In 2014, Ottawa Police Chief Charles Bordeleau launched an initiative to improve the police response to crimes of violence against women. Women who reported crimes of violence to the Ottawa police were invited to share their views by participating in a research study. Participants were asked to describe what worked well for them and where improvements are needed. A total of 219 women participated.

A majority of study participants (146) shared experiences related to intimate partner violence, 37 had been sexually assaulted by men other than partners, and 36 experienced other forms of violence, predominantly harassment, threats and assaults. All but 10 of the perpetrators were male.

How did the police respond?

National victimization surveys, which interview random samples of the population, find that crimes of violence against women typically are not reported to the police. According to Statistics Canada, just 30% of women assaulted by intimate partners and less than 10% those who were sexually assaulted reported these crimes to the police. The low number of sexually assaulted women in the Ottawa study thus reflects the reluctance of women to report these crimes to police more generally.
Women are often deterred from reporting male violence when they are confronted with or anticipate skepticism and blame for provoking the attack or not reacting in stereotypical ways. In the Ottawa study, one in five women assaulted by partners and one in four who were sexually assaulted did not want the police involved but were encouraged or pressured by others to report, or others made the decision to involve the police. Reluctance stemmed from fear and shame and concerns about how they would be treated by the police, and concerns from partner assault victims about supporting themselves independently and about possibly making the situation worse.

These concerns were borne out for many women. Only a slight majority of victims of partner assault felt comfortable with the first officer they spoke to about the incident in detail, felt the officer was considerate of their feelings and opinions, and rated the officer positively overall. Two-thirds felt the officer believed what they said about the incident (Figure 1).

For women who reported sexual assault, these rating were considerably lower with fewer than half rating the police positively on any of these measures.

The OPS follows a mandatory charging policy in cases of partner assault where there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe a crime has occurred and there is sufficient evidence to lay a charge. Study participants stated that charges were laid in 54% of cases of partner assault and in 19% of cases of sexual assault.

Overall, women responding to the survey were happy with a decision to lay charges against the perpetrator and unhappy when charges were not laid. Some women had this to say when charges were not laid:

I felt like he was more about “diffusing” the situation. I told him my husband had a history of abuse, that I was afraid of him and he needed help, and all the cop did was ask us to calm down and talk about it in the morning. No resources were given, no phone numbers, no help... just to calm down.

Be more compassionate; believe their recounting of events/story; DO NOT GIVE WOMEN THE OPTION TO CHARGE OR NOT CHARGE their assailant. This is not supposed to be an option — by giving women this option it adds to the stress, confusion, self-victimization/blame that they (can) feel for reporting the incident which, for women who are perpetually abused, will likely discourage them from reporting future incidents.

The Ottawa Police Service contains a Partner Assault Unit and a Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Unit with investigators specially trained to respond to these crimes. Women who were referred to these units rated the police investigators more highly than the first officers (Figure 2).
What is a good response?

Research has shown that for many women who report violent crimes to the police, procedural justice—being treated fairly and with respect—is as important as the outcome of the case. When asked what about the police response worked well for them, victims of partner assault stressed a quick and compassionate response which in some cases entailed acts as small as officers writing down their name and the case number, showing concern and empathy, or showing kindness toward children. While some women emphasized the need for female officers to be assigned to these cases, others described male officers in very positive terms. For example:

I came from an abusive family life and thought that this was perfectly natural, in fact my mother sent me back to him, my husband, when I left. The officer sat and gently talked to me about abuse and let me know this wasn’t normal and that I didn’t have to live like that, and thanks to him I have changed my life, became a nurse, and raised my children on my own, and now I have a wonderful relationship with a kind, loving, gentle man, we have been together for six years, but I stayed single until I dealt with my family issues and abuse I had grown up in. The officer was a kind, good man.

They believed me. They recognized that I was in danger when I did not see it or understand it.

When it came to the trial I did not want to testify. I was too scared. This officer gave me the strength to stand up to my abuser and face him at trial.

