

On the fourth of July, the typical all-American family is indulging in barbeque cuisine and enjoying the booming sounds of fireworks. This picturesque scene is very different and oversimplified compared to a resident of the Navajo reservation's perspective. The fourth of July is a time for rampant drinking and increased domestic violence disputes, creating an unsafe and unhealthy environment for many of today's Navajo youth. Unfortunately, this is where the pattern begins. The children exposed to this toxic environment are the least likely to graduate¹ and are more likely to have their own substance abuse problems² or they are the resilient ones and continue to strive for an education and leave the reservation.

On the 27,000 sq. foot Navajo reservation, home for over 175,000 Navajos of the 300,000 enrolled tribal members where youth are the majority³. A land where bootlegging and alcoholism is the social norm⁴ and is expected to be the main event rather than a family game of football. It is a land where many children do not know their parents or are subject to negligent abuse because their grandparents are too far along in age to properly care or understand today's delinquent behavior⁵. As you can tell, due to the high and extensive amounts of poverty and substance abuse, children are often relocated to relatives' homes due to the implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act⁶ or become wards of the state⁷ when no living relative will take on the responsibility or cannot be found fit for care. This was never the traditional way of life.

What one must understand about Native American and First Nation reservations in general is how sheltered these remote and isolated communities are. Internet and cell phone reception is growing slowly but surely. However, this does not mean that all citizens are aware and update with the latest information. With the increasing developments of synthetic drugs, prescription drugs dependency, and gang violence⁸. Many are not sure what the warning signs are for substance and domestic abuse. For example, gang affiliation is an increasing problem on

the reservation – in 2009, the Navajo Nation alone was home to 225 gangs⁹ and steadily growing as more conflicts become apparent. But many families are not sure what a gang really is or of the dangers of being involved with a gang member before a family member is murdered or brutally beaten, but what if this had been reported? Would things have been different before it was too late?

Unfortunately, many crimes go unreported and lead to no arrests. There are many factors in contribution to why this occurs but I believe reasons are primarily due to economic and financial reasoning. Families do not want the financial burden that incarceration and trial brings as well as, the fear of not knowing the outcome is another. In many instances – the abuser (domestic or substance) is the main provider of the families' income. Families with little to get by with are afraid to have any or all income stop. Or in some instances, the tribal police much less, city police cannot reach them in time for proper action. I hear of cases where the nearest town is two to five hours away. If you can imagine the potential damage done in that wide window of time, you would be able to understand why the police are not heavily relied on. Tribal police enforcements cover a 70 mile radius on a single shift, much of the time – they patrol alone¹⁰. In border towns, there are instances where we don't know which police force has jurisdiction. It can make it scary to report a crime because of the potential runaround. The amount of confusion and uncertainty on these border towns and reservation communities cause the numbers of Native youth at risk of incarceration to increase with no real solutions being given to stop this growing epidemic.

Due to the shortage in staffing over a large and rural area, there have been instances of officer shootings and cold case murders or kidnappings¹¹. Tragedies are beginning to plague the

reservations faster than students are able to graduate and receive an education to bring home solutions to prevent these disasters.

That is why I propose that all Native youth be given classes on public safety and police education. The idea of giving these children someone to lean on in times of crisis to avoid the loss of loved one or their own lives is the biggest gift of all. I also propose that tribal and city police work together on an initiative to increase the number of law enforcers on reservations to keep isolated communities safe. I suggest the implementation of brotherhood cooperative that would bring in officers from city areas for an allotted amount of time before replacements from the tribal cadet school can take over. But the most important solution would be to teach Native youth how to be safe – education and prevention on substance abuse and domestic violence while promoting healthy living while staying in touch with traditional teachings¹². Increasing incarcerations is not the solution, if anything – it allows the problem to stay permanent and never allow room for growth. If in the event a Native youth is arrested and forced to spend time in jail, I suggest the implantation of traditional practices and educational opportunities while incarcerated – ceremonies, sweat lodges, and potentially those of the Native American Church¹³. However, being aligned with your traditions may help spiritually. Native youth are already at risk of dropping out before being arrested, which is why I also suggest tutoring sessions for minor offenders to expose them to new opportunities that will motivate and encourage a productive lifestyle.

Personally, I was the child during the Fourth of July parties who dreaded and witnessed the next family argument. I've seen this pattern all too much in life through my cousins and their families. But I stand here today not as a drop out statistic or a former juvenile detention alumni. I stand here as voice for the silent and for the future generations to say – you do not have to end up

like our parents before us. You will prosper and succeed because entropy of the mind does not stem from being born a second class citizen but rather, being out of touch with yourself and your roots. Stay proud of your heritage and learn about the resources around you – every way in has a way out.

Endnotes

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