

**FOR THE
SAFETY
OF CANADIAN
CHILDREN
AND YOUTH**

**FROM INJURY DATA
TO PREVENTIVE MEASURES**

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CHAPTER 17

HOMICIDE, ASSAULT AND ABUSE AND NEGLECT: PATTERNS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

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INTRODUCTION

Assaults are one of the most pervasive yet difficult-to-document causes of harm and death to children and youth under the age of 20 in Canada. Assaults against children and youth easily escape public scrutiny because these criminal acts often take place within the privacy of the home and involve children and youth who are either too young or too afraid to reveal the cause of their victimization. There is no single source of data that can be used as a basis for describing the incidence, prevalence and characteristics of this problem.

While violence against children and youth has become an issue of growing public concern, information about the scope and nature of the problem has generally been restricted to police and child welfare data. The public health community has recently taken on violence as a priority. The tools of public health and the principles of injury control should be able to contribute substantially to a collaborative effort to better describe patterns of violence and improve and evaluate programs for its prevention.

This chapter starts by examining the occurrence of homicide in children and youth in Canada, then it describes patterns of abuse and neglect. Both sections use the best data available that offer a Canadian perspective on violence-related injury. We use results from international studies on violence for purposes of comparison and to fill gaps left by Canadian studies.

HOMICIDE

Comparison of Statistics Canada and Homicide Survey Databases

There are two Canadian databases that can be used to describe the incidence of homicide-related deaths and the circumstances surrounding them. These are 1) the mortality database used by Statistics Canada and 2) the Homicide Survey database maintained by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. The Statistics Canada mortality database information on cause of death is abstracted from death certificates and does not take into consideration ongoing coroners' or police investigations. This leads to underestimation of the true incidence of deaths from violence (1). All police forces in Canada are required to report cases to the Homicide Survey when a police investigation is initiated. Data are updated as the investigation progresses.

This part of the chapter will use data from the Homicide Survey, as we believe it to be more accurate in recording homicide events, especially for infants (children under the age

of one). Tables 1 and 2 show similar rates for all age groups except for infants, where Statistics Canada's rate is only one-third (2.3 per 100,000) that of the Homicide Survey (6.5 per 100,000). In addition, the Homicide Survey provides more detailed information on the assailant, the victim and the relationship between the two; the circumstances surrounding the injury event including the weapon or means of assault used; and the perceived reasons inciting the injury event. Data for the three-year period from 1991 to 1993 for children and youth under the age of 20 were analyzed.

Rates of Homicide Reported to the Homicide Survey

Patterns of homicide occurrence vary by age and, to a lesser degree, by sex of the victim (Table 2). Between 1991 and 1993, the Homicide Survey reported 310 homicides among Canadians under the age of 20. Rates of occurrence are by far highest for infants, at nearly five times the overall rate for children and youth under 20. They remain at a lower level until the later teenage years. The analysis of these data shows homicide to be the leading cause of injury-related death in infants. Choking and suffocation would then rank second and not first as shown by Statistics Canada data. A recent review in Ontario of all deaths in children under the age of two suggests that even these high rates are underestimates. The work shows that as many as 10% of deaths attributed to causes such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) prior to 1995 may in fact be due to homicide (Chief Coroner of Ontario, personal communication, 1996).

Child and Youth Homicide in Canada

Two-thirds of murdered infants are killed by a parent, and this pattern holds for other young children (Table 3). The frequency of fatal assaults by mothers and fathers is approximately equal. Friends and acquaintances become the prominent assailants in the case of adolescent victims (about 50% in 15-19-year-old victims).

Fatal injury in younger children is most usually inflicted by beating or strangulation, with the former being more common in boys and the latter in girls (Table 4). Weapons were used more frequently in fatal assaults of older children and youth. In 15-19-year-old youth, weapons are used in 86% and 44% of murders of boys and girls, respectively.

Further analysis revealed that, where a firearm was used, handguns were used in 50% of homicides and a rifle or shotgun in 44% of cases. Illegal or automatic firearms were

rarely used. Handguns were more likely to be used where the victim was a boy (56%) and a long gun was more often the weapon of choice against girls (58%).

boys and 53% of girls. Sexual assault was the most-cited precipitating crime in girls (13% of all cases), and physical assault was most-cited in boys (14%).

The place of occurrence for homicides among Canadians under the age of 20 was most often a private home (60% of all cases). This was especially the case for younger children. In older children and youth, the place of occurrence was more likely to be a public place, usually outdoors.

The gender relationship between victims and assailants is shown in Table 5. In general, males were involved more often than females in homicides, whether as assailants (75%) or as victims (59%) (Table 5).

