

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women Services

RESEARCH
STUDY

NAVIGATING MULTIPLE PANDEMICS

WHAT WE DID

We examined the impact of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women services in Ontario. These findings come mainly from group interviews with 24 executive directors, as well as some interviews with direct care staff and managers.

WHAT WE FOUND

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, three other 'pandemics' – gender-based violence/violence against women (GBV/VAW), systemic racism, and opioid-related overdose – were harming individuals and groups. When COVID-19 was added to these escalating pandemics, additional stressors were placed on VAW service organizations. This landscape of 'multiple pandemics' was clear in our data, and we identified five inter-related themes experienced by leaders* and their organizations:

PANDEMIC HIERARCHY

"... we've shut down society on a dime and have thrown everything we have at COVID, yet we've had our folks dying of overdose for years and there's been no resource, nothing that can be done."

AMPLIFIED SYSTEM WEAKNESSES

"[Of] all of the thing[s] that the pandemic did to us, it highlighted already the craters that exist in the system. We've known this all along and now the whole world knows."

FUNDING ALLOCATION

"And I mean we joked about it, that we had this COVID credit card... So, resource decisions were very equity-based, and that required us to make some choices about who needed our services the most."

EXHAUSTION

"[I] said, 'I'm done folks. I'm burnt and I really don't care anymore. And yeah, you all should have a day off too so, go ahead, take them all.'"

PARTNERSHIPS & SUPPORT

"So our fundraising has also gone through the roof. There's generosity in community."

*All quotes above are from executive directors of shelters or related services.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy/funding audiences:

1. Acknowledge, and direct policy efforts toward addressing, the ongoing pandemics of GBV/VAW, racism, and opioid-related overdose/the toxic drug supply.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic took a serious toll on GBV/VAW organizations; funding and policy adjustments are required to ensure organizational recovery.
3. Decisions to close other government offices, especially housing, had a domino effect on the ability of GBV/VAW organizations to transition women to safe housing. Consider ways to keep these services open to avoid these bottlenecks.
4. Emergency housing across the shelter system was inadequate to address homelessness in general, including due to violence, during COVID-19 space restrictions. Stable and flexible housing that addresses the needs of people using an anti-racist, trauma- and violence-informed and harm reduction approach remains a key priority.
5. As a result of variability in funding, organizations were forced to over-rely on donations to maintain their operating budgets, which varied greatly by community and placed them at greater financial risk during the pandemic. Stable funding that can be used flexibly allows organizations to better meet the needs of their communities.

For the violence against women services sector, including organizational leaders and staff:

6. Leverage formal and informal partnerships; create or maintain coordinating committees (regional multi-agency tables that coordinate service responses and advocacy) or similar structures going forward to sustain collaborative momentum. These relationships may be especially important for rural shelters that typically have fewer resources.
7. Provide meaningful opportunities for staff to be involved in decision-making – this will increase staff buy-in, cohesion, and, ultimately, improve client care.

For the general public, including the media:

8. While the threat posed by COVID-19 is beginning to recede, other overlapping pandemics, especially GBV/VAW, but also opioid-related overdose, systemic racism, sexism and other forms of stigma and discrimination, and lack of housing are getting worse and severely affecting women and their children.
9. GBV/VAW organizations can do a lot with a little, however the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of their budgets (both from government and fundraising), and the interrelatedness of existing social injustices, severely taxing these organizations.

For more information:

- <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/vawservicespandemic/>
- Mantler, T., Wathen, C.N., Burd, C., MacGregor, J. C. D., McLean, I. Veenendaal, J. & The Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Research Team (2022). Navigating multiple pandemics: A critical analysis of the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on gender-based violence services. *Critical Social Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183221088461>