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The incidence of police contact for intimate partner violence in three Canadian regions

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ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence (IPV) places high demands on police and is the most frequent type of violent offending reported to the police in Canada. Police responses are often guided by actuarial risk tools, such as the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA), which provide estimates of recidivism rates associated with specific scores. The interpretation of these case-specific recidivism rates should be guided by the base rate of IPV perpetration in the general population. Accordingly, this study examined officially reported IPV base rates in three Canadian provinces from 2016 to 2018, the settings used for updating the ODARA norms. The overall incidence of perpetration of IPV was 200 per 100,000 (1 out of 500 per year), with substantially higher rates for men against women (304 per 100,000) than for women against men (75 per 100,000). Perpetration against same-gender victims was rare (11 per 100,000 for men to men; 6 per 100,000 for women to women), although these estimates did not control for the proportion of the population who were in same-sex relationships. Regional differences were observed, with lower overall rates in Atlantic Canada than in Alberta and Ontario and relatively high rates of women as perpetrators in Ontario. All population rates were lower than the lowest rates estimated by the 2021 ODARA norms. We recommend that local IPV rates be used to evaluate the effectiveness of public protection policies.

Key Words Domestic assault; population rates; ODARA; gender differences.

THE INCIDENCE OF POLICE CONTACT FOR INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN CANADA

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a complex social problem that can include physical violence, coercive and controlling behaviours, sexual violence, psychological abuse, stalking, and financial abuse between current or former romantic partners (Stewart et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2012). Its high prevalence and harmful consequences (e.g., psychological distress and trauma, physical injury, other health issues, death; Cotter, 2021; White et al., 2023) motivate the need for comprehensive population-level, public health responses (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; World Health Organization, 2012). To assess the effectiveness of public policy, prevention, and intervention efforts at the population level and to help direct scarce resources, it is useful to track incidence rates (i.e., the number of new case occurrences in a given time period). Incidence rates can also aid the interpretation of recidivism rate estimates provided by risk tools for the perpetration of crime and violence (Blais et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023), such as the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA; Hilton, 2021). In particular, case management decisions for people with a history of committing IPV should be rooted in knowledge of the base rate of this behaviour in the general population, with careful reference to subgroups of interest (e.g., based on age, gender, or sexual identity).

Statistics Canada routinely reports the rates of police-reported IPV in Canada (Burczycka, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2024b). Their IPV data are the subset of all police-reported violent offences in which the accused was a current or former intimate partner (married, cohabiting, or dating). They consistently find that the vast majority of the victims are women (four out of five). The Statistics Canada data, however, indicate wide provincial and regional variation in the rates of IPV victimization, with the highest rates in the North and the lowest rates in the urban South (Statistics Canada, 2024b). At a provincial level, Ontario has the lowest rate. The highest rates are in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and

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the territories. There have also been changes over time, with a nadir around 2014 followed by gradually increasing rates thereafter (Statistics Canada, 2024b). Part of the increase could be attributed to the social changes associated with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Kourti et al., 2023); however, the upward trend started before COVID and continued through 2023 after COVID restrictions were lifted (354 victims per 100,000; Statistics Canada, 2024b), suggesting that there are other contributing factors.

The Statistics Canada reports have focused on victimization rates, with relatively little attention to the rates of perpetration. In general, the number of perpetrators is smaller than the number of victims. In 2018, for example, there were 98,257 victims (322 per 100,000) but only 73,804 perpetrators (242 per 100,000) in police-reported IPV incidents (Burczycka, 2019), resulting in a ratio of 4:3, or 1.33 victims per offender. Those accused of perpetration are mostly young (<35 years) men (80% male) offending against young women (Burczycka, 2019). Between 2009 and 2017, the proportion of police-reported IPV incidences that involved persons of the same sex was small (3%; Ibrahim, 2019). Of the same-sex IPV incidents, roughly half (55%) involved men assaulting men, whereas 45% involved women assaulting women.

Actuarial risk tools often express risk in terms of the likelihood of recidivism. In particular, the ODARA presents 5-year IPV recidivism rates for specific scores (0–13), ranging from 7% to 74% (Hilton, 2021). Although an ODARA score of 0 is the lowest possible, the risk for such cases may still be relatively high compared to the general population. Interpretation of recidivism rate estimates requires a comparison group. A 7% recidivism rate at 5 years is equivalent to an annual hazard of 1.44% (1,440 per 100,000).[1] This is meaningfully larger than the annual incidence in the general male population (393 per 100,000; Burczycka, 2019). It is also about twice the rate of the highest risk age group at a national level: 781 per 100,000 for men aged 25–34 (Burczycka, 2019). There is, however, large regional variation, with the rate of IPV victimization of over 1% annually in the territories (Statistics Canada, 2024b). Consequently, it is likely that the annual base rate of IPV perpetration is well over 1% for young men in some regions.

