Te Hiringa
Mahara
Mental Health and
Wellbeing Commission

COVID-19 Impact Insights Paper #4

COVID-19 and safety in the home

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COVID-19 and safety in the home

This paper is the fourth in a series of eight short, focused insights reports that highlight key elements of the wellbeing impacts of the pandemic in Aotearoa.

The focus of this report is the impact of COVID-19 on people feeling safe, secure and free from harm and trauma in their homes. It brings together a rapid review of the literature with findings from engagement with community groups, to include community voices and views. For greater detail on the methodology and findings, please see our technical paper. [1]

Content warning

The analysis in this report references topics that some readers may find distressing - please note that it refers to violence throughout.

Findings

During the 2020 national lockdown, reports of family violence increased dramatically, but it is likely that this is under-reported.

The increase is consistent with international research showing that gender-based violence, violence against women and children, sexual violence and interpersonal violence escalate and intensify during crises like a pandemic.

During Alert Levels 4 to 2, the number of family violence reports to NZ Police ranged from 345 to 645 a day, compared to 271 to 478 a day in the same period in 2019.

As well as increased reports of violence, there were reports of more severe violence and particular forms of abuse, with abusers able to closely monitor their partners, and exercise power and control in a range of ways.

1 https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/our-work/covid-19-insights/

> "Even before the pandemic, violence against women was one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Since lockdown restrictions, domestic violence has multiplied, spreading across the world in a shadow pandemic." (UN Women, 2020).

> "In the first two weeks of lockdown, the counsellors at Victim Support heard stories about stress, stories about panic, and stories about aggression... But the stories that worried them most were the ones they weren't hearing at all." (Johnston, 2020).

NZ Police and community groups suggest violence was under-reported, due to limited opportunities to escape family violence, less external oversight of children, and limited in-person contact with support workers.

Some communities were at particular risk of harm, or faced barriers to accessing support

Women who had separated from abusive ex-partners described how abuser behaviour changed and, for many, got worse, for example through the use of isolation, fear, risk of illness and lack of clarity and consistency of information, to control, isolate and abuse their ex/ partners and children.

Disabled people experience significantly higher reported rates of intimate partner violence and non-partner violence (including by parents and relatives) than non-disabled people. Lockdowns meant decreased visits from carers and less support for families, meaning increased stress and tensions.

Concerns were raised about the safety of **children** in a variety of settings, such as in lockdown in the home of a parent who had been abusive previously, or being in the care of an abusive parent if the caregiving parent contracted COVID-19 or became otherwise unwell. Teachers were concerned about children, some of whom they had lost touch with for weeks.

More than one in five **young people** felt unsafe in their bubble at least some of the time, and the exclusion of young people aged 16 and 17 years from emergency housing meant some were forced to stay in dangerous and exploitative situations. Young people who identified as Rainbow, Māori, Pacific or having a disability were also more likely to report feeling unsafe within their bubbles than other groups of young people.

Over one in four Māori (29%) and Pacific (29%) young people reported they were affected by issues with family as a result of COVID-19.

A small number of **older people** participating in studies in Aotearoa spoke to difficulties related to increased interactions with family members. Stakeholders working with older people reported increases in elder abuse during lockdown periods.

Around one in three rainbow young people (33%) felt unsafe in their bubble at least some of the time during lockdown.

36% had issues with family that had started or gotten worse as a result of COVID-19.

32% had housing or accommodation worries.

More than one in five people in Aotearoa experience **digital exclusion,** and between 100,000 to 150,000 students do not have internet access at home – posing an additional challenge in accessing support to be safe from harm.

Migrants and refugees faced barriers to accessing support services, including limited knowledge of available services, lack of English language skills and/or access to interpreters, lack of cultural support, and experiences of racism and discrimination. Advocacy groups pointed to the courage and effort it took to ask for help from outside their community, with family violence, only for this to be unsuccessful.

Digital technology allowed online violence and abuse to be brought directly into people's homes

Social media can be useful to mitigate physical isolation and enhance social connectedness, however, experiences of digital harm and violence skyrocketed during the lockdowns.

