

# Mean Streets?

## The Social Locations, Gender Dynamics, and Patterns of Violent Crime in Winnipeg

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*“The Mean Streets of Manitoba”*  
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Fuelled in part by newspaper headlines like the above, public concerns over the levels of violence in our communities have intensified in recent years. Our perception and fear of violent crime has had a definite impact on how many of us go about our daily lives. We warn our children not to talk to strangers. We avoid taking public transportation or venturing into certain parts of the city late at night. And we lock up our homes and install security devices to keep out unwanted intruders. Each time the newspapers report yet another incident of violence on the “mean streets,” the calls for the criminal justice system to “get tougher” on violent crime become louder. These “tough” proposals usually include increased surveillance and monitoring of public spaces, stricter law enforcement practices and harsher prison sentences for violent offenders.

Given our fears of violent crime, many of us take comfort in the notion that our homes can provide a refuge from violence. Yet, this image of the home as a ha-

ven has been shattered by the realization that assaults can occur in the privacy of our houses as well as on the streets. Even more worrisome, the assailants are not strangers, but people we know. The idea that violence is a regular occurrence in many homes has been made prominent by the women’s movement. Over the past three decades, feminists have organized, lobbied and advocated to put this issue on the political map. Key to their position is that the victims of this violence are women and the offenders are the men with whom they share an intimate relationship; their husbands, boyfriends or common law partners. Estimates of the incidence of male violence against women are alarming. The most recent and comprehensive study found that one in four Canadian women have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of a male partner (Statistics Canada, 1993). Such findings have produced a sea change in how we understand the problem of violence. Once considered a private matter

between husband and wife and deemed to be “not the law’s business,” wife assault has been transformed into a public issue meriting criminal justice response.

Feminists attribute the prevalence of male violence against women to the privilege, power and sense of entitlement that men are granted in a patriarchal society. Advocating for reforms in the criminal justice system and the provision of services for abused women has been part of a wider effort to realize women’s inequality in both the public and private spheres. But this effort has been met with resistance by those who dispute the feminist claim that violence in the home is the handiwork of men. In her book, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence*, journalist Patricia Pearson (1997) argues not only that “women are violent, too” but that their violence can be just as “nasty” as men’s: women beat up on their lovers, arrange for their husband’s murder, kill their babies and commit serial murders in hospitals and boardinghouses. Pearson draws support for her argument from studies which utilize the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to measure abuse in intimate relationships.

Developed by American researcher Murray Straus (1979), the CTS is a quantitative instrument which consists of eighteen items and measures three different ways of handling interpersonal conflict in intimate relationships: reasoning, verbal aggression and physical violence. The items are categorized on a continuum from least to most severe (for example, “discussed an issue calmly” and “cried” to “threw something,” “hit with a fist” and “used a knife or a gun”). Respondents in a survey are asked how frequently they perpetrated each act in the course of con-

flicts or disagreements with their partners within the past year and how frequently they had been on the receiving end. These self-reports of perpetration and victimization are then used to construct estimates of the rate of violence used by male and female partners. Most researchers who have employed the CTS have found equivalent rates for women and men on both minor and severe types of violence (Straus and Gelles 1986; Steinmetz 1981; Brinkerhoff and Lupri 1988; Kennedy and Dutton 1989). Such findings have led to the conclusion that there is a *sexual symmetry* in intimate violence; that is, that women are just as violent as men.

Despite its popularity, the CTS has not been without its critics (see, for example: DeKeseredy and MacLean 1998; DeKeseredy and Hinch 1991; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson & Daly 1992; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1993; Johnson 1996). Writers have noted that the CTS is an incomplete measure of intimate violence for a number of reasons: it measures only incidents of violence and thus ignores the social context of the violence (such as whether a woman is acting in self-defence); it situates items only in the context of settling quarrels or disputes and thus misses assaults that “come out of the blue” or are motivated by the desire to control another person; it relies on self-reports of violence and may thereby underestimate the incidence of violence by males (who have been found to be more likely to under-report); it fails to make adequate distinctions between the severity of different forms of violence (for example, “tried to hit with something” is defined as “severe” while “slapped” is defined as “minor”); and it does not capture the outcome of the violence (for ex-

ample, the degree of injury incurred by the participants).

Pearson (1997: 121) argues that these methodological concerns amount to unwarranted attacks by battered women's supporters who are invested in a gender dichotomy of "men as evil" and "women as good." In the same fashion, Donna Laframboise (1999: A1), in a *National Post* article titled "Women are Men's Equals in Violence," tells us that "a good deal of what we've been told about domestic abuse over the last 25 years is wrong" and that studies conducted by "researchers without a political axe to grind" are more trustworthy, valid and objective than three decades of feminist-inspired work.

Anyone who follows the media closely would be justified in their confusion over the mixed messages found in commentaries and reports on violent crime. Does stranger violence pose the biggest threat to our safety and security? Have feminists been leading us astray? Is violence in the home the handiwork of men or are women "men's equals" in violence? How we resolve this confusion will depend very much on the kinds of data we bring to bear on the issue. One largely untapped data source is Police Incident Reports (PIRs) on violent crime.

### **Police Incident Reports**

Criminologists have long recognized that official sources of information on crime are limited by their nature and scope. For instance, the actual number of crimes that occur in a given area are larger than those that are reported to police, and those events that are subsequently recorded in police reports are larger in number than those that end up in court

and prison records. As well, given the purpose of most official documents on crime— to establish the presence of legally-relevant factors that would establish an act or event as a criminal matter—the predominant standpoint or interpretation reflected in these accounts may well differ from those of the participants in the event.

Nevertheless, Police Incident Reports do offer a number of advantages as a source of information on violent crime. Since the police are the first point of entry into the criminal justice system, police records will be more inclusive than those maintained by the courts or correctional agencies. While many crimes (especially less serious ones like property offences) are not reported to police, events involving violence have a greater likelihood of police intervention and thus will be included in their records. Also significant is that with the transformation of intimate violence from a private trouble to a public issue, police policies and practices have been revised to focus more attention on domestic violence. As a result, mandatory charging and zero-tolerance policies have opened a window into the private sphere of the home, making violence between partners much more visible. With this increased police attention has come increased documentation as to what goes on when violence occurs between intimates.

To the extent that Police Incident Reports now include documentation on domestic violence, they also hold a number of advantages over the Conflict Tactics Scale for measuring women's and men's violence. For one, while CTS research relies on respondents' self-reports of perpetration and victimization, PIRs are based on a variety of information sources, in-

cluding statements from complainants, accused and bystanders or witnesses. Since they draw from a number of accounts, PIRs offer a potentially richer source of information about the nature of women's and men's violence than self-reports (Sacco and Kennedy 1998: 223).

