

Domestic Homicide: The Witnesses Speak Out

Nationally – What do we know?

According to Statistics Canada's "*Family Violence in Canada: A Statistic Profile – 2009*", there has been a decline in spousal homicides in Canada over the past 30 years. However, such deaths still account for 16% of all solved homicides. Nationally, almost 4 times as many women have died at the hands of a current or former spouse than men.

The Voice of New Brunswick Silent Witnesses – what do they tell us?

Although each woman has a unique story, together their voices point to many common factors. We have researched New Brunswick cases from 1990 to present. This involved searching newspaper archives, reviewing case law and court records and obtaining other relevant information. We looked at a variety of risk factors to see if there were any patterns that might help us to suggest strategies for public education and prevention of future deaths. As of March 2012, there are 40 confirmed deaths of women who lost their lives in acts of domestic violence. There are currently two cases at trial and 4 recent murder-suicides that have not yet been confirmed. Killed along with these women were children, a mother and a current boyfriend.

The New Brunswick Silent Witnesses have taught us¹:

- **Home is not a safe haven:** Close to 90% of the New Brunswick silent witnesses were killed in their homes or cottages – places where one should feel safe and secure. One woman was killed in the parking lot of her work places and one was found in the woods.
- **Family violence happens in rural areas and small towns, as well as big cities:** The silent witnesses came from every corner of the province. Since New Brunswick is a rural province, it is not surprising that the majority were killed in small towns and rural areas with a population of less than 10,000.
- **Anyone can be a victim - murdered women came from diverse backgrounds:** The silent witnesses came from English, French, immigrant and First Nation communities. They came from diverse backgrounds and occupations. They were nurses, translators, physiotherapists, factory workers, store clerks and homemakers.



- **Firearms in the home can be deadly for women:** Although women were killed by beatings, strangulation and knives, over half of the New Brunswick women were killed with firearms – typically shotguns and hunting rifles. Nationally, only about 20% of family violence related deaths were due to firearms. Most of the New Brunswick murder-suicides involved firearms.
- **Ending the relationship does not end the risk of violence:** Close to 35% of the women were killed at or after separating from their partner. Separation is a particularly dangerous time for women. Statistics Canada found that although more married women are killed by their spouses, the rate of homicide is greatest for women after separation. Nationally, almost half of the homicides committed by ex-spouses happen in the first two months of separation and 80% of murders by ex-spouses happen within a year of separating.
- **Many women decide to stay in the abusive relationships:** Almost two thirds of the New Brunswick silent witnesses were killed in “intact relationships” which is much higher than national statistics. Many of these women had experienced abuse over the years and had left for brief periods and returned. Some felt trapped because of the barriers to leaving. This speaks to the need to address safety planning not only for women leaving abuse, but also for those who are stay in the relationship.
- **Marital status may be a factor:** About two thirds of the New Brunswick women were killed by a common-law or ex-common-law partner or boyfriend.
- **Most of the murdered women were middle age:** Statistics Canada’s found that married women under the age of 25 are at significantly higher risk of being killed in acts of domestic violence, especially at separation. In New Brunswick, about 80% of the silent witnesses were between 31-50 years. The silent witnesses all left behind grieving families and more than 40 children.
- **Drugs and alcohol can increase risk that violence turns deadly:** Drug and alcohol use does not cause family violence; though it can worsen the consequences. Sentencing reports showed that three quarters of the New Brunswick offenders were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time and 70% were said to have serious addiction problems.
- **Previous history of domestic violence, past criminal record and mental illness are all risks factor:** Our research suggests that most of the New Brunswick women who lost their lives struggled with violence and abuse in their relationship. Court files often referred to a troubled, violent or stormy relationship. Some of the women had spent time at a transition house. Court records also showed that many of the offenders had prior criminal records.
- **Many perpetrators do not take responsibility for their actions:** Many of the offenders blamed the woman or others for provoking them to murder. Most said they were jealous, angry that she ended the relationship, or upset that she had defied him during an argument. Where provocation was used as a defence, the courts did not accept it.

¹ The research and analysis of the silent witness cases and the development of this fact sheet was undertaken by Dr. Deborah Doherty, Executive Director, Public Legal Education and Information Service of New Brunswick, who extends appreciation to the law students and other individuals who assisted in the compilation of the data. This analysis is not intended to be a scientific study. Moreover, with such low numbers, percentages can change significantly with the addition of new cases. However, the analysis does enable us to identify many factors that are likely a common experience. [Updated: March 2012]