Sexual violence: a call for public health research

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Dear Editor,

Sexual violence is a serious and pervasive public health problem. Public health professionals look to the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* (CJPH) as a source of research about the impact of sexual violence in Canadian society and efforts by public health organizations to combat this problem. Sadly, however, the journal has not published enough about this important issue.

We conducted a systematic search on the online database dating from January 1, 1997 to September 1, 2017 and found 29 articles discussing or mentioning sexual violence in various contexts. The analysis of the 29 articles showed discussion of the following themes in the context of sexual violence (from the most to the least discussed): intimate partner violence (48%), racialized populations (38%), child abuse (21%), drug/substance abuse (18%), sexually transmitted infections (17%), mental health (14%) and survival sex work (10%). See Table 1 for more information. There are significant knowledge gaps presented in the research published by the CJPH, a prominent source of public health information in Canada. Such absences include

sexual violence in university campuses, the significance of drug/substance abuse in sexual violence and the role of mental health in sexual violence as well (Quinlan et al. 2015; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network [Internet] 2017). Research was also lacking regarding rape culture and the normalization of rape in society, and this subtly implies ‘victim blaming’; if we do not understand lack of autonomy, how can we offer strategies for prevention that are realistic? (Buchwald et al. 1993) We know that victim blaming increases silence and shame among those who have experienced sexual violence (Valenti 2010). The focus of several articles on racialized populations might also suggest that sexual violence is only a problem for ‘them’ and not for other Canadians, a suggestion that is patently untrue (Statistics Canada 2017).

As a public health journal, the CJPH has a social responsibility, along with an academic responsibility, to provide the most up-to-date and in-depth information about various public health issues. However, the journal fails when it comes to the issue of sexual violence. We understand that this is not the only source for public health professionals who seek current and up-to-date research on sexual violence. However, the journal promises to provide ‘excellence in public health research, scholarship, policy and practice’ and therefore should provide relevant and in-depth research regarding sexual violence, and public health professionals should be able to count on the CJPH as a reliable, relevant and up-to-date source on this challenging issue (Canadian Journal of Public Health 2018). We suggest that the journal confront this issue and take measures to overcome these knowledge gaps. This call for action could be addressed by encouraging researchers to submit proposals on

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Table 1 Themes explored in the context of sexual violence in each article retrieved from a systematic search on sexual violence from the CJPH database from January 1, 1997 to September 1, 2017 ($n = 29$)

	Intimate partner violence	Racialized populations	Child abuse	Drug/substance abuse	Sexually transmitted infections	Mental health	Survival sex work
Number of articles ^a	14	11	6	5	5	4	3

^a Some articles discuss multiple themes

sexual violence and/or by publishing a special edition promoting/presenting research on sexual violence.

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