

Trading punches

Yes, Virginia, women do belt their husbands

Jennifer Knesse Stevenson was found lying face down in her Calgary apartment two weeks ago, a pool of blood forming next to her head. She had been beaten to death, city police believe, after a violent argument with her estranged husband. Three days earlier Christine Watson's home was invaded by a man who held a knife at her throat while calling her a "rotten bitch." Police were called to the scene by an alert witness and the man was hauled away. These two grim episodes came in the wake of a police study which found investigations of domestic assaults in Calgary were up 340% in the first four months this year, compared to 1990. All of this might leave some people with the impression that Calgary men are beating the living daylights out of women.

But are they? Chief Gerry Borbridge of the Calgary Police Service insists that the three-fold increase in domestic assault investigations doesn't necessarily represent a new trend in violence.

Rather, he says that city police are using less discretion when responding to assault calls. "We've reasserted our policy of using the basis of reasonable and probable grounds when investigating domestic assault calls," explains the chief. "We no longer ignore certain complaints [that seem to be unfounded] or suggest mediation."

Superintendent Gerry Baxter says that public pressure has forced Calgary police to use less personal judgement when investigating complaints of family violence. "Society is giving us a clear message to go after assaulters," he says. "In the past, once we got to a scene, a woman might say: 'I don't want charges laid, just get him out of here for awhile.' Now we're laying charges anyway." Of the 306 investigations conducted in the first four months of 1991, 273 resulted in charges. According to Supt. Baxter, "the vast majority of them resulted from women's complaints against men."

The results of this "reassertion" of policy has some people wondering if Calgary police are being overzealous. Two months

ago a Calgary woman asked the police to free her husband after he had allegedly assaulted her in their home. She explained that she had actually initiated a physical attack on the man and that he had merely been trying to defend himself. The police contend that such incidents are actually few and far between but Earl Silverman isn't so sure. The 42-year-old social work student says he was abused by his wife for years, but no one would believe him. "I tried to seek help because I was abused," he says,

"but there was nowhere to go. The police would just laugh. Men aren't supposed to let their wives hit them. Finally," Mr. Silverman recalls, "I could not take it anymore. One night my wife kned me in the groin, hard, and I lost control and hit her back."

Suddenly, Mr. Silverman was a wife beater. She fled to a women's

shelter, while he was left to pick up the pieces at home. "How many times I wanted to leave the situation and didn't," he sighs. "If a man leaves an abusive relationship, he's a deserter. And if he acts defensively, he's an abuser." Although there's a growing body of evidence that suggests that women abuse their husbands at least as much as men abuse their wives, there are no services for battered husbands. It's a problem that has been overlooked by social agencies, says Mr. Silverman. To fill the vacuum, he recently created his own self-help group for abused men. Last month, the Men's Network Society (MNS) held its first open forum and attracted an audience of 150.

But, despite public interest in the new group, it appears the established agencies are in no hurry to recognize battered husbands and the problems they face. The MNS presented a report to the Mayor's Task Force on Community and Family Violence last summer but the 12-member commission chose not to recognize the



Arleigh Porte: What do cops know?

contribution in their 123-page final report, which appeared last March. In fact, says Mr. Silverman, "they labelled me as an abuser, one of two male batterers who attended a meeting and admitted to hitting their wives. They ignored the fact I had been attacked by my wife."

While the mayor's task force report may have overlooked the problem of husband abuse, it did at least address the common concern that those men who do abuse their mates lack places to seek treatment. There is only one program in Calgary designed specifically for male batterers, at the Pasto-



Silverman: One knee in the groin to many.

ral Institute, and it usually takes two months before a man can get into therapy. Says Anne McFaul, the institute's director of family violence: "We get very few men who come before the abuse begins and there's a waiting list for those who have already abused someone at home. If we want to help men," she adds, "we need to have more places for them to turn, before things get out of hand. Right now, we're focusing on the aftermath and it's usually directed at battered women. Men need help too."

While it's clear there are men who are physically abusive, there's no reason to believe that their numbers are growing by leaps and bounds. At least that's the opinion of Arleigh Porte, a family violence counsellor in Calgary. "I'm not sure there are more of them," he says. "But I do know more men are coming forward saying they have a problem." Both Dr. Porte and Ms. McFaul believe that treatment, rather than the threat of jail, is a more effective means of dealing with the problem. "Family violence is not an easy thing to understand," says Dr. Porte, "because there are so many factors and variables involved. Does a police officer take this into account when he's laying charges?"

—Brian Hutchinson