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Native American Youth in Gangs: Acculturation and Identity

The emergence and rapid proliferation of youth gangs on Native American reservations (Indian Country) in the early-1990s was a result of the intersection of certain factors in the processes of youth identity and tribal acculturation that facilitated the importation and reinforcement of “gangsta” youth culture onto reservations. In 1996 the Navajo Nation was funded by the U.S. Dept. of Justice to research this situation for their reservation. Dr. Troy Armstrong and Ms. Barbara Mendenhall from California State University, Sacramento were contracted to assist this effort (Armstrong, et al. 1999, Mendenhall 1999). This research determined that factors of youth identity and tribal acculturation on the Navajo Nation included:

- socioeconomic issues of poverty, alcoholism and family dysfunction,
- losses of traditional culture but persisting kinship ties among cousins,
- alienated youth who strongly related to certain strains of youth culture, especially “gangsta” identity,
- high rates in geographic mobility of Navajo families between the reservation and metropolitan areas, and
- shifts in reservation housing configurations that run counter to traditional settlement patterns.

These factors resulted from general processes of culture change based in patterns of traditional Navajo behavior. Navajo families utilized cultural traditions of mobility in search of resources and social support as they moved off the reservation into urban centers where youth gangs are endemic and then moved back to the comforts of the reservation. Changes in traditional housing patterns on the reservation created new densities of population conducive to formation and continuation of youth gangs.

New housing patterns also facilitated youths’ access to popular culture. Socioeconomic issues of poverty, alcoholism, substance abuse and family dysfunction resulting from culture conflict and change left Navajo children marginalized from their families, communities and Navajo traditional culture. In place of these traditional points of connectedness, certain youth established strong ties with popular culture and youth gangs as they created identity. Popular culture diffused onto the reservation via youth’s access to new technologies available in cluster housing. Remaining traditional kinship ties of clans and cousins expedited some youth, living both on and off the reservation, into joining or starting youth gangs. These key components coalesced throughout the reservation at a particular time, the early to mid-1990s, with strong causative impact

resulting in the emergence and rapid proliferation of youth gangs on the Navajo Nation.

This thesis is supported by analyzing empirical data generated during the federally funded study of youth gangs on the Navajo Nation. The presence and emergent nature of gangs in Indian Country is documented in published and unpublished sources. Data derived from the Navajo Gang Study were analyzed to profile the study respondents focusing on two critical domains: the key areas of identity for these adolescents and the areas in which they and their families' have experienced acculturation and/or maintained connections to traditional Navajo culture. Areas examined regarding identity and acculturation include: family relations and conflicts, normative Navajo childrearing, peers, school and work, role models, interests in popular culture, involvement with street gangs, competency with Navajo language, knowledge of basic Navajo cultural concepts, involvement in traditional Navajo cultural religious activities, and identification and involvement with the Navajo community.

We also mined empirical data from the study to evaluate the nature of the gangs themselves and their activities on the Navajo reservation, substantiating that the most marginalized youth are those who adopt the most extreme criminal identities. Data from a variety of sources documented the importation of gangs by Navajo youth that occurred in a situation where they and their families are regularly moving off the reservation to urban centers where the youth connect with local street gangs; they then return to the reservation becoming catalysts for gang recruitment. We also learned of profound changes in reservation housing patterns that figure as a significant acculturative variables affecting existence and proliferation of youth gangs on the Navajo Nation.

Unlike gangs in urban centers, where a long history of documentation and research exist, the presence of gangs in Indian Country (and in rural settings in general), had not been studied in any detail. In-depth ethnographic research of rural gangs or gangs in Indian Country, has been virtually nonexistent.

