Challenges of Conducting Applied Research within Community

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Abstract
Canadian colleges and polytechnics have always been leaders in terms of teaching excellence and providing student-centred learning; however, more recently they have begun to excel at conducting innovative research. Many faculty members receive private and public funding to conduct longitudinal research projects across a range of disciplines. These projects tend to have an applied versus theoretical focus because they are housed within the college/polytechnic system. The current project will highlight a meaningful applied project within the area of gender-based violence. In short, survivors of intimate partner violence often have experienced concussion and do not always have access to standard medical support. This research connected with participants to offer concussion recovery technology and education. Overall, there were benefits in conducting this research, such as its framework drawing on trauma- and violence-informed care, including student research assistants in the field, and directly supporting survivors of violence in the community providing them with the opportunity to have their voices heard through research. However, there are additional challenges when completing studies off campus and outside of the typical research lab, especially when participants are from a vulnerable population. This innovation spotlight will discuss the benefits and challenges of applied research within a college system, specifically in the sector of gender-based violence and working with both for-profit and non-profit community organizations.

*__Innovation Spotlights__ are extremely brief contributions that highlight an innovative teaching practice, approach, or tool, and provide accompanying evidence that speaks to the effectiveness of the innovation.

Introduction

The Victimology Research Centre (VRC) is dedicated to advancing the field of victim services through strategic partnerships with non-profit organizations. By studying victimization, resilience, and the experiences of survivors within the criminal justice system, the VRC plays a crucial role in improving the support provided to those affected by crime. In 2023, the VRC received a College and Community and Social Innovation Fund grant to explore concussion recovery technology for intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors. The project aimed to address a critical gap in healthcare services for survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) who

have experienced concussion (i.e., mild traumatic brain injury, mTBI). Many survivors may suffer from mTBI due to head impacts or strangulation, yet these injuries often go undetected and untreated (Cimino et al., 2019). The VRC has worked at the local, provincial and national level to complete an applied research study that helps close the gap in the literature in terms of survivors' awareness of concussion symptoms, education about the experience of concussion, and the effectiveness of various techniques for recovery. Thus, this project worked directly with female survivors who were mainly recruited through IPV shelters, community service organizations, and online snowball sampling.

While data collection for the project is ongoing, the focus of this spotlight is to share the challenges of conducting applied research within the community. The current discussion will explore these challenges across three broad themes of unique challenges:

- conducting research within the gender-based violence sector,
- working with profit and non-for-profit organizations, and
- using online survey methods with community members.

Challenges of Community Research within the Intimate Partner Violence Sector

As would be anticipated, recruiting survivors of violence for research poses significant challenges. The priorities of individuals fleeing violence are about safety, security, medical treatment, housing, children and pet safety, navigating the justice system, personal finances, and avoiding further trauma, as evidenced by the role these factors play in creating safety plans for survivors (Bader et al., 2019; Kahraman & Bell, 2017; Sabri et al., 2022b). While many women have a willingness to participate and want their voices to be heard, it is simply not a priority when facing more pressing and critical life decisions. The correct timing of connecting with an interested participant is challenging, as other priorities must have already been met for a survivor to be ready to engage in their story with a researcher.

For IPV survivors who choose to share their experience, the risk of re-victimization is very real when asking violence-related questions (Anderson et al., 2023; Diab & Al-Azzeh, 2024; Fraley et al., 2024). The current study had numerous working group meetings with IPV experts to develop a survey methodology that worked to avoid re-victimization. This can be especially tricky when part of a research study is conducted virtually, as it removes the in-person interpersonal communication cues between researcher and participant. Providing participants with a disclaimer of upcoming questions related to experiences of violence and the choice to avoid those questions and skip ahead was the agreed-upon method. This method was chosen because avoiding violence questions altogether would eliminate the participants' opportunity to share their story (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Diab & Al-Azzeh, 2024). An ethical standard is to not harm participants, and yet taking their choice away to speak about their experience of violence will violate the principles of trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC) that dictates the importance of giving victims/survivors choice (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006). This idea of choice connects greatly with fostering victim/survivor empowerment, whereby a participant could feel that telling their story would be part of the shift from a state of harm to one of recovery and growth (Skweyiya, 2004). Storozuk (2025) completed interviews with victim service providers for IPV survivors and found that giving opportunities to make informed decisions felt empowering and fostered further resilience.

While some survivors want the opportunity to share their experience, there are others who want to share only parts, or not at all, and our TVIC lens would respect that. These types of intricacies are all important to capture and document when putting together a Research Ethics Board (REB) application. At times, this can be a lengthy process for community-based projects with marginalized populations within a college REB. One reason for this is that using a TVIC approach means giving participants the choice to respond about experiences of violence, which adds an element of risk to be addressed within an REB application (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006).

