

Indian Reservations Have Become Unchecked Havens for Drug Smugglers

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On March 7, 2017, Miguel Rangel-Arce, a 36-year-old Mexican national, was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison, after pleading guilty to drug trafficking charges. He, along with eight others, three of whom are also Mexican nationals (Rogelio Santiago Quiroa-Valdez and Luis and Miguel Rangel-Arce), were caught smuggling large quantities of methamphetamine across the *Navajo Nation Reservation* in New Mexico.

The smuggling ring was responsible for between 60 and 70 percent of the methamphetamine being supplied to drug dealers in San Juan County, New Mexico, according to police.¹

The *Daily Times* reported:

In a seven-count indictment filed in April, they were charged with participating in meth trafficking between November 2015 and March 2016 and with distributing meth on six occasions between January and March 2016 in San Juan County.

During the investigation, authorities seized more than two and a half pounds of meth, \$1,600 in cash, 10 firearms, and a vehicle, the press release states.

When Miguel Rangel-Arce pleaded guilty on August 30, he admitted to conspiring to distribute between 500 grams and 1.5 kilograms of meth to an undercover officer.

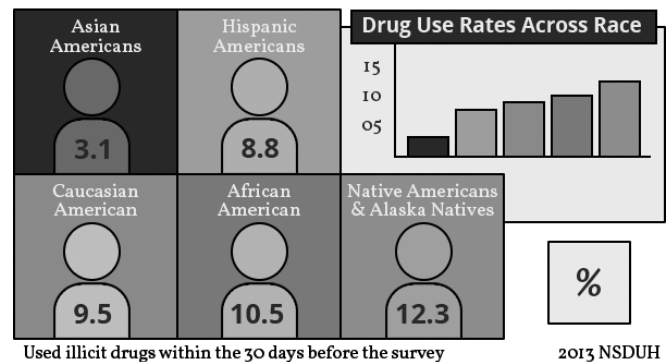
Luis Rangel-Arce pleaded guilty on August 16 to distributing meth on two occasions to an undercover officer in January 2016, according to the press release.

Quiroa-Valdez also pleaded guilty on August 30 and admitted to distributing 85.5 grams of meth to an undercover officer on February 24, 2016, according to the press release.²

Dave Gibson, a former legislative aide to a Virginia state senator, has been working as a freelance writer for many years. His work has been published in many newspapers and magazines, including the Washington Times.

The joint investigation and arrests were performed by both local law enforcement from San Juan County and U.S. Department of Homeland Security agents.

Of course, this is only the latest incident of drug smuggling to occur on Indian land. The issue is an ongoing one, which has reached epidemic proportions.



While we largely associate drug smuggling with the Mexican drug cartels, entering this nation through our Southern border, the problem reaches far beyond the American Southwest, as reported in a February 2006 *New York Times* article.

...large-scale criminal organizations have found havens and allies in the wide-open and isolated regions of Indian country.

In the eyes of law enforcement, reservations have become a critical link in the drug underworld. They have helped traffickers transport high-potency marijuana and Ecstasy from eastern Canada into cities like Buffalo, Boston, and New York, and have facilitated the passage of cocaine and methamphetamine from cities in the West and Midwest into rural America.

In some cases, outside drug gangs work with Indian criminals to distribute drugs on Indian and non-Indian lands. And on a growing number of reservations, drug traffickers — particularly Mexican criminals — are marrying Indian women to establish themselves on reservations.³

- In May 2011, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents arrested 27 members of the Sinaloa Drug Cartel who were using the *Tohono O'Odham Reservation* in Arizona to smuggle both drugs and human cargo into the United States.

The cartel operatives were charged with trafficking of marijuana, human smuggling, criminal conspiracy, money laundering, and related charges.⁴

- In September 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice reported that “as much as 20 per cent of all high-potency marijuana produced in Canada each year is smuggled through the *St. Regis Mohawk Reservation*... The shared international border and geography of the reservation make it conducive to cross-border drug trafficking activity while also inhibiting law enforcement interdiction efforts.”

