

OPINION

Violence against women is a threat to us all

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We remain in shock over the mass homicides in Nova Scotia and are overwhelmed with grief for the victims. Our hearts go out to their families and all Nova Scotians as they deal with this nightmare. A final report from this complex investigation is months away, and a public inquiry is likely years away. Full consensus about the perpetrator's motives may never be reached.

The four of us have each spent more than 30 years conducting research and educating the public on the issue of violence against women. Many of our efforts followed a national cry for action after Canada's previous deadliest mass killing: the 1989 massacre at l'École Polytechnique, in which a man who blamed women for his problems killed 14 women and injured 14 others.

It is now clear that the Nova Scotia mass murder began with domestic violence. Five days into the case, the RCMP confirmed that the killings were preceded by an act of violence against the killer's partner, who narrowly escaped. This matters in the aftermath of the tragedy, as we are left with important questions: What were the warning signs? Who knew what, and when? There are indications that the killer had a troubled history, including reports of jealous and obsessive behaviour toward his partner.

Our national research has identified patterns of risk for domestic homicide that appear consistent with emerging information about this case: Women are most in danger of violence at the hands of their intimate partners. Risk escalates when their ex-partner is jealous and controlling, and when they have access to firearms. An inability to maintain employment, which in this case may be related to COVID-19, may increase risk.

Domestic homicides rarely happen out of the blue. Alongside well-known risk factors, we also

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more than 70 victims per year on average. Nationally, 80 per cent of adult victims of domestic

homicide are women, and according to a 2017 [Statistics Canada](#) report, the risk of intimate partner homicide was nearly five times greater for women than men. Perpetrators often target third parties, such as new partners, children, extended family, professionals who have intervened, including police officers, and in some cases even strangers.

Research has already found links between mass killings and domestic violence. U.S. national data on mass shootings over the past decade found that in more than half of the cases an [intimate partner](#) or family member numbered among the victims. One in four perpetrators had a prior history of domestic violence.

Perpetrators of mass killings are predominantly men with misogynist attitudes who believe everyone else is responsible for their problems. They are often single or estranged white men who kill with firearms after substantial thought and planning. Both the 1989 tragedy and the Nova Scotia case fit a common picture of mass murder: an insecure man perceives himself as a victim of wrongdoing and harms others to restore his lost power. He attempts to restore his status through mass murder in a culture where power and control are equated with violence.

While there are no easy fixes to this complex problem, we must continue to recognize and explicitly name the issue. In 1989, Canadians argued over whether the killer was a “madman” or just motivated by misogyny. We need a different starting point in 2020. If men seeking to assert dominance are at the core of male violence against women and mass murder, it’s time to rally our political will and commit to addressing the problem.

Male violence against women puts all men, women and children at risk. Domestic violence endangers everyone. A future public inquiry into the killings in Nova Scotia will have to attempt to answer many questions. How do we prevent deaths in similar circumstances in the future? What warning signs were missed and what interventions could have saved lives? To honour the lives lost in Nova Scotia, we all need to redouble our efforts. The whole community has to be part of the solution. It’s time to use what we know and take real action.

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