



Family Violence in the Canadian Forces

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Psychosocial Health Dynamics
Personnel and Family Support Research

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Abstract

There is limited understanding of the extent of family violence in the Canadian Forces (CF), the impact of committed resources, or the incidence and prevalence of family violence in the CF compared to that of the civilian population. The aim of this report is to provide an overview of previous research on family violence in the CF, and to present data on violence using existing surveys of spouses/partners of CF members. The survey results indicated that a small percentage of spouses reported that their CF spouse/partner was violent toward them or their children. Contributing factors included personal, family, and work pressures, in addition to deployments. Respondents who experienced violence in their home were most likely to turn to sources outside the CF for help, including family, friends, and civilian counsellors. Although the results of the surveys of spouses provide some indication of violence in the CF, the data are limited. For example, the timeframe in which abuse occurred cannot be determined from the data. As well, for those who experienced abuse but did not seek support, the reasons for not disclosing the abuse were not assessed. It is important to assess the prevalence and incidence of abuse, and the factors associated with it, in order to increase the effectiveness of current programs and policies regarding abuse in the CF. Family issues can affect members' job performance and effectiveness, and may ultimately impact members' decisions to stay in or leave the military. Reliable data on the incidence of family/relationship violence in the CF would allow the CF to gain insight into the components of a healthy military family/relationship, could assist in determining the success of current programs, policies and services for families/relationships, and may aid in focusing resources where they are most needed.

Résumé

Les connaissances sur l'étendue de la violence familiale au sein des Forces canadiennes (FC), les conséquences de l'affectation de ressources, la fréquence ou la prévalence de la violence familiale dans les FC par rapport à la situation dans la population civile. L'objectif du présent rapport est de donner un aperçu des recherches précédentes sur la violence familiale dans les FC et de présenter des données sur la violence en utilisant des sondages existants menés auprès des conjoints des membres des FC. Les résultats de ces sondages ont indiqué qu'un petit pourcentage des conjoints ont déclaré que leur partenaire des FC était violent envers eux ou envers leurs enfants. Les facteurs contributifs étaient notamment des pressions personnelles, familiales et professionnelles en plus des affectations. Les enquêtés ayant subi la violence à la maison étaient plus portés à chercher de l'aide auprès de sources extérieures aux FC, y compris la famille, les amis et des conseillers civils. Bien que les résultats des sondages menés auprès des conjoints indiquent la présence de violence dans les FC, les données sont limitées. Par exemple, la période pendant laquelle des cas de violence sont survenus ne peut pas être déterminée à partir des données. De plus, dans le cas des personnes ayant subi de mauvais traitements sans avoir cherché d'aide, les raisons de ne pas révéler ces incidents n'ont pas été évaluées. Il est important d'évaluer la fréquence et la prévalence de mauvais traitements ainsi que les facteurs associés pour augmenter l'efficacité des programmes et des politiques actuels sur la violence dans les FC. Les problèmes familiaux peuvent nuire à l'efficacité et au rendement au travail des militaires, et finir par influencer sur leur désir de faire carrière ou non dans les FC. Des données fiables sur la fréquence de la violence familiale ou conjugale dans les FC permettraient à cette organisation de mieux connaître les composantes d'une relation ou d'une famille militaire saine, pourraient aider à déterminer le succès des programmes, des politiques et des services actuels destinés aux familles ou aux conjoints, et à affecter des ressources là où l'on en a le plus besoin.

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1 Introduction

The military can have a significant impact upon family life. The military member's family is often more highly involved in the military culture than is the case in other types of organizations (Wisecarver, Cracraft, & Heffner, 2006). Furthermore, the unique demands of military service (e.g., separations from family, postings, deployments) can disrupt family life (Castro, Bienvenu, Huffman, & Adler, 2001). Conversely, the family can have a profound influence on the military organization, in that individuals who have a healthy family life are likely to be more focused and committed in the workplace. For example, in the U.S., family separation for military reasons had a significant impact upon decisions to leave the military, as well as on organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Vernez & Zellman, 1987). Similarly, in the Canadian Forces (CF), military members' perceptions of their spouse as supportive of their career was positively associated with personal morale and organizational commitment (Dursun, 2006). Furthermore, marital quality and work-family conflict in the CF were strong predictors of personal morale (Tucker, Sinclair, & Thomas, 2005). Although most families are able to cope with the stressors of military life, many have difficulty adjusting, and a small number of families are characterized by significant levels of conflict and even violence.

