

**Keeping women safe
Conference focuses on domestic violence risks**

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The Hamilton Spectator

(Feb 9, 2010)

Every six days in Canada, a woman is killed at the hands of her abusive partner.

Despite the known risk factors facing many victims of violence, it is still too often an underreported crime. Hamilton police say the 1,500 domestic violence calls they receive every year -- that's four calls a day -- are just the tip of the iceberg.

How to assess risk factors and keep domestic violence victims safe was the topic of discussion that brought hundreds together for a provincial conference in Hamilton yesterday.

The crowd was made up of shelter staff, Crown attorneys and others who work with domestic violence victims.

They came with the goal of sharing strategies to reduce risks of violence against women.

The most commonly known risk factor is separation. Once a woman leaves, she is at much higher risk of being killed, especially in the first three months, Jacquelyn Campbell, an expert on domestic violence from Johns Hopkins University, told the crowd.

It's also a risk factor if the offender has a past history of violence or substance abuse.

In at least two-thirds of the cases in which women were killed, there were previous reports of domestic violence.

Deborah Sinclair, a member of the province's Domestic Violence Death Review Committee of the Office of the Chief Coroner, said in 85 per cent of domestic violence deaths, there were at least seven risk factors.

The advisory committee is an experts' group set up in 2003 with a mandate to assist the chief coroner's office with the investigation and review of deaths involving domestic violence.

Sinclair said 92 per cent of domestic violence victims are female. In addition to her statistic showing one woman is killed by her partner every six days, Sinclair said one woman is killed by domestic violence every 12 days in Ontario.

"If there was any question this is a gender-neutral issue, these statistics speak for themselves," Sinclair said.

Campbell added being an aboriginal woman also increases the risk.

"The stark reality is that aboriginal women are far more likely to be victims of domestic violence and be killed by their partners," she said.

Hamilton was one of the first communities in Ontario to set up a high-risk domestic violence team that brings together representatives from various groups, including people who work in probation and corrections, sexual assault and men's anti-violence. The goal is to increase victim safety while reducing the risk of abusers re-offending.

Hamilton Detective-Sergeant Chris Kiriakopoulos, who is in charge of the victims of crime branch, told the crowd there was some initial resistance to coming together as a team, and many were working within their own silos. They needed to first create a "climate of trust" for the team to work together.

They have now been together for six years and have become a model for other communities.

"The unique thing about our model is that it's long term," Kiriakopoulos said in an interview. "Our team is part of the program from the beginning."

Peter Jaffe, director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, said in an interview that Hamilton has one of the most advanced models in the province.

The conference continues today at the Hamilton Convention Centre.

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