



The domestic violence victim as COVID crisis figure

Paige L. Sweet¹ · Maya C. Glenn¹ · Jacob Caponi¹

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Abstract

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence came to be understood as a national emergency. In this paper, we ask how and why domestic violence was constructed as a crisis specific to the pandemic. Drawing from newspaper data, we show that the domestic violence victim came to embody the violation of gendered boundaries between “public” and “private” spheres. Representations of domestic violence centered on violence *spilling over* the boundaries of the home, *infecting* the home, or the home *imploding*. While theorists of crisis have focused on the central role of temporality in crisis construction, and especially the performative invocation of “new time,” we argue that crisis rhetoric often relies on anxiety about the transgression of spatial boundaries. Our spatial approach to crisis has two components. First, we argue that crisis framings often invoke the idea that seemingly distinct arenas of social life are becoming disorganized or blurred. And second, because thresholds between social spaces are coded as sacred during crisis, this spatial reordering is rendered dangerous, resulting in calls to resecure boundaries.

Keywords Boundaries · COVID · Crisis · Domestic Violence · Public/private · Securitization

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the figure of the domestic violence victim burst onto news headlines. Report after report indicated that raging beneath the surface of the virus was another devastating pandemic: domestic violence. The *New England Journal of Medicine* called domestic violence the “pandemic within a pandemic” (Evans et al., 2020). Language of “record high” and “soaring” rates of

✉ Paige L. Sweet
psweet@umich.edu

¹ University of Michigan, 500 S. State Street, LSA Building, Office 4116, 48109 Ann Arbor, MI, USA

domestic violence saturated headlines. Due to the isolating effects of COVID safety measures, commentators warned that abuse in the home was increasing dramatically during this exceptional period. Early reports from service providers confirmed that victims were facing isolation and lack of escape options during shutdowns (Bettinger-Lopez & Bro, 2020; Mohler et al., 2020; NDVH, 2020). International policy reports emphasized that COVID lockdowns would reverse “decades” of “progress” toward the eradication of domestic violence (Doyle et al., 2020). The domestic violence victim quickly became the quintessential, panic-laced figure of our newly “unsettled lives” (Swidler, 1986).

This media focus on domestic violence is surprising. While rates of domestic violence and unmet need for services are consistently high in the U.S. and elsewhere, media coverage is sparse. However, lockdowns in March, April, and May of 2020 raised the profile of the domestic violence victim, as pundits, journalists, government officials, and the public wondered what would happen to victims “stuck at home.” The “private” nature of domestic violence, which normally keeps it from public view, suddenly made it hyper-visible. Incredible “discursive urgency” (Nash, 2021:12) was established around domestic violence at this time. A medical epidemic became an “epidemic of meanings” (Treichler, 1987) about gender, home, family, and public/private boundaries. In this paper, we ask why public focus was concentrated on domestic violence during the first few months of the pandemic. How was the figure of the domestic violence victim made into a political subject? What kinds of anxieties and social transformations might this temporary fixation index?

Through analysis of newspaper articles published during the pandemic, we show that the domestic violence victim became a political subject through the way she came to embody the *spatial breakdown* of the lockdown period, or the violation of boundaries between “public” and “private” spheres. While literature on crisis tends to emphasize temporality, we advocate for a focus on spatial boundaries. We show that in crisis framings, the arrangement between symbolically charged social spaces – “public” and “private” in this case – becomes chaotic and dangerous. Specifically, we find that representations of domestic violence during COVID are saturated in metaphors about violence *spilling over* the boundaries of the home, *infecting* the home, or the private sphere *implosioning* during lockdowns. The public/private dichotomy seemed to have gone awry, as the news-reading public’s lives drifted homeward and they experienced their own crises of the “private” sphere. Here, crisis is constituted through anxiety about boundary transgressions, and especially transgressions into the “safe haven” of home.¹ The sacralized boundary between home and public therefore becomes important to understanding when and how crises are constructed, and whether or not boundaries must be *resecured* in response.

Throughout this paper, we follow the “enormous effort” that it takes to make something into a crisis (Wagner-Pacifici, 2021:13–14), focusing on three key crisis representations that circulated powerfully around domestic violence as a pandemic problem: the first constructs the home as a space of mounting chaos, the second relies on language of infection, and the third on language of implosion. In all three

¹ As historians have shown, fears about family violence in the U.S. have long been fixated on the “cultural image of home life as a harmonious, loving, and supportive environment” (Gordon, 1988:2).

cases, the boundaries separating “inside” from “outside” are violated and the resulting spatial reordering is dangerous. First, we show how experts “put a number on” domestic violence, giving the impression that a hidden social problem was newly spiraling into chaos. Despite uncertainty around if domestic violence rates were in fact increasing during lockdowns, these efforts at expert quantification established a sense of destabilized order between public and private, where “the private” was a war zone that demanded securitization. Next, we analyze the key metaphors around which domestic violence was constructed as a mounting problem of spatial boundary transgression: domestic violence invading our homes like the virus invades our bodies; COVID lockdowns causing our homes to implode with violence. Through imagery of spillover, infection, and implosion, the domestic violence victim symbolizes the violation of boundaries between public and private, both through entrapment and boundary collapse. Crisis emerges when the public invades or infects the private, and/or when the private can no longer masquerade as “safe haven.”

Drawing from this case, we offer a theory of crisis that highlights how social spaces seem to get juggled out of order, causing chaos and violence. Because existing literature on crisis focuses on the performative enactment of “new time” or new “temporal landscapes” (Tavory & Wagner-Pacifici, 2022; Xu & Reed, 2023), the spatial elements of crisis have not been adequately theorized. We argue that crises are often constructed through transgression of boundaries represented as sacred, imbued with cultural meaning about purity through separation (Douglas, 1966). And further, because social spaces – such as “home” or “nation” – carry enormous symbolic weight, the boundaries between them may be imagined as protective, as key to social order. The second part of our theoretical approach therefore argues that that attention to the spatial configurations of crisis allows us to see moments when the preexisting social order is called upon to be resecured through crisis. A richer conceptualization of the symbolically charged spatial boundaries through which crisis is wrought reveals how crisis can lead not necessarily to a demand for different futures, but to a call for restored boundaries. When transgressed boundaries are sacralized, crisis rhetoric therefore ironically reasserts and preserves the structure that it names “in crisis.” More generally, then, our theoretical approach asserts that: (1) crisis framings often invoke the idea that seemingly distinct arenas of social life are becoming disorganized or blurred; and (2) because thresholds between social arenas are coded as sacred during crisis, the spatial reordering is rendered dangerous, resulting in calls to resecure boundaries.

