

**A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER: PATHWAYS TOWARD
ENDING ABORIGINAL FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

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March 2003

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Funding and Inspiration:

We gratefully acknowledge the funding support, as well as the inspiration and vision provided by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, without which this study would not have been possible.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study builds on many valuable contributions already made to the understanding of family violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities over the past fifteen years, especially in terms of mapping the complex web of factors that create and sustain this critical issue at the level of individuals, extended families, community systems, and the socio-environmental context within which they exist. Closely aligned to this intent is the study's articulation of a comprehensive framework for intervention that addresses root causes and identifies a set of strategies for significantly reducing the horrendous levels of domestic violence and abuse now ongoing in many communities.

Part I of the study begins by arguing that Aboriginal family violence and abuse is: (1) a multi-factoral social syndrome and not simply an undesirable behaviour (2) that resides within Aboriginal individuals, families and community relationships, as well as within social and political dynamics. (3) It typically manifests itself as a regimen of domination that is established and enforced by one person over one or more others, through violence, fear and a variety of abuse strategies. (4) It is usually not an isolated incidence or pattern, but is most often rooted in intergenerational abuse; (5) and it is almost always linked to the need for healing from trauma. (6) It is allowed to continue and aided to flourish because of the presence of enabling community dynamics, which as a general pattern, constitute a serious breach of trust between the victims of violence and abuse and the whole community. (7) Finally, the entire syndrome has its roots in Aboriginal historical experience, which must be adequately understood in order to be able to restore wholeness, trust and safety to Aboriginal family and community life.

Common theories, models and explanations for family violence and abuse are then reviewed: those that focus on individual behaviours and psychology, those that focus on the dynamics of human interaction, and those that focus on the socio-cultural and historical processes that have shaped societies and communities. Next, the extent of the problem is examined by reviewing statistical and anecdotal evidence. A following section examines what family violence and abuse looks and feels like from the standpoint of victims and others most directly impacted by describing seven categories (or types) of violence: physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic abuse; the exercise of "male privilege", and isolation and restricting freedom. The cycle of violence and abuse through which "a web of domination" is created is explored. The impacts of family violence and abuse, not only on the victims, but also on children who live with and witness this phenomenon, on the strength and health of families, and on the well-being of Aboriginal communities and nations is also examined.

Part II describes twelve key community determinants of family violence and abuse: (1) absence of consequences and personal immunity; (2) prevailing male beliefs and attitudes regarding women, (3) past history of domestic abuse, (4) levels of personal and community wellness, (5) professional support services, (6) community leadership, (7) public policy, (8) policing and the justice system, (9) poverty and unemployment, (10) community awareness and vigilance, (11) geographical and social isolation; and (12) spiritual and moral climate. These factors do not usually operate in isolation, but rather as a mutually reinforcing system of factors. Furthermore, no two communities are alike, and so the ways in which these and other factors combine to impact the phenomenon of family violence and abuse in any particular community needs to be carefully and thoughtfully mapped.

Part III explores constraining factors from outside Aboriginal communities which impact their capacity to work effectively and systematically to address family violence and abuse in terms of three categories: (1) present-day government policies and programs (which have not been developed in full consultation with the whole circle of Aboriginal partners; which are too often based on an inadequate understanding of the problem and lines of action which could prove effective; which are inadequately resourced; and which have are not designed to support the type of integrated long-term strategies needed to tackle the full range of determinants for family violence and abuse); (2) the marginalization of Aboriginal people in society as a whole (which puts them at risk of a whole host of social issues which are associated with family violence and abuse); and (3) national and global trends in society and mass culture (which undermine the values and dynamics which distinguish Aboriginal communities and which sustained them in traditional times).