There are a number of ways in which military experiences can affect marital relationships. For example, among Vietnam war veterans, there is evidence that combat may cause mental health problems, such as symptoms of PTSD and antisocial behaviour, which subsequently increase difficulties in relationships. In addition, military experiences may exacerbate the effects of premilitary stressors and antisocial behaviour, which can then affect relationships (Gimbel & Booth, 1994).

There is a paucity of quantitative data on the prevalence and incidence of violence in military families, and particularly in the Canadian Forces (CF). It is conceivable that the unique stressors of military family life (e.g., postings, deployments, combat exposure) and the emphasis on aggression in military training may serve to increase the risk of violence. However, other variables may actually function to lower the potential rates of violence, including the military's low tolerance for alcohol abuse, the procedures used to screen new recruits, the support services available to military personnel, and financial security (e.g., see Flemming, Truscott, & Verdon, 1997; Sudom & Dursun, 2006). Nonetheless, without quantitative data, any claims about the incidence and prevalence of abuse in the CF, the factors that are associated with it, or how it compares to civilian society, are speculative at best.

1.1 Research on Family Violence in other Militaries

Although limited quantitative research on family/relationship violence has been carried out thus far in the CF population, this topic has been assessed in greater detail in other militaries. In the United States, the incidence of domestic violence was found to be higher in the military than in the civilian population (Cronin, 1995; Griffin & Morgan, 1988). In a study of deployment and the probability of spousal aggression in U.S. Army personnel, it was found that deployment contributes a small but significant increase in the probability of spousal aggression over a one-year period. When demographic variables were controlled, the probability of severe aggression was significantly greater for soldiers who had deployed in the past year, compared

to those who had not. Length of deployment was positively related to spousal aggression (McCarroll, Ursano, Liu, Thayer, Newby, *et al.*, 2000).

Possible reasons for this high rate were hypothesized to be due to the unique stressors of military life, including frequent moves, deployments involving prolonged separation from the family, and exposure to violence (Griffin & Morgan, 1988). In addition, exposure to traumatic events, and the symptoms of PTSD that frequently result, can exacerbate the risk of family violence. Indeed, in a sample of military veterans and active duty service members participating in a domestic violence prevention program, level of PTSD symptomatology was associated with frequency and severity of domestic violence (Gerlock, 2004).

However, others have found that the military is not necessarily characterized by high rates of family violence. Heyman and Neidig (1999) found that the rate of violence in the military was only marginally higher than that in a civilian sample. The researchers pointed out that although rates of violence may appear to be higher in the military in some studies, such differences may reflect an overrepresentation in the military of certain demographic characteristics that are associated with violence in the general population, such as younger age, and being of minority status. Furthermore, it was found that a six-month deployment did not predict violence during a 10-month period following the deployment. Rather, the factors that increased the likelihood of abuse were younger age, and the presence of pre-deployment violence (Newby, Ursano, McCarroll, Liu, Fullerton, & Norwood, 2005). Differences in the findings of various studies may be due to whether the study in question is cross-sectional or longitudinal in design. In this regard, a study of Navy recruits found that individuals entering the military did not have higher rates of perpetration of violence than their civilian counterparts. However, over a two-year period, the rates of violence perpetration increased slightly (Merrill, Crouch, Thomsen, Gulmond, & Milner, 2005).

A study by Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, and Johnson (2007) revealed that the rate of child maltreatment during U.S. soldier deployments was 42% higher than the rate of maltreatment when soldiers were not deployed. The elevated rate of maltreatment during deployment was due to higher rates of maltreatment by female civilian spouses during those times. This was particularly pronounced for neglect and physical abuse. The authors explain this finding in terms of the increased stress that deployment places on the parent remaining behind. There were no differences in rates based on whether individuals had one or multiple deployments. Although it might be expected that multiple deployments would lead to more cases of maltreatment, the authors suggest that the parent remaining behind may develop coping strategies during the soldier's initial deployment that may help to deal with subsequent deployments. However, since all families in the study had a substantiated case of maltreatment, Army-wide prevalence rates cannot be determined (Gibbs *et al.*, 2007).

1.2 Research on Family Violence in the CF

The Canadian government began to place significant focus on family violence and violence against women in the mid to late 1990s, due to the increasing awareness of these as social issues requiring attention. As a result of this focus, preliminary research on the topic of family violence in the Canadian Forces was initiated. In an initial report, the incidence and causes of violence in the CF was assessed through a review of published literature and existing internal databases

(Truscott & Wait, 1996). In a second report, Flemming *et al.* (1997) gathered information on violence in the CF through interviews with personnel from National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), as well as selected bases, who had experience in dealing with violence among CF members. Although incidence and prevalence rates could not be determined from this research, it was evident that several military-related factors may increase the rate of violence, including frequent and intense deployments, issues with reintegration, and high stress levels.