There was often no precipitating crime recorded as leading to or associated with the homicide. This was the case in 66% of

A third (33%) of male assailants were under 20 and close to half (46%) were between 20 and 29 years old. In contrast, female assailants were older, with 40% in the 20–29-year-old

Table 2

Homicide by Sex and Age of Victim, 0–19-Year-Old Children and Youth, Canada, 1991–1993

Number for 3 years and mean annual rate per 100,000

Sex	Victim age group (years)											
	< 1		1–4		5–9		10–14		15–19		Total	
	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate
Total	74	6.5	34	0.7	34	0.6	33	0.6	135	2.5	310	1.4
Boys	43	7.3	16	0.7	16	0.5	11	0.5	78	2.8	164	1.4
Girls	31	5.6	18	0.8	18	0.6	22	0.8	57	2.1	146	1.3

Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1991 to 1993.

Table 3

Homicide by Age of Victim and Relationship to Assailant, 0–19-Year-Old Children and Youth, Canada, 1991–1993

Number for 3 years

Assailant	Victim age group (years)											
	< 1		1–4		5–9		10–14		15–19		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	74	100.0	34	100.0	34	100.0	33	100.0	135	100.0	310	100.0
Boys	43	100.0	16	100.0	16	100.0	11	100.0	78	100.0	164	100.0
Father, mother ¹	30	69.8	10	62.5	10	62.5	2	18.2	–	0.0	52	31.7
Other family	3	7.0	1	6.2	2	12.5	3	27.3	3	3.8	12	7.3
Close friend	1	2.3	1	6.2	–	0.0	2	18.2	11	14.1	15	9.2
Acquaintance	6	13.9	3	18.8	3	18.8	1	9.0	39	50.0	52	31.7
Stranger ²	3	7.0	1	6.3	1	6.2	3	27.3	25	32.1	33	20.1
Girls	31	100.0	18	100.0	18	100.0	22	100.0	57	100.0	146	100.0
Father, mother ¹	20	64.5	11	61.1	7	38.9	7	31.8	2	3.5	47	32.2
Other family	3	9.7	1	5.6	–	–	3	13.6	9	15.8	16	11.0
Close friend	–	0.0	–	0.0	1	5.5	–	0.0	12	21.0	13	8.9
Acquaintance	4	12.9	2	11.1	7	38.9	6	27.3	7	12.3	26	17.8
Stranger ²	4	12.9	4	22.2	3	16.7	6	27.3	27	47.4	44	30.1

– : No cases.

1. Includes step-parents.
2. Includes cases where there was no accused or the accused was unknown to the victim.

Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1991 to 1993.

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Table 4

Homicide by Age, Sex and Method Used to Cause Death, 0-19-Year-Old Children and Youth, Canada, 1991-1993

Number for 3 years

Method used to cause death	Victim age group (years)											
	< 1		1-4		5-9		10-14		15-19		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	74		34		34		33		135		310	
Boys	43	100.0	16	100.0	16	100.0	11	100.0	78	100.0	164	100.0
Shooting	1	2.3	3	18.8	3	18.7	5	45.4	36	46.2	48	29.3
Stabbing	2	4.7	1	6.3	2	12.5	3	27.3	31	39.7	39	23.8
Beating	18	41.9	3	18.7	3	18.8	-	-	9	11.5	33	20.1
Strangulation	13	30.2	3	18.7	4	25.0	-	-	1	1.3	21	12.8
Smoke, burns	2	4.6	2	12.5	1	6.3	1	9.1	-	-	6	3.6
Other, unknown	7	16.3	4	25.0	3	18.7	2	18.2	1	1.3	17	10.4
Girls	31	100.0	18	100.0	18	100.0	22	100.0	57	100.0	146	100.0
Shooting	-	-	2	11.1	4	22.2	6	27.3	14	24.6	26	17.8
Stabbing	1	3.2	1	5.6	4	22.2	2	9.1	11	19.3	19	13.0
Beating	8	25.8	3	16.7	1	5.6	6	27.3	13	22.8	31	21.2
Strangulation	11	35.5	6	33.3	6	33.3	4	18.2	13	22.8	40	27.4
Smoke, burns	5	16.1	2	11.1	2	11.1	2	9.1	1	1.7	12	8.2
Other, unknown	6	19.4	4	22.2	1	5.6	2	9.1	5	8.8	18	12.4

- : No cases

Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1991 to 1993.

age group, another 40% in the 30-39-year-old age group and only 14% in the under 20-year-old age group.