Crisis as boundary transgression

Theorizing crisis

To understand how the domestic violence victim operates as a crisis figure, we draw from theories of what crisis “does” as a framing of persons, history, and social problems (Berlant, 2007; Hagen & Elliot, 2021; Nash, 2021; Povinelli, 2011; Reed, 2016; Roitman, 2013; Sendroiu, 2022b; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). On the whole, this literature asks how *temporal ruptures* are constructed and acted upon during crisis. While

sociologists have been concerned with actors' construction of "new time" in crisis periods (Xu & Reed, 2023) and their projection of new futures through crisis claims (Tavory & Wagner-Pacifi, 2022; Sendroiu, 2023), other critics of crisis rhetoric have focused on the suspension of social problems in backwards time (see Berlant, 2007; Decoteau, 2023; Nash, 2021; Povinelli, 2011). In either case, the primary rupture is temporal; public demands for a different future are forged, either through restoring the past or through revolutionary transformation (Sendroiu, 2023; Tavory & Wagner-Pacifi, 2022).

Meaning is central to these scholars' analyses of rupture. Historical crises are not understood as objective events, but as "struggles over interpretation" (Reed, 2016) that may transform the world but only by way of cultural meanings made about them and acted upon (Sewell, 1996; Swidler, 1986; Wagner-Pacifi, 2017). For many theorists, the crisis period indexes a real set of structural transformations that actors must contend with, such as a political revolution. Sendroiu (2022a) has named this as an "ontological" approach to crisis because structural changes are genuinely unfolding in the world. For William Sewell, for example, when the "usual articulations between different structures become profoundly dislocated" and actors are "beset with insecurity," sequences of interpretation and action follow that create historical "events" (1996:845). Without analysis of those interpretations, we cannot know what has happened. For Swidler (1986), when people's lives are unsettled, they develop new strategies of action, allowing us to see their new cultural toolkits more clearly. In this way, crisis is an especially "cultural" moment for the analyst, who must unpack emergent meanings.

In these frameworks, there is *something* happening. A structural transformation is at hand. But that transformation does not come about on its own, in some brute objectivist way. Rather, actors change the course of history by forcing structural tensions into a particular shape and "doing" things based on that shape (Swidler, 1986). Crises therefore require "performative recognition" by actors (Sendroiu, 2023). To use Robin Wagner-Pacifi's language, "semiotic rearticulation" is the core mechanism that allows for the "eventful emergence" of new things (2017). Or as Sendroiu (2022a) puts it, crisis in these accounts is "generative" of new meanings and new patterns of social action. New time, wherein crises are "performative demands for a different future" (Sendroiu, 2023), has arrived (see also Xu & Reed, 2023).

Meaning and temporality are also central to accounts that take a more skeptical approach to crisis. Reed (2016:59) refers to this as the "fetishizing interpretation of crisis," wherein crisis framings are a *diversion* from the actual problem at hand. This approach derives from work on moral panics, concerned with the political construction of crisis – particularly via monstrous figures like witches, criminals, and welfare queens – to enact new forms of social control (Hall et al., 1978; Reed, 2015). Here, a scapegoat becomes the "ideological conductor" of crisis (Hall et al., 1978:viii). In these works, "crisis" does not refer to a real set of structural tensions; rather, crisis rhetoric is used to create a sense of "new time" that is deeply insecure, facilitating a conservative political movement of some kind.

Landing somewhere in between these two approaches, other scholars have shown that even when "crisis" names an actually existing social problem, that naming often serves to protect the status quo from critique. In our analysis, we track mostly

closely to this approach. Critics of crisis rhetoric show that selective framings of crisis force ordinary inequality into the realm of the “normal” and unremarkable. This is a temporal move: by placing the crisis in “new time,” what came before seems unproblematic. Unproblematic suffering – which goes unnamed – is what Lauren Berlant refers to as “slow death” (2007). “[The] deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a redefinitional tactic, a distorting or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environment phenomenon appear suddenly as an event” (Berlant, 2007:760). For Berlant (2007) and other critics, “crisis rhetoric” obscures the fact that we were already in a crisis of social inequalities and structural harms. What some experienced as “social order” before was already a “chain of everyday disasters” for others (Hagen & Elliot, 2021:2). Here, we are asked to examine long, slow inequalities through the lens of crisis (Roitman, 2013), wherein some forms of harm are rendered “catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” while others are allowed to persist as “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy” (Povinelli, 2011:13). The social construction of crisis sets up a temporal break, separating crisis time from normal time. Like moral panics, this is a kind of diversion tactic, but one that is less intentionally orchestrated and subtler in its implementation: the suggestion is that we should direct our energies toward crisis problems, while “normal” suffering trudges by unnoticed.

In a particularly incisive critique of crisis rhetoric, Nash (2021) argues that public interest in the “crisis” of black maternal health is more about consuming images of Black suffering than it is about saving Black women: “Crisis... has affective, temporal, and aesthetic dimensions that collectively conjure up an image of Black mothers occupying a nontime and nonplace, one that is thought to be qualitatively different from the here and now of the contemporary United States” (Nash, 2021:12). The “crisis framing” surrounding Black maternal health suspends Black women in backwards time. For Nash, crisis rhetoric does not *fabricate* crisis, but it severs the figure of crisis from the long-term conditions of her oppression and replaces meaningful political action with “discursive urgency.” Crisis here is not used to facilitate political conservatism, like in moral panics; but neither is the old structural order thoroughly challenged, like it is in the “ontological” approach to crisis. Rather, as Decoteau (2023) describes, “emergency” is invoked, disappearing enduring inequalities from view and conferring political capital to those who speak crisis language.

Because of the periodization that crisis framings perform, this scholarship leans heavily on an analytics of temporality. In many of these works, crisis or disaster marks a “speeding up” of normal time, wherein new governance measures and new cultural possibilities are generated through a sense of urgency (see Walby, 2021). For other analysts, crisis marks a break in time, wherein a facile rupture is constructed between “crisis times” and “normal times,” allowing the latter to proceed unproblematically. Crises are characterized, in part, by the way they seem to mark everything that came before as “in the past” (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017:42). Temporality is key, since crisis seems to conjure a new future, a new politics, a new way of living.

Spatial boundaries and public/private

Despite the emphasis on temporality in crisis literature, rhetoric surrounding domestic violence during COVID is less anxious about temporal breaks than it is about

violations of spatial boundaries. Wagner-Pacifici writes, “Whatever their nature or scale, events definitely cross thresholds – of time, of space, of political authority” (2017:49). While temporality is important for partitioning pandemic time from “normal” time, we find that domestic violence emerges as a pandemic problem through imagery of “spatial oscillations” (Wagner-Pacific 2017:61). Or to use Reed’s (2016) language, claims to crisis require discursive work to pull together “material geographies” with “symbolic boundaries.” Domestic violence as COVID crisis speaks to anxieties about the collapse of a boundary that cordons off the “haven” of home from the dangers, threats, and cacophony of the public sphere (see Mallett, 2004). As Douglas (1966) has argued, cultural ideas about separating social spaces, demarcating arenas of social life through rituals around pollution, serve to protect the existing social order. Social rules, especially those concerning how parts of society relate to each other, are defined by “beliefs in dangerous contagion,” which “mirror designs of hierarchy” (Douglas, 1966:4). In fact, Douglas uses the example of a groom carrying his bride across the threshold of the home to show the symbolic import of the boundary between private and public, where the image of a tightly bounded home space imposes order on the world (1966:115). Threat to this order therefore projects a sense of chaotic boundary dissolution.

