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Before the First Charge: Using Police Data to Identify Opportunities for Domestic Violence Prevention

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Domestic violence perpetrated by men is a significant public health and public safety issue in Canada. While governments have invested heavily in victim protection, emergency response and justice system interventions, most policies and programs continue to focus on responding after violence has been reported to or detected by the criminal justice system. This paper argues that meaningful opportunities exist to intervene much earlier before violence becomes entrenched, escalates in severity or results in criminal charges.

Patterns of police contact before men are charged with domestic violence reveal distinct developmental trajectories that can be identified years before a domestic violence offence occurs. Understanding these trajectories provides an opportunity to strengthen primary prevention by identifying earlier intervention points and shifting the focus from responding to violence after it occurs to preventing it before it starts. The analysis is based on an expanded longitudinal dataset provided by the Calgary Police Service, spanning January 2017 through December 2023. The study follows 3,846 adult men who received their first criminal charge for domestic violence against a female intimate partner and examines their prior patterns of police contact before the index offence.

The characteristics of these incidents remained remarkably consistent across the seven-year study period. Approximately three-quarters of offences involved a spouse or girlfriend, and nearly two-thirds of couples were living together at the time of the incident. Physical force was used in 73 per cent of cases, while 70 per cent resulted in injuries to the victim. Children were present or witnessed the violence in 42 per cent of incidents, highlighting the broader impact of domestic violence on children and families. The analysis identified four distinct groups of perpetrators based on their history of police contact before their first criminal domestic violence charge. At one end of the spectrum, 39 per cent of men had no previous police contact. At the other, 21 per cent had extensive criminal histories combined with repeated non-criminal domestic conflict incidents. Despite these differences, each group followed stable and identifiable developmental trajectories over time.

For men with prior police contact, interactions with police became increasingly frequent in the years leading up to their first domestic violence charge, with the sharpest increase occurring during the final year. Men with a history of non-criminal domestic incidents averaged more than one domestic conflict call in that year alone, highlighting a clear opportunity for intervention before violence escalates to a criminal offence. The 2023 cohort also demonstrated increasing police involvement related to crimes against persons, property offences, administration of justice offences and other criminal activity. These findings suggest that domestic violence is rarely an isolated or unpredictable event. For many male perpetrators, it represents the culmination of a pattern of escalating police contact and behavioural risk that develops over several years. Repeated non-criminal domestic incidents are particularly significant because they frequently precede violent offences and provide an important opportunity to intervene before violence against women occurs.

Current policy approaches leave a significant prevention gap by focusing predominantly on responses after a criminal offence has occurred. Yet, many male perpetrators who commit domestic violence are already known to police through repeated domestic conflict calls that do not result in criminal charges. These earlier encounters provide a critical opportunity to identify elevated risk, connect individuals with appropriate interventions and strengthen primary prevention before violence occurs. Shifting more attention and investment toward these earlier opportunities has the potential to reduce harm to women, improve safety for children and families and lessen the long-term demands placed on policing, justice, health care and social service systems. Recognizing and acting on these earlier intervention opportunities represents one of the most promising pathways for preventing domestic violence before it starts.

INTRODUCTION

Current domestic violence policy frameworks remain largely reactive, limiting their ability to prevent harm before it occurs (Davis and Taylor 1997; Niolon et al. 2017). Yet emerging evidence points to a different and more consequential starting point: the period before a domestic violence charge is laid. Interactions with police often occur well before perpetrators are formally charged with a domestic violence-related offence, creating critical opportunities for earlier identification, intervention and prevention (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Boodt et al. 2024). This raises an important question: do patterns within these prior police interactions signal an increased risk of future domestic violence? If so, such patterns could provide a basis for timely police and community-based interventions aimed at preventing violence before it occurs. In this paper, we examine the extent to which police interactions with men exhibit discernible patterns that may help anticipate (and prevent) a future domestic violence offence.

In Canada, police-reported intimate partner violence (IPV) is disproportionately perpetrated by men, particularly in more severe cases. National data show that accused persons in reported domestic violence incidents are most often male (Cotter 2021; Perreault 2020). This pattern is consistent with global evidence on IPV and has significant implications for how prevention, policing and public policy are designed (World Health Organization 2021). Establishing the gendered nature of perpetration often becomes the endpoint of analysis rather than the beginning of prevention-oriented inquiry. Because data are more readily available for victims, research and policy attention have tended to focus on describing the experiences and characteristics of women and children who suffer the consequences of violence rather than examining the behaviours, trajectories and systems interactions of those who commit it (Flood and Burrell 2023). As a result, domestic violence policy has largely concentrated on crisis response, victim safety and criminal justice interventions after violence has occurred, rather than on identifying opportunities to prevent men's violence before it occurs (Jewkes 2002; Ryan et al. 2022; Crooks et al. 2021).

This imbalance has significant consequences. When prevention of male violence is underdeveloped, responsibility for safety implicitly shifts onto those at risk and those who have already been harmed. Women are expected to manage danger, modify behaviour and navigate complex support systems, while men are engaged primarily after violence has escalated to criminal thresholds. The absence of a robust focus on male perpetration trajectories and earlier intervention points represents a critical gap in both research and practice.

Reorienting domestic violence policy toward prevention requires understanding the developmental pathways that precede men's use of violence and identifying opportunities for intervention before violence occurs. Without this shift, domestic violence policy will remain largely focused on responding to violence after it occurs rather than preventing it before it starts.

This paper is part of a research series developed to address a critical gap: the lack of longitudinal, system-level evidence on male perpetration that can inform prevention-oriented decision-making and practice. By examining patterns of police interaction prior to domestic violence charges, this series generates actionable insights into how violence escalates over time and where opportunities for earlier intervention with men may exist.

