

Domestic Violence Patterns in King County, WA: March – September 2020

BACKGROUND

Community mitigation efforts to limit the spread of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) resulted in dramatic increases in the number of King County, Washington residents who are unemployed or furloughed, and/or need assistance affording food, utilities, housing, and accessing health care.¹ These stressors, added to social isolation and grief, are likely to affect the mental health and coping strategies for many people.² For individuals experiencing family violence, being at home is not always a safe place. Previous research shows social isolation and pandemic stress combined with decreased access to external supports may increase the occurrence of family violence.^{3,4} Understanding the patterns of family violence during the pandemic and into the recovery period requires looking across varied data sources to understand what communities are experiencing. Policies related to the mitigation of COVID-19 are also being monitored.

We are presenting two briefs to describe family violence patterns; this brief focuses on domestic violence (DV); a second brief will cover child and elder maltreatment. There are several data sources that can describe aspects of the occurrence of DV in communities, but none are comprehensive and obtaining an accurate count is difficult. We were unable to capture all data sources relating to DV and any one data source does not provide a complete view. We recognize the data sources presented in the brief are a partial picture of the DV response system and represent those who were able to seek care or help. Many more may be in an unsafe environment and are not counted in these numbers.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 10 men in the US reported having experienced intimate partner violence during their lifetime.⁵ DV has a severe impact on its victims, including adverse physical and mental health outcomes and a high risk of homicide (1 in 6 homicides are perpetrated by an intimate partner).⁴ Pandemic and disaster response literature suggest this pandemic increases risk, particularly for individuals who have already experienced DV.⁶

To investigate DV patterns in King County, Washington, we analyzed data from criminal, legal, national hotline, and emergency department (ED) visits and compared findings to pre-pandemic rates or counts.

KEY POINTS

- 1) Domestic violence (DV) related deaths in 2020 are up in King County compared to 2019.
- 2) Emergency Department (ED) visits related to DV declined at the beginning of the pandemic compared to 2019 levels, as did all ED visits. Since June, the rate of DV-related ED visits has returned to comparable 2019 rates.
- 3) DV-related felony charge referrals, the most serious legal filing, did not decrease compared to 2019, despite temporary court closures, the statewide stay at home orders and social distancing guidelines.
- 4) More comprehensive monitoring and data collection is needed to understand the occurrence of DV as available data represent care-seeking behavior and are only a part of the DV response systems.

¹ For unemployment, see <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/covid-19/data/impacts/unemployment.aspx>. For food insecurity, see <https://publichealthinsider.com/2020/06/17/with-food-insecurity-on-the-rise-public-health-highlights-critical-new-and-existing-resources/>. For insurance needs, see : <https://ofm.wa.gov/washington-data-research>.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Stress & Coping. July 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

³ Humphreys KL, Myint MT, Zeanah CH. Increased Risk for Family Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Pediatrics*. April 2020:e20200982. doi:10.1542/peds.2020-09829

⁴ Campbell AM. An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives. *Forensic Sci Int Reports*. 2020;2:100089. doi:10.1016/j.fsir.2020.100089

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/fastfact.html>, last accessed 3/8/2021

⁶ <https://tcfv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Hurricane-Harvey-Report-FINAL-and-APPROVED-as-of-060619.pdf>

Reported death data are cited from other sources to provide context. We did not conduct a full analysis of DV-related death because data are not yet available.

DV includes intimate partner (a former or current partner or spouse) as well as family violence (violence between family members such as siblings) and can include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. While experts predicted rates of DV to increase, non-fatal DV data show decreases in DV-related care seeking behavior early in the COVID-19 pandemic, returning to levels similar in 2019 by the summer months. This decrease may reflect limitations of using care seeking behavior as an indicator of prevalence since requests for crisis intervention are influenced by barriers to reaching out for help, such as safety, language, immigration status, technology, lack of community connectedness during the pandemic, and/or social and cultural norms.

