

The RESOLVE Network's

CALL TO PRAIRIE PROVINCES

TO DECLARE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AN

EPIDEMIC



The recent homicides of Amanda Clearwater, her three children (six-year-old Bethany, four-year-old Jayven, and two and half month-old, Isabella) and her niece (17-year Myah-Lee Gratton) in Carman, Manitoba serve as another painful reminder of the horrific reality of domestic violence in our country. In January of this year, a Calgary mother of three was stabbed to death outside an elementary school by her estranged husband. Of the 12 homicides in Saskatoon, SK last year, four were domestic violence-related ([James, 2023](#)). The man who killed 11 people (and injured 17 others) on James Cree First Nation, SK in September 2022 had an extensive history of domestic violence. *On average, one woman or girl is killed every other day, somewhere in our country, mostly by men. Every week, one woman is killed by her male partner* ([Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, 2024](#)). Of the 1,223 domestic violence homicide victims between 2009 to 2022, 79% were women and girls ([Statistics Canada, 2023](#)).

These sobering facts are even higher in the *Prairie Provinces where domestic violence, including domestic homicide are the highest in the country*. In 2022, Saskatchewan and Manitoba had the highest provincial rates of police-reported family violence and intimate partner violence in the country ([Statistics Canada, 2023](#)) and the highest rate of homicide of women and girls ([Statistics, 2023](#)). A 2023 report by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters indicates that domestic violence calls for help was at a 10 year high in the province, with over 59,000 calls answered by domestic abuse shelters ([ACWS, 2023a](#)).

Rural areas report higher rates of violence compared to urban areas. In 2021, the homicide of women and girls in Canada was more than 2.5 times greater in rural areas compared to urban areas. Again, the highest rates occurring in Manitoba, where the homicide rate was 10 times higher in rural compared to urban areas and in Saskatchewan, where the rate was nearly 4 times higher in rural compared to urban areas of the province ([Perreault, 2023](#)). Data from Alberta shows that survivors living in smaller towns and rural areas experienced the greatest danger with 73% of survivors who were surveyed being at severe or extreme danger of being killed ([ACWS, 2023b](#)).

The Prairie Provinces are also home to a large Indigenous population. Indigenous Peoples constitute 14% of Alberta's, 13.4% of Manitoba's, and 11.7% of Saskatchewan's overall population. Many

Indigenous Peoples reside in rural areas ([Statistics Canada, 2017](#)). About 6 in 10 Indigenous women have experienced some form of IPV in their lifetime, and experience the most severe forms of violence ([Heidinger, 2021](#)).

Even more shocking is the rising rates of violence against women and girls. Over the last 7 years, our country has witnessed an escalation of domestic violence across Canada. The costs of such violence are enormous, including the costs to women's health and well-being. Domestic violence often results in serious injury, emotional harm, and, for too many Canadian women, death ([Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative, 2022](#)).

The RESOLVE Network underscores the urgency of addressing domestic violence as a provincial emergency and public health crisis in the Prairie Provinces. We call on the provincial governments of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta to declare domestic violence an epidemic and to act immediately to mitigate its devastating consequences.

The federal government has labelled domestic violence as an epidemic, warranting immediate and urgent attention ([Globe and Mail, September 15, 2023](#)), along with 94 municipalities in Ontario ([Building a Better Wave, n.d.](#)). *No province has yet to declare domestic violence as an epidemic. We urge the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta to be the first.*

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024](#), an epidemic refers to "the occurrence of more cases of disease than expected in a given area or among a specific group of people over a particular period of time". Although, epidemics typically refer to infectious disease, they can also describe public health crises, such as loneliness, suicide, and overdose ([Senior, 2023](#)). Therefore, the disproportionately high rates of both domestic violence ("the disease") and homicide against women and girls ("a specific group of people") in the Prairie Provinces ("a given area") suggests that labelling domestic violence as an epidemic is entirely appropriate. In fact, we should be compelled to.

