

CANADA

# Forced to stay home with their abusers, Canadian victims of domestic violence must ‘choose between two pandemics’

By **Wendy Gillis** Staff Reporter

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There has been one death and nine [COVID-19](#) cases at Six Nations of the Grand River territory. But just like employees at women’s shelters across Canada, the staff [Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services](#) are coming in each day despite the risks, because they know there’s more than one public health problem impacting their community right now.

The employee vehicles parked outside Ganohkwasra now serve as beacons for anyone needing help, said Sandra Montour, executive director of Ohsweken-based support centre.

“They can go by, and they see and know we’re here,” she said. “That’s very important to us as an organization, so that our community knows we can be counted upon and relied upon during this crisis.”

Ganohkwasra saw its call volume nearly double last month, to 90 from an average of 50. Traffic to [ShelterSafe.ca](#) — a national database run by Women’s Shelter Canada — spiked too, double from March 2019. The [Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses](#) (OAITH), a network of more than 70 shelters, has seen an increase in demand for intake at 20 per cent of its sites, and a significant jump in calls for services.

A nationwide [survey released by Statistics Canada](#) last week showed one in 10 women was “very or extremely concerned” about the possibility of violence inside the home.

“Women are certainly trying to manage the best way they can, because they are having to choose between gender-based violence in the home, and then the fear of COVID-19,” Marlene Ham, executive director of OAITH, said of victims.

“They are having to choose between two pandemics.”

After people across the country were asked to stay home to help slow the spread of COVID-19, [domestic violence experts](#) predicted intimate partner or family violence would increase, a phenomenon seen in countries that were hit by the virus weeks earlier including France and China. Last week, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [called for measures](#) to reduce the “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” linked to COVID-19 lockdowns.

One month into nationwide “stay at home” measures, shelter workers and experts say there is little doubt Canadians are at a greater risk of intimate partner or family violence now, particularly in the face of other stresses, such as job loss, financial hardship and greater alcohol consumption.

Data obtained from more than a dozen police services across Canada tell differing stories about the impact of the quarantine measures are having on domestic violence so far; longer-term data will be necessary to capture how COVID-19 has changed these calls.

Services in York Region, Waterloo Region, Vancouver, and Halifax are all reporting moderate increases in domestic violence-related calls compared either to the same four-week period in 2019, or the four-week period immediately before — although, in some cases, the increase is only a few calls. In the past four weeks, the Ontario Provincial Police reported a 21 per cent increase in domestic disturbance incidents, which include intimate partner violence, sexual assault, emotional, child and elder abuse, up to 2,352 from 1,944 in the previous four weeks.

Some forces, including in Toronto, Peel Region, Edmonton, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg have seen either no change or inconsistent patterns within the last month.

“Something to keep in mind is that Thunder Bay already has a high rate of domestic violence and the fact that these calls are not going down, while many other call types are seeing reductions during this pandemic, is concerning,” said Thunder Bay police spokesperson Scott Paradis.

Other police forces, meanwhile, have seen a moderate dip in calls compared to the previous four-week period or the same time frame last year, including in Durham Region, London, and Halton Region.

But intimate partner experts and police services themselves say this data falls far short of capturing the complete picture. The central problem is that many instances of intimate partner or family violence go unreported at the best of times, let alone during a pandemic when victims may be confined to their homes with their abusers.

Far from a signal that violence has stopped, a drop in police calls “could very well be that people feel that they can’t reach out for help,” said Andrea Gunraj, vice-president of public engagement at the Canadian Women’s Foundation, which this week launched a campaign called [Signal For Help](#) to help disseminate a hand signal to silently indicate, on a video call, that there’s violence at home.

“The true vulnerability is not reflected right now in what we’re seeing a month into the pandemic,” Gunraj said.

Kaitlin Geiger-Bardswich, a manager with Women’s Shelters Canada, said her organization is seeing two extremes. In some shelters, demand has “exponentially increased,” forcing staff to house victims and children in hotels and university dorms — a measure already taking place to enforce social distancing.

This is putting added stress on many shelters that already had stretched resources and limited space well before the pandemic struck, several shelter workers said.

But the crisis lines for other shelters and services have gone “really quiet — and that’s really concerning,” Geiger-Bardswich said.

She said she is hearing anecdotally that the severity of some cases is rising — where there were once threats of abuse, there’s now violence — and more reports of strangulation, specifically.

Some border closures meant to slow the spread of the virus have also caused problems, Geiger-Bardswich said. In one case, said, a woman fleeing violence and heading towards her mother’s house was turned away from the Alberta-North West Territories border and told to go to a shelter in Alberta.

