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What are the trends in self-reported spousal violence in Canada?

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Canada's General Social Survey has been gathering information for 20 years on key social issues in Canadian society.

The *Matter of Fact* series highlights important insights into changes in Canadian society over the past two decades, following the theme, "Without the General Social Survey, we would still be wondering . . ."

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Introduction¹

Until 1993, police-reported statistics were the only national source of information on the nature and extent of spousal violence in Canada. However, it was generally recognized that relying on these data was limited because they only include incidents that come to the attention of the police. And given the "delicate" nature of these incidents, spousal violence is an offence that is often not reported to the authorities.

In an effort to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the nature and extent of spousal violence, Statistics Canada measured spousal violence against women for the first time in 1993 through the national Violence Against Women (VAW) survey.

Statistics Canada began to collect information on spousal violence against both women and men, through Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization in 1999. A random sample of approximately 24,000 Canadian women and men aged 15 years and older, living in the 10 provinces were asked about violence that their marital or common-law partner (current and previous) may have committed against them in the 5 years preceding the survey.^{2,3} Questions related to spousal violence were repeated in the 2004 GSS and results permit the analysis of how spousal violence has changed between the two survey cycles.

Defining and measuring spousal violence⁴

To measure spousal violence through the GSS on Victimization, a series of 10 questions was asked of all respondents who were married or living common-law at the time of the survey interview, or who had been married or in a common-law relationship in the 5-year period preceding the survey and who had had contact with their ex-partner during that 5-year period. The series of questions included both measures of physical and sexual violence as defined by the *Criminal Code* that could be acted upon by the police. The nature of the violence under GSS study ranged in seriousness from threats to sexual assault, and related to acts that occurred in the 12-month and 5-year period preceding the survey interview.

Prevalence of spousal violence remains the same between 1999 and 2004⁵

Similar to findings from the 1999 survey, 7% of Canadians either in a current or previous marital or common-law union in 2004 experienced spousal violence in the 5 years prior to the survey⁶. This represents an estimated 653,000 female and 546,000 male victims of spousal violence.

1. Adapted from: Mihorean, K. 2005. "Trends in self-reported spousal violence" In AuCoin, K. *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2005*. Catalogue no. 85-224-XIE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
2. The next victimization survey will be conducted in 2009.
3. Data collected in the Northwest Territories, the Yukon and Nunavut as part of a pilot test are not included in this analysis.
4. In this fact sheet, 'spousal violence' refers to violence by both current and ex-spouses.
5. A person is defined as having a previous relationship if they have been in a marriage or common-law relationship with a person other than their current spouse / partner and they have had contact with that person in the past 5 years. Previous partner violence may have occurred either during their union or following separation, but must have occurred during the 5 year period.
6. According to the GSS, Canadians between the ages of 15 and 17 years represent less than 1% of those in a current or previous marital or common-law union.

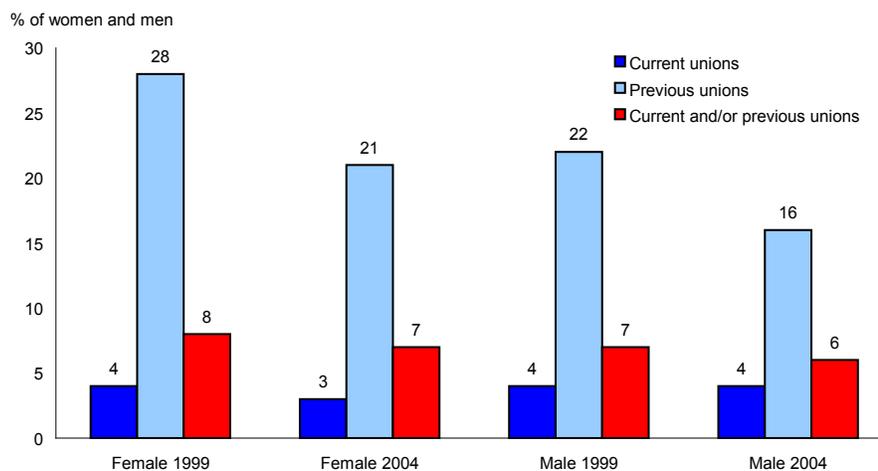
While there was no statistically significant change in the level of spousal violence against men between 1999 and 2004 (7% to 6%), for women, there was a slight statistically significant decline (8% to 7%).

Violence in previous relationships higher than in current unions

While the overall prevalence of spousal violence has remained the same between the two survey periods, declines were seen in spousal violence within previous relationships. The percentage of persons in these relationships who experienced violence dropped for both women (from 28% in 1999 to 21% in 2004) and men (from 22% in 1999 to 16% in 2004).⁷ Still, violence in previous relationships remained significantly higher than that in current unions.

