

Misinformation on violence

Recently, I have formed the opinion that much of the 'information we are fed by various 'causes' is misinformation. In some cases, the 'information' is simply false while in others it is misleading. I have been asked to demonstrate this, so I shall give two examples — though I have

come to suspect that there are as many examples as there are 'facts.'

The first instance of misinformation that I shall address concerns the issue of violence towards women. This is a provocative issue, and one that occasions much passion; however, it seems certain facts have escaped the notice of many. For instance, though it is true that those who perpetrate violence tend to be male, it is also the case that these perpetrators tend to be criminals (80% in one Massachusetts investigation) and that they visit this violence equally upon both men and women.

That our society appears to be becoming increasingly violent (for everyone) is something that needs to be addressed, but it seems to me that we should address the whole issue and not merely part of it. But it will be argued, however, that violence that women in our society have to endure is domestic violence — what if that? Well, I have forwarded some data on this in the past, but the quote I chose was somewhat vague. Let me be more clear. A number of studies have been done on this issue — some better than others. No few have investigated patients in hospitals in inner cities (e.g., Detroit). Patients were asked whether they were there as a result of domestic violence and it was found that the majority of those who responded affirmatively were women.

However, in one such study (J.A.M.A. 1984; 251: 3259-3264) there was no statistically significant difference between the number of male and female victims. Furthermore, these statistics — whatever their significance — cannot be validly applied

beyond the limits of the inner city. However, there have always been studies concerned with the general population. Most of these receive little press because, despite being scientifically conducted, their results are not sensational. All the same, they tell an interesting story: women and men are equally likely to indulge in domestic violence (e.g. Gilles and Strauss).

According to these reports, women were just as likely to yell,

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slap, punch, throw things, stab, and shoot their male partners as these partners were to visit such misfortunes upon them. Granted, women were more often injured in such activity, which accounts, in part, for the hospital statistics mentioned above, but they were the victims of violence no more often than they were its instigators. (Interestingly, researcher Clare Rensotti and others report a comparable amount of domestic violence that passes between lesbian couples — further weakening the claim that domestic violence is exclusively perpetrated by men.)

The second 'fact' that I shall treat is that 'one in four' university women is sexually assaulted. This is an inflammatory figure, and serves only to

breed fear. This 'research' was conducted in the U.S. by researcher Koss and her colleagues, and some questionable methods were used. For instance, one of the three indicators that were supposedly sure indicators of rape, was vaguely worded and ambiguous — even Koss admits as much. Furthermore, 73% of those who were classified as rape victims did not believe they had been raped and 42% of them indicated the veracity of this belief by continuing to see their putative assaulters. If these young women were assaulted, we would expect them to know it (remembering that to deny this is to put at nothing their intelligence and insight) If we discount the ambiguous question in this survey, and we discount those who denied being assaulted, we find that the number of victims drops to between one in 22 and one in 33. This number is still far too high, but it is also far lower than 'one in four.'

However, it might be claimed that simply deleting questionable data is not particularly scientific. Fair enough. In studies that were well conceived and carried out in a careful and scientific way (e.g. a study done by Dr. Margaret Gordon), we find that the prevalence of sexual assault on university campuses is reported to be about one in 50. Again, this is far too high — but again, it is far lower than one in four. The one in four figure was reached by conceiving 'sexual assault' as an irreversibly broad sense, and by asking vague questions of those polled. None of us need this sort of 'information.' If we are really committed to stopping this crime — and its victims deserve nothing less — we should target the criminals who perpetrate it and not the vast majority of university students who do not.

There are other 'facts' that appear to be wholly unsupported — for instance, the 'rule of thumb' is not mentioned anywhere in British Common Law, and the bad reputation it has acquired is entirely unjustified — and far more could be said about those above, but I am afraid that I am out of space.

To conclude, let me just say (though I fear it shall fall on deaf ears) that I strongly object to both violence against women and to sexual assault. They are criminal acts and should not be tolerated. However, we should bear in mind that truth is a far better ally than falsehood — even for the most noble of ends.

Glenn Wylie

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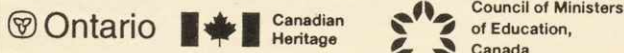
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