

Intimate Partner Violence during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Indsigt

Survey in brief

When, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Denmark's prime minister announced a lockdown of Danish society on 11 March 2020, multiple organisations in Denmark involved with intimate partner violence pointed out and warned that the new situation could cause intimate partner violence to escalate and make it more difficult for victims to reach out for help.

In this memorandum, we chart out how the comprehensive lockdown of Denmark during the COVID-19 lockdown affected the nature of intimate partner violence and the possibilities of victims and perpetrators of violence and their children to seek and get help. In addition, we chart the lessons learnt by specialised organisations and individual authorities in how to provide assistance to target groups during the lockdown.

Based on this charting process, we developed a number of recommendations targeting decision-makers as well as professionals and managers in the specialised organisations and relevant authorities.

The recommendations can be used to determine how we, as a society, can optimise our actions in this area at present, and what we can do if a similar situation arises in the future.

The analysis is based on interviews with 32 specialists from 25 actions taken by authorities and crisis shelters and in the form of specialised outpatient counselling and treatment services. The interviews are supplemented with contact statistics from several of the organisations and individual authorities.

Main conclusions

Rise in the number of reports of violence and changes to the nature and frequency of the violence. The number of contacts to Lev Uden Vold's national hotline increased during the lockdown, and the Police received more reports of domestic disputes during the period. Multiple organisations experienced an escalation in the nature and frequency of the violence in some families which had experienced violence even before the lockdown. Also, violence has also occurred in families that had experienced violence previously.

Limited options for seeking and getting help. The societal lockdown made it more difficult for victims of violence to reach out for help, as they did not have the same possibilities of leaving the home and were less frequently alone at home (i.e. without their violent partner) during the lockdown. In addition, professionals did not have the same possibility of being made aware of and reacting to vulnerable groups as before the lockdown because they were furloughed.

Visitation rights conflicts have worsened. During shutdown, visitation rights cases were postponed which prolonged the processing time. This caused frustration and escalated conflicts between some parents. Disagreements about the severity of the risk of infection and the lack of a neutral location for handing over the child also escalated the level of conflict.

The lockdown has worsened mental well-being. The mental well-being of some victims and perpetrators of violence worsened during the lockdown and male and female victims of violence who had already experienced mental disorders experienced a worsening situation. The lack of help during the lockdown can also slow down their current healing process and worsen the effects of the violence.

Pressure on the organisational capacity of entities offering specialised services. A wide range of entities offering specialised services were closed, which increased waiting times at specialised outpatient counselling services, which even before the lockdown were burdened by long waiting lists. In addition, the rising number of inquiries indicates a rising need for help.

Children are particularly vulnerable. Multiple specialised organisations emphasise that children are particularly vulnerable during this period. This is due to the shortage of professionals who are aware of threats to children's well-being because children have lacked the normal free space available at schools and daycare institutions. During the period, the number of reports of children in distress declined. In addition, some parents have been under pressure, causing them to not have had parenting time with the other parent in some instances.

The shutdown has also had positive outcomes. The shutdown has also had a number of positive outcomes for victims and perpetrators of violence. For instance, the lockdown can calm down the situation for some families due to the lower level of activity. Cancellations of interviews at the job centre can also have a calming effect on everyday life. Some female and male victims of violence who feel lonely have had a greater sensation of being part of a community in a different way than usual, as they share being isolated with a community. Some female victims of violence also experienced feeling more secure during the lockdown due to a lower risk of meeting their former partner.

Digital counselling and treatment creates new opportunities but also new challenges. All the specialised organisations and some of the authorities interviewed increased their use of various types of digital counselling and treatment during the period. This provides new opportunities and more flexibility as it enables the organisations to provide assistance at more times of the day and to people living in remote locations. At the same time, the digital counselling and treatment was not sufficient for all users as it can be difficult for the counsellor/therapist to empathise with the user and provide care over the phone. Finally, digital solutions for holding meetings with partners have freed up more time for conversations with users.

Rewarding lessons learnt from developing new activities. At crisis shelters for women and men, new guidelines and the lockdown have spurred the development of activities that support security and care during the lockdown.

Recommendations here and now

The reopening of Denmark is fully under way, but the prolonged societal lockdown was consequential for victims and perpetrators of violence and their children who need help and support to move on. In the following, we present a number of recommendations for decision-makers, professionals and managers of specialised organisations and authorities which they can use here and now to help victims and perpetrators of violence and their children.

FOR DECISION MAKERS:

A need to enlarge the capacity at outpatient services. The situation at outpatient services – which have had long waiting lists for quite some time – has been exacerbated. The need for help increased during the lockdown because the frequency and severity of violence increased and because fewer people had the possibility of reaching out for help. There is a need to enlarge the capacity of the outpatient counselling and treatment services. On 25 April, DKK 15 million were earmarked for an intensified effort in the field of violence, but the experiences of the specialised entities indicate that there is a need to widen the access to counselling and treatment.

