



# Juristat

Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

Statistics Canada – Catalogue no. 85-002-XPE Vol. 17 no. 11



## ASSAULTS AGAINST CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE FAMILY, 1996

By Robin Fitzgerald\*

### HIGHLIGHTS

- In 1996, children under 18 were the victims of 22% of assaults reported to police agencies. They represented a much larger proportion of all sexual assault victims (60%) than physical assault victims (18%).
- While the majority of assaults against children were committed by non-family members, family members were accused in 24% of all assaults against children. This includes 32% of all sexual assaults and 20% of physical assaults.
- Family members were responsible for the majority of assaults against very young children. Almost 70% of victims under the age of three were physically assaulted by family members, and parents accounted for 85% of these.
- Girls were the victims of assaults by family members more often than were boys. Victims were female in 56% of physical assaults, and almost 80% of sexual assaults.
- Fathers made up a large majority (80%) of parents accused of assaulting their children, accounting for 98% of parents accused of sexual assault and 73% of parents accused of physical assault.
- Between 1974 and 1996, there were 1,994 victims of homicide under 18 years of age, accounting for 13% of all homicide victims in Canada during this period. Despite yearly fluctuations, the homicide rate for children has remained relatively constant. In 1996, the child homicide rate was half the rate for adults.
- A history of violence was considered to be a factor in 26% of all child homicides committed by a family member.

\* Analyst, Integration and Analysis Program



### Ordering/Subscription information

#### All prices exclude sales tax

Catalogue no. 85-002-XPE, is published in a **paper version** for \$10.00 per issue or \$93.00 for an annual subscription in Canada. Outside Canada the cost is US\$10.00 per issue or US\$93.00 for an annual subscription. Please send orders to Statistics Canada, Operations and Integration Division, Circulation Management, 120 Parkdale Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0T6 or by dialling (613) 951-7277 or 1 800 700-1033, by fax (613) 951-1584 or 1 800 889-9734 or by Internet: order@statcan.ca. For change of address, please provide both old and new addresses. Statistics Canada publications may also be purchased from authorized agents, bookstores and local Statistics Canada offices.

November 1997  
ISSN 0715-271X

Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada.

© Minister of Industry, 1997

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior written permission from Licence Services, Marketing Division, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1A 0T6.

#### Note of appreciation

Canada owes the success of its statistical system to a long-standing co-operation involving Statistics Canada, the citizens of Canada, its businesses, governments and other institutions. Accurate and timely statistical information could not be produced without their continued co-operation and goodwill.

#### Standards of service to the public

Statistics Canada is committed to serving its clients in a prompt, reliable and courteous manner and in the official language of their choice. To this end, the agency has developed standards of service which its employees observe in serving its clients. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact your nearest Statistics Canada Regional Reference Centre.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48 – 1984.



## Introduction

The abuse of children and youth in the family is a serious concern for Canadians. Child abuse and neglect often result in physical, emotional and developmental problems which can affect the victims throughout their lives. There are currently no national estimates of child abuse in Canada. Only those incidents that come to the attention of officials, such as the police and child welfare agencies, are known. Efforts to understand the nature and the scope of child abuse should therefore take into account the fact that available data reflect only a portion of the total.

This *Juristat* uses statistical databases of police reported incidents across Canada to describe what is currently known from a criminal justice perspective about violence against children and youth in the family. Although these police reported incidents account for only a portion of all abuse that occurs, they nonetheless provide an important tool for profiling the more serious cases. For the purposes of this analysis, “children” include all young persons under 18 years of age, and “family members” include persons related to the victim by kinship, either through blood, marriage, common-law or adoption, as well as legal guardians such as foster parents.

## Defining child abuse

Part of the difficulty in measuring child abuse arises from the lack of a clear and consistent definition of the problem (Trocmé, McPhee, Tam, Hay, 1994). There is no consensus as to what constitutes child abuse across Canada at the provincial/territorial level where child welfare legislation and services are organized and delivered. As well, there is no agreement with respect to the maximum age of the child to be protected, nor the policies and practices underlying child protection (see Table 1 for details).

Differences in definition can have a considerable impact on the number of reported cases of child abuse. For example, in 1984 the Badgley Committee found that estimates of child sexual abuse doubled if threats and acts of indecent exposure were added to the definition (Canada, 1984). Similarly, the U.S. National Incidence Study estimates of child physical neglect tripled when “substantial risk of harm” was added to the definition of neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988).

Another difficulty in defining child abuse is the distinction between corporal punishment and physical abuse. In 1993, a representative sample survey of the incidence of child maltreatment reported to child protection workers was conducted in Ontario (Trocmé, McPhee, Tam, 1995). These data showed that, in Ontario, physical abuse investigations were substantiated by the child protection workers at a low rate, due partially to the fact that, in over 70% of investigations, punishment of the child was also involved. The authors point out that the distinction between corporal punishment and abuse is not clear in Canada, given that parents are entitled by law to use “reasonable force” to correct their children (*Criminal Code of Canada*, S. 43). In determining whether the force used is reasonable, courts have considered the nature of the child’s actions which require correction, the age and character of the child, the likely effect of punishment on the child, and the degree of force used to inflict the punishment (*R. v. Dupperon*, 1984; *R. v. Halcrow*, 1993).

Child abuse in this report is defined as *Criminal Code of Canada* incidents of physical and sexual assault against victims under 18 years of age that come to the attention of the police (see Box 1 for definition).

## Measuring child abuse

Counting cases of child abuse is fraught with difficulties. In addition to definitional problems, circumstances such as the secrecy surrounding the issue, the dependency of the victim on the perpetrator, the lack of knowledge about available help, and fear of repercussions for reporting the event, lead to underreporting and consequently an underestimate of the extent of the problem (Della Femina, Yeager, and Lewis, 1990; Stein and Lewis, 1992; Widom, 1988).

