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50% of women report assaults

Ground-breaking Statscan survey finds violence pervasive

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More than half of Canadian women have been physically or sexually assaulted at least once in their adult lives, the most comprehensive survey ever undertaken of violence against women shows.

Based on telephone interviews with 12,300 women, the Statistics Canada survey found assault of women by men so endemic that it has become the statistical norm: Fifty-one per cent say it has happened to them. Nation-wide, that would mean more than five million adult women.

One in 10 said they had been assaulted in the 12 months before they were polled. That would be more than one million women in Canada.

Nearly one attack in five (18 per cent) was violent enough to injure the woman physically. Of these, 28 per cent necessitated medical attention.

The figures were greeted with anger. "It is absolutely unacceptable that women have to live lives of terror – absolutely unacceptable", said Sunera Thobani, president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the country's largest women's group. "This is a national crisis. We need [the government] to take clear action".

Bob Glossop, co-ordinator of programs and research for the Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa, said violence is "so widespread that no one can any longer try to dismiss this as a phenomenon that doesn't touch them. Indeed, it is a phenomenon that is endemic".

In spite of suggestions that the extent of violence against women has been exaggerated, the survey found it more pervasive than previous studies on a smaller scale had done.

"This has to force the government to take this seriously," said Glenda Simms, president of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. "We have an epidemic on our hands and no one was listening. People were saying we were overdramatizing".

(Speaking to reporters in Vancouver yesterday afternoon, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien said he could not comment on the survey because he had not been briefed on its contents.)

The women interviewed were 18 years and older and randomly chosen.

They were asked a series of questions designed to elicit whether, since the age of 16, they had suffered an assault that would be considered an offence under the Criminal Code. Women who spoke neither English nor French were not interviewed.

The survey found women were most likely to be assaulted by men they knew. Almost half (45 per cent) of those interviewed said they had been assaulted by dates, boyfriends, husbands, friends, family members or other men familiar to them.

Almost a third (29 per cent) of those who were married or had been married reported being assaulted by a husband. (The figure includes common-law marriages). That would mean a staggering 2.6 million Canadian women have been the victim of wife assault.

"It is a tragic portrait of how, for far too many people, families are possibly the most dangerous place for them to be", Dr. Glossop said.

Violence was reported more or less evenly across every socioeconomic group and age category. There was one marked exception: Women aged 18-24 were more than twice as likely to report violence in the previous year as were older women – 27 per cent in the younger group said they had been assaulted.

Many women had experienced violence more than once in their lives. Almost 60 per cent who said they had been sexually assaulted reported more than one attack. Sixty-three per cent of those assaulted by a husband or former husband had been attacked more than once. One third said there had been more than 10 attacks.

The survey showed marriage was a dangerous place for many. Fifteen per cent of married women said their present husband had attacked them.

Almost half – 48 per cent – of women who had been married previously had been attacked by the partner during the marriage. Three-quarters of those said they had been assaulted more than once, and 41 per cent more than 10 times.

"Maybe this is offering us a clue about why marriages are breaking down", said Holly Johnson, Statscan's manager of the survey.

More than a third whose husbands had attacked them had feared for their lives. Weapons were used by 44 per cent of violent husbands.

Pregnancy did not protect women. More than one in five (21 per cent) of those attacked by a husband had been attacked while pregnant.

The survey also found that alcohol played a huge part in violence. Men had been drinking before more than 40 per cent of attacks. Women whose husbands drank at least four times a week ran triple the risk of assault of those whose husbands did not drink. Those whose husbands drank heavily were at six times the risk.

Just 14 per cent of all the incidents catalogued by the survey were reported to police. In only 9 percent did the women contact a social-service agency. Roughly 22 per cent of woman who had been assaulted said they had told no one about it before the Statscan questioner asked.

The survey also documented a cycle of violence between generations. Women whose fathers-in-law were violent were three times as likely to be assaulted by their husbands as those whose fathers-in-law were not violent. The survey also found that 39 percent of women in violent marriages said their children had witnessed an assault.

The statistics led observers to call for immediate action from the newly elected Liberal government.

Dr. Simms of the advisory council said Mr. Chrétien must formally appoint a minister of women's issues, to sit at the cabinet table. She said the results of the survey have implications for the departments of justice, health and finance.

