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Disrupting Trajectories Leading to Domestic Violence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research into male-on-female domestic violence traditionally focuses on its after-effects, with an emphasis on how victims can keep themselves safe or on the men who have been criminally charged in such incidents. This approach puts the responsibility on the victim to try and protect herself while offering support to the perpetrator only *after* the violence has occurred to prevent recidivism. This policy brief takes a different approach to understanding points of intervention that might prevent domestic violence from occurring in the first place.

Using a robust 10-year dataset supplied by Calgary Police Service, the authors explored a trajectory of criminal behaviour and police interactions prior to an eventual charge for a criminal act involving domestic violence in 2019. While preliminary, the data analysis reported in this brief finds a distinct trajectory of increased criminal behaviour among male perpetrators leading up to a charge in 2019. In fact, the data shows a rising number of police interventions related to complaints involving possible acts of domestic violence during that 10-year period. Very few men in this sample were unknown to police prior to the charge in 2019.

Domestic violence frequently makes headlines, and when femicide is committed, it is often accompanied by announcements of public vigils to be held for the victimized woman along with demands for an end to intimate partner violence. But rarely is the question raised, *why do men continue to be the major perpetrators of this terrible violent act?* And if there is always a passion and commitment to provide support to victims, where is the same passion and commitment to developing policies and strategies to work with men at risk of perpetrating violence and before they commit the offence of domestic violence? The approach of examining male perpetration trajectories analyzed in this policy brief, can help inform legislation, policies, and programs that can not only stop male violence before it starts, but subsequently reduce the suffering of women and their families.

INTRODUCTION

Perpetrators of domestic violence (DV) are overwhelmingly men (Fleming et al. 2015; Hester 2013; Sinha 2013; Statistics Canada 2023). Domestic violence against women — which includes physical, emotional and sexual violence by boyfriends, spouses and other partners — is highly prevalent globally (Sardinha et al. 2022). In Canada, men commit 99 per cent of sexual assaults and 83 per cent of violent incidents against women (Sinha 2013). To date, most research studies, policy and program responses have either focused on the effects of perpetration of DV, placing an emphasis on victims, or have concentrated on working with men who have perpetrated DV after charges have been laid. While valuable, these research and current policy approaches have not focused on stopping male violence from happening in the first place.

This policy brief derives, presents and evaluates preliminary results from an ongoing study of the progression of behaviour that culminates in a criminal charge of DV. We hypothesize that the behaviours of male perpetrators of DV show a progression toward action that ultimately results in a criminal DV charge. If this hypothesis is correct, the development of new policies and programs for DV prevention focused on men and boys could be on the horizon; namely, a community approach that intervenes early in the progression of behaviour to prevent the most violent acts from ever occurring. Refocusing research, policy and community efforts on primary prevention[1] requires a better understanding of the trajectories of DV perpetrators and identifying key intervention points upstream to stop male violence from occurring.

Our research focus is on the behaviours of a sample of men living in a large urban centre who were charged in 2019 with a DV-related criminal charge. Accessing police records from the previous 10 years, we examined the hypothesis that the 2019 criminal DV charge was preceded by other criminal behaviours and police interactions that might predict the ultimate charge.

BACKGROUND

According to the United Nations, DV is "a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse can be emotional, physical, sexual, economic, or psychological actions or threats that influence another person" (United Nations 2023). In Canada, DV refers to violence committed by:

- Spouses (legally married, separated, divorced and common-law, and current and former dating partners who lived together at the time of the incident);

- Parents (biological, step, adoptive and foster);

- Children (biological, step, adopted and foster);

- Siblings (biological, step, half, adopted and foster); and

- Extended family members (e.g., grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and in-laws) (Statistics Canada 2022).

For this paper, we focus specifically on DV committed by current and former legally married spouses, common-law partners, dating partners, former partners and other intimate partners.

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[1]   Primary prevention means "changing the cultural and structural conditions that create opportunities for perpetrators to commit violence while eliminating risk factors and building protective factors to stop initial perpetration of domestic and sexual violence" (Wells et al. 2023).

