

Loving Our Children: Finding What Works for First Nations Families

Canada Research Chair in First Nations Child and Family Services
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Information Sheet #11

What is Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence?

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Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is violence between current or past partners regardless of gender or sexual orientation. The violence may include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual violence, isolation, threats and harassment, financial abuse and coercive control. The majority of survivors of IPV are women (78% of survivors of IPV in Canada were women¹), and men are more likely to perpetrate physical assault and homicide.²

Indigenous women in Canada are more likely to experience IPV in their lifetime compared with non-Indigenous women (61% vs 44%); more specifically, First Nations (64%) and Métis (65%) women.³ Indigenous women make up about 5% of the population of all women in Canada; however, they represented 24% of all women homicide victims (241 victims): 168 First Nations women (17%), 26 Inuit women (3%), 12 Métis women (1%), and 35 (4%) Indigenous group unknown.⁴

Children's exposure to IPV includes seeing/hearing the violence, trying to protect a parent, siblings or other family member, or being directly involved in the physical violence between intimate partners. Exposure also includes indirect exposure, such as hearing the violence or observing the aftermath (e.g., police involvement or arrests, seeing bruises the next day, etc.). Children's exposure to IPV

This information sheet is [one in a series](#)¹⁶ about child welfare, written for First Nations developing child and family prevention services as part of the systemic reform underway across Canada.

can also include situations where children are exposed to emotional abuse between partners including being involved in coercive control.

According to the First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect,⁵ exposure to IPV was identified as the primary form of maltreatment accounting for 27% of maltreatment investigations involving First Nations children.⁶ Most investigations involving children's exposure to IPV are about concerns that a child was exposed to physical violence (76%), either directly (50%) or indirectly (26%); while exposure to emotional violence accounted for 24%. The majority (77%) of investigations involving exposure to IPV as the primary form of maltreatment are substantiated. Almost two-thirds of investigations involving IPV as the primary form of maltreatment close after the initial investigation (61%), with no further child welfare involvement. The vast majority

of investigations involving exposure to IPV as the primary maltreatment concern do not result in an out-of-home placement. In fact, this maltreatment type has the lowest proportion of placements, at 6%.

Children's exposure to IPV may lead to attachment issues for infants, behavioural or emotional problems for children, as well as dating violence and an increased risk of physical or emotional abuse for teens.^{7,8} The proportion of children experiencing physical harm because of exposure to IPV is low; in only 1% of investigations where the primary concern is exposure to IPV involving a First Nations child was there physical harm to the child.

There is some tension and debate arising from the different laws, mandates and approaches of the child-centered child welfare system versus the woman-centered violence against women system; therefore, resulting interventions have different approaches. For example, interventions for children exposed to high conflict custody and access issues or emotional abuse between intimate partners⁹ will be different than a response for a child exposed to physical IPV with a harm reduction approach.¹⁰

Interventions

The majority of investigations involving children's exposure to IPV cases are reported to child welfare by the police. While it is important for law enforcement to ensure public safety, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls both clearly identify the legacy of systemic racism plaguing many police services and the corresponding need for police reform to uphold the dignity and human rights of Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous women in particular. While First Nations are assuming a greater role in policing, a recent Supreme Court of Canada decision confirmed that federal and provincial governments breached their duties to negotiate in good faith and act in keeping with Honour of the Crown by providing

inadequate resources for the Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan First Nation to deliver sustainable policing services over time. This important decision states that federal and provincial governments must not use the promise of self-determination as an opportunity to underfund First Nations public services and set up First Nations for failure.

In most jurisdictions, there are specialized domestic violence courts that provide an integrated coordinated response with designated Crown Attorneys working with victim witness programs and referring to external early intervention(s). While the Criminal Code is federal, six provinces have family violence legislation as of 2025. Family violence legislation complements the Criminal Code, offering victims further protection. Children's exposure to IPV is included in the child welfare legislation of 11 out of 13 provinces and territories and each jurisdiction has its own policies, responses and interventions for IPV offenders. Interventions include Ontario's 12-week Partner Assault Program¹¹ (PAR) and the Caring Dads program offered in a number of provinces. British Columbia's designated Aboriginal Justice Workers (AJW) have a specific focus on culturally appropriate interventions and Alberta has an eight-week Spirit of Peace intervention for First Nations.

