

Native American Drug and Gang Initiative Task Force

Intertribal Nations of Wisconsin

Drug dealers and gang members threaten the well-being of communities throughout the United States. In Indian Country, jurisdictional issues and a lack of trust in law enforcement complicate the apprehension of drug- and gang-involved offenders. Tribal Police Departments in Wisconsin formed the Native American Drug and Gang Initiative Task Force to strengthen their ability to deal with these illegal activities with support from the tribal governments. The Task Force facilitates inter-agency cooperation and helps tribes take the lead in addressing public safety threats to their communities.

ILLICIT ACTIVITIES ON TRIBAL LANDS

Federal, state, and tribal agencies struggle to address drug and gang problems on reservations. Jurisdiction on tribal lands is complex, and can result in confusion about which laws apply. Many federal and state drug interdiction officers have limited cultural and community knowledge. Community members may be reluctant to cooperate with investigators – tribal or nontribal – making it difficult to pursue leads and to arrest criminals. Criminals take advantage of these complications, and as a result, drug and gang prosecutions on reservations occur at a significantly lower rate than in off-reservation communities.

Still other characteristics of Wisconsin reservations have made them prime locations for gang and drug activity. Their proximity to major population centers such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee make them valuable trafficking routes. Tribal members suffering from long-term unemployment, cultural alienation, and a lack of community connection are vulnerable to addiction and recruitment into lucrative but illegal schemes. Backing up law enforcement's perceptions, a 2007 study in Wisconsin found increasing numbers of drug dealers and gang members operating and living on reservations in the state. Not only Native-focused gangs, such as Satan's Disciples, Native Mob, and Sovereign Warriors – known for appropriating sacred objects and cultural practices to conceal illegal activities – but also nationally known gangs such as the Latin Kings and Knights Templar were found to recruit and operate on tribal lands.

As gangs and a substantial trade in illicit drugs like heroin, methamphetamine, and synthetic cannabinoids moved onto reservations in Wisconsin, tribal police were ill-equipped to deal with the surge of violence and related social problems that followed. Tribal officers lacked the training, contacts, and funding needed for effective gang and drug investigations. Federal and state agencies, tribes' putative partners in these efforts, often declined to share intelligence because they feared that tribal officers would mishandle the information yet they also lacked cultural aptitude to effectively police Indian Country. In contrast to gangs, which were establishing sophisticated trafficking and recruiting networks that reached well beyond reservation borders, tribal police departments were isolated in their efforts to respond to this new wave of crime.

A COORDINATED TRIBAL RESPONSE

In 2007, tribal police departments governments in Wisconsin explored the idea of establishing a drug task force under the state's Multi-Jurisdictional Drug Enforcement Group program. More than a dozen such groups existed in the state to facilitate regional drug-related law enforcement, but the Native American Gang and Drug Initiative (NAGDI) Task Force was the first to address these problems across geographically disconnected jurisdictions and the only one operating wholly in Indian Country.

The NAGDI Task Force is a collaboration of the Wisconsin Department of Justice, the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, and the law enforcement agencies of nine Wisconsin tribes (the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa Tribe, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin, Stockbridge-Munsee Community, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, Oneida Nation, and the Ho Chunk Nation). It consists of 35 law enforcement officers who have been designated by their tribal nations as members of local tribal Task Force teams. These patrol officers and detectives continue with their regular law enforcement duties but also receive specialized NAGDI training. The Task Force is governed by a board composed of the nine tribal police chiefs and the chief warden of the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. It receives a small yearly grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, which it uses to fund training and to purchase equipment for tribal initiatives.

Functionally, the Task Force facilitates information coordination among member agencies to better fight illegal drug and gang activities on tribal lands and in surrounding communities. For example, all members of the Task Force have access to shared confidential law enforcement databases with surveillance information about suspects and drug trafficking routes. These allow tribal officers to more quickly identify trends in criminal activity across jurisdictions, track links between on- and off-reservation gang and drug activity, and collaborate with other tribes and agencies on interdiction. For some investigations and special operations, Task Force partner tribes and relevant federal, state, and local drug enforcement agencies may directly assist one another by sharing staff and equipment. The NAGDI Task Force also provides awareness training to police officers, first responders, tribal government personnel, and the public on drug and gang issues.

