

Spousal violence in Canada, 2019

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Findings from the 2019 General Social Survey (GSS) on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) show that there were approximately 432,000 women and 279,000 men in Canada who experienced spousal violence in the five years preceding the survey.

There are two primary methods of measuring spousal violence in Canada: administrative data collected from the police and survey data collected directly from Canadians. Due to the complexities of intimate relationships, spousal violence is particularly susceptible to underreporting to police. As a result, self-reported experiences of violence are an important complement to police-reported data.

For more than two decades, Statistics Canada has collected self-reported data about spousal violence. During that time, there have been significant decreases in spousal violence and many changes to police practices in dealing with spousal violence, as well as numerous policies and programs to prevent and address different forms of intimate partner violence.

According to the GSS on Victimization, self-reported spousal violence was significantly lower in 2019 than in 1999. While 3.5% of Canadians in the provinces with a current or former spouse or common-law partner experienced self-reported spousal violence in the five years preceding the 2019 survey, this was down from 7.5% 20 years prior, marking a 54% decrease. Although comparisons for the territories during the same time period are not possible, data from 2009 show that spousal violence did not decrease significantly in the territories over the past decade (10.2% in 2009 compared with 9.8% in 2019).

The *Juristat* article "[Spousal violence in Canada, 2019](#)" released today discusses the nature and prevalence of spousal violence, victim characteristics, the physical and emotional consequences of such violence, and how victims sought support. The infographic "[Spousal violence trends in Canada, 2019](#)" is also available today.

The COVID-19 pandemic began to have a widespread impact on the lives of Canadians in March 2020, just as data collection for the 2019 GSS on Victimization was ending. The data presented in this article, therefore, do not include information about spousal violence during the pandemic, when—in the interest of public health—many were living in isolation, some with their abuser. The findings in this article, however, will serve as a baseline for future analysis on the issue of spousal violence in Canada. At Statistics Canada, the information that is currently available about family violence and spousal violence during the pandemic relies on police-reported and crowdsourced data (see Note to readers).

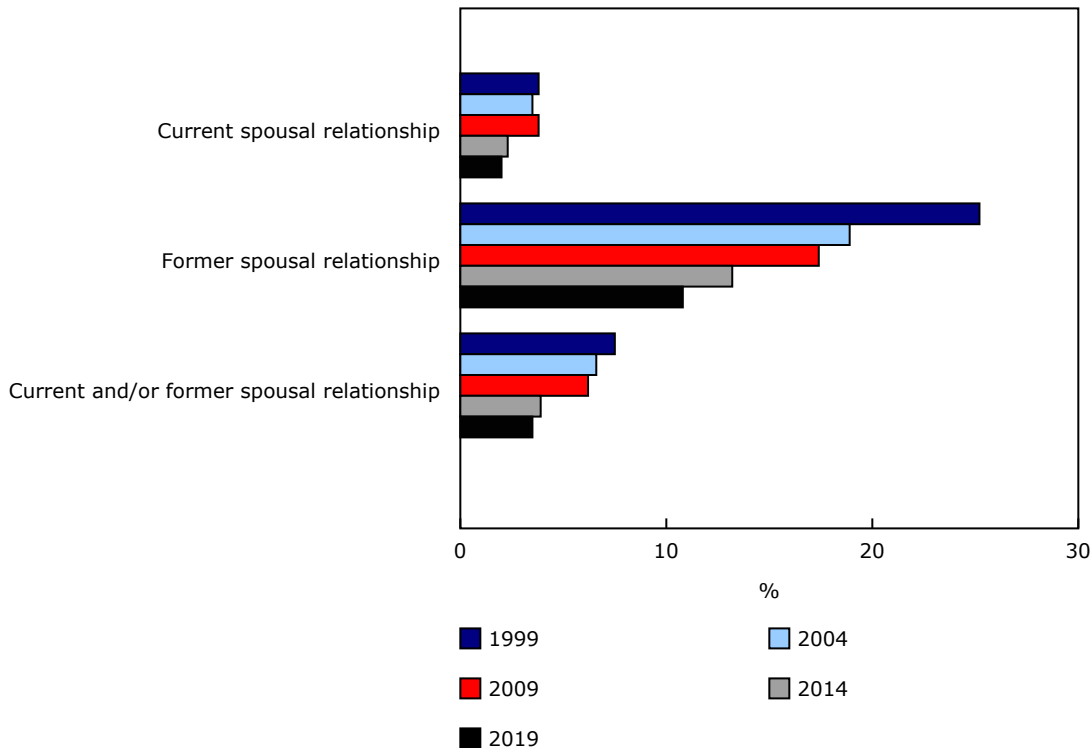
Spousal violence decreases for both women and men in the provinces, with a larger decrease noted for men

