

Digital public health: a hopeful strategy to tackle the surge in domestic violence

Christopher Murray and colleagues¹ described some timely and valuable applications of digital technology in aiding prevention, surveillance, and management of COVID-19 during the current pandemic. However, we wish to highlight that such applications of digital public health measures must be broader than the epidemiological management of COVID-19. Such novel technologies can be applied to other concurrent public health crises, such as the so-called shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls.² In particular, increasing rates of domestic violence following COVID-19 protective measures involving social restrictions are a clear signal for policy makers to adopt a public health approach centred around improving domestic violence surveillance and to deliver evidence-based remote interventions, while face-to-face options are limited.³

There has been promising evidence for remote strategies that are designed to improve the detection (using online screening tools and hidden mobile-reporting apps) and management (through safety decision aids and delivery of remote psychotherapeutic sessions) of domestic violence.⁴⁻⁶ Many of these options are low cost and have the potential to be used in low-income and middle-income countries. Detection of domestic violence can be enhanced through such methods, alongside nationwide improvements to the electronic recording of domestic violence in routinely collected health-care data, similar to existing syndromic surveillance systems for infectious diseases.

Despite the optimism associated with adopting digital approaches, there are also important concerns about the widespread adoption of such technologies to combat

complex public health challenges such as domestic violence.⁴ Digital technologies could provide opportunities for control and coercion from abusers, if access to the apps is compromised. However, novel interface-level security measures that are being applied to mobile and web-based apps are providing hope in mitigating some of the described risk posed by these apps.⁴

Policy makers wishing to adopt a public health approach to combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond should consider making use of the available digital technologies to support case identification, surveillance, and delivery of interventions for domestic violence survivors. However, before adopting these technologies, there is a need to continue the development of security measures to ensure the safety of domestic violence survivors and to provide support for research to continually assess the efficacy of these remote approaches.

We declare no competing interests.

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