



Domestic Violence & COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Americans are currently under stay-at-home orders. But home is not a safe place for everyone — especially when guns and domestic violence are involved. For individuals who are quarantined with domestic abusers, guns in the home can result in an increase in injuries and fatalities. While social distancing and self-isolating are necessary to mitigate the spread of this virus, we must keep in mind how these measures will affect Americans living with abusers.

The Facts:

- Nearly half of all women killed in the U.S. are murdered by a current or former intimate partner.¹
- There are about 4.5 million women in America who have been threatened with a gun and nearly 1 million women who have been shot or shot at by an intimate partner.²
- Over half of all intimate partner homicides are committed with guns.³
- A woman is five times more likely to be murdered when her abuser has access to a gun.⁴

The Laws:

Many states prohibit purchase and/or possession of firearms by:

- Persons convicted of misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence⁵; and
- Persons subject to domestic violence protective orders.⁶

Many, but not all, states also require or authorize judges to require persons subject to domestic violence protective orders to remove firearms from their possession for the duration of the order.⁷

Guns, Domestic Violence, and COVID-19

Firearms Sales

The evidence clearly shows that guns and domestic violence are a lethal combination. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to exacerbate this problem, as more people are stuck at home with abusive partners, and there are reports of increased firearm sales. As of May 11, 2020, at least 40 states have allowed gun stores to remain open during the pandemic, and a number of states have gone so far as to deem them “essential businesses”.⁸ As a result, estimates show that background checks related to gun sales were up in both March and April of 2020 compared to March and April of 2019. There was a reported 85.3% increase in background checks in March 2020 and a 71.3% increase in April 2020, compared to March 2019 and April 2019, respectively.^{9,10} There are reports that first-time gun owners comprised many of these sales.¹¹



Economic Factors

Data released in May 2020 shows that the U.S. unemployment rate has reached nearly 15% — and it will likely increase as the pandemic continues to cripple businesses across the country.¹² Regardless of employment status, many Americans are experiencing economic anxiety and stress related to the pandemic. Overall economic instability, including unemployment and economic hardship, is a risk factor for domestic violence.^{13,14} Research shows that intimate partner violence is more common in households experiencing significant financial stress.¹⁵ A study conducted after the Great Recession found that there was an association between unemployment levels, economic strain, and abusive behavior.¹⁶

Domestic Violence Reports

While we won't know the true impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence injuries and fatalities for quite some time, we have reason to believe the data will be incredibly troubling. It is well established that, during times of national crisis, domestic violence surges.¹⁷ Data shows that some cities are experiencing decreases in reports of domestic violence, but this is likely due to the fact that victims and survivors have fewer places to go now that they are isolated at home with their abusers.^{18,19} For example, the San Diego Police Department and the San Diego Sheriff's Department both reported decreases in domestic violence calls after Governor Newsom issued a stay-at-home-order, but direct service providers in the San Diego region have seen an increase in the severity and volume of domestic violence calls.²⁰ Indeed, some states are already reporting an increase in domestic violence fatalities since stay-at-home orders have been enacted.²¹

We recommend the following for preventing domestic violence injuries and fatalities:

Background Checks

Universal background checks are the foundation upon which all other gun violence prevention policies are built. Background checks should be required on every gun sale and transfer in America, including private and online sales, with certain exceptions, such as for temporary transfers to prevent imminent death or self-harm.

Default Proceed

The majority of federal gun background checks are done instantly. However, if the FBI cannot immediately tell if a potential gun buyer is prohibited, the FBI has three business days to complete the background check. If the firearm dealer does not hear from the FBI within those days, the dealer can sell the gun to the buyer. This is called a “default proceed” sale. Congress should close this loophole and require that a gun background check must be completed before a firearm sale can proceed to ensure that prohibited persons, such as those convicted of misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence, may not purchase a firearm.



Emergency Funding to Service Providers and Economic Support for Survivors

Domestic violence hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, and other direct service providers offer lifesaving tools, support, and shelter to victims of domestic violence. Congress should provide funding for these critical programs. Additionally, Congress should address the unique barriers survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence face in gaining and maintaining employment. For complete recommendations for funding for service providers and economic support, please see the [letter](#) sent to Congress by domestic violence prevention organizations and other organizations committed to reducing domestic violence regarding the COVID-19 Phase Four Response Package.²²

Emergency Funding to Courts Issuing Domestic Violence Protective Orders

Domestic violence protective orders are a critical tool for addressing domestic violence and firearms. Courts must remain open for the issuance of such orders, and when the law allows, such orders should include an order to surrender firearms. Where possible, courts should offer remote hearings for protective orders (i.e. teleconferencing). Congress should provide funding to ensure courts may provide these important resources.