Second, because PIRs record events on a case-by-case basis and are normally collected closer in time to the actual event, they do not encounter the problems of recall in CTS research, whereby respondents are asked to describe events which occurred over the previous twelve months.

Third, while CTS research approaches the issue of intimate violence from the vantage point of "settling disputes" in marital relationships, PIRs are governed by the requirement to establish evidence (physical or otherwise) that a criminal act has occurred. Consequently, police officers include fairly detailed accounts in their reports of "who did what to whom." These descriptions provide a record of the specific violence tactics used by each of the participants in an event.

Fourth, criminal law distinguishes between violent offences on the basis of their "seriousness" (for example, Assault, Assault Causing Bodily Harm and Aggravated Assault). One important measure of seriousness is the harm or injury which results. This makes PIRs a good source of information for measuring the degree of injury incurred by the participants in a violent event—a variable missing in CTS research.

A final benefit of PIRs, especially for our purposes, is that they allow for a more all-encompassing picture of the violence engaged in by men and women. In addition to capturing the violence that occurs

between intimates, we are able to broaden the investigation to explore the other social contexts in which violence occurs.

What, then, do Police Incident Reports tell us about the social locations and the social relationships in which violence occurs? When men and women engage in violence, do they differ in terms of the violence tactics they employ or the harm they inflict? To answer such questions, data were gathered from City of Winnipeg Police Incident Reports on violent crime.

### **Violent Crime in Winnipeg**

Winnipeg offers a prime location for exploring men's and women's violence. According to official crime statistics, the rate of violent crime in Winnipeg is one of the highest of the nine largest Canadian cities. In 1995, for instance, Winnipeg had a rate of 1,198 incidents per 100,000 citizens for violent crime, second only to Vancouver (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1995). Women make up a larger proportion of adults charged with violent offences in Winnipeg than in the country as a whole.<sup>1</sup> It is also significant that Winnipeg has been the site of a number of criminal justice initiatives pertaining to domestic violence.

In response to a national initiative in 1983, the Manitoba Attorney General issued a formal directive whereby police were to charge all reported cases of assault when there were reasonable and probable grounds that an offence had occurred, regardless of the relationship between the victim and the accused. Previously, it had been left to the victim to initiate the complaint. The net effect of this mandatory charging policy was to increase the number of arrests involving abusive part-

ners.<sup>2</sup> A Family Violence Court was established in Winnipeg in September of 1990<sup>3</sup> and, in response to a Domestic Violence Review (Pedlar 1991), the Winnipeg Police Service introduced a zero-tolerance policy in July of 1993. Under this more rigorous protocol, police are mandated to lay charges any time complaints have been made, regardless of the presence (or absence) of corroborating evidence. The decision is then left up to the Crown attorney as to whether the case will proceed to court.

When we examine police records of violent crime, one factor rings clear: even in an era of zero-tolerance, *men are far more likely to appear as accused persons than women*. Of the 23,090 charges laid for violent crimes in the City of Winnipeg between 1991 and 1995, women accounted for only 15 percent of persons charged. While the quantitative difference between men's and women's violence is obvious, what of the presence of qualitative differences?

In order to explore qualitative differences between women's and men's violence, data were gathered from Winnipeg Police Incident Reports on cases of women and men charged with violence offences (assaults, robbery, sexual offences, and murder/manslaughter) over a five year period (1991 to 1995). A random sample of women (stratified by offence type) generated 501 cases or 15 percent of those charged. A sample of men (stratified by offence type) charged over the same period was drawn for comparative purposes, yielding 501 cases or 2.5 percent of those charged. Information was collected on: the social characteristics of the accused; the social setting or location in which the violent event occurred; the relationship between the accused and the complainant or victim; and the outcome in terms of the injuries incurred and the criminal justice response. Because we were interested in the forms and severity of the violence used by women and men, each PIR was coded according to the vio-

**Table 1: Nature of the Relationship Between the Accused and the Complainant**

	<b>Women Accused</b>	<b>Men Accused</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>stranger</b>	<b>69 13.8%</b>	<b>90 18.0%</b>	<b>159 15.9%</b>
<b>friend /acquaintance</b>	<b>112 22.4%</b>	<b>95 19.0%</b>	<b>207 20.7%</b>
<b>family member</b>	<b>68 13.6%</b>	<b>21 4.2%</b>	<b>89 8.9%</b>
<b>(ex) partner</b>	<b>243 48.5%</b>	<b>285 56.9%</b>	<b>528 52.7%</b>
<b>police</b>	<b>9 1.8%</b>	<b>10 2.0%</b>	<b>19 1.9%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>501 100%</b>	<b>501 100%</b>	<b>1002 100%</b>

lence tactics employed during the course of the event<sup>4</sup> as well as the resulting injuries incurred by the participants.

To present the findings of the study, the data have been organized in terms of the main social relationships in which violence occurs: strangers; friends and/or acquaintances; family members; and intimate partners (see Table 1)<sup>5</sup>. Given the public's pre-occupation with stranger violence, we begin with an examination of those cases.

## **Stranger Violence: The "Mean Streets" of Manitoba?**

*What's a guy gonna do? There's a recession, no jobs. I'm broke. I ain't gonna starve. A guy needs cash to eat. (Case #661; Male accused charged with robbery)*

*I'll be honest with you. I feel that I should be able to walk the streets and back lanes and not have to look at queers. Those queers tried to hit on a buddy of mine. (Case #856; Male accused charged with assault)*

*Okay, I did that one, too, but that's it after [the video store robbery]. I didn't do no more. The girl ripped off my balaclava. It's nice to see women take a stance against violence. Too bad it was on me. (Case #866; Male accused charged with robbery)*

The public's perception of crime has been largely built upon fears of encountering violence in the street late at night. These fears easily conjure up images of "dark strangers"—especially men—lurking in doorways and back alleys, waiting to do us harm.

While violence against strangers

does appear in the police reports, it is far less prevalent than newspaper headlines might have us believe. Of the 1,002 cases in our random sample, only 16 percent (159) involved violence between individuals not known to one another. One-third of these events did conform to the public's image of violence "on the streets," as 29 percent occurred in streets or laneways and another 4 percent happened in parking lots, parks or secluded areas. Yet, almost half (47 percent) of the events involving individuals not known to one another occurred either at or near a drinking establishment (15 percent of stranger events) or other commercial establishments such as gas stations or stores (32 percent of stranger events).<sup>6</sup> The complainants in these events were most often bouncers, security guards and store employees.

