

Sexual Assault: Dispelling the Myths

MYTH: *Sexual assault is not a common problem.*

FACT: Sexual assault is experienced by Canadian women every day -- at home, at work, at school and on the street.

The Violence Against Women survey found that over one-half (51%) of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical violence. Of these women, almost 60% were the targets of more than one such incident. [\[1\]](#)

In a 1998 survey, 56% of female victims reporting sexual assault to 169 police forces in Canada were under 18 years of age. [\[2\]](#)

Several studies have shown that women with disabilities are at a high risk of being abused. Research has found that 40% of women with disabilities have been assaulted, raped or abused. Further, it is estimated that 83% of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. [\[3\]](#)

MYTH: *Women lie about being sexually assaulted, often because they feel guilty about having had sex.*

FACT: Women rarely make false reports about sexual assault. In fact, sexual assault is a vastly under-reported crime. According to Statistics Canada, only 6% of all sexual assaults are reported to police. [\[4\]](#) Only 1% of all "date/acquaintances rapes" are reported to police. [\[5\]](#)

MYTH: *Sexual assault is most often committed by strangers.*

FACT: Women face the greatest risk of sexual assault from men they know, not strangers. A 1998 study found that 33% of female victims of sexual assault age 18 and over were assaulted by a friend or a casual acquaintance; 25% by a family member (including a spouse or ex-spouse). [\[6\]](#)

When a woman knows the man who sexually assaults her, it is less likely that it will be recognized as a crime, even by her. These sexual assaults are no less a crime than those that are committed by strangers.

MYTH: *The best way for a woman to protect herself from sexual assault is to avoid being alone at night in dark, deserted places, such as alleys or parking lots.*

FACT: 80% of sexual assaults occur in the home and 49% of sexually assaults occur in broad daylight. [\[7\]](#) Most sexual assaults do not fit the 'stranger-in-a-dark-alley' stereotype. Currently, there is a trend towards non-consensual drug-induced sexual assaults. [\[8\]](#)

MYTH: *Women who are sexually assaulted "ask for it" by the way they dress or act.*

FACT: The idea that women "ask for it" is often used by offenders to rationalize their behaviour. It also blames the victim for the crime, not the offender.

Victims of sexual assault report a wide range of dress and actions at the time of the assault. Any woman of any age and physical type, in almost any situation, can be sexually assaulted. If a woman is sexually assaulted, it is not her fault.

No woman ever "asks" or deserves to be sexually assaulted. Whatever a woman wears, wherever she goes, whomever she talks to, "no" means "no". It's the law. A drug-induced sexual assault is non-consensual and therefore also means "no".

MYTH: *Men who sexually assault women are either mentally ill or sexually starved.*

FACT: Men who sexually assault are not mentally ill or sexually starved. Studies on the profiles of rapists reveal that they appear to be "ordinary" and "normal" men who sexually assault women in order to assert power and control over them. [\[9\]](#)

- MYTH:** *Men of certain races and backgrounds are more likely to sexually assault women*
FACTS: Men who commit sexual assault come from every economic, ethnic, racial, age and social group.
 The belief that women are more often sexually assaulted by men of colour or working class men is a stereotype rooted in racism and classism.
 Men who commit sexual assault can be the doctors, teachers, employers, co-workers, lawyers, husbands, or relatives of the women they assault.
- MYTH:** *It's only sexual assault if physical violence or weapons are used.*
FACTS: The Criminal Code definition of sexual assault includes a number of acts ranging from unwanted sexual touching, to sexual violence resulting in wounding, maiming or endangering the life of the victim. Most sexual assaults are committed by a man known to the victim. The man is likely to use verbal pressure, tricks, such as administering drugs without the victim's consent, and/or threats during an assault.
- MYTH:** *Unless she is physically harmed, a sexual assault victim will not suffer any long-term effects.*
FACTS: Any sexual assault can have serious effects on women's health and well-being. A Canadian survey found that nine out of ten incidents of violence against women have an emotional effect on the victim. Women who have been sexually assaulted feel anger, fear and can become more cautious and less trusting. [10]
 Women who have experienced a history of victimization are at high risk for developing lifetime mental health problems. [11]
 It is estimated that 30% of sexually assaulted women contemplate suicide. [12]
- MYTH:** *Women cannot be sexually assaulted by their husbands or boyfriends.*
FACTS: Under the law, women have the right to say no to any form of sex, even in a marriage or dating relationship. The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women found that 38% of sexually assaulted women were assaulted by their husbands, common-law partners or boyfriends. [13] Although sexual assault within relationships has been illegal in Canada since 1983, few women report such incidents to police.
 Women experience long-term negative effects of partner sexual assault and the traumatic consequences of the sexual assault may even be more significant than those of non-partner sexual assault. [14]

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Statistics Canada. (1999) Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 1999. Ottawa: Author.
- Audio-Visual: The National Clearinghouse of Family Violence (NCFV) co-ordinated by Health Canada has compiled a collection of over 90 videos on violence against women and children which are available for rent from the National Film Board of Canada and partner libraries. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/index.html>
- Print media: The NCFV offers 100 relevant articles, fact sheets, project reports, and information kits as well as a list describing over 90 videos on violence against women and children which are available for distribution.

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only 46% of crimes committed in 1998. It is important to note that in 1993, four times the number of cases of spousal violence against women were reported by the Violence Against Women Survey, than by the police (Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.)

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