This, the fourth policy brief in the series, draws on an expanded longitudinal dataset provided by the Calgary Police Service (CPS) that quantifies police interactions with male perpetrators in the years prior to a criminal domestic violence charge. Earlier reports in this series demonstrated that domestic violence charges are commonly preceded by discernible trajectories of police contact. The first report identified a clear escalation in police interactions in the years leading up to a first domestic violence charge (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Montesanti et al. 2024). The second report classified perpetrators into a typology of four distinct characterizations based on their criminal and non-criminal histories with

police (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Boodt et al. 2024). The third report quantified the substantial public system costs incurred along these trajectories and conducted a cost analysis of investments in prevention (Wells, Boodt, Emery and Fyie 2026).

Building on this foundation, the current paper tests the robustness of these findings using additional cohorts of male perpetrators of domestic violence. Specifically, it examines whether the previously identified typology and trajectories persist over time and across annual cohorts, and whether consistent early warning signs emerge prior to domestic violence charges. Evidence that these patterns are stable strengthens the case for early targeted intervention.

If domestic violence is consistently preceded by observable system interactions, it shows that it is not an isolated or unpredictable event but the culmination of a progression that can be disrupted. Identifying early warning signs creates opportunities for police, community-based supports and governments to intervene earlier — before violence escalates — advancing prevention strategies that reduce harm to women, children, families and communities.

This report outlines the expanded CPS dataset and key considerations for interpretation, examines the stability of the perpetrator typology and police-interaction trajectories over time and concludes with implications for future research and prevention-focused policy and practices.

THE DATA

Incidents involving male perpetrators of domestic violence were extracted from an in-house police information management system and quality-checked by the Corporate Data and Analytics unit at the CPS.¹ Individual observations were anonymized, with no personal and direct identifiers such as names, contact information or dates of birth. We obtained ethics approval from the University of Calgary (certificate REB21-1980) and CPS provided research approval through a research- and data-sharing agreement.

Perpetrators included in our study were male and 18 years or older at the time of an incident leading to a criminal charge involving domestic violence against a female intimate partner. This analysis focuses on male-to-female intimate partner violence because research consistently shows it accounts for the majority of severe, coercive and lethal cases in Canada (Cotter 2021; Perreault 2020). CPS defines domestic violence as physical violence, as well as verbal and emotional abuse, stalking and harassment between individuals in a family or intimate relationship. An intimate partner is defined as a girlfriend, ex-girlfriend, spouse or someone separated or divorced from the perpetrator.

The CPS-supplied data describe police interactions spanning the period from January 2017 to December 2023. The dataset is similar in structure to that used in our previous analyses (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Boodt et al. 2024), but the duration of historical data differs. In our earlier studies, the data were limited to describing police interactions with a single cohort of men: those charged with a crime involving domestic violence for the first time during 2019. That earlier dataset spanned from 2010 to 2019, allowing us to observe interactions of police with that cohort of men for more than nine years prior to a criminal charge laid sometime in 2019.

The data we use in this report describe police interactions with additional cohorts of men, each defined by the year in which a criminal charge involving domestic violence was first laid against them. We define four cohorts for the years 2020 to 2023, inclusive. Men assigned to the 2020 cohort were those against whom a first-time criminal charge for an incident involving domestic violence was laid in 2020. In a similar way, we allocate men to cohorts 2021, 2022 and 2023.

¹ The data analyzed are specific to incidents that occur in Calgary.

We do not define cohorts for 2017, 2018 or 2019 because this would leave us with fewer than one, two and three years, respectively, of information on perpetrator interactions with police prior to their first criminal charge involving domestic violence. This small window for observation would limit our ability to identify patterns of police interaction prior to the criminal charge. Including these earlier cohorts may also create a problem arising from the issue of left censoring. Further discussion of data and cohort issues is in the Appendix.

Our analysis focused on the trajectory of police interactions leading up to a perpetrator's first criminal charge involving domestic violence between 2020 and 2023. Some perpetrators, however, may have had multiple charges involving domestic violence laid against them. To perform our analysis, we identified the first incident chronologically and used this date to assign the perpetrator to a cohort. Table 1 identifies the number of perpetrators assigned to each of our four cohorts, using this approach. The four cohorts are roughly equal in size.

Table 1. Male Perpetrators by Cohort

Cohort	2020	2021	2022	2023	All Cohorts
Number of male perpetrators charged with domestic violence in Calgary	1,022	908	916	1,000	3,846

The expansion of our examination from one cohort in earlier research (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Boodt et al. 2024) to four cohorts here is an important part of our effort to test the robustness of our earlier results. Similarity in behaviour patterns across time periods would offer confidence in suggesting predictable patterns of male perpetrator behaviours that might be useful in domestic violence prevention efforts.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MALE PERPETRATORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

We started by analyzing the characteristics of the male perpetrators in our four cohorts. Our dataset contained information on 3,846 male perpetrators, their victims and the incident that led to the criminal charge (see Table 2). If more than one charge was levied against a perpetrator between 2020 and 2023, we provide information related only to the first charge.

From the analysis, we observed that most domestic violence incidents involved a current partner, whether a spouse or girlfriend (n=2,889 [75 per cent]) and most incidents involved the victim and perpetrator living together (n=2,433 [63 per cent]). Physical force was the most common type of violence (n=2,796 [73 per cent]). In most incidents, there was at least one injury to the victim (n=2,688 [70 per cent]).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Domestic Violence Incidents, 2020–2023 (N=3,846)

	N	%
Incidents by Cohort		
2020	1,022	26%
2021	908	24%
2022	916	24%
2023	1,000	26%
Relationship to Perpetrator		
Girlfriend	1,508	39%
Ex-girlfriend	725	19%
Separated or divorced	232	6%
Spouse	1,381	36%
Age of Perpetrator		
Average age	36 (standard deviation 11)	
Median age	34 (IQR 28-42)	
Up to 30 years old	1,362	36%
31-40 years old	1,358	35%
41+ years old	1,119	29%
Living Together		
Yes	2,433	63%
No or unknown	1,413	37%
Children present	807	42%
Level of Injury		
No injury or unknown	1,158	30%
Minor injury	2,500	65%
Major injury	188	5%

Characteristics did not differ noticeably when compared across years. Spouses or girlfriends were the victims in most incidents, ranging from 73 per cent in 2021 to 77 per cent in 2023 ($\chi^2=6.6$, $p=0.08$). Physical force was involved in 70 per cent of incidents in 2021 to a high of 76 per cent of incidents in 2022 ($\chi^2=12.5$, $p=0.01$). Injuries were common, ranging from 69 per cent of incidents in 2022 to 71 per cent in 2020 ($\chi^2=3.0$, $p=0.40$). Minor injuries (defined as treatable on scene or needing no hospital treatment) made up most incidents (65 per cent), while instances resulting in major injuries to the victim (defined as resulting in hospitalization)² occurred in five per cent of incidents. Victims and perpetrators lived together in most incidents each year, ranging from 57 per cent in 2019 to 68 per cent in 2023 ($\chi^2=11.1$, $p=0.01$). The presence of one or more children at the domestic violence-related incident was recorded for 807 of 1,930 incidents (42 per cent). Data on the presence of children were only available from 2020 to 2021.