Canadian research using police data that examines the background and causes of male perpetration of DV against a current or former intimate partner is limited. In analyses where police data have been used, the focus has been on either developing risk assessments in the context of studying recidivism or preventing further acts of DV by those who have been charged with a DV offence (Fitzgerald and Graham 2016; Hilton and Harris 2009; McCormick, Cohen and Plecas 2011; Nicholls et al. 2013; Scott et al. 2015). While risk assessment tools have been effective in assessing an offender's probability of committing an act of DV or being a repeat offender (Dutton and Kropp 2000; Jung and Himmen 2022; Kropp 2018; Seewald et al. 2017; Storey et al. 2014), there appears to be limited research focused on perpetrators' interactions with police prior to a DV charge and the possibility that this history might suggest a predictable trajectory toward an ultimate criminal DV charge.

This type of analysis, referred to in the literature as *trajectory analysis*, is predicated on the principle that individuals may be on specific developmental sequences that lead to a criminal act in the future (Le Blanc and Kaspy 1998). A key issue in this literature is whether escalation in crime seriousness can be predicted. If we can identify specific circumstances or different typologies of perpetrators, we can target interventions to those who are most likely to escalate to increasingly serious crimes and prevent those crimes from occurring. To our understanding, our study is among the first applications of trajectory analysis using longitudinal retrospective police records to assess DV in Canada.

The following policy brief uses a unique police dataset provided by Calgary Police Service (CPS) that allowed us to explore the demographics and characteristics for individuals charged with DV-related offences in 2019. Using a 10-year criminal charge history combined with information on police attendance to domestic-related incidents, we analyzed the incidence and type of criminal charges to determine discernible patterns associated with the 2019 DV charge. This paper provides preliminary results of our investigation into the evidence of a predictable trajectory specifically for male perpetrators of intimate partner violence that resulted in a criminal charge of DV in 2019. We conclude with a discussion of the study's limitations and the next steps required to refine and confirm preliminary findings.

THE DATA

The data presented and discussed in this paper describe criminal charges and domestic conflict encounters by CPS in Calgary, Alberta from 2010 to 2019, specifically for men who were charged with a DV-related offence in 2019 against a female partner or former partner.

Over this 10-year period, Calgary had an average population of 1.2 million people. In 2019, CPS reported there were 4,666 DV incidents and 13,858 domestic conflict encounter calls (City of Calgary Newsroom 2022). A domestic conflict encounter is an interaction that meets the threshold for police involvement but does not result in a charge of a criminal offence.[2]

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[2] Domestic conflict encounters are the sum of police interventions identified in records as domestic information (police called by a bystander or an involved party in an incident, but which did not lead to a police charge); domestic standby (police called by a victim to assist in retrieving belongings after leaving home); and Mental Health Act apprehensions (police called to assist in taking a subject to a designated facility for mental examination).

Information on specific incidents involving perpetrators of DV was tracked using an in-house police information management system maintained by CPS. Data were provided to us after anonymization to ensure no possibility of identification of individual perpetrators.[3] We included perpetrators in the dataset if they were 18 years or older and charged with a DV-related offence in 2019. Offences varied in severity and included charges ranging from property crimes to common assaults and second-degree murder. In addition, information about any other criminal charges levied against the perpetrators included in the dataset was pulled for a 10-year period prior to the DV criminal charge made in 2019 (2010–2019).[4]

Data were limited to charges laid by CPS. No correctional facility, court or other police agency data were available from other agencies to link to the CPS dataset. We calculated timing intervals specific to charged individuals as a 365-day period prior to the report date of the first incident in 2019 that led to a DV-related charge.

Perpetrators' criminal history was described by the number of charges for crimes against property (e.g., break and enter, possession of stolen property, theft); crimes against persons (e.g., various types of assault, robbery, uttering threats); criminal drug offences (e.g., possession of cocaine or methamphetamines); and criminal traffic offences (e.g., driving while disqualified, impaired operation).

