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# COVID-19 and Femicides in Brazil





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# The Context

# THE CONTEXT

**Many studies have assessed the impact of COVID-19 and social isolation policies on various forms of domestic violence, but very few have sought to study the effects on femicides.** The conclusions from this existing literature are mixed<sup>1</sup>, suggesting the need for further research with this focus. Femicide has a strong and prolonged impact on women's families<sup>2</sup>. Surviving children of women killed by their intimate partners experience lasting adverse effects as they lose one parent to murder, the other to prison, and often have to leave their parents' home and adapt to a new living environment (WHO, 2012).

**In 2017, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Brazil had the fifth-highest rank in femicide rates among the 83 nations for which statistics were available.** Although since 2015 the crime of femicide has been punished with stricter penalties, it still represents a significant public health burden in Brazil. The rate of 4.8 homicides per 100,000 women is only below those observed in El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, and Russia. Further, an important share of homicides (about 25%) occurs within the victim's home,

and 50% of the recorded cases among women aged 18-59 are perpetrated by their current or former intimate partners (Waiselfisz 2015).

**Evidence from monitoring of measures adopted by different countries, including Brazil, suggests trends of policies and interventions for addressing VAW during COVID-19.** Key measures implemented involved strengthening response and support systems; ensuring financial and human resources to maintain essential services for violence survivors; expanding awareness and access to information; and adopting technology-based solutions and innovative adaptations (Bastos et al. 2020). In Brazil, similar key policies and interventions were adopted at the federal and state levels, including in São Paulo State and its municipalities.

**This note, based on Diaz et al. (2022), provides a case study of the consequences of social distancing measures implemented to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, on femicides, the most extreme form of violence against women (VAW)<sup>3</sup>.** Our focus on femicides was determined

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Asik and Nas Ozen (2021) found that social distancing led to a decrease in femicides in Turkey. By contrast, Hoehn-Velasco et al. (2021) reported a stability of femicides in Mexico with respect to social isolation during the pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> Femicide, the most extreme form of violence against women (VAW), is generally defined as the intentional murder of women because they are women (World Health Organization 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The State of São Paulo was selected for this analysis for the following key reasons: i) it comprises more than 20% of the total Brazilian population; ii) Since 2000, São Paulo has had a system to file police reports over the internet, which enables access to systematic data for the analysis, and as of April 3, 2020, the reporting of domestic violence cases was allowed as part of the system; iii) Brazil recorded 1,229, 1,330 and 1,350 femicides in 2018, 2019 and 2020 (respectively), and the State of São Paulo accounted for around 11% of these cases in 2018 and 13.5% in the other years, reaching 168 cases of femicide in 2020 (Diaz et al. 2022), figures that are relatively high also by international standards.

by the fact that high rates of these cases in Brazil have raised concerns and because femicide data is less likely to suffer from underreporting, a known data limitation in the literature. The analysis distinguishes between the consequences of social distancing measures and the potential effects of other pandemic-related factors on the incidence of femicides, in particular the increase in unemployment and consequent loss of household income. It also explores the possible relationship

between femicide incidence and the implementation of emergency cash transfers by the federal government to relieve household financial stress during the pandemic. Based on existing evidence on responses by countries, including Brazil, to impacts of COVID-19 on VAW, this note further suggests some preliminary lessons and policy recommendations for preventing and mitigating impacts of social distancing measures on VAW.



# How did Countries, Including Brazil, Respond to Impacts of COVID-19 on VAW?

# HOW DID COUNTRIES, INCLUDING BRAZIL, RESPOND TO IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON VAW?

**Evidence from early monitoring of measures adopted by different countries suggested trends of policies and interventions for short-term relief in addressing VAW during COVID-19<sup>4</sup>.** Key measures implemented involved strengthening response and support systems, including helplines, psychosocial support, and alternative accommodation for women; ensuring minimum budgeting and human and financial resources to maintain essential services for violence survivors; and expanding awareness and access to information. In addition, technology-based solutions and innovative adaptations to enable and expand access to security and judicial services and psychological support proved to be critical (Bastos et al. 2020).

