

The Mexican Pipeline

Blackfeet Drug Bust Shines Light on South of the Border Dealers Targeting Indian Country

By Jeff Hinkle

EACH MONTH THE TRIBAL POLICE who patrol the Mexican border that runs through the Tohono O'odham Reservation confiscate 4,000 pounds of drugs bound for the United States. That bulky catch does not include the cache of dope intercepted by the FBI, the Border Patrol and the U.S. Customs agents who also monitor the area.

But in spite of all of the overlapping lawmen that peruse the southern Arizona reservation, federal officials say Tohono O'odham remains an oozing wound in the war on drugs.

"We've done an intense examination of the area," says Walt Lamar, head of the BIA's law enforcement branch. "We have all of those agents down there and it's still not enough to stem the flow of drugs."

Those drugs gush into this country — in spite of the heavy police presence — like water through a net. And once they are north of the border, a network of carriers, with marijuana and cocaine in tow, leave the Tohono O'odham destined, in part, for other Indian reservations where drug abuse rates — particularly among adolescents — continue to soar.

Last month, far to the north, officials completed the last of nearly 50 arrests in what one investigator called the "biggest drug bust ever in Indian Country." Authorities say Mexican

Nationals who first gained a foothold in the U.S. market via the Tohono O'odham corridor had specifically targeted the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana as fertile ground.

Among those arrested in the Big Sky bust

the widespread drug use on the reservation.

First launched in August 1999, Operation Beartrap, as it was dubbed, pulled together the resources of the BIA, the FBI, the Montana Department of Criminal Investigations, the

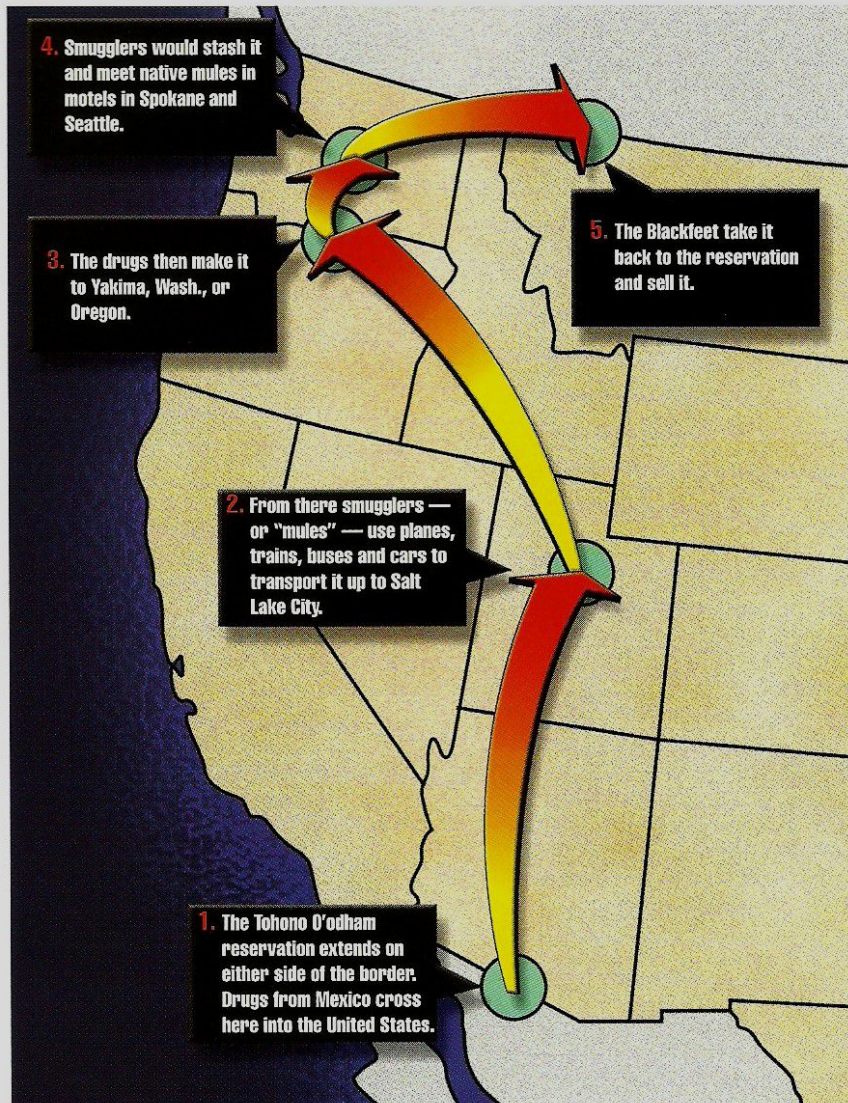
Glacier County Sheriff's Department and the INS. The investigation was headed up by Dave Little, a BIA undercover officer, who along with three others, posed as drifters in search of cocaine and any other illicit buzz they could buy.

