

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19:

Snapshot of Erie County, NY



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University at Buffalo
Gender Institute



About the Authors



Erie County Commission on the Status of Women

The Erie County Commission on the Status of Women works to provide resources to the women and girls of Erie County, to ensure that they participate fully in matters that have an impact on their lives and toward the elimination of all gender based discrimination and the promotion of women's economic, societal and political empowerment.

UB Gender Institute

A university-wide research center founded in 1997, the Gender Institute promotes research and teaching related to women, gender, and sexuality. We offer grants and awards to UB faculty and students to support scholarship on women and on the intricate connections between gender and other social forces, such as sexuality, race, class, health, age, religion, and place. We convene interdisciplinary networks and organize lectures, workshops, conferences, film screenings, art exhibitions, and community events.

Dedication

Dedicated to advancing women and LGBTQ leadership, vision, and influence, the Gender Institute fosters work spaces in which each participant is stimulated to reach their highest potential and to increase knowledge and justice within the university, within their disciplines, and in society at large.

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COVID-19 and Domestic Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated and heightened social inequities. For women, the pandemic affected workplace equality, economic security, health, and violence in the home. This report focuses on the latter. Dubbed “The Shadow Pandemic” by the United Nations, domestic violence reports have surged around the globe during public health lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. Globally, the United Nations Population Fund estimates that for every three months of COVID-19 lockdowns, an additional 15 million cases of gender-based violence will occur (2). Andrew M. Campbell notes that domestic violence rates are soaring globally amid the pandemic but that “may only represent a ‘tip of the iceberg’ as many victims still find themselves trapped with the perpetrator and unable to report the abuse” (2).

Despite increased reports of domestic violence during COVID-19, it is important to note that the public health crisis did not cause abuse, but rather exacerbated the conditions under which abusers thrive. As Usher et al notes in their paper on family violence during COVID-19, “high levels of fear and uncertainty related to pandemics make them enabling environments for family violence to emerge or worsen” (Usher et al, 1026).

One key strategy for abusing and controlling one’s partner is social isolation so government-mandated stay-at-home orders mirror abusive behavior and prevent people experiencing abuse from accessing their social support systems—family and friends—as well as legal and civil support systems (Usher et al, 1026). Usher et al explain that “abusers may use the restriction requirements to exercise power and control over their partners to further reduce access to services and psychosocial support,” (1028). Dawn Troom of University of California states “though the stay-at-home orders have given abusers more hours in the day and more ammunition for abuse, the situation doesn’t cause the violence. Instead, it aggravates cycles of abuse” (Troom).



What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is characterized by a cycle of abusive behavior in which a person exerts power and control over their partner through social isolation, sexual and physical violence, economic dependence, emotional and verbal abuse, and intimidation, coercion, and threats, according to the Duluth Model of Domestic Violence.

The combination of these abusive strategies varies but most instances of intimate partner violence follow a cycle of “honeymoon phase” where the relationship is good, escalating control, isolation, verbal, and emotional abuse, the “event” or physical abuse, apologies and promises to change, and back to the honeymoon phase (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs).

While we most commonly think of abusers as being heterosexual men who abuse women, it is important to understand that abuse exists in LGBTQIA relationships and that straight men can be abused by their women partners. This report avoids gendered language whenever possible.



A Rock and a Hard Place: Balancing Safety and Risk

Victims of domestic violence have had to negotiate a balancing act of managing their risk of COVID-19 exposure and feeling as though their homes are no longer safe either. According to Usher et al, domestic violence victims “are faced with a choice between exposure to the virus outside the home or escalating violence within the home, as well as increased reliance upon family members who may also perpetrate violence” (1028). The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) asserts that accessing help may be more difficult under Covid because “domestic violence shelters and programs may experience funding cuts right when they need more staff and funding to keep up with the demand for their services” (NNEDV 2021). Further, victims may be hesitant to call police to their homes in order to minimize exposure risk and escalating abuse.

