

The Facts about Sexual Violence

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is an all-encompassing term that includes sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The word violence does not only refer to physical violence but includes emotional and psychological harm as well.

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is any sexual act or behaviour that is done without consent. Sexual assault encompasses many sexually inappropriate acts, including but not limited to coerced sexual activity, non-consensual kissing or touch, and rape. It is another umbrella term that encompasses many sexually inappropriate acts, including but not limited to coerced sexual activity, non-consensual kissing or touch, and rape. Sexual assault is a crime. The Criminal Code of Canada recognizes three types of sexualized violence, which result in different charges. All are considered to be sexual assault.

- Sexual assault (causing little or no physical injury);
- Sexual assault involving a weapon, threat, or bodily harm; and
- Aggravated sexual assault, which involves physical wounds, disfigurement, or threats to the life of the survivor.

While most sexual assaults fall into the first category, all types of sexual assault impact the survivor and can have long-term effects on a survivor's psychological well-being. All sexual contact with a child (under the age of 12) is illegal according to the Criminal Code of Canada.

[Follow this link for more information on sexual assault and consent.](#)

The importance of understanding consent by each and every individual cannot be overstated, as consent is the key determining factor between a safe sexual encounter and sexual violence.

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual act or behaviour that is threatening, violent, forced, or coercive, and where consent was not obtained or maintained. The Canadian Criminal Code specifies that consent cannot be obtained in the following instances where:

- the agreement is expressed by the words or conduct of a person other than the complainant;
- the complainant is incapable of consenting to the activity;
- the accused counsels or incites the complainant to engage in the activity by abusing a position of trust, power, or authority;
- the complainant expresses, by words or conduct, a lack of agreement to engage in the activity; or
- the complainant having consented to engage in the sexual activity, expresses, by words or conduct, a lack of agreement to continue to engage in the activity.

Other acts that are sexually inappropriate, such as the non-consensual sharing of nude pictures and voyeurism, are also illegal but are classified under section 162.1 of the Canadian Criminal Code.

What is the difference between sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual harassment?

Sexual abuse refers to ongoing or patterned sexualized behaviour against anyone by someone in a position of power / authority (or perceived power / authority); OR any sexual misconduct that is committed against a child, adolescent, or vulnerable adult by someone in a position of power or perceived authority. Grooming often takes place before the act of abuse.

Grooming is a process of manipulation and trust building that a perpetrator will use to create an atmosphere where they can exploit a person, e.g. keeping secrets, isolating, turning someone against their support system, gift giving, etc. Follow this link for [more information on grooming](#).

Sexual harassment is any unwarranted sexual conduct that interferes with a person's rights, as per the Saskatchewan Human Rights Code. Sexual harassment can be verbal, physical, or visual; it can occur as a single incident or a series of incidents. It is done to intimidate, humiliate or coerce the victims into unwanted sexualized conversation or contact. Sexual harassment is not allowed in the workplace, at schools, colleges or universities, or in the provision of a public service. It is unsolicited and unwelcome behaviour, which can take place in many forms and can lead to more severe acts over time:

- sexual remarks, "jokes", advances, or invitations
- displaying offensive pictures or photos
- threats
- leering
- physical contact, such as touching, patting, pinching, or brushing against
- sexual and physical assault.

How big of a problem is sexual assault?

- Approximately 4.7 million women – or 30% of all women aged 15 and older – have been sexually assaulted outside of an intimate relationship at least once since age 15 ([Statistics Canada, 2019](#)).
- According to self-reported data, there were 22 incidents of sexual assault for every 1,000 people in Canada aged 15 and older. ([Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017](#)).
- In Saskatchewan there were 1,449 cases of sexual assault reported to police in Saskatchewan in 2022. That is almost 4 sexual assaults every day ([Conroy, Statistics Canada, 2024](#)).

