

## FACT SHEET

# INTERVENTIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF FAMILY VIOLENCE IN INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**

POLICY BENCH

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Human Development

January 2022

### Recommended Citation:

Sistovaris, M., Sansone, G., Fallon, B. & Miller, S. (2022). *Interventions for the Prevention Of Family Violence In Indigenous Populations: Fact Sheet*. Toronto, Ontario: Policy Bench, Fraser Mustard Institute of Human Development, University of Toronto.

### Companion document:

Sistovaris, M., Fallon, B., & Sansone, G. (2022). *Interventions for the Prevention of Family Violence in Indigenous Populations: Policy Brief*. Toronto, Ontario: Policy Bench, Fraser Mustard Institute of Human Development, University of Toronto.

## Overview

This fact sheet examines interventions for the prevention of family violence in Indigenous populations, with a focus on intimate partner violence (IPV) and child maltreatment. Indigenous considerations and principles to inform the development of targeted and effective approaches to interventions are also reviewed.

## Why is this issue important?

The issue is of importance for two central reasons:

- ⇒ Indigenous peoples—particularly Indigenous women and children—are much more likely to experience some form of family violence than non-Indigenous people.
- ⇒ Canada's Indigenous population is young and growing at a rapid pace. Therefore, interventions are needed now to prevent a rise in victimization of future generations of Indigenous peoples.

## Conceptualizing Family Violence

### *What forms does it take?*

Family violence can occur in many forms, including: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, neglect, and exposure to IPV. Most research focuses on three broad categories of family violence: IPV, child maltreatment, and elder abuse/neglect.

### *Who are the perpetrators?*

Family violence can be carried out by family members, including non-biological family (i.e. foster, adoptive, and step-parents and siblings) or intimate partners; and child maltreatment can also be carried out by other trusted people in the child's life (i.e. relative, teacher, caregiver or guardian).<sup>1, 2</sup>

### *Who are the victims?*

Anyone can become a victim of family violence regardless of their age, gender, socioeconomic background, and race/ethnicity. However, some Canadians are at higher risk for family violence, including women and Indigenous people.<sup>3</sup> For example, women accounted for two-thirds of all police-reported victims of family violence in 2019.<sup>2</sup>



### Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e. spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends, dating partners, and ongoing sexual partners) and can range from a single incident to ongoing, repeated events. <sup>4, 5</sup>

The effects of IPV can be profound and long-lasting and include a host of physical, psychological and social consequences. <sup>6</sup>

Perpetrators of IPV include both men and women; however, in Canada, women are identified as victims of IPV more frequently (about 80% of victims) and are affected more severely by IPV than men. <sup>7,2</sup>



### Child Maltreatment

Refers to the harm or risk of harm that a child or youth may experience while in the care of a person they trust or depend on; and includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional harm, and exposure to family violence (or IPV).<sup>1</sup>

Child maltreatment has significant and long-lasting physical and psychological impacts on children, including direct and indirect effects on physical and mental health and development.<sup>3</sup>



### Concurrence of IPV and Child Maltreatment

A growing and substantial body of literature shows that IPV and child maltreatment are intrinsically linked in two ways: <sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

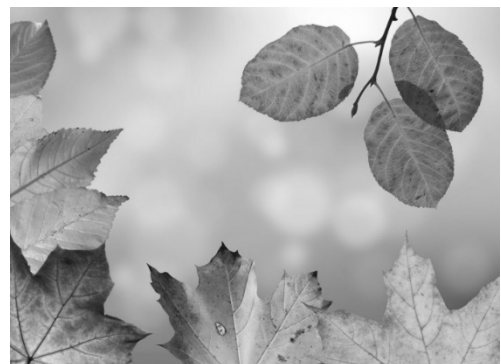
1. They often occur within the same household.
2. Exposure to violence in childhood (either as a victim or witness) increases the risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence later in life.

