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The Endemic Amid the Pandemic: Seeking Help for Violence against Women in the Initial Phases of COVID-19

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Domestic violence during COVID-19 – more complicated than first thought

Despite claims of dramatic increases in violence against women caused by interventions designed to stop the spread of COVID-19, data are scarce and inconsistent. What is available at this point is mostly news reports, which tend to contradict one another even when issued at roughly the same time.

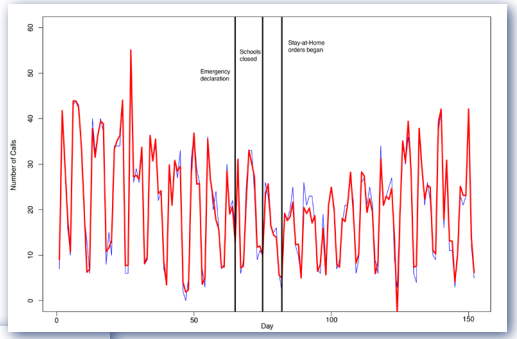
We investigated domestic violence (DV) and sexual assault help-seeking in the context of COVID-19 and examined how phased government intervention may have impacted the help seeking of victims.

Calls to police (typically to request immediate intervention) and calls to hotlines (usually to seek support and information that can shape later decisions and actions) represent different victim needs and have different implications for claims about the impact of COVID-19 and pandemic control interventions.

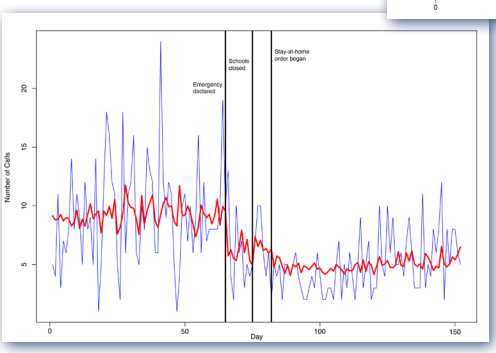
EFFECTS of COVID-19 Government Interventions on Help-Seeking

Interrupted time series analyses on calls to the domestic violence hotline, sexual assault hotline, and police from January 1 - May 30, 2020, Philadelphia

— actual calls
— predicted calls



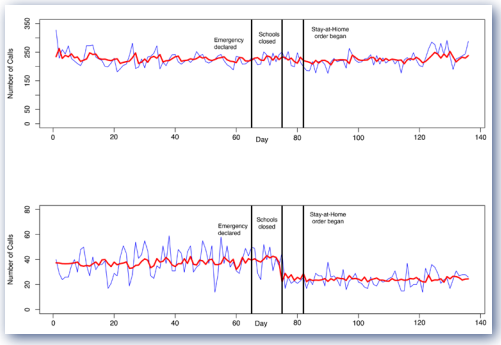
Victim calls to DV hotline



Victim calls to Sexual Assault hotline

911 calls for DV

911 calls for assault (general)



KEY FINDINGS

- Declaration of a state of emergency was associated with fewer victim calls to the sexual assault hotline and fewer 911 calls for rape
- School closure was associated with fewer victim calls to the DV hotline and fewer 911 calls for general assault and rape
- Stay-at-home orders were associated with a gradual increase in DV hotline calls
- 911 calls for DV were unchanged during the entire study period.

IMPLICATIONS

Gender roles: Fewer DV hotline calls for a brief period (following school closure but before stay-at-home orders) might be related to the need for child care, which women are more likely to provide. Calls to police for DV did not decline.

Population change: Most sexual assaults of women are by male acquaintances. Thousands of college students left the region when an emergency was declared, thus, changing the population at risk.

Service needs: The pandemic created special difficulties for services that are routinely available for DV victims (e.g., safe housing).

Not addressed: No research, including ours, directly measures incidents during the pandemic (e.g., many incidents are not reported to police). The needed data are not collected on a regular basis. Claims about the impact of the pandemic and implemented policies need to be treated with some skepticism.

Research on violence against women during a pandemic is nonexistent. Research on violence against women in the context of disasters is of limited usefulness; COVID-19 presents substantially different stressors from those experienced in natural disasters.