Broadly speaking, the situational factors (e.g., living arrangements, relationship type and the perpetrators' age distribution) associated with incidents of domestic violence remained largely consistent across the years of analysis (see Table 2).

² The definition of major versus minor injury to a victim in an incident is standardized across Canada and described in the Uniform Crime Reporting Manual (Statistics Canada 2006, 106).

A TYPOLOGY OF MALE PERPETRATORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In our earlier research (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Boodt et al. 2024), we introduced a typology to characterize male perpetrators based on their patterns of police interaction prior to a domestic violence-related criminal charge. Here, we use the expanded dataset to assess whether the typology identified remains an effective way to summarize police-perpetrator interactions (described below).

The typology developed in earlier research considers two types of police interactions occurring prior to a domestic violence charge: interactions that result in a criminal charge being laid against the perpetrator and interactions classified as domestic conflict encounters.³ Both interaction types are analytically important because they capture formal criminal justice involvement as well as earlier, non-criminal points of system contact where escalation may still be preventable.

For criminal charges, enough evidence of a criminal act was available to lead to a criminal charge. This leads to interaction between the perpetrator and the judicial system. For domestic conflict encounters, police attend an incident but do not lay or recommend criminal charges. Men in our sample were involved as parties to these incidents; however, no determination was made regarding the commission of a criminal offence or the identity of a violent actor. As such, domestic conflict encounters meet the threshold for police involvement but do not result in a criminal charge or further interaction with the judicial system.

Using this information (previous charges or no charges; previous domestic encounters or no previous domestic encounters), our typology characterizes perpetrators according to four types of police-perpetrator interactions prior to the laying of a charge for a crime involving domestic violence. These are:

- Group A had **no prior history with the police**. During our period of analysis, men assigned to this group had no interaction with police, neither a criminal charge nor a domestic conflict encounter, prior to a criminal charge involving domestic violence.
- Group B had **a prior criminal history but no non-criminal domestic encounters involving police**. During our period of analysis, men assigned to this group interacted with police only by way of their criminal histories. Perpetrators were not involved in a domestic encounter investigation in their history of police interactions.
- Group C had **a history of non-criminal domestic encounters, but no criminal history with police**. During our period of analysis, men assigned to this group interacted with police only by way of their involvement in non-criminal domestic encounters. Perpetrators were not charged with a criminal offence in their history of police interactions.
- Group D were **offenders with a history of both criminal charges and non-criminal domestic encounters with police**. Men assigned to this group interacted with police by way of both criminal charges and their involvement in non-criminal domestic encounters.

Table 3 reports, by cohort and for all perpetrators in aggregate, the number and percentage of perpetrators in our current data sample falling within each group.

³ The domestic conflict encounters we associated with domestic violence incidents were those police interventions recorded as domestic information (police called by a bystander or an involved party in an incident but which did not lead to a police charge) or domestic standby (police called by a victim to assist in retrieving belongings after leaving home).

Table 3. Typology of Perpetrators, by Cohort and by Group

Typology	2020	2021	2022	2023	All Cohorts
Group A: No prior history with police	379 (37%)	346 (38%)	359 (39%)	429 (43%)	1,513 (39%)
Group B: Criminal history, but no non-criminal domestic encounters involving police	90 (9%)	71 (8%)	59 (6%)	65 (7%)	285 (8%)
Group C: Non-criminal domestic encounters, but no criminal history with police	290 (28%)	296 (33%)	329 (36%)	329 (33%)	1,244 (32%)
Group D: Offenders with both criminal and non-criminal domestic encounters involving police	263 (26%)	195 (21%)	169 (18%)	177 (18%)	804 (21%)
Total number of perpetrators	1,022	908	916	1,000	3,846
Years available to observe past police interactions	3+ years	4+ years	5+ years	6+ years	

Despite being based on observations from 3+ years up to 6+ years, the results in Table 3 report a remarkable consistency across cohorts. Across all cohorts, approximately 40 per cent of perpetrators had no encounters with police prior to a charge involving domestic violence being levied against them.⁴ In all cohorts, approximately 30 per cent of perpetrators had non-criminal encounters but no criminal encounters with police prior to their charge involving domestic violence. Finally, in all cohorts, approximately 20 per cent of perpetrators had interactions with police involving both criminal and non-criminal domestic encounters.

⁴ A notable difference from our past research is that the percentage of perpetrators with no prior police interaction history increased from 27 per cent previously to 39 per cent here. The primary reason for this change is the shorter data period leading up to the laying of a criminal charge involving domestic violence. The dataset used in our earlier research allowed us to observe 9+ years of prior police interactions compared to between 3+ years and 6+ years here, thereby increasing the likelihood of criminal and non-criminal interactions (captured in Groups B, C and D) and decreasing the likelihood of being captured in Group A.

TRAJECTORIES OF POLICE INTERACTIONS

Data presented in Table 3 report the total number of perpetrators for each cohort according to category of prior criminal and non-criminal police interactions. Equally important as the totals is the timing of when these interactions occurred, which we refer to as the trajectories of police interactions.

An important question is whether criminal trajectories differ by group and whether they are similar across cohorts. This may help identify behaviour patterns that can inform early intervention efforts.

