

Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces

Released at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time in *The Daily*, Thursday, December 5, 2019

In 2018, one in three (32%) women and one in eight (13%) men were subjected to unwanted sexual behaviour while in a public place. Women are also more likely than men to report experiencing certain forms of violence, including sexual assault, online harassment, or unwanted sexual behaviour in the workplace.

Gender-based violence—defined as violence that is committed against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender—encompasses a broad range of behaviours ranging from those that are not necessarily criminal (such as unwanted sexual attention while in public) to those that are classified as criminal acts (physical and sexual assault).

Data collection and increasing knowledge about gender-based violence is a central component of *It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence*. As part of the federal strategy, the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces gathered information on Canadians' experiences of unwanted behaviour and violent victimization. Detailed results from the survey are released today in the *Juristat* article, "[Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces](#)." Some key findings are also summarized in the infographic, "[Inappropriate Sexual or Harassing Behaviours in Canada, 2018](#)."

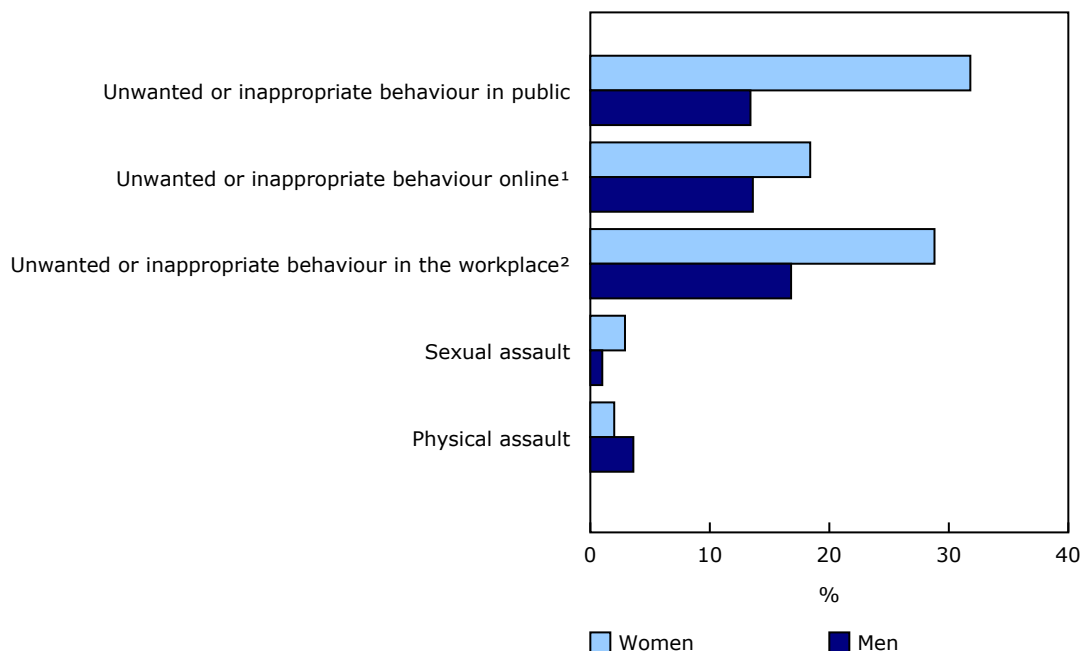
Women more likely than men to experience unwanted sexual behaviour in public places

Both women and men were impacted by unwanted sexual behaviours while in public places, such as on the street, in a bar or restaurant, or while using public transportation. That said, the prevalence of unwanted sexual behaviour while in a public place was more than twice as high among women (32%) than among men (13%) in 2018. A male stranger was most often the perpetrator for both women and men who experienced these behaviours. Those who lived in the core of larger cities were more likely to experience unwanted behaviours in public.



Chart 1

Experiences of unwanted or inappropriate behaviour or violence in the 12 months preceding the survey, by type of behaviour or victimization and gender, 2018



1. Percent calculation excludes those who said they did not use the Internet in the 12 months preceding the survey.

2. Percent calculation excludes those who said they did not work in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Note(s): All differences between women and men are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Source(s): Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (5256).

The most common types of unwanted sexual behaviour experienced in public by women were unwanted sexual attention (25%), unwanted physical contact (17%) and unwanted comments about their sex or gender (12%). These were also the three most common types of behaviour experienced by men, though the prevalence was considerably lower (6% for all three types).

For both women and men, those who were aged 15 to 24 and those who were not heterosexual were most likely to experience unwanted sexual behaviour while in public, even when taking other individual characteristics into account.