Stranger violence was almost as likely to happen during the daytime (29 percent) as in the evening (32 percent) or late at night (39 percent). As well, the prevalent image of the "dark male stranger" is one that does not hold up under scrutiny of the data, as the majority (50 percent) of the men charged with violence against strangers were Caucasian (like the 19-year-old homophobic man quoted above). While it is now widely acknowledged, for example, that Aboriginal people are over-represented in the crime statistics relative to their numbers in the general population, they are more likely to be charged with violence against members of their own communities, especially intimate partners and other family members.

Of the different types of social relationships in which violence can occur, stranger violence is the one most likely to be a group-based activity (28 percent of

these events involved more than one complainant and half involved co-accused). Men accused who engaged in stranger violence were most likely to do so in groups with other men (93 percent of their co-accused were male), and the vast majority of their complainants (72 percent) were also male. While stranger violence made up a smaller proportion of the cases involving women accused in the sample (14 percent for women versus 18 percent for men), women who engage in stranger violence are most likely to participate alongside men in mixed-sex groups and their victims are as likely to be female as male. For both women and men accused, the violence used against strangers is most likely to involve tactics like “pushing, shoving, grabbing or pulling” (32 percent for women versus 33 percent for men) and “property damage or theft” (49 percent for women versus 44 percent for men).

Even though stranger violence conjures up the greatest fears for our physical safety, it is actually the one form of violent event of all the categories we examined that has the least frequency of injuries to complainants. Complainants in events involving strangers received no injuries in one-third of the cases and, of those injured, the majority were of a “minor” nature (involving cuts, scratches, bruises and the like). Perhaps one of the main reasons why stranger violence results in fewer and less serious injuries to the victims is the motive behind many of these incidents: 37 percent of the charges laid by police in stranger events were for robbery. This suggests that perpetrators of stranger violence are not so much intent on inflicting injury or harm as they are on stealing property (whether it be money, NIKE sports jackets or, in several

cases cited in the reports, cases of beer).

Of the 1,217 complainants cited in the 1,002 Police Incident Reports we studied, the accused and the complainant were known to each other 78 percent of the time. Rather than stranger violence committed on the “mean streets,” the vast majority of these events occurred in private dwellings between individuals who are known to one another. Indeed, more frequent than violence against strangers were incidents of violence between friends and/or acquaintances.

## **Violent Encounters Between Friends and/or Acquaintances**

*He was supposed to stay away from my daughter and my house. He has her threatened at school; had his cousins steal her bike; call her a whore and then he’s standing across the street making like he’s shooting her with a pistol. He rapes my 10 year old daughter and he’s free to go around doing this! (Case #431; Female accused charged with assault; the male complainant had been charged with sexual assault)*

Contrary to the public’s perception of violent crime, we are more likely to encounter violence from friends and/or acquaintances than we are from strangers. Violence against friends and/or acquaintances accounted for 21 percent (207) of the cases we studied in the Police Incident Reports. These events differed from stranger violence in a number of significant ways.

While stranger violence is most likely to occur in public spaces, violent events involving friends and/or acquaintances are characterized by their more pri-

vate nature: 57 percent of the incidents involving women accused and 72 percent of those involving men accused occurred in private dwellings. Friend/acquaintance events were also less likely to be a group-based activity than stranger events (as only 22 percent involved more than one complainant and 36 percent involved co-accused). Like stranger violence, men accused were most likely to aggress against other men, but with an important exception: 23 percent of the charges against men in the friend/acquaintance category were for sexual assaults against females. (By comparison, sexual assaults represented only 4 percent of the men's charges in the stranger events.) As in their violence against strangers, women's co-accused are as likely to be male as female. However, their violence is more often directed against female friends and/or acquaintances (64 percent of women's complainants were female).

Whereas stranger violence was most likely to involve violence tactics like "pushing, shoving, grabbing or pulling" and "property damage or theft," violence between friends and/or acquaintances takes on a more serious tone. In addition to being "pushed, shoved, grabbed or pulled" (30 percent for women versus 36 percent for men) complainants in events involving friends and/or acquaintances are more likely to be "repeatedly punched or beaten" by both women and men accused (32 percent for women versus 33 percent for men). Yet, there are also gender differences in the violence tactics used against friends and/or acquaintances. Women accused were four times more likely than men to "pinch, bite, scratch, or poke" (17 percent for women versus 4 percent for men), eight times more likely

to engage in "hair pulling or cutting" (33 percent for women versus 4 percent for men), and twice as likely as men to "kick or knee" (41 percent for women versus 21 percent for men). Men, on the other hand, were twice as likely to "utter threats" (32 percent for men versus 16 percent for women) than women accused. Men were also far more likely to engage in "sexual assaults" (25 percent for men versus 3 percent for women) and "sitting on or restraining" (25 percent for men versus 6 percent for women). These latter two violence tactics are a reflection of men's use of sexual violence when their victim is female.

That the violence against friends and/or acquaintances is more serious than what we found in stranger violence is also reflected in the resulting injuries. Whereas injuries were reported in 68 percent of the cases involving stranger violence, injuries were sustained by complainants in 91 percent of the friends/acquaintances events. While the majority (60 percent) of women's complainants incurred minor injuries, 60 percent of men's complainants received moderate and major injuries (such as broken bones, lacerations, lost teeth or internal injuries). Corresponding with the harm inflicted during the violent event, women and men who engaged in violence against friends and/or acquaintances were also likely to face more serious criminal charges: 29 percent of women accused and 25 percent of men accused were charged with either Assault Causing Bodily Harm or Aggravated Assault. In contrast, only 16 percent of women and men involved in stranger violence were charged with these offences.

That men and women are more likely to be charged with violent crimes



against their friends and/or acquaintances runs counter to our perception of violence as stranger-related. This finding becomes even more noteworthy when we consider that acts of violence against strangers are known to have a greater likelihood of being reported to police, and thus being recorded in Police Incident Reports. Of special concern is the severity of the violence that occurs in encounters between friends and/or acquaintances—both in terms of the seriousness of the violence tactics used and the injuries incurred by victims.

With regard to the gender dynamics involved when violence occurs, women's capacity for violence—especially against other women—is evident in these data. What is also apparent is that men's violence is not confined to their conflicts with each other: male violence against women (in the form of sexual assaults) is also a matter of concern. These gender patterns become even more evident when we examine the violence that occurs within the family setting.

## **Violent Encounters with Family Members**

While violence between intimate partners will be considered in the next section, our interest here is in understanding the nature of the violence that occurs between other family members (children, parents, siblings, extended family members and in-laws). These incidents represented only 9 percent (89) of the cases we examined, although events involving other family members made up a greater proportion of women accused's charges than they did for men accused (14 percent for women

versus 4 percent for men).

