

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic was one that changed the lives of people across the globe in every aspect. Particularly, the restrictions on meeting people and the confinement to homes was the greatest impetus for these lifestyle changes. The changes in family dynamics that stemmed from isolation were among the top significant disruptors. Based on a literature view derived from academic and gray literature, this paper explores topics such as the impacts of proximity and separation, parent-child and partner dynamics, birth rates and resulting maternal mental health, and the spike in domestic abuse cases, also known as the dark or shadow pandemic. The dark pandemic raised questions about more accessible and affordable options for victims, such as shelters, and can help incentivize changes, especially in pandemic or isolation contexts. Additionally, proposed solutions include better access to therapy that need not be in person but assures the same quality. In the case of child abuse, it was found that potential responses include easier access to help in the case of social and physical confinement, even outside of the context of a pandemic.

Methods

This study was conducted exclusively in English. It included looking at gray media and academic literature published between 7 May 2020 and 11 April 2023. Search terms included “marriage”; “COVID-19”; “administrative data”; “United States”; “divorce rates”; “domestic abuse”; “family violence”; “shadow pandemic.” Search engines used include Google Scholar and PubMed. Articles were employed if they focused primarily on aspects of marriage throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Over 30 results were screened, and 17 articles were included.

Results

Impact of Separation

Partner Relationships

The pandemic had a large influence on people’s relationships with their partners and the likelihood of getting into romantic relationships with others. The economic troubles induced by the pandemic impeded single people’s desire to pursue relationships. Single people also had fewer ways to connect during the pandemic.

A scoping review published by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that social isolation (a parameter they defined as being available only to a small network of family/non-family members) and loneliness were separate parameters; however, the levels of loneliness (numerically categorized in multiple

longitudinal studies employed) had risen, although in small amounts (Ernst et al., 2022). This affected relationships in that those that were affected by separation would have increased loneliness, which would double down on its effects on relationships, ultimately resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Marriage rates during the stay-at-home order decreased by 54% (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2023). This was very likely due to the fact that the creation of marriage documents was difficult (if not impossible) during the COVID-19 lockdown. Marriages also experienced delays. Additionally, due to the friction caused by the proximity, a large portion of projected weddings during the pandemic were canceled altogether.

Parent-Child Relationships

The distance resulting from the shelter-in-place order influenced children's abilities to see both of their parents in cases of divorce. The shelter-in-place order for the most part did not override the custody situations that separated homes had in place prior to said order. However, temporary modifications to the custody guidelines could be made, had there been a concern of exposure to one specific parent's side (Goldberg et al., 2021). Additionally, if there was lost time, courts often allowed allotted extra time once the stay-at-home order was officially over.

Impact of Proximity

Partner Relationships

The proximity resulting from the pandemic gave way to increased relationship conflict, reduced sexual frequency, and increased rates of infidelity and approaching alternate sexual and romantic partners (Wager et al., 2020). Structures of marriages are also typically altered during times of recession, including divorce rates. In Mexico, due to the inaccessibility of lawyers during the start of the pandemic in March of 2020, divorce rates dropped by 43% nationwide (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2023). This sharp decrease overall can be attributed to the initial scare the pandemic caused, especially in regard to the stay-at-home mandate. Around September 2020, however, divorce rates rose back to the baseline in a relatively healthier incline as opposed to marriage rates. Both marriages and divorces skewed younger during the pandemic (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2023).

Parent-Child Relationships

One aspect of parent life that was affected significantly as a result of the pandemic was childbirth. Delivery was especially difficult for mothers during the pandemic. This could be due to wearing masks during the delivery, birthing without family or a partner, having fewer visits from family, and more (Mostafavi & Bailey, 2022). These were all likely catalysts for the third of people who had birthed during the pandemic experiencing postpartum depression. This was tangibly three times the pre-pandemic levels. Although these numbers were already on the rise, the pandemic induced the numbers to spike even more drastically. Additionally, a fifth of new mothers during the pandemic were experiencing major depression. The occurrence of suicidal ideation and self-harm among new mothers was also high among those with postpartum depression, at a worrying 20%.

The pandemic also influenced babies' relationships and interactions with others. The concept of the "pandemic baby" was coined to denote the neonates being born during the pandemic. Limited social interaction with people apart from close family members became the norm for the time, raising possible developmental concerns. These stemmed from the lack of visible facial expressions due to masks, limited social interaction, and more. It is apparent that many children who were cut off from what would be considered the norm pre-pandemic-wise are slower than normal to talk and walk (Wong, 2022).