The Current Study

The present study gathered and compared incident rates of IPV perpetration in 2018 from three Canadian police organizations, located in New Brunswick, Ontario, and Alberta. These regions (and this year) were selected because cases from these settings were used to update the norms for the ODARA IPV recidivism risk tool (Hilton et al., 2025). The base rate of IPV perpetration is needed to inform the interpretation of the case-specific recidivism rate estimates provided by the ODARA. Based on provincial data regarding IPV victimization rates for 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2024b), we expected regional variation, with higher IPV perpetration rates for men in Alberta and New Brunswick compared to Ontario. The police services in this study, however, did not cover the whole province; consequently, there likely will be some divergence between the patterns in the provincial-level victimization rates and the rates of IPV perpetration by men in the three settings used for the ODARA norms. We also examined the rates of perpetration by women, as well as perpetration by men and women in same-sex relationships. We held no hypotheses concerning rates or regional variation for these types of IPV (other than that they would be much less common than IPV incidents involving men against women).

[1] $1 - q^5 = 0.07$; $q = \exp[\ln(0.93)/5)] = 0.9856$; $p = 1 - 0.9856 = 0.0144$ annual hazard.

METHODS

Sources of Information

Police occurrences for intimate partner violence (IPV)

We counted police occurrences for IPV that involved men or women who physically assaulted their current or former intimate partner (married, cohabiting, or dating) or threatened their partner with death with a weapon in hand. We only counted incidents where the police laid a charge or recommended charges. All cases involved adults (18 years old and above).

Settings

Three Canadian police services provided the number of IPV occurrences. Sample 1 served a city in New Brunswick, sample 2 served a city in Alberta, and sample 3 served a mixture of urban and rural regions of Ontario.

Years

For samples 2 and 3, we counted all IPV occurrences for the 2018 calendar year. For sample 1, we recorded all IPV occurrences for 2016, 2017, and 2018 and averaged over the 3 years to estimate the yearly incidence.

Population estimates

The populations served by samples 1 and 2 were obtained from publicly available information from the 2016 Census (Statistics Canada, n.d., Table 98-10-0022-01), which was the census closest to the target year (2018). For sample 3, the population served was provided by the police service, which, in turn, had obtained these estimates from Statistics Canada based on the 2016 Census. In total, the three services policed an estimated 2,743,901 adults (1,369,517 men and 1,374,409 women), representing 9.8% of all adults in Canada.

Procedure

Research agreements with each of the three police services allowed data access and sharing. The authors' academic institutions' research ethics boards reviewed and approved the research prior to data collection.

Plan of Analysis

The focus of the current study was on the number of individuals perpetrating IPV offences. Consequently, for occurrences involving a man against a woman, the denominator for the incidence estimate was the number of adult men served by the police jurisdiction. Because absolute values were small, proportions were expressed as whole numbers out of 100,000. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals for the proportions were estimated using the Clopper–Pearson method as implemented in the BinomCI function in the DescTools package (Signorell, 2025) in the R environment (R Core Team, 2024).

Clopper–Pearson is an exact method based on the size of the tails of the binomial distribution (Clopper & Pearson, 1934); it is widely accepted, although it is known to be conservative (i.e., confidence intervals are too wide; Newcombe, 1998). Given the large sample sizes, all common interval estimation methods (e.g., Wald, Agresti-Coull, arcsine transformation) provided similar results.

The combined estimates were the weighted average of the incidences in each of the three samples. The weights were proportional to the sample population as a proportion of the total Canadian population in the 2016 Census (Statistics Canada, n.d.). For each estimate, the weights summed to 1.0 and ranged from 0.019 to 0.022 for sample 1, 0.268 to 0.271 for sample 2, and 0.708 to 0.713 for sample 3, depending on whether the sample was men, women, or both.

The 95% confidence intervals for the combined estimates were calculated using the Clopper–Pearson method, with the sample size set as the sum of the three samples for each analysis (e.g., n = 5,501 incidents among N = 2,743,901 persons for the overall incidence). The application of the Clopper–Pearson method to stratified samples is conservative because the variance of stratified samples is typically smaller than that of completely random samples (Kalton, 1983). Comparison of the Clopper–Pearson method with other approaches for calculating confidence intervals (e.g., Wald variances weighted by strata, without finite population correction) yielded equivalent results to the third or fourth significant figure (e.g., 0.001952 vs. 0.001953).

When the confidence intervals do not overlap, observed values can be considered statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (Cumming & Finch, 2005).