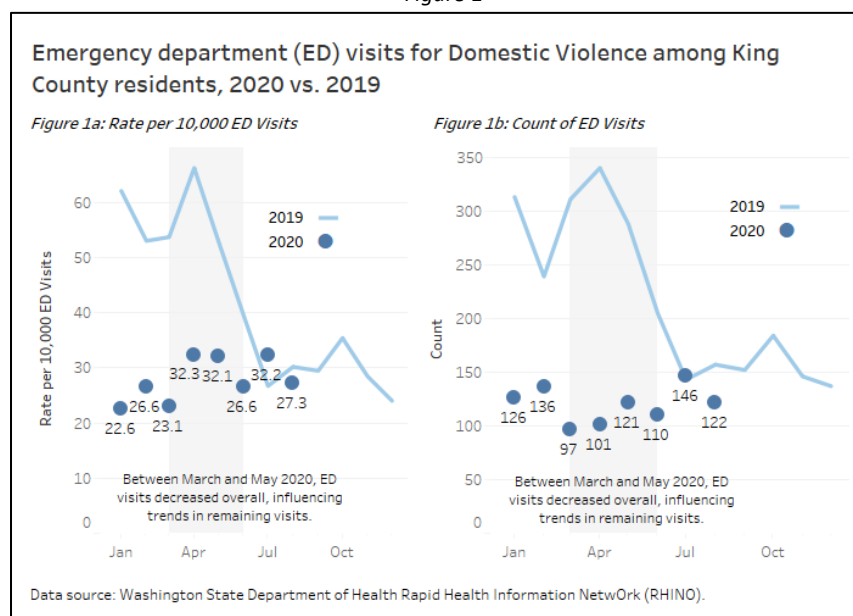
Homicides due to Domestic Violence Nearly Doubled in 2020

Data from the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office shows that DV homicides nearly doubled compared to prior years, from 7 each in 2018 and 2019 to 13 in 2020 (with just 9 months of data).⁷ DV has been linked to an additional 15 deaths so far in 2020, as of September, and include murder-suicides, homicides committed by convicted DV perpetrators, and officer-involved shootings of DV suspects.⁸

Emergency Department (ED) Visits Related to Domestic Violence Declined at the Beginning of the Pandemic compared to 2019 Levels and returned to 2019 Comparable Rates as of June 2020

In the first half of 2020 (January-June) the rate of ED visits related to DV were lower than in the first half of 2019 (Figure 1a). By July and August 2020, the rates of DV-related visits observed were similar to rates in July and August of 2019 (Figure 1a). Normally, lower rates of ED visits due to DV would be something noteworthy. Visits to the ED for all reasons declined drastically, however, given early recommendations to limit ED visits to severe illnesses and the increased use of telemedicine. As a result, the 2020 rate is not entirely comparable to prior years. So far in 2020, the number of ED visits related to DV are lower than previously observed. We will continue to monitor as the recovery period progresses and all-cause ED visit levels return to normal.