Subsequent to these reports, external research was undertaken on the topic of woman abuse in the CF, which portrayed the military as an institution that may foster violence (Harrison, 2002). However, despite much media attention, this report contained numerous methodological shortcomings, including the fact that the interviews conducted as the basis for the research included only those in abusive relationships. The importance of studying this topic was recognized, and further qualitative research was carried out by DND. The major risk factors for violence, based on previous research, were identified (DeKeseredy, 2005). These included alcohol and drug abuse, financial issues, patriarchal attitudes and beliefs, and certain demographic characteristics (e.g., being younger, being in a common law relationship). Subsequently, focus groups and interviews on the topic of family functioning and violence were conducted in 2005 with individuals who had experience in dealing with issues surrounding CF families, namely, service providers (e.g., social workers, military police), and military members in supervisory roles. The results of this research have been reported (Sudom & Dursun, 2006). Briefly, although prevalence and incidence rates could not be determined from this study, it was reported that violence in various forms does occur in the CF. It was perceived that violence was more prevalent among younger, lower ranking personnel, which is consistent with an examination of reported cases of abuse in the Military Police (MP) database between 1991 and 1994 (Truscott & Wait, 1996). However, the focus groups also suggested that abuse occurring among older, higher ranking members may be more likely to go undetected since fewer of these members live on bases. Furthermore, older individuals may perceive more of a stigma or greater career repercussions associated with seeking help. Possible factors associated with abuse, which were identified in the focus groups and interviews, included alcohol, stress, deployments, financial issues, reintegration issues, past experiences (e.g., violence in the family of origin), and the aggressive nature of military culture (Sudom & Dursun, 2006).

A recent MP report, which provided an overview of the domestic violence cases across the country investigated by the MP from 2005 to 2008, indicated that there was a notable increase in domestic violence incidents in 2007 and 2008 (DND, 2009). However, MP reports are limited in that they contain only chargeable cases, and therefore underestimate the extent of actual physical and emotional abuse in the military population.

To date, little scientific research has focused on Canadian Forces (CF) members and their personal relationships, and only limited quantitative research has been conducted in the CF on the incidence and prevalence of family/relationship violence. It is unclear, therefore, the extent to which this is an issue in the CF, and whether the military exhibits higher or lower rates of violence in comparison to the general population. The aim of this report is to provide an overview of existing research on levels of family violence in the CF, using existing data from two surveys of spouses/partners of CF members.

2 Method

2.1 Respondents

The analyses contained in this report are based on two surveys of spouses/partners of CF members. The first survey, administered in 2005 as part of the Perstempo and Human Dimensions of Deployments Study (HDDS), was mailed to a sample of 7,039 spouses/partners of CF regular force members. Responses were received from 1,661 spouses, yielding a response rate of 23.6%. The second survey, administered in 2008, was mailed to a sample of 9,792 spouses of regular force members. Responses were received from 2,086 spouses, yielding a response rate of 21.3%. Demographic characteristics of the respondents from both surveys are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Survey Respondents

	2005	2008 ¹
Age		
17-29	14.4%	18.0%
30-39	39.2%	38.1%
40-49	37.4%	34.7%
50 and above	9.0%	9.3%
Gender		
Male	11.7%	13.3%
Female	88.3%	86.7%
Education		
Some high school	4.8%	5.5%
High school diploma	16.4%	11.0%
Some college or college diploma	36.4%	34.6%
Some university or university degree	34.3%	37.7%
Some graduate school or graduate degree	8.1%	11.1%

¹ Due to rounding, percentages may not add to exactly 100%.

2.2 Measures

In the 2005 survey, spouses were asked about whether their spouse/partner had ever been violent toward them, their children, older adults in the family, pets, property, or possessions. As well, if violent incidents had occurred, they were asked to indicate whether they were connected to stressors relating to the military, posttraumatic symptoms, family pressures, or personal pressures. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the sources they had gone to if they decided to seek help (e.g., counsellor, friends, other military spouses). The 2008 survey asked only whether their military partner had been violent toward themselves, their children, or other people or possessions.