GROUP B: HISTORY OF CRIMINAL CHARGES BUT NO HISTORY OF NON-CRIMINAL DOMESTIC ENCOUNTERS (EIGHT PER CENT OF PERPETRATORS)

Summing across all cohorts, there were 285 offenders in Group B. These men had a criminal charge laid prior to the domestic violence-involved offence but no history of non-criminal domestic encounters. Figure 1 reports the total number of criminal charges for each year prior to the domestic violence-involved criminal charge by cohort. The lines are different lengths because we have a differing number of years of data per cohort.

Figure 1. Criminal Trajectories of Perpetrators in Group B (n=285), by Cohort

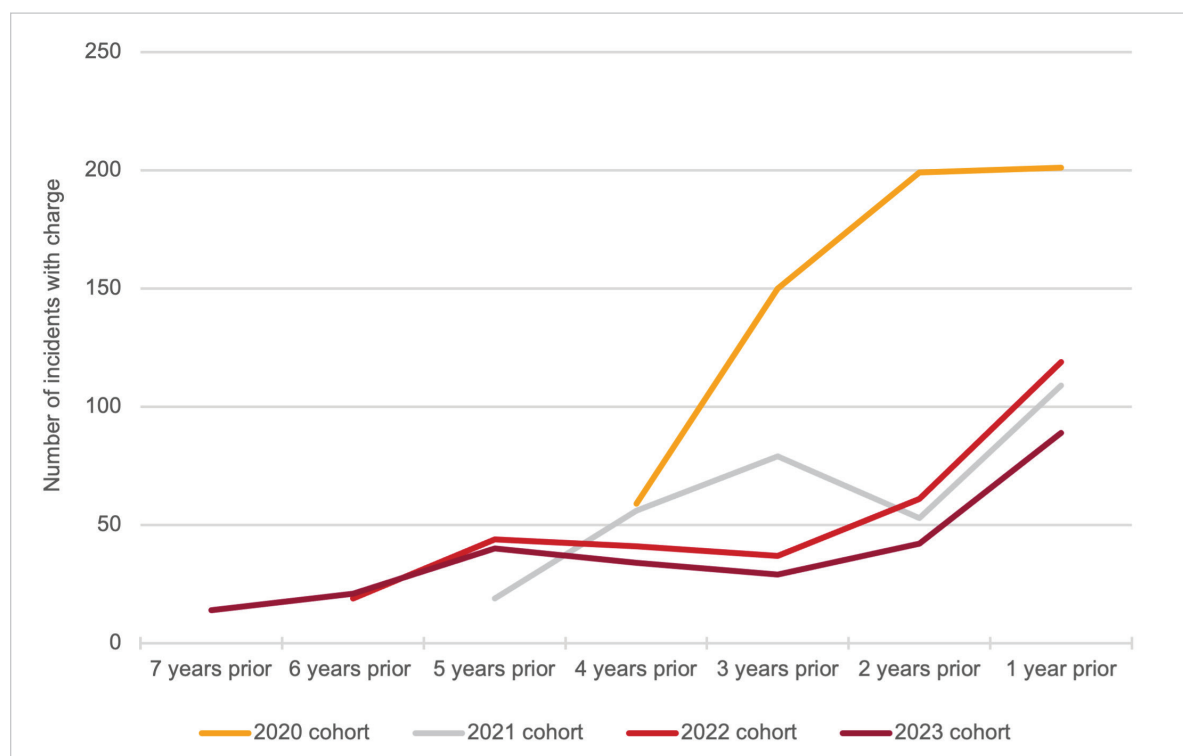
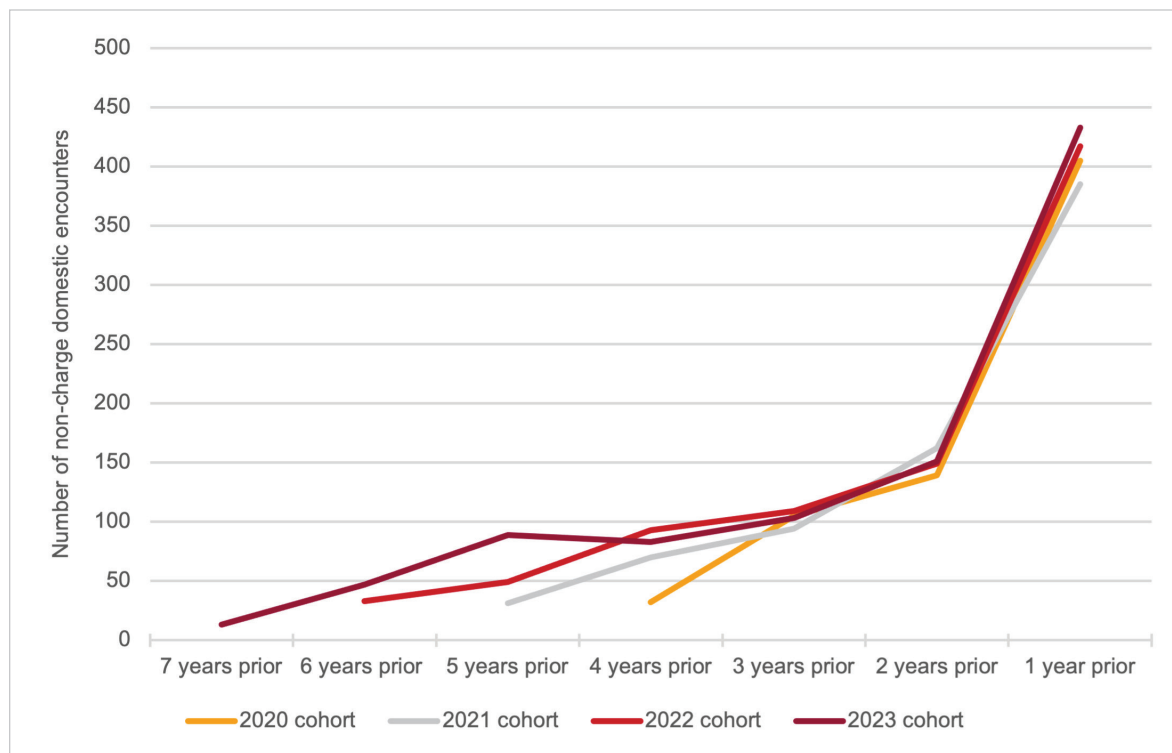


Figure 1 shows that, for each cohort, there is an increase in the number of criminal charges laid against men in Group B prior to their criminal charge involving domestic violence. For men in the 2021, 2022 and 2023 cohorts, we observed a large increase in the number of criminal charges in the year immediately prior to their criminal charge involving domestic violence. Members of the 2020 cohort were different in this regard, with large increases in criminal charges three and two years prior to their criminal charge involving domestic violence, but not in the year immediately prior.

