

Gender-based violence in rural America: How disasters intensify existing inequities



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Background

Rural areas, which are at higher risk for floods, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires, have fewer resources for emergency preparedness and lack emergency transportation and communication infrastructure. Services for domestic violence victims have long been limited in rural areas due to geographic isolation and limited access to legal, shelter, and health services.

According to the *Rural Disparity in Domestic Violence Prevalence and Access to Resources* report, rural women are two times more likely to be turned away from services because there are too few services and too little staffing. More than 25% of rural women live more than 40 miles from the closest intimate partner violence program, compared to <1% of urban women.

Methods

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the challenges faced by domestic violence service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. An interview guide, approved by the University of Delaware's IRB was used. Participants (N=56), consisting of executive directors from State and Territorial DV Coalitions, were recruited via email. Interviews were recorded using detailed notes and researcher reflections. Data were analyzed using a double coding process guided by grounded theory and the constant comparison method. In addition, an online survey was distributed to service providers within 1,341 DV programs using Qualtrics.

Results

25 of the 56 (45%) State and Territorial Domestic Violence Coalition leaders completed an interview. 301 of the 1,341 (22.4%) of service providers responded to the web-based survey. Three themes were identified in the interviews and open-ended survey responses.

1 Challenges to Maintaining Safety and Privacy

During a disaster, safety and privacy can be difficult to maintain in congregate settings where residents may receive emergency assistance. However, in rural areas, the maintenance of safety and privacy is further complicated as victims are likely to personally know emergency responders, healthcare providers, and others involved in investigating reports of DV.

"...because it is such a small community, confidentiality can be really difficult. There are no secrets." Even with these challenges, one coalition leader pointed out "in rural towns, people have gotten really creative because everyone in the town and the surrounding area knows that this program is the place that helps people."

2 Limited Emergency Shelters and Lack of Transportation

Emergency sheltering during disasters is especially difficult in rural areas without hoteling and with other unique challenges such as the responsibility to care for livestock. This is an especially prevalent concern in expensive resort areas that are located in rural locations.

"...In small rural areas, hoteling was not easy and because of the housing market, there's just no place to rent even if you have money."

Most rural areas do not have access to public transportation, including taxis or Uber.

"...It is very rural, so getting to and from places is difficult anyway, but then, when you have the very limited transportation systems it [becomes] completely inaccessible, and that made it so that people were just sitting ducks stuck [with] the abuse."

3 Limited Technology Access and Fluency

In rural areas, internet connections are poor and internet fluency is limited, which can cut off a vital source of disaster-related information as well as access to virtual services for DV victims. One in four rural Americans still lack access to broadband internet.

"We have issues in rural areas with low quality Wi-Fi and cell phone signals. Even tried and true virtual services like hotlines require reliable cell phone coverage." In rural areas without wireless internet, "there were huge barriers in communicating with one another and with the community."

Conclusions

Disasters create challenges for domestic violence victims in rural areas. When transportation, communication, and other infrastructures – like shelters – are disrupted, rural service providers and survivors face unique obstacles. Equitable access for rural victims during disasters will require concerted efforts to close both currently documented and anticipated gaps as disasters become more frequent and severe.