Where in the past, Wisconsin tribes had to wait for off-reservation law enforcement officers to intercede – with operations that met with limited success – the NAGDI Task Force has helped tribes get results. In 2007, before the formation of the Task Force, law enforcement officers arrested only 24 people on the nine Wisconsin reservations for drug crimes and seized only small amounts of marijuana and cocaine. In 2015, tribal officers arrested over 400 individuals and seized larger volumes and a wider range of illicit drugs than ever before. Now that tribal officers can respond to emerging threats more rapidly, reservation communities are becoming safer, and gang membership has become less enticing.

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Through the NAGDI Task Force, tribes have taken a leadership role in combating gang and drug activity on their reservations. Each Native nation develops a plan to reduce local threats, and the Task Force provides support to carry out these tribe-specific law enforcement goals. In addition, the Task Force provides guidance to tribal governments on how to use their sovereign powers to address community crime concerns. In 2013, for example, the Lac du Flambeau Band declared a state of emergency in response to the drug crisis on its reservation, and it enacted laws to allow banishments and to establish restorative justice procedures for drug- and gang-involved offenders. Other nations, including the Ho Chunk Nation and Menominee Indian Tribe, have passed legislation to ban synthetic drug formulations designed to elude law enforcement. Significantly, each local team sees itself both as part of the NAGDI Task Force team and as part of its tribe's overall efforts to prevent crime and the root causes of crime. Task Force officers link their efforts to those of the tribal courts, Indian child welfare workers, schools, addiction counselors, and housing authority staff, among others, to better address these problems. In other words, the NAGDI Task Force works broadly across Native nations and partner agencies to harness law enforcement capacity, and it works deeply within each tribe to access the community and cultural expertise needed to replace violence with healing.

One of the NAGDI Task Force's most notable achievements is renewed trust in law enforcement. Years of ineffective operations by state and federal agencies tasked with gang and drug crime interdiction caused tribal citizens to lose confidence in the police. The Task Force has proven that tribal officers, working in partnership with external agencies, *can* keep reservation communities safe. Tribal officers also build trust and respect through an emphasis on communication. The NAGDI Task force prioritizes a reciprocal flow of information between law enforcement and the community. Reservation residents are informed about the objectives of law enforcement and kept updated on their efforts to fight crime. The Task Force educates and engages hundreds of elders, community members, first responders, casino employees, and other tribal employees to help them identify the signs of gang recruitment and drug activity. Notably, community outreach includes information on resources to help family and friends who are dealing with addiction and abuse. The NAGDI Task Force's efforts to restore trust are further aided by tribal officers' sensitivity to cultural protocols, which not only guide them in their communication efforts but also help them properly deal with sacred items, such as drums and eagle feathers, that gangs have co-opted for illegal uses. Ultimately, renewed trust in law enforcement has encouraged tribal citizens and other reservation residents to express their concerns, share sensitive information, and participate in the process of crime reduction.

The NAGDI Task Force gives tribal police officers the tools they need to address gang and drug activity more effectively. Tribes have access to federal and state specialists in gang behavior and drug trafficking. Increased cooperation among tribes, local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies has reduced the jurisdictional uncertainty that allowed illegal activities to flourish on tribal lands. Non-tribal officers no longer view their tribal counterparts with suspicion but as competent and knowledgeable partners in investigations and special operations. Intelligence sharing leads to more robust surveillance across borders and makes it more difficult

for suspects to evade capture. For example, when a Latin King gang member fled to Menominee shortly after shooting a Satan's Disciple gang member on the Oneida reservation, the Task Force responded immediately, and the suspect was taken into custody within hours. With increased officer training, low costs, and better access to information, the NAGDI Task Force allows tribes to "punch above their weight" on gang and drug issues.

CONCLUSION

Gang and drug trafficking activity do not respect borders. The Native American Drug and Gang Initiative Task Force helps Wisconsin tribes lead the effort to identify and eliminate threats to public safety on their reservations. By working with one another and in cooperation with the federal, state, and local law enforcement partners, Wisconsin Nations protect their sovereignty and help ensure the future of their communities.

LESSONS

1. Tribally led drug and gang task forces increase the effectiveness of law enforcement by improving cooperation and coordination among federal, state, and tribal agencies.
2. Engaging and educating the public about drug and gang activity is critical to keeping Native communities safe.
3. Intertribal law enforcement task forces strengthen Native nations by providing new opportunities for tribes to address their own problems in their own ways.