Smaller gap between men and women in the prevalence of online harassment

Almost one in five women (18%) reported experiencing online harassment in the 12 months preceding the survey, compared with 14% of men. Many of the women and men targeted had little knowledge of who was responsible, such as not knowing how many people were responsible (20% of women and 31% of men), not knowing the gender of the perpetrator (33% of women and 53% of men), and not knowing their relationship to the perpetrator (28% of women and 46% of men).

Women (28%) were also more likely than men (19%) to have taken measures such as blocking others online or deleting accounts in order to protect themselves from online harassment.

More than half of women and men witness inappropriate sexual behaviour in the workplace, but women more likely to experience it

More than half of women (53%) and men (56%) witnessed inappropriate sexual behaviour in their workplaces. However, women (29%) were more often the target of these behaviours relative to their male counterparts (17%). For both women (18%) and men (12%), the most common type of inappropriate sexual behaviour directed at them in the workplace was sexual jokes.

The gender composition of the workplace had an impact on the prevalence of inappropriate sexual behaviour. Almost 4 in 10 (39%) women who stated that most or all of their co-workers were men personally experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour in the workplace, more than double the proportion of men who worked in a predominantly male workplace (16%).

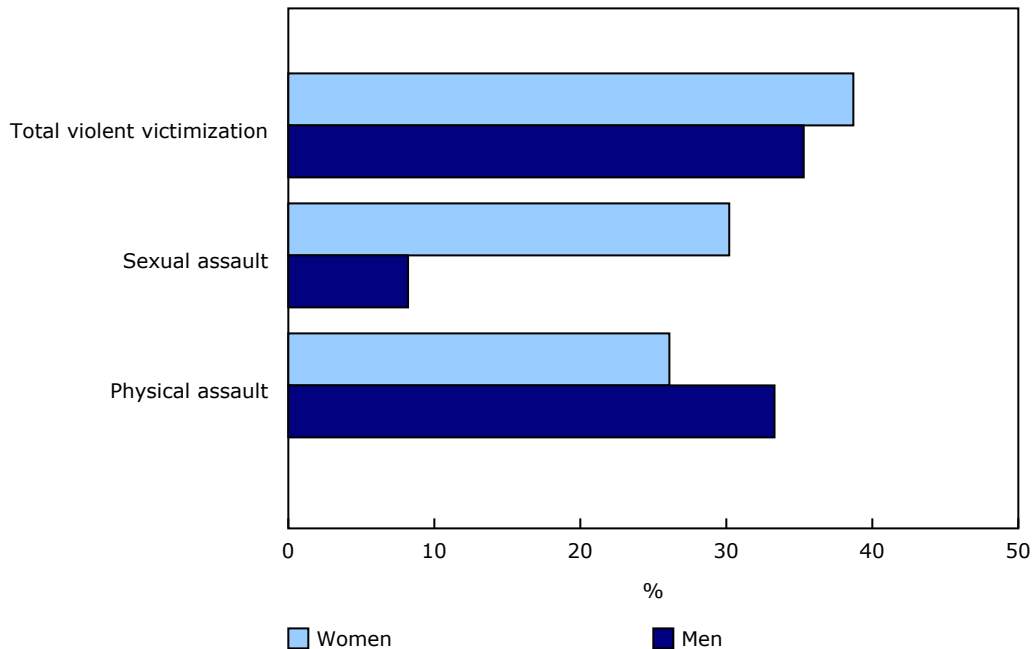
In workplaces where there were roughly the same amount of men and women, women still personally experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour nearly twice as often as men (28% versus 15%). In workplaces of all or mostly women, similar proportions of women (27%) and men (24%) experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Over one-third of Canadians have been physically or sexually assaulted since age 15

Excluding incidents committed by intimate partners, 39% of women and 35% of men aged 15 years and older in Canada, or more than 11 million Canadians, reported experiencing at least one physical or sexual assault since age 15.

Sexual assault was more prevalent among women, as approximately 4.7 million women—or 30% of all women aged 15 and older—had been a victim of sexual assault outside of the context of intimate relationships at least once since age 15. This compares with 1.2 million men (8%) having been sexually assaulted since age 15. One-third of men (33%) and just over one-quarter of women (26%) have been physically assaulted since age 15.

Chart 2
Experiences of violent victimization since the age of 15, by type of victimization and gender of victim, 2018



Note(s): All differences between women and men are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Source(s): Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (5256).

Further, 1.3 million Canadians—or 4% of both women and men aged 15 and older—reported experiencing physical or sexual assault committed by someone other than an intimate partner at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Women were significantly more likely than men to have been sexually assaulted in the 12 months preceding the survey (2.9% versus 1.0% of men) but less likely, outside of the context of intimate relationships, to have been the victim of physical assault (2.0% versus 3.6% of men).