A. The Problem of Emergent Youth Gangs in Indian Country

A very scant literature, mostly generated by a few anthropologists looking as an aside at youth deviance in traditional Native American societies, has noted collective adolescent activities resembling gang behavior. But, what has begun to be seen and documented by local authorities on numerous reservations over the past ten or so years appears to be a qualitatively and quantitatively different phenomenon, with increased levels of violence and links to drug trafficking. A 1995 survey of tribal law enforcement agencies substantiates this impression of a newly emergent problem among Native American youth (Hailer 1996a, 1996b). Seventy-five percent of responding officials cited an increase in violent crime by juveniles on their reservations; gang activity was enumerated as one of the principal factors underlying this shift toward violent crime. Of the twenty-nine states with tribal police departments, thirteen reported experiencing gang activity. Further, the responding departments confirmed that these kinds of gang activity on reservations are a relatively recent turn of events. Most stated that gang activity first began to come to their attention in 1992 and 1993. In describing conditions and circumstances responsible for the appearance and growth of these youth gangs on reservations, respondents emphasized the crucial role of off-reservation influences.

Apparently, when families who have moved to nearby towns and cities return to their reservations, some of their children transport a knowledge and a set of experiences derived from having been involved in youth gangs in these more urbanized settings. Here, one sees a very compelling argument made for an “importation effect.”

A similar set of observations and circumstances were being reported by a variety of parties on the Navajo Nation including judges, law enforcement officials, social service agencies and private citizens prior to the initiation of the Navajo Gang Study. What had apparently begun to occur with regard to youth crime on the Navajo Nation was a substantial escalation in the level of violence. “Gangs” (using the term loosely) of youth were being seen as responsible for a variety of offenses including beatings, stabbings, drive-by shootings, robberies and homicides. There was also indication of a sizable increase in drug trafficking, tagging of buildings and acts of intimidation. By 1993, the Navajo Tribal Court was reporting that more than 50 percent of those youth who were arrested, tried and adjudicated to be delinquent by the court were involved in gang activities leading to their court appearance.

Variables existing on the Navajo Nation as a result of cultural diffusion and culture change coalesced to facilitate the importation of youth gangs onto the reservation. Other sources, including several independent surveys of gangs in Indian Country, verified the emergence of the widespread reservation gang phenomenon in the first half of the 1990s. A brief history of the forces driving culture change among the Navajo shows that importation and proliferation of youth gangs is one of many diffusions of mainstream culture with which the Navajo people have had to contend.

B. Emergence of Youth Gangs in the Context of Culture Change

Particular factors present on the Navajo Nation facilitated the importation and emergence of youth gangs on that reservation during the early to mid-1990s. The emergence of youth gangs occurred in the much broader historical context of the Navajo Nation’s experience with acculturation and culture change. The following brief description of Navajo history can be documented with similar or worse levels of disruption and catastrophe for every tribal group in the United States.

Foremost, the Navajo people have been involved in processes of culture change from time immemorial. As Athapaskan/Apachean nomadic hunter-gatherers organized at the band level, they arrived in the Southwest sometime between 1000 A.D. and 1525. Coming to be known as Navajo, they encountered and were influenced by many other Native American groups on their migration southward (Brugge 1983). Upon arrival in and settlement throughout the Four Corners area, contact with the various village dwelling Pueblo peoples precipitated major changes including practicing agriculture (but still living in widely scattered and shifting camps) and adoption of some Pueblo ceremonial ideas and activities (Vogt 1961). Contacts with Pueblo peoples, including raiding and trading, accelerated with Spanish colonization that forced missions upon Pueblo villages. For example, Acoma Pueblo was destroyed by the Spanish in 1599 and “old captives from that pueblo [were placed] with Navajos” (Brugge 1983). It is likely that the Navajo experienced population reduction due to introduction of European diseases comparable to other Native American tribes. These epidemics were usually deadly

enough to severely impact tribal social structure.

The Navajos also participated in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 when all Spanish were killed or driven out of the area. Following reconquest in 1692, many Pueblo refugees fled to the Navajo and were incorporated into Navajo social structure as new clans and bringing weaving, pottery, architectural and basketry styles, and especially ceremonial lore and practice, as well as sheep, horses and new crops (peaches and cotton) (Brugge 1983, Vogt 1961). Brugge (1983 based on Underhill 1956) suggests that the European custom of whipping as punishment may have been introduced at this time.

