

Manipulative tactics rise in domestic violence during Queensland lockdown

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Controlling behaviour, manipulative tactics and more women reporting violence to Queensland specialist domestic and family violence services have been seen during the COVID-19 lockdown, a Monash University study shows.

A study made up of two surveys conducted by the Queensland Domestic Violence Services Network over a 10-day period in April and a two-week period in May showed similarities to findings in Victoria.

However, further concerns were raised by the 56 practitioners responding to Survey One and 117 to Survey Two, with the majority of them working in regional Queensland.

Strangulation, threats to burn down homes, partners and children, pressuring victims for unwanted sexual intimacy, and refusing to allow a partner to go to work were only some of the forms of abuse that Queensland practitioners identified during COVID-19 restrictions.

More than a third of respondents to Survey One said COVID-19 restrictions had led to an escalation of violence for their clients.

Despite the easing of stage one restrictions in Queensland from May 15, 70 per cent of Survey Two respondents said there had been an escalation of violence experienced by women. Eighty-three per cent of practitioners in one survey reported an increase in perpetrator anger/violence allegedly because of reduced income or loss of a job due to COVID-19.

Perpetrators had more time to drink or take drugs because of a reduction of work, 68 per cent of practitioners said.

The second survey found an escalation of controlling behaviour and manipulation, and perpetrators using COVID-19 as a reason for any form of abuse and moving from non-physical to physical forms of abuse.

There were also increases in threats to kill, suicidal ideations, threats to children and more client visits to the emergency department/hospital with injury from violence.

"The themes coming from clients are that there is no escape from the perpetrator," one practitioner said.

"Before, she would at least get some time when he is at work or out. But now what I'm hearing is that he is home all the time, and that means more abuse and no reprieve."

Practitioners also described instances where perpetrators restricted children's contact with their mother, took her extra Centrelink payments and/or monitored her contact with others. One practitioner described a client who had her perpetrator keep her children with him because of COVID-19 and restricted her from contacting her mother.

The perpetrator took her extra COVID-19 Centrelink payments, limiting her and the children's contact with supports, and her job loss led to his monitoring her contact with others.

Dr Naomi Pfitzner, who led the study, said despite services rapidly transitioning for remote delivery, the wellbeing of practitioners working from home should be a priority, moving forward. She said the shortage of safe housing options in Queensland was a concern.

"While the message from governments has been 'stay home, stay safe' our research clearly demonstrates why home is not a safe option for many women and children across Australia," she said.

Dr Pfitzner said the risks of homelessness or remaining in an abusive home were extremely high without access to crisis and long-term accommodation.

"This study shows that COVID-19 has provided perpetrators with new opportunities to exert power and control over women and sadly this often involves weaponising children," she said.

The second survey noted the difficulty of practitioners supporting children experiencing family violence during the pandemic despite being able to provide services remotely.

"COVID-19 has impacted how I can successfully deliver child support services due to 'approved school programs' (e.g. I can't use Zoom), and organising a private room and supervision for children while I deliver a phone counselling session," a practitioner said.

The report said this highlighted a potentially crucial gap in service delivery, and support for children and young people experiencing family violence during the pandemic.

The invisibility of children during the lockdown means resources need to be directed at ensuring engagement with services and substantive outreach to at-risk cohorts as restrictions eased.

It will be critical for services and governments to minimise sector burn-out, fatigue and high staff turnover.

The report questions policing of domestic family violence during restrictions but there is a critical need to understand how justice system responses have been affected by the pandemic.