



# L&RS Note

## Domestic violence and COVID-19 in Ireland

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### Abstract

Research shows that around 15% of women and 6% of men in Ireland have experienced severe domestic violence from a partner and that most women who were intentionally killed in Ireland were killed by a current or former intimate partner. Emerging evidence suggests that globally and in Ireland domestic violence has risen since the outbreak of COVID-19. This L&RS Note reviews the evidence to support this, explores some possible explanations for it and summarises key national and international policy responses.

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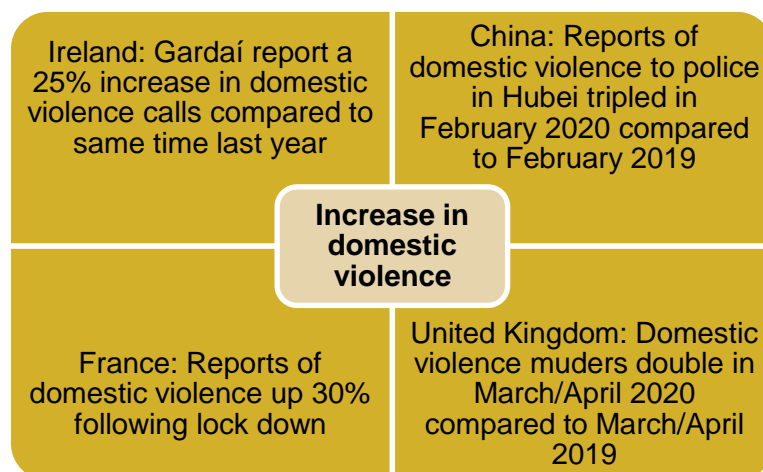
## Key messages from this L&RS Note

- Evidence suggests that globally and in Ireland domestic violence has risen since the outbreak of COVID-19.
- Studies show that emergency situations, such as pandemics, exacerbate evidenced risk factors for domestic violence.
- Leading international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO) have recommended policy measures to address the increase in domestic violence.
- Several policy measures have been introduced in Ireland to support victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, but experts warn that important gaps still remain.

## Global increase in domestic violence

On April 6, 2020 United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for measures to address a “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” linked to lockdowns imposed by governments responding to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Reports from police and non-governmental organisations working on domestic violence across the globe suggest that domestic violence is rising in the wake of COVID-19. In Ireland, leading organisations working on domestic violence such as Women’s Aid report an increase in the number of calls to their helplines<sup>2</sup> and the Gardaí reported a 25% increase in domestic violence calls in April/May 2020 compared to April/May 2019<sup>3</sup>. This mirrors patterns found elsewhere around the world (see Figure 1 for examples).

**Figure 1: Increase in domestic violence since COVID-19 outbreak**



Source: UN Women<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UN News, *UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge’*, April 6, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052> (Accessed April 6, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Reported in The Times, *Coronavirus: domestic abuse reports rise after people are forced to stay home*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-domestic-abuse-reports-rise-after-people-are-forced-to-stay-home-lgz95d9k3> (Accessed April 3, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Reported in The Irish Examiner, *Increase in domestic abuse incidents linked to Covid-19 lockdown*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/increase-in-domestic-abuse-incidents-linked-to-covid-19-lockdown-1002718.html> (Accessed June 1, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> UN Women, *COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls*. (2020).

## What is causing this rise in domestic violence?

While there is no precedent for the COVID-19 crisis, research on other crises such as natural disasters and wars can inform us. This research shows that these crises often increase risk factors for domestic violence such as household stress and unemployment, while at the same time decreasing the level of support available to victims. For instance, in the aftermath of the eruption of Mount St. Helens in Othello, Washington reports of alcohol abuse, family stress and relationship conflict - all known risk factors for domestic violence - increased, as did reports of domestic violence (by 46%)<sup>5</sup>. For COVID-19, experts on domestic violence warn that government-imposed measures such as social-distancing, stay-at-home and restricted travel although necessary to suppress the spread of COVID-19 have the unintended, negative consequence<sup>6</sup> of compounding several of the known risk factors for domestic violence (Box 1)<sup>7</sup>.

