

## Brutal Crimes Grip an Indian Reservation

by Timothy Williams Feb 2, 2012

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WIND RIVER INDIAN RESERVATION, Wyo. — At a boys' basketball game here last month, Wyoming Indian High School, a perennial state power, was trading baskets with a local rival. The players, long-limbed and athletic, are among the area's undisputed stars, and their games one of its few diversions. On this night, more than 2,500 cheering, stomping people came to watch.

Outside the gym, in a glass trophy case, are photographs of players from recent championship teams. Someone peered in and, moving his finger along the line of smiling faces, delivered a cruel counterpoint: killed in a car accident at 19 while intoxicated; murdered in his 20s; struck in the head with an ax not long after graduation....

"This place has always had the gloom here," Kim Lambert, a tribal advocate on the reservation, said as she drove by a line of small houses people refer to as "murderers' row." "There has always been the horrendous murder. There has always been the white-Indian tension. It's always been something."

Crime may be Wind River's most pressing problem, but it has plenty of company. Life, even by the grim standards of the typical American Indian reservation, is as bleak and punishing as that of any developing country. On average, residents can expect to live 49 years, 20 years fewer than in Iraq. Unemployment, estimated to be higher than 80 percent, is on a par with Zimbabwe's, and is approaching the proportionate inverse of Wyoming's 6 percent jobless rate.

The reservation's high school dropout rate of 40 percent is more than twice the state average. Teenagers and young adults are twice as likely to kill themselves as their peers elsewhere in Wyoming. Child abuse, teenage pregnancy, sexual assault and domestic violence are endemic, and alcoholism and drug abuse are so common that residents say positive urinalysis results on drug tests are what bar many from working at the state's booming oil fields.

On one section of the reservation, people must boil drinking water because chemicals, possibly the result of the oil and natural gas drilling method known as hydraulic fracturing, have contaminated the water supply. And fearing that the chemicals might explode in a home, the Environmental Protection Agency ordered residents to run fans and otherwise ensure ventilation while bathing or washing clothes.

The difficulties among Wind River's population of about 14,000 have become so daunting that many believe that the reservation, shared by the [Northern Arapaho](#) and [Eastern Shoshone](#) Tribes, is haunted — the ghosts of the innocent killed in an 1864 massacre.

"Anywhere, there are good spirits and bad spirits around," said Ivan Posey, a member of the Eastern Shoshone Business Council. "But when people are struggling in their lives, those bad spirits come around more often. It's kind of a yin and yang."

## **My Home**

*By Willow Pingree*

The smell of fry bread and burgers, the laughter of friends and family reminiscing about good old times, the sound of music and the sight of people dressed in regalia, dancing inside an arbor while spectators watch from bleachers around the big arena. You'd find all of this at the Annual Eastern Shoshone Indian Days, or the Northern Arapaho Celebration powwow on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming.

As you walk around the outside of the dance arbor, you'd see crowds of people walking around you, sitting against wooden posts built along the outer rim of the powwow arbor: people sitting around a big circular drum, beating on it together in one rhythm and singing together in harmony. As the singers continue blasting their voices to the sky, the dancers slide and sway to the heartbeat of the people, the powerful sound of the drum. Surrounding them, the rolling hills, the sage brush covering the beautiful prairies, the awe-inspiring view of the towering Wind River Mountains.

This is my home, and it has been the home of my Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho people long before my generation.

During the time of our ancestors, the Shoshone and Arapaho people once were enemies who constantly fought each other for land and food. After the reservation was established in 1876, the federal government moved the Northern Arapaho people to a temporary home on the Shoshone reservation in Wyoming. Washakie, chief of the Eastern Band of Shoshones, allowed the Arapaho tribe to stay on the reservation while the government sought a different home for them. The Northern Arapaho tribe was never relocated to a different reservation, nor were they ever asked to leave by the Shoshones, and so they remained on the Shoshone reservation, now called the Wind River Reservation. Today, both tribes share the reservation in what some people consider to be separate communities: Fort Washakie, Arapahoe and Ethete.

Both tribes maintain their own form of tribal government and help with funding for programs that combat drug, alcohol, domestic and sexual abuse and poverty. Indeed, the people of the reservation face these problems, perhaps on a daily basis; however, that does not mean that there are not positive aspects of the reservation.

The people of both tribes still have their languages, their traditional beliefs and values. Involvement in tribal government allows people the opportunity to learn more about the history of the tribes and the reservation. Powwows, Sun Dances, picnics, memorial events such as walks, runs and feasts: These are just a few of the things that the people of the Wind River Reservation do to keep people, especially the young ones, away from drugs, alcohol and violence and help the communities and cultures become stronger.

The reservation sells no alcohol. However, most people buy their alcohol off-reservation. Alcoholism is often a contributing factor in the fatalities that have occurred on the reservation. That is not to say that the Shoshone or Arapaho tribes are not doing something to deal with these issues. The tribal councils grant funding to different programs to help the people overcome addiction. The Sho-Rap Lodge is a residency in Fort Washakie which helps people who have struggled with alcohol. Our people are offered help on a daily basis. It is up to the people themselves to give one another guidance and support in order to improve our communities...

No matter what negative things we face every day, nothing can break our spirit. We will not give up the war to save our culture or our languages, the war that all Native people in America have been fighting for since 1492. I will fight to ensure the survival of our cultures and languages for the rest of my days on this Earth. Ha'ho! Hoo-wee-hoo! (Thank you!)

