

Virtual National Conference May 11-14, 2021

Canadian Domestic Homicide  
Prevention Initiative



# Making Sense of Domestic Homicide: Definitions and Data

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Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative Conference

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Project 895-2015-1025



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

May 11, 2021

# Agenda



1. Why care about definitions?
  - Our experiences with the CDHPIVP
2. Case examples
  - Inclusion vs. Exclusion
3. Nationwide trends & patterns (2010-2019)
4. Challenges in coordinating data collection
5. Panel discussion: key issues related to definitions & data among the vulnerable populations

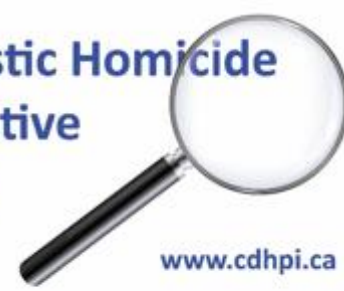


# CDHPIVP definition

Domestic homicide is defined as the killing of a current or former intimate partner, their child(ren), and/or other third parties.

- An intimate partner can include people who are in a current or former married, common-law, or dating relationship\*.
- Other third parties can include new partners, other family members, neighbours, friends, co-workers, helping professionals, bystanders, and others killed as a result of the incident.

# Defining domestic homicide: Intimate relationships

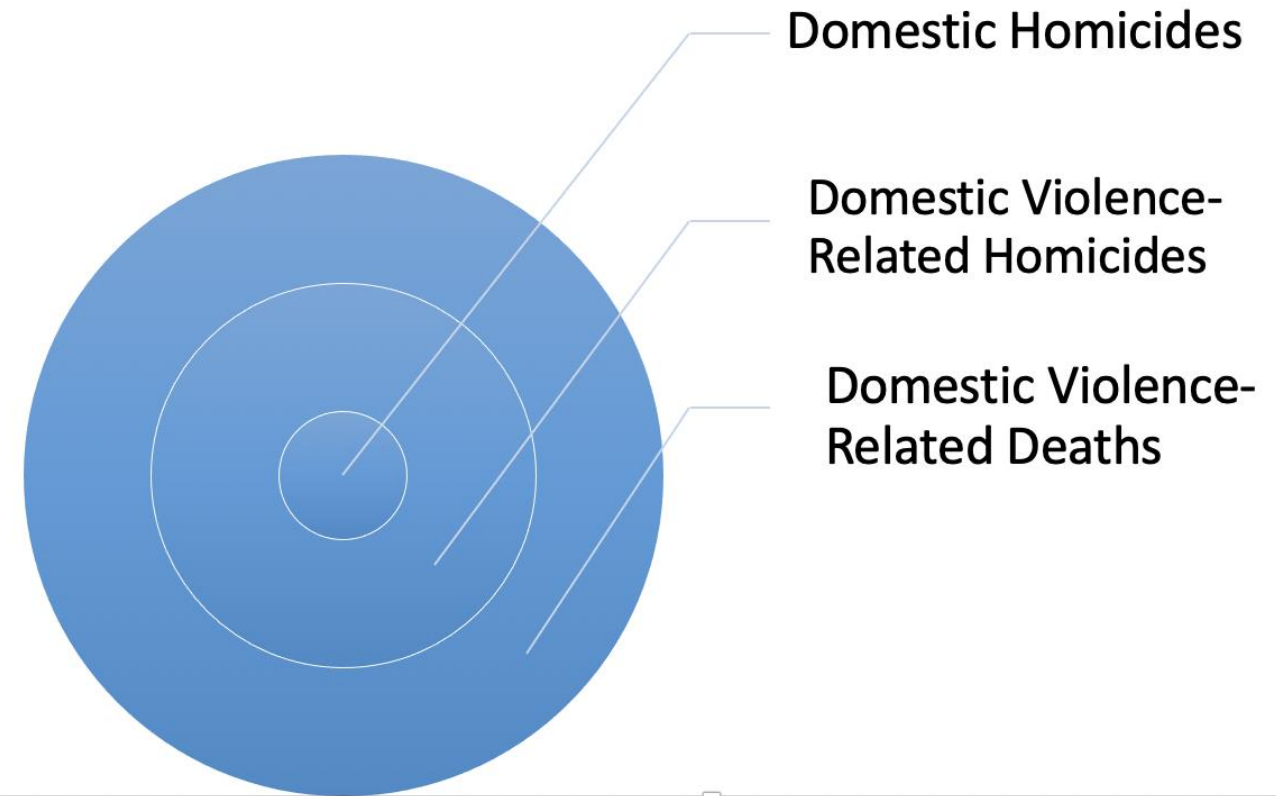


- Domestic Violence Death Review Committees and known definitional issues
- Same-sex relationships
- Defining dating relationships
  - Defining ‘intimacy’
  - Relationship duration
  - Age

*“Officers in the McArthur-related investigations were often unfamiliar with the missing men’s communities – most particularly the LGBTQ2S+ communities and the intersection of those communities with others, such as South Asian or Muslim communities. This meant that these investigations were conducted differently, at a systemic level, from investigations involving affected communities within the officers’ experience, expertise, or ‘comfort zone’”. (Epstein, 2021, p. 60)*