GROUP C: NON-CRIMINAL DOMESTIC ENCOUNTERS BUT NO CRIMINAL CHARGES (32 PER CENT OF PERPETRATORS)

Figure 2 shows that for each cohort there is an increase in the number of non-criminal domestic encounters in every year prior to the domestic violence-related charge.

Figure 2. Non-Criminal Domestic Encounter Trajectory of Perpetrators in Group C (n=1,244), by Cohort



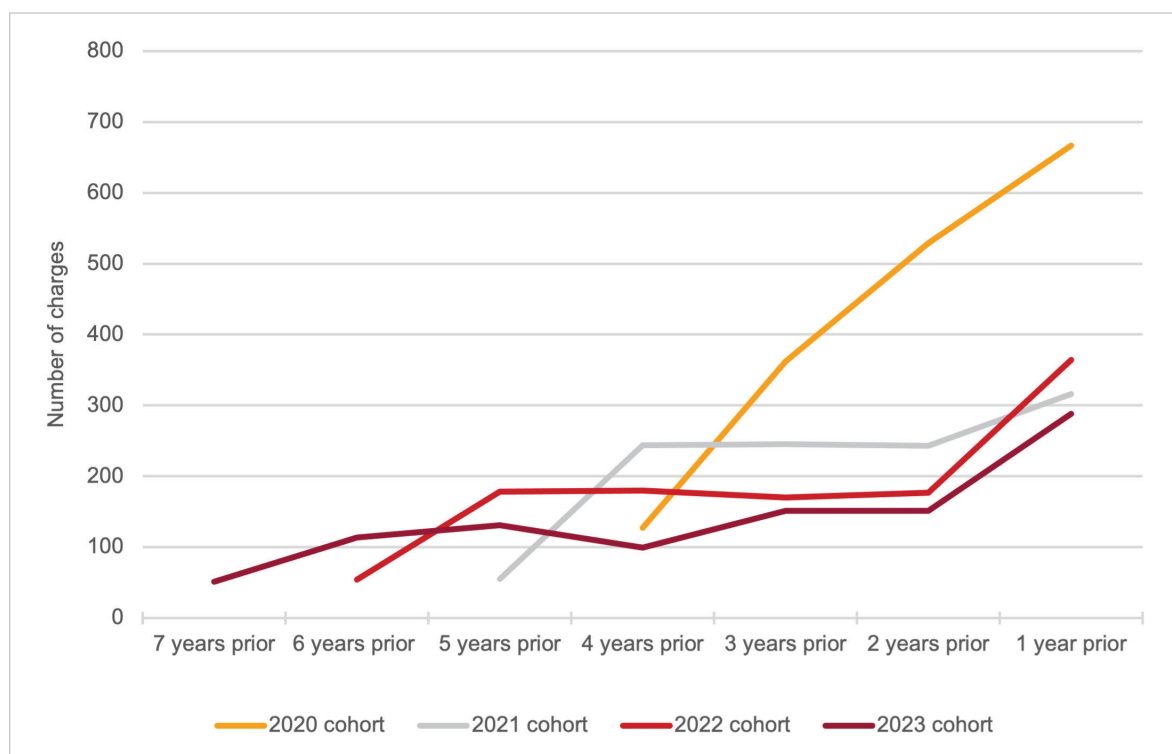
Here we see the clearest evidence of a gradual upward trajectory in the number of police encounters, with the largest increases happening in the year prior to a domestic violence-involved charge. In all cohorts, the average perpetrator had more than one domestic encounter with police in the year prior to a domestic violence-involved criminal charge.

GROUP D: OFFENDERS WITH A CRIMINAL HISTORY AND A HISTORY OF NON-CRIMINAL DOMESTIC ENCOUNTERS (21 PER CENT OF THE SAMPLE)

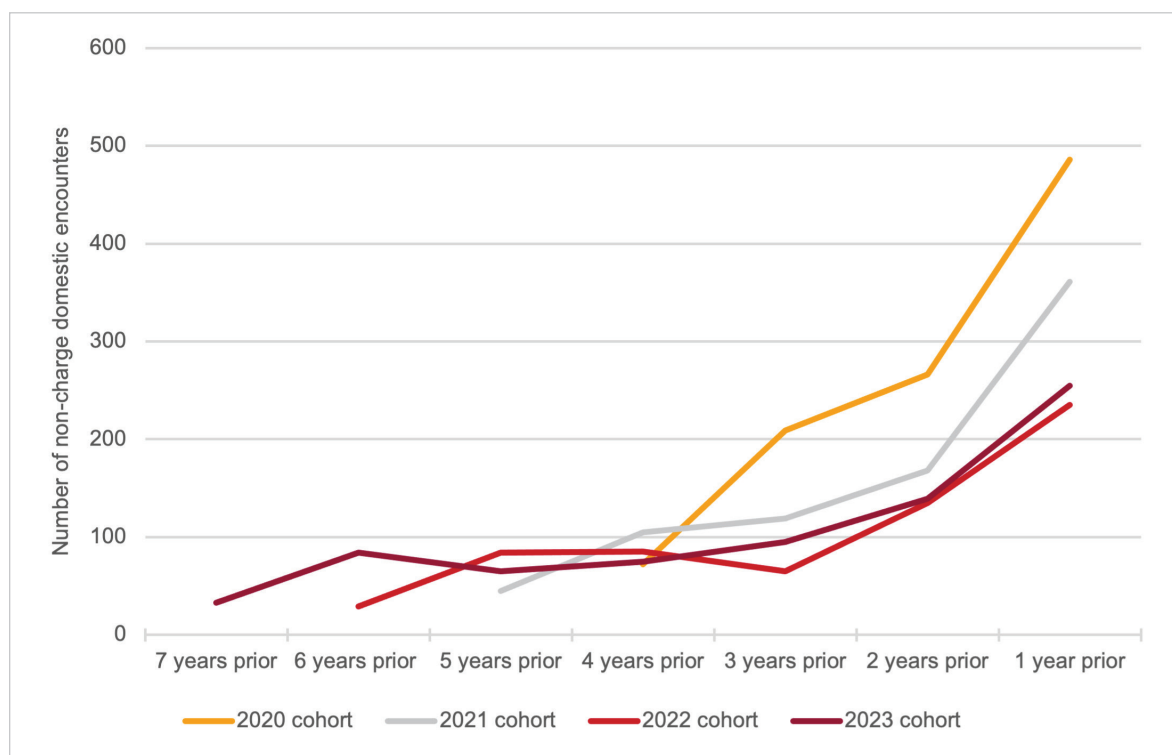
Summing across all cohorts, there were 804 perpetrators in Group D. These men had both a criminal charge laid prior to the domestic violence-involved offence and a history of non-criminal domestic encounters. Figure 3 presents the total number of criminal charges (panel a) and the number of domestic encounters (panel b) by cohort. In Group D, we see a clear upward trajectory in both types of police interactions.