The long-term downward trend in spousal violence was seen in the context of both current and former spousal relationships. Most notably, while one-quarter (25%) of Canadians reported that they had experienced violence by a former spouse in the five years preceding the 1999 GSS on Victimization, by 2019, this had fallen to just over 1 in 10 (11%).



Chart 1

Victims of self-reported spousal violence in the past five years, by status of spousal relationship and year, provinces, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019



Note(s): Spousal violence includes physical and sexual violence. Includes those who are legally married or living common law, and those who are separated or divorced from a legal marriage or common-law union and have had contact with their former partner in the past five years. For comparability over time, trend analysis is limited to the provinces. Differences between 1999 and 2019, 2004 and 2019, and 2009 and 2019 were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), while differences between 2014 and 2019 were not.

Source(s): Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) (4504).

In the provinces, spousal violence decreased for both women and men. In 1999, 8.3% of women and 6.6% of men were victims of spousal violence in the preceding five years. These proportions dropped to 4.2% and 2.7% respectively in 2019, which marked a 49% decrease in spousal violence for women and a 60% decrease for men.

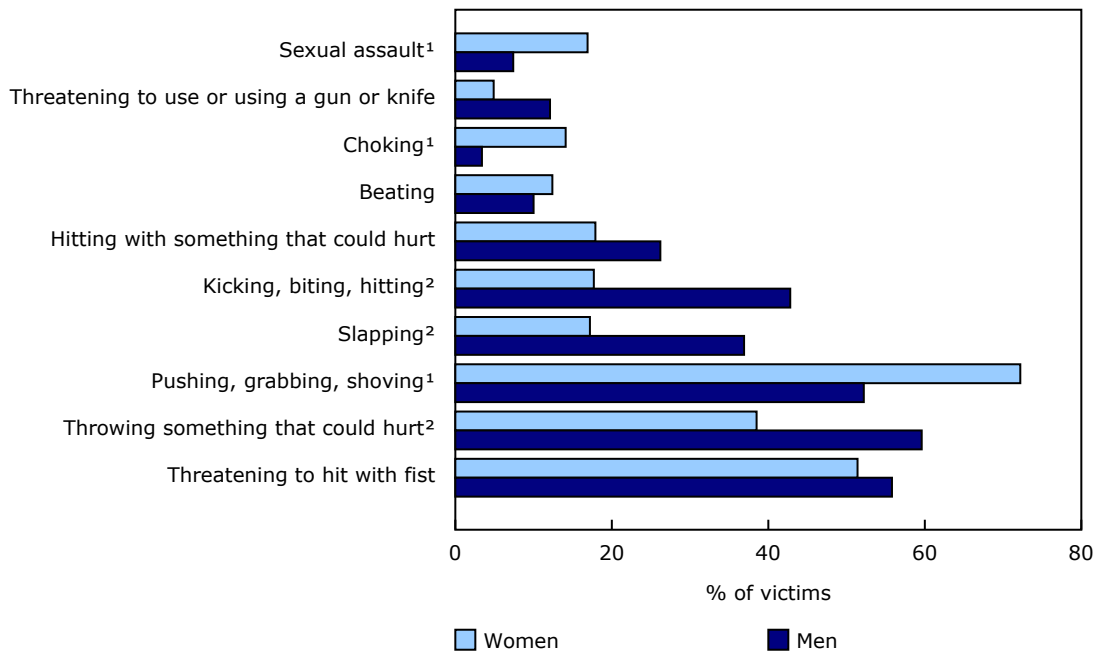
More than one in four spousal violence victims experience the most severe type of violence

