

Police Classification of Sexual Assault Cases as Unfounded

An Exploratory Study

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I. Introduction

A. The research goal

The goal of this research was a better understanding of police founding decisions in sexual assault cases in order to better understand why the sexual assault unfounded rate is significantly higher than that for other violent offences. The hope is that this increased understanding will lead to changes in policing and statistical practices where appropriate.

B. The debate

The rate of cases classified by police as unfounded is significantly higher in sexual assault cases than in other violent offences – more than twice as high – and this difference has been sustained over several decades. We do not know the reasons for this higher rate of unfoundeds – whether it reflects a higher rate of false or otherwise unfounded reports, whether it is a result of imprecise definitions of the unfounded classification or incomplete public understanding of what constitutes a sexual assault, or whether it represents a difference in attitudes on the part of investigators towards sexual assault as opposed to other violent crime.

According to the latest Statistics Canada research on sexual assault, rates of sexual assault victimization have continued to be stable since 1993. However, the non-reporting rate for sexual assault, already significantly higher than for other violent crime, has risen from 78% in 1999 to 88% in 2004. The gender difference in sexual assault victimization rate also continues to be highly significant. In 2004, women were sexually assaulted at a rate five times higher than that for men, a gender difference that has not significantly changed from 1999.

The possible relationship between low reporting rates, on the one hand, and negative experiences of sexual assault victims during police investigations and in the courtroom, on the other, are the subject of much speculation but rarely the subject of empirical study. For many justice system advocates, the relatively high rate of unfounded determinations in sexual assault cases is part of a generally problematic justice system approach to sexual assault.

Those working in the area of victimization and violence against women over the past three decades have highlighted sexual assault in general, and criminal justice processing of sexual assault in particular, as areas that symbolize gender inequality in society and in the justice system. High unfounded rates for sexual assault allegations combined with the fact that most victims are female and most offenders are male lead some advocates to relate high unfounded rates to gender bias. For these advocates, the high rate of sexual assault cases classified by police as unfounded is part of a vicious circle in which gender bias in the justice system discourages women from reporting sexual assault, which in turn helps perpetuate high levels of sexual assault in society.

Police and others, on the other hand, contend that by its very nature, sexual assault is a complex and difficult crime to investigate and prosecute, because of societal values around sexual behaviour and the central role of consent. For these reasons, higher unfounded rates for sexual assault, compared to physical assault, are inevitable. To the extent that gender bias impacts on the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault, it is said, that gender bias is embedded in social and cultural norms and practices, rather than in police practice or legislation. Police practice and legislative frameworks do a good job, these proponents contend, of rising above these socio-cultural biases to ensure even-handed application in all situations.

The issues addressed in this study have emerged from the work of sexual assault centres, victim services, justice system personnel, statisticians, and other justice system researchers. This exploratory research constitutes one step in the direction of a greater understanding of these important issues, hopefully leading to constructive changes.

C. Limitations and value of the research

The reader is reminded that this research is exploratory in nature. Limitations of resources, as always, have limited the sample size, the choice of research sites, and therefore the geographic and cultural diversity of the sample.

Given the relatively small size of the sample, it is advisable to take a conservative view of the application of the results. They should be viewed as being representative of the sample in this study and as providing intriguing clues about possible wider links to the founding process.

However compelling the results are in and of themselves, one of their primary values is as jumping off points for further exploration of these important issues. Nevertheless, there are also some clear indications of areas that require immediate attention.

II. Background to the Research

A. Sexual assault in Canada

The latest Statistics Canada research, *Criminal Victimization in Canada, 2004*, finds that 88% of sexual assault cases are not reported to police, the highest rate of non-reporting of any of the violent crimes. This compares to a 78% non-reporting rate in the 1999 General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization. In spite of significant progress in terms of both police response to sexual assault and legislative reforms, sexual assault reporting rates are declining rather than improving. Between 1993 and 2002, the police-reported rate of sexual offences dropped by 36% (Kong et al, 2003). In the same period, on the other

hand, sexual assault victimization rates have remained stable. (Gannon and Mihorean, 2005) It is noteworthy, however, that the 1999 GSS figures do not include sexual assaults committed within a spousal relationship, as this issue was dealt with separately.

While rates of victimization through physical assault and robbery were significantly higher for men than for women, the rate of sexual assault was five times greater for women than it was for men. This figure has not changed significantly since the 1999 GSS on Victimization (Gannon and Mihorean, 2005).