Ms. Thobani said the fact that so few women are reporting assault means that there ought to be changes in the justice system. She also called for more money to be given to anti-violence groups.

"I think we need to be way beyond convincing people that the problem exists", she said.

Sheila Finestone, secretary of state for the status of women, issued a statement saying that the Liberal government is committed to

Highlights

- 51 per cent of Canadian women have experienced violence since the age of 16.
- 29 per cent of married or formerly married women were assaulted by their husbands.
- Almost 60 per cent who said they had been sexually assaulted were attacked more than once.
- 48 per cent of those who had been married previously had been attacked during marriage by the husbands.
- Women with violent fathers-in-law were three times more likely to be assaulted than other women.
- 18 per cent of the attacks were violent enough to cause physical injury.

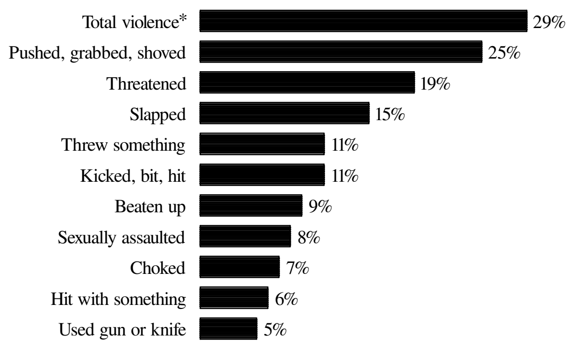
(*continued overleaf*)

"safe homes and safe streets" and to finding solutions to violence.

The survey results were statistically likely to be accurate within 1.2 percentage points upward or downward, 19 times in 20.

HOW MARRIED WOMEN ARE HURT

Proportion of Canada's 9 million women who have ever been married or lived common-law, who reported assault by a partner (18 years and over)



*Figures do not add to 100% because of multiple responses

Source: Statistics Canada

WHO GETS HURT IN JUST ONE YEAR

Number of women 18 years and over who have experienced violence in the past 12 months

	Total female population	Total women victimized (past 12 months)	
Total:	10,498,000	1,016,000	10%
Age group: 18-24	1,315,000	353,000	27
25-34	2,338,000	331,000	14
35-44	2,256,000	191,000	8
45-54	1,628,000	91,000	6
55 and over	2,961,000	49,000	2
Household income:			
Less than $15,000	1,324,000	166,000	13
$15,000-$29,999	1,860,000	198,000	11
$30,000-59,999	3,580,000	312,000	9
$60,000 or more	2,036,000	197,000	10
Not stated/Don't know	1,698,000	142,000	8
Education:			
Less than high school diploma	2,747,000	207,000	8
High school diploma	2,805,000	260,000	9
Some post secondary education	3,299,000	401,000	12
University degree	1,628,000	148,000	9

Source: Statistics Canada

DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE

The survey defined violence as an experience of physical or sexual assault that is consistent with legal definitions of these offences and could be acted on by a police officer.

Sexual Assault

The survey asked two questions about sexual assault by men other than husbands or common-law husbands:

1. "Has a (male stranger, date or boyfriend, other man known to you) ever forced you or attempted to force you into any sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way?"
2. "Has a (male stranger, date or boyfriend, other man known to you) ever touched you against your will in any sexual way, such as unwanted touching, grabbing, kissing or fondling?"

Wife Assault

Women were asked a series of questions about whether their husband or common-law husband had done certain violent things. Violent actions counted included these:

- threatened to hit you with his fist or anything else that could hurt you;
- thrown anything at you that could hurt you;
- pushed, grabbed or shoved you;
- slapped you;
- kicked, bit or hit you with his fist;
- hit you with something that could hurt you;
- beat you up;
- choked you;
- threatened to use or used a gun or knife on you;
- forced you into any sexual activity when you did not want to by threatening you, holding you down, or hurting you in some way.

Physical Assault

The survey asked two questions about physical assault by men other than husbands or common-law husbands.

1. "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 such as being hit, slapped, kicked or grabbed, to being beaten, knifed or shot. Has a (male stranger, date or boyfriend, other man known to you) ever physically attacked you?"
2. "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 man known to you) ever threatened to harm you? Did you believe he would do it?"

The article EM9357 reprinted overleaf and above is used in Chapter 1 of the STAT 231 Course Materials, in Figure 2.2b of the STAT 332 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #45.