RESULTS

Table I lists overall and gender-based incidence rates for IPV reported to the police. The annual incidence of police occurrences for IPV in these samples was estimated to be 200 per 100,000 (or 0.20%). The rate for men perpetrating IPV (320 per 100,000) was four times higher than the rate for women perpetrating IPV (82 per 100,000). By far, the most common pattern was men perpetrating against women (304), followed by women against men (75). Man-to-man (11) and woman-to-woman (6) incidents were rare; however, these analyses did not control for the number of persons in same-sex relationships. There was insufficient information on persons of other gender identities to make reliable estimates.

The overall rates were roughly equivalent in sample 2 (198) and sample 3 (204). However, the incidence involving women perpetrators was notably higher in sample 3 (95) than in sample 2 (53), as was the risk ratio comparing women to men perpetrators (95/312 = 0.30 in sample 3; 53/346 = 0.15 in sample 2). Contrary to expectation, sample 1 from New Brunswick had the lowest overall incidence rate (112) in all categories, including the lowest rate for men (220). Almost all of the police occurrences in sample 1 (92%) involved men as perpetrators and women as victims.

DISCUSSION

The overall incident rate of IPV perpetration in the combined sample (200 per 100,000) was somewhat lower than the Canadian average as estimated by Statistics Canada (241 per 100,000 in 2018; Burczycka, 2019). Similarly, the rate of men as accused in the current sample (329 per 100,000) was somewhat lower than the national average (393 per 100,000). The rate of women as accused (87) was equivalent to the national average (91 per 100,000; Burczycka, 2019). The relatively low rates in the current sample for men accused may be due to the fact that most of the cases (≈ 70%) originated from Ontario, which has the lowest victimization rates of police-reported IPV (Statistics Canada, 2024b). The relatively low rate of accused in the New Brunswick sample (112 per 100,000) was unexpected, given the relatively high rates of IPV victimization in the province as a whole. This may be related to lower rates of IPV in urban regions compared to rural ones (Statistics Canada, 2024b; all New Brunswick data came from one city).

Regional variation in IPV rates is likely influenced by many factors, including social norms, police practices, and demographics. Recent population growth, particularly of young men, is associated with increased crime rates (e.g., Nolan, 2004; Stafford & Gibbs, 1980). Over the past decade, interprovincial migration of young men (aged 20–29) has tended toward Alberta and away from New Brunswick (Statistics Canada, 2025). Compared to Alberta and New Brunswick, Ontario has low rates of both in-migrants and out-migrants (Statistics Canada, 2025). Men in New Brunswick were older (median age of 45 years) than those in Ontario (median age of 40 years) or Alberta (median age of 36 years; census data for 2016, Statistics Canada, n.d.). Consequently, it is not surprising that overall crime severity is relatively high in Alberta (Statistics Canada, 2024a). In a separate analysis of a subset of the current cases, the IPV recidivism risk was higher in sample 2 (Alberta) than in the other settings as measured by the ODARA risk tool (Hilton et al., 2025).

The Ontario sample (sample 3) had the highest rates of IPV perpetration by women (95 per 100,000) compared to the other sites (17 per 100,000 for sample 1 and 53 per 100,000 for sample 2). The reasons for these large differences are unknown but may relate to how different police organizations record and respond to IPV incidents. For example, mandatory charging directives, gender-based prevention strategies, or directives for crown counsel consultations may have differed across police services during this time period, which could, in turn, influence the number of women accused.

When gender was examined, the rates for IPV perpetrated by men against women were substantially higher (304 per 100,000) compared to IPV perpetrated by women against men (75 per 100,000). Of these police-reported incidents, perpetration against a victim of the same gender was rare: 6 per 100,000 for women to women; 11 per 100,000 for men to men. These values do not account for the proportion of the population in same-sex relationships. Whitehead et al. (2021), using Statistics Canada data from Statistics Canada's 2007–2011 incident-based uniform crime-reporting survey, found that the percentage of police-reported IPV incidents involving same-sex couples (3%) was the same as the proportion of the population of Canada who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and concluded that same-sex partners are not over- (or under-) represented in police-reported IPV victimization. There is, however, reluctance among sexual and gender minorities

TABLE I The incidence of police occurrences for intimate partner violence in 2018