Dark Pandemic

A tragic concept that arose during the pandemic is the dark pandemic, referring to the increase in domestic abuse during the stay-at-home mandates. Reports of abuse cases by current partners increased by 8.1% during

the stay-at-home mandate (Ivandic et al., 2020). However, reports of abuse cases by ex-partners declined by 11.4% (Ivandic et al., 2020). This can be ascribed to the fact that it was difficult for ex-partners to interact with their projected victims in person. Spain saw 18% higher calls reporting domestic abuse during the first two weeks of the mandated lockdown (Al-Arshani, 2020). France noted a spike of 30% in cases of domestic violence (Al-Arshani, 2020). Additionally, alcoholism and alcohol use in general heightened during the pandemic, which is generally known to be a strong part of the etiology for domestic abuse. Furthermore, Harvard Medical School Primary Care Review worryingly cites studies that indicate “abusers are more likely to murder their partners in the wake of personal crises, including lost jobs or major financial setbacks” (Walker, 2020). This could be linked to the overall rise in homicide cases during the first year of the pandemic (Ruhm, 2022).

Regardless of the pandemic, only 24% of domestic abuse cases worldwide are actually reported (Billingham, 2019). This lack of addressing issues can be attributed to multiple reasons, but importantly it heightens the issue by looking at only observable data of the phenomenon. This implies that the numbers could have been much higher than the ones mentioned previously because of victims’ inability to access a safe way to report the abuse.

Reports of abuse cases by family members also increased by 17.1% during the stay-at-home mandate (Ivandic et al., 2020). Isolation is linked heavily with family violence, as it is often a way abusers are able to gain full monopoly over victims. Additionally, due to the seclusion imposed by the pandemic, support systems from the outside world were nullified. Moreover, the stress caused by the lack of outlets can also be a stimulant for stress that is induced by the means of violence.

Discussion

Most legal aspects of a family (i.e. marriage, divorce, etc.) were overall halted, with a spike especially seen at the beginning of the lockdown, which is often discussed as the period of March and April 2020, for reference. Additionally, most nations saw a drastic increase in rates of domestic abuse case reporting and emergency calls from victims. As noted by various academic literature, mental health plummeted, especially during the first few months of the pandemic. This can be noted in heightened suicide and depression rates. This data implies that there is a possibility of a relationship between the increase in domestic abuse case reporting and the decrease in general mental health and well-being. Another area in which mental health was affected was maternity. The mental health of new mothers also saw a fall due to multiple factors, such as isolated births and postpartum depression. The pandemic was also a prime catalyst for the loss of jobs and other dire financial situations, putting a strain on relationships and possibly contributing to already tense living situations.

The most practical way to approach mitigating these issues in possible future periods of isolation like the COVID-19 pandemic is by using a holistic approach. In the wake of the pandemic, many telemedicine companies, such as Betterhelp by Teladoc and Amwell, found increased traffic, especially in the mental health industry. However, they have still not been as established as they are now, and users still find many grievances in their delivery methods of intervention. Telemedicine is a relatively new field and so lacks in its ability to maximize efficient service and minimize cost. It is therefore essential to focus on improving mental health accessibility and reliability. This could include investing in improving telehealth services and addressing the issues related to telehealth. Additionally, structures could be built to encourage mental health professionals to use more accessible platforms, possibly as a part-time commitment in addition to their primary income.

Another key issue to be addressed is the domestic abuse cases during lockdowns. Since this is an issue that is unlikely to be ameliorated with mental health interventions alone, support for getting out of an abusive situation should be implemented. This includes expanding the reach of existing hotlines and building more shelters for people suffering from partner and in-house abuse that have the capacity to allow people to isolate themselves if they are sick. Additionally, work needs to be done to innovate a way in which a restraining order can be implemented during a stay-at-home mandate.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the limit on existing literature coming out of the pandemic. The literature on domestic abuse cases during the pandemic was quite limited and dispersed among countries with certain hotspots. Additionally, literature on domestic violence might not reflect the true rates of domestic violence because of difficulty in reporting and taboo. Literature on depression is widely seen, but specifically on postpartum during the pandemic and across the world is more difficult to come by.

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