

Native American Involvement in the Gang Subculture: Current Trends & Dynamics



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Native American Involvement in the Gang Subculture: Current Trends & Dynamics

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All photographs in this document, with the exception of the Puyallup Tribal Police badge from Google Images, were taken by the author, Christopher M. Grant.

FOREWORD

Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) is a nationwide commitment to reduce gun and gang crime in America by networking existing local programs that target gun and gun crime and providing these programs with additional tools necessary to be successful. Since its inception in 2001, approximately \$2 billion has been committed to this initiative.

Since 2003, Community Corrections Institute (CCI) has been involved in Project Safe Neighborhoods and has provided PSN training and technical assistance to community corrections agencies and staff nationwide. CCI continues to provide technical assistance, resources, instruction, tactical training to assist community corrections agencies in implementing and enhancing proactive supervision and reentry strategies for gang offenders currently under criminal justice sentence in urban, rural and tribal communities.

This publication focuses on gang supervision and reentry issues and strategies unique to Native American populations both on and off the reservation. This publication examines factors contributing to the influx of gangs in Indian Country and contributing factors, many of which are unique to Indian Country, resulting in an increase in gang involvement in many Native American communities.

Recognizing that reentry is a process, not a singular event, the publication goes on to examine promising reentry programs that involve unique attitudes and approaches within the tribal community and specific programs that have demonstrated positive results. Through collaboration and community participation, some tribal communities have seen a reduction in gang activity and have made a commitment to continue their efforts and programs to reduce gang involvement.

CCI will follow the release of *Native American Involvement in the Gang Subculture: Current Trends & Dynamics* with webinars and continued training offered through PSN Technical Assistance programs. For further information and access to on-line publications visit CCI's web site, www.communitycorrections.org, and explore the resources and information available in the PSN section.

**Robert L. Thornton, Director
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Native American Involvement in the Gang Subculture: Current Trends & Dynamics

Introduction

From the earliest recognized development of criminal street gangs in the 1800's to present day, much has been written about the gang subculture and the impact it has had on communities, families and the individuals involved. Multiple theories abound regarding the reasons behind the formation of gangs, the motivating factors for individual gang involvement, and effective approaches to deal with an issue that has reached unprecedented levels in American society. While opinions differ, what is generally agreed upon is that criminal street and prison gangs have become a part of our social fabric and must be viewed as a significant issue, regardless of whether the activity is occurring in our metropolitan cities, rural towns or in tribal communities across Indian Country.

The Gang Subculture and the Emergence of Gang Activity in Indian Country

Gang activity is not a recent phenomenon in American society, as evidenced by the fact that the first of the modern-day street gangs appeared in the early 19th century in the New York City area. These gangs, many of which were comprised of immigrants at the time, were primarily based upon class distinction, bias and racism. During the 1900's, the population expansion of

major cities on the east and west coasts, migration patterns from rural communities to urban areas, the Depression Era and the end of World War II all contributed to the growth and expansion of the gang problem. By the mid-1970's, the increase in street gang activity involving drugs, weapons and violence in large cities prompted the forming of the nation's first law enforcement gang suppression units; and by the late 1980's, the gang problem had expanded its reach into smaller cities, suburbs and rural communities across the U.S. (Valdez, 2005).

Up until the late 1980's, however, Indian Country remained relatively untouched by the growing issue of criminal street gang activity. Tribal communities, many of which are rural and far removed from the larger cities where gang activity flourishes, simply did not experience gang activity or the behaviors associated with individuals claiming gang affiliation. However, changes in that dynamic began occurring in the late 1980's to the early and mid-1990's; and since then, Indian Country has experienced a steady and consistent increase in gang issues, primarily within tribal communities in the Southwest, Northwest and Midwest regions of the United States. While there are still many tribal communities across the country that have not felt the impact of the gang subculture, there are many more that are experiencing gang activity ranging from

low-level criminal events to significant levels of violence, drug usage and distribution, and other forms of criminal behavior.

When comparing the Native American gang issue to that which is occurring among other races and ethnicities, however, only very limited research has been conducted into the extent of gang activity occurring across Indian Country, with most of the information primarily derived from limited law enforcement data, informal interviews of gang members, and other anecdotal information. In fact, the first comprehensive study focusing upon Indian Country gang activity did not occur until 2000, when the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention--in conjunction with the National Youth Gang Center (currently known as the National Gang Center)--conducted the “2000 Survey of Youth Gangs in Indian Country” to attempt to determine the type, extent and impact of gang activity occurring in tribal communities across the U.S.

To facilitate the study, the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) designed a survey instrument that was sent to tribal leaders or representatives in 577 tribal communities comprising the 561 federally-recognized tribes at the time. Only 52 percent ($n=300$) of the tribal communities surveyed responded to the survey; and while this response rate is relatively low, it is important to note that the tribal communities that did respond accounted for more than 60 percent of the total responding target population. Of the tribal communities responding to the survey, only 23 percent ($n=69$) reported that there were active street gangs in their communities during 2000.

Fully 70 percent of the tribal communities surveyed at the time indicated they had no gang activity occurring, and 7 percent of the respondents reported that they could not make a determination as to whether gang activity was occurring at all (Major, Egley, Howell, Mendenhall and Armstrong, 2004).

As stated, the NYGC study was the first of its kind within Indian Country, and it has not been replicated since it was conducted over 10 years ago. However, in 2010, the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) conducted a similar but separate study using a different approach methodology. Rather than sending survey instruments to tribal communities, NDIC used its cadre of intelligence analysts and field representatives to physically visit tribal communities and conduct face-to-face interviews with individuals who were known or believed to be knowledgeable about gang activity occurring on the reservations identified for the study.

Importantly, NDIC did not seek to reach every tribal community in Indian Country. Rather, the tribal communities identified for the assessment had to meet at least one of the following criteria: (1) reservations that have an identified gang presence as determined through previous intelligence assessments; federal investigations; congressional testimony or open-source research; (2) reservations bordering major metropolitan areas that have a gang presence, or; (3) reservations within 100 miles of a major U.S. interstate. A total of 132 tribal communities in the Great Lakes Region, Pacific Region, Southwest Region, and West Central Region of the U.S. met the criteria for the study. Notably, 81

percent (n=108) of the tribal communities identified for the study reported that gang activity was occurring (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2011).

The findings of these two studies are illustrative of the growth of the gang issue in tribal communities, clearly demonstrating that gang activity has increased within Indian Country over the past 10 years, a conclusion I agree with based upon over 20 years of personal research and assessments connected to the Native American gang issue.

Factors Contributing to the Influence of Gangs in Indian Country

A significant amount of research has been conducted over the last 30 years regarding the social, environmental and psychological factors that contribute to youth gang involvement. The list of potential contributing factors is extensive, and isolating a specific set of factors within any community, including tribal communities, is difficult.

Additionally, Indian Country is unique in that tribal communities across the nation are, for the most part, distinct and diverse in terms of their history, culture, language and traditions, as well as their socio-economic and infrastructural status. Still, many tribal communities share similar social challenges, several of which are known contributing factors to the influence of gang activity. While the following factors are not reflective of the entirety of Indian Country, each is currently impacting many tribal communities across the United States.

Poverty and Unemployment Issues in Indian Country

One of the most prevalent contributing factors to gang involvement in any community is low socio-economic status, manifested in the form of poverty and unemployment; and this is an issue that impacts many tribal communities on a deep and consistent level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as well as the Friends Committee on National Legislation *Indian Report*, more than one in four (28 percent) Native Americans residing off reservations live in poverty; and more than one in three (38 percent) Native Americans residing on reservations are impoverished. This compared to a corresponding national poverty rate of 15.3 percent (FCNL 2012). In some states, the poverty level among Native Americans is well above the national average, as evidenced by a 2013 report indicating that more than 48 percent of the 65,000 Native Americans residing in South Dakota live below the poverty line (Native American Times, 2012).

Unemployment and lack of employment opportunities in tribal communities across the country contribute to the poverty situation. In 2011, the unemployment rate for American Indians and Alaska Natives was 14.6 percent, well above the national average of 8.9 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). However, in some parts of Indian Country, such as the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the unemployment rate consistently hovers at 80 percent.

As a contributing factor to gang involvement, poverty and unemployment can be powerful incentives for young

Native Americans to turn to gang involvement as a means to acquire income through activity such as drug distribution, theft or other forms of criminal behavior. Aside from this, however, is the fact that young people in Indian Country often see the images of success projected by the media, but do not see the means to achieve success due to their social condition. In other words, poverty and unemployment can translate into feelings of frustration and anger that manifest into behaviors that provide a sense of power in an otherwise powerless environment. And gang activity is one of those behaviors.