Part IV reviews current responses to Aboriginal family violence and abuse by examining the nature and scope of fifteen community-based or regional programs, as well as the primary lessons from their many years of experience operating transition housing, counselling, referrals and many other types of support to women and children seeking sanctuary from abusive situations. Some of the programs also carry out public relations and outreach activities in local communities. Several programs focus on outreach, healing and rehabilitation services for perpetrators of violence, and several of the shelters also sponsor men's healing and support groups. Services related to domestic violence and abuse offered through justice, social services and mental health agencies were also briefly examined, especially in terms of the challenges they are having in finding ways to operate which are culturally relevant and responsive to actual realities and conditions in Aboriginal communities. Nothing less than this type of dramatic shift

in orientation will make it possible for Aboriginal communities to take on the full range of inter-related challenges that must be addressed if the emerging human tragedy that is now being incubated within abusive Aboriginal families is to be averted.

Part V proposes a generic framework for intervention aimed at reducing and eventually eliminating widespread family violence and abuse from Aboriginal communities. The first category of intervention within this framework involves the building an adequate community response system. An important step in this regard is the establishment and training of a community response team (composed of representatives from community agencies and leadership, as well as community volunteers and professionals with extensive experience in counselling) with a mandate related to providing safety, healing and long-term support for victims and for their extended families and containing, monitoring and supervising abusers as they undertake healing and rehabilitation. Establishing a protocol (in collaboration with justice and social service agencies) for intervening in family violence and abuse situations is another crucial step. Finally an alternative program for community-based healing and reconciliation needs to be created to support the needs of both victims and abusers, to which the legal system can divert offenders.

A second category of intervention relates to healing the root causes of family violence and abuse. This work relates to breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma by assisting the present generation of parents to see the roots of their own pain and to learn how to stop the cycle of abuse, and by assisting children now living within abusive relationships to receive focused therapeutic care to help them to heal from the trauma they have already experienced. Equally vital is mobilizing the community around a vision of healing and interrupting power dynamics in the community which create barriers to this work.

The third category of intervention explored in Part V of this document involves transforming the family and community systems that enable and perpetuate abuse. This task requires systematic work in two key areas. First, in identifying and mapping the dynamics of the key determinants of family violence and abuse and acquiring an adequate understanding of how each determinant plays out with the particular community system in question. The second area of work is identifying key community capacities needed to bring about change relative to the determinants of violence and abuse, to develop those capacities, and to apply them strategically and systematically to the work of shifting the status of key determinants.

The fourth and final category of intervention deals with building adequate support and service systems for long-term healing and community development. In this regard, general

principles are offered to guide the work which must be done within Aboriginal communities to build a comprehensive response to family violence and abuse which incorporates the following components: (1) early detection and intervention, (2) safe houses and emergency shelters, (3) protection of victims, including children witnessing violence, (4) confrontation and containment of abusers, (5) healing and long-term support for both victims and abusers, (6) prevention-oriented education and public relations, (7) maintaining and supervision of at-risk households, (8) healing and reconciliation work with extended families, and (9) integrating the family violence initiative within a wider community healing movement. This section also discusses four important issues which are external to Aboriginal community and that need to be addressed in support of comprehensive healing of Aboriginal family violence and abuse. They are: (1) funding, (2) public policy implementation, (c) support for the development of Aboriginal civil society, and (4) the status of Aboriginal people in society as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on domestic violence and abuse in Canadian Aboriginal communities. It stands on the shoulders of several waves of relevant studies and initiatives conducted over the past fifteen years (such as Ontario Native Women's Association, 1989; Sugar and Fox, 1989-1990; Wood and Kiyoshk, 1994; Frank, 1992; Zellerer, 1993; LaRocque 1994; Duran and Duran, 1995; National Clearing House on Family Violence, 1996; Robin, Chester and Goldman, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996; Ferris, 1996; Herman 1997, Perry, 1997; Abadian, 2000; Kiyoshk, 2001; Couture et al., 2001; Jaffe, 2002 and Teicher, 2002). It also draws on the more than thirty-five years of field experience of the authors and of Four Worlds as an organization committed to the healing and transformation of Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Despite all of this very useful work that has been done (and a great deal more), there are gaps as wide as the Milky Way between what is actually occurring related to domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities and the capacity of these same communities and the agencies that work with them to systematically and effectively address the problem. We will argue that one significant reason for this gap is the lack of clear understanding, at many levels, of the true nature and complexity of domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities as a social phenomenon. Closely related to the challenge of mapping the complex web of factors that create and sustain domestic violence and abuse at the level of individuals, extended families, community systems, and the socio-environmental context, is the even more perplexing problem of how to transform that web of relationships and conditions in order to stop the violence and abuse.