# Defining domestic homicide: Third parties and broader context

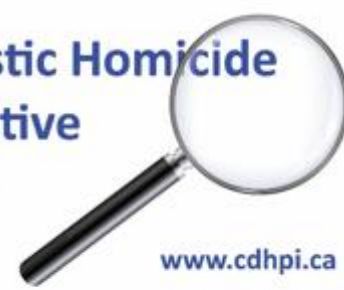
- Capturing lives lost to domestic violence involves looking beyond the victim/perpetrator dyad
- Third parties
- Broader context of deaths involving domestic violence





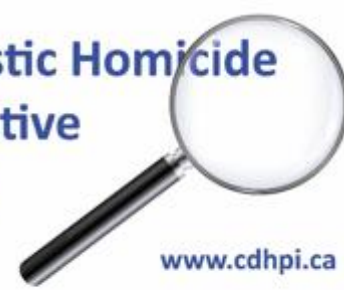
# Case example: Dating

- 21-year-old woman and 32-year-old man, met on online dating site, the accused picked her up and they went for drinks
- Returned to his place and had sex
  - Described by Crown prosecutor as a “hook-up”
- In trial, [male] accused reports the [female] victim assaulted him and held a knife to his throat
- Accused reports he does not remember anything after that, turned around to find victim on floor, deceased
- On trial for second-degree murder
- **Definitional consideration: Dating relationship?**



## Case example: Domestic violence-related homicides

- 26-year-old male victim was visiting his girlfriend's home
- His friend was there too because they were worried about her ex-partner
- After friend leaves, ex-partner showed up, forced his way in, and shot the current partner
- Perpetrator was later found deceased (homicide-suicide)
- Victim's girlfriend and her two children were unharmed
- **Definitional consideration: Third party victim**



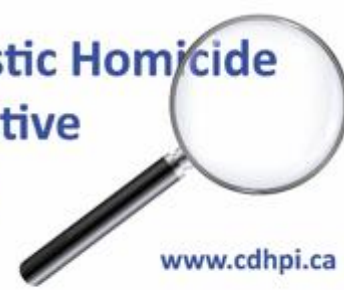
# CDHPIVP Databases

- **Goal was to develop 2 databases:**
  - Database 1:* court documents/media, primary data collected from public documents.
  - Database 2:* coroner/medical examiner files, agreements secured with 5 jurisdictions, initial data collected, but incomplete due to challenges posed by COVID-19.
- **Outcome: Database 1 focus of this presentation (2010-2019)**
  - 718 domestic homicide cases have been identified, involving 815 victims and 760 accused
  - An additional 254 homicide victims have been identified as potential domestic homicides but not yet included in Database 1

