

A close-up portrait of Myrna Dawson, a woman with long dark hair and bangs, resting her chin on her hand. She is looking thoughtfully towards the camera. The background shows a computer desk with a keyboard and monitors.

UNIVERSITY  
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RESEARCH LEADERS

**MYRNA DAWSON**

Canada Research Chair in Public Policy in Criminal Justice

# EQUAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Violence prevention resources must be a priority  
for individuals, groups and communities



# More resources are needed to reduce violence

Anyone experiencing intimate partner violence – most often women – should have equitable access to assistance and the appropriate resources from community and criminal justice agencies, says University of Guelph professor Myrna Dawson.

Whether shelters, legal advocacy, counselling, access to justice or the basic necessities of life, all such resources can contribute to a common goal – violence reduction. Increasing the accessibility and number of resources available to victims and perpetrators is a step in the right direction, says Dawson, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Public Policy in Criminal Justice.

With funding primarily from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), she's creating a database that documents the distribution of domestic violence resources and criminal justice responses available to victims and perpetrators across Ontario.

Dawson hopes that, ultimately, her efforts will lead to more information for those experiencing violence and those concerned with violence prevention.

She's planning to compare the number of resources and the types of criminal justice responses to the number of crimes identified as intimate partner violence across jurisdictions. Her theory is that a community with high resources, including access to justice, should have less violence.

**Prevention can't occur until we communicate, cooperate and collaborate with community agencies and the public**

"It shouldn't matter where you live, or who you are, you should get the same access to justice, both in terms of the criminal justice responses and the services you have access to that can help you deal with violent experiences," says Dawson.

At Guelph, Dawson established the Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence for researchers to collaborate with community organizations, to engage students in this research and to promote the knowledge gained from research studies. These approaches work together to promote violence prevention through outreach activities and educational events.

Dawson will also be identifying the different types of resources available. She says violence prevention resources are varied – they include risk assessment and safety planning, victim crisis assistance, family court services, emergency child care, language and cultural interpreters, housing services, public education, transportation services, mental health and addiction services, shelters and the police.

In terms of risk assessment and safety planning, Dawson is also co-leading a new \$2.2-million national project to curb domestic violence and homicide. As part of this work, during the next five years, she will be involved in developing a national domestic



homicide database that will be used to conduct research to improve risk assessment and management. It will also be used for safety planning with four vulnerable populations – aboriginal women, rural residents, immigrants and refugees, and children exposed to domestic violence. This project is also funded by SSHRC.

The underlying principle of both projects is that people who've experienced violence need a variety of resources to improve their physical and mental health and social well-being. This should occur in a non-judgmental and safe space, she says.

Responding to violence in people's lives is a complex matter. Dawson asserts that communities should look at what resources they can offer victims and perpetrators. Because intimate partner violence largely stems from gender and social inequities, such resources need to include housing, education, child care and job training. Some people don't have the basic necessities of life, she argues, so how can they deal with what is often ongoing and chronic violence in their lives?

"There needs to be less judgment and stigmatization about people who are experiencing violence in their lives," says Dawson. "Any one of us could find ourselves in a similar situation if we've had to face a lot of challenges and obstacles, and we don't get the help we need."

Current and past sponsors of her research also include the Canada Research Chairs program, Department of Justice Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

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*This profile was written by Karen Ball and Joanne Pearce,  
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The Canada Research Chairs program aims to boost the country's capacity as a global research leader by supporting outstanding and emerging scholars and scientists. The program, administered by the federal government, invests approximately \$265 million per year in universities across Canada to attract and retain some of the world's most accomplished and promising minds. Chairholders aim to achieve research excellence in engineering and the natural sciences, health sciences, humanities and social sciences. The program has established almost 30 research chairs at the University of Guelph.

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