Warfare and raiding against Utes, Apaches, Pueblos, Spaniards (Mexicans after 1823 when Mexico became independent from Spain, at which time raids against the Navajo increased for the capture of slaves), and Anglo settlers (the area became U.S. territory in 1846) increased until 1863 when the U.S. Army started a campaign to relocate the Navajo to Fort Sumner in southeastern New Mexico. Although Spanish settlers had tried to encroach on Navajo lands, and missionaries had tried to establish missions, these colonizers were never successfully able to make any inroads or to stop Navajo raids. It was not until the Americans became politically dominant in the region that colonization caused major adverse culture change for the Navajo. Within two years of the start of relocation, most Navajo had been moved to this location remote from their homeland. This relocation effort was a socioeconomic disaster for the United States government, as well as for the Navajo. Within three years a treaty allowed the Navajo to return to a reservation established in the general area of their homeland. This experience ended the Navajo tradition of warfare and raiding.

Colonization by the Spanish was a mild and nondisruptive process of culture contact and diffusion for the Navajo compared to American colonization. This change occurred as a result of interaction and acculturation or adoption and adaptation of non-Navajo cultural behaviors under Spanish/Mexican colonization. Far more dramatic forces of constraint, transformation, and destruction of indigenous values were introduced and prevailed during the westward expansion of U.S. society. Massacres and other unjust acts were perpetrated against the Navajo, including inaction against New Mexicans who held Navajo slaves, as well as continued slave raids and land encroachment by New Mexican settlers. Resources were administered by representatives of the dominant power -- outsiders who tried to manipulate Navajo culture. Racism was fundamental to U.S. colonization (Blauner 1969 in Bachman 1992).

Following the Navajo "Long Walk" to Fort Sumner, the terrible experiences while there, and the return to the Four Corners area (the new reservation contained only ten percent of their former land) U.S. colonization and administration from 1868 to the 1930s was a history of intended and unintended policies of destruction of Native Americans, including the Navajo.

The general policies of the U.S. government in managing Native Americans involved purposeful and inadvertent exposure to disease that caused massive levels of death. Populations were relocated from ancestral homelands to reservation wastelands. Assimilation by various means including land privatization and distribution, criminalizing traditional religious activities, forced adoption of foreign religions, and kidnapping of

children to boarding schools where they were severely punished for speaking their native language or practicing native traditions were all tactics and policies that were employed. Most of these general policies were applied to the Navajo tribe.

However, after 1868, due to the remoteness and the size of the reservation as well as the dispersed nature of the population, the Navajo were able to reestablish themselves, to increase in numbers, and to maintain their traditional ceremonial life and their language. In fact, it was thought by many Navajo that the ceremonies that they had held while at Fort Sumner were what enabled them to return to their home country rather than experience the kind of total tribal relocation that was the result of U.S. government policies for many Native American tribes. For the most part, the contact that Navajo people had with outsiders was with traders who provided goods, helped with filling out forms and writing letters, buried the dead, and opened markets for Navajo crafts in exchange for wool, weavings and silver jewelry. The size of the reservation was increased several times from its original 3.5 million acres to the current size of almost 12 million acres or 25,000 square miles.

Beginning in the 1930s, the U.S. government applied pressure on the Navajo Nation to change economic traditions through forced livestock reduction and by providing payment for relocation off-reservation. Social systems were manipulated by the imposition of tribal governmental structures based on Western models for the purpose of “approving” lease contracts for extraction of resources. In addition, environmental degradation was produced by this resource exploitation and resultant pollution. All of these policies resulted in social disorganization.

