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Window Rock Dispatch Boyz on the Rez

By VINCE BEISER

RANDY, A STOCKY, dark-skinned 28-year-old, sits on a folding chair in the dirt yard outside his battered one-story house. Dressed in baggy jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt, he recounts how his gang, the Insane Cobra Nation, took over the run-down housing projects he's lived in since he was nine. "At first it was just about beating people up for money," Randy says. "Then it built up to where people started shooting at us, and us at them." Not long ago, he boasts, pointing down the road to a spot just past an abandoned house slathered with gang tags, his Cobras stabbed a former comrade-in-arms 13 times for joining the rival West Siders. "I grew up in a fucked-up household," Randy says by way of explaining how he joined his gang. "My dad was an alcoholic.... I grew up poor.... The only people

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who would help me out were my bros, the Cobras. They became my family."

Randy's trajectory—from childhood poverty to adult gang violence—is so familiar that it's practically become a cliché of inner-city life. But Randy's story has a twist: From where he's sitting in his front yard, there's no major city for hundreds of miles. Despite his homeboy outfit and affect, the "streets" his gang claims are mostly dirt roads.

Randy Wauneka is a full-blooded Navajo Indian, and the Insane Cobra Nation's turf is on the Navajos' Southwestern reservation, 25,000 square miles of dry scrubland and soaring red-rock spires. Out in the reservation's high-desert hinterland, tribal elders still herd sheep and sleep in traditional hogans. But in the reservation's capital, Window Rock, a cheerless sprawl of low stucco houses and trailer homes, tags from the Navajo Nation's 50 gangs mark every bridge and street sign.

And it's not just Window Rock: urban-style gangs have been springing up on Indian reservations across the country. Six years ago, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), there were 181 known Indian gangs. Today, the BIA estimates, there are some 520, with a total of more than 6,000 members—from the Bitches for Life among South Dakota's Rosebud tribe to the Red Pride Bloods on Arizona's Tohono O'Odham reservation.

The effect of gangs on Indian communities has been profound. While some gangs are relatively harmless—consisting of packs of alienated Indian youths doing nothing more serious than spray-painting walls—others aren't so benign. In recent years, Window Rock's murder rate has surged past Chicago's and Los Angeles's; at one point, the homicide rate on Montana's Fort Peck reservation was more than double the rate in New Orleans. Indeed, while the nationwide homicide rate has fallen steadily in the last decade—dropping 37 percent between 1992 and 1998, the most recent year for which complete statistics are available—reported murders on Indian reservations shot up by 50 percent between 1992 and 1999. A recent federal study found that American Indians are now twice as likely to be victims of violent crime as members of any other ethnic or racial group. Says Gordon Toadlena, supervisor of the Navajo police department's Window Rock criminal-investigations unit, "The murders went up when we started having gang problems."

LONG PLAGUED BY poverty, alcohol abuse, family dysfunction, and the anger of the marginalized, Indian reservations are fertile ground for criminal gangs. The demographics don't help either: the median age of American Indians is 24, as opposed to 33 for other Americans. On many reservations, half the population is under 18.

That Indian gangs copy the culture of their urban counterparts is little wonder. After all, mainstream American society is seeping onto reservations like never before. Thanks to MTV, CDs, and the Internet, some young Indians know more about Snoop Dogg's history than about the history of their people. "I don't know what Navajo culture really is," says a rail-thin young Navajo who calls himself Xpres and performs with the Window Rock rap group Tribal Live, "so I

can't say I take part in it."

And it's not just technology that's bringing gang culture to reservations; young Indians are bringing it themselves. Increasing numbers of Native Americans are spending time in big cities, where many get involved in gang life and bring it back when they return home. The Cobras, for instance, were started by a Navajo who moved to Chicago, joined a gang, and then returned to Window Rock. Many Indians also join gangs in state and federal prisons, which currently house more than 12,000 Indians—a number that has doubled since 1990.

BUT, WHILE INDIAN gangs copy the styles of their urban counterparts, they may surpass them when it comes to the senselessness of their violence. On reservations, commercial crimes—like drug deals, robberies, and carjackings—aren't a major source of intergang violence. Instead, it consists mostly of gang members attacking each other, either to gain prestige or out of simple malice. "They're not into gangs for the money," says William Mitchell Jr., a BIA police officer who until recently patrolled several reservations near Albuquerque, New Mexico. "It's more about the glamour and trying to be the tough guy." Says Joe Lodge, a prosecutor with the U.S. attorney's office in Phoenix, "The violence is real turf-oriented. It's 'You're in our area wearing the wrong color or flashing the wrong signs, so we're gonna get you, because that's what we see on TV.'"

The turf wars can be particularly brutal. In 1996, when the Cobras took on a rival gang called the Dragons, murders on the Navajo reservation hit a record 67. "There were drive-bys every weekend," recalls Sergeant Wallace Billie, a thickset Navajo police officer. "We had lots of bodies popping up." Even the little Salt River Pima-Maricopa reservation near Phoenix saw dozens of drive-by shootings, which culminated in 1997 when five members of its East Side Crips Rolling Thirties gang were sent to prison on charges ranging from murder to witness intimidation.

Yet, for all this urban-style mayhem, reservation police forces remain staffed and equipped at sub-Podunk levels: While the average small town has 2.9 cops per 1,000 residents, the average reservation has only 1.3. Making matters worse, tribal police often have to cover huge swatches of territory, with no backup officers for miles. Just last December, a police officer arriving alone at the scene of a reported break-in on Arizona's White River Apache reservation was shot to death; he was the only officer on duty at that time on the entire reservation. And, even when the cops do arrest people, dilapidated jails barely hold them. Half a dozen prisoners escaped from the Window Rock Tribal Jail one recent year before police discovered that the back door could be opened with a piece of wire.

In response, many reservations have shifted their strained resources to the fight against youth crime; as of 1998, 15 tribes had created gang task forces. And this year the Navajo Nation began work on the first youth correctional facility on an Indian reservation. What's more, the federal government—responsible for most of the public security in what is called "Indian country"—has belatedly boosted law enforce-

ment funding in the last two years, partly in response to the gang problem. This year, the Clinton administration has asked Congress for an extra \$103 million for Indian law enforcement. Those infusions have swelled the BIA's law enforcement budget by more than \$20 million in each of the last two years.

But it's not nearly enough. "When you spread that out across the whole country, it doesn't go a long way," says Mike McCoy, BIA district commander for the New Mexico area. "It means an extra car here, some extra body armor there."

Things have calmed down a bit on the Navajo reservation in recent months, since an FBI-led crackdown landed 14 top Cobras in prison. Last year's murder rate was the lowest in five years. But no one thinks the gangs are gone for good. Indeed, on the last day of 1999, four Cobras broke into a house and stole a collection of sniper rifles and a .45 pistol. With 300 Cobras still active, not to mention rivals like the Killer Park Crips and West Siders, it's only a matter of time before trouble flares up again. "We don't have the capacity to either suppress or rehabilitate these guys," says Stewart Calnimpewa, a Navajo former cop who now runs a security firm specializing in gang trouble. "We'll see a surge in crime again. The boys are getting restless."

Randy Wauneka agrees. "Once in a gang, you're down for life," he says. "I couldn't just say, 'I want out.' All the respect I've got now, I'd be throwing it down the shithole. And then my old homies would start punkin' me. I was born a Navajo and I'll always be a Navajo. But I'll be a gang member, too, till the day I die." ■