Figure 1



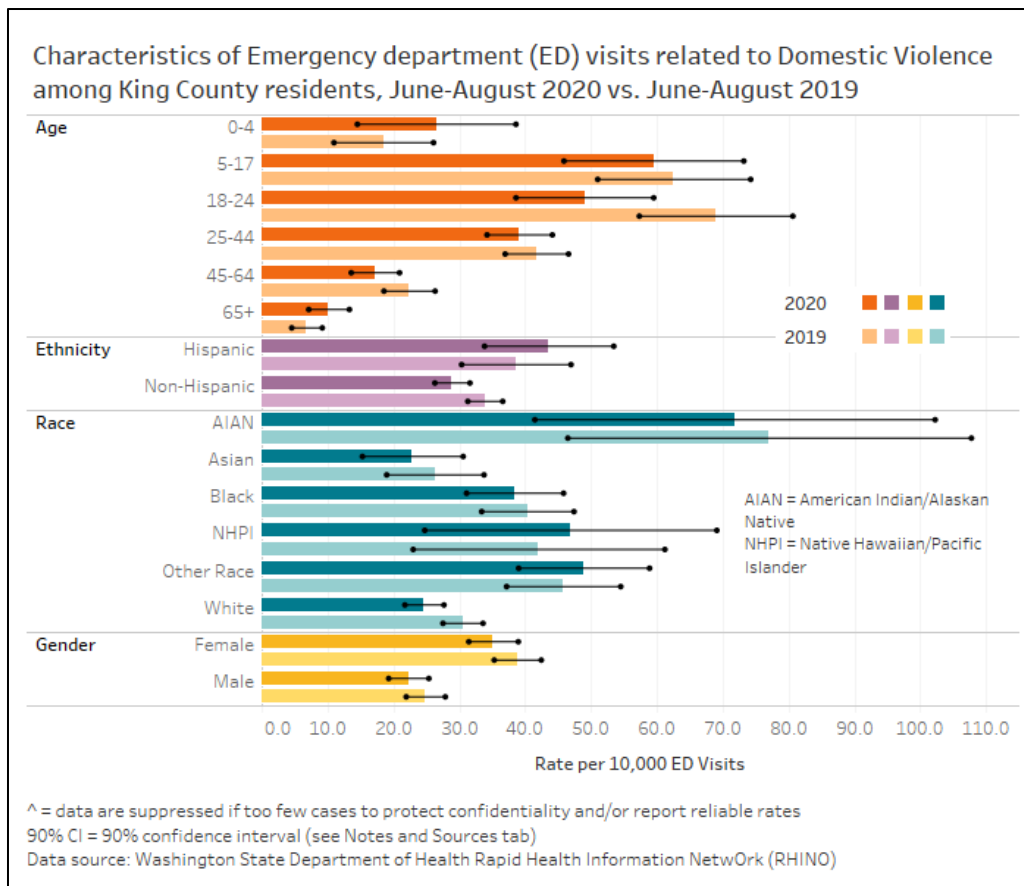
⁷ Brazile, L. King County has already seen 13 domestic violence homicides in 2020. *KUOW*. 10/1/2020. Retrieved on 10/2/2020 from <https://www.kuow.org/stories/13-domestic-violence-homicides-have-happened-in-king-county-this-year>.

⁸ Green, SJ. Man charged with South Lake Union murder in King County’s 13th domestic-violence homicide this year. *The Seattle Times*. 9/28/2020. Retrieved 10/2/2020 from <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/crime/man-charged-with-south-lake-union-murder-in-king-countys-13th-domestic-violence-homicide-this-year/>

ED Visits Involving Domestic Violence in Both 2019 and 2020 Were Higher among Females and Younger Age Groups

Rates of DV-related ED visits by age, race and ethnicity, and gender did not vary between June-August 2020 and June-August 2019 (Figure 2). A few notable patterns held across both years, however. The rate of ED visits related to DV was lowest among the 65 and older age group and among females compared to males. Rates of ED visits involving DV in 2020 were higher among Hispanics than non-Hispanics. Rates of ED visits involving DV were also higher in 2020 among American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black/African American people compared to white people.

