



Assessing Trauma in American Indian/Alaska Native Parents as an ICWA Active Effort

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WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This article examines the correlation between American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) parents who are involved in ICWA cases, their exposure to trauma, and how that affects their ability to care for their children. ICWA active efforts include identifying parental trauma and treatment referrals to prevent removal of AI/AN children and support reunification.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FINDINGS?

AI/AN people have experienced extremely high levels of historical, intergenerational, and individual contemporary trauma in addition to historical and modern racialized trauma. Traumatic experiences can increase people's likelihood of developing substance abuse and mental health conditions and affect their ability to properly care for themselves and their children.

Parental trauma exposure can lead to problematic behavioral and relational issues, which can cause families to become involved in the child welfare system.



Studies show that

70% of women in treatment for co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders, who also reported a history of trauma, **had a child removed involuntarily**, and



26% of these women had their parental rights terminated.

ICWA mandates that child welfare systems engage in active efforts to prevent the removal of AI/AN children, including parental trauma assessment and intervention. Just as parents are referred to substance abuse treatment and parenting classes, active efforts standards also require evidence-informed and culturally responsive trauma therapies. Following active efforts protocols can give parents the tools they need so children can remain safely in their homes and communities.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK?

To ensure ICWA compliance, help decrease the removal of AI/AN children, and support reunification, child welfare professionals should:

- Ensure service and support efforts are active and go beyond reasonable effort standards – this includes awareness of how trauma is impacting a parent and developing a service plan to address the trauma and may include linking parents to providers like traditional healers or elders
- Use a trauma-informed approach that increases workers' ability to consider that denial, lack of engagement, resistance, hostility, anxiety, depression, and other similar behaviors and emotions may be trauma symptoms
- Provide culturally appropriate treatment referrals for evidence-based and evidence-informed trauma therapies like trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy and child parent psychotherapy and encourage connections with elders and traditional healing practices