Another reason calls to police may be down is because abusers are less likely to be jailed if arrested over efforts to reduce the spread of amid COVID-19 within the prison population, said Jane Scheel, executive director of the Simcoe-based Haldimand and Norfolk Women’s Services.

“A woman who has lived in an abusive relationship for a time becomes very skilled at knowing how to keep herself safe,” said Scheel. “I feel like police interventions at this point, with no consequence to the perpetrator, is a scary thing for women.”

But once the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, Scheel said, she predicts the “flood gates” of reports will open.

Another concern for survivors of violence is that their incarcerated abuser may be let out of jail on COVID-19 early release. Karrie Lynn Dymond, who lives in Durham region, only found out Thursday that her abuser was still in jail; in the meantime, she’d packed a bag and made a plan to move across the country and stay with a friend.

“If he’s out, I’m getting in my car and I’m leaving,” she said. “And that was the plan.”

Dymond, who runs a domestic abuse support group called [Keep Your Hands 2 Yourself](#), is relieved knowing her ex-partner is still in jail but she knows others are still fearfully asking about their own abuser’s status.

The province has said that only non-violent inmates who are deemed lower-risk and are already near the end of their sentence are eligible for early release. Brian Gray, a spokesperson for Ontario’s Ministry of the Attorney General, said those being considered for early release “are being carefully assessed to ensure they are a low risk to reoffend.”

Gray also noted that victims who are registered with the province’s Victim Notification System will be informed when a relevant offender is released. Victims wanting inquire about the status of an offender can also contact the province’s Victim Notification System for more information.

Anick Charette, a spokesperson for the Correctional Service of Canada, said in a statement Monday that victims will continue to be notified of decisions made about an offender that harmed them. CSC is required to “integrate any victim concerns into decision making in order to protect the victim,” Charette said.

“We are working closely with the Parole Board of Canada with respect to the safe release of offenders into the community. We are currently conducting an analysis of the offender population to be in a position to make evidence-based recommendations,” Charette said.

The Ontario government has provided a \$2.7 million emergency payment to support services for victims of domestic violence and other violent crimes during COVID-19, Gray said. The federal government has also committed to spend \$40 million on women’s shelters and sexual assault centres across Canada.

Dymond, alongside all the experts interviewed for this story, stressed the importance of friends, family members and neighbours carefully providing support for a victim who may be stuck at home with an abuser. It’s not a time to “mind your own business,” as Dymond said she was raised to do.

“I think it’s super important that everybody in this quarantine starts paying attention to what’s happening right there in their neighborhoods,” she said.

### **Are you a victim of domestic violence? Here’s how to get help:**

Since the pandemic began, it has become increasingly difficult to speak with people who may be living with their abusers — but front-line workers are being creative.

Conversations with an abused person begin with safety planning, said Pamela Cross, the legal director of Luke’s Place. Part of that involves finding out if the person has privacy from her abuser and if the device she is using — whether a laptop or phone — is private and password-protected. A worker will explain how to delete messages, records of phone calls and browser histories. The conversation might happen by phone, by Zoom or by chat — whatever and whenever works best for her.

If you are a victim of abuse, Luke’s Place publishes [a series of safety planning tips on its website](#).

If you’re a family member, neighbour or friend checking in on someone you love, it is important to first make sure that the person can communicate safely through that channel, whether by email, text or phone. Cross said it is important to keep in contact with someone experiencing abuse and, where possible, set up socially-distanced visits or video calls.

The Canadian Women’s Foundation is [sharing a hand signal](#) — point your palm to the camera with the thumb tucked, then close your fingers over your thumb — that when used on a video call, indicates a need for help.

Neighbours are especially important now, Cross said, and can start by having a friendly, socially-distanced chat with each other to build connections. One way to help is by collecting information and resources to share later when it is safe to do so.

Cross said that police are continuing to respond to domestic violence calls and police stations are available for walk-ins for domestic violence victims.

Free legal advice with no financial eligibility requirement is available through Legal Aid Ontario and a new emergency family law referral line. Free legal advice from Legal Aid Ontario is available at 1-800-668-8258.

The family law referral line is available for half-an-hour of advice and referrals to other services at 1-800-268-7568.

Luke’s Place offers a virtual legal clinic for women experiencing intimate partner violence —an expansion of a service already offered to women in rural areas. This can be accessed by contacting the local women’s shelter at [ShelterSafe.ca](#).

Family Court Support workers continue to offer help to domestic violence victims going through the family court process. More information about that can be found through the Victim Support Line toll-free at 1-888-579-2888, or 416-314-2447, and [online](#).

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*With files from Alyshah Hasham*



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