Responding to the Dual Crisis: NY Domestic Violence Task Force



In May 2020, New York created statewide Domestic Violence Task Force overseen by the NYS Council on Women and Girls in order to address “the impact of the pandemic on domestic violence survivors by looking beyond the traditional ways in which services are provided” (NYS Council on Women and Girls, 1). According to the Task Force’s report, the NYS Domestic Violence Hotline saw a 33 percent jump in calls and a 19 percent increase in domestic violence shelter occupancy from April 2019 compared to April 2020. The Task Force worked quickly to convene 27 stakeholder members to make policy recommendations, such as increasing mobile advocacy and culturally competent services. The report was released on May 28, 2020.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence’s 14th Annual Domestic Violence Counts Report for 2019 recorded 1229 hotline calls answered within the 24-hour data collection period (NNEDV 2019). In contrast, for 2020, they recorded 2110 hotline calls, a 71.7 percent increase (NNEDV 2020).

Looking at Erie County

Within this context, we looked at domestic violence in Erie County during the coronavirus pandemic using quantitative data from our community partners at the Erie County Sheriff's Office, Erie County Central Police Services, Haven House, and the Domestic Incident Reports (DIRs) in Erie County for 2019-2020 from the NY Department of Criminal Justice Services (2021 data is not yet available).

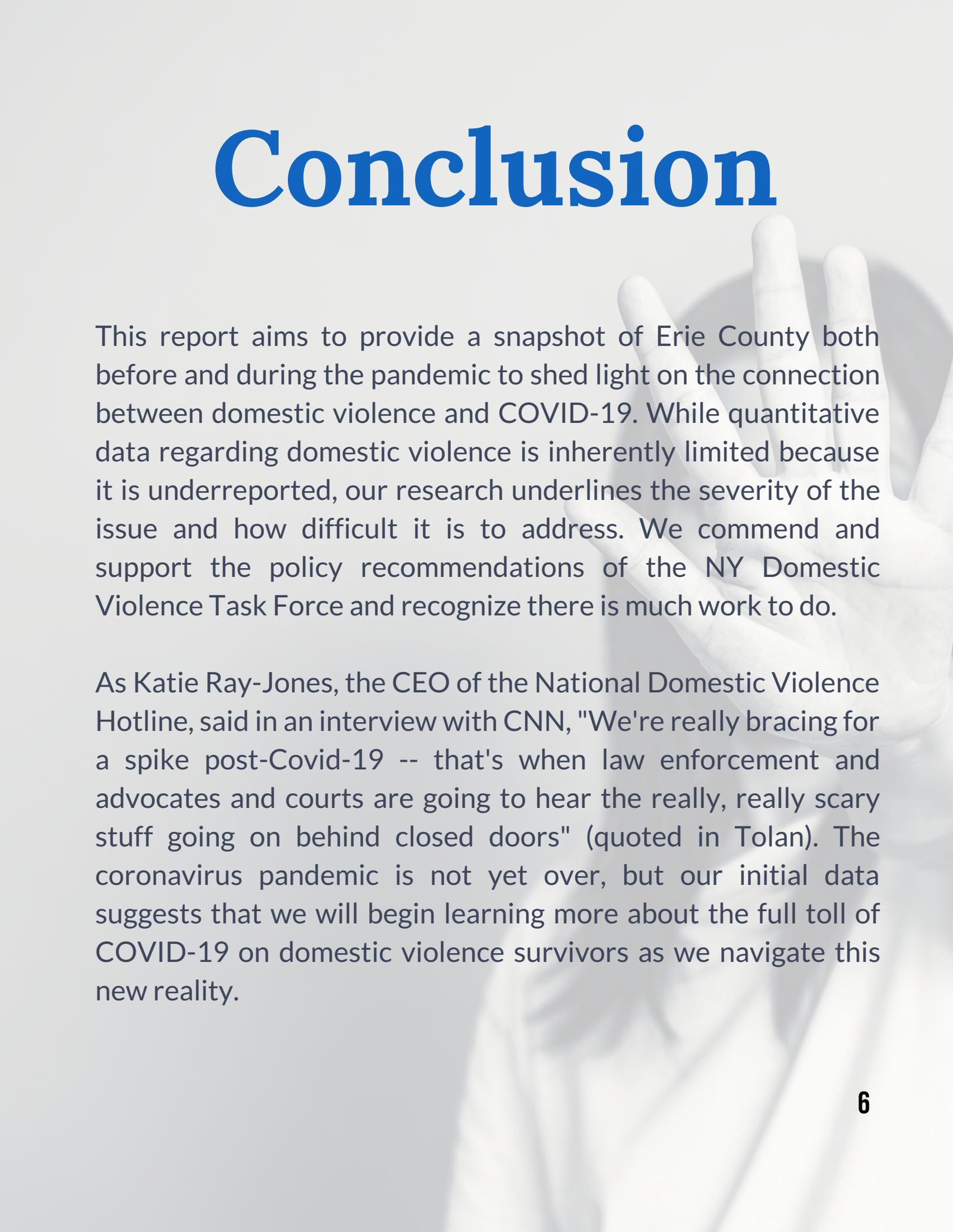
While other areas of the country and state saw steep increases in domestic violence-related calls to both police and service providers, the data that we gathered suggests an overall steady rate from 2019-June 2021. Total domestic violence-related calls to the Erie County Sheriff in 2019 numbered 165 and in 2020 numbered 187, only an additional 17. From January to June 2021, the Sheriff has received 234 such calls, a 29.5 percent increase with half the year remaining.

