

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY

Except from Justice Ministries' Report adopted by the 2021 General Assembly

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world, Justice Ministries began researching impacts the pandemic was having on justice-related issues to try to shape our recommendations and the materials we produce appropriately. Many of those impacts are detailed elsewhere in this report. One of the things we found, however, is that Public Health measures that were necessary to reduce the spread of the virus were accompanied by an alarming rise in reports of domestic violence.²⁵ For this reason, we are including a preliminary report on the issue of domestic and intimate partner violence (IVP) in this report to the General Assembly. Given the complexity of the issue and the ways in which the pandemic continues fostering conditions for domestic and intimate partner violence to flourish, we will bring a fuller report with recommendations next year.

The impacts of the necessary social distancing and isolation measures put into place to control the spread of the virus have dramatically altered household dynamics and family relationships. Increased stressors from financial insecurity, care of and schooling for children, altered work environments, isolation and increased mental health stress all play into contexts that can significantly intensify domestic violence and where being isolated at home reduces opportunities for assistance for victims of abuse.

What is domestic violence? Who does it affect?

Domestic violence may be directed toward anyone: intimate partners, children, elders or any other member of a family group or household. It takes the form of a pattern of behavior that ignores the will and agency of a person and harms the intended target. This harm may take the shape of physical abuse (slapping, shoving, hitting, kicking, etc.), sexual abuse, emotional abuse (belittling, harassing, intimidation), spiritual abuse or financial abuse. In all of these cases, the perpetrator is concerned with controlling and dominating a person without regard for their agency.

Intimate partner violence is one form of domestic violence. It can be defined as a pattern of behavior that is used to harm and to gain and maintain power and control over an intimate partner without regard for their agency. This includes patterns of behaviours that frighten, intimidate, manipulate, hurt, blame, injure, terrorize or belittle. Intimate partner violence can occur between people who are married, living together or dating (whether they are living together or not). Though some people are more likely to be targeted for it than others, anyone can be a victim of intimate partner violence regardless of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, faith or socio-economic location.

Domestic violence in any of its forms – against children, partners, elders, other household members – can be deadly. According to a recent study by the Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative for Vulnerable Populations domestic violence takes the lives of around 70 people a year in Canada.²⁶ Even for those who are not killed, the effects on lives are devastating. Addressing domestic violence is a life and death issue.

Targeted Vulnerability

Though anyone can experience domestic violence, some groups experience it at higher rates than other members of the population. While poverty is not an indicator of perpetrating domestic violence, those living with economic insecurity, under and unemployment and those who struggle

to meet basic needs are at greater risk of experiencing violence.²⁷ Systemic racism is also a factor impacting levels of domestic violence. Below we have listed some sobering statistics from several groups that experience domestic violence at disproportionately higher rates. These brief looks at statistics involving particular groups by no means cover all groups who are disproportionately targeted.

Children

Children are particularly vulnerable in cases of domestic violence and abuse because they often have little or no means to leave the situation and may not know their rights or even realize that the violence they are being forced to experience is wrong. The numbers are stark. Self-reported data indicates for example that “nearly one in three (30%) of people in Canada aged 15 and older experienced either physical and sexual abuse or both, *before* the age of 15.” Additionally, according to the same Government of Canada Factsheet entitled “Family Violence”, that became available in fall 2020:

- between 2017 and 2018, police-reported data show that family violence against children and youth increased by 7%, while non-family violence decreased slightly (-2%).
- According to police-reported data, a combined 18,965 children and youth (aged 17 and younger) experienced family violence in Canada in 2018. From this number, 11,417 were females (60%) and 7,458 were males (40%).
- 2018 police-reported data show that among children and youth, females and males were about equally likely to experience physical assault by a family member (143 versus 148 incidents per 100,000 population). However, the rate of sexual offences was nearly five times higher for females than males (149 incidents versus 32).
- Police-reported data indicate that in 2018, the vast majority of children and youth who experienced family violence were victimized at a residential location (91% of females and 90% of males) and that the majority lived with the person who victimized them.
- In 2018, police-reported data show that rates of family violence against children and youth was nearly twice as high in rural areas than urban areas (448 incidents versus 227 per 100,000 population), with the rural-urban difference being larger for females (566 versus 276 incidents) than males (336 versus 180 incidents).

Recall that this is police-reported data: the actual numbers are much higher, since in order for violence to come to the attention of police, someone has to report it. Domestic violence against children can often remain hidden, with disastrous consequences. We also do not have a full picture yet on how the pandemic has affected children and youth facing domestic violence but preliminary reports suggest it has made the situation significantly worse.

Women

In 2018, Statistics Canada stated that 99,452 people reported incidents of intimate partner violence to Canadian police services; 79% of these were woman. Here too it is worth noting that an estimated three quarters of self-reported victims of intimate partner violence is not reported to police. A Statistics Canada report released in December 2019 states that “More than 11 million Canadians have been physically or sexually assaulted since the age of 15. This represents 39% of women and 35% of men 15 years of age and older in Canada, with the gender difference driven by a much higher prevalence of sexual assault among women than men (30% versus 8%).” Additionally, 67% of Canadians say they have personally known at least one woman who has experienced physical or sexual abuse.

Studies show that the lethality of the violence differs as well: Black women are almost three times as likely to be killed because of domestic violence or intimate partner violence as white women. Experiences of systemic racism and policing which have tended to erode trust between Black communities and policing services also make it less likely for victims of violence to seek assistance from law enforcement. Systemic racism experienced by Black women have contributed to tropes that devalue Black women at a base level.

