



**CULTURE IS PREVENTION:
A Strength Based, Culturally Grounded
Journey Toward Prevention, Intervention,
and Healing**

**ACF's Action Plan for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People
October 2023**

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OVERVIEW

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is committed to harnessing its resources to confront the crisis of Missing or Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP), which has disproportionately harmed Native communities. For generations, Indigenous people and Native communities have struggled with high rates violence and trauma caused by the devastating legacy of assimilationist policies of forced removal, boarding schools, and bureaucratic oppression. To counter the cumulative impacts of this historical trauma, ACF will prioritize working in partnership with Native communities using its grant funding and technical assistance resources, as well as rulemaking authority where appropriate.

This ACF plan of action is entitled *Culture is Prevention: A Strength Based, Culturally Grounded Journey Toward Prevention, Intervention, and Healing* (MMIP Action Plan or “MAP”). ACF recognizes that enduring change must be grounded in culture and self-governance. It is important for non-Native persons to understand that culture to Native American/Indigenous peoples is not merely a social preference, but an ancient cognitive map on how to be and a way of knowing. Moreover, hundreds of years across many generations have taught that culture-based activities and interventions improve Native/Indigenous health and wellbeing. Accordingly, this MMIP Action Plan blends cultural values with the four public health pillars of prevention, intervention, healing, and response to support optimal outcomes in the delivery of ACF programs and services to Native people and communities.

DEFINING MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The phrase “Missing and Murdered Indigenous People” refers to the population that includes American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and the Indigenous peoples of Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands,¹ who have been victims of violence, homicide, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation. Over generations of repeated traumatic experiences, Indigenous people have become vulnerable to these forms of violence, their resilience diminished, and their health weakened. Preventing that susceptibility and healing from inter-generational trauma are directly associated with long term positive health outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Historical Trauma, Culture, and Social Determinants of Health

According to the research of social scientist [Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart](#), the collective phenomenon of [historical trauma](#) stems from centuries of disastrous federal policies targeting Native lands and families. “Indigenous peoples of the Americas have experienced devastating collective, intergenerational massive group trauma and compounding discrimination, racism, and oppression.” The term “historical trauma” is the specific loss and trauma that Native people have experienced over time, described as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations including one’s own lifespan.”²

The traumatic events suffered by previous generations create pathways that result in subsequent generations becoming susceptible to higher risk of experiencing mental and physical distress, much like post-traumatic stress disorder. Biological, social, and environmental factors further contribute to the transmission of cross-generational cycle of trauma.³ [Recent empirical studies](#) have established a through-line from the events that caused historical trauma to current symptoms related to this inter-generational loss. Related to these inequities are the

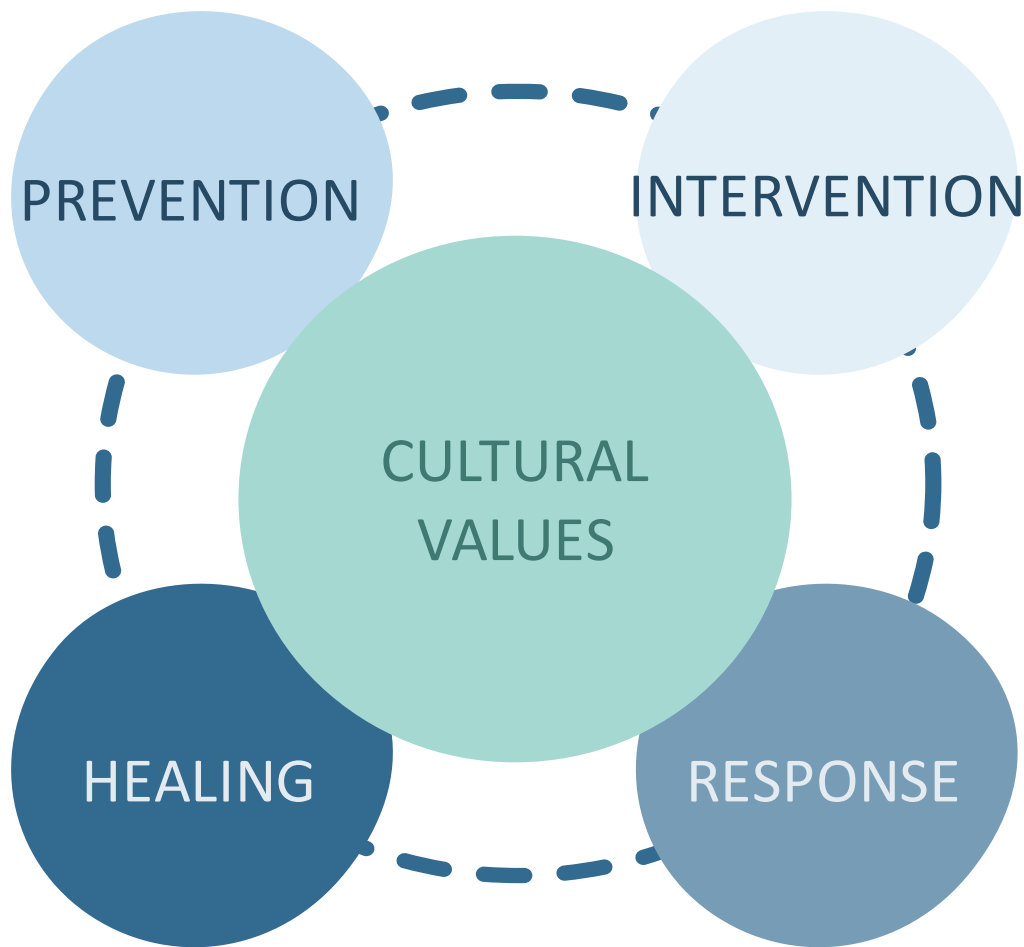
¹ These are the populations served by IHS, ACF, and ANA through their statutory mandates. However, Indigenous also includes peoples of Central and South America and the Caribbean. This document uses the phrase Native and Indigenous synonymously.