According to statistics reported in 2002 to a subset of police departments reporting to the UCR2 Survey, 85% of sexual offence victims were female. In the 1999 GSS Victimization Survey, 82% of sexual assault victims 15 years of age and older were women. In all other violent crimes, women constituted 43% of victims. In 2002, in the same UCR2 data, 61% of all victims of sexual assault were under 18 years of age. The proportion of victims who are male is greater amongst child victims, where 29% were boys. For youth victims, 12% were male; for adults, 8% were male. (Kong et al, 2003).

B. Unfounded sexual assault cases

1. The statistics

The issue of higher levels of unfounded classifications in sexual assault cases than in other assault cases was raised as far back as the pre-1983-reform days by critics of the criminal justice system handling of sexual assault. The following observation was noted in the 1994 Juristat Service Bulletin, Criminal Justice Processing of Sexual Assault Cases.

The unfounded rates for 1992 were 14% in the case of sexual assault level I, 9% in the case of sexual assault level II, and 14% in the case of sexual assault level III.In 1983, the unfounded rate for sexual assault level I was 14% and it has not deviated by more than two percentage points since then.

There has been greater variability for sexual assault level II...Over the ten year period, the average unfounded rate for sexual assault level II was 10%. The greatest degree of variability occurs for sexual assault level III, from a low of 10% in 1987 to 23 % in 1985....

And:

The unfounded rates for assault are systematically lower than for the crimes of sexual assault: 8% in the case of level I and 3% in the case of levels II and III. One criticism of criminal justice processing of crimes of sexual aggression in the pre-reform period was that the unfounded rate for sexual offences was higher than for assault offences. Higher unfounded rates for sexual assault continue to exist in 1992 (Roberts, 1994).

This higher rate of unfoundeds for sexual assault cases than for other violent offences was also highlighted in 2003 in *Sexual Offences in Canada*. Police statistics in Canada for 2002 show that:

Overall, 16% of sexual offences were unfounded....Since 1991, the rate of unfounded offences has remained relatively stable for the three levels of sexual assault, but has increased fairly steadily for other sexual offences, from 8% in 1991 to 15% in 2002. Other types of violent crimes were unfounded by police in 7% of reported incidents between 1991 and 2002 (Kong et al, 2003).

Kong et al also notes that clearance rates for sexual assault are lower than for other violent offences. Clearance rates for sexual offences in 2002 were 44%, compared to 50% in other types of violent offences. Nineteen percent of sexual assaults were cleared otherwise, while that figure was 22% for other violent offences. For sexual offences, 37% were not cleared, while for other violent offences, 28% were not cleared.

2. Variations in unfounded rates across jurisdictions

Rates of unfounded sexual assault cases vary widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in Canada. In 1994, the Juristat reported that unfounded rates for sexual assault level I ranged from 9% in Quebec to 21% in the Yukon (Roberts, 1994).

Within BC in 2002 and 2003, unfounded rates also varied widely across jurisdictions. For this study, an attempt to select police jurisdictions in and around the Lower Mainland with high and low sexual assault unfounded rates, resulted in the selection of Chilliwack RCMP (sexual assault unfounded rates of 19% and 28%) and Langley RCMP (sexual assault unfounded rates of 23% and 26%), on the one hand, and Richmond (sexual assault unfounded rates of 12% and 11%) and Vancouver (sexual assault unfounded rates of 7% and 10%), on the other.

Such widely varying unfounded rates for sexual assault in different locations undermines the argument that high unfounded rates are inevitable in sexual assault cases because of the complex dynamics of these cases and because of the central issue of consent. The wide jurisdictional variations in unfounded sexual assault cases would suggest that high unfounded rates could result, at least in part, from varying police perspectives and practices.

