



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Assuring Self Determination through an Effective Law Enforcement Program Gila River Police Department Gila River Indian Community (Sacaton, AZ)

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Recognizing that effective law enforcement is both an essential governmental function and an important expression of sovereignty, the Gila River Indian Community assumed responsibility for its own policing in the late 1990s. Since taking over management from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Gila River Police Department dramatically strengthened its capacity to enforce laws and enhanced public safety improvements that are especially important because of the Community's proximity to a major metropolitan center. With its cadre of highly trained officers, the Gila River Police Department exemplifies the kind of efficiency and responsiveness gains possible under tribal control.

During the last decade, national studies revealed disturbing trends in criminal activity within American Indian communities. These communities are plagued by unusually high and climbing crime rates. In the late 1990s, for example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that American Indians sustained a rate of violent victimization double that of African Americans and roughly two and a half times that experienced by Caucasians. Studies also reported that the most prevalent crime in Indian Country aggravated assault occurred at twice the rate experienced in the US generally.

Regrettably, the prevalence of crime in Indian communities did not translate to enhanced law enforcement. Indian Country is commonly under-policed; in fact, a 1997 report to the Attorney General and Secretary of the Interior represented law enforcement in Indian Country as inadequate. According to this report, the typical Indian community has only 1.3 officers for every thousand citizens. At the same time, Indian Country also struggles with jurisdictional complications. Policing is often compromised because tribal officers are not certified to respond to certain criminal incidents, including crimes committed by non-Indians on Indian lands. These inadequacies result in even more daunting statistics. In 1999, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that nearly 70 percent of violent victimization experienced by Indians was not committed by Indians. Studies also noted that American Indians were more likely than any other population subgroup to sustain a serious injury during a violent incident.

The Gila River Indian Community was not immune to these trends in criminal activity. In 1995, the Community discovered that dangerous crimes occurred at the rate of one crime for every forty-two individuals, and crimes of all sorts occurred at the rate of three crimes for every eight individuals. The BIA designated the Gila River Indian Community a crime red zone by the late 1990s.

The Community struggled against several of the factors that make policing Indian Country such a complicated matter. For one, the Community's 370,000 acre reservation is located within miles of

Phoenix and is split by the I-10 corridor. As a result, the Community deals with crimes (and frequency of crimes) most rural communities rarely confront. During the 1990s, the Community's BIA law enforcement detachment was too small to patrol such a large area. Moreover, because BIA officers worked out of a central office as opposed to establishing "beats" that divided up the large reservation they found it difficult to respond to calls and arrive on-scene in a reasonable amount of time. Adding to these difficulties, BIA officers held only federal certification, leaving them unauthorized to police criminal activity among non-Indians. In the absence of a Memorandum of Agreement with state officers to assist the Community in handling such incidents, these non-Indian crimes were regularly ignored. Community citizens felt increasingly helpless.

Convinced that something must be done to improve safety for its citizens and the quality and responsiveness of its police services, the Gila River Indian Community decided to take over law enforcement on their reservation. So in 1998, under a PL 93-638 contract with the BIA, the Community established the Gila River Police Department (GRPD).

With full support from the Community's tribal government, the GRPD immediately and systematically began to address the limitations against which the BIA struggled. When the Community took over management in 1998, for example, the law enforcement responsibilities were shouldered by a mere fifteen officers. After an aggressive effort to increase staffing, today, the Department maintains an organization of ninety-two employees, seventy-one of whom are sworn police officers. The GRPD also initiated a structural solution to the challenge of patrolling such a large area. Rather than working from a central office, the GRPD regularly patrol beats, allowing them to respond more quickly to incidents. Under BIA management, emergency calls often took an hour or more to respond to and routine calls could take as long as a day. Now, on average, GRPD officers respond to emergency calls within nine minutes and to routine calls within thirteen minutes. The Community also invested in E911 service so that cellular 911 calls from the reservation are sent directly to their dispatch rather than being routed through Arizona's 911 system. GRPD response times are faster than most Arizona police departments.

