



## FACT SHEET: Sexual Violence

### Definitions

#### **Child Sexual Abuse**

Child sexual abuse is the inappropriate exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity, or behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

This includes:

- Looking at or touching the private parts of a child's body in a sexual way;
- Speaking to a child in a sexual way or using sexual language;
- Asking a child to look at or touch someone else's private parts;
- Showing a child sexually explicit material (such as pornography).

#### **Sexual Assault**

Sexual assault is any form of unwanted sexual contact without voluntary consent. Consent is a voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity.<sup>2</sup> In Canada, if someone is coerced into saying *yes* to sexual activity then that consent is not valid. A popular misconception is that sexual assault is violent and happens through the use of force or by physically overpowering someone. However, coercion is more commonly used to facilitate sexual violence.

#### **Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome conduct, comment, gesture, or contact that is gender-related or sexual in nature that makes the recipient feel uncomfortable, unsafe, offended, or humiliated – whether intended or not.

Sexual Harassment is unwanted, often coercive, sexual behaviour directed by one person towards another. Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination based on gender which is prohibited under the Alberta Human Rights Act.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (2021). Province of Alberta. Retrieved from <https://www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/c12.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *Criminal Code* (2022). Government of Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/page-36.html#docCont>

<sup>3</sup> Sexual Harassment Information Sheet (2017). Alberta Human Rights Commission. Retrieved from [https://albertahumanrights.ab.ca/publications/bulletins\\_sheets\\_booklets/sheets/hr\\_and\\_employment/Pages/sexual\\_harassment.aspx](https://albertahumanrights.ab.ca/publications/bulletins_sheets_booklets/sheets/hr_and_employment/Pages/sexual_harassment.aspx)

In the workplace, the Government of Canada defines workplace sexual harassment as any conduct, comment, gesture, or contact of a sexual nature that is likely to cause offence or humiliation to any employee; or that might, on reasonable grounds be perceived by that employee as placing a condition of a sexual nature on employment or on any opportunity for training or promotion.<sup>4</sup>

While sexual harassment can be overt, generally it tends not to be obvious, explicit, or extreme. Sexual harassment can be a single incident, or a pattern of behavior that occurs over time.

### Online Sexual Violence

Younger women are disproportionately subjected to online sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> Online sexual violence can occur in chat rooms, social network sites, emails or messaging, advertising, and through online video games<sup>6</sup> and may take many forms including:

- In the context of intimate relationships, where one partner distributes sexual images of their ex-partner (or current partner) online in order to humiliate, threaten and harass them<sup>7</sup>
- Sexual assault threats from unknown people
- Committing and filming a sexual assault and then sharing it online
- Disseminating sexual imagery of a peer without consent
- Being coerced into a sexual act online, unwanted sexual comments, and virtual sexual assault<sup>5</sup>

### Who is Sexual Violence Perpetrated Against?

In an effort to advance research excellence in the area of sexual violence and to inform policy makers and service providers in evidence-based decision making, in 2020, AASAS released the findings of the Prevalence of Sexual Assault and Childhood Sexual Abuse in Alberta survey.

The survey estimates that 1.8 million Albertan's have experienced at least one incident of sexual violence in their lifetime. In Alberta:<sup>8</sup>

- 28% of Albertans have experienced sexual assault.

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<sup>4</sup> Human resources and skills development Canada Information on Labour Standards –Sexual Harassment [https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/migration/documents/assets/portfolio/docs/en/reports/labour\\_standards/sexual\\_harassment/harassment.pdf](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/migration/documents/assets/portfolio/docs/en/reports/labour_standards/sexual_harassment/harassment.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2018). Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: A Literature Review of Empirical Research. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 19(2), 195-208.

<sup>6</sup> Arafa, A., Elbahrawe, R., Saber, N., Ahmed, A. & Abbas, A. (2018). *Cyber sexual harassment: a cross-sectional survey over female university students in upper Egypt*. Retrieved from <https://www.ijcmph.com/index.php/ijcmph/article/view/2015>

<sup>7</sup> Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2015). Beyond the 'sext': Technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment against adult women. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 48(1), 104-118.

<sup>8</sup> Summary of Key Findings: Prevalence of Sexual Assault and Childhood Sexual Abuse in Alberta (2020). *Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services*.

- 41% of women and 17% of men have experienced sexual assault.
- 34% of Albertans have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18.
  - Just under one in two girls (44%) and one in four boys (24%) in Alberta have experienced child sexual abuse.

Anyone can experience sexual violence.

