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VICTIMS RARELY REPORT ONGOING ABUSE

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Most victims of domestic violence only tell police about it once -- even though they likely face violence on multiple occasions, says a just-released report.

The Statistics Canada findings, based on police reports collected between 1995 and 2004, show eight out of 10 offenders were reported to authorities only a single time.

Whether a person reports an incident depends on a number of factors. Women are twice as likely to report abuse as men, and aboriginals more likely than non-natives.

If children are witnesses to the violence, or if a person has had contact with a social-service agency, the violence is also more likely to be reported.

One London observer says there are promising signs in yesterday's Statistics Canada report, including that more young and aboriginal victims are stepping forward, along with more children of victims.

The "success story" is that "as a society we have clearly established women abuse is a crime," Barbara MacQuarrie, community director of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, said yesterday.

Both young and aboriginal women are groups at high risk of domestic violence, she said.

"The fact those high-risk groups feel they can go to the police, I think that's progress," she said. "That's a step in the right direction."

The Statistics Canada report indicates police are laying charges in 84 per cent of spousal violence incidents, compared to 47 per cent in overall violent crimes.

Most people -- 52 per cent -- who reported incidents to the police later said violence decreased after the intervention.

Thirty per cent said there was no change in the abuse, and 11 per cent said things actually got worse.

The numbers may be reflecting the effectiveness of a community effort to understand domestic violence issues and the relationship between criminal justice and social services, said MacQuarrie.

She pointed specifically to how contact with a community resource is more likely to lead to a police contact.

"That speaks to the success of our co-ordinating effort," she said.

Women with children are also reporting more often, indicating "mothers understand witnessing violence harms the children."

She noted turning to police and the courts isn't the only strategy for those who suffer domestic violence. Some victims act without police intervention, using shelters, counselling and leaving relationships safely.

"The threat of police intervention is always there in the background for the abuser," she said.

While the numbers are encouraging signs, MacQuarrie said there are still challenges for the community.

Poverty, mental illness and addictions are often barriers to women repeatedly victimized.