² The reaction to this massive disruption and loss, which Brave Heart calls the historical trauma response, often includes survivor guilt, depression, PTSD symptoms, physical symptoms, psychic numbing, anger, suicidal ideation, and fixation to trauma, among other features and behaviors. While the scope and scale of historical trauma response among Native population today is difficult to ascertain, diligent researchers have created a matrix to trace the relationship between historical trauma and current condition. Les B. Whitbeck, Gary W. Adams, Dan R. Hoyt, and Xiaojin Chen, “[Conceptualizing and Measuring Historical Trauma Among American Indian People](#),” *Am. J. of Comm. Psychology*, 33(3-4):119-30 (June 2004).

³ Kathleen Brown-Rice, [Examining the Theory of Historical Trauma Among Native Americans](#), Oct. 15, 2014.

unique Indigenous determinants of health that shape conditions of daily life in many Native communities and impact their vulnerability to violence.⁴

At the same time, Native culture is steeped with traditional knowledge and holistic health practices such as ceremony, sweat lodges, talking circles, language, and community gatherings (pow wows and potlatches). Traditional lifeways promote collective governance and accountability processes to minimize violence. The pathway to healing trauma and preventing more violence is culture: culture is prevention.⁵



⁴ The **Indian Health Service** and the **National Institute of Health** have identified significant health disparities within the Native population, including nutrition-related chronic diseases and several risk factors for disease and social determinants of health, including historical trauma, boarding schools, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, federal food programs, and food deserts. To address these disparities, the NIH has established a specific **Social Determinants of American Indian Nutritional Health strategy** to address the upstream social determinants of health and increase access to healthier foods.

⁵ See, e.g., *Indigenous Community Projects: Addressing Colonization through Using Culture as a Protective Factor*, a recent study of ANA funded projects whose grant recipients incorporated culture into their programs and community activities, finding that these projects are more effective and achieved better outcomes.

WHOLE GOVERNMENT APPROACH

Collective Legislative and Policy Actions to Addressing the MMIP Crisis

Not Invisible Act Commission (2019)

The Not Invisible Act amends federal law to increase the coordination needed to begin to address the crisis of missing and murdered Native women. It also establishes the [Not Invisible Act Commission \(NIAC\)](#), the first combined federal and non-federal working group to inquire and make recommendations to the DOI and DOJ on what more the department can do to combat violent crime. The Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans is a member of the NIAC. The Not Invisible Act requires:

- The Secretary of the Interior to designate an official within the Office of Justice Services in the Bureau of Indian Affairs to coordinate violent crime prevention efforts across federal agencies.
- The Commission to identify legislative, administrative, training, and staffing changes to increase reporting and prosecutions of violent crimes.

ACF's Missing and Murdered Native Americans: A Public Health Framework for Action (2020)

Three years ago, ACF developed the [Missing and Murdered Native Americans: A Public Health Framework for Action \(Framework\)](#) in collaboration with the ACF Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC). The goals of the Framework are:

- Incorporate culture, language, and traditional practices to build social and physical resiliency.
- Promote economic well-being through workforce development, education, and skills-building to increase earnings and success in school, work, and life.
- Elevate prevention as a *primary focus for human services* and proactively connect families to services before they are in crisis and preventing all forms of violence while promoting health and positive development.

