



**AVALON**  
SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE

# The Dartmouth North Project

Preventing Violence Against

Women and Girls in Dartmouth North

(Needs Assessment Summary)

Funding by  Status of Women  
Canada Condition féminine  
Canada

## Dartmouth North Project

Although there is an abundance of research regarding the influence of violence within low-income neighbourhoods; there is very little information to be found addressing concerns of violence in Nova Scotia, and even more specifically, Dartmouth North. This needs assessment was created to specifically address these gaps in the literature and provide people in the community with a voice. Information for this report was gained through individual interviews and focus groups with members of the Dartmouth North community. All participants were required to read and sign a project consent form which included a statement of confidentiality and an agreement for the interviews to be recorded. During focus groups, an evaluation was also provided to document the effectiveness of the focus groups.

People from a range of ages, race, socio-economic backgrounds, sexual orientations and religious affinities participated in this needs assessment. In regards to youth participation, three focus groups were completed with a total of 22 people. One of these groups was completed with boys (6 total). For community members, three focus groups were completed and nine interviews. A total of 30 people participated in this piece, meaning that 52 people in total were part of the needs assessment process.

An attempt was made to ensure a diverse range of community members as well. Various grassroots organizations (including housing projects and support for sex workers), school administration, community police officers, community volunteers, and religious organizations were asked to participate in this assessment. To ensure that as many people as possible were reached, participants who were interviewed were asked to provide names or ideas on whom else within the community should participate in this project. This snowballing technique ensured that multiple people could provide a voice in the project. This also allowed for more diversity and for community expertise to identify participants.

It is recognized that there are noticeable gaps in the participants who provided information for the current project. More information from people identifying as members of the LGBTQ community, sex workers, ethnic minorities and individuals with a lower socio-economic status would be helpful to represent diverse community needs. School administration and parents in the community would be helpful as well. Although attempts were made to reach these populations, it is recognized that participation in projects such as this can be quite challenging and inaccessible, despite attempts to reduce barriers for community participation.

### **Key Identified Priorities**

It is well established that women and girls experience violence in a community differently than other people living within the same community. Information from this assessment supported this idea, with many participants identifying specific areas of violence that women and girls experience. The critical issues that were identified by participants are listed and then described in more detail below.

The key priorities that were addressed by participants in the Dartmouth North Needs assessment are as follows:

1. Sexual Assault and Sexualized Violence (normalization of sexual violence, exploitation of young girls, date rape)
2. Violence associated with necessary survival (sex work, weapons) and related to poverty.
3. Verbal and Physical Violence (often in the form of domestic abuse)

**Sexual Assault and Sexualized Violence:** Participants deemed sexualized violence as the most critical issue in the community. A high concern among participants was young girls working illegally as sex workers. . It was consistently stated how easy it was for young girls to participate in sex work and how much violence they experience in the industry. Sex work was a difficult topic with youth as family members or friends may be involved in the sex industry, and they view it as a necessary survival strategy. Many adults interviewed expressed how youth were “used to” the violence and that many times, youth specifically failed to recognize when sexualized violence was occurring. For example, youth in community were able to recognize forms of violence such as sexual assault or date rape, however did not report on sexual harassment such as name calling or pressure for sexual acts as often. Violence becomes more normalized as it becomes something that “everyone deals with.” There’s a need for more police involvement and aid. There is minimal community outreach or resources made available following trauma in the community, causing residents to cope with trauma in their own way. Participants felt this increased the normalization of the violence in the community as residents were expected to simply, “suck it up, and deal with it.”

Many youth had questions on what constituted sexual assault. They also had mixed views on it. At one point they blamed the perpetrator for committing the assault. Then in the next statement commented on how the girls were dressed “too revealing” or that certain girls’ sexually promiscuous behavior warranted them being assaulted. It is these types of opposite ideologies that warrant an increased educational component for the youth in this community. There were many teachable moments provided in these focus groups that may have increased the capacity for these girls to recognize violence in their own lives that were not addressed due to lack of resources.