Setting	IPV Police Contacts	Reference Population		Incidence per 100,000	Lower CI	Upper CI
Sample 1 (New Brunswick)	62	Adults (18+)	55,505	112	86	143
Male perpetrator	57	Men	25,920	220	167	284
Female victim	57	Men	25,920	220	167	284
Male victim	0	Men	25,920	0	–	–
Female perpetrator	5	Women	29,570	17	5	39
Female victim	1	Women	29,570	3	<1	18
Male victim	4	Women	29,570	14	4	34
Sample 2 (Alberta)	1,465	Adults (18+)	739,010	198	188	209
Male perpetrator	1,268	Men	366,870	346	327	365
Female victim	1,201	Men	366,870	327	309	346
Male victim	68	Men	366,870	18	14	23
Female perpetrator	196	Women	372,180	53	46	60
Female victim	28	Women	372,180	8	5	11
Male victim	168	Women	372,180	45	39	53
Sample 3 (Ontario)	3,974	Adults (18+)	1,949,386	204	198	210
Male perpetrator	3,051	Men	976,727	312	301	324
Female victim	2,899	Men	976,727	297	286	308
Male victim	87	Men	976,727	9	7	11
Female perpetrator	921	Women	972,659	95	89	101
Female victim	59	Women	972,659	6	5	8
Male victim	854	Women	972,659	88	82	94
Combined	5,501	Adults (18+)	2,743,901	200	195	206
Male perpetrator	4,376	Men	1,369,517	320	310	329
Female victim	4,157	Men	1,369,517	304	294	313
Male victim	155	Men	1,369,517	11	9	13
Female perpetrator	1,122	Women	1,374,409	82	77	87
Female victim	88	Women	1,374,409	6	5	8
Male victim	1,026	Women	1,374,409	75	70	79

CI = confidence interval; IPV = intimate partner violence.

to report abuse to the police (e.g., Jennings-Fitz-Gerald et al., 2024). Future research on the incidence of police contact for perpetration of IPV in Canada could benefit from using similar information about regional-specific population estimates of individuals identifying as LGB.

The annual incident rate for the men (0.32%) in this study was lower than the IPV recidivism rate estimated by the lowest possible ODARA score (1.44%; 5-year rate of 7%; Hilton, 2021). This means that, at the time of assessment, all men accused of IPV by police would be at a perceptibly higher risk for IPV recidivism than men in the general population. It is likely, however, that there are identifiable subgroups of men who present a risk of first-time IPV offending of more than 1% per year (e.g., young men from regions with high base rates of IPV). As with other forms of criminal behaviour (Hanson, 2018), the residual risk of IPV recidivism should decline the longer men remain offence-free in the community. Although we are unaware of any studies that directly measure the time-free effect for IPV, the association of IPV incidence with young age suggests that most people desist from IPV over time. One way of quantifying desistance would be a likelihood of IPV recidivism that is no different than the rate of first-time IPV offending in the general male population (following the desistance paradigm of Bushway et al., 2001). In the language of standardized risk levels, cases with such very low risk would be classified as level I and deemed not to need any further criminal justice intervention to reduce recidivism risk (Hanson et al., 2017). For the purpose of defining a threshold for level I, the incident rate estimated in the current study is probably too high because it did not distinguish between first-time and recidivist IPV offenders.

LIMITATIONS

Data were collected from only three police services. Consequently, we were not able to provide national-level estimates nor provide estimates for any province overall. Nevertheless, incidence rates from these settings are necessary to ground the interpretation of the ODARA recidivism rate norms (these settings were used for updating the norms; Hilton et al., 2025). Data were centred on 2018 cases. IPV police incident rates increased in recent years (Statistics Canada, 2024b), as did the rate of intimate partner sexual assaults and domestic homicides (Statistics Canada, 2022). Consequently, the incidence rates during the follow-up period for the ODARA re-norming sample (2019–2025) may be different from the incidence rates for the year when the re-norming sample was initially identified (2018).

All studies of officially reported incidents will underestimate the actual incidence rate because many domestic abuse occurrences are never reported (e.g., Birdsey & Snowball, 2013). We have no data concerning whether the reporting rates vary across the settings examined in this study.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Tracking incidence rates is a useful metric for guiding the efficient allocation of finite resources, guiding public policy, and evaluating prevention and intervention efforts, such as Clare's Law (Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate, 2017; Robinson, 2020), which allows police to share information about a partner's abusive behaviour toward their current partner. Incidence rates are crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of such initiatives, especially when the objective is to decrease incidents in a specific region. Similarly, incidence data should inform advocacy efforts to have domestic abuse declared as an epidemic (e.g., Magill, 2023; Valera, 2018). Finally, we hope that the statistics presented in this study help policymakers understand the importance of both requesting these statistics and supporting technical staff in retrieving such important information for their decision-making processes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES
Zoe Hilton is the author of the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA) risk tool and receives royalties from sales of the scoring manual. The other authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ETHICS APPROVAL
This study received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Information System (Protocol #43056), University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board (Protocol #2022-167), MacEwan University Research Ethics Board (Protocol #102015), and Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care Health Partners Research Administration (HPRA# 22.05.12B). Data-sharing agreements were also established with each participating police service.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Except where noted in the manuscript, data for the present study are not publicly available.

DETAILS OF POSSIBLE PREVIOUS OR DUPLICATE PUBLICATION
None.

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