

Seeing the *Wendigo*: Linking Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Children's Exposure to Violence, and Sex Trafficking

**January 7, 2015 webinar
National Indigenous Women's
Resource Center
Sandi Pierce, PhD**

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Webinar goals

- Recognize the connections between various types of violence
- Identify the ways that experiencing and witnessing violence affect victims
- Consider interventions that address repeated exposure to violence of various types

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Violence affecting Native communities

- Child sexual abuse
- Child neglect
- Community violence (assault, homicide)
- Suicide
- Domestic violence
- Sexual assault
- Sex trafficking

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Child sexual and physical abuse

Both place child victims at high risk of serious and chronic problems with...

- Physical health
- PTSD and other mental health disorders
- Suicidality and self-harm
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Sexuality and sexual behavior

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Physical abuse/neglect

- May be even stronger predictors of early sexual activity than sexual abuse
- Psychological impacts of neglect include neediness, a poor sense of self, and decreased feelings of personal value

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Trauma responses to child abuse/neglect

- Efforts to escape painful feelings through substance use, aggressive/disruptive behavior, and/or risk-taking
- Early sexual activity, more likely to be involved in hook-up and survival sex
- Increased vulnerability to sex traffickers' promises of love, glamour, excitement, self-sufficiency

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Intimate partner violence at home

Children are at high risk for severe, lifelong problems:

- Physical health
- Mental health
- School and peer relationships
- Disruptive behavior
- Physical and sexual abuse by the batterer (49-70% of cases)

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Abuse/neglect and sex trafficking

77 sex trafficked youth ages 12-17:

- Almost one-third were 12-15
- 40% had a child/juvenile in need of protection case on record
- 69% had been reported as missing at least once

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Witnessing community violence

Children exposed to community violence in their communities and schools:

- Often see family members, peers, trusted adults, and strangers injured or even murdered—as innocent bystanders and as active participants
- Can come to view violence as a normal part of daily life

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Poly-victimization

Toxic exposure to multiple forms of violence

- Family violence
- Child physical and sexual abuse
- Community violence
- Lateral violence
- Viewing these as separate issues is not helpful

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Effects of poly-victimization on children/ youth

- At least 2x the risk and severity of posttraumatic effects and health & mental disorders, up to 10x the risk
- High risk of losing the basic capacity for normal development, unable to become successful learners and productive adults

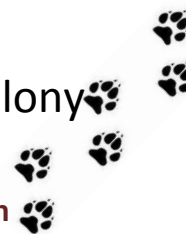
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Native youth in the juvenile justice system

- From 1999 through 2008, up to 60% of juveniles in federal custody were AI/AN
- Juvenile offenders often shipped to facilities far from home if the rez has no juvenile detention center
- Juveniles that commit a serious felony may be sent to a federal prison or facility—increases harms

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Violence in tribal communities

- Violent crime rates more than 2.5 times the national rate—on some reservations, more than 20 times the national rate
- Child abuse/neglect rates significantly higher than national rates
- As of 2014, 8344 Native children were in foster care placement

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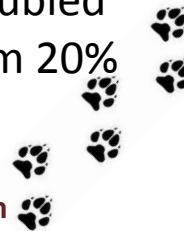
2010: More than 7000 reported abused/neglected AI/AN children

State	AI/AN % of victims	AI/AN % of the child population
Alaska	48.5%	17.2%
South Dakota	46.8%	13.0%
Montana	21.5%	9.5%
Minnesota	7.4%	1.5%
Nebraska	5.0%	1.2%

Alaska's Covenant House 2010

- Almost all of the runaway/homeless youth coming to the Anchorage Covenant House from rural areas were Alaska Native
- The Native proportion of youth served by Covenant House has nearly doubled over the prior 10 years, rising from 20% in 1999 to nearly 40% in 2010

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Environmental effects (Minnesota)

High rates of neighborhood/community poverty, crime, and violence are linked to:

- Increased rates of sexual violence against teen girls
- Increased rates of girls victimized by teen dating violence
- Increased exposure to sex traffickers, normalization of commercial sex

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Boarding school impacts

- The losses of language, culture, and family/community were hugely traumatic
- Back home, children no longer fit in their communities and became isolated from community supports
- Cultural constraints against harming one another have broken down a little more with each generation

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Lateral violence

Has an additional damaging effect on normal adolescent development

- Gossip and lies
- Verbal aggression, bullying
- Social exclusion, isolation

These behaviors are NOT part of normal child development

They ARE behaviors learned in boarding schools

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What do we know about trauma?

Trauma occurs when:

- People experience events or situations that overwhelm their ability to cope
- An experience threatens a person's life, safety, or well-being
- Childhood trauma has long-range impacts

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Trauma effects

Intense feelings of:

- Fear
- Terror
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness

PTSD

Desire to escape the feelings

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Effects on parents/caregivers

Research tells us:

- Life adversity can cause strain on caregivers
- Some try to escape the painful emotions through dysfunctional coping strategies

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Violence as a response

- Unhealed generational trauma
- Violence as a learned behavior, viewed as appropriate way to “teach a lesson”
- New layers of grief, loss, and trauma added each generation, dysfunctional coping strategies in parenting
- Violence creates trauma, is also a trauma response

