

Exploring the Links: Firearms, Family Violence and Animal Abuse in Rural Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the growing body of literature on family violence, there are few studies which deal specifically with family violence in a rural context. None have examined extensively the social and cultural context of firearms in rural homes and the impact this may have on women dealing with abuse. Yet we know from our previous research¹ that the availability of firearms in rural homes is a perceived threat by abused rural women (see Doherty, Hornosty & McCallum, 1997; Hornosty & Doherty, 2004; Doherty & Hornosty, 2004; Hornosty & Doherty, 2003). We also know that threats often extend to family pets and farm animals.

The current study, which was funded by the Canada Firearms Centre, examines family violence, firearms, and pet abuse within a rural context where firearms are positively valued. The research was by conducted by Drs Doherty and Hornosty, as part of a research team, *Family Violence on the Farm and in Rural Communities*, at the University of New Brunswick. The research partners in the study included all the transition houses in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, Victim Services in Prince Edward Island, the Chief Firearms Officers in both provinces, Victim Services of the Fredericton City Police and Codiac RCMP in New Brunswick, and the RCMP “J” Division. The major goal of the study was to examine, from a broad regional perspective, the various dimensions or forms in which firearms serve as instruments of control, intimidation and abuse in family violence situations with a view to expanding the information base and gaining a better understanding of the risk factors that lead to, or escalate, firearms victimization of women and children in rural homes. The research documents the experiences of abused rural women and explores service providers’/crisis workers’ perceptions of domestic firearms abuse and its influence on safety planning and intervention strategies. It also sheds light on rural perceptions, norms and values on the relationships between firearms, family violence and animal abuse.

¹ This previous research was conducted by the research team, *Family Violence on the Farm and in Rural Communities*. The team was comprised of academic researchers, community researchers, a farmwoman, RCMP, and social service providers. The published articles reflect the analysis of Drs Doherty and Hornosty. The “Rural Research Team” is a team of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre on Family Violence Research, established in 1994 to engage in participatory action research to end violence against women.

The research was carried out in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island in 2005-2007, over an 18 month period. We used both surveys (quantitative data) and semi-structured interviews and focus groups (qualitative data). The research instruments were available in both official languages. We conducted a review of the literature on firearms misuse, family violence, and animal abuse as a backdrop to the research. In addition, a media content analysis of newspaper articles on selected family violence issues helped us to understand public perceptions, particularly in association with firearms. Finally, an analysis of court cases in Atlantic Canada over the past several years relating to family violence provided insights into the justice system's response to family violence, particularly when it involved firearms victimization and/or abuse of pets.

Quantitative Data – Survey Participants

The survey questionnaire contained two parts – A and B. Transition house staff and victim services personnel invited abused women to participate and administered the survey. Part A was demographic information such as woman's age, the community of residence, her employment status, number of children, types of abuse experienced and relationship to the abuser. Part B asked specific questions that participants answered about the presence and types of firearms, the presence of pets, whether the presence of firearms made her more fearful or made her more reluctant to seek help, and whether her partner had deliberately threatened to harm the pets or farm animals.

In total, we received 391 surveys; 283 women had answered Parts A and B, while 108 surveys contained information only for Part A. A comparison of the two data sets shows no significant difference in the demographic characteristics of these sub-groups. Here is a profile of the women in the survey:

- 20% of the surveys were from Prince Edward Island; 80% from New Brunswick;
- Women ranged in age from 16 to 75 years of age;
- 33% of all participants used the services of French-speaking transition houses in New Brunswick;
- 75% of the women lived in rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less;
- Over 70% of the women in the survey were unemployed - the majority of them (58%) were receiving social assistance, while 27% had no income at all;
- 54% of the women who went to a transition house were accompanied by children;
- 64% of New Brunswick women who were abused in their current relationship were abused by a common-law partner; in Prince Edward Island, the percentage was 56% (Common-law relationships comprise less than 16% of intimate partner relationships in Canada);
- Over 80% percent of the women had experienced two or more types of abuse.

With respect to firearms, we learned that:

- 25% of the women who answered this question had firearms in their household;
- Of these, 72% had long guns. 18% had both long guns and hand guns present;
- Nearly 40% said partners did not have a license to own firearms; 44% of firearms were not registered; 50% were not kept locked, and 11% indicated the guns were kept loaded;
- 66% of the women who indicated there were firearms in their home said knowing about the firearms made them more fearful for their safety and well-being;
- 70% said it had an affect on their decisions to tell others or seek help;
- Women were more likely to express concern for their safety when the firearms were not licensed, registered or locked;
- 83% of the women who knew the guns were loaded were fearful;
- The presence of firearms increased a woman's fear when her partner used drugs and alcohol or was threatening suicide, or there were concerns that the partner would harm her, the children, family, or property.

Survey questions about the abuse of pets and farm animals revealed that:

- 70% of households had a pet or farm animal (based on the 273 women who answered the question concerning pets);
- 57% of the households with pets also had children;
- 45% said their partner deliberately threatened to harm their pets or farm animal, and, of those, 41% said their partner deliberately harmed or killed the pet;
- 64% of women in homes with firearms thought firearms were used to harm the animal;
- 27% of the women who owned pets said they were more reluctant to get help for fear the abuser would harm their animal if they left;
- 60% said they were reluctant to disclose even when an animal had been harmed;
- 24% of women with children said that their child was aware that an animal had been harmed or threatened with abuse.