3 Results

Figure 1 shows spouses' reports of violence in the home. Both the 2005 and 2008 data are presented here. In 2008, 5.1% of spouses reported that their partner had been violent towards them (compared to 6.3% in 2005), and 3.5% had been violent towards children (compared to 4.1% in 2005). Violence toward household property increased somewhat from 4.7% to 7.8%. However, statistically significant differences cannot be determined from this data, and it is possible that the differences reflect trivial variations due to the relatively small numbers of individuals who actually experienced abuse.

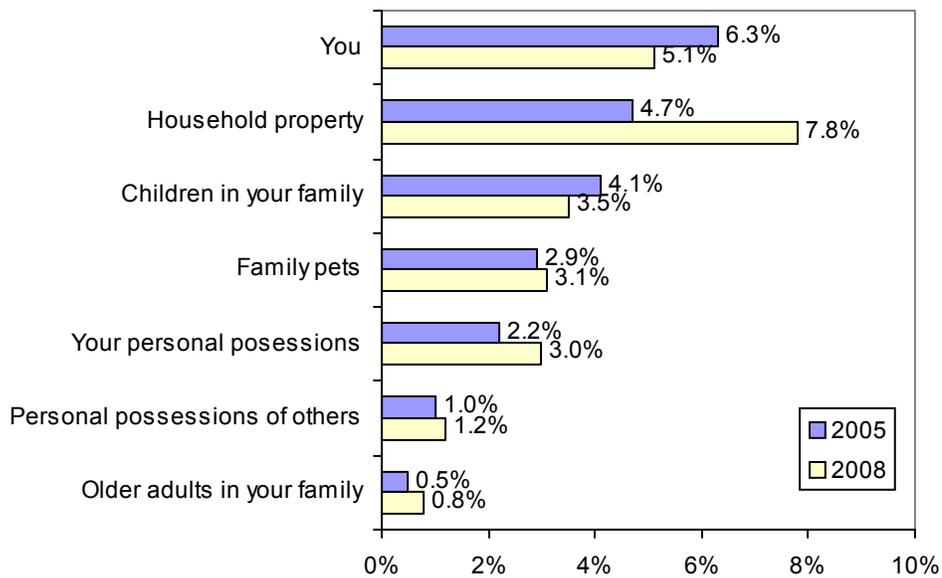


Figure 1: Percentages of Respondents Reporting Violence (2005 and 2008 Surveys)

Figure 2 presents spouses' perceptions of violence within their home. Approximately 14% of respondents had endured or committed emotional abuse at some point in their relationship, while 3.6% had endured physical abuse. In addition, some respondents felt that there was a hostile-angry climate in their home or were burdened with uncertainty about the possibility of another violent outburst.

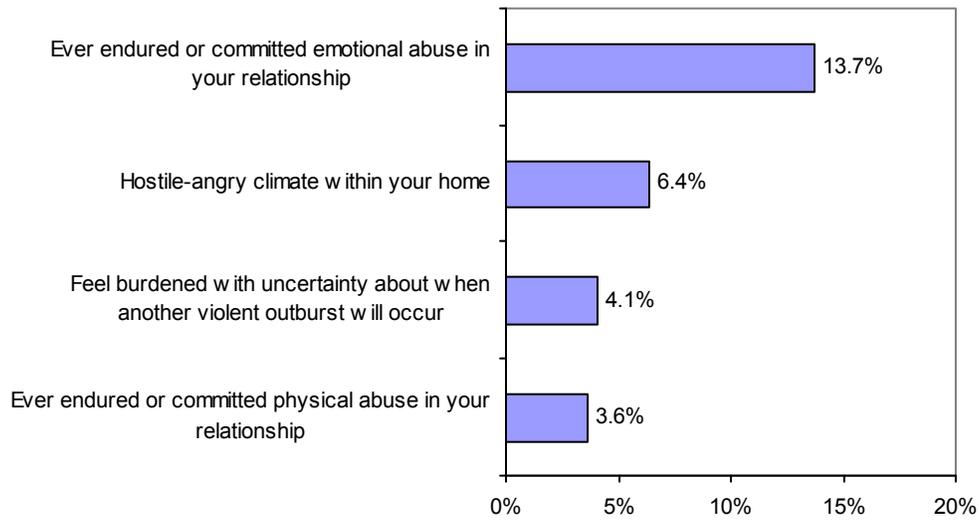


Figure 2: Experiences of Violence in the Home (2005)

If they had experienced violence in their household, respondents were asked what they felt were contributing factors to the violence. As indicated in Figure 3, the largest contributing factors were personal, family, and work pressures. According to the respondents, deployments accounted for approximately one-third of violent encounters.

