



# Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: An Aboriginal Perspective

Information from...

## The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

*“Our Elders and traditional people encouraged us to look at initiating a healing approach rather than continuing to focus on the negative, on the violence. The concepts of healing – rather than merely responding to incidents of violence – and the focus on wellness demand a strategy that is different from the current responses to family violence. There is a contradiction between a solution that seeks harmony and balance, among the individuals, family and community, and one that is crisis-oriented, punishes the abuser and separates the family and community. Our approach to wellness includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being.*

*Throughout our work in addressing family violence, we strive to return our people to a time where everyone had a place in the circle and was valued. Recovering our identity will contribute to healing ourselves; our healing will require us to rediscover who we are. We cannot look outside for our self-image.*

*We need to rededicate ourselves to understanding our traditional ways. In our songs, ceremonies, language and relationships lie the instructions and directions to recovery.*

*We must avoid a pan-Indian [one size fits all] approach. The issues of violence in our communities are diverse and so are our own cultural ways. It will be a long journey to recovery. The East, South, West and North all must develop their own process of healing – as must urban areas and reserve. This must be done if we are to return once more to a people without violence.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Aboriginal people have defined family violence “as a consequence to colonization, forced assimilation, and cultural genocide; the learned negative, cumulative, multi-generational actions, values, beliefs, attitudes and behavioural patterns practised by one or more people that weaken or destroy the harmony and well-being of an

Aboriginal individual, family, extended family, community or nationhood."<sup>2</sup>

### **What is Family Violence<sup>3</sup>**

*Family Violence takes many forms:*

**Physical abuse** is any physical act intended to harm, injure or inflict pain on another person, including slapping, punching, burning, kicking, biting, pushing, hair-pulling, choking, shoving, hitting with an object, threatening with an object such as a knife or gun, and any action that causes physical harm to another person.

**Psychological violence** involves the abuse of power and control over another person. It includes inducing fear by intimidating, terrorizing or threatening, humiliating, insulting, degrading, destroying property, isolating a person from friends and family and withholding emotions of love, or caring.

**Sexual abuse** includes all acts of unwanted sexual attention or exploitation, including inappropriate touching or molesting, exposing a victim to pornographic materials, sexual assault with an object, forced bondage, date rape, gang rape, rape within an intimate relationship and sexual harassment.

**Child sexual abuse** is any sexual contact inflicted on a child and includes all acts described above under Sexual Abuse.

**Incest** is any form of sexual contact or attempted sexual contact between relatives, no matter how distant the relationship.

**Financial abuse** is any act which involves the deceitful or immoral use of another person's money or belongings (for example, the misappropriation of resources, using another person's money or resources to exert power and control over them, taking pension money or other forms of family support, forcing parents to provide free child care, denying one's family of money for food or shelter).

**Spiritual abuse** entails the erosion or breaking down of one's cultural or religious belief system.

An individual can be subjected to various types of abuse by the same abuser.

### **What Some Aboriginal Communities are Doing to Address Family Violence**

- Native Child and Family Services of Toronto offers a Sexual Abuse Treatment Program which combines Native healing with contemporary social work practice. An evaluation of the program concluded that the women and children who participated were able to develop a stronger sense of themselves as Native people and that this was a positive path toward healing and recovery from the effects of their abuse.

- The Mid-Island Tribal Council on Vancouver Island, British Columbia represents several bands in small rural communities, in the area around Chemainus, British Columbia. It has developed a perspective that defines family violence as a community problem, not just an individual or family problem. The Council established a Family Development Program to integrate and link existing services to families and to respond to community needs. The program was designed to address the issue of family violence as well as facilitate healing among its victims in a culturally appropriate way.
- The Mi'kmaq First Nation Communities of Nova Scotia have developed programs to address family violence with the goal of encouraging women and children who experience violence to develop and practise a peaceful and healthful lifestyle. They operate a shelter for women and children, and provide outreach services for men, a crisis telephone service, group and individual counselling and community education for Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia.
- There are many other Aboriginal communities that have developed programs and community-based responses to the problem of family violence. Education and awareness programs have often led to the development of treatment programs and other services for victims, offenders, families and communities.

## **Incidence of Family Violence**

There are no national studies providing information on the prevalence or incidence of family violence in Aboriginal communities. However, several provincial and regional studies have found the following:

- A 1989 study by the Ontario Native Women's Association found that 8 out of 10 Aboriginal women in Ontario had personally experienced family violence. Of those women, 87% had been injured physically and 57% had been sexually abused.<sup>4</sup>
- In some northern Aboriginal communities, it is believed that between 75% and 90% of women are battered.<sup>5</sup> The study found that 40% of children in these communities had been physically abused by a family member.<sup>6</sup>
- Little is known about the incidence of abuse of older adults, of people with disabilities, and of the homosexual population in Aboriginal communities. However, abuse of older adults has been identified as a serious problem in some First Nation communities.<sup>7</sup>

## **Factors Contributing to Family Violence**

According to Sharlene Frank, in a 1991 study by the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada, (formerly the Indian and Inuit Nurses of Canada) it was found that the three leading factors which sustained family violence were

alcohol and substance abuse, economic problems and intergenerational abuse.<sup>8</sup>

## **Paths for Healing**

The roots of this problem are deep and have a long history. The loss of Aboriginal culture and tradition rendered many Aboriginal people, both men and women, powerless and dependent. Acknowledging the root of the problem will empower individuals, families and communities to address the issue.