Education Issues in Indian Country

While there are ample opportunities for young Native Americans to receive a quality education both within and outside Indian Country, a long-standing issue that remains both problematic and unresolved is that of drop-out rates among both urban Native Americans and reservation youth. Despite the best efforts of those attempting to address the issue, Native American youth continue to track behind non-Native Americans in education achievement.

According to a 2012 report from Education Week and Editorial Projects in Education, only 53 percent of Native American public school students graduated from high school in 2009, translating to a drop-out rate of 47 percent, the highest of all races and ethnicities. The report reveals that some states fare better in terms of Native American graduation rates, such as Arizona (60 percent) and North Dakota (57 percent). However, Wyoming's graduation rate for Native American public school students in 2009 was 31

percent; and South Dakota's graduation rate was only 26 percent for that same year (Matthews, 2012).

The statistics for Native American youth attending tribal schools or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools reveal that the same issue exists in tribal communities. In South Dakota, for example, the graduation rate dropped from 65 percent to 46 percent during the 2011 and 2012 school years in both tribal and BIE schools (Rose, 2013).

Mr. Junior Bettelyoun, the Indian Education Director for the Rapid City (SD) School District, points out that the phenomenon of young Native Americans dropping out of school is not so much an event as it is a process which begins as early as elementary school, progressing and often increasing into middle school and high school. As well, the mechanism for classifying "drop-out" students has many variables that don't necessarily accurately reflect the true picture of the issue or the individual. Still, Mr. Bettelyoun, as well as many other Indian Country educators, readily acknowledges that the drop-out rate among Native American youth remains a serious and challenging problem.

The relevance of this issue is that lack of education is another factor known to contribute to a greater potential for gang involvement. Among youth who are uneducated or under-educated, there tends to be a higher risk potential to gravitate into behaviors that are self-destructive due to limited employment qualifications and opportunities. As well, youth who are not in school often have a great deal of time on their hands and tend to group together for camaraderie, support and

protection, with such relationships often resulting in the formation of formal or informal gang structures. Such is the case in many tribal communities.

Substance Abuse Issues in Indian Country

Alcohol abuse and dependency within the Native American population has been thoroughly documented over the years, and the issue continues to plague many tribal communities, families and individuals in Indian Country. Multiple studies conducted over the years reveal that Native Americans residing on reservations consistently experience higher rates of alcohol use than any other ethnic group in America, resulting in multiple risk factors for physical and mental health issues, accidents, violent crime and suicide (Szlemko, et al., 2006).

According to a 2013 blog released by Rehab International in “Rehab Today,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) reported that a four-year study revealed that 11.7 percent of deaths among reservation-based Native Americans were a direct result of excessive alcohol consumption.



These grim statistics are even higher for urban-based Native Americans. A 2005 report prepared by the National Urban Indian Family Coalition revealed

that Native Americans residing in urban areas have higher rates of accidental deaths, liver disease, diabetes, and alcohol-related deaths than the general population. Additionally, compared to the U.S. population as a whole, urban Native Americans experience a 178 percent higher death rate from alcohol abuse. (2004 study by the Seattle Indian Health Board’s Urban Indian Health Institute, Wagner, 2006.)

Additionally, Native Americans are more likely than other races and ethnicities to experience Fetal Alcohol Syndrome births, which are known to negatively impact children through both cognitive and functional disabilities. Certain of these disabilities, such as impulsive behavior and limited cause-and-effect reasoning capabilities, can be a contributing factor toward youth gang involvement.

Illicit drug use and dependency in Indian Country is another major issue as well. In 2008, the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) conducted a study of illicit drug use on 80 reservations across Indian Country, and subsequently reported that Native American substance abuse levels are higher than those for any other demographic group. The study also found that both national and local street gangs were increasingly distributing retail-level quantities of illicit drugs on reservations, as well as engaging in gang-related criminal activities in tribal communities to facilitate their drug distribution operations, including intimidation, assaults, and burglary (NDIC, 2010).

Alcohol and drug consumption is commonplace among Indian Country gang members, and much of the violence in tribal communities--whether gang-involved or not--has a connection to substance abuse. However, some tribal gang members are involved in gang behavior primarily because it provides greater access to drugs and alcohol, both of which are often obtained through criminal means.

Family-Based Gang Involvement in Indian Country

Traditional Native American culture has always placed significant emphasis on the importance of both the nuclear and extended family as a source of nurturing, support and protection for tribal youth. Today, most tribal families across Indian Country are healthy and well-grounded, providing their children with the love, respect and attention they need. Because of this--and despite the social challenges many Native American youth face every day--most tribal youth stay unininvolved in gang activity, as they understand that such behavior is not only destructive, but is also in opposition to their traditional culture. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, because within some tribal communities, the core of the gang problem can often be found within individual family dynamics.

The multiple tribal community gang assessments I've conducted over the years consistently reveal that a significant degree of the gang activity occurring in Indian Country has a family nexus, in that certain tribal gangs are merely an extension or manifestation of long-standing problems between tribal familial groups. In some circumstances, what may have started years ago as

animosity between two or more tribal families has now evolved into opposing family-based gang factions. Once this occurs, the involved families typically expect their immediate members, as well as other relatives, to align with or claim allegiance to their family-based gang. In such circumstances, it is not at all unusual to observe multiple members of a Native American gang related to each other on some level and in opposition to another group (gang) that shares common familial relationships. As well, family-based gang activity has become multi-generational on many reservations, resulting in gang involvement at increasingly younger ages due to the influence exerted by gang-involved parents, siblings or extended family members. The family-based dynamic makes the gang issue even more problematic to address since most tribal communities are close-knit, and community members are often related to each other on some level.

Catherine Conly, writing in "Street Gangs: Current Knowledge and Strategies," suggests that the social balance between a gang and its community is a delicate one. In communities where gang members are the family members and neighbors of community residents, gangs may be afforded a certain amount of community tolerance because community residents identify with the economic and social challenges that gang youths face (Conly, 1993).

While the family structure may not be the impetus for gang affiliation, there are also tribal youth whose gang involvement stems from having parents or guardians who are absent, uncommitted or disinterested in what

their children are involved with or with whom they associate. Additionally, some tribal youth experience consistent patterns of physical, sexual or emotional abuse at home. And some young people in Indian Country have parents who are incarcerated or consumed by substance abuse or mental health issues, leaving their children to fend for themselves or to be raised by grandparents or other relatives, many of whom are unaware of or unfamiliar with the gang lifestyle and its manifestations. It is these family elements that result in a young person being more likely to associate with gang activity as a replacement for their biological family, since the gang offers the perception of refuge, often purporting to provide the protection, support, attention and belonging young people seek.

Dean Chavez, writing in *Indian Country Today*, observes that “Instead of learning how to be truthful and strong from their parents, our children are learning how to be gangsters and drug users...Instead of learning the wisdom of the ages and respect from their grandparents, these children are learning to respect basketball players, football players and rock musicians...Instead of learning their Native songs from the reservations, they are learning rap songs from the ghettos...” (Chavez, 1998).

In the course of my work in Indian Country, I frequently conduct interviews with gang-involved Native American youth for the purpose of learning more about their behavior and what motivates them to be involved in gang activity. I also conduct interviews with young Native Americans who are not gang-involved, asking them about the elements in their life that kept them from

choosing the gang lifestyle. In one such interview with a young member of the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana--who acknowledged being approached several times about joining a gang in his community--I asked why he decided to not take part in the behavior. He responded by saying, “Basically, it was the way I grew up, with my family and the things I was doing...playing basketball, riding horses, staying positive...and I always had a good mentor.”

The statement regarding having a “good mentor” is an important part of this discussion, in that this is yet another missing element in many tribal communities. While there are many strong and healthy Native American men raising families in Indian Country, the lack of effective male role models, particularly male parenting role models, is an issue many young Native American males confront in their adolescent years. The absence of such models leaves such youth in the position of determining, on their own, whom they will emulate in terms of male behavioral patterns. In too many cases, the role model chosen is less than desirable, resulting in problems associated with gang, criminal and deviant behavior.