Information about the 2019 DV incident included the victim's gender, age and relationship to the perpetrator (spouse, separated or girlfriend). We identified 1,313 distinct individuals for analysis, referred to as perpetrators (or offenders), someone against whom there is sufficient evidence to be held accountable for a criminal offence and is charged. An individual was only included in the dataset once, regardless of how many charges were levied against them in 2019. Police interactions with individuals during 2019 that did not result in a DV criminal charge were not included in the dataset. Thus, the number of perpetrators in our dataset is an undercount of the number of DV charges levied in 2019 as well as the number of DV incidents in Calgary in 2019.

While the primary dataset provided by CPS included all types of DV (e.g., intimate partner, parent-child, etc.) our analysis for this policy brief focuses solely on male perpetrators of violence against female intimate, common-law, dating or ex-partners. This means other situations, such as when children or other family members were victims, or when females were charged in 2019, were excluded from the dataset examined in this paper.

As a result, the focus on male perpetrators of violence against female intimate, common-law, dating or ex-partners resulted in a sample of 934 perpetrators for analysis. From this sample:

• 31 per cent of male perpetrators were aged between 18–30 years;

• 35 per cent were aged between 31–40 years;

• 34 per cent were aged 41 years or over; and

• 23 per cent were aged 28 years or younger.

Thus, we have an incomplete 10-year criminal history on these individuals as they would have been under the age of 18 for a portion of that time.
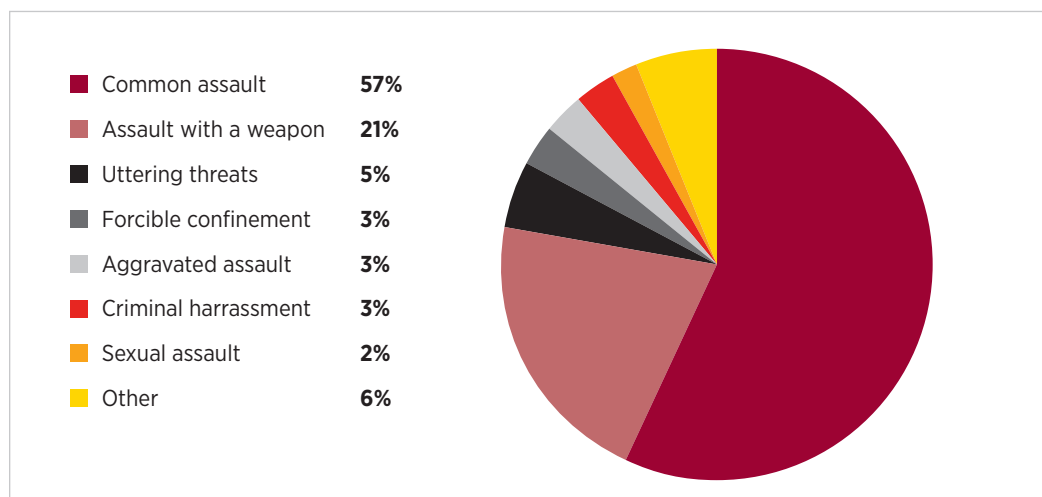
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[3]   An anonymous identifier was created and used to track individual perpetrators. No consistent identifier was provided for victims. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary (certificate REB21-1980), and research approval was received from CPS.
[4]   This may include previous DV criminal charges, something we are unable to determine from the data.

ANALYSIS

From our sample of 934 male perpetrators who were charged with a DV-related offence against a female intimate partner in 2019, Figure 1 summarizes the specific charges associated with a DV incident. Fifty-seven per cent of these incidents involved a charge of common assault and 21 per cent involved a charge of assault with a weapon. Thus, over three-quarters of all DV criminal charges levied in 2019 involved just two Criminal Code sections. The prevalence of those two categories in particular speaks to the pervasiveness of very serious physical violence in domestic violence incidents.

Figure 1: Distribution of the Most Serious Charge Levied in a Domestic Violence-Related Incident, N=934

Common assault	57%
Assault with a weapon	21%
Uttering threats	5%
Forcible confinement	3%
Aggravated assault	3%
Criminal harrassment	3%
Sexual assault	2%
Other	6%

Tables 1a and 1b summarize the decade-long history of police interactions for the 934 males who received a criminal charge in 2019 related to a DV incident.

