

Native American Youth Gangs: Linking Culture, History and Theory for Improved Understanding, Prevention and Intervention

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ABSTRACT. The number of Native American youth gangs has increased dramatically since the 1990s. These gangs bring increases in crime and pose unique challenges to tribal leaders and local police departments. Using an integrated theoretical perspective, this article connects cultural and historical factors to explain the emergence of gangs in Indian country, identify risk factors for gang involvement, and outline important considerations for effective prevention and intervention strategies. It is expected that an improved understanding of Native American culture and experiences combined with the implementation of culturally-appropriate prevention and intervention programs will lead to more positive outcomes. doi:10.1300/J222v05n04_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail ad-

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The number of Native American youth gangs has grown substantially in the past fifteen years (Hailer & Hart, 1999; Joseph & Taylor, 2003; Pridemore, 2004; Wyrick, 2000). Studies of Native Americans living in rural areas and on reservations have found that approximately 15% of youth are gang members or associates (Donnermeyer, Edwards, Chavez, & Beauvais, 2000), suggesting this problem is most acute in *Indian country*, or that land on and around Indian reservations (Martinez, 2005). In these areas, the number of Native American youth gangs has doubled since 1994 (Joseph & Taylor, 2003). It is presently estimated that there are more than 4,500 gang members active in almost 400 gangs on or near tribal lands (Pridemore, 2004). Such gangs bring increases in property and violent crimes, further threaten Native American families and traditional values, and pose unique challenges to tribal leaders and local law enforcement.

Though knowledge about Native American gangs is still limited, available information suggests that these gangs differ from other youth gangs in several important ways. These differences reflect the relative newness of American Indian gangs as well as the distinctive experiences of Native American youth, the challenges of reservation living, and the difficulties in cultural assimilation experienced by many Native Americans. These differences have implications for effective prevention and intervention strategies and a better understanding of these differences (and appropriate sensitivity to these experiences) will enhance programming. This article therefore discusses the emerging problem of Native American youth gangs with a particular focus on their unique characteristics and key cultural, historical, and theoretical considerations for prevention and intervention strategies. Such information is critical for effective practice with Native American gangs but has not been adequately detailed in the extant literature. In fact, while youth gangs have been the subject of scholarly discourse for decades, most of the available literature is descriptive in nature, there is very limited information on actual intervention strategies with gangs and individual gang members, and few evaluations of gang prevention programs have

been completed (Jackson, Bass, & Sharpe, 2005; Esbensen, 2004; Stinchcomb, 2002). This is especially true for Native American gangs, who only started receiving serious consideration and examination in the last ten years. Prior to the mid-1990s, there was little available data about youth gangs in Indian country (Major et al., 2004; Joseph & Taylor, 2003).

CHARACTERISTICS OF NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH GANGS

There is significant disagreement among researchers about conceptual and operational definitions of gangs and gang membership (Jones et al., 2004; Bjerregaard, 2002; Ellis, 2002). Nonetheless, several criteria are commonly used to define youth gangs, or *street gangs*. As summarized by Bjerregaard (2002) and Jones, Roper, Stys, and Wilson (2004), these criteria include organizational factors (i.e. some level of organization and structure of members, the presence of a leader, identifiable territory), symbolic characteristics (gang name, special clothing, specific gang colors), and criminal behavior. This latter factor is perhaps the most popular condition to defining gangs though the level and type of crime and violence varies among gangs and communities. These assorted characteristics help to identify the gang, differentiate it from other gangs, and signify the level of organization and cohesion present within the group (Bjerregaard, 2002).

The dearth of information on Native American youth gangs prior to the 1990s could be interpreted as an oversight on behalf of researchers, law enforcement and government agencies. Based on the characteristics of these gangs, however, it is more likely that they are indeed a relatively new phenomenon in Indian country. For example, Native American juveniles are still very open and honest about their gang involvement (Hailer & Hart, 1999). This suggests that gang membership is still very new to them and they have not had enough experience with gang life and exposure to hardened criminals to learn to be "uncommunicative" with law enforcement officers (p. 28). Likewise, many Native American gangs share names with infamous African American and Hispanic gangs (Joseph & Taylor, 2003; Hailer & Hart, 1999). The use of names like Crips, Bloods, Latin Kings, and Banditos supports that Native American gangs are influenced by their exposure to—or their perception of—popular urban gangs.