**In Brazil, similar key policies and interventions were adopted at the federal level in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in São Paulo State and its municipalities (box 1).** Between March and July 2020, the federal government adopted legislation designating VAW services as essential which should remain open during the pandemic, and mandating that cases reported through the national VAW helpline

should be communicated to authorities within 48 hours. It also determined that security agencies should create virtual assistance communication channels for survivors, that urgent protective measures could be requested through online channels and that any such measures should be automatically extended and enforced throughout the pandemic. In addition, the government launched a national contingency plan including a national awareness and information campaign targeting survivors, men and bystanders, the creation of online and digital platforms for reporting, among others.

**In particular, in light of employment shocks experienced particularly by the more vulnerable, especially women, measures targeting their economic security were also relevant to mitigate gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, including, in certain contexts, on VAW.** Analysis of fiscal and economic, social protection and labor market measures registered globally throughout 2020 and 2021 shows that 13% address women's economic security<sup>5</sup>. Close to half of these were adopted as part

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<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the World Bank started to systematize information on "GBV and COVID-19 Initiatives" including VAW policy responses. The early monitoring exercise identified five major trends in initiatives: (i) adaptations to justice sector interventions; (ii) communications campaigns using mass media; (iii) increased resources available to survivors; (iv) innovations in the provision of support to survivors; and (v) increased funding to organizations that work on the prevention of VAW. The World Bank discontinued this monitoring in 2021 given the existence of other similar and broader efforts; the resource however was a key basis for World Bank analysis on trends in early 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The analysis examined data obtained from the UNDP and UN Women's COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, which monitors responses adopted by governments worldwide to tackle the pandemic, highlighting those that have integrated a gender lens. More information can be found at <https://data.undp.org/gendertacker/>



of social protection programmes, mostly through cash transfers that prioritize women as the main recipients, showing the relevance of this form of policy response in strengthening women's economic security in the context of COVID-19<sup>6</sup>. In Brazil, the federal government

passed legislation providing for emergency cash transfers to low-income families, as earlier referenced, particularly prioritizing single mothers (women head of households with young children), who received double the financial benefit<sup>7</sup>.

## Box 1. Policy responses addressing VAW in São Paulo, Brazil

**Given the focus of this note on São Paulo data, it is worth mentioning some of the policies adopted at the state and city level to address increased rates of VAW during the pandemic.** In São Paulo, all 134 VAW-specialized police stations in the state continued working normal hours. In April 2020, the police force created an online portal where domestic violence survivors can request restraining orders. São Paulo state also hosted live sessions and developed videos aimed at raising awareness on VAW during the pandemic. Furthermore, four new VAW-specialized police stations were launched in the following cities: São Caetano do Sul, Itanhaém, Itaquaquecetuba e Arujá.

**In June 2020, São Paulo city launched a package targeted at vulnerable women, which included additional housing, specialized support, financial aid, awareness-raising and capacity building measures.** The package included training 60 additional female attendants to provide specialized support for VAW survivors through the city's hotline and an awareness-raising campaign and building capacity on VAW for health agents who perform home visits to vulnerable families, expanding the number of agents with this kind of training from 756 to 3,630. Hotel rooms were offered to vulnerable women (i.e., whose income corresponded to one fourth of the minimum wage or less) who had requested restraining orders, in addition to a 400 BRL voucher as housing support<sup>8</sup>. In addition, other initiatives were launched, including a campaign against abuse in public transportation, new survivor support units in bus and subway terminals, and the creation of the [Violence Against Women Observatory](#).

Sources: UNDP 2020, Governo de São Paulo 2020 and Cidade de São Paulo 2020.

<sup>6</sup> COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker Global Fact Sheet (<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2021-11/undp-unwomen-covid19-global-regional-factsheet-2020-en-v4.pdf>)

<sup>7</sup> On April 2, 2020, Law 13.982 was enacted providing for emergency financial support of R\$600 (USD 115) to low income families, whereby single mothers were granted twice the amount and were prioritized in withdrawing the cash

<sup>8</sup> The housing support (auxílio aluguel) was established by Law [17.320/2020](#) and regulated by [Decree 60.111/2021](#).