Table 1a: Ten-year History of *Domestic Violence Police Encounters* for 934 Males Received a Domestic Violence Criminal Charge in 2019

Domestic Violence Encounters	
None	327 (35%)
One or more	607 (65%)
Total	**934**

Table 1b: Ten-year History of *Criminal Charges* for 934 Males Received a Domestic Violence Criminal Charge in 2019

Criminal Charges	
None	482 (52%)
One or more	452 (48%)
Total	**934**

Table 1a reports that 607 (65%) had been involved in a domestic violence encounter with CPS during the 10 years leading to their DV charge in 2019, while 452 (48%) had at least one criminal charge during the 10 years found in Table 1b. Putting the two together, 685 (73%) had one or more interactions with the police, while the remaining 249 (27%) had no police interactions.

In Table 2, we focus on the 10-year history of criminal charges levied against the 452 perpetrators with a history of one or more criminal charges. These 452 men exhibited a deep criminal history. Over 2,400 criminal charges were levied against them at an average of 5.4 criminal charges per individual.

Table 2: Prior Criminal Charges of Males Charged with Domestic Violence Crime in 2019

	Against Property	Against Persons	Involving Drugs	Traffic	Other	Total
Number of Individuals	205	331	76	68	236	452*
Number of Charges	613	790	122	108	791	2,424

Note: *Number of individuals with at least one charge.

The number of charges per person is skewed because many persons have no prior history of criminal charges, and a small number of offenders account for a large proportion of the offending. This pattern matches what is seen elsewhere worldwide (Martinez et al. 2017). Though the average for these 452 men is 5.4 criminal charges per individual, the median is three. This is graphically represented in Figure 2. Just under 70 per cent of these 452 perpetrators had one to five prior charges, while just over 30 per cent had six or more prior charges. Of note, just under four per cent of these men had more than 20 criminal charges levied against them in the 10 years prior to the 2019 DV-related criminal charge.

Figure 2: Number of Criminal Charges for 452 Males with a Criminal History Prior to Domestic Violence Crimes in 2019


Number of Criminal Charges
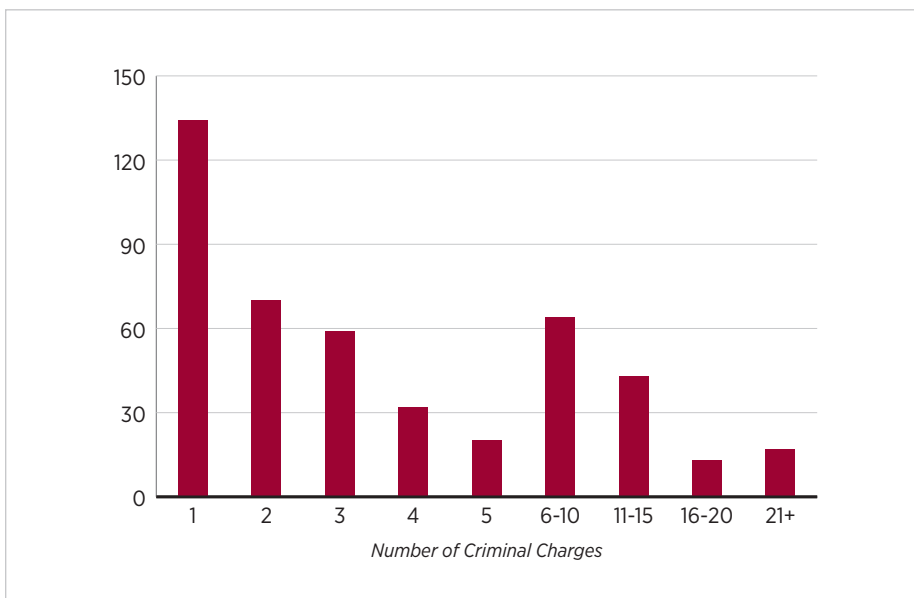
The number of crimes reported in Table 2 is important to recognize but equally important is the trajectory of those crimes. In Figure 3 (below), we report the number of criminal charges against the 452 men by type and by year prior to the 2019 DV charge.