FOR PROFESSIONALS AND MANAGERS OF SPECIALISED ORGANISATIONS AND AUTHORITIES

Follow up on users experiencing mental distress. Multiple specialised organisations have experienced a worsening of mental well-being among the women and men with whom they are normally in contact, including due to the temporary closure of their usual counselling and treatment offerings and due to the risk of infection. It can be a difficult process for this group to return to society which is why there is an urgent need to follow up on and provide support to users at risk of mental distress.

Follow up on children in distress. Many children in families with domestic violence have been left to their own devices during the lockdown. They have not been in touch with any other adults besides their parents. This includes teachers and educators who in normal circumstances could help arrange contact to assistance and support. This is why it is important that professionals who are in touch with children and youths to follow up on any children who show signs of distress and changed patterns of behaviour, as well as any children who have already been a source of concern. This includes schools and daycare institutions, but the municipalities may

also have their own entities which prioritise contacting any children who have previously been a source of concern.

Continued use of digital counselling. Most of the specialised organisations have learnt valuable lessons from using new types of digital counselling during the lockdown. These lessons should be evaluated and the interventions further developed so those who have benefited from the digital counselling can also get this type of help going forward. The digital counselling can make the provision of the services more flexible by making it possible to provide help all over Denmark, and digital counselling also makes it possible to reach a new target group who have previously been harder to reach through physical conversations.

Use digital solutions for meetings between organisations and authorities. The use of digital solutions for meetings between authorities and specialised organisations has worked well and freed up time for core tasks such as conversations with victims and perpetrators of violence and should continue to be used wherever relevant.

Recommendations for a future emergency response plan

Based on the knowledge and experiences obtained during the COVID-19 lockdown, we developed a series of recommendations for an emergency response plan in the event that a similar situation arises in the future. This will enable us, as a society, to be better prepared in terms of helping victims and perpetrators of violence and their children during a national crisis.

FOR DECISION MAKERS:

Draft a national action plan. A national action plan should be developed to ensure that access to assistance and support is still available to victims and perpetrators of violence in a similar situation in the future. It should also be made easier for victims of violence with children to get in contact with caseworkers in the municipality and the Agency of Family Law, and temporary decision-making must be rendered easier to prevent potential visitation-rights conflicts from escalating.

Develop digital solution guidelines. During the lockdown, specialised organisations and authorities have made extensive use of digital solutions to ensure the continuance of counselling, treatment and case processing. In a future situation, authorities must support options of

digital counselling and treatment, such as by providing guidelines and assistance to relevant authorities and organisations about the use of digital solutions.

FOR PROFESSIONALS AND MANAGERS OF SPECIALISED ORGANISATIONS AND AUTHORITIES

Have an emergency response plan ready.

Authorities and specialised organisations need to articulate an emergency response plan. The emergency response plan must ensure access to interventions, etc., and that guidelines are in place for the provision of help and support if possibilities of face-to-face meetings are curtailed. Multiple organisations are interested in having one unifying coordinator to provide guidance on how local emergency response plans are to be structured.

Clear communication. The availability of help must be communicated more clearly to the target group. Multiple reports by users who felt they should only get in touch when help was urgently needed kept many victims from seeking help, because they were unsure of whether their situation was sufficiently urgent. Information about emergency childcare, crisis shelter vacancies and outpatient counselling options must be clearly communicated and there should be an overall view of where help is available. Focus must be intensified on reaching individuals who live alone and persons who do not speak Danish, as they are particularly at risk of not receiving help.

Follow up on all users as quickly as possible.

To avoid losing contact with users receiving outpatient services, it is important for counsellors and therapists to contact users as quickly as possible to tell them what the organisation can offer during the lockdown. It is important to be proactive vis-à-vis users, even if it is difficult to get in touch with them. Top priority should be given to urgent cases where it is difficult for users to reach out for help or users who are at greatest risk of being subjected to violence. This could be users who are still in a relationship with a violent partner or users with limited Danish language skills.

Be continuously alert to children. Contact with children currently receiving assistance or specialised services with their parents should be continuously upheld. Efforts must be made to ensure that any children who need a free space outside the family have an opportunity for this.

Set aside time for creating spaces for security and care. Multiple organisations describe how victims of violence have had a great need to talk about how they fear infection and precautions and about how they experienced the lockdown. Accordingly, employees of organisations providing specialised interventions are advised to set aside time to initiate common, reassuring activities with the target group and time for multiple counselling sessions.

Indsigte

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About Lev Uden Vold

Lev Uden Vold is Denmark's national entity which fights intimate partner violence. The goal of Lev Uden Vold is that no one in Denmark should have to live with intimate partner violence. Lev Uden Vold gathers, produces and communicates knowledge about intimate partner violence. In addition, Lev Uden Vold provides help and counselling. One example is our national hotline which provides counselling to victims and perpetrators of violence, their relatives and professionals.

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