3. The implications of high unfounded rates

If, in fact, unfounded rates are higher (in general and, specifically, in some jurisdictions) than circumstances warrant, there are a number of implications for crime statistics, for police investigation, and for police-community relations:

- Once a police- reported offence is determined by police to be unfounded, it is no longer included in official crime statistics. Sexual assaults classified as unfounded are not reflected at either the local or the national level in statistical reports on sexual assault levels, characteristics of sexual assaults or statistical trends in sexual assault.
- Once police classify a case as unfounded, no further investigation occurs. If a classification of unfounded is made too early in the process or incorrectly, the case will not receive the investigative attention it warrants, with clear implications for victim safety, risk management and crime prevention.
- If VICLAS booklets are not required on all cases of sexual assault that have been classified as unfounded and some cases are erroneously determined to be unfounded, then there may be sexual assault cases that should have been the subject of a VICLAS report but are not. Given the intent of VICLAS to aid investigation of violent crime nation-wide, this omission of some cases from the database could have serious implications for criminal investigation and crime prevention across the country.
- High levels of sexual assault cases classified as unfounded have long been a source of tension both between police and individual victims and between police and the wider women-serving and victim-serving community. If, in fact, some of the unfounded classifications are unwarranted, then these high levels of sexual assault cases classified as unfounded may unnecessarily place a strain on police relations with these community members. Erosion of public confidence in the justice system is likely to result in lower reporting rates for sexual assault.

4. Unfounded allegations no longer a reporting requirement

It emerged late in the research process that Statistics Canada recently discontinued the systematic collection of data on unfounded offences and that submission to Statistics Canada of police data on unfounded allegations is no longer mandatory. Key informants at the local and provincial level appeared to be unaware of this decision, which clearly has serious implications for the issues raised in this report.

Without national and regional statistics on unfounded levels for sexual assault cases, research and evaluation with respect to the high levels of unfounded sexual assaults will be difficult if not impossible. Without these statistics, no tracking of trends will be possible, further exploration of the police decision-making process will be severely restricted, and assessment of the impact on founding levels of remedial action taken to address erroneous or inconsistent classification decision practices will be difficult on a local basis and impossible on a national basis.

III. Findings of the Research

It has been emphasized throughout this report that this is an exploratory study and that limited sample size, statistical limitations, and other factors mean that caution must be exercised in interpreting the results. Nevertheless, in spite of these limitations, some interesting results have emerged from this study, providing some intriguing clues to a better understanding of the founding process in sexual assault cases.

The issues identified in this study can be grouped under two headings: investigative issues and statistical, scoring issues. Both impact on the founding decision.

A. Investigative issues

1. Overview of the statistical associations

The most interesting results emerged where statistically significant associations between certain factors and the founding decision could be compared across jurisdictions with high and low unfounded rates, and across the Vancouver Police Department and the RCMP.

The victim or offence-related factors that appeared to have the clearest impact on the founding decision were whether the victim and suspect were strangers, whether it was noted in the file that the victim or parent had mental health issues or a mental disability, whether use of force in the sexual assault was noted in the file, whether it was noted in the file that the victim said “no”, and whether it was noted in the file that the victim appeared upset or not.

There were two other factors statistically associated with the police founding decision where numbers did not allow a comparison across jurisdictions. These were the age of the suspect and whether it was noted in the file that the victim physically resisted or not. For these factors, it was not possible to do further analysis on their impact on the founding decision or whether that impact was appropriate or not. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to these factors as clearly indicative of a need for both wider and more in-depth exploration, to further investigate their relationship to the founding decision.

2. Whether victim and suspect were strangers

When victims and suspects knew each other, it was more likely that a case was classified as unfounded than founded. However, it was when victims and suspects were strangers that the most dramatic differences were evident. When victims and suspects were strangers it was much more likely that a case was classified as founded than unfounded.

These differences may, in fact, reflect reality, as this difference was generally consistent across jurisdictions with high and low unfounded rates. Police key informants confirmed that it was much less likely that a sexual assault allegation involving strangers would be unfounded.

While police will always need to be careful not to make assumptions about consent issues in sexual assault allegations involving victims and suspects who know each other, there was not strong evidence in this study that the fact that victims and suspects knew each other was affecting the founding decision unreasonably.

3. Mental health issues/mental disability of complainants

Whether it was noted in the file that the victim or parent had a mental health issue or mental disability was consistently statistically significant in terms of the founding decision, across those jurisdictions that had high rates of unfounded sexual assaults as well as in the three RCMP detachments as a whole. In those jurisdictions, if the victim, or, in the case of children, the victim's parent, had mental health issues or mental disabilities noted in the file, the sexual assault was more likely to be classified as unfounded. In those jurisdictions with low rates of unfounded sexual assaults, a victim or parent's reported mental health issues or mental disability did not affect the founding decision to a statistically significant degree.

This information appears to indicate that there is no intrinsic reason why a victim's or complainant's mental health issues or mental disability should affect the founding decision. This information further indicates that the fact that this issue appears to impact the founding decision in some jurisdictions but not in others may suggest that this constitutes a factor in the higher unfounded rates for these jurisdictions.

