



Bill 173, *Intimate Partner Violence Epidemic Act, 2024*

AMO'S SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE
POLICY

July 29, 2024

Introduction

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) is a non-partisan, non-profit association representing almost all 444 municipal governments from across Ontario. Municipal governments work through AMO to achieve shared goals and meet common challenges. As the frontline order of government closest to the people, municipal governments are deeply invested in the safety and wellbeing of residents of Ontario and are confronted by the reality of gender-based violence provincially, nationally, and internationally.

AMO is encouraged that Bill 173 is being considered by the Standing Committee on Justice Policy. Declaring intimate partner violence an epidemic would be an important symbolic action and fulfill the first recommendation of the Culleton, Kuzyk & Warmerdam Inquest. However, symbolic action is not sufficient. Recognizing intimate partner violence as an epidemic must also be accompanied by concrete provincial action to support victims and address root causes.

In a 2018 overview of intimate partner violence in Canada, Statistics Canada reports that more than four in 10 women have experienced some form of intimate-partner violence in their lifetime. While one-third of men have also experienced intimate partner violence, women disproportionately experience the most severe forms.¹ According to the Government of Canada, between 2014 and 2019 there were 497 cases of intimate partner homicide nationally and 80% of the victims were women.

The roots of intimate partner violence are complex and varied with cultural (e.g., gender stereotypes), legal (e.g., low levels of reporting and investigation), economic (e.g., unequal economic resources), and political (e.g., unequal representation in politics) factors playing a role. Income security is critical to ending violence as fear of poverty or economic hardship often keeps women and children trapped in violent situations.² This is compounded by the growing housing affordability crisis and the significant increases in rent across Ontario which make intimate partner violence the leading cause of women's homelessness.³

In addition, there has been a significant increase in abuse and domestic violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic with an increase in the number of reported cases of intimate partner violence and the severity of those cases.⁴ Increased financial stressors, caregiver burnout, and a lack of community resources during the pandemic have been identified as contributing factors. The impacts of this are being seen and felt in communities across the province.

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00003-eng.htm>

² <https://www.ywcatoronto.org/takeaction/additional/incomesecurity>

³ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(21\)00234-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(21)00234-6/fulltext)

⁴ <https://cjen.ca/index.php/cjen/article/download/148/166/1007>

The Municipal Role in Addressing the Intimate Partner Violence Epidemic

In 2023, along with 93 of our member municipalities from across the province, AMO recognized that gender-based and intimate partner violence is an epidemic in Ontario that requires urgent and coordinated government action. By making this declaration AMO recognizes municipal governments are key partners in responding to issues of intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, and violence against Indigenous women.

Municipalities play a multifaceted role in addressing intimate partner violence. Making this declaration acknowledges the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Ontario communities and expresses our commitment to responding to this issue. Since making their declarations, we have seen many municipalities grow, expand, and initiate new responses to intimate partner violence and gender-based violence in their communities.

Through Community Safety and Well-Being plans, municipalities play an important convener role, bringing together community organizations, members of the public, police, and health sector partners to identify gaps and make local service improvements. This can take the form of co-locating services within spaces people experiencing violence are already accessing. Community Safety and Well-Being plans remain unfunded by the provincial government and municipal governments are frequently filling funding gaps from property tax revenue for community-based organizations where provincial funding is insufficient.

Municipal governments recognize the impacts of intimate partner violence on the broader community. Municipalities deliver training and awareness programs to their staff and residents to better equip them to identify and respond to intimate partner violence.

In addition, municipalities are responsible for resource planning and service delivery for community housing and homelessness prevention programs, emergency shelters, and public health. These programs and services are frequently utilized by people experiencing intimate partner violence. It is especially important to ensure that they are adequately funded to ensure there is capacity to respond to the need within the community. In many cases, municipalities fund over and beyond their obligations to sustain these services.

The municipal role continues to be clarified as municipalities act in their responses to making the declaration of intimate partner violence as an epidemic in Ontario. Our members are committed to growing their contributions to addressing the epidemic, but proper resourcing is essential to their ability to do so.