# Case Study of the Consequences of Social Distancing Measures Implemented to Deal with the COVID-19 Pandemic in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, on Femicides

# CASE STUDY OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES IMPLEMENTED TO DEAL WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE STATE OF SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL, ON FEMICIDES

## Methodology

**This case study analysed quantitatively the impacts of social distancing measures on the probability of femicides in the State of Sao Paulo, Brazil.** As detailed below, these impacts were estimated through fixed-effects regression models that compared femicide data in the State for the period of higher social distancing during the pandemic (March-April 2020) to corresponding periods in previous years

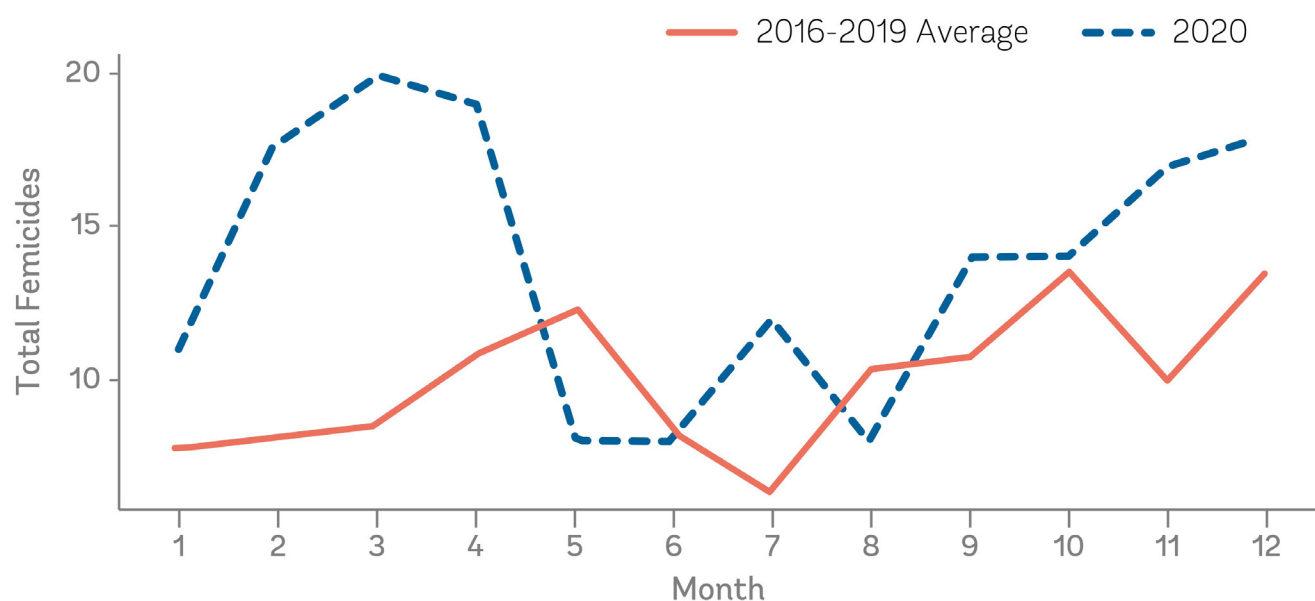
(2016 to 2019), as well as to later and earlier periods of 2020. Our analyses for Brazil examined data at the municipality level for the State of São Paulo, for all its 645 municipalities, ranging from January 2016 (i.e., pre-pandemic) to December 2020 (i.e., including periods after stay-at-home orders were implemented in the State beginning on 22 March 2020).

## Main Variables of Interest

**Our main outcome variable was the probability of a femicide occurrence, in a given municipality, during the period of higher social distancing during the pandemic.** This probability was measured by a binary variable that equals one if a femicide occurred during that period in the municipality, zero otherwise. Weekly and monthly data on femicide episodes were calculated from the data available at the State's

digital police records (Public Security Office). The evolution of femicides before and after the first official case of COVID-19 in the State, and of the introduction of social distancing and other pandemic-related policy measures, is displayed in **Figure 1** (Diaz et al. 2022).