Table 1



### Provincial/Territorial Child Welfare Legislation

Province/ Territory	Child's age as defined in Child Protection Legislation	Abuse as defined in Child Protection Legislation	Child Abuse Registry	Witnessing Family Violence: Definition of a Child in Need of Protection
NFLD	Under 16	A child who is physically or sexually abused, physically or emotionally neglected, sexually exploited or in danger of that treatment (Child Welfare Act)	No	A child who is living in a situation where there is severe domestic violence; ...
PEI	Under 18	Abuse is defined as physical, mental, emotional or sexual mistreatment of the child by a person responsible for his care and well-being (Family and Child Services Act)	No	A child: who is living in a situation where there is severe domestic violence;...
NS	Under 16	Child has suffered physical, sexual, or emotional harm by the person, or by the person's failure to supervise and protect the child adequately (Children and Family Services Act)	Yes	A child is in need of protective services where the child has suffered physical or emotional harm caused by being exposed to repeated domestic violence by or towards a parent or guardian, and the child's parent or guardian fails or refuses to obtain services or treatment to remedy or alleviate the violence;...
NB	Under 16	The security or development of a child is suspected to be in danger if he/she is physically or sexually abused, physically or emotionally neglected, sexually exploited or in danger of such treatment (Family Services Act, 1995)	No	The security and development of the child may be in danger when the child is living in a situation where there is severe domestic violence;...
QUE	Under 18	Sexual abuse and physical ill-treatment are the result of an action or failure to act which lead to trauma or physical injury (Youth Protection Act)	No	No legislation
ONT	Under 16	Child is in need of protection where...the child has suffered physical harm ...been sexually molested... been emotionally harmed demonstrated by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or self-destructive behaviour... suffered from a mental, emotional or developmental condition that could impair the child's development (Child and Family Services Act)	Yes	No legislation
MAN	Under 18	Abuse is an act or omission of any person...that .results in physical injury, emotional disability of a permanent nature, or sexual exploitation of the child with or without the child's consent (Child and Family Services Amendment Act, 1996)	Yes	No legislation
SASK	Under 16	Physical abuse occurs when a parent uses physical means or permits another person to use physical means which result in severe bruising, burns or ...Sexual abuse involves any parental behaviour which may involve erotic touching... emotional neglect or abuse (Child and Family Services Act)	No	The child has been exposed to domestic violence or severe domestic disharmony that is likely to result in physical or emotional harm to the child.
ALTA	Under 18	A child is emotionally injured if there is substantial and observable impairment of the child's mental or emotional functioning ...physically injured if there is substantial and observable injury to any part of the child's body...sexually abused if the child is inappropriately exposed or subjected to sexual contact, activity or behaviour (Child Welfare Act)	No	A child is emotionally injured if there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe that the emotional injury is a result of ...exposure to domestic violence or severe domestic disharmony.
BC	Under 19	A child needs protection if the child is or is likely to be physically harmed...sexually abused or exploited by a parent...or by another person if the child's parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child...or, if the child is physically harmed because of neglect...emotionally harmed...deprived of necessary health care... (Child, Family and Community Services Act)	No	No legislation
YUK	Under 18	A child is in need of protection if he is abandoned...if he is in probable danger of physical or psychological harm...if he is cut burned or physically abused in any other way...if he is deprived of necessities of live...(Children's Act)	No	No legislation
NWT	Under 18	Child abuse is a condition of physical harm where a child suffers physical injury but does not include reasonable punishment administered by a parent or guardian...malnutrition or mental ill-health of a degree that if not remedied could impair growth ... sexual molestation (Child Welfare Act).	No	No legislation

Source: Federal-Provincial Working Group on Child and Family Services Information. (1994). *Child welfare in Canada: The role of provincial and territorial authorities in cases of child abuse*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services (with updates).

Estimates of child abuse are also affected by shifts in the level of scrutiny that official agencies maintain in suspected cases. For instance, in recent years most provinces have legislated mandatory coroner inquests into sudden and unexpected deaths of children under two years of age. The re-evaluation of the cause of death could result in an increase in the number of reported homicides which previously would have been recorded as accidental or natural deaths.

At the present time, data on child abuse are available from a variety of sources including general population surveys, provincial/territorial child welfare caseload data, clinical sample studies and police statistics. Each has certain advantages and limitations. Population surveys have been used in an effort to identify cases which have not been reported to official authorities. These surveys rely on adult victims or parents to identify specific incidents of maltreatment, but it is assumed that these also result in an underestimate because victims and parents may be reluctant to disclose abuse, particularly if parents themselves are the abusers.

Differences in the way data are collected in each jurisdiction do not allow for inter-provincial comparisons of child welfare caseload data, nor do they provide a basis for estimating national child welfare statistics. Estimates based on clinical samples are typically small and not representative of the population.

Incidents of violence against children reported to the police also form only a partial estimate of the prevalence of child abuse. The Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Abuse and Neglect revealed that police agencies were involved in only 23% of all Children's Aid Society investigations, and criminal charges were laid in only 6% of investigations (Trocmé, McPhee, Tam, and Hay, 1994). However, the advantage of police data is that police record these events according to a common *Criminal Code* definition and provide a profile of cases that are detected and deemed serious enough for criminal justice intervention.

## The nature of assaults on children reported to the police

The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey, maintained by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, has captured information about all criminal incidents known to the police in Canada since 1962. In 1988, new survey requirements were introduced in the UCR II including the collection of information about the relationship between the victim and the suspect in violent incidents. Police departments across Canada have been gradually changing their data collection systems to reflect these changes so that by 1996, the UCR II data reflected criminal incidents reported to 154 police agencies in six provinces. These data represent 47% of the national volume of actual *Criminal Code* incidents. Currently, UCR II data are not nationally representative, as they originate largely from Ontario and Quebec and reflect mostly urban populations. Similarly, it is not currently possible to provide provincial breakdowns of these data. Nonetheless, an analysis of these data provides insight into the nature of child abuse cases reported to the police.

## General patterns

During 1996, children and youth from infancy to age 17 were the victims in over one-fifth (22%) of all incidents of assault reported to the police. Children accounted for 18% of all victims of reported physical assaults and a much higher proportion (60%) of all victims of reported sexual assaults (Figures 1 and 2). However, while children under 18 years accounted for a smaller proportion of all physical assault victims, the actual number of children physically assaulted was much higher than the number sexually assaulted. In 1996, there were over 16,300 incidents of physical assault against children reported to the sample of 154 police agencies, in contrast to 6,400 incidents of sexual assault.