## Family Violence in Indigenous Populations

### Intimate Partner Violence

IPV is more pronounced throughout Canada's Indigenous population: research indicates that **Indigenous peoples of Canada have an increased risk of experiencing IPV compared to non-Indigenous Canadians**, and Indigenous women are at least three times more likely to be a victim of spousal violence compared to non-Indigenous women.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

- ⇒ In 2014, 9% of Indigenous people in Canada (10% of women; 8% of men) reported spousal violence against them in the last five years, compared to only 4% of non-Indigenous people (3% of women; 4% of men).<sup>3,11</sup>





In addition, Indigenous people – especially women – are **more likely than non-Indigenous people to report the most severe forms of spousal violence**, such as being beaten, choked, threatened with a gun or knife, or sexually assaulted (51% vs. 23% of those who experienced spousal violence in 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Higher rates of IPV among Indigenous women can be attributed to several complex factors, including: <sup>14, 15, 16</sup>

- Broader historical factors associated with **Canada's legacy of colonialism** and the intergenerational effects of unresolved trauma;
- Political and societal factors such as **racism/discrimination; gaps in health and social services** and barriers in access; and **lack of safe housing**;
- Individual level factors such as gender, age, and other socioeconomic and demographic characteristics that can intersect to increase vulnerability; and
- Cultural factors such as **loss of traditional culture and identity**; breakdown of community kinship systems; and loss of traditional Indigenous male role and status.

### ***Child Maltreatment***

Data from the *2019 First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* revealed that the rate of substantiated child maltreatment investigations was **4.7 times higher** for First Nations children compared to non-Indigenous children. <sup>17</sup>

⇒ **Neglect** was the most commonly substantiated form of maltreatment for investigations involving First Nations children in 2019, whereas physical abuse was the most commonly substantiated form of maltreatment for investigations involving non-Indigenous children.<sup>17</sup>

A higher proportion of Indigenous people self-report experiencing some form of childhood physical and/or sexual maltreatment before the age of 15 compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (40% and 29%, respectively). <sup>18</sup>

Child welfare statistics also show that **Indigenous children are overrepresented at every phase of child welfare intervention**. <sup>19, 20</sup>

⇒ For example, Indigenous children account for only 8% of Canada's child population but 52% of children in foster care. <sup>21</sup>



### ***Concurrence of IPV and Child Maltreatment***

The effects of intergenerational trauma due to historical events and colonization have resulted in cycles of family violence among Indigenous peoples.<sup>22</sup> Evidence shows that childhood maltreatment increases the risk of experiencing IPV among Indigenous adults to a greater extent than non-Indigenous people.<sup>23</sup>

- ⇒ For example, Canadian data from 2018 show that Indigenous women were almost twice as likely to experience IPV if they had also experienced physical or sexual abuse in childhood—a higher proportion compared to women who did not experience childhood abuse and to non-Indigenous women who experienced childhood abuse.<sup>23</sup>

## Family Violence Interventions

Findings from review studies have shown promising results for some interventions designed to prevent the occurrence of family violence through delivery of services to at-risk families using methods such as: home visits by nurses, other health practitioners and case managers; behavioural therapy; and assistance in accessing other needed services.<sup>24</sup>

- Features of more successful programs include those that: intervene early (i.e. during pregnancy); have higher intensity, longer duration, and are more comprehensive; provide parenting education; provide support directly to children; and help women access new resources.<sup>25</sup>
- However, some programs were found to have limited impacts on preventing child maltreatment, especially for families where abuse already occurred.<sup>26</sup>

Understanding the elements of successful and unsuccessful interventions can help to inform future strategies for preventing family violence.

## Interventions for Indigenous Populations

There is limited evidence to evaluate specific interventions designed to prevent family violence in Indigenous populations. However, research suggests that interventions which include the following elements may be either more or less likely to succeed:

**Table 1: Indigenous considerations for designing more effective family violence interventions<sup>15,16</sup>**

<b>What Doesn't Work?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies that are top-down and paternalistic</li> <li>• Interventions that reinforce gender inequalities and privilege the maintenance of the family over the abuse survivor's wishes</li> <li>• Policies that embrace a "one-size fits all" approach that models gender relations from a Western liberal perspective and stands in opposition to the traditional roles found in Indigenous cultures</li> <li>• Approaches that are unstable resulting from poor funding and lack of capacity</li> <li>• Initiatives that do not address the analytical tension between universalism and relativism</li> </ul>
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## What Does Work?