Spousal violence can take on many forms, and can vary in terms of severity. Of those who had experienced spousal violence in the past five years, more than 6 in 10 (64%) victims had been pushed, grabbed or shoved by their spouse, while about half said their spouse threatened to hit them (53%) or threw something that could have hurt them (46%). More than one in four (28%) victims of spousal violence experienced the most serious type of spousal violence included in the GSS on Victimization: beating, choking, threatening to use or using a gun or knife, or sexual assault.

Among victims of spousal violence, experiences differed for women and men. It was more common for women who were victims to be pushed, grabbed or shoved (72% compared with 52% of men), sexually assaulted (17% compared with 7.4%) or choked (14% compared with 3.4%) by their spouse. In contrast, it was more common for

men who were victims to experience their spouse throwing something that could hurt them (60% compared with 39% of women), kicking, biting or hitting them (43% compared with 18%) or slapping them (37% compared with 17%).

Chart 2
Victims of self-reported spousal violence in the past five years, by gender of victim and type of violence, Canada, 2019



1. Significantly higher for women than men (p < 0.05).

2. Significantly higher for men than women (p < 0.05).

Note(s): Spousal violence includes physical and sexual violence. Includes those who are legally married or living common law, and those who are separated or divorced from a legal marriage or common-law union and have had contact with their former partner in the past five years. Respondents could select as many types of violence that applied in their situation.

Source(s): Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) (4504).

As spousal violence decreased over the past two decades in the provinces, declines were noted among those who experienced the most severe types of spousal violence measured—beating, choking, threatening to use or using a gun or knife, or sexual assault—which was experienced by 2.3% of people in 1999 and 1.0% in 2019. The same trend applied for those who experienced other types of violence: kicking, biting, hitting or hitting with something that could hurt (the most severe type of violence experienced by 1.9% of people in 1999 compared with 0.6% in 2019), pushing, grabbing, shoving or slapping (2.3% in 1999 compared with 1.2% in 2019) and threatening to hit with fist or throwing something that could hurt (1.0% in 1999 compared with 0.6% in 2019).