As such, we posit that “crisis claims” (Sendroiu, 2023) often involve the transgression or dislocation of boundaries between social spaces. Literal spaces, such as “home,” need not be at issue. Rather, seemingly distinct arenas of social life appear to become disorganized in relation to each other. For example, the imaginary of separate nations is jeopardized when “Others” cross borders (Braun, 2022). Or the boundary between the individual body and the social body is made dangerously porous via claims to an “obesity epidemic” (Saguy, 2013). We use Mary Douglas’s arguments about purity and symbolic thresholds because when boundaries are culturally sacred, the breach between social spaces is likely to result in a call to *reassert* the boundary named “in crisis.” Language of infection, contagion, chaos, porosity, entrapment, and dirtiness abound when the neat arrangements between symbolically charged social arenas are unmoored. A spatial approach to crisis directs our attention to these moments and this kind of “polluting” language. Our theoretical approach therefore: (1) asserts that spatial boundary problems are often invoked in crisis framings *and*; (2) specifies the conditions under which such boundary problems may lead to reinvestment in the existing spatial order. Domestic violence during COVID is a useful case study to explore this theory of crisis because it calls forth the relationship between “public” and “private” in especially lucid ways.

Why is the dichotomy of public and private raised in the case of domestic violence? In many ways, domestic violence epitomizes how and why feminists have challenged the implicit separation between public and private “spheres” upon which social life rests. Gordon (1988) has shown that anxieties about immigration, urbanism, and the erosion of the nuclear family at the turn of the 20th century drove the construction of “family violence” as a social problem. While the first wave of reformers in the late 1800s idealized the home and “sacralized motherhood” (Gordon, 1988:57) in response to concerns about violence, Progressive Era reformers focused on the chaotic, dirty public sphere as a pathological influence on the family. Like COVID, largescale transformations to the relationship between domestic life and public life

bring domestic violence (anxiously) to the foreground of public consciousness. It wasn't until the 1960 and 1970 s, however, that second-wave feminists challenged the ideology of separate spheres directly as part of their efforts to intervene in family violence (Gordon, 1988).

Indeed, Marxists and feminists have long recognized that the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy revolves around the ideology of "separate spheres," wherein the "public" means masculine, wage labor, productivity, individualism, and politics, and the "private" means feminine, family, domestic labor, and "nature." As Carole Pateman wrote in 1983, "The dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" (281). The manufactured separation of the world into public and private spheres allows capitalism to reproduce itself through the degradation of women's labor and naturalization of their lack of fit into the world of work and politics. The ideology of separate spheres is also racialized, since, for example, women of color in the United States historically worked "publicly" in others' "private spheres" (Collins, 1990; Dow, 2019; Glenn, 1999).

In this sense, socialist and intersectional feminist scholarship has illustrated that separate spheres – the "liberal contrast between private and public" (Pateman, 1983:282) – is institutionalized in our lives and yet also a deep source of ideological mystification related to racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. While some experience the boundary between public and private as real, others simply cannot. "The separation of the private and public is both part of our actual lives and an ideological mystification of liberal-patriarchal reality" (Pateman, 1983:295). According to Catharine MacKinnon, this standpoint problem is why feminists had to "explode" the private sphere, revealing that, "The private is public for those for whom the personal is political. In this sense, for women, there is no private, either normatively or empirically" (1989:191). The separation of public from private is institutionalized, so we live it as *real*, even though it is actually an ideological construct that maintains inequality.

The case of domestic violence during COVID raises the seemingly outdated specter of the public/private dichotomy in important ways. On the one hand, the slew of articles about domestic violence under lockdowns suggests that second-wave feminists have decidedly won part of the battle: we consider "private" violence a "public" issue. On the other hand, these articles are replete with anxieties about violated boundaries between inside/outside and masculine/feminine. Of course, it makes sense that there was anxiety about the public infecting the private since many people's work and school lives were forced homeward. As such, COVID lockdowns created real spatial problems as well as anxiety about spatial breakdowns, showcased through representations of domestic violence. Our spatial approach to crisis encourages us to focus on how and why social spaces such as "public" and "private" were problematized, and through what imagery those spaces were rendered out of order. In our case, the taken-for-granted social geography of work/political versus home/familial is disrupted during COVID, and domestic violence becomes a symbol of that disruption.

However, rather than challenging the ideology of separate spheres, public discourses surrounding domestic violence during COVID *reified the public-private*

dichotomy. In popular renderings, the breakdown of public and private worlds seems to cause abuse. The collapse itself is sickening and potentially violent. Ironically, just when the public-private dichotomy seems to be revealed as a fragile construct, we double down on the idea that the public-private divide is healthy and protective: a deep and abiding sense of crisis is created when those spheres are either too hardened or too collapsed. In this sense, a spatial approach to crisis encourages us to ask further questions about the sacredness of boundaries between ostensibly separate arenas of social life. Through analysis of the symbolics of those boundaries, we can ask whether the preexisting spatial order is called upon to be restored or transformed. When the violated boundary is coded as sacred and the object's boundedness is symbolically charged – i.e., home, nation, body – crisis rhetoric may ironically reassert what it claims to trouble. Rather than forcing us to question whether violence in the home was ever “private” in the first place, representations of abuse during COVID suggest that a healthy divide between public and private – separateness, with some porosity – should be reinstated in order for the “safe haven” of home to return to normal.

Data & methods

To understand how domestic violence became a central COVID problem, we analyze a sample of newspaper articles about domestic violence during the pandemic. This analysis is part of a larger project about the effects of COVID on domestic violence that includes: a digital policy archive; life story interviews with survivors who experienced domestic violence during COVID; and in-depth interviews with domestic violence workers. In this paper, we focus on newspaper data from our policy archive in order to theorize how domestic violence was publicly constructed as a crisis during COVID, focusing on popular framings of abuse as a pandemic problem.

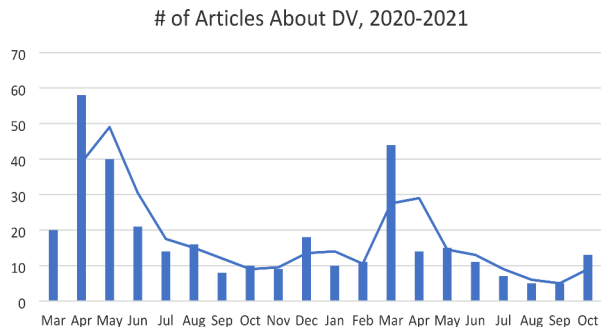
News articles are incredibly useful for understanding crisis framings. As Savelsberg (2015:21–22) argues about the Darfur crisis, the framing of a crisis relies on the news media's “collective representations—supra-individual ideas, scripts, beliefs, values, or cognitive and normative images...” to “continuously bring...reality...into the homes of people around the world.” As a testament to the widespread impact of early-pandemic reporting on domestic violence, many of the survivors and domestic violence professionals we interviewed referenced the explosion of news coverage about domestic violence between May–June 2020. Tracing public representations of domestic violence during this period therefore gives us insight into how people living through and responding to domestic violence interacted with crisis constructions of their own experiences.

