



News Release

1.8 million Albertans have experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime

That is 43% of Alberta's population – almost one in every two people

Edmonton and Calgary – January 29, 2020 – Until now, the most recent data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Canada was from a study chaired by Dr. Robin Badgely that took place 36 years ago.

Partnering with the Government of Alberta and the reputable research firm of R.A. Malatest and Associates, the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (AASAS) undertook research modelled on the 1984 study but expanded to gather information on sexual assault throughout the lifespan – under the age of 18, over the age of 18 and combined data.

The key findings of this research - Prevalence of Sexual Assault and Childhood Sexual Abuse in Alberta (2020) - provide insight into the prevalence and nature of Albertan's experiences of childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault throughout their lifetime.

"With an estimated 1.8 million individuals in Alberta experiencing sexual abuse in their lifetime, this research shows us that sexual abuse is a health and safety issue of epidemic proportions" said **Debra Tomlinson, CEO of AASAS**. "Albertans have a strong history of coming together to help each other in times of need. People who experience sexual abuse are our family members, our friends and our colleagues. And each and every one of us has a role to play in ensuring survivors get support."

Added Honourable Minister Leela Sharon Aheer, Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women: "In order to combat gender-based violence it is important that we understand the landscape in which we stand. It is heartbreaking that so many Albertans are impacted by abuse and violence in all forms. Our Government will utilize this current and long overdue information as we move forward in cooperation with community organizations to inform how best to make an impact, support survivors and end gender-based violence together."

Added Honourable Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Community and Social Services: "The Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services provides compassionate and caring support to survivors of sexual abuse and help to those who need to be believed. Research is important, and our government will continue to address the prevalence of sexual abuse in our communities. We have recently passed Alberta's version of Clare's Law. We remain committed to providing supports and services to survivors of sexual violence."

Added Debra Tomlinson: "Understanding the problem of sexual violence is key to finding solutions. The experience of Sexual violence is linked to some of our most serious health and social issues like, mental illness, human trafficking, suicide, homelessness and domestic violence. These study findings have the potential to make a positive difference in the health and safety of all Albertans."

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Edmonton:
Calgary:

Angela Joyce: aj@whiterabbitcommunications.com or 403.681.9286
Cheryl Wallach: cwallach@aasas.ca or 403.860.6257

Background

How the survey was conducted

This groundbreaking, Alberta-based research was conducted by R.A. Malatest and Associates, and made possible by support from the Government of Alberta, which included funding from the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and Health.

Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, the Human Research Ethics Board required the design and implementation of two pilot studies before giving final approval to go ahead with the complete study in 2019.

Surveyors were trained by AASAS sexual assault centres before administering the survey, and respondents who wanted support were connected directly to Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence.

Over 1,500 adults over the age of 18 were surveyed from all areas of Alberta. To administer the survey, the research team procured a general population sample.

Key Findings

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse over the Lifespan

Forty-five percent of adult Albertans have experienced some type of sexual abuse or violence in their lifetime. That's almost one in every two.

The number of individuals surveyed (adults over the age of 18) who experienced sexual abuse at some point in their lifetime, is estimated to be 1.48 million Albertans. This does not include however, children currently living in Alberta.

If we consider the current population of children in Alberta (955,799) and use the 34% prevalence rate of childhood sexual abuse from our study, we can estimate that the number of children who are experiencing childhood sexual abuse in Alberta is approximately 325,000. Therefore, the total number of Alberta residents who have experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime is estimated at 1.80 million (1.48 Million + 325,000). Based on these results, the estimated prevalence rate of sexual abuse in Alberta is approximately 43%.

Like the Badgley research, this study asked people about eight different types of sexual abuse.

Of all types of sexual abuse surveyed, 92% reached the threshold of a crime when perpetrated against adults. 100% reached the threshold of a crime when perpetrated against children.

Two in three females and one in three males experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime. These results show that females are two times more likely than males to experience sexual abuse.

Of all survivors surveyed, 75% were first abused as children. Of those, 50% also experienced sexual assault as an adult. This aligns with research that people who experience sexual abuse as a child are at greater risk of being sexually assaulted again as an adult.

Prevalence of Childhood Sexual Abuse

One in three Albertans (34%) experienced sexual abuse when they were under the age of 18.

44% of females and 24% of males experienced child sexual abuse in Alberta. As people progress to adulthood, the rate of sexual assault against males decreases while the rate of sexual assault against females continues. Females are more likely to experience sexual assault in childhood and adulthood. Males are most likely to experience sexual assault in childhood.

In most incidences of child sexual abuse reported in the survey:

- Survivors were commonly between the ages of 6 and 11 years at the time of the first incident of abuse
- The abuse was most likely committed by one male individual
- The survivor knew the abuser (friend, relative, acquaintance)
- And the abuser did not live in the survivor's home

Strangers were least likely to commit child sexual abuse but when they did, the types of abuse they committed were: exposing their sexual organs and touching themselves in front of the child.

Most of the incidents of child sexual abuse did not occur over a prolonged period of time. The one type of sexual abuse that was more likely to be prolonged was trying to have or having sex with the survivor when the individual didn't want this.

Prevalence of Sexual Assault Over the age of 18

Over one quarter (28%) of the individuals surveyed had experienced sexual assault when they were over the age of 18. If you look at the population of Alberta, this means almost 920,000 Albertans have experienced sexual assault over the age of 18.

41% of females experienced sexual assault over the age of 18 compared to 17% of males.

Including females and males, sexual assault that occurs when an individual is over the age of 18 more commonly includes physical touch with 83% surveyed reporting physical contact.

Comparison to Other Research

Prevalence rates in the Badgley study were consistent with the current Alberta research. Badgley found an overall prevalence rate of 45% in Alberta/BC, and the AASAS study found 43%.

It is important to note that while the prevalence rates found in the two studies are similar, the number of people impacted by sexual assault has grown significantly. In 1984, a prevalence rate of 42% would result in an estimated 1 million people in Alberta being impacted by sexual assault; by 2019, the prevalence rate of 43% has resulted in this number expanding to 1.8 million.

Perceptions and Awareness of Sexual Assault and Abuse

One in two respondents (57%) agree that the average Alberta resident believes that sexual abuse is an issue in their community.

40% believe there are still not enough supports for survivors and when asked about what types of support they felt was most important, the most common response was counselling.

Two out of three respondents (67%) personally know a survivor of sexual abuse, either as a child or an adult, and one in two Albertans (53%) had personally supported a survivor.

Detailed Key Findings document is available at www.aasas.ca

About AASAS

The primary work of the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services is to provide leadership, coordination and collaboration of sexual assault services in Alberta. The AASAS member agencies and services are responsible for day-to-day front line delivery of services within their local communities and regional areas. These agencies provide specialized sexual assault support services to individuals of all genders and ages throughout the lifespan.

As a provincial support organization, AASAS focuses its efforts in these key areas:

- Awareness: AASAS works to increase public and government awareness of issues involving sexual abuse and sexual assault and the impacts they have on Albertans.
- Access: AASAS strives to ensure that all Albertans affected by sexual abuse and sexual assault have access to healing and recovery programs, services and supports.