



Pandemic Linked to Surge in Domestic Violence, Suicide

This article is from [ChurchLeaders.com](https://www.churchleaders.com) by Jessica Mouser.

Requiring people to shelter at home might be a necessary measure in order to combat the spread of COVID-19, but a side effect for many is that it increases the danger they are in. Across the world and in the U.S., the *coronavirus* and the ensuing social isolation is making it more likely that people will experience a greater strain on their mental health, leading in some unfortunate cases to suicide and in others to domestic violence.



"We are seeing an increase in the number of survivors reaching out who are concerned with COVID-19," says Katie Ray-Jones, the CEO of the National Domestic Violence Hotline. She told CNN that those reaching out are describing how "their abusive partner is leveraging COVID-19 to further isolate, coerce, or increase fear in the relationship."

In addition to the potential for domestic violence, parents and church leaders should also be aware of how social isolation can increase anxiety and depression, especially among youth. In a recent interview on the ChurchLeaders podcast, Dr. Kara Powell of the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) warned that our present circumstances make us ripe for a spike in teen suicide. *"Yesterday I heard more about the suicide of young people and had more questions about it than literally any other day of my life,"* she said.

Social Isolation, Domestic Violence, and Suicide

"This is an anxious season," said Powell, noting that *"during a more normal time"* an estimated one out of three people will develop an anxiety disorder.





But now, many people are dealing with some significant stressors, including fears about their own health and the health of their loved ones, losing their jobs, being unable to pay their bills, and being cut off from their communities. As a result, some will experience an increase in depression and suicidal ideation. Another result is that those who have power will take out their stress by abusing the people who live with them. The data is in fact showing a connection between the pandemic and a surge in domestic violence.

The New York Times reports that domestic violence is rising around the world, with increases reported in China, Italy, and France. VOA News reports that during the first week of its lockdown, South Africa recorded 90,000 incidents of domestic violence against women. Turkey has seen an increase in the number of women killed in the country following its lockdown on March 11, and Australia reports that online searches for help because of domestic violence have risen by 75 percent. Numerous states in the U.S. are reporting a rise in domestic violence, including Oklahoma, Hawaii, Tennessee, and Texas. The Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance says that calls to hotlines increased by 76 percent throughout the state during the month of March.

If someone is a victim of domestic abuse, going to work or school provides time away from the abuser. Another benefit, says ERLC's Chelsea Patterson Sobolik, is that teachers provide an extra set of eyes and therefore potential help for children experiencing abuse. But with people being required to shelter at home in social isolation, those outlets have disappeared.

The tendency toward suicidal ideation seems to be increasing as well. Los Angeles has reported 75 times the number of suicide-related calls in March compared to February. A man in Manhattan hung himself after he found out he tested positive for the virus, and a 19-year-old girl in the U.K. committed suicide because she could not deal with "her world closing in, plans being canceled, and being stuck inside." There was a significant increase in calls to a suicide helpline in Boston recently, and other states reporting similar spikes include Idaho, Oregon, and North Dakota.



Clinical health psychologist Dr. Lindsay Bira says, "We have a lot of social isolation and a huge disruption of our norm. People are having mental health symptoms, a lot. If you are human and alive you will have symptoms. It just depends on the range and what kind." Regarding the strain on teenagers specifically, Sacramento City Councilwoman Angelique Ashby observed, "Being a teenager is hard in an ideal situation. Our kids have been out of school for a month now and for a teenager, a month is a long time."





Practical Steps for Helping People Who Are in Social Isolation

Says Sobolik, *"Domestically and abroad, vulnerable children are suffering the impacts of the coronavirus, and Christians must be ready to stand in the gap for them."* Christians, in fact, should be ready to defend not only children but any person vulnerable to violence or a mental health crisis due to social isolation.

To help with basic care during the pandemic, some pastors have divided their congregations into small groups and assigned each group to an elder, who then checks in with the families on his list. This is all the more important if leaders have any suspicion that their families could be dealing with domestic violence or mental health challenges.

Laypeople can help by paying attention to what is happening in their neighbors' homes. Sandra Nevarez García, executive director at the Center Against Sexual and Family Violence, says, *"It's about making sure that we're keeping our eyes and ears open for sounds that you might be hearing coming from your neighbor's house or checking in on that family member that you know is not in a healthy relationship and making sure that they're okay."*

This article from the National Domestic Violence hotline has specific advice regarding steps victims of abuse can take to stay safe during the pandemic. This resource is available to help people find local domestic violence shelters. There is also the option of calling 911 or the National Domestic Violence hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

As far as protecting people from committing suicide, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline is 1-800-273-8255. The National Institute of Mental Health has this advice about what to do if you suspect someone you know might be suicidal.

The Fuller Youth Institute has a number of resources for how parents can help their children cope with the challenges arising from the pandemic. In her interview with ChurchLeaders, Dr. Kara Powell emphasized the importance of communicating well with kids about their mental health and what they are hearing about suicide. This article from FYI also has practical strategies for helping young people deal with anxiety.

Sobolik notes that another way church members can help people in crisis is by giving to nonprofits that serve the vulnerable. Like many of us, these organizations are financially strained because of the pandemic. And of course, we can pray. Says Sobolik, *"May we pour out our time, talent, and treasure for the good of others and the glory of God."*