Another challenge of completing research within the IPV sector is simply accessing participants. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma that surrounds the topic of IPV in communities, which can make survivors hesitate to engage in studies (Sabri et al., 2022a). Other barriers to engaging in research that survivors of IPV note include lack of familiarity with the recruiters, normalcy of abuse, and fear related to legal implications of disclosing violence experience (Sabri et al., 2022a). This is on top of the real threat of violence

that remains for participants who have contact with their abuser, should it become known that they have shared about the abuse. Of course, it is possible that shared technology between the victim and abuser could be monitored. Safety and security of IPV survivors remains a significant issue and is consistently advocated for by gender-based violence organizations (Sabri et al., 2023). Referrals to participants who met inclusion criteria from case workers within the IPV shelter community worked best. To ensure accessibility for participants, it was important to translate the project materials into a range of languages. While anyone can be a victim of IPV, there is a higher prevalence related to various demographics. One of those is for newly landed immigrant women who often do not have English or French as their primary language (Wathen et al., 2025). While parts of our study were limited to Canada's official languages, we were able to translate materials into Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese and, at times, rely on translators within the shelter community to reach a wider range of participants (Ghidei et al., 2022).

Challenges of Research with Community Partners

It is incredibly rewarding to provide voices to participants from the community on topics such as IPV, given its epidemic impact on women at local, provincial, and national levels (Cotter, 2021). However, for most gender-based violence organizations, their focus, staffing, resources and funding are related to directly supporting survivors of violence. Few have a mandate for research, and those that do are oftentimes stretched to first be providing their clients with essential services. As such, long-term research projects are not practical or can only be conducted "off the side of their desks", if at all (Voth Schrag et al., 2023). This positions research centres, like the VRC, that are embedded within the college/polytechnic system, to be able to take on research projects that are relevant to the community and partner with non-profit organizations to support conducting research. Even with a college-led partnership approach, completing community-based projects requires significant flexibility from the research team. Real-world priorities always come first, and we found this several times within the project when scheduled data collection was rightfully cancelled at shelters due to COVID outbreaks, high-risk security breaches, a gas leak, and snowstorm. Research engagement must therefore be rescheduled.

Two additional challenges were the size and organizational structure of the community-based organizations. Firstly, part of the current project involved partnering with a small start-up company that was used to develop online concussion recovery tools for survivors. At times, funding and grant incentives are provided to colleges to foster these partnerships, and it is a win-win for start-up companies to connect with college students seeking experience in their field. While this is an innovative idea and overall strength, the sustainability of such small technological start-ups must be considered because when a company ceases operations, so does the research partnership. Secondly, as with any community project, it is important to anticipate the level of staff turnover. Within the gender-based violence sector (and/or victim services), turnover is incredibly high (Lundy & Crawford, 2024; Voronov et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2019). This is often due to organizational factors, such as high caseloads, low pay, and inadequate funding (McGlinchey et al., 2024; Storozuk, 2025), in addition to the high rates of secondary traumatic stress and burnout in the sector (McGlinchey & Eyjolfson, 2025). Within our project, we have found that it could take weeks or months to build rapport through emails and virtual or in-person meetings to explain the focus of our research to a new potential collaborator. On several occasions, we experienced personnel turnover at the leadership or caseworker level and essentially had to restart the process again with a new individual. While none of this is the organization's fault, it is something to anticipate and consider in terms of project management and project-completion timelines. Others have found similar challenges when conducting applied research within the IPV sector (Btoush & Campbell, 2009; Storozuk, 2025). However, some researchers noted that recruitment of IPV participants was strongest when the research team could do direct outreach with potential participants (Dichter et al., 2019). In short, once a research team is partnered with an organization/shelter, then the researchers could handle the recruitment directly and essentially take the workload off the plate of the victim service provider. Another solution would be to budget a substantial monetary stipend into the project's budget to be provided directly to shelter staff to compensate them for any time spent on recruitment. Of course, this would need to avoid any conflict-of-interest concerns. While we were able to provide honorariums in the form of gift cards to shelter staff, it was far from sufficient and came with its own bureaucratic red-tape challenges.

Challenges of Online Survey Methods

Sharing Recruitment Texts in Online Forums

To recruit a national sample, it is common practice to post recruitment texts online, including providing recruitment texts to professional agencies for them to share widely. Fileborn (2016) discusses the ethical implications of using social media platforms for this purpose. One concern she raised is whether the researcher has an obligation to track all the "shares" in order to monitor and respond to questions and comments that may arise on shared posts. Relatedly, Fileborn (2016) notes that when posts are shared using a personal social media account, there is ambiguity as to whether the researcher is responding as a private individual or through their role as a researcher.

We experienced this in the early stages of our participant recruitment, where one of our partner organizations shared our recruitment poster on their social media page with relevant hashtags. An account associated with a fringe group then commented on the project's limited scope, questioning why we were excluding men from the study. At the time of writing, the VRC does not have its own social media presence, so any comments posted online must be responded to from the researchers' personal accounts or not at all. Using online platforms for participant recruitment also increases the risk that the survey will fall into the hands of bad actors, which we also experienced throughout the participant recruitment stage of this project. More details about this are in the following section.