Sexual assaults reported to the police only represent a small portion of the actual number of sexual assaults; research studies have found that only 6% of sexual assault cases are ever reported to police (Cotter, A. (2021). Criminal victimization in Canada, 2019. *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X). Using that data, we can estimate that 24,150 sexual assaults in Saskatchewan occurred in 2022, or **68 sexual assaults each and every day** ([Conroy, Statistics Canada, 2024](#)).

Who is most at risk?

Sexual assault is a gender-based crime in which women are most likely to be the victims and men are most likely to be the perpetrator.

- Sexual assault is a highly gendered crime, with women and girls accounting for nine in ten (90%) victims involved in incidents reported to police across Canada in 2022. The

vast majority (96%) of accused persons were men and boys, and most (74%) victims of sexual assault knew the person accused of the crime (Conroy, Statistics Canada, 2024).

- Of all sexual assault incidents, the vast majority (87%) were committed against women (Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017).
- In Canada, the rate of sexual assault victimization was more than five times higher among women (50 per 1,000) than men (9 per 1,000) (Statistics Canada, 2021).
- Women account for 92% of police reported sexual assaults. (Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017).

Other populations are at increased risk of sexual assault as well:

- Youth are at higher risk, especially young women. Of all sexual assault incidences, 47% are committed against young women aged 15 to 24 (Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017). The median age of victims was higher for women and girls than men and boys (21 years versus 17 years), and 30% of all victims were youth aged 12 to 17.
- Indigenous women are at high risk. The rate of sexual assault against Indigenous women is approximately three times higher than among non-Indigenous women (Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017). “Indigenous women are at an increased risk of violent victimization and are frequently dismissed by the justice system. This is consistent with ongoing structural violence resulting from colonization, and may be associated with unconscious or conscious racial discrimination” (Murphy-Oikonen et al., Violence Against Women, 2021).
- “Homelessness is uniquely dangerous for women and gender diverse peoples.” While on the street, 37.4% of young women and 41.3% of trans and gender non-binary youth experience sexual assault compared to 8.2% of young men (Schwan et al., 2020).
- People who identify as homosexual or bisexual have a rate of sexual assault six times higher than those who identify as heterosexual (Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017).
- “[People] with disabilities – particularly women and those with mental disabilities – are at greater risk of sexual violence, which may be partially attributed to greater vulnerability, negative social attitudes and perceptions, and abuses of trust.” The rate of sexual assault among those with a disability are approximately two times higher than those with no disability (Conroy and Cotter, Statistics Canada, 2017).

Why does this happen?

Sexual assault is not about sex, it is a crime about power and control. Sexual assault is a crime of violence rooted in the need to assert power, dominate, control, abuse, and humiliate the victim. The crime is not about sexual need, as victims range from infants to seniors. Groups seen in our society as more powerful are given the right to dominate and control others, and this translates into being allowed to commit violence against those groups, including perpetrating sexual violence. Our collective failure to address these inequalities makes those with less societal power (and therefore viewed as less worthy) vulnerable to sexual violence.

Why don't more people report their sexual assault to police?

Only six percent of sexual assaults are reported to police, making it the most underreported crime measured in the General Social Survey on Victimization (Adam Cotter, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Statistics Canada, 2019).

In cases where sexual assault was not reported, victims cited the following reasons:

- concern that the perpetrator would not be held responsible;
- a lack of understanding of what constitutes sexual assault;
- feelings of shame or embarrassment about what happened to them;
- a perception that they wouldn't be believed; and
- concern about bringing shame and dishonour to their families.

And frankly, their reasons and fears are valid.

Most perpetrators are not held responsible. It is estimated that less than 1% of sexual assaults experienced by women lead to an offender being convicted ([Johnson, 2012](#)). Even when sexual assault cases are reported to police, they often drop off at investigation or prosecution.

When sexual assault victims report to police only one third of those reports will result in charges. Of those cases that result in charges, only 50% proceed to trial. Of the 50% of cases that go on to trial, less than 50% result in prosecution, and only 25% of those result in a conviction.



