

SURVEY: VIOLENCE INCREASED IN CALIFORNIA DURING COVID-19

Survey of state residents shows increase in online sexual harassment, violence, and substance misuse over the last year

Eight percent of Californians purchased a firearm during the pandemic

SAN DIEGO, May 13, 2021 – Nineteen percent of Californians surveyed reported an increase in violence in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic, 15 percent reporting more partner violence against women and 11 percent reporting an escalation in family violence against children, a new survey shows. More than a third of Californians surveyed (35%) reported a rise in substance use in their community.

The findings come from the CalVEX study, a survey of Californians conducted by researchers at the University of California San Diego and NORC at the University of Chicago. The survey of 2,203 California adults was initially conducted March 2020, and then again in March 2021 to explore effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers found personal reports of online sexual harassment doubled during the pandemic. Three percent of internet users reported sexual harassment in March 2020. One year later, the number doubled to six percent. And reports of physical violence, including threats with a weapon, also increased from 4% in 2020 to 7% in 2021.

“The outward effects of the pandemic on health and the economy are just the tip of the iceberg,” said Anita Raj, PhD, director of the Center on Gender Equity and Health at UC San Diego and lead researcher on the survey. “Less visible effects of the pandemic include more violence, harassment, and substance misuse, compounding stress felt in communities across the state. Latinx and Asian Californians are especially likely to witness this increased violence in their communities.”

With understanding that the past year has also seen increased politicization and public activist events, and with violence at times erupting at these, the research team asked about participation in and firearms at these events. One third of survey respondents attended a political or activism event between March 2020 and March 2021. Ten percent of these attendees said they carried a firearm to the event. Eight percent of Californians purchased a firearm from March 2020 to March 2021, with 4% reporting that this was their first time acquiring a firearm.

“For many Californians, the murder of George Floyd and the contentious election were reasons to demonstrate despite fears of COVID-19,” said Nicole Johns, a research data analyst at the Center on Gender, Equity and Health at UC San Diego. “The number of people saying they carried a firearm to these kinds of events was surprising – and in light of incidents of gun violence seen across the country, this may raise security concerns.”

CalVEX 2020 surveyed experiences of violence in the past year in California, conducted in March 2020. The CalVEX 2021 study was conducted in March 2021, allowing for a direct comparison between state-level representative data collected at the start of the pandemic versus one year later.

Full results are available at <https://geh.ucsd.edu/cal-vex/>.

The survey of 2,203 California adults was conducted March 12-24, 2021 by NORC at the University of Chicago. Funding for the study was provided by Blue Shield Foundation of California and Kaiser Permanente. The margin of sampling error is +/- 2.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

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