Figure 3(a) reports all criminal offences. The rising bars indicate that as time passed, either the frequency of criminal behaviour increased, or police apprehended and/or charged them more frequently. In the year prior to receiving a DV criminal charge, the average male with a history of criminal charges was charged with 1.4 criminal offences. This indicates that in the year prior to being charged with a criminal DV offence, on average, these men were committing more than twice as many offences as three years prior (average number of offences recorded for 2016 was 0.6).

Figure 3: Number of Prior Criminal Charges against 452 Males Charged with a Domestic Violence Criminal Offence in 2019
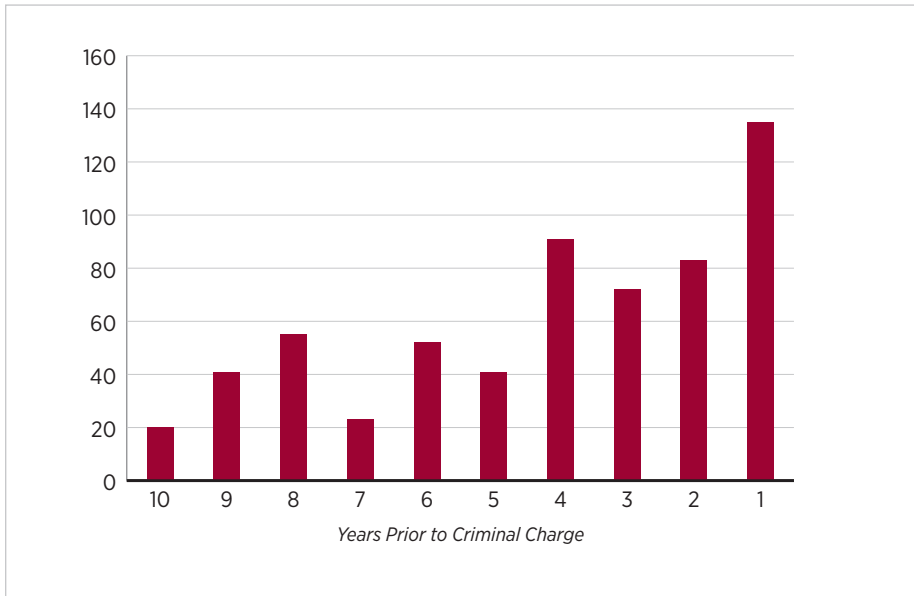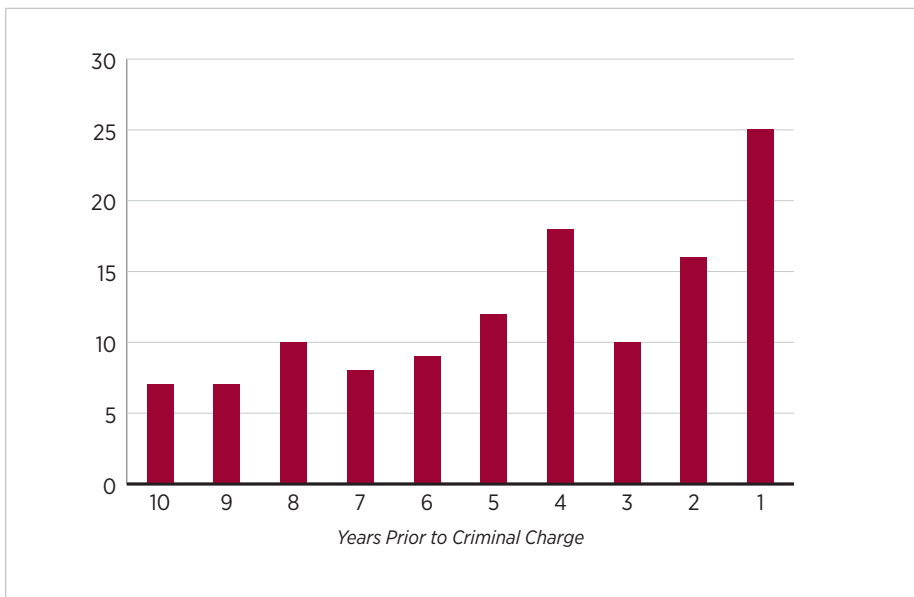
(a) All criminal offences