Violence against other family members begins to look quite different from what we saw with those events involving strangers or friends/acquaintances. One difference is the social location where the event occurs, as family violence is most likely to occur within the private sphere of the home: almost all (91 percent) of events involving women accused and all of those involving men accused occurred in private dwellings. Another difference is that family events primarily involve one complainant (77 percent for women versus 90 percent for men) and only one accused (88 percent for women versus 100 percent for men). Children were the most likely victims for both women and men accused (representing 41 percent and 48 percent of women's and men's complainants, respectively). Siblings—especially sisters—were the second most likely victims for women accused. Extended family members or in-laws were the second most likely victims for men.

While men's violence in the other relationships we have examined is mainly directed at other men, their violence against other family members is primarily directed at females. Despite the fact that men's victims are most often female children and relatives, they do not appear to shy away from using more severe violence tactics: men accused not only allegedly "push, pull, shove or grab" their complainants (38 percent of the cases), they also "sit on or restrain" (29 percent), "beat or repeatedly punch" (24 percent) and "slam bodies or head into something" (24 percent). Also significant is the prevalence of sexual violence: men accused sexually assaulted their complainants in 38 percent of the cases involving other

family members.

Whereas men's violence in the family setting is primarily inter-gendered (male/female), women's violence is more likely to be intra-gendered, or directed at other females. While women accused are five times more likely than men to engage in "hair pulling or cutting" (25 percent for women versus 5 percent for men) and to "pinch, bite or scratch" their complainants (21 percent for women versus 5 percent for men), they are just as likely as men to "push, pull, shove or grab" (35 percent) and "beat or repeatedly punch" (27 percent) other family members. To this extent, women's violence against other family members looks very similar to what we saw with friends and/or acquaintances.

While there are some notable differences in the social dynamics involved in men's and women's violence, the fact that women are engaging in violence tactics, sometimes with similar frequency as men, might be taken as evidence that they are "men's equals" in violence. Nevertheless, we do not yet have the complete picture. Indeed, *over half* (53 percent) of the cases in the Police Incident Reports involved violence between intimate partners (husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, common-law partners and gay and lesbian partners). What remains to be seen, then, is whether women are "men's equals" when it comes to partner violence.

## **Encounters Between Intimate Partners:<sup>7</sup> Equals in Violence?**

*We both know that you deserve this . . . You're my baby, you're mine, all mine. You're my property.* (Case #672; Male accused

charged with sexual assault with a weapon)

*You better lock me up, man, cause if you let me out I'm gonna do something bad to her.* (Case #727; Male accused charged with assault causing bodily harm)

*Next time I'll kill the bitch, before I call you guys, I'll just kill her.* (Case #735; Male accused charged with assault causing bodily harm)

*I did it because I'm tired of getting beaten up.* (Case #156; Female accused charged with assault)

That violence between intimates has attained the status of a criminal matter is clearly reflected in the Police Incident Reports. Partner violence made up 49 percent (243) of the cases involving women accused and 57 percent (285) of those involving men accused in our study. Save for three cases involving gay or lesbian partners, violence between partners was inter-gendered (male/female; female/male). Even more so than family events, partner violence was likely to be a one-on-one event; 93 percent of cases involving women accused and 89 percent of those involving men accused had one complainant and almost none (2 percent versus .4 percent) involved co-accused.

Studies that use the Conflict Tactics Scale have concluded that a sexual symmetry exists in intimate violence: men are as likely as women to be victims of abuse and women are as likely as men to be perpetrators of both minor and serious acts of violence. A different picture emerges, however, when we examine five indicators found in the police reports: 1. the so-

**Table 2: Social Setting or Location of Partner Events**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Women Accused</b>	<b>Men Accused</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>private residence</b>	<b>221 91%</b>	<b>264 93%</b>	<b>485 92%</b>
<b>a. complainant's</b>	<b>41 17%</b>	<b>82 29%</b>	<b>123 23%</b>
<b>b. accused's</b>	<b>31 13%</b>	<b>22 8%</b>	<b>53 10%</b>
<b>c. both</b>	<b>127 52%</b>	<b>144 50%</b>	<b>271 51%</b>
<b>d. other</b>	<b>22 9%</b>	<b>16 6%</b>	<b>38 7%</b>
<b>Public Place</b>	<b>22 9%</b>	<b>21 7%</b>	<b>43 8%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>243 100%</b>	<b>285 100%</b>	<b>528 100%</b>

cial location of the event; 2. the violence tactics used by men and women accused; 3. the use of violence by complainants; 4. the degree of injury or harm inflicted; and 5. the question of “who called the police?”

### **1. The Social Location of the Event**

Partner violence is most likely to occur in private settings (see Table 2). In half (51 percent) of these cases, the violence occurred at a residence shared by the accused and the complainant. Not all of the victims were co-habiting with the accused at the time of the incident. Some were girlfriends or boyfriends and some had ended their relationship with the accused. In these latter cases, there is often a restraining or “no contact” order against the ex-partner.

There were 176 cases where violence occurred between men and women who were not co-habiting. Of these cases, the violent event occurred at the woman’s residence 64 percent of the time. This finding would suggest that men may play a greater role in initiating the violence, in

that they are the ones journeying to the residence of their (ex)partner, and violence subsequently breaks out. Of the 48 charges laid by police for Breach of Recognizance (eg. for violation of a no-contact or communication order) in events involving partner violence, 75 percent (36) were laid against men.

### **2. Violence Tactics Used by Men and Women Accused**

One of the ways to determine if women are “men’s equals” in violence is to gauge whether there are statistically significant differences in men’s and women’s use of violence tactics. As we saw previously, men and women who engaged in stranger violence were most likely to push, pull or grab complainants and to engage in property damage or theft. There were no statistically significant differences in the violence tactics used by men and women in stranger events.<sup>8</sup> It was in events involving friends and/or acquaintances where some gender differences in violence tactics became

evident: of the violence tactics used by women and men accused, six showed statistically significant differences.<sup>9</sup> Only two violence tactics – “sitting on or restraining” (6 percent for women versus 29 percent for men) and “sexual acts” (7 percent for women versus 38 percent for men)—were statistically significant in events involving other family members. When we examine the violence tactics used by men and women accused in events involving partners, however, gender differences become much more acute: there were nine items where statistically significant differences existed; seven of these were at the .001 level.

All of the violence tactics used by women and men accused in partner events are reported in Table 3. In terms of frequency, men accused utilize more violence tactics than women accused (2.9 versus 2.3 per person). With regard to the nature of the violence tactics used, men accused were almost twice as likely as women to “push/pull/grab.” When combined with tactics such as “sitting on or restraining,” “slamming body or head into something,” and “strangling or choking,” the picture which emerges is one of men using their *physical strength or force* to overpower their female partners. The greater use of physical force by male accused is reflected in the charges laid by police: men were twice as likely as women to be charged with Assault Causing Bodily Harm (19 percent for men versus 10 percent for women).

