

WOMEN'S SAFETY AND COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS

Women's Personal Security Issues

Women's fear of crime has a significant impact on their use of public space, and on their participation in all aspects of community life.⁵

National surveys, such as Statistics Canada's General Social Survey consistently find that, on average, one in four Canadians feel unsafe walking in their own neighbourhood at night.⁶ And of women who have ever been in the following situation:

60% are worried about walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark;
76% are worried about waiting for, or using public transit after dark;
83% are worried about walking alone to their car in a parking garage; and
39% are worried about being home alone at night.⁷

At times, women's fear has been viewed by criminologists and community planners as either irrational, or out of proportion with crime rates. However, it is now recognized that the majority of women's experiences of harassment, intimidation and violence do not make it into the general "picture of crime". That is, most interpersonal crime - sexual assaults, violence against women in relationships, sexual abuse of children, and so on - remains "hidden crime", most often committed in the home, where the offender is known to the victim, and is rarely reported to the police. Canada's National

Crime Prevention Centre notes that an estimated 90 percent of sexual assaults and 68 percent of non-sexual assaults are not reported to the police.⁸

In order to gain a better understanding of women's personal security issues, official crime statistics must be supplemented with victimization data. This data comes from a variety of sources; for example, from surveys based on women's accounts of their experiences told to interviewers, from research studies, and from reports to hospitals, women's organizations, and social services.



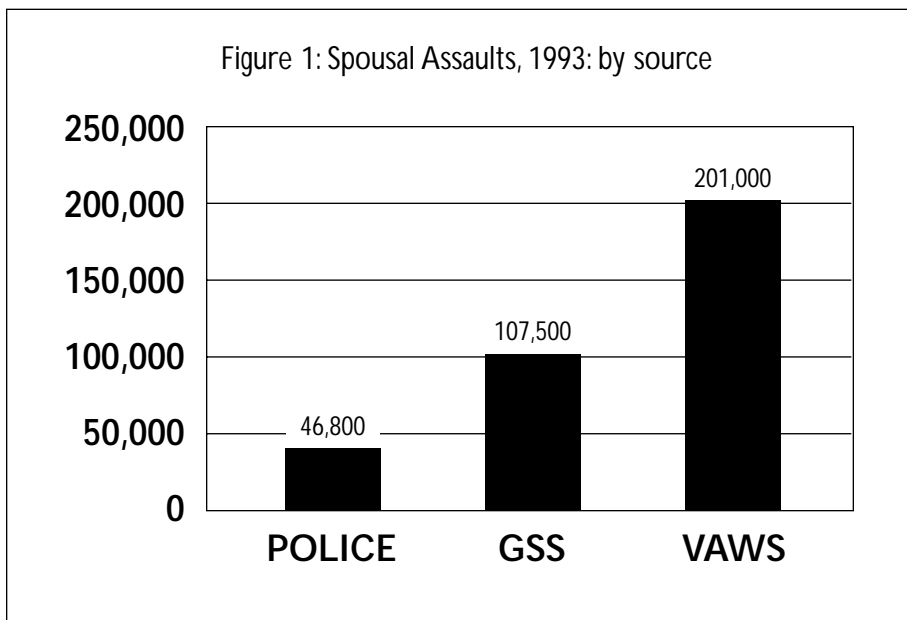


FIGURE 1: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, 1993, BY SOURCE

Police (Uniform Crime Reporting Survey), GSS (General Social Survey), VAWS (Violence Against Women Survey)

Figure 1⁹ illustrates how critical it is to use a variety of sources to develop a fuller picture of women's experiences in your community. The wide variation between the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (Police), the General Social Survey (GSS), and the specialized Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS), is evident.

When we look more closely at a survey like Statistics Canada's Violence Against Women Survey, and compare those findings to reported crime statistics, we can see the many ways in which women's experiences of crime are being left out of the official picture:

- one of every two women in Canada since the age of 16 has been physically or sexually assaulted by a man at least once;
- one of every three women in BC is assaulted by her husband or partner;
- 39% of women in Canada have been sexually assaulted; and
- 87% of women have experienced sexual harassment, about half from men known to them.