### Box 1

#### Police reported incidents of child abuse

In this *Juristat* child abuse includes police reported incidents of physical and sexual assault and homicide where the victim is under 18 years of age. "Family" refers to immediate and extended family members related by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption, as well as, those who would be considered to be the child's legal guardian.

If the accused is a boyfriend or girlfriend of an abused child's parent, he or she is likely to be reported as a non-family member.

In this report, *Criminal Code* offence categories include:

**Homicide**—first and second degree murder, manslaughter and infanticide. Deaths caused by criminal negligence, suicide, accident or justifiable homicide are not included;

#### Assault—

Level 1—Common assault includes behaviours such as pushing, slapping, punching, face-to-face verbal threats, and threats by an act or gesture;

Level 2—Assault causing bodily harm includes carrying or threatening to carry a weapon or imitation weapon for the purposes of causing bodily harm;

Level 3—Aggravated assault includes incidents where the accused wounds, maims, disfigures or endangers the life of the victim;

Other *Criminal Code* assaults—All other assaults not included above, such as criminal negligence causing bodily harm, or discharging a firearm with intent;

#### Sexual Assault—

Level 1—Sexual assault includes incidents of the least physical injury to the victim.

Level 2—Sexual assault causing bodily harm includes sexual assaults with a weapon, threats to use a weapon, or causing bodily harm;

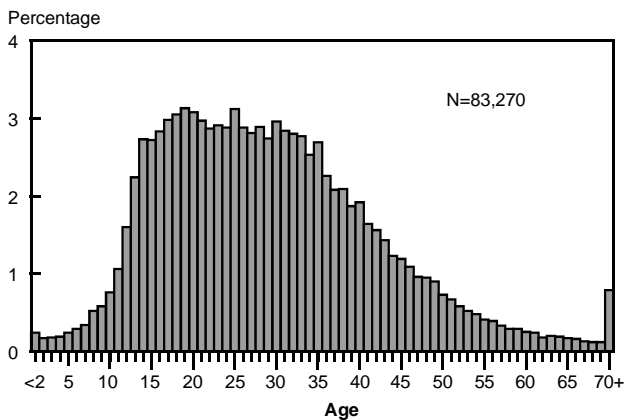
Level 3—Aggravated sexual assault includes sexual assaults in which the accused wounds, disfigures or endangers the life of the victim;

Other sexual offences—specifically designed to protect children from sexual abuse, including: incest, sexual interference (child under 14), sexual exploitation (child under 14), invitation to sexual touching (child under 14).

Child prostitution and child pornography could also be included within a definition of abuse, but are not covered in this report.

Figure 1

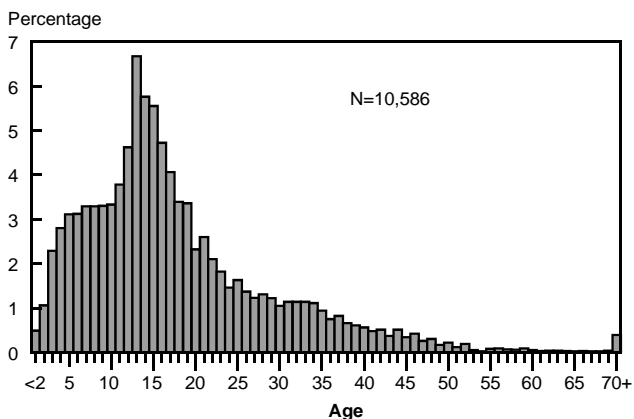
**Victims of physical assault by age, 1996**



Excludes cases where the age of the victim is unknown  
 Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996

Figure 2

**Victims of sexual assault by age, 1996**



Excludes cases where the age of the victim is unknown  
 Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996

In 1993, a survey on personal risk related to criminal victimization was conducted for the second time as part of Statistics Canada's General Social Survey program. These data show a pattern similar to police data. A sample of approximately 10,000 respondents over the age of 15 were asked about the most serious crime that had ever happened to them, and at what age it happened. Extrapolating to the total adult population, three percent, or almost 700,000 Canadians, reported having been physically or sexually assaulted at some time before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Of those who reported being assaulted at some point in their lives, over half of sexual assaults (55%) and nearly one-quarter of physical assaults (24%) occurred when the victim was under 18 years. Over one-half (51%) of all sexual assaults occurred to girls under 18 years of age.

Police statistics (UCR II) indicate that the age distribution for child victims is different for physical and sexual assaults. In 1996, the majority of sexual assault victims were under 18, while physical assault was prevalent into the adolescent and adult years (see Figures 1 and 2). As shown in Table 2, youth between the ages of 12 and 17 made up the majority of child victims of physical assault (76%), and half (51%) of sexual assaults. An exception to the general pattern is aggravated assault where infants under the age of three and youth aged 15 to 17 were disproportionately represented, collectively accounting for three-quarters of all child victims of these incidents (16% and 59% respectively).

Police data show that one-quarter of all child assault incidents reported in 1996 were perpetrated by a family member (Table 3). In the majority of cases (52%), the accused person was an acquaintance or close friend, and in one-fifth of cases the accused was a stranger to the victim. While the proportion of accused who are acquaintances remained at about half regardless of the victim's gender or the type of assault (physical or sexual), this was not the case when accused were family members. For example, family members were accused in one-third of child sexual assaults, but in only one-fifth of physical assaults. In addition, female victims of physical assault were much more likely to have been assaulted by a family member than were males (30% versus 14%). Male victims of physical assault were more likely than females to be assaulted by strangers. This tendency increased with age as the accused person was a stranger in over one-third (34%) of all incidents of physical assault against male teenaged victims between 15 and 17 years.

### Assaults within the family

The family members most often accused of physically assaulting children were parents, accounting for nearly two-thirds of physical assaults against children, compared to less than one-half of sexual assaults (Table 4). This general pattern holds true for both male and female victims of physical and sexual assault.


Police data also showed that a higher proportion of other immediate family members, including natural, step, half, adopted or foster siblings, were the accused in sexual assaults (28%) than in physical assaults (21%) of children. Extended family members, which include all other persons related to the victim by blood, marriage or adoption, are responsible for a similar proportion (27%) of sexual assaults against children but a much smaller proportion (7%) of physical assaults.

