

Practitioners' report on client experiences during COVID-19

In April 2020, The Sexual Assault & Family Violence Centre asked our practitioners, including our Orange Door staff, across the Barwon and Wimmera regions about how clients are experiencing COVID-19. The findings below are based on responses from 39 practitioners.

62%

Practitioners said clients experienced an escalation in the severity or types of violence.

72%

Practitioners said clients reported situations of violence that relate specifically to COVID-19.

74%

Practitioners said clients presented with more complex needs since the pandemic escalated.

69%

Practitioners said clients experienced an increase or intensified experience of trauma symptoms.

64%

Practitioners said clients needed more support in relation to anxiety about the impact of COVID-19 in addition to sexual assault and family violence.



Children

Clients reported significant increases in challenges regarding parenting stress, negotiating custody arrangements and shared care of children. Some clients also reported an increase in family stress due to home schooling. In the case of clients who are no longer living with perpetrator, but have children together, there was a forced increase in contact due to children being at home.



Increase in violence

Clients reported to practitioners that they had experienced an increase in physical violence and abuse, sexual violence, controlling behaviour, psychological abuse, verbal abuse and financial abuse from the perpetrator since the COVID-19 pandemic escalated. Some practitioners noted an increase in reported strangulation, while other practitioners noted the violence had remained the same for their clients throughout the pandemic.



More time at home

For clients who live in the same home as the perpetrator, they indicated to practitioners that they felt like they couldn't leave the house because they were living and working under the same roof, with little opportunity to leave and no access to support from friends and family. Due to the increased time at home, clients had to be more vigilant and use de-escalation strategies.



Threat to infect

Many practitioners commented that clients stated perpetrators were using the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of abuse and control as part of their violent behaviour. Some perpetrators used their 'essential worker' status as a form of abuse when it came to access or non-access of children, and some perpetrators used COVID-19 to instil fear in the family so they didn't leave the house.



Employment and financial stress

Based on feedback from clients, practitioners reported that some perpetrator's increased violent behaviour coincided with losing employment due to COVID-19. Clients also reported that financial-related issues had increased due to an uncertain financial future.



Mental health

Some practitioners reported an increase in clients struggling with mental health and wellbeing issues, as well as increased suicidality, since the pandemic escalated. Practitioners believed this was due to increased trauma symptoms, increased financial stress, loss of routine, children at home and social isolation.



Increased trauma symptoms

Some clients reported an increase in feelings of panic, loneliness, depression, isolation and anxiety, and being triggered by the current pandemic. One practitioner said that two of their clients felt very safe at home and wanted to do deeper work on their trauma, however many other clients required more grounding and self-regulation strategies to talk through the COVID-19 virus and how this impacts their trauma symptoms.