Years Prior to Criminal Charge

(b) Crimes against persons

Years Prior to Criminal Charge
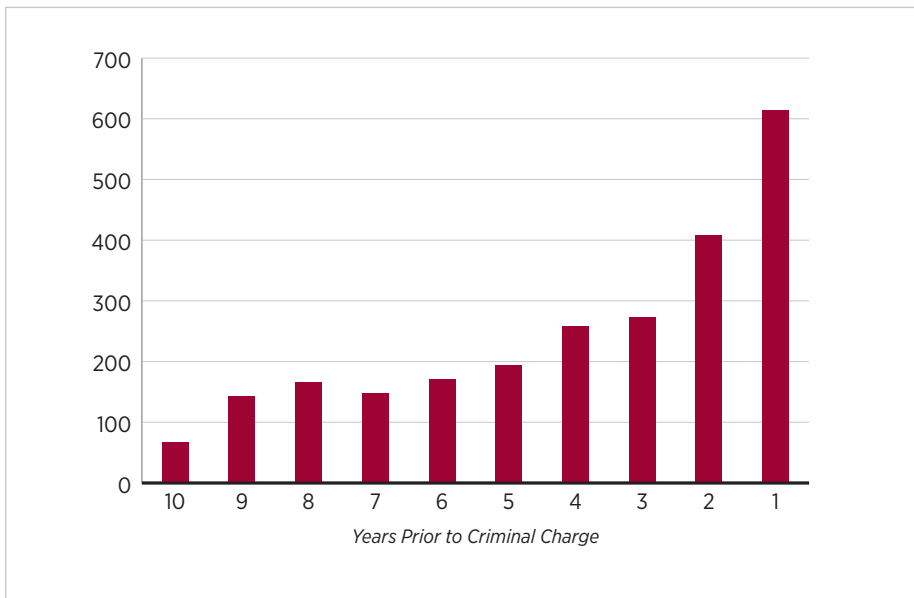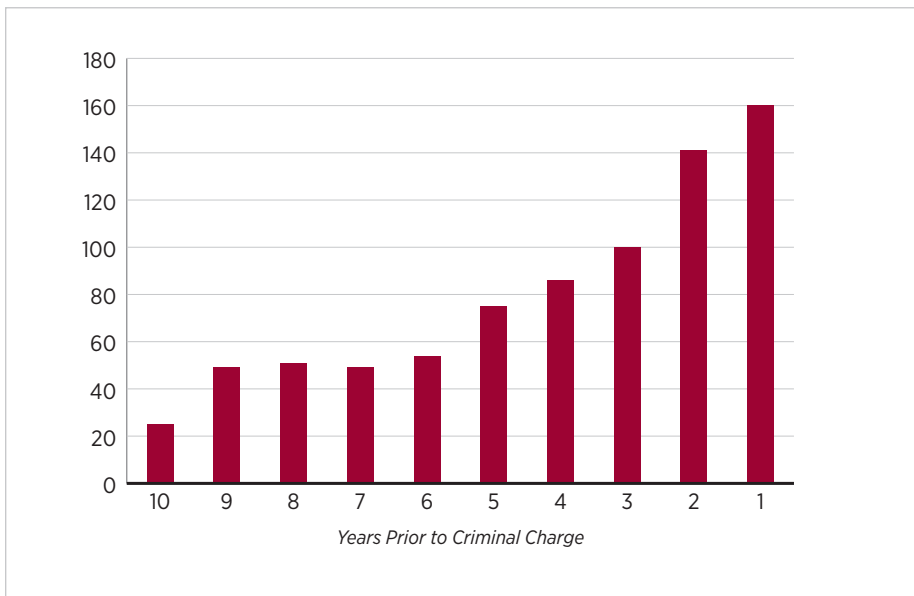
**(c) Crimes against property**