Figure 2



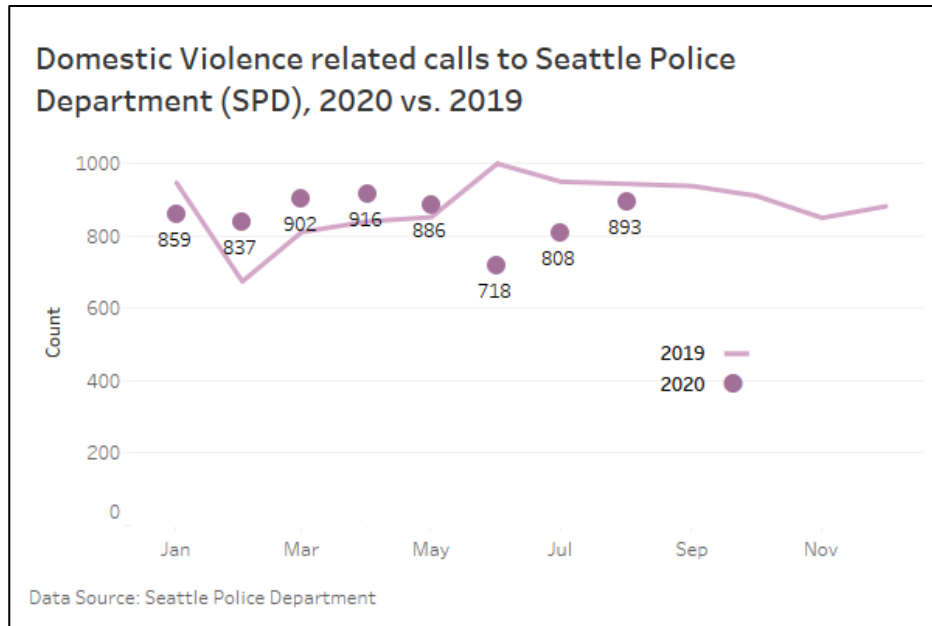
Domestic Violence Related Calls to Seattle Police Department Higher in February to May 2020 compared to Same Months in 2019

When individuals experiencing DV are looking for help, they may call the police to intervene or call local or national hotlines for assistance. These calls for assistance are a source of complementary information that may provide a different pattern.

The Seattle Police Department (SPD) maintains a dashboard monitoring local 911 calls for a police response. One metric is calls responding to a DV situation. Between February and May 2020, the number of calls to SPD were elevated in comparison to corresponding months in 2019 (Figure 3). The number of calls in February was significantly higher in 2020 than 2019. In the summer, the number of calls dropped; June and July 2020 had significantly lower number of calls than in 2019. June marked the beginning of active protests for racial justice which may have impacted call volume and response. Since June 2020, DV-related calls to SPD have steadily increased, with August calls approaching 2019 levels.

Data for other sheriff and police departments are not available at this time.

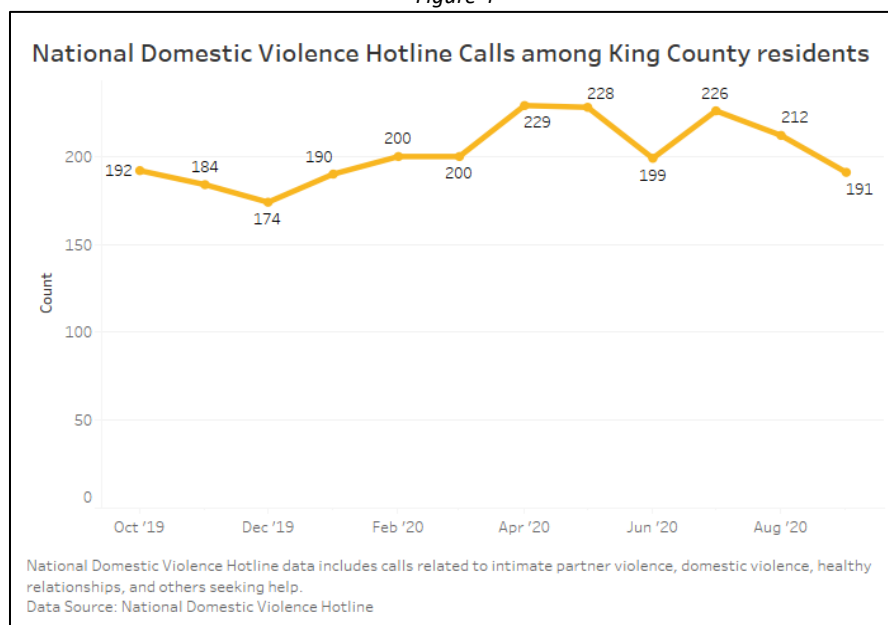
Figure 3



National Domestic Violence Hotline Reported the Highest Monthly Call Volumes from King County, WA Residents in April, May, and July 2020

