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## 'It's sad as hell'

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WIND RIVER INDIAN RESERVATION -- Just off the deserted highways, the silver pickup truck eases down quiet streets, its driver offering a numbing tour of a remote reservation framed by the beauty of snowcapped mountains.

There, Leon Tillman says, over there -- the house on the right, a white, two-story building set off by itself. It used to be a big drug house. Now it's shuttered, its owners in prison.

A man dressed in an Army-green shirt and pants appears on the side of the road, his thumb up, looking for a ride. "That's a meth head," Tillman says. "He's bumming right now."

A few more drug houses, and Tillman's tour of the despair of methamphetamine ends.

Not long ago, most people here had never even heard of meth. But today, most know someone on meth or in prison because of it. Tillman, 39, knows too many to count.

"It's everywhere," he said.

Indeed, American Indians have been especially hard hit by meth. Drug cartels have targeted Indian Country because the people are vulnerable, and law enforcement struggles to keep up.

But the story of how meth came to this remote reservation is really quite remarkable.

Like a cancer, a Mexican drug gang permeated the reservation and its families. It left behind a landscape strewn with broken lives.

How meth arrived

Some 12,000 Indians -- members of the Northern Arapaho and the Eastern Shoshone tribes -- live on 2.2 million acres, an area so vast many homes are separated by miles of barren land.

Poverty and unemployment are high, alcoholism is rampant and the police department is so understaffed -- patrolling such a large area -- that the average response time is 15 to 20 minutes.

Jesus Martin Sagaste-Cruz knew that. And he knew the reservation's isolation would be perfect for his business.

Authorities learned of the Sagaste-Cruz drug ring back in 1997. Sagaste-Cruz and his Mexican gang had already been selling around Indian reservations in South Dakota and Nebraska.

But an article in The Denver Post that changed the way they did business. The story talked about how a Nebraska liquor store near the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota did millions of dollars in business. Sales were especially high immediately after Indians received their per capita checks -- their share of their tribe's income.

Sagaste-Cruz figured if there were already so many Indians addicted to alcohol, it would be easy enough to addict them to methamphetamine.

So around 2000, the Mexicans moved in and near the Wind River reservation.

"They came to a place where people don't have anything," said Frances Monroe, who works in the Northern Arapaho Child Protection Services office.

They started with free meth samples. The men pursued Indian women, providing them with meth even as they romanced them and fathered their children. Eventually, the women needed to support their habit, so they became dealers, too -- and they used free samples to recruit new customers.

It was all part of the plan.

For the next four years, the gang sold pounds and pounds of meth, much of it 98 percent pure. The drugs came from Mexico, then on to Los Angeles; Ogden, Utah (where Sagaste-Cruz lived); and finally Wyoming, where gang members had a handful of local distributors, each with their own customer base.

Customers became dealers and recruiters, and their customers did the same.

Before, meth was barely mentioned on the reservation. Police reported only sporadic arrests.

But now the reservation was saturated with it. Crime soared. From 2003 to 2006, cases of child neglect increased 131 percent. Drug possession was up 163 percent; spousal abuse rose 218 percent.

The Wind River reservation is not alone. The Bureau of Indian Affairs found that methamphetamine was listed as the greatest threat to Indian communities by police departments.

Mexican drug cartels take advantage of the often complicated law enforcement jurisdictions in Indian Country. Isolated communities are hit the hardest, and sometimes even tribal leaders are not immune, said Heather Dawn Thompson, director of government affairs for the National Congress of American Indians.

Here on the Wind River, a tribal judge, Lynda Munnell-Noah, was arrested in a 2005 drug ring bust and accused of threatening to assault and murder a Bureau of Indian Affairs law enforcement officer.

Resources are few, and most reservations don't have treatment centers. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of methamphetamine contacts in Indian Health Services facilities increased by almost 250 percent.

"Even if we arrest people for use or sale, there's almost nothing to do with them in order to help them recover," Thompson said. "Where do you go and how do you pay for it?"

