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"Violence against women: a statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them"

Expert Group Meeting

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## **Assessing the prevalence of violence against women in Canada**

**Expert paper prepared by:**

**Holly Johnson, PhD**  
**Statistics Canada**  
**and**  
**Visiting Fellow**  
**Australian Institute of Criminology**

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order to examine court outcomes and sentencing patterns in family violence cases.<sup>1</sup>

5. Transition Home Survey – a biannual survey of all emergency and longer term sheltered accommodation.



### *Violence reported to police*

- ! The rate of partner violence reported to the police has increased in recent years and survey data suggest this may be due to an increase in victim willingness to report these crimes to police.
- ! The rate of sexual assault reported to police increased until 1993 then declined significantly; it is not known how these trends might be affected by victim willingness to report to police

### *Court sentencing of partner violence cases*

- ! Partner violence cases were more likely to result in a probation order as compared with other violent cases, and less likely to result in prison or a fine.
- ! Treatment as a sentencing option has increased in specialized Domestic Violence Courts

### *Women using emergency shelters*

- ! The number of emergency shelters available to abused women in Canada increased from 18 in 1975 to 524 in 2002.
- ! In 2001/02, over 55,000 women and 45,000 children were admitted to shelters in Canada.

### *Non-residential services for victims of crime*

- ! Sixty-two percent of all victims served by victim service agencies in 2003 were female victims of sexual assault, stalking or other forms of violence, the majority involving intimate partners or other family members.

This paper will focus primarily on Statistics Canada's experience in designing and conducting national prevalence surveys. It has four main objectives: (1) to present the challenges and benefits of this work; (2) to briefly present some of the more salient results of these surveys; (3) to assess the gaps in current data collection activities; and (4) to make recommendations for future.

### **Challenges of conducting national prevalence surveys on violence against women**

Prevalence surveys, in which random samples of women are interviewed about their experiences of violence, have emerged over the past decade as essential research and policy making tools. The first survey dedicated to interviewing women about their experiences of violence was developed by Statistics Canada in the early 1990s and conducted in 1993. A total of 12,300 women were interviewed by telephone about their experiences of sexual and physical violence and sexual harassment since the age of 16, the impacts of violence on their lives, including physical and emotional injury and fear of violent victimization, and formal and informal supports they turned to, including police.



chose to reschedule the interview at a workplace or at a different time when they would have greater privacy. Women who undertook this option were not only those who were living with a violent partner, but were also those who had past experiences of violence that they had not disclosed, and did not want to risked being overheard by children or other family members. At the outset of each interview, respondents were provided a toll-free telephone number that they could use to call back to resume an interrupted interview or to check on the legitimacy of the survey. No call-backs were made into respondents' home, as is often the practice in surveys on other topics, which gave them control over their participation.

Many women took advantage of the call-back option. A total of 1,000 calls were received over the five month interviewing period and 150 were from women wanting to continue an uncompleted interview or wanting to add information they were unable to provide during the interview. The remainder of calls were from women wanting to confirm the legitimacy of the survey, usually at the point of sensitive questions about violence, or had questions about how they could obtain the results. Some called to commend the government on conducting the survey and taking the issue seriously.

### *Definitions of violence*

Definitions of violence vary cross-culturally and even within cultures. It is therefore critical that prevalence surveys ask about experiences with violence in behavioural terms, not simply whether respondents have been the victims of 'violence' or have ever been 'assaulted' or 'sexually assaulted'. Providing multiple opportunities for disclosure helps counter the reluctance or hesitance of many women to talk about their experiences. Single questions have been shown to undercount rates of partner violence and sexual violence, which women are naturally reluctant to discuss. Both reliability and validity will be affected if respondents interpret question wording differently to other respondents and if large numbers fail to disclose. For these reasons, a list of behavioural items is the preferred approach.

Violence by marital partners was addressed somewhat differently than violence perpetrated by other men. In order to examine in detail the b

7. *Beat you up*
8. *Choked you*
9. *Threatened to or used a gun or knife on you*
10. *Forced you into any sexual activity when you did not want to, by threatening you, holding you down, or hurting you in some way*

Preceding this section, were questions about physical and sexual violence committed by other men. Under Canadian criminal law, a very broad range of acts qualify as sexual assault, from unwanted sexual touching to sexual violence resulting in serious injury. Rape is not an essential component. The following two questions were used to estimate sexual assault:

*Has a (male stranger, other known man) ever touched you against your will in any sexual way, such as unwanted touching, grabbing, kissing or fondling?*

*Has a (male stranger, date or boyfriend, other known man) ever forced you or attempted to force you into any sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way?*

Question wording was carefully tested with focus groups of women seeking help through sexual assault centres and shelters for abused women. Unwanted sexual touching in the context of dating or marital relationships was found to be potentially ambiguous and consequently the decision was made to limit questioning about sexual violence in intimate relationships to forced sexual activity.

The following questions were used to measure physical violence by men other than marital partners:

*Now I m going to ask you some questions about physical attacks you may have had since the age of 16. By this I mean any use of force such as being hit, slapped, kicked or grabbed to being beaten, knifed or shot. Has a (male stranger, date or boyfriend, other known man) ever physically attacked you?*

*The next few questions are about face-to-face threats you may have experienced. By threats I mean any time you have been threatened with physical harm, since you were 16. Has a (male stranger, date or boyfriend, other known man) ever threatened to harm you? Did you believe he would do it?*

### *Reducing response bias*

At the time of the development of this survey in the early 1990s, it was a common belief among researchers and women's advocates that large numbers of women would refuse to





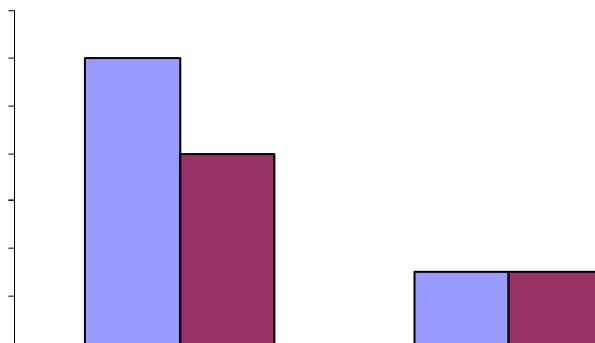
women because of their omnibus approach, lack of sensitivity in question wording, lack of training for interviewers and consideration for the safety of respondents (Johnson 1996). Specialized prevalence surveys have become the accepted method to meet the demand for reliable statistical information on violence against women.