Sexually assaulted women offered many of the same views:

At no point did I feel judged by them. I felt throughout the entire response that they believed me.

I was referred to a detective and she’s absolutely amazing. She put all of my concerns at ease, explained every step of the process and presents as caring and kind. Throughout the process I have felt that I have been able to call her at any point to make inquiries. She also takes everything I say seriously. I feel so fortunate to have been assigned to this detective.

These statements demonstrate that the actions of individual police officers can have important impacts on the wellbeing of the women they serve, in ways that go beyond laying charges against the perpetrators.

Where can Ottawa police do better?

When asked how Ottawa police could improve their response to women in a similar situation, many women made suggestions related to operational matters, such as assigning officers who are sensitive and knowledgeable about the cultural background of the women reporting violence, and ensuring that female officers are assigned to these cases. Others described behaviour that could be remedied through training or oversight to ensure that policies (such as the mandatory charging policy in cases of partner assault) are followed. Victims of partner assault shared these thoughts:

A better understanding of the emotional and mental strength it takes to come forward with something like this. I promise you, you will have one tiny opening into that part of a victim’s life. Don’t miss out on it. They won’t come forward again for a LONG time.

A non-judgemental demeanour, more training and victim stories relayed to police officers on their experiences and problems they encountered. The notion of the ‘perfect victim’ really needs to be re-evaluated and analyzed, as officers are often women’s first contact. The reality is that no matter our skin colour, what we look like and how we act, we’re victims of a very scary, traumatizing, emotionally-attacking crime and being judged or having even more power taken away from us will only push us away and therefore put us and others at an even greater risk.

Many sexual assault victims felt police held them responsible and some threatened repercussions if the woman was found to be fabricating the attack:

He told me I used the word ‘rape’ too liberally, told me if I made a statement charges likely wouldn’t be pressed . . . told me that the assailant interpreted by body language wrong and thought he was ‘laying the smooth moves’.

He told me there would be serious consequences if I were lying. He accused me of many things, such as lying to him and not fighting or yelling enough.
Recommendations

Study participants described both positive and negative experiences with the Ottawa Police Service thus identifying good practices that could be built upon and areas where changes are needed and could be addressed through training and oversight.

Specific recommendations follow from the insights offered by these women:

1. Continuously monitor decisions to discontinue complaints and to not refer cases to investigators.

2. Provide information on the progress of the case to each complainant with a clear explanation of why a suspect will not be charged or an investigation discontinued.

3. Implement ongoing training in collaboration with community groups who provide services to abused and sexually assaulted women to ensure front line officers and investigators are knowledgeable about the impacts of male violence on women and are capable of providing a nonjudgmental and compassionate response in all cases. Incorporate training that challenges damaging biases and stereotypes that potentially lie behind decisions to discontinue cases.

4. Make victim safety a priority and ensure that all reasonable measures are taken to thoroughly investigate all complaints, connect victims with community supports, hold perpetrators accountable by laying charges, and take breaches of court orders seriously.

5. Continuously review operations, policies and practices within the OPS, in collaboration with victim-serving agencies in the Ottawa community, to identify areas needing improvement.

Download the complete summary of results of the study

Holly Johnson, Associate Professor, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa
Professor Johnson’s research interests focus on the effectiveness of criminal justice and societal responses to violence against women.

Sincere thanks to the women who stepped forward to share their experiences, the interviewers who gave generously of their time, and members of the Advisory Committee for providing their energy and insights into the design of this research project.

1. The research was conducted independently of the Ottawa Police Service and local social service agencies. Participation was voluntary and responses are held strictly confidential and anonymous in accordance with requirements of the University of Ottawa’s Research Ethics Board.

2. The sample was not randomly selected; those who chose to participate are therefore not necessarily representative of women who have experience with the OPS following a violent incident.


4. For some sexually assaulted women, feeling uncomfortable talking to the officer was due to the sensitivity and nature of the experience rather than the skills or characteristics of the officer.