For other assistance beyond police, individuals experiencing DV may choose to call one of several hotlines such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline or other agencies providing support services. Nationally, the DV Hotline reported an increase in calls at the start of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. King County DV-related calls to the National DV Hotline in 2020 ranged from a low of 174 in December 2019 to a high of 229 in April 2020 (Figure 4). In 2020, the National DV Hotline reported the highest monthly call volumes among King County residents in April, May, and July. This is likely an underreport of the true number of calls for DV assistance, given the number of DV-related service calls to SPD were substantially higher during the same months.

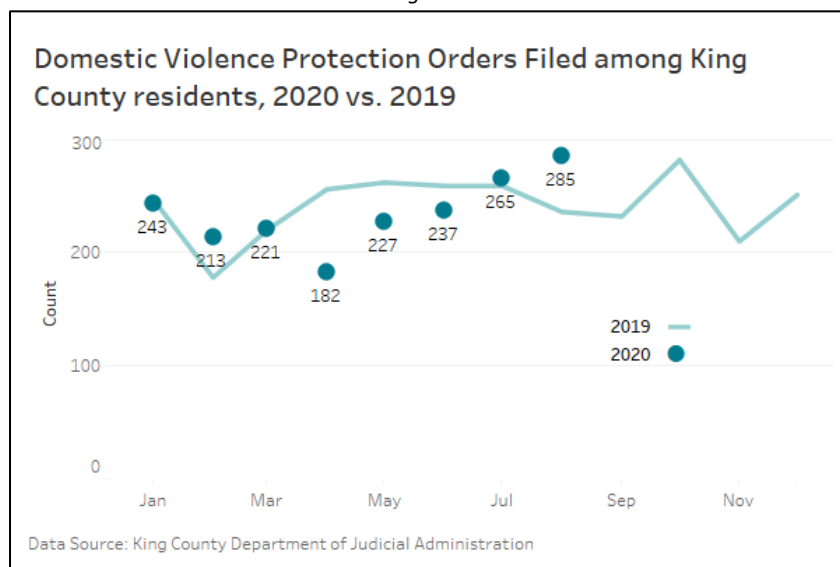
Figure 4



Since April 2020, Domestic Violence Protection Order Filings Have Been Increasing and Have Now Returned to 2019 Levels

Individuals experiencing physical harm, bodily injury, assault, stalking, sexual assault OR who fear imminent physical harm or bodily injury by a family or household member can also file legal and criminal actions against their perpetrator. Protection orders are legal documents issued by a court designed to protect individuals from contact and harm; violation of these orders could result in criminal prosecution.⁹ Prior to the pandemic, King County courts required in-person filing for protection orders. In April 2020, the King County Superior Court added an additional remote (email) process allowing people to file for protection orders without appearing in-person. The remote process allowed protection orders to continue, when most other court systems operationally shut down.¹⁰ Even with remote filing possible, the number of DV protection orders filed was significantly lower in April 2020 compared to April 2019 (Figure 5). Since April 2020, the number of DV protection order filings has been increasing and has now returned to similar levels as in 2019. This may indicate that the email filing system was somewhat effective as the number of protection orders in recent months is similar to 2019, even though social distancing guidelines remain in effect. No demographic information was available on who is filing protection orders. The ability to file on-line may be impacted based on levels of safety at home; internet service, computer access, and technology skill; or challenges with literacy and language.