For Central Police Services, calls related to possible domestic incidents have remained steady, though our partners pointed out that they may receive multiple calls regarding the same incident from different neighbors or may receive calls that were unfounded as domestic violence incidents.

To clarify, we sought the DIRs that law enforcement officers are required by state law to submit to the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). In 2019, Erie County law enforcement filed DIRs related to 4183 incidents and 4073 in 2020, a 2.6 percent decline (DCJS). Again, this is likely related to the hesitation to call police to the home found in other areas of the country.

Haven House, a domestic violence shelter administered by Child and Family Services of Erie County, has seen 842 clients so far up to June, 2021. This represents 69.5 percent of the total clients seen in 2019, suggesting an increase in 2021. Calls to the Haven House have remained commensurate with pre-pandemic levels. While we did reach out to multiple community partners who provide direct services such as advocacy and shelter to domestic violence victims, only Haven House was able to provide the data by the time of publication. We look forward to continuing to work with the other service providers in the future.

Conclusion



This report aims to provide a snapshot of Erie County both before and during the pandemic to shed light on the connection between domestic violence and COVID-19. While quantitative data regarding domestic violence is inherently limited because it is underreported, our research underlines the severity of the issue and how difficult it is to address. We commend and support the policy recommendations of the NY Domestic Violence Task Force and recognize there is much work to do.

As Katie Ray-Jones, the CEO of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, said in an interview with CNN, "We're really bracing for a spike post-Covid-19 -- that's when law enforcement and advocates and courts are going to hear the really, really scary stuff going on behind closed doors" (quoted in Tolan). The coronavirus pandemic is not yet over, but our initial data suggests that we will begin learning more about the full toll of COVID-19 on domestic violence survivors as we navigate this new reality.

Resources

If you or someone you know is facing domestic violence, here are some local and national resources.

Erie County

Erie County Family Justice Center

<https://www.fjcsafe.org/>

716.558.SAFE (7233)

Crisis Services

<http://crisisservices.org/>

716.862.HELP (4357)

Haven House

www.cfsbny.org/programs/haven-house

716.884.6000

New York State

New York State

Domestic Violence Hotline

Call: 800.942.6906

Text: 844.997.2121

NYS Coalition Against Domestic Violence

(NYSCADV)

<https://www.nyscadv.org/>

NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence

<https://opdv.ny.gov/>

National

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1.800.799.SAFE (7233)

National Network to End Domestic Violence

<https://nnedv.org/>

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

<https://ncadv.org/>

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