On the other hand, women accused are almost six times more likely than men to “pinch/bite/scratch/poke.” They are also more likely to “hit with or throw something” and to “stab or slash.” The picture which emerges here is one of

women—lacking comparable physical strength or force to their male partners—resorting to the use of objects or weapons during the course of a violent event.

Indeed, women accused were more likely than men to use weapons in their encounters with intimate partners (42 percent for women versus 28 percent for men). The weapon of choice for many women appears to be beer bottles and other “sharp objects” such as knives or scissors. These objects accounted for 66 percent of the weapons used by women in partner events (versus 51 percent for men) (Table 4). Men accused used firearms in three of the cases, and were twice as likely as women to use “blunt objects” like bats, wooden boards, hammers or metal pipes (19 percent for men versus 9 percent for women).

What is especially interesting in these findings is the considerable range of “other” articles cited in the police reports (which accounted for 43 percent versus 40 percent of the weapons used by women and men respectively). “Other objects” included things like: bathroom plungers, telephones, wooden spoons, ashtrays, coffee pots, dishes, books, hair brushes, TV remote controls, running shoes, pizza boxes, clothes baskets and hair gel bottles. Taken together, this list suggests that virtually *any* object which is readily accessible in a domestic setting could potentially be thrown or used to hit with during the course of a violent event—and thus subsequently come to be defined as a “weapon” in Police Incident Reports.

One consequence of the more frequent use of these “weapons” on the part of women accused is that when police are called to intervene, women are more likely

**Table 3: Violence Tactics Used by the Accused in Partner Events**

<b>Type of Violence</b>	<b>Women Accused</b>		<b>Men Accused</b>	
uttering threats	33	14%	63	22%
property damage/theft*	23	9.5%	51	18%
push/pull/grab/shake/ elbow/wrestle*	68	28%	147	52%
pinch/bite/scratch/ poke **	67	28%	14	5%
pull or cut hair	40	16.5%	47	16.5%
burn or spray	5	2.1%	4	1.4%
hit with/threw something **	79	32.5%	51	18%
slapping	54	22%	67	23.5%
kicking/kneeing	47	19%	57	20%
sitting on/restraining**	4	2%	43	15%
punched	55	23%	72	25%
beat (repeated punching)	44	18%	62	22%
slamming head or body into something**	6	2.5%	75	26%
sexual acts*	0		11	4%
strangling/choking**	6	2.5%	39	14%
stabbing/slashing**	21	9%	6	2%
shooting	0		1	0.4%
other#	0		12	4%

no. of violence tactics

552

822

no. of accused

243 (2.3 per person)

285 (2.9 per person)

\*p<.01

\*\*p<.001

+ percentages add up to more than 100 due to multiple responses

# This category includes actions such as driving a vehicle at or unleashing a dog on the complainant.

**Table 4: Weapons Used by Accused in Partner Events**

Type of Weapon	Women Accused+	Men Accused+
firearm	0 0%	3 4%
beer bottle	28 27%	13 16%
sharp object	40 39%	28 35%
blunt object	9 9%	15 19%
other weapon	44 43%	32 40%
<b>Total no. of weapons used</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Total no. of accused using</b>	<b>103 (42% of accused)</b>	<b>80 (28% of accused)</b>

than men to be charged with the more serious offence of Assault with a Weapon; 32 percent of women’s violent crime charges in the partner category involved Assault with a Weapon compared with only 11 percent of men’s charges. Another consequence is that so long as Conflict Tactics Scale researchers collapse all of these objects into one category, then “tried to hit with something” (which is defined as “severe” according to the scale) will include a woman who throws a laundry basket or a TV remote control at her partner alongside a man who wields an iron bar or a hammer.

### 3. Use of Violence by Complainants

While women and men accused differ in their use of violence tactics in their encounters with intimate partners, what of the use of violence by their complainants? Conflict Tactics Scale researchers have described the violence which occurs between men and women in intimate relationships as “mutual combat.” When we

examined the use of violence by complainants in partner events, however, we found that the female partners of men accused used violence in only 23 percent of the cases. In contrast, male partners of women accused used violence in 65 percent of the cases.<sup>10</sup>

The violence tactics used by male and female complainants tend to mirror the gendered differences we saw for male and female accused. Male complainants, like male accused, utilize more violence tactics than female complainants (2.2 versus 1.4 per person). Male complainants are most likely to engage in “pushing, shoving or grabbing” (53 percent for men versus 30 percent for women), “sitting on or restraining” (17 percent for men versus 0 percent for women), and “slamming body or head into something” (17 percent for men versus 3 percent for women). Women complainants, like women accused, are more likely to “pinch, bite or scratch” (18 percent for women versus 5 percent for men) and “hit with or throw something” (29 percent for women versus 10 percent for men).<sup>11</sup> Such findings run counter to

the depiction of violence in intimate relationships as “mutual combat.”

#### 4. The Degree of Injury or Harm Inflicted

One of the factors which has been missing in Conflict Tactics Scale research is that of “outcome,” in particular, the nature and extent of the injuries incurred by participants in a violent encounter. In the present study, 73 percent of women’s complainants and 78 percent of men’s complainants were injured during the course of the event. The majority of the injuries (54 percent versus 64 percent) were classified as “minor” in nature and involved cuts, bruises, sprains, black eyes, bleeding noses and hair loss. However, when we investigated whether the accused person incurred injury, we found that *almost one-half* (48 percent) of the women accused—as opposed to only 7

percent of the men accused—were injured during the course of the event. While the majority of these injuries were of a “minor” nature, this finding adds weight to the conclusion that violent events between women and men are *not* symmetrical.

#### 5. Who Called the Police?

Finally, one of the variables often included in Police Incident Reports is “who made initial contact with the police?” Calls to the police can be interpreted as a form of “help-seeking behaviour” on the part of someone in trouble. In incidents involving partners, the complainants were the ones to call the police in 77 percent of the cases involving a male accused (versus 40 percent for women accused). In contrast, however, it was the *accused woman* who called the police in 35 percent of those cases (versus only 5 percent for

**Table 5: Who Made Initial Contact with the Police in Partner Events?**

	Women Accused+	Men Accused+
<b>Complainant</b>	<b>89 39.7%</b>	<b>220 77.2%</b>
<b>Accused</b>	<b>68 30.4%</b>	<b>13 4.6%</b>
<b>Both</b>	<b>10 4.5%</b>	<b>1 0.4%</b>
<b>Witness/Bystander</b>	<b>42 18.8%</b>	<b>46 16.1%</b>
<b>Police Happened By</b>	<b>15 6.7%</b>	<b>5 1.8%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>224* 100%</b>	<b>285 100%</b>

\*There are 19 missing cases.

p<.001

male accused) (Table 5). In *more than one-third* of the cases involving a woman accused, then, *she* was the one who perceived the need for police intervention. Nevertheless, she also ended up being charged with a criminal offence.

