



# FIRST RESPONDERS: Support for Pregnant Survivors of Abuse or Rape During Disasters

Intimate partner violence is more common than any other health problem that affects women during pregnancy. Studies show that up to **8%** of women report domestic violence or sexual assault before and during pregnancy; victimization by partners increases to **12%** after birth.



Disaster impact leads to symptoms of

**anxiety, depression, and hostility.**

A small number of studies and anecdotal evidence indicate increases in police reports of sexual assaults and domestic violence, restraining/protective order requests, and spousal abuse calls following disasters.

## Barriers to Reporting:



**Compromised communication lines**



**Advocates have their own emergencies**



**Lack of privacy in emergency shelters may not facilitate talking**



**Power outages will impact all or part of the disaster area**

Decreased capacity of support services during disasters places victims at greater risk of harm, assault, rape, stalking, harassment, and threats. There was a reported **45%** increase in domestic violence following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Of reported rapes post-Hurricane Katrina, incidents occurred at:



**31%**  
Evacuation site



**23%** Open areas or public buildings



**12%**  
Host homes

Rape victims may be unable to report or receive services due to law enforcement and emergency services being diverted to disaster response activities.

**Refer Victims:**

National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-7233/SAFE

RAINN, the National Sexual Assault Hotline  
1-800-656-4673/HOPE



## First Responders Need to Know:

Abuse survivors may feel **exposed and unsafe** from the person who has abused or sexually assaulted them. Disaster disruptions to **childcare, schools, traffic, public transit, and health care services** may impact abuse survivors' **safety plan**, which **increases their vulnerability**.

Abusers may **take advantage of the increased vulnerability** to **emotionally manipulate** and **coerce** their way back into the survivor's life. They could withhold critical necessities including:



Financial Support



Food



Clothes



Medication & Medical Supplies

There will be **variations of help-seeking behavior** from abuse victims—some may readily seek out help while others may get lost in the crowd and seek support after the disaster has passed.



Given limited choices and facing multiple barriers, **some abuse victims may risk interacting with their abusers to get through the disaster** until they can access safety supports and crisis services.

**Being in a disaster is inherently traumatic** and creates both known and unforeseen challenges in accessing safety, support, and much needed resources—abuse survivors who are pregnant and experiencing intimate partner violence have additional layers of stigma, trauma, and difficulties getting their most basic needs met.

## First Responders Can Help:



Refresh your training in case you have to catch the baby



Facilitate private conversations with a nurse or advocate away from others



Promote access to:

- Continued clinical care
- Healthy foods and baby care items
- Clean water, formula, or breastfeeding supplies
- An emergency birth plan



[www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)



[www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov)



[www.PHE.gov](http://www.PHE.gov)



Family Violence Prevention & Services Program

[www.acf.hhs.gov/fvpsa](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/fvpsa)

## Additional Resources:

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### [National Institutes of Health: Health Resources on Pregnant Women in Disasters and Emergencies](#)

Resources related to medical and public health issues of pregnant and breastfeeding women in disasters and emergencies.

<https://sis.nlm.nih.gov/dimrc/pregnantwomen.html>

### [National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, VAWnet Special Collection: Disaster and Emergency Preparedness and Response](#)

Gender-informed materials and resources intended for domestic and sexual violence organizations to increase their preparedness for and response to major disasters and emergencies.

<http://vawnet.org/sc/disaster-and-emergency-preparedness-and-response>

### [National Sexual Violence Resource Center: Disaster Preparedness Resources](#)

Recommendations and tools to assist advocates, preventionists, disaster managers, and their community partners in helping prevent sexual violence and ensure that supportive services are available during and after a disaster.

<https://www.nsvrc.org/projects/preventing-sexual-violence-disasters>

### [Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence Natural Disasters Power & Control Wheel](#)

Modeled after the traditional Power & Control Wheel, this wheel describes tactics of coercive control used by abusers when disasters happen.

<http://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/assets/files/2016-09/FCADVDisasterPowerControlWheel.pdf>

### [March of Dimes: Staying Safe and Breastfeeding After a Natural Disaster](#)

Tips on how to keep your baby and children safe, such as continuing to breastfeed to help protect against illnesses, which is especially important following a natural disaster.

<http://newsmomsneed.marchofdimes.org/?p=23855>

<http://newsmomsneed.marchofdimes.org/?p=23864>

## Document Research:

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Klein, A. (2008) "[Sexual violence in disasters: A planning guide for prevention and response.](#)" Available from <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/sexual-violence-disasters-planning-guide-prevention-and-response>.

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. [Report on Database of Sexual Violence Prevalence and Incidence Related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita](#). Available from <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/hurricanes-katrinarita-and-sexual-violence-report-database-sexual-vi>.

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