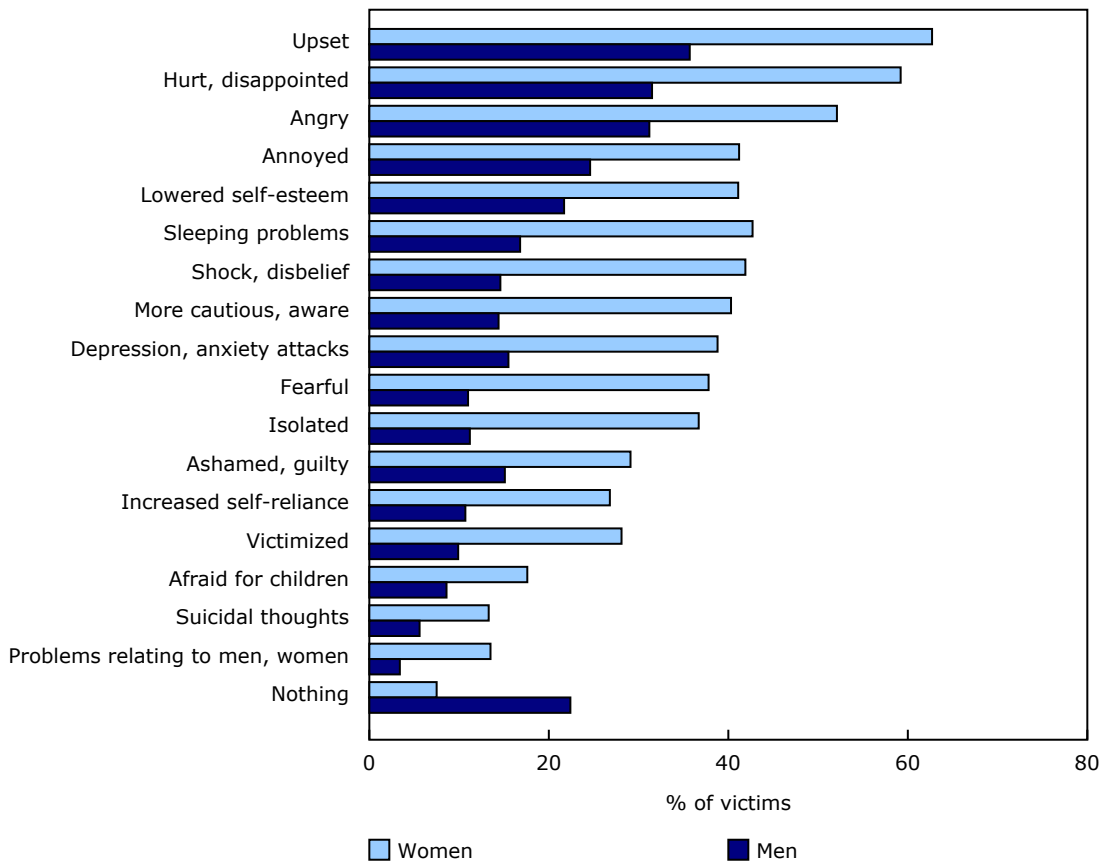
Women more likely than men to sustain physical injury and experience negative emotional impacts after spousal violence

According to the GSS on Victimization, one-third (33%) of spousal violence victims were physically injured. Nearly 1 in 4 (23%) men reported an injury compared with 4 in 10 (39%) women.

The most common emotional impacts cited by victims were feeling upset (52%), hurt or disappointed (48%) and angry (44%). More than one-quarter of victims reported feeling isolated (27%) or experienced depression or anxiety attacks (29%). About 1 in 6 (14%) victims said that they were afraid for their children, and 1 in 10 (10%) said they

had suicidal thoughts. Among victims of spousal violence, women were significantly more likely than men to report each of the negative emotional impacts measured by the survey, while men were more likely than women to say they felt no emotional impact.

Chart 3
Victims of self-reported spousal violence in the past five years, by gender of victim and emotional impact, Canada, 2019



Note(s): Spousal violence includes physical and sexual violence. Includes those who are legally married or living common law, and those who are separated or divorced from a legal marriage or common-law union and have had contact with their former partner in the past five years. Respondents could select as many emotional impacts that applied in their situation. Each of the listed emotional impacts was significantly more common among women than men, while "nothing" was more common among men than women ($p < 0.05$).

Source(s): Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) (4504).

Fear, and fear of an escalation in violence, was another emotional impact reported by women who experienced spousal violence. Almost 4 in 10 (38%) women reported feeling fearful while over one-quarter (29%) of women stated that they had feared for their lives. These impacts were less common among male victims of spousal violence (11% and 3.8% respectively).

Large majority of spousal violence not reported to police

According to the GSS on Victimization, one in five (19%) spousal violence victims said the violence they experienced in the past five years was reported to police, either by the victim or by someone else. In all, the large majority (80%) of spousal violence victims said the violence they experienced was not reported to police. Meanwhile, 35% of household victimization (i.e., break and enter, motor vehicle or parts theft, theft of household property and vandalism) and 24% of non-spousal violent victimization was reported to the police in 2019.

While the overall prevalence of spousal violence in the provinces decreased over the past two decades, a smaller proportion of spousal violence victims said the violence they experienced was reported to police (28% in 1999 compared with 19% in 2019).