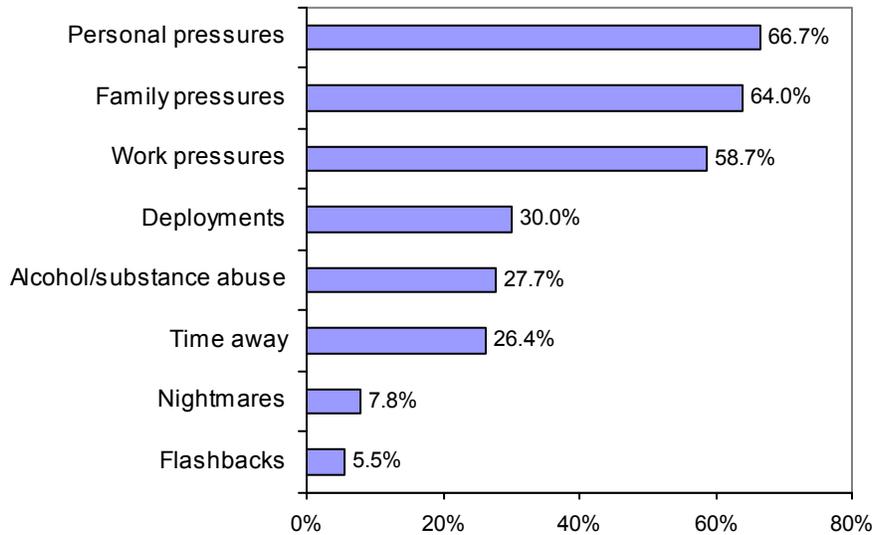


Figure 3: Factors Contributing to Violence² (2005)

² Selected for respondents who reported any form of abuse (i.e., against themselves, or other family members or possessions).

According to Figure 4, in cases of violence, spouses were most likely to turn to their friends, followed by parents or family members or civilian therapists.

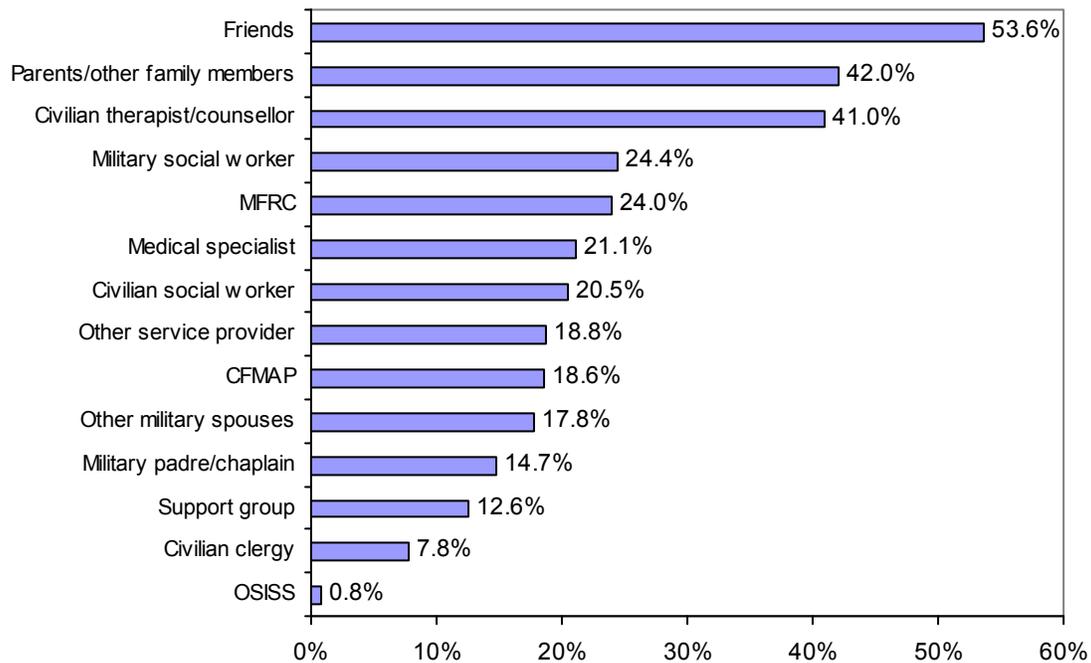


Figure 4: Help sought by Spouses following Abuse³ (2005)

In terms of gender, a similar proportion of male spouses, compared to females, reported being the victims of domestic violence. However, it must be noted that the percentage of male respondents in both samples was small (12% in the 2005 survey, and 13% in the 2008 survey), so the actual numbers of males reporting abuse was not sufficient to be able to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between male and female reports of violence. Data from the general Canadian population has indicated that males and females report similar levels of victimization by their partner (Mihorean, 2005), although examination of police reports has indicated that male-instigated violence was more likely to come to the attention of the police (Statistics Canada, 2008). As well, women in the general population were more likely than men to experience repeated violence (Mihorean, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2006).