Figure 1: AVERAGE NUMBER OF FEMICIDE VICTIMS BY MONTH OF THE YEAR IN THE STATE OF SAO PAULO, BRAZIL (2016-19 AND 2020)

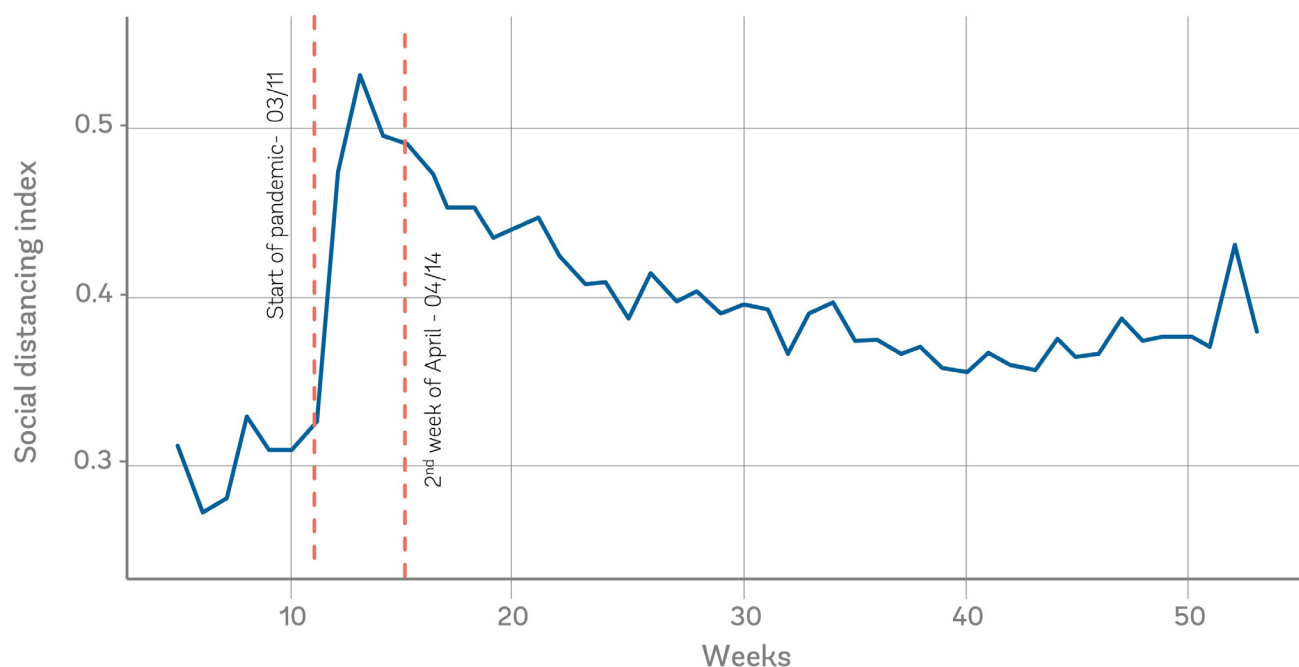


**The degree of social distancing adherence in each municipality was the main explanatory variable in our analyses.** This was measured using a InLoco Social Isolation Index-SII<sup>9</sup> based on anonymised, user-authorized location data collected daily from 60 million mobile phones, indicating the percentage of devices that remained within a 450-metre radius of the home location. InLoco index information was gathered for the period between 1 February 2020 and 31 December 2020 (Figure 2). Additional data used include information about each municipality's monthly share of beneficiaries of the federal COVID-19 emergency

financial aid program (obtained from the Ministry of Citizenship), other socio-economic characteristics of the municipalities (poverty and extreme poverty rates, a multidimensional social vulnerability index) and a constructed measure of monthly changes in employment by gender and industry.

<sup>9</sup> InLoco. Mapa brasileiro da COVID-19. <https://tinyurl.com/ybepensd> (Accessed: 13/10/21).

Figure 2: **EVOLUTION OF THE INLOCO SOCIAL DISTANCING INDEX IN THE STATE OF SAO PAULO, BRAZIL (01 FEB 2020-31 DEC 2020)**



## Other Explanatory Variables

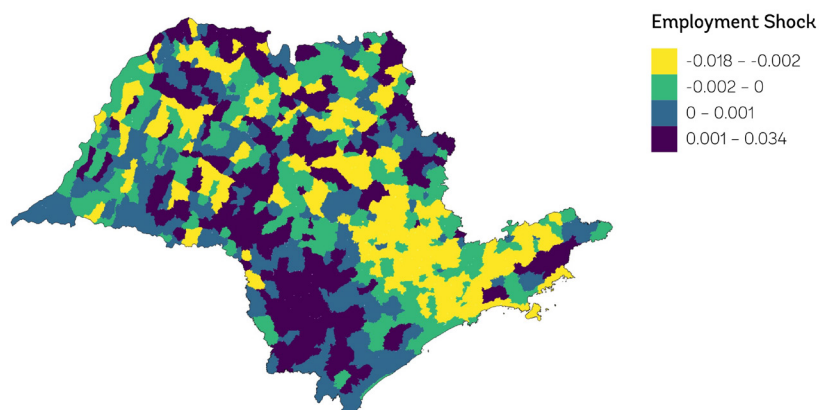
To investigate possible economic channels influencing the femicide impacts of social distancing during the pandemic, we constructed a measure of employment shocks from data of formal employment databases<sup>10</sup>.