The following collection of statements, made by Aboriginal people who have first-hand knowledge of domestic violence and abuse illustrates something of the nature, dimensionality, impact, and range of the problem as it manifests itself in many Aboriginal communities.¹

¹ These statements have been altered to hide the identity and location of speakers.

One time he dragged me by my hair from behind the skidoo. Another time we were out on the lake in a boat. He threw me into the water, parka, boots and all. The water was so cold, it took my breath away. Then he shouted at me that he was going to kill me, and he pushed my head under the water and held it there. I tried to get away but I couldn't. I blacked out. He must have pulled me out because I woke up and we were almost back to town. He told me he loved me, and that he was sorry. I believed him.

Woman, age 36, Saskatchewan

He is sweet, gentle and kind when he is sober. But when he starts drinking he gets mean. That's when I get scared. Sometimes his drinking goes on for days. I let him hit me so he doesn't kill one of the kids.

Woman, age 43, NWT

What has he done to hurt me? Hit me with the axe handle, cut me with his razor, held me down and burned me with cigarettes all over my stomach and breasts, cut my hair off so I would be too ashamed to leave the house, forced me to give him blow jobs in front of his friends, threatened to give away my kids to Social Services, pulled my hair, beat me with his belt on my bare ass ... and I was always so scared he would do something. All he had to do was look at me and I felt sick. One time he made me sleep outside with the dogs. It was winter.

Woman, age 47, Nova Scotia

I tried to get away. First I went to his mom's house. She said I was a bad wife and I deserved to get beat. She told Eddy I tried to talk to her, and he beat me hard. He would never let me have any money. I had to account for every penny. He took out the phone so I couldn't talk to anybody. I tried to go to the Chief. He told me to go home. Then he told Eddy he'd better keep an eye on his woman ... It's sixty-two miles to town. I've got no money. There's nobody I can trust. I don't drive. The social worker is Eddy's cousin, and all my relatives tell me to keep quiet 'cause it's "family business". I would just walk to town but I don't want to leave my kids with him.

Woman, age 22, Manitoba

I was never gonna be the guy who drank, who hit people and hurt them. I saw too much of that when my dad got drunk and hurt my mom. But I ended up a drunk, a drug addict, and in jail. I lived on the street in Toronto for a while. I'd go up against anybody. I didn't give a shit. Stealing cars? I did it. Using people? I did it. I went from one woman to another. If I passed out, someone took my woman. We all did that. I could never stay in a relationship for long. We acted like couples, but it was really mutual use. There was no communication. No real love, no caring, and then I would explode and hurt her. Then came the promises. "O God, I'm so sick. I must be sick. I don't want to hurt people." So then I would drink myself into oblivion, or try to get enough coke in me so the pain would stop. It was a hell of a hole to be stuck in. There seemed to be no way out. I was ashamed of everything Native.

Man, age 53, Ontario

I promised my wife I would never hurt her like my dad hurt my mom. He would slap her till she begged him to stop. I swore (when I was about ten) that I would kill him if he didn't stop hurting her. Sometimes he dragged her around the house by her hair. And he was always hyper-jealous. He tried to turn us kids against her. "She's a lying, cheating slut," he told us. "Was there a man here? Was there another man in the house?" He would twist our fingers till they seemed like they would break, or pinch us real hard. Sometimes we told him "yes" to make him stop. One time our dad grabbed my sister and spun her around by the neck until she peed her pants. I broke my promise. In the very first month of marriage I blackened my wife's eye. She left me for a week, but she came back. Every once in a while I'd slap her around. But that was only part of it. I abused her in so many ways—psychological and emotional abuse. As a man, I had a right, I told myself. I had to feel like I was in control. If I felt I was losing control, I abused her. Once I pulled a gun out and cornered her and the kids. They went to a shelter. "I love you," I told her, "and I love the kids." "I know you love me," she said, "but one day you could love me to death." I had to find a way to stop, and I found it. The secret was to come to accept who I was as a native man and to learn about my culture, spirituality and traditions.