More recent policies have further increased Navajo social disorganization. Although now managed by a Tribal Council, who are elected from and by the enrolled members of the Navajo Tribe, many of the Nation’s policies and plans are modeled on Western concepts. For example, livestock allocations are managed on the basis of the environmental conditions of the family’s rangeland. In the 1970s the federal government determined that a large area of land (Joint Use Area) shared by Hopi and Navajo since ancient times was Hopi land and the Hopi tribe could require Navajo residents to leave. Another example is the proliferation of cluster housing units on the reservation. The Navajo Housing Authority uses federal funding to build densely populated Western-design, multi-room, single-family housing clusters that are totally different from traditional Navajo one-room circular or 8-sided hogan housing design or living patterns. The combination of continued livestock reduction, removal of Navajo from the Joint Use Area, and increasing population has meant that more people must leave family land to make a living. Their only housing options are to move off-reservation to urban centers or to live in reservation cluster housing.

Another example of tribally-managed but Western-based concepts is the institution of tribal social control. The tribal judicial code was based on Western concepts of jurisprudence. A recent major shift has been reintroduction of indigenous concepts of social control through changing the tribal code, acceptance of Navajo common law, and the creation of the Peacemaker Division of the Judicial Branch of Navajo government, which is modeled on the traditional pattern of reconciliation. Here, a respected elder brings all concerned persons together in an atmosphere where everyone has the

opportunity to participate in determining an outcome that restores harmony to all parties. The concept of the Navajo as a cohesive group with tribal-level institutions was imposed by the U.S. Government for the convenience of the federal government in making treaties with the people known as Navajo.

When the U.S. assumed control over the former northern territories of Mexico in 1846, Navajo social structure largely operated as small communities of related families whose disputes were managed, when necessary, by headmen. It became clear that treaties signed by various headmen were not recognized by other Navajo. Prior to developing the treaty that established the Navajo reservation and allowed the Navajo to leave Fort Sumner in 1868, the captive population was required to elect "chiefs" to represent them in negotiations with the government. However, there was little need for tribal level organization on the reservation until outside mining interests wanted to establish leases to extract resources from tribal lands. At that point, the U.S. government appointed a committee of headmen to represent the tribe, but the legality of this was immediately questioned and a procedure for election was established (see Young 1972 for a complete history of establishment of the Navajo Tribe). The U.S. government subdivided the reservation into agencies and selected a community in each agency area that became the locus for federal services in that region with Western-style housing built for government staff. Some of these agency towns such as Shiprock, Ft. Defiance, and Tuba City are where gangs first emerged and proliferated.

By the 1950s, an elected Tribal Council was in place, as was the bureaucratic structure to manage all of the services and programs operated by the tribe. This governmental structure is based on the model of Western democratic government with no foundation or parallels in traditional Navajo social structure or value system. There also seem to be remnants of Navajo social structure and interpersonal norms scattered throughout the structures: I was frequently told that certain persons were hired or not hired or could not be fired or disciplined because of kinship relations.

Despite the introduction of Western-based social structures, many Navajo remain relatively isolated from outside influences. The exceptions are those Navajo who move off-reservation or who live and/or work directly with non-Navajo employed on the reservation by various federal, private and tribal agencies. Most Navajo are not forced to relocate, do continue to live in traditional housing patterns where social disputes with individuals outside the extended family seldom become a significant problem, have the ability to continue some level of traditional subsistence pattern and live within a traditional system of values and beliefs keeping them connected to extended family. As noted previously, access to electronic media is a recent development. For families that are grounded in traditional beliefs, values, language and kinship relations, the pace of culture contact and culture change is slow enough to be integrated and largely absorbed into the robust Navajo culture. At the same time, however, some Navajo families experience enormous levels of cultural change and disruption.

Those families that must leave the reservation for employment, who have lost language skills, are immersed in alcohol or substance abuse during critical periods of their children's development, are no longer part of reciprocal kinship systems, or have lost connection with traditional religious values, beliefs and activities may have experienced

culture change that is severely damaging. For these families, these factors of mobility and relocation, poverty, loss of kin support, substance abuse, and loss of language and traditional values resulted in marginalized youth, some of whom found connection with the social support networks known as youth gangs.