We gathered an archive of newspaper articles about domestic violence during the pandemic and conducted content analysis on articles ($n=355$) published in five newspapers with the highest circulation of print and digital editions in the United States. The newspapers with the highest circulation (as of November 2021) in the U.S. are *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post*, *New York Times*, and the *Boston*

Globe.² We also read through other publications with large circulations, like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Chicago Tribune*, as well as smaller regional and local newspapers, but felt that we had reached thematic saturation with the top five outlets. Articles selected were published between March 13, 2020, and October 31, 2021. This period represents just over 19 months, from the first article meeting our search criteria to a point of saturation. Most articles about domestic violence came out during the first 2–3 months of the pandemic (March–June 2020), though some outlets continued regular coverage of domestic violence through the end of 2020, and another surge of articles came out in March 2021, around the one-year anniversary of lockdowns and the introduction of Violence Against Women Act reauthorization in Congress. Although the newspapers are based in large coastal cities, we coded the publications based on the location reported on and discovered that articles covered 22 states and the Navajo Nation. Most articles focused on the United States, but around 30 articles refer to other countries across the globe, or to cross-country patterns.

We used keywords on publishers' websites and matched findings with ProQuest, which allowed us to capture visuals. In the case of the *Boston Globe* and *New York Post*, complete archives were unavailable on ProQuest and therefore articles were taken from the publisher's online database. In selecting articles, we created two groups of key words. Articles were initially captured when they contained at least one key word from both group one and group two keywords. The first group pertained to the domestic violence victim with any mention of "domestic violence OR DV"; "gender-based violence OR GBV"; "intimate partner violence OR IPV"; "rape"; "sexual violence"; "sexual abuse". The second group captured mentions of COVID with "pandemic"; "coronavirus"; "COVID-19;" "COVID".³

Fig. 1 Number of articles published about domestic violence in top five outlets, March 2020–October 2021



² According to the Alliance for Audited Media, a digital edition "... is defined as a product distributed via electronic/digital means that maintains the basic identity of the host publication either by maintain the same name/log or by identifying itself as 'an edition of _____,' but contains different editorial and/or advertising content." In rare cases, an identical article was produced as a digital edition and print edition with different publication dates. For these cases, the article with the earlier publication date is included and the later publication date is excluded. The difference in dates was under 5 days.

³ We excluded articles that did not have any correlation between group one and two words, but we included articles in which groups one and two had a relationship within the article. We followed this method for other niche articles in which words from group two were unrelated to a case mentioning words in group one, but we were liberal in including articles to capture an initial, broad collection of data.

After reading each of the captured articles, we created a list of descriptive and analytical codes. Each author selected four articles to test the initial codes and compare coding strategies. Almost identical coding practices emerged between the authors, and the third author coded all remaining articles in Nvivo using an analytical codebook. Although several dozen codes were used, this article primarily focuses on the following codes: “law and legality,” “lockdown,” “experts,” “government action,” “evidence,” “safety,” “economic stress,” “descriptions of COVID,” “home,” and “crisis.” These reflect the top ten most common codes found in newspapers. Because we are interested in following patterns of public representations of domestic violence throughout COVID, newspaper data are ideal for the task.

Crisis narratives

We trace three central crisis narratives about domestic violence during COVID, each of which suggests that crisis is constructed through boundary transgression, especially violation of the sanctified space of home. First, we show that efforts to quantify domestic violence during the pandemic created a sense of spiraling emergency in the private sphere, wherein the home space was newly “spilling over” with violence. Newspapers relied primarily on administrative data – police and hotline calls – to support their claims of increasing rates of domestic violence, even though there was, and remains, a great deal of uncertainty about the validity of these measures. Second, we show that domestic violence was likened to the virus itself, “infecting” homes. Here, newly porous boundaries between inside and outside threaten the social order, just as the integrity of the body itself is threatened with COVID infection. Finally, we highlight the media’s hyper-focus on the explosiveness of the “private” sphere during COVID, in which homes and families are represented as combustible. In this case, spatial breakdown is explicitly gendered, as men’s lives turned homeward and they are rendered frustrated and violent, while women are tragically trapped. While quantification draws on expert estimates to create a sense of chaotic boundary spillover, infection and implosion metaphors emphasize the violent breakdown of boundaries between “inside” and “outside.” Through these examples, we illustrate the central tenets of our spatial boundaries approach to crisis: the border that ostensibly keeps the “private” safe and separate from the “public” is violently undone and rendered polluting; in response, explicit calls are made to resecure that boundary.

Numbers and spillover

The use of statistics in newspaper articles about domestic violence during COVID established “increasing violence in the home” as a real and novel problem during COVID, despite ambivalent findings about the prevalence of domestic violence during the pandemic and the causal role of stay-at-home orders. Wagner-Pacifici (2017:84) observes that crisis events regularly feature quantification, as we witness the world moving from “predictable odds into chaos.” During the first few months of pandemic, various types of numbers – especially estimates of police calls and hotline calls – were used to construct domestic violence as newly in crisis, evoking

a “spiraling” emergency and raising concerns about the “unintended consequences” of lockdowns. The ubiquitous use of estimates and quantified predictions, however uncertain they turned out to be, was critical to moving domestic violence from an “ordinary” social problem into the realm of crisis, creating a sense of generalized risk.⁴ Quantification also helped construct the home as a site of multiplying danger, suggesting an eerie lack of boundedness between inside and outside, wherein escalating violence in the home space may bubble over at any moment.

Despite uncertainty about the empirical contours of domestic violence during COVID, many early news articles, such as the coverage of three domestic violence related killings within ten days in New York City, began by citing with certainty the “sharp increase in calls during the pandemic” (*New York Times*, October 27, 2020). This could be in reference to hotline calls or police calls or both. For this article, the “sharp increase” references hotline calls and is used to counter a “10% decrease” in in police calls, which authorities claim, “mask an underreported problem that has likely worsened during the pandemic because many victims are more focused on trying to meet basic needs than stopping their abusers” (*New York Times*, October 27, 2020). Regardless of the quantity of calls increasing or decreasing, police call data were used to emphasize mounting problems in the home. Citations of these numbers increased during the summer of 2020 as preliminary research reports were released that analyzed county-level police data. The most commonly cited study, from the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, found that domestic violence reports increased by over 8% after lockdowns began (Piquero et al., 2021). This study was based on police call logs and other administrative documents. While the authors noted that “it is unclear precisely which factors drove the 2020 spike in domestic violence” theories about spiraling rates of violence were often repeated in newspapers alongside this quantitative evidence, emphasizing the dangers of families being “stuck at home.”⁵

Further, police chiefs were regularly cited as domestic violence experts and interviewed about increased demand on police due to lockdown-related abuse. Evidence from police was used to convince the public that domestic violence was a “spiraling crisis” and that calls to police were “mounting” as the summer progressed (*New York Times*, May 15a, 2020). In one illustrative case from the *New York Times* (Novem-

⁴ In the academic and policy literatures, experts questioned the validity of quantitative data about domestic violence, especially police data, and expressed uncertainty about whether domestic violence was increasing and if it was, for whom and for how long. This is, in part, because what constitutes violence is itself contested (Merry, 2016) and it is further unclear if domestic violence statistics are actually capturing victimization rates, help-seeking behaviors, or third-party reporting trends (Piquero et al., 2021).