Man, age 61, Alberta

There's nothing we can do for these people. We get called to certain houses and it's "here-we-go-again" time. We knock on the door, and before it even opens we can hear them screaming at each other. We go in and try to calm them down so nobody gets hurt, but we have to be careful. Sometimes they both turn on us. If we know it's a domestic disturbance, there's lots of other thing we would rather be doing. Sometimes we don't respond, because it's just the same old thing, over and over. It doesn't do any good anyway. Even if we do charge somebody, lots of time it doesn't stick.

RCMP Officer, remote community

It's an old boys network. They all protect each other, and cover up for each other. These are our leaders, and the heads or sons of big families, even some elders. When everybody with power agrees to look the other way, what chance does one scared, desperate woman have?

Women's on-reserve shelter worker, British Columbia

What's the use of reporting abuse? Here, if you do that, you just make the wrong people mad – people who can hurt you. The police can't do anything. The courts re-victimize the victims by putting them on display, exposing them to ridicule and retaliation, and by putting most of their attention on the abuser. Our people don't trust the courts. They don't understand our culture. They don't respect our values, and they force solutions on us that make the problems worse, such as putting abusers in jail with no treatment, so they come home meaner and madder than before, but still abusers, and meanwhile our families suffer.

Aboriginal family service program worker, Ontario

Purpose of the Study

This study set out to address the following research goals:

1. to develop a generic map of the problem of Aboriginal domestic violence and abuse, which simultaneously describes the full nature and extent of the problem and which also uncovers the dynamics of family, community, cultural, professional and governmental systems that make it possible for Aboriginal domestic violence and abuse to continue; and
2. to develop a comprehensive framework for intervention that addresses the root causes of domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities, and which identifies an integrated set of strategies for significantly reducing the currently horrendous levels of domestic violence and abuse now ongoing in many communities.

These are, admittedly, very large goals, and as a research team, we would likely never have aimed so high if it were not for the vision and encouragement of Aboriginal community partners across the country, who are already transforming their communities, and who have shown us by their example that it is entirely possible to do so.

Methodology

In order to achieve these goals, the following methodological elements were woven together into an integrated strategy.

1. *A comprehensive review of research and program literature related specifically to Aboriginal domestic violence and abuse, as well as domestic violence and abuse more generally* - In this regard, literature related to Canadian Aboriginal communities was given a high priority, but relevant material from mainstream research and practice was also reviewed, including material related to family violence and abuse, trauma, post-traumatic-stress-disorder, as well as the impacts of violence and abuse (including witnessing violence) on child development, and particularly the development of the brain.

2. *A comprehensive review of Aboriginal approaches to healing from the impacts of trauma and abuse*, grounded in extensive community consultations, and a national program review that looked closely at the work of twenty-four Aboriginal family violence programs across Canada.
3. *An in-depth consultation and analysis process focused on the research goals with selected practitioners and experts* who have been working with the problem of Aboriginal domestic violence and abuse and community healing for many years.
4. *The iterative development of an interactive set of dynamic models and processes for intervention* based on the generic map of the problem as it emerged through the process of the study, but also based on the knowledge capital related to healing and community transformation that has recently emerged from Aboriginal community change efforts across the country.

The Organization of this Report

This report is organized as follows:

Part I will define and describe the problem of domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities. Various definitions, theories and models of domestic violence and abuse (which includes both physical and sexual abuse, as well as other methods abusers use to control and dominate their victims) will be discussed, a portrait of the anatomy of abuse will be painted, the known levels of incidence and extent of the problem will be discussed, and an analysis of the impacts of domestic violence and abuse on human well-being in Aboriginal communities will be offered. From this discussion a case will be made for why Aboriginal domestic violence and abuse needs to be seen as a fundamental social problem, as well as one of the primary turning point issues toward which community healing initiatives must now be directed.

Part II will explore the family and community systems and configuration of stakeholders, root causes and enabling factors internal to many Aboriginal communities that make it possible for domestic violence and abuse to flourish.