Moreover, typical criminal behavior among urban gangs ranges from assaults on rival gangs to drug use and sales, drive-by shootings, auto

theft, and burglary (Huff, 1998; Stinchcomb, 2002). Larger, more established urban gangs are often financially motivated with a strong emphasis on the sale of drugs and weapons. Conversely, American Indian gangs seem less motivated by such economic pursuits though some gangs do traffic marijuana (Joseph & Taylor, 2003). Criminal activity among Native American gangs instead consists primarily of property crimes and misdemeanor offenses like vandalism, graffiti, and theft as well as alcohol-related offenses (Major et al., 2004; Hailer & Hart, 1999). Presently, lone gang members or small groups of members perpetrate most gang-related violent crimes on reservations (Joseph & Taylor, 2003). In contrast to urban gangs, most of this violence is committed to gain status within the gang and community rather than in turf warfare or to acquire more gang territory. In a survey of tribal leaders across the United States, "commits crime together" was ranked significantly lower as a defining characteristic of gangs than in comparison surveys of non-Native Americans (Major et al., 2004; p. 9). This finding in conjunction with the frequency of gang members acting alone or in smaller groups lends further support to the notion that Indian gangs have less formal structure and cohesion than other gangs. As a cautionary note, however, Joseph and Taylor (2003) and Hailer and Hart (1999) warn that gang-related violence perpetrated by Native Americans is increasing, perhaps signifying increased levels of organization among these gangs. This type of escalation mirrors the trajectory demonstrated in other gangs wherein members begin by perpetrating property crimes but then move to commit drug-related and violent crime within 18-24 months (Huff, 1998). As a final note, Native American gang members tend to be adolescent males between 11 and 18 years of age (Hailer & Hart, 1999). This composition is similar to urban street gangs.

RISK FACTORS FOR GANG INVOLVEMENT

Several theories have been proposed that seek to explain crime and many have been directly applied to explain street gangs and gang development. While there are no known attempts to apply criminological theories to explain Native American gangs, a handful of such theories seem especially relevant to this topic. The underlying mechanisms and causes of crime suggested by these theories highlight critical risk factors for delinquency and gang membership, including difficult economic conditions and poverty, exclusion from main-

stream American society and opportunities, poor attachments and family struggles, and negative social influences. Though the validity and utility of different theories are frequently debated and no one theory explains all, consideration of an integrated theoretical perspective gives insight to understanding the experiences of Native American juveniles today and their risks for gang involvement. These theories also suggest that Native American gangs have deep historical roots and their recent proliferation was predictable given the unique experiences of American Indians in the United States.

Native Americans have a history marked by periods of forced migration and assimilation and neglectful and abusive treatment from federal and local government. The lasting effects of such experiences are feelings of isolation, exclusion, and frustration that contribute to the ongoing problems and difficulties endured by many Native Americans, including high rates of alcoholism and substance abuse, crime, suicide, poverty, and unemployment. Studies have concluded that alcohol-related problems among Native Americans are as much as three times that of the general population (Pridemore, 2004). Such problems also contribute to high rates of suicide, domestic violence, physical and mental health problems, and alcohol-related arrests among Native Americans (Bearinger et al., 2005; Pridemore, 2004). The suicide rate for Native American adolescents and young adults is 2.5 times greater than the national average (Shaughnessy, Doshi, & Jones, 2004). Crime rates in Native American communities are well above those for the general United States population and violent crime rates are two to three times higher than the national average (Bearinger et al., 2005; Major et al., 2004). In a study by Stevens et al. (2005), Native American male adolescents were found to be at a greater risk to experience multiple incidents of physical and sexual assault than boys from other ethnic groups. Specific to poverty and employment, approximately 26% of Native Americans lived in poverty in 1999 compared to 12.4% of the total population while Native American males and females both reported lower levels of labor force participation (65.6% and 56.8%, respectively) than those reported by the general population (70.7% and 57.5%; Ogunwole, 2006).

Strain Theory

One popular criminological theory often associated with street gangs is *strain theory*. Extrapolated from ideas first described by Merton (1938),

strain theory postulates that gangs form as a result of the disconnect between an individual's desire for economic success and the legitimate means by which to achieve this (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2002). This disconnect then creates strain and yields strong pressure towards deviance and crime. Strain theory is most often applied to African American and Hispanic youth gangs living in urban areas and destitute inner cities. Yet, Pridemore (2004) notes important parallels between the isolation and powerlessness experienced by Native American adolescents on reservations and minority youth living in inner-city communities and ghettos. Such parallels help to explain the emergence of gangs in reservations and on tribal lands. Like African American and Hispanic adolescents residing in urban areas, Native American adolescents often have limited exposure to positive role models, few pro-social opportunities, and high levels of boredom (Pridemore, 2004). Appropriately, Rizzo (2003) notes that one of the more alluring qualities of gang membership is the simple chance for excitement associated with gangs, selling drugs, and making money. Major et al. (2004) concur in commenting that Indian gang activity seems to be "an expression of youthful experimentation with gang identity" and that gang problems result from a strained environment, the popular appeal of gang culture, and a lack of constructive activities for Native American youth to engage in.