Women's experience of crime is also linked to other factors such as age, income, sexuality, race, and ability. Any, or all, of these factors can

One of every two women in Canada since the age of 16 has been physically or sexually assaulted by a man at least once.

Most interpersonal crime - sexual assaults, violence against women in relationships, sexual abuse of children, and so on - remains "hidden crime", most often committed in the home, where the offender is known to the victim, and is rarely reported to the police.



affect women's risk of violence, their perceptions about safety, and the choices they may or may not have in their community. For example:

- Young, single women are at greater risk of stranger assaults and of sexual harassment at work than any other age group.¹⁰
- As many as 90% of women with disabilities are assaulted or abused.¹¹
- An estimated 80% of aboriginal women have been assaulted or abused.¹²

It is critical to look at our communities from the perspectives of those most vulnerable to violence; there are obvious links between economic, social and political conditions and disadvantage, discrimination, vulnerability, and inaccessibility.

Income level, for example, has a huge impact on choices available to women in our communities, choices about employment, education, where to live, etc. Financial resources affect everything from a woman's ability to leave a violent situation at home, to her ability to own a car. In turn, lack of safe, accessible

transportation may limit her ability to attend school or to access community support services. For example, research conducted in the Boundary Region revealed that local economic and social factors – lack of employment opportunities and community attitudes – were critical factors affecting women's safety in that community.

To help you make the links between physical, social and institutional factors that affect safety, and encourage you to relate to other experiences, have your group go through the exercise outlined in Activity 1.

ACTIVITY 1: Identities Exercise

It can be a challenge to understand how, and to what extent, violence and fear affect people's lives on a daily basis. It is critical to try to think about these issues, not only from our own perspective, but also from the perspective of others. This exercise can help us to do that.¹³

Write out the identities listed below on index cards, or cut each sheet up into strips of paper, each strip containing one identity. Give out the identities and ask participants to keep their identity a secret. Line participants along a wall, facing the wall. Tell participants to imagine the life of their assigned identity, how she or he might feel about using and participating in various community environments, and how her or his circumstances would affect choices.

Ask the following questions, and ask participants to take a step towards you whenever they can answer yes. Adapt both the questions and the identities to your own community.

Questions:

If you are free to be open about your sexual orientation/identity with those close to you (example: out of the closet in most situations), please turn around and face the centre of the room.

Take one step forward only if you can answer **yes** to the question asked.

1. Could you expect to speak openly and easily about your sexual orientation/identity at school, or at work, without fear of harassment, or negative consequences?
2. Do you feel safe in your own home?
3. Do you expect to be treated fairly by the police?
4. Is it easy for you to get to the services you need (e.g. grocery store, community centre, social and emergency services)?
5. Do you have enough income for food and shelter?
6. Do you think that you could get a bank loan.
7. Can you walk alone in your own neighbourhood at night without fear of sexual assault?
8. Do you own a vehicle?
9. Can you afford to take a vacation?
11. Do you feel comfortable enough to attend city / town council meetings?
12. Are you able to attend night classes to upgrade your education?
13. Do you feel safe at your place of work?

Identities:

1. You are an 18 year old, white single heterosexual female secretary who is HIV+. You are in a treatment program for substance abuse.
2. You are a 40 year old aboriginal woman living on the second floor of an apartment complex located three kilometres from town and services. You are a single mom with three children and no car.
3. You are a 23 year old immigrant woman who came to Canada from India three months ago to be married, and are just beginning to learn English. You live with your husband's family.
4. You are a 45 year old white male lawyer in a local firm. You are married with two children.
5. You are a 40 year old white female lawyer in a local firm. You are married with two children.
6. You are a 30 year old woman who has come to Canada from the Philippines under the Live-In Caregiver Program. The white family that employs you expects you to work long hours, and you've recently felt uncomfortable with your employer's behaviour towards you.
7. You are a 20 year old Indo-Canadian woman attending university. During your first year there you were the victim of date-rape and have not told anyone about it.
8. You are a 40 year old white, gay male, recently separated from your wife. You have joint custody of your ten-year old daughter and are an elementary school teacher.
9. You are a stay-at-home, heterosexual mother of three children. You have "traditional values" and a husband with a very high income.
10. You are a 21 year old heterosexual woman who came from Vietnam to Canada with your family four years ago. You are working as a hotel clerk, mostly at night, and recently your supervisor has made unwanted sexual advances towards you.
11. You are a 65 year old white woman, recently widowed and living on a small government pension. You live on a small farm outside of town and have lately been in poor health.
12. You are a 35 year old lesbian of colour who immigrated to a small community in Canada, from England, three months ago. You are a computer technician and are looking for work.
13. You are a 30 year old Muslim woman who has come to Canada as a refugee, a victim of war crimes in your own country. You are living with three other women in a small apartment on the outskirts of the City.
14. You are a 25 year old Russian woman who came to Canada six months ago, sponsored by your Canadian husband. You have recently separated from him because he is violent.
15. You are a 35 year old Japanese Canadian woman with a disability, living on the ground floor of an apartment complex in the inner city. You use a wheelchair to get around.
16. You are a 52 year old white female politician, recently married. Your husband is a bank manager who is becoming increasingly financially controlling at home. He recently flew into a rage when you bought a new suit.
17. You are 59 year old francophone woman who has recently moved to town to be near your daughter who lives in a predominantly English-speaking community. There are no francophone services or resources in town.



Women who have to work night shifts, who cannot afford to own a car, who have to walk or rely on public transit to get to work, school or essential services, and who need to attend school, community meetings and other activities, often must do so despite their knowledge of the risks.

Community Environments

The Identities Activity has illustrated some of the ways that both fear and experience of violence have an impact on women's participation in community life. Indeed, studies have counted over a 1,000 strategies that women use to try to avoid danger, such as not going out at night alone (if at all), avoiding certain areas of the community, and attending fewer evening activities including educational activities, employment activities, and public meetings:

- women are eight times more likely than men to forego an evening activity due to concerns for their safety;
- 68% of women routinely lock their car doors when driving (compared with 40% of men);
- 58% of women routinely check the back seat of their car before getting in (compared with 33% of men); and
- about one half of women do not use public transportation or parking garages due to concerns for their safety.¹⁴

About two thirds of women who are fearful of walking alone after dark, say they would do so if they felt safer.

*Statistics Canada
Violence Against Women
Survey, 1993*

In your group, have everyone participate in the Avoidance and Precautions Exercise outlined in Activity 2. It will help to illustrate all the steps that women take on a daily basis to try and stay safe, and uncover all the actions that become “second nature” to women in a society with pervasive gender-based crime.

ACTIVITY 2: Precautions and Avoidance

Break into small groups and have one person in each group agree to record the results on flip chart paper. Have participants list some of the things that they do on a daily basis to try and keep themselves safe, or to try and keep the ones they love safe. Give groups 15 minutes to do this and then have them report back. Post the flip chart papers on the wall and have the large group discuss the results.

Of course, most women want and/or need to go out and be a part of their community and many women who choose not to do certain things out of concern for their safety, state that they would choose otherwise if these concerns did not exist. About two thirds of women who are fearful of walking alone after dark, for example, say they would do so if they felt safer.¹⁵

Further, most women do not have a choice when it comes to avoiding potentially dangerous situations. They may not be able to choose where to live, shop or go to school. Women who have to

work night shifts, who cannot afford to own a car, who have to walk or rely on public transit to get to work, school or essential services, and who need to attend school, community meetings and other activities, often must do so despite their knowledge of risks. Over 40% of women who say they are worried about walking alone after dark must walk alone at least once a week and sometimes daily.¹⁶

What is it about particular places or situations that can make us feel unsafe? Our perceptions about safety are related to physical, social, and institutional factors.