Guidance for Law Enforcement

Law enforcement play a critical role in addressing domestic violence. The Attorney General, in consultation with domestic violence prevention and law enforcement stakeholders, should develop guidance on promising practices and resources that law enforcement agencies can adopt to effectively address domestic violence, including firearm removal, while also ensuring the safety of law enforcement officers, their families, survivors of domestic violence and their families and preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Bottom Line

This time of uncertainty is certainly not business as usual for many Americans. However, courts, law enforcement, hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, and other direct service providers must be able to continue to address domestic violence. A failure to respond in a timely manner to domestic violence incidents will result in an increase in domestic violence injuries and deaths. It is more important than ever that we educate ourselves and others about the role of firearms in a domestic violence situation and dissuade the purchase of firearms during these uncertain times.

Our resources:

For more information on domestic violence and firearms laws, visit the [Consortium report](#) on firearm removal in cases of domestic violence, and [DisarmDV.org](#).



Additional Resources:

[The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)'s message about staying safe during COVID-19.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available 24/7.

- Call 1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-799-7233 for TTY;
- Visit www.thehotline.org; or
- Text LOVEIS to 22522

[The Trace](#)'s article on the surge in gun sales and the impact on domestic violence.

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)'s resources on COVID-19.

[WomensLaw.org](#)'s FAQ Involving Courts & COVID-19

¹ Websdale N, Ferraro K, & Barger SD. (2019). [The domestic violence fatality review clearinghouse: introduction to a new National Data System with a focus on firearms](#). *Injury Epidemiology*.

² Sorenson SB, & Schut RA. (2018). [Nonfatal Gun Use in Intimate Partner Violence: A Systematic Review of the Literature](#). *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*.

³ Zeoli AM. (2018). [Multiple Victim Homicides, Mass Murders, and Homicide Suicides as Domestic Violence Events](#). *Battered Women's Justice Project*.

⁴ Campbell JC, Webster D, Koziol-McLain J, Block C, Campbell D, Curry MA... & Laughon K. (2003). [Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: results from a multisite case control study](#). *American Journal of Public Health*.

⁵ See e.g., Ala. Code § 13A-11-72(a).

⁶ See e.g., Wis. Stat. Ann. §§ 941.29(1m)(f).; 813.128(3g).

⁷ See e.g., Cal. Fam. Code § 6218.

⁸ Nass D. (2020). [How Coronavirus Shutdowns Are Affecting Gun Stores in Each State](#). *The Trace*.

⁹ Small Arms Analytics. (2020). [U.S. firearm sales: March 2020 unit sales show anticipated covid-19 related boom](#).

¹⁰ Small Arms Analytics. (2020). [U.S. firearms sales: April 2020 unit sales continue drastic covid-19-related increase](#).

¹¹ Beckett L. (2020). [Americans purchasing record-breaking numbers of guns amid coronavirus](#). *The Guardian*.

¹² Lewis B, & Hsu T. (2020). [The Collateral Damage of the Coronavirus](#). *New York Times*.

¹³ Mithani J. (2020). [What We Know About Crises And Domestic Violence — And What That Could Mean For COVID-19](#). *Five-Thirty-Eight*.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). [Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration](#).

¹⁵ Mithani J. (2020). [What We Know About Crises And Domestic Violence — And What That Could Mean For COVID-19](#). *Five-Thirty-Eight*.

¹⁶ Schneider D, Harknett K, & McLanahan S. (2016). [Intimate Partner Violence in the Great Recession](#). *Demography*.

¹⁷ Stanley M. (2020). [Why the Increase in Domestic Violence During COVID-19?](#) *Psychology Today*.

¹⁸ Li W, & Schwartzapfel B. (2020). [Is Domestic Violence Rising During the Coronavirus Shutdown? Here's What the Data Shows](#). *The Marshall Project*.

¹⁹ Srikrishnan M. (2020). [The Dark Explanations Behind the Drop in Domestic Violence Calls](#). *Voices of San Diego*.

²⁰ Srikrishnan M. (2020). [The Dark Explanations Behind the Drop in Domestic Violence Calls](#). *Voices of San Diego*.

²¹ Knight C, & Saker A. (2020). [6 local women have been fatally shot during the stay-at-home order – more than all of 2019](#). *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

²² (2020). [Requests for COVID-19 Phase Four Response Package](#).