Comparisons with Other Reports on Homicide in Canada

The incidence of reported adult homicide in Canada has been in a slow decline during the past 20 years, following a sharp increase from the 1950s to 1970 (2). This has been true regardless of the method used. On the other hand, the incidence of child and youth homicide (6-19-year-olds) has not changed significantly since the mid-1970s, as shown in the *Mortality and Hospitalization Profile* as well as in Wright and Leroux (3). It is probable, however, that these trend data significantly underrepresent actual rates of child and youth homicide. Child and youth homicides, especially homicides of young children, are more easily concealed because deaths that are committed through beating, suffocating or shaking are easier to conceal than are those where a weapon is used. Further work must be done to improve the detection of such cases.

8. Some jurisdictions include witnessing family violence as a distinct type of violence.

However, there is ample evidence from other countries, especially the United States, that there is a clear relationship between the availability of firearms (especially handguns) and the incidence of homicide (2,4-7). The rate of homicide in the United States for boys in the 15-19 age group is more than ten times that of Canada's rate of 2.3 per 100,000, this difference being associated with a much higher proportion of firearm-related homicides in the United States. Canada's rate for 15-19-year-old boys is similar to those of Australia and Sweden, while Japan has a rate of 0.4 per 100,000 (World Health Organization, 1992; Statistics Canada, 1991, unpublished data). Homicide rates in children under 10 are similar between Canada and the United States (8); this is perhaps due to the infrequent use of firearms against younger children. However, while we may not be seeing an increase in firearm-related homicide in Canada, there is still ample opportunity to decrease its incidence.

CHILD AND YOUTH MALTREATMENT: ASSAULT, ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Child and youth maltreatment covers a broad range of situations where an adult or an older youth is held responsible for a child or youth being harmed or placed at serious risk of harm, through physical assault, sexual assault, emotional abuse, physical neglect or emotional neglect.⁸ Because

maltreatment is not necessarily associated with visible (physical) injuries or other immediate manifestations of emotional harm, it is often difficult to detect. Even when detected, many cases are not reported. The two primary sources of information on rates of child and youth maltreatment are child welfare authorities and the police. Legislation in all provinces and territories requires that cases of suspected child or youth maltreatment be reported to child welfare authorities. Police investigations are carried out in cases where assaults fall under corresponding sections of the *Criminal Code*. This section examines police statistics reported through the second revision of the Uniform Crime Reporting survey (UCRII) and child welfare statistics reported by the *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Abuse and Neglect* (OIS) of children and youth.⁹

Physical and Sexual Assaults (UCRII Database)

Description of Database

The UCRII documents validated¹⁰ criminal incidents that have been investigated by police forces across Canada. Assaults against children and youth are classified under the categories of sexual and physical assault. The UCRII also documents age and sex of the child or youth, relationship to and age of assailant, location and time of assault, severity of injury and use of weapon. Unfortunately, because the UCRII report is filed only once for each incident, it does not track the actual charges laid, dispositions and sentences. The UCRII is currently completed by a non-representative sample of 111 police departments¹¹ (10).

9. No Canadian data on rates of reported child and youth abuse and neglect are currently collected. The most recent effort to provide, at the Canadian level, a profile of annual rates of reported abuse and neglect was the *Child Welfare in Canada* report (9). However, because of differences in definitions and data reporting methods, the statistics published by the provinces and territories are not sufficiently comparable to provide a basis for deriving Canadian estimates. In addition, most provincial or territorial databases do not include information on rates of substantiation, nature and severity of injury, and subtypes of abuse and neglect.
10. "Validated" means that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that an assault may have occurred. The number of non-validated reports is not documented.
11. UCRII contains data provided by police departments in British Columbia, Ontario, Québec and New Brunswick. The proportion of police departments involved varies greatly from one province to the other (e.g., 90% of municipal police forces in Québec and only one municipal police force in British Columbia).
12. Incidence rates are estimated by dividing the UCRII data by the child and youth population (0-19) in the jurisdictions reporting to the UCRII.

Table 5

Homicide by Sex of Assailant and Victim, 0-19-Year-Old Children and Youth, Canada, 1991-1993

Number for 3 years

Victim	Assailants					
	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%
Total	226	75.3	74	24.7	300	100.0
Boys	135		42		177	59.0
Girls	91		32		123	41.0

1. Total number of cases = 310, for 10 cases sex of assailant was unknown.

Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1991 to 1993.

Rates of Assaults against Children and Youth

The Canadian police forces reporting to the UCRII documented 21,481 assaults against children and youth under the age of 20 in 1993, at a rate of 8.5 reported assaults per 1,000 children and youth in the reporting jurisdictions.¹² Projected to all of Canada, the 1993 UCRII figures indicate that more than 60,000 assaults against children and youth would have been investigated across the country. As seen in Table 6, rates of investigated assault vary considerably by age, sex and type of assault. Rates of investigated physical assault were highest for boys 15-19 years old (15.2 cases per 1,000) and girls (14.5 cases per 1,000) and lowest for preschool-aged boys (0.9 cases per 1,000) and girls (0.7 cases per 1,000). Rates of investigated sexual assault were four times higher for girls (4.0 cases per 1,000) compared to boys (0.9 cases per 1,000), with girls 10-14 years old (6.2 cases per 1,000) and 15-19 years old (4.9 cases per 1,000) being at highest risk.

