In January 2014, Ottawa Police Chief Charles Bordeleau launched an initiative to improve the police response to crimes of violence against women. Service providers, women and their advocates were invited to have input in a variety of ways: an Advisory Committee was formed with representation from diverse groups; a broader range of service providers and community agencies participated in a community forum; and women who have had direct experience with the Ottawa police were invited to share their views by participating in a research study. Results of this study are presented here along with a snapshot of OPS statistical data.

This research study provided women in Ottawa with a rare opportunity to share their experiences and views and to have direct input into improving the policies and practices of the Ottawa Police Service. A detailed questionnaire asked women to describe what worked well for them and where improvements are needed. A total of 219 women participated in the study; 187 chose to participate online and 32 were interviewed by telephone or in person by specially trained interviewers.

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. (See Appendix for additional details about the study sample and the methodology).
Why do women report to the police?

National victimization surveys, which interview random samples of the population, find that crimes of violence against women typically are not reported to the police. The most recent victimization survey conducted by Statistics Canada in 2009 finds that just 30% of women assaulted by intimate partners and less than 10% those who were sexually assaulted reported these crimes to the police (Sinha, 2013). This represents a decrease in the percentage of women who reported intimate partner violence from 38% in 2004, when the survey was previously conducted, while reporting rates for sexual assault remained at less than 10% over time. The low number of sexually assaulted women in the Ottawa study thus reflects the reluctance of women to report 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. Reasons women provided in the Statistics Canada survey for not reporting intimate partner violence relate to concerns about becoming involved with the criminal justice system or feeling that the police wouldn't be able to help, embarrassment, fear of their partner, and wanting to keep the experience private. Widespread societal biases and myths act as an additional deterrent to women who have been sexually assaulted as they have been shown to negatively influence the reactions and decisions of friends, family, police and other services to whom women turn for support (Johnson, 2012).

In the Ottawa study, where all participants reported the violence to the police, two-thirds of partner assault (PA) victims and sexual assault (SA) victims reported the violent incident themselves. 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 PA victims about supporting themselves independently of a violent partner, and about possibly making the situation worse.

The decision to involve the police is complicated by many factors and having the person arrested is not always the motivation.

The decision to involve the police is seldom straightforward. When asked to expand on their decision, many women described escalating or imminent danger that outweighed initial fear or reluctance, sometimes after years of partner abuse:

It was actually a 9/11 call for help because he had a knife and was threatening and self-harming. I wanted an ambulance but obviously the police also came. I was very nervous what would happen to him (be assaulted, tasered, etc.) because he was out of control. After living in this abusive relationship for 4 years, I was horrified that he put a drug in my drink without my knowledge and I was in shock and fearful it would escalate.

I didn't want his life ruined, but I wanted him to stop stalking me and leave me alone. I had told him to so many times. He just wouldn't. So in the end I felt like I didn't have a choice.

I thought I could manage it on my own and was afraid if I involved the police he would kill me. In the end he tried to kill me and I had to call the police to save my life.

I reported a more “minor” incident immediately and called 911 because he damaged my car as I was trying to flee, but this report led me to reveal the more serious assaults that had happened a few months before. I wanted to involve the police only at the end when I couldn't take it anymore but before that I didn't want to get him in trouble, even when he attempted to kill me.

In the words of women who were sexually assaulted:

I became more afraid as the evening went on that since he was a taxi driver who knew exactly where I lived that he would return and hurt or assault me again.

I did it approximately four years after the abuse because even after cutting ties with him he continued to email and text me. I needed that to stop.

I had the address of the rapists and my sister had a blood sample, since we had evidence I felt confident that we would get a good response. I was wrong.

I was reluctant because of my mental health issues.

The assailant was a bartender, and it seemed dangerous to leave it unreported.
How did the police respond?

Concerns about involving the police 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 2).

For women who reported sexual assault, these rating were considerably lower with fewer than half rating the police positively on any of these measures.4

Data collected by the Ottawa Police Service also shows that the extent to which they lay charges varies depending on the type of offence. The OPS responded to 24,762 domestic-related calls for service over the five years from 2009 to 2013. Two-thirds of these calls were recorded as domestic disputes that did not involve a criminal offence. Cases with a female victim or complainant totalled 6,694 or 82% of cases deemed to involve a partner-related criminal offence and the remaining 18% (1,515 cases) involved male victims or complainants. Most of the criminal incidents were common assaults, serious assaults (which includes assaults causing bodily harm, assaults with a weapon and sexual assault), threats and criminal harassment (stalking) (Figure 4).