In addition to present conditions of poverty and hardship that make gangs more attractive, the economic and cultural strain felt by many Native American youth has existed for many generations. Beginning in the late 1800s, Native American children were removed from their families and sent to boarding schools for the purpose of learning popular American culture, values, and behavior. They were returned home to their reservations after such schooling. Unfortunately, however, they were unprepared to function in this world and they were not accepted in the mainstream society for which they had been trained and socialized. Though such practices were ended in the mid 1900s, Native American adolescents consistently still feel torn between traditional Indian culture and other, mainstream American influences (Hailer & Hart, 1999).

Self-Control Theory

These efforts to "Americanize" juveniles also disrupted Native American families and the transmission of key life lessons, values, and traditions from parents to their children. As a result, according to Pridemore (2004), "generations of Native American parents thus had no role models to demonstrate appropriate parenting and traditional culture and thus many lack the broad repertoire of parenting skills necessary to

deal effectively with their children" (p. 47). Pridemore continues by noting that transportation and childcare needs, language barriers, and general discomfort in school settings contribute to low Native American parental involvement at their children's schools. Native American adults also have high levels of illiteracy and lower levels of college completion than Caucasian adults. This suggested link between ineffective parenting and delinquency reflects another popular criminological theory, *self-control theory*. This theory, a modern variation of control theory, states that lawless individuals have a strong pull towards activities that offer short-term and instant gratification, including drug and alcohol abuse, unprotected sexual activity, and smoking in addition to crime. They possess less self-control than law-abiding individuals.

Since research has shown a robust link between problems in childhood and subsequent delinquency and criminal behavior, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) propose that attentive and effective parents instill appropriate self-control early in childhood. Absent this transmission of self-control, it is argued youth will lack the restraint to resist crime, be more likely to fail at work and school, and unable to maintain intimate relationships (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2002). Specific to gangs, research has shown that parents of young gang members often provide inadequate supervision (Lyon, Henggler, & Hall, 1992) and are likely to act aggressively (Maxon, Whitlock, & Klein, 1998). While such research supports Gottfredson and Hirschi's link between poor parenting, low self-control and criminal conduct, critics are quick to note that larger socioeconomic conditions impact parenting abilities, family structure, and opportunities for teaching self-control. As a result, integrating strain theory and self-control theory might be a useful perspective for understanding the complex problems endured by many Native American families while also recognizing the importance of family- and community-level interventions in gang prevention.

Social Disorganization and Differential Association Theory

Whereas strain and self-control theories highlight risk factors for gang involvement and suggest why Native American youth are more susceptible to gang influences, they do not address the critical issues of how gangs are introduced on reservations and how gang values are transmitted. To this end, evidence supports extending this integrated theoretical perspective to include Edwin Sutherland's classic *differential association theory*. The combination of reservation hardships, parenting and family problems, few positive role models and pro-social

opportunities, and adolescent feelings of exclusion and boredom suggest high levels of *social disorganization* in Native American communities. This disorganization is characterized by weakened pro-social and lawful influences, leaving the community more susceptible to criminal influences. Differential association theory then argues that greater exposure to these negative influences than to conventional, law-abiding influences can lead individuals to act delinquently (Sutherland & Cressey, 1970). In this theoretical perspective, criminal behavior is learned.

There is robust empirical support for the concept of social disorganization (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2002). Though the concept is most often applied to inner cities and ghettos, the reality of reservation living resembles that found in these harsh urban areas. Just as Pridemore (2004) identifies parallels between the experiences of Native American and inner-city juveniles, similar parallels about the social conditions and differential social organization between these types of communities can be made. While it is difficult to test Sutherland's theory, the genesis of many Native American gangs reflects outside criminal influences. Specifically, gang-involved juveniles who move to reservations after living in urban centers often initiate gangs in Indian country (Joseph & Taylor, 2003; Hailer & Hart, 1999). Returning with their parents from cities like Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis, these transplanted youth bring gang attitudes, values, and attire with them. Entering disorganized reservation communities, this lifestyle proves appealing to the isolated and dejected adolescents already residing there. The power of outside influences is also evident in the aforementioned practice of using borrowed names for Native American gangs.