More rigorous policies and protocols that mandate police to lay charges in cases of domestic violence have provided us with a window into the domestic sphere that has previously been unavailable. Through this window, we are now able to investigate more fully the nature of the violence that occurs between intimate partners. When we do, we find that—contrary to Conflict Tactics Scale research—while women are certainly capable of violence, they are *not* “men’s equals.” In combination, the five indicators presented here—the social location of the event, the violence tactics used by women and men accused, the use of violence by complainants, the degree of harm or injury inflicted and who made the initial call to the police—suggest that partner violence is *asymmetrical*.

In many respects, the violence tactics used by men and women reflect the gendered power differences that operate when violence occurs in intimate relationships. Male accused do not refrain from using brute force against their female partners: they push; they sit on; they strangle; and they slam bodies and heads. To this extent, men’s violence in partner relationships conforms to the traditional “masculine script” premised on aggression and dominance (Kypers 1992; Stoltenberg 1990; and Messerschmidt 1997). Comments made by women to the police suggest that they are very aware of their partner’s size and strength:

*I don’t understand how you can assault a*

*guy that size. I don’t agree. I thought this was supposed to protect the woman not the man. It was self-defence. (Case # 145; Female accused charged with assault)*

*I don’t want to say anything, but I feel I should. I was defending myself. He has a black belt in judo and he uses it. He broke my camera. That’s how it started. (Case #146; Female accused charged with assault)*

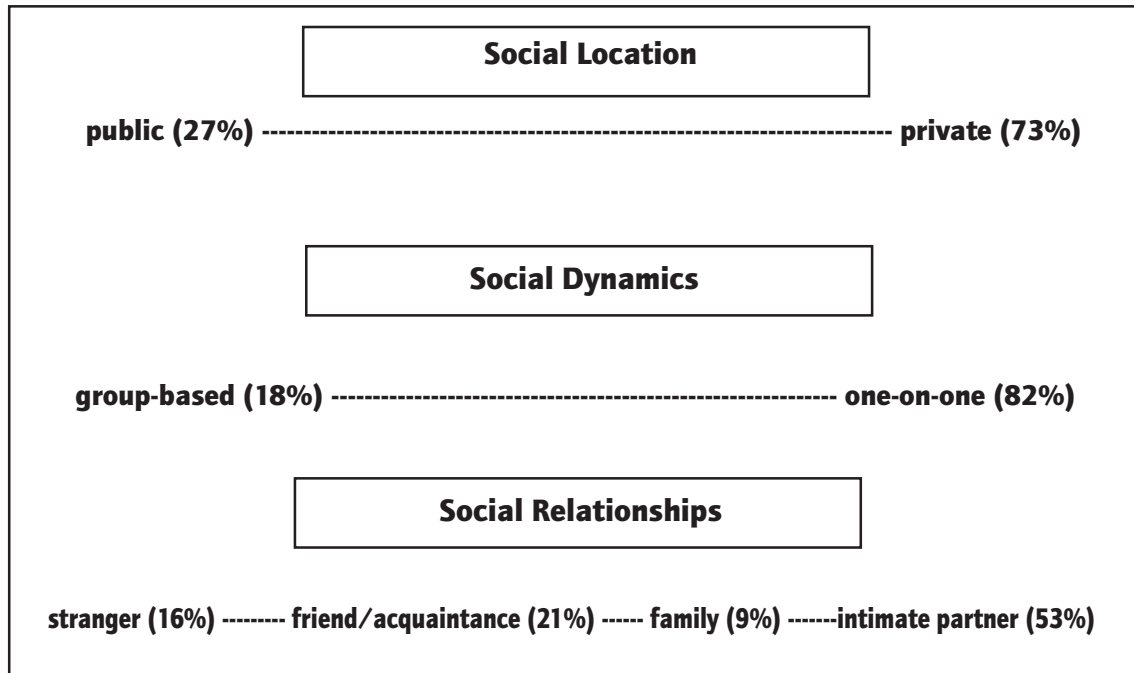
That women are most likely to use so-called female tactics like pinching, biting or scratching and that they resort to the use of hitting with or throwing objects at their male partners might be taken as evidence of self-defensive strategies in response to an aggressive partner. This would add weight to the claims of feminist researchers (Dobash et. al. 1990) that women’s violence in intimate relationships often occurs in the course of defending themselves against their abusive partners. In any case, the net effect of these gendered differences is that women are the ones most likely to be injured when violence erupts in intimate relationships.

## **Responding to Violent Crime**

Presenting the data on violent crime found in Police Incident Reports—its social locations, its social dynamics and the social relationships in which it occurs—has allowed us to appreciate some of the patterns of violence. These patterns can be captured in the form of a chart (see Chart 1). On the left hand side of the chart fall those violent events that occur in public. These are most likely to be group-based, and to be acts of violence against strangers. As we move from left to right, the social locations and social dynamics



**Chart 1: Patterns of Violent Crime\***



\* the 19 cases involving police officers as complainants have not been included here

shift along with the social relationships between participants. Events involving friends and/or acquaintances are less likely to occur in public spaces and to be group-based, while those involving family members and intimate partners are much more likely to occur in private dwellings and to be one-on-one incidents.

Our aim has not only been to map the patterns of violent crime, but also its gendered nature. As the violence which occurs in the home has come under increasing scrutiny, the issue of whether women are “men’s equals” in violence has also surfaced. In quantitative terms, men are far more likely to appear in Police Incident Reports on charges of violent crime than women. They represented 85 percent of those charged during the period of the study (1991 to 1995). However, when we examined the qualitative differences be-

tween men’s and women’s violence some patterns became evident (see Chart 2). Men’s violence against strangers and friends/acquaintances tends to be intra-gendered—involving groups of men in altercations with other men. As we move from the public to the private sphere, however, men’s victims are more likely to be female—children, female relatives and intimate partners. Women’s violence, on the other hand, displays a different gender dynamic. When women engage in stranger violence, they are most likely to do so in the company of men and their victims are as likely to be male as female. Women’s violence against friends/acquaintances and family members, however, is primarily directed toward other females. Like their male counterparts, women accused are most often charged with violence against their intimate part-

**Chart 2: Qualitative Differences in Men's and Women's Violence**

<b>Men's Violence</b>	<b>Primary Gender Dynamics</b>
<b>strangers</b>	<b>intra-gendered (male/male)</b>
<b>friends/acquaintances</b>	<b>intra-gendered (male/male)</b>
<b>family members</b>	<b>inter-gendered (male/female)</b>
<b>intimate partners</b>	<b>inter-gendered (male/female)</b>
<b>Women's Violence</b>	
<b>strangers</b>	<b>mixed sex-groups</b>
<b>friends/acquaintances</b>	<b>intra-gendered (female/female)</b>
<b>family members</b>	<b>intra-gendered (female/female)</b>
<b>intimate partners</b>	<b>inter-gendered (female/male)</b>

ners. What implications do these findings hold for our efforts to respond to violent crime?