But Little says that early on it became clear that the drugs they were stockpiling as evidence were coming from the reservation. In fact, the traffic was traced from the snow-capped mountain vistas of Montana to the harsh desert of Tohono O'odham, where residents freely cross the Mexican border that divides their land.

"The reservation extends on either side of the border," says Lamar, "so there are a large number of folks who go back and forth every day."

Lawrence Seligman, head of the tribal police at Tohono O'odham, says that the 2,000 O'odham Indians who live in Mexico are not recognized by the United States, so they live in hazy state of citizenship that

allows them to cross a border that technically has "no legal point of entry." He says the 60 officers who make up his department and patrol the 5,000-square-mile reservation



have inherited the drug problem inadvertently.

“The more pressure the Border Patrol has put on other parts of the border, near towns like Douglas, the more it pushes traffic out into

In an effort to tip the scales, Lamar says he has been busy lobbying federal lawmakers in hopes of generating funding to tackle the epidemic problem.

“You have Mexican Nationals flying into

“There were drug sales going on right in school. Everything was happening right out in the open.”

Drug networks operating right under the noses of police on Indian land is also nothing new. For Little — who has conducted investigations in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington and Oregon for several years — the Blackfeet bust brought to mind parallels to the year and a half he spent undercover on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota in 1997 and 1998.

“We nailed 30-plus people there,” he says. “But it was strictly distribution charges. There was no conspiracy stuff like we have here in Montana. Here we knew we had a

chance to get to the root of the problem. We knew we would be able to go after the suppliers on this one. This is a lot bigger than Pine Ridge. This is the biggest drug bust ever in Indian Country.”

Although the Pine Ridge arrests were not tied to Mexican drug rings, Lamar says the

Several Mexican Nationals told authorities that they specifically targeted Indian Country because of the minor threat of police intervention.

what is called the ‘western desert.’ The desert is perceived as a barrier, because it’s a hostile environment, but it’s not a barrier. If you squeeze the balloon over there, we feel it here,” says Seligman.

“So we are confiscating 4,000 to 6,000 pounds of marijuana monthly, and it’s not our job. Our focus is not working the border; it’s serving our community. But we can’t ignore it,” he says.

For those smugglers — or “mules” — who made it through the portal in Arizona with plans to visit Montana, the trip took many forms says Little.

“From there they were using planes, trains, buses and cars to transport it up to Salt Lake City — then on to Yakima, Wash., or Oregon. They would stash it and meet native mules in motels in Spokane and Seattle,” says Little. “The Blackfeet would take it back to the reservation and sell it.”

Later, once dealers started tumbling like proverbial dominos, Mexican kingpins told investigators that they ran their operation with little fear of the Blackfeet Police. In fact, Little says, several

Washington State with the specific purpose [of orchestrating] drug sales on Indian land,” says Lamar. “Even these people recognize there is a void in Indian Country law enforcement.”

And it was not just dealers South of the Border who shrugged off local cops. Little says the Blackfeet residents were just as unconcerned.



Tohono O’odham police bust a drug smuggler on Highway 86 that runs through the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Photo courtesy of the Tohono O’odham Police Department

Mexican Nationals told authorities that they specifically targeted Indian Country because of the minor threat of police intervention.

The news that the bad guys don’t expect problems with police on tribal land is hardly news at all — especially when it comes to enforcing drug laws, says Lamar.

“We have two investigators for each of our five districts. That means there are ten drug agents working in all of Indian Country,” he says. “It doesn’t take a mathematical genius to figure out the possibilities there.”

“The drugs were so rampant on the reservation and the dealers were so bold. In one case there was a bust going down, and 70 feet away there was another drug deal taking place. That’s how brazen these guys were,” says Little.

Fred Guardipee, director of law enforcement for the Blackfeet, says when he took office two years ago, he had only 10 officers patrolling the 1.5 million-acre reservation, and only one of those focused on drugs full-time.

“There were dealers operating in every one of our seven major communities,” he says.

pipeline that runs from Mexico to Arizona to points north has been connected to traffic in numerous states.