4. Use of force in the sexual assault

Whether use of force in the sexual assault was noted in the file was also consistently statistically significant in terms of the founding decision across those jurisdictions that had high rates of unfounded sexual assaults and in the three RCMP detachments as a whole. In those jurisdictions, if the file did not note that force was used in the sexual assault, the sexual assault was more likely to be classified as unfounded. In those jurisdictions with low rates of unfounded sexual assaults, the fact that no force was noted in the file did not affect the founding decision to a statistically significant degree.

Again, this information would seem to indicate that there is no intrinsic reason why the use of force in a sexual assault should affect the founding decision. In addition, this information would appear to indicate that the fact that this issue impacts the founding decision in some jurisdictions but not in others may suggest that it is a one factor contributing to a higher unfounded rate for these jurisdictions.

5. Victim's physical resistance

Although numbers are small, the fact that it was noted in the file that a victim physically resisted the sexual assault was statistically associated with the founding decision. Where physical resistance was noted, a much higher proportion of cases was classified as founded compared to those cases where there was no mention of physical resistance. This finding is consistent with what one would expect, as physical resistance to an assault is a very clear statement of lack of consent.

While there is no doubt that physical resistance makes it clear that a victim is not consenting to the activity, and the relationship between a victim's physical resistance and the founding decision may be appropriate, it is well recognized that there are many valid reasons why a victim may not physically resist a sexual assault and that there are other ways of resisting a sexual assault besides physical resistance.

In those cases where the victim did not physically resist because the victim was asleep/unconscious/drugged/intoxicated, there was no significant difference in the founding rates, indicating that the unconscious state of the victim was not used by police to invalidate the allegation of sexual assault.

There were too few victims who physically resisted to permit comparisons between those sites with high and low unfounded rates, and between the RCMP and Vancouver.

6. Whether the victim said "no"

The situation with respect to documentation in the file that the victim said "no" is not so clearly related to jurisdictions with high and low unfounded rates. The association between documentation that the victim said "no" and a lower unfounded rate was statistically significant for all samples except for the Vancouver Police Department alone. This means that only in Vancouver was the fact that a file noted that a victim said "no" apparently unrelated to the founding decision.

This would appear to indicate that the difference in approach may be related to RCMP and Vancouver Police Department practices. In those RCMP jurisdictions where there was a statistically significant relationship between documentation that the victim said "no" and a greater likelihood that the case would be classified as founded, this would imply that if a file does not note that a victim said "no", the police are less likely to believe that an offence occurred.

This relationship between a victim not saying "no" and the fact that no offence occurred may, in fact, be true in some circumstances. However all police members agreed that, unless police have other reasons to doubt a victim's credibility or her remembered version of events, the fact that she did not say "no" should never be a reason for classifying a case as unfounded. It may also be true that the victim communicated no consent in other ways or that she had valid reasons for not saying "no" to the suspect.

Police members also pointed out that the fact that a victim clearly said “no” to a sexual encounter makes the investigation into the issue of consent considerably more straightforward. Where a victim did not say “no” and did not resist in some other way, it may mean that police have to undertake a more extensive investigation to find out the truth of the matter.

Police and records staff were clear that without strong evidence that an offence did *not* occur, no case should be classified as unfounded. However, as indicated in the files, the situation was not so clear in practice and there were, quite clearly, cases where this rule was not followed. Nevertheless, information from key informants indicates that it would never be appropriate to classify a case as unfounded primarily because a victim did not say “no”, without adequate investigation of other relevant factors.

7. Whether the victim appeared upset or not

Whether it was noted in the file that the victim was upset or not showed a strong statistical relationship with the founding decision in the Chilliwack-Langley sample, and a similar pattern in the three RCMP detachments.

Although small numbers limit our understanding of the nature of this relationship, this statistical association would imply that, in the RCMP detachments, if a victim does not exhibit behaviour indicating that she is upset, police may be less likely to believe that an offence occurred. This expectation that a victim will react by being upset may be based on stereotypical views about sexual assault and about victim’s reactions. This expectation may also have a gender dimension to it in the sense that female victims of sexual assault may be expected to respond to the incident by being obviously emotionally upset.