One of the key findings of this study is that police reports reveal a contradiction in the public's perception of violent crime: while it is stranger violence that we fear most, we are much more likely to encounter violence at the hands of people we know, sometimes intimately. That stranger violence made up a relatively small proportion (16 percent) of violent crime is, in large part, due to the impact of "get tough" policies like zero-tolerance which have resulted in an increased number of police reports involving domestic violence and a corresponding increase in the overall levels of violence reported in the media. In other words, *one of the main reasons why Winnipeg ranks higher than most other Canadian cities for violent crime has to do not so much with in-*

*creased levels of violence in the "mean streets of Manitoba," but with the impact of a zero-tolerance protocol which mandates police to lay charges in cases of partner violence.*<sup>12</sup>

Stranger violence not only made up a smaller proportion of violent events. By comparison it was also less serious than other violent events in terms of the violence tactics used and the resulting injuries to victims. This is not to say that we should ignore or downplay the incidence of violence against strangers. But it does suggest that we might re-think our strategies for responding to violent crime. In particular, the fears surrounding stranger violence have produced some counter-productive strategies for reducing crime in the streets. So long as we "don't talk to strangers" or avoid venturing out into public spaces, we become dis-connected from each other and leave our streets empty and barren, thereby creating the

conditions for stranger violence to occur. Installing lighting, cameras and emergency call-boxes will not fix this problem. It is only by actively revitalizing our neighbourhoods and reclaiming the public spaces in our communities that the potential for violence will be reduced.

What is more concerning when we examine police reports on violent crime is the prevalence and seriousness of violence between friends and/or acquaintances. Both men and women were likely to aggress against members of their same sex (with one important exception: men also engaged in sexual violence against their female friends and/or acquaintances). That individuals choose to resolve their conflicts with those they know through violent means leads us to question the wider cultural messages in society that condone violence. And we do not have to look very far. Whether it be Tom Cruise battling it out with his nemesis in the latest *Mission Impossible* movie, “The Rock” going up against “The Undertaker” in a WWF bout or video games like *Soldier of Fortune* where the players can eviscerate, decapitate, dismember and burn their victims, the messages are pretty clear: violence has become normative. To the extent that these messages are directed at young men, we should not be surprised when they begin to act out these scripts in their own lives. Indeed, the police reports are replete with cases of young men “taking it outside” at the local bar to settle their differences with friends or acquaintances. There is also no reason to believe that women will be immune from the cultural messages that permeate our society, especially when those messages herald violence as a means of “getting your way.” So long as violence is held up

as a resource to be used when confronted with problems and conflicts in our lives, then both men and women will be encouraged to act out violently.

Our findings also indicate that the home is certainly not a haven from violence. Men commit sexual violence against their children and other relatives, and women engage in violent acts against female children and siblings. Nevertheless, while both men and women have the capacity for violence, the police reports indicate that women are not “men’s equals,” especially when it comes to partner violence. Contrary to studies that use the Conflict Tactics Scale, our findings tell us that men are more likely to use violence tactics that rely on the use of brute force against their partners, whereas women resort to using weapons or objects (like TV remote controls or laundry baskets) during the course of an event and so-called “female tactics” (like pinching, biting or scratching). Further, women’s complainants are much more likely than men’s to use violence, and women accused are almost seven times more likely than men to receive injuries during the course of a violent event. In these terms, our findings confirm the feminist claim that male violence against women *is* a social problem deserving of public attention and response. Nevertheless, some cautions are in order.

Changing police protocols represented by the zero-tolerance policy of the Winnipeg Police Service have brought more men—and women—into the criminal justice system on charges of violent crime. Whereas partner violence represented 43 percent of all men’s violent crime charges in 1991, by 1995 it represented 64 percent. An even more signifi-

cant change occurred for women. In 1991, 23 percent of women accused's charges were for partner violence. By 1995, it had more than doubled: 58 percent of all violent crime charges against women involved partner violence. The vast majority – 80 percent of the charges laid against women accused and 51 percent of those laid against men accused—were subsequently stayed by the Crown.

While the underlying intent of the zero-tolerance policy was to assist victims of domestic violence (who are predominantly women), zero-tolerance has opened the way for “double-charging” to occur (whereby both partners are charged with a criminal offence when police are called in). Both the accused and the complainant were charged in 55 percent of the cases involving women accused and 10 percent of those involving men. Stays of proceedings were even higher in those cases where double-charging occurred (88 percent versus 70 percent respectively).

Findings such as these raise serious questions about the use of a zero-tolerance policy for responding to partner violence. At the very least, we need to examine the merits of a protocol that removes all discretion from police in deciding whether or not criminal charges are warranted in a particular case. At the same time, we need to ensure that individuals are receiving the help they require when they need it. One promising recommendation that emerged from the public inquiry into the murder/suicide deaths of Rhonda and Roy Lavoie (Schulman 1997) is currently in the process of being implemented as a pilot project by the Winnipeg Police Service. Police officers working in tandem with social workers will target high-risk domestic violence incidents and provide

support and direction to families in need (*Winnipeg Free Press*, November 7, 2000). There are a number of advantages to this approach.

Zero-tolerance resulted in significant increases in the workload of police and Crown attorneys and a corresponding backlog of court cases which, more often than not, eventually ended with a stay of proceedings. This meant that individuals were less likely to get access to help at a time in their lives when they most needed it. By instituting a crisis-intervention team to attend to the matter “as it is happening,” responders will be in a better position to attend to the needs of people in trouble by directing them to appropriate resources and supports in the community. As well, whereas zero-tolerance has led to an “over-criminalization” of families at risk, this new approach has the potential to direct cases away from the criminal justice system and toward social service resources that might better address the root causes of domestic violence. In other words, such an approach has the potential to ensure individuals’ physical safety and to connect them with resources in their community without over-extending the reach of the criminal justice system into people’s lives.

The underlying causes of the violent crime patterns described here are many and complex. They connect to the urban decay encountered by inner city communities, the disappearing social safety net, the sense of alienation and anomie experienced by marginalized groups, some men’s sense of entitlement over the women in their lives, and broader cultural messages that condone and normalize violence as a problem-solving tool. Given the depth and complexity of such causal

factors, is it reasonable to expect that one set of institutions in society— the criminal justice system—will be capable of alleviating the violence? While “getting tougher” on crime may seem to offer a quick and easy fix, the fact remains that the long-term sources for change lie in the more difficult and challenging task of strengthening our communities by providing people with access to the ways and means for resolving their troubles in non-violent ways.