⁵ It matters that studies based on administrative data such as police calls were most commonly cited in newspapers during the first few months of the pandemic. Most research reports using police data reported an increase in domestic violence prevalence when compared to pre-pandemic times (Piquero et al., 2021; Mendie et al., 2022; Boserup et al., 2020) with some studies indicating increases anywhere from 7.5% (Leslie & Wilson, 2020) to 22% (McLay, 2022). Most findings that reference hotline contact volume, on the other hand, indicate that domestic violence prevalence *did* increase during the pandemic, but only *after* shelter-in-place orders were lifted (Leigh et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2020; NNEDV, 2021). The National Domestic Violence Hotline (2022) reported the highest contact volume in the organization’s history in February 2022. Only studies using police data found evidence for domestic violence spiking during the pandemic’s “initial shock” (Henke & Hsu, 2022) or during the first months of the pandemic (Leslie & Wilson, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020).

ber 24, 2020), a college public-safety officer shot two New York police officers for responding to his wife's domestic violence report. The police chief described the shooting as "a stark reminder" of the daily "dangers police officers face in the line of duty," and then-mayor Bill de Blasio emphasized the role of the officers in describing the shooting as "a situation where a woman was in danger, and these officers went to protect her, only to find themselves in harm's way immediately." Police took on an important symbolic role in news coverage, since they are the "public" experts who are allowed to cross the border into the "private" sphere and report on its mounting dangers.

Frequent use of police and their data – despite evidence that police are poorly attuned to domestic violence in general (Richie, 2012; Ritchie, 2017) – was also used to bolster the credibility of the police as defenders of victims, an especially politically charged claim during Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020. When calls to police did decrease, police and other criminal justice authorities argued that isolation and other COVID-protective measures "mask an underreported problem" which requires more attention from police—not less. The president of the Police Benevolent Association used domestic violence to "ridicule recent calls from protesters to defund the police and, in some situations, replace them with social workers on emergency calls. 'We can't be removed,' he said. 'We need to be there.'" (*New York Times*, November 24, 2020). As public officials who were permitted to enter private homes during COVID, police were represented as the only safeguard against the spiraling emergency of the private sphere. For example, a neighbor of the college public-safety officer is quoted as being "very surprised" by the violence: "But obviously, we don't know what's going on inside." We need police because they can "peer into" the home and act as translators of the mysterious private, a space that is increasingly dangerous during lockdowns. Domestic violence is represented as a problem of the home that police are uniquely positioned to see, since they are designated to cross the threshold of the private precisely to secure that boundary.

News articles also referenced predicted increases in the effects of violence, such as the "undeniable increase in traumatic injuries" (*USA Today*, April 17, 2020). Often these statements are given in juxtaposition to language of "spiraling crisis," suggesting chaos and overwhelmed helping systems. Militarized language creeps in via quantification efforts, for example, "When the pandemic first laid siege," domestic violence rates were "doubling and even tripling" as the "pandemic became just one more tool in a perpetrator's arsenal" (*New York Post*, July 26, 2020). Some articles referenced an increase in domestic violence calls by as much as "300%" (*New York Times*, June 16, 2020). The state of Alaska reported a 52% increase in hotline calls (*USA Today*, May 11, 2020), while domestic violence reports in France were said to risen 42% during the first spring lockdown, and 64% in Britain during the same period (*USA Today*, November 25, 2020). Typically, these examples are referencing hotline calls. The circulation of hotline data in these news articles established the pandemic as a novel era of domestic violence, while also suggesting that homes across the world were dangerously bubbling over with violence – rates could be increasing by 300% – in a way that could pose a risk to *everyone*.

Many research and policy reports have since indicated that domestic violence reached its peak around the spring and summer of 2021, almost a year after this

period of heavy news coverage about domestic violence (Shariati & Guerette, 2022; Leigh et al., 2022; NDVH, 2022). Despite empirical fuzziness about whether or not domestic violence was increasing during lockdowns, quantification efforts established the pandemic as a new era of domestic violence, both in prevalence and severity, severing gender-based violence from the complex social landscape that facilitated it before COVID.⁶ In doing so, quantification created a temporal break – important to establishing March 2020 as the beginning of a novel era.⁷ But this kind of reporting did more than create a temporal break. Use of police and hotline call numbers also suggest the chaotic reorganization of public and private spheres, wherein the home was spilling over with new violence. Certain experts were privileged in reporting – for example, police chiefs – because of their ability to go inside others’ private spheres and report back on the chaos found inside. Typically, police chiefs’ role in newspaper articles was to sound the alarm, suggesting that lockdowns had generated such a crisis of the private sphere that violence could soon infect anyone’s home. The implied solution, then, is to resecure the boundary. We turn next to newspapers’ powerful use of infection metaphors – and the dangerous porosity of boundaries between inside and outside – in constructing crisis.

Infection

As one report stated, “Mounting data suggests that domestic violence is acting like an opportunistic infection, flourishing in the conditions created by the pandemic” (*New York Times*, April 6b, 2020). Here, domestic violence acts like the virus itself. The newly porous boundaries of the home are rendered dangerous: an infection is spreading. Certainly, the writer of this article could have intended to convey the simple point that lockdowns added additional pressures to homes already prone to violence. However, the ubiquity of virus language to describe domestic violence also strongly suggests anxiety about “spread” across previously secured spaces. Medicalized language flowed throughout newspaper articles in the early months of the pandemic, giving a strange symmetry to articles about domestic violence and to articles explaining how viruses work. Here, the private sphere is represented as a body, its boundar-

⁶ Most survey data that measured survivors’ experiences during the pandemic found that domestic violence increased or worsened *among those experiencing other forms of social marginality before and during the pandemic*. These studies indicated that domestic violence during COVID was more prevalent or more severe among: those subjected to unemployment and pandemic-related job loss (Davis et al., 2021; Peitzmeier et al., 2022; Wake & Kandula, 2022; McNeil et al., 2022) and economic, housing, and food instability (Peitzmeier et al., 2022; McNeil et al., 2022); essential workers (Peitzmeier et al., 2022); people who stayed home all day (Henke & Hsu, 2022; Hsu & Henke, 2020), or were housewives or married (Wake & Kandula, 2022); those who were pregnant (Peitzmeier et al., 2022; Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2022), lived with children (UN Women & Women Count, 2021), or had a toddler (Peitzmeier et al., 2022); people with mental illness and drug abuse habits (Wake & Kandula, 2022; McNeil et al., 2022) or impacted by the COVID-19 virus (Davis et al., 2021; Peitzmeier et al., 2022; McNeil et al., 2022); and LGBTQ+people (Peitzmeier et al., 2022; McCool-Meyers et al., 2022).