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. Thirty-eight percent of PA victims and 44% of women who reported a sexual assault had a follow-up interview with a police investigator. Women who were referred to these units rated the police investigators more highly than the first officers. Just over half of these PA victims felt comfortable speaking with the investigator, felt the investigator was considerate of their feelings and explained the process. Slightly higher percentages had all their question answered and felt the investigator believed them. Two-thirds rated the investigator as good or satisfactory overall.

Compared with victims of PA, sexual assault victims rated investigators lower, but rated them more highly than first officers. Just half gave investigators a good or satisfactory rating overall.

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.

A slight majority of partner assault victims gave police positive ratings; ratings by victims of sexual assaults were less positive.
It is OPS policy to treat complaints as unfounded when, after an initial investigation, police determine that a crime did not occur or do not find sufficient evidence to establish that a crime has occurred; founded not solved indicates that although a crime has occurred there are not sufficient grounds to pursue laying a charge, for example when complainants cannot be located for follow-up or refuse to cooperate with an investigation.

Statistics Canada compared the per capita rate of family violence cases across large metropolitan areas in Canada, based on the total number of cases reported minus those deemed to be unfounded or noncriminal, and found that Ottawa Police recorded a rate that was half the average for these cities and the lowest of all (Taylor-Butts, 2015). Differences in rates across the country may reflect real differences in the level of violence in local communities and the overall violent crime rate in Ottawa is one of the lowest among large cities (Boyce, 2015). However, police statistics can also be affected by variations in willingness of victims and witnesses to report these crimes to the police, differences in police policies and practices, or disparities in statistical record keeping.

OPS recorded 1,798 cases of sexual assault (excluding those pertaining specifically to children) involving female adult victims or complainants in the five-year period between 2009 and 2013. Charges were laid in 19% of cases, 32% were coded as founded not solved and 38% as unfounded. Complainants either did not want charges laid or police used their discretion not to lay charges in the remainder of cases. In 2013, the OPS adopted a policy to examine unfounded cases more closely and in that year sexual assaults deemed to be unfounded dropped by half compared to previous years to 21% while the category 'founded not solved' rose to 47%.

If OPS has sufficient evidence to lay a charge in sexual assault cases, but the victim does not want to proceed, police will not lay a charge. According to OPS data, the rate at which charges were laid varied according to characteristics of the complainant, such as her age, and circumstances of the offences, including relationship to the suspect and where the incident took place. Police were more likely to lay charges in cases that involved suspects who were intimate partners, women who were 25 years of age or older, and incidents that took place on public transit or in private dwellings. Those most likely to be coded as founded not solved were cases involving strangers, women between 18 and 29 years of age, and those that took place on public transit, in outdoor areas, bars and restaurants. Sexual assaults were more often coded as unfounded when they involved family members (other than intimate partners), friends and casual acquaintances, teenagers under 18 years of age, and when they occurred at a school, a dwelling, or an institution (such as a shelter, hospital or jail).

Overall, women responding to the survey were happy with a decision to lay charges against the perpetrator and unhappy when charges were not laid. Those who were not happy to have charges laid stated that this was due to hostile treatment by police officers, charges being dropped, lengthy court processes, and what the women perceived to be lenient sentences or failure to get the help the man needed to end his violent behaviour. Only one-quarter of partner assault victims were aware of mandatory charging prior to involvement with the police and none of the women who were unhappy to have charges laid for partner assault cited the mandatory charging policy as a reason.

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.

I was trying to escape this man but I was charged.

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 (Spohn, Tellis & O’Neal, 2015). 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 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 normal, 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.

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.
Improving the Police Response to Crimes of Violence Against Women: Ottawa Women have their Say

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.

One of the kids woke up and the officer got stickers and made sure he was comfortable with an officer in the house. Took the time needed to make me feel comfortable. Was not made to feel it was a waste of time.

Their quick action – kept me informed. Always believed me. Never had an officer disbelieve me. Never came up.

They listened as much as they talked. They were calm when I was upset. It helped to restore some dignity to a terrible and sadly embarrassing moment. They did not judge or lecture. Nor did they convey the slightest sense of criticism. Essentially, after years of doubting that anyone would believe us or help, they did, and without fanfare. In fact they appeared embarrassed by our gratitude.

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.

The initial 911 call and the officer that met me at the Tim Hortons to take my report handled things perfectly, from A to Z. In fact, if I knew the name of the officer who responded to my first call I would give him a huge hug and a sincere, heart-felt thank you and even nominate him for an award if I could! The way he handled things meant the world to me and helped me by contrasting and emphasizing the point that not ALL men are dangerous. Some men, like him, have big hearts and are kind. By his example and the stark contrast he offered, he showed me that I deserved better. A simple thing like that helped get me out of the dangerous addictive brainwashing of domestic abuse. I needed to want that, to want to get out, and by his example of kindness and compassion he helped me see the light. I'm SO grateful to him. He set me on a new path.

