

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

HOW COVID-19 RULES AFFECTED SERVICES

RESEARCH
STUDY

WHAT WE DID

We examined how COVID-19-related policies and guidelines (i.e., “rules”) from public health and governments impacted the violence against women (VAW) service sector during the pandemic. We spoke to more than 50 people in total, including women using shelter services, shelter staff, and shelter directors/leaders.

WHAT WE FOUND

Overall, inconsistency or lack of clarity in rules, and how they were communicated, caused significant stress for women using, and staff providing, services. Staff and leaders were very concerned about rules that isolated women or replicated other aspects of abusive relationships. Leaders sought clarity and consistency from various decision-makers in the face of ever-evolving directives. As in the broader public, there was often the perception that the rules did not apply equally to everyone, for example, some reported that women of colour or whose first language was not English were more negatively affected by new and evolving rules.

TOO MANY RULES, OR TOO FEW

“I’ve never in my life felt so much anger and frustration and feeling so abandoned by a public health unit...”
(executive director)

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

“...it almost feels like bullying at some point where... they’re taking the rules more seriously than... the mental side of things.”
(client)

RULES THAT DON’T WORK

“When a woman comes into shelter they are to be 14 days in isolation... it didn’t make sense, it was increasing the risk to women so we chose not to do it.”
(executive director)

RULE INEQUITIES

“As a Black woman, it’s so hurtful to see how when you know [how] to navigate the system and challenge [it], how you get your needs met... [but] those women of colour who are so fearful... just kind of say yes...”
(staff member)

UNDERSTANDING RULES

“I will say overall, it seems that all of us are somewhat confused about what we should be and what we should not be doing.”
(staff member)

COMPLIANCE & ENFORCEMENT

“...everyone was really scared of getting in trouble, like and we were going to get kicked out and then be on the street.”
(client)

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy/funding audiences:

1. Guidance must be synchronized across government Ministries and Public Health, and aligned with both regional contexts, and the specific context of VAW services, ideally in consultation with VAW sector leaders. Any new rules or protocols require clear communication and implementation support to minimize confusion and facilitate uptake.
2. Women's shelters are very different from other types of congregate housing. Allow agencies to tailor protocols to their specific needs to minimize harm to women and children while respecting health and safety.

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

3. Rules should be clear and consistent. Women need to understand what options are available (e.g., in shelter, alternative housing, and in outreach) and what's expected of them and their children in these spaces, and staff need information and support so that they can effectively communicate and explain rules to women.
4. In the broader public and within shelters, rules were not always applied equitably. For example, some women of colour, or women whose first language was not English, were sometimes monitored more closely for compliance. Sector leaders need to provide oversight to ensure that rules are applied equitably, including being clear why different rules might apply to women versus staff, or between different staff roles.

For the general public, including the media:

5. Shelter funders and other authorities should consult with shelter leaders to coordinate rules and tailor them to the kinds of services that women's shelters provide. It was very difficult for women's shelters to follow different rules from different authorities, especially when they did not match.
6. Some rules, such as enforced distancing and separation, are especially hard on women and children who have experienced domestic violence, since control and isolation are tactics often used by abusers. The public, media, funders and decision-makers need to understand that shelters are unique service spaces that need careful and tailored attention during times of crisis.

For more information:

- <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/vawservicespandemic/>
- Wathen, C.N., Burd, C., MacGregor, J. C. D., Veenendaal, J., McLean, I., Mantler, T., & The Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Research Team (2022). "We're So Limited with What We Actually Can Do if We Follow All the Rules": A Qualitative Study of the Impact of COVID-19 Public Health Protocols on Violence Against Women Services. *BMC Public Health*, 22:1175, 1-14. <https://rdcu.be/cPArN>