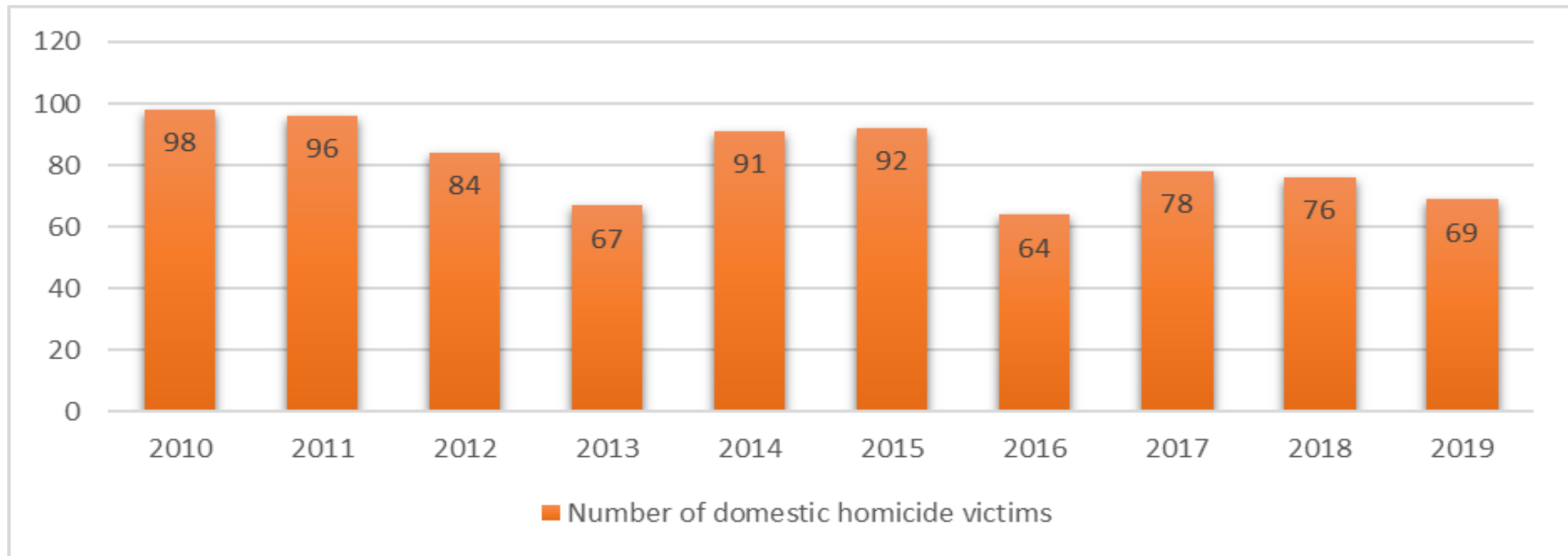


# Annual trends

Full sample

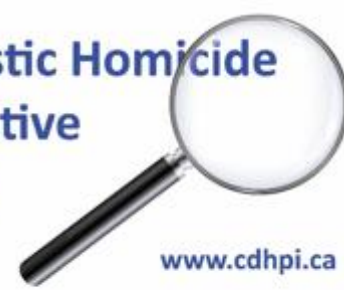


## Annual distribution of domestic homicide victims, Canada, 2010-2019 (N=815)

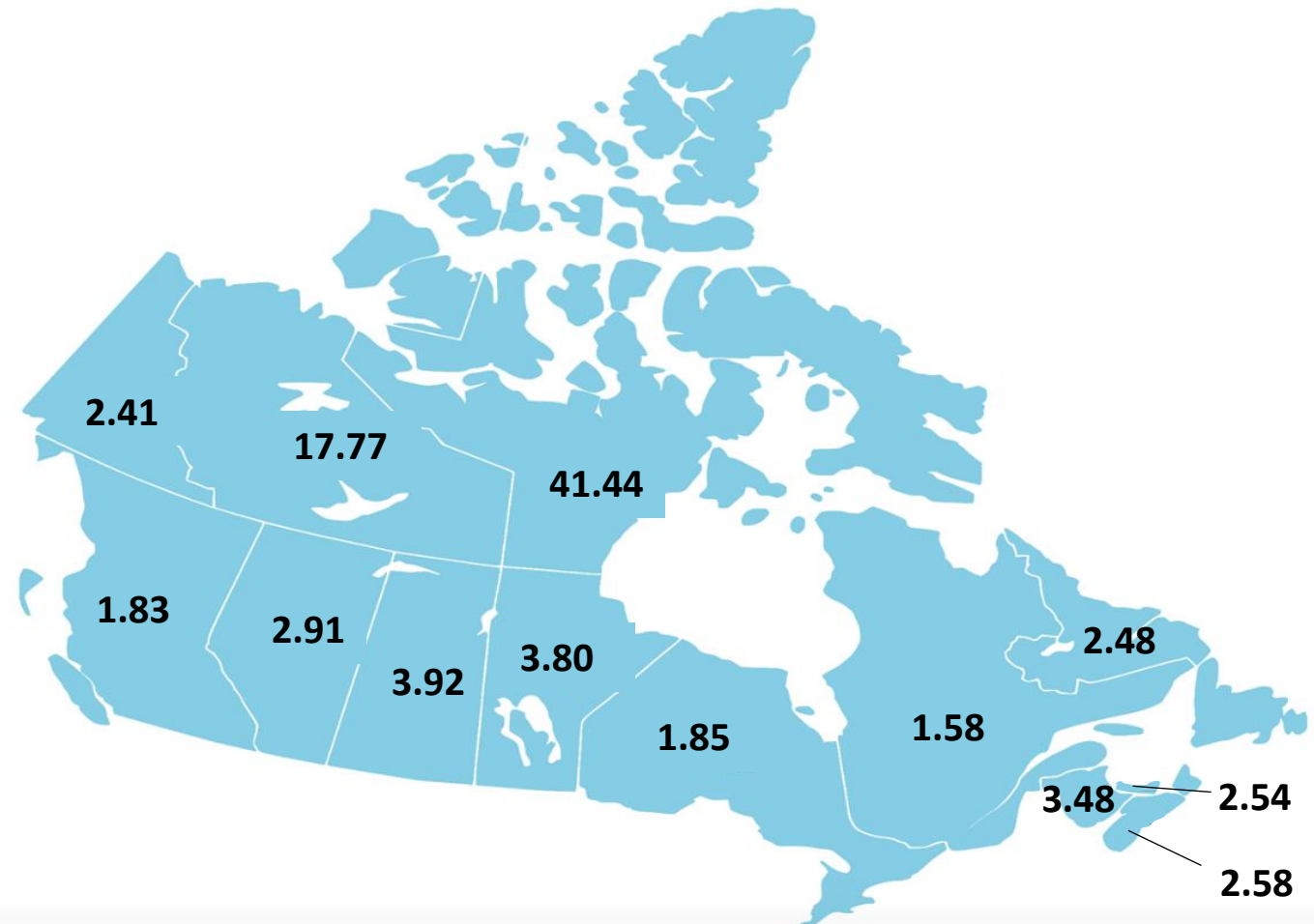


# Geographic trends

Full sample



- Highest number of victims killed in Ontario, then Quebec, and Alberta.