The reservation, which straddles the U.S.-Canada border, is also a hotbed for smuggling “multi-thousand tablet quantities” of ecstasy into this country every week. Indian smugglers are supplied by gangs based in Canada.

- In June 2010, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the

District of Arizona charged nine Tohono tribe members, following a five-month long investigation, in which undercover agents made 39 cocaine buys, for more than 250 grams.⁵

- In February 2010, a load of 41 assault weapons were seized on the *Tohono O'Odham Reservation*, as the weapons were on their way from Phoenix, into Mexico. The Valencia-Rodriguez drug trafficking organization operates on the reservation, on behalf of the Sinaloa Cartel.

“These suspects used remote areas of the Tohono O’Odham Nation in Arizona to funnel drugs and humans into the United States, and to re-direct racketeering proceeds and weapons back into Mexico...This criminal enterprise was a well-organized operation that constantly worked against law enforcement interdiction efforts with sophisticated counter-surveillance methods, including using human spotters embedded on U.S. soil, night vision equipment, and radio communication,” said then-Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne.

- In May 2006, the U.S. Attorney’s Office charged 14 residents of the Wind River Indian Reservation in



Wyoming with distribution of methamphetamine, during a period of only one week.⁶

Of course, the lack of jurisdictional cooperation from the reservations as well as simple geography play a role in using Indian reservations for smuggling routes, as described in a January 2011 *Times-Union* article:

The St. Regis Mohawk reservation is a prime entry point, according to [Franklin County District Attorney, Derek] Champagne, who describes it as “a jurisdictional nightmare.” Smugglers take advantage of a peninsula formed by the St. Lawrence River in offloading contraband from boats during warm weather and, in winter, driving it in cars and snowmobiles across the frozen waters to roads where stone markers delineate the border.⁷

Of course, there are definite financial advantages for those living on reservations who choose to aid the drug smugglers.

Unfortunately, most Indian reservations now bear more of a resemblance to inner city Detroit or Baltimore than they do the great open plains. Rundown trailers, piles of trash, and empty beer cans dominate the landscape in these places, where both unemployment and substance abuse are rampant.

In June 2010, Tim Johnson, Mexico Bureau Chief for McClatchy newspapers, told NPR:

You know, another factor is the economic factor. It’s just very — I mean, there’s a certain appeal if you have high unemployment on a tribal lands. And everybody there knows that you can earn \$2,000 for a 45-minute drive in your pickup truck by carrying marijuana off the reservation into Tucson or into Phoenix, which isn’t very far away.⁸

More than 60 percent of those arrested for smuggling are tribal members, and corruption among tribal leaders is rampant. In 1999, former Tohono O’odham Nation tribal judge Mary Audrey Dolaretta Juan was arrested and convicted on drug smuggling charges, and was sentenced to one year in prison.⁹

Indian reservations come under the jurisdiction of tribal councils, rather than the states in which they are located, making detection and arrests incredibly difficult. Tribal police forces are vastly undermanned, and as such, by 2009, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota was home to 39 criminal gangs with no less than 5,000 members, according to a *New York Times* article.¹⁰

Until the federal government begins patrolling and/or fencing-off these lands which straddle our international borders with Canada and Mexico, these reservations will continue to serve as entry points for drug smugglers. ■

Endnotes

1. <http://www.daily-times.com/story/news/crime/2016/08/31/mexican-nationals-plead-guilty-federal-meth-bust/89660630/>
2. <http://www.daily-times.com/story/news/crime/2017/03/08/mexican-national-sentenced-federal-meth-case/98903038/>
3. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/us/drug-traffickers-find-haven-in-shadows-of-indian-country.html>
4. <http://www.policemag.com/channel/gangs/news/2011/05/19/sinaloa-cartel-operators-used-indian-reservation-as-smuggling-pass-through.aspx>
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10. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/14/us/14gangs.html?_r=1