

Sexual Violence & COVID-19

Sexual violence is still occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, sexual violence is often made possible by situations of increased isolation and social marginalization. Here are some ways that the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting sexual violence:

- Pandemic-related stressors such as unemployment, financial stress, or loss of coping strategies can increase attempts to “control” others through sexual violence.
- Increased opportunities for online grooming and cyber sexual violence may put individuals at risk during and after the pandemic.
- Sexual exploitation of an individual’s financial strain may occur, such as demands for sex in lieu of rent or in exchange for food, other resources, or a safe place to stay.
- The complexity and overall needs of survivors of historical sexual violence may increase during this stressful time.
- Alcohol or drugs – which some people use to cope with the impacts of the pandemic – can be exploited by others to facilitate sexual assault.
- Increased risk of intimate partner violence during the pandemic is also connected to higher risk of sexual violence.
- Restrictions on visits and fewer staff in prisons or residential care settings – such as group homes or long-term care homes – can further enable opportunities for sexual violence in these spaces.
- Social/physical distancing measures may put individuals in isolation at home with others who may cause harm (e.g. sexually abusive intimate partners, caregivers), and away from bystanders who might otherwise intervene to stop sexual violence.

These impacts may affect people differently due to their individual circumstances and the intersecting oppressions they face, such as colonialism, ableism, racism, cisnormativity, and classism. COVID-19 can also create barriers that will differentially affect survivors of sexual violence who are seeking support. Some of these barriers include:

- Difficulty finding private and safe times to reach out for support while isolated with others.
- Reluctance to go to the hospital or access other services out of fear of exposure to COVID-19.
- Schedule changes to public transportation services limiting the ability to access supports.
- Pandemic-related concerns and needs that may result in minimization of sexual violence and its impacts.
- Shame and fear of repercussions for disclosing if the sexual violence occurred while disobeying social/physical distancing mandates.
- Separation from informal supports (e.g. religious community, co-workers) and coping strategies (e.g. coffee with friends, going to the gym).

Supports for survivors of sexual violence are available, and sexual assault services continue to operate (e.g. by phone and online, through hospital services).

Help your local sexual assault centre and join us in increasing awareness about the impacts of sexual violence and COVID-19. Please share this resource.

The [Learning Network](#) at the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children produced this resource in collaboration with the following organizations: [Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services](#), [Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres](#), and [Ontario Network of Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres](#).