While the physical environment does not cause violence against women, it can create opportunities for violence to occur. For example, research on public sexual assault sites has found that a number of features are often present:

- the ability of an offender to predict time and path of a potential victim;
- the presence of an ambush site;
- an attack site which is often enclosed on three sides;
- poor visibility;
- an escape route for the offender.¹⁷

Factors that are commonly identified by women as contributing to their fear of being in, or using, a place include:

- poor lighting;
- isolation (i.e., no one around to respond in an emergency);
- places that present opportunities for entrapment, (such as alleys, laneways, behind buildings);
- obstructions to sightlines that detract from a person's ability to see what is ahead (sharp corners, walls); and
- presence of derogatory graffiti.

Time of day or year, and presence or lack of security and emergency services, can exacerbate any of these factors.

Women also identify the context of an area and its people, as well as societal attitudes, as significant to their sense of safety. Familiarity with an area and the people, social norms about women's appropriate use of space, (i.e., women should not go out at night alone), expectations about consequences, and knowledge of crimes that have occurred in a place or in similar places, are all part of how a place may be perceived, and factor into decisions about appropriate use of those places.

Figure 2 on the following page illustrates places that women have identified as unsafe, and the factors associated with fear of being in and/or using them.





FIGURE 2: EXAMPLES OF PLACES WHERE SAFETY IS A CONCERN

PLACES	CONTRIBUTING FACTORS
<p>HOME</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence in the home • Isolation, being alone, inadequate security • Knowledge of crime and violence in an area.
<p>WORK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At work • Going to and leaving work in the morning and at night 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate security • Harassment • Design factors (see below) • Isolation, especially at night when few staff are on duty.
<p>PUBLIC PLACES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parks, trails, pathways • Parking lots • Highways and secondary roads • Streets & lanes • Side streets and alleyways • Commercial areas • Areas used as hangouts • Bus stops, stations • Public and other communal buildings (entrances, hallways, stairways, elevators, laundry rooms and washrooms) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation (being alone) • Inadequate security • Poor lighting • Obstacles to access • Entrapment and hiding spots • Lack of signage • Derogatory graffiti • Poor visibility due to various factors including presence of bushes, trees, high fences, sharp corners • Inadequate access to emergency services (e.g., telephones) • People in the area perceived as threatening • Dogs and wildlife



Institutional factors have a huge impact on women's use of, and participation in, various community environments. The institutions that operate in our communities - local government, education, health services, and so on - have responsibilities with regard to provision of services. How these services are provided, where, and when, has an impact on how accessible they are to women and other vulnerable groups. For example:

- a local college may not be accessible to women who need to take night courses if it is not linked adequately with public transit, or if women don't feel safe there at night;
- health and social services that are spread out geographically, can make it next to impossible for people without vehicles to access;
- workplaces may feel and be unsafe without adequate policies and practices to prevent sexual harassment or assault;
- local decision-making processes, like those that take place at Council meetings, may not be accessible to many in the community because of formality of processes, language, meeting schedules and location, as well as receptivity to issues.

This can be particularly acute in small, rural, and/or isolated communities where personal security issues are often exacerbated by geographical and social isolation, lack of public transit, poor economic and social conditions, lack of social and emergency services; and long distances to work, recreation, and community services.

The institutions that operate in our communities - local government, education, health services, and so on - have responsibilities with regard to the provision of services.

How these services are provided, where, and when, has an impact on how accessible they are to women and other vulnerable groups.



In a study of rural women who were abused by their partners, researchers found that rural women stayed in abusive relationships five to seven years longer than women living in urban areas because of lack of resources, and isolation from support systems.¹⁸

In a safety audit conducted in the Boundary Region, a vast rural area of the southern interior of British Columbia, “Lack of infrastructure and capacity to respond”, and “concerns about the response or service provided”, were identified as the top two categories of concern.¹⁹

Thus, any community safety strategy that is to effectively address the complex nature of women’s personal security issues must be an integrated one; that is, it must address the physical, social and institutional factors involved in women’s community safety.

In the following section, we look at the integrated strategy offered by the safer communities approach. We also explore how local government works, and why it is uniquely placed to provide the leadership necessary for success in this area.