In his 2008 budget, President Bush proposed a \$16 million increase in law enforcement funding in Indian Country to help combat methamphetamine, a godsend to police departments like Wind River's, which has only 10 police officers.

"The heartbreaking part of it is, it's had this absolutely devastating effect on our community," Thompson said. "I have tribal leaders coming to my office all the time just crying. I mean, how do you fight this? How do you function as a government when 30 percent of your tribal employees are now using meth?"

Dealers weave twisted, toxic web

Inside a tribal office, a bulletin board displays meth's effects: In a series of mug shots, a woman deteriorates -- her teeth rotting, her skin collecting scabs. A nearby poster warns that making, selling or using meth around a child will mean prison time.

This is a place where people mostly keep to themselves. They know meth is a huge problem, but they don't want to talk much about it. They fear retaliation.

A jury found that the Sagaste-Cruz ring had distributed more than 99 pounds of meth -- an amount that had a street value of between \$4.5 to \$6.8 million, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. The gang also sold meth on the Rosebud, Pine Ridge and Yankton reservations in South Dakota and Santee Sioux reservation in Nebraska, authorities found.

Sagaste-Cruz and 22 other people were given prison time -- a life sentence, in Sagaste-Cruz's case. His brother, Julio Caesar Sagaste-Cruz, remains a fugitive.

Ask people on the reservation about the Sagaste-Cruz case and most don't know much about it. They seem surprised to learn how sophisticated the operation was.

But mention the Goodman case, and everyone knows. The Goodmans were an entire family, grandparents down to grandchildren, who were dealing meth and prescription drugs here.

Nineteen people, including the tribal judge, were arrested in 2005.

The two cases weren't directly related, but with many Indians already hooked on meth compliments of the Sagaste-Cruz gang, the Goodmans didn't have any trouble finding customers. Assistant U.S. Attorney Kelly Rankin said the Goodmans often had 20 to 50 customers a day come to their house.

Darrell LoneBear Sr., whose sister, Donna Goodman, and her husband, John Goodman, were the ring's leaders, said his relatives fell victim to easy money on a reservation where jobs are hard to find.

He rattles off his family's prison sentences: "John Goodman, 21 years. My sister Donna, 24 years. My nephew James got 19 years. My nephew Darrell got 8.

"It was all of my family," he said.

Thirteen children were sent to live with other relatives. One sister took in six children, another took in three.

"It is a tremendous, added responsibility emotionally and financially," said LoneBear, crime prevention and safety supervisor for the Northern Arapaho Tribal Housing. "All of us have been traumatized by this matter. We all still stay here."

Police Chief Doug Noseep has a police force that can't possibly keep up with every call. He is grateful for the help from outside law enforcement agencies in the raids over the past few years, and believes it has reduced the amount of meth here.

Noseep knows who is trying to get help, who is still using. Once, his officers encountered a 12-year-old girl who was addicted.

"It's sad as hell," he said. "It's here and it's not going to go anywhere. It's never going to go away."

### Meth's lasting effects

Seven years after the Sagaste-Cruz gang arrived, meth rolls on: Last summer, another bust at Wind River resulted in 43 arrests, the largest drug bust in the history of Wyoming.

On a recent night, Partners Against Meth met at a local school. The group struggles to attract volunteers and to keep committees on track. But here families that have been struck hard by the meth epidemic, and those that want to learn more about it, can come together to talk.

Leon Tillman brought his wife, son and daughter. He told the group he has six relatives in prison for meth or alcohol charges. "That's one of my worst fears, is to have one of my kids on drugs. I want to at least say I tried," he said.

A few years ago, John Washakie noticed his daughter, now 27, was losing weight and locking herself in her bedroom at her house. Then, one night, she dropped off her three young children at his house and disappeared into the darkness.

He cared for the kids for three years. It wasn't easy. "They lose all their energy about life. You spend a lot of time dealing with their emotions," he said.

Today, his daughter is clean, and cares for her children, now numbering five, herself.

"I think there are a lot of people that are scared to tell you the truth," the grandfather said. "You don't walk away from this."