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Fighting Back Against Indian Gangs - Despite rise in urban-violence, some report progress

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Boyd Osegueda considers himself a modern-day warrior.

He bears the scars and tattoos from 16 years as a gang banger. Now 25, he is fighting the good fight, trying to persuade young gang members to go straight.

But Mr. Osegueda is no urban gang reformer. And he labors far from the concrete jungle. He's an American Indian trying to curb the rising influence of gangs on a reservation.

In recent years, his Tohono O'odham nation here in southern Arizona has seen a disturbing increase in gang activity with a corresponding increase in violent crimes. Nationally, studies indicate the number of gangs in Indian country has more than doubled since 1994. Researchers say gangs are a problem in more than three-quarters of the nation's Indian communities, and some tribes report homicide rates that exceed those of notoriously violent urban areas.

Indian communities are fighting back with a combination of law-enforcement and intervention efforts designed to reconnect tribal youths with traditional cultural values. Officials in some communities say they are beginning to stem the tide.

The Tohono O'odham reservation is the second-largest in the United States. For 6,000 years the Tohono O'odham, or "Desert People," - formerly known as the Papago - have lived on this land of mostly small, remote villages separated by shrubby hills and miles of rugged desert terrain thick with saguaro cactuses, mesquite, and paloverde.

A gang task force has identified 25 gangs operating on the reservation, which extends from west of Tucson into Sonora, Mexico. One member estimates that as many as 2,000 of the reservation's 20,000 residents belong to gangs, with some joining as early as elementary school.

With the increase in gangs, violent crimes have risen dramatically in recent years. The number of willful homicides and concealed weapons violations more than doubled from 1995 to 1997, and aggravated assaults rose nearly 70 percent during the same period.

Imported gangs

Experts say gangs are not indigenous to Indian communities and most reservation gangs bear the names of black and Latino gangs found in nearby urban areas. According to law-enforcement officials, gangs spread to the Tohono O'odham nation and other

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Arizona Indian communities via movies and through tribal members, like Osegueda, who returned to reservations after living in urban centers and brought their gangs with them.

Once on the reservation, gangs found fertile soil among the vulnerable in the community's poorest neighborhoods. Like many tribes, the Tohono O'odham struggle with unemployment rates of 50 percent or more, and in spite of a tribally owned casino, only 13 percent of its members earned more than \$9,048 in 1995.

Law enforcement on the reservation is complicated by geography. A 60-man police department is responsible for patrolling a reservation that is roughly the size of Connecticut. And stepped-up border patrols elsewhere have made the reservation a pipeline for Mexican drug runners who take advantage of the nation's unmanned border. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the increased flow of drugs has dramatically increased crime.

Everett Lafferty, a Tohono O'odham police officer, says the tribe first started seeing elements of gang activity around 1993, about the same time that gangs began appearing on reservations throughout Arizona. Juveniles started sporting gang colors and "tagging" their territory with graffiti. Then came the types of violence characteristic of gangs, including assaults and driveby shootings.

Officer Lafferty says the first gang-related homicide shocked the community in 1993, when a 15-year-old boy was shot at a youth dance. A 16-year-old boy was shot to death on his doorstep in 1996, and two other teenage boys killed themselves while playing Russian roulette within the last year, some believe as part of a gang initiation.

In response, the nation formed a multidisciplinary task force consisting of members from throughout the community to develop educational and recreational programs to give young people alternatives to gangs.

Heightened policing

At the same time, tribal police are stepping up enforcement efforts. Since 1996, the Tohono O'odham Police Department has hired 25 additional officers. This year, it opened two new police substations. And three months ago, it formed a safe-trails task force in partnership with the FBI to target gang organizations.

Similar programs have borne fruit on other Arizona reservations. In the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, tribal police say violent crime has declined 30 percent in the past year following the landmark prosecution of 12 members of the East Side Crips Rolling 30s. In that case, racketeering statutes developed to combat Mafia activity were used for the first time to prosecute gang members on Indian land.

Reforming gang members is where Osegueda fits in. As part of his job with the tribe's children's services department, he works with at-risk youths. On his own, he visits jailed gang members and travels to other reservations.

"Our people are trying to be something we're not and we're paying for it heavily" he says. "We don't have to live like this."

In his wallet, he carries the evidence of one victory: a letter from a 17-year-old gang member who has decided to get out. "Thank you for letting me know who I am," it says.

Caption: PHOTO: STANDING GUARD: A year after a gang killing and fire at this house in the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community in Scottsdale, Ariz., local police say violent crime has declined. But elsewhere on reservations, with widespread poverty and unemployment rates reaching 50 percent or more, gang-related activity is on the upswing. Much of it is imported by urban gang members who return to the reservation. BY JEFF ROBBINS/AP

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