The research on the Navajo Nation between 1996-1999 documented that the emergence and rapid proliferation of youth gangs on the Navajo Nation in the early-1990s was a result of the intersection between:

- socioeconomic issues of poverty, alcoholism and family dysfunction,
- losses of traditional culture but persisting kinship ties among cousins,
- alienated youth who strongly related to certain strains of youth culture, especially “gangsta” identity,
- high rates in geographic mobility of Navajo families between the reservation and metropolitan areas, and
- shifts in reservation housing configurations that run counter to traditional settlement patterns

and processes of youth identity and Navajo acculturation that facilitated the importation, reinforcement, and persistence of “gangsta” youth culture onto the reservation. Data generated by the OJJDP-funded Navajo Gang Study were utilized to document the existence and role of these variables in the gang emergence phenomenon. We found that many of the families of the study respondents are (or were previously), in fact, highly dysfunctional. Respondents reported numerous instances of parental alcohol abuse and child neglect, especially during the respondent’s early years. This abuse and neglect was particularly damaging if these families, having relocated off-reservation in search of resources, lived in metropolitan low-income neighborhoods without the support of extended relatives who could intervene with neglected children. Instead of identifying with and being socialized by their family, the respondents turned to peers and the streets where gangs were a significant community social factor and offered a cohesive system of support, recognition, camaraderie, and meaningful interaction with which to identify. Thus, the high mobility of some Navajo families to urban gang-infested areas created the circumstance where some of their children joined gangs and then returned to the reservation to reside in cluster housing communities.

Cluster housing built in communities throughout the reservation during and after the 1970s provided the environmental setting where gangs could take root and proliferate on the Navajo Nation. Historically, dispersed homesites have been the foundation for maintaining the core of Navajo culture even while participating in ongoing culture change. This is the setting where Navajo families reside with or near extended relatives, sharing resources, participating and sharing in traditional (even if minimal) pastoral and agricultural subsistence activities, and having access to traditional hogans to hold ceremonies and continue day-to-day practice of traditional cultural beliefs and values. These locales are where children are successfully socialized to be independent and self-reliant in the enveloping cocoon of an extended family where they also learn the

importance of reciprocity and establish deep spiritual connection to family land. This is the sociocultural setting in which Navajo children learn that they matter to their community. In contrast, single-family, densely populated cluster housing neighborhoods offer none of these critical, supportive components of Navajo tradition.

Living in cluster housing frequently isolates families from the support and shared resources of extended relatives. Subsistence activities are not possible, and resources must be guarded and not shared with unrelated and sometimes troublesome neighbors. Neighbors are unlikely to be the extended family with whom children learn the value of reciprocity. In this setting the normative Navajo childrearing pattern of independence and self-discovery of appropriate behavior exposes children to dangers and influences for which they are ill-prepared. In cluster housing, the large gatherings of kin required to conduct healing ceremonies are inappropriate because of space constraints and easily invaded by disruptive outsiders. Without major counteracting efforts by parents, in these settings children are likely to learn that they do not matter to their community. But these alienated children do matter to the gangs that have taken root. Like epidemic diseases, which prior to development of agriculture and concentration of people, could not develop and spread among small dispersed populations of nomadic gatherer/hunters, gangs could not effectively diffuse onto the Navajo Nation prior to the establishment of numerous densely populated cluster housing neighborhoods.