- Lowest number of victims in Yukon, Prince Edward Island, and Northwest Territories.
- However, adjusting for population size, highest rates were in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, then Saskatchewan and Manitoba.





# Demographic characteristics

Full sample

Most adult victims were female (79%)

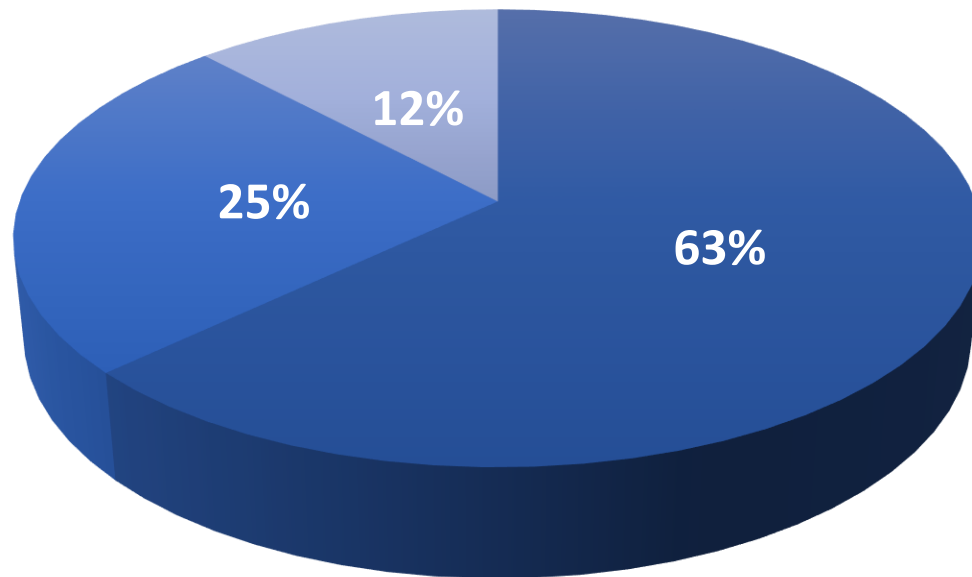
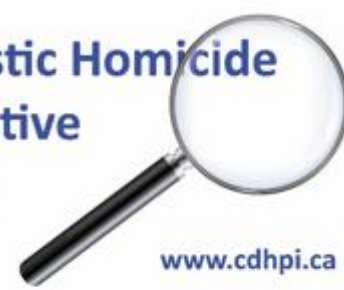
- Average age of 41 years