A higher proportion of Indigenous people experience spousal violence

According to the 2019 GSS on Victimization, a higher proportion of the Indigenous population—that is, those who are First Nations people, Métis and Inuit—experienced spousal violence. While 3.4% of non-Indigenous people experienced spousal violence in the past five years, the prevalence was more than twice as high for Indigenous people (7.5%). In particular, this difference reflected the experiences of the Inuit and Métis, 15% and 9.4% of whom experienced this type of abuse, respectively. Meanwhile, the proportion of First Nations people who were victims of spousal violence did not differ significantly from non-Indigenous people.

Between 2009 and 2019, spousal violence declined for Indigenous women in the provinces (15% in 2009 compared with 7.5% in 2019). The comparable trend for Indigenous men cannot be presented as the estimate for 2009 is too unreliable to be published.

Spousal violence more common for people with disabilities, less common for those belonging to visible minority groups

Spousal violence was more common for those with a disability, with 5.1% of people reporting they had experienced spousal violence in the past five years. In comparison, 2.7% of those without a disability said the same. Between 2014 and 2019, spousal violence among those with a disability living in the provinces did not change significantly.

Among those belonging to a group designated as visible minority, 2.3% reported being victims of spousal violence in the five years preceding 2019 (compared with 3.9% of those who do not identify as belonging to a visible minority group). Spousal violence among visible minority populations in the provinces declined significantly between 1999 and 2019 (5.5% versus 2.3%).

Note to readers

This article is based on data from the 2019 General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization, which has collected information on self-reported spousal violence every five years since 1999. In order to measure spousal violence, the GSS on Victimization asked those who are married or living common law, and those who are separated or divorced and have had contact with their former partner in the previous five years, about a series of violent behaviours in the context of their spousal relationship.

During data certification, an analysis of responses between the two collection modes (telephone and online) showed a "mode effect," meaning there were differences in how Canadians answered certain survey questions based on the method that they used to provide their responses. These differences impact the comparability of data from the 2019 GSS on Victimization to previous victimization survey cycles. As a result, trend analysis of non-spousal violent and household victimization indicators is not possible. However, no such mode effect was identified for the spousal violence variables.

Trend analysis in this article is limited to either the provinces or the territories. Due to differences in how data were collected, data from the territories cannot be combined with data from the provinces prior to 2014. In addition, information about gender was collected as of 2019, whereas data from earlier cycles are based on sex (i.e., sex at birth) instead of gender (i.e., gender identity or gender expression). Trend data for earlier cycles (i.e., 1999, 2004 and 2009) are not available for all demographic groups.

Other findings from the 2019 GSS on Victimization have been released by the Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (CCJCSS), including [Criminal victimization in Canada, 2019](#) and [Public perceptions of the police in Canada's provinces, 2019](#). In addition, the CCJCSS has released several articles about intimate partner violence, including spousal and non-spousal relationships. Based on data from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, these articles focus on specific populations of interest: [Intimate partner violence in Canada, 2018: An overview](#); [Intimate partner violence: Experiences of Indigenous First Nations, Métis and Inuit women in Canada, 2018](#); [Intimate partner violence: Experiences of visible minority women in Canada, 2018](#); [Intimate partner violence: Experiences of women with disabilities in Canada, 2018](#); [Intimate partner violence: Experiences of sexual minority women in Canada, 2018](#); [Intimate partner violence: Experiences of sexual minority men in Canada, 2018](#); and [Intimate partner violence: Experiences of young women in Canada, 2018](#).

While data from the 2019 GSS on Victimization are from prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCJCSS has released other information about crime and violence during this time, including [Selected police-reported crime and calls for service during the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2020 to July 2021](#); [Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020](#); [Police-reported crime incidents down during the early months of the pandemic, while domestic disturbance calls increase](#); [The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on Canadian victim services](#); and [Canadians' perceptions of personal safety in the context of COVID-19](#).

Some estimates in this article for the Indigenous population should be used with caution; for more information, please refer to the Juristat article ["Spousal violence in Canada, 2019."](#)

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [4504](#).

The article ["Spousal violence in Canada, 2019"](#) is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* ([85-002-X](#)). The infographic ["Spousal violence trends in Canada, 2019"](#) ([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).