Scott Davis, the Executive Director of the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission and an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, expressed his opinion about the role of men in Native American society today by saying, “Today we are witnessing many young Native Americans joining gangs. These gangs exist in urban cities and also within our tribal nations. Research, studies and data show there are many reasons as to why they join

gangs, but as father of four children and an uncle of many children, I see one of the reasons our young warriors join gangs to be connected to the lack of fatherhood. While there are many positive male role models in Indian Country, there is also an absence of father figures in too many tribal families. This void leaves tribal youth, especially males, in the position of having to determine their own path, resulting in some turning to gang and drug-involved peers for guidance. This is not consistent with our traditional ways, and the impact on both tribal families and tribal communities can be devastating. While females in traditional culture are often a strong and positive influence on our youth, young Native American males need the male role model to teach them what it is to be a true warrior in today's society. As fathers, we have an underlying duty to protect and to teach our young warriors. This can be challenging, but if I am doing my job as a father, the odds are my children will have a better chance to grow up in a healthy environment. My best advice to my fellow Native American brothers is to remember that the greatest gift a father can do for his children is to love their mother" (Davis, 2013).

Cultural Disconnection Issues in Indian Country

In order to more fully appreciate many of the social challenges Native Americans face today, one must look back 150 years to find the roots of what is appropriately referred to as "Historical Trauma."

The Native American Center for Excellence--a component of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration (SAMHSA)--describes Historical Trauma (also known as Multi-Generational Trauma) as being based upon "shared experiences by American Indian and Alaska Native people of historic traumatic events like displacement, forced assimilation, language and cultural suppression, and boarding schools, and it is passed down through generations. There is a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness associated with historical trauma that contributes to high rates of alcoholism, substance abuse, suicide and other health issues" (NACE-SAMHSA).

In a paper entitled "The Case for Indigenous Concepts for Indigenous Gang Members," V. Tawney White Calf observes that "Today there is a crisis in Indigenous territory among our youth, specifically in the area of self-identity, which has not been prevalent since the implementation of Government and Christian boarding schools. What is referred to as "boarding school mentality" includes some of the parents and grandparents of today's youth. This mentality includes denial, lack of parenting skills, and ultimately the loss--to some degree--of indigenous cultural norms. We are now witnessing what the Boarding School Era has created: dysfunctional families and a hostile community environment. A dysfunctional environment leads to chaos, the opportunity for illegal activity, and deviant behavior" (White Calf, 1998).

Many of the tribal leaders I've interviewed over the years have expressed the opinion that cultural disconnection is an important contributing factor to young Native Americans gravitating to the gang

lifestyle. Unfortunately, despite the fact that most tribal communities offer cultural opportunities to tribal members, such opportunities are often not taken advantage of to the degree they should be, not only by young people, but often by their parents, guardians or elders as well.

In 1999, I conducted a Master's Degree Thesis study regarding Native American involvement in the street gang subculture. In doing so, I engaged in personal interviews with 50 Native American youth between the ages of 18 and 27, each of whom were either an enrolled member of one of the Sioux Tribes (Lakota, Nakota, Dakota) or were related by birth to an enrolled member of one of the aforementioned tribes. Those interviewed fell into one of three categories, including current gang members, former gang members, and persons with no gang affiliation.

The majority of the respondents (76 percent) characterized their knowledge of their culture as being strong or moderate, although 24 percent indicated that they knew nothing of their culture. However, one of the questions asked of each respondent was "How important do you think knowledge of the Native American culture and heritage is to preventing gang activity among Native American youth?" Fully 96 percent of those interviewed indicated that such knowledge is either very important or somewhat important to preventing gang activity. These findings suggest that while cultural connectivity is not an absolute barrier to gang involvement among tribal youth, it can be a preventative factor to such activity.

This same finding is supported through interviews I've conducted with other gang-involved Native Americans over the past 20 years, many of whom readily acknowledge that they possess limited knowledge of their own history, language, culture and traditions.

In one such recent interview with a gang-involved tribal member from the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota, I asked the question, "Why did you choose the gang life instead of embracing your traditional Native American culture?" The young man--who openly claimed gang affiliation--replied, "The reason I chose the gang life and culture is because it was fun and not as boring as sitting in class learning about your heritage, where Native Americans came from and how we became Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate (The People). I never did want to learn all that when I could be on the street learning street values and everything having to do with the street, you know, gang life, gang language, colors, the way they dress, the way they act. It's more fun because you get to move around, be outside, party, hang-out with friends. Back when I was a kid, they were teaching it (heritage) in school. I didn't want to sit in school and listen to them. To me it was nonsense. It would come in one ear and out the other."

In yet another interview conducted with a former member of the Native Gangster Bloods from the Puyallup Reservation in Washington, I asked whether being culturally disconnected would be a contributing factor to gang involvement among Native American youth. His response was, "Yes, I believe it's huge. Most urban and rural Natives don't have that cultural presence, and by

the time they get it, it's usually too late. You're also dealing with the competition of today's society and the environment of the community. You've got these guys who are the role models of what's cool, with the cars, the money, the girls; and without knowing your culture, you're more apt to hang on with that gang lifestyle. I would encourage young people, parents, uncles and aunties to get involved with their culture. Hang on to it. Practice it. It worked for me to get back into my (cultural) lifestyle to learn what a true warrior is."

While the lack of cultural connectivity is one of the many contributing factors to gang involvement in Indian Country, on-going efforts to revitalize traditional culture have resulted in positive outcomes. For example, while statistics suggest that less than 30 percent of all Native Americans in the U.S. speak their tribal language, the development of language immersion schools in Indian Country is changing that dynamic, resulting not only in lower drop-out rates, but higher educational achievement. Instilling pride in culture strengthens not only tribal communities, but the young people who reside in them as well, providing a strong barrier to the gang lifestyle.

In paraphrasing from a paper entitled "Integrating Tribal Cultural Practices into Tribal Juvenile Detention Centers and Reentry Plans," the author notes that traditional cultural ceremonies and practices help provide a sense of identity, purpose, and strength, as well as teaching values of respect, responsibility, health and wellness, helping youth understand how to take responsibility and overcome their past experiences with crime, violence, and

substance abuse (Tribal Juvenile Detention and Reentry Resource Center, 2009).

Criminal Justice Resource Challenges in Indian Country

Most non-tribal communities experiencing issues such as gang activity and drug usage and distribution usually have the necessary criminal justice resources in place or available to impact these behaviors. Such is not always the case in Indian Country.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, many tribal law enforcement agencies across Indian Country remain seriously understaffed due not only to budgeting issues, but also to the lack of qualified candidates, lack of available housing for law enforcement personnel and/or lack of adequate compensation compared to non-tribal agencies and other issues. The agency also reports that turnover among Indian Country law enforcement officers remains high, resulting in the constant need to recruit and train replacement officers, thereby affecting the ability to create an effective community policing atmosphere.



In a study conducted in 2001, the agency reported that the typical law

enforcement agency in Indian Country serves a population of approximately 10,000 people, residing in an area about the size of Delaware, patrolled by no more than three officers at any given time (USDOJ, 2001 and 2008).

The situation has not changed appreciably since the 2001 study. Many tribal law enforcement agencies continue to struggle with a lack of adequate resources to effectively provide for public safety in tribal communities, where crime rates are often greater than those in non-tribal communities. This lack of resources often results in extended response times to calls for service, since officers typically have to drive many miles to respond to the scene, often with no backup or assistance. This fact is not lost on those involved in gang activity in tribal communities, who often believe they can engage in criminal behavior with impunity due to the decreased likelihood they will be apprehended.

An example of this can be found within the Tohono O'odham Nation in south central Arizona, a reservation that encompasses 4,400 square miles of remote desert and mountain terrain. In 2008, the Tohono O'odham Police Department had only 66 sworn officers to not only protect the interior boundaries of the reservation, but to also patrol the 75 miles of shared international border with Mexico, a known location for significant drug smuggling activity. Such limited resources often result in a 1- to 2-hour response time to calls for service, due not only to distance, but also to the lack of paved roads in various areas of the reservation.

The same situation can be found on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, an area encompassing 1,500 square miles. The Three Affiliated Tribes law enforcement agency is currently comprised of 15 full-time officers who are responsible for protecting a service population of 15,000-20,000 people at any given time within this large geographic area. Due to the oil exploration occurring on and near the reservation, tribal officers respond to approximately 850 calls for service each month, and a significant number of these calls involve individuals who are under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

Along with the lack of adequate law enforcement personnel, tribal police agencies often deal with issues including limited radio and cellular phone communication capability; insufficient, out-dated or damaged equipment; lack of adequate continuing education for tribal officers; and myriad other challenges.

The same issues extend into the area of tribal jails and tribal courts, both of which struggle with limited resources as well. According to a report released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in September of 2012, a total of 2,239 inmates were incarcerated in Indian Country jails at mid-year 2011, an increase of 5.7 percent from the previous year. While this statistic may not appear significant, it is not truly representative of the issue many tribal communities face; that being, either the lack of detention and jail facilities, or inadequate facilities to house tribal offenders.