The first responder was strong and his written statement was invaluable, otherwise no one would believe me that my ex could be like that. He was very supportive but at no time did he tell me what to do. He listened, gave me the facts, answered my questions and provided me with information sufficient to make an informed choice.

Sexually assaulted women offered many of the same views:

The process was explained to me in a language I understood, considering I don't know much about the legal system it was very helpful.

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.

He got someone to cover at the front desk for him and he took me and the friend I brought along into another room so that there would be privacy. He got me kleenex and water and listened and made notes, then let me take the other sheet of paper so I could fill out the report there.

The follow-up interview with the investigator was helpful in answering my questions about the process, and my options.

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.

Women who rated the police highly and said they would report a similar experience of violence to the police in the future were predominantly those who felt believed, felt they received a respectful and compassionate response where their questions were answered, and those for whom police called a support person or provided referrals to services in the community. In the words of one woman:

One officer drove myself and my 3 little ones to my father's. He was a really nice officer. He was a talker and he had me thinking about my situation and gave me another way to look at the situation. I won't ever forget him.

It is OPS policy that the Victim Crisis Unit (VCU) provides crisis intervention, support information and referrals to victims of crime, tragic circumstances and critical incidents. Over 80% of PA victims who used the Victim Crisis Unit at OPS rated that service positively.

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 PA 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 and being mindful that they too get angry, they get anxious, may drink, etc. but that does not make them offenders or to be treated any differently. 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.

All I wanted was to be taken seriously. No one I spoke with gave my any indication of what I should do next. I was constantly the one trying to initiate contact with the police and I feel that they did nothing about it. My experiences dealing with the police have been more damaging than my actual rape. They have made me wonder if it was my fault or if it what happened to me even matters. I do not feel safe knowing this man is living free in Ottawa.

Anything said at the scene should be presented in Court to support victims. Breaches have to be taken seriously. If a woman reports a breach, it has to be taken seriously and the man should be charged. Otherwise he laughs at police and doesn't take it seriously. When the police investigated the breaches and came back with unfounded as a result, this was like re-victimization all over again.

He made me feel like a liar and that what I had to say didn't matter and tried to put words in my mouth.

A main theme running throughout the responses of sexual assault victims was that officers' reactions were often based on societal myths and biases against women who report sexual violence. Many felt police held them responsible and some threatened repercussions if the woman was found to be fabricating the attack:

I felt like I was a suspect being interviewed. I was told I would be charged if I was found to be lying.

He asked me why I didn’t scream or fight more, and didn’t seem to believe me.

I went in the next day to see the investigating officer. Very cold, very unsympathetic. When I contacted him later after giving a video statement he didn't return my calls. Basically he didn't care. They don't care at all.

He (the investigator) was horrible. Cold, uncaring, unfeeling. Not empathetic at all. But most importantly he didn’t care about finding who did this to me…. My case remains unsolved. He left me a message on my answering machine about the findings of the rape kit. That isn’t a message you leave on a machine. He never returned my calls or the calls of my brother. He was awful and I was left with the impression that the police are overpaid useless security guards frankly.

He told me I used the word ‘rape’ too liberally... told me the assailant interpreted my body language wrong and thought he was “laying the smooth moves”.

He told me I used the word ‘rape’ too liberally, told me if I made a statement charges likely wouldn’t be pressed, had to be begged by my friend to arrest the assailant who was staying in the same place I was downtown where the assault occurred and told me that the assailant interpreted my body language wrong and thought he was “laying the smooth moves”.

His body language was dismissive, rolling his eyes, checking me out, inspecting my home.

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.

I felt like I was putting him out when I needed a break to compose myself, wanted a SASC Sexual Assault Support Centre counsellor present, he resisted heavily having a witness to my interrogation – felt like I was being interrogated.

She kept on telling me what my sister had said during her interview. We had been given date rape drugs, so because our few memories did not happen at the same time, she implied we were lying.

After giving my statement on camera (name of investigator) said: “there is no criminal charge here”. They proceeded to say that maybe I should learn how to say “No” in the future. After a few days she followed up with me and became angry with me for stating that there was a lack of justice to women that report and she insinuated that I was lying about my statement anyway.

You shouldn’t make women repeatedly repeat their stories!! You might as well hold them down while their attacker continuously attacks them again. It's not different.

Summary and recommendations

This study was designed to assist the Ottawa Police Service to improve their response toward crimes of violence against women by hearing directly from their primary client group: the women themselves. Study participants described both positive and negative experiences with OPS thus identifying good practices that could be built upon and areas where changes are needed and could be addressed through training and oversight.