With the presence and continued expansion of this new housing configuration -- only one of the most recent elements of federally imposed culture change -- the environmental stage necessary for emergence and proliferation of youth gangs was set in place. At the same time, popular youth culture was undergoing the musical evolution from hip hop to gangsta rap and broadcast via television. One of the audiences to which this music diffused was alienated youth living in densely populated cluster housing on the Navajo reservation. Having little identity as Navajo persons responsible for themselves and to their relatives and mattering to their larger community, certain estranged Navajo youth were attracted to the themes of alienation, opposition to oppression and authority and proud worldwide minority identity expressed in hip hop and gangsta rap. When experienced gang-involved youths, who had shaped their social identities on the streets of cities, moved into cluster housing, an explosion of gang activity, recruitment, and proliferation took place in just a few short years. It should be noted, that not all gangs and gang members are based in cluster housing complexes. We also gathered evidence that gang identity emerged and proliferated at other locales on the reservation as well, although the cluster housing sites were (and are) particularly intense "hotspots" for this kind of activity given the surge of dysfunctional and socially disorganized factors concentrated in those settings. Gang recruitment occurred primarily with youth from dysfunctional families in cluster housing who had already lost connection to traditional culture but gang proliferation also occurred in other geographic areas.

C. Navajo Gang Study Documents Connection Between Culture Change and Gangs on Reservation

The study data showed that gang-involved youth and their families had for the most part and to varying degrees lost connection to traditional Navajo culture. More than one-half of the families did not speak Navajo. Only one-half the respondents knew and were

willing to report their clan affiliations, a fundamental component of traditional Navajo social structure and cultural competency. Although 80 percent of the respondents' families did participate in traditional religious activities, only 55 percent of the respondents were involved in these reciprocal family interactions. This lack of participation represents a loss of connection to not only traditional culture but also to extended family, since the way youth would participate in traditional cultural/religious activities would be by assisting relatives in those work activities associated with holding a ceremony. Connection to the land was the most widespread bond to Navajo tradition that was reported by the study respondents.

Another widespread expression of traditional cultural knowledge was the persisting identification between cousins as siblings and strong ties that were established. Unlike the fictive ties reported for Latino gangs (Vigil and Long 1990), the kinship ties between Navajo gang and crew members are between real clan relatives. However, this aspect of traditional culture is at the subterranean level of cultural memory, since the customary equation was between siblings and cross-cousins, whereas the current equation is more widespread. The kinship connection between cousins, sisters, and brothers was the most commonly expressed reason for why a particular respondent joined his/her gang: "all my cousins/brothers/sisters were in it." These clan relations are also manipulated by some Navajo gang members to allow them to maintain attachment to family members in rival gangs.

During the past several years we have continued research on youth gangs in Indian Country in additional settings. We find many of the same general trends in these other locations, although there are always particular local factors of tribal history, urban gang history, and the importation/migration of gangs onto a specific reservation or the involvement of Native American youth in gangs in any given city.

D. What Works to Reduce Native American Youth Gang Involvement?

Because the research with the Navajo Nation took several years to complete, we were able to see the evolution of community response to youth gangs on that reservation. During the first two years of research, a number of schools and community organizations sponsored forums around the reservation that brought in outside "Gang Experts," many of whom were themselves Native American, to inform housing managers, educators, parents, youth, and law enforcement about the realities and dangers of gang involvement. Also, over the subsequent several years, juvenile recreational programs (especially Boys and Girls Clubs) were opened throughout the Navajo Nation. As parents, educators and youth themselves became better informed about youth gangs and as other opportunities for youth expanded, the visibility of gangs on the Navajo Nation was reduced. In addition, law enforcement suppression efforts, primarily directed at major drug trafficking enterprises and violent offenders had removed key gang leaders from communities and also helped deter other gang-involved youth. The consensus was that recruitment of youth was less and the level of intimidation, graffiti, and public expression of gangs was not as evident. Police and other informed persons agreed that gangs were still existent and dangerous and that drug sales continued but that the previous high level of widespread and overt violence was "on the downlow." In subsequent research in some communities we have heard the same

assessment: gangs were extremely active in the early to mid-1990s but at the present time parents and youth are better informed about the dangers of gang involvement, youth have more opportunity for positive community activities, and law enforcement have a pretty good handle on gang activities in their community. However, there are still many Native American communities where youth gangs are a growing problem.

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