Even though there are 314 reservations across Indian Country, there are only 80 tribal jails that are fully operational; and certain of these facilities are substandard in terms of staffing and infrastructure. In 2008, the Gannett News Service quoted a Bureau of Indian Affairs report indicating that many tribal jails across Indian Country are often overcrowded, understaffed and unsafe for both inmates and guards. The report stated that it would require \$8.4 billion in federal spending to bring tribal and federal detention centers in Indian Country to current American Correctional Association standards, prompting North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan to state, “This confirms what so many in Indian Country have known all along...the tribal jail system is unbelievably broken. There are not enough beds, facilities must be improved and there is a lack of trained staff. This is a crisis that allows half of all those in Indian Country who should be incarcerated to go free” (AZ Central, 2008).

While not every reservation necessarily requires an adult jail or juvenile detention facility, many large tribal communities that need one or both of these resources do not have them due to budget constraints that prevent the construction or staffing of such facilities. Rather, many tribes contract with city or county entities to house tribal offenders. While this process is workable, it is often expensive and unwieldy, in that such facilities are typically located many miles from the tribal community.

An example of this can be found on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, which encompasses approximately 3,400 square miles and

has a population of approximately 23,000 people. Wind River, which is the seventh largest reservation by land area in the U.S., is policed by approximately 20 Bureau of Indian Affairs police officers who regularly deal with significant gang, drug and violent crime issues. A federal detention facility on the reservation allows for the incarceration of adult criminal offenders and, until recently, juvenile offenders were placed in a detention facility in Lander, Wyoming, which is a non-tribal community bordering the reservation. In 2012, the detention facility in Lander closed, requiring BIA law enforcement to find other options for provision of this service. Currently, the BIA is utilizing the services of a detention facility in Busby, Montana, resulting in officers having to drive approximately 300 miles, one way, to reach this facility. Doing so takes an officer out of service for at least ten hours, considering the time it takes to drive to this location, book the juvenile offender, and drive back to the reservation. The problem is exacerbated by the need for an officer to make a return trip to the facility to transport the juvenile back to the reservation for tribal court.

This fact results in tribal officers having to be extremely selective about which juvenile offenders are incarcerated, leading to the frequency of either not arresting juveniles or releasing them to parents or guardians, even in the event of serious offenses. And on reservations without an adult correctional facility, many criminal offenders are released on their own recognizance, often in situations where they would be incarcerated for their criminal offenses in non-native communities. The result, once again, is

the perpetuation of attitudes of disrespect for the rule of law, creating the impression among criminal offenders--including gang members--that they are unlikely to be held accountable for the crimes they commit.

The Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 seeks to address a number of criminal justice issues in Indian Country. Two of the major provisions of the Act include enhancing the current Special Law Enforcement Commission program to allow for the deputizing of tribal police officers to enforce federal laws on Indian lands against all offenders, including non-Indians. Yet another provision serves to provide tribal and federal officers serving Indian Country with specialized training to interview victims of sexual assault and collect crime scene evidence.

While these provisions are helpful, what many tribal communities need are additional law enforcement personnel, not only to effectively respond to calls for service, but also to engage in specialized functions that will serve to directly impact the gang and drug activity that is occurring, such as Community Policing Officers; School Resource Officers; and Gang Suppression, Intervention and Prevention Officers.

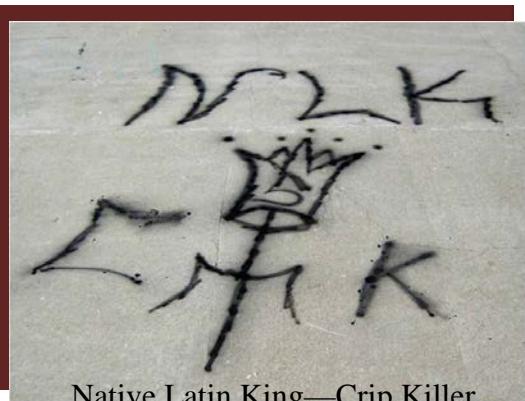
Native American Street Gangs: Current Trends

Native American Gang Formation and Identity

Similar to there being various factors that contribute to a young person becoming gang-involved, there are also various factors behind the formation of

gangs in tribal communities. While no singular element can be identified as an absolute predictor, what is known is that many Indian Country gangs are formed by individuals who are related to each other and who reside within the tribal community or within a specific housing area on the reservation. The motivation for gang formation varies as well, but is often based upon individuals seeking to wield power, influence or fear over other individuals or families; individuals seeking protection from other gangs or specific persons; or individuals seeking to realize some degree of profit from gang involvement.

When gangs form in tribal communities, it is not unusual for the individuals involved to identify by a unique, localized name (i.e., Odd Squad, The Boyz, Red Nation Klique, etc.). However, the usual trend in most tribal communities involves the gang identifying with, and adopting the names and symbols of, major urban gangs (i.e., Native Gangster Bloods, Native Gangster Crips, Native Gangster Disciples, Native Latin King).



Native Latin King—Crip Killer

Because of this, the type and style of most of the gang activity in Indian Country can best be described as fitting the “local hybrid” form of gang behavior.

This form of gang activity was identified in a 2001 Juvenile Justice Bulletin entitled “Hybrid and Other Modern Gangs,” which essentially describes hybrid gangs as being mainly comprised of local individuals who claim affiliation with a national gang, primarily for the purpose of capitalizing on the notoriety the national gang has already established, even though none of the local members is connected to the national gang in any form. Within the hybrid gang form, local members may use and/or mix the national gang’s signs, symbols and representing styles, and switch gang membership or allegiance (Starbuck, Howell and Lindquist, 2001).

For the most part, the primary purpose behind this behavior has to do with instant name recognition and the notoriety associated with claiming affiliation with a national gang. In identifying with major urban street gangs, tribal members seek to gain power through intimidation---essentially attempting to create a climate of fear among other gangs or other individuals within the community. As previously stated, in the great majority of instances, the tribal gang has no connection to or affiliation with the national gang they are claiming to be part of. And while much of this behavior is localized, yet another element bears discussion--that having to do with gang influences transplanted to tribal communities from urban areas.

It is important to note that the Native American gang issue is not isolated to tribal communities. A recent *New York Times* article entitled, “Quietly, Indians Reshape Cities and Reservations,” discussed the current migration trend among Native Americans from

reservations to urban areas. According to the article, current census bureau data Reveals that the majority of American Indian and Alaska Natives now live in a metropolitan area, compared with 8 percent in 1940 and 45 percent in 1970. The article goes on to state that one of the effects of the move toward cities has been a proliferation of Native American street gangs, which mimic and sometimes form partnerships with better-established African-American and Latino gangs, according to the F.B.I. and local law enforcement reports (Williams, 2013).

The migration of Native Americans to urban areas--as well as to smaller non-tribal communities in close proximity to tribal lands--is often connected to the fact that such communities usually offer a greater potential for employment and housing, as well as a higher level of safety and security depending on the reservation of origin. As well, some tribal members move their families from the reservation to a non-tribal community expressly for the purpose of seeking to avoid exposing their children to drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, and other forms of violence on the reservation. Because of this changing population demographic, the aspect of urban-based Native American gang involvement must be considered when discussing gang activity occurring in tribal communities.

For Native Americans who were born and raised in a non-tribal community, and more specifically within the urban environment, social adjustment tends to be less challenging than it is for Native Americans who migrate to the urban environment from the reservation environment. And while

most Native Americans who move to an urban area make the adjustment well, some do not. It is these individuals--often homeless, unemployed or marginalized--who have the greatest potential for gravitating to urban street gang activity, their motive for doing so often based upon the need or desire for protection, profit or power.

In her doctoral dissertation entitled “American Indian Youth Involvement in Urban Street Gangs: Invisible No More?”, Julie Hailer observed that “Like other minority groups moving into the cities, American Indians have had to overcome socioeconomic obstacles, cultural adjustments and psychological struggles. These factors would indicate that the urban environment is ripe for American Indian youth to turn to gangs as other minority youth have done--that the structural factors are in place which lead to a breakdown in traditional social controls (family, school and law enforcement) that impact an individual’s decision-making skills about turning to a gang to fulfill those economic, social, and psychological needs” (Hailer, 2008).

As with gang activity in tribal communities, little or no research exists to quantify the number of urban Native Americans who are gang-involved. Law enforcement agencies across the country vary in their efforts to track gang affiliation; and even when such processes are in place, misidentification of the racial or ethnic background of gang members has occurred. What is known is that Native American involvement within urban street gangs can be problematic in and of itself, as Native American gang members have the potential to be as violent and predatory as any other gang member.

However, the issue takes on yet another dimension when urban-based Native American gang members transplant their gang influence back to the tribal community.