The GRPD also addresses the jurisdictional challenges that constrain so many tribal and BIA police forces. In order to protect both Community citizens and the thousands of non-Indians who visit the reservation for business or recreation, the GRPD ensures that every one of its officers meets or exceeds the training and certification requirements of police officers throughout the state of Arizona. Officers hold triple certification: they work with the Gila River Law Enforcement Commission to achieve tribal officer status, with the state of Arizona to gain state peace officer certification, and with the BIA to become federally certified officers. GRPD officers are legally authorized and qualified to handle virtually every criminal incident that occurs in the Community.

Not surprisingly, the Gila River Police Department is succeeding in its law enforcement mandate. Currently, the GRPD is in the accreditation process from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, a national organization that determines through a rigorous, on-site assessment whether individual departments meet the standards of the nation's finest policing agencies. As a testament to its effectiveness, the GRPD is exceeding the standards of surrounding communities. Statistics in 2002 showed an 8 percent decrease in criminal activities such as homicide, rape, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and armed assault from 2001. This decrease is a significant achievement at a time when many neighboring communities, including Phoenix, have seen a rise in such crimes. These successes have earned the GRPD widespread respect not only from outsiders, but most importantly, from the Community citizens themselves.

Understandably, the Gila River Indian Community makes significant demands upon the Department. The Community understands that no nation is truly sovereign unless it possesses the ability to establish and enforce its own laws. By establishing its own law enforcement agency, the Community exercises its sovereignty and in doing so, makes the reservation a safer place to

live, work, and visit. Critically, the GRPD constantly strives to improve itself. While it already possesses far superior tools for law enforcement than available under BIA management, the GRPD continues to solicit Community input on how to improve its services. Such attention to continuous quality improvement helps to solidify GRPD's effectiveness as an institution of self-governance. The tribal government requires, as well, that the GRPD stay at the cutting edge of law enforcement. The GRPD embraces this challenge and consistently complements its conventional police operations with community services. These services include community-based policing, neighborhood block watch programs, a citizen police academy, and a citizens-in-policing volunteer program. All of these programs foster better relationships between officers and Community citizens. Some programs also actively involve citizens in the crime prevention process. The GRPD believes that citizens who are familiar with the Department and its services help the Department to better serve the Community. These citizens share information with others and help to create a more knowledgeable and safety-conscious community.

Finally, it is important to the Community that the GRPD be motivated by Community values. The GRPD works actively to incorporate Akimel O'odham and Pee-Posh values into its policing work. It does this, in part, by encouraging Community citizens to consider careers within the Department. Today, 41 percent of GRPD police officer are Native, 22 percent of the sworn compliment are from the Community. In order to develop a pool of future officers from Community citizens, the GRPD established the Police Explorer Program, which provides opportunities for youth to participate in law enforcement activities and generate interest in law enforcement careers. Similarly, the Police Cadet Program hires high school students to perform part-time work within the Department. Such programs help the GRPD to positively influence youth and encourage their commitment to serving the Community through law enforcement.

As the Gila River Police Department consistently meets and exceeds the Community's expectations, it justifies the Community's push to assume management of their own law enforcement. The GRPD demonstrates that such an endeavor is an investment in Community safety, values, and sovereignty.

Lessons:

- By taking control of law enforcement, tribal governments have an opportunity to improve responsiveness, strengthen accountability, and tailor services to meet community needs. GRPD is an example of how a tribe can conscientiously take over a program and dramatically improve its overall performance.
- Cross-deputization of tribal police officers places them in a better position to protect and serve their communities. Obtaining state and federal accreditations qualify and legally permit tribal police officers to enforce a wider range of laws.
- Police officers can play a vital role in building healthy communities by serving as mentors, participating in community events, and by making citizens' first encounters with the police a positive experience.

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