From this systems analysis we will build an integrative “map” that identifies the complex web of determinants of violence and abuse, and describes how clusters of determinants often collude to create a particular constellation of conditions which make domestic abuse in many Aboriginal communities extremely difficult to root out.

Part III will focus on externally driven influences and constraining factors; i.e. factors that must, at least in part, be addressed through systems that are outside the control of Aboriginal communities and nations. In this section, factors such as the criteria and structure of funding, policing, the courts, popular media and culture, public policy governing support agency responses, levels of public education and awareness, dominant social service practice models, the climate of cultural sensitivity and awareness across all relevant agencies and services, the doctrines and policies of the churches serving Aboriginal communities toward domestic abuse, and the poverty trap (that wearing constellation of factors such as low income, inadequate nutrition, poor and overcrowded housing, low social status, political powerlessness, poor health, low education and literacy levels, high levels of social isolation, and poor health [including a high incidence of depression, addictions, frustration, aggression and other mental health factors] all combining to trap victims and their dependents in abuse situations).

Part IV will review and explore the wide variety of responses to Aboriginal family violence and abuse occurring both within Aboriginal communities and across the range of government services and programs attempting in some way to address the problem or its impacts. In this section we will provide a summary of our findings based on a review of twenty-four programs across Canada that are attempting to respond to the challenge of domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities. We will also provide a brief review of the prevailing patterns of response from services and agencies typically called upon to respond when incidences of abuse are reported, such as police, prosecutors, courts, and social services, as well as the state of current federal funding and program initiatives focused on Aboriginal domestic violence and abuse at the national level.

Based on a very recent and extensive review of Canadian Aboriginal community healing experience,² we will also provide an analysis of the types of responses many Aboriginal communities are making to the challenge of community healing, the effectiveness of various approaches, and the stages of development that communities seem to experience as they progress in the work of stopping addictions, abuse and other dysfunctional behaviours, and healing from the impacts of trauma, so that abuse is not recycled yet again to future generations.

Based on the above review we will then conclude Part IV with an analysis of the adequacy of current patterns of response in view of the realities and needs described in earlier chapters.

Part V will propose a comprehensive framework for intervention that addresses both the root causes and the web of enabling factors that contribute to domestic violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities. This framework will identify an integrated set of strategies, or lines of action, that can be taken by communities and the agencies that work with them, to significantly reduce the incidence and impacts of domestic violence and abuse. Four primary categories of intervention will be discussed, all aimed at contributing to a transformation of the violence-prone community. They are:

- a) building an adequate community response system to existing patterns of violence and abuse (involving prevention, consequences, early warning, early intervention, protecting those who have already been impacted, treatment, establishing new patterns, monitoring and ongoing family support);
- b) healing the root causes of trauma and abuse, and learning new patterns, so that violence and abuse are not recycled to future generations;
- c) transforming the family and community systems that enable and perpetuate abuse;
and

² First reported in “Mapping the Healing Journey” (Lane, Bopp, Bopp & Norris, 2002)

- d) building adequate support and service systems that are capable of working as partners with Aboriginal communities toward long-term healing and community development.

A Note about Urban and Reserve Aboriginal Communities

The authors of this report recognize that close to fifty percent of Aboriginal people in Canada live in urban areas, especially in Western Canada. The realities and needs of these individuals and families are in some ways different than those of their relatives in reserve communities, but there are also many challenges which are similar. Part II of this report, which discusses the determinants of family violence and abuse, draws largely on the particular circumstances of reserve communities, because the family and community systems which currently support the present pattern of life, of which family violence and abuse are a part, are more easily visible there. Many of the same dynamics and processes also operate in urban areas, however, and a wide variety of Aboriginal services are attempting to respond to the needs. Part II of this report makes reference to the constraints, external to Aboriginal communities (whether they consist of a reserve or a sub-community in a city, which have an impact on family violence and abuse. Part IV reviews both reserve and urban programs addressing family violence and abuse, and Part V offers recommendations which have impact for all Aboriginal people, regardless of where they live.