Using data to reduce violent crime in Indian communities

by Isabelle Brantley

Between 2009 and 2012, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) at the U.S. Department of the Interior succeeded in reducing violent crime on four Indian reservations in significant need of greater public safety by a combined 55 percent.[1] The BIA achieved this dramatic improvement by overcoming a scarcity of crime data, staffing shortages, and a violent crime rate that at the start was over twice the national average.[2]

Despite what these figures suggest, this achievement was neither an anomaly nor a miracle, but the result of the straightforward, repeatable steps the BIA took using data to achieve safe Indian communities. To find out how the BIA achieved this significant reduction in violent crime, I spoke with Charles Addington, the Associate Director of Field Operations for the Office of Justice Services. Based on Addington and the BIA's experience, public sector leaders can make a change in government by: setting clear, outcome-based goals, collecting the right data to manage performance, and making data-driven, real time course corrections to achieve impact. Here is how the BIA and Addington used data to reduce violent crime by 55 percent across four Indian communities.

Setting a clear, outcome-based goal

The BIA began driving change by setting a clear, outcome-based goal to define priorities and motivate action. Leaders in the federal government had been searching for ways to address high crime across Indian reservations. In 2009 the Department of the Interior and the BIA set a High Priority Performance Goal to reduce violent crime by five percent within 24 months across four reservations with substantial public safety needs: the Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana, the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico, the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, and the Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota. By honing in on violent crimes across four specific reservations, this goal clarified priorities and focused attention on outcomes as opposed to inputs.

Collecting the right data

In order to make progress towards their goal, the BIA first had to collect the right data to measure and drive performance. At the start, Addington quickly realized that the BIA police departments lacked both basic crime data as well as the ability to gather and analyze data, all essential to reducing violent crime.

First, Addington and an FBI employee worked with enforcement and program officials, many of whom were borrowed from other federal agencies to support this effort, to review handwritten records and manually establish a three-year baseline for violent crime rates — the critical benchmark from which all progress would be measured. Second, Addington and the BIA team developed an initial records management system (spreadsheets) to log each violent crime's location, time, and date — data previously handwritten and stored on paper dispatch slips. Next, the BIA brought police chiefs to the Albuquerque Office of Justice Services' headquarters to

> "We have never been good at putting resources to where the numbers show — we haven't been trained that way. I'm a cop — you are out there answering calls. We never looked at numbers in the past. To be effective, you have to look at numbers — it's the only way you can make a difference."
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> Charles Addington

1 U.S. Department of the Interior, "U.S. Department of the Interior 2013/ 2014 Annual Performance Plan & 2012 Report (APP&R)," (11 April 2013), 221, http://www.doi.gov/bpp/upload/DOI-APPR-04112013-v2.pdf.

2 USA Government Accountability Office, *U.S. Department of Justice Declinations of Indian Country Criminal Matters*, GAO-11-167R, (Washington, DC.: 13 Dec 2010), 1, http://www.gao.gov/assets/100/97229.pdf.

from data to impact helping agencies harness data to transform government effectiveness

Charles Addington was a finalist for a 2013 Samuel J. Haymen Service to America Medal for his leadership in reducing violent crime across four Indian communities.

demonstrate how to perform a crime trend analysis step by step, carefully explaining how the analysis could contribute to reducing crime. The police chiefs would put these skills to use during newly established weekly calls with Addington where they tracked progress against goals.

Making data-driven course corrections to strategy

Once the BIA had set a clear, outcome-based goal and collected the right data to drive performance, the bureau decided to adopt a dynamic approach to implementation — making course corrections along the way based on what they learned from the data and experience.

Addington and the local police chiefs took action by developing new, often preventative community policing strategies — strategically placing officers where crimes were likely to happen during hours when they were likely to occur. For example, if most violent crimes on a reservation happened between the hours of midnight and 3 a.m., the police chiefs would increase the number and visibility of officers during those hours.

"If you put a police car in a community (during times when violent crimes typically occur) and flip on the lights, the violent crime numbers go drastically down. If it hadn't been for the data, no one would have ever have thought that."

Charles Addington

Reducing violent crime, however, wasn't as simple as making a one-time change in how police were deployed. Addington describes it as similar to squeezing an air balloon: by preventing crime in one area, sometimes you expand it somewhere else. To address this, the BIA held weekly calls with police departments to track performance data against goals. Conversations focused on understanding what was happening on reservations and how the police departments planned to adapt their strategies to respond. Carefully monitoring crime data and dynamically implementing community policing strategies proved critical to reducing overall violent crime.

These discussions served as a starting point for a larger investigation into possible factors contributing to the trends seen in the violent crime data. The BIA instituted weekly stakeholder meetings among the police force, the tribal leadership, critical social services, and relevant federal agencies. Everyone around the table brought their data to understand violent crime trends in the community and to discuss how to address them.

For example, the stakeholders identified that a lack of available housing on reservations contributed to a shortage of police officers. By engaging other federal agencies, the BIA helped communities to increase housing for police officers on reservations. This helped the BIA recruit enough officers to achieve national parity ratios and to implement community policing strategies.

Achieving impact

Within the 24 month initial goal period, the BIA successfully reduced violent crime across the four target reservations by a combined 35 percent, exceeding the goal by a factor of seven. Furthermore, violent crime has continued to decrease in these communities by a cumulative 55 percent as of Fiscal Year 2012. Addington is quick to acknowledge the contributions public safety professionals in the field made to the success of this initiative.

In addition to lasting partnerships with tribal communities and other government agencies, the BIA emerged with a set of innovative community policing strategies tailored to Indian communities. The BIA has begun to spread these strategies to additional reservations. In 2012 the BIA published the *Crime-Reduction Best Practices Handbook: Making Indian Communities Safe* to share lessons learned and help others adopt novel policies strategies.

The BIA's achievements demonstrate what government can accomplish by adopting a data-driven approach and focusing on outcomes. By setting a clear, outcome-based goal, collecting the right data, and making data-driven course corrections to refine new approaches to reducing crime, the BIA has surpassed expectations and achieved previously inconceivable gains in promoting safe Indian communities. The BIA experience should encourage others in government eying significant public challenges without clear answers that starting with data and focusing on outcomes can lead to tremendous progress in delivering the mission.

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