It is important to note that when an accused person identifies as Indigenous, courts in Canada are required by a 1999 Supreme Court of Canada decision¹² to consider Gladue principles,¹³ including:

1. the unique systemic or background factors related to the history of Indigenous people in Canada as a consequence of colonialism that may have played a role in bringing the particular Indigenous offender before the court, and
2. restorative justice procedures and sanctions that may be appropriate for the offender because of their particular Indigenous heritage or connection.

There are successful interventions involving Indigenous, restorative, and community-based programs across Canada, including healing circles and sentencing circles. In 2017, the CDC summarized the best available evidence for intimate partner

violence prevention.¹⁴ Successful interventions specific to Indigenous populations were also explored and summarized in a 2022 policy brief by the University of Toronto.¹⁵

If you would like to share information about a First Nations child and family support initiative in your community, the Loving Our Children project researchers would like to hear from you. LOCwhatworks@gmail.com

Endnotes

- 1 Statistics Canada. (2024). *The Daily — Trends in police-reported family violence and intimate partner violence in Canada, 2023*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/241024/dq241024b-eng.htm>
- 2 Sinha, M. (2013). *Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends*. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11766-eng.pdf?st=wlxv41is>
- 3 Heidinger, L. (2021). *Intimate partner violence: Experiences of Indigenous First Nations, Métis and Inuit women in Canada, 2018* [Juristat]. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.htm>
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Richard, K., Hélie, S., Montgomery, M., et al. (2021). *Denouncing the continued overrepresentation of First Nations children in Canadian child welfare: Findings from the First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2019*. Ottawa, Ontario: Assembly of First Nations. <https://cwrp.ca/publications/denouncing-continued-overrepresentation-first-nations-children-canadian-child-welfare>
- 6 A custom analysis of the FNCIS-2019 dataset was conducted to produce these statistics. Please refer to Fallon et al. (2021) for a comprehensive description of the study methods.
- 7 Howell, K. H., Barnes, S. E., Miller, L. E., & Graham-Bermann, S. A. (2016). Developmental variations in the impact of intimate partner violence exposure during childhood. *Journal of injury & violence research*, 8(1), 43–57. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4729333/>
- 8 Temple, J. R., Choi, H. J., Elmquist, J., Hecht, M., Miller-Day, M., Stuart, G. L., et al. (2016). Psychological Abuse, Mental Health, and Acceptance of Dating Violence Among Adolescents. *The Journal of adolescent health : Official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 59(2), 197–202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.034>
- 9 Black, T., Saini, M., Fallon, B., Deljavan, S., & Theoduloz, R. (2020). The intersection of child welfare, intimate partner violence and child custody disputes: secondary data analysis of the Ontario incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 15(4), 473–486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1751770>
- 10 Cross, C. (2019). Harm Reduction in the Domestic Violence Context. In *The Politicization of Safety: Critical Perspectives on Domestic Violence Responses*. New York, NY, NYU Press Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479805648.003.0014>
- 11 Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General (Updated May 15, 2023). Partner assault response program. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/partner-assault-response-program>
- 12 Supreme Court of Canada (1999). *R. v. Gladue*. Supreme Court Judgements, [1999] 1 SCR 688. <https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1695/index.do>
- 13 Department of Justice Canada (2024). *Applying R v Gladue: The use of Gladue reports and principles*. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/gladue2/summary-resume.html>
- 14 Niolon, P. H., Kearns, M., Dills, J., Rambo, K., Irving, S., Armstead, T., et al. (2017). *Intimate Partner Violence Prevention Resource for Action: A Compilation of the Best Available Evidence*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- 15 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.
- 16 <https://cwrp.ca/indigenous-child-welfare>

