The escalation of domestic violence during the Covid-19 lockdown

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What are the effects of lockdown and recession on domestic violence?

Social distancing restrictions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to millions of families the world over being locked down together in their homes and to widespread job and income losses. This has coincided with a substantial global surge in domestic violence, which the United Nations (UN) has described as a 'shadow pandemic'.

In the UK, in the first month after the initial lockdown from 23 March, the rate of homicide of women was more than twice the average of two women a week, and the highest rate in the last 11 years. At the same time, 80% of women's frontline support services reported a reduced service because of less face-to-face contact, staff sickness and technical issues preventing working from home.

The fact that a similar pattern has been observed across the world must reveal something about the underlying causes of domestic violence. Is it the result of income or other stress associated with unemployment, or has an escalation of conflict resulted directly from couples spending more time together?

Our research

Our research was designed to investigate the specific question of how unexpected unemployment influences domestic violence. We analysed the impacts of male job loss on perpetration of violence and the impacts of female job loss on victimisation using pre-Covid data. We then investigated whether unemployment benefits mitigate any impacts of unemployment on domestic violence.

To do this, we gained access to court registers for Brazil that contain every domestic violence case during 2009-2017, a total of 2 million cases. We linked individuals involved in domestic violence cases to administrative data containing longitudinal employment records for every individual in Brazil through 2009-2017. Using the linked data, we set out to test whether unemployment shocks lead to domestic violence cases. These are 'big data', containing 100 million workers, over 60 million employment spells and 10 million layoffs per year.

Key findings

- Male and female job loss each result in large increases in the chances of domestic violence perpetration and victimisation respectively.

- Eligibility for unemployment benefits fails to mitigate impacts of job loss on domestic violence. We find evidence that cash benefits mitigate but this is offset by increased exposure or opportunities for violence, as eligibility leads to longer unemployment durations.

- Finding a role for exposure suggests that lockdown policies are likely to aggravate domestic violence, conditional on job loss

Author's main message

To counter the increase in domestic violence triggered by unexpected job loss, the ideal policy intervention would be to compensate the income shortfall, and get people out of the home and back to work to limit exposure. Unemployment benefits are likely to help when combined with active policies aimed at getting the unemployed back to work. These include skills training, support with job search and possibly also community-based projects, or charitable work.

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