Most accused were male (86%)

- Average age of 41 years

# Victim-accused relationship

Full sample



- Current relationships
- Estranged relationships
- Other

- Most victims in current intimate partner relationship with accused (N=463; 63%)
- One quarter estranged from accused (N=183; 25%)
- Remaining victims shared a non-intimate relationship (N=89; 12%)
  - i.e., other family members, strangers, friends, or a new intimate partner of primary target, etc.



# Incident characteristics

## Full sample

### Location:

- Most victims killed in private residence (73%).

### Method:

- Most common methods were stabbing (35%), firearms (27%), beating (13%), strangulation (12%).
- Almost half of all victims (46%) killed using excessive force.

### Suicide:

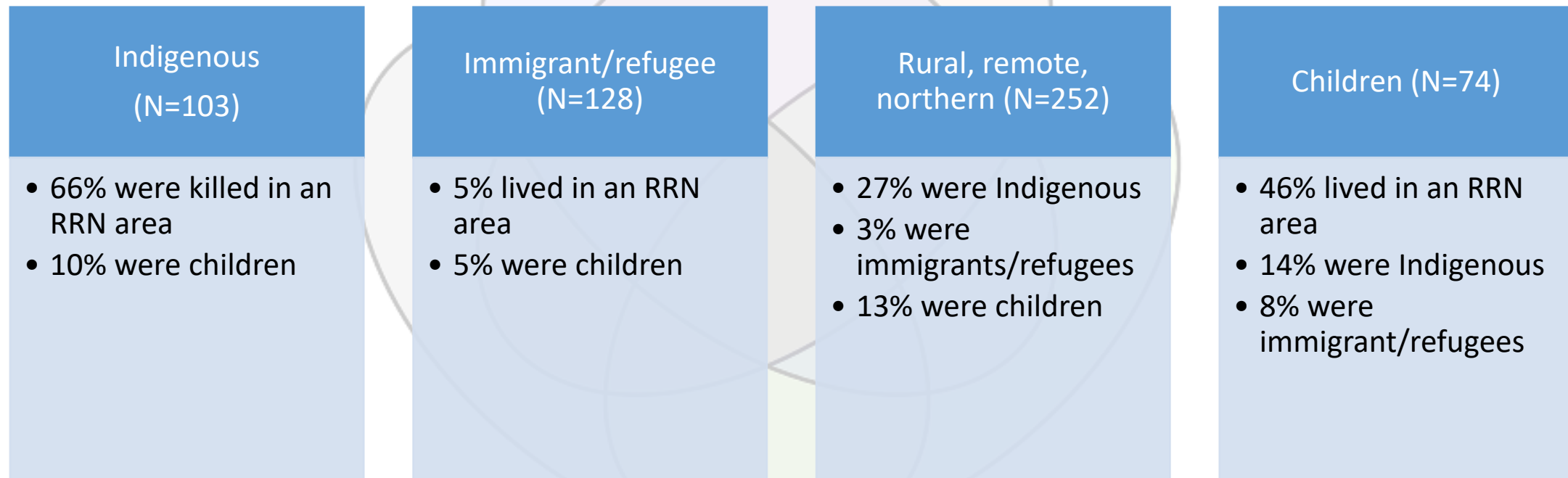
- Of the 760 accused, 21 percent died by suicide.
- Those who died by suicide were primarily male (98%).