Figure 5



Domestic Violence Felony Charge Referrals, Representing the Most Serious Legal Filing, Did Not Decrease Compared to 2019

DV Criminal charges can also be brought against a defendant. Many DV-related offenses are charged as misdemeanors. When police determine that a DV case meets the threshold for a felony charge, they refer the case to King County’s Prosecuting Attorney’s Office (PAO) who then determine whether to file felony charges. Felony DV charges represent more serious DV cases; they are based on the severity of the crime and the defendant’s prior criminal history.¹¹ Though the number of DV felony referrals to the PAO are higher for several months in 2020 compared to the same month in 2019, only the differences in March were statistically significant (Figure 6). The number of referrals in April and August 2020 are the highest number of referrals received in the past five years (data not shown). Between March-August

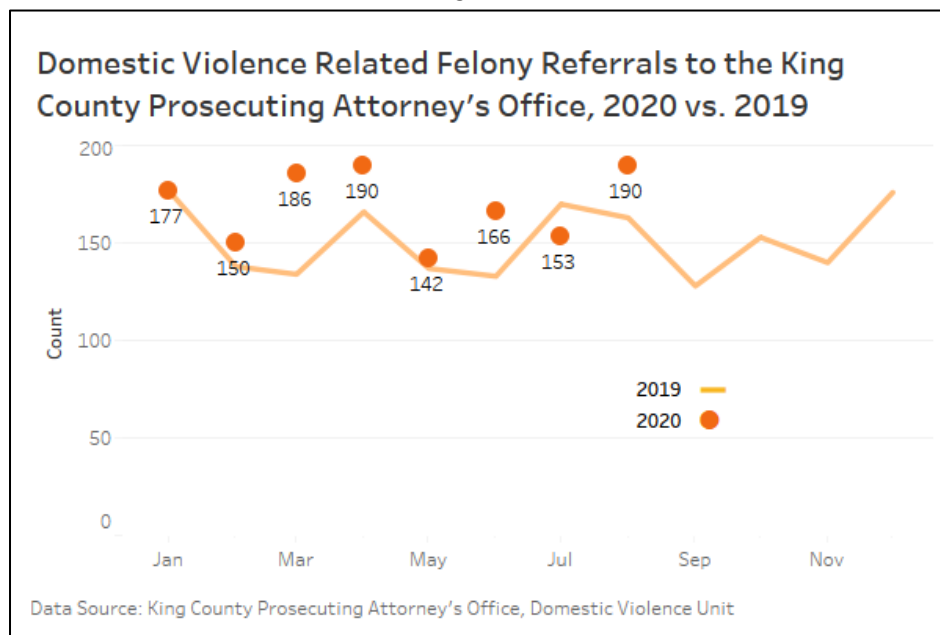
⁹ www.protectionorder.org and <https://www.kingcounty.gov/courts/district-court/protection-order.aspx>

¹⁰ With courthouse closed, King County unveils e-filing for domestic violence victims. KUOW. 03/30/2020. Retrieved 10/6/2020 from <https://www.kuow.org/stories/with-courthouse-closed-king-county-unveils-e-filing-for-dv-victims>

¹¹ The majority of criminal DV charges filed in King County are misdemeanors, and these data were not available at this time.

2020, even as social distancing guidelines and the statewide order took effect, DV felony referrals did not drop off, as many other care seeking behaviors did (e.g. ED visits).

Figure 6



LIMITATIONS

The measures reported in this brief are limited in that they reflect people's requests for crisis intervention and represent data from only part of the system of response. For example, calls to the DV National Hotline represent only a portion of calls for assistance as King County residents may also call 911 or individual agencies for assistance. Calls for service to SPD can be handled in the field or over the phone and do not always result in a report being taken. Data from other police and sheriff's departments are not available, thus we do not have complete data on calls for service to law enforcement agencies across the county. Protection order data represent orders processed by King County Superior Court but do not include orders processed by King County District Court and include petitions filed but not necessarily granted. DV felony charge referrals do not include misdemeanor offense referrals, and the majority of DV charges are misdemeanors processed by local municipalities (or for unincorporated King County, district courts). Estimates suggest between 15-50% of DV incidents are reported to the police, and numerous factors influence whether arrests occur.¹² These data sources reflect the rate or number of calls or visits, not the number of people seeking support. It is not possible to determine how well these data represent community experiences or differentiate whether observed changes in crisis service requests result from changes in care-seeking behaviors or community needs. Some data sources lack demographics that allow for in-depth analyses to understand patterns by geography, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability status. A full analysis of DV-related deaths is not included because data are not yet available.