This variable can be interpreted as an expected rate of employment loss, expressed as a fraction of the municipality population. It can take either positive or negative values, where negative values indicate net employment destruction. We used this measure to identify the municipalities where industries dominated

by men have more severe job losses and defined a binary variable that takes the value of one if the municipality had employment destruction in industries dominated by men. **Figure 3** shows the spatial distribution of the employment shock in the state of São Paulo. The most and least affected municipalities (in terms of job losses) are highlighted in yellow (job losses of 0.2% or more) and green (employment loss lower than 0.2%).

<sup>10</sup> Sources: General Register of the Employed and Unemployed (CAGED) for recruitment and termination of employment and annual employment from the Annual Social Information List (RAIS) for 2019 (i.e. before the COVID-19 pandemic).

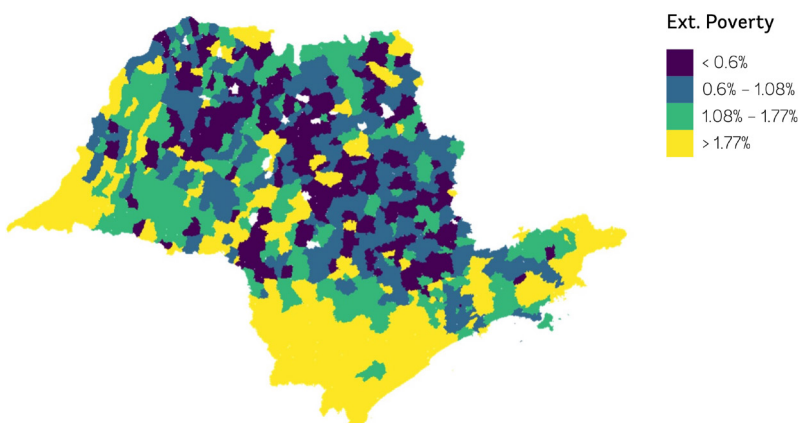
Figure 3: **Employment shock by municipality, April 2020**



To further investigate economic factors potentially influencing the impacts of social distancing on femicides, along with possible differential impacts according to socio-economic conditions, we obtained poverty index data from the “Atlas of Human Development in Brazil” platform<sup>11</sup>. This index is defined according to the eligibility criteria of Bolsa Família, the largest conditional cash transfer program in Brazil.

Families in a situation of extreme poverty are defined as those with a monthly income of up to R\$70.00 per person<sup>12</sup> or US\$ 39.76<sup>13</sup>. We defined a municipality as being “extremely poor” if it had a percentage of families in extreme poverty that is above the median for the state (1.08%). The municipalities identified as extremely poor according to this definition are depicted in green and yellow in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4: **Distribution of Sao Paulo municipalities according to the proportion of families living in extreme poverty**



<sup>11</sup> This platform is the result of a partnership between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), and the Joao Pinheiro Foundation (FJP). As detailed in <http://www.atlasbrasil.org.br/acervo/atlas> “Conceived with the purpose of presenting the Municipal Human Development Index (MHDl), the Atlas currently makes available, in addition to the index, more than 330 indicators that encompass topics such as health, education, income and labor, housing, social vulnerability, environment and political participation, for the 5,570 cities (...)”.