Native American gang members relocate from urban areas to tribal communities for a number of reasons. Some individuals do so to escape or disconnect from the urban gang or drug lifestyle in which they are involved. Some relocate for the purpose of reconnecting with their family, for work, or for cultural or spiritual reasons. These individuals typically do not pose a threat, as their purpose in relocating to the tribal community is often legitimate and appropriate.

However, there are also individuals who relocate to the tribal community for the purpose of engaging in gang recruitment, establishing drug distribution networks, or other nefarious motives. An example of this can be found in the transplanting of the Latin King gang influence from the Milwaukee area to the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in Wisconsin in the early 2000's.



Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation,
Wisconsin

A tribal member who was a member of the Latin Kings in Milwaukee transplanted his gang influence--and the cocaine distribution activity associated with it--to the reservation, primarily for the purpose of establishing a drug market for the Latin Kings on the reservation. Ultimately, the violence and criminal activity associated with this movement resulted in the federal indictment of multiple tribal and non-tribal individuals, many of whom remain incarcerated today.

Yet another example is that of the Navajo Nation street gang known as Insane Cobraz Nation, or simply "Cobraz." This gang is known to have been started by a tribal member who lived in Chicago, IL for a period of time in the 1990's and, while living there, became a member of the Spanish Cobras street gang. Upon returning to Navajo Country a few years later, the individual initiated the Insane Cobraz Nation street gang, using the signs and symbols of the Chicago gang he was part of. Today, the Cobraz are one of the largest Native American street gangs in Southwest Indian Country.



When urban-based, gang-involved Native Americans return to the tribal community, they often find what Hailer refers to as a receptive peer group

comprised of young Native Americans who are bored and alienated from their traditional lifestyle, seeking to absorb a popular youth culture marked by a gang lifestyle. To some degree, the urban-based tribal member coming back to the reservation is seen as a "big fish in a little pond," in that he or she is seen as someone who has street credibility based upon their urban experience. It is these individuals who are at least partially responsible for the formation of many gangs that are currently active in Indian Country.

It is also important to consider the fact that a tribal member does not have to actually live in an urban area to be associated with urban gangs. Tribal members attending off-reservation schools, or occasionally associating with urban gang members through friendships or relationships, pose the same risk through their exposure to the lifestyle. As well, there also exists the element of non-tribal members moving to the reservation to cohabit with or marry tribal members. While the majority of these relationships are legitimate, some occur for the purpose of providing an individual with access to the tribal community for motives that are less than honorable, such as gang recruitment or drug distribution.

Importantly, the transplanted gang influence is not isolated to urban Native American gang members impacting tribal communities. The gang influence is often transplanted between tribal communities through gang-involved students changing schools, through friendships, family relationships and, in some instances, through cultural events that involve large gatherings of Native American people.

Finally, while the claiming of national gang affiliation continues to occur in tribal communities, a trend has begun to emerge over the years involving what appears to be an effort among some individuals in Indian Country to more fully self-identify as Native American street gang entities. In other words, rather than claiming affiliation with African-American gangs (i.e., Bloods and Crips) or Hispanic gangs (i.e., Sureños and Nortenos), some gang-involved Native Americans appear intent on being identified as separate and unique Native American gang structures.

An example of this can be found in the formation of the Wild Boyz, a street gang that originated on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. In 2010, the History Channel's "Gangland" series profiled the Wild Boyz and interviewed a number of members of this gang. In the broadcast segment, one of the Wild Boyz members states, "Us guys didn't wanna be no Black gang, no Mexican gang...didn't wanna copy off nothin'...this is from Pine Ridge...west side Wild Boyz from the rez."

Whether a real sentiment or merely bravado, this statement reflects a trend that is occurring in other parts of Indian Country. Native American street gangs, such as Sovereign Natural Warriors in Wisconsin and Native Mob in Minnesota, were formerly aligned with major gang structures (Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords), and now self-identify as Native American gangs. In other words, these gangs no longer claim national gang affiliation, but instead embrace a unique identity that often involves allowing only Native American membership, as well as the use of

traditional symbolism and language within the gang behavior.

While this trend is relatively recent in terms of Native American street gangs, it is not a new phenomenon in the prison system. Native American prison gangs, such as Warrior Society, Dine' Pride, Indian Brotherhood, Native Nation and others, have long required their members to be Native American, and will typically disassociate with gangs of other races and ethnicities.



Indian Brotherhood Tattoo

While alignments between Native American prison gangs and other groups, such as Hispanic prison gangs, has occurred, it is increasingly common for incarcerated Native Americans--if their numbers within the correctional facility are sufficient--to form unique gang structures and self-identify as a Native American gang.

Gang Organization and Structure

Similar to many other street gangs across the country, the majority of Native American street gangs are fragmented, unorganized and leaderless. If leadership in any form exists within such gangs, it usually takes the form of

“shot callers,” or individuals within the gang who have the ability to influence others; have access to money, alcohol or drugs; or who have a reputation for being prone to criminality or violent, aggressive behavior. Still, most of the activity of the gang is unplanned and spontaneous and depends on what’s happening in the community, neighborhood, school, home or other location at any given time. This lack of predictability is challenging in terms of identifying or predicting discernible patterns of behavior among most Native American gangs. However, there are exceptions to this rule.

In the early to mid-1990’s, several Native American males began associating with the Vice Lords criminal street gang in south Minneapolis, Minnesota, primarily for the purpose of drug distribution. Eventually, due to various issues between Vice Lords members and their Native American counterparts, a split occurred between the two groups, resulting in the formation of the criminal street and prison gang known today as Native Mob, or Native Mob Family.



Native Mob “tagging”

Native Mob is one of the few Native American-based street gangs with an

organizational hierarchy. The gang uses the terms “Chief” and “Co-Chief”—these names often interchangeable with the Ojibwe words “Ogema” or “Co-Ogema”—to represent their highest levels of leadership, these individuals responsible for determining the types of criminal activity the gang engages in and ensuring that such acts are planned and carried out. Other ranks within Native Mob include “Treasurer,” the person responsible for the distribution of money or other items of value to members of the gang; “War Chief,” the person responsible for responding to threats from adversarial gangs or individuals; and “Chief Enforcer,” the person responsible for maintaining discipline within the gang and punishing violators of the gang’s by-laws, which consist of several pages of rules and regulations members are expected to adhere to. While this degree of organizational structure is not seen among most Native American gangs, Native Mob is indicative of the potential every Native American gang holds in terms of establishing an organizational hierarchy.

Gang Membership, Alignment and Opposition

The size and number of active gangs on reservations across Indian Country varies. Within the street gang subculture, it is not unusual for gangs to form, only to fade out of existence after a short period of time or be absorbed into a larger gang within the community. Many smaller reservations tend to have only a few active gangs, and membership within such gangs tends to be low, often involving anywhere from 5-25 individuals at any given time.

However, many of Indian Country's larger reservations are experiencing issues involving multiple gangs and higher numbers of participants. On the Navajo Nation Reservation, for example, 60-70 active gangs have been identified, with approximately 1,500 to 2,500 individuals claiming some level of gang affiliation (Navajo Nation Department of Law Enforcement, 2012).



The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota has 30-40 active gangs, with several thousand individuals involved in gang activity to one degree or another (Pine Ridge Law Enforcement, 2009). This level of gang activity is not reflective of the majority of reservations across Indian Country, but both are examples of how significant the gang issue can become in tribal communities.

When multiple gangs are present within the tribal community, there tends to be a degree of both alignment and opposition that occurs. As stated earlier, there exists a strong element of family connectivity within many Native American gangs; and it is not unusual for relatives within an extended family to not only claim similar gang affiliation, but potentially rival gang affiliation as well. The reasons for this vary from one tribal community to another and are

often dependent upon individual family dynamics. Be that as it may, multiple gangs within a tribal community will often result in some gangs aligning with each other, and some opposing each other.

Gang alignment in tribal communities is more about co-existence than cooperation. In other words, individuals claiming different gang sets essentially adopt a "leave each other alone" attitude; or they may align because certain members of each gang are related, or because each gang claims the same major gang affiliation (i.e., West Side Bloods, East Side Bloods). Despite this, there is always the potential for violence to occur between these groups because of the presence of the gangster mentality within their membership.

The dynamics of gang opposition vary as well. Rival gangs within a tribal community may limit their animosity to disrespect, threats and intimidation, or may express their dislike for each other through violence--much of which is driven by immediate circumstances--as well as alcohol or drug consumption. Indian Country has experienced its share of gang violence over the years in terms of homicides and felony assaults, and is no more immune from gang violence than any other community.

