

December 14, 2009

Gang Violence Grows on an Indian Reservation

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

PINE RIDGE, S.D. — Richard Wilson has been a pallbearer for at least five of his “homeboys” in the North Side Tre Tre Gangster Crips, a Sioux imitation of a notorious Denver gang.

One 15-year-old member was mauled by rivals. A 17-year-old shot himself; another, on a cocaine binge and firing wildly, was shot by the police. One died in a drunken car wreck, and another, a founder of the gang named Gaylord, was stabbed to death at 27.

“We all got drunk after Gaylord’s burial, and I started rapping,” said Mr. Wilson, who, at 24, is practically a gang elder. “But I teared up and couldn’t finish.”

Mr. Wilson is one of 5,000 young men from the Oglala Sioux tribe involved with at least 39 gangs on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The gangs are being blamed for an increase in vandalism, theft, violence and fear that is altering the texture of life here and in other parts of American Indian territory.

This stunning land of crumpled prairie, horse pastures turned tawny in the autumn and sunflower farms is marred by an astonishing number of roadside crosses and gang tags sprayed on houses, stores and abandoned buildings, giving rural Indian communities an inner-city look.

Groups like Wild Boyz, TBZ, Nomads and Indian Mafia draw children from broken, alcohol-ravaged homes, like Mr. Wilson’s, offering brotherhood, an identity drawn from urban gangsta rap and self-protection.

Some groups have more than a hundred members, others just a couple of dozen. Compared with their urban models, they are more likely to fight rivals, usually over some minor slight, with fists or clubs than with semiautomatic pistols.

Mr. Wilson, an unemployed school dropout who lives with assorted siblings and partners in his mother's ramshackle house, without running water, displayed a scar on his nose and one over his eye. "It's just like living in a ghetto," he said. "Someone's getting beat up every other night."

The Justice Department distinguishes the home-grown gangs on reservations from the organized drug gangs of urban areas, calling them part of an overall juvenile crime problem in Indian country that is abetted by eroding law enforcement, a paucity of juvenile programs and a suicide rate for Indian youth that is more than three times the national average.

If they lack the reach of the larger gangs after which they style themselves, the Indian gangs have emerged as one more destructive force in some of the country's poorest and most neglected places.

While many crimes go unreported, the police on the Pine Ridge reservation have documented thousands of gang-related thefts, assaults — including sexual assaults — and rising property crime over the last three years, along with four murders. Residents are increasingly fearful that their homes will be burglarized or vandalized. Car windows are routinely smashed out.

"Tenants are calling in and saying 'I'm scared,'" Paul Iron Cloud, executive officer of the [Oglala Sioux \(Lakota\) Housing Authority](#), told the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in July at [a special hearing](#) on the increase of gang activity.

"It seems that every day we're getting more violence," Mr. Iron Cloud said.

Perhaps unique to reservations, rivals sometimes pelt one other with cans of food from the federal commodity program, a practice called "commod-squadding."

As federal grants to Pine Ridge have declined over the last decade, the tribal police force has shrunk by more than half, with only 12 to 20 officers per shift patrolling an area the size of Rhode Island, said John Mousseau, chairman of the tribe's judiciary committee.

Attorney General [Eric H. Holder Jr.](#) has proposed large increases in money for the police, courts and juvenile programs, and for fighting rampant domestic and sexual violence on reservations.

Christopher M. Grant, who used to head a police antigang unit in Rapid City, S.D., and is now a consultant on gangs to several tribes and federal agencies, has noted the “marked increase in gang activity, particularly on reservations in the Midwest, the Northwest and the Southwest” over the last five to seven years.

The Navajo Nation in Arizona, for example, has identified 225 gang units, up from 75 in 1997.

One group that reaches across reservations in Minnesota, called the Native Mob, is more like the street gangs seen in cities, with hierarchical leadership and involvement in drug and weapons trafficking, Mr. Grant said.

Many of the gangs in Pine Ridge, like the Tre Tre Crips, were started by tribal members who encountered them in prison or while living off the reservation; others have taken their names and colors from movies and records.

Even as they seek to bolster policing, Pine Ridge leaders see their best long-term hope for fighting gangs in cultural revival.

“We’re trying to give an identity back to our youth,” said Melvyn Young Bear, the tribe’s appointed cultural liaison. “They’re into the subculture of African-Americans and Latinos. But they are Lakota, and they have a lot to be proud of.”

Mr. Young Bear, 42, is charged with promoting Lakota rituals, including drumming, chanting and sun dances. He noted that some Head Start programs were now conducted entirely in Lakota.

Michael Little Boy Jr., 30, of the village of Evergreen, said he had initially been tempted by gang life, but with rituals and purifying sweat lodges, “I was able to turn myself around.” He is emerging as a tribal spiritual leader, working with youth groups to promote native traditions. Mr. Grant said a survey of young men in South Dakota reservations found that the approach might be helping.

Mr. Wilson, the 24-year-old gang member, said he regretted not learning the Sioux language when he was young and now wondered about his own future.

“I still get drunk and hang with my homeboys, but not like I used to,” he said.

His car, its windows shattered, sits outside his house, so he cannot get to the G.E.D. class he says he would like to attend. His goal is to run a recording studio where his younger half-brother, Richard Lame, 18, could make rap songs. Mr. Lame is finishing high school and says he wants to go to college.

But he admits that he still joined 30 or so homeboys in town to party any chance he got — “for the rush, the thrill.” As he spoke, he was dressed in the dark colors of his set, the Black Wall Street Boyz; his tiny bedroom was decorated with movie posters of Al Pacino as the megalomaniacal drug dealer Tony Montana in “Scarface,” and he wore a black bandanna.

He pulled out a thick sheaf of his rap lyrics and gave an impromptu performance.

Ever since birth

I been waitin’ for death ...