These women described a positive experience as one characterized by empathy, respect and compassion for the woman and her children, connecting victims with community and family support, and unequivocally holding the perpetrator responsible through laying charges and expressly condemning the violence. The gender of individual officers seems less important, although some women emphatically stressed the need for female officers to attend to these crimes because of the traumatic effects of male violence and the sensitive nature of the questioning.
Although individual officers have made an important difference in the lives of many women, other study participants articulated experiences that left them feeling demeaned, blamed for the violence committed against them, and often left in dangerous situations. Both the data compiled by OPS and the study of women who shared their experiences with OPS raise questions about cases that are discontinued. Many women said they would not report a similar experience to the OPS in the future, signaling a loss of confidence in the police that may increase the vulnerability of these and other women.

The experiences of sexual assault victims suggest that myths and stereotypes that hold women responsible for the attacks and assume that a great many reports are fabricated underpin the actions of some members of the OPS. These societal myths are widespread (Johnson, 2012) and must be continuously challenged within the Ottawa Police Service and more broadly.

Specific recommendations to improve the response of the OPS follow from the insights offered by these women:

1. Continuously monitor decisions to discontinue complaints as unfounded 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.

These study results illustrate the importance of a consistent professional response from police when women make the difficult decision to report violent crime. The reluctance many women expressed in coming forward to police, dissatisfaction with the response they received, and avowal of many not to report a similar experience in the future reflects negatively on the Ottawa Police Service and on the criminal justice system more broadly. On the flip side, the respectful, compassionate response from some police officers, where the violence was swiftly condemned and women were connected to community supports, made a very important and immediate difference in the emotional wellbeing of these women and for some it gave them the strength required to leave violent relationships and give testimony at trial. These study results suggest practical ways in which the Ottawa Police Service can continue to improve their response to crimes of violence against women.

References


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 Sexual assaults by intimate partners are counted as intimate partner violence.

3 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.

5 Among partner assault cases recorded by police in Statistics Canada’s national Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, 71% led to a charge, a rate that is calculated based on cases deemed to be founded (Beaupré, 2015). If the same calculation is made for the OPS, the charging rate is 79%. Women responding to Statistics Canada’s victimization survey say police came to the scene in 85% of spousal violence cases (a definition restricted to married or common-law partners) and laid charges or made an arrest in 44% (Sinha, 2013).

6 The researcher entered into an agreement with the Ottawa Police Service to analyze statistical data on partner assault and sexual assault cases compiled by the OPS over the five years from 2009 to 2013. All personal information, such as names, exact addresses and dates of birth were deleted. Under this agreement, and approval granted by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, the research further protects the confidentiality of all complainants, charged persons, witnesses and other entities by storing the data in a secure password-protected location and releasing the results of all analyses in summary form in a way that does not reveal the identity of individuals.

7 Domestic-related calls can include members of a household other than intimate partners.
Appendix: Study sample and methodology

This study was conducted between November 24, 2014 and March 31, 2015. Participants were recruited via websites, social media, bulletin boards, community agencies and via the media. Outreach was made to community agencies that provide support to marginalized women in order to inform women who may not have had other opportunities to learn about the study. Three options were available: women were invited to complete an online survey or to be interviewed over the telephone or in person. Six English and French speaking interviewers were specially trained to conduct interviews. In-person interviews took place in private spaces in community agencies across Ottawa. A total of 219 women participated: 187 completed the survey online and 32 women took the option of being interviewed.

There were five criteria for participation: to be 18 years of age or older; to have lived all or part of life as a woman; to have experienced some form of violence or abuse while living in Ottawa; to have had some kind of interaction with the Ottawa Police Service related to this violent incident; and, to have all police investigation and court hearings related to the case completed. Ethics approval was granted from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. The study was conducted independently of the OPS and community agencies. Responses were obtained anonymously to protect the identity of the women participating.

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. Table 1 shows the diversity of the sample. Although special efforts were made to encourage new immigrants to participate by training interviewers to recruit and conduct interviews in a variety of languages (including Arabic, Samali, Farsi, Cantonese, Mandarin and Spanish), these efforts were less successful than hoped. Just 20 participants speak a language other than English or French at home, and these include First Nations, Asian, Arabic, and some European languages.

The profile of the sample at the time of the violent incident shows that these incidents occur across the socio-economic spectrum. As shown in Table 2, 70% of study participants had at least some post-secondary education and 26% were living in households with income over $60,000. Thirty percent of women had high school education or less and the same percentage reported personal income of less than $12,000 per year.