It must be understood by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike that family violence is not part of traditional Aboriginal culture and is unacceptable.

Solutions must be holistic. That means looking at the “individual in the context of the family; the family in the context of the community; the community in the context of the larger society”<sup>9</sup>, as well as the relationship of all things to one another.

Solutions must be community-driven. This means that decisions have to be made by and within the community, however that community is defined. A generic model will not work in the diversity of Aboriginal communities.<sup>10</sup>

All programs and organizations designing and delivering programs and services must acknowledge the impact of the past and the need for healing individuals, families and communities.

Communities must focus on the healing of individuals, families and communities as a whole and seek to overcome the past.

Everyone has a responsibility for eliminating family violence in Aboriginal communities. The first step in the process, whether for an individual, family or community, is to break the silence and acknowledge that there is a problem.

Existing Aboriginal governments and organizations must develop innovative, culturally appropriate solutions, rather than adapting existing programs and services that may not address the underlying causes of family violence in Aboriginal communities.

Existing program and service delivery agencies that provide services to Aboriginal people must train their staff to be culturally sensitive and must integrate Aboriginal traditions and service providers as part of their program delivery systems.

Aboriginal governments, organizations, service delivery agencies, caregivers, Elders, healers and service providers must themselves be healed if they are to heal others. They must not abuse their trust, traditions or position of respect in the fulfilment of their responsibilities.

Aboriginal organizations and governments must embrace the urgent need to heal communities and to rid them of

family violence, alcoholism, suicide and other such forms of social malaise.

The uniqueness of each individual and of each community must be respected.

When dealing with individual victims of violence, it is important to understand that victims must deal with a multitude of issues. For example:

- their resources may be very limited; their support system may be in the very community in which they live;
- their perpetrator could be an important member of the community;
- suspicion about the justice system may discourage many Aboriginal people from seeing it as an option;
- victims are loath to put a perpetrator in a system that is viewed as racist;
- many victims, in cases of spousal violence fear police will take their children; and,
- finally, in many instances there are no culturally appropriate services.

The centre of Aboriginal communities is the family; consequently, Aboriginal people may seek treatment for the whole family in the case of family violence. Thus, treatment of the offender, independent of the family, is not always the preferred approach.

*“Our strength is in our visions and dreams, our ability to interpret the songs, dances of the earth, sky, spirit worlds. If we can remember our purpose, we will survive.”<sup>11</sup>*

## **Suggested Reading**

*Breaking the Silence, An Interpretive Study of Residential School Impact and Healing* as illustrated by the stories of First Nations individuals, Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations, 1994.

*Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence – Achieving Equality: Final Report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women*, by Pat Freeman Marshall and Marthe Asselin Vaillancourt. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1993.

*Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nations Report*, by Sharlene Frank. Victoria: Queen’s Printer (Ministry of Women’s Equity; Taskforce on Family Violence) 1992.

*Language, Tradition, Health, Lifestyle and Social Issues: 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey* by Statistics Canada (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1993), (Cat. No. 89-533).

*Mid-Island Tribal Council Family Development Program, Project Manual*, by Jackie Major and Luce Carrier. Chemainus, B.C.: Mid-Island Tribal Council, 1995 – P.O. Box 270, Chemainus, B.C., V0R 1K0, (604) 246-2729.

*Mooka’am Sexual Abuse Treatment Program – Program Description and Planning Guidelines*, by Frank Maidman and Merle Beedie. Toronto: Native

Child and Family Services of Toronto,  
1994 – 101-22 College Street, Toronto,  
Ontario, M5G 1K2, (416) 969-8510.

*Procedures and guidelines manual:  
Mi'kmaq Family Treatment Centre and  
Program*, by the Centre, Nova Scotia:  
Mi'kmaq Family and Children's  
Services Nova Scotia, 1993 –  
Whycomomagh First Nation,  
P.O. Box 310, Whycomomagh,  
Nova Scotia, B0E 3M0, (902) 756-3440.

*Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of  
Manitoba*, 2 volumes by A.C. Hamilton  
and C.M. Sinclair (Commissioners).  
Winnipeg: Public Inquiry into the  
Administration of Justice and  
Aboriginal People, 1991.

*A Resource Guide on Family Violence  
Issues for Aboriginal Communities*, by  
David McTimoney. Ottawa: Health  
Canada, Department of Indian Affairs  
and Northern Development, 1994.

“Violence in Aboriginal Communities.”  
In *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,  
The Path to Healing*, by  
Emma D. LaRocque. Ottawa: Canada  
Communications Group, 1994.

