

Date:

To: Mayor
and Council Members,

From:

Re: Declare Intimate Partner Violence as an Epidemic and ensure that it is integrated into the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan.

I am writing as a concerned citizen. Intimate partner violence (IPV), sometimes called spousal abuse or domestic violence refers to any form of physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse between intimate partners of any gender or sexual orientation, who may be married, common law, living together, or dating. It can also continue to happen after the relationship has ended.

There is no specific population affected by IPV, it impacts people of all genders, ages, socioeconomic, racial, educational, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. IPV continues to be a serious issue in Ontario. Police reported intimate partner violence is on the rise for the 7th consecutive year and there has been a large increase in police-reported intimate partner sexual assaults (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Statistics Canada recorded 788 homicide victims in 2021; of those, 90 were killed by an intimate partner, an increase from 2020, when there were 84 recorded victims of intimate partner homicide, and 2019, when there were 79 victims (Statistics Canada, 2022). Almost half, (44%) of all Canadian women have experienced IPV in their lifetime and 54% of 2SLGBTQIA+ people have also experienced it in their lifetime.

Renfrew County was the site of a major inquest after the murders of three women in 2015, Carol Culleton, Anastasia Kuzyk and Nathalie Warmerdam. The inquest jury filed a total of 86 recommendations. The first recommendation called on the Ontario Government to formally declare intimate partner violence as an epidemic. The Ontario government rejected the recommendation to declare IPV an epidemic, stating that “intimate partner violence would not be considered an epidemic, as it is not an infectious or communicable disease”. However, our friends at the VAW Coordinating Committee of Windsor-Essex have pointed out that this rationale is deeply flawed.

According to the Merriam Webster, definition, an epidemic can be described as “effecting, or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time,” an “outbreak of disease that spreads quickly and effects, many individuals at the same time” and “an outbreak or product of sudden, rapid spread, growth, or development.” Based on this, IPV does not meet the definition of an epidemic as an “outbreak of disease”, however, it certainly meets the criteria of affecting a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population.

IPV affects the lives of survivors in many ways and extends beyond the individual to impact the social fabric of families, social networks, and communities. Likewise, intergenerational transmission of IPV cannot be ignored. Children who are exposed IPV have an increased risk of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress reactions, behaviour difficulties, sleep disturbances, lower levels of cognitive functioning, and peer problems Tabibi, Baker and Nonomura (2020), as well as using abusive behaviours in their adult lives.

In addition to trauma and loss of life, there are economic impacts associated with IPV. For example, the Department of Justice Canada noted that in 2009, the total estimated cost of spousal violence was \$7.4 billion, with the most direct economic impact being primarily on victims. Of the total estimated costs, \$6 billion was incurred by victims as a direct result of intimate partner violence through seeking medical attention, being hospitalized, lost wages, missing school, and stolen or damaged property (Department of Justice Canada, 2021) Intimate partner violence is also the leading cause of homelessness among women in Canada (Homeless Hub, 2021). In a more current pilot study Bowlus and MacQuarrie (2022) investigated the costs of IPV in the workplace, it was found that respondents who have experienced IPV are more likely to be absent or suffer from absenteeism, with the effects estimated at one additional lost month of work per year, which translates to 1.7-2.7% in lost productivity. Thus, IPV also has a significant impact on the workplace environment.

The VAW Coordinating Committee of Windsor-Essex also points out that recognizing IPV as an epidemic would align with global perspectives and leaders in health. For example, the World Health Organization has classified violence against women as a “global health problem of epidemic proportions” and the United Nations “Secretary-General has referred to violence against women and girls as the world’s, longest, deadliest pandemic. The initial recommendation to declare IPV an epidemic is based on the understanding that epidemic status extends beyond the realm of infectious disease and rather acknowledges the pervasive and widespread impacts of IPV on individuals, families, and communities.

Declaring IPV an epidemic would show victims/survivors that our municipal government understands the seriousness and urgency of IPV. Many victims/survivors of IPV are isolated and carry a lot of shame about what they are experiencing. They are often afraid to talk to anyone about it because they worry that they won’t be believed (Cross, 2023). Declaring IPV an epidemic will take away some of that shame and fear and make it easier for victims/survivors to come forward and to get the support they need.

Given the rise in reported IPV cases and the increase in victims of intimate partner homicide, we are calling on you, our local government to understand the importance and urgency of IPV and to declare intimate partner violence an epidemic, as well as to ensure that it is integrated into the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan.

Thank you for your time.