Online Survey Research with Incentives

Although there are benefits to online participant recruitment, once these materials are online they are accessible to anyone. Some bad actors may pretend that they meet the inclusion criteria to be eligible for the participant incentive, or they may create multiple email accounts to complete the survey multiple times to receive multiple incentives. Some research indicates that close to 40% of online survey researchers have had their studies compromised by fraudulent respondents with an additional 20% being unsure if their work had ever been affected (Schuster et al., 2026). Online surveys are also vulnerable to malicious bots, which can abuse the incentive system as well as skew the data (Goodrich et al., 2023; Griffen et al., 2021). Our study has been compromised in both of these ways. When the survey link was first posted publicly, we received over 70 responses within a few hours, most of which were easily identified as malicious (either by the quality of responses to open-ended questions, or by the respondent's IP address being outside the country). Other ways to detect malicious bots include non-sensical or contradictory responses to open-ended questions, or multiple responses with the exact same start and end time, which would be statistically highly unlikely (Storozuk et al., 2020). When this occurred, we added a password to the survey and required participants to enter a single-use authentication code. However, we still discovered that single-use authentication codes were being shared amongst different participants (i.e. the same code would be used by two different email addresses), leading us to believe that some participants were creating additional email addresses.

When using online forums and social media for recruitment, it is important to put safeguards in place to reduce risks such as fraudulent responses and safety concerns. One effective approach is to work through trusted community organizations, so that recruitment posts come from familiar and credible sources rather than personal accounts. This helps build trust and reduces confusion about the researcher's role (Fileborn, 2016). In addition, practical steps such as password-protected surveys, single-use access codes, and manually reviewing responses can help reduce fraudulent participation and the impact of bots (Goodrich et al., 2023; Griffen et al; 2021). Using online survey data collection tools that track IP addresses was beneficial to ensure our participants were Canadian. Given our method was a pre- and- post-survey, we were also able to manually review demographic responses that would not have changed (i.e., age, number of dependents, etc.) to ensure consistent responding from pre-to-post. Of course, this can be time-consuming for the research team, so factoring this into the project timeline is essential. It is also important to consider participant safety, especially in IPV-related research, by allowing participants to exit surveys safely and by providing clear information about support services. These strategies help ensure that online research remains both ethical and reliable (Sabri et al., 2023; Turk & Hutchings, 2023).

Solutions and Moving Forward

Though there are challenges with completing research within various marginalized communities, the benefits outweigh the challenges in terms of being able to amplify voices from those communities, especially for survivors of violence.

Obviously, building relationships with community leaders to establish partnerships early on is important but our work on this project, and others within the VRC, has taught us more specific approaches to future community research.

Given the high turnover rate within the gender-based violence sector, it has been helpful to meet personnel from executive directors to middle management to individual case managers because each individual employee will advocate for the project even when some individuals move on from their roles. Also, the most successful method for survivor participation in research was in-person recruitment (compared to online recruitment), so attending community events, shelter house meetings, professional development and advocacy sessions were all beneficial. In-person communications also facilitated the building of trust and allowed for clear communication about research goals. In addition to fostering rapport between potential participants and the research team, in-person recruitment helped ensure that participants were indeed legitimate (rather than online bots or malicious actors). Given the high turnover rate within the gender-based violence sector, building relationships across multiple organizational levels is essential for sustaining research partnerships. Establishing connections, not only with executive directors, but also with middle management, frontline counsellors, shelter staff, and case managers helps maintain continuity when staff turnover occurs. Research shows that staff burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and high caseload demand contribute significantly to turnover within IPV organizations (Lundy & Crawford, 2024; McGlinchey & Eyjolfson, 2025; Wood et al., 2019). For this reason, relationship-building should be viewed as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time partnership agreement. In our project, the most successful participant recruitment occurred through trusted referrals from frontline staff and in-person engagement at shelters, advocacy events, and professional development sessions. These approaches strengthened trust, improved communication about research goals, and increased participant safety by allowing direct clarification of confidentiality, consent, and available support. Ultimately, it should be understood that this type of research takes significant time and also that those doing the research can experience burnout and harm from this work. Great care must be taken to protect participants from re-traumatization and harm. Burnout prevention and harm mitigation protocols are also important for the research team (especially when teams include students) (Jakubowski et al., 2025).

When conducting research involving community partners, especially partners who serve vulnerable populations, it is not unusual to face barriers. It is the job of researchers to anticipate these challenges and plan next steps. Significant flexibility and the ability to adapt to real-world challenges are needed to conduct this sort of research within communities. This can include adapting timelines, modifying recruitment methods and responding to the needs of community partners as they arise. Polytechnic and applied college programs tend to be well-positioned for this type of research, as the hired student research assistants are well-trained in working within the "real-world" (i.e., outside of a lab) since these programs often have placement/practicum requirements within the community.

In summary, this spotlight article sought to show others in the college research community the ways in which projects can be applied and work with external organizations, even within vulnerable sectors like gender-based violence. While a range of challenges are possible, many of these can be anticipated by drawing on some of the suggestions provided here. Completing applied research in partnerships with the community has several benefits, including giving a voice to participants, providing students with research training outside of the classroom, and furthering academic knowledge to continue to demonstrate expertise and innovation within one's discipline.

Conflict of Interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Note on Contributors

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