Yet another interesting dynamic among Indian Country gangs has to do with gang allegiance. While it does not frequently occur, it is nonetheless not unusual for a gang member to "flip" to another gang within the tribal community and completely change their affiliation. In the many interviews I've conducted with tribal gang members, I

have been told that two of the most important aspects of gang involvement in the tribal community are that of power and protection. Young Native Americans who feel unsafe or insecure in their neighborhood, housing area, school or community, and who gravitate into the gang lifestyle, will often choose to participate within whatever gang is seen as most influential and affords the greatest degree of protection. However, the power base of any gang always has the potential to change, as members are incarcerated, move away, or age out of the behavior. Therefore, a gang that held power for a period of time may be replaced by another that assumes the power position, resulting in some individuals choosing to change their gang allegiance.

When individuals choose to change their gang allegiance, there may be ramifications for doing so. Consequences may range from a “jump out,” which involves a physical beating, to murder, as exemplified by a 2006 homicide that occurred on the Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota. In that case, a 20-year-old member of a Native American gang known as the Third Avenue Killers was beaten to death by four members of his gang after he left the gang to befriend or join another Native American gang in the area. Having said this, while the changing of gang allegiance is not a frequent occurrence, it is yet another unique aspect of Native American gang involvement.

Gang-Based Criminal Activity in Tribal Communities

As previously discussed, certain of the characteristics of Native American

gangs are dependent upon the dynamics of the tribal community the behavior is occurring within. Such is the case with criminal activity.

Smaller and more geographically-isolated reservations tend to have fewer gangs and fewer gang members. In such communities, criminal activity primarily involves lower-level offenses such as criminal destruction of property (graffiti, slashed tires, broken windows), drug usage, weapon offenses, threats, intimidation and occasional assaults. This is not to say that higher levels of criminal activity cannot occur on smaller reservations. However, geographically-larger reservations with greater populations tend to have more gangs and more gang members, often translating into more significant forms of criminal activity, including drug distribution, burglary, robbery, felony assaults and murder. Certain of the reservations in the southwest, such as the Tohono O’odham, Salt River and Gila River Reservations in Arizona, have experienced higher levels of gang-based criminal activity for many years. The same applies to the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations in South Dakota, the Red Lake Reservation in Minnesota, and the Oneida and Lac Courte O’Reilles Reservations in Wisconsin, as well as the Puyallup Reservation in Washington State, and the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon. These are just a few examples of tribal communities that have multiple active gang factions whose behavior translates into higher levels of criminal activity.

Importantly, however, regardless of the geographic size of the reservation or its population, the impact of gang activity is relative. A small number of

gangs and gang members can engage in an inordinate amount of criminal activity in any community, draining tribal law enforcement and court resources and creating a climate of fear that is as powerful on small reservations as it is on large reservations.

Native American Prison Gangs: Current Trends

As street gang activity has continued to increase in tribal communities, so too has Native American gang activity in the corrections environment. While not every state or federal prison facility has a Native American gang presence, there are tribal, state and federal correctional facilities across the country that deal with the issue every day. According to U. S. Department of Justice statistics, there were 14, 600 Native Americans incarcerated in state prisons across the country in 2011. While many of these individuals remain free of gang involvement during their period of incarceration, some either bring their street gang affiliation into prison with them or become gang-involved within the prison environment.

Whether or not a correctional facility will have a Native American prison gang or Security Threat Group, is usually dependent on the number of Native American inmates within the facility. In correctional facilities with low Native American inmate populations, the majority of Native Americans who become gang-involved usually do so for the primary purpose of protection against other inmates. In such cases, it is not unusual for Native American inmates to align with an existing prison gang; and when such alignments occur, they usually involve Hispanic gang

members. An exception to the rule, however, is found within the Oklahoma Department of Corrections where, according to intelligence sources, the Indian Brotherhood prison gang either formerly or currently aligns with the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang...an alignment that is primarily about strength in numbers, as well as protection against the African-American and Hispanic prison population.

In prisons that have a more significant Native American population, it is not unusual for a “stand-alone” Native American prison gang to form. Often, such gangs are merely an extension of the street gang activity inmates were involved in prior to being incarcerated, as seen in the example of Native Mob, which is active both on the street and within the corrections environment, particularly in Minnesota.

Unlike most Native American street gangs, Native American prison gangs generally tend to be more organized and disciplined; and it is not unusual for a Native American prison gang to have rules and regulations, as well as a rank structure and leadership hierarchy. Indian Brotherhood is an example of this, in that members are expected to adhere to a strictly-designed set of by-laws and organizational hierarchy. As well, both Warrior Society and Dine’ Pride within the Arizona Department of Corrections have membership rules, qualification requirements for admission, and specific signs and symbols that are culturally-based.

Most Native American prison gangs are closed and secretive, and their members typically deny that they are a gang. Rather, members often assert that

they are a brotherhood, a cultural group, or a “warrior society” that is merely about protecting their brethren and honoring their cultural traditions. To some degree, the motivation for membership within these groups may be about those very things. However, the individuals involved often eventually become involved in the negative and destructive behavior that is the basis for most prison gang activity.

Finally, among certain Native American prison gangs there exists a degree of expectation that the activity will stay within the prison walls and not emerge onto the street. This doesn’t always occur, however, since released inmates often take their prison gang affiliation with them when they leave the facility, transplanting the behavior back to their reservation or community of origin. Such is the case with Indian Brotherhood in Oklahoma, Indian Pride Organization in Oregon, East River Skins in South Dakota, and Native Nation in North Dakota, to name a few. Each of these gangs originated in prison, but each is now active on the street in tribal and non-tribal communities.

Tribal Community Attitudes and Approaches About Gang Activity

In “Street Gangs: Current Knowledge and Strategies,” Conly observes that tolerance, or at least ambivalence toward gangs by community residents, can be sufficient to allow gangs to survive or flourish (Conly, 1993). Such is the case within many tribal communities.

While there are many individuals in tribal communities who recognize and understand the potential impact of gang

activity, there are also many people who embrace attitudes of minimization, denial and apathy about such behavior. Part of the reason for this has to do with the mistaken impression that the gang activity young tribal members engage in is not the same as that which is occurring in off-reservation communities, particularly urban areas, and is therefore not worthy of concern. It is my opinion that these attitudes have contributed greatly to the growth of the Indian Country gang problem.

As discussed, there are many reservations across Indian Country today that have multiple active gang structures and a significant number of gang-involved individuals. However, there was a time, very recently, when each of these reservations had no gang activity occurring at all. The opportunity to curtail the growth of the gang problem in these communities when it initially emerged was missed, often due to denial and minimization, which in turn allowed the activity to flourish.

Once gang activity becomes entrenched in the tribal community, it is difficult to change the dynamic, especially when multiple gangs have formed. In such cases, attitudes of denial are often replaced by fear of retaliation, fear of ostracism, or fear of reprisal if one stands up to the behavior that is occurring. As well, some tribal members tend to consider the gang issue to be yet another social problem that is part of the tribal community’s fabric, choosing to simply live with what is occurring. And finally, it is not unusual for tribal community members to develop a feeling of helplessness in the face of what appears to be an insurmountable problem. These

elements are sometimes exacerbated by tribal leaders, law enforcement officers, or other community stakeholders who may have relatives involved in the behavior.

Having said this, there are tribal communities that have taken a strong stance to address an emerging or entrenched gang issue. Through such efforts as hosting community gang awareness workshops for adults, providing gang prevention education for youth, forming community action teams that address social infrastructural issues, and enhancing cultural opportunities for youth, some tribal communities are successfully impacting their gang issues.

As well, there are tribal law enforcement agencies in Indian Country that are successfully addressing gang behavior from a collaborative suppression standpoint. An example of this can be found within the Puyallup Tribe of Indians in Washington, which is a member of the Pierce County (WA) Multi-Agency Gang Task Force. The task force was formed several years ago to address the growing gang issues in this region of western Washington State; and it is currently comprised of law enforcement officers from the Pierce County Sheriff's Office, Tacoma Police Department, Puyallup City Police Department, Fife Police Department, Lakewood Police Department, Pierce County Transit Police Department, and the Puyallup Tribal Police Department.

According to Lieutenant William Loescher of the Puyallup Tribal Police Department, there

are currently 100 or more active street gangs in the Tacoma area, including 28 gangs on the Puyallup Reservation alone, with hundreds of individuals involved in gang activity to one degree or another. These individuals cross jurisdictional lines, engaging in criminal behavior that impacts every community in the region, necessitating a coordinated response to address the behavior.