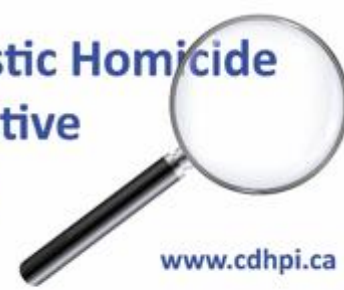
# Vulnerable populations

- Of the 815 domestic homicide victims, 439 (54%) were identified as belonging to one or more of the four focal populations:



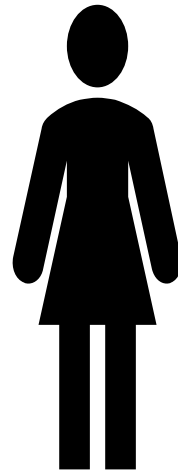
# Victim characteristics

## Vulnerable populations



- Most victims were female, but some variation documented:

- Indigenous (73% female)
  - Average age of 31 years
- Immigrant/refugee (86% female)
  - Average age of 41 years
- RRN (77% female)
  - Average age of 41 years
- Children (53% female)
  - Average age of 6 years



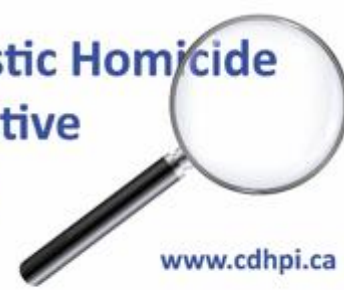
Females comprised the greatest proportion of all victims, but more so among immigrant and refugee populations. Almost an equal gender split among children killed in context of domestic violence.

Aside from children, Indigenous peoples were younger, on average, than other domestic homicide victims.



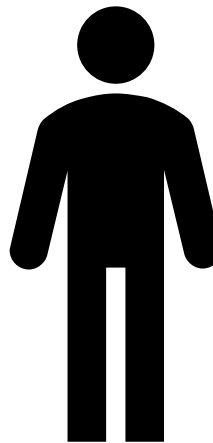
# Perpetrator/accused characteristics

## Vulnerable populations



- Most accused were male, but some variation documented:

- Indigenous (73% male)
  - Average age 33 years
- Immigrant/refugee (92% male)
  - Average age of 42 years
- RRN (86% male)
  - Average age of 43 years
- Children (82% male)
  - Average age of 37 years



While males are the most common perpetrators across all groups, higher proportion among immigrant and refugee victims.

Individuals accused of killing Indigenous victims and children were younger, on average, than other accused.

