

The impact of COVID-19 on interpersonal violence victim services: First responders' perceptions

Savannah Redfern, Ava Munzinger-Defrain, Madchen DeFrian, Jennifer Demers

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of sexual and intimate partner violence increased substantially. Victims were at greater risk for negative physical and psychological outcomes due to isolation policies, changes in resource availability, and increased exposure to perpetrators. First responders to interpersonal violence were impacted as their job structures changed, with anecdotal accounts suggesting duties increased, like advertising availability of resources and implementing novel ways for victims to report abuse. Previous research has only examined the impact of COVID-19 on victims and protocol changes without measuring mental health outcomes for first responders. There is consequently a gap in the literature surrounding how the increase in interpersonal violence during COVID-19 impacted first responders. The current study seeks to gather information about first responders' experiences working during COVID-19 and the impact it had on their wellbeing. This study surveyed 117 Kansas first responders (i.e., hospital employees, therapists, social workers, police officers and crisis center employees) who were recruited via email. Participants described how COVID-19 affected their ability to respond to victims, how their job changed, and what additional changes would have made working through the pandemic more effective. Short answer responses were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis and several overarching themes were identified and discussed. Findings demonstrated that the increased stress of trying to stay safe while managing new procedures and decreasing budgets made it more difficult to maintain satisfaction in their careers and that COVID-19 negatively affected the mental health of first responders and the quality and availability of services for victims.

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