The pattern of physical assault by family members differs somewhat for male and female victims in one respect. Notably, spousal assaults represented a larger proportion (14%) of physical assaults against female victims under 18 years, than they did for male victims (1%). This is consistent with the finding from the Violence Against Women Survey that young women are at a particularly high risk of wife assault.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This number may be an underestimate of the extent of physical and sexual assault against children under age 18, since responses were dependent on the respondent's perception of what constitutes a crime and his or her ability to recall the event and the time at which it occurred.

<sup>2</sup> The Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) was conducted by Statistics Canada in 1993. Findings show that age is strongly correlated with wife assault. The twelve month rate of wife assault among young women 18 to 24 years of age is four times the national average. The VAVS surveyed 12,300 women 18 years of age and over about experiences since age 16. For more information refer to Rodgers (1994).

Table 2



**Type of assault by age group of victim, 1996**

Type of Assault	Number	Total	Total Child & Youth (<18)	Total Adult (18+)	Age Unknown	Age Breakdown as a Proportion of Total Children and Youth (under 18)						
						Total	< 3	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Sexual Assault - Total</b>	<b>10,851</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>23</b>
Aggravated Sexual Assault	139	100	34	63	3	100	2	6	11	17	21	43
Sexual Assault with a Weapon	291	100	33	65	2	100	-	6	8	11	29	45
Sexual Assault	9,037	100	58	40	3	100	3	14	15	17	27	24
Other Sexual Offences <sup>1</sup>	1,384	100	81	18	1	100	2	12	18	18	31	19
<b>Physical Assault - Total</b>	<b>90,857</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>43</b>
Aggravated Assault	1,526	100	12	83	5	100	16	3	3	8	12	59
Assault With Weapon/Causing Bodily Harm	18,168	100	17	75	8	100	2	3	5	10	30	49
Assault	65,743	100	20	74	7	100	2	3	6	13	34	42
Unlawfully Causing Bodily Harm	348	100	17	82	1	100	5	5	8	10	30	42
Discharge Firearm with Intent	113	100	14	83	3	100	-	-	13	31	19	38
Assault Peace-Public Officer	3,608	100	-	65	35	100	-	-	-	-	-	-
Criminal Negligence Causing Bodily Harm	96	100	29	65	6	100	4	14	11	11	43	18
Other Assaults <sup>2</sup>	1,255	100	5	52	43	100	2	5	14	15	35	30
<b>Assault Total</b>	<b>101,708</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>38</b>


<sup>1</sup> The UCR II Survey groups other sexual offences including sexual interference, sexual touching, sexual exploitation, incest, etc., into one category.

<sup>2</sup> The UCR II Survey groups other assault including unlawfully causing bodily harm, criminal negligence causing bodily harm, trap to cause harm, interfering with transportation, etc., into one category.

- Nil or zero.

Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996.

Table 3



**Child victims of assault by accused-victim relationship and gender of victim, 1996**

Accused-Victim Relationship	Total Assault <sup>2</sup>	Sexual Assault			Physical Assault			
		Victim Gender			Victim Gender			
		Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	
<b>Total</b>	Number Percent	<b>22,833</b> <b>100</b>	<b>6,474</b> <b>100</b>	<b>5,009</b> <b>100</b>	<b>1,465</b> <b>100</b>	<b>16,359</b> <b>100</b>	<b>6,160</b> <b>100</b>	<b>10,199</b> <b>100</b>
Acquaintance <sup>1</sup>	Percent	52	49	48	52	53	52	53
Family	Percent	24	32	33	30	20	30	14
Stranger	Percent	19	13	13	11	22	14	27
Unknown	Percent	5	6	6	7	5	4	5

<sup>1</sup> "Acquaintance" includes any relationship in which the accused and victim are familiar with each other (either on a long term or short term basis), but are not related, or in a legal guardianship arrangement.

<sup>2</sup> Excludes cases for which the sex of the victim is unknown.

<sup>3</sup> Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996.

Table 4

**Child victims of family assault by accused-victim relationship and gender of victim, 1996**

Accused-Victim Relationship		Sexual Assault			Physical Assault		
		Victim Gender			Victim Gender		
		Total <sup>3</sup>	Female	Male	Total <sup>3</sup>	Female	Male
<b>Total</b>	Number	<b>2,102</b>	<b>1,662</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>3,328</b>	<b>1,855</b>	<b>1,473</b>
	Percent	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Parent	Percent	43	42	48	64	59	70
Other immediate family <sup>1</sup>	Percent	28	29	24	21	21	21
Extended family <sup>2</sup>	Percent	27	27	28	7	6	8
Spouse	Percent	1	2	1	8	14	1

<sup>1</sup> "Immediate family" includes natural siblings, or step, half, foster or adopted siblings.  
<sup>2</sup> "Extended family" includes others related by blood or marriage, e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws.  
<sup>3</sup> Excludes cases for which the sex of the victim is unknown.  
 Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996.

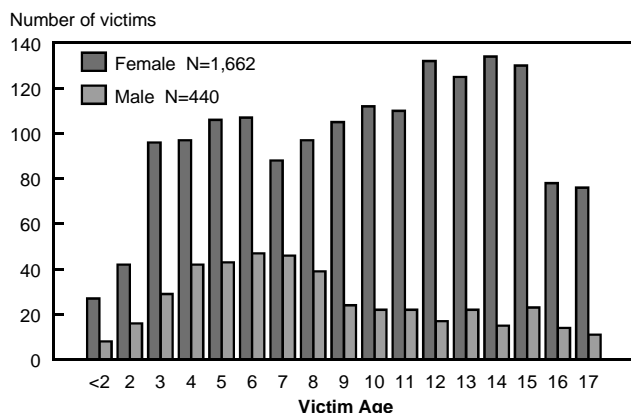
**Girls primary victims of assaults by family members**

Overall, girls under 18 were more frequently the victims of all types of assault by family members than were boys, but most particularly in the case of sexual assaults. Girls represented four-fifths (79%) of the victims of sexual assault, and virtually all (99%) of the perpetrators of these incidents were male. Girls were the victims in just over half (56%) of the cases of physical assault by family members, and in these cases over three-quarters of those accused were male family members.