Indigenous People

Colonialism had a profound impact on Indigenous people through the disruption of culturally specific gender roles in Indigenous communities and families. Violence and especially interpersonal violence experienced by Indigenous girls and women, must be understood within the wider context of racism, colonialism and intergenerational trauma, according to Native Women's Association of Canada "You are not alone: a toolkit for Aboriginal women escaping domestic violence". The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls gives a haunting account of the connections between racism, intergenerational trauma and domestic violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls.

Research shows that Indigenous women experience dramatically higher rates of violence, including domestic violence. 24% of Indigenous women in Canada report having been assaulted by a current or former spouse, compared to 7% of non-Indigenous women. The Ontario Native Women's Association toolkit reports even higher statistics: 54% of Indigenous women reported severe forms of family violence such as being beaten, choked, having a gun or knife used against them and sexual assault (verses 37% of non-Indigenous women).

Few studies provide an estimate or statistics regarding domestic abuse experienced by Indigenous men and boys but higher rates of violence are known to be experienced by Indigenous peoples generally. The domestic violence experiences of Two-Spirit people are also underreported.

LGBTQQI2S+ People

Studies have shown that sexual and gender minorities experience rates of intimate partner violence similar to or higher than the national average. Those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual are at increased risk of victimization in general but there is not an abundance of information regarding the forms and extent of domestic violence. Barriers that lesbian, gay or bisexual folks may face in disclosing violence may include exposing their sexual orientation, fears about other's beliefs regarding same sex partnerships or in cases where someone has faced previous harassment or violence, fears that such experiences will be repeated. Research also indicates that the victims of violence in a same-sex relationship may not disclose this to police for fear of hostility or the belief that police may not take the crime seriously, which likely indicates that violence is under-reported. One literature review estimates that lifetime intimate partner violence among transgender people ranges from 31.1% to 50% and a report focusing on experiences of domestic violence in transgender people in Scotland found that 80% of trans respondents reported experiencing some form of domestic abuse and that 46% of transgender respondents reported transphobic abuse within a domestic relationship.

Data regarding the experiences of LGBTQQI2S+ who are Black, Indigenous or People of Colour is even more scarce and needs to be prioritized. One study reported that 44.7% of Black Trans Women reported experiencing intimate partner violence within a one-year period. This same study recommended increased economic opportunity as a key factor in preventing intimate

partner violence, linking experiences of discrimination to limitation in economic opportunities including homelessness, unemployment, job discrimination and social service discrimination.

Elders

Elder abuse is any action by someone in a relationship of trust that results in harm or distress to an older person. As with all forms of domestic violence, it can manifest in many ways, including in any of the physical, psychological or financial abuses listed above. Neglect is especially common and is also a form of abuse. Like other forms of domestic violence, elder abuse occurrences are tied to an abuser exercising power and control over an older person. It too can be lethal.

Forms of abuse against older people can be complicated by some of the impacts of aging including the reliance of an older person on a caregiver for daily living activities, dementia and other forms of physical or cognitive limitation. Shared living arrangements or institutional care can increase the risk for elder abuse. An estimated 4–10% of seniors experience abuse, while 20% of abuse is reported to someone who can help, according to Statistics Canada’s report “Family violence in Canada, a statistical profile, 2015”. The same publication shows that women are at greater risk from elder abuse and account for 60% of seniors experiencing family violence. Arguments or quarrels (37%) and feelings of frustration, anger or despair (33%) were the most commonly reported motives for family-related homicides against seniors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed the vulnerability of elders in residential care facilities. High rates of virus transmission in these facilities stemming in part from underfunding of care points to a need for a systemic review of the rights and protections of older people in institutional care.

A role for the church? Breaking a Culture of Silence and Practicing Informed Support

Being able to recognize and identify forms of abuse is an important key to being able to address it, which is why we have brought forward this preliminary report with a brief look at some of the statistics available. Patriarchal structures and societal adages about gender roles can influence how victims of abuse and often well-meaning people perceive and respond to abusive behaviours (e.g., offering advice that could actually increase the risk of harm to a victim). It is important to counter social stigma related to domestic violence and to help those experiencing domestic violence find safety again. Additionally, because there are many social injustices with intersecting impacts that increase the vulnerability of some people to experiences of domestic violence, it is important to consider intimate partner violence and domestic violence as a public justice issue – not an individual issue. Framing it in this way helps people see that it is justifiably the subject of community-wide engagement to combat it. This reframing is critical to maximize the impact of public policy measures that can not only provide appropriate supports for those who experience abuse but create societal environments that do not foster or tolerate abusive behaviours.

As church communities and leaders we can:

- Talk about domestic violence in sermons, small groups and church literature, acknowledging that domestic violence exists in all communities, including churches and letting those experiencing domestic violence know that there is help available.
- Ensure that church leaders and elders know what expectations and responsibilities in the disclosure of different kinds of domestic violence (e.g. children, adult, older people) are, especially in reference to the church’s Leading with Care Policy and responsibilities.

- Provide opportunities for learning about forms of abuse, violence and appropriate ways to respond if someone discloses experiences of domestic violence.
- Know what services are available in your community and be ready to connect those who come forward with those supports, as needed.

The full report is found in The Presbyterian Church in Canada's Acts and Proceedings 2021, pp.407-443.