

**Missoula Healthy Indian Families Consortium**  
**REPORT ON FAMILY VIOLENCE**  
**SUMMARY**  
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**Background**

The Missoula Healthy Indian Families Consortium formed in December, 2002, bringing those working with and advocating for Indian<sup>1</sup> people together with those working in the field of intimate partner violence prevention and advocacy.

Recognizing that Indian people were underrepresented among those seeking some intimate partner violence services and concerned that the needs of Indian people and families experiencing violence were not being adequately met, the Consortium reviewed relevant literature in the field of Indian family violence and designed a series of focus groups to gather information from Indian women and men about their perception of intimate partner violence in their community as well as about the needs for and barriers to accessing relevant services in Missoula.

The intent of these groups was to provide a local picture of the existing needs and to augment the base of knowledge and experience of the Consortium, on the basis of which the Consortium can make recommendations for improved service delivery and/or new program development.

The Consortium is interested in strengthening support for families struggling with violence. Whereas historically the majority of family violence initiatives have limited their focus to developing services for victims of battering, the Consortium's approach is holistic: violence—like alcoholism, PTSD, diabetes, poverty, and racism—tears at the fabric of families and communities. The Consortium is ultimately concerned with providing resources for all Indian people to build stronger, safer, and healthier families and communities.

This report documents the findings from a review of existing literature in the field of Indian family violence as well as from local focus groups that explored Indian peoples experiences of relationship and family violence, the effectiveness of existing resources, and needs for new or strengthened intervention/prevention efforts.

**Summary**

The focus groups revealed significant gender differences in perceptions of violence; the women interviewed perceived a high degree of violence in Indian families, and the men did not. Nonetheless, the focus group findings suggest that Indian families are experiencing battering (the systematic use of intimidation, coercion, and violence to establish control over a partner) as well as systemic family violence, which refers to violence that occurs between any and all members of a family and does not necessarily include a system of control.

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<sup>1</sup> “Indian” will be used throughout to refer to American Indian, Native American, and First Nations People, in order to maintain consistency with the Missoula Healthy Indian Families Consortium.

Addressing violence among Indian families in Missoula requires developing appropriate responses to and family supports for the different types of violence families are experiencing. The findings also highlight the relationship between family responsibilities—being employed, faithful, financially responsible—and violence as well as the relationship between chemical dependency and violence and suggest the need for a holistic approach to family violence that takes into account the other factors in a families life. In addition, the findings discuss the cyclical and generational aspects of violence, in particular the negative impact on children of witnessing violence.

Family, traditional cultural values, and schools were identified as positive resources that could be strengthened to help prevent violence and hold offenders accountable for their actions. There is exciting potential in viewing family and traditional cultural values as resources to prevent violence, as community-based—rather than systems-based—resources are inherently sustainable and empowerment-based.

The Missoula Indian Center was also highlighted as a key community resource, though the Center does not offer family violence services at this time. Findings suggest a significant lack of awareness about existing domestic violence services as well as a resistance to accessing the criminal justice system for support. Participants noted ineffective police response and services, fear of losing children, and prejudicial attitudes of law enforcement.

Participants identified needs for individual and group counseling. Men saw counseling as a way to strengthen or improve a relationship, whereas women were primarily interested in group support and activities to educate themselves about dating and violence and about leaving abusive relationships. Men were also interested in a support service for those who are feeling or acting violent. Men and women also identified the need for culturally sensitive services and for increased awareness of existing services.

Up to this point, there have been no formal efforts to identify needs for and barriers to family violence services for Missoula's Indian community. With this study and through joining together those working with Indian people and those working in the field of domestic violence, the Missoula Healthy Indian Families Consortium aims to strengthen systems-based and community-based efforts to prevent family violence and strengthen Indian families.