The number of girls reported being victims of sexual assault by family members was highest between the ages of 12 and 15. In contrast, most sexual assaults occurred to boys between the ages of 4 and 8 (Figure 3). The likelihood of being physically assaulted increased with age for both boys and girls, reaching

Figure 3

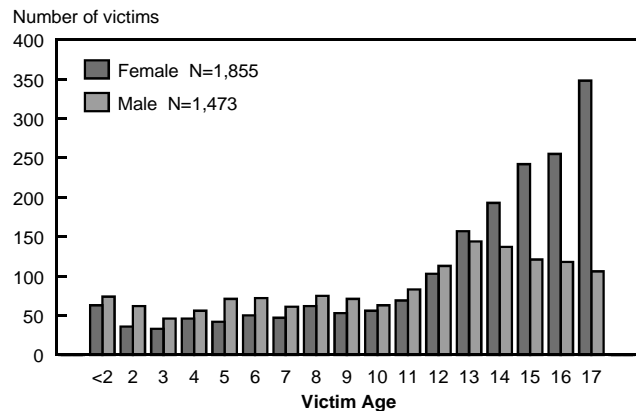
**Number of victims of family-related sexual assault by age and gender of victims, 1996**



Excludes cases where the age and sex of the victim are unknown  
 Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996

Figure 4

**Number of victims of family-related physical assault by age and gender of victims, 1996**



Excludes cases where the age and sex of the victim are unknown  
 Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996

a peak for girls at the age of 17, and for boys at the age of 13 (Figure 4). As shown in Figure 4, boys under 13 are more frequently the victims of physical assault than are girls of the same age (991 cases of physical assault against boys under 13 compared to 817 cases against girls).

It should be noted that when acquaintances and strangers are taken into account, the number of physical assaults against male victims increases dramatically (see Table 3). General population studies have reported a similar pattern. For example, the Ontario Health Supplement Survey<sup>3</sup> indicated that when all types of relationships were taken into account, 13% of girls and 4% of boys suffered sexual abuse, whereas 31% of boys and 21% of girls suffered physical abuse while growing up (MacMillan, et al., 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The Ontario Health Supplement surveyed a random sample of 9,953 Ontario residents aged 15 years and older about the history of abuse in childhood.

Table 5

**Age group of victim and type of assault by accused-victim relationship, 1996**

Accused-Victim Relationship		Sexual Assault							Physical Assault						
		Age of Victim													
		Total	< 3	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	Total	< 3	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17
<b>Total</b>	Number	6,481	164	867	1,026	1,101	1,805	1,518	16,371	342	509	961	1,997	5,465	7,097
	Percent <sup>1</sup>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Acquaintance	Percent	49	25	41	46	47	56	51	53	17	25	40	54	60	52
Stranger	Percent	13	6	5	8	13	14	21	22	4	9	15	21	21	26
Unknown	Percent	6	12	7	5	5	5	6	5	10	8	7	5	4	5
<b>Family Total</b>	Percent	32	57	48	42	36	25	21	20	69	58	38	20	15	17
Spouse	Percent	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	4
Parent	Percent	14	30	20	15	16	11	10	13	58	49	33	15	10	7
Other immediate family	Percent	9	9	12	13	11	7	6	4	6	6	3	3	4	5
Extended family	Percent	9	18	16	14	9	6	4	1	5	4	2	2	1	1

- Nil or zero.

<sup>1</sup> Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

**Very young victims most likely to be assaulted by family members**

Family members were responsible for a vast majority of physical assaults against young children in particular. Almost 70% of victims of physical assault under the age of three were assaulted by family members, and parents were accused in 85% of these (58% of all physical assaults against children of this age) (Table 5). Casual acquaintances and strangers were responsible for increasing numbers of physical assaults against older children. The majority (80%) of victims of physical assault 12 to 17 years of age were assaulted by acquaintances and strangers.

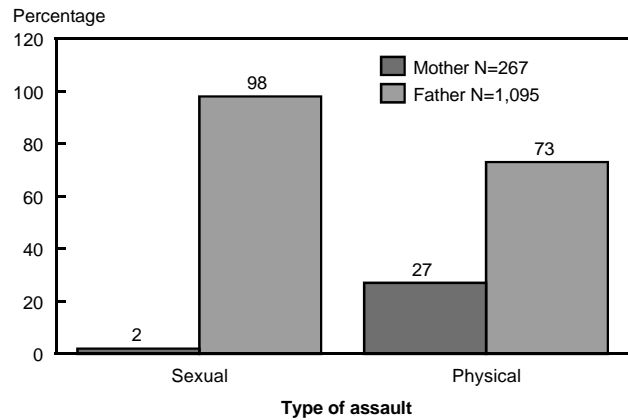
The same pattern holds true in the case of sexual assault, where the percentage assaulted by family members was highest for very young children (57% of victims of sexual assault who were under 3 years of age), and the proportion victimized by family members declines with age. Acquaintances were accused in one-quarter of sexual assaults against victims under 3 and rose dramatically to double that for youth 12 and over. Strangers accounted for only 6% of sexual assaults against infants, but by age 15, children were assaulted by strangers in more than 20% of sexual assaults. By comparison, family members accounted for less than one-quarter of those accused of sexual assault against children 12 and over.

**Fathers more likely to be accused of assaulting their children**

Fathers made up a large majority of parents who were accused of physically or sexually assaulting their children. Fathers were accused in 80% of incidents involving a parent, including 98% of sexual assaults and 73% of physical assaults (Figure 5). Both mothers and fathers were more frequently accused of physical assault than sexual assault, but this was particularly the case for mothers where physical assault accounted for 97% of all cases in which they were accused.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 5

**Percentage distribution of mothers and fathers accused of assault, 1996**



Includes incidents for which there is a single accused and a single victim. Counts the number of individual incidents by sex of accused.

Source: Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996

Female children were the victims in the majority (88%) of incidents in which fathers were accused of sexual assault. Female children between the ages of 11 and 15 were most frequently sexually assaulted by fathers. Girls between these ages accounted for 46% of all girls who were sexually assaulted by fathers. Mothers who were accused of sexually assaulting their children were equally likely to assault female and male children.

<sup>4</sup> Analysis of accused and victim characteristics in this section is based on only those incidents for which there is a single accused and a single victim. Thus, percentages are derived from a sample of incidents representing 47% of the sample size used in the remainder of the report.