DISCUSSION

Though the information reviewed in this brief shows that DV-related service requests were similar or lower than requests received during 2019, we cannot draw meaningful conclusions about the frequency of DV occurrence during the pandemic given the limitations noted above. The reported increase in DV-related homicide data and the consistency of felony charge referrals and protection order filings,

¹² Klein A. *Practical implications of current domestic violence research: for law enforcement, prosecutors and judges*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs; 2009.

despite the complications of filing, suggest that concern about DV during the pandemic and recovery period is warranted. Many individuals experiencing DV may not be included in the data presented as the response system is fragmented and there is no single comprehensive data source. Other factors such as language, cultural context, or concerns about engaging with law enforcement or the legal system may prevent reporting related to DV. With social distancing, other people are less likely to observe or report signs of family violence.

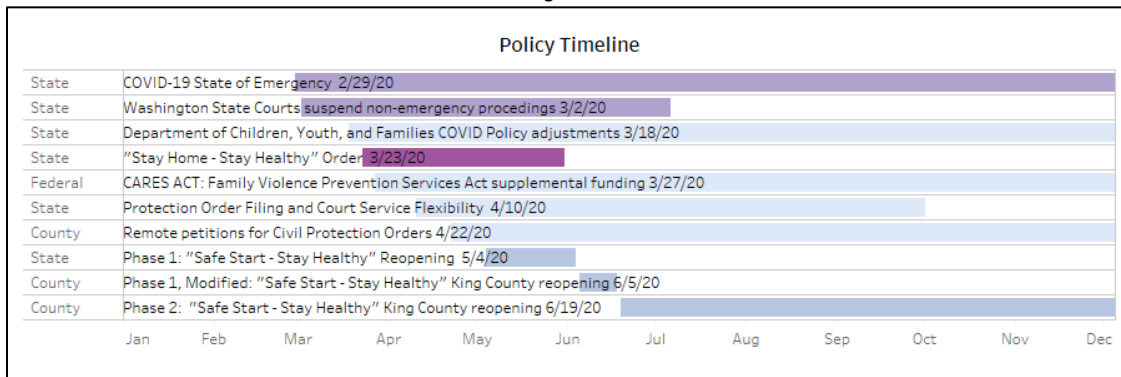
Outside of the data presented in this brief, other community sources suggest that the frequency and severity of DV is increasing during the pandemic. The Bellevue Police Department reported a 28% increase in the number of DV felony assaults, and staff from a DV survivor service agency, LifeWire, also reported an increase in the number and severity of DV incidents.¹³ A survey of 24 service agencies responding to gender-based violence in King County showed that most agencies experienced increased reports of violence in both frequency and severity, and increased mental health concerns since the start of the pandemic. They also received more reports of a loss of income and a lack of access to technology to enable supports and legal remedies.¹⁴

The different information highlights the need for comprehensive and timely information about the nature and extent of family violence in the community. This will require better data quality and more extensive data sharing across municipalities and organizations to provide a clearer picture and better understanding of community experiences. Systemic and timely monitoring is needed to determine how to best ensure people’s safety, particularly during the pandemic recovery period.