### Box 1: Risk factors for domestic violence

- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Relationship conflict
- Alcohol use/abuse
- A family history of violence
- Social norms that accept violence
- Social isolation
- Inadequate victim care
- Lack of information
- Gender inequality

Source: OECD

For example, the closure of hotels, entertainment venues and retail units (among others) has left hundreds of thousands of people unemployed in Ireland<sup>8</sup>, and research consistently links increases in unemployment to increases in domestic violence<sup>9</sup>. Survey studies report that stay-at-home measures have driven higher levels of alcohol consumption<sup>10</sup>, and alcohol use/abuse has long been acknowledged as one of the strongest predictors of physical domestic violence<sup>11</sup>. These are just two of the ways in the COVID-19 pandemic stands to exacerbate risk factors for domestic violence, with other possibilities considered in Figure 1 below. Added to this, experts report that victims of domestic violence have diminished access to help and support (e.g. from friends, families, colleagues, doctors, social workers and women's/men's refuges) as a result of stay-at-home and social distancing measures, and that these same measures increase the level of control

<sup>5</sup> Adams, Paul R., and Gerald R. Adams. "Mount Saint Helens's ashfall: Evidence for a disaster stress reaction." *American Psychologist* 39, no. 3 (1984): 252.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, Andrew M. "An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives." *Forensic Science International: Reports* (2020): 100089.

<sup>7</sup> Heise, Lori L. "What works to prevent partner violence: an evidence overview." *OECD* (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Irish economy faces largest recession in history as lockdown takes its toll, May 28, 2020, <https://www.esri.ie/news/irish-economy-faces-largest-recession-in-history-as-lockdown-takes-its-toll> (Accessed June 2, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Heise, Lori L. "Violence against women: An integrated, ecological framework." *Violence against women* 4, no. 3 (1998): 262-290.

<sup>10</sup> The Journal, Over half of Irish people say they drink alcohol more frequently since Covid-19 restrictions brought in, June 3, 2020, <https://www.thejournal.ie/global-drug-survey-irish-people-use-of-drugs-and-alcohol-during-pandemic-5113142-Jun2020/> (Accessed June 3, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Jeyaseelan et al. "World studies of abuse in the family environment—risk factors for physical intimate partner violence." *Injury control and safety promotion* 11, no. 2 (2004): 117-124.

of perpetrators of domestic violence over victims<sup>12</sup>. This can create a “perfect storm” to trigger an unprecedented wave of domestic violence<sup>13</sup>.

**Figure 1: Evidenced risk factors for domestic violence (L) and COVID-19 (R)**



Source: Oireachtas L&RS<sup>14</sup>

## What is being done to address this increase in domestic violence and support victims in a COVID-19 environment?

Box 2 summarises some of the recommended measures to address this apparent increase in domestic violence according to the United Nations<sup>15</sup> and World Health Organization<sup>16</sup>. These recommendations have been incorporated to varying degrees in most European countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic. To give some examples of measures from across Europe, governments in Italy and France have supported the development of new ways for victims of domestic violence to safely seek support without alerting their abusers, including by supporting the development of phone apps which allow victims to seek help without having to make phone calls<sup>17</sup>. In France and

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, Andrew M. "An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives." *Forensic Science International: Reports* (2020): 100089

<sup>13</sup> Usher et al. "Family violence and COVID-19: Increased vulnerability and reduced options for support." *International journal of mental health nursing* (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2020, L&RS Note: Anticipating the gendered impacts of COVID-19.

<sup>15</sup> UN News, UN chief calls for domestic violence 'ceasefire' amid 'horrifying global surge'.

<sup>16</sup> World Health Organization. *COVID-19 and violence against women: what the health sector/system can do*, 7 April 2020. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331699/WHO-SRH-20.04-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Accessed June 3, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> See NBC News, *European countries develop new ways to tackle domestic violence during coronavirus lockdowns*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/european-countries-develop-new-ways->

certain municipalities in Germany empty hotel rooms have been repurposed to provide shelter for victims of domestic violence outside of refuges (which are often poorly set-up for social distancing and at capacity)<sup>18</sup>. In France and the United Kingdom, “safe spaces” have been set up in pharmacies and well-known retail units where victims of domestic violence can contact services and seek support<sup>19</sup>. Finally, several governments have significantly increased financial support to civil society organisations working on domestic violence, including the French government which has committed an additional one million euro to help domestic violence organisations respond to the increased demand for their services<sup>20</sup>.

