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Rosemary Westwood: The voice of Metro.

We know shockingly little about the true nature of sexual assault in Canada

Sexual assault — everything from unwanted sexual touching to violent rape — is a unique umbrella of crime in this country.



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CHRIS YOUNG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

A protester is seen outside a Toronto courthouse where the Jian Ghomeshi trial took place.

By: **Rosemary Westwood** Metro Published on Tue Apr 12 2016

It began last week with a simple question.

Ottawa police had a 39 per cent charge rate for sexual assaults in 2014. I wanted to know: How does that compare to the national average?

But there was one problem. That comparison doesn't exist.

Statistics Canada tracks some data on sexual assault in this country. But rates of charges versus police complaints?

No. In fact, even StatsCan's own data sets aren't designed to be compared to each other, like puzzle pieces never cut to fit.

We are witnessing a crescendo of attention on sexual assault never seen before. Decades of research and activism have brought us here, but depressingly, they have done nothing to change the rate of sexual violence in the last 15 years.

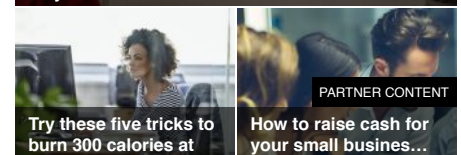
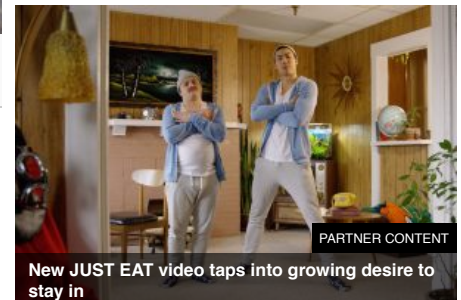
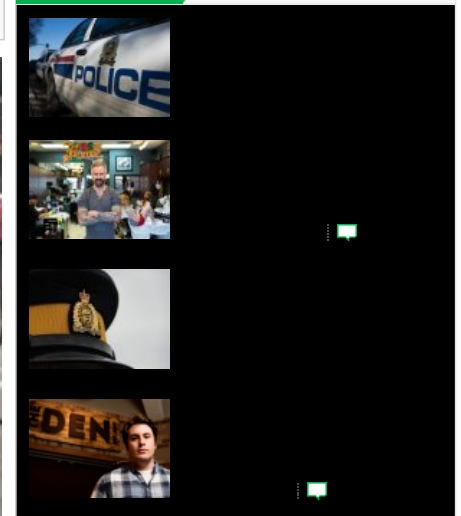


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There is one thing we haven't tried: the collection, organization and analysis of robust, in-depth and actionable data.

As things stand now, when a woman comes forward, we don't usefully record what happens next.

The same is true, of course, for all crimes. But there is good reason to demand that, in the case of sexual assault, much more needs to be done.

Sexual assault — everything from unwanted sexual touching to violent rape — is a unique umbrella of crime in this country.

First of all, it's overwhelming committed by men against women. Secondly, sexual assaults aren't addressed by the justice system as often as other crimes. Nationally, physical assaults are seven times more likely to play out in courts, compared to sexual assaults.

But most alarming is that while crime rates have uniformly been falling since 1999, only sexual assault has remained stable.

Better data should begin with local police departments, which only ever hear about five per cent of sexual assaults to begin with, and which have no uniform practice for tracking or publishing sexual-assault data. In Vancouver, police host an online public database, but it only includes the number of cases investigated as sexual assaults (including those against children); it doesn't include all complaints and doesn't break down cases by outcome or factors like race.

Ottawa police released stats on sexual assault complaints (also including kids) only after a freedom of information request. The data showed the result of each complaint, including "unfounded" and "founded but not solved," but there were no details on how investigators reached their conclusions. This is typical.

Both Ottawa and Calgary police have played the "trust us" card and taken pains to defend the thoroughness of their investigators.

But police forces could be hard-pressed to offer more nuanced data, even if they wanted to. ViCLAS, a national computer investigation system, was designed, like other police computer systems, to take in information and help investigations — not to spit out data for analysis.

Nowhere have statistics on sexual assault come more under fire recently than on Canadian campuses. In 2014, media investigations revealed the hodgepodge, incomplete nature of information collected at universities and colleges. Schools weren't even tracking the same categories of incidents and they had no obligation to share their data publicly. A concealing blanket lay atop a space where, advocates say, women face heightened risk of sexual assault.

In reaction, Ontario passed a law requiring campuses to create specific sexual assault policies and data-reporting practices. In B.C. and Alberta, advocates are drawing up recommendations for how campuses should track and investigate sexual assault complaints and support survivors.

Tracy Porteous, part of that team, wants to see schools in B.C. adopt a computer database that would track complaints and aid investigations (like police systems) and also compile statistics (unlike police systems).

But even these efforts are insufficient.

For one, not all provinces are demanding change. Whatever data is generated might not even be comparable to that of schools in other provinces, let alone to police or StatsCan. And I highly doubt it will be sufficiently detailed, given that, in Ontario, schools have been vaguely instructed to collect "information" on sexual assault complaints.

It's particularly ironic that this kind of paltry information exists in the age of big data, giving lie to the belief that boundless information is everywhere, just waiting to be found. There's a chance, though, that new mathematical algorithms of the kinds studied by Prof. Andrea Lodi could shed light on what little sex assault data we've got. Lodi, the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Data Science for Real-Time Decision-Making, calls it that kind of analysis "the new frontier."

But you can't sift insight from thin air. Police, schools and even StatsCan must be