- Reconciliatory efforts that harmonize policies and interventions across international, national, and local community-based levels of government
- Holistic approaches that address the relationship between discrimination and violence against Indigenous people, particularly the distinct triple discrimination faced by Indigenous women
- Approaches that involve the whole community in the development, design, and implementation of family violence initiatives, particularly the involvement of community Elders
- Interventions that take preventative approaches to addressing family violence
- Initiatives that involve all parties – parents and children – in the conflict resolution process; including both the perpetrator and victim of the violence
- Interventions that promote non-violent masculinities
- Approaches that draw on elements or whole parts of traditional Indigenous culture
- Services and supports that are culturally and community based and that accommodate the family as a whole unit, seeking to keep the family intact rather than separating or dividing them
- Models that address the historical legacy and trauma impacting family violence and the need for individual and family healing as a key components in addressing the violence

***In addition, some examples of more traditional approaches that could be useful for addressing family violence among Indigenous populations include:***

### ***The Life Story Board (LSB)***

A toolkit involving a game board with sets of cards, markers, and tokens used to represent an individual's life experience at personal, family, and community levels. The LSB is a medium of symbolic communication that facilitates personal storytelling through visual representations.<sup>27</sup>

### ***The Circle***

A process in which each individual sees the connection between themselves and others and faces the impact of their behaviours on others in a safe space. There are different types of circles, including the talking circle, the sharing circle, the healing circle and the spiritual circle. Circles can involve the family, the extended family, and/or the community.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Oral storytelling***

Allowing a family member (i.e. a woman who has experienced violence) to tell their story by gaining their trust, rather than the professional practice of asking directive questions.<sup>16</sup>

The methods above could provide more qualitative alternatives to Western assessment tools and approaches to addressing family violence and are highly compatible with long-held Indigenous cultural traditions and knowledge.

However, it is important to note that there is no single intervention or solution that is appropriate and relevant for all Indigenous people, as different cultural groups and communities have different approaches to healing and prevention of family violence.<sup>16</sup>

## Principles to Inform Indigenous Family Violence Initiatives

*The ability to support Indigenous families and reduce or prevent violence within the family requires a greater understanding of Indigenous cultural, knowledge, values, and worldviews.*

Central to this approach is the concept of reframing Indigenous family violence using a broader determinants of health framework that identifies systemic and structural factors resulting from ongoing colonialism as overarching causes of violence, rather than focusing on risk factors at the individual or family level.<sup>13</sup>

Six principles that have the potential to improve the way family violence is understood and addressed among Indigenous populations include:<sup>13</sup>

1. Recognize ongoing colonialism and dispossession
2. Locate risk within colonial systems
3. Foster self-determination of individuals, families and communities
4. Work from an Indigenous gender-based analysis
5. Create localized solutions
6. Understand kinship systems as integral to Indigenous law



## Policy Implications

Any approach to addressing and preventing family violence among Indigenous groups – specifically IPV and child maltreatment - should take the following policy considerations into account in order to have the greatest impact:

- ⇒ First and foremost, solutions and/or violence prevention **strategies should be targeted and tailored** so that they address the unique needs and circumstances of Canada's diverse Indigenous peoples.
  - This includes a focus on the disproportionate level of risk factors for family violence among Indigenous people along with the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma resulting from colonization.
  - This will require greater involvement and/or participation of Indigenous peoples themselves in all aspects of program development.

- ⇒ Evidence showing that IPV and child maltreatment are intrinsically linked requires that **IPV and child maltreatment be addressed in tandem** rather than in isolation from one another. Preventing maltreatment and exposure to violence among Indigenous children is critical for reducing the risk of IPV in adulthood.
- ⇒ Recognizing and **addressing inherent institutional biases and discrimination** resulting from decades of government policies is critical to the success of a program and/or initiative.
- ⇒ Frontline healthcare workers provide a key role in not only the provision of healthcare services to Canadians, but also the transfer of valuable knowledge that can help to dispel myths about Canada's Indigenous peoples. Ensuring that **healthcare workers are provided with the necessary funds, resources and training** will require a commitment by decision makers to provide adequate and ongoing financial support for programs.
- ⇒ Finally, although the focus of this fact sheet has been on prevention, it is important to note that prevention is not always successful. In such cases, **measures to alleviate the effects of IPV and child maltreatment** are necessary if the cyclical flow of violence can be mitigated.
  - Continued investment into community-based, culturally-informed strategies and programs to promote healing, including programs focusing on mental health, coping skills, and parenting skills are needed to support future generations of at-risk Indigenous families.

## Conclusion

The path towards reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous peoples is a long and challenging one. Addressing the issue of family violence will help Canadians move one step closer to reconciliation by ensuring that future generations of Indigenous peoples do not experience the same degree and depth of pain and suffering inflicted by past policies and biases.

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