What constitutes a sexual assault is still not widely understood in Canada. Survivors of sexual assault often feel victimized but aren't sure what happened to them was actually sexual assault. Sexual assault does not have to mean vaginal or anal penetration, and you don't have to be physically injured to have been sexually assaulted.

A [2015 study by the Canadian Women's Foundation](#) indicated that consent not well understood. Almost all people in Canada (96%) believe all sexual activities should be consensual, but only one in three understands what it means to give consent.

In Canada we still “blame the victim” for sexual assault when the blame is entirely on the perpetrator. We blame female victims for making themselves vulnerable to the “sexual uncontrollable needs of men” We downplay or discredit the experiences of women because we don’t want to believe that someone we know, like, admire, or trust is capable of sexual violence.

Victim-blaming often sounds like this:

- “Are you sure? Maybe you misinterpreted the situation? Maybe it was an accidental brush and not a grab?”
- “Were you drinking and now don’t know what really happened?”
- “Were you flirting with him?”
- “Why did you agree to be alone with him? You know what is likely to happen.”
- “But he is such a nice guy! He would never do that. He’s never made me feel uncomfortable.”

There is still a false belief that many women lie about sexual assault to punish men. This fear prevents many women from reporting. Some believe that many sexual assault reports are false, but a review of international research on false reporting suggests that it happens in only 2-8% of cases (Lonsway et al., The National Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women, 2009), which is no higher than the average amount of false reporting on various other types of crime, including robbery, physical assault, and break and enters. In Canada, 7% of sexual assaults in 2022 were classified as unfounded (Moreau, Statistics Canada, 2024).

Why are the impacts of sexual violence?

Sexual violence causes significant and long-lasting harm to survivors, as well as a large societal impact, and substantial financial costs. There is no “normal” way to cope with the aftermath of sexualized violence, but there are many common short and long-term effects. Every survivor will react differently, and all reactions are normal to the abnormal circumstance of experiencing sexual violence. Some of the most common impacts include:

- Guilt, shame, blame and anger. Survivors may feel angry and direct their anger at people they love and trust, but not really know why. They might feel guilty about not having been able to stop the assault or blame themselves for what happened. Survivors often struggle with questions about why this happened to me! They think maybe it was something about them that caused the assault. They blame themselves for trusting someone that used their trust to hurt them.
- Self-esteem. After the assault survivors may struggle with low self-esteem, which affects many different areas of life such as relationships, school or career, and health. The survivor may feel overwhelmed, inadequate, or helpless.
- Physical and emotional effects. Survivors may experience headaches, digestive issues or other pain, and develop sleeping difficulties. They may become anxious or depressed. Some may choose to numb their pain with alcohol, drugs, or other coping behaviours like disordered eating or self-harm.
- Intimacy and relationships. Survivors may struggle to set boundaries that help them feel safe in relationships. Trusting others may be difficult. Survivors may find challenges with intimacy or communications.

The impacts can also differ depending on when the violence occurred during one's lifetime, as well as demographic details such as the survivors' gender, race, socioeconomic status, and so on ([SSAIC, 2024](#)).

What can we do to stop sexual assault?

Education is the key.

- Support sexual violence prevention education in schools so that young people can identify what sexual violence and consent are, know they have the right to say no regardless of who the person is, and where to seek help if this is happening to them.
- Support sexual violence education in our communities so that we can learn how to support victims in our homes, businesses, professions, and communities
- Educate yourself about rape myths and victim-blaming, understand victim-blaming and challenge it when we see or hear it in ourselves and others.
- Educate yourself on how to support someone who discloses to you that they are the victim of sexual violence.

What else can I do to help?

Support your local sexual assault centres. They provide counselling and support to survivors as well as sexual violence education in their community. [Click here for a list of sexual assault centres in Saskatchewan and other sexual assault services in Saskatchewan.](#)