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# HARRIS COUNTY HEALTH AND RELATIONSHIP STUDY

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Leila Wood, Elizabeth Bauml, Shannon Guillot-Wright, Elizabeth Torres, Dixie Hairston, Maggy McGiffert, Jeff R. Temple

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges with deep impacts to the safety, stability, and wellness of Harris County residents, especially those impacted by domestic violence (DV). While we have early indicators from police reports and DV-focused professionals that the COVID-19 pandemic increased DV, we have not heard directly from DV survivors, partners using violence, and those at high-risk for DV victimization and offending. To address this gap, The Center for Violence Prevention (CVP) at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) partnered with the Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (HCDVCC) to examine the experiences of Harris County residents impacted by DV. The goals of the **Harris County Health and Relationship Study** (HCHR) were to 1) understand the impact of COVID-19 on DV and 2) assess needs and service experiences of Harris County residents impacted by DV to improve community recovery, safety, and wellness. To meet these goals, we conducted comprehensive online surveys with 446 Harris County residents impacted by DV, and follow-up interviews were done with 48 survey participants. Survey participants were 77.8% female-identified and 54% were recruited from DV-related community organizations.

### The vast majority of HCHR participants were DV survivors

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- 83% had experienced past year psychological DV
- 69% had experienced past year physical DV and 28% had experienced past year sexual DV
- The majority (72%) of HCHR participants experienced two or more types of DV

### The COVID-19 pandemic increased DV

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- Over 50% report violence increased during COVID-19
- The average number of past year physical DV incidents was 16.37
- Interview participants attributed job loss, intensified conflict from the stress of stay-at-home orders, and increased substance misuse as the cause of DV increases

### Participants used many approaches to get safer

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The most common safety strategies used by DV survivors were leaving home (45%); staying in another room (45%); and using social media to connect (41%)

### Sexual assault was a concern for participants

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In the past year, 17% of HCHR participants experienced unwanted, coerced, or forced vaginal, oral, or anal penetration

## Economic impacts were significant for those impacted by DV

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- There was 31% reduction in full time work for participants after the pandemic began and 41% were currently unemployed
- Only 30% of participants who needed childcare had regular access
- Economic needs made it difficult for DV survivors to leave violent relationships

## The COVID-19 pandemic led to housing loss

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- Critically, 56% of HCHR survey participants experienced homelessness since the COVID-19 pandemic began
- 60% of study participants with minor children experienced homelessness during COVID-19

## Health and mental health impacts were widespread

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- 52% met criteria for moderate to severe depression, 64% met criteria for probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 40% screened positively for probable traumatic brain injury (TBI)
- Over 35% of HCHR survey participants were at moderate to high risk for hazardous alcohol use
- There was a 19% decrease in excellent to good physical health status among participants

## COVID-19 impacts were worse for Black and Hispanic HCHR participants

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- Compared to White survey participants, Black participants had over 16% more job loss
- Black participants, followed by Hispanic participants, had the highest rates of sexual DV victimization, and Black participants had the highest rates of physical DV victimization

## Services & supports provided for essential needs but difficult to access

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- Over 41% had difficulty accessing mental health services
- The most common support sought was friends/family (39%), followed by food assistance (34%)
- Rental assistance (16%) and housing support (13%) were reported as the the most commonly *unavailable* services needed

## Stimulus and cash assistance programs were literally lifesaving

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- The cash and rental assistance were critical to participants in surviving the pandemic and DV
- Many participants referenced the role of stimulus checks and unemployment benefits in helping to leave violent relationships

## DV programs were a vital lifeline

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- 31% of participants reported past year DV-related service use
- The most commonly used services were emergency shelter, hotline, and counseling
- Participants had overwhelmingly positive ratings of Harris County DV-related services
- Of DV service users, 71% reported a decrease of violence or harm since using services
- Over 88% indicated services met needs, and over 89% reported staff were there when the needed them

## Recommendations

### Prioritize cash assistance and housing vouchers

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By providing housing and cash assistance for basic needs, families can focus on their health and mental health care, further stabilizing and recovering from the impacts of DV and COVID-19.

### Continuously offer free and affordable childcare for work, school, & health respite

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Childcare offers protective benefits for families exposed to trauma like DV and access to childcare benefits the economic stability and safety of families and communities.

### Center racial justice in DV and sexual assault work

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Investing in culturally specific programs, focusing on diverse hiring and retention, and collaborating with partners to provide cross training and services with racial justice organizations are all steps to better address the trio of DV, COVID-19, and racism.

### Invest in health and mental health

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Harris County entities should address physical and mental health needs of DV and other trauma survivors by increasing access to free therapy services, reducing waitlists, increasing TBI specialists, and providing extended services to complex trauma survivors, including teens exposed to DV.

### Increase service access by enhancing DV and sexual assault agency capacity

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Increased funding and operational support are needed for DV, sexual assault, and collaborative programs to better meet community demands.

### Use technology to increase access to community support & criminal justice remedies

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Expanding the use of technology as a tool to increase capacity and make services safer and more survivor-center will enhance supports to Harris County residents impact by DV.

### Support friends, family, and social networks to help survivors

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Community education, beginning in middle and high school, is needed on a widespread platform in Harris County to better prepare friends and family to support survivors in their lives.

### Continue to assess pandemic impacts & efficacy of programs for survivors

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Engagement in research and evaluation will improve programs, ensure use of evidence-based practices, and help prepare for future disasters and emergencies.

## Correspondence or Full Report Request

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Leila Wood, Ph.D., Assistant Professor & Director of Evaluation, Center for Violence Prevention, UTMB, leiwood@utmb.edu