⁷ A survey conducted in Michigan during the first several months of the pandemic, however, shows that rates of domestic violence did not change, but severity of existing abuse increased for marginalized people (Peitzmeier et al., 2022).

ies newly open to airborne viral risk. This panicky breakdown of boundaries creates a sense of urgency around containing risk.

United Nations language surrounding the rise of domestic violence during COVID leaned heavily on infection language, calling domestic violence the “shadow pandemic” (*Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2020). At the U.N. Women’s Generation Equality Forum in Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron coined COVID-19 as “an anti-feminist virus” that “pushed more women around the world into poverty, nudged more girls out of school and locked women in with their abusers” (*New York Times*, June 30, 2021). A British government spokesperson spoke of increased police reports as “appalling statistics [that] show endemic levels of domestic abuse” (*USA Today*, November 25, 2020). The UN also reported, “The increase in violence during lockdown has been a shocking revelation in almost all our societies” (*USA Today*, November 25, 2020). The certainty with which “increase” is asserted, and the universality of this claim, gives a sense of a dramatic, unpredictable spike. Like the virus, domestic violence appears to enter our homes from afar, “shocking” us with its transmissibility and entering in uninvited from the outside. The World Health Organization (WHO) also described violence against women as a “global public health crisis of epidemic proportions” (*New York Times*, March 25, 2021), its surge mirroring COVID-19 itself, mounting a “private” crisis on top of a “public one.” One article called this another “horrible blight” that layers on top of the effects of the virus (*New York Times*, April 6a, 2021). While there’s nothing particularly remarkable about government officials using public health language to describe domestic violence, these strongly patterned statements piled up early in the pandemic – shot through with the language of “shock” – to associate the spatial reordering of lockdown periods with the idea that abuse was spreading like a virus.

Like the virus, quarantines are represented as “toxic” to the intimate space of home and family: “Quarantines can have a toxic effect on marriages already in trouble” (*USA Today*, June 2, 2020). And quarantines “fuel a direct rise in trauma and suffering for vulnerable children” (*USA Today*, December 9, 2020). Here, necessary public health measures destabilize the (ostensibly previously settled) boundaries of home and family, creating a “double pandemic” where COVID “laid bare the social and economic privations that often allow such abuse to thrive” (*New York Times*, March 18, 2021). Some articles even suggest that domestic violence will have “cascading effects” on the spread of COVID since police will have to enter violent homes and risk spreading the virus further (*Boston Globe*, April 2, 2020). Here, domestic violence victims become a contamination threat, represented as a source of potential exposure even when the “helping hands” of police are lent. Risk abounds as threats from “outside” infect homes and families, which again threaten to infect those who have to come “inside,” creating a series of dizzying boundary violations.

In response, calls to “flatten the curve of domestic violence” (*New York Times*, August 9, 2020) would seem to require the opposite response needed for virus containment: being allowed to go outside. Here, the problem of domestic violence is a problem of being quarantined, created by too much time together inside. Quarantine itself is a public health risk, instigated by the policies necessary to curtail the virus. This risk then begets longer term risks, drawing from the medicalized logic of sequelae. As one article stated, “Beyond the impact of immediate violence, research

suggests that domestic abuse can heighten the risk of long-term cardiac problems. There is the psychological burden too. Symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder can manifest for years after” (*USA Today*, September 26, 2020). In the same article, it is further argued that quarantine stoked PTSD, wherein “Isolating at home, with no avenue of escape, invokes triggering feelings of losing control” where victims experience “nervousness,” “pacing,” and a “sense that something is going to happen.” Here, the infection comes from prolonged time at home and the multitude of problems created by inability to exit the private sphere. In these examples, domestic violence is saturated in the public health language of risk, needs assessments, and the like, as articles emphasized the need for “appropriate screening” and “trauma assessments” (*USA Today*, September 26, 2020). In these examples, sickness comes from the too-rigid spatial boundaries created by quarantine.

Whether boundaries between “inside” and “outside” are too rigid because of quarantine, or dangerously porous because domestic violence works like a virus, infection metaphors invoke a sense of violated spaces and dizzying spatial reorganization. With infection metaphors, spatial transgressions mean that boundaries are confused – typically, too open – which results in sickness and disease. But efforts to contain the virus, by ossifying the boundary between public and private, also cause the infection to worsen. In either case, violated boundaries between inside and outside cause crisis. These descriptions are medicalized and tend to be only implicitly gendered. Implosion metaphors, on the other hand, have strong gender connotations, as men stuck at home are rendered frustrated and explosive, while women stuck at home are tragically trapped.

Implosion

While infection metaphors suggest that the private sphere is newly open to contamination, nothing quite evokes the sense of ruptured boundaries like the language of explosion/implosion. As one article stated, “If you’re being abused, sheltering at home is like lighting a match to a tinderbox” (*New York Times*, May 25, 2020). This kind of imagery – the home as a “ticking time bomb” (*Boston Globe*, May 13, 2020) – pervades news articles about domestic violence during the pandemic, as COVID-19 “exploded from state to state” (*New York Times*, March 24, 2020). Here, we get the sense of a protected, bounded home space that has been made newly combustible by COVID lockdowns, or by “public” policy about the “private” sphere. Now, the home has become what some articles called a “breeding ground” where “social pressure,” shaped by “economic loss and overall anxiety,” bears down on the protective boundaries of the home (*USA Today*, June 11, 2021). For example, the home is often described as a “pressure cooker” (*New York Times*, April 16, 2020). Like steam building, lockdowns violate the home as a protected space by putting too much pressure on the private sphere to contain the stressors of the pandemic, as the release valve of public sphere participation is lost.

Often, this language of combustible homes is related to the idea that men will become violent with job loss and increased opportunities for drinking alcohol at home, ideas long supported by “family stress models” of violence (see Fox et al., 2002). The language of “fuel” and “gasoline” are common in these renderings. As

one article – subtitled “COVID-19 fuels domestic violence surge” – indicated, alcohol consumption has gone up during the pandemic and this is likely to stoke “pandemic-related stress” (*USA Today*, November 25, 2020). Many articles discuss the need for public health officials to restrict alcohol sales due to fear of explosive masculinity. The mundane dangers of masculinity are “intensified” during lockdowns, while job loss and economic stress may aggravate men to the point of “fatal peril” (*USA Today*, May 22, 2020). As another article stated: “People like her are the ones I’m thinking about during this pandemic -- those for whom the world outside might be safer than their own home. What if her already-violent boyfriend could not attend his Ironman trainings? Or watch sports to decompress?” (*Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 2020). Here, hegemonic, “strong man” masculinity needs the release valve of the public sphere in order to remain nonviolent in the “tinderbox of abusive homes” (*Boston Globe* March 22, 2020).