³ Selected for respondents who reported any form of abuse (i.e., against themselves, or other family members or possessions). Respondents could select multiple items.

4 Discussion and Recommendations

The 2005 and 2008 surveys of spouses/partners of CF members found that a small percentage of spouses reported that their military spouse/partner was violent toward them or their children. Contributing factors included personal, family, and work pressures, in addition to deployments. Respondents who experienced violence in their home were most likely to turn to sources outside the CF for help, including family, friends, and civilian counsellors.

Although the results of these surveys provide some indication of violence in the CF, several limitations of the research must be noted. The first limitation relates to the manner in which questions regarding violence and abuse were asked. Respondents were asked to indicate whether their spouse/partner was or had been violent. Although it is assumed that they are reporting on their current spouse/partner, the question did not specify to answer in terms of a current partner, so it is possible that respondents may not have been consistent in reporting current experiences. As well, given that the question did not ask for a time frame in which the abuse occurred (e.g., one year), it is not possible to tell whether the violence reported was relatively recent, or whether it occurred many years ago. Recent experiences of abuse may affect the responses to a number of variables regarding well-being (e.g., depressive symptoms) much more than abusive experiences from the distant past.

Although the proportion of spouses of CF members reporting abuse is small, it is not insubstantial. It is important to assess the prevalence and incidence of abuse, and the factors associated with it, in order to increase the effectiveness of current programs and policies regarding abuse in the CF. Family issues can affect members' job performance and effectiveness, and may ultimately impact members' decisions to stay in or leave the military. Examination of other sources of data, such as the 2008 Health and Lifestyle Information Survey (data collection to be completed in late 2009) will allow for further insight into the extent and nature of domestic violence and the factors associated with it. In addition, if sample size is sufficient, then differences in rates of male and female reports of violence can be examined. Reliable data on the incidence of family/relationship violence in the CF would allow the CF to gain insight into the components of a healthy military family/relationship, and could assist in determining the success of current programs, policies and services for families/relationships, and may aid in focusing resources where they are most needed.

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There is limited understanding of the extent of family violence in the Canadian Forces (CF), the impact of committed resources, or the incidence and prevalence of family violence in the CF compared to that of the civilian population. The aim of this report is to provide an overview of previous research on family violence in the CF, and to present data on violence using existing surveys of spouses/partners of CF members. The survey results indicated that a small percentage of spouses reported that their CF spouse/partner was violent toward them or their children. Contributing factors included personal, family, and work pressures, in addition to deployments. Respondents who experienced violence in their home were most likely to turn to sources outside the CF for help, including family, friends, and civilian counsellors. Although the results of the surveys of spouses provide some indication of violence in the CF, the data are limited. For example, the timeframe in which abuse occurred cannot be determined from the data. As well, for those who experienced abuse but did not seek support, the reasons for not disclosing the abuse were not assessed. It is important to assess the prevalence and incidence of abuse, and the factors associated with it, in order to increase the effectiveness of current programs and policies regarding abuse in the CF. Family issues can affect members' job performance and effectiveness, and may ultimately impact members' decisions to stay in or leave the military. Reliable data on the incidence of family/relationship violence in the CF would allow the CF to gain insight into the components of a healthy military family/relationship, could assist in determining the success of current programs, policies and services for families/relationships, and may aid in focusing resources where they are most needed.

14. **KEYWORDS, DESCRIPTORS or IDENTIFIERS** (Technically meaningful terms or short phrases that characterize a document and could be helpful in cataloguing the document. They should be selected so that no security classification is required. Identifiers, such as equipment model designation, trade name, military project code name, geographic location may also be included. If possible keywords should be selected from a published thesaurus, e.g. Thesaurus of Engineering and Scientific Terms (TEST) and that thesaurus identified. If it is not possible to select indexing terms which are Unclassified, the classification of each should be indicated as with the title.)

Family; Violence; Abuse; Relationship; Perstempo



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