### **Suggested Audio-Visuals**

#### *Children of the Eagle*

This video is about the healing of three  
sexually abused Aboriginal children.  
The eagle symbolizes the bravery,  
leadership and wisdom that the

community has to muster in order  
to deal with their children's crisis.

Purchase inquiries:  
Peigan Child and Family Services,  
P.O. Box 3129,  
Brockett, Alberta,  
T0K 0H0  
(403) 965-2390.

#### *Beyond the Shadows*

This documentary explores the  
devastating effects residential schools  
have had on First Nations communities  
in Canada. The video tells the history of  
these government-mandated schools,  
the painful personal stories of abuse  
and the resulting ‘multi-generational  
grief’, and it describes how First Nations  
communities have begun the process of  
healing.

Purchase inquiries:  
Cariboo Tribal Council  
P.O. Box 4333  
Williams Lake, B.C.  
V2G 2V4  
(604) 392-7361.

#### *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Metis Child*

A moving tribute to Richard Cardinal,  
a seventeen-year old Metis boy who  
committed suicide in 1984. Richard had  
been taken from his home when he  
was four because of family problems;  
he spent the next thirteen years  
moving in and out of twenty-eight  
foster homes, group homes and shelters

in Alberta. Richard left behind a diary upon which this film is based.

Purchase inquiries:

National Film Board of Canada,  
Sales and Customer Services,  
P.O. Box 6100, Station Centre-ville,  
Montreal, Quebec,  
H3C 3H5.

Internet Address: <http://www.nfb.ca>

### Endnotes

1. Sylvia Maracle, "A Historical Viewpoint" in *Vis-à-Vis: (Family Violence: Aboriginal Perspectives)* Spring, 1993, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 4.
2. The Aboriginal Family Healing Joint Steering Committee, *For Generations To Come: The Time is Now: A Strategy for Aboriginal Family Healing (Sylvia Maracle, Barbara Craig, co-chairs) (Ontario: the Committee, 1993) p. 10.*
3. Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Basic Departmental Data-1992, cited in the *Final Report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence-Achieving Equality* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1993), p. 149.
4. Ontario Native Women's Association, *Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence* (Thunder Bay: Ontario Native Women's Association, 1989). pp. 18-19.
5. Claudette Dumont-Smith, and Pauline Sioui-Labelle, *National Family Violence Survey: Phase I* (Ottawa: Indian and Inuit Nurses of Canada, 1991.) p.18. Quoted in *Dragging Wife Abuse Out of the Closet.* (Wetaway News, Nov. 1989).
6. Claudette Dumont-Smith, and Pauline Sioui-Labelle, *National Family Violence Survey: Phase I* (Ottawa: Indian and Inuit Nurses of Canada, 1991) p. 25. Quoted in *Native Counselling Services of Alberta, Report to the Secretariat on Child Sexual Abuse.* (Neilson, 1987).
7. Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens. *Denied Too Long: The Needs and Concerns of Seniors Living in First Nation Communities in Ontario.* (Toronto: Publications Ontario, 1993). pp. 73-76.
8. Sharlene Frank, *Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nations Report* (Queen's Printer, Ministry of Women's Equality, Taskforce on Family Violence, 1992), p. 6.
9. The Steering Committee on Native Mental Health (Canada) *Agenda For First Nations and Inuit Mental Health* (Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada, 1991) p. 17.

10. Sharlene Frank, *Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nations Report* (Queen's Printer, Ministry of Women' Equality Taskforce on Family Violence, 1992), p. 17.
11. Canadian Council on Social Development, and the Native Women's Association of Canada, *Voices of Aboriginal Women: Aboriginal Women Speak Out About Violence* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 1991), p. 28.

This document was prepared by Karen Green. The contributions of the following individuals are gratefully acknowledged: Rose Moses and Shining Water, Aboriginal Women's Support Centre; Valerie Pryce, Medical Services Branch, Health Canada; Jackie Major, Mid-Island Tribal Council; Fred Chafe, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; Sandra McKay and Bernie Whiteford, Helping Spirit Lodge Society, Vancouver, B.C.; Charlene Avalos, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto; Gina Whiteduck, Assembly of First Nations; David Allen, Barbara Merriam, Katherine Stewart, Janice Ireland, Gisèle Lacroix, Velma Guvenc and Katalin Kennedy, Family Violence Prevention Division, Health Canada.



For further information on family violence, contact:

**National Clearinghouse on Family Violence**

Postal Locator 0201A1  
Family Violence Prevention Division  
Health Promotion and Programs Branch  
Health Canada  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 1B4

Tel: (613) 957-2938  
Toll-free: **1-800-267-1291**  
Fax: (613) 941-8930  
FaxLink: (613) 941-7285  
Toll-free: 1-888-267-1233

Internet Homepage: <http://www.hwc.ca/datahpsb/ncfv/nc-cn.htm>



TTY/TTD users: (613) 952-6396  
or toll-free: 1-800-561-5643

This publication can be made available in/on computer diskette/large print/audio-cassette/braille, upon request.

November, 1996

Our mission is to help the people of Canada  
maintain and improve their health.

*Health Canada*