While it may be that, in fact, victim behaviour after an incident is partially indicative of whether an assault took place, it is well known that sexual assault victims may exhibit a wide range of reactions to the traumatic experience – from openly expressive of strong emotion to very emotionally controlled. It would appear that this dynamic may be less well understood in RCMP detachments than in Vancouver, although police key informants from all jurisdictions appeared to be very cognizant of this fact.

Again, police members’ insistence that no one factor should be taken in isolation from other factors, and any determination of founding must be based on a thorough investigation of all relevant factors, applies in this situation.

8. Victim, witness, and suspect information in files

Finally, whether or not there was evidence in the file of a formal statement from the victim, witness or suspect was significantly associated with the founding decision in the sample as a whole, but results were inconclusive when compared across site-specific samples. In general, however, victim, witness, and suspect information in the Vancouver

Police Department files was less formal than that in RCMP files. That is, in more RCMP files than Vancouver files, there was evidence of formal interviews or formal statements from victims, witnesses, and suspects. One key RCMP informant speculated that this may be a result of recent RCMP efforts to increase training in investigative interviewing province-wide.

It was interesting to note that 25-31% of files where the suspect was identified contained no further information about the suspect and only 21-32% contained a formal statement or interview with the suspect. This information surprised some police members and did not surprise others. However, all agreed that it was a matter of concern. Members pointed out that good investigative practice should always involve a serious effort to interview a suspect, that a formal interview with a suspect should always be attempted, and that a file should always document efforts made to contact and to interview suspects. Members further pointed out that, unless there was clear evidence early on in an investigation that a case was unfounded, these requirements would apply both to founded and to unfounded cases.

B. Scoring and statistical issues

The file review indicated that in some cases there was confusion or inconsistency in the classification of cases as unfounded, unsubstantiated, or not cleared. There were some cases where the criterion for an unfounded determination – strong evidence that an offence did *not* occur – was not met, but the case was classified as unfounded. There were other cases where what appeared to be comparable situations resulted in different classifications.

Confusion appeared to exist particularly in cases where insufficient evidence was the primary issue or where the member faced significant challenges in terms of obtaining evidence from a victim. Such cases included, but were not limited to, those where the victim was a young child or had mental health or other disability issues. In some of these cases it appeared likely that there was insufficient evidence to proceed with charges or that there would not be a substantial likelihood of conviction, but it did not appear that there was clear evidence that no offence occurred. In some of these cases, what appeared in the files to be comparable situations resulted in different classifications.

Some police members believed that the introduction of a new scoring category to denote insufficient evidence would be of significant value in the decision-making process, by removing the need to arbitrarily decide whether a case is founded or not when there is not enough evidence to make that determination. Most records staff, on the other hand, believed that sufficient categories already existed and that the issue was primarily one of decision-makers having adequate training and guidelines, including clear definitions and criteria.

Whether or not key informants believed that a new category of insufficient evidence was required, all agreed that training, guidelines, clear definitions and criteria, and adequate quality control were essential to ensure accuracy and consistency in scoring cases. Most key respondents also agreed that evidence of inconsistency in classification and scoring was indicative of a need for improvements in these areas.

The statistical implications of cases being erroneously classified and scored as unfounded are significant. Once a case is classified as unfounded, it is no longer taken into consideration as an official crime statistic. Sexual assaults determined, rightly or wrongly, to be unfounded will not, therefore, be reflected in statistical reports on sexual assault levels, characteristics, or statistical trends.

IV. Implications of the Research

A. Implications for investigation

With respect to investigation, it would appear that despite much improved approaches to police sexual assault training and to police investigative practice, what is still required is:

- enhanced training on the nature and dynamics of sexual assault, including the various forms sexual assault may take, issues of consent and victim resistance, the range of possible reactions to the trauma of victimization, and the gendered nature of sexual assault;
- enhanced training in optimal investigative procedures, including formal interviewing of victims, witnesses, and suspects, in cases of sexual assault;
- enhanced training on the greater susceptibility to victimization of those with mental health issues or mental disabilities and on techniques and strategies for conducting investigations in cases where victims or complainants have mental health issues or mental disabilities;
- development of detailed sexual assault policy and operational guidelines for the RCMP to guide police practice in the investigation of adult sexual assault and child sexual abuse cases, and to address the issues raised in this report with respect to the decision to found or unfound a report of sexual assault;
- review of the Vancouver Police Department's sexual assault policy to ensure that it adequately covers the issues raised in this report with respect to the decision to found or unfound a report of sexual assault, including thoroughness of investigations;
- improved quality control and accountability mechanisms to ensure that sexual assault investigations, including founding decisions, are conducted in the most effective manner possible; and

- greater sexual assault specialization in RCMP detachments in order to reap the benefits of enhanced training and experience of specialized sexual assault investigators, and a culture of awareness of and sensitivity toward sexual assault issues that appears to result from a group of highly trained and experienced investigators working together to investigate these cases.