- Women make up the vast majority of individuals of police-reported sexual assault (87%), particularly young women and girls.<sup>9</sup>
- Rates of police-reported sexual offences were seven times higher for young women and girls than for boys and young men.<sup>10</sup>
- A significant number of children are sexually abused. Estimates range from 8-31% for girls and 3-17% for boys across 24 countries.<sup>11</sup>
- 80% of children being sexually exploited online are girls.<sup>12</sup>
- More than one in five young Indigenous women are sexually assaulted in Canada.<sup>10</sup>
- Indigenous women are more likely to experience multiple forms of violence, including sexual violence, as well as the most severe forms that result in serious physical injury and homicide.<sup>13</sup>
- Canadians with cognitive/developmental disabilities are five times more likely to report being sexually assaulted.<sup>10</sup>
- People with disabilities have several additional barriers that increase their vulnerability. These included greater inability to leave a violent situation, dependence on poor social services, may have communication difficulties, being de-sexualized by society (and therefore disbelieved), and lack credibility.<sup>14</sup>
- Canadians who identify as homosexual or bisexual were six times more likely to self-report sexual assault than those who identified as heterosexual.<sup>10</sup>
- Almost half of all transgender people (47%) have been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives, these rates are even higher for transgender people of color and those who have done sex work, been homeless, or have (or had) a disability.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rotenburg, C. (2017). *Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009-2014: A statistical profile [Data set]*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Conroy, S., & A. Cotter. (2017). *Self-reported sexual assault in Canada, 2014 [Data set]*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14842-eng.pdf?st=Hhk8zFBY>

<sup>11</sup> Barth, J., Bermetz, L., Heim, E., Trelle, S., & Tonia, T. (2013). The current prevalence of child sexual abuse worldwide: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Public Health, 58*(3), 469-483.

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2016). *Child sexual abuse images on the internet: A Cybertip.ca analysis*. Retrieved from <https://protectchildren.ca/en/resources-research/child-sexual-abuse-images-report/>

<sup>13</sup> Brennan, S. (2011). *Violent victimization of Aboriginal women in the Canadian provinces, 2009 [Date set]*. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2011001/article/11439-eng.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Benoit, C., Shumka, L., Phillips, R., Kennedy, M.C., & Belle-Isle, L. (2015). *Issue brief: Sexual violence against women in Canada*. Retrieved from <https://cfc-swc.gc.ca/svawc-vcsfc/index-en.html>

<sup>15</sup> James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). The report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Retrieved from the National Center for Transgender Equality: <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>

## Who Commits Sexual Violence?

- Of the sexual assaults reported to police, almost all were committed by men (98%) with a median age of 33 years old.<sup>16</sup>
- In most cases of sexual assault, the person who commits the sexual assault is known to the person who they assaulted – such as an employer, co-worker, friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, neighbour, or relative:
  - In 87% of police-reported sexual assaults, the individual who was sexually assaulted knew their attacker: 26% as a casual acquaintance or friend, 24% as a non-spousal family member, 19% as an intimate partner.
  - 13% of assaults were committed by a stranger.<sup>16</sup>
- Most of the time children are also sexually abused by someone they know and trust. In 2012, of the 14,000 police-reported cases of child/youth sexual assaults:<sup>17</sup>
  - In 88% of the cases, the accused was known to the child/youth;
  - Only 12% of sexual offences were committed by a stranger – older children/youth between the ages of 12 and 17 were more likely to be assaulted by a stranger than younger children (80% of stranger assaults were committed against this older age group);
  - Of those known, 38% were family members, 44% were acquaintances of the child/youth and 6% were intimate partners of the child/youth;
  - Older children were more likely to be assaulted by acquaintances versus family members and younger children were more at risk for assault by a family member;
  - Approximately one third of sexual offenses against children and youth were committed by another youth.

## Impacts of Sexual Violence

The impact of sexual violence on survivors can vary greatly, not only from person to person, but also throughout a survivor's lifetime. Survivors of sexual violence can experience a range of physical, emotional, and psychological short- and long-term impacts. Traumatic experiences can shift a person's sense of safety, trust, self-esteem, intimacy, and control which can continue to impact all aspects of a survivor's life long after the abuse has stopped. Sexual violence can result in significant consequences including physical injury, psychological difficulties such as depression, anxiety, PTSD or suicidal ideation, sexual health problems, addictions, loss of work, and difficulties in relationships.<sup>18</sup>

Other impacts include:

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<sup>16</sup> Rotenburg, C. (2017). *Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009-2014: A statistical profile [Data set]*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Statistics Canada (2012a). *Police-reported sexual offences against children and youth in Canada [Data set]*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/14008-eng.htm>

<sup>18</sup> CDC. (2012). *Preventing sexual violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html>