In the case of physical assaults, fathers were equally likely to assault male and female children. Older children aged 12 to 17 years were most frequently the victims of physical assault perpetrated by fathers. Sixty-five percent of the physical assaults by fathers were against children of this age group. The mean age of child victims assaulted by fathers was 12 years. Mothers accused of physical assault were also equally likely to assault male and female children. The mean age of victims of physical assault perpetrated by mothers was 10 years.

### Six in ten children sustain injuries during physical assaults by family members

The majority (61%) of child victims of physical assault by family members experienced some form of injury<sup>5</sup> which was apparent to the attending police officer: 58% suffered minor injury and 3% major injury. Reported injury was much less apparent in cases of sexual assault in which 9% of children suffered apparent minor injury, and less than 1% suffered major injury. This finding reflects the nature of sexual assault which is frequently reported long after the incident when physical injuries may be less visible, and includes offences such as unwanted touching and invitation to sexual touching which cause emotional rather than physical injury. Very young children are at greatest risk of sustaining major physical injuries during any type of assault. Children under 6 years of age sustained injuries in 64% of physical assaults and in 11% of sexual assaults.

The weapon causing the most serious physical injury to the victim is also captured as part of the UCR database. In 1996, the physical force of the attacker was the most frequently reported method of causing injury to children during incidents of assault by family members. Physical force was reportedly used against child victims in 58% of sexual assaults by family members and in 75% of physical assaults by family members. This category includes actions such as choking, punching, shaking or pushing, as well as, other methods of assault such as poisoning.

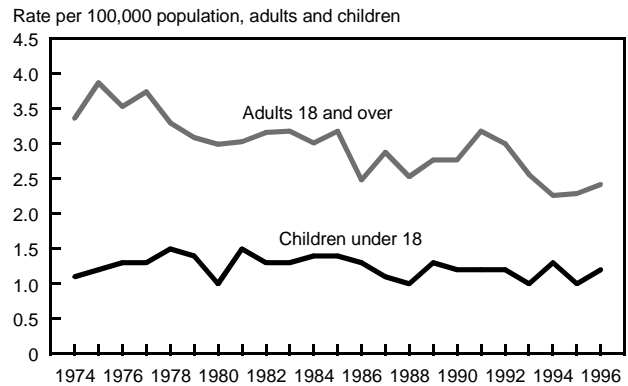
Weapons other than physical force were used in 7% of all assaults against children by family members (11% of physical assaults and only 1% of sexual assaults). Of these assaults, blunt instruments were used in 64% of cases, knives or sharp instruments were used in 31%, fires were intentionally or accidentally set in 4% of cases and firearms were used in 1% of cases.

### Family-related homicides against children

Between 1974 and 1996,<sup>6</sup> there were 1,994 victims of homicide under 18 years of age. This represented 13% of all homicide victims in Canada during this period, an average of 87 children each year. This age group made up the smallest proportion of homicide victims relative to their representation in the Canadian population which averaged 27% from 1974 to 1996. The homicide rate for children under 18 has remained relatively constant, fluctuating between 1.1 and 1.5 homicides per 100,000 children in the population from 1974 to 1996. The rate for adults aged 18 years and older has gradually declined from 3.4 to 2.4 homicides per 100,000 adult population, a decrease of 28% (Figure 6).

Figure 6

### Homicide rates by age group, Canada, 1974-1996



Excludes cases where the age of the victim is unknown  
Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996

Nearly six in ten (58%) child homicides over this period were committed by family members and the majority (79%) of these were committed by a parent. As was the case with police reported assaults against children, the youngest victims of homicide were most likely to be killed by family members (usually parents), whereas older children were more likely to be killed by non-family members such as acquaintances and strangers (Table 6). The greater likelihood for children under 12 to be killed by a family member is consistent for both sexes.

During the 23 year period, 7 in 10 family homicides committed against children resulted in at least one charge being laid against an accused. In one quarter of the remaining cases that were not cleared by a charge, the accused, usually a parent, committed suicide prior to charges being laid in the incident.


Mothers who killed their children were relatively young. Of the females accused of child homicide during the past decade, 13% were under the age of 18, and 39% were under the age of 25.

Infanticide is a *Criminal Code* (Section 233) provision for diminished responsibility in the act of killing a child under the age of one. A woman is charged with this offence if at the time of killing her child, she is not fully recovered from the effects of giving birth or is otherwise affected mentally by the act of giving birth. From 1991 to 1996, there were 18 cases of infanticide which represented 16% of all homicides of victims under one year of age. The average age of this group of perpetrators was 20 years.

<sup>5</sup> 'Apparent injury' refers only to physical injuries, sustained in the course of an assault, that a police officer identifies and records. Invisible forms of injury such as internal or emotional injury are not reported.

<sup>6</sup> Although homicide data have been collected since 1961, manslaughter and infanticide statistics were first reported in the Homicide Survey in 1974. Where possible this report describes data beginning in 1974. Variables such as the history of domestic violence were introduced in 1991.

Table 6



## Homicide victims by age group, gender, and accused-victim relationship<sup>1</sup>, 1974-1996

Accused-Victim Relationship		Age Group and Gender						
		Under 18 years Total	Under 12 years			12-17 years		
			Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
<b>Total</b>	Number	1,771	1,164	534	630	607	283	324
	Percent <sup>2</sup>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Family	Percent	59	79	78	79	25	27	23
Acquaintance	Percent	29	15	14	15	51	47	54
Stranger	Percent	13	6	7	5	24	26	23

<sup>1</sup> Excludes cases where victim age and sex, and accused-victim relationship were unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996.

### Box 2

#### Shaken baby syndrome and post-infant death inquiries

Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS) has recently been identified as a cause of infant deaths. The cause of death is difficult to identify in these cases because there are no external signs of injury. Death occurs from abrupt or repeated motion which causes the infant's head to roll back and forth. In some cases, less violent but repeated shaking may cause deafness, blindness, seizures, paralysis, or developmental delay. Shaken Baby Syndrome occurs most often at two to six months of age, but babies up to two years are at risk.

The identification of the syndrome is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has not previously been identified as a separate

cause of death on the Homicide Survey, although these deaths could be identified through the "other cause" category. A total of 17 deaths were identified as SBS from 1993 to 1996, 17% of all homicides of infants less than 2 years old during the period. Beginning in 1997, the Homicide Survey will identify SBS as a separate cause of death.