B. Implications for statistical data collection

1. Implications of statistical issues at the local level

The findings of this research indicate that what is required at the local level is:

- enhanced training and guidelines, with definitions, clear criteria, and instructive examples for records staff and scoring decision-makers, including police members, to ensure understanding of the requirements of each scoring category for case outcome;
- enhanced training, guidelines, and criteria to be applied not only to the scoring of case outcomes, but to the utilization of supplementary or survey codes such as spousal assault and alcohol and drug use;
- for maximum effectiveness and enhanced communication and collaboration, training to be conducted jointly with records staff and police members; and
- effective quality control to ensure that the knowledge of those who are making classification decisions and doing the scoring is consistently translated into practice.

2. Implications of statistical issues at the federal level

It is important that Statistics Canada reverse its recent decision to discontinue the systematic collection of data on unfounded allegations. Without the collection of this data on a systematic, national basis, there will be no way of gauging trends in terms of unfounded sexual assault cases and no way of assessing the impact of any corrective measures that may be taken to ensure accuracy in decision-making regarding founded and unfounded determinations.

Other issues emerging from this research require further exploration at the federal level and are therefore discussed below.

C. Implications for further research

1. Further exploration of factors affecting the founding decision

The issues emerging from this research should be further investigated utilizing:

- a wider range of sites, in order to explore these issues in a variety of jurisdictional, geographic, cultural, and operational contexts, including independent forces, RCMP, and provincial police forces, police forces with and without specialized sexual offence units, and forces utilizing a variety of different training approaches.
- larger samples, in order to allow for more extensive statistical analysis and a higher degree of statistical reliability;
- samples consisting of policing jurisdictions that have more clearly and consistently high and low sexual assault unfounded rates over extended periods of time; and
- more extensive qualitative research, in order to solicit information and opinions from a larger number of key informants and informants from a wider range of disciplines, including community-based service providers and advocates.

2. Further exploration of broader statistical issues at the federal level

Some of the other issues that emerged from this research require further exploration at a federal level. These include:

- the issue of case classification in those cases where there is insufficient evidence to determine if an allegation is founded or unfounded. Strategies to address this issue may include consideration of an additional Statistics Canada category of insufficient evidence, so that decision-makers are not forced into making an arbitrary decision as to whether a case is founded or not when there is insufficient evidence to do so. This may also address the issue of unnecessary stigmatization of suspects where there is insufficient evidence to know if an offence has been committed or not;
- the impact of the MSO rule on the reporting of sexual assault cases, and how this could be addressed, including consideration of recording offences based on the *intent* of the incident rather than the maximum penalty, thereby shifting the focus from the ‘most serious offence’ to the ‘primary’ offence committed;
- possible impact of such a broad range of behaviours included in level I sexual assault, both on police practices and on the analysis of unfounded levels and other issues related to crime statistics, and ways to capture the differences between the relatively

minor sexual offences and very serious sexual offences included within level I; and

- the separation of child and adult sexual offences on a routine basis, in order to capture the differences between the two types of offence in terms of the nature and dynamics of the offence, investigative approaches and founding rates.

It is essential that any study of these issues by Statistics Canada, the Department of Justice, or any other federal department, and any contemplation of changes, involve appropriate consultation with police and others whose experience could inform this process and whose practice will be impacted by such changes.

3. The collaborative research model

One of the primary strengths of this research model was its collaborative approach to both the victim and women-serving community and the policing community.

The victim and women-serving community was represented by our partner, the BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs. Input from the BCASVACP as well as the experience of the researchers, ensured that the perspectives of the victim and women-serving community were represented at all stages of this research.

The collaborative approach to working *with* the policing community, as opposed to conducting research *on* the police, was key to gaining access to police files and to ongoing assistance from police members, civilian records staff and Police Services Division staff. Such collaborative working relationships are also key to achieving one of the goals of this research – that these research findings be turned into action, where action is required.

List of key informants

Records/statistics staff

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