Figure 3. Criminal and Non-Criminal Trajectories of Perpetrators in Group D (n=804), by Cohort

(a) Criminal Charges



(b) Non-Criminal Domestic Encounters



These trajectories for Group D do not differ noticeably from those of the other groups. As we observed in Group B, the upward trajectory of criminal charges begins earlier for men in the 2020 cohort.

TRAJECTORIES OF CRIMES, BY TYPE

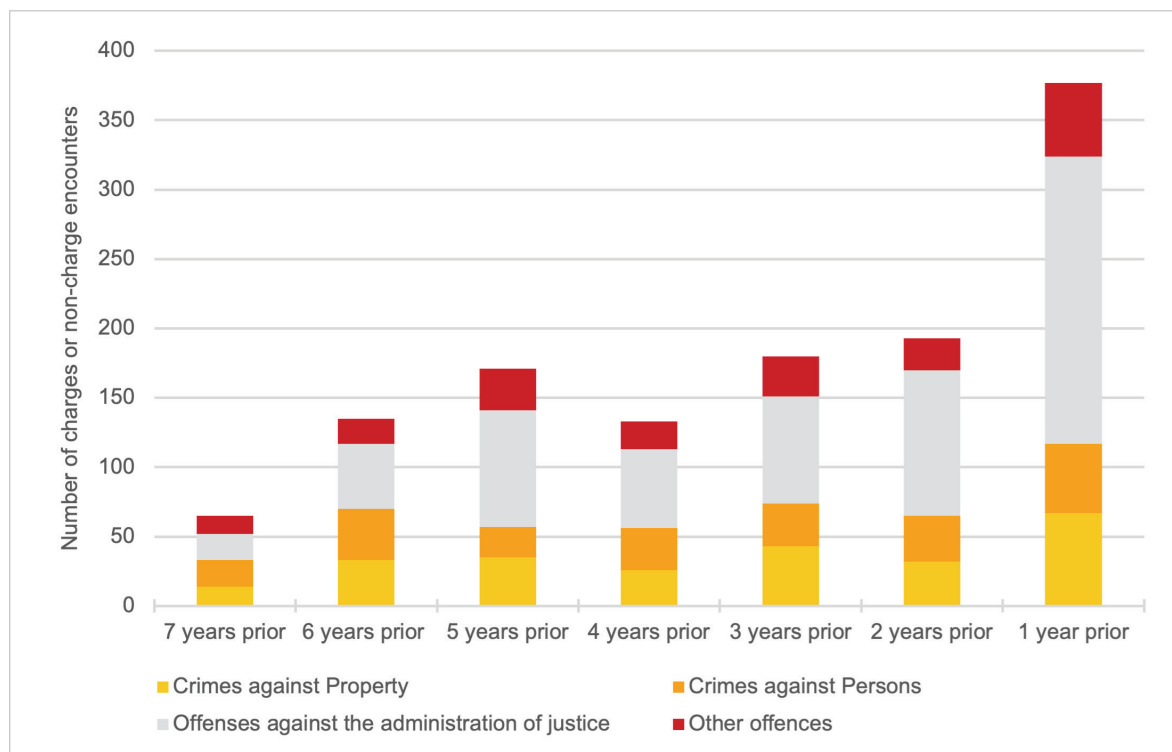
As reported in Table 3, over 60 per cent of male perpetrators had either criminal or non-criminal domestic interactions with police prior to them being charged with a crime involving domestic violence. Seventy-five per cent of these interactions (1,450 of 1,941) involved criminal charges.⁵ To better appreciate the nature of these criminal interactions, we grouped their crimes into four broad categories:

1. **Crimes against property** (e.g., break-and-enter, possession of stolen property, theft)
2. **Crimes against persons** (e.g., various types of assault, robbery, uttering threats that may include threats or assaults against an intimate partner)
3. **Other offences** (comprising drugs, Criminal Code traffic and other statute violations such as possession of cocaine or methamphetamines or driving while disqualified)
4. **Offences against the administration of justice** (e.g., being at-large, failure to comply with appearance)

⁵ When police close their investigation into an incident, it is deemed cleared. Charges against a perpetrator for an incident, as defined here, are where CPS had cleared an incident, specifically by a criminal charge (or charges), or recommended charges be laid. Incidents which were cleared otherwise, such as by departmental discretion or victim not wishing to proceed, were not included. In these cases, the initial incident involving domestic violence that resulted in a criminal charge (and inclusion of a perpetrator in this dataset) was also not included.