The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative (2021)

In June 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced the [Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative](#), a comprehensive effort to recognize the troubled legacy of federal Indian boarding school policies with the goal of addressing their intergenerational impact and to shed light on the traumas of the past. An [investigative report](#) has been prepared, detailing historical records relating to federal Indian boarding schools. This report lays the groundwork for the continued work of addressing the intergenerational trauma created by historical federal Indian boarding school policies.

As part of this Initiative and in response to recommendations from the report, Secretary Haaland launched "[The Road to Healing](#)." This year-long commitment to engaging with Native

American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian survivors of the federal Indian boarding school system provided the opportunity to share their stories, help connect communities with trauma-informed support, and facilitate collection of a permanent oral history.

President Biden’s Executive Order 14053 (2021)

On November 15, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order (EO) 14053, [Improving Public Safety and Criminal Justice for Native Americans and Addressing the Crisis of Missing or Murdered Indigenous People \(MMIP\)](#) and set out several mandates that directly connect to the ACF MMIP Action Plan:

- Support of culture, language, and traditional Knowledge
- Strengthen primary prevention via social determinants of health
- Improve and expand victim and family services

ACF’s Strategic Plan (2022)

In 2022, ACF’s TAC identified several ways to activate this plan, and ACF adopted many of these recommendations into its [Strategic Plan and Priorities](#).



Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Indigenous Knowledge (2022)

The following year, the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) [released new government-wide guidance](#) and an accompanying [implementation memorandum](#) for federal agencies on recognizing and including Indigenous Knowledge in Federal research, policy, and decision making (November 30, 2022). The [Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Indigenous Knowledge](#) emphasizes that as the original stewards of the natural environment, Tribes and Indigenous communities have expertise critical to finding solutions to the climate crisis, protecting our nation’s ecosystems, and restoring health and harmony to their peoples. Importantly, the origin of Indigenous Knowledge is culture and traditional lifeways.

ACF'S MMIP ACTION PLAN (2023)

This MMIP Action Plan updates the TAC's earlier work and responds to recent White House directives. It also advances the whole of government commitment to addressing the MMIP crisis and sets out a multipronged approach to advance ACF's work in preventing violence to Native people promoting healing from historical trauma. Importantly, it adopts responsive administrative processes such as equity, self-governance, and Indigenous knowledge, as well as identifying ways to leverage ACF's grant funding, community engagement, and rulemaking authority.

Administrative Actions

- 1) ACF recognizes that community partners/grant recipients know how to administer and evaluate the efficacy of their programs and service delivery. We will work towards more flexibility in grant administration and grant management to lessen the burden on community partners and streamline internal processes such as:
 - Simplify grant applications (NOFOs) to make them more accessible to communities seeking vital funding opportunities.
 - When possible, eliminate or support waivers for non-federal match requirement to lessen the financial burdens on Native grantees in providing critical services.
 - Minimize the burdens of the reporting and evaluation processes and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and traditional ways of knowing into grant assessment requirements.
- 2) ACF recognizes that community partners/grant recipients are underfunded and utilize ACF's grants to supplement substantial funding gaps for essential services. We will pursue more grant funding that supports health and wellness.
- 3) ACF recognizes that many community partners/grant recipients are heavily burdened in administering their grants and meeting their reporting requirements. We will assess our ability to modify reporting requirements to reduce redundancy and incorporate Indigenous Knowledge wherever possible. We also will evaluate the effectiveness of our

extensive range of technical assistance to better support community partners in their grant administration.

“As native people, our connections to land and place support how we understand and apply the concept of Indigenous Social Determinants of Health (ISDOH) for our shared purpose of community healing, health and wellbeing.”

~ Seven Directions A Center for Indigenous Public Health

Programmatic Actions

Through the ACF Native American Affairs Advisory Council (NAAAC), ACF will inquire and make recommendations on four main approaches to curtailing the MMIP crisis: Prevention; Intervention; Healing; and Response

Prevention

Develop an ACF-wide plan to highlight prevention grants and programs that reduce risk factors for victimization of Native Americans and increase protective factors.

Intervention

The ACF-wide plan will identify community-based strategies that improve cultural connectivity and language preservation, and trauma-informed and victim-centered service delivery to Native Americans, including for survivors of gender-based violence.

Healing

Build on current strategies to improve mental and behavioral health and supports for Native families, including financial supports and high-quality early childhood programs for victims and survivors with young children.

Response

Evaluate the effectiveness of technical assistance for Tribes to provide community-based conflict resolution, as well as culturally and linguistically appropriate, trauma-informed, and victim-centered strategies, including traditional healing services and make improvements as needed.

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