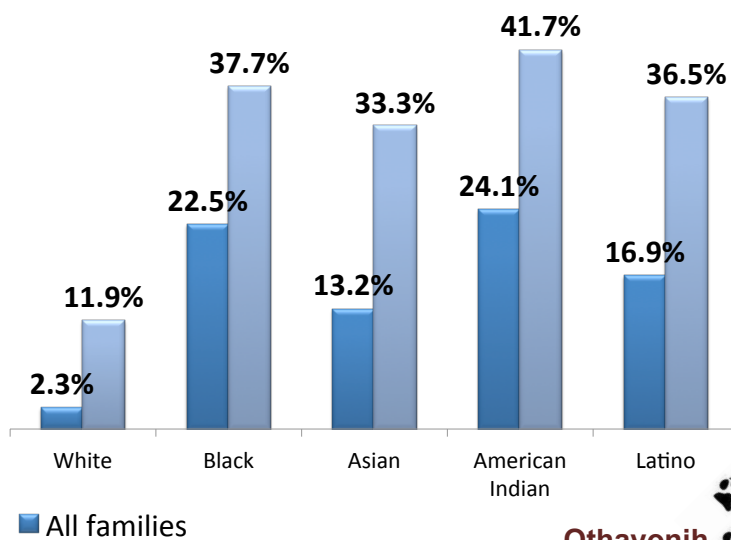
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Example: Minneapolis

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Families in poverty: Hennepin County



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Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center intakes: Exposure to violence

Traumatic event (two age groups)	18-62 n=18	12-21 n=23
Someone used a weapon to rob/try to rob ("jump") her or her family member	67%	87%
Saw someone in neighborhood beaten up, shot, or killed	72%	65%
Saw/heard family member being hit, punched, kicked very hard, or killed	67%	52%
Saw/heard family members act like they were going to kill/hurt each other	56%	35%

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Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center intakes: Parental absence

Traumatic event (two age groups)	18-62 n=18	12-21 n=23
Separated from parent(s) for a long time (foster care, never seeing again)	89%	74%
Had time in life living in a car, shelter, or on the street	94%	65%
Family member depressed/mentally ill for a long time	67%	61%
Family member put in jail/prison, taken away by police	67%	65%

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Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center intakes: Absence of safety

Traumatic event (two age groups)	18-62 n=18	12-21 n=23
Lived with older/stronger person who abused alcohol, used street drugs	78%	61%
Someone in home was physically violent to her	67%	44%
Was threatened/picked on by non-family member	78%	57%
Someone made her touch his or her private sexual body parts	61%	26%

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Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center intakes: Traumatic loss

Traumatic event (two age groups)	18-62 n=18	12-21 n=23
Family member/person close to her died unexpectedly	83%	52%
Parent swore at/put her down, said hurtful things	72%	44%
Someone in her home tried to hurt or kill themselves	50%	39%

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MIWRC: Oshkiniigikwe screening Female youth ages 12-21

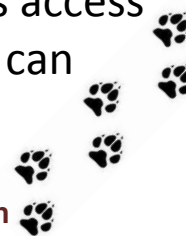
Reported at intake (18 month period) n=58

Had traded sex	34%
Were sexually trafficked as children	26%
One or more friends in prostitution	41%
Knew a pimp personally	31%
Regular contact with gang members	45%
Average age at intake	16.0
Average age when first sold for sex	10.7

Research on “victim selection”

- Lifestyles and daily routines may create a context that exposes the potential victim to dangerous places and people
- Perpetrators target individuals they view as attractive or valuable in some way
- Perpetrators consider the victim’s access to “capable guardianship,” which can increase costs/penalties for the perpetrator

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Targeting of Native adolescents (MN)

Sex traffickers look for Native youth who:

- Are marketable: “exotic,” “fresh,” “young”
- Are unprotected
- Whose basic needs are not met
- Are traumatized, less able to recognize dangerous/exploitative people
- Have cognitive delays/mental illness
- Are emotionally insecure, starved for positive attention

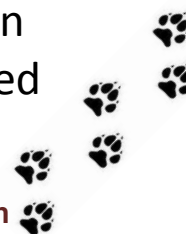
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So what does it all mean?

- All forms of violence are interconnected
- There is no such thing as “less harmful” or “more important” violence
- That viewpoint has prevented community healing, ignores poly-victims
- We must respond to violence as an illness (a *wendigo*) that has infected our communities

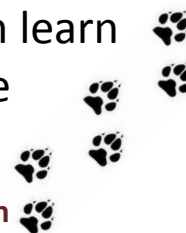
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When we put healing first, we regain:

- Respect for self and others
- Acceptance of personal responsibility without shame or blame
- Holding others accountable in ways that affirm their value to the community
- An environment in which children learn positive life skills by observing the adults in their lives

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Challenges

- Federal funding streams force tribes to separate services for different types of violence—and tribes have no other options
- Most are law enforcement-focused, don't allow community-level healing as the main priority
- Tribes still cannot prosecute non-Native perpetrators for crimes other than domestic violence

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Example: Pine Ridge 2014

70% of adults are unemployed, one of highest rates of child abuse/neglect in U.S.

Tribal DA reported:

- No available funding for behavioral health services for physically/sexually abused children
- The tribe's federal applications for public safety and child protection funding all rejected past 2 years

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Steps in the right direction

- Mindfulness/body-mind medicine (Bonnie Duran, Patina Park & Linda EagleSpeaker, Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center)
- Incorporating tribal customs/spiritual ceremonies into substance abuse Tx
- In-home services in cases of child neglect (parenting & life skills coaching/mentoring)

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Questions? Comments?

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