As seen in Table 7, minor injuries (physical injuries that required no professional treatment) were documented in 53% of cases of physical assault and major injuries (physical injuries that required professional medical attention) in 6% of cases. While the proportion of major injuries is low, it should be noted that emotional and psychological harm are not documented by the UCRII. The proportion of major physical injuries was twice as high for assaulted preschoolers and youth 15-19 years old than for children and youth in the 5-14-year-old age group.

UCRII data revealed that weapons were infrequently involved in assaults against children and youth. In 2% of physical assaults firearms were used, and in 6% of physical assaults knives were used. However, physical force was used in 57% of physical assaults. In cases of sexual assault, weapons were used even less frequently, with less than 1% of cases involving

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Table 6

Rate of Investigated Assaults against 0-19-Year-Old Children and Youth by Age, Sex and Type of Assault, UCRII, 1993

Rate per 1,000

Type of Assault	Victim age group (years)										
	0-4		5-9		10-14		15-19		Total		
	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate	N	Rate	
Total	1,296	1.8	2,623	4.1	6,795	10.9	10,911	17.5	21,625	8.5	
Physical assault	Total	492	0.8	1,147	1.8	4,520	7.2	9,242	14.8	15,401	6.1
	Boys	267	0.9	766	2.4	2,835	8.8	4,853	15.2	8,721	6.8
	Girls	225	0.7	381	1.2	1,685	5.5	4,389	14.5	6,680	5.4
Sexual assault	Total	804	1.0	1,476	2.3	2,275	3.7	1,669	2.7	6,224	2.4
	Boys	239	0.6	423	1.3	395	1.2	177	0.6	1,234	0.9
	Girls	565	1.4	1,053	3.4	1,880	6.2	1,492	4.9	4,990	4.0

Source: UCRII, 1993.

Table 7

Severity of Physical Injuries in Cases of Investigated Assaults against 0-19-Year-Old Children and Youth, UCRII, 1993

Type of assault	Severity of injury	Victim age group (years)									
		0-4		5-9		10-14		15-19		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Physical assault	Total	492	100.0	1,147	100.0	4,520	100.0	9,242	100.0	15,401	100.0
	Major	43	8.7	19	1.7	168	3.7	713	7.7	943	6.1
	Minor	241	49.0	552	48.1	2,363	52.3	4,965	53.7	8,121	52.7
	No injury	148	30.1	476	41.5	1,612	35.7	2,794	30.2	5,030	32.7
	Unknown	60	12.2	100	8.7	377	8.3	770	8.4	1,307	8.5
Sexual assault	Total	804	100.0	1,476	100.0	2,275	100.0	1,669	100.0	6,224	100.0
	Major	7	0.9	3	0.2	7	0.3	10	0.6	27	0.4
	Minor	117	14.5	107	7.3	144	6.3	206	12.4	574	9.2
	No injury	456	56.7	1,010	68.4	1,691	74.4	1,147	68.7	4,304	69.2
	Unknown	224	27.9	356	24.1	433	19.0	306	18.3	1,319	21.2

Source: UCRII, 1993.

firearms and 2% involving knives. Physical force was used in 70% of sexual assaults.

Both physical and sexual assaults are most often perpetrated by an acquaintance (35%). Sexual assaults are more likely to be perpetrated by a parent or relative (32%) than are physical assaults (16%). Conversely, physical assaults are more likely to be committed by a stranger (23%) than are sexual assaults (14%). Relationships to the perpetrator are associated with the age of children and youth, with younger children being more likely to be assaulted by a parent or relative and older children and youth more likely to be assaulted by a stranger or an acquaintance. Over half (61%) of physical assaults against boys 10-19 were perpetrated by other youths (10-19) and close to half (48%) of girls aged 10-19 were also physically assaulted by other youths (10-19). Young offenders (10-19)

were also responsible for 23% of sexual assaults; with 34% of boys in the 5-9 age group being sexually assaulted by youths.

Child and Youth Abuse and Neglect (OIS Database)

Description of Database

The *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Abuse and Neglect* (OIS) of children and youth (11) is the first province-wide study in Canada to examine the annual incidence and characteristics of reported child and youth abuse and neglect. The OIS used a multistage sample survey design to collect information about cases of reported abuse and neglect directly from investigating child protection workers. The weighted OIS estimates are based on a representative sample of 2,447