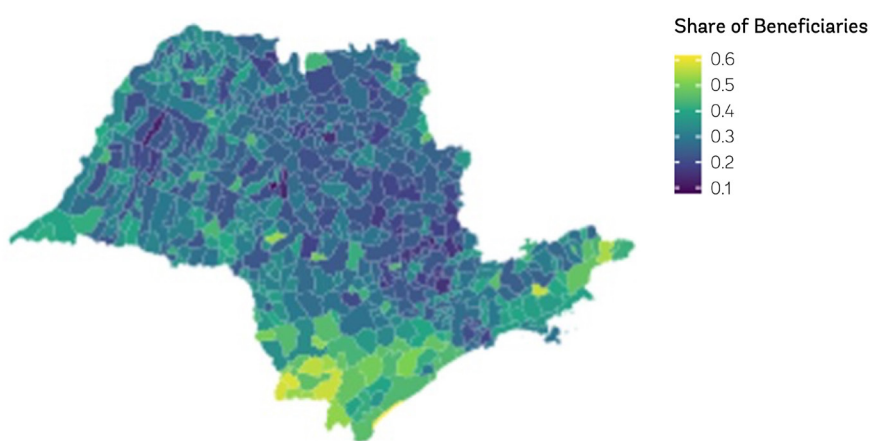
<sup>12</sup> Value of 2010 August.

<sup>13</sup> We consider the average PTAX R\$\$ of 1.76 for 2010.

As a final economic channel potentially affecting the social distancing impacts on femicides, we also examined data on the coverage of the federal emergency financial aid program, defined as the proportion of beneficiary families in each São Paulo municipality. Financial aid was offered from April to

December 2020 to adults with no formal employment, from families with a monthly per capita income of up to half the minimum wage, or total monthly family income of up to three times the minimum wage. The share of emergency aid beneficiary families by municipality in São Paulo is depicted in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: **Share of families in receipt of emergency financial aid by municipality – April 2020**



## Estimation Methods

We estimated how changes in factors such as social distancing adherence, employment, and the share of emergency aid beneficiaries influenced the probability of a femicide occurrence in a given municipality. Our empirical strategy relies on the variation in the timing of social distancing implementation across municipalities, alongside the difference in femicide rates and other municipality factors between 2020 and the previous years. We estimated linear models with multi-way fixed effects applied to different samples: first, the sample including all municipalities (170,925 municipality-week observations) and, second, the sample including only poor municipalities (83,210 municipality-week observations).

# What did the Case Study Find?



# WHAT DID THE CASE STUDY FIND?

## The Impact of Social Distancing Measures on Femicides in the State of São Paulo, Brazil

**Overall, higher social isolation in São Paulo State municipalities after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the probability of femicide in these municipalities.** The probability of a femicide almost doubled during the most pronounced period of isolation: from the pre-pandemic average of 0.174 femicides per municipality-year, the measured impact was an increase of 0.169 percentage points in this probability. Our findings also suggest that this incremental effect on the probability of femicide due to social isolation was driven by employment shocks in male-dominated sectors.

Although our evidence indicates that the harmful effect of increased social distancing on the probability of femicide was the same on average between poorer and richer municipalities, financial aid to poorer families did contribute to mitigate that harmful effect. We find that, considering that the average share of people who received financial aid is 29.8% in the extremely poor municipalities, the

effect associated with the financial aid in extremely poor municipalities is more than two times greater than the negative effect of the employment shock. This suggests that the poverty “safety net” in the form of financial aid offered by the federal government to vulnerable families, amid the context of economic downturn during the pandemic, has had a protective role against further negative consequences of social isolation on the probability of femicide.



# Conclusions

# CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis indicates that the probability of femicide in any given municipality of the State of São Paulo nearly doubled during the more pronounced social isolation period after the COVID-19 outbreak.

There are several potential mechanisms that may have influenced the occurrence of femicides during the pandemic. We explored the role of job losses in male dominated industries, poverty and financial aid provided by the government as pathways through which social isolation may affect the risk of femicide. We find evidence that economic distress increased the risk of femicide during the pandemic.

**Our evidence also suggests that governmental financial aid to households mitigated the increase in the risk of femicide.** This finding could be linked to existing evidence that shows that economic transfers are effective in preventing interpersonal violence, since economic stress is a key driver of VAW. These types of transfers can also increase the economic independence of women, allowing them to leave abusive relationships (Kerr-Wilson et al 2020; Baranov et al., 2021).

The above is important to consider also because, while initial spikes of domestic violence during COVID-19 were associated more directly with quarantine measures, job losses and constrained financial sustainability for women in later stages of the pandemic were identified as potential drivers of increased abuse within the home and declines in reporting (Tavares, P. 2021). And indeed, lack of financial independence has been consistently pointed out as a major factor contributing to VAW during the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Economic and emotional channels to VAW are closely related, as pointed out by Beland et al. (2021). All these channels, together with the fact that people outside the families could not act as agents of social control (Gelles, 1983), potentialize the pandemic effect on violence against women.