FEDERAL, STATE AND COUNTY POLICIES RELATED TO FAMILY VIOLENCE SERVICE NEEDS

Faced with an unprecedented pandemic, Washington state declared a State of Emergency on February 29, 2020 and by early March, many businesses and schools began mandated work/learn from home policies (Figure 7). The subsequent “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order issued by the Governor on March 23 also resulted in many people staying in or close to their home for extended periods of time.

Figure 7



Court systems adjusted as well. Washington State Courts suspended all non-emergency proceedings March 2 through July 6, but enabled all emergency matters, including civil protection and restraining order processing, to occur via telephone, video, or other means that did not require in-person attendance. The Governor provided courts flexibility and relief by removing certain statutory hearing deadlines and service of process requirements relating to protection orders, including DV, sexual assault, stalking, extreme risk, and other similar orders, to ensure survivors access to justice. King

¹³ Severe domestic violence assaults up 28% in Bellevue amid pandemic. *KOMO News*. 10/1/2020. Retrieved 10/2/2020 from <https://komonews.com/news/local/severe-domestic-violence-assaults-up-28-in-bellevue-amid-pandemic>

¹⁴ Cousin M. Impact of COVID-19 on survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in King County. 2020. Coalition Ending Gender-based Violence. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/15wghExp4K3-6Ki005DPMK4IEI4yLk-Qu/view>

County Courts began offering email submission of self-service civil protection orders by late April.

At the Federal level, the CARES Act signed into law on March 27 provided \$45 million in supplemental funding for the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act Program, \$2 million in funding for the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and enhanced financial support for childcare providers. This funding provided flexibility in how agencies can prevent, prepare for, and respond to the COVID-19 public health emergency while addressing the evolving needs of domestic violence survivors and local domestic violence programs within their communities. In September 2020, the King County Council included additional funding for DV and sexual violence survivors in the emergency funding 4th round.

Resources

- Guidance related to COVID-19: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/covid-19.aspx>
- More information about data: kingcounty.gov/covid/impacts or contact data.request@kingcounty.gov
- Domestic violence resources: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/how-do-i/domestic-violence.aspx>
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (Voice); 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) or <https://www.thehotline.org/>
- Washington State Domestic Violence Information & Referral: <https://www.domesticviolenceinforeferral.org/>
- Washington State and County Domestic Violence Service Providers: <https://wscadv.org/washington-domestic-violence-programs/>
- Protection Orders: www.protectionorder.org
- Community support and well-being: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/covid-19/support.aspx>

Technical Notes

Seattle Police Department calls for service information was obtained from their public dashboard (<https://www.seattle.gov/police/information-and-data/calls-for-service-dashboard>). The National Domestic Violence Hotline provided King County calls from national data. National DV Hotline data include calls related to intimate partner violence, domestic violence, healthy relationships, and others seeking help. Protection orders filed information was provided by King County Department of Judicial Administration. DV felony charge referral data was provided by the King County PAO; felony charges could be for the same defendant involved in separate incidents. Demographic information was not yet available for these sources, and data reflect unique incidents rather than unique individuals.

ED data represent visits by King County residents to healthcare facilities rather than number of individuals and are not restricted to King County facilities. Race/ethnicity data may be based on providers' observation rather than self-report. Data were obtained and analyzed through the National Syndromic Surveillance Program BioSense ESSENCE platform. ED visits involving DV (family and intimate partner violence) were selected by applying a definition developed by Washington Department of Health Rapid Health Information Network (RHINO) team that searches triage notes and clinical impression fields in addition to chief complaint (reason for visit) and discharge diagnosis fields. See "more information about data" link for more details. ED visits data are preliminary and subject to change as data are added, updated and validated over time.

Poisson confidence limits were calculated as a measure of variability for SPD calls, hotline calls, protection orders filed, DV felony charges referred, and ED visits count data to conservatively rule out random variation as an explanation for the observed change and are available upon request. A Poisson normal approximation formula was used to compute corresponding confidence intervals for variation in rates of ED visits. Data by disability and LGBTQ+ status were not available.

Suggested citation

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