Concerns about the investigation of infant deaths have led many provincial jurisdictions to draft new protocols for coroners' investigations of sudden and unexpected deaths of children under the age of two. These recent changes reflect a shift in the justice and child welfare communities toward greater scrutiny in all children's deaths and cases of child maltreatment.

### Domestic violence a factor

The Homicide Survey defines "domestic violence" as a previously reported history of violence involving the victim and accused. Previous violence known to the police was a factor in one-quarter of family-related child homicides from 1991 to 1996. Homicides involving victims under two years of age were most likely to have been preceded by this type of abuse: three in ten victims in this age group were reported to have previously been subjected to violence (Table 7). Given the general underreporting of child abuse, it is likely that these percentages underestimate the extent of abuse in incidents of child homicide.

### Precipitating crime

The Homicide Survey also captures data on incidents in which the accused committed an offence leading directly to the homicide. From 1991 to 1996 less than one-fifth of child homicides committed by family members were reported to be precipitated by another crime. Of these crimes, non-sexual assaults were most frequently (43%) reported. Sexual assault was a precipitating crime in one-fifth (20%) of cases.

Table 7



## History of domestic violence in family homicides by age group of victim, 1991-1996

		Age Group			
		Total Under 18	Under 2	2-11	12-17
<b>Total by age of victim</b>	Number	271	115	119	37
	Percent <sup>2</sup>	100	100	100	100
Yes	Percent	26	31	24	20
No	Percent	74	69	76	80

<sup>1</sup> Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

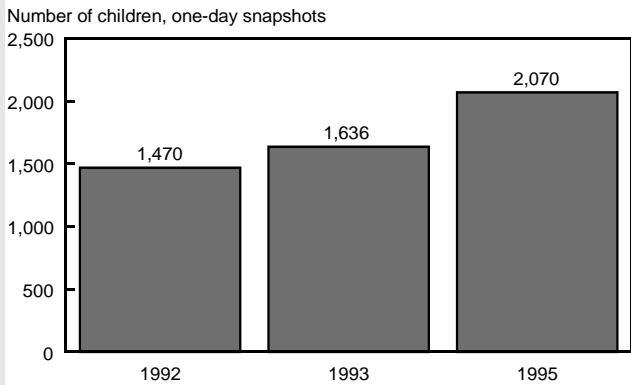
Source: Homicide Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996.

**Box 3**  
**The Impact of Witnessing Violence**

Empirical studies indicate that children who witness violence between their parents are at increased risk of behavioural and developmental problems (O'Keefe, 1995; Allan, 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson, 1990; Egeland, Jacobvitz and Sroufe, 1988), and are at greater risk of becoming victims and perpetrators of violence themselves. Witnessing violence can encompass a wide range of experiences including visually witnessing violence between parents, hearing violence from another part of the house, or seeing the physical or emotional consequences of the battering of a parent (Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson, 1990).

Figure 7

**Number of children accompanying mothers to transition homes increasing**



Represents the number of children for whom age was provided on one-day snapshots of transition homes in 1992, 1993 and 1995.

Source: Transition Home Survey, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1991-92, 1992-93, 1994-95

In response to the recognition that witnessing spousal abuse constitutes emotional and psychological abuse for children, six provinces have introduced legislation stipulating that a child who witnesses the abuse of a parent can be found in need of protection. Such legislation exists in the provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta (Table 1).

The prevalence of children who witness violence in the family can be estimated from the Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) (Statistics Canada, 1993) and indirectly through the Transition Home Survey<sup>7</sup>. Estimates from the VAWS indicate that children witnessed violence between their parents in 39% of violent marriages which amounts to the children from over one million families although some of these children are now adults. Moreover, much of this violence is serious. In 52% of violent relationships in which children witnessed violence, the battered mother feared for her life, and in 61% the woman was injured by her partner.

According to the Transition Home Survey, the majority of women who are admitted to shelters every year bring their children. Data from one-day snapshots of transition homes across Canada show that the number of children accompanying their mothers increased by 41% from 1992 to 1995 (Figure 7). In 1995 three-quarters of women escaping abusive situations were admitted to transition homes with children. Almost one-half of these children were under 5 years of age. The Violence Against Women Survey has indicated that women are more likely to use the services of a transition home or shelter when their children have witnessed violence against them. These data also show that 78% of women who stayed in shelters indicated that their children had witnessed violence at some point, compared with 39% of all abused women.

<sup>7</sup> The Transition Home Survey collects data on services dispensed by the transition homes across Canada during a twelve month period as well as a one-day snapshot of the characteristics of residents. The first survey cycle was 1991-92 and there have been two subsequent cycles—1992-93 and 1994-95. The survey frame was developed during initial consultations for each cycle and therefore data may not include homes that began operation after 1991.

**Looking ahead**

The abuse of children and youth in the family is an issue of growing importance for the Canadian public, governments, and service providers. In recent years there has been a shift within child welfare and child abuse prevention communities toward the belief that, where possible, national estimates of the prevalence of abuse are necessary. To this end, the Child Maltreatment Division of Health Canada is supporting the development of a national incidence study of child abuse and neglect. The four principal forms of child maltreatment: sexual, physical and emotional abuse, and child neglect, will be addressed in the context of the study. In the near future, the

Revised UCR Survey is expected to increase coverage, which will allow for trend analyses of police reported cases of physical and sexual assaults against children and youth. In addition, work is ongoing to improve the links between sentencing and police data in order to provide a more complete picture of the criminal justice response to child abuse. However, these efforts will provide rates of prevalence for reported cases only. Factors such as the dependency of the victim on the perpetrator and the victim's fear of repercussions suggest that there will always be a degree of secrecy leading to an underreporting of child abuse. In the future, victimization or self-report surveys could, at least in part, remedy this underreporting.

**Box 4**  
**Data Sources**

The Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCRII) was introduced in 1988. The survey collects detailed data on the characteristics of violent incidents, victims and accused. In 1996, a non-representative sample of 154 police forces, which covered 47% of the criminal incidents in Canada were participating in the UCRII. Since the sample of participating police forces in the UCRII is not nationally representative it is not possible to calculate rates of occurrence. The largest proportion of cases in the survey originate in Ontario and Quebec. It should also be noted that an unknown number of crimes are never reported to the police. Secrecy surrounding crimes against children and youth means that these offences are prone to under-reporting.

