

CORONAVIRUS

# In shadow of two Bergen killings, pandemic worsening severity of domestic violence calls

**Alexis Shanes** NorthJersey.com

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The grisly back-to-back killings that rocked a normally quiet part of Bergen County this week were unrelated. But they share a common thread: both had domestic ties.

It's unknown whether the coronavirus pandemic created or hastened the conditions that allowed Michelle Burns' and Divna Rosasco's perpetrators to carry out the alleged murders. But domestic violence experts say the COVID-19 outbreak has created circumstances ripe for proliferation of such violence.

Calls for help from victims are increasingly intense, even as numbers of those calls fall because victims are trapped with their abusers and cannot safely reach out for help, one expert said.

"With the pandemic we believe that people have hunkered down," said Julye Myner, executive director of the Center for Hope and Safety, a victim services nonprofit based in Rochelle Park. "Being in the abusive situation 24/7 limits the ability to reach out for help.

"People aren't reaching out for help and now we're seeing the murders," she added. "We're quite alarmed."

Burns, a beloved mother of three girls who range in age from 6 months to 5 years, was stabbed to death early Tuesday in her Dumont apartment. Her boyfriend, Jeffrey Daniels, the father of two of her children, was arrested and charged with murder.

Burns' sister, Nicole Boccellari, told NorthJersey.com the couple had a history of arguments and fights but that Burns never filed a restraining order against Daniels

because she feared he would kill her.

One day earlier and less than a mile away, Rosasco, a 51-year-old real estate agent, was stabbed to death in her Cresskill home and her body left in a Teaneck creek. Authorities said 19-year-old Nicolas Coirazza killed Rosasco and enlisted the help of an unnamed 14-year-old girl to dispose of the body and cover up the evidence.

Prosecutors allege Coirazza knew Rosasco's family and was visiting her home when the killing occurred.

**'She was loved by all of us':** Family and friends mourn mother of three killed in Dumont

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## **Increased anxiety and violence**

When the coronavirus pandemic struck in March, JBWS, a Morristown nonprofit that aids domestic violence victims, had a safe house full of victims and their families. The JBWS team helped those families find longer-term safe housing during March and early April, said Diane Williams, JBWS CEO and president.

“There was concurrently a significant drop in calls to our 24/7 helpline as well as requests for emergency shelter,” Williams said. “Both our emergency shelter census and our helpline decreased by more than 50%.”

The pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have increased the levels of anxiety and violence in some homes, Myner said.

Both experts pointed to isolation as an exacerbating factor. Family justice centers, courts and nonprofit offices moved operations online, leaving victims disconnected from some support systems. Isolation can also lead to depression, which in turn can be a triggering factor for abusers, although the two aren't directly linked.

And while the number of calls has decreased — a trend Myner said is “extremely concerning” — they have in some cases increased in intensity.

“The calls that we received were women calling from a room, with the abuser in the next room, just whispering,” Myner said. “We’ve had situations when the calls have ended very abruptly. We’ve had victims who had their homes destroyed. One of our clients was severely physically assaulted after calling us.”

Data provided by the New Jersey State Police show a downturn in arrests and charges tied to domestic violence, even after Attorney General Gurbir Grewal advised law enforcement about vigilance toward domestic violence, according to the state.

From March 1 to June 15, 2019, police made 6,900 arrests involving domestic violence charges, according to the state police data.

During the same period in 2020 — at the height of the coronavirus pandemic — arrests involving domestic violence charges totaled 5,697 — a decrease of more than 1,200, or more than 17%.

### ***Story continues below.***

“From the outset of this pandemic, we knew we needed to be especially vigilant about protecting victims of domestic violence, because evidence from other countries indicated that domestic violence incidents increased while residents were quarantined,” Grewal said in a statement to NorthJersey.com on Thursday.

“While the numbers of reported incidents have not increased for the most part, numbers alone do not tell the whole story,” he said, “particularly when we have tragic incidents like the recent domestic-related homicides in Bergen County and when we hear anecdotal information about victims who feel trapped and unable to report abuse.”

In response, the attorney general’s office offered organizations that had been granted funding from state victim services an opportunity to apply to increase their budgets to pay for COVID-19 related costs, such as emergency relocation, staff overtime and supplies. The state also made \$500,000 available to county domestic violence response teams for emergency victim housing.

In March, as much of New Jersey shut down, victim services organizations mostly stayed open, creating a new challenge — communicating to victims that their services were still available. They ramped up outreach: JBWS did so on locations where people under the

stay-at-home order would still venture, such as grocery stores and laundromats. The Center for Hope and Safety partnered with a public relations firm for a 45-day outreach campaign.

***Story continues below.***

In addition to isolation, domestic violence behaviors can include coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional and economic abuse and even use of children to achieve power and control, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Williams said JBWS has heard about physical assaults and threats of using knives and guns — but that those signs aren't new.

Violence could also include actions uniquely tied to the pandemic, according to the Hotline. Abusers could withhold materials such as hand sanitizer from victims or feed them misinformation about the virus. They could also prevent victims from seeking medical attention.

Domestic violence incidents often occur between romantic partners. But the term can be used more broadly to describe any abuse and violence that happens in a home. Domestic violence is not limited to one gender, although it is most often perpetrated against women.

One often-overlooked group is older adults, who could be at risk for domestic violence now more than ever.

Older adults are among the populations most vulnerable to COVID-19, meaning they may stay home longer even as New Jersey begins to lift its lockdown. They could be subjected to financial abuse, especially if those who care for them are impacted by the economic downturn. Abuse targeting elders can also involve violence or neglect.

Finances have “always been a strong factor in the equation as to whether or not a victim will leave,” Myner said. Victims with children are more likely to stay in abusive situations if they can't support themselves or their children, and lost wages during the pandemic compound the problem.

But even victims who don't leave can get help. Experts at organizations such as JBWS and Center for Hope and Safety can help victims develop safety plans for staying in their

homes until it's safe to leave. Survivors can still get temporary restraining orders, according to the attorney general's office.

And for those who have left, organizations — as always — are aiding survivors with support such as food pantries and rental assistance in addition to counseling and case management services.

“We are doing the best that we can in helping bridge those financial gaps,” said Myner, “so they don’t even consider going back.”

*If you are in immediate danger, call 911.*

*The National Domestic Violence Hotline offers confidential calls and chats any time, day or night. You can reach advocates at 1-800-799-7233 or [thehotline.org](http://thehotline.org).*

*The New Jersey Domestic Violence Hotline also provides confidential 24-hour support at 1-800-572-7233.*

*Alexis Shanes is a local reporter for [NorthJersey.com](http://NorthJersey.com). For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.*

*Email: [shanesa@northjersey.com](mailto:shanesa@northjersey.com) Twitter: [@alexisjshanes](https://twitter.com/alexisjshanes)*