Through a Memorandum of Understanding, the tribal and non-tribal task force officers who are part of the consortium have the authority to conduct investigations and make arrests, regardless of their jurisdictional assignment. Loescher indicated that the multi-jurisdictional task force endeavor has served to not only improve the relationship between the tribal and non-tribal communities in the area, but has also resulted in a reduction in many of the visible aspects of gang behavior, including open representing of gang affiliation, drug distribution, and violence occurring on and around the reservation (Loescher, 2013).

Yet another example of cooperation between tribal law enforcement agencies, specifically in the area of gang and drug intelligence sharing, is that of the Native American Drug and Gang Initiative (NADGI) Task Force. This task force was created in 2007 as a collaborative alliance between the Wisconsin Department of Justice, Division of Criminal Investigation and the nine tribal communities in Wisconsin that provide their own law enforcement services. NADGI is primarily designed to provide resources, specialized funding and training opportunities to these nine tribal agencies, as well as work in conjunction with other statewide local, county, state and federal law



enforcement agencies to conduct tactical and strategic investigations and gather and disseminate information pertaining to gangs, drugs and firearms in Wisconsin tribal communities.

Finally, another example of positive collaboration between tribal and non-tribal law enforcement is the FBI's Safe Trails Task Force (STTF) concept. According to the agency's website, the purpose of the program--which was initiated in 1994--was to "unite the FBI with other federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in a collaborative effort to combat the growth of crime in Indian Country. STTFs allow participating agencies to combine limited resources and increase investigative coordination in Indian Country to target violent crime, drugs, gangs, and gaming violations." There are currently 14 active Safe Trails Task Force teams across Indian Country, and further information about the program can be found at www.fbi.gov.

In addition to the law enforcement approach to gang issues, two other options that bear mentioning for addressing gang behavior in tribal communities include mentoring programs and corrections-to-community reintegration programs.

Native American-Based Mentoring Programs

According to Jacob Flores, a professional mentor trainer with significant experience working with tribal communities, gang-involved Native American youth often grow up in a family environment lacking in structure, opportunity, shelter and safety. Many witness domestic violence,

substance abuse, and other disruptive behaviors in their homes, as well as the lack of a healthy male presence, particularly in their adolescent years. Young tribal members in this situation tend to develop a sense of mistrust, often resulting in the disconnection from indigenous culture and traditions, and the eventual connection to the gang lifestyle, which provides the flawed perception of protection and identity.

Flores asserts that a properly-conducted mentoring process applies a balance that provides gang-involved youth with the elements of consistency, dependability and predictability...the primary components of a healthy sustained relationship with a caring adult. While such elements are often foreign to many of the young people who are used to a world of inconsistency, the mentoring process provides the powerful potential for the raising of expectations for a more positive future, as opposed to a future that many young gang-involved Native Americans view as hopeless (Flores, 2013).

While mentoring programs for gang-involved tribal youth are important, of equal significance is the importance of mentoring for Native American men in the context of their role as fathers in tribal communities. An example of a successful adult mentoring program can be found on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC) of Arizona. The SRPMIC O'odham Piipaash Fatherhood Program was initiated in 2001, and restructured in 2006, to include the Healthy Relationship Program. Both programs, which are herein referred to collectively as the Fatherhood Program, are designed

to assist tribal adults in becoming more active in their children's lives and within their community.

According to Program Coordinator Kevin Poleyumptewa, while the name of the program implies that only Native American fathers can participate, involvement within the Fatherhood Program is open to all Native American men, as well as men who are raising Native American children.

Poleyumptewa points out that the philosophy of the group is that if you're a Native American man, then you are a father, considering the fact that Native brothers and uncles have always been considered to be father figures in traditional culture. Within the Fatherhood Program, men come together and talk freely about the issues that concern them that may separate them from their family members, including gang activity. As well, participants are able to receive motivational input, referral services, individual counseling, couples counseling, family counseling, job-finding assistance, job preparation, job-hunting transportation, and some housing services.

The Healthy Relationships Program augments the Fatherhood Program, in that it is designed to give both men and women the information, support and assistance they need to create strong relationships so as to build a healthy and safe environment for their children. The program includes a family-based skill-building component that involves role-playing to address different scenarios that families may confront, including that of gang activity.

For Poleyumptewa, who is the father of three children, the reasons to be

part of the Fatherhood Program are clear in that he believes that one of the primary responsibilities of a Native American father is to teach young children how to be proud Native Americans. Poleyumptewa also points to statistics suggesting that the absence of a father figure from the home often results in adverse outcomes for youth, including suicide, teen pregnancy and gang involvement. Using culturally-based mentoring, the Fatherhood Program teaches that while the father's role is vital, it also emphasizes the importance of the family as a whole. Poleyumptewa also feels that preserving cultural identity is especially important because of the rapid decline of this knowledge among Native American communities (Poleyumptewa, 2013).

Further information about the Fatherhood Program can be obtained by contacting the SRPMIC Social Services Department.

Native American-Based Reintegration Programs

One of the most promising approaches to addressing potential gang issues in tribal communities is corrections-to-community reintegration programming. According to a 2011 report from the Office of Drug Control Policy, every year more than 700,000 adult inmates are released from state and federal prisons, and many more are released each year from county and city jail facilities. Fully two-thirds of these individuals are re-arrested within three years of their release, with half reincarcerated for having committed another offense. This high level of recidivism results in more crime, more victims, and more pressure on the

criminal justice system as a whole (Caporizzo, 2011).

Reintegration programs, which are also known as “Reentry Programs,” are designed to assist individuals who are released from correctional facilities in making a successful transition back into their communities. While they are not a new concept nationally, the process is relatively new to Indian Country.

The first Indian Country reintegration program was established in 2004 within the Muscogee (Creek) Nation of east central Oklahoma, a tribe of 72,600 enrolled members. According to Program Director Tony Fish, the Muscogee Nation Reintegration Program was initiated after concerns arose over the number of Muscogee tribal members who re-offended after being released from the Oklahoma Department of Corrections. Mr. Fish indicated that the program fits well into Muscogee Nation customs, which views justice as restorative, with the primary goal being that of changing an offender’s behavior and bringing that person back into the community.

In accomplishing this goal, the Muscogee Nation Reintegration program begins the process of reintegration while the offender is still in prison. Working with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, the program offers Muscogee inmates classes and seminars on a variety of topics such as character building, job skills, and planning for reentry into society. In doing so, the program begins facilitating change before the inmate is released, setting the stage for eventual transition into the program outside the prison walls.

Once released from prison, inmates who are chosen for the program meet regularly with their case worker, who assists the client with any number of services, including finding a place to live, buying groceries, and securing employment, among many other things. The primary goal is to make the client self-sufficient; and this is accomplished through not only working directly with the client, but also with a broad range of service providers, as well as the tribal community.

Importantly, as they receive these critical services, clients must adhere to the parameters of the program by attending probation and parole hearings, meeting their financial obligations, and staying substance-free. Clients who are able to be employed must either work or be in a job-related training program. To ensure compliance, case workers monitor each of these aspects of the program, including conducting random, unannounced drug screenings. All of these elements serve to convey to the client that as long as they are willing to strive for success, they will be supported in their efforts.

Another important aspect of this reintegration program is referred to as the “Service Pay Back” initiative, in which clients assist Muscogee elders by donating labor in the form of home maintenance projects, such as lawn mowing, painting and tree trimming. Such activities provide the client with a stronger bond to their community and to their culture...two important aspects of reconnecting.

The viability of this program is evident in the fact that of the 115 Muscogee Nation former inmates who

entered the program in 2010, only 12 clients failed to complete the reentry plan, instead re-offending and returning to confinement. This translates into a success rate of 90 percent and a recidivism rate of only 10 percent, which is far below the national recidivism average. In 2011, the program provided reentry services to 77 clients, and only 3 failed to complete their reentry plan, resulting in a success rate of 96 percent and a recidivism rate of only 4 percent.

The Muscogee Nation Reintegration Program is primarily funded by the tribe, which provides an annual appropriation of approximately \$986,000 through their tribal casino operation. Additional funding comes from the Bureau of Justice Assistance Second Chance Offender Program. The strength of the program is evident in the fact that there are plans to create a regional transitional living facility that will provide housing, reentry classrooms and vocational training. The essence of the Muscogee Nation Reintegration Program is aptly summed up by Mr. Fish, who wrote the following in a recent report to tribal officials:

“The Muscogee (Creek) Nation recognizes that every citizen—even an ex-prisoner—is important, and that investments in its people are investments in the Nation’s strength and sovereignty. In a setting where the state, surrounding counties, municipalities, and other Native nations are not offering services to ex-prisoners, the Muscogee Nation has built a cutting-edge reintegration program. Citizens who have served their time are now welcomed into what has been described as a “powerful culture of caring.” By reaching out to former criminals, the Muscogee Nation

Reintegration Program helps them stay out of jail, make a home within the Nation, and lead productive, healthy lives.”