Thus, police statistics are not representative of the range of offences against children and youth.

The Homicide Survey provides police reported data on the characteristics of all homicide incidents, victims and accused persons since 1961. When a homicide becomes known to the police a survey questionnaire is completed. The count for a particular year represents all homicides reported in that year, regardless of when the death actually occurred. The survey remained unchanged from 1961 to 1974 at which time more detailed information was collected. A question regarding the history of domestic violence between accused and victim was added to the survey in 1991. The upcoming 1997 survey will capture data on Shaken Baby Syndrome as a cause of death.

**Box 5**

**Kid's Help Phone**

The Kid's Help Phone is a national, bilingual, confidential helpline for children and adolescents. It is funded by the Canadian Children's Foundation, and provides services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Professionally trained counsellors respond, and make referrals to other agencies. In 1996, Kid's Help Foundation data showed that over 80% of Canada's teenagers were aware of the services, and over 2.5 million calls had been

answered from 1989 to 1996. Approximately 30% of Kid's Help Phone callers are identified as "children at risk".

In 1996, the majority of calls were made by adolescents aged 10 to 14 (41%) and teenagers aged 15 to 19 (51%). The majority of these calls were placed by females (76%). In 15% of calls children indicated that they were experiencing abusive behaviour or violence, including physical, sexual, or verbal abuse.

The toll free number for the Kid's Help Phone is 1-800-668-6868.

**References**

Allan, B. (1991). *Wife abuse: The impact on children*. Ottawa: The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada.

Canada. (1984). *Report of the committee on sexual offences against children and youth* (Volume 1). Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.

Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. (1994). *Family violence in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Della Femina, D., C.A. Yeager, and D.O. Lewis. (1990). Child abuse: Adolescent records vs. Adult recall. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 14: 227-231.

Durrant, J.E. and L. Rose-Krasnor. (1995). *Corporal Punishment: Research Review and Policy Recommendations*. Ottawa: Health Canada.

Egeland, B., D. Jacobvitz and L. Sroufe, (1988). Breaking the cycle of abuse. *Child Development*. 59:1080-1088.

Fedorowycz, O. (1996). Homicide in Canada – 1996. *Juristat*. 17(9). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Jaffe, P., D. Wolfe and S. Wilson. (1990). *Children of battered women*. London: Sage.

Johnson, H. (1995). Children and youths as victims of violent crimes. *Juristat*. 15(15). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

MacMillan, H. L., J. E. Fleming, N. Trocmé, M. H. Boyle, M. Wong, Y. A. Racine, W. R. Beardslee, and D. R. Offord. (1997). Prevalence of child physical and sexual abuse in the community: Results from the Ontario Health Supplement. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 278(2): 131-135.

O'Keefe, M. (1995). Predictors of Child Abuse in Maritally Violent Families. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 10(1), 3-25.

Rodgers, K. (1994). Wife assault: The findings of a national survey. *Juristat*. 14(9). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

Regina v. Dupperon, 16 C.C.C. (3d) 453 (1984).

Regina v. Halcrow, 80 C.C.C. (3d) 320 (1993).

Stein, A., and D.O. Lewis. (1992). Discovering physical abuse: Insights from a follow-up study of delinquents. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 14: 523-531.

Trocmé, N., D. McPhee, K. K. Tam, T. Hay. (1994). *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect: Final Report*. Toronto: Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse.

Trocmé, N., D. McPhee, K. K. Tam (1995). Child abuse and neglect in Ontario: Incidence and characteristics. *Child Welfare*. 74(3): 563-586.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1988). *Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect*. Washington, DC: National Centre on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Widom, C. S. (1988). Sampling biases and implications for child abuse research. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 58(2):260-270.

## Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

For further information, please contact the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 19th floor, R.H. Coats Building, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0T6 at **(613) 951-9023** or call **toll-free 1 800 387-2231**. To order a publication, you may telephone (613) 951-7277 or fax (613) 951-1584 or internet: [order@statcan.ca](mailto:order@statcan.ca). You may also call 1 800 267-6677 (Canada and United States) toll-free. If you order by telephone, written confirmation is not required.

### Recent Juristat Releases

#### Catalogue 85-002-XPB

- Vol. 16 No. 4 Youth Court Statistics 1994-95 Highlights / Statistiques sur les tribunaux de la jeunesse : Faits saillants de 1994-1995
- Vol. 16 No. 5 Youth Custody and Probation in Canada, 1994-95 / Le placement sous garde et la probation chez les adolescents au Canada, 1994-1995
- Vol. 16 No. 6 Violent Crime in Canada / Les crimes de violence au Canada
- Vol. 16 No. 7 Adult Correctional Services in Canada: Highlights for 1994-95 / Les services correctionnels pour adultes au Canada : Faits saillants de 1994-1995
- Vol. 16 No. 8 Adult Community Corrections in Canada: 1994-95 / Les services correctionnels communautaires pour adultes au Canada : 1994-1995
- Vol. 16 No. 9 The Justice Data Factfinder / Recueil de données sur la justice

#### Catalogue 85-002-XPE

- Vol. 16 No. 10 Canadian Crime Statistics, 1995
- Vol. 16 No. 11 Homicide in Canada — 1995
- Vol. 16 No. 12 Criminal Harassment
- Vol. 17 No. 1 Sentencing in Adult Provincial Courts — A Study of Nine Canadian Jurisdictions: 1993 & 1994
- Vol. 17 No. 2 Street Prostitution in Canada
- Vol. 17 No. 3 Justice Spending in Canada
- Vol. 17 No. 4 Adult Correctional Services in Canada, 1995-96
- Vol. 17 No. 5 Crime in Major Metropolitan Areas, 1991-1995
- Vol. 17 No. 6 Adult Criminal Court Statistics, 1995-96
- Vol. 17 No. 7 Weapons and Violent Crime
- Vol. 17 No. 8 Canadian Crime Statistics, 1996
- Vol. 17 No. 9 Homicide in Canada — 1996
- Vol. 17 No. 10 Youth Court Statistics 1995-96 Highlights