CONSIDERATIONS IN PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Jones, Roper, Stys, and Wilson (2004) identify three basic approaches for addressing youth gang problems. *Prevention strategies* are those proactive programs seeking to discourage gang involvement while *intervention strategies* seek to reduce and eliminate gang problems in areas affected by gangs. This usually involves identification of gang members, mobilization of community members and resources, and collaboration between community leaders and the criminal justice and social service systems. Finally, *suppression* describes those law enforcement tactics aimed at reducing crime committed by gangs, includ-

ing police "crackdowns" on gang members, dedicated street patrols, specialized prosecution methods, and heightened supervision of parolees and probationers. Despite literally hundreds of implemented programs, there is very little research evaluating the effectiveness of any of these strategies with gangs generally (Jackson, Bass, & Sharpe, 2005; Esbensen, 2004) and even less evaluating their effectiveness with Native Americans gangs specifically. Nevertheless, available research about non-Native American gangs is helpful for identifying promising approaches (Major et al., 2004). A review of such information with special consideration for their use with Native American communities will help to direct and focus efforts intended to curtail gang problems in Indian country.

Comprehensive community-wide approaches hold the most promise for addressing the problem of Native American gangs. Such approaches recognize the complex relationship of individual and situational variables that lead to gang involvement (Jones et al., 2004) and have been shown to be most effective for areas—like reservations—that are experiencing an *emerging* gang problem (Spergel, 1995). Moreover, this type of approach may be especially welcome on reservations since many tribal leaders report being more concerned about the social problems and conditions that lead to gangs than the gangs themselves (Major et al., 2004). Comprehensive approaches require strong community organizing, sharing of resources, and collaboration across multiple settings, especially families, schools, law enforcement, social services, and government.

Given that most Native American gangs are in infancy, prevention programs are likely the most cost-effective strategy (Howell & Wilson, 2000; Stinchcomb, 2002). Yet, to properly and fully address the problem, community leaders must also consider intervention and suppression methods (Major et al., 2004). Such consideration and subsequent identification of specific programs and strategies should always follow an ongoing and careful assessment of the local gang problem (Wyrick, 2000; Howell & Wilson, 2000; Stinchcomb, 2002; Major et al., 2004). Clearly, the nature, size, and extent of the gang problem will vary from one community to another. Therefore, gang prevention and intervention strategies should be targeted to a community's most pressing and relevant issues.

Regarding specific programs, several exist that are intended to prevent juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and gang involvement. These programs are often school-based and few have been evaluated with American Indian samples. Perhaps the most popular gang preven-

tion program is Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.). This is a school-based program led by a uniformed law enforcement officer for the purpose of building positive relationships between juveniles and law enforcement, educating students about gangs, and reducing youth involvement in gangs. Evaluations of G.R.E.A.T. show modest positive results (Esbensen, 2004). While efforts have been made to train officers from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and tribal police departments (Major et al., 2004), research has not yet evaluated the importance of using American Indian officers (or officers who are especially sensitive to Indian culture) at Indian schools. This might be an important consideration though for maximizing the benefit of the G.R.E.A.T. program to Native American students. Given the feelings of isolation, exclusion, and strain experienced by many Native American adolescents, one might expect heightened levels of distrust and suspicion for Anglo law enforcement officers perceived as representing mainstream society. For example, among Native American arrestees and prisoners, contact with the criminal justice system is likely to increase their feelings of distrust of the Anglo system and people (Pridemore, 2004). Consequently, American Indians involved with the criminal justice system are more likely to trust other Indians, especially tribal and spiritual leaders (Pridemore, 2004).

Beyond G.R.E.A.T., effective approaches from school-based programs include teaching skills for nonviolent conflict resolution, enhancing interpersonal communication, and educating students about the role of law and law enforcement (Major et al., 2004). Other promising programs seek to prepare students for GED testing, provide vocational training and job placement, and educate parents (Stinchcomb, 2002). After-school, summer and weekend programs are also promising because they offer more structure and positive pro-social role models to Native American youth. The Boys and Girls Club of America offers two specific anti-gang programs that have demonstrated positive effects, including fewer behavior problems at school and somewhat decreased levels of gang-related delinquency (Major et al., 2004; Joseph & Taylor, 2003). These programs, Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach and Gang Intervention Through Targeted Outreach, seek to develop adolescents' conflict resolution skills, build character, and provide education, vocational training, and recreational activities. Additionally, the *Strengthening Families Program*, a 7-week course for parents and their children, has been shown to reduce substance abuse, delinquency, and family conflict while improving family communica-

tion among Native American families who successfully completed the curriculum (as described by Major et al., 2004).