Importantly, the Muscogee Nation’s Reintegration Program receives full support from the Oklahoma Department of Corrections (OK-DOC), and this cooperation is invaluable in ensuring the success of the program. The following statement, provided by the OK-DOC, reflects their commitment to the partnership: “Approximately 17 percent of the prison population in Oklahoma self-identify as Native American. As a result of this statistic, since 2004 the Oklahoma Department of Corrections (ODOC) has engaged with tribal communities across the state in an effort to understand the tribes’ ability and interest in working with their returning tribal citizens. Data from 2012 suggested that the Oklahoma Native American population recidivated at a rate of 26.1%, down 1 percent from 2011. This and many other demographic and statistical information has been shared with tribal partners in an effort to develop a strong spirit of cooperation.

Recently, this cooperative spirit has aided the development of a statewide Intertribal Re-entry Council which plans to meet quarterly at different tribal locations around the State. The Council is bringing together stakeholders to receive training and identify gaps and possible funding mechanisms to help foster an even stronger ongoing reentry effort for all tribal members in Oklahoma.

Through cooperative efforts, the ODOC works to assist the tribes in

identifying tribal members and other reentrants that would qualify for tribal re-entry services. Cooperation with programs such as the Muscogee Creek Nation, along with other tribal programs helps to produce a mutual respect and trust among the agency and the tribes of Oklahoma.”

The success of the Muscogee Nation Reintegration Program has prompted other tribal communities to create their own programs, as evidenced by the Citizen Potawatomi Tribe of Oklahoma, which established a reentry program based upon the framework of the Muscogee model. According to Citizen Potawatomi Reintegration Program Counselor Sue Johnson and Employment Training Director Carol Levi, the program was initiated in 2011 to assist potential clients with felony backgrounds who were applying for employment training funds, education support, or reentry assistance through the tribe’s employment and training program.

The program, which is funded through the U.S. Department of Justice, requires that potential clients meet a number of qualifications, including that of being a Native American adult who is enrolled in a federally-recognized tribe; applying for program participation within a year of being released from a correctional facility or within six months of an anticipated release date; residency within the Citizen Potawatomi service area; willingness to follow a case management plan; lack of current outstanding criminal charges; compliance with court-ordered plans and sanctions; and submission of an application that includes all required documents.

Once accepted to the program, client assistance is provided on a case-by-case basis, but typically includes employment guidance; clothing for job interviews and employment; fuel vouchers for job searches and training classes; tuition assistance; and other support designed to assist the client with successfully transitioning from the corrections environment into the community.

An important distinction between the Citizen Potawatomi and Muscogee Creek Reintegration programs is the fact that due to the program funding mechanism, the Citizen Potawatomi program can accept any Native American client--regardless of whether they are a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation--as long as they are an enrolled member of a federally-recognized tribe. This provides an advantage to potential clients who may be an enrolled member of a tribe that does not provide reentry services, in that they still have the opportunity to receive such services. Further information about either program can be obtained through muscogeenation-nsn.gov or potawatomi.org.

Yet another successful program involves both cultural and transitional opportunities for Native American offenders within the prison environment. The New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD) currently provides American Indian and Alaska Native inmates with the opportunity to receive culturally-sensitive substance abuse and reentry programming through affording inmates the opportunity to participate in Sweat Lodge Ceremonies, Talking Circle Ceremonies, Blessing Way Ceremonies, Pipe Ceremonies, and Smudging or Traditional Cleansing

Ceremonies, all while within the confines of the prison system. Additional information about this program can be found by visiting the New Mexico Corrections Department website at www.iad.state.nm.us and accessing the 2011 State-Tribal collaboration Act Agency Report through the website’s “Outreach” link.

While reintegration programs designed for juvenile offenders have been in place for some time, the concept is also relatively new to Indian Country. In 2009, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) identified three tribal communities to be the recipients of funding for what is termed the “Tribal Juvenile Detention and Reentry Green Demonstration,” also known as “Green Reentry.” Funding was provided for a period of four years, to include a planning year followed by three years of service delivery. According to OJJDP, the goals of the project include:

- The provision of services to help detained and reentering youth successfully reintegrate into the community, using risk and needs assessments, educational and vocational programming, mental health services, substance abuse programs, family strengthening, and extended reentry aftercare;
- Support of the development of partnerships to help tribes implement green technologies and environmentally-sustainable activities and to create long-term environmental and economic benefits to tribes; and
- To support each tribe’s ability to implement, monitor, and maintain tribal detention standards.

The three tribal communities identified as the recipients of the Green Reentry funding include the Hualapai Indian Tribe of AZ, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe of SD. The Cross-Site Evaluation of this project is being conducted by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and American Indian Development Associates (AIDA). In a 2013 report entitled “Early Implementation Experiences of OJJDP’s Tribal Green Reentry Programs,” the elements of each project were provided.

For example, the report reflects that the Rosebud Sioux Tribe’s Green Reentry Program is administered by the tribal juvenile detention center and is designed for youth who have had persistent truancy issues and who have been processed through truancy court; youth who have been sentenced through tribal court to probation status; and youth who have been released from the tribal detention center after serving a sentence. The “green” aspects of the project include activities such as gardening, beekeeping, raising chickens, recycling, taking part in environmental education, and participating in community service learning projects with a focus on beautification. The program also has an extensive emphasis on cultural activities, including the use of traditional healing; culturally-based counseling; culturally-relevant offsite excursions; infusion of culture in daily activities; and Lakota history education.

The Hualapai Tribe’s Green Reentry Program is also administered by the tribe’s juvenile detention facility and is designed for Hualapai tribal youth, as well as youth from nearby tribes who have been adjudicated to the facility.

The components of this program include horticultural instruction and hands-on practice at garden plots in the recreation yard of the detention center (for detained youth) and gardening and greenhouse construction, and maintenance at the local Boys & Girls Club for youth who have been released. In addition, youth who achieve Positive Warrior Work Service status are allowed to participate in other “green” activities, such as greenhouse construction and maintenance and hydroponic gardening, as well as solar panel installation. Finally, the Hualapai Green Reentry Program includes cultural components available to youth before and after their release, including instruction on Hualapai culture and language; talking circles; and participation in cultural events and activities, such as sweat lodges and traditional arts and crafts.

Finally, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) Green Reentry Program is administered by the Division of Court Services within tribal government and is primarily delivered on the grounds of the MBCI Justice Complex, which includes the Smith John Justice Center and the Adult and Juvenile Detention Centers. While the program does not take tribal youth who are currently incarcerated, due to security concerns, the program does accept:

- Tribal youth who participate in the program voluntarily as an informal diversion strategy;
- Tribal youth who are sentenced to probation and participate in Green Reentry as a community service sanction;
- Tribal youth who are released from the detention center and are on

probation, with participation in Green Reentry established as a community service sanction.

The MBCI Green Reentry Program components include gardening in a large plot on the grounds of the Justice Complex, as well as environmental education, which includes instruction in the garden and technical assistance by contractors on topics such as native permaculture and forestry. Furthermore, the Green Reentry program incorporates traditional Choctaw culture by providing youth with opportunities to participate in culturally-relevant events in the community, receive traditional education about Choctaw culture, engage in individual and family counseling, and receive other services.

Further details regarding all three programs can be accessed at www.aidainc.net.

In summary, while there are many challenges and obstacles involved in establishing and implementing a successful reintegration program, the basic premise for doing so remains constant...that being the provision of a process that allows individuals to regain their dignity, self-respect and independence, as well as their place as a productive member of mainstream society.

For Indian Country, there is an added element of importance connected to the reentry process. Melton points out that while reentry programs present issues and challenges, they also provide an opportunity to validate and encourage traditional tribal processes, including the opportunity to develop culture-based processes designed to maintain harmony

and balance through traditional philosophies, ceremonies, and approaches. Such an approach, aside from assisting the individual, may also serve to reduce negative response to an offender's return to the tribal community or village (Melton, et al., 2010).

Conclusion

While the Native American gang issue presents unique challenges on many levels, Indian Country remains strong and resilient through years of experience dealing with adversity. By utilizing focused leadership, tenacity, and collaboration, the growth of the gang problem can be mitigated and, in many instances, reversed, as long as tribal communities recognize that gang activity is not only unacceptable, but is also not a part of the traditional culture.

By utilizing focused leadership, tenacity, and collaboration, the growth of the gang problem can be mitigated and, in many instances, reversed.

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