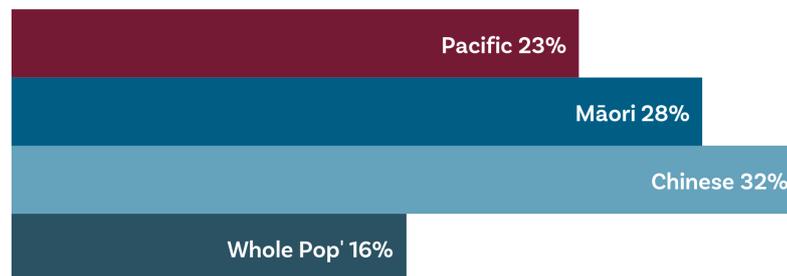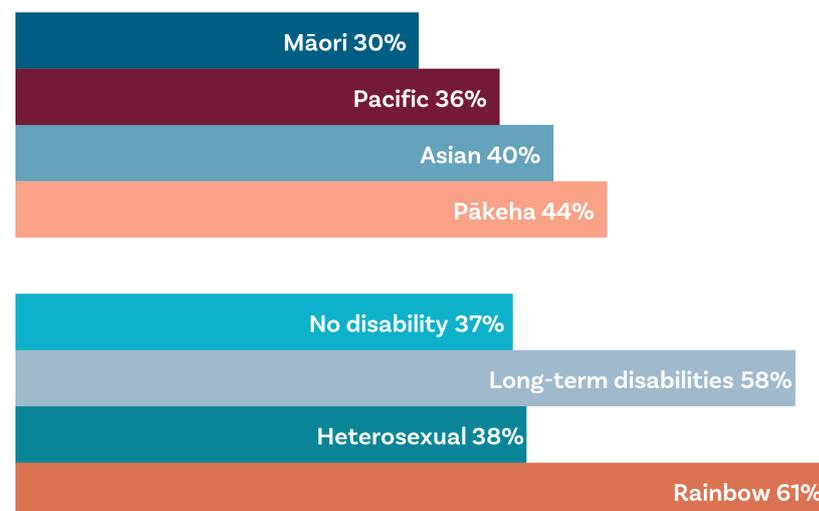**Figure 1: Experienced online discrimination in early pandemic (Nielsen)**

Pacific 23%
Māori 28%
Chinese 32%
Whole Pop' 16%

Figure 2: Received unwanted digital communications during or after lockdown (Netsafe)

Māori 30%
Pacific 36%
Asian 40%
Pākeha 44%

No disability 37%
Long-term disabilities 58%
Heterosexual 38%
Rainbow 61%

> "... young people have lost the routine of school, and have been impacted by the absence of the safe, and dependable experiences schools can provide. Other supportive environments like churches, friend's houses, and service providers have also been off-limits [...] young people who have challenging home environments – homes which are cold, damp, crowded, or abusive – have been particularly impacted." (Curative New Zealand, 2021).

Government and community responses are valuable, but research shows that more could have been done, before and during a crisis, to keep some of our most vulnerable safe

The increased risk of family violence was recognised and acted upon from the start of the pandemic, by the government, and Māori and community organisations and initiatives.

Māori leadership in keeping people safe during COVID-19 was evident across a broad range of organisations, including Whānau Ora providers, women's refuges and Māori Wardens. Not all these service providers are funded to meet the needs of whānau with family violence issues, but they stepped up to provide support until specialist services could come in.

Keeping people safe requires a range of safe, accessible options

Traditional models of connection were significantly disrupted by COVID-19 lockdowns, and the importance of ensuring equitable access to services and supports was reinforced. It is vital that future support be directed towards groups who experience inequity, as outlined in this paper, to increase their general sense of safety and acceptance at home.

Online connectivity provides an important way of keeping people safe and connected to support, but many communities struggled with access to both essential services and technology during the pandemic. Accessing help needs to be easier and safer.

Empowerment and involvement of communities in planning and management is key to supporting safety

Preventing an increase in violence during the next crisis will be aided by promoting respectful, non-violent relationships, and enabling communities to take a lead in changing social attitudes, behaviours and norms that support violence.

Community organisations are well placed to respond to changing needs, and empowering and involving communities in planning is key to preventing violence and reaching people safely and quickly.

"In extraordinary times like this, we need to be creative in how support is made easily accessible and affordable. Assuming that people can dial in for assistance from the comfort of their home is not helpful" (Saunoamaali'i Karanina Sumeo, in Johnston, 2020).

"The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how empowering communities to lead provided a more effective response; we need to prioritise taking those learnings forward." (The Joint Venture of the Social Wellbeing Board, 2020).

Disadvantaged communities, such as young people and rainbow communities, feel overlooked in times of crisis. In order to support safety, systems in place must enhance involvement of communities through both planning and decision-making processes.

Ongoing monitoring and research on the impact of the pandemic on people feeling safe will enable the development of better systems and resources

It is essential that research is undertaken, so that consistent and reliable data can provide insight into the scale and impacts of the pandemic for different communities. Given the difficulties gaining meaningful statistics about family violence and sexual violence, engagement and check-ins with service providers and community organisations is critical for understanding trends and developments in safety risks for vulnerable populations.