Declaring domestic violence as an epidemic demonstrates that our provincial leaders are committed to taking steps forward in reducing those incidents and ensuring those who are impacted by intimate partner and gender-based violence have timely and universal access to the comprehensive medical, social, and mental health care they deserve. Identifying and naming domestic violence as a real threat to women's/girls' health and well-being will prompt action to eliminate it. It is long overdue, but we must invest in strategies that will result in real and meaningful change. We have the potential for real transformation and change in our provinces and communities. But it will require a concerted effort by government and all sectors. For far too long, the burden of protecting and supporting women and their children has fallen squarely on the shoulders of shelter workers and women's advocates, and indeed women themselves. This should no longer be tolerated. A "whole of society" approach is required, recognizing the range of actors that have roles and responsibilities to contribute to ending this epidemic, including: provincial, municipal, and Indigenous governments; the health sector and the justice system; the nongovernmental and community-based social services sector; businesses, and workplaces; media; schools and educational institutions; communities; and individuals, including survivors and perpetrators ([Mass Casualty Commission, 2023](#)).

Declaring domestic violence an epidemic can be the first step toward taking effective, immediate action. Our provincial leaders can no longer ignore the devastation of domestic violence. But declaring domestic violence an epidemic must not be symbolic. Real commitment and change are needed.

We call on each of the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta to:

- 1 Establish a province-wide, multi-sector task force to develop plans of action for responding to domestic violence/gender-based violence. These plans of action should be tied to the federal government's [National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence](#).
- 2 Create a longstanding and evolving system-based solution that involves shelters, community organizations, Indigenous groups, health care, justice systems, researchers, and survivors/those with lived experience to prevent escalation in domestic violence/gender-based violence situations.
- 3 Create a mechanism for identifying and managing high-risk cases of domestic violence.
- 4 Establish resources for wellness checks especially after an initial incident is reported and the provision of support for both those experiencing domestic violence and perpetrators.
- 5 Create a system of care for those who experience domestic violence/gender-based violence, including those with serious injuries such as traumatic brain injury and injuries resulting from non-fatal strangulation.
- 6 Build in measures for greater transparency and public accountability for Domestic Violence Death Review Committees (DVDRC). Re-establish a DVDRC in Manitoba, which was initially created in 2010.
- 7 Pass legislation that would require judges and judicial justices of the peace to be trained in domestic violence and coercive control to ensure that the dynamics of such violence are understood (like the passing of the [Strengthening Safety and Modernizing Justice Act, 2023](#) in Ontario).
- 8 Immediately increase operating funding to shelters and women's resource centres to reflect the actual costs of providing services, with annual cost of living increases.
- 9 Create shelter facilities fully equipped to support women/gender-diverse peoples with substance use and mental health issues so they can get the assistance they need and escape from violence.
- 10 Increase resources to support families experiencing domestic violence/gender-based violence and presenting with complex traumas, so families have enough resources and support to completely leave dangerous situations, such as affordable housing, access to mental health support, and financial support.

- 11 Recognize that children are also primary victims of domestic violence and provide a comprehensive range of specialized trauma-informed supports, as well as preventative programs.
- 12 Increase funding to legal aid, so that victims of domestic violence can receive the legal assistance they need.
- 13 Legislate mandatory (and ongoing) domestic violence training for all Child and Family Services staff, strengthening their relationships with local women's shelters.
- 14 Work with municipalities and RCMP to provide mandatory (and ongoing) joint domestic violence training between police and domestic violence service providers.
- 15 Increase resources and supports for rural, remote, and Northern communities.
- 16 Provide accessible and affordable transportation in rural/northern areas, as the limited or complete lack of bus service in rural areas severely impacts women and children fleeing abuse.
- 17 Increase mental health and substance use supports.
- 18 Increase programming for men's services, including evidence-based programs for those who use violence.
- 19 Increase in supports for loved ones of DV homicide victims (mental health and financial) with ongoing supports for children whose parent was killed.
- 20 Promote evidence-based bystander intervention programs and education that is accountable to women's domestic violence services.
- 21 Engage in ongoing, systematic data collection, analysis, and research to provide the evidence to identify, address, and prioritize gaps in the area of domestic violence/gender-based violence and to develop evidence-based policies and practices.
- 22 Track all mass casualty incidents.
- 23 All above-noted recommendations should prioritize women and children's safety in all strategies to prevent, intervene in, and respond to domestic violence/gender-based violence and in those designed to support recovery and healing.
- 24 All above-noted recommendations should be culturally responsive and safe; inclusive of Indigenous, newcomer, 2SLGBTQ+, and Francophone perspectives; and evidence-based.