Qualitative Data – Interviews and Focus Groups

The qualitative research was structured to provide a strong and poignant voice for New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island women who had recently experienced family violence in a rural context, as well as the service providers, crisis workers, police, social workers, child protection workers and many others, who daily come into contact with victims of abuse. In total we conducted 14 interviews; 11 with abused women and 3 with service providers. We conducted seven focus groups with 58 people. In total, we heard the views of 72 participants. These participants talked about their perceptions of rural life and rural values, the prevalence and status of firearms, experiences with domestic firearms victimization and its impact on women's decision-making, and whether threats to harm animals affected women's decision-making. They also discussed the sorts of barriers rural women face when disclosing or leaving an abusive relationship. In light of the survey findings, it is not surprising that we heard numerous heart-wrenching stories of firearms victimization of women, children, and pets. Some common and recurring themes that emerged include:

- Traditional family values, a submissive role for women, and stigmatizing women who report abuse are still common features of rural communities;
- Rural women face other unique and significant barriers and challenges to leaving abuse, including social and geographic isolation, poverty, a paucity of social services, inadequate transportation, and a lack of privacy;
- Firearms, mostly long guns, are thought to be readily available in most rural homes; a significant portion of which are unregistered;
- The attitude to firearms is influenced by the “hunting” or “gun culture” which places a strong, positive value on gun ownership for hunting and other peaceful pursuits. This fosters a cavalier attitude to proper firearms storage and lack of attention to the potential increased risk of lethality in homes which are experiencing family violence and other problems;
- Women who are experiencing firearms victimization tend not to tell the police or others about their experiences for a variety of reasons;
- While abuse sometimes involves having a firearm pointed at them, the very presence of firearms serves to silence women, even when the threats are indirect;
- The fear of firearms misuse can become a community concern affecting family, neighbours and service providers who are scared to call the police when they witness abuse for fear of retaliation;
- Women are concerned about police response times in rural areas and the widespread use of scanners. They generally distrust police and the justice system to take them seriously or protect them if they disclose. And when abused women do disclose firearms misuse to service providers, often, there is no follow-up;
- Police response to family violence situations is not standardized and unless an “incident” specifically involves a firearm, police may not search for and seize the firearms in the home;
- Other factors that heighten women’s fear of harm, particularly when associated with firearms misuse by their partners, include their partner’s mental health problems, threats to commit suicide, and drinking or drug use;
- Pets and/or farm animal are often threatened, harmed or neglected as a means of controlling an abused woman, and it is common for women to delay seeking help out of fear for their animals. Generally, there is no safe haven for these animals.

While we recognize that these interviews and focus groups looked at the experiences of relatively small sample of rural women and service providers, and because the sample was not randomly chosen, we make no attempt to generalize our findings to the entire population. However, our analysis confirms much of what we learned in the quantitative research, and our earlier research. We are confident the views expressed by the women, service providers and other participants are shared by many.

Recommendations

Since this study was conducted as participatory action research, we encouraged participants to reflect on the solutions to family violence and firearms victimization – the policies, programs and community responses that might help other rural women experiencing abuse.

Suggested solutions varied. Our recommendations incorporate the different views expressed, but we take sole responsibility for the following recommended suggestions:

- Ensure that risk assessment tools include questions about the misuse and abuse of firearms, as well as pet/animal abuse
- Support a series of gun safety commercials targetted at rural communities /provinces
- Publicize the family violence provisions of the *Firearms Act*
- Create pro-removal and pro-confiscation firearms policies in domestic violence cases similar to pro-arrest and pro-charge policies
- Confiscate firearms for unsafe storage violations
- Educate police, justice officials, and service providers on the nature and extent of firearms victimization in rural homes
- Encourage abused women to think about personal safety issues – explain risk.
- Restrict firearms access on stay-away and no-contact orders, and peace bonds in all domestic cases
- Ensure follow up and support for victims following a charge and better enforcement of protective orders
- Enact legislation to compel certain professionals (mental health and doctors) to report concerns about the stability of a gun owner

Specific recommendations relating to the abuse of pets and farm animals include:

- Create a public awareness education campaign about pet abuse and the risks associated with family violence and firearms
- Ensure that questions about pet-farm animal abuse are included on in-take forms and risk assessments
- Develop a safe haven program for pets and farm animals
- Provide stronger legal protections for the animals of victims of family violence
- Link animal abuse to other forms of abuse such as child abuse and senior abuse

Our general recommendations include the need for a public education initiative about the different faces of family violence, a need for a diversity of safe environments were women feel confident to disclose abuse and the importance of coordinating services and improving communication among all service providers. As well, we point to the necessity of coordinating risk assessment tools that take into account evidence-based risks such as pet abuse, and indirect fears of firearms.

Conclusion

The research findings help us to understand better the ways in which firearms may and do serve as instruments of control, intimidation and abuse in family violence situations. They show that the normalization of firearms in rural homes in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island has lead to the minimization of firearms misuse generally, including desensitization to firearms abuse in instances where women, children and pets/farm animals are the victims. The qualitative findings have complemented and enhanced the quantitative data. We not only know more about the

prevalence of firearms in rural homes and their association with various aspects of family violence, we can now situate firearms misuse within the social and culture context that shapes experiences and responses, and as a result, we can offer insights into potential strategies for addressing it.

In conclusion, we believe that the study makes a significant contribution to family violence research by demonstrating that cultural factors play a critical role in understanding the nature of, and response to, firearms victimization. The research and findings provide much needed information about the nature of family violence in rural communities and fill a gap in our understanding of how the presence and status of firearms influence women's decision-making. Dissemination of the findings will be a critical component of the success of this study.

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