

Tough on wife-killers

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Violence-against-women campaign led to harsher penalties: Study

A **PUSH** to end violence against women in Canada that began 20 years ago has led to harsher sentences for men who kill their spouses, according to a study to be released this week.

The study by a University of Guelph sociologist for the federal justice department reviewed all known Toronto homicides resolved through the courts from 1974 to 2002.

It found that during the 1970s and early '80s, men accused of killing intimate partners were less likely to be convicted of first- or second-degree murder than those who killed strangers.

Domestic crimes

But after 1984, when campaigns against domestic violence took root, those accused

of killing their spouses were more likely to be convicted compared to those accused of other types of homicide.

"The movement to fight violence against women certainly served as the impetus for change in dealing with these crimes in the criminal justice system," study author Myrna Dawson said.

Dawson's study was ordered by the federal government to

examine trends of domestic crimes after Canadians protested a 10-year sentence handed to Fred Sheppard of Prince Edward Island for killing his common-law partner in 2000.

Joseph Neuberger, a Toronto-based criminal defence lawyer, says the women's rights movement has played a tremendous role in the crack-down on domestic abuse.

"I'd say more in the 1990s,

the administration of justice has been better educated on issues of spouses and children," Neuberger said.

'Trust' issue

"Women's rights groups have been integral in the education of the administration of justice on domestic violence and victims."

In her study, Dawson noted

a 1996 Criminal Code "breach of trust" amendment greatly emphasized the issue of intimate partner violence and led to stiffer punishment.

"The more vulnerable the victim, the greater the need for harsher penalties," Neuberger said. "It's a breach of trust issue. The relationship between intimate partners is much more significant than the relationship between non-intimate partners because there's an element of trust there."