



# Pandemic left domestic violence victims vulnerable in Baltimore

BY LISA WÖLFEL

When Kelsey Cassone's client needed clothes, she put together a bag and dropped it off on her doorsteps. "I hoped she liked what I picked out," Cassone says. At the beginning of the pandemic, she was still working as a case manager at TurnAround, an organization that serves survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence in Baltimore.

TurnAround's offices closed for a year when Covid-19 hit. Clients lost access to the food pantry, free toiletries and clothes, the community kitchen and computers. "We did have a community of regulars," Cassone says. "We had clients who would come in daily because they needed to get out." With their safe space had to shut down, some felt isolated at a time that left victims of intimate partner violence especially vulnerable.

## Calls to TurnAround's domestic violence hotline increased since spring 2020



TurnAround did not regularly track calls in the database until COVID lockdown (March 2020) so prior numbers may be inaccurate

Chart: Lisa Woelfel - Source: TurnAround Inc. - Get the data - Created with Datawrapper

The 24-hour hotline kept running when the city shut down. "At first our calls were lower, but then we saw a spike," says Cassone, TurnAround's senior data coordinator.

The staff started regularly tracking calls to the hotline in March 2020. Ever since then, the trend shows an increase in calls. According to Cassone, demand for shelter was especially high during the beginning of the pandemic.

Multiple studies have found that domestic violence worsened during the stay-at-home orders that shaped the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. One study examined calls to the police and to emergency hotlines in seven cities, including Baltimore. The researchers found that both types of calls increased in Baltimore, although the police's and emergency hotline's experiences were "dramatically different", researcher Tara Richards says.

In March, calls to the police much higher than expected before returning to the usual call volume in May. The emergency hotline only registered a minor increase. By November, calls to the emergency hotline returned to normal levels, while calls to the police increased sharply from May through November.

The data is not without limitations. As the study authors explain, surveys suggest that less than half of all incidents related to domestic violence are reported.

## Calls for service in Baltimore related to domestic violence



Baltimore Police logs domestic violence as "family disturbance", graph shows daily calls.

Source: Baltimore Police Data - Get the data - Created with Datawrapper

Cassone cites stress and fear as factors that can heighten abuse. "Anything that can trigger stress and anger can trigger violence," she says. Loss of income and staying inside for long periods of time during the stay-at-home orders contribute to these risk factors.

Dorothy Lennig, who runs the legal clinic at House of Ruth, one of the biggest providers in the state, agrees. Her colleagues working the 24-hour hotline and the shelter saw an increase in cries for help. "That didn't happen at legal," Lennig says. One of the most important services in the legal clinic is helping victims of domestic violence obtain protective orders against their abusers. Their offices are situated at the courthouses around Maryland.

"Word on the street was that the courts were closed," Lennig says about the early days of the pandemic, even though the legal clinic was still operating. "A lot of people thought you couldn't access our services. That was a problem." Additionally, there was really nowhere for victims to go, Lennig says. At times, the House of Ruth emergency shelter was at capacity. Friends and family members might have hesitated to take in survivors, worrying about transmission.

## Pandemic led to sharp drop in domestic violence protective orders

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The number of protective orders issued in Baltimore dropped sharply in early 2020.

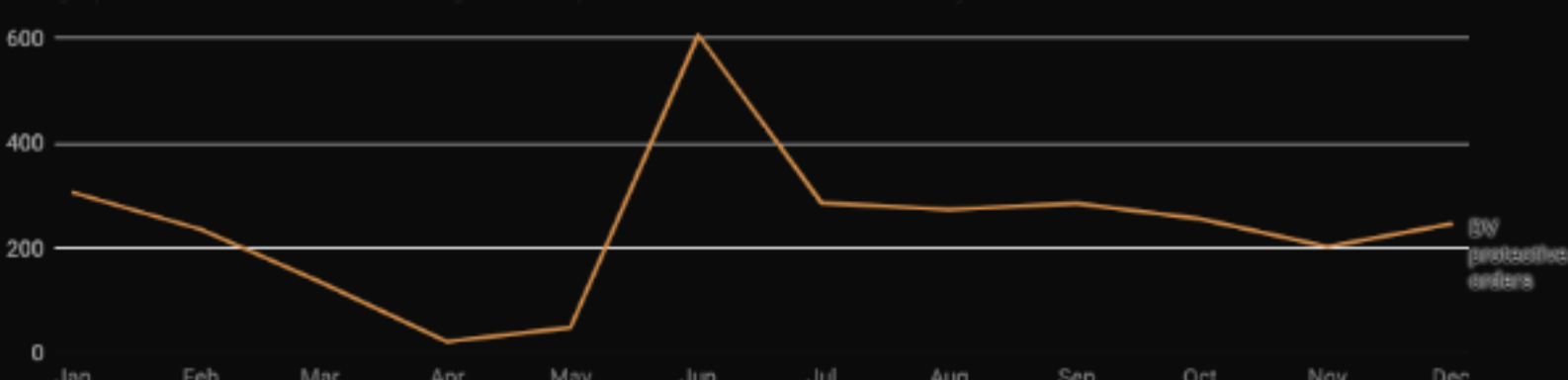


Chart: Lisa Woelfel - Source: State of Maryland, Administrative Office of the Courts Domestic Violence Monthly Summary Reporting - Get the data - Created with Datawrapper

In the city of Baltimore, the number of protective order issued dropped to just 22 cases in April 2020. Figures stayed low through May and spiked in June, when a record number of over 600 protective orders were issued. After June, the number stabilized.

"It was really the most horrible cases," Lennig says of those who turned to the legal clinic in the early months of the pandemic. "The abuse was so much worse than the average abuse that we see." The numbers of protective orders still haven't reached pre-pandemic levels, according to Lennig.

In 2021, Maryland registered the highest number of intimate partner violence related deaths since 2007. Out of the 58 deaths, 13 occurred in Baltimore City.

On a single day, Maryland domestic violence programs serve 762 victims. Lack of resources account for 191 unmet requests made to these organizations. Around 29% of these unmet requests were for housing and emergency shelter, the National Network to End Domestic Violence reports.

## ARE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE AT HOME? HERE'S WHERE TO FIND HELP:

- National 24/7 Hotline: 1.800.799.7233
- House of Ruth, 24/7 Hotline, Baltimore: 410.889.7884
- TurnAround, Call for Services, Baltimore: 410.377.6806
- Directory of local domestic violence programs in Maryland