Likelihood of being a victim similar across provinces

Among the provinces, violent victimization in the 12 months preceding the survey did not vary greatly, with a few exceptions. A smaller proportion of women in Newfoundland and Labrador (2.5%) and Quebec (3.1%) had been violently victimized than women overall (4.3%), while, in contrast, a somewhat higher proportion of men in Manitoba (6.2%) had been violently victimized than men overall (4.3%).

Victim-blaming more common for women sexually assaulted by someone they know

Over 4 in 10 women (44%) who reported being sexually assaulted in the 12 months preceding the survey said that they were victimized by a stranger or by someone who they knew by sight only. An equal proportion (44%) were victimized by a friend or acquaintance.

Those who were victimized were asked if anyone made them feel as though they were to blame for their own victimization. While 20% of sexual assault victims felt blamed for their victimization, women who were sexually assaulted by a friend or acquaintance were considerably more likely to have felt blamed compared with women victimized by a stranger (31% versus 10%).

The vast majority of incidents of violent crime did not come to the attention of police: 5% of women stated that the most serious incident of sexual assault they experienced came to the attention of police, either from themselves or otherwise. Meanwhile, 26% of women and 33% of men who were physically assaulted said police found out about the most serious incident.

Most victims did not use or consult victims' services, such as centres, helplines, or psychologists, counsellors, or social workers, following their victimization. The proportion of those who did consult or use services varied: 9% of women who were sexually assaulted consulted or used services, as did 7% of men who were physically assaulted and 20% of women who were physically assaulted.

Regardless of the victim's gender or the type of assault, the most common reasons provided for not using or consulting victims' services were that they believed the incident was too minor or that they did not want or need help.

Note to readers

This Juristat article is based on results from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS), conducted in 2018. The SSPPS collects information on experiences and characteristics of violent victimization as well as the continuum of other unwanted sexual experiences while in public, online, or at work.

The SSPPS was also conducted in the three territories in 2018; due to a different sampling and weighting methodology, these data were not available at the time of this report. A report focused specifically on the territories is forthcoming; future reports will be able to combine results from the provinces and the territories to report on Canada-level findings.

In the coming months, several publications relying on SSPPS data will be released, including a profile of experiences of transgender persons and sexual minorities living in Canada, an overview of gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviours among residents of the territories, and detailed analysis of intimate partner violence.

The SSPPS is the first of three surveys dedicated to better understanding gender-based violence in Canada. While the SSPPS focuses on the general population, other instruments have been designed with specific populations in mind. Results from the Survey of Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population will be released in spring 2020, while the Survey of Sexual Misconduct in the Workplace will begin data collection in February 2020. Each of these surveys will fill key data gaps about experiences of gender-based violence in these specific settings.

The Safe Cities profile series, to be released in spring 2020, will provide indicators across a number of Statistics Canada data sources specific to community safety for each of the census metropolitan areas, including data from the SSPPS.

The development and collection of the SSPPS and the analysis of its results was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.

The analysis was conducted according to gender, based on the question which allowed respondents to specify if they were male, female, or gender diverse. A dedicated analysis of transgender, gender diverse, and sexual minority populations is planned for a forthcoming article.

For the purposes of this article, physical and sexual assault excludes violence committed in the context of intimate partner relationships. An article dedicated specifically to the analysis of intimate partner violence will be published separately.

In the SSPPS, the following five questions are used to measure physical assault and sexual assault:

Physical assault:

- Since you were 15, have you been attacked by anyone; that is anything from being threatened, hit, slapped, pushed or grabbed, to being shot or beaten?
- Since you were 15, has anyone threatened to hit or attack you, or threatened you with a weapon?

Sexual assault:

- Since you were 15, has anyone ever touched you against your will in any sexual way; that is, anything from unwanted touching or grabbing, to kissing or fondling?
- Since you were 15, has anyone, including family and non-family, forced you or attempted to force you into any unwanted sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way?
- Since you were 15, has anyone subjected you to a sexual activity to which you were not able to consent; that is, were you drugged, intoxicated, manipulated or forced in other ways than physically?

The prevalence of physical assault and sexual assault in the 12 months preceding the survey was measured by asking respondents who stated yes to any of these questions if any incidents had occurred in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Since the survey asked broadly about all experiences of violence, and not only those which were perceived to be gender-based, key gender differences in the prevalence, nature, and impact of unwanted behaviours and violent victimization were explored in order to examine gender-based violence in Canada.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5256](#).

The article "[Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces](#)" is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* ([85-002-X](#)).

The infographic "[Inappropriate Sexual or Harassing Behaviours in Canada, 2018](#)," which is part of the series *Statistics Canada—Infographics* ([11-627-M](#)), is also released today.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).