

Domestic and Sexual Violence

In the

Aboriginal Community

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Domestic and Sexual Violence in Aboriginal Communities

Extent of Domestic Violence in Aboriginal Communities

Canadian studies have consistently reported high rates of victimization among Aboriginal women and children. Statistics Canada report that Aboriginal women are victimized at three times the rate of non-Aboriginal women and twice the rate of Aboriginal men (Statistics Canada 1999 General Social Survey on Victimization). According to the survey although 7% of adult Canadians report experiencing at least one incident of violence by a current or former partner between 1993 and 1998, this rate increased to 20% for Aboriginal peoples. Moreover the severity of abuse is higher and potentially more life threatening for Aboriginal spousal abuse victims compared to non-Aboriginal victims. The Statistics Canada, Homicide Survey determined that the Spousal homicide rates for Aboriginal women are more than nine times the rate for non-Aboriginal women.

As much family violence involves sexual assault, special attention must be given to sexual violence within Aboriginal communities. The Canadian Council on Social Development (1984) found "high incidence of sexual assault and incest in many Native communities". An analysis of data from Statistics Canada 1991 Aboriginal peoples Survey indicated that 36 to 44 per cent of Aboriginal people saw family violence as a problem and 22 to 35 per cent of Aboriginal people saw sexual abuse as a problem in their community. Unemployment and alcohol and drug abuse were the only social issues eliciting higher levels of concern among Aboriginal people in this survey.

Since it is considerably more difficult in to get precise statistics on Métis people, it is virtually impossible to determine the extent of sexual violence in Métis families and communities. However as more victims start to report, there is every indication that family violence, including sexual violence is just as problematic. The extent of violence reported in national studies further underlies the severity of the problem and leads us to ask why family violence is so pervasive in Aboriginal families and communities.

The Socio/political Context of Domestic and Sexual Violence in the Aboriginal Community

"Many of these studies link the specific prevalence and nature of family violence in Aboriginal communities to their experience of colonization, the legacy of residential schools and the consequent pattern of intergenerational abuse. "(Ursel, 2001). "First Nations people have been a group dispossessed of their language, culture, land and self-esteem. "The symptoms of this marginalization

have been expressed in child sexual abuse, substance abuse, assault, neglect, unemployment, suicide, mental illness and cultural self-hatred."(Berwin & Poteous, 1992) Domestic and sexual abuse is frequently cited as risk factors in homelessness. Higher rates of abuse cited above have also contributed to higher incidences of physical and mental health problems among Aboriginal people.

The socio/political history of colonization has directly lead to the endemic levels of domestic and community violence experienced by Aboriginal people. The marginalization and dehumanization of Aboriginal people created a cultural void whereby complex social/spiritual structures that support cohesion were replaced by values of dominance through violence. This has manifested itself in the contemporary context in the form of racism both external and internalized, social isolation, poverty, low educational attainment, under employment. Aboriginal people continue to experience significant social and economic barriers that in themselves are not the cause of domestic violence but rather support an environment in which violence is a common behavioral choice to gain a sense of power and control. Within the specific context of violence and Aboriginal people, first and foremost there must be a committed campaign to address the underlying social and political structures that support the marginalization of Aboriginal people.

It is critical to understand that application of generalizations about Aboriginal people contributes to the on going difficulty in creating solutions to violence in the community. Pan Aboriginal perceptions that assume all Aboriginal people share a common set of values and traditions leads to cookie cutter solutions that are difficult to measure. An example of this is the movement to use restorative justice models such as sentencing and healing circles. These models however do not provide for the safety of victims especially in isolated communities. The emphasis is placed on spiritual healing without necessarily holding the offender accountable in a legal sense. Also there is a great deal of focus placed on the use of traditional, holistic interventions. While this is a critical piece of the work it cannot be viewed as the panacea. Spiritual practices are but one piece of the puzzle. The psycho/social impacts of violence also require sound clinical practices and development of enforceable social/legal instruments. An ongoing barrier is the jurisdictional barriers created by on and off reserve policing practices as well as the impact of self-governance under the Indian Act. Unless laws designed to improve the safety of victims is applied uniformly Aboriginal women on reserves remain at higher risk.

Need for Culturally Competent Supports and Services

One must be cautious to not presume that one solution fits all sizes, however all services created must be culturally competent. Again generalities must be avoided. What is appropriate knowledge for one geographical area may not be for another. For example the experiences and culture of the northern Dene people is quite different than for the Blackfoot. It is also essential that service

providers recognize that many Aboriginal people may have lived in an urban setting all their lives and may or may not subscribe to a "traditional" lifestyle. Being culturally competent does not mean services speak only to the cultural/spiritual issues/needs but rather ground their services on a in-depth understanding and analysis of the psycho/social ramifications of both the historical and contemporary circumstances experienced by Aboriginal people.

Strengthening the Spirit

Strengthening the Spirit formed three years ago to ensure that culturally competent services are available to meet the needs of all Aboriginal peoples impacted by domestic, sexual and intimate partner violence. To date, Strengthening the Spirit has developed 24-Hour Help Cards specific to Aboriginal men and women, worked with the Calgary Domestic Violence Committee to develop protocols in four Aboriginal serving agencies, collaborated with HomeFront to provide extensive domestic violence training in the Aboriginal community, and organized an annual conference for Aboriginal service providers for the past three years. Currently members of the committee are working with Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse to ensure that their educational and program materials are culturally competent.

Development of an Aboriginal Men's Domestic Violence Treatment Program

In Calgary, Aboriginal service providers have partnered with mainstream organizations to provide support and direction to the development and implementation of services. This partnership has assisted the mainstream organizations to implement culturally competent and relevant treatment services for male offenders. The YWCA Family Violence Prevention Centre and Sheriff King Home in partnership with Aboriginal serving agencies was able to obtain funding for Oskâyi Kiskinotahn, which is currently in it's pilot phase. This innovative pilot project has developed a treatment manual, which has integrated core family violence content with Aboriginal culture and the use of spirituality in the healing process. To date three pilot groups have been completed. An evaluation is also underway to determine the effectiveness of the program.

Current Barriers

The current barriers are a lack of core funding and cohesive community relations between mainstream and Aboriginal organizations. What's required is time, energy and resources into building these relationships, with a goal of reciprocal supports as the Aboriginal community can provide the cultural training while receiving clinical services, supports and training from organizations with strong clinical models and expertise.

Recommendations

What has become apparent is the need for an Aboriginal community partnership coordinator. This person would provide the cross cultural liaison in terms of assisting organizations in developing competent programming models while also supporting the Aboriginal community to access to these services.

Funding for culturally specific treatment programs for all members of the family should be a priority. It is critical that these programs focus on enhancing victim safety and offender accountability. It must be linked to existing services and be part of a coordinated community response to family and sexual violence.

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.

Finally, any public service campaigns must have a specific Aboriginal component. Aboriginal people must participate in the development of the messaging and have material that is targeted to the community using Aboriginal images and people.