In 1999, it was found that 4% of both men and women in current marital or common-law relationships experienced either physical or sexual violence from their partner. In 2004, this figure remained virtually unchanged for both men and women.⁸

Chart 1
Spousal violence trends, 5 year rates, 1999 and 2004



Notes: Includes common-law partners.
Excludes people who refused to state their marital status.
Source: Statistics Canada, *General Social Survey, 1999 and 2004*

Women and men who had been in contact with a previous partner in the 5 years preceding the survey were more likely than those in current relationships to report all types of violence.

Women continue to experience more serious violence than men

While the results of the 1999 and 2004 GSS indicated that relatively equal proportions of women and men report spousal violence, data also revealed in both cycles that women experienced more serious violence than men.

When looking at the most serious types of violence reported to the survey, it was found that a larger proportion of women reported being beaten, choked, or threatened with or had a gun or knife used against them by their intimate partner than were men.

7. Includes women and men who had a previous marital or common-law partner in the past 5 years and who had contact with their ex-partner in the past five years.
8. The difference between females who experienced violence by a current spouse in 1999 and 2004 (4% and 3%) was not statistically significant.

In 2004, numbers were too small to produce statistically reliable comparisons between women and men for the most serious forms of violence experienced by current spouses. In the case of previous violent spousal relationships, women who reported violence were more likely to state that they were beaten (27% versus 15%) and choked (25% versus 9%) than were men. Results from the 1999 survey were similar.

Between 1999 and 2004, the GSS data revealed that there was a slight decrease in the severity of spousal violence experienced by men, and there was no significant difference in the level of severity for women.

For example, similar proportions of male spousal violence victims said that they had been beaten, choked, threatened with or had a gun or knife used against them or sexually assaulted by their current or previous marital or common-law partner in 1999 and 2004 (16% for each year). However, 34% of men indicated that the most serious spousal violence experienced included being kicked, bit, hit or hit with something in 2004, down from 43% in 1999.

In 2004, 39% of women reported that the most serious spousal violence they experienced involved being beaten, choked, threatened with or having a gun or knife used against them or sexually assaulted by their current or previous marital or common-law partner. This proportion was not statistically different from what was found in the 1999 survey.

Results for both 1999 and 2004 revealed that consequences of spousal violence were more serious for women than men. For example, in 2004, female victims of spousal violence were more likely to report being injured (44% versus 19%) and fearing for their lives (34% versus 10%) than were male victims of spousal violence.

The relationship between emotional abuse and violence⁹

For both women and men, levels of violence in emotionally abusive relationships were significantly higher than in relationships with no emotional abuse. For example, in 2004, the prevalence of spousal violence in emotionally abusive relationships was 34% for females and 26% for males, while in relationships with no emotional abuse, it was 1% for females and 2% for males.

Factors that increase the risk of spousal violence¹⁰

While spousal violence affects all socio-demographic groups, there are certain segments of the population that are more vulnerable to spousal violence than others. Results from both the 1999 and 2004 surveys revealed that those who were between the ages of 15 and 24, who lived in a common-law relationship, who were Aboriginal¹¹, and whose partner was a frequent heavy drinker¹², were at an increased risk of experiencing violence at the hands of their intimate partner.

For the first time in 2004, the GSS examined whether the length of time a couple had been in a marital relationship or cohabiting was related to the level of risk in a relationship. The survey found that one-year rates of spousal violence by a current marital or common-law partner were highest in relationships of three years or less.

9. In both survey cycles, respondents who were either currently married or in a common-law relationship, or who had been previously married or living common-law and who had had contact with their previous partner in the past 5 years were asked a series of questions concerning emotional or financial abuse that they may have experienced in the 5 years preceding the survey.

10. When assessing socio-demographic factors associated with the risk of spousal violence it is necessary to look at 12-month rates of violence for those who are currently in a relationship. Socio-demographics such as age, marital status, income and education can change over a five-year period.

11. Mihorean, K. 2005. "Trends in self-reported spousal violence", Figure 1.6 'Self-reported five year rates of spousal violence high among Aboriginal women and men, 1999 and 2004', pg 20. Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2005. Catalogue no. 85-224-XIE Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

12. A frequent heavy drinker is defined as one who consumes five or more drinks on one occasion, five or more times per month.

Levels of reporting spousal violence to the police remain unchanged

According to the 1999 cycle of the GSS, 27% of victims of spousal violence stated that the police had found out about the violence, a proportion which was not statistically different from the 28% reported in 2004. Both survey cycles found that among victims of spousal violence, women were twice as likely as men to turn to the police for help.

Conclusion

Through the 1999 and 2004 General Social Surveys on Victimization, Statistics Canada has been able to assess the extent and nature of spousal violence against both women and men in Canada. Furthermore, it has been possible to examine trends in rates of spousal violence, risk factors and consequences of spousal violence.

Questions on spousal violence will be repeated in the next victimization survey cycle of the GSS in 2009 and will permit the analysis of longer-term trends in spousal violence in Canada.

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How to obtain more information

Specific inquiries about this product and related statistics or services should be directed to: Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0T6 by telephone: 613-951-5979 or by e-mail at sasd-dssea@statcan.ca.

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