Masculinity itself becomes another pandemic problem, as men are presumed to need the public sphere in a way that renders their containment at home unnatural and dangerous. As another article advised, “Assume responsibility for your emotions. When you’re steaming mad, your heart beats faster and stress hormones course through your blood. It’s important to recognize that you are in charge of managing your anger” (*New York Times*, April 16, 2020). Masculine anger control became another pandemic task. The boundaries between public (masculinized, work and entertainment) and private (feminized, family and home) are rendered protective for victims, while their collapse under COVID lockdowns results in danger and violence. Indeed, this collapse may be dangerously feminizing for traditional masculinity, invoking frustrated eruptions.

While many articles focus on explosive masculinity as the boundary problem, others focus on the victim who is “trapped at home” (*USA Today*, March 25, 2020; *New York Post*, March 29, 2020). Here, the boundary problem is such that women (and sometimes children) can no longer cross over into the public sphere at all. With lockdowns, the same article worried that children “who once found an escape from abusive caretakers at schools and youth programs” were “cut off from those safe spaces.” Sometimes, writers discuss this as a problem of vulnerable victims whose “private” lives already included dangers: “I think about the kind of progress women have made and how politics invades our home in this pandemic. They tell us to shelter in place, right? Like by staying home, we’re saving lives. But what if your home is horrible?” (*New York Times*, May 15b, 2020). For women and children whose homes are already “horrible,” the pandemic creates new opportunities for abuse. Now that “politics invades our homes” – homes being presumably apolitical spaces before the pandemic – some women and children will face more dangers.

Other times, entrapment is imagined as a newly *generalizable* risk for all of us. Rates are “spiking,” and violence against women should be considered a “state of emergency” during these times (*New York Times*, September 17, 2020). Because incidences of domestic violence are “skyrocketing” (*Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2020; *New York Times*, November 6, 2020), this puts average home spaces at risk of abuse. In both cases, the idea that “staying home” creates safety is questioned, suggesting that we should never have expected homes to be a “safe haven.” Rather, the home should have already been considered a potential site of danger and fear, now

soaked with more combustible fuel during COVID. Nevertheless, boundaries are rendered protective. When people leave for work, socialize outside the home, and take their children to school and daycare – opportunities to cross into the public sphere – release valves are created. Here the pressure cooker metaphor resurfaces. As one local expert stated, danger is created “when people are kept 24 hours a day together within a reduced space” (*New York Times*, April 6b, 2020). The dangerous hardening of boundaries, wherein the private sphere is asked to contain too much of social life, creates a “perfect storm” for violence (*New York Times*, December 9, 2020).

Still, brief releases from the perfect storm are not enough when public spaces are “eerily empty, leaving women feeling increasingly worried about their safety” (*New York Times*, March 25, 2021). Not only did quarantine measures keep people in the home, but even when respites did occur, the public sphere failed to act as protective. Alone with her husband in her boutique, Liu Zengyan said, “the only way she could escape” was to jump from the second story window to the city street (*New York Times*, September 16, 2020). Examples of dangerous escapes, similar to escaping burning and imploding buildings, are described as the only way out. Here, the dangers of entrapment are feminized while the source of explosiveness – created by confinement in the feminized private sphere – is masculinized.

Some articles even warn of *overreporting* domestic violence, using exploding/imploding metaphors to signify who should receive support. One article cautions against reporting “personal conflict” in order to reserve limited resources for those in “truly inescapable abusive relationships.” The authors go on to say, “we must understand that not every domestic combustion right now indicates an abusive relationship,” and “identifying everyone who is reacting to the unusual times we’re living by exploding in anger as a domestic violence perpetrator who other family members need to escape, uses too broad a brush” (*USA Today*, April 26, 2020). Here, resources should be saved for people whose homes are *truly* explosive, not those for whom normal conflict has simply increased.

What kind of work are these framings of exploding homes and imploding public-private boundaries doing? The existing spatial order – particularly the gendered binary between private life and public life – is destabilized during COVID lockdowns. The suggestion is that the status quo gendered separation of public and private is normally stabilizing for families, while “crisis” is responsible for the dangerous reordering of those boundaries. That reordering could be anxious about dangerous masculinity being forced homeward, or about ossification of boundaries when victims are hyper-trapped. Crisis rhetoric surrounding domestic violence suggests, then, that recreating “separate spheres” (which should be somewhat porous, but not *too* porous) is desirable, even healthy – at least for the idealized middle class family who can “leave” for work and school. Otherwise, the dislocation of those boundaries throws social life into a gendered, familial breakdown.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that crisis framings surrounding domestic violence during the pandemic were predicated on the idea that violated boundaries between public and private spheres threw family life newly into chaos and danger. The intense media focus on domestic violence during the first few months of the pandemic created a sense of panic around the erosion of spatial order, the dangerous effects of the “outside” coming “inside,” of masculinity captured unnaturally inside the private sphere, or of the dramatic ossification of normally flexible boundaries. The implication is that going back to normal, or reordering “inside” and “outside,” will be protective for families. By exploring the discursive landscape of “crisis” surrounding domestic violence during COVID, we have pushed for a renewed focus on the cultural construction of the public-private divide and its coding as masculine-feminine (Polletta & Chen, 2013), rational-irrational, and liberating-entrapping. Our focus on spatial boundaries also allows us to contribute more generally to scholarship on crisis.

Beyond the case of domestic violence during COVID, our analysis is useful for showing how “arenas of social life” may be mobilized as part of crisis construction (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) – in this case, “public” and “private” spheres, or the implicit gendered spatial order. While existing scholarship has argued that crisis performs temporal ruptures, we highlight the importance of *spatial boundaries* for understanding the “breaks” and blurriness that crisis performs into being. While the crisis rhetoric we analyzed worried about the breakdown of public and private spheres, it also suggested that the gendered dichotomy of “inside” and “outside” was protective and should be restored. As such, when crisis transgresses a boundary as sacred as the threshold of home, such framings may preserve the very structure that they name “in crisis.” In our case, the ostensible separateness of “public” and “private” spheres, and their gendered ideologies, are protected through panicky representations of domestic violence during COVID.