In Figure 4, we used data describing the 2023 cohort — the cohort for which we have the most observations on previous police interactions — to investigate how the trajectory of criminal interactions with police varied by the four types of crime defined above.

Figure 4. Trajectories by Type of Crime, 2023 Cohort



There was an increase in the number of charges for all four categories of crime in the seven years prior to the criminal charge involving domestic violence, with an escalation in the year prior to a domestic violence charge.

THE CRIMINAL CHARGE IN CRIMES INVOLVING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Still focusing on the 1,000 perpetrators in the 2023 cohort, Table 4 presents data on the specific crime involving domestic violence. In 2019, assault by choking, suffocation or strangulation was introduced as a separate charge in the Criminal Code of Canada. This charge is now one of the most frequent charges in domestic violence-related cases, as Table 4 notes.

Table 4. Most Frequently Laid Charges in Domestic Violence-Involved Crime, 2023 Cohort

Description of Charge	N	%
Assault or common assault	480	48%
Assault with a weapon or causing bodily harm	161	16%
Assault by choking, suffocation or strangulation	158	16%
Sexual assault (including bodily harm or while choking)	45	5%
Uttering threats to cause death or bodily harm	37	4%
Criminal harassment or stalking	37	4%
Other offences	82	8%
All offences	1,000	

DISCUSSION

In our previous research of men charged with a domestic violence offence in 2019 (Wells, Fyie, Kneebone, Boodt et al. 2024), we developed a typology that identifies four groups of perpetrators based on their police interactions. To assess the robustness of this typology, we expanded our sample of perpetrators to include men charged with a domestic violence offence at any point in the years 2020–2023. The broader sample size (four annual cohorts rather than one) has allowed us to compare patterns and trends to the single-year sample from earlier research.

We have found that the percentage of perpetrators falling into each of the four groups defining our typology is remarkably constant across yearly cohorts. Approximately 40 per cent of perpetrators had no police interactions prior to a criminal charge involving domestic violence, while the remaining 60 per cent had non-criminal interactions (approximately eight per cent), criminal interactions (approximately 32 per cent) or both (approximately 20 per cent).

Drilling down deeper into the data, we examined patterns of police interactions with men prior to their being charged with a domestic violence-related crime. Here again, our previous results were confirmed. Prior to the criminal charge involving domestic violence, the interactions with police dramatically increased, particularly in the year immediately prior to the criminal charge. This pattern is invariant across all cohorts. In all cohorts, the increase in police interactions is greatest in the form of non-criminal domestic encounters, which include police interactions related to domestic situations that may not result in criminal charges, or providing support for women who need to return home to retrieve personal belongings. Criminal encounters of all types also increase prior to the criminal charge. The type of criminal encounter — whether a crime against property, a crime against persons or another type of crime — does not appear to offer additional useful information for anticipating a future criminal charge involving domestic violence. This, again, is true of all cohorts.

The additional information made available for this study enabled us to observe whether there were obvious differences in the police interactions with men charged before, during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. We see little evidence of differences in terms of the size of cohorts, the allocation of men in our typology or in the trajectories of police interactions. With respect to police interactions, the pandemic appears to have had little influence on domestic violence incidents or behaviours preceding those incidents.

It is worth emphasizing that our data show a good deal of prior interaction between police and men who were eventually charged with a crime involving domestic violence (60 per cent of our sample). There is an opportunity to use these interactions to intervene in a way that short-circuits what may otherwise be a steady progression toward violence. Whether this involves changes in police procedures and practices or increasing the involvement of non-police intervenors, there are important opportunities not to be missed. For the large minority of men without police interactions prior to their criminal charge (40 per cent of men in our sample), another manner of intervention is required.

LIMITATIONS

Our data on crimes involving domestic violence were limited to incidents cleared through a charge. Incidents that police cleared without a charge were not included in our set. Adding these data would allow a more detailed look at the background leading to a charge involving domestic violence, as well as provide the ability to assess whether police interactions reduced the incidence of domestic violence.

These analyses focus on univariate associations between factors associated with domestic violence and the rates in each year. While serving as a starting point to highlight trends associated with domestic violence, further investigation using multivariate analyses is warranted. This would assess whether there is evidence that certain characteristics of previous police incidents (e.g., type and number of charges) or characteristics of men involved in crimes or domestic encounters (e.g., socio-demographic characteristics) are associated with a strong possibility of future domestic violence.

In addition, the scope of the CPS data is necessarily shaped by policing needs and does not include detailed socio-demographic information that could help illuminate underlying factors associated with domestic violence or other forms of criminal behaviour. As a result, our ability to examine the interaction between individual characteristics, neighbourhood context and prior police contact is limited. Future research would benefit from supplementing police data with additional data sources, such as census, health, justice, housing or social service information. Integrating these datasets would enable a more nuanced examination of how age, income, neighbourhood effects, social and system interactions intersect to shape pathways toward domestic violence. Such work would strengthen the evidence base needed to design targeted, prevention-focused interventions and inform co-ordinated policy responses across justice, social and public health systems. These gaps highlight both the limitations of relying on police data alone and the importance of cross-sector data integration as a foundation for effective domestic violence prevention policy.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This study's findings have important implications for how male-perpetrated domestic violence is understood, prevented and addressed across policy and practice systems. Most notably, the consistency of perpetration trajectories across cohorts demonstrates that domestic violence is rarely an isolated or sudden event (Boxall and Lawler 2021). Instead, it often emerges through a progression marked by repeated and observable police interactions well before a criminal charge is laid. This challenges prevailing policy approaches that prioritize post-incident response and reinforces the need for upstream, prevention-focused strategies.

From a policy perspective, the evidence supports a shift toward earlier intervention frameworks that leverage existing system touchpoints (Hester et al. 2006) and prioritize interventions targeting men before violence escalates (Wells, Claussen and Boodt 2026). Police interactions, particularly non-criminal domestic conflict encounters with men, represent underutilized opportunities for intervention and possible prevention. Policies and investments that enable structured, proportionate responses at these early points of contact may prove effective at interrupting escalation, reducing repeated harm and lessening long-term system costs. Effective responses may include formalized referral pathways, risk-informed decision-making tools, stronger co-ordination between police and community-based services and targeted prevention programs for men.⁶

⁶ The CPS' Review and Assignment Team is dedicated to evaluating and triaging all domestic violence files in Calgary. Using structured professional judgment, they review each incident, conduct detailed history checks and identify risk factors to inform operational next steps.

