

Law Enforcement Challenges/Barriers in Indian Country: Assessing Impact on Drug Trafficking Arrests

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RESEARCH PURPOSE

The present study seeks to test the associations between specific tribal law enforcement agency (LEA) challenges/barriers and two outcomes: methamphetamine sales or distribution arrests during calendar year 2018 and opioid sales or distribution arrests during calendar year 2018 to address the following research question:

(1) Which of the barriers and challenges faced by tribal law enforcement in improving public safety in tribal communities results in higher odds of drug arrests?

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INTRODUCTION

- Native American reservations and tribal lands face heightened vulnerability to illicit drug trafficking (Revels & Cummings, 2014).
- The highest rates of drug overdose fatalities occur among American Indian populations (Bauer et al., 2024; Spencer et al., 2024).
- The use of meth in tribal communities is estimated to be 4x higher than the rest of the US population (Coughlin et al., 2021).
- Challenges associated with crime response and prevention are partly attributable to inadequate technology and infrastructure (e.g., broadband) and jurisdictional complexities (Richards et al., 2022).
- However, little is understood empirically about the challenges facing tribal LEA in addressing crimes within Indian Country.

METHODS

Data on Tribally-Operated Agencies (N=215)

- Census of Tribal Law Enforcement Agencies, 2018
- Authority:** 12-item variety index (KR-20 = 0.89)
Examples: Indian offenders for victimless crimes (e.g., drug violations)
- Funding:** 9-item variety index (KR-20 = 0.75)
Examples: Federal grants, state grants, private funding, etc.
- Equipment/Technology:** 14-item variety index (KR-20 = 0.64)
GPS equipment, land-mobile radios, dashboard cameras, etc.
- Methamphetamine Arrests:** dichotomous; sales or distribution arrests
- Opioid Arrests:** dichotomous; sales or distribution arrests
- Other Controls:** Agency office size; Natural log of population

Analytic Plan

- Examine bivariate correlations
- Estimate series of logistic regression models predicting (a) meth arrests and (b) opioid arrests

DISCUSSION

- The magnitude of the effect was strongest in the association between equipment/technology and opioid arrests.
- Given the prevalence of meth use on tribal lands (Coughlin et al., 2021), it may be that funding is particularly useful in the detection and interdiction of meth trafficking.
- Findings point to significance of funding and access to technology to improve tribal public safety.

Limitations:

- Limited variability and indicators in sample
- Outcome variables do not capture arrest quality
- Lack of representation among federally recognized tribes in dataset

Future Directions:

- Combine multiple data sources (e.g., NIBRS, Census data)
- Include count for number of arrests instead of dichotomous variable
- Revise analytic strategy to consider mediators of the association between agency office size and outcome variables
- Analyze 2024 CTLEA for patterns, trends

RESULTS

Table 1. Logistic Regression: 2018 Methamphetamine Arrests (N = 208)

	OR	RSE
Authority	1.14*	0.06
Natural Log of Population	1.03	0.09
Agency Office Size	2.31***	0.43
Constant	0.04***	0.04
Pseudo R ²	0.146	

Logistic Regression: 2018 Methamphetamine Arrests (N = 208)

	OR	RSE
Funding	1.36*	0.19
Natural Log of Population	1.01	0.08
Agency Office Size	2.03***	0.38
Constant	0.09**	0.06
Pseudo R ²	0.148	

Logistic Regression: 2018 Methamphetamine Arrests (N = 208)

	OR	RSE
Equipment/Technology	1.24**	0.08
Natural Log of Population	1.02	0.09
Agency Office Size	2.12***	0.40
Constant	0.03***	0.03
Pseudo R ²	0.160	

Table 2. Logistic Regression: 2018 Opioid Arrests (N = 208)

	OR	RSE
Authority	1.09	0.05
Natural Log of Population	0.96	0.08
Agency Office Size	2.06***	0.35
Constant	0.09**	0.08
Pseudo R ²	0.101	

Logistic Regression: 2018 Opioid Arrests (N = 208)

	OR	RSE
Funding	1.27*	0.15
Natural Log of Population	0.95	0.08
Agency Office Size	1.87***	0.33
Constant	0.14**	0.10
Pseudo R ²	0.108	

Logistic Regression: 2018 Opioid Arrests (N = 208)

	OR	RSE
Equipment/Technology	1.42*	0.07
Natural Log of Population	0.96	0.08
Agency Office Size	1.95***	0.34
Constant	0.09**	0.07
Pseudo R ²	0.107	

Notes: RSE = Robust standard error adjusted for clustering within tribes. OR = Odds Ratio. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).