



# Women and Community Safety Fact Sheet #1

## Community Safety: Exploring the Issues

The defining feature of a safe community is the ability of all of its citizens - regardless of gender, race, age, income, sexuality, language or ability - to participate fully and freely in all of its environments. This requires that citizens both feel, and are, safe, and that they have meaningful opportunities to participate in local decision-making processes.

However, the reality of violence, in our homes, at our places of work, and in public places, means that the ability of women and other marginalized groups to fully participate in community life is severely limited. Safety is a basic quality of life issue – violence and fear have severe implications for women’s health and well-being, and that of the entire community.

Statistics Canada estimates that the direct costs of crime each year is \$10 billion, spent on police, courts and corrections services. Policing takes up over half of that \$10 billion, and represents a significant part of the budget of many municipalities. The physical and sexual abuse of girls and women in Canada costs our economy approximately \$4.2 billion a year - this includes the costs of health care interventions, lost work days, social services and criminal justice.

For the majority of women in Canada, knowledge of their risk of violence translates into fear of victimization . 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. At times, women’s fear has been viewed by criminologists and community planners as either irrational, or out of proportion with crime rates. However, because the majority of interpersonal crimes go unreported, the majority of women’s experiences of harassment, intimidation and violence do not make it into the general “picture of crime”.

People’s fear, lessened mobility, and distrust of neighbours, result in enormous costs to the vitality of the community. When women and other vulnerable groups experience physical and social environments as unsafe, they cannot freely participate in community activities, engage in employment or educational opportunities, or become involved in local decision-making processes. Research has shown that fear of crime can result in the decline of neighbourhoods and economic vitality of communities.

The social and economic implications for the entire community are obvious; a healthy, viable community is one where all members can freely and fully participate.

The question becomes then—how can we address crime, victimization and fear, and its impact on the most vulnerable people in our communities?

*When we make  
communities safer  
for women,  
we make them  
safer for  
all citizens.*

# WOMEN'S PERSONAL SECURITY ISSUES

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF CRIME

Violence against women covers a broad range of actions, from violence against women in relationships, to public sexual assault, to more subtle forms of violence, including harassment and verbal attacks.

Most interpersonal crime remains “hidden crime”, most often committed in the home, where the offender is known to the victim, and is rarely reported. The National Crime Prevention Centre confirms that an estimated 90 percent of sexual assaults and 68 percent of non-sexual assaults are not reported to the police. (Statistics Canada, Violence Against Women Survey, 1993)

Nationally,

- 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. (Statistics Canada, 1993)

Women's experience of crime is also linked to factors such as age, income, sexuality, race, and ability. Any, or all, of these factors can 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.
- As many as 90% of women with disabilities are assaulted or abused.
- An estimated 80% of aboriginal women have been assaulted or abused. (Statistics Canada, 1993)

In small, rural, and/or isolated communities, violence against women can be particularly problematic, exacerbated by factors such as: geographical and social isolation; lack of, or inadequate, public transportation systems; poor economic and social conditions; lack of social and emergency services; and long distances to work, recreation, and community services.

## WOMEN'S FEAR OF CRIME

Many people, particularly women, have concerns about their safety in public and semi-public places - at home alone, walking alone in our neighbourhoods after dark, going out at night to meetings, waiting for and using public transportation, at our places of work, and school.

In study after study, a majority of women report restricting their activities out of concern for their safety, including major life decisions about where to live and work, about education and recreation, and many seemingly routine activities such as shopping or visiting a friend.

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. (Statistics Canada, 1993)

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.