Interpersonal Violence found that 78 % of calls to police reporting domestic violence come from the victim themselves, and in only 7% of those cases the suspect was on scene when officers arrived [4]. Victims of domestic violence often report waiting for the perpetrator to leave the scene before they call 911. Current shelter in-place measures likely leave victims of domestic violence trapped in-home with these perpetrators for an extended period of time, limiting opportunity to safely report any incidents that may be occurring.

While the majority of domestic violence reports come from victims, the majority of animal control calls come from neighbors. My recent analysis of data from multiple victim-serving agencies across the State of Indiana revealed that while only 8% of calls reporting domestic violence to law enforcement come from a neighbor or bystander, 80 % or more of animal control calls come from neighbors or bystanders. This important difference in report sources may provide critical opportunity to detect violence or abuse in the home during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. While family violence victims are likely significantly restricted from reporting right now, neighbors may be even more likely to be in their

home as a result of the shelter in-place recommendations and often do not face the same barriers to reporting to authorities that victims experience. Animal control officers must utilize all opportunities to check on the welfare of animals in their community, to ensure the well-being of humans residing in the home as well, both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

If there was ever a time our nation needed animal welfare professionals and human welfare professionals to work together – it's right now. While these agencies often work alongside each other, they may less often work well *with each other*. Research is clear regarding a significant link between abuse or neglect of animals and an increased risk for humans who reside in the home as well. Perpetrators of domestic violence who also abuse animals are more likely have mental illness and/or abuse substances, have attempted suicide, and to have access to a firearm than domestic violence abusers who do not abuse pets [6]. Animal-abusing, domestic violence perpetrators present a significant risk of harm to households, communities, and first responders, with outcomes that include emotional harm, physical injury, and/or death.

The idea of animal welfare and human welfare agencies working together is not novel. In fact, organized child welfare efforts in the United States were birthed from Henry Bergh's successes with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York in 1800's [14]. Over time, animal and human welfare efforts seem to have largely gone their separate ways. Now more than ever, we must return to our collaborative roots. With resources so significantly limited and both welfare initiatives facing unprecedented barriers to providing assistance, professionals must unite their efforts to better protect the many vulnerable humans and animals at high risk of abuse.

Improving community collaborations: a call to action

The reality is, we were hardly "winning" the fight to end family violence even before this pandemic shook the world. Many agencies around the globe were already feeling the strain of an ever-increasing workload and continually diminishing resources. Now, many find themselves facing even greater barriers as they struggle to find ways to reach these families who have been cut-off from the rest of the community and likely at great risk of harm. In addition to improving relations between human welfare and animal welfare agencies, family violence victim-serving agencies must explore new and expanded community partnerships. Many postal workers, garbage collectors, food delivery staff, and home repair agut and traveling through neighborhoods during the global crisis – they may still have opportunity to detect violence in the home and report their concerns to the proper authorities.

Though many communities around the globe now find themselves physically separated by the threat of spreading the virus, opportunities to remain connected through this difficult time still exist. Communities must ensure citizens are aware of the current increased risk of family violence at this time, encourage them to check on their neighbors, friends, and family (while maintaining adherence to any distancing regulations) and report ANY concerns they see or hear to the proper authorities.

For as long as we allow family violence to remain in the shadows, it will do just that – remain. We must be vigilant. Risk of family violence is currently very high and will likely remain that way for the coming months. If you see or hear something concerning, please report it. The call you make may very well save a life.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsir.2020.100089>.

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