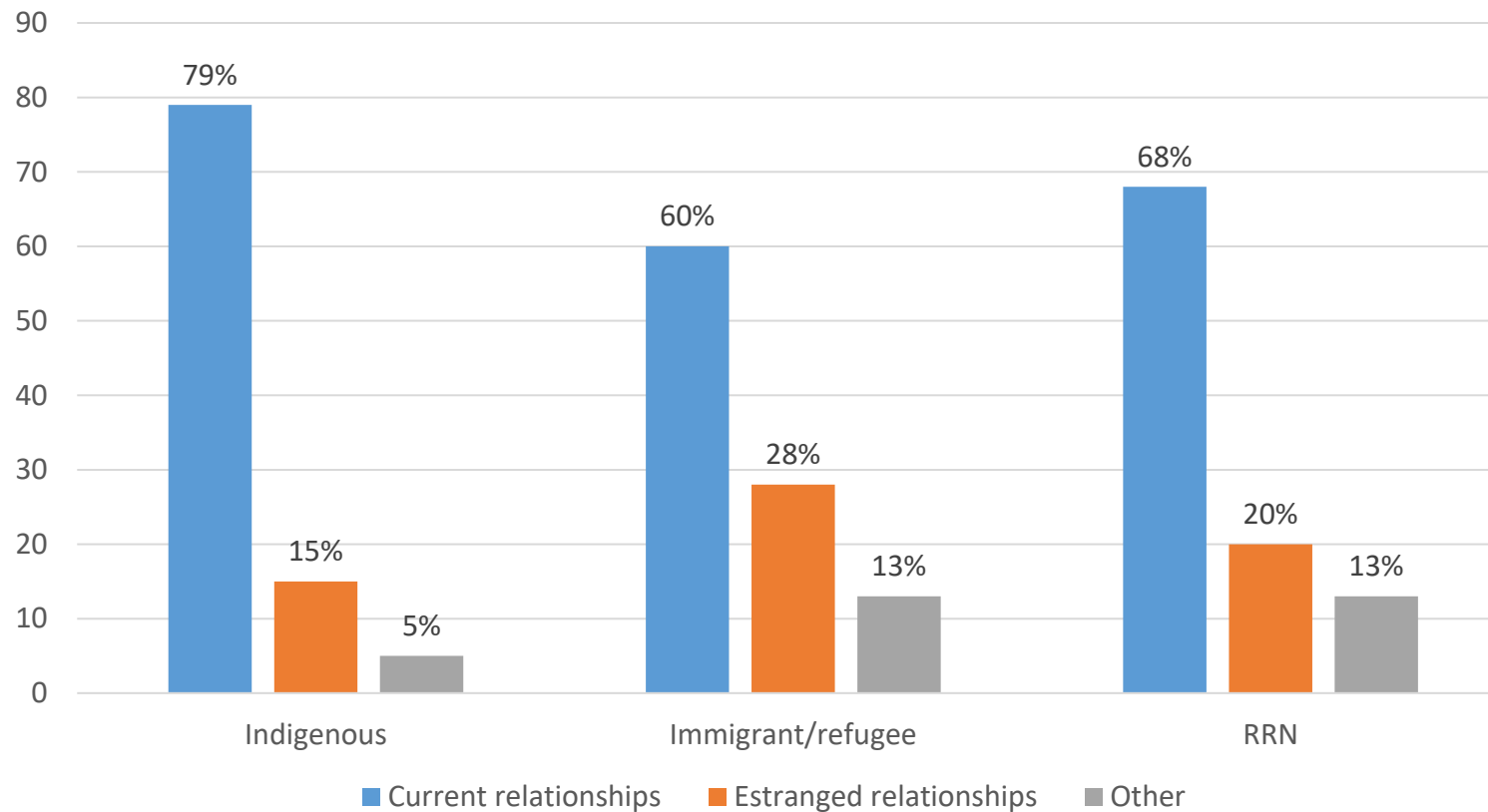
Accused who killed children most likely to die by suicide (50%); those who killed Indigenous victims least likely (10%).



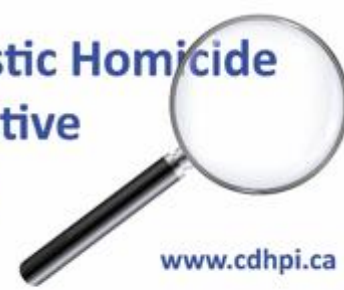


# Relationship status

## Vulnerable populations



The largest proportion of victims were in current intimate partner relationship with accused



# Relationship Type

## Vulnerable populations

- The most common relationship type varied according to vulnerable population:

### Indigenous

- Current common-law (55%)

### Immigrant/refugee

- Current legal marriages (54%)

### RRN

- Current common-law (38%) or legal marriages (28%)

### Children

- Biological child of accused (70%)



# Method of killing

## Vulnerable populations

### Indigenous

- Stabbing (40%)
- Beating (34%)
- Firearms (11%)

### Immigrant/refugee

- Stabbing (41%)
- Firearms (22%)
- Beating (16%)

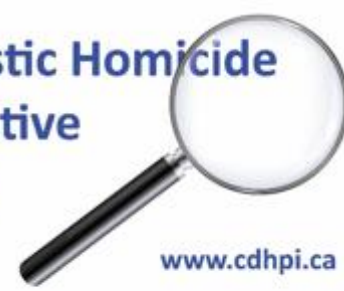
### RRN

- Firearms (41%)
- Stabbing (22%)
- Beating (15%)

