

THE INCIDENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CANADA

Rarely a day goes by in this country in which Canadian media do not carry reports of sexual and physical assaults, perpetrated by trusted persons and strangers against girls and women. The frequency with which incidents of this nature are reported in the media would lead the most Canadians to conclude that violence against women is, indeed, a serious problem in Canada. In fact, the gravity of the situation is far greater than the number of cases in news reports suggests. Research has shown that most women who are victims of violence do not report their victimization to the police. As a result, its actual incidence is largely invisible and absent from official crime statistics and, by extension, from media coverage. Indeed, sexual assault and wife assault are two crimes known to be significantly under-reported relative to other crimes of violence. A Canada-wide survey published in 1985 found that fewer than 40% of female sexual assault victims and less than half of wife assault victims had made a report to the police. Studies show that women's reluctance to report violent attacks against them is related to fear of retaliation that would result in further violence or death, lack of confidence in the police and the courts, guilt, and embarrassment.

The national statistical reporting system in Canada, the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system contains statistics on criminal incidents in Canada. This database includes only crimes reported to police and records reported incidents of wife assault as assaults. The UCR does not contain descriptive information about the relationship between victims and offenders or about the circumstances of the offence which would identify incidents of violence against women in the family.

In order to measure the frequency of those crimes that do not come to the attention of enforcement officials and those which take place in the family home, other sources of data have been developed. Victimization surveys ask respondents to report anonymously on incidents in a particular time frame in which they were the victim of a physical or sexual assault. One of the advantages of such surveys is that they measure both those incidents that were and were not reported to police. Another source of data are public opinion surveys measuring public attitudes towards and awareness of violence against women. Special studies carried out with shelters for battered women, sexual assault centres and other front-line agencies provide information on the number of victims who have sought assistance from these agencies.