Attention to the role of spatial boundaries in crisis construction may be useful for understanding other crises that received attention during COVID, such as childcare and youth mental health. In these two examples, panic around the dissolution of the public-private divide is also central, though the imagined solutions diverge. The childcare crisis was featured prominently in the news and was represented as a COVID-specific problem. One news article titled, “The Pandemic Created a Child-Care Crisis. Mothers Bore the Burden” figures childcare as another gendered crisis of family life during the pandemic (*New York Times*, May 17, 2021). Like the domestic violence victim, the burned-out working mother with young children embodies the public-private breakdown of the lockdown period (Heilman & Calarco, 2022). Themes of infection and entrapment are common here as well. The childcare crisis indexes a similar anxiety about COVID boundary problems, wherein work life invades and infects the home, and burned-out mothers are trapped inside with no reprieve. However, the symbol of the burned-out mother was mobilized to advocate for progressive policy changes, such as subsidized childcare (*Forbes*, August 10, 2020; *U.S. News & World Report*, September 1, 2020). State-subsidized childcare is desirable, in part, because it allows families to keep domestic life and work life *sepa-*

rate.⁸ While the burned-out mother could be saved by progressive social policy, the domestic violence victim needed police securitization. In both cases, reinstating the public-private divide is key, but when violence is invoked, securitization is needed, whereas social policies can restore the boundary in the case of childcare. Notably, some articles did advocate that work culture and expectations should be changed to become more accommodating and flexible – to loosen or intentionally rearrange the boundary between public and private (*New York Times*, May 17, 2021). These proposed solutions have the potential to *problematize* the boundary between public and private rather than resecure it. In such cases, the boundary protecting the private sphere from work life is intentionally de-sacralized.

Attention to spatial boundaries can also help make sense of contemporary crises such as youth mental health. One article entitled, “It’s Life or Death: The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens,” establishes that rates of mental health disorders among youth have been “soaring” since the mid to late 2010’s (*New York Times*, April 23, 2022). Similar to domestic violence during the pandemic, researchers, psychologists, and journalists are uncertain about the cause of decline in youth mental health—“What the heck is going on?” is the first line in one news article (*Psychology Today*, August 16, 2023). Another article states that “solid data on the issue is limited, the findings are nuanced and often contradictory” (*New York Times*, April 23, 2022). Despite this uncertainty, news coverage tends to assert that social media is to blame (*CBS News*, February 27, 2023; *Psychology Today*, August 16, 2023; *New York Times*, April 23, 2022) and that “parents need to play an active part in how their children are engaging with ... social media posts” (*CBS News*, February 27, 2023). The articles suggest that children will be healthier once the boundary between public and private is resecured and they are protected from dangerous exposure to the public sphere via their devices. Like domestic violence, a healthy public-private boundary should be restored lest the crisis continue, and some form of policing or securitization is necessary for that restoration.

Our spatial boundaries approach to crisis, and its attention to the symbolic meanings of violated boundaries, can also help unpack cases that deal with boundaries beyond COVID and the public-private dichotomy. Robert Braun’s (2022) work on the “spatial sources of xenophobia” shows how public renderings of border crossings and the imaginary of “nation” help spur the construction of immigrants as social problems. In his analysis of antisemitism in Weimar Germany, Braun (2022) shows that under certain political conditions, “border crossings” are figured as especially dangerous, and outsiders as evil, ramping up the symbolic import of national borders in the public imagination. When the symbolically charged boundaries between

⁸ Since poor and working-class women and women of color (arguably the most chronically burned-out parental figures) have historically engaged in “public” reproductive labor, this proposed solution continues to rely on these women’s labor to maintain a lived sense of the public-private divide as real for middle-class families (Collins, 1990; Parreñas, 2000; Duffy, 2007). Indeed, when it comes to poor and/or racialized families’ “private sphere” crises, *dissolving and disregarding the boundary* between public and private life is often seen as protective (Roberts, 2022). For example, these families’ private lives are subjected to sometimes chronic surveillance by state actors, such as Child Protective Service officers (Smith & Roane, 2023). As such, the public-private divide is a classed and racialized ideology that can only be lived as *separate* by some (see *New York Times*, December 29, 2020).

insiders and outsiders are violated, a crisis seems to be at hand. Calls to resecure the boundary become ferocious, and scapegoats are conjured. Similarly to “public” and “private,” national boundaries are deeply culturally and politically charged – and during crisis, the imagined preexisting spatial order is associated with social order.

In a seemingly dramatically different case, Abigail Saguy’s (2013) work on obesity foregrounds spatial boundary problems and public calls to resecure imagined boundaries. “Corpulent” bodies deemed excessively large seem to *spill over* their allotted space, violating the health of the social body. In its transgression of the imagined boundary between individual body and social body, the obese body becomes a threat: the ubiquitous language of “obesity epidemic” further suggests that the threat is spreading like an infection. And as Strings (2015, 2019) shows, fears of excessive corporeality in the West are rooted in racism, wherein “unrestrained Black women” are figured as “deadly” for the (imagined white) social body (2015:108). As in the case of domestic violence during COVID, efforts at expert quantification abound – however dubious measures like Body Mass Index (BMI) may be (Strings, 2015; Sugay, 2013) – in order to prove that the threat is real and growing. The boundaries between social spaces have become too porous, and the appropriate threshold between the individual and the social has been violated, resulting in calls to resecure boundaries.

The crisis framings outlined here are not inevitable. In the case of domestic violence, crisis rhetoric misconstrues the reality of domestic violence by reasserting the middle-class, masculinist ideology of separate spheres as “safe” for families. The idea, perpetuated through crisis rhetoric, that domestic violence occurs when exogenous shocks affect bounded home spaces, is simply not a good model for explaining how domestic violence operates in people’s lives. For example, recent studies that rely on survey data indicate that domestic violence worsened along the lines of existing social marginalities (Peitzmeier et al., 2022). And according to our own preliminary analysis of interviews with survivors, COVID lockdowns and social isolation *did* affect abusive dynamics, but not necessarily in the ways suggested by media representations. Rather than a collapse of public-private boundaries, or a spiraling crisis initiated by being “stuck at home,” the survivors we interviewed experienced a range of social instabilities that were only sometimes affected by lockdowns. Survivors’ experiences of abuse during COVID tend to be most affected by lack of housing, problems with criminal legal systems, persistent patterns of masculine power and control, unreliable social networks, addiction, and isolation. For most domestic violence survivors, such problems predated COVID and continued to plague them after “leaving” home. In this sense, rather than understanding domestic violence during COVID as a problem caused by spatial rearrangement of previously functional “separate spheres,” domestic violence is better conceptualized as an always-already “public sphere” problem shaped by chronic social inequalities. Adopting a spatial boundaries approach to crisis can therefore help us more accurately theorize the social conditions through which crisis is experienced for people on the margins – people whose actual crises may be *obfuscated* by “crisis claims” about boundary transgressions, and whose problems are unlikely to be ameliorated by panicky constructions of dissolving boundaries.

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Paige L. Sweet is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan. Her work focuses on gender and sexuality, governance and the state, social theory, gender-based violence, and the politics of health. She is the author of *The Politics of Surviving: How Women Navigate Domestic Violence and its Aftermath*, published by University of California Press in 2021.

Maya C. Glenn is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Michigan. Her scholarship focuses on gender and sexuality, sex education, pleasure, and black feminist theory.

Jacob Caponi is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Michigan. His research is interested in how societies respond to atrocities and crises with a focus on culture and knowledge, collective violence, gender, and law.