- Because of the trauma associated with sexual violence, people who experience sexual assault are significantly more likely to struggle with mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, disordered eating, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.<sup>19</sup>
- The trauma associated with sexual assault can impact a survivor's employment and economic well-being. Dealing with the outcomes of sexual violence, including trauma, survivors may need time off, be unable to work, have lower job performance, and/or lose their employment resulting in significant financial impacts.<sup>20</sup>
- For women who are in university or college, sexual assault can affect academic performance. Research has found a significant association between sexual assault and a drop in GPA.<sup>21</sup>
- A person who has been sexually assaulted may freeze, struggle with memory recall, or have no apparent emotional reaction.<sup>22</sup> Others may try to minimize or forget about the assault as a way of coping with the trauma.<sup>23</sup>
- Sexual assault can affect intimacy and interpersonal relationships. Women who have experienced a sexual assault are more likely to report lower levels of relationship satisfaction and emotional intimacy.<sup>24</sup> Studies have also indicated that women's sexuality can also be affected. Following an assault, women's self-esteem, desire to engage in sexual intimacy, perceived value as a romantic partner, and attractiveness are negatively affected.<sup>25</sup>
- Recovery from sexual violence can be more difficult for sexual and racial minorities. Research has shown heightened psychological symptoms amongst women survivors from these communities due to the additional stresses associated with homophobia, racism, and societal marginalization.<sup>26</sup>
- Responses by family, friends, and support systems are an important part of recovery from sexual assault. Responses that are positive, supportive, non-blaming and do not aim to control the survivor's decisions have been found to result in lower levels of psychological distress and increases in coping, problem solving, and self-esteem.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dworkin, E., Menon, S., Bystrynski, J., & Allen, N. (2017). Sexual assault victimization and psychopathology: A review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review, 56*, 65-81.

<sup>20</sup> Loya, R. (2015). Rape as an Economic Crime: The Impact of Sexual Violence on Survivors' Employment and Economic Well-Being. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 30*(16), 2793-2813.

<sup>21</sup> Jordan, C., Combs, J., & Smith, G. (2014). An Exploration of Sexual Victimization and Academic Performance Among College Women. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 15*(3), 191-200.

<sup>22</sup> Haskell, L. & Randall, M. (2019). The impact of trauma on adult sexual assault victims. Ottawa, ON: Department of Justice Canada.

<sup>23</sup> Ontario Women's Directorate. (2013). *Developing a Response to Sexual Violence: A Resource Guide for Ontario's Colleges and Universities*. Retrieved from: [http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/ending-violence/campus\\_guide.shtml](http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/ending-violence/campus_guide.shtml)

<sup>24</sup> Georgia, E., Roddy, M., & Doss, B. (2018). Sexual Assault and Dyadic Relationship Satisfaction: Indirect Associations Through Intimacy and Mental Health. *Violence Against Women, 24*(8), 936-951.

<sup>25</sup> Perilloux, C., Duntley, J., & Buss, D. (2012). The Costs of Rape. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 41*(5), 1099-1106.

<sup>26</sup> Sigurvinsdottir, R., & Ullman, S. (2016). Sexual Orientation, Race, and Trauma as Predictors of Sexual Assault Recovery. *Journal of Family Violence, 31*(7), 913-921.

<sup>27</sup> Orchowski, L., Untied, A., & Gidycz, C. (2013). Social Reactions to Disclosure of Sexual Victimization and Adjustment Among Survivors of Sexual Assault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 28*(10), 2005-2023.

Given the prevalence of sexual violence, it is likely that anyone who has not personally experienced sexual violence knows and cares for someone who has. Friends, family members, partners, and support people also experience considerable distress when someone they care about is sexually abused, assaulted, or harassed. Feelings of devastation, shock, rage, and confusion can surface. Support people often struggle with feelings of helplessness – wishing that they could have done something to protect their loved one or wishing they could ease their pain after the fact, while also feeling unsure about what to do or how to help.

When survivors are not believed or are made to feel like they are in some way to blame, sexual violence has the power to fracture social connections and family supports. Survivors may withdraw or struggle with trust and connection. However, when survivors are believed, validated, and nurtured by their support people throughout the healing process, support networks and family bonds are strengthened.

Sexual violence is a threat to the well-being of communities. Sexual violence happens in all of our shared spaces – in homes, schools, and workplaces, on campuses, in locker rooms, in religious and cultural spaces, as well as in the places we gather and socialize. Those impacted by sexual violence can find it difficult to participate in community and the loss of their contributions to society is immeasurable.

When someone chooses to commit an act of sexual violence the costs to society are immense. When the prevalence of sexual violence in Canada is considered, and correlated to a number of resulting health and social issues, the conservative financial cost of this type of violence is easily calculated in the millions of dollars each year, if not, billions. The systems most impacted by sexual violence are health, social services, and justice. The direct costs of sexual assault are estimated to be more than \$546 million a year in Canada.<sup>28</sup> When pain and suffering are calculated in, this number rises to \$1.9 billion.<sup>28</sup>

Sexual violence is a complex social issue. There are no simple solutions. Everyone has a role to play in ending sexual violence.

AASAS welcomes your suggestions and recommendations about other relevant Canadian research references that could be included on this handout. Please e-mail us at [mailbox@aasas.ca](mailto:mailbox@aasas.ca)

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<sup>28</sup> The Gap in the Gender Gap: Violence Against Women in Canada. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved from <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/gap-gender-gap>