### **Brief overview of results of prevalence surveys**

The 1993 VAWS estimates that one-half of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. A total of 29% of women who had ever been married or lived in a common-law relationship had been the victims of violence by a marital partner. Sixteen percent were assaulted by dates or boyfriends, 23% by other known men, and 23% by male strangers. Sexual assaults and physical assaults occurred in almost equal frequency (39% and 34%).

The 1999 General Social Survey on Victimization provides more current estimates of the level of partner violence using the same module of questions used in the VAWS to define partner violence. The focus of the GSS was on the five years prior to the interview as opposed to experiences since age 16. According to the GSS, 8% of women were victims of partner violence in the previous five years and 3% were victimized in the previous year. Results of the VAWS can be scoped to the five year period prior to that survey. As shown in Figure 1, there was a statistically significant drop in the percentage of women who reported violence in 1999 as compared with 1993, from 12% to 8%. However, the percentage of women who reported experiencing partner violence in the year prior to these surveys was identical at 3%.

**Figure 1: Five-year and one-year rates of spousal violence, 1993 and 1999**

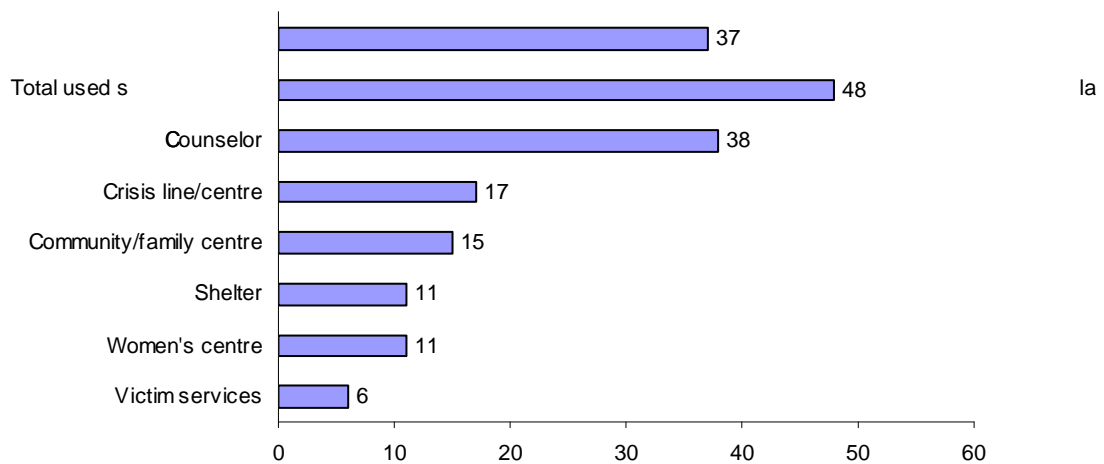


However, looking at each women by the most serious type o



Prevalence surveys can be helpful in identifying the way in which women may use of criminal justice and social services in their communities. With repeated surveys changes can be tracked over time, providing important information for the interpretation of trends in police statistics. According to the GSS, 37% of women assaulted by partners reported the assault to the police and a larger proportion, 48%, contacted social services for help. These figures are both higher in comparison to 1993 when 29% reported to police and 35% used social services (in the five years preceding the survey). Services contacted were primarily counselors, crisis centres, and community centres (Figure 5). Women also used emergency shelters, women's centres and victim services (the latter are usually located within police or court services).

**Figure 5: Use of criminal justice and social services by female victims of spousal violence**



## General Social Survey on Victimiz

opposed to random surveys of the population. Reliability of results will be affected to the extent that women who did not participate differ from those who did. Eh

### *Other data sources*

Notwithstanding the central importance of prevalence surveys, other data sources have a valuable contribution to make to understand both the dynamics of violence and societal responses to it. For example:

5. Homicide surveys monitor trends and patterns in lethal violence and with sufficient detail can hel



- children who are admitted to emergency shelters fleeing abuse. Counts of repeat admissions to shelters and other services are needed as an indicator of the severity of the problem.
9. Information on the number of women presenting to hospitals for medical treatment for injuries resulting from violence is needed as an indicator of the severity of the problem, demand for health services resulting from violence, and the portion of health costs that are due to violence.
  10. Male controlling behaviours have been identified as primary predictors of perpetrating sexual and physical violence against women (Johnson 2001). Fundamental changes in attitudes toward women and their place in society are essential if violence is to be prevented and reduced. Many public awareness and violence prevention efforts have changing attitudes as their primary focus. Public attitude surveys are needed to monitor shifts in attitudes as a measure of progress in this area.

In Canada, prevalence surveys on violence against women have become a mainstay for research and formulating public policy. A wide array of other data sources have been developed to address the need for information about the response of criminal justice and social services. But significant challenges remain in our ability to ensure that all women in Canadian society are heard and their experiences included. Progress continues to be made toward improving the range and depth of data available to monitor levels of violence, and societal responses to it.

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