“We have found Mexican connections to cases in reservations in New Mexico, the Dakotas, Wyoming as well as other parts of Montana,” he says.

But Lamar says his agency — which has jurisdiction over all law enforcement on tribal lands — is limited when it comes to large-scale investigations because of shortfalls in funding and manpower. But he says the potential is there.

"We concentrated on the Blackfeet because we recognized there was a significant need in that particular area. But we believe what was happening on Blackfeet Reservation is symptomatic of what's going on all over Indian Country. I suspect we would see similar results if we were to target other reservations," he says.

The flow of drugs follows employment demands, he says. "In the case of Montana, you have timber industry jobs that attract Mexican Nationals. Once those people are in place they realize the opportunities and make the connections," says Lamar.

In the case of the Blackfeet, those connections made for unlikely dealers, says Little.

"Some of these [people] were mom-and-pop types, older couples who had \$200-a-day habits between them. In one year they had freebased \$28,000 worth of cocaine. The only way they could support their habit was to deal drugs," says Little.

Another set of arrests hit closer to home for investigators. Two three-year veterans with the Browning, Mont., police department were among those arrested this year. The officers were charged with misprision of a felony and possession of cocaine.

And although neither were booked for dealing, Guardipee says he was not sur-

prised to learn that some local cops were "dirty."

"When I started two years ago — my first day on the job — I was told by council mem-

busts, many have offered up names of bigger fish along the way. Little says that at least 10 informants have identified suppliers. And the reach of Beartrap has gone beyond Blackfeet land. One methamphetamine lab in nearby Great Falls, Mont., was also shut down in the sweep.

Lamar says the drug seizures that resulted from the lengthy investigation amounted to multiple kilos of cocaine. Admittedly small amounts by big city standards, but he says "historical information" was also gained helping to pinpoint connections in Mexico.

Following the slew of arrests, Little was given a special accommodation from Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton for his work on the Blackfeet case.

Guardipee believes the recognition is well-deserved.

"I would say, overall, drug use on the reservation is down 50 percent from last year. There has also been a lessening of other related crimes, like burglary. But the most positive impact has been on the community. People are now willing to come forward," he says. "We're trying to focus now on keeping the whole community involved. The dealers had the run of the reservation, but now the people have stepped up to say we want our reservation back." □



Some of the confiscated cash from Operation Beartrap. Photo courtesy of the BIA

bers that they suspected cops on the force [were] selling drugs. I was told that there were officers who were selling drugs to school kids right out of their patrol cars while parked on school grounds," says Guardipee.

Those two officers are among the 50-odd defendants now facing federal drug and conspiracy charges. The majority of those arrested so far have pleaded guilty and cooperated with the investigation. And in the tradition of all drug

From Another Front: The Demand Side

ALTHOUGH THE USE OF ILLICIT DRUGS HAS dropped sharply nationwide, 10.6 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives reported using drugs within a month of being surveyed — the highest rate of drug use among all ethnic groups, according to the latest government statistics. Among youth the statistics are even more alarming. More than 19 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives between the ages of 12 and 17 reported using drugs within a month of being surveyed. The national average for those 12 to 17 years old was 9 percent.

"We don't have a national drug problem, we have a series of community drug problems that need to be addressed in individual homes," said former Drug Control Advisor Barry McCaffrey last fall when he announced the federal government's new anti-drug campaign targeting American Indian youth.

Speaking at a summit of tribal leaders who gathered to strategize on reducing the use of drugs and alcohol in their communities, McCaffrey announced that the Office of National Drug Control

Policy was prepared to invest more than \$3 million to reach American Indians and Alaska Natives with an anti-drug message. The campaign was launched in 29 national magazines (including *American Indian Report*) that target American Indians and Alaska Natives, 79 local tribal newspapers, 14 local radio stations and 29 radio stations that reach Alaska Natives. These ads are the first ever based on new behavioral studies into how to most effectively communicate anti-drug information targeting American Indian youth, their parents and adult care givers.

"...American Indian parents, and every parent in America, need to understand that they can make a huge difference in their children's lives by talking about drugs," McCaffrey said. □

19.6 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives between the ages of 12 and 17 reported using drugs within a month of being surveyed.

9 percent of youth nationwide reported using drugs within a month of being surveyed.

10.6 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives reported using drugs within a month of being surveyed.

15 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native youth reported using marijuana during the past year.

5.2 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native youth reported using cocaine within the last year.