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UCF researchers studied partner cyber abuse during pandemic

By Daniela Vivas Labrador
Special to the Orlando Sentinel • May 03, 2022 at 10:20 am



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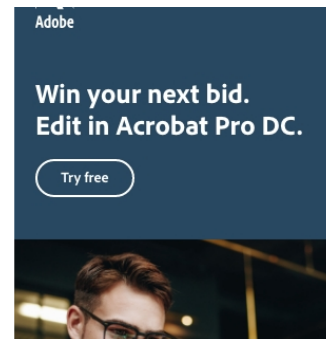
A recent study conducted by University of Central Florida researchers showed the prevalence of intimate partner cyber abuse stayed consistent before, during, and shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Erica Fissel, an assistant professor in UCF's department of criminal justice, defied her own hypothesis of intimate partner cyber abuse increasing with lockdowns, with results appearing to show that individuals did not experience these behaviors more frequently as they cohabitated with their partners during lockdowns.

"Intimate partner cyber abuse can be defined as the use of communication technologies to attempt, threaten, or complete physical, sexual, or psychological harm against an intimate partner or to monitor, coerce or control an intimate partner's behavior," said UCF assistant professor in departments of sociology and psychology Jackie Woerner in an email, who has also collaborated with Fissel on previous studies focused on understanding the perpetrator side of intimate partner cyber abuse.

"This includes behaviors such as monitoring partners' online activities including social media use, controlling access to online banking, sending threatening messages, cyberstalking, and sharing unwanted sexual photos," she said.

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Fissel’s preliminary data showed that between 34.7% and 38.5% respondents reported some form of intimate partner cyber abuse before, during and after, the lockdowns, with the highest percentage of respondents reporting abuse occurring before the pandemic and lockdowns began in March 2020.

During the lockdowns, the most reported form of cyber abuse reported by respondents was use of the partner’s online funds.

And although Fissel’s study focused solely on cyber abuse between intimate partners during the COVID-19 lockdowns, previous studies, including one done by [UCF, found that domestic violence incidents spiked 8% nationwide](#), including in Central Florida.

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Fissel said her main goal was to establish a valid definition of what intimate partner cyber abuse is, which is why she conducted a multistage research project. After researching and talking to general cyber abuse experts, she developed a survey to gather data from a nationally representative sample of 1,500 respondents.

But when the results from the first pilot survey came in, she realized she wasn’t asking the right questions.

“We were asking ‘within the past six months, have you experienced any of these behaviors within the context of your current intimate partner relationship,’ and they would check off the behaviors that they experienced,” Fissel said. “After these pilot tests, we found that 100% of people were experiencing these things within their intimate partner relationship. And we were like, ‘either this is a huge problem, like way worse than we thought, or we’re measuring it incorrectly.’”

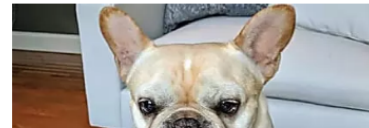
Fissel said she and her team took the challenge to a conference, where a member from the audience explained they share their location with their partner for safety reasons, opening up a new perspective for Fissel’s team.

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Jacqueline (Jackie) Woerner, assistant professor in UCF's departments of sociology and psychology, is currently working with Erica Fissel on a research paper that explores the relationship between alcohol use and intimate partner cyber abuse perpetration. As they move forward, they are trying to identify the motivation for the perpetration, "that why piece as well," Fissel said. - Original Credit: UCF (Courtesy photo)

"We did not think that there are people who are engaging in these types of behaviors, in very healthy, normal, well-functioning relationships," she shared.

An already [published](#) and two in-progress research papers later, Fissel said they have often circled back to the idea of "it depends."

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"One of the tricky things with intimate partner cyber abuse is that some of the behaviors that are on the list of potentially abusive behaviors are not always abusive," she said. "So it depends on the relationship context."

Alternatively, one of her in-progress research studies explores how normalized these behaviors have become. Fissel said some individuals might not recognize them or see them as problematic rather than abusive.

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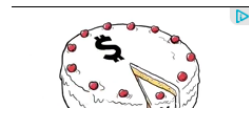
"In our research, we found that only 3% of victims reported it to law enforcement," Fissel shared. "That's a very small percentage of individuals even seeking out law enforcement or any sort of criminal justice intervention. That's part of why we don't have anything because it hasn't really been confronted to those individuals in the criminal justice system yet."

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Erica Fissel, an assistant professor in UCF's department of criminal justice, has been working on intimate partner cyber abuse research since 2018. Fissel said that after finishing up the second and third research papers from the data she gathered in the summer of 2019, she will continue to pursue her goal of creating danger assessments, policies, and prevention strategies like the ones that have been previously developed for domestic violence. - Original Credit: UCF (Ross Wolf / Courtesy photo)

Woerner also hopes further research can be used as a preventative measure.

"Understanding cyber abuse perpetration with the goal of preventing it is a critical step. Many of these behaviors are extremely common, and many victims don't label their experiences as violence, so they often go undetected in clinical care settings," she stated.

There is still a lot to learn about risk factors and motives for perpetration by intimate partners, Woerner said

"Our ultimate goal is that we can create a measure that can be used by domestic violence entities, shelters, or other sorts of help-seeking locations that can help identify if someone's at really high risk," she explained. "We need to understand how these behaviors evolve and co-occur with offline abuse so that we can create a short survey like they do for offline abuse, where they can say 'are you experiencing these types of things? okay, you are in a lot of danger right now, these are the resources that you need.'"

Reach Harbor House of Central Florida's 24-hour crisis hotline at 407-886-2856 or email contactus@harborhousefl.com if speaking would be unsafe.

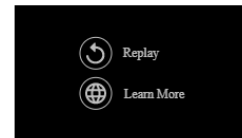
The [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) is available 24/7. If you need support, call 1-800-799-7233. If you're unable to speak safely, log onto thehotline.org or text LOVEIS to 22522.

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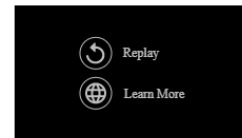


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