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Honour-based violence | Royal Canadian Mounted Police

C/Supt. Shahin Mehdizadeh, District Officer, Eastern Alberta District, RCMP : 7-9 minutes

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Honour-Based Violence (HBV) is a common, yet largely invisible crime in Canada. Such crimes impact innocent victims and, unfortunately, the police often don't get engaged until victims have suffered significant injuries or lost their lives.

The 2009 Shafia quadruple homicide in Kingston, Ont. provided some needed publicity on the concept of HBV or honour killings, and other related offences such as forced marriages and female genital mutilation. As a result, different agencies, including the global policing community, have recognized the need not only to improve their knowledge of the issue but also their approach to the prevention and investigation of such incidents.

Recent Statistics Canada reports indicate that Canada is home to almost seven million immigrants. This is the fastest growing sector of our population. Cultural diversity makes a country strong but the police and other partner agencies face challenges when dealing with many communities.

Challenges for police

There are a wide range of reasons why members of certain cultural groups may not be inclined to make reports to the police. Such under-reporting of crimes against persons pose a significant challenge to the law enforcement community as it doesn't allow them or other partner agencies to provide adequate protection for the victims. There are several reasons why such crimes might not be reported:

- Strained relationships and lack of trust between the community and the police (or other agencies)
- Fear of negative stigma
- Linguistic barriers
- Immigration concerns
- Financial dependence on family members
- Fear of escalating violence by family and community members
- Love for family members (despite the abuse)

Another challenge is the lack of knowledge and understanding of HBV. This very complex topic deals with the how individuals who commit such crimes justify their actions through their own interpreted ideologies and beliefs.

What honour?

The term honour-based violence is generally defined as criminal conduct that has been motivated because the perpetrator perceived the crime was necessary or acceptable to protect or defend the honour of the family or the community.

HBV isn't a legal term and many don't endorse using honour and violence in the same sentence. But the term continues to be used to put context into the motive for the crime.

In simple terms, these crimes are committed against vulnerable, innocent victims to force them into doing what is morally right based on the perpetrator's interpretation of acceptable values and practices. Culture and religion are often used as excuses to commit acts of violence. However, no culture or religion endorses such behaviour.

The victims of honour-based violence and forced marriage are predominantly women and girls but men and boys can be victims as well.

One key challenge with such investigations is that the crimes are committed by close family members. It's very difficult to obtain any evidence because family members — including the victims themselves — are rarely willing to provide damaging evidence against someone close to them.

Police officers must be able to identify threats or risks and take the appropriate steps to properly investigate. These investigations may require assistance from subject matter experts either within the police force of jurisdiction or elsewhere.

Be aware of the complexities

The manner in which a suspected victim is interviewed, the location of the interview, who conducts the interview and ensuring that family members aren't present during an interview are critical to having some success in getting the story and continuing with the investigation.

For example, when police have faced communication barriers with immigrants, the easy road has been to have another family member provide assistance when interviewing victims. At times, police officers have questioned a potential victim in the presence of other family members. But when dealing with HBV incidents, this falls on the "do not do" list.

A subject matter expert can provide suggestions or guidance so that investigators can gather the best evidence and provide safety to the victims. If this isn't done right, the consequences to the victims can be grave.

If attempts to secure charges are successful, the more important task is to conduct a comprehensive security plan and risk assessment for the victim. For example, in the case of a marriage in which a female provides evidence against her husband, investigators must factor the threat against her from her husband, her husband's family, and at times her own family and the community. Such disclosures can be seen as a sign of betrayal that brings shame to the entire family and cultural group.

The same goes for a child victim who reaches out to police to report crimes at home (either against them or another family member). Investigators need to assess risks from different angles and work with other partners to ensure the victim's safety.

Canada has gained a reputation as one of the best places in the world to live. That attraction is the reason many immigrants come to this country (me included). Police have a duty to ensure they provide a safe environment for everyone to enjoy their lives here. While it's encouraging that in the past few years several initiatives have promoted more awareness of this topic, more needs to be done.

The way forward

A better outreach program for immigrant populations can help build trusting relationships between police and these communities. The policing world in Canada is actively looking at opportunities to recruit men and women from different groups to better represent the diverse Canadian population within their police forces. A better understanding of different cultural groups and religions is critical for police officers to better serve their communities. Without a trusting relationship, crimes that are honour based will never be reported.

Engaging with different cultural groups is also critical. When more awareness is provided to these groups, there will be greater effort in addressing honour-based violence from within. This can be done by partnering with different ethnic women's groups, Status of Women, Immigration and Multiculturalism, and many others.

A more collaborative model of addressing the issues of honour-based violence and forced marriage is essential. One agency can't do it all. Education and awareness for newcomers is also important as they need to know their rights in their new home, and where they can get help and protection.

Ensuring a bias-free service to every citizen regardless of their culture, religion and colour of skin is critical. The slightest indication of bias and stereotyping damages trust in police.

Finally, police officers must be equipped with the right tools and knowledge to deal with such crimes.

The RCMP has already developed a basic online course and other police departments in Canada have developed training to increase general awareness on this topic. More training is needed for front-line officers and more intensive training is needed to develop a larger pool of subject matter experts.

The sad reality is that honour-based crimes occur and many individuals are victimized. The policing community in Canada has an opportunity to develop more initiatives through education, collaboration and outreach to move forward on this front.