Programs designed to increase family and community support, strengthen family connections (like the above-referenced program), and build cultural identification hold special promise for helping Native American youth. It is believed that American Indian parents maintain strong influence over their children throughout adolescence and research has demonstrated that increased feelings of family connectedness are associated with better self-reported health and well-being among Indian youth (Pridemore, 2004). Similarly, adolescents with stronger cultural identification and cultural affiliation are less vulnerable to risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse (Sanchez-Way & Johnson, 2000; Pridemore, 2004). Sanchez-Way and Johnson (2000) argue that the positive effects of cultural identification act with family, peer, and community influences to lessen a youth's susceptibility to risk factors. They see cultural identification as "multidimensional rather than a simple linear matter of acculturation or non-acculturation" (p. 22). Building cultural identification requires more than simply living on a reservation or interacting with Indian neighbors. Instead, it is critical that youth feel invested in society (Sanchez-Way & Johnson, 2000). This could include speaking a Native American language, participating in tribal activities like traditional ceremonies, dances and storytelling, and cooking traditional foods. The majority of research on the relationship between cultural identification and affiliation and decreased risky behavior has been conducted using samples of African American and Hispanic adolescents. Yet, given that these groups share many risk factors with Native American youth, it is likely that a similar relationship exists in Indian country.

Regarding suppression strategies, most studies have found these to be relatively ineffective (Jones et al., 2004) and law enforcement officers have been unsuccessful to date in controlling Native American gangs (Joseph & Taylor, 2003). While this lack of success might result partially from the distrustful relationship between adolescents and police, this can also be attributed to the difficulties found in reservation law enforcement. Depending on the location of the crime, severity of the offense, and ethnicity of the alleged perpetrator, tribal, state, and federal law enforcement officers all have jurisdiction on reservations (Wakeling et al., 2001). The complexity of this system makes it difficult to effectively patrol reservations and surrounding areas (Joseph & Taylor, 2003). Tribal police department also are often under-funded and have too few officers to patrol very large territories (Wakeling et al.,

2001). For all of these reasons, suppression strategies might be the least effective for controlling Native American gangs. However, in areas already confronted with severe gang problems, suppression tactics might be necessary (Major et al., 2004). This determination should be made locally and only after careful assessment. Regardless, as part of community-based anti-gang efforts, emphasis should be placed on using tribal leaders and tribal law enforcement officers when possible.

CONCLUSION

While the hardships, poverty, criminal victimization, and poor health experienced by many Native Americans are not new problems, youth gangs are an emerging and growing problem confronting Indian communities. As described, cultural and historical factors are linked to risk factors for gang involvement and these gangs pose unique challenges to Native American families, tribal leaders, and local police departments. Clearly, a better understanding of Native American culture and experiences is critical to addressing gangs in Indian country. In this pursuit, future research is needed that addresses several important topics. Future research should seek to identify unique characteristics of Native American gangs as well as the full spectrum of risk factors for Indian youth involvement. For example, research has found that many parents of gang members abuse substances (Moldier, 1996) and gang-involved youth are more likely than non-involved youth to be substance abusers (Danyko, Arlia, & Martinez, 2002). Given that such alcohol and substance abuse problems are especially common among Native Americans, it is unknown if Native American gang members abuse substances more than other gang members or Native American adolescents who are not involved in gangs. Also, the role of substance abuse as a risk factor for gang membership among Native American youth needs further investigation. Future research also should seek to identify protective factors against gang membership. Subsequent research examining specific topics—like female Native American gangs—also promises to advance knowledge and increase our understanding of Native American gangs generally.

This increased understanding does not mean, however, that all prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies need to be overhauled for use with Native American populations. Instead, just as risk factors like poverty, community isolation and social exclusion reach across cultures, so too do many protective factors and effective programs

(Pridemore, 2004). It seems more cost-effective and timely to modify promising and effective programs to be sensitive to Native American culture than to create entirely new programs for use solely with Native Americans (Wyrick, 2000). Several promising programs have been described here. Research is needed now that rigorously evaluates these programs and measures their impact on Native American youth gangs. This responsible implementation of evidence-based, culturally-appropriate programs will undoubtedly lead to more positive outcomes and a reduction in the Native American gang problem.

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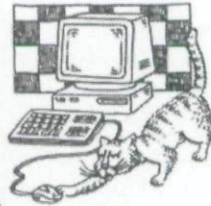
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