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## Notes

1 In 1996, women made up 18 percent of those charged with violent offences in Winnipeg compared with 12.5 percent for Canada as a whole (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996).

2 For instance, the number of cases of spousal assault where charges were laid in the City of Winnipeg went from 629 in 1983 to 1137 in 1989, an 80 percent increase in six years (Ursel, 1998A).

3 Since that time, the number of cases passing through the court increased dramatically: from 1800 in 1990-91 to 2660 in 1991-92, 3646 in 1992-93 and 4140 in 1993-94 (Ursel, 1998B: 75).

4 This produced a list of eighteen different violence tactics which ranged in seriousness from "uttering threats" to "shooting."

5 Police were the main complainants in 1.9 percent (19) of the cases studied. Because of its small number, this social relationship is not examined here.

6 Eleven percent of stranger events occurred in private dwellings, the remainder (9 percent) occurred in cars, taxis or buses, at leisure centres, or in prisons and court.

7 Since violence does not always end once a relationship is terminated (indeed, it sometimes escalates), we include in this category individuals who are currently in a relationship as well as former or "ex" partners. For the sake of brevity, however, the term "partner" will be used to refer to these relationships.

8 Statistical significance is defined here as  $p < .01$  (i.e. less than one percent of the time or one time in 100 would the observed differences be the result of chance).

9 Three of these tactics— "pulling or cutting hair" (33 percent for women versus 4 per-

cent for men), "sitting on or restraining" (6 percent for women versus 25 percent for men) and "sexual acts" (3 percent for women versus 25 percent for men) were significant at the .001 level.

10 This finding was significant at the .001 level.

11 The gender differences for each of these violence tactics were statistically significant at the .01 level or higher.

12 For example, in 1999 the Winnipeg Police Service made 3,500 arrests in cases involving domestic violence. That same year, police in Edmonton – a city of comparable size but with no zero-tolerance policy – made 889 domestic violence arrests (*Winnipeg Free Press*, July 7, 2000: A1).

# **Mean Streets?**

**The Social Locations, Gender Dynamics, and Patterns of  
Violent Crime in Winnipeg**

**by Elizabeth Comack, Vanessa Chopyk and Linda Wood**

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# Mean Streets?

## The Social Locations, Gender Dynamics, and Patterns of Violent Crime in Winnipeg

### H I G H L I G H T S

Fuelled by newspaper headlines like “*The Mean Streets of Manitoba*,” public concern over levels of violence in our communities has intensified in recent years. The common perception of violent crime is that it is the work of strangers out on the streets at night who are waiting to do us harm. Meanwhile, feminists have drawn attention to the violence that women encounter in their own homes, usually at the hands of their male partners. In response, several writers are now arguing that feminists have been leading us astray, and that women are “men’s equals” in violence. Drawing on research which utilizes the Conflict Tactics Scale, these writers claim that a ‘sexual symmetry’ exists in marital violence.

In the effort to add some clarity to the confusion of mixed messages found in commentaries on violent crime, we used Police Incident Reports to explore the patterns of violent crime in Winnipeg.

Our study is based on a random sample of 1,002 cases (501 women and 501 men) involving charges laid by the Winnipeg Police Service for violent crime (assaults, robberies and murders) over a five year period (1991 to 1995).

The data were analysed according to the main types of social relationship reflected in the event: those involving strangers or people unknown to each other; friends and/or acquaintances; family members; and intimate partners.

## Main Findings

### Stranger Violence

Contrary to the public’s perception, stranger violence represented only 16 percent of the charges laid by the Winnipeg Police Service for violent crime. While one-third of these events occurred “on the streets,” almost half occurred either at or near a drinking establishment or other commercial enterprise. The complainants in these latter events were most likely to be bouncers, security guards and store employees. The event was as likely to occur during the daytime as it was during the evening or nighttime. Rather than “dark strangers,” Caucasian males were the ones most likely to be involved in stranger violence. Compared with the other three types of social relationships we studied, stranger violence was most likely to be a group-based activity. However, it involved less serious violence tactics and resulted in the least frequency of injuries to complainants. Of those injuries, the majority were minor. The main motive behind stranger violence was theft of property.

### Friend/Acquaintance Violence

Violence involving friends and/or acquaintances was not only more prevalent than stranger violence (occurring in 21

percent of the events studied), it also involved more serious violence tactics and a greater frequency of injury to complainants. While men accused were most likely to aggress against other men, 23 percent of their charges involved sexual violence against females (compared with 4 percent for stranger violence). Women accused were most likely to aggress against other females.

### **Family Violence**

Violence against other family members (children, parents, siblings and extended family) represented only 9 percent of the events studied. These events were most likely to involve only one accused and one complainant.

### **Partner Violence**

That women accused are charged with violent offences involving their (mainly female) friends/acquaintances and family members confirms that women have the capacity for violence. However, our findings suggest that women are not “men’s equals” in violence, especially in their encounters with partners.

Partner violence made up the majority (53 percent) of the cases where charges were laid by police over the period under study.

We chart partner violence according to five characteristics: social location; violence tactics used; use of violence by complainants; injuries incurred by accused; and who called the police.

## **Responding to Violent Crime**

Police reports reveal that, while it is stranger violence we may fear most, we are more likely to encounter violence at

the hands of people we know, sometimes intimately.

The home is not a haven from violence. Male violence against women they know is a social problem deserving of serious public attention and response. However, we need to re-examine our strategies.

The zero-tolerance policy implemented in 1993 has resulted in more men – and women – being charged with domestic violence. It accounts for Winnipeg’s high ranking for violent crime compared with other Canadian cities. For instance, in 1991, 23 percent of women accused’s charges were for partner violence. By 1995, 58 percent of all violent crime charges against women were for partner violence.

Yet 80 percent of the charges laid against women and 51 percent of those laid against men were subsequently stayed by the Crown. Double-charging occurred in 55 percent of the cases involving women accused and 10 percent of those involving men. Stays of proceedings were even higher in these cases (88 percent versus 70 percent respectively).

These findings suggest the need to rethink a policy that removes all discretion from police in deciding whether or not criminal charges are warranted in a particular case. Rather, we need to ensure that individuals are receiving the help they need – when then need it.

One promising new development along these lines in Winnipeg is the implementation of a pilot project that teams police officers with social workers to target high risk domestic violence incidents and provide support and direction to families in need. These crisis-intervention teams offer the potential to attend better to the needs of people in trouble, and avoid over-criminalizing families at risk.