### Children

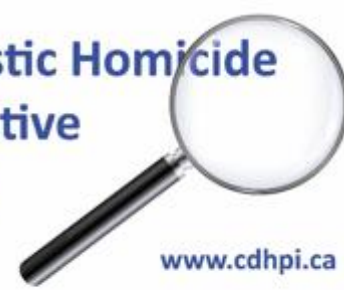
- Firearms (24%)
- Arson (21%)
- Stabbing (16%)

# Challenges when documenting domestic homicide



- Identifying clear definitional parameters in research, across jurisdictions.
- Privacy and confidentiality issues when dealing with coroner/medical examiner data.
- Limitations of available, accessible data sources.
  - Variations by type of homicide (e.g., homicide-suicide)
  - Variations by characteristics of those involved
  - Data quality and completeness low (e.g., separation, prior violence)
  - Inability to capture information on key social identities which compound marginalization and vulnerability to domestic homicide (i.e., intersectionality).
  - Emphasis on individual rather than community- or societal-level factors and latter are often more important particularly for the groups examined (i.e., social ecological lens)
- Time and resources required to sustain data collection over time.

# Indigenous peoples

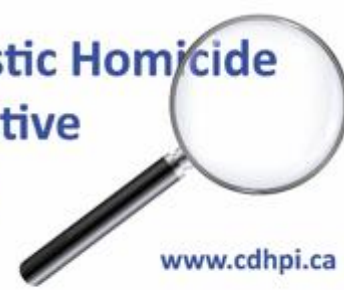


- Media coverage is often brief, with missing detail about victim-accused relationship, esp. if remote or Northern communities.
- Cases of missing and murdered women where domestic violence may play a role often unsolved or may not be identified as domestic homicide.
- Overemphasis on individual factors rather than community-level factors such as poverty, lack of basic resources (e.g., clean drinking water), culturally-appropriate services (e.g., Indigenous, women led responses to violence), and public transportation to access services.
- Inability to capture societal-level factors such as how the ongoing legacy of colonization shapes the context in which this violence occurs and related experiences of racism and discrimination.

# Rural, Remote and Northern

- Lack of consensus on what is rural, remote, and northern
- RRN identity often overlaps with other identities (e.g., Indigenous, immigrant/refugee, children) underscoring need for intersectional lens.
- Emphasis on individual-level factors precludes examination of how social and geographic isolation impacts risk and safety.
- Lack of data on accessibility and availability of guns, legal or otherwise, precludes examination of role played in domestic homicides and in domestic violence generally.
- Remote location hinders help seeking and may increase potential for collateral victims (who intervene when violence escalates).

# Immigrant/refugee



- Narrow definitions may not capture dynamics for families from what are often perceived as more collectivist cultures.
- Data cannot capture power, control, and victim vulnerability which are key because social isolation will also stem from cultural & linguistic barriers (e.g., lack of intersectional lens).
- Dynamics of domestic violence within parent-child and in-law relationships may be particularly important to explore, but little data.
- Emphasis on individual-level risk factors and ‘culture’ preclude an understanding of how other community- and societal-level racism and discrimination impact experiences of and responses to violence.

# Children

- Lack of information in media & court files on motive (requires detailed reviews by DVDRCs).
- Lack of details on family court proceedings.
- Children may be killed as a result of:
  - (1) attempting to protect a parent during a violent episode.
  - (2) part of an overall murder–suicide plan by a parent who kills entire family.
  - (3) As revenge against partner who decided to end relationship or for other perceived betrayal.

Even when children survive, they witness horrific trauma and lose both parents (death and jail or murder-suicide)





# Key takeaways

- All definitions have limitations in capturing the full picture of lives lost to DV.
- CDHPIVP able to collect *some* data on domestic homicides in general and specific to vulnerable groups *to varying degrees*.
- Looking at domestic homicide in the context of vulnerable populations reveals specific definitional issues that need to be considered.
- In research and practice, central challenge is to balance inclusiveness with need to make meaningful risk assessment, risk management, and safety planning recommendations
- An intersectional, multi-level approach with attention to social structural factors (e.g., systemic marginalization, colonization, racism, poverty) remains a key, yet unattainable, goal with current data.

# Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative



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Initiative canadienne sur la  
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homicides familiaux