#### Box 1: Recommended domestic violence reduction strategies

- Increase investment in online services and civil society organizations
- Make sure judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers
- Set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and groceries
- Make sure health facilities provide information about domestic violence services
- Healthcare workers trained to identify domestic violence and refer victims to appropriate services
- Declare shelters as essential services,
- Create safe ways for women to seek support, without alerting their abusers,
- Avoid releasing prisoners convicted of violence against women in any form,
- Scale up public awareness campaigns, particularly those targeted at men and boys

Source: UN, WHO

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[tackle-domestic-violence-during-coronavirus-n1174301](#) (Accessed April 3, 2020) and The Guardian, 'This is so wrong': Hollande highlights domestic violence in French lockdown, May 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/09/france-hollande-french-president-app-anti-domestic-violence> (Accessed, May 10, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> World Economic Forum, *France offers hotel rooms to domestic abuse victims as cases jump during lockdown*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/france-domestic-abuse-coronavirus-covid19-lockdown-hotels> (Accessed April 6, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> NBC News, *European countries develop new ways to tackle domestic violence during coronavirus lockdowns* and Independent, *Which shops are offering safe spaces to victims of domestic abuse?*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/safe-space-domestic-abuse-victim-women-boots-morrisons-superdrug-pharmacies-a9523881.html> (Accessed May 20, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> World Economic Forum, *France offers hotel rooms to domestic abuse victims as cases jump during lockdown*.

Turning our attention to the Irish context, many of the main measures which have been introduced to support victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic are summarised in Box 3<sup>21</sup>. These include a national public awareness campaign, additional funding for domestic violence support services, measures to support access to legal services for victims of domestic violence, and a proactive police operation to reach out to individuals who have previously reported domestic violence. While these recommendations have been welcomed by the leading organisations and experts working on domestic violence, they warn that they are not enough to adequately address the increased prevalence of domestic violence and increased demand for services. The main issue raised here has been a lack of adequate additional funding for domestic violence organisations, where organisations report that €160,000 is not enough to meet the extra pressures placed on their resources<sup>22</sup>. The shortage of safe emergency accommodation to replace communal refuges has also been raised as an issue<sup>23</sup>, with organisations urging the government to (among other solutions) provide emergency rent supplements for victims of domestic violence in need of urgent relocation<sup>24</sup>. The need for additional supports for victims of domestic violence to access legal support and the courts has also been raised as an issue, as has the lack of adequate protocols for the safe placement of children should their mother become ill. These are some of the critical areas which may need to be addressed.

### Box 3: Measures in Ireland

- 'Still here' awareness campaign
- Extra €160,000 for domestic violence orgs.
- An Garda Síochána has established 'Operation Faoisimh' to support victims of domestic violence
- Courts Service prioritising domestic violence and childcare cases
- The Legal Aid Board prioritising domestic violence and childcare cases
- Legal Aid board has set up a helpline to assist victims of domestic violence

Source: Department of Justice, Merrion Street

<sup>21</sup> Source Department of Justice and Equality, *Major new TV, Radio and Social Media Campaign reaching out to Victims of Domestic Abuse begins today*, April 15, 2020, <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR20000055> (Accessed April 15, 2020) and Merrion Street, *Ministers Flanagan and Stanton announce campaign to reassure victims of domestic abuse that support is still available despite COVID-19*, April 10, 2020, [https://merrionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/Releases/Ministers\\_Flanagan\\_and\\_Stanton\\_announce\\_campaign\\_to\\_reassure\\_victims\\_of\\_domestic\\_abuse\\_that\\_support\\_is\\_still\\_available\\_despite\\_COVID-19.html](https://merrionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/Releases/Ministers_Flanagan_and_Stanton_announce_campaign_to_reassure_victims_of_domestic_abuse_that_support_is_still_available_despite_COVID-19.html) (Accessed April 10, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Safe Ireland, *Safe Ireland 2020 Programme for Government Submission – Global Pandemic, National Epidemic – Working to End Domestic Abuse & Coercive Control*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/> (Accessed April 11, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> The Irish Times, *Domestic violence victims lose out on housing due to county rules*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/domestic-violence-victims-lose-out-on-housing-due-to-county-rules-1.3068882> (Accessed June 3, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> The Irish Times, *Domestic violence and COVID-19*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/domestic-violence-and-covid-19-1.4252680> (Accessed June 3, 2020).



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