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<sup>14</sup> Examples of evidence during COVID-19 include: Social media analysis echoed an emphasis on financial challenges in relation to domestic violence during the lockdown (Ah-Rawi, 2021); A phone survey in Indonesia analysed factors that might mitigate the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) during COVID-19 (World Bank 2020). The main predictors of exposure to GBV were associated to economic stress. Moreover, food insecurity and the number of household members increase the chances of exposure to VAW. Having a second job was the strongest protective factor from VAW according to the study (Ibid).

# Responding to Impacts of COVID-19 on Femicides: Some Preliminary Lessons and Policy Recommendations

# RESPONDING TO IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON FEMICIDES: SOME PRELIMINARY LESSONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Femicide is the most extreme form of VAW. Therefore, its prevention involves investing in different policy measures likewise set forth as recommendations to prevent other forms of violence against women, and which involve a wide range of sectors and actors.

In particular, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic,

## **Strengthening VAW services and adapting them to virtual contexts, in particular:**

- Maintaining support health and social services open (UNICEF 2020; UN Women 2020) and determining services for survivors as essential, with a high priority on police and justice responses (UN Women 2020), is crucial to prevent femicides. The continuation of psychosocial and recreational activities within the limits of local COVID-19 protocols is also relevant for the benefit of survivors' mental health (IRC 2020).
- The continuation and adaptation of police reporting systems to ensure accessibility for survivors, in particular through virtual and digital channels, including the prioritization and urgent response to VAW reported cases and the online availability

the consequences of social distancing measures implemented and potential effects of other pandemic-related factors on the incidence of femicides, and the relationship between femicide incidence and the implementation of financial aid measures explored in this note, the following preliminary lessons and recommendations may be suggested:

of urgent protection measures, as well as the automatic extension of existing ones, particularly during the period of isolation measures.

- Further structuring and providing VAW services using remote service delivery (UNICEF 2020), ensuring safety protocols are in place in VAW-specific helplines, apps, websites etc. to mitigate the threat of violence escalation (Seff et al 2020).

## **Establishing or Reinforcing Early Warning /Alert Systems:**

- Usually established and monitored by police departments, these systems include detailed risk assessments of women who have been previously abused and monitor them more consistently, providing them protection and support services. These systems have expanded significantly and have been transformed by the availability of new

technology. Police Risk Assessment, the core protocol of the Spanish VioGen system (VPR), for example, has shown significant results in predicting femicides.<sup>15</sup> During contexts of crisis, such as the pandemic, higher attention should be paid to women at higher risk of victimization.

### **Implementing or expanding financial aid:**

- Adopting or expanding social protection measures in the form of financial aid, including direct cash transfer, staple foods packages, or other subsidies, including cash for care, electric bill, and wage subsidies (World Bank 2020).
- Implementing policies fostering women's economic empowerment and childcare policies during the pandemic and as part of recovery measures (World Bank 2020).

### **Raising Awareness on VAW reporting and services among survivors, men and the overall community :**

- Given the high level of underreporting of violence against women, many femicide victims may not be able to be tracked prior to being murdered. In the case of Brazil, for example, according to the Federal Government approximately 70% of women who were victims of femicide had never reported her

aggressor before.<sup>16</sup> Also, a study conducted by the Public Prosecutor of the State of São Paulo in 2018 showed that, in that year, only 4% of the femicide victims in the state (5 out of 124) had previously reported her aggressor.<sup>17</sup> Hence it is safe to assume that the vast majority of survivors of violence against women in Brazil could not be tracked by an alert system. This reinforces the importance of also investing in broad and targeted (e.g. at school, workplaces, public spaces, etc.) awareness raising campaigns about the availability of services, options for reporting and the importance of bystander and community involvement to prevent and protect women from escalation of violence and, ultimately, femicides.

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<sup>15</sup> López-Ossorio, Juan José; González-Álvarez, José Luis; and Antonio Andrés-Pueyo, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2020-2/novembro/70-das-mulheres-vitimas-de-feminicidio-nunca-denunciaram-agressores>.

<sup>17</sup> Ministério Público do Estado de São Paulo, 2018.

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