(d) Drug crimes

Our data are rich enough to allow us to look behind the broad crime category of "crimes against persons" shown in Figure 3(b). This is important because not all crimes against a person are alike. As reported in Figure 1, DV charges involving crimes against persons levied in 2019 most frequently involved charges of common assault (57 per cent) and assault with a weapon (21 per cent), charges that are arguably the most harmful to victims. Observing the trajectories of these types of crimes prior to the 2019 charge may be particularly important. We present those trajectories in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Number of Criminal Charges Prior to Assault and Assault with a Weapon for 452 Male Perpetrators with Criminal Charges Prior to 2019 DV Charge

Years Prior to Criminal Charge

■ Common Assault   ■ Assault with Weapon
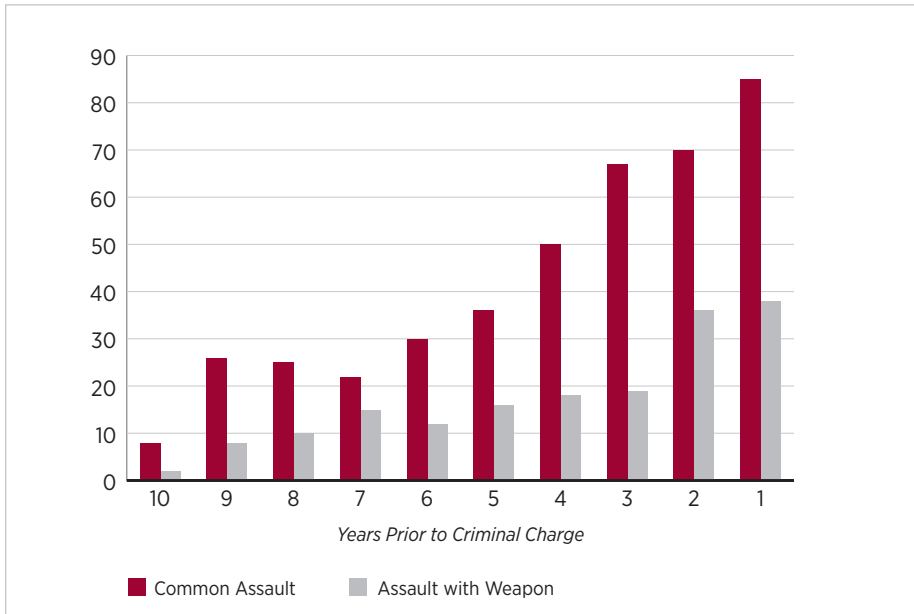
Data presented in Figure 4 show that the trajectory of common assault charges ahead of the DV criminal charge levied in 2019 is especially strong.

Finally, in Figure 5, we focus on the history of domestic conflict encounters prior to the DV-related charge laid in 2019. These are encounters that meet the threshold for police involvement but do not result in a criminal offence charge. The upward trajectory of such encounters is pronounced for both those men with no criminal history prior to the 2019 charge and for men with a criminal history in the 10 years prior to the 2019 charge. The upward trajectory is particularly pronounced for those with a criminal history.

Figure 5: Number of Domestic Conflict Encounters in Years Prior to a Domestic Violence Criminal Charge