**Violence as a means of Survival:** Many community members spoke about the high rate of poverty in Dartmouth North and how a lower income community can be related to an increase of violence. The first issue most participants discussed was the low socio-economic status of many people in Dartmouth North and the various social determinants of health that can affect the rates of violence in the community. Lack of stable housing, inability to access transportation, low education and unemployment of residents were all stated to contribute to violence in Dartmouth North. There was recognition by participants that much of the highly violent crimes in the community were not related to random acts of violence. Therefore, many people felt safe in the community as they framed crime occurring among those groups who do use violence as a means of survival. Highly violent crimes were often related to those involved in drug or gang violence and thus, community members often felt safe from highly violent acts of crime if they were not in proximity to this type of criminal activity. Those who lived long

term and who had a positive reputation in the community were thought to not experience localized violence the same way as those who were new in Dartmouth North. Another aspect of violence relating to survival addressed by participants is the increased tolerance of violence and the inability to recognize or address it in personal relationships. Many participants spoke of the cycle of abuse related to domestic violence, and how difficult it is for people who experience this type of violence to leave their offending partners. The lack of effective support systems for marginalized populations wishing to leave their partners was a concern for participants. Lack of accessibility to parenting resources such as childcare for single mothers and lack of available safe housing shelters were expressed as areas that could be improved in the community. Many women expressed how difficult it was to leave their partners and the resistance to involve police due to not feeling “worth it” or that they didn’t feel that they “deserved” the services available. Additionally, participants addressed that often people who experience domestic violence in the community do not recognize the violence as a concern for them. Many women may stay with a partner because, “it’s better than what I’m used to.” These survival-based relationships were a concern for participants, although these concerns were more addressed by adult community members than youth. The youth talked about violence from gangs, drugs and weapons. Many youth said that people carry weapons all the time because “you have to”. They also discussed how youth were part of gangs and had to beat people up so that they themselves would not get beaten.

**Verbal and Physical Abuse:** The final key priority addressed by participants in this Needs Assessment was the amount of verbal and physical violence prevalent in Dartmouth North. Community members expressed how visible violence is in the community and how this visibility negatively impacts their sense of safety in the community. Members of the community varied on how safe they felt in regards to consistent violence, however most people felt that if you weren’t involved in activities of a criminal nature (gangs, drugs, weapons) you didn’t have a need to worry about violence happening to you. The youth gave a few examples of the exceptions to this. They talked about swarming that had been happening in the community. These could have been personally instigated or a wrong place, wrong time, random act of violence. There was also talk about girls being followed home from school and approached by men for sexual acts. Youth and adults also commented on verbal and physical abuse in relationships. Examples given were the way that men spoke to their girlfriend/wife. Talking down to them, being controlling and making unwarranted comments in front of other men. There were other examples of physical abuse such as mothers disciplining their children or older siblings disciplining younger siblings. It wasn’t uncommon to see a mother dragging a child by their hand down the street and giving them a “beating”. What was shocking to participants about the examples of physical abuse is how normalized it seemed to the youth.

**Additional findings: Police Presence in the Community** Participants had many varying opinions on police presence in the community. Some felt that police had a good relationship with community members while other participants felt that police could do more to decrease violence. Many indicated distrust for authority figures. Police response time to violence that was not deemed “highly violent” was discussed as being slower than preferred as well. Despite these concerns by participants, the presence

of a female community police officer was overwhelmingly positive. She was considered to be a positive role model in the community.

**Barriers to Community Collaboration** Participants felt that there is a lack of communication between organizations which increases barriers of participation compared to other communities and decreases input by community members regarding programs and services. Many people are not aware of all the community groups and agencies that are available. As well, these organizations have a lack of awareness of other agencies within the community and their programs which leads to duplication of services at times. Many people have talked about a lack of community cohesion. The community has been described as people sticking to their own streets or networks and not the greater community.

**Recommendations:** More involvement with the schools in the area. The schools are key components and facilitate many community programs and activities.

Community collaboration between service providers and community members should be strengthened. Many service providers do not know the full capabilities of other organizations in their community meaning that they cannot pass on this knowledge to community members who may require services as such. By collaborating and facilitating communication between various community organizations, service providers can be informed of health services in the community, and thus can better provide information to those who require it within Dartmouth North.

Increased access to services. Service providers need to look at how easy they are to be accessed. One mother said how inaccessible services are for her and her family due to hours of operation, location, cost and lack of specific services. Services that are provided often do not meet the needs of the community due to accessibility.

More trauma-informed and specialized services. To meet the needs of the community, service providers should move towards a trauma-informed model of care. Many organizations currently do this in the community, and others, like the HRM Police, are adapting and moving towards a more trauma informed approach. Efforts could be made to inform more service providers in the community and facilitate discussions about the importance of a trauma informed approach, but also how organizations in Dartmouth North can obtain it.

It has been shown how prevalent violence is in the Dartmouth North Community. We have heard the concerns from the community and suggested recommendations. Now we need to make a plan of action. Communication seems to be a big area where we can start. If we can get people to communicate better then we can get co-operation and coordination of agencies and service providers. Having a more coordinated response with agencies and service providers will help the Dartmouth North Community prevent violence against women and girls.