AMO's Gender-Based Violence Action Plan and Collaboration with Indigenous Organizations

As an organization we have acted on our declaration of the epidemic in part by approving AMO's own action plan on advocacy and member education on gender-based violence.

Over the coming year, AMO will be undertaking a number of priority actions, including developing training for elected officials on the importance of trauma-informed policymaking and service delivery; a resource toolkit to support municipalities in the development of their local responses; member education opportunities to share promising practices from communities innovating in their responses to gender-based violence; and research and consultation with members and subject matter experts to identify future advocacy priorities.

All governments have a role to play in responding to the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. AMO is also working to develop a parallel action plan in collaboration with the Ontario Native Women's Association and the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres to address violence against Indigenous women and girls. This work recognizes that the experiences of Indigenous women and girls are different from other groups and commits us to supporting the role municipalities play in addressing this violence and in demonstrating our commitment to implementing the Calls for Justice in Ontario's municipalities.

The response to date on implementing the Calls for Justice has not been met with the same urgency as the Culleton, Kuzyk, and Warmerdam Inquest by any order of government. However, we are committed as AMO to rectifying this discrepancy. We encourage the Province in their study of intimate partner violence to also recognize this and to consider the unique experiences of Indigenous women and girls as part of their response.

Recommendations to the Provincial Government

Since declaring intimate partner violence an epidemic, AMO has met with the Ministries of the Solicitor General; Attorney General; and Children, Community and Social Services on their responses to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

We are pleased to see that the provincial government has responded to our advocacy and the feedback of the sector with the launch of Ontario STANDS. However, to fully address this epidemic significant and sustained action will be required across government. Interventions around intimate partner violence must also be culturally appropriate and targeted to the diverse communities within Ontario.

As a result of decades of poor provincial policy decisions, Ontario is facing growing income insecurity, an insufficient supply of deeply affordable housing, and an inadequate approach to mental health and addictions. These challenges have contributed to the growing epidemic of intimate partner violence as well as the intersecting homelessness and opioid crises as substance misuse is often seen after intimate partner violence.⁵

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9912846/>

AMO has repeatedly called on the provincial government to transform the social assistance system and increase social assistance rates; significantly expand the supply of deeply affordable housing, including transitional housing; and improve the mental health and addictions system to reduce wait times for those in need of support.

We have seen successful coordination and collaboration through Community Safety and Well-Being plans and other partnerships with community organizations, but dedicated sustainable funding is needed, as are systems changes to ensure that the services utilized by people experiencing violence have the capacity and training to be responsive to their needs.

The provincial response must also address the impacts of intimate partner violence on children. We are pleased to see an emphasis on prevention programs aimed at children within Ontario STANDS, as well as strengthening connections between children's aid societies and other sectors. Improving the capacity of the childcare system and the accessibility of mental health supports for children and youth are important measures that should be taken to provide stability and support for children and families.

AMO has called for collection of disaggregated data to ensure appropriate responses to communities that are disproportionately affected by these forms of violence, including racialized communities. The provincial response must include specific, culturally appropriate supports for Indigenous and racialized communities. This work should be led by experts from the communities affected and should have specific, sustainable funding to be able to reliably provide culturally appropriate responses. We encourage the Standing Committee to consult with organizations serving cultural groups as part of this study to inform culturally appropriate services.

Learning from data collection will also be essential to being able to implement targeted responses. Additional funding and supports to collect and monitor data from Community Safety and Well-Being plan initiatives could also be helpful to track their impact on safety by identifying local risk and protection factors and identifying what is needed to prevent violence and recidivism by offenders. We recommend that the provincial government also take on the role of compiling and disseminating this data provincially to analyze trends and share findings on what promising practices are working well and can be applied to other communities across the province. A publicly available annual report from the Province on Community Safety and Well-Being plans would be an appropriate mechanism for sharing this information.

Conclusion

We look forward to continuing to work with the Province on the implementation of this strategy and encourage the Standing Committee to support the Province's declaration of intimate partner violence as an epidemic as a reflection of the Province's commitment to this issue.