The persistence of the perpetrator typology across cohorts also suggests that prevention policies do not need to be continuously redesigned to account for changing demographics. Instead, resources can be invested in strengthening interventions targeted to well-established patterns of risk. This stability supports the development of standardized, evidence-informed prevention models that can be scaled and adapted across jurisdictions.

For practice, the findings underscore the importance of moving beyond reactive enforcement toward co-ordinated, prevention-oriented engagement. Police services, in collaboration with community agencies, are well positioned to identify early warning signs and connect men to supports before violence escalates. Drawing on prior research (Wells, Fyie, Boodt and Emery 2026), this includes leveraging the full spectrum of police responses, from informal cautioning and non-charge interactions to formal interventions, such as behavioural-change programs (Wells, Claussen and Boodt 2026), as critical entry points for prevention.

Evidence suggests that many perpetrators come into contact with police multiple times prior to a domestic violence charge, often through incidents where no charges are laid. These encounters represent missed opportunities to assess risk, engage men earlier and connect them to appropriate supports, thereby disrupting trajectories before harm intensifies. Importantly, this approach does not replace victim safety responses but complements them by addressing the potential for perpetration prior to the act.

Finally, the study highlights the value and limits of police data as a prevention tool. While policing data can identify patterns of escalation, integrating it with data from health, housing and social services would strengthen prevention efforts and enable more holistic responses. Together, these findings support a reorientation of domestic violence policy and practice toward early intervention with men, stronger co-ordination between police, the justice system and local agencies and clearer accountability. The goal is to reduce harm to women, children and families by connecting men to the right supports before violence escalates into criminal behaviour.

CONCLUSION

A key contribution of this study is the finding that domestic violence is not a phenomenon driven by year-to-year changes in perpetrator characteristics. Instead, there is striking consistency across cohorts of male perpetrators, suggesting that the pathways leading to domestic violence remain largely stable over time. This consistency indicates that prevention efforts do not need to be continually redesigned to account for shifting demographics but should focus on interrupting well-established trajectories.

The findings demonstrate that patterns of police interaction prior to domestic violence charges can serve as meaningful early signals of escalation risk. These interactions provide actionable opportunities to direct targeted, prevention-focused interventions toward men with a higher likelihood of committing domestic violence. Leveraging police contact as an early warning mechanism allows law enforcement to move beyond reactive responses and toward co-ordinated strategies that intervene earlier in the progression toward male violence.

Together, these findings strengthen the evidence base for upstream prevention approaches that reduce harm to women, children and families by prioritizing early action and supporting men before violence escalates to criminal thresholds.

APPENDIX: NOTES ON DATA QUALITY AND MEASUREMENT

Data used in this and previous reports in the series are drawn from administrative records collected by the Calgary Police Service and capture police interactions with men charged with a criminal offence involving domestic violence. Individuals appear in the dataset because the offence occurred within the City of Calgary. As a result, the analysis cannot account for police interactions these men may have had in other jurisdictions prior to relocating to Calgary.

This limitation is inherent in studies relying on local police data and diminishes as the geographic scope of the dataset expands. If comparable national-level police data were available, it would be possible to observe police interactions across jurisdictions within Canada, leaving only interactions occurring outside the country, such as those involving immigrants prior to arrival, as unobserved. We note this issue because over the period of analysis, from January 2017 to December 2023, Calgary's population grew rapidly, adding an average of 30,000 people annually to a base of approximately 1.3 million. There is, then, a potential for our data not to capture all previous police interactions with the men in our sample.

A related problem arises due to a phenomenon known as left censoring. This happens when a variable of interest — in our case, whether someone has had previous interactions with police — may have occurred at a time outside of one's dataset. The approach we have used to assign men to a cohort requires that we recognize this issue.

For the men assigned to the 2023 cohort, we have up to 6+ years of data (from 2017 to a date in 2023) to observe whether they had a previous criminal charge involving domestic violence. The earliest date of historical charges would be Jan. 1, 2017, while the last date (exploring the trajectory up to domestic violence) would be the day before a domestic violence charge was laid. Given this length of time, there is arguably a high degree of certainty that members of the 2023 cohort are indeed first-time recipients of a criminal charge involving domestic violence. On the other hand, for the men assigned to the 2020 cohort, we have only up to 3+ years (2017 to a date in 2020) to observe whether they had a previous criminal charge involving domestic violence. Thus, our confidence in saying members of the 2020 cohort were first-time recipients of a criminal charge involving domestic violence is lower. Were we to assign men to the 2017, 2018 or 2019 cohorts, we would be doing so when relying on even less information.

Some appreciation for the potential significance of the left-censoring problem can be had by observing that in our earlier analyses focusing solely on a 2019 cohort, we had 9+ years of data available to confirm that men placed in that cohort had received no previous charge for a crime involving domestic violence. Using that longer period of observation, we identified 934 men as belonging to the 2019 cohort. Using our current dataset, in which we have only 2+ years to determine whether they had a previous criminal charge involving domestic violence, we would assign 1,113 men to the 2019 cohort. The difference in the estimated size of the 2019 cohort illustrates the potential for the left-censoring problem to misidentify the number of first-time offenders.

Not reported in the paper, the percentages of the 2019 cohort of men falling into Groups A, B, C and D are very similar to what is reported for the other cohorts in Table 1. That is, for the 2019 cohort, 38 per cent are Group A perpetrators, nine per cent are Group B, 29 per cent are Group C and 23 per cent are Group D. Based on this, combined with seeing little variation between 2020 and 2023 in the analyses in this review, our suspicion is that left censoring does not present a significant issue for our analysis. Our decision to omit the 2019 cohort from our analysis is driven by wanting to be as free as possible from misinterpretations of our results.

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