Years Prior to Criminal Charge

■ Men with criminal history (N=452)   ■ Men with no criminal history (N=482)
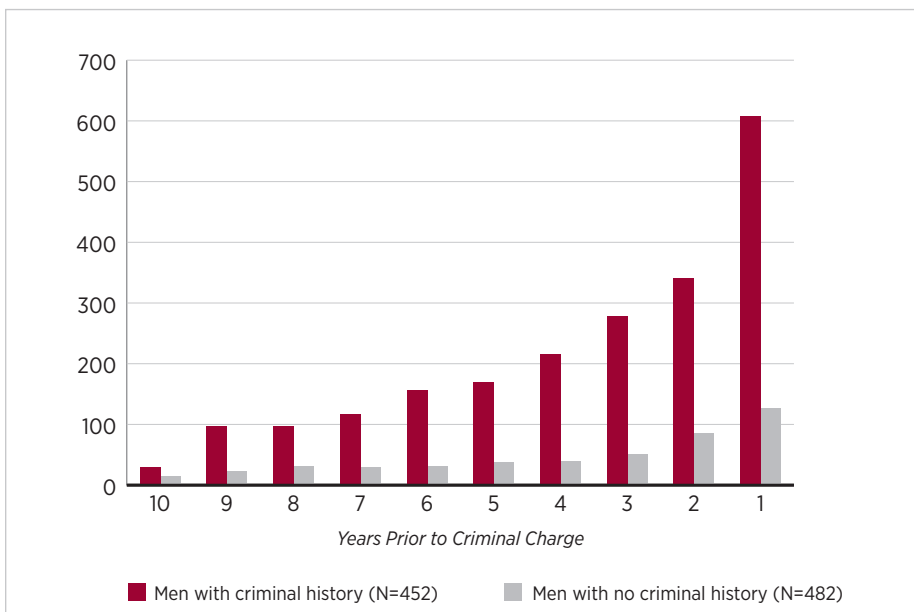
LIMITATIONS

The analysis in this policy brief is limited to revealing patterns of previous police interactions with males who would eventually be charged with a criminal offence involving domestic violence. We do not have information on those who may have had criminal charges during the historical time period but were not charged with a DV offence. As a result, though we can highlight the characteristics of those with a DV charge and can observe the possibility of there being an observable trajectory of behaviour leading to a crime involving domestic violence, we cannot use the data currently available to predict who will commit a crime involving domestic violence. Our analysis is limited by its focus on males and one domestic violence charge in 2019 involving only a current or past female intimate partner. Further details on the full sample will be analyzed in our future work to meet our objective of addressing gaps in knowledge regarding the trajectory of perpetration of DV.

DISCUSSION

While certainly preliminary, the information presented here supports the hypothesis that individuals may be on specific developmental sequences that lead to a criminal domestic violence act in the future. If forthcoming research can show a relationship between type and frequency of police encounters, then the growing frequency of police involvements, either in the form of criminal charges or domestic conflict encounters, may be interpreted as a warning of an impending DV incident leading to a criminal charge. If so, it may be possible for police and the legal system to both change their practices and to involve support services at an earlier phase of a perpetrator's behavioural trajectory to reduce the likelihood that it continues to a DV charge.

We hope that governments, police, community groups and the legal system can use the results of our research to influence policies and practices to better support early intervention activities to reduce DV incidence rates by disrupting the trajectory of male violence. Without accurate information on the conditions and red flags related to DV offending, it is hard to target timely and appropriate interventions in ways that can reduce both the incidence and burden of abuse. Other research has noted that the lack of information on the trajectory of male perpetration means that many current programs and practices are not as effective as they could be (Day et al. 2009). An important goal of our research agenda is to provide that type of information to police organizations along with community agencies and policy-makers, particularly in the legal system, thereby increasing the efficacy of preventative programs and policy responses. While CPS has a long history of partnering with community-based organizations and they have shared much success on reducing recidivism, we think by targeting supports for men earlier with community-based partners, along with legal reforms, we can reduce incidents of DV and, most importantly, the trauma suffered by victims and their families.

CONCLUSION

Instead of focusing on incidence rates and victims of DV, our research agenda narrows in on the background of perpetrators, specifically their criminal history and other contextual data over 10 years, which may be associated with a higher likelihood of a DV criminal charge at a future date. This unique perspective addresses a serious and growing concern for femicide, which holds responsible not only the male perpetrators of DV but also state and judicial structures that normalize and reinforce misogyny. We hope this new approach of examining perpetrator trajectories will lead to identifying new legislation, policies and programs that can stop male violence before it starts.

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